The Belgariad: Pawn of ProphecyDavid Eddings
THE BELGARIAD
Part One

PAWN OF PROPHECY

For Theone
who told me stories but could not stay for mine
and for Arthur,
who showed me the way to become a man and who shows me still.

PROLOGUE
Being a History of the War of the Gods and the Acts of Belgarath the Sorcerer
-adapted from The Book of Alorn
WHEN THE WORLD was new, the seven Gods dwelt in harmony, and the races of man were as one people. Belar, youngest of the Gods, was beloved by the Alorns. He abode with them and cherished them, and they prospered in his care. The other Gods also gathered peoples about them, and each God cherished his own people.
But Belar's eldest brother, Aldur, was God over no people. He dwelt apart from men and Gods, until the day that a vagrant child sought him out. Aldur accepted the child as his disciple and called him Belgarath. Belgarath learned the secret of the Will and the Word and became a sorcerer. In the years that followed, others also sought out the solitary God. They joined in brotherhood to learn at the feet of Aldur, and time did not touch them.
Now it happened that Aldur took up a stone in the shape of a globe, no larger than the heart of a child, and he turned the stone in his hand until it became a living soul. The power of the living jewel, which men called the Orb of Aldur, was very great, and Aldur worked wonders with it.
Of all the Gods, Torak was the most beautiful, and his people were the Angaraks. They burned sacrifices before him, calling him Lord of Lords, and Torak found the smell of sacrifice and the words of adoration sweet. The day came, however, when he heard of the Orb of Aldur, and from that moment he knew no peace. Finally, in a dissembling guise, he went to Aldur. "My brother," he said, "it is not fitting that thou shouldst absent thyself from our company and counsel. Put aside this jewel which hath seduced thy mind from our fellowship."
Aldur looked into his brother's soul and rebuked him. "Why lost thou seek lordship and dominion, Torak? Is not Angarak enough for thee? Do not in thy pride seek to possess the Orb, lest it slay thee."
Great was Torak's shame at the words of Aldur, and he raised his hand and smote his brother. Taking the jewel, he fled.
The other Gods besought Torak to return the Orb, but he would not. Then the races of man rose up and came against the hosts of Angarak and made war on them. The wars of the Gods and of men raged across the land until, near the high places of Korim, Torak raised the Orb and forced its will to join with his to split the earth asunder. The mountains were cast down, and the sea came in. But Belar and Aldur joined their wills and set limits upon the sea. The races of man, however, were separated one from the others, and the Gods also.
Now when Torak raised the living Orb against the earth, its mother, it awoke and began to glow with holy flame. The face of Torak was seared by the blue fire. In pain he cast down the mountains; in anguish he cracked open the earth; in agony he let in the sea. His left hand flared and burned to ashes, the flesh on the left side of his face melted like wax, and his left eye boiled in its socket.
With a great cry, he cast himself into the sea to quench the burning, but his anguish was without end.
When Torak rose from the water, his right side was still fair, but his left was burned and scarred hideously by the fire of the Orb. In endless pain, he led his people away to the east, where they built a great city on the plains of Mallorea, which they called Cthol Mishrak, City of Night, for Torak hid his

maiming in darkness. The Angaraks raised an iron tower for their God and placed the Orb in an iron cask in the topmost chamber. Often Torak stood before the cask, then fled weeping, lest his yearning to look on the Orb overpower him and he perish utterly.

The centuries rolled past in the lands of the Angarak, and they came to call their maimed God Kal-Torak, both King and God.

Belar had taken the Alorns to the north. Of all men, they were the most hardy and warlike, and Belar put eternal hatred for Angarak in their hearts. With cruel swords and axes they ranged the north, even to the fields of eternal ice, seeking a way to their ancient enemies.

Thus it was until the time when Cherek Bear-shoulders, greatest king of the Alorns, traveled to the Vale of Aldur to seek out Belgarath the Sorcerer. "The way to the north is open," he said. "The signs and the auguries are propitious. Now is the time ripe for us to discover the way to the City of Night and regain the Orb from One-eye."

Poledra, wife of Belgarath, was great with child, and he was reluctant to leave her. But Cherek prevailed. They stole away one night to join Cherek's sons, Dras Bull-neck, Algar Fleet-foot, and Riva Iron-grip.

Cruel winter gripped the northland, and the moors glittered beneath the stars with frost and steel-gray ice. To seek out their way, Belgarath cast an enchantment and took the shape of a great wolf. On silent feet, he slunk through the snow-floored forests where the trees cracked and shattered in the sundering cold. Grim frost silvered the ruff and shoulders of the wolf, and ever after the hair and beard of Belgarath were silver.

Through snow and mist they crossed into Mallorea and came at last to Cthol Mishrak. Finding a secret way into the city, Belgarath led them to the foot of the iron tower. Silently they climbed the rusted stairs which had known no step for twenty centuries. Fearfully they passed through the chamber where Torak tossed in pain-haunted slumber, his maimed face hidden by a steel mask. Stealthily they crept past the sleeping God in the smoldering darkness and came at last to the chamber where lay the iron cask in which rested the living Orb.

Cherek motioned for Belgarath to take the Orb, but Belgarath refused. "I may not touch it," he said, "lest it destroy me. Once it welcomed the touch of man or God, but its will hardened when Torak raised it against its mother. It will not be so used again. It reads our souls. Only one without ill intent, who is pure enough to take it and convey it in peril of his life, with no thought of power or possession, may touch it now."

"What man has no ill intent in the silence of his soul?" Cherek asked. But Riva Iron-grip opened the cask and took up the Orb. Its fire shone through his fingers, but he was not burned.

"So be it, Cherek," Belgarath said. "Your youngest son is pure. It shall be his doom and the doom of all who follow him to bear the Orb and protect it." And Belgarath sighed, knowing the burden he had placed upon Riva.

"Then his brothers and I will sustain him," Cherek said, "for so long as this doom is upon him."

Riva muffled the Orb in his cloak and hid it beneath his tunic. They crept again through the chambers of the maimed God, down the rusted stairs, along the secret way to the gates of the city, and into the wasteland beyond.

Soon after, Torak awoke and went as always into the Chamber of the Orb. But the cask stood open, and the Orb was gone. Horrible was the wrath of Kal-Torak. Taking his great sword, he went down from the iron tower and turned and smote it once, and the tower fell. To the Angaraks he cried out in a voice of thunder. "Because you are become indolent and unwatchful and have let a thief steal that for which I paid so dear, I will break your city and drive you forth. Angarak shall wander the earth until Cthrag Yaska, the burning stone, is returned to me." Then he cast down the City of Night in ruins and drove the hosts of Angarak into the wilderness. Cthol Mishrak was no more.

Three leagues to the north, Belgarath heard the wailing from the city and knew that Torak had awakened. "Now will he come after us," he said, "and only the power of the Orb can save us. When the hosts are upon us, Iron-grip, take the

Orb and hold it so they may see it."
The hosts of Angarak came, with Torak himself in the forefront, but Riva held forth the Orb so that the maimed God and his hosts might behold it. The Orb knew its enemy. Its hatred flamed anew, and the sky became alight with its fury. Torak cried out and turned away. The front ranks of the Angarak hosts were consumed by fire, and the rest fled in terror.
Thus Belgarath and his companions escaped from Mallorea and passed again through the marches of the north, bearing the Orb of Aldur once more into the Kingdoms of the West.
Now the Gods, knowing all that had passed, held council, and Aldur advised them, "If we raise war again upon our brother Torak, our strife will destroy the world. Thus we must absent ourselves from the world so that our brother may not find us. No longer in flesh, but in spirit only may we remain to guide and protect our people. For the world's sake it must be so. In the day that we war again, the world will be unmade."
The Gods wept that they must depart. But Chaldan, Bull-God of the Arends, asked, "In our absence, shall not Torak have dominion?"
"Not so," Aldur replied. "So long as the Orb remains with the line of Riva Iron-grip, Torak shall not prevail."
So it was that the Gods departed, and only Torak remained. But the knowledge that the Orb in the hand of Riva denied him dominion cankered his soul.
Then Belgarath spoke with Cherek and his sons. "Here we must part, to guard the Orb and to prepare against the coming of Torak. Let each turn aside as I have instructed and make preparations."
"We will, Belgarath," vowed Cherek Bear-shoulders. "From this day, Aloria is no more, but the Alorns will deny dominion to Torak as long as one Alorn remains."
Belgarath raised his face. "Hear me, Torak One-eye," he cried. "The living Orb is secure against thee, and thou shalt not prevail against it. In the day that thou comest against us, I shall raise war against thee. I will maintain watch upon thee by day and by night and will abide against thy coming, even to the end of days."
In the wastelands of Mallorea, Kal-Torak heard the voice of Belgarath and smote about him in fury, for he knew that the living Orb was forever beyond his reach.
Then Cherek embraced his sons and turned away, to see them no more. Dras went north and dwelt in the lands drained by River Mrin. He built a city at Boktor and called his lands Drasnia. And he and his descendants stood athwart the northern marches and denied them to the enemy. Algar went south with his people and found horses on the broad plains drained by Aldur River. The horses they tamed and learned to ride for the first time in the history of man, mounted warriors appeared. Their country they called Algaria, and they became nomads, following their herds. Cherek returned sadly to Val Alorn and renamed his kingdom Cherek, for now he was alone and without sons. Grimly he built tall ships of war to patrol the seas and deny them to the enemy.
Upon the bearer of the Orb, however, fell the burden of the longest journey. Taking his people, Riva went to the west coast of Sendaria. There he built ships, and he and his people crossed to the Isle of the Winds. They burned their ships and built a fortress and a walled city around it. The city they called Riva and the fortress the Hall of the Rivan King. Then Belar, God of the Alorns, caused two iron stars to fall from the sky. Riva took up the stars and forged a blade from one and a hilt from the other, setting the Orb upon it as a pommel-stone. So large was the sword that none but Riva could wield it. In the wasteland of Mallorea, Kal-Torak felt in his soul the forging of the sword and he tasted fear for the first time.
The sword was set against the black rock that stood at the back of Riva's throne, with the Orb at the highest point, and the sword joined to the rock so that none but Riva could remove it. The Orb burned with cold fire when Riva sat upon the throne. And when he took down his sword and raised it, it became a great tongue of cold fire.
The greatest wonder of all was the marking of Riva's heir. In each generation, one child in the line of Riva bore upon the palm of his right hand the mark of

the Orb. The child so marked was taken to the throne chamber, and his hand was placed upon the Orb, so that it might know him. With each infant touch, the Orb waxed in brilliance, and the bond between the living Orb and the line of Riva became stronger with each joining.

After Belgarath had parted from his companions, he hastened to the Vale of Aldur. But there he found that Poledra, his wife, had borne twin daughters and then had died. In sorrow he named the elder Polgara. Her hair was dark as the raven's wing. In the fashion of sorcerers, he stretched forth his hand to lay it upon her brow, and a single lock at her forehead turned frost-white at his touch. Then he was troubled, for the white lock was the mark of the sorcerers, and Polgara was the first female child to be so marked.

His second daughter, fair-skinned and golden-haired, was unmarked. He called her Beldaran, and he and her dark-haired sister loved her beyond all else and contended with each other for her affection.

Now when Polgara and Beldaran had reached their sixteenth year, the Spirit of Aldur came to Belgarath in a dream, saying, "My beloved disciple, I would join thy house with the house of the guardian of the Orb. Choose, therefore, which of thy daughters thou wilt give to the Rivan King to be his wife and the mother of his line, for in that line lies the hope of the world, against which the dark power of Torak may not prevail."

In the deep silence of his soul, Belgarath was tempted to choose Polgara. But, knowing the burden which lay upon the Rivan King, he sent Beldaran instead, and wept when she was gone. Polgara wept also, long and bitterly, knowing that her sister must fade and die. In time, however, they comforted each other and came at last to know each other.

They joined their powers to keep watch over Torak. And some men say that they abide still, keeping their vigil through all the uncounted centuries.

Part One
SENDARIA

Chapter One

THE FIRST THING the boy Garion remebered was the kitchen at Faldor's farm. For all the rest of his life he had a special warm feeling for kitchens and those peculiar sounds and smells that seemed somehow to combine into a bustling seriousness that had to do with love and food and comfort and security and, above all, home. No matter how high Garion rose in life, he never forgot that all his memories began in that kitchen.

The kitchen at Faldor's farm was a large, low-beamed room filled with ovens and kettles and great spits that turned slowly in cavernlike arched fireplaces.

There were long, heavy worktables where bread was kneaded into loaves and chickens were cut up and carrots and celery were diced with quick, crisp rocking movements of long, curved knives. When Garion was very small, he played under those tables and soon learned to keep his fingers and toes out from under the feet of the kitchen helpers who worked around them. And sometimes in the late afternoon when he grew tired, he would lie in a corner and stare into one of the flickering fires that gleamed and reflected back from the hundred polished pots and knives and long-handled spoons that hung from pegs along the whitewashed walls and, all bemused, he would drift off into sleep in perfect peace and harmony with all the world around him.

The center of the kitchen and everything that happened there was Aunt Pol. She seemed somehow to be able to be everywhere at once. The finishing touch that plumped a goose in its roasting pan or deftly shaped a rising loaf or garnished a smoking ham fresh from the oven was always hers. Though there were several others who worked in the kitchen, no loaf, stew, soup, roast, or vegetable ever went out of it that had not been touched at least once by Aunt Pol. She knew by smell, taste, or some higher instinct what each dish required, and she seasoned them all by pinch or trace or a negligent-seeming shake from earthenware spice

pots. It was as if there was a kind of magic about her, a knowledge and power beyond that of ordinary people. And yet, even at her busiest, she always knew precisely where Garion was. In the very midst of crimping a pie crust or decorating a special cake or stitching up a freshly stuffed chicken she could, without looking, reach out a leg and hook him back out from under the feet of others with heel or ankle.

As he grew a bit older, it even became a game. Garion would watch until she seemed far too busy to notice him, and then, laughing, he would run on his sturdy little legs toward a door. But she would always catch him. And he would laugh and throw his arms around her neck and kiss her and then go back to watching for his next chance to run away again.

He was quite convinced in those early years that his Aunt Pol was quite the most important and beautiful woman in the world. For one thing, she was taller than the other women on Faldor's farm-very nearly as tall as a man-and her face was always serious-even sternexcept with him, of course. Her hair was long and very dark-almost black-all but one lock just above her left brow which was white as new snow. At night when she tucked him into the little bed close beside her own in their private room above the kitchen, he would reach out and touch that white lock; she would smile at him and touch his face with a soft hand. Then he would sleep, content in the knowledge that she was there, watching over him.

Faldor's farm lay very nearly in the center of Sendaria, a misty kingdom bordered on the west by the Sea of the Winds and on the east by the Gulf of Cherek. Like all farmhouses in that particular time and place, Faldor's farmstead was not one building or two, but rather was a solidly constructed complex of sheds and barns and hen roosts and dovecotes all facing inward upon a central yard with a stout gate at the front. Along the second story gallery were the rooms, some spacious, some quite tiny, in which lived the farmhands who tilled and planted and weeded the extensive fields beyond the walls. Faldor himself lived in quarters in the square tower above the central dining hall where his workers assembled three times a day-sometimes four during harvest time-to feast on the bounty of Aunt Pol's kitchen.

All in all, it was quite a happy and harmonious place. Farmer Faldor was a good master. He was a tall, serious man with a long nose and an even longer jaw. Though he seldom laughed or even smiled, he was kindly to those who worked for him and seemed more intent on maintaining them all in health and well-being than extracting the last possible ounce of sweat from them. In many ways he was more like a father than a master to the sixty-odd people who lived on his freeholding. He ate with them-which was unusual, since many farmers in the district sought to hold themselves aloof from their workers-and his presence at the head of the central table in the dining hall exerted a restraining influence on some of the younger ones who tended sometimes to be boisterous. Farmer Faldor was a devout man, and he invariably invoked with simple eloquence the blessing of the Gods before each meal. The people of his farm, knowing this, filed with some decorum into the dining hall before each meal and sat in the semblance at least of piety before attacking the heaping platters and bowls of food that Aunt Pol and her helpers had placed before them.

Because of Faldor's good heart-and the magic of Aunt Pol's deft fingers-the farm was known throughout the district as the finest place to live and work for twenty leagues in any direction. Whole evenings were spent in the tavern in the nearby village of Upper Gralt in minute descriptions of the near-miraculous meals served regularly in Faldor's dining hall. Less fortunate men who worked at other farms were frequently seen, after several pots of ale, to weep openly at descriptions of one of Aunt Pol's roasted geese, and the fame of Faldor's farm spread wide throughout the district.

The most important man on the farm, aside from Faldor, was Durnik the smith. As Garion grew older and was allowed to move out from under Aunt Pol's watchful eye, he found his way inevitably to the smithy. The glowing iron that came from Durnik's forge had an almost hypnotic attraction for him. Durnik was an ordinary-looking man with plain brown hair and a plain face, ruddy from the heat of his forge. He was neither tall nor short, nor was he thin or stout. He was

sober and quiet, and like most men who follow his trade, he was enormously strong. He wore a rough leather jerkin and an apron of the same material. Both were spotted with burns from the sparks which flew from his forge. He also wore tight-fitting hose and soft leather boots as was the custom in that part of Sendaria. At first Durnik's only words to Garion were warnings to keep his fingers away from the forge and the glowing metal which came from it. In time, however, he and the boy became friends, and he spoke more frequently.
"Always finish what you set your hand to," he would advise. "It's bad for the iron if you set it aside and then take it back to the fire more than is needful."
"Why is that?" Garion would ask.
Durnik would shrug. "It just is."
"Always do the very best job you can," he said on another occasion as he put a last few finishing touches with a file on the metal parts of a wagon tongue he was repairing.
"But that piece goes underneath," Garion said. "No one will ever see it."
"But I know it's there," Durnik said, still smoothing the metal. "If it isn't done as well as I can do it, I'll be ashamed every time I see this wagon go by-and I'll see the wagon every day."
And so it went. Without even intending to, Durnik instructed the small boy in those solid Sendarian virtues of work, thrift, sobriety, good manners, and practicality which formed the backbone of the society.
At first Aunt Pol worried about Garion's attraction to the smithy with its obvious dangers; but after watching from her kitchen door for a while, she realized that Durnik was almost as watchful of Garion's safety as she was herself and she became less concerned.
"If the boy becomes pestersome, Goodman Durnik, send him away," she told the smith on one occasion when she had brought a large copper kettle to the smithy to be patched, "or tell me, and I'll keep him closer to the kitchen."
"He's no bother, Mistress Pol," Durnik said, smiling. "He's a sensible boy and knows enough to keep out of the way."
"You're too good-natured, friend Durnik," Aunt Pol said. "The boy is full of questions. Answer one and a dozen more pour out."
"That's the way of boys," Durnik said, carefully pouring bubbling metal into the small clay ring he'd placed around the tiny hole in the bottom of the kettle. "I was questionsome myself when I was a boy. My father and old Barl, the smith who taught me, were patient enough to answer what they could. I'd repay them poorly if I didn't have the same patience with Garion."
Garion, who was sitting nearby, had held his breath during this conversation. He knew that one wrong word on either side would have instantly banished him from the smithy. As Aunt Pol walked back across the hard-packed dirt of the yard toward her kitchen with the new-mended kettle, he noticed the way that Durnik watched her, and an idea began to form in his mind. It was a simple idea, and the beauty of it was that it provided something for everyone.
"Aunt Pol," he said that night, wincing as she washed one of his ears with a rough cloth.
"Yes?" she said, turning her attention to his neck.
"Why don't you marry Durnik?"
She stopped washing. "What?" she asked.
"I think it would be an awfully good idea."
"Oh, do you?" Her voice had a slight edge to it, and Garion knew he was on dangerous ground.
"He likes you," he said defensively.
"And I suppose you've already discussed this with him?"
"No," he said. "I thought I'd talk to you about it first."
"At least that was a good idea."
"I can tell him about it tomorrow morning, if you'd like."
His head was turned around quite firmly by one ear. Aunt Pol, Garion felt, found his ears far too convenient.
"Don't you so much as breathe one word of this nonsense to Durnik or anyone

else," she said, her dark eyes burning into his with a fire he had never seen there before.
"It was only a thought," he said quickly.
"A very bad one. From now on leave thinking to grown-ups." She was still holding his ear.
"Anything you say," he agreed hastily.
Later that night, however, when they lay in their beds in the quiet darkness, he approached the problem obliquely.
"Aunt Pol?"
"Yes?"
"Since you don't want to marry Durnik, whom do you want to marry?"
"Garion," she said.
"Yes?"
"Close your mouth and go to sleep."
"I think I've got a right to know," he said in an injured tone.
"Garion!"
"All right. I'm going to sleep, but I don't think you're being very fair about all this."
She drew in a deep breath. "Very well," she said. "I'm not thinking of getting married. I have never thought of getting married and I seriously doubt that I'll ever think of getting married. I have far too many important things to attend to for any of that."
"Don't worry, Aunt Pol," he said, wanting to put her mind at ease. "When I grow up, I'll marry you."
She laughed then, a deep, rich laugh, and reached out to touch his face in the darkness. "Oh no, my Garion," she said. "There's another wife in store for you."
"Who?" he demanded.
"You'll find out," she said mysteriously. "Now go to sleep."
"Aunt Pol?"
"Yes?"
"Where's my mother?" It was a question he had been meaning to ask for quite some time.
There was a long pause, then Aunt Pol sighed.
"She died," she said quietly.
Garion felt a sudden wrenching surge of grief, an unbearable anguish. He began to cry.
And then she was beside his bed. She knelt on the floor and put her arms around him. Finally, a long time later, after she had carried him to her own bed and held him close until his grief had run its course, Garion asked brokenly, "What was she like? My mother?"
"She was fair-haired," Aunt Pol said, "and very strong and very beautiful. Her voice was gentle, and she was very happy."
"Did she love me?"
"More than you could imagine."
And then he cried again, but his crying was quieter now, more regretful than anguished.
Aunt Pol held him closely until he cried himself to sleep.
There were other children on Faldor's farm, as was only natural in a community of sixty or so. The older ones on the farm all worked, but there were three other children of about Garion's age on the freeholding. These three became his playmates and his friends.
The oldest boy was named Rundorig. He was a year or two older than Garion and quite a bit taller. Ordinarily, since he was the eldest of the children, Rundorig would have been their leader; but because he was an Arend, his sense was a bit limited and he cheerfully deferred to the younger ones. The kingdom of Sendaria, unlike other kingdoms, was inhabited by a broad variety of racial stocks. Chereks, Algars, Drasnians, Arends, and even a substantial number of Tolnedrans had merged to form the elemental Sendar. Arends, of course, were very brave, but were also notoriously thick-wined.
Garion's second playmate was Doroon, a small, quick boy whose background was so

mixed that he could only be called a Sendar. The most notable thing about Doroon was the fact that he was always running; he never walked if he could run. Like his feet, his mind seemed to tumble over itself, and his tongue as well. He talked continually and very fast and he was always excited.

The undisputed leader of the little foursome was the girl Zubrette, a golden-haired charmer who invented their games, made up stories to tell them, and set them to stealing apples and plums from Faldor's orchard for her. She ruled them as a little queen, playing one against the other and inciting them into fights. She was quite heartless, and each of the three boys at times hated her even while remaining helpless thralls to her tiniest whim.

In the winter they slid on wide boards down the snowy hillside behind the farmhouse and returned home, wet and snow-covered, with chapped hands and glowing cheeks as evening's purple shadows crept across the snow. Or, after Durnik the smith had proclaimed the ice safe, they would slide endlessly across the frozen pond that lay glittering frostily in a little dale just to the east of the farm buildings along the road to Upper Gralt. And, if the weather was too cold or on toward spring when rains and warm winds had made the snow slushy and the pond unsafe, they would gather in the hay barn and leap by the hour from the loft into the soft hay beneath, filling their hair with chaff and their noses with dust that smelled of summer.

In the spring they caught polliwogs along the marshy edges of the pond and climbed trees to stare in wonder at the tiny blue eggs the birds had laid in twiggy nests in the high branches.

It was Doroon, naturally, who fell from a tree and broke his arm one fine spring morning when Zubrette urged him into the highest branches of a tree near the edge of the pond. Since Rundorig stood helplessly gaping at his injured friend and Zubrette had run away almost before he hit the ground, it fell to Garion to make certain necessary decisions. Gravely he considered the situation for a few moments, his young face seriously intent beneath his shock of sandy hair. The arm was obviously broken, and Doroon, pale and frightened, bit his lip to keep from crying.

A movement caught Garion's eye, and he glanced up quickly. A man in a dark cloak sat astride a large black horse not far away, watching intently. When their eyes met, Garion felt a momentary chill, and he knew that he had seen the man before-that indeed that dark figure had hovered on the edge of his vision for as long as he could remember, never speaking, but always watching. There was in that silent scrutiny a kind of cold animosity curiously mingled with something that was almost, but not quite, fear. Then Doroon whimpered, and Garion turned back.

Carefully he bound the injured arm across the front of Doroon's body with his rope belt, and then he and Rundorig helped the injured boy to his feet.

"At least he could have helped us," Garion said resentfully.

"Who?" Rundorig said, looking around.

Garion turned to point at the dark-cloaked man, but the rider was gone.

"I didn't see anyone," Rundorig said.

"It hurts," Doroon said.

"Don't worry," Garion said. "Aunt Pol will fix it."

And so she did. When the three appeared at the door of her kitchen, she took in the situation with a single glance.

"Bring him over here," she told them, her voice not even excited. She set the pale and violently trembling boy on a stool near one of the ovens and mixed a tea of several herbs taken from earthenware jars on a high shelf in the back of one of her pantries.

"Drink this," she instructed Doroon, handing him a steaming mug.

"Will it make my arm well?" Doroon asked, suspiciously eyeing the evil-smelling brew.

"Just drink it," she ordered, laying out some splints and linen strips.

"Ick! It tastes awful," Doroon said, making a face.

"It's supposed to," she told him. "Drink it all."

"I don't think I want any more," he said.

"Very well," she said. She pushed back the splints and took down a long, very sharp knife from a hook on the wall.
"What are you going to do with that?" he demanded shakily.
"Since you don't want to take the medicine," she said blandly, "I guess it'll have to come off."
"Off?" Doroon squeaked, his eyes bulging.
"Probably about right there," she said, thoughtfully touching his arm at the elbow with the point of the knife.
Tears coming to his eyes, Doroon gulped down the rest of the liquid and a few minutes later he was nodding, almost drowsing on his stool. He screamed once, though, when Aunt Pol set the broken bone, but after the arm had been wrapped and splinted, he drowsed again. Aunt Pol spoke briefly with the boy's frightened mother and then had Durnik carry him up to bed.
"You wouldn't really have cut off his arm," Garion said.
Aunt Pol looked at him, her expression unchanging. "Oh?" she said, and he was no longer sure. "I think I'd like to have a word with Mistress Zubrette now," she said then.
"She ran away when Doroon fell out of the tree," Garion said.
"Find her."
"She's hiding," Garion protested. "She always hides when something goes wrong. I wouldn't know where to look for her."
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "I didn't ask you if you knew where to look. I told you to find her and bring her to me."
"What if she won't come?" Garion hedged.
"Garion!" There was a note of awful finality in Aunt Pol's tone, and Garion fled.
"I didn't have anything to do with it," Zubrette lied as soon as Garion led her to Aunt Pol in the kitchen.
"You," Aunt Pol said, pointing at a stool, "sit!"
Zubrette sank onto the stool, her mouth open and her eyes wide.
"You," Aunt Pol said to Garion, pointing at the kitchen door, "out!"
Garion left hurriedly.
Ten minutes later a sobbing little girl stumbled out of the kitchen. Aunt Pol stood in the doorway looking after her with eyes as hard as ice.
"Did you thrash her?" Garion asked hopefully.
Aunt Pol withered him with a glance. "Of course not," she said. "You don't thrash girls."
"I would have," Garion said, disappointed. "What did you do to her?"
"Don't you have anything to do?" Aunt Pol asked.
"No," Garion said, "not really."
That, of course, was a mistake.
"Good," Aunt Pol said, finding one of his ears. "It's time you started to earn your way. You'll find some dirty pots in the scullery. I'd like to have them scrubbed."
"I don't know why you're angry with me," Garion objected, squirming. "It wasn't my fault that Doroon went up that tree."
"The scullery, Garion," she said. "Now."
The rest of that spring and the early part of the summer were quiet. Doroon, of course, could not play until his arm mended, and Zubrette had been so shaken by whatever it was that Aunt Pol had said to her that she avoided the two other boys. Garion was left with only Rundorig to play with, and Rundorig was not bright enough to be much fun. Because there was really nothing else to do, the boys often went into the fields to watch the hands work and listen to their talk.
As it happened, during that particular summer the men on Faldor's farm were talking about the Battle of Vo Mimbre, the most cataclysmic event in the history of the west. Garion and Rundorig listened, enthralled, as the men unfolded the story of how the hordes of Kal Torak had quite suddenly struck into the west some five hundred years before.
It had all begun in 4865, as men reckoned time in that part of the world, when

vast multitudes of Murgos and Nadraks and Thulls had struck down across the mountains of the eastern escarpment into Drasnia, and behind them in endless waves had come the uncountable numbers of the Malloreans.
After Drasnia had been brutally crushed, the Angaraks had turned southward onto the vast grasslands of Algaria and had laid siege to that enormous fortress called the Algarian Stronghold. The siege had lasted for eight years until finally, in disgust, Kal Torak had abandoned it. It was not until he turned his army westward into Ulgoland that the other kingdoms became aware that the Angarak invasion was directed not only against the Alorns but against all of the west. In the summer of 4875 Kal Torak had come down upon the Arendish plain before the city of Vo Mimbre, and it was there that the combined armies of the west awaited him.
The Sendars who participated in the battle were a part of the force under the leadership of Brand, the Rivan Warder. That force, consisting of Rivans, Sendars and Asturian Arends, assaulted the Angarak rear after the left had been engaged by Algars, Drasnians and Ulgos; the right by Tolnedrans and Chereks; and the front by the legendary charge of the Mimbrate Arends. For hours the battle had raged until, in the center of the field, Brand had met in a single combat with Kal Torak himself. Upon that duel had hinged the outcome of the battle.
Although twenty generations had passed since that titanic encounter, it was still as fresh in the memory of the Sendarian farmers who worked on Faldor's farm as if it had happened only yesterday. Each blow was described, and each feint and parry. At the final moment, when it seemed that he must inevitably be overthrown, Brand had removed the covering from his shield, and Kal Torak, taken aback by some momentary confusion, had lowered his guard and had been instantly struck down.
For Rundorig, the description of the battle was enough to set his Arendish blood seething. Garion, however, found that certain questions had been left unanswered by the stories.
"Why was Brand's shield covered?" he asked Cralto, one of the older hands.
Cralto shrugged. "It just was," he said. "Everyone I've ever talked with about it agrees on that."
"Was it a magic shield?" Garion persisted.
"It may have been," Cralto said, "but I've never heard anyone say so. All I know is that when Brand uncovered his shield, Kal Torak dropped his own shield, and Brand stabbed his sword into Kal Torak's head through the eye, or so I am told."
Garion shook his head stubbornly. "I don't understand," he said. "How would something like that have made Kal Torak afraid?"
"I can't say," Cralto told him. "I've never heard anyone explain it."
Despite his dissatisfaction with the story, Garion quite quickly agreed to Rundorig's rather simple plan to re-enact the duel. After a day or so of posturing and banging at each other with sticks to simulate swords, Garion decided that they needed some equipment to make the game more enjoyable. Two kettles and two large pot lids mysteriously disappeared from Aunt Pol's kitchen; and Garion and Rundorig, now with helmets and shields, repaired to a quiet place to do war upon each other.
It was all going quite splendidly until Rundorig, who was older, taller and stronger, struck Garion a resounding whack on the head with his wooden sword. The rim of the kettle cut into Garion's eyebrow, and the blood began to flow. There was a sudden ringing in Garion's ears, and a kind of boiling exaltation surged up in his veins as he rose to his feet from the ground.
He never knew afterward quite what happened. He had only sketchy memories of shouting defiance at Kal Torak in words which sprang to his lips and which even he did not understand. Rundorig's familiar and somewhat foolish face was no longer the face before him but rather was replaced by something hideously maimed and ugly. In a fury Garion struck at that face again and again with fire seething in his brain.
And then it was over. Poor Rundorig lay at his feet, beaten senseless by the enraged attack. Garion was horrified at what he had done, but at the same time there was the fiery taste of victory in his mouth.

Later, in the kitchen, where all injuries on the farm were routinely taken, Aunt Pol tended their wounds with only minimal comments about them. Rundorig seemed not to be seriously hurt, though his face had begun to swell and turn purple in several places and he had difficulty focusing his eyes at first. A few cold cloths on his head and one of Aunt Pol's potions quickly restored him.
The cut on Garion's brow, however, required a bit more attention. She had Durnik hold the boy down and then she took needle and thread and sewed up the cut as calmly as she would have repaired a rip in a sleeve, all the while ignoring the howls from her patient. All in all, she seemed much more concerned about the dented kettles and battered pot lids than about the war wounds of the two boys.
When it was over, Garion had a headache and was taken up to bed.
"At least I beat Kal Torak," he told Aunt Pol somewhat drowsily.
She looked at him sharply.
"Where did you hear about Torak?" she demanded.
"It's Kal Torak, Aunt Pol," Garion explained patiently.
"Answer me."
"The farmers were telling stories-old Cralto and the others-about Brand and Vo Mimbre and Kal Torak and all the rest. That's what Rundorig and I were playing. I was Brand and he was Kal Torak. I didn't get to uncover my shield, though. Rundorig hit me on the head before we got that far."
"I want you to listen to me, Garion," Aunt Pol said, "and I want you to listen carefully. You are never to speak the name of Torak again."
"It's Kal Torak, Aunt Pol," Garion explained again, "not just Torak."
Then she hit him - which she had never done before. The slap across his mouth surprised him more than it hurt, for she did not hit very hard.
"You will never speak the name of Torak again. Neverl" she said. "This is important, Garion. Your safety depends on it. I want your promise."
"You don't have to get so angry about it," he said in an injured tone.
"Promise."
"All right, I promise. It was only a game."
"A very foolish one," Aunt Pol said. "You might have killed Rundorig."
"What about me?" Garion protested.
"You were never in any danger," she told him. "Now go to sleep."
And as he dozed fitfully, his head light from his injury and the strange, bitter drink his aunt had given him, he seemed to hear her deep, rich voice saying, "Garion, my Garion, you're too young yet." And later, rising from deep sleep as a fish rises toward the silvery surface of the water, he seemed to hear her call, "Father, I need you." Then he plunged again into a troubled sleep, haunted by a dark figure of a man on a black horse who watched his every movement with a cold animosity and something that hovered very near the edge of fear; and behind that dark figure he had always known to be there but had never overtly acknowledged, even to Aunt Pol, the maimed and ugly face he had briefly seen or imagined in the fight with Rundorig loomed darkly, like the hideous fruit of an unspeakable evil tree.

Chapter Two

NOT LONG AFTER in the endless noon of Garion's boyhood, the storyteller appeared once again at the gate of Faldor's farm. The storyteller, who seemed not to have a proper name as other men do, was a thoroughly disreputable oid man. The knees of his hose were patched and his mismatched shoes were out at the toes. His long-sleeved woolen tunic was belted about the waist with a piece of rope, and his hood, a curious garment not normally worn in that part of Sendaria and one which Garion thought quite fine with its loosely fitting yoke covering shoulders, back and chest, was spotted and soiled with spilled food and drink. Only his full cloak seemed relatively new. The old storyteller's white hair was cropped quite close, as was his beard. His face was strong, with a kind of angularity to it, and his features provided no clue to his background. He did not resemble Arend nor Cherek, Algar nor Drasnian, Rivan nor Tolnedran, but seemed rather to derive from some racial stock long since forgotten. His eyes were a deep and merry blue, forever young and forever full of mischief

The storyteller appeared from time to time at Faldor's farm and was always welcome. He was in truth a rootless vagabond who made his way in the world by telling stories. His stories were not always new, but there was in his telling of them a special kind of magic. His voice could roll like thunder or hush down into a zepherlike whisper. He could imitate the voices of a dozen men at once; whistle so like a bird that the birds themselves would come to him to hear what he had to say; and when he imitated the howl of a wolf, the sound could raise the hair on the backs of his listeners' necks and strike a chill into their hearts like the depths of a Drasnian winter. He could make the sound of rain and of wind and even, most miraculously, the sound of snow falling. His stories were filled with sounds that made them come alive, and through the sounds and the words with which he wove the tales, sight and smell and the very feel of strange times and places seemed also to come to life for his spellbound listeners.

All of this wonder he gave freely in exchange for a few meals, a few tankards of ale, and a warm spot in the hay barn in which to sleep. He roamed about the world seemingly as free of possessions as the birds.

Between the storyteller and Aunt Pol there seemed to be a sort of hidden recognition. She had always viewed his coming with a kind of wry acceptance, knowing, it seemed, that the ultimate treasures of her kitchen were not safe so long as he lurked in the vicinity. Loaves and cakes had a way of disappearing when he was around, and his quick knife, always ready, could neatly divest the most carefully prepared goose of a pair of drumsticks and a generous slab of breast meat with three swift slices when her back was turned. She called him "Old Wolf," and his appearance at the gate of Faldor's farm marked the resumption of a contest which had obviously been going on for years. He flattered her outrageously even as he stole from her. Offered cookies or dark brown bread, he would politely refuse and then steal half a plateful before the platter had moved out of his reach. Her beer pantry and wine cellar might as well have been delivered into his hands immediately upon his appearance at the gate. He seemed to delight in pilferage, and if she watched him with steely eye, he found quite easily a dozen confederates willing to sack her kitchen in exchange for a single story.

Lamentably, among his most able pupils was the boy Garion. Often, driven to distraction by the necessity of watching at once an old thief and a fledgling one, Aunt Pol would arm herself with a broom and drive them both from her kitchen with hard words and resounding blows. And the old storyteller, laughing, would flee with the boy to some secluded place where they would feast on the fruits of their pilferage and the old man, tasting frequently from a flagon of stolen wine or beer, would regale his student with stories out of the dim past. The best stories, of course, were saved for the dining hall when, after the evening meal was over and the plates had been pushed back, the old man would rise from his place and carry his listeners off into a world of magical enchantment.

"Tell us of the beginnings, my old friend," Faldor, always pious, said one evening, "and of the Gods."

"Of the beginnings and the Gods," the old man mused. "A worthy subject, Faldor, but a dry and dusty one."

"I've noticed that you find all subjects dry and dusty, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol said, going to the barrel and drawing off a tankard of foamy beer for him.

He accepted the tankard with a stately bow. "It's one of the hazards of my profession, Mistress Pol," he explained. He drank deeply, then set the tankard aside. He lowered his head in thought for a moment, then looked directly, or so it seemed, at Garion. And then he did a strange thing which he had never before done when telling stories in Faldor's dining hall. He drew his cloak about him and rose to his full height.

"Behold," he said, his voice rich and sonorous, "at the beginning of days made the Gods the world and the seas and the dry land also. And cast they the stars across the night sky and did set the sun and his wife, the moon, in the heavens to give light unto the world.

"And the Gods caused the earth to bring forth the beasts, and the waters to bud

with 6sh, and the skies to flower with birds.
"And they made men also, and divided men into Peoples.
"Now the Gods were seven in number and were all equal, and their names were Belar, and Chaldan, and Nedra, and Issa, and Mara, and Aldur, and Torak."
Garion knew the story, of course; everyone in that part of Sendaria was familiar with it, since the story was of Alorn origin and the lands on three sides of Sendaria were Alorn kingdoms. Though the tale was familiar, however, he had never before heard it told in such a way. His mind soared as in his imagination the Gods themselves strode the world in those dim, misty days when the world was first made, and a chill came over him at each mention of the forbidden name of Torak.
He listened intently as the storyteller described how each God selected a people---for Belar the Alorns, for Issa the Nyissans, for Chaldan the Arends, for Nedra the Tolnedrans, for Mara the Marags which are no more, and for Torak the Angaraks. And he heard how the God Aldur dwelt apart and considered the stars in his solitude, and how some very few men he accepted as pupils and disciples.
Garion glanced at the others who were listening. Their faces were rapt with attention. Durnik's eyes were wide, and old Cralto's hands were clasped on the table in front of him. Faldor's face was pale, and tears stood in his eyes. Aunt Pol stood at the rear of the room. Though it was not cold, she too had drawn her mantle about her and stood very straight, her eyes intent.
"And it came to pass," the storyteller continued, "that the God Aldur caused to be made a jewel in the shape of a globe, and behold, in the jewel was captured the light of certain stars that did glitter in the northern sky. And great was the enchantment upon the jewel which men called the Orb of Aldur, for with the Orb could Aldur see that which had been, that which was, and that which was yet to be."
Garion realized he was holding his breath, for he was now completely caught up in the story. He listened in wonder as Torak stole the Orb and the other Gods made war on him. Torak used the Orb to sunder the earth and let in the sea to drown the land, until the Orb struck back against misuse by melting the left side of his face and destroying his left hand and eye.
The old man paused and drained his tankard. Aunt Pol, with her mantle still close about her, brought him another, her movements somehow stately and her eyes burning.
"I've never heard the story told so," Durnik said softly.
"It's The Book of Alorn. * It's only told in the presence of kings," Cralto said, just as softly. "I knew a man once who had heard it at the king's court at Sendar, and he remembered some of it. I've never heard it all before, though."
The story continued, recounting how Belgarath the Sorcerer led Cherek and his three sons to regain the Orb two thousand years later, and how the western lands were settled and guarded against the hosts of Torak. The Gods removed from the world, leaving Riva to safeguard the Orb in his fortress on the Isle of the Winds. There he forged a great sword and set the Orb in its hilt. While the Orb remained there and the line of Riva sat on the throne, Torak could not prevail. Then Belgarath sent his favorite daughter to Riva to be a mother to kings, while his other daughter remained with him and learned his art, for the mark of the sorcerers was upon her.
The old storyteller's voice was now very soft as his ancient tale drew to its close. "And between them," he said, "did Belgarath and his daughter, the Sorceress Polgara, set enchantments to keep watch against the coming of Torak. And some men say they shall abide against his coming even though it be until the very end of days, for it is phophesied that one day shall maimed Torak come against the kingdoms of the west to reclaim the Orb which he so dearly purchased, and battle shall be joined between Torak and the fruit of the line of Riva, and in that battle shall be decided the fate of the world."
And then the old man fell silent and let his mantle drop from about his shoulders, signifying that his story was at an end.
There was a long silence in the hall, broken only by a few faint cracks from the

dying fire and the endless song of frogs and crickets in the summer night outside.
Finally Faldor cleared his throat and rose, his bench scraping loudly on the wooden floor. "You have done us much honor tonight, my old
* Several shorter, less formal versions of the story existed, similar to the adaptation used here in the Prologue. Even The Book of Alorn was said to be an abridgment of a much older document, friend," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "This is an event we will remember all our lives. You have told us a kingly story, not usually wasted on ordinary people."
The old man grinned then, his blue eyes twinkling. "I haven't consorted with many kings of late, Faldor." He laughed. "They all seem to be too busy to listen to the old tales, and a story must be told from time to time if it is not to be lost-besides, who knows these days where a king might be hiding?"
They all laughed at that and began to push back their benches, for it was growing late and time for those who must be up with the first light of the sun to seek their beds.
"Will you carry a lantern for me to the place where I sleep, boy?" the storyteller asked Garion.
"Gladly," Garion said, jumping up and running into the kitchen. He fetched down a square glass lantern, lighted the candle inside it from one of the banked kitchen fires, and went back into the dining hall.
Faldor was speaking with the storyteller. As he turned away, Garion saw a strange look pass between the old man and Aunt Pol, who still stood at the back of the hall.
"Are we ready then, boy?" the old man asked as Garion came up to him.
"Whenever you are," Garion replied, and the two of them turned and left the hall.
"Why is the story unfinished?" Garion asked, bursting with curiosity. "Why did you stop before we found out what happened when Torak met the Rivan King?"
"That's another story," the old man explained.
"Will you tell it to me sometime?" Garion pressed.
The old man laughed. "Torak and the Rivan King have not as yet met," he said, "so I can't very well tell it, can I?-at least not until after their meeting."
"It's only a story," Garion objected. "Isn't it?"
"Is it?" The old man removed a flagon of wine from under his tunic and took a long drink. "Who is to say what is only a story and what is truth disguised as a story?"
"It's only a story," Garion said stubbornly, suddenly feeling very hardheaded and practical like any good Sendar."It can't really be true. Why, Belgarath the Sorcerer would be - would be I don't know how old - and people don't live that long."
"Seven thousand years," the old man said.
"What?"
"Belgarath the Sorcerer is seven thousand years old - perhaps a bit older."
"That's impossible," Garion said.
"Is it? How old are you?"
"Nine-next Erastide."
"And in nine years you've learned everything that's both possible and impossible? You're a remarkable boy, Garion."
Garion flushed. "Well," he said, somehow not quite so sure of himself, "the oldest man I ever heard of is old Weldrik over on Mildrin's farm. Durnik says he's over ninety and that he's the oldest man in the district."
"And it's a very big district, of course," the old man said solemnly.
"How old are you?" Garion asked, not wanting to give up.
"Old enough, boy," the old man said.
"It's still only a story," Garion insisted.
"Many good and solid men would say so," the old man told him, looking up at the stars, "good men who will live out their lives believing only in what they can see and touch. But there's a world beyond what we can see and touch, and that world lives by its own laws. What may be impossible in this very ordinary world

is very possible there, and sometimes the boundaries between the two worlds disappear, and then who can say what is possible and impossible?"
"I think I'd rather live in the ordinary world," Garion said. "The other one sounds too complicated."
"We don't always have that choice, Garion," the storyteller told him. "Don't be too surprised if that other world someday chooses you to do something that must be done - some great and noble thing."
"Me?" Garion said incredulously.
"Stranger things have happened. Go to bed, boy. I think I'll look at the stars for a while. The stars and I are very old friends."
"The stars?" Garion asked, looking up involuntarily. "You're a very strange old man - if you don't mind my saying so."
"Indeed," the storyteller agreed. "Quite the strangest you'll likely meet."
"I like you all the same," Garion said quickly, not wanting to give offense.
"That's a comfort, boy," the old man said. "Now go to bed. Your Aunt Pol will be worried about you."
Later, as he slept, Garion's dreams were troubled. The dark figure of maimed Torak loomed in the shadows, and monstrous things pursued him across twisted landscapes where the possible and the impossible merged and joined as that other world reached out to claim him.

Chapter Three

SOME FEW MORNINGS later, when Aunt Pol had begun to scowl at his continued lurking in her kitchen, the old man made excuse of some errand to the nearby village of Upper Gralt.
"Good," Aunt Pol said, somewhat ungraciously. "At least my pantries will be safe while you're gone."
He bowed mockingly, his eyes twinkling. "Do you need anything, Mistress Pol?" he asked. "Some trifling thing I might purchase for you - as long as I'm going anyway?"
Aunt Pol thought a moment. "Some of my spice pots are a bit low," she said, "and there's a Tolnedran spice merchant in Fennel Lane just south of the Town Tavern. I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding the tavern."
"The trip is likely to be dry," the old man admitted pleasantly. "And lonely, too. Ten leagues with no one to talk to is a long way."
"Talk to the birds," Aunt Pol suggested bluntly.
"Birds listen well enough," the old man said, "but their speech is repetitious and quickly grows tiresome. Why don't I take the boy along for company?"
Garion held his breath.
"He's picking up enough bad habits on his own," Aunt Pol said tartly. "I'd prefer his not having expert instruction."
"Why, Mistress Pol," the old man objected, stealing a cruller almost absently, "you do me an injustice. Besides, a change will do the boy good - broaden his horizons, you might say."
"His horizons are quite broad enough, thank you," she said.
Garion's heart sank.
"Still," she continued, "at least I can count on him not to forget my spices altogether or to become so fuddled with ale that he confuses peppercorns with cloves or cinnamon with nutmeg. Very well, take the boy along; but mind, I don't want you taking him into any low or disreputable places."
"Mistress Pol!" the old man said, feigning shock. "Would I frequent such places?"
"I know you too well, Old Wolf," she said dryly. "You take to vice and corruption as naturally as a duck takes to a pond. If I hear that you've taken the boy into any unsavory place, you and I will have words."
"Then I'll have to make sure that you don't hear of anything like that, won't I?"
Aunt Pol gave him a hard look. "I'll see which spices I need," she said.
"And I'll borrow a horse and cart from Faldor," the old man said, stealing

another cruller.
In a surprisingly short time, Garion and the old man were bouncing along the rutted road to Upper Gralt behind a fast-trotting horse. It was a bright summer morning, and there were a few dandelion-puff' clouds in the sky and deep blue shadows under the hedgerows. After a few hours, however, the sun became hot, and the jolting ride became tiresome.
"Are we almost there?" Garion asked for the third time.
"Not for some time yet," the old man said. "Ten leagues is a goodly distance."
"I was there once before," Garion told him, trying to sound casual. "Of course I was only a child at the time, so I don't remember too much about it. It seemed to be quite a fine place."
The old man shrugged. "It's a village," he said, "much like any other." He seemed a bit preoccupied.
Garion, hoping to nudge the old man into a story to make the miles go faster, began asking questions.
"Why is it that you have no name - if I'm not being impolite in asking?"
"I have many names," the old man said, scratching his white beard. "Almost as many names as I have years."
"I've only got one," Garion said.
"So far."
"What?"
"You only have one name so far," the old man explained. "In time you may get another - or even several. Some people collect names as they go along through their lives. Sometimes names wear out just like clothes."
"Aunt Pol calls you Old Wolf," Garion said.
"I know," the old man said. "Your Aunt Pol and I have known each other for a very long time."
"Why does she call you that?"
"Who can say why a woman such as your Aunt does anything?"
"May I call you Mister Wolf?" Garion asked. Names were quite important to Garion, and the fact that the old storyteller did not seem to have one had always bothered him. That namelessness had made the old man seem somehow incomplete, unfinished.
The old man looked at him soberly for a moment, and then he burst out laughing. "Mister Wolf indeed. How very appropriate. I think I like that name better than any I've had in years."
"May I then?" Garion asked. "Call you Mister Wolf, I mean?"
"I think I'd like that, Garion. I think I'd like that very much."
"Now would you please tell me a story, Mister Wolf?" Garion asked.
The time and distance went by much faster then as Mister Wolf wove for Garion tales of glorious adventure and dark treachery taken from those gloomy, unending centuries of the Arendish civil wars.
"Why are the Arends like that?" Garion asked after a particularly grim tale.
"The Arends are very noble," Wolf said, lounging back in the seat of the cart with the reins held negligently in one hand. "Nobility is a trait that's not always trustworthy, since it sometimes causes men to do things for obscure reasons."
"Rundorig is an Arend," Garion said. "He sometimes seems to bewell, not too quick of thought, if you know what I mean."
"It's the effect of all that nobility," Wolf said. "Arends spend so much time concentrating on being noble that they don't have time to think of other things."
They came over the crest of a long hill, and there in the next valley lay the village of Upper Gralt. To Garion the tiny cluster of gray stone houses with slate roofs seemed disappointingly small. Two roads, white with thick dust, intersected there, and there were a few narrow, winding streets besides. The houses were square and solid, but seemed almost like toys set down in the valley below. The horizon beyond was ragged with the mountains of eastern Sendaria, and, though it was summer, the tops of most of the mountains were still wrapped in snow.

Their tired horse plodded down the hill toward the village, his hooves stirring little clouds of dust with each step, and soon they were clattering along the cobblestoned streets toward the center of the village. The villagers, of course, were all too important to pay any attention to an old man and a small boy in a farm cart. The women wore gowns and high-pointed hats, and the men wore doublets and soft velvet caps. Their expressions seemed haughty, and they looked with obvious disdain at the few farmers in town who respectfully stood aside to let them pass.

"They're very fine, aren't they?" Garion observed.

"They seem to think so," Wolf said, his expression faintly amused. "I think it's time that we found something to eat, don't you?"

Though he had not realized it until the old man mentioned it, Garion was suddenly ravenous. "Where will we go?" he asked. "They all seem so splendid. Would any of them let strangers sit at their tables?"

Wolf laughed and shook a jingling purse at his waist. "We should have no trouble making acquaintances," he said. "There are places where one may buy food."

Buy food? Garion had never heard of such a thing before. Anyone who appeared at Faldor's gate at mealtime was invited to the table as a matter of course. The world of the villagers was obviously very different from the world of Faldor's farm.

"But I don't have any money," he objected.

"I've enough for us both," Wolf assured him, stopping their horse before a large, low building with a sign bearing a picture of a cluster of grapes hanging just above its door. There were words on the sign, but of course Garion could not read them.

"What do the words say, Mister Wolf?" he asked.

"They say that food and drink may be bought inside," Wolf told him, getting down from the cart.

"It must be a fine thing to be able to read," Garion said wistfully. The old man looked at him, seemingly surprised. "You can't read, boy?" he asked incredulously.

"I've never found anyone to teach me," Garion said. "Faldor reads, I think, but no one else at the farm knows how."

"Nonsense," Wolf snorted. "I'll speak to your Aunt about it. She's been neglecting her responsibility. She should have taught you years ago."

"Can Aunt Pol read?" Garion asked, stunned.

"Of course she can," Wolf said, leading the way into the tavern. "She says she finds little advantage in it, but she and I had that particular argument out, many years ago." The old man seemed quite upset by Garion's lack of education.

Garion, however, was far too interested in the smoky interior of the tavern to pay much attention. The room was large and dark with a low, beamed ceiling and a stone floor strewn with rushes. Though it was not cold, a fire burned in a stone pit in the center of the room, and the smoke rose errantly toward a chimney set above it on four square stone pillars. Tallow candles guttered in clay dishes on several of the long, stained tables, and there was a reek of wine and stale beer in the air.

"What have you to eat?" Wolf demanded of a sour, unshaven man wearing a grease-spotted apron.

"We've a bit of a joint left," the man said, pointing at a spit resting to one side of the fire pit. "Roasted only day before yesterday. And meat porridge fresh yesterday morning, and bread no more than a week old."

"Very well," Wolf said, sitting down. "And I'll have a pot of your best ale and milk for the boy."

"Milk?" Garion protested.

"Milk," Wolf said firmly.

"You have money?" the sour-looking man demanded.

Wolf jingled his purse, and the sour man looked suddenly less sour.

"Why is that man over there sleeping?" Garion asked, pointing at a snoring villager sitting with his head down on one of the tables.

"Drunk," Wolf said, scarcely glancing at the snoring man.

"Shouldn't someone take care of him?"
"He'd rather not be taken care of."
"Do you know him?"
"I know of him," Wolf said, "and many others like him. I've occasionally been in that condition myself."
"Why?"
"It seemed appropriate at the time."
The roast was dry and overdone, the meat porridge was thin and watery, and the bread was stale, but Garion was too hungry to notice. He carefully cleaned his plate as he had been taught, then sat as Mister Wolf lingered over a second pot of ale.
"Quite splendid," he said, more to be saying something than out of any real conviction. All in all he found that Upper Gralt did not live up to his expectations.
"Adequate." Wolf shrugged. "Village taverns are much the same the world over. I've seldom seen one I'd hurry to revisit. Shall we go?" He laid down a few coins, which the sour-looking man snatched up quickly, and led Garion back out into the afternoon sunlight.
"Let's find your Aunt's spice merchant," he said, "and then see to a night's lodging-and a stable for our horse." They set off down the street, leaving horse and cart beside the tavern.
The house of the Tolnedran spice merchant was a tall, narrow building in the next street. Two swarthy, thick-bodied men in short tunics lounged in the street at his front door near a fierce-looking black horse wearing a curious armored saddle. The two men stared with dull-eyed disinterest at passers-by in the lane. Mister Wolf stopped when he caught sight of them.
"Is something wrong?" Garion asked.
"Thulls," Wolf said quietly, looking hard at the two men.
"What?"
"Those two are Thulls," the old man said. "They usually work as porters for the Murgos."
"What are Murgos?"
"The people of Cthol Murgos," Wolf said shortly. "Southern Angaraks."
"The ones we beat at the battle of Vo Mimbre?" Garion asked. "Why would they be here?"
"The Murgos have taken up commerce," Wolf said, frowning. "I hadn't expected to see one of them in so remote a village. We may as well go in. The Thulls have seen us, and it might look strange if we turned now and went back. Stay close to me, boy, and don't say anything."
They walked past the two heavyset men and entered the spice merchant's shop. The Tolnedran was a thin, baldheaded man wearing a brown, belted gown that reached to the floor. He was nervously weighing several packets of pungent-smelling powder which lay on the counter before him.
"Good day to you," he said to Wolf. "Please have patience. I'll be with you shortly." He spoke with a slight lisp that Garion found peculiar.
"No hurry," Wolf said in a wheezy, cracking voice. Garion looked at him sharply and was astonished to see that his friend was stooped and that his head was nodding foolishly.
"See to their needs," the other man in the shop said shortly. He was a dark, burly man wearing a chain-mail shirt and a short sword belted to his waist. His cheekbones were high, and there were several savagelooking scars on his face. His eyes looked curiously angular, and his voice was harsh and thickly accented.
"No hurry," Wolf said in his wheezy cackle.
"My business.here will take some time," the Murgo said coldly, "and 1 prefer not to be rushed. Tell the merchant here what you need, old man."
"My thanks, then," Wolf cackled. "I have a list somewhere about me." He began to fumble foolishly in his pockets. "My master drew it up. I do hope you can read it, friend merchant, for I cannot." He finally found the list and presented it to the Tolnedran.
The merchant glanced at the list. "This will only take a moment," he told the

Murgo.
The Murgo nodded and stood staring stonily at Wolf and Garion. His eyes narrowed slightly, and his expression changed. "You're a seemly appearing boy," he said to Garion. "What's your name?"
Until that moment, in his entire life, Garion had been an honest and truthful boy, but Wolf's manner had opened before his eyes an entire world of deception and subterfuge. Somewhere in the back of his mind he seemed to hear a warning voice, a dry, calm voice advising him that the situation was dangerous and that he should take steps to protect himself. He hesitated only an instant before telling his first deliberate lie. He allowed his mouth to drop open and his face to assume an expression of vacantheaded stupidity. "Rundorig, your Honor," he mumbled.
"An Arendish name," the Murgo said, his eyes narrowing even more. "You don't look like an Arend."
Garion gaped at him.
"Are you an Arend, Rundorig?" the Murgo pressed.
Garion frowned as if struggling with a thought while his mind raced. The dry voice suggested several alternatives.
"My father was," he said finally, "but my mother is a Sendar, and people say I favor her."
"You say was, " the Murgo said quickly. "Is your father dead, then?" His scarred face was intent.
Garion nodded foolishly. "A tree he was cutting fell on him," he lied. "It was a long time ago."
The Murgo suddenly seemed to lose interest. "Here's a copper penny for you, boy," he said, indifferently tossing a small coin on the floor at Garion's feet. "It has the likeness of the God Torak stamped on it. Perhaps it will bring you luck-or at least more wit."
Wolf stooped quickly and retrieved the coin, but the coin he handed to Garion was a common Sendarian penny.
"Thank the good man, Rundorig," he wheezed.
"My thanks, your Honor," Garion said, concealing the penny tightly in his fist.
The Murgo shrugged and looked away.
Wolf paid the Tolnedran merchant for the spices, and he and Garion left the shop.
"You played a dangerous game, boy," Wolf said once they were out of earshot of the two lounging Thulls.
"You seemed not to want him to know who we were," Garion explained. "I wasn't sure why, but I thought I ought to do the same. Was what I did wrong?"
"You're very quick," Wolf said approvingly. "I think we managed to deceive the Murgo."
"Why did you change the coin?" Garion asked.
"Sometimes Angarak coins are not what they seem," Wolf said. "It's better for you not to have any of them. Let's fetch our horse and cart. It's a long way back to Faldor's farm."
"I thought we were going to take lodgings for the night."
"That's changed now. Come along, boy. It's time for us to leave."
The horse was very tired, and he moved slowly up the long hill out of Upper Gralt as the sun went down ahead of them.
"Why wouldn't you let me keep the Angarak penny, Mister Wolf?" Garion persisted. The subject still puzzled him.
"There are many things in this world that seem to be one thing and are in fact another," Wolf said somewhat grimly. "I don't trust Angaraks, and I particularly don't trust Murgos. It would be just as well, I think, if you never had in your possession anything that bears the likeness of Torak."
"But the war between the west and the Angaraks has been over for five hundred years now," Garion objected."All men say so."
"Not all men," Wolf said. "Now take that robe out of the back of the cart and cover up. Your Aunt would never forgive me if you should take a chill."
"I will if you think I should," Garion said, "but I'm not a bit cold and not at

all sleepy. I'll keep you company as we go."
"That'll be a comfort, boy," Wolf said.
"Mister Wolf," Garion said after some time, "did you know my mother and father?"
"Yes," Wolf said quietly.
"My father's dead too, isn't he?"
"I'm afraid so."
Garion sighed deeply. "I thought so," he said. "I wish I'd known them. Aunt Pol says I was only a baby when-" He couldn't bring himself to say it. "I've tried to remember my mother, but I can't."
"You were very small," Wolf said.
"What were they like?" Garion asked.
Wolf scratched at his beard. "Ordinary," he said. "So ordinary you wouldn't look twice at either one of them."
Garion was offended by that. "Aunt Pol says my mother was very beautiful," he objected.
"She was."
"Then how can you say she was ordinary?"
"She wasn't prominent or important," Wolf said. "Neither was your father. Anyone who saw them thought that they were just simple village people - a young man with a young wife and their baby - that's all anyone ever saw. That's all anyone was ever supposed to see."
"I don't understand."
"It's very complicated."
"What was my father like?"
"Medium size," Wolf said. "Dark hair. A very serious young man. I liked him."
"Did he love my mother?"
"More than anything."
"And me?"
"Of course."
"What kind of place did they live in?"
"It was a small place," Wolf said, "a little village near the mountains, a long way from any main roads. They had a cottage at the end of the street. It was a small, solid little house. Your father built it himself - he was a stonecutter. I used to stop by there once in a while when I was in the neighborhood." The old man's voice droned on, describing the village and the house and the two who lived there. Garion listened, not even realizing it when he fell asleep.
It must have been very late, almost on toward dawn. In a half drowse, the boy felt himself lifted from the cart and carried up a flight of stairs. The old man was surprisingly strong. Aunt Pol was there - he knew that without even opening his eyes. There was a particular scent about her that he could have found in a dark room.
"Just cover him up," Mister Wolf said softly to Aunt Pol. "Best not to wake him just now."
"What happened?" Aunt Pol asked, her voice as soft as the old man's.
"There was a Murgo in town-at your spice merchant's. He asked questions and he tried to give the boy an Angarak penny."
"In Upper Gralt? Are you certain he was only a Murgo?"
"It's impossible to tell. Not even I can distinguish between Murgo and Grolim with any certainty."
"What happened to the coin?"
"I was quick enough to get it. I gave the boy a Sendarian penny instead. If our Murgo was a Grolim, we'll let him follow me. I'm sure I can give him several months of entertainment."
"You'll be leaving, then?" Aunt Pol's voice seemed somehow sad.
"It's time," Wolf said. "Right now the boy is safe enough here, and I must be abroad. There are things afoot I must see to. When Murgos begin to appear in remote places, I begin to worry. We have a great responsibility and a great care placed upon us, and we mustn't allow ourselves to become careless."
"Will you be gone long?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Some years, I expect. There are many things I must look into and many people

I'll have to see."
"I'll miss you," Aunt Pol said softly.
He laughed. "Sentimentality, Pol?" he said dryly. "That's hardly in character."
"You know what I mean. I'm not suited for this task you and the others have given me. What do I know about the raising of small boys?"
"You're doing well," Wolf said. "Keep the boy close, and don't let his nature drive you into hysterics. Be careful; he lies like a champion."
"Garion?" Her voice was shocked.
"He lied to the Murgo so well that even I was impressed."
"Garion?"
"He's also started asking questions about his parents," Wolf said.
"How much have you told him?"
"Very little. Only that they're dead."
"Let's leave it at that for now. There's no point in telling him things he isn't old enough to cope with yet."
Their voices went on, but Garion drifted off into sleep again, and he was almost sure that it was all a dream.
But the next morning when he awoke, Mister Wolf was gone.

Chapter Four

THE SEASONS TURNED, as seasons will. Summer ripened into autumn; the blaze of autumn died into winter; winter grudgingly relented to the urgency of spring; and spring bloomed into summer again.
With the turning of the seasons the years turned, and Garion imperceptibly grew older.
As he grew, the other children grew as well - all except poor Doroon, who seemed doomed to be short and skinny all his life. Rundorig sprouted like a young tree and was soon almost as big as any man on the farm. Zubrette, of course, did not grow so tall, but she developed in other ways which the boys began to find interesting.
In the early autumn just before Garion's fourteenth birthday, he came very close to ending his career. In response to some primal urge all children have - given a pond and a handy supply of logs - they had built a raft that summer. The raft was neither very large nor was it particularly well-built. It had a tendency to sink on one end if the weight aboard it were improperly distributed and an alarming habit of coming apart at unexpected moments.
Quite naturally it was Garion who was aboard the raft - showing off - on that fine autumn day when the raft quite suddenly decided once and for all to revert to its original state. The bindings all came undone, and the logs began to go their separate ways.
Realizing his danger only at the last moment, Garion made a desperate effort to pole for shore, but his haste only made the disintegration of his craft more rapid. In the end he found himself standing on a single log, his arms windmilling wildly in a futile effort to retain his balance. His eyes, desperately searching for some aid, swept the marshy shore. Some distance up the slope behind his playmates he saw the familiar figure of the man on the black horse. The man wore a dark robe, and his burning eyes watched the boy's plight. Then the spiteful log rolled under Garion's feet, and he toppled and fell with a resounding splash.
Garion's education, unfortunately, had not included instruction in the art of swimming; and while the water was not really very deep, it was deep enough. The bottom of the pond was very unpleasant, a kind of dark, weedy ooze inhabited by frogs, turtles and a singularly unsavory-looking eel that slithered away snakelike when Garion plunged like a sinking rock into the weeds. Garion struggled, gulped water and launched himself with his legs toward the surface again. Like a broaching whale, he rose from the depths, gasped a couple of quick, sputtering breaths and heard the screams of his playmates. The dark figure on the slope had not moved, and for a single instant every detail of that bright afternoon was etched on Garion's mind. He even observed that, although the rider was in the open under the full glare of the autumn sun, neither man

nor horse cast any shadow. Even as his mind grappled with that impossibility, he sank once more to the murky bottom.
It occurred to him as he struggled, drowning, amongst the weeds that if he could launch himself up in the vicinity of the log, he might catch hold of it and so remain afloat. He waved off a startled-looking frog and plunged upward again. He came up, unfortunately, directly under the log. The blow on the top of his head filled his eyes with light and his ears with a roaring sound, and he sank, no longer struggling, back toward the weeds which seemed to reach up for him.
And then Durnik was there. Garion felt himself lifted roughly by the hair toward the surface and then towed by that same convenient handle toward shore behind Durnik's powerfully churning strokes. The smith pulled the semiconscious boy out onto the bank, turned him over and stepped on him several times to force the water out of his lungs.
Garion's ribs creaked.
"Enough, Durnik," he gasped finally. He sat up, and the blood from the splendid cut on top of his head immediately ran into his eyes. He wiped the blood clear and looked around for the dark, shadowless rider, but the figure had vanished.
He tried to get up, but the world suddenly spun around him, and he fainted.
When he awoke, he was in his own bed with his head wrapped in bandages. Aunt Pol stood beside his bed, her eyes blazing. "You stupid boy!" she cried. "What were you doing in that pond?"
"Rafting," Garion said, trying to make it sound quite ordinary.
"Rafting?" she said. "Rafting? Who gave you permission?"
"Well-" he said uncertainly. "We just "
"You just what?"
He looked at her helplessly.
And then with a low cry she took him in her arms and crushed him to her almost suffocatingly.
Briefly Garion considered telling her about the strange, shadowless figure that had watched his struggles in the pond, but the dry voice in his mind that sometimes spoke to him told him that this was not the time for that. He seemed to know somehow that the business between him and the man on the black horse was something very private, and that the time would inevitably come when they would face each other in some kind of contest of will or deed. To speak of it now to Aunt Pol would involve her in the matter, and he did not want that. He was not sure exactly why, but he did know that the dark figure was an enemy, and though that thought was a bit frightening, it was also exciting. There was no question that Aunt Pol could deal with this stranger, but if she did, Garion knew that he would lose something very personal and for some reason very important. And so he said nothing.
"It really wasn't anything all that dangerous, Aunt Pol," he said instead, rather lamely. "I was starting to get the idea of how to swim. I'd have been all right if I hadn't hit my head on that log."
"But of course you did hit your head," she pointed out.
"Well, yes, but it wasn't that serious. I'd have been all right in a minute or two."
"Under the circumstances I'm not sure you had a minute or two," she said bluntly.
"Well-" he faltered, and then decided to let it drop.
That marked the end of Garion's freedom. Aunt Pol confined him to the scullery. He grew to know every dent and scratch on every pot in the kitchen intimately. He once estimated gloomily that he washed each one twenty-one times a week. In a seeming orgy of messiness, Aunt Pol suddenly could not even boil water without dirtying at least three or four pans, and Garion had to scrub every one. He hated it and began to think quite seriously of running away.
As autumn progressed and the weather began to deteriorate, the other children were also more or less confined to the compound as well, and it wasn't so bad. Rundorig, of course, was seldom with them anymore since his man's size had made him - even more than Garion - subject to more and more frequent labor.
When he could, Garion slipped away to be with Zubrette and Doroon, but they no

longer found much entertainment in leaping into the hay or in the endless games of tag in the stables and barns. They had reached an age and size where adults rather quickly noticed such idleness and found tasks to occupy them. Most often they would sit in some out of the way place and simply talk - which is to say that Garion and Zubrette would sit and listen to the endless flow of Doroon's chatter. That small, quick boy, as unable to be quiet as he was to sit still, could seemingly talk for hours about a half dozen raindrops, and his words tumbled out breathlessly as he fidgeted.

"What's that mark on your hand, Garion?" Zubrette asked one rainy day, interrupting Doroon's bubbling voice.

Garion looked at the perfectly round, white patch on the palm of his right hand.

"I've noticed it too," Doroon said, quickly changing subjects in midsentence. "But Garion grew up in the kitchen, didn't you, Garion? It's probably a place where he burned himself when he was little - you know, reached out before anyone could stop him and put his hand on something hot. I'll bet his Aunt Pol really got angry about that, because she can get angrier faster than anybody else I've ever seen, and she can really-"

"It's always been there," Garion said, tracing the mark on his palm with his left forefinger. He had never really looked closely at it before. It covered the entire palm of his hand and had in certain light a faint silvery sheen.

"Maybe it's a birthmark," Zubrette suggested.

"I'll bet that's it," Doroon said quickly. "I saw a man once that had a big purple one on the side of his face-one of those wagoneers that comes by to pick up the turnip crop in the fall - anyway, the mark was all over the side of his face, and I thought it was a big bruise at first and thought that he must have been in an awful fight - those wagoneers fight all the time - but then I saw that it wasn't really a bruise but - like Zubrette just said - it was a birthmark. I wonder what causes things like that."

That evening, after he'd gotten ready for bed, he asked his Aunt about it.

"What's this mark, Aunt Pol?" he asked, holding his hand up, palm out.

She looked up from where she was brushing her long, dark hair.

"It's nothing to worry about," she told him.

"I wasn't worried about it," he said. "I just wondered what it was. Zubrette and Doroon think it's a birthmark. Is that what it is?"

"Something like that," she said.

"Did either of my parents have the same kind of mark?"

"Your father did. It's been in the family for a long time."

A sudden strange thought occurred to Garion. Without knowing why, he reached out with the hand and touched the white lock at his Aunt's brow. "Is it like that white place in your hair?" he asked.

He felt a sudden tingle in his hand, and it seemed somehow that a window opened in his mind. At first there was only the sense of uncountable years moving by like a vast sea of ponderously rolling clouds, and then, sharper than any knife, a feeling of endlessly repeated loss, of sorrow. Then, more recent, there was his own face, and behind it more faces, old, young, regal or quite ordinary, and behind them all, no longer foolish as it sometimes seemed, the face of Mister Wolf. But more than anything there was a knowledge of an unearthly, inhuman power, the certainty of an unconquerable will.

Aunt Pol moved her head away almost absently.

"Don't do that, Garion," she said, and the window in his mind shut.

"What was it?" he asked, burning with curiosity and wanting to open the window again.

"A simple trick," she said.

"Show me how."

"Not yet, my Garion," she said, taking his face between her hands. "Not yet. You're not ready yet. Now go to bed."

"You'll be here?" he asked, a little frightened now.

"I'll always be here," she said, tucking him in. And then she went back to brushing her long, thick hair, humming a strange song as she did in a deep, melodious voice; to that sound he fell asleep.

After that not even Garion himself saw the mark on his own palm very often. There suddenly seemed to be all kinds of dirty jobs for him to do which kept not only his hands, but the rest of him as well, very dirty.

The most important holiday in Sendaria - and indeed in the rest of the kingdoms of the west - was Erastide. It commemorated that day, eons before, when the seven Gods joined hands to create the world with a single word. The festival of Erastide took place in midwinter, and, because there was little to do on a farm like Faldor's at that season, it had by custom become a splendid two-week celebration with feasts and gifts and decorations in the dining hall and little pageants honoring the Gods. These last, of course, were a reflection of Faldor's piety. Faldor, though he was a good, simple man, had no illusions about how widely his sentiments were shared by others on the farm. He thought, however, that some outward show of devotional activity was in keeping with the season; and, because he was such a good master, the people on his farm chose to humor him.

It was also at this season, unfortunately, that Faldor's married daughter, Anhelda, and her husband, Eilbrig, made their customary annual visit to remain on speaking terms with her father. Anhelda had no intention of endangering her inheritance rights by seeming inattention. Her visits, however, were a trial to Faldor, who looked upon his daughter's somewhat overdressed and supercilious husband, a minor functionary in a commercial house in the capital city of Sendar, with scarcely concealed contempt.

Their arrival, however, marked the beginning of the Erastide festival at Faldor's farm; so, while no one cared for them personally, their appearance was always greeted with a certain enthusiasm.

The weather that year had been particularly foul, even for Sendaria. The rains had settled in early and were soon followed by a period of soggy snow - not the crisp, bright powder which came later in the winter, but a damp slush, always half melting. For Garion, whose duties in the kitchen now prevented him from joining with his former playmates in their traditional preholiday orgy of anticipatory excitement, the approaching holiday seemed somehow flat and stale. He yearned back to the good old days and often sighed with regret and moped about the kitchen like a sandy-haired cloud of doom.

Even the traditional decorations in the dining hall, where Erastide festivities always took place, seemed decidedly tacky to him that year. The fir boughs festooning the ceiling beams were somehow not as green, and the polished apples carefully tied to the boughs were smaller and not as red. He sighed some more and reveled in his sullen moping.

Aunt Pol, however, was not impressed, and her attitude was firmly unsympathetic. She routinely checked his brow with her hand for signs of fever and then dosed him with the foulest-tasting tonic she could concoct. Garion was careful after that to mope in private and to sigh less audibly. That dry, secret part of his mind informed him matter-of factly that he was being ridiculous, but Garion chose not to listen. The voice in his mind was much older and wiser than he, but it seemed determined to take all the fun out of life.

On the morning of Erastide, a Murgo and five Thulls appeared with a wagon outside the gate and asked to see Faldor. Garion, who had long since learned that no one pays attention to a boy and that many interesting things may be learned by placing himself in a position to casually overhear conversations, busied himself with some small, unimportant chore near the gate.

The Murgo, his face scarred much like the face of the one in Upper Gralt, sat importantly on the wagon seat, his chain-mail shirt clinking each time he moved. He wore a black, hooded robe, and his sword was much in evidence. His eyes moved constantly, taking in everything. The Thulls, in muddy felt boots and heavy cloaks, lounged disinterestedly against the wagon, seemingly indifferent to the raw wind whipping across the snowy fields.

Faldor, in his finest doublet - it was after all Erastide - came across the yard, closely followed by Anhelda and Eilbrig.

"Good morrow, friend," Faldor said to the Murgo. "Joyous Erastide to you."

The Murgo grunted. "You are, I take it, the farmer Faldor?" he asked in his

heavily accented voice.
"I am," Faldor replied.
"I understand you have a goodly number of hams on hand-well cured."
"The pigs did well this year," Faldor answered modestly.
"I will buy them," the Murgo announced, jingling his purse.
Faldor bowed. "First thing tomorrow morning," he said.
The Murgo stared.
"This is a pious household," Faldor explained. "We do not offend the Gods by breaking the sanctity of Erastide."
"Father," Anhelda snapped, "don't be foolish. This noble merchant has come a long way to do business."
"Not on Erastide," Faldor said stubbornly, his long face firm.
"In the city of Sendar," Eilbrig said in his rather high-pitched, nasal voice, "we do not let such sentimentality interfere with business."
"This is not the city of Sendar," Faldor said flatly. "This is Faldor's farm, and on Faldor's farm we do no work and conduct no business on Erastide."
"Father," Anhelda protested, "the noble merchant has gold. Gold, father, goldl "
"I will hear no more of it," Faldor announced. He turned to the Murgo. "You and your servants are welcome to join us in our celebration, friend," he said. "We can provide quarters for you and the promise of the finest dinner in all of Sendaria and the opportunity to honor the Gods on this special day. No man is made poorer by attending to his religious obligations."
"We do not observe this holiday in Cthol Murgos," the scar-faced man said coldly. "As the noble lady says, I have come a long way to do business and have not much time to tarry. I'm sure there are other farmers in the district with the merchandise I require."
"Father!" Anhelda wailed.
"I know my neighbors," Faldor said quietly. "Your luck today will be small, I fear. The observance of this day is a firm tradition in this area."
The Murgo thought for a moment. "It may be as you say," he said finally. "I will accept your invitation, provided that we can do business as early as possible tomorrow."
Faldor bowed. "I'll place myself at your service at first light tomorrow if you so desire."
"Done, then," the Murgo said, climbing down from his wagon.
That afternoon the feast was laid in the dining hall. The kitchen helpers and a half dozen others who had been pressed into service for the special day scurried from kitchen to hall bearing smoking roasts, steaming hams and sizzling geese all under the lash of Aunt Pol's tongue. Garion observed sourly as he struggled with an enormous baron of beef that Faldor's prohibition of work on Erastide stopped at the kitchen door.
In time, all was ready. The tables were loaded, the fires in the fireplaces burned brightly, dozens of candles filled the hall with golden light, and torches flared in their rings on the stone pillars. Faldor's people, all in their best clothes, filed into the hall, their mouths watering in anticipation.
When all were seated, Faldor rose from his bench at the head of the center table. "Dear friends," he said, lifting his tankard, "I dedicate this feast to the Gods."
"The Gods," the people responded in unison, rising respectfully. Faldor drank briefly, and they all followed suit. "Hear me, O Gods," he prayed. "Most humbly we thank you for the bounty of this fair world which you made on this day, and we dedicate ourselves to your service for yet another year." He looked for a moment as if he were going to say more, but then sat down instead. Faldor always labored for many hours over special prayers for occasions such as this, but the agony of speaking in public invariably erased the words so carefully prepared from his mind. His prayers, therefore, were always very sincere and very short.
"Eat, dear friends," he instructed. "Do not let the food grow cold."
And so they ate. Anhelda and Eilbrig, who joined them all at this one meal only at Faldor's insistence, devoted their conversational efforts to the Murgo, since he was the only one in the room who was worthy of their attention.

"I have long thought of visiting Cthol Murgos," Eilbrig stated rather pompously. "Don't you agree, friend merchant, that greater contact between east and west is the way to overcome those mutual suspicions which have so marred our relationships in the past?"
"We Murgos prefer to keep to ourselves," the scar-faced man said shortly.
"But you are here, friend," Eilbrig pointed out. "Doesn't that suggest that greater contact might prove beneficial?"
"I am here as a duty," the Murgo said. "I don't visit here out of preference."
He looked around the room. "Are these then all of your people?" he asked Faldor.
"Every soul is here," Faldor told him.
"I was led to believe there was an old man here - with white hair and beard."
"Not here, friend," Faldor said. "I myself am the eldest here, and as you can see, my hair is far from white."
"One of my countrymen met such a one some years ago," the Murgo said. "He was accompanied by an Arendish boy - Rundorig, I believe his name was."
Garion, seated at the next table, kept his face to his plate and listened so hard that he thought his ears must be growing.
"We have a boy named Rundorig here," Faldor said. "That tall lad at the end of the far table over there." He pointed.
"No," the Murgo said, looking hard at Rundorig. "That isn't the boy who was described to me."
"It's not an uncommon name among the Arends," Faldor said. "Quite probably your friend met a pair from another farm."
"That must be it," the Murgo said, seeming to dismiss the affair. "This ham is excellent," he said, pointing at his plate with the point of the dagger with which he ate. "Are the ones in your smokehouse of similar quality?"
"Oh, no, friend merchant!" Faldor laughed. "You won't so easily trick me into talking business on this day."
The Murgo smiled briefly, the expression appearing strange on his scarred face.
"One can always try," he said. "I would, however, compliment your cook."
"A compliment for you, Mistress Pol," Faldor said, raising his voice slightly. "Our friend from Cthol Murgos finds your cooking much to his liking."
"I thank him for his compliment," Aunt Pol said, somewhat coldly.
The Murgo looked at her, and his eyes widened slightly as if in recognition.
"A noble meal, great lady," he said, bowing slightly in her direction. "Your kitchen is a place of magic."
"No," she said, her face suddenly very haughty, "not magic. Cooking is an art which anyone with patience may learn. Magic is quite something else."
"But magic is also an art, great lady," the Murgo said.
"There are many who think so," Aunt Pol said, "but true magic comes from within and is not the result of nimble fingers which trick the eye."
The Murgo stared at her, his face hard, and she returned his gaze with steely eyes. To Garion, sitting nearby, it seemed as if something had passed between them that had nothing to do with the words they spoke - a kind of challenge seemed to hang in the air. And then the Murgo looked away almost as if he feared to take up that challenge.
When the meal was over, it was time for the rather simple pageant which traditionally marked Erastide. Seven of the older farmhands who had slipped away earlier appeared in the doorway wearing the long, hooded robes and carefully carved and painted masks which represented the faces of the Gods. The costumes were old and showed the wrinkles which were the result of having been packed away in Faldor's attic for the past year. With a slow step, the robed and masked figures paced into the hall and lined up at the foot of the table where Faldor sat. Then each in turn spoke a short piece which identified the God he represented.
"I am Aldur," Cralto's voice came from behind the first mask, "the God who dwells alone, and I command this world to be."
"I am Belar," came another familiar voice from behind the second mask, "Bear-God of the Alorns, and I command this world to be." And so it went down the line, Chaldan, Issa, Nedra, Mara and then finally the last figure, which, unlike the

others, was robed in black and whose mask was made of steel instead of painted wood.
"I am Torak," Durnik's voice came hollowly from behind the mask, "Dragon-God of the Angaraks, and I command this world to be."
A movement caught Garion's eye, and he looked quickly. The Murgo had covered his face with his hands in a strange, almost ceremonial gesture. Beyond him, at the far table, the five Thulls were ashen-faced and trembling.
The seven figures at the foot of Faldor's table joined their hands. "We are the Gods," they said in unison, "and we command this world to be."
"Hearken unto the words of the Gods," Faldor declaimed. "Welcome are the Gods in the house of Faldor."
"The blessing of the Gods be upon the house of Faldor," the seven responded, "and upon all this company." And then they turned and, as slowly as they had come, they paced from the hall.
And then came the gifts. There was much excitement at this, for the gifts were all from Faldor, and the good farmer struggled long each year to provide the most suitable gift for each of his people. New tunics and hose and gowns and shoes were much in evidence, but Garion this year was nearly overwhelmed when he opened a smallish, cloth - wrapped bundle and found a neat, well-sheathed dagger.
"He's nearly a man," Faldor explained to Aunt Pol, "and a man always has need of a good knife."
Garion, of course, immediately tested the edge of his gift and quite promptly managed to cut his finger.
"It was inevitable, I suppose," Aunt Pol said, but whether she was speaking of the cut or the gift itself or the fact of Garion's growing up was not entirely clear.
The Murgo bought his hams the next morning, and he and the five Thulls departed. A few days later Anhelda and Eilbrig packed up and left on their return journey to the city of Sendar, and Faldor's farm returned to normal.
The winter plodded on. The snows came and went, and spring returned, as it always does. The only thing which made that spring any different from any other was the arrival of Brill, the new hand. One of the younger farmers had married and rented a small nearby croft and had left, laden down with practical gifts and good advice from Faldor to begin his life as a married man. Brill was hired to replace him.
Garion found Brill to be a definitely unattractive addition to the farm. The man's tunic and hose were patched and stained, his black hair and scraggly beard were unkempt, and one of his eyes looked off in a different direction from its fellow. He was a sour, solitary man, and he was none too clean. He seemed to carry with him an acrid reek of stale sweat that hung in his vicinity like a miasma. After a few attempts at conversation, Garion gave up and avoided him.
The boy, however, had other things to occupy his mind during that spring and summer. Though he had until then considered her to be more an inconvenience than a genuine playmate, quite suddenly he began to notice Zubrette. He had always known that she was pretty, but until that particular season that fact had been unimportant, and he had much preferred the company of Rundorig and Doroon. Now matters had changed. He noticed that the two other boys had also begun to pay more attention to her as well, and for the first time he began to feel the stirrings of jealousy.
Zubrette, of course, flirted outrageously with all three of them, and positively glowed when they glared at each other in her presence. Rundorig's duties in the fields kept him away most of the time, but Doroon was a serious worry to Garion. He became quite nervous and frequently found excuses to go about the compound to make certain that Doroon and Zubrette were not alone together.
His own campaign was charmingly simple - he resorted to bribery. Zubrette, like all little girls, was fond of sweets, and Garion had access to the entire kitchen. In a short period of time they had worked out an arrangement. Garion would steal sweets from the kitchen for his sunnyhaired playmate, and in return she would let him kiss her. Things might perhaps have gone further if Aunt Pol

had not caught them in the midst of such an exchange one bright summer afternoon in the seclusion of the hay barn.
"That's quite enough of that," she announced firmly from the doorway.
Garion jumped guiltily away from Zubrette.
"I've got something in my eye," Zubrette lied quickly. "Garion was trying to get it out for me."
Garion stood blushing furiously.
"Really?" Aunt Pol said. "How interesting. Come with me, Garion."
"I-" he started.
"Now, Garion."
And that was the end of that. Garion's time thereafter was totally occupied in the kitchen, and Aunt Pol's eyes seemed to be on him every moment. He mooned about a great deal and worried desperately about Doroon, who now appeared hatefully smug, but Aunt Pol remained watchful, and Garion remained in the kitchen.

Chapter Five

IN MIDAUTUMN that year, when the leaves had turned and the wind had showered them down from the trees like red and gold snow, when evenings were chill and the smoke from the chimneys at Faldor's farm rose straight and blue toward the first cold stars in a purpling sky, Wolf returned. He came up the road one gusty afternoon under a lowering autumn sky with the new-fallen leaves tumbling about him and his great, dark cloak whipping in the wind.
Garion, who had been dumping kitchen slops to the pigs, saw his approach and ran to meet him. The old man seemed travel-stained and tired, and his face under his gray hood was grim. His usual demeanor of happy-go-lucky cheerfulness had been replaced by a somber mood Garion had never seen in him before.
"Garion," Wolf said by way of greeting. "You've grown, I see."
"It's been five years," Garion said.
"Has it been so long?"
Garion nodded, falling into step beside his friend.
"Is everyone well?" Wolf asked.
"Oh yes," Garion said. "Everything's the same here-except that Breldo got married and moved away, and the old brown cow died last summer."
"I remember the cow," Wolf said. Then he said, "I must speak with your Aunt Pol."
"She's not in a very good mood today," Garion warned. "It might be better if you rested in one of the barns. I can sneak some food and drink to you in a bit."
"We'll have to chance her mood," Wolf said. "What I have to say to her can't wait."
They entered the gate and crossed the courtyard to the kitchen door. Aunt Pol was waiting. "You again?" she said tartly, her hands on her hips. "My kitchen still hasn't recovered from your last visit."
"Mistress Pol," Wolf said, bowing. Then he did a strange thing. His fingers traced an intricate little design in the air in front of his chest. Garion was quite sure that he was not intended to see those gestures.
Aunt Pol's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, and her face became grim.
"How do you-" she started, then caught herself. "Garion," she said sharply, "I need some carrots. There are still some in the ground at the far end of the kitchen garden. Take a spade and a pail and fetch me some."
"But " he protested, and then, warned by her expression, he left quickly. He got a spade and pail from a nearby shed and then loitered near the kitchen door.
Eavesdropping, of course, was not a nice habit and was considered the worst sort of bad manners in Sendaria, but Garion had long ago concluded that whenever he was sent away, the conversation was bound to be very interesting and would probably concern him rather intimately. He had wrestled briefly with his conscience about it; but, since he really saw no harm in the practice - as long as he didn't repeat anything he heard - conscience had lost to curiosity.
Garion's ears were very sharp, but it took him a moment or two to separate the

two familiar voices from the other sounds in the kitchen.
"He will not leave you a trail," Aunt Pol was saying.
"He doesn't have to," Wolf replied. "The thing itself will make its trail known to me. I can follow it as easily as a fox can scent out the track of a rabbit."
"Where will he take it?" he asked.
"Who can say? His mind is closed to me. My guess is that he'll go north to Boktor. That's the shortest route to Gar og Nadrak. He'll know that I'll be after him, and he'll want to cross into the lands of the Angaraks as soon as possible. His theft won't be complete so long as he stays in the west."
"When did it happen?"
"Four weeks ago."
"He could already be in the Angarak kingdoms."
"That's not likely. The distances are great; but if he is, I'll have to follow him. I'll need your help."
"But how can I leave here?" Aunt Pol asked. "I have to watch over the boy."
Garion's curiosity was becoming almost unbearable. He edged closer to the kitchen door.
"The boy'll be safe enough here," Wolf said. "This is an urgent matter."
"No," Aunt Pol contradicted. "Even this place isn't safe. Last Erastide a Murgo and five Thulls came here. He posed as a merchant, but he asked a few too many questions - about an old man and a boy named Rundorig who had been seen in Upper Gralt some years ago. He may also have recognized me."
"It's more serious than I thought, then," Wolf said thoughtfully. "We'll have to move the boy. We can leave him with friends elsewhere."
"No," Aunt Pol disagreed again. "If I go with you, he'll have to go along. He's reaching an age where he has to be watched most carefully."
"Don't be foolish," Wolf said sharply.
Garion was stunned. Nobody talked to Aunt Pol that way.
"It's my decision to make," Aunt Pol said crisply. "We all agreed that he was to be in my care until he was grown. I won't go unless he goes with me."
Garion's heart leaped.
"Pol," Wolf said sharply, "think where we may have to go. You can't deliver the boy into those hands."
"He'd be safer in Cthol Murgos or in Mallorea itself than he would be here without me to watch him," Aunt Pol said. "Last spring I caught him in the barn with a girl about his own age. As I said, he needs watching."
Wolf laughed then, a rich, merry sound.
"Is that all?" he said. "You worry too much about such things."
"How would you like it if we returned and found him married and about to become a father?" Aunt Pol demanded acidly. "He'd make an excellent farmer, and what matter if we'd all have to wait a hundred years for the circumstances to be right again?"
"Surely it hasn't gone that far. They're only children."
"You're blind, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol said. "This is backcountry Sendaria, and the boy has been raised to do the proper and honorable thing. The girl is a bright-eyed little minx who's maturing much too rapidly for my comfort. Right now charming little Zubrette is a far greater danger than any Murgo could ever be. Either the boy goes along, or I won't go either. You have your responsibilities, and I have mine."
"There's no time to argue," Wolf said. "If it has to be this way, then so be it."
Garion almost choked with excitement. He felt only a passing, momentary pang at leaving Zubrette behind. He turned and looked exultantly up at the clouds scudding across the evening sky. And, because his back was turned, he did not see Aunt Pol approach through the kitchen door.
"The garden, as I recall, lies beyond the south wall," she pointed out.
Garion started guiltily.
"How is it that the carrots remain undug?" she demanded.
"I had to look for the spade," he said unconvincingly.
"Really? I see that you found it, however." Her eyebrows arched dangerously.

"Only just now."
"Splendid. Carrots, Garion-novel"
Garion grabbed his spade and pail and ran.
It was just dusk when he returned, and he saw Aunt Pol mounting the steps that led to Faldor's quarters. He might have followed her to listen, but a faint movement in the dark doorway of one of the sheds made him step instead into the shadow of the gate. A furtive figure moved from the shed to the foot of the stairs Aunt Pol had just climbed and silently crept up the stairs as soon as she went in Faldor's door. The light was fading, and Garion could not see exactly who followed his Aunt. He set down his pail and, grasping the spade like a weapon, he hurried quickly around the inner court, keeping to the shadows.
There came the sound of a movement inside the chambers upstairs, and the figure at the door straightened quickly and scurried down the steps. Garion slipped back out of sight, his spade still held at the ready. As the figure passed him, Garion briefly caught the scent of stale, musty clothing and rank sweat. As certainly as if he had seen the man's face, he knew that the figure that had followed his Aunt had been Brill, the new farmhand.
The door at the top of the stairs opened, and Garion heard his Aunt's voice.
"I'm sorry, Faldor, but it's a family matter, and I must leave immediately."
"I would pay you more, Pol." Faldor's voice was almost breaking.
"Money has nothing to do with it," Aunt Pol replied. "You're a good man, Faldor, and your farm has been a haven to me when I needed one. I'm grateful to you - more than you can know - but I must leave."
"Perhaps when this family business is over, you can come back," Faldor almost pleaded.
"No, Faldor," she said. "I'm afraid not."
"We'll miss you, Pol," Faldor said with tears in his voice.
"And I'll miss you, dear Faldor. I've never met a better-hearted man. I'd take it kindly if you wouldn't mention my leaving until I've gone. I'm not fond of explanations or sentimental good-byes."
"Whatever you wish, Pol."
"Don't look so mournful, old friend," Aunt Pol said lightly. "My helpers are well-trained. Their cooking will be the same as mine. Your stomach will never know the difference."
"My heart will," Faldor said.
"Don't be silly," she said gently. "Now I must see to supper." Garion moved quickly away from the foot of the stairs. Troubled, he put his spade back in the shed and fetched the pail of carrots he had left sitting by the gate. To reveal to his Aunt that he had seen Brill listening at the door would immediately raise questions about his own activities that he would prefer not to have to answer.
In all probability Brill was merely curious, and there was nothing menacing or ominous about that. To observe the unsavory Brill duplicating his own seemingly harmless pastime, however, made Garion quite uncomfortable - even slightly ashamed of himself.
Although Garion was much too excited to eat, supper that evening seemed as ordinary as any meal on Faldor's farm had ever been. Garion covertly watched sour-faced Brill, but the man showed no outward sign of having in any way been changed by the conversation he had gone to so much trouble to overhear.
When supper was over, as was always the case when he visited the farm, Mister Wolf was prevailed upon to tell a story. He rose and stood for a moment deep in thought as the wind moaned in the chimney and the torches flickered in their rings on the pillars in the hall.
"As all men know," he began, "the Marags are no more, and the Spirit of Mara weeps alone in the wilderness and wails among the mossgrown ruins of Maragor. But also, as all men know, the hills and streams of Maragor are heavy with fine yellow gold. That gold, of course, was the cause of the destruction of the Marags. When a certain neighboring kingdom became aware of the gold, the temptation became too great, and the result - as it almost always is when gold is at issue between kingdoms - was war. The pretext for the war was the lamentable fact that the Marags were cannibals. While this habit is distasteful

to civilized men, had there not been gold in Maragor it might have been overlooked.
"The war, however, was inevitable, and the Marags were slain. But the Spirit of Mara and the ghosts of all the slaughtered Marags remained in Maragor, as those who went into that haunted kingdom soon discovered."
"Now it chanced to happen that about that time there lived in the town of Muros in southern Sendaria three adventuresome men, and, hearing of all that gold, they resolved to journey down to Maragor to claim their share of it. The men, as I said, were adventuresome and bold, and they scoffed at the tales of ghosts.
"Their journey was long, for it is many hundreds of leagues from Muros to the upper reaches of Maragor, but the smell of the gold drew them on. And so it happened, one dark and stormy night, that they crept across the border into Maragor past the patrols which had been set to turn back just such as they. That nearby kingdom, having gone to all the expense and inconvenience of war, was quite naturally reluctant to share the gold with anyone who chanced to pass by.
"Through the night they crept, burning with their lust for gold. The Spirit of Mara wailed about them, but they were brave men and not afraid of spirits - and besides, they told each other, the sound was not truly a spirit, but merely the moaning of the wind in the trees.
"As dim and misty morning seeped amongst the hills, they could hear, not far away, the rushing sound of a river. As all men know, gold is most easily found along the banks of rivers, and so they made quickly toward that sound.
"Then one of them chanced to look down in the dim light, and behold, the ground at his feet was strewn with gold-lumps and chunks of it. Overcome with greed, he remained silent and loitered behind until his companions were out of sight; then he fell to his knees and began to gather up gold as a child might pick flowers.
"He heard a sound behind him and he turned. What he saw it is best not to say. Dropping all his gold, he bolted.
"Now the river they had heard cut through a gorge just about there, and his two companions were amazed to see him run off the edge of that gorge and even continue to run as he fell, his legs churning insubstantial air. Then they turned, and they saw what had been pursuing him.
"One went quite mad and leaped with a despairing cry into the same gorge which had just claimed his companion, but the third adventurer, the bravest and boldest of all, told himself that no ghost could actually hurt a living man and stood his ground. That, of course, was the worst mistake of all. The ghosts encircled him as he stood bravely, certain that they could not hurt him."
Mister Wolf paused and drank briefly from his tankard. "And then," the old storyteller continued, "because even ghosts can become hungry, they divided him up and ate him."
Garion's hair stood on end at the shocking conclusion of Wolf's tale, and he could sense the others at his table shuddering. It was not at all the kind of story they had expected to hear.
Durnik the smith, who was sitting nearby, had a perplexed expression on his plain face. Finally he spoke. "I would not question the truth of your story for the world," he said to Wolf, struggling with the words, "but if they ate him - the ghosts, I mean - where did it go? I mean -if ghosts are insubstantial, as all men say they are, they don't have stomachs, do they? And what would they bite with?"
Wolf's face grew sly and mysterious. He raised one finger as if he were about to make some cryptic reply to Durnik's puzzled question, and then he suddenly began to laugh.
Durnik looked annoyed at first, and then, rather sheepishly, he too began to laugh. Slowly the laughter spread as they all began to understand the joke.
"An excellent jest, old friend," Faldor said, laughing as hard as any of the others, "and one from which much instruction may be gained. Greed is bad, but fear is worse, and the world is dangerous enough without cluttering it with imaginary hobgoblins." Trust Faldor to twist a good story into a moralistic sermon of some kind.
"True enough, good Faldor," Wolf said more seriously, "but there are things in

this world which cannot be explained away or dismissed with laughter."
Brill, seated near the fire, had not joined in the laughter.
"I have never seen a ghost," he said sourly, "nor ever met anyone who has, and I for one do not believe in any kind of magic or sorcery or such childishness."
And he stood up and stamped out of the hall almost as if the story had been a kind of personal insult.
Later, in the kitchen, when Aunt Pol was seeing to the cleaning up and Wolf lounged against one of the worktables with a tankard of beer, Garion's struggle with his conscience finally came into the open. That dry, interior voice informed him most pointedly that concealing what he had seen was not merely foolish, but possibly dangerous as well. He set down the pot he was scrubbing and crossed to where they were. "It might not be important," he said carefully, "but this afternoon, when I was coming back from the garden, I saw Brill following you, Aunt Pol."
She turned and looked at him. Wolf set down his tankard.
"Go on, Garion," Aunt Pol said.
"It was when you went up to talk with Faldor," Garion explained. "He waited until you'd gone up the stairs and Faldor had let you in. Then he sneaked up and listened at the door. I saw him up there when I went to put the spade away."
"How long has this man Brill been at the farm?" Wolf asked, frowning.
"He came just last spring," Garion said, "after Breldo got married and moved away."
"And the Murgo merchant was here at Erastide some months before?"
Aunt Pol looked at him sharply.
"You think-" She did not finish.
"I think it might not be a bad idea if I were to step around and have a few words with friend Brill," Wolf said grimly, "Do you know where his room is, Garion?"
Garion nodded, his heart suddenly racing.
"Show me." Wolf moved away from the table against which he had been lounging, and his step was no longer the step of an old man. It was curiously as if the years had suddenly dropped away from him.
"Be careful," Aunt Pol warned.
Wolf chuckled, and the sound was chilling. "I'm always careful. You should know that by now."
Garion quickly led Wolf out into the yard and around to the far end where the steps mounted to the gallery that led to the rooms of the farmhands. They went up, their soft leather shoes making no sound on the worn steps.
"Down here," Garion whispered, not knowing exactly why he whispered.
Wolf nodded, and they went quietly down the dark gallery.
"Here," Garion whispered, stopping.
"Step back," Wolf breathed. He touched the door with his fingertips.
"Is it locked?" Garion asked.
"That's no problem," Wolf said softly. He put his hand to the latch, there was a click, and the door swung open. Wolf stepped inside with Garion close behind. It was totally dark in the room, and the sour stink of Brill's unwashed clothes hung in the air.
"He's not here," Wolf said in a normal tone. He fumbled with something at his belt, and there was the scrape of flint against steel and a flare of sparks. A wisp of frayed rope caught the sparks and began to glow. Wolf blew on the spark for a second, and it flared into flame. He raised the burning wisp over his head and looked around the empty room.
The floor and bed were littered with rumpled clothes and personal belongings. Garion knew instantly that this was not simple untidiness, but rather was the sign of a hasty departure, and he did not know exactly how it was that he knew.
Wolf stood for a moment, holding his little torch. His face seemed somehow empty, as if his mind were searching for something.
"The stables," he said sharply. "Quickly, boy!"
Garion turned and dashed from the room with Wolf close behind. The burning wisp of rope drifted down into the yard, illuminating it briefly after Wolf discarded

it over the railing as he ran.
There was a light in the stable. It was dim, partially covered, but faint beams shone through the weathered cracks in the door. The horses were stirring uneasily.
"Stay clear, boy," Wolf said as he jerked the stable door open.
Brill was inside, struggling to saddle a horse that shied from his rank smell.
"Leaving, Brill?" Wolf asked, stepping into the doorway with his arms crossed.
Brill turned quickly, crouched and with a snarl on his unshaven face. His off center eye gleamed whitely in the half muffled light of the lantern hanging from a peg on one of the stalls, and his broken teeth shone behind his pulled-back lips.
"A strange time for a journey," Wolf said dryly.
"Don't interfere with me, old man," Brill said, his tone menacing. "You'll regret it."
"I've regretted many things in my life," Wolf said. "I doubt that one more will make all that much difference."
"I warned you." Brill snarled, and his hand dove under his cloak and emerged with a short, rust-splotched sword.
"Don't be stupid," Wolf said in a tone of overwhelming contempt. Garion, however, at the first flash of the sword, whipped his hand to his belt, drew his dagger, and stepped in front of the unarmed old man. "Get back, boy," Wolf barked.
But Garion had already lunged forward, his bright dagger thrust out ahead of him. Later, when he had time to consider, he could not have explained why he reacted as he did. Some deep instinct seemed to take over.
"Garion," Wolf said, "get out of the way!"
"So much the better," Brill said, raising his sword.
And then Durnik was there. He appeared as if from nowhere, snatched up an ox yoke and struck the sword from Brill's hand. Brill turned on him, enraged, and Durnik's second blow took the cast-eyed man in the ribs, a little below the armpit. The breath whooshed from Brill's lungs, and he collapsed, gasping and writhing to the straw-littered floor.
"For shame, Garion," Durnik said reproachfully. "I didn't make that knife of yours for this kind of thing."
"He was going to kill Mister Wolf," Garion protested.
"Never mind that," Wolf said, bending over the gasping man on the floor of the stable. He searched Brill roughly and pulled a jingling purse out from under the stained tunic. He carried the purse to the lantern and opened it.
"That's mine," Brill gasped, trying to rise. Durnik raised the ox yoke, and Brill sank back again.
"A sizable sum for an ordinary farmhand to have, friend Brill," Wolf said, pouring the jingling coins from the purse into his hand. "How did you manage to come by it?"
Brill glared at him.
Garion's eyes grew wide at the sight of the coins. He had never seen gold before.
"You don't really need to answer, friend Brill," Wolf said, examining one of the coins. "Your gold speaks for you." He dumped the coins back in the purse and tossed the small leather pouch back to the man on the floor. Brill grabbed it quickly and pushed it back inside his tunic.
"I'll have to tell Faldor of this," Durnik said.
"No," Wolf said.
"It's a serious matter," Durnik said. "A bit of wrestling or a few blows exchanged is one thing, but drawing weapons is quite another."
"There's no time for all of that," Wolf said, taking a piece of harness strap from a peg on the wall. "Bind his hands behind him, and we'll put him in one of the grain bins. Someone will find him in the morning."
Durnik stared at him.
"Trust me, good Durnik," Wolf said. "The matter is urgent. Bind him and hide him someplace; then come to the kitchen. Come with me, Garion." And he turned and

left the stable.
Aunt Pol was pacing her kitchen nervously when they returned.
"Well?" she demanded.
"He was attempting to leave," Wolf said. "We stopped him."
"Did you-?" she left it hanging.
"No. He drew a sword, but Durnik chanced to be nearby and knocked the belligerence out of him. The intervention was timely. Your cub here was about to do battle. That little dagger of his is a pretty thing, but not really much of a match for a sword."
Aunt Pol turned on Garion, her eyes ablaze. Garion prudently stepped back out of reach.
"There's no time for that," Wolf said, retrieving the tankard he had set down before leaving the kitchen. "Brill had a pouchful of good red Angarak gold. The Murgos have set eyes to watching this place. I'd wanted to make our going less noticeable, but since we're already being watched, there's no point in that now. Gather what you and the boy will need. I want a few leagues between us and Brill before he manages to free himself. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder for Murgos every place I go."
Durnik, who had just come into the kitchen, stopped and stood staring at them.
"Things aren't what they seem here," he said. "What manner of folk are you, and how is it that you have such dangerous enemies?"
"That's a long story, good Durnik," Wolf said, "but I'm afraid there's no time to tell it now. Make our apologies to Faldor, and see if you can't detain Brill for a day or so. I'd like our trail to be quite cold before he or his friends try to find it."
"Someone else is going to have to do that," Durnik said slowly. "I'm not sure what this is all about, but I am sure that there's danger involved in it. It appears that I'll have to go with you - at least until I've gotten you safely away from here."
Aunt Pol suddenly laughed.
"You, Durnik? You mean to protect us?"
He drew himself up.
"I'm sorry, Mistress Pol," he said. "I will not permit you to go unescorted."
"Will not permit?" she said incredulously.
"Very well," Wolf said, a sly look on his face.
"Have you totally taken leave of your senses?" Aunt Pol demanded, turning on him.
"Durnik has shown himself to be a useful man," Wolf said. "If nothing else, he'll give me someone to talk with along the way. Your tongue has grown sharper with the years, Pol, and I don't relish the idea of a hundred leagues or more with nothing but abuse for companionship."
"I see that you've finally slipped into your dotage, Old Wolf," she said acidly.
"That's exactly the sort of thing I meant," Wolf replied blandly. "Now gather a few necessary things, and let's be away from here. The night is passing rapidly."
She glared at him a moment and then stormed out of the kitchen.
"I'll have to fetch some things too," Durnik said. He turned and went out into the gusty night.
Garion's mind whirled. Things were happening far too fast.
"Afraid, boy?" Wolf asked.
"Well-" Garion said. "It's just that I don't understand. I don't understand any of this at all."
"You will in time, Garion," Wolf said. "For now it's better perhaps that you don't. There's danger in what we're doing, but not all that great a danger. Your Aunt and I - and good Durnik, of course - will see that no harm comes to you. Now help me in the pantry." He took a lantern into the pantry and began loading some loaves of bread, a ham, a round yellow cheese and several bottles of wine into a sack which he took down from a peg.
It was nearly midnight, as closely as Garion could tell, when they quietly left the kitchen and crossed the dark courtyard. The faint creak of the gate as

Durnik swung it open seemed enormously loud.
As they passed through the gate, Garion felt a momentary pang. Faldor's farm had been the only home he had ever known. He was leaving now, perhaps forever, and such things had great significance. He felt an even sharper pang at the memory of Zubrette. The thought of Doroon and Zubrette together in the hay barn almost made him want to give the whole thing up altogether, but it was far too late now.
Beyond the protection of the buildings, the gusty wind was chill and whipped at Garion's cloak. Heavy clouds covered the moon, and the road seemed only slightly less dark than the surrounding fields. It was cold and lonely and more than a little frightening. He walked a bit closer to Aunt Pol.
At the top of the hill he stopped and glanced back. Faldor's farm was only a pale, dim blur in the valley behind. Regretfully, he turned his back on it. The valley ahead was very dark, and even the road was lost in the gloom before them.

Chapter Six

THEY HAD WALKED for miles, how many Garion could not say. He nodded as he walked, and sometimes stumbled over unseen stones on the dark road. More than anything now he wanted to sleep. His eyes burned, and his legs trembled on the verge of exhaustion.
At the top of another hill - there always seemed to be another hill, for that part of Sendaria was folded like a rumpled cloth - Mister Wolf stopped and looked about, his eyes searching the oppressive gloom.
"We turn aside from the road here," he announced.
"Is that wise?" Durnik asked. "There are woods hereabout, and I've heard that there may be robbers hiding there. Even if there aren't any robbers, aren't we likely to lose our way in the dark?" He looked up at the murky sky, his plain face, dimly seen, troubled. "I wish there was a moon."
"I don't think we need to be afraid of robbers," Wolf said confidently, "and I'm just as happy that there isn't a moon. I don't think we're being followed yet, but it's just as well that no one happens to see us pass. Murgo gold can buy most secrets." And with that he led them into the fields that lay beside the road.
For Garion the fields were impossible. If he had stumbled now and then on the road, the unseen furrows, holes, and clumps in the rough ground seemed to catch at his feet with every step. At the end of a mile, when they reached the black edge of the woods, he was almost ready to weep with exhaustion.
"How can we find our way in there?" he demanded, peering into the utter darkness of the woods.
"There's a woodcutter's track not far to this side," Wolf said, pointing. "We only have a little farther to go." And he set off again, following the edge of the dark woods, with Garion and the others stumbling along behind him. "Here we are," he said finally, stopping to allow them to catch up. "It's going to be very dark in there, and the track isn't wide. I'll go first, and the rest of you follow me."
"I'll be right behind you, Garion," Durnik said. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right." There was a note in the smith's voice, however, that hinted that his words were more to reassure himself than to calm the boy.
It seemed warmer in the woods. The trees sheltered them from the gusty wind, but it was so dark that Garion could not understand how Wolf could possibly find his way. A dreadful suspicion grew in his mind that Wolf actually did not know where he was going and was merely floundering along blindly, trusting to luck.
"Stop," a rumbling voice suddenly, shockingly, said directly ahead of them.
Garion's eyes, accustomed slightly now to the gloom of the woods, saw a vague outline of something so huge that it could not possibly be a man.
"A giant!" he screamed in a sudden panic. Then, because he was exhausted and because everything that had happened that evening had simply piled too much upon him all at one time, his nerve broke and he bolted into the trees.
"Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice cried out after him, "come back!"

But panic had taken hold of him. He ran on, falling over roots and bushes, crashing into trees and tangling his legs in brambles. It seemed like some endless nightmare of blind flight. He ran full tilt into a lowhanging, unseen branch, and sparks flared before his eyes with the sudden blow to his forehead. He lay on the damp earth, gasping and sobbing, trying to clear his head.
And then there were hands on him, horrid, unseen hands. A thousand terrors flashed through his mind at once, and he struggled desperately, trying to draw his dagger.
"Oh, no," a voice said. "None of that, my rabbit." His dagger was taken from him.
"Are you going to eat me?" Garion babbled, his voice breaking.
His captor laughed.
"On your feet, rabbit," he said, and Garion felt himself pulled up by a strong hand. His arm was taken in a firm grasp, and he was half dragged through the woods.
Somewhere ahead there was a light, a winking fire among the trees, and it seemed that he was being taken that way. He knew that he must think, must devise some means of escape, but his mind, stunned by fright and exhaustion, refused to function.
There were three wagons sitting in a rough half circle around the fire. Durnik was there, and Wolf, and Aunt Pol, and with them a man so huge that Garion's mind simply refused to accept the possibility that he was real. His tree-trunk sized legs were wrapped in furs cross-tied with leather thongs, and he wore a chain-mail shirt that reached to his knees, belted at the waist. From the belt hung a ponderous sword on one side and a short-handled axe on the other. His hair was in braids, and he had a vast, bristling red beard.
As they came into the light, Garion was able to see the man who had captured him. He was a small man, scarcely taller than Garion himself, and his face was dominated by a long pointed nose. His eyes were small and squinted, and his straight, black hair was raggedly cut. The face was not the sort to inspire confidence, and the man's stained and patched tunic and short, wicked-looking sword did little to contradict the implications of the face.
"Here's our rabbit," the small, weasel-like man announced as he pulled Garion into the circle of the firelight. "And a merry chase he led me, too."
Aunt Pol was furious.
"Don't you ever do that again," she said sternly to Garion.
"Not so quick, Mistress Pol," Wolf said. "It's better for him to run than to fight just yet. Until he's bigger, his feet are his best friends."
"Have we been captured by robbers?" Garion asked in a quavering voice.
"Robbers?" Wolf laughed. "What a wild imagination you have, boy. These two are our friends."
"Friends?" Garion asked doubtfully, looking suspiciously at the redbearded giant and the weasel-faced man beside him. "Are you sure?" The giant laughed then too, his voice rumbling like an earthquake.
"The boy seems mistrustful," he boomed. "Your face must have warned him, friend Silk."
The smaller man looked sourly at his burly companion.
"This is Garion," Wolf said, pointing at the boy. "You already know Mistress Pol." His voice seemed to stress Aunt Pol's name. "And this is Durnik, a brave smith who has decided to accompany us."
"Mistress Pol?" the smaller man said, laughing suddenly for no apparent reason.
"I am known so," Aunt Pol said pointedly.
"It shall be my pleasure to call you so then, great lady," the small man said with a mocking bow.
"Our large friend here is Barak," Wolf went on. "He's useful to have around when there's trouble. As you can see, he's not a Sendar, but a Cherek from Val Alorn."
Garion had never seen a Cherek before, and the fearful tales of their prowess in battle became suddenly quite believable in the presence of the towering Barak.
"And I," the small man said with one hand to his chest, "am called Silk - not

much of a name, I'll admit, but one which suits me - and I am from Boktor in Drasnia. I am a juggler and an acrobat."
"And also a thief and a spy," Barak rumbled good-naturedly.
"We all have our faults," Silk admitted blandly, scratching at his scraggly whiskers.
"And I'm called Mister Wolf in this particular time and place," the old man said. "I'm rather fond of the name, since the boy there gave it to me."
"Mister Wolf?" Silk asked, and then he laughed again. "What a merry name for you, old friend."
"I'm delighted that you find it so, old friend," Wolf said flatly. "Mister Wolf it shall be, then," Silk said. "Come to the fire, friends. Warm yourselves, and I'll see to some food."
Garion was still uncertain about the oddly matched pair. They obviously knew Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf - and just as obviously by different names. The fact that Aunt Pol might not be whom he had always thought she was was very disturbing. One of the foundation stones of his entire life had just disappeared.
The food which Silk brought was rough, a turnip stew with thick chunks of meat floating in it and crudely hacked off slabs of bread, but Garion, amazed at the size of his appetite, fell into it as if he had not eaten for days.
And then, his stomach full and his feet warmed by the crackling campfire, he sat on a log, half dozing.
"What now, Old Wolf?" he heard Aunt Pol ask. "What's the idea behind these clumsy wagons?"
"A brilliant plan," Wolf said, "even if I do say it myself. There are, as you know, wagons going every which way in Sendaria at this time of year. Harvests are moving from field to farm, from farm to village and from village to town. Nothing is more unremarkable in Sendaria than wagons. They're so common that they're almost invisible. This is how we're going to travel. We're now honest freight haulers."
"We're what?" Aunt Pol demanded.
"Wagoneers," Wolf said expansively. "Hard-working transporters of the goods of Sendaria - out to make our fortunes and seek adventure, bitten by the desire to travel, incurably infected by the romance of the road."
"Have you any idea how long it takes to travel by wagon?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Six to ten leagues a day," he told her. "Slow, I'll grant you, but it's better to move slowly than to attract attention."
She shook her head in disgust.
"Where first, Mister Wolf?" Silk asked.
"To Darine," Wolf announced. "If the one we're following went to the north, he'll have to have passed through Darine on his way to Boktor and beyond."
"And what exactly are we carrying to Darine?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Turnips, great lady," Silk said. "Last morning my large friend and I purchased three wagonloads of them in the village of Winold."
"Turnips?" Aunt Pol asked in a tone that spoke volumes.
"Yes, great lady, turnips," Silk said solemnly.
"Are we ready, then?" Wolf asked.
"We are," the giant Barak said shortly, rising with his mail shirt clinking.
"We should look the part," Wolf said carefully, eyeing Barak up and down. "Your armor, my friend, is not the sort of garb an honest wagoneer would wear. I think you should change it for stout wool."
Barak's face looked injured.
"I could wear a tunic over it," he suggested tentatively.
"You rattle," Silk pointed out, "and armor has a distinctive fragrance about it. From the downwind side you smell like a rusty ironworks, Barak."
"I feel undressed without a mail shirt," Barak complained.
"We must all make sacrifices," Silk said.
Grumbling, Barak went to one of the wagons, jerked out a bundle of clothes and began to pull off his mail shirt. His linen undertunic bore large, reddish rust stains.

"I'd change tunics as well," Silk suggested. "Your shirt smells as bad as the armor."
Barak glowered at him. "Anything else?" he demanded. "I hope, for decency's sake, you don't plan to strip me entirely."
Silk laughed.
Barak pulled off his tunic. His torso was enormous and covered with thick red hair.
"You look like a rug," Silk observed.
"I can't help that," Barak said. "Winters are cold in Cherek, and the hair helps me to stay warm." He put on a fresh tunic.
"It's just as cold in Drasnia," Silk said. "Are you absolutely sure your grandmother didn't dally with a bear during one of those long winters?"
"Someday your mouth is going to get you into a great deal of trouble, friend Silk," Barak said ominously.
Silk laughed again. "I've been in trouble most of my life, friend Barak."
"I wonder why," Barak said ironically.
"I think all this could be discussed later," Wolf said pointedly. "I'd rather like to be away from here before the week's out, if I can."
"Of course, old friend," Silk said, jumping up. "Barak and I can amuse each other later."
Three teams of sturdy horses were picketed nearby, and they all helped to harness them to the wagons.
"I'll put out the fire," Silk said and fetched two pails of water from a small brook that trickled nearby. The fire hissed when the water struck it, and great clouds of steam boiled up toward the low-hanging tree limbs.
"We'll lead the horses to the edge of the wood," Wolf said. "I'd rather not pick my teeth on a low branch."
The horses seemed almost eager to start and moved without urging along a narrow track through the dark woods. They stopped at the edge of the open fields, and Wolf looked around carefully to see if anyone was in sight.
"I don't see anybody," he said. "Let's get moving."
"Ride with me, good smith," Barak said to Durnik. "Conversation with an honest man is much preferable to a night spent enduring the insults of an over-clever Drasnian."
"As you wish, friend," Durnik said politely.
"I'll lead," Silk said. "I'm familiar with the back roads and lanes hereabouts. I'll put us on the high road beyond Upper Gralt before noon. Barak and Durnik can bring up the rear. I'm sure that between them they can discourage anyone who might feel like following us."
"All right," Wolf said, climbing up onto the seat of the middle wagon. He reached down his hand and helped up Aunt Pol.
Garion quickly climbed up onto the wagon bed behind them, a trifle nervous that someone might suggest that he ride with Silk. It was all very well for Mister Wolf to say that the two they had just met were friends, but the fright he had suffered in the wood was still too fresh in his mind to make him quite comfortable with them.
The sacks of musty-smelling turnips were lumpy, but Garion soon managed to push and shove a kind of half reclining seat for himself among them just behind Aunt Pol and Mister Woif. He was sheltered from the wind, Aunt Pol was close, and his cloak, spread over him, kept him warm. He was altogether comfortable, and, despite the excitement of the night's events, he soon drifted into a half drowse. The dry voice in his mind suggested briefly that he had not behaved too well back in the wood, but it too soon fell silent, and Garion slept.
It was the change of sound that woke him. T'he soft thud of the horses' hooves on the dirt road became a clatter as they came to the cobblestones of a small village sleeping in the last chill hours of the autumn night. Garion opened his eyes and looked sleepily at the tall, narrow houses with their tiny windows all dark.
A dog barked briefly, then retreated back to his warm place under some stairs. Garion wondered what village it might be and how many people slept under those

steep-peaked tile roofs, unaware of the passage of their three wagons.
The cobbled street was very narrow, and Garion could almost have reached out and touched the weathered stones of the houses as they passed.
And then the nameless village was behind them, and they were back on the road again. The soft sound of the horses' hooves lured him once more toward sleep.
"What if he hasn't passed through Darine?" Aunt Pol asked Mister Wolf in a low tone.
It occurred to Garion that in all the excitement he had never actually found out exactly what it was that they were seeking. He kept his eyes closed and listened.
"Don't start with the `what ifs,' " Wolf said irritably. "If we sit around saying `what if,' we'll never do anything."
"I was merely asking," Aunt Pol said.
"If he hasn't gone through Darine, we'll turn south - to Muros. He may have joined a caravan there to take the Great North Road to Boktor."
"And if he hasn't gone through Muros?"
"Then we go on to Camaar."
"And then?"
"We'll see when we get to Camaar." His tone was final, as if he no longer wished to discuss the matter.
Aunt Pol drew in a breath as if she were about to deliver some final retort, but apparently she decided against it and settled back instead on the wagon seat.
To the east, ahead of them, the faint stain of dawn touched the lowering clouds, and they moved on through the tattered, windswept end of the long night in their search for something which, though he could not yet even identify it, was so important that Garion's entire life had been uprooted in a single day because of it.

Chapter Seven

IT TOOK THEM FOUR DAYS to reach Darine On the north coast. The first day went quite well, since, though it was cloudy and the wind kept blowing, the air was dry and the roads were good. They passed quiet farmsteads and an occasional farmer bent to his labor in the middle of a field. Inevitably each man stopped his work to watch them pass. Some waved, but some did not.
And then there were villages, clusters of tall houses nestled in valleys. As they passed, the children came out and ran after the wagons, shouting with excitement. The villagers watched, idly curious, until it became obvious that the wagons were not going to stop, and then they sniffed and went back to their own concerns.
As afternoon of that first day lowered toward evening, Silk led them into a grove of trees at the roadside, and they made preparations for the night. They ate the last of the ham and cheese Wolf had filched from Faldor's pantry and then spread their blankets on the ground beneath the wagons. The ground was hard and cold, but the exciting sense of being on some great adventure helped Garion to endure the discomfort.
The next morning, however, it began to rain. It was a fine, misty rain at first, scattering before the wind, but as the morning wore on, it settled into a steady drizzle. The musty smell of the turnips in their wet sacks became stronger, and Garion huddled miserably with his cloak pulled tightly around him. The adventure was growing much less exciting.
The road became muddy and slick, and the horses struggled their way up each hill and had to be rested often. On the first day they had covered eight leagues; after that they were lucky to make five.
Aunt Pol became waspish and short-tempered.
"This is idiocy," she said to Mister Wolf about noon on the third day.
"Everything is idiocy if you choose to look at it in the proper light," he replied philosophically.
"Why wagoneers?" she demanded. "There are faster ways to travels wealthy family in a proper carriage, for instance, or Imperial messengers on good horses -

either way would have put us in Darine by now."
"And left a trail in the memories of all these simple people we've passed so wide that even a Thull could follow it," Wolf explained patiently. "Brill has long since reported our departure to his employers. Every Murgo in Sendaria is looking for us by now."
"Why are we hiding from the Murgos, Mister Wolf?" Garion asked, hesitant to interrupt, but impelled by curiosity to try to penetrate the mystery behind their flight. "Aren't they just merchants-like the Tolnedrans and the Drasnians?"
"The Murgos have no real interest in trade," Wolf explained. "Nadraks are merchants, but the Murgos are warriors. The Murgos pose as merchants for the same reason that we pose as wagoneers - so that they can move about more or less undetected. If you simply assumed that all Murgos are spies, you wouldn't be too far from the truth."
"Haven't you anything better to do than ask all these questions?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Not really," Garion said, and then instantly knew that he'd made a mistake.
"Good," she said. "In the back of Barak's wagon you'll find the dirty dishes from this morning's meal. You'll also find a bucket. Fetch the bucket and run to that stream ahead for water, then return to Barak's wagon and wash the dishes."
"In cold water?" he objected.
"Now, Garion," she said firmly.
Grumbling, he climbed down off the slowly moving wagon.
In the late afternoon of the fourth day they came over a high hilltop and saw below the city of Darine and beyond the city the leaden gray sea.
Garion caught his breath. To his eyes the city looked very large. Its surrounding walls were thick and high, and there were more buildings within those walls than he had seen in all his life. But it was to the sea that his eyes were drawn. There was a sharp tang to the air. Faint hints of that smell had been coming to him on the wind for the past league or so, but now, inhaling deeply, he breathed in that perfume of the sea for the first time in his life.
His spirit soared.
"Finally," Aunt Pol said.
Silk had stopped the lead wagon and came walking back. His hood was pulled back slightly, and the rain ran down his long nose to drip from its pointed tip.
"Do we stop here or go on down to the city?" he asked.
"We go to the city," Aunt Pol said. "I'm not going to sleep under a wagon when there are inns so close at hand."
"Honest wagoneers would seek out an inn," Mister Wolf agreed, "and a warm taproom."
"I might have guessed that," Aunt Pol said.
"We have to try to look the part." Wolf shrugged.
They went on down the hill, the horses' hooves slipping and sliding as they braced back against the weight of the wagons.
At the city gate two watchmen in stained tunics and wearing rustspotted helmets came out of the tiny watch house just inside the gate.
"What's your business in Darine?" one of them asked Silk.
"I am Ambar of Kotu," Silk lied pleasantly, "a poor Drasnian merchant hoping to do business in your splendid city."
"Splendid?" one of the watchmen snorted.
"What have you in your wagons, merchant?" the other inquired.
"Turnips," Silk said deprecatingly. "My family has been in the spice trade for generations, but I'm reduced to peddling turnips." He sighed. "The world is a topsy-turvy place, is it not, good friend?"
"We're obliged to inspect your wagons," the watchman said. "It'll take some time, I'm afraid."
"And a wet time at that," Silk said, squinting up into the rain. "It would be much more pleasant to devote the time to wetting one's inside in some friendly tavern."
"That's difficult when one doesn't have much money," the watchman suggested

hopefully.
"I'd be more than pleased if you'd accept some small token of friendship from me to aid you in your wetting," Silk offered.
"You're most kind," the watchman replied with a slight bow.
Some coins changed hands, and the wagons moved on into the city uninspected. From the hilltop Darine had looked quite splendid, but Garion found it much less so as they clattered through the wet streets. The buildings all seemed the same with a kind of self important aloofness about them, and the streets were littered and dirty. The salt tang of the sea was tainted here with the smell of dead fish, and the faces of the people hurrying along were grim and unfriendly. Garion's first excitement began to fade.
"Why are the people all so unhappy?" he asked Mister Wolf.
"They have a stern and demanding God," Wolf replied.
"Which God is that?" Garion asked.
"Money," Wolf said. "Money is a worse God than Torak himself."
"Don't fill the boy's head with nonsense," Aunt Pol said. "The people aren't really unhappy, Garion. They're just all in a hurry. They have important affairs to attend to and they're afraid they'll be late. That's all."
"I don't think I'd like to live here," Garion said. "It seems like a bleak, unfriendly kind of place." He sighed. "Sometimes I wish we were all back at Faldor's farm."
"There are worse places than Faldor's," Wolf agreed.
The inn Silk chose for them was near the docks, and the smell of the sea and the rank detritus of the meeting of sea and land was strong there. The inn, however, was a stout building with stables attached and storage sheds for the wagons. Like most inns, the main floor was given over to the kitchen and the large common room with its rows of tables and large fireplaces. The upper floors provided sleeping chambers for the guests.
"It's a suitable place," Silk announced as he came back out to the wagons after speaking at some length with the innkeeper. "The kitchen seems clean, and I saw no bugs when I inspected the sleeping chambers."
"I will inspect it," Aunt Pol said, climbing down from the wagon.
"As you wish, great lady," Silk said with a polite bow.
Aunt Pol's inspection took much longer than Silk's, and it was nearly dark when she returned to the courtyard. "Adequate," she sniffed, "but only barely."
"It's not as if we planned to settle in for the winter, Pol," Wolf said. "At most we'll only be here a few days."
She ignored that.
"I've ordered hot water sent up to our chambers," she announced. "I'll take the boy up and wash him while you and the others see to the wagons and horses. Come along, Garion." And she turned and went back into the inn.
Garion wished fervently that they would all stop referring to him as the boy. He did, after all, he reflected, have a name, and it was not that difficult a name to remember. He was gloomily convinced that even if he lived to have a long gray beard, they would still speak of him as the boy.
After the horses and wagons had been attended to and they had all washed up, they went down again to the common room and dined. The meal certainly didn't match up to Aunt Pol's, but it was a welcome change from turnips. Garion was absolutely certain that he'd never be able to look a turnip in the face again for the rest of his life.
After they had eaten, the men loitered over their ale pots, and Aunt Pol's face registered her disapproval. "Garion and I are going up to bed now," she said to them. "Try not to fall down too many times when you come up."
Wolf, Barak and Silk laughed at that, but Durnik, Garion thought, looked a bit shamefaced.
The next day Mister Wolf and Silk left the inn early and were gone all day. Garion had positioned himself in a strategic place in hopes that he might be noticed and asked to go along, but he was not; so when Durnik went down to look after the horses, he accompanied him instead.
"Durnik," he said after they had fed and watered the animals and the smith was

examining their hooves for cuts or stone bruises, "does all this seem strange to you?"
Durnik carefully lowered the leg of the patient horse he was checking.
"All what, Garion?" he asked, his plain face sober.
"Everything," Garion said rather vaguely. "This journey, Barak and Silk, Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol - all of it. They all talk sometimes when they don't think I can hear them. This all seems terribly important, but I can't tell if we're running away from someone or looking for something."
"It's confusing to me as well, Garion," Durnik admitted. "Many things aren't what they seem - not what they seem at all."
"Does Aunt Pol seem different to you?" Garion asked. "What I mean is, they all treat her as if she were a noblewoman or something, and she acts differently too, now that we're away from Faldor's farm."
"Mistress Pol is a great lady," Durnik said. "I've always known that." His voice had that same respectful tone it always had when he spoke of her, and Garion knew that it was useless to try to make Durnik perceive anything unusual about her.
"And Mister Wolf," Garion said, trying another tack. "I always thought he was just an old storyteller."
"He doesn't seem to be an ordinary vagabond," Durnik admitted. "I think we've fallen in with important people, Garion, on important business. It's probably better for simple folk such as you and I not to ask too many questions, but to keep our eyes and ears open."
"Will you be going back to Faldor's farm when this is all over?" Garion asked carefully.
Durnik considered that, looking out across the rainswept courtyard of the inn.
"No," he said finally in a soft voice. "I'll follow as long as Mistress Pol allows me to."
On an impulse Garion reached out and patted the smith's shoulder. "Everything is going to turn out for the best, Durnik."
Durnik sighed.
"Let's hope so," he said and turned his attention back to the horses.
"Durnik," Garion asked, "did you know my parents?"
"No," Durnik said. "The first time I saw you, you were a baby in Mistress Pol's arms."
"What was she like then?"
"She seemed angry," Durnik said. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone quite so angry. She talked with Faldor for a while and then went to work in the kitchen - you know Faldor. He never turned anyone away in his whole life. At first she was just a helper, but that didn't last too long. Our old cook was getting fat and lazy, and she finally went off to live with her youngest daughter. After that, Mistress Pol ran the kitchen."
"She was a lot younger then, wasn't she?" Garion asked.
"No," Durnik said thoughtfully. "Mistress Pol never changes. She looks exactly the same now as she did that first day."
"I'm sure it only seems that way," Garion said. "Everybody gets older."
"Not Mistress Pol," Durnik said.
That evening Wolf and his sharp-nosed friend returned, their faces somber.
"Nothing," Wolf announced shortly, scratching at his snowy beard.
"I might have told you that," Aunt Pol sniffed.
Wolf gave her an irritated look, then shrugged.
"We had to be certain," he said.
The red-bearded giant, Barak, looked up from the mail shirt he was polishing.
"No trace at all?" he asked.
"Not a hint," Wolf said. "He hasn't gone through here."
"Where now, then?" Barak asked, setting his mail shirt aside.
"Muros," Wolf said.
Barak rose and went to the window. "The rain is slacking," he said, "but the roads are going to be difficult."
"We won't be able to leave tomorrow anyway," Silk said, lounging on a stool near

the door. "I have to dispose of our turnips. If we carry them out of Darine with us, it will seem curious, and we don't want to be remembered by anyone who might have occasion to talk to any wandering Murgo."
"I suppose you're right," Wolf said. "I hate to lose the time, but there's no help for it."
"The roads will be better after a day's drying," Silk pointed out, "and wagons travel faster empty."
"Are you sure you can sell them, friend Silk?" Durnik asked.
"I am a Drasnian," Silk replied confidently. "I can sell anything. We might even make a good profit."
"Don't worry about that," Wolf said. "The turnips have served their purpose. All we need to do now is to get rid of them."
"It's a matter of principle," Silk said airily. "Besides, if I don't try to strike a hard bargain, that too would be remembered. Don't be concerned. The business won't take long and won't delay us."
"Could I go along with you, Silk?" Garion asked hopefully. "I haven't seen any part of Darine except for this inn."
Silk looked inquiringly at Aunt Pol.
She considered for a moment. "I don't suppose it would do any harm," she said, "and it'll give me time to attend to some things."
The next morning after breakfast Silk and Garion set out with Garion carrying a bag of turnips. The small man seemed to be in extraordinarily good spirits, and his long, pointed nose seemed almost to quiver. "The whole point," he said as they walked along the littered, cobblestoned streets, "is not to appear too eager to sell - and to know the market, of course."
"That sounds reasonable," Garion said politely.
"Yesterday I made a few inquiries," Silk went on. "Turnips are selling on the docks of Kotu in Drasnia for a Drasnian silver link per hundredweight."
"A what?" Garion asked.
"It's a Drasnian coin," Silk explained, "about the same as a silver imperial - not quite, but close enough. The merchant will try to buy our turnips for no more than a quarter of that, but he'll go as high as half."
"How do you know that?"
"It's customary."
"How many turnips do we have?" Garion asked, stepping around a pile of refuse in the street.
"We have thirty hundredweight," Silk said.
"That would be-" Garion's face contorted in an effort to make the complex calculation in his head.
"Fifteen imperials," Silk supplied. "Or three gold crowns."
"Gold?" Garion asked. Because gold coins were so rare in country dealings, the word seemed to have an almost magic quality.
Silk nodded. "It's always preferable," he said. "It's easier to carry. The weight of silver becomes burdensome."
"And how much did we pay for the turnips?"
"Five imperials," Silk said.
"The farmer gets five, we get fifteen, and the merchant gets thirty?" Garion asked incredulously. "That hardly seems fair."
Silk shrugged. "It's the way things are," he said. "There's the merchant's house." He pointed at a rather imposing building with broad steps. "When we go in, he'll pretend to be very busy and not at all interested in us. Later, while he and I are bargaining, he'll notice you and tell you what a splendid boy you are."
"Me?"
"He'll think that you're some relation of mine - a son or a nephew perhaps - and he'll think to gain advantage over me by flattering you."
"What a strange notion," Garion said.
"I'll tell him many things," Silk went on, talking very rapidly now. His eyes seemed to glitter, and his nose was actually twitching. "Pay no attention to what I say, and don't let any surprise show on your face. He'll be watching us

both very closely."
"You're going to lie?" Garion was shocked.
"It's expected," Silk said. "The merchant will also lie. The one of us who lies the best will get the better of the bargain."
"It all seems terribly involved," Garion said.
"It's a game," Silk said, his ferretlike face breaking into a grin. "A very exciting game that's played all over the world. Good players get rich, and bad players don't."
"Are you a good player?" Garion asked.
"One of the best," Silk replied modestly. "Let's go in." And he led Garion up the broad steps to the merchant's house.
The merchant wore an unbelted, fur-trimmed gown of a pale green color and a close-fitting cap. He behaved much as Silk had predicted that he would, sitting before a plain table and leafing through many scraps of parchment with a busy frown on his face while Silk and Garion waited for him to notice them.
"Very well, then," he said finally. "You have business with me?"
"We have some turnips," Silk said somewhat deprecatingly.
"That's truly unfortunate, friend," the merchant said, assuming a long face. "The wharves at Kotu groan with turnips just now. It would hardly pay me to take them off your hands at any price."
Silk shrugged. "Perhaps the Chereks or the Algars then," he said. "Their markets may not yet be so glutted as yours." He turned. "Come along, boy," he said to Garion.
"A moment, good friend," the merchant said. "I detect from your speech that you and I are countrymen. Perhaps as a favor I'll look at your turnips."
"Your time is valuable," Silk said. "If you aren't in the market for turnips, why should we trouble you further?"
"I might still be able to find a buyer somewhere," the merchant protested, "if the merchandise is of good quality." He took the bag from Garion and opened it.
Garion listened with fascination as Silk and the merchant fenced politely with each other, each attempting to gain the advantage.
"What a splendid boy this is," the merchant said, suddenly seeming to notice Garion for the first time.
"An orphan," Silk said, "placed in my care. I'm attempting to teach him the rudiments of business, but he's slow to learn."
"Ah," the merchant said, sounding slightly disappointed.
Then Silk made a curious gesture with the fingers of his right hand. The merchant's eyes widened slightly, then he too gestured.
After that, Garion had no idea of what was going on. The hands of Silk and the merchant wove intricate designs in the air, sometimes flickering so rapidly that the eye could scarce follow them. Silk's long, slender fingers seemed to dance, and the merchant's eyes were fixed upon them, his forehead breaking into a sweat at the intensity of his concentration.
"Done, then?" Silk said finally, breaking the long silence in the room.
"Done," the merchant agreed somewhat ruefully.
"It's always a pleasure doing business with an honest man," Silk said.
"I've learned much today," the merchant said. "I hope you don't intend to remain in this business for long, friend. If you do, I might just as well give you the keys to my warehouse and strongroom right now and save myself the anguish I'll experience every time you appear."
Silk laughed. "You've been a worthy opponent, friend merchant," he said.
"I thought so at first," the merchant said, shaking his head, "but I'm no match for you. Deliver your turnips to my warehouse on Bedik wharf tomorrow morning." He scratched a few lines on a piece of parchment with a quill. "My overseer will pay you."
Silk bowed and took the parchment. "Come along, boy," he said to Garion, and led the way from the room.
"What happened?" Garion asked when they were outside in the blustery street.
"We got the price I wanted," Silk said, somewhat smugly.
"But you didn't say anything," Garion objected.

"We spoke at great length, Garion," Silk said. "Weren't you watching?"
"All I saw was the two of you wiggling your fingers at each other."
"That's how we spoke," Silk explained. "It's a separate language my countrymen devised thousands of years ago. It's called the secret language, and it's much faster than the spoken one. It also permits us to speak in the presence of strangers without being overheard. An adept can conduct business while discussing the weather, if he chooses."
"Will you teach it to me?" Garion asked, fascinated.
"It takes a long time to learn," Silk told him.
"Isn't the trip to Muros likely to take a long time?" Garion suggested.
Silk shrugged. "As you wish," he said. "It won't be easy, but it will help pass the time, I suppose."
"Are we going back to the inn now?" Garion asked.
"Not right away," Silk said. "We'll need a cargo to explain our entry into Muros."
"I thought we were going to leave with the wagons empty."
"We are."
"But you just said-"
"We'll see a merchant I know," Silk explained. "He buys farm goods all over Sendaria and has them held on the farms until the markets are right in Arendia and Tolnedra. Then he arranges to have them freighted either to Muros or Camaar."
"It sounds very complicated," Garion said doubtfully.
"1t's not really," Silk assured him. "Come along, my boy, you'll see." The merchant was a Tolnedran who wore a flowing blue robe and a disdainful expression on his face. He was talking with a grim-faced Murgo as Silk and Garion entered his counting room. The Murgo, like all of his race Garion had ever seen, had deep scars on his face, and his black eyes were penetrating. Silk touched Garion's shoulder with a cautionary hand when they entered and saw the Murgo, then he stepped forward. "Forgive me, noble merchant," he said ingratiatingly. "I didn't know you were occupied. My porter and I will wait outside until you have time for us."
"My friend and I will be busy for most of the day," the Tolnedran said. "Is it something important?"
"I was just wondering if you might have a cargo for me," Silk replied.
"No," the Tolnedran said shortly. "Nothing." He started to turn back to the Murgo, then stopped and looked sharply at Silk. "Aren't you Ambar of Kotu?" he asked. "I thought you dealt in spices."
Garion recognized the name Silk had given the watchmen at the gates of the city. It was evident that the little man had used the name before.
"Alas," Silk sighed. "My last venture lies at the bottom of the sea just off the hook of Arendia - two full shiploads bound for Tol Honeth. A sudden storm and I am a pauper."
"A tragic tale, worthy Ambar," the Tolnedran master merchant said, somewhat smugly.
"I'm now reduced to freighting produce," Silk said morosely. "I have three rickety wagons, and that's all that's left of the empire of Ambar of Kotu."
"Reverses come to us all," the Tolnedran said philosophically.
"So this is the famous Ambar of Kotu," the Murgo said, his harshly accented voice quite soft. He looked Silk up and down, his black eyes probing. "It was a fortunate chance that brought me out today. I am enriched by meeting so illustrious a man."
Silk bowed politely. "You're too kind, noble sir," he said.
"I am Asharak of Rak Goska," the Murgo introduced himself. He turned to the Tolnedran. "We can put aside our discussion for a bit, Mingan," he said. "We will accrue much honor by assisting so great a merchant to begin recouping his losses."
"You're too kind, worthy Asharak," Silk said, bowing again. Garion's mind was shrieking all kinds of warnings, but the Murgo's sharp eyes made it impossible for him to make the slightest gesture to Silk. He kept his face impassive and

his eyes dull even as his thoughts raced.
"I would gladly help you, my friend," Mingan said, "but I have no cargo in Darine at the moment."
"I'm already committed from Darine to Medalia," Silk said quickly. "Three wagonloads of Cherek iron. And I also have a contract to move furs from Muros to Camaar. It's the fifty leagues from Medalia to Muros that concerns me. Wagons traveling empty earn no profit."
"Medalia." Mingan frowned. "Let me examine my records. It seems to me that I do have something there." He stepped out of the room. "Your exploits are legendary in the kingdoms of the east, Ambar,"
Asharak of Rak Goska said admiringly. "When last I left Cthol Murgos there was still a kingly price on your head."
Silk laughed easily. "A minor misunderstanding, Asharak," he said. "I was merely investigating the extent of Tolnedran intelligence gathering activities in your kingdom. I took some chances I probably shouldn't have, and the Tolnedrans found out what I was up to. The charges they leveled at me were fabrications."
"How did you manage to escape?" Asharak asked. "The soldiers of King Taur Urgas nearly dismantled the kingdom searching for you."
"I chanced to meet a Thullish lady of high station," Silk said. "I managed to prevail upon her to smuggle me across the border into Mishrak ac Thull."
"Ah," Asharak said, smiling briefly. "Thullish ladies are notoriously easy to prevail upon."
"But most demanding," Silk said. "They expect full repayment for any favors. I found it more difficult to escape from her than I did from Cthol Murgos."
"Do you still perform such services for your government?" Asharak asked casually.
"They won't even talk to me," Silk said with a gloomy expression. "Ambar the spice merchant is useful to them, but Ambar the poor wagoneer is quite another thing."
"Of course," Asharak said, and his tone indicated that he obviously did not believe what he had been told. He glanced briefly and without seeming interest at Garion, and Garion felt a strange shock of recognition. Without knowing exactly how it was that he knew, he was instantly sure that Asharak of Rak Goska had known him for all of his life. There was a familiarity in that glance, a familiarity that had grown out of the dozen times or more that their eyes had met while Garion was growing up and Asharak, muffled always in a black cloak and astride a black horse, had stopped and watched and then moved on. Garion returned the gaze without expression, and the faintest hint of a smile flickered across Asharak's scarred face.
Mingan returned to the room then. "I have some hams on a farm near Medalia," he announced. "When do you expect to arrive in Muros?"
"Fifteen or twenty days," Silk told him.
Mingan nodded. "I'll give you a contract to move my hams to Muros," he offered. "Seven silver nobles per wagonload."
"Tolnedran nobles or Sendarian?" Silk asked quickly.
"This is Sendaria, worthy Ambar."
"We're citizens of the world, noble merchant," Silk pointed out. "Transactions between us have always been in Tolnedran coin."
Mingan sighed. "You were ever quick, worthy Ambar," he said."Very well, Tolnedran nobles - because we are old friends, and I grieve for your misfortunes."
"Perhaps we'll meet again, Ambar," Asharak said.
"Perhaps," Silk said, and he and Garion left the counting room. "Skinflint," Silk muttered when they reached the street. "The rate should have been ten, not seven."
"What about the Murgo?" Garion asked. Once again there was the familiar reluctance to reveal too much about the strange, unspoken link that had existed between him and the figure that now at least had a name.
Silk shrugged.
"He knows I'm up to something, but he doesn't know exactly what just as I know

that he's up to something. I've had dozens of meetings like that. Unless our purposes happen to collide, we won't interfere with each other. Asharak and I are both professionals."
"You're a very strange person, Silk," Garion said.
Silk winked at him.
"Why were you and Mingan arguing about the coins?" Garion asked.
"Tolnedran coins are a bit purer," Silk told him. "They're worth more."
"I see," Garion said.
The next morning they all mounted the wagons again and delivered their turnips to the warehouse of the Drasnian merchant. Then, their wagons rumbling emptily, they rolled out of Darine, bound toward the south.
The rain had ceased, but the morning was overcast and blustery.
On the hill outside town Silk turned to Garion, who rode beside him.
"Very well," he said,"let's begin." He moved his fingers in front of Garion's face. "This means `Good morning.' "

Chapter Eight

AFTER THE FIRST DAY the wind blew itself out, and the pale autumn sun reappeared. Their route southward led them along the Darine River, a turbulent stream that rushed down from the mountains on its way to the Gulf of Cherek. The country was hilly and timbered but, since the wagons were empty, their horses made good time.
Garion paid scant attention to the scenery as they trundled up the valley of the Darine. His attention was riveted almost totally on Silk's flickering fingers.
"Don't shout," Silk instructed as Garion practiced.
"Shout?" Garion asked, puzzled.
"Keep your gestures small. Don't exaggerate them. The idea is to make the whole business inconspicuous."
"I'm only practicing," Garion said.
"Better to break bad habits before they become too strong," Silk said. "And be careful not to mumble."
"Mumble?"
"Form each phrase precisely. Finish one before you go on to the next. Don't worry about speed. That comes with time."
By the third day their conversations were half in words and half in gestures, and Garion was beginning to feel quite proud of himself. They pulled off the road into a grove of tall cedars that evening and formed up their usual half circle with the wagons.
"How goes the instruction?" Mister Wolf asked as he climbed down.
"It progresses," Silk said. "I expect it will go more rapidly when the boy outgrows his tendency to use baby talk."
Garion was crushed.
Barak, who was also dismounting, laughed.
"I've often thought that the secret language might be useful to know," he said, "but fingers built to grip a sword are not nimble enough for it." He held out his huge hand and shook his head.
Durnik lifted his face and sniffed at the air. "It's going to be cold tonight," he said. "We'll have frost before morning."
Barak also sniffed, and then he nodded. "You're right, Durnik," he rumbled. "We'll need a good fire tonight." He reached into the wagon and lifted out his axe.
"There are riders coming," Aunt Pol announced, still seated on the wagon.
They all stopped talking and listened to the faint drumming sound on the road they had just left.
"Three at least," Barak said grimly. He handed the axe to Durnik and reached back into the wagon for his sword.
"Four," Silk said. He stepped to his own wagon and took his own sword out from under the seat.
"We're far enough from the road," Wolf said. "If we stay still, they'll pass

without seeing us."
"That won't hide us from Grolims," Aunt Pol said. "They won't be searching with their eyes." She made two quick gestures to Wolf which Garion did not recognize.
No, Wolf gestured back. Let us instead - He also made an unrecognizable gesture.
Aunt Pol looked at him for a moment and then nodded.
"All of you stay quite still," Wolf instructed them. Then he turned toward the road, his face intent.
Garion held his breath. The sound of the galloping horses grew nearer.
Then a strange thing happened. Though Garion knew he should be fearful of the approaching riders and the threat they seemed to pose, a kind of dreamy lassitude fell over him. It was as if his mind had quite suddenly gone to sleep, leaving his body still standing there watching incuriously the passage of those dark-mantled horsemen along the road.
How long he stood so he was not able to say; but when he roused from his half dream, the riders were gone and the sun had set. The sky to the east had grown purple with approaching evening, and there were tatters of sun-stained clouds along the western horizon.
"Murgos," Aunt Pol said quite calmly, "and one Grolim." She started to climb down from the wagon.
"There are many Murgos in Sendaria, great lady," Silk said, helping her down, "and on many different missions."
"Murgos are one thing," Wolf said grimly, "but Grolims are quite something else. I think it might be better if we moved off the welltraveled roads. Do you know a back way to Medalia?"
"Old friend," Silk replied modestly, "I know a back way to every place."
"Good," Wolf said. "Let's move deeper into these woods. I'd prefer it if no chance gleam from our fire reached the road."
Garion had seen the cloaked Murgos only briefly. There was no way to be sure if one of them had been that same Asharak he had finally met after all the years of knowing him only as a dark figure on a black horse, but somehow he was almost certain that Asharak had been among them. Asharak would follow him, would be there wherever he went. It was the kind of thing one could count on.
Durnik had been right when he had spoken of frost. The ground was white with it the next morning, and the horses' breath steamed in the chill air as they set out. They moved along lanes and little-used tracks that were partially weed-choked. The going was slower than it might have been on the main road, but they all felt much safer.
It took them five more days to reach the village of Winold, some twelve leagues to the north of Medalia. There, at Aunt Pol's insistence, they stopped overnight at a somewhat rundown inn. "I refuse to sleep on the ground again," she announced flatly.
After they had eaten in the dingy common room of the inn, the men turned to their ale pots, and Aunt Pol went up to her chamber with instructions that hot water be brought to her for bathing. Garion, however, made some pretext about checking the horses and went outside. It was not that he was in the habit of being deliberately deceptive, but it had occurred to him in the last day or so that he had not had a single moment alone since they had left Faldor's farm. He was not by nature a solitary boy, but he had begun to feel quite keenly the restriction of always being in the presence of his elders.
The village of Winold was not a large one, and he explored it from one end to the other in less than half an hour, loitering along its narrow, cobblestoned streets in the crispness of the early evening air. The windows of the houses glowed with golden candlelight, and Garion suddenly felt a great surge of homesickness.
Then, at the next corner of the crooked street, in the brief light from an opening door, he saw a familiar figure. He could not be positive, but he shrank back against a rough stone wall anyway.
The man at the corner turned in irritation toward the light, and Garion caught the sudden white gleam from one of his eyes. It was Brill. The unkempt man moved quickly out of the light, obviously not wishing to be seen, then he stopped.

Garion hugged the wall, watching Brill's impatient pacing at the corner. The wisest thing would have been to slip away and hurry back to the inn, but Garion quickly dismissed that idea. He was safe enough here in the deep shadow beside the wall, and he was too caught up by curiosity to leave without seeing exactly what Brill was doing here.

After what seemed hours, but was really only a few more minutes, another shadowy shape came scurrying down the street. The man was hooded, so it was impossible to see his face, but the outline of his form revealed a figure dressed in the tunic, hose and calf length boots of an ordinary Sendar. There was also, when he turned, the outline of a sword belted at his waist, and that was far from ordinary. While it was not precisely illegal for Sendars of the lower classes to bear arms, it was uncommon enough to attract notice.

Garion tried to edge close enough to hear what Brill said to the man with the sword, but they spoke only briefly. There was a clink as some coins changed hands, and then the two separated. Brill moved quietly off around the corner, and the man with the sword walked up the narrow, crooked street toward the spot where Garion stood.

There was no place to hide, and as soon as the hooded man came close enough, he would be able to see Garion. To turn and run would be even more dangerous. Since there was no alternative, Garion put on a bold front and marched determinedly toward the oncoming figure.

"Who's there?" the hooded man demanded, his hand going to his sword-hilt.

"Good evening, sir," Garion said, deliberately forcing his voice up into the squeaky registers of a much younger boy. "Cold night, isn't it?"

The hooded man grunted and seemed to relax.

Garion's legs quivered with the desire to run. He passed the man with the sword, and his back prickled as he felt that suspicious gaze follow him.

"Boy," the man said abruptly.

Garion stopped.

"Yes, sir?" he said, turning.

"Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir," Garion lied, trying to keep his voice from trembling.

"Is there a tavern hereabouts?"

Garion had just explored the town, and he spoke confidently.

"Yes, sir," he said. "You go on up this street to the next corner and turn to your left. There are torches out front. You can't miss it."

"My thanks," the hooded man said shortly, and walked on up the narrow street.

"Good night, sir," Garion called after him, made bold by the fact that the danger seemed past.

The man did not answer, and Garion marched on down to the corner, exhilarated by his brief encounter. Once he was around the corner, however, he dropped the guise of a simple village boy and ran.

He was breathless by the time he reached the inn and burst into the smoky common room where Mister Wolf and the others sat talking by the fire.

At the last instant, realizing that to blurt out his news in the common room where others might overhear would be a mistake, he forced himself to walk calmly to where his friends sat. He stood before the fire as if warming himself and spoke in a low tone. "I just saw Brill in the village," he said.

"Brill?" Silk asked. "Who's Brill?"

Wolf frowned. "A farmhand with too much Angarak gold in his purse to be entirely honest," he said. Quickly he told Silk and Barak about the adventure in Faldor's stable.

"You should have killed him," Barak rumbled.

"This isn't Cherek," Wolf said. "Sendars are touchy about casual killings." He turned to Garion. "Did he see you?" he asked.

"No," Garion said. "I saw him first and hid in the dark. He met another man and gave him some money, I think. The other man had a sword." Briefly he described the whole incident.

"This changes things," Wolf said. "I think we'll leave earlier in the morning than we'd planned."

"It wouldn't be hard to make Brill lose interest in us," Durnik said. "I could probably find him and hit him on the head a few times."
"Tempting." Wolf grinned. "But I think it might be better just to slip out of town early tomorrow and leave him with no notion that we've ever been here. We don't really have time to start fighting with everyone we run across."
"I'd like a closer look at this sword-carrying Sendar, however," Silk said, rising. "If it turns out that he's following us, I'd rather know what he looks like. I don't like being followed by strangers."
"Discreetly," Wolf cautioned.
Silk laughed. "Have you ever known me to be otherwise?" he asked. "This won't take long. Where did you say that tavern was, Garion?"
Garion gave him directions.
Silk nodded, his eyes bright and his long nose twitching. He turned, went quickly across the smoky common room and out into the chill night.
"I wonder," Barak considered. "If we're being followed this closely, wouldn't it be better to discard the wagons and this tiresome disguise, buy good horses and simply make straight for Muros at a gallop?"
Wolf shook his head. "I don't think the Murgos are all that certain where we are," he said. "Brill could be here for some other dishonesty, and we'd be foolish to start running from shadows. Better just to move on quietly. Even if Brill is still working for the Murgos, I'd rather just slip away and leave them all beating the bushes here in central Sendaria." He stood up. "I'm going to step upstairs and let Pol know what's happened." He crossed the common room and mounted the stairs.
"I still don't like it," Barak muttered, his face dark.
They sat quietly then, waiting for Silk's return. The fire popped, and Garion started slightly. It occurred to him as he waited that he had changed a great deal since they'd left Faldor's farm. Everything had seemed simple then with the world neatly divided into friends and enemies. In the short time since they'd left, however, he'd begun to perceive complexities that he hadn't imagined before. He'd grown wary and distrustful and listened more frequently to that interior voice that always advised caution if not outright guile. He'd also learned not to accept anything at face value. Briefly he regretted the loss of his former innocence, but the dry voice told him that such regret was childish.
Then Mister Wolf came back down the stairs and rejoined them. After about a half hour Silk returned. "Thoroughly disreputable-looking fellow," he said, standing in front of the fire. "My guess is that he's a common footpad."
"Brill's seeking his natural level," Wolf observed. "If he's still working for the Murgos, he's probably hiring ruffians to watch for us. They'll be looking for four people on foot, however, rather than six in wagons. If we can get out of Winold early enough in the morning, I think we can elude them altogether."
"I think Durnik and I should stand watch tonight," Barak said.
"Not a bad idea," Wolf agreed. "Let's plan to leave about the fourth hour after midnight. I'd like to have two or three leagues of back roads between us and this place when the sun comes up."
Garion scarcely slept that night; when he did, there were nightmares about a hooded man with a cruel sword chasing him endlessly down dark, narrow streets. When Barak woke them, Garion's eyes felt sandy, and his head was thick from the exhausting night.
Aunt Pol carefully drew the shutters in their chamber before lighting a single candle. "It's going to be colder now," she said, opening the large bundle she'd had him carry up from the wagons. She took out a pair of heavy woolen hose and winter boots lined with lambswool. "Put these on," she instructed Garion, "and your heavy cloak."
"I'm not a baby any more, Aunt Pol," Garion said.
"Do you enjoy being cold?"
"Well, no, but " He stopped, unable to think of any words to explain how he felt. He began to dress. He could hear the faint murmur of the others talking softly in the adjoining chamber in that curious, hushed tone that men always assume when they rise before the sun.

"We're ready, Mistress Pol," Silk's voice came through the doorway.
"Let's leave then," she said, drawing up the hood of her cloak.
The moon had risen late that night and shone brightly on the frostsilvered stones outside the inn. Durnik had hitched the horses to the wagons and had led them out of the stable.
"We'll lead the horses out to the road," Wolf said very quietly. "I see no need of rousing the villagers as we pass."
Silk again took the lead, and they moved slowly out of the innyard. The fields beyond the village were white with frost, and the pale, smoky-looking moonlight seemed to have leeched all color from them.
"As soon as we're well out of earshot," Wolf said, climbing up into his wagon, "let's put some significant distance between us and this place. The wagons are empty, and a little run won't hurt the horses."
"Truly," Silk agreed.
They all mounted their wagons and set off at a walk. The stars glittered overhead in the crisp, cold sky. The fields were very white in the moonlight, and the clumps of trees back from the road very dark.
Just as they went over the first hilltop, Garion looked back at the dark cluster of houses in the valley behind. A single flicker of light came from a window somewhere, a lone, golden pinpoint that appeared and then vanished.
"Someone's awake back there," he told Silk. "I just saw a light."
"Some early riser perhaps," Silk suggested. "But then again, perhaps not." He shook the reins slightly, and the horses increased their pace. He shook them again, and they began to trot.
"Hang on, boy," he instructed, reached forward and slapped the reins down smartly on the rumps of the horses.
The wagon bounced and clattered fearfully behind the running team, and the bitterly chill air rushed at Garion's face as he clung to the wagon seat.
At full gallop the three wagons plunged down into the next valley, rushing between the frost-white fields in the bright moonlight, leaving the village and its single light far behind.
By the time the sun rose, they had covered a good four leagues, and Silk reined in his steaming horses. Garion felt battered and sore from the wild ride over the iron-hard roads and was glad for the chance to rest. Silk handed him the reins and jumped down from the wagon. He walked back and spoke briefly to Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol, then returned to the wagon.
"We turn off at that lane just ahead," he told Garion as he massaged his fingers.
Garion offered him the reins.
"You drive," Silk told him. "My hands are frozen stiff. Just let the horses walk."
Garion clucked at the horses and shook the reins slightly. Obediently, the team started out again.
"The lane circles around to the back of that hill," Silk said, pointing with his chin since his hands were tucked inside his tunic. "On the far side there's a copse of fir trees. We'll stop there to rest the horses."
"Do you think we're being followed?" Garion asked.
"This'll be a good time to find out," Silk said.
They rounded the hill and drove on down to where the dark firs bordered the road. Then Garion turned the horses and moved in under the shadowy trees.
"This will do fine," Silk said, getting down. "Come along."
"Where are we going?"
"I want to have a look at that road behind us," Silk said. "We'll go up through the trees to the top of the hill and see if our back trail has attracted any interest."
And he started up the hill, moving quite rapidly but making absolutely no sound as he went. Garion floundered along behind him, his feet cracking the dead twigs underfoot embarrassingly until he began to catch the secret of it. Silk nodded approvingly once, but said nothing.
The trees ended just at the crest of the hill, and Silk stopped there. The

valley below with the dark road passing through it was empty except for two deer who had come out of the woods on the far side to graze in the frosty grass.
"We'll wait a while," Silk said. "If Brill and his hireling are following, they shouldn't be far behind."
He sat on a stump and watched the empty valley.
After a while, a cart moved slowly along the road toward Winold. It looked tiny in the distance, and its pace along the scar of the road seemed very slow.
The sun rose a bit higher, and they squinted into its full morning brightness.
"Silk," Garion said finally in a hesitant tone.
"Yes, Garion?"
"What's this all about?" It was a bold question to ask, but Garion felt he knew Silk well enough now to ask it.
"All what?"
"What we're doing. I've heard a few things and guessed a few more, but it doesn't really make any sense to me."
"And just what have you guessed, Garion?" Silk asked, his small eyes very bright in his unshaven face.
"Something's been stolen-something very important - and Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol - and the rest of us - are trying to get it back."
"All right," Silk said. "That much is true."
"Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol are not at all what they seem to be," Garion went on.
"No," Silk agreed, "they aren't."
"I think they can do things that other people can't do," Garion said, struggling with the words. "Mister Wolf can follow this thing - whatever it is - without seeing it. And last week in those woods when the Murgos passed, they did something - I don't even know how to describe it, but it was almost as if they reached out and put my mind to sleep. How did they do that? And why?"
Silk chuckled.
"You're a very observant lad," he said. Then his tone became more serious. "We're living in momentous times, Garion. The events of a thousand years and more have all focused on these very days. The world, I'm told, is like that. Centuries pass when nothing happens, and then in a few short years events of such tremendous importance take place that the world is never the same again."
"I think that if I had my choice, I'd prefer one of those quiet centuries," Garion said glumly.
"Oh, no," Silk said, his lips drawing back in a ferretlike grin. "Now's the time to be alive - to see it all happen, to be a part of it. That makes the blood race, and each breath is an adventure."
Garion let that pass.
"What is this thing we're following?" he asked.
"It's best if you don't even know its name," Silk told him seriously, "or the name of the one who stole it. There are people trying to stop us; and what you don't know, you can't reveal."
"I'm not in the habit of talking to Murgos," Garion said stiffly.
"It's not necessary to talk to them," Silk said. "There are some among them who can reach out and pick the thoughts right out of your mind."
"That isn't possible," Garion said.
"Who's to say what's possible and what isn't?" Silk asked. And Garion remembered a conversation he had once had with Mister Wolf about the possible and the impossible.
Silk sat on the stump in the newly risen sun looking thoughtfully down into the still-shadowy valley, an ordinary-looking little man in ordinary-looking tunic and hose and a rough brown shoulder cape with its hood turned up over his head.
"You were raised as a Sendar, Garion," he said, "and Sendars are solid, practical men with little patience for such things as sorcery and magic and other things that can't be seen or touched. Your friend, Durnik, is a perfect Sendar. He can mend a shoe or fix a broken wheel or dose a sick horse, but I doubt that he could bring himself to believe in the tiniest bit of magic."
"I am a Sendar," Garion objected. The hint implicit in Silk's observation struck at the very center of his sense of his own identity.

Silk turned and looked at him closely.
"No," he said, "you aren't. I know a Sendar when I see one just as I can recognize the difference between an Arend and a Tolnedran or a Cherek and an Algar. There's a certain set of the head, a certain look about the eyes of Sendars that you don't have. You're not a Sendar."
"What am I then?" Garion challenged.
"I don't know," Silk said with a puzzled frown, "and that's very unusual, since I've been trained to know what people are. It may come to me in time, though."
"Is Aunt Pol a Sendar?" Garion asked.
"Of course not." Silk laughed.
"That explains it then," Garion said. "I'm probably the same thing she is."
Silk looked sharply at him.
"She's my father's sister, after all," Garion said. "At first I thought it was my mother she was related to, but that was wrong. It was my father; I know that now."
"That's impossible," Silk said flatly.
"Impossible?"
"Absolutely out of the question. The whole notion's unthinkable."
"Why?"
Silk chewed at his lower lip for a moment. "Let's go back to the wagons," he said shortly.
They turned and went down through the dark trees with the bright morning sunlight slanting on their backs in the frosty air.
They rode the back lanes for the rest of the day. Late in the afternoon when the sun had begun to drop into a purple bank of clouds toward the west, they arrived at the farm where they were to pick up Mingan's hams. Silk spoke with the stout farmer and showed him the piece of parchment Mingan had given them in Darine.
"I'll be glad to get rid of them," the farmer said. "They've been occupying storage space I sorely need."
"That's frequently the case when one has dealings with Tolnedrans," Silk observed. "They're gifted at getting a bit more than they pay foreven if it's only the free use of someone else's storage sheds."
The farmer glumly agreed.
"I wonder," Silk said as if the thought had just occurred to him, "I wonder if you might have seen a friend of mine - Brill by name? A medium-sized man with black hair and beard and a cast to one eye?"
"Patched clothes and a sour disposition?" the stout farmer asked.
"That's him," Silk said.
"He's been about the area," the farmer said, "looking - or so he said - for an old man and a woman and a boy. He said that they stole some things from his master and that he'd been sent to find them."
"How long ago was that?" Silk asked.
"A week or so," the farmer said.
"I'm sorry to have missed him," Silk said. "I wish I had the leisure to look him up."
"I can't for my life think why," the farmer said bluntly. "To be honest with you, I didn't care much for your friend."
"I'm not overfond of him myself," Silk agreed, "but the truth is that he owes me some money. I could quite easily do without Brill's companionship, but I'm lonesome for the money, if you take my meaning."
The farmer laughed.
"I'd take it as a kindness if you happened to forget that I asked after him," Silk said. "He'll likely be hard enough to find even if he isn't warned that I'm looking for him."
"You can depend on my discretion," the stout man said, still laughing. "I have a loft where you and your wagoneers can put up for the night, and I'd take it kindly if you'd sup with my workers in the dining hall over there."
"My thanks," Silk said, bowing slightly. "The ground's cold, and it's been some time since we've eaten anything but the rough fare of the road."
"You wagoneers lead adventuresome lives," the stout man said almost enviously.

"Free as birds with always a new horizon just beyond the next hilltop."
"It's much overrated," Silk told him, "and winter's a thin time for birds and wagoneers both."
The farmer laughed again, clapped Silk on the shoulder and then showed him where to put up the horses.
The food in the stout farmer's dining hall was plain, but there was plenty; and the loft was a bit drafty, but the hay was soft. Garion slept soundly. The farm was not Faldor's, but it was familiar enough, and there was that comforting sense of having walls about him again that made him feel secure.
The following morning, after a solid breakfast, they loaded the wagons with the Tolnedran's salt-crusted hams and bade the farmer a friendly good-bye.
The clouds that had begun to bank up in the west the evening before had covered the sky during the night, and it was cold and gray as they set out for Muros, fifty leagues to the south.

Chapter Nine

THE ALMOST TWO WEEKS it took them to reach Muros were the most uncomfortable Garion had ever spent. Their route skirted the edge of the foothills through rolling and sparsely settled country, and the sky hung gray and cold overhead. There were occasional spits of snow, and the mountains loomed black against the skyline to the east.
It seemed to Garion that he would never be warm again. Despite Durnik's best efforts to find dry firewood each night, their fires always seemed pitifully small, and the great cold around them enormously large. The ground upon which they slept was always frozen, and the chill seemed actually to seep into Garion's bones.
His education in the Drasnian secret language continued and he became, if not adept, at least competent by the time they passed Lake Camaar and began the long, downhill grade that led to Muros.
The city of Muros in south-central Sendaria was a sprawling, unattractive place that had been since time immemorial the site of a great annual fair. Each year in late summer, Algar horsemen drove vast cattle herds through the mountains along the Great North Road to Muros where cattle buyers from all over the west gathered to await their coming. Huge sums changed hands, and, because the Algar clansmen also commonly made their yearly purchases of useful and ornamental articles at that time, merchants from as far away as Nyissa in the remote south gathered to offer their wares. A large plain which lay to the east of the city was given over entirely to the cattle pens that stretched for miles but were still inadequate to contain the herds which arrived at the height of the season. Beyond the pens to the east lay the more or less permanent encampment of the Algars.
It was to this city one midmorning at the tag end of the fair, when the cattle pens were nearly empty and most of the Algars had departed and only the most desperate merchants remained, that Silk led the three wagons laden with the hams of Mingan the Tolnedran.
The delivery of the hams took place without incident, and the wagons soon drew into an innyard near the northern outskirts of the city.
"This is a respectable inn, great lady," Silk assured Aunt Pol as he helped her down from the wagon. "I've stopped here before."
"Let's hope so," she said. "The inns of Muros have an unsavory reputation."
"Those particular inns lie along the eastern edge of town," Silk assured her delicately. "I know them well."
"I'm certain you do," she said with an arched eyebrow.
"My profession sometimes requires me to seek out places I might otherwise prefer to avoid," he said blandly.
The inn, Garion noted, was surprisingly clean, and its guests seemed for the most part to be Sendarian merchants.
"I thought there'd be many different kinds of people here in Muros," he said as he and Silk carried their bundles up to the chambers on the second floor.

"There are," Silk said, "but each group tends to remain aloof from the others. The Tolnedrans gather in one part of town, the Drasnians in another, the Nyissans in yet another. The Earl of Muros prefers it that way. Tempers sometimes flare in the heat of the day's business, and it's best not to have natural enemies housed under the same roof."
Garion nodded. "You know," he said as they entered the chambers they had taken for their stay in Muros, "I don't think I've ever seen a Nyissan."
"You're lucky," Silk said with distaste. "They're an unpleasant race."
"Are they like Murgos?"
"No," Silk said. "The Nyissans worship Issa, the Snake-God, and it's considered seemly among them to adopt the mannerisms of the serpent. I don't find it at all that attractive myself. Besides, the Nyissans murdered the Rivan King, and all Alorns have disliked them since then."
"The Rivans don't have a king," Garion objected.
"Not anymore," Silk said. "They did once, though - until Queen Salmissra decided to have him murdered."
"When was that?" Garion asked, fascinated.
"Thirteen hundred years ago," Silk said, as if it had only been yesterday.
"Isn't that sort of a long time to hold a grudge?" Garion asked.
"Some things are unforgivable," Silk said shortly.
Since there was still a good part of the day left, Silk and Wolf left the inn that afternoon to search the streets of Muros for those strange, lingering traces that Wolf could apparently see or feel and which would tell him whether the object they sought had passed this way. Garion sat near the fire in the chamber he shared with Aunt Pol, trying to bake the chill out of his feet. Aunt Pol also sat by the fire, mending one of his tunics, her shining needle flickering in and out of the fabric.
"Who was the Rivan King, Aunt Pol?" he asked her. She stopped sewing.
"Why do you ask?" she said.
"Silk was telling me about Nyissans," he said. "He told me that their queen murdered the Rivan King. Why would she do that?"
"You're full of questions today, aren't you?" she asked, her needle moving again.
"Silk and I talk about a lot of things as we ride along," Garion said, pushing his feet even closer to the fire.
"Don't burn your shoes," she told him.
"Silk says that I'm not a Sendar," Garion said. "He says that he doesn't know what I am, but that I'm not a Sendar."
"Silk talks too much," Aunt Pol observed.
"You never tell me anything, Aunt Pol," he said in irritation.
"I tell you everything you need to know," she said calmly. "Right now it's not necessary for you to know anything about Rivan kings or Nyissan queens."
"All you want to do is keep me an ignorant child," Garion said petulantly. "I'm almost a man, and I don't even know what I am - or who."
"I know who you are," she said, not looking up.
"Who am I then?"
"You're a young man who's about to catch his shoes on fire," she said.
He jerked his feet back quickly.
"You didn't answer me," he accused.
"That's right," she said in that same infuriatingly calm voice.
"Why not?"
"It's not necessary for you to know yet. When it's time, I'll tell you, but not until."
"That's not fair," he objected.
"The world's full of injustice," she said. "Now, since you're feeling so manly, why don't you fetch some more firewood? That'll give you something useful to think about."
He glared at her and stamped across the room.
"Garion," she said.
"What?"

"Don't even think about slamming the door."
That evening when Wolf and Silk returned, the usually cheerful old man seemed impatient and irritable. He sat down at the table in the common room of the inn and stared moodily at the fire. "I don't think it
passed this way," he said finally. "There are a few places left to try, but I'm almost certain that it hasn't been here."
"Then we go on to Camaar?" Barak rumbled, his thick fingers combing his bristling beard.
"We must," Wolf said. "Most likely we should have gone there first."
"There was no way to know," Aunt Pol told him. "Why would he go to Camaar if he's trying to carry it to the Angarak kingdoms?"
"I can't even be certain where he's going," Wolf said irritably. "Maybe he wants to keep the thing for himself. He's always coveted it." He stared into the fire again.
"We're going to need some kind of cargo for the trip to Camaar," Silk said.
Wolf shook his head. "It slows us too much," he said. "It's not unusual for wagons to return to Camaar from Muros without cargo, and it's reaching the point where we'll have to gamble our disguise for the sake of speed. It's forty leagues to Camaar, and the weather's turning bad. A heavy snowstorm could stop the wagons entirely, and I don't have time to spend the whole winter mired down in a snowbank."
Durnik dropped his knife suddenly and started to scramble to his feet.
"What's amiss?" Barak asked quickly.
"I just saw Brill," Durnik said. "He was in that doorway."
"Are you sure?" Wolf demanded.
"I know him," Durnik said grimly. "It was Brill, all right."
Silk pounded his fist down on the table.
"Idiot!" he accused himself. "I underestimated the man."
"That doesn't matter now," Mister Wolf said, and there was almost a kind of relief in his voice. "Our disguise is useless now. I think it's time for speed."
"I'll see to the wagons," Durnik said.
"No," Wolf said. "The wagons are too slow. We'll go to the camp of the Algars and buy good horses." He stood up quickly.
"What of the wagons?" Durnik persisted.
"Forget them," Wolf said. "They're only a hindrance now. We'll ride the wagon horses to the camp of the Algars and take only what we can conveniently carry. Let's get ready to leave immediately. Meet me in the innyard as soon as you can." He went quickly to the door and out into the cold night.
It was only a few minutes later that they all met near the door to the stable in the cobblestoned innyard, each carrying a small bundle. Hulking Barak jingled as he walked, and Garion could smell the oiled steel of his mail shirt. A few Bakes of snow drifted down through the frosty air and settled like tiny feathers to the frozen ground.
Durnik was the last to join them. He came breathlessly out of the inn and pressed a small handful of coins upon Mister Wolf.
"It was the best I could do," he apologized. "It's scarce half the worth of the wagons, but the innkeeper sensed my haste and bargained meanly." He shrugged then. "At least we're rid of them," he said. "It's not good to leave things of value behind. They nag at the mind and distract one from the business at hand."
Silk laughed. "Durnik," he said, "you're the absolute soul of a Sendar."
"One must follow one's nature," Durnik said.
"Thank you, my friend," Wolf said gravely, dropping the coins in his purse.
"Let's lead the horses," he went on. "Galloping through these narrow streets at night would only attract attention."
"I'll lead," Barak announced, drawing his sword. "If there's any trouble, I'm best equipped to deal with it."
"I'll walk along beside you, friend Barak;" Durnik said, hefting a stout cudgel of firewood.
Barak nodded, his eyes grimly bright, and led his horse out through the gate with Durnik closely at his side.

Taking his lead from Durnik, Garion paused momentarily as he passed the woodpile and selected a good oak stick. It had a comforting weight, and he swung it a few times to get the feel of it. Then he saw Aunt Pol watching him, and he hurried on without any further display.

The streets through which they passed were narrow and dark, and the snow had begun to fall a bit more heavily now, settling almost lazily through the dead calm air. The horses, made skittish by the snow, seemed to be fearful and crowded close to those who led them.

When the attack came, it was unexpected and swift. There was a sudden rush of footsteps and a sharp ring of steel on steel as Barak fended off the first blow with his sword.

Garion could see only shadowy figures outlined against the falling snow, and then, as once before when in his boyhood he had struck down his friend Rundorig in mock battle, his ears began to ring; his blood surged boilingly in his veins as he leaped into the fight, ignoring the single cry from Aunt Pol.

He received a smart rap on the shoulder, whirled and struck with his stick. He was rewarded with a muffled grunt. He struck again - and then again, swinging his club at those parts of his shadowy enemy which he instinctively knew were most sensitive.

The main fight, however, surged around Barak and Durnik. The ring of Barak's sword and the thump of Durnik's cudgel resounded in the narrow street along with the groans of their assailants.

"There's the boy!" a voice rang out from behind them, and Garion whirled. Two men were running down the street toward him, one with a sword and the other with a wicked-looking curved knife. Knowing it was hopeless, Garion raised his club, but Silk was there. The small man launched himself from the shadows directly at the feet of the two, and all three crashed to the street in a tangle of arms and legs. Silk rolled to his feet like a cat, spun and kicked one of the floundering men solidly just below the ear. The man sank twitching to the cobblestones. The other scrambled away and half rose just in time to receive both of Silk's heels in his face as the rat-faced Drasnian leaped into the air, twisted and struck with both legs. Then Silk turned almost casually.

"Are you all right?" he asked Garion.

"I'm fine," Garion said. "You're awfully good at this kind of thing."

"I'm an acrobat," Silk said. "It's simple once you know how."

"They're getting away," Garion told him.

Silk turned, but the two he had just put down were dragging themselves into a dark alley.

There was a triumphant shout from Barak, and Garion saw that the rest of the attackers were fleeing.

At the end of the street in the snow-speckled light from a small window was Brill, almost dancing with fury. "Cowards!" he shouted at his hirelings.

"Cowards!" And then Barak started for him, and he too turned and ran.

"Are you all right, Aunt Pol?" Garion said, crossing the street to where she stood.

"Of course I am," she snapped. "And don't do that again, young man. Leave street brawling to those better suited for it."

"I was all right," he objected. "I had my stick here."

"Don't argue with me," she said. "I didn't go to all the trouble of raising you to have you end up dead in a gutter."

"Is everyone all right?" Durnik asked anxiously, coming back to them.

"Of course we are," Aunt Pol snapped peevishly. "Why don't you see if you can help the Old Wolf with the horses?"

"Certainly, Mistress Pol," Durnik said mildly.

"A splendid little fight," Barak said, wiping his sword as he joined them. "Not much blood, but satisfying all the same."

"I'm delighted you found it so," Aunt Pol said acidly. "I don't much care for such encounters. Did they leave anyone behind?"

"Regrettably no, dear lady," Barak said. "The quarters were too narrow for good strokes, and these stones too slippery for good footing. I marked a couple of

them quite well, however. We managed to break a few bones and dent a head or two. As a group, they were much better at running than at fighting."
Silk came back from the alley where he had pursued the two who had tried to attack Garion. His eyes were bright, and his grin was vicious.
"Invigorating," he said, and then laughed for no apparent reason.
Wolf and Durnik had managed to calm their wild-eyed horses and led them back to where Garion and the others stood.
"Is anyone hurt?" Wolf demanded.
"We're all intact," Barak rumbled. "The business was hardly worth drawing a sword for."
Garion's mind was racing; in his excitement, he spoke without stopping to consider the fact that it might be wiser to think the whole thing through first.

"How did Brill know we were in Muros?" he asked.
Silk looked at him sharply, his eyes narrowing.
"Perhaps he followed us from Winold," he said.
"But we stopped and looked back," Garion said. "He wasn't following when we left, and we've kept a watch behind us every day."
Silk frowned.
"Go on, Garion," he said.
"I think he knew where we were going," Garion blurted, struggling against a strange compulsion not to speak what his mind saw clearly now.
"And what else do you think?" Wolf asked.
"Somebody told him," Garion said. "Somebody who knew we were coming here."
"Mingan knew," Silk said, "but Mingan's a merchant, and he wouldn't talk about his dealings to somebody like Brill."
"But Asharak the Murgo was in Mingan's counting room when Mingan hired us." The compulsion was so strong now that Garion's tongue felt stiff.
Silk shrugged.
"Why should it concern him? Asharak didn't know who we were."
"But what if he did?" Garion struggled. "What if he isn't just an ordinary Murgo, but one of those others - like the one who was with those ones who passed us a couple days after we left Darine?"
"A Grolim?" Silk said, and his eyes widened. "Yes, I suppose that if Asharak is a Grolim, he'd have known who we are and what we're doing."
"And what if the Grolim who passed us that day was Asharak?" Garion fought to say. "What if he wasn't really looking for us, but just coming south to find Brill and send him here to wait for us?"
Silk looked very hard at Garion.
"Very good," he said softly. "Very, very good." He glanced at Aunt Pol. "My compliments, Mistress Pol. You've raised a rare boy here."
"What did this Asharak look like?" Wolf asked quickly.
"A Murgo." Silk shrugged. "He said he was from Rak Goska. I took him to be an ordinary spy on some business that didn't concern us. My mind seems to have gone to sleep."
"It happens when one deals with Grolims," Wolf told him.
"Someone's watching us," Durnik said quietly, "from that window up there."
Garion looked up quickly and saw a dark shape at a second-story window outlined by a dim light. The shape was hauntingly familiar. Mister Wolf did not look up, but his face turned blank as if he were looking inward, or his mind were searching for something. Then he drew himself up and looked at the figure in the window, his eyes blazing. "A Grolim," he said shortly.
"A dead one perhaps," Silk said. He reached inside his tunic and drew out a long, needle-pointed dirk. He took two quick steps away from the house where the Grolim stood watching, spun and threw the dirk with a smooth, overhand cast. The dirk crashed through the window. There was a muffled shout, and the light went out. Garion felt a strange pang in his left arm.
"Marked him," Silk said with a grin.
"Good throw," Barak said admiringly.
"One has picked up certain skills," Silk said modestly. "If it was Asharak, I

owed him that for deceiving me in Mingan's counting room."
"At least it'll give him something to think about," Wolf said. "There's no point in trying to creep through town now. They know we're here. Let's mount and ride." He climbed onto his horse and led the way down the street at a quick walk.
The compulsion was gone now, and Garion wanted to tell them about Asharak, but there was no chance for that as they rode.
Once they reached the outskirts of the city, they nudged their horses into a fast canter. The snow was falling more seriously now, and the hoof churned ground in the vast cattle pens was already faintly dusted with white.
"It's going to be a cold night," Silk shouted as they rode.
"We could always go back to Muros," Barak suggested. "Another scuffle or two might warm your blood."
Silk laughed and put his heels to his horse again.
The encampment of the Algars was three leagues to the east of Muros. It was a large area surrounded by a stout palisade of poles set in the ground. The snow by now was falling thickly enough to make the camp look hazy and indistinct. The gate, flanked by hissing torches, was guarded by two fierce-looking warriors in leather leggings, snow-dusted jerkins of the same material, and pot-shaped steel helmets. The points of their lances glittered in the torchlight.
"Halt," one of the warriors commanded, leveling his lance at Mister Wolf. "What business have you here at this time of night?"
"I have urgent need of speaking with your herd master," Wolf replied politely. "May I step down?"
The two guards spoke together briefly.
"You may come down," one of them said. "Your companions, however, must withdraw somewhat - but not beyond the light."
"Algars!" Silk muttered under his breath. "Always suspicious."
Mister Wolf climbed down from his horse, and, throwing back his hood, approached the two guards through the snow.
Then a strange thing happened. The elder of the two guards stared at Mister Wolf, taking in his silver hair and beard. His eyes suddenly opened very wide. He quickly muttered something to his companion, and the two men bowed deeply to Wolf.
"There isn't time for that," Wolf said in annoyance. "Convey me to your herd master."
"At once, Ancient One," the elder guard said quickly and hurried to open the gate.
"What was that about?" Garion whispered to Aunt Pol.
"Algars are superstitious," she said shortly. "Don't ask so many questions."
They waited with snow settling down upon them and melting on their horses. After about a half hour, the gate opened again and two dozen mounted Algars, fierce in their rivet-studded leather vests and steel helmets, herded six saddled horses out into the snow.
Behind them Mister Wolf walked, accompanied by a tall man with his head shaved except for a flowing scalp lock.
"You have honored our camp by your visit, Ancient One," the tall man was saying, "and I wish you all speed on your journey."
"I have little fear of being delayed with Algar horses under us," Wolf replied.
"My riders will accompany you along a route they know which will put you on the far side of Muros within a few hours," the tall man said. "They will then linger for a time to be certain you are not followed."
"I cannot express my gratitude, noble herd master," Wolf said, bowing.
"It is I who am grateful for the opportunity to be of service," the herd master said, also bowing.
The change to their new horses took only a minute. With half of their contingent of Algars leading and the other half bringing up the rear, they turned and rode back toward the west through the dark, snowy night.

Chapter Ten

GRADUALLY, ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY, the darkness became paler as the softly falling snow made indistinct even the arrival of morning. Their seemingly inexhaustible horses pounded on through the growing light, the sound of their hooves muffled by the snow now lying fetlock-deep on the broad surface of the Great North Road. Garion glanced back once and saw the jumbled tracks of their passage stretching behind them and, already at the hazy gray limit of his vision, beginning to fill with concealing snow.

When it was fully light, Mister Wolf reined in his steaming horse and proceeded at a walk for a time.

"How far have we come?" he asked Silk.

The weasel-faced man who had been shaking the snow out of the folds of his cloak looked around, trying to pick out a landmark in the misty veil of dropping flakes.

"Ten leagues," he said finally. "Perhaps a bit more."

"This is a miserable way to travel," Barak rumbled, wincing slightly as he shifted his bulk in the saddle.

"Think of how your horse must feel." Silk grinned at him.

"How far is it to Camaar?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Forty leagues from Muros," Silk told her.

"We'll need shelter then," she said. "We can't gallop forty leagues without rest, no matter who's behind us."

"I don't think we need to worry about pursuit just now," Wolf said. "The Algars will detain Brill and his hirelings or even Asharak if they try to follow us."

"At least there's something Algars are good for," Silk said dryly.

"If I remember correctly, there should be an imperial hostel about five leagues farther to the west," Wolf said. "We ought to reach it by noon."

"Will we be allowed to stay there?" Durnik asked doubtfully. "I've never heard that Tolnedrans are noted for hospitality."

"Tolnedrans will sell anything for a price," Silk said. "The hostel would be a good place to stop. Even if Brill or Asharak should evade the Algars and follow us there, the legionnaires won't permit any foolishness within their walls."

"Why should there be Tolnedran soldiers in Sendaria?" Garion asked, feeling a brief surge of patriotic resentment at the thought.

"Wherever the great roads are, you'll find the legions," Silk said. "Tolnedrans are even better at writing treaties than they are at giving short weight to their customers."

Mister Wolf chuckled. "You're inconsistent, Silk," he said. "You don't object to their highways, but you dislike their legions. You can't have the one without the other."

"I've never pretended to be consistent," the sharp-nosed man said airily. "If we want to reach the questionable comfort of the imperial hostel by noon, hadn't we better move along? I wouldn't want to deny His Imperial Majesty the opportunity to pick my pocket."

"All right," Wolf said, "let's ride." And he put his heels to the flanks of the Algar horse which had already begun to prance impatiently under him.

The hostel, when they reached it in the full light of snowy noon, proved to be a series of stout buildings surrounded by an even stouter wall. The legionnaires who manned it were not the same sort of men as the Tolnedran merchants Garion had seen before. Unlike the oily men of commerce, these were hard-faced professional fighting men in burnished breastplates and plumed helmets. They carried themselves proudly, even arrogantly, each bearing the knowledge that the might of all Tolnedra was behind him.

The food in the dining hall was plain and wholesome, but dreadfully expensive. The tiny sleeping cubicles were scrupulously clean, with hard, narrow beds and thick woolen blankets, and were also expensive. The stables were neat, and they too reached deeply into Mister Wolf's purse. Garion wondered at the thought of how much their lodging was costing, but Wolf paid for it all with seeming indifference as if his purse were bottomless.

"We'll rest here until tomorrow," the white-bearded old man announced when they

had finished eating. "Maybe it will snow itself out by morning. I'm not happy with all this plunging blindly through a snowstorm. Too many things can hide in our path in such weather."
Garion, who by now was numb with exhaustion, heard these words gratefully as he half drowsed at the table. The others sat talking quietly, but he was too tired to listen to what they said.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said finally, "why don't you go to bed?"
"I'm all right, Aunt Pol," he said, rousing himself quickly, mortified once more at being treated like a child.
"Now, Garion," she said in that infuriating tone he knew so well. It seemed that all his life she had been saying "Now, Garion," to him. But he knew better than to argue.
He stood up and was surprised to feel that his legs were trembling. Aunt Pol also rose and led him from the dining hall.
"I can find my way by myself," he objected.
"Of course," she said. "Now come along."
After he had crawled into bed in his cubicle, she pulled his blankets up firmly around his neck. "Stay covered," she told him. "I don't want you taking cold." She laid her cool hand briefly on his forehead as she had done when he was a small child.
"Aunt Pol?" he asked drowsily.
"Yes, Garion?"
"Who were my parents? I mean, what were their names?"
She looked at him gravely. "We can talk about that later," she said.
"I want to know," he said stubbornly.
"All right. Your father's name was Geran; your mother's was Ildera."
Garion thought about that.
"The names don't sound Sendarian," he said finally.
"They're not," Aunt Pol said.
"Why was that?"
"It's a very long story," she said, "and you're much too tired to hear it just now."
On a sudden impulse he reached out and touched the white lock at her brow with the mark on the palm of his right hand. As had some times happened before, a window seemed to open in his mind at the tingling touch, but this time that window opened on something much more serious. There was anger, and a single face-a face that was strangely like Mister Wolf's, but was not his face, and all the towering fury in the world was directed at that face.
Aunt Pol moved her head away. "I've asked you not to do that, Garion," she said, her tone very matter-of fact. "You're not ready for it yet.
"You're going to have to tell me what it is someday," he said.
"Perhaps," she said, "but not now. Close your eyes and go to sleep."
And then, as if that command had somehow dissolved his will, he fell immediately into a deep, untroubled sleep.
By the next morning it had stopped snowing. The world outside the walls of the imperial hostel was mantled in thick, unbroken white, and the air was filmy with a kind of damp haze that was almost-but not quite-fog.
"Misty Sendaria," Silk said ironically at breakfast. "Sometimes I'm amazed that the entire kingdom doesn't rust shut."
They traveled all that day at a mile-eating canter, and that night there was another imperial hostel, almost identical to the one they had left that morning - so closely identical in fact that it almost seemed to Garion that they had ridden all day and merely arrived back where they had started. He commented on that to Silk as they were putting their horses in the stable.
"Tolnedrans are nothing if not predictable," Silk said. "All their hostels are exactly the same. You can find these same buildings in Drasnia, Algaria, Arendia and any place else their great roads go. It's their one weakness - this lack of imagination."
"Don't they get tired of doing the same thing over and over again?"
"It makes them feel comfortable, I guess." Silk laughed. "Let's go see about

supper."
It snowed again the following day, but by noon Garion caught a scent other than that faintly dusty odor snow always seemed to have. Even as he had done when they had approached Darine, he began to smell the sea, and he knew their journey was almost at an end.
Camaar, the largest city in Sendaria and the major seaport of the north, was a sprawling place which had existed at the mouth of the Greater Camaar River since antiquity. It was the natural western terminus of the Great North Road which stretched to Boktor in Drasnia and the equally natural northern end of the Great West Road which reached down across Arendia into Tolnedra and the imperial capital at Tol Honeth. With some accuracy it could be said that all roads ended at Camaar.
Late on a chill, snowy afternoon, they rode down a gradual hill toward the city. Some distance from the gate, Aunt Pol stopped her horse. "Since we're no longer posing as vagabonds," she announced, "I see no further need for selecting the most disreputable inns, do you?"
"I hadn't really thought about it," Mister Wolf said.
"Well, I have," she said. "I've had more than enough of wayside hostels and seedy village inns. I need a bath, a clean bed and some decent food. If you don't mind, I'll choose our lodging this time."
"Of course, Pol," Wolf said mildly. "Whatever you say."
"Very well, then," she said and rode on toward the city gate with the rest of them trailing behind her.
"What is your business in Camaar?" one of the fur-mantled guards at the broad gate asked rather rudely.
Aunt Pol threw back her hood and fixed the man with a steely gaze. "I am the Duchess of Erat," she announced in ringing tones. "These are my retainers, and my business in Camaar is my own affair."
The guard blinked and then bowed respectfully.
"Forgive me, your Grace," he said. "I didn't intend to give offense."
"Indeed?" Aunt Pol said, her tone still cold and her gaze still dangerous.
"I did not recognize your Grace," the poor man floundered, squirming under that imperious stare. "May I offer any assistance?"
"I hardly think so," Aunt Pol said, looking him up and down. "Which is the finest inn in Camaar?"
"That would be the Lion, my Lady."
"And-?" she said impatiently.
"And what, my Lady?" the man said, confused by her question.
"Where is it?" she demanded. "Don't stand there gaping like a dolt. Speak up."
"It lies beyond the customs houses," the guard replied, flushing at her words. "Follow this street until you reach Customs Square. Anyone there can direct you to the Lion."
Aunt Pol pulled her hood back up.
"Give the fellow something," she said over her shoulder and rode on into the city without a backward glance.
"My thanks," the guard said as Wolf leaned down to hand him a small coin. "I must admit that I haven't heard of the Duchess of Erat before."
"You're a fortunate man," Wolf said.
"She's a great beauty," the man said admiringly.
"And has a temper to match," Wolf told him.
"I noticed that," the guard said.
"We noticed you noticing," Silk told him slyly.
They nudged their horses and caught up with Aunt Pol.
"The Duchess of Erat?" Silk asked mildly.
"The fellow's manner irritated me," Aunt Pol said loftily, "and I'm tired of putting on a poor face in front of strangers."
At Customs Square Silk accosted a busy-looking merchant trudging across the snow-covered paving. "You-fellow," he said in the most insulting way possible, pulling his horse directly in front of the startled merchant. "My mistress, the Duchess of Erat, requires directions to an inn called the Lion. Be so good as to

provide them."
The merchant blinked, his face flushing at the rat-faced man's tone.
"Up that street," he said shortly, pointing. "Some goodly way. It will be on your left. There's a sign of a Lion at the front."
Silk sniffed ungraciously, tossed a few coins into the snow at the man's feet and whirled his horse in a grand manner. The merchant, Garion noted, looked outraged, but he did grope in the snow for the coins Silk had thrown.
"I doubt that any of these people will quickly forget our passage," Wolf said sourly when they were some ways up the street.
"They'll remember the passage of an arrogant noblewoman," Silk said. "This is as good a disguise as any we've tried."
When they arnved at the inn, Aunt Pol commanded not just the usual sleeping chambers but an entire apartment. "My chamberlain there will pay you," she said to the innkeeper, indicating Mister Wolf. "Our baggage horses are some days behind with the rest of my servants, so I'll require the services of a dressmaker and a maid. See to it." And she turned and swept imperially up the long staircase that led to her apartment, following the servant who scurried ahead to show her the way.
"The duchess has a commanding presence, doesn't she?" the innkeeper ventured as Wolf began counting out coins.
"She has indeed," Wolf agreed. "I've discovered the wisdom of not countering her wishes."
"I'll be guided by you then," the innkeeper assured him. "My youngest daughter is a serviceable girl. I'll dispatch her to serve as her Grace's maid."
"Many thanks, friend," Silk told him. "Our Lady becomes most irntable when those things she desires are delayed, and we're the ones who suffer most from her displeasure."
They trooped up the stairs to the apartments Aunt Pol had taken and stepped into the main sitting room, a splendid chamber far richer than any Garion had seen before. The walls were covered by tapestries with intricate pictures woven into the fabric. A wealth of candles - real wax instead of smoky tallow - gleamed in sconces on the walls and in a massive candelabra on the polished table. A good warm fire danced merrily on the hearth, and a large carpet of curious design lay on the floor.
Aunt Pol was standing before the fire, warming her hands. "Isn't this better than some shabby, wharfside inn reeking of fish and unwashed sailors?" she asked.
"If the Duchess of Erat will forgive my saying so," Wolf said somewhat tartly, "this is hardly the way to escape notice, and the cost of these lodgings would feed a legion for a week."
"Don't grow parsimonious in your dotage, Old Wolf," she replied. "No one takes a sPolled noblewoman seriously, and your wagons weren't able to keep that disgusting Brill from finding us. This guise is at least comfortable, and it permits us to move more rapidly."
Wolf grunted. "I only hope we won't regret all this," he said.
"Stop grumbling, old man," she told him.
"Have it your way, Pol." He sighed.
"I intend to," she said.
"How are we to behave, Mistress Po1?" Durnik asked hesitantly. Her sudden regal manner had obviously confused him. "I'm not familiar with the ways of the gentry."
"It's quite simple, Durnik," she said. She eyed him up and down, noting his plain, dependable face and his solid competence. "How would you like to be chief groom to the Duchess of Erat? And master of her stables?"
Durnik laughed uncomfortably. "Noble titles for work I've done all my life," he said. "I could manage the work easily enough, but the titles might grow a bit heavy."
"You'll do splendidly, friend Durnik," Silk assured him. "That honest face of yours makes people believe anything you choose to tell them. If I had a face like yours, I could steal half the world." He turned to Aunt Pol. "And what role

am I to play, my Lady?" he asked.
"You'll be my reeve," she said. "The thievery usually associated with the position should suit you."
Silk bowed ironically.
"And I?" Barak said, grinning openly.
"My man-at-arms," she said. "I doubt that any would believe you to be a dancing master. Just stand around looking dangerous."
"What of me, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked. "What do I do?"
"You can be my page."
"What does a page do?"
"You fetch things for me."
"I've always done that. Is that what it's called?"
"Don't be impertinent. You also answer doors and announce visitors; and when I'm melancholy, you may sing to me."
"Sing?" he said incredulously. "Me?"
"It's customary."
"You wouldn't make me do that, would you, Aunt Pol?"
"Your Grace," she corrected.
"You won't be very gracious if you have to listen to me sing," he warned. "My voice isn't very good."
"You'll do just fine, dear," she said.
"And I've already been appointed to your Grace's chamberlain," Wolf said.
"My chief steward," she told him. "Manager of my estates and keeper of my purse."
"Somehow I knew that would be part of it."
There was a timid rap at the door.
"See who that is, Garion," Aunt Pol said.
When he opened the door, Garion found a young girl with light brown hair in a sober dress and starched apron and cap standing outside. She had very large brown eyes that looked at him apprehensively.
"Yes?" he asked.
"I've been sent to wait upon the duchess," she said in a low voice.
"Your maid has arrived, your Grace," Garion announced.
"Splendid," Aunt Pol said. "Come in, child."
The girl entered the room.
"What a pretty thing you are," Aunt Pol said.
"Thank you, my Lady," the girl answered with a brief curtsy and a rosy blush.
"And what is your name?"
"I am called Donia, my Lady."
"A lovely name," Aunt Pol said. "Now to important matters. Is there a bath on the premises?"
It was still snowing the next morning. The roofs of nearby houses were piled high with white, and the narrow streets were deep with it.
"I think we're close to the end of our search," Mister Wolf said as he stared intently out through the rippled glass of the window in the room with the tapestries.
"It's unlikely that the one we're after would stay in Camaar for long," Silk said.
"Very unlikely," Wolf agreed, "but once we've found his trail, we'll be able to move more rapidly. Let's go into the city and see if I'm right."
After Mister Wolf and Silk had left, Garion sat for a while talking with Donia, who seemed to be about his own age. Although she was not quite as pretty as Zubrette, Garion found her soft voice and huge brown eyes extremely attractive. Things were going along well between them until Aunt Pol's dressmaker arrived and Donia's presence was required in the chamber where the Duchess of Erat was being fitted for her new gowns.
Since Durnik, obviously ill at ease in the luxurious surroundings of their chambers, had adjourned to the stables after breakfast, Garion was left in the company of the giant Barak, who worked patiently with a small stone, polishing a nick out of the edge of his sword - a memento of the skirmish in Muros. Garion

had never been wholly comfortable with the huge, red-bearded man. Barak spoke rarely, and there seemed to be a kind of hulking menace about him. So it was that Garion spent the morning examining the tapestries on the walls of the sitting room. The tapestries depicted knights in full armor and castles on hilltops and strangely angular-looking maidens moping about in gardens.
"Arendish," Barak said, directly behind him. Garion jumped. The huge man had moved up so quietly that Garion had not heard him.
"How can you tell?" Garion asked politely.
"The Arends have a fondness for tapestry," Barak rumbled, "and the weaving of pictures occupies their women while the men are off denting each other's armor."
"Do they really wear all that?" Garion asked, pointing at a heavily armored knight pictured on the tapestry.
"Oh yes." Barak laughed. "That and more. Even their horses wear armor. It's a silly way to make war."
Garion scuffed his shoe on the carpet.
"Is this Arendish too?" he asked.
Barak shook his head.
"Mallorean," he said.
"How did it get here all the way from Mallorea?" Garion asked. "I've heard that Mallorea's all the way on the other end of the world."
"It's a goodly way off," Barak agreed, "but a merchant would go twice as far to make a profit. Such goods as this commonly move along the North Caravan Route out of Gar og Nadrak to Boktor. Mallorean carpets are prized by the wealthy. I don't much care for them myself, since I'm not fond of anything that has to do with the Angaraks."
"How many kinds of Angaraks are there?" Garion asked. "I know there are Murgos and Thulls, and I've heard stories about the Battle of Vo Mimbre and all, but I don't know much about them really."
"There are five tribes of them," Barak said, sitting back down and resuming his polishing, "Murgos and Thulls, Nadraks and Malloreans, and of course the Grolims. They live in the four kingdoms of the east Mallorea, Gar og Nadrak, Mishrak ac Thull and Cthol Murgos."
"Where do the Grolims live?"
"They have no special place," Barak replied grimly. "The Grolims are the priests of Torak One-eye and are everywhere in the lands of the Angaraks. They're the ones who perform the sacrifices to Torak. Grolim knives have spilled more Angarak blood than a dozen Vo Mimbres."
Garion shuddered.
"Why should Torak take such pleasure in the slaughter of his own people?" he asked.
"Who can say?" Barak shrugged. "He's a twisted and evil God. Some believe that he was made mad when he used the Orb of Aldur to crack the world and the Orb repaid him by burning out his eye and consuming his hand."
"How could the world be cracked?" Garion asked. "I've never understood that part of the story."
"The power of the Orb of Aldur is such that it can accomplish anything," Barak told him. "When Torak raised it, the earth was split apart by its power, and the seas came in to drown the land. The story's very old, but I think that it's probably true."
"Where is the Orb of Aldur now?" Garion asked suddenly.
Barak looked at him, his eyes icy blue and his face thoughtful, but he didn't say anything.
"Do you know what I think?" Garion said on a sudden impulse. "I think that it's the Orb of Aldur that's been stolen. I think it's the Orb that Mister Wolf is trying to find."
"And I think it would be better if you didn't think so much about such things," Barak warned.
"But I want to know," Garion protested, his curiosity driving him even in the face of Barak's words and the warning voice in his mind. "Everyone treats me like an ignorant boy. All I do is tag along with no idea of what we're doing.

Who is Mister Wolf, anyway? Why did the Algars behave the way they did when they saw him? How can he follow something that he can't see? Please tell me, Barak."
"Not I." Barak laughed. "Your Aunt would pull out my beard whisker by whisker if I made that mistake."
"You're not afraid of her, are you?"
"Any man with good sense is afraid of her," Barak said, rising and sliding his sword into its sheath.
"Aunt Pol?" Garion asked incredulously.
"Aren't you afraid of her?" Barak asked pointedly.
"No," Garion said, and then realized that was not precisely true. "Well-not really afraid. It's more-" He left it hanging, not knowing how to explain it.
"Exactly," Barak said. "And I'm no more foolhardy than you, my boy. You're too full of questions I'd be far wiser not to answer. If you want to know about these things, you'll have to ask your Aunt."
"She won't tell me," Garion said glumly. "She won't tell me anything. She won't even tell me about my parents-not really."
Barak frowned.
"That's strange," he said.
"I don't think they were Sendars," Garion said. "Their names weren't Sendarian, and Silk says that I'm not a Sendar - at least I don't look like one."
Barak looked at him closely. "No," he said finally. "Now that you mention it, you don't. You look more like a Rivan than anything else, but not quite that either."
"Is Aunt Pol a Rivan?"
Barak's eyes narrowed slightly. "I think we're getting to some more of those questions I hadn't better answer," he said.
"I'm going to find out someday," Garion said.
"But not today," Barak said. "Come along. I need some exercise. Let's go out into the innyard and I'll teach you how to use a sword."
"Me?" Garion said, all his curiosity suddenly melting away in the excitement of that thought.
"You're at an age where you should begin to learn," Barak said. "The occasion may someday arise when it will be a useful thing for you to know."
Late that afternoon when Garion's arm had begun to ache from the effort of swinging Barak's heavy sword and the whole idea of learning the skills of a warrior had become a great deal less exciting, Mister Wolf and Silk returned. Their clothes were wet from the snow through which they had trudged all day, but Wolf's eyes were bright, and his face had a curiously exultant expression as he led them all back up the stairs to the sitting room.
"Ask your Aunt to join us," he told Garion as he removed his sodden mantle and stepped to the fire to warm himself.
Garion sensed quickly that this was not the time for questions. He hurried to the polished door where Aunt Pol had been closeted with her dressmaker all day and rapped.
"What is it?" her voice came from inside.
"Mister-uh-that is, your chamberlain has returned, my Lady," Garion said, remembering at the last moment that she was not alone. "He requests a word with you."
"Oh, very well," she said. After a minute she came out, firmly closing the door behind her.
Garion gasped. The rich, blue velvet gown she wore made her so magnificent that she quite took his breath away. He stared at her in helpless admiration.
"Where is he?" she asked. "Don't stand and gape, Garion. It's not polite."
"You're beautiful, Aunt Pol," he blurted.
"Yes, dear," she said, patting his cheek, "I know. Now where's the Old Wolf?"
"In the room with the tapestries," Garion said, still unable to take his eyes from her.
"Come along, then," she said and swept down the short hall to the sitting room. They entered to find the others all standing by the fireplace.
"Well?" she asked.

Wolf looked up at her, his eyes still bright. "An excellent choice, Pol," he said admiringly. "Blue has always been your best color."
"Do you like it?" she asked, holding out her arms and turning almost girlishly so that they all might see how fine she looked. "I hope it pleases you, old man, because it's costing you a great deal of money."
Wolf laughed. "I was almost certain it would," he said.
The effect of Aunt Pol's gown on Durnik was painfully obvious. The poor man's eyes literally bulged, and his face turned alternately very pale and then very red, then finally settled into an expression of such hopelessness that Garion was touched to the quick by it.
Silk and Barak in curious unison both bowed deeply and wordlessly to Aunt Pol, and her eyes sparkled at their silent tribute.
"It's been here," Wolf announced seriously.
"You're certain?" Aunt Pol demanded.
He nodded. "I could feel the memory of its passage in the very stones."
"Did it come by sea?" she asked.
"No. He probably came ashore with it in some secluded cove up the coast and then traveled here by land."
"And took ship again?"
"I doubt that," Wolf said. "I know him well. He's not comfortable on the sea."
"Besides which," Barak said, "one word to King Anheg of Cherek would have put a hundred warships on his trail. No one can hide on the sea from the ships of Cherek, and he knows that."
"You're right," Wolf agreed. "I think he'll avoid the domains of the Alorns. That's probably why he chose not to pass along the North Road through Algaria and Drasnia. The Spirit of Belar is strong in the kingdoms of the Alorns, and not even this thief is bold enough to risk a confrontation with the Bear-God."
"Which leaves Arendia," Silk said, "or the land of the Ulgos."
"Arendia, I think," Wolf said. "The wrath of UL is even more fearsome than that of Belar."
"Forgive me," Durnik said, his eyes still on Aunt Pol. "This is all most confusing. I've never heard just exactly who this thief is."
"I'm sorry, gentle Durnik," Wolf said. "It's not a good idea to speak his name. He has certain powers which might make it possible for him to know our every move if we alert him to our location, and he can hear his name spoken a thousand leagues away."
"A sorcerer?" Durnik asked unbelievingly.
"The word isn't one I'd choose," Wolf said. "It's a term used by men who don't understand that particular art. Instead let's call him `thief,' though there are a few other names I might call him which are far less kindly."
"Can we be certain that he'll make for the kingdoms of the Angaraks?" Silk asked, frowning. "If that's the case, wouldn't it be quicker to take a ship directly to Tol Honeth and pick up his trail on the South Caravan Route into Cthol Murgos?"
Wolf shook his head. "Better to stay with this trail now that we've found it. We don't know what he intends. Maybe he wants to keep the thing he's stolen for himself rather than deliver it over to the Grolims. He might even seek sanctuary in Nyissa."
"He couldn't do that without the connivance of Salmissra," Aunt Pol said.
"It wouldn't be the first time that the Queen of the Serpent People has tampered with things that are none of her concern," Wolf pointed out.
"If that turns out to be true," Aunt Pol said grimly, "I think I'll give myself the leisure to deal with the snake-woman permanently."
"It's too early to know," Wolf said. "Tomorrow we'll buy provisions and ferry across the river to Arendia. I'll take up the trail there. For the time being all we can do is follow that trail. Once we know for certain where it leads, we'll be able to consider our alternatives."
From the evening-darkened innyard outside there came suddenly the sound of many horses.
Barak stepped quickly to the window and glanced out.

"Soldiers," he said shortly.
"Here?" Silk said, also hurrying to the window.
"They appear to be from one of the king's regiments," Barak said. "They won't be interested in us," Aunt Pol said.
"Unless they aren't what they seem," Silk said. "Uniforms of one kind or another aren't that difficult to come by."
"They aren't Murgos," Barak said. "I'd recognize Murgos."
"Brill isn't a Murgo either," Silk said, staring down into the innyard.
"See if you can hear what they say," Wolf instructed.
Barak carefully opened one of the windows a crack, and the candles all flickered in the gust of icy wind. In the yard below the captain of the soldiers was speaking with the innkeeper.
"He's a man of somewhat more than medium height, with white hair and a short white beard. He may be traveling with some others."
"There's such a one here, your Honor," the innkeeper said dubiously, "but I'm sure he isn't the one you seek. This one is chief steward to the Duchess of Erat, who honors my inn with her presence."
"The Duchess of where?" the captain asked sharply.
"Of Erat," the innkeeper replied. "A most noble lady of great beauty and a commanding presence."
"I wonder if I might have a word with her Grace," the captain said, climbing down from his horse.
"I'll ask her if she will receive your Honor," the innkeeper replied.
Barak closed the window.
"I'll deal with this meddlesome captain," he said firmly.
"No," Wolf said. "He's got too many soldiers with him, and if they're who they seem to be, they're good men who haven't done us any harm."
"There's the back stairs," Silk suggested. "We could be three streets away before he reached our door."
"And if he stationed soldiers at the back of the inn?" Aunt Pol suggested. "What then? Since he's coming to speak with the Duchess of Erat, why don't we let the duchess deal with him?"
"What have you got in mind?" Wolf asked.
"If the rest of you stay out of sight, I'll speak with him," she said. "I should be able to put him off until morning. We can be across the river into Arendia before he comes back."
"Perhaps," Wolf said, "but this captain sounds like a determined man."
"I've dealt with determined men before," she said.
"We'll have to decide quickly," Silk said from the door. "He's on the stairs right now."
"We'll try it your way, Pol," Wolf said, opening the door to the next chamber.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "you stay here. A duchess wouldn't be unattended."
Wolf and the others quickly left the room.
"What do you want me to do, Aunt Pol?" Garion whispered.
"Just remember that you're my page, dear," she said, seating herself in a large chair near the center of the room and carefully arranging the folds of her gown. "Stand near my chair and try to look attentive. I'll take care of the rest."
"Yes, my Lady," Garion said.
The captain, when he arrived behind the innkeeper's knock, proved to be a tall, sober-looking man with penetrating gray eyes. Garion, trying his best to sound officious, requested the soldier's name and then turned to Aunt Pol.
"There's a Captain Brendig to see you, your Grace," he announced. "He says that it's a matter of importance."
Aunt Pol looked at him for a moment as if considering the request. "Oh, very well," she said finally. "Show him in."
Captain Brendig stepped into the room, and the innkeeper left hurriedly.
"Your Grace," the captain said, bowing deferentially to Aunt Pol.
"What is it, Captain?" she demanded.
"I would not trouble your Grace if my mission were not of such urgency," Brendig apologized. "My orders are directly from the king himself, and you of all people

will know that we must defer to his wishes."
"I suppose I can spare you a few moments for the king's business," she said.
"There's a certain man the king wishes to have apprehended," Brendig said. "An elderly man with white hair and beard. I'm informed that you have such a one among your servants."
"Is the man a criminal?" she asked.
"The king didn't say so, your Grace," he told her. "I was only told that the man was to be seized and delivered to the palace at Sendarand, all who are with him as well."
"I am seldom at court," Aunt Pol said. "It's most unlikely that any of my servants would be of such interest to the king."
"Your Grace," Brendig said delicately, "in addition to my duties in one of the king's own regiments, I also have the honor to hold a baronetcy. I've been at court all my life and must confess that I've never seen you there. A lady of your striking appearance would not be soon forgotten."
Aunt Pol inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment of the compliment. "I suppose I should have guessed, my Lord Brendig," she said. "Your manners are not those of a common soldier."
"Moreover, your Grace," he continued, "I'm familiar with all the holdings of the kingdom. If I'm not mistaken, the district of Erat is an earldom, and the Earl of Erat is a short, stout man - my great uncle incidentally. There has been no duchy in that part of Sendaria since the kingdom was under the dominion of the Wacite Arends."
Aunt Pol fixed him with an icy stare.
"My Lady," Brendig said almost apologetically, "the Wacite Arends were exterminated by their Asturian cousins in the last years of the third millenium. There has been no Wacite nobility for over two thousand years."
"I thank you for the history lesson, my Lord," Aunt Pol said coldly.
"All of that, however, is hardly the issue, is it?" Brendig continued. "I am bidden by my king to seek out the man of whom I spoke. Upon your honor, Lady, do you know such a man?"
The question hung in the air between them, and Garion, knowing in sudden panic that they were caught, almost shouted for Barak.
Then the door to the next chamber opened, and Mister Wolf stepped into the room.
"There's no need to continue with this," he said. "I'm the one you're looking for. What does Fulrach of Sendaria want with me?"
Brendig looked at him without seeming surprise. "His Majesty did not see fit to take me into his confidence," he said. "He will explain it himself, I have no doubt, as soon as we reach the palace at Sendar."
"The sooner the better then," Wolf said. "When do we leave?"
"We depart for Sendar directly after breakfast in the morning," Brendig said. "I will accept your word that none of you will attempt to leave this inn during the night. I'd prefer not to subject the Duchess of Erat to the indignity of confinement at the local barracks. The cells there are most uncomfortable, I'm told."
"You have my word," Mister Wolf said.
"Thank you," Brendig said, bowing slightly. "I must also advise you that I am obliged to post guards about this inn - for your protection, of course."
"Your solicitude overwhelms us, my Lord," Aunt Pol said dryly.
"Your servant, my Lady," Brendig said with a formal bow. And then he turned and left the room.
The polished door was only wood; Garion knew that, but as it closed behind the departing Brendig it seemed to have that dreadful, final clang of the door to a dungeon.

Chapter Eleven

THEY WERE NINE DAYS on the coast road from Camaar to the capital at Sendar, though it was only fifty-five leagues. Captain Brendig measured their pace carefully, and his detachment of soldiers was arranged in such fashion that even

the thought of escape was impossible. Although it had stopped snowing, the road was still difficult, and the wind which blew in off the sea and across the broad, snow-covered salt marshes was raw and chill. They stayed each night in the evenly spaced Sendarian hostels which stood like mileposts along that uninhabited stretch of coast. The hostels were not quite so well appointed as were their Tolnedran counterparts along the Great North Road, but they were at least adequate. Captain Brendig seemed solicitous about their comfort, but he also posted guards each night.

On the evening of the second day, Garion sat near the fire with Durnik, staring moodily into the flames. Durnik was his oldest friend, and Garion felt a desperate need for friendship just then.

"Durnik," he said finally.

"Yes, lad?"

"Have you ever been in a dungeon?"

"What could I have done to be put in a dungeon?"

"I thought that you might have seen one sometime."

"Honest folk don't go near such places," Durnik said.

"I've heard they're awful-dark and cold and full of rats." "What is this talk of dungeons?" Durnik asked.

"I'm afraid we may find out all about places like that very soon," Garion said, trying not to sound too frightened.

"We've done nothing wrong," Durnik said.

"Then why would the king have us seized like this? Kings don't do things like that without good reason."

"We haven't done anything wrong," Durnik repeated stubbornly.

"But maybe Mister Wolf has," Garion suggested. "The king wouldn't send all these soldiers after him without some reason - and we could all be thrown in the dungeon with him just because we happened to be his companions."

"Thing like that don't happen in Sendaria," Durnik said firmly.

The next day the wind was very strong as it blew in off the sea; but it was a warm wind, and the foot-deep snow on the road began to turn slushy. By midday it had started to rain. They rode in sodden misery toward the next hostel.

"I'm afraid we'll have to delay our journey until this blows out," Captain Brendig said that evening, looking out one of the tiny windows of the hostel. "The road's going to be quite impassable by morning."

They spent the next day, and the next, sitting in the cramped main room of the hostel listening to the wind-driven rain slashing at the walls and roof, all the while under the watchful eyes of Brendig and his soldiers.

"Silk," Garion said on the second day, moving over to the bench where the rat-faced little man sat dozing.

"Yes, Garion?" Silk asked, rousing himself.

"What kind of man is the king?"

"Which king?"

"Of Sendaria."

"A foolish man - like all kings." Silk laughed. "The Sendarian kings are perhaps a bit more foolish, but that's only natural. Why do you ask?"

"Well" Garion hesitated. "Let's suppose that somebody did something that the king didn't like, and there were some other people traveling with him, and the king had these people seized. Would the king just throw them all into the dungeon? Or would he let the others go and just keep the one who'd angered him?"

Silk looked at him for a moment and then spoke firmly.

"That question is unworthy of you, Garion."

Garion flushed. "

I'm afraid of dungeons," he said in a small voice, suddenly very ashamed of himself. "I don't want to be locked up in the dark forever when I don't even know what for."

"The kings of Sendaria are just and honest men," Silk told him. "Not too bright, I'm afraid, but always fair."

"How can they be kings if they aren't wise?" Garion objected.

"Wisdom's a useful trait in a king," Silk said, "but hardly essential."

"How do they get to be kings, then?" Garion demanded.
"Some are born to it," Silk said. "The stupidest man in the world can be a king if he has the right parents. Sendarian kings have a disadvantage because they started so low."
"Low?"
"They were elected. Nobody ever elected a king before - only the Sendars."
"How do you elect a king?"
Silk smiled.
"Very badly, Garion. It's a poor way to select a king. The other ways are worse, but election is a very bad way to choose a king."
"Tell me how it was done," Garion said.
Silk glanced briefly at the rain-spattered window across the room and shrugged.
"It's a way to pass the time," he said. And then he leaned back, stretched his feet toward the fire and began.
"It all started about fifteen hundred years ago," he said, his voice loud enough to reach the ears of Captain Brendig, who sat nearby writing on a piece of parchment. "Sendaria wasn't a kingdom then, nor even a separate country. It had belonged from time to time to Cherek, Algaria or the northern Arends - Wacite or Asturian, depending on the fortunes of the Arendish civil war. When that war finally came to an end and the Wacites were destroyed and the Asturians had been defeated and driven into the untracked reaches of the great forest in northern Arendia, the Emperor of Tolnedra, Ran Horb II, decided that there ought to be a kingdom here."
"How could a Tolnedran emperor make that kind of decision for Sendaria?" Garion asked.
"The arm of the Empire is very long," Silk said. "The Great North Road had been built during the Second Borune Dynasty- I think it was Ran Borune IV who started the construction, wasn't it, Captain?"
"The fifth," Brendig said somewhat sourly without looking up. "Ran Borune V."
"Thank you, Captain," Silk said. "I can never keep the Borune Dynasties straight. Anyway, there were already imperial legions in Sendaria to maintain the highway, and if one has troops in an area, one has a certain authority, wouldn't you say, Captain?"
"It's your story," Brendig said shortly.
"Indeed it is," Silk agreed. "Now it wasn't really out of any kind of generosity that Ran Horb made his decision, Garion. Don't misunderstand that. Tolnedrans never give anything away. It was just that the Mimbrate Arends had finally won the Arendish civil war - a thousand years of bloodshed and treachery - and Tolnedra couldn't afford to allow the Mimbrates to expand into the north. The creation of an independent kingdom in Sendaria would block Mimbrate access to the trade routes down out of Drasnia and prevent the seat of world power from moving to Vo Mimbre and leaving the imperial capital at Tol Honeth in a kind of backwater."
"It all sounds terribly involved," Garion said.
"Not really," Silk said. "It's only politics, and that's a very simple game, isn't it, Captain?"
"A game I do not play," Brendig said, not looking up.
"Really?" Silk asked. "So long at court and not a politician? You're a rare man, Captain. At any rate, the Sendars suddenly discovered that they had themselves a kingdom but that they had no genuine hereditary nobility. Oh, there were a few retired Tolnedran nobles living on estates here and there, assorted pretenders to this or that Wacite or Asturian title, a Cherek war chief or two with a few followers, but no genuine Sendarian nobility. And so it was that they decided to hold a national election - select a king, don't you see, and then leave the bestowing of titles up to him. A very practical approach, and typically Sendarian."
"How do you elect a king?" Garion asked, beginning to lose his dread of dungeons in his fascination with the story.
"Everybody votes," Silk said simply. "Parents, of course, probably cast the votes for their children, but it appears that there was very little cheating.

The rest of the world stood around and laughed at all this foolishness, but the Sendars continued to cast ballot after ballot for a dozen years."
"Six years, actually," Brendig said with his face still down over his parchment. "3827 to 3833."
"And there were over a thousand candidates," Silk said expansively.
"Seven hundred and forty-three," Brendig said tightly.
"I stand corrected, noble Captain," Silk said. "It's an enormous comfort to have such an expert here to catch my errors. I'm but a simple Drasnian merchant with little background in history. Anyway, on the twenty-third ballot, they finally elected their king - a rutabaga farmer named Fundor."
"He raised more than just rutabagas," Brendig said, looking up with an angry face.
"Of course he did," Silk said, smacking his forehead with an open palm. "How could I have forgotten the cabbages? He raised cabbages, too, Garion. Never forget the cabbages. Well, everybody in Sendaria who thought he was important journeyed to Fundor's farm and found him vigorously fertilizing his fields, and they greeted him with a great cry, `Hail, Fundor the Magnificent, King of Sendaria,' and fell on their knees in his august presence."
"Must we continue with this?" Brendig asked in a pained voice, looking up.
"The boy wants to know, Captain," Silk replied with an innocent face. "It's our duty as his elders to instruct him in the history of our past, wouldn't you say?"
"Say whatever you like," Brendig said in a stiff voice.
"Thank you for your permission, Captain," Silk said, inclining his head. "Do you know what the King of Sendaria said then, Garion?" he asked.
"No," Garion said. "What?"
" `I pray you, your eminences,' the king said, `have a care for your finery. I have just well manured the bed in which you are kneeling.' "
Barak, who was sitting nearby, roared with laughter, pounding his knee with one huge hand.
"I find this less than amusing, sir," Captain Brendig said coldly, rising to his feet. "I make no jokes about the King of Drasnia, do I?"
"You're a courteous man, Captain," Silk said mildly, "and a noble man. I'm merely a poor man trying to make his way in the world."
Brendig looked at him helplessly and then turned and stamped from the room.
The following morning the wind had blown itself out and the rain had stopped. The road was very nearly a quagmire, but Brendig decided that they must continue. Travel that day was difficult, but the next was somewhat easier as the road began to drain.
Aunt Pol seemed unconcerned by the fact that they had been seized at the king's orders. She maintained her regal bearing even though Garion saw no real need to continue the subterfuge and wished fervently that she would abandon it. The familiar practical sensibility with which she had ruled her kitchen at Faldor's farm had somehow been replaced by a kind of demanding willfulness that Garion found particularly distressing. For the first time in his life he felt a distance between them, and it left a vacancy that had never been there before.
To make matters worse, the gnawing uncertainty which had been steadily growing since Silk's unequivocal declaration on the hilltop outside Winold that Aunt Pol could not possibly be his Aunt sawed roughly at his sense of his own identity, and Garion often found himself staring at the awful question, "Who am I?"
Mister Wolf seemed changed as well. He seldom spoke either on the road nor at night in the hostels. He spent a great deal of time sitting by himself with an expression of moody irritability on his face.
Finally, on the ninth day after their departure from Camaar, the broad salt marshes ended, and the land along the coast became more rolling. They topped a hill about midday just as the pale winter sun broke through the clouds, and there in the valley below them the walled city of Sendar lay facing the sea.
The detachment of guards at the south gate of the city saluted smartly as Captain Brendig led the little party through, and he returned their salute crisply. The broad streets of the city seemed filled with people in the finest

clothing, all moving about importantly as if their errands were the most vital in the world.
"Courtiers." Barak, who chanced to be riding beside Garion, snorted with contempt. "Not a real man amongst them."
"A necessary evil, my dear Barak," Silk said back over his shoulder to the big man. "Little jobs require little men, and it's the little jobs that keep a kingdom running."
After they had passed through a magnificently large square, they moved up a wide avenue to the palace. It was a very large building with many stories and broad wings extending out on each side of the paved courtyard. The entire structure was surmounted by a round tower that was easily the highest edifice in the whole city.
"Where do you suppose the dungeons are?" Garion whispered to Durnik when they stopped.
"I would take it most kindly, Garion," Durnik said with a pained look, "if you would not speak so much of dungeons."
Captain Brendig dismounted and went to meet a fussy-looking man in an embroidered tunic and feathered cap who came down the wide steps at the front of the palace to meet them. They spoke for a few moments and seemed to be arguing.
"My orders are from the king himself," Brendig said, his voice carrying to where they sat. "I am commanded to deliver these people directly to him immediately upon our arrival."
"My orders are also from the king," the fussy-looking man said, "and I am commanded to have them made presentable before they are delivered to the throne room. I will take charge of them."
"They will remain in my custody, Count Nilden, until they have been delivered to the king himself," Brendig said coldly.
"I will not have your muddy soldiers tracking through the halls of the palace, Lord Brendig," the Count replied.
"Then we will wait here, Count Nilden," Brendig said. "Be so good as to fetch his Majesty."
"Fetch?" The Count's face was aghast. "I am Chief Butler to his Majesty's household, Lord Brendig. I do not fetch anything or anybody."
Brendig turned as if to remount his horse.
"Oh, very well," Count Nilden said petulantly, "if you must have it your own way. At least have them wipe their feet."
Brendig bowed coldly.
"I won't forget this, Lord Brendig," Nilden threatened.
"Nor shall I, Count Nilden," Brendig replied.
Then they all dismounted and, with Brendig's soldiers drawn up in close order about them, they crossed the courtyard to a broad door near the center of the west wing.
"Be so good as to follow me," Count Nilden said, glancing with a shudder at the mud-spattered soldiers, and he led them into the wide corridor which lay beyond the door.
Apprehension and curiosity struggled in Garion's mind. Despite the assurances of Silk and Durnik and the hopeful implications of Count Nilden's announcement that he was going to have them made presentable, the threat of some clammy, rat-infested dungeon, complete with a rack and a wheel and other unpleasant things, still seemed very real. On the other hand, he had never been in a palace before, and his eyes tried to be everywhere at once. That part of his mind which sometimes spoke to him in dry detachment told him that his fears were probably groundless and that his gawking made him appear to be a doltish country bumpkin.
Count Nilden led them directly to a part of the corndor where there were a number of highly polished doors. "This one is for the boy," he announced, pointing at one of them.
One of the soldiers opened the door, and Garion reluctantly stepped through, looking back over his shoulder at Aunt Pol.
"Come along now," a somewhat impatient voice said. Garion whirled, not knowing what to expect.

"Close the door, boy," the fine-looking man who had been waiting for him said. "We don't have all day, you know." The man was waiting beside a large wooden tub with steam rising from it. "Quickly, boy, take off those filthy rags and get into the tub. His Majesty is waiting."

Too confused to object or even answer, Garion numbly began to unlace his tunic.

After he had been bathed and the knots had been brushed out of his hair, he was dressed in clothes which lay on a nearby bench. His coarse woolen hose of serviceable peasant brown were exchanged for ones of a much finer weave in a lustrous blue. His scuffed and muddy boots were traded for soft leather shoes. His tunic was soft white linen, and the doublet he wore over it was a rich blue, trimmed with a silvery fur.

"I guess that's the best I can do on short notice," the man who had bathed and dressed him said, looking him up and down critically. "At least I won't be totally embarrassed when you're presented to the king."

Garion mumbled his thanks and then stood, waiting for further instructions.

"Well, go along, boy. You mustn't keep his Majesty waiting."

Silk and Barak stood in the corridor, talking quietly. Barak was hugely splendid in a green brocade doublet, but looked uncomfortable without his sword. Silk's doublet was a rich black, trimmed in silver, and his scraggly whiskers had been carefully trimmed into an elegant short beard.

"What does all of this mean?" Garion asked as he joined them. "We're to be presented to the king," Barak said, "and our honest clothes might have given offense. Kings aren't accustomed to looking at ordinary men."

Durnik emerged from one of the rooms, his face pale with anger. "That overdressed fool wanted to give me a bath!" he said in choked outrage.

"It's the custom," Silk explained. "Noble guests aren't expected to bathe themselves. I hope you didn't hurt him."

"I'm not a noble, and I'm quite able to bathe myself," Durnik said hotly. "I told him that I'd drown him in his own tub if he didn't keep his hands to himself. After that, he didn't pester me anymore, but he did steal my clothes. I had to put these on instead." He gestured at his clothes which were quite similar to Garion's. "I hope nobody sees me in all this frippery."

"Barak says the king might be offended if he saw us in our real clothes," Garion told him.

"The king won't be looking at me," Durnik said, "and I don't like this business of trying to look like something I'm not. I'll wait outside with the horses if I can get my own clothes back."

"Be patient, Durnik," Barak advised. "We'll get this business with the king straightened out and then be on our way again."

If Durnik was angry, Mister Wolf was in what could best be described as a towering fury. He came out into the corridor dressed in a snowy white robe, deeply cowled at the back. "Someone's going to pay for this," he raged.

"It does become you," Silk said admiringly.

"Your taste has always been questionable, Master Silk," Wolf said in a frosty tone. "Where's Pol?"

"The lady has not yet made her appearance," Silk said.

"I should have known," Wolf said, sitting down on a nearby bench. "We may as well be comfortable. Pol's preparations usually take quite a while."

And so they waited. Captain Brendig, who had changed his boots and doublet, paced up and down as the minutes dragged by. Garion was totally baffled by their reception. They did not seem to be under arrest, but his imagination still saw dungeons, and that was enough to make him very jumpy.

And then Aunt Pol appeared. She wore the blue velvet gown that had been made for her in Camaar and a silver circlet about her head which set off the single white lock at her brow. Her bearing was regal and her face stern.

"So soon, Mistress Pol?" Wolf asked dryly. "I hope you weren't rushed."

She ignored that and examined each of them in turn.

"Adequate, I suppose," she said finally, absently adjusting the collar of Garion's doublet. "Give me your arm, Old Wolf, and let's find out what the King of the Sendars wants with us."

Mister Wolf rose from his bench, extended his arm, and the two of them started down the corridor. Captain Brendig hastily assembled his soldiers and followed them all in some kind of ragged order. "If you please, my Lady," he called out to Aunt Pol, "permit me to show you the way."
"We know the way, Lord Brendig," she replied without so much as turning her head.
Count Nilden, the Chief Butler, stood waiting for them in front of two massive doors guarded by uniformed men-at-arms. He bowed slightly to Aunt Pol and snapped his fingers. The men-at-arms swung the heavy doors inward.
Fulrach, the King of Sendaria, was a dumpy-looking man with a short brown beard. He sat, rather uncomfortably it appeared, on a highbacked throne which stood on a dais at one end of the great hall into which Count Nilden led them. The throne room was vast, with a high, vaulted ceiling and walls covered with what seemed acres of heavy, red velvet drapery. There were candles everywhere, and dozens of people strolled about in fine clothes and chatted idly in the corners, all but ignoring the presence of the king.
"May I announce you?" Count Nilden asked Mister Wolf.
"Fulrach knows who I am," Wolf replied shortly and strode down the long scarlet carpet toward the throne with Aunt Pol still on his arm. Garion and the others followed, with Brendig and his soldiers close behind, through the suddenly quiet crowd of courtiers and their ladies.
At the foot of the throne they all stopped, and Wolf bowed rather coldly. Aunt Pol, her eyes frosty, curtsied, and Barak and Silk bowed in a courtly manner. Durnik and Garion followed suit, though not nearly as gracefully.
"If it please your Majesty," Brendig's voice came from behind them, "these are the ones you sought."
"I knew you could be depended upon, Lord Brendig," the King replied in a rather ordinary-sounding voice. "Your reputation is well deserved. You have my thanks." Then he looked at Mister Wolf and the rest of them, his expression undecipherable.
Garion began to tremble.
"My dear old friend," the king said to Mister Wolf. "It's been too many years since we met last."
"Have you lost your wits entirely, Fulrach?" Mister Wolf snapped in a voice which carried no further than the king's ears. "Why do you choose to interfere with me - now, of all times? And what possessed you to outfit me in this absurd thing?" He plucked at the front of his white robe in disgust. "Are you trying to announce my presence to every Murgo from here to the hook of Arendia?"
The king's face looked pained. "I was afraid you might take it this way," he said in a voice no louder than Mister Wolf's had been. "I'll explain when we can speak more privately." He turned quickly to Aunt Pol as if trying to preserve the appearance at least of dignity. "It's been much too long since we have seen you, dear Lady. Layla and the children have missed you, and I have been desolate in your absence."
"Your Majesty is too kind," Aunt Pol said, her tone as cold as Wolf's. The king winced. "Pray, dear Lady," he apologized, "don't judge me too hastily. My reasons were urgent. I hope that Lord Brendig's summons did not too greatly inconvenience you."
"Lord Brendig was the soul of courtesy," Aunt Pol said, her tone unchanged. She glanced once at Brendig, who had grown visibly pale.
"And you, my Lord Barak," the king hurned on as if trying to make the best of a bad situation, "how fares your cousin, our dear brother king, Anheg of Cherek?"
"He was well when last I saw him, your Majesty," Barak replied formally. "A bit drunk, but that's not unusual for Anheg."
The king chuckled a bit nervously and turned quickly to Silk. "Prince Kheldar of the Royal House of Drasnia," he said. "We are amazed to find such noble visitors in our realm, and more than a little injured that they chose not to call upon us so that we might greet them. Is the King of the Sendars of so little note that he's not even worth a brief stop?"
"We intended no disrespect, your Majesty," Silk replied, bowing, "but our errand

was of such urgency that there was no time for the usual courtesies."
The king flickered a warning glance at that and surprisingly wove his fingers in the scarce perceptible gestures of the Drasnian secret language. Not here. Too many ears about. He then looked inquiringly at Durnik and Garion.
Aunt Pol stepped forward.
"This is Goodman Durnik of the District of Erat, your Majesty," she said, "a brave and honest man."
"Welcome, Goodman Durnik," the king said. "I can only hope that men may also one day call me a brave and honest man."
Durnik bowed awkwardly, his face filled with bewilderment. "I'm just a simple blacksmith, your Honor," he said, "but I hope all men know that I am your Honor's most loyal and devoted subject."
"Well-spoken, Goodman Durnik," the king said with a smile, and then he looked at Garion.
Aunt Pol followed his glance.
"A boy, your Majesty," she said rather indifferently. "Garion by name. He was placed in my care some years ago and accompanies us because I didn't know what else to do with him."
A terrible coldness struck at Garion's stomach. The certainty that her casual words were in fact the bald truth came crashing down upon him. She had not even tried to soften the blow. The indifference with which she had destroyed his life hurt almost more than the destruction itself.
"Also welcome, Garion," the king said. "You travel in noble company for one so young."
"I didn't know who they were, your Majesty," Garion said miserably. "Nobody tells me anything."
The king laughed in tolerant amusement.
"As you grow older, Garion," he said, "you'll probably find that during these days such innocence is the most comfortable state in which to live. I've been told things of late that I'd much prefer not to know."
"May we speak privately now, Fulrach?" Mister Wolf said, his voice still irritated.
"In good time, my old friend," the king replied. "I've ordered a banquet prepared in your honor. Let's all go in and dine. Layla and the children are waiting for us. There will be time later to discuss certain matters." And with that he rose and stepped down from the dais.
Garion, sunk in his private misery, fell in beside Silk. "Prince Kheldar?" he said, desperately needing to take his mind off the shocking reality that had just fallen upon him.
"An accident of birth, Garion," Silk said with a shrug. "Something over which I had no control. Fortunately I'm only the nephew of the King of Drasnia and far down in the line of succession. I'm not in any immediate danger of ascending the throne."
"And Barak is-?"
"The cousin of King Anheg of Cherek," Silk replied. He looked over his shoulder. "What is your exact rank, Barak?" he asked.
"The Earl of Trellheim," Barak rumbled. "Why do you ask?"
"The lad here was curious," Silk said.
"It's all nonsense anyway," Barak said, "but when Anheg became king, someone had to become Clan-Chief. In Cherek you can't be both. It's considered unlucky - particularly by the chiefs of the other clans."
"I can see why they might feel that way." Silk laughed.
"It's an empty title anyway," Barak observed. "There hasn't been a clan war in Cherek for over three thousand years. I let my youngest brother act in my stead. He's a simpleminded fellow and easily amused. Besides, it annoys my wife."
"You're married?" Garion was startled.
"If you want to call it that," Barak said sourly.
Silk nudged Garion warningly, indicating that this was a delicate subject.
"Why didn't you tell us?" Garion demanded accusingly. "About your titles, I mean."

"Would it have made any difference?" Silk asked.
"Well - no," Garion admitted, "but " He stopped, unable to put his feelings about the matter into words. "I don't understand any of this," he concluded lamely.
"It will all become clear in time," Silk assured him as they entered the banquet hall.
The hall was almost as large as the throne room. There were long tables covered with fine linen cloth and once again candles everywhere. A servant stood behind each chair, and everything was supervised by a plump little woman with a beaming face and a tiny crown perched precariously atop her head. As they all entered, she came forward quickly.
"Dear Pol," she said, "you look just wonderful." She embraced Aunt Pol warmly, and the two began talking together animatedly.
"Queen Layla," Silk explained briefly to Garion. "They call her the Mother of Sendaria. The four children over there are hers. She has four or five others - older and probably away on state business, since Fulrach insists that his children earn their keep. It's a standard joke among the other kings that Queen Layla's been pregnant since she was fourteen, but that's probably because they're expected to send royal gifts at each new birth. She's a good woman, though, and she keeps King Fulrach from making too many mistakes."
"She knows Aunt Pol," Garion said, and that fact disturbed him for some reason.
"Everybody knows your Aunt Pol," Silk told him.
Since Aunt Pol and the queen were deep in conversation and already drifting toward the head of the table, Garion stayed close to Silk. Don't let me make any mistakes, he gestured, trying to keep the movements of his fingers inconspicuous.
Silk winked in reply.
Once they were all seated and the food began to arrive, Garion began to relax. He found that all he had to do was follow Silk's lead, and the intricate niceties of formal dining no longer intimidated him. The talk around him was dignified and quite incomprehensible, but he reasoned that no one was likely to pay much attention to him and that he was probably safe if he kept his mouth shut and his eyes on his plate.
An elderly nobleman with a beautifully curled silvery beard, however, leaned toward him. "You have traveled recently, I'm told," he said in a somewhat condescending tone. "How fares the kingdom, young man?"
Garion looked helplessly across the table at Silk. What do I say? he gestured with his fingers.
Tell him that the kingdom fares no better nor no worse than might be anticipated under the present circumstances, Silk replied.
Garion dutifully repeated that.
"Ah," the old nobleman said, "much as I had expected. You're a very observant boy for one so young. I enjoy talking with young people. Their views are so fresh."
Who is he? Garion gestured.
The Earl of Seline, Silk replied. He's a tiresome old bore, but be polite to him. Address him as my Lord.
"And how did you find the roads?" the earl inquired.
"Somewhat in disrepair, my Lord," Garion replied with Silk's prompting. "But that's normal for this time of year, isn't it?"
"Indeed it is," the earl said approvingly. "What a splendid boy you are."
The strange three-way conversation continued, and Garion even began to enjoy himself as the comments fed to him by Silk seemed to amaze the old gentleman.
At last the banquet was over, and the king rose from his seat at the head of the table. "And now, dear friends," he announced, "Queen Layla and I would like to visit privately with our noble guests, and so we pray you will excuse us." He offered his arm to Aunt Pol, Mister Wolf offered his to the plump little queen, and the four of them walked toward the far door of the hall.
The Earl of Seline smiled broadly at Garion and then looked across the table. "I've enjoyed our conversation, Prince Kheldar," he said to Silk. "I may indeed

be a tiresome old bore as you say, but that can sometimes be an advantage, don't you think?"
Silk laughed ruefully. "I should have known that an old fox like you would be an adept at the secret language, my Lord."
"A legacy from a misspent youth." The earl laughed. "Your pupil is most proficient, Prince Kheldar, but his accent is strange."
"The weather was cold while he was learning, my Lord," Silk said, "and our fingers were a bit stiff. I'll correct the problem when we have leisure."
The old nobleman seemed enormously pleased with himself at having outsmarted Silk. "Splendid boy," he said, patting Garion's shoulder, and then he went off chuckling to himself.
"You knew he understood all along," Garion accused Silk.
"Of course," Silk said. "Drasnian intelligence knows every adept at our secret speech. Sometimes it's useful to permit certain carefully selected messages to be intercepted. Don't ever underestimate the Earl of Seline, however. It's not impossible that he's at least as clever as I am, but look how much he enjoyed catching us."
"Can't you ever do anything without being sly?" Garion asked. His tone was a bit grumpy, since he was convinced that somehow he had been the butt of the whole joke.
"Not unless I absolutely have to, my Garion." Silk laughed. "People such as I continually practice deception -even when it's not necessary. Our lives sometimes depend on how cunning we are, and so we need to keep our wits sharp."
"It must be a lonely way to live," Garion observed rather shrewdly at the silent prompting of his inner voice. "You never really trust anyone, do you?"
"I suppose not," Silk said. "It's a game we play, Garion. We're all very skilled at it - at least we are if we intend to live very long. We all know each other, since we're members of a very small profession. The rewards are great, but after a while we play our game only for the joy of defeating each other. You're right, though. It is lonely, and sometimes disgusting - but most of the time it's a great deal of fun."
Count Nilden came up to them and bowed politely. "His Majesty asks that you and the boy join him and your other friends in his private apartments, Prince Kheldar," he said. "If you'll be so good as to follow me."
"Of course," Silk said. "Come along, Garion."
The king's private apartments were much simpler than the ornate halls in the main palace. King Fulrach had removed his crown and state robes and now looked much like any other Sendar in rather ordinary clothes. He stood talking quietly with Barak. Queen Layla and Aunt Pol were seated on a couch deep in conversation, and Durnik was not far away, trying his best to look inconspicuous. Mister Wolf stood alone near a window, his face like a thundercloud.
"Ah, Prince Kheldar," the king said. "We thought perhaps you and Garion had been waylaid."
"We were fencing with the Earl of Seline, your Majesty," Silk said lightly. "Figuratively speaking, of course."
"Be careful of him," the king cautioned. "It's quite possible that he's too shrewd even for one of your talents."
"I have a great deal of respect for the old scoundrel." Silk laughed.
King Fulrach glanced apprehensively at Mister Wolf, then squared his shoulders and sighed. "I suppose we'd better get this unpleasantness over with," he said. "Layla, would you entertain our other guests while I give our grim-faced old friend there and the Lady the opportunity to scold me. It's obvious that he's not going to be happy until they've said a few unkind things to me about some matters that weren't really my fault."
"Of course, dear," Queen Layla said. "Try not to be too long and please don't shout. The children have been put to bed and they need their rest."
Aunt Pol rose from the couch, and she and Mister Wolf, whose expression hadn't changed, followed the king into an adjoining chamber.
"Well, then," Queen Layla said pleasantly; "what shall we talk about?"

"I am instructed, your Highness, to convey the regards of Queen Porenn of Drasnia to you should the occasion arise," Silk said in a courtly manner. "She asks leave of you to broach a correspondence on a matter of some delicacy."
"Why, of course," Queen Layla beamed. "She's a dear child, far too pretty and sweet-natured for that fat old bandit, Rhodar. I hope he hasn't made her unhappy."
"No, your Highness," Silk said. "Amazing though it may seem, she loves my uncle to distraction, and he, of course, is delirious with joy over so young and beautiful a wife. It's positively sickening the way they dote on each other."
"Some day, Prince Kheldar, you will fall in love," the queen said with a little smirk, "and the twelve kingdoms will stand around and chortle over the fall of so notorious a bachelor. What is this matter Porenn wishes to discuss with me?"
"It's a question of fertility, your Highness," Silk said with a delicate cough. "She wants to present my uncle with an heir and she needs to seek your advice in the business. The entire world stands in awe of your gifts in that particular area."
Queen Layla blushed prettily and then laughed.
"I'll write to her at once," she promised.
Garion by now had carefully worked his way to the door through which King Fulrach had taken Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf. He began a meticulous examination of a tapestry on the wall to conceal the fact that he was trying to hear what was going on behind the closed door. It took him only a moment to begin to pick up familiar voices.
"Exactly what does all this foolishness mean, Fulrach?" Mister Wolf was saying.
"Please don't judge me too hastily, Ancient One," the King said placatingly. "Some things have happened that you might not be aware of."
"You know that I'm aware of everything that happens," Wolf said.
"Did you know that we are defenseless if the Accursed One awakens? That which held him in check has been stolen from off the throne of the Rivan King."
"As a matter of fact, I was following the trail of the thief when your noble Captain Brendig interrupted me in my search."
"I'm sorry," Fulrach said, "but you wouldn't have gone much farther anyway. All the Kings of Aloria have been searching for you for three months now. Your likeness, drawn by the finest artists, is in the hands of every ambassador, agent and official of the five kingdoms of the north. Actually, you've been followed since you left Darine."
"Fulrach, I'm busy. Tell the Alorn Kings to leave me alone. Why are they suddenly so interested in my movements?"
"They want to have council with you," the king said. "The Alorns are preparing for war, and even my poor Sendaria is being quietly mobilized. If the Accursed One arises now, we're all doomed. The power that's been stolen can very possibly be used to awaken him, and his first move will be to attack the west - you know that, Belgarath. And you also know that until the return of the Rivan King, the west has no real defense."
Garion blinked and started violently, then tried to cover the sudden movement by bending to look at some of the finer detail on the tapestry. He told himself that he had heard wrong. The name King Fulrach had spoken could not have really been Belgarath. Belgarath was a fairy-tale figure, a myth.
"Just tell the Alorn Kings that I'm in pursuit of the thief," Mister Wolf said. "I don't have time for councils just now. If they'll leave me alone, I should be able to catch up with him before he can do any mischief with the thing he's managed to steal."
"Don't tempt fate, Fulrach," Aunt Pol advised. "Your interference is costing us time we can't afford to lose. Presently I'll become vexed with you."
The king's voice was firm as he answered. "I know your power, Lady Polgara," he said, and Garion jumped again. "I don't have any choice, however," the king continued. "I'm bound by my word to deliver you all up at Val Alorn to the Kings of Aloria, and a king can't break his word to other kings."
There was a long silence in the other room while Garion's mind raced through a dozen possibilities.

"You're not a bad man, Fulrach," Mister Wolf said. "Not perhaps as bright as I might wish, but a good man nonetheless. I won't raise my hand against you - nor will my daughter."
"Speak of yourself, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol said grimly.
"No, Polgara," he said. "If we have to go to Val Alorn, let's go with all possible speed. The sooner we explain things to the Alorns, the sooner they'll stop interfering."
"I think age is beginning to soften your brain, Father," Aunt Pol said. "We don't have the time for this excursion to Val Alorn. Fulrach can explain to the Alorn Kings."
"It won't do any good, Lady Polgara," the king said rather ruefully. "As your father so pointedly mentioned, I'm not considered very bright. The Alorn Kings won't listen to me. If you leave now, they'll just send someone like Brendig to apprehend you again."
"Then that unfortunate man may suddenly find himself living out the remainder of his days as a toad or possibly a radish," Aunt Pol said ominously.
"Enough of that, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "Is there a ship ready, Fulrach?"
"It lies at the north wharf, Belgarath," the king replied. "A Cherek vessel sent by King Anheg."
"Very well," Mister Wolf said. "Tomorrow then we'll go to Cherek. It seems that I'm going to have to point out a few things to some thickheaded Alorns. Will you be going with us?"
"I'm obliged to," Fulrach said. "The council's to be general, and Sendaria's involved."
"You haven't heard the last of this, Fulrach," Aunt Pol said.
"Never mind, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "He's only doing what he thinks is right. We'll straighten it all out in Val Alorn."
Garion was trembling as he stepped away from the door. It was impossible. His skeptical Sendarian upbringing made him at first incapable of even considering such an absurdity. Reluctantly, however, he finally forced himself to look the idea full in the face.
What if Mister Wolf really was Belgarath the Sorcerer, a man who had lived for over seven thousand years? And what if Aunt Pol was really his daughter, Polgara the Sorceress, who was only slightly younger? All the bits and pieces, the cryptic hints, the half truths, fell together. Silk had been right; she could not be his Aunt. Garion's orphaning was complete now. He was adrift in the world with no ties of blood or heritage to cling to. Desperately he wanted to go home, back to Faldor's farm, where he could sink himself in unthinking obscurity in a quiet place where there were no sorcerers or strange searches or anything that would even remind him of Aunt Pol and the cruel hoax she had made of his life.

Part Two
CHEREK

Chapter Twelve
IN THE GRAY FIRST LIGHT Of early morning they rode through the quiet streets of Sendar to the harbor and their waiting ship. The finery of the evening before had been put aside, and they had all resumed their customary clothes. Even King Fulrach and the Earl of Seline had donned plain garb and now resembled nothing quite so much as two moderately prosperous Sendars on a business trip. Queen Layla, who was not to go with them, rode beside her husband, talking earnestly to him with an expression on her face that seemed almost to hover on the verge of tears. The party was accompanied by soldiers, cloaked against the raw, chill wind off the sea.
At the foot of the street which led down from the palace to the harbor, the stone wharves of Sendar jutted out into the choppy water, and there, rocking and straining against the hawsers which held her, was their ship. She was a lean

vessel, narrow of beam and high-prowed, with a kind of wolfish appearance that did little to quiet Garion's nervousness about his first sea voyage. Lounging about on her deck were a number of savage-looking sailors, bearded and garbed in shaggy garments made of fur. With the exception of Barak, these were the first Chereks Garion had ever seen, and his first impression was that they would probably prove to be totally unreliable.

"Barak!" a burly man halfway up the mast shouted and dropped hand over hand down a steeply slanting rope to the deck and then jumped across to the wharf.

"Greldik!" Barak roared in response, swung down from his horse and clasped the evil-looking sailor in a bear hug.

"It would seem that Lord Barak is acquainted with our captain," the Earl of Seline observed.

"That's disquieting," Silk said wryly. "I was hoping for a sober, sensible captain of middle years and a conservative disposition. I'm not fond of ships and sea travel to begin with."

"I'm told that Captain Greldik is one of the finest seamen in all of Cherek," the earl assured him.

"My Lord," Silk said with a pained look, "Cherek definitions can be deceptive." Sourly he watched Barak and Greldik toasting their reunion with tankards of ale that had been passed down to them from the ship by a grinning sailor.

Queen Layla had dismounted and she embraced Aunt Pol. "Please watch out for my poor husband, Pol," she said with a little laugh that quivered a bit. "Don't let those Alorn bullies goad him into doing anything foolish."

"Of course, Layla," Aunt Pol said comfortingly.

"Now, Layla," King Fulrach said in an embarrassed voice. "I'll be all right. I'm a grown man, after all."

The plump little queen wiped her eyes. "I want you to promise to wear warm clothes," she said, "and not to sit up all night drinking with Anheg."

"We're on serious business, Layla," the kind said. "There won't be time for any of that."

"I know Anheg too well," the queen sniffed. She turned to Mister Wolf, stood on her tiptoes and kissed his bearded cheek. "Dear Belgarath," she said. "When this is over, promise that you and Pol will come back for a long visit."

"I promise, Layla," Mister Wolf said gravely.

"The tide is turning, Lord King," Greldik said, "and my ship is growing restless."

"Oh dear," the queen said. She put her arms around the king's neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

"Now, now," Fulrach said awkwardly.

"If you don't go now, I'm going to cry right here in public," she said, pushing him away.

The stones of the wharf were slippery, and the slim Cherek ship bobbed and rolled in the chop. The narrow plank they had to cross heaved and swayed dangerously, but they all managed to board without accident. The sailors slipped the hawsers and took their places at the oars. The lean vessel leaped away from the wharf and moved swiftly into the harbor past the stout and bulky merchantmen anchored nearby. Queen Layla stood forlornly on the wharf, surrounded by tall soldiers. She waved a few times and then stood watching, her chin lifted bravely.

Captain Greldik took his place at the tiller with Barak by his side and signaled to a squat, muscular warrior crouched nearby. The squat man nodded and pulled a ragged square of sailcloth off a hide-topped drum.

He began a slow beat, and the oarsmen immediately took up the rhythm. The ship surged ahead and made for the open sea.

Once they were beyond the protection of the harbor, the swells grew so ponderous that the ship no longer rocked but ran instead down the back of each wave and up the face of the next. The long oars, dipping to the rhythm of the sullen drum, left little swirls on the surface of the waves. The sea was lead-gray beneath the wintry sky, and the low, snow-covered coastline of Sendaria slid by on their right, bleak and desolate-looking.

Garion spent most of the day shivering in a sheltered spot near the high prow, moodily staring out at the sea. The shards and shambles into which his life had fallen the night before lay in ruins around him. The idea that Wolf was Belgarath and Aunt Pol was Polgara was of course an absurdity. He was convinced, however, that a part of the whole thing at least was true. She might not be Polgara, but she was almost certainly not his Aunt. He avoided looking at her as much as possible, and did not speak to anyone.

They slept that night in cramped quarters beneath the stern deck of the ship. Mister Wolf sat talking for a long time with King Fulrach and the Earl of Seline. Garion covertly watched the old man whose silvery hair and short-cropped beard seemed almost to glow in the light from a swinging oil lamp hanging from one of the low beams. He still looked the same as always, and Garion finally turned over and went to sleep.

The next day they rounded the hook of Sendaria and beat northeasterly with a good following wind. The sails were raised, and the oarsmen were able to rest. Garion continued to wrestle with his problem.

On the third day out the weather turned stormy and bitterly cold. The rigging crackled with ice, and sleet hissed into the sea around them. "If this doesn't break, it will be a rough passage through the Bore," Barak said, frowning into the sleet.

"The what?" Durnik asked apprehensively. Durnik was not at all comfortable on the ship. He was just recovering from a bout of seasickness, and he was obviously a bit edgy.

"The Cherek Bore," Barak explained. "It's a passage about a league wide between the northern tip of Sendaria and the southern end of the Cherek peninsula - riptides, whirlpools, that sort of thing. Don't be alarmed, Durnik. This is a good ship, and Greldik knows the secret of navigating the Bore. It may be a bit rough, but we'll be perfectly safe unless we're unlucky, of course."

"That's a cheery thing to say," Silk observed dryly from nearby. "I've been trying for three days not to think about the Bore."

"Is it really that bad?" Durnik asked in a sinking voice.

"I make a special point of not going through it sober," Silk told him.

Barak laughed. "You ought to be thankful for the Bore, Silk," he said. "It keeps the Empire out of the Gulf of Cherek. All Drasnia would be a Tolnedran province if it wasn't there."

"I admire it politically," Silk said, "but personally I'd be much happier if I never had to look at it again."

On the following day they anchored near the rocky coast of northern Sendaria and waited for the tide to turn. In time it slackened and reversed, and the waters of the Sea of the Winds mounted and plunged through the Bore to raise the level of the Gulf of Cherek.

"Find something solid to hold on to, Garion," Barak advised as Greldik ordered the anchor raised. "With this following wind, the passage could be interesting." He strode along the narrow deck, his teeth gleaming in a broad grin.

It was foolish. Garion knew that, even as he stood up and began to follow the red-bearded man toward the prow, but four days of solitary brooding over a problem that refused to yield to any kind of logic made him feel almost belligerently reckless. He set his teeth together and took hold of a rusted iron ring embedded in the prow.

Barak laughed and clapped him a stunning blow on the shoulder. "Good boy," he said approvingly. "We'll stand together and look the Bore right down the throat."

Garion decided not to answer that.

With wind and tide behind her, Greldik's ship literally flew through the passage, yawing and shuddering as she was seized by the violent riptides. Icy spray stung their faces, and Garion, half blinded by it, did not see the enormous whirlpool in the center of the Bore until they were almost upon it. He seemed to hear a vast roar and cleared his eyes just in time to see it yawning in front of him.

"What's that?" he yelled over the noise.

"The Great Maelstrom," Barak shouted. "Hold on."
The Maelstrom was fully as large as the village of Upper Gralt and descended horribly down into a seething, mist-filled pit unimaginably far below.
Incredibly, instead of guiding his vessel away from the vortex, Greldik steered directly at it.
"What's he doing?" Garion screamed.
"It's the secret of passing through the Bore," Barak roared. "We circle the Maelstrom twice to gain more speed. If the ship doesn't break up, she comes out like a rock from a sling, and we pass through the riptides beyond the Maelstrom before they can slow us down and drag us back."
"If the ship doesn't what?"
"Sometimes a ship is torn apart in the Maelstrom," Barak said. "Don't worry, boy. It doesn't happen very often, and Greldik's ship seems stout enough."
The ship's prow dipped hideously into the outer edges of the Maelstrom and then raced twice around the huge whirlpool with the oarsmen frantically bending their backs to the frenzied beat of the drum. The wind tore at Garion's face, and he clung to his iron ring, keeping his eyes averted from the seething maw gaping below.
And then they broke free and shot like a whistling stone through the churning water beyond the Maelstrom. The wind of their passage howled in the rigging, and Garion felt half suffocated by its force.
Gradually the ship slowed in the swirling eddies, but the speed they had gained from the Maelstrom carried them on to calm water in a partially sheltered cove on the Sendarian side.
Barak was laughing gleefully and mopping spray from his beard. "Well, lad," he said, "what do you think of the Bore?"
Garion didn't trust himself to answer and concentrated on trying to pry his numb fingers from the iron ring.
A familiar voice rang out from the stern.
"Garion!"
"Now you've gone and got me in trouble," Garion said resentfully, ignoring the fact that standing in the prow had been his own idea. Aunt Pol spoke scathingly to Barak about his irresponsibility and then turned her attention to Garion.
"Well?" she said. "I'm waiting. Would you like to explain?"
"It wasn't Barak's fault," Garion said. "It was my own idea." There was no point in their both being in trouble, after all.
"I see," she said. "And what was behind that?"
The confusion and doubt which had been troubling him made him reckless. "I felt like it," he said, half defiantly. For the first time in his life he felt on the verge of open rebellion.
"You what?"
"I felt like it," he repeated. "What difference does it make why I did it? You're going to punish me anyway."
Aunt Pol stiffened, and her eyes blazed.
Mister Wolf, who was sitting nearby, chuckled.
"What's so funny?" she snapped.
"Why don't you let me handle this, Pol?" the old man suggested.
"I can deal with it," she said.
"But not well, Pol," he said. "Not well at all. Your temper's too quick, and your tongue's too sharp. He's not a child anymore. He's not a man yet, but he's not a child either. The problem needs to be dealt with in a special way. I'll take care of it." He stood up. "I think I insist, Pol."
"You what?"
"I insist." His eyes hardened.
"Very well," she said in an icy voice, turned, and walked away. "Sit down, Garion," the old man said.
"Why's she so mean?" Garion blurted.
"She isn't," Mister Wolf said. "She's angry because you frightened her. Nobody likes to be frightened."
"I'm sorry," Garion mumbled, ashamed of himself.

"Don't apologize to me," Wolf said. "I wasn't frightened." He looked for a moment at Garion, his eyes penetrating. "What's the problem?" he asked.
"They call you Belgarath," Garion said as if that explained it all, "and they call her Polgara."
"So."
"It's just not possible."
"Didn't we have this conversation before? A long time ago?"
"Are you Belgarath?" Garion demanded bluntly.
"Some people call me that. What difference does it make?"
"I'm sorry," Garion said. "I just don't believe it:"
"All right," Wolf shrugged. "You don't have to if you don't want to. What's that got to do with your being impolite to your Aunt?"
"It's just " Garion faltered. "Well-" Desperately he wanted to ask Mister Wolf that ultimate, fatal question, but despite his certainty that there was no kinship between himself and Aunt Pol, he could not bear the thought of having it finally and irrevocably confirmed.
"You're confused," Wolf said. "Is that it? Nothing seems to be like it ought to be, and you're angry with your Aunt because it seems like it has to be her fault."
"You make it sound awfully childish," Garion said, flushing slightly.
"Isn't it?"
Garion flushed even more.
"It's your own problem, Garion," Mister Wolf said. "Do you really think it's proper to make others unhappy because of it?"
"No," Garion admitted in a scarcely audible voice.
"Your Aunt and I are who we are," Wolf said quietly. "People have made up a lot of nonsense about us, but that doesn't really matter. There are things that have to be done, and we're the ones who have to do them. That's what matters. Don't make things more difficult for your Aunt just because the world isn't exactly to your liking. That's not only childish, it's ill-mannered, and you're a better boy than that. Now, I really think you owe her an apology, don't you?"
"I suppose so," Garion said.
"I'm glad we had this chance to talk," the old man said, "but I wouldn't wait too long before making up with her. You wouldn't believe how long she can stay angry." He grinned suddenly. "She's been angry with me for as long as I can remember, and that's so long that I don't even like to think about it."
"I'll do it right now," Garion said.
"Good," Wolf approved.
Garion stood up and walked purposefully to where Aunt Pol stood staring out at the swirling currents of the Cherek Bore.
"Aunt Pol," he said.
"Yes, dear?"
"I'm sorry. I was wrong."
She turned and looked at him gravely.
"Yes," she said, "you were."
"I won't do it again."
She laughed then, a low, warm laugh, and ran her fingers through his tangled hair. "Don't make promises you can't keep, dear," she said, and she embraced him, and everything was all right again.
After the fury of the tide through the Cherek Bore had abated, they sailed north along the snow-mufled east coast of the Cherek peninsula toward the ancient city which was the ancestral home of all Alorns, Algar and Drasnian as well as Cherek and Rivan. The wind was chill and the skies threatening, but the remainder of the voyage was uneventful. After three more days their ship entered the harbor at Val Alorn and tied up at one of the ice-shrouded wharves.
Val Alorn was unlike any Sendarian city. Its walls and buildings were so incredibly ancient that they seemed more like natural rock formations than the construction of human hands. The narrow, crooked streets were clogged with snow, and the mountains behind the city loomed high and white against the dark sky. Several horse-drawn sleighs awaited them at the wharf with savagelooking drivers

and shaggy horses stamping impatiently in the packed snow. There were fur robes in the sleighs, and Garion drew one of them about him as he waited for Barak to conclude his farewells to Greldik and the sailors.
"Let's go," Barak told the driver as he climbed into the sleigh. "See if you can't catch up with the others."
"If you hadn't talked so long, they wouldn't be so far ahead, Lord Barak," the driver said sourly.
"That's probably true," Barak agreed.
The driver grunted, touched his horses with his whip, and the sleigh started up the street where the others had already disappeared. Fur-clad Cherek warriors swaggered up and down the narrow streets, and many of them bellowed greetings to Barak as the sleigh passed. At one corner their driver was forced to halt while two burly men, stripped to the waist in the biting cold, wrestled savagely in the snow in the center of the street to the encouraging shouts of a crowd of onlookers.
"A common pastime," Barak told Garion. "Winter's a tedious time in Val Alorn."
"Is that the palace ahead?" Garion asked.
Barak shook his head. "The temple of Belar," he said. "Some men say that the Bear-God resides there in spirit. I've never seen him myself, though, so I can't say for sure."
Then the wrestlers rolled out of the way, and they continued.
On the steps of the temple an ancient woman wrapped in ragged woolen robes stood with a long staff clutched in one honey hand and her stringy hair wild about her face. "Hail, Lord Barak," she called in a cracked voice as they passed. "Thy Doom still awaits thee."
"Stop the sleigh," Barak growled at the driver, and he threw off his fur robe and jumped to the ground. "Martje," he thundered at the old woman. "You've been forbidden to loiter here. If I tell Anheg that you've disobeyed him, he'll have the priests of the temple burn you for a witch."
The old woman cackled at him, and Garion noted with a shudder that her eyes were milk-white blankness.
"The fire will not touch old Martje," she laughed shrilly. "That is not the Doom which awaits her."
"Enough of dooms," Barak said. "Get away from the temple."
"Martje sees what she sees," the old woman said. "The mark of thy Doom is still upon thee, great Lord Barak. When it comes to thee, thou shalt remember the words of old Martje." And then she seemed to look at the sleigh where Garion sat, though her milky eyes were obviously blind. Her expression suddenly changed from malicious glee to one strangely awestruck.
"Hail, greatest of Lords," she crooned, bowing deeply. "When thou comest into throe inheritance, remember that it was old Martje who first greeted thee."
Barak started toward her with a roar, but she scurried away, her staff tapping on the stone steps.
"What did she mean?" Garion asked when Barak returned to the sleigh.
"She's a crazy woman," Barak replied, his face pale with anger. "She's always lurking around the temple, begging and frightening gullible housewives with her gibberish. If Anheg had any sense, he'd have had her driven out of the city or burned years ago." He climbed back into the sleigh. "Let's go," he growled at the driver.
Garion looked back over his shoulder as they sped away, but the old blind woman was nowhere in sight.

Chapter Thirteen

THE PALACE OF KING ANHEG Of Cherek was a vast, brooding structure near the center of Val Alorn. Huge wings, many of them crumbled into decay with unpaned windows staring emptily at the open sky through collapsed roofs, stretched out from the main building in all directions. So far as Garion could tell there was no plan to the palace whatsoever. It had, it seemed, merely grown over the three thousand years and more that the kings of Cherek had ruled there.

"Why is so much of it empty and broken down like that?" he asked Barak as their sleigh whirled into the snow-packed courtyard.
"What some kings build, other kings let fall down," Barak said shortly. "It's the way of kings." Barak's mood had been black since their encounter with the blind woman at the temple.
The others had all dismounted and stood waiting.
"You've been away from home too long if you can get lost on the way from the harbor to the palace," Silk said pleasantly.
"We were delayed," Barak grunted.
A broad, ironbound door at the top of the wide steps that led up to the palace opened then as if someone behind it had been waiting for them all to arrive. A woman with long flaxen braids and wearing a deep scarlet cloak trimmed with rich fur stepped out onto the portico at the top of the stairs and stood looking down at them. "Greetings, Lord Barak, Earl of Trellheim and husband," she said formally.
Barak's face grew even more somber. "Merel," he acknowledged with a curt nod.
"King Anheg granted me permission to greet you, my Lord," Barak's wife said, "as is my right and my duty."
"You've always been most attentive to your duties, Merel," Barak said. "Where are my daughters?"
"At Trellheim, my Lord," she said. "I didn't think it would be a good idea for them to travel so far in the cold." There was a faintly malicious note in her voice.
Barak sighed. "I see," he said.
"Was I in error, my Lord?" Merel asked.
"Let it pass," Barak said.
"If you and your friends are ready, my Lord," she said, "I'll escort you to the throne room."
Barak went up the stairs, briefly and rather formally embraced his wife, and the two of them went through the wide doorway.
"Tragic," the Earl of Seline murmured, shaking his head as they all went up the stairs to the palace door.
"Hardly that," Silk said. "After all, Barak got what he wanted, didn't he?"
"You're a cruel man, Prince Kheldar," the earl said.
"Not really," Silk said. "I'm a realist, that's all. Barak spent all those years yearning after Merel, and now he's got her. I'm delighted to see such steadfastness rewarded. Aren't you?"
The Earl of Seline sighed.
A party of mailed warriors joined them and escorted them through a maze of corridors, up broad stairs and down narrow ones, deeper and deeper into the vast pile.
"I've always admired Cherek architecture," Silk said sardonically. "It's so unanticipated."
"Expanding the palace gives weak kings something to do," King Fulrach observed. "It's not a bad idea, really. In Sendaria bad kings usually devote their time to street-paving projects, but all of Val Alorn was paved thousands of years ago."
Silk laughed. "It's always been a problem, your Majesty," he said. "How do you keep bad kings out of mischief?"
"Prince Kheldar," King Fulrach said, "I don't wish your uncle any misfortune, but I think it might be very interesting if the crown of Drasnia just happened to fall to you."
"Please, your Majesty," Silk said with feigned shock, "don't even suggest that."
"Also a wife," the Earl of Seline said slyly. "The prince definitely needs a wife."
"That's even worse," Silk said with a shudder.
The throne room of King Anheg was a vaulted chamber with a great fire pit in the center where whole logs blazed and crackled. Unlike the lushly draped hall of King Fulrach, the stone walls here were bare, and torches flared and smoked in iron rings sunk in the stone. The men who lounged near the fire were not the elegant courtiers of Fulrach's court, but rather were bearded Cherek warriors,

gleaming in chain mail. At one end of the room sat five thrones, each surmounted by a banner. Four of the thrones were occupied, and three regal-looking women stood talking nearby.
"Fulrach, King of Sendaria!" one of the warriors who had escorted them boomed, striking the butt of his spear hollowly on the rush-strewn stone floor.
"Hail, Fulrach," a large, black-bearded man on one of the thrones called, rising to his feet. His long blue robe was wrinkled and spotted, and his hair was shaggy and unkempt. The gold crown he wore was dented in a place or two, and one of its points had been broken off
"Hail, Anheg," the King of the Sendars replied, bowing slightly. "Thy throne awaits thee, my dear Fulrach," the shaggy-haired man said, indicating the banner of Sendaria behind the one vacant throne. "The Kings of Aloria welcome the wisdom of the King of Sendaria at this council."
Garion found the stilted, archaic form of address strangely impressive.
"Which king is which, friend Silk?" Durnik whispered as they approached the thrones.
"The fat one in the red robe with the reindeer on his banner is my uncle, Rhodar of Drasnia. The lean-faced one in black under the horse banner is Cho-Hag of Algaria. The big, grim-faced one in gray with no crown who sits beneath the sword banner is Brand, the Rivan Warder."
"Brand?" Garion interrupted, startled as he remembered the stories of the Battle of Vo Mimbre.
"All Rivan Warders are named Brand," Silk explained.
King Fulrach greeted each of the other kings in the formal language that seemed to be customary, and then he took his place beneath the green banner with its golden sheaf of wheat that was the emblem of Sendaria.
"Hail Belgarath, Disciple of Aldur," Anheg said, "and hail Lady Polgara, honored daughter of immortal Belgarath."
"There's little time for all this ceremony, Anheg," Mister Wolf said tartly, throwing back his cloak and striding forward. "Why have the Kings of Aloria summoned me?"
"Permit us our little ceremonies, Ancient One," Rhodar, the grossly fat King of Drasnia said slyly. "We so seldom have the chance to play king. We won't be much longer at it."
Mister Wolf shook his head in disgust.
One of the three regal-looking women came forward then. She was a tall, raven-haired beauty in an elaborately cross-tied black velvet gown. She curtsied to King Fulrach and touched her cheek briefly to his. "Your Majesty," she said, "your presence honors our home."
"Your Highness," Fulrach replied, inclining his head respectfully.
"Queen Islena," Silk murmured to Durnik and Garion, "Anheg's wife." The little man's nose twitched with suppressed mirth. "Watch her when she greets Polgara."
The queen turned and curtsied deeply to Mister Wolf. "Divine Belgarath," she said, her rich voice throbbing with respect.
"Hardly divine, Islena," the old man said dryly.
"Immortal son of Aldur," she swept on, ignoring the interruption, "mightiest sorcerer in all the world. My poor house trembles at the awesome power you bring within its walls."
"A pretty speech, Islena," Wolf said. "A little inaccurate, but pretty all the same."
But the queen had already turned to Aunt Pol. "Glorious sister," she intoned.
"Sister?" Garion was startled.
"She's a mystic," Silk said softly. "She dabbles a bit in magic and thinks of herself as a sorceress. Watch."
With an elaborate gesture the queen produced a green jewel and presented it to Aunt Pol.
"She had it up her sleeve," Silk whispered gleefully.
"A royal gift, Islena," Aunt Pol said in a strange voice. "A pity that I can only offer this in return." She handed the queen a single deep red rose.
"Where did she get that?" Garion asked in amazement. Silk winked at him.

The queen looked at the rose doubtfully and cupped it between her two hands. She examined it closely, and her eyes widened. The color drained out of her face, and her hands began to tremble.
The second queen had stepped forward. She was a tiny blonde with a beautiful smile. Without ceremony she kissed King Fulrach and then Mister Wolf and embraced Aunt Pol warmly. Her affection seemed simple and unselfconscious.
"Porenn, Queen of Drasnia," Silk said, and his voice had an odd note to it.
Garion glanced at him and saw the faintest hint of a bitter, self mocking expression flicker across his face. In that single instant, as clearly as if it had suddenly been illuminated by a bright light, Garion saw the reason for Silk's sometimes strange manner. An almost suffocating surge of sympathy welled up in his throat.
The third queen, Silar of Algaria, greeted King Fulrach, Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol with a few brief words in a quiet voice.
"Is the Rivan Warder unmarried?" Durnik asked, looking around for another queen.
"He had a wife," Silk said shortly, his eyes still on Queen Porenn, "but she died some years ago. She left him four sons."
"Ah," Durnik said.
Then Barak, grim-faced and obviously angry, entered the hall and strode to King Anheg's throne.
"Welcome home, cousin," King Anheg said. "I thought perhaps you'd lost your way."
"Family business, Anheg," Barak said. "I had to have a few words with my wife."
"I see," Anheg said and let it drop.
"Have you met our friends?" Barak asked.
"Not as yet, Lord Barak," King Rhodar said. "We were involved with the customary formalities." He chuckled, and his great paunch jiggled. "I'm sure you all know the Earl of Seline," Barak said, "and this is Durnik, a smith and a brave man. The boy's name is Garion. He's in Lady Polgara's care - a good lad."
"Do you suppose we could get on with this?" Mister Wolf asked impatiently.
Cho-Hag, King of the Algars, spoke in a strangely soft voice. "Are thou aware, Belgarath, of the misfortune which hath befallen us? We turn to thee for counsel."
"Cho-Hag," Wolf said testily, "you sound like a bad Arendish epic. Is all this theeing and thouing really necessary?"
Cho-Hag looked embarrassed and glanced at King Anheg.
"My fault, Belgarath," Anheg said ruefully. "I set scribes to work to record our meetings. Cho-Hag was speaking to history as well as to you." His crown had slipped a bit and perched precariously over one ear.
"History's very tolerant, Anheg," Wolf said. "You don't have to try to impress her. She'll forget most of what we say anyway." He turned to the Rivan Warder. "Brand," he said, "do you suppose you could explain all this without too much embellishment?"
"I'm afraid it's my fault, Belgarath," the gray-robed Warder said in a deep voice. "The Apostate was able to carry off his theft because of my laxity."
"The thing's supposed to protect itself, Brand," Wolf told him. "You can't even touch it. I know the thief, and there's no way you could have kept him out of Riva. What concerns me is how he was able to lay hands on it without being destroyed by its power."
Brand spread his hands helplessly. "We woke one morning, and it was gone. The priests were only able to divine the name of the thief. The Spirit of the Bear-God wouldn't say any more. Since we knew who he was, we were careful not to speak his name or the name of the thing he took."
"Good," Wolf said. "He has ways to pick words out of the air at great distances. I taught him how to do that myself."
Brand nodded. "We knew that," he said. "It made phrasing our message to you difficult. When you didn't come to Riva and my messenger didn't return, I thought something had gone wrong. That's when we sent men out to find you."
Mister Wolf scratched at his beard. "I guess it's my own fault that I'm here then," he said. "I borrowed your messenger. I had to get word to some people in

Arendia. I suppose I should have known better."
Silk cleared his throat. "May I speak?" he asked politely.
"Certainly, Prince Kheldar," King Anheg said.
"Is it entirely prudent to continue these discussions in public?" Silk asked.
"The Murgos have enough gold to buy ears in many places, and the arts of the Grolims can lift the thoughts out of the minds of the most loyal warriors. What isn't known can't be revealed, if you take my meaning."
"The warriors of Anheg aren't so easily bought, Silk," Barak said testily, "and there aren't any Grolims in Cherek."
"Are you also confident about the serving men and the kitchen wenches?" Silk suggested. "And I've found Grolims in some very unexpected places."
"There's something in what my nephew says," King Rhodar said, his face thoughtful. "Drasnia has centuries of experience in the gathering of information, and Kheldar is one of our best. If he thinks that our words might go further than we'd want them to, we might be wise to listen to him."
"Thank you, uncle," Silk said, bowing.
"Could you penetrate this palace, Prince Kheldar?" King Anheg challenged.
"I already have, your Majesty," Silk said modestly, "a dozen times or more."
Anheg looked at Rhodar with one raised eyebrow.
Rhodar coughed slightly. "It was some time ago, Anheg. Nothing serious. I was just curious about something, that's all."
"All you had to do was ask," Anheg said in a slightly injured tone.
"I didn't want to bother you," Rhodar said with a shrug. "Besides, it's more fun to do it the other way."
"Friends," King Fulrach said, "the issue before us is too important to chance compromising it. Wouldn't it be better to be overcautious rather than take any risks?"
King Anheg frowned and then shrugged. "Whatever you wish," he said. "We'll continue in private then. Cousin, would you clear old King Eldrig's hall for us and set guards in the hallways near it?"
"I will, Anheg," Barak said. He took a dozen warriors and left the hall.
The kings rose from their thrones-all except Cho-Hag. A lean warrior, very nearly as tall as Barak and with the shaved head and flowing scalp lock of the Algars, stepped forward and helped him up.
Garion looked inquiringly at Silk.
"An illness when he was a child," Silk explained softly. "It left his legs so weak that he can't stand unaided."
"Doesn't that make it kind of hard for him to be king?" Garion asked.
"Algars spend more time sitting on horses than they do standing on their feet," Silk said. "Once he's on a horse, Cho-Hag's the equal of any man in Algaria. The warrior who's helping him is Hettar, his adopted son."
"You know him?" Garion asked.
"I know everyone, Garion." Silk laughed softly. "Hettar and I have met a few times. I like him, though I'd rather he didn't know that."
Queen Porenn came over to where they stood. "Islena's taking Silar and me to her private quarters," she said to Silk. "Apparently women aren't supposed to be involved in matters of state here in Cherek."
"Our Cherek cousins have a few blind spots, your Highness," Silk said. "They're arch-conservatives, of course, and it hasn't occurred to them yet that women are human."
Queen Porenn winked at him with a sly little grin. "I'd hoped that we might get a chance to talk, Kheldar, but it doesn't look like it now. Did you get my message to Layla?"
Silk nodded. "She said she'd write to you immediately," he said. "If we'd known you were going to be here, I could have carried her letter myself."
"It was Islena's idea," she said. "She decided that it might be nice to have a council of queens while the kings were meeting. She'd have invited Layla too, but everyone knows how terrified she is of sea travel."
"Has your council produced anything momentous, Highness?" Silk asked lightly.
Queen Porenn made a face. "We sit around and watch Islena do tricks -

disappearing coins, things up her sleeves, that kind of thing," she said. "Or she tells fortunes. Silar's too polite to object, and I'm the youngest, so I'm not supposed to say too much. It's terribly dull, particularly when she goes into trances over that stupid crystal ball of hers. Did Layla think she could help me?"
"If anyone can," Silk assured her. "I should warn you, though, that her advice is likely to be quite explicit. Queen Layla's an earthy little soul, and sometimes very blunt."
Queen Porenn giggled wickedly. "That's all right," she said. "I'm a grown woman, after all."
"Of course," Silk said. "I just wanted to prepare you, that's all."
"Are you making fun of me, Kheldar?" she asked.
"Would I do that, your Highness?" Silk asked, his face full of innocence.
"I think you would," she said.
"Coming, Porenn?" Queen Islena asked from not far away.
"At once, your Highness," the queen of Drasnia said. Her fingers flickered briefly at Silk. What a bore.
Patience, Highness, Silk gestured in reply.
Queen Porenn docilely followed the stately Queen of Cherek and the silent Queen of Algaria from the hall. Silk's eyes followed her, and his face had that same self mocking expression as before.
"The others are leaving," Garion said delicately and pointed to the far end of the hall where the Alorn Kings were just going out the door.
"All right," Silk said and led the way quickly after them.
Garion stayed at the rear of the group as they all made their way through the drafty corridors toward King Eldrig's hall. The dry voice in his mind told him that if Aunt Pol saw him, she'd probably find a reason to send him away.
As he loitered along at the rear of the procession, a furtive movement flickered briefly far down one of the side corridors. He caught only one glimpse of the man, an ordinary-looking Cherek warrior wearing a dark green cloak, and then they had moved past that corridor. Garion stopped and stepped back to look again, but the man in the green cloak was gone.
At the door to King Eldrig's hall, Aunt Pol stood waiting with her arms crossed.
"Where have you been?" she asked.
"I was just looking," he said as innocently as possible.
"I see," she said. Then she turned to Barak. "The council's probably going to last for a long time," she said, "and Garion's just going to get restless before it's over. Is there someplace where he can amuse himself until suppertime?"
"Aunt Pol!" Garion protested.
"The armory, perhaps?" Barak suggested.
"What would I do in an armory?" Garion demanded.
"Would you prefer the scullery?" Aunt Pol asked pointedly.
"On second thought, 1 think I might like to see the armory."
"I thought you might."
"It's at the far end of this corridor, Garion," Barak said. "The room with the red door."
"Run along, dear," Aunt Pol said, "and try not to cut yourself on anything."
Garion sulked slowly down the corridor Barak had pointed out to him, keenly feeling the injustice of the situation. The guards posted in the passageway outside King Eldrig's hall even made eavesdropping impossible. Garion sighed and continued his solitary way toward the armory.
The other part of his mind was busy, however, mulling over certain problems. Despite his stubborn refusal to accept the possibility that Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol were indeed Belgarath and Polgara, the behavior of the Alorn Kings made it obvious that they at least did believe it. Then there was the question of the rose Aunt Pol had given to Queen Islena. Setting aside the fact that roses do not bloom in the winter, how had Aunt Pol known that Islena would present her with that green jewel and therefore prepared the rose in advance? He deliberately avoided the idea that his Aunt had simply created the rose on the spot.

The corridor along which he passed, deep in thought, was dim, with only a few torches set in rings on the walls to light the way. Side passages branched out from it here and there, gloomy, unlighted openings that stretched back into the darkness. He had almost reached the armory when he heard a faint sound in one of those dark passages. Without knowing exactly why, he drew back into one of the other openings and waited.

The man in the green cloak stepped out into the lighted corridor and looked around furtively. He was an ordinary-looking man with a short, sandy beard, and he probably could have walked anywhere in the palace without attracting much notice. His manner, however, and his stealthy movements cried out louder than words that he was doing something he was not supposed to be doing. He hurried up the corridor in the direction from which Garion had come, and Garion shrank back into the protective darkness of his hiding place. When he carefully poked his head out into the corridor again, the man had disappeared, and it was impossible to know down which of those dark side passageways he had gone.

Garion's inner voice told him that even if he told anyone about this, they wouldn't listen. He'd need more than just an uneasy feeling of suspicion to report if he didn't want to appear foolish. All he could do for the time being was to keep his eyes open for the man in the green cloak.

Chapter Fourteen

IT WAS SNOWING the following morning, and Aunt Pol, Silk, Barak, and Mister Wolf again met for council with the kings, leaving Garion in Durnik's keeping. The two sat near the fire in the huge hall with the thrones, watching the two dozen or so bearded Cherek warriors who lounged about or engaged in various activities to pass the time. Some of them sharpened their swords or polished their armor; others ate or sat drinking-even though it was still quite early in the morning; several were engaged in a heated dice game; and some simply sat with their backs against the wall and slept.

"These Chereks seem to be very idle people," Durnik said quietly to Garion. "I haven't seen anyone actually working since we arrived, have you?"

Garion shook his head. "I think these are the king's own warriors," he said just as quietly. "I don't think they're supposed to do anything except sit around and wait for the king to tell them to go fight someone."

Durnik frowned disapprovingly. "It must be a terribly boring way to live," he said.

"Durnik," Garion asked after a moment, "did you notice the way Barak and his wife acted toward each other?"

"It's very sad," Durnik said. "Silk told me about it yesterday. Barak fell in love with her when they were both very young, but she was highborn and didn't take him very seriously."

"How does it happen that they're married, then?" Garion asked.

"It was her family's idea," Durnik explained. "After Barak became the Earl of Trellheim, they decided that a marriage would give them a valuable connection. Merel objected, but it didn't do her any good. Silk said that Barak found out after they were married that she's really a very shallow person, but of course it was too late by then. She does spiteful things to try to hurt him, and he spends as much time away from home as possible."

"Do they have any children?" Garion asked.

"Two," Durnik said. "Both girls - about five and seven. Barak loves them very much, but he doesn't get to see them very often."

Garion sighed. "I wish there was something we could do," he said.

"We can't interfere between a man and his wife," Durnik said. "Things like that just aren't done."

"Did you know that Silk's in love with his aunt?" Garion said without stopping to think.

"Garion!" Durnik's voice was shocked. "That's an unseemly thing to say."

"It's true all the same," Garion said defensively. "Of course she's not really his aunt, I guess. She's his uncle's second wife. It's not exactly like she was

his real aunt."
"She's married to his uncle," Durnik said firmly. "Who made up this scandalous story?"
"Nobody made it up," Garion said. "I was watching his face when he talked to her yesterday. It's pretty plain the way he feels about her."
"I'm sure you just imagined it," Durnik said disapprovingly. He stood up. "Let's look around. That will give us something better to do than sit here gossiping about our friends. It's really not the sort of thing decent men do."
"All right," Garion agreed quickly, a little embarrassed. He stood up and followed Durnik across the smoky hall and out into the corridor. "Let's have a look at the kitchen," Garion suggested.
"And the smithy, too," Durnik said.
The royal kitchens were enormous. Entire oxen roasted on spits, and whole flocks of geese simmered in lakes of gravy. Stews bubbled in cartsized cauldrons, and battalions of loaves were marched into ovens big enough to stand in. Unlike Aunt Pol's well-ordered kitchen at Faldor's farm, everything here was chaos and confusion. The head cook was a huge man with a red face who screamed orders which everyone ignored. There were shouts and threats and a great deal of horseplay. A spoon heated in a fire and left where an unsuspecting cook would pick it up brought shrieks of mirth, and one man's hat was stolen and deliberately thrown into a seething pot of stew.
"Let's go someplace else, Durnik," he said. "This isn't what I expected at all."
Durnik nodded. "Mistress Pol would never tolerate all of this foolishness," he agreed disapprovingly.
In the hallways outside the kitchen a maid with reddish-blond hair and a pale green dress cut quite low at the bodice loitered.
"Excuse me," Durnik said to her politely, "could you direct us to the smithy?"
She looked him up and down boldly. "Are you new here?" she asked. "I haven't seen you before."
"We're just visiting," Durnik said.
"Where are you from?" she demanded.
"Sendaria," Durnik said.
"How interesting. Perhaps the boy could run this errand for you, and you and I could talk for a while." Her look was direct.
Durnik coughed, and his ears reddened. "The smithy?" he asked again.
The maid laughed lightly. "In the courtyard at the end on this corridor," she said. "I'm usually around here someplace. I'm sure you can find me when you finish your business with the smith."
"Yes," Durnik said, "I'm sure I could. Come along, Garion."
They went on down the corridor and out into a snowy inner courtyard.
"Outrageous!" Durnik said stiffly, his ears still flaming. "The girl has no sense of propriety whatsoever. I'd report her if I knew to whom."
"Shocking," Garion agreed, secretly amused by Durnik's embarrassment. They crossed the courtyard through the lightly sifting snow.
The smithy was presided over by a huge, black-bearded man with forearms as big as Garion's thighs. Durnik introduced himself and the two were soon happily talking shop to the accompaniment of the ringing blows of the smith's hammer. Garion noticed that instead of the plows, spades, and hoes that would fill a Sendarian smithy, the walls here were hung with swords, spears, and war axes. At one forge an apprentice was hammering out arrowheads, and at another, a lean, one-eyed man was working on an evil-looking dagger.
Durnik and the smith talked together for most of the remainder of the morning while Garion wandered about the inner courtyard watching the various workmen at their tasks. There were coopers and wheelwrights, cobblers and carpenters, saddlers and candlemakers, all busily at work to maintain the huge household of King Anheg. As he watched, Garion also kept his eyes open for the sandy-bearded man in the green cloak he'd seen the night before. It wasn't likely that the man would be here where honest work was being done, but Garion stayed alert all the same.
About noon, Barak came looking for them and led them back to the great hall

where Silk lounged, intently watching a dice game.
"Anheg and the others want to meet privately this afternoon," Barak said. "I've got an errand to run, and I thought you might want to go along."
"That might not be a bad idea," Silk said, tearing his eyes from the game. "Your cousin's warriors dice badly, and I'm tempted to try a few rolls with them. It would probably be better if I didn't. Most men take offense at losing to strangers."
Barak grinned. "I'm sure they'd be glad to let you play, Silk," he said.
"They've got just as much chance of winning as you do."
"Just as the sun has as much chance of coming up in the west as in the east," Silk said.
"Are you that sure of your skill, friend Silk?" Durnik asked.
"I'm sure of theirs." Silk chuckled. He jumped up. "Let's go," he said. "My fingers are starting to itch. Let's get them away from temptation."
"Anything you say, Prince Kheldar." Barak laughed.
They all put on fur cloaks and left the palace. The snow had almost stopped, and the wind was brisk.
"I'm a bit confused by all these names," Durnik said as they trudged toward the central part of Val Alorn. "I've been meaning to ask about it. You, friend Silk, are also Prince Kheldar and sometimes the merchant Ambar of Kotu, and Mister Wolf is called Belgarath, and Mistress Pol is also Lady Polgara or the Duchess of Erat. Where I come from, people usually have one name."
"Names are like clothes, Durnik," Silk explained. "We put on what's most suitable for the occasion. Honest men have little need to wear strange clothes or strange names. Those of us who aren't so honest, however, occasionally have to change one or the other."
"I don't find it amusing to hear Mistress Pol described as not being honest," Durnik said stifliy.
"No disrespect intended," Silk assured him. "Simple definitions don't apply to Lady Polgara; and when I say that we're not honest, I simply mean that this business we're in sometimes requires us to conceal ourselves from people who are evil as well as devious."
Durnik looked unconvinced but let it pass.
"Let's take this street," Barak suggested. "I don't want to pass the Temple of Belar today."
"Why?" Garion asked.
"I'm a little behind in my religious duties," Barak said with a pained look, "and I'd rather not be reminded of it by the High Priest of Belar. His voice is very penetrating, and I don't like being called down in front of the whole city. A prudent man doesn't give either a priest or a woman the opportunity to scold him in public."
The streets of Val Alorn were narrow and crooked, and the ancient stone houses were tall and narrow with overhanging second stories. Despite the intermittent snow and the crisp wind, the streets seemed full of people, most of them garbed in furs against the chill.
There was much good-humored shouting and the exchange of bawdy insults. Two elderly and dignified men were pelting each other with snowballs in the middle of one street to the raucous encouragement of the bystanders.
"They're old friends," Barak said with a broad grin. "They do this every day all winter long. Pretty soon they'll go to an alehouse and get drunk and sing old songs together until they fall off their benches. They've been doing it for years now."
"What do they do in the summer?" Silk asked.
"They throw rocks," Barak said. "The drinking and singing and falling off the benches stays the same, though."
"Hello, Barak," a green-eyed young woman called from an upper window. "When are you coming to see me again?"
Barak glanced up, and his face flushed, but he didn't answer.
"That lady's talking to you, Barak," Garion said.
"I heard her," Barak replied shortly.

"She seems to know you," Silk said with a sly look.
"She knows everyone," Barak said, flushing even more. "Shall we move along?"
Around another corner a group of men dressed in shaggy furs shufted along in single file. Their gait was a kind of curious swaying from side to side, and people quickly made way for them.
"Hail, Lord Barak," their leader intoned.
"Hail, Lord Barak," the others said in unison, still swaying. Barak bowed stitpy.
"May the arm of Belar protect thee," the leader said. "All praise to Belar, Bear-God of Aloria," the others said. Barak bowed again and stood until the procession had passed.
"Who were they?" Durnik asked.
"Bear-cultists," Barak said with distaste. "Religious fanatics."
"A troublesome group," Silk explained. "They have chapters in all the Alorn kingdoms. They're excellent warriors, but they're the instruments of the High Priest of Belar. They spend their time in rituals, military training, and interfering in local politics."
"Where's this Aloria they spoke of?" Garion asked.
"All around us," Barak said with a broad gesture. "Aloria used to be all the Alorn kingdoms together. They were all one nation. The cultists want to reunite them."
"That doesn't seem unreasonable," Durnik said.
"Aloria was divided for a reason," Barak said. "A certain thing had to be protected, and the division of Aloria was the best way to do that."
"Was this thing so important?" Durnik asked.
"It's the most important thing in the world," Silk said. "The Bearcultists tend to forget that."
"Only now it's been stolen, hasn't it?" Garion blurted as that dry voice in his mind informed him of the connection between what Barak and Silk had just said and the sudden disruption of his own life. "It's this thing that Mister Wolf is following."
Barak glanced quickly at him. "The lad is wiser than we thought, Silk," he said soberly.
"He's a clever boy," Silk agreed, "and it's not hard to put it all together."
His weasel face was grave. "You're right, of course, Garion," he said. "We don't know how yet, but somebody's managed to steal it. If Belgarath gives the word, the Alorn Kings will take the world apart stone by stone to get it back."
"You mean war?" Durnik said in a sinking voice.
"There are worse things than war," Barak said grimly. "It might be a good opportunity to dispose of the Angaraks once and for all."
"Let's hope that Belgarath can persuade the Alorn Kings otherwise," Silk said.
"The thing has to be recovered," Barak insisted.
"Granted," Silk agreed, "but there are other ways, and I hardly think a public street's the place to discuss our alternatives."
Barak looked around quickly, his eyes narrowing.
They had by then reached the harbor where the masts of the ships of Cherek rose as thickly as trees in a forest. They crossed an icy bridge over a frozen stream and came to several large yards where the skeletons of ships lay in the snow. A limping man in a leather smock came from a low stone building in the center of one of the yards and stood watching their approach.
"Ho, Krendig," Barak called.
"Ho, Barak," the man in the leather smock replied.
"How does the work go?" Barak asked.
"Slowly in this season," Krendig said. "It's not a good time to work with wood. My artisans are fashioning the fittings and sawing the boards, but we won't be able to do much more until spring."
Barak nodded and walked over to lay his hand on the new wood of a ship prow rising out of the snow. "Krendig is building this for me," he said, patting the prow. "She'll be the finest ship afloat."
"If your oarsmen are strong enough to move her," Krendig said. "She'll be very

big, Barak, and very heavy."
"Then I'll man her with big men," Barak said, still gazing at the ribs of his ship.
Garion heard a gleeful shout from the hillside above the shipyard and looked up quickly. Several young people were sliding down the hill on smooth planks. It was obvious that Barak and the others were going to spend most of the rest of the afternoon discussing the ship. While that might be all very interesting, Garion realized that he hadn't spoken with anyone his own age for a long time. He drifted away from the others and stood at the foot of the hill, watching.
One blond girl particularly attracted his eye. In some ways she reminded him of Zubrette, but there were some differences. Where Zubrette had been petite, this girl was as big as a boy - though she was noticeably not a boy. Her laughter rang out merrily, and her cheeks were pink in the cold afternoon air as she slid down the hill with her long braids flying behind her.
"That looks like fun," Garion said as her improvised sled came to rest nearby.
"Would you like to try?" she asked, getting up and brushing the snow from her woolen dress.
"I don't have a sled," he told her.
"I might let you use mine," she said, looking at him archly, "if you give me something."
"What would you want me to give you?" he asked.
"We'll think of something," she said, eyeing him boldly. "What's your name?"
"Garion," he said.
"What an odd name. Do you come from here?"
"No. I'm from Sendaria."
"A Sendar? Truly?" Her blue eyes twinkled. "I've never met a Sendar before. My name is Maidee."
Garion inclined his head slightly.
"Do you want to use my sled?" Maidee asked.
"I might like to try it," Garion said.
"I might let you," she said, "for a kiss."
Garion blushed furiously, and Maidee laughed.
A large red-haired boy in a long tunic slid to a stop nearby and rose with a menacing look on his face.
"Maidee, come away from there," he ordered.
"What if I don't want to?" she asked.
The red-haired boy swaggered toward Garion.
"What are you doing here?" he demanded.
"I was talking with Maidee," Garion said.
"Who gave you permission?" the red-haired boy asked. He was a bit taller than Garion and somewhat heavier.
"I didn't bother to ask permission," Garion said.
The red-haired boy glowered, flexing his muscles threateningly.
"I can thrash you if I like," he announced.
Garion realized that the redhead was feeling belligerent and that a fight was inevitable. The preliminaries-threats, insults and the likewould probably go on for several more minutes, but the fight would take place as soon as the boy in the long tunic had worked himself up to it. Garion decided not to wait. He doubled his fist and punched the larger boy in the nose.
The blow was a good one, and the redhead stumbled back and sat down heavily in the snow. He raised one hand to his nose and brought it away bright red.
"It's bleeding!" he wailed accusingly. "You made my nose bleed."
"It'll stop in a few minutes," Garion said.
"What if it doesn't?"
"Nose bleeds don't last forever," Garion told him.
"Why did you hit me?" the redhead demanded tearfully, wiping his nose. "I didn't do anything to you."
"You were going to," Garion said. "Put snow on it, and don't be such a baby."
"It's still bleeding," the boy said.
"Put snow on it," Garion said again.

"What if it doesn't stop bleeding?"
"Then you'll probably bleed to death," Garion said in a heartless tone. It was a trick he had learned from Aunt Pol. It worked as well on the Cherek boy as it had on Doroon and Rundorig. The redhead blinked at him and then took a large handful of snow and held it to his nose.
"Are all Sendars so cruel?" Maidee asked.
"I don't know all the people in Sendaria," Garion said. The affair hadn't turned out well at all, and regretfully he turned and started back toward the shipyard.
"Garion, wait," Maidee said. She ran after him and caught him by the arm. "You forgot my kiss," she said, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the lips.
"There," she said, and she turned and ran laughing back up the hill, her blond braids flying behind her.
Barak, Silk and Durnik were all laughing when he returned to where they stood.
"You were supposed to chase her," Barak said.
"What for?" Garion asked, flushing at their laughter.
"She wanted you to catch her."
"I don't understand."
"Barak," Silk said, "I think that one of us is going to have to inform the Lady Polgara that our Garion needs some further education."
"You're skilled with words, Silk," Barak said. "I'm sure you ought to be the one to tell her."
"Why don't we throw dice for the privilege?" Silk suggested.
"I've seen you throw dice before, Silk." Barak laughed.
"Of course we could simply stay here a while longer," Silk said slyly. "I rather imagine that Garion's new playmate would be quite happy to complete his education, and that way we wouldn't have to bother Lady Polgara about it."
Garion's ears were flaming. "I'm not as stupid as all that," he said hotly. "I know what you're talking about, and you don't have to say anything to Aunt Pol about it." He stamped away angrily, kicking at the snow.
After Barak had talked for a while longer with his shipbuilder and the harbor had begun to darken with the approach of evening, they started back toward the palace. Garion sulked along behind, still offended by their laughter. The clouds which had hung overhead since their arrival in Val Alorn had begun to tatter, and patches of clear sky began to appear. Here and there single stars twinkled as evening slowly settled in the snowy streets. The soft light of candles began to glow in the windows of the houses, and the few people left in the streets hurried to get home before dark.
Garion, still loitering behind, saw two men entering a wide door beneath a crude sign depicting a cluster of grapes. One of them was the sandy-bearded man in the green cloak that he had seen in the palace the night before. The other man wore a dark hood, and Garion felt a familiar tingle of recognition. Even though he couldn't see the hooded man's face, there was no need of that. They had looked at each other too often for there to be any doubt. As always before, Garion felt that peculiar restraint, almost like a ghostly finger touching his lips. The hooded man was Asharak, and, though the Murgo's presence here was very important, it was for some reason impossible for Garion to speak of it. He watched the two men only for a moment and then hurried to catch up with his friends. He struggled with the compulsion that froze his tongue, and then tried another approach.
"Barak," he asked, "are there many Murgos in Val Alorn?"
"There aren't any Murgos in Cherek," Barak said. "Angaraks aren't allowed in the kingdom on pain of death. It's our oldest law. It was laid down by old Cherek Bear-shoulders himself. Why do you ask?"
"I was just wondering," Garion said lamely. His mind shrieked with the need to tell them about Asharak, but his lips stayed frozen.
That evening, when they were all seated at the long table in King Anheg's central hall with a great feast set before them, Barak entertained them with a broadly exaggerated account of Garion's encounter with the young people on the hillside.

"A great blow it was," he said in expansive tones, "worthy of the mightiest warrior and truly struck upon the nose of the foe. The bright blood flew, and the enemy was dismayed and overcome. Like a hero, Garion stood over the vanquished, and, like a true hero, did not boast nor taunt his fallen opponent, but offered instead advice for quelling that crimson flood. With simple dignity then, he quit the field, but the brighteyed maid would not let him depart unrewarded for his valor. Hastily, she pursued him and fondly clasped her snowy arms about his neck. And there she lovingly bestowed that single kiss that is the true hero's greatest reward. Her eyes flamed with admiration, and her chaste bosom heaved with newly wakened passion. But modest Garion innocently departed and tarried not to claim those other sweet rewards the gentle maid's fond demeanor so clearly offered. And thus the adventure ended with our hero tasting victory but tenderly declining victory's true compensation."

The warriors and kings at the long table roared with laughter and pounded the table and their knees and each others' backs in their glee. Queen Islena and Queen Silar smiled tolerantly, and Queen Porenn laughed openly. Lady Merel, however, remained stony-faced, her expression faintly contemptuous as she looked at her husband.

Garion sat with his face aflame, his ears besieged with shouted suggestions and advice.

"Is that really the way it happened, nephew?" King Rhodar demanded of Silk, wiping tears from his eyes.

"More or less," Silk replied. "Lord Barak's telling was masterly, though a good deal embellished."

"We should send for a minstrel," the Earl of Seline said. "This exploit should be immortalized in song."

"Don't tease him," Queen Porenn said, looking sympathetically at Garion.

Aunt Pol did not seem amused. Her eyes were cold as she looked at Barak.

"Isn't it odd that three grown men can't keep one boy out of trouble?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It was only one blow, my Lady," Silk protested, "and only one kiss, after all."

"Really?" she said. "And what's it going to be next time? A duel with swords, perhaps, and even greater foolishness afterward?"

"There was no real harm in it, Mistress Pol," Durnik assured her. Aunt Pol shook her head. "I thought you at least had good sense, Durnik," she said, "but now I see that I was wrong."

Garion suddenly resented her remarks. It seemed that no matter what he did, she was ready to take it in the worst possible light. His resentment flared to the verge of open rebellion. What right had she to say anything about what he did? There was no tie between them, after all, and he could do anything he wanted without her permission if he felt like it. He glared at her in sullen anger.

She caught the look and returned it with a cool expression that seemed almost to challenge him. "Well?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said shortly.

Chapter Fifteen

THE NEXT MORNING dawned bright and crisp. The sky was a deep blue, and the sunlight was dazzling on the white mountaintops that rose behind the city. After breakfast, Mister Wolf announced that he and Aunt Pol would again meet privately that day with Fulrach and the Alorn Kings.

"Good idea," Barak said. "Gloomy ponderings are good for kings. Unless one has regal obligations, however, it's much too fine a day to be wasted indoors." He grinned mockingly at his cousin.

"There's a streak of cruelty in you that I hadn't suspected, Barak," King Anheg said, glancing longingly out a nearby window.

"Do the wild boars still come down to the edges of the forest?" Barak asked.

"In droves," Anheg replied even more disconsolately.

"I thought I might gather a few good men and go out and see if we can thin their numbers a bit," Barak said, his grin even wider now.

"I was almost sure you had something like that in mind," Anheg said moodily, scratching at his unkempt hair.
"I'm doing you a service, Anheg," Barak said. "You don't want your kingdom overrun with the beasts, do you?"
Rhodar, the fat King of Drasnia, laughed hugely. "I think he's got you, Anheg," he said.
"He usually does," Anheg agreed sourly.
"I gladly leave such activities to younger and leaner men," Rhodar said. He slapped his vast paunch with both hands. "I don't mind a good supper, but I'd rather not have to fight with it first. I make too good a target. The blindest boar in the world wouldn't have much trouble finding me."
"Well, Silk," Barak said, "what do you say?"
"You're not serious," Silk said.
"You must go along, Prince Kheldar," Queen Porenn insisted. "Someone has to represent the honor of Drasnia in this venture."
Silk's face looked pained.
"You can be my champion," she said, her eyes sparkling.
"Have you been reading Arendish epics again, your Highness?" Silk asked acidly.
"Consider it a royal command," she said. "Some fresh air and exercise won't hurt you. You're starting to look dyspeptic."
Silk bowed ironically. "As you wish, your Highness," he said. "I suppose that if things get out of hand I can always climb a tree."
"How about you, Durnik?" Barak asked.
"I don't know much about hunting, friend Barak," Durnik said doubtfully, "but I'll come along if you like."
"My Lord?" Barak asked the Earl of Seline politely.
"Oh, no, Lord Barak." Seline laughed. "I outgrew my enthusiasm for such sport years ago. Thanks for the invitation, however."
"Hettar?" Barak asked the rangy Algar. Hettar glanced quickly at his father.
"Go along, Hettar," Cho-Hag said in his soft voice. "I'm sure King Anheg will lend me a warrior to help me walk."
"I'll do it myself, Cho-Hag," Anheg said. "I've carned heavier burdens."
"I'll go with you then, Lord Barak," Hettar said. "And thanks for asking me."
His voice was deep and resonant, but very soft, much like that of his father.
"Well, lad?" Barak asked Garion.
"Have you lost your wits entirely, Barak?" Aunt Pol snapped. "Didn't you get him into enough trouble yesterday?"
That was the last straw. The sudden elation he'd felt at Barak's invitation turned to anger. Garion gritted his teeth and threw away all caution. "If Barak doesn't think I'll just be in the way, I'll be glad to go along," he announced defiantly.
Aunt Pol stared at him, her eyes suddenly very hard.
"Your cub is growing teeth, Pol." Mister Wolf chuckled.
"Be still, father," Aunt Pol said, still glaring at Garion.
"Not this time, Miss," the old man said with a hint of iron in his voice. "He's made his decision, and you're not going to humiliate him by unmaking it for him. Garion isn't a child now. You may not have noticed, but he's almost man high and filling out now. He'll soon be fifteen, Pol. You're going to have to relax your grip sometime, and now's as good a time as any to start treating him like a man."
She looked at him for a moment.
"Whatever you say, father," she said at last with deceptive meekness. "I'm sure we'll want to discuss this later, though-in private."
Mister Wolf winced.
Aunt Pol looked at Garion then. "Try to be careful, dear," she said, "and when you come back, we'll have a nice long talk, won't we?"
"Will my Lord require my aid in arming himself for the hunt?" Lady Merel asked in the stilted and insulting manner she always assumed with Barak.
"That won't be necessary, Merel," Barak said.
"I would not neglect any of my duties," she said.

"Leave it alone, Merel," Barak said. "You've made your point."
"Have I my Lord's permission then to withdraw?" she asked.
"You have," he said shortly.
"Perhaps you ladies would like to join me," Queen Islena said. "We'll cast auguries and see if we can predict the outcome of the hunt."
Queen Porenn, who stood somewhat behind the Queen of Cherek, rolled her eyes upward in resignation.
Queen Silar smiled at her.
"Let's go then," Barak said. "The boars are waiting."
"Sharpening their tusks, no doubt," Silk said.
Barak led them down to the red door of the armory where they were joined by a grizzled man with enormously broad shoulders who wore a bullhide shirt with metal plates sewn on it.
"This is Torvik," Barak introduced the grizzled man, "Anheg's chief huntsman. He knows every boar in the forest by his first name."
"My Lord Barak is overkind," Torvik said, bowing.
"How does one go about this hunting of boars, friend Torvik?" Durnik asked politely. "I've never done it before."
"It's a simple thing," Torvik explained. "I take my huntsmen into the forest and we drive the beasts with noise and shouting. You and the other hunters wait for them with these." He gestured at a rack of stout, broad-headed boar spears. "When the boar sees you standing in his way, he charges you and tries to kill you with his tusks, but instead you kill him with your spear."
"I see," Durnik said somewhat doubtfully. "It doesn't sound very complicated."
"We wear mail shirts, Durnik," Barak said. "Our hunters are hardly ever injured seriously."
" `Hardly ever' has an uncomfortable ring of frequency to it, Barak," Silk said, fingering a mail shirt hanging on a peg by the door.
"No sport is very entertaining without a certain element of risk." Barak shrugged, hefting a boar spear.
"Have you ever thought of throwing dice instead?" Silk asked.
"Not with your dice, my friend." Barak laughed.
They began pulling on mail shirts while Torvik's huntsmen carried several armloads of boar spears out to the sleighs waiting in the snowy courtyard of the palace.
Garion found the mail shirt heavy and more than a little uncomfortable. The steel rings dug at his skin even through his heavy clothes, and every time he tried to shift his posture to relieve the pressure of one of them, a half dozen others bit at him. The air was very cold as they climbed into the sleighs, and the usual fur robes seemed hardly adequate.
They drove through the narrow, twisting streets of Val Alorn toward the great west gate on the opposite side of the city from the harbor. The breath of the horses steamed in the icy air as they rode.
The ragged old blind woman from the temple stepped from a doorway as they passed in the bright morning sun. "Hail, Lord Barak," she croaked. "Thy Doom is at hand. Thou shalt taste of it before this day's sun finds its bed."
Without a word Barak rose in his sleigh, took up a boar spear and cast it with deadly accuracy full at the old woman.
With surprising speed, the witch-woman swung her staff and knocked the spear aside in midair. "It will avail thee not to try to kill old Martje." She laughed scornfully. "Thy spear shall not find her, neither shall thy sword. Go thou, Barak. Thy Doom awaits thee." And then she turned toward the sleigh in which Garion sat beside the startled Durnik. "Hail, Lord of Lords," she intoned. "Thy peril this day shall be great, but thou shall survive it. And it is thy peril which shall reveal the mark of the beast which is the Doom of thy friend Barak."
And then she bowed and scampered away before Barak could lay his hands on another spear.
"What was that about, Garion?" Durnik asked, his eyes still surprised.
"Barak says she's a crazy old blind woman," Garion said. "She stopped us when we arrived in Val Alorn after you and the others had already passed."

"What was all that talk about Doom?" Durnik asked with a shudder.
"I don't know," Garion said. "Barak wouldn't explain it."
"It's a bad omen so early in the day," Durnik said. "These Chereks are a strange people."
Garion nodded in agreement.
Beyond the west gate of the city were open fields, sparkling white in the full glare of the morning sun. They crossed the fields toward the dark edge of the forest two leagues away with great plumes of powdery snow flying out behind their racing sleighs.
Farmsteads lay muffled in snow along their track. The buildings were all made of logs and had high-peaked wooden roofs.
"These people seem to be indifferent to danger," Durnik said. "I certainly wouldn't want to live in a wooden house - what with the possibility of fire and all."
"It's a different country, after all," Garion said. "We can't expect the whole world to live the way we do in Sendaria."
"I suppose not," Durnik sighed, "but I'll tell you, Garion, I'm not very comfortable here. Some people just aren't meant for travel. Sometimes I wish we'd never left Faldor's farm."
"I do too, sometimes," Garion admitted, looking at the towering mountains that seemed to rise directly out of the forest ahead. "Someday it will be over, though, and we'll be able to go home again."
Durnik nodded and sighed once more.
By the time they had entered the woods, Barak had regained his temper and his good spirits, and he set about placing the hunters as if nothing had happened. He led Garion through the calf deep snow to a large tree some distance from the narrow sleigh track.
"This is a good place," he said. "There's a game trail here, and the boars may use it to try to escape the noise of Torvik and his huntsmen. When one comes, brace yourself and hold your spear with its point aimed at his chest. They don't see very well, and he'll run full into your spear before he even knows it's there. After that it's probably best to jump behind a tree. Sometimes the spear makes them very angry."
"What if I miss?" Garion asked.
"I wouldn't do that," Barak advised. "It's not a very good idea."
"I didn't mean that I was going to do it on purpose," Garion said. "Will he try to get away from me or what?"
"Sometimes they'll try to run," Barak said, "but I wouldn't count on it. More likely he'll try to split you up the middle with his tusks. At that point it's usually a good idea to climb a tree."
"I'll remember that," Garion said.
"I won't be far away if you have trouble," Barak promised, handing Garion a pair of heavy spears. Then he trudged back to his sleigh, and they all galloped off, leaving Garion standing alone under the large oak tree.
It was shadowy among the dark tree trunks, and bitingly cold. Garion walked around a bit through the snow, looking for the best place to await the boar. The trail Barak had pointed out was a beaten path winding back through the dark brush, and Garion found the size of the tracks imprinted in the snow on the path alarmingly large. The oak tree with low-spreading limbs began to look very inviting, but he dismissed that thought angrily. He was expected to stand on the ground and meet the charge of the boar, and he decided that he would rather die than hide in a tree like a frightened child.
The dry voice in his mind advised him that he spent far too much time worrying about things like that. Until he was grown, no one would consider him a man, so why should he go to all the trouble of trying to seem brave when it wouldn't do any good anyway?
The forest was very quiet now, and the snow muffled all sounds. No bird sang, and there was only the occasional padded thump of snow sliding from overloaded branches to the earth beneath. Garion felt terribly alone. What was he doing here? What business had a good, sensible Sendarian boy here in the endless

forests of Cherek, awaiting the charge of a savage wild pig with only a pair of unfamiliar spears for company?
What had the pig ever done to him? He realized that he didn't even particularly like the taste of pork.
He was some distance from the beaten forest track along which their sleighs had passed, and he set his back to the oak tree, shivered, and waited.
He didn't realize how long he had been listening to the sound when he became fully aware of it. It was not the stamping, squealing rush of a wild boar he had been expecting but was, rather, the measured pace of several horses moving slowly along the snow-carpeted floor of the forest, and it was coming from behind him. Cautiously he eased his face around the tree.
Three riders, muffled in furs, emerged from the woods on the far side of the sleigh-churned track. They stopped and sat waiting. Two of them were bearded warriors, little different from dozens of others Garion had seen in King Anheg's palace. The third man, however, had long, flaxencolored hair and wore no beard. His face had the sullen, pampered look of a sPolled child, although he was a man of middle years, and he sat his horse disdainfully as if the company of the other two somehow offended him.
After a time, the sound of another horse came from near the edge of the forest. Almost holding his breath, Garion waited. The other rider slowly approached the three who sat their horses in the snow at the edge of the trees. It was the sandy-bearded man in the green cloak whom Garion had seen creeping through the passageways of King Anheg's palace two nights before.
"My Lord," the green-cloaked man said deferentially as he joined the other three.
"Where have you been?" the flaxen-haired man demanded.
"Lord Barak took some of his guests on a boar hunt this morning. His route was the same as mine, and I didn't want to follow too closely."
The nobleman grunted sourly.
"We saw them deeper in the wood," he said. "Well, what have you heard?"
"Very little, my Lord. The kings are meeting with the old man and the woman in a guarded chamber. I can't get close enough to head what they're saying."
"I'm paying you good gold to get close enough. I have to know what they're saying. Go back to the palace and work out a way to hear what they're talking about."
"I'll try, my Lord," the green-cloaked man said, bowing somewhat stifliy.
"You'll do more than try," the flaxen-haired man snapped.
"As you wish, my Lord," the other said, starting to turn his horse.
"Wait," the nobleman commended. "Were you able to meet with our friend?"
"Your friend, my Lord," the other corrected with distaste. "I met him, and we went to a tavern and talked a little."
"What did he say?"
"Nothing very useful. His kind seldom do."
"Will he meet us as he said he would?"
"He told me that he would. If you want to believe him, that's your affair."
The nobleman ignored that.
"Who arrived with the King of the Sendars?"
"The old man and the woman, another old man-some Sendarian noble, I think, Lord Barak and a weasel-faced Drasnian, and another Sendar - a commoner of some sort."
"That's all? Wasn't there a boy with them as well?"
The spy shrugged.
"I didn't think the boy was important," he said.
"He's there then-in the palace?"
"He is, my Lord-an ordinary Sendarian boy of about fourteen, I'd judge. He seems to be some kind of servant to the woman."
"Very well. Go back to the palace and get close enough to that chamber to hear what the kings and the old man are saying."
"That may be very dangerous, my Lord."
"It'll be more dangerous if you don't. Now go, before that ape Barak comes back

and finds you loitering here." He whirled his horse and, followed by his two warriors, plunged back into the forest on the far side of the snowy track that wound among the dark trees.
The man in the green cloak sat grimly watching for a moment, then he too turned his horse and rode back the way he had come.
Garion rose from his crouched position behind the tree. His hands were clenched so tightly around the shaft of his spear that they actually ached. This had gone entirely too far, he decided. The matter must be brought to someone's attention.
And then, some way ofi in the snowy depths of the wood, he heard the sound of hunting horns and the steely clash of swords ringing rhythmically on shields.
The huntsmen were coming, driving all the beasts of the forest before them.
He heard a crackling in the bushes, and a great stag bounded into view, his eyes wild with fright and his antlers flaring above his head. With three huge leaps he was gone. Garion trembled with excitement.
Then there was a squealing rush, and a red-eyed sow plunged down the trail followed by a half dozen scampering piglets. Garion stepped behind his tree and let them pass.
The next squeals were deeper and rang less with fright than with rage. It was the boar-Garion knew that before the beast even broke out of the heavy brush.
When the boar appeared, Garion felt his heart quail.
This was no fat, sleepy porker, but rather a savage, infuriated beast. The horrid tusks jutting up past the flaring snout were yellow, and bits of twigs and bark clung to them, mute evidence that the boar would slash at anything in his path-trees, bushes or a Sendarian boy without sense enough to get out of his way.
Then a peculiar thing happened. As in the long-ago fight with Rundorig or in the scuffle with Brill's hirelings in the dark streets of Muros, Garion felt his blood begin to surge, and there was a wild ringing in his ears. He seemed to hear a defiant, shouted challenge and could scarcely accept the fact that it came from his own throat. He suddenly realized that he was stepping into the middle of the trail and crouching with his spear braced and leveled at the massive beast.
The boar charged. Red-eyed and frothing from the mouth, with a deep-throated squeal of fury, he plunged at the waiting Garion. The powdery snow sprayed up from his churning hooves like foam from the prow of a ship.The snow crystals seemed to hang in the air, sparkling in a single ray of sunlight that chanced just there to reach the forest floor.
The shock as the boar hit the spear was frightful, but Garion's aim was good. The broad-bladed spearhead penetrated the coarsely haired chest, and the white froth dripping from the boar's tusks suddenly became bloody foam. Garion felt himself driven back by the impact, his feet slipping out from under him, and then the shaft of his spear snapped like a dry twig and the boar was on him.
The first slashing, upward-ripping blow of the boar's tusks took Garion full in the stomach, and he felt the wind whoosh out of his lungs. The second slash caught his hip as he tried to roll, gasping, out of the way. His chain-mail shirt deflected the tusks, saving him from being wounded, but the blows were stunning. The boar's third slash caught him in the back, and he was flung through the air and crashed into a tree. His eyes filled with shimmering light as his head banged against the rough bark.
And then Barak was there, roaring and charging through the snowbut somehow it seemed not to be Barak. Garion's eyes, glazed from the shock of the blow to his head, looked uncomprehendingly at something that could not be true. It was Barak, there could be no doubt of that, but it was also something else. Oddly, as if somehow occupying the same space as Barak, there was also a huge, hideous bear. The images of the two figures crashing through the snow were superimposed, their movements identical as if in sharing the same space they also shared the same thoughts.
Huge arms grasped up the wriggling, mortally wounded boar and crushed in upon it. Bright blood fountained from the boar's mouth, and the shaggy, half man thing that seemed to be Barak and something else at the same time raised the

dying pig and smashed it brutally to the ground. The man-thing lifted its awful face and roared in earthshaking triumph as the light slid away from Garion's eyes and he felt himself drifting down into the gray well of unconsciousness.
There was no way of knowing how much time passed until he came to in the sleigh. Silk was applying a cloth filled with snow to the back of his neck as they flew across the glaring white fields toward Val Alorn.
"I see you've decided to live." Silk grinned at him.
"Where's Barak?" Garion mumbled groggily.
"In the sleigh behind us," Silk said, glancing back.
"Is he-all right?"
"What could hurt Barak?" Silk asked.
"I mean -,does he seem like himself?"
"He seems like Barak to me." Silk shrugged. "No, boy, lie still. That wild pig may have cracked your ribs." He placed his hands on Garion's chest and gently held him down.
"My boar?" Garion demanded weakly. "Where is it?"
"The huntsmen are bringing it," Silk said. "You'll get your triumphal entry. If I might suggest it, however, you should give some thought to the virtue of constructive cowardice. These instincts of yours could shorten your life."
But Garion had already slipped back into unconsciousness.
And then they were in the palace, and Barak was carrying him, and Aunt Pol was there, white-faced at the sight of all the blood.
"It's not his," Barak assured her quickly. "He speared a boar, and it bled on him while they were tussling. I think the boy's all right - a little rap on the head is all."
"Bring him," Aunt Pol said curtly and led the way up the stairs toward Garion's room.
Later, with his head and chest wrapped and a foul-tasting cup of Aunt Pol's brewing making him light-headed and sleepy, Garion lay in his bed listening as Aunt Pol finally turned on Barak.
"You great overgrown dolt," she raged. "Do you see what all your foolishness has done?"
"The lad is very brave," Barak said, his voice low and sunk in a kind of bleak melancholy.
"Brave doesn't interest me," Aunt Pol snapped. Then she stopped. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. She reached out suddenly and put her hands on the sides of the huge man's head. She looked for a moment into his eyes and then slowly released him. "Oh," she said softly, "it finally happened, I see."
"I couldn't control it, Polgara," Barak said in misery.
"It'll be all right, Barak," she said, gently touching his bowed head.
"It'll never be all right again," Barak said.
"Get some sleep," she told him. "It won't seem so bad in the morning."
The huge man turned and quietly left the room.
Garion knew they were talking about the strange thing he had seen when Barak had rescued him from the boar, and he wanted to ask Aunt Pol about it; but the bitter drink she had given him pulled him down into a deep and dreamless sleep before tIe could put the words together to ask the question.

Chapter Sixteen

THE NEXT DAY Garion was too stiff and sore to even think about getting out of bed. A stream of visitors, however, kept him too occupied to think about his aches and pains. The visits from the Alorn Kings in their splendid robes were particularly flattering, and each of them praised his courage. Then the queens came and made a great fuss over his injuries, offering warm sympathy and gentle, stroking touches to his forehead. The combination of praise, sympathy and the certain knowledge that he was the absolute center of attention was overwhelming, and his heart was full.
The last visitor of the day, however, was Mister Wolf, who came when evening was creeping through the snowy streets of Val Alorn. The old man wore his usual

tunic and cloak, and his hood was turned up as if he had been outside.
"Have you seen my boar, Mister Wolf?" Garion asked proudly.
"An excellent animal," Wolf said, though without much enthusiasm, "but didn't anyone tell you it's customary to jump out of the way after the boar has been speared?"
"I didn't really think about it," Garion admitted, "but wouldn't that seem - well - cowardly?"
"Were you that concerned about what a pig might think of you?"
"Well," Garion faltered, "not really, I guess."
"You're developing an amazing lack of good sense for one so young," Wolf observed. "It normally takes years and years to reach the point you seem to have arrived at overnight." He turned to Aant Pol, who sat nearby. "Polgara, are you quite certain that there's no hint of Arendish blood in our Garion's background? He's been behaving most Arendish lately. First he rides the Great Maelstrom like a rocking horse, and then he tries to break a wild boar's tusks with his ribs. Are you sure you didn't drop him on his head when he was a baby?"
Aunt Pol smiled, but said nothing.
"I hope you recover soon, boy," Wolf said, "and try to give some thought to what I've said."
Garion sulked, mortally offended by Mister Wolf's words. Tears welled up in his eyes despite all his efforts to control them.
"Thank you for stopping by, Father," Aunt Pol said.
"It's always a pleasure to call on you, my daughter," Wolf said and quietly left the room.
"Why did he have to talk to me like that?" Garion burst out, wiping his nose. "Now he's gone and spoiled it all."
"Spoiled what, dear?" Aunt Pol asked, smoothing the front of her gray dress.
"All of it," Garion complained. "The kings all said I was very brave."
"Kings say things like that," Aunt Pol said. "I wouldn't pay too much attention, if I were you."
"I was brave, wasn't I?"
"I'm sure you were, dear," she said. "And I'm sure the pig was very impressed."
"You're as bad as Mister Wolf is," Garion accused.
"Yes, dear," she said, "I suppose I probably am, but that's only natural. Now, what would you like for supper?"
"I'm not hungry," Garion said defiantly.
"Really? You probably need a tonic then. I'll fix you one."
"I think I've changed my mind," Garion said quickly.
"I rather thought you might," Aunt Pol said. And then, without explanation, she suddenly put her arms around him and held him close to her for a long time.
"What am I going to do with you?" she said finally.
"I'm all right, Aunt Pol," he assured her.
"This time perhaps," she said, taking his face between her hands. "It's a splendid thing to be brave, my Garion, but try once in a while to think a little bit first. Promise me."
"All right, Aunt Pol," he said, a little embarrassed by all this. Oddly enough she still acted as if she really cared about him. The idea that there could still be a bond between them even if they were not related began to dawn on him. It could never be the same, of course, but at least it was something. He began to feel a little better about the whole thing.
The next day he was able to get up. His muscles still ached a bit, and his ribs were somewhat tender, but he was young and was healing fast. About midmorning he was sitting with Durnik in the great hall of Anheg's palace when the silvery-bearded Earl of Seline approached them.
"King Fulrach wonders if you would be so kind as to join us in the council chamber, Goodman Durnik," he said politely.
"Me, your Honor?" Durnik asked incredulously.
"His Majesty is most impressed with your sensibility," the old gentleman said. "He feels that you represent the very best of Sendarian practicality. What we face involves all men, not just the Kings of the West, and so it's only proper

that good, solid common sense be represented in our proceedings."
"I'll come at once, your Honor," Durnik said, getting up quickly, "but you'll have to forgive me if I say very little."
Garion waited expectantly.
"We've all heard of your adventure, my boy," the Earl of Seline said pleasantly to Garion. "Ah, to be young again," he sighed. "Coming, Durnik?"
"Immediately, your Honor," Durnik said, and the two of them made their way out of the great hall toward the council chamber.
Garion sat alone, wounded to the quick by his exclusian. He was at an age where his self esteem was very tender, and inwardly he writhed at the lack of regard implicit in his not being invited to join them. Hurt and offended, he sulkily left the great hall and went to visit his boar which hung in an ice-filled cooling room just oti the kitchen. At least the boar had taken him seriously.
One could, however, spend only so much time in the company of a dead pig without becoming depressed. The boar did not seem nearly so big as he had when he was alive and charging, and the tusks were impressive but neither so long nor so sharp as Garion remembered them. Besides, it was cold in the cooling room and sore muscles stiffened quickly in chilly places.
There was no point in trying to visit Barak. The red-bearded man had locked himself in his chamber to brood in blackest melancholy and refused to answer his door, even to his wife. And so Garion, left entirely on his own, moped about for a while and then decided that he might as well explore this vast palace with its dusty, unused chambers and dark, twisting corridors. He walked for what seemed hours, opening doors and following hallways that sometimes ended abruptly against blank stone walls.
The palace of Anheg was enormous, having been, as Barak had explained, some three thousand years and more in construction. One southern wing was so totally abandoned that its entire roof had fallen in centuries ago. Garion wandered there for a time in the second-floor corridors of the ruin, his mind filled with gloomy thoughts of mortality and transient glory as he looked into rooms where snow lay thickly on ancient beds and stools and the tiny tracks of mice and squirrels ran everywhere. And then he came to an unroofed corridor where there were other tracks, those of a man. The footprints were quite fresh, for there was no sign of snow in them and it had snowed heavily the night before. At first he thought the tracks might be his own and that he had somehow circled and come back to a corridor he had already explored, but the footprints were much larger than his.
There were a dozen possible explanations, of course, but Garion felt his breath quicken. The man in the green cloak was still lurking about the palace, Asharak the Murgo was somewhere in Val Alorn, and the flaxen-haired nobleman was hiding somewhere in the forest with obviously unfriendly intentions.
Garion realized that the situation might be dangerous and that he was unarmed except for his small dagger. He retraced his steps quickly to a snowy chamber he had just explored and took down a rusty sword from a peg where it had hung forgotten for uncountable years. Then, feeling a bit more secure, he returned to follow the silent tracks.
So long as the path of the unknown intruder lay in that roofless and long-abandoned corridor, following him was simplicity itself; the undisturbed snow made tracking easy. But once the trail led over a heap of fallen debris and into the gaping blackness of a dusty corridor where the roof was still intact, things became a bit more difficult. The dust on the floor helped, but it was necessary to do a great deal of stooping and bending over. Garion's ribs and legs were still sore, and he winced and grunted each time he had to bend down to examine the stone floor. In a very short while he was sweating and gritting his teeth and thinking about giving the whole thing up.
Then he heard a faint sound far down the corridor ahead. He shrank back against the wall, hoping that no light from behind him would filter dimly through to allow him to be seen. Far ahead, a figure passed stealthily through the pale light from a single tiny window. Garion caught a momentary flicker of green and knew finally whom he was following. He kept close to the wall and moved with

catlike silence in his soft leather shoes, the rusty sword gripped tightly in his hand. If it had not been for the startling nearness of the voice of the Earl of Seline, however, he would probably have walked directly into the man he had been following.
"Is it at all possible, noble Belgarath, that our enemy can be awakened before all the conditions of the ancient prophecy are met?" the earl was asking.
Garion stopped. Directly ahead of him in a narrow embrasure in the wall of the corridor, he caught sight of a slight movement. The green cloaked man lurked there, listening in the dimness to the words that seemed to come from somewhere beneath. Garion shrank back against the wall, scarcely daring to breathe. Carefully he stepped backward until he found another embrasure and drew himself into the concealing darkness.
"A most appropriate question, Belgarath," the quiet voice of ChoHag of the Algars said. "Can this Apostate use the power now in his hands to revive the Accursed One?"
"The power is there," the familiar voice of Mister Wolf said, "but he might be afraid to use it. If it isn't done properly, the power will destroy him. He won't rush into such an act, but will think very carefully before he tries it. It's that hesitation that gives us the little bit of time we have."
Then Silk spoke. "Didn't you say that he might want the thing for himself? Maybe he plans to leave his Master in undisturbed slumber and use the power he's stolen to raise himself as king in the lands of the Angaraks."
King Rhodar of Drasnia chuckled. "Somehow I don't see the Grolim Priesthood so easily relinquishing their power in the lands of Angarak and bowing down to an outsider. The High Priest of the Grolims is no mean sorcerer himself, I'm told."
"Forgive me, Rhodar," King Anheg said, "but if the power is in the thief's hands, the Grolims won't have any choice but to accept his dominion. I've studied the power of this thing, and if even half of what I've read is true, he can use it to rip down Rak Cthol as easily as you'd kick apart an anthill. Then, if they still resist, he could depopulate all of Cthol Murgos from Rak Goska to the Tolnedran border. No matter what, however, whether it's the Apostate or the Accursed One who eventually raises that power, the Angaraks will follow and they will come west."
"Shouldn't we inform the Arends and Tolnedrans-and the Ulgos as well-what has happened then?" Brand, the Rivan Warder, asked. "Let's not be taken by surprise again."
"I wouldn't be in too much hurry to rouse our southern neighbors," Mister Wolf said. "When Pol and I leave here, we'll be moving south. If Arendia and Tolnedra are mobilizing for war, the general turmoil would only hinder us. The Emperor's legions are soldiers. They can respond quickly when the need arises, and the Arends are always ready for war. The whole kingdom hovers on the brink of general warfare all the time."
"It's premature," Aunt Pol's familiar voice agreed. "Armies would just get in the way of what we're trying to do. If we can apprehend my father's old pupil and return the thing he pilfered to Riva, the crisis will be past. Let's not stir up the southerners for nothing."
"She's right," Wolf said. "There's always a risk in a mobilization. A king with an army on his hands often begins to think of mischief. I'll advise the King of the Arends at Vo Mimbre and the Emperor at Tol Honeth of as much as they need to know as I pass through. But we should get word through to the Gorim of Ulgo. Cho-Hag, do you think you could get a messenger through to Prolgu at this time of the year?"
"It's hard to say, Ancient One," Cho-Hag said. "The passes into those mountains are difficult in the winter. I'll try, though."
"Good," Wolf said. "Beyond that, there's not much more we can do. For the time being it might not be a bad idea to keep this matter in the family-so to speak. If worse comes to worst and the Angaraks invade again, Aloria at least will be armed and ready. There'll be time for Arendia and the Empire to make their preparations."
King Fulrach spoke then in a troubled voice. "It's easy for the Alorn Kings to

talk of war," he said. "Alorns are warriors; but my Sendaria is a peaceful kingdom. We don't have castles or fortified keeps, and my people are farmers and tradesmen. Kal Torak made a mistake when he chose the battlefield at Vo Mimbre; and it's not likely that the Angaraks will make the same mistake again. I think they'll strike directly across the grasslands of northern Algaria and fall upon Sendaria. We have a lot of food and very few soldiers. Our country would provide an ideal base for a campaign in the west, and I'm afraid that we'd fall quite easily."

Then, to Garion's amazement, Durnik spoke. "Don't cheapen the men of Sendaria so, Lord King," he said in a firm voice. "I know my neighbors, and they'll fight. We don't know very much about swords and lances, but we'll fight. If Angaraks come to Sendaria, they won't find the taking as easy as some might imagine, and if we put torches to the fields and storehouses there won't be all that much food for them to eat."

There was a long silence, and then Fulrach spoke again in a voice strangely humble. "Your words shame me, Goodman Durnik," he said. "Maybe I've been king for so long that I've forgotten what it means to be a Sendar."

"One remembers that there are only a few passes leading through the western escarpment into Sendaria," Hettar, the son of King Cho-Hag, said quietly. "A few avalanches in the right places could make Sendaria as inaccessible as the moon. If the avalanches took place at the right times, whole armies of Angaraks might find themselves trapped in those narrow corridors."

"Now that's an entertaining thought." Silk chuckled. "Then we could let Durnik put his incendiary impulses to a better use than burning turnip patches. Since Torak One-eye seems to enjoy the smell of burning sacrifices so much, we might be able to accommodate him."

Far down the dusty passageway in which he was hiding, Garion caught the sudden flicker of a torch and heard the faint jingling of several mail shirts. He almost failed to recognize the danger until the last instant. The man in the green cloak also heard the sounds and saw the light of the torch. He stepped from his hiding place and fled back the way he had come-directly past the embrasure where Garion had concealed himself. Garion shrank back, clutching his rusty sword; but as luck had it, the man was looking back over his shoulder at the twinkling torch as he ran by on soft feet.

As soon as he had passed, Garion also slipped out of his hiding place and fled. The Cherek warriors were looking for intruders, and it might be difficult to explain what he was doing in the dark hallway. He briefly considered following the spy again, but decided that he'd had enough of that for one day. It was time to tell someone about the things he'd seen. Someone had to be told-someone to whom the kings would listen. Once he reached the more frequented corridors of the palace, he firmly began to make his way toward the chamber where Barak brooded in silent melancholy.

Chapter Seventeen

"BARAK," GARION CALLED through the door after he had knocked for several minutes without any answer.

"Go away," Barak's voice came thickly through the door.

"Barak, it's me, Garion. I have to talk with you."

There was a long silence inside the room, and finally a slow movement. Then the door opened.

Barak's appearance was shocking. His tunic was rumpled and stained. His red beard was matted, the long braids he usually wore were undone, and his hair was tangled. The haunted look in his eyes, however, was the worst. The look was a mixture of horror and self loathing so naked that Garion was forced to avert his eyes.

"You saw it, didn't you, boy?" Barak demanded "You saw what happened to me out there."

"I didn't really see anything," Garion said carefully. "I hit my head on that tree, and all I really saw were stars."

"You must have seen it," Barak insisted. "You must have seen my Doom."
"Doom?" Garion said. "What are you talking about? You're still alive."
"A Doom doesn't always mean death," Barak said morosely, flinging himself into a large chair. "I wish mine did. A Doom is some terrible thing that's fated to happen to a man, and death's not the worst thing there is."
"You've just let the words of that crazy old blind woman take over your imagination," Garion said.
"It's not only Martje," Barak said. "She's just repeating what everybody in Cherek knows. An augurer was called in when I was born - it is the custom here. Most of the time the auguries don't show anything at all, and nothing special is going to happen during the child's life. But sometimes the future lies so heavily on one of us that almost anyone can see the Doom."
"That's just superstition," Garion scoffed. "I've never seen any fortune-teller who could even tell for sure if it's going to rain tomorrow. One of them came to Faldor's farm once and told Durnik that he was going to die twice. Isn't that silly?"
"The augurers and soothsayers of Cherek have more skill," Barak said, his face still sunk in melancholy. "The Doom they saw for me was always the same - I'm going to turn into a beast. I've had dozens of them tell me the same thing. And now it's happened. I've been sitting here for two days now, watching. The hair on my body's getting longer, and my teeth are starting to get pointed."
"You're imagining things," Garion said. "You look exactly the same to me as you always have."
"You're a kind boy, Garion," Barak said. "I know you're just trying to make me feel better, but I've got eyes of my own. I know that my teeth are getting pointed and my body's starting to grow fur. It won't be long until Anheg has to chain me up in his dungeon so I won't be able to hurt anyone, or I'll have to run off into the mountains and live with the trolls."
"Nonsense," Garion insisted.
"Tell me what you saw the other day," Barak pleaded. "What did I look like when I changed into a beast?"
"All I saw were stars from banging my head on that tree," Garion said again, trying to make it sound true.
"I just want to know what kind of beast I'm turning into," Barak said, his voice thick with self pity. "Am I going to be a wolf or a bear or some kind of monster no one even has a name for?"
"Don't you remember anything at all about what happened?" Garion asked carefully, trying to blot the strange double image of Barak and the bear out of his memory.
"Nothing," Barak said. "I heard you shouting, and the next thing I remember was the boar lying dead at my feet and you lying under that tree with his blood all over you. I could feel the beast in me, though. I could even smell him."
"All you smelled was the boar," Garion said, "and all that happened was that you lost your head in all the excitement."
"Berserk, you mean?" Barak said, looking up hopefully. Then he shook his head. "No, Garion. I've been berserk before. It doesn't feel at all the same. This was completely different." He sighed.
"You're not turning into a beast," Garion insisted.
"I know what I know," Barak said stubbornly.
And then Lady Merel, Barak's wife, stepped into the room through the still-open door. "I see that my Lord is recovering his wits," she said.
"Leave me alone, Merel," Barak said. "I'm not in the mood for these games of yours."
"Games, my Lord?" she said innocently. "I'm simply concerned about my duties. If my Lord is unwell, I'm obliged to care for him. That's a wife's right, isn't it?"
"Quit worrying so much about rights and duties, Merel," Barak said. "Just go away and leave me alone."
"My Lord was quite insistent about certain rights and duties on the night of his return to Val Alorn," she said. "Not even the locked door of my bedchamber was

enough to curb his insistence."
"All right," Barak said, Hushing slightly. "I'm sorry about that. I hoped that things might have changed between us. I was wrong. I won't bother you again."
"Bother, my Lord?" she said. "A duty is not a bother. A good wife is obliged to submit whenever her husband requires it of her - no matter how drunk or brutal he may be when he comes to her bed. No one will ever be able to accuse me of laxity in that regard."
"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Barak accused.
"Enjoying what, my Lord?" Her voice was light, but there was a cutting edge to it.
"What do you want, Merel?" Barak demanded bluntly.
"I want to serve my Lord in his illness," she said. "I want to care for him and watch the progress of his disease-each symptom as it appears."
"Do you hate me that much?" Barak asked with heavy contempt. "Be careful, Merel. I might take it into my head to insist that you stay with me. How would you like that? How would you like to be locked in this room with a raging beast?"
"If you grow unmanageable, my Lord, I can always have you chained to the wall," she suggested, meeting his enraged glare with cool unconcern.
"Barak," Garion said uncomfortably, "I have to talk to you."
"Not now, Garion," Barak snapped.
"It's important. There's a spy in the palace."
"A spy-",
"A man in a green cloak," Garion said. "I've seen him several times."
"Many men wear green cloaks," Lady Merel said.
"Stay out of this, Merel," Barak said. He turned to Garion. "What makes you think he's a spy?"
"I saw him again this morning," Garion said, "and I followed him. He was sneaking along a corridor that nobody seems to use. It passes above the hall where the kings are meeting with Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol. He could hear every word they said."
"How do you know what he could hear?" Merel asked, her eyes narrowing.
"I was up there too," Garion said. "I hid not far from him, and I could hear them myself - almost as if I were in the same room with them."
"What does he look like?" Barak asked.
"He has sandy-colored hair," Garion said, "and a beard and, as I said, he wears a green cloak. I saw him the day we went down to look at your ship. He was going into a tavern with a Murgo."
"There aren't any Murgos in Val Alorn," Merel said.
"There's one," Garion said. "I've seen him before. I know who he is." He had to move around the subject carefully. The compulsion not to speak about his dark-robed enemy was as strong as always. Even the hint he had given made his tongue seem stiff and his lips numb.
"Who is he?" Barak demanded.
Garion ignored the question. "And then on the day of the boar hunt I saw him in the forest."
"The Murgo?" Barak asked.
"No. The man in the green cloak. He met some other men there. They talked for a while not far from where I was waiting for the boar to come. They didn't see me."
"`There's nothing suspicious about that," Barak said. "A man can meet with his friends anywhere he likes."
"I don't think they were friends exactly," Garion said. "The one in the green cloak called one of the other men `my Lord,' and that one was giving him orders to get close enough so that he could hear what Mister Wolf and the kings were saying."
"That's more serious," Barak said, seeming to forget his melancholy. "Did they say anything else?"
"The flaxen-haired man wanted to know about us," Garion said. "You, me, Durnik, Silk - all of us."
"Flaxen-colored hair?" Merel asked quickly.

"The one he called `my Lord,' " Garion explained. "He seemed to know about us. He even knew about me."
"Long, pale-colored hair?" Merel demanded. "No beard? A little older than Barak?"
"It couldn't be him," Barak said. "Anheg banished him on pain of death."
"You're a child, Barak," she said. "He'd ignore that if it suited him. I think we'd better tell Anheg about this."
"Do you know him?" Garion asked. "Some of the things he said about Barak weren't very polite."
"I can imagine," Merel said ironically. "Barak was one of those who said that he ought to have his head removed."
Barak was already pulling on his mail shirt.
"Fix your hair," Merel told him in a tone that oddly had no hint of her former rancor in it. "You look like a haystack."
"I can't stop to fool with it now," Barak said impatiently. "Come along, both of you. We'll go to Anheg at once."
There was no time for any further questions, since Garion and Merel almost had to run to keep up with Barak. They swept through the great hall, and startled warriors scrambled out of their way after one look at Barak's face.
"My Lord Barak," one of the guards at the door of the council hall greeted the huge man.
"One side," Barak commanded and flung open the door with a crash. King Anheg looked up, startled at the sudden interruption.
"Welcome, cousin," he began.
"Treason, Anheg!" Barak roared. "The Earl of Jarvik has broken his banishment and set spies on you in your own palace."
"Jarvik?" Anheg said. "He wouldn't dare."
"He dared, all right," Barak said. "He's been seen not far from Val Alorn, and some of his plotting has been overheard."
"Who is this Jarvik?" the Rivan Warder asked.
"An earl I banished last year," Anheg said. "One of his men was stopped, and we found a message on him. The message was to a Murgo in Sendaria, and it gave the details of one of our most secret councils. Jarvik tried to deny that the message was his, even though it had his own seal on it and his strongroom bulged with red gold from the mines of Cthol Murgos. I'd have had his head on a pole, but his wife's a kinswoman of mine and she begged for his life. I banished him to one of his estates on the west coast instead." He looked at Barak. "How did you find out about this?" he asked. "Last I heard, you'd locked yourself in your room and wouldn't talk to anybody."
"My husband's words are true, Anheg," Lady Merel said in a voice that rang with challenge.
"I don't doubt him, Merel," Anheg said, looking at her with a faintly surprised expression. "I just wanted to know how he learned about Jarvik, that's all."
"This boy from Sendaria saw him," Merel said, "and heard him talk to his spy. I heard the boy's story myself, and I stand behind what my husband said, if anyone here dares to doubt him."
"Garion?" Aunt Pol said, startled.
"May I suggest that we hear from the lad?" Cho-Hag of the Algars said quietly. "A nobleman with a history of friendship for the Murgos who chooses this exact moment to break his banishment concerns us all, I think."
"Tell them what you told Merel and me, Garion," Barak ordered, pushing Garion forward.
"Your Majesty," Garion said, bowing awkwardly, "I've seen a man in a green cloak hiding here in your palace several times since we came here. He creeps along the passageways and takes a lot of trouble not to be seen. I saw him the first night we were here, and the next day I saw him going into a tavern in the city with a Murgo. Barak says there aren't any Murgos in Cherek, but I know that the man he was with was a Murgo."
"How do you know?" Anheg asked shrewdly.
Garion looked at him helplessly, unable to say Asharak's name.

"Well, boy?" King Rhodar asked.
Garion struggled with the words, but nothing would come out.
"Maybe you know this Murgo?" Silk suggested.
Garion nodded, relieved that someone could help him.
"You wouldn't know many Murgos," Silk said, rubbing his nose with one finger.
"Was it the one we met in Darine, perhaps - and later in Muros? The one known as Asharak?"
Garion nodded again.
"Why didn't you tell us?" Barak asked.
"I - I couldn't," Garion stammered.
"Couldn't?"
"The words wouldn't come out," Garion said. "I don't know why, but I've never been able to talk about him."
"Then you've seen him before?" Silk said.
"Yes," Garion said.
"And you've never told anybody?"
"No."
Silk glanced quickly at Aunt Pol. "Is this the sort of thing you might know more about than we would, Polgara?" he asked.
She nodded slowly. "It's possible to do it," she said. "It's never been very reliable, so I don't bother with it myself. It is possible, however." Her expression grew grim.
"The Grolims think it's impressive," Mister Wolf said. "Grolims are easily impressed."
"Come with me, Garion," Aunt Pol said.
"Not yet," Wolf said.
"This is important," she said, her face hardening.
"You can do it later," he said. "Let's hear the rest of his story first. The damage has already been done. Go ahead, Garion. What else did you see?"
Garion took a deep breath. "All right," he said, relieved to be talking to the old man instead of the kings. "I saw the man in the green cloak again that day we all went hunting. He met in the forest with a yellowhaired man who doesn't wear a beard. They talked for a while, and I could hear what they were saying. The yellow-haired man wanted to know what all of you were saying in this hall."
"You should have come to me immediately," King Anheg said.
"Anyway," Garion went on, "I had that fight with the wild boar. I hit my head against a tree and was stunned. I didn't remember what I'd seen until this morning. After King Fulrach called Durnik here, I went exploring. I was in a part of the palace where the roof is all fallen in, and I found some footprints. I followed them, and then after a while I saw the man in the green cloak again. That was when I remembered all this. I followed him, and he went along a corridor that passes somewhere over the top of this hall. He hid up there and listened to what you were saying."
"How much do you think he could hear, Garion?" King Cho-Hag asked.
"You were talking about somebody called the Apostate," Garion said, "and you were wondering if he could use some power of some kind to awaken an enemy who's been asleep for a long time. Some of you thought you ought to warn the Arends and the Tolnedrans, but Mister Wolf didn't think so. And Durnik talked about how the men of Sendaria would fight if the Angaraks came."
They appeared startled.
"I was hiding not far from the man in the green cloak," Garion said. "I'm sure he could hear everything that I could. Then some soldiers came, and the man ran away. That's when I decided that I ought to tell Barak about all this."
"Up there," Silk said, standing near one of the walls and pointing at a corner of the ceiling of the hall. "The mortar's crumbled away. The sound of our voices carries right up through the cracks between the stones into the upper corridor."
"This is a valuable boy you've brought with you, Lady Polgara," I King Rhodar said gravely. "If he's looking for a profession, I think I might find a place for him. Gathering information is a rewarding occupation, and he seems to have certain natural gifts along those lines."

"He has some other gifts as well," Aunt Pol said. "He seems to be very good at turning up in places where he's not supposed to be."
"Don't be too hard on the boy, Polgara," King Anheg said. "He's done us a service that we may never be able to repay."
Garion bowed again and retreated from Aunt Pol's steady gaze.
"Cousin," Anheg said then to Barak, "it seems that we have an unwelcome visitor somewhere in the palace. I think I'd like to have a little talk with this lurker in the green cloak."
"I'll take a few men," Barak said grimly. "We'll turn your palace upside down and shake it and see what falls out."
"I'd like to have him more or less intact," Anheg cautioned.
"Of course," Barak said.
"Not too intact, however. As long as he's still able to talk, he'll serve our purposes."
Barak grinned. "I'll make sure that he's talkative when I bring him to you, cousin," he said.
A bleak answering grin touched Anheg's face, and Barak started toward the door.
Then Anheg turned to Barak's wife. "I'd like to thank you also, Lady Merel," he said. "I'm sure you had a significant part in bringing this to us."
"I don't need thanks, your Majesty," she said. "It was my duty."
Anheg sighed. "Must it always be duty, Merel?" he asked sadly.
"What else is there?" she asked.
"A very great deal, actually," the king said, "but you're going to have to find that out for yourself."
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "come here."
"Yes, ma'am," Garion said and went to her a little nervously.
"Don't be silly, dear," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you." She put her fingertips lightly to his forehead.
"Well?" Mister Wolf asked.
"It's there," she said. "It's very light, or I'd have noticed it before. I'm sorry, Father."
"Let's see," Wolf said. He came over and also touched Garion's heart with his hand. "It's not serious," he said.
"It could have been," Aunt Pol said. "And it was my responsibility to see that something like this didn't happen."
"Don't flog yourself about it, Pol," Wolf said. "That's very unbecoming. Just get rid of it."
"What's the matter?" Garion asked, alarmed.
"It's nothing to worry about, dear," Aunt Pol said. She took his right hand and touched it for a moment to the white lock at her brow. Garion felt a surge, a welter of confused impressions, and then a tingling wrench behind his ears. A sudden dizziness swept over him, and he would have fallen if Aunt Pol had not caught him.
"Who is the Murgo?" she asked, looking into his eyes.
"His name is Asharak," Garion said promptly.
"How long have you known him?"
"All my life. He used to come to Faldor's farm and watch me when I was little."
"That's enough for now, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "Let him rest a little first. I'll fix something to keep it from happening again."
"Is the boy ill?" King Cho-Hag asked.
"It's not exactly an illness, Cho-Hag," Mister Wolf said. "It's a little hard to explain. It's cleared up now, though."
"I want you to go to your room, Garion," Aunt Pol said, still holding him by the shoulders. "Are you steady enough on your feet to get there by yourself?"
"I'm all right," he said, still feeling a little light-headed.
"No side trips and no more exploring," she said firmly.
"No, ma'am."
"When you get there, lie down. I want you to think back and remember every single time you've seen this Murgo - what he did, what he said."
"He never spoke to me," Garion said. "He just watched."

"I'll be along in a little while," she went on, "and I'll want you to tell me everything you know about him. It's important, Garion, so concentrate as hard as you can."
"All right, Aunt Pol," he said.
Then she kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Run along now, dear," she said.
Feeling strangely light-headed, Garion went to the door and out into the corridor.
He passed through the great hall where Anheg's warriors were belting on swords and picking up vicious-looking battle-axes in preparation for the search of the palace. Still bemused, he went through without stopping.
Part of his mind seemed half asleep, but that secret, inner part was wide awake. The dry voice observed that something significant had just happened. The powerful compulsion not to speak about Asharak was obviously gone. Aunt Pol had somehow pulled it out of his mind entirely. His feeling about that was oddly ambiguous. That strange relationship between himself and dark-robed, silent Asharak had always been intensely private, and now it was gone. He felt vaguely empty and somehow violated. He sighed and went up the broad stairway toward his room.
There were a half dozen warriors in the hallway outside his room, probably part of Barak's search for the man in the green cloak. Garion stopped. Something was wrong, and he shook off his half daze. This pan of the palace was much too populated to make it very likely that the spy would be hiding here. His heart began racing, and step by step he began to back away toward the top of the stairs he had just climbed. The warriors looked like any other Chereks in the palace-bearded, dressed in helmets, mail shirts, and furs, but something didn't seem exactly right.
A bulky man in a dark, hooded cloak stepped through the doorway of Garion's room into the corridor. It was Asharak. The Murgo was about to say something, but then his eyes fell on Garion. "Ah," he said softly. His dark eyes gleamed in his scarred face. "I've been looking for you, Garion," he said in that same soft voice. "Come here, boy."
Garion felt a tentative tug at his mind that seemed to slip away as if it somehow could not get a sure grip. He shook his head mutely and continued to back away.
"Come along now," Asharak said. "We've known each other far too long for this. Do as I say. You know that you must."
The tug became a powerful grasp that again slipped away. "Come here, Garion!" Asharak commanded harshly. Garion kept backing away, step by step.
"No," he said. Asharak's eyes blazed, and he drew himself up angrily.
This time it was not a tug or a grasp, but a blow. Garion could feel the force of it even as it seemed somehow to miss or be deflected. Asharak's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed. "Who did this?" he demanded. "Polgara? Belgarath? It won't do any good, Garion. I had you once, and I can take you again any time I want to. You're not strong enough to refuse me."
Garion looked at his enemy and answered out of some need for defiance. "Maybe I'm not," he said, "but I think you'll have to catch me first."
Asharak turned quickly to his warriors. "That's the boy I want," he barked sharply. "Take him!"
Smoothly, almost as if it were done without thought, one of the warriors raised his bow and leveled an arrow directly at Garion. Asharak swung his arm quickly and knocked the bow aside just as the steelpointed shaft was loosed. The arrow sang in the air and clattered against the stones of the wall a few feet to Garion's left.
"Alive, idiot," Asharak snarled and struck the bowman a crushing blow to the side of the head. The bowman fell twitching to the stone floor.
Garion spun, dashed back to the stairs and plunged down three steps at a time. He didn't bother to look back. The sound of heavy feet told him that Asharak and his men were after him. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned sharply to the left and fled down a long, dark passageway that led back into the maze of Anheg's palace.

Chapter Eighteen

THERE WERE WARRIORS everywhere, and the sounds of fighting. In the first instant of his flight, Garion's plan had been simple. All he had to do was to find some of Barak's warriors, and he would be safe. But there were other warriors in the palace as well. The Earl of Jarvik had led a small army into the palace by way of the ruined wings to the south, and fighting raged in the corridors.

Garion quickly realized that there was no way he could distinguish friend from enemy. To him, one Cherek warrior looked the same as another. Unless he could find Barak or someone else he recognized, he did not dare reveal himself to any of them. The frustrating knowledge that he was running from friends as well as enemies added to his fright. It was altogether possible - even quite likely - that he would run from Barak's men directly into the arms of Jarvik's.

The most logical thing to do would be to go directly back to the council hall, but in his haste to escape from Asharak, he had run down so many dim passageways and turned so many corners that he had no idea where he was or how to get back to the familiar parts of the palace. His headlong flight was dangerous. Asharak or his men could wait around any corner to seize him, and he knew that the Murgo could quickly re-establish that strange bond between them that Aunt Pol had shattered with her touch. It was that which had to be avoided at any cost. Once Asharak had him again, he would never let go. The only alternative to him was to find some place to hide.

He dodged into another narrow passageway and stopped, panting and with his back pressed tightly against the stones of the wall. Dimly, at the far end of this hallway, he could see a narrow flight of worn stone steps twisting upward in the flickering light of a single torch. He quickly reasoned that the higher he went, the less likely he would be to encounter anyone. The fighting would most likely be concentrated on the lower floors. He took a deep breath and went swiftly to the foot of the stairs.

Halfway up he saw the flaw in his plan. There were no side passages on the stairs, no way to escape and no place to hide. He had to get to the top quickly or chance discovery and capture, or even worse.

"Boy!" a shout came from below.

Garion looked quickly over his shoulder. A grim-faced Cherek in mail and helmet was coming up the stairs behind him, his sword drawn. Garion started to run, stumbling up the stairs.

There was another shout from above, and Garion froze. The warrior at the top was as grim as the one below and wielded a cruel-looking axe. He was trapped between them. Garion shrank back against the stones, fumbling for his dagger, though he knew it would be of little use. Then the two warriors saw each other. With ringing shouts they both charged. The one with the sword rushed up past Garion while the one with the axe lunged down.

The axe swung wide, missed and clashed a shower of sparks from the stones of the wall. The sword was more true. With his hair standing on end in horror, Garion saw it slide through the downward-plunging body of the axeman. The axe fell clattering down the stairs, and the axeman, still falling on top of his opponent, pulled a broad dagger from its sheath at his hip and drove it into the chest of his enemy. The impact as the two men came together tore them from their feet, and they tumbled, still grappled together down the stairs, their daggers flashing as each man struck again and again.

In helpless horror Garion watched as they rolled and crashed past him, their daggers sinking into each other with sickening sounds and blood spurting from their wounds like red fountains.

Garion retched once, clenched his teeth tightly, and ran up the stairs, trying to close his ears to the awful sounds coming from below as the two dying men continued their horrid work on each other.

He no longer even considered stealth; he simply ran-fleeing more from that hideous encounter on the stairs than from Asharak or the Earl of Jarvik. At last, after how long he could not have said, gasping and winded, he plunged

through the partially open door of a dusty, unused chamber. He pushed the door shut and stood trembling with his back against it.

There was a broad, sagging bed against one wall of the room and a small window set high in the same wall. Two broken chairs leaned wearily in corners and an empty chest, its lid open, in a third, and that was all. The chamber was at least a place out of the corridors where savage men were killing each other, but Garion quickly realized that the seeming safety here was an illusion. If anyone opened this door, he would be trapped. Desperately he began to look around the dusty room.

Hanging on the bare wall across from the bed were some drapes; and thinking that they might conceal some closet or adjoining chamber, Garion crossed the room and pulled them aside. There was an opening behind the drapes, though it did not lead into another room but instead into a dark, narrow hall. He peered into the passageway, but the darkness was so total that he could only see a short distance into it. He shuddered at the thought of groping through that blackness with armed men pounding along at his heels.

He glanced up at the single window and then dragged the heavy chest across the room to stand on so that he could see out. Perhaps he might be able to see something from the window that would give him some idea of his location. He climbed up on the chest, stood on his tiptoes and looked out.

Towers loomed here and there amid the long slate roofs of the endless galleries and halls of King Anheg's palace. It was hopeless. He saw nothing that he could recognize. He turned back toward the chamber and was about to jump down from the chest when he stopped suddenly. There, clearly in the dust which lay heavily on the floor, were his foot punts. He hopped quickly down and grabbed up the bolster from the long unused bed. He spread it out on the floor and dragged it around the room, erasing the footprints. He knew that he could not completely conceal the fact that someone had been in the room, but he could obliterate the footprints which, because of their size, would immediately make it obvious to Asharak or any of his men that whoever had been i hiding here was not yet full-grown. When he finished, he tossed the bolster back on the bed. The job wasn't perfect, but at least it was better than it had been.

Then there was a shout in the corridor outside and the ring of steel on steel. Garion took a deep breath and plunged into the dark passageway behind the drapes.

He had gone no more than a few feet when the darkness in the narrow passage become absolute. His skin crawled at the touch of cobwebs on his face, and the dust of years rose chokingly from the uneven floor. At first he moved quite rapidly, wanting more than anything to put as much distance between himself and the fighting in the corridor as possible, but then he stumbled, and for one heart-stopping instant it seemed that he would fall. The picture of a steep stairway dropping down into the blackness flashed through his mind, and he realized that at his present pace there would be no possible way to catch himself. He began to move more cautiously, one hand on the stones of the wall and the other in front of his face to ward off the cobwebs which hung thickly from the low ceiling.

There was no sense of time in the dark, and it seemed to Garion that he had been groping for hours in this dark hallway that appeared to go on forever. Then, despite his care, he ran full into a rough stone wall. He felt a moment of panic. Did the passageway end here? Was it a trap?

Then, flickering at one corner of his vision, he saw dim light. The passageway did not end, but rather made a sharp turn to the right. There seemed to be a light at the far end, and Garion gratefully followed it.

As the light grew stronger, he moved more rapidly, and soon he reached the spot that was the source of the light. It was a narrow slot low in the wall. Garion knelt on the dusty stones and peered out.

The hall below was enormous, and a great fire burned in a pit in the center with the smoke rising to the openings in the vaulted roof which lofted even above the place where Garion was. Though it looked much different from up here, he immediately recognized King Anheg's throne room. As he looked down, he saw the

gross shape of King Rhodar and the smaller form of King Cho-Hag with the ever-present Hettar standing behind him. Some distance from the thrones, King Fulrach stood in conversation with Mister Wolf, and nearby was Aunt Pol. Barak's wife was talking with Queen Islena, and Queen Porenn and Queen Silar stood not far from them. Silk paced the floor nervously, glancing now and then at the heavily guarded doors. Garion felt a surge of relief. He was safe.

He was about to call down to them when the great door banged open, and King Anheg, mail-shined and with his sword in his hand, strode into the hall, closely followed by Barak and the Rivan Warder, holding between them the struggling form of the flaxen-haired man Garion had seen in the forest on the day of the boar hunt.

"This treason will cost you dearly, Jarvik," Anheg said grimly over his shoulder as he strode toward his throne.

"Is it over, then?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Soon, Polgara," Anheg said. "My men are chasing the last of Jarvik's brigands in the furthest reaches of the palace. If we hadn't been warned, it might have gone quite differently, though."

Garion, his shout still hovering just behind his lips, decided at the last instant to stay silent for a few more moments.

King Anheg sheathed his sword and took his place on his throne.

"We'll talk for a bit, Jarvik," he said, "before what must be done is done."

The flaxen-haired man gave up his hopeless struggle against Barak and the almost equally powerful Brand. "I don't have anything to say, Anheg," he said defiantly. "If the luck had gone differently, I'd be sitting on your throne right now. I took my chance, and that's the end of it.

"Not quite," Anheg said. "I want the details. You might as well tell me. One way or another, you're going to talk."

"Do your worst," Jarvik sneered. "I'll bite out my own tongue before I tell you anything."

"We'll see about that," Anheg said grimly.

"That won't be necessary, Anheg," Aunt Pol said, walking slowly toward the captive. "There's an easier way to persuade him."

"I'm not going to say anything," Jarvik told her. "I'm a warrior and I'm not afraid of you, witch-woman."

"You're a greater fool than I thought, Lord Jarvik," Mister Wolf said. "Would you rather I did it, Pol?"

"I can manage, Father," she said, not taking her eyes off Jarvik.

"Carefully," the old man cautioned. "Sometimes you go to extremes. Just a little touch is enough."

"I know what I'm doing, Old Wolf," she said tartly. She stared full into the captive's eyes.

Garion, still hidden, held his breath.

The Earl of Jarvik began to sweat and tried desperately to pull his eyes away from Aunt Pol's gaze, but it was hopeless. Her will commanded him, locking his eyes. He trembled, and his face grew pale. She made no move, no gesture, but merely stood before him, her eyes burning into his brain.

And then, after a moment, he screamed. Then he screamed again and collapsed, his weight sagging down in the hands of the two men who held him.

"Take it away," he whimpered, shuddering uncontrollably. "I'll talk, but please take it away."

Silk, now lounging near Anheg's throne, looked at Hettar. "I wonder what he saw," he said.

"I think it might be better not to know," Hettar replied.

Queen Islena had watched intently as if hoping to gain some hint of how the trick was done. She winced visibly when Jarvik screamed, pulling her eyes away.

"All right, Jarvik," Anheg said, his tone strangely subdued. "Begin at the beginning. I want it all."

"It was a little thing at first," Jarvik said in a shaking voice. "There didn't seem to be any harm in it."

"There never does," Brand said.

The Earl of Jarvik drew in a deep breath, glanced once at Aunt Pol and shuddered again. Then he straightened. "It started about two years ago," he said. "I'd sailed to Kotu in Drasnia, and I met a Nadrak merchant named Grashor there. He seemed to be a good enough fellow and after we'd gotten to know each other he asked me if I'd be interested in a profitable venture. I told him that I was an earl and not a common tradesman, but he persisted. He said he was nervous about the pirates who live on the islands in the Gulf of Cherek and an earl's ship manned by armed warnors was not likely to be attacked. His cargo was a single chest - not very large. I think it was some jewels he'd managed to smuggle past the customs houses in Boktor, and he wanted them delivered to Darine in Sendaria. I said that I wasn't really interested, but then he opened his purse and poured out gold. The gold was bright red, I remember, and I couldn't seem to take my eyes off it. I did need money - who doesn't after all?-and I really couldn't see any dishonor in doing what he asked.

"Anyway, I carried him and his cargo to Darine and met his associate - a Murgo named Asharak."

Garion started at the name, and he heard Silk's low whistle of surprise.

"As we'd agreed," Jarvik continued, "Asharak paid me a sum equal to what Grashor had given me, and I came away from the affair with a whole pouch of gold. Asharak told me that I'd done them a great favor and that if I ever needed more gold, he'd be happy to find ways for me to earn it.

"I now had more gold than I'd ever had at one time before, but it somehow seemed that it wasn't enough. For some reason I felt that I needed more."

"It's the nature of Angarak gold," Mister Wolf said. "It calls to its own. The more one has, the more it comes to possess him. That's why Murgos are so lavish with it. Asharak wasn't buying your services, Jarvik; he was buying your soul."

Jarvik nodded, his face gloomy. "At any rate," he continued, "it wasn't long before I found an excuse to sail to Darine again. Asharak told me that since Murgos are forbidden to enter Cherek, he'd developed a great curiosity about us and our kingdom. He asked me many questions and he gave me gold for every answer. It seemed to me to be a foolish way to spend money, but I gave him the answers and took his gold. When I came back to Cherek, I had another pouch full. I went to Jarviksholm and put the new gold with that I already had. I saw that I was a rich man, and I still hadn't done anything dishonorable. But now it seemed that there weren't enough hours in the day. I spent all my time locked in my strongroom, counting my gold over and over, polishing it until it gleamed red as blood and filling my ears with the sound of its tinkling.

But after a while it seemed that I didn't really have very much, and so I went back to Asharak. He said he was still curious about Cherek and that he'd like to know Anheg's mind. He told me that he'd give me as much gold as I already had if I sent him word of what was said in the high councils here in the palace for a year. At first I said no, because I knew it would be dishonorable; but then he showed me the gold, and I couldn't say no any more."

From where he watched Garion could see the expressions of those in the hall below. Their faces had a curious mingling of pity and contempt as Jarvik's story continued.

"It was then, Anheg," he said, "that your men captured one of my messengers, and I was banished to Jarviksholm. At first I didn't mind, " because I could still play with my gold. But again it wasn't long before it seemed that I didn't have enough. I sent a fast ship through the Bore to Darine with a message to Asharak begging him to find something else for me to do to earn more gold. When the ship came back, Asharak was aboard her, and we sat down and talked about what I could do to increase my hoard."

"You're doubly a traitor then, Jarvik," Anheg said in a voice that was almost sad. "You've betrayed me and you've broken the oldest law in Cherek. No Angarak has set foot on Cherek soil since the days of Bear-shoulders himself."

Jarvik shrugged. "I didn't really care by then," he said. "Asharak had a plan, and it seemed like a good one to me. If we could get through the city a few at a time, we could hide an army in the ruined southern wings of the palace. With surprise and a bit of luck we could kill Anheg and the other Alorn Kings, and I

could take the throne of Cherek and maybe of all Aloria as well."
"And what was Asharak's price?" Mister Wolf demanded, his eyes narrowing. "What did he want in return for making you king?"
"A thing so small that I laughed when he told me what he wanted," Jarvik said. "But he said that he'd not only give me the crown but a roomful of gold if I'd get it for him."
"What was it?" Wolf repeated.
"He said that there was a boy - about fourteen - in the party of King Fulrach of Sendaria. He told me that as soon as that boy was delivered to him, he'd give me more gold than I could count and the throne of Cherek as well."
King Fulrach looked startled.
"The boy Garion?" he asked. "Why would Asharak want him?"
Aunt Pol's single frightened gasp carried even up to where Garion was concealed.

"Durnik!" she said in a ringing voice, but Durnik was already on his feet and racing toward the door with Silk close behind him. Aunt Pol spun with eyes blazing and the white lock at her brow almost incandescent in the midnight of her hair. The Earl of Jarvik flinched as her glare fell on him.
"If anything's happened to the boy, Jarvik, men will tremble at the memory of your fate for a thousand years," she told him.
It had gone far enough. Garion was ashamed and a little frightened by the fury of Aunt Pol's reaction.
"I'm all right, Aunt Pol," he called down to her through the narrow slot in the wall. "I'm up here."
"Garion?" She looked up, trying to see him. "Where are you?"
"Up here near the ceiling," he said, "behind the wall."
"How did you get up there?"
"I don't know. Some men were chasing me, and I ran. This is where I ended up."
"Come down here at once."
"I don't know how, Aunt Pol," he said. "I ran so far and took so many turns that I don't know how to get back. I'm lost."
"All right," she said, regaining her composure. "Stay where you are. We'll think of a way to get you down."
"I hope so," he said.

Chapter Nineteen

"Well it has to come out someplace," King Anheg said, squinting up toward the spot where Garion waited nervously. "All he has to do is follow it."
"And walk directly into the arms of Asharak the Murgo?" Aunt Pol asked. "He's better off staying where he is."
"Asharak is fleeing for his life," Anheg said. "He's no-where in the palace."
"As I recall, he's not even supposed to be in the kingdom," she said pointedly.
"All right Pol," Mister Wolf said. He called up, "Garion, which way does the passage run?"
"It seems to go on toward the back of the hall where the thrones are," Garion answered. "I can't tell for sure if it turns off or not. It's pretty dark up here."
"We'll pass you up a couple of torches," Wolf said. "Set one at the spot where you are now and then go on down the passage with the other. As long as you can see the first one, you'll be going in a straight line."
"Very clever," Silk said. "I wish I were seven thousand years old so I could solve problems so easily."
Wolf let that pass.
"I still think the safest way would be to get some ladders and break a hole in the wall," Barak said.
King Anheg looked pained. "Couldn't we try Belgarath's suggestion first?" he asked.
Barak shrugged. "You're the king."
"Thanks," Anheg said dryly.

A warrior fetched a long pole and two torches were passed up to Garion.
"If the line of the passageway holds straight," Anheg said, "he should come out somewhere in the royal apartments."
"Interesting," King Rhodar said with one raised eyebrow. "It would be most enlightening to know if the passage led to the royal chambers or from them."
"It's entirely possible that the passageway is just some long-forgotten escape route," Anheg said in an injured tone. "Our history, after all, has not been all that peaceful. There's no need to expect the worst, is there?"
"Of course not," King Rhodar said blandly, "no need at all."
Garion set one of the torches beside the slot in the wall and followed the dusty passageway, looking back often to be sure that the torch was still in plain sight. Eventually he came to a narrow door which opened into the back of an empty closet. The closet was attached to a splendid-looking bedchamber, and outside there was a broad, well-lighted corridor.
Several warriors were coming down the corridor, and Garion recognized Torvik the huntsman among them. "Here I am", he said, stepping out with a surge of relief.
"You've been busy, haven't you?" Torvik said with a grin.
"It wasn't my idea," Garion said.
"Let's get you back to King Anheg," Torvik said. "The lady, your Aunt, seemed concerned about you."
"She's angry with me, I suppose," Garion said, falling into step beside the broad-shouldered man.
"More than likely," Torvik said. "Women are almost alwasy angry with us for one reason or another. It's one of the things you'll have to get used to as you get older."
Aunt Pol was waiting at the door to the throne room. There were no reproaches - not yet, at any rate. For one brief moment she clasped him fiercely to her and then looked at him gravely. "We've been waiting for you dear," she said almost calmly; then she led him to where the others waited.
"In my grandmother's quarters, you say?" Anheg was saying to Torvik. "What an astonishing thing. I remember her as a crotchety old lady who walked with a cane."
"No one is born old, Anheg," King Rhodar said with a sly look.
"I'm sure there are many explanations, Anheg," Queen Porenn said. "My husband is just teasing you."
"One of the men looked into the passage, your Majesty," Torvik said tactfully. "The dust is very thick. It's possible that it hasn't been used in centuries."
"What an astonishing thing," Anheg said again.
The matter was then delicately allowed to drop, though King Rhodar's sly expression spoke volumes.
The Earl of Seline coughed politely. "I think young Garion here may have a story for us," he said.
"I expect he has," Aunt Pol said, turning toward Garion. "I seem to remember telling you to stay in your room."
"Asharak was in my room," Garion said, "and he had warriors with him. He tried to make me with him. When I wouldn't, he said he'd had me once and could get me again. I didn't understand wxactly what he meant, but I told him that he'd have to catch me first. Then I ran."
Brand, the Rivan Warder, chuckled. "I don't see how you can find much fault with that, Polgara," he said. "I think if I found a Grolim priest in my room, I'd probably run away too."
"You're sure it was Asharak?" Silk asked.
Garion nodded. "I've known him for a long time," he said. "All my life, I guess. And he knew me. He called me by name."
"I think I'd like to have a long talk with this Asharak," Anheg said. "I want to ask him some questions about all the mischief he's been stirring up in my kingdom."
"I doubt if you'll find him, Anheg," Mister Wolf said. "He seems to be more than just a Grolim Priest. I touched his mind once - in Muros. It's not an ordinary mind."

"I'll amuse myself with the search for him," Anheg said with a bleak expression. "Not even a Grolim can walk on water so I believe I'll just seal off all the ports in Cherek and then put my warriors to searching the mountains and forests for him. They get fat and troublesome in the wintertime anyway, and it'll give them something to do."
"Driving fat, troublesome warriors into the snow in the dead of winter isn't going to make you a popular king, Anheg," Rhodar observed.
"Offer a reward," Silk suggested. "That way you get the job done and stay popular as well."
"That's an idea," Anheg said. "What kind of reward would you suggest, Prince Kheldar?"
"Promise to equal the weight of Asharak's head in gold," Silk said. "That should lure the fattest warrior away from the dice cup and the ale keg."
Anheg winced.
"He's a Grolim," Silk said. "They probably won't find him, but they'll take the kingdom apart looking. Your gold is safe, your warriors get a bit of exercise, you get a reputation for generosity, and, with every man in Cherek looking for him with an axe, Asharak's going to be much to busy hiding to stir up any more mischief. A man whose head is more valuable to others than it is to himself has little time for foolishness."
"Prince Kheldar," Anheg said gravely, "you are a devious man."
"I try, King Anheg," Silk said with an ironic bow.
"I don't suppose you'd care to come to work for me?" the King of Cherek offered.
"Anheg!" Rhodar protested.
Silk sighed. "Blood, King Anheg," he said. "I'm committed to my uncle by our bonds of kinship. I'd be interested to hear your offer, though. It might help in future negotiations about compensation for my services."
Queen Porenn's laughter was like a small silver bell, and King Rhodar's face became tragic. "You see," he said. "I'm absolutely surrounded by traitors. What's a poor fat old man to do?"
A grim-looking warrior entered the hall and marched up to Anheg. "It's done, King," he said. "Do you want to look at his head?"
"No," Anheg said shortly.
"Should we put it on a pole near the harbor?" The warrior asked.
"No," Anheg said. "Jarvik was a brave man once and my kinsman by marriage. Have him delivered to his wife for proper burial."
The warrior bowed and left the hall.
"This problem of the Grolim, Asharak, interests me," Queen Islena said to Aunt Pol. "Might we not between us, Lady Polgara, devise a way to locate him?" Her expression had a certain quality of self-importance to it.
Mister Wolf spoke quickly before Aunt Pol could answer. "Bravely spoken, Islena," he said. "But we couldn't allow the Queen of Cherek to take such a risk. I'm sure your skills are formidable, but such a search opens the mind completely. If Asharak felt you looking for him he'd retaliate instantly. Polgara wouldn't be in any danger, but I'm afraid your mind could be blown out like a candle. It would be a great shame to have the Queen of Cherek live out the rest of her life as a raving lunatic."
Islena turned suddenly very pale and did not see the sly wink Mister Wolf directed at Anheg.
"I couldn't permit it.," Anheg said firmly. "My Queen is far too precious for me to allow her to take such a terrible risk."
"I must accede to the will of my Lord," Islena said in a relieved tone. "By his command I withdraw my suggestion."
"The courage of my Queen honors me," Anheg said with an absolutely straight face.
Islena bowed and backed away rather quickly. Aunt Pol looked at Mister Wolf with one raised eyebrow, but let it pass.
Wolf's expression became more serious as he rose from the chair in which he had been sitting. "I think the time has come to make some decisions," he said. "Things are beginning to move too fast for any more delay." He looked at Anheg.

"Is there some place where we can speak without risk of being overheard?"
"There's a chamber in one of the towers," Anheg said. "I thought about it before our first meeting but-" He paused and looked at Cho-Hag.
"You shouldn't let it concern you," Cho-Hag said. "I can manage stairs if I have to, and it would have been better for me to have been a little inconvenienced than to have Jarvik's spy overhear us."
"I'll stay with Garion," Durnik said to Aunt Pol.
Aunt Pol shook her head firmly. "No," she said. "As long as Asharak is on the loose in Cherek, I don't want him out of my sight."
"Shall we go then?" Mister Wolf said. "It's getting late, and I want to leave first thing in the morning. The trail I was following is getting colder."
Queen Islena, still looking shaken stood to one side with Porenn and Silar and made no effort to follow as King Anheg led the way from the throne room.
I'll let you know what happens, King Rhodar signalled to his queen.
Of course, Porenn gestured back. Her face was placid, but the snap of her fingers betrayed her irritability.
Calmly, child, Rhodar's fingers told her. We're guests here and have to obey local customs.
Whatever my Lord commands, she replied with a tilt of her hands that spoke whole volumes of sarcasm.
With Hettar's help, King Cho-Hag managed the stairs although his progress was painfully slow. "I apologize for this," he puffed, stopping halfway to catch his breath. "It's as tiresome for me as it is for you."
King Anheg posted guards at the foot of the stairs, then came up and closed the heavy door behind him. "Light the fire, cousin," he said to Barak. "We might as well be comfortable."
Barak nodded and put a torch to the wood in the fireplace.
The chamber was round and not too spacious, but there was adequate room for them all and chairs and benches to sit on.
Mister Wolf stood at one of the windows, looking down at the twinkling lights of Val Alorn below. "I've always been fond of towers," he said, almost to himself. "My Master lived in one like this, and I enjoyed the time I spent there."
"I'd give my life to have known Aldur," Cho-Hag said softly. "Was he really surrounded by light as some say?"
"He seemed quite ordinary to me," Mister Wolf said. "I lived with him for five years before I even knew who he was."
"Was he really as wise as we're told?" Anheg asked.
"Probably wiser," Wolf said. "I was a wild and errant boy when he found me dying in a snowstorm outside his tower. He managed to tame me - though it took him several hundred years to do it." He turned from the window with a deep sigh. "To work then," he said.
"Where will you go to take up the search?" King Fulrach asked.
"Camaar," Wolf said. "I found the trail there, I think it led down into Arendia."
"We'll send warriors with you," Anheg said. "After what happened here, it looks like the Grolims may try to stop you."
"No, Wolf said firmly. "Warriors are useless in dealing with the Grolims. I can't move with an army underfoot, and I won't have time to explain to the King of Arendia why I'm invading his kingdom with a horde of troops at my back. It takes even longer to explain things to Arends than it does to Alorns - impossible as that sounds."
"Don't be uncivil, Father," Aunt Pol said. "It's their world too, and they're concerned."
"you wouldn't necessarily need an army, Belgarath," King Rhodar said, "but wouldn't it be prudent to take along a few good men?"
There's very little that Polgara and I can't deal with by ourselves," Wolf said, "and Silk, Barak and Durnik are along to deal with the more mundane problems. The smaller our group, the less attention we'll attract." He turned to Cho-Hag.
"As long as we're on the subject, though, I'd like to have your son with us. We're likely to need his rather specialized talents."

"Impossible," Hettar said flatly. "I have to remain with my father."
"No, Hettar," Cho-Hag said. "I don't intend for you to live out your life as a cripple's legs."
"I've never felt any restriction in serving you, Father," Hettar said. "There are plenty of others with the same talents I have. Let the Ancient One choose another."
"How many other Sha-Darim are there among the Algars?" Mister Wolf asked gravely?
Hettar looked at him sharply as if trying to tell him something with his eyes.
King Cho-Hag drew his breath sharply. "Hettar," he asked, "is this true?"
Hettar shrugged. "It may be, Father," he said. "I didn't think it was important."
Cho-Hag looked at Mister Wolf.
Wolf nodded. "It's true," he said. "I knew it the first time I saw him. He's a Sha-Dar. He had to find out for himself, though."
Cho-Hag's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "My son!" he said proudly, pulling Hettar into a rough embrace.
"It's no great thing, Father," Hettar said quietly, as if suddenly embarrassed.
"What are they talking about? Garion whispered to Silk.
"It's something the Algars take very seriously," Silk said softly. "They think that there are some people who can talk to horses with their thoughts alone. They call these people the Sha-Darim - Clan-Chiefs of the horses. It's very rare - maybe only two or three in a whole generation. It's instant nobility for any Algar who has it. Cho-Hag's going to explode with pride when he gets back to Algaria."
"Is it that important?" Garion asked.
Silk shrugged. "The Algars seem to think so," he said. "All the clans gather at the Stronghold when they find a new Sha-Dar. The whole nation celebrates for six weeks. There are all kinds of gifts. Hettar'll be a rich man if he chooses to accept them. He may not. He's a strange man."
"You must go," Cho-Hag said to Hettar. "The pride of Algaria goes with you, your duty is clear."
"As my father decides," Hettar said reluctantly.
"Good," Mister Wolf said. "How long will it take you to go to Algaria, pick up a dozen or so of your best horses and take them to Camaar?"
Hettar thought for a moment. "Two weeks," he said, "if there aren't any blizzards in the mountains of Sendaria."
"We'll all leave here in the morning then," Wolf said. "Anheg can give you a ship. Take the horses along the Great North Road to the place a few leagues east of Camaar where another road strikes off to the south. It fords the Great Camaar River and runs down to join the Great West Road at the ruins of Vo Wacune in northern Arendia. We'll meet you there in two weeks."
Hettar nodded.
"We'll also be joined at Vo Wacune by an Asturian Arend," Wolf went on, "and somewhat later by a Mimbrate. They might be useful to us in the south."
"And will also fulfill the prophecies," Anheg said cryptically.
Wolf shrugged, his bright blue eyes twinkling suddenly. "I don't object to fulfilling prophecies," he said, "as long as it doesn't inconvenience me too much."
"Is there anything we can do to help in the search?" Brand asked.
You'llhave enough to do," Wold said. "No matter how our search turns out, it's obvious that the Angaraks are getting ready for some kind of major action. If we're successful, they might hesitate, but Angaraks don't think the way we do. Even after what happened at Vo Mimbre, they may decide to risk an all-out attack on the west. It could be that they are responding to prophecies of their own that we don't know anything about. In any event, I think you should be ready for something fairly major from them. You'll need to make preparations."
Anheg grinned wolfishly. "We've been preparing for them for five thousand years," he said. "This time we'll purge the whole world of this Angarak infection. When Torak One-eye awakes, he'll find himself as alone as Mara - and

just as powerless."
"Maybe," Mister Wolf said, "but don't plan the victory celebration until the war's over. Make your preparations quietly, and don't sir up the people in your kingdoms any more than you have to. The west is crawling with Grolims, and they're watching everything we do. The trail I'll be following could lead me into Cthol Murgos, and I'd rather not have to deal with an army of Murgos massed on the border."
"I can play the watching game too," King Rhodar said with a grim look on his plump face. "Probably even better than the Grolims. It's time to send a few more caravans to the east. The Angaraks won't move without help from the east, and the Malloreans will have to cross over into Gar og Nadrak before they deploy south. A bribe or two here and there, a few barrels of strong ale in the right mining camps - who knows what a bit of diligent corruption might turn up? A chance word or two could give us several months' warning."
If they're planning anything major, the Thulls will be building supply dumps along the eastern escarpment," Cho-Hag said. "Thulls aren't bright, and it's easy to observe them without being seen. I'll increase my patrols along those mountains. With a little luck, we might be able to anticipate their invasion route. Is there anything else we can do to help you, Belgarath?"
Mister Wolf thought for a moment. Suddenly he grinned. "I'm certain our theif is listening very hard, waiting for one of us to speak his name or the name of the thing he stole. Sooner or later someone's bound to make a slip; and once he locates us, he'll be able to hear every word we say. Instead of trying to gag ourselves, I think it might be better if we gave him something to listen to. If you can arrange it, I'd like every minstel ans storyteller in the north start retelling certain old stories - you know the ones. When those names start sounding in every village marketplace north of the Camaar River, it'll set up a roaring in his ears like a thunderstorm. If nothing else it will give us the freedom to speak. In time he'll get tired of it and stop listening."
"It's getting late, Father," Aunt Pol reminded him.
Wolf nodded. "We're playing a deadly game," he told them all, "but our enemies are playing one just as deadly. Their danger's as great as ours, and right now, no one can predict what will finally happen. Make your preparations and send out men you can trust to keep watch. Be patient and don't do anything rash. That could be more dangerous than anything else right now. At the moment, Polgara and I are the only ones who can act. You're going to have to trust us. I know that sometimes some of the things we've done have seemed a bit strange, but there are reasons for what we do. Please don't interfere again. I'll get word to you now and then about our progress; if I need you to do anything else, I'll let you know. All right?"
The kings nodded gravely, and everyone rose to his feet.
Anheg stepped over to Mister Wolf. "Could you come by my study in an hour or so, Belgarath?" he said quietly. "I'd like to have a few words with you and Polgara before your departure."
"If you wish, Anheg," Mister Wolf said.
"Come along, Garion," Aunt Pol said. "We have packing to take care of."
Garion, a little awed at the solemnity of the discussions, rose quietly and followed her to the door.

Chapter Twenty

King Anheg's study was a large, cluttered room high in a square tower. Books bound in heavy leather lay everywhere, and strange devices with gears and pulleys and tiny brass chains sat on tables and stands. Intricately drawn maps, with beautiful illuminations were pinned up on the walls, and the floor was littered with scraps of parchment covered with tiny writing. King Anheg, hus coarse black hair hanging in his eyes, sat at a slanted table in the soft glow of a pair of candles studying a large book written on thin sheets of crackling parchment.
The guard at the door let them enter without a word, and Mister Wolf stepped

briskly into the center of the room. "You wanted to see us, Anheg?"
The King of Cherek straightened from his book and laid it aside. "Belgarath," he said with a short nod of greeting. "Polgara." He glanced at Garion who stood uncertainly near the door.
"I meant what I said earlier," Aunt Pol said. "I'm not going to let him out of my sight until I know for certain he's out of the reach of that Grolim, Asharak."
"Anything you say, Polgara," Anheg said. "Come in, Garion."
"I see that you are continuing your studies," Mister Wolf said approvingly, glancing at the littered room.
"There's so much to learn," Anheg said with a helpless gesture that included all the welter of books and papers and strange machines. "I have a feeling that I might have been happier if you'd never introduced me to this impossible task."
"You asked me," said Wolf simply.
"You could have said no." Anheg laughed. Then his brutish face turned serious. He glanced once more at Garion and began to speak in an obviously oblique manner. "I don't want to interfere," he said, "but the behavior of this Asharak concerns me."
Garion moved away from Aunt Pol and began to study one of the strange little machines sitting on a nearby table, being careful not to touch it.
"We'll take care of Asharak," Aunt Pol said.
But Anheg persisted. There have been rumors for centuries that you and your father have been protecting -" he hesitated, glanced at Garion, and then continued smoothly. "- A certain thing that must be protected at all costs. Several of my books speak of it."
"You read too much, Anheg," Aunt Pol said.
Anheg laughed again. "It passes the time, Polgara," he said. "The alternative is drinking with my earls, and my stomach's getting a little delicate for that - and my ears as well. Have you any idea of how much noise a hall full of drunk Chereks can make? My books don't shout or boast and they don't fall down or slide under the tables and snore. They're much better company, really."
"Foolishness," Aunt Pol said.
"We're all foolish at one time or another," Anheg said philisophically. "But let's get back to this other matter. If these rumors I mentioned are true, aren't you taking some serious risks? Your search is likely to be very dangerous."
"No place is really safe," Mister Wolf said.
"Why take chances you don't have to?" Anheg asked. "Asharak isn't the only Grolim in the world you know."
"I can see why they call you Anheg the sly," Wolf said with a smile.
"Wouldn't it be safer to leave this certain thing in my care until you return?" Anheg suggested.
"We've already found that not even Val Alorn is safe from the Grolims, Anheg," Aunt Pol said firmly. "The mines of Cthol Murgos and Gar og Nadrak are endless, and the Grolims have more gold at their disposal than you could even imagine. How many others like Jarvik have they bought? The Old Wolf and I arevery experienced at protecting this certain thing you mentioned. It will be safe with us."
"Thank you for your concern, however," Mister Wolf said.
"The matter concerns us all," Anheg said.
Garion, despite his youth and occasional recklessness, was not stupid. It was obvious that what they were talking about involved him in some way and quite possibly had to do with the mystery of his parentage as well. To conceal the fact that he was listening as hard as he could, he picked up a small book bound in a strangely textured black leather. He opened it, but there were neither pictures or illuminations, merely a spidery-looking script that seemed strangely repulsive.
Aunt Pol, who always seemed to know what he was doing, looked over at him. "What are you doing with that?" She said sharply.
"Just looking," He said. "I can't read."

"Put it down immediately," she told him.
King Anheg smiled. "You wouldn't be able to read it anyway, Garion," he said. "It's written in Old Angarak."
"What are you doing with that filthy thing anyway?" Aunt Pol asked Anheg. "You of all people should know that it's forbidden."
"It's only a book, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "It doesn't have any power unless it's permitted to."
"Besides," Anheg said, rubbing thoughtfully at the side of his face, "the book gives us clues to the mind of our enemy. That's always a good thing to know."
"You can't know Torak's mind," Aunt Pol said, "and it's dangerous to open yourself to him, He can poison you without your even knowing what's happening."
"I don't think there's any danger of that, Pol," Wolf said. "Anheg's mind is well-trained enough to avoid the traps in Torak's book, They're pretty obvious after all."
"You're an observant young man, Garion," Anheg said gravely. "You've done me a service today, and you can call on me at any time for service in return. Know that Anheg of Cherek is your friend." He extended hs right hand, and Garion took it into his own without thinking.
King Anheg's eyes grew suddenly wide, and his face paled slightly. He turned Garion's hand over and looked down at the silvery mark on the boy's palm. Then Aunt Pol's hands were also there, firmly closing Garion's fingers and removing him from Anheg's grip.
"It's true, then," Anheg said softly.
"Enough," Aunt Pol said. "Don't confuse the boy." Her hands were still firmly holding Garion's. "Come along, dear," she said. "It's time to finish packing." And she turned and led him from the room.
Garion's mind was racing, What was there about the mark on his hand that had so startled Anheg? The birthmark, he knew, was hereditary. Aunt Pol had once told him that his father's hand had had the same mark, but why would that be of interest to Anheg? It had gone too far, His need to know became almost unbearable. He had to know about his parents, about Aunt Pol - about all of it. If the answers hurt, then they'd just have to hurt. At least he would know.
The next morning was clear, and they left the palace for the harbor quite early. They all gathered in the courtyard where the sleighs waited.
"There's no need for you to come out in the cold like this, Merel," Barak told his fur-robed wife as she mounted the sleigh beside him.
"I have a duty to see my Lord safely to his ship," she replied with an arrogant lift of her chin.
Barak sighed. "Whatever you wish," he said.
With King Anheg and Queen Islena in the lead, the sleighs whirled out of the courtyard and into the snowy streets.
The sun was very bright, and the air was crisp. Garion rode silently with Silk and Hettar.
"Why so quiet, Garion?" Silk asked.
"A lot of things have happened here that I don't understand," Garion said.
"No one can understand everything," Hettar said rather sententiously.
"Chereks are a violent and moody people," Silk said. "They don't even understand themselves."
"It's not just the Chereks," Garion said, struggling with the words. "It's Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf and Asharak - all of it. Things are happening too fast. I can't get it all sorted out."
"Events are like horses," Hettar told him. "Sometimes they run away. After they've run for a while, though, they'll start to walk again, Then there'll be time to put everything together."
"I hope so," Garion said dubiously and fell silent again.
The sleighs came round a corner into the broad square before the temple of Belar. The blind woman was there again and Garion realized that he had been half-expecting her. She stood on the steps of the temple and raised her staff. Unaccountably, the horses which pulled the sleighs stopped, trembling, despite the urgings of the drivers.

"Hail, Great One," the blind woman said. "I wish thee well on thy journey."
The sleigh in which Garion was riding had stopped closest to the temple steps, and it seemed that the old woman was speaking to him. Almost without thinking he answered, "Thank you. But why do you call me that?"
She ignored the question. "Remember me," she commanded, bowing deeply. "Remember Martje when thou comest into thine inheritance."
It was the second time she'd said that, and Garion felt a sharp pang of curiosity. "What inheritance?" he demanded.
But Barak was roaring with fury and struggling to throw off the fur robe and draw his sword at the same time. King Anheg was also climbing down from his sleigh, his coarse face livid with rage.
"No!" Aunt Pol said sharply from nearby. "I'll tend to this." She stood up.
"Hear me witch-woman," she said in a clear voice, casting back the hood of her cloak. "I think you see too much with those blind eyes of yours. I'm going to do you a favor so that you'll no longer be troubled by the darkness and these disturbing visions which grow out of it."
"Strike me down if it please thee, Polgara," the old woman said. "I see what I see."
"I won't strike you down, Martje," Aunt Pol said. "I'm going to give you a gift instead." She raised her hand in a brief and curious gesture.
Garion saw it happen quite plainly, so there was no way that he could persuade himself that it had all been some trick of the eye. He was looking directly at Martje's face and saw the white film drain down off her eyes like milk draining down the inside of a glass.
The old woman stood frozen on the spot as the bright blue of her eyes emerged from the film which had covered them. And then she screamed. She held up her hands and looked at them and screamed again. There was in her scream a wrenching note of indescribable loss.
"What did you do," Queen Islena demanded.
"I gave her back her eyes," Aunt Pol said, sitting down again and rearranging the fur robe about her.
"You can do that?" Islena asked, her face blanching and her voice weak.
"Can't you? It's a simple thing, really."
"But," Queen Porenn objected, "with her eyes restored, she'll lose that other vision, won't she?"
"I imagine so," Aunt Pol said, "but that's a small price to pay, isn't it?"
"She'll no longer be a witch, then?" Porenn pressed.
"She wasn't a very good witch anyway," Aunt Pol said. "Her vision was clouded and uncertain. It's better this way, She won't be disturbing herself and others with shadows anymore." She looked at King Anheg who sat frozen in awe beside his half-fainting queen. "Shall we continue?" she asked calmly. "Our ship is waiting."
The horses, as if released by her words, leaped forward, and the sleighs sped away from the temple, spraying snow from their runners.
Garion glanced back once. Old Martje stood on the steps of the temple looking at her two outstretched hands and sobbing uncontrollably.
"We've been been privileged to witness a miracle, my friends," Hettar said.
"I gather, however, that the beneficiary was not very pleased with it," Silk said dryly. "Remind me not to offend Polgara. Her miracles seem to have two edges to them."

Chapter Twenty-one

The low-slanting rays of the morning sun glittered on the icy waters of the harbor as their sleighs halted near the stone quays. Greldik's ship rocked and strained at her hawsers, and a smaller ship also waited with seeming impatience.
Hettar stepped down and went over to speak to Cho-Hag and Queen Silar. The three of them talked together quietly and seriously, drawing a kind of shell of privacy about them.
Queen Islena had partially regained her composure and sat in her sleigh

straight-backed and with a fixed smile on her face. After Anheg had gone to speak with Mister Wolf, Aunt Pol crossed the Icy wharf and stopped near the sleigh of the Queen of Cherek.
"If I were you, Islena," she said firmly, "I'd find another hobby. Your gifts in the arts of sorcery are limited, and it's a dangerous area for dabbling. Too many things can go wrong if you don't know what you are doing.
The queen stared at her mutely.
"Oh," Aunt Pol said, "one other thing. It would be best, I think, if you broke off your connections with the Bear-cult. It's hardly proper for a queen to have dealings with her husband's political enemies."
Islena's eyes widened. "Does Anheg know?" she asked in a stricken voice.
"I wouldn't be suprised," Aunt Pol said. "He's much more clever than he looks, you know. You'rewalking very close to the edge of treason. You ought to have a few babies. They'd give you something useful to do with your time and keep you out of trouble. That's only a suggestion, of course, but you might think it over. I've enjoyed our visit, dear. Thank you for your hospitality." And with that she turned and walked away.
Silk whistled softly. That explains a few things," he said.
"Explains what?" Garion asked.
"The High Priest of Belar's been dabbling in Cherek politics lately. He's obviously gone a bit further than I'd thought in penetrating the palace."
"The queen?" Garion asked, startled.
"Islena's obsessed with the idea of magic," Silk said. "The Bear-cultists dabble in certain kinds of rituals that might look sort of mystical to someone as gullible as she is." He looked quickly toward where King Rhodar was speaking with the other kings and Mister Wolf. Then he drew a deep breath. "Let's go talk to Porenn," he said and led the way across the wharf to where the tiny blond Queen of Drasnia stood looking out at the icy sea.
"Highness," Silk said deferentially.
"Dear Kheldar," she said, smiling at him.
"Could you give some information to my uncle for me?" he asked.
"Of course."
"It seems that Queen Islena's been a bit indiscreet," Silk said. "She's been involved with the Bear-cult here in Cherek."
"Oh dear," Porenn said. "Does Anheg know?"
"It's hard to say," Silk told her. "I doubt if he'd admit it if he did. Garion and I happened to hear Polgara tell her to stop it."
"I hope that puts an end to it," Porenn said. "If it went too far, Anheg would have to take steps. That could be tragic."
"Polgara was quite firm," Silk said. "I think Islena will do as she was told, but advise my uncle. He likes to be kept aware of this kind of thing."
"I'll tell him about it," she said.
"You might also suggest that he keep his eyes on the local chapters of the cult in Boktor and Kotu," Silk suggested. "This kind of thing isn't usually isolated. It's been about 50 years since the last time the cult had to be suppressed."
Queen Porenn nodded gravely. "I'll see to it that he knows," she said. "I've got some of my own people planted in the Bear-cult. As soon as we get back to Boktor, I'll talk with them and see what's afoot."
"Your people? Have you gone that far already?" Silk asked in a bantering tone. "You're maturing rapidly, my Queen. It won't be long until you're as corrupt as the rest of us."
"Boktor is full of intrigue, Kheldar," the queen said primly. "It isn't just the Bear-cult, you know. Merchants from all over the world gather in our city, and at least half of them are spies. I have to protect myself - and my husband."
"Does Rhodar know what you're up to?" Silk asked slyly.
"Of course he does," she said. "He gave me my first dozen spies himself - as a wedding present.
"How typically Drasnian," Silk said.
"It's only practical, after all," she said. "My husband's concerned with matters involving other kingdoms. I try to keep an eye on things at home to leave his

mind free for that kind of thing. My operations are a bit more modest than his, but I manage to stay aware of things." She looked at him slyly from beneath her eyelashes. "If you ever decide to come home to Boktor and settle down I might just be able to find work for you."
Silk laughed. "The whole world seems to be full of opportunities lately," he said.
The queen looked at him seriously. "When are you coming home, Kheldar?" she asked. "When will you stop being this vagabond, Silk, and come back where you belong? My husband misses you very much, and you could serve Drasnia more by becoming his chief advisor than all this flitting about the world."
Silk looked away, squinting into the bright wintry sun. "Not just yet, your Highness," he said. "Belgarath needs me too, and this is a very important thing we're doing just now. Besides, I'm not ready to settle down yet. The game is still entertaining. Perhaps someday when we're all much older it won't be anymore - who knows?"
She sighed. "I miss you too Kheldar," she said gently.
"Poor, lonely little queen," Silk said, half-mockingly.
"You're impossible," she said, stamping her tiny foot.
"One does one's best." He grinned.
Hettar had embraced his father and mother and leaped across to the deck of the small ship King Anheg had provided him. "Belgarath," he called as the sailors slipped the stout ropes that bound the ship to the quay, "I'll meet you in two weeks at the ruins of Vo Wacune."
"We'll be there," Mister Wolf replied.
The sailors pushed the ship away from the quay and began to row out into the bay. Hettar stood on the deck, his long scalp lock flowing in the wind. He waved once, then turned to face the sea.
A long plank was run down over the side of Captain Greldik's ship to the snow covered stones.
"Shall we go on board, Garion?" Silk said. They climbed the precarious plank and stepped out onto the deck.
"Give our daughters my love," Barak said to his wife.
"I will, my Lord," Merel said in the same stiffly formal tone she always used with him. "Have you any other instructions?"
"I won't be back for some time," Barak said. "Plant the south fields to oats this year, and let the west fields lie fallow. Do whatever you think best with the north fields. And don't move the cattle up to the high pastures until all the frost is out of the ground."
"I'll be most careful of my husband's lands and herds," she said.
"They're yours too," Barak said.
"As my husband wishes."
Barak sighed. "You never let it rest, do you, Merel?" He said sadly.
"My Lord?"
"Forget it."
"Will my Lord embrace me before he leaves?" she asked.
"What's the point?" Barak said. He jumped across to the ship and immediately went below.
Aunt Pol stopped on her way to the ship and looked gravely at Barak's wife. Then, without warning, she suddenly laughed.
"Something amusing, Lady Polgara?" Merel asked.
"Very amusing, Merel," Aunt Pol said with a mysterious smile.
"Might I be permitted to share it?"
"Oh, you'll share it, Merel," Aunt Pol promised, "but I wouldn't want to spoil it for you by telling you too soon." She laughed again and stepped onto the plank that led to the ship. Durnik offered his hand to steady her, and the two of them crossed to the deck.
Mister Wolf clasped hands with each of the kings on turn and then nimbly crossed to the ship. He stood for a moment on the deck looking at the ancient, snow-shrouded city of Val Alorn and the towering mountains of Cherek rising behind.

"Farewell, Belgarath," King Anheg called.
Mister Wolf nodded. "Don't forget about the minstrels," he said.
"We won't," Anheg promised. "Good luck."
Mister Wolf grinned and then walked forward toward the prow of Greldik's ship. Garion, on an impulse, followed him. There were questions which needed answers, and the old man would know if anyone would.
"Mister Wolf," he said when they had both reached the high prow.
"Yes, Garion?"
He was not sure where to start, so Garion approached the problem obliquely. "How did Aunt Pol do that to old Martje's eyes?"
"The Will and the Word," Wolf said, his long cloak whipping about him in the stiff breeze. "It isn't difficult."
"I don't understand," Garion said.
"You simply will something to happen," the old man said, "and then speak the word. If your will's strong enough, it happens."
"That's all there is to it?" Garion asked, a little disappointed.
"That's all," Wolf said.
"Is the word a magic word?"
Wolf laughed, looking out at the sun glittering sharply on the winter sea. "No," he said. "There aren't any magic words. Some people think so, but they're wrong. Grolims use strange words, but that's not really necessary. Any word will do the job. It's the Will that's important, not the Word. The Word's just a channel for the Will."
"Could I do it?" Garion asked hopefully.
Wolf looked at him. "I don't know, Garion," he said. "I wasn't much older than you are the first time I did it, but I'd been living with Aldur for several years. That makes a difference, I suppose."
"What happened?"
"My Master wanted me to move a rock," Wolf said. "He seemed to think that it was in his way. I tried to move it, but it was too heavy. After a while I got angry, and I told it to move. It did. I was a little suprised, but my Master didn't think it so unusual."
"You just said, 'move?' That's all?" Garion was incredulous.
"That's all." Wolf shrugged. "It seemed so simple that I was suprised I hadn't thought of it before. At the time I imagined that anybody could do it, but men have changed quite a bit since then. Maybe it isn't possible anymore. It's hard to say, really."
"I always thought that sorcery had to be done with long spells and strange signs and things like that," Garion said.
"Those are just the devices of tricksters and charlatans," Wolf said. "They make a fine show and impress and frighten simple people, but spells and incantations have nothing to do with the real thing, It's all in the Will. Focus the Will and speak the Word, and it happens. Sometimes a gesture of sorts helps, but it isn't really necessary. Your Aunt has always seemed to want to gesture when she makes something happen. I've been trying to break her of that habit for hundreds of years now."
Garion blinked. "Hundreds of years?" he gasped. "How old is she?"
"Older than she looks," Wolf said. "It isn't polite to ask questions about a lady's age, however."
Garion felt a sudden, shocking emptiness. The worst of his fears had been confirmed. "Then she isn't really my Aunt, is she?" he asked sickly.
"What makes you say that?" Wolf asked.
She couldn't be, could she? I always thought that she was my father's sister, but if she's hundreds and thousands of years old, it would be impossible."
"You're much to fond of that word, Garion," Wolf said. "When you get right down to it, nothing - or at least very little - is actually impossible."
"How could she be? My Aunt I mean?"
"All right," Wolf said. "Polgara was not strictly speaking your father's sister. Her relationship to him is quite more complex. She was the sister of his grandmother - his ultimate grandmother, it there is such a term - and of yours

as well, of course."
"Then she'd be my great-aunt," Garion said with a faint in spark of hope. It was something, at least.
"I don't know that I'd use that precise term around her." Wolf grinned. "She might take offense. Why are you so concerned about all of this?"
"I was afraid that maybe she'd just said that she was my Aunt, and that there wasn't really any connection between us at all," Garion said. "I've been afraid of that for quite a while now."
"Why were you afraid?"
"It's kind of hard to explain," Garion said. "You see, I don't really know who or what I am. Silk says I'm not a Sendar, and Barak says I look sort of like a Rivan - but not exactly. I always thought I was a Sendar - like Durnik - but I guess I'm not. I don't know anything about my parents or where they come from or anything like that. If Aunt Pol isn't related to me, then I don't have anybody in the world at all. I'm all alone, and that's a very bad thing."
"But now it's alright, isn't it?" Wolf said, your Aunt really is your Aunt - at least your blood and hers are the same."
"I'm glad you told me," Garion said. "I've been worried about it."
Greldik's sailors untied the hawsers and began to push the ship away from the quay.
"Mister Wolf," Garion said as a strange thought occurred to him.
"Yes, Garion?"
"Aunt Pol really is my Aunt - or my Great-Aunt?"
"Yes."
"And she's your daughter."
"I have to admit that she is," Wolf said wryly. "I try to forget that sometimes, but I can't really deny it."
Garion took a deep breath and plunged directly into it. "If she's my Aunt, and you're her father," he said, "wouldn't that sort of make you my Grandfather?"
Wolf looked at him with a startled expression. "Why yes," he said, laughing suddenly, "I suppose that in a way it does. I'd never thought of it exactly like that before."
Garion's eyes suddenly filled with tears, and he impulsively embraced the old man. "Grandfather," he said, trying the word out.
""Well, well," Wolf said, his own voice strangely thick. "What a remarkable discovery." Awkwardly he patted Garion's shoulder.
"They were both a little embarrassed by Garion's sudden display of affection, and they stood silently, watching as Greldik's sailors rowed the ship out into the harbor.
"Grandfather," Garion said after a little while.
"Yes?"
"What really happened to my mother and father? I mean, how did they die?"
Wolf's face became very bleak. "There was a fire," he said shortly.
"A fire?" Garion said weakly, his imagination lurching back from that awful thought - of the unspeakable pain. "How did it happen?"
"It's not very pleasant," Wolf said grimly. "Aew you really sure you want to know?"
"I have to, Grandfather," Garion said quietly. "I have to know everything I can about them. I don't know why, but it's very important."
Mister Wolf sighed. "Yes, Garion," he said, "I guess it would be at that. All right, then. If you're old enough to ask the questions, you're old enough to hear the answers." He sat down on a sheltered bench out of the chilly wind. "Come over here and sit down." He patted the bench beside him.
Garion sat down and pulled his cloak around him.
"Let's see," Wolf said, scratching thoughtfully at his beard, "where do we start?" He pondered for a moment. "Your family's very old, Garion," he said finally, "and like so many old families, it has a certain number of enemies."
"Enemies?" Garion was startled. That particular idea hadn't occurred to him before.
"It's not uncommon," Wolf said. "When we do something someone else doesn't like,

they tend to hate us. The hatred builds up over the years until it turns into something almost like a religion. They hate not only us, but everything connected with us. Anyway, a long time ago your family's enemies became so dangerous that your Aunt and I decided that the only way we could protect the family was to hide it."
"You aren't telling me everything," Garion said.
"No," said Wolf blandly, "I'm not. I'm telling you as much as it's safe for you to know right now. If you knew certain things, you'd act differently, and people would notice that. It's safer if you remain ordinary for a while longer."
"You mean ignorant," Garion accused.
"All right, ignorant then. Do you want to hear the story, or do you want to argue?"
"I'm sorry," Garion said.
"It's all right," Wolf said, patting Garion's shoulder. "Since your Aunt and I are related to your family in rather a special way, we were naturally interested in your safety. That's why we hid your people."
"Can you actually hide a whole family?" Garion asked.
"It's never been that big a family," Wolf said. "It seems, for one reason or another, to be a single, unbroken line - no cousins or uncles or that kind of thing. It's not all that hard to hide a man and wife with a single child. We've been doing it for hundreds of years now. We've hidden them in Tolnedra, Riva, Cherek, Drasnia - all kinds of places. They've lived simple lives - artisans mostly, sometimes ordinary peasants - the kind of people nobody would ever look at twice. Anyway, everything had gone well until about twenty years ago. We moved your father, Geran, from a place in Arendia to a little village in eastern Sendaria, about sixty leagues southeast of Darine, up in the mountains. Geran was a stonecutter - didn't I tell you that once before?"
Garion nodded. "A long time ago," he said. "You said you liked him and used to visit him once in a while. Was my mother a Sendar then?"
"No," Wolf said. "Ildera as an Algar, actually - the second daughter of a Clan Chief. Your Aunt and I introduced her to Geran whenthey were about the right age. The usual sort of thing happened, and they got married. You were born a year or so afterward."
"When was the fire?" Garion asked.
"I'm getting to that," Wolf said. One of the enemies of your family had been looking for your people for a long time."
"How long?"
"Hundreds of years, actually."
"That means he was a sorcerer, too, doesn't it?" Garion asked. "I mean, only sorcerers live for that long, don't they?"
"He has certain capabilities along those linesm" Wolf admitted. "Sorcerer is a misleading term, though. It's not the sort of thing we actually call ourselves. Other people do, but we don't exactly think of it that way. It's a convenient term for people who don't really understand what it's all about. Anyway, your Aunt and I happened to be away when this enemy finally tracked down Geran and Ildera. He came to their house very early one morning while they were still sleeping and he sealed up the doors and windows. And then he set it on fire."
"I thought you said the house was made of stone."
"It was," Wolf said, "but you can make stone burn if you really want to. The fire just has to be hotter, that's all. Geran and Ildera knew there was no way they could get out of the burning building, but Geran managed to knock one of the stones out of the wall, and Ildera pushed you out through the hole. The one who started the fire was waiting for that. He picked you up and started out of the village. We could never be sure exactly what he had in mind - either he was going to kill you, or maybe he was going to keep you for some reason of his own. At any rate, that's when I got there. I put out the fire, but Geran and Ildera were already dead. Then I went after the one who'd stolen you."
"Did you kill him?" Garion demanded fiercely.
"I try not to do that more than I have to," Wolf said. "It disrupts the natural course of events too much. I had some other ideas at the time - much more

unpleasant than killing." His eyes were icy. "As it turned out though, I never got the chance. He threw you at me - you were only a baby - and I had to try to catch you. It gave him time to get away. I left you with Polgara and then I went looking for your enemy. I haven't been able to find him yet, though."
"I'm glad you haven't," Garion said.
Wolf looked a little suprised at that.
"When I get older, I'm going to find him," Garion said, "I think I ought to be the one who pays him back for what he did, don't you?"
Wolf looked at him gravely. "It could be dangerous," he said.
"I don't care. What's his name?"
"I think that maybe I better wait a while before I tell you that," Wolf said. "I don't want you jumping into something before you're ready."
"But you will tell me?"
"When the time comes."
"It's very important, Grandfather"
"Yes," Wolf said. "I can see that."
"Do you promise?"
"If you insist. And if I don't, I'm sure your Aunt will. She feels the same way you do."
"Don't you?"
"I'm much older," Wolf said. "I see things a little differently."
"I'm not that old yet," Garion said. "I won't be able to do the kind of things you'd do, so I'll have to settle for just killing him." He stood up and began to pace back and forth, a rage boiling in him.
"I don't suppose I'll be able to talk you out of this," Wolf said, "but I really think you're going to feel differently about it after it's over."
"Not likely," Garion said, still pacing.
"We'll see," Wolf said.
"Thank you for telling me, Grandfather," Garion said.
"You'd have found out sooner or later anyway," the old man said, "and it's better that I tell you than for you to get a distorted account from someone else."
"You mean Aunt Pol?"
"Polgara wouldn't deliberately lie to you," Wolf said, "but she sees things in a much more personal way than I do. Sometimes that colors her perceptions. I try to take the long view of things. I could take - under the circumstances."
Garion looked at the old man whose white hair and beard seemed somehow luminous in the morning sun. "What's it like to live forever, Grandfather?" He asked.
"I don't know," Wolf said. "I haven't lived forever."
"You know what I mean."
"The quality of life isn't much different," Wolf said. "We all live as long as we need to. It just happened that that I have something to do that's taken a very long time." He stood up abruptly. "This conversation's taken a gloomy turn," he said.
"This thing that we're doing is very important, isn't it, Grandfather?" Garion asked.
"It's the most important thing in the world right now," Wolf said.
"I'm afraid I'm not going to be very much help," Garion said.
Wolf looked at him gravely for a moment and then put one arm round his shoulders. "I think you may be suprised about that before it's all over, Garion," he said.
And then they turned and looked out over the prow of the ship at the snowy coast of Cherek sliding by on their right as the sailors rowed the ship south towards Camaar and whatever lay beyond.
*
Here ends Book One of the Belgariad. Book Two, Queen of Sorcery will reveal Garion's own dangerous powers of sorcery and more on his heritage, which underlies their quest.

The Belgariad: Queen of SorceryQUEEN OF SORCERY

For Helen,
who gave me the most precious thing in my life,
and for Mike,
who taught me how to play.

PROLOGUE
Being an Account of the Battle of the Kingdoms of the West against the most heinous Invasion and Evil of Kal Torak.
-based upon The Battle of Vo Mimbre
IN THE YOUTH of the world, the evil God Torak stole the Orb of Aldur and fled, seeking dominion. The Orb resisted, and its fire maimed him with a dreadful burning. But he would not give it up, for it was precious to him.
Then Belgarath, a sorcerer and disciple of the God Aldur, led forth the king of the Alorns and his three sons, and they reclaimed the Orb from the iron tower of Torak. Torak sought to pursue, but the wrath of the Orb repelled him and drove him back.
Belgarath set Cherek and his sons to be kings over four great kingdoms in eternal guard against Torak. The Orb he gave to Riva to keep, saying that so long as a descendant of Riva held the Orb the West would be safe.
Century followed century with no menace from Torak, until the spring of 4865, when Drasnia was invaded by a vast horde of Nadraks, Thulls, and Murgos. In the center of this sea of Angaraks was borne the huge iron pavilion of one called Kal Torak, which means King and God. Cities and villages were razed and burned, for Kal Torak came to destroy, not to conquer. Those of the people who lived were given to the steel-masked Grolim priests for sacrifice in the unspeakable rites of the Angaraks. None survived save those who fled to Algaria or were taken from the mouth of the Aldur River by Cherek warships.
Next the horde struck south at Algaria. But there they found no cities. The nomadic Algarian horsemen fell back before them, then struck in vicious hit-and-run attacks. The traditional seat of the Algarian kings was the Stronghold, a man-made mountain with stone walls thirty feet thick. Against this, the Angaraks hurled themselves in vain before settling down to besiege the place. The siege lasted for eight futile years.
This gave the West time to mobilize and prepare. The generals gathered at the Imperial War College in Tol Honeth and planned their strategy. National differences were set aside, and Brand, the Warder of Riva, was chosen to have full command. With him came two strange advisers: an ancient but vigorous man who claimed knowledge even of the Angarak kingdoms; and a strikingly handsome woman with a silver lock at her brow and an imperious manner. To these Brand listened, and to them he paid almost deferential respect.
In the late spring of 4875, Kal Torak abandoned his siege and turned west toward the sea, pursued still by Algar horsemen. In the mountains, the Ulgos came forth from their caverns by night and wreaked fearful slaughter on the sleeping Angaraks. But still were the forces of Kal Torak beyond counting. After a pause to regroup, the host proceeded down the valley of the River Arend toward the city of Vo Mimbre, destroying all in its path. Early in the summer, the Angaraks deployed for the assault upon the city.
On the third day of the battle, a horn was heard to blow three times. Then the gates of Vo Mimbre opened, and the Mimbrate knights charged out to fall upon the front of the Angarak horde, the iron-shod hoofs of their chargers trampling living and dead. From the left came Algar cavalry, Drasnian pikemen, and veiled Ulgo irregulars. And from the right came the Cherek berserks and the legions of Tolnedra.

Attacked on three sides, Kal Torak committed his reserves. It was then that the gray-clad Rivans, the Sendars, and the Asturian archers came upon his forces from the rear. The Angaraks began to fall like mown wheat and were overcome by confusion.

Then the Apostate, Zedar the Sorcerer, went in haste to the black iron pavilion from which Kal Torak had not yet emerged. And to the Accursed One he said, "Lord, throe enemies have thee surrounded in great numbers. Yea, even the gray Rivans have come in their numbers to cast defiance at thy might."

Kal Torak arose in anger and declared, "I will come forth, that the false keepers of Cthrag Yaska, the jewel which was mine, shall see me and know fear of me. Send to me my kings."

"Great Lord," Zedar told him, "thy kings are no more. The battle hath claimed their lives and those of a multitude of thy Grolim priests as well."

Kal Torak's wrath grew great at these words, and fire spat from his right eye and from the eye that was not. He ordered his servants to bind his shield to the arm on which he had no hand and he took up his dread black sword. With this, he went forth to do battle.

Then came a voice from the midst of the Rivans, saying, "In the name of Belar I defy thee, Torak. In the name of Aldur I cast my despite in thy teeth. Let the bloodshed be abated, and I will meet thee to decide the battle. I am Brand, Warder of Riva. Meet me or take the stinking host away and come no more against the kingdoms of the West."

Kal Torak strode apart from the host and cried, "Where is he who dares pit his mortal flesh against the King of the World? Behold, I am Torak, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I will destroy this loud-voiced Rivan. Mine enemies shall perish, and Cthrag Yaska shall again be mine."

Brand stood forth. He bore a mighty sword and a shield muffled with cloth. A grizzled wolf marched at his side, and a snowy owl hovered over his head. Brand said, "I am Brand and I will contend with thee, foul and misshapen Torak."

When Torak saw the wolf, he said, "Begone, Belgarath. Flee if thou wouldst save thy life." And to the owl he said, "Abjure thy father, Polgara, and worship me. I will wed thee and make thee Queen of the World."

But the wolf howled defiance, and the owl screeched her scorn. Torak raised his sword and smote down upon the shield of Brand. Long they fought, and many and grievous were the blows they struck. Those who stood near to see them were amazed. The fury of Torak grew great, and his sword battered the shield of Brand until the Warder fell back before the onslaught of the Accursed One. Then the wolf howled and the owl shrieked in one voice together, and the strength of Brand was renewed.

With a single motion, the Rivan Warder unveiled his shield, in the center of which stood a round jewel, in size like the heart of a child. As Torak gazed upon it, the stone began to glow and flame. The Accursed One drew back from it. He dropped his shield and sword and raised his arms before his face to ward away the dread fire of the stone.

Brand struck, and his sword pierced Torak's visor to strike into the eye that was not and plunge into the Accursed One's head. Torak fell back and gave a great cry. He plucked out the sword and threw off his helmet. Those who watched recoiled in terror, for his face was seared by some great fire and was horrible to behold. Weeping blood, Torak cried out again as he beheld the jewel which he had named Cthrag Yaska and for which he had brought his war into the West. Then he collapsed, and the earth resounded with his fall.

A great cry went up from the host of the Angaraks when they saw what had befallen Kal Torak, and they sought to flee in their panic. But the armies of the West pursued them and slew them, so that when the smoky dawn broke on the fourth day, the host was no more.

Brand asked that the body of the Accursed One be brought to him, that he might

behold him who would be king of all the world. But the body was not to be found. In the night, Zedar the Sorcerer had cast an enchantment and passed unseen through the armies of the West, bearing away the one he had chosen as master.
Then Brand took counsel with his advisers. And Belgarath said to him, "Torak is not dead. He only sleeps. For he is a God and cannot be slain by any mortal weapon."
"When will he awaken?" Brand asked. "I must prepare the West against his return."
Polgara answered, "When once again a King of Riva's line sits on his northern throne, the Dark God will waken to do war with him."
Brand frowned, saying, "But that is neverl" For all knew that the last Rivan King had been slain with his family in 4002 by Nyissan assassins.
Again the woman spoke. "In the fullness of time the Rivan King will rise to claim his own, as the ancient Prophecy foretells. More cannot be said."
Brand was content and set his armies to cleaning the battlefield of the wreckage of Angaraks. And when that was finished, the kings of the West gathered before the city of Vo Mimbre and held council. Many were the voices raised in praise of Brand.
Soon men began crying that Brand should henceforth be chosen as ruler of all the West. Only Mergon, ambassador of Imperial Tolnedra, protested in the name of his Emperor, Ran Borune IV. Brand refused the honor, and the proposal was dropped, so that there was again peace among those assembled in council. But in return for peace, a demand was made of Tolnedra.
The Gorim of the Ulgos spoke first in a loud voice. "In fulfillment of the Prophecy, there must be promised a princess of Tolnedra to be wife unto the Rivan King who will come to save the world. This the Gods require of us."
Again Mergon protested. "The Hall of the Rivan King is empty and desolate. No king sits upon the Rivan throne. How many a princess of Imperial Tolnedra be wed with a phantom?"
Then the woman who was Polgara replied. "The Rivan King will return to assume his throne and claim his bride. From this day forward, therefore, each princess of Imperial Tolnedra shall present herself in the Hall of the Rivan King upon her sixteenth birthday. She shall be clad in her wedding gown and shall abide there for three days against the coming of the King. If he comes not to claim her, then she shall be free to return to her father for whatever he may decree for her."
Mergon cried out. "All Tolnedra shall rise against this indignity. No! It shall not be!"
The wise Gorim of the Ulgos spoke again. "Tell your Emperor that this is the will of the Gods. Tell him also that in the day Tolnedra fails in this, the West shall rise against him and scatter the sons of Nedra to the winds and pull down the might of the Empire, until Imperial Tolnedra is no more."
At that, seeing the might of the armies before him, the ambassador submitted to the matter. All then agreed and were bound to it.
When that was done, the nobles of strife-torn Arendia came to Brand, saying, "The king of the Mimbrates is dead and the duke of the Asturians also. Who now shall rule us? For two thousand years has war between Mimbre and Asturia rent fair Arendia. How may we become one people again?"
Brand considered. "Who is heir to the Mimbrate throne?" "Korodullin is crown prince of the Mimbrates," the nobles replied. "And to whom descends the Asturian line?"
"Mayaserana is the daughter of the Asturian duke," they told him. Brand said, "Bring them to me." And when they were brought before Brand, he said to them, "The bloodshed between Mimbre and Asturia must end. Therefore, it is my will that you be wed to each other and that the houses which so long have warred shall thus be joined."

The two cried against the judgment, for they were filled with ancient enmity and with the pride of their separate lines. But Belgarath took Korodullin aside and spoke in private with him. And Polgara withdrew Mayaserana to a separate place and was long in converse with her. No man learned then or later what was said to the two young people. But when they returned to where Brand waited, Mayaserana and Korodullin were content that they should be wed. And this was the final act of the council that met after the battle of Vo Mimbre.

Brand spoke to all the kings and nobles one final time before departing for the north.

"Much has been wrought here that is good and shall endure. Behold, we have met together against the Angaraks and they have been overthrown. Evil Torak is quelled. And the covenant we have made here among us prepares the West for the day of the Prophecy when the Rivan King shall return and Torak shall wake from his long sleep to contend again for empire and dominion. All that may be done in this day to prepare for the great and final war has been done. We can do no more. And here, perchance, the wounds of Arendia have been healed, and the strife of more than two thousand years may see its end. So far as may be, I am content with it all.

"Hail, then, and farewell!"

He turned from them and rode north with the grizzled man who was Belgarath and the queenly woman who was Polgara by his side. They took ship at Camaar in Sendaria and set sail for Riva. And Brand returned no more to the kingdoms of the West.

But of his companions are many tales told. And of that telling, what may be true and what false few men may know.

Part One
ARENDIA

Chapter One

VO WACUNE WAS NO MORE. Twenty-four centuries had passed since the city of the Wacite Arends had been laid waste, and the dark, endless forests of northern Arendia had reclaimed the ruins. Broken walls had toppled and been swallowed up in the moss and wet brown bracken of the forest floor, and only the shattered stumps of the once proud towers moldered among the trees and fog to mark the place where Vo Wacune had stood. Sodden snow blanketed the mist-shrouded ruins, and trickles of water ran down the faces of ancient stones like tears.

Garion wandered alone down the tree-choked avenues of the dead city, his stout gray wool cloak drawn tight against the chill, and his thoughts as mournful as the weeping stones around him. Faldor's farm with its green, sun-drenched fields was so far behind him that it seemed lost in a kind of receding haze, and he was desperately homesick. No matter how hard he tried to hold onto them, details kept escaping him. The rich smells of Aunt Pol's kitchen were only a faint memory; the ring of Durnik's hammer in the smithy faded like the dying echo of the last note of a bell, and the sharp, clear faces of his playmates wavered in his remembrance of them until he could no longer be sure that he would even recognize them. His childhood was slipping away, and try though he might he could not hold on to it.

Everything was changing; that was the whole problem. The core of his life, the rock upon which his childhood had been built, had always been Aunt Pol. In the simple world of Faldor's farm she had been Mistress Pol, the cook, but in the world beyond Faldor's gate she was Polgara the Sorceress, who had watched the passage of four millennia with a purpose beyond mortal comprehension.

And Mister Wolf, the old vagabond storyteller, had also changed. Garion knew now

that this old friend was in fact his great-great grandfather - with an infinite number of additional "greats" added on for good measure - but that behind that roguish old face there had always been the steady gaze of Belgarath the Sorcerer, who had watched and waited as he had looked upon the folly of men and Gods for seven thousand years. Garion sighed and trudged on through the fog. Their very names were unsettling. Garion had never wanted to believe in sorcery or magic or witchcraft. Such things were unnatural, and they violated his notion of solid, sensible reality. But too many things had happened to allow him to hold on to his comfortable skepticism any longer. In a single, shattering instant the last vestiges of his doubt had been swept away. As he had watched with stunned disbelief, Aunt Pol had erased the milky stains from the eyes of Martje the witch with a gesture and a single word, restoring the madwoman's sight and removing her power to see into the future with a brutal evenhandedness. Garion shuddered at the memory of Martje's despairing wail. That cry somehow marked the point at which the world had become less solid, less sensible, and infinitely less safe.

Uprooted from the only place he had ever known, unsure of the identities of the two people closest to him, and with his whole conception of the difference between the possible and the impossible destroyed, Garion found himself committed to a strange pilgrimage. He had no idea what they were doing in this shattered city swallowed up in trees, and not the faintest idea where they would go when they left. The only certainty that remained to him was the single grim thought to which he now clung; somewhere in the world there was a man who had crept through the predawn darkness to a small house in a forgotten village and had murdered Garion's parents; if it took him the rest of his life, Garion was going to find that man, and when he found him, he was going to kill him. There was something strangely comforting in that one solid fact.

He carefully climbed over the rubble of a house that had fallen outward into the street and continued his gloomy exploration of the ruined city. There was really nothing to see. The patient centuries had erased nearly all of what the war had left behind, and slushy snow and thick fog hid even those last remaining traces. Garion sighed again and began to retrace his steps toward the moldering stump of the tower where they had all spent the previous night.

As he approached, he saw Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol standing together some distance from the ruined tower, talking quietly. The old man's rust-colored hood was turned up, and Aunt Pol's blue cloak was drawn about her. There was a look of timeless regret on her face as she looked out at the foggy ruins. Her long, dark hair spilled down her back, and the single white lock at her brow seemed paler than the snow at her feet.

"There he is now," Mister Wolf said to her as Garion approached them.

She nodded and looked gravely at Garion. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"No place," Garion replied. "I was thinking, that's all."

"I see you've managed to soak your feet."

Garion lifted one of his sodden brown boots and looked down at the muddy slush clinging to it. "The snow's wetter than I thought," he apologized.

"Does wearing that thing really make you feel better?" Mister Wolf asked, pointing at the sword Garion always wore now.

"Everybody keeps saying how dangerous Arendia is," Garion explained. "Besides, I need to get used to it." He shifted the creaking new leather sword belt around until the wirebound hilt was not so obvious. The sword had been an Erastide present from Barak, one of several gifts he had received when the holiday had passed while they were at sea.

"It doesn't really suit you, you know," the old man told him somewhat disapprovingly.

"Leave him alone, father," Aunt Pol said almost absently. "It's his, after all, and he can wear it if he likes."

"Shouldn't Hettar be here by now?" Garion asked, wanting to change the subject.
"He may have run into deep snow in the mountains of Sendaria," Wolf replied. "He'll be here. Hettar's very dependable."
"I don't see why we just didn't buy horses in Camaar."
"They wouldn't have been as good," Mister Wolf answered, scratching at his short, white beard. "We've got a long way to go, and I don't want to have to worry about a horse foundering under me somewhere along the way. It's a lot better to take a little time now than to lose more time later."
Garion reached back and rubbed at his neck where the chain of the curiously carved silver amulet Wolf and Aunt Pol had given him for Erastide had chafed his skin.
"Don't worry at it, dear," Aunt Pol told him.
"I wish you'd let me wear it outside my clothes," he complained. "Nobody can see it under my tunic."
"It has to be next to your skin."
"It's not very comfortable. It looks nice enough, I suppose, but sometimes it seems cold, and other times it's hot, and once in a while it seems to be awfully heavy. The chain keeps rubbing at my neck. I guess I'm not used to ornaments."
"It's not entirely an ornament, dear," she told him. "You'll get used to it in time."
Wolf laughed. "Maybe it will make you feel better to know that it took your Aunt ten years to get used to hers. I was forever telling her to put it back on."
"I don't know that we need to go into that just now, father," Aunt Pol answered coolly.
"Do you have one, too?" Garion asked the old man, suddenly curious about it.
"Of course."
"Does it mean something that we all wear them?"
"It's a family custom, Garion," Aunt Pol told him in a tone that ended the discussion. The fog eddied around them as a chill, damp breeze briefly swirled through the ruins.
Garion sighed. "I wish Hettar would get here. I'd like to get away from this place. It's like a graveyard."
"It wasn't always this way," Aunt Pol said very quietly.
"What was it like?"
"I was happy here. The walls were high, and the towers soared. We all thought it would last forever." She pointed toward a rank patch of winter-browned brambles creeping over the broken stones. "Over there was a flower-filled garden where ladies in pale yellow dresses used to sit while young men sang to them from beyond the garden wall. The voices of the young men were very sweet, and the ladies would sigh and throw bright red roses over the wall to them. And down that avenue was a marble-paved square where the old men met to talk of forgotten wars and long-gone companions. Beyond that there was a house with a terrace where I used to sit with friends in the evening to watch the stars come out while a boy brought us chilled fruit and the nightingales sang as if their hearts were breaking." Her voice drifted off into silence. "But then the Asturians came," she went on, and there was a different note then. "You'd be surprised at how little time it takes to tear down something that took a thousand years to build."
"Don't worry at it, Pol," Wolf told her. "These things happen from time to time. There's not a great deal we can do about it."
"I could have done something, father," she replied, looking off into the ruins. "But you wouldn't let me, remember?"
"Do we have to go over that again, Pol?" Wolf asked in a pained voice. "You have to learn to accept your losses. The Wacite Arends were doomed anyway. At best, you'd have only been able to stall off the inevitable for a few months. We're not who we are and what we are in order to get mixed up in things that don't

have any meaning."
"So you said before." She looked around at the filmy trees marching away in the fog down the empty streets. "I didn't think the trees would come back so fast," she said with a strange little catch in her voice. "I thought they might have waited a little longer."
"It's been almost twenty-five centuries, Pol."
"Really? It seems like only last year."
"Don't brood about it. It'll only make you melancholy. Why don't we go inside? The fog's beginning to make us all a bit moody."
Unaccountably, Aunt Pol put her arm about Garion's shoulders as they turned toward the tower. Her fragrance and the sense of her closeness brought a lump to his throat. The distance that had grown between them in the past few months seemed to vanish at her touch.
The chamber in the base of the tower had been built of such massive stones that neither the passage of centuries nor the silent, probing tendrils of tree roots had been able to dislodge them. Great, shallow arches supported the low stone ceiling, making the room seem almost like a cave. At the end of the room opposite the narrow doorway a wide crack between two of the rough-hewn blocks provided a natural chimney. Durnik had soberly considered the crack the previous evening when they had arrived, cold and wet, and then had quickly constructed a crude but efficient fireplace out of rubble. "It will serve," the smith had said "Not very elegant perhaps, but good enough for a few days."
As Wolf, Garion and Aunt Pol entered the low, cavelike chamber, a good fire crackled in the fireplace, casting looming shadows among the low arches and radiating a welcome warmth. Durnik in his brown leather tunic was stacking firewood along the wall. Barak, huge, redbearded, and mail-shined, was polishing his sword. Silk, in an unbleached linen shirt and black leather vest, lounged idly on one of the packs, toying with a pair of dice.
"Any sign of Hettar yet?" Barak asked, looking up.
"It's a day or so early," Mister Wolf replied, going to the fireplace to warm himself.
"Why don't you change your boots, Garion?" Aunt Pol suggested, hanging her blue cloak on one of the pegs Durnik had hammered into a crack in the wall.
Garion lifted his pack down from another peg and began rummaging through it.
"Your stockings, too," she added.
"Is the fog lifting at all?" Silk asked Mister Wolf.
"Not a chance."
"If I can persuade you all to move out from in front of the fire, I'll see about supper," Aunt Pol told them, suddenly very businesslike. She began setting out a ham, a few loaves of dark, peasant bread, a sack of dried peas and a dozen or so leathery-looking carrots, humming softly to herself as she always did when she was cooking.
The next morning after breakfast, Garion pulled on a fleece-lined overvest, belted on his sword, and went back out into the fog-muffled ruins to watch for Hettar. It was a task to which he had appointed himself, and he was grateful that none of his friends had seen fit to tell him that it wasn't really necessary. As he trudged through the slushcovered streets toward the broken west gate of the city, he made a conscious effort to avoid the melancholy brooding that had blackened the previous day. Since there was absolutely nothing he could do about his circumstances, chewing on them would only leave a sour taste in his mouth. He was not exactly cheerful when he reached the low piece of wall by the west gate, but he was not precisely gloomy either.
The wall offered some protection, but the damp chill still crept through his clothes, and his feet were already cold. He shivered and settled down to wait. There was no point in trying to see any distance in the fog, so he concentrated on listening. His ears began to sort out the sounds in the forest beyond the

wall, the drip of water from the trees, the occasional sodden thump of snow sliding from the limbs, and the tapping of a woodpecker working on a dead snag several hundred yards away.
"That's my cow," a voice said suddenly from somewhere off in the fog.
Garion froze and stood silently, listening.
"Keep her in your own pasture, then," another voice replied shortly. "Is that you, Lammer?" the first voice asked.
"Right. You're Detton, aren't you?"
"I didn't recognize you. How longs it been?"
"Four or five years, I suppose," Lammer judged.
"How are things going in your village?" Detton asked.
"We're hungry. The taxes took all our food."
"Ours too. We've been eating boiled tree roots."
"We haven't tried that yet. We're eating our shoes."
"How's your wife?" Detton asked politely.
"She died last year," Lammer answered in a flat, unemotional voice. "My lord took our son for a soldier, and he was killed in a battle somewhere. They poured boiling pitch on him. After that my wife stopped eating. It didn't take her long to die."
"I'm sorry," Detton sympathized. "She was very beautiful."
"They're both better off," Lammer declared. "They aren't cold or hungry anymore. Which kind of tree roots have you been eating?"
"Birch is the best," Detton told him. "Spruce has too much pitch, and oak's too tough. You boil some grass with the roots to give them a bit of flavor."
"I'll have to try it."
"I've got to get back," Detton said. "My lord's got me clearing trees, and he'll have me flogged if I stay away too long."
"Maybe I'll see you again sometime."
"If we both live."
"Good-bye, Detton."
"Good-bye, Lammer."
The two voices drifted away. Garion stood quite still for a long time after they were gone, his mind numb with shock and with tears of sympathy standing in his eyes. The worst part of it was the matter-of fact way in which the two had accepted it all. A terrible anger began to burn in his throat. He wanted suddenly to hit somebody.
Then there was another sound off in the fog. Somewhere in the forest nearby someone was singing. The voice was a light, clear tenor, and Garion could hear it quite plainly as it drew closer. The song was filled with ancient wrongs, and the refrain was a call to battle. Irrationally, Garion's anger focused on the unknown singer. His vapid bawling about abstract injustices seemed somehow obscene in the face of the quiet despair of Lammer and Detton. Without thinking, Garion drew his sword and crouched slightly behind the shattered wall.
The song came yet nearer, and Garion could hear the step of a horse's hooves in the wet snow. Carefully he poked his head out from behind the wall as the singer appeared out of the fog no more than twenty paces away. He was a young man dressed in yellow hose and a bright red jerkin. His fur-lined cloak was tossed back, and he had a long, curved bow slung over one shoulder and a well-sheathed sword at his opposite hip. His reddish-gold hair fell smoothly down his back from beneath a pointed cap with a feather rising from it. Although his song was grim and he sang it in a voice throbbing with passion, there was about his youthful face a kind of friendly openness that no amount of scowling could erase. Garion glared at this empty-headed young nobleman, quite certain that the singing fool had never made a meal of tree roots or mourned the passing of a wife who had starved herself to death out of grief. The stranger turned his horse and, still singing, rode directly toward the broken arch of the gateway

beside which Garion lurked in ambush.
Garion was not normally a belligerent boy, and under other circumstances he might have approached the situation differently. The gaudy young stranger, however, had presented himself at precisely the wrong time. Garion's quickly devised plan had the advantage of simplicity. Since there was nothing to complicate it, it worked admirably - up to a point. No sooner had the lyric young man passed through the gate than Garion stepped from his hiding place, grasped the back of the rider's cloak and yanked him bodily out of the saddle. With a startled outcry and a wet splat, the stranger landed unceremoniously on his back in the slush at Garion's feet. The second part of Garion's plan, however, fell completely apart. Even as he moved in to take the fallen rider prisoner at sword point, the young man rolled, came to his feet, and drew his own sword, seemingly all in one motion. His eyes were snapping with anger, and his sword weaved threateningly.
Garion was not a fencer, but his reflexes were good and the chores he had performed at Faldor's farm had hardened his muscles. Despite the anger which had moved him to attack in the first place, he had no real desire to hurt this young man. His opponent seemed to be holding his sword lightly, almost negligently, and Garion thought that a smart blow on the blade might very well knock it out of his hand. He swung quickly, but the blade flicked out of the path of his heavy swipe and clashed with a steely ring down on his own sword. Garion jumped back and made another clumsy swing. The swords rang again. Then the air was filled with clash and scrape and bell-like rattle as the two of them banged and parried and feinted with their blades. It took Garion only a moment to realize that his opponent was much better at this than he was but that the young man had ignored several opportunities to strike at him. In spite of himself he began to grin in the excitement of their noisy contest. The stranger's answering grin was open, even friendly.
"All right, that's enough of that!" It was Mister Wolf. The old man was striding toward them with Barak and Silk close on his heels. "Just exactly what do you two think you're doing?"
Garion's opponent, after one startled glance, lowered his sword. "Belgarath-" he began.
"Lelldorin," Wolf's tone was scathing, "have you lost what little sense you had to begin with?"
Several things clicked into place in Garion's mind simultaneously as Wolf turned on him coldly. "Well, Garion, would you like to explain this?"
Garion instantly decided to try guile. "Grandfather," he said, stressing the word and giving the younger stranger a quick warning look, "you didn't think we were really fighting, did you? Lelldorin here was just showing me how you block somebody's sword when he attacks, that's all."
"Really?" Wolf replied skeptically.
"Of course," Garion said, all innocence now. "What possible reason could there be for us to be trying to hurt each other?"
Lelldorin opened his mouth to speak, but Garion deliberately stepped on his foot.
"Lelldorin's really very good," he rushed on, putting his hand in a friendly fashion on the young man's shoulder. "He taught me a lot in just a few minutes."
-Let it stand-Silk's fingers flickered at him in the minute gestures of the Drasnian secret language. Always keep a lie simple.
"The lad is an apt pupil, Belgarath," Lelldorin said lamely, finally understanding.
"He's agile, if nothing else," Mister Wolf replied dryly. "What's the idea behind all the frippery?" He indicated Lelldorin's gaudy clothes. "You look like a maypole."
"The Mimbrates had started detaining honest Asturians for questioning," the

young Arend explained, "and I had to pass several of their strongholds. I thought that if I dressed like one of their toadies I wouldn't be bothered."
"Maybe you've got better sense than I thought," Wolf conceded grudgingly. He turned to Silk and Barak. "This is Lelldorin, son of the Baron of Wildantor. He'll be joining us."
"I wanted to talk to you about that, Belgarath," Lelldorin put in quickly. "My father commanded me to come here and I can't disobey him, but I'm pledged in a matter of extremest urgency."
"Every young nobleman in Asturias pledged in at least two or three such matters of urgency," Wolf replied. "I'm sorry, Lelldorin, but the matter we're involved in is much too important to be postponed while you go out to ambush a couple of Mimbrate tax collectors."
Aunt Pol approached them out of the fog then, with Durnik striding protectively at her side. "What are they doing with the swords, father?" she demanded, her eyes flashing.
"Playing," Mister Wolf replied shortly. "Or so they say. This is Lelldorin. I think I've mentioned him to you."
Aunt Pol looked Lelldorin up and down with one raised eyebrow. "A very colorful young man."
"The clothes are a disguise," Wolf explained. "He's not as frivolous as all that - not quite, anyway. He's the best bowman in Asturia, and we might need his skill before we're done with all this."
"I see," she said, somewhat unconvinced.
"There's another reason, of course," Wolf continued, "but I don't think we need to get into that just now, do we?"
"Are you still worried about that passage, father?" she asked with exasperation.
"The Mrin Codex is very obscure, and none of the other versions say anything at all about the people it mentions. It could be pure allegory, you know."
"I've seen a few too many allegories turn out to be plain fact to start gambling at this point. Why don't we all go back to the tower?" he suggested. "It's a bit cold and wet out here for lengthy debates on textual variations."
Garion glanced at Silk, baffled by this exchange, but the little man returned his look with blank incomprehension.
"Will you help me catch my horse, Garion?" Lelldorin asked politely, sheathing his sword.
"Of course," Garion replied, also putting away his weapon. "I think he went that way."
Lelldorin picked up his bow, and the two of them followed the horse's tracks off into the ruins.
"I'm sorry I pulled you off your horse," Garion apologized when they were out of sight of the others.
"No matter." Lelldorin laughed easily. "I should have been paying more attention." He looked quizzically at Garion. "Why did you lie to Belgarath?"
"It wasn't exactly a lie," Garion replied. "We weren't really trying to hurt each other, and sometimes it takes hours trying to explain something like that."
Lelldorin laughed again, an infectious sort of laugh. In spite of himself, Garion could not help joining in.
Both laughing, they continued together down an overgrown street between the low mounds of slush-covered rubble.

Chapter Two

LELLDORIN OF WILDANTOR Was eighteen years old, although his ingenuous nature made him seem more boyish. No emotion touched him that did not instantly register in his expression, and sincerity shone in his face like a beacon. He was impulsive, extravagant in his declarations, and probably, Garion reluctantly

concluded, not overly bright. It was impossible not to like him, however.
The following morning when Garion pulled on his cloak to go out and continue his watch for Hettar, Lelldorin immediately joined him. The young Arend had changed out of his garish clothing and now wore brown hose, a green tunic, and a dark brown wool cape. He carried his bow and wore a quiver of arrows at his belt; as they walked through the snow toward the broken west wall he amused himself by loosing arrows at targets only half visible ahead of him.
"You're awfully good," Garion said admiringly after one particularly fine shot.
"I'm an Asturian," Lelldorin replied modestly. "We've been bowmen for thousands of years. My father had the limbs of this bow cut on the day I was born, and I could draw it by the time I was eight."
"I imagine you hunt a great deal," Garion said, thinking of the dense forest all around them and the tracks of game he had seen in the snow.
"It's our most common pastime." Lelldorin stopped to pull the arrow he had just shot from a tree trunk. "My father prides himself on the fact that beef or mutton are never served at his table."
"I went hunting once, in Cherek."
"Deer?" Lelldorin asked.
"No. Wild boars. We didn't use bows though. The Chereks hunt with spears."
"Spears? How can you get close enough to kill anything with a spear?"
Garion laughed a bit ruefully, remembering his bruised ribs and aching head. "Getting close isn't the problem. It's getting away after you've speared him that's the difficult part."
Lelldorin didn't seem to grasp that.
"The huntsmen form a line," Garion explained, "and they crash through the woods, making as much noise as they can. You take your spear and wait where the boars are likely to pass when they try to get away from the noise. Being chased makes them bad-tempered, and when they see you, they charge. That's when you spear them."
"Isn't that dangerous?" Lelldorin's eyes were wide.
Garion nodded. "I almost got all my ribs broken." He was not exactly boasting, but he admitted to himself that he was pleased by Lelldorin's reaction to his story.
"We don't have many dangerous animals in Asturia," Lelldorin said almost wistfully. "A few bears and once in a while a pack of wolves." He seemed to hesitate for a moment, looking closely at Garion. "Some men, though, find more interesting things to shoot at than wild stags." He said it with a kind of secretive sidelong glance.
"Oh?" Garion was not quite sure what he meant.
"Hardly a day goes by that some Mimbrate's horse doesn't come home riderless."

Garion was shocked at that.
"Some men think that there are too many Mimbrates in Asturia," Lelldorin explained with heavy emphasis.
"1 thought that the Arendish civil war was over."
"There are many who don't believe that. There are many who believe that the war will continue until Asturia is free of the Mimbrate crown." Lelldorin's tone left no question as to where he stood in the matter.
"Wasn't the country unified after the Battle of Vo Mimbre?" Garion objected.
"Unified? How could anybody believe that? Asturia is treated like a subject province. The king's court is at Vo Mimbre; every governor, every tax collector, every bailiff, every high sheriff in the kingdom is a Mimbrate. There's not a single Asturian in a position of authority anywhere in Arendia. The Mimbrates even refuse to recognize our titles. My father, whose line extends back a thousand years, is called landowner. A Mimbrate would sooner bite out his tongue than call him Baron." Lelldorin's face had gone white with suppressed

indignation.
"I didn't know that," Garion said carefully, not sure how to handle the young man's feelings.
"Asturia's humiliation is almost at an end, however," Lelldorin declared fervently. "There are some men in Asturia for whom patriotism is not dead, and the time is not far off when these men will hunt royal game." He emphasized his statement by snapping an arrow at a distant tree.
That confirmed the worst of Garion's fears. Lelldorin was a bit too familiar with the details not to be involved in this plot.
As if he had realized himself that he had gone too far, Lelldorin stared at Garion with consternation. "I'm a fool," he blurted with a guilty look around him. "I've never learned to control my tongue. Please forget what I just said, Garion. I know you're my friend, and I know you won't betray what I said in a moment of heat."
That was the one thing Garion had feared. With that single statement, Lelldorin had effectively sealed his lips. He knew that Mister Wolf should be warned that some wild scheme was afoot, but Lelldorin's declaration of friendship and trust had made it impossible for him to speak. He wanted to grind his teeth with frustration as he stared full in the face of a major moral dilemma.
They walked on, neither of them speaking and both a little embarrassed, until they reached the bit of wall where Garion had waited in ambush the day before. For a time they stared out into the fog, their strained silence growing more uncomfortable by the moment.
"What's it like in Sendaria?" Lelldorin asked suddenly. "I've never been there."
"There aren't so many trees," Garion answered, looking over the wall at the dark trunks marching off in the fog. "It's an orderly kind of place."
"Where did you live there?"
"At Faldor's farm. It's near Lake Erat."
"Is this Faldor a nobleman?"
"Faldor?" Garion laughed. "No, Faldor's as common as old shoes. He's just a farmer - decent, honest, good-hearted. I miss him."
"A commoner, then," Lelldorin said, seeming ready to dismiss Faldor as a man of no consequence.
"Rank doesn't mean very much in Sendaria," Garion told him rather pointedly. "What a man does is more important than what he is." He made a wry face. "I was a scullery boy. It's not very pleasant, but somebody's got to do it, I suppose."
"Not a serf, certainly?" Lelldorin sounded shocked.
"There aren't any serfs in Sendaria."
"No serfs?" The young Arend stared at him uncomprehendingly.
"No," Garion said firmly. "We've never found it necessary to have serfs."
Lelldorin's expression clearly showed that he was baffled by the notion. Garion remembered the voices that had come to him out of the fog the day before, but he resisted the urge to say something about serfdom. Lelldorin would never understand, and the two of them were very close to friendship. Garion felt that he needed a friend just now and he didn't want to spoil things by saying something that would offend this likeable young man.
"What sort of work does your father do?" Lelldorin asked politely.
"He's dead. So's my mother." Garion found that if he said it quickly, it didn't hurt so much.
Lelldorin's eyes filled in sudden, impulsive sympathy. He put his hand consolingly on Garion's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice almost breaking. "It must have been a terrible loss."
"I was a baby." Garion shrugged, trying to sound offhand about it. "I don't even remember them." It was still too personal to talk about.
"Some pestilence?" Lelldorin asked gently.
"No," Garion answered in the same flat tone. "They were murdered."

Lelldorin gasped and his eyes went wide.
"A man crept into their village at night and set fire to their house," Garion continued unemotionally. "My grandfather tried to catch him, but he got away. From what I understand, the man is a very old enemy of my family."
"Surely you're not going to let it stand like that?" Lelldorin demanded.
"No," Garion replied, still looking out into the fog. "As soon as I'm old enough, I'm going to find him and kill him."
"Good lad!" Lelldorin exclaimed, suddenly catching Garion in a rough embrace. "We'll find him and cut him to pieces."
"We?"
"I'll be going with you, of course," Lelldorin declared. "No true friend could do any less." He was obviously speaking on impulse, but just as obviously he was totally sincere. He gripped Garion's hand firmly. "I swear to you, Garion, I won't rest until the murderer of your parents lies dead at your feet."
The sudden declaration was so totally predictable that Garion silently berated himself for not keeping his mouth shut. His feelings in the matter were very personal, and he was not really sure he wanted company in his search for his faceless enemy. Another part of his mind, however, rejoiced in Lelldorin's impulsive but unquestioning support. He decided to let the subject drop. He knew Lelldorin well enough by now to realize that the young man undoubtedly made a dozen devout promises a day, quickly offered in absolute sincerity, and just as quickly forgotten.
They talked then of other things, standing close together beside the shattered wall with their dark cloaks drawn tightly about them.
Shortly before noon Garion heard the muffled sound of horses' hooves somewhere out in the forest. A few minutes later, Hettar materialized out of the fog with a dozen wild-looking horses trailing after him. The tall Algar wore a short, fleece-lined leather cape. His boots were mudspattered and his clothes travel-stained, but otherwise he seemed unaffected by his two weeks in the saddle.
"Garion," he said gravely by way of greeting and Garion and Lelldorin stepped out to meet him.
"We've been waiting for you," Garion told him and introduced Lelldorin. "We'll show you where the others are."
Hettar nodded and followed the two young men through the ruins to the tower where Mister Wolf and the others were waiting. "Snow in the mountains," the Algar remarked laconically by way of explanation as he swung down from his horse. "It delayed me a bit." He pulled his hood back from his shaved head and shook out his long, black scalp lock.
"No harm's been done," Mister Wolf replied. "Come inside to the fire and have something to eat. We've got a lot to talk about."
Hettar looked at the horses, his tan, weathered face growing strangely blank as if he were concentrating. The horses all looked back at him, their eyes alert and their ears pointed sharply forward. Then they turned and picked their way off among the trees.
"Won't they stray?" Durnik wanted to know.
"No," Hettar answered. "I asked them not to."
Durnik looked puzzled, but he let it pass.
They all went into the tower and sat near the fireplace. Aunt Pol cut dark bread and pale, yellow cheese for them while Durnik put more wood on the fire.
"Cho-Hag sent word to the Clan-Chiefs," Hettar reported, pulling off his cape. He wore a black, long-sleeved horsehide jacket with steel discs riveted to it to form a kind of flexible armor. "They're gathering at the Stronghold for council." He unbelted the curved sabre he wore, laid it to one side and sat near the fire to eat.
Wolf nodded. "Is anyone trying to get through to Prolgu?"

"I sent a troop of my own men to the Gorim before I left," Hettar responded. "They'll get through if anyone can."
"I hope so," Wolf stated. "The Gorim's an old friend of mine, and I'll need his help before all this is finished."
"Aren't your people afraid of the Land of the Ulgos?" Lelldorin inquired politely. "I've heard that there are monsters there that feed on the flesh of men."
Hettar shrugged. "They stay in their lairs in the wintertime. Besides, they're seldom brave enough to attack a full troop of mounted men." He looked over at Mister Wolf. "Southern Sendaria's crawling with Murgos. Or did you know that?"
"I could have guessed," Wolf replied. "Did they seem to be looking for anything in particular?"
"I don't talk with Murgos," Hettar said shortly. His hooked nose and fierce eyes made him look at that moment like a hawk about to swoop down to the kill.
"I'm surprised you weren't delayed even more," Silk bantered. "The whole world knows how you feel about Murgos."
"I indulged myself once," Hettar admitted. "I met two of them alone on the highway. It didn't take very long."
"Two less to worry about, then," Barak grunted with approval.
"I think it's time for some plain talk," Mister Wolf said, brushing crumbs off the front of his tunic. "Most of you have some notion of what we're doing, but I don't want anybody blundering into something by accident. We're after a man named Zedar. He used to be one of my Master's disciples - then he went over to Torak. Early last fall he somehow slipped into the throne room at Riva and stole the Orb of Aldur. We're going to chase him down and get it back."
"Isn't he a sorcerer too?" Barak asked, tugging absently at a thick red braid.
"That's not the term we use," Wolf replied, "but yes, he does have a certain amount of that kind of power. We all did - me, Beltira and Belkira, Belzedar - all the rest of us. That's one of the things I wanted to warn you about."
"You all seem to have the same sort of names," Silk noticed.
"Our Master changed our names when he took us as disciples. It was a simple change, but it meant a great deal to us."
"Wouldn't that mean that your original name was Garath?" Silk asked, his ferret eyes narrowing shrewdly.
Mister Wolf looked startled and then laughed. "I haven't heard that name for thousands of years. I've been Belgarath for so long that I'd almost completely forgotten Garath. It's probably just as well. Garath was a troublesome boy - a thief and a liar among other things."
"Some things never change," Aunt Pol observed.
"Nobody's perfect," Wolf admitted blandly.
"Why did Zedar steal the Orb?" Hettar asked, setting aside his plate.
"He's always wanted it for himself," the old man replied. "That could be it - but more likely he's trying to take it to Torak. The one who delivers the Orb to One-Eye is going to be his favorite."
"But Torak's dead," Lelldorin objected. "The Rivan Warder killed him at Vo Mimbre."
"No," Wolf said. "Torak isn't dead; only asleep. Brand's sword wasn't the one destined to kill him. Zedar carried him off after the battle and hid him someplace. Someday he'll awaken - probably someday fairly soon, if I'm reading the signs right. We've got to get the Orb back before that happens."
"This Zedar's caused a lot of trouble," Barak rumbled. "You should have dealt with him a long time ago."
"Possibly," Wolf admitted.
"Why don't you just wave your hand and make him disappear?" Barak suggested, making a sort of gesture with his thick fingers.
Wolf shook his head. "I can't. Not even the Gods can do that."

"We've got some big problems, then," Silk said with a frown. "Every Murgo from here to Rak Goska's going to try to stop us from catching Zedar."
"Not necessarily," Wolf disagreed. "Zedar's got the Orb, but Ctuchik commands the Grolims."
"Ctuchik?" Lelldorin asked.
"The Grolim High Priest. He and Zedar hate each other. I think we can count on him to try to keep Zedar from getting to Torak with the Orb."
Barak shrugged. "What difference does it make? You and Polgara can use magic if we run into anything difficult, can't you?"
"There are limitations on that sort of thing," Wolf said a bit evasively.
"I don't understand," Barak said, frowning.
Mister Wolf took a deep breath. "All right. As long as it's come up, let's go into that too. Sorcery - if that's what you want to call it - is a disruption of the natural order of things. Sometimes it has certain unexpected effects, so you have to be very careful about what you do with it. Not only that, it makes-" He frowned. "-Let's call it a sort of noise. That's not exactly what it is, but it serves well enough to explain. Others with the same abilities can hear that noise. Once Polgara and I start changing things, every Grolim in the West is going to know exactly where we are and what we're doing. They'll keep piling things in front of us until we're exhausted."
"It takes almost as much energy to do things that way as it does to do them with your arms and back," Aunt Pol explained. "It's very tiring."
She sat beside the fire, carefully mending a small tear in one of Garion's tunics.
"I didn't know that," Barak admitted. "Not many people do."
"If we have to, Pol and I can take certain steps," Wolf went on, "but we can't keep it up forever and we can't simply make things vanish. I'm sure you can see why."
"Oh, of course," Silk professed, though his tone indicated that he did not.
"Everything that exists depends on everything else," Aunt Pol explained quietly. "If you were to unmake one thing, it's altogether possible that everything would vanish."
The fire popped, and Garion jumped slightly. The vaulted chamber seemed suddenly dark, and shadows lurked in the corners.
"That can't happen, of course," Wolf told them. "When you try to unmake something, your will simply recoils on you. If you say, `Be not,' then you are the one who vanishes. That's why we're very careful about what we say."
"I can understand why," Silk said, his eyes widening slightly.
"Most of the things we'll encounter can be dealt with by ordinary means," Wolf continued. "That's the reason we've brought you together - at least that's one of the reasons. Among you, you'll be able to handle most of the things that get in our way. The important thing to remember is that Polgara and I have to get to Zedar before he can reach Torak with the Orb. Zedar's found some way to touch the Orb - I don't know how. If he can show Torak how it's done, no power on earth will be able to stop One-Eye from becoming King and God over the whole world."
They all sat in the ruddy, flickering light of the fire, their faces serious as they considered that possibility.
"I think that pretty well covers everything, don't you, Pol?"
"I believe so, father," she replied, smoothing the front of her gray, homespun gown.
Later, outside the tower as gray evening crept in among the foggy ruins of Vo Wacune and the smell of the thick stew Aunt Pol was cooking for supper drifted out to them, Garion turned to Silk. "Is it all really true?" he asked.
The small man looked out into the fog. "Let's act as if we believed that it is," he suggested. "Under the circumstances, I think it would be a bad idea to make a

mistake."
"Are you afraid too, Silk?" Garion asked.
Silk sighed. "Yes," he admitted, "but we can behave as if we believed that we aren't, can't we?"
"I guess we can try," Garion said, and the two of them turned to go back into the chamber at the foot of the tower where the firelight danced on the low stone arches, holding the fog and chill at bay.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT MORNING Silk came out of the tower wearing a rich maroon doublet and a baglike black velvet cap cocked jauntily over one ear.
"What's all that about?" Aunt Pol asked him.
"I chanced across an old friend in one of the packs," Silk replied airily.
"Radek of Boktor by name."
"What happened to Ambar of Kotu?"
"Ambar's a good enough fellow, I suppose," Silk said a bit deprecatingly, "but a Murgo named Asharak knows about him and may have dropped his name in certain quarters. Let's not look for trouble if we don't have to."
"Not a bad disguise," Mister Wolf agreed. "One more Drasnian merchant on the Great West Road won't attract any attention - whatever his name."
"Please," Silk objected in an injured tone. "The name's very important. You hang the whole disguise on the name."
"I don't see any difference," Barak asserted bluntly.
"There's all the difference in the world. Surely you can see that Ambar's a vagabond with very little regard for ethics, while Radek's a man of substance whose word is good in all the commercial centers of the West. Besides, Radek's always accompanied by servants."
"Servants?" One of Aunt Pol's eyebrows shot up.
"Just for the sake of the disguise," Silk assured her quickly. "You, of course, could never be a servant, Lady Polgara."
"Thank you."
"No one would ever believe it. You'll be my sister instead, traveling with me to see the splendors of To1 Honeth."
"Your sister?"
"You could be my mother instead, if you prefer," Silk suggested blandly, "making a religious pilgrimage to Mar Terrin to atone for a colorful past."
Aunt Pol gazed steadily at the small man for a moment while he grinned impudently at her. "Someday your sense of humor's going to get you into a great deal of trouble, Prince Kheldar."
"I'm always in trouble, Lady Polgara. I wouldn't know how to act if I weren't."
"Do you two suppose we could get started?" Mister Wolf asked.
"Just a moment more," Silk replied. "If we meet anyone and have to explain things, you, Lelldorin, and Garion are Polgara's servants. Hettar, Barak, and Durnik are mine."
"Anything you say," Wolf agreed wearily.
"There are reasons."
"All right."
"Don't you want to hear them?"
"Not particularly."
Silk looked a bit hurt.
"Are we ready?" Wolf asked.
"Everything's out of the tower," Durnik told him. "Oh just a moment. I forgot to put out the fire." He went back inside.
Wolf glanced after the smith in exasperation. "What difference does it make?" he muttered. "This place is a ruin anyway."

"Leave him alone, father," Aunt Pol said placidly. "It's the way he is."
As they prepared to mount, Barak's horse, a large, sturdy gray, sighed and threw a reproachful look at Hettar, and the Algar chuckled.
"What's so funny?" Barak demanded suspiciously.
"The horse said something," Hettar replied. "Never mind."
Then they swung into their saddles and threaded their way out of the foggy ruins and along the narrow, muddy track that wound into the forest. Sodden snow lay under wet trees, and water dripped continually from the branches overhead. They all drew their cloaks about them to ward off the chill and dampness. Once they were under the trees, Lelldorin pulled his horse in beside Garion's, and they rode together.
"Is Prince Kheldar always so - well - extremely complicated?" he asked.
"Silk? Oh yes. He's very devious. You see, he's a spy, and disguises and clever lies are second nature to him."
"A spy? Really?" Lelldorin's eyes brightened as his imagination caught hold of the idea.
"He works for his uncle, the King of Drasnia," Garion explained. "From what I understand, the Drasnians have been at this sort of thing for centuries."
"We've got to stop and pick up the rest of the packs," Silk was reminding Mister Wolf.
"I haven't forgotten," the old man replied.
"Packs?" Lelldorin asked.
"Silk picked up some wool cloth in Camaar," Garion told him. "He said it would give us a legitimate reason to be on the highway. We hid them in a cave when we left the road to come to Vo Wacune."
"He thinks of everything, doesn't he?"
"He tries. We're lucky to have him with us."
"Maybe we could have him show us a few things about disguises," Lelldorin suggested brightly. "It might be very useful when we go looking for your enemy."
Garion had thought that Lelldorin had forgotten his impulsive pledge. The young Arend's mind seemed too flighty to keep hold of one idea for very long, but he saw now that Lelldorin only seemed to forget things. The prospect of a serious search for his parents' murderer with this young enthusiast adding embellishments and improvisations at every turn began to present itself alarmingly.
By midmorning, after they had picked up Silk's packs and lashed them to the backs of the spare horses, they were back out on the Great West Road, the Tolnedran highway running through the heart of the forest. They rode south at a loping canter that ate up the miles.
They passed a heavily burdened serf clothed in scraps and pieces of sackcloth tied on with bits of string. The serf's face was gaunt, and he was very thin under his dirty rags. He stepped off the road and stared at them with apprehension until they had passed. Garion felt a sudden stab of compassion. He briefly remembered Lammer and Detton, and he wondered what would finally happen to them. It seemed important for some reason. "Is it really necessary to keep them so poor?" he demanded of Lelldorin, unable to hold it in any longer.
"Who?" Lelldorin asked, looking around.
"That serf."
Lelldorin glanced back over his shoulder at the ragged man. "You didn't even see him," Garion accused.
Lelldorin shrugged. "There are so many."
"And they all dress in rags and live on the edge of starvation."
"Mimbrate taxes," Lelldorin replied as if that explained everything.
"You seem to have always had enough to eat."
"I'm not a serf, Garion," Lelldorin answered patiently. "The poorest people always suffer the most. It's the way the world is."

"It doesn't have to be," Garion retorted.
"You just don't understand."
"No. And I never will."
"Naturally not," Lelldorin said with infuriating complacency. "You're not Arendish."
Garion clenched his teeth to hold back the obvious reply.
By late afternoon they had covered ten leagues, and the snow had largely disappeared from the roadside. "Shouldn't we start to give some thought to where we're going to spend the night, father?" Aunt Pol suggested.
Mister Wolf scratched thoughtfully at his beard as he squinted at the shadows hovering in the trees around them.
"I have an uncle who lives not far from here," Lelldorin offered, "Count Reldegen. I'm sure he'll be glad to give us shelter."
"Thin?" Mister Wolf asked. "Dark hair?"
"It's gray now," Lelldorin replied. "Do you know him?"
"I haven't seen him for twenty years," Wolf told him. "As I recall, he used to be quite a hothead."
"Uncle Reldegen? You must have him confused with somebody else, Belgarath."
"Maybe," Wolf said. "How far is it to his house?"
"No more than a league and a half away."
"Let's go see him," Wolf decided.

Lelldorin shook his reins and moved into the lead to show them the way.
"How are you and your friend getting along?" Silk asked, falling in beside Garion.
"Fine, I suppose," Garion replied, not quite sure how the rat-faced little man intended the question. "It seems to be a little hard to explain things to him though."
"That's only natural," Silk observed. "He's an Arend, after all."
Garion quickly came to Lelldorin's defense. "He's honest and very brave."
"They all are. That's part of the problem."
"I like him," Garion asserted.
"So do I, Garion, but that doesn't keep me from realizing the truth about him."
"If you're trying to say something, why don't you just go ahead and say it?"
"All right, I will. Don't let friendship get the better of your good sense. Arendia's a very dangerous place, and Arends tend to blunder into disasters quite regularly. Don't let your exuberant young companion drag you into something that's none of your business." Silk's look was direct, and Garion realized that the little man was quite serious.
"I'll be careful," he promised.
"I knew I could count on you," Silk said gravely.
"Are you making fun of me?"
"Would I do that, Garion?" Silk asked mockingly. Then he laughed and they rode on together through the gloomy afternoon.
The gray stone house of Count Reldegen was about a mile back in the forest from the highway, and it stood in the center of a clearing that extended beyond bowshot in every direction. Although it had no wall, it had somehow the look of a fort. The windows facing out were narrow and covered with iron gratings. Strong turrets surmounted by battlements stood at each corner, and the gate which opened into the central courtyard of the house was made of whole tree trunks, squared off and strapped together with iron bands. Garion stared at the brooding pile as they approached in the rapidly fading light. There was a kind of haughty ugliness about the house, a grim solidity that seemed to defy the world.
"It's not a very pleasant-looking sort of place, is it?" he said to Silk.
"Asturian architecture's a reflection of their society," Silk replied. "A strong

house isn't a bad idea in a country where neighborhood disputes sometimes get out of hand."
"Are they all so afraid of each other?"
"Just cautious, Garion. Just cautious."
Lelldorin dismounted before the heavy gate and spoke to someone on the other side through a small grill. There was finally a rattling of chains and the grinding sound of heavy, iron-shod bars sliding back.
"I wouldn't make any quick moves once we're inside," Silk advised quietly. "There'll probably be archers watching us."
Garion looked at him sharply.
"A quaint custom of the region," Silk informed him.
They rode into a cobblestoned courtyard and dismounted.
Count Reldegen, when he appeared, was a tall, thin man with irongray hair and beard who walked with the aid of a stout cane. He wore a rich green doublet and black hose; despite the fact that he was in his own house, he carried a sword at his side. He limped heavily down a broad flight of stairs from the house to greet them.
"Uncle," Lelldorin said, bowing respectfully.
"Nephew," the count replied in polite acknowledgment.
"My friends and I found ourselves in the vicinity," Lelldorin stated, "and we thought we might impose on you for the night."
"You're always welcome, nephew," Reldegen answered with a kind of grave formality. "Have you dined yet?"
"No, uncle."
"Then you must all take supper with me. May I know your friends?"
Mister Wolf pushed back his hood and stepped forward. "You and I are already acquainted, Reldegen," he said.
The count's eyes widened. "Belgarath? Is it realy you?"
Wolf grinned. "Oh, yes. I'm still wandering about the world, stirring up mischief."
Reldegen laughed then and grasped Wolf's upper arm warmly. "Come inside, all of you. Let's not stand about in the cold." He turned and limped up the steps to the house.
"What happened to your leg?" Wolf asked him.
"An arrow in the knee." The count shrugged. "The result of an old disagreement - long since forgotten."
"As I recall, you used to get involved in quite a few of those. I thought for a while that you intended to go through life with your sword half drawn."
"I was an excitable youth," the count admitted, opening the broad door at the top of the steps. He led them down a long hallway to a room of imposing size with a large blazing fireplace at each end. Great curving stone arches supported the ceiling. The floor was of polished black stone, scattered with fur rugs, and the walls, arches, and ceiling were whitewashed in gleaming contrast. Heavy, carved chairs of dark brown wood sat here and there, and a great table with an iron candelabra in its center stood near the fireplace at one end. A dozen or so leather-bound books were scattered on its polished surface.
"Books, Reldegen?" Mister Wolf said in amazement as he and the others removed their cloaks and gave them to the servants who immediately appeared. "You have mellowed, my friend."
The count smiled at the old man's remark.
"I'm forgetting my manners," Wolf apologized. "My daughter, Polgara. Pol, this is Count Reldegen, an old friend."
"My Lady," the count acknowledged with an exquisite bow, "my house is honored."
Aunt Pol was about to reply when two young men burst into the room, arguing heatedly.
"You're an idiot, Berentain!" the first, a darkhaired youth in a scarlet

doublet, snapped.
"It may please thee to think so, Torasin," the second, a stout young man with pale, curly hair and wearing a green and yellow striped tunic, replied, "but whether it please thee or not, Asturias future is in Mimbrate hands. Thy rancorous denouncements and sulfurous rhetoric shall not alter that fact."
"Don't thee me or thou me, Berentain," the dark-haired one sneered. "Your imitation Mimbrate courtesy turns my stomach."
"Gentlemen, that's enough!" Count Reldegen said sharply, rapping his cane on the stone floor. "If you two are going to insist on discussing politics, I'll have you separated - forcibly, if necessary."
The two young men scowled at each other and then stalked off to opposite sides of the room. "My son, Torasin," the count admitted apologetically, indicating the dark-haired youth, "and his cousin Berentain, the son of my late wife's brother. They've been wrangling like this for two weeks now. I had to take their swords away from them the day after Berentain arrived."
"Political discussion is good for the blood, my Lord," Silk observed, "especially in the winter. The heat keeps the veins from clogging up."
The count chuckled at the little man's remark.
"Prince Kheldar of the royal house of Drasnia," Mister Wolf introduced Silk.
"Your Highness," the count responded, bowing.

Silk winced slightly. "Please, my Lord. I've spent a lifetime running from that mode of address, and I'm sure that my connection with the royal family embarrasses my uncle almost as much as it embarrasses me."
The count laughed again with easy good nature. "Why don't we all adjourn to the dining table?" he suggested. "Two fat deer have been turning on spits in my kitchen since daybreak, and I recently obtained a cask of red wine from southern Tolnedra. As I recall, Belgarath has always had a great fondness for good food and fine wines."
"He hasn't changed, my Lord," Aunt Pol told him. "My father's ternbly predictable, once you get to know him."
The count smiled and offered her his arm as they all moved toward a door on the far side of the room.
"Tell me, my Lord," Aunt Pol said, "do you by chance have a bathtub in your house?"
"Bathing in winter is dangerous, Lady Polgara," the count warned her.
"My Lord," she stated gravely, "I've been bathing winter or summer for more years than you could possibly imagine."
"Let her bathe, Reldegen," Mister Wolf urged. "Her temper deteriorates quite noticeably when she thinks she's getting dirty."
"A bath wouldn't hurt you either, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol retorted tartly. "You're starting to get a bit strong from the downwind side."
Mister Wolf looked a bit injured.
Much later, after they had eaten their fill of venison, gravy-soaked bread, and rich cherry tarts, Aunt Pol excused herself and went with a maidservant to oversee the preparation of her bath. The men all lingered at the table over their wine cups, their faces washed with the golden light of the many candles in Reldegen's dining hall.
"Let me show you to your rooms," Torasin suggested to Lelldorin and Garion, pushing back his chair and casting a look of veiled contempt across the table at Berentain.
They followed him from the room and up a long flight of stairs toward the upper stories of the house. "I don't want to offend you, Tor," Lelldorin said as they climbed, "but your cousin has some peculiar ideas."
Torasin snorted. "Berentain's a jackass. He thinks he can impress the Mimbrates by imitating their speech and by fawning on them." His dark face was angry in

the light of the candle he carried to light their way.
"Why should he want to?" Lelldorin asked.
"He's desperate for some kind of holding he can call his own," Torasin replied. "My mother's brother has very little land to leave him. The fat idiot's all calf eyed over the daughter of one of the barons in his district, and since the baron won't even consider a landless suitor, Berentain's trying to wheedle an estate from the Mimbrate governor. He'd swear fealty to the ghost of Kal Torak himself, if he thought it would get him land."
"Doesn't he realize that he hasn't got a chance?" Lelldorin inquired. "There are too many land-hungry Mimbrate knights around the governor for him to even think of granting an estate to an Asturian."
"I've told him the same thing myself," Torasin declared with scathing contempt, "but there's no reasoning with him. His behavior degrades our whole family."
Lelldorin shook his head commiseratingly as they reached an upper hall. He looked around quickly then. "I have to talk with you, Tor," he blurted, his voice dropping to a whisper.
Torasin looked at him sharply.
"My father's committed me to Belgarath's service in a matter of great importance," Lelldorin hurried on in that same hushed voice. "I don't know how long we'll be gone, so you and the others will have to kill Korodullin without me."
Torasin's eyes went wide with horror. "We're not alone, Lelldorin!" he said in a strangled voice.
"I'll go down to the other end of the hall," Garion said quickly.
"No," Lelldorin replied firmly, taking hold of Garion's arm. "Garion's my friend, Tor. I have no secrets from him."
"Lelldorin, please," Garion protested. "I'm not an Asturian - I'm not even an Arend. I don't want to know what you're planning."
"But you will know, Garion, as proof of my trust in you," Lelldorin declared. "Next summer, when Korodullin journeys to the ruined city of Vo Astur to hold court there for the six weeks that maintain the fiction of Arendish unity, we're going to ambush him on the highway."
"Lelldorin!" Torasin gasped, his face turning white.
But Lelldorin was already plunging on. "It won't be just a simple ambush, Garion. This will be a master stroke at Mimbre's heart. We're going to ambush him in the uniforms of Tolnedran legionnaires and cut him down with Tolnedran swords. Our attack will force Mimbre to declare war on the Tolnedran Empire, and Tolnedra will crush Mimbre like an eggshell. Mimbre will be destroyed, and Asturia will be free!"
"Nachak will have you killed for this, Lelldorin," Torasin cried. "We've all been sworn to secrecy on a blood oath."
"Tell the Murgo that I spit on his oath," Lelldorin said hotly. "What need have Asturian patriots for a Murgo henchman?"
"He's providing us with gold, you blockhead!" Torasin raged, almost beside himself. "We need his good red gold to buy the uniforms, the swords, and to strengthen the backbones of some of our weaker friends."
"I don't need weaklings with me," Lelldorin said intensely. "A patriot does what he does for love of his country-not for Angarak gold."
Garion's mind was moving quickly now. His moment of stunned amazement had passed. "There was a man in Cherek," he recalled. "The Earl of Jarvik. He also took Murgo gold and plotted to kill a king."
The two stared at him blankly.
"Something happens to a country when you kill its king," Garion explained. "No matter how bad the king is or how good the people are who kill him, the country falls apart for a while. Everything is confused, and there's nobody to point the country in any one direction. Then, if you start a war between that country and

another one at the same time, you add just that much more confusion. I think that if I were a Murgo, that's exactly the kind of confusion I'd want to see in all the kingdoms of the West."
Garion listened to his own voice almost in amazement. There was a dry, dispassionate quality in it that he instantly recognized. From the time of his earliest memories that voice had always been there - inside his mind - occupying some quiet, hidden corner, telling him when he was wrong or foolish. But the voice had never actively interfered before in his dealings with other people. Now, however, it spoke directly to these two young men, patiently explaining.
"Angarak gold isn't what it seems to be," he went on. "There's a kind of power in it that corrupts you. Maybe that's why it's the color of blood. I'd think about that before I accepted any more red gold from this Murgo Nachak. Why do you suppose he's giving you gold and helping you with this plan of yours? He's not an Asturian, so patriotism couldn't have anything to do with it, could it? I'd think about that, too."
Lelldorin and his cousin looked suddenly troubled.
"I'm not going to say anything about this to anybody," Garion said. "You told me about it in confidence, and I really wasn't supposed to hear about it anyway. But remember that there's a lot more going on in the world right now than what's happening here in Arendia. Now I think I'd like to get some sleep. If you'll show me where my bed is, I'll leave you to talk things over all night, if you'd like."
All in all, Garion thought he'd handled the whole thing rather well. He'd planted a few doubts at the very least. He knew Arends well enough by now to realize that it probably wouldn't be enough to turn these two around, but it was a start.

Chapter Four

THE FOLLOWING MORNING they rode out early while the mist still hung among the trees. Count Reldegen, wrapped in a dark cloak, stood at his gate to bid them farewell; and Torasin, standing beside his father, seemed unable to take his eyes off Garion's face. Garion kept his expression as blank as possible. The fiery young Asturian seemed to be filled with doubts, and those doubts might keep him from plunging headlong into something disastrous. It wasn't much, Garion realized, but it was the best he could manage under the circumstances.
"Come back soon, Belgarath," Reldegen said. "Sometime when you can stay longer. We're very isolated here, and I'd like to know what the rest of the world's doing. We'll sit by the fire and talk away a month or two.
Mister Wolf nodded gravely. "Maybe when this business of mine is over, Reldegen." Then he turned his horse and led the way across the wide clearing that surrounded Reldegen's house and back once again into the gloomy forest.
"The count's an unusual Arend," Silk said lightly as they rode along. "I think I actually detected an original thought or two in him last evening."
"He's changed a great deal," Wolf agreed.
"He sets a good table," Barak said. "I haven't felt this full since I left Val Alorn."
"You should," Aunt Pol told him. "You ate the biggest part of one deer by yourself."
"You're exaggerating, Polgara," Barak said.
"But not by very much," Hettar observed in his quiet voice. Lelldorin had pulled his horse in beside Garion's, but he had not spoken. His face was as troubled as his cousin's had been. It was obvious that he wanted to say something and just as obvious that he didn't know how to begin.
"Go ahead," Garion said quietly. "We're good enough friends that I'm not going to be upset if it doesn't come out exactly right."

Lelldorin looked a little sheepish.
"Am I really that obvious?"
"Honest is a better word for it," Garion told him. "You've just never learned to hide your feelings, that's all."
"Was it really true?" Lelldorin blurted. "I'm not doubting your word, but was there really a Murgo in Cherek plotting against King Anheg?"
"Ask Silk," Garion suggested, "or Barak, or Hettar-any of them. We were all there."
"Nachak isn't like that, though," Lelldorin said quickly, defensively.
"Can you be sure?" Garion asked him. "The plan was his in the first place, wasn't it? How did you happen to meet him?"
"We'd all gone down to the Great Fair, Torasin, me, several of the others. We bought some things from a Murgo merchant, and Tor made a few remarks about Mimbrates-you know how Tor is. The merchant said that he knew somebody we might be interested in meeting and he introduced us to Nachak. The more we talked with him, the more sympathetic he seemed to become to the way we felt."
"Naturally."
"He told us what the king is planning. You wouldn't believe it."
"Probably not."
Lelldorin gave him a quick, troubled look. "He's going to break up our estates and give them to landless Mimbrate nobles." He said it accusingly.
"Did you verify that with anybody but Nachak?"
"How could we? The Mimbrates wouldn't admit it if we confronted them with it, but it's the kind of thing Mimbrates would do."
"So you've only got Nachak's word for it? How did this plan of yours come up?"
"Nachak said that if he were an Asturian, he wouldn't let anybody take his land, but he said that it'd be too late to try to stop them when they came with knights and soldiers. He said that if he were doing it, he'd strike before they were ready and that he'd do it in such a way that the Mimbrates wouldn't know who'd done it. That's when he suggested the Tolnedran uniforms."
"When did he start giving you money?"
"I'm not sure. Tor handled that part of it."
"Did he ever say why he was giving you money?"
"He said it was out of friendship."
"Didn't that seem a little odd?"
"I'd give someone money out of friendship," Lelldorin protested.
"You're an Asturian," Garion told him. "You'd give somebody your life out of friendship. Nachak's a Murgo, though, and I've never heard that they were all that generous. What it comes down to, then, is that a stranger tells you that the king's planning to take your land. Then he gives you a plan to kill the king and start a war with Tolnedra; and to make sure you succeed with his plan, he gives you money. Is that about it.
Lelldorin nodded mutely, his eyes stricken.
"Weren't any of you just the least bit suspicious?"
Lelldorin seemed almost about to cry.
"It's such a good plan," he burst out finally. "It couldn't help but succeed."
"That's what makes it so dangerous," Garion replied.
"Garion, what am I going to do?" Lelldorin's voice was anguished.
"I don't think there's anything you can do right now," Garion told him. "Maybe later, after we've had time to think about it, we'll come up with something. If we can't, we can always tell my grandfather about it. He'll think of a way to stop it."
"We can't tell anybody," Lelldorin reminded him. "We're pledged to silence."
"We might have to break that pledge," Garion said somewhat reluctantly. "I don't see that either of us owes that Murgo anything, but it's going to have to be up to you. I won't say anything to anybody without your permission."

"You decide," Lelldorin pleaded then. "I can't do it, Garion."
"You're going to have to," Garion told him. "I'm sure that if you think about it, you'll see why."
They reached the Great West Road then, and Barak led them south at a brisk trot, cutting off the possibility of further discussion.
A league or so down the road they passed a muddy village, a dozen or so turf roofed huts with walls made of wattles plastered over with mud. The fields around the village were dotted with tree stumps, and a few scrawny cows grazed near the edge of the forest. Garion could not control his indignation as he looked at the misery implicit in the crude collection of hovels.
"Lelldorin," he said sharply, "look!"
"What? Where?" The blond young man came out of his troubled preoccupation quickly as if expecting some danger.
"The village," Garion told him. "Look at it."
"It's only a serfs' village," Lelldorin said indifferently. "I've seen hundreds like it." He seemed ready to return to his own inner turmoil.
"In Sendaria we wouldn't keep pigs in places like that." Garion's voice rang with fervor. If he could only make his friend see!
Two ragged serfs were dispiritedly hacking chunks of firewood from one of the stumps near the road. As the party approached, they dropped their axes and bolted in terror for the forest.
"Does it make you proud, Lelldorin?" Garion demanded. "Does it make you feel good to know that your own countrymen are so afraid of you that they run from the very sight of you?"
Lelldorin looked baffled.
"They're serfs, Garion," he said as if that explained.
"They're men. They're not animals. Men deserve to be treated better."
"I can't do anything about it. They aren't my serfs." And with that Lelldorin's attention turned inward again as he continued to struggle with the dilemma Garion had placed upon him.
By late afternoon they had covered ten leagues and the cloudy sky was gradually darkening as evening approached.
"I think we're going to have to spend the night in the forest, Belgarath," Silk said, looking around. "There's no chance of reaching the next Tolnedran hostel."
Mister Wolf had been half-dozing in his saddle. He looked up, blinking a bit.
"All right," he replied, "but let's get back from the road a bit. Our fire could attract attention, and too many people know we're in Arendia already."
"There's a woodcutter's track right there." Durnik pointed at a break in the trees just ahead. "It should lead us back into the trees."
"All right," Wolf agreed.
The sound of their horses' hooves was muffled by the sodden leaves on the forest floor as they turned in among the trees to follow the narrow track. They rode silently for the better part of a mile until a clearing opened ahead of them.
"How about here?" Durnik asked. He indicated a brook trickling softly over mossy stones on one side of the clearing.
"It will do," Wolf agreed.
"We're going to need shelter," the smith observed.
"I bought tents in Camaar," Silk told him. "They're in the packs."
"That was foresighted of you," Aunt Pol complimented him.
"I've been in Arendia before, my Lady. I'm familiar with the weather."
"Garion and I'll go get wood for a fire then," Durnik said, climbing down from his horse and untying his axe from his saddle.
"I'll help you," Lelldorin offered, his face still troubled.
Durnik nodded and led the way off into the trees. The woods were soaked, but the smith seemed to know almost instinctively where to find dry fuel. They worked quickly in the lowering twilight and soon had three large bundles of limbs and

fagots. They returned to the clearing where Silk and the others were erecting several dun-colored tents. Durnik dropped his wood and cleared a space for the fire with his foot. Then he knelt and began striking sparks with his knife from a piece of flint into a wad of dry tinder he always carried. In a short time he had a small fire going, and Aunt Pol set out her pots beside it, humming softly to herself.

Hettar came back from tending the horses, and they all stood back watching Aunt Pol prepare a supper from the stores Count Reldegen had pressed on them before they had left his house that morning.

After they had eaten, they sat around the fire talking quietly.

"How far have we come today?" Durnik asked.

"Twelve leagues," Hettar estimated.

"How much farther do we have to go to get out of the forest?"

"It's eighty leagues from Camaar to the central plain," Lelldorin replied.

Durnik sighed. "A week or more. I'd hoped that it'd be only a few days."

"I know what you mean, Durnik," Barak agreed. "It's gloomy under all these trees."

The horses, picketed near the brook, stirred uneasily. Hettar rose to his feet.

"Something wrong?" Barak asked, also rising.

"They shouldn't be-" Hettar started. Then he stopped. "Back!" he snapped. "Away from the fire. The horses say there are men out there. Many - with weapons." He jumped back from the fire, drawing his sabre.

Lelldorin took one startled look at him and bolted for one of the tents.

Garion's sudden disappointment in his friend was almost like a blow to the stomach.

An arrow buzzed into the light and shattered on Barak's mail shirt.

"Arm yourselves!" the big man roared, drawing his sword.

Garion grasped Aunt Pol's sleeve and tried to pull her from the light.

"Stop that!" she snapped, jerking her sleeve free. Another arrow whizzed out of the foggy woods. Aunt Pol flicked her hand as if brushing away a fly and muttered a single word. The arrow bounced back as if it had struck something solid and fell to the ground.

Then with a hoarse shout, a gang of rough, burly men burst from the edge of the trees and splashed across the brook, brandishing swords. As Barak and Hettar leaped forward to meet them, Lelldorin reemerged from the tent with his bow and began loosing arrows so rapidly that his hands seemed to blur as they moved. Garion was instantly ashamed that he had doubted his friend's courage.

With a choked cry, one of the attackers stumbled back, an arrow through his throat. Another doubled over sharply, clutching at his stomach, and fell to the ground, groaning. A third, quite young and with a pale, downy beard on his cheeks, dropped heavily and sat plucking at the feathers on the shaft protruding from his chest with a bewildered expression on his boyish face. Then he sighed and slumped over on his side with a stream of blood coming from his nose.

The ragged-looking men faltered under the rain of Lelldorin's arrows, and then Barak and Hettar were upon them. With a great sweep, Barak's heavy sword shattered an upflung blade and crunched down into the angle between the neck and shoulder of the black-whiskered man who had held it. The man collapsed. Hettar made a quick feint with his sabre, then ran it smoothly through the body of a pockmarked ruffian. The man stiffened, and a gush of bright blood burst from his mouth as Hettar pulled out his blade. Durnik ran forward with his axe, and Silk drew his long dagger from under his vest and ran directly at a man with a shaggy brown beard. At the last moment, he dived forward, rolled and struck the bearded man full in the chest with both feet. Without pausing he came up and ripped his dagger into his enemy's belly. The dagger made a wet, tearing sound as it sliced upward, and the stricken man clutched at his stomach with a scream, trying to hold in the blue-colored loops and coils of his entrails that seemed to come

boiling out through his fingers.
Garion dived for the packs to get his own sword, but was suddenly grabbed roughly from behind. He struggled for an instant, then felt a stunning blow on the back of his head, and his eyes filled with a blinding flash of light.
"This is the one we want," a rough voice husked as Garion sank into unconsciousness.
He was being carried - that much was certain. He could feel the strong arms under him. He didn't know how long it had been since he had been struck on the head. His ears still rang, and he was more than a little sick to his stomach. He stayed limp, but carefully opened one eye. His vision was blurred and uncertain, but he could make out Barak's bearded face looming above him in the darkness, and merged with it, as once before in the snowy woods outside Val Alorn, he seemed to see the shaggy face of a great bear. He closed his eyes, shuddered, and started to struggle weakly.
"It's all right, Garion," Barak said, his voice sunk in a kind of despair. "It's me."
Garion opened his eyes again, and the bear seemed to be gone. He wasn't even sure he had ever really seen it.
"Are you all right?" Barak asked, setting him on the ground.
"They hit me on the head," Garion mumbled, his hand going to the swelling behind his ear.
"They won't do it again," Barak muttered, his tone still despairing. Then the huge man sank to the ground and buried his face in his hands. It was dark and difficult to see, but it looked as if Barak's shoulders were shaking with a kind of terrible suppressed grief - a soundless, wrenching series of convulsive sobs.
"Where are we?" Garion asked, looking around into the darkness.
Barak coughed and wiped at his face.
"Quite a ways from the tents. It took me a little while to catch up to the two who were carrying you off."
"What happened?" Garion was still a bit confused.
"They're dead. Can you stand up?"
"I don't know." Garion tried to get up, but a wave of giddiness swept over him, and his stomach churned.
"Never mind. I'll carry you," Barak said in a now - grimly practical voice. An owl screeched from a nearby tree, and its ghostly white shape drifted off through the trees ahead of them. As Barak lifted him, Garion closed his eyes and concentrated on keeping his stomach under control.
Before long they came out into the clearing and its circle of firelight.
"Is he all right?" Aunt Pol asked, looking up from bandaging a cut on Durnik's arm.
"A bump on the head is all," Barak replied, setting Garion down.
"Did you run them off?"
His voice was harsh, even brutal.
"Those that could still run," Silk answered, his voice a bit excited and his ferret eyes bright. "They left a few behind." He pointed at a number of still shapes lying near the edge of the firelight.
Lelldorin came back into the clearing, looking over his shoulder and with his bow half drawn. He was out of breath, his face was pale, and his hands were shaking. "Are you all right?" he asked as soon as he saw Garion.
Garion nodded, gently fingering the lump behind his ear.
"I tried to find the two who took you," the young man declared, "but they were too quick for me. There's some kind of animal out there. I heard it growling while I was looking for you - awful growls."
"The beast is gone now," Barak told him flatly.
"What's the matter with you?" Silk asked the big man.
"Nothing."

"Who were these men?" Garion asked.
"Robbers, most likely," Silk surmised, putting away his dagger. "It's one of the benefits of a society that holds men in serfdom. They get bored with being serfs and go out into the forest looking for excitement and profit."
"You sound just like Garion," Lelldorin objected. "Can't you people understand that serfdom's part of the natural order of things here? Our serfs couldn't take care of themselves alone, so those of us in higher station accept the responsibility of caring for them."
"Of course you do," Silk agreed sarcastically. "They're not so wellfed as your pigs nor as well - kenneled as your dogs, but you do care for them, don't you?"
"That'll do, Silk," Aunt Pol said coolly. "Let's not start bickering among ourselves." She tied a last knot on Durnik's bandage and came over to examine Garion's head. She touched her fingers gently to the lump, and he winced.
"It doesn't seem too serious," she observed.
"It hurts all the same," he complained.
"Of course it does, dear," she said calmly. She dipped a cloth in a pail of cold water and held it to the lump. "You're going to have to learn to protect your head, Garion. If you keep banging it like this, you're going to soften your brains."
Garion was about to answer that, but Hettar and Mister Wolf came back into the firelight just then.
"They're still running," Hettar announced. The steel discs on his horsehide jacket gleamed red in the flickering light, and his sabre was streaked with blood.
"They seemed to be awfully good at that part of it," Wolf said. "Is everyone all right?"
"A few bumps and bruises is about all," Aunt Pol told him. "It could have been much worse."
"Let's not start worrying about what could have been."
"Shall we remove those?" Barak growled, pointing at the bodies littering the ground near the brook.
"Shouldn't they be buried?" Durnik asked. His voice shook a little, and his face was very pale.
"Too much trouble," Barak said bluntly. "Their friends can come back later and take care of it - if they feel like it."
"Isn't that just a little uncivilized?" Durnik objected.
Barak shrugged. "It's customary."
Mister Wolf rolled one of the bodies over and carefully examined the dead man's gray face.
"Looks like an ordinary Arendish outlaw," he grunted. "It's hard to say for sure, though."
Lelldorin was retrieving his arrows, carefully pulling them out of the bodies.
"Let's drag them all over there a ways," Barak said to Hettar. "I'm getting tired of looking at them."
Durnik looked away, and Garion saw two great tears standing in his eyes.
"Does it hurt, Durnik?" he asked sympathetically, sitting on the log beside his friend.
"I killed one of those men, Garion," the smith replied in a shaking voice. "I hit him in the face with my axe. He screamed, and his blood splashed all over me. Then he fell down and kicked on the ground with his heels until he died."
"You didn't have any choice, Durnik," Garion told him. "They were trying to kill us."
"I've never killed anyone before," Durnik said, the tears now running down his face. "He kicked the ground for such a long time - such a terribly long time."
"Why don't you go to bed, Garion?" Aunt Pol suggested firmly. Her eyes were on Durnik's tear-streaked face.

Garion understood.
"Good night, Durnik," he said. He got up and started toward one of the tents. He glanced back once. Aunt Pol had seated herself on the log beside the smith and was speaking quietly to him with one of her arms comfortingly about his shoulders.

Chapter Five

THE FIRE HAD BURNED down to a tiny orange flicker outside the tent, and the forest around the clearing was silent. Garion lay with a throbbing head trying to sleep. Finally, long past midnight, he gave it up. He slid out from under his blanket and went searching for Aunt Pol.
Above the silvery fog a full moon had risen, and its light made the mist luminous. The air around him seemed almost to glow as he picked his way carefully through the silent camp. He scratched on the outside of her tent flap and whispered, "Aunt Pol?" There was no answer. "Aunt Pol," he whispered a bit louder, "it's me, Garion. May I come in?" There was still no answer, nor even the faintest sound. Carefully he pulled back the flap and peered inside. The tent was empty.
Puzzled, even a bit alarmed, he turned and looked around the clearing. Hettar stood watch not far from the picketed horses, his hawk face turned toward the foggy forest and his cape drawn about him. Garion hesitated a moment and then stepped quietly behind the tents. He angled down through the trees and the filmy, luminous fog toward the brook, thinking that if he bathed his aching head in cold water it might help. He was about fifty yards from the tents when he saw a faint movement among the trees ahead. He stopped.
A huge gray wolf padded out of the fog and stopped in the center of a small open space among the trees. Garion drew in his breath sharply and froze beside a large, twisted oak. The wolf sat down on the damp leaves as if he were waiting for something. The glowing fog illuminated details Garion would not have been able to see on an ordinary night. The wolf's ruff and shoulders were silvery, and his muzzle was shot with gray. He carried his age with enormous dignity, and his yellow eyes seemed calm and very wise somehow.
Garion stood absolutely still. He knew that the slightest sound would instantly reach the sharp ears of the wolf, but it was more than that. The blow behind his ear had made him light-headed, and the strange glow of moon-drenched fog made this encounter seem somehow unreal. He found that he was holding his breath.
A large, snowy white owl swooped over the open space among the trees on ghosting wings, settled on a low branch and perched there, looking down at the wolf with an unblinking stare. The gray wolf looked calmly back at the perched bird. Then, though there was no breath of wind, it seemed somehow that a sudden eddy in the shimmering fog made the figures of the owl and the wolf hazy and indistinct.
When it cleared again, Mister Wolf stood in the center of the opening, and Aunt Pol in her gray gown was seated rather sedately on the limb above him.
"It's been a long time since we've hunted together, Polgara," the old man said.
"Yes, it has, father." She raised her arms and pushed her fingers through the long, dark weight of her hair. "I'd almost forgotten what it was like." She seemed to shudder then with a strange kind of pleasure. "It's a very good night for it."
"A little damp," he replied, shaking one foot.
"It's very clear above the treetops, and the stars are particularly bright. It's a splendid night for flying."
"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Did you happen to remember what you were supposed to be doing?"
"Don't be sarcastic, father."
"Well?"

"There's no one in the vicinity but Arends, and most of them are asleep."
"You're sure?"
"Of course. There isn't a Grolim for five leagues in any direction. Did you find the ones you were looking for?"
"They weren't hard to follow," Wolf answered. "They're staying in a cave about three leagues deeper into the forest. Another one of them died on their way back there, and a couple more probably won't live until morning. The rest of them seemed a little bitter about the way things turned out."
"I can imagine. Did you get close enough to hear what they were saying?"
He nodded. "There's a man in one of the villages nearby who watches the road and lets them know when somebody passes by who might be worth robbing."
"Then they're just ordinary thieves?"
"Not exactly. They were watching for us in particular. We'd all been described to them in rather complete detail."
"I think I'll go talk to this villager," she said grimly. She flexed her fingers in an unpleasantly suggestive manner.
"It's not worth the time it would take," Wolf told her, scratching thoughtfully at his beard. "All he'd be able to tell you is that some Murgo offered him gold. Grolims don't bother to explain very much to their hirelings."
"We should attend to him, father," she insisted. "We don't want him lurking behind us, trying to buy up every brigand in Arendia to send after us."
"After tomorrow he won't buy much of anything," Wolf replied with a short laugh. "His friends plan to lure him out into the woods in the morning and cut his throat for him - among other things."
"Good. I'd like to know who the Grolim is, though."
Wolf shrugged. "What difference does it make? There are dozens of them in northern Arendia, all stirnng up as much trouble as they can. They know what's coming as well as we do. We can't expect them to just sit back and let us pass."
"Shouldn't we put a stop to it?"
"We don't have the time," he said. "It takes forever to explain things to Arends. If we move fast enough, maybe we can slip by before the Grolims are ready."
"And if we can't?"
"Then we'll do it the other way. I've got to get to Zedar before he crosses into Cthol Murgos. If too many things get in my way, I'll have to be more direct."
"You should have done that from the beginning, father. Sometimes you're too delicate about things."
"Are you going to start that again? That's always your answer to everything, Polgara. You're forever fixing things that would fix themselves if you'd just leave them alone, and changing things when they don't have to be changed."
"Don't be cross, father. Help me down."
"Why not fly down?" he suggested.
"Don't be absurd."
Garion slipped away among the mossy trees, trembling violently as he went.
When Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf returned to the clearing, they roused the others.
"I think we'd better move on," Wolf told them. "We're a little vulnerable out here. It's safer on the highway, and I'd like to get past this particular stretch of woods."
The dismantling of their night's encampment took less than an hour, and they started back along the woodcutter's track toward the Great West Road. Though it was still some hours before dawn, the moonbathed fog filled the night with misty luminosity, and it seemed almost as if they rode through a shining cloud that had settled among the dark trees. They reached the highway and turned south again.
"I'd like to be a good way from here when the sun comes up," Wolf said quietly, "but we don't want to blunder into anything, so keep your eyes and ears open."

They set off at a canter and had covered a good three leagues by the time the fog had begun to turn a pearly gray with the approach of morning. As they rounded a broad curve, Hettar suddenly raised his arm, signaling for a halt.
"What's wrong?" Barak asked him.
"Horses ahead," Hettar replied. "Coming this way."
"Are you sure? I don't hear anything."
"Forty at least," Hettar answered firmly.
"There," Durnik said, his head cocked to one side. "Hear that?"
Faintly they all heard a jingling clatter some distance off in the fog. "We could hide in the woods until they've passed," Lelldorin suggested.
"It's better to stay on the road," Wolf replied.
"Let me handle it," Silk said confidently, moving into the lead. "I've done this sort of thing before." They proceeded at a careful walk.
The riders who emerged from the fog were encased in steel. They wore full suits of polished armor and round helmets with pointed visors that made them look strangely like huge insects. They earned long lances with colored pennons at their tips, and their horses were massive beasts, also encased in armor.
"Mimbrate knights," Lelldorin snarled, his eyes going flat.
"Keep your feelings to yourself," Wolf told the young man. "If any of them say anything to you, answer in such a way that they'll think you're a Mimbrate sympathizer - like young Berentain back at your uncle's house."
Lelldorin's face hardened.
"Do as he tells you, Lelldorin," Aunt Pol said. "This isn't the time for heroics."
"Hold!" the leader of the armored column commanded, lowering his lance until the steel point was leveled at them. "Let one come forward so that I may speak with him." The knight's tone was peremptory.
Silk moved toward the steel-cased man, his smile ingratiating. "We're glad to see you, Sir Knight," he lied glibly. "We were set upon by robbers last night, and we've been riding in fear of our lives."
"What is thy name?" the knight demanded, raising his visor, "and who are these who accompany thee?"
"I am Radek of Boktor, my Lord," Silk answered, bowing and pulling off his velvet cap, "a merchant of Drasnia bound for Tol Honeth with Sendarian woolens in hopes of catching the winter market."
The armored man's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Thy party seems overlarge for so simple an undertaking, worthy merchant."
"The three there are my servants," Silk told him, pointing at Barak, Hettar, and Durnik. "The old man and the boy serve my sister, a widow of independent means who accompanies me so that she might visit Tol Honeth."
"What of the other?" the knight pressed. "The Asturian?"
"A young nobleman traveling to Vo Mimbre to visit friends there. He graciously consented to guide us through this forest."
The knight's suspicion seemed to relax a bit. "Thou madest mention of robbers,"

he said. "Where did this ambush take place?"
"About three or four leagues back. They set upon us after we had made our night's encampment. We managed to beat them off, but my sister was terrified."
"This province of Asturia seethes with rebellion and brigandage," the knight said sternly. "My men and I are sent to suppress such offenses. Come here, Asturian."
Lelldorin's nostrils flared, but he obediently came forward. "I will require thy name of thee."
"My name is Lelldorin, Sir Knight. How may I serve thee?"
"These robbers thy friends spoke of - were they commons or men of quality?"
"Serfs, my Lord," Lelldorin replied, "ragged and uncouth. Doubtless fled from

lawful submission to their masters to take up outlawry in the forest."
"How may we expect duty and proper submission from serfs when nobles raise detestable rebellion against the crown?" the knight asserted.
"Truly, my Lord," Lelldorin agreed with a show of sadness that was a trifle overdone. "Much have I argued that selfsame point with those who speak endlessly of Mimbrate oppression and overweening arrogance. My appeals for reason and dutiful respect for His Majesty, our Lord King, however, are greeted with derision and cold despite." He sighed.
"Thy wisdom becomes thee, young Lelldorin," the knight approved. "Regrettably, I must detain thee and thy companions in order that we may verify certain details."
"Sir Knight!" Silk protested vigorously. "A change in the weather could destroy the value of my merchandise in Tol Honeth. I pray you, don't delay me."
"I regret the necessity, good merchant," the knight replied, "but Asturia is filled with dissemblers and plotters. I can permit none to pass without meticulous examination."
There was a stir at the rear of the Mimbrate column. In single file, resplendent in burnished breastplates, plumed helmets and crimson capes, a half a hundred Tolnedran legionnaires rode slowly along the flank of the armored knights.
"What seems to be the problem here?" the legion commander, a lean, leather-faced man of forty or so, asked politely as he stopped not far from Silk's horse.
"We do not require the assistance of the legions in this matter," the knight said coldly. "Our orders are from Vo Mimbre. We are sent to help restore order in Asturia and we were questioning these travelers to that end."
"I have a great respect for order, Sir Knight," the Tolnedran replied, "but the security of the highway is my responsibility." He looked inquiringly at Silk.
"I am Radek of Boktor, Captain," Silk told him, "a Drasnian merchant bound for Tol Honeth. I have documents, if you wish to see them."
"Documents are easily forged," the knight declared.
"So they are," the Tolnedran agreed, "but to save time I make it a practice to accept all documents at face value. A Drasnian merchant with goods in his packs has a legitimate reason to be on an Imperial Highway, Sir Knight. There's no reason to detain him, is there?"
"We seek to stamp out banditry and rebellion," the knight asserted hotly.
"Stamp away," the captain said, "but off the highway, if you don't mind. By treaty the Imperial Highway is Tolnedran territory. What you do once you're fifty yards back in the trees is your affair; what happens on this road is mine. I'm certain that no true Mimbrate knight would want to humiliate his king by violating a solemn agreement between the Arendish crown and the Emperor of Tolendra, would he?"
The knight looked at him helplessly.
"I think you should proceed, good merchant," the Tolnedran told Silk. "I know that all Tol Honeth awaits your arrival breathlessly." Silk grinned at him and bowed fioridly in his saddle. Then he gestured to the others and they all rode slowly past the fuming Mimbrate knight. After they had passed, the legionnaires closed ranks across the highway, effectively cutting off any pursuit.
"Good man there," Barak said. "I don't think much of Tolnedrans ordinarily, but that one's different."
"Let's move right along," Mister Wolf said. "I'd rather not have those knights doubling back on us after the Tolnedrans leave."
They pushed their horses into a gallop and rode on, leaving the knights behind, arguing heatedly with the legion commander in the middle of the road.
They stayed that night at a thick-walled Tolnedran hostel, and for perhaps the first time in his life Garion bathed without the insistence or even the suggestion of his Aunt. Though he had not had the chance to become directly involved in the fight in the clearing the night before, he felt somehow as if he

were spattered with blood or worse. He had not before realized how grotesquely men could be mutilated in close fighting. Watching a living man disembowled or brained had filled him with a kind of deep shame that the ultimate inner secrets of the human body could be so grossly exposed. He felt unclean. He removed his clothing in the chilly bathhouse and even, without thinking, the silver amulet Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol had given him, and then he entered the steaming tub where he scrubbed at his skin with a coarse brush and strong soap, much harder than even the most meticulous obsession with personal cleanliness would have required.

For the next several days they moved southward at a steady pace, stopping each night at the evenly spaced Tolnedran hostels where the presence of the hard-faced legionnaires was a continual reminder that all the might of Imperial Tolnedra guaranteed the safety of travelers who sought refuge there.

On the sixth day after the fight in the forest, however, Lelldorin's horse pulled up lame. Durnik and Hettar, under Aunt Pol's supervision, spent several hours brewing poultices over a small fire by the roadside and applying steaming compresses to the animal's leg while Wolf fumed at the delay. By the time the horse was fit to continue, they all realized that there was no chance to reach the next hostel before dark.

"Well, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol said after they had remounted, "what now? Do we ride on at night, or do we try to take shelter in the forest again?"

"I haven't decided," Wolf answered shortly.

"If I remember right, there's a village not far ahead," Lelldorin, now mounted on an Algar horse, stated. "It's a poor place, but I think it has an inn - of sorts."

"That sounds ominous," Silk said. "What exactly do you mean by 'of sorts'?"

"The Lord of this demesne is notoriously greedy," Lelldorin replied. "His taxes are crushing, and his people have little left for themselves. The inn isn't good."

"We'll have to chance it," Wolf decided, and led them off at a brisk trot. As they approached the village, the heavy clouds began to clear off, and the sun broke through wanly.

The village was even worse than Lelldorin's description had led them to believe. A half dozen ragged beggars stood in the mud on the outskirts, their hands held out imploringly and their voices shrill. The houses were nothing more than rude hovels oozing smoke from the pitiful fires within. Scrawny pigs rooted in the muddy streets, and the stench of the place was awful.

A funeral procession slogged through the mud toward the burial ground on the other side of the village. The corpse, carried on a board, was wrapped in a ragged brown blanket, and the richly robed and cowled priests of Chaldan, the Arendish God, chanted an age-old hymn that had much to do with war and vengeance, but little to do with comfort. The widow, a whimpering infant at her breast, followed the body, her face blank and her eyes dead.

The inn smelled of stale beer and half-rotten food. A fire had destroyed one end of the common room, charring and blackening the lowbeamed ceiling. The gaping hole in the burned wall was curtained off with a sheet of rotting canvas. The fire pit in the center of the room smoked, and the hard-faced innkeeper was surly. For supper he offered only bowls of watery gruel - a mixture of barley and turnips.

"Charming," Silk said sardonically, pushing away his untouched bowl. "I'm a bit surprised at you, Lelldorin. Your passion for correcting wrongs seems to have overlooked this place. Might I suggest that your next crusade include a visit to the Lord of this demesne? His hanging seems long overdue."

"I hadn't realized it was so bad," Lelldorin replied in a subdued voice. He looked around as if seeing certain things for the first time. A kind of sick horror began to show itself in his transparent face.

Garion, his stomach churning, stood up. "I think I'll go outside," he declared.
"Not too far," Aunt Pol warned.
The air outside was at least somewhat cleaner, and Garion picked his way carefully toward the edge of the village, trying to avoid the worst of the mud.
"Please, my Lord," a little girl with huge eyes begged, "have you a crust of bread to spare?"
Garion looked at her helplessly. "I'm sorry." He fumbled through his clothes, looking for something to give her, but the child began to cry and turned away.
In the stump-dotted field beyond the stinking streets, a ragged boy about Garion's own age was playing a wooden flute as he watched a few scrubby cows. The melody he played was heartbreakingly pure, drifting unnoticed among the hovels squatting in the slanting rays of the pale sun. The boy saw him, but did not break off his playing. Their eyes met with a kind of grave recognition, but they did not speak.
At the edge of the forest beyond the field, a dark-robed and hooded man astride a black horse came out of the trees and sat watching the village. There was something ominous about the dark figure, and something vaguely familiar as well. It seemed somehow to Garion that he should know who the rider was, but, though his mind groped for a name, it tantalizingly eluded him. He looked at the figure at the edge of the woods for a long time, noticing without even being aware of it that though the horse and rider stood in the full light of the setting sun, there was no shadow behind them. Deep in his mind something tried to shriek at him, but, all bemused, he merely watched. He would not say anything to Aunt Pol or the others about the figure at the edge of the woods because there was nothing to say; as soon as he turned his back, he would forget.
The light began to fade, and, because he had begun to shiver, he turned to go back to the inn with the aching song of the boy's flute soaring toward the sky above him.

Chapter Six

DESPITE THE PROMISE Of the brief Sunset, the next day dawned cold and murky with a chill drizzle that wreathed down among the trees and made the entire forest sodden and gloomy. They left the inn early and soon entered a part of the wood that seemed more darkly foreboding than even the ominous stretches through which they had previously passed. The trees here were enormous, and many vast, gnarled oaks lifted their bare limbs among the dark firs and spruces. The forest floor was covered with a kind of gray moss that looked diseased and unwholesome.
Lelldorin had spoken little that morning, and Garion assumed that his friend was still struggling with the problem of Nachak's scheme. The young Asturian rode along, wrapped in his heavy green cloak, his reddish-gold hair damp and dispirited-looking in the steady drizzle. Garion pulled in beside his friend, and they rode silently for a while. "What's troubling you, Lelldorin?" he asked finally.
"I think that all my life I've been blind, Garion," Lelldorin replied.
"Oh? In what way?" Garion said it carefully, hoping that his friend had finally decided to tell Mister Wolf everything.
"I saw only Mimbre's oppression of Asturia. I never saw our own oppression of our own people."
"I've been trying to tell you that," Garion pointed out. "What made you see it finally?"
"That village where we stayed last night," Lelldorin explained. "I've never seen so poor and mean a place - or people crushed into such hopeless misery. How can they bear it?"
"Do they have any choice?"
"My father at least looks after the people on his land," the young man asserted

defensively. "No one goes hungry or without shelter - but those people are treated worse than animals. I've always been proud of my station, but now it makes me ashamed." Tears actually stood in his eyes.
Garion was not sure how to deal with his friend's sudden awakening. On the one hand, he was glad that Lelldorin had finally seen what had always been obvious; but on the other, he was more than a little afraid of what this newfound perception might cause his mercurial companion to leap into.
"I'll renounce my rank," Lelldorin declared suddenly, as if he had been listening to Garion's thoughts, "and when I return from this quest, I'll go among the serfs and share their lives - their sorrows."
"What good will that do? How would your suffering in any way make theirs less?"
Lelldorin looked up sharply, a half dozen emotions chasing each other across his open face. Finally he smiled, but there was a determination in his blue eyes.
"You're right, of course," he said. "You always are. It's amazing how you can always see directly to the heart of a problem, Garion."
"Just what have you got in mind?" Garion asked a little apprehensively.
"I'll lead them in revolt. I'll sweep across Arendia with an army of serfs at my back." His voice rang as his imagination fired with the idea.
Garion groaned. "Why is that always your answer to everything, Lelldorin?" he demanded. "In the first place, the serfs don't have any weapons and they don't know how to fight. No matter how hard you talk, you'd never get them to follow you. In the second place, if they did, every nobleman in Arendia would join ranks against you. They'd butcher your army; and afterward, things would be ten times worse. In the third place, you'd just be starting another civil war; and that's exactly what the Murgos want."
Lelldorin blinked several times as Garion's words sank in. His face gradually grew mournful again. "I hadn't thought of that," he confessed.
"I didn't think you had. You're going to keep making these mistakes as long as you keep carrying your brain in the same scabbard with your sword, Lelldorin."
Lelldorin hushed at that, and then he laughed ruefully. "That's a pointed way of putting it, Garion," he said reproachfully.
"I'm sorry," Garion apologized quickly. "Maybe I should have said it another way."
"No," Lelldorin told him. "I'm an Arend. I tend to miss things if they aren't said directly."
"It's not that you're stupid, Lelldorin," Garion protested. "That's a mistake everyone makes. Arends aren't stupid - they're just impulsive."
"All this was more than just impulsiveness," Lelldorin insisted sadly, gesturing out at the damp moss lying under the trees.
"This what?" Garion asked, looking around.
"This is the last stretch of forest before we come out on the plains of central Arendia," Lelldorin explained. "It's the natural boundary between Mimbre and Asturia."
"The woods look the same as all the rest," Garion observed, looking around.
"Not really," Lelldorin said somberly. "This was the favorite ground for ambush. The floor of this forest is carpeted with old bones. Look there." He pointed.
At first it seemed to Garion that what his friend indicated was merely a pair of twisted sticks protruding from the moss with the twigs at their ends entangled in a scrubby bush. Then, with revulsion, he realized that they were the greenish bones of a human arm, the fingers clutched at the bush in a last convulsive agony. Outraged, he demanded, "Why didn't they bury him?"
"It would take a thousand men a thousand years to gather all the bones that lie here and commit them to earth," Lelldorin intoned morbidly. "Whole generations of Arendia rest here - Mimbrate, Wacite, Asturian. All lie where they fell, and the moss blankets their endless slumber."

Garion shuddered and pulled his eyes away from the mute appeal of that lone arm rising from the sea of moss on the floor of the forest. The curious lumps and hummocks of that moss suggested the horror which lay moldering beneath. As he raised his eyes, he realized that the uneven surface extended as far as he could see, "How long until we reach the plain?" he asked in a hushed voice.
"Two days, probably."
"Two days? And it's all like this?"
Lelldorin nodded.
"Why?" Garion's tone was harsher, more accusing than he'd intended.
"At first for pride - and honor," Lelldorin replied. "Later for grief and revenge. Finally it was simply because we didn't know how to stop. As you said before, sometimes we Arends aren't very bright."
"But always brave," Garion answered quickly.
"Oh yes," Lelldorin admitted. "Always brave. It's our national curse."
"Belgarath," Hettar said quietly from behind them, "the horses smell something."
Mister Wolf roused himself from the doze in which he usually rode. "What?"
"The horses," Hettar repeated. "Something out there's frightening them."
Wolf's eyes narrowed and then grew strangely blank. After a moment he drew in a sharp breath with a muttered curse.
"Algroths," he swore.
"What's an Algroth?" Durnik asked.
"A non-human-somewhat distantly related to Trolls."
"I saw a Troll once," Barak said. "A big ugly thing with claws and fangs."
"Will they attack us?" Durnik asked.
"Almost certainly." Wolf's voice was tense. "Hettar, you're going to have to keep the horses under control. We don't dare get separated."
"Where did they come from?" Lelldorin asked. "There aren't any monsters in this forest."
"They come down out of the mountains of Ulgo sometimes when they get hungry," Wolf answered. "They don't leave survivors to report their presence."
"You'd better do something, father," Aunt Pol said. "They're all around us."
Lelldorin looked quickly around as if getting his bearings. "We're not far from Elgon's tor," he offered. "We might be able to hold them off if we get there."
"Elgon's tor?" Barak said. He had already drawn his heavy sword.
"It's a high hillock covered with boulders," Lelldorin explained. "It's almost like a fort. Elgon held it for a month against a Mimbrate army."
"Sounds promising," Silk said. "It would get us out of the trees at least." He looked nervously around at the forest looming about them in the drizzling rain.
"Let's try for it," Wolf decided. "They haven't worked themselves up to the point of attacking yet, and the rain's confusing their sense of smell."
A strange barking sound came from back in the forest.
"Is that them?" Garion asked, his voice sounding shrill in his own ears.
"They're calling to each other," Wolf told him. "Some of them have seen us. Let's pick up the pace a bit, but don't start running until we see the tor."
They nudged their nervous horses into a trot and moved steadily along the muddy road as it began to climb toward the top of a low ridge. "Half a league," Lelldorin said tensely. "Half a league and we should see the tor."
The horses were difficult to hold in, and their eyes rolled wildly at the surrounding woods. Garion felt his heart pounding, and his mouth was suddenly dry. It started to rain a bit harder. He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and looked quickly. A manlike figure was loping along parallel to the road about a hundred paces back in the forest. It ran half crouched, its hands touching the ground. It seemed to be a loathsome gray color.
"Over there!" Garion cried.
"I saw him," Barak growled. "Not quite as big as a Troll."
Silk grimaced. "Big enough."

"If they attack, be careful of their claws," Wolf warned. "They're venomous."
"That's exciting," Silk said.
"There's the tor," Aunt Pol announced quite calmly.
"Let's run!" Wolf barked.
The frightened horses, suddenly released, leaped forward and fled up the road, their hoofs churning. An enraged howl came from the woods behind them, and the barking sound grew louder all around them.
"We're going to make it!" Durnik shouted in encouragement. But suddenly a half-dozen snarling Algroths were in the road in front of them, their arms spread wide and their mouths gaping hideously. They were huge, with apelike arms and claws instead of fingers. Their faces were goatish, surmounted by short, sharp-pointed horns, and they had long, yellow fangs. Their gray skin was scaly, reptilian.
The horses screamed and reared, trying to bolt. Garion clung to his saddle with one hand and fought the reins with the other.
Barak beat at his horse's rump with the flat of his sword and kicked savagely at the animal's flanks until the horse, finally more afraid of him than the Algroths, charged. With two great sweeps, one to either side, Barak killed two of the beasts as he plunged through. A third, claws outstretched, tried to leap on his back, but stiffened and collapsed facedown in the mud with one of Lelldorin's arrows between its shoulders. Barak wheeled his horse and chopped at the three remaining creatures. "Let's go!" he bellowed.
Garion heard Lelldorin gasp and turned quickly. With sick horror he saw that a lone Algroth had crept out of the woods beside the road and was clawing at his friend, trying to hook him out of the saddle. Weakly, Lelldorin beat at the goat face with his bow. Garion desperately drew his sword, but Hettar, coming from behind, was already there. His curved sabre ran through the beast's body, and the Algroth shrieked and fell writhing to the ground beneath the pounding hoofs of the pack animals.
The horses, running now in sheer panic, scrambled toward the slope of the boulder-strewn tor. Garion glanced back over his shoulder and saw Lelldorin swaying dangerously in his saddle, his hand pressed to his bleeding side. Garion pulled in savagely on his reins and turned his horse.
"Save yourself, Garion!" Lelldorin shouted, his face deadly pale.
"No!" Garion sheathed his sword, pulled in beside his friend and took his arm, steadying him in the saddle. Together they galloped toward the tor with Garion straining to hold the injured young man.
The tor was a great jumble of earth and stone thrusting up above the tallest trees around it. Their horses scrambled and clattered up the side among the wet boulders. When they reached the small flat area at the top of the tor where the pack animals huddled together, trembling in the rain, Garion slid out of his saddle in time to catch Lelldorin, who toppled slowly to one side.
"Over here," Aunt Pol called sharply. She was pulling her small bundle of herbs and bandages out of one of the packs. "Durnik, I'll need a fire - at once."
Durnik looked around helplessly at the few scraps of wood lying in the rain at the top of the tor. "I'll try," he said doubtfully.
Lelldorin's breathing was shallow and very fast. His face was still a deadly white, and his legs would not hold him. Garion held him up, a sick fear in the pit of his stomach. Hettar took the wounded man's other arm, and between them they half carried him to where Aunt Pol knelt, opening her bundle.
"I have to get the poison out immediately," she told them. "Garion, give me your knife."
Garion drew his dagger and handed it to her. Swiftly she ripped open Lelldorin's brown tunic along his side, revealing the savage wounds the Algroth's claws had made.
"This will hurt," she said. "Hold him."

Garion and Hettar took hold of Lelldorin's arms and legs, holding him down. Aunt Pol took a deep breath and then deftly sliced open each of the puffy wounds. Blood spurted and Lelldorin screamed once. Then he fainted.
"Hettar!" Barak shouted from atop a boulder near the edge of the slope. "We need you!"
"Go!" Aunt Pol told the hawk-faced Algar. "We can handle this now. Garion, you stay here." She was crushing some dried leaves and sprinkling the fragments into the bleeding wounds. "The fire, Durnik," she ordered.
"It won't start, Mistress Pol," Durnik replied helplessly. "It's too wet."
She looked quickly at the pile of sodden wood the smith had gathered. Her eyes narrowed, and she made a quick gesture. Garion's ears rang strangely and there was a sudden hissing. A cloud of steam burst from the wood, and then crackling flames curled up from the sticks. Durnik jumped back, startled.
"The small pot, Garion," Aunt Pol instructed, "and water. Quickly." She pulled ofl' her blue cloak and covered Lelldorin with it.
Silk, Barak and Hettar stood at the edge of the slope, heaving large rocks over the edge. Garion could hear the clatter and clash of the rocks striking the boulders below and the barking of the Algroths, punctuated by an occasional howl of pain.
He cradled his friend's head in his lap, terribly afraid. "Is he going to be all right?" he appealed to Aunt Pol.
"It's too early to tell," she answered. "Don't bother me with questions just now."
"They're running!" Barak shouted.
"They're still hungry," Wolf replied grimly. "They'll be back."
From far off in the forest there came the sound of a brassy horn.
"What's that?" Silk asked, still puffing from the effort of heaving the heavy stones over the edge.
"Someone I've been expecting," Wolf answered with a strange smile. He raised his hands to his lips and whistled shrilly.
"I can manage now, Garion," Aunt Pol said, mashing a thick paste into a steaming pad of wet linen bandage. "You and Durnik go help the others."
Reluctantly Garion lowered Lelldorin's head to the wet turf and ran over to where Wolf stood. The slope below was littered with dead and dying Algroths, crushed by the rocks Barak and the others had hurled down on them.
"They're going to try again," Barak said, hefting another rock. "Can they get at us from behind?"
Silk shook his head. "No. I checked. The back of the hill's a sheer face."
The Algroths came out of the woods below, barking and snarling as they loped forward with their half crouched gait. The first of them had already crossed the road when the horn blew again, very close this time.
And then a huge horse bearing a man in full armor burst out of the trees and thundered down upon the attacking creatures. The armored man crouched over his lance and plunged directly into the midst of the startled Algroths. The great horse screamed as he charged, and his ironshod hoofs churned up big clots of mud. The lance crashed through the chest of one of the largest Algroths and splintered from the force of the blow. The splintered end took another full in the face. The knight discarded the shattered lance and drew his broadsword with a single sweep of his arm. With wide swings to the right and left he chopped his way through the pack, his warhorse trampling the living and the dead alike into the mud of the road. At the end of his charge he whirled and plunged back again, once more opening a path with his sword. The Algroths turned and fled howling into the woods.
"Mandorallen!" Wolf shouted. "Up here!"
The armored knight raised his blood-spattered visor and looked up the hill.
"Permit me to disperse this rabble first, my ancient friend," he answered gaily,

clanged down his visor, and plunged into the rainy woods after the Algroths.
"Hettar!" Barak shouted, already moving.
Hettar nodded tersely, and the two of them ran to their horses. They swung into their saddles and plunged down the wet slope to the aid of the stranger.
"Your friend shows a remarkable lack of good sense," Silk observed to Mister Wolf, wiping the rain from his face. "Those things will turn on him any second now."
"It probably hasn't occurred to him that he's in any danger," Wolf replied.
"He's a Mimbrate, and they tend to think they're invincible." The fight in the woods seemed to last for a long time. There were shouts and ringing blows and shrieks of terror from the Algroths. Then Hettar, Barak, and the strange knight rode out of the trees and trotted up the tor. At the top, the armored man clanged down from his horse. "Well met, my old friend," he boomed to Mister Wolf. "Thy friends below were most frolicsome." His armor gleamed wetly in the rain.
"I'm glad we found something to entertain you," Wolf said dryly.
"I can still hear them," Durnik reported. "I think they're still running."
"Their cowardice hath deprived us of an amusing afternoon," the knight observed, regretfully sheathing his sword and removing his helmet.
"We must all make sacrifices," Silk drawled.
The knight sighed. "All too true. Thou art a man of philosophy, I see." He shook the water out of the white plume on his helmet.
"Forgive me," Mister Wolf said. "This is Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor. He'll be going with us. Mandorallen, this is Prince Kheldar of Drasnia and Barak, Earl of Trellheim and cousin to King Anheg of Cherek. Over there is Hettar, son of Cho-Hag, chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria. The practical one is Goodman Durnik of Sendaria, and this boy is Garion, my grandson - several times removed."
Mandorallen bowed deeply to each of them. "I greet you, comrades all," he declaimed in his booming voice. "Our adventure hath seen a fortuitous beginning. And pray tell, who is this lady, whose beauty doth bedazzle mine eye?"
"A pretty speech, Sir Knight," Aunt Pol replied with a rich laugh, her hand going almost unconsciously to her damp hair. "I'm going to like this one, father."
"The legendary Lady Polgara?" Mandorallen asked. "My life hath now seen its crown." His courtly bow was somewhat marred by the creaking of his armor.
"Our injured friend is Lelldorin, son of the Baron of Wildantor," Wolf continued. "You may have heard of him."
Mandorallen's face darkened slightly. "Indeed. Rumor, which sometimes loth run before us like a barking dog, hath suggested that Lelldorin of Wildantor hath raised on occasion foul rebellion against the crown."
"That's of no matter now," Wolf stressed. "The business which has brought us together is much more serious than all that. You'll have to put it aside."
"It shall be as you say, noble Belgarath," Mandorallen declared immediately, though his eyes still lingered on the unconscious Lelldorin.
"Grandfather!" Garion called, pointing at a mounted figure that had suddenly appeared on the side of the stony hilltop. The figure was robed in black and sat a black horse. He pushed back his hood to reveal a polished steel mask cast in the form of a face that was at once beautiful and strangely repelling. A voice deep in Garion's mind told him that there was something important about the strange rider - something he should remember - but whatever it was eluded him.
"Abandon this quest, Belgarath." The voice was hollow behind the mask.
"You know me better than that, Chamdar," Mister Wolf said calmly, quite obviously recognizing the rider. "Was this childishness with the Algroths your idea?"
"And you should know me better than that," the figure retorted derisively. "When

I come against you, you can expect things to be a bit more serious. For now, there are enough underlings about to delay you. That's all we really need. Once Zedar has carried Cthrag Yaska to my Master, you can try your power against the might and will of Torak, if you'd like."
"Are you running errands for Zedar, then?" Wolf asked.
"I run no man's errands," the figure replied with heavy contempt. The rider seemed solid, as real as any of them standing on the hilltop, but Garion could see the filmy drizzle striking the rocks directly beneath horse and man. Whatever the figure was, the rain was falling right through it.
"Why are you here then, Chamdar?" Wolf demanded.
"Let's call it curiosity, Belgarath. I wanted to see for myself how you'd managed to translate the Prophecy into everyday terms." The figure looked around at the others on the hilltop. "Clever," it said with a certain grudging admiration. "Where did you find them all?"
"I didn't have to find them, Chamdar," Wolf answered. "They've been there all along. If any part of the Prophecy is valid, then it all has to be valid, doesn't it? There's no contrivance involved at all, Each one has come down to me through more generations than you can imagine."
The figure seemed to hiss with a sharp intake of its breath. "It isn't complete yet, old man."
"It will be, Chamdar," Wolf replied confidently. "I've already seen to that."
"Which is the one who will live twice?" the figure asked suddenly. Wolf smiled coldly, but did not answer.
"Hail, my Queen," the figure said mockingly then to Aunt Pol.
"Grolim courtesy always leaves me quite cold," she returned with a frosty look. "I'm not your queen, Chamdar."
"You will be, Polgara. My Master said that you are to become his wife when he comes into his kingdom. You'll be queen of all the world."
"That puts you at a bit of a disadvantage, doesn't it, Chamdar? If I'm to become your queen, you can't really cross me, can you?"
"I can work around you, Polgara, and once you've become the bride of Torak, his will becomes your will. I'm sure you won't hold any old grudges at that point."
"I think we've had about enough of this, Chamdar," Mister Wolf said. "Your conversation's beginning to bore me. You can have your shadow back now." He waved his hand negligently as if brushing away a troublesome fly. "Go," he commanded.
Once again Garion felt that strange surge and that hollow roaring in his mind. The horseman vanished.
"You didn't destroy him, did you?" Silk gasped in a shocked voice.
"No," Mister Wolf told him. "It was all just an illusion. It's a childish trick the Grolims find impressive. A shadow can be projected over quite some distance if you want to take the trouble. All I did was send his shadow back to him." He grinned suddenly with a sly twist to his lips. "Of course I selected a somewhat indirect route. It may take a few days to make the trip. It won't actually hurt him, but it's going to make him a bit uncomfortable - and extremely conspicuous."
"A most unseemly specter," Mandorallen observed. "Who was this rude shade?"
"It was Chamdar," Aunt Pol said, returning her attention to the injured Lelldorin, "one of the chief priests of the Grolims. Father and I have met him before."
"I think we'd better get off this hilltop," Wolf stated. "How soon will Lelldorin be able to ride?"
"A week at least," Aunt Pol replied, "if then."
"That's out of the question. We can't stay here."
"He can't ride," she told him firmly.
"Couldn't we make a litter of some sort?" Durnik suggested. "I'm sure I can make

something we can sling between two horses so we can move him without hurting him."
"Well, Pol?" Wolf asked.
"I suppose it will be all right," she said a little dubiously.
"Let's do it then. We're much too exposed up here, and we've got to move on."
Durnik nodded and went to the packs for rope to use in building the litter.

Chapter Seven

SIR MANDORALLEN, BARON OF VO MANDOR, was a man of slightly more than medium height. His hair was black and curly, his eyes were deep blue, and he had a resonant voice in which he expressed firmly held opinions. Garion did not like him. The knight's towering self confidence, an egotism so pure that there was a kind of innocence about it, seemed to confirm the worst of Lelldorin's dark pronouncements about Mimbrates; and Mandorallen's extravagant courtesy to Aunt Pol struck Garion as beyond the bounds of proper civility. To make matters even worse, Aunt Pol seemed quite willing to accept the knight's flatteries at face value.
As they rode through the continuing drizzle along the Great West Road, Garion noted with some satisfaction that his companions appeared to share his opinion. Barak's expression spoke louder than words; Silk's eyebrows lifted sardonically at each of the knight's pronouncements; and Durnik scowled.
Garion, however, had little time to sort out his feelings about the Mimbrate. He rode close beside the litter upon which Lelldorin tossed painfully as the Algroth Polson seared in his wounds. He offered his friend what comfort he could and exchanged frequent worried looks with Aunt Pol, who rode nearby. During the worst of Lelldorin's paroxysms, Garion helplessly held the young man's hand, unable to think of anything else to do to ease his pain.
"Bear thine infirmity with fortitude, good youth," Mandorallen cheerfully advised the injured Asturian after a particularly bad bout that left Lelldorin gasping and moaning. "This discomfort of throe is but an illusion. Thy mind can put it to rest if thou wouldst have it so."
"That's exactly the kind of comfort I'd expect from a Mimbrate," Lelldorin retorted from between clenched teeth. "I think I'd rather you didn't ride so close. Your opinions smell almost as bad as your armor."
Mandorallen's face flushed slightly. "The venom which loth rage through the body of our injured friend hath, it would seem, bereft him of civility as well as sense," he observed coldly.
Lelldorin half raised himself in the litter as if to respond hotly, but the sudden movement seemed to aggravate his injury, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.
"His wounds are grave," Mandorallen stated. "Thy poultice, Lady Polgara, may not suffice to save his life."
"He needs rest," she told him. "Try not to agitate him so much."
"I will place myself beyond the reach of his eye," Mandorallen replied. "Through no fault of mine own, my visage is hateful to him and doth stir him to unhealthful choler." He moved his warhorse ahead at a canter until he was some distance in front of the rest of them.
"Do they all talk like that?" Garion asked with a certain rancor. "Thee's and thou's and cloth's?"
"Mimbrates tend to be very formal," Aunt Pol explained. "You'll get used to it."
"I think it sounds stupid," Garion muttered darkly, glaring after the knight.
"An example of good manners won't hurt you all that much, Garion."
They rode on through the dripping forest as evening settled among the trees.

"Aunt Pol?" Garion asked finally.

"Yes, dear?"
"What was that Grolim talking about when he said that about you and Torak?"
"It's something Torak said once when he was raving. The Grolims took it seriously, that's all." She pulled her blue cloak tighter about her.
"Doesn't it worry you?"
"Not particularly."
"What was that Prophecy the Grolim was talking about? I didn't understand any of that." The word "Prophecy" for some reason stirred something very deep in him.
"The Mrin Codex," she answered. "It's a very old version, and the writing's almost illegible. It mentions companions - the bear, the rat, and the man who will live twice. It's the only version that says anything about them. Nobody knows for certain that it really means anything."

"Grandfather thinks it does, doesn't he?"
"Your grandfather has a number of curious notions. Old things impress him - probably because he's so old himself."
Garion was going to ask her about this Prophecy that seemed to exist in more than one version, but Lelldorin moaned then and they both immediately turned to him.
They arrived shortly thereafter at a Tolnedran hostel with thick, whitewashed walls and a red tile roof. Aunt Pol saw to it that Lelldorin was placed in a warm room, and she spent the night sitting by his bed caring for him. Garion padded worriedly down the dark hallway in his stocking feet a half-dozen times before morning to check on his friend, but there seemed to be no change.
By daybreak the rain had let up. They started out in the grayish dawn with Mandorallen still riding some distance ahead until they reached at last the edge of the dark forest and saw before them the vast, open expanse of the Arendish central plain, dun-colored and sere in the last few weeks of winter. The knight stopped there and waited for them to join him, his face somber.
"What's the trouble?" Silk asked him.
Mandorallen pointed gravely at a column of black smoke rising from a few miles out on the plain.
"What is it?" Silk inquired, his rat face puzzled.
"Smoke in Arendia can mean but one thing," the knight replied, pulling on his plumed helmet. "Abide here, dear friends. I will investigate, but I fear the worst." He set his spurs to the flanks of his charger and leaped forward at a thunderous gallop.
"Wait!" Barak roared after him, but Mandorallen rode on obliviously. "That idiot," the big Cherek fumed. "I'd better go with him in case there's trouble."
"It isn't necessary," Lelldorin advised weakly from his litter. "Not even an army would dare to interfere with him."
"I thought you didn't like him," Barak said, a little surprised.
"I don't," Lelldorin admitted, "but he's the most feared man in Arendia. Even in Asturia we've heard of Sir Mandorallen. No sane man would stand in his way."
They drew back into the shelter of the forest and waited for the knight to come back. When he returned, his face was angry. "It is as I feared," he announced. "A war doth rage in our path - a senseless war, since the two barons involved are kinsmen and the best of friends."
"Can we go around it?" Silk asked.
"Nay, Prince Kheldar," Mandorallen replied. "Their conflict is so widespread that we would be waylaid ere we had gone three leagues. I must, it would appear, buy us passage."
"Do you think they'll take money to let us pass?" Durnik asked dubiously.
"In Arendia there is another way to make such purchase, Goodman," Mandorallen responded. "May I prevail upon thee to obtain six or eight stout poles perhaps twenty feet in length and about as thick as my wrist at the butt?"

"Of course." Durnik took up his axe.
"What have you got in mind?" Barak rumbled.
"I will challenge them," Mandorallen announced calmly, "one or all. No true knight could refuse me without being called craven. Wilt thou be my second and deliver my challenge, my Lord?"
"What if you lose?" Silk suggested.
"Lose?" Mandorallen seemed shocked. "I? Lose?"
"Let it pass," Silk said.
By the time Durnik had returned with the poles, Mandorallen had finished

tightening various straps beneath his armor. Taking one of the poles, he vaulted into his saddle and started at a rolling trot toward the column of smoke, with Barak at his side.
"Is this really necessary, father?" Aunt Pol asked.
"We have to get through, Pol," Mister Wolf replied. "Don't worry. Mandorallen knows what he's doing."
After a couple of miles they reached the top of a hill and looked down at the battle below. Two grim, black castles faced each other across a broad valley, and several villages dotted the plain on either side of the road. The nearest village was in flames, with a great pillar of greasy smoke rising from it to the lead-gray sky overhead, and serfs armed with scythes and pitchforks were attacking each other with a sort of mindless ferocity on the road itself. Some distance off, pikemen were gathering for a charge, and the air was thick with arrows. On two opposing hills parties of armored knights with bright-colored pennons on their lances watched the battle. Great siege engines lofted boulders into the air to crash down on the struggling men, killing, so far as Garion could tell, friend and foe indiscriminately. The valley was littered with the dead and the dying.
"Stupid," Wolf muttered darkly.
"No one I know of has ever accused Arends of brilliance," Silk observed.
Mandorallen set his horn to his lips and blew a shattering blast. The battle paused as the soldiers and serfs all stopped to stare up at him. He sounded his horn again, and then again, each brassy note a challenge it itself. As the two opposing bodies of knights galloped through the kneehigh, winter-yellowed grass to investigate, Mandorallen turned to Barak. "If it please thee, my Lord," he requested politely, "deliver my challenge as soon as they approach us."
Barak shrugged. "It's your skin," he noted. He eyed the advancing knights and then lifted his voice in a great roar. "Sir Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor, desires entertainment," he declaimed. "It would amuse him if each of your parties would select a champion to joust with him. If, however, you are all such cowardly dogs that you have no stomach for such a contest, cease this brawling and stand aside so that your betters may pass."
"Splendidly spoken, my Lord Barak," Mandorallen said with admiration.
"I've always had a way with words," Barak replied modestly. The two parties of knights warily rode closer.
"For shame, my Lords," Mandorallen chided them. "Ye will gain no honor in this sorry war. Sir Derigen, what hath caused this contention?"
"An insult, Sir Mandorallen," the noble replied. He was a large man, and his polished steel helmet had a golden circlet riveted above the visor. "An insult so vile that it may not go unpunished."
"It was I who was insulted," a noble on the other side contended hotly.
"What was the nature of this insult, Sir Oltorain?" Mandorallen inquired.
Both men looked away uneasily, and neither spoke.
"Ye have gone to war over an insult which cannot even be recalled?" Mandorallen said incredulously. "I had thought, my Lords, that ye were serious men, but I now perceive my error."

"Don't the nobles of Arendia have anything better to do?" Barak asked in a voice heavy with contempt.
"Of Sir Mandorallen the bastard we have all heard," a swarthy knight in black enamelled armor sneered, "but who is this red-bearded ape who so maligns his betters?"
"You're going to take that?" Barak asked Mandorallen.
"It's more or less true," Mandorallen admitted with a pained look, "since there was some temporary irregularity about my birth which still raises questions about my legitimacy. This knight is Sir Haldorin, my third cousin-twice removed. Since it's considered unseemly in Arendia to spill the blood of kinsmen, he thus cheaply gains reputation for boldness by casting the matter in my teeth."
"Stupid custom," Barak grunted. "In Cherek kinsmen kill each other with more enthusiasm than they kill strangers."
"Alas." Mandorallen sighed. "This is not Cherek."
"Would you be offended if I dealt with this?" Barak asked politely.
"Not at all."
Barak moved closer to the swarthy knight. "I am Barak, Earl of Trellheim," he announced in a loud voice, "kinsman to King Anheg of Cherek, and I see that certain nobles in Arendia have even fewer manners than they have brains."
"The Lords of Arendia are not impressed by the self bestowed titles of the pig-sty kingdoms of the north," Sir Haldorin retorted coldly.
"I find your words offensive, friend," Barak said ominously.
"And I find thy ape face and scraggly beard amusing," Sir Haldorin replied.
Barak did not even bother to draw his sword. He swung his huge arm in a wide circle and crashed his fist with stunning force against the side of the swarthy knight's helmet. Sir Haldorin's eyes glazed as he was swept from his saddle, and he made a vast clatter when he struck the ground.
"Would anyone else like to comment about my beard?" Barak demanded.
"Gently, my Lord," Mandorallen advised. He glanced down with a certain satisfaction at the unconscious form of his senseless kinsman twitching in the tall grass.
"Will we docilely accept this attack on our brave companion?" one of the knights in Baron Derigen's party demanded in a harshly accented voice. "Kill them all!"

He reached for his sword.
"In the instant thy sword leaves its sheath thou art a dead man, Sir Knight," Mandorallen coolly advised him.
The knight's hand froze on his sword hilt.
"For shame, my Lords," Mandorallen continued accusingly. "Surely ye know that by courtesy and common usage my challenge, until it is answered, guarantees my safety and that of my companions. Choose your champions or withdraw. I tire of all this and presently will become irritable."
The two parties of knights pulled back some distance to confer, and several men-at-arms came to the hilltop to pick up Sir Haldorin.
"That one who was going to draw his sword was a Murgo," Garion said quietly.
"I noticed that," Hettar murmured, his dark eyes glittering.
"They're coming back," Durnik warned.
"I will joust with thee, Sir Mandorallen," Baron Derigen announced as he approached. "I doubt not that thy reputation is well-deserved, but I also have taken the prize in no small number of tourneys. I would be honored to try a lance with thee."
"And I too will try my skill against throe, Sir Knight," Baron Oltorain declared. "My arm is also feared in some parts of Arendia."
"Very well," Mandorallen replied. "Let us seek level ground and proceed. The day wears on, and my companions and I have business to the south."
They all rode down the hill to the field below where the two groups of knights

drew up on either side of a course which had been quickly trampled out in the high, yellow grass. Derigen galloped to the far end, turned and sat waiting, his blunted lance resting in his stirrup.
"Thy courage becomes thee, my Lord," Mandorallen called, taking up one of the poles Durnik had cut. "I shall try not to injure thee too greatly. Art thou prepared to meet my charge?"
"I am," the baron replied, lowering his visor.
Mandorallen clapped down his visor, lowered his lance, and set his spurs to his warhorse.
"It's probably inappropriate under the circumstances," Silk murmured, "but I can't help wishing that our overbearing friend could suffer some humiliating defeat."
Mister Wolf gave him a withering look. "Forget it!"
"Is he that good?" Silk asked wistfully.
"Watch," Wolf told him.
The two knights met in the center of the course with a resounding crash, and their lances both shattered at the stunning impact, littering the trampled grass with splinters. They thundered past each other, turned and rode back, each to his original starting place. Derigen, Garion noticed, swayed somewhat in the saddle as he rode.
The knights charged again, and their fresh lances also shattered. "I should have cut more poles," Durnik said thoughtfully.
But Baron Derigen swayed even more as he rode back this time, and on the third charge his faltering lance glanced off Mandorallen's shield. Mandorallen's lance, however, struck true, and the baron was hurled from his saddle by the force of their meeting.
Mandorallen reined in his charger and looked down at him. "Art thou able to continue, my Lord?" he asked politely.
Derigen staggered to his feet. "I do not yield," he gasped, drawing his sword.
"Splendid," Mandorallen replied. "I feared that I might have done thee harm." He slid out of his saddle, drew his sword and swung directly at Derigen's head. The blow glanced off the baron's hastily raised shield, and Mandorallen swung again without pause. Derigen managed one or two feeble swings before Mandorallen's broadsword caught him full on the side of the helmet. He spun once and collapsed facedown on the earth.
"My Lord?" Mandorallen inquired solicitously. He reached down, rolled over his fallen opponent and opened the dented visor of the baron's helmet. "Art thou unwell, my Lord?" he asked. "Dost thou wish to continue?"
Derigen did not reply. Blood ran freely from his nose, and his eyes were rolled back in his head. His face was blue, and the right side of his body quivered spasmodically.
"Since this brave knight is unable to speak for himself," Mandorallen announced, "I declare him vanquished." He looked around, his broadsword still in his hand. "Would any here gainsay my words?"
There was a vast silence.
"Will some few then remove him from the field?" Mandorallen suggested. "His injuries do not appear grave. A few months in bed should make him whole again." He turned to Baron Oltorain, whose face had grown visibly pale. "Well, my Lord," he said cheerfully, "shall we proceed? My companions and I are impatient to continue our journey."
Sir Oltorain was thrown to the ground on the first charge and broke his leg as he fell.
"Ill luck, my Lord," Mandorallen observed, approaching on foot with drawn sword. "Dost thou yield?"
"I cannot stand," Oltorain said from between clenched teeth. "I have no choice but to yield."

"And I and my companions may continue our journey?"
"Ye may freely depart," the man on the ground replied painfully.
"Not just yet," a harsh voice interrupted. The armored Murgo pushed his horse through the crowd of other mounted knights until he was directly in front of Mandorallen.
"I thought he might decide to interfere," Aunt Pol said quietly. She dismounted and stepped out onto the hoof churned course. "Move out of the way, Mandorallen," she told the knight.
"Nay, my Lady," Mandorallen protested.
Wolf barked sharply. "Move, Mandorallen!"
Mandorallen looked startled and stepped aside.
"Well, Grolim?" Aunt Pol challenged, pushing back her hood.
The mounted man's eyes widened as he saw the white lock in her hair, and then he raised his hand almost despairingly, muttering rapidly under his breath.
Once again Garion felt that strange surge, and the hollow roaring filled his mind.
For an instant Aunt Pol's figure seemed surrounded by a kind of greenish light. She waved her hand indifferently, and the light disappeared. "You must be out of practice," she told him. "Would you like to try again?"
The Grolim raised both hands this time, but got no further. Maneuvering his horse carefully behind the armored man, Durnik had closed on him. With both hands he raised his axe and smashed it down directly on top of the Grolim's helmet.
"Durnik!" Aunt Pol shouted. "Get away!"
But the smith, his face set grimly, swung again, and the Grolim slid senseless from his saddle with a crash.
"You fool!" Aunt Pol raged. "What do you think you're doing?"
"He was attacking you, Mistress Pol," Durnik explained, his eyes still hot. "Get down off that horse."
He slid down.
"Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?" she demanded. "He could have killed you."
"I will protect you, Mistress Pol," Durnik replied stubbornly. "I'm not a warrior or a magician, but I won't let anybody try to hurt you."
Her eyes widened in surprise for an instant, then narrowed, then softened. Garion, who had known her from childhood, recognized her rapid changes of emotion. Without warning she suddenly embraced the startled Durnik. "You great, clumsy, dear fool," she said. "Never do that again - never! You almost made my heart stop."
Garion looked away with a strange lump in his throat and saw the brief, sly smile that flickered across Mister Wolf's face.
A peculiar change had come over the knights lining the sides of the course. Several of them were looking around with the amazed expressions of men who had just been roused from some terrible dream. Others seemed suddenly lost in thought. Sir Oltorain struggled to rise.
"Nay, my Lord," Mandorallen told him, pressing him gently back down. "Thou wilt do thyself injury."
"What have we done?" the baron groaned, his face anguished.
Mister Wolf dismounted and knelt beside the injured man.
"It wasn't your fault," he informed the baron. "Your war was the Murgo's doing. He twisted your minds and set you on each other."
"Sorcery?" Oltorain gasped, his face growing pale.
Wolf nodded. "He's not really a Murgo, but a Grolim priest."
"And the spell is now broken?"
Wolf nodded again, glancing at the unconscious Grolim.
"Chain the Murgo," the baron ordered the assembled knights. He looked back at

Wolf. "We have ways of dealing with sorcerers," he said grimly. "We will use the occasion to celebrate the end of our unnatural war. This Grolim sorcerer hath cast his last enchantment."
"Good," Wolf replied with a bleak smile.
"Sir Mandorallen," Baron Oltorain said, wincing as he shifted his broken leg, "in what way may we repay thee and thy companions for bringing us to our senses?"
"That peace hath been restored is reward enough," Mandorallen replied somewhat pompously, "for, as all the world knows, I am the most peace-loving man in the kingdom." He glanced once at Lelldorin lying nearby on the ground in his litter, and a thought seemed to occur to him. "I would, however, ask a boon of thee. We have in our company a brave Asturian youth of noble family who hath suffered grievous injury. We would leave him, if we might, in thy care."
"His presence shall honor me, Sir Mandorallen," Oltorain assented immediately. "The women of my household will care for him most tenderly." He spoke briefly to one of his retainers, and the man mounted and rode quickly toward one of the nearby castles.
"You're not going to leave me behind," Lelldorin protested weakly. "I'll be able to ride in a day or so." He began to cough rackingly.
"I think not," Mandorallen disagreed with a cool expression. "The results of thy wounding have not yet run their natural course."
"I won't stay with Mimbrates," Lelldorin insisted. "I'd rather take my chances on the road."
"Young Lelldorin," Mandorallen replied bluntly, even harshly, "I know thy distaste for the men of Mimbre. Thy wound, however, will soon begin to abscess and then suppurate, and raging fever and delirium will aflict thee, making thy presence a burden upon us. We have not the time to care for thee, and thy sore need would delay us in our quest."
Garion gasped at the brutal directness of the knight's words. He glared at Mandorallen with something very close to hatred.
Lelldorin's face meanwhile had gone white. "Thank you for pointing that out to me, Sir Mandorallen," he said stiffly. "I should have considered it myself. If you'll help me to my horse, I'll leave immediately."
"You'll stay right where you are," Aunt Pol told him flatly.
Baron Oltorain's retainer returned with a group of household servants and a blonde girl of about seventeen wearing a rose-colored gown of stiff brocade and a velvet cloak of teal.
"My younger sister, Lady Ariana," Oltorain introduced her. "She's a spirited girl, and though she is young she is already well-versed in the care of the sick."
"I won't trouble her for long, my Lord," Lelldorin declared. "I'll be returning to Asturia within a week."
Lady Ariana laid a professional hand to his forehead. "Nay, good youth," she disagreed. "Thy visit, I think, will be protracted."
"I'll leave within the week," Lelldorin repeated stubbornly.
She shrugged. "As it please thee. I expect that my brother will be able to spare some few servants to follow after thee to provide thee that decent burial which, if I misjudge not, thou wilt require before thou hast gone ten leagues."
Lelldorin blinked.
Aunt Pol took Lady Ariana to one side and spoke with her at some length, giving her a small packet of herbs and certain instructions. Lelldorin motioned to Garion, and Garion went to him immediately and knelt beside the litter.
"So it ends," the young man murmured. "I wish I could go on with you."
"You'll be well in no time at all," Garion assured him, knowing that it wasn't true. "Maybe you can catch up with us later."
Lelldorin shook his head. "No," he disagreed, "I'm afraid not." He began to

cough again, the spasms seeming to tear at his lungs. "We don't have much time, my friend," he gasped weakly, "so listen carefully."
Garion, near tears, took his friend's hand.
"You remember what we were talking about that morning after we left my uncle's house?"
Garion nodded.
"You said that I was the one who'd have to decide if we were to break our pledge to Torasin and the others to keep silent."
"I remember," Garion told him.
"All right," Lelldorin said. "I've decided. I release you from your pledge. Do what you have to do."
"It would be better if you told my grandfather about it yourself, Lelldorin," Garion protested.
"I can't, Garion," Lelldorin groaned. "The words would stick in my throat. I'm sorry, but it's the way I am. I know that Nachak's only using us, but I gave the others my word. I'm an Arend, Garion. I'll keep my word even though I know it's wrong, so it's up to you. You're going to have to keep Nachak from destroying my country. I want you to go straight to the king himself."
"To the king? He'd never believe me."
"Make him believe you. Tell him everything."
Garion shook his head firmly. "I won't tell him your name," he declared, "or Torasin's. You know what he'd do to you if I did."
"We don't matter," Lelldorin insisted, coughing again.
"I'll tell him about Nachak," Garion said stubbornly, "but not about you. Where do I tell him to find the Murgo?"
"He'll know," Lelldorin replied, his voice very weak now. "Nachak's the ambassador to the court at Vo Mimbre. He's the personal representative of Taur Urggs, King of the Murgos."
Garion was stunned at the implications of that.
"He's got all the gold from the bottomless mines of Cthol Murgos at his command," Lelldorin continued. "The plot he gave my friends and me could be just one of a dozen or more all aimed at destroying Arendia. You've got to stop him, Garion. Promise me." The pale young man's eyes were feverish, and his grip on Garion's hand tightened.
"I'll stop him, Lelldorin," Garion vowed. "I don't know how yet, but one way or another, I'll stop him."
Lelldorin sank weakly back on the litter, his strength seeming to run out as if the necessity for extracting that promise had been the only thing sustaining him.
"Good-bye, Lelldorin," Garion said softly, his eyes filling with tears.
"Good-bye, my friend," Lelldorin barely more than whispered, and then his eyes closed, and the hand gripping Garion's went limp. Garion stared at him with a dreadful fear until he saw the faint flutter of his pulse in the hollow of his throat. Lelldorin was still alive - if only barely. Garion tenderly put down his friend's hand and pulled the rough gray blanket up around his shoulders. Then he stood up and walked quickly away with tears running down his cheeks.
The rest of the farewells were brief, and they remounted and rode at a trot toward the Great West Road. There were a few cheers from the serfs and pikemen as they passed, but in the distance there was another sound. The women from the villages had come out to search for their men among the bodies littering the field, and their wails and shrieks mocked the cheers.
With deliberate purpose, Garion pushed his horse forward until he drew in beside Mandorallen. "I have something to say to you," he said hotly. "You aren't going to like it, but I don't really care."
"Oh?" the knight replied mildly.
"I think the way you talked to Lelldorin back there was cruel and disgusting,"

Garion told him. "You might think you're the greatest knight in the world, but I think you're a loud-mouthed braggart with no more compassion than a block of stone, and if you don't like it, what do you plan to do about it?"
"Ah," Mandorallen said. "That! I think that thou hast misunderstood, my young friend. It was necessary in order to save his life. The Asturian youth is very brave and so gives no thought to himself. Had I not spoken so to him, he would surely have insisted upon continuing with us and would soon have died."
"Died?" Garion scoffed. "Aunt Pol could have cured him."
"It was the Lady Polgara herself who informed me that his life was in danger," Mandorallen replied. "His honor would not permit him to seek proper care, but that same honor prevailed upon him to remain behind lest he delay us." The knight smiled wryly. "He will, I think, be no fonder of me for my words than thou art, but he will be alive, and that's what matters, is it not?"
Garion stared at the arrogant-seeming Mimbrate, his anger suddenly robbed of its target. With painful clarity he realized that he had just made a fool of himself. "I'm sorry," he apologized grudgingly. "I didn't realize what you were doing."
Mandorallen shrugged. "It's not important. I'm frequently misunderstood. As long as I know that my motives are good, however, I'm seldom very concerned with the opinions of others. I'm glad, though, that I had the opportunity to explain this to thee. Thou art to be my companion, and it ill-behooves companions to have misapprehensions about each other."
They rode on in silence as Garion struggled to readjust his thinking. There was, it seemed, much more to Mandorallen than he had suspected.
They reached the highway then and turned south again under a threatening sky.

Chapter Eight

THE ARENDISH PLAIN WAS A VAST, rolling grassland Only sparsely settled. The wind sweeping across the dried grass was raw and chill, and dirty-looking clouds scudded overhead as they rode. The necessity for leaving the injured Lelldorin behind had put them all into a melancholy mood, and for the most part they traveled in silence for the next several days. Garion rode at the rear with Hettar and the packhorses, doing his best to stay away from Mandorallen.
Hettar was a silent man who seemed undisturbed by hours of riding without conversation; but after two days of this, Garion made a deliberate effort to draw the hawk-faced Algar out.
"Why is it that you hate Murgos so much, Hettar?" he asked for want of something better to say.
"All Alorns hate Murgos," Hettar answered quietly.
"Yes," Garion admitted, "but it seems to be something personal with you. Why is that?"
Hettar shifted in his saddle, his leather clothing creaking. "They killed my parents," he replied.
Garion felt a sudden shock as the Algar's words struck a responsive note. "How did it happen?" he asked before he realized that Hettar might prefer not to talk about it.
"I was seven," Hettar told him in an unemotional voice. "We were going to visit my mother's family - she was from a different clan. We had to pass near the eastern escarpment, and a Murgo raiding-party caught us. My mother's horse stumbled, and she was thrown. The Murgos were on us before my father and I could get her back on her horse. They took a long time to kill my parents. I remember that my mother screamed once, near the end." The Algar's face was as bleak as rock, and his flat, quiet voice made his story seem that much more dreadful.
"After my parents were dead, the Murgos tied a rope around my feet and dragged me behind one of their horses," he continued. "When the rope finally broke, they

thought I was dead, and they all rode off. They were laughing about it as I recall. Cho-Hag found me a couple of days later."
As clearly as if he had been there, Garion had a momentary picture of a child, dreadfully injured and alone, wandering in the emptiness of eastern Algaria with only grief and a terrible hatred keeping him alive.
"I killed my first Murgo when I was ten," Hettar went on in the same flat voice. "He was trying to escape from us, and I rode him down and put a javelin between his shoulders. He screamed when the javelin went through him. That made me feel better. Cho-Hag thought that if he made me watch the Murgo die, it might cure me of the hatred. He was wrong about that, though." The tall Algar's face was expressionless, and his wind-whipped scalp lock tossed and flowed out behind

him. There was a kind of emptiness about him as if he were devoid of any feeling but that one driving compulsion.
For an instant Garion dimly understood what Mister Wolf had been driving at when he had warned about the danger of becoming obsessed with a desire for revenge, but he pushed the notion out of his mind. If Hettar could live with it, so could he. He felt a sudden fierce admiration for this lonely hunter in black leather.
Mister Wolf was deep in conversation with Mandorallen, and the two of them loitered until Hettar and Garion caught up with them. For a time they rode along together.
"It is our nature," the knight in his gleaming armor was saying in a melancholy voice. "We are over-proud, and it is our pride that dooms our poor Arendia to internecine war."
"That can be cured," Mister Wolf said.
"How?" Mandorallen asked. "It is in our blood. I myself am the most peaceful of men, but even I am subject to our national disease. Moreover, our divisions are too great, too buried in our history and our souls to be purged away. The peace will not last, my friend. Even now Asturian arrows sing in the forests, seeking Mimbrate targets, and Mimbre in reprisal burns Asturian houses and butchers hostages. War is inevitable, I fear."
"No," Wolf disagreed, "it's not."
"How may it be prevented?" Mandorallen demanded. "Who can cure our insanity?"
"I will, if I have to," Wolf told him quietly, pushing back his gray hood.
Mandorallen smiled wanly. "I appreciate thy good intentions, Belgarath, but that is impossible, even for thee."
"Nothing is actually impossible, Mandorallen," Wolf answered in a matter-of fact voice. "Most of the time I prefer not to interfere with other people's amusements, but I can't afford to have Arendia going up in flames just now. If I have to, I'll step in and put a stop to any more foolishness."
"Hast thou in truth such power?" Mandorallen asked somewhat wistfully as if he could not quite bring himself to believe it.
"Yes," Wolf replied prosaically, scratching at his short white beard, "as a matter of fact, I do."
Mandorallen's face grew troubled, even a bit awed at the old man's quiet statement, and Garion found his grandfather's declaration profoundly disturbing. If Wolf could actually stop a war single-handedly, he'd have no difficulty at all thwarting Garion's own plans for revenge. It was something else to worry about.
Then Silk rode back toward them. "The Great Fair's just ahead," the rat-faced man announced. "Do we want to stop, or should we go around it.
"We might as well stop," Wolf decided. "It's almost evening, and we need some supplies."
"The horses could use some rest, too," Hettar said. "They're starting to complain."
"You should have told me," Wolf said, glancing back at the pack train.

"They're not really in bad shape yet," Hettar informed him, "but they're starting to feel sorry for themselves. They're exaggerating of course, but a little rest wouldn't hurt them."
"Exaggerating?" Silk sounded shocked. "You don't mean to say that horses can actually lie, do you?"
Hettar shrugged. "Of course. They lie all the time. They're very good at it."
For a moment Silk looked outraged at the thought, and then he suddenly laughed. "Somehow that restores my faith in the order of the universe," he declared.
Wolf looked pained. "Silk," he said pointedly, "you're a very evil man. Did you know that?"
"One does one's best," Silk replied mockingly.
The Arendish Fair lay at the intersection of the Great West Road and the mountain track leading down out of Ulgoland. It was a vast collection of blue, red and yellow tents and broad-striped pavilions stretching for a league or more in every direction. It appeared like a brightly hued city in the midst of the dun-colored plain, and its brilliant pennons snapped bravely in the endless wind under a lowering sky.
"I hope I'll have time to do some business," Silk said as they rode down a long hill toward the Fair. The little man's sharp nose was twitching. "I'm starting to get out of practice."
A half dozen mud-smeared beggars crouched miserably beside the road, their hands outstretched. Mandorallen paused and scattered some coins among them.
"You shouldn't encourage them," Barak growled.
"Charity is both a duty and a privilege, my Lord Barak," Mandorallen replied.
"Why don't they build houses here?" Garion asked Silk as they approached the central part of the Fair.
"Nobody stays here that long," Silk explained. "The Fair's always here, but the population's very fluid. Besides, buildings are taxed; tents aren't."
Many of the merchants who came out of their tents to watch the party pass seemed to know Silk, and some of them greeted him warily, suspicion plainly written on their faces.
"I see that your reputation's preceded you, Silk," Barak observed dryly.
Silk shrugged. "The price of fame."
"Isn't there some danger that somebody'll recognize you as that other merchant?" Durnik asked. "The one the Murgos are looking for?"
"You mean Ambar? It's not very likely. Ambar doesn't come to Arendia very often, and he and Radek don't look a bit alike."
"But they're the same man," Durnik objected. "They're both you."
"Ah," Silk said, raising one finger, "you and I both know that, but they don't. To you I always look like myself, but to others I look quite different."
Durnik looked profoundly skeptical.
"Radek, old friend," a bald Drasnian merchant called from a nearby tent.
"Delvor," Silk replied delightedly. "I haven't seen you in years."
"You look prosperous," the bald man observed.
"Getting by," Silk responded modestly. "What are you dealing in now?"
"I've got a few Mallorean carpets," Delvor told him. "Some of the local nobles are interested, but they don't like the price." His hands, however, were already speaking of other matters.-Your uncle sent out word that we were to help you if necessary. Do you need anything?"What are you carrying in your packs?" he asked aloud.
"Sendarian woolens," Silk answered, "and a few other odds and ends." Have you seen any Murgos here at the Fair?
-One, but he left for Vo Mimbre a week ago. There are some Nadraks on the far side of the Fair, though
-They're a long way from home-Silk gestured. Are they really in business?
It's hard to say-Delvor answered.

-Can you put us up for a day or so?
I'm sure we can work something out Delvor replied with a sly twinkle in his eyes.
Silk's fingers betrayed his shock at the suggestion.
-Business is business, after all-Delvor gestured. "You must come inside," he said aloud. "Take a cup of wine, have some supper. We have years of catching up to do."
"We'd be delighted," Silk returned somewhat sourly.
"Could it be that you've met your match, Prince Kheldar?" Aunt Pal inquired softly with a faint smile as the little man helped her down from her horse in front of Delvor's brightly striped pavilion.
"Delvor? Hardly. He's been trying to get even with me for yearsever since a ploy of mine in Yar Gorak cost him a fortune. I'll let him think he's got me for a while though. It will make him feel good, and I'll enjoy it that much more when I pull the rug out from under him."
She laughed. "You're incorrigible."
He winked at her.
The interior of Delvor's main pavilion was ruddy in the light of several glowing braziers that put out a welcome warmth. The floor was covered with a deep blue carpet, and large red cushions were scattered here and there to sit upon. Once they were inside, Silk quickly made the introductions.
"I'm honored, Ancient One," Delvor murmured, bowing deeply to Mister Wolf and then to Aunt Pol. "What can I do to help?"
"Right now we need information more than anything," Wolf replied, pulling ofi' his heavy cloak. "We ran into a Grolim stirring up trouble a few days north of here. Can you nose about and find out what's happening between here and Vo Mimbre? I'd like to avoid any more neighborhood squabbles if possible."
"I'll make inquiries," Delvor promised.
"I'll be moving around too," Silk said. "Between us, Delvor and I should be able to sift out most of the loose information in the Fair." Wolf looked at him inquiringly.
"Radek of Boktor never passes up a chance to do business," the little man explained just a bit too quickly. "It would look very strange if he stayed in Delvor's tent."
"I see," Wolf said.
"We wouldn't want anything to spoil our disguise, would we?" Silk asked innocently. His long nose, however, was twitching even more violently.
Wolf surrendered. "All right. But don't get exotic. I don't want a crowd of outraged customers outside the tent in the morning howling for your head."
Delvor's porters took the packs from the spare horses, and one of them showed Hettar the way to the horse pens on the outskirts of the Fair. Silk began rummaging through the packs. A myriad of small, expensive items began to pile up on Delvor's carpet as Silk's quick hands dipped into the corners and folds of the wool cloth.
"I wondered why you needed so much money in Camaar," Wolf commented dryly.
"Just part of the disguise," Silk replied. "Radek always has a few curios with him for trade along the way."
"That's a very convenient explanation," Barak observed, "but I wouldn't run it into the ground if I were you."
"If I can't double our old friend's money in the next hour, I'll retire permanently," Silk promised. "Oh, I almost forgot. I'll need Garion to act as a porter for me. Radek always has at least one porter."
"Try not to corrupt him too much," Aunt Pol said.
Silk bowed extravagantly and set his black velvet cap at a jaunty angle; with Garion at his heels, carrying a stout sack of his treasures, he swaggered out into the Great Arendish Fair like a man going into battle.

A fat Tolnedran three tents down the way proved troublesome and succeeded in getting a jeweled dagger away from Silk for only three times what it was worth, but two Arendish merchants in a row bought identical silver goblets at prices which, though widely different, more than made up for that setback. "I love to deal with Arends," Silk gloated as they moved on down the muddy streets between the pavilions.

The sly little Drasnian moved through the Fair, wreaking havoc as he went. When he could not sell, he bought; when he could not buy, he traded; and when he could not trade, he dredged for gossip and information. Some of the merchants, wiser than their fellows, saw him coming and promptly hid from him. Garion, swept along by the little man's enthusiasm, began to understand his friend's fascination with this game where profit was secondary to the satisfaction of besting an opponent.

Silk's predations were broadly ecumenical. He was willing to deal with anyone. He met them all on their own ground. Tolnedrans, Arends, Chereks, fellow Drasnians, Sendars - all fell before him. By midafternoon he had disposed of all of what he had bought in Camaar. His full purse jingled, and the sack on Garion's shoulder was still as heavy, but now it contained entirely new merchandise.

Silk, however, was frowning. He walked along bouncing a small, exquisitely blown glass bottle on the palm of his hand. He had traded two ivory-bound books of Wacite verse to a Rivan for the little bottle of perfume. "What's the trouble?" Garion asked him as they walked back toward Delvor's pavilions.

"I'm not sure who won," Silk told him shortly.

"What?"

"I don't have any idea what this is worth."

"Why did you take it, then?"

"I didn't want him to know that I didn't know its value."

"Sell it to somebody else."

"How can I sell it if I don't know what to ask for it? If I ask too much, nobody'll talk to me; and if I ask too little, I'll be laughed out of the Fair."

Garion started to chuckle.

"I don't see that it's all that funny, Garion," Silk said sensitively. He remained moody and irritable as they entered the pavilion. "Here's the profit I promised you," he told Mister Wolf somewhat ungraciously as he poured coins into the old man's hand.

"What's bothering you?" Wolf asked, eyeing the little man's grumpy face.

"Nothing," Silk replied shortly. Then he glanced over at Aunt Pol, and a broad smile suddenly appeared on his face. He crossed to her and bowed. "My dear Lady Polgara, please accept this trifling memento of my regard for you." With a flourish he presented the perfume bottle to her.

Aunt Pol's look was a peculiar mixture of pleasure and suspicion. She took the small bottle and carefully worked out the tightly fitting stopper. Then with a delicate gesture she touched the stopper to the inside of her wrist and raised the wrist to her face to catch the fragrance. "Why, Kheldar," she exclaimed with delight, "this is a princely gift."

Silk's smile turned a bit sickly, and he peered sharply at her, trying to determine if she was serious or not. Then he sighed and went outside, muttering darkly to himself about the duplicity of Rivans.

Delvor returned not long afterward, dropped his striped cloak in one corner and held out his hands to one of the glowing braziers. "As near as I was able to find out, things are quiet between here and Vo Mimbre," he reported to Mister Wolf, "but five Murgos just rode into the Fair with two dozen Thulls behind them."

Hettar looked up quickly, his hawk face alert.

Wolf frowned. "Did they come from the north or the south?"
"They claim to have come from Vo Mimbre, but there's red clay on the Thulls' boots. I don't think there's any clay between here and Vo Mimbre, is there?"
"None," Mandorallen declared firmly. "The only clay in the region is to the north."
Wolf nodded. "Get Silk back inside," he told Barak. Barak went to the tent flap.
"Couldn't it just be a coincidence?" Durnik wondered.
"I don't think we want to take that chance," Wolf answered. "We'll wait until the Fair settles down for the night and then slip away."
Silk came back inside, and he and Delvor spoke together briefly.
"It won't take the Murgos long to find out we've been here," Barak rumbled, tugging thoughtfully at his red beard. "Then we'll have them dogging our heels every step of the way from here to Vo Mimbre. Wouldn't it simplify things if Hettar, Mandorallen, and I go pick a fight with them? Five dead Murgos aren't going to follow anybody."
Hettar nodded with a certain dreadful eagerness.
"I don't know if that would set too well with the Tolnedran legionnaires who police the Fair," Silk drawled. "Policemen seem to worry about unexplained bodies. It upsets their sense of neatness."
Barak shrugged. "It was a thought."
"I think I've got an idea," Delvor said, pulling on his cloak again. "They set up their tents near the pavilions of the Nadraks. I'll go do some business with them." He started toward the tent flap, then paused. "I don't know if it means anything," he told them, "but I found out that the leader is a Murgo named Asharak."
Garion felt a sudden chill at the mention of the name.
Barak whistled and looked suddenly very grim. "We're going to have to attend to that one sooner or later, Belgarath," he declared.
"You know him?" Delvor did not seem very surprised.
"We've met a time or two," Silk replied in an offhand way.
"He's starting to make a nuisance of himself," Aunt Pol agreed.
"I'll get started," Delvor said.
Garion lifted the tent flap to allow Delvor to leave; but as he glanced outside, he let out a startled gasp and jerked the flap shut again.
"What's the matter?" Silk asked him.
"I think I just saw Brill out there in the street."
"Let me see," Durnik said. His fingers parted the flap slightly, and he and Garion both peered out. A slovenly figure loitered in the muddy street outside. Brill had not changed much since they'd left Faldor's farm. His tunic and hose were still patched and stained; his face was still unshaven, and his cast eye still gleamed with a kind of unwholesome whiteness.
"It's Brill, all right," Durnik confirmed. "He's close enough for me to smell him."
Delvor looked at the smith inquiringly.
"Brill bathes irregularly," Durnik explained. "He's a fragrant sort of a fellow."
"May I?" Delvor asked politely. He glanced out over Durnik's shoulder. "Ah," he said, "that one. He works for the Nadraks. I thought that was a little strange, but he didn't seem important, so I didn't bother to investigate."
"Durnik," Wolf said quickly, "step outside for a moment. Make sure he sees you, but don't let him know that you know he's there. After he sees you, come back inside. Hurry. We don't want to let him get away."
Durnik looked baffled, but he lifted the tent flap and stepped out.
"What are you up to, father?" Aunt Pol asked rather sharply. "Don't just stand there smirking, old man. That's very irritating."
"It's perfect," Wolf chortled, rubbing his hands together.

Durnik came back in, his face worried. "He saw me," he reported. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"
"Of course," Wolf replied. "Asharak's obviously here because of us, and he's going to be looking all over the Fair for us."
"Why make it easy for him?" Aunt Pol asked.
"We won't," Wolf replied. "Asharak's used Brill before - in Murgos, remember? He brought Brill down here because Brill would recognize you or me or Durnik or Garion - probably Barak too, and maybe Silk. Is he still out there?"
Garion peered out through the narrow opening. After a moment he saw the unkempt Brill half hidden between two tents across the street. "He's still there," he answered.
"We'll want to keep him there," Wolf said. "We'll have to be sure that he doesn't get bored and go back to report to Asharak that he's found us."
Silk looked at Delvor, and they both began to laugh.
"What's funny?" Barak demanded suspiciously.
"You almost have to be a Drasnian to appreciate it," Silk replied. He looked at Wolf admiringly. "Sometimes you amaze me, old friend."
Mister Wolf winked at him.
"Thy plan still escapes me," Mandorallen confessed.
"May I?" Silk asked Wolf. He turned back to the knight. "It goes like this, Mandorallen. Asharak's counting on Brill to find us for him, but as long as we keep Brill interested enough, he'll delay going back to tell Asharak where we are. We've captured Asharak's eyes, and that puts him at quite a disadvantage."
"But will this curious Sendar not follow us as soon as we leave the tent?" Mandorallen asked. "When we ride from the Fair, the Murgos will be immediately behind us."
"The back wall of the tent is only canvas, Mandorallen," Silk pointed out gently. "With a sharp knife you can make as many doors in it as you like."
Delvor winced slightly, then sighed. "I'll go see the Murgos," he said. "I think I can delay them even more."
"Durnik and I'll go out with you," Silk told his bald friend. "You go one way, and we'll go another. Brill will follow us, and we can lead him back here."
Delvor nodded, and the three of them went out.
"Isn't all this unnecessarily complicated?" Barak asked sourly. "Brill doesn't know Hettar. Why not just have Hettar slip out the back, circle around behind him, and stick a knife between his ribs? Then we could stuff him in a sack and drop him in a ditch somewhere after we leave the Fair."
Wolf shook his head. "Asharak would miss him," he replied. "I want him to tell the Murgos that we're in this tent. With any luck, they'll sit outside for a day or so before they realize that we're gone."
For the next several hours various members of the party went out into the street in front of the tent on short and wholly imaginary errands to hold the attention of the lurking Brill. When Garion stepped out into the gathering darkness, he put on a show of unconcern, although his skin prickled as he felt Brill's eyes on him. He went into Delvor's supply tent and waited for several minutes. The noise from a tavern pavilion several rows of tents over seemed very loud in the growing stillness of the Fair as Garion waited nervously in the dark supply tent. Finally he drew a deep breath and went out again, one arm tucked up as if he were carrying something. "I found it, Durnik," he announced as he reentered the main pavilion.
"There's no need to improvise, dear," Aunt Pol remarked.
"I just wanted to sound natural," he replied innocently.
Delvor returned soon after that, and they all waited in the warm tent as it grew darker outside and the streets emptied. Once it was fully dark, Delvor's porters pulled the packs out through a slit in the back of the tent. Silk, Delvor, and Hettar went with them to the horse pens on the outskirts of the Fair while the

rest remained long enough to keep Brill from losing interest. In a final attempt at misdirection, Mister Wolf and Barak went outside to discuss the probable conditions of the road to Prolgu in Ulgoland.
"It might not work," Wolf admitted as he and the big red-bearded man came back inside. "Asharak's sure to know that we're following Zedar south, but if Brill tells him that we're going to Prolgu, it might make him divide his forces to cover both roads." He looked around the inside of the tent. "All right," he said. "Let's go."
One by one they squeezed out through the slit in the back of the tent and crept into the next street. Then, walking at a normal pace like serious people on honest business, they proceeded toward the horse pens. They passed the tavern pavilion where several men were singing. The streets were mostly empty by now, and the night breeze brushed the city of tents, fluttering the pennons and banners.
Then they reached the edge of the Fair where Silk, Delvor and Hettar waited with their mounts.
"Good luck," Delvor said as they prepared to mount. "I'll delay the Murgos for as long as I can."
Silk shook his friend's hand. "I'd still like to know where you got those lead coins."
Delvor winked at him.
"What's this?" Wolf asked.
"Delvor's got some Tolnedran crowns stamped out of lead and gilded over," Silk told him. "He hid some of them in the Murgos' tent, and tomorrow morning he's going to go to the legionnaires with a few of them and accuse the Murgos of passing them. When the legionnaires search the Murgos' tent, they're sure to find the others."
"Money's awfully important to Tolnedrans," Barak observed. "If the legionnaires get excited enough about those coins, they might start hanging people."
Delvor smirked. "Wouldn't that be a terrible shame?"
They mounted then and rode away from the horse pens toward the highway. It was a cloudy night, and once they were out in the open the breeze was noticeably brisk. Behind them the Fair gleamed and twinkled under the night sky like some vast city.
Garion drew his cloak about him. It was a lonely feeling to be on a dark road on a windy night when everyone else in the world had a fire and a bed and walls around him. Then they reached the Great West Road stretching pale and empty across the dark, rolling Arendish plain and turned south again.

Chapter Nine

THE WIND PICKED UP AGAIN shortly before dawn and was blowing briskly by the time the sky over the low foothills to the east began to lighten. Garion was numb with exhaustion by then, and his mind had drifted into an almost dreamlike trance. The faces of his companions all seemed strange to him as the pale light began to grow stronger. At times he even forgot why they rode. He seemed caught in a company of grim-faced strangers pounding along a road to nowhere through a bleak, featureless landscape with their wind-whipped cloaks flying dark behind them like the clouds scudding low and dirty overhead. A peculiar idea began to take hold of him. The strangers were somehow his captors, and they were taking him away from his real friends. The idea seemed to grow stronger the farther they rode, and he began to be afraid.
Suddenly, without knowing why, he wheeled his horse and broke away, plunging off the side of the road and across the open field beside it.
"Garion!" a woman's voice called sharply from behind, but he set his heels to

his horse's flanks and sped even faster across the rough field.
One of them was chasing him, a frightening man in black leather with a shaved head and a dark lock at his crown flowing behind him in the wind. In a panic Garion kicked at his horse, trying to make the beast run even faster, but the fearsome rider behind him closed the gap quickly and seized the reins from his hands.
"What are you doing?" he demanded harshly.
Garion stared at him, unable to answer.
Then the woman in the blue cloak was there, and the others not far behind her. She dismounted quickly and stood looking at him with a stern face. She was tall for a woman, and her face was cold and imperious. Her hair was very dark, and there was a single white lock at her brow.
Garion trembled. The woman made him terribly afraid.
"Get down off that horse," she commanded.
"Gently, Pol," a silvery-haired old man with an evil face said.
A huge red-bearded giant rode closer, threatening, and Garion, almost sobbing with fright, slid down from his horse.
"Come here," the woman ordered.
Falteringly, Garion approached her.
"Give me your hand," she said.
Hesitantly, he lifted his hand and she took his wrist firmly. She opened his fingers to reveal the ugly mark on his palm that he seemed to always have hated and then put his hand against the white lock in her hair.
"Aunt Pol," he gasped, the nightmare suddenly dropping away. She put her arms about him tightly and held him for some time. Strangely, he was not even embarrassed by that display of affection in front of the others.
"This is serious, father," she told Mister Wolf.
"What happened, Garion?" Wolf asked, his voice calm.
"I don't know," Garion replied. "I was as if I didn't know any of you, and you were my enemies, and all I wanted to do was run away to try to get back to my real friends."
"Are you still wearing the amulet I gave you?"
"Yes."
"Have you had it off at any time since I gave it to you?"

"Just once," Garion admitted. "When I took a bath in the Tolnedran hostel."
Wolf sighed. "You can't take it off," he said, "not ever - not for any reason. Take it out from under your tunic."
Garion drew out the silver pendant with the strange design on it. The old man took a medallion out from under his own tunic. It was very bright and there was upon it the figure of a standing wolf so lifelike that it looked almost ready to lope away.
Aunt Pol, her one arm still about Garion's shoulders, drew a similar amulet out of her bodice. Upon the disc of her medallion was the figure of an owl. "Hold it in your right hand, dear," she instructed, firmly closing Garion's fingers over the pendant. Then, holding her amulet in her own right hand, she placed her left hand over his closed fist. Wolf, also holding his talisman, put his hand on theirs.
Garion's palm began to tingle as if the pendant were suddenly alive. Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol looked at each other for a long moment, and the tingling in Garion's hand suddenly became very strong. His mind seemed to open, and strange things flickered before his eyes. He saw a round room very high up somewhere. A fire burned, but there was no wood in it. At a table there was seated an old man who looked somewhat like Mister Wolf but obviously was someone else. He seemed to be looking directly at Garion, and his eyes were kindly, even affectionate. Garion was suddenly overwhelmed with a consuming love for the old man.

"That should be enough," Wolf judged, releasing Garion's hand.
"Who was the old man?" Garion asked.
"My Master," Wolf replied.
"What happened?" Durnik asked, his face concerned.
"It's probably better not to talk about it," Aunt Pol said. "Do you think you could build a fire? It's time for breakfast."
"There are some trees over there where we can get out of the wind," Durnik suggested.
They all remounted and rode toward the trees.
After they had eaten, they sat by the small fire for a while. They were tired, and none of them felt quite up to facing the blustery morning again. Garion felt particularly exhausted, and he wished that he were young enough to sit close beside Aunt Pol and perhaps to put his head in her lap and sleep as he had done when he was very young. The strange thing that had happened made him feel very much alone and more than a little frightened. "Durnik," he said, more to drive the mood away than out of any real curiosity. "What sort of bird is that?" He pointed.
"A raven, I think," Durnik answered, looking at the bird circling above them.
"I thought so too," Garion said, "but they don't usually circle, do they?"
Durnik frowned. "Maybe it's watching something on the ground."
"How long has it been up there?" Wolf asked, squinting up at the large bird.
"I think I first saw it when we were crossing the field." Garion told him.
Mister Wolf glanced over at Aunt Pol. "What do you think?"
She looked up from one of Garion's stockings she had been mending. "I'll see." Her face took on a strange, probing expression.
Garion felt a peculiar tingling again. On an impulse he tried to push his own mind out toward the bird.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said without looking at him, "stop that."
"I'm sorry," he apologized quickly and pulled his mind back where it belonged.
Mister Wolf looked at him with a strange expression, then winked at him.
"It's Chamdar," Aunt Pol announced calmly. She carefully pushed her needle into the stocking and set it aside. Then she stood up and shook off her blue cloak.
"What have you got in mind?" Wolf asked.
"I think I'll go have a little chat with him," she replied, flexing her fingers like talons.
"You'd never catch him," Wolf told her. "Your feathers are too soft for this kind of wind. There's an easier way." The old man swept the windy sky with a searching gaze. "Over there." He pointed at a barely visible speck above the hills to the west. "You'd better do it, Pol. I don't get along with birds."
"Of course, father," she agreed. She looked intently at the speck, and Garion felt the tingle as she sent her mind out again. The speck began to circle, rising higher and higher until it disappeared.
The raven did not see the plummeting eagle until the last instant, just before the larger bird's talons struck. There was a sudden puff of black feathers, and the raven, screeching with fright, flapped wildly away with the eagle in pursuit.
"Nicely done, Pol," Wolf approved.
"It will give him something to think about." She smiled. "Don't stare, Durnik."
Durnik was gaping at her, his mouth open. "How did you do that?"
"Do you really want to know?" she asked.
Durnik shuddered and looked away quickly.
"I think that just about settles it," Wolf said. "Disguises are probably useless now. I'm not sure what Chamdar's up to, but he's going to be watching us every step of the way. We might as well arm ourselves and ride straight on to Vo Mimbre."
"Aren't we going to follow the trail anymore?" Barak asked.

"The trail goes south," Wolf replied. "I can pick it up again once we cross over into Tolnedra. But first I want to stop by and have a word with King Korodullin. There are some things he needs to know."
"Korodullin?" Durnik looked puzzled. "Wasn't that the name of the first Arendish king? It seems to me somebody told me that once."
"All Arendish kings are named Korodullin," Silk told him. "And the queens are all named Mayaserana. It's part of the fiction the royal family here maintains to keep the kingdom from flying apart. They have to marry as closely within the bloodline as possible to maintain the illusion of the unification of the houses of Mimbre and Asturia. It makes them all a bit sickly, but there's no help for it - considering the peculiar nature of Arendish politics."
"All right, Silk," Aunt Pol said reprovingly.
Mandorallen looked thoughtful. "Could it be that this Chamdar who so dogs our steps is one of great substance in the dark society of the Grolims?" he asked.
"He'd like to be," Wolf answered. "Zedar and Ctuchik are Torak's disciples, and Chamdar wants to be one as well. He's always been Ctuchik's agent, but he may believe that this is his chance to move up in the Grolim hierarchy. Ctuchik's very old, and he spends all his time in the temple of Torak at Rak Cthol. Maybe Chamdar thinks it's time that someone else became High Priest."
"Is Torak's body at Rak Cthol?" Silk asked quickly.
Mister Wolf shrugged. "Nobody knows for sure, but I doubt it. After Zedar carried him away from the battlefield at Vo Mimbre, I don't think he'd have just handed him over to Ctuchik. He could be in Mallorea or somewhere in the southern reaches of Cthol Murgos. It's hard to say."
"But at the moment, Chamdar's the one we have to worry about," Silk concluded.
"Not if we keep moving," Wolf told him.
"We'd better get moving then," Barak said, standing up.
By midmorning the heavy clouds had begun to break up, and patches of blue sky showed here and there. Enormous pillars of sunlight stalked ponderously across the rolling fields that waited, damp and expectant, for the first touches of spring. With Mandorallen in the lead they had ridden hard and had covered a good six leagues. Finally they slowed to a walk to allow their steaming horses to rest.
"How much farther is it to Vo Mimbre, grandfather?" Garion asked, pulling his horse in beside Mister Wolf.
"Sixty leagues at least," Wolf answered. "Probably closer to eighty."
"That's a long way." Garion winced as he shifted in his saddle.
"Yes."
"I'm sorry I ran away like that back there," Garion apologized.
"It wasn't your fault. Chamdar was playing games."
"Why did he pick me? Couldn't he have done the same thing to Durnik - or Barak?"
Mister Wolf looked at him. "You're younger, more susceptible."
"That's not really it, is it?" Garion accused.
"No," Wolf admitted, "not really, but it's an answer, of sorts."
"This is another one of those things you aren't going to tell me, isn't it?"
"I suppose you could say that," Wolf answered blandly.
Garion sulked about that for a while, but Mister Wolf rode on, seemingly unconcerned by the boy's reproachful silence.
They stopped that night at a Tolnedran hostel, which, like all of them, was plain, adequate, and expensive. The next morning the sky had cleared except for billowy patches of white cloud scampering before the brisk wind. The sight of the sun made them all feel better, and there was even some bantering between Silk and Barak as they rode along - something Garion hadn't heard in all the weeks they'd spent traveling under the gloomy skies of northern Arendia.
Mandorallen, however, scarcely spoke that morning, and his face grew more somber with each passing mile. He was not wearing his armor, but instead a mail suit

and a deep blue surcoat. His head was bare, and the wind tugged at his curly hair.
On a nearby hilltop a bleak-looking castle brooded down at them as they passed, its grim walls high and haughty-looking. Mandorallen seemed to avoid looking at it, and his face became even more melancholy.
Garion found it difficult to make up his mind about Mandorallen. He was honest enough with himself to admit that much of his thinking was still clouded by Lelldorin's prejudices. He didn't really want to like Mandorallen; but aside from the habitual gloominess which seemed characteristic of all Arends and the studied and involuted archaism of the man's speech and his towering self confidence, there seemed little actually to dislike.
A half league along the road from the castle, a ruin sat at the top of a long rise. It was not much more than a single wall with a high archway in the center and broken columns on either side. Near the ruin a woman sat on horseback, her dark red cape flowing in the wind.
Without a word, almost without seeming to think about it, Mandorallen turned his warhorse from the road and cantered up the rise toward the woman, who watched his approach without any seeming surprise, but also with no particular pleasure.
"Where's he going?" Barak asked.
"She's an acquaintance of his," Mister Wolf said dryly.
"Are we supposed to wait for him?"
"He can catch up with us," Wolf replied.
Mandorallen had stopped his horse near the woman and dismounted. He bowed to her and held out his hands to help her down from her horse. They walked together toward the ruin, not touching, but walking very close to each other. They stopped beneath the archway and talked. Behind the ruin, clouds raced in the windy sky, and their enormous shadows swept uncaring across the mournful fields of Arendia.
"We should have taken a different route," Wolf said. "I wasn't thinking, I guess."
"Is there some problem?" Durnik asked.
"Nothing unusual - in Arendia," Wolf answered. "I suppose it's my fault. Sometimes I forget the kind of things that can happen to young people."
"Don't be cryptic, father," Aunt Pol told him. "It's very irritating. Is this something we should know about?"
Wolf shrugged. "It isn't any secret," he replied. "Half of Arendia knows about it. A whole generation of Arendish virgins cry themselves to sleep every night over it."
"Father," Aunt Pol snapped exasperatedly.
"All right," Wolf said. "When Mandorallen was about Garion's age, he showed a great deal of promise-strong, courageous, not too bright the qualities that make a good knight. His father asked me for advice, and I made arrangements for the young man to live for a while with the Baron of Vo Ebor - that's his castle back there. The baron had an enormous reputation, and he provided Mandorallen with the kind of instruction he needed. Mandorallen and the baron became almost like father and son, since the baron was quite a bit older. Everything was going along fine until the baron got married. His bride, however, was much younger - about Mandorallen's age."
"I think I see where this is going," Durnik remarked disapprovingly.
"Not exactly," Wolf disagreed. "After the honeymoon, the baron returned to his customary knightly pursuits and left a very bored young lady wandering around his castle. It's a situation with all kinds of interesting possibilities.
Anyway, Mandorallen and the lady exchanged glances - then words - the usual sort of thing."
"It happens in Sendaria too," Durnik observed, "but I'm sure the name we have for it is different from the one they use here." His tone was critical, even

offended.
"You're jumping to conclusions, Durnik," Wolf told him. "Things never went any further. It might have been better if they had. Adultery isn't really all that serious, and in time they'd have gotten bored with it. But, since they both loved and respected the baron too much to dishonor him, Mandorallen left the castle before things could get out of hand. Now they both suffer in silence. It's all very touching, but it seems like a waste of time to me. Of course I'm older."
"You're older than everyone, father," Aunt Pol said.
"You didn't have to say that, Pol."
Silk laughed sardonically. "I'm glad to see that our stupendous friend at least has the bad taste to fall in love with another man's wife. His nobility was beginning to get rather cloying." The little man's expression had that bitter, self mocking cast to it Garion had first seen in Val Alorn when they had spoken with Queen Porenn.
"Does the baron know about it?" Durnik asked.
"Naturally," Wolf replied. "That's the part that makes the Arends get all mushy inside about it. There was a knight once, stupider than most Arends, who made a bad joke about it. The baron promptly challenged him and ran a lance through him during the duel. Since then very few people have found the situation humorous."
"It's still disgraceful," Durnik said.
"Their behavior's above reproach, Durnik," Aunt Pol maintained firmly. "There's no shame in it as long as it doesn't go any further."
"Decent people don't allow it to happen in the first place," Durnik asserted.
"You'll never convince her, Durnik," Mister Wolf told the smith. "Polgara spent too many years associating with the Wacite Arends. They were as bad or worse than the Mimbrates. You can't wallow in that kind of sentimentality for that long without some of it rubbing off. Fortunately it hasn't totally blotted out her good sense. She's only occasionally girlish and gushy. If you can avoid her during those seizures, it's almost as if there was nothing wrong with her."
"My time was spent a little more usefully than yours, father," Aunt Pol observed acidly. "As I remember, you spent those years carousing in the waterfront dives in Camaar. And then there was that uplifting period you spent amusing the depraved women of Maragor. I'm certain those experiences broadened your concept of morality enormously."
Mister Wolf coughed uncomfortably and looked away.
Behind them, Mandorallen had remounted and begun to gallop back down the hill. The lady stood in the archway with her red cloak billowing in the wind, watching him as he rode away.
They were five days on the road before they reached the River Arend, the boundary between Arendia and Tolnedra. The weather improved as they moved farther south, and by the morning when they reached the hill overlooking the river, it was almost warm. The sun was very bright, and a few fleecy clouds raced overhead in the fresh breeze.
"The high road to Vo Mimbre branches to the left just there," Mandorallen remarked.
"Yes," Wolf said. "Let's go down into that grove near the river and make ourselves a bit more presentable. Appearances are very important in Vo Mimbre, and we don't want to arrive looking like vagabonds."
Three brown-robed and hooded figures stood humbly at the crossroads, their faces down and their hands held out in supplication. Mister Wolf reined in his horse and approached them. He spoke with them briefly, then gave each a coin.
"Who are they?" Garion asked.
"Monks from Mar Terin," Silk replied.
"Where's that?"
"It's a monastery in southeastern Tolnedra where Maragor used to be," Silk told

him. "The monks try to comfort the spirits of the Marags."
Mister Wolf motioned to them, and they rode on past the three humble figures at the roadside. "They say that no Murgos have passed here in the last two weeks."
"Are you sure you can believe them?" Hettar asked.
"Probably. The monks won't lie to anybody."
"Then they'll tell anybody who comes by that we've passed here?" Barak asked.
Wolf nodded. "They'll answer any question anybody puts to them."
"That's an unsavory habit," Barak grunted darkly.
Mister Wolf shrugged and led the way among the trees beside the river. "This ought to do," he decided, dismounting in a grassy glade. He waited while the others climbed down from their horses. "All right," he told them, "we're going to Vo Mimbre. I want you all to be careful about what you say there. Mimbrates are very touchy, and the slightest word can be taken as an insult."
"I think you should wear the white robe Fulrach gave you, father," Aunt Pol interrupted, pulling open one of the packs.
"Please, Pol," Wolf said, "I'm trying to explain something."
"They heard you, father. You tend to belabor things too much." She held up the white robe and looked at it critically. "You should have folded it more carefully. You've wrinkled it."
"I'm not going to wear that thing," he declared flatly.
"Yes, you are, father," she told him sweetly. "We might have to argue about it for an hour or two, but you'll wind up wearing it in the end anyway. Why not just save yourself all the time and aggravation?"
"It's silly," he complained.
"Lots of things are silly, father. I know the Arends better than you do. You'll get more respect if you look the part. Mandorallen and Hettar and Barak will wear their armor; Durnik and Silk and Garion can wear the doublets Fulrach gave them in Sendar; I'll wear my blue gown, and you'll wear the white robe. I insist, father."
"You what? Now listen here, Polgara-"
"Be still, father," she said absently, examining Garion's blue doublet.
Wolf's face darkened, and his eyes bulged dangerously.
"Was there something else?" she asked with a level gaze.
Mister Wolf let it drop.
"He's as wise as they say he is," Silk observed.
An hour later they were on the high road to Vo Mimbre under a sunny sky. Mandorallen, once again in full armor and with a blue and silver pennon streaming from the tip of his lance, led the way with Barak in his gleaming mail shirt and black bearskin cape riding immediately behind him. At Aunt Pol's insistence, the big Cherek had combed the tangles out of his red beard and even rebraided his hair. Mister Wolf in his white robe rode sourly, muttering to himself, and Aunt Pol sat her horse demurely at his side in a short, fur-lined cape and with a blue satin headdress surmounting the heavy mass of her dark hair. Garion and Durnik were ill at ease in their finery, but Silk wore his doublet and black velvet cap with a kind of exuberant flair. Hettar's sole concession to formality had been the replacement of a ring of beaten silver for the leather thong which usually caught in his scalp lock.
The serfs and even the occasional knight they encountered along the way stood aside and saluted respectfully. The day was warm, the road was good, and their horses were strong. By midafternoon they crested a high hill overlooking the plain which sloped down to the gates of Vo Mimbre.

Chapter Ten

THE CITY OF THE MIMBRATE ARENDS reared almost like a mountain beside the sparkling river. Its thick, high walls were surmounted by massive battlements,

and great towers and slender spires with bright banners at their tips rose within the walls, gleaming golden in the afternoon sun.
"Behold Vo Mimbre," Mandorallen proclaimed with pride, "queen of cities. Upon that rock the tide of Angarak crashed and recoiled and crashed again. Upon this field met they their ruin. The soul and pride of Arendia loth reside within that fortress, and the power of the Dark One may not prevail against it."
"We've been here before, Mandorallen," Mister Wolf said sourly.
"Don't be impolite, father," Aunt Pol told the old man. Then she turned to Mandorallen and to Garion's amazement she spoke in an idiom he had never heard from her lips before. "Wilt thou, Sir Knight, convey us presently into the palace of thy king? We must needs take council with him in matters of gravest urgency." She delivered this without the least trace of self-consciousness as if the archaic formality came quite naturally to her. "Forasmuch as thou art the mightiest knight on life, we place ourselves under the protection of thy arm."
Mandorallen, after a startled instant, slid with a crash from his warhorse and sank to his knees before her. "My Lady Polgara," he replied in a voice throbbing with respect - with reverence even, "I accept thy charge and will convey thee safely unto King Korodullin. Should any man question thy paramount right to the king's attention, I shall prove his folly upon his body."
Aunt Pol smiled at him encouragingly, and he vaulted into his saddle with a clang and led the way at a rolling trot, his whole bearing seething with a willingness to do battle.
"What was that all about?" Wolf asked.
"Mandorallen needed something to take his mind off his troubles," she replied. "He's been out of sorts for the last few days."
As they drew closer to the city, Garion could see the scars on the great walls where heavy stones from the Angarak catapults had struck the unyielding rock. The battlements high above were chipped and pitted from the impact of showers of steel-tipped arrows. The stone archway that led into the city revealed the incredible thickness of the walls, and the ironbound gate was massive. They clattered through the archway and into the narrow, crooked streets. The people they passed seemed for the most part to be commoners, who quickly moved aside. The faces of the men in dun-colored tunics and the women in patched dresses were dull and uncurious.
"They don't seem very interested in us," Garion commented quietly to Durnik.
"I don't think the ordinary people and the gentry pay much attention to each other here," Durnik replied. "They live side by side, but they don't know anything about each other. Maybe that's what's wrong with Arendia."
Garion nodded soberly.
Although the commoners were indifferent, the nobles at the palace seemed afire with curiosity. Word of the party's entrance into the city apparently had raced ahead of them through the narrow streets, and the windows and parapets of the palace were alive with people in brightly colored clothes.
"Abate thy pace, Sir Knight," a tall man with dark hair and beard, wearing a black velvet surcoat over his polished mail, called down from the parapet to Mandorallen as they clattered into the broad plaza before the palace. "Lift thy visor so that I may know thee."
Mandorallen stopped in amazement before the closed gate and raised his visor. "What discourtesy is this?" he demanded. "I am, as all the world knows, Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor. Surely thou canst see my crest upon the face of my shield."
"Any man may wear another's crest," the man above declared disdainfully.
Mandorallen's face darkened. "Art thou not mindful that no man on life would dare to counterfeit my semblance?" he asked in a dangerous tone.
"Sir Andorig," another knight on the parapet told the dark-haired man, "this is indeed Sir Mandorallen. I met him on the field of the great tourney last year,

and our meeting cost me a broken shoulder and put a ringing in my ears which hath not yet subsided."
"Ah," Sir Andorig replied, "since thou wilt vouch for him, Sir Helbergin, I will admit that this is indeed the bastard of Vo Mandor."
"You're going to have to do something about that one of these days," Barak said quietly to Mandorallen.
"It would seem so," Mandorallen replied.
"Who, however, are these others with thee who seek admittance, Sir Knight?" Andorig demanded. "I will not cause the gates to open for foreign strangers."
Mandorallen straightened in his saddle. "Behold!" he announced in a voice that could probably be heard all over the city. "I bring you honor beyond measure. Fling wide the palace gate and prepare one and all to make obeisance. You look upon the holy face of Belgarath the Sorcerer, the Eternal Man, and upon the divine countenance of his daughter, the Lady Polgara, who have come to Vo Mimbre to consult with the King of Arendia on diverse matters."
"Isn't that a little overdone?" Garion whispered to Aunt Pol.
"It's customary, dear," she replied placidly. "When you're dealing with Arends, you have to be a little extravagant to get their attention."
"And who hath told thee that this is the Lord Belgarath?" Andorig asked with the faintest hint of a sneer. "I will bend no knee before an unproved vagabond."
"Dost thou question my word, Sir Knight?" Mandorallen returned in an ominously quiet voice. "And wilt thou then come down and put thy doubt to the test? Or is it perhaps that thou wouldst prefer to cringe doglike behind thy parapet and yap at thy betters?"
"Oh, that was very good," Barak said admiringly. Mandorallen grinned tightly at the big man.
"I don't think we're getting anywhere with this," Mister Wolf muttered. "It looks like I'll have to prove something to this skeptic if we're ever going to get in to see Korodullin." He slid down from his saddle and thoughtfully removed a twig from his horse's tail, picked up somewhere during their journey. Then he strode to the center of the plaza and stood there in his gleaming white robe.
"Sir Knight," he called up mildly to Andorig, "you're a cautious man, I see. That's a good quality, but it can be carried too far."
"I am hardly a child, old man," the dark-haired knight replied in a tone hovering on the verge of insult, "and I believe only what mine own eye hath confirmed."
"It must be a sad thing to believe so little," Wolf observed. He bent then and inserted the twig he'd been holding between two of the broad granite flagstones at his feet. He stepped back a pace and stretched his hand out above the twig, his face curiously gentle. "I'm going to do you a favor, Sir Andorig," he announced. "I'm going to restore your faith. Watch closely." And then he spoke a single soft word that Garion couldn't quite hear, but which set off the now-familiar surge and a faint roaring sound.
At first nothing seemed to be happening. Then the two flagstones began to buckle upward with a grinding sound as the twig grew visibly thicker and began to reach up toward Mister Wolf's outstretched hand. There were gasps from the palace walls as branches began to sprout from the twig as it grew. Wolf raised his hand higher, and the twig obediently grew at his gesture, its branches broadening. By now it was a young tree and still growing. One of the flagstones cracked with a sharp report.
There was absolute silence as every eye fixed in awed fascination on the tree. Mister Wolf held out both hands and turned them until the palms were up. He spoke again, and the tips of the branches swelled and began to bud. Then the tree burst into flower, its blossoms a delicate pink and white.
"Apple, wouldn't you say, Pol?" Wolf asked over his shoulder.
"It appears to be, father," she replied.

He patted the tree fondly and then turned back to the dark-haired knight who had sunk, white-faced and trembling, to his knees. "Well, Sir Andorig," he inquired, "what do you believe now?"
"Please forgive me, Holy Belgarath," Andorig begged in a strangled voice.
Mister Wolf drew himself up and spoke sternly, his words slipping into the measured cadences of the Mimbrate idiom as easily as Aunt Pol's had earlier. "I charge thee, Sir Knight, to care for this tree. It hath grown here to renew thy faith and trust. Thy debt to it must be paid with tender and loving attention to its needs. In time it will bear fruit, and thou wilt gather the fruit and give it freely to any who ask it of thee. For thy soul's sake, thou wilt refuse none, no matter how humble. As the tree gives freely, so shalt thou."
"That's a nice touch," Aunt Pol approved. Wolf winked at her.
"I will do even as thou hast commanded me, Holy Belgarath," Sir Andorig choked. "I pledge my heart to it."
Mister Wolf returned to his horse. "At least he'll do one useful thing in his life," he muttered.
After that there was no further discussion. The palace gate creaked open, and they all rode into the inner courtyard and dismounted. Mandorallen led them past kneeling and even sobbing nobles who reached out to touch Mister Wolf's robe as he passed. At Mandorallen's heels they walked through the broad, tapestried hallways with a growing throng behind them. The door to the throne room opened, and they entered.
The Arendish throne room was a great, vaulted hall with sculptured buttresses soaring upward along the walls. Tall, narrow windows rose between the buttresses, and the light streaming through their stainedglass panels was jeweled. The floor was polished marble, and on the carpeted stone platform at the far end stood the double throne of Arendia, backed by heavy purple drapes. Flanking the draped wall hung the massive antique weapons of twenty generations of Arendish royalty. Lances, maces, and huge swords, taller than any man, hung among the tattered war banners of forgotten kings.
Korodullin of Arendia was a sickly-looking young man in a goldembroidered purple robe, and he wore his large gold crown as if it were too heavy for him. Beside him on the double throne sat his pale, beautiful queen. Together they watched somewhat apprehensively as the throng surrounding Mister Wolf approached the wide steps leading up to the throne.
"My King," Mandorallen announced, dropping to one knee, "I bring into thy presence Holy Belgarath, Disciple of Aldur and the staff upon which the kingdoms of the West have leaned since time began."
"He knows who I am, Mandorallen," Mister Wolf said. He stepped forward and bowed briefly. "Hail Korodullin and Mayaserana," he greeted the king and queen. "I'm sorry we haven't had the chance to get acquainted before."
"The honor is ours, noble Belgarath," the young king replied in a voice whose rich timbre belied his frail appearance.
"My father spoke often of thee," the queen said.
"We were good friends," Wolf told her. "Allow me to present my daughter, Polgara."
"Great Lady," the king responded with a respectful inclination of his head. "All the world knows of thy power, but men have forgotten to speak of thy beauty."
"We'll get along well together," Aunt Pol answered warmly, smiling at him.
"My heart trembles at the sight of the flower of all womanhood," the queen declared.
Aunt Pol looked at the queen thoughtfully. "We must talk, Mayaserana," she said in a serious tone, "in private and very soon."
The queen looked startled.
Mister Wolf introduced the rest of them, and each bowed in turn to the young king.

"Welcome, gentles all," Korodullin said. "My poor court is overwhelmed by so noble a company."
"We don't have much time, Korodullin," Mister Wolf told him. "The courtesy of the Arendish throne is the marvel of the world. I don't want to offend you and your lovely queen by cutting short those stately observances which so ornament your court, but I have certain news which I have to present to you in private. The matter is of extreme urgency."
"Then I am at thy immediate disposal," the king replied, rising from his throne. "Forgive us, dear friends," he said to the assembled nobles, "but this ancient friend of our kingly line hath information which must be imparted to our ears alone with utmost urgency. I pray thee, let us go apart for a little space of time to receive this instruction. We shall return presently."
"Polgara," Mister Wolf said.
"Go ahead, father," she replied. "Just now I have to speak with Mayaserana about something that's very important to her."
"Can't it wait?"
"No, father, it can't." And with that she took the queen's arm, and the two left. Mister Wolf stared after her for a moment; then he shrugged, and he and Korodullin also left the throne room. An almost shocked silence followed their departure.
"Most unseemly," an old courtier with wispy white hair disapproved. "A necessary haste, my Lord," Mandorallen informed him. "As the revered Belgarath hath intimated, our mission is the hinge-pin of the survival of all the kingdoms of the west. Our Ancient Foe may soon be abroad again. It will not be long, I fear, ere Mimbrate knights will again stand the brunt of titanic war."
"Blessed then be the tongue which brings the news," the white-haired old man declared. "I had feared that I had seen my last battle and would die abed in my dotage. I thank great Chaldan that I still have my vigor, and that my prowess is undiminished by the passage of a mere fourscore years."
Garion drew off by himself to one side of the room to wrestle with a problem. Events had swept him into King Korodullin's court before he had had the time to prepare himself for an unpleasant duty. He had given his word to Lelldorin to bring certain things to the king's attention, but he did not have the faintest idea how to begin. The exaggerated formality of the Arendish court intimidated him. This was not at all like the rough, good-natured court of King Anheg in Val Alorn or the almost homey court of King Fulrach in Sendar. This was Vo Mimbre, and the prospect of blurting out news of the wild scheme of a group of Asturian firebrands as he had blurted out the news of the Earl of Jarvik in Cherek now seemed utterly out of the question.
Suddenly the thought of that previous event struck him forcibly. The situation then was so similar to this one that it seemed all at once like some elaborate game. The moves on the board were almost identical, and in each case he had been placed in the uncomfortable position of being required to block that last crucial move where a king would die and a kingdom would collapse. He felt oddly powerless, as if his entire life were in the fingers of two faceless players maneuvering pieces in the same patterns on some vast board in a game that, for all he knew, had lasted for eternity. There was no question about what had to be done. The players, however, seemed content to leave it up to him to come up with a way to do it.
King Korodullin appeared shaken when he returned to the throne room with Mister Wolf a half hour later, and he controlled his expression with obvious difficulty. "Forgive me, gentles all," he apologized, "but I have had disturbing news. For the present time, however, let us put aside our cares and celebrate this historic visit. Summon musicians and command that a banquet be made ready."
There was a stir near the door, and a black-robed man entered with a half dozen Mimbrate knights in full armor following him closely, their eyes narrow with

suspicion and their hands on their sword hilts as if daring anyone to bar their leader's path. As the robed man strode nearer, Garion saw his angular eyes and scarred cheeks. The man was a Murgo.
Barak put a firm hand on Hettar's arm.
The Murgo had obviously dressed in haste and he seemed slightly breathless from his burned trip to the throne room. "Your Majesty," he rasped, bowing deeply to Korodullin, "I have just been advised that visitors have arrived at thy court and have made haste here to greet them in the name of my king, Taur Urgas."
Korodullin's face grew cold. "I do not recall summoning thee, Nachak," he said.
"It is, then, as I had feared," the Murgo replied. "These messengers have spoken ill of my race, seeking to dissever the friendship which loth exist between the thrones of Arendia and of Cthol Murgos. I am chagrined to find that thou bast given ear to slanders without offering me opportunity to reply. Is this just, august Majesty?"
"Who is this?" Mister Wolf asked Korodullin.
"Nachak," the king replied, "the ambassador of Cthol Murgos. Shall I introduce thee to him, Ancient One?"
"That won't be necessary," Mister Wolf answered bleakly. "Every Murgo alive knows who I am. Mothers in Cthol Murgos frighten their children into obedience by mentioning my name."
"But I am not a child, old man," Nachak sneered. "I'm not afraid of you."
"That could be a serious failing," Silk observed.
The Murgo's name had struck Garion almost like a blow. As he looked at the scarred face of the man who had so misled Lelldorin and his friends, he realized that the players had once again moved their pieces into that last crucial position, and that who would win and who would lose once again depended entirely on him.
"What lies have you told the king?" Nachak was demanding of Mister Wolf.
"No lies, Nachak," Wolf told him. "Just the truth. That should be enough."
"I protest, your Majesty," Nachak appealed to the king. "I protest in the strongest manner possible. All the world knows of his hatred for my people. How can you allow him to poison your mind against us?"
"He forgot the thees and thous that time," Silk commented slyly.
"He's excited," Barak replied. "Murgos get clumsy when they're excited. It's one of their shortcomings."
"Alorns!" Nachak spat.
"That's right, Murgo," Barak said coldly. He was still holding Hettar's arm.
Nachak looked at them, and then his eyes widened as he seemed to see Hettar for the first time. He recoiled from the Algar's hate-filled stare, and his half dozen knights closed protectively around him. "Your Majesty," he rasped, "I know that man to be Hettar of Algaria, a known murderer. I demand that you arrest him."
"Demand, Nachak?" the king asked with a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Thou wilt present demands to me in my own court?"
"Forgive me, your Majesty," Nachak apologized quickly. "The sight of that animal so disturbed me that I forgot myself."
"You'd be wise to leave now, Nachak," Mister Wolf recommended. "It's not really a good idea for a Murgo to be alone in the presence of so many Alorns. Accidents have a way of happening under such conditions."
"Grandfather," Garion said urgently. Without knowing exactly why, he knew that it was time to speak. Nachak must not be allowed to leave the throne room. The faceless players had made their final moves, and the game must end here.
"Grandfather," he repeated, "there's something I have to tell you."
"Not now, Garion." Wolf was still looking with hard eyes at the Murgo.
"It's important, grandfather. Very important."
Mister Wolf turned as if to reply sharply, but then he seemed to see something -

something that no one else in the throne room could see and his eyes widened in momentary amazement. "All right, Garion," he said in a strangely quiet voice. "Go ahead."
"Some men are planning to kill the king of Arendia. Nachak's one of them." Garion had said it louder than he'd intended, and a sudden silence fell over the throne room at his words.
Nachak's face went pale, and his hand moved involuntarily toward his sword hilt, then froze. Garion was suddenly keenly aware of Barak hulking just behind him and Hettar, grim as death in black leather towering beside him. Nachak stepped back and made a quick gesture to his steel-clad knights. Quickly they formed a protective ring around him, their hands on their weapons. "I won't stay and listen to such slander," the Murgo declared.
"I have not yet given thee my permission to withdraw, Nachak," Korodullin informed him coolly. "I require thy presence yet a while." The young king's face was stern, and his eyes bored into the Murgo's. Then he turned to Garion. "I would hear more of this. Speak truthfully, lad, and fear not reprisal from any man for thy words."
Garion drew a deep breath and spoke carefully. "I don't really know all the details, your Majesty," he explained. "I found out about it by accident."
"Say what thou canst," the king told him.
"As nearly as I can tell, your Majesty, next summer when you travel to Vo Astur, a group of men are going to try to kill you somewhere on the highway."
"Asturian traitors, doubtless," a gray-haired courtier suggested.
"They call themselves patriots," Garion answered.
"Inevitably," the courtier sneered.
"Such attempts are not uncommon," the king stated. "We will take steps to guard against them. I thank thee for this information."
"There's more, your Majesty," Garion added. "When they attack, they're going to be wearing the uniforms of Tolnedran legionnaires."
Silk whistled sharply.
"The whole idea is to make your nobles believe that you've been killed by the Tolnedrans," Garion continued. "These men are sure that Mimbre will immediately declare war on the Empire, and that as soon as that happens the legions will march in. Then, when everybody here is involved in the war, they're going to announce that Asturias no longer subject to the Arendish throne. They're sure that the rest of Asturia will follow them at that point."
"I see," the king replied thoughtfully. "'This a well-conceived plan, but with a subtlety uncharacteristic of our wild-eyed Asturian brothers. But I have yet heard nothing linking the emissary of Taur Urgas with this treason."
"The whole plan was his, your Majesty. He gave them all the details and the gold to buy the Tolnedran uniforms and to encourage other people to join them."
"He lies!" Nachak burst out.
"Thou shalt have opportunity to reply, Nachak," the king advised him. He turned back to Garion. "Let us pursue this matter further. How camest thou by this knowledge?"
"I can't say, your Majesty," Garion replied painfully. "I gave my word not to. One of the men told me about it to prove that he was my friend. He put his life in my hands to show how much he trusted me. I can't betray him."
"Thy loyalty speaks well of thee, young Garion," the king commended him, "but thy accusation against the Murgo ambassador is most grave. Without violating thy trust, canst thou provide corroboration?"
Helplessly, Garion shook his head.
"This is a serious matter, your Majesty," Nachak declared. "I am the personal representative of Taur Urgas. This lying urchin is Belgarath's creature, and his wild, unsubstantiated story is an obvious attempt to discredit me and to drive a wedge between the thrones of Arendia and Cthol Murgos. This accusation must not

be allowed to stand. The boy must be forced to identify these imaginary plotters or to admit that he lies."
"He hath given his pledge, Nachak," the king pointed out.
"He says so, your Majesty," Nachak replied with a sneer. "Let us put him to the test. An hour on the rack may persuade him to speak freely."
"I've seldom had much faith in confessions obtained by torment," Korodullin said.
"If it please your Majesty," Mandorallen interjected, "it may be that I can help to resolve this matter."
Garion threw a stricken look at the knight. Mandorallen knew Lelldorin, and it would be a simple thing for him to guess the truth. Mandorallen, moreover, was a Mimbrate, and Korodullin was his king. Not only was he under no compulsion to remain silent, but his duty almost obliged him to speak.
"Sir Mandorallen," the king responded gravely, "thy devotion to truth and duty are legendary. Canst thou perchance identify these plotters?"
The question hung there.
"Nay, Sire," Mandorallen replied firmly, "but I know Garion to be a truthful and honest boy. I will vouch for him."
"That's scanty corroboration," Nachak asserted. "I declare that he lies, so where does that leave us?"
"The lad is my companion," Mandorallen said. "I will not be the instrument of breaking his pledge, since his honor is as dear to me as mine own. By our law, however, a cause incapable of proof may be decided by trial at arms. I will champion this boy. I declare before this company that this Nachak is a foul villain who hath joined with diverse others to slay my king." He pulled off his steel gauntlet and tossed it to the floor. The crash as it struck the polished stone seemed thunderous. "Take up my gage, Murgo," Mandorallen said coldly, "or let one of thy sycophant knights take it up for thee. I will prove thy villainy upon thy body or upon the body of thy champion."
Nachak stared first at the mailed gauntlet and then at the great knight standing accusingly before him. He licked his lips nervously and looked around the throne room. Except for Mandorallen, none of the Mimbrate nobles present were under arms. The Murgo's eyes narrowed with a sudden desperation. "Kill him!" he snarled at the six men in armor surrounding him.
The knights looked shocked, doubtful.
"Kill him!" Nachak commanded them. "A thousand gold pieces to the man who spills out his life!"
The faces of the six knights went flat at his words. As one man they drew their swords and spread out, moving with raised shields toward Mandorallen. There were gasps and cries of alarm as the nobles and their ladies scrambled out of the way.
"What treason is this?" Mandorallen demanded of them. "Are ye so enamored of this Murgo and his gold that ye will draw weapons in the king's presence in open defiance of the law's prohibitions? Put up your swords."
But they ignored his words and continued their grim advance.
"Defend thyself, Sir Mandorallen," Korodullin urged, half rising from his throne. "I free thee of the law's constraint."
Barak, however, had already begun to move. Noting that Mandorallen had not carried his shield into the throne room, the red-bearded man jerked an enormous two-handed broadsword down from the array of banners and weapons at one side of the dais. "Mandorallen!" he shouted and with a great heave he slid the huge blade skittering and bouncing across the stone floor toward the knight's feet. Mandorallen stopped the sliding weapon with one mailed foot, stooped, and picked it up.
The approaching knights looked a bit less confident as Mandorallen lifted the six-foot blade with both hands.

Barak, grinning hugely, drew his sword from one hip and his war axe from the other. Hettar, his drawn sabre held low, was circling the clumsy knights on catlike feet. Without thinking, Garion reached for his own sword, but Mister Wolf's hand closed on his wrist. "You stay out of it," the old man told him and pulled him clear of the impending fight.

Mandorallen's first blow crashed against a quickly raised shield, shattering the arm of a knight with a crimson surcoat over his armor and hurling him into a clattering heap ten feet away. Barak parried a sword stroke from a burly knight with his axe and battered at the man's raised shield with his own heavy sword. Hettar toyed expertly with a knight in green-enameled armor, easily avoiding his opponent's awkward strokes and flicking the point of his sabre at the man's visored face.

The steely ring of sword on sword echoed through Korodullin's throne room, and showers of sparks cascaded from the clash of edge against edge. With huge blows, Mandorallen smashed at a second man. A vast sweep of his two-handed sword went under the knight's shield, and the man shrieked as the great blade bit through his armor and into his side. Then he fell with blood spouting from the sheared-in gash that reached halfway through his body.

Barak, with a deft backswing of his war axe, caved in the side of the burly knight's helmet, and the knight half spun and fell to the floor. Hettar feinted a quick move, then drove his sabre point through a slot in the green-armored knight's visor. The stricken knight stiffened as the sabre ran into his brain.

As the melee surged across the polished floor, the nobles and ladies scurried this way and that to avoid being overrun by the struggling men. Nachak watched with dismay as his knights were systematically destroyed before his eyes. Then,

quite suddenly he turned and fled.

"He's getting away!" Garion shouted, but Hettar was already in pursuit, his dreadful face and blood-smeared sabre melting the courtiers and their screaming ladies out of his path as he ran to cut off Nachak's flight. The Murgo had almost reached the far end of the hall before Hettar's long strides carried him through the crowd to block the doorway. With a cry of despair, the ambassador yanked his sword from its scabbard, and Garion felt a strange, momentary pity for him.

As the Murgo raised his sword, Hettar flicked his sabre almost like a whip, lashing him once on each shoulder. Nachak desperately tried to raise his numbed arms to protect his head, but Hettar's blade dropped low instead. Then, with a peculiar fluid grace, the grim-faced Algar quite deliberately ran the Murgo through. Garion saw the sabre blade come out between Nachak's shoulders, angling sharply upward. The ambassador gasped, dropped his sword and gripped Hettar's wrist with both hands, but the hawk-faced man inexorably turned his hand, twisting the sharp, curved blade inside the Murgo's body. Nachak groaned and shuddered horribly. Then his hands slipped off Hettar's wrist and his legs buckled under him. With a gurgling sigh, he toppled backward, sliding limply off Hettar's blade.

Chapter Eleven

A MOMENT OF DREADFUL SILENCE filled the throne room following the death of Nachak. Then the two members of his bodyguard who were still on their feet threw their weapons down on the bloodspattered floor with a sudden clatter.

Mandorallen raised his visor and turned toward the throne. "Sire," he said respectfully, "the treachery of Nachak stands proved by reason of this trial at arms:"

"Truly," the king agreed. "My only regret is that thy enthusiasm in pursuing this cause hath deprived us of the opportunity to probe more deeply into the

full extent of Nachak's duplicity."
"I expect that the plots he hatched will dry up once word of what happened here gets around," Mister Wolf observed.
"Perhaps so," the king acknowledged. "I would have pursued the matter further, however. I would know if this villainy was Nachak's own or if I must look beyond him to Taur Urgas himself." He frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head as if to put certain dark speculations aside. "Arendia stands in thy debt, Ancient Belgarath. This brave company of throe hath forestalled the renewal of a war best forgotten." He looked sadly at the blood-smeared floor and the bodies littering it. "My throne room hath become as a battlefield. The curse of Arendia extends even here." He sighed. "Have it cleansed," he ordered shortly and turned his head so that he would not have to watch the grim business of cleaning up.
The nobles and ladies began to buzz as the dead were removed and the polished stone floor was quickly mopped to remove the pools of sticky blood.
"Good fight," Barak commented as he carefully wiped his axe blade.
"I am in thy debt, Lord Barak," Mandorallen said gravely. "Thy aid was fortuitous."
Barak shrugged. "It seemed appropriate."
Hettar rejoined them, his expression one of grim satisfaction.
"You did a nice job on Nachak," Barak complimented him.
"I've had a lot of practice," Hettar answered. "Murgos always seem to make that same mistake when they get into a fight. I think there's a gap in their training somewhere."
"That's a shame, isn't it?" Barak suggested with vast insincerity.
Garion moved away from them. Although he knew it was irrational, he nevertheless felt a keen sense of personal responsibility for the carnage he had just witnessed. The blood and violent death had come about as the result of his words. Had he not spoken, men who were now dead would still be alive. No matter how justified -how necessary - his speaking out had been, he still suffered the pangs of guilt. He did not at the moment trust himself to speak with his friends. More than anything he wished that he could talk with Aunt Pol, but she had not yet returned to the throne room, and so he was left to wrestle alone with his wounded conscience.
He reached one of the embrasures formed by the buttresses along the south wall of the throne room and stood alone in somber reflection until a girl, perhaps two years older than he, glided across the floor toward him, her stiff, crimson brocade gown rustling. The girl's hair was dark, even black, and her skin was creamy. Her bodice was cut quite low, and Garion found some difficulty in finding a safe place for his eyes as she bore down on him.
"I would add my thanks to the thanks of all Arendia, Lord Garion," she breathed at him. Her voice was vibrant with all kinds of emotions, none of which Garion understood. "Thy timely revelation of the Murgo's plotting hath in truth saved the life of our sovereign."
Garion felt a certain warmth at that. "I didn't do all that much, my lady," he replied with a somewhat insincere attempt at modesty. "My friends did all the fighting."
"But it was thy brave denunciation which uncovered the foul plot," she persisted, "and virgins will sing of the nobility with which thou protected the identity of thy nameless and misguided friend."
Virgin was not a word with which Garion was prepared to deal. He blushed and floundered helplessly.
"Art thou in truth, noble Garion, the grandson of Eternal Belgarath?"
"The relationship is a bit more distant. We simplify it for the sake of convenience."
"But thou art in his direct line?" she persisted, her violet eyes glowing.
"He tells me I am."

"Is the Lady Polgara perchance thy mother?"
"My aunt."
"A close kinship nonetheless," she approved warmly, her hand coming to rest lightly on his wrist. "Thy blood, Lord Garion, is the noblest in the world. Tell me, art thou perchance as yet unbetrothed?"
Garion blinked at her, his ears growing suddenly redder.
"Ah, Garion," Mandorallen boomed in his hearty voice, striding into the awkward moment, "I had been seeking thee. Wilt thou excuse us, Countess?"
The young lady shot Mandorallen a look filled with sheer venom, but the knight's firm hand was already drawing Garion away.
"We will speak again, Lord Garion," she called after him.
"I hope so, my Lady," Garion replied back over his shoulder. Then he and Mandorallen merged with the crowd of courtiers near the center of the throne room.
"I wanted to thank you, Mandorallen," Garion said finally, struggling with it a little.
"For what, lad?"
"You knew whom I was protecting when I told the King about Nachak, didn't you?"
"Naturally," the knight replied in a rather offhand way.
"You could have told the king,- actually it was your duty to tell him, wasn't it?"
"But thou hadst given thy pledge."
"You hadn't, though."
"Thou art my companion, lad. Thy pledge is as binding upon me as it is upon thee. Didst thou not know that?"
Garion was startled by Mandorallen's words. The exquisite involvement of Arendish ethics were beyond his grasp. "So you fought for me instead."
Mandorallen laughed easily. "Of course," he answered, "though I must confess to thee in all honesty, Garion, that my eagerness to stand as thy champion grew not entirely out of friendship. In truth I found the Murgo Nachak offensive and liked not the cold arrogance of his hirelings. I was inclined toward battle before thy need of championing presented itself. Perhaps it is I who should thank thee for providing the opportunity."
"I don't understand you at all, Mandorallen," Garion admitted. "Sometimes I think you're the most complicated man I've ever met."
"I?" Mandorallen seemed amazed. "I am the simplest of men." He looked around then and leaned slightly toward Garion. "I must advise thee to have a care in thy speech with the Countess Vasrana," he warned. "It was that which impelled me to draw thee aside."
"Who?"
"The comely young lady with whom thou wert speaking. She considers herself the greatest beauty in the kingdom and is seeking a husband worthy of her."
"Husband?" Garion responded in a faltering voice.
"Thou art fair game, lad. Thy blood is noble beyond measure by reason of thy kinship to Belgarath. Thou wouldst be a great prize for the countess."
"Husband?" Garion quavered at.in, his knees beginning to tremble. "Me?"
"I know not how things stand in misty Sendaria," Mandorallen declared, "but in Arendia thou art of marriageable age. Guard well thy speech, lad. The most innocent remark can be viewed as a promise, should a noble choose to take it so."
Garion swallowed hard and looked around apprehensively. After that he did his best to hide. His nerves, he felt, were not up to any more shocks.
The Countess Vasrana, however, proved to be a skilled huntress. With appalling determination she tracked him down and pinned him in another embrasure with smoldering eyes and heaving bosom. "Now perchance we may continue our most interesting discussion, Lord Garion," she purred at him.

Garion was considering flight when Aunt Pol, accompanied by a now radiant Queen Mayaserana, reentered the throne room. Mandorallen spoke briefly to her, and she immediately crossed to the spot where the violet-eyed countess held Garion captive.
"Garion, dear," she said as she approached. "It's time for your medicine."
"Medicine?" he replied, confused.
"A most forgetful boy," she told the countess. "Probably it was all the excitement, but he knows that if he doesn't take the potion every three hours, the madness will return."
"Madness?" the Countess Vasrana repeated sharply.
"The curse of his family," Aunt Pol sighed. "They all have it-all the male children. The potion works for a while, but of course it's only temporary. We'll have to find some patient and self sacrificing lady soon, so that he can marry and father children before his brains begin to soften. After that his poor wife will be doomed to spend the rest of her days caring for him." She looked critically at the young countess. "I wonder," she said. "Could it be possible that you are as yet unbetrothed? You appear to be of a suitable age." She reached out and briefly took hold of Vasrana's rounded arm. "Nice and strong," she said approvingly. "I'll speak to my father, Lord Belgarath, about this immediately."
The countess began to back away, her eyes wide.
"Come back," Aunt Pol told her. "His fits won't start for several minutes yet."
The girl fled.
"Can't you ever stay out of trouble?" Aunt Pol demanded of Garion, leading him firmly away.
"But I didn't say anything," he objected.
Mandorallen joined them, grinning broadly. "I perceive that thou hast routed our predatory countess, my Lady. I should have thought she would prove more persistent."
"I gave her something to worry about. It dampened her enthusiasm for matrimony."
"What matter didst thou discuss with our queen?" he asked. "I have not seen her smile so in years."
"Mayaserana's had a problem of a female nature. I don't think you'd understand."
"Her inability to carry a child to term?"
"Don't Arends have anything better to do than gossip about things that don't concern them? Why don't you go find another fight instead of asking intimate questions?"
"The matter is of great concern to us all, my Lady," Mandorallen apologized. "If our queen does not produce an heir to the throne, we stand in danger of dynastic war. All Arendia could go up in flames."
"There aren't going to be any flames, Mandorallen. Fortunately I arrived in time - though it was very close. You'll have a crown prince before winter."
"Is it possible?"
"Would you like all the details?" she asked pointedly. "I've noticed that men usually prefer not to know about the exact mechanics involved in childbearing."
Mandorallen's face slowly flushed. "I will accept thy assurances, Lady Polgara," he replied quickly.
"I'm so glad."
"I must inform the king," he declared.
"You must mind your own business, Sir Mandorallen. The queen will tell Korodullin what he needs to know. Why don't you go clean off your armor? You look as if you just walked through a slaughterhouse."
He bowed, still blushing, and moved away.
"Men!" she said to his retreating back. Then she turned back to Garion. "I hear that you've been busy."
"I had to warn the king," he replied.

"You seem to have an absolute genius for getting mixed up in this sort of thing. Why didn't you tell me - or your grandfather."
"I promised that I wouldn't say anything."
"Garion," she said firmly, "under our present circumstances, secrets are very dangerous. You knew that what Lelldorin told you was important, didn't you?"
"I didn't say it was Lelldorin."
She gave him a withering look. "Garion, dear," she told him bluntly, "don't ever make the mistake of thinking that I'm stupid."
"I didn't," he floundered. "I wasn't. I - Aunt Pol, I gave them my word that I wouldn't tell anybody."
She sighed. "We've got to get you out of Arendia," she declared. "The place seems to be affecting your good sense. The next time you feel the urge to make one of these startling public announcements, talk it over with me first, all right?"
"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled, embarrassed.
"Oh, Garion, what am I ever going to do with you?" Then she laughed fondly and put her arm about his shoulder and everything was all right again.
The evening passed uneventfully after that. The banquet was tedious, and the toasts afterward interminable as each Arendish noble arose in turn to salute Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol with flowery and formal speeches. They went to bed late, and Garion slept fitfully, troubled by nightmares of the hot-eyed countess pursuing him through endless, flower-strewn corridors.
They were up early the next morning, and after breakfast Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf spoke privately with the king and queen again. Garion, still nervous about his encounter with the Countess Vasrana, stayed close to Mandorallen. The Mimbrate knight seemed best equipped to help him avoid any more such adventures. They waited in an antechamber to the throne room, and Mandorallen in his blue surcoat explained at length an intricate tapestry which covered one entire wall.
About midmorning Sir Andorig, the dark-haired knight Mister Wolf had ordered to spend his days caring for the tree in the plaza, came looking for Mandorallen.
"Sir Knight," he said respectfully, "the Baron of Vo Ebor hath arrived from the north accompanied by his lady. They have asked after thee and besought me that I should seek thee out for them."
"Thou art most kind, Sir Andorig," Mandorallen replied, rising quickly from the bench where he had been sitting. "Thy courtesy becomes thee greatly."
Andorig sighed. "Alas that it was not always so. I have this past night stood vigil before that miraculous tree which Holy Belgarath commended to my care. I thus had leisure to consider my life in retrospect. I have not been an admirable man. Bitterly I repent my faults and will strive earnestly for amendment."
Wordlessly, Mandorallen clasped the knight's hand and then followed him down a long hallway to a room where the visitors waited.
It was not until they entered the sunlit room that Garion remembered that the wife of the Baron of Vo Ebor was the lady to whom Mandorallen had spoken on that windswept hill beside the Great West Road some days before.
The baron was a solid-looking man in a green surcoat, and his hair and beard were touched with white. His eyes were deep-set, and there seemed to be a great sadness in them. "Mandorallen," he said, warmly embracing the younger knight. "Thou art unkind to absent thyself from us for so long."
"Duty, my Lord," Mandorallen replied in a subdued voice. "Come, Nerina," the baron told his wife, "greet our friend."
The Baroness Nerina was much younger than her husband. Her hair was dark and very long. She wore a rose-colored gown, and she was beautiful-though, Garion thought, no more so than any of a half dozen others he had seen at the Arendish court.
"Dear Mandorallen," she said, kissing the knight with a brief, chaste embrace, "we have missed thee at Vo Ebor."

"And the world is desolate for me that I must be absent from its wellloved halls."
Sir Andorig had bowed and then discreetly departed, leaving Garion standing awkwardly near the door.
"And who is this likely-appearing lad who accompanies thee, my son?" the baron asked.
"A Sendarian boy," Mandorallen responded. "His name is Garion. He and diverse others have joined with me in a perilous quest."
"Joyfully I greet my son's companion," the baron declared.
Garion bowed, but his mind raced, attempting to find some legitimate excuse to leave. The situation was terribly embarrassing, and he did not want to stay.
"I must wait upon the king," the baron announced. "Custom and courtesy demand that I present myself to him as soon as possible upon my arrival at his court. Wilt thou, Mandorallen, remain here with my baroness until I return?"
"I will, my Lord."
"I'll take you to where the king is meeting with my aunt and my grandfather, sir," Garion offered quickly.
"Nay, lad," the baron demurred. "Thou too must remain. Though I have no cause for anxiety, knowing full well the fidelity of my wife and my dearest friend, idle tongues would make scandal were they left together unattended. Prudent folk leave no possible foundation for false rumor and vile innuendo."
"I'll stay then, sir," Garion replied quickly.

"Good lad," the baron approved. Then, with eyes that seemed somehow haunted, he quietly left the room.
"Wilt thou sit, my Lady?" Mandorallen asked Nerina, pointing to a sculptured bench near a window.
"I will," she said. "Our journey was fatiguing."
"It is a long way from Vo Ebor," Mandorallen agreed, sitting on another bench. "Didst thou and my Lord find the roads passable?"
"Perhaps not yet so dry as to make travel enjoyable," she told him. They spoke at some length about roads and weather, sitting not far from each other, but not so close that anyone chancing to pass by the open door could have mistaken their conversation for anything less than innocent. Their eyes, however, spoke more intimately. Garion, painfully embarrassed, stood looking out a window, carefully choosing one that kept him in full view of the door.
As the conversation progressed, there were increasingly long pauses, and Garion cringed inwardly at each agonizing silence, afraid that either Mandorallen or the Lady Nerina might in the extremity of their hopeless love cross that unspoken boundary and blurt the one word, phrase, or sentence which would cause restraint and honor to crumble and turn their lives into disaster. And yet a certain part of his mind wished that the word or phrase or sentence might be spoken and that their love could flame, however briefly.
It was there, in that quiet sunlit chamber, that Garion passed a small crossroad. The prejudice against Mandorailen that Lelldorin's unthinking partisanship had instilled in him finally shattered and fell away. He felt a surge of feelings - not pity, for they would not have accepted pity, but compassion rather. More than that, there was the faint beginning of an understanding of the honor and towering pride which, though utterly selfless, was the foundation of that tragedy which had existed in Arendia for uncounted centuries.
For perhaps a half hour more Mandorallen and the Lady Nerina sat, speaking hardly at all now, their eyes lost in each other's faces while Garion, near to tears, stood his enforced watch over them. And then Durnik came to tell them that Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf were getting ready to leave.

PART TWO

TOLNEDRA

Chapter Twelve

A BRASSY CHORUS OF HORNS saluted them from the battlements of Vo Mimbre as they rode out of the city accompanied by twoscore armored knights and by King Korodullin himself. Garion glanced back once and thought he saw the Lady Nerina standing upon the wall above the arched gate, though he could not be sure. The lady did not wave, and Mandorallen did not look back. Garion, however, very nearly held his breath until Vo Mimbre was out of sight.

It was midafternoon by the time they reached the ford which crossed the River Arend into Tolnedra, and the bright sun sparkled on the river. The sky was very blue overhead, and the colored pennons on the lances of the escorting knights snapped in the breeze. Garion felt a desperate urgency, an almost unbearable necessity to cross the river and to leave Arendia and the terrible things that had happened there behind.

"Hail and farewell, Holy Belgarath," Korodullin said at the water's edge. "I will, as thou hast advised me, begin my preparations. Arendia will be ready. I pledge my life to it."

"And I'll keep you advised of our progress from time to time," Mister Wolf said.

"I will also examine the activities of the Murgos within my kingdom," Korodullin said. "If what thou hast told me should prove true, as I doubt not that it shall, then I will expell them from Arendia. I will seek them out, one and all, and harry them out of the land. I will make their lives a burden and an affliction to them for sowing discord and contention among my subjects."

Wolf grinned at him. "That's an idea that appeals to me. Murgos are an arrogant people, and a little affliction now and then teaches them humility." He reached out and took the king's hand. "Good-bye, Korodullin. I hope the world's happier next time we meet."

"I will pray that it may be so," the young king said.

Then Mister Wolf led the way down into the rippling water of the shallow ford. Beyond the river Imperial Tolnedra waited, and from the banks behind them the Mimbrate knights saluted with a great fanfare on their horns.

As they emerged on the far side of the river, Garion looked around, trying to see some difference in terrain or foliage which might distinguish Arendia from Tolnedra, but there seemed to be none. The land, indifferent to human boundaries, flowed on unchanged.

About a half mile from the river they entered the forest of Vordue, an extensive tract of well-kept woodland which extended from the sea to the foothills of the mountains to the east. Once they were under the trees, they stopped and changed back into their traveling clothes.

"I think we might as well keep the guise of merchants," Mister Wolf said, settling with obvious comfort back into his patched rust-colored tunic and mismatched shoes. "It won't fool the Grolims, of course, but it will satisfy the Tolnedrans we meet along the way. We can deal with the Grolims in other ways."

"Are there any signs of the Orb about?" Barak rumbled as he stowed his bearskin cloak and helmet in one of the packs.

"A hint or two," Wolf said, looking around. "I'd guess that Zedar went through

here a few weeks ago."
"We don't seem to be gaining on him much," Silk said, pulling on his leather vest.
"We're holding our own at least. Shall we go?"
They remounted and continued along the Tolnedran highway, which ran straight through the forest in the afternoon sun. After a league or so, they came to a wide place in the road where a single whitewashed stone building, low and red-roofed, stood solidly at the roadside. Several soldiers lounged indolently about, but their armor and equipment seemed less well-cared-for than that of the legionnaires Garion had seen before.
"Customs station," Silk said. "Tolnedrans like to put them far enough from the border so that they don't interfere with legitimate smuggling."
"Those are very slovenly legionnaires," Durnik said disapprovingly.
"They aren't legionnaires," Silk explained. "They're soldiers of the customs service-local troops. There's a great difference."

"I can see that," Durnik said.
A soldier wearing a rusty breastplate and carrying a short spear stepped into the road and held up his hand. "Customs inspection," he announced in a bored tone. "His excellency will be with you in a moment or two. You can take your horses over there." He pointed to a kind of yard at the side of the building.
"Is trouble likely?" Mandorallen asked. The knight had removed his armor and now wore the mail suit and surcoat in which he customarily traveled.
"No," Silk said. "The customs agent will ask a few questions, and then we'll bribe him and be on our way."
"Bribe?" Durnik asked.
Silk shrugged. "Of course. That's the way things are in Tolnedra. Better let me do the talking. I've been through all this before."
The customs agent, a stout, balding man in a belted gown of a rusty brown color, came out of the stone building, brushing crumbs from the front of his clothes.
"Good afternoon," he said in a businesslike manner.
"Good day, your Excellency," Silk replied with a brief bow.
"And what have we here?" the agent asked, looking appraisingly at the packs.
"I'm Radek of Boktor," Silk replied, "a Drasnian merchant. I'm taking Sendarian wool to Tol Honeth." He opened the top of one of the packs and pulled out a corner of woven gray cloth.
"Your prospects are good, worthy merchant," the customs agent said, fingering the cloth. "It's been a chilly winter this year, and wool's bringing a good price."
There was a brief clicking sound as several coins changed hands. The customs agent smiled then, and his manner grew more relaxed. "I don't think we'll need to open all the packs," he said. "You're obviously an honorable man, worthy Radek, and I wouldn't want to delay you."
Silk bowed again. "Is there anything I should know about the road ahead, your Excellency?" he asked, tying up the pack again. "I've learned to rely on the advice of the customs service."
"The road's good," the agent said with a shrug. "The legions see to that."
"Of course. Any unusual conditions anywhere?"
"It might be wise if you kept somewhat to yourselves on your way south," the stout man advised. "There's a certain amount of political turmoil in Tolnedra just now. I'm sure, though, that if you show that you're tending strictly to business, you won't be bothered."
"Turmoil?" Silk asked, sounding a bit concerned. "I hadn't heard about that."
"It's the succession. Things are a bit stirred up at the moment."
"Is Ran Borune ill?" Silk asked with surprise.
"No," the stout man said, "only old. It's a disease no one recovers from. Since

he doesn't have a son to succeed him, the Borune Dynasty hangs on his feeblest breath. The great families are already maneuvering for position. It's all terribly expensive of course, and we Tolnedrans get agitated when there's money involved."
Silk laughed briefly. "Don't we all? Perhaps it might be to my advantage to make a few contacts in the right quarters. Which family would you guess is in the best position at the moment?"
"I think we have the edge over the rest of them," the agent said rather smugly.
"We-"
"The Vorduvians. I'm distantly related on my mother's side to the family. The Grand Duke Kador of Tol Vordue's the only logical choice for the throne."
"I don't believe I know him," Silk said.
"An excellent man," the agent said expansively. "A man of force and vigor and foresight. If the selection were based on simple merit, Grand Duke Kador would be given the throne by general consent. Unfortunately, though, the selection's in the hands of the Council of Advisers."
"Ah!"
"Indeed," the agent agreed bitterly. "You wouldn't believe the size of the bribes some of those men are asking for their votes, worthy Radek."
"It's an opportunity that comes only once in a lifetime, I suppose," Silk said.
"I don't begrudge any man the right to a decent, reasonable bribe," the stout agent complained, "but some of the men on the council have gone mad with greed. No matter what position I get in the new government, it's going to take me years to recoup what I've already been obliged to contribute. It's the same all over Tolnedra. Decent men are being driven to the wall by taxes and all these emergency subscriptions. You don't dare let a list go by that doesn't have your name on it, and there's a new list out every day. The expense is making everyone desperate. They're killing each other in the streets of Tol Honeth."
"That bad?" Silk asked.
"Worse than you can imagine," the customs man said. "The Horbites don't have the kind of money it takes to conduct a political campaign, so they've started to poison off council members. We spend millions to buy a vote, and the next day our man turns black in the face and falls over dead. Then we have to raise more millions to buy up his successor. They're absolutely destroying me. I don't have the right kind of nerves for politics."
"Terrible," Silk sympathized.
"If Ran Borune would only die, " the Tolnedran complained desperately. "We're in control now, but the Honeths are richer than we are. If they unite behind one candidate, they'll be able to buy the throne right out from under us. And all the while Ran Borune sits in the palace doting on that little monster he calls a daughter and with so many guards around that we can't persuade even the bravest assassin to make an attempt on him. Sometimes I think he intends to live forever."
"Patience, Excellency," Silk advised. "The more we suffer, the greater the rewards in the end."
The Tolnedran sighed. "I'll be very rich someday then. But I've kept you long enough, worthy Radek. I wish you good speed and cold weather in Tol Honeth to bring up the price of your wool."
Silk bowed formally, remounted his horse and led the party at a trot away from the customs station. "It's good to be back in Tolnedra again," the weasel-faced little man said expansively once they were out of earshot. "I love the smell of deceit, corruption, and intrigue."
"You're a bad man, Silk," Barak said. "This place is a cesspool."
"Of course it is." Silk laughed. "But it isn't dull, Barak. Tolnedra's never dull."
They approached a tidy Tolnedran village as evening fell and stopped for the

night in a solid, well-kept inn where the food was good and the beds were clean. They were up early the next morning; after breakfast they clattered out of the innyard and onto the cobblestoned street in that curious silver light that comes just before the sun rises.
"A proper sort of place," Durnik said approvingly, looking around at the white stone houses with their red-tiled roofs. "Everything seems neat and orderly."
"It's a reflection of the Tolnedran mind," Mister Wolf explained. "They pay great attention to details."
"That's not an unseemly trait," Durnik observed.

Wolf was about to answer that when two brown-robed men ran out of a shadowy side street.
"Look out!" the one in the rear yelled. "He's gone mad!"
The man running in front was clutching at his head, his face contorted into an expression of unspeakable horror. Garion's horse shied violently as the madman ran directly at him, and Garion raised his right hand to try to push the bulging-eyed lunatic away. At the instant his hand touched the man's forehead, he felt a surge in his hand and arm, a kind of tingling as if the arm were suddenly enormously strong, and his mind filled with a vast roaring. The madman's eyes went blank, and he collapsed on the cobblestones as if Garion's touch had been some colossal blow.
Then Barak nudged his horse between Garion and the fallen man.
"What's this all about?" he demanded of the second robed man who ran up, gasping for breath.
"We're from Mar Terrin," the man answered. "Brother Obor couldn't stand the ghosts anymore, so I was given permission to bring him home until his sanity returned." He knelt over the fallen man. "You didn't have to hit him so hard," he accused.
"I didn't," Garion protested. "I only touched him. I think he fainted."
"You must have hit him," the monk said. "Look at the mark on his face."
An ugly red welt stood on the unconscious man's forehead.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "can you do exactly what I tell you to do without asking any questions?"
Garion nodded. "I think so."
"Get down off your horse. Go to the man on the ground and put the palm of your hand on his forehead. Then apologize to him for knocking him down."
"Are you sure it's safe, Polgara?" Barak asked.
"It will be all right. Do as I told you, Garion."
Garion hesitantly approached the stricken man, reached out, and laid his palm on the ugly welt. "I'm sorry," he said, "and I hope you get well soon." There was a surge in his arm again, but quite different from the first one.
The madman's eyes cleared, and he blinked.
"Where am I?" he asked. "What happened?" His voice sounded very normal, and the welt on his forehead was gone.
"It's all right now," Garion told him, not knowing exactly why he said it. "You've been sick, but you're better now."
"Come along, Garion," Aunt Pol said. "His friend can care for him now."
Garion went back to his horse, his thoughts churning.
"A miracle!" the second monk exclaimed.
"Hardly that," Aunt Pol said. "The blow restored your friend's mind, that's all. It happens sometimes." But she and Mister Wolf exchanged a long glance that said quite plainly that something else had happened, something unexpected.
They rode on, leaving the two monks in the middle of the street.
"What happened?" Durnik asked, a stunned look on his face.
Mister Wolf shrugged. "Polgara had to use Garion," he said. "There wasn't time to do it any other way."

Durnik looked unconvinced.
"We don't do it often," Wolf explained. "It's a little cumbersome to go through someone else like that, but sometimes we don't have any choice."
"But Garion healed him," Durnik objected.
"It has to come from the same hand as the blow, Durnik," Aunt Pol said. "Please don't ask so many questions."
The dry awareness in Garion's mind, however, refused to accept any of their explanations. It told him that nothing had come from outside. With a troubled face he studied the silvery mark on his palm. It seemed different for some reason.
"Don't think about it, dear," Aunt Pol said quietly as they left the village and rode south along the highway. "It's nothing to worry about. I'll explain it all later." Then, to the caroling of birds that greeted the rising sun, she reached across and firmly closed his hand with her fingers.

Chapter Thirteen

IT TOOK THEM THREE DAYS to pass through the forest of Vordue. Garion, remembering the dangers of the Arendish forest, was apprehensive at first and watched the shadows beneath the trees nervously, but after a day or so with nothing out of the ordinary occurring, he began to relax. Mister Wolf, however, seemed to grow increasingly irritable as they rode south. "They're planning something," he muttered. "I wish they'd get on with it. I hate to ride with one eye over my shoulder every step of the way."
Garion had little opportunity along the way to speak with Aunt Pol about what had happened to the crazy monk from Mar Terrin. It seemed almost as if she were deliberately avoiding him; when he finally did manage to ride briefly beside her and question her about the incident, her answers were vague and did little to quiet his unease about the whole affair.
It was the middle of the morning on the third day when they emerged from the trees and rode out into open farmland. Unlike the Arendish plain where vast tracts of land seemed to lie fallow, the ground here was extensively cultivated, and low stone walls surrounded each field. Although it was still far from being warm, the sun was very bright, and the well-turned earth in the fields seemed rich and black as it lay waiting for sowing. The highway was broad and straight, and they encountered frequent travelers along the way. Greetings between the party and these travelers were restrained but polite, and Garion began to feel more at ease. This country appeared to be much too civilized for the kind of dangers they had encountered in Arendia.
About midafternoon they rode into a sizable town where merchants in variously colored mantles called to them from booths and stalls which lined the streets, imploring them to stop and look at merchandise.
"They sound almost desperate," Durnik said.
"Tolnedrans hate to see a customer get away," Silk told him. "They're greedy."
Ahead, in a small square, a disturbance suddenly broke out. A half dozen slovenly, unshaven soldiers had accosted an arrogant-looking man in a green mantle.
"Stand aside, I say," the arrogant man protested sharply.
"We just want a word or two with you, Lembor," one of the.soldiers said with an evil-looking leer. He was a lean man with a long scar down one side of his face.
"What an idiot," a passer-by observed with a callous laugh. "Lembor's gotten so important that he doesn't think he has to take any precautions."
"Is he being arrested, friend?" Durnik inquired politely.
"Only temporarily," the passer-by said dryly.
"What are they going to do to him?" Durnik asked.
"The usual."

"What's the usual?"
"Watch and see. The fool should have known better than to come out without his bodyguards."
The soldiers had surrounded the man in the green mantle, and two of them took hold of his arms roughly.
"Let me go," Lembor protested. "What do you think you're doing?"
"Just come along quietly, Lembor," the scar-faced soldier ordered. "It will be a lot easier that way." They began pulling him toward a narrow alleyway.
"Help!" Lembor shouted, desperately trying to struggle.
One of the soldiers smashed the captive in the mouth with his fist, and they pulled him into the alley. There was a single, short scream and the sounds of a brief scuffle. There were other sounds as well, a few grunts and the grating sound of steel on bone, then a long, sighing moan. A wide rivulet of bright blood trickled out of the mouth of the alley and ran into the gutter. A minute or so later, the soldiers came back out into the square, grinning and wiping their swords.
"We've got to do something," Garion said, sick with outrage and horror.
"No," Silk said bluntly. "What we have to do is mind our own business. We're not here to get involved in local politics."
"Politics?" Garion objected. "That was deliberate murder. Shouldn't we at least see if he's still alive?"
"Not too likely," Barak said. "Six men with swords can usually do a pretty thorough job."
A dozen other soldiers, as shabby-looking as the first group, ran into the square with drawn swords.
"Too late, Rabbas." The scar-faced soldier laughed harshly to the leader of the newcomers. "Lembor doesn't need you anymore. He just came down with a bad case of dead. It looks like you're out of work."
The one called Rabbas stopped, his expression dark. Then a look of brutal cunning spread across his face. "Maybe you're right, Kragger." His voice was also harsh. "But then again we might be able to create a few vacancies in Elgon's garrison. I'm sure he'd be happy to hire good replacements." He began to move forward again, his short sword swinging in a low, dangerous arc.
Then there came the sound of a jingling trot, and twenty legionnaires in a double column came into the square, their feet striking the cobblestones in unison. They carried short lances, and they stopped between the two groups of soldiers. Each column turned to face one group, their lances leveled. The breastplates of the legionnaires were brightly burnished, and their equipment was spotless.
"All right, Rabbas, Kragger, that's enough," the sergeant in charge said sharply. "I want both of you off the street immediately."
"These swine killed Lembor, Sergeant," Rabbas protested.
"That's too bad," the sergeant said without much sympathy. "Now clear the street. There's not going to be any brawling while I'm on duty."
"Aren't you going to do something?" Rabbas demanded.
"I am," the legionnaire said. "I'm clearing the street. Now get out of here."
Sullenly, Rabbas turned and led his men out of the square.
"That goes for you too, Kragger," the sergeant ordered.
"Of course, Sergeant," Kragger said with an oily smirk. "We were just leaving anyway."
A crowd had gathered, and there were several boos as the legionnaires herded the sloppy-looking soldiers out of the square.
The sergeant looked around, his face dangerous, and the boos died immediately.
Durnik hissed sharply. "Over there on the far side of the square," he said to Wolf in a hoarse whisper. "Isn't that Brill?"
"Again?" Wolf's voice held exasperation. "How does he keep getting ahead of us

like this?"
"Let's find out what he's up to," Silk suggested, his eyes bright.
"He'd recognize any of us if we tried to follow him," Barak warned.
"Leave that to me," Silk said, sliding out of his saddle.
"Did he see us?" Garion asked.
"I don't think so," Durnik said. "He's talking to those men over there. He isn't looking this way."
"There's an inn near the south end of town," Silk said quickly, pulling off his vest and tying it to his saddle. "I'll meet you there in an hour or so." Then the little man turned and disappeared into the crowd.
"Get down off your horses," Mister Wolf ordered tersely. "We'll lead them."
They all dismounted and led their mounts slowly around the edge of the square, staying close to the buildings and keeping the animals between them and Brill as much as possible.
Garion glanced once up the narrow alleyway where Kragger and his men had dragged the protesting Lembor. He shuddered and looked away quickly. A green-mantled heap lay in a grimy corner, and there was blood splashed thickly on the walls and the filthy cobblestones in the alley.
After they had moved out of the square, they found the entire town seething with excitement and in some cases consternation. "Lembor, you say?" an ashen-faced merchant in a blue mantle exclaimed to another shaken man. "Impossible."
"My brother just talked to a man who was there," the second merchant said. "Forty of Elgon's soldiers attacked him in the street and cut him down right in front of the crowd."
"What's going to happen to us?" the first man asked in a shaking voice.
"I don't know about you, but I'm going to hide. Now that Lembor's dead, Elgon's soldiers are probably going to try to kill us all."
"They wouldn't dare."
"Who's going to stop them? I'm going home."
"Why did we listen to Lembor?" the first merchant wailed. "We could have stayed out of the whole business."
"It's too late now," the second man said. "I'm going to go home and bar my doors." He turned and scurried away.
The first man stared after him and then he too turned and fled.
"They play for keeps, don't they?" Barak observed.
"Why do the legions allow it?" Mandorallen asked.
"The legions stay neutral in these affairs," Wolf said. "It's part of their oath."
The inn to which Silk had directed them was a neat, square building surrounded by a low wall. They tied their horses in the courtyard and went inside. "We might as well eat, father," Aunt Pol said, seating herself at a table of well-scrubbed oak in the sunny common room.
"I was just- " Wolf looked toward the door which led into the taproom.
"I know," she said, "but I think we should eat first."
Wolf sighed. "All right, Pol."
The serving-man brought them a platter of smoking cutlets and heavy slabs of brown bread soaked in butter. Garion's stomach was still a bit shaky after what he had witnessed in the square, but the smell of the cutlets soon overcame that.
They had nearly finished eating when a shabby-looking little man in a linen shirt, leather apron and a ragged hat came in and plunked himself unceremoniously at the end of their table. His face looked vaguely familiar somehow. "Wine!" he bawled at the serving-man, "and food." He squinted around in the golden light streaming through the yellow glass windows of the common room.
"There are other tables, friend," Mandorallen said coldly.
"I like this one," the stranger said. He peered at each of them in turn, and then he suddenly laughed. Garion stared in amazement as the man's face relaxed,

the muscles seeming to shift under his skin back into their normal positions. It was Silk.
"How did you do that?" Barak asked, startled.
Silk grinned at him and then reached up to massage his cheeks with his fingertips. "Concentration, Barak. Concentration and lots of practice. It makes my jaws ache a bit, though."
"Useful skill, I'd imagine - under the right circumstances," Hettar said blandly.
"Particularly for a spy," Barak said.
Silk bowed mockingly.
"Where did you get the clothes?" Durnik asked,
"Stole them." Silk shrugged, peeling off the apron.
"What's Brill doing here?" Wolf asked.
"Stirring up trouble, the same as always," Silk replied. "He's telling people that a Murgo named Asharak is offering a reward for any information about us. He describes you quite well, old friend - not very flatteringly, but quite well."
"I expect we'll have to deal with this Asharak before long," Aunt Pol said. "He's beginning to irritate me."
"There's another thing." Silk started on one of the cutlets. "Brill's telling everyone that Garion is Asharak's son - that we've stolen him and that Asharak's offering a huge reward for his return."
"Garion?" Aunt Pol asked sharply.
Silk nodded. "The kind of money he's talking about is bound to make everyone in Tolnedra keep his eyes open." He reached for a piece of bread.
Garion felt a sharp pang of anxiety.
"Why me?" he asked.
"It would delay us," Wolf said. "Asharak-whoever he is - knows that Polgara would stop to look for you. So would the rest of us, most likely. That would give Zedar time to get away."
"Just who is Asharak?" Hettar asked, his eyes narrowing.
"A Grolim, I expect," Wolf said. "His operations are a little too widespread for him to be an ordinary Murgo."
"How can one tell the difference?" Durnik asked.
"You can't," Wolf answered. "They look very much the same. They're two separate tribes, but they're much more closely related to each other than they are to other Angaraks. Anyone can tell the difference between a Nadrak and a Thull or a Thull and a Mallorean, but Murgos and Grolims are so much alike that you can't tell them apart."
"I've never had any problem," Aunt Pol said. "Their minds are quite different."
"That will make it much easier," Barak commented dryly. "We'll just chop open the head of the next Murgo we meet, and you can point out the differences to us."
"You've been spending too much time with Silk lately," Aunt Pol said acidly. "You're starting to talk like him."
Barak looked over at Silk and winked.
"Let's finish up here and see if we can't get out of town quietly," Wolf said.
"Is there a back alley out of this place?" he asked Silk.
"Naturally," Silk said, still eating.
"Are you familiar with it?"
"Please!" Silk looked a little offended. "Of course I'm familiar with it.
"Let it pass," Wolf said.
The alleyway Silk led them through was narrow, deserted, and smelled quite bad, but it brought them to the town's south gate, and they were soon on the highway again.
"A little distance wouldn't hurt at this point," Wolf said. He thumped his heels to his horse's flanks and started off at a gallop. They rode until well after

dark. The moon, looking swollen and unhealthy, rose slowly above the horizon and filled the night with a pale light that seemed to leech away all trace of color.
Wolf finally pulled to a stop. "There's really no point in riding all night," he said. "Let's move off the road and get a few hours' sleep. We'll start out again early. I'd like to stay ahead of Brill this time if we can."
"Over there?" Durnik suggested, pointing at a small copse of trees looming black in the moonlight not far from the road.
"It will do," Wolf decided. "I don't think we'll need a fire." They led the horses in among the trees and pulled their blankets out of the packs. The moonlight filtered in among the trees and dappled the leaf strewn ground. Garion found a fairly level place with his feet, rolled up in his blankets and, after squirming around a bit, he fell asleep.
He awoke suddenly, his eyes dazzled by the light of a half dozen torches. A heavy foot was pushed down on his chest, and the point of a sword was set firmly, uncomfortably against his throat.
"Nobody move!" a harsh voice ordered. "We'll kill anybody who moves."
Garion stiffened in panic, and the sword point at his throat dug in sharply. He rolled his head from side to side and saw that all of his friends were being held down in the same way he was. Durnik, who had been standing guard, was held by two rough-looking soldiers, and a piece of rag was stuffed in his mouth.
"What does this mean?" Silk demanded of the soldiers.
"You'll find out," the one in charge rasped. "Get their weapons." As he gestured, Garion saw that a finger was missing from his right hand.
"There's a mistake here," Silk said. "I'm Radek of Boktor, a merchant, and my friends and I haven't done anything wrong."
"Get on your feet," the three-fingered soldier ordered, ignoring the little man's objections. "If any one of you tries to get away, we'll kill all the rest."
Silk rose and crammed on his cap. "You're going to regret this, Captain," he said. "I've got powerful friends here in Tolnedra."
The soldier shrugged. "That doesn't mean anything to me," he said. "I take my orders from Count Dravor. He told me to bring you in."
"All right," Silk said. "Let's go see this Count Dravor, then. We'll get this cleared up right now, and there's no need for waving your swords around. We'll come along quietly. None of us is going to do anything to get you excited."
The three-fingered soldier's face darkened in the torchlight. "I don't like your tone, merchant."
"You're not being paid to like my tone, friend," Silk said. "You're being paid to escort us to Count Dravor. Now suppose we get moving. The quicker we get there, the quicker I can give him a full report about your behavior."
"Get their horses," the soldier growled.
Garion had edged over to Aunt Pol.
"Can't you do anything?" he asked her quietly.
"No talking!" the soldier who had captured him barked.
Garion stood helplessly, staring at the sword leveled at his chest.

Chapter Fourteen

THE HOUSE OF Count Dravor was a large white building set in the center of a broad lawn with clipped hedges and formal gardens on either side. The moon, fully overhead now, illuminated every detail as they rode slowly up a white-graveled, curving road that led to the house.
The soldiers ordered them to dismount in the courtyard between the house and the garden on the west side of the house, and they were hustled inside and down a long hallway to a heavy, polished door.
Count Dravor was a thin, vague-looking man with deep pouches under his eyes, and

he sprawled in a chair in the center of a richly furnished room. He looked up with a pleasant, almost dreamy smile on his face as they entered. His mantle was a pale rose color with silver trim at the hem and around the sleeves to indicate his rank. It was badly wrinkled and none too clean. "And who are these guests?" he asked, his voice slurred and barely audible.
"The prisoners, my Lord," the three-fingered soldier explained. "The ones you ordered arrested."
"Did I order someone arrested?" the count asked, his voice still slurred. "What a remarkable thing for me to do. I hope I haven't inconvenienced you, my friends."
"We were a bit surprised, that's all," Silk said carefully.
"I wonder why I did that." The count pondered. "I must have had a reason - I never do anything without a reason. What have you done wrong?"
"We haven't done anything wrong, my Lord," Silk assured him.
"Then why would I have you arrested? There must be some sort of mistake."
"That's what we thought, my Lord," Silk said.
"Well, I'm glad that's all cleared up," the count said happily. "May I offer you some dinner, perhaps?"
"We've already eaten, my Lord."
"Oh." The count's face fell with disappointment. "I have so few visitors."
"Perhaps your steward Y'diss may remember the reason these people were detained, my Lord," the three-fingered soldier suggested.
"Of course," the count said. "Why didn't I think of that? Y'diss remembers everything. Please send for him at once."
"Yes, my Lord." The soldier bowed and jerked his head curtly at one of his men. Count Dravor dreamily began playing with one of the folds of his mantle, humming tunelessly as they waited.
After a few moments a door at the end of the room opened, and a man in an iridescent and intricately embroidered robe entered. His face was grossly sensual, and his head was shaved. "You sent for me, my Lord?" His rasping voice was almost a hiss.
"Ah, Y'diss," Count Dravor said happily, "how good of you to join us."
"It's my pleasure to serve you, my Lord," the steward said with a sinuous bow.
"I was wondering why I asked these friends to stop by," the count said. "I seem to have forgotten. Do you by any chance recall?"
"It's just a small matter, my Lord," Y'diss answered. "I can easily handle it for you. You need your rest. You mustn't overtire yourself, you know."
The count passed a hand across his face. "Now that you mention it, I do feel a bit fatigued, Y'diss. Perhaps you could entertain our guests while I rest a bit."
"Of course, my Lord," Y'diss said with another bow.
The count shifted around in his chair and almost immediately fell asleep.
"The count is in delicate health," Y'diss said with an oily smile. "He seldom leaves that chair these days. Let's move away a bit so that we don't disturb him."
"I'm only a Drasnian merchant, your Eminence," Silk said, "and these are my servants - except for my sister there. We're baffled by all of this."
Y'diss laughed. "Why do you persist in this absurd fiction, Prince Kheldar? I know who you are. I know you all, and I know your mission."
"What's your interest in us, Nyissan?" Mister Wolf asked bluntly.
"I serve my mistress, Eternal Salmissra," Y'diss said.
"Has the Snake Woman become the pawn of the Grolims, then?" Aunt Pol asked, "or does she bow to the will of Zedar?"
"My queen bows to no man, Polgara," Y'diss denied scornfully.
"Really?" She raised one eyebrow. "It's curious to find her servant dancing to a Grolim tune."

"I have no dealings with the Grolims," Y'diss said. "They're scouring all Tolnedra for you, but I'm the one who found you."
"Finding isn't keeping, Y'diss," Mister Wolf stated quietly. "Suppose you tell us what this is all about."
"I'll tell you only what I feel like telling you, Belgarath."
"I think that's about enough, father," Aunt Pol said. "We really don't have time for Nyissan riddle games, do we?"
"Don't do it, Polgara," Y'diss warned. "I know all about your power. My soldiers will kill your friends if you so much as raise your hand." Garion felt himself roughly grabbed from behind, and a sword blade was pressed firmly against his throat.
Aunt Pol's eyes blazed suddenly. "You're walking on dangerous ground!"
"I don't think we need to exchange threats," Mister Wolf said. "I gather, then, that you don't intend to turn us over to the Grolims?"
"I'm not interested in the Grolims," Y'diss said. "My queen has instructed me to deliver you to her in Sthiss Tor."
"What's Salmissra's interest in this matter?" Wolf asked. "It doesn't concern her."
"I'll let her explain that to you when you get to Sthiss Tor. In the meantime, there are a few things I'll require you to tell me."
"I think thou wilt have scant success in that," Mandorallen said stiffly. "It is not our practice to discuss private matters with unwholesome strangers."
"And I think you're wrong, my dear Baron," Y'diss replied with a cold smile. "The cellars of this house are deep, and what happens there can be most unpleasant. I have servants highly skilled in applying certain exquisitely persuasive torments."
"I do not fear thy torments, Nyissan," Mandorallen said contemptuously.
"No. I don't imagine you do. Fear requires imagination, and you Arends aren't bright enough to be imaginative. The torments, however, will wear down your will - and provide entertainment for my servants. Good torturers are hard to find, and they grow sullen if they aren't allowed to practice - I'm sure you understand. Later, after you've all had the chance to visit with them a time or two, we'll try something else. Nyissa abounds with roots and leaves and curious little berries with strange properties. Oddly enough, most men prefer the rack or the wheel to my little concoctions." Y'diss laughed then, a brutal sound with no mirth in it. "We'll discuss all this further after I have the count settled in for the night. For right now, the guards will take you downstairs to the places I've prepared for you all."
Count Dravor roused himself and looked around dreamily. "Are our friends departing so soon?" he asked.
"Yes, my Lord," Y'diss told him.
"Well then," the count said with a vague smile, "farewell, dear people. I hope you'll return someday so that we can continue our delightful conversation."

The cell to which Garion was taken was dank and clammy, and it smelled of sewage and rotting food. Worst of all was the darkness. He huddled beside the iron door with the blackness pressing in on him palpably. From one corner of the cell came little scratchings and skittering sounds. He thought of rats and tried to stay as near to the door as possible. Water trickled somewhere, and his throat began to burn with thirst.
It was dark, but it was not silent. Chains clinked in a nearby cell, and someone was moaning. Further off, there was insane laughter, a meaningless cackle repeated over and over again without pause, endlessly rattling in the dark. Someone screamed, a piercing, shocking sound, and then again. Garion cringed back against the slimy stones of the wall, his imagination immediately manufacturing tortures to account for the agony in those screams.

Time in such a place was nonexistent, and so there was no way to know how long he had huddled in his cell, alone and afraid, before he began to hear a faint metallic scraping and clinking that seemed to come from the door itself. He scrambled away, stumbling across the uneven floor of his cell to the far wall.
"Go away!" he cried.
"Keep your voice down!" Silk whispered from the far side of the door.
"Is that you, Silk?" Garion almost sobbed with relief.
"Who were you expecting?"
"How did you get loose?"
"Don't talk so much," Silk said from between clenched teeth. "Accursed rust!" he swore. Then he grunted, and there was a grating click from the door. "There!"
The cell door creaked open, and the dim light from torches somewhere filtered in. "Come along," Silk whispered. "We have to hurry."
Garion almost ran from the cell. Aunt Pol was waiting a few steps down the gloomy stone corridor. Without a word, Garion went to her. She looked at him gravely for a moment and then put her arms about him. They did not speak.
Silk was working on another door, his face gleaming with perspiration. The lock clicked, and the door creaked open. Hettar stepped out. "What took you so long?" he asked Silk.
"Rust!" Silk snapped in a low voice. "I'd like to flog all the jailers in this place for letting the locks get into this condition."
"Do you suppose we could hurry a bit?" Barak suggested over his shoulder from where he stood guard.
"Do you want to do this?" Silk demanded.
"Just move along as quickly as you can," Aunt Pol said. "We don't have the time for bickerin just now." She removed her blue cloak over one arm.
Silk grunted sourly and moved on to the next door.
"Is all this oratory actually necessary?" Mister Wolf, the last to be released, asked crisply as he stepped out of his cell. "You've all been babbling like a flock of geese out here."
"Prince Kheldar felt need to make observations about the condition of the locks," Mandorallen said lightly.
Silk scowled at him and led the way toward the end of the corridor where the torches fumed greasy onto the blackened ceiling.
"Have a care," Mandorallen whispered urgently. "There's a guard."
A bearded man in a dirty leather jerkin sat on the floor with his back against the wall of the corridor, snoring.
"Can we get past without waking him up?" Durnik breathed.
"He isn't going to wake up for several hours," Barak said grimly. The large purple swelling on the side of the guard's face immediately explained.
"Dost think there might be others?" Mandorallen asked, flexing his hands.
"There were a few," Barak said. "They're sleeping too."
"Let's get out of here, then," Wolf suggested.
"We'll take Y'diss with us, won't we?" Aunt Pol asked.
"What for?"
"I'd like to talk with him," she said. "At great length."
"It would be a waste of time," Wolf said. "Salmissra's involved herself in this affair. That's all we really need to know. Her motives don't really interest me all that much. Let's just get out of here as quietly as we can."
They crept past the snoring guard, turned a corner and moved softly down another corridor.
"Did he die?" a voice, shockingly loud, asked from behind a barred door that emitted a smoky red light.
"No," another voice said, "only fainted. You pulled too hard on the lever. You have to keep the pressure steady. Otherwise they faint, and you have to start over."

"This is a lot harder than I thought," the first voice complained.
"You're doing fine," the second voice said. "The rack's always tricky. Just remember to keep a steady pressure and not to jerk the lever. They usually die if you pull their arms out of the sockets."
Aunt Pol's face went rigid, and her eyes blazed briefly. She made a small gesture and whispered something. A brief, hushed sound murmured in Garion's mind.
"You know," the first voice said rather faintly, "suddenly I don't feel so good."
"Now that you mention it, I don't either," the second voice agreed. "Did that meat we had for supper taste all right to you?"
"It seemed all right." There was a long pause. "I really don't feel good at all."
They tiptoed past the barred door, and Garion carefully avoided looking in. At the end of the corridor was a stout oak door bound with iron. Silk ran his fingers around the handle. "It's locked from the outside," he said.
"Someone's coming," Hettar warned.
There was the tramp of heavy feet on the stone stairs beyond the door, the murmur of voices and a harsh laugh.
Wolf turned quickly to the door of a nearby cell. He touched his fingers to the rusty iron lock, and it clicked smoothly. "In here," he whispered. They all crowded into the cell, and Wolf pulled the door shut behind them.
"When we've got some leisure, I'll want to talk to you about that," Silk said.
"You were having such a good time with the locks that I didn't want to interfere." Wolf smiled blandly. "Now listen. We're going to have to deal with these men before they find out that our cells are empty and rouse the whole house."
"We can do that," Barak said confidently. They waited.
"They're opening the door," Durnik whispered.
"How many are there?" Mandorallen asked.
"I can't tell."
"Eight," Aunt Pol said firmly.
"All right," Barak decided. "We'll let them pass and then jump on them from behind. A scream or two won't matter much in a place like this, but let's put them down quickly."
They waited tensely in the darkness of the cell.
"Y'diss says it doesn't matter if some of them die under the questioning," one of the men outside said. "The only ones wee have to keep alive are the old man, the woman, and the boy."
"Let's kill the big one with the red whiskers then," other suggested. "He looks like he might be troublesome, and he's probably too stupid to know anything useful."
"I want that one," Barak whispered.
The men in the corridor passed their cell.
"Let's go," Barak said.
It was a short, ugly fight. They swarmed over the startled jailers in a savage rush. Three were down before the others fully realized what was happening. One made a startled outcry, dodged past the fight and ran back toward the stairs. Without thinking, Garion dove in front of the running man. Then he rolled, tangling the man's feet, tripping him up. The guard fell, started to rise, then sagged back down in a limp heap as Silk neatly kicked him just below the ear.
"Are you all right?" Silk asked.
Garion squirmed out from under the unconscious jailer and scrambled to his feet, but the fight was nearly over. Durnik was pounding a stout man's head against the wall, and Barak was driving his fist into another's face. Mandorallen was strangling a third, and Hettar stalked a fourth, his hands out. The wide-eyed

man cried out once just as Hettar's hands closed on him. The tall Algar straightened, spun about and slammed the man into the stone wall with terrific force. There was the grating sound of bones breaking, and the man went limp.
"Nice little fight," Barak said, rubbing his knuckles.
"Entertaining," Hettar agreed, letting the limp body slide to the floor.
"Are you about through?" Silk demanded hoarsely from the door by the stairs.
"Almost," Barak said. "Need any help, Durnik?"
Durnik lifted the stout man's chin and examined the vacant eyes critically. Then he prudently banged the jailer's head against the wall once more and let him fall.
"Shall we go?" Hettar suggested.
"Might as well," Barak agreed, surveying the littered corridor.
"The door's unlocked at the top of the stairs," Silk said as they joined him, "and the hallway's empty beyond it. The house seems to be asleep, but let's be quiet."
They followed him silently up the stairs. He paused briefly at the door. "Wait here a moment," he whispered. Then he disappeared, his feet making absolutely no sound. After what seemed a long time, he returned with the weapons the soldiers had taken from them. "I thought we might need these."
Garion felt much better after he had belted on his sword.
"Let's go," Silk said and led them to the end of the hall and around a corner.
"I think I'd like some of the green, Y'diss," Count Dravor's voice came from behind a partially open door.
"Certainly, my Lord," Y'diss said in his sibilant, rasping voice. "The green tastes bad," Count Dravor said drowsily, "but it gives me such lovely dreams. The red tastes better, but the dreams aren't so nice."
"Soon you'll be ready for the blue, my Lord," Y'diss promised. There was a faint clink and the sound of liquid being poured into a glass. "Then the yellow, and finally the black. The black's best of all."
Silk led them on tiptoe past the half open door. The lock on the outside door yielded quickly to his skill, and they all slipped out into the cool, moonlit night. The stars twinkled overhead, and the air was sweet. "I'll get the horses," Hettar said.
"Go with him, Mandorallen," Wolf said. "We'll wait over there." He pointed at the shadowy garden. The two men disappeared around the corner, and the rest of them followed Mister Wolf into the looming shadow of the hedge which surrounded Count Dravor's garden.
They waited. The night was chilly, and Garion found himself shivering. Then there was a click of a hoof touching a stone, and Hettar and Mandorallen came back, leading the horses.
"We'd better hurry," Wolf said. "As soon as Dravor drops off to sleep, Y'diss is going to go down to his dungeon and find out that we've left. Lead the horses. Let's get away from the house before we start making any noise."
They went down through the moonlit garden with the horses trailing along after them until they emerged on the open lawn beyond. They mounted carefully.
"We'd better hurry," Aunt Pol suggested, glancing back at the house.
"I bought us a little time before I left," Silk said with a short laugh.
"How'd you manage that?" Barak asked.
"When I went to get our weapons, I also set fire to the kitchen." Silk smirked. "That will keep their attention for a bit."
A tendril of smoke rose from the back of the house.
"Very clever," Aunt Pol said with a certain grudging admiration.
"Why thank you, my Lady." Silk made a mocking little bow. Mister Wolf chuckled and led them away at an easy trot.
The tendril of smoke at the back of the house became thicker as they rode away, rising black and oily toward the uncaring stars.

Chapter Fifteen

THEY RODE HARD for the next several days, stopping only long enough to rest the horses and catch a few hours' sleep at infrequent intervals. Garion found that he could doze in his saddle whenever they walked the horses. He found, indeed, that if he were tired enough, he could sleep almost anyplace. One afternoon as they rested from the driving pace Wolf set, he heard Silk talking to the old man and Aunt Pol. Curiosity finally won out over exhaustion, and he roused himself enough to listen.

"I'd still like to know more about Salmissra's involvement in this," the little man was saying.

"She's an opportunist," Wolf said. "Any time there's turmoil, she tries to turn it to her own advantage."

"That means we'll have to dodge Nyissans as well as Murgos." Garion opened his eyes. "Why do they call her Eternal Salmissra?" he asked Aunt Pol. "Is she very old?"

"No," Aunt Pol answered. "The Queens of Nyissa are always named Salmissra, that's all."

"Do you know this particular one?"

"I don't have to," she told him. "They're always exactly the same. They all look alike and act alike. If you know one, you know them all."

"She's going to be terribly disappointed with Y'diss," Silk observed, grinning.

"I imagine that Y'diss has taken some quiet, painless way out by now," Wolf said. "Salmissra grows a bit excessive when she's irritated."

"Is she so cruel then?" Garion asked.

"Not cruel exactly," Wolf explained. "Nyissans admire serpents. If you annoy a snake, he'll bite you. He's a simple creature, but very logical. Once he bites you, he doesn't hold any further grudges."

"Do we have to talk about snakes?" Silk asked in a pained voice.

"I think the horses are rested now," Hettar said from behind them. "We can go now."

They pushed the horses back into a gallop and pounded south toward the broad valley of the Nedrane River and Tol Honeth. The sun turned warm, and the trees along the way were budding in the first days of spring,

The gleaming Imperial City was situated on an island in the middle of the river, and all roads led there. It was clearly visible in the distance as they crested the last ridge and looked down into the fertile valley and it seemed to grow larger with each passing mile as they approached it. It was built entirely of white marble and it dazzled the eye in the midmorning sun. The walls were high and thick, and towers soared above them within the city.

A bridge arched gracefully across the rippled face of the Nedrane to the bronze expanse of the north gate where a glittering detachment of legionnaires marched perpetual guard.

Silk pulled on his conservative cloak and cap and drew himself up, his face assuming that sober, businesslike expression that meant that he was undergoing a private internal transition that seemed to make him almost believe himself that he was the Drasnian merchant whose identity he assumed.

"Your business in Tol Honeth?" one of the legionnaires asked politely. "I am Radek of Boktor," Silk said with the preoccupied air of a man whose mind was on business. "I have Sendarian woolens of the finest quality."

"You'll probably want to talk with the Steward of the Central Market, then," the legionnaire suggested.

"Thank you." Silk nodded and led them through the gate into the broad and crowded streets beyond.

"I think I'd better stop by the palace and have a talk with Ran Borune," Mister

Wolf said. "The Borunes aren't the easiest emperors to deal with, but they're the most intelligent. I shouldn't have too much trouble convincing him that the situation's serious."
"How are you going to get to see him?" Aunt Pol asked him. "It could take weeks to get an appointment. You know how they are."
Mister Wolf made a sour face. "I suppose I could make a ceremonial visit of it," he said as they pushed their horses through the crowd.
"And announce your presence to the whole city?"
"Do I have any choice? I have to nail down the Tolnedrans. We can't afford to have them neutral."
"Could I make a suggestion?" Barak asked.
"I'll listen to anything at this point."
"Why don't we go see Grinneg?" Barak said. "He's the Cherek Ambassador here in Tol Honeth. He could get us into the palace to see the Emperor without all that much fuss."
"That's not a bad idea, Belgarath," Silk agreed. "Grinneg's got enough connections in the palace to get us inside quickly, and Ran Borune respects him."
"That only leaves the problem of getting in to see the ambassador," Durnik said as they stopped to let a heavy wagon pass into a side street.
"He's my cousin," Barak said. "He and Anheg and I used to play together when we were children." The big man looked around. "He's supposed to have a house near the garrison of the Third Imperial Legion. I suppose we could ask somebody the way."
"That won't be necessary," Silk said. "I know where it is."
"I should have known." Barak grinned.
"We can go through the north marketplace," Silk said. "The garrison's located near the main wharves on the downstream end of the island."
"Lead the way," Wolf told him. "I don't want to waste too much time here."
The streets of Tol Honeth teemed with people from all over the world. Drasnians and Rivans rubbed elbows with Nyissans and Thulls. There was a sprinkling of Nadraks in the crowd and, to Garion's eye, a disproportionate number of Murgos. Aunt Pol rode close beside Hettar, talking quietly to him and frequently laying her hand lightly on his sword arm. The lean Algar's eyes burned, and his nostrils flared dangerously each time he saw a scarred Murgo face.
The houses along the wide streets were imposing, with white marble facades and heavy doors, quite often guarded by private mercenary soldiers, who glared belligerently at passers-by.
"The Imperial City seems awash with suspicion," Mandorallen observed. "Do they fear their neighbors so?"
"Troubled times," Silk explained. "And the merchant princes of Tol Honeth keep a great deal of the world's wealth in their counting-rooms. There are men along this street who could buy most of Arendia if they wanted to."
"Arendia is not for sale," Mandorallen said stiffly.
"In Tol Honeth, my dear Baron, everything's for sale," Silk told him. "Honor, virtue, friendship, love. It's a wicked city full of wicked people, and money's the only thing that matters."
"I expect you fit right in, then," Barak said.
Silk laughed. "I like Tol Honeth," he admitted. "The people here have no illusions. They're refreshingly corrupt."
"You're a bad fan, Silk," Barak stated bluntly.
"So you've said before," the rat-faced little Drasnian said with a mocking grin.
The banner of Cherek, the outline of a white war-boat on an azure background, fluttered from a pole surmounting the gate of the ambassador's house. Barak dismounted a bit stiffly and strode to the iron grill which blocked the gate.
"Tell Grinneg that his cousin Barak is here to see him," he announced to the

bearded guards inside.
"How do we know you're his cousin?" one of the guards demanded roughly.
Barak reached through the grill almost casually and took hold of the front of the guard's mail shirt. He pulled the man up firmly against the barn. "Would you like to rephrase that question," he asked, "while you still have your health?"
"Excuse me, Lord Barak," the man apologized quickly. "Now that I'm closer, I do seem to recognize your face."
"I was almost sure you would," Barak said.
"Let me unlock the gate for you," the guard suggested.
"Excellent idea," Barak said, letting go of the man's shirt. The guard opened the gate quickly, and the party rode into a spacious courtyard.
Grinneg, the ambassador of King Anheg to the Imperial Court at Tol Honeth, was a burly man almost as big as Barak. His beard was trimmed very short, and he wore a Tolnedran-style blue mantle. He came down the stairs two at a time and caught Barak in a vast bear hug. "You pirate!" he roared. "What are you doing in Tol Honeth?"
"Anheg's decided to invade the place," Barak joked. "As soon as we've rounded up all the gold and young women, we're going to let you burn the city."
Grinneg's eyes glittered with a momentary hunger. "Wouldn't that infuriate them?" he said with a vicious grin.
"What happened to your beard?" Barak asked.
Grinneg coughed and looked embarrassed. "It's not important," he said quickly.
"We've never had any secrets," Barak accused.
Grinneg spoke quietly to his cousin for a moment, looking very ashamed of himself, and Barak burst out with a great roar of laughter. "Why did you let her do that?" he demanded.
"I was drunk," Grinneg said. "Let's go inside. I've got a keg of good ale in my cellar."
The rest of them followed the two big men into the house, and they went down a broad hallway to a room with Cherek furnishings - heavy chairs and benches covered with skins, a rush-strewn floor and a huge fireplace where the butt end of a large log smoldered. Several pitchsmeared torches smoked in iron rings on the stone wall.
"I feel more at home here," Grinneg said.
A servant brought tankards of dark brown ale for them all and then quietly left the room. Garion quickly lifted his tankard and took a large swallow of the bitter drink before Aunt Pol could suggest something more bland. She watched him without comment, her eyes expressionless.
Grinneg sprawled in a large, hand-hewn chair with a bearskin tossed over it.
"Why are you really in Tol Honeth, Barak?" he asked.
"Grinneg," Barak said serously, "this is Belgarath. I'm sure you've heard of him."
The ambassador's eyes widened, and he inclined his head. "My house is yours," he said respectfully.
"Can you get me in to see Ran Borune?" Mister Wolf asked, sitting on a rough bench near the fireplace.
"Without any difficulty."
"Good," Wolf said. "I have to talk to him, and I don't want to stir up any fuss in the process."
Barak introduced the others, and his cousin nodded politely to each of them.
"You've come to Tol Honeth during a turbulent period," he said after the amenities were over. "The nobility of Tolnedra are gathering in the city like ravens on a dead cow."
"We picked up a hint or two of that on our way south," Silk told him. "Is it as bad as we heard?"
"Probably worse," Grinneg said, scratching one ear. "Dynastic succession only

happens a few times in each eon. The Borunes have been in power now for over six hundred years, and the other houses are anticipating the changeover with a great deal of enthusiasm."
"Who's the most likely to succeed Ran Borune?" Mister Wolf asked.
"Right at the moment the best would probably be the Grand Duke Kador of Tol Vordue," Grinneg answered. "He seems to have more money than the rest. The Honeths are richer, of course, but they've got seven candidates, and their wealth is spread out a little too thin. The other families aren't really in the running. The Borunes don't have anyone suitable, and no one takes the Ranites seriously."
Garion carefully set his tankard on the floor beside the stool he sat on. The bitter ale didn't really taste that good, and he felt vaguely cheated somehow. The half tankard he had drunk made his ears quite warm, though, and the end of his nose seemed a little numb.
"A Vorduvian we met said that the Horbites are using poison," Silk said.
"They all are." Grinneg wore a slightly disgusted look. "The Horbites are just a little more obvious about it, that's all. If Ran Borune dies tomorrow, though, Kador will be the next Emperor."
Mister Wolf frowned. "I've never had much success dealing with the Vorduvians. They don't really have imperial stature."
"The old Emperor's still in pretty fair health," Grinneg said. "If he hangs on

for another year or two, the Honeths will probably fall into line behind one candidate - whichever one survives - and then they'll be able to bring all their money to bear on the situation. These things take time, though. The candidates themselves are staying out of town for the most part, and they're all being extremely careful, so the assassins are having a great deal of difficulty reaching them." He laughed, taking a long drink of ale. "They're a funny people."
"Could we go to the palace now?" Mister Wolf asked.
"We'll want to change clothes first," Aunt Pol said firmly.
"Again, Polgara?" Wolf gave her a long-suffering look.
"Just do it, father," she said. "I won't let you embarrass us by wearing rags to the palace."
"I'm not going to wear that robe again." The old man's voice was stubborn.
"No," she said. "It wouldn't be suitable. I'm sure the ambassador can lend you a mantle. You won't be quite so obvious that way."
"Whatever you say, Pol." Wolf sighed, giving up.
After they had changed, Grinneg formed up his honorguard, a grimlooking group of Cherek warriors, and they were escorted along the broad avenues of Tol Honeth toward the palace. Garion, all bemused by the opulence of the city and feeling just a trifle giddy from the effects of the half tankard of ale he had drunk, rode quietly beside Silk, trying not to gawk at the huge buildings or the richly dressed Tolnedrans strolling with grave decorum in the noonday sun.

Chapter Sixteen

THE IMPERIAL PALACE Sat on a high hill in the center of Tol Honeth. It consisted not of one building, but rather was a complex of many, large and small, all built of marble and surrounded by gardens and lawns where cypress trees cast a pleasing shade. The entire compound was enclosed by a high wall, surmounted by statues spaced at intervals along its top. The legionnaires at the palace gate recognized the Cherek ambassador and sent immediately for one of the Emperor's chamberlains, a gray-haired official in a brown mantle.
"I need to see Ran Borune, Lord Morin," Grinneg told him as they all dismounted in a marble courtyard just inside the palace gate. "It's a matter of urgency."

"Of course, Lord Grinneg," the gray-haired man assented. "His Imperial Highness is always delighted to speak with the personal envoy of King Anheg. Unfortunately, his Highness is resting just now. I should be able to get you in to see him sometime this afternoon - tomorrow morning at the latest."
"This won't wait, Morin," Grinneg said. "We have to see the Emperor immediately. You'd better go wake him up."
Lord Morin looked surprised. "It can't be that urgent," he suggested chillingly.
"I'm afraid so," Grinneg said.
Morin pursed his lips thoughtfully as he looked at each member of the party.
"You know me well enough to realize that I wouldn't ask this lightly, Morin," Grinneg said.
Morin sighed. "I'm trusting you a great deal, Grinneg. All right. Come along. Ask your soldiers to wait."
Grinneg made a curt gesture to his guards, and the party followed Lord Morin through a broad courtyard to a columned gallery that ran along one of the buildings.
"How's he been?" Grinneg asked as they walked along the shady gallery.
"His health is still good," Morin answered, "but his temper's been deteriorating lately. The Borunes have been resigning their posts in flocks and returning to Tol Borune."
"That seems prudent under the circumstances," Grinneg said. "I suspect that a certain number of fatalities are likely to accompany the succession."
"Probably so," Morin agreed, "but his Highness finds it a bit distressing to be abandoned by members of his own family." He stopped by an arched marble gate where two legionnaires in gold-embellished breastplates stood stiffly. "Please leave your weapons here. His Highness is sensitive about such things - I'm sure you can understand."
"Of course," Grinneg said, pulling a heavy sword out from under his mantle and leaning it against the wall.
They all followed his example, and Lord Morin's eyes flickered slightly with surprise when Silk removed three different daggers from various places beneath his garments. Formidable eguipment - the chamberlain's hands flickered in the gestures of the secret language.
-Troubled times-Silk's fingers explained deprecatingly.
Lord Morin smiled faintly and led them through the gate into the garden beyond. The lawn in the garden was neatly manicured. There were softly splashing fountains, and the rosebushes were all well-pruned. Fruit trees that seemed to be very old were budding, almost ready to burst into bloom in the warm sun. Sparrows bickered over nesting sites on the twisted limbs. Grinneg and the others followed Morin along a curving marble walk toward the center of the garden.

Ran Borune XXIII, Emperor of Tolnedra, was a small, elderly man, quite bald and dressed in a gold-colored mantle. He lounged in a heavy chair beneath a budding grape arbor, feeding small seeds to a bright canary perched on the arm of his chair. The Emperor had a little, beaklike nose and bright, inquisitive eyes. "I said I wanted to be left alone, Morin," he said in a testy voice, looking up from the canary.
"A million apologies, your Highness," Lord Morin explained, bowing deeply. "Lord Grinneg, the ambassador of Cherek, wishes to present you a matter of gravest urgency. He convinced me that it simply could not wait."
The Emperor looked sharply at Grinneg. His eyes grew sly, almost malicious. "I see that your beard's beginning to grow back, Grinneg."
Grinneg's face flushed slowly. "I should have known that your Highness would have heard of my little misfortune."
"I know everything that happens in Tol Honeth, Lord Grinneg," the Emperor

snapped. "Even if all my cousins and nephews are running like rats out of a burning house, I still have a few faithful people around me. Whatever possessed you to take up with that Nadrak woman? I thought you Alorns despised Angaraks."
Grinneg coughed awkwardly and glanced quickly at Aunt Pol. "It was a kind of joke, your Highness," he said. "I thought it might embarrass the Nadrak ambassador - and his wife is, after all, a handsomelooking woman. I didn't know she kept a pair of scissors under her bed."
"She keeps your beard in a little gold box, you know." The emperor smirked. "And she shows it to all her friends."
"She's an evil woman," Grinneg said mournfully.
"Who are these?" the Emperor asked, waving one finger at the members of the party standing on the grass somewhat behind Ambassador Grinneg.
"My cousin Barak and some friends," Grinneg said. "They're the ones who have to talk to you."
"The Earl of Trellheim?" the Emperor asked. "What are you doing in Tol Honeth, my Lord?"
"Passing through, your Highness," Barak replied, bowing.
Ran Borune looked sharply at each of the rest in turn as if actually seeing them for the first time. "And this would be Prince Kheldar of Drasnia," he said, "who left Tol Honeth in a hurry last time he was here - posing as an acrobat in a traveling circus, I believe, and about one jump ahead of the police."
Silk also bowed politely.
"And Hettar of Algaria," the Emperor continued, "the man who's trying to depopulate Cthol Murgos singlehandedly."
Hettar inclined his head.
"Morin," the Emperor demanded sharply, "why have you surrounded me with Alorns? I don't like Alorns."
"It's this matter of urgency, your Highness," Morin replied apologetically.
"And an Arend?" the Emperor said, looking at Mandorallen. "A Mimbrate, I should say." His eyes narrowed. "From the descriptions I've heard, he could only be the Baron of Vo Mandor."
Mandorallen's bow was gracefully elaborate. "Throe eye is most keen, your Highness, to have read us each in turn without prompting."
"Not all of you precisely," the Emperor said. "I don't recognize the Sendar or the Rivan lad."
Garion's mind jumped. Barak had once told him that he resembled a Rivan more than anything else, but that thought had been lost in the welter of events which had followed the chance remark. Now the Emperor of Tolnedra, whose eye seemed to have an uncanny ability to penetrate to the true nature of things, had also identified him as a Rivan. He glanced quickly at Aunt Pol, but she seemed absorbed in examining the buds on a rosebush.
"The Sendar is Durnik," Mister Wolf said, "a smith. In Sendaria that useful trade is considered somewhat akin to nobility. The lad is my grandson, Garion."
The Emperor looked at the old man. "It seems that I should know who you are. There's something about you-" He paused thoughtfully. The canary, which had been perched on the arm of the Emperor's chair, suddenly burst into song. He launched himself into the air and fluttered directly to Aunt Pol. She held out her finger, and the bright bird landed there, tipped back his head and sang ecstatically as if his tiny heart were breaking with adoration. She listened gravely to his song. She wore a dark blue dress, elaborately laced at the bodice, and a short sable cape.
"What are you doing with my canary?" the Emperor demanded.
"Listening," she said.
"How did you get him to sing? I've been trying to coax him into song for months."
"You didn't take him seriously enough."

"Who is this woman?" the Emperor asked.
"My daughter Polgara," Mister Wolf said. "She has a particularly keen understanding of birds."
The Emperor laughed suddenly, a harshly skeptical laugh. "Oh, come now. You really don't expect me to accept that, do you?"
Wolf looked at him gravely. "Are you really sure you don't know me, Ran Borune?" he asked mildly. The pale green mantle Grinneg had lent him made him look almost like a Tolnedran - almost, but not quite.
"It's a clever ruse," the Emperor said. "You look the part, and so does she, but I'm not a child. I gave up fairy tales a long time ago."
"That's a pity. I'd guess that your life's been a little empty since then." Wolf looked around at the manicured garden with the servants and fountains and the members of the Emperor's personal guard posted unobtrusively here and there among the flowerbeds. "Even with all this, Ran Borune, a life without any wonder left in it is flat and stale." His voice was a little sad. "I think that perhaps you gave up too much."
"Morin," Ran Borune demanded peremptorily, "send for Zereel. We'll settle this immediately."
"At once, your Highness," Morin said and beckoned to one of the servants.
"May I have my canary back?" the Emperor asked Aunt Pol rather plaintively.
"Of course." She moved across the grass toward the chair, stepping slowly to avoid startling the trilling little bird.
"Sometimes I wonder what they're saying when they sing," Ran Borune said.
"Right now he's telling me about the day he learned to fly," Aunt Pol said. "That's a very important day for a bird." She reached out her hand, and the canary hopped onto the Emperor's finger, still singing and with its bright eye cocked toward Ran Borune's face.
"That's an amusing conceit, I suppose." The little old man smiled, staring out at the sunlight sparkling on the water in one of the fountains. "But I'm afraid I don't have time for that kind of thing. Right now the whole nation is holding its breath in anticipation of my death. They all seem to think that the greatest thing I can do for Tolnedra is to die immediately. Some of them have even gone to the trouble of trying to help me along. We caught four assassins inside the palace grounds just last week. The Borunes, my own family, are deserting me to the point that I scarcely have enough people left to run the palace, much less the Empire. Ah, here comes Zereel."
A lean, bushy-browed man in a red mantle covered with mystic symbols scurried across the lawn and bowed deeply to the emperor. "You sent for me, your Highness?"
"I am informed that this woman is Polgara the Sorceress," the Emperor said, "and that the old man there is Belgarath. Be a good fellow, Zereel, and have a look into their credentials."
"Belgarath and Polgara?" the bushy-browed man scoffed. "Surely your Highness isn't serious. The names are mythological. No such people exist."
"You see," the Emperor said to Aunt Pol. "You don't exist. I have it on the very best authority. Zereel's a wizard himself, you know."
"Really?"
"One of the very best," he assured her. "Of course most of his tricks are just sleight of hand, since sorcery's only a sham, but he amuses me and he takes himself very seriously. You may proceed, Zereel, but try not to raise an awful stink, as you usually do."
"That won't be necessary, your Highness," Zereel said flatly. "If they were wizards of any kind, I'd have recognized them immediately. We have special ways of communicating, you know."
Aunt Pol looked at the wizard with one eyebrow slightly raised. "I think that you should look a bit closer, Zereel," she suggested. "Sometimes we miss

things." She made an almost imperceptible gesture, and Garion seemed to hear a faint rush of sound.
The wizard stared, his eyes fixed on open air directly in front of him. His eyes began to bulge, and his face turned deathly pale. As if his legs had been cut from under him, he fell onto his face. "Forgive me, Lady Polgara," he croaked, groveling.
"That's supposed to impress me, I assume," the Emperor said. "I've seen men's minds overwhelmed before, however, and Zereel's mind isn't all that strong to begin with."
"This is getting tiresome, Ran Borune," she said tartly.
"You really ought to believe her, you know." The canary spoke in a tiny, piping voice. "I knew who she was immediately - of course we're much more perceptive than you things that creep around on the ground - why do you do that? If you'd just try, I'm sure you'd be able to fly. And I wish you'd stop eating so much garlic - it makes you smell awful."
"Hush, now," Aunt Pol said gently to the bird. "You can tell him all about it later."
The Emperor was trembling violently, and he stared at the bird as if it were a snake.
"Why don't we all just behave as if we believed that Polgara and I are who we say we are?" Mister Wolf suggested. "We could spend the rest of the day trying to convince you, and we really don't have that much time. There are some things I have to tell you, and they're important no matter who I am."
"I think I can accept that," Ran Borune said, still trembling and staring at the now-silent canary.
Mister Wolf clasped his hands behind his back and stared up at a cluster of bickering sparrows on the limb of a nearby tree. "Early last fall," he began, "Zedar the Apostate crept into the throne room at Riva and stole the Orb of Aldur."
"He did what?" Ran Borune demanded, sitting up quickly. "How?"
"We don't know," Wolf answered. "When I catch up with him, maybe I'll ask him. I'm sure, however, that you can see the importance of the event."
"Obviously," the Emperor said.
"The Alorns and the Sendars are quietly preparing for war," Wolf told him.
"War?" Ran Borune asked in a shocked voice. "With whom?"
"The Angaraks, of course."
"What's Zedar got to do with the Angaraks? He could be acting on his own, couldn't he?"
"Surely you're not that simple," Aunt Pol remarked.
"You forget yourself, Lady," Ran Borune said stiffly. "Where's Zedar now?"
"He went through Tol Honeth about two weeks ago," Wolf replied. "If he can get across the border into one of the Angarak kingdoms before I can stop him, the Alorns will march."
"And Arendia with them," Mandorallen said firmly. "King Korodullin has also been advised."
"You'll tear the world apart," the Emperor protested.
"Perhaps," Wolf admitted, "but we can't let Zedar get to Torak with the Orb."
"I'll send emissaries at once," Ran Borune said. "This has to be headed off before it gets out of hand."
"It's a little late for that," Barak said grimly. "Anheg and the others aren't in any mood for Tolnedran diplomacy right now."
"Your people have a bad reputation in the north, your Highness," Silk pointed out. "They always seem to have a few trade agreements up their sleeves. Every time Tolnedra mediates a dispute, it seems to cost a great deal. I don't think we can afford your good offices anymore."
A cloud passed in front of the sun, and the garden seemed suddenly chilly in its

shadow.
"This is being blown all out of proportion," the Emperor protested. "The Alorns and the Angaraks have been squabbling over that worthless stone for thousands of years. You've been waiting for the chance to fall on each other, and now you've got an excuse. Well, enjoy yourselves. Tolnedra's not going to get involved as long as I'm her Emperor."
"You're not going to be able to sit to one side in this, Ran Borune," Aunt Pol said.
"Why not? The Orb doesn't concern me one way or the other. Go ahead and destroy each other if you want. Tolnedra will still be here when it's all over."
"I doubt it," Wolf told him. "Your Empire's crawling with Murgos. They could overrun you in a week."
"They're honest merchants - here on honest business."
"Murgos don't have honest business," Aunt Pol told him. "Every Murgo in Tolnedra is here because he was sent by the Grolim High Priest."
"That's an exaggeration," Ran Borune said stubbornly. "The whole world knows that you and your father have an obsessive hatred of all Angaraks, but times have changed."
"Cthol Murgos is still ruled from Rak Cthol," Wolf said, "and Ctuchik is master there. Ctuchik hasn't changed, even if the world has. The merchants from Rak Goska might seem civilized to you, but they all jump when Ctuchik whistles, and Ctuchik's the disciple of Torak."
"Torak's dead."
"Really?" Aunt Pol said. "Have you seen his grave? Have you opened the grave and seen his bones?"
"My Empire's very expensive to run," the Emperor said, "and I need the revenue the Murgos bring me. I've got agents in Rak Goska and all along the South Caravan Route, so I'd know if the Murgos were getting ready for any kind of move against me. I'm just a little suspicious that all this might be the result of some internal contention within the Brotherhood of Sorcerers. You people have your own motives, and I'm not going to let you use my Empire as a pawn in your power struggles."
"And if the Angaraks win?" Aunt Pol said, "How do you plan to deal with Torak?"
"I'm not afraid of Torak."
"Have you ever met him?" Wolf asked.
"Obviously not. Listen, Belgarath, you and your daughter have never been friendly to Tolnedra. You treated us like a defeated enemy after Vo Mimbre. Your information's interesting, and I'll consider it in its proper perspective, but Tolnedran policy is not dominated by Alorn preconceptions. Our economy relies heavily on trade along the South Caravan Route. I'm not going to disrupt my Empire simply because you happen to dislike Murgos."
"You're a fool then," Wolf said bluntly.
"You'd be surprised at how many people think so," the Emperor replied. "Maybe you'll have better luck with my successor. If he's a Vorduvian or a Honeth, you might even be able to bribe him, but Borunes don't take bribes."
"Or advice," Aunt Pol added.
"Only when it suits us, Lady Polgara," Ran Borune said.
"I think we've done everything we can here," Wolf decided.
A bronze door at the back of the garden slammed open, and a tiny girl with flaming hair stormed through, her eyes ablaze. At first Garion thought she was a child, but as she came closer, he realized that she was somewhat older than that. Although she was very small, the short, sleeveless green tunic she wore displayed limbs that were much closer to maturity. He felt a peculiar kind of shock when he saw her - almost, but not quite, like recognition. Her hair was a tumbled mass with long, elaborate curls cascading down over her neck and shoulders, and it was a color that Garion had never seen before, a deep,

burnished red that seemed somehow to glow from within. Her skin was a golden color that seemed, as she swept through the shadows of the trees near the gate, to have an almost greenish cast to it. She was in a state verging on sheer rage.
"Why am I being kept prisoner here?" she demanded of the Emperor.
"What are you talking about?" Ran Borune asked.
"The legionnaires won't let me leave the palace grounds!"
"Oh," the Emperor said, "that."
"Exactly. That. "
"They're acting on my orders, Ce'Nedra," the Emperor told her.
"So they said. Tell them too stop it."
"No."
"No?" Her tone was incredulous. "No?" Her voice climbed several octaves. "What do you mean, no?"
"It's too dangerous for you to be out in the city just now," the Emperor said placatingly.
"Nonsense," she snapped. "I don't intend to sit around in this stuffy palace just because you're afraid of your own shadow. I need some things from the market."
"Send someone."
"I don't want to send anyone!" she shouted at him. "I want to go myself."
"Well, you can't," he said flatly. "Spend your time on your studies instead."
"I don't want to study," she cried. "Jeebers is a stuffy idiot, and he bores me. I don't want to sit around talking about history or politics or any of the rest of it. I just want an afternoon to myself."
"I'm sorry."
"Please, father," she begged, her tone dropping into a wheedling note. She took hold of one of the folds of his gold mantle and twisted it around one of her tiny fingers. "Please." The look she directed at the Emperor through her lashes would have melted stone.
"Absolutely not," he said, refusing to look at her. "My order stands. You will not leave the palace grounds."
"I hate you!" she cried. Then she ran from the garden in tears. "My daughter," the Emperor explained almost apologetically. "You can't imagine what it's like having a child like that."
"Oh, I can imagine, all right," Mister Wolf said, glancing at Aunt Pol. She looked back at him, her eyes challenging.
"Go ahead and say it, father," she told him. "I'm sure you won't be happy until you do."
Wolf shrugged. "Forget it."
Ran Borune looked thoughtfully at the two of them. "It occurs to me that we might be able to negotiate a bit here," he said, his eyes narrowing.
"What did you have in mind?" Wolf asked.
"You have a certain authority among the Alorns," the Emperor suggested.
"Some," Wolf admitted carefully.
"If you were to ask them, I'm sure they'd be willing to overlook one of the more absurd provisions of the Accords of Vo Mimbre."
"Which one is that?"
"There's really no necessity for Ce'Nedra to journey to Riva, is there? I'm the last emperor of the Borune Dynasty, and when I die, she won't be an Imperial Princess anymore. Under the circumstances, I'd say that the requirement doesn't really apply to her. It's nonsense anyway. The line of the Rivan King became extinct thirteen hundred years ago, so there isn't going to be any bridegroom waiting for her in the Hall of the Rivan King. As you've seen, Tolnedra's a very dangerous place just now. Ce'Nedra's sixteenth birthday's only a year or so off, and the date's well known. If I have to send her to Riva, half the assassins in the Empire are going to be lurking outside the palace gates, waiting for her to

come out. I'd rather not take that kind of risk. If you could see your way clear to speak to the Alorns, I might be able to make a few concessions regarding the Murgos - restrictions on their numbers, closed areas, that sort of thing."
"No, Ran Borune," Aunt Pol said flatly. "Ce'Nedra will go to Riva. You've failed to understand that the Accords are only a formality. If your daughter's the one destined to become the bride of the Rivan King, no force on earth can prevent her from being in the throne room at Riva on the appointed day. My father's recommendations about the Murgos are only suggestions - for your own good. What you choose to do about the matter is your affair."
"I think we've just about exhausted the possibilities of this conversation," the Emperor stated coldly.
Two important-looking officials came into the garden and spoke briefly to Lord Morin.
"Your Highness," the gray-haired chamberlain said deferentially, "the Minister of Trade wanted to inform you that he's reached an excellent agreement with the trade deputation from Rak Goska. The gentlemen from Cthol Murgos were most accommodating."
"I'm delighted to hear it," Ran Borune said, throwing a meaningful look at Mister Wolf.
"The contingent from Rak Goska would like to pay their respects before they leave," Morin added.
"By all means," the Emperor said. "I'll be delighted to receive them here."
Morin turned and nodded shortly to the two officials near the gate. The officials turned and spoke to someone outside, and the gate swung open.
Five Murgos strode into the garden. Their coarse black robes were hooded, but the hoods were thrown back. The front of their robes were unclasped, and the chain mail shirts they all wore gleamed in the sunlight. The Murgo in front was a bit taller than the others, and his bearing indicated that he was the leader of the deputation. A welter of images and partial memories flooded Garion's mind as he looked at the scar-faced enemy he had known all his life. The strange pull of the silent, hidden linkage between them touched him. It was Asharak.
Something brushed Garion's mind, tentative only - not the powerful force the Murgo had directed at him in the dim hallway in Anheg's palace at Val Alorn. The amulet under his tunic became very cold and yet seemed to burn at the same time.
"Your Imperial Highness," Asharak said, striding forward with a cold smile, "we are honored to be admitted into your august presence." He bowed, his mail shirt clinking.
Barak was holding Hettar's right arm firmly, and Mandorallen moved and took the other.
"I'm overjoyed to see you again, worthy Asharak," the Emperor said. "I'm told that an agreement has been reached."
"Beneficial to both sides, your Highness."
"The best kind of agreement," Ran Borune approved.
"Taur Urgas, King of the Murgos, sends greetings," Asharak said. "His Majesty feels most keenly the desirability of cementing relations between Cthol Murgos and Tolnedra. He hopes that one day he may call your Imperial Highness brother."
"We respect the peaceful intentions and legendary wisdom of Taur Urgas." The Emperor smiled with a certain smugness.
Asharak looked around, his black eyes flat. "Well, Ambar," he said to Silk, "your fortunes seem to have improved since we met last in Mingan's counting room in Darine."
Silk spread his hands in an innocent-looking gesture. "The Gods have been kind - most of them, anyway."
Asharak smiled briefly.
"You know each other?" the Emperor asked, a bit surprised.
"We've met, your Highnešs," Silk admitted.

"In another kingdom," Asharak added. He looked directly then at Mister Wolf.
"Belgarath," he said politely with a brief nod.
"Chamdar," the old man replied.
"You're looking well."
"Thank you."
"It seems that I'm the only stranger here," the Emperor said.
"Chamdar and I have known each other for a very long time," Mister Wolf told him. He glanced at the Murgo with a faintly malicious twinkle in his eyes. "I see that you've managed to recover from your recent indisposition."
Asharak's face flickered with annoyance, and he looked quickly at his shadow on the grass as if for reassurance.
Garion remembered what Wolf had said atop the tor after the attack of the Algroths - something about a shadow returning by an "indirect route." For some reason the information that Asharak the Murgo and Chamdar the Grolim were the same man did not particularly surprise him. Like a complex melody that had been faintly out of tune, the sudden merging of the two seemed right somehow. The knowledge clicked in his mind like a key in a lock.
"Someday you'll have to show me how you did that," Asharak was saying. "I found the experience interesting. My horse had hysterics, however."
"My apologies to your horse."
"Why is it that I feel as if I'm missing about half of this conversation?" Ran Borune asked.
"Forgive us, your Highness," Asharak said. "Ancient Belgarath and I are renewing an old enmity. We've seldom had the opportunity to speak to each other with any degree of civility." He turned and bowed politely to Aunt Pol. "My Lady Polgara. You're as beautiful as ever." He eyed her with a deliberately suggestive stare.
"You haven't changed much either, Chamdar." Her tone was mild, even bland, but Garion, who knew her so well, recognized immediately the deadly insult she had just delivered to the Grolim.
"Charming," Asharak said with a faint smile.
"This is better than a play," the Emperor cried delightedly. "You people are actually dripping with malice. I wish I'd had the opportunity to see the first act."
"The first act was very long, your Highness," Asharak said, "and quite often tedious. As you may have noticed, Belgarath sometimes gets carried away with his own cleverness."
"I'm certain I'll be able to make up for that," Mister Wolf told him with a slight smile. "I promise you that the last act will be extremely short, Chamdar."
"Threats, old man?" Asharak asked. "I thought we'd agreed to be civilized."
"I can't recall when we ever agreed on anything," Wolf said. He turned to the Emperor. "I think we'll leave now, Ran Borune," he said. "With your permission, of course."
"Of course," the Emperor replied. "I'm pleased to have met youthough I still don't believe in you, naturally. My skepticism, however, is theological, not personal."
"I'm glad of that," Wolf said, and quite suddenly he grinned impishly at the Emperor.
Ran Borune laughed.
"I look forward to our next meeting, Belgarath," Asharak said.
"I wouldn't if I were you," Wolf advised him, then turned and led the way out of the Emperor's garden.

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS MIDAFTERNOON when they emerged from the palace gate. The broad lawns were

green in the warm spring sunlight, and the cypress trees stirred in a faint breeze.
"I don't think we want to stay in Tol Honeth too much longer," Wolf said.
"Do we leave now, then?" Mandorallen asked.
"There's something I have to do first," Wolf replied, squinting into the sunlight. "Barak and his cousin will come along with me. The rest of you go on back to Grinneg's house and wait there."
"We'll stop by the central market on our way," Aunt Pol told him. "There are a few things I need."
"This isn't a shopping expedition, Pol."
"The Grolims already know we're here, father," she said, "so there's no point in creeping about like sneak thieves, is there?"
He sighed. "All right, Pol."
"I knew you'd see it my way," she said.
Mister Wolf shook his head helplessly and rode off with Barak and Grinneg. The rest of them rode down the hill from the palace toward the gleaming city below. The streets at the foot of the hill were broad and lined on either side by magnificent houses-each almost a palace in itself.
"The rich and the noble," Silk said. "In Tol Honeth, the closer you live to the palace, the more important you are."
"'Tis oft times thus, Prince Kheldar," Mandorallen observed. "Wealth and position sometimes need the reassurance of proximity to the seat of power. By ostentation and propinquity to the throne, small men are able to avoid facing their own inadequacy."
"I couldn't have said it better myself," Silk said.
The central marketplace of Tol Honeth was a vast square filled with bright-colored booths and stalls where a significant portion of the goods of the world were on display. Aunt Pol dismounted, left her horse with one of the Cherek guards, and moved busily from booth to booth, buying, it appeared, almost everything in sight. Silk's face blanched often at her purchases, since he was paying for them.
"Can't you talk to her?" the small man pleaded with Garion. "She's destroying me."
"What makes you think she'd listen to me?" Garion asked.
"You could at least try, " Silk said desperately.
Three richly mantled men stood near the center of the market, arguing heatedly.
"You're mad, Haldor," one of them, a thin man with a snub nose, said agitatedly. "The Honeths would strip the Empire for their own profit." His face was flushed, and his eyes bulged dangerously.
"Would Kador of the Vorduvians be any better?" the stout man named Haldor demanded. "You're the one who's mad, Radan. If we put Kador on the throne, he'll grind us all under foot. There's such a thing as being too imperial."
"How dare you?" Radan almost screamed, his perspiring face growing darker. "Grand Duke Kador is the only possible choice. I'd vote for him even if he hadn't paid me." He flung his arms about wildly as he talked, and his tongue seemed to stumble over his words.
"Kador's a pig," Haldor said flatly, carefully watching Radan as if gauging the impact of his words. "An arrogant, brutal pig with no more right to the throne than a mongrel dog. His great-grandfather bought his way into the House of Vordue, and I'd sooner open a vein than bow to the offspring of a sneak thief from the docks of Tol Vordue."
Radan's eyes almost started from his head at Haldor's calculated insults. He opened his mouth several times as if trying to speak, but his tongue seemed frozen with fury. His face turned purple, and he clawed at the air in front of him. Then his body stiffened and began to arch backward.
Haldor watched him with an almost clinical detachment.

With a strangled cry, Radan toppled back onto the cobblestones, his arms and legs threshing violently. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he began to foam at the mouth as his convulsions became more violent. He began to bang his head on the stones, and his twitching fingers clutched at his throat.
"Amazing potency," the third mantled man said to Haldor. "Where did you find it?"
"A friend of mine recently made a voyage to Sthiss Tor," Haldor said, watching Radan's convulsions with interest. "The beautiful part of it is that it's completely harmless unless one gets excited. Radan wouldn't drink the wine until I tasted it first to prove that it was safe."
"You've got the same poison in your own stomach?" the other man asked with astonishment.
"I'm quite safe," Haldor said. "My emotions never get the best of me."
Radan's convulsions had grown weaker. His heels beat at the stones with a rapid pattering sound; then he stiffened, gave a long, gurgling sigh, and died.
"I don't suppose you've got any of the drug left, do you?" Haldor's friend asked thoughtfully. "I'd be willing to pay quite a bit for something like that."
Haldor laughed. "Why don't we go to my house, and we'll talk about it? Over a cup of wine, perhaps?"
The other man threw him a startled glance; then he laughed too, although a bit nervously. The two of them turned and walked away, leaving the dead man sprawled on the stones.
Garion stared in horror at them and then at the black-faced corpse lying so grotesquely twisted in the center of the marketplace. The Tolnedrans near the body seemed to ignore its existence. "Why doesn't somebody do something?" he demanded.
"They're afraid," Silk said. "If they show any concern, they might be mistaken for partisans. Politics here in Tol Honeth are taken very seriously."
"Shouldn't someone notify the authorities?" Durnik suggested, his face pale and his voice shaking.
"I'm sure it's already been taken care of," Silk said. "Let's not stand around staring. I don't think we want to get involved in this sort of thing."
Aunt Pol came back to where they were standing. The two Cherek warriors from Grinneg's house who had been accompanying her were loaded down with bundles and both of them looked a little sheepish about it.
"What are you doing?" she asked Silk.
"We were just watching a bit of Tolnedran politics in action," Silk said, pointing at the dead man in the center of the square.
"Poison?" she asked, noting Radan's contorted limbs.
Silk nodded. "A strange one. It doesn't seem to work unless the victim gets excited."
"Athsat," she said with a grim nod.
"You've heard of it before?" Silk seemed surprised.
She nodded. "It's quite rare, and very expensive. I didn't think the Nyissans would be willing to sell any of it."
"I think we should move away from here," Hettar suggested. "There's a squad of legionnaires coming, and they might want to question any witnesses."
"Good idea," Silk said and led them toward the far side of the marketplace.
Near the row of houses that marked the edge of the square, eight burly men carried a heavily veiled litter. As the litter approached, a slender, jeweled hand reached languidly out from behind the veil and touched one of the porters on the shoulder. The eight men stopped immediately and set the litter down.
"Silk," a woman's voice called from within the litter, "what are you doing back in Tol Honeth?"
"Bethra?" Silk said. "Is that you?"
The veil was drawn back, revealing a lushly endowed woman lounging on crimson

satin cushions inside the litter. Her dark hair was elaborately curled with strings of pearls woven into her tresses. Her pink silken gown clung to her body, and golden rings and bracelets clasped her arms and fingers. Her face was breathtakingly beautiful, and her long-lashed eyes were wicked. There was about her a kind of overripeness and an almost overpowering sense of self indulgent corruption. For some reason Garion felt himself blushing furiously.
"I thought you'd still be running," she said archly to Silk. "The men I sent after you were very professional."
Silk bowed with an ironic little flourish. "They were quite good, Bethra," he agreed with a wry grin. "Not quite good enough, but very good, actually. I hope you didn't need them anymore."
"I always wondered why they didn't come back." She laughed. "I should have known, of course. I hope you didn't take it personally."
"Certainly not, Bethra. It's just part of the profession, after all."
"I knew you'd understand," she said. "I had to get rid of you. You were disrupting my entire plan."
Silk grinned wickedly. "I know," he gloated. "And after all you had to go through to set it up - and with the Thullish ambassador, no less."
She made a disgusted face.
"Whatever happened to him?" Silk asked.
"He went swimming in the Nedrane."
"I didn't know that Thulls swam all that well."
"They don't - particularly not with large rocks tied to their feet. After you'd destroyed the whole thing, I didn't really need him anymore, and there were some things I didn't want him mentioning in certain quarters."
"You always were prudent, Bethra."
"What are you up to now?" she asked curiously.
Silk shrugged. "A little of this, a little of that."
"The succession?"
"Oh, no." He laughed. "I know better than to get involved in that. Which side are you on?"
"Wouldn't you like to know?"
Silk looked around, his eyes narrowing. "I could use some information, Bethra - if you're free to talk about it, of course."
"About what, Silk?"
"The city seems to be awash with Murgos," Silk said. "If you're not presently involved with them, I'd appreciate anything you could tell me."
She smiled at him archly. "And what would you be willing to pay?" she asked.
"Couldn't we just call it professional courtesy?"
She smiled wickedly at him; then she laughed. "Why not? I like you, Silk, and I think I'll like you even more if you owe me a favor."
"I'll be your slave," he promised.
"Liar." She thought for a moment. "The Murgos have never really shown all that much interest in trade," she said. "But a few years ago they began arriving in twos and threes; and then late last summer, whole caravans started coming in from Rak Goska."
"You think they want to influence the succession?" Silk asked.
"That would be my guess," she said. "There's a great deal of red gold in Tol Honeth suddenly. My coin chests are full of it."
Silk grinned. "It all spends."
"It does indeed."
"Have they picked any one candidate?"
"Not that I've been able to determine. They seem to be divided into two different factions, and there's quite a bit of antagonism between them."
"That could be a ruse, of course."
"I don't think so. I think the antagonism has to do with the quarrel between

Zedar and Ctuchik. Each side wants to get control of the next Emperor. They're spending money like water."
"Do you know the one called Asharak?"
"Ah, that one," she replied. "The other Murgos are all afraid of him. At the moment he seems to be working for Ctuchik, but I think he's playing some game of his own. He owns the Grand Duke Kador out right, and Kador's closest to the throne right now. That puts Asharak in a very powerful position. That's about all I really know."
"Thank you, Bethra," Silk said respectfully.
"Are you planning to stay in Tol Honeth for long?" she asked.
"Unfortunately no."
"Pity. I was hoping you might be able to come by for a visit. We could talk over old times. I don't have many close friends anymore - or dear enemies, like you."
Silk laughed dryly. "I wonder why," he said. "I don't imagine I could swim much better than the Thullish ambassador did. You're a dangerous woman, Bethra."
"In more ways than one," she admitted, stretching languidly. "But your life's not really in any danger from me, Silk - not anymore."
"It wasn't my life I was worried about." Silk grinned.
"That's another matter, of course," she admitted. "Don't forget that you owe me a favor."
"I hunger for the opportunity to repay my debt," he said impudently.
"You're impossible." She laughed, then gestured to her porters, and they lifted her litter to their shoulders. "Good-bye, Silk," she said.
"Good-bye, Bethra," he replied with a deep bow.
"Absolutely disgusting," Durnik said in a voice strangled with outrage as the porters marched away with the litter. "Why is a woman like that even permitted to stay in the city?"
"Bethra?" Silk asked in surprise. "She's the most brilliant and fascinating woman in Tol Honeth. Men come from all over the world just for an hour or two with her."
"For a price, of course," Durnik said.
"Don't misunderstand her, Durnik," Silk told him. "Her conversation's probably more valuable than-" He coughed slightly with a quick glance at Aunt Pol.
"Really?" Durnik questioned in a voice heavy with sarcasm.
Silk laughed. "Durnik," he said, "I love you like a brother, but you're a terrible prude, do you know that?"
"Leave him alone, Silk," Aunt Pol said firmly. "I like him exactly the way he is."
"I'm only trying to improve him, Lady Polgara," Silk explained innocently.
"Barak's right about you, Prince Kheldar," she said. "You're a very bad man."
"It's all in the line of duty. I sacrifice my more delicate feelings for the sake of my country."
"Of course!"
"Surely you don't imagine that I enjoy that sort of thing?"
"Why don't we just let it drop?" she suggested.
Grinneg, Barak, and Mister Wolf returned to Grinneg's house not long after the others had arrived.
"Well?" Aunt Pol asked Wolf as the old man came into the room where they had been waiting.
"He went south," Wolf said.
"South? He didn't turn east toward Cthol Murgos?"
"No," Wolf said. "He's probably trying to avoid a meeting with Ctuchik's people. He'll look for a quiet place to slip across the border. Either that or he's headed for Nyissa. Perhaps he's made some arrangement with Salmissra. We'll have to follow him to find out."
"I met an old friend in the marketplace," Silk said from the chair in which he

lounged. "She tells me that Asharak's been involved in the politics of succession. It appears that he's managed to buy the Grand Duke of Vordue. If the Vorduvians get the throne, Asharak's going to have Tolnedra in the palm of his hand."
Mister Wolf scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "We're going to have to do something about him sooner or later. He's beginning to make me just a little tired."
"We could stop over for a day or so," Aunt Pol suggested. "Attend to it once and for all."
"No," Wolf decided. "It's probably best not to do that sort of thing here in the city. The business is likely to be a bit noisy, and Tolnedrans get excited about things they can't understand. I'm sure he'll give us an opportunity later - in some less-populated place."
"Do we leave now, then?" Silk asked.
"Let's wait until early morning," Wolf told him. "We'll probably be followed, but if the streets are empty, it will make things a little more difficult for them."
"I'll talk to my cook, then," Grinneg said. "The least I can do is send you on your way with a good meal to help you face the road. Then, of course, there's still that barrel of ale to be dealt with."
Mister Wolf smiled broadly at that, then caught Aunt Pol's reproving frown. "It would only go flat, Pol," he explained. "Once it's broached, you have to drink it up fairly quickly. It would be a shame to waste it, wouldn't it?"

Chapter Eighteen

THEY LEFT GRINNEG'S HOUSE before dawn the next morning, dressed once more in their traveling clothes. They slipped quietly out a back gate and proceeded through those narrow alleys and back streets Silk always seemed able to find. The sky to the east was beginning to lighten when they reached the massive bronze gate on the south end of the island.
"How long until the gate opens?" Mister Wolf asked one of the legionnaires.
"Not much longer," the legionnaire told him. "Just as soon as we can see the far bank clearly."
Wolf grunted. He had grown quite mellow the evening before and he was obviously troubled by a headache this morning. He dismounted, went to one of the packhorses, and drank from a leather waterskin.
"That isn't going to help, you know," Aunt Pol told him a bit smugly. He chose not to answer.
"I think it's going to be a lovely day today," she said brightly, looking first at the sky and then at the men around her who slumped in their saddles in attitudes of miserable dejection.
"You're a cruel woman, Polgara," Barak said sadly.
"Did you talk to Grinneg about that ship?" Mister Wolf asked.
"I think so," Barak replied. "I seem to remember saying something about it."
"It's fairly important," Wolf said.
"What's this?" Aunt Pol asked.
"I thought it might not be a bad idea to have a ship waiting off the mouth of the River of the Woods," Wolf said. "If we have to go to Sthiss Tor, it would probably be better to sail there rather than wade through the swamps in northern Nyissa."
"That's a very good idea, actually," she approved. "I'm surprised it occurred to you - considering your condition last night."
"Do you suppose we could talk about something else?" he asked somewhat plaintively.
It grew imperceptibly lighter, and the command to open the gate came from the

watchtower on the wall above. The legionnaires slipped the iron bar and swung the ponderous gate open. With Mandorallen at his side, Silk led them out through the thick portal and across the bridge that spanned the dark waters of the Nedrane.

By noon they were eight leagues south of Tol Honeth, and Mister Wolf had somewhat regained his composure, though his eyes still seemed a bit sensitive to the bright spring sunlight, and he winced now and then when a bird sang a bit too near.

"Riders coming up behind," Hettar said.

"How many?" Barak asked.

"Two."

"Ordinary travelers, perhaps," Aunt Pol said.

The two figures on horseback appeared from around a bend behind them and stopped. They spoke together for a moment or two and then came on, their bearing somewhat cautious. They were a peculiar pair. The man wore a green Tolnedran mantle, a garment not really suited for riding. His forehead was quite high, and his hair was carefully combed to conceal his encroaching baldness. He was very skinny, and his ears stuck out from the side of his head like flaps. His companion appeared to be a child dressed in a hooded traveling cloak and with a kerchief across her face to keep out the dust.

"Good day to you," the skinny man greeted them politely as the pair drew alongside.

"Hello," Silk returned.

"Warm for so early in the year, isn't it?" the Tolnedran said.

"We noticed that," Silk agreed.

"I wonder," the skinny man asked, "do you have a bit of water you could spare?"

"Of course," Silk said. He looked at Garion and gestured toward the pack animals. Garion dropped back and unhooked a leather waterskin from one of the packs. The stranger removed the wooden stopper and carefully wiped the mouth of the skin. He offered the bag to his companion. She removed her kerchief and looked at the skin with an expression of perplexity.

"Like this, your-uh-my Lady," the man explained, taking the skin back, raising it in both hands and drinking.

"I see," the girl said.

Garion looked at her more closely. The voice was familiar for some reason, and there was something about her face. She was not a child, though she was very small, and there was a kind of self indulged petulance about her tiny face. Garion was almost certain he had seen her somewhere before.

The Tolnedran handed the waterskin back to her, and she drank, making a small face at the resinous taste. Her hair was a purplish black, and there were faint dark smears on the collar of her traveling cloak that indicated that the color was not natural.

"Thank you, Jeebers," she said after she had drunk. "And thank you, sir," she said to Silk.

Garion's eyes narrowed as a dreadful suspicion began to grow in his mind.

"Are you going far?" the skinny man asked Silk.

"Quite a ways," Silk answered. "I'm Radek of Boktor, a Drasnian merchant, and I'm bound to the south with Sendarian woolens. This break in the weather destroyed the market in Tol Honeth, so I thought I'd try Tol Rane. It's in the mountains, and it's probably still cold there."

"You're taking the wrong road, then," the stranger said. "The road to Tol Rane lies off to the east."

"I've had trouble on that road," Silk said glibly. "Robbers, you know. I thought it'd be safer to go through Tol Borune."

"What a coincidence," the skinny man told him. "My pupil and I are bound for Tol Borune ourselves."

"Yes," Silk admitted. "Quite a coincidence."
"Perhaps we could ride along together."
Silk looked doubtful.
"I don't see any reason why not," Aunt Pol decided before he could refuse.
"You're most kind, gracious lady," the stranger said. "I am Master Jeebers, Fellow of the Imperial Society, a tutor by profession. Perhaps you've heard of me."
"I can't really say so," Silk told him, "although that's not too remarkable, since we're strangers here in Tolnedra."
Jeebers looked a bit disappointed. "I suppose that's true," he said. "This is my pupil, Lady Sharell. Her father's a grand master merchant, the Baron Reldon. I'm accompanying her to Tol Borune where she's to visit relatives."
Garion knew that was not true. The tutor's name had confirmed his suspicions. They rode several miles further, with Jeebers babbling animatedly at Silk. He spoke endlessly about his learning and continually prefaced his remarks with references to important people who seemed to rely on his judgment. Although he was tiresome, he appeared to be quite harmless. His pupil rode beside Aunt Pol, saying very little.
"I think it's time we stopped for a bite to eat," Aunt Pol announced. "Would you and your pupil care to join us, Master Jeebers? We have plenty."
"I'm quite overcome by your generosity," the tutor said. "We'd be delighted."
They stopped the horses near a small bridge that crossed a brook and led them into the shade of a thick clump of willows not far from the road. Durnik built a fire, and Aunt Pol began to unload her pots and kettles.
Master Jeebers' pupil sat in her saddle until the tutor quickly stepped over to help her down. She looked at the slightly marshy ground near the brook unenthusiastically. Then she glanced imperiously at Garion. "You-boy," she called. "Fetch me a cup of fresh water."
"The brook's right there," he told her, pointing.
She stared at him in amazement. "But the ground's all muddy," she objected.
"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" he admitted and then quite deliberately turned his back on her and went over to help his Aunt.
"Aunt Pol," he said after several moments of debating with himself.
"Yes, dear?"
"I don't think the Lady Sharell's who she says she is."
"Oh?"
"I'm not completely positive, but I think she's the Princess Ce'Nedra -the one who came into the garden when we were at the palace."
"Yes, dear. I know."
"You know?"
"Of course. Would you hand me the salt, please?"
"Isn't it dangerous to have her with us?"
"Not really," she said. "I think we can manage it."
"Won't she be a lot of bother?"
"An Imperial Princess is supposed to be a lot of bother, dear." After they had eaten a savory stew which seemed to Garion quite good but which their little guest appeared to find distasteful, Jeebers began to approach a subject which had obviously been on his mind since they had first met. "Despite the best efforts of the legions, the roads are never entirely safe," the fussy man said. "It's imprudent to travel alone, and the Lady Sharell's been entrusted to my care. Since I'm responsible for her safety, I was wondering if we might travel along with you. We wouldn't be any bother, and I'd be more than happy to pay for whatever food we eat."
Silk glanced quickly at Aunt Pol.
"Of course," she said.
Silk looked surprised.

"There's no reason we can't travel together," she went on. "We're all going to the same place, after all."
Silk shrugged. "Anything you say."
Garion knew the idea was a mistake so serious that it bordered on disaster. Jeebers would not be a good traveling companion, and his pupil showed every sign of quickly becoming intolerable. She was obviously accustomed to extensive personal service, and her demands were probably made without thought. They were still demands, however, and Garion knew immediately who was most likely to be expected to attend to them. He got up and walked around to the far side of the clump of willows.
The fields beyond the trees were pale green in the spring sunshine, and small white clouds drifted lazily across the sky. Garion leaned against a tree and gazed out at the fields without actually seeing them. He would not become a servant - no matter who their little guest might be. He wished there were some way he could get that firmly established right at the outset - before things got out of hand.
"Have you lost your senses, Pol?" he heard Mister Wolf say somewhere behind him among the trees. "Ran Borune's probably got every legion in Tolnedra looking for her by now."
"This is my province, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol told him. "Don't interfere. I can manage things so that we won't be bothered by the legions."
"We don't have the time to coddle her," the old man said. "I'm sorry, Pol, but the child's going to be an absolute little monster. You saw the way she acted toward her father."
"It's no great chore to break bad habits," she said, unconcerned.
"Wouldn't it be simpler just to arrange to have her taken back to Tol Honeth?"
"She's already run away once," Aunt Pol answered. "If we send her back, she'll just run away again. I'll feel much more comfortable having her Imperial little Highness where I can put my hands on her when I need her. When the proper time comes, I don't want to have to take the world apart looking for her."
Wolf sighed. "Have it your way, Pol."
"Naturally."
"Just keep the brat away from me," he said. "She sets my teeth on edge. Do any of the others know who she is?"
"Garion does."
"Garion? That's surprising."
"Not really," Aunt Pol said. "He's brighter than he looks."
A new emotion began to grow in Garion's already confused mind. Aunt Pol's obvious interest in Ce'Nedra sent a sharp pang through him. With a certain amount of shame, he realized that he was jealous of the attention the girl was receiving.
In the days that followed, Garion's fears quickly proved to be wellfounded. An inadvertant remark about Faldor's farm had revealed quite early to the princess his former status as a scullery-boy, and she used the knowledge heartlessly to browbeat him into a hundred stupid little errands every day. To make it all worse, each time he tried to resist, Aunt Pol would firmly remind him to pay more attention to his manners. Inevitably, he became quite surly about the whole business.
The princess developed a story about the reason for her departure from Tol Honeth as they rode south. The story changed daily, growing more wildly implausible with every passing league. At first she seemed content to be on a simple excursion to visit relatives; then she dropped dark hints about flight from a marriage to an ugly old merchant. Next, there were even darker hints about a plot to capture her and hold her for ransom. Finally, in a crowning effort, she confided to them that the proposed kidnapping was politically motivated - a part of some vast scheme to gain power in Tolnedra.

"She's an awful liar, isn't she?" Garion asked Aunt Pol when they were alone one evening.
"Yes, dear," Aunt Pol agreed. "Lying is an art. A good lie shouldn't be embellished so much. She'll need a lot more practice if she plans to make a career of it."
Finally, about ten days after they had left Tol Honeth, the city of Tol Borune came into sight in the afternoon sun.
"It looks like this is where we part company," Silk said to Jeebers with a certain amount of relief.
"Aren't you going into the city?" Jeebers asked.
"I don't think so," Silk answered. "We don't really have any business to take care of there, and the usual explanations and searches just waste time-not to mention the expense of the bribes. We'll go around Tol Borune and pick up the road to Tol Rane on the other side."
"We can ride a bit farther with you then," Ce'Nedra said quickly. "My relatives live on an estate to the south of the city."
Jeebers stared at her in amazement.
Aunt Pol drew in her horse and looked at the small girl with a raised eyebrow. "This seems like as good a place as any for us to have a little talk," she said.
Silk looked quickly at her and then nodded.
"I believe, little lady," Aunt Pol told the girl when they had all dismounted, "that the time has come for you to tell us the truth."
"But I have," Ce'Nedra protested.
"Oh, come now, child," Aunt Pol said. "Those stories of yours have been very entertaining, but you don't actually think anyone believed them, do you? Some of us already know who you are, but I really think we should get it out in the open."
"You know?" Ce'Nedra faltered.
"Of course, dear," Aunt Pol said. "Would you like to tell them, or shall I?"
Ce'Nedra's little shoulders drooped. "Tell them who I am, Master Jeebers," she ordered quietly.
"Do you really think that's wise, your Ladyship?" Jeebers asked nervously.
"They already know anyway," she said. "If they were going to do anything to us, they'd have done it a long time ago. We can trust them."
Jeebers drew in a deep breath and then spoke rather formally. "I have the honor to introduce her Imperial Highness, the Princess Ce'Nedra, daughter to his Imperial Majesty, Ran Borune XXIII, and the jewel of the House of Borune."
Silk whistled, and his eyes widened momentarily. The others showed similar signs of amazement.
"The political situation in Tol Honeth had become far to volatile, too menacing, for her Highness to remain safely in the capital," Jeebers went on. "The Emperor commissioned me to convey his daughter secretly here to Tol Borune where the members of the Borune family can protect her from the plots and machinations of the Vordues, the Honeths, and the Horbites. I'm proud to say that I've managed to execute my commission rather brilliantly - with your help, of course. I'll mention your assistance in my report - a footnote, perhaps, or maybe even an appendix."
Barak pulled at his beard, his eyes thoughtful. "An Imperial Princess travels across half of Tolnedra with only a schoolmaster for protection?" he questioned. "At a time when they're knifing and poisoning each other in the streets?"
"It does seem a trifle risky, doesn't it?" Hettar agreed.
"Did throe Emperor charge thee with this task in person?" Mandorallen asked Jeebers.
"It wasn't necessary," Jeebers said stiffly, "His Highness has a great deal of respect for my judgment and discretion. He knew that I'd be able to devise a safe disguise and a secure mode of travel. The princess assured me of his

absolute confidence in me. It all had to be done in utmost secrecy, of course. That's why she came to my chambers in the middle of the night to advise me of his instructions and why we left the palace without telling anyone what we were-" His voice trailed off, and he stared at Ce'Nedra in horror.
"You might as well tell him the truth, dear," Aunt Pol advised the little princess. "I think he's guessed already."
Ce'Nedra's chin lifted arrogantly. "The orders came from me, Jeebers," she told him. "My father had nothing to do with it." Jeebers went deathly pale and he nearly collapsed.
"What idiocy made you decide to run away from your father's palace?" Barak demanded of the tiny girl. "All Tolnedra's probably looking for you, and we're caught right in the middle."
"Gently," Wolf said to the hulking Cherek. "She may be a princess, but she's still a little girl. Don't frighten her."
"The question's to the point, though," Hettar observed. "If we're caught with an Imperial Princess in our company, we'll all see the inside of a Tolnedran dungeon." He turned to Ce'Nedra. "Do you have an answer, or were you just playing games?"
She drew herself up haughtily. "I'm not accustomed to explaining my actions to servants."
"We're going to have to clear up a few misconceptions before long, I see," Wolf said.
"Just answer the question, dear," Aunt Pol told the girl. "Never mind who asked it."
"My father had imprisoned me in the palace," Ce'Nedra said in a rather offhand way, as if that explained everything. "It was intolerable, so I left. There's another matter, too, but that's a matter of politics. You wouldn't understand."
"You'd probably be surprised at what we'd understand, Ce'Nedra," Mister Wolf told her.
"I'm accustomed to being addressed as my Lady," she said tartly, "or as your Highness."
"And I'm accustomed to being told the truth."
"I thought you were in charge," Ce'Nedra said to Silk.
"Appearances are deceiving," Silk observed blandly. "I'd answer the question."
"It's an old treaty," she said. "I didn't sign it, so I don't see why I should be bound by it. I'm supposed to present myself in the throne room at Riva on my sixteenth birthday."
"We know that," Barak said impatiently. "What's the problem?"
"I'm not going, that's all," Ce'Nedra announced. "I won't go to Riva, and no one can make me go. The queen in the Wood of the Dryads is my kinswoman and she'll give me sanctuary."
Jeebers had partially recovered. "What have you done?" he demanded, aghast. "I undertook this with the clear understanding that I'd be rewarded - even promoted. You've put my head on the block, you little idiot!"
"Jeebers!" she cried, shocked at his words.
"Let's get off the road a ways," Silk suggested. "We've obviously got quite a bit to discuss, and we're likely to be interrupted here on the main highway."
"Probably a good idea," Wolf agreed. "Let's find some quiet place and set up for the night. We'll decide what we're going to do and then we can start out fresh in the morning."
They remounted and rode across the rolling fields toward a line of trees that marked the course of a winding country lane about a mile away.
"How about there?" Durnik suggested, pointing at a broad oak which stood beside the lane, its branches beginning to leaf out in the late afternoon sunlight.
"That should do," Wolf said.
It was pleasant in the dappled shade beneath the spreading limbs of the oak. The

lane was lined with low stone walls, mossy and cool. A stile stepped up over one of the walls just there, and a path meandered across the field from it toward a nearby pond, sparkling in the sun.
"We can put the fire down behind one of the walls," Durnik said. "It won't be seen from the main road that way."
"I'll get some wood," Garion volunteered, looking at the dead limbs littering the grass beneath the tree.
They had by now established a sort of routine in the setting up of a night's encampment. The tents were erected, the horses watered and picketed, and the fire was started all within the space of an hour. Then Durnik, who had noticed a few telltale circles on the surface of the pond, heated an iron pin in the fire and carefully hammered it into a hook.
"What's that for?" Garion asked him.
"I thought some fish might be good for supper," the smith said, wiping the hook on the skirt of his leather tunic. He laid it aside then and lifted a second pin out of the fire with a pair of tongs. "Would you like to try your luck too?"
Garion grinned at him.
Barak, who sat nearby combing the snarls out of his beard, looked up rather wistfully. "I don't suppose you'd have time to make another hook, would you?" he asked.
Durnik chuckled. "It only takes a couple minutes."
"We'll need bait," Barak said, getting up quickly. "Where's your spade?"
Not long afterward, the three of them crossed the field to the pond, cut some saplings for poles and settled down to serious fishing.
The fish, it appeared, were ravenous and attacked the worm-baited hooks in schools. Within the space of an hour nearly two dozen respectable-sized trout lay in a gleaming row on the grassy bank of the pond.
Aunt Pol inspected their catch gravely when they returned as the sky turned rosy overhead with the setting of the sun. "Very nice," she told them, "but you forgot to clean them."
"Oh," Barak said. He looked slightly pained. "We thought that well, what I mean is - as long as we caught them" He left it hanging.
"Go on," she said with a level gaze.
Barak sighed. "I guess we'd better clean them," he regretfully told Durnik and Garion.
"You're probably right," Durnik agreed.
The sky had turned purple with evening, and the stars had begun to come out when they sat down to eat. Aunt Pol had fried the trout to a crisp, golden brown, and even the sulky little princess found nothing to complain about as she ate.
After they had finished, they set aside their plates and took up the problem of Ce'Nedra and her flight from Tol Honeth. Jeebers had sunk into such abject melancholy that he could offer little to the discussion, and Ce'Nedra adamantly announced that even if they were to turn her over to the Borunes in the city, she would run away again. In the end, they reached no conclusion.
"We're in trouble no matter what we do," Silk summed it all up ruefully. "Even if we try to deliver her to her family, there are bound to be some embarrassing questions, and I'm sure she can be counted on to invent a colorful story that will put us in the worst possible light."
"We can talk about it some more in the morning," Aunt Pol said. Her placid tone indicated that she had already made up her mind about something, but she did not elaborate.
Shortly before midnight, Jeebers made his escape. They were all awakened by the thudding of his horse's hooves as the panic-stricken tutor fled at a gallop toward the walls of Tol Borune.
Silk stood in the flickering light of the dying fire, his face angry. "Why didn't you stop him?" he asked Hettar, who had been standing watch.

"I was told not to," the leather-clad Algar said with a glance at Aunt Pol.
"It solves the only real problem we had," Aunt Pol explained. "The schoolmaster would only have been excess baggage."
"You knew he was going to run away?" Silk asked.
"Naturally. I helped him to arrive at the decision. He'll go straight to the Borunes and try to save his own skin by informing them that the princess ran away from the palace on her own and that we have her now."
"You have to stop him then," Ce'Nedra said in a ringing voice. "Go after him! Bring him back!"
"After all the trouble I went to persuading him to leave?" Aunt Pol asked. "Don't be foolish."
"How dare you speak to me like that?" Ce'Nedra demanded. "You seem to forget who I am."
"Young lady," Silk said urbanely, "I think you'd be amazed at how little Polgara's concerned about who you are."
"Polgara?" Ce'Nedra faltered. "The Polgara? I thought you said that she was your sister."
"I lied," Silk confessed. "It's a vice I have."
"You're not an ordinary merchant," the girl accused him.
"He's Prince Kheldar of Drasnia," Aunt Pol said. "The others have a similar eminence. I'm sure you can see how little your title impresses us. We have our own titles, so we know how empty they are."
"If you're Polgara, then he must be-" The princess turned to stare at Mister Wolf, who had seated himself on the lowest step of the stile to pull on his shoes.
"Yes," Aunt Pol said. "He doesn't really look the part, does he?"
"What are you doing in Tolnedra?" Ce'Nedra asked in a stunned voice. "Are you going to use magic of some kind to control the outcome of the succession?"
"Why should we?" Mister Wolf said, getting to his feet. "Tolnedrans always seem to think that their politics shake the whole world, but the rest of the world's really not all that concerned about who gains the throne in Tol Honeth. We're here on a matter of much greater urgency." He looked off into the darkness in the direction of Tol Borune. "It will take Jeebers a certain amount of time to convince the people in the city that he's not a lunatic," he said, "but it would probably be a good idea if we left the area. I imagine we'd better stay away from the main highway."
"That's no problem," Silk assured him.
"What about me?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"You wanted to go to the Wood of the Dryads," Aunt Pol told her. "We're going in that direction anyway, so you'll stay with us. We'll see what Queen Xantha says when we get you there."
"Am I to consider myself a prisoner then?" the princess asked stifliy.
"You can if it makes you feel better, dear," Aunt Pol said. She looked at the tiny girl critically in the flickering firelight. "I'm going to have to do something about your hair, though. What did you use for dye? It looks awful."

Chapter Nineteen

THEY MOVED RAPIDLY SOUTH for the next few days, traveling frequently at night to avoid the mounted patrols of legionnaires who were beating the countryside in their efforts to locate Ce'Nedra.
"Maybe we should have hung on to Jeebers," Barak muttered sourly after one near-brush with the soldiers. "He's roused every garrison from here to the border. It might have been better to have dropped him off in some isolated place or something."
"That `or something' has a certain ring of finality to it, old friend," Silk

said with a sharp little grin.
Barak shrugged. "It's a solution to a problem."
Silk laughed. "You really should try not to let your knife do all your thinking for you. That's the one quality we find least attractive in our Cherek cousins."
"And we find this compulsion to make clever remarks which seems to overwhelm our Drasnian brothers now and then almost equally unattractive," Barak told him coolly.
"Nicely put," Silk said with mock admiration.
They rode on, watchful, always ready to hide or to run. During those days they relied heavily on Hettar's curious ability. Since the patrols searching for them were inevitably mounted, the tall, hawk-faced Algar swept their surroundings with his mind, searching for horses. The warnings he could thus provide usually gave them sufficient notice of the approach of the patrols.
"What's it like?" Garion asked him one cloudy midmorning as they rode along a seldom-used and weed-grown track to which Silk had led them. "I mean being able to hear a horse's thoughts?"
"I don't think I can describe it exactly," Hettar answered. "I've always been able to do it, so I can't imagine what it's like not doing it. There's a kind of reaching-out in a horse's mind - a sort of inclusiveness. A horse seems to think 'we' instead of 'I'. I suppose it's because in their natural condition they're members of a herd. After they get to know you, they think of you as a herd mate. Sometimes they even forget that you're not a horse." He broke off suddenly. "Belgarath," he announced sharply, "there's another patrol coming just beyond that hill over there. Twenty or thirty of them."
Mister Wolf looked about quickly. "Have we got time to reach those trees?" He pointed at a thick stand of scrub maple about a half mile ahead.
"If we hurry."
"Then run!" Wolf ordered, and they all kicked their horses into a sudden burst of speed. They reached the trees just as the first few raindrops of the spring shower that had been threatening all morning pattered on the broad leaves. They dismounted and pushed in among the springy saplings, worming their way back out of sight, leading their horses.
The Tolnedran patrol came over the hilltop and swept down into the shallow valley. The captain in charge of the legionnaires pulled in his horse not far from the stand of maples and dispersed his men with a series of sharp commands. They moved out in small groups, scouting the weedy road in both directions and surveying the surrounding countryside from the top of the next rise. The officer and a civilian in a gray riding cloak remained behind, sitting their horses beside the track.
The captain squinted distastefully up into the sprinkling rain. "It's going to be a wet day," he said, dismounting and pulling his crimson cloak tighter around him.
His companion also swung down and turned so that the party hiding among the maples was able to see his face. Garion felt Hettar tense suddenly. The man in the cloak was a Murgo.
"Over here, Captain," the Murgo said, leading his horse into the shelter provided by the outspreading limbs of the saplings at the edge of the stand.
The Tolnedran nodded and followed the man in the riding cloak. "Have you had a chance to think over my offer?" the Murgo asked.
"I thought it was only speculation," the captain replied. "We don't even know that these foreigners are in this quadrant."
"My information is that they're going south, captain," the Murgo told him. "I think you can be quite certain that they're somewhere in your quadrant."
"There's no guarantee that we'll find them, though," the captain said. "And even if we do, it'd be very difficult to do what you propose."
"Captain," the Murgo explained patiently, "it's for the safety of the princess,

after all. If she's returned to Tol Honeth, the Vorduvians are going to kill her. You've read those documents I brought you."
"She'll be safe with the Borunes," the captain said. "The Vorduvians aren't going to come into Southern Tolnedra after her."
"The Borunes are only going to turn her over to her father. You're a Borune yourself. Would you defy an Emperor of your own house?" The captain's face was troubled.
"Her only hope of safety is with the Horbites," the Murgo pressed.
"What guarantees do I have that she'll be safe with them?"
"The best guarantee of all - politics. The Horbites are doing everything in their power to block the Grand Duke Kador on his march to the throne. Since he wants the princess dead, the Horbites naturally want to keep her alive. It's the only way really to insure her safety - and you become a wealthy man in the process." He jingled a heavy purse suggestively.
The captain still looked doubtful.
"Suppose we double the amount," the Murgo said in a voice that almost purred.
The captain swallowed hard. "It is for her safety, isn't it?"
"Of course it is."
"It's not as if I were betraying the House of Borune."
"You're a patriot, Captain," the Murgo assured the officer with a cold smile.
Aunt Pol was holding Ce'Nedra's arm quite firmly as they crouched together among the trees. The tiny girl's face was outraged, and her eyes were blazing.
Later, after the legionnaires and their Murgo friend had departed, the princess exploded. "How dare they?" she raged. "And for money!"
"That Tolnedran politics for you," Silk said as they led their horses out of the stand of saplings into the drizzly morning.
"But he's a Borune," she protested, "a member of my own family."
"A Tolnedran's first loyalty is to his purse," Silk told her. "I'm surprised you haven't discovered that by now, your Highness."
A few days later they topped a hill and saw the Wood of the Dryads spreading like a green smudge on the horizon. The showers had blown off, and the sun was very bright.
"We'll be safe once we reach the Wood," the princess told them. "The legions won't follow us there."
"What's to stop them?" Garion asked her.
"The treaty with the Dryads," she said. "Don't you know anything?"
Garion resented that.
"There's no one about," Hettar reported to Mister Wolf. "We can go now or wait for dark."
"Let's make a run for it," Wolf said. "I'm getting tired of dodging patrols."
They started down the hill at a gallop toward the forest lying ahead of them. There seemed to be none of the usual brushy margin which usually marked the transition from fields to woodlands. The trees simply began. When Wolf led them beneath those trees, the change was as abrupt as if they had suddenly gone inside a house. The Wood itself was a forest of incredible antiquity. The great oaks spread so broadly that the sky was almost never visible. The forest floor was mossy and cool, and there was very little undergrowth. It seemed to Garion that they were all quite tiny under the vast trees, and there was a strange, hushed quality about the wood. The air was very still, and there was a hum of insects and, from far overhead, a chorus of birdsong.
"Strange," Durnik said, looking around, "I don't see any sign of woodcutters."
"Woodcutters?" Ce'Nedra gasped. "In here? They wouldn't dare come into this wood."
"The wood is inviolate, Durnik," Mister Wolf explained. "The Borune family has a treaty with the Dryads. No one has touched a tree here for over three thousand years."

"This is a curious place," Mandorallen said, looking around a bit uncomfortably. "Me thinks I feel a presence here - a presence not altogether friendly."
"The Wood is alive," Ce'Nedra told him. "It doesn't really like strangers - but don't worry, Mandorallen, you're safe as long as you're with me." She sounded quite smug about it.
"Are you sure the patrols won't follow us?" Durnik asked Mister Wolf. "Jeebers knew we were coming here, after all, and I'm sure he told the Borunes."
"The Borunes won't violate their treaty with the Dryads," Wolf assured him. "Not for any reason."
"I've never known of a treaty a Tolnedran wouldn't step around if it was to his advantage." Silk spoke skeptically.
"This one is a bit different," Wolf said. "The Dryads gave one of their princesses to a young noble of the House of Borune. She became the mother of the Emperor of the First Borune Dynasty. The fortunes of the Borunes are very intimately tied up with the treaty. They're not going to gamble with that - not for any reason."
"What exactly is a Dryad?" Garion asked. The strange sense of a presence, an awareness in the wood, made him want to talk to cover the oppressive, watchful silence.
"A small group," Mister Wolf said. "Quite gentle. I've always rather liked them. They aren't human, of course, but that's not all that important."
"I'm a Dryad," Ce'Nedra said rather proudly.
Garion stared at her.
"Technically she's right," Wolf said. "The Dryad line seems to breed true on the female side of the House of Borune. That's one of the things that keeps the family honest about the treaty - all those wives and mothers who'd pack up and leave if it were ever broken."
"She looks human," Garion objected, still staring at the princess.
"The Dryads are so closely related to humans that the differences are hardly significant," Wolf said. "That probably explains why they didn't go mad like the other monsters did when Torak cracked the world."
"Monsters!" Ce'Nedra protested loudly.
"Your pardon, Princess," Wolf apologized. "It's an Ulgo term used to describe the non-humans who supported Gorim at Prolgu when he met with the God UL."
"Do I look like a monster to you?" she demanded, tossing her head angrily.
"A poor choice of words, perhaps," Wolf murmured. "Forgive me."
"Monsters indeed!" Ce'Nedra fumed.
Wolf shrugged. "There's a stream not far ahead, if I remember right. We'll stop there and wait until word of our arrival reaches Queen Xantha. It's not a good idea to go into the territory of the Dryads without the queen's permission. They can get quite nasty if they're provoked."
"I thought you said they were gentle," Durnik said.
"Within reason," Wolf told him. "But it's not a good idea to irritate people who communicate with trees when you're in the middle of a forest. Unpleasant things have a way of happening." He frowned. "That reminds me. You'd better stow your axe away out of sight. Dryads have strong feelings about axes - and fires. They're most unreasonable about fire. We'll have to keep our fires small and only for cooking."
They rode in under a colossal oak beside a sparkling stream purling over mossy rocks, dismounted and set up their dun-colored tents. After they had eaten, Garion wandered around feeling bored. Mister Wolf was napping, and Silk had lured the others into a dice game. Aunt Pol had seated the Princess on a log and was stripping the purple dye from her hair.
"If you don't have anything else to do, Garion," she said, "why don't you go bathe?"
"Bathe?" he asked. "Where?"

"I'm sure you'll find a pool somewhere along the stream," she said, carefully lathering Ce'Nedra's hair.
"You want me to bathe in that water? Aren't you afraid I'll catch cold?"
"You're a healthy boy, dear," she told him, "but a very dirty one. Now go wash."
Garion gave her a dark look and went to one of the packs for clean clothing, soap, and a towel. Then he stamped off upstream, grumbling at every step.
Once he was alone under the trees, he felt even more strongly that peculiar sense of being watched. It was not anything definable. There seemed to be nothing specific about it, but rather it felt as if the oaks themselves were aware of him and were passing information about his movements among themselves with a kind of vegetative communication he could not begin to understand. There seemed to be no menace in it, merely a kind of watchfulness.
Some distance from the tents he found a fairly large pool where the stream dropped in a waterfall from the rocks above. The water in the pool was very clear, and he could see the bright pebbles on the bottom and several large trout that eyed him warily. He tested the water with his hand and shuddered. He considered subterfuge - a quick splashing of water on his body and a bit of soap on the more obvious smudgesbut on reflection, he gave up the notion. Aunt Pol would settle for nothing less than a complete bath. He sighed bitterly and began to take oft his clothing.
The first shock was awful, but after a few minutes he found that he could bear it. In a short time it even became exhilarating. The waterfall provided a convenient means for rinsing off the soap, and before long he found that he was actually enjoying himself.
"You're making an awful lot of noise," Ce'Nedra said, standing on the bank and appraising him quite calmly.
Garion immediately dove to the bottom of the pool.
Unless one was a fish, however, one could hardly remain underwater indefinitely. After about a minute, he struggled to the surface and popped his head out of the water, gasping and sputtering.
"Whatever are you doing?" Ce'Nedra asked. She was wearing a short white tunic, sleeveless and belted at the waist, and open sandals with laces that crisscrossed her slender ankles and calves and tied just below her knees. She carried a towel in one hand.
"Go away," Garion spluttered.
"Don't be so silly," she said, sitting down on a large stone and beginning to unlace her sandals. Her coppery hair was still damp and tumbled in a heavy mass about her shoulders.
"What are you doing?"
"I want to bathe," she said. "Are you going to be much longer?"
"Go someplace else," Garion cried, starting to shiver, but remaining determinedly crouched over in the water with only his head sticking out.
"This place looks just fine," she said. "How's the water?"
"Cold," he chattered, "but I'm not coming out until you go away."
"Don't be such a ninny," she told him.
He shook his head stubbornly, his face flaming.
She sighed with exasperation. "Oh, very well," she said. "I won't look, but I think you're being very silly. At the baths in Tol Honeth, no one thinks anything at all about such things."
"This isn't Tol Honeth," he told her pointedly.
"I'll turn my back, if that'll make you feel better," she said, getting up and standing with her back to the pool.
Not entirely trusting her, Garion crept from the pool and, still dripping, jerked on his drawers and hose. "All right," he called, "you can have the pool now." He mopped at his streaming face and hair with his towel. "I'm going back to the tents."

"The Lady Polgara says that you're to stay with me," she said, calmly untying the cord about her waist.
"Aunt Pol said what?" he demanded, terribly shocked.
"You're supposed to stay with me to protect me," she told him. She took hold of the hem of her tunic, obviously preparing to take it off.
Garion spun about and stared determinedly at the trees. His ears flamed, and his hands trembled uncontrollably.
She laughed a small, silvery laugh, and he could hear splashing as she entered the pool. She squealed from the shock of the cold water, and then there was more splashing.
"Bring me the soap," she commanded.
Without thinking, he bent to pick up the soap and caught one brief glimpse of her standing waist-deep in the water before he shut his eyes tightly. He backed toward the pool, his eyes closed and the hand holding the soap thrust out awkwardly behind him.
She laughed again and took the soap from his hand.
After what seemed an eternity, the princess completed her bath, emerged from the pool, dried herself and put her clothes back on. Garion kept his eyes firmly shut the entire time.
"You Sendars have such curious notions," she said as they sat together in the sun-warmed glade beside the pool. She was combing her deep red hair, her head inclined to one side and the comb pulling down through the thick, damp tangles.
"The baths in Tol Honeth are open to all, and athletic contests are always conducted without clothing. Just last summer I myself ran against a dozen other girls in the Imperial Stadium. The spectators were most appreciative."
"I can imagine," Garion said dryly.
"What's that?" she asked, pointing at the amulet resting against his bare chest.
"My grandfather gave it to me last Erastide," Garion answered.
"Let me see." She held out her hand.
He leaned forward.
"Take it off so I can see it," she ordered.
"I'm not supposed to take it off," he told her. "Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol say I'm never supposed to take it off for any reason. I think there's a spell of some kind on it."
"What a strange idea," she remarked as she bent to examine the amulet. "They aren't really sorcerers, are they?"
"Mister Wolf is seven thousand years old," Garion said. "He knew the God Aldur. I've seen him make a tree grow from a small twig in a matter of minutes and set rocks on fire. Aunt Pol cured a blind woman with a single word, and she can turn herself into an owl."
"I don't believe in such things," Ce'Nedra told him. "I'm sure there's another explanation."
Garion shrugged and pulled on his linen shirt and brown tunic. He shook his head and raked his fingers through his still-damp hair.
"You're making an awful mess of it," she observed critically. "Here." She stood up and stepped behind him. "Let me do it." She put the comb to his hair and began pulling it through carefully. "You have nice hair for a man," she said.
"It's just hair," he said indifferently.
She combed in silence for a moment or two, then took his chin in her hand, turned his head and looked at him critically. She touched his hair at the sides a time or two until it was arranged to her satisfaction. "That's better," she decided.
"Thank you." He was a bit confused by the change in her.
She sat down again on the grass, clasped her arms around one knee and gazed at the sparkling pool. "Garion," she said finally.
"Yes?"

"What's it like to grow up as an ordinary person?"
He shrugged. "I've never been anything but an ordinary person," he told her, "so I wouldn't know what to compare it to."
"You know what I mean. Tell me about where you grew up - and what you did and all."
So he told her about Faldor's farm, about the kitchen and Durnik's smithy and Doroon and Rundorig and Zubrette.
"You're in love with Zubrette, aren't you?" She asked it almost accusingly.
"I thought I was, but so much has happened since we left the farm that sometimes I can't even remember what she looks like. I think I could do without being in love anyway. From what I've seen of it, it's pretty painful most of the time."
"You're impossible," she said, and then she smiled at him, her little face framed in the blazing mass of her sun-touched hair.
"Probably," he admitted. "All right, now you tell me what it's like to grow up as a very special person."
"I'm not that special."
"You're an Imperial Princess," he reminded her. "I'd call that pretty special."
"Oh, that," she said, and then giggled. "You know, sometimes since I joined you people, I almost forget that I'm an Imperial Princess."
"Almost," he said with a smile, "but not quite."
"No," she agreed, "not quite." She looked out across the pool again. "Most of the time being a princess is very boring. It's all ceremonies and formalities. You have to stand around most of the time listening to speeches or receiving state visitors. There are guards around all the time, but sometimes I sneak away so I can be by myself. It makes them furious." She giggled again, and then her gaze turned pensive. "Let me tell your fortune," she said, taking his hand.
"Can you tell fortunes?" Garion asked.
"It's only make-believe," she admitted. "My maids and I play at it sometimes. We all promise each other high-born husbands and many children." She turned his hand over and looked at it. The silvery mark on his palm was very plain now that the skin was clean. "Whatever is that?" she asked.
"I don't know."
"It's not a disease, is it?"
"No," he said. "It has always been there. I think it has something to do with my family. Aunt Pol doesn't like to have people see it for some reason, so she tries to keep it hidden."
"How could you hide something like that?"
"She finds things for me to do that keep my hands dirty most of the time."
"How strange," she said. "I have a birthmark too - right over my heart. Would you like to see it?" She took hold of the neck of her tunic.
"I'll take your word for it," Garion told her, blushing furiously.
She laughed a silvery, tinkling little laugh. "You're a strange boy, Garion. You're not at all like the other boys I've met."
"They were Tolnedrans probably," Garion pointed out. "I'm a Sendar - or at least that's the way I was raised - so there are bound to be differences."
"You sound as if you're not sure what you are."
"Silk says I'm not a Sendar," Garion said. "He says he isn't sure exactly what I am, and that's very odd. Silk can recognize anybody for what he is immediately. Your father thought I was a Rivan."
"Since the Lady Polgara's your Aunt and Belgarath's your Grandfather, you're probably a sorcerer," Ce'Nedra observed.
Garion laughed. "Me? That's silly. Besides, the sorcerers aren't a race - not like Chereks or Tolnedrans or Rivans. It's more like a profession, I think - sort of like being a lawyer or a merchant - only there aren't any new ones. The sorcerers are all thousands of years old. Mister Wolf says that maybe people have changed in some way so that they can't become sorcerers anymore."

Ce'Nedra had leaned back and was resting on her elbows, looking up at him.
"Garion?"
"Yes?"
"Would you like to kiss me?"
Garion's heart started to pound.
Then Durnik's voice called to them from not far away, and for one flaming instant Garion hated his old friend.

Chapter Twenty

"MISTRESS POL SAYS THAT IT'S TIME for you to come back to the tents," Durnik told them when he reached the glade. There was a faint hint of amusement on his plain, dependable face, and he looked knowingly at the two of them.
Garion blushed and then grew angry with himself for blushing. Ce'Nedra, however, showed no concern at all.
"Have the Dryads come yet?" she asked, getting to her feet and brushing the grass from the back of her tunic.
"Not yet," Durnik answered. "Wolf says that they should find us soon. There seems to be some kind of storm building up to the south, and Mistress Pol thought the two of you ought to come back."
Garion glanced at the sky and saw a layer of inky clouds moving up from the south, staining the bright blue sky as they rolled ponderously northward. He frowned. "I've never seen clouds like that, have you, Durnik?"
Durnik looked up. "Strange," he agreed.
Garion rolled up the two wet towels, and they started back down the stream. The clouds blotted out the sun, and the woods became suddenly very dark. The sense of watchfulness was still there, that wary awareness they had all felt since they had entered the wood, but now there was something else as well. The great trees stirred uneasily, and a million tiny messages seemed to pass among the rustling leaves.
"They're afraid," Ce'Nedra whispered. "Something's frightening them."
"What?" Durnik asked.
"The trees - they're afraid of something. Can't you feel it?"
He stared at her in perplexity.
Far above them the birds suddenly fell silent, and a chill breeze began to blow, carrying with it a foul reek of stagnant water and rotting vegetation.
"What's that smell?" Garion asked, looking about nervously.
"Nyissa is south of here," Ce'Nedra said. "It's mostly swamps."
"Is it that close?" Garion asked.
"Not really," she said with a small frown. "It must be sixty leagues or more."
"Would a smell carry that far?"
"It's not likely," Durnik said. "At least it wouldn't be in Sendaria."
"How far is it to the tents?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"About a half-mile," Durnik answered.
"Maybe we should run," she suggested.
Durnik shook his head. "The ground's uneven," he said, "and running in bad light's dangerous. We can walk a bit faster, though." They hurried on through the gathering gloom. The wind began to blow harder, and the trees trembled and bent with its force. The strange fear that seemed to permeate the wood grew stronger.
"There's something moving over there," Garion whispered urgently and pointed at the dark trees on the other side of the stream.
"I don't see anything," Ce'Nedra said.
"There, just beyond the tree with the large white limb. Is it a Dryad?"
A vague shape slid from tree to another in the half light. There was something chillingly wrong with the figure. Ce'Nedra stared at it with revulsion. "It's

not a Dryad," she said. "It's something alien."
Durnik picked up a fallen limb and gripped it like a cudgel with both hands. Garion looked quickly around and saw another limb. He too armed himself. Another figure shambled between two trees, a bit closer this time. "We'll have to chance it," Durnik said grimly. "Be careful, but run. Get the others. Now go!"
Garion took Ce'Nedra's hand, and they started to run along the streambank, stumbling often. Durnik lagged farther and father behind, his two-handed club swinging warningly about him.
The figures were now all around them, and Garion felt the first surges of panic. Then Ce'Nedra screamed. One of the figures had risen from behind a low bush directly in front of them. It was large and ill-shaped, and there was no face on the front of its head. Two eye-holes stared vacantly as it shambled forward with its half-formed hands reaching out for them. The entire figure was a dark gray mud color, and it was covered with rotting, stinking moss that adhered to its oozing body.
Without thinking, Garion thrust Ce'Nedra behind him and leaped to the attack. The first blow of his club struck the creature solidly in the side, and the club merely sank into the body with no visible effect. One of the outstretched hands touched his face, and he recoiled from that slimy touch with revulsion. Desperately he swung again and struck the thing solidly on the forearm. With horror he saw the arm break off at the elbow. The creature paused to pick up the still-moving arm.
Ce'Nedra screamed again, and Garion spun about. Another of the mud-men had come up behind her and had grasped her about the waist with both arms. It was starting to turn, lifting the struggling princess from the ground when Garion swung his club with all his might. The blow was not aimed at head or back, but rather at the ankles.
The mud-man toppled backward with both of its feet broken off. Its grip about Ce'Nedra's waist, however, did not loosen as it fell.
Garion jumped forward, discarding his club and drawing his dagger. The substance of the thing was surprisingly tough. Vines and dead twigs were encased in the clay which gave it its shape. Feverishly, Garion cut away one of the arms and then tried to pull the screaming princess free. The other arm still clung to her. Almost sobbing with the need to hurry, Garion started hacking at the remaining arm.
"Look out!" Ce'Nedra shrieked. "Behind you!"
Garion looked quickly over his shoulder. The first mud-man was reaching for him. He felt a cold grip about his ankle. The arm he had just severed had inched its way across the ground and grasped him.
"Garion!" Barak's voice roared from a short distance off.
"Over here!" Garion shouted. "Hurry!"
There was a crashing in the bushes, and the great, red-bearded Cherek appeared, sword in hand, with Hettar and Mandorallen close behind. With a mighty swing, Barak cut off the head of the first mudman. It sailed through the air and landed with a sickening thump several yards away. The headless creature turned and groped blindly, trying to put its hands on its attacker. Barak paled visibly and then chopped away both outstretched arms. Still the thing shambled forward.
"The legs," Garion said quickly. He bent and hacked at the clay hand about his ankle.
Barak lopped off the mud-man's legs, and the thing fell. The dismembered pieces crawled toward him.
Other mud-men had appeared, and Hettar and Mandorailen were laying about them with their swords, filling the air with chunks and pieces of living clay.
Barak bent and ripped away the remaining arm which held Ce'Nedra.
Then he jerked the girl to her feet and thrust her at Garion. "Get her back to

the tents!" he ordered. "Where's Durnik?"
"He stayed behind to hold them off," Garion said.
"We'll go help him," Barak said. "Run!"
Ce'Nedra was hysterical, and Garion had to drag her to the tents.
"What is it?" Aunt Pol demanded.
"Monsters out there in the woods," Garion said, pushing Ce'Nedra at her.
"They're made out of mud, and you can't kill them. They've got Durnik." He dove into one of the tents and emerged a second later with his sword in his hand and fire in his brain.
"Garion!" Aunt Pol shouted, trying to disentangle herself from the sobbing princess. "What are you doing?"
"I've got to help Durnik," he said.
"You stay where you are."
"No!" he shouted. "Durnik's my friend." He dashed back toward the fight, brandishing his sword.
"Garion! Come back here!"
He ignored her and ran through the dark woods.
The fray was raging about a hundred yards from the tents. Barak, Hettar and Mandorallen were systematically chopping the slime-covered mud-men into chunks, and Silk darted in and out of the melee, his short sword leaving great gaping holes in the thick, moss-covered monsters. Garion plunged into the fight, his ears ringing and a kind of desperate exultation surging through him.
And then Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol were there with Ce'Nedra hovering ashen-faced and trembling behind them. Wolf's eyes blazed, and he seemed to tower over them all as he gathered his will. He thrust one hand forward, palm up. "Fire!" he commanded, and a sizzling bolt of lightning shot upward from his hand into the whirling clouds overhead. The earth trembled with the violence of the shattering thunderclap. Garion reeled at the force of the roaring in his mind.
Aunt Pol raised her hand. "Water!" she said in a powerful voice. The clouds burst open, and rain fell so heavily that it seemed that the air itself had turned to water.
The mud-men, still mindlessly stumbling forward, began to ooze and dissolve in the thundering downpour. With a kind of sick fascination, Garion watched them disintegrate into sodden lumps of slime and rotten vegetation, surging and heaving as the pounding rain destroyed them.
Barak reached forward with his dripping sword and tentatively poked at the shapeless lump of clay that had been the head of one of their attackers. The lump broke apart, and a coiled snake unwound from its center. It raised itself as if to strike, and Barak chopped it in two.
Other snakes began to appear as the mud which had encased them dissolved in the roaring deluge.
"That one," Aunt Pol said, pointing at a dull green reptile struggling to free itself from the clay. "Fetch it for me, Garion."
"Me?" Garion gasped, his flesh crawling.
"I'll do it," Silk said. He picked up a forked stick and pinned the snake's head down with it. Then he carefully took hold of the wet skin at the back of the serpent's neck and lifted the twisting reptile.
"Bring it here," Aunt Pol ordered, wiping the water from her face. Silk carried the snake to her and held it out. The forked tongue flickered nervously, and the dead eyes fixed on her.
"What does this mean?" she demanded of the snake.
The serpent hissed at her. Then in a voice that was a sibilant whisper it replied, "That, Polgara, is the affair of my mistress."
Silk's face blanched as the dripping snake spoke, and he tightened his grip.
"I see," Aunt Pol said.
"Abandon this search," the snake hissed. "My mistress will allow you to go no

further."
Aunt Pol laughed scornfully. "Allow?" she said. "Your mistress hasn't the power to allow me anything."
"My mistress is the queen of Nyissa," the snake said in its whispering hiss. "Her power there is absolute. The ways of the serpent are not the ways of men, and my mistress is queen of the serpents. You will enter Nyissa at your own peril. We are patient and not afraid. We will await you where you least expect us. Our sting is a small injury, scarce noted, but it is death."
"What's Salmissra's interest in this matter?" Aunt Pol asked.
The serpent's flickering tongue darted at her. "She has not chosen to reveal that to me, and it is not in my nature to be curious. I have delivered my message and already received my reward. Now do with me as you wish."
"Very well," Aunt Pol said. She looked coldly at the snake, her face streaming in the heavy rain.
"Shall I kill it?" Silk asked, his face set and his fingers white-knuckled from the strain of holding the thick-coiling reptile.
"No," she said quietly. "There's no point in destroying so excellent a messenger." She fixed the snake with a flinty look. "Return with these others to Salmissra," she said. "Tell her that if she interferes again, I'll come after her, and the deepest slime-pit in all Nyissa won't hide her from my fury."
"And my reward?" the snake asked.
"You have your life as a reward," she said.
"That's true," the serpent hissed. "I will deliver your message, Polgara."
"Put it down," Aunt Pol told Silk.
The small man bent and lowered his arm to the ground. The snake uncoiled from about his arm, and Silk released it and jumped back. The snake glanced once at him, then slithered away.
"I think that's enough rain, Pol," Wolf said, mopping at his face. Aunt Pol waved her hand almost negligently, and the rain stopped as if a bucket had emptied itself.
"We have to find Durnik," Barak reminded them.
"He was behind us." Garion pointed back up the now-overflowing stream. His chest felt constricted with a cold fear at what they might find, but he steeled himself and led the way back into the trees.
"The smith is a good companion," Mandorallen said. "I should not care to lose him." There was a strange, subdued quality in the knight's voice, and his face seemed abnormally pale in the dim light. The hand holding his great broadsword, however, was rock-steady. Only his eyes betrayed a kind of doubt Garion had never seen there before.
Water dripped around them as they walked through the sodden woods. "It was about here," Garion said, looking around. "I don't see any sign of him."
"I'm up here." Durnik's voice came from above them. He was a goodly distance up a large oak tree and was peering down. "Are they gone?" He carefully began climbing down the slippery tree trunk. "The rain came just in time," he said, jumping down the last few feet. "I was starting to have a little trouble keeping them out of the tree."
Quickly, without a word, Aunt Pol embraced the good man, and then, as if embarrassed by that sudden gesture, she began to scold him. Durnik endured her words patiently, and there was a strange expression on his face.

Chapter Twenty-one

GARION'S SLEEP THAT NIGHT WAS TROUBLED. He awoke frequently, shuddering at the remembered touch of the mud-men. But in time the night, as all nights must, came to an end, and the morning dawned clear and bright. He drowsed for a while, rolled in his blankets, until Ce'Nedra came to get him up.

"Garion," she said softly, touching his shoulder, "are you awake?" He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "Good morning."
"Lady Polgara says that you're supposed to get up," she told him.
Garion yawned, stretched and sat up. He glanced out the tent flap and saw that the sun was shining.
"She's teaching me how to cook," Ce'Nedra said rather proudly.
"That's nice," Garion told her, pushing his hair out of his eyes.
She looked at him for a long moment, her small face serious and her green eyes intent. "Garion."
"Yes?"
"You were very brave yesterday."
He shrugged slightly. "I'll probably get a scolding for it today."
"What for?"
"Aunt Pol and my grandfather don't like it when I try to be brave," he explained. "They think I'm still a child, and they don't want me to get hurt."
"Garion!" Aunt Pol called from the small fire where she was cooking. "I need more firewood."
Garion sighed and rolled out of his blankets. He pulled on his half boots, belted on his sword and went off into the woods.
It was still damp under the huge oaks from the downpour Aunt Pol had called down the day before, and dry wood was hard to find. He wandered about, pulling limbs out from under fallen trees and from beneath overhanging rocks. The silent trees watched him, but they seemed somehow less unfriendly this morning.
"What are you doing?" a light voice came from above him. He looked up quickly, his hand going to his sword.
A girl was standing on a broad limb just over his head. She wore a belted tunic and sandals. Her hair was a tawny color, her gray eyes were curious, and her pale skin had that faint greenish hue to it that identified her as a Dryad. In her left hand she held a bow, and her right held an arrow against the taut string. The arrow was pointed directly at Garion.
He carefully took his hand away from his sword. "I'm gathering wood," he said.
"What for?"
"My aunt needs it for the fire," he explained.
"Fire?" The girl's face hardened, and she half drew her bow. "A small one," he said quickly, "for cooking."
"Fire isn't permitted here," the girl said sternly.
"You'll have to explain that to Aunt Pol," Garion told her. "I just do what I'm told."
The girl whistled, and another girl came from behind a nearby tree. She also carried a bow. Her hair was almost as red as Ce'Nedra's, and her skin was also touched with the color of leaves.
"It says it's gathering wood," the first girl reported, "for a fire. Do you think I should kill it?"
"Xantha says we're supposed to find out who they are," the redhaired one said thoughtfully. "If it turns out that they don't have any business here, then you can kill it."
"Oh, very well," the tawny-haired girl agreed, with obvious disappointment. "But don't forget that I found this one. When the time comes, I get to kill it."
Garion felt the hair beginning to rise on the back of his neck.
The red-haired one whistled, and a half dozen other armed Dryads drifted out of the trees. They were all quite small, and their hair was various shades of reds and golds, not unlike the color of autumn leaves.
They gathered about Garion, giggling and chattering as they examined him.
"That one is mine," the tawny-haired Dryad said, climbing down from the tree. "I found it, and Xera says that I get to kill it."
"It looks healthy," one of the others observed, "and quite tame. Maybe we should

keep it. Is it a male?"
Another one giggled. "Let's check and find out."
"I'm a male," Garion said quickly, blushing in spite of himself.
"It seems a shame to waste it," one remarked. "Maybe we could keep it for a while and then kill it."
"It's mine," the tawny-haired Dryad stated stubbornly, "and if I want to kill it. I will." She took hold of Garion's arm possessively.
"Let's go look at the others," the one called Xera suggested. "They're building fires, and we'll want to stop that."
"Fires?" several of the others gasped, and they all glared at Garion accusingly.
"Only a small one," Garion said quickly.
"Bring it along," Xera ordered and started off through the Wood toward the tents. Far overhead the trees murmured to each other. Aunt Pol was waiting calmly when they reached the clearing where the tents were. She looked at the Dryads clustered around Garion without changing expression. "Welcome, ladies," she said.
The Dryads began whispering to each other.
"Ce'Nedra!" the one called Xera exclaimed.
"Cousin Xera," Ce'Nedra replied, and the two ran to embrace each other. The other Dryads came out a little farther into the clearing, looking nervously at the fire.
Ce'Nedra spoke quickly with Xera, explaining to her cousin who they were, and Xera motioned for the others to come closer. "It seems that these are friends," she said. "We'll take them to my mother, Queen Xantha."
"Does that mean that I won't get to kill this one?" The tawny-haired Dryad demanded petulantly, pointing a small finger at Garion.
"I'm afraid not," Xera answered.
The tawny one stamped away, pouting. Garion breathed a sigh of relief.
Then Mister Wolf came out of one of the tents and looked at the cluster of Dryads with a broad smile.
"It's Belgarath!" one of the Dryads squealed and ran to him happily. She threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him soundly. "Did you bring us any sweets?" she demanded.
The old man put on a sober expression and began rummaging through his many pockets. Bits of sweetmeats began to appear just as quickly disappeared as the Dryads gathered about him, snatching them as fast as he took them from his pockets.
"Have you got any new stories for us?" one of the Dryads asked.
"Many stories," Wolf told her, touching one finger to the side of his nose slyly. "But we ought to wait so your sisters can hear them too, shouldn't we?"
"We want one just for ourselves," the Dryad said.
"And what would you give me for this special story?"
"Kisses," the Dryad offered promptly. "Five kisses from each of us."
"I've got a very good story," Wolf bargained. "It's worth more than five. Let's say ten."
"Eight," the Tittle Dryad countered.
"All right," Wolf agreed. "Eight sounds about right."
"I see you've been here before, Old Wolf," Aunt Pol remarked dryly.
"I visit from time to time," he admitted with a bland expression.
"Those sweets aren't good for them, you know," she chided.
"A little bit won't hurt them, Pol," he said, "and they like them very much. A Dryad will do almost anything for sweets."
"You're disgusting," she told him.
The Dryads were all clustered around Mister Wolf, looking almost like a garden of spring flowers - all, that is, except for the tawny one who'd captured Garion. She stood a bit apart, sulking and fingering the point of her arrow. She

finally came over to Garion. "You're not thinking about running away, are you?" she asked hopefully.
"No," Garion denied emphatically.
She sighed with disappointment. "I don't suppose you'd consider it, would you - as a special favor to me?"
"I'm sorry," he said.
She sighed again, bitterly this time. "I never get to have any fun," she complained and went to join the others.
Silk emerged from a tent, moving slowly and carefully; and after the Dryads had become accustomed to him, Durnik appeared.
"They're just children, aren't they?" Garion commented to Aunt Pol.
"They seem to be," she said, "but they're much older than they look. A Dryad lives as long as her tree does, and oak trees live for a long time."
"Where are the boy Dryads?" he asked. "All I see are girls."
"There aren't any boy Dryads, dear," she explained, returning to her cooking.
"Then how-? I mean-" He faltered and felt his ears growing hot.
"They catch human males for that," she said. "Travelers and the like."
"Oh." He delicately let the subject drop.
After they had eaten breakfast and carefully quenched their fire with water from the stream, they saddled their horses and started off through the Wood. Mister Wolf walked ahead with the tiny Dryads still gathered around him, laughing and chattering like happy children. The murmuring of the trees about them was no longer unfriendly, and they moved through a kind of welcoming rustle from a million leaves.
It was late afternoon by the time they reached a large clearing in the center of the Wood. Standing alone in the middle of the clearing was an oak so large that Garion could hardly accept the idea that anything so enormous could be alive. Here and there in its mossy trunk were openings almost like caverns, and its lower limbs were as broad as highways and they spread out to shade nearly the entire clearing. There was about the tree a sense of vast age and a patient wisdom. Tentatively Garion felt a faint touch on his mind, almost like the soft brush of a leaf against his face. The touch was unlike anything he had ever felt before, but it also seemed to welcome him.
The tree was literally alive with Dryads, clustering randomly on the limbs like blossoms. Their laughter and girlish chatter filled the air like birdsongs.
"I'll tell my mother you've arrived," the one called Xera said and went toward the tree.
Garion and the others dismounted and stood uncertainly near their horses. From overhead Dryads peered curiously down at them, whispering among themselves and giggling often.
For some reason the frank, mirthful stares of the Dryads made Garion feel very self conscious. He moved closer to Aunt Pol and noticed that the others were also clustering around her as if unconsciously seeking her protection.
"Where's the princess?" she asked.
"She's just over there, Mistress Pol," Durnik answered, "visiting with that group of Dryads."
"Keep your eye on her," Aunt Pol said. "And where's my vagrant father?"
"Near the tree," Garion replied. "The Dryads seem very fond of him."
"The old fool," Aunt Pol said darkly.
Then, from a hollow in the tree some distance above the first broad limbs, another Dryad appeared. Instead of the short tunic the others wore, this one was garbed in a flowing green gown, and her golden hair was caught in with a circlet of what appeared to be mistletoe. Gracefully she descended to the ground.
Aunt Pol went forward to meet her, and the others trailed behind at a respectful distance.
"Dear Polgara," the Dryad said warmly, "it's been so long."

"We all have our duties, Xantha," Aunt Pol explained.
The two embraced fondly.
"Have you brought us these as gifts?" Queen Xantha asked, looking admiringly at the men standing behind Aunt Pol.
Aunt Pol laughed. "I'm afraid not, Xantha. I'd be happy to give them to you, but I think I may need them later."
"Ah well," the queen said with a mock sigh. "Welcome all," she greeted them. "You'll sup with us, of course."
"We'd be delighted," Aunt Pol said. Then she took the queen's arm. "Can we talk for a moment first, Xantha?" The two moved apart from the others and spoke quietly together as the Dryads carried bundles and sacks down from the hollows in the tree and began to lay a feast on the grass beneath the broad limbs.
The meal which was spread out looked peculiar. The common food of the Dryads seemed to consist entirely of fruits, nuts and mushrooms, all prepared without any cooking.
Barak sat down and looked sourly at what was offered. "No meat," he grumbled.
"It heats up your blood anyway," Silk told him.
Barak sipped suspiciously at his cup. "Water," he said with distaste.
"You might find it a novelty to go to bed sober for a change," Aunt Pol observed as she rejoined them.
"I'm sure it's unhealthy," Barak said.
Ce'Nedra seated herself near Queen Xantha. She obviously wanted to talk to her, but since there was no opportunity for privacy, she finally spoke out in front of them all. "I have a favor to ask, your Highness."
"You may ask, child," the queen said, smiling.
"It's only a small thing," Ce'Nedra explained. "I'll need sanctuary for a few years. My father's growing unreasonable in his old age. I'll have to stay away from him until he comes to his senses."
"In what way is Ran Borune growing unreasonable?" Xantha asked.
"He won't let me go out of the palace, and he insists that I go to Riva on my sixteenth birthday," Ce'Nedra said in an outraged tone. "Have you ever heard of such a thing?"
"And why does he want you to go to Riva?"
"Some foolish treaty. No one even remembers the reason for it."
"If it's a treaty, it must be honored, dear," the queen said gently.
"I won't go to Riva," Ce'Nedra announced. "I'll stay here until after my sixteenth birthday's passed, and that'll be the end of it."
"No, dear," the queen said firmly, "you won't."
"What?" Ce'Nedra was stunned.
"We have a treaty too," Xantha explained. "Our agreement with the House of Borune is most explicit. Our Wood remains inviolate only for so long as the female descendants of the Princess Xoria stay with the Borunes. It's your duty to remain with your father and to obey him."
"But I'm a Dryad," Ce'Nedra wailed. "I belong here."
"You're also human," the queen said, "and you belong with your father."
"I don't want to go to Riva," Ce'Nedra protested.
"It's degrading." Xantha looked at her sternly. "Don't be a foolish child," she said. "Your duties are clear. You have a duty as a Dryad, as a Borune, and as an Imperial Princess. Your silly little whims are quite beside the point. If you have an obligation to go to Riva, then you must go."
Ce'Nedra appeared shaken by the finality of the queen's tone, and she sulked in silence after that.
Then the queen turned to Mister Wolf. "There are many rumors abroad," she said, "and some of them have even reached us here. I think something momentous is happening out there in the world of the humans, and it may even touch our lives in this Wood. I think I should know what this thing is."

Wolf nodded gravely. "I expect you should," he agreed. "The Orb of Aldur has been stolen from the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King by Zedar the Apostate."
Xantha caught her breath. "How?" she demanded.
Wolf spread his hands. "We don't know. Zedar's trying to reach the kingdoms of the Angaraks with the Orb. Once he's there, he'll try to use its power to awaken Torak."
"That must never happen," the Queen said. "What's being done?"
"The Alorns and the Sendars are getting ready for war," Wolf replied. "The Arends have promised aid, and Ran Borune has been advised, though he didn't make any promises. The Borunes can be difficult at times." He glanced at the pouting Ce'Nedra.
"Then it means war?" the queen asked sadly.
"I'm afraid so, Xantha," he said. "I'm pursuing Zedar with these others, and I hope we can catch him and get the Orb back before he can reach Torak with it. If we're successful, I think the Angaraks will attack the West anyway out of desperation. Certain ancient prophecies are getting close to their fulfillment. There are signs everywhere, and even the twisted perceptions of the Grolims can read them."
The Queen sighed. "I've seen some of the signs myself, Belgarath," she said. "I'd hoped I was wrong. What does this Zedar look like?"
"A great deal like me," Wolf told her. "We served the same Master for a very long time, and that puts a certain mark on people."
"Someone like that passed through the upper reaches of our Wood last week and crossed over into Nyissa," Xantha said. "If we'd known, we might have been able to detain him."
"We're closer than I thought, then. Was he alone?"
"No," Xantha reported. "He had two of the servants of Torak with him and a small boy."
Wolf looked startled. "A boy?"
"Yes-about six years old or so."
The old man frowned, and then his eyes opened very wide. "So that's how he did it," he exclaimed. "I never thought of that."
"We can show you where he crossed the river into Nyissa," the queen offered. "I should warn you though that it's going to be dangerous for so large a party to go there. Salmissra has eyes everywhere in those swamps."
"I've already made plans for that," Mister Wolf assured her. He turned to Barak. "Are you sure that ship's going to be waiting at the mouth of the River of the Woods?" he asked.
"She'll be there," Barak rumbled. "Her captain's a dependable man."
"Good," Wolf said. "Silk and I'll pick up Zedar's trail then, and the rest of you can follow the river to the sea. Take the ship down the coast and then up the River of the Serpent to Sthiss Tor. We'll meet you there."
"Dost thou think it wise to separate our party in so perilous a place as Nyissa?" Mandorallen asked.
"It's necessary," Wolf said. "The snake people are at home in their jungles, and they don't like outsiders. Silk and I can move swiftly and with greater stealth if we're alone."
"Where do you want us to meet you?" Barak asked.
"There's a Drasnian trade enclave near the wharves in Sthiss Tor," Silk said. "Several of the merchants there are my friends. Just ask for Radek of Boktor. If we can't meet you there, we'll leave word of our whereabouts with the merchants."
"What about me?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"I think you'll have to stay with us," Aunt Pol answered.
"There's no reason for me to go to Nyissa," Ce'Nedra said.

"You'll go because I tell you to go," Aunt Pol told the tiny girl. "I'm not your father, Ce'Nedra. Your pouting doesn't wring my heart, and your fluttering eyelashes don't really impress me."
"I'll run away," Ce'Nedra threatened.
"That would be very foolish," Aunt Pol said coldly. "I'd just have to bring you back again, and you'd find that unpleasant. Affairs in the world just now are much too serious to allow the whims of one spoiled little girl to have very much importance. You'll stay with me, and you will stand in the Hall of the Rivan King on your sixteenth birthday even if I have to take you there in chains. We're all much too busy to pamper you any further."
Ce'Nedra stared at her, and then she suddenly burst into tears.

Chapter Twenty-two

THE NEXT MORNING before the sun rose and while filmy mist still hovered beneath the limbs of the great oaks, Silk and Mister Wolf made preparations to leave for Nyissa. Garion sat on a log, somberly watching the old man bundle up some food.
"Why so glum?" Wolf asked him.
"I wish we didn't have to separate this way," Garion said.
"It's only for a couple of weeks."
"I know, but I still wish-" Garion shrugged.
"Keep an eye on your Aunt for me while I'm gone," Wolf said, tying up his bundle.
"All right."
"And keep your amulet on. Nyissa's a dangerous place."
"I'll remember," Garion promised. "You'll be careful, won't you, grandfather?"
The old man looked at him gravely, his white beard glistening in the misty light. "I'm always careful, Garion," he said.
"It's getting late, Belgarath," Silk called, leading two horses up to where the two of them were talking.
Wolf nodded. "We'll see you in two weeks in Sthiss Tor," he said to Garion.
Garion embraced the old man quickly and then turned away so that he wouldn't have to watch the two of them leave. He crossed the clearing to where Mandorallen stood pensively looking out into the mist.
"Parting is a melancholy business," the knight said moodily. He sighed.
"It's more than that though, isn't it, Mandorallen?" Garion asked.
"Thou art a perceptive lad."
"What's been troubling you? You've been acting strangely for the last two days."
"I have discovered a strange feeling within myself, Garion, and I like it not."
"Oh? What is it?"
"Fear," Mandorallen said shortly.
"Fear? Of what?"
"The clay men. I know not why, but their very existence struck a chill into my soul."
"They frightened us all, Mandorallen," Garion told him.
"I have never been afraid before," Mandorallen said quietly.
"Never?"
"Not even as a child. The clay men made my very flesh creep, and I wanted most desperately to run away."
"But you didn't," Garion pointed out. "You stayed and fought."
"That time yes," Mandorallen admitted. "But what of next time? Now that fear has found its way into my spirit, who can say when it might return? In some desperate hour when the outcome of our quest hangs in the balance, might not vile fear lay its cold hand upon my heart and unman me? It is that possibility which doth gnaw upon my soul. I am sorely ashamed of my weakness and my fault."
"Ashamed? For being human? You're too hard on yourself, Mandorallen."

"Thou art kind thus to excuse me, lad, but my failing is too grievous for such simple forgiveness. I have striven for perfection and struck, I think, not too far off the mark; but now that perfection, which was the marvel of the world, is flawed. It is a bitter thing to accept." He turned, and Garion was startled to see tears standing in his eyes. "Wilt thou assist me into mine armor?" he asked.
"Of course."
"I feel profoundly the need to be encased in steel. It will perchance strengthen my cowardly heart."
"You're not a coward," Garion insisted.
Mandorallen sighed sadly. "Only time can reveal that."
When it was time to leave, Queen Xantha spoke briefly to them. "I wish you all well," she said. "I'd help you in your search if possible, but a Dryad's bound to her tree by ties which can't be broken. My tree here is very old, and I must care for him." She looked fondly up at the vast oak rising into the morning mist. "We're in bondage to each other, but it's a bondage of love."
Once again Garion felt that same faint touch on his mind that he had experienced the day before when he had first seen the huge tree. There was a sense of farewell in that touch, and what seemed to be a warning.
Queen Xantha exchanged a startled glance with Aunt Pol and then looked at Garion rather closely. "Some of my younger daughters will guide you to the river that marks the southern border of our Wood," she continued. "From there your way to the sea is clear." Her voice showed no sign of any change, but her eyes seemed thoughtful.
"Thank you, Xantha," Aunt Pol said warmly, embracing the Dryad queen. "If you can send word to the Borunes that Ce'Nedra's safe and with me, it might relieve the Emperor's mind somewhat."
"I will, Polgara," Xantha promised.
They mounted then and followed the half dozen or so Dryads who flitted ahead of them like butterflies, guiding them southward into the forest. For some reason Garion felt profoundly depressed, and he paid little attention to his surroundings as he rode beside Durnik along the winding forest trail.
About midmorning it began to grow darker under the trees, and they rode in silence through the now-somber wood. The warning Garion had seemed to hear in Queen Xantha's clearing echoed somehow in the creak of limbs and the rustling of leaves.
"The weather must be changing," Durnik said, looking up. "I wish I could see the sky."
Garion nodded and tried to shake off the sense of impending danger. Mandorallen in his armor and Barak in his mail shirt rode at the head of the party, and Hettar in his horsehide jacket with steel plates riveted to it rode at the rear.
The ominous sense of foreboding seemed to have reached them all, and they rode warily with their hands near their weapons and their eyes searching for trouble.
Then quite suddenly Tolnedran legionnaires were all around them, rising from the bushes or stepping out from behind trees. They made no attempt to attack, but stood in their brightly polished breastplates with their short spears at the ready.
Barak swore, and Mandorallen reined in his charger sharply. "Stand aside!" he ordered the soldiers, lowering his lance.
"Easy," Barak cautioned.
The Dryads, after one startled look at the soldiers, melted into the gloomy woods.
"What thinkest thou, Lord Barak?" Mandorallen asked blithely. "They cannot be over a hundred. Shall we attack them?"
"One of these days you and I are going to have to have a long talk about a few things," Barak said. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that Hettar was edging closer, then he sighed. "Well, I suppose we might as well get on with

it." He tightened the straps on his shield and loosened his sword in its sheath.
"What do you think, Mandorallen? Should we give them a chance to run away?"
"A charitable suggestion, Lord Barak," Mandorallen agreed.
Then, some distance up the trail, a body of horsemen rode out from under the shadowy trees. Their leader was a large man wearing a blue cloak trimmed with silver. His breastplate and helmet were inlaid with gold, and he rode a prancing chestnut stallion whose hooves churned the damp leaves lying on the ground.
"Splendid," he said as he rode up. "Absolutely splendid."
Aunt Pol fixed the newcomer with a cold eye. "Don't the legions have anything better to do than to waylay travelers?" she demanded.
"This is my legion, Madam," the man in the blue cloak said arrogantly, "and it does what I tell it to. I see that you have the Princess Ce'Nedra with you."
"Where I go and with whom is my concern, your Grace," Ce'Nedra said loftily.
"It's of no concern to the Grand Duke Kador of the House y of Vordue."
"Your father is most concerned, Princess," Kador said. "All Tolnedra's searching for you. Who are these people?"
Garion tried with a dark scowl and a shake of his head to warn her, but it was too late.
"The two knights who lead our party are Sir Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor, and Lord Barak, Earl of Trellheim," she announced. "The Algar warrior who guards our rear is Hettar, son of Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria. The lady-"
"I can speak for myself, dear," Aunt Pol said smoothly. "I'm curious to know what brings the Grand Duke of Vordue so far into southern Tolnedra."
"I have interests here, Madam," Kador said.
"Evidently," Aunt Pol replied.
"All the legions of the Empire are searching for the princess, but it's I who have found her."
"I'm amazed to find a Vorduvian so willing to aid in the search for a Borune princess," Aunt Pol observed. "Especially considering the centunes of enmity between your two houses."
"Shall we cease this idle banter?" Kador suggested icily. "My motives are my own affair."
"And unsavory, no doubt," she added.
"I think you forget yourself, Madam," Kador said. "I am, after all, who I am - and more to the point, who I will become."
"And who will you become, your Grace?" she inquired.
"I will be Ran Vordue, Emperor of Tolnedra," Kador announced.
"Oh? And just what's the future Emperor of Tolnedra doing in the Wood of the Dryads?"
"I'm doing what's necessary to protect my interests," Kador said stifly. "For the moment, it's essential that the Princess Ce'Nedra be in my custody."
"My father may have something to say about that, Duke Kador," Ce'Nedra said, "and about this ambition of yours."
"What Ran Borune says is of no concern to me, your Highness," Kador told her. "Tolnedra needs me, and no Borune trick is going to deny me the Imperial Crown. It's obvious that the old man plans to marry you to a Honeth or a Horbite to raise some spurious claim to the throne. That could complicate matters, but I intend to keep things simple."
"By marrying me yourself?" Ce'Nedra asked scornfully. "You'll never live that long."
"No," Kador said. "I wouldn't be interested in a Dryad wife. Unlike the Borunes, the House of Vordue believes in keeping its line pure and uncontaminated."
"So you're going to hold me prisoner?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"That'd be impossible, I'm afraid," Duke Kador told her. "The Emperor has ears everywhere. It's really a shame you ran away just when you did, your Highness. I'd gone to a great expense to get one of my agents into the Imperial kitchen

and to obtain a quantity of a rare Nyissan poison. I'd even taken the trouble to compose a letter of sympathy to your father."
"How considerate of you," Ce'Nedra said, her face turning pale.
"Unfortunately, I'll have to be more direct now," Kador went on. "A sharp knife and a few feet of dirt should end your unfortunate involvement in Tolnedran politics. I'm very sorry, Princess. There's nothing personal in it, you understand, but I have to protect my interests."
"Thy plan, Duke Kador, hath one small flaw," Mandorallen said, carefully leaning his lance against a tree.
"I fail to see it, Baron," Kador said smugly.
"Throe error lay in rashly coming within reach of my sword," Mandorallen told him. "Thy head is forfeit now, and a man with no head has little need of a crown."
Garion knew that a part of Mandorallen's brashness arose from his desperate need to prove to himself that he was no longer afraid.
Kador looked at the knight apprehensively. "You wouldn't do that," he said without much certainty. "You're too badly outnumbered."
"Thou art imprudent to think so," Mandorallen said. "I am the hardiest knight on life and fully armed. Thy soldiers will be as blades of grass before me. Thou art doomed, Kador." And with that he drew his great sword.
"It was bound to happen," Barak said wryly to Hettar and drew his own sword.
"I don't think we'll do that," a new voice announced harshly. A familiar black-robed man rode out from behind a nearby tree on a sablecolored horse. He muttered a few quick words and gestured sharply with his right hand. Garion felt a dark rush and a strange roaring in his mind. Mandorallen's sword spun from his grip.
"My thanks, Asharak," Kador said in a relieved tone. "I hadn't anticipated that."
Mandorallen pulled off his mailed gauntlet and nursed his hand as if he had been struck a heavy blow. Hettar's eyes narrowed, and then went strangely blank. The Murgo's black mount glanced curiously at him once and then looked away almost contemptuously.
"Well, Sha-dar," Asharak gloated with an ugly smirk on his scarred face, "would you like to try that again?"
Hettar's face had a sick look of revulsion on it. "It's not a horse," he said. "It looks like a horse, but it's something else."
"Yes," Asharak agreed. "Quite different, really. You can sink yourself into its mind if you want, but I don't think you'll like what you find there." He swung down from his saddle and walked toward them, his eyes burning. He stopped in front of Aunt Pol and made an ironic bow. "And so we meet again, Polgara."
"You've been busy, Chamdar," she replied.
Kador, in the act of dismounting, seemed startled. "You know this woman, Asharak?"
"His name is Chamdar, Duke Kador," Aunt Pol said, "and he's a Grolim priest. You thought he was only buying your honor, but you'll soon find that he's bought much more than that." She straightened in her saddle, the white lock at her brow suddenly incandescently bright. "You've been an interesting opponent, Chamdar. I'll almost miss you."
"Don't do it, Polgara," the Grolim said quickly. "I've got my hand around the boy's heart. The instant you start to gather your will, he'll die. I know who he is and how much you value him."
Her eyes narrowed. "An easy thing to say, Chamdar."
"Would you like to test it?" he mocked.
"Get down off your horses," Kador ordered sharply, and the legionnaires all took a threatening step forward.
"Do as he says," Aunt Pol ordered quietly.

"It's been a long chase, Polgara," Chamdar said. "Where's Belgarath?"
"Not far," she told him. "Perhaps if you start running now, you can get away before he comes back."
"No, Polgara." He laughed. "I'd know if he were that close." He turned and looked intently at Garion. "You've grown, boy. We haven't had a chance to talk for quite some time, have we?"
Garion stared back at the scarred face of his enemy, alert, but strangely not afraid. The contest between them for which he had been waiting all his life was about to begin, and something deep within his mind told him that he was ready.
Chamdar looked into his eyes, probing. "He doesn't know, does he?" he asked Aunt Pol. And then he laughed. "How like a woman you are, Polgara. You've kept the secret from him simply for the sake of the secret itself. I should have taken him away from you years ago."
"Leave him alone, Chamdar," she ordered.
He ignored that. "What's his real name, Polgara? Have you told him yet.
"That doesn't concern you," she said flatly.
"But it does, Polgara. I've watched over him almost as carefully as you have." He laughed again. "You've been his mother, but I've been his father. Between us we've raised a fine son - but I still want to know his real name."
She straightened. "I think this has gone far enough, Chamdar," she said coldly. "What are your terms?"
"No terms, Polgara," the Grolim answered. "You and the boy and I are going to the place where Lord Torak awaits the moment of his awakening. My hand will be about the boy's heart the entire time, so you'll be suitably docile. Zedar and Ctuchik are going to destroy each other fighting over the Orb - unless Belgarath finds them first and destroys them himself - but the Orb doesn't really interest me. It's been you and the boy I've been after from the very beginning."
"You weren't really trying to stop us, then?" she asked.
Chamdar laughed. "Stop you? I've been trying to help you. Ctuchik and Zedar both have underlings here in the West. I've delayed and deceived them at every turn just so you could get through. I knew that sooner or later Belgarath would find it necessary to pursue the Orb alone, and when that happened, I could take you and the boy."
"For what purpose?"
"You still don't see?" he asked. "The first two things Lord Torak sees when he awakens will be his bride and his mortal enemy, kneeling in chains before him. I'll be exalted above all for so royal a gift."
"Let the others go then," she said.
"The others don't concern me," Chamdar said. "I'll leave them with the noble Kador, I don't imagine he'll find it convenient to keep them alive, but that's up to him. I've got what I want."
"You swine!" Aunt Pol raged helplessly. "You filthy swine!"
With a bland smile Chamdar slapped her sharply across the face. "You really must learn to control your tongue, Polgara," he said. Garion's brain seemed to explode. Dimly he saw Durnik and the others being restrained by the legionnaries, but no soldier seemed to consider him a danger. He started toward his enemy without thinking, reaching for his dagger.
"Not that way!" It was that dry voice in his mind that had always been there, but the voice was no longer passive, disinterested.
"I'll kill him!" Garion said silently in the vaults of his brain.
"Not that way!" the voice warned again. "They won't let you - not with your knife. "
"How, then?"
"Remember what Belgarath said - the Will and the Word."
"I don't know how I can't do that. "
"You are who you are. I'll show you. Look!" Unbidden and so clearly that it was

almost as if he were watching it happen, the image of the God Torak writhing in the fire of Aldur's Orb rose before his eyes. He saw Torak's face melting and his fingers aflame. Then the face shifted and altered until it was the face of the dark watcher whose mind had been linked with his for as long as he could remember. He felt a terrible force building in him as the image of Chamdar wrapped in seething flame stood before him.

"Nowl " the voice commanded him. "Do it!"

It required a blow. His rage would be satisfied with nothing less. He leaped at the smirking Grolim so quickly that none of the legionnaires could stop him. He swung his right arm, and at the instant his palm struck Chamdar's scarred left cheek, he felt all the force that had built in him surge out from the silvery mark on his palm. "Burn!" he commanded, willing it to happen.

Taken off guard, Chamdar jerked back. A momentary anger began to appear on his face, and then his eyes widened with an awful realization. For an instant he stared at Garion in absolute horror, and then his face contorted with agony.

"No!" he cried out hoarsely, and then his cheek began to smoke and seethe where the mark on Garion's hand had touched it. Wisps of smoke drifted from his black robe as if it had suddenly been laid on a red-hot stove. Then he shrieked and clutched at his face. His fingers burst into flame. He shrieked again and fell writhing to the damp earth.

"Stand still!" It was Aunt Pol's voice this time, sounding sharply inside Garion's head.

Chamdar's entire face was engulfed in flames now, and his shrieks echoed in the dim wood. The legionnaires recoiled from the burning man, and Garion suddenly felt sick. He started to turn away.

"Don't weaken!" Aunt Pol's voice told him. "Keep your will on him!" Garion stood over the blazing Grolim. The wet leaves on the ground smoked and smoldered where Chamdar thrashed and struggled with the fire that was consuming him. Flames were spurting from his chest, and his shrieks grew weaker. With an enormous effort, he struggled to his feet and held out his flaming hands imploringly to Garion. His face was gone, and greasy black smoke rolled off his body, drifting low to the ground. "Master," he croaked, "have mercy!"

Garion's heart wrenched with pity. All the years of that secret closeness between them pulled at him.

"No!" Aunt Pol's stern voice commanded. "He'll kill you if you release him!"

"I can't do it, " Garion said. "I'm going to stop it. " As once before, he began to gather his will, feeling it build in him like some vast tide of pity and compassion. He half reached toward Chamdar, focusing his thought on healing.

"Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice rang. "It was Chamdar who killed your parents!"

The thought forming in his mind froze.

"Chamdar killed Geran and Ildera. He burned them alive just as he's burning now. Avenge them, Garion! Keep the fire on him!"

All the rage and fury he had carried within him since Wolf had told him of the deaths of his parents flamed in his brain. The fire, which a moment before he had almost extinguished, was suddenly not enough. The hand he had begun to reach out in compassion stiffened. In terrible anger he raised it, palm out. A strange sensation tingled in that palm, and then his own hand burst into flames. There was no pain, not even a feeling of heat, as a bright blue fire burst from the mark on his hand and wreathed up through his fingers. The blue fire became brighter - so bright that he could not even look at it.

Even in the extremity of his mortal agony, Chamdar the Grolim recoiled from that blazing hand. With a hoarse, despairing cry he tried to cover his blackened face, staggered back a few steps, and then, like a burning house, he collapsed in upon himself and sank back to earth.

"It is done!" Aunt Pol's voice came again. "They are avenged!" And then her voice rang in the vaults of his mind with a soaring exultation. "Belgarion!" she

sang. "My Belgarion!"
Ashen-faced Kador, trembling in every limb, backed in horror from the still-burning heap that had been Chamdar the Grolim. "Sorcery!" he gasped.
"Indeed," Aunt Pol said coolly. "I don't think you're ready for this kind of game yet, Kador."
The frightened legionnaires were also backing away, their eyes bulging at what they had just seen.
"I think the Emperor's going to take this whole affair rather seriously," Aunt Pol told them. "When he hears that you were going to kill his daughter, he'll probably take it personally."
"It wasn't us," one of the soldiers said quickly. "It was Kador. We were just following orders."
"He might accept that as an excuse," she said doubtfully. "If it were me, though, I'd take him some kind of gift to prove my loyalty - something appropriate to the circumstances." She looked significantly at Kador.
Several of the legionnaires took her meaning, drew their swords and moved into position around the Grand Duke.
"What are you doing?" Kador demanded of them.
"I think you've lost more than a throne today, Kador," Aunt Pol said.
"You can't do this," Kador told the legionnaires.
One of the soldiers put the point of his sword against the Grand Duke's throat. "We're loyal to the Emperor, my Lord," he said grimly. "We're placing you under arrest for high treason, and if you give us any trouble, we'll settle for just delivering your head to Tol Honeth - if you take my meaning."
One of the legion officers knelt respectfully before Ce'Nedra. "Your Imperial Highness," he said to her, "how may we serve you?"
The princess, still pale and trembling, drew herself up. "Deliver this traitor to my father," she said in a ringing voice, "and tell him what happened here. Inform him that you have arrested the Grand Duke Kador at my command."
"At once, your Highness," the officer said, springing to his feet. "Chain the prisoner!" he ordered sharply, then turned back to Ce'Nedra. "May we provide you an escort to your destination, your Highness?"
"That won't be necessary, captain," she told him. "Just remove this traitor from my sight."
"As your Highness wishes," the captain said with a deep bow. He gestured sharply, and the soldiers led Kador away.
Garion was staring at the mark on his palm. There was no sign of the fire that had burned there.
Durnik, released now from the grip of the soldiers, looked at Garion, his eyes wide. "I thought I knew you," he whispered. "Who are you, Garion, and how did you do this?"
"Dear Durnik," Aunt Pol said fondly, touching his arm. "Still willing to believe only what you can see. Garion's the same boy he's always been."
"You mean it was you?" Durnik looked at Chamdar's body and pulled his eyes quickly away.
"Of course," she said. "You know Garion. He's the most ordinary boy in the world."
But Garion knew differently. The Will had been his, and the Word had come from him.
"Keep still!" her voice warned inside his head. "No one must know."
"Why did you call me Belgarion?" he demanded silently.
"Because it's your name, " her voice replied. "Now try to act natural and don't bother me with guestions. We'll talk about it later. " And then her voice was gone.
The others stood around awkwardly until the legionnaires left with Kador. Then, when the soldiers were out of sight and the need for imperial self possession

was gone, Ce'Nedra began to cry. Aunt Pol took the tiny girl in her arms and began to comfort her.
"I guess we'd better bury this," Barak said, nudging what was left of Chamdar with his foot. "The Dryads might be offended if we went off and left it still smoking."
"I'll fetch my spade," Durnik said.
Garion turned away and brushed past Mandorallen and Hettar. His hands were trembling violently, and he was so exhausted that his legs barely held him. She had called him Belgarion, and the name had rung in his mind as if he had always known that it was his - as if for all his brief years he had been incomplete until in that instant the name itself had completed him. But Belgarion was a being who with Will and Word and the touch of his hand could turn flesh into living fire.
"You did it!" he accused the dry awareness in one corner of his mind. "No, " the voice replied. "I only showed you how. The Will and the Word and the touch were all yours. "
Garion knew that it was true. With horror he remembered his enemy's final supplication and the flaming, incandescent hand with which he had spurned that agonized appeal for mercy. The revenge he had wanted so desperately for the past several months was dreadfully complete, but the taste of it was bitter, bitter. Then his knees buckled, and he sank to the earth and wept like a broken-hearted child.

Part Three
NYISSA

Chapter Twenty-three
THE EARTH WAS STILL THE SAME. The trees had not changed, nor had the sky. It was still spring, for the seasons had not altered their stately march. But for Garion nothing would ever again be the way that it had been.
They rode down through the Wood of the Dryads to the banks of the River of the Woods which marked the southern boundary of Tolnedra, and from time to time as they rode he caught strange glances from his friends. The looks were speculative, thoughtful, and Durnik - good, solid Durnik - behaved as if he were almost afraid. Only Aunt Pol seemed unchanged, unconcerned. "Don't worry about it, Belgarion, " her voice murmured in his mind.
"Don't call me that," he replied with an irritated thought.
"It's your name, " the silent voice said. "You might as well get used to it.
"Leave me alone. "
And then the sense of her presence in his mind was gone.
It took them several days to reach the sea. The weather remained intermittently cloudy, though it did not rain. A stiff onshore breeze was blowing when they rode out onto the wide beach at the mouth of the river. The surf boomed against the sand, and whitecaps flecked the tops of the waves.
Out beyond the surf, a lean, black Cherek war-boat swung at anchor, the air above her alive with screeching gulls. Barak pulled his horse in and shaded his eyes. "She looks familiar," he rumbled, peering intently at the narrow ship.
Hettar shrugged. "They all look the same to me."
"There's all the difference in the world," Barak said, sounding a bit injured. "How would you feel if I said that all horses looked the same?"
"I'd think you were going blind."
Barak grinned at him. "It's exactly the same thing," he said.

"How do we let them know we're here?" Durnik asked.
"They know already," Barak said, "unless they're drunk. Sailors always watch an unfriendly shore very carefully."
"Unfriendly?" Durnik asked.
"Every shore is unfriendly when a Cherek war-boat comes in sight," Barak answered. "It's some kind of superstition, I think."
The ship came about and her anchor was raised. Her oars came out like long, spidery legs, and she seemed to walk through the froth-topped combers toward the mouth of the river. Barak led the way toward the riverbank, then rode along the broad flow until he found a spot deep enough so that the ship could be moored next to the shore.
The fur-clad sailors who threw Barak a mooring line looked familiar, and the first one who leaped across to the riverbank was Greldik, Barak's old friend.
"You're a long ways south," Barak said as if they had only just parted.
Greldik shrugged. "I heard you needed a ship. I wasn't doing anything, so I thought I'd come down and see what you were up to."
"Did you talk to my cousin?"
"Grinneg? No. We made a run down from Kotu to the harbor at Tol Horb for some Drasnian merchants. I ran into Elteg - you remember him - black beard, only one eye?"
Barak nodded.
"He told me that Grinneg was paying him to meet you here. I remembered that you and Elteg didn't get along very well, so I offered to come down instead."
"And he agreed?"
"No," Greldik replied, pulling at his beard. "As a matter of fact, he told me to mind my own business."
"I'm not surprised," Barak said. "Elteg always was greedy, and Grinneg probably offered him a lot of money."
"More than likely." Greldik grinned. "Elteg didn't say how much, though."
"How did you persuade him to change his mind?"
"He had some trouble with his ship," Greldik said with a straight face.
"What kind of trouble?"
"It seems that one night after he and his crew were all drunk, some scoundrel slipped aboard and chopped down his mast."
"What's the world coming to?" Barak asked, shaking his head.
"My thought exactly," Greldik agreed.
"How did he take it?"
"Not very well, I'm afraid," Greldik said sadly. "When we rowed out of the harbor, he sounded as if he was inventing profanities on the spot. You could hear him for quite some distance."
"He should learn to control his temper. That's the kind of behavior that gives Chereks a bad name in the ports of the world."
Greldik nodded soberly and turned to Aunt Pol. "My Lady," he said with a polite bow, "my ship is at your disposal."
"Captain," she asked, acknowledging his bow. "How long will it take you to get us to Sthiss Tor?"
"Depends on the weather," he answered, squinting at the sky. "Probably ten days at the most. We picked up fodder for your horses on the way here, but we'll have to stop for water from time to time."
"We'd better get started then," she said.
It took a bit of persuading to get the horses aboard the ship, but Hettar managed it without too much difficulty. Then they pushed away from the bank, crossed the bar at the mouth of the river and reached the open sea. The crew raised the sails, and they quartered the wind down along the gray-green coastline of Nyissa.
Garion went forward to his customary place in the bow of the ship and sat there,

staring bleakly out at the tossing sea. The image of the burning man back in the forest filled his mind.
There was a firm step behind him and a faint, familiar fragrance.
"Do you want to talk about it?" Aunt Pol asked.
"What's there to talk about?"
"Many things," she told him.
"You knew I could do that kind of thing, didn't you?"
"I suspected it," she said, sitting down beside him. "There were several hints. One can never be sure, though, until it's used for the first time. I've known any number of people who had the capability and just never used it."
"I wish I never had," Garion said.
"I don't see that you really had much choice. Chamdar was your enemy."
"But did it have to be that way?" he demanded. "Did it have to be fire?"
"The choice was yours," she answered. "If fire bothers you so much, don't do it that way next time."
"There isn't going to be a next time," he stated flatly. "Not ever."
"Belgarion, " her voice snapped within his mind, "stop this foolishness at once. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. "
"Quit that," he said aloud. "Stay out of my mind - and don't call me Belgarion."
"You are Belgarion," she insisted. "Like it or not, you will use the power again. Once it's been released, you can never cage it up. You'll get angry or frightened or excited, and you'll use it without even thinking. You can no more choose not to use it than you can choose not to use one of your hands. The important thing now is to teach you how to control it. We can't have you blundering through the world uprooting trees and flattening hills with random thoughts. You must learn to control it and yourself. I didn't raise you to let you become a monster."
"It's too late," he said. "I'm already a monster. Didn't you see what I did back there?"
"All this self pity is very tedious, Belgarion, " her voice told him. "I don't think we're getting anywhere. " She stood up. "Do try to grow up a little, dear," she said aloud. "It's very hard to instruct someone who's so self absorbed that he won't listen."
"I'll never do it again," he told her defiantly.
"Oh yes, you will, Belgarion. You'll learn and you'll practice and you'll develop the discipline this requires. If you don't want to do it willingly, then we'll have to do it the other way. Think about it, dear, and make up your mind - but don't take too long. It's too important to be put off. "She reached out and gently touched his cheek; then she turned and walked away.
"She's right, you know, " the voice in his mind told him.
"You stay out of this, " Garion said.
In the days that followed, he avoided Aunt Pol as much as possible, but he could not avoid her eyes. Wherever he went on the narrow ship, he knew that she was watching him, her eyes calm, speculative.
Then, at breakfast on the third day out, she looked at his face rather closely as if noticing something for the first time. "Garion," she said, "you're starting to look shaggy. Why don't you shave?"
Garion blushed furiously and put his fingers to his chin. There were definitely whiskers there - downy, soft, more like fuzz than bristles, but whiskers all the same.
"Thou art truly approaching manhood, young Garion," Mandorallen assured him rather approvingly.
"The decision doesn't have to be made immediately, Polgara," Barak said, stroking his own luxuriant red beard. "Let the whiskers grow for a while. If they don't turn out well, he can always shave them off later."
"I think your neutrality in the matter is suspect, Barak," Hettar remarked.

"Don't most Chereks wear beards?"
"No razor's ever touched my face," Barak admitted. "But I just don't think it's the sort of thing to rush into. It's very hard to stick whiskers back on if you decide later that you wanted to keep them after all."
"I think they're kind of funny," Ce'Nedra said. Before Garion could stop her, she reached out two tiny fingers and tugged the soft down on his chin. He winced and blushed again.
"They come off," Aunt Pol ordered firmly.
Wordlessly, Durnik went below decks. When he came back, he carried a basin, a chunk of brown-colored soap, a towel, and a fragment of mirror. "It isn't really hard, Garion," he said, putting the things on the table in front of the young man. Then he took a neatly folded razor out of a case at his belt. "You just have to be careful not to cut yourself, that's all. The whole secret is not to rush."
"Pay close attention when you're near your nose," Hettar advised. "A man looks very strange without a nose."
The shaving proceeded with a great deal of advice, and on the whole it did not turn out too badly. Most of the bleeding stopped after a few minutes, and, aside from the fact that his face felt as if it had been peeled, Garion was quite satisfied with the results.
"Much better," Aunt Pol said.
"He'll catch cold in his face now," Barak predicted.
"Will you stop that?" she told him.
The coast of Nyissa slid by on their left, a blank wall of tangled vegetation, festooned with creepers and long tatters of moss. Occasional eddies in the breeze brought the foul reek of the swamps out to the ship. Garion and Ce'Nedra stood together in the prow of the ship, looking toward the jungle.
"What are those?" Garion asked, pointing at some large things with legs slithering around on a mud bank along a stream that emptied into the sea.
"Crocodiles," Ce'Nedra answered.
"What's a crocodile?"
"A big lizard," she said.
"Are they dangerous?"
"Very dangerous. They eat people. Haven't you ever read about them?"
"I can't read," Garion admitted without thinking.
"What?"
"I can't read," Garion repeated. "Nobody ever taught me how."
"That's ridiculous!"
"It's not my fault," he said defensively.
She looked at him thoughtfully. She had seemed almost half afraid of him since the meeting with Chamdar, and her insecurity had probably been increased by the fact that, on the whole, she had not treated him very well. Her first assumption that he was only a servant boy had gotten their whole relationship off on the wrong foot, but she was far too proud to admit that initial mistake. Garion could almost hear the little wheels clicking around in her head. "Would you like to have me teach you how?" she offered. It was probably the closest thing he'd ever get to an apology from her.
"Would it take very long?"
"That depends on how clever you are."
"When do you think we could start?"
She frowned. "I've got a couple of books, but we'll need something to write on."
"I don't know that I need to learn how to write," he said. "Reading 'ought to be enough for right now."
She laughed. "They're the same thing, you goose."
"I didn't know that," Garion said, flushing slightly. "I thought " He floundered with the whole idea. "I guess I never really thought about it," he concluded

lamely. "What sort of thing do we need to write on?"
"Parchment's the best," she said, "and a charcoal stick to write with - so we can rub it off and write on the parchment again."
"I'll go talk to Durnik," he decided. "He'll be able to think of something."
Durnik suggested sailcloth and a charred stick. Within an hour Garion and Ce'Nedra were sitting in a sheltered spot in the bow of the ship their heads close together over a square of canvas nailed to a plank. Garion glanced up once and saw Aunt Pol not far away. She was watching the two of them with an indecipherable expression. Then he lowered his eyes again to the strangely compelling symbols on the canvas.
His instruction went on for the next several days. Since his fingers were naturally nimble, he quickly picked up the trick of forming the letter.
"No, no," Ce'Nedra said one afternoon, "you've spelled it wrong, used the wrong letters. Your name's Garion, not Belgarion."
He felt a sudden chill and looked down at the canvas square. The name was spelled out quite clearly - "Belgarion."
He looked up quickly. Aunt Pol was standing where she usually stood, her eyes on him as always.
"Stay out of my mind!" He snapped the thought at her.
"Study hard, dear, " her voice urged him silently. "Learning of any kind is useful, and you have a great deal to learn. The sooner you get the habit, the better. " Then she smiled, turned and walked away.
The next day, Greldik's ship reached the mouths of the River of the Serpent in central Nyissa, and his men struck the sail and set their oars into the locks along the sides of the ship in preparation for the long pull upriver to Sthiss Tor.

Chapter Twenty-four

THERE WAS NO AIR. It seemed as if the world had suddenly been turned into a vast, reeking pool of stagnant water. The River of the Serpent had a hundred mouths, each creeping sluggishly through the jellied muck of the delta as if reluctant to join the boisterous waves of the sea. The reeds which grew in that vast swamp reached a height of twenty feet and were as thick as woven fabric. There was a tantalizing sound of a breeze brushing the tops of the reeds, but down among them, all thought or memory of breeze was lost. There was no air. The delta steamed and stank beneath a sun that did not burn so much as boil. Each breath seemed to be half water. Insects rose in clouds from the reeds and settled in mindless gluttony on every inch of exposed skin, biting, feeding on blood.
They were a day and a half among the reeds before they reached the first trees, low, scarcely more than bushes. The main river channel began to take shape as they moved slowly on into the Nyissan heartland. The sailors sweated and swore at their oars, and the ship moved slowly against the current, almost as if she struggled against a tide of thick oil that clung to her like some loathsome glue.
The trees grew taller, then immense. Great, gnarled roots twisted up out of the ooze along the banks like grotesquely misshapen legs, and trunks vast as castles reached up into the steaming sky. Ropey vines undulated down from the limbs overhead, moving, seeming to writhe with a kind of vegetable will of their own in the breathless air. Shaggy tatters of grayish moss descended in hundred-foot-long streamers from the trees, and the river wound spitefully in great coils that made their journey ten times as long as it needed to be.
"Unpleasant sort of place," Hettar grumbled, dispiritedly looking out over the bow at the weedy surface of the river ahead. He had removed his horsehide jacket and linen undertunic, and his lean torso gleamed with sweat. Like most of them,

he was covered with the angry welts of insect bites.
"My very thought," Mandorallen agreed.
One of the sailors shouted and jumped up, kicking at his oar-handle. Something long, slimy, and boneless had crawled unseen up his oar, seeking his flesh with an eyeless voracity.
"Leech," Durnik said with a shudder as the hideous thing dropped with a wet plop back into the stinking river. "I've never seen one so big. It must be a foot long or more."
"Probably not a good place for swimming," Hettar observed.
"I wasn't considering it," Durnik said.
"Good." Aunt Pol, wearing a light linen dress, came out of the cabin beneath the high stern where Greldik and Barak were taking turns at the tiller. She had been caring for Ce'Nedra, who had drooped and wilted like a flower in the brutal climate of the river.
"Can't you do something?" Garion demanded of her silently.
"About what?"
"All of this."He looked around helplessly.
"What do you want me to do?"
"Drive of the bugs, if nothing else."
"Why don't you do it yourself, Belgarion?"
He set his jaw. "No!" It was almost a silent shout.
"It isn't really very hard."
"No."
She shrugged and turned away, leaving him seething with frustration. It took them three more days to reach Sthiss Tor. The city was embraced in a wide coil of the river and was built of black stone. The houses and buildings were low and for the most part were windowless. In the center of the city a vast pile of a building rose with strangely shaped spires and domes and terraces, oddly alien-looking. Wharves and jetties poked out into the turbid river, and Greldik guided his ship toward one which was much larger than the rest. "We have to stop at customs," he explained.
"Inevitably," Durnik said.
The exchange at customs was brief. Captain Greldik announced that he was delivering the goods of Radek of Boktor to the Drasnian trade enclave. Then he handed a jingling purse to the shaven-headed customs official, and the ship was allowed to proceed without inspection.
"You owe me for that, Barak," Greldik said. "The trip here was out of friendship, but the money's something else again."
"Write it down someplace," Barak told him. "I'll take care of it when I get back to Val Alorn."
"If you ever get back to Val Alorn," Greldik said sourly.
"I'm sure you'll remember me in your prayers, then," Barak said. "I know you pray for me all the time anyway, but now you've got a bit more incentive."
"Is every official in the whole world corrupt?" Durnik demanded irritably. "Doesn't anyone do his job the way it's supposed to be done without taking bribes?"
"The world would come to an end if one of them did," Hettar replied. "You and I are too simple and honest for these affairs, Durnik. We're better off leaving this kind of thing to others."
"It's disgusting, that's all."
"That may be true," Hettar agreed, "but I'm just as happy that the customs man didn't look below decks. We might have had some trouble explaining the horses."
The sailors had backed the ship into the river again and rowed toward a series of substantial wharves. They pulled up beside the outer wharf, shipped their oars and looped the hawsers around the tar-blackened pilings of a mooring spot.
"You can't moor here," a sweaty guard told them from the wharf. "This is for

Drasnian ships."
"I'll moor anyplace it suits me," Greldik said shortly.
"I'll call out the soldiers," the guard threatened. He took hold of one of their hawsers and pulled out a long knife.
"If you cut that rope, friend, I'll come down there and tear off your ears," Greldik warned.
"Go ahead and tell him," Barak suggested. "It's too hot for fighting."
"My ship's carrying Drasnian goods," Greldik told the guard on the wharf, "belonging to a man named Radek-from Boktor, I think."
"Oh," the guard said, putting away his knife, "why didn't you say so in the first place?"
"Because I didn't like your attitude," Greldik replied bluntly. "Where do I find the man in charge?"
"Droblek? His house is just up that street past the shops. It's the one with the Drasnian emblem on the door."
"I've got to talk with him," Greldik said. "Do I need a pass to go off the wharf? I've heard some strange things about Sthiss Tor."
"You can move around inside the enclave," the guard informed him. "You only need a pass if you want to go into the city."
Greldik grunted and went below. A moment later he came back with several packets of folded parchment. "Do you want to talk to this official?" he asked Aunt Pol. "Or do you want me to take care of it?"
"We'd better come along," she decided. "The girl's asleep. Tell your men not to disturb her."
Greldik nodded and spoke briefly to his first mate. The sailors ran a plank across to the wharf, and Greldik led the way ashore. Thick clouds were rolling in overhead, darkening the sun.
The street which ran down to the wharf was lined on both sides with the shops of Drasnian merchants, and Nyissans moved torpidly from shop to shop, stopping now and then to haggle with the sweating shop-keepers. The Nyissan men all wore loose-fitting robes of a light, iridescent fabric, and their heads were all shaved completely bald. As he walked along behind Aunt Pol, Garion noticed with a certain distaste that the Nyissans wore elaborate makeup on their eyes, and that their lips and cheeks were rouged. Their speech was rasping and sibilant, and they all seemed to affect a lisp.
The heavy clouds had by now completely obscured the sky, and the street seemed suddenly dark. A dozen wretched, near-naked men were repairing a section of cobblestones. Their unkempt hair and shaggy beards indicated that they were not Nyissan, and there were shackles and chains attached to their ankles. A brutal-looking Nyissan stood over them with a whip, and the fresh welts and cuts on their bodies spoke mutely of the freedom with which he used it. One of the miserable slaves accidentally dropped an armload of crudely squared-off stones on his foot and opened his mouth with an animal-like howl of pain. With horror, Garion saw that the slave's tongue had been cut out.
"They reduce men to the level of beasts," Mandorallen growled, his eyes burning with a terrible anger. "Why has this cesspool not been cleansed?"
"It was once," Barak said grimly. "Just after the Nyissans assassinated the Rivan King, the Alorns came down here and killed every Nyissan they could find."
"Their numbers appear undiminished," Mandorallen said, looking around.
Barak shrugged. "It was thirteen hundred years ago. Even a single pair of rats could reestablish their species in that length of time."
Durnik, who was walking beside Garion, gasped suddenly and averted his eyes, blushing furiously.
A Nyissan lady had just stepped from a litter carried by eight slaves. The fabric of her pale green gown was so flimsy that it was nearly transparent and left very little to the imagination. "Don't look at her, Garion," Durnik

whispered hoarsely, still blushing. "She's a wicked woman."
"I'd forgotten about that," Aunt Pol said with a thoughtful frown. "Maybe we should have left Durnik and Garion on the ship."
"Why's she dressed like that?" Garion asked, watching the nearly nude woman.
"Undressed, you mean." Durnik's voice was strangled with outrage.
"It's the custom," Aunt Pol explained. "It has to do with the climate. There are some other reasons, of course, but we don't need to go into those just now. All Nyissan women dress that way."
Barak and Greldik were watching the woman also, their broad grins appreciative.
"Never mind," Aunt Pol told them firmly.
Not far away a shaven-headed Nyissan stood leaning against a wall, staring at his hand and giggling senselessly. "I can see right through my fingers," he announced in a hissing lisp. "Right through them."
"Drunk?" Hettar asked.
"Not exactly," Aunt Pol answered. "Nyissans have peculiar amusements - leaves, bernes, certain roots. Their perceptions get modified. It's a bit more serious than the common drunkenness one finds among Alorns."
Another Nyissan shambled by, his gait curiously jerky and his expression blank.
"Doth this condition prevail widely?" Mandorallen asked.
"I've never met a Nyissan yet who wasn't at least partially drugged," Aunt Pol said. "It makes them difficult to talk to. Isn't that the house we're looking for?" She pointed at a solid building across the street.
There was an ominous rumble of thunder off to the south as they crossed to the large house. A Drasnian servant in a linen tunic answered their knock, let them into a dimly lighted antechamber, and told them to wait.
"An evil city," Hettar said quietly. "I can't see why any Alorn in his right mind would come here willingly."
"Money," Captain Greldik replied shortly. "The Nyissan trade is very profitable."
"There are more important things than money," Hettar muttered.
An enormously fat man came into the dim room. "More light," he snapped at his servant. "You didn't have to leave them here in the dark."
"You said that the lamps just made it hotter," the servant protested in a surly tone. "I wish you'd make up your mind."
"Never mind what I said; just do as I say."
"The climate's making you incoherent, Droblek," the servant noted acidly. He lit several lamps and left the room muttering to himself.
"Drasnians make the world's worst servants," Droblek grumbled.
"Shall we get down to business?" He lowered his vast bulk into a chair. The sweat rolled continually down his face and into the damp collar of his brown silk robe.
"My name's Greldik," the bearded seaman said. "I've just arrived at your wharves with a shipload of goods belonging to the merchant, Radek of Boktor." He presented the folded packets of parchment.
Droblek's eyes narrowed. "I didn't know that Radek was interested in the southern trade. I thought he dealt mostly in Sendaria and Arendia."
Greldik shrugged indifferently. "I didn't ask him. He pays me to carry his goods in my ship, not to ask questions about his business."
Droblek looked at them all, his sweating face expressionless. Then his fingers moved slightly.-Is everything here what it seems to be? The Drasnian secret language made his fat fingers suddenly nimble.
Can we speak openly here? Aunt Pol's fingers asked him. Her gestures were stately, somehow archaic. There was a kind of formality to her movements that Garion had not seen in the signs made by others.
As openly as anyplace in this pest-hole - Droblek replied,-You have a strange accent, lady. There's something about it that it seems I should remember- '

I learned the language a very long time ago-she replied.-You know who Radek of Boktor really is, of course-
"Naturally," Droblek said aloud. "Everyone knows that. Sometimes he calls himself Ambar of Kotu - when he wants to have dealings that are not, strictly speaking, legitimate."
"Shall we stop fencing with each other, Droblek?" Aunt Pol asked quietly. "I'm quite certain you've received instructions from King Rhodar by now. All this dancing about is tiresome."
Droblek's face darkened. "I'm sorry," he said stiffly. "I'll need a bit more in the way of verification."
"Don't be an idiot, Droblek," Barak rumbled at the fat man. "Use your eyes. You're an Alorn; you know who the lady is."
Droblek looked suddenly at Aunt Pol, his eyes going very wide. "It's not possible," he gasped.
"Would you like to have her prove it to you?" Hettar suggested. The house shook with a sudden crash of thunder.
"No, no," Droblek refused hastily, still staring at Aunt Pol. "It just never occurred to me - I mean, I just never-" He floundered with it.
"Have you heard from Prince Kheldar or my father?" Aunt Pol asked crisply.
"Your father? You mean-? Is he involved in this too?"
"Really, Droblek," she said tartly, "don't you believe the communications King Rhodar sends you?"
Droblek shook his head like a man trying to clear his mind. "I'm sorry, Lady Polgara," he said. "You surprised me, that's all. It takes a moment to get used to. We didn't think you'd be coming this far south."
"It's obvious then that you haven't received any word from Kheldar or the old man."
"No, my Lady," Droblek said. "Nothing. Are they supposed to be here?"
"So they said. They were either going to meet us here or send word."
"It's very hard to get messages any place in Nyissa," Droblek explained. "The people here aren't very reliable. The prince and your father could be upcountry, and their messenger could very well have gone astray. I sent a messenger to a place not ten leagues from the city once, and it took six months to arrive. The Nyissan who was carrying it found a certain berry patch along the way. We found him sitting in the middle of the patch, smiling." Droblek made a sour face. "There was moss growing on him," he added.
"Dead?" Durnik asked.
Droblek shrugged. "No, just very happy. He enjoyed the berries very much. I dismissed him at once, but he didn't seem to mind. For all I know, he's still sitting there."
"How extensive is your network here in Sthiss Tor?" Aunt Pol asked.
Droblek spread his pudgy hands modestly. "I manage to pick up a bit of information here and there. I've got a few people in the palace and a minor official at the Tolnedran embassy. The Tolnedrans are very thorough." He grinned impishly. "It's cheaper to let them do all the work and then buy the information after they've gathered it."
"If you can believe what they tell you," Hettar suggested.
"I never take what they say at face value," Droblek said. "The Tolnedran ambassador knows that I've bought his man. He tries to trip me up with false leads now and then."
"Does the ambassador know that you know?" Hettar asked.
"Of course he does." The fat man laughed. "But he doesn't think that I'm aware of the fact that he knows that I know." He laughed again. "It's all terribly complicated, isn't it?"
"Most Drasnian games usually are," Barak observed.
"Does the name Zedar mean anything to you?" Aunt Pol asked.

"I've heard it, naturally," Droblek said.
"Has he been in touch with Salmissra?"
Droblek frowned. "I couldn't say for sure. I haven't heard that he has, but that doesn't mean that he hasn't. Nyissa's a murky sort of place, and Salmissra's palace is the murkiest spot in the whole country. You wouldn't believe some of the things that go on there."
"I'd believe them," Aunt Pol said, "and probably things you haven't even begun to guess." She turned back to the others. "I think we're at a standstill. We can't make any kind of move until we hear from Silk and the Old Wolf."
"Could I offer you my house?" Droblek asked.
"I think we'll stay on board Captain Greldik's ship," she told him. "As you say, Nyissa's a murky place, and I'm sure that the Tolnedran ambassadors bought a few people in your establishment."
"Naturally," Droblek agreed. "But I know who they are."
"We'd better not chance it," she told him. "There are several reasons for our avoiding Tolnedrans just now. We'll stay aboard the ship and keep out of sight. Let us know as soon as Prince Kheldar gets in touch with you."
"Of course," Droblek said. "You'll have to wait until the rain lets up, though. Listen to it." There was the thundering sound of a downpour on the roof overhead.
"Will it last long?" Durnik asked.
Droblek shrugged. "An hour or so usually. It rains every afternoon during this season."
"I imagine it helps to cool the air," the smith said.
"Not significantly," the Drasnian told him. "Usually it just makes things worse." He mopped the sweat from his fat face.
"How can you live here?" Durnik asked.
Droblek smiled blandly. "Fat men don't move around all that much. I'm making a great deal of money, and the game I'm playing with the Tolnedran ambassador keeps my mind occupied. It's not all that bad, once you get used to it. It helps if I keep telling myself that."
They sat quietly then, listening to the pounding rain.

Chapter Twenty-five

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS they all remained aboard Greldik's ship, waiting for word from Silk and Mister Wolf. Ce'Nedra recovered from her indisposition and appeared on deck wearing a palecolored Dryad tunic which seemed to Garion to be only slightly less revealing than the gowns worn by Nyissan women. When he rather stiffly suggested that she ought to put on a few more clothes, however, she merely laughed at him. With a single-mindedness that made him want to grind his teeth, she returned to the task of teaching him to read and write. They sat together in an out-of the-way spot on deck, poring over a tedious book on Tolnedran diplomacy. The whole business seemed to Garion to be taking forever, though in fact his mind was very quick, and he was learning surprisingly fast. Ce'Nedra was too thoughtless to compliment him, though she seemed to await his next mistake almost breathlessly, delighting it seemed in each opportunity to ridicule him. Her proximity and her light, spicy perfume distracted him as they sat close beside each other, and he perspired as much from their occasional touch of hand or arm or hip as he did from the climate. Because they were both young, she was intolerant and he was stubborn. The sticky, humid heat made them both short-tempered and irritable, so the lessons erupted into bickering more often than not.
When they arose one morning, a black, square-rigged Nyissan ship rocked in the river current at a nearby wharf. A foul, evil kind of reek carried to them from her on the fitful morning breeze.

"What's that smell?" Garion asked one of the sailors.
"Slaves," the sailor answered grimly, pointing at the Nyissan ship. "You can smell them twenty miles away when you're at sea."
Garion looked at the ugly black ship and shuddered.
Barak and Mandorallen drifted across the deck and joined Garion at the rail.
"Looks like a scow," Barak said of the Nyissan ship, his voice heavy with contempt. He was stripped to the waist, and his hairy torso ran with sweat.
"It's a slave ship," Garion told him.
"It smells like an open sewer," Barak complained. "A good fire would improve it tremendously."
"A sorry trade, my Lord Barak," Mandorallen said. "Nyissa hath dealt in human misery for untold centuries."
"Is that a Drasnian wharf?" Barak asked with narrowed eyes.
"No," Garion answered. "The sailors say that everything on that side's Nyissan."
"That's a shame," Barak growled.
A group of mail-shirted men in black cloaks walked out onto the wharf where the slave ship was moored and stopped near the vessel's stern.
"Oh-oh," Barak said. "Where's Hettar?"
"He's still below," Garion replied. "What's the matter?"
"Keep an eye out for him. Those are Murgos."
The shaven-headed Nyissan sailors pulled open a hatch on their ship and barked a few rough orders down into the hold. Slowly, a line of dispirited-looking men came up. Each man wore an iron collar, and a long chain fastened them together.
Mandorallen stiffened and began to swear.
"What's wrong?" Barak asked.
"Arendishmen!" the knight exclaimed. "I had heard of this, but I did not believe it."
"Heard of what?"
"An ugly rumor hath persisted in Arendia for some years," Mandorallen answered, his face white with rage. "We are told that some of our nobles have upon occasion enriched themselves by selling their serfs to the Nyissans."
"Looks like it's more than a rumor," Barak said.
"There," Mandorallen growled. "See that crest upon the tunic of that one there? It's the crest of Vo Toral. I know the Baron of Vo Toral for a notorious spendthrift, but had not thought him dishonorable. Upon my return to Arendia, I will denounce him publicly."
"What good's that going to do?" Barak asked.
"He will be forced to challenge me," Mandorallen said grimly. "I will prove his villainy upon his body."
Barak shrugged. "Serf or slave - what's the difi'erence?"
"Those men have rights, my Lord," Mandorallen stated. "Their Lord is required to protect them and care for them. The oath of knighthood demands it of us. This vile transaction hath stained the honor of every true Arendish knight. I shall not rest until I have bereft that foul baron of his miserable life."
"Interesting idea," Barak said. "Maybe I'll go with you."
Hettar came up on deck, and Barak moved immediately to his side and began talking quietly to him, holding one of his arms firmly.
"Make them jump around a bit," one of the Murgos ordered harshly. "I want to see how many are lame."
A heavy-shouldered Nyissan uncoiled a long whip and began to flick it deftly at the legs of the chained men. The slaves began to dance feverishly on the wharf beside the slave ship.
"Dog's blood!" Mandorallen swore, and his knuckles turned white as he gripped the railing.
"Easy," Garion warned. "Aunt Pol says we're supposed to stay pretty much out of sight."

"It cannot be borne!" Mandorallen cried.
The chain that bound the slaves together was old and pitted with rust. When one slave tripped and fell, a link snapped, and the man found himself suddenly free. With an agility born of desperation, he rolled quickly to his feet, took two quick steps and plunged off the wharf into the murky waters of the river.
"This way, man!" Mandorallen called to the swimming slave.
The burly Nyissan with the whip laughed harshly and pointed at the escaping slave. "Watch," he told the Murgos.
"Stop him, you idiot," one of the Murgos snapped. "I paid good gold for him."
"It's too late." The Nyissan looked on with an ugly grin. "Watch." The swimming man suddenly shrieked and sank out of sight. When he came up again, his face and arms were covered with the slimy, footlong leeches that infested the river. Screaming, the struggling man tore at the writhing leeches, ripping out chunks of his own flesh in his efforts to pull them off.
The Murgos began to laugh.
Garion's mind exploded. He gathered himself with an awful concentration, pointed one hand at the wharf just beyond their own ship and said, "Be there!" He felt an enormous surge as if some vast tide were rushing out of him, and he reeled almost senseless against Mandorallen. The sound inside his head was deafening. The slave, still writhing and covered with the oozing leeches, was suddenly lying on the wharf. A wave of exhaustion swept over Garion; if Mandorallen had not caught him, he would have fallen.
"Where did he go?" Barak demanded, still staring at the turbulent spot on the surface of the river where the slave had been an instant before. "Did he go under?"
Wordlessly and with a shaking hand, Mandorallen pointed at the slave, who lay still weakly struggling on the Drasnian wharf about twenty yards in front of the bow of their ship.
Barak looked at the slave, then back at the river. The big man blinked with surprise.
A small boat with four Nyissans at the oars put out from the other wharf and moved deliberately toward Greldik's ship. A tall Murgo stood in the bow, his scarred face angry.
"You have my property," he shouted across the intervening water. "Return the slave to me at once."
"Why don't you come and claim him, Murgo?" Barak called back. He released Hettar's arm. The Algar moved to the side of the ship, stopping only to pick up a long boathook.
"Will I be unmolested?" the Murgo asked a bit doubtfully.
"Why don't you come alongside, and we'll discuss it?" Barak suggested pleasantly.
"You're denying me my rights to my own property," the Murgo complained.
"Not at all," Barak told him. "Of course there might be a fine point of law involved here. This wharf is Drasnian territory, and slavery isn't legal in Drasnia. Since that's the case, the man's not a slave anymore."
"I'll get my men," the Murgo said. "We'll take the slave by force if we have to."
"I think we'd have to look on that as an invasion of Alorn territory," Barak warned with a great show of regret. "In the absence of our Drasnian cousins, we'd almost be compelled to take steps to defend their wharf for them. What do you think, Mandorallen?"
"Thy perceptions are most acute, my Lord," Mandorallen replied. "By common usage, honorable men are morally obliged to defend the territory of kinsmen in their absence."
"There," Barak said to the Murgo. "You see how it is. My friend here is an Arend, so he's totally neutral in this matter. I think we'd have to accept his

interpretation of the affair."
Greldik's sailors had begun to climb the rigging by now, and they clung to the ropes like great, evil-looking apes, fingering their weapons and grinning at the Murgo.
"There is yet another way," the Murgo said ominously.
Garion could feel a force beginning to build, and a faint sound seemed to echo inside his head. He drew himself up, putting his hands on the wooden rail in front of him. He felt a terrible weakness, but he steeled himself and tried to gather his strength.
"That's enough of that," Aunt Pol said crisply, coming up on deck with Durnik and Ce'Nedra behind her.
"We were merely having a little legal discussion," Barak said innocently.
"I know what you were doing," she snapped. Her eyes were angry. She looked coldly across the intervening stretch of river at the Murgo.
"You'd better leave," she told him.
"I have something to retrieve first," the man in the boat called back.
"I'd forget about it!"
"We'll see," he said. He straightened and began muttering as if to himself, his hands moving rapidly in a series of intricate gestures. Garion felt something pushing at him almost like a wind, though the air was completely still.
"Be sure you get it right," Aunt Pol advised quietly. "If you forget even the tiniest part of it, it'll explode in your face."
The man in the boat froze, and a faintly worried frown crossed his face. The secret wind that had been pushing at Garion stopped. The man began again, his fingers weaving in the air and his face fixed with concentration.
"You do it like this, Grolim," Aunt Pol said. She moved her hand slightly, and Garion felt a sudden rush as if the wind pushing at him had turned and begun to blow the other way. The Grolim threw his hands up and reeled back, stumbling and falling into the bottom of his boat. As if it had been given a heavy push, the boat surged backward several yards.
The Grolim half raised, his eyes wide and his face deathly pale.
"Return to your master, dog," Aunt Pol said scathingly. "Tell him to beat you for not learning your lessons properly."
The Grolim spoke quickly to the Nyissans at the oars, and they immediately turned the boat and rowed back toward the slave ship.
"We had a nice little fight brewing there, Polgara," Barak complained. "Why did you have to spoil it?"
"Grow up," she ordered bluntly. Then she turned on Garion, her eyes blazing and the white lock at her brow like a streak of fire. "You idiot! You refuse any kind of instruction, and then you burst out like a raging bull. Have you the slightest conception of what an uproar translocation causes? You've alerted every Grolim in Sthiss Tor to the fact that we're here."
"He was dying," Garion protested, gesturing helplessly at the slave lying on the wharf. "I had to do something."
"He was dead as soon as he hit the water," she said flatly. "Look at him."
The slave had stiffened into an arched posture of mortal agony, his head twisted back and his mouth agape. He was obviously dead.
"What happened to him?" Garion asked, feeling suddenly sick.
"The leeches are poisonous. Their bites paralyze their victims so that they can feed on them undisturbed. The bites stopped his heart. You exposed us to the Grolims for the sake of a dead man."
"He wasn't dead when I did it!" Garion shouted at her. "He was screaming for help." He was angrier than he had ever been in his life.
"He was beyond help." Her voice was cold, even brutal.
"What kind of monster are you?" he asked from between clenched teeth. "Don't you have any feelings? You'd have just let him die, wouldn't you?"

"I don't think this is the time or place to discuss it."
"No! This is the time-right now, Aunt Pol. You're not even human, did you know that? You left being human behind so long ago that you can't even remember where you lost it. You're four thousand years old. Our whole lives go by while you blink your eyes. We're just an entertainment for you - an hour's diversion. You manipulate us like puppets for your own amusement. Well, I'm tired of being manipulated. You and I are finished!"
It probably went further than he'd intended, but his anger had finally run away with him, and the words seemed to rush out before he could stop them.
She looked at him, her face as pale as if he had suddenly struck her. Then she drew herself up. "You stupid boy," she said in a voice that was all the more terrible because it was so quiet. "Finished? You and I? How can you even begin to understand what I've had to do to bring you to this world? You've been my only care for over a thousand years. I've endured anguish and loss and pain beyond your ability to understand what the words mean - all for you. I've lived in poverty and squalor for hundreds of years at a time - all for you. I gave up a sister I loved more than my life itself - all for you. I've gone through fire and despair worse than fire a dozen times over - all for you. And you think this has all been an entertainment for me? - some idle amusement? You think the kind of care I've devoted to you for a thousand years and more comes cheaply? You and I will never be finished, Belgarion. Never! We will go on together until the end of days if necessary. We will never be finished. You owe me too much for that!"
There was a dreadful silence. The others, shocked by the intensity of Aunt Pol's words, stood staring first at her and then at Garion.
Without speaking further, she turned and went below decks again. Garion looked around helplessly, suddenly terribly ashamed and terribly alone.
"I had to do it, didn't I?" he asked of no one in particular and not entirely sure exactly what it was that he meant.
They all looked at him, but no one answered his question.

Chapter Twenty-six

BY MIDAFTERNOON THE CLOUDS had rolled in again, and the thunder began to rumble off in the distance as the rain swept in to drown the steaming city once more.
The afternoon thunderstorm seemed to come at the same time each day, and they had even grown accustomed to it. They all moved below deck and sat sweltering as the rain roared down on the deck above them.
Garion sat stifliy, his back planted against a rough-hewn oak rib of the ship and watched Aunt Pol, his face set stubbornly and his eyes unforgiving.
She ignored him and sat talking quietly with Ce'Nedra.
Captain Greldik came through the narrow companionway door, his face and beard streaming water. "The Drasnian-Droblek-is here," he told them. "He says he's got word for you."
"Send him in," Barak said.
Droblek squeezed his vast bulk through the narrow door. He was totally drenched from the rain and stood dripping on the Hoor. He wiped his face. "It's wet out there," he commented.
"We noticed," Hettar said.
"I've received a message," Droblek told Aunt Pol. "It's from Prince Kheldar."
"Finally," she said.
"He and Belgarath are coming downriver," Droblek reported. "As closely as I can make out, they should be here in a few days - a week at the most. The messenger isn't very coherent."
Aunt Pol looked at him inquiringly.
"Fever," Droblek explained. "The man's a Drasnian, so he's reliable - one of my agents at an upcountry trading post - but he's picked up one of the diseases

that infest this stinking swamp. He's a little delirious just now. We hope we can break the fever in a day or so and get some sense out of him. I came as soon as I got the general idea of his message. I thought you'd want to know immediately."
"We appreciate your concern," Aunt Pol said.
"I'd have sent a servant," Droblek explained, "but messages sometimes go astray in Sthiss Tor, and servants sometimes get things twisted around." He grinned suddenly. "That's not the real reason, of course."
Aunt Pol smiled, "Of course not."
"A fat man tends to stay in one place and let others do his walking around for him. From the tone of King Rhodar's message, I gather that this business might be the most important thing happening in the world just now. I wanted to take part in it." He made a wry face. "We all lapse into childishness from time to time, I suppose."
"How serious is the condition of the messenger?" Aunt Pol asked.
Droblek shrugged. "Who can say? Half of these pestilential fevers in Nyissa don't even have names, and we can't really tell one from another. Sometimes people die very quickly from them; sometimes they linger for weeks. Now and then someone even recovers. About all we can do is make them comfortable and wait to see what happens."
"I'll come at once," Aunt Pol said, rising. "Durnik, would you get me the green bag from our packs? I'll need the herbs I have in it."
"It's not always a good idea to expose oneself to some of these fevers, my Lady," Droblek cautioned.
"I won't be in any danger," she said. "I want to question your messenger closely, and the only way I'll be able to get any answers from him is to rid him of his fever."
"Durnik and I'll come along," Barak offered.
She looked at him.
"It doesn't hurt to be on the safe side," the big man said, belting on his sword.
"If you wish." She put on her cloak and turned up the hood. "This may take most of the night," she told Greldik. "There are Grolims about, so have your sailors stay alert. Put a few of the more sober ones on watch."
"Sober, my Lady?" Greldik asked innocently.
"I've heard the singing coming from the crew's quarters, Captain," she said a bit primly, "Chereks don't sing unless they're drunk. Keep the lid on your ale-barrel tonight. Shall we go, Droblek?"
"At once, my Lady," the fat man assented with a sly look at Greldik.
Garion felt a certain relief after they had gone. The strain of maintaining his rancor in Aunt Pol's presence had begun to wear on him. He found himself in a difficult position. The horror and self-loathing which had gnawed at him since he had unleashed the dreadful fire upon Chamdar in the Wood of the Dryads had grown until he could scarcely bear it. He looked forward to each night with dread, for his dreams were always the same. Over and over again he saw Chamdar, his face burned away, pleading, "Master, have mercy." And over and over again he saw the awful blue flame that had come from his own hand in answer to that agony. The hatred he had carried since Val Alorn had died in that flame. His revenge had been so absolute that there was no possible way he could evade or shift the responsibility for it. His outburst that morning had been directed almost more at himself than at Aunt Pol, He had called her a monster, but it was the monster within himself he hated. The dreadful catalogue of what she had suffered over uncounted years for him and the passion with which she had spoken - evidence of the pain his words had caused her - twisted searingly in his mind. He was ashamed, so ashamed that he could not even bear to look into the faces of his friends. He sat alone and vacant-eyed with Aunt Pol's words thundering over

and over in his mind.
The rain slackened on the deck above them as the storm passed. Swirling little eddies of raindrops ran across the muddy surface of the river in the fitful wind. The sky began to clear, and the sun sank into the roiling clouds, staining them an angry red. Garion went up on deck to wrestle alone with his troubled conscience.
After a while he heard a light step behind him. "I suppose you're proud of yourself?" Ce'Nedra asked acidly.
"Leave me alone."
"I don't think so. I think I want to tell you just exactly how we all felt about your little speech this morning."
"I don't want to hear about it."
"That's too bad. I'm going to tell you anyway."
"I won't listen."
"Oh yes, you will," She took him by the arm and turned him around. Her eyes were blazing and her tiny face filled with a huge anger. "What you did was absolutely inexcusable," she said. "Your Aunt raised you from a baby. She's been a mother to you."
"My mother's dead."
"The Lady Polgara's the only mother you ever knew, and what did you give her for thanks? You called her a monster. You accused her of not caring."
"I'm not listening to you," Garion cried. Knowing that it was childish - even infantile - he put his hands over his ears. The Princess Ce'Nedra always seemed to bring out the worst in him.
"Move your hands!" she commanded in a ringing voice. "You're going to hear me even if I have to scream."
Garion, afraid that she meant it, took his hands away.
"She carned you when you were a baby," Ce'Nedra went on, seeming to know exactly where the sorest spot on Garion's wounded conscience lay. "She watched your very first steps. She fed you; she watched over you; she held you when you were afraid or hurt. Does that sound like a monster? She watches you all the time, did you know that? If you even so much as stumble, she almost reaches out to catch you. I've seen her cover you when you're asleep. Does that sound like someone who doesn't care?"
"You're talking about something you don't understand," Garion told her. "Please, just leave me alone."
"Please?" she repeated mockingly. "What a strange time for you to remember your manners. I didn't hear you saying please this morning. I didn't hear a single please. I didn't hear any thank you's either. Do you know what you are, Garion? You're a spoiled child, that's what you are."
That did it! To have this pampered, willful little princess call him a spoiled child was more than Garion could bear. Infuriated, he began to shout at her. Most of what he said was wildly incoherent, but the shouting made him feel better.
They started with accusations, but the argument soon degenerated into name-calling. Ce'Nedra was screeching like a Camaar fishwife, and Garion's voice cracked and warbled between a manly baritone and a boyish tenor. They shook their fingers in each other's faces and shouted. Ce'Nedra stamped her feet, and Garion waved his arms. All in all, it was a splendid little fight. Garion felt much better when it was over. Yelling insults at Ce'Nedra was an innocent diversion compared to some of the deadly things he'd said to Aunt Pol that morning, and it allowed him to vent his confusion and anger harmlessly.
In the end, of course, Ce'Nedra resorted to tears and fled, leaving him feeling more foolish than ashamed. He fumed a bit, muttering a few choice insults he hadn't had the opportunity to deliver, and then he sighed and leaned pensively on the rail to watch night settle in over the dank city.

Though he would not have cared to admit it, even to himself, he was grateful to the princess. Their descent into absurdity had cleared his head. Quite clearly now he saw that he owed Aunt Pol an apology. He had lashed out at her out of his own sense of deep-seated guilt, trying somehow to shift the blame to her. Quite obviously there was no way to evade his own responsibility. Having accepted that, he seemed for some reason to feel better.

It grew darker. The tropical night was heavy, and the smell of rotting vegetation and stagnant water rolled in out of the trackless swamps. A vicious little insect crawled down inside his tunic and began to bite him somewhere between his shoulders where he could not reach.

There was absolutely no warning - no sound or lurch of the ship or any hint of danger. His arms were seized from behind and a wet cloth was pressed firmly over his mouth and nose. He tried to struggle, but the hands holding him were very strong. He tried to twist his head to get his face clear enough to shout for help. The cloth smelled strange - cloying, sickeningly sweet, thick somehow. He began to feel dizzy, and his struggles grew weaker. He made one last effort before the dizziness overcame him and he sank down into unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-seven

THEY WERE IN A LONG HALLWAY of some sort. Garion could see the flagstone floor quite clearly. Three men were carrying him face down, and his head bobbed and swung on his neck uncomfortably. His mouth was dry, and the thick, sweet smell that had impregnated the cloth they had crushed to his face lingered. He raised his head, trying to look around.

"He's awake," the man holding one of his arms said.

"Finally," one of the others muttered. "You held the cloth to his face too long, Issus."

"I know what I'm doing," the first one said.

"Put him down."

"Can you stand?" Issus asked Garion. His shaved head was stubbled, and he had a long scar running from his forehead to his chin directly through the puckered vacancy of an empty eye-socket. His belted robe was stained and spotted.

"Get up," Issus ordered in a hissing kind of voice. He nudged Garion with his foot. Garion struggled to rise. His knees were shaky, and he put his hand on the wall to steady himself. The stones were damp and covered with a kind of mold.

"Bring him," Issus told the others. They took Garion's arms and halfdragged, half-carried him down the damp passageway behind the oneeyed man. When they came out of the corridor, they were in a vaulted area that seemed not so much like a room but rather a large roofed place. Huge pillars, covered with carvings, supported the soaring ceiling, and small oil lamps hung on long chains from above or sat on little stone shelves on the pillars. There was a confused sense of movement as groups of men in varicolored robes drifted from place to place in a kind of langorous stupor.

"You," Issus snapped at a plump young man with dreamy eyes, "tell Sadi, the chief eunuch, that we have the boy."

"Tell him yourself," the young man said in a piping voice. "I don't take orders from your kind, Issus."

Issus slapped the plump young man sharply across the face.

"You hit me!" the plump one wailed, putting his hand to his mouth. "You made my lip bleed - see?" He held out his hand to show the blood.

"If you don't do what I tell you to do, I'll cut your fat throat," Issus told him in a flat, unemotional voice.

"I'm going to tell Sadi what you did."

"Go ahead. And as long as you're there, tell him that we've got the boy the queen wanted."

The plump young man scurried away.
"Eunuchs!" One of the men holding Garion's arm spat.
"They have their uses," the other said with a coarse laugh.
"Bring the boy," Issus ordered. "Sadi doesn't like to be kept waiting."
They pulled Garion across the lighted area.
A group of wretched-looking men with unkempt hair and beards sat chained together on the floor. "Water," one of them croaked. "Please." He stretched out an imploring hand.
Issus stopped and stared at the slave in amazement. "Why does this one still have its tongue?" he demanded of the guard who stood over the slaves.
The guard shrugged. "We haven't had time to attend to that yet."
"Take time," Issus told him. "If one of the priests hear it talk, they'll have you questioned. You wouldn't like that."
"I'm not afraid of the priests," the guard said, but he looked nervously over his shoulder.
"Be afraid," Issus advised him. "And water these animals. They're no good to anybody dead." He started to lead the men holding Garion through a shadowy area between two pillars, then stopped again. "Get out of my way," he said to something lying in the shadows. Grudgingly, the thing began to move. With revulsion Garion realized that it was a large snake.
"Get over there with the others," Issus told the snake. He pointed toward a dimly lighted corner where a large mass seemed to be undulating, moving with a kind of sluggish seething. Faintly Garion could hear the dry hiss of scales rubbing together. The snake which had barred their way flicked a nervous tongue at Issus, then slithered toward the dim corner.
"Someday you're going to get bitten, Issus," one of the men warned. "They don't like being ordered around."
Issus shrugged indifferently and moved on.
"Sadi wants to talk to you," the plump young eunuch said spitefully to Issus as they approached a large polished door. "I told him that you hit me. Maas is with him."
"Good," Issus said. He pushed the door open. "Sadi," he called sharply, "tell your friend I'm coming in. I don't want him making any mistakes."
"He knows you, Issus," a voice on the other side of the door said. "He won't do anything by mistake."
Issus went in and closed the door behind him.
"You can leave now," one of the men holding Garion told the young eunuch.
The plump one sniffed. "I go where Sadi tells me to go."
"And come running when Sadi whistles, too."
"That's between Sadi and me, isn't it?"
"Bring him in," Issus ordered, opening the door again.
The two men pushed Garion into the room. "We'll wait out here," one of them said nervously.
Issus laughed harshly, pushed the door shut with his foot, and pulled Garion to the front of a table where a single oil lamp flickered with a tiny flame that barely held back the darkness. A thin man with deadlooking eyes sat at the table, lightly stroking his hairless head with the long fingers of one hand.
"Can you speak, boy?" he asked Garion. His voice had a strange contralto quality to it, and his silk robe was a solid crimson rather than varicolored.
"Could I have a drink of water?" Garion asked.
"In a minute."
"I'll take my money now, Sadi," Issus said.
"As soon as we're sure this is the right boy," Sadi replied.
"Ask it what its name is," a hissing whisper said from the darkness behind Garion.
"I will, Maas." Sadi looked faintly annoyed at the suggestion. "I've done this

before."
"You're taking too long," the whisper said.
"Say your name, boy," Sadi told Garion.
"Doroon," Garion lied quickly. "I'm really very thirsty."
"Do you take me for a fool, Issus?" Sadi asked. "Did you think just any boy would satisfy me?"
"This is the boy you told me to fetch," Issus said. "I can't help it if your information was wrong."
"You say your name is Doroon?" Sadi asked.
"Yes," Garion said. "I'm the cabin-boy on Captain Greldik's ship. Where are we?"
"I'll ask the questions, boy," Sadi said.
"It's lying," the sibilant whisper came from behind Garion.
"I know that, Maas," Sadi replied calmly. "They always do at first."
"We don't have time for all this," the hiss said. "Give it oret. I need the truth immediately."
"Whatever you say, Maas," Sadi agreed. He rose to his feet and disappeared momentarily into the shadows behind the table. Garion heard a clink and then the sound of water pouring. "Remembering that this was your idea, Maas. If she becomes angry about it, I don't want to be the one she blames."
"She'll understand, Sadi."
"Here, boy," Sadi offered, coming back into the light and holding out a brown earthenware cup.
"Uh-no, thank you," Garion said. "I guess I'm not really thirsty after all."
"You might as well drink it, boy," Sadi told him. "If you don't, Issus will hold you, and I'll pour it down your throat. It isn't going to hurt you.
"Drink," the hissing voice commanded.
"Better do as they say," Issus advised.
Helplessly Garion took the cup. The water had a strangely bitter taste and seemed to burn his tongue.
"Much better," Sadi said, resuming his seat behind the table. "Now, you say your name is Doroon?"
"Yes."
"Where are you from, Doroon?"
"Sendaria."
"Where exactly in Sendaria?"
"Near Darine on the north coast."
"What are you doing on a Cherek ship?"
"Captain Greldik's a friend of my father," Garion said. For some reason he suddenly wanted to explain further. "My father wanted me to learn about ships. He says that being a sailor's better than being a farmer. Captain Greldik agreed to teach me what I'd need to know to be a sailor. He says I'll be good at it because I didn't even get seasick, and I'm not afraid to climb up the ropes that hold the sails in place, and I'm almost strong enough to pull an oar already, and-"
"What did you say your name was, boy?"
"Garion - I mean - uh - Doroon. Yes, Doroon, and-"
"How old are you, Garion?"
"Fifteen last Erastide. Aunt Pol says that people who are born on Erastide are very lucky, only I haven't noticed that I'm luckier than-"
"And who is Aunt Pol?"
"She's my aunt. We used to live on Faldor's farm, but Mister Wolf came and we-"
"Do people call her something besides Aunt Pol?"
"King Fulrach called her Polgara - that was when Captain Brendig took us all to the palace in Sendar. Then we went to King Anheg's palace in Val Alorn, and-"
"Who's Mister Wolf?"
"My grandfather. They call him Belgarath. I didn't used to believe it, but I

guess it has to be true because one time he-"
"And why did you all leave Faldor's farm?"
"I didn't know why at first, but then I found out that it was because Zedar stole the Orb of Aldur off the pommel of the Sword of the Rivan King, and we've got to get it back before Zedar can take it to Torak and wake him up and-"
"This is the boy we want," the hissing voice whispered.
Garion turned around slowly. The room seemed brighter now, as if the tiny flame were putting out more light. In the corner, rearing out of its own coils and with a strangely flattened neck and glowing eyes was a very large snake.
"We can take it to Salmissra now," the snake hissed. It lowered itself to the floor and crawled across to Garion. He felt its cold, dry nose touch his leg, and then, though a hidden part of his mind shrieked, he stood unresisting as the scaly body slowly mounted his leg and coiled upward until the snake's head reared beside his face and its flickering tongue touched his face. "Be very good, boy," the snake hissed in his ear, "very, very good." The reptile was heavy, and its coils thick and cold.
"This way, boy," Sadi told Garion, rising to his feet.
"I want my money," Issus demanded.
"Oh," Sadi said almost contemptuously, "that. It's in that pouch there on the table." Then he turned and led Garion from the room.
"Garion." The dry voice that had always been in his mind spoke quietly to him. "I want you to listen carefully. Don't say anything or let anything show on your face. Just listen to me. "
"Who are you?" Garion asked silently, struggling with the fog in his brain.
"You know me, " the dry voice told him. "Now listen. They've given you something that makes you do what they want you to do. Don't fight against it. Just relax and don't fight it. "
"But - I said things I shouldn't have. I-"
"That doesn't matter now. Just do as I say. If anything happens and it starts to get dangerous, don't fight. I'll take care of it - but I can't do it if you're struggling. You have to relax so that I can do what has to be done. If you suddenly find yourself doing things or saying things you don't understand, don't be afraid and don't try to fight. It won't be them; it will be me."
Comforted by this silent reassurance, Garion walked obediently beside Sadi the eunuch while the coils of the snake, Maas, lay heavily about his chest and shoulders and the bluntly pointed reptilian head rested, almost nuzzling, against his cheek.
They entered a large room where the walls were heavily draped and crystal oil lamps hung glittering on silver chains. An enormous stone statue, its upper third lost in the shadows high above, raised its mass titanically at one end of the room, and directly in front of the statue was a low stone platform, carpeted and strewn with cushions. Upon the platform stood a heavy divan that was not quite a chair and not quite a couch.
There was a woman on the divan. Her hair was raven black, cascading in loose coils down her back and across her shoulders. About her head was an intricately wrought golden crown sparkling with jewels. Her gown was white and spun of the filmiest gauze. It did not in any way conceal her body, but rather seemed to be worn only to provide a material to which her jewels and adornments could be attached. Beneath the gauze, her skin was an almost chalky white, and her face was extraordinarily beautiful. Her eyes were pale, even colorless. A large, gold-framed mirror stood on a pedestal at one side of the divan, and the woman lounged at ease, admiring herself in the glass.
Two dozen shaven-headed eunuchs in crimson robes knelt in a cluster to one side of the dais, resting on their haunches and gazing at the woman and the statue behind her with worshipful adoration.
Among the cushions at the side of the divan lolled an indolent, pampered-looking

young man whose head was riot shaved. His hair was elaborately curled, his cheeks were rouged, and his eyes were fantastically made up. He wore only the briefest of loincloths, and his expression was bored and sulky. The woman absently ran the fingers of one hand through his curls as she watched herself in the mirror.
"The queen has visitors," one of the kneeling eunuchs announced in a singsong voice.
"Ah," the others chanted in unison, "visitors."
"Hail, Eternal Salmissra," Sadi the eunuch said, prostrating himself before the dais and the pale-eyed woman.
"What is it, Sadi?" she demanded. Her voice was vibrant and had a strange, dark timbre.
"The boy, my Queen," Sadi announced, his face still pressed to the floor.
"On your knees before the Serpent Queen," the snake hissed in Garion's ear. The coils tightened about Garion's body, and he fell to his knees in their sudden crushing grip.
"Come here, Maas," Salmissra said to the snake.
"The queen summons the beloved serpent," the eunuch intoned. "Ah."
The reptile uncoiled itself from about Garion's body and undulated up to the foot of the divan, reared half its length above the reclining woman and then lowered itself upon her body, its thick length curving, fitting itself to her.
The blunt head reached up to her face, and she kissed it affectionately. The long, forked tongue flickered over her face, and Maas began to whisper sibilantly in her ear. She lay in the embrace of the serpent, listening to its hissing voice and looking at Garion with heavy-lidded eyes.
Then, pushing the reptile aside, the queen rose to her feet and stood over Garion. "Welcome to the land of the snake-people, Belgarion," she said in her purring voice.
The name, which he had heard only from Aunt Pol before, sent a strange shock through Garion, and he tried to shake the fog from his head.
"Not yet,"the dry voice in his mind warned him.
Salmissra stepped down from the dais, her body moving with a sinuous grace beneath her transparent gown. She took one of Garion's arms and drew him gently to his feet; then she touched his face lingeringly. Her hand seemed very cold.
"A pretty young man," she breathed, almost as if to herself. "So young. So warm." Her look seemed somehow hungry.
A strange confusion seemed to fill Garion's mind. The bitter drink Sadi had given him still lay on his consciousness like a blanket. Beneath it he felt at once afraid and yet strangely attracted to the queen. Her chalky skin and dead eyes were repellent, yet there was a kind of lush invitation about her, an overripe promise of unspeakable delights. Unconsciously he took a step backward.
"Don't be afraid, my Belgarion," she purred at him. "I won't hurt you - not unless you want me to. Your duties here will be very pleasant, and I can teach you things that Polgara hasn't even dreamed of."
"Come away from him, Salmissra," the young man on the dais ordered petulantly. "You know I don't like it when you pay attention to others."
A flicker of annoyance showed in the queen's eyes. She turned and looked rather coldly at the young man. "What you like or don't like doesn't really concern me anymore, Essia," she said.
"What?" Essia cried incredulously.
"Do as I say at once!"
"No, Essia," she told him.
"I'll punish you," he threatened.
"No," she said, "you won't. That sort of thing doesn't amuse me anymore, and all your pouting and tantrums have begun to grow boring. Leave now."
"Leave?" Essia's eyes bulged with disbelief.

"You're dismissed, Essia."
"Dismissed? But you can't live without me. You said so yourself."
"We all say things we don't mean sometimes."
The arrogance went out of the young man like water poured from a bucket. He swallowed hard and began to tremble. "When do you want me to come back?" he whined.
"1 don't, Essia."
"Never?" he gasped.
"Never," she told him. "Now go, and stop making a scene."
"What's to become of me?" Essia cried. He began to weep, the makeup around his eyes running in grotesque streaks down his face.
"Don't be tiresome, Essia," Salmissra said. "Pick up your belongings and leave-now! I have a new consort." She stepped back up on the dais.
"The queen has chosen a consort," the eunuch intoned.
"Ah," the others chanted. "Hail the consort of Eternal Salmissra, most fortunate of men."
T'he sobbing young man grabbed up a pink robe and an ornately carved jewel box. He stumbled down from the dais. "You did this," he accused Garion. "It's all your fault." Suddenly, out of the folds of the robe draped over his arm, he pulled a small dagger. "I'll fix you," he screamed, raising the dagger to strike.
There was no thought this time, no gathering of will. The surge of force came without warning, pushing Essia away, driving him back. He slashed futilely at the air with his little knife. Then the surge was gone.
Essia lunged forward again, his eyes insane and his dagger raised. The surge came again, stronger this time. The young man was spun away. He fell, and his dagger clattered across the floor.
Salmissra, her eyes ablaze, pointed at the prostrate Essia and snapped her fingers twice. So fast that it seemed almost like an arrow loosed from a bow, a small green snake shot from beneath the divan, its mouth agape and its hiss a kind of snarl. It struck once, hitting Essia high on the leg, then slithered quickly to one side and watched with dead eyes.
Essia gasped and turned white with horror. He tried to rise, but his legs and arms suddenly sprawled out from under him on the polished stones. He gave one strangled cry and then the convulsions began. His heels pattered rapidly on the floor, and his arms flailed wildly. His eyes turned vacant and staring, and a green froth shot like a fountain from his mouth. His body arched back, every muscle writhing beneath his skin, and his head began to pound on the floor. He gave one thrashing, convulsive leap, his entire body bounding up from the floor. When he came down, he was dead.
Salmissra watched him die, her pale eyes expressionless, incurious, with no hint of anger or regret.
"Justice is done," the eunuch announced.
"Swift is the justice of the Queen of the Serpent People," the others replied.

Chapter Twenty-eight

THERE WERE OTHER THINGS they made him drink - some bitter, some sickeningly sweet - and his mind seemed to sink deeper with each cup he raised to his lips. His eyes began to play strange tricks on him. It seemed somehow that the world had suddenly been drowned and that all of this was taking place under water. The walls wavered and the figures of the kneeling eunuchs seemed to sway and undulate like seaweed in the endless wash and eddy of tide and current. The lamps sparkled like jewels, casting out brilliant colors in slow-falling showers. Garion slumped, all bemused, on the dais near Salmissra's divan, his eyes filled with light and his head washed clean of all thought. There was no

sense of time, no desire, no will. He briefly and rather vaguely remembered his friends, but the knowledge that he would never see them again brought only a brief, passing regret, a temporary melancholy that was rather pleasant. He even shed one crystal tear over his loss, but the tear landed on his wrist and sparkled with such an unearthly beauty that he lost himself utterly in contemplating it.

"How did he do it?" the queen's voice said somewhere behind him. Her voice was so beautifully musical that the sound of it pierced Garion's very soul.

"It has power," Maas replied, his serpent voice thrilling Garion's nerves, vibrating them like the strings of a lute. "Its power is untried, undirected, but it is very strong. Beware of this one, beloved Salmissra. It can destroy quite by accident."

"I will control him," she said.

"Perhaps," the snake replied.

"Sorcery requires will," Salmissra pointed out. "I will take his will away from him. Your blood is cold, Maas, and you've never felt the fire that fills the veins with the taste of oret or athal or kaldiss. Your passions are also cold, and you can't know how much the body can be used to enslave the will. I'll put his mind to sleep and then smother his will with love."

"Love, Salmissra?" the snake asked, sounding faintly amused.

"The term serves as well as any other," she replied. "Call it appetite, if you wish."

"That I can understand," Maas agreed. "But don't underestimate this one - or overestimate your own power. It does not have an ordinary mind. There's something strange about it that I can't quite penetrate."

"We'll see," she said. "Sadi," she called the eunuch.

"Yes, my Queen?"

"Take the boy. Have him bathed and perfumed. He smells of boats and tar and salt water. I don't like such Alorn smells."

"At once, Eternal Salmissra."

Garion was led away to a place where there was warm water. His clothes were taken from him, and he was immersed and soaped and immersed again. Fragrant oils were rubbed into his skin, and a brief loincloth was tied about his waist. Then he was taken quite firmly by the chin and rouge was applied to his cheeks. It was during this process that he realized that the person painting his face was a woman. Slowly, almost incuriously, he let his eyes move around the bath chamber. He realized then that except for Sadi, everyone there was female. It seemed that something about that should bother him - something having to do with appearing naked in the presence of women - but he could not exactly remember what it was.

When the woman had finished painting his face, Sadi the eunuch took his arm and led him again through the dim, endless corridors back to the room where Salmissra half lay on her divan beneath the statue, admiring herself in the pedestaled mirror beside her.

"Much better," she said, looking Garion up and down with a certain appreciation. "He's much more muscular than I thought. Bring him here."

Sadi led Garion to the side of the queen's divan and gently pressed him down onto the cushions where Essia had lounged.

Salmissra reached out with a lingeringly slow hand and brushed her cold fingertips across his face and chest. Her pale eyes seemed to burn, and her lips parted slightly. Garion's eyes fixed themselves on her pale arm. There was no trace of hair on that white skin.

"Smooth," he said vaguely, struggling to focus on that peculiarity.

"Of course, my Belgarion," she murmured. "Serpents are hairless, and I am the queen of the serpents."

Slowly, puzzled, he raised his eyes to the lustrous black tresses tumbling down across one of her white shoulders.

"Only this," she said, touching the curls with a sensuous kind of vanity.
"How?" he asked.
"It's a secret." She laughed. "Someday perhaps I'll show you. Would you like that?"
"I suppose so."
"Tell me, Belgarion," she said, "do you think I'm beautiful?"
"I think so."
"How old would you say I am?" She spread her arms so that he could see her body through the filmy gauze of her gown.
"I don't know," Garion said. "Older than I am, but not too old." A brief flicker of annoyance crossed her face. "Guess," she ordered somewhat harshly.
"Thirty perhaps," he decided, confused.
"Thirty?" Her voice was stricken. Swiftly she turned to her mirror and examined her face minutely. "You're blind, you idiot!" she snapped, still staring at herself in the glass. "That's not the face of a woman of thirty. Twenty-three - twenty-five at the most."
"Whatever you say," he agreed.
"Twenty-three," she stated firmly. "Not a single day over twentythree."
"Of course," he said mildly.
"Would you believe that I'm nearly sixty?" she demanded, her eyes suddenly flint-hard.
"No," Garion denied. "I couldn't believe that - not sixty."
"What a charming boy you are, Belgarion," she breathed at him, her glance melting. Her fingers returned to his face, touching, stroking, caressing.
Slowly, beneath the pale skin of her naked shoulder and throat, curious patches of color began to appear, a faint mottling of green and purple that seemed to shift and pulsate, growing first quite visible and then fading. Her lips parted again, and her breathing grew faster. The mottling spread down her torso beneath her transparent gown, the colors seeming to writhe beneath her skin.
Maas crept nearer, his dead eyes suddenly coming awake with a strange adoration. The vivid pattern of his own scaly skin so nearly matched the colors that began to emerge upon the body of the Serpent Queen that when he draped a caressing coil across one of her shoulders it became impossible to say exactly where lay the boundary between the snake and the woman.
Had Garion not been in a half stupor, he would have recoiled from the queen. Her colorless eyes and mottled skin seemed reptilian, and her openly lustful expression spoke of some dreadful hunger. Yet there was a curious attraction about her. Helplessly he felt drawn by her blatant sensuality.
"Come closer, my Belgarion," she ordered softly. "I'm not going to hurt you." Her eyes gloated over her possession of him.
Not far from the dais, Sadi the eunuch cleared his throat. "Divine Queen," he announced, "the emissary of Taur Urgas requests a word with you."
"Of Ctuchik, you mean," Salmissra said, looking faintly annoyed. Then a thought seemed to cross her mind, and she smiled maliciously. The mottling of her skin faded. "Bring the Grolim in," she instructed Sadi.
Sadi bowed and withdrew to return a moment later with a scar-faced man in the garb of a Murgo.
"Give welcome to the emissary of Taur Urgas," the eunuch chanted. "Welcome," the chorus replied.
"Carefully now, "the dry voice in his mind said to Garion. "That's the one we saw at the harbor. "
Garion looked more carefully at the Murgo and realized that it was true.
"Hail, Eternal Salmissra," the Grolim said perfunctorily, bowing first to the queen and then to the statue behind her. "Taur Urgas, King of Cthol Murgos, sends greetings to the Spirit of Issa and to his handmaiden."
"And are there no greetings from Ctuchik, High Priest of the Grolims?" she

asked, her eyes bright.
"Of course," the Grolim said, "but those are customarily given in private."
"Is your errand here on behalf of Taur Urgas or of Ctuchik?" she inquired, turning to examine her reflection in the mirror.
"May we speak in private, your Highness?" the Grolim asked. "We are in private," she said.
"But-" He looked around at the kneeling eunuchs in the room.
"My body servants," she said. "A Nyissan queen is never left alone. You should know that by now."
"And that one?" The Grolim pointed at Garion.
"He is also a servant - but of a slightly different kind."
The Grolim shrugged. "Whatever you wish. I salute you in the name of Ctuchik, High Priest of the Grolims and Disciple of Torak."
"The Handmaiden of Issa salutes Ctuchik of Rak Cthol," she responded formally. "What does the Grolim High Priest want of me?"
"The boy, your Highness," the Grolim said bluntly.
"Which boy is that?"
"The boy you stole from Polgara and who now sits at your feet."
She laughed scornfully. "Convey my regrets to Ctuchik," she said, "but that would be impossible."
"It's unwise to deny the wishes of Ctuchik," the Grolim warned.
"It's even more unwise to make demands of Salmissra in her own palace," she said. "What is Ctuchik prepared to offer for this boy?"
"His eternal friendship."
"What need has the Serpent Queen of friends?"
"Gold, then," the Grolim offered with annoyance.
"I know the secret of the red gold of Angarak," she told him. "I don't wish to become a slave to it. Keep your gold, Grolim."
"Might I say that the game you play is very dangerous, your Highness?" the Grolim said coolly. "You've already made Polgara your enemy. Can you afford the enmity of Ctuchik as well?"
"I'm not afraid of Polgara," she answered. "Nor of Ctuchik."
"The queen's bravery is remarkable," he said dryly.
"This is beginning to get tiresome. My terms are very simple. Tell Ctuchik that I have Torak's enemy, and I will keep him - unless-" She paused.
"Unless what, your Highness?"
"If Ctuchik will speak to Torak for me, an agreement might be reached."
"What sort of agreement?"
"I will give the boy to Torak as a wedding gift."
The Grolim blinked.
"If Torak will make me his bride and give me immortality, I will deliver Belgarion up to him."
"All the world knows that the Dragon God of Angarak is bound in slumber," the Grolim objected.
"But he will not sleep forever," Salmissra said flatly. "The priests of Angarak and the sorcerers of Aloria always seem to forget that Eternal Salmissra can read the signs in the heavens as clearly as they. The day of Torak's awakening is at hand. Tell Ctuchik that upon the day that I am wed to Torak, Belgarion will be in his hands. Until that day, the boy is mine."
"I shall deliver your message to Ctuchik," the Grolim said with a stiff, icy bow.
"Leave, then," she told him with an airy wave of her hand.
"So that is it, " the voice in Garion's mind said as the Grolim left. "I should have known, I suppose."
Maas the serpent suddenly raised his head, his great neck flaring and his eyes burning. "Beware!" he hissed.

"Of the Grolim?" Salmissra laughed. "I have nothing to fear from him."
"Not the Grolim," Maas said. "That one." He flickered his tongue at Garion. "Its mind is awake."
"That's impossible," she objected.
"Nevertheless, its mind is awake. It has to do, I think, with that metal thing around its neck."
"Remove the ornament then," she told the snake.
Maas lowered his length to the floor and slid around the divan toward Garion.
"Remain very still, " Garion's inner voice told him. "Don't try to fight. "
Numbly, Garion watched the blunt head draw closer.
Maas raised his head, his hood flaring. His nervous tongue darted. Slowly he leaned forward. His nose touched the silver amulet hanging about Garion's neck. There was a bright blue spark as the reptile's head came in contact with the amulet. Garion felt the familiar surge, but tightly controlled now, focused down to a single point. Maas recoiled, and the spark from the amulet leaped out, sizzling through the air, linking the silver disc to the reptile's nose. The snake's eyes began to shrivel and steam poured from his nostrils and his gaping mouth.
Then the spark was gone, and the body of the dead snake writhed and twisted convulsively on the polished stone floor of the chamber.
"Maasl" Salmissra shrieked.
The eunuchs scrambled out of the way of the wildly threshing body of the snake.
"My Queen!" a shaved-headed, functionary gibbered from the door, "the world is ending!"
"What?" Salmissra tore her eyes from the convulsions of the snake.
"The sun has gone out! Noon is as dark as midnight! The city is gone mad with terror!"

Chapter Twenty-nine

IN THE TUMULT WHICH FOLLOWED that announcement, Garion sat quietly on the cushions beside Salmissra's throne. The quiet voice in his mind, however, was speaking to him rapidly. "Stay very still,"the voice told him. "Don't say anything, and don't do anything."
"Get my astronomers here immediately!" Salmissra ordered. "I want to know why I wasn't warned about this eclipse."
"It's not an eclipse, my Queen," the bald functionary wailed, groveling on the polished floor not far from the still-writhing Maas. "The dark came like a great curtain. It was like a moving wall - no wind, no rain, no thunder. It swallowed the sun without a sound." He began to sob brokenly. "We shall never see the sun again."
"Stop that, you idiot," Salmissra snapped. "Get on your feet. Sadi, take this babbling fool out of here and go look at the sky. Then come back to me here. I have to know what's going on."
Sadi shook himself almost like a dog coming out of the water and pulled his fascinated eyes off the dead, fixed grin on the face of Maas. He pulled the blubbering functionary to his feet and led him out of the chamber.
Salmissra turned then on Garion. "How did you do that?" she demanded, pointing at the twitching form of Maas.
"I don't know," he said. His mind was still sunk in fog. Only the quiet corner where the voice lived was alert.
"Take off that amulet," she commanded.
Obediently, Garion reached his hands toward the medallion. Suddenly his hands froze. They would not move. He let them fall. "I can't," he said.
"Take it from him," she ordered one of the eunuchs. The man glanced once at the dead snake, then stared at Garion. He shook his head and backed away in fright.

"Do as I say!" the Snake Queen ordered sharply.
From somewhere in the palace came a hollow, reverberating crash. There was the sound of nails screeching out of heavy wood and the avalanche noise of a wall collapsing. Then, a long way down one of the dim corridors, someone screamed in agony.
The dry consciousness in his mind reached out, probing. "At last, " it said with obvious relief.
"What's going on out there?" Salmissra blazed.
"Come with me, " the voice in Garion's mind said. "I need your help. " Garion put his hands under him and started to push himself up. "No. This way. " A strange image of separation rose in Garion's mind.
Unthinking, he willed the separation and felt himself rising and yet not moving. Suddenly he had no sense of his body - no arms or legs - yet he seemed to move. He saw himself - his own body - sitting stupidly on the cushions at Salmissra's feet.
"Hurry," the voice said to him. It was no longer inside his mind but seemed to be somewhere beside him. A dim shape was there, formless but somehow very familiar.
The fog that had clouded Garion's wits was gone, and he felt very alert. "Who are you?" he demanded of the shape beside him.
"There isn't time to explain. Quickly, we have to lead them back before Salmissra has time to do anything."
"Lead who?"
"Polgara and Barak."
"Aunt Pol? Where is she?"
"Come," the voice said urgently.
Together Garion and the strange presence at his side seemed to waft toward the closed door. They passed through it as if it were no more than insubstantial mist and emerged in the corridor outside.
Then they were flying, soaring down the corridor with no sense of air rushing past or even of movement. A moment later they came out into that vast open hall where Issus had first brought Garion when they had entered the palace. There they stopped, hovering in the fir.
Aunt Pol, her splendid eyes ablaze and a fiery nimbus about her, strode through the hall. Beside her hulked the great shaggy bear Garion had seen before. Barak's face seemed vaguely within that bestial head, but there was no humanity in it. The beast's eyes were afire with raging madness, and its mouth gaped horribly.
Desperate guards tried to push the bear back with long pikes, but the beast swiped the pikes away and fell upon the guards. Its vast embrace crushed them, and its flailing claws ripped them open. The trail behind Aunt Pol and the bear was littered with maimed bodies and quivering chunks of flesh.
The snakes which had lain in the corners were seething across the floor, but as they came into contact with the flaming light which surrounded Aunt Pol, they died even as Maas had died.
Methodically, Aunt Pol was blasting down doors with word and gesture. A thick wall barred her way, and she brushed it into rubble as if it had been made of cobwebs.
Barak raged through the dim hall, roaring insanely, destroying everything in his path. A shrieking eunuch tried desperately to climb one of the pillars. The great beast reared up and hooked his claws into the man's back and pulled him down. The shrieks ended abruptly in a spurt of brains and blood when the massive jaws closed with a sickening crunch on the eunuch's head.
"Polgara!" the presence beside Garion shouted soundlessly. "This way!"
Aunt Pol turned quickly.
"Follow us," the presence said. "Hurry!"

Then Garion and that other part of himself were flying back down the corridor toward Salmissra and the semiconscious body they had recently vacated. Behind them came Aunt Pol and the ravening Barak.
Garion and his strange companion passed again through the heavy, closed door. Salmissra, her naked body mottled now with rage rather than lust beneath her transparent gown, stood over the vacant-eyed form on the cushions. "Answer me!" she was shouting. "Answer me!"
"When we get back," the shapeless presence said, "let me handle things. We have to buy some time."
And then they were back. Garion felt his body shudder briefly, and he was looking out through his own eyes again. The fog which had benumbed him before came rushing back. "What?" his lips said, though he had not consciously formed the word.
"I said, is this your doing?" Salmissra demanded.
"Is what my doing?" The voice coming from his lips sounded like his, but there was a subtle difference.
"All of it," she said. "The darkness. The attack on my palace."
"I don't think so. How could I? I'm only a boy."
"Don't lie to me, Belgarion," she demanded. "I know who you are. I know what you are. It has to be you. Belgarath himself could not blot out the sun. I warn you, Belgarion, what you have drunk today is death. Even now the poison in your veins is killing you."
"Why did you do that to me?"
"To keep you. You must have more or you will die. You must drink what only I can give you, and you must drink every day of your life. You're mine, Belgarion, mine!"
Despairing shrieks came from just outside the door.
The Serpent Queen looked up, startled, then she turned to the huge statue behind her, bowed down in a strange ceremonial way and began to weave her hands through the air in a series of intricate gestures. She started to pronounce an involved formula in a language Garion had never heard before, a language filled with guttural hissings and strange cadences.
The heavy door exploded inward, blasted into splinters, and Aunt Pol stood in the shattered doorway, her white lock ablaze and her eyes dreadful. The great bear at her side roared, his teeth dripping blood and with tatters of flesh still hanging from his claws.
"I've warned you, Salmissra." Aunt Pol spoke in a deadly voice.
"Stop where you are, Polgara," the queen ordered. She did not turn around, and her fingers continued their sinuous weaving in the air. "The boy is dying," she said. "Nothing can save him if you attack me."
Aunt Pol stopped. "What have you done?" she demanded.
"Look at him," Salmissra said. "He has drunk athal and kaldiss. Even now their fire is in his veins. He will need more very soon." Her hands still moved in the air, and her face was fixed in extreme concentration. Her lips began moving again in that guttural hissing.
"Is it true?" Aunt Pol's voice echoed in Garion's mind.
"It seems to be, " the dry voice replied. "They made him drink things, and he seems different now. "
Aunt Pol's eyes widened. "Who are you?"
"I've always been here, Polgara. Didn't you know that?"
"Did Garion know?"
"He knows that I'm here. He doesn't know what it means."
"We can talk about that later, " she decided. "Watch very closely. This is what you have to do. " A confused blur of images welled up in Garion's mind. "Do you understand?"
"Of course. I'll show him how. "

"Can't you do it?"
"No, Polgara, " the dry voice said. "The power is his, not mine. Don't worry. He and I understand each other. "
Garion felt strangely alone as the two voices spoke together in his mind.
"Garion. " The dry voice spoke quietly. "I want you to think about your blood."
"My blood?"
"We're going to change it for a moment. "
"Why?"
"To burn away the poison they gave you. Now concentrate on your blood. "
Garion did.
"You want it to be like this. " An image of yellow came into Garion's mind. "Do you understand?"
"Yes. "
"Do it, then. Now. "
Garion put his fingertips to his chest and willed his blood to change. He suddenly felt as if he were on fire. His heart began to pound, and a heavy sweat burst out all over his body.
"A moment longer, " the voice said.
Garion was dying. His altered blood seared through his veins, and he began to tremble violently. His heart hammered in his chest like a tripping sledge. His eyes went dark, and he began to topple slowly forward.
"Now!" the voice demanded sharply. "Change it back. "
Then it was over. Garion's heart stuttered and then faltered back to its normal pace. He was exhausted, but the fog in his brain was gone. "It's done, Polgara, " the other Garion said. "You can do what needs doing now."
Aunt Pol had watched anxiously, but now her face became dreadfully stern. She walked across the polished floor toward the dais. "Salmissra," she said, "turn around and look at me."
The queen's hands were raised above her head now, and the hissing words tumbled from her lips, rising finally to a hoarse shout.
Then, far above them in the shadows near the ceiling, the eyes of the huge statue opened and began to glow a deep emerald fire. A polished jewel on Salmissra's crown began also to burn with the same glow.
The statue moved. The sound it made was a kind of ponderous creaking, deafeningly loud. The solid rock from which the huge shape had been hewn bent and flexed as the statue took a step forward and then another.
"Why-did-you-summon-me?" An enormous voice demanded through stiff, stony lips. The voice reverberated hollowly up from the massive chest.
"Defend thy handmaiden, Great Issa," Salmissra cried, turning to look triumphantly at Aunt Pol. "This evil sorceress hath invaded thy domain to slay me. Her wicked power is so great that none may withstand her. I am thy promised bride, and I place myself under thy protection."
"Who is this who defiles my temple?" the statue demanded in a vast roar. "Who dares to raise her hand against my chosen and beloved?" The emerald eyes flashed in dreadful wrath.
Aunt Pol stood alone in the center of the polished floor with the vast statue looming above her. Her face was unafraid. "You go too far, Salmissra," she said. "This is forbidden."
The Serpent Queen laughed scornfully. "Forbidden? What does your forbidding mean to me? Flee now, or face the wrath of Divine Issa. Contend if you will with a God!"
"If I must," Aunt Pol said. She straightened then and spoke a single word. The roaring in Garion's mind at that word was overwhelming. Then, suddenly, she began to grow. Foot by foot she towered up, rising like a tree, expanding, growing gigantic before Garion's stunned eyes. Within a moment she faced the great stone God as an equal.

"Polgara?" the God's voice sounded puzzled. "Why have you done this?"
"I come in fulfillment of the Prophecy, Lord Issa," she said. "Thy handmaiden hath betrayed thee and thy brothers."
"It cannot be so," Issa said. "She is my chosen one. Her face is the face of my beloved."
"The face is the same," Aunt Pol said, "but this is not the Salmissra beloved of Issa. A hundred Salmissras have served thee in this temple since thy beloved died."
"Died?" the God said incredulously.
"She lies!" Salmissra shrieked. "I am thy beloved, O my Lord. Let not her lies turn thee from me. Kill her."
"The Prophecy approaches its day," Aunt Pol said. "The boy at Salmissra's feet is its fruit. He must be returned to me, or the Prophecy will fail."
"Is the day of the Prophecy come so soon?" the God asked.
"It is not soon, Lord Issa," Aunt Pol said. "It is late. Thy slumber hath encompassed eons."
"Lies! All lies!" Salmissra cried desperately, clinging to the ankle of the huge stone God.
"I must test out the truth of this," the God said slowly. "I have slept long and deeply, and now the world comes upon me unaware."
"Destroy her, O my Lord!" Salmissra demanded. "Her lies are an abomination and a desecration of thy holy presence."
"I will find the truth, Salmissra," Issa said.
Garion felt a brief, enormous touch upon his mind. Something had brushed him - something so vast that his imagination shuddered back from its immensity. Then the touch moved on.
"Ahhh-" The sigh came from the floor. The dead snake Maas stirred. "Ahhh- Let me sleep," it hissed.
"In but a moment," Issa said. "What was your name?"
"I was called Maas," the snake said. "I was counsellor and companion to Eternal Salmissra. Send me back, Lord. I cannot bear to live again."
"Is this my beloved Salmissra?" the God asked.
"Her successor." Maas sighed. "Thy beloved priestess died thousands of years ago. Each new Salmissra is chosen because of her resemblance to thy beloved."
"Ah," Issa said with pain in his huge voice. "And what was this woman's purpose in removing Belgarion from Polgara's care?"
"She sought alliance with Torak," Maas said. "She thought to trade Belgarion to the Accursed One in exchange for the immortality his embrace would bestow upon her."
"His embrace? My priestess would submit to the foul embrace of my mad brother?"
"Willingly, Lord," Maas said. "It is her nature to seek the embrace of any man or God or beast who passes."
A look of repugnance flickered across Issa's stony face. "Has it always been so?" he asked.
"Always, Lord," Maas said. "The potion which maintains her youth and semblance to thy beloved sets her veins afire with lust. That fire remains unquenched until she dies. Let me go, Lord. The pain!"
"Sleep, Maas," Issa granted sorrowfully. "Take my thanks with you down into silent death."
"Ahhh-" Maas sighed and sank down again.
"I too will return to slumber," Issa said. "I must not remain, lest my presence rouse Torak to that war which would unmake the world." The great statue stepped back to the spot where it had stood for thousands of years. The deafening creak and groan of flexing rock again filled the huge chamber. "Deal with this woman as it pleases thee, Polgara," the stone God said. "Only spare her life out of remembrance of my beloved."

"I will, Lord Issa," Aunt Pol said, bowing to the statue.
"And carry my love to my brother, Aldur," the hollow voice said, fading even as it spoke.
"Sleep, Lord," Aunt Pol said. "May thy slumber wash away thy grief."
"No!" Salmissra wailed, but the green fire had already died in the statue's eyes, and the jewel on her crown flickered and went dark.
"It's time, Salmissra," Aunt Pol, vast and terrible, announced.
"Don't kill me, Polgara," the queen begged, falling to her knees. "Please don't kill me."
"I'm not going to kill you, Salmissra," Aunt Pol told her. "I promised Lord Issa that I would spare your life."
"I didn't make any such promise," Barak said from the doorway. Garion looked sharply at his huge friend, dwarfed now by Aunt Pol's immensity. The bear was gone, and in its place the big Cherek stood, sword in hand.
"No, Barak. I'm going to solve the problem of Salmissra once and for all." Aunt Pol turned back to the groveling queen. "You will live, Salmissra. You'll live for a very long time - eternally, perhaps."
An impossible hope dawned in Salmissra's eyes. Slowly she rose to her feet and looked up at the huge figure rising above her. "Eternally, Polgara?" she asked.
"But I must change you," Aunt Pol said. "The poison you've drunk to keep you young and beautiful is slowly killing you. Even now its traces are beginning to show on your face."
The queen's hands flew to her cheeks, and she turned quickly to look into her mirror.
"You're decaying, Salmissra," Aunt Pol said. "Soon you'll be ugly and old. The lust which fills you will burn itself out, and you'll die. Your blood's too warm; that's the whole problem."
"But how-" Salmissra faltered.
"A little change," Aunt Pol assured her. "Just a small one, and you'll live forever." Garion could feel the force of her will gathering itself. "I will make you eternal, Salmissra." She raised her hand and spoke a single word. The terrible force of that word shook Garion like a leaf in the wind.
At first nothing seemed to happen. Salmissra stood fixed with her pale nakedness gleaming through her gown. Then the strange mottling grew more pronounced, and her thighs pressed tightly together. Her face began to shift, to grow more pointed. Her lips disappeared as her mouth spread, and its corners slid up into a fixed reptilian grin.
Garion watched in horror, unable to take his eyes off the queen. Her gown slid away as her shoulders disappeared and her arms adhered to her sides. Her body began to elongate, and her legs, grown completely together now, began to loop into coils. Her lustrous hair disappeared, and the last vestiges of humanity faded from her face. Her golden crown, however, remained firmly upon her head. Her tongue flickered as she sank down into the mass of her loops and coils. The hood upon her neck spread as she looked with flat, dead eyes at Aunt Pol, who had somehow during the queen's transformation resumed her normal size.
"Ascend your throne, Salmissra," Aunt Pol said.
The queen's head remained immobile, but her coils looped and mounted the cushioned divan, and the sound of coil against coil was a dry, dusty rasp.
Aunt Pol turned to Sadi the eunuch. "Behold the Handmaiden of Issa, the queen of the snake-people, whose dominion shall endure until the end of days, for she is immortal now and will reign in Nyissa forever."
Sadi's face was ghastly pale, and his eyes bulged wildly. He swallowed hard and nodded.
"I'll leave you with your queen, then," she told him. "I'd prefer to go peacefully, but one way or another, the boy and I are leaving."
"I'll send word ahead," Sadi agreed quickly. "No one will try to bar your way."

"Wise decision," Barak said dryly.
"All hail the Serpent Queen of Nyissa," one of the crimson-robed eunuchs pronounced in a shaking voice, sinking to his knees before the dais.
"Praise her," the others responded ritualistically, also kneeling. "Her glory is revealed to us."
"Worship her."
Garion glanced back once as he followed Aunt Pol toward the shattered door. Salmissra lay upon her throne with her mottled coils redundantly piled and her hooded head turned toward the mirror. The golden crown sat atop her head, and her flat, serpent eyes regarded her reflection in the glass. There was no expression on her reptile face, so it was impossible to know what she was thinking.

Chapter Thirty

THE CORRIDORS AND VAULTED HALLS Of the palace were empty as Aunt Pol led them from the throne room where the eunuchs knelt, chanting their praises to the Serpent Queen. Sword in hand, Barak stalked grimly through the awful carnage that marked the trail he had left when he had entered. The big man's face was pale, and he frequently averted his eyes from some of the more savagely mutilated corpses that littered their way.
When they emerged, they found the streets of Sthiss Tor darker than night and filled with hysterical crowds wailing in terror. Barak, with a torch he had taken from the palace wall in one hand and his huge sword in the other, led them into the street. Even in their panic the Nyissans made way for him.
"What is this, Polgara?" he growled over his shoulder, waving the torch slightly as if to brush the darkness away. "Is it some kind of sorcery?"
"No," she answered. "It's not sorcery."
Tiny flecks of gray were falling through the torchlight. "Snow?" Barak asked incredulously.
"No," she said. "Ashes."
"What's burning?"
"A mountain," she replied. "Let's get back to the ship as quickly as we can. There's more danger from this crowd than from any of this." She threw her light cloak about Garion's shoulders and pointed down a street where a few torches bobbed here and there. "Let's go that way."
The ash began to fall more heavily. It was almost like dirty gray flour sifting down through the sodden air, and there was a dreadful, sulfurous stink to it.
By the time they reached the wharves, the absolute darkness had begun to pale. The ash continued to drift down, seeping into the cracks between the cobblestones and gathering in little windrows along the edges of the buildings. Though it was growing lighter, the falling ash, like fog, blotted out everything more than ten feet away.
The wharves were total chaos. Crowds of Nyissans, shrieking and wailing, were trying to climb into boats to flee from the choking ash that sifted with deadly silence down through the damp air. Mad with terror, many even leaped into the deadly waters of the river.
"We're not going to be able to get through that mob, Polgara," Barak said. "Stay here a moment." He sheathed his sword, jumped up and caught the edge of a low roof. He pulled himself up and stood outlined dimly above them. "Ho, Greldik!" he roared in a huge voice that carried even over the noise of the crowd.
"Barak!" Greldik's voice came back. "Where are you?"
"At the foot of the pier," Barak shouted. "We can't get through the crowd."
"Stay there," Greldik yelled back. "We'll come and get you."
After a few moments there was the tramp of heavy feet on the wharf and the occasional sound of blows. A few cries of pain mingled with the sounds of panic

from the crowd. Then Greldik, Mandorallen and a half dozen burly sailors armed with clubs strode out of the ashfall, clearing a path with brutal efficiency.
"Did you get lost?" Greldik yelled up to Barak.
Barak jumped down from the roof. "We had to stop by the palace," he answered shortly.
"We were growing concerned for thy safety, my Lady," Mandorallen told Aunt Pol, pushing a gibbering Nyissan out of his way. "Good Durnik returned some hours ago."
"We were delayed," she said. "Captain, can you get us on board your ship?"
Greldik gave her an evil grin.
"Let's go then," she urged. "As soon as we get on board, it might be a good idea to anchor out in the river a little way. This ash will settle after a while, but these people are going to be hysterical until it does. Has there been any word from Silk or my father yet?"
"Nothing, my Lady," Greldik said.
"What is he doing?" she demanded irritably of no one in particular. Mandorallen drew his broadsword and marched directly into the face of the crowd, neither slowing nor altering his course. The Nyissans melted out of his path.
The crowd pressing at the edge of the wharf beside Greldik's ship was even thicker, and Durnik, Hettar and the rest of the sailors lined the rail with long boat-hooks, pushing the terror-stricken people away.
"Run out the plank," Greldik shouted as they reached the edge of the wharf.
"Noble captain," a bald Nyissan blubbered, clinging to Greldik's fur vest. "I'll give you a hundred gold pieces if you'll let me aboard your ship."
Disgusted, Greldik pushed him away.
"A thousand gold pieces," the Nyissan promised, clutching Greldik's arm and waving a purse.
"Get this baboon off me," Greldik ordered.
One of the sailors rather casually clubbed the Nyissan into insensibility, then bent and yanked the purse from his grip. He opened the purse and poured the coins out into one hand. "Three pieces of silver," he said with disgust. "All the rest is copper." He turned back and kicked the unconscious man in the stomach.
They crossed to the ship one by one while Barak and Mandorallen held the crowd back with the threat of massive violence.
"Cut the hawsers," Greldik shouted when they were all aboard. The sailors chopped the thick hawsers loose to a great cry of dismay from the Nyissans crowding the edge of the wharf. The sluggish current pulled the ship slowly away, and wails and despairing moans followed them as they drifted.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "why don't you go below and put on some decent clothes? And wash that disgusting rouge off your face. Then come back up here. I want to talk to you."
Garion had forgotten how scantily he was dressed and he flushed slightly and went quickly below deck.
It had grown noticeably lighter when he came back up, dressed again in tunic and hose, but the gray ash still sifted down through the motionless air, making the world around them hazy and coating everything with a heavy layer of fine grit. They had drifted some distance out into the river, and Greldik's sailors had dropped the anchor. The ship swung slowly in the sluggish current.
"Over here, Garion," Aunt Pol called. She was standing near the prow, looking out into the dusty haze. Garion went to her a little hesitantly, the memory of what had happened at the palace still strong in his mind.
"Sit down, dear," she suggested. "There's something I have to talk with you about."
"Yes, ma'am," he said, sitting on the bench there.
"Garion." She turned to look at him. "Did anything happen while you were in

Salmissra's palace?"
"What do you mean?"
"You know what I mean," she said rather crisply. "You're not going to embarrass us both by making me ask certain questions, are you?"
"Oh." Garion blushed. "That! No, nothing like that happened." He remembered the lush overripeness of the queen with a certain regret.
"Good. That was the one thing I was afraid of. You can't afford to get involved in any of that sort of thing just yet. It has some peculiar effects on one in your rather special circumstances."
"I'm not sure I understand," he said.
"You have certain abilities," she told him. "And if you start experimenting with that other thing before they're fully matured, the results can sometimes be a bit unpredictable. It's better not to confuse things at this point."
"Maybe it'd be better if something had happened, then," Garion blurted. "Maybe it would have fixed it so I couldn't hurt people anymore."
"I doubt it," she said. "Your power's too great to be neutralized so easily. Do you remember what we talked about that day when we left Tolnedra - about instruction?"
"I don't need any instruction," he protested, his tone growing sullen.
"Yes, you do," she said, "and you need it now. Your power is enormous - more power than I've ever seen before, and some of it so complex that I can't even begin to understand it. You must begin your instruction before something disastrous happens. You're totally out of control, Garion. If you're really serious about not wanting to hurt people, you should be more than willing to start learning how to keep any accidents from happening."
"I don't want to be a sorcerer," he objected. "All I want to do is get rid of it. Can't you help me do that?"
She shook her head. "No. And I wouldn't even if I could. You can't renounce it, my Garion. It's part of you."
"Then I'm going to be a monster?" Garion demanded bitterly. "I'm going to go around burning people alive or turning them into toads or snakes? And maybe after a while I'll get so used to it that it won't even bother me anymore. I'll live forever - like you and grandfather - but I won't be human anymore. Aunt Pol, I think I'd rather be dead.
"Can't you reason with him?" Her voice inside his head spoke directly to that other awareness.
"Not at the moment, Polgara, " the dry voice replied. "He's too busy wallowing in self pity. "
"He must learn to control the power he has," she said.
"I'll keep him out of mischief, " the voice promised. "I don't think there's much else we can do until Belgarath gets back. He's going through a moral crisis, and we can't really tamper with him until he works out his own solutions to it. "
"I don't like to see him suffering this way. "
"You're too tender-hearted, Polgara. He's a sturdy boy, and a bit of suffering won't damage him. "
"Will the two of you stop treating me as if I'm not even here?" Garion demanded angrily.
"Mistress Pol," Durnik said, coming across the deck to them, "I think you'd better come quickly. Barak's going to kill himself."
"He's what?" she asked.
"It's something about some curse," Durnik explained. "He says he's going to fall on his sword."
"That idiot! Where is he?"
"He's back by the stern," Durnik said. "He's got his sword out, and he won't let anybody near him."

"Come with me." She started toward the stern with Garion and Durnik behind her.
"We have all experienced battle madness, my Lord," Mandorallen was saying, trying to reason with the big Cherek. "It is not a thing of which to be proud, but neither is it a cause for such bleak despair."
Barak did not answer, but stood at the very stern of the ship, his eyes blank with horror and his huge sword weaving in a slow, menacing arc, holding everyone at bay.
Aunt Pol walked through the crowd of sailors and directly up to him.
"Don't try to stop me, Polgara," he warned.
She reached out quite calmly and touched the point of his sword with one finger. "It's a little dull," she said thoughtfully. "Why don't we have Durnik sharpen it? That way it'll slip more smoothly between your ribs when you fall on it."
Barak looked a bit startled.
"Have you made all the necessary arrangements?" she asked.
"What arrangements?"
"For the disposal of your body," she told him. "Really, Barak, I thought you had better manners. A decent man doesn't burden his friends with that kind of chore." She thought a moment. "Burning is customary, I suppose, but the wood here in Nyissa's very soggy. You'd probably smolder for a week or more. I imagine we'll have to settle for just dumping you in the river. The leeches and crayfish should have you stripped to the bone in a day or so."
Barak's expression grew hurt.
"Did you want us to take your sword and shield back to your son?" she asked.
"I don't have a son," he answered sullenly. He was obviously not prepared for her brutal practicality.
"Oh, didn't I tell you? How forgetful of me."
"What are you talking about?"
"Never mind," she said. "It's not important now. Were you just going to fall on your sword, or would you prefer to run up against the mast with the hilt? Either way works rather well." She turned to the sailors. "Would you clear a path so the Earl of Tellheim can get a good run at the mast?"
The sailors stared at her.
"What did you mean about a son?" Barak asked, lowering his sword.
"It would only unsettle your mind, Barak," she answered. "You'd probably make a mess of killing yourself if I told you about it. We'd really rather not have you lying around groaning for weeks on end. That sort of thing is so depressing, you know."
"I want to know what you're talking about!"
"Oh, very well," she said with a great sigh. "Your wife Merel is with child - the result of certain courtesies you exchanged when we visited Val Alorn, I imagine. She looks like a rising moon at the moment, and your lusty brat is making her life miserable with his kicking."
"A son?" Barak said, his eyes suddenly very wide.
"Really, Barak," she protested. "You must learn to pay attention. You'll never make anything of yourself if you keep blundering around with your ears closed like this."
"A son?" he repeated, his sword sliding out of his fingers.
"Now you've dropped it," she chided him. "Pick it up immediately, and let's get on with this. It's very inconsiderate to take all day to kill yourself like this."
"I'm not going to kill myself," he told her indignantly.
"You're not?"
"Of course not," he sputtered, and then he saw the faint flicker of a smile playing about the corners of her mouth. He hung his head sheepishly.
"You great fool," she said. Then she took hold of his beard with both hands, pulled his head down and kissed his ash-dusted face soundly. Greldik began to

chortle, and Mandorallen stepped forward and caught Barak in a rough embrace. "I rejoice with thee, my friend," he said. "My heart soars for thee."
"Brink up a cask," Greldik told the sailors, pounding on his friend's back. "We'll salute Trellheim's heir with the bright brown ale of timeless Cherek."
"I expect this will get rowdy now," Aunt Pol said quietly to Garion. "Come with me." She led the way back toward the ship's prow.
"Will she ever change back?" Garion asked when they were alone again.
"What?"
"The queen," Garion explained. "Will she ever change back again?"
"In time she won't even want to," Aunt Pol answered. "The shapes we assume begin to dominate our thinking after a while. As the years go by, she'll become more and more a snake and less and less a woman."
Garion shuddered. "It would have been kinder to have killed her."
"I promised Lord Issa that I wouldn't," she said.
"Was that really the God?"
"His spirit," she replied, looking out into the hazy ashfall. "Salmissra infused the statue with Issa's spirit. For a time at least the statue was the God. It's all very complicated." She seemed a bit preoccupied. "Where is he?" She seemed suddenly irritated.
"Who?"
"Father. He should have been here days ago."
They stood together looking out at the muddy river.
Finally she turned from the railing and brushed at the shoulders of her cloak with distaste. The ash puffed from under her fingers in tiny clouds. "I'm going below," she told him, making a face. "It's just too dirty up here."
"I thought you wanted to talk to me," he said.
"I don't think you're ready to listen. It'll wait." She stepped away, then stopped. "Oh, Garion."
"Yes?"
"I wouldn't drink any of that ale the sailors are swilling. After what they made you drink at the palace, it would probably make you sick."
"Oh," he agreed a trifle regretfully. "All right."
"It's up to you, of course," she said, "but I thought you ought to know." Then she turned again and went to the hatch and disappeared down the stairs.
Garion's emotions were turbulent. The entire day had been vastly eventful, and his mind was filled with a welter of confusing images.
"Be quiet, " the voice in his mind said.
"What?"
"I'm trying to hear something. Listen. "
"Listen to what?"
"There. Can't you hear it?"
Faintly, as if from a very long way ofi, Garion seemed to hear a muffled thudding.
"What is it?"
The voice did not answer, but the amulet about his neck began to throb in time with the distant thudding.
Behind him he heard a rush of tiny feet.
"Garion!" He turned just in time to be caught in Ce'Nedra's embrace. "I was so worried about you. Where did you go?"
"Some men came on board and grabbed me," he said, trying to untangle himself from her arms. "They took me to the palace."
"How awful!" she said. "Did you meet the queen?"
Garion nodded and then shuddered, remembering the hooded snake lying on the divan looking at itself in the mirror.
"What's wrong?" the girl asked.
"A lot of things happened," he answered. "Some of them weren't very pleasant."

Somewhere at the back of his awareness, the thudding continued.
"Do you mean they tortured you?" Ce'Nedra asked, her eyes growing very wide.
"No, nothing like that."
"Well, what happened?" she demanded. "Tell me."
He knew that she would not leave him alone until he did, so he described what had happened as best he could. The throbbing sound seemed to grow louder while he talked, and his right palm began to tingle. He rubbed at it absently.
"How absolutely dreadful," Ce'Nedra said after he had finished. "Weren't you terrified?"
"Not really," he told her, still scratching at his palm. "Most of the time the things they made me drink made my head so foggy I couldn't feel anything."
"Did you really kill Maas?" she asked, "Just like that?" She snapped her fingers.
"It wasn't exactly just like that," he tried to explain. "There was a little more to it."
"I knew you were a sorcerer," she said. "I told you that you were that day at the pool, remember?"
"I don't want to be," he protested. "I didn't ask to be."
"I didn't ask to be a princess either."
"It's not the same. Being a king or a princess is what one is. Being a sorcerer has to do with what one does."
"I really don't see that much difference," she objected stubbornly.
"I can make things happen," he told her. "Awful things, usually."
"So?" she said maddeningly. "I can make awful things happen too or at least I could back in Tol Honeth. One word from me could have sent a servant to the whipping-post - or to the headsman's block. I didn't do it of course, but I could have. Power is power, Garion. The results are the same. You don't have to hurt people if you don't want to."
"It just happens sometimes. It's not that I want to do it." The throbbing had become a nagging thing, almost like a dull headache.
"Then you have to learn to control it."
"Now you sound like Aunt Pol."
"She's trying to help you," the princess said. "She keeps trying to get you to do what you're going to have to do eventually anyway. How many more people are you going to have to burn up before you finally accept what she says?"
"You didn't have to say that." Garion was stung deeply by her words.
"Yes," she told him, "I think I did. You're lucky I'm not your aunt. I wouldn't put up with your foolishness the way Lady Polgara does."
"You don't understand," Garion muttered sullenly.
"I understand much better than you think, Garion. You know what your problem is? You don't want to grow up. You want to keep on being a boy forever. You can't, though; nobody can. No matter how much power you have - whether you're an emperor or a sorcerer - you can't stop the years from going by. I realized that a long time ago, but then I'm probably much smarter than you are." Then without any word of explanation, she raised up on her toes and kissed him lightly full on the lips.
Garion blushed and lowered his head in embarrassment.
"Tell me," Ce'Nedra said, toying with the sleeve of his tunic, "was Queen Salmissra as beautiful as they say?"
"She was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life," Garion answered without thinking.
The princess caught her breath sharply. "I hate you," she cried from between clenched teeth. Then she turned and ran sobbing in search of Aunt Pol.
Garion stared after her in perplexity. He turned then to stare moodily out at the river and the drifting ash. The tingling in his palm was becoming intolerable, and he scratched at it, digging in with his fingernails.

"You'll just make it sore, " the voice in his mind said.
"It itches. I can't stand it."
"Stop being a baby. "
"What's causing it?"
"Do you mean to say you really don't know? You've got further to go than I thought. Put your right hand on the amulet. "
"Why?"
"Just do it, Garion. "
Garion reached inside his tunic, and put his burning palm on his medallion. As a key fitting into the lock for which it was made, the contact between his hand and the throbbing amulet seemed somehow enormously right. The tingling became that now - familiar surge, and the throbbing began to echo hollowly in his ears.
"Not too much, " the voice warned him. "You're not trying to dry up the river, you know. "
"What's happening? What is all this?"
"Belgarath's trying to find us. "
"Grandfather? Where?"
"Be patient. "
The throbbing seemed to grow louder until Garion's entire body quivered with each thudding beat. He stared out over the rail, trying to see through the haze. The settling ash, so light that it coated the muddy surface of the river, made everything more than twenty paces away indistinct. It was impossible to see the city, and the wails and cries from the hidden streets seemed somehow muffled. Only the slow wash of the current against the hull seemed clear.
Then a long way out on the river, something moved. It was not very large and seemed to be little more than a dark shadow ghosting silently with the current. The throbbing grew even louder.
The shadow drew closer, and Garion could just begin to make out the shape of a small boat. An oar caught the surface of the water with a small splash. The man at the oars turned to look over his shoulder. It was Silk. His face was covered with gray ash, and tiny rivulets of sweat streaked his cheeks.
Mister Wolf sat in the stern of the little boat, muffled in his cloak and with his hood turned up.
"Welcome back, Belgarath, " the dry voice said.
"Who's that?" Wolf's voice in Garion's mind sounded startled. "Is that you, Belgarion?"
"Not quite. " the voice replied. "Not yet anyway, but we're getting closer."
"I wondered who was making all the noise. "
"He overdoes things sometimes. He'll learn eventually."
A shout came from one of the sailors clustered around Barak at the stern, and they all turned to watch the small boat drifting toward them. Aunt Pol came up from below and stepped to the rail. "You're late," she called.
"Something came up," the old man answered across the narrowing gap. He pushed back his hood and shook the floury ash out of his cloak. Then Garion saw that the old man's left arm was bound up in a dirty sling across the front of his body.
"What happened to your arm?" Aunt Pol asked.
"I'd rather not talk about it." There was an ugly scratch running down one of Wolf's cheeks into his short, white beard, and his eyes seemed to glitter with some huge irritation.
The grin on Silk's ash-coated face was malicious as he dipped his oars once, deftly pulling the little boat in beside Greldik's ship with a slight thump.
"I don't imagine you can be persuaded to keep your mouth shut," Wolf said irritably to the small man.
"Would I say anything, mighty sorcerer?" Silk asked mockingly, his ferret eyes wide with feigned innocence.

"Just help me aboard," Wolf told him, his voice testy. His entire bearing was that of a man who had been mortally insulted.
"Whatever you say, ancient Belgarath," Silk said, obviously trying to keep from laughing. He steadied Wolf as the old man awkwardly climbed over the ship's rail.
"Let's get out of here," Mister Wolf curtly told Captain Greldik, who had just joined them.
"Which way, Ancient One?" Greldik asked carefully, clearly not wanting to aggravate the old man further.
Wolf stared hard at him.
"Upstream or down?" Greldik explained mollifyingly.
"Upstream, of course," Wolf snapped.
"How was I supposed to know?" Greldik appealed to Aunt Pol. Then he turned and crossly began barking orders to his sailors.
Aunt Pol's expression was a peculiar mixture of relief and curiosity. "I'm sure your story's going to be absolutely fascinating, father," she said as the sailors began raising the heavy anchors. "I simply can't wait to hear it."
"I can do without the sarcasm, Pol," Wolf told her. "I've had a very bad day. Try not to make it any worse."
That last was finally too much for Silk. The little man, in the act of climbing across the rail, suddenly collapsed in helpless glee. He tumbled forward to the deck, howling with laughter.
Mister Wolf glared at his laughing companion with a profoundly of fronted expression as Greldik's sailors ran out their oars and began turning the ship in the sluggish current.
"What happened to your arm, father?" Aunt Pol's gaze was penetrating, and her tone said quite clearly that she did not intend to be put off any longer.
"I broke it," Wolf told her flatly.
"How did you manage that?"
"It was just a stupid accident, Pol. Those things happen sometimes."
"Let me see it."
"In a minute." He scowled at Silk, who was still laughing. "Will you stop that? Go tell the sailors where we're going."
"Where are we going, father?" Aunt Pol asked him. "Did you find Zedar's trail?"
"He crossed into Cthol Murgos. Ctuchik was waiting for him."
"And the Orb?"
"Ctuchik's got it now."
"Are we going to be able to cut him off before he gets to Rak Cthol with it?"
"I doubt it. Anyway, we have to go to the Vale first."
"The Vale? Father, you're not making any sense."
"Our Master's summoned us, Pol. He wants us at the Vale, so that's where we're going."
"What about the Orb?"
"Ctuchik's got it, and I know where to find Ctuchik. He isn't going anyplace. For right now, we're going to the Vale."
"All right, father," she concurred placatingly. "Don't excite yourself." She looked at him closely. "Have you been fighting, father?" she asked dangerously.
"No, I haven't been fighting." He sounded disgusted.
"What happened, then?"
"A tree fell on me."
"What?"
"You heard me."
Silk exploded into fresh howls of mirth at the old man's grudging confession. From the stern of the ship where Greldik and Barak stood at the tiller, the slow beat of the drum began, and the sailors dug in with their oars. The ship slid through the oily water, moving upstream against the current, with Silk's

laughter trailing behind in the ash-laden air.

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Here ends Book Two of The Belgariad. Book Three, Magician's Gambit, carries the quest on to the Orb through stranger lands and darker magic, while Garion begins to learn the incredible power of the dry voice within his mind.

The Belgariad: Magicians Gambit

For Dorothy,
who has the enduring grace to put up with Eddings men,
and for Wayne,
for reasons we both understand but could never be put into words.

PROLOGUE
Being an Account of how Gorim sought a God for his People and of how he found UL upon the sacred Mountain of Prolgu.
-based upon The Book of Ulgo and other fragments
AT THE BEGINNING Of Days, the world was spun out of darkness by the seven Gods, and they also created beasts and fowls, serpents and fishes, and lastly Man.
Now there dwelt in the heavens a spirit known as UL who did not join in this creation. And because he withheld his power and wisdom, much that was made was marred and imperfect. Many creatures were unseemly and strange. These the younger Gods sought to unmake, so that all upon the world might be fair.
But UL stretched forth his hand and prevented them, saying: "What you have wrought you may not unmake. You have torn asunder the fabric and peace of the heavens to bring forth this world as a plaything and an entertainment. Know, however, that whatsoever you make, be it ever so monstrous, shall abide as a rebuke for your folly. In the day that one thing which you have made is unmade, all shall be unmade."
The younger Gods were angered. To each monstrous or unseemly thing they had made they said: "Go thou unto UL and let him be thy God." Then from the races of men, each God chose that people which pleased him. And when there were yet peoples who had no God, the younger Gods drove them forth and said: "Go unto UL, and he shall be your God." And UL did not speak.
For long and bitter generations, the Godless Ones wandered and cried out unheard in the wastelands and wilderness of the West.
Then there appeared among their numbers a just and righteous man named Gorim. He gathered the multitudes before him and spoke to them: "We wither and fall as the leaves from the rigors of our wanderings. Our children and our old men die. Better it is that only one shall die. Therefore, stay here and rest upon this plain. I will search for the God named UL so that we may worship him and have a place in this world."
For twenty years, Gorim sought UL, but in vain. Yet the years passed, his hair turned gray, and he wearied of his search. In despair, he went up onto a high mountain and cried in a great voice to the sky: "No more! I will search no longer. The Gods are a mockery and deception, and the world is a barren void. There is no UL, and I am sick of the curse and afliiction of my life."
The Spirit of UL heard and replied: "Why art thou wroth with me, Gorim? Thy making and thy casting out were none of my doing."
Gorim was afraid and fell upon his face. And UL spoke again, saying:
"Rise, Gorim, for I am not thy God."
Gorim did not rise. "O my God," he cried, "hide not thy face from thy people who are sorely afflicted because they are outcast and have no God to protect them."
"Rise, Gorim," UL repeated, "and quit this place. Cease thy complaining. Seek thou a God elsewhere and leave me in peace."
Still Gorim did not rise. "O my God," he said, "I will still abide. Thy people hunger and thirst. They seek thy blessing and a place where they may dwell."
"Thy speech wearies me," UL said and he departed.
Gorim remained on the mountain, and the beasts of the field and fowls of the air brought him sustenance. For more than a year he remained. Then the monstrous and

unseemly things which the Gods had made came and sat at his feet, watching him. The Spirit of UL was troubled. At last he appeared to Gorim. "Abidest thou still?"
Gorim fell on his face and said: "O my God, thy people cry unto thee in their affliction."
The Spirit of UL fled. But Gorim abode there for another year. Dragons brought him meat, and unicorns gave him water. And again UL came to him, asking: "Abidest thou still?"
Gorim fell on his face. "O my God," he cried, "thy people perish in the absence of thy care." And UL fled from the righteous man. Another year passed while nameless, unseen things brought him food and drink. And the Spirit of UL came to the high mountain and ordered: "Rise, Gorim."
From his prostrate position, Gorim pleaded: "O my God, have mercy."
"Rise, Gorim," UL replied. He reached down and lifted Gorim up with his hands. "I am UL - thy God. I command thee to rise and stand before me."
"Then wilt thou be my God?" Gorim asked. "And God unto my people?"
"I am thy God and the God of thy people also," UL said.
Gorim looked down from his high place and beheld the unseemly creatures which had cared for him in his travail. "What of these, O my God? Wilt thou be God unto the basilisk and the minotaur, the Dragon and the chimera, the unicorn and the thing unnamed, the winged serpent and the thing unseen? For these are also outcast. Yet there is beauty in each. Turn not your face from them, O my God, for in them is great worthiness. They were sent to thee by the younger Gods. Who will be their God if you refuse them?"
"It was done in my despite," UL said. "These creatures were sent unto me to bring shame upon me that I had rebuked the younger Gods. I will in no wise be God unto monsters."
The creatures at Gorim's feet moaned. Gorim seated himself on the earth and said: "Yet will I abide, O my God."
"Abide if it please thee," UL said and departed.
It was even as before. Gorim abode, the creatures sustained him, and UL was troubled. And before the holiness of Gorim, the Great God repented and came again. "Rise, Gorim, and serve thy God." UL reached down and lifted Gorim. "Bring unto me the creatures who sit before thee and I will consider them. If each hath beauty and worthiness, as thou sayest, then I will consent to be their God also."
Then Gorim brought the creatures before UL. The creatures prostrated themselves before the God and moaned to beseech his blessing. UL marveled that he had not seen the beauty of each creature before. He raised up his hands and blessed them, saying: "I am UL and I find beauty and worthiness in each of you. I will be your God, and you shall prosper, and peace shall be among you."
Gorim was glad of heart and he named the high place where all had come to pass Prolgu, which means "Holy Place." Then he departed and returned to the plain to bring his people unto their God. But they did not know him, for the hands of UL had touched him, and all color had fled, leaving his body and hair as white as new snow. The people feared him and drove him away with stones.
Gorim cried unto UL: "O my God, thy touch has changed me, and my people know me not."
UL raised his hand, and the people were made colorless like Gorim. The Spirit of UL spoke to them in a great voice: "Hearken unto the words of your God. This is he whom you call Gorim, and he has prevailed upon me to accept you as my people, to watch over you, provide for you, and be God over you. Henceforth shall you be called UL-Go in remembrance of me and in token of his holiness. You shall do as he commands and go where he leads. Any who fail to obey him or follow him will I cut off to wither and perish and be no more."
Gorim commanded the people to take up their goods and their cattle and follow

him to the mountains. But the elders of the people did not believe him, nor that the voice had been the voice of UL. They spoke to Gorim in despite, saying: "If you are the servant of the God UL, perform a wonder in proof of it."
Gorim answered: "Behold your skin and hair. Is that not wonder enough for you?"
They were troubled and went away. But they came to him again, saying: "The mark upon us is because of a pestilence which you brought from some unclean place and no proof of the favor of UL."
Gorim raised his hands, and the creatures which had sustained him came to him like lambs to a shepherd. The elders were afraid and went away for a time. But soon they came again, saying: "The creatures are monstrous and unseemly. You are a demon sent to lure the people to destruction, not a servant of the Great God UL. We have still seen no proof of the favor of UL."
Now Gorim grew weary of them. He cried in a great voice: "I say to the people that they have heard the voice of UL. I have suffered much in your behalf. Now I return to Prolgu, the holy place. Let him who would follow me do so; let him who would not remain." He turned and went toward the mountains.
Some few people went with him, but the greater part of the people remained, and they reviled Gorim and those who followed him: "Where is this wonder which proves the favor of UL? We do not follow or obey Gorim, yet neither do we wither and perish."
Then Gorim looked upon them in great sadness and spoke to them for the last time: "You have besought a wonder from me. Then behold this wonder. Even as the voice of UL said, you are withered like the limb of a tree that is cut off.
Truly, this day you have perished." And he led the few who followed him into the mountains and to Prolgu.
The multitude of the people mocked him and returned to their tents to laugh at the folly of those who followed him. For a year they laughed and mocked. Then they laughed no more, for their women were barren and bore no children. The people withered and in time they perished and were no more.
The people who followed Gorim came with him to Prolgu. There they built a city. The Spirit of UL was with them, and they dwelt in peace with the creatures who had sustained Gorim. Gorim lived for many lifetimes; and after him, each High Priest of UL was named Gorim and lived to a great age. For a thousand years, the peace of UL was with them, and they believed it would last forever.
But the evil God Torak stole the Orb that was made by the God Aldur, and the war of men and Gods began. Torak used the Orb to break the earth asunder and let in the sea, and the Orb burned him horribly. And he fled into Mallorea.
The earth was maddened by her wounding, and the creatures which had dwelt in peace with the people of Ulgo were also maddened by that wounding. They rose against the fellowship of UL and cast down the cities and slew the people, until few remained.
Those who escaped fled to Prolgu, where the creatures dared not follow for fear of the wrath of UL. Loud were the cries and lamentations of the people. UL was troubled and he revealed to them the caves that lay under Prolgu. The people went down into the sacred caves of UL and dwelt there.
In time, Belgarath the Sorcerer led the king of the Alorns and his sons into Mallorea to steal back the Orb. When Torak sought to pursue, the wrath of the Orb drove him back. Belgarath gave the Orb to the first Rivan King, saying that so long as one of his descendants held the Orb, the West would be safe.
Now the Alorns scattered and pushed southward into new lands. And the peoples of other Gods were troubled by the war of Gods and men and fled to seize other lands which they called by strange names. But the people of UL held to the caverns of Prolgu and had no dealings with them. UL protected them and hid them, and the strangers did not know that the people were there. For century after century, the people of UL took no note of the outer world, even when that world was rocked by the assassination of the last Rivan King and his family.

But when Torak came ravening into the West, leading a mighty army through the lands of the children of UL, the Spirit of UL spoke with the Gorim. And the Gorim led forth his people in stealth by night. They fell upon the sleeping army and wreaked mighty havoc. Thus the army of Torak was weakened and fell in defeat before the armies of the West at a place called Vo Mimbre.

Then the Gorim girded himself and went forth to hold council with the victors. And he brought back word that Torak had been gravely wounded. Though the evil God's body was stolen away and hidden by his disciple Belzedar, it was said that Torak would lie bound in a sleep like death itself until a descendant of the Rivan line should again sit upon the throne at Riva - which meant never, since it was known that no descendants of that line lived.

Shocking as the visit of the Gorim to the outer world had been, no harm seemed to come of it. The children of UL still prospered under the care of their God and life went on almost as before. It was noticed that the Gorim seemed to spend less time studying The Book of Ulgo and more searching through moldy old scrolls of prophecy. But a certain oddity might be expected of one who had gone forth from the caverns of UL into the world of other peoples.

Then a strange old man appeared before the entrance to the caverns, demanding to speak with the Gorim. And such was the power of his voice that the Gorim was summoned. Then, for the first time since the people had sought safety in the caverns, one who was not of the people of UL was admitted. The Gorim took the stranger into his chambers and remained closeted with him for days. And thereafter, the strange man with the white beard and tattered clothing appeared at long intervals and was welcomed by the Gorim.

It was even reported once by a young boy that there was a great gray wolf with the Gorim. But that was probably only some dream brought on by sickness, though the boy refused to recant.

The people adjusted and accepted the strangeness of their Gorim. And the years passed, and the people gave thanks to their God, knowing that they were the chosen people of the Great God UL.

Part One
MARAGOR

Chapter One

HER IMPERIAL HIGHNESS, Princess Ce'Nedra, jewel of the House of Borune and the loveliest flower of the Tolnedran Empire, sat cross-legged on a sea chest in the oak-beamed cabin beneath the stern of Captain Greldik's ship, nibbling thoughtfully on the end of a tendril of her coppery hair as she watched the Lady Polgara attend to the broken arm of Belgarath the Sorcerer. The princess wore a short, pale-green Dryad tunic, and there was a smudge of ash on one of her cheeks. On the deck above she could hear the measured beat of the drum that paced the oar strokes of Greldik's sailors as they rowed upstream from the ash-choked city of Sthiss Tor.

It was all absolutely dreadful, she decided. What had begun as merely another move in the interminable game of authority and rebellion against it that she had been playing with her father, the Emperor, for as long as she could remember had suddenly turned deadly serious. She had never really intended for things to go this far when she and Master Jeebers had crept from the Imperial Palace in Tol Honeth that night so many weeks ago. Jeebers had soon deserted her - he had been no more than a temporary convenience, anyway - and now she was caught up with

this strange group of grim-faced people from the north in a quest she could not even understand. The Lady Polgara, whose very name sent a chill through the princess, had rather bluntly informed her in the Wood of the Dryads that the game was over and that no evasion, wheedling, or coaxing would alter the fact that she, Princess Ce'Nedra, would stand in the Hall of the Rivan King on her sixteenth birthday - in chains if necessary. Ce'Nedra knew with absolute certainty that Lady Polgara had meant exactly that, and she had a momentary vision of being dragged, clanking and rattling in her chains, to stand in total humiliation in that grim hall while hundreds of bearded Alorns laughed at her. That had to be avoided at any cost. And so it had been that she had accompanied them - not willingly, perhaps - but never openly rebellious. The hint of steel in Lady Polgara's eyes always seemed to carry with it the suggestion of manacles and clinking chains, and that suggestion cowed the princess into obedience far more than all the Imperial power her father possessed had ever been able to do.
Ce'Nedra had only the faintest idea of what these people were doing. They seemed to be following someone or something, and the trail had led them here into the snake-infested swamps of Nyissa. Murgos seemed to be somehow involved, throwing frightful obstacles in their path, and Queen Salmissra also seemed to take an interest, even going so far as to have young Garion abducted.
Ce'Nedra interrupted her musing to look across the cabin at the boy. Why would the queen of Nyissa want him? He was so ordinary. He was a peasant, a scullion, a nobody. He was a nice enough boy, certainly, with rather plain, sandy hair that kept tumbling down across his forehead, making her fingers itch to push it back. He had a nice enough face - in a plain sort of way - and he was somebody she could talk to when she was lonely or frightened, and somebody she could fight with when she felt peevish, since he was only slightly older than she was. But he completely refused to treat her with the respect due her - he probably didn't even know how. Why all this excruciating interest in him? She pondered that, looking thoughtfully at him.
She was doing it again. Angrily she jerked her eyes from his face. Why was she always watching him? Each time her thoughts wandered, her eyes automatically sought out his face, and it wasn't really that exciting a face to look at. She had even caught herself making up excuses to put herself into places where she could watch him. It was stupid!
Ce'Nedra nibbled at her hair and thought and nibbled some more, until once again her eyes went back to their minute study of Garion's features.
"Is he going to be all right?" Barak, the Earl of Trellheim, rumbled, tugging absently at his great red beard as he watched the Lady Polgara put the finishing touches on Belgarath's sling.
"It's a simple break," she replied professionally, putting away her bandages. "And the old fool heals fast."
Belgarath winced as he shifted his newly splinted arm. "You didn't have to be so rough, Pol." His rust-colored old tunic showed several dark mud smears and a new rip, evidence of his encounter with a tree.
"It had to be set, father," she told him. "You didn't want it to heal crooked, did you?"
"I think you actually enjoyed it," he accused.
"Next time you can set it yourself," she suggested coolly, smoothing her gray dress.
"I need a drink," Belgarath grumbled to the hulking Barak.
The Earl of Trellheim went to the narrow door. "Would you have a tankard of ale brought for Belgarath?" he asked the sailor outside.
"How is he?" the sailor inquired.
"Bad-tempered," Barak replied. "And he'll probably get worse if he doesn't get a drink pretty soon."
"I'll go at once," the sailor said.

"Wise decision."
This was yet another confusing thing for Ce'Nedra. The noblemen in their party all treated this shabby-looking old man with enormous respect; but so far as she could tell, he didn't even have a title. She could determine with exquisite precision the exact difference between a baron and a general of the Imperial Legions, between a grand duke of Tolnedra and a crown prince of Arendia, between the Rivan Warder and the king of the Chereks; but she had not the faintest idea where sorcerers fit in. The materially oriented mind of Tolnedra refused even to admit that sorcerers existed. While it was quite true that Lady Polgara, with titles from half the kingdoms of the West, was the most respected woman in the world, Belgarath was a vagabond, a vagrant, frequently a public nuisance. And Garion, she reminded herself, was his grandson.
"I think it's time you told us what happened, father," Lady Polgara was saying to her patient.
"I'd really rather not talk about it," he replied shortly.
She turned to Prince Kheldar, the peculiar little Drasnian nobleman with the sharp face and sardonic wit, who lounged on a bench with an impudent expression on his face. "Well, Silk?" she asked him.
"I'm sure you can see my position, old friend," the prince apologized to Belgarath with a great show of regret. "If I try to keep secrets, she'll only force things out of me - unpleasantly, I imagine."
Belgarath looked at him with a stony face, then snorted with disgust.
"It's not that I want to say anything, you realize."
Belgarath turned away.
"I knew you'd understand."
"The story, Silk!" Barak insisted impatiently. "It's really very simple," Kheldar told him.
"But you're going to complicate it, right?"
"Just tell us what happened, Silk," Polgara said.
The Drasnian sat up on his bench. "It's not really much of a story," he began. "We located Zedar's trail and followed it down into Nyissa about three weeks ago. We had a few encounters with some Nyissan border guards - nothing very serious. Anyway, the trail of the Orb turned east almost as soon as it crossed the border. That was a surprise. Zedar had been headed for Nyissa with so much single-mindedness that we'd both assumed that he'd made some kind of arrangement with Salmissra. Maybe that's what he wanted everybody to think. He's very clever, and Salmissra's notorious for involving herself in things that don't really concern her."
"I've attended to that," Lady Polgara said somewhat grimly.
"What happened?" Belgarath asked her.
"I'll tell you about it later, father. Go on, Silk."
Silk shrugged. "There isn't a great deal more to it. We followed Zedar's trail into one of those ruined cities up near the old Marag border. Belgarath had a visitor there - at least he said he did. I didn't see anybody. At any rate, he told me that something had happened to change our plans and that we were going to have to turn around and come on downriver to Sthiss Tor to rejoin all of you. He didn't have time to explain much more, because the jungles were suddenly alive with Murgos - either looking for us or for Zedar, we never found out which. Since then we've been dodging Murgos and Nyissans both - traveling at night, hiding - that sort of thing. We sent a messenger once. Did he ever get through?"
"The day before yesterday," Polgara replied. "He had a fever, though, and it took a while to get your message from him."
Kheldar nodded. "Anyway, there were Grolims with the Murgos, and they were trying to find us with their minds. Belgarath was doing something to keep them from locating us that way. Whatever it was must have taken a great deal of

concentration, because he wasn't paying too much attention to where he was going. Early this morning we were leading the horses through a patch of swamp. Belgarath was sort of stumbling along with his mind on other things, and that was when the tree fell on him."
"I might have guessed," Polgara said. "Did someone make it fall?"
"I don't think so," Silk answered. "It might have been an old deadfall, but I rather doubt it. It was rotten at the center. I tried to warn him, but he walked right under it."
"All right," Belgarath said.
"I did try to warn you."
"Don't belabor it, Silk."
"I wouldn't want them to think I didn't try to warn you," Silk protested.
Polgara shook her head and spoke with a profound note of disappointment in her voice. "Fatherl"
"Just let it lie, Polgara," Belgarath told her.
"I dug him out from under the tree and patched him up as best I could," Silk went on. "Then I stole that little boat and we started downriver. We were doing fine until all this dust started falling."
"What did you do with the horses?" Hettar asked. Ce'Nedra was a little afraid to this tall, silent Algar lord with his shaved head, his black leather clothing, and his flowing black scalp lock. He never seemed to smile, and the expression on his hawklike face at even the mention of the word "Murgo" was as bleak as stone. The only thing that even slightly humanized him was his overwhelming

concern for horses.
"They're all right," Silk assured him. "I left them picketed where the Nyissans won't find them. They'll be fine where they are until we pick them up."
"You said when you came aboard that Ctuchik has the Orb now," Polgara said to

Belgarath. "How did that happen?"
The old man shrugged. "Beltira didn't go into any of the details. All he told me was that Ctuchik was waiting when Zedar crossed the border into Cthol Murgos. Zedar managed to escape, but he had to leave the Orb behind."
"Did you speak with Beltira?"
"With his mind," Belgarath answered.
"Did he say why the Master wants us to go to the Vale?"
"No. It probably never occurred to him to ask. You know how Beltira is."
"It's going to take months, father," Polgara objected with a worried frown.
"It's two hundred and fifty leagues to the Vale."
"Aldur wants us to go there," he answered. "I'm not going to start disobeying him after all these years."
"And in the meantime, Ctuchik's got the Orb at Rak Cthol."
"It's not going to do him any good, Pol. Torak himself couldn't make the Orb submit to him, and he tried for over two thousand years. I know where Rak Cthol is; Ctuchik can't hide it from me. He'll be there with the Orb when I decide to go take it away from him. I know how to deal with that magician." He said the word "magician" with a note of profound contempt in his voice.
"What's Zedar going to be doing all that time?'
"Zedar's got problems of his own. Beltira says that he's moved Torak from the place where he had him hidden. I think we can depend on him to keep Torak's body as far away from Rak Cthol as he possibly can. Actually, things have worked out rather well. I was getting a little tired of chasing Zedar anyway."
Ce'Nedra found all this a bit confusing. Why were they all so caught up in the movements of a strangely named pair of Angarak sorcerers and this mysterious jewel which everyone seemed to covet? To her, one jewel was much the same as another. Her childhood had been surrounded by such opulence that she had long

since ceased to attach much importance to ornaments. At the moment, her only adornment consisted of a pair of tiny gold earrings shaped like little acorns, and her fondness for them arose not so much from the fact that they were gold but rather from the tinkling sound the cunningly contrived clappers inside them made when she moved her head.
All of this sounded like one of the Morn myths she'd heard from a storyteller in her father's court years before. There had been a magic jewel in that, she remembered. It was stolen by the God of the Angaraks, Torak, and rescued by a sorcerer and some Alorn kings who put it on the pommel of a sword kept in the throne room at Riva. It was somehow supposed to protect the West from some terrible disaster that would happen if it were lost. Curious - the name of the sorcerer in the legend was Belgarath, the same as that of this old man.
But that would make him thousands of years old, which was ridiculous! He must have been named after the ancient myth hero - unless he'd assumed the name to impress people.
Once again her eyes wandered to Garion's face. The boy sat quietly in one corner of the cabin, his eyes grave and his expression serious. She thought perhaps that it was his seriousness that so piqued her curiosity and kept drawing her eyes to him. Other boys she had known - nobles and the sons of nobles - had tried to be charming and witty, but Garion never tried to joke or to say clever things to try to amuse her. She was not entirely certain how to take that. Was he such a lump that he didn't know how he was supposed to behave? Or perhaps he knew but didn't care enough to make the effort. He might at least try - even if only occasionally. How could she possibly deal with him if he was going to refuse flatly to make a fool of himself for her benefit?
She reminded herself sharply that she was angry with him. He had said that Queen Salmissra had been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and it was far, far too early to forgive him for such an outrageous statement. She was definitely going to have to make him suffer extensively for that insulting lapse. Her fingers toyed absently with one of the curls cascading down the side of her face, her eyes boring into Garion's face.
The following morning ashfall that was the result of a massive volcanic eruption somewhere in Cthol Murgos had diminished sufficiently to make the deck of the ship habitable again. The jungle along the riverbank was still partially obscured in the dusty haze, but the air was clear enough to breathe, and Ce'Nedra escaped from the sweltering cabin below decks with relief.
Garion was sitting in the sheltered spot near the bow of the ship where he usually sat and he was deep in conversation with Belgarath. Ce'Nedra noted with a certain detachment that he had neglected to comb his hair that morning. She resisted her immediate impulse to go fetch comb and brush to rectify the situation. She drifted instead with artful dissimulation to a place along the rail where, without seeming to, she could conveniently eavesdrop.
"-It's always been there," Garion was saying to his grandfather. "It used to just talk to me - tell me when I was being childish or stupid - that sort of thing. It seemed to be off in one corner of my mind all by itself."
Belgarath nodded, scratching absently at his beard with his good hand. "It seems to be completely separate from you," he observed. "Has this voice in your head ever actually done anything? Besides talk to you, I mean."
Garion's face grew thoughtful. "I don't think so. It tells me how to do things, but I think that I'm the one who has to do them. When we were at Salmissra's palace, I think it took me out of my body to go look for Aunt Pol." He frowned. "No," he corrected. "When I stop and think about it, it told me how to do it, but I was the one who actually did it. Once we were out, I could feel it beside me - it's the first time we've ever been separate. I couldn't actually see it, though. It did take over for a few minutes, I think. It talked to Salmissra to smooth things over and to hide what we'd been doing."

"You've been busy since Silk and I left, haven't you?"
Garion nodded glumly. "Most of it was pretty awful. I burned Asharak. Did you know that?"
"Your Aunt told me about it."
"He slapped her in the face," Garion told him. "I was going to go after him with my knife for that, but the voice told me to do it a different way. I hit him with my hand and said 'burn.' That's all, just 'burn'and he caught on fire. I was going to put it out until Aunt Pol told me he was the one who killed my mother and father. Then I made the fire hotter. He begged me to put it out, but I didn't do it." He shuddered.
"I tried to warn you about that," Belgarath reminded him gently. "I told you that you weren't going to like it very much after it was over."
Garion sighed. "I should have listened. Aunt Pol says that once you've used this-" He floundered, looking for a word.
"Power?" Belgarath suggested.
"All right," Garion assented. "She says that once you've used it, you never forget how, and you'll keep doing it again and again. I wish I had used my knife instead. Then this thing in me never would have gotten loose."
"You're wrong, you know," Belgarath told him quite calmly. "You've been bursting at the seams with it for several months now. You've used it without knowing it at least a half dozen times that I know about."
Garion stared at him incredulously.
"Remember that crazy monk just after we crossed into Tolnedra? When you touched him, you made so much noise that I thought for a moment you'd killed him."
"You said Aunt Pol did that."
"I lied," the old man admitted casually. "I do that fairly often. The whole point, though, is that you've always had this ability. It was bound to come out sooner or later. I wouldn't feel too unhappy about what you did to Chamdar. It was a little exotic perhaps - not exactly the way I might have done it - but there was a certain justice to it, after all."
"It's always going to be there, then?"
"Always. That's the way it is, I'm afraid."
The Princess Ce'Nedra felt rather smug about that. Belgarath had just confirmed something she herself had told Garion. If the boy would just stop being so stubborn, his Aunt and his grandfather and of course she herself - all of whom knew much better than he what was right and proper and good for him - could shape his life to their satisfaction with little or no difficulty.
"Let's get back to this other voice of yours," Belgarath suggested. "I need to know more about it. I don't want you carrying an enemy around in your mind."
"It's not an enemy," Garion insisted. "It's on our side."
"It might seem that way," Belgarath observed, "but things aren't always what they seem. I'd be a lot more comfortable if I knew just exactly what it is. I don't like surprises."
The Princess Ce'Nedra, however, was already lost in thought. Dimly, at the back of her devious and complex little mind, an idea was beginning to take shape - an idea with very interesting possibilities.

Chapter Two

THE TRIP UP to the rapids of the River of the Serpent took the better part of a week. Although it was still swelteringly hot, they had all by now grown at least partially accustomed to the climate. Princess Ce'Nedra spent most of her time sitting on deck with Polgara, pointedly ignoring Garion. She did, however, glance frequently his way to see if she could detect any signs of suffering. Since her life was entirely in the hands of these people, Ce'Nedra felt keenly the necessity for winning them over. Belgarath would be no problem. A few

winsome little-girl smiles, a bit of eyelash fluttering, and a spontaneous-seeming kiss or two would wrap him neatly around one of her fingers. That particular campaign could be conducted at any time she felt it convenient, but Polgara was a different matter. For one thing, Ce'Nedra was awed by the lady's spectacular beauty. Polgara was flawless. Even the white lock in the midnight of her hair was not so much a defect as it was a sort of accent - a personal trademark. Most disconcerting to the princess were Polgara's eyes. Depending on her mood, they ranged in color from gray to a deep, deep blue and they saw through everything. No dissimulation was possible in the face of that calm, steady gaze. Each time the princess looked into those eyes, she seemed to hear the clink of chains. She definitely had to get on Polgara's good side.

"Lady Polgara?" the princess said one morning as they sat together on deck, while the steaming, gray-green jungle slid by on either bank and the sweating sailors labored at their oars.

"Yes, dear?" Polgara looked up from the button she was sewing on one of Garion's tunics. She wore a pale blue dress, open at the throat in the heat.

"What is sorcery? I was always told that such things didn't exist." It seemed like a good place to start the discussion.

Polgara smiled at her. "Tolnedran education tends to be a bit onesided."

"Is it a trick of some kind?" Ce'Nedra persisted. "I mean, is it like showing people something with one hand while you're taking something away with the other?" She toyed with the laces on her sandals.

"No, dear. It's nothing at all like that."

"Exactly how much can one do with it?"

"We've never explored that particular boundary," Polgara replied, her needle still busy. "When something has to be done, we do it. We don't bother worrying about whether we can or not. Different people are better at different things, though. It's somewhat on the order of some men being better at carpentry while others specialize in stonemasonry."

"Garion's a sorcerer, isn't he? How much can he do?" Now why had she asked that?

"I was wondering where this was leading," Polgara said, giving the tiny girl a penetrating look.

Ce'Nedra blushed slightly.

"Don't chew on your hair, dear," Polgara told her. "You'll split the ends."

Ce'Nedra quickly removed the curl from between her teeth.

"We're not sure what Garion can do yet," Polgara continued. "It's probably much too early to tell. He seems to have talent. He certainly makes enough noise whenever he does something, and that's a fair indication of his potential."

"He'll probably be a very powerful sorcerer then."

A faint smile touched Polgara's lips. "Probably so," she replied. "Always assuming that he learns to control himself."

"Well," Ce'Nedra declared, "we'll just have to teach him to control himself then, won't we?"

Polgara looked at her for a moment, and then she began to laugh. Ce'Nedra felt a bit sheepish, but she also laughed.

Garion, who was standing not far away, turned to look at them. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing you'd understand, dear," Polgara told him.

He looked offended and moved away, his back stiff and his face set. Ce'Nedra and Polgara laughed again.

When Captain Greldik's ship finally reached the point where rocks and swiftly tumbling water made it impossible to go any farther, they moored her to a large tree on the north bank, and the party prepared to go ashore. Barak stood sweating in his mail shirt beside his friend Greldik, watching Hettar oversee the unloading of the horses. "If you happen to see my wife, give her my

greetings," the red-bearded man said.
Greldik nodded. "I'll probably be near Trellheim sometime during the coming winter."
"I don't know that you need to tell her that I know about her pregnancy. She'll probably want to surprise me with my son when I get home. I wouldn't want to spoil that for her."
Greldik looked a little surprised. "I thought you enjoyed spoiling things for her, Barak."
"Maybe it's time that Merel and I made peace with each other. This little war of ours was amusing when we were younger, but it might not be a bad idea to put it aside now - for the sake of the children, if nothing else."
Belgarath came up on deck and joined the two bearded Chereks. "Go to Val Alorn," he told Captain Greldik. "Tell Anheg where we are and what we're doing. Have him get word to the others. Tell him that I absolutely forbid their going to war with the Angaraks just now. Ctuchik has the Orb at Rak Cthol, and if there's a war, Taur Urgas will seal the borders of Cthol Murgos. Things are going to be difficult enough for us without that to contend with."
"I'll tell him," Greldik replied doubtfully. "I don't think he'll like it much, though."
"He doesn't have to like it," Belgarath said bluntly. "He just as to do it."
Ce'Nedra, standing not far away, felt a little startled when she heard the shabby-looking old man issuing his peremptory commands. How could he speak so to sovereign kings? And what if Garion, as a sorcerer, should someday have a similar authority? She turned and gazed at the young man who was helping Durnik the smith calm an excited horse. He didn't look authoritative. She pursed her lips. A robe of some kind might help, she thought, and maybe some sort of book of magic in his hands - and perhaps just the hint of a beard. She narrowed her eyes, imagining him so robed, booked and bearded.
Garion, obviously feeling her eyes on him, looked quickly in her direction, his expression questioning. He was so ordinary. The image of this plain, unassuming boy in the finery she had concocted for him in her mind was suddenly ludicrous. Without meaning to, she laughed. Garion flushed and stiffly turned his back on her.
Since the rapids of the River of the Serpent effectively blocked all further nagivation upriver, the trail leading up into the hills was quite broad, indicating that most travelers struck out overland at that point.
As they rode up out of the valley in the midmorning sunlight, they passed rather quickly out of the tangled jungle growth lining the river and moved into a hardwood forest that was much more to Ce'Nedra's liking. At the crest of the first rise, they even encountered a breeze that seemed to brush away the sweltering heat and stink of Nyissa's festering swamps. Ce'Nedra's spirits lifted immediately. She considered the company of Prince Kheldar, but he was dozing in his saddle, and Ce'Nedra was just a bit afraid of the sharp-nosed Drasnian. She recognized immediately that the cynical, wise little man could probably read her like a book, and she didn't really care for that idea. Instead she rode forward along the column to ride with Baron Mandorallen, who led the way, as was his custom. Her move was prompted in part by the desire to get as far away from the steaming river as possible, but there was more to it than that. It occurred to her that this might be an excellent opportunity to question this Arendish nobleman about a matter that interested her.
"Your Highness," the armored knight said respectfully as she pulled her horse in beside his huge charger, "dost think it prudent to place thyself in the vanguard thus?"
"Who would be so foolish as to attack the bravest knight in the world?" she asked with artful innocence.
The baron's expression grew melancholy, and he sighed.

"And why so great a sigh, Sir Knight?" she bantered.
"It is of no moment, your Highness," he replied.
They rode along in silence through the dappled shade where insects hummed and darted and small, scurrying things skittered and rustled in the bushes at the side of the trail.
"Tell me," the princess said finally, "have you known Belgarath for long?"
"All my life, your Highness."
"Is he highly regarded in Arendia?"
"Highly regarded? Holy Belgarath is the paramount man in the world! Surely thou knowest that, Princess."
"I'm Tolnedran, Baron Mandorallen," she pointed out. "Our familiarity with sorcerers is limited. Would an Arend describe Belgarath as a man of noble birth?"
Mandorallen laughed. "Your Highness, holy Belgarath's birth is so far lost in the dim reaches of antiquity that thy question has no meaning."
Ce'Nedra frowned. She did not particularly like being laughed at. "Is he or is he not a nobleman?" she pressed.
"He is Belgarath," Mandorallen replied, as if that explained everything. "There are hundreds of barons, earls by the score, and lords without number, but there is only one Belgarath. All men give way to him."
She beamed at him. "And what about Lady Polgara?"
Mandorallen blinked, and Ce'Nedra saw that she was going too fast for him. "The Lady Polgara is revered above all women," he said in puzzled response.
"Highness, could I but know the direction of throe inquiry, I might provide thee with more satisfactory response."
She laughed. "My dear Baron, it's nothing important or serious just curiosity, and a way to pass the time as we ride."
Durnik the smith came forward at a trot just then, his sorrel horse's hoofbeats thudding on the packed earth of the trail. "Mistress Pol wants you to wait for a bit," he told them.
"Is anything wrong?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"No. It's just that there's a bush not far from the trail that she recognized. She wants to harvest the leaves - I think they have certain medicinal uses. She says it's very rare and only found in this part of Nyissa." The smith's plain, honest face was respectful as it always was when he spoke of Polgara. Ce'Nedra had certain private suspicions about Durnik's feelings, but she kept them to herself. "Oh," he went on, "she said to warn you about the bush. There might be others around. It's about a foot tall and has very shiny green leaves and a little purple flower. It's deadly poisonous - even to touch."
"We will not stray from the trail, Goodman," Mandorallen assured him, "but will abide here against the lady's permission to proceed." Durnik nodded and rode on back down the trail.
Ce'Nedra and Mandorallen pulled their horses into the shade of a broad tree and sat waiting. "How do the Arends regard Garion?" Ce'Nedra asked suddenly.
"Garion is a good lad," Mandorallen replied, somewhat confused.
"But hardly noble," she prompted him.
"Highness," Mandorallen told her delicately, "throe education, I fear, hath led thee astray. Garion is of the line of Belgarath and Polgara. Though he hath no rank such as thou and I both have, his blood is the noblest in the world. I would give precedence to him without question should he ask it of me - which he would not, being a modest lad. During our sojourn at the court of King Korodullin at Vo Mimbre, a young countess pursued him most fervently, thinking to gain status and prestige by marriage to him."
"Really?" Ce'Nedra asked with a hard little edge coming into her voice.
"She sought betrothal and trapped him often with blatant invitation to dalliance and sweet conversation."

"A beautiful countess?"
"One of the great beauties of the kingdom."
"I see." Ce'Nedra's voice was like ice.
"Have I given offense, Highness?"
"It's not important."
Mandorallen sighed again.
"What is it now?" she snapped.
"I perceive that my faults are many."
"I thought you were supposed to be the perfect man." She regretted that instantly.
"Nay, Highness. I am marred beyond thy conception."
"A bit undiplomatic, perhaps, but that's no great flaw - in an Arend."
"Cowardice is, your Highness."
She laughed at the notion. "Cowardice? You?"
"I have found that fault in myself," he admitted.
"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "If anything, your fault lies in the other

direction."
"It is difficult to believe, I know," he replied. "But I assure thee with great shame that I have felt the grip of fear upon my heart."
Ce'Nedra was baffled by the knight's mournful confession. She was struggling to find some proper reply when a great crashing rush burst out of the undergrowth a few yards away. With a sudden start of panic, her horse wheeled and bolted. She caught only the briefest glimpse of something large and tawny leaping out of the bushes at her - large, tawny, and with a great gaping mouth. She tried desperately to cling to her saddle with one hand and to control her terrified horse with the other, but its frantic flight took him under a low branch, and she was swept off its back to land unceremoniously in the middle of the trail. She rolled to her hands and knees and then froze as she faced the beast that had so clumsily burst forth from concealment.
She saw at once that the lion was not very old. She noted that, though his body was fully developed, he had only a half grown mane. Clearly, he was an adolescent, unskilled at hunting. He roared with frustration as he watched the fleeing horse disappear back down the trail, and his tail lashed. The princess felt a momentary touch of amusement - he was so young, so awkward. Then her amusement was replaced by irritation with this clumsy young beast who had caused her humiliating unhorsing. She rose to her feet, brushed off her knees, and looked at him sternly. "Shoo!" she said with an insistent flip of her hand. She was, after all, a princess, and he was only a lion - a very young and foolish lion.
The yellow eyes fell on her then and narrowed slightly. The lashing tail grew suddenly quite still. The young lion's eyes widened with a sort of dreadful intensity, and he crouched, his belly going low to the ground. His upper lip lifted to reveal his very long, white teeth. He took one slow step toward her, his great paw touching down softly.
"Don't you dare," she told him indignantly.

"Remain quite still, Highness," Mandorallen warned her in a deathly quiet voice. From the corner of her eye she saw him slide out of his saddle. The lion's eyes flickered toward him with annoyance.
Carefully, one step at a time, Mandorallen crossed the intervening space until he had placed his armored body between the lion and the princess. The Lion watched him warily, not seeming to realize what he was doing until it was too late. Then, cheated of another meal, the cat's eyes went flat with rage.
Mandorallen drew his sword very carefully; then, to Ce'Nedra's amazement, he passed it back hilt - first to her. "So that thou shall have means of defending

thyself, should I fail to withstand him," the knight explained.
Doubtfully, Ce'Nedra took hold of the huge hilt with both hands. When Mandorallen released his grip on the blade, however, the point dropped immediately to the ground. Try though she might, Ce'Nedra could not even lift the huge sword.
Snarling, the lion crouched even lower. His tail lashed furiously for a moment, then stiffened out behind him. "Mandorallen, look out!" Ce'Nedra screamed, still struggling with the sword.
The lion leaped.
Mandorallen flung his steel-cased arms wide and stepped forward to meet the cat's charge. They came together with a resounding crash, and Mandorallen locked his arms around the beast's body. The lion wrapped his huge paws around Mandorallen's shoulders and his claws screeched deafeningly as they raked the steel of the knight's armor. His teeth grated and ground as he gnawed and bit at Mandorallen's helmeted head. Mandorallen tightened his deadly embrace.
Ce'Nedra scrambled out of the way, dragging the sword behind her, and stared wide-eyed with fright at the dreadful struggle.
The lion's clawing became more desperate, and great, deep scratches appeared on Mandorallen's armor as the Mimbrate's arms tightened inexorably. The roars became yowls of pain, and the lion struggled now not to fight or kill, but to escape. He wriggled and thrashed and tried to bite. His hind paws came up to rake furiously on Mandorallen's armored trunk. His yowls grew more shrill, more filled with panic.
With a superhuman effort, Mandorallen jerked his arms together. Ce'Nedra heard the cracking of bones with a sickening clarity, and an enormous fountain of blood erupted from the cat's mouth. The young lion's body quivered, and his head dropped. Mandorallen unclenched his locked hands, and the dead beast slid limply from his grasp to the ground at his feet.
Stunned, the princess stared at the stupendous man in blood-smeared and clawed armor standing before her. She had just witnessed the impossible. Mandorallen had killed a lion with no weapon but his mighty arms-and all for her!
Without knowing why, she found herself crowing with delight. "Mandorallen!" She sang his name. "You are my knight!"
Still panting from his efforts, Mandorallen pushed up his visor. His blue eyes were wide, as if her words had struck him with a stunning impact. Then he sank to his knees before her. "Your Highness," he said in a choked voice, "I pledge to thee here upon the body of this beast to be thy true and faithful knight for so long as I have breath."
Deep inside her, Ce'Nedra felt a profound sort of click - the sound of two things, fated from time's beginning to come together, finally meeting. Something - she did not know exactly what - but something very important had happened there in that sun-dappled glade.
And then Barak, huge and imposing, came galloping up the trail with Hettar at his side and the others not far behind. "What happened?" the big Cherek demanded, swinging down from his horse.
Ce'Nedra waited until they had all reined in to make her announcement. "The lion there attacked me," she said, trying to make it sound like an everyday occurrence. "Mandorallen killed him with his bare hands."
"I was in fact wearing these, Highness," the still-kneeling knight reminded her, holding up his gauntleted fists.
"It was the bravest thing I've ever seen in my life," Ce'Nedra swept on.
"Why are you down on your knees?" Barak asked Mandorallen. "Are you hurt?"
"I have just made Sir Mandorallen my very own knight," Ce'Nedra declared, "and as is quite proper, he knelt to receive that honor from my hands." From the corner of her eye she saw Garion in the act of sliding down from his horse. He was scowling like a thundercloud. Silently, Ce'Nedra exulted. Leaning forward

then, she placed a sisterly kiss on Mandorallen's brow. "Rise, Sir Knight," she commanded, and Mandorallen creaked to his feet.
Ce'Nedra was enormously pleased with herself.
The remainder of the day passed without incident. They crossed a low range of hills and came down into a little valley as the sun settled slowly into a cloudbank off to the west. The valley was watered by a small stream, sparkling and cold, and they stopped there to set up their night's encampment.
Mandorallen, in his new role as knight-protector, was suitably attentive, and Ce'Nedra accepted his service graciously, casting occasional covert glances at Garion to be certain that he was noticing everything.
Somewhat later, when Mandorallen had gone to see to his horse and Garion had stomped off to sulk, she sat demurely on a moss-covered log congratulating herself on the day's accomplishments.
"You're playing a cruel game, Princess," Durnik told her bluntly from the spot a few feet away where he was building a fire.
Ce'Nedra was startled. So far as she could remember, Durnik had never spoken directly to her since she had joined the party. The smith was obviously uncomfortable in the presence of royalty and, indeed, seemed actually to avoid her. Now, however, he looked straight into her face, and his tone was reproving.
"I don't know what you're talking about," she declared.
"I think you do." His plain, honest fact was serious, and his gaze was steady.
Ce'Nedra lowered her eyes and flushed slowly.
"I've seen village girls play this same game," he continued. "Nothing good ever comes of it."
"I'm not trying to hurt anybody, Durnik. There isn't really anything of that sort between Mandorallen and me - we both know that."
"Garion doesn't."
Ce'Nedra was amazed. "Garion?"
"Isn't that what it's all about?"
"Of course not!" she objected indignantly. Durnik's look was profoundly skeptical.
"Such a thing never entered my mind," Ce'Nedra rushed on. "It's absolutely absurd."
"Really?"
Ce'Nedra's bold front collapsed. "He's so stubborn," she complained. "He just won't do anything the way he's supposed to."
"He's an honest boy. Whatever else he is or might become, he's still the plain, simple boy he was at Faldor's farm. He doesn't know the rules of the gentry. He won't lie to you or flatter you or say things he doesn't really feel. I think something very important is going to happen to him before very long - I don't know what - but I do know it's going to take all his strength and courage. Don't weaken him with all this childishness."
"Oh, Durnik," she said with a great sigh. "What am I going to do?"
"Be honest. Say only what's in your heart. Don't say one thing and mean another. That won't work with him."
"I know. That's what makes it all so difficult. He was raised one way, and I was raised another. We're never going to get along." She sighed again.
Durnik smiled, a gentle, almost whimsical smile. "It's not all that bad, Princess," he told her. "You'll fight a great deal at first. You're almost as stubborn as he is, you know. You were born in different parts of the world, but you're not really all that different inside. You'll shout at each other and shake your fingers in each others' faces; but in time that will pass, and you won't even remember what you were shouting about. Some of the best marriages I know of started that way."
"Marriage!"
"That's what you've got in mind, isn't it?"

She stared at him incredulously. Then she suddenly laughed. "Dear, dear Durnik," she said. "You don't understand at all, do you?"
"I understand what I see," he replied. "And what I see is a young girl doing everything she possibly can to catch a young man."
Ce'Nedra sighed. "That's completely out of the question, you know - even if I felt that way - which of course I don't."
"Naturally not." He looked slightly amused.
"Dear Durnik," she said again, "I can't even allow myself such thoughts. You forget who I am."
"That isn't very likely," he told her. "You're usually very careful to keep the fact firmly in front of everybody."
"Don't you know what it means?"
He looked a bit perplexed. "I don't quite follow."
"I'm an Imperial Princess, the jewel of the Empire, and I belong to the Empire. I'll have absolutely no voice in the decision about whom I'm going to marry. That decision will be made by my father and the Cauncil of Advisers. My husband will be rich and powerful - probably much older than I am - and my marriage to him will be to the advantage of the Empire and the House of Borune. I probably won't even be consulted in the matter."
Durnik looked stunned. "That's outrageous!" he objected.
"Not really," she told him. "My family has the right to protect its interests, and I'm an extremely valuable asset to the Borunes." She sighed again, a forlorn little sigh. "It might be nice, though - to be able to choose for myself, I mean. If I could, I might even look at Garion the way you seem to think I have been looking - even though he's absolutely impossible. The way things are, though, all he can ever be is a friend."
"I didn't know," he apologized, his plain, practical face melancholy.
"Don't take it so seriously, Durnik," she said lightly. "I've always known that this was the way things have to be."
A large, glistening tear, however, welled into the corner of her eye, and Durnik awkwardly put his work-worn hand on her arm to comfort her. Without knowing why, she threw her arms around his neck, buried her face in his chest, and sobbed.
"There, there," he said, clumsily patting her shaking shoulder. "There, there."

Chapter Three

GARION DID NOT Sleep well that night. Although he was young and inexperienced, he was not stupid, and Princess Ce'Nedra had been fairly obvious. Over the months since she had joined them, he had seen her attitude toward him change until they had shared a rather specialized kind of friendship. He liked her; she liked him. Everything had been fine up to that point. Why couldn't she just leave it alone? Garion surmised that it probably had something to do with the inner workings of the female mind. As soon as a friendship passed a certain point - some obscure and secret boundary - a woman quite automatically became overwhelmed by a raging compulsion to complicate things.
He was almost certain that her transparent little game with Mandorallen had been aimed at him, and he wondered if it might not be a good idea to warn the knight to spare him more heartbreak in the future. Ce'Nedra's toying with the great man's affections was little more than the senseless cruelty of a spoiled child. Mandorallen must be warned. His Arendish thick-headedness might easily cause him to overlook the obvious.
And yet, Mandorallen had killed the lion for her. Such stupendous bravery could quite easily have overwhelmed the flighty little princess. What if her admiration and gratitude had pushed her over the line into infatuation? That possibility, coming to Garion as it did in those darkest hours just before dawn, banished all possibility of further sleep. He arose the next morning sandy-eyed

and surly and with a terrible worry gnawing at him.
As they rode out through the blue-tinged shadows of early morning with the slanting rays of the newly risen sun gleaming on the treetops above them, Garion fell in beside his grandfather, seeking the comfort of the old man's companionship. It was not only that, however. Ce'Nedra was riding demurely with Aunt Pol just ahead, and Garion felt very strongly that he should keep an eye on her.
Mister Wolf rode in silence, looking cross and irritable, and he frequently dug his fingers under the splint on his left arm.
"Leave it alone, father," Aunt Pol told him without turning around.
"It itches."
"That's because it's healing. Just leave it alone."
He grumbled about that under his breath.
"Which route are you planning to take to the Vale?" she asked him.
"We'll go around by way of Tol Rane," he replied.
"The season's moving on, father," she reminded him. "If we take too long, we'll run into bad weather in the mountains."
"I know that, Pol. Would you rather cut straight across Maragor?"
"Don't be absurd."
"Is Maragor really all that dangerous?" Garion asked.
Princess Ce'Nedra turned in her saddle and gave him a withering look. "Don't you know anything?" she asked him with towering superiority.
Garion drew himself up, a dozen suitable responses to that coming to mind almost at once.
Mister Wolf shook his head warningly. "Just let it pass," the old man told him. "It's much too early to start in on that just now."
Garion clenched his teeth together.
They rode for an hour or more through the cool morning, and Garion gradually felt his temper improving. Then Hettar rode up to speak with Mister Wolf. "There are some riders coming," he reported.
"How many?" Wolf asked quickly.
"A dozen or more - coming in from the west."
"They could be Tolnedrans."
"I'll see," Aunt Pol murmured. She lifted her face and closed her eyes for a moment. "No," she said. "Not Tolnedrans. Murgos."
Hettar's eyes went flat. "Do we fight?" he asked with a dreadful kind of eagerness, his hand going to his sabre.
"No," Wolf replied curtly. "We hide."
"There aren't really that many of them."
"Never mind, Hettar," Wolf told him. "Silk," he called ahead, "there are some Murgos coming toward us from the west. Warn the others and find us all a place to hide."
Silk nodded curtly and galloped forward.
"Are there any Grolims with them?" the old man asked Aunt Pol.
"I don't think so," she answered with a small frown. "One of them has a strange mind, but he doesn't seem to be a Grolim."
Silk rode back quickly. "There's a thicket off to the right," he told them. "It's big enough to hide in."
"Lets go, then," Wolf said.
The thicket was fifty yards back among the larger trees. It appeared to be a patch of dense brush surrounding a small hollow. The ground in the hollow was marshy, and there was a spring at its center.
Silk had swung down from his horse and was hacking a thick bush off close to the ground with his short sword. "Take cover in here," he told them. "I'll go back and brush out our tracks." He picked up the bush and wormed his way out of the thicket.

"Be sure the horses don't make any noise," Wolf told Hettar. Hettar nodded, but his eyes showed his disappointment.
Garion dropped to his knees and wormed his way through the thick brush until he reached the edge of the thicket; then he sank down on the leaves covering the ground to peer out between the gnarled and stumpy trunks.
Silk, walking backward and swing his bush, was sweeping leaves and twigs from the forest floor over the tracks they had made from the trail to the thicket. He was moving quickly, but was careful to obliterate their trail completely.
From behind them, Garion heard a faint snap and rustle in the leaves, and Ce'Nedra crawled up and sank to the ground at his side. "You shouldn't be this close to the edge of the brush," he told her in a low voice.
"Neither should you," she retorted.
He let that pass. The princess had a warm, flowerlike smell; for some reason, that made Garion very nervous.
"How far away do you think they are?" she whispered.
"How would I know?"
"You're a sorcerer, aren't you?"
"I'm not that good at it."
Silk finished brushing away the tracks and stood for a moment studying the ground as he looked for any trace of their passage he might have missed. Then he burrowed his way into the thicket and crouched down a few yards from Garion and Ce'Nedra.
"Lord Hettar wanted to fight them," Ce'Nedra whispered to Garion. "Hettar always wants to fight when he sees Murgos."
"The Murgos killed his parents when he was very young. He had to watch while they did it."
She gasped. "How awful!"
"If you children don't mind," Silk said sarcastically, "I'm trying to listen for horses."
Somewhere beyond the trail they had just left, Garion heard the thudding sound of horses' hooves moving at a trot. He sank down deeper into the leaves and watched, scarcely breathing.
When the Murgos appeared, there were about fifteen of them, mailshirted and with the scarred cheeks of their race. Their leader, however, was a man in a patched and dirty tunic and with coarse black hair. He was unshaven, and one of his eyes was out of line with its fellow. Garion knew him.
Silk drew in a sharp breath with an audible hiss. "Brill," he muttered.
"Who's Brill?" Ce'Nedra whispered to Garion.
"I'll tell you later," he whispered back. "Shush!"
"Don't shush me!" she flared.
A stem look from Silk silenced them.
Brill was talking sharply to the Murgos, gesturing with short, jerky movements. Then he raised his hands with his fingers widespread and stabbed them forward to emphasize what he was saying. The Murgos all nodded, their faces expressionless, and spread out along the trail, facing the woods and the thicket where Garion and the others were hiding. Brill moved farther up the trail. "Keep your eyes open," he shouted to them. "Let's go."
The Murgos started to move forward at a walk, their eyes searching. Two of them rode past the thicket so close that Garion could smell the sweat on their horses' flanks.
"I'm getting tired of that man," one of them remarked to the other.
"I wouldn't let it show," the second one advised.
"I can take orders as well as any man," the first one said, "but that one's beginning to irritate me. I think he would look better with a knife between his shoulder blades."
"I don't think he'd like that much, and it might be a little hard to manage."

"I could wait until he was asleep."
"I've never seen him sleep."
"Everybody sleeps-sooner or later."
"It's up to you," the second replied with a shrug, "but I wouldn't try anything rash - unless you've given up the idea of ever seeing Rak Hagga again."
The two of them moved on out of earshot.
Silk crouched, gnawing nervously at a fingernail. His eyes had narrowed to slits, and his sharp little face was intent. Then he began to swear under his breath.
"What's wrong, Silk?" Garion whispered to him.
"I've made a mistake," Silk answered irntably. "Let's go back to the others." He turned and crawled through the bushes toward the spring at the center of the thicket.
Mister Wolf was seated on a log, scratching absently at his splinted arm.
"Well?" he asked, looking up.
"Fifteen Murgos," Silk replied shortly. "And an old friend."
"It was Brill," Garion reported. "He seemed to be in charge."
"Brill?" The old man's eyes widened with surprise.
"He was giving orders and the Murgos were following them," Silk said. "They didn't like it much, but they were doing what he told them to do. They seemed to be afraid of him. I think Brill's something more than an ordinary hireling."
"Where's Rak Hagga?" Ce'Nedra asked. Wolf looked at her sharply.
"We heard two of them talking," she explained. "They said they were from Rak Hagga. I thought I knew the names of all the cities in Cthol Murgos, but I've never heard of that one."
"You're sure they said Rak Hagga?" Wolf asked her, his eyes intent.
"I heard them too," Garion told him. "That was the name they used - Rak Hagga."
Mister Wolf stood up, his face suddenly grim. "We're going to have to hurry then. Taur Urgas is preparing for war."
"How do you know that?" Barak asked him.
"Rak Hagga's a thousand leagues south of Rak Goska, and the southern Murgos are never brought up into this part of the world unless the Murgo king is on the verge of going to war with someone."
"Let them come," Barak said with a bleak smile.
"If it's all the same to you, I'd like to get our business attended to first. I've got to go to Rak Cthol, and I'd prefer not to have to wade through whole armies of Murgos to get there." The old man shook his head angrily. "What is Taur Urgas thinking of?" he burst out. "It's not time yet."
Barak shrugged. "One time's as good as another."
"Not for this war. Too many things have to happen first. Can't Ctuchik keep a leash on that maniac?"
"Unpredictability is part of Taur Urgas' unique charm," Silk observed sardonically. "He doesn't know himself what he's going to do from one day to the next."
"Knowest thou the king of the Murgos?" Mandorallen inquired.
"We've met," Silk replied. "We're not fond of each other."
"Brill and his Murgos should be gone by now," Mister Wolf said. "Let's move on.

We've got a long way to go, and time's starting to catch up with us." He moved quickly toward his horse.
Shortly before sundown they went through a high pass lying in a notch between two mountains and stopped for the night in a little glen a few miles down on the far side.
"Keep the fire down as much as you can, Durnik," Mister Wolf warned the smith. "Southern Murgos have sharp eyes and they can see the light from a fire from

miles away. I'd rather not have company in the middle of the night."

Durnik nodded soberly and dug his firepit somewhat deeper than usual. Mandorallen was attentive to the Princess Ce'Nedra as they set up for the night, and Garion watched sourly. Though he had violently objected each time Aunt Pol had insisted that he serve as Ce'Nedra's personal attendant, now that the tiny girl had her knight to fetch and carry for her, Garion felt somehow that his rightful position had in some way been usurped.
"We're going to have to pick up our pace," Wolf told them after they had finished a meal of bacon, bread, and cheese. "We've got to get through the mountains before the first storms hit, and we're going to have to try to stay ahead of Brill and his Murgos." He scraped a space clear on the ground in front of him with one foot, picked up a stick and began sketching a map in the dirt. "We're here." He pointed. "Maragor's directly ahead of us. We'll circle to the west, go through Tol Rane, and then strike northeast toward the Vale."
"Might it not be shorter to cross Maragor?" Mandorallen suggested, pointing at the crude map.
"Perhaps," the old man replied, "but we won't do that unless we have to. Maragor's haunted, and it's best to avoid it if possible."
"We are not children to be frightened of insubstantial shades," Mandorallen declared somewhat stiffly.
"No one's doubting your courage, Mandorallen," Aunt Pol told him, "but the spirit of Mara wails in Maragor. It's better not to offend him."
"How far is it to the Vale of Aldur?" Durnik asked.
"Two hundred and fifty leagues," Wolf answered. "We'll be a month or more in the mountains, even under the best conditions. Now we'd better all get some sleep. Tomorrow's likely to be a hard day."

Chapter Four

WHEN THEY ROSE the next morning as the first pale hint of light was appearing on the eastern horizon, there was a touch of silvery frost on the ground and a thin scum of ice around the edges of the spring at the bottom of the glen. Ce'Nedra, who had gone to the spring to wash her face, lifted a leaf thin shard from the water and stared at it.
"It's much colder up in the mountains," Garion told her as he belted on his sword.
"I'm aware of that," she replied loftily.
"Forget it," he said shortly and stamped away, muttering.
They rode down out of the mountains in the bright morning sunlight, moving at a steady trot. As they rounded a shoulder of outcropping rock, they saw the broad basin that had once been Maragor, the District of the Marags, stretching out below them. The meadows were a dusty autumn green, and the streams and lakes sparkled in the sun. A tumbled ruin, looking tiny in the distance, gleamed far out on the plain.
Princess Ce'Nedra, Garion noticed, kept her eyes averted, refusing even to look. Not far down the slope below them, a cluster of crude huts and lopsided tents lay in a steep gully where a frothy creek had cut down through the rocks and gravel. Dirt streets and paths wandered crookedly up and down the sides of the gully, and a dozen or so raggedlooking men were hacking somewhat dispiritedly at the creek bank with picks and mattocks, turning the water below the shabby settlement a muddy yellow brown.
"A town?" Durnik questioned. "Out here?"
"Not exactly a town," Wolf replied. "The men in those settlements sift gravel and dig up the streambanks, looking for gold."
"Is there gold here?" Silk asked quickly, his eyes bright.

"A little," Wolf said. "Probably not enough to make it worth anyone's time to look for it."
"Why do they bother, then?"

Wolf shrugged. "Who knows?"
Mandorallen and Barak took the lead, and they moved down the rocky trail toward the settlement. As they approached, two men came out of one of the huts with rusty swords in their hands. One, a thin, unshaven man with a high forehead, wore a greasy Tolnedran jerkin. The other, much taller and bulkier, was dressed in the ragged tunic of an Arendish serf.
"That's far enough," the Tolnedran shouted. "We don't let armed men come in here until we know what their business is."
"You're blocking the trail, friend," Barak advised him. "You might find that unhealthy."
"One shout from me will bring fifty armed men," the Tolnedran warned.
"Don't be an idiot, Reldo," the big Arend told him. "That one with all the steel on him is a Mimbrate knight. There aren't enough men on the whole mountain to stop him, if he decides to go through here." He looked warily at Mandorallen.
"What're your intentions, Sir Knight?" he asked respectfully.
"We are but following the trail," Mandorallen replied. "We have no interest in thy community."
The Arend grunted. "That's good enough for me. Let them pass, Reldo." He slid his sword back under his rope belt.
"What if he's lying?" Reldo retorted. "What if they're here to steal our gold?"
"What gold, you jackass?" the Arend demanded with contempt. "There isn't enough gold in the whole camp to fill a thimble - and Mimbrate knights don't lie. If you want to fight with him, go ahead. After it's over, we'll scoop up what's left of you and dump you in a hole someplace."
"You've got a bad mouth, Berig," Reldo observed darkly.
"And what do you plan to do about it?"
The Tolnedran glared at the larger man and then turned and walked away, muttering curses.
Berig laughed harshly, then turned back to Mandorallen. "Come ahead, Sir Knight," he invited. "Reldo's all mouth. You don't have to worry about him."
Mandorallen moved forward at a walk. "Thou art a long way from home, my friend."
Berig shrugged. "There wasn't anything in Arendia to keep me, and I had a misunderstanding with my lord over a pig. When he started talking about hanging, I thought I'd like to try my luck in a different country."
"Seems like a sensible decision." Barak laughed.
Berig winked at him. "The trail goes right on down to the creek," he told them, "then up the other side behind those shacks. The men over there are Nadraks, but the only one who might give you any trouble is Tarlek. He got drunk last night, though, so he's probably still sleeping it off."
A vacant-eyed man in Sendarian clothing shambled out of one of the tents. Suddenly he lifted his face and howled like a dog. Berig picked up a rock and shied it at him. The Sendar dodged the rock and ran yelping behind one of the shacks. "One of these days I'm going to do him a favor and stick a knife in him," Berig remarked sourly. "He bays at the moon all night long."
"What's his problem?" Barak asked.
Berig shrugged. "Crazy. He thought he could make a dash into Maragor and pick up some gold before the ghosts caught him. He was wrong."
"What did they do to him?" Durnik asked, his eyes wide.
"Nobody knows," Berig replied. "Every so often somebody gets drunk or greedy and thinks he can get away with it. It wouldn't do any good, even if the ghosts didn't catch you. Anybody coming out is stripped immediately by his friends. Nobody gets to keep any gold he brings out, so why bother?"

"You've got a charming society here," Silk observed wryly.
Berig laughed. "It suits me. It's better than decorating a tree in my lord's apple orchard back in Arendia." He scratched absently at one armpit. "I guess I'd better go do some digging," he sighed. "Good luck." He turned and started toward one of the tents.
"Let's move along," Wolf said quietly. "These places tend to get rowdy as the day wears on."
"You seem to know quite a bit about them, father," Aunt Pol noticed.
"They're good places to hide," he replied. "Nobody asks any questions. I've needed to hide a time or two in my life."
"I wonder why?"
They started along the dusty street between the slapped-together shacks and patched tents, moving down toward the roiling creek. "Wait!" someone called from behind. A scruffy-looking Drasnian was running after them, waving a small leather pouch. He caught up with them, puffing. "Why didn't you wait?" he demanded.
"What do you want?" Silk asked him.
"I'll give you fifty pennyweight of fine gold for the girl," the Drasnian panted, waving his leather sack again.
Mandorallen's face went bleak, and his hand moved toward his sword hilt.
"Why don't you let me deal with this, Mandorallen?" Silk suggested mildly, swinging down from his saddle.
Ce'Nedra's expression had first registered shock, then outrage. She appeared almost on the verge of explosion before Garion reached her and put his hand on her arm. "Watch," he told her softly.
"How dare-"
"Hush. Just watch. Silk's going to take care of it."
"That's a pretty paltry offer," Silk said, his fingers flicking idly.
"She's still young," the other Drasnian pointed out. "She obviously hasn't had much training yet. Which one of you owns her?"
"We'll get to that in a moment," Silk replied. "Surely you can make a better offer than that."
"It's all I've got," the scruffy man answered plaintively, waving his fingers, "and I don't want to go into partnership with any of the brigands in this place. I'd never get to see any of the profits."
Silk shook his head. "I'm sorry," he refused. "It's out of the question. I'm sure you can see our position."
Ce'Nedra was making strangled noises.
"Be quiet," Garion snapped. "This isn't what it seems to be."
"What about the older one?" the scruffy man suggested, sounding desperate. "Surely fifty pennyweight's a good price for her."
Without warning Silk's fist lashed out, and the scruffy Drasnian reeled back from the apparent blow. His hand flew to his mouth, and he began to spew curses.
"Run him off, Mandorallen," Silk said quite casually.
The grim-faced knight drew his broadsword and moved his warhorse deliberately at the swearing Drasnian. After one startled yelp, the man turned and fled.
"What did he say?" Wolf asked Silk. "You were standing in front of him, so I couldn't see."
"The whole region's alive with Murgos," Silk replied, climbing back on his horse. "Kheran says that a dozen parties of them have been through here in the last week."
"You knew that animal?" Ce'Nedra demanded.
"Kheran? Of course. We went to school together."
"Drasnians like to keep an eye on things, Princess," Wolf told her. "King Rhodar has agents everywhere."
"That awful man is an agent of King Rhodar?" Ce'Nedra asked incredulously.

Silk nodded. "Actually Kheran's a margrave," he said. "He has exquisite manners under normal circumstances. He asked me to convey his compliments."
Ce'Nedra looked baffled.
"Drasnians talk to each other with their fingers," Garion explained. "I thought everybody knew that."
Ce'Nedra's eyes narrowed at him.
"What Kheran actually said was, 'Tell the red-haired wench that I apologize for the insult,' " Garion informed her smugly. "He needed to talk to Silk, and he had to have an excuse."
"Wench?"
"His word, not mine," Garion replied quickly.
"You know this sign language?"
"Naturally."
"That'll do, Garion," Aunt Pol said firmly.
"Kheran recommends that we get out of here immediately," Silk told Mister Wolf. "He says that the Murgos are looking for somebody - us, probably."
From the far side of the camp there were sudden angry voices. Several dozen Nadraks boiled out of their shanties to confront a group of Murgo horsemen who had just ridden up out of a deep gully. At the forefront of the Nadraks hulked a huge, fat man who looked more animal than human. In his right hand he carried a brutal-looking steel mace. "Kordoch!" he bellowed. "I told you I'd kill you next time you came here."
The man who stepped out from among the Murgo horses to face the hulking Nadrak was Brill. "You've told me a lot of things, Tarlek," he shouted back.
"This time you get what's coming to you, Kordoch," Tarlek roared, striding forward and swinging his mace.
"Stay back," Brill warned, stepping away from the horses. "I don't have time for this right now."
"You don't have any time left at all, Kordoch - for anything." Tarlek was grinning broadly. "Would anyone like to take this opportunity to say good - bye to our friend over there?" he said. "I think he's about to leave on a very long journey."
But Bril1's right hand had dipped suddenly inside his tunic. With a flickering movement, he whipped out a peculiar-looking triangular steel object about six inches across. Then, in the same movement, he flipped it, spinning and whistling, directly at Tarlek. The flat steel triangle sailed, flashing in the sun as it spun, and disappeared with a sickening sound of shearing bone into the hulking Nadrak's chest. Silk hissed with amazement.
Tarlek stared stupidly at Brill, his mouth agape and his left hand going to the spurting hole in his chest. Then his mace slid out of his right hand, his knees buckled, and he fell heavily forward.
"Let's get out of here!" Mister Wolf barked. "Down the creek! Go!"
They plowed into the rocky streambed at a plunging gallop, and the muddy water sprayed out from under their horses' hooves. After several hundred yards they turned sharply to scramble up a steep gravel bank.
"That way!" Barak shouted, pointing toward more level ground. Garion did not have time to think, only to cling to his horse and try to keep up with the others. Faintly, far behind, he could hear shouts.
They rode behind a low hill and reined in for a moment at Wolf's signal.
"Hettar," the old man said, "see if they're coming."
Hettar wheeled his horse and loped up to a stand of trees on the brow of the hill.
Silk was muttering curses, his face livid.
"What's your problem now?" Barak demanded.
Silk kept on swearing.
"What's got him so worked up?" Barak asked Mister Wolf.

"Our friend's just had a nasty shock," the old man answered. "He misjudged somebody - so did I, as a matter of fact. That weapon Brill used on the big Nadrak is called an adder-sting."
Barak shrugged. "It looked like just an odd-shaped throwing knife to me.
"There's a bit more to it than that," Wolf told him. "It's as sharp as a razor on all three sides, and the points are usually dipped in poison. It's the special weapon of the Dagashi. That's what has got Silk so upset."
"I should have known," Silk berated himself. "Brill's been a little too good all along to be just an ordinary Sendarian footpad."
"Do you know what they're talking about, Polgara?" Barak asked.
"The Dagashi are a secret society in Cthol Murgos," she told him. "Trained killers-assassins. They answer only to Ctuchik and their own elders. Ctuchik's been using them for centuries to eliminate people who get in his way. They're very efficient."
"I've never been that curious about the peculiarities of Murgo culture," Barak replied. "If they want to creep around and kill each other, so much the better." He glanced up the hill quickly to find out if Hettar had seen anything behind them. "That thing Brill used might be an interesting toy, but it's no match for armor and a good sword."
"Don't be so provincial, Barak," Silk said, beginning to regain his composure. "A well-thrown adder-sting can cut right through a mail shirt; if you know how, you can even sail it around corners. Not only that, a Dagashi could kill you with his hands and feet, whether you're wearing armor or not." He frowned. "You know, Belgarath," he mused, "we might have been making a mistake all along. We assumed that Asharak was using Brill, but it might have been the other way around. Brill has to be good, or Ctuchik wouldn't have sent him into the West to keep an eye on us." He smiled then, a chillingly bleak little smile. "I wonder just how good he is." He flexed his fingers. "I've met a few Dagashi, but never one of their best. That might be very interesting."
"Let's not get sidetracked," Wolf told him. The old man's face was grim. He looked at Aunt Pol, and something seemed to pass between them.
"You're not serious," she said.
"I don't think we've got much choice, Pol. There are Murgos all around us - too many and too close. I don't have any room to move; they've got us pinned right up against the southern edge of Maragor. Sooner or later, we're going to get pushed out onto the plain anyway. At least, if we make the decision ourselves, we'll be able to take some precautions."
"I don't like it, father," she stated bluntly.
"I don't care much for it myself," he admitted, "but we've got to shake off all these Murgos or we'll never make it to the Vale before winter sets in."
Hettar rode back down the hill. "They're coming," he reported quietly. "And there's another group of them circling in from the west to cut us off."
Wolf drew in a deep breath. "I think that pretty well decides it, Pol," he said. "Let's go."
As they passed into the belt of trees dotting the last low line of hills bordering the plain, Garion glanced back once. A half dozen dust clouds spotted the face of the miles-wide slope above them. Murgos were converging on them from all over the mountains.
They galloped on into the trees and thundered through a shallow draw. Barak, riding in the lead, suddenly held up his hand. "Men ahead of us," he warned.
"Murgos?" Hettar asked, his hand going to his sabre.
"I don't think so," Barak replied. "The one I saw looked more like some of those we saw back at the settlement."
Silk, his eyes very bright, pushed his way to the front. "I've got an idea," he said. "Let me talk to them." He pushed his horse into a dead run, plunging directly into what seemed to be an ambush. "Comrades!" he shouted. "Get ready!

They're coming - and they've got the gold!"
Several shabby-looking men with rusty swords and axes rose from the bushes or stepped out from behind trees to surround the little man. Silk was talking very fast, gesticulating, waving his arms and pointing back toward the slope looming behind them.
"What's he doing?" Barak asked.
"Something devious, I imagine," Wolf replied.
The men surrounding Silk looked dubious at first, but their expressions gradually changed as he continued to talk excitedly. Finally he turned in his saddle to look back. He jerked his arm in a broad, overhead sweep. "Let's go!" he shouted. "They're with us!" He spun his horse to scramble up the graveled side of the gully.
"Don't get separated," Barak warned, shifting his shoulders under his mail shirt. "I'm not sure what he's up to, but these schemes of his sometimes fall apart."
They pounded down through the grim-looking brigands and up the side of the gully on Silk's heels.
"What did you say to them?" Barak shouted as they rode.
"I told them that fifteen Murgos had made a dash into Maragor and come out with three heavy packs of gold." The little man laughed. "Then I said that the men at the settlement had turned them back and that they were trying to double around this way with the gold. I told them that we'd cover this next gully if they'd cover that one back there."
"Those scoundrels will swarm all over Brill and his Murgos when they try to come through," Barak suggested.
"I know." Silk laughed. "Terrible, isn't it?"
They rode on at a gallop. After about a half mile, Mister Wolf raised his arm, and they all reined in. "This should be far enough," he told them. "Now listen very carefully, all of you. These hills are alive with Murgos, so we're going to have to go into Maragor."
Princess Ce'Nedra gasped, and her face turned deathly pale.
"It will be all right, dear," Aunt Pol soothed her.
Wolf's face was grimly serious. "As soon as we ride out onto the plain, you're going to start hearing certain things," he continued. "Don't pay any attention. Just keep riding. I'm going to be in the lead and I want you all to watch me very closely. As soon as I raise my hand, I want you to stop and get down off your horses immediately. Keep your eyes on the ground and don't look up, no matter what you hear. There are things out there that you don't want to see. Polgara and I are going to put you all into a kind of sleep. Don't try to fight us. Just relax and do exactly what we tell you to do."
"Sleep?" Mandorallen protested. "What if we are attacked? How may we defend ourselves if we are asleep?"
"There isn't anything alive out there to attack you, Mandorallen," Wolf told him. "And it isn't your body that needs to be protected; it's your mind."
"What about the horses?" Hettar asked.
"The horses will be all right. They won't even see the ghosts."
"I can't do it," Ce'Nedra declared, her voice hovering on the edge of hysteria. "I can't go into Maragor."
"Yes, you can, dear," Aunt Pol told her in that same calm, soothing voice. "Stay close to me. I won't let anything happen to you."
Garion felt a sudden profound sympathy for the frightened little girl, and he drew his horse over beside hers. "I'll be here, too," he told her. She looked at him gratefully, but her lower lip still trembled, and her face was very pale.
Mister Wolf took a deep breath and glanced once at the long slope behind them. The dust clouds raised by the converging Murgos were much closer now. "All right," he said, "let's go." He turned his horse and began to ride at an easy

trot down toward the mouth of the gully and the plain stretching out before them.
The sound at first seemed faint and very far away, almost like the murmur of wind among the branches of a forest or the soft babble of water over stones. Then, as they rode farther out onto the plain, it grew louder and more distinct. Garion glanced back once, almost longingly at the hills behind them. Then he pulled his horse close in beside Ce'Nedra's and locked his eyes on Mister Wolf's back, trying to close his ears.
The sound was now a chorus of moaning cries punctuated by occasional shrieks. Behind it all, and seeming to carry and sustain all the other sounds, was a dreadful wailing - a single voice surely, but so vast and all-encompassing that it seemed to reverberate inside Garion's head, erasing all thought.
Mister Wolf suddenly raised his hand, and Garion slid out of his saddle, his eyes fixed almost desperately on the ground. Something flickered at the edge of his vision, but he refused to look.
Then Aunt Pol was speaking to them, her voice calm, reassuring. "I want you to form a circle," she told them, "and take each others' hands. Nothing will be able to enter the circle, so you'll all be safe."
Trembling in spite of himself, Garion stretched out his hands. Someone took his left, he didn't know who; but he instantly knew that the tiny hand that clung so desperately to his right was Ce'Nedra's.
Aunt Pol stood in the center of their circle, and Garion could feel the force of her presence there washing over all of them. Somewhere outside the circle, he could feel Wolf. The old man was doing something that swirled faint surges through Garion's veins and set off staccato bursts of the familiar roaring sound.
The wailing of the dreadful, single voice grew louder, more intense, and Garion felt the first touches of panic. It was not going to work. They were all going to go mad.
"Hush, now," Aunt Pol's voice came to him, and he knew that she spoke inside his mind. His panic faded, and he felt a strange, peaceful lassitude. His eyes grew heavy, and the sound of the wailing grew fainter. Then, enfolded in a comforting warmth, he fell almost at once into a profound slumber.

Chapter Five

GARION WAS NOT exactly sure when it was that his mind shook off Aunt Pol's soft compulsion to sink deeper and deeper into protective unawareness. It could not have been long. Falteringly, like someone rising slowly from the depths, he swam back up out of sleep to find himself moving stiffly, even woodenly, toward the horses with the others. When he glanced at them, he saw their faces were blank, uncomprehending. He seemed to hear Aunt Pol's whispered command to "sleep, sleep, sleep," but it somehow lacked the power necessary to compel him to obey.
There was to his consciousness, however, a subtle difference. Although his mind was awake, his emotions seemed not to be. He found himself looking at things with a calm, lucid detachment, uncluttered by those feelings which so often churned his thoughts into turmoil. He knew that in all probability he should tell Aunt Pol that he was not asleep, but for some obscure reason he chose not to. Patiently, he began to sort through the notions and ideas surrounding that decision, trying to isolate the single thought which he knew must lie behind the choice not to speak. In his search, he touched that quiet corner where the other mind stayed. He could almost sense its sardonic amusement.
"Well?" he said silently to it.
"I see that you're finally awake," the other mind said to him. "No," Garion corrected rather meticulously, "actually a part of me is asleep, I think."
"That was the part that kept getting in the way. We can talk now. We have some

things to discuss."
"Who are you?" Garion asked, absently following Aunt Pol's instructions to get back on his horse.
"I don't actually have a name."
"You're separate from me, though, aren't you? I mean, you're not just another part of me, are you?"
"No," the voice replied, "we're quite separate."
The horses were moving at a walk now, following Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf across the meadow.
"What do you want?" Garion asked.
"I need to make things come out the way they're supposed to. I've been doing that for a very long time now."
Garion considered that. Around him the wailing grew louder, and the chorus of moans and shrieks became more distinct. Filmy, half formed tatters of shape began to appear, floating across the grass toward the horses. "I'm going to go mad, aren't I?" he asked somewhat regretfully. "I'm not asleep like the others are, and the ghosts will drive me mad, won't they?"
"I doubt it," the voice answered. "You'll see some things you'd probably rather not see, but I don't think it will destroy your mind. You might even learn some things about yourself that will be useful later on."
"You're very old, aren't you?" Garion asked as the thought occurred to him.
"That term doesn't have any meaning in my case."
"Older than my grandfather?" Garion persisted.
"I knew him when he was a child. It might make you feel better to know that he was even more stubborn than you are. It took me a very long time to get him started in the direction he was supposed to go."
"Did you do it from inside his mind?"
"Naturally."
Garion noted that his horse was walking obliviously through one of the filmy images that was taking shape in front of him. "Then he knows you, doesn't he - if you were in his mind, I mean?"
"He didn't know I was there."
"I've always known you were there."
"You're different. That's what we need to talk about."
Rather suddenly, a woman's head appeared in the air directly in front of Garion's face. The eyes were bulging, and the mouth was agape in a soundless scream. The ragged, hacked-off stump of its neck streamed blood that seemed to dribble off into nowhere. "Kiss me," it croaked at him. Garion closed his eyes as his face passed through the head.
"You see," the voice pointed out conversationally. "It's not as bad as you thought it was going to be."
"In what way am I different?" Garion wanted to know.
"Something needs to be done, and you're the one who's going to do it. All the others have just been in preparation for you."
"What is it exactly that I have to do?"
"You'll know when the time comes. If you find out too soon, it might frighten you." The voice took on a somewhat wry note. "You're difficult enough to manage without additional complications."

"Why are we talking about it then?"
"You need to know why you have to do it. That might help you when the time comes."
"All right," Garion agreed.
"A very long time ago, something happened that wasn't supposed to happen," the voice in his mind began. "The universe came into existence for a reason, and it was moving toward that purpose smoothly. Everything was happening the way it was

supposed to happen, but then something went wrong. It wasn't really a very big thing, but it just happened to be in the right place at the right time - or perhaps in the wrong place at the wrong time might be a better way to put it. Anyway, it changed the direction of events. Can you understand that?"
"I think so," Garion replied, frowning with the effort. "Is it like when you throw a rock at something but it bounces off something else instead and goes where you don't want it to go - like the time Doroon threw that rock at the crow and it hit a tree limb and bounced off and broke Faldor's window instead?"
"That's exactly it," the voice congratulated him. "Up to that point there had always been only one possibility - the original one. Now there were suddenly two. Let's take it one step further. If Doroon - or you had thrown another rock very quickly and hit the first rock before it got to Faldor's window, it's possible that the first rock might have been knocked back to hit the crow instead of the window."
"Maybe, " Garion conceded doubtfully. "Doroon wasn't really that good at throwing rocks."
"I'm much better at it than Doroon," the voice told him. "That's the whole reason I came into existence in the first place. In a very special way, you are the rock that I've thrown. If you hit the other rock just right, you'll turn it and make it go where it was originally intended to go.
"And if I don't?"
"Faldor's window gets broken."
The figure of a naked woman with her arms chopped off and a sword thrust through her body was suddenly in front of Garion. She shrieked and moaned at him, and

the stumps of her arms spurted blood directly into his face. Garion reached up to wipe off the blood, but his face was dry. Unconcerned, his horse walked through the gibbering ghost.
"We have to get things back on the right course," the voice went on. "This certain thing you have to do is the key to the whole business. For a long time, what was supposed to happen and what was actually happening went off in different directions. Now they're starting to converge again. The point where they meet is the point where you'll have to act. If you succeed, things will be all right again; if you don't, everything will keep going wrong, and the purpose for which the universe came into existence will fail."
"How long ago was it when this started?"
"Before the world was made. Even before the Gods."
"Will I succeed?" Garion asked.
"I don't know," the voice replied. "I know what's supposed to happen - not what will. There's something else you need to know too. When this mistake occurred, it set off two separate lines of possibility, and a line of possibility has a kind of purpose. To have a purpose, there has to be awareness of that purpose. To put it rather simply, that's what I am - the awareness of the original purpose of the universe."
"Only now there's another one, too, isn't there?" Garion suggested. "Another awareness, I mean - one connected with the other set of possibilities."
"You're even brighter than I thought."
"And wouldn't it want things to keep going wrong?"
"I'm afraid so. Now we come to the important part. The spot in time where all this is going to be decided one way or another is getting very close, and you've got to be ready."
"Why me?" Garion asked, brushing away a disconnected hand that appeared to be trying to clutch at his throat. "Can't somebody else do it?"
"No," the voice told him. "That's not the way it works. The universe has been waiting for you for more millions of years than you could even imagine. You've been hurtling toward this event since before the beginning of time. It's yours

alone. You're the only one who can do what needs to be done, and it's the most important thing that will ever happen - not just in this world but in all the worlds in all the universe. There are whole races of men on worlds so far away that the light from their suns will never reach this world, and they'll cease to exist if you fail. They'll never know you or thank you, but their entire existence depends on you. The other line of possibility leads to absolute chaos and the ultimate destruction of the universe, but you and I lead to something else."
"What?"
"If you're successful, you'll live to see it happen."
"All right," Garion said. "What do I have to do - now, I mean?"
"You have enormous power. It's been given to you so that you can do what you have to do, but you've got to learn how to use it. Belgarath and Polgara are trying to help you learn, so stop fighting with them about it. You've got to be ready when the time comes, and the time is much closer than you might think."
A decapitated figure stood in the trail, holding its head by the hair with its right hand. As Garion approached, the figure raised the head. The twisted mouth shrieked curses at him.
After he had ridden through the ghost, Garion tried to speak to the mind within his mind again, but it seemed to be gone for the moment. They rode slowly past the tumbled stones of a ruined farmstead.
Ghosts clustered thickly on the stones, beckoning and calling seductively.
"A disproportionate number seem to be women," Aunt Pol observed calmly to Mister Wolf.
"It was a peculiarity of the race," Wolf replied. "Eight out of nine births were female. It made certain adjustments necessary in the customary relationships between men and women."
"I imagine you found that entertaining," she said dryly.
"The Marags didn't look at things precisely the way other races do. Marriage never gained much status among them. They were quite libieral about certain things."
"Oh? Is that the term for it?"
"Try not to be so narrow-minded, Pol. The society functioned; that's what counts."
"There's a bit more to it than that, father," she said. "What about their cannibalism?"
"That was a mistake. Somebody misinterpreted a passage in one of their sacred texts, that's all. They did it out of a sense of religious obligation, not out of appetite. On the whole, I rather liked the Marags. They were generous, friendly, and very honest with each other. They enjoyed life. If it hadn't been for the gold here, they'd probably have worked out their little aberration."
Garion had forgotten about the gold. As they crossed a small stream, he looked down into the sparkling water and saw the butter-yellow flecks glittering among the pebbles on the bottom.
A naked ghost suddenly appeared before him. "Don't you think I'm beautiful?" she leered. Then she took hold of the sides of the great slash that ran up her abdomen, pulled it open and spilled out her entrails in a pile on the bank of the stream.
Garion gagged and clenched his teeth together.
"Don't think about the gold!" the voice in his mind said sharply. "The ghosts come at you through your greed. If you think about gold, you'll go mad."
They rode on, and Garion tried to push the thought of gold out of his mind. Mister Wolf, however, continued to talk about it. "That's always been the problem with gold. It seems to attract the worst kind of people - the Tolnedrans in this case."
"They were trying to stamp out cannibalism, father," Aunt Pol replied. "That's a

custom most people find repugnant."
"I wonder how serious they'd have been about it if all that gold hadn't been lying on the bed of every stream in Maragor."
Aunt Pol averted her eyes from the ghost of a child impaled on a Tolnedran spear. "And now no one has the gold," she said. "Mara saw to that."
"Yes," Wolf agreed, lifting his face to listen to the dreadful wail that seemed to come from everywhere. He winced at a particularly shrill note in the wailing. "I wish he wouldn't scream so loud."
They passed the ruins of what appeared to have been a temple. The white stones were tumbled, and grass grew up among them. A broad tree standing nearby was festooned with hanging bodies, twisting and swinging on their ropes. "Let us down," the bodies murmured. "Let us down."
"Father!" Aunt Pol said sharply, pointing at the meadow beyond the fallen temple. "Over there! Those people are real."
A procession of robed and hooded figures moved slowly through the meadow, chanting in unison to the sound of a mournfully tolling bell supported on a heavy pole they carried on their shoulders.
"The monks of Mar Terrin," Wolf said. "Tolnedra's conscience. They aren't anything to worry about."
One of the hooded figures looked up and saw them. "Go back!" he shouted. He broke away from the others and ran toward them, recoiling often from things Garion could not see. "Go back!" he cried again. "Save yourselves! You approach the very center of the horror. Mar Amon lies just beyond that hill. Mara himself rages through its haunted streets!"

Chapter Six

THE PROCESSION OF monks moved on, the sound of their chanting and slowly tolling bell growing fainter as they crossed the meadow. Mister Wolf seemed deep in thought, the fingers of his good hand stroking his beard. Finally he sighed rather wryly. "I suppose we might as well deal with him here and now, Pol. He'll just follow us if we don't."
"You're wasting your time, father," Aunt Pol replied. "There's no way to reason with him. We've tried before."
"You're probably right," he agreed, "but we should try at least. Aldur would be disappointed if we didn't. Maybe when he finds out what's happening, he'll come around to the point where we can at least talk to him."
A piercing wail echoed across the sunny meadow, and Mister Wolf made a sour face. "You'd think that he'd have shrieked himself out by now. All right, let's go to Mar Amon." He turned his horse toward the hill the wild-eyed monk had pointed out to them. A maimed ghost gibbered at him from the air in front of his face. "Oh, stop that!" he said irritably. With a startled flicker, the ghost disappeared.
There had perhaps been a road leading over the hill at some time in the past. The faint track of it was dimly visible through the grass, but the thirty-two centuries which had passed since the last living foot had touched its surface had all but erased it. They wound to the top of the hill and looked down into the ruins of Mar Amon. Garion, still detached and unmoved, perceived and deduced things about the city he would not have otherwise noted. Though the destruction had been nearly total, the shape of the city was clearly evident. The street - for there was only one - was laid out in a spiral, winding in toward a broad, circular plaza in the precise center of the ruins. With a peculiar flash of insight, Garion became immediately convinced that the city had been designed by a woman. Men's minds ran to straight lines, but women thought more in terms of circles.
With Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf in the lead and the rest following in wooden-faced

unconsciousness, they started down the hill to the city. Garion rode at the rear, trying to ignore the ghosts rising from the earth to confront him with their nudity and their hideous maiming. The wailing sound which they had heard from the moment they had entered Maragor grew louder, more distinct. The wail had sometimes seemed to be a chorus, confused and distorted by echoes, but now Garion realized that it was one single, mighty voice, filled with a grief so vast that it reverberated through all the kingdom.

As they approached the city, a terrible wind seemed to come up, deadly chill and filled with an overpowering charnel-house stench. As Garion reached automatically to draw his cloak tighter about him, he saw that the cloak did not in any way react to that wind, and that the tall grass through which they rode did not bend before it. He considered it, turning it over in his mind as he tried to close his nostrils to the putrid stench of decay and corruption carried on that ghostly wind. If the wind did not move the grass, it could not be a real wind. Furthermore, if the horses could not hear the wails, they could not be real wails either. He grew colder and he shivered, even as he told himself that the chill - like the wind and the grief laden howling - was spiritual rather than real.

Although Mar Amon, when he had first glimpsed it from the top of the hill, had appeared to be in total ruin, when they entered the city Garion was startled to see the substantial walls of houses and public buildings surrounding him; and somewhere not far away he seemed to hear the sound of laughing children. There was also the sound of singing off in the distance.

"Why does he keep doing this?" Aunt Pol asked sadly. "It doesn't do any good."

"It's all he has, Pol," Mister Wolf replied.

"It always ends the same way, though."

"I know, but for a little while it helps him forget."

"There are things we'd all like to forget, father. This isn't the way to do it."

Wolf looked admiringly at the substantial-seeming houses around them. "It's very good, you know."

"Naturally," she said. "He's a God, after all - but it's still not good for him."

It was not until Barak's horse inadvertently stepped directly through one of the walls - disappearing through the solid-looking stone and then reemerging several yards farther down the street - that Garion understood what his Aunt and grandfather were talking about. The walls, the buildings, the whole city was an illusion - a memory. The chill wind with its stink of corruption seemed to grow stronger and carried with it now the added reek of smoke. Though Garion could still see the sunlight shining brightly on the grass, it seemed for some reason that it was growing noticeably darker. The laughter of children and the distant singing faded; instead, Garion heard screams.

A Tolnedran legionnaire in burnished breastplate and plumed helmet, as solid-looking as the walls around them, came running down the long curve of the street. His sword dripped blood, his face was fixed in a hideous grin, and his eyes were wild.

Hacked and mutilated bodies sprawled in the street now, and there was blood everywhere. The waiting climbed into a piercing shriek as the illusion moved on toward its dreadful climax.

The spiral street opened at last into the broad circular plaza at the center of Mar Amon. The icy wind seemed to howl through the burning city, and the dreadful sound of swords chopping through flesh and bone seemed to fill Garion's entire mind. The air grew even darker.

The stones of the plaza were thick with the illusory memory of uncounted scores of Marag dead lying beneath rolling clouds of dense smoke. But what stood in the center of the plaza was not an illusion, nor even a ghost. The figure towered and seemed to shimmer with a terrible presence, a reality that was in no way

dependent upon the mind of the observer for its existence. In its arms it held the body of a slaughtered child that seemed somehow to be the sum and total of all the dead of haunted Maragor; and its face, lifted in anguish above the body of that dead child, was ravaged by an expression of inhuman grief. The figure wailed; and Garion, even in the half somnolent state that protected his sanity, felt the hair on the back of his neck trying to rise in honor.

Mister Wolf grimaced and climbed down from his saddle. Carefully stepping over the illusions of bodies littering the plaza, he approached the enormous presence. "Lord Mara," he said, respectfully bowing to the figure.

Mara howled.

"Lord Mara," Wolf said again. "I would not lightly intrude myself upon thy grief, but I must speak with thee."

The dreadful face contorted, and great tears streamed down the God's cheeks. Wordlessly, Mara held out the body of the child and lifted his face and wailed.

"Lord Mara!" Wolf tried once again, more insistent this time.

Mara closed his eyes and bowed his head, sobbing over the body of the child.

"It's useless, father," Aunt Pol told the old man. "When he's like this, you can't reach him."

"Leave me, Belgarath," Mara said, still weeping. His huge voice rolled and throbbed in Garion's mind. "Leave me to my grief."

"Lord Mara, the day of the fulfillment of the prophecy is at hand," Wolf told him.

"What is that to me?" Mara sobbed, clutching the body of the child closer. "Will the prophecy restore my slaughtered children to me? I am beyond its reach. Leave me alone."

"The fate of the world hinges upon the outcome of events which will happen very soon, Lord Mara," Mister Wolf insisted. "The kingdoms of East and West are girding for the last war, and Torak One-Eye, thy accursed brother, stirs in his slumber and will soon awaken."

"Let him awaken," Mara replied and bowed down over the body in his arms as a storm of fresh weeping swept him.

"Wilt thou then submit to his dominion, Lord Mara?" Aunt Pol asked him.

"I am beyond his dominion, Polgara," Mara answered. "I will not leave this land of my murdered children, and no man of God will intrude upon me here. Let Torak have the world if he wants it."

"We might as well leave, father," Aunt Pol said. "Nothing's going to move him."

"Lord Mara," Mister Wolf said to the weeping God, "we have brought before thee the instruments of the prophecy. Wilt thou bless them before we go?"

"I have no blessings, Belgarath," Mara replied. "Only curses for the savage children of Nedra. Take these strangers and go."

"Lord Mara," Aunt Pol said firmly, "a part is reserved for thee in the working-out of the prophecy. The iron destiny which compels us all compels thee as well. Each must play that part laid out for him from the beginning of days, for in the day that the prophecy is turned aside from its terrible course, the world will be unmade."

"Let it be unmade," Mara groaned. "It holds no more joy for me, so let it perish. My grief is eternal, and I will not abandon it, though the cost be the unmaking of all that has been made. Take these children of the prophecy and depart."

Mister Wolf bowed with resignation, turned, and came back toward the rest of them. His expression registered a certain hopeless disgust.

"Wait!" Mara roared suddenly. The images of the city and its dead wavered and shimmered away. "What is this?" the God demanded.

Mister Wolf turned quickly.

"What hast thou done, Belgarath?" Mara accused, suddenly towering into immensity. "And thou, Polgara. Is my grief now an amusement for thee? Wilt thou

cast my sorrow into my teeth?"
"My Lord?" Aunt Pol seemed taken aback by the God's sudden fury.
"Monstrous!" Mara roared. "Monstrous!" His huge face convulsed with rage. In terrible anger, he strode toward them and then stopped directly in front of the horse of Princess Ce'Nedra. "I will rend thy flesh!" he shrieked at her. "I will fill thy brain with the worms of madness, daughter of Nedra. I will sink thee in torment and horror for all the days of thy life."
"Leave her alone!" Aunt Pol said sharply.
"Nay, Polgara," he raged. "Upon her will fall the brunt of my wrath." His dreadful, clutching fingers reached out toward the uncomprehending princess, but she stared blankly through him, unflinching and unaware.
The God hissed with frustration and whirled to confront Mister Wolf. "Tricked!" he howled. "Her mind is asleep."
"They're all asleep, Lord Mara," Wolf replied. "Threats and horrors don't mean anything to them. Shriek and howl until the sky falls down; she cannot hear thee."
"I will punish thee for this, Belgarath," Mara snarled, "and Polgara as well. You will all taste pain and terror for this arrogant despite of me. I will wring the sleep from the minds of these intruders, and they will know the agony and madness I will visit upon them all." He swelled suddenly into vastness.
"That's enough! Mara! Stop!" The voice was Garion's, but Garion knew that it was not he who spoke.
The Spirit of Mara turned on him, raising his vast arm to strike, but Garion felt himself slide from his horse to approach the vast threatening figure. "Your vengeance stops here, Mara," the voice coming from Garion's mouth said. "The girl is bound to my purpose. You will not touch her." Garion realized with a certain alarm that he had been placed between the raging God and the sleeping princess.
"Move out of my way, boy, lest I slay thee," Mara threatened.
"Use your mind, Mara," the voice told him, "if you haven't howled it empty by now. You know who I am."
"I will have her!" Mara howled. "I will give her a multitude of lives and tear each one from her quivering flesh."
"No," the voice replied, "you won't. "
The God Mara drew himself up again, raising his dreadful arms; but at the same time, his eyes were probing - and more than his eyes. Garion once again felt a vast touch on his mind as he had in Queen Salmissra's throne room when the Spirit of Issa had touched him. A dreadful recognition began to dawn in Mara's weeping eyes. His raised arms fell. "Give her to me," he pleaded. "Take the others and go, but give the Tolnedran to me. I beg it of thee."
"No." What happened then was not sorcery - Garion knew it instantly. The noise was not there nor that strange, rushing surge that always accompanied sorcery. Instead, there seemed to be a terrible pressure as the full force of Mara's mind was directed crushingly at him. Then the mind within his mind responded. The power was so vast that the world itself was not large enough to contain it. It did not strike back at Mara, for that dreadful collision would have shattered the world, but it stood rather, calmly unmoved and immovable against the raging torrent of Mara's fury. For a fleeting moment, Garion shared the awareness of the mind within his mind, and he shuddered back from its immensity. In that instant, he saw the birth of uncounted suns swirling in vast spirals against the velvet blackness of the void, their birth and gathering into galaxies and ponderously turning nebulae encompassing but a moment. And beyond that, he looked full in the face of time itself - seeing its beginning and its ending in one awful glimpse.
Mara fell back. "I must submit," he said hoarsely, and then he bowed to Garion, his ravaged face strangely humble. He turned away and buried his face in his

hands, weeping uncontrollably.
"Your grief will end, Mara," the voice said gently. "One day you will find joy again."
"Never," the God sobbed. "My grief will last forever."
"Forever is a very long time, Mara," the voice replied, "and only I can see to the end of it."
The weeping God did not answer, but moved away from them, and the sound of his wailing echoed again through the ruins of Mar Amon. Mister Wolf and Aunt Pol were both staring at Garion with stunned faces. When the old man spoke, his voice was awed. "Is it possible?"
"Aren't you the one who keeps saying that anything is possible, Belgarath?"
"We didn't know you could intervene directly," Aunt Pol said.
"I nudge things a bit from time to time - make a few suggestions. If you think back carefully, you might even remember some of them."
"Is the boy aware of any of this?" she asked.
"Of course. We had a little talk about it."
"How much did you tell him?"
"As much as he could understand. Don't worry, Polgara, I'm not going to hurt him. He realizes how important all this is now. He knows that he needs to prepare himself and that he doesn't have a great deal of time for it. I think

you'd better leave here now. The Tolnedran girl's presence is causing Mara a great deal of pain."
Aunt Pol looked as if she wanted to say more, but she glanced once at the shadowy figure of the God weeping not far away and nodded. She turned to her

horse and led the way out of the ruins.
Mister Wolf fell in beside Garion after they had remounted to follow her.
"Perhaps we could talk as we ride along," he suggested. "I have a great many questions."
"He's gone, Grandfather," Garion told him.
"Oh," Wolf answered with obvious disappointment.
It was nearing sundown by then, and they stopped for the night in a grove about a mile away from Mar Amon. Since they had left the ruins, they had seen no more of the maimed ghosts. After the others had been fed and sent to their blankets, Aunt Pol, Garion, and Mister Wolf sat around their small fire. Since the presence in his mind had left him, following the meeting with Mara, Garion had felt himself sinking deeper toward sleep. All emotion was totally gone now, and he seemed no longer able to think independently.
"Can we talk to the - other one?" Mister Wolf asked hopefully.
"He isn't there right now," Garion replied.
"Then he isn't always with you?"
"Not always. Sometimes he goes away for months - sometimes even longer. He's been there for quite a long while this time - ever since Asharak burned up."
"Where exactly is he when he's with you?" the old man asked curiously.
"In here." Garion tapped his head.
"Have you been awake ever since we entered Maragor?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Not exactly awake," Garion answered. "Part of me was asleep."
"You could see the ghosts?"
"Yes."
"But they didn't frighten you?"
"No. Some of them surprised me, and one of them made me sick."
Wolf looked up quickly. "It wouldn't make you sick now though, would it?"
"No. I don't think so. Right at first I could still feel things like that a little bit. Now I can't."
Wolf looked thoughtfully at the fire as if looking for a way to phrase his next

question. "What did the other one in your head say to you when you talked together?"
"He told me that something had happened a long time ago that wasn't supposed to happen and that I was supposed to fix it."
Wolf laughed shortly. "That's a succinct way of putting it," he observed. "Did he say anything about how it was going to turn out?"
"He doesn't know."
Wolf sighed. "I'd hoped that maybe we'd picked up an advantage somewhere, but I guess not. It looks like both prophecies are still equally valid."
Aunt Pol was looking steadily at Garion. "Do you think you'll be able to remember any of this when you wake up again?" she asked.
"I think so."
"All right then, listen carefully. There are two prophecies, both leading toward the same event. The Grolims and the rest of the Angaraks are following one; we're following the other. The event turns out differently at the end of each prophecy."
"I see."
"Nothing in either prophecy excludes anything that will happen in the other until they meet in that event," she continued. "The course of everything that follows will be decided by how that event turns out. One prophecy will succeed; the other will fail. Everything that has happened and will happen comes together at that point and becomes one. The mistake will be erased, and the universe will go in one direction or the other, as if that were the direction it had been going from its very beginning.The only real difference is that something that's very important will never happen if we fail."
Garion nodded, feeling suddenly very tired.
"Beldin call it the theory of convergent destinies," Mister Wolf said. "Two equally possible possibilities. Beldin can be very pompous sometimes."
"It's not an uncommon failing, father," Aunt Pol told him.
"I think I'd like to sleep now," Garion said.
Wolf and Aunt Pol exchanged a quick glance. "All right," Aunt Pol said. She rose and took him by the arm and led him to his blankets.
After she had covered him, drawing the blankets up snugly, she laid one cool hand on his forehead. "Sleep, my Belgarion," she murmured.
And he did that.

Part Two
THE VALE OF ALDUR

Chapter Seven
THEY WERE ALL standing in a circle with their hands joined when they awoke. Ce'Nedra was holding Garion's left hand, and Durnik was on his right. Garion's awareness came flooding back as sleep left him. The breeze was fresh and cool, and the morning sun was very bright. Yellow-brown foothills rose directly in front of them and the haunted plain of Maragor lay behind.
Silk looked around sharply as he awoke, his eyes wary. "Where are we?" he asked quickly.
"On the northern edge of Maragor," Wolf told him, "about eighty leagues east of Tol Rane."
"How long were we asleep?"
"A week or so."
Silk kept looking around, adjusting his mind to the passage of time and distance. "I guess it was necessary," he conceded finally.

Hettar went immediately to check the horses, and Barak began massaging the back of his neck with both hands. "I feel as if I've been sleeping on a pile of rocks," he complained.
"Walk around a bit," Aunt Pol advised. "That will work the stiffness out."
Ce'Nedra had not removed her hand from Garion's, and he wondered if he should mention it to her. Her hand felt very warm and small in his and, on the whole, it was not unpleasant. He decided not to say anything about it.
Hettar was frowning when he came back. "One of the pack mares is with foal, Belgarath," he said.
"How long has she got to go?" Wolf asked, looking quickly at him.

"It's hard to say for sure - no more than a month. It's her first."
"We can break down her pack and distribute the weight among the other horses," Durnik suggested. "She'll be all right if she doesn't have to carry anything."
"Maybe." Hettar sounded dubious.
Mandorallen had been studying the yellowed foothills directly ahead. "We are being watched, Belgarath," he said somberly, pointing at several wispy columns of smoke rising toward the blue morning sky.
Mister Wolf squinted at the smoke and made a sour face. "Goldhunters, probably. They hover around the borders of Maragor like vultures over a sick cow. Take a look, Pol."
But Aunt Pol's eyes already had that distant look in them as she scanned the foothills ahead. "Arends," she said, "Sendars, Tolnedrans, a couple of Drasnians. They aren't very bright."
"Any Murgos?"
"No."
"Common rabble then," Mandorallen observed. "Such scavengers will not impede us significantly."
"I'd like to avoid a fight if possible," Wolf told him. "These incidental skirmishes are dangerous and don't really accomplish anything." He shook his head with disgust. "We'll never be able to convince them that we're not carrying gold out of Maragor, though, so I guess there's no help for it."
"If gold's all they want, why don't we just give them some?" Silk suggested.
"I didn't bring all that much with me, Silk," the old man replied.
"It doesn't have to be real," Silk said, his eyes bright. He went to one of the packhorses, came back with several large pieces of canvas, and quickly cut them into foot-wide squares. Then he took one of the squares and laid a double handful of gravel in its center. He pulled up the corners and wrapped a stout piece of cord around them, forming a heavy-looking pouch. He hefted it a few times. "Looks about like a sackful of gold, wouldn't you say?"
"He's going to do something clever again," Barak said.
Silk smirked at him and quickly made up several more pouches. "I'll take the lead," he said, hanging the pouches on their saddles. "Just follow me and let me do the talking. How many of them are up there, Polgara?"
"About twenty," she replied.
"That will work out just fine," he stated confidently. "Shall we go?" They mounted their horses and started across the ground toward the broad mouth of a dry wash that opened out onto the plain. Silk rode at the front, his eyes everywhere. As they entered the mouth of the wash, Garion heard a shrill whistle and saw several furtive movements ahead of them. He was very conscious of the steep banks of the wash on either side of them.
"I'm going to need a bit of open ground to work with," Silk told them. "There." He pointed with his chin at a spot where the slope of the bank was a bit more gradual. When they reached the spot, he turned his horse sharply. "Now!" he barked. "Ride!"
They followed him, scrambling up the bank and kicking up a great deal of gravel;

a thick cloud of choking yellow dust rose in the air as they clawed their way up out of the wash.
Shouts of dismay came from the scrubby thornbushes at the upper end of the wash, and a group of rough-looking men broke out into the open, running hard up through the knee-high brown grass to head them off. A black-bearded man, closer and more desperate than the rest, jumped out in front of them, brandishing a rust-pitted sword. Without hesitation, Mandorallen rode him down. The black-bearded man howled as he rolled and tumbled beneath the churning hooves of the huge warhorse.
When they reached the hilltop above the wash, they gathered in a tight group.
"This will do," Silk said, looking around at the rounded terrain. "All I need is for the mob to have enough room to think about casualties. I definitely want them to be thinking about casualties."
An arrow buzzed toward them, and Mandorallen brushed it almost contemptuously out of the air with his shield.
"Stop!" one of the brigands shouted. He was a lean, pockmarked Sendar with a crude bandage wrapped around one leg, wearing a dirty green tunic.
"Who says so?" Silk yelled back insolently.
"I'm Kroldor," the bandaged man announced importantly. "Kroldor the robber. You've probably heard of me."
"Can't say that I have," Silk replied pleasantly.
"Leave your gold - and your women," Kroldor ordered. "Maybe I'll let you live."
"If you get out of our way, maybe we'll let you live."
"I've got fifty men," Kroldor threatened, "all desperate, like me."
"You've got twenty," Silk corrected. "Runaway serfs, cowardly peasants, and sneak thieves. My men are trained warriors. Not only that, we're mounted, and you're on foot."
"Leave your gold," the self proclaimed robber insisted.
"Why don't you come and take it?"
"Let's go!" Kroldor barked at his men. He lunged forward. A couple of his outlaws rather hesitantly followed him through the brown grass, but the rest hung back, eyeing Mandorallen, Barak, and Hettar apprehensively. After a few paces, Kroldor realized that his men were not with him. He stopped and spun around. "You cowards!" he raged. "If we don't hurry, the others will get here. We won't get any of the gold."
"I'll tell you what, Kroldor," Silk said. "We're in kind of a hurry, and we've got more gold than we can conveniently carry." He unslung one of his bags of gravel from his saddle and shook it suggestively. "Here." Negligently he tossed the bag into the grass off to one side. Then he took another bag and tossed it over beside the first. At his quick gesture the others all threw their bags on the growing heap. "There you are, Kroldor," Silk continued. "Ten bags of good yellow gold that you can have without a fight. If you want more, you'll have to bleed for it."
The rough-looking men behind Kroldor looked at each other and began moving to either side, their eyes fixed greedily on the heap of bags lying in the tall grass.
"Your men are having thoughts about mortality, Kroldor," Silk said dryly. "There's enough gold there to make them all rich, and rich men don't take unnecessary risks."
Kroldor glared at him. "I won't forget this," he growled.
"I'm sure you won't," Silk replied. "We're coming through now. I suggest that you get out of our way."
Barak and Hettar moved up to flank Mandorallen, and the three of them started deliberately forward at a slow, menacing walk.
Kroldor the robber stood his ground until the last moment, then turned and scurried out of their path, spouting curses.

"Let's go," Silk snapped.
They thumped their heels to their horses' flanks and charged through at a gallop. Behind them, the outlaws circled and then broke and ran toward the heap of canvas bags. Several ugly little fights broke out almost immediately, and three men were down before anyone thought to open one of the bags. The howls of rage could be heard quite clearly for some distance.
Barak was laughing when they finally reined in their horses after a couple of miles of hard riding. "Poor Kroldor." He chortled. "You're an evil man, Silk."
"I've made a study of the baser side of man's nature," Silk replied innocently. "I can usually find a way to make it work for me."
"Kroldor's men are going to blame him for the way things turned out," Hettar observed.
"I know. But then, that's one of the hazards of leadership."
"They might even kill him."

"I certainly hope so. I'd be terribly disappointed in them if they didn't."
They pushed on through the yellow foothills for the rest of the day and camped that night in a well-concealed little canyon where the light from their fire would not betray their location to the brigands who infested the region. The next morning they started out early, and by noon they were in the mountains. They rode on up among the rocky crags, moving through a thick forest of dark green firs and spruces where the air was cool and spicy. Although it was still summer in the lowlands, the first signs of autumn had begun to appear at the higher elevations. The leaves on the underbrush had begun to turn, the air had a faint, smoky haze, and there was frost on the ground each morning when they awoke. The weather held fair, however, and they made good time.
Then, late one afternoon after they had been in the mountains for a week or more, a heavy bank of clouds moved in from the west, bringing with it a damp chill. Garion untied his cloak from the back of the saddle and pulled it around his shoulders as he rode, shivering as the afternoon grew colder.
Durnik lifted his face and sniffed at the air. "We'll have snow before morning," he predicted.
Garion could also smell the chill, dusty odor of snow in the air. He nodded glumly.
Mister Wolf grunted. "I knew this was too good to last." Then he shrugged. "Oh, well," he added, "we've all lived through winters before."
When Garion poked his head out of the tent the next morning, an inch of snow lay on the ground beneath the dark firs. Soft flakes were drifting down, settling soundlessly and concealing everything more than a hundred yards away in a filmy haze. The air was cold and gray, and the horses, looking very dark under a dusting of snow, stamped their feet and flicked their ears at the fairy touch of the snowflakes settling on them. Their breath steamed in the damp cold.
Ce'Nedra emerged from the tent she shared with Aunt Pol with a squeal of delight. Snow, Garion realized, was probably a rarity in Tol Honeth, and the tiny girl romped through the soft drifting flakes with childish abandon. He smiled tolerantly until a well-aimed snowball caught him on the side of the head. Then he chased her, pelting her with snowballs, while she dodged in and out among the trees, laughing and squealing. When he finally caught her, he was determined to wash her face with snow, but she exuberantly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, her cold little nose rubbing against his cheek and her eyelashes thick with snowflakes. He didn't realize the full extent of her deceitfulness until she had already poured a handful of snow down the back of his neck. Then she broke free and ran toward the tents, hooting with laughter, while he tried to shake the snow out of the back of his tunic before it all melted.
By midday, however, the snow on the ground had turned to slush, and the drifting

flakes had become a steady, unpleasant drizzle. They rode up a narrow ravine under dripping firs while a torrentlike stream roared over boulders beside them. Mister Wolf finally called a halt. "We're getting close to the western border of Cthol Murgos," he told them. "I think it's time we started to take a few precautions."
"I'll ride out in front," Hettar offered quickly.
"I don't think that's a very good idea," Wolf replied. "You tend to get distracted when you see Murgos."
"I'll do it," Silk said. He had pulled his hood up, but water still dripped from the end of his long, pointed nose. "I'll stay about half a mile ahead and keep my eyes open."
Wolf nodded. "Whistle if you see anything."
"Right." Silk started off up the ravine at a trot.
Late that afternoon, the rain began to freeze as it hit, coating the rocks and trees with gray ice. They rounded a large outcropping of rock and found Silk waiting for them. The stream had turned to a trickle, and the walls of the ravine had opened out onto the steep side of a mountain. "We've got about an hour of daylight left," the little man said. "What do you think? Should we go on, or do you want to drop back down the ravine a bit and set up for the night?"
Mister Wolf squinted at the sky and then at the mountainside ahead. The steep slope was covered with stunted trees, and the timberline lay not far above them. "We have to go around this and then down the other side. It's only a couple of miles. Let's go ahead."
Silk nodded and led out again.
They rounded the shoulder of the mountain and looked down into a deep gorge that separated them from the peak they had crossed two days before. The rain had slackened with the approach of evening, and Garion could see the other side of the gorge clearly. It was not more than half a mile away, and his eyes caught a movement near the rim. "What's that?" He pointed.
Mister Wolf brushed the ice out of his beard. "I was afraid of that."
"What?"
"It's an Algroth."
With a shudder of revulsion, Garion remembered the scaly, goatfaced apes that had attacked them in Arendia. "Hadn't we better run?" he asked.
"It can't get to us," Wolf replied. "The gorge is at least a mile deep. The Grolims have turned their beasts loose, though. It's something we're going to have to watch out for." He motioned for them to continue.
Faintly, distorted by the wind that blew perpetually down the yawning gorge, Garion could hear the barking yelps of the Algroth on the far side as it communicated with the rest of its pack. Soon a dozen of the loathsome creatures were scampering along the rocky rim of the gorge, barking to one another and keeping pace with the party as they rode around the steep mountain face toward a shallow draw on the far side. The draw led away from the gorge; after a mile, they stopped for the night in the shelter of a grove of scrubby spruces.
It was colder the next morning and still cloudy, but the rain had stopped. They rode on back down to the mouth of the draw and continued following the rim of the gorge. The face on the other side fell away in a sheer, dizzying drop for thousands of feet to the tiny-looking ribbon of the river at the bottom. The Algroths still kept pace with them, barking and yelping and looking across with a dreadful hunger. There were other things as well, dimly seen back among the trees on the other side. One of them, huge and shaggy, seemed even to have a human body, but its head was the head of a beast. A herd of swift-moving animals galloped along the fir rim, manes and tails tossing.
"Look," Ce'Nedra exclaimed, pointing. "Wild horses."
"They're not horses," Hettar said grimly.
"They look like horses."

"They may look like it, but they aren't."
"Hrulgin," Mister Wolf said shortly.
"What's that?"
"A Hrulga is a four-legged animal-like a horse-but it has fangs instead of teeth, and clawed feet instead of hooves."
"But that would mean-" The princess broke off, her eyes wide.
"Yes. They're meat-eaters."
She shuddered. "How dreadful."
"That gorge is getting narrower, Belgarath," Barak growled. "I'd rather not have any of those things on the same side with us."
"We'll be all right. As I remember, it narrows down to about a hundred yards and then widens out again. They won't be able to get across."
"I hope your memory hasn't failed you."
The sky above looked ragged, tattered by a gusty wind. Vultures soared and circled over the gorge, and ravens flapped from tree to tree, croaking and squawking to one another. Aunt Pol watched the birds with a look of stern disapproval, but said nothing.
They rode on. The gorge grew narrower, and soon they could see the brutish faces of the Algroths on the other side clearly. When the Hrulgin, manes tossing in the wind, opened their mouths to whinny to each other, their long, pointed teeth were plainly visible.
Then, at the narrowest point of the gorge, a party of mail-skirted Murgos rode out onto the opposite precipice. Their horses were lathered from hard riding, and the Murgos themselves were gaunt-faced and travel-stained. They stopped and waited until Garion and his friends were opposite them. At the very edge, staring first across the gorge and then down at the river far below, stood Brill.
"What kept you?" Silk called in a bantering tone that had a hard edge just below the surface. "We thought perhaps you'd gotten lost."
"Not very likely, Kheldar," Brill replied. "How did you get across to that side?"
"You go back that way about four days' ride," Silk shouted, pointing back the way they had come. "If you look very carefully, you'll find the canyon that leads up here. It shouldn't take you more than a day or two to find it."
One of the Murgos pulled a short bow out from beneath his left leg and set an arrow to it. He pointed the arrow at Silk, drew back the string and released. Silk watched the arrow calmly as it fell down into the gorge, spinning in a long, slow-looking spiral. "Nice shot," he called.
"Don't be an idiot," Brill snapped at the Murgo with the bow. He looked back at Silk. "I've heard a great deal about you, Kheldar," he said.
"One has developed a certain reputation," Silk replied modestly.
"One of these days I'll have to find out if you're as good as they say."
"That particular curiosity could be the first symptom of a fatal disease."
"For one of us, at least."
"I look forward to our next meeting, then," Silk told him. "I hope you'd excuse us, my dear fellow - pressing business, you know."
"Keep an eye out behind you, Kheldar," Brill threatened. "One day I'll be there."
"I always keep an eye out behind me, Kordoch," Silk called back, "so don't be too surprised if I'm waiting for you. It's been wonderful chatting with you. We'll have to do it again-soon."
The Murgo with the bow shot another arrow. It followed his first into the gorge. Silk laughed and led the party away from the brink of the precipice. "What a splendid fellow," he said as they rode away. He looked up at the murky sky overhead. "And what an absolutely beautiful day."
The clouds thickened and grew black as the day wore on. The wind picked up until

it howled among the trees. Mister Wolf led them away from the gorge which separated them from Brill and his Murgos, moving steadily toward the northeast. They set up for the night in a rock-strewn basin just below the timberline. Aunt Pol prepared a meal of thick stew; as soon as they had finished eating, they let the fire go out. "There's no point in lighting beacons for them," Wolf observed.
"They can't get across the gorge, can they?" Durnik asked.
"It's better not to take chances," Wolf replied. He walked away from the last few embers of the dying fire and looked out into the darkness. On an impulse. Garion followed him.
"How much farther is it to the Vale, Grandfather?" he asked.
"About seventy leagues," the old man told him.
"We can't make very good time up here in the mountains."
"The weather's getting worse, too."
"I noticed that."
"What happens if we get a real snowstorm?"
"We take shelter until it blows over."
"What if-"
"Garion, I know it's only natural, but sometimes you sound a great deal like your Aunt. She's been saying 'what if' to me since she was about seventeen. I've gotten terribly tired of it over the years."
"I'm sorry."
"Don't be sorry. Just don't do it any more."
Overhead in the pitch-blackness of the blustery sky, there was a sudden, ponderous flap as of enormous wings.
"What's that?" Garion asked, startled.
"Be still!" Wolf stood with his face turned upward. There was another great flap. "Oh, that's sad."
"What?"
"I thought the poor old brute had been dead for centuries. Why don't they leave her alone?"
"What is it?"
"It doesn't have a name. It's big and stupid and ugly. The Gods only made three of them, and the two males killed each other during the first mating season. She's been alone for as long as I can remember."
"It sounds huge," Garion said, listening to the enormous wings beat overhead and peering up into the darkness. "What does it look like?"
"She's as big as a house, and you really wouldn't want to see her."
"Is she dangerous?"
"Very dangerous, but she can't see too well at night." Wolf sighed. "The Grolims must have chased her out of her cave and put her to hunting for us. Sometimes they go too far."
"Should we tell the others about her?"
"It would only worry them. Sometimes it's better not to say anything."
The great wings flapped again, and there was a long, despairing cry from the darkness, a cry filled with such aching loneliness that Garion felt a great surge of pity welling up in him.
Wolf sighed again. "There's nothing we can do," he said. "Let's go back to the tents."

Chapter Eight

THE WEATHER CONTINUED raw and unsettled as they rode for the next two days up the long, sloping rise toward the snow-covered summits of the mountains. The trees became sparser and more stunted as they climbed and finally disappeared entirely. The ridgeline flattened out against the side of one of the mountains, and they rode up onto a steep slope of tumbled rock and ice where the wind

scoured continually.
Mister Wolf paused to get his bearings, looking around in the pale afternoon light. "That way," he said finally, pointing. A saddleback stretched between two peaks, and the sky beyond roiled in the wind. They rode up the slope, their cloaks pulled tightly about them.
Hettar came forward with a worried frown on his hawk face. "That pregnant mare's in trouble," he told Wolf. "I think her time's getting close."
Without a word Aunt Pol dropped back to look at the mare, and her face was grave when she returned. "She's no more than a few hours away, father," she reported.
Wolf looked around. "There's no shelter on this side."
"Maybe there'll be something on the other side of the pass," Barak suggested, his beard whipping in the wind.
Wolf shook his head. "I think it's the same as this side. We're going to have to hurry. We don't want to spend the night up here."
As they rode higher, occasional spits of stinging sleet pelted them, and the wind gusted even stronger, howling among the rocks. As they crested the slope and started through the saddle, the full force of the gale struck them, driving a tattered sleet squall before it.
"It's even worse on this side, Belgarath," Barak shouted over the wind. "How far is it down to the trees?"
"Miles," Wolf replied, trying to keep his flying cloak pulled around him.
"The mare will never make it," Hettar said. "We've got to find shelter."
"There isn't any," Wolf stated. "Not until we get to the trees. It's all bare rock and ice up here."
Without knowing why he said it - not even aware of it until he spoke - Garion made a shouted suggestion. "What about the cave?"
Mister Wolf turned and looked sharply at him. "What cave? Where?"
"The one in the side of the mountain. It isn't far." Garion knew the cave was there, but he did not know how he knew.
"Are you sure?"
"Of course. It's this way." Garion turned his horse and rode up the slope of the saddle toward the vast, craggy peak on their left. The wind tore at them as they rode, and the driving sleet half blinded them. Garion moved confidently, however. For some reason every rock about them seemed absolutely familiar, though he could not have said why. He rode just fast enough to stay in front of the others. He knew they would ask questions, and he didn't have any answers.
They rounded a shoulder of the peak and rode out onto a broad rock ledge. The ledge curved along the mountainside, disappearing in the swirling sleet ahead.
"Where art thou taking us, lad?" Mandorallen shouted to him.
"It's not much farther," Garion yelled back over his shoulder.
The ledge narrowed as it curved around the looming granite face of the mountain. Where it bent around a jutting cornice, it was hardly more than a footpath. Garion dismounted and led his horse around the cornice. The wind blasted directly into his face as he stepped around the granite outcrop, and he had to put his hand in front of his face to keep the sleet from blinding him. Walking that way, he did not see the door until it was almost within reach of his hands.
The door in the face of the rock was made of iron, black and pitted with rust and age. It was broader than the gate at Faldor's farm, and the upper edge of it

was lost in the swirling sleet.
Barak, following close behind him, reached out and touched the iron door. Then he banged on it with his huge fist. The door echoed hollowly. "There is a cave," he said back over his shoulder to the others. "I thought that the wind had blown out the boy's senses."
"How do we get inside?" Hettar shouted, the wind snatching away his words.
"The door's as solid as the mountain itself," Barak said, hammering with his

fist again.
"We've got to get out of this wind," Aunt Pol declared, one of her arms protectively about Ce'Nedra's shoulders.
"Well, Garion?" Mister Wolf asked.
"It's easy," Garion replied. "I just have to find the right spot." He ran his fingers over the icy iron, not knowing just what he was looking for. He found a spot that felt a little different. "Here it is." He put his right hand on the spot and pushed lightly. With a vast, grating groan, the door began to move. A line that had not even been visible before suddenly appeared like a razor-cut down the precise center of the pitted iron surface, and flakes of rust showered from the crack, to be whipped away by the wind.
Garion felt a peculiar warmth in the silvery mark on the palm of his right hand where it touched the door. Curious, he stopped pushing, but the door continued to move, swinging open, it seemed, almost in reponse to the presence of the mark on his palm. It continued to move even after he was no longer touching it. He closed his hand, and the door stopped moving.
He opened his hand, and the door, grating against stone, swung open even wider.
"Don't play with it, dear," Aunt Pol told him. "Just open it."
It was dark in the cave beyond the huge door, but it seemed not to have the musty smell it should have had. They entered cautiously, feeling at the floor carefully with their feet.
"Just a moment," Durnik murmured in a strangely hushed voice. They heard him unbuckling one of his saddlebags and then heard the rasp of his flint against steel. There were a few sparks, then a faint glow as the smith blew on his tinder. The tinder flamed, and he set it to the torch he had pulled from his saddlebag. The torch sputtered briefly, then caught. Durnik raised it, and they all looked around at the cave.
It was immediately evident that the cave was not natural. The walls and floor were absolutely smooth, almost polished, and the light of Durnik's torch reflected back from the gleaming surfaces. The chamber was perfectly round and about a hundred feet in diameter. The walls curved inward at they rose, and the ceiling high overhead seemed also to be round. In the precise center of the floor stood a round stone table, twenty feet across, with its top higher than Barak's head. A stone bench encircled the table. In the wall directly opposite the door was a circular arch of a fireplace. The cave was cool, but it did not seem to have the bitter chill it should have had.
"Is it all right to bring in the horses?" Hettar asked quietly.
Mister Wolf nodded. His expression seemed bemused in the flickering torchlight, and his eyes were lost in thought.
The horses' hooves clattered sharply on the smooth stone floor as they were led inside, and they looked around, their eyes wide and their ears twitching nervously.
"There's a fire laid in here," Durnik said from the arched fireplace. "Shall I light it?"
Wolf looked up. "What? Oh-yes. Go ahead."
Durnik reached into the fireplace with his torch, and the wood caught immediately. The fire swelled up very quickly, and the flames seemed inordinately bright.
Ce'Nedra gasped. "The walls! Look at the walls!" The light from the fire was somehow being refracted through the crystalline structure of the rock itself, and the entire dome began to glow with a myriad of shifting colors, filling the chamber with a soft, multihued radiance.
Hettar had moved around the circle of the wall and was peering into another arched opening. "A spring," he told them. "This is a good place to ride out a storm."
Durnik put out his torch and pulled off his cloak. The chamber had become warm

almost as soon as he had lighted the fire. He looked at Mister Wolf. "You know about this place, don't you?" he asked.
"None of us has ever been able to find it before," the old man replied, his eyes still thoughtful. "We weren't even sure it still existed."
"What is this strange cave, Belgarath?" Mandorallen asked.
Mister Wolf took a deep breath. "When the Gods were making the world, it was necessary for them to meet from time to time to discuss what each of them had done and was going to do so that everything would fit together and work in harmony - the mountains, the winds, the seasons and so on." He looked around. "This is the place where they met."
Silk, his nose twitching with curiosity, had climbed up onto the bench surrounding the huge table. "There are bowls up here," he said. "Seven of them-and seven cups. There seems to be some kind of fruit in the bowls." He began to reach out with one hand.
"Silk!" Mister Wolf told him sharply. "Don't touch anything." Silk's hand froze, and he looked back over his shoulder at the old man, his face startled.
"You'd better come down from there," Wolf said gravely.
"The door!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.
They all turned in time to see the massive iron door gently swinging closed. With an oath, Barak leaped toward it, but he was too late. Booming hollowly, it clanged shut just before his hands reached it. The big man turned, his eyes filled with dismay.
"It's all right, Barak," Garion told him. "I can open it again."
Wolf turned then and looked at Garion, his eyes questioning. "How did you know about the cave?" he asked.
Garion floundered helplessly. "I don't know. I just did. I think I've known we were getting close to it for the last day or so."
"Does it have anything to do with the voice that spoke to Mara?"
"I don't think so. He doesn't seem to be there just now, and my knowing about the cave seemed to be different somehow, I think it came from me, not him, but I'm not sure how. For some reason, it seems that I've always known this place was here - only I didn't think about it until we started to get near it. It's awfully hard to explain it exactly."
Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf exchanged a long glance. Wolf looked as if he were about to ask another question, but just then there was a groan at the far end of the chamber.
"Somebody help me," Hettar called urgently. One of the horses, her sides distended and her breath coming in short, heaving gasps, stood swaying as if her legs were about to give out from under her. Hettar stood at her side, trying to support her. "She's about to foal," he said.
They all turned then and went quickly to the laboring mare. Aunt Pol immediately took charge of the situation, giving orders crisply. They eased the mare to the floor, and Hettar and Durnik began to work with her, even as Aunt Pol filled a small pot with water and set it carefully in the fire. "I'll need some room," she told the rest of them pointedly as she opened the bag which contained her jars of herbs.
"Why don't we all get out of your way?" Barak suggested, looking uneasily at the gasping horse.
"Splendid idea," she agreed. "Ce'Nedra, you stay here. I'll need your help."
Garion, Barak, and Mandorallen moved a few yards away and sat down, leaning back against the glowing wall, while Silk and Mister Wolf went off to explore the rest of the chamber. As he watched Durnik and Hettar with the mare and Aunt Pol and Ce'Nedra by the fire, Garion felt strangely abstracted. The cave had drawn him, there was no question of that, and even now it was exerting some peculiar force on him. Though the situation with the mare was immediate, he seemed unable to focus on it. He had a strange certainty that finding the cave was only the

first part of whatever it was that was happening, There was something else he had to do, and his abstraction was in some way a preparation for it.
"It is not an easy thing to confess," Mandorallen was saying somberly.
Garion glanced at him, "In view of the desperate nature of our quest, however," the knight continued, "I must openly acknowledge my great failing. It may come to pass that this flaw of mine shall in some hour of great peril cause me to turn and flee like the coward I am, leaving all your lives in mortal danger."
"You're making too much of it," Barak told him.
"Nay, my Lord. I urge that you consider the matter closely to determine if I am fit to continue in our enterprise." He started to creak to his feet.
"Where are you going?" Barak asked.
"I thought to go apart so that you may freely discuss this matter."
"Oh, sit down, Mandorallen," Barak said irritably. "I'm not going to say anything behind your back I wouldn't say to your face."
The mare, lying close to the fire with her head cradled in Hettar's lap, groaned again. "Is that medicine almost ready, Polgara?" the Algar asked in a worried voice.
"Not quite," she replied. She turned back to Ce'Nedra, who was carefully grinding up some dried leaves in a small cup with the back of a spoon. "Break them up a little finer, dear," she instructed.
Durnik was standing astride the mare, his hands on her distended belly. "We may have to turn the foal," he said gravely. "I think it's trying to come the wrong way."
"Don't start on that until this has a chance to work," Aunt Pol told him, slowly tapping a grayish powder from an earthen jar into her bubbling pot, She took the cup of leaves from Ce'Nedra and added that as well, stirring as she poured.
"I think, my Lord Barak," Mandorallen urged, "that thou hast not fully considered the import of what I have told thee."
"I heard you. You said you were afraid once. It's nothing to worry about. It happens to everybody now and then."
"I cannot live with it. I live in constant apprehension, never knowing when it will return to unman me."
Durnik looked up from the mare. "You're afraid of being afraid?" he asked in a puzzled voice.
"You cannot know what it was like, good friend," Mandorallen replied.
"Your stomach tightened up," Durnik told him. "Your mouth was dry, and your heart felt as if someone had his fist clamped around it?"
Mandorallen blinked.
"It's happened to me so often that I know exactly how it feels."
"Thou? Thou art among the bravest men I have ever known."
Durnik smiled wryly. "I'm an ordinary man, Mandorallen," he said. "Ordinary men live in fear all the time. Didn't you know that? We're afraid of the weather, we're afraid of powerful men, we're afraid of the night and the monsters that lurk in the dark, we're afraid of growing old and of dying. Sometimes we're even afraid of living. Ordinary men are afraid almost every minute of their lives."
"How can you bear it?"
"Do we have any choice? Fear's a part of life, Mandorallen, and it's the only life we have. You'll get used to it. After you've put it on every morning like an old tunic, you won't even notice it any more. Sometimes laughing at it helps - a little."
"Laughing?"
"It shows the fear that you know it's there, but that you're going to go ahead and do what you have to do anyway." Durnik looked down at his hands, carefully kneading the mare's belly. "Some men curse and swear and bluster," he continued. "That does the same thing, I suppose. Every man has to come up with his own technique for dealing with it. Personally, I prefer laughing. It seems more

appropriate somehow."
Mandorallen's face became gravely thoughtful as Durnik's words slowly sank in. "I will consider this," he said. "It may be, good friend, that I will owe thee more than my life for thy gentle instruction."
Once more the mare groaned, a deep, tearing sound, and Durnik straightened and began rolling up his sleeves. "The foal's going to have to be turned, Mistress Pol," he said decisively. "And soon, or we'll lose the foal and the mare both."
"Let me get some of this into her first," she replied, quenching her boiling pot with some cold water. "Hold her head," she told Hettar. Hettar nodded and firmly wrapped his arms around the laboring mare's head. "Garion," Aunt Pol said, as she spooned the liquid between the mare's teeth, "why don't you and Ce'Nedra go over there where Silk and your grandfather are?"
"Have you ever turned a foal before, Durnik?" Hettar asked anxiously.
"Not a foal, but calves many times. A horse isn't that much different from a cow, really."
Barak stood up quickly. His face had a slight greenish cast to it. "I'll go with Garion and the princess," he rumbled. "I don't imagine I'd be much help here."
"And I will join thee," Mandorallen declared. His face was also visibly pale. "It were best, I think, to leave our friends ample room for their midwifery."
Aunt Pol looked at the two warriors with a slight smile on her face, but said nothing.
Garion and the others moved rather quickly away.
Silk and Mister Wolf were standing beyond the huge stone table, peering into another of the circular openings in the shimmering wall. "I've never seen fruits exactly like those," the little man was saying.
"I'd be surprised if you had," Wolf replied.
"They look as fresh as if they'd just been picked." Silk's hand moved almost involuntarily toward the tempting fruit.
"I wouldn't," Wolf warned.
"I wonder what they taste like."
"Wondering won't hurt you. Tasting might."
"I hate an unsatisfied curiosity."
"You'll get over it." Wolf turned to Garion and the others. "How's the horse?"
"Durnik says he's going to have to turn the foal," Barak told him. "We thought it might be better if we all got out of the way."
Wolf nodded. "Silk!" he admonished sharply, not turning around.
"Sorry." Silk snatched his hand back.
"Why don't you just get away from there? You're only going to get yourself in trouble."
Silk shrugged. "I do that all the time anyway."
"Just do it, Silk," Wolf told him firmly. "I can't watch over you every minute."
He slipped his fingers up under the dirty and rather ragged bandage on his arm, scratching irritably. "That's enough of that," he declared. "Garion, take this thing off me." He held out his arm.
Garion backed away. "Not me," he refused. "Do you know what Aunt Pol would say to me if I did that without her permission?"
"Don't be silly. Silk, you do it."
"First you say to stay out of trouble, and then you tell me to cross Polgara? You're inconsistent, Belgarath."
"Oh, here," Ce'Nedra said. She took hold of the old man's arm and began picking at the knotted bandage with her tiny fingers. "Just remember that this was your idea. Garion, give me your knife."
Somewhat reluctantly, Garion handed over his dagger. The princess sawed through the bandage and began to unwrap it. The splints fell clattering to the stone floor.
"What a dear child you are." Mister Wolf beamed at her and began to scratch at

his arm with obvious relief.
"Just remember that you owe me a favor," she told him.
"She's a Tolnedran, all right," Silk observed.
It was about an hour later when Aunt Pol came around the table to them, her eyes somber.
"How's the mare?" Ce'Nedra asked quickly.
"Very weak, but I think she'll be all right."
"What about the baby horse?"
Aunt Pol sighed. "We were too late. We tried everything, but we just couldn't get him to start breathing."
Ce'Nedra gasped, her little face suddenly a deathly white. "You're not going to just give up, are you?" She said it almost accusingly.
"There's nothing more we can do, dear," Aunt Pol told her sadly. "It took too long. He just didn't have enough strength left."
Ce'Nedra stared at her, unbelieving. "Do something!" she demanded. "You're a sorceress. Do something!"
"I'm sorry, Ce'Nedra, that's beyond our power. We can't reach beyond that barrier."
The little princess wailed then and began to cry bitterly. Aunt Pol put her arms comfortingly about her and held her as she sobbed.
But Garion was already moving. With absolute clarity he now knew what it was that the cave expected of him, and he responded without thinking, not running or even hurrying. He walked quietly around the stone table toward the fire.
Hettar sat cross-legged on the floor with the unmoving colt in his lap, his head bowed with sorrow and his manelike scalp lock falling across the spindle-shanked little animal's silent face.
"Give him to me, Hettar," Garion said.
"Garion! No!" Aunt Pol's voice, coming from behind him, was alarmed.
Hettar looked up, his hawk face filled with deep sadness.
"Let me have him, Hettar," Garion repeated very quietly. Wordlessly Hettar raised the limp little body, still wet and glistening in the firelight, and handed it to Garion. Garion knelt and laid the foal on the floor in front of the shimmering fire. He put his hands on the tiny ribcage and pushed gently.
"Breathe," he almost whispered.
"We tried that, Garion," Hettar told him sadly. "We tried everything."
Garion began to gather his will.
"Don't do that, Garion," Aunt Pol told him firmly. "It isn't possible, and you'll hurt yourself if you try."
Garion was not listening to her. The cave itself was speaking to him too loudly for him to hear anything else. He focused his every thought on the wet, lifeless body of the foal. Then he stretched out his right hand and laid his palm on the unblemished, walnut-colored shoulder of the dead animal. Before him there seemed to be a blank wall - black and higher than anything else in the world, impenetrable and silent beyond his comprehension. Tentatively he pushed at it, but it would not move. He drew in a deep breath and hurled himself entirely into the struggle. "Live," he said.
"Garion, stop."
"Live," he said again, throwing himself deeper into his effort against that blackness.
"It's too late now, Pol," he heard Mister Wolf say from somewhere. "He's already committed himself."
"Live," Garion repeated, and the surge he felt welling up out of him was so vast that it drained him utterly. The glowing walls flickered and then suddenly rang as if a bell had been struck somewhere deep inside the mountain. The sound shimmered, filling the air inside the domed chamber with a vibrant ringing. The light in the walls suddenly flared with a searing brightness, and the chamber

was as bright as noon.
The little body under Garion's hand quivered, and the colt drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Garion heard the others gasp as the sticklike little legs began to twitch. The colt inhaled again, and his eyes opened.
"A miracle," Mandorallen said in a choked voice.
"Perhaps even more than that," Mister Wolf replied, his eyes searching Garion's face.
The colt struggled, his head wobbling weakly on his neck. He pulled his legs under him and began to struggle to his feet. Instinctively, he turned to his mother and tottered toward her to nurse. His coat, which had been a deep, solid brown before Garion had touched him, was now marked on the shoulder with a single incandescently white patch exactly the size of the mark on Garion's palm.
Garion lurched to his feet and stumbled away, pushing past the others. He staggered to the icy spring bubbling in the opening in the wall and splashed water over his head and neck. He knelt before the spring, shaking and breathing hard for a very long time. Then he felt a tentative, almost shy touch on his elbow. When he wearily raised his head, he saw the now steadier colt standing at his side and gazing at him with adoration in its liquid eyes.

Chapter Nine

THE STORM BLEW itself out the next morning, but they stayed in the cave for another day after the wind had died down to allow the mare to recover and the newborn colt to gain a bit more strength. Garion found the attention of the little animal disturbing. It seemed that no matter where he went in the cave, those soft eyes followed him, and the colt was continually nuzzling at him. The other horses also watched him with a kind of mute respect. All in all it was a bit embarrassing.
On the morning of their departure, they carefully removed all traces of their stay from the cave. The cleaning was spontaneous, neither the result of some suggestion or of any discussion, but rather was something in which they all joined without comment.
"The fire's still burning," Durnik fretted, looking back into the glowing dome from the doorway as they prepared to leave.
"It will go out by itself after we leave," Wolf told him. "I don't think you could put it out anyway - no matter how hard you tried."
Durnik nodded soberly. "You're probably right," he agreed.
"Close the door, Garion," Aunt Pol said after they had led their horses out onto the ledge outside the cave.
Somewhat self consciously, Garion took hold of the edge of the huge iron door and pulled it. Although Barak with all his great strength had tried without success to budge the door, it moved easily as soon as Garion's hand touched it. A single tug was enough to set it swinging gently closed. The two solid edges came together with a great, hollow boom, leaving only a thin, nearly invisible line where they met.
Mister Wolf put his hand lightly on the pitted iron, his eyes far away. Then he sighed once, turned, and led them back along the ledge the way they had come two days before.
Once they had rounded the shoulder of the mountain, they remounted and rode on down through the tumbled boulders and patches of rotten ice to the first low bushes and stunted trees a few miles below the pass. Although the wind was still brisk, the sky overhead was blue, and only a few fleecy clouds raced by, appearing strangely close.
Garion rode up to Mister Wolf and fell in beside him. His mind was filled with confusion by what had happened in the cave, and he desperately needed to get things straightened out. "Grandfather," he said.

"Yes, Garion?" the old man answered, rousing himself from his half doze.
"Why did Aunt Pol try to stop me? With the colt, I mean?"
"Because it was dangerous," the old man replied. "Very dangerous."
"Why dangerous?"
"When you try to do something that's impossible, you can pour too much energy into it; and if you keep trying, it can be fatal."
"Fatal?"
Wolf nodded. "You drain yourself out completely, and you don't have enough strength left to keep your own heart beating."
"I didn't know that." Garion was shocked.
Wolf ducked as he rode under a low branch. "Obviously."
"Don't you keep saying that nothing is impossible?"
"Within reason, Garion. Within reason."
They rode on quietly for a few minutes, the sound of their horses' hooves muffled by the thick moss covering the ground under the trees. "Maybe I'd better find out more about all this," Garion said finally.
"That's not a bad idea. What was it you wanted to know?"
"Everything, I guess."
Mister Wolf laughed. "That would take a very long time, I'm afraid."
Garion's heart sank. "Is it that complicated?"
"No. Actually it's very simple, but simple things are always the hardest to explain."
"That doesn't make any sense," Garion retorted, a bit irritably.
"Oh?" Wolf looked at him with amusement. "Let me ask you a simple question, then. What's two and two?"
"Four," Garion replied promptly.
"Why?"
Garion floundered for a moment. "It just is," he answered lamely.
"But why?"
"There isn't any why to it. It just is."
"There's a why to everything, Garion."
"All right, why is two and two four then?"
"I don't know," Wolf admitted. "I thought maybe you might." They passed a dead snag standing twisted and starkly white against the deep blue sky.
"Are we getting anywhere?" Garion asked, even more confused now.
"Actually, I think we've come a very long way," Wolf replied. "Precisely what was it you wanted to know?"
Garion put it as directly as he knew how. "What is sorcery?"
"I told you that once already. The Will and the Word."
"That doesn't really mean anything, you know."
"All right, try it this way. Sorcery is doing things with your mind instead of your hands. Most people don't use it because at first it's much easier to do things the other way."
Garion frowned. "It doesn't seem hard."
"That's because the things you've been doing have come out of impulse. You've never sat down and thought your way through something - you just do it."
"Isn't it easier that way? What I mean is, why not just do it and not think about it?"
"Because spontaneous sorcery is just third-rate magic - completely uncontrolled. Anything can happen if you simply turn the power of your mind loose. It has no morality of its own. The good or the bad of it comes out of you, not out of the sorcery."
"You mean that when I burned Asharak, it was me and not the sorcery?" Garion asked, feeling a bit sick at the thought.
Mister Wolf nodded gravely. "It might help if you remember that you were also the one who gave life to the colt. The two things sort of balance out."

Garion glanced back over his shoulder at the colt, who was frisking along behind him like a puppy. "What you're saying is that it can be either good or bad."
"No," Wolf corrected. "By itself it has nothing to do with good or bad. And it won't help you in any way to make up your mind how to use it. You can do anything you want to with it - almost anything, that is. You can bite the tops off all the mountains or stick the trees in the ground upside down or turn all the clouds green, if you feel like it. What you have to decide is whether you should do something, not whether you can do it."
"You said almost anything," Garion noted quickly.
"I'm getting to that," Wolf said. He looked thoughtfully at a lowflying cloud - an ordinary-looking old man in a rusty tunic and gray hood looking at the sky. "There's one thing that's absolutely forbidden. You can never destroy anything - not ever."
Garion was baffled by that. "I destroyed Asharak, didn't I?"
"No. You killed him. There's a difference. You set fire to him, and he burned to death. To destroy something is to try to uncreate it. That's what's forbidden."
"What would happen if I did try?"
"Your power would turn inward on you, and you'd be obliterated in an instant."
Garion blinked and then suddenly went cold at the thought of how close he had come to crossing that forbidden line in his encounter with Asharak. "How do I tell the difference?" he asked in a hushed voice. "I mean, how do I go about explaining that I only meant to kill somebody and not destroy him?"
"It's not a good area for experimentation," Wolf told him. "If you really want to kill somebody, stick your sword in him. Hopefully you won't have occasion to do that sort of thing too often."
They stopped at a small brook trickling out of some mossy stones to allow their horses to drink.
"You see, Garion," Wolf explained, "the ultimate purpose of the universe is to create things. It will not permit you to come along behind it uncreating all the things it went to so much trouble to create in the first place. When you kill somebody, all you've really done is alter him a bit. You've changed him from being alive to being dead. He's still there. To uncreate him, you have to will him out of existence entirely. When you feel yourself on the verge of telling something to 'vanish' or 'go away' or 'be not,' you're getting very close to the point of self destruction. That's the main reason we have to keep our emotions under control all the time."
"I didn't know that," Garion admitted.
"You do now. Don't even try to unmake a single pebble."
"A pebble?"
"The universe doesn't make any distinction between a pebble and a man." The old man looked at him somewhat sternly. "Your Aunt's been trying to explain the necessity for keeping yourself under control for several months now, and you've been fighting her every step of the way."
Garion hung his head. "I didn't know what she was getting at," he apologized.
"That's because you weren't listening. That's a great failing of yours, Garion."
Garion flushed. "What happened the first time you found out you could - well - do things?" he asked quickly, wanting to change the subject.
"It was something silly," Wolf replied. "It usually is, the first time."
"What was it?"
Wolf shrugged. "I wanted to move a big rock. My arms and back weren't strong enough, but my mind was. After that I didn't have any choice but to learn to live with it because, once you unlock it, it's unlocked forever. That's the point where your life changes and you have to start learning to control yourself."
"It always gets back to that, doesn't it?"
"Always," Wolf said. "It's not as difficult as it sounds, really. Look at

Mandorallen." He pointed at the knight, who was riding with Durnik. The two of them were in a deep discussion. "Now, Mandorallen's a nice enough fellow - honest, sincere, toweringly noble - but let's be honest. His mind has never been violated by an original thought - until now. He's learning to control fear, and learning to control it is forcing him to think - probably for the first time in his whole life. It's painful for him, but he's doing it. If Mandorallen can learn to control fear with that limited brain of his, surely you can learn the same kind of control over the other emotions. After all, you're quite a bit

brighter than he is."

Silk, who had been scouting ahead, came riding back to join them. "Belgarath," he said, "there's something about a mile in front of us that I think you'd better take a look at."

"All right," Wolf replied. "Think about what I've been saying, Garion. We'll talk more about it later." Then he and Silk moved off through the trees at a gallop.

Garion pondered what the old man had told him. The one thing that bothered him the most was the crushing responsibility his unwanted talent placed upon him. The colt frisked along beside him, galloping off into the trees from time to time and then rushing back, his little hooves pattering on the damp ground. Frequently he would stop and stare at Garion, his eyes full of love and trust.

"Oh, stop that," Garion told him.

The colt scampered away again.

Princess Ce'Nedra moved her horse up until she was beside Garion. "What were you and Belgarath talking about?" she asked.

Garion shrugged. "A lot of things."

There was immediately a hard little tightening around her eyes. In the months that they had known each other, Garion had learned to catch those minute danger signals. Something warned him that the princess was spoiling for an argument, and with an insight that surprised him he reasoned out the source of her unspoken belligerence. What had happened in the cave had shaken her badly, and Ce'Nedra did not like to be shaken. To make matters even worse, the princess had made a few coaxing overtures to the colt, obviously wanting to turn the little animal into her personal pet. The colt, however, ignored her completely, fixing all his attention on Garion, even to the point of ignoring his own mother unless he was hungry. Ce'Nedra disliked being ignored even more than she disliked being shaken. Glumly, Garion realized how small were his chances of avoiding a squabble with her.

"I certainly wouldn't want to pry into a private conversation," she said tartly.

"It wasn't private. We were talking about sorcery and how to keep accidents from happening. I don't want to make any more mistakes."

She turned that over in her mind, looking for something offensive in it. His mild answer seemed to irritate her all the more. "I don't believe in sorcery," she said flatly. In the light of all that had recently happened, her declaration was patently absurd, and she seemed to realize that as soon as she said it. Her eyes hardened even more.

Garion sighed. "All right," he said with resignation, "was there anything in particular you wanted to fight about, or did you just want to start yowling and sort of make it up as we go along?"

"Yowling?" Her voice went up several octaves. "Yowling?"

"Screeching, maybe," he suggested as insultingly as possible. As long as the fight was inevitable anyway, he determined to get in a few digs at her before her voice rose to the point where she could no longer hear him.

"SCREECHING?" she screeched.

The fight lasted for about a quarter of an hour before Barak and Aunt Pol moved forward to separate them. On the whole, it was not very satisfactory. Garion was

a bit too preoccupied to put his heart into the insults he flung at the tiny girl, and Ce'Nedra's irritation robbed her retorts of their usual fine edge. Toward the end, the whole thing had degenerated into a tedious repetition of "spoiled brat" and "stupid peasant" echoing endlessly back from the surrounding mountains.

Mister Wolf and Silk rode back to join them. "What was all the yelling?" Wolf asked.

"The children were playing," Aunt Pol replied with a withering look at Garion.

"Where's Hettar?" Silk asked.

"Right behind us," Barak said. He turned to look back toward the packhorses, but the tall Algar was nowhere to be seen. Barak frowned. "He was just there. Maybe he stopped for a moment to rest his horse or something."

"Without saying anything?" Silk objected. "That's not like him. And it's not like him to leave the packhorses unattended."

"He must have some good reason," Durnik said.

"I'll go back and look for him," Barak offered.

"No," Mister Wolf told him. "Wait a few minutes. Let's not get scattered all over these mountains. If anybody goes back, we'll all go back."

They waited. The wind stirred the branches of the pines around them, making a mournful, sighing sound.

After several moments, Aunt Pol let out her breath almost explosively. "He's coming." There was a steely note in her voice. "He's been entertaining himself."

From far back up the trail, Hettar appeared in his black leather clothing, riding easily at a loping canter with his long scalp lock flowing in the wind. He was leading two saddled but riderless horses. As he drew nearer, they could hear him whistling rather tunelessly to himself.

"What have you been doing?" Barak demanded.

"There were a couple of Murgos following us," Hettar replied as if that explained everything.

"You might have asked me to go along," Barak said, sounding a little injured.

Hettar shrugged. "There were only two. They were riding Algar horses, so I took it rather personally."

"It seems that you always find some reason to take it personally where Murgos are concerned," Aunt Pol said crisply.

"It does seem to work out that way, doesn't it?"

"Didn't it occur to you to let us know you were going?" she asked.

"There were only two," Hettar said again. "I didn't expect to be gone for very long."

She drew in a deep breath, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Let it go, Pol," Mister Wolf told her.

"But "

"You're not going to change him, so why excite yourself about it? Besides, it's just as well to discourage pursuit." The old man turned to Hettar, ignoring the dangerous look Aunt Pol leveled at him. "Were the Murgos some of those who were with Brill?" he asked.

Hettar shook his head. "No. Brill's Murgos were from the south and they were riding Murgo horses. These two were northern Murgos."

"Is there a visible difference?" Mandorallen asked curiously.

"The armor is slightly different, and the southerners have flatter faces and they're not quite so tall."

"Where did they get Algar horses?" Garion asked.

"They're herd raiders," Hettar answered bleakly. "Algar horses are valuable in Cthol Murgos, and certain Murgos make a practice of creeping down into Algaria on horse-stealing expeditions. We try to discourage that as much as possible."

"These horses aren't in very good shape," Durnik observed, looking at the two weary-looking animals Hettar was leading. "They've been ridden hard, and there

are whip cuts on them."
Hettar nodded grimly. "That's another reason to hate Murgos."
"Did you bury them?" Barak asked.
"No. I left them where any other Murgos who might be following could find them. I thought it might help to educate any who come along later."
"There are some signs that others have been through here, too," Silk said. "I found the tracks of a dozen or so up ahead."
"It was to be expected, I suppose," Mister Wolf commented, scratching at his beard. "Ctuchik's got his Grolims out in force, and Taur Urgas is probably having the region patrolled. I'm sure they'd like to stop us if they could. I think we should move on down into the Vale as fast as possible. Once we're there, we won't be bothered any more."
"Won't they follow us into the Vale?" Durnik asked, looking around nervously.
"No. Murgos won't go into the Vale - not for any reason. Aldur's Spirit is there, and the Murgos are desperately afraid of him."
"How many days to the Vale?" Silk asked.
"Four or five, if we ride hard," Wolf replied.
"We'd better get started then."

Chapter Ten

THE WEATHER, WHICH had seemed on the brink of winter in the higher mountains, softened back into autumn as they rode down from the peaks and ridges. The forests in the hills above Maragor had been thick with fir and spruce and heavy undergrowth. On this side, however, the dominant tree was the pine, and the undergrowth was sparse. The air seemed drier, and the hillsides were covered with high, yellow grass.
They passed through an area where the leaves on the scattered bushes were bright red; then, as they moved lower, the foliage turned first yellow, then green again. Garion found this reversal of the seasons strange. It seemed to violate all his perceptions of the natural order of things. By the time they reached the foothills above the Vale of Aldur, it was late summer again, golden and slightly dusty. Although they frequently saw evidences of the Murgo patrols which were crisscrossing the region, they had no further encounters. After they crossed a certain undefined line, there were no more tracks of Murgo horses.
They rode down beside a turbulent stream which plunged over smooth, round rocks, frothing and roaring. The stream was one of several forming the headwaters of the Aldur River, a broad flow running through the vast Algarian plain to empty into the Gulf of Cherek, eight hundred leagues to the northwest.
The Vale of Aldur was a valley lying in the embrace of the two mountain ranges which formed the central spine of the continent. It was lush and green, covered with high grass and dotted here and there with huge, solitary trees. Deer and wild horses grazed there, as tame as cattle. Skylarks wheeled and dove, filling the air with their song. As the party rode out into the valley, Garion noticed that the birds seemed to gather wherever Aunt Pol moved, and many of the braver ones even settled on her shoulders, warbling and trilling to her in welcome and adoration.
"I'd forgotten about that," Mister Wolf said to Garion. "It's going to be difficult to get her attention for the next few days."
"Why?"
"Every bird in the Vale is going to stop by to visit her. It happens every time we come here. The birds go wild at the sight of her."
Out of the welter of confused bird sound it seemed to Garion that faintly, almost like a murmuring whisper, he could hear a chorus of chirping voices repeating, "Polgara. Polgara. Polgara."
"Is it my imagination, or are they actually talking?" he asked.

"I'm surprised you haven't heard them before," Wolf replied. "Every bird we've passed for the last ten leagues has been babbling her name."
"Look at me, Polgara, look at me," a swallow seemed to say, hurling himself into a wild series of swooping dives around her head. She smiled gently at him, and he redoubled his efforts.
"I've never heard them talk before," Garion marveled.
"They talk to her all the time," Wolf said. "Sometimes they go on for hours. That's why she seems a little abstracted sometimes. She's listening to the birds. Your Aunt moves through a world filled with conversation."
"I didn't know that."
"Not many people do."
The colt, who had been trotting rather sedately along behind Garion as they had come down out of the foothills, went wild with delight when he reached the lush grass of the Vale. With an amazing burst of speed, he ran out over the meadows. He rolled in the grass, his thin legs flailing. He galloped in long, curving sweeps over the low, rolling hilts. He deliberately ran at herds of grazing deer, startling them into flight and then plunging along after them. "Come back here!" Garion shouted at him.
"He won't hear you," Hettar said, smiling at the little horse's antics. "At least, he'll pretend that he doesn't. He's having too much fun."
"Get back here right now!" Garion projected the thought a bit more firmly than he'd intended. The colt's forelegs stiffened, and he slid to a stop. Then he turned and trotted obediently back to Garion, his eyes apologetic. "Bad horse!" Garion chided.
The colt hung his head.
"Don't scold him," Wolf said. "You were very young once yourself."
Garion immediately regretted what he had said and reached down to pat the little animal's shoulder. "It's all right," he apologized. The colt looked at him gratefully and began to frisk through the grass again, although staying close.
Princess Ce'Nedra had been watching him. She always seemed to be watching him for some reason. She would look at him, her eyes speculative and a tendril of her coppery hair coiled about one finger and raised absently to her teeth. It seemed to Garion that every time he turned around she was watching and nibbling. For some reason he could not quite put his finger on, it made him very nervous.
"If he were mine, I wouldn't be so cruel to him," she accused, taking the tip of the curl from between her teeth.
Garion chose not to answer that.
As they rode down the valley, they passed three ruined towers, standing some distance apart and all showing signs of great antiquity. Each of them appeared to have originally been about sixty feet high, though weather and the passage of years had eroded them down considerably. The last of the three looked as if it had been blackened by some intensely hot fire.
"Was there some kind of war here, Grandfather?" Garion asked.
"No," Wolf replied rather sadly. "The towers belonged to my brothers. That one over there was Belsambar's, and the one near it was Belmakor's. They died a long time ago."
"I didn't think sorcerers ever died."
"They grew tired - or maybe they lost hope. They caused themselves no longer to exist."
"They killed themselves?"
"In a manner of speaking. It was a little more complete than that, though."
Garion didn't press it, since the old man appeared to prefer not to go into details. "What about the other one - the one that's been burned? Whose tower was that?"
"Belzedar's."
"Did you and the other sorcerers burn it after he went over to Torak?"

"No. He burned it himself. I suppose he thought that was a way to show us that he was no longer a member of our' brotherhood. Belzedar always liked dramatic gestures."
"Where's your tower?"
"Farther on down the Vale."
"Will you show it to me?"
"If you like."
"Does Aunt Pol have her own tower?"
"No. She stayed with me while she was growing up, and then we went out into the world. We never got around to building her one of her own."
They rode until late afternoon and stopped for the day beneath an enormous tree which stood alone in the center of a broad meadow. The tree quite literally shaded whole acres. Ce'Nedra sprang out of her saddle and ran toward the tree, her deep red hair flying behind her. "He's beautiful!" she exclaimed, placing her hands with reverent affection on the rough bark.
Mister Wolf shook his head. "Dryads. They grow giddy at the sight of trees."
"I don't recognize it," Durnik said with a slight frown. "It's not an oak."
"Maybe it's some southern species," Barak suggested. "I've never seen one exactly like it myself."
"He's very old," Ce'Nedra said, putting her cheek fondly against the tree trunk, "and he speaks strangely - but he likes me."
"What kind of tree is it?" Durnik asked. He was still frowning, his need to classify and categorize frustrated by the huge tree.
"It's the only one of its kind in the world," Mister Wolf told him. "I don't think we ever named it. It was always just the tree. We used to meet here sometimes."
"It doesn't seem to drop any berries or fruit or seeds of any kind," Durnik observed, examining the ground beneath the spreading branches.
"It doesn't need them," Wolf replied. "As I told you, it's the only one of its kind. It's always been here - and always will be. It feels no urge to propagate itself."
Durnik seemed worried about it. "I've never heard of a tree with no seeds."
"It's a rather special tree, Durnik," Aunt Pol said. "It sprouted on the day the world was made, and it will probably stand here for as long as the world exists. It has a purpose other than reproducing itself."
"What purpose is that?"
"We don't know," Wolf answered. "We only know that it's the oldest living thing in the world. Maybe that's its purpose. Maybe it's here to demonstrate the continuity of life."
Ce'Nedra had removed her shoes and was climbing up into the thick branches, making little sounds of affection and delight.
"Is there by any chance a tradition linking Dryads with squirrels?" Silk asked.
Mister Wolf smiled. "If the rest of you can manage without us, Garion and I have something to attend to."
Aunt Pol looked questioningly at him.
"It's time for a little instruction, Pol," he explained.
"We can manage, father," she said. "Will you be back in time for supper?"
"Keep it warm for us. Coming, Garion?"
The two of them rode in silence through the green meadows with the golden afternoon sunlight making the entire Vale warm and lovely. Garion was baffled by Mister Wolf's curious change of mood. Always before, there had been a sort of impromptu quality about the old man. He seemed frequently to be making up his life as he went along, relying on chance, his wits, and his power, when necessary, to see him through. Here in the Vale, he seemed serene, undisturbed by the chaotic events taking place in the world outside.
About two miles from the tree stood another tower. It was rather squat and round

and was built of rough stone. Arched windows near the top faced out in the directions of the four winds, but there seemed to be no door.
"You said you'd like to visit my tower," Wolf said, dismounting. "This is it."
"It isn't ruined like the others."
"I take care of it from time to time. Shall we go up?"
Garion slid down from his horse. "Where's the door?" he asked.
"Right there." Wolf pointed at a large stone in the rounded wall. Garion looked skeptical.
Mister Wolf stepped in front of the stone. "It's me," he said. "Open."
The surge Garion felt at the old man's word seemed commonplaceordinary - a household kind of surge that spoke of something that had been done so often that it was no longer a wonder. The rock turned obediently, revealing a sort of narrow, irregular doorway. Motioning for Garion to follow, Wolf squeezed through into the dim chamber beyond the door.
The tower, Garion saw, was not a hollow shell as he had expected, but rather was a solid pedestal, pierced only by a stairway winding upward.
"Come along," Wolf told him, starting up the worn stone steps. "Watch that one," he said about halfway up, pointing at one of the steps. "The stone is loose."
"Why don't you fix it?" Garion asked, stepping up over the loose stone.
"I've been meaning to, but I just haven't gotten around to it. It's been that way for a long time. I'm so used to it now that I never seem to think of fixing it when I'm here."
The chamber at the top of the tower was round and very cluttered. A thick coat of dust lay over everything. There were several tables in various parts of the room, covered with rolls and scraps of parchment, strange-looking implements and models, bits and pieces of rock and glass, and a couple of birds' nests; on one, a curious stick was so wound and twisted and coiled that Garion's eye could not exactly follow its convolutions. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands, trying to trace it out. "What's this, Grandfather?" he asked.
"One of Polgara's toys," the old man said absently, staring around at the dusty chamber.
"What's it supposed to do?"
"It kept her quiet when she was a baby. It's only got one end. She spent five years trying to figure it out."
Garion pulled his eyes off the fascinatingly compelling piece of wood. "That's a cruel sort of thing to do to a child."
"I had to do something," Wolf answered. "She had a penetrating voice as a child. Beldaran was a quiet, happy little girl, but your Aunt never seemed satisfied."
"Beldaran?"
"Your Aunt's twin sister." The old man's voice trailed off, and he looked sadly out of one of the windows for a few moments. Finally he sighed and turned back to the round room. "I suppose I ought to clean this up a bit," he said, looking around at the dust and litter.
"Let me help," Garion offered.
"Just be careful not to break anything," the old man warned. "Some of those things took me centuries to make." He began moving around the chamber, picking things up and setting them down again, blowing now and then on them to clear away a bit of the dust. His efforts didn't really seem to be getting anywhere. Finally he stopped, staring at a low, rough-looking chair with the rail along its back, scarred and gashed as if it had been continually grasped by strong claws. He sighed again.
"What's wrong?" Garion asked.
"Poledra's chair," Wolf said. "-My wife. She used to perch there and watch me - sometimes for years on end."
"Perch?"
"She was fond of the shape of the owl."

"Oh." Garion had somehow never thought of the old man as ever having been married, although he obviously had to have been at some time, since Aunt Pol and her twin sister were his daughters. The shadowy wife's affinity for owls, however, explained Aunt Pol's own preference for that shape. The two women, Poledra and Beldaran, were involved rather intimately in his own background, he realized, but quite irrationally he resented them. They had shared a part of the lives of his Aunt and his grandfather that he would never - could never know.
The old man moved a parchment and picked up a peculiar-looking device with a sighting glass in one end of it. "I thought I'd lost you," he told the device, touching it with a familiar fondness. "You've been under that parchment all this time."
"What is it?" Garion asked him.
"A thing I made when I was trying to discover the reason for mountains."
"The reason?"
"Everything has a reason." Wolf raised the instrument. "You see, what you do is-" He broke off and laid the device back on the table. "It's much too complicated to explain. I'm not even sure if I remember exactly how to use it myself. I haven't touched it since before Belzedar came to the Vale. When he arrived, I had to lay my studies aside to train him." He looked around at the dust and clutter. "This is useless," he said. "The dust will just come back anyway."
"Were you alone here before Belzedar came?"

"My Master was here. That's his tower over there." Wolf pointed through the north window at a tall, slender stone structure about a mile away.
"Was he really here?" Garion asked. "I mean, not just his spirit?"
"No. He was really here. That was before the Gods departed."
"Did you live here always?"
"No. I came like a thief, looking for something to steal - well, that's not actually true, I suppose. I was about your age when I came here, and I was dying at the time."
"Dying?" Garion was startled.
"Freezing to death. I'd left the village I was born in the year before after my mother died - and spent my first winter in the camp of the Godless Ones. They were very old by then."
"Godless Ones?"
"Ulgos - or rather the ones who decided not to follow Gorim to Prolgu. They stopped having children after that, so they were happy to take me in. I couldn't understand their language at the time, and all their pampering got on my nerves, so I ran away in the spring. I was on my way back the next fall, but I got caught in an early snowstorm not far from here. I lay down against the side of my Master's tower to die - I didn't know it was a tower at first. With all the snow swirling around, it just looked like a pile of rock. As I recall, I was

feeling rather sorry for myself at the time."
"I can imagine." Garion shivered at the thought of being alone and dying.
"I was sniveling a bit, and the sound disturbed my Master. He let me in - probably more to quiet me than for any other reason. As soon as I got inside, I started looking for things to steal."
"But he made you a sorcerer instead."
"No. He made me a servant - a slave. I worked for him for five years before I even found out who he was. Sometimes I think I hated him, but I had to do what he told me to - I didn't really know why. The last straw came when he told me to move a big rock out of his way. I tried with all my strength, but I couldn't budge it. Finally I got angry enough to move it with my mind instead of my back. That's what he'd been waiting for, of course. After that we got along better. He

changed my name from Garath to Belgarath, and he made me his pupil."
"And his disciple?"
"That took a little longer. I had a lot to learn. I was examining the reason that certain stars fell at the time he first called me his discipleand he was working on a round, gray stone he'd picked up by the riverbank."
"Did you ever discover the reason - that stars fall, I mean?"
"Yes. It's not all that complicated. It has to do with balance. The world needs a certain weight to keep it turning. When it starts to slow down, a few nearby stars fall. Their weight makes up the difference."
"I never thought of that."
"Neither did I - not for quite some time."
"The stone you mentioned. Was it-"
"The Orb," Wolf confirmed. "Just an ordinary rock until my Master touched it. Anyway, I learned the secret of the Will and the Word which isn't really that much of a secret, after all. It's there in all of us or did I say that before?"

"1 think so."
"Probably so. I tend to repeat myself." The old man picked up a roll of parchment and glanced at it, then laid it aside again. "So much that I started and haven't finished." He sighed.
"Grandfather?"
"Yes, Garion?"
"This - thing of ours - how much can you actually do with it?"
"That depends on your mind, Garion. The complexity of it lies in the complexity of the mind that puts it to use. Quite obviously, it can't do something that can't be imagined by the mind that focuses it. That was the purpose of our studies - to expand our minds so that we could use the power more fully."
"Everybody's mind is different, though." Garion was struggling toward an idea.
" Yes."
"Wouldn't that mean that - this thing-" He shied away from the word "power."
"What I mean is, is it different? Sometimes you do things, and other times you have Aunt Pol do them."
Wolf nodded. "It's different in each one of us. There are certain things we can all do. We can all move things, for example."
"Aunt Pol called it trans-" Garion hesitated, not remembering the word.
"Translocation," Wolf supplied. "Moving something from one place to another. It's the simplest thing you can do - usually the thing you do first - and it makes the most noise."
"That's what she told me." Garion remembered the slave he had jerked from the river at Sthiss Tor-the slave who had died.
"Polgara can do things that I can't," Wolf continued. "Not because she's any stronger than I am, but because she thinks differently than I do. We're not sure how much you can do yet, because we don't know exactly how your mind works. You seem to be able to do certain things quite easily that I wouldn't even attempt. Maybe it's because you don't realize how difficult they are."
"I don't quite understand what you mean."
The old man looked at him. "Perhaps you don't, at that. Remember the crazy monk who tried to attack you in that village in northern Tolnedra just after we left Arendia?"
Garion nodded.
"You cured his madness. That doesn't sound like much until you realize that in the instant you cured him, you had to understand fully the nature of his insanity. That's an extremely difficult thing, and you did it without even thinking about it. And then, of course, there was the colt."
Garion glanced down through the window at the little horse friskily running through the field surrounding the tower.

"The colt was dead, but you made him start to breathe. In order for you to do that, you had to be able to understand death."
"It was just a wall," Garion explained. "All I did was reach through it."
"There's more to it than that, I think. What you seem to be able to do is to visualize extremely difficult ideas in very simple terms. That's a rare gift, but there are some dangers involved in it that you should be aware of."
"Dangers? Such as what?"
"Don't oversimplify. If a man's dead, for example, he's usually dead for a very good reason - like a sword through the heart. If you bring him back, he'll only die immediately again anyway. As I said before, just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean that you should. "
Garion sighed. "I'm afraid this is going to take a very long time, Grandfather," he said. "I have to learn how to keep myself under control; I have to learn what I can't do, so I don't kill myself trying to do something impossible; I have to learn what I can do and what I should do. I wish this had never happened to me."
"We all do sometimes," the old man told him. "The decision wasn't ours to make, though. I haven't always liked some of the things I've had to do, and neither has your Aunt; but what we're doing is more important than we are, so we do what's expected of us - like it or not."
"What if I just said, 'No. I won't do it'?"
"You could do that, I suppose, but you won't, will you?"
Garion sighed again. "No," he said, "I guess not."
The old sorcerer put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "I thought you might see things that way, Belgarion. You're bound to this the same way we all are."
The strange thrill he always felt at the sound of his other, secret name ran through Garion. "Why do you all insist on calling me that?" he asked.
"Belgarion?" Wolf said mildly. "Think, boy. Think what it means. I haven't been talking to you and telling you stories all these years just because I like the sound of my own voice."
Garion turned it over carefully in his mind. "You were Garath," he mused thoughtfully, "but the God Aldur changed your name to Belgarath. Zedar was Zedar first and then Belzedar - and then he went back to being Zedar again."
"And in my old tribe, Polgara would have just been Gara. Pol is like Bel. The only difference is that she's a woman. Her name comes from mine - because she's my daughter. Your name comes from mine, too."
"Garion-Garath," the boy said. "Belgarath-Belgarion. It all fits together, doesn't it?"
"Naturally," the old man replied. "I'm glad you noticed it."
Garion grinned at him. Then a thought occurred. "But I'm not really Belgarion yet, am I?"
"Not entirely. You still have a way to go."
"I suppose I'd better get started then." Garion said it with a certain ruefulness. "Since I don't really have any choice."
"Somehow I knew that eventually you'd come around," Mister Wolf said.
"Don't you sometimes wish that I was just Garion again, and you were the old storyteller coming to visit Faldor's farm - with Aunt Pol making supper in the kitchen as she did in the old days - and we were hiding under a haystack with a bottle I'd stolen for you?" Garion felt the homesickness welling up in him.
"Sometimes, Garion, sometimes," Wolf admitted, his eyes far away.
"We won't ever be able to go back there again, will we?"
"Not the same way, no."
"I'll be Belgarion, and you'll be Belgarath. We won't even be the same people any more."
"Everything changes, Garion," Belgarath told him.
"Show me the rock," Garion said suddenly.
"Which rock?"

"The one Aldur made you move - the day you first discovered the power."
"Oh," Belgarath said, "that rock. It's right over there - the white one. The one the colt's sharpening his hooves on."
"It's a very big rock."
"I'm glad you appreciate that," Belgarath replied modestly. "I thought so myself."
"Do you suppose I could move it?"
"You never know until you try, Garion," Belgarath told him.

Chapter Eleven

THE NEXT MORNING when Garion awoke, he knew immediately that he was not alone.
"Where have you been?" he asked silently.
"I've been watching, " the other consciousness in his mind said. "I see that you've finally come around. "
"What choice did I have?"
"None. You'd better get up. Aldur's coming. "
Garion quickly rolled out of his blankets. "Here? Are you sure?" The voice in his mind didn't answer.
Garion put on a clean tunic and hose and wiped off his half boots with a certain amount of care. Then he went out of the tent he shared with Silk and Durnik. The sun was just coming up over the high mountains to the east, and the line between sunlight and shadow moved with a stately ponderousness across the dewy grass of the Vale. Aunt Pol and Belgarath stood near the small fire where a pot was just beginning to bubble. They were talking quietly, and Garion joined them.
"You're up early," Aunt Pol said. She reached out and smoothed his hair.
"I was awake," he replied. He looked around, wondering from which direction Aldur would come.
"Your grandfather tells me that the two of you had a long talk yesterday."
Garion nodded. "I understand a few things a little better now. I'm sorry I've been so difficult."
She drew him to her and put her arms around him. "It's all right, dear. You had some hard decisions to make."
"You're not angry with me, then?"
"Of course not, dear."
The others had begun to get up, coming out of their tents, yawning and stretching and rumpled-looking.
"What do we do today?" Silk asked, coming to the fire and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.
"We wait," Belgarath told him. "My Master said he'd meet us here."
"I'm curious to see him. I've never met a God before."
"Thy curiosity, me thinks, will soon be satisfied, Prince Kheldar," Mandorallen said. "Look there."
Coming across the meadow not far from the great tree beneath which they had pitched their tents, a figure in a blue robe was approaching. A soft nimbus of blue light surrounded the figure, and the immediate sense of presence made it instantly clear that what approached was not a man. Garion was not prepared for the impact of that presence. His meeting with the Spirit of Issa in Queen Salmissra's throne room had been clouded by the narcotic effects of the things the Serpent Queen had forced him to drink. Similarly, half his mind had slept during the confrontation with Mara in the ruins of Mar Amon. But now, fully awake in the first light of morning, he found himself in the presence of a God. Aldur's face was kindly and enormously wise. His long hair and beard were white - from conscious choice, Garion felt, rather than from any result of age. The face was very familiar to him somehow. It bore a startling resemblance to Belgarath's, but Garion perceived immediately, with a sudden curious inversion

of his original notion, that it was Belgarath who resembled Aldur - as if their centuries of association had stamped Aldur's features upon the face of the old man. There were differences, of course. That certain mischievous roguishness was not present on the calm face of Aldur. That quality was Belgarath's own, the last remnant, perhaps, of the face of the thieving boy Aldur had taken into his tower on a snowy day some seven thousand years ago.

"Master," Belgarath said, bowing respectfully as Aldur approached.

"Belgarath," the God acknowledged. His voice was very quiet. "I have not seen thee in some time. The years have not been unkind to thee."

Belgarath shrugged wryly. "Some days I feel them more than others, Master. I carry a great number of years with me."

Aldur smiled and turned to Aunt Pol. "My beloved daughter," he said fondly, reaching out to touch the white lock at her brow. "Thou art as lovely as ever."

"And thou as kind, Master," she replied, smiling and inclining her head.

There passed among the three of them a kind of intensely personal linkage, a joining of minds that marked their reunion. Garion could feel the edges of it with his own mind, and he was somewhat wistful at being excluded - though he realized at once that there was no intent to exclude him. They were merely reestablishing an eons-old companionship - shared experiences that stretched back into antiquity.

Aldur then turned to look at the others. "And so you have come together at last, as it hath been foretold from the beginning of days you should. You are the instruments of destiny, and my blessing goes with each as you move toward that awful day when the universe will become one again."

The faces of Garion's companions were awed and puzzled by Aldur's enigmatic blessing. Each, however, bowed with profound respect and humility.

And then Ce'Nedra emerged from the tent she shared with Aunt Pol. The tiny girl stretched luxuriantly and ran her fingers through the tumbled mass of her flaming hair. She was dressed in a Dryad tunic and sandals.

"Ce'Nedra," Aunt Pol called her, "come here."

"Yes, Lady Polgara," the little princess replied obediently. She crossed to the fire, her feet seeming barely to touch the ground. Then she saw Aldur standing with the others and stopped, her eyes wide.

"This is our Master, Ce'Nedra," Aunt Pol told her. "He wanted to meet you."

The princess stared at the glowing presence in confusion. Nothing in her life had prepared her for such a meeting. She lowered her eyelashes and then looked up shyly, her tiny face artfully and automatically assuming its most appealing expression.

Aldur smiled gently. "She's like a flower that charms without knowing it." His eyes looked deeply into those of the princess. "There is steel in this one, however. She is fit for her task. My blessings upon thee, my child."

Ce'Nedra responded with an instinctively graceful curtsey. It was the first time Garion had ever seen her bow to anyone.

Aldur turned then to look full at Garion. A brief, unspoken acknowledgment passed between the God and the consciousness that shared Garion's thoughts. There was in that momentary meeting a sense of mutual respect and of shared responsibility. And then Garion felt the massive touch of Aldur's mind upon his own and knew that the God had instantly seen and understood his every thought and feeling.

"Hail, Belgarion," Aldur said gravely.

"Master," Garion replied. He dropped to one knee, not really knowing why.

"We have awaited thy coming since time's beginning. Thou art the vessel of all our hopes." Aldur raised his hand. "My blessing, Belgarion. I am well pleased with thee."

Garion's entire being was suffused with love and gratitude as the warmth of Aldur's benediction filled him.

"Dear Polgara," Aldur said to Aunt Pol, "thy gift to us is beyond value. Belgarion has come at last, and the world trembles at his coming."
Aunt Pol bowed again.
"Let us now go apart," Aldur said to Belgarath and Aunt Pol. "Your task is well begun, and I must now provide you with that instruction I promised when first I set your steps upon this path. That which was once clouded becomes clearer, and we now can see what lies before us. Let us look toward that day we have all awaited and make our preparations."
The three of them moved away from the fire, and it seemed to Garion that, as they went, the glowing nimbus which had surrounded Aldur now enclosed Aunt Pol and his grandfather as well. Some movement or sound distracted his eye for a moment, and when he looked back, the three had vanished.
Barak let out his breath explosively. "Belar! That was something to seel"
"We have been favored, I think, beyond all men," Mandorallen said. They all stood staring at each other, caught up in the wonder of what they had just witnessed.
Ce'Nedra, however, broke the mood. "All right," she ordered peremptorily, "don't just stand there gaping. Move away from the fire."
"What are you going to do?" Garion asked her.
"The Lady Polgara's going to be busy," the little girl said loftily, "so I'm going to make breakfast." She moved toward the fire with a businesslike bustling.
The bacon was not too badly burned, but Ce'Nedra's attempt to toast slices of bread before the open fire turned out disastrously, and her porridge had lumps in it as solid as clods in a sun-baked field. Garion and the others, however, ate what she offered without comment, prudently avoiding the direct gaze she leveled at them, as if daring them to speak so much as one word of criticism.
"I wonder how long they're going to be," Silk said after breakfast. "Gods, I think, have little notion of time," Barak replied sagely, stroking at his beard.
"I don't expect them back until sometime this afternoon at the earliest."
"It is a good time to check over the horses," Hettar decided. "Some of them have picked up a few burrs along the way, and I'd like to have a look at their hooves - just to be on the safe side."
"I'll help you," Durnik offered, getting up.
Hettar nodded, and the two went off to the place where the horses were picketed.
"And I've got a nick or two in my sword edge," Barak remembered, fishing a piece of polishing stone out of his belt and laying his heavy blade across his lap.
Mandorallen went to his tent and brought out his armor. He laid it out on the ground and began a minute inspection for dents and spots of rust.
Silk rattled a pair of dice hopefully in one hand, looking inquiringly at Barak.
"If it's all the same to you, I think I'd like to enjoy the company of my money for a while longer," the big man told him.
"This whole place absolutely reeks of domesticity," Silk complained. Then he sighed, put away his dice, and went to fetch a needle and thread and a tunic he'd torn on a bush up in the mountains.
Ce'Nedra had returned to her communion with the vast tree and was scampering among the branches, taking what Garion felt to be inordinate risks as she jumped from limb to limb with a catlike unconcern. After watching her for a few moments, he fell into a kind of reverie, thinking back to the awesome meeting that morning. He had met the Gods Issa and Mara already, but there was something special about Aldur. The affinity Belgarath and Aunt Pol showed so obviously for this God who had always remained aloof from men spoke loudly to Garion. The devotional activities of Sendaria, where he had been raised, were inclusive rather than exclusive. A good Sendar prayed impartially, and honored all the Gods - even Torak. Garion now, however, felt a special closeness and reverence for Aldur, and the adjustment in his theological thinking required a certain

amount of thought.
A twig dropped out of the tree onto his head, and he glanced up with annoyance. Ce'Nedra, grinning impishly, was directly over his head. "Boy," she said in her most superior and insulting tone, "the breakfast dishes are getting cold. The grease is going to be difficult to wash off if you let it harden."
"I'm not your scullion," he told her.
"Wash the dishes, Garion," she ordered him, nibbling at the tip of a lock of hair.
"Wash them yourself."
She glared down at him, biting rather savagely at the unoffending lock.
"Why do you keep chewing on your hair like that?" he asked irritably.
"What are you talking about?" she demanded, removing the lock from between her teeth.
"Every time I look at you, you've got your hair stuck in your mouth."
"I do not, " she retorted indignantly.
"Are you going to wash the dishes?"
"No."
He squinted up at her. The short Dryad tunic she was wearing seemed to expose an unseemly amount of leg. "Why don't you go put on some clothes?" he suggested.
"Some of us don't appreciate the way you run around half naked all the time."
The fight got under way almost immediately after that.
Finally Garion gave up his efforts to get in the last word and stamped away in disgust.
"Garion!" she screamed after him. "Don't you dare go off and leave me with all these dirty dishes!"
He ignored her and kept walking.
After a short distance, he felt a familiar nuzzling at his elbow and he rather absently scratched the colt's ears. The small animal quivered with delight and rubbed against him affectionately. Then, unable to restrain himself any more, the colt galloped off into the meadow to pester a family of docilely feeding rabbits. Garion found himself smiling. The morning was just too beautiful to allow the squabble with the princess to spoil it.
There was, it seemed, something rather special about the Vale. The world around grew cold with the approach of winter and was buffeted by storms and dangers, but here it seemed as if the hand of Aldur stretched protectively above them, filling this special place with warmth and peace and a kind of eternal and magical serenity. Garion, at this trying point in his life, needed all the warmth and peace he could get. There were things that had to be worked out, and he needed a time, however brief, without storms and dangers to deal with them.
He was halfway to Belgarath's tower before he realized that it had been there that he had been going all along. The tall grass was wet with dew, and his boots were soon soaked, but even that did not spoil the day.
He walked around the tower several times, gazing up at it. Although he found the stone that marked the door quite easily, he decided not to open it. It would not be proper to go uninvited into the old man's tower; and beyond that, he was not entirely certain that the door would respond to any voice but Belgarath's.
He stopped quite suddenly at that last thought and started searching back, trying to find the exact instant when he had ceased to think of his grandfather as Mister Wolf and had finally accepted the fact that he was Belgarath. The changeover seemed significant - a kind of turning point.
Still lost in thought, he turned then and walked across the meadow toward the large, white rock the old man had pointed out to him from the tower window. Absently he put one hand on it and pushed. The rock didn't budge.
Garion set both hands on it and pushed again, but the rock remained motionless. He stepped back and considered it. It wasn't really a vast boulder. It was rounded and white and not quite as high as his waist heavy, certainly, but it

should not be so inflexibly solid. He bent over to look at the bottom, and then he understood. The underside of the rock was flat. It would never roll. The only way to move it would be to lift one side and tip it over. He walked around the rock, looking at it from every angle. He judged that it was marginally movable. If he exerted every ounce of his strength, he might be able to lift it. He sat down and looked at it, thinking hard. As he sometimes did, he talked to himself, trying to lay out the problem.

"The first thing to do is to try to move it," he concluded. "It doesn't really look totally impossible. Then, if that doesn't work, we'll try it the other way."

He stood up, stepped purposefully to the rock, wormed his fingers under the edge of it and heaved. Nothing happened.

"Have to try a little harder," he told himself. He spread his feet and set himself. He began to lift again, straining, the cords standing out in his neck. For the space of about ten heartbeats he tried as hard as he could to lift the stubborn rock - not to roll it over; he'd given that up after the first instant - but simply to make it budge, to acknowledge his existence. Though the ground was not particularly soft there, his feet actually sank a fraction of an inch or so as he strained against the rock's weight.

His head was swimming, and little dots seemed to swirl in front of his eyes as he released the rock and collapsed, gasping, against it. He lay against the cold, gritty surface for several minutes, recovering.

"All right," he said finally, "now we know that that won't work." He stepped back and sat down.

Each time he'd done something with his mind before, it had been on impulse, a response to some crisis. He had never sat down and deliberately worked himself up to it. He discovered almost at once that the entire set of circumstances was completely different. The whole world seemed suddenly filled with distractions. Birds sang. A breeze brushed his face. An ant crawled across his hand. Each time he began to bring his will to bear, something pulled his attention away.

There was a certain feeling to it, he knew that, a tightness in the back of his head and a sort of pushing out with his forehead. He closed his eyes, and that seemed to help. It was coming. It was slow, but he felt the will begin to build in him. Remembering something, he reached inside his tunic and put the mark on his palm against the amulet. The force within him, amplified by that touch, built to a great roaring crescendo. He kept his eyes closed and stood up. Then he opened his eyes and looked hard at the stubborn white rock. "You will move," he muttered. He kept his right hand on the amulet and held out his left hand, palm up.

"Now!" he said sharply and slowly began to raise his left hand in a lifting motion. The force within him surged, and the roaring sound inside his head became deafening.

Slowly the edge of the rock came up out of the grass. Worms and burrowing grubs who had lived out their lives in the safe, comfortable darkness under the rock flinched as the morning sunlight hit them. Ponderously, the rock raised, obeying Garion's inexorably lifting hand. It teetered for a second on its edge, then toppled slowly over.

The exhaustion he had felt after trying to lift the rock with his back was nothing compared to the bone-deep weariness that swept over him after he let the clenching of his will relax. He folded his arms on the grass and let his head sink down on them.

After a moment or two, that peculiar fact began to dawn on him. He was still standing, but his arms were folded comfortably in front of him on the grass. He jerked his head up and looked around in confusion. He had moved the rock, certainly. That much was obvious, since the rock now lay on its rounded top with its damp underside turned up. Something else had also happened, however. Though

he had not touched the rock, its weight had nonetheless been upon him as he had lifted it, and the force he had directed at it had not all gone at the rock.
With dismay, Garion realized that he had sunk up to his armpits in the firm soil of the meadow.
"Now what do I do?" he asked himself helplessly. He shuddered away from the idea of once again mustering his will to pull himself out of the ground. He was too exhausted even to consider it. He tried to wriggle, thinking that he might be able to loosen the earth around him and work his way up an inch at a time, but he could not so much as budge.
"Look what you've done," he accused the rock. The rock ignored him.
A thought occurred to him. "Are you in there?" he asked that awareness that seemed always to have been with him.
The silence in his mind was profound. "Help!" he shouted.
A bird, attracted by the exposed worms and bugs that had been under the rock, cocked one eye at him and then went back to its breakfast. Garion heard a light step behind him and craned around, trying to see. The colt was staring at him in amazement. Hesitantly, the small horse thrust out his nose and nuzzled Garion's face.
"Good horse," Garion said, relieved not to be alone, at least. An idea came to him. "You're going to have to go get Hettar," he told the colt. The colt pranced about and nuzzled his face again.
"Stop that," Garion commanded. "This is serious." Cautiously, he tried to push his mind into the colt's thoughts. He tried a dozen different ways until he finally struck the right combination by sheer accident. The colt's mind flitted from here to there without purpose or pattern. It was a baby's mind, vacant of thought, receiving only sense impressions. Garion caught flickering images of green grass and running and clouds in the sky and warm milk. He also felt the sense of wonder in the little mind, and the abiding love the colt had for him.
Slowly, painfully, Garion began constructing a picture of Hettar in the colt's wandering thoughts. It seemed to take forever.
"Hettar," Garion said over and over. "Go get Hettar. Tell him that I'm in trouble."
The colt scampered around and came back to stick his soft nose in Garion's ear.
"Please pay attention," Garion cried. "Please!"
Finally, after what seemed hours, the colt seemed to understand. He went several paces away, then came back to nuzzle Garion again. "Go-get-Hettar," Garion ordered, stressing each word.
The colt pawed at the ground, then turned and galloped away - going in the wrong direction. Garion started to swear. For almost a year now he had been exposed to some of the more colorful parts of Barak's vocabulary. After he had repeated all the phrases he remembered six or eight times, he began to extemporize.
A flickering thought came back to him from the now-vanished colt. The little beast was chasing butterflies. Garion pounded the ground with his fists, wanting to howl with frustration.
The sun rose higher, and it started to get hot.
It was early afternoon when Hettar and Silk, following the prancing little colt, found him.
"How in the world did you manage to do that?" Silk asked curiously.
"I don't want to talk about it," Garion muttered, somewhere between relief and total embarrassment.
"He probably can do many things that we can't," Hettar observed, climbing down from his horse and untying Durnik's shovel from his saddle. "The thing I can't understand, though, is why he'd want to do it.
"I'm positive he had a good reason for it," Silk assured him. "Do you think we should ask him?"
"It's probably very complicated," Silk replied. "I'm sure simple men like you

and me wouldn't be able to understand it."
"Do you suppose he's finished with whatever it is he's doing?"
"We could ask him, I suppose."
"I wouldn't want to disturb him," Hettar said. "It could be very important."
"It almost has to be," Silk agreed.
"Will you please get me out of here?" Garion begged.
"Are you sure you're finished?" Silk asked politely. "We can wait if you're not done yet."
"Please, " Garion asked, almost in tears.

Chapter Twelve

"WHY DID YOU try to lift it?" Belgarath asked Garion the next morning after he and Aunt Pol had returned and Silk and Hettar had solemnly informed them of the predicament in which they had found the young man the afternoon before.
"It seemed like the best way to tip it over," Garion answered. "You know, kind of get hold of it from underneath and then roll it-sort of."
"Why didn't you just push against it - close to the top? It would have rolled over if you'd done it that way."
"I didn't think of it."
"Don't you realize that soft earth won't accept that kind of pressure?" Aunt Pol asked.
"I do now," Garion replied. "But wouldn't pushing on it have just moved me backward?"
"You have to brace yourself," Belgarath explained. "That's part of the whole trick. As much of your will goes to holding yourself immobile as it does to pushing against the object you're trying to move. Otherwise all you do is just shove yourself away."
"I didn't know that," Garion admitted. "It's the first time I've ever tried to do anything unless it was an emergency . . . Will you stop that?" he demanded crossly of Ce'Nedra, who had collapsed into gales of laughter as soon as Silk had finished telling them about Garion's blunder.
She laughed even harder.
"I think you're going to have to explain a few things to him, father," Aunt Pol said. "He doesn't seem to have even the most rudimentary idea about the way forces react against each other." She looked at Garion critically. "It's lucky you didn't decide to throw it," she told him. "You might have flung yourself halfway back to Maragor."
"I really don't think it's all that funny," Garion told his friends, who were all grinning openly at him. "This isn't as easy as it looks, you know." He realized that he had just made a fool of himself and he was not sure if he were more embarrassed or hurt by their amusement.
"Come with me, boy," Belgarath said firmly. "It looks as if we're going to have to start at the very beginning."
"It's not my fault I didn't know," Garion protested. "You should have told me."
"I didn't know you were planning to start experimenting so soon," the old man replied. "Most of us have sense enough to wait for guidance before we start rearranging local geography."
"Well, at least I did manage to move it," Garion said defensively as he followed the old man across the meadow toward the tower.
"Splendid. Did you put it back the way you found it?"
"Why? What difference does it make?"
"We don't move things here in the Vale. Everything that's here is here for a reason, and they're all supposed to be exactly where they are."
"I didn't know," Garion apologized.
"You do now. Let's go put it back where it belongs." They trudged along in

silence.
"Grandfather?" Garion said finally.
"Yes?"
"When I moved the rock, it seemed that I was getting the strength to do it from all around me. It seemed just to flow in from everyplace. Does that mean anything?"
"That's the way it works," Belgarath explained. "When we do something, we take the power to do it from our surroundings. When you burned Chamdar, for example, you drew the heat from all around you - from the air, from the ground, and from everyone who was in the area. You drew a little heat from everything to build the fire. When you tipped the rock over, you took the force to do it from everything nearby."
"I thought it all came from inside."
"Only when you create things," the old man replied. "That force has to come from within us. For anything else, we borrow. We gather up a little power from here and there and put it all together and then turn it loose all at one spot. Nobody's big enough to carry around the kind of force it would take to do even the simplest sort of thing."
"Then that's what happens when somebody tries to unmake something," Garion said intuitively. "He pulls in all the force, but then he can't let it go, and it just " He spread his hands and jerked them suddenly apart.
Belgarath looked narrowly at him. "You've got a strange sort of mind, boy. You understand the difficult things quite easily, but you can't seem to get hold of the simple ones. There's the rock." He shook his head. "That will never do. Put it back where it belongs, and try not to make so much noise this time. That racket you raised yesterday echoed all over the Vale."
"What do I do?" Garion asked.
"Gather in the force," Belgarath told him. "Take it from everything around."
Garion tried that.
"Not from me!" the old man exclaimed sharply.
Garion excluded his grandfather from his field of reaching out and pulling in. After a moment or two, he felt as if he were tingling all over and that his hair was standing on end. "Now what?" he asked, clenching his teeth to hold it in.
"Push out behind you and push at the rock at the same time."
"What do I push at behind me?"
"Everything - and at the rock as well. It has to be simultaneous."
"Won't I get - sort of squeezed in between?"
"Tense yourself up."
"We'd better hurry, Grandfather," Garion said. "I feel like I'm going to fly apart."
"Hold it in. Now put your will on the rock, and say the word." Garion put his hands out in front of him and straightened his arms. "Push," he commanded. He felt the surge and the roaring.
With a resounding thud, the rock teetered and then rolled back smoothly to where it had been the morning before. Garion suddenly felt bruised all over, and he sank to his knees in exhaustion.
"Push?" Belgarath said incredulously.
"You said to say push."
"I said to push. I didn't say to say push."
"It went over. What difference does it make what word I used?"
"It's a question of style," the old man said with a pained look. "Push sounds so - so babyish."
Weakly, Garion began to laugh.
"After all, Garion, we do have a certain dignity to maintain," the old man said loftily. "If we go around saying 'push' or 'flop' or things like that, no one's ever going to take us seriously."

Garion wanted to stop laughing, but he simply couldn't. Belgarath stalked away indignantly, muttering to himself.
When they returned to the others, they found that the tents had been struck and the packhorses loaded.
"There's no point in staying here," Aunt Pol told them, "and the others are waiting for us. Did you manage to make him understand anything, father?"
Belgarath grunted, his face set in an expression of profound disapproval.
"Things didn't go well, I take it."
"I'll explain later," he said shortly.
During Garion's absence, Ce'Nedra, with much coaxing and a lapful of apples from their stores, had seduced the little colt into a kind of ecstatic subservience.
He followed her about shamelessly, and the rather distant look he gave Garion showed not the slightest trace of guilt.
"You're going to make him sick," Garion accused her.
"Apples are good for horses," she replied airily.
"Tell her, Hettar," Garion said.
"They won't hurt him," the hook-nosed man answered. "It's a customary way to gain the trust of a young horse."
Garion tried to think of another suitable objection, but without success. For some reason the sight of the little animal nuzzling at Ce'Nedra offended him, though he couldn't exactly put his finger on why.
"Who are these others, Belgarath?" Silk asked as they rode. "The ones Polgara mentioned."
"My brothers," the old sorcerer replied. "Our Master's advised them that we're coming."
"I've heard stories about the Brotherhood of Sorcerers all my life. Are they as remarkable as everyone says?"
"I think you're in for a bit of a disappointment," Aunt Pol told him rather primly. "For the most part, sorcerers tend to be crotchety old men with a wide assortment of bad habits. I grew up amongst them, so I know them all rather well." She turned her face to the thrush perched on her shoulder, singing adoringly. "Yes," she said to the bird, "I know."
Garion pulled closer to his Aunt and began to listen very hard to the birdsong. At first it was merely noise-pretty, but without sense. Then, gradually, he began to pick up scraps of meaning - a bit here, a bit there. The bird was singing of nests and small, speckled eggs and sunrises and the overwhelming joy of flying. Then, as if his ears had suddenly opened, Garion began to understand. Larks sang of flying and singing. Sparrows chirped of hidden little pockets of seeds. A hawk, soaring overhead, screamed its lonely song of riding the wind alone and the fierce joy of the kill. Garion was awed as the air around him suddenly came alive with words.
Aunt Pol looked at him gravely. "It's a beginning," she said without bothering to explain.
Garion was so caught up in the world that had just opened to him that he did not see the two silvery-haired men at first. They stood together beneath a tall tree, waiting as the party rode nearer. They wore identical blue robes, and their white hair was quite long, though they were clean-shaven. When Garion looked at them for the first time, he thought for a moment that his eyes were playing tricks. The two were so absolutely identical that it was impossible to tell them apart.
"Belgarath, our brother," one of them said, "it's been such-" "-a terribly long time," the other finished.
"Beltira," Belgarath said. "Belkira." He dismounted and embraced the twins.
"Dearest little Polgara," one of them said then. "The Vale has been-" the other started.
"-empty without you," the second completed. He turned to his brother. "That was

very poetic," he said admiringly.
"Thank you," the first replied modestly.
"These are my brothers, Beltira and Belkira," Belgarath informed the members of the party who had begun to dismount. "Don't bother to try to keep them separate. Nobody can tell them apart anyway."
"We can," the two said in unison.
"I'm not even sure of that," Belgarath responded with a gentle smile. "Your minds are so close together that your thoughts start with one and finish with the other."
"You always complicate it so much, father," Aunt Pol said. "This is Beltira." She kissed one of the sweet-faced old men. "And this is Belkira." She kissed the other. "I've been able to tell them apart since I was a child."
"Polgara knows-"
"-all our secrets." The twins smiled. "And who are-"
"-your companions?"
"I think you'll recognize them," Belgarath answered. "Mandorallen, Baron of Vo Mandor."
"The Knight Protector," the twins said in unison, bowing.
"Prince Kheldar of Drasnia."
"The Guide," they said.
"Barak, Earl of Trellheim."
"The Dreadful Bear." They looked at the big Cherek apprehensively. Barak's face darkened, but he said nothing.
"Hettar, son of Cho-Hag of Algaria."
"The Horse Lord."
"And Durnik of Sendaria."
"The One with Two Lives," they murmured with profound respect. Durnik looked baffled at that.
"Ce'Nedra, Imperial Princess of Tolnedra."
"The Queen of the World," they replied with another deep bow. Ce'Nedra laughed nervously.
"And this-"
"-can only be Belgarion," they said, their faces alive with joy, "the Chosen One." The twins reached out in unison and laid their right hands on Garion's head. Their voices sounded within his mind. "Hail, Belgarion, Overlord and Champion, hope of the world."
Garion was too surprised at this strange benediction to do more than awkwardly nod his head.
"If this gets any more cloying, I think I'll vomit," a new voice, harsh and rasping, announced. The speaker, who had just stepped out from behind the tree, was a squat, misshapen old man, dirty and profoundly ugly. His legs were bowed and gnarled like oak trunks. His shoulders were huge, and his hands dangled below his knees. There was a large hump in the middle of his back, and his face was twisted into a grotesque caricature of a human countenance. His straggly, iron-gray hair and beard were matted, and twigs and bits of leaves were caught in the tangles. His hideous face wore an expression of perpetual contempt and anger.
"Beldin," Belgarath said mildly, "we weren't sure you would come."
"I shouldn't have, you bungler," the ugly man snapped. "You've made a mess of things as usual, Belgarath." He turned to the twins. "Get me something to eat," he told them peremptorily.
"Yes, Beldin," they said quickly and started away.
"And don't be all day," he shouted after them.
"You seem to be in a good humor today, Beldin," Belgarath said with no trace of sarcasm. "What's made you so cheerful?"
The ugly dwarf scowled at him, then laughed, a short, barking sound. "I saw

Belzedar. He looked like an unmade bed. Something had gone terribly wrong for him, and I enjoy that sort of thing."
"Dear Uncle Beldin," Aunt Pol said fondly, putting her arms around the filthy little man. "I've missed you so much."
"Don't try to charm me, Polgara," he told her, though his eyes seemed to soften slightly. "This is as much your fault as it is your father's. I thought you were going to keep an eye on him. How did Belzedar get his hands on our Master's Orb?"
"We think he used a child," Belgarath answered seriously. "The Orb won't strike an innocent."
The dwarf snorted. "There's no such thing as an innocent. All men are born corrupt." He turned his eyes back to Aunt Pol and looked appraisingly at her. "You're getting fat," he said bluntly. "Your hips are as wide as an ox cart."
Durnik immediately clenched his fists and went for the hideous little man.
The dwarf laughed, and one of his big hands caught the front of the smith's tunic. Without any seeming effort, he lifted the surprised Durnik and threw him several yards away. "You can start your second life right now if you want," he growled threateningly.
"Let me handle this, Durnik," Aunt Pol told the smith. "Beldin," she said coolly, "how long has it been since you've had a bath?"
The dwarf shrugged. "It rained on me a couple months ago."
"Not hard enough, though. You smell like an uncleaned pigsty."
Beldin grinned at her. "That's my girl." He chortled. "I was afraid the years had taken off your edge."
The two of them then began to trade the most hair-raising insults Garion had ever heard in his life. Graphic, ugly words passed back and forth between them, almost sizzling in the air. Barak's eyes widened in astonishment, and Mandorallen's face blanched often. Ce'Nedra, her face flaming, bolted out of earshot.
The worse the insults, however, the more the hideous Beldin smiled. Finally Aunt Pol delivered an epithet so vile that Garion actually cringed, and the ugly little man collapsed on the ground, roaring with laughter and hammering at the dirt with his great fists. "By the Gods, I've missed you, Pol!" he gasped. "Come here and give us a kiss."
She smiled, kissing his dirty face affectionately. "Mangy dog."
"Big cow." He grinned, catching her in a crushing embrace.
"I'll need my ribs more or less in one piece, uncle," she told him.
"I haven't cracked any of your ribs in years, my girl."
"I'd like to keep it that way."
The twins hurried across to the dwarf Beldin, carrying a large plate of steaming stew and a huge tankard. The ugly man looked curiously at the plate, then casually dumped the stew on the ground and tossed the plate away. "Doesn't smell too bad." He squatted and began to stuff the food into his mouth with both hands, pausing only now and then to spit out some of the larger pebbles that clung to the chunks of meat. When he had finished, he swilled down the contents of the tankard, belched thunderously, and sat back, scratching at his matted hair with gravy-smeared fingers. "Let's get down to business," he said.
"Where have you been?" Belgarath asked him.
"Central Cthol Murgos. I've been sitting on a hilltop since the Battle of Vo Mimbre, watching the cave where Belzedar took Torak."
"Five hundred years?" Silk gasped.

Beldin shrugged. "More or less," he replied indifferently. "Somebody had to keep an eye on Burnt-Face, and I wasn't doing anything that couldn't be interrupted."
"You said you saw Belzedar," Aunt Pol said.
"About a month ago. He came to the cave as if he had a demon on his tail and

pulled Torak out. Then he changed himself into a vulture and flew off with the body."
"That must have been right after Ctuchik caught him at the Nyissan border and took the Orb away from him," Belgarath mused.
"I wouldn't know about that. That was part of your responsibility, not mine. All I was supposed to do was keep watch over Torak. Did any of the ashes fall on you?"
"Which ashes?" one of the twins asked.
"When Belzedar took Torak out of the cave, the mountain exploded -blew its guts out. I imagine it had something to do with the force surrounding One-Eye's body. It was still blowing when I left."
"We wondered what had caused the eruption," Aunt Pol commented. "It put ash down an inch deep all over Nyissa."
"Good. Too bad it wasn't deeper."
"Did you see any signs-"
"-of Torak stirring?" the twins asked.
"Can't you two ever talk straight?" Beldin demanded.
"We're sorry-"
"-it's our nature."
The ugly little man shook his head with disgust. "Never mind. No. Torak didn't move once in the whole five hundred years. There was mold on him when Belzedar dragged him out of the cave."
"Did you follow Belzedar?" Belgarath asked.
"Naturally."
"Where did he take Torak?"
"Now where do you think, idiot? To the ruins of Cthol Mishrak in Mallorea, of course. There are only a few places on earth that will bear Torak's weight, and that's one of them. Belzedar will have to keep Ctuchik and the Orb away from Torak, and that's the only place he could go. The Mallorean Grolims refuse to accept Ctuchik's authority, so Belzedar will be safe there. It will cost him a great deal to pay for their aid, but they'll keep Ctuchik out of Mallorea - unless he raises an army of Murgos and invades."
"That's something we could hope for," Barak said.
"You're supposed to be a bear, not a donkey," Beldin told him. "Don't base your hopes on the impossible. Neither Ctuchik nor Belzedar would start that sort of war at this particular time - not with Belgarion here stalking through the world like an earthquake." He scowled at Aunt Pol. "Can't you teach him to be a little quieter? Or are your wits getting as flabby as your behind?"
"Be civil, uncle," she replied. "The boy's just coming into his strength. We were all a bit clumsy at first."
"He doesn't have time to be a baby, Pol. The stars are dropping into southern Cthol Murgos like poisoned roaches, and dead Grolims are moaning in their tombs from Rak Cthol to Rak Hagga. The time's on us, and he has to be ready."
"He'll be ready, uncle."
"Maybe," the filthy man said sourly.
"Are you going back to Cthol Mishrak?" Belgarath asked.
"No. Our Master told me to stay here. The twins and I have work to do and we don't have much time."
"He spoke to-"
"-us, too."
"Stop that!" Beldin snapped. He turned back to Belgarath. "Are you going to Rak Cthol now?"
"Not yet. We've got to go to Prolgu first. I have to talk to the Gorim, and we've got to pick up another member of the party."
"I noticed that your group wasn't complete yet. What about the last one?"
Belgarath spread his hands. "That's the one that worries me. I haven't been able

to find any trace of her - and I've been looking for three thousand years."
"You spent too much time looking in alehouses."
"I noticed the same thing, uncle," Aunt Pol said with a sweet little smile.
"Where do we go after Prolgu?" Barak asked.
"I think that then we'll go to Rak Cthol," Belgarath replied rather grimly.
"We've got to get the Orb back from Ctuchik, and I've been meaning to have a rather pointed discussion with the magician of the Murgos for a long, long time, now."

Part Three
ULGO

Chapter Thirteen

THE FOLLOWING MORNING they turned northwest and rode toward the stark, white peaks of the mountains of Ulgo, glittering in the morning sun above the lush meadows of the Vale.
"Snow up there," Barak observed. "It could be a difficult trip."
"It always is," Hettar told him.
"Have you been to Prolgu before?" Durnik asked.
"A few times. We keep communications open with the Ulgos. Our visits are mostly ceremonial."
Princess Ce'Nedra had been riding beside Aunt Pol, her tiny face troubled. "How can you stand him, Lady Polgara?" she burst out finally. "He's so ugly."
"Who's that, dear?"
"That awful dwarf."
"Uncle Beldin?" Aunt Pol looked mildly surprised. "He's always been like that. You have to get to know him, that's all."
"But he says such terrible things to you."
"It's the way he hides his real feelings," Aunt Pol explained. "He's a very gentle person, really, but people don't expect that - coming from him. When he was a child, his people drove him out because he was so deformed and hideous. When he finally came to the Vale, our Master saw past the ugliness to the beauty in his mind."
"But does he have to be so dirty?"
Aunt Pol shrugged slightly. "He hates his deformed body, so he ignores it." She looked at the princess, her eyes calm. "It's the easiest thing in the world to judge things by appearances, Ce'Nedra," she said, "and it's usually wrong. Uncle Beldin and I are very fond of each other. That's why we take the trouble to invent such elaborate insults. Compliments would be hypocrisy - he is, after all, very ugly."
"I just don't understand." Ce'Nedra sounded baffled.
"Love can show itself in many strange ways," Aunt Pol told her. Her tone was offhand, but the look she directed at the tiny princess was penetrating.
Ce'Nedra flickered one quick look at Garion, and then averted her eyes, blushing slightly.
Garion considered the exchange between his Aunt Pol and the princess as he rode. It was quite obvious that Aunt Pol had been telling the little girl something important, but whatever it was escaped him.
They rode for several days across the Vale and then moved up into the foothills which clustered along the flanks of the ragged peaks that formed the land of the Ulgos. Once again the seasons changed as they rode. It was early autumn as they crested the first low range, and the valleys beyond were aflame with crimson

leaves. At the top of a second, higher range, the trees had been swept bare, and the wind had the first bite of winter in it as it whistled down from the peaks.
The sky grew overcast, and tendrils of cloud seeped down the rocky gorges above them. Spits of intermittent snow and rain pelted them as they climbed higher up the rocky slopes.
"I suppose we'd better begin keeping an eye out for Brill," Silk said hopefully one snowy afternoon. "It's about time for him to show up again."
"Not very likely," Belgarath replied. "Murgos avoid Ulgoland even more than they avoid the Vale. Ulgos dislike Angaraks intensely."
"So do Alorns."
"Ulgos can see in the dark, though," the old man told him. "Murgos who come into these mountains tend not to wake up from their first night's sleep up here. I don't think we need to worry about Brill."
"Pity," Silk remarked with a certain disappointment.
"It won't hurt to keep our eyes open, though. There are worse things than Murgos in the mountains of Ulgo."
Silk scoffed. "Aren't those stories exaggerated?"
"No. Not really."
"The region abounds with monsters, Prince Kheldar," Mandorallen assured the little man. "Some years back, a dozen foolish young knights of my acquaintance rode into these mountains to test their bravery and prowess against the unseemly beasts. Not one returned."
When they crested the next ridge, the full force of a winter gale struck them. Snow, which had grown steadily heavier as they climbed, drove horizontally in the howling wind.
"We'll have to take cover until this blows over, Belgarath," Barak shouted above the wind, fighting to keep his flapping bearskin cape around him.
"Let's drop down into this next valley," Belgarath replied, also struggling with his cloak. "The trees down there should break the wind."
They crossed the ridge and angled down toward the pines clustered at the bottom of the basin ahead. Garion pulled his cloak tighter and bowed his head into the shrieking wind.
The thick stand of sapling pine in the basin blocked the force of the gale, but the snow swirled about them as they reined in.
"We're not going to get much farther today, Belgarath," Barak declared, trying to brush the snow out of his beard. "We might as well hole up here and wait for morning."
"What's that?" Durnik asked sharply, cocking his head to one side.
"The wind," Barak shrugged.
"No. Listen."
Above the howling of the wind, a shrill whinnying sound came to them.
"Look there." Hettar pointed.
Dimly they saw a dozen horselike animals crossing the ridge behind them. Their shapes were blurred by the thickly falling snow, and their line as they moved seemed almost ghostly. On a rise just above them stood a huge stallion, his mane and tail tossing in the wind. His neigh was almost a shrill scream.
"Hrulgin!" Belgarath said sharply.
"Can we outrun them?" Silk asked hopefully.
"I doubt it," Belgarath replied. "Besides, they've got our scent now. They'll dog our trail from here to Prolgu if we try to run."
"Then we must teach them to fear our trail and avoid it," Mandorallen declared, tightening the straps on his shield. His eyes were very bright.
"You're falling back into your old habits, Mandorallen," Barak observed in a grumpy voice.
Hettar's face had assumed that curiously blank expression it usually did when he was communicating with his horses. He shuddered finally, and his eyes went sick

with revulsion.
"Well?" Aunt Pol asked him.
"They aren't horses," he began.
"We know that, Hettar," she replied. "Can you do anything with them? Frighten them off perhaps?"
He shook his head. "They're hungry, Polgara," he told her, "and they have our scent. The herd stallion seems to have much more control over them than he would if they were horses. I might be able to frighten one or two of the weaker ones - if it weren't for him."
"Then we'll have to fight them all," Barak said grimly, buckling on his shield.
"I don't think so," Hettar replied, his eyes narrowing. "The key seems to be the stallion. He dominates the whole herd. I think that if we kill him, the rest will turn and run."
"All right," Barak said, "we try for the stallion then."
"We might want to make some kind of noise," Hettar suggested. "Something that sounds like a challenge. That might make him come out to the front to answer it. Otherwise, we'll have to go through the whole herd to get to him."
"Mayhap this will provoke him," Mandorallen said. He lifted his horn to his lips and blew a brassy note of ringing defiance that was whipped away by the gale. The stallion's shrill scream answered immediately.
"It sounds as if it's working," Barak observed. "Blow it again, Mandorallen."
Mandorallen sounded his horn again, and again the stallion shrilled his reply. Then the great beast plunged down from the ridgetop and charged furiously through the herd toward them. When he reached the forefront, he shrieked again and reared up on his hind legs, his front claws flashing in the snowy air.
"That did it," Barak barked. "Let's go!" He jammed his spurs home, and his big gray leaped forward, spraying snow behind him. Hettar and Mandorallen swept out to flank him, and the three plunged forward through the thickly falling snow toward the screaming Hrulga stallion. Mandorallen set his lance as he charged, and a strange sound drifted back on the wind as he thundered toward the advancing Hrulgin. Mandorallen was laughing.
Garion drew his sword and pulled his horse in front of Aunt Pol and Ce'Nedra. He realized that it was probably a futile gesture, but he did it anyway.
Two of the Hrulgin, perhaps at the herd stallion's unspoken command, bounded forward to cut off Barak and Mandorallen while the stallion himself moved to meet Hettar as if recognizing the Algar as the greatest potential danger to the herd. As the first Hrulga reared, his fangs bared in a catlike snarl and his clawed feet widespread, Mandorallen lowered his lance and drove it through the snarling monster's chest. Bloody froth burst from the Hrulga's mouth, and he toppled over backward, clawing the broken shaft of Mandorallen's lance into splinters as he fell.
Barak caught a clawed swipe on his shield and split open the head of the second Hrulga with a vast overhand swing of his heavy sword. The beast collapsed, his convulsions churning the snow.
Hettar and the herd stallion stalked each other in the swirling snow. They moved warily, circling, their eyes locked on each other with a deadly intensity. Suddenly the stallion reared and lunged all in one motion, his great forelegs wide and his claws outspread. But Hettar's horse, his mind linked with his rider's, danced clear of the furious charge. The Hrulga spun and charged again, and once again Hettar's horse jumped to one side. The infuriated stallion screamed his frustration and lunged in, his claws flailing. Hettar's horse sidestepped the enraged beast, then darted in, and Hettar launched himself from his saddle and landed on the stallion's back. His long, powerful legs locked about the Hrulga's ribs and his right hand gathered a great fistful of the animal's mane.
The stallion went mad as he felt for the first time in the entire history of his

species the weight of a rider on his back. He plunged and reared and shrieked, trying to shake Hettar off. The rest of the herd, which had been moving to the attack, faltered and stared in uncomprehending horror at the stallion's wild attempts to dislodge his rider. Mandorallen and Barak reined in, dumbfounded, as Hettar rode the raging stallion in circles through the blizzard. Then, grimly, Hettar slid his left hand down his leg and drew a long, broad dagger from his boot. He knew horses, and he knew where to strike.

His first thrust was lethal. The churned snow turned red. The stallion reared one last time, screaming and with blood pouring out of his mouth, and then he dropped back to stand on shuddering legs. Slowly his knees buckled and he toppled to one side. Hettar jumped clear.

The herd of Hrulgin turned and fled, squealing, back into the blizzard.

Hettar grimly cleaned his dagger in the snow and resheathed it in his boot. Briefly he laid one hand on the dead stallion's neck, then turned to look through the trampled snow for the sabre he had discarded in his wild leap onto the stallion's back.

When the three warriors returned to the shelter of the trees, Mandorallen and Barak were staring at Hettar with a look of profound respect.

"It's a shame they're mad," the Algar said with a distant look on his face. "There was a moment just a moment-when I almost got through to him, and we moved together. Then the madness came back, and I had to kill him. If they could be tamed-" He broke off and shook his head. "Oh, well." He shrugged regretfully.

"You wouldn't actually ride something like that?" Durnik's voice was shocked.

"I've never had an animal like that under me," Hettar said quietly. "I don't think I'll ever forget what it was like." The tall man turned and walked some distance away and stood staring out into the swirling snow.

They set up for the night in the shelter of the pines. The next morning the wind had abated, although it was still snowing heavily when they set out again. The snow was already knee-deep, and the horses struggled as they climbed.

They crossed yet another ridge and started down into the next valley. Silk looked dubiously around at the thick-falling snow settling through the silent air. "If it gets much deeper, we're going to bog down, Belgarath," he said glumly. "Particularly if we have to keep climbing like this."

"We'll be all right now," the ald man assured him. "We follow a series of valleys from here. They lead right up to Prolgu, so we can avoid the peaks."

"Belgarath," Barak said back over his shoulder from his place in the lead, "there are some fresh tracks up here." He pointed ahead at a line of footprints plowed through the new snow across their path.

The old man moved ahead and stopped to examine the tracks. "Algroth," he said shortly. "We'd better keep our eyes open."

They rode warily down into the valley where Mandorallen paused long enough to cut himself a fresh lance.

"I'd be a little dubious about a weapon that keeps breaking," Barak observed as the knight remounted.

Mandorallen shrugged, his armor creaking. "There are always trees about, my Lord," he replied.

Back among the pines that carpeted the valley floor, Garion heard a familiar barking.

"Grandfather," he warned.

"I hear them," Belgarath answered.

"How many, do you think?" Silk asked.

"Perhaps a dozen," Belgarath said.

"Eight," Aunt Pol corrected firmly.

"If they are but eight, will they dare attack?" Mandorallen asked. "Those we met in Arendia seemed to seek courage in numbers."

"Their lair's in this valley, I think," the old man replied. "Any animal tries

to defend its lair. They're almost certain to attack."
"We must seek them out, then," the knight declared confidently.
"Better to destroy them now on ground of our own choosing than to be surprised in some ambush."
"He's definitely backsliding," Barak observed sourly to Hettar.
"He's probably right this time, though," Hettar replied.
"Have you been drinking, Hettar?" Barak asked suspiciously.
"Come, my Lords," Mandorallen said gaily. "Let us rout the brutes so that we may continue our journey unmolested." He plowed off through the snow in search of the barking Algroths.
"Coming, Barak?" Hettar invited as he drew his sabre.
Barak sighed. "I guess I'd better," he answered mournfully. He turned to Belgarath. "This shouldn't take long. I'll try to keep our bloodthirsty friends out of trouble."
Hettar laughed.
"You're getting to be as bad as he is," Barak accused as the two of them moved into a gallop in Mandorallen's wake.
Garion and the others sat waiting tensely in the sifting snowfall. Then the barking sounds off in the woods suddenly turned into yelps of surprise. The sound of blows began to ring through the trees, and there were shrieks of pain and shouts as the three warriors called to each other. After perhaps a quarter of an hour, they came galloping back with the deep snow spraying out from their horses' hooves.
"Two of them got away," Hettar reported regretfully.
"What a shame," Silk replied.
"Mandorallen," Barak said with a pained look, "you've picked up a bad habit somewhere. Fighting's a serious business, and all this giggling and laughing of yours smacks of frivolity."
"Doth it offend thee, my Lord?"
"It's not so much that it offends me, Mandorallen. It's more a distraction. It breaks my concentration."
"I shall strive to moderate my laughter in future, then."
"I'd appreciate it."
"How did it go?" Silk asked.
"It wasn't much of a fight," Barak replied. "We caught them completely by surprise. I hate to admit it, but our chortling friend there was right for once."
Garion thought about Mandorallen's changed behavior as they rode on down the valley. Back at the cave where the colt had been born, Durnik had told Mandorallen that fear could be conquered by laughing at it, and, though Durnik had probably not meant it in precisely that way, Mandorallen had taken his words quite literally. The laughter which so irritated Barak was not directed at the foes he met, but rather at the enemy within him. Mandorallen was laughing at his own fear as he rode to each attack.
"It's unnatural," Barak was muttering to Silk. "That's what bothers me so much. Not only that, it's a breach of etiquette. If we ever get into a serious fight, it's going to be terribly embarrassing to have him giggling and carrying on like that. What will people think?"
"You're making too much of it, Barak," Silk told him. "Actually, I think it's rather refreshing."
"You think it's what?"
"Refreshing. An Arend with a sense of humor is a novelty, after all sort of like a talking dog."
Barak shook his head in disgust. "There's absolutely no point in ever trying to discuss anything seriously with you, Silk, do you know that? The compulsion of yours to make clever remarks turns everything into a joke."

"We all have our little shortcomings," Silk admitted blandly.

Chapter Fourteen

THE SNOW GRADUALLY slackened throughout the rest o the day and by evening only a few solitary flakes drifted down through the darkening air as they set up for the night in a grove of dense spruces. During the night, however, the temperature fell, and the air was bitterly cold when they arose the next morning.

"How much farther to Prolgu?" Silk asked, standing close to the fire with his shivering hands stretched out to its warmth.

"Two more days," Belgarath replied.

"I don't suppose you'd consider doing something about the weather?" the little man asked hopefully.

"I prefer not to do that unless I absolutely have to," the old man told him. "It disrupts things over a very wide area. Besides, the Gorim doesn't like us to tamper with things in his mountains. The Ulgos have reservations about that sort of thing."

"I was afraid you might look at it that way."

Their route that morning twisted and turned so often that by noon Garion was completely turned around. Despite the biting cold, the sky was overcast, a solid lead-gray. It seemed somehow as if the cold had frozen all color from the world. The sky was gray; the snow was a flat, dead white; and the tree trunks were starkly black. Even the rushing water in the streams they followed flowed black between snow-mounded banks. Belgarath moved confidently, pointing their direction as each succeeding valley intersected with another.

"Are you sure?" the shivering Silk asked him at one point. "We've been going upstream all day, now you say we go down."

"We'll hit another valley in a few miles. Trust me, Silk. I've been here before."

Silk pulled his heavy cloak tighter. "It's just that I get nervous on unfamiliar ground," he objected, looking at the dark water of the river they followed.

From far upstream came a strange sound, a kind of mindless hooting that was almost like laughter. Aunt Pol and Belgarath exchanged a quick look.

"What is it?" Garion asked.

"Rock-wolf," Belgarath answered shortly.

"It doesn't sound like a wolf."

"It isn't." The old man looked around warily. "They're scavengers for the most part and, if it's just a wild pack, they probably won't attack. It's too early in the winter for them to be that desperate. If it's one of the packs that has been raised by the Eldrakyn, though, we're in for trouble." He stood up in his stirrups to look ahead. "Let's pick up the pace a bit," he called to Mandorallen, "and keep your eyes open."

Mandorallen, his armor glittering with frost, glanced back, nodded, and moved out at a trot, following the seething black water of the mountain river.

Behind them the shrill, yelping laughter grew louder.

"They're following us, father," Aunt Pol said.

"I can hear that." The old man began searching the sides of the valley with his eyes, his face creased with a worried frown. "You'd better have a look, Pol. I don't want any surprises."

Aunt Pol's eyes grew distant as she probed the thickly forested sides of the valley with her mind. After a moment, she gasped and then shuddered. "There's an Eldrak out there, father. He's watching us. His mind is a sewer."

"They always are," the old man replied. "Could you pick up his name?"

"Grul."

"That's what I was afraid of. I knew we were getting close to his range." He put

his fingers to his lips and whistled sharply.
Barak and Mandorallen halted to wait while the rest caught up with them. "We've got trouble," Belgarath told them all seriously. "There's an Eldrak out there with a pack of rock-wolves. He's watching us right now. It's only a question of time until he attacks."
"What's an Eldrak?" Silk asked.
"The Eldrakyn are related to Algroths and Trolls, but they're more intelligent - and much bigger."
"But only one?" Mandorallen asked.
"One's enough. I've met this one. His name is Grul. He's big, quick, and as cruel as a hook-pointed knife. He'll eat anything that moves, and he doesn't really care if it's dead or not before he starts to eat."
The hooting laughter of the rock-wolves drew closer.
"Let's find an open place and build a fire," the old man said. "The rock-wolves are afraid of fire, and there's no point in fighting with them and Grul if we don't have to."
"There?" Durnik suggested, pointing to a broad, snow-covered bar protruding out into the dark water of the river. The bar was joined to the near bank by a narrow neck of gravel and sand.
"It's defensible, Belgarath," Barak approved, squinting at the bar. "The river will keep them off our backs, and they can only come at us across that one narrow place."
"It will do," Belgarath agreed shortly. "Let's go."
They rode out onto the snow-covered bar and quickly scraped an area clear with their feet while Durnik worked to build a fire under a large, gray driftwood snag that half blocked the narrow neck of the bar. Within a few moments, orange flames began to lick up around the snag. Durnik fed the fire with sticks until the snag was fully ablaze. "Give me a hand," the smith said, starting to pile larger pieces of wood on the fire. Barak and Mandorallen went to the jumbled mass of driftwood piled against the upstream edge of the gravel and began hauling limbs and chunks of log to the fire. At the end of a quarter of an hour they had built a roaring bonfire that stretched across the narrow neck of sand, cutting them off completely from the dark trees on the riverbank.
"It's the first time I've been warm all day." Silk grinned, backing up to the fire.
"They're coming," Garion warned. Back among the dark tree trunks, he had caught a few glimpses of furtive movements.
Barak peered through the flames. "Big brutes, aren't they?" he observed grimly.
"About the size of a donkey," Belgarath confirmed.
"Are you sure they're afraid of fire?" Silk asked nervously.
"Most of the time."
"Most of the time?"
"Once in a while they get desperate - or Grul could drive them toward us. They'd be more afraid of him than of the fire."
"Belgarath," the weasel-faced little man objected, "sometimes you've got a nasty habit of keeping things to yourself."
One of the rock-wolves came out onto the riverbank just upstream from the bar and stood sniffing the air and looking nervously at the fire. Its forelegs were noticeably longer than its hind ones, giving it a peculiar, half erect stance, and there was a large, muscular hump across its shoulders. Its muzzle was short, and it seemed snub-faced, almost like a cat. Its coat was a splotchy black and white, marked with a pattern hovering somewhere between spots and stripes. It paced nervously back and forth, staring at them with a dreadful intensity and yelping its highpitched, hooting laugh. Soon another came out to join it, and then another. They spread out along the bank, pacing and hooting, but staying well back from the fire.

"They don't look like dogs exactly," Durnik said.
"They're not," Belgarath replied. "Wolves and dogs are related, but rock-wolves belong to a different family."
By now ten of the ugly creatures lined the bank, and their hooting rose in a mindless chorus.
Then Ce'Nedra screamed, her face deathly pale and her eyes wide with horror. The Eldrak shambled out of the trees and stood in the middle of the yelping pack. It was about eight feet tall and covered with shaggy black fur. It wore an armored shirt that had been made of large scraps of chainmail tied together with thongs; over the mail, also held in place with thongs, was a rusty breastplate that appeared to have been hammered out with rocks until it was big enough to fit around the creature's massive chest. A conical steel helmet, split up the back to make it fit, covered the brute's head. In its hand the Eldrak held a huge, steelwrapped club, studded with spikes. It was the face, however, that had brought the scream to Ce'Nedra's lips. The Eldrak had virtually no nose, and its lower jaw jutted, showing two massive, protruding tusks. Its eyes were sunk in deep sockets beneath a heavy ridge of bone across its brow, and they burned with a hideous hunger.
"That's far enough, Grul," Belgarath warned the thing in a cold, deadly voice.
"'Grat come back to Grul's mountains?" the monster growled. Its voice was deep and hollow, chilling.
"It talks?" Silk gasped incredulously.
"Why are you following us, Grul?" Belgarath demanded.
The creature stared at them, its eyes like fire. "Hungry, 'Grat," it growled.
"Go hunt something else," the old man told the monster.
"Why? Horses here - men. Plenty to eat."
"But not easy food, Grul," Belgarath replied.
A hideous grin spread across Grul's face. "Fight first," he said, "then eat. Come 'Grat. Fight again."
"Grat?" Silk asked.
"He means me. He can't pronounce my name - it has to do with the shape of his jaw."
"You fought that thing?" Barak sounded stunned.
Belgarath shrugged. "I had a knife up my sleeve. When he grabbed me, I sliced him open. It wasn't much of a fight."
"Fight!" Grul roared. He hammered on his breastplate with his huge fist. "Iron," he said. "Come, 'Grat. Try to cut Grul's belly again. Now Grul wear iron - like men wear." He began to pound on the frozen ground with his steel-shod club. "Fight!" he bellowed. "Come, 'Grat. Fight!"
"Maybe if we all go after him at once, one of us might get in a lucky thrust," Barak said, eyeing the monster speculatively.
"Thy plan is flawed, my Lord," Mandorallen told him. "We must lose several companions should we come within range of that club."
Barak looked at him in astonishment. "Prudence, Mandorallen? Prudence from you?"
"It were best, I think, should I undertake this alone," the knight stated gravely. "My lance is the only weapon that can seek out the monster's life with safety."
"There's something to what he says," Hettar agreed.
"Come fight!" Grul roared, still beating on the ground with his club.
"All right," Barak agreed dubiously. "We'll distract him then - come at him from two sides to get his attention. Then Mandorallen can make his charge."
"What about the rock-wolves?" Garion asked.
"Let me try something," Durnik said. He took up a burning stick and threw it, spinning and flaring, at the nervous pack surrounding the monster. The rock-wolves yelped and shied quickly away from the tumbling brand. "They're afraid of the fire, all right," the smith said. "I think that if we all throw at

once and keep throwing, their nerve will break and they'll run."
They all moved to the fire.
"Now!" Durnik shouted sharply. They began throwing the blazing sticks as fast as they could. The rock-wolves yelped and dodged, and several of them screamed in pain as the tumbling firebrands singed them.
Grul roared in fury as the pack dodged and scurried around his feet, trying to escape the sudden deluge of fire. One of the singed beasts, maddened by pain and fright, tried to leap at him. The Eldrak jumped out of its way with astonishing agility and smashed the rock-wolf to the ground with his great club.
"He's quicker than I thought," Barak said. "We'll have to be careful."
"They're running!" Durnik shouted, throwing another fiery stick. The pack had broken under the rain of burning brands and turned to flee howling back into the woods, leaving the infuriated Grul standing alone on the riverbank, hammering at the snow-covered ground with his spiked club. "Come fight!" he roared again. "Come fight!" He advanced one huge step and smashed his club at the snow again.
"We'd better do whatever we're going to do now," Silk said tensely. "He's getting himself worked up. We'll have him out here on the bar with us in another minute or two."
Mandorallen nodded grimly and turned to mount his charger.
"Let the rest of us distract him first," Barak said. He drew his heavy sword. "Let's go!" he shouted and leaped over the fire. The others followed him, spreading out in a half circle in front of the towering Grul. Garion reached for his sword.
"Not you," Aunt Pol snapped. "You stay here."
"But "
"Do as I say."
One of Silk's daggers, skillfully thrown from several yards away, sank into Grul's shoulder while the creature was advancing on Barak and Durnik. Grul howled and turned to charge Silk and Hettar, swinging his vast club. Hettar dodged, and Silk danced back out of reach. Durnik began pelting the monster with fist-sized rocks from the riverbank. Grul turned back, raging now, with flecks of foam dripping from his pointed tusks.
"Now, Mandorallen!" Barak shouted.
Mandorallen couched his lance and spurred his warhorse. The huge armored animal leaped forward, its hooves churning gravel, jumped the fire, and bore down on the astonished Grul. For a moment it looked as if their plan might work. The deadly, steel-pointed lance was leveled at Grul's chest, and it seemed that nothing could stop it from plunging through his huge body. But the monster's quickness again astonished them all. He leaped to one side and smashed his spiked club down on Mandorallen's lance, shattering the stout wood.
The force of Mandorallen's charge, however, could not be stopped. Horse and man crashed into the great brute with a deafening impact. Grul reeled back, dropping his club, tripping, falling with Mandorallen and his warhorse on top of him.
"Get him!" Barak roared, and they all dashed forward to attack the fallen Grul with swords and axes. The monster, however, levered his legs under Mandorallen's thrashing horse and thrust the big animal off. A great, flailing fist caught Mandorallen in the side, throwing him for several yards. Durnik spun and dropped, felled by a glancing blow to the head even as Barak, Hettar, and Silk swarmed over the fallen Grul.
"Father!" Aunt Pol cried in a ringing voice.
There was suddenly a new sound directly behind Garion - first a deep, rumbling snarl followed instantly by a hair-raising howl. Garion turned quickly and saw the huge wolf he had seen once before in the forests of northern Arendia. The old gray wolf bounded across the fire and entered the fight, his great teeth flashing and tearing.
"Garion, I need you!" Aunt Pol was shaking off the panic-stricken princess and

pulling her amulet out of her bodice. "Take out your medallion-quickly!"
He did not understand, but he drew his amulet out from under his tunic. Aunt Pol reached out, took his right hand, and placed the mark on his palm against the figure of the owl on her own talisman; at the same time, she took his medallion in her other hand. "Focus your will," she commanded.
"On what?"
"On the amulets. Quickly!"
Garion brought his will to bear, feeling the power building in him tremendously, amplified somehow by his contact with Aunt Pol and the two amulets. Polgara closed her eyes and raised her face to the leaden sky. "Mother!" she cried in a voice so loud that the echo rang like a trumpet note in the narrow valley.
The power surged out of Garion in so vast a rush that he collapsed to his knees, unable to stand. Aunt Pol sank down beside him.
Ce'Nedra gasped.
As Garion weakly raised his head, he saw that there were two wolves attacking the raging Grul - the gray old wolf he knew to be his grandfather, and another, slightly smaller wolf that seemed surrounded by a strange, flickering blue light.
Grul had struggled to his feet and was laying about him with his huge fists as the men attacking him chopped futilely at his armored body. Barak was flung out of the fight and fell to his hands and knees, shaking his head groggily. Grul brushed Hettar aside, his eyes alight with dreadful glee as he lunged toward Barak with both huge arms raised. But the blue wolf leaped snarling at his face. Grul swung his fist and gaped with astonishment as it passed directly through the flickering body. Then he shrieked with pain and began to topple backward as Belgarath, darting in from behind to employ the wolf's ancient tactic, neatly hamstrung him with great, ripping teeth. The towering Grul, howling, fell and struck the earth like some vast tree.
"Keep him down!" Barak roared, stumbling to his feet and staggering forward. The wolves were ripping at Grul's face, and he flailed his arms, trying to beat them away. Again and again his hands passed through the body of the strange, flickering blue wolf. Mandorallen, his feet spread wide apart and holding the hilt of his broadsword with both hands, chopped steadily at the monster's body, his great blade shearing long rents in Grul's breastplate. Barak swung huge blows at Grul's head, his sword striking sparks from the rusty steel helmet. Hettar crouched at one side, eyes intent, sabre ready, waiting. Grul raised his arm to ward off Barak's blows, and Hettar lunged, thrusting his sabre through the exposed armpit and into the huge chest. A bloody froth spouted from Grul's mouth as the sabre ripped through his lungs. He struggled to a half sitting position.
Then Silk, who had lurked just at the edge of the fight, darted in, set the point of his dagger against the back of Grul's neck and smashed a large rock against the dagger's pommel. With a sickening crunch, the dagger drove through bone, angling up into the monster's brain. Grul shuddered convulsively. Then he collapsed.
In the moment of silence that followed, the two wolves looked at each other across the monster's dead face. The blue wolf seemed to wink once; in a voice which Garion could hear quite clearly - a woman's voice - she said, "How remarkable." With a seeming smile and one last flicker, she vanished.
The old gray wolf raised his muzzle and howled, a sound of such piercing anguish and loss that Garion's heart wrenched within him.
Then the old wolf seemed to shimmer, and Belgarath knelt in his place. He rose slowly to his feet and walked back toward the fire, tears streaming openly down his grizzled cheeks.

Chapter Fifteen

"IS HE GOING to be all right?" Barak asked anxiously, hovering over the still unconscious Durnik as Aunt Pol examined the large purple contusion on the side of the smith's face.

"It's nothing serious," she replied in a voice seeming to droop with a great weariness.

Garion sat nearby with his head in his hands. He felt as if all the strength had been wrenched out of his body.

Beyond the heaped coals of the rapidly dying bonfire, Silk and Hettar were struggling to remove Mandorallen's dented breastplate. A deep crease running diagonally from shoulder to hip gave mute evidence of the force of Grul's blow and placed so much stress on the straps beneath the shoulder plates that they were almost impossible to unfasten.

"I think we're going to have to cut them," Silk said.

"I pray thee, Prince Kheldar, avoid that if possible," Mandorallen answered, wincing as they wrenched at the fastenings. "Those straps are crucial to the fit of the armor, and are most difficult to replace properly."

"This one's coming now," Hettar grunted, prying at a buckle with a short iron rod. The buckle released suddenly and the taut breastplate rang like a softly struck bell.

"Now I can get it," Silk said, quickly loosening the other shoulder buckle.

Mandorallen sighed with relief as they pulled off the dented breastplate. He took a deep breath and winced again.

"Tender right here?" Silk asked, putting his fingers lightly to the right side of the knight's chest. Mandorallen grunted with pain, and his face paled visibly. "I think you've got some cracked ribs, my splendid friend," Silk told him. "You'd better have Polgara take a look."

"In a moment," Mandorallen said. "My horse?"

"He'll be all right," Hettar replied. "A strained tendon in his right foreleg is all."

Mandorallen let out a sigh of relief. "I had feared for him."

"I feared for us all there for a while," Silk said. "Our oversized playmate there was almost more than we could handle."

"Good fight, though," Hettar remarked.

Silk gave him a disgusted look, then glanced up at the scudding gray clouds overhead. He jumped across the glowing coals of their fire and went over to where Belgarath sat staring into the icy river. "We're going to have to get off this bar, Belgarath," he urged. "The weather's going bad on us again, and we'll all freeze to death if we stay out here in the middle of the river tonight."

"Leave me alone," Belgarath muttered shortly, still staring at the river.

"Polgara?" Silk turned to her.

"Just stay away from him for a while," she told him. "Go find a sheltered place for us to stay for a few days."

"I'll go with you," Barak offered, hobbling toward his horse.

"You'll stay here," Aunt Pol declared firmly. "You creak like a wagon with a broken axle. I want to have a look at you before you get a chance to damage yourself permanently."

"I know a place," Ce'Nedra said, rising and pulling her cloak about her shoulders. "I saw it when we were coming down the river. I'll show you."

Silk looked inquiringly at Aunt Pol.

"Go ahead," she told him. "It's safe enough now. Nothing else would live in the same valley with an Eldrak."

Silk laughed. "I wonder why? Coming, Princess?" The two of them mounted and rode off through the snow.

"Shouldn't Durnik be coming around?" Garion asked his Aunt.

"Let him sleep," she replied wearily. "He'll have a blinding headache when he

wakes up."
"Aunt Pol?"
"Yes?"
"Who was the other wolf?"
"My mother, Poledra."
"But isn't she-"
"Yes. It was her spirit."
"You can do that?" Garion was stunned by the enormity of it.
"Not alone," she said. "You had to help me."
"Is that why I feel so-" It was an effort even to talk.
"It took everything we could both raise to do it. Don't ask so many questions just now, Garion. I'm very tired and I still have many things to do."
"Is Grandfather all right?"
"He'll come around. Mandorallen, come here."
The knight stepped over the coals at the neck of the bar and walked slowly toward her, his hand pressed lightly against his chest.
"You'll have to take off your shirt," she told him. "And please sit down."
About a half hour later Silk and the princess returned. "It's a good spot," Silk reported. "A thicket in a little ravine. Water, shelter - everything we need. Is anybody seriously hurt?"
"Nothing permanent." Aunt Pol was applying a salve to Barak's hairy leg.
"Do you suppose you could hurry, Polgara?" Barak asked. "It's a little chilly for standing around half-dressed."
"Stop being such a baby," she said heartlessly.
The ravine to which Silk and Ce'Nedra led them was a short way back upriver. A small mountain brook trickled from its mouth, and a dense thicket of spindly pines filled it seemingly from wall to wall. They followed the brook for a few hundred yards until they came to a small clearing in the center of the thicket. The pines around the inner edge of the clearing, pressed by the limbs of the others in the thicket, leaned inward, almost touching above the center of the open area.
"Good spot." Hettar looked around approvingly. "How did you find it?"
"She did." Silk nodded at Ce'Nedra.
"The trees told me it was here," she said. "Young pine trees babble a lot." She looked at the clearing thoughtfully. "We'll build our fire there," she decided, pointing at a spot near the brook at the upper end of the clearing, "and set up our tents along the, edge of the trees just back from it. You'll need to pile rocks around the fire and clear away all the twigs from the ground near it. The trees are very nervous about the fire. They promised to keep the wind off us, but only if we keep our fire strictly under control. I gave them my word."
A faint smile flickered across Hettar's hawklike face.
"I'm serious," she said, stamping her little foot.
"Of course, your Highness," he replied, bowing.
Because of the incapacity of the others, the work of sating up the tents and building the firepit fell largely upon Silk and Hettar. Ce'Nedra commanded them like a little general, snapping out her orders in a clear, firm voice. She seemed to be enjoying herself immensely.
Garion was sure that it was some trick of the fading light, but the trees almost seemed to draw back when the fire first flared up, though after a while they seemed to lean back in again to arch protectively over the little clearing. Wearily he got to his feet and began to gather sticks and dead limbs for firewood.
"Now," Ce'Nedra said, bustling about the fire in a thoroughly businesslike way, "what would you all like for supper?"
They stayed in their protected little clearing for three days while their battered warriors and Mandorallen's horse recuperated from the encounter with

the Eldrak. The exhaustion which had fallen upon Garion when Aunt Pol had summoned all his strength to help call the spirit of Poledra was largely gone after one night's sleep, though he tired easily during the next day. He found Ce'Nedra's officiousness in her domain near the fire almost unbearable, so he passed some time helping Durnik hammer the deep crease out of Mandorallen's breastplate; after that, he spent as much time as possible with the horses. He began teaching the little colt a few simple tricks, though he had never attempted training animals before. The colt seemed to enjoy it, although his attention wandered frequently.

The incapacity of Durnik, Barak, and Mandorallen was easy to understand, but Belgarath's deep silence and seeming indifference to all around him worried Garion. The old man appeared to be sunk in a melancholy reverie that he could not or would not shake off.

"Aunt Pol," Garion said finally on the afternoon of the third day, "you'd better do something. We'll be ready to leave soon, and Grandfather has to be able to show us the way. Right now I don't think he even cares where he is."

Aunt Pol looked across at the old sorcerer, who sat on a rock, staring into the fire. "Possibly you're right. Come with me." She led the way around the fire and stopped directly in front of the old man. "All right, father," she said crisply, "I think that's about enough."

"Go away, Polgara," he told her.

"No, father," she replied. "It's time for you to put it away and come back to the real world."

"That was a cruel thing to do, Pol," he said reproachfully.

"To mother? She didn't mind."

"How do you know that? You never knew her. She died when you were born."

"What's that got to do with it?" She looked at him directly. "Father," she declared pointedly, "you of all people should know that mother was extremely strong-minded. She's always been with me, and we know each other very well."

He looked dubious.

"She has her part to play in this just the same as the rest of us do. If you'd been paying attention all these years, you'd have realized that she's never really been gone."

The old man looked around a little guiltily.

"Precisely," Aunt Pol said with just the hint of a barb in her voice. "You really should have behaved yourself, you know. Mother's very tolerant for the most part, but there were times when she was quite vexed with you."

Belgarath coughed uncomfortably.

"Now it's time for you to pull yourself out of this and stop feeling sorry for yourself," she continued crisply.

His eyes narrowed. "That's not entirely fair, Polgara," he replied.

"I don't have time to be fair, father."

"Why did you choose that particular form?" he asked with a hint of bitterness.

"I didn't, father. She did. It's her natural form, after all."

"I'd almost forgotten that," he mused.

"She didn't."

The old man straightened and drew back his shoulders. "Is there any food around?" he asked suddenly.

"The princess has been doing the cooking," Garion warned him. "You might want to think it over before you decide to eat anything she's had a hand in."

The next morning under a still-threatening sky, they struck their tents, packed their gear again, and rode down along the narrow bed of the brook back into the river valley.

"Did you thank the trees, dear?" Aunt Pol asked the princess.

"Yes, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra replied. "Just before we left."

"That's nice," Aunt Pol said.

The weather continued to threaten for the next two days, and finally the blizzard broke in full fury as they approached a strangely pyramidal peak. The sloping walls of the peak were steep, rising sharply up into the swirling snow, and they seemed to have none of the random irregularities of the surrounding mountains. Though he rejected the idea immediately, Garion could not quite overcome the notion that the curiously angular peak had somehow been constructed - that its shape was the result of a conscious design.

"Prolgu," Belgarath said, pointing at the peak with one hand while he clung to his wind-whipped cloak with the other.

"How do we get up there?" Silk asked, staring at the steep walls dimly visible in the driving snow.

"There's a road," the old man replied. "It starts over there." He pointed to a vast pile of jumbled rock to one side of the peak.

"We'd better hurry then, Belgarath," Barak said. "This storm isn't going to improve much."

The old man nodded and moved his horse into the lead. "When we get up there," he shouted back to them over the sound of the shrieking wind, "we'll find the city. It's abandoned, but you may see a few things lying about-broken pots, some other things. Don't touch any of them. The Ulgos have some peculiar beliefs about Prolgu. It's a very holy place to them, and everything there is supposed to stay just where it is."

"How do we get down into the caves?" Barak asked.

"The Ulgos will let us in," Belgarath assured him. "They already know we're here."

The road that led to the mountaintop was a narrow ledge, inclining steeply up and around the sides of the peak. They dismounted before they started up and led their horses. The wind tugged at them as they climbed, and the driving snow, more pellets than flakes, stung their faces.

It took them two hours to wind their way to the top, and Garion was numb with cold by the time they got there. The wind seemed to batter at him, trying to pluck him off the ledge, and he made a special point of staying as far away from the edge as possible.

Though the wind had been brutal on the sides of the peak, once they reached the top it howled at them with unbroken force. They passed through a broad, arched gate into the deserted city of Prolgu with snow swirling about them and the wind shrieking insanely in their ears.

There were columns lining the empty streets, tall, thick columns reaching up into the dancing snow. The buildings, all unroofed by time and the endless progression of the seasons, had a strange, alien quality about them. Accustomed to the rigid rectangularity of the structures in the other cities he had seen, Garion was unprepared for the sloped corners of Ulgo architecture. Nothing seemed exactly square. The complexity of the angles teased at his mind, suggesting a subtle sophistication that somehow just eluded him. There was a massiveness about the construction that seemed to defy time, and the weathered stones sat solidly, one atop the other, precisely as they had been placed thousands of years before.

Durnik seemed also to have noticed the peculiar nature of the structures, and his expression was one of disapproval. As they all moved behind a building to get out of the wind and to rest for a moment from the exertions of the climb, he ran his hand up one of the slanted corners. "Hadn't they ever heard of a plumb line?" he muttered critically.

"Where do we go to find the Ulgos?" Barak asked, pulling his bearskin cloak even tighter about him.

"It isn't far," Belgarath answered.

They led their horses back out into the blizzard-swept streets, past the strange, pyramidal buildings.

"An eerie place," Mandorallen said, looking around him. "How long hath it been abandoned thus?"
"Since Torak cracked the world," Belgarath replied. "About five thousand years."
They trudged across a broad street through the deepening snow to a building somewhat larger than the ones about it and passed inside through a wide doorway surmounted by a huge stone lintel. Inside, the air hung still and calm. A few flakes of snow drifted down through the silent air, sifting through the narrow opening at the top where the roof had been and lightly dusting the stone floor.
Belgarath moved purposefully to a large black stone in the precise center of the floor. The stone was cut in such a way as to duplicate the truncated pyramidal shape of the buildings in the city, angling up to a flat surface about four feet above the floor. "Don't touch it," he warned them, carefully stepping around the stone.
"Is it dangerous?" Barak asked.
"No," Belgarath said. "It's holy. The Ulgos don't want it profaned. They believe that UL himself placed it here." He studied the floor intently, scraping away the thin dusting of snow with his foot in several places. "Let's see." He frowned slightly. Then he uncovered a single flagstone that seemed a slightly different color from those surrounding it. "Here we are," he grunted. "I always have to look for it. Give me your sword, Barak."
Wordlessly the big man drew his sword and handed it to the old sorcerer.
Belgarath knelt beside the flagstone he'd uncovered and rapped sharply on it three times with the pommel of Barak's heavy sword. The sound seemed to echo hollowly from underneath.
The old man waited for a moment, then repeated his signal. Nothing happened.
A third time Belgarath hammered his three measured strokes on the echoing flagstone. A slow grinding sound started in one corner of the large chamber.
"What's that?" Silk demanded nervously.
"The Ulgos," Belgarath replied, rising to his feet and dusting off his knees. "They're opening the portal to the caves."
The grinding continued and a line of faint light appeared suddenly about twenty feet out from the east wall of the chamber. The line became a crack and then slowly yawned wider as a huge stone in the floor tilted up, rising with a ponderous slowness. The light from below seemed very dim.
"Belgarath," a deep voice echoed from beneath the slowly tilting stone, "Yad ho, groja UL. "
"Yad ho, groja UL. dad mar ishum, " Belgarath responded formally. "Peed mo, Belgarath. Mar ishum Ulgo, " the unseen speaker said.
"What was that?" Garion asked in perplexity.
"He invited us into the caves," the old man said. "Shall we go down now?"

Chapter Sixteen

IT TOOK ALL Of Hettar's force of persuasion to start the horses moving down the steeply inclined passageway that led into the dimness of the caves of Ulgo. Their eyes rolled nervously as they took step after braced step down the slanting corridor, and they all flinched noticeably as the grinding stone boomed shut behind them. The colt walked so close to Garion that they frequently bumped against each other, and Garion could feel the little animal's trembling with every step.
At the end of the corridor two figures stood, each with his face veiled in a kind of filmy cloth. They were short men, shorter even than Silk, but their shoulders seemed bulky beneath their dark robes. Just beyond them an irregularly shaped chamber opened out, faintly lighted by a dim, reddish glow.
Belgarath moved toward the two, and they bowed respectfully to him as he approached. He spoke with them briefly, and they bowed again, pointing toward

another corridor opening on the far side of the chamber. Garion nervously looked around for the source of the faint red light, but it seemed lost in the strange, pointed rocks hanging from the ceiling.
"We go this way," Belgarath quietly told them, crossing the chamber toward the corridor the two veiled men had indicated to him.
"Why are their faces covered?" Durnik whispered.
"To protect their eyes from the light when they opened the portal."
"But it was almost dark inside that building up there," Durnik objected.
"Not to an Ulgo," the old man replied.
"Don't any of them speak our language?"
"A few-not very many. They don't have much contact with outsiders. We'd better hurry. The Gorim is waiting for us."
The corridor they entered ran for a short distance and then opened abruptly into a cavern so vast that Garion could not even see the other side of it in the faint light that seemed to pervade the caves.
"How extensive are these caverns, Belgarath?" Mandorallen asked, somewhat awed by the immensity of the place.
"No one knows for sure. The Ulgos have been exploring the caves since they came down here, and they're still finding new ones."
The passageway they had followed from the portal chamber had emerged high up in the wall of the cavern near the vaulted roof, and a broad ledge sloped downward from the opening, running along the sheer wall. Garion glanced once over the edge. The cavern floor was lost in the gloom far below. He shuddered and stayed close to the wall after that.
As they descended, they found that the huge cavern was not silent. From what seemed infinitely far away there was the cadenced sound of chanting by a chorus of deep male voices, the words blurred and confused by the echoes reverberating from the stone walls and seeming to die off, endlessly repeated. Then, as the last echoes of the chant faded, the chorus began to sing, their song strangely disharmonic and in a mournful, minor key. In a peculiar fashion, the disharmony of the first phrases echoing back joined the succeeding phrases and merged with them, moving inexorably toward a final harmonic resolution so profound that Garion felt his entire being moved by it. The echoes merged as the chorus ended its song, and the caves of Ulgo sang on alone, repeating that final chord over and over.
"I've never heard anything like that," Ce'Nedra whispered softly to Aunt Pol.
"Few people have," Polgara replied, "though the sound lingers in some of these galleries for days."
"What were they singing?"
"A hymn to UL. It's repeated every hour, and the echoes keep it alive. These caves have been singing that same hymn for five thousand years now."
There were other sounds as well, the scrape of metal against metal, snatches of conversation in the guttural language of the Ulgos, and an endless chipping sound, coming, it seemed, from a dozen places.
"There must be a lot of them down there," Barak observed, peering over the edge.
"Not necessarily," Belgarath told him. "Sound lingers in these caves, and the echoes keep coming back over and over again."
"Where does the light come from?" Durnik asked, looking puzzled. "I don't see any torches."
"The Ulgos grind two different kinds of rock to powder," Belgarath replied. "When you mix them, they give off a glow."
"It's pretty dim light," Durnik observed, looking down toward the floor of the cavern.
"Ulgos don't need all that much light."
It took them almost half an hour to reach the cavern floor. The walls around the bottom were pierced at regular intervals with the openings of corridors and

galleries radiating out into the solid rock of the mountain. As they passed, Garion glanced down one of the galleries. It was very long and dimly lighted with openings along its walls and a few Ulgos moving from place to place far down toward the other end.
In the center of the cavern lay a large, silent lake, and they skirted the edge of it as Belgarath moved confidently, seeming to know precisely where he was going. Somewhere from far out on the dim lake, Garion heard a faint splash, a fish perhaps or the sound of a dislodged pebble from far above falling into the water. The echo of the singing they had heard when they entered the cavern still lingered, curiously loud in some places and very faint in others.
Two Ulgos waited for them near the entrance to one of the galleries. They bowed and spoke briefly to Belgarath. Like the men who had met them in the portal chamber, both were short and heavy-shouldered. Their hair was very pale and their eyes large and almost black.
"We'll leave the horses here," Belgarath said. "We have to go down some stairs. These men will care for them."
The colt, still trembling, had to be told several times to stay with his mother, but he finally seemed to understand. Then Garion hurried to catch up to the others, who had already entered the mouth of one of the galleries.
There were doors in the walls of the gallery they followed, doors opening into small cubicles, some of them obviously workshops of one kind or another and others just as obviously arranged for domestic use. The Ulgos inside the cubicles continued at their tasks, paying no attention to the party passing in the gallery. Some of the pale-haired people were working with metal, some with stone, a few with wood or cloth. An Ulgo woman was nursing a small baby. Behind them in the cavern they had first entered, the sound of the chanting began again. They passed a cubicle where seven Ulgos, seated in a circle, were reciting something in unison.
"They spend a great deal of time in religious observances," Belgarath remarked as they passed the cubicle. "Religion's the central fact of Ulgo life."
"Sounds dull," Barak grunted.
At the end of the gallery a flight of steep, worn stairs descended sharply, and they went down, their hands on the wall to steady themselves.
"It would be easy to get turned around down here," Silk observed. "I've lost track of which direction we're going."
"Down," Hettar told him.
"Thanks," Silk replied dryly.
At the bottom of the stairs they entered another cavern, once again high up in the wall, but this time the cavern was spanned by a slender bridge, arching across to the other side. "We cross that," Belgarath told them and led them out onto the bridge that arched through the half light to the other side.
Garion glanced down once and saw a myriad of gleaming openings dotting the cavern walls far below. The openings did not appear to have any systematic arrangement, but rather seemed scattered randomly. "There must be a lot of people living here," he said to his grandfather.
The old man nodded. "It's the home cave of one of the major Ulgo tribes," he replied.
The first disharmonic phrases of the ancient hymn to UL drifted up to them as they neared the other end of the bridge. "I wish they'd find another tune," Barak muttered sourly. "That one's starting to get on my nerves."
"I'll mention that to the first Ulgo I meet," Silk told him lightly. "I'm sure they'll be only too glad to change songs for you."
"Very funny," Barak said.
"It probably hasn't occurred to them that their song isn't universally admired."
"Do you mind?" Barak asked acidly.
"They've only been singing it for five thousand years now."

"That'll do, Silk," Aunt Pol told the little man.
"Anything you say, great lady," Silk answered mockingly.
They entered another gallery on the far side of the cavern and followed it until it branched. Belgarath firmly led them to the left.
"Are you sure?" Silk asked. "I could be wrong, but it seems like we're going in a circle."
"We are."
"I don't suppose you'd care to explain that."
"There's a cavern we wanted to avoid, so we had to go around it."
"Why did we have to avoid it?"
"It's unstable. The slightest sound there might bring the roof down."
"Oh."
"That's one of the dangers down here."
"You don't really need to go into detail, old friend," Silk said, looking nervously at the roof above. The little man seemed to be talking more than usual, and Garion's own sense of oppression at the thought of all the rock surrounding him gave him a quick insight into Silk's mind. The sense of being closed in was unbearable to some men, and Silk, it appeared, was one of them. Garion glanced up also, and seemed to feel the weight of the mountain above pressing down firmly on him. Silk, he decided, might not be the only one disturbed by the thought of all that dreadful mass above them.
The gallery they followed opened out into a small cavern with a glassclear lake in its center. The lake was very shallow and it had a white gravel bottom. An island rose from the center of the lake, and on the island stood a building constructed in the same curiously pyramidal shape as the buildings in the ruined city of Prolgu far above. The building was surrounded by a ring of columns, and here and there benches were carved from white stone. Glowing crystal globes were suspended on long chains from the ceiling of the cavern about thirty feet overhead, and their light, while still faint, was noticeably brighter than that in the galleries through which they had passed. A white marble causeway crossed to the island, and a very old man stood at its end, peering across the still water toward them as they entered the cavern.
"Yad ho, Belgarath," the old man called. "Groja UL. "
"Gorim," Belgarath replied with a formal bow. "Yad ho, groja UL. " He led them across the marble causeway to the island in the center of the lake and warmly clasped the old man's hand, speaking to him in the guttural Ulgo language.
The Gorim of Ulgo appeared to be very old. He had long, silvery hair and beard, and his robe was snowy white. There was a kind of saintly serenity about him that Garion felt immediately, and the boy knew, without knowing how he knew, that he was approaching a holy man - perhaps the holiest on earth.
The Gorim extended his arms fondly to Aunt Pol, and she embraced him affectionately as they exchanged the ritual greeting, "Yad ho, groja UL."
"Our companions don't speak your language, old friend," Belgarath said to the Gorim. "Would it offend you if we conversed in the language of the outside?"
"Not at all, Belgarath," the Gorim replied. "UL tells us that it's important for men to understand one another. Come inside, all of you. I've had food and drink prepared for you." As the old man looked at each of them, Garion noticed that his eyes, unlike those of the other Ulgos he had seen, were a deep, almost violet blue. Then the Gorim turned and led them along a path to the doorway of the pyramid-shaped building.
"Has the child come yet?" Belgarath asked the Gorim as they passed through the massive stone doorway.
The Gorim sighed. "No, Belgarath, not yet, and I am very weary. There's hope at each birth. But after a few days, the eyes of the child darken. It appears that UL is not finished with me yet."
"Don't give up hope, Gorim," Belgarath told his friend. "The child will come-in

UL's own time."
"So we are told." The Gorim sighed again. "The tribes are growing restless, though, and there's bickering-and worse - in some of the farther galleries. The zealots grow bolder in their denunciations, and strange aberrations and cults have begun to appear. Ulgo needs a new Gorim. I've outlived my time by three hundred years."
"UL still has work for you," Belgarath replied. "His ways are not ours, Gorim, and he sees time in a different way."
The room they entered was square but had, nonetheless, the slightly sloping walls characteristic of Ulgo architecture. A stone table with low benches on either side sat in the center of the room, and there were a number of bowls containing fruit sitting upon it. Among the bowls sat several tall flasks and round crystal cups. "I'm told that winter has come early to our mountains," the Gorim said to them. "The drink should help to warm you."
"It's chilly outside," Belgarath admitted.
They sat down on the benches and began to eat. The fruit was tangy and wild-tasting, and the clear liquid in the flasks was fiery and brought an immediate warm glow that radiated out from the stomach.
"Forgive us our customs, which may seem strange to you," the Gorim said, noting that Barak and Hettar in particular approached the meal of fruit with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "We are a people much tied to ceremony. We begin our meals with fruit in remembrance of the years we spent wandering in search of UL. The meat will come in due time."
"Where do you obtain such food in these caves, Holy One?" Silk asked politely.
"Our gatherers go out of the caves at night," the Gorim replied. "They tell us that the fruits and grains they bring back with them grow wild in the mountains, but I suspect that they have long since taken up the cultivation of certain fertile valleys. They also maintain that the meat they carry down to us is the flesh of wild cattle, taken in the hunt, but I have my doubts about that as well." He smiled gently. "I permit them their little deceptions."
Perhaps emboldened by the Gorim's geniality, Durnik raised a question that had obviously been bothering him since he had entered the city on the mountaintop above. "Forgive me, your Honor," he began, "but why do your builders make everything crooked? What I mean is, nothing seems to be square. It all leans over."
"It has to do with weight and support; I understand," the Gorim replied. "Each wall is actually falling down; but since they're all falling against each other, none of them can move so much as a finger's width - and, of course, their shape reminds us of the tents we lived in during our wanderings."
Durnik frowned thoughtfully, struggling with the alien idea.
"And have you as yet recovered Aldur's Orb, Belgarath?" the Gorim inquired then, his face growing serious.
"Not yet," Belgarath replied. "We chased Zedar as far as Nyissa, but when he crossed over into Cthol Murgos, Ctuchik was waiting and took the Orb away from him. Ctuchik has it now - at Rak Cthol."
"And Zedar?"
"He escaped Ctuchik's ambush and carried Torak off to Cthol Mishrak in Mallorea to keep Ctuchik from raising him with the Orb."
"Then you'll have to go to Rak Cthol."
Belgarath nodded as an Ulgo servingman brought in a huge, steaming roast, set it on the table, and left with a respectful bow.
"Has anyone found out how Zedar was able to take the Orb without being struck down?" the Gorim asked.
"He used a child," Aunt Pol told him. "An innocent."
"Ah." The Gorim stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Doesn't the prophecy say, 'And the child shall deliver up the birthright unto the Chosen One'?"

"Yes," Belgarath replied.
"Where's the child now?"
"So far as we know, Ctuchik has him at Rak Cthol."
"Will you assault Rak Cthol, then?"
"I'd need an army, and it could take years to reduce that fortress. There's another way, I think. A certain passage in the Darine Codex speaks of caves under Rak Cthol."
"I know that passage, Belgarath. It's very obscure. It could mean that, I suppose, but what if it doesn't?"
"It's confirmed by the Mrin Codex," Belgarath said a little defensively.
"The Mrin Codex is even worse, old friend. It's obscure to the point of being gibberish."
"I somehow have the feeling that when we look back at it - after all this is over - we're going to find that the Mrin Codex is the most accurate version of all. I do have certain other verification, however. Back during the time when the Murgos were constructing Rak Cthol, a Sendarian slave escaped and made his way back to the West. He was delirious when he was found, but he kept talking of caves under the mountain before he died. Not only that, Anheg of Cherek found a copy of The Book of Torak that contains a fragment of a very old Grolim prophecy - 'Guard well the temple, above and beneath, for Cthrag Yaska will summon foes down from the air or up from the earth to bear it away again.' "
"That's even more obscure," the Gorim objected.
"Grolim prophecies usually are, but it's all I've got to work with. If I reject the notion of caves under Rak Cthol, I'll have to lay siege to the place. It would take all the armies of the West to do that, and then Ctuchik would summon the Angarak armies to defend the city. Everything points to some final battle, but I'd prefer to pick the time and place - and the Wasteland of Murgos is definitely not one of the places I'd choose."
"You're leading someplace with this, aren't you?"
Belgarath nodded. "I need a diviner to help me find the caves beneath Rak Cthol and to lead me up through them to the city."
The Gorim shook his head. "You're asking the impossible, Belgarath. The diviners are all zealots-mystics. You'll never persuade one of them to leave the holy caverns here beneath Prolgu - particularly not now. All of Ulgo is waiting for the coming of the child, and every zealot is firmly convinced that he will be the one to discover the child and reveal him to the tribes. I couldn't even order one of them to accompany you. T'he diviners are regarded as holy men, and I have no authority over them."
"It may not be as hard as you think, Gorim." Belgarath pushed back his plate and reached for his cup. "The diviner I need is one named Relg."
"Relg? He's the worst of the lot. He's gathered a following and he preaches to them by the hour in some of the far galleries. He believes that he's the most important man in Ulgo just now. You'll never persuade him to leave these caves."
"I don't think I'll have to, Gorim. I'm not the one who selected Relg. That decision was made for me long before I was born. Just send for him."
"I'll send for him if you want," the Gorim said doubtfully. "I don't think he'll come, though."
"He'll come," Aunt Pol told him confidently. "He won't know why, but he'll come. And he will go with us, Gorim. The same power that brought us all together will bring him as well. He doesn't have any more choice in the matter than we do."

Chapter Seventeen

IT ALL SEEMED so tedious. The snow and cold they had endured on the journey to Prolgu had numbed Ce'Nedra, and the warmth here in the caverns made her drowsy. The endless, obscure talk of Belgarath and the strange, frail old Gorim seemed

to pull her toward sleep. The peculiar singing began again somewhere, echoing endlessly through the caves, and that too lulled her. Only a lifetime of training in the involved etiquette of court behavior kept her awake.
The journey had been ghastly for Ce'Nedra. Tol Honeth was a warm city, and she was not accustomed to cold weather. It seemed that her feet would never be warm again. She had also discovered a world filled with shocks, terrors, and unpleasant surprises. At the Imperial Palace in Tol Honeth, the enormous power of her father, the Emperor, had shielded her from danger of any kind, but now she felt vulnerable. In a rare moment of absolute truth with herself, she admitted that much of her spiteful behavior toward Garion had grown out of her dreadful new sense of insecurity. Her safe, pampered little world had been snatched away from her, and she felt exposed, unprotected, and afraid.
Poor Garion, she thought. He was such a nice boy. She felt a little ashamed that he had been the one who'd had to suffer from her bad temper. She promised herself that soon - very soon - she would sit down with him and explain it all. He was a sensible boy, and he'd be sure to understand. That, of course, would immediately patch up the rift which had grown between them.
Feeling her eyes on him, he glanced once at her and then looked away with apparent indifference. Ce'Nedra's eyes hardened like agates. How dared he? She made a mental note of it and added it to her list of his many imperfections.
The frail-looking old Gorim had sent one of the strange, silent Ulgos to fetch the man he and Belgarath and Lady Polgara had been discussing, and then they turned to more general topics. "Were you able to pass through the mountains unmolested?" the Gorim asked.
"We had a few encounters," Barak, the big, red-bearded Earl of Trellheim, replied with what seemed to Ce'Nedra gross understatement.
"But thanks to UL you're all safe," the Gorim declared piously.
"Which of the monsters are still abroad at this season? I haven't been out of the caves in years, but as I recall most of them seek their lairs when the snow begins."
"We encountered Hrulgin, Holy One," Baron Mandorallen informed him, "and some Algroths. And there was an Eldrak."
"The Eldrak was troublesome," Silk said dryly.
"Understandably. Fortunately there aren't very many Eldrakyn. They're fearsome monsters."
"We noticed that," Silk said.
"Which one was it?"
"Grul," Belgarath replied. "He and I had met before, and he seemed to hold a grudge. I'm sorry, Gorim, but we had to kill him. There wasn't any other way."
"Ah," the Gorim said with a slight note of pain in his voice. "Poor Grul."
"I personally don't miss him very much," Barak said. "I'm not trying to be forward, Holy One, but don't you think it might be a good idea to exterminate some of the more troublesome beasts in these mountains?"
"They're the children of UL, even as we," the Gorim explained.
"But if they weren't out there, you could return to the world above," Barak pointed out.
The Gorim smiled at that. "No," he said gently. "Ulgo will never leave the caves now. We've dwelt here for five millennia and, over the years, we've changed. Our eyes could not bear the sunlight now. The monsters above cannot reach us here, and their presence in the mountains keeps strangers out of Ulgo. We're not at ease with strangers, really, so it's probably for the best."
The Gorim was sitting directly across the narrow stone table from Ce'Nedra. The subject of the monsters obviously pained him, and he looked at her for a moment, then gently reached out his frail old hand and cupped her little chin in it, lifting her face to the dim light of the hanging globe suspended above the table. "All of the alien creatures are not monsters," he said, his large, violet

eyes calm and very wise. "Consider the beauty of this Dryad."
Ce'Nedra was a little startled - not by his touch, certainly, for older people had responded to her flowerlike face with that same gesture for as long as she could remember - but rather by the ancient man's immediate recognition of the fact that she was not entirely human.
"Tell me, child," the Gorim asked, "do the Dryads still honor UL?"
She was completely unprepared for the question. "I - I'm sorry, Holy One," she floundered. "Until quite recently, I'd not even heard of the God UL. For some reason, my tutors have very little information about your people or your God."
"The princess was raised as a Tolnedran," Lady Polgara explained. "She's a Borune - I'm sure you've heard of the link between that house and the Dryads. As a Tolnedran, her religious affiliation is to Nedra."
"A serviceable God," the Gorim said. "Perhaps a bit stuffy for my taste, but certainly adequate. The Dryads themselves, though - do they still know their God?"
Belgarath coughed a bit apologetically. "I'm afraid not, Gorim. They've drifted away, and the eons have erased what they knew of UL. They're flighty creatures anyway, not much given to religious observances."
The Gorim's face was sad. "What God do they honor now?"
"None, actually," Belgarath admitted. "They have a few sacred groves - a rough idol or two fashioned from the root of a particularly venerated tree. That's about it. They don't really have any clearly formulated theology."
Ce'Nedra found the whole discussion a trifle offensive. Rising to the occasion, she drew herself up slightly and smiled winsomely at the old Gorim. She knew exactly how.to charm an elderly man. She'd practiced for years on her father. "I feel the shortcomings of my education most keenly, Holy One," she lied. "Since mysterious UL is the hereditary God of the Dryads, I should know him. I hope that someday soon I may receive instruction concerning him. It may be that I - unworthy though I am - can be the instrument of renewing the allegiance of my sisters to their rightful God."
It was an artful little speech, and on the whole Ce'Nedra was rather proud of it. To her surprise, however, the Gorim was not satisfied to accept a vague expression of interest and let it go at that. "Tell your sisters that the core of our faith is to be found in The Book of Ulgo, " he told her seriously.
"The Book of Ulgo, " she repeated. "I must remember that. As soon as I return to Tol Honeth, I'll obtain a copy and deliver it to the Wood of the Dryads personally." That, she thought, should satisfy him.
"I'm afraid that such copies as you'd find in Tol Honeth would be much corrupted," the Gorim told her. "The tongue of my people is not easily understood by strangers, and translations are difficult."
Ce'Nedra definitely felt that the dear old man was becoming just a bit tiresome about the whole thing.
"As is so often the case with scriptures," he was saying, "our Holy Book is bound up in our history. The wisdom of the Gods is such that their instruction is concealed within stories. Our minds delight in the stories, and the messages of the Gods are implanted thus. All unaware, we are instructed even as we are entertained."
Ce'Nedra was familiar with the theory. Master Jeebers, her tutor, had lectured her tediously concerning it. She cast about rather desperately, trying to find some graceful way to change the subject.
"Our story is very old," the Gorim continued inexorably. "Would you like to hear it?"
Caught by her own cleverness, Ce'Nedra could only nod helplessly. And so the Gorim began: "At the Beginning of Days when the World was spun out of darkness by the wayward Gods, there dwelt in the silences of the heavens a spirit known only as UL."

In utter dismay, Ce'Nedra realized that he fully intended to recite the entire book to her. After a few moments of chagrin, however, she began to feel the strangely compelling quality of his story. More than she would have cared to admit, she was moved by the first Gorim's appeal to the indifferent spirit that appeared to him at Prolgu. What manner of man would thus dare to accuse a God?
As she listened, a faint flicker seemed to tug at the corner of her eye. She glanced toward it and saw a soft glow somewhere deep within the massive rocks that formed one of the walls of the chamber. The glow was peculiarly different from the dim light of the hanging crystal globes.
"Then the heart of Gorim was made glad," the old man continued his recitation, "and he called the name of the high place where all this had come to pass Prolgu, which is Holy Place. And he departed from Prolgu and returned unto-"
"Ya! Garach tek, Gorim!" The words were spat out in the snarling Ulgo language, and the harsh voice that spoke them was filled with outrage.
Ce'Nedra jerked her head around to look at the intruder. Like all Ulgos, he was short, but his arms and shoulders were so massively developed that he seemed almost deformed. His colorless hair was tangled and unkempt. He wore a hooded leather smock, stained and smeared with some kind of mud, and his large black eyes burned with fanaticism. Crowded behind him were a dozen or more other Ulgos, their faces set in expressions of shock and righteous indignation. The fanatic in the leather smock continued his stream of crackling vituperation.
The Gorim's face set, but he endured the abuse from the wild-eyed man at the door patiently. Finally, when the fanatic paused for breath, the frail old man turned to Belgarath. "This is Relg," he said a bit apologetically. "You see what I mean about him? Trying to convince him of anything is impossible."
"What use would he be to us?" Barak demanded, obviously irritated by the newcomer's attitude. "He can't even speak a civilized tongue."
Relg glared at him. "I speak your language, foreigner," he said with towering contempt, "but I choose not to defile the holy caverns with its unsanctified mouthings." He turned back to Gorim. "Who gave you the right to speak the words of the Holy Book to unbelieving foreigners?" he demanded.
The gentle old Gorim's eyes hardened slightly. "I think that's about enough, Relg," he said firmly. "Whatever idiocies you babble in out-of the-way galleries to those gullible enough to listen is your concern, but what you say to me in my house is mine. I am still Gorim in Ulgo, whatever you may think, and I am not required to answer to you." He looked past Relg at the shocked faces of the zealot's followers. "This is not a general audience," he informed Relg. "You were summoned here; they were not. Send them away."
"They came to be sure you intended me no harm," Relg replied stiffly. "I have spoken the truth about you, and powerful men fear the truth."
"Relg," the Gorim said in an icy voice, "I don't think you could even begin to realize how indifferent I am to anything you might have said about me. Now send them away - or would you rather have me do it?"
"They won't obey you," Relg sneered. "I am their leader."
The Gorim's eyes narrowed, and he rose to his feet. Then he spoke in the Ulgo tongue directly to Relg's adherents. Ce'Nedra could not understand his words, but she did not really need to. She recognized the tone of authority instantly, and she was a bit startled at how absolutely the saintly old Gorim used it. Not even her father would have dared speak in that tone.
The men crowded behind Relg looked nervously at each other and began to back away, their faces frightened. The Gorim barked one final command, and Relg's followers turned and fled.
Relg scowled after them and seemed for a moment on the verge of raising his voice to call them back, but apparently thought better of it. "You go too far, Gorim," he accused. "That authority is not meant to be used in worldly matters."
"That authority is mine, Relg," the Gorim replied, "and it's up to me to decide

when it's required. You've chosen to confront me on theological ground, therefore I needed to remind your followers - and you just who I am."
"Why have you summoned me here?" Relg demanded. "The presence of these unsanctified ones is an affront to my purity."
"I require your service, Relg," the Gorim told him. "These strangers go to battle against our Ancient Foe, the one accursed above all others. The fate of the world hangs upon their quest, and your aid is needed."
"What do I care about the world?" Relg's voice was filled with contempt. "And what do I care about maimed Torak? I am safe within the hand of UL. He has need of me here, and I will not go from the holy caverns to risk defilement in the lewd company of unbelievers and monsters."
"The entire world will be defiled if Torak gains dominion over it," Belgarath pointed out, "and if we fail, Torak will become king of the world."
"He will not reign in Ulgo," Relg retorted.
"How little you know him," Polgara murmured.
"I will not leave the caves," Relg insisted. "The coming of the child is at hand, and I have been chosen to reveal him to Ulgo and to guide and instruct him until he is ready to become Gorim."
"How interesting," the Gorim observed dryly. "Just who was it who advised you of your election?"
"UL spoke to me," Relg declared.
"Odd. The caverns respond universally to the voice of UL. All Ulgo would have heard his voice."
"He spoke to me in my heart," Relg replied quickly.
"What a curious thing for him to do," the Gorim answered mildly.
"All of this is beside the point," Belgarath said brusquely. "I'd prefer to have you join us willingly, Relg; but willing or not, you will join us. A power greater than any of us commands it. You can argue and resist as much as you like, but when we leave here, you'll be going with us."
Relg spat. "Never! I will remain here in the service of UL and of the child who will become Gorim of Ulgo. And if you try to compel me, my followers will not permit it."
"Why do we need this blind mole, Beigarath?" Barak asked. "He's just going to be an aggravation to us. I've noticed that men who spend all their time congratulating themselves on their sanctity tend to be very poor companions, and what can this one do that I can't?"
Relg looked at the red-bearded giant with disdain. "Big men with big mouths seldom have big brains," he said. "Watch closely, hairy one." He walked over to the sloping wall of the chamber. "Can you do this?" he asked and slowly pushed his hand directly into the rock as if he were sinking it into water.
Silk whistled with amazement and moved quickly over to the wall beside the fanatic. As Relg pulled his hand out of the rock, Silk reached out to put his own hand on the precise spot. "How did you do that?" he demanded, shoving at the stones.
Relg laughed harshly and turned his back.
"That's the ability that makes him useful to us, Silk," Belgarath explained. "Relg's a diviner. He finds caves, and we need to locate the caves under Rak Cthol. If necessary, Relg can walk through solid rock to find them for us."
"How could anyone do that?" Silk asked, still staring at the spot where Relg had sunk his hand into the wall.
"It has to do with the nature of matter," the sorcerer replied. "What we see as solid isn't really all that impenetrable."
"Either something's solid or it's not," Silk insisted, his face baffled.
"Solidity's an illusion," Belgarath told him. "Relg can slip the bits and pieces that make up his substance through the spaces that exist between the bits and pieces that make up the substance of the rock."

"Can you do it?" Silk demanded skeptically.
Belgarath shrugged. "I don't know. I've never had occasion to try. Anyway, Relg can smell caves, and he goes straight to them. He probably doesn't know himself how he does it."
"I am led by my sanctity," Relg declared arrogantly.
"Perhaps that's it," the sorcerer agreed with a tolerant smile.
"The holiness of the caves draws me, since I am drawn to all holy things," Relg rasped on, "and for me to leave the caverns of Ulgo would be to turn my back on holiness and move toward defilement."
"We'll see," Belgarath told him.
The glow in the rock wall which Ce'Nedra had noticed before began to shimmer and pulsate, and the princess seemed to see a dim shape within the rocks. Then, as if the stones were only air, the shape became distinct and stepped out into the chamber. For just a moment, it seemed that the figure was an old man, bearded and robed like the Gorim, although much more robust. Then Ce'Nedra was struck by an overpowering sense of something more than human. With an awed shudder, she realized that she was in the presence of divinity.
Relg gaped at the bearded figure, and he began to tremble violently. With a strangled cry he prostrated himself.
The figure looked calmly at the groveling zealot. "Rise, Relg," it said in a soft voice that seemed to carry all the echoes of eternity in it, and the caverns outside rang with the sound of that voice. "Rise, Relg, and serve thy God."

Chapter Eighteen

CE'NEDRA HAD RECEIVED an exquisite education. She had been so thoroughly trained that she knew instinctively all the niceties of etiquette and all the proper forms to be observed upon coming into the presence of an emperor or a king, but the physical presence of a God still baffled and even frightened her. She felt awkward, even gauche, like some ignorant farm girl. She found herself trembling and, for one of the few times in her life, she hadn't the faintest idea what to do.
UL was still looking directly into Relg's awe-struck face. "Thy mind hath twisted what I told thee, my son," the God said gravely. "Thou hast turned my words to make them conform to thy desire, rather than to my will."
Relg flinched, and his eyes were stricken.
"I told thee that the child who will be Gorim will come to Ulgo through thee," UL continued, "and that thou must prepare thyself to nurture him and see to his rearing. Did I tell thee to exalt thyself by reason of this?"
Relg began to shake violently.
"Did I tell thee to preach sedition? Or to stir Ulgo against the Gorim whom I have chosen to guide them?"
Relg collapsed. "Forgive me, O my God," he begged, groveling again on the floor.
"Rise, Relg," UL told him sternly. "I am not pleased with thee, and throe obeisance offends me, for thy heart is filled with pride. I will bend thee to my will, Relg, or I will break thee. I will purge thee of this overweening esteem thou hast for thyself. Only then wilt thou be worthy of the task to which I have set thee."
Relg stumbled to his feet, his face filled with remorse. "O my God-" He choked.
"Hearken unto my words, Relg, and obey me utterly. It is my command that thou accompany Belgarath, Disciple of Aldur, and render unto him all aid within thy power. Thou wilt obey him even as if he were speaking in my voice. Dost thou understand this?"
"Yes, O my God," Relg replied humbly.
"And wilt thou obey?"

"I will do as thou hast commanded me. O my God - though it cost me my life."
"It shall not cost thee thy life, Relg, for I have need of thee. Thy reward for this shall be beyond thy imagining."
Relg bowed in mute acceptance.
The God then turned to the Gorim. "Abide yet a while, my son," he said, "though the years press heavily upon thee. It shall not be long until thy burden shall be lifted. Know that I am pleased with thee."
The Gorim bowed in acceptance.
"Belgarath," UL greeted the sorcerer. "I have watched thee at thy task, and I share thy Master's pride in thee. The prophecy moves through thee and Polgara thy daughter toward that moment we have all awaited."
Belgarath also bowed. "It's been a long time, Most Holy," he replied, "and there were twists and turns to it that none of us could see at the beginning."
"Truly," UL agreed. "It hath surprised us all upon occasion. Hath Aldur's gift to the world come into his birthright as yet?"
"Not entirely, Most Holy," Polgara answered gravely. "He's touched the edges of it, however, and what he's shown us so far gives us hope for his success."
"Hail then, Belgarion," UL said to the startled young man. "Take my blessing with thee and know that I will join with Aldur to be with thee when thy great task begins."
Garion bowed - rather awkwardly, Ce'Nedra noticed. She decided that soon - very soon-she'd have to give him some schooling in such matters. He'd resist, naturally - he was impossibly stubborn - but she knew that if she nagged and badgered him enough, he'd eventually come around. And it was for his own good, after all.
UL seemed to be still looking at Garion, but there was a subtle difference in his expression. It seemed to Ce'Nedra that he was communicating wordlessly to some other presence - something that was a part of Garion and yet not a part of him. He nodded gravely then, and turned his gaze directly upon the princess herself.
"She seems but a child," he observed to Polgara.
"She's of a suitable age, Most Holy," Polgara replied. "She's a Dryad, and they're all quite small."
UL smiled gently at the princess, and she felt herself suddenly glowing in the warmth of that smile. "She is like a flower, is she not?" he said.
"She still has a few thorns, Most Holy," Belgarath replied wryly, "and a bit of bramble in her nature."
"We will value her all the more for that, Belgarath. The time wilt come when her fire and her brambles will serve our cause far more than her beauty." UL glanced once at Garion, and a strange, knowing smile crossed his face. For some reason, Ce'Nedra felt herself beginning to blush, then lifted her chin as if daring the blush to go any further.
"It is to speak with thee that I have come, my daughter," UL said directly to her then, and his tone and face grew serious. "Thou must abide here when thy companions depart. Do not venture into the kingdom of the Murgos, for if it should come to pass that thou makest this journey unto Rak Cthol, thou shalt surely die, and without thee the struggle against the darkness must fail. Abide here in the safety of Ulgo until thy companions return."
This was the kind of thing Ce'Nedra completely understood. As a princess, she knew the need for instant submission to authority. Though she had wheedled, coaxed, and teased her father all her life to get her own way, she had seldom directly rebelled. She bowed her head. "I will do as thou hast commanded, Most Holy," she replied without even thinking of the implications of the God's words.
UL nodded with satisfaction. "Thus is the prophecy protected," he declared. "Each of you hath his appointed tasks in this work of ours - and I have mine as well. I will delay you no longer, my children. Fare you all well in this. We

will meet again." Then he vanished.
The sounds of his last words echoed in the caverns of Ulgo. After a moment of stunned silence, the hymn of adoration burst forth again in a mighty chorus, as every Ulgo raised his voice in ecstasy at this divine visitation.
"Belar!" Barak breathed explosively. "Did you feel it?"
"UL has a commanding presence," Belgarath agreed. He turned to look at Relg, one eyebrow cocked rather whimsically. "I take it you've had a change of heart," he observed.
Relg's face had gone ashen, and he was still trembling violently. "I will obey my God," he vowed. "Where he has commanded me, I will go.
"I'm glad that's been settled," Belgarath told him. "At the moment he wants you to go to Rak Cthol. He may have other plans for you later, but right now Rak Cthol's enough to worry about."
"I will obey you without question," the fanatic declared, "even as my God has commanded me."
"Good," Belgarath replied, and then he went directly to the point. "Is there a way to avoid the weather and the difficulties above?"
"I know a way," Relg answered. "It's difficult and long, but it will lead us to the foothills above the land of the horse people."
"You see," Silk observed to Barak, "he's proving useful already." Barak grunted, still not looking entirely convinced.
"May I know why we must go to Rak Cthol?" Relg asked, his entire manner changed by his meeting with his God.
"We have to reclaim the Orb of Aldur," Belgarath told him.
"I've heard of it," Relg admitted.
Silk was frowning. "Are you sure you'll be able to find the caves under Rak Cthol?" he asked Relg. "Those caves won't be the caverns of UL, you know, and in Cthol Murgos they're not likely to be holy - quite the opposite, most probably."
"I can find any cave - anywhere," Relg stated confidently.
"All right then," Belgarath continued. "Assuming that all goes well, we'll go up through the caves and enter the city unobserved. We'll find Ctuchik and take the Orb away from him."
"Won't he try to fight?" Durnik asked.
"I certainly hope so," Belgarath replied fervently.
Barak laughed shortly. "You're starting to sound like an Alorn, Belgarath."
"That's not necessarily a virtue," Polgara pointed out.
"I'll deal with the magician of Rak Cthol when the time comes," the sorcerer said grimly. "At any rate, once we've recovered the Orb, we'll go back down through the caves and make a run for it."
"With all of Cthol Murgos hot on our heels," Silk added. "I've had dealings occasionally with Murgos. They're a persistent sort of people."
"That could be a problem," Belgarath admitted. "We don't want their pursuit gaining too much momentum. If any army of Murgos inadvertently follows us into the West, it will be viewed as an invasion, and that will start a war we aren't ready for yet. Any ideas?" He looked around.
"Turn them all into frogs," Barak suggested with a shrug. Belgarath gave him a withering look.
"It was just a thought," Barak said defensively.
"Why not just stay in the caves under the city until they give up the search?" Durnik offered.
Polgara shook her head firmly. "No," she said. "There's a place we have to be at a certain time. We'll barely make it there as it is. We can't afford to lose a month or more hiding in some cave in Cthol Murgos."
"Where do we have to be, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked her.
"I'll explain later," she evaded, throwing a quick glance at Ce'Nedra. The princess perceived immediately that the appointment the Lady spoke of concerned

her, and curiosity began to gnaw at her. .
Mandorallen, his face thoughtful and his fingers lightly touching the ribs that had been cracked in his encounter with Grul, cleared his throat. "Does there perchance happen to be a map of the region we must enter somewhere nearby, Holy Gorim?" he asked politely.
The Gorim thought for a moment. "I believe I have one somewhere," he replied. He tapped his cup lightly on the table and an Ulgo servingman immediately entered the chamber. The Gorim spoke briefly to him, and the servingman went out. "The map I recall is very old," the Gorim told Mandorallen, "and I'm afraid it won't be very accurate. Our cartographers have difficulty comprehending the distances involved in the world above."
"The distances do not matter so much," Mandorallen assured him. "I wish but to refresh my memory concerning the contiguity of certain other realms upon the borders of Cthol Murgos. I was at best an indifferent student of geography as a schoolboy."
The servingman returned and handed a large roll of parchment to the Gorim. The Gorim in turn passed the roll to Mandorallen.
The knight carefully unrolled the chart and studied it for a moment. "It is as I recalled," he said. He turned to Belgarath. "Thou hast said, ancient friend, that no Murgo will enter the Vale of Aldur?"
"That's right," Belgarath replied.
Mandorallen pointed at the map. "The closest border from Rak Cthol is that which abuts Tolnedra," he showed them. "Logic would seem to dictate that our route of escape should lie in that direction - toward the nearest frontier."
"All right," Belgarath conceded.
"Let us then seem to make all haste toward Tolnedra, leaving behind us abundant evidence of our passage. Then, at some point where rocky ground would conceal signs of our change of direction, let us turn and strike out to the northwest toward the Vale. Might this not confound them? May we not confidently anticipate that they will continue to pursue our imagined course? In time, certainly, they will realize their error, but by then we will be many leagues ahead of them. Pursuing far to our rear, might not the further discouragement of the prohibited Vale cause them to abandon the chase entirely?"
They all looked at the map.
"I like it," Barak said, effusively slapping one huge hand on the knight's shoulder.
Mandorallen winced and put his hand to his injured ribs.
"Sorry, Mandorallen," Barak apologized quickly. "I forgot."
Silk was studying the map intently. "It's got a lot to recommend it, Belgarath," he urged, "and if we angle up to hers" He pointed. "-we'll come out on top of the eastern escarpment. We should have plenty of time to make the descent, but they'll definitely want to think twice before trying it. It's a good mile straight down at that point."
"We could send word to Cho-Hag," Hettar suggested. "If a few clans just happened to be gathered at the foot of the escarpment there, the Murgos would think more than twice before starting down."
Belgarath scratched at his beard. "All right," he decided after a moment, "we'll try it that way. As soon as Relg leads us out of Ulgo, you go pay your father a visit, Hettar. Tell him what we're going to do and invite him to bring a few thousand warriors down to the Vale to meet us."
The lean Algar nodded, his black scalp lock bobbing. His face, however, showed a certain disappointment.
"Forget it, Hettar," the old man told him bluntly. "I never had any intention of taking you into Cthol Murgos. There'd be too many opportunities there for you to get yourself in trouble."
Hettar sighed somewhat mournfully.

"Don't take it so hard, Hettar," Silk bantered. "Murgos are a fanatic race. You can be practically certain that a few of them at least will try the descent - no matter what's waiting for them at the bottom. You'd almost have to make an example of them, wouldn't you?"
Hettar's face brightened at that thought.
"Silk," Lady Polgara said reprovingly.
The little man turned an innocent face to her. "We have to discourage pursuit, Polgara," he protested.
"Of course," she replied sarcastically.
"It wouldn't do to have Murgos infesting the Vale, would it?"
"Do you mind?"
"I'm not really all that bloodthirsty, you know."
She turned her back on him.
Silk sighed piously. "She always thinks the worst of me."
By now Ce'Nedra had had sufficient time to consider the implications of the promise she had so unhesitatingly given to UL. The others would soon leave, and she must remain behind. Already she was beginning to feel isolated, cut off from them, as they made plans which did not include her. The more she thought about it, the worse it became. She felt her lower lip beginning to quiver.
The Gorim of the Ulgos had been watching her, his wise old face sympathetic.
"It's difficult to be left behind," he said gently, almost as if his large eyes had seen directly into her thoughts, "and our caves are strange to you-dark and seemingly filled with gloom."
Wordlessly she nodded her agreement.
"In a day or so, however," he continued, "your eyes will become accustomed to the subdued light. There are beauties here which no one from the outside has ever seen. While it's true that we have no flowers, there are hidden caverns where gems bloom on the floors and walls like wild blossoms. No trees or foliage grow in our sunless world, but I know a cave wall where vines of pure gold twist in ropey coils down from the ceiling and spill out across the floor."
"Careful, Holy Gorim," Silk warned. "The Princess is Tolnedran. If you show her that kind of wealth, she may go into hysterics right before your eyes."
"I don't find that particularly amusing, Prince Kheldar," Ce'Nedra told him in a frosty tone.
"I'm overcome with remorse, your Imperial Highness," he apologized with towering hypocrisy and a florid bow.
In spite of herself, the princess laughed. The rat-faced little Drasnian was so absolutely outrageous that she found it impossible to remain angry with him.
"You'll be as my beloved granddaughter while you stay in Ulgo, Princess," the Gorim told her. "We can walk together beside our silent lakes and explore long forgotten caves. And we can talk. The world outside knows little of Ulgo. It may well be that you will become the very first stranger to understand us."
Ce'Nedra impulsively reached out to take his frail old hand in hers. He was a dear old man. "I'll be honored, Holy Gorim," she told him with complete sincerity.
They stayed that night in comfortable quarters in the Gorim's pyramid-shaped house -though the terms night and day had no meaning in this strange land beneath the earth. The following morning several Ulgos led the horses into the Gorim's cavern, traveling, the princess assumed, by some longer route than the one the party had followed, and her friends made their preparations to leave.
Ce'Nedra sat to one side, feeling terribly alone already. Her eyes moved from face to face as she tried to fix each of them in her memory. When she came at last to Garion, her eyes brimmed.
Irrationally, she had already begun to worry about him. He was so impulsive. She knew that he'd do things that would put him in danger once he was out of her sight. To be sure, Polgara would be there to watch aver him, but it wasn't the

same. She felt quite suddenly angry with him for all the foolish things he was going to do and for the worry his careless behavior was going to cause her. She glared at him, wishing that he would do something for which she could scold him. She had determined that she would not follow them out of the Gorim's house - that she would not stand forlornly at the edge of the water staring after them as they departed - but as they all filed out through the heavy-arched doorway, her resolution crumbled. Without thinking she ran after Garion and caught his arm.

He turned with surprise, and she stretched up on her tiptoes, took his face between her tiny hands and kissed him. "You must be careful," she commanded. Then she kissed him again, spun and ran sobbing back into the house, leaving him staring after her in bafiied astonishment.

Part Four
CTHOL MURGOS

Chapter Nineteen

THEY HAD BEEN In the darkness for days. The single dim light Relg carried could only provide a point of reference, something to follow. The darkness pressed against Garion's face, and he stumbled along the uneven floor with one hand thrust out in front of him to keep himself from banging his head into unseen rocks. It was not only the musty smelling darkness, however. He could sense the oppressive weight of the mountains above him and on all sides. The stone seemed to push in on him; he was closed in, sealed up in miles of solid rock. He fought continually with the faint, fluttering edges of panic and he often clenched his teeth to keep from screaming.

There seemed to be no purpose to the twisting, turning route Relg followed. At the branching of passageways, his choices seemed random, but always he moved with steady confidence through the dark, murmuring caves where the memory of sounds whispered in the dank air, voices out of the past echoing endlessly, whispering, whispering. Relg's air of confidence as he led them was the only thing that kept Garion from giving in to unreasoning panic.

At one point the zealot stopped.

"What's wrong?" Silk asked sharply, his voice carrying that same faint edge of panic that Garion felt gnawing at his own awareness.

"I have to cover my eyes here," Relg replied. He was wearing a peculiarly fashioned shirt of leaf mail, a strange garment formed of overlapping metal scales, belted at the waist and with a snug-fitting hood that left only his face exposed. From his belt hung a heavy, hookppointed knife, a weapon that made Garion cold just to look at it. He drew a piece of cloth out from under his mail shirt and carefully tied it over his face.

"Why are you doing that?" Durnik asked him.

"There's a vein of quartz in the cavern just ahead," Relg told him. "It reflects sunlight down from the outside. The light is very bright."

"How can you tell which way to go if you're blindfolded?" Silk protested.

"The cloth isn't that thick. I can see through it well enough. Let's go.

They rounded a corner in the gallery they were following, and Garion saw light ahead. He resisted an impulse to run toward it. They moved on, the hooves of the horses Hettar was leading clattering on the stone floor. The lighted cavern was

huge, and it was filled with a glittering crystal light. A gleaming band of quartz angled across the ceiling, illuminating the cavern with a blazing radiance. Great points of stone hung like icicles from the ceiling, and other points rose from the floor to meet them. In the center of the cavern another underground lake stretched, its surface rippled by a tiny waterfall trickling down into its upper end with an endless tinkling sound that echoed in the cave like a little silver bell and joined harmoniously with the faint, remembered sigh of the singing of the Ulgos miles behind. Garion's eyes were dazzled by color that seemed to be everywhere. The prisms in the crystalline quartz twisted the light, breaking it into colored fragments and filling the cave with the multihued light of the rainbow. Garion found himself quite suddenly wishing that he could show the dazzling cave to Ce'Nedra, and the thought puzzled him.
"Hurry," Relg urged them, holding one hand across his brow as if to further shade his already veiled eyes.
"Why not stop here?" Barak suggested. "We need some rest, and this looks like a good place."
"It's the worst place in all the caves," Relg told him. "Hurry."
"Maybe you like the dark," Barak said, "but the rest of us aren't that fond of it." He looked around at the cave.
"Protect your eyes, you fool," Relg snapped.
"I don't care for your tone, friend."
"You'll be blind once we get past this place if you don't. It's taken your eyes two days to get used to the dark. You'll lose all of that if you stay here too long."
Barak stared hard at the Ulgo for a moment. Then he grunted and nodded shortly. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't understand." He reached out to put his hand on Relg's shoulder in apology.
"Don't touch me!" Relg cried, shrinking away from the big hand.
"What's the matter?"
"Just don't touch me - not ever." Relg hurried on ahead.
"What's the matter with him?" Barak demanded.
"He doesn't want you to defile him," Belgarath explained.
"Defile him? Defile him?"
"He's very concerned about his personal purity. The way he sees it, any kind of touch can soil him."
"Soil? He's as dirty as a pig in a wallow."
"It's a different kind of dirt. Let's move on."
Barak strode along behind the rest of them, grumbling and sputtering in outrage. They moved into another dark passageway, and Garion looked longingly back over his shoulder at the fading light from the glowing cavern behind. Then they rounded a corner and the light was gone.
There was no way to keep track of time in the murmuring darkness. They stumbled on, pausing now and then to eat or to rest, though Garion's sleep was filled with nightmares about mountains crushing in on him. He had almost given up all hope of ever seeing the sky again when the first faint cobweb touch of moving air brushed his cheek. It had been, as closely as he could judge, five days since they had left the last dimly lighted gallery of the Ulgos behind and plunged into this eternal night. At first he thought the faint hint of warmer air might only be his imagination, but then he caught the scent of trees and grass in the musty air of the cave, and he knew that somewhere ahead there lay an opening - a way out.
The touch of warmer outside air grew stronger, and the smell of grass began to fill the passageway along which they crept. The floor began to slope upward, and imperceptibly it grew less dark. It seemed somehow that they moved up out of endless night toward the light of the first morning in the history of the world.
The horses, plodding along at the rear, had also caught the scent of fresh air,

and their pace quickened. Relg, however, moved slower, and then slower still. Finally he stopped altogether. The faint metallic rustling of his leaf mail shirt spoke loudly for him. Relg was trembling, bracing himself for what lay ahead. He bound his veil across his face again, mumbling something over and over in the snarling language of the Ulgos, fervent, almost pleading. Once his eyes were covered, he moved on again, reluctantly, his feet almost dragging.

Then there was golden light ahead. The mouth of the passageway was a jagged, irregular opening with a stiff tangle of limbs sharply outlined in front of it.

With a sudden clatter of little hooves, the colt, ignoring Hettar's sharp command, bolted for the opening and plunged out into the light.

Belgarath scratched at his whiskers, squinting after the little animal. "Maybe you'd better take him and his mother with you when we separate," he said to Hettar. "He seems to have a little trouble taking things seriously, and Cthol Murgos is a very serious place."

Hettar nodded gravely.

"I can't," Relg blurted suddenly, turning his back to the light and pressing himself against the rock wall of the passageway. "I can't do it."

"Of course you can," Aunt Pol said comfortingly to him. "We'll go out slowly so you can get used to it a little at a time."

"Don't touch me," Relg replied almost absently.

"That's going to get very tiresome," Barak growled.

Garion and the rest of them pushed ahead eagerly, their hunger for light pulling at them. They shoved their way roughly through the tangle of bushes at the mouth of the cave and, blinking and shading their eyes, they emerged into the sunlight. The light at first stabbed Garion's eyes painfully; but after a few moments, he found that he could see again. The partially concealed entrance to the caves was near the midpoint of a rocky hillside. Behind them, the snow-covered mountains of Ulgo glittered in the morning sun, outlined against the deep blue sky, and a vast plain spread before them like a sea. The tall grass was golden with autumn, and the morning breeze touched it into long, undulating waves. The plain reached to the horizon, and Garion felt as if he had just awakened from a nightmare.

Just inside the mouth of the cave behind them, Relg knelt with his back to the light, praying and beating at his shoulders and chest with his fists.

"Now what's he doing?" Barak demanded.

"It's a kind of purification ritual," Belgarath explained. "He's trying to purge himself of all unholiness and draw the essence of the caves into his soul. He thinks it may help to sustain him while he's outside."

"How longs he going to be at it?"

"About an hour, I'd imagine. It's a fairly complicated ritual."

Relg stopped praying long enough to bind a second veil across his face on top of the first one.

"If he wraps any more cloth around his head, he's likely to smother," Silk observed.

"I'd better get started," Hettar said, tightening the straps on his saddle. "Is there anything else you wanted me to tell Cho-Hag?"

"Tell him to pass the word along to the others about what's happened so far," Belgarath answered. "Things are getting to the point where I'd like everybody to be more or less alert."

Hettar nodded.

"Do you know where you are?" Barak asked him.

"Of course." The tall man looked out at the seemingly featureless plain before him.

"It's probably going to take us at least a month to get to Rak Cthol and back," Belgarath advised. "If we get a chance, we'll light signal fires on top of the eastern escarpment before we start down. Tell Cho-Hag how important it is for

him to be waiting for us. We don't want Murgos blundering into Algaria. I'm not ready for a war just yet."
"We'll be there," Hettar replied, swinging up into his saddle. "Be careful in Cthol Murgos." He turned his horse and started down the hill toward the plain with the mare and the colt tagging along behind him. The colt stopped once to look back at Garion, gave a forlorn little whinny, then turned to follow his mother.
Barak shook his head sombrely. "I'm going to miss Hettar," he rumbled.
"Cthol Murgos wouldn't be a good place for Hettar," Silk pointed out. "We'd have to put a leash on him."
"I know that." Barak sighed. "But I'll miss him all the same."
"Which direction do we take?" Mandorallen asked, squinting out at the grassland.
Belgarath pointed to the southeast. "That way. We'll cross the upper end of the Vale to the escarpment and then go through the southern tip of Mishrak ac Thull. The Thulls don't put out patrols as regularly as the Murgos do."
"Thulls don't do much of anything unless they have to," Silk noted. "They're too preoccupied with trying to avoid Grolims."
"When do we start?" Durnik asked.
"As soon as Relg finishes his prayers," Belgarath replied.
"We'll have time for breakfast then," Barak said dryly.
They rode all that day across the flat grassland of southern Algaria beneath the deep blue autumn sky. Relg, wearing an old hooded tunic of Durnik's over his mail shirt, rode badly, with his legs sticking out stifliy. He seemed to be concentrating more on keeping his face down than on watching where he was going.
Barak watched sourly, with disapproval written plainly on his face. "I'm not trying to tell you your business, Belgarath," he said after several hours, "but that one's going to be trouble before we're finished with this."
"The light hurts his eyes, Barak," Aunt Pol told the big man, "and he's not used to riding. Don't be so quick to criticize."
Barak clamped his mouth shut, his expression still disparaging.
"At least we'll be able to count on his staying sober," Aunt Pol observed primly. "Which is more than I can say about some members of this little group."
Barak coughed uncomfortably.
They set up for the night on the treeless bank of a meandering stream. Once the sun had gone down, Relg seemed less apprehensive, though he made an obvious point of not looking directly at the driftwood fire. Then he looked up and saw the first stars in the evening sky. He gaped up at them in horror, his unveiled face breaking out in a glistening sweat. He covered his head with his arms and collapsed face down on the earth with a strangled cry.
"Relg!" Garion exclaimed, jumping to the stricken man's side and putting his hands on him without thinking.
"Don't touch me," Relg gasped automatically.
"Don't be stupid. What's wrong? Are you sick?"
"The sky," Relg croaked in despair. "The sky! It terrifies me!"
"The sky?" Garion was baffled. "What's wrong with the sky?" He looked up at the familiar stars.
"There's no end to it," Relg groaned. "It goes up forever."
Quite suddenly Garion understood. In the caves he had been afraid unreasoningly afraid - because he had been closed in. Out here under the open sky, Relg suffered from the same kind of blind terror. Garion realized with a kind of shock that quite probably Relg had never been outside the caves of Ulgo in his entire life. "It's all right," he assured him comfortingly. "The sky can't hurt you. It's just up there. Don't pay any attention to it."
"I can't bear it."
"Don't look at it."
"I still know it's there - all that emptiness."

Garion looked helplessly at Aunt Pol. She made a quick gesture that told him to keep talking. "It's not empty," he floundered. "It's full of things - all kinds of things - clouds, birds, sunlight, stars-"
"What?" Relg lifted his face up out of his hands. "What are those?"
"Clouds? Everyone knows what-" Garion stopped. Obviously Relg did not know what clouds were. He'd never seen a cloud in his life. Garion tried to rearrange his thoughts to take that into account. It was not going to be easy to explain. He took in a deep breath. "All right. Let's start with clouds, then."
It took a long time, and Garion was not really sure that Relg understood or if he was simply clinging to the words to avoid thinking about the sky. After clouds, birds were a bit easier, although feathers were very hard to explain.
"UL spoke to you," Relg interrupted Garion's description of wings. "He called you Belgarion. Is that your name?"
"Well-" Garion replied uncomfortably. "Not really. Actually my name is Garion, but I think the other name is supposed to be mine too sometime later, I believe - when I'm older."
"UL knows all things," Relg declared. "If he called you Belgarion, that's your true name. I will call you Belgarion."
"I really wish you wouldn't."
"My God rebuked me," Relg groaned, his voice sunk into a kind of sick self loathing. "I have failed him."
Garion couldn't quite follow that. Somehow, even in the midst of his panic, Relg had been suffering the horrors of a theological crisis. He sat on the ground with his face turned away from the fire and his shoulders slumped in an attitude of absolute despair.
"I'm unworthy," he said, his voice on the verge of a sob. "When UL spoke in the silence of my heart, I felt that I had been exalted above all other men, but now I am lower than dirt."
In his anguish he began to beat the sides of his head with his fists.
"Stop that!" Garion said sharply. "You'll hurt yourself. What's this all about?"
"UL told me that I was to reveal the child to Ulgo. I took his words to mean that I had found special grace in his eyes."
"What child are we talking about?"
"The child. The new Gorim. It's UL's way to guide and protect his people. When an old Gorim's work is done, UL places a special mark upon the eyes of the child who is to succeed him. When UL told me that I had been chosen to bring the child to Ulgo, I revealed his words to others, and, they revered me and asked me to speak to them in the words of UL. I saw sin and corruption all around me and I denounced it, and the people listened to me - but the words were mine, not UL's. In my pride, I presumed to speak for UL. I ignored my own sins to accuse the sins of others." Relg's voice was harsh with fanatic self accusation. "I am filth," he declared, "an abomination. UL should have raised his hand against me and destroyed me."
"That's forbidden," Garion told him without thinking.
"Who has the power to forbid anything to UL?"
"I don't know. All I know is that unmaking is forbidden - even to the Gods. It's the very first thing we learn."
Relg looked up sharply, and Garion knew instantly that he had made a dreadful mistake. "You know the secrets of the Gods?" the fanatic demanded incredulously.
"The fact that they're Gods doesn't have anything to do with it," Garion replied. "The rule applies to everybody."
Relg's eyes burned with a sudden hope. He drew himself up onto his knees and bowed forward until his face was in the dirt. "Forgive me my sin," he intoned.
"What?"
"I have exalted myself when I was unworthy."
"You made a mistake - that's all. Just don't do it anymore. Please get up,

Relg."
"I'm wicked and impure."
"You?"
"I've had impure thoughts about women."
Garion flushed with embarrassment. "We all have those kinds of thoughts once in a while," he said with a nervous cough.
"My thoughts are wicked - wicked," Relg groaned with guilt. "I burn with them."
"I'm sure that UL understands. Please get up, Relg. You don't have to do this."
"I have prayed with my mouth when my mind and heart were not in my prayers."
"Relg-"
"I have sought out hidden caves for the joy of finding them rather than to consecrate them to UL. I have this defiled the gift given me by my God."
"Please, Relg-"
Relg began to beat his head on the ground. "Once I found a cave where the echoes of UL's voice lingered. I did not reveal it to others, but kept the sound of UL's voice for myself."
Garion began to become alarmed. The fanatic Relg was working himself into a frenzy.
"Punish me, Belgarion," Relg pleaded. "Lay a hard penance on me for my iniquity."
Garion's mind was very clear as he answered. He knew exactly what he had to say. "I can't do that, Relg," he said gravely. "I can't punish you - any more than I can forgive you. If you've done things you shouldn't have, that's between you and UL. If you think you need to be punished, you'll have to do it yourself. I can't. I won't."
Relg lifted his stricken face out of the dirt and stared at Garion. Then with a strangled cry he lurched to his feet and fled wailing into the darkness.
"Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice rang with that familiar note.
"I didn't do anything," he protested almost automatically.
"What did you say to him?" Belgarath demanded.
"He said that he'd committed all kinds of sins," Garion explained. "He wanted me to punish him and forgive him."
"So?"
"I couldn't do that, Grandfather."
"What's so hard about it?"
Garion stared at him.
"All you had to do was lie to him a little. Is that so difficult?"
"Lie? About something like that?" Garion was horrified at the thought.
"I need him, Garion, and he can't function if he's incapacitated by some kind of religious hysteria. Use your head, boy."
"I can't do it, Grandfather," Garion repeated stubbornly. "It's too important to him for me to cheat him about it."
"You'd better go find him, father," Aunt Pol said.
Belgarath scowled at Garion. "You and I aren't finished with this yet, boy," he said, pointing an angry finger. Then, muttering irritably to himself, he went in search of Relg.
With a cold certainty Garion suddenly knew that the journey to Cthol Murgos was going to be very long and uncomfortable.

Chapter Twenty

THOUGH SUMMER THAT year had lingered in the lowlands and on the plains of Algaria, autumn was brief. The blizzards and squalls they had encountered in the mountains above Maragor and again among the peaks of Ulgo had hinted that winter would be early and severe, and there was already a chill to the nights as they rode day after day across the open grassland toward the eastern escarpment. Belgarath had recovered from his momentary fit of anger over Garion's failure to

deal with Relg's attack of guilt, but then, with inescapable logic, he had placed an enormous burden squarely on Garion's shoulders. "For some reason he trusts you," the old man observed, "so I'm going to leave him entirely in your hands. I don't care what you have to do, but keep him from flying apart again."
At first, Relg refused to respond to Garion's efforts to draw him out; but after a while, one of the waves of panic caused by the thought of the open sky above swept over the zealot, and he began to talk - haltingly at first but then finally in a great rush. As Garion had feared, Relg's favorite topic was sin. Garion was amazed at the simple things that Relg considered sinful. Forgetting to pray before a meal, for example, was a major transgression. As the fanatic's gloomy catalogue of his faults expanded, Garion began to perceive that most of his sins were sins of thought rather than of action. The one matter that kept cropping up again and again was the question of lustful thoughts about women. To Garion's intense discomfort, Relg insisted on describing these lustful thoughts extensively.
"Women are not the same as we are, of course," the zealot confided one afternoon as they rode together. "Their minds and hearts are not drawn to holiness the way ours are, and they set out deliberately to tempt us with their bodies and draw us into sin."
"Why do you suppose that is?" Garion asked carefully.
"Their hearts are filled with lust," Relg declared adamantly. "They take particular delight in tempting the righteous. I tell you truly, Belgarion, you would not believe the subtlety of the creatures. I have seen the evidence of this wickedness in the soberest of matrons - the wives of some of my most devout followers. They're forever touching - brushing as if by accident - and they take great pains to allow the sleeves of their robes to slip up brazenly to expose their rounded arms - and the hems of their garments always seem to be hitching up to display their ankles."
"If it bothers you, don't look," Garion suggested.
Relg ignored that. "I have even considered banning them from my presence, but then I thought that it might be better if I kept my eyes on them so that I could protect my followers from their wickedness. I thought for a time that I should forbid marriage among my followers, but some of the older ones told me that I might lose the young if I did that. I still think it might not be a bad idea."
"Wouldn't that sort of eliminate your followers altogether?" Garion asked him. "I mean, if you kept it up long enough? No marriage, no children. You get my point?"
"That's the part I haven't worked out yet," Relg admitted.
"And what about the child - the new Gorim? If two people are supposed to get married so they can have a child - that particular, special child - and you persuade them not to, aren't you interfering with something that UL wants to happen?"
Relg drew in a sharp breath as if he had not considered that. Then he groaned. "You see? Even when I'm trying my very hardest, I always seem to stumble straight into sin. I'm cursed, Belgarion, cursed. Why did UL choose me to reveal the child when I am so corrupt?"
Garion quickly changed the subject to head off that line of thought. For nine days they crossed the endless sea of grass toward the eastern escarpment, and for nine days the others, with a callousness that hurt Garion to the quick, left him trapped in the company of the ranting zealot. He gew sulky and frequently cast reproachful glances at them, but they ignored him.
Near the eastern edge of the plain, they crested a long hill and stared for the first time at the immense wall of the eastern escarpment, a sheer basalt cliff rising fully a mile above the rubble at its base and stretching off into the distance in either direction.
"Impossible," Barak stated flatly. "We'll never be able to climb that."

"We won't have to," Silk told him confidently. "I know a trail."
"A secret trail, I suppose?"
"Not exactly a secret," Silk replied. "I don't imagine too many people know about it, but it's right out in plain sight - if you know where to look. I had occasion to leave Mishrak ac Thull in a hurry once, and I stumbled across it."
"One gets the feeling that you've had occasion to leave just about every place in a hurry at one time or another."
Silk shrugged. "Knowing when it's time to run is one of the most important things people in my profession ever learn."
"Will the river ahead not prove a barrier?" Mandorallen asked, looking at the sparkling surface of the Aldur River lying between them and the grim, black cliff. He was running his fingertips lightly over his side, testing for tender spots.
"Mandorallen, stop that," Aunt Pol told him. "They'll never heal if you keep poking at them."
"Me thinks, my Lady, that they are nearly whole again," the knight replied. "Only one still causes me any discomfort."
"Well, leave it alone."
"There's a ford a few miles upstream," Belgarath said in answer to the question. "The river's down at this time of year, so we won't have any difficulty crossing." He started out again, leading them down the gradual slope toward the Aldur.
They forded late that afternoon and pitched their tents on the far side. The next morning they moved out to the foot of the escarpment.
"The trail's just a few miles south," Silk told them, leading the way along the looming black cliff.
"Do we have to go up along the face of it?" Garion asked apprehensively, craning his neck to look up the towering wall.
Silk shook his head. "The trail's a streambed. It cuts down through the cliff. It's a little steep and narrow, but it will get us safely to the top."
Garion found that encouraging.
The trail appeared to be little more than a crack in the stupendous cliff, and a trickle of water ran out of the opening to disappear into the jumble of rocky debris along the base of the escarpment.
"Are you sure it goes all the way to the top?" Barak asked, eyeing the narrow chimney suspiciously.
"Trust me," Silk assured him.
"Not if I can help it."
The trail was awful, steep and strewn with rock. At times it was so narrow that the packhorses had to be unloaded before they could make it through and they had to be literally manhandled up over basalt boulders that had fractured into squares, almost like huge steps. The trickle of water running down the cut made everything slick and muddy. To make matters even worse, thin, high clouds swept in from the west and a bitterly cold draft spilled down the narrow cut from the arid plains of Mishrak ac Thull, lying high above.
It took them two days, and by the time they reached the top, a mile or so back from the brink of the escarpment, they were all exhausted.
"I feel as if somebody's been beating me with a stick," Barak groaned, sinking to the ground in the brushy gully at the top of the cut. "A very big, dirty stick."
They all sat on the ground among the prickly thornbushes in the gully, recovering from the dreadful climb. "I'll have a look around," Silk said after only a few moments. The small man had the body of an acrobat - supple, strong, and quick to restore itself. He crept up to the rim of the gully, ducking low under the thornbushes and worming his way the last few feet on his stomach to peer carefully over the top. After several minutes, he gave a low whistle, and

they saw him motion sharply for them to join him.
Barak groaned again and stood up. Durnik, Mandorallen, and Garion also got stiffly to their feet.
"See what he wants," Belgarath told them. "I'm not ready to start moving around just yet."
The four of them started up the slope through the loose gravel toward the spot where Silk lay peering out from under a thornbush, crawling the last few feet as he had done.
"What's the trouble?" Barak asked the little man as they came up beside him.
"Company," Silk replied shortly, pointing out over the rocky, arid plain lying brown and dead under the flat gray sky.
A cloud of yellow dust, whipped low to the ground by the stiff, chill wind, gave evidence of riders.
"A patrol?" Durnik asked in a hushed voice.
"I don't think so," Silk answered. "Thulls aren't comfortable on horses. They usually patrol on foot."
Garion peered out across the arid waste. "Is that somebody out in front of them?" he asked, pointing at a tiny, moving speck a half mile or so in front of the riders.
"Ah," Silk said with a peculiar kind of sadness.
"What is it?" Barak asked. "Don't keep secrets, Silk. I'm not in the mood for it."
"They're Grolims," Silk explained. "The one they're chasing is a Thull trying to escape being sacrificed. It happens rather frequently."
"Should Belgarath be warned?" Mandorallen suggested.
"It's probably not necessary," Silk replied. "The Grolims around here are mostly low-ranking. I doubt that any of them would have any skill at sorcery."
"I'll go tell him anyway," Durnik said. He slid back away from the edge of the gully, rose, and went back down to where the old man rested with Aunt Pol and Relg.
"As long as we stay out of sight, we'll probably be all right," Silk told them. "It looks as if there are only three of them, and they're concentrating on the Thull."
The running man had moved closer. He ran with his head down and his arms pumping at his sides.
"What happens if he tries to hide here in the gully?" Barak asked.
Silk shrugged. "The Grolims will follow him."
"We'd have to take steps at that point, wouldn't we?" Silk nodded with a wicked little smirk.
"We could call him, I suppose," Barak suggested, loosening his sword in its sheath.
"The same thought had just occurred to me."
Durnik came back up the slope, his feet crunching in the gravel.
"Wolf says to keep an eye on them," he reported, "but he says not to do anything unless they actually start into the gully."
"What a shame!" Silk sighed regretfully.
The running Thull was clearly visible now. He was a thick-bodied man in a rough tunic, belted at the waist. His hair was shaggy and mudcolored, and his face was contorted into an expression of brutish panic. He passed the place where they hid, perhaps thirty paces out on the flats, and Garion could clearly hear his breath whistling in his throat as he pounded past. He was whimpering as he ran - an animal-like sound of absolute despair.
"They almost never try to hide," Silk said in a soft voice tinged with pity.
"All they do is run." He shook his head.
"They'll overtake him soon," Mandorallen observed. The pursuing Grolims wore black, hooded robes and polished steel masks.

"We'd better get down," Barak advised.
They all ducked below the gully rim. A few moments later, the three horses galloped by, their hooves thudding on the hard earth.
"They'll catch him in a few more minutes," Garion said. "He's running right for the edge. He'll be trapped."
"I don't think so," Silk replied somberly.
A moment later they heard a long, despairing shriek, fading horribly into the gulf below.
"I more or less expected that," Silk said.
Garion's stomach wrenched at the thought of the dreadful height of the escarpment.
"They're coming back," Barak warned. "Get down."
The three Grolims rode back along the edge of the gully. One of them said something Garion could not quite hear, and the other two laughed.
"The world might be a brighter place with three less Grolims in it," Mandorallen suggested in a grim whisper.
"Attractive thought," Silk agreed, "but Belgarath would probably disapprove. I suppose it's better to let them go. We wouldn't want anybody looking for them."
Barak looked longingly after the three Grolims, then sighed with deep regret.
"Let's go back down," Silk said.
They all turned and crawled back down into the brushy gully. Belgarath looked up as they returned. "Are they gone?"
"They're riding off," Silk told him.
"What was that cry?" Relg asked.
"Three Grolims chased a Thull off the edge of the escarpment," Silk replied.
"Why?"
"He'd been selected for a certain religious observance, and he didn't want to participate."
"He refused?" Relg sounded shocked. "He deserved his fate then."
"I don't think you appreciate the nature of Grolim ceremonies, Relg," Silk said.
"One must submit to the will of one's God," Relg insisted. There was a sanctimonious note to his voice. "Religious obligations are absolute."
Silk's eyes glittered as he looked at the Ulgo fanatic. "How much do you know about the Angarak religion, Relg?" he asked.
"I concern myself only with the religion of Ulgo."
"A man ought to know what he's talking about before he makes judgments."
"Let it lie, Silk," Aunt Pol told him.
"I don't think so, Polgara. Not this time. A few facts might be good for our devout friend here. He seems to lack perspective." Silk turned back to Relg. "The core of the Angarak religion is a ritual most men find repugnant. Thulls devote their entire lives to avoiding it. That's the central reality of Thullish life."
"An abominable people." Relg's denunciation was harsh.
"No. Thulls are stupid - even brutish - but they're hardly abominable. You see, Relg, the ritual we're talking about involves human sacrifice."
Relg pulled the veil from his eyes to stare incredulously at the ratfaced little man.
"Each year two thousand Thulls are sacrificed to Torak," Silk went on, his eyes boring into Relg's stunned face. "The Grolims permit the substitution of slaves, so a Thull spends his whole life working in order to get enough money to buy a slave to take his place on the altar if he's unlucky enough to be chosen. But slaves die sometimes - or they escape. If a Thull without a slave is chosen, he usually tries to run. Then the Grolims chase him - they've had a lot of practice, so they're very good at it. I've never heard of a Thull actually getting away."
"It's their duty to submit," Relg maintained stubbornly, though he seemed a bit

less sure of himself.
"How are they sacrificed?" Durnik asked in a subdued voice. The Thull's willingness to hurl himself off the escarpment had obviously shaken him.
"It's a simple procedure," Silk replied, watching Relg closely. "Two Grolims bend the Thull backward over the altar, and a third cuts his heart out. Then they burn the heart in a little fire. Torak isn't interested in the whole Thull. He only wants the heart."
Relg flinched at that.
"They sacrifice women, too," Silk pressed. "But women have a simpler means of escape. The Grolims won't sacrifice a pregnant woman - it confuses their count - so Thulllish women try to stay pregnant constantly. That explains why there are so many Thulls and why Thullish women are notorious for their indiscriminate appetite."
"Monstrous." Relg gasped. "Death would be better than such vile corruption."
"Death lasts for a long time, Relg," Silk said with a cold little smile. "A little corruption can be forgotten rather quickly if you put your mind to it. That's particularly true if your life depends on it."
Relg's face was troubled as he struggled with the blunt description of the horror of Thullish life. "You're a wicked man," he accused Silk, though his voice lacked conviction.
"I know," Silk admitted.
Relg appealed to Belgarath. "Is what he says true?"
The sorcerer scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "He doesn't seem to have left out very much," he replied. "The word religion means different things to different people, Relg. It depends on the nature of one's God. You ought to try to get that sorted out in your mind. It might make some of the things you'll have to do a bit easier."
"I think we've just about exhausted the possibilities of this conversation, father," Aunt Pol suggested, "and we have a long way to go."
"Right," he agreed, getting to his feet.
They rode down through the arid jumble of rock and scrubby bushes that spread across the western frontier of the land of the Thulls. The continual wind that swept up across the escarpment was bitterly cold, though there were only a few patches of thin snow lying beneath the somber gray sky.
Relg's eyes adjusted to the subdued light, and the clouds appeared to quiet the panic the open sky had caused him. But this was obviously a difficult time for him. The world here above ground was alien, and everything he encountered seemed to shatter his preconceptions. It was also a time of personal religious turmoil, and the crisis goaded him into peculiar fluctuations of speech and action. At one moment he would sanctimoniously denounce the sinful wickedness of others, his face set in a stern expression of righteousness; and in the next, he would be writhing in an agony of self loathing, confessing his sin and guilt in an endless, repetitious litany to any who would listen. His pale face and huge, dark eyes, framed by the hood of his leaf mail shirt, contorted in the tumult of his emotions. Once again the others - even patient, good-hearted Durnik - drew away from him, leaving him entirely to Garion. Relg stopped often for prayers and obscure little rituals that always seemed to involve a great deal of groveling in the dirt.
"It's going to take us all year to get to Rak Cthol at this rate," Barak rumbled sourly on one such occasion, glaring with open dislike at the ranting fanatic kneeling in the sand beside the trail.
"We need him," Belgarath replied calmly, "and he needs this. We can live with it if we have to."
"We're getting close to the northern edge of Cthol Murgos," Silk said, pointing ahead at a low range of hills. "We won't be able to stop like this once we cross the border. We'll have to ride as hard as we can until we get to the South

Caravan Route. The Murgos patrol extensively, and they disapprove of side trips. Once we get to the track, we'll be all right, but we don't want to be stopped before we get there."
"Will we not be questioned even on the caravan route, Prince Kheldar?" Mandorallen asked. "Our company is oddly assorted, and Murgos are suspicious."
"They'll watch us," Silk admitted, "but they won't interfere as long as we don't stray from the track. The treaty between Taur Urgas and Ran Borune guarantees freedom of travel along the caravan route, and no Murgo alive would be foolish enough to embarrass his king by violating it. Taur Urgas is very severe with people who embarrass him."
They crossed into Cthol Murgos shortly after noon on a cold, murky day and immediately pushed into a gallop. After about a league or so, Relg began to pull in his horse.
"Not now, Relg," Belgarath told him sharply. "Later."
"But-"
"UL's a patient God. He'll wait. Keep going."
They galloped on across the high, barren plain toward the caravan route, their cloaks streaming behind them in the biting wind. It was midafternoon when they reached the track and reined in. The South Caravan Route was not precisely a road, but centuries of travel had clearly marked its course. Silk looked around with satisfaction. "Made it," he said. "Now we become honest merchants again, and no Murgo in the world is going to interfere with us." He turned his horse eastward then and led the way with a great show of confidence. He squared his shoulders, seeming to puff himself up with a kind of busy self importance, and Garion knew that he was making mental preparations involved in assuming a new role. When they encountered the well-guarded packtrain of a Tolnedran merchant moving west, Silk had made his transition and he greeted the merchant with the easy camaraderie of a man of trade.
"Good day, Grand High Merchant," he said to the Tolnedran, noting the other's marks of rank. "If you can spare a moment, I thought we might exchange information about the trail. You've come from the east, and I've just come over the route to the west of here. An exchange might prove mutually beneficial."
"Excellent idea," the Tolnedran agreed. The Grand High Merchant was a stocky man with a high forehead and wore a fur-lined cloak pulled tightly about him to ward off the icy wind.
"My name is Ambar," Silk said. "From Kotu."
The Tolnedran nodded in polite acknowledgement. "Kalvor," he introduced himself, "of Tol Horb. You've picked a hard season for the journey east, Ambar."
"Necessity," Silk said. "My funds are limited, and the cost of winter lodgings in Tol Honeth would have devoured what little I have."
"The Honeths are rapacious," Kalvor concurred. "Is Ran Borune still alive?"
"He was when I left."
Kalvor made a face. "And the squabble over the succession goes on?"
Silk laughed. "Oh, yes."
"Is that swine Kador from Tol Vordue still dominant?"
"Kador fell upon hard times, I understand. I heard that he made an attempt on the life of Princess Ce'Nedra. I imagine that the Emperor's going to take steps to remove him from the race."
"What splendid news," Kalvor said, his face brightening.
"How's the trail to the east?" Silk asked.
"There's not much snow," Kalvor told him. "Of course there never is in Cthol Murgos. It's a very dry kingdom. It's cold, though. It's bitter in the passes. What about the mountains in eastern Tolnedra?"
"It was snowing when we came through."
"I was afraid of that," Kalvor said with a gloomy look.
"You probably should have waited until spring, Kalvor. The worst part of the

trip's still ahead of you."
"I had to get out of Rak Goska." Kalvar looked around almost as if expecting to see someone listening. "You're headed toward trouble, Ambar," he said seriously.
"Oh?"
"This is not the time to go to Rak Goska. The Murgos have gone insane there."
"Insane?" Silk said with alarm.
"There's no other explanation. They're arresting honest merchants on the flimsiest charges you ever heard of, and everyone from the West is followed constantly. It's certainly not the time to take a lady to that place."
"My sister," Silk replied, glancing at Aunt Pol. "She's invested in my venture, but she doesn't trust me. She insisted on coming along to make sure I don't cheat her."
"I'd stay out of Rak Goska," Kalvor advised.
"I'm committed now," Silk said helplessly. "I don't have any other choice, do I?"
"I'll tell you quite honestly, Ambar, it's as much as a man's life is worth to go to Rak Goska just now. A good merchant I know was actually accused of violating the women's quarters in a Murgo household."
"Well, I suppose that happens sometimes. Murgo women are reputed to be very handsome."
"Ambar," Kalvor said with a pained expression, "the man was seventy-three years old."
"His sons can be proud of his vitality then." Silk laughed. "What happened to him?"
"He was condemned and impaled," Kalvor said with a shudder. "The soldiers rounded us all up and made us watch. It was ghastly."
Silk frowned. "There's no chance that the charges were true?"
"Seventy-three years old, Ambar," Kalvor repeated. "The charges were obviously false. If I didn't know better, I'd guess that Taur Urgas is trying to drive all western merchants out of Cthol Murgos. Rak Goska simply isn't safe for us any more."
Silk grimaced. "Who can ever say what Taur Urgas is thinking?"
"He profits from every transaction in Rak Goska. He'd have to be insane to drive us out deliberately."
"I've met Taur Urgas," Silk said grimly. "Sanity's not one of his major failings." He looked around with a kind of desperation on his face. "Kalvor, I've invested everything I own and everything I can borrow in this venture. If I turn back now, I'll be ruined."
"You could turn north after you get through the mountains," Kalvor suggested. "Cross the river into Mishrak ac Thull and go to Thull Mardu."
Silk made a face. "I hate dealing with Thulls."
"There's another possibility," the Tolnedran said. "You know where the halfway point between Tol Honeth and Rak Goska is?"
Silk nodded.
"There's always been a Murgo resupply station there - food, spare horses, other necessities. Anyway, since the troubles in Rak Goska, a few enterprising Murgos have come out there and are buying whole caravan loads - horses and all. Their prices aren't as attractive as the prices in Rak Goska, but it's a chance for some profit, and you don't have to put yourself in danger to make it."
"But that way you have no goods for the return journey," Silk objected. "Half the profit's lost if you come back with nothing to sell in Tol Honeth."
"You'd have your life, Ambar," Kalvor said pointedly. He looked around again nervously, as if expecting to be arrested. "I'm not coming back to Cthol Murgos," he declared in a firm voice. "I'm as willing as any man to take risks for a good profit, but all the gold in the world isn't worth another trip to Rak Goska."

"How far is it to the halfway point?" Silk asked, seemingly troubled.
"I've ridden for three days since I left there," Kalvor replied. "Good luck, Ambar - whatever you decide." He gathered up his reins. "I want to put a few more leagues behind me before I stop for the night. There may be snow in the Tolnedran mountains, but at least I'll be out of Cthol Murgos and out from under the fist of Taur Urgas." He nodded briefly and moved off to the west at a fast trot, with his guards and his packtrain following after him.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE SOUTH CARAVAN ROUTE wound through a series of high, arid valleys that ran in a generally east-west direction. The surrounding peaks were high - higher probably than the mountains to the west, but their upper slopes were only faintly touched with snow. The clouds overhead turned the sky a dirty slate-gray, but what moisture they held did not fall on this desiccated wilderness of sand, rock, and scrubby thorn. Though it did not snow, it was nonetheless bitterly cold. The wind blew continually, and its edge was like a knife.

They rode east, making good time.

"Belgarath," Barak said back over his shoulder, "there's a Murgo on that ridgeline ahead just to the south of the track."

"I see him."

"What's he doing?"

"Watching us. He won't do anything as long as we stay on the caravan route."

"They always watch like that," Silk stated. "The Murgos like to keep a close watch on everybody in their kingdom."

"That Tolnedran-Kalvor," Barak said. "Do you think he was exaggerating?"

"No," Belgarath replied. "I'd guess that Taur Urgas is looking for an excuse to close the caravan route and expel all the westerners from Cthol Murgos."

"Why?" Durnik asked.

Belgarath shrugged. "The war is coming. Taur Urgas knows that a good number of the merchants who take this route to Rak Goska are spies. He'll be bringing armies up from the south soon, and he'd like to keep their numbers and movements a secret."

"What manner of army could be gathered from so bleak and uninhabited a realm?" Mandorallen asked.

Belgarath looked around at the high, bleak desert. "This is only the little piece of Cthol Murgos we're permitted to see. It stretches a thousand leagues or more to the south, and there are cities down there that no westerner has ever seen - we don't even know their names. Here in north, the Murgos play a very elaborate game to conceal the real Cthol Murgos."

"Is it thy thought then that the war will come soon?"

"Next summer perhaps," Belgarath replied. "Possibly the summer following."

"Are we going to be ready?" Barak asked.

"We're going to try to be."

Aunt Pol made a brief sound of disgust.

"What's wrong?" Garion asked her quickly.

"Vultures," she said. "Filthy brutes."

A dozen heavy-bodied birds were flapping and squawking over something on the ground to one side of the caravan track.

"What are they feeding on?" Durnik asked. "I haven't seen any animals of any kind since we left the top of the escarpment."

"A horse, probably - or a man," Silk said. "There's nothing else up here."

"Would a man be left unburied?" the smith asked.

"Only partially," Silk told him. "Sometimes certain brigands decide that the pickings along the caravan route might be easy. The Murgos give them plenty of

time to realize how wrong they were."
Durnik looked at him questioningly.
"The Murgos catch them," Silk explained, "and then they bury them up to the neck and leave them. The vultures have learned that a man in that situation is helpless. Often they get impatient and don't bother to wait for the man to finish dying before they start to eat."
"That's one way to deal with bandits," Barak said, almost approvingly. "Even a Murgo can have a good idea once in a while."
"Unfortunately, Murgos automatically assume that anybody who isn't on the track itself is a bandit."
The vultures brazenly continued to feed, refusing to leave their dreadful feast as the party passed no more than twenty yards from their flapping congregation. Their wings and bodies concealed whatever it was they were feeding on, a fact for which Garion was profoundly grateful. Whatever it was, however, was not very large.
"We should stay quite close to the track when we stop for the night, then," Durnik said, averting his eyes with a shudder.
"That's a very good idea, Durnik," Silk agreed.
The information the Tolnedran merchant had given them about the makeshift fair at the halfway point proved to be accurate. On the afternoon of the third day, they came over a rise and saw a cluster of tents surrounding a solid stone building set to one side of the caravan track. The tents looked small in the distance and they billowed and flapped in the endless wind that swept down the valley.
"What do you think?" Silk asked Belgarath.
"It's late," the old man replied. "We're going to have to stop for the night soon anyway, and it would look peculiar if we didn't stop."
Silk nodded.
"We're going to have to try to keep Relg out of sight, though," Belgarath continued. "Nobody's going to believe we're ordinary merchants if they see an Ulgo with us."
Silk thought a moment. "We'll wrap him in a blanket," he suggested, "and tell anybody who asks that he's sick. People stay away from sick men."
Belgarath nodded. "Can you act sick?" he asked Relg.
"I am sick," the Ulgo said without any attempt at humor. "Is it always this cold up here?" He sneezed.
Aunt Pol pulled her horse over beside his and reached out to put her hand on his forehead.
"Don't touch me." Relg cringed away from her hand.
"Stop that," she told him. She briefly touched his face and looked at him closely. "He's coming down with a cold, father," she announced. "As soon as we get settled, I'll give him something for it. Why didn't you tell me?" she asked the fanatic.
"I will endure what UL chooses to send me," Relg declared. "It's his punishment for my sins."
"No," she told him flatly. "It has nothing to do with sin or punishment. It's a cold - nothing more."
"Am I going to die?" Relg asked calmly.
"Of course not. Haven't you ever had a cold before?"
"No. I've never been sick in my life."
"You won't be able to say that again," Silk said lightly, pulling a blanket out of one of the packs and handing it to him. "Wrap this around your shoulders and pull it up over your head. Try to look like you're suffering."
"I am," Relg said, starting to cough.
"But you have to look like it," Silk told him. "Think about sin - that ought to make you look miserable."

"I think about sin all the time," Relg replied, still coughing.
"I know," Silk said, "but try to think about it a little harder."
They rode down the hill toward the collection of tents with the dry, icy wind whipping at them as they rode. Very few of the assembled merchants were outside their tents, and those who were moved quickly about their tasks in the biting chill.
"We should stop by the resupply station first, I suppose," Silk suggested, gesturing toward the square stone building squatting among the tents. "That would look more natural. Let me handle things."
"Silk, you mangy Drasnian thief!" a coarse voice roared from a nearby tent.
Silk's eyes widened slightly, and then he grinned. "I seem to recognize the squeals of a certain Nadrak hog," he said, loud enough to be heard by the man in the tent.
A rangy Nadrak in a belted, ankle-length, black felt overcoat and a snug-fitting fur cap strode out of the tent. He had coarse, black hair and a thin, scraggly beard. His eyes had the peculiar angularity to them that was a characteristic of all Angaraks; but unlike the dead eyes of the Murgos, this Nadrak's eyes were alive with a kind of wary friendship. "Haven't they caught you yet, Silk?" he demanded raucously. "I was sure that by now someone would have peeled off your hide."
"Drunk as usual, I see." Silk grinned viciously. "How many days has it been this time, Yarblek?"
"Who counts?" The Nadrak laughed, swaying slightly on his feet. "What are you doing in Cthol Murgos, Silk? I thought your fat king needed you in Gar og Nadrak."
"I was getting to be a little too well-known on the streets of Yar Nadrak," Silk replied. "It was getting to the point that people were avoiding me."
"Now I wonder just why that could be," Yarblek retorted with heavy sarcasm. "You cheat at trade, you switch dice, you make free with other men's wives, and you're a spy. That shouldn't be any reason for men not to admire your good points - whatever they are."
"Your sense of humor's as overpowering as ever, Yarblek."
"It's my only failing," the slightly tipsy Nadrak admitted. "Get down off that horse, Silk. Come inside my tent and we'll get drunk together. Bring your friends." He lurched back inside the tent.
"An old acquaintance," Silk explained quickly, sliding out of his saddle.
"Can he be trusted?" Barak asked suspiciously.
"Not entirely, but he's all right. He's not a bad fellow, really - for a Nadrak. He'll know everything that's going on, and if he's drunk enough, we might be able to get some useful information out of him."
"Get in here, Silk," Yarblek roared from inside his gray felt tent.
"Let's see what he has to say," Belgarath said.
They all dismounted, tied their horses to a picket line at the side of the Nadrak's tent, and trooped inside. The tent was large, and the floor and walls were covered with thick crimson carpets. An oil lamp hung from the ridgepole, and an iron brazier shimmered out waves of heat.
Yarblek was sitting cross-legged on the carpeting at the back of the tent, with a large black keg conveniently beside him. "Come in. Come in," he said brusquely. "Close the flap. You're letting out all the heat."
"This is Yarblek," Silk said by way of introduction, "an adequate merchant and a notorious drunkard. We've known each other for a long time now."
"My tent is yours." Yarblek hiccuped indifferently. "It's not much of a tent, but it's yours anyway. There are cups over there in that pile of things by my saddle - some of them are even clean. Let's all have a drink."
"This is Mistress Pol, Yarblek," Silk introduced her.
"Good-looking woman," Yarblek observed, looking at her boldly. "Forgive me for

not getting up, Mistress, but I feel a bit giddy at the moment - probably something I ate."
"Of course," she agreed with a dry little smile. "A man should always be careful about what he puts in his stomach."
"I've made that exact point myself a thousand times." He squinted at her as she pulled back her hood and unfastened her cape. "That's a remarkably handsome woman, Silk," he declared. "I don't suppose you'd care to sell her."
"You couldn't afford me, Yarblek," she told him without seeming to take the slightest offense.
Yarblek stared at her and then roared with laughter. "By One-Eye's nose, I'd bet that I couldn't, at that - and you've probably got a dagger somewhere under your clothes, too. You'd slice open my belly if I tried to steal you, wouldn't you?"
"Naturally."
"What a woman!" Yarblek chortled. "Can you dance, too?"
"Like you've never seen before, Yarblek," she replied. "I could turn your bony to water."
Yarblek's eyes burned. "After we all get drunk, maybe you'll dance for us."
"We'll see," she said with a hint of promise. Garion was stunned at this uncharacteristic boldness. It was obviously the way Yarblek expected a woman to behave, but Garion wondered just when Aunt Pol had learned the customs of the Nadraks so well that she could respond without the slightest hint of embarrassment.
"This is Mister Wolf," Silk said, indicating Belgarath.
"Never mind names." Yarblek waved his hand. "I'd just forget them anyway." He did, however, look rather shrewdly at each of them. "As a matter of fact," he continued, sounding suddenly not nearly as drunk as he appeared, "it might be just as well if I didn't know your names. What a man doesn't know, he can't reveal, and you're too well-mixed a group to be in stinking Cthol Murgos on honest business. Fetch yourselves cups. This keg is almost full, and I've got another chilling out back of the tent."
At Silk's gesture, they each took a cup from the heap of cookware piled beside a well-worn saddle and joined Yarblek on the carpet near the keg.
"I'd pour for you like a proper host," Yarblek told them, "but I spill too much that way. Dip out your own."
Yarblek's ale was a very dark brown and had a rich, almost fruity flavor.
"Interesting taste," Barak said politely.
"My brewer chops dried apples into his vats," the Nadrak replied. "It smooths out some of the bite." He turned to Silk. "I thought you didn't like Murgos."
"I don't."
"What are you doing in Cthol Murgos, then?"
Silk shrugged. "Business."
"Whose? Yours or Rhodar's?"
Silk winked at him.
"I thought as much. I wish you luck, then. I'd even offer to help, but I'd probably better keep my nose out of it. Murgos distrust us even more than they distrust you Alorns - not that I can really blame them. Any Nadrak worth the name would go ten leagues out of his way for the chance to cut a Murgo's throat."
"Your affection for your cousins touches my heart." Silk grinned.
Yarblek scowled. "Cousins!" he spat. "If it weren't for the Grolims, we'd have exterminated the whole cold-blooded race generations ago." He dipped out another cup of ale, lifted it and said, "Confusion to the Murgos."
"I think we've found something we can drink to together," Barak said with a broad smile. "Confusion to the Murgos."
"And may Taur Urgas grow boils on his behind," Yarblek added. He drank deeply, scooped another cupful of ale from the open keg and drank again. "I'm a little

drunk," he admitted.
"We'd never have guessed," Aunt Pol told him.
"I like you, girl." Yarblek grinned at her. "I wish I could afford to buy you. I don't suppose you'd consider running away?"
She sighed a mocking little sigh. "No," she refused. "I'm afraid not. That gives a woman a bad reputation, you know."
"Very true," Yarblek agreed owlishly. He shook his head sadly. "As I was saying," he went on, "I'm a little drunk. I probably shouldn't say anything about this, but it's not a good time for westerners to be in Cthol Murgos - Alorns particularly. I've been hearing some strange things lately. Word's been filtering out of Rak Cthol that Murgoland is to be purged of outsiders. Taur Urgas wears the crown and plays king in Rak Goska, but the old Grolim at Rak Cthol has his hand around Taur Urgas' heart. The king of the Murgos knows that one squeeze from Ctuchik will leave his throne empty."
"We met a Tolnedran a few leagues west of here who said the same sort of thing," Silk said seriously. "He told us that merchants from the West were being arrested all over Rak Goska on false charges."
Yarblek nodded. "That's only the first step. Murgos are always predictable - they have so little imagination. Taur Urgas isn't quite ready to offend Ran Borune openly by butchering every western merchant in the kingdom, but it's getting closer. Rak Goska's probably a closed city by now. Taur Urgas is free to turn his attention to the outlands. I'd imagine that's why he's coming here."
"He's what?" Silk's face paled visibly.
"I thought you knew," Yarblek told him. "Taur Urgas is marching toward the frontier with his army behind him. My guess is that he plans to close the border."
"How far away is he?" Silk demanded.
"I was told that he was seen this morning not five leagues from here," Yarblek said. "What's wrong?"
"Taur Urgas and I have had some serious fallings out," Silk answered quickly, his face filled with consternation. "I can't be here when he arrives." He jumped to his feet.
"Where are you going?" Belgarath asked quickly.
"Some place safe. I'll catch up with you later." He turned then and bolted out of the tent. A moment later they heard the pounding of his horse's hooves.
"Do you want me to go with him?" Barak asked Belgarath.
"You'd never catch him."
"I wonder what he did to Taur Urgas," Yarblek mused. He chuckled then. "It must have been something pretty awful, the way the little thief ran out of here."
"Is it safe for him to go away from the caravan track?" Garion asked, remembering the vultures at their grisly feast beside the trail.
"Don't worry about Silk," Yarblek replied confidently.
From a great distance away, a slow thudding sound began to intrude itself. Yarblek's eyes narrowed with hate. "It looks like Silk left just in time," he growled.
The thudding became louder and turned into a hollow, booming sound. Dimly, behind the booming, they could hear a kind of groaning chant of hundreds of voices in a deep, minor key.
"What's that?" Durnik asked.
"Taur Urgas," Yarblek answered and spat. "That's the war song of the king of the Murgos."
"War?" Mandorallen demanded sharply.
"Taur Urgas is always at war," Yarblek replied with heavy contempt. "Even when there isn't anybody to be at war with. He sleeps in his armor, even in his own palace. It makes him smelly, but all Murgos stink anyway, so it doesn't really make any difference. Maybe I'd better go see what he's up to." He

got heavily to his feet. "Wait here," he told them. "This is a Nadrak tent, and there are certain courtesies expected between Angaraks. His soldiers won't come in here, so you'll be safe as long as you stay inside." He lurched toward the door of the tent, an expression of icy hatred on his face.
The chanting and the measured drumbeats grew louder. Shrill fifes picked up a discordant, almost jigging accompaniment, and then there was a sudden blaring of deep-throated horns.
"What do you think, Belgarath?" Barak rumbled. "This Yarblek seems like a good enough fellow, but he's still an Angarak. One word from him, and we'll have a hundred Murgos in here with us."
"He's right, father," Aunt Pol agreed. "I know Nadraks well enough to know that Yarblek wasn't nearly as drunk as he pretended to be."
Belgarath pursed his lips. "Maybe it isn't too good an idea to gamble all that much on the fact that Nadraks despise Murgos," he conceded. "We might be doing Yarblek an injustice, but perhaps it would be better just to slip away before Taur Urgas has time to put guards around the whole place anyway. There's no way of knowing how long he's going to stay here; and once he settles in, we might have trouble leaving."
Durnik pulled aside the red carpeting that hung along the back wall, reached down, and tugged out several tent pegs. He lifted the canvas. "I think we can crawl out here."
"Let's go, then," Belgarath decided.
One by one, they rolled out of the tent into the chill wind.
"Get the horses," Belgarath said quietly. He looked around, his eyes narrowing. "That gully over there." He pointed at a wash opening out just beyond the last row of tents. "If we keep the tents between us and the main caravan track, we should be able to get into it without being seen. Most likely everybody here's going to be watching the arrival of Taur Urgas."
"Would the Murgo king know thee, Belgarath?" Mandorallen asked.
"He might. We've never met, but my description's been noised about in Cthol Murgos for a long time now. It's best not to take any chances."
They led their horses along the back of the tents and gained the cover of the gully without incident.
"This wash comes down off the back side of that hill there." Barak pointed. "If we follow it, we'll be out of sight all the way, and once we get the hill between us and the camp, we'll be able to ride away without being seen."
"It's almost evening." Belgarath looked up at the lowering sky. "Let's go up a ways and then wait until after dark."
They moved on up the gully until they were behind the shoulder of the hill.
"Better keep an eye on things," Belgarath said.
Barak and Garion scrambled up out of the gully and moved at a crouch to the top of the hill, where they lay down behind a scrubby bush. "Here they come," Barak muttered.
A steady stream of grim-faced Murgo soldiers marched eight abreast into the makeshift fair to the cadenced beat of great drums. In their midst, astride a black horse and under a flapping black banner, rode Taur Urgas. He was a tall man with heavy, sloping shoulders and an angular, merciless face. The thick links of his mail shirt had been dipped in molten red gold, making it almost appear as if he were covered with blood. A thick metal belt encircled his waist, and the scabbard of the sword he wore on his left hip was jewel-encrusted. A pointed steel helmet sat low over his black eyebrows, and the blood-red crown of Cthol Murgos was riveted to it. A kind of chain-mail hood covered the back and sides of the king's neck and spread out over his shoulders.
When he reached the open area directly in front of the square stone supply post, Taur Urgas reined in his horse. "Wine!" he commanded. His voice, carried by the icy wind, seemed startlingly close. Garion squirmed a bit lower under the bush.

The Murgo who ran the supply post scurried inside and came back out, carrying a flagon and a metal goblet. Taur Urgas took the goblet, drank, and then slowly closed his big fist around it, crushing it in his grip. Barak snorted with contempt.
"What was that about?" Garion whispered.
"Nobody drinks from a cup once Taur Urgas has used it," the redbearded Cherek replied. "If Anheg behaved like that, his warriors would dunk him in the bay at Val Alorn."
"Have you the names of all foreigners here?" the king demanded of the Murgo storekeeper, his wind-carried voice distinct in Garion's ears. "As you commanded, dread king," the storekeeper replied with an obsequious bow. He drew a roll of parchment out of one sleeve and handed it up to his ruler.
Taur Urgas unrolled the parchment and glanced at it. "Summon the Nadrak, Yarblek," he ordered.
"Let Yarblek of Gar og Nadrak approach," an officer at the king's side bellowed. Yarblek, his felt overcoat flapping stiffly in the wind, stepped forward. "Our cousin from the north," Taur Urgas greeted him coldly.
"Your Majesty," Yarblek replied with a slight bow.
"It would be well if you departed, Yarblek," the king told him. "My soldiers have certain orders, and some of them might fail to recognize a fellow Angarak in their eagerness to obey my commands. I cannot guarantee your safety if you remain, and I would be melancholy if something unpleasant befell you."
Yarblek bowed again. "My servants and I will leave at once, your Majesty."
"If they are Nadraks, they have our permission to go," the king said. "All foreigners, however, must remain. You're dismissed, Yarblek."
"I think we got out of that tent just in time," Barak muttered. Then a man in a rusty mail shirt covered with a greasy brown vest stepped out of the supply post. He was unshaven, and the white of one of his eyes gleamed unwholesomely.
"Brill!" Garion exclaimed. Barak's eyes went flat.
Brill bowed to Taur Urgas with an unexpected grace. "Hail, Mighty King," he said. His tone was neutral, carrying neither respect nor fear.
"What are you doing here, Kordoch?" Taur Urgas demanded coldly.
"I'm on my master's business, dread king," Brill replied.
"What business would Ctuchik have in a place like this?"
"Something personal, Great King," Brill answered evasively.
"I like to keep track of you and the other Dagashi, Kordoch. When did you come back to Cthol Murgos?"
"A few months ago, Mighty Arm of Torak. If I'd known you were interested, I'd have sent word to you. The people my master wants me to deal with know I'm following them, so my movements aren't secret."
Taur Urgas laughed shortly, a sound without any warmth. "You must be getting old, Kordoch. Most Dagashi would have finished the business by now."
"These are rather special people." Brill shrugged. "It shouldn't take me much longer, however. The game is nearly over. Incidentally, Great King, I have a gift for you." He snapped his fingers sharply, and two of his henchmen came out of the building, dragging a third man between them. There was blood on the front of the captive's tunic, and his head hung down as if he were only semiconscious. Barak's breath hissed between his teeth.
"I thought you might like a bit of sport," Brill suggested.
"I'm the king of Cthol Murgos, Kordoch," Taur Urgas replied coldly. "I'm not amused by your attitude and I'm not in the habit of doing chores for the Dagashi. If you want him dead, kill him yourself."
"This would hardly be a chore, your Majesty," Brill said with an evil grin. "The man's an old friend of yours." He reached out, roughly grasped the prisoner's hair, and jerked his head up for the king to see.
It was Silk. His face was pale, and a deep cut on one side of his forehead

trickled blood down the side of his face.
"Behold the Drasnian spy Kheldar." Brill smirked. "I make a gift of him to your Majesty."
Taur Urgas began to smile then, his eyes lighting with a dreadful pleasure. "Splendid," he said. "You have the gratitude of your king, Kordoch. Your gift is beyond price." His smile grew broader. "Greetings, Prince Kheldar," he said, almost purring. "I've been waiting for the chance to see you again for a long time now. We have many old scores to settle, don't we?"
Silk seemed to stare back at the Murgo king, but Garion could not be sure if he were conscious enough even to comprehend what was happening to him.
"Abide here a bit, Prince of Drasnia," Taur Urgas gloated. "I'll want to give some special thought to your final entertainment, and I'll want to be sure you're fully awake to appreciate it. You deserve something exquisite, I think - probably lingering - and I certainly wouldn't want to disappoint you by rushing into it."

Chapter Twenty-two

BARAK AND GARION slid back down into the gully with the gravel rattling down the steep bank around them.
"They've got Silk," Barak reported quietly. "Brill's there. It looks as if he and his men caught Silk while he was trying to leave. They turned him over to Taur Urgas,"
Belgarath stood up slowly, a sick look on his face. "Is he-" He broke off.
"No," Barak answered. "He's still alive. It looks as if they roughed him up a little, but he seemed to be all right."
Belgarath let out a long, slow breath. "That's something, anyway."
"Taur Urgas seemed to know him," Barak continued. "It sounded as if Silk had done something that offended the king pretty seriously, and Taur Urgas looks like the kind of man who holds grudges."
"Are they holding him someplace where we can get to him?" Durnik asked.
"We couldn't tell," Garion answered. "They all talked for a while, and then several soliders took him around behind that building down there. We couldn't see where they took him from there."
"The Murgo who runs the place said something about a pit," Barak added.
"We have to do something, father," Aunt Pol said.
"I know, Pol. We'll come up with something." He turned to Barak again. "Haw many soldiers did Taur Urgas bring with him?"
"A couple of regiments at least. They're all over the place down there."
"We can translocate him, father," Aunt Pol suggested.
"That's a long way to lift something, Pol," he objected. "Besides, we'd have to know exactly where he's being held."
"I'll find that out." She reached up to unfasten her cloak.
"Better wait until after dark," he told her. "There aren't many owls in Cthol Murgos, and you'd attract attention in the daylight. Did Taur Urgas have any Grolims with him?" he asked Garion.
"I think I saw a couple."
"That's going to complicate things. Translocation makes an awful noise. We'll have Taur Urgas right on our heels when we leave."
"Do you have any other ideas, father?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Let me work on it," he replied. "At any rate, we can't do anything until it gets dark."
A low whistle came from some distance down the gully.
"Who's that?" Barak's hand went to his sword.
"Ho, Alorns." It was a hoarse whisper.
"Methinks it is the Nadrak Yarblek," Mandorallen said.

"How did he know we're here?" Barak demanded.
There was the crunching sound of footsteps, in the gravel, and Yarblek came around a bend in the gully. His fur cap was low over his face, and the collar of his felt overcoat was pulled up around his ears. "There you are," he said, sounding relieved.
"Are you alone?" Barak's voice was heavy with suspicion.
"Of course I'm alone," Yarblek snorted. "I told my servants to go on ahead. You certainly left in a hurry."
"We didn't feel like staying to greet Taur Urgas," Barak replied.
"It's probably just as well. I'd have had a great deal of trouble getting you out of that mess back there. The Murgo soldiers inspected every one of my people to be sure they were all Nadraks before they'd let me leave. Taur Urgas has Silk."
"We know," Barak said. "How did you find us?"
"You left the pegs pulled up at the back of my tent, and this hill's the closest cover on this side of the fair. I guessed which way you'd go, and you left a track here and there to confirm it." The Nadrak's coarse face was serious, and he showed no signs of his extended bout at the ale barrel. "We're going to have to get you out of here," he said. "Taur Urgas will be putting out patrols soon, and you're almost in his lap."
"We must rescue our companion first," Mandorallen told him.
"Silk? You'd better forget that. I'm afraid my old friend has switched his last pair of dice." He sighed. "I liked him, too."
"He's not dead, is he?" Durnik's voice was almost sick.
"Not yet," Yarblek replied, "but Taur Urgas plans to correct that when the sun comes up in the morning. I couldn't even get close enough to that pit to drop a dagger to him so he could open a vein. I'm afraid his last morning's going to be a bad one."
"Why are you trying to help us?" Barak asked bluntly.
"You'll have to excuse him, Yarblek," Aunt Pol said. "He's not familiar with Nadrak customs." She turned to Barak. "He invited you into his tent and offered you his ale. That makes you the same as his brother until sunrise tomorrow."
Yarblek smiled briefly at her. "You seem to know us quite well, girl," he observed. "I never got to see you dance, did I?"
"Perhaps another time," she replied.
"Perhaps so." He squatted and pulled a curved dagger from beneath his overcoat. He smoothed a patch of sand with his other hand and began sketching rapidly with his dagger point. "The Murgos are going to watch me," he said, "so I can't add half a dozen or so more people to my party without having them all over me. I think the best thing would be for you to wait here until dark. I'll move out to the east and stop a league or so on up the caravan track. As soon as it gets dark, you slip around and catch up with me. We'll work something out after that."
"Why did Taur Urgas tell you to leave?" Barak asked him.
Yarblek looked grim. "There's going to be a large accident tomorrow. Taur Urgas will immediately send an apology to Ran Borune - something about inexperienced troops chasing a band of brigands and mistaking honest merchants for bandits. He'll offer to pay reparation, and things will all be smoothed over. Pay is a magic word when you're dealing with Tolnedrans."
"He's going to massacre the whole camp?" Barak sounded stunned.
"That's his plan. He wants to clean all the westerners out of Cthol Murgos and he seems to think that a few such accidents will do the job for him."
Relg had been standing to one side, his large eyes lost in thought. Suddenly he stepped across the gully to where Yarblek's sketch was. He smoothed it out of the sand. "Can you show me exactly where this pit in which they're holding our friend is located?" he asked.

"It won't do you any good," Yarblek told him. "It's guarded by a dozen men. Silk's got quite a reputation, and Taur Urgas doesn't want him to get away."
"Just show me," Relg insisted.
Yarblek shrugged. "We're here on the north side." He roughed in the fair and the caravan route. "The supply station is here." He pointed with his dagger. "The pit's just beyond it at the base of that big hill on the south side."
"What kind of walls does it have?"
"Solid stone."
"Is it a natural fissure in the rock, or has it been dug out?"
"What difference does it make?"
"I need to know."
"I didn't see any tool marks," Yarblek replied, "and the opening at the top is irregular. It's probably just a natural hole."
Relg nodded. "And the hill behind it - is it rock or dirt?"
"Mostly rock. All of stinking Cthol Murgos is mostly rock."
Relg stood up. "Thank you," he said politely.
"You're not going to be able to tunnel through to him, if that's what you're thinking," Yarblek said, also standing and brushing the sand off the skirts of his overcoat. "You don't have time."
Belgarath's eyes were narrowed with thought. "Thanks, Yarblek," he said. "You've been a good friend."
"Anything to irritate the Murgos," the Nadrak said. "I wish I could do something for Silk."
"Don't give up on him yet."
"There isn't much hope, I'm afraid. I'd better be going. My people will wander off if I'm not there to watch them."
"Yarblek," Barak said, holding out his hand, "someday we'll have to get together and finish getting drunk."
Yarblek grinned at him and shook his hand. Then he turned and caught Aunt Pol in a rough embrace. "If you ever get bored with these Alorns, girl, my tent flap is always open to you."
"I'll keep that in mind, Yarblek," she replied demurely.
"Luck," Yarblek told them. "I'll wait for you until midnight." Then he turned and strode off down the gully.
"That's a good man there," Barak said. "I think I could actually get to like him."
"We must make plans for Prince Kheldar's rescue," Mandorallen declared, beginning to take his armor out of the packs strapped to one of the horses. "All else failing, we must of necessity resort to main force."
"You're backsliding again, Mandorallen," Barak said.
"That's already been taken care of," Belgarath told them.
Barak and Mandorallen stared at him.
"Put your armor away, Mandorallen," the old man instructed the knight. "You're not going to need it."
"Who's going to get Silk out of there?" Barak demanded.
"I am," Relg answered quietly. "How much longer is it going to be before it gets dark?"
"About an hour. Why?"
"I'll need some time to prepare myself."
"Have you got a plan?" Durnik asked.
Relg shrugged. "There isn't any need. We'll just circle around until we're behind that hill on the other side of the encampment. I'll go get our friend, and then we can leave."
"Just like that?" Barak asked.
"More or less. Please excuse me." Relg started to turn away.
"Wait a minute. Shouldn't Mandorallen and I go with you?"

"You wouldn't be able to follow me," Relg told him. He walked up the gully a short distance. After a moment, they could hear him muttering his prayers.
"Does he think he can pray him out of that pit?" Barak sounded disgusted.
"No," Belgarath replied. "He's going to go through the hill and carry Silk back out. That's why he was asking Yarblek all those questions."
"He's going to what?"
"You saw what he did at Prolgu - when he stuck his arm into the wall?"
"Well, yes, but "
"It's quite easy for him, Barak."
"What about Silk? How's he going to pull him through the rock?"
"I don't really know. He seems quite sure he can do it, though."
"If it doesn't work, Taur Urgas is going to have Silk roasting over a slow fire first thing tomorrow morning. You know that, don't you?"
Belgarath nodded somberly.
Barak shook his head. "It's unnatural," he grumbled.
"Don't let it upset you so much," Belgarath advised.
The light began to fade, and Relg continued to pray, his voice rising and falling in formal cadences. When it was fully dark, he came back to where the others waited. "I'm ready," he said quietly. "We can leave now."
"We'll circle to the west," Belgarath told them. "We'll lead the horses and stay under cover as much as we can."
"It will take us a couple hours," Durnik said.
"That's all right. It will give the soldiers time to settle down. Pol, see what the Grolims Garion saw are up to."
She nodded, and Garion felt the gentle push of her probing mind. "It's all right, father," she stated after a few moments. "They're preoccupied. Taur Urgas has them conducting services for him."
"Let's go, then," the old man said.
They moved carefully down the gully, leading the horses. The night was murky, and the wind bit at them as they came out from between the protecting gravel banks. The plain to the east of the fair was dotted with a hundred fires whipping in the wind and marking the vast encampment of the army of Taur Urgas.
Relg grunted and covered his eyes with his hands.
"What's wrong?" Garion asked him.
"Their fires," Relg said. "They stab at my eyes."
"Try not to look at them."
"My God has laid a hard burden on me, Belgarion." Relg sniffed and wiped at his nose with his sleeve. "I'm not meant to be out in the open like this."
"You'd better have Aunt Pol give you something for that cold. It will taste awful, but you'll feel better after you drink it."
"Perhaps," Relg said, still shielding his eyes from the dim flicker of the Murgo watch fires.
The hill on the south side of the fair was a low outcropping of granite. Although eons of constant wind had covered it for the most part with a thick layer of blown sand and dirt, the rock itself lay solid beneath its covering mantle. They stopped behind it, and Relg began carefully to brush the dirt from a sloping granite face.
"Wouldn't it be closer if you started over there?" Barak asked quietly.
"Too much dirt," Relg replied.
"Dirt or rock - what's the difference?"
"A great difference. You wouldn't understand." He leaned forward and put his tongue to the granite face, seeming actually to taste the rock. "This is going to take a while," he said. He drew himself up, began to pray, and slowly pushed himself directly into the rock.
Barak shuddered and quickly averted his eyes.
"What ails thee, my Lord?" Mandorallen asked.

"It makes me cold all over just watching that," Barak replied.
"Our new friend is perhaps not the best of companions," Mandorallen said, "but if his gift succeeds in freeing Prince Kheldar, I will embrace him gladly and call him brother."
"If it takes him very long, we're going to be awfully close to this spot when morning comes and Taur Urgas finds out that Silk's gone," Barak mentioned.
"We'll just have to wait and see what happens," Belgarath told him. The night dragged by interminably. The wind moaned and whistled around the rocks on the flanks of the stony hill, and the sparse thornbushes rustled stiffly. They waited. A growing fear oppressed Garion as the hours passed. More and more, he became convinced that they had lost Relg as well as Silk. He felt that same sick emptiness he had felt when it had been necessary to leave the wounded Lelldorin behind back in Arendia. He realized, feeling a bit guilty about it, that he hadn't thought about Lelldorin in months. He began to wonder how well the young hothead had recovered from his wound - or even if he had recovered. His thoughts grew bleaker as the minutes crawled.
Then, with no warning - with not even a sound - Relg stepped out of the rock face he had entered hours before. Astride his broad back and clinging desperately to him was Silk. The rat-faced little man's eyes were wide with horror, and his hair seemed to be actually standing on end.
They all crowded around the two, trying to keep their jubilation quiet, conscious of the fact that they were virtually on top of an army of Murgos.
"I'm sorry it took so long," Relg said, jerking his shoulders uncomfortably until Silk finally slid off his back. "There's a different kind of rock in the middle of the hill. I had to make certain adjustments."
Silk stood, gasping and shuddering uncontrollably. Finally he turned on Relg. "Don't ever do that to me again," he blurted. "Not ever."
"What's the trouble?" Barak asked.
"I don't want to talk about it."
"I had feared we had lost thee, my friend," Mandorallen said, grasping Silk's hand.
"How did Brill catch you?" Barak asked.
"I was careless. I didn't expect him to be here. His men threw a net over me as I was galloping through a ravine. My horse fell and broke his neck."
"Hettar's not going to like that."
"I'll cut the price of the horse out of Brill's skin - someplace close to the bone, I think."
"Why does Taur Urgas hate you so much?" Barak asked curiously.
"I was in Rak Goska a few years ago. A Tolnedran agent made a few false charges against me - I never found out exactly why. Taur Urgas sent some soldiers out to arrest me. I didn't particularly feel like being arrested, so I argued with the soldiers a bit. Several of them died during the argument - those things happen once in a while. Unfortunately, one of the casualties was Taur Urgas' oldest son. The king of the Murgos took it personally. He's very narrow-minded sometimes."
Barak grinned. "He'll be terribly disappointed in the morning when he finds out that you've left."
"I know," Silk replied. "He'll probably take this part of Cthol Murgos apart stone by stone trying to find me."
"I think it's time we left," Belgarath agreed.
"I thought you'd never get around to that," Silk said.

Chapter Twenty-three

THEY RODE HARD through the rest of the night and for most of the following day. By evening their horses were stumbling with exhaustion, and Garion was as numb

with weariness as with the biting cold.
"We'll have to find shelter of some kind," Durnik said as they reined in to look for a place to spend the night. They had moved up out of the series of connecting valleys through which the South Caravan Route wound and had entered the ragged, barren wilderness of the mountains of central Cthol Murgos. It had grown steadily colder as they had climbed into that vast jumble of rock and sand, and the endless wind moaned among the treeless crags. Durnik's face was creased with fatigue, and the gritty dust that drove before the wind had settled into the creases, etching them deeper. "We can't spend the night in the open," he declared. "Not with this wind."
"Go that way," Relg said, pointing toward a rockfall on the steep slope they were climbing. His eyes were squinted almost shut, though the sky was still overcast and the fading daylight was pale. "There's shelter there - a cave."
They had all begun to look at Relg in a somewhat different light since his rescue of Silk. His demonstration that he could, when necessary, take decisive action made him seem less an encumbrance and more like a companion. Belgarath had finally convinced him that he could pray on horseback just as well as he could on his knees, and his frequent devotions no longer interrupted their journey. His praying thus had become less an inconvenience and more a personal idiosyncrasy - somewhat like Mandorallen's archaic speech or Silk's sardonic witticisms.
"You're sure there's a cave?" Barak asked him.
Relg nodded. "I can feel it."
They turned and rode toward the rockfall. As they drew closer, Relg's eagerness became more obvious. He pushed his horse into the lead and nudged the tired beast into a trot, then a canter. At the edge of the rockslide, he swung down from his horse, stepped behind a large boulder, and disappeared.
"It looks as if he knew what he was talking about," Durnik observed. "I'll be glad to get out of this wind."
The opening to the cave was narrow, and it took some pushing and dragging to persuade the horses to squeeze through; but once they were inside, the cave widened out into a large, low-ceilinged chamber.
Durnik looked around with approval. "Good place." He unfastened his axe from the back of his saddle. "We'll need firewood."
"I'll help you," Garion said.
"I'll go, too," Silk offered quickly. The little man was looking around at the stone walls and ceiling nervously, and he seemed obviously relieved as soon as the three of them were back outside.
"What's wrong?" Durnik asked him.
"After last night, closed-in places make me a little edgy," Silk replied.
"What was it like?" Garion asked him curiously. "Going through stone, I mean?"
Silk shuddered. "It was hideous. We actually seeped into the rock. I could feel it sliding through me."
"It got you out, though," Durnik reminded him.
"I think I'd almost rather have stayed," Silk shuddered again. "Do we have to talk about it?"
Firewood was difficult to find on that barren mountainside and even more difficult to cut. The tough, springy thornbushes resisted the blows of Durnik's axe tenaciously. After an hour, as darkness began to close in on them, they had gathered only three very scanty armloads.
"Did you see anybody?" Barak asked as they reentered the cave.
"No," Silk replied.
"Taur Urgas is probably looking for you."
"I'm sure of it." Silk looked around. "Where's Relg?"
"He went back into the cave to rest his eyes," Belgarath told him. "He found water - ice actually. We'll have to thaw it before we can water the horses."

Durnik's fire was tiny, and he fed it with twigs and small bits of wood, trying to conserve their meager fuel supply. It proved to be an uncomfortable night.
In the morning Aunt Pol looked critically at Relg. "You don't seem to be coughing any more," she told him. "How do you feel?"
"I'm fine," he replied, being careful not to look directly at her. The fact that she was a woman seemed to make him terribly uncomfortable, and he tried to avoid her as much as possible.
"What happened to that cold you had?"
"I don't think it could go through the rock. It was gone when I brought him out of the hillside last night."
She looked at him gravely. "I'd never thought of that," she mused. "No one's ever been able to cure a cold before."
"A cold isn't really that serious a thing, Polgara," Silk told her with a pained look. "I'll guarantee you that sliding through rock is never going to be a popular cure."
It took them four days to cross the mountains to reach the vast basin Belgarath referred to as the Wasteland of Murgos and another half day to make their way down the steep basalt face to the black sand of the floor.
"What hath caused this huge depression?" Mandorallen asked, looking around at the barren expanse of scab-rock, black sand and dirty gray salt flats.
"There was an inland sea here once," Belgarath replied. "When Torak cracked the world, the upheaval broke away the eastern edge and all the water drained out."
"That must have been something to see," Barak said.
"We had other things on our minds just then."
"What's that?" Garion asked in alarm, pointing at something sticking out of the sand just ahead of them. The thing had a huge head with a long, sharp-toothed snout. Its eye sockets, as big as buckets, seemed to stare balefully at them.
"I don't think it has a name," Belgarath answered calmly. "They lived in the sea before the water escaped. They've all been dead now for thousands of years."
As they passed the dead sea monster, Garion could see that it was only a skeleton. Its ribs were as big as the rafters of a barn, and its vast, bleached skull larger than a horse. The vacant eye sockets watched them as they rode past.
Mandorallen, dressed once again in full armor, stared at the skull. "A fearsome beast," he murmured.
"Look at the size of the teeth," Barak said in an awed voice. "It could bite a man in two with one snap."
"That happened a few times," Belgarath told him, "until people learned to avoid this place."
They had moved only a few leagues out into the wasteland when the wind picked up, scouring along the black dunes under the slate-gray sky. The sand began to shift and move and then, as the wind grew even stronger, it began to whip off the tops of the dunes, stinging their faces.
"We'd better take shelter," Belgarath shouted over the shrieking wind. "This sandstorm's going to get worse as we move out farther from the mountains."
"Are there any caves around?" Durnik asked Relg.
Relg shook his head. "None that we can use. They're all filled with sand."
"Over there." Barak pointed at a pile of scab-rock rising from the edge of a salt flat. "If we go to the leeward side, it will keep the wind off us."
"No," Belgarath shouted. "We have to stay to the windward. The sand will pile up at the back. We could be buried alive."
They reached the rock pile and dismounted. The wind tore at their clothing, and the sand billowed across the wasteland like a vast, black cloud.
"This is poor shelter, Belgarath," Barak roared, his beard whipping about his shoulders. "How long is this likely to last?"
"A day - two days - sometimes as long as a week."

Durnik had bent to pick up a piece of broken scab-rock. He looked at it carefully, turning it over in his hands. "It's fractured into square pieces," he said, holding it up. "It will stack well. We can build a wall to shelter us."
"That will take quite a while," Barak objected.
"Did you have something else to do?"
By evening they had the wall up to shoulder height, and by anchoring the tents to the top of it and higher up on the side of the rock-pile, they were able to get in out of the worst of the wind. It was crowded, since they had to shelter the horses as well, but at least it was out of the storm.
They huddled in their cramped shelter for two days with the wind shrieking insanely around them and the taut tent canvas drumming overhead. Then, when the wind finally blew itself out and the black sand began to settle slowly, the silence seemed almost oppressive.
As they emerged, Relg glanced up once, then covered his face and sank to his knees, praying desperately. The clearing sky overhead was a bright, chilly blue. Garion moved over to stand beside the praying fanatic. "It will be all right, Relg," he told him. He reached out his hand without thinking.
"Don't touch me," Relg said and continued to pray.
Silk stood, beating the dust and sand out of his clothing. "Do these storms come up often?" he asked.
"It's the season for them," Belgarath replied.
"Delightful," Silk said sourly.
Then a deep rumbling sound seemed to come from deep in the earth beneath them, and the ground heaved. "Earthquake!" Belgarath warned sharply. "Get the horses out of there!"
Durnik and Barak dashed back inside the shelter and led the horses out from behind the trembling wall and onto the salt flat.
After several moments the heaving subsided.
"Is Ctuchik doing that?" Silk demanded. "Is he going to fight us with earthquakes and sandstorms?"
Belgarath shook his head. "No. Nobody's strong enough to do that. That's what's causing it." He pointed to the south. Far across the wasteland they could make out a line of dark peaks. A thick plume was rising from one of them, towering into the air, boiling up in great black billows as it rose. "Volcano," the old man said. "Probably the same one that erupted last summer and dropped all the ash on Sthiss Tor."
"A fire-mountain?" Barak rumbled, staring at the great cloud that was growing up out of the mountaintop. "I've never seen one before."
"That's fifty leagues away, Belgarath," Silk stated. "Would it make the earth shake even here?"
The old man nodded. "The earth's all one piece, Silk. The force that's causing that eruption is enormous. It's bound to cause a few ripples. I think we'd better get moving. Taur Urgas' patrols will be out looking for us again, now that the sandstorm's blown over."
"Which way do we go?" Durnik asked, looking around, trying to get his bearings.
"That way." Belgarath pointed toward the smoking mountain.
"I was afraid you were going to say that," Barak grumbled.
They rode at a gallop for the rest of the day, pausing only to rest the horses. The dreary wasteland seemed to go on forever. The black sand had shifted and piled into new dunes during the sandstorm, and the thick-crusted salt flats had been scoured by the wind until they were nearly white. They passed a number of the huge, bleached skeletons of the sea monsters which had once inhabited this inland ocean. The bony shapes appeared almost to be swimming up out of the black sand, and the cold, empty eye sockets seemed somehow hungry as they galloped past.
They stopped for the night beside another shattered outcropping of scab-rock.

Although the wind had died, it was still bitterly cold, and firewood was scanty.
The next morning as they set out again, Garion began to smell a strange, foul odor. "What's that stink?" he asked.
"The Tarn of Cthok," Belgarath replied. "It's all that's left of the sea that used to be here. It would have dried out centuries ago, but it's fed by underground springs."
"It smells like rotten eggs," Barak said.
"There's quite a bit of sulfur in the ground water around here. I wouldn't drink from the lake."
"I wasn't planning to." Barak wrinkled his nose.
The Tarn of Cthok was a vast, shallow pond filled with oily-looking water that reeked like all the dead fish in the world. Its surface steamed in the icy air, and the wisps of steam gagged them with the dreadful stink. When they reached the southern tip of the lake, Belgarath signalled for a halt. "This next stretch is dangerous," he told them soberly. "Don't let your horses wander. Be sure you stay on solid rock. Ground that looks firm quite often won't be, and there are some other things we'll need to watch out for. Keep your eyes on me and do what I do.
When I stop, you stop. When I run, you run." He looked thoughtfully at Relg. The Ulgo had bound another cloth across his eyes, partially to keep out the light and partially to hide the expanse of the sky above him.
"I'll lead his horse, Grandfather," Garion offered.
Belgarath nodded. "It's the only way, I suppose."
"He's going to have to get over that eventually," Barak said.
"Maybe, but this isn't the time or place for it. Let's go." The old man moved forward at a careful walk.
The region ahead of them steamed and smoked as they approached it. They passed a large pool of gray mud that bubbled and fumed, and beyond it a sparkling spring of clear water, boiling merrily and cascading a scalding brook down into the mud. "At least it's warmer," Silk observed.
Mandorallen's face was streaming perspiration beneath his heavy helmet. "Much warmer," he agreed.
Belgarath had been riding slowly, his head turned slightly as he listened intently.
"Stop!" he said sharply.
They all reined in.
Just ahead of them another pool suddenly erupted as a dirty gray geyser of liquid mud spurted thirty feet into the air. It continued to spout for several minutes, then gradually subsided.
"Now!" Belgarath barked. "Run!" He kicked his horse's flanks, and they galloped past the still-heaving surface of the pool, the hooves of their horses splashing in the hot mud that had splattered across their path. When they had passed, the old man slowed again and once more rode with his ear cocked toward the ground.
"What's he listening for?" Barak asked Polgara.
"The geysers make a certain noise just before they erupt," she answered.
"I didn't hear anything."
"You don't know what to listen for."
Behind them the mud geyser spouted again.
"Garion!" Aunt Pol snapped as he turned to look back at the mud plume rising from the pool. "Watch where you're going!"
He jerked his eyes back. The ground ahead of him looked quite ordinary.
"Back up," she told him. "Durnik, get the reins of Relg's horse."
Durnik took the reins, and Garion began to turn his mount.
"I said to back up," she repeated.
Garion's horse put one front hoof on the seemingly solid ground, and the hoof sank out of sight. The horse scrambled back and stood trembling as Garion held

him in tightly. Then, carefully, step by step, Garion backed to the solid rock of the path they followed.
"Quicksand," Silk said with a sharp intake of his breath.
"It's all around us," Aunt Pol agreed. "Don't wander off the path - any of you."
Silk stared with revulsion at the hoofprint of Garion's horse, disappearing on the surface of the quicksand. "How deep is it?"
"Deep enough," Aunt Pol replied.
They moved on, carefully picking their way through the quagmires and quicksand, stopping often as more geysers - some of mud, some of frothy, boiling water - shot high into the air. By late afternoon, when they reached a low ridge of hard, solid rock beyond the steaming bog, they were all exhausted from the effort of the concentration it had taken to pass through the hideous region.
"Do we have to go through any more like that?" Garion asked.
"No," Belgarath replied. "It's just around the southern edges of the Tarn."
"Can one not go around it, then?" Mandorallen inquired.
"It's much longer if you do, and the bog helps to discourage pursuit."
"What's that?" Relg cried suddenly.
"What's what?" Barak asked him.
"I heard something just ahead - a kind of click, like two pebbles knocking together."
Garion felt a quick kind of wave against his face, almost like an unseen ripple in the air, and he knew that Aunt Pol was searching ahead of them with her mind.
"Murgos!" she said.
"How many?" Belgarath asked her.
"Six and a Grolim. They're waiting for us just behind the ridge."
"Only six?" Mandorallen said, sounding a little disappointed.
Barak grinned tightly. "Light entertainment."
"You're getting to be as bad as he is," Silk told the big Cherek.
"Thinkest thou that we might need some plan, my Lord?" Mandorallen asked Barak.
"Not really," Barak replied. "Not for just six. Let's go spring their trap."
The two warriors moved into the lead, unobtrusively loosening their swords in their scabbards.
"Has the sun gone down yet?" Relg asked Garion.
"It's just setting."
Relg pulled the binding from around his eyes and tugged down the dark veil. He winced and squinted his large eyes almost shut.
"You're going to hurt them," Garion told him. "You ought to leave them covered until it gets dark."
"I might need them," Relg said as they rode up the ridge toward the waiting Murgo ambush.
The Murgos gave no warning. They rode out from behind a large pile of black rock and galloped directly at Mandorallen and Barak, their swords swinging. The two warriors, however, were waiting for them and reacted without that instant of frozen surprise which might have made the attack successful. Mandorallen swept his sword from its sheath even as he drove his warhorse directly into the mount of one of the charging Murgos. He rose in his stirrups and swung a mighty blow downward, splitting the Murgo's head with his heavy blade. The horse, knocked off his feet by the impact, fell heavily backward on top of his dying rider.
Barak, also charging at the attackers, chopped another Murgo out of the saddle with three massive blows, spattering bright red blood on the sand and rock around them.
A third Murgo sidestepped Mandorallen's charge and struck at the knight's back, but his blade clanged harmlessly off the steel armor. The Murgo desperately raised his sword to strike again, but stiffened and slid from his saddle as Silk's skilfully thrown dagger sank into his neck, just below the ear.
A dark-robed Grolim in his polished steel mask had stepped out from behind the

rocks. Garion could quite clearly feel the priest's exultation turning to dismay as Barak and Mandorallen systematically chopped his warriors to pieces. The Grolim drew himself up, and Garion sensed that he was gathering his will to strike. But it was too late. Relg had already closed on him. The zealot's heavy shoulders surged as he grasped the front of the Grolim's robe with his knotted hands. Without apparent effort he lifted and pushed the man back against the flattened face of a house-sized boulder.

At first it appeared that Relg only intended to hold the Grolim pinned against the rock until the others could assist him with the struggling captive, but there was a subtle difference. The set of his shoulders indicated that he had not finished the action he had begun with lifting the man from his feet. The Grolim hammered at Relg's head and shoulders with his fists, but Relg pushed at him inexorably. The rock against which the Grolim was pinned seemed to shimmer slightly around him.

"Relg - no!" Silk's cry was strangled.

The dark-robed Grolim began to sink into the stone face, his arms flailing wildly as Relg pushed him in with a dreadful slowness. As he went deeper into the rock, the surface closed smoothly over him. Relg continued to push, his arms sliding into the stone as he sank the Grolim deeper and deeper. The priest's two protruding hands continued to twitch and writhe, even after the rest of his body had been totally submerged. Then Relg drew his arms out of the stone, leaving the Grolim behind. The two hands sticking out of the rock opened once in mute supplication, then stiffened into dead claws.

Behind him, Garion could hear the muffled sound of Silk's retching. Barak and Mandorallen had by now engaged two of the remaining Murgos, and the sound of clashing sword blades rang in the chill air. The last Murgo, his eyes wide with fright, wheeled his horse and bolted. Without a word, Durnik jerked his axe free of his saddle and galloped after him. Instead of striking the man down, however, Durnik cut across in front of his opponent's horse, turning him, driving him back. The panic-stricken Murgo flailed at his horse's flanks with the flat of his sword, turning away from the grim-faced smith, and plunged at a dead run back up over the ridge with Durnik close behind him.

The last two Murgos were down by then, and Barak and Mandorallen, both wild-eyed with the exultation of battle, were looking around for more enemies.

"Where's that last one?" Barak demanded.

"Durnik's chasing him," Garion said.

"We can't let him get away. He'll bring others."

"Durnik's going to take care of it," Belgarath told him.

Barak fretted. "Durnik's a good man, but he's not really a warrior. Maybe I'd better go help him."

From beyond the ridge there was a sudden scream of horror, then another. The third cut off quite suddenly, and there was silence.

After several minutes, Durnik came riding back alone, his face somber.

"What happened?" Barak asked. "He didn't get away, did he?"

Durnik shook his head. "I chased him into the bog, and he ran into some quicksand."

"Why didn't you cut him down with your axe?"

"I don't really like hitting people," Durnik replied.

Silk was staring at Durnik, his face still ashen. "So you just chased him into quicksand instead and then stood there and watched him go down? Durnik, that's monstrous!"

"Dead is dead," Durnik told him with uncharacteristic bluntness. "When it's over, it doesn't really matter how it happened, does it?" He looked a bit thoughtful. "I am sorry about the horse, though."

Chapter Twenty-four

THE NEXT MORNING they followed the ridgeline that angled off toward the east. The wintry sky above them was an icy blue, and there was no warmth to the sun. Relg kept his eyes veiled against the light and muttered prayers as he rode to ward off his panic. Several times they saw dust clouds far out on the desolation of sand and salt flats to the south, but they were unable to determine whether the clouds were caused by Murgo patrols or vagrant winds.

About noon, the wind shifted and blew in steadily from the south. A ponderous cloud, black as ink, blotted out the jagged line of peaks lying along the southern horizon. It moved toward them with a kind of ominous inexorability, and flickers of lightning glimmered in its sooty underbelly.

"That's a bad storm coming, Belgarath," Barak rumbled, staring at the cloud.

Belgarath shook his head. "It's not a storm," he replied. "It's ashfall. That volcano out there is erupting again, and the wind's blowing the ash this way."

Barak made a face, then shrugged. "At least we won't have to worry about being seen, once it starts," he said.

"The Grolims won't be looking for us with their eyes, Barak," Aunt Pol reminded him.

Belgarath scratched at his beard. "We'll have to take steps to deal with that, I suppose."

"This is a large group to shield, father," Aunt Pol pointed out, "and that's not even counting the horses."

"I think you can manage it, Pol. You were always very good at it."

"I can hold up my side as long as you can hold up yours, Old Wolf."

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to help you, Pol. Ctuchik himself is looking for us. I've felt him several times already, and I'm going to have to concentrate on him. If he decides to strike at us, he'll come very fast. I'll have to be ready for him, and I can't do that if I'm all tangled up in a shield."

"I can't do it alone, father," she protested. "Nobody can enclose this many men and horses without help."

"Garion can help you."

"Me?" Garion jerked his eyes off the looming cloud to stare at his grandfather.

"He's never done it before, father," Aunt Pol pointed out.

"He's going to have to learn sometime."

"This is hardly the time or place for experimentation."

"He'll do just fine. Walk him through it a time or two until he gets the hang of it."

"Exactly what is it I'm supposed to do?" Garion asked apprehensively.

Aunt Pol gave Belgarath a hard look and then turned to Garion. "I'll show you dear," she said. "The first thing you have to do is stay calm. It really isn't all that difficult."

"But you just said-"

"Never mind what I said, dear. Just pay attention."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked doubtfully.

"The first thing is to relax," she replied, "and think about sand and rock."

"That's all?"

"Just do that first. Concentrate."

He thought about sand and rock.

"No, Garion, not white sand. Black sand - like the sand all around us."

"You didn't say that."

"I didn't think I had to."

Belgarath started to laugh.

"Do you want to do this, father?" she demanded crossly. Then she turned back to Garion. "Do it again, dear. Try to get it right this time."

He fixed it in his mind.

"That's better," she told him. "Now, as soon as you get sand and rock firmly in your mind, I want you to sort of push the idea out in a half circle so that it covers your entire right side. I'll take care of the left."
He strained with it. It was the hardest thing he had ever done. "Don't push quite so hard, Garion. You're wrinkling it, and it's very hard for me to make the seams match when you do that. Just keep it steady and smooth."
"I'm sorry." He smoothed it out.
"How does it look, father?" she asked the old man.
Garion felt a tentative push against the idea he was holding.
"Not bad, Pol," Belgarath replied. "Not bad at all. The boy's got talent."
"Just exactly what are we doing?" Garion asked. In spite of the chill, he felt sweat standing out on his forehead.
"You're making a shield," Belgarath told him. "You enclose yourself in the idea of sand and rock, and it merges with the real sand and rock all around us. When Grolims go looking for things with their minds, they're looking for men and horses. They'll sweep right past us, because all they'll see here is more sand and more rock."
"That's all there is to it?" Garion was quite pleased with how simple it was.
"There's a bit more, dear," Aunt Pol said. "We're going to extend it now so that it covers all of us. Go out slowly, a few feet at a time."
That was much less simple. He tore the fabric of the idea several times before he got it pushed out as far as Aunt Pol wanted it. He felt a strange merging of his mind with hers along the center of the idea where the two sides joined.
"I think we've got it now, father," Aunt Pol said.
"I told you he could do it, Pol."
The purple-black cloud was rolling ominously up the sky toward them, and faint rumbles of thunder growled along its leading edge.
"If that ash is anything like what it was in Nyissa, we're going to be wandering blind out here, Belgarath," Barak said.
"Don't worry about it," the sorcerer replied. "I've got a lock on Rak Cthol. The Grolims aren't the only ones who can locate things that way. Let's move out."
They started along the ridge again as the cloud blotted out the sky overhead. The thunder shocks were a continuous rumble, and lightning seethed in the boiling cloud. The lightning had an arid, crackling quality about it as the billions of tiny particles seethed and churned, building enormous static discharges. Then the first specks of drifting ash began to settle down through the icy air, as Belgarath led them down off the ridge and out onto the sand flats.
By the end of the first hour, Garion found that holding the image in his mind had grown easier. It was no longer necessary to concentrate all his attention on it as it had been at first. By the end of the second hour, it had become no more than tedious. To relieve the boredom of it as they rode through the thickening ashfall, he thought about one of the huge skeletons they had passed when they had first entered the wasteland. Painstakingly he constructed one of them and placed it in the image he was holding. On the whole he thought it looked rather good, and it gave him something to do.
"Garion," Aunt Pol said crisply, "please don't try to be creative."
"What?"
"Just stick to sand. The skeleton's very nice, but it looks a bit peculiar with only one side."
"One side?"
"There wasn't a skeleton on my side of the image - just yours. Keep it simple, Garion. Don't embellish."
They rode on, their faces muffled to keep the choking ash out of their mouths and noses. Garion felt a tentative push against the image he was holding. It seemed to flutter against his mind, feeling almost like the wriggling touch of

the tadpoles he had once caught in the pond at Faldor's farm.
"Hold it steady, Garion," Aunt Pol warned. "That's a Grolim."
"Did he see us?"
"No. There - he's moving on now." And the fluttering touch was gone.
They spent the night in another of the piles of broken rock that dotted the wasteland. Durnik once again devised a kind of low, hollowed-out shelter of piled rock and anchored-down tent cloth. They took a cold supper of bread and dried meat and built no fire. Garion and Aunt Pol took turns holding the image of empty sand over them like an umbrella. He discovered that it was much easier when they weren't moving.
The ash was still falling the next morning, but the sky was no longer the inky black it had been the day before. "I think it's thinning out, Belgarath," Silk said as they saddled their horses. "If it blows over, we'll have to start dodging patrols again."
The old man nodded. "We'd better hurry," he agreed. "There's a place I know of where we can hide - about five miles north of the city. I'd like to get there before this ashfall subsides. You can see for ten leagues in any direction from the walls of Rak Cthol."
"Are the walls so high, then?" Mandorallen asked.
"Higher than you can imagine."
"Higher even than the walls of Vo Mimbre?"
"Ten times higher - fifty times higher. You'll have to see it to understand."
They rode hard that day. Garion and Aunt Pol held their shield of thought in place, but the searching touches of the Grolims came mare frequently now. Several times the push against Garion's mind was very strong and came without warning.
"They know what we're doing, father," Aunt Pol told the old man. "They're trying to penetrate the screen."
"Hold it firm," he replied. "You know what to do if one of them breaks through."
She nodded, her face grim.
"Warn the boy."
She nodded again, then turned to Garion. "Listen to me carefully, dear," she said gravely. "The Grolims are trying to take us by surprise. The best shield in the world can be penetrated if you hit it quickly enough and hard enough. If one of them does manage to break through, I'm going to tell you to stop. When I say stop, I want you to erase the image immediately and put your mind completely away from it."
"I don't understand."
"You don't have to. Just do exactly as I say. If I tell you to stop, pull your thought out of contact with mine instantly. I'll be doing something that's very dangerous, and I don't want you getting hurt."
"Can't I help?"
"No, dear. Not this time."
They rode on. The ashfall grew even thinner, and the sky overhead turned a hazy, yellowish blue. The ball of the sun, pale and round like a full moon, appeared not far above the southwestern horizon.
"Garion, stop!"
What came was not a push but a sharp stab. Garion gasped and jerked his mind away, throwing the image of sand from him. Aunt Pol stiffened, and her eyes were blazing. Her hand flicked a short gesture, and she spoke a single world. The surge Garion felt as her will unleashed was overpowering. With a momentary dismay, he realized that his mind was still linked to hers. The merging that had held the image together was too strong, too complete to break. He felt himself drawn with her as their still joined minds lashed out like a whip. They flashed back along the faint trail of thought that had stabbed at the shield and they found its origin. They touched another mind, a mind filled with the exultation

of discovery. Then, sure of her target now, Aunt Pol struck with the full force of her will. The mind they had touched flinched back, trying to break off the contact, but it was too late for that now. Garion could feel the other mind swelling, expanding unbearably. Then it suddenly burst, exploding into gibbering insanity, shattering as horror upon horror overwhelmed it. There was flight then, blind shrieking flight across dark stones of some kind, a flight with the single thought of a dreadful, final escape. The stones were gone, and there was a terrible sense of falling from some incalculable height. Garion wrenched his mind away from it.

"I told you to get clear," Aunt Pol snapped at him.

"I couldn't help it. I couldn't get loose."

"What happened?" Silk's face was startled.

"A Grolim broke through," she replied.

"Did he see us?"

"For a moment. It doesn't matter. He's dead now."

"You killed him? How?"

"He forgot to defend himself. I followed his thought back."

"He went crazy," Garion said in a choked voice, still filled with the horror of the encounter. "He jumped off something very high. He wanted to jump. It was the only way he could escape from what was happening to him." Garion felt sick.

"It was awfully noisy, Pol," Belgarath said with a pained expression.

"You haven't been that clumsy in years."

"I had this passenger." She gave Garion an icy look.

"It wasn't my fault," Garion protested. "You were holding on so tight I couldn't break loose. You had us all tied together."

"You do that sometimes, Pol," Belgarath told her. "The contact gets a little too personal, and you seem to want to take up permanent residence. It has to do with love, I imagine."

"Do you have any idea what they're talking about?" Barak asked Silk.

"I wouldn't even want to guess."

Aunt Pol was looking thoughtfully at Garion. "Perhaps it was my fault," she admitted finally.

"You're going to have to let go someday, Pol," Belgarath said gravely.

"Perhaps - but not just yet."

"You'd better put the screen back up," the old man suggested. "They know we're out here now, and there'll be others looking for us."

She nodded. "Think about sand again, Garion."

The ash continued to settle as they rode through the afternoon, obscuring less and less with each passing mile. They were able to make out the shapes of the jumbled piles of rock around them and a few rounded spires of basalt thrusting up out of the sand. As they approached another of the low rock ridges that cut across the wasteland at regular intervals, Garion saw something dark and enormously high looming in the haze ahead.

"We can hide here until dark," Belgarath said, dismounting behind the ridge.

"Are we there?" Durnik asked, looking around.

"That's Rak Cthol." The old man pointed at the ominous shadow. Barak squinted at it.

"I thought that was just a mountain."

"It is. Rak Cthol's built on top of it."

"It's almost like Prolgu then, isn't it?"

"The locations are similar, but Ctuchik the magician lives here. That makes it quite different from Prolgu."

"I thought Ctuchik was a sorcerer," Garion said, puzzled. "Why do you keep calling him a magician?"

"It's a term of contempt," Belgarath replied. "It's considered a deadly insult in our particular society."

They picketed their horses among some large rocks on the back side of the ridge and climbed the forty or so feet to the top, where they took cover to watch and wait for nightfall.
As the settling ash thinned even more, the peak began to emerge from the haze. It was not so much a mountain as a rock pinnacle towering up out of the wasteland. Its base, surrounded by a mass of shattered rubble, was fully five miles around, and its sides were sheer and black as night.
"How high loth it reach?" Mandorallen asked, his voice dropping almost unconsciously into a half whisper.
"Somewhat more than a mile," Belgarath replied.
A steep causeway rose sharply from the floor of the wasteland to encircle the upper thousand or so feet of the black tower.
"I imagine that took a while to build," Barak noted.
"About a thousand years," Belgarath answered. "While it was under construction, the Murgos bought every slave the Nyissans could put their hands on."
"A grim business," Mandorallen observed.
"It's a grim place," Belgarath agreed.
As the chill breeze blew off the last of the haze, the shape of the city perched atop the crag began to emerge. The walls were as black as the sides of the pinnacle, and black turrets jutted out from them, seemingly at random. Dark spires rose within the walls, stabbing up into the evening sky like spears.
There was a foreboding, evil air about the black city of the Grolims. It perched, brooding, atop its peak, looking out over the savage wasteland of sand, rock, and sulfur-reeking bogs that encircled it. The sun, sinking into the banks of cloud and ash along the jagged western rim of the wasteland, bathed the grim fortress above them in a sotty crimson glow. The walls of Rak Cthol seemed to bleed. It was as if all the blood that had been spilled on all the altars of Torak since the worldbegan had been gathered together to stain the dread city above them and that all the oceans of the world would not be enough to wash it clean again.

Chapter Twenty-five

AS THE LAST trace of light slid from the sky, they moved carefully down off the ridge and crossed the ash-covered sand toward the rock tower looming above them. When they reached the shattered scree at its base, they dismounted, left the horses with Durnik and climbed up the steeply sloped rubble to the rock face of the basalt pinnacle that blotted out the stars. Although Relg had been shuddering and hiding his eyes a moment before, he moved almost eagerly now. He stopped and then carefully placed his hands and forehead against the icy rock.
"Well?" Belgarath asked after a moment, his voice hushed but carrying a note of dreadful concern: "Was I right? Are there caves?"
"There are open spaces," Relg replied. "They're a long way inside."
"Can you get to them?"
"There's no point. They don't go anywhere. They're just closed-in hollows."
"Now what?" Silk asked.
"I don't know," Belgarath admitted, sounding terribly disappointed. "Let's try a little farther around," Relg suggested. "I can feel some echoes here. There might be something off in that direction." He pointed.
"I want one thing clearly understood right here and now," Silk announced, planting his feet firmly. "I'm not going to go through any more rock. If there's going to be any of that, I'll stay behind."
"We'll come up with something," Barak told him.
Silk shook his head stubbornly. "No passing through rock," he declared adamantly.
Relg was already moving along the face, his fingers lightly touching the basalt. "It's getting stronger," he told them. "It's large and it goes up." He moved on another hundred yards or so, and they followed, watching him intently. "It's

right through here," he said finally, patting the rock face with one hand. "It might be the one we want. Wait here." He put his hands against the rock and pushed them slowly into the basalt.
"I can't stand this," Silk said, turning his back quickly. "Let me know once he's inside."
With a kind of dreadful determination, Relg pushed his way into the rock.
"Is he gone yet?" Silk asked.
"He's going in," Barak replied clinically. "Only half of him's still sticking out."
"Please, Barak, don't tell me about it."
"Was it really that bad?" the big man asked.
"You have no idea. You have absolutely no idea." The rat-faced man was shivering uncontrollably.
They waited in the chill darkness for half an hour or more. Somewhere high above them there was a scream.
"What was that cry?" Mandorallen asked.
"The Grolims are busy," Belgarath answered grimly. "It's the season of the wounding - when the Orb burned Torak's hand and face. A large number of sacrifices are called for at this time of year - usually slaves. Torak doesn't seem to insist on Angarak blood. As long as it's human, it seems to satisfy him."
There was a faint sound of steps somewhere along the cliff, and a few moments later Relg rejoined them. "I found it," he told them. "The opening's about a half mile farther along. It's partially blocked."
"Does it go all the way up?" Belgarath demanded.
Relg shrugged. "It goes up. I can't say how far. The only way to find out for sure is to follow it. The whole series of caves is fairly extensive, though."
"Do we really have any choice, father?" Aunt Pol asked.
"No. I suppose not."
"I'll go get Durnik," Silk said. He turned and disappeared into the darkness.
The rest of them followed Relg until they reached a small hole in the rock face just above the tumbled scree. "We'll have to move some of this rubble if we're going to get your animals inside," he told them.
Barak bent and lifted a large stone block. He staggered under its weight and dropped it to one side with a clatter.
"Quietly!" Belgarath told him.
"Sorry," Barak mumbled.
For the most part, the stones were not large, but there were a great many of them. When Silk and Durnik joined them, they all fell to clearing the rubble out of the cave mouth. It took them nearly an hour to remove enough rock to make it possible for the horses to squeeze through.
"I wish Hettar was here," Barak grunted, putting his shoulder against the rump of a balky packhorse.
"Talk to him, Barak," Silk suggested.
"I am talking."
"Try it without all the curse words."
"There's going to be some climbing involved," Relg told them after they had pushed the last horse inside and stood in the total blackness of the cave. "As nearly as I can tell, the galleries run vertically, so we'll have to climb from level to level."
Mandorallen leaned against one of the walls, and his armor clinked. "That's not going to work," Belgarath told him. "You wouldn't be able to climb in armor anyway. Leave it here with the horses, Mandorallen."
The knight sighed and began removing his armor.
A faint glow appeared as Relg mixed powders in a wooden bowl from two leather pouches he carned inside his mail shirt.

"That's better," Barak approved, "but wouldn't a torch be brighter?"
"Much brighter," Relg agreed, "but then I wouldn't be able to see. This will give you enough light to see where you're going."
"Let's get started," Belgarath said.
Relg handed the glowing bowl to Barak and turned to lead them up a dark gallery. After they had gone a few hundred yards, they came to a steep slope of rubble rising up into darkness. "I'll look," Relg said and scrambled up the slope out of sight. After a moment or so, they heard a peculiar popping sound, and tiny fragments of rock showered down onto the rubble from above. "Come up now," Relg's voice came to them.
Carefully they climbed the rubble until they reached a sheer wall. "To your right," Relg said, still above them. "You'll find some holes in the rock you can use to climb up."
They found the holes, quite round and about six inches deep. "How did you make these?" Durnik asked, examining one of the holes.
"It's a bit difficult to explain," Relg replied. "There's a ledge up here. It leads to another gallery."
One by one they climbed the rock face to join Relg on the ledge. As he had told them, the ledge led to a gallery that angled sharply upward.
They followed it toward the center of the peak, passing several passageways opening to the sides.
"Shouldn't we see where they go?" Barak asked after they had passed the third or fourth passageway.
"They don't go anyplace," Relg told him. "How can you be sure?"
"A gallery that goes someplace feels different. That one we just passed comes to a blank wall about a hundred feet in."
Barak grunted dubiously.
They came to another sheer face, and Relg stopped to peer up into the blackness.
"How high is it?" Durnik asked.
"Thirty feet or so. I'll make some holes so we can climb up." Relg knelt and slowly pushed one hand into the face of the rock. Then he tensed his shoulder and twisted his arm slightly. The rock popped with a sharp little detonation; when Relg pulled his hand out, a shower of fragments came with it. He brushed the rest of the debris out of the hole he had made, stood up and sank his other hand into the rock about two feet above the first hole.
"Clever," Silk admired.
"It's a very old trick," Relg told him.
They followed Relg up the face and squeezed through a narrow crack at the top. Barak muttered curses as he wriggled through, leaving a fair amount of skin behind.
"How far have we come?" Silk asked. His voice had a certain apprehension in it, and he looked about nervously at the rock which seemed to press in all around them.
"We're about eight hundred feet above the base of the pinnacle," Relg replied. "We go that way now." He pointed up another sloping passageway.
"Isn't that back in the direction we just came?" Durnik asked.
"The cave zigzags," Relg told him. "We have to keep following the galleries that lead upward."
"Do they go all the way to the top?"
"They open out somewhere. That's all I can tell for sure at this point."
"What's that?" Silk cried sharply.
From somewhere along one of the dark passageways, a voice floated out at them, singing. There seemed to be a deep sadness in the song, but the echoes made it impossible to pick out the words. About all they could be sure of was the fact that the singer was a woman.
After a moment, Belgarath gave a startled exclamation.

"What's wrong?" Aunt Pol asked him.
"Marag!" the old man said. "That's impossible."
"I know the song, Pol. It's a Marag funeral song. Whoever she is, she's very close to dying."
The echoes in the twisting passageways made it very difficult to pinpoint the singer's exact location; but as they moved, the sound seemed to be getting closer.
"Down here," Silk said finally, stopping with his head cocked to one side in front of an opening.
The singing stopped abruptly. "No closer," the unseen woman warned sharply. "I have a knife."
"We're friends," Durnik called to her.
She laughed bitterly at that. "I have no friends. You're not going to take me back. My knife is long enough to reach my heart."
"She thinks we're Murgos," Silk whispered.
Belgarath raised his voice, speaking in a language Garion had never heard before. After a moment, the woman answered haltingly, as if trying to remember words she had not spoken for years.
"She thinks it's a trick," the old man told them quietly. "She says she's got a knife right against her heart, so we're going to have to be careful." He spoke again into the dark passageway, and the woman answered him. The language they were speaking was liquid, musical.
"She says she'll let one of us go to her," Belgarath said finally. "She still doesn't trust us."
"I'll go," Aunt Pol told him.
"Be careful, Pol. She might decide at the last minute to use her knife on you instead of herself."
"I can handle it, father." Aunt Pol took the light from Barak and moved slowly on down the passageway, speaking calmly as she went. The rest of them stood in the darkness, listening intently to the murmur of voices coming from the passageway, as Aunt Pol talked quietly to the Marag woman. "You can come now," she called to them finally, and they went down the passageway toward her voice.
The woman was lying beside a small pool of water. She was dressed only in scanty rags, and she was very dirty. Her hair was a lustrous black, but badly tangled, and her face had a resigned, hopeless look on it. She had wide cheekbones, full lips, and huge, violet eyes framed with sooty black lashes. The few pitiful rags she wore exposed a great deal of her pale skin. Relg drew in a sharp breath and immediately turned his back.
"Her name is Taiba," Aunt Pol told them quietly. "She escaped from the slave pens under Rak Cthol several days ago."
Belgarath knelt beside the exhausted woman. "You're a Marag, aren't you?" he asked her intently.
"My mother told me I was," she confirmed. "She's the one who taught me the old language." Her dark hair fell across one of her pale cheeks in a shadowy tangle.
"Are there any other Marags in the slave pens?"
"A few, I think. It's hard to tell. Most of the other slaves have had their tongues cut out."
"She needs food," Aunt Pol said. "Did anyone think to bring anything?"
Durnik untied a pouch from his belt and handed it to her. "Some cheese," he said, "and a bit of dried meat."
Aunt Pol opened the pouch.
"Have you any idea how your people came to be here?" Belgarath asked the slave woman. "Think. It could be very important."
Taiba shrugged. "We've always been here." She took the food Aunt Pol offered her and began to eat ravenously.
"Not too fast," Aunt Pol warned.

"Have you ever heard anything about how Marags wound up in the slave pens of the Murgos?" Belgarath pressed.
"My mother told me once that thousands of years ago we lived in a country under the open sky and that we weren't slaves then," Taiba replied. "I didn't believe her, though. It's the sort of story you tell children."
"There are some old stories about the Tolnedran campaign in Maragor, Belgarath," Silk remarked. "Rumors have been floating around for years that some of the legion commanders sold their prisoners to the Nyissan slavers instead of killing them. It's the sort of thing a Tolnedran would do."
"It's a possibility, I suppose," Belgarath replied, frowning.
"Do we have to stay here?" Relg demanded harshly. His back was still turned, and there was a rigidity to it that spoke his outrage loudly.
"Why is he angry with me?" Taiba asked, her voice dropping wearily from her lips in scarcely more than a whisper.
"Cover your nakedness, woman," Relg told her. "You're an affront to decent eyes."
"Is that all?" She laughed, a rich, throaty sound. "These are all the clothes I have." She looked down at her lush figure. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with my body. It's not deformed or ugly. Why should I hide it?"
"Lewd woman!" Relg accused her.
"If it bothers you so much, don't look," she suggested.
"Relg has a certain religious problem," Silk told her dryly.
"Don't mention religion," she said with a shudder.
"You see," Relg snorted. "She's completely depraved."
"Not exactly," Belgarath told him. "In Rak Cthol the word religion means the altar and the knife."
"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "give me your cloak."
He unfastened his heavy wool cloak and handed it to her. She started to cover the exhausted slave woman with it, but stopped suddenly and looked closely at her. "Where are your children?" she asked.
"The Murgos took them," Taiba replied in a dead voice. "They were two baby girls - very beautiful - but they're gone now."
"We'll get them back for you," Garion promised impulsively.
She gave a bitter little laugh. "I don't think so. The Murgos gave them to the Grolims, and the Grolims sacrificed them on the altar of Torak. Ctuchik himself held the knife."
Garion felt his blood run cold.
"This cloak is warm," Taiba said gratefully, her hands smoothing the rough cloth. "I've been cold for such a long time." She sighed with a sort of weary contentment.
Belgarath and Aunt Pol were looking at each other across Taiba's body. "I must be doing something right," the old man remarked cryptically after a moment. "To stumble across her like this after all these years of searching!"
"Are you sure she's the right one, father?"
"She almost has to be. Everything fits together too well - right down to the last detail." He drew in a deep breath and then let it out explosively. "That's been worrying me for a thousand years." He suddenly looked enormously pleased with himself. "How did you escape from the slave pens, Taiba?" he asked gently.
"One of the Murgos forgot to lock a door," she replied, her voice drowsy. "After I slipped out, I found this knife. I was going to try to find Ctuchik and kill him with it, but I got lost. There are so many caves down here - so many. I wish I could kill him before I die, but I don't suppose there's much hope for that now." She sighed regretfully. "I think I'd like to sleep now. I'm so very tired."
"Will you be all right here?" Aunt Pol asked her. "We have to leave, but we'll be back. Do you need anything?"

"A little light, maybe." Taiba sighed. "I've lived in the dark all my life. I think I'd like it to be light when I die."
"Relg," Aunt Polt said, "make her some light."
"We might need it ourselves." His voice was still stiffly offended.
"She needs it more."
"Do it, Relg," Belgarath told the zealot in a firm voice.
Relg's face hardened, but he mixed some of the contents of his two pouches together on a flat stone and dribbled a bit of water on the mixture. The pasty substance began to glow.
"Thank you," Taiba said simply.
Relg refused to answer or even to look at her.
They went back up the passageway, leaving her beside the small pool with her dim little light. She began to sing again, quite softly this time and in a voice near the edge of sleep.
Relg led them through the dark galleries, twisting and changing course frequently, always climbing. Hours dragged by, though time had little meaning in the perpetual darkness. They climbed more of the sheer faces and followed passageways that wound higher and higher up into the vast rock pillar. Garion lost track of direction as they climbed, and found himself wondering if even Relg knew which way he was going. As they rounded another corner in another gallery, a faint breeze seemed to touch their faces. The breeze carried a dreadful odor with it.
"What's that stink?" Silk asked, wrinkling his sharp nose.
"The slave pens, most likely," Belgarath replied. "Murgos are lax about sanitation."
"The pens are under Rak Cthol, aren't they?" Barak asked. Belgarath nodded.
"And they open up into the city itself?"
"As I remember it, they do."
"You've done it, Relg," Barak said, clapping the Ulgo on the shoulder.
"Don't touch me," Reig told him.
"Sorry, Relg."
"The slave pens are going to be guarded," Belgarath told them. "We'll want to be very quiet now."
They crept on up the passageway, being careful where they put their feet. Garion was not certain at what point the gallery began to show evidence of human construction. Finally they passed a partially open iron door. "Is there anybody in there?" he whispered to Silk.
The little man sidled up to the opening, his dagger held low and ready. He glanced in, his head making a quick, darting movement. "Just some bones," he reported somberly.
Belgarath signalled for a halt. "These lower galleries have probably been abandoned," he told them in a very quiet voice. "After the causeway was finished, the Murgos didn't need all those thousands of slaves. We'll go on up, but be quiet and keep your eyes open."
They padded silently up the gradual incline of the gallery, passing more of the rusting iron doors, all standing partially ajar. At the top of the slope, the gallery turned back sharply on itself, still angling upward. Some words were crudely lettered on the wall in a script Garion could not recognize.
"Grandfather," he whispered, pointing at the words.
Belgarath glanced at the lettering and grunted. "Ninth level," he muttered. "We're still some distance below the city."
"How far do we go before we start running into Murgos?" Barak rumbled, looking around with his hand on his sword hilt.
Belgarath shrugged slightly. "It's hard to say. I'd guess that only the top two or three levels are occupied."
They followed the gallery upward until it turned sharply, and once again there

were words written on the wall in the alien script. "Eighth level," Belgarath translated. "Keep going."
The smell of the slave pens grew stronger as they progressed upward through the succeeding levels.
"Light ahead," Durnik warned sharply, just before they turned the corner to enter the fourth level.
"Wait here," Silk breathed and melted around the corner, his dagger held close against his leg.
The light was dim and seemed to be bobbing slightly, growing gradually brighter as the moments dragged by. "Someone with a torch," Barak muttered.
The torchlight suddenly flickered, throwing gyrating shadows. Then it grew steady, no longer bobbing. After a few moments, Silk came back, carefully wiping his dagger. "A Murgo," he told them. "I think he was looking for something. The cells up there are still empty."
"What did you do with him?" Barak asked.
"I dragged him into one of the cells. They won't stumble over him unless they're looking for him."
Relg was carefully veiling his eyes.
"Even that little bit of light?" Durnik asked him.
"It's the color of it," Relg explained.
They rounded the corner into the fourth level and started up again. A hundred yards up the gallery a torch was stuck into a crack in the wall, burning steadily. As they approached it, they could see a long smear of fresh blood on the uneven, littered floor.
Belgarath stopped outside the cell door, scratching at his beard. "What was he wearing?" he asked Silk.
"One of those hooded robes," Silk replied. "Why?"
"Go get it."
Silk looked at him briefly, then nodded. He went back into the cell and came out a moment later carrying a black Murgo robe. He handed it to the old man.
Belgarath held up the robe, looking critically at the long cut running up the back. "Try not to put such big holes in the rest of them," he told the little man.
Silk grinned at him. "Sorry. I guess I got a bit overenthusiastic. I'll be more careful from now on." He glanced at Barak. "Care to join me?" he invited.
"Naturally. Coming, Mandorallen?"
The knight nodded gravely, loosening his sword in its sheath. "We'll wait here, then," Belgarath told them. "Be careful, but don't take any longer than you have to."
The three men moved stealthily on up the gallery toward the third level.
"Can you guess at the time, father?" Aunt Pol asked quietly after they had disappeared.
"Several hours after midnight."
"Will we have enough time left before dawn?"
"If we hurry."
"Maybe we should wait out the day here and go up when it gets dark again."
He frowned. "I don't think so, Pol. Ctuchik's up to something. He knows I'm coming - I've felt that for the last week - but he hasn't made a move of his own yet. Let's not give him any more time than we have to.
"He's going to fight you, father."
"It's long overdue anyway," he replied. "Ctuchik and I have been stepping around each other for thousands of years because the time was never just exactly right. Now it's finally come down to this." He looked off into the darkness, his face bleak. "When it starts, I want you to stay out of it, Pol."
She looked at the grim-faced old man for a long moment, then nodded. "Whatever you say, father," she said.

Chapter Twenty-six

THE MURGO ROBE was made of coarse, black cloth and it had a strange red emblem woven into the fabric just over Garion's heart. It smelled of smoke and of something else even more unpleasant. There was a small ragged hole in the robe just under the left armpit, and the cloth around the hole was wet and sticky. Garion's skin cringed away from that wetness.

They were moving rapidly up through the galleries of the last three levels of the slave pens with the deep-cowled hoods of the Murgo robes hiding their faces. Though the galleries were lighted by sooty torches, they encountered no guards, and the slaves locked behind the pitted iron doors made no sound as they passed. Garion could feel the dreadful fear behind those doors.

"How do we get up into the city?" Durnik whispered.

"There's a stairway at the upper end of the top gallery," Silk replied softly.

"Is it guarded?"

"Not any more."

An iron-barred gate, chained and locked, blocked the top of the stairway, but Silk bent and drew a slim metal implement from one boot, probed inside the lock for a few seconds, then grunted with satisfaction as the lock clicked open in his hand. "I'll have a look," he whispered and slipped out.

Beyond the gate Garion could see the stars and, outlined against them, the looming buildings of Rak Cthol. A scream, agonized and despairing, echoed through the city, followed after a moment by the hollow sound of some unimaginably huge iron gong. Garion shuddered.

A few moments later, Silk slipped back through the gate. "There doesn't seem to be anybody about," he murmured softly. "Which way do we go?"

Belgarath pointed. "That way. We'll go along the wall to the Temple."

"The Temple?" Relg asked sharply.

"We have to go through it to get to Ctuchik," the old man replied. "We're going to have to hurry. Morning isn't far off."

Rak Cthol was not like other cities. The vast buildings had little of that separateness that they had in other places. It was as if the Murgos and Grolims who lived here had no sense of personal possession, so that their structures lacked that insularity of individual property to be found among the houses in the cities of the West. There were no streets in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather interconnecting courtyards and corridors that passed between and quite often through the buildings.

The city seemed deserted as they crept silently through the dark courtyards and shadowy corridors, yet there was a kind of menacing watchfulness about the looming, silent black walls around them. Peculiar-looking turrets jutted from the walls in unexpected places, leaning out over the courtyards, brooding down at them as they passed. Narrow windows stared accusingly at them, and the arched doorways were filled with lurking shadows. An oppressive air of ancient evil lay heavily on Rak Cthol, and the stones themselves seemed almost to gloat as Garion and his friends moved deeper and deeper into the dark maze of the Grolim fortress.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Barak whispered nervously to Belgarath.

"I've been here before, using the causeway," the old man told him quietly. "I like to keep an eye on Ctuchik from time to time. We got up those stairs. They'll take us to the top of the city wall."

The stairway was narrow and steep, with massive walls on either side and a vaulted roof overhead. The stone steps were worn by centuries of use. They climbed silently. Another scream echoed through the city, and the huge gong sounded its iron note once more.

When they emerged from the stairway, they were atop the outer wall. It was as broad as a highway and encircled the entire city. A parapet ran along its outer

edge, marking the brink of the dreadful precipice that dropped away to the floor of the rocky wasteland a mile or more below. Once they emerged from the shelter of the buildings, the chill air bit at them, and the black flagstones and rough-hewn blocks of the outer parapet glittered with frost in the icy starlight.

Belgarath looked at the open stretch lying along the top of the wall ahead of them and at the shadowy buildings looming several hundred yards ahead. "We'd better spread out," he whispered. "Too many people in one place attract attention in Rak Cthol. We'll go across here two at a time. Walk - don't run or crouch down. Try to look as if you belong here. Let's go." He started along the top of the wall with Barak at his side, the two of them walking purposefully, but not appearing to hurry. After a few moments, Aunt Pol and Mandorallen followed.

"Durnik," Silk whispered. "Garion and I'll go next. You and Relg follow in a minute or so." He peered at Relg's face, shadowed beneath the Murgo hood. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"As long as I don't look up at the sky," Relg answered tightly. His voice sounded as if it were coming from between clenched teeth.

"Come along, then, Garion," Silk murmured.

It required every ounce of Garion's self control to walk at a normal pace across the frosty stones. It seemed somehow that eyes watched from every shadowy building and tower as he and the little Drasnian crossed the open section atop the wall. The air was dead calm and bitterly cold, and the stone blocks of the outer parapet were covered with a lacy filigree of rime frost.

There was another scream from the Temple lying somewhere ahead. The corner of a large tower jutted out at the end of the open stretch of wall, obscuring the walkway beyond.

"Wait here a moment," Silk whispered as they stepped gratefully into its shadow and he slipped around the jutting corner.

Garion stood in the icy dark, straining his ears for any sound. He glanced once toward the parapet. Far out on the desolate wasteland below, a small fire was burning. It twinkled in the dark like a small red star. He tried to imagine how far away it might be.

Then there was a slight scraping sound somewhere above him. He spun quickly, his hand going to his sword. A shadowy figure dropped from a ledge on the side of the tower several yards over his head and landed with catlike silence on the flagstones directly in front of him. Garion caught a familiar sour, acid reek of stale perspiration.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Garion?" Brill said quietly with an ugly chuckle.

"Stay back," Garion warned, holding his sword with its point tow as Barak had taught him.

"I knew that I'd catch you alone someday," Brill said, ignoring the sword. He spread his hands wide and crouched slightly, his cast eye gleaming in the starlight.

Garion backed away, waving his sword threateningly. Brill bounded to one side, and Garion instinctively followed him with the sword point. Then, so fast that Garion could not follow, Brill dodged back and struck his hand down sharply on the boy's forearm. Garion's sword skittered away across the icy flagstones. Desperately, Garion reached for his dagger.

Then another shadow flickered in the darkness at the corner of the tower. Brill grunted as a foot caught him solidly in the side. He fell, but rolled quickly across the stones and came back up onto his feet, his stance wide and his hands moving slowly in the air in front of him.

Silk dropped his Murgo robe behind him, kicked it out of the way, and crouched, his hands also spread wide.

Brill grinned. "I should have known you were around somewhere, Kheldar."
"I suppose I should have expected you too, Kordoch," Silk replied. "You always seem to show up."
Brill flicked a quick hand toward Silk's face, but the little man easily avoided it. "How do you keep getting ahead of us?" he asked, almost conversationally. "That's a habit of yours that's starting to irritate Belgarath." He launched a quick kick at Brill's groin, but the cast-eyed man jumped back agilely.
Brill laughed shortly. "You people are too tender-hearted with horses," he said. "I've had to ride quite a few of them to death chasing you. How did you get out of that pit?" He sounded interested. "Taur Urgas was furious the next morning."
"What a shame."
"He had the guards flayed."
"I imagine a Murgo looks a bit peculiar without his skin."
Brill dove forward suddenly, both hands extended, but Silk sidestepped the lunge and smashed his hand sharply down in the middle of Brill's back. Brill grunted again, but rolled clear farther out on the stones atop the wall. "You might be just as good as they say," he admitted grudgingly.
"Try me, Kordoch," Silk invited, with a nasty grin. He moved out from the wall of the tower, his hands in constant motion. Garion watched the two circling each other with his heart in his mouth.
Grill jumped again, with both feet lashing out, but Silk dove under him. They both rolled to their feet again. Silk's left hand flashed out, even as he came to his feet, catching Brill high on the head. Brill reeled from the blow, but managed to kick Silk's knee as he spun away. "Your technique's defensive, Kheldar," he grated, shaking his head to clear the effects of Silk's blow. "That's a weakness."
"Just a difference of style, Kordoch," Silk replied.
Grill drove a gouging thumb at Silk's eye, but Silk blocked it and slammed a quick counterblow to the pit of his enemy's stomach. Brill scissored his legs as he fell, sweeping Silk's legs out from under him. Both men tumbled across the frosty stones and sprang to their feet again, their hands flickering blows faster than Garion's eyes could follow them.
The mistake was a simple one, so slight that Garion could not even be sure it was a mistake. Brill flicked a jab at Silk's face that was an ounce or two harder than it should have been and traveled no more than a fraction of an inch too far. Silk's hands flashed up and caught his opponent's wrist with a deadly grip and he rolled backward toward the parapet, his legs coiling, even as the two of them fell. Jerked off balance, Brill seemed almost to dive forward.
Silk's legs straightened suddenly, launching the cast-eyed man up and forward with a tremendous heave. With a strangled exclamation Brill clutched desperately at one of the stone blocks of the parapet as he sailed over, but he was too high and his momentum was too great. He hurtled over the parapet, plunging out and down into the darkness below the wall. His scream faded horribly as he fell, lost in the sound of yet another shriek from the Temple of Torak.
Silk rose to his feet, glanced once over the edge, and then came back to where Garion stood trembling in the shadows by the tower wall.
"Silk!" Garion exclaimed, catching the little man's arm in relief.
"What was that?" Belgarath asked, coming back around the corner.
"Brill," Silk replied blandly, pulling his Murgo robe back on.
"Again?" Belgarath demanded with exasperation. "What was he doing this time?"
"Trying to fly, last time I saw him." Silk smirked.
The old man looked puzzled.
"He wasn't doing it very well," Silk added.
Belgarath shrugged. "Maybe it'll come to him in time."
"He doesn't really have all that much time." Silk glanced out over the edge. From far below - terribly far below - there came a faint, muffled crash; then,

after several seconds, another. "Does bouncing count?" Silk asked.
Belgarath made a wry face. "Not really."
"Then I'd say he didn't learn in time." Silk said blithely. He looked around with a broad smile. "What a beautiful night this is," he remarked to no one in particular.
"Let's move along," Belgarath suggested, throwing a quick, nervous glance at the eastern horizon. "It will start to lighten up over there any time now."
They joined the others in the deep shadows beside the high wall of the Temple some hundred yards farther down the wall and waited tensely for Relg and Durnik to catch up.
"What kept you?" Barak whispered as they waited.
"I met an old friend of ours," Silk replied quietly. His grin was a flash of white teeth in the shadows.
"It was Brill," Garion told the rest of them in a hoarse whisper. "He and Silk fought with each other, and Silk threw him over the edge."
Mandorallen glanced toward the frosty parapet. "'Tis a goodly way down," he observed.
"Isn't it, though?" Silk agreed.
Barak chuckled and put his big hand wordlessly on Silk's shoulder. Then Durnik and Relg came along the top of the wall to join them in the shadows.
"We have to go through the Temple," Belgarath told them in a quiet voice. "Pull your hoods as far over your faces as you can and keep your heads down. Stay in single file and mutter to yourselves as if you were praying. If anybody speaks to us, let me do the talking; and each time the gong sounds, turn toward the altar and bow." He led them then to a thick door bound with weathered iron straps. He looked back once to be sure they were all in line, then put his hand to the latch and pushed the door open.
The inside of the Temple glowed with smoky red light, and a dreadful, charnel-house reek filled it. The door through which they entered led onto a covered balcony that curved around the back of the dome of the Temple. A stone balustrade ran along the edge of the balcony, with thick pillars at evenly spaced intervals. The openings between the pillars were draped with the same coarse, heavy cloth from which the Murgo robes were woven. Along the back wall of the balcony were a number of doors, set deep in the stone. Garion surmised that the balcony was largely used by Temple functionaries going to and fro on various errands.
As soon as they started along the balcony, Belgarath crossed his hands on his chest and led them at a slow, measured pace, chanting in a deep, loud voice.
A scream echoed up from below, piercing, filled with terror and agony. Garion involuntarily glanced through the parted drapery toward the altar. For the rest of his life he wished he had not.
The circular walls of the Temple were constructed of polished black stone, and directly behind the altar was an enormous face forged of steel and buffed to minor brightness-the face of Torak and the original of the steel masks of the Grolims. The face was beautiful - there was no question of that - yet there was a kind of brooding evil in it, a cruelty beyond human ability to comprehend the meaning of the word. The Temple floor facing the God's image was densely packed with Murgos and Grolim priests, kneeling and chanting an unintelligible rumble in a dozen dialects. The altar stood on a raised dais directly beneath the glittering face of Torak. A smoking brazier on an iron post stood at each front corner of the blood-smeared altar, and a square pit opened in the floor immediately in front of the dais. Ugly red flames licked up out of the pit, and black, oily smoke rolled from it toward the dome high above.
A half dozen Grolims in black robes and steel masks were gathered around the altar, holding the naked body of a slave. The victim was already dead, his chest gaping open like the chest of a butchered hog, and a single Grolim stood in

front of the altar, facing the image of Torak with raised hands. In his right, he held a tong, curved knife; in his left, a dripping human heart. "Behold our offering, Dragon God of Angarak!" he cried in a huge voice, then turned and deposited the heart in one of the smoking braziers. There was a burst of steam and smoke from the brazier and a hideous sizzle as the heart dropped into the burning coals. From somewhere beneath the Temple floor, the huge iron gong sounded, its vibration shimmering in the air. The assembled Murgos and their Grolim overseers groaned and pressed their faces to the floor.

Garion felt a hand nudge his shoulder. Silk, already turned, was bowing toward the bloody altar. Awkwardly, sickened by the horror below, Garion also bowed. The six Grolims at the altar lifted the lifeless body of the slave almost contemptuously and cast it into the pit before the dais. Flames belched up and sparks rose in the thick smoke as the body fell into the fire below.

A dreadful anger welled up in Garion. Without even thinking, he began to draw in his will, fully intent upon shattering that vile altar and the cruel image hovering above it into shards and fragments in a single, cataclysmic unleashing of naked force.

"Belgarion!" the voice within his mind said sharply. "Don't interfere. This isn't the time. "

"I can't stand it, " Garion raged silently. "I've got to do something. "

"You can't. Not now. You'll rouse the whole city. Unclench your will, Belgarion."

"Do as he says, Garion, "Aunt Pol's voice sounded quietly in his mind. The unspoken recognition passed between Aunt Pol's mind and that strange other mind as Garion helplessly let the anger and the will drain out of him.

"This abomination won't stand much longer, Belgarion, " the voice assured him. "Even now the earth gathers to rid itself of it."And then the voice was gone.

"What are you doing up here?" a harsh voice demanded. Garion jerked his eyes away from the hideous scene below. A masked and robed Grolim stood in front of Belgarath, blocking their way.

"We are the servants of Torak," the old man replied in an accent that perfectly matched the gutturals of Murgo speech.

"All in Rak Cthol are the servants of Torak," the Grolim said. "You aren't attending the ritual of sacrifice. Why?"

"We're pilgrims from Rak Hagga," Belgarath explained, "only just arnved in the dread city. We were commanded to present ourselves to the Hierarch of Rak Hagga in the instant of our arrival. That stern duty prevents our participation in the celebration."

The Grolim grunted suspiciously.

"Could the revered priest of the Dragon God direct us to the chambers of our Hierarch? We are unfamiliar with the dark Temple." There was another shriek from below. As the iron gong boomed, the Grolim turned and bowed toward the altar. Belgarath gave a quick jerk of his head to the rest of them, turned and also bowed.

"Go to the last door but one," the Grolim instructed, apparently satisfied by their gestures of piety. "It will lead you down to the halls of the Hierarchs."

"We are endlessly grateful to the priest of the Dark God," Belgarath thanked him, bowing. They filed past the steel-masked Grolim, their heads down and their hands crossed on their breasts, muttering to themselves as if in prayer.

"Vile!" Relg was strangling. "Obscenity! Abomination!"

"Keep your head down!" Silk whispered. "There are Grolims all around us."

"As UL gives me strength, I won't rest until Rak Cthol is laid waste," Relg vowed in a fervent mutter.

Belgarath had reached an ornately carved door near the end of the balcony, and he swung it open cautiously. "Is the Grolim still watching us?" he whispered to Silk.

The little man glanced back at the priest standing some distance behind them.
"Yes. Wait - there he goes. The balcony's clear now."
The sorcerer let the door swing shut and stepped instead to the last door on the balcony. He tugged the latch carefully, and the door opened smoothly. He frowned. "It's always been locked before," he muttered.
"Do you think it's a trap?" Barak rumbled, his hand dipping under the Murgo robe to find his sword hilt.
"It's possible, but we don't have much choice." Belgarath pulled the door open the rest of the way, and they all slipped through as another shriek came from the altar. The door slowly closed behind them as the gong shuddered the stones of the Temple. They started down the worn stone steps beyond the door. The stairway was narrow and poorly lighted, and it went down sharply, curving always to the right.
"We're right up against the outer wall, aren't we?" Silk asked, touching the black stones on his left.
Belgarath nodded. "The stairs lead down to Ctuchik's private place." They continued down until the walls on either side changed from blocks to solid stone.
"He lives below the city?" Silk asked, surprised.
"Yes," Belgarath replied. "He built himself a sort of hanging turret out from the rock of the peak itself."
"Strange idea," Durnik said.
"Ctuchik's a strange sort of person," Aunt Pol told him grimly.
Belgarath stopped them. "The stairs go down about another hundred feet," he whispered. "There'll be two guards just outside the door to the turret. Not even Ctuchik could change that - no matter what he's planning."
"Sorcerers?" Barak asked softly.
"No. The guards are ceremonial more than functional. They're just ordinary Grolims."
"We'll rush them then."
"That won't be necessary. I can get you close enough to deal with them, but I want it quick and quiet." The old man reached inside his Murgo robe and drew out a roll of parchment bound with a strip of black ribbon. He started down again with Barak and Mandorallen close behind him.
The curve of the stairway brought a lighted area into view as they descended. Torches illuminated the bottom of the stone steps and a kind of antechamber hewn from the solid rock. Two Grolims priests stood in front of a plain black door, their arms folded.
"Who approaches the Holy of Holies?" one of them demanded, putting his hand to his sword hilt.
"A messenger," Belgarath announced importantly. "I bear a message for the Master from the Hierarch of Rak Goska." He held the rolled parchment above his head. "Approach, messenger."
"Praise the name of the Disciple of the Dragon God of Angarak," Belgarath boomed as he marched down the steps with Mandorallen and Barak flanking him. He reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped in front of the steel-masked guards. "Thus have I performed my appointed task," he declared, holding out the parchment.
One of the guards reached for it, but Barak caught his arm in a huge fist. The big man's other hand closed swiftly about the surprised Grolim's throat.
The other guard's hand flashed toward his sword hilt, but he grunted and doubled over sharply as Mandorallen thrust a long, needle-pointed poniard up into his belly. With a kind of deadly concentration the knight twisted the hilt of the weapon, probing with the point deep inside the Grolim's body. The guard shuddered when the blade reached his heart and collapsed with a long, gurgling sigh.
Barak's massive shoulder shifted, and there was a grating crunch as the bones in

the first Grolim's neck came apart in his deadly grip. The guard's feet scraped spasmodically on the floor for a moment, and then he went limp.
"I feel better already," Barak muttered, dropping the body.
"You and Mandorallen stay here," Belgarath told him. "I don't want to be disturbed once I'm inside."
"We'll see to it," Barak promised. "What about these?" He pointed at the two dead guards.
"Dispose of them, Relg," Belgarath said shortly to the Ulgo.
Silk turned his back quickly as Relg knelt between the two bodies and took hold of them, one with each hand. There was a sort of muffled slithering as he pushed down, sinking the bodies into the stone floor.
"You left a foot sticking out," Barak observed in a detached tone.
"Do you have to talk about it?" Silk demanded.
Belgarath took a deep breath and put his hand to the iron door handle. "All right," he said to them quietly, "let's go, then." He pushed open the door.

Chapter Twenty-seven

THE WEALTH OF empires lay beyond the black door. Bright yellow coins - gold beyond counting - lay in heaps on the floor; carelessly scattered among the coins were rings, bracelets, chains, and crowns, gleaming richly. Blood-red bars from the mines of Angarak stood in stacks along the wall, interspersed here and there by open chests filled to overflowing with fist-sized diamonds that glittered like ice. A large table sat in the center of the room, littered with rubies, sapphires, and emeralds as big as eggs. Ropes and strings of pearls, pink, rosy gray, and even some of jet held back the deep crimson drapes that billowed heavily before the windows.
Belgarath moved like a stalking animal, showing no sign of his age, his eyes everywhere. He ignored the riches around him and crossed the deep-carpeted floor to a room filled with learning, where tightly rolled scrolls lay in racks reaching to the ceiling and the leather backs of books marched like battalions along dark wooden shelves. The tables in the second room were covered with the curious glass apparatus of chemical experiment and strange machines of brass and iron, all cogs and wheels and pulleys and chains.
In yet a third chamber stood a massive gold throne backed by drapes of black velvet. An ermine cape lay across one arm of the throne, and a scepter and a heavy gold crown lay upon the seat. Inlaid in the polished stones of the floor was a map that depicted, so far as Garion could tell, the entire world.
"What sort of place is this?" Durnik whispered in awe.
"Ctuchik amuses himself here," Aunt Pol replied with an expression of repugnance. "He has many vices and he likes to keep each one separate."
"He's not down here," Belgarath muttered. "Let's go up to the next level." He led them back the way they had come and started up a flight of stone steps that curved along the rounded wall of the turret.
The room at the top of the stairs was filled with horror. A rack stood in the center of it, and whips and flails hung on the walls. Cruel implements of gleaming steel lay in orderly rows on a table near the wallhooks, needle-pointed spikes, and dreadful things with saw-edges that still had bits of bone and flesh caught between their teeth. The entire room reeked of blood.
"You and Silk go ahead, father," Aunt Pol said. "There are things in the other rooms on this level that Garion, Durnik, and Relg shouldn't see."
Belgarath nodded and went through a doorway with Silk behind him. After a few moments they returned by way of another door. Silk's face looked slightly sick.
"He has some rather exotic perversions, doesn't he?" he remarked with a shudder.
Belgarath's face was bleak. "We go up again," he said quietly. "He's on the top level. I thought he might be, but I needed to be sure." They mounted another stairway.
As they neared the top, Garion felt a peculiar tingling glow beginning somewhere

deep within him, and a sort of endless singing seemed to draw him on. The mark on the palm of his right hand burned.
A black stone altar stood in the first room on the top level of the turret, and the steel image of the face of Torak brooded from the wall behind it. A gleaming knife, its hilt crusted with dried blood, lay on the altar, and bloodstains had sunk into the very pores of the rock. Belgarath was moving quickly now, his face intent and his stride catlike. He glanced through one door in the wall beyond the altar, shook his head and moved on to a closed door in the far wall. He touched his fingers lightly to the wood, then nodded. "He's in here," he murmured with satisfaction. He drew in a deep breath and grinned suddenly. "I've been waiting for this for a long time," he said.
"Don't dawdle, father," Aunt Pol told him impatiently. Her eyes were steely, and the white lock at her brow glittered like frost.
"I want you to stay out of it when we get inside, Pol," he reminded her. "You too, Garion. This is between Ctuchik and me."
"All right, father," Aunt Pol replied.
Belgarath put out his hand and opened the door. The room beyond was plain, even bare. The stone floor was uncarpeted, and the round windows looking out into the darkness were undraped. Simple candles burned in sconces on the walls, and a plain table stood in the center of the room. Seated at the table with his back to the door sat a man in a hooded black robe who seemed to be gazing into an iron cask. Garion felt his entire body throbbing in response to what was in the casks, and the singing in his mind filled him.
A little boy with pale blond hair stood in front of the table, and he was also staring at the cask. He wore a smudged linen smock and dirty little shoes. Though his expression seemed devoid of all thought, there was a sweet innocence about him that caught at the heart. His eyes were blue, large, and trusting, and he was quite the most beautiful child Garion had ever seen.
"What took you so long, Belgarath?" the man at the table asked, not even bothering to turn around. His voice sounded dusty. He closed the iron box with a faint click. "I was almost beginning to worry about you."
"A few minor delays, Ctuchik," Belgarath replied. "I hope we didn't keep you waiting too long."
"I managed to keep myself occupied. Come in. Come in - all of you." Ctuchik turned to look at them. His hair and beard were a yellowed white and were very long. His face was deeply lined, and his eyes glittered in their sockets. It was a face filled with an ancient and profound evil. Cruelty and arrogance had eroded all traces of decency or humanity from it, and a towering egotism had twisted it into a perpetual sneer of contempt for every other living thing. His eyes shifted to Aunt Pol. "Polgara," he greeted her with a mocking inclination of his head. "You're as lovely as ever. Have you come finally then to submit yourself to the will of my Master?" His leer was vile.
"No, Ctuchik," she replied coldly. "I came to see justice."
"Justice?" He laughed scornfully. "There's no such thing, Polgara. The strong do what they like; the weak submit. My Master taught me that."
"And his maimed face did not teach you otherwise?"
The High Priest's face darkened briefly, but he shrugged off his momentary irritation. "I'd offer you all a place to sit and some refreshment, perhaps," he continued in that same dusty voice, "but you won't be staying that long, I'm afraid." He glanced at the rest of them, his eyes noting each in turn. "Your party seems diminished, Belgarath," he observed. "I hope you haven't lost any of them along the way."
"They're all well, Ctuchik," Belgarath assured him. "I'm certain that they'll appreciate your concern, however."
"All?" Ctuchik drawled. "I see the Nimble Thief and the Man with Two Lives and the Blind Man, but I don't see the others. Where's the Dreadful Bear and the

Knight Protector? The Horse Lord and the Bowman? And the ladies? Where are they-the Queen of the World and the Mother of the Race That Died?"
"All well, Ctuchik," Belgarath replied. "All well."
"How extraordinary. I was almost certain that you'd have lost one or two at least by now. I admire your dedication, old man - to keep intact for all these centuries a prophecy that would have collapsed if one single ancestor had died at the wrong time." His eyes grew distant momentarily. "Ah," he said. "I see. You left them below to stand guard. You didn't have to do that, Belgarath. I left orders that we weren't to be disturbed."
The High Priest's eyes stopped then on Garion's face. "Belgarion," he said almost politely. Despite the singing that still thrilled in his veins, Garion felt a chill as the evil force of the High Priest's mind touched him. "You're younger than I expected."
Garion stared defiantly at him, gathering his will to ward off any surprise move by the old man at the table.
"Would you pit your will against mine, Belgarion?" Ctuchik seemed amused. "You burned Chamdar, but he was a fool. You'll find me a bit more difficult. Tell me, boy, did you enjoy it?"
"No," Garion replied, still holding himself ready.
"In time you'll learn to enjoy it," Ctuchik said with an evil grin. "Watching your enemy writhe and shriek in your mind's grip is one of the more satisfying rewards of power." He turned his eyes back to Belgarath. "And so you've come at last to destroy me?" he said mockingly.
"If it comes down to that, yes. It's been a long time coming, Ctuchik."
"Hasn't it, though? We're very much alike, Belgarath. I've been looking forward to this meeting almost as much as you have. Yes, we're very much alike. Under different circumstances, we might even have been friends."
"I doubt that. I'm a simple man, and some of your amusements are a bit sophisticated for my taste."
"Spare me that, please. You know as well as I do that we're both beyond all restriction."
"Perhaps, but I prefer to choose my friends a bit more carefully."
"You're growing tiresome, Belgarath. Tell the others to come up." Ctuchik raised one eyebrow sardonically. "Don't you want to have them watch while you destroy me? Think of how sweet their admiration will be.
"They're fine just where they are," Belgarath told him.
"Don't be tedious. Surely you're not going to deny me the opportunity to pay homage to the Queen of the World." Ctuchik's voice was mocking. "I yearn to behold her exquisite perfection before you kill me."
"I doubt that she'd care much for you, Ctuchik. I'll convey your respects, however."
"I insist, Belgarath. It's a small request - easily granted. If you don't summon her, I will."
Belgarath's eyes narrowed, and then he suddenly grinned. "So that's it," he said softly. "I wondered why you'd gone to all the trouble to let us get through so easily."
"It doesn't really matter now, you know," Ctuchik almost purred. "You've made your last mistake, old man. You've brought her to Rak Cthol, and that's all I really needed. Your prophecy dies here and now, Belgarath - and you with it, I'd imagine." The High Priest's eyes flashed triumphantly, and Garion felt the evil force of Ctuchik's mind reaching out, searching with a terrible purpose.
Belgarath exchanged a quick look with Aunt Pol and slyly winked. Ctuchik's eyes widened suddenly as his mind swept through the lower levels of his grim turret and found it empty. "Where is she?" he demanded wildly in a voice that was almost a scream.
"The princess wasn't able to come with us," Belgarath replied blandly. "She

sends her apologies, though."
"You're lying, Belgarath! You wouldn't have dared to leave her behind. There's no place in the world where she'd be safe."
"Not even in the caves of Ulgo?"
Ctuchik's face blanched. "Ulgo?" he gasped.
"Poor old Ctuchik," Belgarath said, shaking his head in mock regret. "You're slipping badly, I'm afraid. It wasn't a bad plan you had, but didn't it occur to you to make sure that the princess was actually with us before you let me get this close to you?"
"One of the others will do just as well," Ctuchik asserted, his eyes blazing with fury.
"No," Belgarath disagreed. "The others are all unassailable. Ce'Nedra's the only vulnerable one, and she's at Prolgu - under the protection of UL himself. You can attempt that if you'd like, but I wouldn't really advise it."
"Curse you, Belgarath!"
"Why don't you just give me the Orb now, Ctuchik?" Belgarath suggested. "You know I can take it away from you if I have to."
Ctuchik struggled to gain control of himself. "Let's not be hasty, Belgarath," he said after a moment. "What are we going to gain by destroying each other? We have Cthrag Yaska in our possession. We could divide the world between us."
"I don't want half the world, Ctuchik."
"You want it all for yourself?" A brief, knowing smile crossed Ctuchik's face. "So did I - at first - but I'll settle for half."
"Actually, I don't want any of it."
Ctuchik's expression became a bit desperate. "What do you want, Belgarath?"
"The Orb," Belgarath replied inexorably. "Give it to me, Ctuchik."
"Why don't we join forces and use the Orb to destroy Zedar?"
"Why?"
"You hate him as much as I do. He betrayed your Master. He stole Cthrag Yaska from you."
"He betrayed himself, Ctuchik, and I think that haunts him sometimes. His plan to steal the Orb was clever, though." Belgarath looked thoughtfully at the little boy standing in front of the table, his large eyes fixed on the iron cask. "I wonder where he found this child," he mused. "Innocence and purity are not exactly the same thing, of course, but they're very close. It must have cost Zedar a great deal of effort to raise a total innocent. Think of all the impulses he had to suppress."
"That's why I let him do it," Ctuchik said.
The little blond boy, seeming to know that they were discussing him, looked at the two old men, his eyes filled with absolute trust.
"The whole point is that I still have Cthrag Yaska - the Orb," Ctuchik said, leaning back in his chair and laying one hand on the cask. "If you try to take it, I'll fight you. Neither of us knows for sure how that would turn out. Why take chances?"
"What good is it doing you? Even if it would submit to you, what then? Would you raise Torak and surrender it to him?"
"I might think about it. But Torak's been asleep for five centuries now, and the world's run fairly well without him. I don't imagine there's all that much point in disturbing him just yet."
"Which would leave you in possession of the Orb."
Ctuchik shrugged. "Someone has to have it. Why not me?"
He was still leaning back in his chair, seeming almost completely at ease. There was no warning movement or even a flicker of emotion across his face as he struck.
It came so quickly that it was not a surge but a blow, and the sound of it was not the now-familiar roaring in the mind but a thunderclap. Garion knew that,

had it been directed at him, it would have destroyed him. But it was not directed at him. It lashed instead at Belgarath. For a dreadful instant Garion saw his grandfather engulfed in a shadow blacker than night itself. Then the shadow shattered like a goblet of delicate crystal, scattering shards of darkness as it blew apart. Now grim-faced, Belgarath still faced his ancient enemy.

"Is that the best you can do, Ctuchik?" he asked, even as his own will struck.

A searing blue light suddenly surrounded the Grolim, closing in upon him, seeming to crush him with its intensity. The stout chair upon which he sat burst into chunks and splinters, as if a sudden vast weight had settled down upon it. Ctuchik fell among the fragments of his chair and pushed back the blue incandescence with both hands. He lurched to his feet and answered with flames. For a dreadful instant Garion remembered Asharak, burning in the Wood of the Dryads, but Belgarath brushed the fire away and, despite his once-stated assertion that the Will and Word needed no gesture, he raised his hand and smashed at Ctuchik with lightning.

The sorcerer and the magician faced each other in the center of the room, surrounded by blazing lights and waves of flame and darkness. Garion's mind grew numb under the repeated detonations of raw energy as the two struggled. He sensed that their battle was only partially visible and that blows were being struck which he could not see - could not even imagine. The air in the turret room seemed to crackle and hiss. Strange images appeared and vanished, flickering at the extreme limits of visibility - vast faces, enormous hands, and things Garion could not name. The turret itself trembled as the two dreadful old men ripped open the fabric of reality itself to grasp weapons of imagination or delusion.

Without even thinking, Garion began to gather his will, drawing his mind into focus. He had to stop it. The edges of the blows were smashing at him and at the others. Beyond thought now, Belgarath and Ctuchik, consumed with their hatred for each other, were unleashing forces that could kill them all.

"Garion! Stay out of it!" Aunt Pol told him in a voice so harsh that he could not believe it was hers. "They're at the limit. If you throw anything else into it, you'll destroy them both." She gestured sharply to the others. "Get back - all of you. The air around them is alive."

Fearfully, they all backed toward the rear wall of the turret room. The sorcerer and the magician stood no more than a few feet apart now, their eyes blazing and their power surging back and forth in waves. The air sizzled around them, and their robes smoked.

Then Garion's eyes fell upon the little boy. He stood watching with calm, uncomprehending eyes. He neither started nor flinched at the dreadful sounds and sights that crashed around him. Garion tensed himself to dash forward and yank the child to safety, but at that moment the little boy turned toward the table. Quite calmly, he walked through a sudden wall of green flame that shot up in front of him. Either he did not see the fire, or he did not fear it. He reached the table, stood on his tiptoes and, raising the lid, he put his hand into the iron cask over which Ctuchik had been gloating. He lifted a round, polished, gray stone out of the cask. Garion instantly felt that strange tingling glow again, so strong now that it was almost overwhelming, and his ears filled with the haunting song.

He heard Aunt Pol gasp.

Holding the gray stone in both hands like a ball, the little boy turned and walked directly toward Garion, his eyes filled with trust and the expression on his small face confident. The polished stone reflected the flashing lights of the terrible conflict raging in the center of the room, but there was another light within it as well. Deep within it stood an intense azure glow - a light that neither flickered nor changed, a light that grew steadily stronger as the

boy approached Garion. The child stopped and raised the stone in his hands, offering it to Garion. He smiled and spoke a single word, "Errand."
An instant image filled Garion's mind, an image of a dreadful fear. He knew that he was looking directly into the mind of Ctuchik. There was a picture in Ctuchik's mind - a picture of Garion holding the glowing stone in his hand - and that picture terrified the Grolim. Garion felt waves of fear spilling out toward him. Deliberately and quite slowly he reached his right hand toward the stone the child was offering. The mark on his palm yearned toward the stone, and the chorus of song in his mind swelled to a mighty crescendo. Even as he stretched out his hand, he felt the sudden, unthinking, animal panic in Ctuchik.
The Grolim's voice was a hoarse shriek. "Be not!" he cried out desperately, directing all his terrible power at the stone in the little boy's hands.
For a shocking instant, a deadly silence filled the turret. Even Belgarath's face, drawn by his terrible struggle, was shocked and unbelieving.
The blue glow within the heart of the stone seemed to contract. Then it flared again.
Ctuchik, his long hair and beard disheveled, stood gaping in wideeyed and openmouthed horror. "I didn't mean it!" he howled. "I didn't - I-"
But a new and even more stupendous force had already entered the round room. The force flashed no light, nor did it push against Garion's mind. It seemed instead to pull out, drawing at him as it closed about the horrified Ctuchik.
The High Priest of the Grolims shrieked mindlessly. Then he seemed to expand, then contract, then expand again. Cracks appeared on his face as if he had suddenly solidified into stone and the stone was disintegrating under the awful force welling up within him. Within those hideous cracks Garion saw, not flesh and blood and bone, but blazing energy. Ctuchik began to glow, brighter and brighter. He raised his hands imploringly. "Help me!" he screamed. He shrieked out a long, despairing, "NO!" And then, with a shattering sound that was beyond noise, the Disciple of Torak exploded into nothingness.
Hurled to the floor by that awesome blast, Garion tumbled against the wall. Without thinking, he caught the little boy, who was flung against him like a rag doll. The round stone clattered as it bounced against the rocks of the wall. Garion reached out to catch it, but Aunt Pol's hand closed on his wrist. "No!" she said. "Don't touch it. It's the Orb."
Garion's hand froze.
The little boy squirmed out of his grasp and ran after the rolling Orb. "Errand." He laughed triumphantly as he caught it.
"What happened?" Silk muttered, struggling to his feet and shaking his head.
"Ctuchik destroyed himself," Aunt Pol replied, also rising. "He tried to unmake the Orb. The Mother of the Gods will not permit unmaking." She looked quickly at Garion. "Help me with your grandfather."
Belgarath had been standing almost in the center of the explosion that had destroyed Ctuchik. The blast had thrown him halfway across the room, and he lay in a stunned heap, his eyes glazed and his hair and beard singed.
"Get up, father," Aunt Pol said urgently, bending over him.
The turret began to shudder, and the basalt pinnacle from which it hung swayed. A vast booming sound echoed up out of the earth. Bits of rock and mortar showered down from the walls of the room as the earth quivered in the aftershock of Ctuchik's destruction.
In the rooms below, the stout door banged open and Garion heard pounding feet.
"Where are you?" Barak's voice bellowed.
"Up here," Silk shouted down the stairway.
Barak and Mandorallen rushed up the stone stairs. "Get out of here!" Barak roared. "The turret's starting to break away from the rock. The Temple up there's collapsing, and there's a crack two feet wide in the ceiling where the turret joins the rock."

"Father!" Aunt Pol said sharply, "you must get up!"
Belgarath stared at her uncomprehendingly. "Pick him up," she snapped at Barak.
There was a dreadful tearing sound as the rocks that held the turret against the side of the peak began to rip away under the pressures of the convulsing earth.
"There!" Relg said in a ringing voice. He was pointing at the back wall of the turret where the stones were cracking and shattering. "Can you open it? There's a cave beyond."
Aunt Pol looked up quickly, focused her eyes on the wall and pointed one finger. "Burst!" she commanded. The stone wall blew back into the echoing cave like a wall of straw struck by a hurricane.
"It's pulling loose!" Silk yelled, his voice shrill. He pointed at a widening crack between the turret and the solid face of the peak. "Jump!" Barak shouted. "Hurry!"
Silk flung himself across the crack and spun to catch Relg, who had followed him blindly. Durnik and Mandorallen, with Aunt Pol between them, leaped across as the groaning crack yawned wider. "Go, boy!" Barak commanded Garion. Carrying the still-dazed Belgarath, the big Cherek was lumbering toward the opening.
"The childl" the voice in Garion's mind crackled, no longer dry or disinterested. "Save the child or everything that has ever happened is meaninglessl"
Garion gasped, suddenly remembering the little boy. He turned and ran back into the slowly toppling turret. He swept up the boy in his arms and ran for the hole Aunt Pol had blown in the rock.
Barak jumped across, and his feet scrambled for an awful second on the very edge of the far side. Even as he ran, Garion pulled in his strength. At the instant he jumped, he pushed back with every ounce of his will. With the little boy in his arms he literally flew across the awful gap and crashed directly into Barak's broad back.
The little boy in his arms with the Orb of Aldur cradled protectively against his chest smiled up at him. "Errand?" he asked.
Garion turned. The turret was leaning far out from the basalt wall, its supporting stones cracking, ripping away from the sheer face. Ponderously, it toppled outward. And then, with the shards and fragments of the Temple of Torak hurtling past it, it sheared free of the wall and fell into the awful gulf beneath.
The floor of the cave they had entered was heaving as the earth shuddered and shock after shock reverberated up through the basalt pinnacle. Huge chunks of the walls of Rak Cthol were ripping free and plunging past the cave mouth, flickering down through the red light of the newly risen sun.
"Is everybody here?" Silk demanded, looking quickly around. Then, satisfied that they were all safe, he added, "We'd better get back from the opening a bit. This part of the peak doesn't feel all that stable."
"Do you want to go down now?" Relg asked Aunt Pol. "Or do you want to wait until the shaking subsides?"
"We'd better move," Barak advised. "These caves will be swarming with Murgos as soon as the quake stops."
Aunt Pol glanced at the half conscious Belgarath and then seemed to gather herself. "We'll go down," she decided firmly. "We still have to stop to pick up the slave woman."
"She's almost certain to be dead," Relg asserted quickly. "The earthquake's probably brought the roof of that cave down on her."
Aunt Pol's eyes were flinty as she looked him full in the face.
No man alive could face that gaze for long. Relg dropped his eyes. "All right," he said sullenly. He turned and led them back into the dark cave with the earthquake rumbling beneath their feet.
Here ends Book Three of The Belgariad.

Book Four, Castle of Wizardry,
brings Garion and Ce'Nedra to the first realization of their heritage as the Prophecy moves them toward its fulfillment, and Garion discovers there are powers more difficult than sorcery.

About the Author

David Eddings was born in Spokane, Washington, in 1931, and was raised in the Puget Sound area north of Seattle. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Reed College in Portland, Oregon, in 1954 and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Washington in 1961. He has served in the United States Army, worked as a buyer for the Boeing Company, has been a grocery clerk, and has taught college English. He has lived in many parts of the United States.

His first novel, High Hunt (published by Putnam in 1973), was a contemporary adventure story. The field of fantasy has always been of interest to him, however, and he turned to The Belgariad in an effort to develop certain technical and philosophical ideas concerning that genre.

Eddings currently resides with his wife, Leigh, in the northwest.

THE BELGARIAD
Part Four

CASTLE OF WIZARDRY

David Eddings

For Bibbidie,
and for Chopper Jack
and for Jimmy and Eddie
- close and special friends who have given support
from the start.

PROLOGUE

Being an account of how Riva Iron grip became Guardian of the Orb of Aldur
and of the evil wrought by Nyissa.

-Based upon The Book of Alorn and later accounts.

NOW A TIME came when Cherek and his three sons went with Belgarath the Sorcerer into Mallorea. Together they sought to reclaim the Orb of Aldur, which had been stolen by the maimed God Torak. And when they came to the place in the iron tower of Torak where the Orb was hidden, only Riva Iron-grip, youngest of the sons, dared seize the great jewel and bear it forth. For Riva alone was free of evil intent within his soul.

And when they were come again to the West, Belgarath gave unto Riva and his descendants eternal guardianship of the Orb, saying: "So long as the Orb rests with you and your line, so long shall the West be safe."

Then Riva took the Orb and sailed with his people to the Isle of the Winds. There, upon the one place where ships might land, Riva caused to be built a Citadel and a walled city around it, which men named Riva. It was a fortress city, built for war.

Within the Citadel was built a great hall, with a throne carved of black rock set against the wall. And men called this throne room the Hall of the Rivan King.

Then a deep sleep fell upon Riva, and Belar, Bear-God of the Alorns, appeared to him in a dream, saying: "Behold, Guardian of the Orb, I will cause two stars to fall from the sky. And thou shalt take up the two stars and place them in a fire and forge them. One shall thou forge into a blade, the other into a hilt, and together they shall be a sword to guard the Orb of my brother Aldur."

When Riva awoke, he saw two stars fall and he sought and found them in the high mountains. And he did with them as Belar had instructed. But when it was done, the blade and hilt could not be joined. Then Riva cried out, "Behold, I have marred the work, for the sword will not become one."

A fox, which had sat nearby to watch him, said to Riva, "The work is not marred, Riva. Take the hilt and place the Orb upon it as a pommel stone." And when Riva did as the fox instructed, the Orb became one with the hilt. But blade and hilt were still unjoined. Again the fox counseled him. "Take the blade in your left hand and the hilt in the right and join them."

"They will not join. It is not possible," Riva said.

"Wise are you, indeed," the fox said, "to know what is not possible before you have made the attempt."

Then Riva was ashamed. He set blade and hilt together, and the blade passed into the hilt as a stick slides into water. The sword was joined forever.

The fox laughed and said, "Take the sword and smite the rock which stands before you."

Riva feared for the blade, lest the blow shatter it, but he smote the rock. The rock broke in two, and water gushed forth in a river and flowed down to the city below. And far to the east in the darkness of Mallorea, maimed Torak started up from his bed as a chill coursed through his heart.

Again the fox laughed. Then it ran away, but stopped to look back. Riva saw that it was a fox no longer, but the great silver wolf form of Belgarath.

Riva had the sword placed upon the face of the black rock wall that stood at the back of his throne with its blade downward so that the Orb at its pommel stood at the highest point. And the sword cleaved itself to the rock. None but Riva could take it down.

As the years passed, men saw that the Orb burned with a cold fire when Riva sat upon the throne; and when he took down the sword and raised it, it became a great tongue of blue flame.

In the early spring of the year after the sword was forged, a small boat came across the dark waters of the Sea of the Winds, moving without oars or sails. Alone within the boat was the fairest maid in all the world. Her name was Beldaran, beloved daughter of Belgarath, and she had come to be a wife to Riva. And Riva's heart melted with love for her, as had been ordained from the beginning of time.

In the year that followed the wedding of Beldaran to Riva, a son was born to them upon Erastide. And upon the right hand of this son of Riva was the mark of the Orb. Straightaway, Riva carried his infant manchild to the Hall of the Rivan King and placed the tiny hand upon the Orb. The Orb knew the child and glowed with love for him. Ever afterward, the hand of each descendant of Riva bore the mark of the Orb that it might know him and not destroy him when he touched it, for only one of Riva's line could touch the Orb in safety. With each touch of infant hand upon the Orb the bond between Riva's line and the Orb grew stronger. And with each joining, the brilliance of the Orb increased.

Thus it was in the city of Riva for a thousand years. Sometimes strangers sailed into the Sea of Winds, seeking trade, but the ships of Cherek, bound to defend the Isle of the Winds, fell upon the strangers and destroyed them. But in time, the Alorn Kings met and determined in council that these strangers were not the servants of Torak, but bowed instead to the God Nedra. Then they agreed to let the ships sail the Sea of the Winds unmolested. "For," the Rivan King told his fellow monarchs, "a time may come when the sons of Nedra will join with us in our struggle against the Angaraks of Torak One-Eye. Let us not offend Nedra by sinking the ships of his children." The ruler of Riva spoke wisely, and the Alorn Kings agreed, knowing that the world was changing.

Then treaties were signed with the sons of Nedra; who took a childish delight in signing scraps of parchment. But when they sailed into the harbor at Riva, with their ships bearing full loads of gaudy trinkets upon which they placed high value, the Rivan King laughed at their folly and closed the gates of the city to them.

The sons of Nedra importuned their king, whom they called Emperor, to force the city gates so that they might hawk their wares in the streets, and the Emperor sent his army to the Isle. Now to permit these strangers from the kingdom they called Tolnedra passage upon the Sea was one thing, but to let them land an army at the gates of Riva without challenge was quite another. The Rivan King ordered that the strand before the city be cleared and the harbor be swept clean of the ships of Tolnedra. And it was done.

Great was the wrath of the Emperor of Tolnedra. He assembled his armies to cross the Sea of the Winds and do war. Then the peaceloving Alorns held council to try reason upon this rash Emperor. And they sent out a message to advise him that, should he persist, they would rise up and destroy Emperor and kingdom and sweep the wreckage thereof into the sea. And the Emperor gave heed to this quiet remonstrance and abandoned his desperate

adventure.

As years passed and the Rivan King realized that these merchants from Tolnedra were harmless, he allowed them to build a village upon the strand before his city and there to display their useless goods. Their desperation to sell or trade came to amuse him, and he asked his people to buy some few items from them - though no purpose could be found for the goods thus purchased.

Then, four thousand and two years from the day when Accursed Torak raised the stolen Orb and cracked open the world, other strange people came to the village which the sons of Nedra had built outside the walls of Riva. And it was learned of these strangers that they were the sons of the God Issa. They called themselves Ny-Issans, and they claimed that their ruler was a woman, which seemed unnatural to all who heard. The name of this queen was Salmissra.

They came in dissembling guise, saying that they brought rich gifts from their queen for the Rivan King and his family. Hearing this, Gorek the Wise, aged king in the line of Riva, grew curious to know more of these children of Issa and their queen. With his wife, his two sons and their wives, and all his royal grandchildren, he went from out the fortress and the city to visit the pavilion of the Ny-Issans, to greet them courteously, and to receive from them the valueless gifts sent by the harlot of Sthiss Tor. With smiles of greeting, the Rivan King and his family were welcomed into the pavilion of the strangers.

Then the foul and accursed sons of Issa struck at all who were the fruit and the seed of the line of Riva. And venom was anointed upon their weapons, so that the merest scratch was death.

Mighty even in age, Gorek struggled with the assassins - not to save himself, for he felt death in his veins from the first blow - but to save at least one of his grandsons that his line might continue. Alas, all were doomed, save only one child who fled and cast himself into the sea. When Gorek saw this, he covered his head with his cloak, groaned, and fell dying beneath the knives of Nyissa.

When word of this reached Brand, Warder of the Citadel, his wrath was dreadful. The traitorous assassins were overcome, and Brand questioned each in turn in ways that made brave men tremble. And the truth was wrung from them. Gorek and his family had been foully murdered at the instructions of Salmissra, Snake Queen of the Nyissans.

Of the child who had cast himself into the sea there was no trace. One assassin claimed that he had seen a snowy owl swoop down and bear the child away, but he was not believed, though even the severest urging would not make him change his story.

Then all Aloria made dreadful war upon the sons of Issa and tore down their

cities and put all they could find to the sword. And in her final hour, Salmissra confessed that the evil deed had been done at the urging of Torak One-Eye and his servant Zedar.

Thus there was no longer a Rivan King and Guardian of the Orb, though Brand and those of the same name who followed reluctantly took up rule of Riva. Rumor, ever vagrant, persisted in the years that followed, saying that the seed of Riva still lay hidden in some remote land. But gray-cloaked Rivans scoured the world in search of him and never found him.

The sword remained as Riva had placed it, and the Orb was still affixed to its pommel, though now the jewel was ever dull and seeming without life. And men began to feel that so long as the Orb was there, the West was safe, even though there was no Rivan King. Nor did there seem aught of danger that the Orb could ever be removed, since any man who touched it would be instantly and utterly consumed, were he not truly of the line of Riva.

But now that his minions had removed the Rivan King and Guardian of the Orb, Torak One-Eye again dared begin plans for the conquest of the West. And after many years, he led forth an enormous army of Angaraks to destroy all who opposed him. His hordes raved through Algaria and down through Arendia, to the city of Vo Mimbre.

Now Belgarath and his daughter Polgara the Sorceress came to the one who was Brand and Warder of Riva to advise and counsel with him. With them, Brand led his army to Vo Mimbre. And in the bloody battle before that city, Brand drew upon the power of the Orb to overcome Torak. Zedar spirited the body of his master away and hid it, but not all the disciple's skill could again awaken his God. And again men of the West felt safe, protected by the Orb and Aldur.

Now there came rumors of a prophecy that a Rivan King, true seed of the line of Riva, should again appear and sit upon the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King. And in later years, some claimed that each daughter of an Emperor of Tolnedra appeared on her sixteenth birthday to be the bride of the new king, should he appear. But few regarded such tales. Time passed into centuries, and still the West was safe. The Orb remained, quiet and dark upon the pommel of the sword. And somewhere fearful Torak was said to sleep until the return of the Rivan King - which came to mean never.

And thus the account should be ended. But no true account can ever end. And nothing can ever be safe or sure so long as cunning men plot to steal or destroy.

Again, long centuries passed. And then new rumors came, this time to disturb those in the highest places of power. And it was whispered that somehow the Orb had been stolen. Then Belgarath and Polgara were seen to be moving through the lands of the West again. This time they took with them a young man named Garion who named Belgarath his grandfather and called Polgara his aunt. And as they moved through the kingdoms, they gathered

upon them a strange company.

To the Alorn Kings who gathered in council, Belgarath revealed that it was the Apostate Zedar who had somehow contrived to steal the Orb from the sword and who was even then fleeing with it to the East, presumably to use it to awaken sleeping Torak. And it was there Belgarath must go with his company to rescue it.

Then Belgarath discovered that Zedar had found a boy of total innocence who could safely touch the Orb. But now the way led to the grim and dangerous headquarters of the Grolim priests of Torak, where the magician Ctuchik had seined the Orb and the boy from Zedar.

In time this quest of Belgarath and his company to regain the Orb would come to be known as the Belgariad. But the end thereof lay entangled within the Prophecy. And even to the Prophecy was the ultimate conclusion unknown.

Part One

ALGARIA

[Image]

Chapter One

CTUCHIK WAS DEAD - arid more than dead - and the earth itself heaved and groaned in the aftershock of his destruction. Garion and the others fled down through the dim galleries that honeycombed the swaying basalt pinnacle, with the rocks grinding and cracking about them and fragments shattering away from the ceilings and raining down on them in the darkness. Even as he ran, Garion's mind jerked and veered, his thoughts tumbling over each other chaotically, stunned out of all coherence by the enormity of what had just happened. Flight was a desperate need, and he fled without thought or even awareness, his running steps as mechanical as his heartbeat.

His ears seemed full of a swelling, exultant song that rang and soaxed in the vaults of his mind, erasing thought and filling him with stupefied

wonder. Through all his confusion, however, he was sharply conscious of the trusting touch of the small hand he held in his. The little boy they had found in Ctuchik's grim turret ran beside him with the Orb of Aldur clasped tightly to his little chest. Garion knew that it was the Orb that filled his mind with song. It had whispered to him as they had mounted the steps of the turret, and its song had soared as he had entered the room where it had lain. It was the song of the Orb that obliterated all thought - more than shock or the thunderous detonation that had destroyed Ctuchik and tumbled Belgarath across the floor like a rag doll or the deep sullen boom of the earthquake that had followed.

Garion struggled with it as he ran, trying desperately to pull his wits into some kind of order, but the song intruded on his every effort, scattering his mind so that chance impression and random memory fluttered and scurried this way and that and left him to flee without design or direction.

The dank reek of the slave pens lying just beneath the disintegrating city of Rak Cthol came sharply through the shadowy galleries. As if suddenly awakened by that single stimulus, a flood of memories of other smells crashed in on Garion's consciousness - the warm smell of freshbaked bread in Aunt Pol's kitchen back at Faldor's farm, the salt smell of the sea when they had reached Darine on the north coast of Sendaria on the first leg of their quest for the Orb, the stink of the swamps and jungles of Nyissa, the stomach-turning smell of the burning bodies of the sacrificed slaves in the Temple of Torak which even now shattered and fell in upon itself among the collapsing walls of Rak Cthol. But, oddly, the smell that came sharpest to his confused memory was the sun-warmed scent of Princess Ce'Nedra's hair.

"Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice came sharply to him in the near dark through which they ran. "Watch where you're going!" And he struggled to pull his mind back from its wandering even as he stumbled over a pile of broken rock where a large stretch of ceiling had fallen to the floor.

The terrified wails of the imprisoned slaves locked in clammy cells rose all around them now, joining in a weird counterharmony with the rumble and boom of earthquake. Other sounds came from the darkness as well-confused shouts in harshly accented Murgo voices, the lurching stagger of running feet, the clanging of an unlatched iron cell door swinging wildly as the huge rock pinnacle swayed and shuddered and heaved in the surging roll. Dust billowed through the dark caves, a thick, choking rock dust that stung their eyes and made them all cough almost continually as they clambered over the broken rubble.

Garion carefully lifted the trusting little boy over the pile of shattered rock, and the child looked into his face, calm and smiling despite the chaos of noise and stink all around them in the oppressive dimness. He started to set the child down again, but changed his mind. It would be easier and safer to carry the boy. He turned to go on along the passageway, but he recoiled sharply as his foot came down on something soft. He peered

at the floor, then felt his stomach suddenly heave with revulsion as he saw that he had stepped on a lifeless human hand protruding from the rockfall.

They ran on through the heaving darkness with the black Murgo robes which had disguised them flapping around their legs and the dust still thick in the air about them.

"Stop!" Relg, the Ulgo zealot, raised his hand and stood with his head cocked to one side, listening intently.

"Not here!" Barak told him, still lumbering forward with the dazed Belgarath in his arms. "Move, Relg!"

"Be still!" Relg ordered. "I'm trying to listen." Then he shook his head. "Go back!" he barked, turning quickly and pushing at them. "Run!"

"There are Murgos back there!" Barak objected.

"Run!" Relg repeated. "The side of the mountain's breaking away!" Even as they turned, a new and dreadful creaking roar surrounded them. Screeching in protest, the rock ripped apart with a long, hideous tearing. A sudden flood of light filled the gallery along which they fled as a great crack opened in the side of the basalt peak, widening ponderously as a vast chunk of the mountainside toppled slowly outward to fall to the floor of the wasteland thousands of feet below. The red glow of the new-risen sun was blinding as the dark world of the caves was violently opened, and the great wound in the side of the peak revealed a dozen or more dark openings both above and beneath, where caves suddenly ran out into nothingness.

"There!" a shout came from overhead. Garion jerked his head around. Perhaps fifty feet above and out along the sharp angle of the face, a half dozen black-robed Murgos, swords drawn, stood in a cave mouth with the dust billowing about them. One was pointing excitedly at the fleeing fugitives. And then the peak heaved again, and another great slab of rock sheared away, carrying the shrieking Murgos into the abyss beneath.

"Run!" Relg shouted again, and they all pounded along at his heels, back into the darkness of the shuddering passageway.

"Stop a minute," Barak gasped, plowing to a sudden halt after they had retreated several hundred yards. "Let me get my breath." He lowered Belgarath to the floor, his huge chest heaving.

"Can I help thee, my Lord?" Mandorallen offered quickly.

"No," Barak panted. "I can manage all right, I'm just a little winded." The big man peered around. "What happened back there? What set all this off?"

"Belgarath and Ctuchik had a bit of a disagreement," Silk told him with sardonic understatement. "It got a little out of hand toward the end."

"What happened to Ctuchik?" Barak asked, still gasping for breath. "I didn't see anybody else when Mandorallen and I broke into that room."

"He destroyed himself," Polgara replied, kneeling to examine Belgarath's face.

"We saw no body, my Lady," Mandorallen noted, peering into the darkness with his great broadsword in his hand.

"There wasn't that much left of him," Silk said.

"Are we safe here?" Polgara asked Relg.

The Ulgo set the side of his head against the wall of the passageway, listening intently. Then he nodded. "For the moment," he replied. "Let's stop here for a while then. I want to have a look at my father. Make me some light."

Relg fumbled in the pouches at his belt and mixed the two substances that gave off that faint Ulgo light.

Silk looked curiously at Polgara. "What really happened?" he asked her. "Did Belgarath do that to Ctuchik?"

She shook her head, her hands lightly touching her father's chest. "Ctuchik tried to unmake the Orb for some reason," she said. "Something happened to frighten him so much that he forgot the first rule."

A momentary flicker of memory came to Garion as he set the little boy down on his feet - that brief glimpse of Ctuchik's mind just before the Grolim had spoken the fatal "Be Not" that had exploded him into nothingness. Once again he caught that single image that had risen in the High Priest's mind - the image of himself holding the Orb in his hand - and he felt the blind, unreasoning panic the image had caused Ctuchik. Why? Why would that have frightened the Grolim into that deadly mistake?

"What happened to him, Aunt Pol?" he asked. For some reason he had to know.

"He no longer exists," she replied. "Even the substance that formed him is gone."

"That's not what I meant," Garion started to object, but Barak was already speaking.

"Did he destroy the Orb?" the big man asked with a kind of weak sickness in his voice.

"Nothing can destroy the Orb," she told him calmly.

"Where is it then?"

The little boy pulled his hand free from Garion's and went confidently to the big Cherek. "Errand?" he asked, holding out the round, gray stone in his hand.

Barak recoiled from the offered stone. "Belay!" he swore, quickly putting his hands behind his back. "Make him stop waving it around like that, Polgara. Doesn't he know how dangerous it is?"

"I doubt it."

"How's Belgarath?" Silk asked.

"His heart's still strong," Polgara replied. "He's exhausted, though. The fight nearly killed him."

With a long, echoing shudder the quaking subsided, and the silence seemed very loud.

"Is it over?" Durnik asked, looking around nervously.

"Probably not," Relg replied, his voice hushed in the sudden quiet. "An earthquake usually goes on for quite some time."

Barak was peering curiously at the little boy. "Where did he come from?" he asked, his rumbling voice also subdued.

"He was in the turret with Ctuchik," Polgara told him. "He's the child Zedar raised to steal the Orb."

"He doesn't look all that much like a thief."

"He isn't precisely." She looked gravely at the blond-headed waif. "Somebody's going to have to keep an eye on him," she observed. "There's something very peculiar about him. After we get down, I'll look into it, but I've got too much on my mind for that at the moment."

"Could it be the Orb?" Silk asked curiously. "I've heard that it has strange effects on people."

"Perhaps that's it." But she didn't sound very convinced. "Keep him with you, Garion, and don't let him lose the Orb."

"Why me?" He said it without thinking. She gave him a level gaze.

"All right, Aunt Pol." He knew there was no point in arguing with her.

"What was that?" Barak asked, holding up his hand for silence. Somewhere off in the darkness there was the murmur of voices - harsh, guttural

voices.

"Murgos!" Silk whispered sharply, his hand going to his dagger.

"How many?" Barak asked Aunt Pol.

"Five," she replied. "No-six. One's lagging behind."

"Are any of them Grolims?"

She shook her head.

"Let's go, Mandorallen," the big Cherek muttered, grimly drawing his sword.

The knight nodded, shifting his own broadsword in his hands. "Wait here," Barak whispered to the rest of them. "We shouldn't be long." And then he and Mandorallen moved off into the darkness, their black Murgo robes blending into the shadows.

The others waited, their ears straining to catch any sound. Once again that strange song began to intrude itself upon Garion's awareness, and once again his thoughts scattered before its compulsion. Somewhere a long, hissing slither of dislodged pebbles rattled down a slope, and that sound raised a confused welter of memory in him. He seemed to hear the ring of Durnik's hammer on the anvil at Faldor's farm, and then the plodding step of the horses and the creak of the wagons in which they had carried turnips to Darine back when this had all begun. As clearly as if he were there, he heard again the squealing rush of the boar he had killed in the snowy woods outside Val Alorn, and then the aching song of the Arendish serfboy's flute that had soared to the sky from the stump-dotted field where Asharak the Murgo had watched with hate and fear on his scarred face.

Garion shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, but the song drew him back into that bemused reverie. Sharply, he heard the awful, hissing crackle of Asharak burning beneath the vast, ancient trees in the Wood of the Dryads and heard the Grolim's desperate plea, "Master, have mercy." Then there were the screams in Salmissra's palace as Barak, transformed into that dreadful bear shape, clawed and ripped his way toward the throne room with Aunt Pol in her icy fury striding at his side.

And then the voice that had always been in his mind was there again. "Stop fighting with it."

"What is it?" Garion demanded, trying to focus his thoughts.

"It's the Orb."

"What's it doing?"

"It wants to know you. This is its way of finding things out."

"Can't it wait? We don't really have time just now "

"You can try to explain that, if you'd like." The voice sounded amused. "It might listen, but I doubt it. It's been waiting for you for a very long time. "

"Why me?"

"Don't you ever get tired of saying that?"

"Is it doing the same thing to the others?"

"To a lesser degree. You might as well relax. One way or another, it's going to get what it wants. "

There was a sudden ring of steel against steel somewhere off in the dark passageways and a startled cry. Then Garion heard the crunch of blows, and someone groaned. After that, there was silence.

A few moments later they heard the scuff of footsteps, and Barak and Mandorallen returned. "We couldn't find that one who was coming along behind the rest of them," Barak reported. "Is Belgarath showing any signs of coming around yet?"

Polgara shook her head. "He's still completely dazed," she replied.

"I'll carry him then. We'd better go. It's a long way back down, and these caves are going to be full of Murgos before long."

"In a moment," she said. "Relg, do you know where we are?"

"Roughly."

"Take us back to the place where we left the slave woman," she instructed in a tone that tolerated no objection.

Relg's face went hard, but he said nothing.

Barak bent and picked up the unconscious Belgarath. Garion held out his arms, and the little boy obediently came to him, the Orb still held protectively against his chest. The child seemed peculiarly light, and Garion carried him with almost no effort. Relg lifted his faintly glowing wooden bowl to illuminate their path, and they started out again, twisting, turning, following a zigzag course that went deeper and deeper into the gloomy caves. The darkness of the peak above them seemed to bear down on Garion's shoulders with a greater and greater weight the farther they went. The song in his mind swelled again, and the faint light Relg carried sent his thoughts roving once more. Now that he understood what was happening, it seemed to go more easily. The song opened his mind, and the Orb leeched

out every thought and memory, passing through his life with a light, flickering touch. It had a peculiar kind of curiosity, lingering often on things Garion did not think were all that important and barely touching matters that had seemed so dreadfully urgent when they had occurred. It traced out in detail each step they had taken in their long journey to Rak Cthol. It passed with them to the crystal chamber in the mountains above Maragor where Garion had touched the stillborn colt and given life in that oddly necessary act of atonement that had somehow made up for the burning of Asharak. It went down with them into the Vale where Garion had turned over the large white rock in his first conscious attempt to use the Will and the Word objectively. It scarcely noticed the dreadful fight with Grul the Eldrak nor the visit to the caves of Ulgo, but seemed to have a great curiosity about the shield of imagining which Garion and Aunt Pol had erected to conceal their movements from the searching minds of the Grolims as they had approached Rak Cthol. It ignored the death of Brill and the sickening ceremonies in the Temple of Torak, but lingered instead on the conversation between Belgarath and Ctuchik in the Grolim High Priest's hanging turret. And then, most peculiarly, it went back to sift through every one of Garion's memories of Princess Ce'Nedra - of the way the sun caught her coppery hair, of the lithe grace of her movements, of her scent, of each unconscious gesture, of the flicker and play of emotion across her tiny, exquisite face. It lingered on her in a way that Garion eventually found unsettling. At the same time he found himself a bit surprised that so much of what the princess had said and done had stuck so firmly in his memory.

"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "what is the matter with you? I told you to hold onto the child. Pay attention. This isn't the time for daydreaming."

"I wasn't. I was-" How could he explain it?

"You were what?"

"Nothing." They moved on, and there were periodic tremors as the earth settled uneasily. The huge basalt pinnacle swayed and groaned each time the earth shuddered and convulsed under its base; and at each new quiver, they stopped, almost fearing to breathe.

"How far down have we come?" Silk asked, looking around nervously.

"A thousand feet perhaps," Relg replied.

"That's all? We'll be penned up in here for a week at this rate."

Relg shrugged his heavy shoulders. "It will take as long as it takes," he said in his harsh voice as they moved on.

There were Murgos in the next gallery, and another nasty little fight in the darkness. Mandorallen was limping when he came back,

"Why didn't you wait for me as I told you to?" Barak demanded crossly.

Mandorallen shrugged. "They were but three, my Lord."

"There's just no point in trying to talk to you, do you know that?" Barak sounded disgusted.

"Are you all right?" Polgara asked the knight.

"A mere scratch, my Lady," Mandorallen replied indifferently. "It is of no moment."

The rock floor of the gallery shuddered and heaved again, and the booming noise echoed up through the caves. They all stood frozen, but the uneasy movement of the earth subsided after a few moments.

They moved steadily downward through the passageways and caves. The aftershocks of the earthquake that had shattered Rak Cthol and sent Ctuchik's turret crashing to the floor of the wasteland of Murgos continued at intervals. At one point, hours later it seemed, a party of Murgos, perhaps a dozen strong, passed through a gallery not far ahead, their torches casting flickering shadows on the walls and their harsh voices echoing. After a brief, whispered conference, Barak and Mandorallen let them go by unmolested and unaware of the ternble violence lurking in the shadows not twenty yards away. After they were out of earshot, Relg uncovered his light again and selected yet another passageway. They moved on, descending, twisting, zigzagging their way down through the caves toward the foot of the pinnacle and the dubious safety of the wasteland which lay outside.

While the song of the Orb did not diminish in any way, Garion was at least able to think as he followed Silk along the twisting passageways with the little boy in his arms. He thought that perhaps it was because he had grown at least partially accustomed to it - or maybe its attention was concentrated on one of the others.

They had done it; that was the amazing thing. Despite all the odds against them, they had retrieved the Orb. The search that had so abruptly interrupted his quiet life at Faldor's farm was over, but it had changed him in so many ways that the boy who had crept out through the gate at Faldor's farm in the middle of a windswept autumn night no longer even existed. Garion could feel the power he had discovered within himself even now and he knew that power was there for a reason. There had been hints along the way - vague, half spoken, sometimes only implied - that the return of the Orb to its proper place was only a beginning of something much larger and much more serious. Garion was absolutely certain that this was not the end of it.

"It's about time,"the dry voice in his mind said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why do I have to explain this every single time?"

"Explain what?"

"That I know what you're thinking. It's not as if we were completely separate, you know."

"All right, then. Where do we go from here?"

"To Riva."

"And after that?"

"We'll see."

"You aren't going to tell me?"

"No. Not yet. You haven't come nearly as far as you think you have. There's still a very long way to go. "

"If you aren't going to tell me anything, why don't you just leave me alone?"

"I just wanted to advise you not to make any long-term plans. The recovery of the Orb was only a step - an important one - but only a beginning."

And then, as if mention of it somehow reminded the Orb of Garion's presence, its song returned in full force, and Garion's concentration dissolved.

Not much later, Relg stopped, lifting the faint light aloft.

"What's the trouble?" Barak demanded, lowering Belgarath to the floor again.

"'The ceiling fell in," Relg replied, pointing at the rubble choking the passageway ahead. "We can't get through." He looked at Aunt Pol. "I'm sorry," he said, and Garion felt that he really meant it. "That woman we left down here is on the other side of the cave-in."

"Find another way," she told him shortly.

"There isn't any. This was the only passageway leading to the pool where we found her."

"We'll have to clear it then."

Relg shook his head gravely. "We'd just bring more of it down on top of us.

It probably fell in on her as well - at least we can hope so."

"Isn't that just a bit contemptible, Relg?" Silk asked pointedly.

The Ulgo turned to regard the little man. "She has water there and sufficient air to breathe. If the cave-in didn't kill her, she could live for weeks before she starves to death." There was a peculiar, quiet regret in Relg's voice.

Silk stared at him for a moment. "Sorry, Relg," he said finally. "I misunderstood."

"People who live in caves have no desire to see anyone trapped like that."

Polgara, however, was considering the rubble-blocked passageway. "We have to get her out of there," she declared.

"Relg could be right, you know," Barak pointed out. "For all we know, she's buried under half the mountain."

She shook her head. "No," she disagreed. "Taiba's still alive, and we can't leave without her. She's as important to all of this as any one of us." She turned back to Relg. "You'll have to go get her," she told him firmly.

Relg's large, dark eyes widened.

"You can't ask that," he protested.

"There's no alternative."

"You can do it, Relg," Durnik encouraged the zealot. "You can go through the rock and bring her out the same way you carried Silk out of that pit where Taur Urgas had him."

Relg had begun to tremble violently. "I can't!" his voice was choked. "I'd have to touch her - put my hands on her. It's sin."

"This is most uncharitable of thee, Relg," Mandorallen told him. "There is no sin in giving aid to the weak and helpless. Consideration for the unfortunate is a paramount responsibility of all decent men, and no force in all the world can corrupt the pure spirit. If compassion doth not move thee to fly to her aid, then mayest thou not perhaps regard her rescue a test of thy purity?"

"You don't understand," Relg told him in an anguished voice. He turned back to Polgara. "Don't make me do this, I beg you."

"You must," she replied quietly. "I'm sorry, Relg, but there's no other way."

A dozen emotions played across the fanatic's face as he shrank under Aunt Pol's unrelenting gaze. Then with a strangled cry, he turned and put his hand to the solid rockface at the side of the passageway. With a dreadful concentration, he pushed his fingers into the rock, demonstrating once more his uncanny ability to slip his very substance through seemingly unyielding stone.

Silk quickly turned his back. "I can't stand to watch that," the little man choked. And then Relg was gone, submerged in the rock.

"Why does he make so much fuss about touching people?" Barak demanded.

But Garion knew why. His enforced companionship with the ranting zealot during the ride across Algaria had given him a sharp insight into the workings of Relg's mind. The harsh-voiced denunciations of the sins of others served primarily to conceal Relg's own weakness. Garion had listened for hours at a time to hysterical and sometimes incoherent confessions about the lustful thoughts that raged through the fanatic's mind almost continually. Taiba, the lush-bodied Marag slave woman, would represent for Relg the ultimate temptation, and he would fear her more than death itself.

In silence they waited. Somewhere a slow drip of water measured the passing seconds. The earth shuddered from time to time as the last uneasy shocks of earthquake trembled beneath their feet. The minutes dragged on in the dim cavern.

And then there was a flicker of movement, and Relg emerged from the rock wall carrying the half naked Taiba. Her arms were desperately clasped about his neck, and her face was buried in his shoulder. She was whimpering in tenor and trembling uncontrollably.

Relg's face was twisted into an agony. Tears of anguish streamed openly from his eyes, and his teeth were clenched as if he were in the grip of intolerable pain. His arms, however, cradled the ternfied slave woman protectively, almost gently, and even when they were free of the rock, he held her closely against him as if he intended to hold her thus forever.

Chapter Two

IT WAS NOON by the time they reached the foot of the basalt tower and the large cave where they had left the horses. Silk went to the cave mouth to stand watch as Barak carefully lowered Belgarath to the floor. "He's heavier than he looks," the big man grunted, wiping the sweat from his face. "Shouldn't he be starting to come around?"

"It may be days before he's fully conscious," Polgara replied. "Just cover

him and let him sleep."

"How's he going to ride?"

"I'll take care of that."

"Nobody's going to be riding anywhere for a while," Silk announced from the narrow mouth of the cave. "The Murgos are swarming around out there like hornets."

"We'll wait until dark," Polgara decided. "We all need some rest anyway." She pushed back the hood of her Murgo robe and went to one of the packs they had piled against the cave wall when they had entered the night before. "I'll see about something to eat, then you'd all better sleep."

Taiba, the slave woman, wrapped once again in Garion's cloak, had been watching Relg almost continually. Her large, violet eyes glowed with gratitude mingled with a faint puzzlement. "You saved my life," she said to him in a rich, throaty voice. She leaned slightly toward him as she spoke. It was an unconscious gesture, Garion was certain, but it was distinctly noticeable. "Thank you," she added, her hand moving to rest lightly on the zealot's arm.

Relg cringed back from her. "Don't touch me," he gasped. She stared at him in amazement, her hand still half extended. "You must never put your hands on me," he told her. "Never." Taiba's look was incredulous. Her life had been spent almost entirely in darkness, and she had never learned to keep her emotions from showing on her face. Amazement gave way to humiliation, and her expression settled then into a kind of stiff, sullen pout as she turned quickly away from the man who had just so harshly rejected her. The cloak slipped from her shoulders as she turned, and the few rags she had for clothing scarcely concealed her nakedness. Despite her tangled hair and the dirty smudges on her limbs, there was a lush, inviting ripeness about her. Relg stared at her and he began to tremble. Then he quickly turned, moved as far away from her as possible, and dropped to his knees, praying desperately and pressing his face against the rocky floor of the cave.

"Is he all right?" Taiba asked quickly.

"He's got some problems," Barak replied. "You'll get used to it."

"Taiba," Polgara said. "Come over here." She looked critically at the woman's scanty clothing. "We're going to have to get something together for you to wear. It's very cold outside. There are other reasons too, it appears."

"I'll see what I can find in the packs," Durnik offered. "we'll need something for the boy too, I think. That smock of his doesn't look any too warm." He looked over at the child, who was curiously examining the horses.

"You won't need to bother about me," Taiba told them. "There's nothing out there for me. As soon as you leave, I'm going back to Rak Cthol."

"What are you talking about?" Polgara asked her sharply.

"I still have something to settle with Ctuchik," Taiba replied, fingering her rusty knife.

Silk laughed from the cave mouth. "We took care of that for you. Rak Cthol's falling to pieces up there, and there isn't enough left of Ctuchik to make a smudge on the floor."

"Dead?" she gasped. "How?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Silk told her.

"Did he suffer?" She said it with a ternble eagerness.

"More than you could ever imagine," Polgara replied.

Taiba drew in a long, shuddering breath, and then she began to cry. Aunt Pol opened her arms and took the sobbing woman into them, comforting her even as she had comforted Garion so often when he was small.

Garion sank wearily to the floor, resting his back against the rocky wall of the cave. Waves of exhaustion washed over him, and a great lassitude drained him of all consciously directed thought. Once again the Orb sang to him, but lulling now. Its curiosity about him apparently was satisfied, and its song seemed to be there only to maintain the contact between them. Garion was too tired even to be curious about why the stone took such pleasure in his company.

The little boy turned from his curious examination of the horses and went to where Taiba sat with one of Aunt Pol's arms about her shoulders. He looked puzzled, and reached out with one hand to touch his fingers to her tear-streaked face.

"What does he want?" Taiba asked.

"He's probably never seen tears before," Aunt Pol replied.

Taiba stared at the child's serious little face, then suddenly laughed through her tears and gave him a quick embrace.

The little boy smiled then. "Errand?" he asked, offering her the Orb. "Don't take it, Taiba," Polgara told her very quietly. "Don't even touch it."

Taiba looked at the smiling child and shook her head.

The little boy sighed, then came across the cave, sat down beside Garion, and nestled against him.

Barak had gone a short distance back up the passageway they had followed; now he returned, his face grim. "I can hear Murgos moving around up there," the big man reported. "You can't tell how far away they are with all the echoes in these caves, but it sounds as if they're exploring every cave and passageway."

"Let us find some defensible spot then, my Lord, and give them reason to look for us elsewhere," Mandorallen suggested gaily.

"Interesting notion," Barak replied, "but I'm afraid it wouldn't work. Sooner or later they're going to find us."

"I'll take care of it," Relg said quietly, breaking off his praying and getting to his feet. The ritual formulas had not helped him, and his eyes were haunted.

"I'll go with you," Barak offered.

Relg shook his head. "You'd just be in my way," he said shortly, already moving toward the passage leading back into the mountain. "What's come over him?" Barak asked, puzzled.

"I think our friend's having a religious crisis," Silk observed from the mouth of the cave where he kept watch.

"Another one?"

"It gives him something to occupy his spare moments," Silk replied lightly.

"Come and eat," Aunt Pol told them, laying slices of bread and cheese on top of one of the packs. "Then I want to have a look at the cut on your leg, Mandorallen."

After they had eaten and Polgara had bandaged Mandorallen's knee, she dressed Taiba in a peculiar assortment of clothes Durnik had taken from the packs. Then she turned her attention to the little boy. He returned her grave look with one just as serious, then reached out and touched the white lock at her brow with curious fingers. With a start of remembrance, Garion recalled how many times he had touched that lock with the selfsame gesture, and the memory of it raised a momentary irrational surge of jealousy, which he quickly suppressed.

The little boy smiled with sudden delight. "Errand," he said firmly, offering the Orb to Aunt Pol.

She shook her head. "No, child," she told him. "I'm afraid I'm not the one." She dressed him in clothing that had to be rolled up and taken in

with bits of twine in various places, then sat down with her back against the wall of the cave and held out her arms to him. Obediently he climbed into her lap, put one arm about her neck and kissed her. Then he nestled his face down against her, sighed and immediately fell asleep. She looked down at him with a strange expression on her face - a peculiar mixture of wonder and tenderness - and Garion fought down another wave of jealousy.

There was a grinding rumble in the caves above them.

"What's that?" Durnik asked, looking around with apprehension.

"Relg, I'd imagine," Silk told him. "He seems to be taking steps to head off the Murgos."

"I hope he doesn't get carried away," Durnik said nervously, gland ing at the rock ceiling.

"How longs it going to take to get to the Vale?" Barak asked.

"A couple of weeks, probably," Silk replied. "A lot's going to depend on the terrain and how quickly the Grolims can organize a search for us. If we can get enough of a headstart to put down a good false trail, we can send them all running off to the west toward the Tolnedran border, and we can move toward the Vale without needing to waste all that time dodging and hiding." The little man grinned. "The notion of deceiving the whole Murgo nation appeals to me," he added.

"You don't have to get too creative," Barak told him. "Hettar's going to be waiting for us in the Vale - along with King Cho-Hag and half the clans of Algaria. They'll be awfully disappointed if we don't bring them at least a few Murgos."

"Life's full of little disappointments," Silk told him sardonically. "As I remember it, the eastern edge of the Vale is very steep and rough. It will take a couple of days at least to make it down, and I don't think we'll want to try it with all of Murgodom snapping at our heels."

It was midafternoon when Relg returned. His exertions seemed to have quieted some of the turmoil in his mind, but there was still a haunted look in his eyes, and he deliberately avoided Taiba's violet-eyed gaze. "I pulled down the ceilings of all the galleries leading to this cave," he reported shortly. "We're safe now."

Polgara, who had seemed asleep, opened her eyes. "Get some rest," she told him.

He nodded and went immediately to his blankets.

They rested in the cave through the remainder of the day, taking turns on watch at the narrow opening. The wasteland of black sand and wind-scoured

rock lying out beyond the tumbled scree at the base of the pinnacle was alive with Murgo horsemen scurrying this way and that in a frenzied, disorganized search.

"They don't seem to know what they're doing," Garion observed quietly to Silk as the two of them watched. The sun was just sinking into a bank of cloud on the western horizon, staining the sky fiery red, and the stiff wind brought a dusty chill with it as it seeped into the cave opening.

"I imagine that things are a bit scrambled up in Rak Cthol," Silk replied. "No one's in charge any more, and that confuses Murgos. They tend to go all to pieces when there's nobody around to give them orders."

"Isn't that going to make it hard for us to get out of here?" Garion asked. "What I mean is that they're not going anyplace. They're just milling around. How are we going to get through them?"

Silk shrugged. "We'll just pull up our hoods and mill around with the rest of them." He pulled the coarse cloth of the Murgo robe he wore closer about him to ward off the chill and turned to look back into the cave. "The sun's going down," he reported.

"Let's wait until it's completely dark," Polgara replied. She was carefully bundling the little boy up in one of Garion's old tunics.

"Once we get out a ways, I'll drop a few odds and ends," Silk said. "Murgos can be a little dense sometimes, and we wouldn't want them to miss our trail." He turned to look back out at the sunset. "It's going to be a cold night," he remarked to no one in particular.

"Garion," Aunt Pol said, rising to her feet, "you and Durnik stay close to Taiba. She's never ridden before, and she might need some help at first."

"What about the little boy?" Dumik asked.

"He'll ride with me."

"And Belgarath?" Mandorallen inquired, glancing over at the stilh sleeping old sorcerer.

"When the time comes, we'll just put him on his horse," Polgara replied. "I can keep him in his saddle - as long as we don't make any sudden changes in direction. Is it getting any darker?"

"We'd better wait for a little longer," Silk answered. "There's still quite a bit of light out there."

They waited. The evening sky began to turn purple, and the first stars came out, glittering cold and very far away. Torches began to appear among the searching Murgos. "Shall we go?" Silk suggested, rising to his feet.

They led their horses quietly out of the cave and down across the scree to the sand. There they stopped for several moments while a group of Murgos carrying torches galloped by several hundred yards out. "Don't get separated," Silk told them as they mounted.

"How far is it to the edge of the wasteland?" Barak asked the little man, grunting as he climbed up onto his horse.

"Two days' hard riding," Silk replied. "Or nights in this case. We'll probably want to take cover when the sun's out. We don't look all that much like Murgos."

"Let's get started," Polgara told him.

They moved out at a walk, going slowly until Taiba became more sure of herself and Belgarath showed that he could stay in his saddle even though he could not yet communicate with anyone. Then they nudged their horses into a canter that covered a great deal of ground without exhausting the horses.

As they crossed the first ridge, they rode directly into a large group of Murgos carrying torches.

"Who's there?" Silk demanded sharply, his voice harsh with the characteristic accents of Murgo speech. "Identify yourselves."

"We're from Rak Cthol," one of the Murgos answered respectfully.

"I know that, blockhead," Silk barked. "I asked your identity."

"Third Phalanx," the Murgo said stiffly.

"That's better. Put out those torches. How do you expect to see anything beyond ten feet with them flaring in your eyes?"

The torches were immediately extinguished.

"Move 'your search to the north," Silk commanded. "The Ninth Phalanx is covering this sector."

"But "

"Are you going to argue with me`?"

"No, but "

"Move! Now!"

The Murgos wheeled their horses about and galloped off into the darkness.

"Clever," Barak said admiringly.

Silk shrugged. "Pretty elementary," he replied. "People are grateful for a bit of direction when they're confused. Let's move along, shall we?"

There were other encounters during the long, cold, moonless night as they rode west. They were inescapable in view of the hordes of Murgos scouring the wasteland in search of them, but Silk handled each such meeting smoothly, and the night passed without significant incident.

Toward morning the little man began artfully dropping various articles to mark their trail. "A bit overdone, perhaps," he said critically, looking at an old shoe he had just tossed into the hoof churned sand behind them.

"What are you mumbling about?" Barak asked him.

"Our trail," Silk replied. "We want them to follow us, remember? They're supposed to think we're headed toward Tolnedra."

"So?"

"I was just suggesting that this is a bit crude."

"You worry too much about things like that."

"It's a question of style, my dear Barak," Silk replied loftily. "Sloppy work tends to be habit-forming."

As the first steel-gray light of dawn began to creep across the wintry sky, they took shelter among the boulders of one of the ridges that laced the floor of the wasteland. Durnik, Barak and Mandorallen stretched the canvas of their tents tautly over a narrow ravine on the west side of the ridge and sprinkled sand on top of it to disguise their makeshift shelter.

"It's probably best not to build a fire," Durnik said to Polgara as they led their horses in under the canvas, "what with the smoke and all."

She nodded her agreement. "We could all use a hot meal," she said, "but I suppose we'll have to wait."

They ate a cold breakfast of bread and cheese and began to settle in, hoping to sleep out the day so that they could ride on the next night.

"I could definitely use a bath," Silk said, brushing sand out of his hair.

The little boy looked at nim, frowning slightly. Then he walked over and offered him the Orb. 'Errand'" he asked.

Silk carefully put his hands behind his back and shook his head. "Is that

the only word he knows?" he asked Polgara.

"It seems to be," she replied.

"I don't quite get the connection," Silk said. "What does he mean by it.

"He's probably been told that he has an errand to run," she explained, "to steal the Orb. I imagine that Zedar's been telling him that over and over since he was a baby, and the word stuck in his mind."

"It's a bit disconcerting." Silk was still holding his hands behind his back. "It seems oddly appropriate sometimes."

"He doesn't appear to think the way we do," she told him. "The only purpose he has in life is to give the Orb to someone - anyone, it would seem." She frowned thoughtfully. "Durnik, why don't you see if you can make him some kind of pouch to carry it in, and we'll fasten it to his waist. Maybe if he doesn't have it right there in his hand all the time, he won't think about it so much."

"Of course, Mistress Pol," Durnik agreed. "I should have thought of that myself." He went to one of the packs and took out an old, burnscarred leather apron and fashioned a pouch out of a wide piece of leather he cut from it. "Boy," he said when he had finished, "come here."

The little boy was curiously examining a small, very dry bush at the upper end of the ravine and gave no indication that he knew the smith was calling him.

"You-Errand!" Durnik said.

The little boy looked around quickly and smiled as he went to Durnik.

"Why did you call him that?" Silk asked curiously.

Durnik shrugged. "He seems to be fond of the word and he answers to it. It will do for a name until we can find something more suitable, I suppose."

"Errand?" the child asked, offering the Orb to Durnik.

Durnik smiled at him, bent over and held the mouth of the pouch open. "Put it in here, Errand," he instructed, "and we'll tie it up all nice and safe so you won't lose it."

The little boy delightedly deposited the Orb in the leather pouch. "Errand," he declared firmly.

"I suppose so," Durnik agreed. He pulled the drawstring tight and then tied the pouch to the bit of rope the boy wore as a belt. "There we are, Errand. All safe and secure now."

Errand examined the pouch carefully, tugging at it a few times as if to be sure it was tightly tied. Then he gave a happy little laugh, put his arms about Durnik's neck and kissed his cheek.

"He's a good lad," Durnik said, looking a trifle embarrassed.

"He's totally innocent," Aunt Pol told him from where she was examining the sleeping Belgarath. "He has no idea of the difference between good and evil, so everything in the world seems good to him."

"I wonder what it's like to see the world that way," Taiba mused, gently touching the child's smiling face. "No sorrow; no fear; no pain - just to love everything you see because you believe that everything is good."

Relg, however, had looked up sharply. The troubled expression that had hovered on his face since he had rescued the trapped slave woman fell away to be replaced by that look of fanatic zeal that it had always worn before. "Monstrous!" he gasped.

Taiba turned on him, her eyes hardening. "What's so monstrous about happiness?" she demanded, putting her arm about the boy.

"We aren't here to be happy," he replied, carefully avoiding her eyes.

"Why are we here then?" she challenged.

"To serve our God and to avoid sin." He still refused to look at her, and his tone seemed a trifle less certain.

"Well, I don't have a God," she retorted, "and the child probably doesn't either, so if it's all the same to you, he and I will just concentrate on trying to be happy - and if a bit of sin gets involved in it, so what?"

"Have you no shame?" His voice was choked.

"I am what I am," she replied, "and I won't apologize, since I didn't have very much to say about it."

"Boy," Relg snapped at the child, "come away from her at once."

Taiba straightened, her face hardening even more, and she faced him defiantly. "What do you think you're going to do?" she demanded.

"I will fight sin wherever I find it," he declared.

"Sin, sin, sin!" she flared. "Is that all you ever think about?"

"It's my constant care. I guard against it every moment."

She laughed. "How tedious. Can't you think of anything better to do? Oh, I forgot," she added mockingly. "There's all that praying too, isn't there? All that bawling at your God about how vile you are. I think you must bore this UL of yours tremendously sometimes, do you know that?"

Enraged, Relg raised his fist. "Don't ever speak UL's name again!"

"Will you hit me if I do? It doesn't matter that much. People have been hitting me all my life. Go ahead, Relg. Why don't you hit me?" She lifted her smudged face to him.

Relg's hand fell.

Sensing her advantage, Taiba put her hands to the throat of the rough gray dress Polgara had given her. "I can stop you, Relg," she told him.

She began unfastening the dress. "Watch me. You look at me all the time anyway - I've seen you with your hot eyes on me. You call me names and say that I'm wicked, but still you watch. Look then. Don't try to hide it." She continued to unfasten the front of the dress. "If you're free of sin, my body shouldn't bother you at all."

Relg's eyes were bulging now.

"My body doesn't bother me, but it bothers you very much, doesn't it? But is the wickedness in my mind or yours? I can sink you in sin any time I want to. All I have to do is this." And she pulled open the front of her dress.

Relg spun about, making strangled noises.

"Don't you want to look, Relg?" she mocked him as he fled.

"You have a formidable weapon there, Taiba," Silk congratulated her.

"It was the only weapon I had in the slave pens," she told him. "I learned to use it when I had to." She carefully rebuttoned her dress and turned back to Errand as if nothing had happened.

"What's all the shouting?" Belgarath mumbled, rousing slightly, and they all turned quickly to him.

"Relg and Taiba were having a little theological discussion," Silk replied lightly. "The finer points were very interesting. How are you?" But the old man had already drifted back into sleep.

"At least he's starting to come around," Durnik noted.

"It will be several days before he's fully recovered," Polgara told him, putting her hand to Belgarath's forehead. "He's still terribly weak."

Garion slept for most of the day, wrapped in his blankets and lying on the stony ground. When the chill and a particularly uncomfortable rock under his hip finally woke him, it was late afternoon. Silk sat guard near the mouth of the ravine, staring out at the black sand and the grayish salt flats, but the rest were all asleep. As he walked quietly down to where the little man sat, Garion noticed that Aunt Pol slept with Errand in her arms, and he pushed away a momentary surge of jealousy. Taiba murmured something as he passed, but a quick glance told him that she was not awake. She was lying not far from Relg; in her sleep, her hand seemed to be reaching out toward the slumbering Ulgo.

Silk's sharp little face was alert and he showed no signs of weariness. "Good morning," he murmured, "or whatever."

"Don't you ever get tired?" Garion asked him, speaking quietly so that his voice would not disturb the others.

"I slept a bit," Silk told him.

Durnik came out from under the canvas roof to join them, yawning and rubbing at his eyes. "I'll relieve you now," he said to Silk. "Did you see anything?" He squinted out toward the lowering sun.

Silk shrugged. "Some Murgos. They were a couple of miles off to the south. I don't think anyone's found our trail yet. We might have to make it a little more obvious for them."

Garion felt a peculiar, oppressive sort of weight on the back of his neck. He glanced around uncomfortably. Then, with no warning, there was a sudden sharp stab that seemed to go straight into his mind. He gasped and tensed his will, pushing the attack away.

"What's wrong?" Silk asked sharply.

"A Grolim," Garion snarled, clenching his will as he prepared to fight.

"Garion!" It was Aunt Pol, and her voice sounded urgent. He turned and darted back in under the canvas with Silk and Durnik on his heels. She had risen to her feet and was standing with her arms protectively about Errand.

"That was a Grolim, wasn't it?" Garion demanded, his voice sounding a bit shrill.

"It was more than one," she replied tensely. "The Hierarchs control the Grolims now that Ctuchik's dead. They've joined their wills to try to kill Errand."

The others, awakened by her sharp cry, were stumbling to their feet and reaching for weapons.

"Why are they after the boy?" Silk asked.

"They know that he's the only one who can touch the Orb. They think that if he dies, we won't be able to get it out of Cthol Murgos."

"What do we do?" Garion asked her, looking around helplessly.

"I'm going to have to concentrate on protecting the child," she told him. "Step back, Garion."

"What?"

"Get back away from me." She bent and drew a circle in the sand, enclosing herself and the little boy in it. "Listen to me, all of you," she said. "Until we're out of this, none of you come any closer to me than this. I don't want any of you getting hurt." She drew herself up, and the white lock in her hair seemed to blaze.

"Wait," Garion exclaimed.

"I don't dare. They could attack again at any moment. It's going to be up to you to protect your grandfather and the others."

" Me?"

"You're the only one who can do it. You have the power. Use it." She raised her hand.

"How many of them are there that I have to fight off?" Garion demantled, but he already felt the sudden surge and the peculiar roaring sound in his mind as Aunt Pol's will thrust out. The air about her seemed to shimmer, distorting like heat-waves on a summer afternoon. Garion could actually feel the barrier encircling her. "Aunt Pol?" he said to her. Then he raised his voice and shouted, "Aunt Pol!"

She shook her head and pointed at her ear. She seemed to say something, but no sound penetrated the shimmering shield she had erected.

"How many?" Garion mouthed the words exaggeratedly.

She held up both hands with one thumb folded in.

"Nine?" he mouthed again.

She nodded and then drew her cloak in around the little boy.

"Well, Garion?" Silk asked then, his eyes penetrating, "What do we do now?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"You heard her. Belgarath's still in a daze, and she's busy. You're in charge now."

"Me?"

"What do we do?" Silk pressed. "You've got to learn to make decisions."

"I don't know." Garion floundered helplessly.

"Never admit that," Silk told him. "Act as if you know - even if you don't."

"We-uh-we'll wait until it gets dark, I guess - then we'll keep going the same way we have been."

"There." Silk grinned. "See how easy it is?"

Chapter Three

THERE WAS THE faintest sliver of a moon low over the horizon as they started out across the black sand of the wasteland in the biting chill. Garion felt distinctly uncomfortable in the role Silk had thrust upon him. He knew that there had been no need for it, since they all knew where they were going and what they had to do. If any kind of leadership had actually been required, Silk himself was the logical one to provide it; but instead, the little man had placed the burden squarely on Garion's shoulders and now seemed to be watching intently to see how he would handle it.

There was no time for leadership or even discussion when, shortly after midnight, they ran into a party of Murgos. There were six of them, and they came galloping over a low ridge to the south and blundered directly into the middle of Garion's party. Barak and Mandorallen reacted with that instant violence of trained warriors, their swords whistling out of their sheaths to crunch with steely ringing sounds into the mail-skirted bodies of the startled Murgos. Even as Garion struggled to draw his own sword, he saw one of the black-robed intruders tumble limply out of his saddle, while another, howling with pain and surprise, toppled slowly backward, clutching at his chest. There was a confusion of shouts and shrill screams from terrified horses as the men fought in the darkness. One frightened Murgo wheeled his mount to flee, but Garion, without even thinking, pulled his horse in front of him, sword raised to strike. The desperate Murgo made a frantic swing with his own weapon, but Garion easily parried the badly aimed swipe and flicked his blade lightly, whiplike, across the Murgo's shoulder. There was a satisfying crunch as the sharp edge bit into the Murgo's mail shirt. Garion deftly parried another clumsy swing and whipped

his blade again, slashing the Murgo across the face. All the instruction he had received from his friends seemed to click together into a single, unified style that was part Cherek, part Arendish, part Algar, and was distinctly Garion's own. This style baked the frightened Murgo, and his efforts became more desperate. But each time he swung, Garion easily parried and instantly countered with those light, flicking slashes that inevitably drew blood. Garion felt a wild, surging exultation boiling in his veins as he fought, and there was a fiery taste in his mouth.

Then Relg darted in out of the shadows, jerked the Murgo off balance, and drove his hook-pointed knife up under the man's ribs. The Murgo doubled over sharply, shuddered, then fell dead from his saddle.

"What did you do that for?" Garion demanded without thinking. "That was my Murgo."

Barak, surveying the carnage, laughed, his sudden mirth startling in the darkness. "He's turning savage on us, isn't he?"

"His skill is noteworthy, however," Mandorallen replied approvingly.

Garion's spirits soared. He looked around eagerly for someone else to fight, but the Murgos were all dead. "Were they alone?" he demanded, somewhat out of breath. "I mean, were there any others coming along behind them? Maybe we should go look."

"We do want them to find our trail, after all," Silk reminded him. "It's up to you of course, Garion, but if we exterminate all the Murgos in the area, there won't be anyone left to report our direction back to Rak Cthol, will there?"

"Oh," Garion said, feeling a little sheepish, "I forgot about that."

"You have to keep the grand plan in view, Garion, and not lose sight of it during these little side adventures."

"Maybe I got carried away."

"A good leader can't afford to do that."

"All right." Garion began to feel embarrassed.

"I just wanted to be sure you understood, that's all."

Garion didn't answer, but he began to see what it was about Silk that irritated Belgarath so much. Leadership was enough of a burden without these continuously comments from the weasel-faced little man to complicate things.

"Are you all right?" Taiba was saying to Relg with a strange note of

concern in her voice. The Ulgo was still on his knees beside the body of the Murgo he had killed.

"Leave me alone," he told her harshly.

"Don't be stupid. Are you hurt? Let me see."

"Don't touch me!" He cringed away from her outstretched hand. "Belgarion, make her get away from me."

Garion groaned inwardly. "What's the trouble now?" he asked.

"I killed this man," Relg replied. "There are certain things I have to do - certain prayers - purification. She's interfering."

Garion resisted an impulse to swear. "Please, Taiba," he said as calmly as he could, "just leave him alone."

"I just wanted to see if he was all right," Taiba answered a bit petulantly. "I wasn't hurting him." She had an odd look on her face that Garion could not begin to understand. As she stared at the kneeling Ulgo, a curious little smile flickered across her lips. Without warning, she reached her hand out toward him again.

Relg shrank back. "No!" he gasped.

Taiba chuckled, a throaty, wicked little sound, and walked away, humming softly to herself. After Relg had performed his ritual of purification over the dead Murgo's body, they remounted and rode on. The sliver of moon stood high overhead in the chill sky, casting a pale light down on the black sands, and Garion looked about constantly as he rode, trying to pick out any possible dangers lurking ahead. He glanced frequently at Aunt Pol, wishing that she were not so completely cut off from him, but she seemed to be totally absorbed in maintaining her shield of will. She rode with Errand pulled closely against her, and her eyes were distant, unfathomable. Garion looked hopefully at Belgarath, but the old man, though he looked up from his doze at times, seemed largely unaware of his surroundings. Garion sighed, and his eyes resumed their nervous scrutiny of the trail ahead. They rode on through the tag-end of night in the biting chill with the faint moonlight about them and the stars glittering like points of ice in the sky above.

Suddenly Garion heard a roaring in his mind - a sound that had a peculiar echo to it - and the shield of force surrounding Aunt Pol shimmered with an ugly orange glow. He jerked his will in sharply and gestured with a single word. He had no idea what word he used, but it seemed to work. Like a horse blundering into a covey of feeding birds, his will scattered the concerted attack on Aunt Pol and Errand. There had been more than one mind involved in the attack - he sensed that - but it seemed to make no difference. He caught a momentary flicker of chagrin and even fear as the joined wills of

Aunt Pol's attackers broke and fled from him.

"Not bad,"the voice in his mind observed. "A little clumsy, perhaps, but not bad at all."

"It's the first time I ever did it, " Garion replied. "I'll get better with more practice."

"Don't get overconfident," the voice advised dryly, and then it was gone.

He was growing stronger, there was no doubt about that. The ease with which he had dispersed the combined wills of that group of Grolims Aunt Pol had called the Hierarchs amazed him. He faintly began to understand what Aunt Pol and Belgarath meant in their use of the word "talent." There seemed to be some kind of capacity, a limit beyond which most sorcerers could not go. Garion realized with a certain surprise that he was already stronger than men who had been practicing this art for centuries, and that he was only beginning to touch the edges of his talent. The thought of what he might eventually be able to do was more than a little frightening.

It did, however, make him feel somewhat more secure. He straightened in his saddle and rode a bit more confidently. Perhaps leadership wasn't so bad after all. It took some getting used to, but once you knew what you were doing, it didn't seem all that hard.

The next attack came as the eastern horizon had begun to grow pale behind them. Aunt Pol, her horse, and the little boy all seemed to vanish as absolute blackness engulfed them. Garion struck back instantly and he added a contemptuous little twist to it - a stinging slap at the joined minds that had mounted the attack. He felt a glow of self satisfaction at the surprise and pain in the minds as they flinched back from his quick counterblow. There was a glimpse - just a momentary one - of nine very old men in black robes seated around a table in a room somewhere. One of the walls of the room had a large crack in it, and part of the ceiling had collapsed as a result of the earthquake that had convulsed Rak Cthol. Eight of the evil old men looked surprised and frightened; the ninth one had fainted. The darkness surrounding Aunt Pol disappeared.

"What are they doing?" Silk asked him.

"They're trying to break through Aunt Pol's shield," Garion replied. "I gave them something to think about." He felt a little smug about it.

Silk looked at him, his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Don't overdo things, Garion," he advised.

"Somebody had to do something," Garion protested.

"That's usually the way it works out. All I'm saying is that you shouldn't lose your perspective."

The broken wall of peaks that marked the western edge of the waste land was clearly visible as the light began to creep up the eastern sky. "How far would you say it is?" Garion asked Durnik.

The smith squinted at the mountains ahead. "Two or three leagues at least," he judged. "Distances are deceiving in this kind of light."

"Well?" Barak asked. "Do we take cover for the day here or do we make a run for it?"

Garion thought about that. "Are we going to change direction as soon as we get to the mountains?" he asked Mandorallen.

"It would seem better mayhap to continue our present course for some little distance first," the knight replied thoughtfully. "A natural boundary such as that which lies ahead might attract more than passing scrutiny."

"That's a good point," Silk agreed.

Garion scratched at his cheek, noticing that his whiskers had begun to sprout again. "Maybe we should stop here then," he suggested. "We could start out again when the sun goes down, get up into the mountains a way and then rest. When the sun comes up tomorrow morning, we can change our route. That way, we'll have light enough to see any tracks we leave and cover them up."

"Seems like a good plan," Barak approved.

"Let's do it that way then," Garion decided.

They sought out another ridge and another ravine, and once again concealed it with their tent canvas. Although he was tired, Garion was reluctant to lose himself in sleep. Not only did the cares of leadership press heavily on him, but he also felt apprehensive about the possibility of an attack by the Hierarchs coming while he was asleep. As the others began to unroll their blankets, he walked about rather aimlessly, stopping to look at Aunt Pol, who sat with her back against a large rock, holding the sleeping Errand and looking as distant as the moon behind her shimmering shield. Garion sighed and went on down to the mouth of the ravine where Durnik was attending to the horses. It had occurred to him that all their lives depended on the well-being of their mounts, and that gave him something else to worry about.

"How are they?" he asked Durnik as he approached.

"They're bearing up fairly well," Durnik replied. "They've come a long way, though, and it's beginning to show on some of them."

"Is there anything we can do for them?"

"A week's rest in a good pasture, perhaps," Durnik answered with a wry smile.

Garion laughed. "I think we could all use a week's rest in a good pasture."

"You've really grown, Garion," Durnik observed as he lifted another horse's hind hoof to examine it for cuts or bruises.

Garion glanced at his arm and saw that his wrist stuck an inch or two out of his sleeve. "Most of my clothes still fit - pretty much," he replied.

"That's not the way I meant." Durnik hesitated. "What's it like, Garion? Being able to do things the way you do?"

"It scares me, Durnik," Garion admitted quietly. "I didn't really want any of this, but it didn't give me any choice."

"You mustn't let it frighten you, you know," Durnik said, carefully lowering the horse's hoof. "If it's part of you, it's part of you just like being tall or having blond hair."

"It's not really like that, Durnik. Being tall or having blond hair doesn't hurt anybody. This can."

Durnik looked out at the long shadows of the ridge stretching away from the newly risen sun. "You just have to learn to be careful with it, that's all. When I was about your age, I found out that I was much stronger than the other young men in our village - probably because I worked in the smithy. I didn't want to hurt anybody, so I wouldn't wrestle with my friends. One of them thought I was a coward because of that and he pushed me around for about six months until I finally lost my temper."

"Did you fight him?"

Durnik nodded. "It wasn't really much of a contest. After it was over, he realized that I wasn't a coward after all. We even got to be good friends again - after his bones all healed up and he got used to the missing teeth."

Garion grinned at him, and Durnik smiled back a bit ruefully. "I was ashamed of myself afterward, of course."

Garion felt very close to this plain, solid man. Durnik was his oldest friend - somebody he could always count on.

"What I'm trying to say, Garion," Durnik continued seriously, "is that you can't go through life being afraid of what you are. If you do that, sooner or later somebody will come along who'll misunderstand, and you'll have to do something to show him that it's not him that you're afraid of. When it

goes that far, it's usually much worse for you - and for him, too."

"As it was with Asharak?"

Durnik nodded. "It's always best in the long run to be what you are. It isn't proper to behave as if you were more, but it isn't good to behave as if you were less, either. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"The whole problem seems to be finding out just exactly what you really are," Garion observed.

Durnik smiled again. "That's the part that gets most of us in trouble at times," he agreed. Suddenly the smile fell away from his face and he gasped. Then he fell writhing to the ground, clutching at his stomach.

"Durnik!" Garion cried, "What's wrong?"

But Durnik could not answer. His face was ashen and contorted with agony as he twisted in the dirt.

Garion felt a strange, alien pressure and he understood instantly. Thwarted in their attempts to kill Errand, the Hierarchs were directing their attacks at the others in the hope of forcing Aunt Pol to drop her shield. A terrible rage boiled up in him. His blood seemed to burn, and a fierce cry came to his lips.

"Calmly." It was the voice within his mind again.

"What do I do?"

"Get out into the sunlight."

Garion did not understand that, but he ran out past the horses into the pale morning light.

"Put yourself into your shadow. "

He looked down at the shadow stretching out on the ground in front of him and obeyed the voice. He wasn't sure exactly how he did it, but he poured his will and his awareness into the shadow.

"Now, follow the trail of their thought back to them. Quickly." Garion felt himself suddenly flying. Enclosed in his shadow, he touched the still-writhing Durnik once like a sniffing hound, picked up the direction of the concerted thought that had felled his friend, and then flashed through the air back over the miles of wasteland toward the wreckage of Rak Cthol. He had, it seemed, no weight, and there was an odd purplish cast to everything he saw.

He felt his immensity as he entered the room with the cracked wall where

the nine black-robed old men sat, trying with the concerted power of their minds to kill Durnik. Their eyes were all focused on a huge ruby, nearly the size of a man's head, which lay flickering in the center of the table around which they sat. The slanting rays of the morning sun had distorted and enlarged Garion's shadow, and he filled one corner of the room, bending slightly so that he could fit under the ceiling. "Stop!" he roared at the evil old men. "Leave Durnik alone!"

They flinched back from his sudden apparition, and he could feel the thought they were directing at Durnik through the stone on the table falter and begin to fall apart. He took a threatening step and saw them cringe away from him in the purple light that half clouded his vision.

Then one of the old men-very thin and with a long dirty beard and completely hairless scalp - seemed to recover from his momentary fright. "Stand firm!" he snapped at the others. "Keep the thought on the Sendar!"

"Leave him alone!" Garion shouted at them.

"Who says so?" the thin old man drawled insultingly.

"I do."

"And just who are you?"

"I am Belgarion. Leave my friends alone."

The old man laughed, and his laugh was as chilling as Ctuchik's had been. "Actually, you're only Belgarion's shadow," he corrected. "We know the trick of the shadow. You can talk and bluster and threaten, but that's all you can do. You're just a powerless shade, Belgarion."

"Leave us alone!"

"And what will you do if we don't?" The old man's face was filled with contemptuous amusement.

"Is he right?" Garion demanded of the voice within his mind.

"Perhaps perhaps not,"the voice replied. "A few men have been able to go beyond the limitation. You won't know unless you try."

Despite his dreadful anger, Garion did not want to kill any of them. "Ice!" he said, focusing on the idea of cold and lashing out with his will. It felt odd - almost tenuous, as if it had no substance behind it, and the roaring was hollow and puny-sounding.

The bald old man sneered and waggled his beard insultingly. Garion ground his insubstantial teeth and drew himself in with dreadful concentration. "Burn!" he said then, driving his will. There was a flicker and then a

sudden flash. The force of Garion's will burst forth, directed not at the bald man himself, but rather at his whiskers.

The Hierarch jumped up and stumbled back with a hoarse exclamation, trying desperately to beat the flames out of his beard.

The concerted thought of the Hierarchs shattered as the rest of them scrambled to their feet in terrified astonishment. Grimly, Garion gathered his swelling will and began to lay about him with his immensely long arms. He tumbled the Hierarchs across the rough stone floor and slammed them into walls. Squealing with fright, they scurried this way and that, trying to escape, but he methodically reached out and grasped them one by one to administer his chastisement. With a peculiar kind of detachment, he even stuffed one of them headfirst into the crack in the wall, pushing quite firmly until only a pair of wriggling feet were sticking out.

Then, when it was done, he turned back to the bald Hierarch, who had managed finally to beat the last of the fire out of his beard.

"It's impossible - impossible," the Hierarch protested, his face stunned. "How did you do it?"

"I told you - I am Belgarion. I can do things you can't even imagine."

"The jewel, "the voice told him. "They're using the jewel to focus their attacks. Destroy it."

"How?"

"It can only hold so much. Look."

Garion suddenly found that he could actually see into the interior of the still-flickering ruby on the table. He saw the minute stress lines within its crystalline structure, and then he understood. He turned his will on it and poured all his anger into it. The stone blazed with light and began to pulsate as the force within it swelled. Then, with a sharp detonation, the stone exploded into fragments.

"No!" the bald Hierarch wailed. "You idiot! That stone was irreplaceable."

"Listen to me, old man," Garion said in an awful voice, "you will leave us alone. You will not pursue us, or try to injure any of us any more." He reached out with his shadowy hand and slid it directly into the bald man's chest. He could feel the heart flutter like a terrified bird and the lungs falter as the Hierarch's breath stopped and he gaped with horror at the arm sticking out of his chest. Garion slowly opened his fingers very wide. "Do you understand me?" he demanded.

The Hierarch gurgled and tried to take hold of the arm, but his fingers found nothing to grasp.

"Do you understand me?" Garion repeated and suddenly clenched his fist.

The Hierarch screamed.

"Are you going to leave us alone?"

"Please, Belgarion! No more! I'm dying!"

"Are you going to leave us alone?" Garion demanded again.

"Yes, yes - anything, but please stop! I beg you! I'll do anything. Please!"

Garion unclenched his fist and drew his hand out of the Hierarch's heaving chest. He held it up, clawlike, directly in front of the old man's face. "Look at this and remember it," he said in a dreadfully quiet voice. "Next time I'll reach into your chest and pull your heart out."

The Hierarch shrank back, his eyes filled with horror as he stared at the awful hand. "I promise you," he stammered. "I promise."

"Your life depends on it," Garion told him, then turned and flashed back across the empty miles toward his friends. Quite suddenly he was standing at the mouth of the ravine staring down at his shadow slowly reforming on the ground before him. The purple haze was gone; strangely enough, he didn't even feel tired.

Durnik drew in a shuddering breath and struggled to rise.

Garion turned quickly and ran back to his friend. "Are you all right?" he asked, taking hold of the smith's arm.

"It was like a knife twisting inside me," Durnik replied in a shaking voice. "What was it?"

"The Grolim Hierarchs were trying to kill you," Garion told him. Durnik looked around, his eyes frightened.

"Don't worry, Durnik. They won't do it again.'" Garion helped him to his feet and together they went back into the ravine.

Aunt Pol was looking directly at him as he approached her. Her eyes were penetrating. "You're growing up very fast," she said to him.

"I had to do something," he replied. "What happened to your shield?"

"It doesn't seem to be necessary any more."

"Not bad," Belgarath said. The old man was sitting up. He looked weak and

drawn, but his eyes were alert. "Some of it was a bit exotic; but on the whole, it wasn't bad at all. The business with the hand was just a little overdone, though."

"I wanted to be sure he understood that I meant what I was saying." Garion felt a tremendous wave of relief at his grandfather's return to consciousness.

"I think you convinced him," Belgarath said dryly. "Is there anything to eat somewhere nearby?" he asked Aunt Pol.

"Are you all right now, Grandfather?" Garion asked him.

"Aside from being as weak as a fresh-hatched baby chick and as hungry as a she-wolf with nine puppies, I'm just fine," Belgarath replied. "I could really use something to eat, Polgara."

"I'll see what I can find, father," she told him, turning to the packs.

"I don't know that you need to bother cooking it," he added.

The little boy had been looking curiously at Garion, his wide, blue eyes serious and slightly puzzled. Quite suddenly he laughed; smiling, he looked into Garion's face. "Belgarion," he said.

Chapter Four

"NO REGRETS?" SILK asked Garion that evening as they rode toward the sharply rising peaks outlined against the glittering stars ahead.

"Regrets about what?"

"Giving up command." Silk had been watching him curiously ever since the setting sun had signalled the resumption of their journey.

"No," Garion replied, not quite sure what the little man meant. "Why should there be?"

"It's a very important thing for a man to learn about himself, Garion," Silk told him seriously. "Power can be very sweet for some men, and you never know how a man's going to handle it until you give him the chance to try."

"I don't know why you went to all the trouble. It's not too likely that I'm going to be put in charge of things very often."

"You never know, Garion. You never know."

They rode on across the barren black sands of the wasteland toward the mountains looming ahead. The quarter moon rose behind them, and its light was cold and white. Near the edge of the wasteland there were a few scrubby thornbushes huddling low to the sand and silvered with frost. It was an hour or so before midnight when they finally reached rocky ground, and the hooves of their horses clattered sharply as they climbed up out of the sandy waste. When they topped the first ridge, they stopped to look back. The dark expanse of the wasteland behind them was dotted with the watch fires of the Murgos, and far back along their trail they saw moving torches.

"I was starting to worry about that," Silk said to Belgarath, "but it looks as if they found our trail after all."

"Let's hope they don't lose it again," the old man replied. "Not too likely, really. I made it pretty obvious."

"Murgos can be a bit undependable sometimes." Belgarath seemed to have recovered almost completely, but Garion noted a weary slump to his shoulders and was glad that they did not plan to ride all night.

The mountains into which they rode were as arid and rocky as the ones lying to the north had been. There were looming cliffs and patches of alkali on the ground and a bitingly cold wind that seemed to wail endlessly through the rocks and to tug at the coarse-woven Murgo robes that disguised them. They pushed on until they were well into the mountains; then, several hours before dawn, they stopped to rest and to wait for the sun to rise.

When the first faint light appeared on the eastern horizon, Silk rode out and located a rocky gap passing to the northwest between two ocherous cliff faces. As soon as he returned, they saddled their horses again and moved out at a trot.

"We can get rid of these now, I think," Belgarath said, pulling off his Murgo robe.

"I'll take them," Silk suggested as he reined in. "The gap's just ahead there." He pointed. "I'll catch up in a couple of hours."

"Where are you going?" Barak asked him.

"I'll leave a few miles more of false trail," Silk replied. "Then I'll double back and make sure that you haven't left any tracks. It won't take long."

"You want some company?" the big man offered.

Silk shook his head. "I can move faster alone."

"Be careful."

Silk grinned. "I'm always careful." He took the Murgo garments from them and rode off to the west.

The gap into which they rode appeared to be the bed of a stream that had dried up thousands of years before. The water had cut down through the rock, revealing layer upon layer of red, brown, and yellow stone lying in bands, one atop the other. The sound of their horses' hooves was very loud as they clattered along between the cliffs, and the wind whistled as it poured through the cut.

Taiba drew her horse in beside Garion's. She was shivering and she had the cloak he had given her pulled tightly ahout her shoulders. "Is it always this cold?" she asked, her large, violet eyes very wide.

"In the wintertime," he replied. "I imagine it's pretty hot here in the summer."

"The slave pens were always the same," she told him. "We never knew what season it was."

The twisting streambed made a sharp bend to the right, and they rode into the light of the newly risen sun. Taiba gasped.

"What's wrong?" Garion asked her quickly.

"The light," she cried, covering her face with her hands. "It's like fire in my eyes."

Relg, who rode directly in front of them, was also shielding his eyes. He looked back over his shoulder at the Marag woman. "Here," he said. He took one of the veils he usually bound across his eyes when they were in direct sunlight and handed it back to her. "Cover your face with this until we're back into the shadows again." His voice was peculiarly neutral.

"Thank you," Taiba said, binding the cloth across her eyes. "I didn't know that the sun could be so bright."

"You'll get used to it," Relg told her. "It just takes some time. Try to protect your eyes for the first few days." He seemed about to turn and ride on, then he looked at her curiously. "Haven't you ever seen the sun before?" he asked her.

"No," she replied. "Other slaves told me about it, though. The Murgos don't use women on their work gangs, so I was never taken out of the pens. It was always dark down there."

"It must have been terrible." Garion shuddered.

She shrugged. "The dark wasn't so bad. It was the light we were afraid of. Light meant that the Murgos were coming with torches to take someone to the Temple to be sacrificed."

The trail they followed turned again, and they rode out of the bright glare of sunlight. "Thank you," Taiba said to Relg, removing the veil from her eyes and holding it out to him.

"Keep it," he told her. "You'll probably need it again." His voice seemed oddly subdued, and his eyes had a strange gentleness in them. As he looked at her, the haunted expression crept back over his face.

Since they had left Rak Cthol, Garion had covertly watched these two. He knew that Relg, despite all his efforts, could not take his eyes off the Marag woman he had been forced to rescue from her living entombment in the caves. Although Relg still ranted about sin continually, his words no longer carried the weight of absolute conviction; indeed quite often, they seemed to be little more than a mechanical repetition of a set of formulas. Occasionally, Garion had noted, even those formulas had faltered when Taiba's deep violet eyes had turned to regard the Ulgo's face. For her part, Taiba was quite obviously puzzled. Relg's rejection of her simple gratitude had humiliated her, and her resentment had been hot and immediate. His constant scrutiny, however, spoke to her with a meaning altogether different from the words coming from his lips. His eyes told her one thing, but his mouth said something else. She was baffled by him, not knowing whether to respond to his look or his words.

"You've lived your whole life in the dark, then?" Relg asked her curiously.

"Most of it," she replied. "I saw my mother's face once - the day the Murgos came and took her to the Temple. I was alone after that. Being alone is the worst of it. You can bear the dark if you aren't alone."

"How old were you when they took your mother away?"

"I don't really know. I must have been almost a woman, though, because not long after that the Murgos gave me to a slave who had pleased them. There were a lot of slaves in the pens who did anything the Murgos wanted, and they were rewarded with extra food - or with women. I cried at first; but in time I learned to accept it. At least I wasn't alone any more."

Relg's face hardened, and Taiba saw the expression. "What should I have done?" she asked him. "When you're a slave, your body doesn't belong to you. They can sell you or give you to anybody they want to, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"There must have been something."

"Such as what? I didn't have any kind of weapon to fight with -or to kill

myself with - and you can't strangle yourself." She looked at Garion. "Did you know that? Some of the slaves tried it, but all you do is fall into unconsciousness, and then you start to breathe again. Isn't that curious?"

"Did you try to fight?" It seemed terribly important to Relg for some reason.

"What would have been the point? The slave they gave me to was stronger than I. He'd have just hit me until I did what he wanted."

"You should have fought," Relg declared adamantly. "A little pain is better than sin, and giving up like that is sin."

"Is it? If somebody forces you to do something and there's no possible way to avoid it, is it really sin?"

Relg started to answer, but her eyes, looking directly into his face, seemed to stop up his tongue. He faltered, unable to face that gaze. Abruptly he turned his mount and rode back toward the pack animals.

"Why does he fight with himself so much?" Taiba asked.

"He's completely devoted to his God," Garion explained. "He's afraid of anything that might take away some of what he feels he owes to UL."

"Is this UL of his really that jealous?"

"No, I don't think so, but Relg does."

Taiba pursed her lips into a sensual pout and looked back over her shoulder at the retreating zealot. "You know," she said, "I think he's actually afraid of me." She laughed then, that same low, wicked little laugh, and lifted her arms to run her fingers through the glory of her midnight hair. "No one's ever been afraid of me before - not ever. I think I rather like it. Will you excuse me?" She turned her horse without waiting for a reply and quite deliberately rode back after the fleeing Relg.

Garion thought about it as he rode on through the narrow, twisting canyon. He realized that there was a strength in Taiba that none of them had suspected, and he finally concluded that Relg was in for a very bad time.

He trotted on ahead to speak to Aunt Po1 about it as she rode with her arms about Errand.

"It's really none of your businccss, Garion," she told him. "Relg and Taiba can work out their problems without any help from you."

"I was just curious, that's all. Relg's tearing himself apart, and Taiba's all confused about him. What's really going on between them, Aunt Pol?"

"Something very necessary," she replied.

"You could say that about nearly everything that happens, Aunt Pol." It was almost an accusation. "You could even say that the way Ce'Nedra and I quarrel all the time is necessary too, couldn't you?"

She looked slightly amused. "It's not exactly the same thing, Garion," she answered, "but there's a certain necessity about that too."

"That's ridiculous," he scoffed.

"Is it really? Then why do you suppose the two of you go out of your way so much to aggravate each other?"

He had no answer for that, but the entire notion worried him. At the same time the very mention of Ce'Nedra's name suddenly brought her sharply into his mind, and he realized that he actually missed her. He rode along in silence beside Aunt Pol for a while, feeling melancholy. Finally he sighed.

"And why so great a sigh?"

"It's all over, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

"This whole thing. I mean - we've recovered the Orb. That's what this was all about, wasn't it?"

"There's more to it than that, Garion - much more - and we're not out of Cthol Murgos yet, are we?"

"You're not really worried about that, are you?" But then, as if her question had suddenly uncovered some lingering doubts in his own mind, he stared at her in sudden apprehension. "What would happen if we didn't?" he blurted. "If we didn't make it out, I mean. What would happen to the West if we didn't get the Orb back to Riva?"

"Things would become unpleasant."

"There'd be a war, wouldn't there? And the Angaraks would win, and there'd be Grolims everywhere with their knives and their altars." The thought of Grolims marching up to the gates of Faldor's farm outraged him.

"Don't go borrowing trouble, Garion. Let's worry about one thing at a time, shall we?"

"But what if-"

"Garion," she said with a pained look, "don't belabor the 'what ifs,' please. If you start that, you'll just worry everybody to death."

"You say 'what if' to grandfather all the time," he accused.

"That's different," she replied.

They rode hard for the next several days through a series of passes with the dry, bitter chill pressing at them like some great weight. Silk rode back often to look for any signs of pursuit, but their ruse seemed to have fooled the Murgos. Finally, about noon on a cold, sunless day when the wind was kicking up dust clouds along the horizon, they reached the broad, arid valley through which the south caravan route wound. They took cover behind a low hill while Silk rode on ahead to take a quick look.

"Thinkest thou that Taur Urgas hath joined in the search for us?" Mandorallen, dressed again in his armor, asked Belgarath.

"It's hard to say for sure," the old sorcerer replied. "He's a very unpredictable man."

"There's a Murgo patrol headed east on the caravan route," Silk reported when he returned. "It will be another half hour or so until they're out of sight."

Belgarath nodded.

"Do you think we'll be safe once we cross over into Mishrak ac Thull?" Durnik asked.

"We can't count on it," Belgarath replied. "Gethel, the king of the Thulls, is afraid of Taur Urgas, so he wouldn't make any kind of fuss about a border violation if Taur Urgas decided to follow us."

They waited until the Murgos had crossed a low ridge to the east and then moved out again.

For the next two days they rode steadily to the northwest. The terrain grew less rocky after they crossed into the land of the Thulls, and they saw the telltale dust clouds far behind them that spoke of mounted Murgo search parties. It was late in the afternoon of a murky day when they finally reached the top of the eastern escarpment.

Barak glanced back over his shoulder at the dust clouds behind them, then pulled his horse in beside Belgarath's. "Just how rough is the ground leading down into the Vale?" he asked.

"It's not the easiest trail in the world."

"Those Murgos are less than a day behind us, Belgarath. If we have to pick our way down, they'll be on top of us before we make it."

Belgarath pursed his lips, squinting at the dust clouds on the southern horizon. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "Maybe we'd better think this through." He raised his hand to call a halt. "It's time to make a couple of decisions," he told the rest of them. "The Murgos are a little closer than we really want them to be. It takes two to three days to make the descent into the Vale, and there are places where one definitely doesn't want to be rushed."

"We could always go on to that ravine we followed coming up," Silk suggested. "It only takes a half day to go down that way."

"But Lord Hettar and the Algar clans of King Cho-Hag await us in the Vale," Mandorallen objected. "Were we to go on, would we not lead the Murgos down into undefended country?"

"Have we got any choice?" Silk asked him.

"We could light fires along the way," Barak suggested. "Hettar will know what they mean."

"So would the Murgos," Silk said. "They'd ride all night and be right behind us every step of the way down."

Belgarath scratched sourly at his short white beard. "I think we're going to have to abandon the original plan," he decided. "We have to take the shortest way down, and that means the ravine, I'm afraid. We'll be on our own once we get down, but that can't be helped."

"Surely King Cho-Hag will have scouts posted along the foot of the escarpment," Durnik said, his plain face worried.

"We can hope so," Barak replied.

"All right," Belgarath said firmly, "we'll use the ravine. I don't altogether like the idea, but our options seem to have been narrowed a bit. Let's ride."

It was late afternoon when they reached the shallow gully at the top of the steep notch leading down to the plain below. Belgarath glanced once down the precipitous cut and shook his head. "Not in the dark," he decided. "Can you see any signs of the Algars?" he asked Barak, who was staring out at the plain below.

"I'm afraid not," the red-bearded man answered. "Do you want to light a fire to signal them?"

"No," the old man replied. "Let's not announce our intentions."

"I will need a small fire, though," Aunt Pol told him. "We all need a hot meal."

"I don't know if that's wise, Polgara," Belgarath objected.

"We'll have a hard day tomorrow, father," she said firmly. "Durnik knows how to build a small fire and keep it hidden."

"Have it your own way, Pol," the old man said in a resigned tone of voice.

"Naturally, father."

It was cold that night, and they kept their fire small and well sheltered. As the first light of dawn began to stain the cloudy sky to the east, they rose and prepared to descend the rocky cut toward the plain below.

"I'll strike the tents," Durnik said.

"Just knock them down," Belgarath told him. He turned and nudged one of the packs thoughtfully with his foot. "We'll take only what we absolutely have to have," he decided. "We're not going to have the time to waste on these."

"You're not going to leave them?" Durnik sounded shocked.

"They'll just be in the way, and the horses will be able to move faster without them."

"But - all of our belongings!" Durnik protested.

Silk also looked a bit chagrined. He quickly spread out a blanket and began rummaging through the packs, his quick hands bringing out innumerable small, valuable items and piling them in a heap on the blanket.

"Where did you get all those?" Barak asked him.

"Here and there," Silk replied evasively.

"You stole them, didn't you?"

"Some of them," Silk admitted. "We've been on the road for a long time, Barak."

"Do you really plan to carry all of that down the ravine?" Barak asked, curiously eyeing Silk's treasures.

Silk looked at the heap, mentally weighing it. Then he sighed with profound regret. "No," he said, "I guess not." He stood up and scattered the heap with his foot. "It's all very pretty though, isn't it? Now I guess I'll have to start all over again." He grinned then. "It's the stealing that's fun, anyway. Let's go down." And he started toward the top of the steeply descending streambed that angled sharply down toward the base of the escarpment.

The unburdened horses were able to move much more rapidly, and they all passed quite easily over spots Garion remembered painfully from the upward climb weeks before. By noon they were more than halfway down.

Then Polgara stopped and raised her face. "Father," she said calmly, "they've found the top of the ravine."

"How many of them?"

"It's an advance patrol - no more than twenty."

Far above them they heard a sharp clash of rock against rock, and then, after a moment, another. "I was afraid of that," Belgarath said sourly.

"What?" Garion asked.

"They're rolling rocks down on us." The old man grimly hitched up his belt. "All right, the rest of you go on ahead. Get down as fast as you can.

"Are you strong enough, father?" Aunt Pol asked, sounding concerned. "You still haven't really recovered, you know."

"We're about to find out," the old man replied, his face set. "Move - all of you." He said it in a tone that cut off any possible argument. As they all began scrambling down over the steep rocks, Garion lagged farther and farther behind. Finally, as Durnik led the last packhorse over a jumble of broken stone and around a bend, Garion stopped entirely and stood listening. He could hear the clatter and slide of hooves on the rocks below and, from above, the clash and bounce of a large stone tumbling over the ravine, coming closer and closer. Then there was a familiar surge and roaring sound. A rock, somewhat larger than a man's head, went whistling over him, angling sharply up out of the cut to fall harmlessly far out on the tumbled debris at the floor of the escarpment. Carefully Garion began climbing back up the ravine, pausing often to listen.

Belgarath was sweating as Garion came into sight around a bend in the ravine a goodly way above and ducked back out of the old man's sight. Another rock, somewhat larger than the first, came bounding and crashing down the narrow ravine, bouncing off the walls and leaping into the air each time it struck the rocky streambed. About twenty yards above Belgarath, it struck solidly and spun into the air. The old man gestured irritably, grunting with the effort, and the rock sailed out in a long arc, clearing the walls of the ravine and falling out of sight.

Garion quickly crossed the streambed and went down several yards more, staying close against the rocky wall and peering back to be sure he was concealed from his grandfather.

When the next rock came bouncing and clashing down toward them, Garion

gathered his will. He'd have to time it perfectly, he knew, and he peered around a corner, watching the old man intently. When Belgarath raised his hand, Garion pushed his own will in to join his grandfather's, hoping to slip a bit of unnoticed help to him.

Belgarath watched the rock go whirling far out over the plain below, then he turned and looked sternly down the ravine. "All right, Garion," he said crisply, "step out where I can see you."

Somewhat sheepishly Garion went out into the center of the streambed and stood looking up at his grandfather.

"Why is it that you can never do what you're told to do?" the old man demanded.

"I just thought I could help, that's all."

"Did I ask for help? Do I look like an invalid?"

"There's another rock coming."

"Don't change the subject. I think you're getting above yourself, young man."

"Grandfather!" Garion said urgently, staring at the large rock bounding down the ravine directly for the old man's back. He threw his will under the rock and hurled it out of the ravine.

Belgarath looked up at the stone soaring over his head. "Tacky, Garion," he said disapprovingly, "very tacky. You don't have to throw them all the way to Prolgu, you know. Stop trying to show off."

"I got excited," Garion apologized. "I pushed a little too hard."

The old man grunted. "All right," he said a bit ungraciously, "as long as you're here anyway but stick to your own rocks. I can manage mine, and you throw me off balance when you come blundering in like that."

"I just need a little practice, that's all."

"You need some instruction in etiquette, too," Belgarath told him, coming on down to where Garion stood. "You don't just jump in with help until you're asked. That's very bad form, Garion."

"Another rock coming," Garion informed him politely. "Do you want to get it or shall I?"

"Don't get snippy, young man," Belgarath told him, then turned and flipped the approaching rock out of the ravine.

They moved on down together, taking turns on the rocks the Murgos were rolling down the ravine. Garion discovered that it grew easier each time he did it, but Belgarath was drenched with sweat by the time they neared the bottom. Garion considered trying once again to slip his grandfather a bit of assistance, but the old sorcerer glared at him so fiercely as he started to gather in his will that he quickly abandoned the idea.

"I wondered where you'd gone," Aunt Pol said to Garion as the two clambered out over the rocks at the mouth of the ravine to rejoin the rest of the party. She looked closely at Belgarath. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm just fine," he snapped. "I had all this assistance - unsolicited, of course." He glared at Garion again.

"When we get a bit of time, we're going to have to give him some lessons in controlling the noise," she observed. "He sounds like a thunderclap."

"That's not all he has to learn to control." For some reason the old man was behaving as if he'd just been dreadfully insulted.

"What now?" Barak asked. "Do you want to light signal fires and wait here for Hettar and Cho-Hag?"

"This isn't a good place, Barak," Silk pointed out. "Half of Murgodom's going to come pouring down that ravine very shortly."

"The passage is not wide, Prince Kheldar," Mandorallen observed.

"My Lord Barak and I can hold it for a week or more if need be."

"You're backsliding again, Mandorallen," Barak told him.

"Besides, they'd just roll rocks down on you," Silk said. "And they're going to be dropping boulders off the edge up there before long. We're probably going to have to get out on the plain a ways to avoid that sort of thing."

Durnik was staring thoughtfully at the mouth of the ravine. "We need to send something up there to slow them down, though," he mused. "I don't think we want them right behind us."

"It's a little hard to make rocks roll uphill," Barak said.

"I wasn't thinking of rocks," Durnik replied. "We'll need something much lighter."

"Like what?" Silk asked the smith.

"Smoke would be good," Durnik answered. "The ravine should draw just like a chimney. If we build a fire and fill the whole thing with smoke, nobody's

going to come down until the fire goes out."

Silk grinned broadly. "Durnik," he said, "you're a treasure."

Chapter Five

THERE WERE BUSHES, scrub and bramble for the most part, growing here and there along the base of the cliff, and they quickly fanned out with their swords to gather enough to build a large, smoky fire. "You'd better hurry," Belgarath called to them as they worked. "There are a dozen Murgos or more already halfway down the ravine."

Durnik, who had been gathering dry sticks and splintered bits of log, ran back to the mouth of the ravine, knelt and began striking sparks from his flint into the tinder he always carried. In a few moments he had a small fire going, the orange flames licking up around the weathered gray sticks. Carefully he added larger pieces until his fire was a respectable blaze. Then he began piling thornbushes and brambles atop it, critically watching the direction of the smoke. The bushes hissed and smoldered fitfully at first, and a great cloud of smoke wafted this way and that for a moment, then began to pour steadily up the ravine. Durnik nodded with satisfaction. "Just like a chimney," he observed. From far up the cut came shouts of alarm and a great deal of coughing and choking.

"How long can a man breathe smoke before he chokes to death?" Silk asked.

"Not very long," Durnik replied.

"I didn't think so." The little man looked happily at the smoking blaze. "Good fire," he said, holding his hands out to the warmth.

"The smoke's going to delay them, but I think it's time to move on out," Belgarath said, squinting at the cloud-obscured ball of the sun hanging low over the horizon to the west. "We'll move on up the face of the escarpment and then make a run for it. We'll want to surprise them a bit, to give us time to get out of range before they start throwing rocks down on us."

"Is there any sign of Hettar out there?" Barak asked, peering out at the grassland.

"We haven't seen any yet," Durnik replied.

"You do know that we're going to lead half of Cthol Murgos out onto the plain?" Barak pointed out to Belgarath.

"That can't be helped. For right now, we've got to get out of here. If Taur Urgas is up there, he's going to send people after us, even if he has to throw them off the cliff personally. Let's go."

They followed the face of the cliff for a mile or more until they found a spot where the rockfall did not extend so far out onto the plain. "This will do," Belgarath decided. "As soon as we get to level ground, we ride hard straight out. An arrow shot off the top of that cliff will carry a long way. Is everybody ready?" He looked around at them. "Let's move, then."

They led their horses down the short, steep slope of rock to the grassy plain below, mounted quickly and set off at a dead run.

"Arrow!" Silk said sharply, looking up and back over his shoulder. Garion, without thinking, slashed with his will at the tiny speck arching down toward them. In the same instant he felt a peculiar double surge coming from either side of him. The arrow broke into several pieces in midair.

"If you two don't mind!" Belgarath said irritably to Garion and Aunt Pol, half reining in his horse.

"I just didn't want you to tire yourself, father," Aunt Pol replied coolly. "I'm sure Garion feels the same way."

"Couldn't we discuss it later?" Silk suggested, looking apprehensively back at the towering escarpment.

They plunged on, the long, brown grass whipping at the legs of their horses. Other arrows began to fall, dropping farther and farther behind them as they rode. By the time they were a half mile out from the sheer face, the arrows were sheeting down from the top of the cliff in a whistling black rain.

"Persistent, aren't they?" Silk observed.

"It's a racial trait," Barak replied. "Murgos are stubborn to the point of idiocy."

"Keep going," Belgarath told them. "It's just a question of time until they bring up a catapult."

"They're throwing ropes down the face of the cliff," Dumik reported, peering back at the escarpment. "As soon as a few of them get to the bottom, they'll pull the fire clear of the ravine and start bringing horses down."

"At least it slowed them down a bit," Belgarath said.

Twilight, hardly more than a gradual darkening of the cloudy murk that had obscured the sky for several days, began to creep across the Algarian plain. They rode on.

Garion glanced back several times as he rode and noticed moving pinpoints of light along the base of the cliff. "Some of them have reached the bottom, grandfather," he called to the old man, who was pounding along in the lead. "I can see their torches."

"It was bound to happen," the sorcerer replied.

It was nearly midnight by the time they reached the Aldur River, lying black and oily-looking between its frosty banks.

"Does anybody have any idea how we're going to find that ford in the dark?" Durnik asked.

"I'll find it," Relg told him. "It isn't all that dark for me. Wait here."

"That could give us a certain advantage," Silk noted. "We'll be able to ford the river, but the Murgos will flounder around on this side in the dark for half the night. We'll be leagues ahead of them before they get across."

"That was one of the things I was sort of counting on," Belgarath replied smugly.

It was a half an hour before Relg returned. "It isn't far," he told them.

They remounted and rode through the chill darkness, following the curve of the river bank until they heard the unmistakable gurgle and wash of water running over stones. "That's it just ahead," Relg said.

"It's still going to be dangerous fording in the dark," Barak pointed out.

"It isn't that dark," Relg said. "Just follow me." He rode confidently a hundred yards farther upriver, then turned and nudged his horse into the shallow rippling water.

Garion felt his horse flinch from the icy chill as he rode out into the river, following closely behind Belgarath. Behind him he heard Durnik coaxing the now-unburdened pack animals into the water.

The river was not deep, but it was very wide - almost a half mileand in the process of fording, they were all soaked to the knees.

"The rest of the night promises to be moderately unpleasant," Silk observed, shaking one sodden foot.

"At least you've got the river between you and Taur Urgas," Barak reminded

him.

"That does brighten things up a bit," Silk admitted.

They had not gone a half mile, however, before Mandorallen's charger went down with a squeal of agony. The knight, with a great clatter, tumbled in the grass as he was pitched out of the saddle. His great horse floundered with threshing legs, trying futilely to rise.

"What's the matter with him?" Barak demanded sharply.

Behind them, with another squeal, one of the packhorses collapsed. "What is it?" Garion asked Durnik, his voice shrill.

"It's the cold," Durnik answered, swinging down from his saddle. "We've ridden them to exhaustion, and then we made them wade across the river. The chill's settled into their muscles."

"What do we do?"

"We have to rub them down - all of them - with wool."

"We don't have time for that," Silk objected.

"It's that or walk," Durnik declared, pulling off his stout wool cloak and beginning to rub vigorously at his horse's legs with it.

"Maybe we should build a fire," Garion suggested, also dismounting and beginning to rub down his horse's shivering legs.

"There isn't anything around here to burn," Durnik told him. "This is all open grassland."

"And a fire would set up a beacon for every Murgo within ten miles," Barak added, massaging the legs of his gray horse.

They all worked as rapidly as possible, but the sky to the east had begun to pale with the first hints of dawn before Mandorallen's horse was on his feet again and the rest of their mounts were able to move.

"They won't be able to run," Durnik declared somberly. "We shouldn't even ride them."

"Durnik," Silk protested, "Taur Urgas is right behind us."

"They won't last a league if we try to make them run," the smith said stubbornly. "There's nothing left in them."

They rode away from the river at a walk. Even at that pace, Garion could feel the trembling of his horse under him. They all looked back frequently,

watching the dark-shrouded plain beyond the river as the sky grew gradually lighter. When they reached the top of the first low hills, the deep shadow which had obscured the grasslands behind them faded and they were able to see movement. Then, as the light grew stronger, they saw an army of Murgos swarming toward the river. In the midst of them were the flapping black banners of Taur Urgas himself.

The Murgos came on in waves until they reached the far bank of the river. Then their mounted scouts ranged out until they located the ford. The bulk of the army Taur Urgas had brought down to the plain was still on foot, but clusters of horses were being driven up from the rear as rapidly as they could be brought down the narrow cut leading from the top of the escarpment.

As the first units began splashing across the ford, Silk turned to Belgarath. "Now what?" the little man asked in a worried voice.

"We'd better get off the top of this hill," the old man replied. "I don't think they've seen us yet, but it's just a question of time, I'm afraid." They rode down into a little swale just beyond the hill. The overcast which had obscured the sky for the past week or more had begun to blow off, and broad patches of pale, icy blue had begun to appear, though the sun had not yet come up.

"My guess is that he's going to hold the bulk of his army on the far side," Belgarath told them after they had all dismounted. "He'll bring them on across as their horses catch up. As soon as they get to this side, they're going to spread out to look for us."

"That's the way I'd do it," Barak agreed.

"Somebody ought to keep an eye on them," Durnik suggested. He started back up the hill on foot. "I'll let you know if they start doing anything unusual."

Belgarath seemed lost in thought. He paced up and down, his hands clasped together behind his back and an angry look on his face. "This isn't working out the way I'd expected," he said finally. "I hadn't counted on the horses playing out on us."

"Is there any place we can hide?" Barak asked.

Belgarath shook his head. "This is all grassland," he replied. "There aren't any rocks or caves or trees, and it's going to be impossible to cover our tracks." He kicked at the tall grass. "This isn't turning out too well," he admitted glumly. "We're all alone out here on exhausted horses." He chewed thoughtfully at his lower lip. "The nearest help is in the Vale. I think we'd better turn south and make for it. We're fairly close."

"How close?" Silk asked.

"Ten leagues or so."

"That's going to take all day, Belgarath. I don't think we've got that long."

"We might have to tamper with the weather a bit," Belgarath conceded. "I don't like doing that, but I might not have any choice." There was a distant low rumble somewhere off to the north. The little boy looked up and smiled at Aunt Pol. "Errand?" he asked.

"Yes, dear," she replied absently.

"Can you pick up any traces of Algars in the vicinity, Pol?" Belgarath asked her.

She shook her head. "I think I'm too close to the Orb, father. I keep getting an echo that blots things out more than a mile or so away."

"It always has been noisy," he grunted sourly.

"Talk to it, father," she suggested. "Maybe it will listen to you."

He gave her a long, hard look - a look she returned quite calmly. "I can do without that, miss," he told her finally in a crisp voice.

There was another low rumble, from the south this time. "Thunder?" Silk said, looking a bit puzzled. "Isn't this an odd time of year for it?"

"This plain breeds peculiar weather," Belgarath said. "There isn't anything between here and Drasnia but eight hundred leagues of grass."

"Do we try for the Vale then?" Barak asked.

"It looks as if we'll have to," the old man replied.

Durnik came back down the hill. "They're coming across the river," he reported, "but they aren't spreading out yet. It looks as if they want to get more men across before they start looking for us."

"How hard can we push the horses without hurting them?" Silk asked him.

"Not very," Durnik replied. "It would be better to save them until we absolutely have to use up whatever they've got left. If we walk and lead them for an hour or so, we might be able to get a canter out of them - for short periods of time."

"Let's go along the back side of the crest," Belgarath said, picking up the reins of his horse. "We'll stay pretty much out of sight that way, but I want to keep an eye on Taur Urgas." He led them at an angle back up out of

the swale.

The clouds had broken even more now, and the tatters raced in the endless winds that swept the vast grassland. To the east, the sky was turning a pale pink. Although the Algarian plain did not have that bitter, arid chill that had cut at them in the uplands of Cthol Murgos and Mishrak ac Thull, it was still very cold. Garion shivered, drew his cloak in tight about him, and kept walking, trailing his weary horse behind him.

There was another brief rumble, and the little boy, perched in the saddle of Aunt Pol's horse laughed. "Errand," he announced.

"I wish he'd stop that," Silk said irritably.

They glanced from time to time over the crest of the long hill as they walked. Below, in the broad valley of the Aldur River, the Murgos of Taur Urgas were fording in larger and larger groups. It appeared that fully half his army had reached the west bank by now, and the red and black standard of the king of the Murgos stood planted defiantly on Algarian soil.

"If he brings too many more men down the escarpment, it's going to take something pretty significant to dislodge him," Barak rumbled, scowling down at the Murgos.

"I know," Belgarath replied, "and that's the one thing I've wanted to avoid. We aren't ready for a war just yet."

The sun, huge and red, ponderously moved up from behind the eastern escarpment, turning the sky around it rosy. In the still-shadowed valley below them, the Murgos continued to splash across the river in the steely morning light.

"Methinks he will await the sun before he begins the search for us," Mandorallen observed.

"And that's not very far off," Barak agreed, glancing at the slowly moving band of sunlight just touching the hill along which they moved. "We've probably got half an hour at the most. I think it's getting to the point where we're going to have to gamble on the horses. Maybe if we switch mounts every mile or so, we can get some more distance out of them."

The rumble that came then could not possibly have been thunder. The ground shook with it, and it rolled on and on endlessly from both the north and south.

And then, pouring over the crests of the hills surrounding the valley of the Aldur like some vast tide suddenly released by the bursting of a mighty dam, came the clans of the Algars. Down they plunged upon the startled Murgos thickly clustered along the banks of the river, and their great war cry shook the very heavens as they fell like wolves upon the divided army

of Taur Urgas.

A lone horseman veered out of the great charge of the clans and came pounding up the hillside toward Garion and his friends. As the warrior drew closer, Garion could see his long scalp lock flowing behind him and his drawn sabre catching the first rays of the morning sun. It was Hettar. A vast surge of relief swept over Garion. They were safe.

"Where have you been?" Barak demanded in a great voice as the hawk-faced Algar rode closer.

"Watching," Hettar replied calmly as he reined in. "We wanted to let the Murgos get out a ways from the escarpment so we could cut them off. My father sent me to see how you all are."

"How considerate," Silk observed sardonically. "Did it ever occur to you to let us know you were out there?"

Hettar shrugged. "We could see that you were all right." He looked critically at their exhausted mounts. "You didn't take very good care of them," he said accusingly.

"We were a bit pressed," Durnik apologized.

"Did you get the Orb?" the tall man asked Belgarath, glancing hungrily down toward the river where a vast battle had been joined.

"It took a bit, but we got it," the old sorcerer replied.

"Good." Hettar turned his horse, and his lean face had a fierce look on it. "I'll tell Cho-Hag. Will you excuse me?" Then he stopped as if remembering something. "Oh," he said to Barak, "congratulations, by the way."

"For what?" the big man asked, looking puzzled.

"The birth of your son."

"What?" Barak sounded stunned. "How?"

"In the usual way, I'd imagine," Hettar replied.

"I mean how did you find out?"

"Anheg sent word to us."

"When was he born?"

"A couple months ago." Hettar looked nervously down at the battle which was raging on both sides of the river and in the middle of the ford as well. "I really have to go," he said. "If I don't hurry, there won't be any Murgos

left." And he drove his heels into his horse's flanks and plunged down the hill.

"He hasn't changed a bit," Silk noted.

Barak was standing with a somewhat foolish grin on his big, redbearded face.

"Congratulations, my Lord," Mandorallen said to him, clasping his hand.

Barak's grin grew broader.

It quickly became obvious that the situation of the encircled Murgos below was hopeless. With his army cut in two by the river, Taur Urgas was unable to mount even an orderly retreat. The forces he had brought across the river were quickly swarmed under by King Cho-Hag's superior numbers, and the few survivors of that short, ugly melèe plunged back into the river, protectively drawn up around the red and black banner of the Murgo king. Even in the ford, however, the Algar warriors pressed him. Some distance upriver Garion could see horsemen plunging into the icy water to be carried down by the current to the shallows of the ford in an effort to cut off escape. Much of the fight in the river was obscured by the sheets of spray kicked up by struggling horses, but the bodies floating downstream testified to the savagery of the clash.

Briefly, for no more than a moment, the red and black banner of Taur Urgas was confronted by the burgundy-and-white horse-banner of King Cho-Hag, and then the two were swept apart.

"That could have been an interesting meeting," Silk noted. "ChoHag and Taur Urgas have hated each other for years."

Once the king of the Murgos regained the east bank, he rallied what forces he could, turned, and fled back across the open grassland toward the escarpment with Algar clansmen hotly pursuing him. For the bulk of his army, however, there was no escape. Since their horses had not yet descended the narrow ravine from the top of the escarpment, they were forced to fight on foot. The Algars swept down upon them in waves, sabres flashing in the morning sun. Faintly, Garion could hear the screams. Sickened finally, he turned away, unable to watch the slaughter any longer.

The little boy, who was standing close beside Aunt Pol with his hand in hers, looked at Garion gravely. "Errand," he said with a sad conviction.

By midmorning the battle was over. The last of the Murgos on the far bank of the river had been destroyed, and Taur Urgas had fled with the tattered remnants of his army back up the ravine. "Good fight," Barak observed professionally, looking down at the bodies littering both banks of the river and bobbing limply in the shallows downstream from the ford.

"The tactics of thy Algar cousins were masterly," Mandorallen agreed. "Taur Urgas will take some time to recover from this morning's chastisement."

"I'd give a great deal to see the look on his face just now." Silk laughed. "He's probably frothing at the mouth."

King Cho-Hag, dressed in steel-plated black leather and with his horse-banner streaming triumphantly in the bright morning sun, came galloping up the hill toward them, closely surrounded by the members of his personal guard. "Interesting morning," he said with typical Algar understatement as he reined in. "Thanks for bringing us so many Murgos."

"He's as bad as Hettar," Silk observed to Barak.

The king of the Algars grinned openly as he slowly dismounted. His weak legs seemed almost to buckle as he carefully put his weight on them, and he held onto his saddle for support. "How did things go in Rak Cthol?" he asked.

"It wound up being rather noisy," Belgarath replied.

"Did you find Ctuchik in good health?"

"Moderately. We corrected that, however. The whole affair set off an earthquake. Most of Rak Cthol slid off its mountaintop, I'm afraid."

Cho-Hag grinned again. "What a shame."

"Where's Hettar?" Barak asked.

"Chasing Murgos, I imagine," Cho-Hag replied. "Their rear guard got cut off, and they're out there trying to find someplace to hide."

"There aren't very many hiding places on this plain, are there?" Barak asked.

"Almost none at all," the Algar king agreed pleasantly.

A dozen or so Algar wagons crested a nearby hill, rolling toward them through the tall, brown grass. They were square-boxed conveyances, looking not unlike houses on wheels. They had roofs, narrow windows, and steps at the rear leading up to the doorway on the back of each wagon. It looked, Garion thought, almost like a moving city as they approached.

"I imagine Hettar's going to be a while," Cho-Hag noted. "Why don't we have a bit of lunch? I'd like to get word to Anheg and Rhodar about what's happened here as soon as possible, but I'm sure you'll want to pass a few things along as well. We can talk while we eat."

Several of the wagons were drawn up close together and their sides were let

down and joined to form a spacious, low-ceilinged dining hall. Braziers provided warmth, and candles illuminated the interior of the quickly assembled hall, supplementing the bright winter sunlight streaming in through the windows.

They dined on roasted meat and mellow ale. Garion soon found that he was wearing far too many clothes. It seemed that he had not been warm in months, and the glowing braziers shimmered out a welcome heat. Although he was tired and very dirty, he felt warm and safe, and he soon found himself nodding over his plate, almost drowsing as Belgarath recounted the story of their escape to the Algar king.

Gradually, however, as the old man spoke, something alerted Garion. There was, it seemed, a trace too much vivacity in his grandfather's voice, and Belgarath's words sometimes seemed almost to tumble over each other. His blue eyes were very bright, but seemed occasionally a bit unfocused.

"So Zedar got away," Cho-Hag was saying. "That's the only thing that mars the whole affair."

"Zedar's no problem," Belgarath replied, smiling in a slightly dazed way.

His voice seemed strange, uncertain, and King Cho-Hag looked at the old man curiously. "You've had a busy year, Belgarath," he said.

"A good one, though." The sorcerer smiled again and lifted his ale cup. His hand was trembling violently, and he stared at it in astonishment.

"Aunt Pol!" Garion called urgently.

"Are you all right, father?"

"Fine, Pol, perfectly fine." He smiled vaguely at her, his unfocused eyes blinking owlishly. He rose suddenly to his feet and began to move toward her, but his steps were lurching, almost staggering. And then his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the floor like a pole-axed cow.

"Father!" Aunt Pol exclaimed, leaping to his side.

Garion, moving almost as fast as his Aunt, knelt on the other side of the unconscious old man. "What's wrong with him?" he demanded. But Aunt Pol did not answer. Her hands were at Belgarath's wrist and brow, feeling for his pulse. She peeled back one of his eyelids and stared intently into his blank, unseeing eyes. "Durnik!" she snapped. "Get my herb-bag-quickly!"

The smith bolted for the door.

King Cho-Hag had half risen, his face deathly pale. "He isn't-"

"No," she answered tensely. "He's alive, but only barely."

"Is something attacking him?" Silk was on his feet, looking around wildly, his hand unconsciously on his dagger.

"No. It's nothing like that." Aunt Pol's hands had moved to the old man's chest. "I should have known," she berated herself. "The stubborn, proud old fool! I should have been watching him."

"Please, Aunt Pol," Garion begged desperately, "what's wrong with him?"

"He never really recovered from his fight with Ctuchik," she replied. "He's been forcing himself, drawing on his will. Then those rocks in the ravine - but he wouldn't quit. Now he's burned up all his vital energy and will. He barely has enough strength left to keep breathing."

Garion had lifted his grandfather's head and cradled it on his lap. "Help me, Garion!"

He knew instinctively what she wanted. He gathered his will and held out his hand to her. She grasped it quickly, and he felt the force surge out of him.

Her eyes were very wide as she intently watched the old man's face. "Again!" And once more she pulled the quickly gathered will out of him.

"What are we doing?" Garion's voice was shrill.

"Trying to replace some of what he has lost. Maybe-" She glanced toward the door. "Hurry, Durnik!" she shouted.

Durnik rushed back into the wagon.

"Open the bag," she instructed, "and give me that black jar - the one that's sealed with lead - and a pair of iron tongs."

"Should I open the jar, Mistress Pol?" the smith asked.

"No. Just break the seal - carefully. And give me a glove - leather, if you can find one."

Wordlessly, Silk pulled a leather gauntlet from under his belt and handed it to her. She pulled it on, opened the black jar, and reached inside with the tongs. With great care, she removed a single dark, oily-looking green leaf. She held it very carefully in the tongs. "Pry his mouth open, Garion," she ordered.

Garion wedged his fingers between Belgarath's clenched teeth and carefully pried the old man's jaws apart. Aunt Pol pulled down her father's lower lip, reached inside his mouth with the shiny leaf, and lightly brushed his tongue with it, once and once only.

Belgarath jumped violently, and his feet suddenly scraped on the floor. His muscles heaved, and his arms began to flail about.

"Hold him down," Aunt Pol commanded. She pulled back sharply and held the leaf out of the way while Mandorallen and Barak jumped in to hold down Belgarath's convulsing body. "Give me a bowl," she ordered. "A wooden one."

Durnik handed her one, and she deposited the leaf and the tongs in it. Then, with great care, she took off the gauntlet and laid it atop the leaf. "Take this," she told the smith. "Don't touch any part of the glove."

"What do you want me to do with it, Mistress Pol?"

"Take it out and burn it - bowl and all - and don't let anyone get into the smoke from it."

"Is it that dangerous?" Silk asked.

"It's even worse, but those are the only precautions we can take out here."

Durnik swallowed very hard and left the wagon, holding the bowl as if it were a live snake.

Polgara took a small mortar and pestle and began grinding certain herbs from her bag into a fine powder as she watched Belgarath intently. "How far is it to the Stronghold, Cho-Hag?" she asked the Algar king.

"A man on a good horse could make it in half a day," he replied.

"How long by wagon-a wagon driven carefully to avoid bouncing?"

"Two days."

She frowned, still mixing the herbs in the mortar. "All right, there's no help for it, I guess. Please send Hettar to Queen Silar. Have him tell her that I'm going to need a warm, well-lighted chamber with a good bed and no drafts. Durnik, I want you to drive the wagon. Don't hit any bumps even if it means losing an hour."

The smith nodded.

"He's going to be all right, isn't he?" Barak asked, his voice strained and his face shocked by Belgarath's sudden collapse.

"It's really too early to say," she replied. "He's been on the point of collapse for days maybe. But he wouldn't let himself go. I think he's past this crisis, but there may be others." She laid one hand on her father's chest. "Put him in bed carefully. Then I want a screen of some kind around the bed - blankets will do. We have to keep him very quiet and out of

drafts. No loud noises."

They all stared at her as the significance of her extreme precautions struck them.

"Move, gentlemen," she told them firmly. "His life may depend on a certain speed."

Chapter Six

THE WAGON SEEMED barely to crawl. The high, thin cloud had swept in again to hide the sun, and a kind of leaden chill descended on the featureless plain of southern Algaria. Garion rode inside the wagon, thick-headed and numb with exhaustion, watching with dreadful concern as Aunt Pol hovered over the unconscious Belgarath. Sleep was out of the question. Another crisis could arise at any time and he had to be ready to leap to her aid, joining his will and the power of his amulet with hers. Errand, his small face grave, sat quietly in a chair at the far side of the wagon, his hands firmly clasped around the pouch Durnik had made for hirn. The sound of the Orb still hung in Garion's ears, muted but continual. He had grown almost accustomed to the song in the weeks since they had left Rak Cthol; but at quiet moments or when he was tired, it always seemed to return with renewed strength. It was somehow a comforting sound.

Aunt Pol leaned forward to touch Belgarath's chest. "What's wrong?" Garion asked in a sharp whisper.

"Nothing's wrong, Garion," she replied calmly. "Please don't keep saying that every time I so much as move. If something's wrong, I'll tell you."

"I'm sorry - I'm just worried, that's all."

She turned to give him a steady look. "Why don't you take Errand and go up and ride on top of the wagon with Silk and Durnik?"

"What if you need me?"

"I'll call you, dear."

"I'd really rather stay, Aunt Pol."

"I'd really rather you didn't. I'll call if I need you."

"But "

"Now, Garion."

Garion knew better than to argue. He took Errand out the back door of the wagon and up the steps to the top.

"How is he?" Silk asked.

"How should I know? All I know is that she chased me out." Garion's reply was a bit surly.

"That might be a good sign, you know."

"Maybe." Garion looked around. Off to the west there was a range of low hills. Rearing above them stood a vast pile of rock.

"The Algar Stronghold," Durnik told Garion, pointing.

"Are we that close?"

"That's still a good day's ride."

"How high is it?" Garion asked.

"Four or five hundred feet at least," Silk told him. "The Algars have been building at it for several thousand years. It gives them something to do after the calving season."

Barak rode up. "How's Belgarath?" he asked as he approached.

"I think he might be improving just a little," Garion answered. "I don't know for sure, though."

"That's something, anyway." The big man pointed toward a gully just ahead. "You'd better go around that," he told Durnik. "King ChoHag says that the ground gets a bit rough through there."

Durnik nodded and changed the wagon's direction.

Throughout the day, the Stronghold of the Algars loomed higher and higher against the western horizon. It was a vast, towering fortress rearing out of the dun-colored hills.

"A monument to an idea that got out of hand," Silk observed as he lounged idly atop the wagon.

"I don't quite follow that," Durnik said.

"Algars are nomads," the little man explained. "They live in wagons like this one and follow their herds. The Stronghold gives Murgo raiders something to attack. That's its only real purpose. Very practical, really. It's much easier than looking for them all over these plains. The Murgos

always come here, and it's a convenient place to wipe them out."

"Don't the Murgos realize that?" Durnik looked a bit skeptical.

"Quite possibly, but they come here anyway because they can't resist the place. They simply can't accept the fact that nobody really lives here." Silk grinned his ferretlike little grin. "You know how stubborn Murgos are. Anyway, over the years the Algar clans have developed a sort of competition. Every year they try to outdo one another in hauling rock, and the Stronghold keeps growing higher and higher."

"Did Kal Torak really lay siege to it for eight years?" Garion asked him.

Silk nodded. "They say that his army was like a sea of Angaraks dashing itself to pieces against the walls of the Stronghold. They might still be here, but they ran out of food. That's always been the problem with large armies. Any fool can raise an army, but you start running into trouble around suppertime."

As they approached the man-made mountain, the gates opened and a party emerged to greet them. In the lead on a white palfrey rode Queen Silar with Hettar close behind. At a certain point they stopped and sat waiting.

Garion lifted a small trapdoor in the roof of the wagon. "We're here, Aunt Pol," he reported in a hushed voice.

"Good," she replied.

"How's grandfather?"

"He's sleeping. His breathing seems a bit stronger. Go ask Cho-Hag to take us inside immediately. I want to get father into a warm bed as soon as possible."

"Yes, Aunt Pol." Garion lowered the trapdoor and then went down the steps at the rear of the slowly moving wagon. He untied his horse, mounted and rode to the front of the column where the Algar queen was quietly greeting her husband.

"Excuse me," he said respectfully, swinging down from his horse, "but Aunt Pol wants to get Belgarath inside at once."

"How is he?" Hettar asked.

"Aunt Pol says that his breathing's getting stronger, but she's still worried."

From the rear of the group that had emerged from the Stronghold, there was a flurry of small hooves. The colt that had been born in the hills above Maragor burst into view and came charging directly at them. Garion

immediately found himself swarmed under by the colt's exuberant greetings. The small horse nuzzled him and butted at him with its head, then pranced away only to gallop back again. When Garion put his hand on the animal's neck to calm him, the colt quivered with joy at his touch.

"He's been waiting for you," Hettar said to Garion. "He seems to have known you were coming."

The wagon drew up and stopped. The door opened, and Aunt Pol looked out.

"Everything's ready, Polgara," Queen Silar told her.

"Thank you, Silar."

"Is he recovering at all?"

"He seems better, but it's very hard to say for sure at this point." Errand, who had been watching from the top of the wagon, suddenly clambered down the steps at the rear, hopped to the ground, and ran out along the legs of the horses.

"Catch him, Garion," Aunt Pol said. "I think he'd better ride in here with me until we get inside the Stronghold."

As Garion started after the little boy, the colt scampered away, and Errand, laughing with delight, ran after him. "Errand!" Garion called sharply. The colt, however, had turned in midgallop and suddenly bore down on the child, his hooves flailing wildly. Errand, showing no signs of alarm, stood smiling directly in its path. Startled, the little horse stiffened his legs and skidded to a stop. Errand laughed and held out his hand. The colt's eyes were wide as he sniffed curiously at the hand, and then the boy touched the small animal's face.

Again within the vaults of his mind Garion seemed to hear that strange, bell-like note, and the dry voice murmured, "Dome," with a peculiar sort of satisfaction.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Garion asked silently, but there was no answer. He shrugged and picked Errand up to avoid any chance collision between horse and child. The colt stood staring at the two of them, its eyes wide as if in amazement; when Garion turned to carry Errand back to the wagon, it trotted alongside, sniffing and even nuzzling at the child. Garion wordlessly handed Errand up to Aunt Pol and looked her full in the face. She said nothing as she took the child, but her expression told him plainly that something very important had just happened.

As he turned to remount his horse, he felt that someone was watching him, and he turned quickly toward the group of riders that had accompanied Queen Silar from the Stronghold. Just behind the queen was a tall girl mounted on a roan horse. She had long, dark brown hair, and the eyes she had fixed on

Garion were gray, calm, and very serious. Her horse pranced nervously, and she calmed him with a quiet word and a gentle touch, then turned to gaze openly at Garion again. He had the peculiar feeling that he ought to know her.

The wagon creaked as Durnik shook the reins to start the team, and they all followed King Cho-Hag and Queen Silar through a narrow gate into the Stronghold. Garion saw immediately that there were no buildings inside the towering fortress. Instead there was a maze of stone walls perhaps twenty feet high twisting this way and that without any apparent plan.

"But where is thy city, your Majesty?" Mandorallen asked in perplexity.

"Inside the walls themselves," King Cho-Hag replied. "They're thick enough and high enough to give us all the room we could possibly need."

"What purpose hath all this, then?"

"It's just a trap." The king shrugged. "We permit attackers to break through the gates, and then we deal with them in here. We want to go this way." He led them along a narrow alleyway.

They dismounted in a courtyard beside the vast wall. Barak and Hettar unhooked the latches and swung the side of the wagon down. Barak tugged thoughtfully at his beard as he looked at the sleeping Belgarath. "It would probably disturb him less if we just took him inside bed and all," he suggested.

"Right," Hettar agreed, and the two of them climbed up into the wagon to lift out the sorcerer's bed.

"Just don't bounce him around," Polgara cautioned. "And don't drop him."

"We've got him, Polgara," Barak assured her. "I know you might not believe it, but we're almost as concerned about him as you are."

With the two big men carrying the bed, they passed through an arched doorway into a wide, torch-lighted corridor and up a flight of stairs, then along another hallway to another flight.

"Is it much farther?" Barak asked. Sweat was running down his face into his beard. "This bed isn't getting any lighter, you know."

"Just up here," the Algar Queen told him.

"I hope he appreciates all this when he wakes up," Barak grumbled. The room to which they carried Belgarath was large and airy. A glowing brazier stood in each corner and a broad window overlooked the maze inside the walls of the Stronghold. A canopied bed stood against one wall and a large wooden tub against the other.

"This will be just fine," Polgara said approvingly. "Thank you, Silar."

"We love him too, Polgara," Queen Silar replied quietly.

Polgara drew the drapes, darkening the room. Then she turned back the covers, and Belgarath was transferred to the canopied bed so smoothly that he did not even stir.

"He looks a little better," Silk said.

"He needs sleep, rest and quiet more than anything right now," Polgara told him, her eyes intent on the old man's sleeping face.

"We'll leave you with him, Polgara," Queen Silar said. She turned to the rest of them. "Why don't we all go down to the main hall? Supper's nearly ready, but in the meantime I'll have some ale brought in."

Barak's eyes brightened noticeably, and he started toward the door. "Barak," Polgara called to him, "aren't you and Hettar forgetting something?" She looked pointedly at the bed they had used for a stretcher.

Barak sighed. He and Hettar picked up the bed again.

"I'll send some supper up for you, Polgara," the queen said.

"Thank you, Silar." Aunt Pol turned to Garion, her eyes grave. "Stay for a few moments, dear," she asked, and he remained as the others all quietly left.

"Close the door, Garion," she said, pulling a chair up beside the sleeping old man's bed.

He shut the door and crossed the room back to her. "Is he really getting better, Aunt Pol?"

She nodded. "I think we're past the immediate danger. He seems stronger physically. But it's not his physical body I'm worried aboutit's his mind. That's why I wanted to talk to you alone."

Garion felt a sudden cold grip of fear. "His mind?"

"Keep your voice down, dear," she told him quietly. "This has to be kept strictly between us." Her eyes were still on Belgarath's face. "An episode like this can have very serious effects, and there's no way to know how it will be with him when he recovers. He could be very seriously weakened."

"Weakened? How?"

"His will could be greatly reduced - to that of any other old man. He

drained it to the utter limit, and he might have gone so far that he could never regain his powers."

"You mean he wouldn't be a sorcerer any more?"

"Don't repeat the obvious, Garion," she said wearily. "If that happens, it's going to be up to you and me to conceal it from everybody. Your grandfather's power is the one thing that has held the Angaraks in check for all these years. If something has happened to that power, then you and I will have to make it look as if he's the same as he always was. We'll have to conceal the truth even from him, if that is possible."

"What can we do without him?"

"We'd go on, Garion," she replied quietly, looking directly into his eyes. "Our task is too important for us to falter because a man falls by the wayside - even if that man happens to be your grandfather. We're racing against time in all this, Garion. We absolutely must fulfill the Prophecy and get the Orb back to Riva by Erastide, and there are people who must be gathered up to go with us."

"Who?"

"Princess Ce'Nedra, for one."

"Ce'Nedra?" Garion had never really forgotten the little princess, but he failed to see why Aunt Pol was making such an issue of her going with them to Riva.

"In time you'll understand, dear. All of this is part of a series of events that must occur in proper sequence and at the proper time. In most situations, the present is determined by the past. This series of events is different, however. In this case, what's happening in the present is determined by the future. If we don't get it exactly the way it's supposed to be, the ending will be different, and I don't think any of us would like that at all."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, placing himself unquestioningly in her hands.

She smiled gratefully at him. "Thank you, Garion," she said simply. "When you rejoin the others, they're going to ask you how father's coming along, and I want you to put on your best face and tell them that he's doing fine."

"You want me to lie to them." It was not even a question.

"No place in the world is safe from spies, Garion. You know that as well as I, and no matter what happens, we can't let any hint that father might not recover fully get back to the Angaraks. If necessary, you'll lie until your

tongue turns black. The whole fate of the West could depend on how well you do it."

He stared at her.

"It's possible that all this is totally unnecessary," she reassured him. "He may be exactly the same as always after he's had a week or two of rest, but we've got to be ready to move smoothly, just in case he's not."

"Can't we do something?"

"We're doing all we can. Go back to the others now, Garion - and smile. Smile until your jaws ache if you have to."

There was a faint sound in the corner of the room, and they both turned sharply. Errand, his blue eyes very serious, stood watching them.

"Take him with you," Aunt Pol said. "See that he eats and keep an eye on him."

Garion nodded and beckoned to the child. Errand smiled his trusting smile and crossed the room. He reached out and patted the unconscious Belgarath's hand, then turned to follow Garion from the room.

The tall, brown-haired girl who had accompanied Queen Silar out through the gates of the Stronghold was waiting for him in the corndor outside. Her skin, Garion noticed, was very pale, almost translucent, and her gray eyes were direct. "Is the Eternal Man really any better?" she asked.

"Much better," Garion replied with all the confidence he could muster. "He'll be out of bed in no time at all."

"He seems so weak," she said. "So old and frail."

"Frail? Belgarath?" Garion forced a laugh. "He's made out of old iron and horseshoe nails."

"He is seven thousand years old, after all."

"That doesn't mean anything to him. He stopped paying attention to the years a long time ago."

"You're Garion, aren't you?" she asked. "Queen Silar told us about you when she returned from Val Alorn last year. For some reason I thought you were younger."

"I was then," Garion replied. "I've aged a bit this last year."

"My name is Adara," the tall girl introduced herself. "Queen Silar asked me to show you the way to the main hall. Supper should be ready soon."

Garion inclined his head politely. In spite of the worry gnawing at him, he could not shake off the peculiar feeling that he ought to know this quiet, beautiful girl. Errand reached out and took the girl's hand, and the three of them passed hand in hand down the torch-lighted corridor.

King Cho-Hag's main hall was on a lower floor. It was a long, narrow room where chairs and padded benches sat in little clusters around braziers filled with glowing coals. Barak, holding a large ale tankard in one huge fist, was describing with some embellishment their descent from the top of the escarpment.

"We didn't really have any choice, you see," the big man was saying. "Taur Urgas had been frothing on our heels for several days, and we had to take the shortest way down."

Hettar nodded. "Plans sometimes have a way of changing when the unexpected crops up," he agreed. "That's why we put men to watching every known pass down from the top of the escarpment."

"I still think you might have let us know you were there." Barak sounded a little injured.

Hettar grinned wolfishly. "We couldn't really take the chance, Barak," he explained. "The Murgos might have seen us, and we didn't want to frighten them off. It would have been a shame if they'd gotten away, wouldn't it?"

"Is that all you ever think about?"

Hettar considered the question for a moment. "Pretty much, yes," he admitted.

Supper was announced then, and they all moved to the long table at the far end of the hall. The general conversation at the table made it unnecessary for Garion to lie directly to anyone about the frightening possibility Aunt Pol had raised, and after supper he sat beside Adara and lapsed into a kind of sleepy haze, only half listening to the talk.

There was a stir at the door, and a guard entered. "The priest of Belar!" he announced in a loud voice, and a tall man in a white robe strode into the room, followed by four men dressed in shaggy furs. The four walked with a peculiar shuffling gait, and Garion instantly recognized them as Bear-cultists, indistinguishable from the Cherek members of the same group he had seen in Val Alorn.

"Your Majesty," the man in the white robe boomed.

"Hail, Cho-Hag," the cultists intoned in unison, "Chief of the ClanChiefs of the Algars and guardian of the southern reaches of Aloria."

King Cho-Hag inclined his head briefly. "What is it, Elvar?" he asked the priest.

"I have come to congratulate your Majesty upon the occasion of your great victory over the forces of the Dark God," the priest replied.

"You are most kind, Elvar," Cho-Hag answered politely.

"Moreover," Elvar continued, "it has come to my attention that a holy object has come into the Stronghold of the Algars. I presume that your Majesty will wish to place it in the hands of the priesthood for safekeeping."

Garion, alarmed at the priest's suggestion, half rose from his seat, but stopped, not knowing how to voice his objection. Errand, however, with a confident smile, was already walking toward Elvar. The knots Durnik had so carefully tied were undone, and the child took the Orb out of the pouch at his waist and offered it to the startled priest. "Errand?" he said.

Elvar's eyes bulged and he recoiled from the Orb, lifting his hands above his head to avoid touching it.

"Go ahead, Elvar," Polgara's voice came mockingly from the doorway. "Let him who is without ill intent in the silence of his soul stretch forth his hand and take the Orb."

"Lady Polgara," the priest stammered. "We thought - that is - I -"

"He seems to have some reservations," Silk suggested dryly. "Perhaps he has some lingering and deep-seated doubts about his own purity. That's a serious failing in a priest, I'd say."

Elvar looked at the little man helplessly, his hands still held aloft.

"You should never ask for something you're not prepared to accept, Elvar," Polgara suggested.

"Lady Polgara," Elvar blurted, "we thought that you'd be so busy caring for your father that " He faltered.

"-That you could take possession of the Orb before I knew about it? Think again, Elvar. I won't allow the Orb to fall into the hands of the Bear-cult." She smiled rather sweetly at him. "Unless you happen to be the one destined to wield it, of course. My father and I would both be overjoyed to hand the burden over to someone else. Why don't we find out? All you have to do is reach out your hand and take the Orb."

Elvar's face blanched, and he backed away from Errand fearfully.

"I believe that will be all, Elvar," King Cho-Hag said firmly.

The priest looked about helplessly, then turned and quickly left the hall with his cultists close behind him.

"Make him put it away, Durnik," Polgara told the smith. "And see if you can do something about the knots."

"I could seal them up with lead," Durnik mused. "Maybe that would keep him from getting it open."

"It might be worth a try." Then she looked around. "I thought you might all like to know that my father's awake," she told him. "The old fool appears to be stronger than we thought."

Garion, immediately alert, looked at her sharply, trying to detect some hint that she might not be telling them everything, but her calm face was totally unreadable.

Barak, laughing loudly with relief, slapped Hettar on the back. "I told you he'd be all right," he exclaimed delightedly. The others in the room were already crowding around Polgara, asking for details.

"He's awake," she told them. "That's about all I can say at the moment - except that he's his usual charming self. He's already complaining about lumps in the bed and demanding strong ale."

"I'll send some at once," Queen Silar said.

"No, Silar," Polgara replied firmly. "He gets broth, not ale."

"He won't like that much," Silk suggested.

"Isn't that a shame?" She smiled. She half turned, as if about to go back to the sickroom, then stopped and looked rather quizzically at Garion who sat, relieved, but still apprehensive about Belgarath's true condition, beside Adara. "I see that you've met your cousin," she observed.

"Who?"

"Don't sit there with your mouth open, Garion," she advised him. "It makes you look like an idiot. Adara's the youngest daughter of your mother's sister. Haven't I ever told you about her?"

It all came crashing in on him. "Aunt Pol!" he protested. "How could you forget something that important?"

But Adara, obviously as startled by the announcement as he had been, gave a low cry, put her arms about his neck and kissed him warmly. "Dear cousin!" she exclaimed.

Garion flushed, then went pale, then flushed again. He stared first at Aunt Pol, then at his cousin, unable to speak or even to think coherently.

Chapter Seven

IN THE DAYS that followed while the others rested and Aunt Pol nursed Belgarath back to health, Garion and his cousin spent every waking moment together. From the time he had been a very small child he had believed that Aunt Pol was his only family. Later, he had discovered that Mister Wolf-Belgarath - was also a relative, though infinitely far removed. But Adara was different. She was nearly his own age, for one thing, and she seemed immediately to fill that void that had always been there. She became at once all those sisters and cousins and younger aunts that others seemed to have but that he did not.

She showed him the Algar Stronghold from top to bottom. As they wandered together down long, empty corridors, they frequently held each others' hands. Most of the time, however, they talked. They sat together in out-of the-way places with their heads close together, talking, laughing, exchanging confidences and opening their hearts to each other. Garion discovered a hunger for talk in himself that he had not suspected. The circumstances of the past year had made him reticent, and now all that flood of words broke loose. Because he loved his tall, beautiful cousin, he told her things he would not have told any other living soul.

Adara responded to his affection with a love of her own that seemed as deep, and she listened to his outpourings with an attention that made him reveal himself even more.

"Can you really do that?" she asked when, one bright winter afternoon, they sat together in an embrasure high up in the fortress wall with a window behind them overlooking the vast sea of winter-brown grass stretching to the horizon. "Are you really a sorcerer?"

"I'm afraid so," he replied.

"Afraid?"

"There are some pretty awful things involved in it, Adara. At first I didn't want to believe it, but things kept happening because I wanted them to happen, It finally reached the point where I couldn't doubt it any more."

"Show me," she urged him.

He looked around a bit nervously. "I don't really think I should," he

apologized. "It makes a certain kind of noise, you see, and Aunt Pol can hear it. For some reason I don't think she'd approve if I just did it to show off."

"You're not afraid of her, are you?"

"It's not exactly that. I just don't want her to be disappointed in me." He considered that. "Let me see if I can explain. We had an awful argument once - in Nyissa. I said some things I didn't really mean, and she told me exactly what she'd gone through for me." He looked somberly out of the window, remembering Aunt Pol's words on the steamy deck of Greldik's ship. "She's devoted a thousand years to me, Adara - to my family actually, but finally all because of me. She's given up every single thing that's ever been important to her for me. Can you imagine the kind of obligation that puts on me? I'll do anything she wants me to, and I'd cut off my arm before I'd ever hurt her again."

"You love her very much, don't you, Garion?"

"It goes beyond that. I don't think there's even been a word invented yet to describe what exists between us."

Wordlessly Adara took his hand, her eyes warm with a wondering affection.

Later that afternoon, Garion went alone to the room where Aunt Pol was caring for her recalcitrant patient. After the first few days of bed rest, Belgarath had steadily grown more testy about his enforced confinement. Traces of that irritability lingered on his face even as he dozed, propped up by many pillows in his canopied bed. Aunt Pol, wearing her familiar gray dress, sat nearby, her needle busy as she altered one of Garion's old tunics for Errand. The little boy, sitting not far away, watched her with that serious expression that always seemed to make him look older than he really was.

"How is he?" Garion asked softly, looking at his sleeping grandfather.

"Improving," Aunt Pol replied, setting aside the tunic. "His temper's getting worse, and that's always a good sign."

"Are there any hints that he might be getting back his-? Well, you know." Garion gestured vaguely.

"No," she replied. "Nothing yet. It's probably too early."

"Will you two stop that whispering?" Belgarath demanded without opening his eyes. "How can I possibly sleep with all that going on?"

"You were the one who said he didn't want to sleep," Polgara reminded him.

"That was before," he snapped, his eyes popping open. He looked at Garion.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Garion's been getting acquainted with his cousin Adara," Aunt Pol explained.

"He could stop by to visit me once in a while," the old man complained.

"There's not much entertainment in listening to you snore, father."

"I do not snore, Polgara."

"Whatever you say, father," she agreed placidly.

"Don't patronize me, Pol!"

"Of course not, father. Now, how would you like a nice hot cup of broth?"

"I would not like a nice hot cup of broth. I want meat - rare, red meat - and a cup of strong ale."

"But you won't get meat and ale, father. You'll get what I decide to give you-and right now it's broth and milk."

"Milk?"

"Would you prefer gruel?"

The old man glared indignantly at her, and Garion quietly left the room.

After that, Belgarath's recovery was steady. A few days later he was out of bed, though Polgara raised some apparently strenuous objections. Garion knew them both well enough to see directly to the core of his Aunt's behavior. Prolonged bed rest had never been her favorite form of therapy. She had always wanted her patients ambulatory as soon as possible. By seeming to want to coddle her irascible father, she had quite literally forced him out of bed. Even beyond that, the precisely calibrated restrictions she imposed on his movements were deliberately designed to anger him, to goad his mind to activity - never anything more than he could handle at any given time, but always just enough to force his mental recovery to keep pace with his physical recuperation. Her careful manipulation of the old man's convalescence stepped beyond the mere practice of medicine into the realm of art.

When Belgarath first appeared in King Cho-Hag's hall, he looked shockingly weak. He seemed actually to totter as he leaned heavily on Aunt Pol's arm, but a bit later when the conversation began to interest him, there were hints that this apparent fragility was not wholly genuine. The old man was not above a bit of self dramatization once in a while, and he soon demonstrated that no matter how skillfully Aunt Pol played, he could play too. It was marvellous to watch the two of them subtly maneuvering around

each other in their elaborate little game.

The final question, however, still remained unanswered. Belgarath's physical and mental recovery now seemed certain, but his ability to bring his will to bear had not yet been tested. That test, Garion knew, would have to wait.

Quite early one morning, perhaps a week after they had arrived at the Stronghold, Adara tapped on the door of Garion's room; even as he came awake, he knew it was she. "Yes?" he said through the door, quickly pulling on his shirt and hose.

"Would you like to ride today, Garion?" she asked. "The sun's out, and it's a little warmer."

"Of course," he agreed immediately, sitting to pull on the Algar boots Hettar had given him. "Let me get dressed. I'll just be a minute."

"There's no great hurry," she told him. "I'll have a horse saddled for you and get some food from the kitchen. You should probably tell Lady Polgara where you're going, though. I'll meet you in the west stables."

"I won't be long," he promised.

Aunt Pol was seated in the great hall with Belgarath and King ChoHag, while Queen Silar sat nearby, her fingers flickering through warp and woof on a large loom upon which she was weaving. The click of her shuttle was a peculiarly drowsy sort of sound.

"Travel's going to be difficult in midwinter," King Cho-Hag was saying. "It will be savage in the mountains of Ulgo."

"I think there's a way we can avoid all that," Belgarath replied lazily. He was lounging deeply in a large chair. "We'll go back to Prolgu the way we came, but I need to talk to Relg. Do you suppose you could send for him?"

Cho-Hag nodded and gestured to a serving man. He spoke briefly to him as Belgarath negligently hung one leg over the arm of his chair and settled in even deeper. The old man was wearing a soft, gray woolen tunic; although it was early, he held a tankard of ale.

"Don't you think you're overdoing that a bit?" Aunt Pol asked him, looking pointedly at the tankard.

"I have to regain my strength, Pol," he explained innocently, "and strong ale restores the blood. You seem to forget that I'm still practically an invalid."

"I wonder how much of your invalidism's coming out of Cho-Hag's ale-barrel," she commented. "You looked terrible when you came down this

morning."

"I'm feeling much better now, though." He smiled, taking another drink.

"I'm sure you are. Yes, Garion?"

"Adara wants me to go riding with her," Garion said. "I - that is, she - thought I should tell you where I was going."

Queen Silar smiled gently at him. "You've stolen away my favorite lady in waiting, Garion," she told him.

"I'm sorry," Garion quickly replied. "If you need her, we won't go."

"I was only teasing you." The queen laughed. "Go ahead and enjoy your ride."

Relg came into the hall just then, and not far behind him, Taiba. The Marag woman, once she had bathed and been given decent clothes to wear, had surprised them all. She was no longer the hopeless, dirty slave woman they had found in the caves beneath Rak Cthol. Her figure was full and her skin very pale. She moved with a kind of unconscious grace, and King Cho-Hag's clansmen looked after her as she passed, their lips pursed speculatively. She seemed to know she was being watched, and, far from being offended by the fact, it seemed rather to please her and to increase her self confidence. Her violet eyes glowed, and she smiled often now. She was, however, never very far from Relg. At first Garion had believed that she was deliberately placing herself where the Ulgo would have to look at her out of a perverse enjoyment of the discomfort it caused him, but now he was not so sure. She no longer even seemed to think about it, but followed Relg wherever he went, seldom speaking, but always there.

"You sent for me, Belgarath?" Relg asked. Some of the harshness had gone out of his voice, but his eyes still looked peculiarly haunted.

"Ah, Relg," Belgarath said expansively. "There's a good fellow. Come, sit down. Take a cup of ale."

"Water, thank you," Relg replied firmly.

"As you wish." Belgarath shrugged. "I was wondering, do you by any chance know a route through the caves of Ulgo that reaches from Prolgu to the southern edge of the land of the Sendars?"

"That's a very long way," Relg told him.

"Not nearly as long as it would be if we rode over the mountains," Belgarath pointed out. "There's no snow in the caves, and no monsters. Is there such a way?"

"There is," Relg admitted.

"And would you be willing to guide us?" the old man pressed.

"If I must," Relg agreed with some reluctance.

"I think you must, Relg," Belgarath told him.

Relg sighed. "I'd hoped that I could return home now that our journey's almost over," he said regretfully.

Belgarath laughed. "Actually, our journey's only just started, Relg. We have a long way to go yet."

Taiba smiled a slow, pleased little smile at that.

Garion felt a small hand slip into his, and he smiled down at Errand, who had just come into the hall. "Is it all right, Aunt Pol?" he asked. "If I go riding, I mean?"

"Of course, dear," she replied. "Just be careful. Don't try to show off for Adara. I don't want you falling off a horse and breaking anything."

Errand let go of Garion's hand and walked over to where Relg stood.

The knots on the pouch that Durnik had so carefully sealed with lead were undone again, and the little boy took the Orb out and offered it to Relg. "Errand?" he said.

"Why don't you take it, Relg?" Taiba asked the startled man. "No one in the world questions your purity."

Relg stepped back and shook his head. "The Orb is the holy object of another religion," he declared. "It is from Aldur, not UL, so it wouldn't be proper for me to touch it."

Taiba smiled knowingly, her violet eyes intent on the zealot's face. "Errand," Aunt Pol said, "come here."

Obediently he went to her. She took hold of the pouch at his belt and held it open. "Put it away," she told him.

Errand sighed and deposited the Orb in the pouch.

"How does he manage to keep getting this open?" she said half to herself as she examined the strings of the pouch.

Garion and Adara rode out from the Stronghold into the rolling hills to the west. The sky was a deep blue, and the sunlight was very bright. Although the morning was crisp, it was not nearly as cold as it had been for the

past week or so. The grass beneath their horses' hooves was brown and lifeless, lying dormant under the winter sky. They rode together without speaking for an hour or so, and finally they stopped and dismounted on the sunny south side of a hill where there was shelter from the stiff breeze. They sat together looking out at the featureless miles of the Algarian plain.

"How much can actually be done with sorcery, Garion?" she asked after a long silence.

He shrugged. "It depends on who's doing it. Some people are very powerful; others can hardly do anything at all."

"Could you-" She hesitated. "Could you make this bush bloom?" She went on quickly, and he knew that was not the question she had originally intended to ask. "Right now, I mean, in the middle of wintertime," she added.

Garion looked at the dry, scrubby bit of gorse, putting the sequence of what he'd have to do together. "I suppose I could," he replied, "but if I did that in the wrong season, the bush wouldn't have any defense against the cold, and it would die."

"It's only a bush, Garion."

"Why kill it?"

She avoided his eyes. "Could you make something happen for me, Garion?" she asked. "Some small thing. I need something to believe in very much just now."

"I can try, I guess." He did not understand her suddenly somber mood. "How about something like this?" He picked up a twig and turned it over in his hands, looking carefully at it. Then he wrapped several strands of dry grass around it and studied it again until he had what he wanted to do firmly in his mind. When he released his will on it, he did not do it all at once, so the change was gradual. Adara's eyes widened as the sorry-looking clump of twig and dry grass was transmuted before her.

It really wasn't much of a flower. It was a kind of pale lavender color, and it was distinctly lopsided. It was quite small, and its petals were not very firmly attached. Its fragrance, however, was sweet with all the promise of summer. Garion felt very strange as he wordlessly handed the flower to his cousin. The sound of it had not been that rushing noise he'd always associated with sorcery, but rather was very much like the bell-tone he'd heard in the glowing cave when he'd given life to the colt. And when he had begun to focus his will, he had not drawn anything from his surroundings. It had all come from within him, and there had been a deep and peculiar love in it.

"lt's lovely," Adara said, holding the little flower gently in her cupped

hands and inhaling its fragrance. Her dark hair fell across her cheek, hiding her face from him. Then she lifted her chin, and Garion saw that her eyes were filled with tears. "It seems to help," she said, "for a little while, anyway "

"What's wrong, Adara?"

She did not answer, but looked out across the dun-brown plain.

"Who's Ce'Nedra?" she asked suddenly. "I've heard the others mention her "

"Ce'Nedra? She's an Imperial Princess - the daughter of Itan Horune of Tolnedra."

"What's she like?"

"Very small - she's part Dryad - and she has red hair and green eyes and a bad temper. She's a spoiled little brat, and she doesn't like me very much."

"But you could change that, couldn't you?" Adara laughed and wiped at the tears.

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"All you'd have to do is-" She made a vague kind of gesture.

"Oh." He caught her meaning. "No, we can't do very much with other people's thoughts and feelings. What I mean is - well, there's nothing to get hold of. I wouldn't even know where to start."

Adara looked at him for a moment, then she buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

"What's the matter?" he asked, alarmed.

"Nothing," she said. "It's not important."

"It is important. Why are you crying?"

"I'd hoped - when I first heard that you were a sorcerer - and then when you made this flower, I thought you could do anything. I thought that maybe you might be able to do something for me."

"I'll do anything you ask, Adara. You know that."

"But you can't, Garion. You just said so yourself."

"What was it that you wanted me to do?"

"I thought that perhaps you might be able to make somebody fall in love with me. Isn't that a foolish idea?"

"Who?" She looked at him with a quiet dignity, her eyes still full of tears. "It doesn't really matter, does it? You can't do anything about it, and neither can I. It was just a foolish notion, and I know better now. Why don't we just forget that I ever said anything?" She rose to her feet. "Let's go back now. It's not nearly as nice a day as I'd thought, and I'm starting to get cold."

They remounted and rode in silence back toward the looming walls of the Stronghold. They did not speak any more. Adara did not wish to talk, and Garion did not know what to say.

Behind them, forgotten, lay the flower he had created. Protected by the slope and faintly warmed by the winter sun, the flower that had never existed before swelled with silent, vegetative ecstasy and bore its fruit. A tiny seed pod at its heart opened, scattering infinitesimal seeds that sifted down to the frozen earth through the stalks of winter grass, and there they lay, awaiting spring.

Chapter Eight

THE ULGO GIRLS had pale skin, white-blond hair and huge, dark eyes. Princess Ce'Nedra sat in the midst of them like a single red rose in a garden of lilies. They watched her every move with a sort of gentle astonishment as if overwhelmed by this vibrant little stranger who had quite suddenly become the center of their lives. It was not merely her coloring, though that was astonishing enough. Ulgos by nature were a serious, reserved people, seldom given to laughter or outward displays of emotion. Ce'Nedra, however, lived as always on the extreme outside of her skin. They watched, enthralled, the flicker and play of mood and emotion across her exquisite little face. They blushed and giggled nervously at her outrageous and often wicked little jokes. She drew them into confidences, and each of the dozen or so who had become her constant companions had at one time or another opened her heart to the little princess.

There were bad days, of course, days when Ce'Nedra was out of sorts, impatient, willful, and when she drove the gentle-eyed Ulgo girls from her with savage vituperation, sending them fleeing in tears from her unexplained tantrums. Later, though they all resolved after such stormy outbursts never to go near her again, they would hesitantly return to find her smiling and laughing as if nothing at all had happened.

It was a difficult time for the princess. She had not fully realized the implications of her unhesitating acquiescence to the command of UL when he

had told her to remain behind in the caves while the others journeyed to Rak Cthol. For her entire life, Ce'Nedra had been at the center of events, but here she was, shunted into the background, forced to endure the tedious passage of hours spent doing nothing but waiting. She was not emotionally constructed for waiting, and the outbursts that scattered her companions like startled doves were at least in part generated by her enforced inactivity.

The wild swings of her moods were particularly trying for the Gorim. The frail, ancient holy man had lived for centuries a life of quiet contemplation, and Ce'Nedra had exploded into the middle of that quiet like a comet. Though sometimes tried to the very limits of his patience, he endured the fits of bad temper, the storms of weeping, the unexplained outbursts - and just as patiently her sudden exuberant displays of affection when she would throw her arms about his neck and cover his startled face with kisses.

On those days when Ce'Nedra's mood was congenial, she gathered her companions among the columns on the shore of the Gorim's island to talk, laugh, and play the little games she had invented, and the dim silent cavern was filled with the babble and laughter of adolescent girls. When her mood was pensive, she and the Gorim sometimes took short walks to view the strange splendors of this subterranean world of cave and gallery and cavern beneath the abandoned city of Prolgu. To the unpracticed eye, it might have appeared that the princess was so involved in her own emotional pyrotechnics that she was oblivious to anything around her, but such was not the case. Her complex little mind was quite capable of observing, analyzing, and questioning; even in the very midst of an outburst. To the Gorim's surprise, he found her mind quick and retentive. When he told her the stories of his people, she questioned him closely, moving always to the meaning that lay behind the stories.

The princess made many discoveries during those talks. She discovered that the core of Ulgo life was religion, and that the moral and theme of all their stories was the duty of absolute submission to the will of UL. A Tolnedran might quibble or even try to strike bargains with his God. Nedra expected it, and seemed to enjoy the play of offer and counteroffer as much as did his people. The Ulgo mind, however, was incapable of such casual familiarity.

"We were nothing," the Gorim explained. "Less than nothing. We had no place and no God, but wandered outcast in the world until UL consented to become our God. Some of the zealots have even gone so far as to suggest that if one single Ulgo displeases our God, he will withdraw himself from us. I don't pretend to know the mind of UL entirely, but I don't think he's quite that unreasonable. Still, he didn't really want to be our God in the first place, so it's best probably not to offend him."

"He loves you, " Ce'Nedra pointed out quickly. "Anyone could see that in his face when he came to us that time."

The Gorim looked doubtful. "I hope I haven't disappointed him too much."

"Don't be silly," the princess said airily. "Of course he loves you. Everyone in the whole world loves you." Impulsively, as if to prove her point, she kissed his pale cheek fondly.

The Gorim smiled at her. "Dear child," he observed, "your own heart is so open that you automatically assume that everyone loves those whom you love. It's not always that way, I'm afraid. There are a good number of people in our caves who aren't all that fond of me."

"Nonsense," she said. "Just because you argue with someone doesn't mean that you don't love him. I love my father very much, but we fight all the time. We enjoy fighting with each other." Ce'Nedra knew that she was safe using such terms as "silly" and "nonsense" with the Gorim. She had by now so utterly charmed him that she was quite sure she could get away with almost anything.

Although it might have been difficult to persuade anyone around her that such was the case, there had been a few distinct but subtle changes in Ce'Nedra's behavior. Impulsive though she might seem to these serious, reserved people, she now gave at least a moment's thought - however brief - before acting or speaking. She had on occasion embarrassed herself here in the caves, and embarrassment was the one thing Ce'Nedra absolutely could not bear. Gradually, imperceptibly, she learned the value of marginal self control, and sometimes she almost appeared ladylike.

She had also had time to consider the problem of Garion. His absence during the long weeks had been particularly and inexplicably painful for her. It was as if she had misplaced something - something very valuable - and its loss left an aching kind of vacancy. Her emotions had always been such a jumble that she had never fully come to grips with them. Usually they changed so rapidly that she never had time to examine one before another took its place. This yearning sense of something missing, however, had persisted for so long that she finally had to face it.

It could not be love. That was impossible. Love for a peasant scullion - no matter how nice he was - was quite out of the question! She was, after all, an Imperial Princess, and her duty was crystal clear. If there had been even the faintest suspicion in her mind that her feelings had moved beyond casual friendship, she would have an absolute obligation to break off any further contact. Ce'Nedra did not want to send Garion away and never see him again. The very thought of doing so made her lip tremble. So, quite obviously, what she felt was not - could not - be love. She felt much better once she had worked that out. The possibility had been worrying her, but now that logic had proved beyond all doubt that she was safe, she was able to relax. It was a great comfort to have logic on her side.

That left only the waiting, the seemingly endless, unendurable waiting for

her friends. Where were they? When were they coming back? What were they doing out there that could take so long? The longer she waited, the more frequently her newfound self control deserted her, and her pale-skinned companions learned to watch apprehensively for those minute danger signs that announced imminent eruption.

Then finally the Gorim told her that word had reached him that her friends were returning, and the little princess went absolutely wild with anticipation. Her preparations were lengthy and elaborate. She would greet them properly of course. No little girl enthusiasm this time. Instead, she would be demure, reserved, imperial and altogether grown up. Naturally, she would have to look the part.

She fretted for hours before selecting the perfect gown, a floor-length Ulgo dress of glistening white. Ulgo gowns, however, were perhaps a trifle too modest for Ce'Nedra's taste. While she wished to appear reserved, she did not want to be that reserved. Thoughtfully, she removed the sleeves from the gown and made a few modifications to the neckline. Some elaborate cross-tying at bodice and waist with a slender gold sash accentuated things a bit. Critically she examined the results of her efforts and found them to her liking.

Then there was the problem of her hair. The loose, tumbled style she had always worn would never do. It needed to be up, piled in a soft mass of curls atop her head and then cascading elegantly down over one shoulder to add that splash of color across the pristine whiteness of her bodice that would set things off just right. She worked on it until her arms ached from being raised over her head for so long. When she was finished, she studied the entire effect of gown and hair and demurely regal expression. It wasn't bad, she congratulated herself. Garion's eyes would fall out when he saw her. The little princess exulted.

When the day finally arrived, Ce'Nedra, who had scarcely slept, sat nervously with the Gorim in his now-familiar study. He was reading from a long scroll, rolling the top with one hand while he unrolled the bottom with another. As he read, the princess fidgeted, nibbling absently on a lock.

"You seem restless today, child," he observed.

"It's just that I haven't seen him - them - for so long," she explained quickly. "Are you sure I look all right'?" She had only asked the question six or eight times that morning already.

"You're lovely, child," he assured her once again. She beamed at him.

A servingman came into the Gorim's study. "Your guests have arrived, Holy One," he said with a respectful bow.

Ce'Nedra's heart began to pound.

"Shall we go greet them, child?" the Gorim suggested, laying aside his scroll and rising to his feet.

Ce'Nedra resisted her impulse to spring from her chair and run out of the room. With an iron grip she controlled herself. Instead, she walked at the Gorim's side, silently repeating to herself, "Dignity. Reserve. Imperially demure."

Her friends were travel-stained and weary-looking as they entered the Gorim's cavern, and there were strangers with them whom Ce'Nedra did not recognize. Her eyes however, sought out only one face.

He looked older than she remembered him. His face, which had always been so serious, had a gravity to it now that had not been there before. Things had obviously happened to him while he had been gone - important things - and the princess felt a little pang at having been excluded from such momentous events in his life.

And then her heart froze. Who was that great gangling girl at his side? And why was he being so deferential to the big cow? Ce'Nedra's jaws clenched as she glared across the calm waters of the lake at the perfidious young man. She had known it would happen. The minute she had let him out of her sight, he had run headlong into the arms of the first girl who happened by. How dared he? How dared he!

As the group on the far side of the lake began to come across the causeway, Ce'Nedra's heart sank. The tall girl was lovely. Her dark hair was lustrous, and her features were perfect. Desperately, Ce'Nedra looked for some flaw, some blemish. And the way the girl moved! She actually seemed to flow with a grace that nearly brought tears of despair to Ce'Nedra's eyes.

The greetings and introductions seemed hardly more than some incoherent babble to the suffering princess. Absently she curtsied to the king of the Algars and his lovely queen. Politely she greeted the lushly beautiful woman - Taiba, her name was - whom Lady Polgara introduced to her. The moment she was dreading was approaching, and there was no way she could forestall it.

"And this is Adara," Lady Polgara said, indicating the lovely creature at Garion's side. Ce'Nedra wanted to cry. It wasn't fair! Even the girl's name was beautiful. Why couldn't it have been something ugly?

"Adara," Lady Polgara continued, her eyes intently on Ce'Nedra's face, "this is her Imperial Highness, the Princess Ce'Nedra."

Adara curtsied with a grace that was like a knife in Ce'Nedra's heart. "I've so wanted to meet your Highness," the tall girl said. Her voice was vibrant, musical.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Ce'Nedra replied with a lofty superiority. Though every nerve within her screamed with the need to lash out at this detested rival, she held herself rigid and silent. Any outburst, even the faintest trace of dismay showing in her expression or her voice would make this Adara's victory complete. Ce'Nedra was too much a princess - too much a woman - to permit that ultimate defeat. Though her pain was as real as if she were in the hands of a torturer, she stood erect, enclosed in all the imperial majesty she could muster. Silently she began to repeat all of her titles over and over to herself, steeling herself with them, reminding herself grimly just who she was. An Imperial Princess did not cry. The daughter of Ran Borune did not snivel. The flower of Tolnedra would never grieve because some clumsy scullery boy had chosen to love somebody else.

"Forgive me, Lady Polgara," she said, pressing a trembling hand to her forehead, "but I suddenly seem to have the most dreadful headache. Would you excuse me, please?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned to walk slowly toward the Gorim's house. She paused only once, just as she passed Garion. "I hope you'll be very happy," she lied to him.

He looked baffled.

It had gone too far. It had been absolutely necessary to conceal her emotions from Adara, but this was Garion, and she had to let him know exactly how she felt. "I despise you, Garion," she whispered at him with a terrible intensity, "and I don't ever want to lay eyes on you again."

He blinked.

"I don't think you can even begin to imagine how much I loathe the very sight of you," she added. And with that she continued on into the Gorim's house, her back straight and her head unbowed.

Once she was inside, she fled to her room, threw herself on the bed, and wept in broken-hearted anguish.

She heard a light step near the doorway, and then the Lady Polgara was there. "All right, Ce'Nedra," she said, "what's this all about?" She sat down on the edge of the bed and put one hand on the shoulder of the sobbing little princess.

"Oh, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra wailed, suddenly throwing herself into Polgara's arms. "I - I've l-lost him. He - he's in love with h-h-her."

"Who's that, dear?" Polgara asked her calmly.

"Garion. He's in love with that Adara, and he doesn't even know I'm alive any m-m-more."

"You silly little goose," Polgara chided her gently.

"He does love her, doesn't he?" Ce'Nedra demanded.

"Of course he does, dear."

"I knew it," Ce'Nedra wailed, collapsing into a fresh storm of weeping.

"It's only natural for him to love her," Polgara continued. "She's his cousin, after all."

"His cousin?" Ce'Nedra's tear-streaked face came up suddenly.

"The daughter of his mother's sister," Polgara explained. "You did know that Garion's mother was an Algar, didn't you?"

Ce'Nedra shook her head mutely.

"Is that what all this is about?"

Ce'Nedra nodded. Her weeping had suddenly stopped.

Lady Polgara took a handkerchief from her sleeve and offered it to the tiny girl. "Blow your nose, dear," she instructed. "Don't sniff like that. It's very unbecoming."

Ce'Nedra blew her nose.

"And so you've finally admitted it to yourself," Polgara observed. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you."

"Admitted what?"

Polgara gave her a long, steady look, and Ce'Nedra flushed slowly, lowering her eyes. "That's better," Polgara said. "You mustn't try to hide things from me, Ce'Nedra. It doesn't do any good, you know, and it only makes things more difficult for you."

Ce'Nedra's eyes had widened as the full impact of her tacit admission struck her. "It's not possible," she gasped in absolute horror. "It can't happen."

"As my father's so fond of saying, just about anything is possible," Polgara told her.

"What am I going to do?"

"First you ought to go wash your face," Polgara told her. "Some girls can cry without making themselves ugly, but you don't have the right coloring for it. You're an absolute fright. I'd advise you never to cry in public if you can help it."

"That's not what I meant," Ce'Nedra said. "What am I going to do about Garion?"

"I don't know that you really need to do anything, dear. Things will straighten themselves out eventually."

"But I'm a princess, and he's - well, he's just Garion. This sort of thing isn't permitted."

"Everything will probably turn out all right," Lady Polgara assured her. "Trust me, Ce'Nedra. I've been handling matters like this for a very long time. Now go wash your face."

"I made a terrible fool of myself out there, didn't I?" Ce'Nedra said.

"It's nothing that can't be fixed," Polgara said calmly. "We can pass it off as something brought on by the excitement of seeing your friends again after so long. You are glad to see us, aren't you?"

"Oh, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra said, embracing her and laughing and crying at the same time.

After the ravages of Ce'Nedra's crying fit had been repaired, they rejoined the others in the Gorim's familiar study.

"Are you recovered, my child?" the Gorim asked her gently, concern written all over his dear old face.

"Just a touch of nerves, Holy One," Lady Polgara reassured him. "Our princess, as you've probably noticed, is somewhat high-strung."

"I'm so sorry that I ran off like that," Ce'Nedra apologized to Adara. "It was silly of me."

"Your Highness could never be silly," Adara told her.

Ce'Nedra lifted her chin. "Oh yes I can," she declared. "I've got as much right to make a fool of myself in public as anyone else."

Adara laughed, and the entire incident was smoothed over.

There was still, however, a problem. Ce'Nedra had, she realized, gone perhaps a bit too far in her impulsive declaration of undying hatred for Garion. His expression was confused, even a trifle hurt. Ce'Nedra decided somewhat loftily to ignore the injury she had inflicted upon him. She had suffered through that dreadful scene on the shore of the Gorim's island, and it seemed only fair that he should suffer a little as well - not too much, of course, but a little anyway. He did, after all, have it coming. She allowed him a suitable period of anguish - at least she hoped it was anguish - then spoke to him warmly, even fondly, as if those spiteful words

had never passed her lips. His expression became even more baffled, and then she turned the full force of her most winsome smile on him, noting with great satisfaction its devastating effect. After that she ignored him.

While Belgarath and Lady Polgara were recounting the events of their harrowing journey to Rak Cthol, the princess sat demurely beside Adara on a bench, half listening, but for the most part turning the amazing discovery of the past hour over and over in her mind. Suddenly, she felt eyes on her, and she looked up quickly. The little blond boy Lady Polgara called Errand was watching her, his small face very serious. There was something about his eyes. With a sudden and absolute certainty, she knew that the child was looking directly into her heart. He smiled at her then; without knowing why, she felt a sudden overwhelming surge of joy at his smile. He walked toward her, still smiling, and his little hand dipped into the pouch at his waist. He took out a round, gray stone and offered it to her. "Errand?" he said. For an instant Ce'Nedra seemed to see a faint blue flicker deep within the stone.

"Don't touch it, Ce'Nedra," Lady Polgara told her in a tone that made Ce'Nedra's hand freeze in the very act of reaching for the stone. "Durnik!" Lady Polgara said to the smith with an odd note of complaint in her voice.

"Mistress Pol," he said helplessly, "I don't know what else to do. No matter how I seal it up, he always manages to get it open."

"Make him put it away," she told him with just a hint of exasperation.

Durnik went to the little boy, knelt and took hold of the pouch. Without a word he held it open, and the child dropped the stone into it. Durnik tied the pouch shut, pulling the knots as tight as he could. When he had finished, the little boy put his arms affectionately around the smith's neck. Durnik looked a bit embarrassed and was about to lead the child away, but Errand pulled his hand free and climbed instead into Ce'Nedra's lap. Quite seriously he kissed her, then nestled down in her arms and promptly fell asleep.

Feelings moved in Ce'Nedra that she had never felt before. Without knowing why, she was happier than she had ever been in her life. She held the child close against her, her arms protectively about him and her cheek laid snugly against his pale blond curls. She felt an impulse to rock him and perhaps to croon a very soft lullaby to him.

"We'll have to hurry," Belgarath was saying to the Gorim. "Even with Relg's help, it will take a week or more to reach the Sendarian border. Then we'll have to cross the whole country, and the snow in Sendaria can pile up in a hurry this time of year. To make things even worse, this is the season for storms in the Sea of the Winds, and it's a long way over open water from Sendar to Riva."

The word "Riva" jerked Ce'Nedra out of her reverie. From the very moment

that she and Jeebers had crept from the Imperial Palace at Tol Honeth, one single thought had dominated her thinking. She was not going to Riva. Though she might have seemed on occasion to have surrendered on that point, her acquiescence had always been a subterfuge. Now, however, she would have to take a stand. The reasons for her adamant refusal to obey the provisions of the Accords of Vo Mimbre were no longer entirely clear to her. So much had happened that she was not even the same person, but one thing was absolutely certain no matter who she was. She was not going to Riva. It was a matter of principle.

"I'm sure that once we reach Sendaria, I'll be able to make my way to an Imperial garrison," she said as casually as if the matter had already been decided.

"And why would you want to do that, dear?" Lady Polgara asked her.

"As I said earlier, I'm not going to Riva," Ce'Nedra replied. "The legionnaires will be able to make arrangements to return me to Tol Honeth."

"Perhaps you should visit your father," Polgara said quite calmly.

"You mean you're just going to let me go?"

"I didn't say that. I'm sure we'll be able to find a ship bound for Tol Honeth sometime in the late spring or early summer. Rivan commerce with the Empire is extensive."

"I don't think you fully understand me, Lady Polgara. I said that I'm not going to go to Riva - under any circumstances."

"I heard you, Ce'Nedra. You're wrong, however. You are going to Riva. You have an appointment there, remember?"

"I won't go!" Ce'Nedra's voice went up an octave or two.

"Yes, you will." Polgara's voice was deceptively calm, but there was a hint of steel in it.

"I absolutely refuse," the princess declared. She was about to say more, but a small finger gently brushed her lips. The sleepy child in her arms raised his hand to touch her mouth. She moved her head irntably. "I've told you all before that I will not submit to-" The child touched her lips again. His eyes were drowsy as he looked up at her, but his gaze was calm and reassuring. Ce'Nedra forgot what she had been saying. "I am not going to the Isle of the Winds," she concluded rather lamely, "and that's final." The trouble was that it didn't sound all that final.

"It seems that we've had this discussion once or twice before," Polgara observed.

"You have no right to-" Ce'Nedra's words trailed off again as her thoughts went astray once more. The child's eyes were so blue - so very blue. She found herself unable to look away from them and seemed to be sinking into that incredible color. She shook her head. It was so completely unlike her to keep losing track of an argument this way. She tried to concentrate. "I refuse to be publicly humiliated," she declared. "I will not stand in the Hall of the Rivan King like a beggar while all the Alorns snicker up their sleeves at me." That was better. Her momentary distraction seemed to be fading. Inadvertently she glanced down at the child and it all went out the window again. "I don't even have the right kind of dress," she added plaintively low what had made her say that?

Polgara said nothing, but her eyes seemed very wise as she watched the princess flounder. Ce'Nedra stumbled along, her objections growing less and less relevant. Even as she argued, she realized that there was no real reason for her not going to Riva. Her refusal seemed frivolouseven childish. Why on earth had she made such a fuss about it? The little boy in her arms smiled encouragingly at her, and, unable to help herself, she smiled back at him, her defenses crumbling. She made one last try. "It's only some silly old formality anyway, Lady Polgara," she said. "There won't be anyone waiting for me in the Hall of the Rivan King - there never has been. The Rivan line is extinct." She tore her eyes away from the child's face. "Do I really have to go?"

Lady Polgara nodded gravely.

Ce'Nedra heaved a great sigh. All this bickering seemed so unnecessary. What was the point of making such an issue of a simple trip? It was not as if there was any danger involved. If it would make people happy, why be stubborn about it? "Oh, all right," she surrendered. "If it's so important to everyone, I suppose I can go to Riva." For some reason, saying it made her feel much better. The child in her arms smiled again, gently patted her cheek and went back to sleep. Lost in a sudden inexplicable happiness, the princess nestled her cheek against his curls again and began to rock back and forth gently, crooning very softly.

PART TWO

RIVA

[Image]

Chapter Nine

ONCE MORE RELG led them through the dark, silent world of the caves, and once more Garion hated every moment of it. It seemed an eternity ago that they had left Prolgu, where Ce'Nedra's farewells to the frail old Gorim had been long and tearful. The princess rather balled Garion, and he gave himself over to some speculation about her as he stumbled along in the musty-smelling darkness. Something had happened at Prolgu. In some very subtle ways, Ce'Nedra was different - and the differences made Garion jumpy for some reason.

When at last, after uncountable days in the dark, twisting galleries, they emerged once again into the world of light and air, it was through an irregular, brush-choked opening in the wall of a steep ravine. It was snowing heavily outside with large flakes settling softly down through the windless air.

"Are you sure this is Sendaria?" Barak asked Relg as he bulled his way through the obstructing brush at the cave mouth.

Relg shrugged, once more binding a veil across his face to protect his eyes from the light. "We're no longer in Ulgo."

"There are a lot of places that aren't in Ulgo, Relg," Barak reminded him sourly.

"It sort of looks like Sendaria," King Cho-Hag observed, leaning over in his saddle to stare out of the cave at the softly falling snow. "Can anybody make a guess at the time of day?"

"It's really very hard to say when it's snowing this hard, father," Hettar told him. "The horses think it's about noon, but their idea of time is a bit imprecise."

"Wonderful," Silk noted sardonically. "We don't know where we are or what time it is. Things are getting off to a splendid start."

"It's not really that important, Silk," Belgarath said wearily. "All we have to do is go north. We're bound to run into the Great North Road eventually."

"Fine," Silk replied. "But which way is north?"

Garion looked closely at his grandfather as the old man squeezed out into the snowy ravine. The old man's face was etched with lines of weariness, and the hollows under his eyes were dark again. Despite the two weeks or more of convalescence at the Stronghold and Aunt Pol's considered opinion that he was fit to travel, Belgarath had obviously not yet fully recovered

from his collapse.

As they emerged from the cave, they pulled on their heavy cloaks and tightened the cinches on their saddles in preparation to move out.

"Uninviting sort of place, isn't it?" Ce'Nedra observed to Adara, looking around critically.

"This is mountain country," Garion told her, quickly coming to the defense of his homeland. "It's no worse than the mountains of eastern Tolnedra."

"I didn't say it was, Garion," she replied in an infuriating way. They rode for several hours until they heard the sound of axes somewhere off in the forest. "Woodcutters," Durnik surmised. "I'll go talk with them and get directions." He rode off in the direction of the sound. When he returned, he had a slightly disgusted look on his face. "We've been going south," he told them.

"Naturally," Silk said sardonically. "Did you find out what time it is?"

"Late afternoon," Durnik told him. "The woodcutters say that if we turn west, we'll strike a road that runs northwesterly. It will bring us to the Great North Road about twenty leagues on this side of Muros."

"Let's see if we can find this road before dark, then," Belgarath said. It took them several days to ride down out of the mountains and several more before they had passed through the sparsely inhabited stretches of eastern Sendaria to the more thickly populated plains around Lake Sulturn. It snowed intermittently the entire time, and the heavily travelled roads of south-central Sendaria were slushy and lay like ugly brown scars across the snowy hills. Their party was large, and they usually had to split up among several inns in the neat, snowcovered villages at which they stopped. Princess Ce'Nedra quite frequently used the word "quaint" to describe both the villages and the accommodations, and Garion found her fondness for the word just a trifle offensive.

The kingdom through which they travelled was not the same Sendaria he had left more than a year before. Garion saw quiet evidence of mobilization in almost every village along the way. Groups of country militia drilled in the brown slush in village squares; old swords and bent pikes, long forgotten in dusty attics or damp cellars, had been located and scraped free of rust in preparation for the war everyone knew was coming. The efforts of these peaceful farmers and villagers to look warlike were often ludicrous. Their homemade uniforms were in every possible shade of red or blue or green, and their bright-colored banners obviously showed that treasured petticoats had been sacrificed to the cause. The faces of these simple folk, however, were serious. Though young men strutted in their uniforms for the benefit of village girls, and older men tried to look like veterans, the atmosphere in each village was grave. Sendaria stood quietly on the brink of war.

At Sulturn, Aunt Pol, who had been looking thoughtfully at each village through which they passed, apparently reached a decision. "Father," she said to Belgarath as they rode into town, "you and Cho-Hag and the rest go straight on to Sendar. Durnik, Garion, and I need to make a little side trip."

"Where are you going?"

"To Faldor's farm."

"Faldor's? What for?"

"We all left things behind, father. You hustled us out of there so fast that we barely had time to pack." Her tone and expression were so matter-of fact that Garion immediately suspected subterfuge, and Belgarath's briefly raised eyebrow indicated that he also was fairly certain that she was not telling him everything.

"We're starting to trim this a bit close, Pol," the old man pointed out.

"There's still plenty of time, father," she replied. "It's not really all that far out of our way. We'll only be a few days behind you."

"Is it really that important, Pol?"

"Yes, father. I think it is. Keep an eye on Errand for me, won't you? I don't think he really needs to go with us."

"All right, Pol."

A silvery peal of laughter burst from the lips of the Princess Ce'Nedra, who was watching the stumbling efforts of a group of militiamen to execute a right turn without tripping over their own weapons. Aunt Pol's expression did not change as she turned her gaze on the giggling jewel of the Empire. "I think we'll take that one with us, however," she added.

Ce'Nedra protested bitterly when she was advised that she would not be travelling directly to the comforts of King Fulrach's palace at Sendar, but her objections had no impact on Aunt Pol.

"Doesn't she ever listen to anybody?" the little princess grumbled to Garion as they rode along behind Aunt Pol and Durnik on the road to Medalia.

"She always listens," Garion replied.

"But she never changes her mind, does she?"

"Not very often - but she does listen."

Aunt Pol glanced over her shoulder at them. "Pull up your hood, Ce'Nedra," she instructed. "It's starting to snow again, and I don't want you riding with a wet head."

The princess drew in a quick breath as if preparing to retort.

"I wouldn't," Garion advised her softly.

"But "

"She's not in the mood for discussion just now."

Ce'Nedra glared at him, but pulled up her hood in silence.

It was still snowing lightly when they reached Medalia that evening. Ce'Nedra's reaction to the lodgings offered at the inn was predictable. There was, Garion had noted, a certain natural rhythm to her outbursts. She never began at the top of her voice, but rather worked her way up to it with an impressively swelling crescendo. She had just reached the point of launching herself into full voice when she was suddenly brought up short.

"What an absolutely charming display of good breeding," Aunt Pol observed calmly to Durnik. "All of Garion's old friends will be terribly impressed by this sort of thing, don't you think?"

Durnik looked away, hiding a smile. "I'm sure of it, Mistress Pol."

Ce'Nedra's mouth was still open, but her tirade had been cut off instantly. Garion was amazed at her sudden silence. "I was being a bit silly, wasn't I?" she said after a moment. Her tone was reasonable almost sweet-natured.

"Yes, dear just a bit," Aunt Pol agreed.

"Please forgive me - all of you." Ce'Nedra's voice dripped honey.

"Don't overdo it, Ce'Nedra," Aunt Pol told her.

It was perhaps noon of the following day when they turned off the main road leading to Erat into the country lane that led to Faldor's farm. Since that morning, Garion's excitement had risen to almost intolerable heights. Every milepost, every bush and tree was familiar to him now. And over there - wasn't that old Cralto riding an unsaddled horse on some errand for Faldor? Finally, at the sight of a tall, familiar figure clearing brush and twigs from a drainage ditch, he was no longer able to restrain himself. He drove his heels into his horse's flanks, smoothly jumped a fence and galloped across the snowy field toward the solitary worker.

"Rundorig!" he shouted, hauling his horse to a stop and flinging himself from his saddle.

"Your Honor?" Rundorig replied, blinking with astonishment.

"Rundorig, it's me - Garion. Don't you recognize me?"

"Garion?" Rundorig blinked several more times, peering intently into Garion's face. The light dawned slowly in his eyes like a sunrise on a murky day. "Why, I believe you're right," he marvelled. "You are Garion, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, Rundorig," Garion exclaimed, reaching out to take his friend's hand.

But Rundorig shoved both hands behind him and stepped back. "Your clothing, Garionl Have a care. I'm all over mud."

"I don't care about my clothes, Rundorig. You're my friend."

The tall lad shook his head stubbornly. "You mustn't get mud on them. They're too splendid. Plenty of time to shake hands after I clean up." He stared curiously at Garion. "Where did you get such fine things? And a sword? You'd better not let Faldor see you wearing a sword. You know he doesn't approve of that sort of thing."

Somehow things were not going the way they were supposed to be going. "How's Doroon?" Garion asked, "and Zubrette?"

"Doroon moved away last summer," Rundorig replied after a moment's struggle to remember. "I think his mother remarried - anyway, they're on a farm down on the other side of Winold. And Zubrette well, Zubrette and I started walking out together not too long after you left." The tall young man suddenly blushed and looked down in embarrassed confusion. "There's a sort of an understanding between us, Garion," he blurted.

"How splendid, Rundorig!" Garion explained quickly to cover the little dagger cut of disappointment.

Rundorig, however, had already taken the next step. "I know that you and she were always fond of each other," he said, his long face miserably unhappy. "I'll have a talk with her." He looked up, tears standing in his eyes. "It wouldn't have gone so far, Garion, except that none of us thought that you were ever coming back."

"I haven't really, Rundorig," Garion quickly assured his friend. "We only came by to visit and to pick up some things we left behind. Then we'll be off again."

"Have you come for Zubrette, too?" Rundorig asked in a numb, stricken sort of voice that tore at Garion's heart.

"Rundorig," he said it very calmly, "I don't even have a home any more. One night I sleep in a palace; the next night in the mud beside the road. Would either one of us want that kind of life for Zubrette?"

"I think she'd go with you if you asked her to, though," Rundorig said. "I think she'd endure anything to be with you."

"But we won't let her, will we? So far as we're concerned, the understanding between the two of you is official."

"I could never lie to her, Garion," the tall boy objected.

"I could," Garion said bluntly. "Particularly if it will keep her from living out her life as a homeless vagabond. All you have to do is keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking." He grinned suddenly. "Just as in the old days."

A slow smile crept shyly across Rundorig's face.

The gate of the farm stood open, and good, honest Faldor, beaming and rubbing his hands with delight, was bustling around Aunt Pol, Durnik, and Ce'Nedra. The tall, thin farmer seemed as lean as always, and his long jaw appeared to have grown even longer in the year and more since they had left. There was a bit more gray at his temples, but his heart had not changed.

Princess Ce'Nedra stood demurely to one side of the little group, and Garion carefully scanned her face for danger signs. If anyone could disrupt the plan he had in mind, it would most likely be Ce'Nedra; but, try though he might, he could not read her face.

Then Zubrette descended the stairs from the gallery that encircled the interior of the courtyard. Her dress was a country dress, but her hair was still golden, and she was even more beautiful than before. A thousand memories flooded over Garion all at once, together with an actual pain at what he had to do. They had grown up together, and the ties between them were so deep that no outsider could ever fully understand what passed between them in a single glance. And it was with a glance that Garion lied to her. Zubrette's eyes were filled with love, and her soft lips were slightly parted as if almost ready to answer the question she was sure he would ask, even before he gave it voice. Garion's look, however, feigned friendship, affection even, but no love. Incredulity flickered across her face and then a slow flush. The pain Garion felt as he watched the hope die in her blue eyes was as sharp as a knife. Even worse, he was forced to retain his pose of indifference while she wistfully absorbed every feature of his face as if storing up those memories which would have to last her a lifetime. Then she turned and, pleading some errand, she walked away from them. Garion knew that she would avoid him thereafter and that he had seen her for the last time in his life.

It had been the right thing to do, but it had very nearly broken Garion's heart. He exchanged a quick glance with Rundorig that said all that needed saying, then he sadly watched the departure of the girl he had always thought that one day he might marry. When she turned a corner and disappeared, he sighed rather bitterly, turned back and found Ce'Nedra's eyes on him. Her look plainly told him that she understood precisely what he had just done and how much it had cost him. There was sympathy in that look - and a peculiar questioning.

Despite Faldor's urgings, Polgara immediately rejected the role of honored guest. It was as if her fingers itched to touch all the familiar things in the kitchen once more. No sooner had she entered than her cloak went on a peg, an apron went about her waist, and her hands fell to work. Her polite suggestions remained so for almost a full minute and a half before they became commands, and then everything was back to normal again. Faldor and Durnik, their hands clasped behind their back, strolled about the courtyard, looking into storage sheds, talking about the weather and other matters, and Garion stood in the kitchen doorway with Princess Ce'Nedra.

"Will you show me the farm, Garion?" she asked very quietly.

"If you wish."

"Does Lady Polgara really like to cook that much?" She looked across the warm kitchen to where Aunt Pol, humming happily to herself, was rolling out a pie crust.

"I believe she does," Garion answered. "Her kitchen is an orderly kind of place, and she likes order. Food goes in one end and supper comes out the other." He looked around at the low-beamed room with all the polished pots and pans hanging on the wall. His life seemed to have come full-circle. "I grew up in this room," he said quietly.

"There are worse places to grow up, I suppose."

Ce'Nedra's tiny hand crept into his. There was a kind of tentativeness in her touch - almost as if she were not entirely certain how the gesture would be received. There was something peculiar and rather comforting about holding her hand. It was a very small hand; sometimes Garion found himself forgetting just how diminutive Ce'Nedra really was. At the moment she seemed very tiny and very vulnerable, and Garion felt protective for some reason. He wondered if it would be appropriate to put his arm about her shoulder.

Together they wandered about the farmstead, looking into barns and stables and hen roosts. Finally they reached the hayloft that had always been Garion's favorite hiding place. "I used to come here when I knew that Aunt Pol had work for me to do," he confessed with a rueful little laugh.

"Didn't you want to work?" Ce'Nedra asked him. "Everybody here seems to be

busy every single moment."

"I don't mind working," Garion told her. "It's just that some of the things she wanted me to do were pretty distasteful."

"Like scrubbing pots?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

"That's not one of my favorites - no."

They sat together on the soft, fragrant hay in the loft. Ce'Nedra, her fingers now locked firmly in Garion's, absently traced designs on the back of his hand with her other forefinger. "You were very brave this afternoon, Garion," she told him seriously.

"Brave?"

"You gave up something that's always been very special and very important to you."

"Oh," he said. "You mean Zubrette. I think it was for the best, really. Rundorig loves her, and he can take care of her in ways that I probably won't be able to."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Zubrette needs a lot of special attention. She's clever and pretty, but she's not really very brave. She used to run away from trouble a lot. She needs someone to watch over her and keep her warm and safe - somebody who can devote his entire life to her. I don't think I'll be able to do that."

"If you'd stayed here at the farm, though, you'd have married her, wouldn't you?"

"Probably," he admitted, "but I didn't stay at the farm."

"Didn't it hurt - giving her up like that?"

Garion sighed. "Yes," he said, "it did, sort of, but it was best for all of us, I think. I get a feeling that I'm going to spend a lot of my life travelling about, and Zubrette's really not the sort of person you can ask to sleep on the ground."

"You people never hesitated to ask me to sleep on the ground," Ce'Nedra pointed out a trifle indignantly.

Garion looked at her. "We didn't, did we? I guess I never thought about that before. Maybe it's because you're braver."

The following morning after extended farewells and many promises to return, the four of them set out for Sendar.

"Well, Garion?" Aunt Pol said as they rode across the hill that put Faldor's farm irrevocably behind them.

"Well what?"

She gave him a long, silent look.

He sighed. There was really not much point in trying to hide things from her. "I won't be able to go back there, will I?"

"No, dear."

"I guess I always thought that when this was all finished, maybe we could go back to the farm - but we won't, will we?"

"No, Garion, we won't. You had to see it again to realize it, though. It was the only way to get rid of the little bits and pieces of it you've been trailing behind you all these months. I'm not saying that Faldor's is a bad place, you understand. It's just that it's not right for certain people."

"We make the trip all the way up there just so I could find that out?"

"It is fairly important, Garion - of course I enjoyed visiting with Faldor, too - and there were a few special things I left in the kitchen - things I've had for a very long time and that I'd rather not lose."

A sudden thought had occurred to Garion, however. "What about Ce'Nedra? Why did you insist that she come along?"

Aunt Pol glanced back once at the little princess, who was riding some yards behind them with her eyes lost in thought. "It didn't hurt her, and she saw some things there that were important for her to see."

"I'm fairly sure that I'll never understand that."

"No, dear," she agreed, "probably not."

It snowed fitfully for the next day and a half as they rode along the road that crossed the white central plain toward the capital at Sendar. Though it was not particularly cold, the sky remained overcast and periodic flurries swept in on them as they rode west. Near the coastline, the wind picked up noticeably, and the occasional glimpses of the sea were disquieting. Great waves ran before the wind, their tops ripped to frothy tatters.

At King Fulrach's palace, they found Belgarath in a foul humor. It was little more than a week until Erastide, and the old man stood glaring out a window at the stormy sea as if it were all some kind of vast, personal insult. "So nice you could join us," he said sarcastically to Aunt Pol when

she and Garion entered the room where he brooded.

"Be civil, father," she replied calmly, removing her blue cloak and laying it across a chair.

"Do you see what it's doing out there, Pol?" He jabbed an angry finger toward the window.

"Yes, father," she said, not even looking. Instead, she peered intently at his face. "You aren't getting enough rest," she accused him.

"How can I rest with all that going on?" He waved at the window again.

"You're just going to agitate yourself, father, and that's bad for you. Try to keep your composure."

"We have to be in Riva by Erastide, Pol."

"Yes, father, I know. Have you been taking your tonic?"

"There's just no talking with her." The old man appealed directly to Garion. "You can see that, can't you?"

"You don't really expect me to answer a question like that, do you, Grandfather? Not right here in front of her?"

Belgarath scowled at him. "Turncoat," he muttered spitefully.

The old man's concern, however, was unfounded. Four days before Erastide, Captain Greldik's familiar ship sailed into the harbor out of a seething sleet storm. Her masts and bulwarks were coated with ice, and her main sail was ripped down the center.

When the bearded sailor arrived at the palace, he was escorted to the room where Belgarath waited with Captain - now Colonel - Brendig; the sober baronet who had arrested them all in Camaar so many months before. Brendig's rise had been very rapid, and he was now, along with the Earl of Seline, among King Fulrach's most trusted advisors.

"Anheg sent me," Greldik reported laconically to Belgarath. "He's waiting at Riva with Rhodar and Brand. They were wondering what was keeping you."

"I can't find any ship captain willing to venture out of the harbor during this storm," Belgarath replied angrily.

"Well, I'm here now," Greldik told him. "I've got to patch my sail, but that won't take too long. We can leave in the morning. Is there anything to drink around here?"

"How's the weather out there?" Belgarath asked.

"A little choppy," Greldik admitted with an indifferent shrug. He glanced through a window at the twelve-foot waves crashing green and foamy against the icy stone wharves in the harbor below. "Once you get out past the breakwater it isn't too bad."

"We'll leave in the morning then," Belgarath decided. "You'll have twenty or so passengers. Have you got room?"

"We'll make room," Greldik said. "I hope you're not planning to take horses this time. It took me a week to get my bilges clean after the last trip."

"Just one," Belgarath replied. "A colt that seems to have become attached to Garion. He won't make that much mess. Do you need anything?"

"I could still use that drink," Greldik replied hopefully.

The following morning the queen of Sendaria went into hysterics. When she learned that she was going to accompany the party to Riva, Queen Layla went all to pieces. King Fulrach's plump little wife had an absolute horror of sea travel - even in the calmest weather. She could not so much as look at a ship without trembling. When Polgara informed her that she had to go with them to Riva, Queen Layla promptly collapsed.

"Everything will be all right, Layla," Polgara kept repeating over and over again, trying to calm the agitated little queen. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"We'll all drown like rats," Queen Layla wailed in stark terror. "Like rats! Oh, my poor orphaned children."

"Now stop that at once!" Polgara told her.

"The sea monsters will eat us all up," the queen added morbidly, "crunching all our bones with their horrid teeth."

"There aren't any monsters in the Sea of the Winds, Layla," Polgara said patiently. "We have to go. We must be in Riva on Erastide."

"Couldn't you tell them that I'm sick - that I'm dying?" Queen Layla pleaded. "If it would help, I will die. Honestly, Polgara, I'll die right here and now on this very spot. Only, please, don't make me get on that awful ship. Please."

"You're being silly, Layla," Polgara chided her firmly. "You have no choice in the matter - none of us do. You and Fulrach and Seline and Brendig all have to go to Riva with the rest of us. That decision was made long before any of you were born. Now stop all this foolishness and start packing."

"I can't!" the queen sobbed, flinging herself into a chair.

Polgara looked at the panic-stricken queen with a kind of understanding sympathy, but when she spoke there was no trace of it in her voice. "Get up, Layla," she commanded briskly. "Get on your feet and pack your clothes. You are going to Riva. You'll go even if I have to drag you down to the ship and tie you to the mast until we get there."

"You wouldn't!" Queen Layla gasped, shocked out of her hysteria as instantly as if she had just been doused with a pail full of cold water. "You wouldn't do that to me, Polgara."

"Wouldn't I?" Polgara replied. "I think you'd better start packing, Layla."

The queen weakly struggled to her feet. "I'll be seasick every inch of the way," she promised.

"You can if it makes you happy, dear," Polgara said sweetly, patting the plump little queen gently on the cheek.

Chapter Ten

THEY WERE TWO days at sea from Sendar to Riva, running before a quartering wind with their patched sail booming and the driving spray that froze to everything it touched. The cabin belowdecks was crowded, and Garion spent most of his time topside, trying to stay out of the wind and out from under the sailors' feet at the same time. Inevitably, he moved finally to the sheltered spot in the prow, sat with his back against the bulwark and his blue hooded cloak tight about him, and gave himself over to some serious thinking. The ship rocked and pitched in the heavy swells and frequently slammed head-on into monstrous black waves, shooting spray in all directions. The sea around them was flecked with whitecaps, and the sky was a threatening, dirty gray.

Garion's thoughts were almost as gloomy as the weather. His life for the past fifteen months had been so caught up in the pursuit of the Orb that he had not had time to look toward the future. Now the quest was almost over, and he began to wonder what would happen once the Orb had been restored to the Hall of the Rivan King. There would no longer be any reason for his companions to remain together. Barak would return to Val Alorn; Silk would certainly find some other part of the world more interesting; Hettar and Mandorallen and Relg would return home; and even Ce'Nedra, once she had gone through the ceremony of presenting herself in the throne room, would be called back to Tol Honeth. The adventure was almost over, and they would all pick up their lives again. They would promise to get together someday and probably be quite sincere about it; but Garion knew that once they parted, he would never see them all together again.

He wondered also about his own life. The visit to Faldor's farm had forever closed that door to him, even if it had ever really been open. The bits and pieces of information he had been gathering for the past year and more told him quite plainly that he was not going to be in a position to make his own decisions for quite some time.

"I don't suppose you'd consider telling me what I'm supposed to do next?" He didn't really expect any kind of satisfactory answer from that other awareness.

"It's a bit premature," the dry voice in his mind replied.

"We'll be in Riva tomorrow,"Garion pointed out. "As soon as we put the Orb back where it belongs, this part of the adventure will be all finished. Don't you think that a hint or two might be in order along about now?"

"I wouldn't want to spoil anything for you."

"You know, sometimes I think you keep secrets just because you know that it irritates people."

"What an interesting idea."

The conversation got absolutely nowhere after that.

It was about noon on the day before Erastide when Greldik's icecoated ship tacked heavily into the sheltered harbor of the city of Riva on the east coast of the Isle of the Winds. A jutting promentory of wind-lashed rock protected the harbor basin and the city itself. Riva, Garion saw immediately, was a fortress. The wharves were backed by a high, thick city wall, and the narrow, snow-choked gravel strand stretching out to either side of the wharves was also cut off from access to the city. A cluster of makeshift buildings and low, varicolored tents stood on the strand, huddled against the city wall and half buried in snow. Garion thought he recognized Tolnedrans and a few Drasnian merchants moving quickly through the little enclave in the raw wind.

The city itself rose sharply up the steep slope upon which it was built, each succeeding row of gray stone houses towering over the ones below. The windows facing out toward the harbor were all very narrow and very high up in the buildings, and Garion could see the tactical advantage of such construction. The terraced city was a series of successive barriers. Breaching the gates would accomplish virtually nothing. Each terrace would be as impregnable as the main wall. Surmounting the entire city and brooding down at it rose the final fortress, its towers and battlements as gray as everything else in the bleak city of the Rivans. The blue and white sword-banners of Riva stood out stiffly in the wind above the fortress, outlined sharply against the dark gray clouds scudding across the winter sky.

King Anheg of Cherek, clad in fur, and Brand, the Rivan Warder, wearing his gray cloak, stood on the wharf before the city gates waiting for them as Greldik's sailors rowed the ship smartly up to the wharf. Beside them, his reddish-gold hair spread smoothly out over his greencloaked shoulders, stood Lelldorin of Wildantor. The young Asturian was grinning broadly. Garion took one incredulous look at his friend; then, with a shout of joy, he jumped to the top of the rail and leaped across to the stone wharf. He and Lelldorin caught each other in a rough bear hug, laughing and pounding each other on the shoulders with their fists.

"Are you all right?" Garion demanded. "I mean, did you completely recover and everything?"

"I'm as sound as ever," Lelldorin assured him with a laugh. Garion looked at his friend's face dubiously. "You'd say that even if you were bleeding to death, Lelldorin."

"No, I'm really fine," the Asturian protested. "The young sister of Baron Oltorain leeched the Algroth poison from my veins with poultices and vile-tasting potions and restored me to health with her art. She's a marvellous girl." His eyes glowed as he spoke of her.

"What are you doing here in Riva?" Garion demanded.

"Lady Polgara's message reached me last week," Lelldorin explained. "I was still at Baron Oltorain's castle." He coughed a bit uncomfortably. "For one reason or another, I had kept putting off my departure. Anyway, when her instruction to travel to Riva with all possible haste reached me, I left at once. Surely you knew about the message."

"This is the first I'd heard of it," Garion replied, looking over to where Aunt Pol, followed by Queen Silar and Queen Layla, was stepping down from the ship to the wharf.

"Where's Rhodar?" Cho-Hag was asking King Anheg.

"He stayed up at the Citadel." Anheg shrugged. "There isn't really that much point to his hauling that paunch of his up and down the steps to the harbor any more than he has to."

"How is he?" King Fulrach asked.

"I think he's lost some weight," Anheg replied. "The approach of fatherhood seems to have had some impact on his appetite."

"When's the child due?" Queen Layla asked curiously.

"I really couldn't say, Layla," the king of Cherek told her. "I have trouble keeping track of things like that. Porenn had to stay at Boktor,

though. I guess she's too far along to travel. Islena's here though."

"I need to talk with you, Garion," Lelldorin said nervously.

"Of course." Garion led his friend several yards down the snowy pier away from the turmoil of disembarking.

"I'm afraid that the Lady Polgara's going to be cross with me, Garion," Lelldorin said quietly.

"Why cross?" Garion said it suspiciously.

"Well-" Lelldorin hesitated. "A few things went wrong along the way-sort of."

"What exactly are we talking about when we say 'went wrong - sort of?'"

"I was at Baron Oltorain's castle," Lelldorin began.

"I got that part."

"Ariana - the Lady Ariana, that is, Baron Oltorain's sister-"

"The blond Mimbrate girl who nursed you back to health?"

"You remember her," Lelldorin sounded very pleased about that. "Do you remember how lovely she is? How-"

"I think we're getting away from the point, Lelldorin," Garion said firmly. "We were talking about why Aunt Pol's going to be cross with you."

"I'm getting to it, Garion. Well-to put it briefly - Ariana and I had become - well - friends."

"I see."

"Nothing improper, you understand," Lelldorin said quickly. "But our friendship was such that - well - we didn't want to be separated." The young Asturian's face appealed to his friend for understanding. "Actually," he went on, "it was a bit more than 'didn't want to.' Ariana told me that she'd die if I left her behind."

"Possibly she was exaggerating," Garion suggested.

"How could I risk it, though?" Lelldorin protested. "Women are much more delicate than we are - besides, Ariana's a physician. She'd know if she'd die, wouldn't she?"

"I'm sure she would." Garion sighed. "Why don't you just plunge on with the story, Lelldorin? I think I'm ready for the worst now."

"It's not that I really meant any harm," Lelldorin said plaintively.

"Of course not."

"Anyway, Ariana and I left the castle very late one evening. I knew the knight on guard at the drawbridge, so I hit him over the head because I didn't want to hurt him."

Garion blinked.

"I knew that he'd be honor-bound to try to stop us," Lelldorin explained. "I didn't want to have to kill him, so I hit him over the head."

"I suppose that makes sense," Garion said dubiously.

"Ariana's almost positive that he won't die."

"Die?"

"I hit him just a little too hard, I think."

The others had all disembarked and were preparing to follow Brand and King Anheg up the steep, snow-covered stairs toward the upper levels of the city.

"So that's why you think Aunt Pol might be cross with you," Garion said as he and Lelldorin fell in at the rear of the group.

"Well, that's not exactly the whole story, Garion," Lelldorin admitted. "A few other things happened, too."

"Such as what?"

"Well - they chased us - a little - and I had to kill a few of their horses."

"I see."

"I specifically aimed my arrows at the horses and not at the men. It wasn't my fault that Baron Oltorain couldn't get his foot clear of the stirrup, was it?"

"How badly was he hurt?" Garion was almost resigned by now.

"Nothing serious at all - at least I don't think so. A broken leg perhaps - the one he broke before when Sir Mandorallen unhorsed him."

"Go on," Garion told him.

"The priest did have it coming, though," Lelldorin declared hotly.

"What priest?"

"The priest of Chaldan at that little chapel who wouldn't marry us because Ariana couldn't give him a document proving that she had her family's consent. He was very insulting."

"Did you break anything?"

"A few of his teeth is about all - and I stopped hitting him as soon as he agreed to perform the ceremony."

"And so you're married? Congratulations. I'm sure you'll both be very happy just as soon as they let you out of prison."

Lelldorin drew himself up. "It's a marriage in name only, Garion. I would never take advantage of it - you know me better than that. We reasoned that Ariana's reputation might suffer if it became known that we were travelling alone like that. The marriage was just for the sake of appearances."

As Lelldorin described his disastrous journey through Arendia, Garion glanced curiously at the city of Riva. There was a kind of unrelieved bleakness about its snow-covered streets. The buildings were all very tall and were of a uniform gray color. The few evergreen boughs, wreaths, and brightly-hued buntings hung in celebration of the Erastide season seemed somehuw to accentuate the stiff grimneess of the city. There were, however, some very interesting smells coming from kitchens where Erastide feasts simmered and roasted under the watchful eyes of the women of Riva.

"That was all of it, then?" Garion asked his friend. "You stole Baron Oltorain's sister, married her without his consent, broke his leg and assaulted several of his people - and a priest. That was everything that happened?"

"Well - not exactly." Lelldorin's face was a bit pained.

"There's more?"

"I didn't really mean to hurt Torasin."

"Your cousin?"

Lelldorin nodded moodily. "Ariana and I took refuge at my Uncle Reldegin's house, and Torasin made some remarks about Ariana - she is a Mimbrate after all, and Torasin's very prejudiced. My remonstrances were quite temperate, I thought - all things considered - but after I knocked him down the stairs, nothing would satisfy him but a duel."

"You killed him?" Garion asked in a shocked voice.

"Of course I didn't kill him. All I did was run him through the leg - just a little bit."

"How can you run somebody through just a little bit, Lelldorin?" Garion demanded of his friend in exasperation.

"You're disappointed in me, aren't you, Garion?" The young Asturian seemed almost on the verge of tears.

Garion rolled his eyes skyward and gave up. "No, Lelldorin, I'm not disappointed - a little startled perhaps - but not really disappointed. Was there anything else you can remember?-Anything you might have left out?"

"Well, I hear that I've sort of been declared an outlaw in Arendia."

"Sort of?"

"The crown's put a price on my head," Lelldorin admitted, "or so I understand."

Garion began to laugh helplessly.

"A true friend wouldn't laugh at my misfortunes," the young man complained, looking injured.

"You managed to get into that much trouble in just a week?"

"None of it was really my fault, Garion. Things just got out of hand, that's all. Do you think Lady Polgara's going to be angry?"

"I'll talk to her," Garion assured his impulsive young friend. "Maybe if she and Mandorallen appeal to King Korodullin, they can get him to take the price off your head."

"Is it true that you and Sir Mandorallen destroyed the Murgo Nachak and all his henchmen in the throne room at Vo Mimbre?" Lelldorin asked suddenly.

"I think the story might have gotten a bit garbled," Garion replied. "I denounced Nachak, and Mandorallen offered to fight him to prove that what I said was true. Nachak's men attacked Mandorallen then, and Barak and Hettar joined in. Hettar's the one who actually killed Nachak. We did manage to keep your name - and Torasin's - out of it."

"You're a true friend, Garion."

"Here?" Barak was saying. "What's she doing here?"

"She came with Islena and me," King Anheg replied.

"Did she-?"

Anheg nodded. "Your son's with her - and your daughters. His birth seems to have mellowed her a bit."

"What does he look like?" Barak asked eagerly.

"He's a great, red-haired brute of a boy." Anheg laughed. "And when he gets hungry, you can hear him yell for a mile."

Barak grinned rather foolishly.

When they reached the top of the stairs and came out in the shallow square before the great hall, two rosy-cheeked little girls in green cloaks were waiting impatiently for them. They both had long, reddish-blond braids and seemed to be only slightly older than Errand. "Poppa," the youngest of the two squealed, running to Barak. The huge man caught her up in his arms and kissed her soundly. The second girl, a year or so older than her sister, joined them with a show of dignity but was also swept up in her father's embrace.

"My daughters," Barak introduced the girls to the rest of the party. "This is Gundred." He poked his great red beard into the face of the eldest girl, and she giggled as his whiskers tickled her face. "And this is little Terzie." He smiled fondly at the youngest.

"We have a little brother, Poppa," the elder girl informed him gravely.

"What an amazing thing," Barak replied, feigning a great show of astonishment.

"You knew about it already!" Gundred accused him. "We wanted to be the ones to tell you." She pouted.

"His name's Unrak, and he's got red hair just the same as you have," Terzie announced, "but he doesn't have a beard yet."

"I expect that will come in time," Barak assured her.

"He dells a lot," Gundred reported, "and he hasn't got any teeth."

Then the broad gateway to the Rivan Citadel swung open and Queen Islena, wearing a dark red cloak, emerged from within, accompanied by a lovely blond Arendish girl and by Merel, Barak's wife. Merel was dressed all in green and she was carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. Her expression was one of pride.

"Hail Barak, Earl of Trellheim and husband," she said with great formality. "Thus have I fulfilled my ultimate duty." She extended the bundle. "Behold your son Unrak, Trellheim's heir."

With a strange expression, Barak gently set his daughters down, approached his wife, and took the bundle from her. Very gently, his great fingers trembling, he turned back the blanket to gaze for the first time at his son's face. Garion could see only that the baby had bright red hair, much the same color as Barak's.

"Hail, Unrak, heir to Trellheim and my son," Barak greeted the infant in his rumbling voice. Then he kissed the child in his hands. The baby boy giggled and cooed as his father's great beard tickled his face. His two tiny hands reached up and clutched at the beard, and he bur rowed his face into it like a puppy.

"He's got a good strong grip," Barak commented to his wife, wincing as the infant tugged at his beard.

Merel's eyes seemed almost startled, and her expression was unreadable.

"This is my son Unrak," Barak announced to the rest of them, holding the baby up so that they could see him. "It may be a bit early to tell, but he shows some promise."

Barak's wife had drawn herself up with pride. "I have done well then, my Lord?"

"Beyond all my expectations, Merel," he told her. Then, holding the baby in one arm, he caught her in the other and kissed her exuberantly. She seemed even more startled than before.

"Let's go inside," the brutish-looking King Anheg suggested. "It's very cold out here, and I'm a sentimental man. I'd rather not have tears freezing in my beard."

The Arendish girl joined Lelldorin and Garion as they entered the fortress.

"And this is my Ariana," Lelldorin told Garion with an expression of total adoration on his face.

For a moment - for just a moment - Garion had some hope for his impossible friend. Lady Ariana was a slim, practical-looking Mimbrate girl, whose medical studies had given her face a certain seriousness. The look she directed at Lelldorin, however, immediately dispelled any hope. Garion shuddered inwardly at the total lack of anything resembling reason in the gaze these two exchanged. Ariana would not restrain Lelldorin as he crashed headlong into disaster after disaster; she would encourage him; she would cheer him on.

"My Lord hath awaited thy coming most eagerly," she said to Garion as they followed the others along a broad stone corndor. The very slight stress she put on "My Lord" indicated that while Lelldorin might think that their

marriage was one in name only, she did not.

"We're very good friends," Garion told her. He looked around, a bit embarrassed by the way these two kept staring into each others' eyes. "Is this the Hall of the Rivan King, then?" he asked.

"'Tis generally called so," Ariana replied. "The Rivans themselves speak with more precision, however. Lord Olban, youngest son of the Rivan Warder, hath most graciously shown us throughout the fortress, and he doth speak of this as the Citadel. The Hall of the Rivan King is the throne room itself."

"Ah," Garion said, "I see." He looked away quickly, not wanting to see the way all thought vanished from her eyes when they returned to their contemplation of Lelldorin's face.

King Rhodar of Drasnia, wearing his customary red robe, was sitting in the large, low-beamed dining room where a fire crackled in a cavelike fireplace and a multitude of candles gave off a warm, golden light. Rhodar vastly filled a chair at the head of a long table with the ruins of his lunch spread before him. His crown was hung negligently on the back of his chair, and his round, red face was gleaming with perspiration. "Finally!" he said with a grunt. He waddled ponderously to greet them. He fondly embraced Polgara, kissed Queen Silar and Queen Layla, and took the hands of King Cho-Hag and King Fulrach in his own. "It's been a long time," he said to them. Then he turned to Belgarath. "What took you so long?" he asked.

"We had a long way to go, Rhodar," the old sorcerer replied, pulling off his cloak and backing up to the broad-arched fireplace. "You don't go from here to Rak Cthol in a week, you know."

"I hear that you and Ctuchik finally had it out," the king said.

Silk laughed sardonically. "It was a splendid little get-together, uncle."

"I'm sorry I missed it." King Rhodar looked inquiringly at Ce'Nedra and Adara, his expression openly admiring. "Ladies," he said to them bowing politely, "if someone will introduce us, I'll be more than happy to bestow a few royal kisses."

"If Porenn catches you kissing pretty girls, she'll carve out your tripes, Rhodar." King Anheg laughed crudely.

As Aunt Pol made the introductions, Garion drew back a few paces to consider the havoc Lelldorin had caused in one short week. It was going to take months to unravel it, and there was no guarantee that it would not happen again - indeed, that it would not happen every time the young man got loose.

"What's the matter with your friend?" It was the Princess Ce'Nedra, and she was tugging on Garion's sleeve.

"What do you mean, what's the matter with him?"

"You mean he's always like that?"

"Lelldorin-" Garion hesitated. "Well, Lelldorin's very enthusiastic about things, and sometimes he speaks or acts without stopping to think." Loyalty made him want to put the best face on it.

"Garion." Ce'Nedra's gaze was very direct. "I know Arends, and he's the most Arendish Arend I've ever met. He's so Arendish that he's almost incapacitated."

Garion quickly came to the defense of his friend. "He's not that bad."

"Really? And Lady Ariana. She's a lovely girl, a skilled physician and utterly devoid of anything remotely resembling thought."

"They're in love," Garion said, as if that explained everything.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Love does things to people," Garion told her. "It seems to knock holes in their judgment or something."

"What a fascinating observation," Ce'Nedra replied. "Do go on."

Garion was too preoccupied with the problem to catch the dangerous lilt in her voice. "As soon as somebody falls in love, all the wits seem to dribble out of the bottom of his head," he continued moodily.

"What a colorful way to put it," Ce'Nedra said.

Garion even missed that warning. "It's almost as if it were some kind of disease," he added.

"Do you know something, Garion?" the princess said in a conversational, almost casual tone of voice. "Sometimes you make me positively sick." And she turned and walked away, leaving him staring after her in open-mouthed astonishment.

"What did I say?" he called after her, but she ignored him.

After they had all dined, King Rhodar turned to Belgarath. "Do you suppose we might have a look at the Orb?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," the old man answered. "We'll reveal it when it's returned to its proper place in the Hall of the Rivan King at midday."

"We've all seen it before, Belgarath," King Anheg asserted. "What's the

harm in our having a look now?"

Belgarath shook his head stubbornly. "There are reasons, Anheg," he said. "I think it may surprise you tomorrow, and I wouldn't want to spoil it for anyone."

"Stop him, Durnik," Polgara said as Errand slipped from his seat and walked around the table toward King Rhodar, his hand fumbling with the strings of the pouch at his waist.

"Oh no, little fellow," Durnik said, catching the boy from behind and lifting him up into his arms.

"What a beautiful child," Queen Islena observed. "Who is he?"

"That's our thief," Belgarath replied. "Zedar found him someplace and raised him as a total innocent. At the moment, he seems to be the only one in the world who can touch the Orb."

"Is that it in the pouch?" Anheg asked.

Belgarath nodded. "He's caused us all some anxiety along the way. He keeps trying to give it to people. If he decides to offer you something, I don't really advise taking it."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Anheg agreed.

As was usually the case, once Errand's attention had been diverted, he immediately seemed to forget about the Orb. His gaze focused on the infant Barak was holding; as soon as Durnik set him down, he went over to look at the baby. Unrak returned the look and some kind of peculiar recognition seemed to pass between them. Then Errand gently kissed the child in Barak's arms, and Unrak, smiling, took hold of the strange little boy's finger. Gundred and Terzie gathered close, and Barak's great face rose from the garden of children clustered about him. Garion could clearly see the tears glistening in his friend's eyes as he looked at his wife Merel. The look she returned him was strangely tender; for the first time Garion could remember, she smiled at her husband.

Chapter Eleven

THAT NIGHT A sudden, savage storm howled down from the northwest to claw at the unyielding rock of the Isle of the Winds. Great waves crashed and thundered against the cliffs, and a shrieking gale howled among the ancient battlements of Iron-grip's Citadel. The firm set rock of the fortress seemed almost to shudder as the seething storm lashed again and again at

the walls.

Garion slept fitfully. There was not only the shriek and bellow of wind and the rattle of sleet against close-shuttered windows to contend with, nor the gusting drafts that blew suddenly down every corridor to set unlatched doors banging, but there were also those peculiar moments of oppressive silence that were almost as bad as the noise. Strange dreams stalked his sleep that night. Some great, momentous, and unexplained event was about to take place, and there were all manner of peculiar things that he had to do in preparation for it. He did not know why he had to do them, and no one would tell him if he were doing them right or not. There seemed to be some kind of dreadful hurry, and people kept rushing him from one thing to the next without ever giving him time to make sure that anything was really finished.

Even the storm seemed to be mixed up in it - like some howling enemy trying with noise and wind and crashing waves to break the absolute concentration necessary to complete each task.

"Are you ready?" It was Aunt Pol, and she was placing a longhandled kitchen kettle on his head like a helmet and handing him a potlid shield and a wooden stick sword.

"What am I supposed to do?" he demanded of her.

"You know," she replied. "Hurry. It's getting late."

"No, Aunt Pol, I don't - really."

"Of course you do. Now stop wasting time."

He looked around, feeling very confused and apprehensive. Not far away, Rundorig stood with that same rather foolish look on his face that had always been there. Rundorig also had a kettle on his head, a pot-lid shield, and a wooden sword. Apparently he and Rundorig were supposed to do this together. Garion smiled at his friend, and Rundorig grinned back.

"That's right," Aunt Pol said encouragingly. "Now kill him. Hurry, Garion. You have to be finished by suppertime."

He spun around to stare at her. Kill Rundorig? But when he looked back, it was not Rundorig. Instead the face that looked at him from beneath the kettle was maimed and hideous.

"No, no," Barak said impatiently. "Don't hold it like that. Grip it in both hands and keep it pointed at his chest. Keep the point low so that, when he charges, he doesn't knock the spear aside with his tusks. Now do it again. Try to get it right this time. Hurry, Garion. We don't have all day, you know." The big man nudged the dead boar with his foot, and the boar got up and began to paw at the snow. Barak gave Garion a quick look. "Are you

ready?" he demanded.

Then he was standing on a strange, colorless plain, and there seemed to be statues all around him. No. Not statues - figures. King Anheg was there - or a figure that looked like him - and King Korodullin, and Queen Islena, and there was the Earl of Jarvik, and over there was Nachak, the Murgo ambassador at Vo Mimbre.

"Which piece do you want to move?" It was the dry voice in his mind.

"I don't know the rules," Garion objected.

"That doesn't matter. You have to move. It's your turn."

When Garion turned back, one of the figures was rushing at him. It wore a cowled robe, and its eyes bulged with madness. Without thinking, Garion raised his hand to ward off the figure's attack.

"Is that the move you want to make?" the voice asked him.

"I don't know."

"It's too late to change it now. You've already touched him. From now on, you have to make your own moves."

"Is that one of the rules?"

"That's the way it is. Are you ready?"

There was the smell of loam and of ancient oak trees. "You really must learn to control your tongue, Polgara," Asharak the Murgo said with a bland smile, slapping Aunt Pol sharply across the face.

"It's your move again," the dry voice said. "There's only one that you can make."

"Do I have to do it? Isn't there anything else I can do?"

"It's the only move there is. You'd better hurry."

With a deep sigh of regret, Garion reached out and set fire to Asharak with the palm of his hand.

A sudden, gusting draft banged open the door of the room Garion shared with Lelldorin, and the two of them sat bolt upright in their beds.

"I'll latch it again," Lelldorin said, throwing back the covers and stumbling across the chilly stones of the floor.

"How longs it going to keep blowing like this?" Garion asked peevishly.

"How's anyone supposed to sleep with all this noise?"

Lelldorin closed the door again, and Garion heard him fumbling around in the darkness. There was a scraping click and a sudden bright spark. The spark went out, and Lelldorin tried again. This time it caught in the tinder. The young Asturian blew on it, and it grew brighter, then flared into a small finger of flame.

"Have you got any idea what time it is?" Garion asked as his friend lighted the candle.

"Some hours before dawn, I imagine," Lelldorin replied.

Garion groaned. "It feels like this night's already been about ten years long."

"We can talk for a while," Lelldorin suggested. "Maybe the storm will die down toward dawn."

"Talking's better than lying here in the dark, jumping at every sound," Garion agreed, sitting up and pulling his blanket around his shoulders.

"Things have happened to you since we saw each other last, haven't they, Garion?" Lelldorin asked, climbing back into his own bed.

"A lot of things," Garion told him, "not all of them good, either."

"You've changed a great deal," Lelldorin noted.

"I've been changed. There's a difference. Most of it wasn't my idea. You've changed, too, you know."

"Me?" Lelldorin laughed ruefully. "I'm afraid not, my friend. The mess I've made of things in the past week is proof that I haven't changed at all."

"That will take a bit of straightening out, won't it?" Garion agreed.

"The funny part about it all is that there is a perverse sort of logic about the whole thing. There wasn't one single thing you did that was actually insane. It's just when you put them all together that it starts to look like a catastrophe."

Lelldorin sighed. "And now my poor Ariana and I are doomed to perpetual exile."

"I think we'll be able to fix it," Garion assured him. "Your uncle will forgive you, and Torasin probably will, too. He likes you too much to stay angry for long. Baron Oltorain is probably very put out with you, but he's a Mimbrate Arend. He'll forgive anything if it's done for love. We might have to wait until his leg heals up again, though. That was the part that

was a real blunder, Lelldorin. You shouldn't have broken his leg."

"Next time I'll try to avoid that," Lelldorin promised quickly.

"Next time?"

They both laughed then and talked on as their candle flickered in the vagrant drafts stirred by the raging storm. After an hour or so, the worst of the gale seemed to pass, and the two of them found their eyes growing heavy once more.

"Why don't we try to sleep again?" Garion suggested.

"I'll blow out the candle," Lelldorin agreed. He got up out of bed and stepped to the table. "Are you ready?" he asked Garion.

Garion slept again almost immediately, and almost immediately heard a sibilant whisper in his ear and felt a dry, cold touch. "Are you ready?" the whispering voice hissed, and he turned to look with uncomprehending eyes at the face of Queen Salmissra, a face that shifted back and forth from woman to snake to something midway between.

Then he stood beneath the shimmering dome of the cave of the Gods and moved without thought to touch the unblemished, walnut-colored shoulder of the stillborn colt, thrusting his hand into the absolute silence of death itself.

"Are you ready?" Belgarath asked quite calmly.

"I think so."

"All right. Put your will against it and push."

"It's awfully heavy, Grandfather."

"You don't have to pick it up, Garion. Just push it. It will roll over if you do it right. Hurry up. We have a great deal more to do."

Garion began to gather his will.

And then he sat on a hillside with his cousin Adara. In his hand he held a dead twig and a few wisps of dry grass.

"Are you ready?" the voice in his mind asked him.

"Is this going to mean anything?" Garion asked. "I mean, will it make any difference?"

"That depends on you and how well you do it."

"That's not a very good answer."

"It wasn't a very good question. If you're ready, turn the twig into a flower."

Garion did that and looked critically at the result. "It's not a very good flower, is it?" he apologized.

"It will have to do," the voice told him.

"Let me try it again."

"What are you going to do with this one?"

"I'll just " Garion raised his hand to obliterate the defective bloom he had just created.

"That's forbidden, you know," the voice reminded him.

"I made it, didn't I?"

"That has nothing to do with it. You can't unmake it. It will be fine. Come along now. We have to hurry."

"I'm not ready yet."

"That's too bad. We can't wait any longer."

And then Garion woke up. He felt oddly light-headed, as if his troubled sleep had done him more harm than good. Lelldorin was still deep in slumber, and Garion found his clothes in the dark, pulled them on and quietly left the room. The strange dream nagged at his mind as he wandered in the dimly lighted corridors of Iron-grip's Citadel. He still felt that pressing urgency and the peculiar sense that everyone was waiting impatiently for him to do something.

He found a windswept courtyard where snow had piled up in the corners and the stones were black and shiny with ice. Dawn was just breaking, and the battlements surrounding the courtyard were etched sharply against a sky filled with scudding cloud.

Beyond the courtyard lay the stables - warm, smelling of fragrant hay and of horses. Durnik had already found his way there. As was so frequently the case, the smith was uncomfortable in the presence of nobility, and he sought the company of animals instead. "Couldn't you sleep either?" he asked as Garion entered the stable.

Garion shrugged. "For some reason sleep just made things worse. I feel as if my head's stuffed full of straw."

"Joyous Erastide, Garion," Durnik said then.

"That's right. It is, isn't it?" In all the rush, the holiday seemed to have crept up on him. "Joyous Erastide, Durnik."

The colt, who had been sleeping in a back stall, nickered softly as he caught Garion's scent, and Garion and Durnik went back to where the small animal stood.

"Joyous Erastide, horse," Garion greeted him a bit whimsically. The colt nuzzled at him. "Do you think that the storm has blown over completely?" Garion asked Durnik as he rubbed the colt's ears. "Or is there more on the way?"

"It has the smell of being over," Durnik answered. "Weather could smell differently here on this island, though."

Garion nodded his agreement, patted the colt's neck and turned toward the door. "I suppose I'd better go find Aunt Pol," he said. "She was saying something last night about wanting to check my clothes. If I make her look for me, she'll probably make me wish I hadn't."

"Age is bringing you wisdom, I see." Durnik grinned at him. "If anyone wants me, I'll be here."

Garion put his hand briefly on Durnik's shoulder and then left the stable to go looking for Aunt Pol.

He found her in the company of women in the apartment that appeared to have been set aside for her personal use centuries before. Adara was there and Taiba, Queen Layla and Ariana, the Mimbrate girl; in the center of the room stood Princess Ce'Nedra.

"You're up early," Aunt Pol observed, her needle flickering as she made some minute modification to Ce'Nedra's creamy gown.

"I had trouble sleeping," he told her, looking at the princess with a certain puzzlement. She looked different somehow.

"Don't stare at me, Garion," she told him rather primly.

"What have you done to your hair?" he asked her.

Ce'Nedra's flaming hair had been elaborately arranged, caught at brow and temples by a gold coronet in the form of a band of twined oak leaves. There was some rather intricate braiding involved at the back and then the coppery mass flowed smoothly down over one of her tiny shoulders. "Do you like it?" she asked him.

"That's not the way you usually wear it," he noted.

"We're all aware of that, Garion," she replied loftily. Then she turned and looked rather critically at her reflection in the mirror. "I'm still not convinced about the braiding, Lady Polgara," she fretted. "Tolnedran ladies don't braid their hair. This makes me look like an Alorn."

"Not entirely, Ce'Nedra," Adara murmured.

"You know what I mean, Adara - all those buxom blondes with their braids and their milk-maid complexions."

"Isn't it a little early to be getting ready?" Garion asked. "Grandfather said that we weren't going to take the Orb to the throne room until noon."

"That's not really that far off, Garion," Aunt Pol told him, biting a thread and stepping back to look critically at Ce'Nedra's dress. "What do you think, Layla?"

"She looks just like a princess, Pol," Queen Layla gushed.

"She is a princess, Layla," Aunt Pol reminded the plump little queen. 'Then she turned to Garion. "Get some breakfast and have someone show you the way to the baths," she instructed. "They're in the cellars under the west wing. After you've bathed, you'll need a shave. Try not to cut yourself. I don't want you bleeding all over your good clothes."

"Do I have to wear all that?"

She gave him a look that immediately answered that question - as well as several others he might have asked.

"I'll go find Silk," he agreed quickly. "He'll know where the baths are."

"Do that," she told him quite firmly. "And don't get lost. When the time comes, I want you to be ready."

Garion nodded and left. Her words had somehow strangely echoed the words of his dream, and he wondered about that as he went looking for Silk.

The little man was lounging in the company of the others in a large, torch-lighted room in the west wing. The kings were there, with Brand, Belgarath and Garion's other friends. They were breakfasting on cakes and hot spiced wine.

"Where did you go this morning?" Lelldorin asked him. "You were gone when I woke up."

"I couldn't sleep any more," Garion replied.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Why should you lose sleep just because I'm having a restless night?" Garion could see that they were deep in a discussion, and he sat down quietly to wait for the opportunity to speak to Silk.

"I think we've managed to aggravate Taur Urgas pretty thoroughly in the past couple of months," Barak was saying. The big man was sprawled deep in a high-backed chair with his face sunk in the shadows from the flaring torch behind him. "First Relg steals Silk right out from under his nose, then Belgarath destroys Ctuchik and knocks down Rak Cthol in the process of taking back the Orb, and finally Cho-Hag and Hettar exterminate a sizable piece of his army when he tries to follow us. The king of the Murgos has had a bad year." The big man's chuckle rumbled out of the shadows. For a moment - a fleeting instant - Garion seemed to see a different shape sprawled there. Some trick of the flickering light and dancing shadows made it appear momentarily that a great, shaggy bear sat in Barak's place. Then it was gone. Garion rubbed at his eyes and tried to shake off the half bemused reverie that had dogged him all morning.

"I still don't quite follow what you mean about Relg going into the rock to rescue Prince Kheldar." King Fulrach frowned. "Do you mean that he can burrow through?"

"I don't think you'd understand unless you saw it, Fulrach," Belgarath told him. "Show him, Relg."

The Ulgo zealot looked at the old man, then walked over to the stone wall beside the large window. Silk instantly turned his back, shuddering. "I still can't stand to watch that," he declared to Garion.

"Aunt Pol said I was supposed to ask you the way to the baths," Garion said quietly. "She wants me to get cleaned up and shaved, and then I guess I'm supposed to put on my best clothes."

"I'll go with you," Silk offered. "I'm sure that all these gentlemen are going to be fascinated by Relg's demonstration, and they'll want him to repeat it. What's he doing?"

"He stuck his arm through the wall and he's wiggling his fingers at them from outside the window," Garion reported.

Silk glanced once over his shoulder, then shuddered again and quickly averted his eyes. "That makes my blood cold," he said with revulsion. "Let's go bathe."

"I'll go along," Lelldorin said, and the three of them quietly left the room.

The baths were in a cavernous cellar beneath the west wing of the Citadel. There were hot springs deep in the rock, and they bubbled up to fill the

tiled chambers with steam and a faintly sulfurous smell. There were but few torches and only one attendant who wordlessly handed them towels and then went off into the steam to manage the valves that adjusted the water temperature.

"The big pool there gets hotter the closer you go toward the far end," Silk told Garion and Lelldorin as they all disrobed. "Some people say you should go in until it's as hot as you can stand it, but I prefer just to pick a comfortable temperature and soak." He splashed down into the water.

"Are you sure we'll be alone here?" Garion asked nervously. "I don't think I'd care to have a group of ladies come trooping in while I'm trying to bathe."

"The women's baths are separate," Silk assured him. "The Rivans are very proper about that sort of thing. They aren't nearly as advanced as the Tolnedrans yet."

"Are you really sure that bathing in the wintertime is healthy?" Lelldorin asked, eyeing the steaming water suspiciously.

Garion plunged into the pool and moved quickly out of the tepid water at the near end toward the hotter area. The steam rose more thickly as he waded out into the pool, and the pair of torches set in rings on the back wall receded into a kind of ruddy glow. The tiled walls echoed back the sounds of their voices and splashing with a peculiar, cavernlike hollowness. The steam eddied up out of the water, and he found himself suddenly shut off by it, separated from his friends in the hazy dimness. The hot water relaxed him, and he seemed almost to want to float, half aware, and let it soak out all memory - all the past and all the future. Dreamily he lay back, and then, not knowing why, he allowed himself to sink beneath the dark, steaming water. How long he floated, his eyes closed and all sense suspended, he could not have said, but finally his face rose to the surface and he stood up, the water streaming out of his hair and down across his shoulders. He felt strangely purified by his immersion. And then the sun broke through the tattered cloud outside for a moment, and a single shaft of sunlight streamed down through a small grilled window to fall fully upon Garion. The sudden light was diffused by the steam and seemed to flicker with an opalescent fire.

"Hail, Belgarion, " the voice in his mind said to him. "I greet thee on this Erastide. " There was no hint of the usual amusement in the voice, and the formality seemed strange, significant.

"Thank you, " Garion replied gravely, and they did not speak again. The steam rose and eddied about him as he waded back toward the cooler reaches of the pool where Silk and Lelldorin, both sunk to their necks in warm water, were talking quietly together.

About half an hour before noon, Garion, in response to a summons from Aunt

Pol, walked down a long stone corridor toward a room a few steps from the huge, carved doors that gave entrance into the Hall of the Rivan King. He was wearing his best doublet and hose, and his soft leather half boots had been brushed until they glowed. Aunt Pol wore a deep blue robe, cowled and belted at the waist. For once Belgarath, also blue-robed, did not look rumpled or spotted. The old man's face was very serious; as he and Aunt Pol spoke together, there was no hint of the banter that usually marked their conversation. Seated quietly in the corner of the little room, Errand, dressed all in white linen, gravely watched.

"You look very nice, Garion," Aunt Pol said, reaching out to smooth his sandy hair back from his forehead.

"Shouldn't we go inside?" Garion asked. He had seen others, grayclad Rivans and the more brightly garbed visitors entering the hall.

"We will, Garion," she replied. "All in good time." She turned to Belgarath. "How long?" she asked.

"Another quarter-hour or so," he replied.

"Is everything ready?"

"Ask Garion," the old man told her. "I've taken care of everything I can. The rest is up to him."

Aunt Pol turned to Garion then, her eyes very serious and the white lock at her brow gleaming silver in the darkness of her hair. "Well, Garion," she asked, "are you ready?"

He looked at her, baffled. "I had the oddest dream last night," he said. "Everyone kept asking me that same question. What does it mean, Aunt Pol? Am I ready for what?"

"That will become clearer in a bit," Belgarath told him. "Take out your amulet. You'll wear it on the outside of your clothes today."

"I thought it was supposed to be out of sight."

"Today's different," the old man replied. "As a matter of fact, today's unlike any day I've ever seen - and I've seen a lot of them."

"Because it's Erastide?"

"That's part of it." Belgarath reached inside his robe and drew out his own silver medallion. He glanced at it briefly. "It's getting a little worn," he noted. Then he smiled. "-but then, so am I, I suppose."

Aunt Pol drew out her amulet. She and Belgarath each reached out to take Garion's hands and then to join their own.

"It's been a long time coming, Polgara," Belgarath said.

"Yes it has, father," Aunt Pol agreed.

"Any regrets?"

"I can live with them, Old Wolf"

"Let's go in then."

Garion started toward the door.

"Not you, Garion," Aunt Pol told him. "You'll wait here with Errand. You two will come in later."

"You'll send somebody for us?" he asked her. "What I mean is, how will we know when we're supposed to come in?"

"You'll know," Belgarath told him. And then they left him alone with Errand.

"They didn't give us very complete instructions, did they?" Garion said to the child. "I hope we don't make any mistakes."

Errand smiled confidently, reached out and put his small hand in Garion's. At his touch, the song of the Orb filled Garion's mind again, sponging away his worries and doubts. He could not have said how long he stood holding the child's hand and immersed in that song.

"It's come at last, Belgarion."The voice seemed to come from outside somehow, no longer confined within Garion's mind, and the look on Errand's face made it quite clear that he also could hear the words.

"Is this what I'm supposed to do?" Garion asked.

"It's part of it."

"What are they doing in there?" Garion looked rather curiously toward the door.

"They're getting the people in the Hall ready for what's going to happen. "

"Will they be ready?"

"Will you?" There was a pause. "Are you ready, Belgarion?"

"Yes, " Garion replied. "Whatever it is, I think I'm ready for it."

"Let's go then."

"You'll tell me what to do?"

"If it's necessary. "

With his hand still holding Errand's, Garion walked toward the door. He raised his other hand to push it open, but it swung inexplicably open ahead of him before he touched it.

There were two guards at the huge, carved door a few steps down the hall, but they seemed frozen into immobility as Garion and Errand approached. Once again Garion raised his hand, and the immense doors to the Hall of the Rivan King swung silently open in response to his hand alone.

The Hall of the Rivan King was a huge, vaulted throne room with massive and ornately carved wooden buttresses supporting the ceiling beams. The walls were festooned with banners and green boughs, and hundreds of candles burned in iron sconces. Three great stone firepits were set at intervals in the floor; instead of logs, blocks of peat glowed in the pits, radiating an even, fragrant warmth. The Hall was crowded, but there was a broad avenue of blue carpet leading from the doors to the throne. Garion's eyes, however, scarcely noted the crowd. His thoughts seemed suspended by the song of the Orb, which now filled his mind completely. Bemused, freed of all thought or fear or hint of self consciousness, he walked with Errand close beside him toward the front of the Hall where Aunt Pol and Belgarath stood, one on each side of the throne.

The throne of the Rivan King had been chiseled from a single basalt block. Its back and arms were all one height, and there was a massiveness about it that made it seem more permanent than the mountains themselves. It sat solidly against the wall and, hanging point downward above it, was a great sword.

Somewhere in the Citadel, a bell had begun to peal, and the sound of it mingled with the song of the Orb as Garion and Errand moved down the long, carpeted pathway toward the front of the Hall. As they passed each sconce, the candles inexplicably dropped to the merest pinpoint. There was no draft, no flickering, as, one by one, the candles dimmed and the Hall filled with deepening shadow.

When they reached the front of the Hall, Belgarath, his face a mystery, looked gravely at them for a moment, then looked out at the throng assembled in the Hall of the Rivan King.

"Behold the Orb of Aldur," he announced in a solemn voice.

Errand released Garion's hand, tugged open the pouch, and reached inside. As he turned to face the darkened Hall, Errand drew the round gray stone out of the pouch and lifted it with both hands, displaying it for all to see.

The song of the Orb was overpowering; joining with it, there was a kind of vast, shimmering sound. The sound seemed to soar, rising, ringing higher and higher as Garion stood beside the child, looking at the faces of the assemblage. Within the stone Errand held aloft there seemed to be a pinpoint of intense blue light. The light grew brighter as the shimmering sound rose higher. The faces before him were all familiar, Garion could see. Barak was there and Lelldorin, Hettar, Durnik, Silk, and Mandorallen. Seated in a royal box beside the Tolnedran ambassador, with Adara and Ariana directly behind her, was Ce'Nedra, looking every inch an Imperial Princess. But, mingled somehow with the familiar faces were others - strange, stark faces, each so caught up in a single overriding identity that they seemed almost masklike. Mingled with Barak was the Dreadful Bear, and Hettar bore with him the sense of thousands upon thousands of horses. With Silk stood the figure of the Guide and with Relg that of the Blind Man. Lelldorin was the Archer and Mandorallen the Knight Protector. Seeming to hover in the air above Taiba was the sorrowing form of the Mother of the Race That Died, and her sorrow was like the sorrow of Mara. And Ce'Nedra was no longer a princess but now a queen - the one Ctuchik had called the Queen of the World. Strangest of all, Durnik, good solid Durnik, stood with his two lives plainly evident on his face. In the searing blue light of the Orb and with the strange sound shimmering in his ears, Garion looked in wonder at his friends, realizing with amazement that he was seeing for the first time what Belgarath and Aunt Pol had seen all along.

From behind him he heard Aunt Pol speak, her voice calm and very gentle. "Your task is completed, Errand. You may now give up the Orb."

The little boy crowed with delight, turned, and presented the glowing Orb to Garion. Uncomprehending, Garion stared at the fiery stone. He could not take it. It was death to touch the Orb.

"Reach forth thy hand, Belgarion, and receive thy birthright from the child who hath borne it unto thee."It was the familiar voice, and yet at the same time it was not. When this voice spoke, there was no possibility of refusal. Garion's hand stretched out without his even being aware that it was moving.

"Errand!" the child declared, firmly depositing the Orb in Garion's outstretched hand. Garion felt the peculiar, seething touch of it against the mark on his palm. It was alive! He could feel the life in it, even as he stared in blank incomprehension at the living fire he held in his naked hand.

"Return the Orb to the pommel of the sword of the Rivan King,"the voice instructed, and Garion turned with instant, unthinking obedience. He stepped up onto the seat of the basalt throne and then onto the wide ledge formed by its back and arms. He stretched up, taking hold of the huge sword hilt to steady himself, and placed the Orb on the great sword's pommel. There was a faint but clearly audible click as the Orb and the sword became

one, and Garion could feel the living force of the Orb surging down through the hilt he gripped in one hand. The great blade began to glow, and the shimmering sound rose yet another octave. Then the huge weapon quite suddenly came free from the wall to which it had been attached for so many centuries. The throng in the Hall gasped. As the sword began to drop free, Garion caught hold of the hilt with both hands, half turning as he did so, striving to keep the great blade from falling to the floor.

What pulled him off balance was the fact that it had no apparent weight. The sword was so huge that he should not have been able to hold it, much less lift it; but as he braced himself with his feet widespread and his shoulders pressed back against the wall, the point of the sword rose easily until the great blade stood upright before him. He stared at it in amazement, feeling a strange throbbing between the hands he had clasped about the hilt. The Orb flared and began to pulsate. Then, as the shimmering sound soared into a mighty crescendo of jubilation, the sword of the Rivan King burst into a great tongue of searing blue flame. Without knowing why, Garion lifted the flaming sword over his head with both hands, staring up at it in wonder.

"Let Aloria rejoice!" Belgarath called out in a voice like thunder, "for the Rivan King has returned! All hail Belgarion, King of Riva and Overlord of the West!"

And yet in the midst of the turmoil that followed and even with the shimmering chorus of what seemed a million million voices raised in an exultation echoing from one end of the universe to the other, there was a sullen clang of iron as if the rust-scoured door of some dark tomb had suddenly burst open, and the sound of that clanging chilled Garion's heart. A voice echoed hollowly from the tomb, and it did not join the universal rejoicing. Ripped from its centuries of slumber, the voice in the tomb awoke raging and crying out for blood.

Stunned past all thought, Garion stood with his flaming sword aloft as, with a steely rustle, the assembled Alorns unsheathed their swords to raise them in salute.

"Hail Belgarion, my King," Brand, the Rivan Warder, boomed, sinking to one knee and lifting his sword. His four sons knelt behind him, their swords also lifted. "Hail Belgarion, King of Riva!" they cried.

"Hail Belgarion!" The great shout shook the Hall of the Rivan King, and a forest of upraised swords glittered in the fiery blue light of the flaming blade in Garion's hands. Somewhere within the Citadel, a bell began to peal. As the news raced through the breathless city below, other bells caught the sound, and their iron rejoicing echoed back from the rocky crags to announce to the icy waters of the sea the return of the Rivan King.

One in the Hall, however, did not rejoice. In the instant that the kindling of the sword had irrevocably announced Garion's identity, Princess Ce'Nedra

had started to her feet, her face deathly pale and her eyes wide with absolute consternation. She had instantly grasped something that eluded him - something so unsettling that it drained the color from her face and brought her to her feet to stare at him with an expression of total dismay. Then there suddenly burst from the lips of the Imperial Princess Ce'Nedra a wail of outrage and protest.

With a voice that rang in the rafters she cried out, "OH NO!"

Chapter Twelve

THE WORST PART Of it all was that people kept bowing to him. Garion had not the slightest idea of how he should respond. Should he bow back? Should he nod slightly in acknowledgment? Or perhaps might it not be better just to ignore the whole business and act as if he hadn't seen it, or something? But what was he supposed to do when someone called him, "Your Majesty"?

The events of the previous day were still a confused blur in his mind. He seemed to remember being presented to the people of the citystanding on the battlements of Iron-grip's Citadel with a great, cheering throng below and the huge sword that somehow seemed weightless still blazing in his hands. Stupendous as they were, however, the overt events of the day were unimportant when compared to things which were taking place on a different level of reality. Enormous forces had focused on the moment of the revelation of the Rivan King, and Garion was still numb as a result of things he had seen and perceived in that blinding instant when he had at last discovered who he was.

There had been endless congratulations and a great many preparations for his coronation, but all of that blurred in his mind. Had his life depended upon it, he could not have given a rational, coherent account of the day's events.

Today promised to be even worse, if that were possible. He had not slept well. For one thing, the great bed in the royal apartments to which he had been escorted the previous evening was definitely uncomfortable.

It had great round posts rising from each comer and it was canopied and curtained in purple velvet. It seemed much too large for him and it was noticeably on the soft side. For the past year and more he had done most of his sleeping on the ground, and the down-filled mattress on the royal bed was too yielding to be comfortable. There was, moreover, the sure and certain knowledge that as soon as he arose, he was going to be the absolute center of attention.

On the whole, he decided, it might just be simpler to stay in bed. The more

he thought about that, the better it sounded. The door to the royal bedchamber, however, was not locked. Sometime not long after sunrise it swung open, and Garion could hear someone moving around. Curious he peeked through the purple drapery enclosing his bed. A soberlooking servant was busily opening the drapes at the window and stirring up the fire. Garion's attention, however, moved immediately to the large, covered silver tray sitting on the table by the fireplace. His nose recognized sausage and warm, fresh-baked bread-and butter-there was definitely butter involved somewhere on that tray. His stomach began to speak to him in a loud voice.

The servant glanced around the room to make sure everything was in order, then came to the bed with a no-nonsense expression. Garion burrowed quickly back under the covers.

"Breakfast, your Majesty," the servant announced firmly, drawing the curtains open and tying them back.

Garion sighed. Quite obviously, decisions about staying in bed were not his to make. "Thank you," he replied.

"Does your Majesty require anything else?" the servant asked solicitously, holding open a robe for Garion to put on.

"Uh-no-not right now, thank you," Garion answered, climbing out of the royal bed and down the three carpeted steps leading up to it. The servant helped him into the robe, then bowed and quietly left the room. Garion went to the table, seated himself, lifted the cover from the tray, and assaulted breakfast vigorously.

When he had finished eating, he sat for a time in a large, blue-upholstered armchair looking out the window at the snowy crags looming above the city. The storm that had raked the coast for days had blown off - at least for the moment; the winter sun was bright, and the morning sky very blue. The young Rivan King stared for a time out his window, lost in thought.

Something nagged at the back of his memory - something he had heard once but had since forgotten. It seemed that there was something he ought to remember that involved Princess Ce'Nedra. The tiny girl had fled from the Hall of the Rivan King almost immediately after the sword had so flamboyantly announced his identity the previous day. He was fairly sure that it was all mixed together. Whatever it was that he was trying to recall had been directly involved in her flight. With some people it might be better to let things quiet down before clearing the air, but Garion knew that this was not the proper way to deal with Ce'Nedra. Things should never be allowed to fester in her mind. That only made matters worse. He sighed and began to dress.

As he walked purposefully through the corridors, he met with startled looks and hasty bows. He soon realized that the events of the preceding day had forever robbed him of his anonymity. Someone Garion could never catch a

glimpse of his face - even went so far as to follow him, probably in the hope of performing some service. Whoever it was kept a discrete distance behind, but Garion caught occasional glimpses of him far back along the corridor - a gray-cloaked man who moved on strangely noiseless feet. Garion did not like being followed, whatever the reason, but he resisted the urge to turn around and tell the man to go away.

The Princess Ce'Nedra had been given several rooms just down the hall from Aunt Pol's apartments, and Garion steeled himself as he raised his hand to rap on the door.

"Your Majesty," Ce'Nedra's maid greeted him with a startled curtsy.

"Would you please ask her Highness if I might have a word with her?" Garion asked.

"Certainly, your Majesty," the girl replied and darted into the next chamber.

There was a brief murmur of voices and then Ce'Nedra swept into the room. She wore a plain gown, and her face was as pale as it had been the previous day. "Your Majesty," she greeted him in an icy voice, and then she curtsied, a stiff little curtsy that spoke whole volumes.

"Something's bothering you," Garion said bluntly. "Would you like to get it out in the open?"

"Whatever your Majesty wishes," she replied.

"Do we have to do this?"

"I can't imagine what your Majesty is talking about."

"Don't you think we know each other well enough to be honest?"

"Of course. I suppose I'd better accustom myself to obeying your Majesty immediately."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't pretend that you don't know," she flared.

"Ce'Nedra, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." She looked at him suspiciously, then her eyes softened just a bit.

"Perhaps you don't at that," she murmured. "Have you ever read the Accords of Vo Mimbre?"

"You taught me how to read yourself," he reminded her, "about six or eight months ago. You know every book I've read. You gave me most of them

yourself."

"That's true, isn't it?" she said. "Wait just a moment. I'll be right back." She went briefly into the adjoining room and returned with a rolled parchment. "I'll read it to you," she told him. "Some of the words are a little difficult."

"I'm not that stupid," he objected.

But she had already begun to read. " `-And when it shall come to pass that the Rivan King returns, he shall have Lordship and Dominion, and swear we all fealty to him as Overlord of the Kingdoms of the West. And he shall have an Imperial Princess of Tolnedra to wife, and-'"

"Wait a minute," Garion interrupted her with a strangled note in his voice.

"Was there something you didn't understand? It all seems quite clear to me."

"What was that last part again?"

"-`he shall have an Imperial Princess of Tolnedra to wife, and"'

"Are there any other princesses in Tolnedra?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then that means-" He gaped at her.

"Precisely." She said it like a steel trap suddenly snapping shut.

"Is that why you ran out of the Hall yesterday?"

"I did not run."

"You don't want to marry me." It was almost an accusation.

"I didn't say that."

"Then you do want to marry me?"

"I didn't say that either - but it doesn't really matter, does it? We don't have any choice at all - neither one of us."

"Is that what's bothering you?"

Her look was lofty. "Of course not. I've always known that my husband would be selected for me."

"What's the problem, then?"

"I'm an Imperial Princess, Garion."

"I know that."

"I'm not accustomed to being anyone's inferior."

"Inferior? To who - whom?"

"The Accords state that you are the Overlord of the West."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, your Majesty, that you outrank me."

"Is that all that's got you so upset?"

Her look was like a drawn dagger. "With your Majesty's permission, I believe I'd like to withdraw." And without waiting for an answer, she swept from the room.

Garion stared after her. This was going too far. He considered going immediately to Aunt Pol to protest, but the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that she would be totally unsympathetic. Too many little things began to click together all at once. Aunt Pol was not merely a party to this absurd notion; she had actively done everything in her power to make absolutely sure that there was no escape for him. He needed someone to talk to - someone devious enough and unscrupulous enough to think a way out of this. He left Ce'Nedra's sitting room and went looking for Silk.

The little man was not in his room, and the servant who was making up the bed kept bowing as he stammered out his apologies at not having the slightest notion of where Silk might be. Garion left quickly.

Since the apartment Barak shared with his wife and children was only a few steps down the corridor, Garion went there, trying not to look back at the gray-cloaked attendant he knew was still following him. "Barak," he said, knocking on the big Cherek's door, "it's me, Garion. May I come in?"

The Lady Merel opened the door immediately and curtsied respectfully.

"Please, don't do that," Garion begged her.

"What's the trouble, Garion?" Barak asked from the green-covered chair where he sat, bouncing his infant son on his knee.

"I'm looking for Silk," Garion replied, entering the large, comfortable room that was littered with clothes and children's toys.

"You're a little wild around the eyes," the big man noted. "Is something wrong?"

"I've just had some very unsettling news," Garion told him, shuddering. "I need to talk to Silk. Maybe he can come up with an answer for me."

"Would you like some breakfast?" Lady Merel suggested.

"I've already eaten, thank you," Garion replied. He looked at her a bit more closely. She had undone the rather severe braids she customarily wore, and her blond hair framed her face softly. She wore her usual green gown, but her carriage seemed not to have the rigidity it had always had. Barak, Garion noted, had also lost a bit of the grim defensiveness that had always been there previously when he was in the presence of his wife.

Barak's two daughters entered the room then, one on each side of Errand. They all sat down in the corner and began playing an elaborate little game that seemed to involve a great deal of giggling.

"I think my daughters have decided to steal him." Barak grinned. "Quite suddenly I'm up to my ears in wife and children, and the funny part about it is that I don't seem to mind it at all."

Merel threw him a quick, almost shy smile. Then she looked over at the laughing children, "The girls absolutely adore him," she said, and then turned back to Garion. "Have you ever noticed that you can't look directly into his eyes for more than a moment or so? He seems to be looking right into your heart."

Garion nodded. "I think it might have something to do with the way he trusts everybody," he suggested. He turned back to Barak. "Do you have any idea where I might find Silk?"

Barak laughed. "Walk up and down the halls and listen for the rattle of dice. The little thief's been gambling ever since we got here. Durnik might know. He's been hiding out in the stables. Royalty makes him nervous."

"It does the same thing to me," Garion said.

"But you are royalty, Garion," Merel reminded him.

"That makes me even more nervous," he replied.

There was a series of back hallways that led to the stables, and Garion decided to follow that route rather than pass through the more stately corridors where he might encounter members of the nobility. These narrower passageways were used for the most part by servants going to and from the kitchen, and Garion reasoned that most of the minor household staff would probably not recognize him yet. As he walked quickly along one of the passageways with his head down to avoid any chance recognition, he caught

another glimpse behind him of the man who had dogged his steps ever since he had left the royal apartment. Irritated finally to the point where he no longer cared about concealing his identity, Garion turned to confront his pursuer. "I know you're there," he declared. "Come out where I can see you." He waited, tapping his foot impatiently.

The hallway behind him remained empty and silent.

"Come out here at once," Garion repeated, his voice taking on an unaccustomed note of command. But there was no movement, no sound. Garion thought for a moment of retracing his steps to catch this persistent attendant in the act of creeping along behind him, but just then a servant carrying a tray of dirty dishes came along from the direction Garion had just come.

"Did you see anybody back there?" Garion asked him.

"Back where?" the servant said, obviously not recognizing his king.

"Back along the hall."

The servant shook his head. "I haven't seen anyone since I left the apartments of the King of Drasnia," he replied. "Would you believe that this is his third breakfast? I've never seen anybody eat so much." He looked curiously at Garion. "You shouldn't be back here, you know," he warned. "If the head cook catches you, he'll thrash you. He doesn't like anybody in this hall who doesn't have business here."

"I'm just on my way to the stables," Garion told him.

"I'd move right along, then. The head cook's got a vicious temper."

"I'll keep that in mind," Garion assured him.

Lelldorin was coming out of the stable, and he gave Garion a startled look as the two of them approached each other in the snowy courtyard. "How did you manage to escape from all the officials?" he asked. Then, as if remembering, he bowed.

"Please don't do that, Lelldorin," Garion told him.

"The situation is a bit awkward, isn't it?" Lelldorin agreed.

"We'll behave toward each other the same as we always have behaved," Garion said firmly. "At least until they tell us we can't. Have you any idea where Silk might be?"

"I saw him earlier this morning," Lelldorin replied. "He said he was going to visit the baths. He looked a bit unwell. I think he celebrated last night."

"Let's go find him," Garion suggested. "I've got to talk to him."

They found Silk sitting in a tiled stone room thick with steam. The little man had a towel about his waist and he was sweating profusely.

"Are you sure this is good for you?" Garion asked, waving his hand in front of his face to clear an eddying cloud of steam.

"Nothing would really be good for me this morning, Garion," Silk replied sadly. He put his elbows on his knees and sank his face miserably into his hands.

"Are you sick?"

"Horribly."

"If you knew it was going to make you feel this way, why did you drink so much last night?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time - at least I think it did. I seem to have lost track of several hours." An attendant brought the suffering man a foaming tankard, and Silk drank deeply.

"Is that really wise?" Lelldorin asked him.

"Probably not," Silk admitted with a shudder, "but it's the best I could come up with on short notice." He shuddered again. "I feel also lutely wretched," he declared. "Was there anything in particular you wanted?"

"I've got a problem," Garion blurted. He looked quickly at Lelldorin. "I'd rather this didn't go beyond the three of us," he said.

"You have my oath on it," Lelldorin responded instantly.

"Thank you, Lelldorin." It was easier to accept the oath than to try to explain why it wasn't really necessary. "I've just read the Accords of Vo Mimbre," he told them. "Actually, I had them read to me. Did you know that I'm supposed to marry Ce'Nedra?"

"I hadn't actually put that part together yet," Silk admitted, "but the Accords do mention something about it, don't they?"

"Congratulations, Garion!" Lelldorin exclaimed, suddenly clapping his friend on the shoulder. "She's a beautiful girl."

Garion ignored that. "Can you think of some way I can get out of it?" he demanded of Silk.

"Garion, right now I can't really think of anything except how awful I

feel. My first hunch though, is that there isn't any way out for you. Every kingdom in the west is signatory to the Accords - and then I think the Prophecy's involved too."

"I'd forgotten about that," Garion admitted glumly.

"I'm sure they'll give you time to get used to the idea," Lelldorin said.

"But how much time will they give Ce'Nedra? I talked to her this morning, and she's not happy about the idea at all."

"She doesn't actually dislike you," Silk told him.

"That's not what the problem is. She seems to think that I outrank her, and that's what's got her upset."

Silk began to laugh weakly.

"A real friend wouldn't laugh," Garion accused him.

"Is rank really that important to your princess?" Lelldorin asked.

"Probably not much more important than her right arm," Garion replied sourly. "I think she reminds herself that she's an Imperial Princess six or eight times every hour. She makes a pretty big issue about it. Now I come along from out of nowhere, and suddenly I outrank her. It's the sort of thing that's going to set her teeth on edge-permanently, I expect." He stopped and looked rather closely at Silk. "Do you think there's any chance of your getting well today?"

"What have you got in mind?"

"Do you know your way around Riva at all?"

"Naturally."

"I was sort of thinking that I ought to go down into the city - not with trumpets blowing and all that - but just dressed like somebody ordinary. I don't know anything at all about the Rivans, and now-" He faltered with it.

"And now you're their king," Lelldorin finished for him.

"It's probably not a bad idea," Silk agreed. "Though I can't really say for sure. My brain isn't working too well just now. It will have to be today, of course. Your coronation's scheduled for tomorrow, and your movements are likely to be restricted after they've put the crown on your head."

Garion didn't want to think about that.

"I hope the two of you don't mind if I take a little while to pull myself

together first, though," Silk added, drinking from the tankard again. "Actually it doesn't really matter if you mind or not. It's a question of necessity."

It took the rat-faced little man only about an hour to recuperate. His remedies were brutally direct. He soaked up hot steam and cold ale in approximately equal amounts, then emerged from the steamroom to plunge directly into a pool of icy water. He was blue and shaking when he came out, but the worst of his indisposition seemed to be gone. He carefully selected nondescript clothes for the three of them, then led the way out of the Citadel by way of a side gate. As they left, Garion glanced back several times, but he seemed to have shaken off the persistent attendant who had been following him all morning.

As they wandered down into the city, Garion was struck again by the bleak severity of the place. The outsides of the houses were uniformly gray and totally lacking any form of exterior decoration. They were solid, square, and absolutely colorless. The gray cloak which was the outstanding feature of the Rivan national costume gave the people in the narrow streets an appearance of that same grimness. Garion quailed a bit at the thought of spending the rest of his life in so uninviting a place.

They walked down a long street in pale winter sunshine with the salt smell of the harbor strong in their nostrils and passed a house from which came the sound of children singing. Their voices were very clear and merged together in subtle harmonies. Garion was astonished at the complexity of the children's song.

"A national pastime," Silk said. "Rivans are very much involved in music. I suppose it helps relieve the boredom. I'd hate to offend your Majesty, but your kingdom's a tedious sort of place." He looked around. "I have an old friend who lives not far from here. Why don't we pay him a visit?"

He led them down a long stairway to the street below. Not far up that street a large building stood solidly on the downhill side. Silk strode up to the door and knocked. After a moment, a Rivan in a burn-spotted leather smock answered. "Radek, old friend," he said with a certain surprise. "I haven't seen you in years."

"Torgan." Silk grinned at him. "I thought I'd stop by and see how you were doing."

"Come in, come in," Torgan said, opening the door wider.

"You've expanded things a bit, I see," Silk noticed, looking around.

"The market's been good to me," Torgan replied modestly. "The perfume makers in Tol Borune are buying just about any kind of bottle they can get." The Rivan was a solid-looking man with iron-gray hair and strangely rounded and rosy cheeks. He glanced curiously at Garion and frowned

slightly as if trying to remember something. Garion turned to examine a row of delicate little glass bottles standing neatly on a nearby table, trying to keep his face turned away.

"You're concentrating on bottle making then?" Silk asked.

"Oh, we still try to turn out a few good pieces," Torgan replied a bit ruefully. "I've got an apprentice who's an absolute genius. I have to let him spend a certain amount of time on his own work. I'm afraid that if I kept him blowing bottles all day, he'd leave me." The glassmaker opened a cabinet and carefully took out a small velvet-wrapped bundle. "This is a piece of his work," he said, folding back the cloth.

It was a crystal wren, wings half spread, and it was perched on a leafy twig with buds at its tip. The entire piece was so detailed that even the individual feathers were clearly visible. "Amazing," Silk gasped, examining the glass bird. "This is exquisite, Torgan. How did he get the colors so perfect?"

"I have no idea," Torgan admitted. "He doesn't even measure when he mixes, and the colors always come out exactly right. As I said, he's a genius." He carefully rewrapped the crystal bird and placed it back in the cabinet.

There were living quarters behind the workshop, and the rooms were filled with warmth and affection and vibrant colors. Brightly colored cushions were everywhere, and paintings hung on the walls in every room. Torgan's apprentices seemed to be not so much workers as members of his family, and his eldest daughter played for them as they concentrated on the molten glass, her fingers touching the strings of her harp in cascading waterfalls of music.

"It's so unlike the outside," Lelldorin observed, his face puzzled.

"What's that?" Silk asked him.

"The outside is so grim - so stiff and gray - but once you come inside the building, it's all warmth and color."

Torgan smiled. "It's something outsiders don't expect," he agreed.

"Our houses are very much like ourselves. Out of necessity, the outside is bleak. The city of Riva was built to defend the Orb, and every house is part of the overall fortifications. We can't change the outside, but inside we have art and poetry and music. We ourselves wear the gray cloak. It's a useful garment - woven from the wool of goats - light, warm, nearly waterproof - but it won't accept dye, so it's always gray. But even though we're gray on the outside, that doesn't mean that we have no love of beauty."

The more Garion thought about that, the more he began to understand these

bleak-appearing islanders. The stiff reserve of the graycloaked Rivans was a face they presented to the world. Behind that face, however, was an altogether different kind of people.

The apprentices for the most part were blowing the delicate little bottles that were the major item in the trade with the perfume makers of Tol Borune. One apprentice, however, worked alone, fashioning a glass ship cresting a crystal wave. He was a sandy-haired young man with an intent expression. When he looked up from his work and saw Garion, his eyes widened, but he lowered his head quickly to his work again.

Back at the front of the shop as they were preparing to leave, Garion asked to look once more at the delicate glass bird perched on its gleaming twig. The piece was so beautiful that it made his heart ache.

"Does it please your Majesty?" It was the young apprentice, who had quietly entered from the workroom. He spoke softly. "I was in the square yesterday when Brand introduced you to the people," he explained. "I recognized you as soon as I saw you."

"What's your name?" Garion asked curiously.

"Joran, your Majesty," the apprentice replied.

"Do you suppose we could skip the 'Majesties'?" Garion said rather plaintively. "I'm not really comfortable with that sort of thing yet. The whole business came as a complete surprise to me."

Joran grinned at him. "There are all kinds of rumors in the city. They say you were raised by Belgarath the Sorcerer in his tower in the Vale of Aldur."

"Actually I was raised in Sendaria by my Aunt Pol, Belgarath's daughter."

"Polgara the Sorceress?" Joran looked impressed. "Is she as beautiful as men say she is?"

"I've always thought so."

"Can she really turn herself into a dragon?"

"I suppose she could if she wanted to," Garion admitted, "but she prefers the shape of an owl. She loves birds for some reason - and birds go wild at the sight of her. They talk to her all the time."

"What an amazing thing," Joran marvelled. "I'd give anything to be able to meet her." He pursed his lips thoughtfully, hesitating a moment. "Do you think she'd like this little thing?" he blurted finally, touching the crystal wren.

"Like it?" Garion said. "She'd love it."

"Would you give it to her for me?"

"Joran!" Garion was startled at the idea. "I couldn't take it. It's too valuable, and I don't have any money to pay you for it."

Joran smiled shyly. "It's only glass," he pointed out, "and glass is only melted sand-and sand's the cheapest thing in the world. If you think she'd like it, I'd really like for her to have it. Would you take it to her for me - please? Tell her it's a gift from Joran the glassmaker."

"I will, Joran," Garion promised, impulsively clasping the young man's hand. "I'll be proud to carry it to her for you."

"I'll wrap it," Joran said then. "It's not good for glass to go out in the cold from a warm room." He reached for the piece of velvet, then stopped. "I'm not being entirely honest with you," he admitted, looking a bit guilty. "The wren's a very good piece, and if the nobles up at the Citadel see it, they might want me to make other things for them. I need a few commissions if I'm ever going to open my own shop, and-" He glanced once at Torgan's daughter, his heart in his eyes.

"-And you can't get married until you've established your own business?" Garion suggested.

"Your Majesty will be a very wise king," Joran said gravely.

"If I can get past all the blunders I'll make during the first few weeks," Garion added ruefully.

Later that afternoon he delivered the crystal bird to Aunt Pol in her private apartment.

"What's this?" she asked, taking the cloth-wrapped object.

"It's a present for you from a young glassmaker I met down in the city," Garion replied. "He insisted that I give it to you. His name's Joran. Be careful. I think it's kind of fragile."

Aunt Pol gently unwrapped the crystal piece. Her eyes slowly widened as she stared at the exquisitely wrought bird. "Oh, Garion," she murmured, "it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"He's awfully good," Garion told her. "He works for a glassmaker called Torgan, and Torgan says he's a genius. He wants to meet you."

"And I want to meet him," she breathed, her eyes lost in the glowing detail of the glass figure. Then she carefully set the crystal wren down on a table. Her hands were trembling and her glorious eyes were full of tears.

"What's wrong, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked her, slightly alarmed.

"Nothing, Garion," she replied. "Nothing at all."

"Why are you crying then?"

"You'd never understand, dear," she told him. Then she put her arms around him and pulled him to her in an almost fierce embrace.

The coronation took place at noon the following day. The Hall of the Rivan King was full to overflowing with nobles and royalty, and the city below was alive with the sound of bells.

Garion could never actually remember very much of his coronation. He did remember that the ermine-bordered cape was hot and that the plain gold crown the Rivan Deacon placed on his head was very heavy. What stood out most in his mind was the way the Orb of Aldur filled the entire Hall with an intense blue light that grew brighter and brighter as he approached the throne and overwhelmed his ears with that strange, exultant song he always seemed to hear whenever he came near it. The song of the Orb was so loud that he scarcely heard the great cheer that greeted him as he turned, robed and crowned, to face the throng in the Hall of the Rivan King.

He did, however, hear one voice very clearly.

"Hail, Belgarion, " the voice in his mind said quietly to him.

Chapter Thirteen

KING BELGARION SAT somewhat disconsolately on his throne in the Hall of the Rivan King, listening to the endless, droning voice of Valgon, the Tolnedran ambassador. It had not been an easy time for Garion. There were so many things he did not know how to do. For one thing, he was totally incapable of giving orders; for another, he discovered that he had absolutely no time to himself and that he had not the faintest idea of how to dismiss the servants who continually hovered near him. He was followed wherever he went, and he had even given up trying to catch the overzealous bodyguard or valet or messenger who was always in the passageways behind him.

His friends seemed uncomfortable in his presence and they persisted in calling him "your Majesty" no matter how many times he asked them not to. He didn't feel any different, and his mirror told him that he didn't look any different, but everyone behaved as if he had changed somehow. The look of relief that passed over their faces each time he left injured him, and

he retreated into a kind of protective shell, nursing his loneliness in silence.

Aunt Pol stood continually at his side now, but there was a difference there as well. Before, he had always been an adjunct to her, but now it was the other way around, and that seemed profoundly unnatural.

"The proposal, if your Majesty will forgive my saying so, is most generous," Valgon observed, concluding his reading of the latest treaty offered by Ran Borune. The Tolnedran ambassador was a sardonic man with an aquiline nose and an aristocratic bearing. He was a Honethite, a member of that family which had founded the Empire and from which the Imperial dynasties had sprung, and he had a scarcely concealed contempt for all Alorns. Valgon was a continual thorn in Garion's side. Hardly a day passed that some new treaty or trade agreement did not arrive from the Emperor. Garion had quickly perceived that the Tolnedrans were desperately nervous about the fact that they did not have his signature on a single piece of parchment, and they were proceeding on the theory that if they kept shoving documents in front of a man, eventually he would sign something just to get them to leave him alone.

Garion's counterstrategy was very simple; he refused to sign anything.

"It's exactly the same as the one they offered last week, " Aunt Pol's voice observed in the silence of his mind. "All they did was switch the clauses around and change a few words. Tell him no."

Garion looked at the smug ambassador with something very close to active dislike. "Totally out of the question," he replied shortly.

Valgon began to protest, but Garion cut him short. "It's identical to last week's proposal, Valgon, and we both know it. The answer was no then, and it's still no. I will not give Tolnedra preferred status in trade with Riva; I will not agree to ask Ran Borune's permission before I sign any agreement with any other nation; and I most certainly will not agree to any modification of the terms of the Accords of Vo Mimbre. Please ask Ran Borune not to pester me any more until he's ready to talk sense."

"Your Majesty!" Valgon sounded shocked. "One does not speak so to the Emperor of Tolnedra."

"I'll speak any way I please," Garion told him. "You have my - our permission to leave."

"Your Majesty-"

"You're dismissed, Valgon," Garion cut him off.

The ambassador drew himself up, bowed coldly, and stalked from the Hall.

"Not bad," King Anheg drawled from the partially concealed embrasure where he and the other kings generally gathered. The presence of these royal onlookers made Garion perpetually uneasy. He knew they were watching his every move, judging, evaluating his decisions, his manner, his words. He knew he was bound to make mistakes during these first few months, and he'd have greatly preferred to make them without an audience, but how could he tell a group of sovereign kings that he would prefer not to be the absolute center of their attention?

"A trifle blunt, though, wouldn't you say?" King Fulrach suggested.

"He'll learn to be more diplomatic in time," King Rhodar predicted.

"I expect that Ran Borune will find this directness refreshing just as soon as he recovers from the fit of apoplexy our Belgarion's reply is going to give him."

The assembled kings and nobles all laughed at King Rhodar's sally, and Garion tried without success to keep from blushing.

"Do they have to do that?" he whispered furiously to Aunt Pol. "Every time I so much as hiccup, I get all this commentary."

"Don't be surly, dear," she replied calmly. "It was a trifle impolite, though. Are you really sure you want to take that tone with your future father-in-law?"

That was something of which Garion most definitely did not wish to be reminded. The Princess Ce'Nedra had still not forgiven him for his sudden elevation, and Garion was having grave doubts about the whole notion of marrying her. Much as he liked her - and he did like her - he regretfully concluded that Ce'Nedra would not make him a good wife. She was clever and spoiled, and she had a streak of stubbornness in her nature as wide as an oxcart. Garion was fairly certain that she would take a perverse delight in making his life as miserable as she possibly could. As he sat on his throne listening to the jocular comments of the Alorn Kings, he began to wish that he had never heard of the Orb.

As always, the thought of the jewel made him glance up to where it glowed on the pommel of the massive sword hanging above the throne. There was something so irritatingly smug about the way it glowed each time he sat on the throne. It always seemed to be congratulating itselfas if he, Belgarion of Riva, were somehow its own private creation. Garion did not understand the Orb. There was an awareness about it; he knew that. His mind had tentatively touched that awareness and then had carefully retreated. Garion had been touched on occasion by the minds of Gods, but the consciousness of the Orb was altogether different. There was a power in it he could not even begin to comprehend. More than that, its attachment for him seemed quite irrational. Garion knew himself, and he was painfully aware that he was not that lovable. But each time he came near it, it would begin to glow

insufferably, and his mind would fill with that strange, soaring song he had first heard in Ctuchik's turret. The song of the Orb was a kind of compelling invitation. Garion knew that if he should take it up, its will would join with his, and there would be nothing that between them they could not do. Torak had raised the Orb and had cracked the world with it. Garion knew that if he chose, he could raise the Orb and mend that crack. More alarming was the fact that as soon as the notion occurred to him, the Orb began to provide him with precise instructions on how to go about it.

"Pay attention, Garion, " Aunt Pol's voice said to him.

The business of the morning, however, was very nearly completed. There were a few other petitions and a peculiar note of congratulation that had arrived that morning from Nyissa. The tone of the note was tentatively conciliatory, and it appeared over the signature of Sadi the eunuch. Garion decided that he wanted to think things through rather carefully before he drafted a reply. The memory of what had happened in Salmissra's throne room still bothered him, and he was not entirely sure he wanted to normalize relations with the snake-people just yet.

Then, since there was no further court business, he excused himself and left the Hall. His ermine-trimmed robe was very hot, and the crown was beginning to give him a headache. He most definitely wanted to return to his apartment and change clothes.

The guards at the side door to the Hall bowed respectfully as he passed them and drew up into formation to accompany him. "I'm not really going anyplace," Garion told the sergeant in charge. "Just back to my rooms, and I know the way. Why don't you and your men go have some lunch?"

"Your Majesty is very kind," the sergeant replied. "Will you need us later?"

"I'm not sure. I'll send somebody to let you know."

The sergeant bowed again, and Garion went on along the dimly lighted corridor. He had found this passageway about two days after his coronation. It was relatively unused and it was the most direct route from the royal apartment to the throne room. Garion liked it because he could follow it to and from the great Hall with a minimum of pomp and ceremony. There were only a few doors, and the candles on the walls were spaced far enough apart to keep the light subdued. The dimness seemed comforting for some reason, almost as if it restored in some measure his anonymity.

He walked along, lost in thought. There were so many things to worry about. The impending war between the West and the Angarak kingdoms was uppermost in his mind. He, as Overlord of the West, would be expected to lead the West; and Kal Torak, awakened from his slumber, would come against him with the multitudes of Angarak. How could he possibly face so ternble an adversary? The very name of Torak chilled him, and what did he know about

armies and battles? Inevitably, he would blunder, and Torak would smash all the forces of the West with one mailed fist.

Not even sorcery could help him. His own power was still too untried to risk a confrontation with Torak. Aunt Pol would do her best to aid him, of course, but without Belgarath they had little hope of success; and Belgarath had still not given any indication that his collapse had not permanently impaired his abilities.

Garion did not want to think about that any more, but his other problems were nearly as bad. Very soon he was going to have to come to grips with Ce'Nedra's adamant refusal to make peace. If she would only be reasonable, Garion was sure that the marginal difference in their rank would not make all that much difference. He liked Ce'Nedra. He was even prepared to admit that his feelings for her went quite a bit deeper than that. She could - usually when she wanted something - be absolutely adorable. If they could just get past this one minor problem, things might turn out rather well. That possibility brightened his thoughts considerably. Musing about it, he continued on down the corridor.

He had gone only a few more yards when he heard that furtive step behind him again. He sighed, wishing that his everpresent attendant would find some other amusement. Then he shrugged and, deep in thought about the Nyissan question, he continued on along the corridor.

The warning was quite sharp and came at the last instant. "Look outl" the voice in his mind barked at him. Not knowing exactly why, not even actually thinking about it, Garion reacted instantly, diving headlong to the floor. His crown went rolling as, with a great shower of sparks, a thrown dagger clashed into the stone wall and went bouncing and skittering along the flagstones. Garion swore, rolled quickly and came to his feet with his own dagger in his hand. Outraged and infuriated by this sudden attack, he ran back along the corridor, his erminetrimmed robe flapping and tangling cumbersomely around his legs.

He caught only one or two momentary glimpses of his gray-cloaked attacker as he ran after the knife thrower. The assassin dodged into a recessed doorway some yards down the corridor, and Garion heard a heavy door slam behind the fleeing man. When he reached the door and wrenched it open, his dagger still in his fist, he found only another long, dim passageway. There was no one in sight.

His hands were shaking, but it was more from anger than from fright. He briefly considered calling the guards, but almost immediately dismissed that idea. To continue following the assailant was, the more he thought about it, even more unwise. He had no weapon but his dagger, and the possibility of meeting someone armed with a sword occurred to him. There might even be more than one involved in this business, and these dimly lighted and deserted corridors were most certainly not a good place for confrontations.

As he started to close the door, something caught his eye. A small scrap of gray wool lay on the floor just at the edge of the door frame. Garion bent, picked it up and carried it over to one of the candles hanging along the wall. The bit of wool was no more than two fingers wide and seemed to have been torn from the corner of a gray Rivan cloak. In his haste to escape, the assassin had, Garion surmised, inadvertently slammed the door on his own cape, and then had ripped off this fragment in his flight. Garion's eyes narrowed and he turned and hurried back up the corridor, stooping once to retrieve his crown and again to pick up his assailant's dagger. He looked around once. The hallway was empty and somehow threatening. If the unknown knife thrower were to return with three or four companions, things could turn unpleasant. All things considered, it might be best to get back to his own apartments as quickly as possible - and to lock his door. Since there was no one around to witness any lack of dignity, Garion lifted the skirts of his royal robe and bolted like a rabbit for safety.

He reached his own door, jerked it open and jumped inside, closing and locking it behind him. He stood with his ear against the door, listening for any sounds of pursuit.

"Is something wrong, your Majesty?"

Garion almost jumped out of his skin. He whirled to confront his valet, whose eyes widened as he saw the daggers in the king's hands. "Uh-nothing" he replied quickly, trying to cover his confusion. "Help me out of this thing." He struggled with the fastenings of his robe. His hands seemed to be full of daggers and crowns. With a negligent flip he tossed his crown into a nearby chair, sheathed his own dagger and then carefully laid the other knife and the scrap of wool cloth on the polished table.

The valet helped him to remove the robe and then carefully folded it over his arm. "Would your Majesty like to have me get rid of these for you?" he asked, looking a bit distastefully at the dagger and the bit of wool on the table.

"No," Garion told him firmly. Then a thought occurred to him. "Do you know where my sword is?" he asked.

"Your Majesty's sword hangs in the throne room," the valet replied.

"Not that one," Garion said. "The other one. The one I was wearing when I first came here."

"I suppose I could find it," the valet answered a bit dubiously.

"Do that," Garion said. "I think I'd like to have it where I can get my hands on it. And please see if you can find Lelldorin of Wildantor for me. I need to talk to him."

"At once, your Majesty." The valet bowed and quietly left the room. Garion took up the dagger and the scrap of cloth and examined both rather closely. The dagger was just a commonplace knife, heavy, sturdily made and with a wirebound hilt. It bore no ornaments or identifying marks of any kind. Its tip was slightly bent, the result of its contact with the stone wall. Whoever had thrown it had thrown very hard. Garion developed a definitely uncomfortable sensation between his shoulder blades. The dagger would probably not be very useful. There were undoubtedly a hundred like it in the Citadel. The wool scrap, on the other hand, might prove to be very valuable. Somewhere in this fortress, there was a man with the corner of his cloak torn off. The torn cloak and this little piece of cloth would very likely match rather closely.

About a half an hour later Lelldorin arrived. "You sent for me, Garion?" he asked.

"Sit down, Lelldorin," Garion told his friend, then pointedly waited until the valet left the room. "I think I've got a little bit of a problem," he said then, sprawling deeper in the chair by the table. "I wondered if I might ask your help."

"You know you don't have to ask, Garion," the earnest young Asturian told him.

"This has to be just between the two of us," Garion cautioned. "I don't want anyone else to know."

"My word of honor on it," Lelldorin replied instantly.

Garion slid the dagger across the table to his friend. "A little while ago when I was on my way back here, somebody threw this at me."

Lelldorin gasped and his eyes went wide. "Treason?" he gasped. "Either that or something personal," Garion replied. "I don't know what it's all about."

"You must alert your guards," Lelldorin declared, jumping to his feet.

"No," Garion answered firmly. "If I do that, they'll lock me up entirely. I don't have very much freedom left at all, and I don't want to lose it."

"Did you see him at all?" Lelldorin asked, sitting down again and examining the dagger.

"Just his back. He was wearing one of those gray cloaks."

"All Rivan wear gray cloaks, Garion."

"We do have something to work with, though." Garion took the scrap of wool out from under his tunic. "After he threw the knife, he ran through a door and slammed it shut behind him. He caught his cloak in the door and this

got ripped off."

Lelldorin examined the bit of cloth. "It looks like a corner," he noted.

"That's what I think, too," Garion agreed. "If we both keep our eyes open, we might just happen to see somebody with the corner of his cloak missing. Then, if we can get our hands on his cloak, we might be able to see if this piece matches."

Lelldorin nodded his agreement, his face hardening. "When we find him, though, I want to deal with him. A king isn't supposed to become personally involved in that sort of thing."

"I might decide to suspend the rules," Garion said grimly. "I don't like having knives thrown at me. But let's find out who it is first."

"I'll start at once," Lelldorin said, rising quickly. "I'll examine every corner of every cloak in Riva if I have to. We'll find this traitor, Garion. I promise you."

Garion felt better after that, but it was still a wary young king who, in the company of a detachment of guards, went late that afternoon to the private apartments of the Rivan Warder. He looked about constantly as he walked, and his hand was never far from the hilt of the sword at his waist.

He found Brand seated before a large harp. The Warder's big hands seemed to caress the strings of the instrument, bringing forth a plaintively rippling melody. The big, grim man's face was soft and reflective as he played, and Garion found that the music was even more beautiful because it was so unexpected.

"You play very well, my Lord," he said respectfully as the last notes of the song lingered in the strings.

"I play often, your Majesty," Brand replied. "Sometimes as I play I can even forget that my wife is no longer with me." He rose from the chair in front of the harp and squared his shoulders, all softness going out of his face. "How may I serve you, King Belgarion?"

Garion cleared his throat a trifle nervously. "I'm probably not going to say this very well," he admitted, "but please take it the way I mean it and not the way it might come out."

"Certainly, your Majesty."

"I didn't ask for all this, you know," Garion began with a vague gesture that took in the entire Citadel. "The crown, I mean, and being king - all of it. I was really pretty happy the way I was."

"Yes, your Majesty?"

"What I'm trying to get at is - well - you were the ruler here in Riva until I came along."

Brand nodded soberly.

"I didn't really want to be king," Garion rushed on, "and I certainly didn't want to push you out of your position."

Brand looked at him, and then he slowly smiled. "I'd wondered why you seemed so uneasy whenever I came into the room, your Majesty. Is that what's been making you uncomfortable?"

Mutely, Garion nodded.

"You don't really know us yet, Belgarion," Brand told him. "You've only been here for a little more than a month. We're a peculiar sort of people. For over three thousand years we've been protecting the Orb ever since Iron-grip came to this island. That's why we exist, and I think that one of the things we've lost along the way is that sense of self other men seem to feel is so important. Do you know why I'm called Brand?"

"I never really thought about it," Garion admitted.

"I do have another name, of course," Brand said, "but I'm not supposed ever to mention it. Each Warder has been called Brand so that there could never be any sense of personal glory in the office. We serve the Orb; that's our only purpose. To be quite honest with you, I'm really rather glad you came when you did. It was getting close to the time when I was supposed to choose my successor - with the help of the Orb, of course. But I didn't have the faintest idea whom to choose. Your arrival has relieved me of that task."

"We can be friends, then?"

"I think we already are, Belgarion," Brand replied gravely. "We both serve the same master, and that always brings men close together."

Garion hesitated. "Am I doing all right?" he blurted.

Brand considered that. "Some of the things you've done weren't exactly the way I might have done them, but that's to be expected. Rhodar and Anheg don't always do things the same way either. Each of us has his own particular manner."

"They make fun of me, don't they - Anheg, Rhodar, and the others. I hear all the clever remarks every time I make a decision."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that, Belgarion. They're Alorns, and Alorns don't take kings very seriously. They make fun of each other too,

you know. You could almost say that as long as they're joking, everything is all right. If they suddenly become very serious and formal, then you'll know that you're in trouble."

"I suppose I hadn't thought of it that way," Garion admitted.

"You'll get used to it in time," Brand assured him.

Garion felt much better after his conversation with Brand. In the company of his guards he started back toward the royal apartments; but part way there, he changed his mind and went looking for Aunt Po1 instead. When he entered her rooms, his cousin Adara was sitting quietly with her, watching as Aunt Pol carefully mended one of Garion's old tunics. The girl rose and curtsied formally.

"Please Adara," he said in a pained voice, "don't do that when we're alone. I see enough of it out there." He gestured in the direction of the more public parts of the building.

"Whatever your Majesty wishes," she replied.

"And don't call me that. I'm still just Garion."

She looked gravely at him with her calm, beautiful eyes. "No, cousin," she disagreed, "you'll never be `just Garion' any more."

He sighed as the truth of that struck his heart.

"If you'll excuse me," she said then, "I must go attend Queen Silar. She's a bit unwell, and she says it comforts her to have me near."

"It comforts all of us when you're near," Garion told her without even thinking about it.

She smiled at him fondly.

"There might be some hope for him after all," Aunt Pol observed, her needle busy.

Adara looked at Garion. "He has never really been that bad, Lady Polgara," she said. She inclined her head toward them both and quietly left the room.

Garion wandered around for a few moments and then flung himself into a chair. A great deal had happened that day, and he felt suddenly at odds with the whole world.

Aunt Pol continued to sew.

"Why are you doing that?" Garion demanded finally. "I'll never wear that old thing again."

"It needs fixing, dear," she told him placidly.

"There are a hundred people around who could do it for you."

"I prefer to do it myself."

"Put it down and talk to me."

She set the tunic aside and looked at him inquiringly. "And what did your Majesty wish to discuss?" she inquired.

"Aunt Pol!" Garion's voice was stricken. "Not you too."

"Don't give orders then, dear," she recommended, picking up the tunic again.

Garion watched her at her sewing for a few moments, not really knowing what to say. A strange thought occurred to him. "Why are you doing that, Aunt Pol?" he asked, really curious this time. "Probably nobody'll ever use it again, so you're just wasting time on it."

"It's my time, dear," she reminded him. She looked up from her sewing, her eyes unreadable. Then, without explanation she held up the tunic with one hand and ran the forefinger of her other hand carefully up the rip. Garion felt a very light surge, and the sound was only a whisper. The rip mended itself before his eyes, rewoven as if it had never existed. "Now you can see how completely useless mending it really is," she told him.

"Why do you do it then?"

"Because I like to sew, dear," she replied. With a sharp little jerk she ripped the tunic again. Then she picked up her needle and patiently began repairing the rip. "Sewing keeps the hands and eyes busy, but leaves the mind free for other things. It's very relaxing."

"Sometimes you're awfully complicated, Aunt Pol."

"Yes, dear. I know."

Garion paced about for a bit, then suddenly knelt beside her chair and, pushing her sewing aside, he put his head into her lap. "Oh, Aunt Pol," he said, very close to tears.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked, carefully smoothing his hair.

"I'm so lonely."

"Is that all?"

He lifted his head and stared at her incredulously. He had not expected that.

"Everyone is lonely, dear," she explained, drawing him close to her. "We touch other people only briefly, then we're alone again. You'll get used to it in time."

"Nobody will talk to me now - not the way they did before. They're always bowing and saying 'Your Majesty' to me."

"You are the king, after all," she replied.

"But I don't want to be."

"That's too bad. It's the destiny of your family, so there's not a thing you can do about it. Did anyone ever tell you about Prince Gared?"

"I don't think so. Who was he?"

"He was the only survivor when the Nyissan assassins killed King Gorek and his family. He escaped by throwing himself into the sea."

"How old was he?"

"Six. He was a very brave child. Everyone thought that he had drowned and that his body had been washed out to sea. Your grandfather and I encouraged that belief. For thirteen hundred years we've hidden Prince Gared's descendants. For generations they've lived out their lives in quiet obscurity for the single purpose of bringing you to the throne - and now you say that you don't want to be king?"

"I don't know any of those people," he said sullenly. He knew he was behaving badly, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Would it help if you did know them - some of them, anyway?"

The question baffled him.

"Perhaps it might," she decided. She laid her sewing aside and stood up, drawing him to his feet. "Come with me," she told him and led him to the tall window that looked out over the city below. There was a small balcony outside; in one corner where a rain-gutter had cracked, there had built up during the fall and winter a sheet of shiny black ice, curving down over the railing and spreading out on the balcony floor.

Aunt Pol unlatched the window and it swung open, admitting a blast of icy air that made the candles dance. "Look directly into the ice, Garion," she told him, pointing at the glittering blackness. "Look deep into it."

He did as she told him and felt the force of her mind at work. Something

was in the ice - shapeless at first but emerging slowly and becoming more and more visible. It was, he saw finally, the figure of a pale blond woman, quite lovely and with a warm smile on her lips. She seemed young, and her eyes were directly on Garion's face. "My baby," a voice seemed to whisper to him. "My little Garion."

Garion began to tremble violently. "Mother?" he gasped.

"So tall now," the whisper continued. "Almost a man."

"And already a king, Ildera," Aunt Pol told the phantom in a gentle voice.

"Then he was the chosen one," the ghost of Garion's mother exulted. "I knew it. I could feel it when I carried him under my heart."

A second shape had begun to appear beside the first. It was a tall young man with dark hair but a strangely familiar face. Garion clearly saw its resemblance to his own. "Hail Belgarion, my son," the second shape said to him.

"Father," Garion replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Our blessings, Garion," the second ghost said as the two figures started to fade.

"I avenged you, father," Garion called after them. It seemed important that they know that. He was never sure, however, if they had heard him.

Aunt Pol was leaning against the window frame with a look of exhaustion on her face.

"Are you all right?" Garion asked her, concerned.

"It's a very difficult thing to do, dear," she told him, passing a weary hand over her face.

But there was yet another flicker within the depths of the ice, and the familiar shape of the blue wolf appeared-the one who had joined Belgarath in the fight with Grul the Eldrak in the mountains of Ulgo. The wolf sat looking at them for a moment, then flickered briefly into the shape of a snowy owl and finally became a tawny-haired woman with golden eyes. Her face was so like Aunt Pol's that Garion could not help glancing quickly back and forth to compare them.

"You left it open, Polgara," the golden-eyed woman said gently. Her voice was as warm and soft as a summer evening.

"Yes, mother," Aunt Pol replied. "I'll close it in a moment."

"It's all right, Polgara," the wolf woman told her daughter. "It gave me

the chance to meet him." She looked directly into Garion's face. "A touch or two is still there," she observed. "A bit about the eyes and in the shape of the jaw. Does he know?"

"Not everything, mother," Aunt Pol answered.

"Perhaps it's as well," Poledra noted.

Once again another figure emerged out of the dark depths of the ice. The second woman had hair like sunlight, and her face was even more like Aunt Pol's than Poledra's. "Polgara, my dear sister," she said.

"Beldaran," Aunt Pol responded in a voice overwhelmed with love.

"And Belgarion," Garion's ultimate grandmother said, "the final flower of my love and Riva's."

"Our blessings also, Belgarion," Poledra declared. "Farewell for now, but know that we love thee." And then the two were gone.

"Does that help?" Aunt Pol asked him, her voice deep with emotion and her eyes filled with tears.

Garion was too stunned by what he had just seen and heard to answer. Dumbly he nodded.

"I'm glad the effort wasn't wasted then," she said. "Please close the window, dear. It's letting the winter in."

Chapter Fourteen

IT WAS THE first day of spring, and King Belgarion of Riva was terribly nervous. He had watched the approach of Princess Ce'Nedra's sixteenth birthday with a steadily mounting anxiety and, now that the day had finally arrived, he hovered on the very edge of panic. The deep blue brocade doublet over which a half dozen tailors had labored for weeks still did not seem to feel just right. Somehow it was a bit tight across the shoulders, and the stiff collar scratched his neck. Moreover, his gold crown seemed unusually heavy on this particular day, and, as he fidgeted, his throne seemed even more uncomfortable than usual.

The Hall of the Rivan King had been decorated extensively for the occasion, but even the banners and garlands of pale spring flowers could not mask the ominous starkness of the great throne room. The assembled notables, however, chatted and laughed among themselves as if nothing significant were taking place. Garion felt rather bitter about their heartless lack of

concern in the face of what was about to happen to him.

Aunt Pol stood at the left side of his throne, garbed in a new silver gown and with a silver circlet about her hair. Belgarath lounged indolently on the right, wearing a new green doublet which had already become rumpled.

"Don't squirm so much, dear," Aunt Pol told Garion calmly.

"That's easy enough for you to say," Garion retorted in an accusing tone.

"Try not to think about it," Belgarath advised. "It will all be over in a little while."

Then Brand, his face seeming even more bleak than usual, entered the Hall from the side door and came to the dais. "There's a Nyissan at the gate of the Citadel, your Majesty," he said quietly. "He says that he's the emissary of Queen Salmissra and that he's here to witness the ceremony."

"Isn't that impossible?" Garion asked Aunt Pol, startled by the Warder's surprising announcement.

"Not entirely," she replied. "More likely, though, it's a diplomatic fiction. I'd imagine that the Nyissans would prefer to keep Salmissra's condition a secret."

"What do I do?" Garion asked. Belgarath shrugged.

"Let him in."

"In here?" Brand's voice was shocked. "A Nyissan in the throne room? Belgarath, you're not serious."

"Garion is Overlord of the West, Brand," the old man replied, "and that includes Nyissa. I don't imagine that the snake-people will be much use to us at any time, but let's be polite, at least."

Brand's face went stiff with disapproval. "What is your Majesty's decision?" he asked Garion directly.

"Well-" Garion hesitated. "Let him come in, I guess."

"Don't vacillate, Garion," Aunt Pol told him firmly.

"I'm sorry," Garion said quickly.

"And don't apologize," she added. "Kings do not apologize."

He looked at her helplessly. Then he turned back to Brand. "Tell the emissary from Nyissa to join us," he said, though his tone was placating.

"By the way, Brand," Belgarath suggested, "I wouldn't let anyone get too excited about this. The Nyissan has ambassadorial status, and it would be a serious breach of protocol if he were to die unexpectedly."

Brand bowed rather stiffly, turned, and left the Hall.

"Was that really necessary, father?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Old grudges die hard, Pol," Belgarath replied. "Sometimes it's best to get everything right out in front so that there aren't any misunderstandings later."

When the emissary of the Snake Queen entered the Hall, Garion started with surprise. It was Sadi, the chief eunuch in Salmissra's palace. The thin man with the dead-looking eyes and shaved head wore the customary iridescent blue-green Nyissan robe, and he bowed sinuously as he approached the throne. "Greetings to his Majesty, Belgarion of Riva, from Eternal Salmissra, Queen of the Snake-People," he intoned in his peculiarly contralto voice.

"Welcome, Sadi," Garion replied formally.

"My queen sends her regards on this happy day," Sadi continued.

"She didn't really, did she?" Garion asked a bit pointedly.

"Not precisely, your Majesty," Sadi admitted without the least trace of embarrassment. "I'm sure she would have, however, if we'd been able to make her understand what was happening."

"How is she?" Garion remembered the dreadful transformation Salmissra had undergone.

"Difficult," Sadi answered blandly. "Of course that's nothing new. Fortunately she sleeps for a week or two after she's been fed. She moulted last month, and it made her dreadfully short-tempered." He rolled his eyes ceilingward. "It was ghastly," he murmured. "She bit three servants before it was over. They all died immediately, of course."

"She's venomous?" Garion was a bit startled at that.

"She's always been venomous, your Majesty."

"That's not the way I mean."

"Forgive my little joke," Sadi apologized. "Judging from the reactions of people she's bitten, I'd guess that she's at least ten times more deadly than a common cobra."

"Is she terribly unhappy?" Garion felt a strange pity for the hideously

altered queen.

"That's really rather hard to say, your Majesty," Sadi replied clinically. "It's difficult to tell what a snake's really feeling, you understand. By the time she'd learned to communicate her wishes to us, she seemed to have become reconciled to her new form. We feed her and keep her clean. As long as she has her mirror and someone to bite when she's feeling peevish, she seems quite content."

"She still looks at herself in the mirror? I wouldn't think she'd want to now."

"Our race has a somewhat different view of the serpent, your Majesty," Sadi explained. "We find it a rather attractive creature, and our queen is a splendid-looking snake, after all. Her new skin is quite lovely, and she seems very proud of it." He turned and bowed deeply to Aunt Pol. "Lady Polgara," he greeted her.

"Sadi," she acknowledged with a brief nod.

"May I convey to you the heartfelt thanks of her Majesty's government?"

One of Aunt Pol's eyebrows rose inquiringly.

"The government, my Lady - not the queen herself. Your - ah - intervention, shall we say, has simplified things in the palace enormously. We no longer have to worry about Salmissra's whims and peculiar appetites. We rule by committee and we hardly ever find it necessary to poison each other any more. No one's tried to poison me for months. It's all very smooth and civilised in Sthiss Tor now." He glanced briefly at Garion. "May I also offer my congratulations on your success with his Majesty? He seems to have matured considerably. He was really very callow when last we met,"

"Whatever happened to Issus?" Garion asked him, ignoring that particular observation.

Sadi shrugged. "Issus? Oh, he's still about, scratching out a living as a paid assassin, probably. I imagine that one day we'll find him floating facedown in the river. It's the sort of end one expects for someone like that."

There was a sudden blare of trumpets from just beyond the great doors at the back of the Hall. Garion started nervously, and his mouth quite suddenly went dry.

The heavy doors swung open, and a double file of Tolnedran legionnaires marched in, their breastplates burnished until they shone like mirrors, and the tall crimson plumes on their helmets waving as they marched. The inclusion of the legionnaires in the ceremony had infuriated Brand. The Rivan Warder had stalked about in icy silence for days after he had

discovered that Garion had granted ambassador Valgon's request for a proper escort for Princess Ce'Nedra. Brand did not like Tolnedrans, and he had been looking forward to witnessing the pride of the empire humbled by Ce'Nedra's forlorn and solitary entrance into the Hall. The presence of the legionnaires spoiled that, of course, and Brand's disappointment and disapproval had been painfully obvious. As much as Garion wanted to stay on Brand's good side, however, he did not intend to start off the official relationship between his bride-to-be and himself by publicly humiliating her. Garion was quite ready to acknowledge his lack of education, but he was not prepared to admit to being that stupid.

When Ce'Nedra entered, her hand resting lightly on Valgon's arm, she was every inch an Imperial Princess. Garion could only gape at her. Although the Accords of Vo Mimbre required that she present herself in her wedding gown, Garion was totally unprepared for such Imperial magnificence. Her gown was of gold and white brocade covered with seed pearls, and its train swept the floor behind her. Her flaming hair was intricately curled and cascaded over her left shoulder like a deep crimson waterfall. Her circlet of tinted gold held in place a short veil that did not so much conceal her face as soften it into luminousness.

She was tiny and perfect, exquisite beyond belief, but her eyes were like little green agates.

She and Valgon moved at stately pace down between the ranks of her tall, burnished legionnaires; when they reached the front of the Hall, they stopped.

Brand, sober-faced and imposing, took his staff of office from Bralon, his eldest son, and rapped sharply on the stone floor with its butt three times. "Her Imperial Highness Ce'Nedra of the Tolnedran Empire," he announced in a deep, booming voice. "Will your Majesty grant her audience?"

"I will receive the princess," Garion declared, straightening a bit on his throne.

"The Princess Ce'Nedra may approach the throne," Brand proclaimed. Though his words were ritual formality, they had obviously been chosen with great care to make it absolutely clear that Imperial Tolnedra came to the Hall of the Rivan King as a suppliant. Ce'Nedra's eyes flashed fire, and Garion groaned inwardly. The little princess, however, glided to the appointed spot before the dais and curtsied regally. There was no submission in that gesture.

"The Princess has permission to speak," Brand boomed. For a brief, irrational moment Garion wanted to strangle him.

Ce'Nedra drew herself up, her face as cold as a winter sea. "Thus I, Ce'Nedra, daughter to Ran Borune XXIII and Princess of Imperial Tolnedra, present myself as required by treaty and law in the presence of His

Majesty, Belgarion of Riva," she declared. "And thus has the Tolnedran Empire once more demonstrated her willingness to fulfill her obligations as set forth in the Accords of Vo Mimbre. Let other kingdoms witness Tolnedra's meticulous response and follow her example in meeting their obligations. I declare before these witnesses that I am an unmarried virgin of a suitable age. Will his Majesty consent to take me to wife?"

Garion's reply had been carefully thought out. The quiet inner voice had suggested a way to head off years of marital discord. He rose to his feet and said, "I, Belgarion, King of Riva, hereby consent to take the Imperial Princess Ce'Nedra to be my wife and queen. I declare, moreover, that she will rule jointly by my side in Riva and wheresoever else the authority of our throne may extend."

The gasp that rippled through the Hall was clearly audible, and Brand's face went absolutely white. The look Ce'Nedra gave Garion was quizzical, and her eyes softened slightly.

"Your Majesty is too kind," she responded with a graceful little curtsy. Some of the edge had gone out of her voice, and she threw a quick sidelong glance at the spluttering Brand. 'Have I your Majesty's permission to withdraw?" she asked sweetly.

"As your Highness wishes," Garion replied, sinking back down onto his throne. He was perspiring heavily.

The princess curtsied again with a mischievous little twinkle in her eyes, then turned and left the Hall with her legionnaires drawn up in close order about her.

As the great doors boomed shut behind her, an angry buzz ran through the crowd. The word "outrageous" seemed to be the most frequently repeated.

"This is unheard of, your Majesty," Brand protested.

"Not entirely," Garion replied defensively. "The throne of Arendia is held jointly by King Korodullin and Queen Mayaserana." He looked to Mandorallen, gleaming in his armor, with a mute appeal in his eyes.

"His Majesty speaks truly, my Lord Brand," Mandorallen declared. "I assure thee that our kingdom suffers not from the lack of singularity upon the throne."

"That's Arendia," Brand objected. "This is Riva. The situations are entirely different. No Alorn kingdom has ever been ruled by a woman."

"It might not hurt to examine the possible advantages of the situation," King Rhodar suggested. "My own queen, for example, plays a somewhat more significant role in Drasnian affairs than custom strictly allows."

With great difficulty Brand regained at least some of his composure. "May I withdraw, your Majesty?" he asked, his face still livid.

"If you wish," Garion answered quietly. It wasn't going well. Brand's conservatism was the one stumbling block he hadn't considered.

"It's an interesting notion, dear," Aunt Pol said quietly to him, "but don't you think it might have been better to consult with someone before you made it a public declaration?"

"Won't it help to cement relations with the Tolnedrans?"

"Quite possibly," she admitted. "I'm not saying that it's a bad idea, Garion; I just think it might have been better to warn a few people first. What are you laughing at?" she demanded of Belgarath, who was leaning against the throne convulsed with mirth.

"The Bear-cult's going to have collective apoplexy," he chortled.

Her eyes widened slightly. "Oh, dear," she said. "I'd forgotten about them."

"They aren't going to like it very much, are they?" Garion concluded. "Particularly since Ce'Nedra's a Tolnedran."

"I think you can count on them to go up in flames," the old sorcerer replied, still laughing.

In the days that followed, the usually bleak halls of the Citadel were filled with color as official visitors and representatives teemed through them, chatting, gossiping, and conducting business in out-of the-way corners. The rich and varied gifts they had brought to celebrate the occasion filled several tables lining one of the walls in the great throne room. Garion, however, was unable to visit or to examine the gifts. He spent his days in a room with his advisers and with the Tolnedran ambassador and his staff as the details of the official betrothal document were hammered out.

Valgon had seized on Garion's break with tradition and was trying to wring the last measure of advantage from it, while Brand was desperately trying to add clauses and stipulations to circumscribe Ce'Nedra's authority rigidly. As the two haggled back and forth, Garion found himself more and more frequently staring out the window. The sky over Riva was an intense blue, and puffy white clouds ran before the wind. The bleak crags of the island were touched with the first green blush of spring. Faintly, carried by the wind, the high, clear voice of a shepherdess singing to her flock wafted through the open window. There was a pure, unschooled quality to her voice, and she sang with no hint of self consciousness as if there were not a human ear within a hundred leagues. Garion sighed as the last notes of her song died away and then returned his attention to the tedious

negotiations.

His attention, however, was divided in those early days of spring. Since he was unable to pursue the search for the man with the torn cloak himself, he was forced to rely on Lelldorin to press the investigation. Lelldorin was not always entirely reliable, and the search for the would-be assassin seemed to fire the enthusiastic young Asturian's imagination. He crept about the Citadel with dark, sidelong glances, and reported his lack of findings in conspiratorial whispers. Turning things over to Lelldorin might have been a mistake, but there had been no real choice in the matter. Any of Garion's other friends would have immediately raised a general outcry, and the entire affair would have been irrevocably out in the open. Garion did not want that. He was not prepared to make any decisions about the assassin until he found out who had thrown the knife and why. Too many other things could have been involved. Only Lelldorin could be relied upon for absolute secrecy, even though there was some danger in turning him loose in the Citadel with a license to track someone down. Lelldorin had a way of turning simple things into catastrophes, and Garion worried almost as much about that as he did about the possibility of another knife hurtling out of the shadows toward his unprotected back.

Among the visitors present for the betrothal ceremonies was Ce'Nedra's cousin Xera, who was present as the personal representative of Queen Xantha. Though shy at first, the Dryad soon lost her reserve - particularly when she found herself the center of the attention of a cluster of smitten young noblemen.

The gift of Queen Xantha to the royal couple was, Garion thought, somewhat peculiar. Wrapped in plain leaves, Xera presented them with two sprouted acorns. Ce'Nedra, however, seemed delighted. She insisted upon planting the two seeds immediately and rushed down to the small private garden adjoining the royal apartments.

"It's very nice, I suppose," Garion commented dubiously as he stood watching his princess on her knees in the damp loam of the garden, busily preparing the earth to receive Queen Xantha's gift.

Ce'Nedra looked at him sharply. "I don't believe your Majesty understands the significance of the gift," she said in that hatefully formal tone she had assumed with him.

"Stop that," Garion told her crossly. "I still have a name, after all and I'm almost positive you haven't forgotten it."

"If your Majesty insists," she replied loftily.

"My Majesty does. What's so significant about a couple of nuts?"

She looked at him almost pityingly. "You wouldn't understand."

"Not if you won't take the trouble to explain it to me."

"Very well." She sounded irntatingly superior. "The one acorn is from my very own tree. The other is from Queen Xantha's."

"So?"

"See how impossibly dense he is," the princess said to her cousin.

"He's not a Dryad, Ce'Nedra," Xera replied calmly.

"Obviously."

Xera turned to Garion. "The acorns are not really from my mother," she explained. "They're gifts from the trees themselves."

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" Garion demanded of Ce'Nedra.

She sniffed and returned to her digging.

"While they're still just young shoots, Ce'Nedra will bind them together," Xera went on. "The shoots will intertwine as they grow, embracing each other and forming a single tree. It's the Dryad symbol for marriage. The two will become one - just as you and Ce'Nedra will."

"That remains to be seen," Ce'Nedra sniffed, trowelling busily in the dirt.

Garion sighed. "I hope the trees are patient."

"Trees are very patient, Garion," Xera replied. She made a little gesture that Ce'Nedra could not see, and Garion followed her to the other end of the garden.

"She does love you, you know," Xera told him quietly. "She won't admit it, of course, but she loves you. I know her well enough to see that."

"Why's she acting the way she is, then?"

"She doesn't like being forced into things, that's all."

"I'm not the one who's forcing her. Why take it out on me?"

"Whom else can she take it out on?"

Garion hadn't thought of that. He left the garden quietly. Xera's words gave him some hope that one of his problems, at least, might eventually be resolved. Ce'Nedra would pout and storm for a while, and then - after she had made him suffer enough - she would relent. Perhaps it might speed things along if he suffered a bit more obviously.

The other problems had not changed significantly. He was still going to have to lead an army against Kal Torak; Belgarath had still given no sign that his power was intact; and someone in the Citadel was still, so far as Garion knew, sharpening another knife for him. He sighed and went back to his own rooms where he could worry in private.

Somewhat later he received word that Aunt Pol wanted to see him in her private apartment. He went immediately and found her seated by the fire, sewing as usual. Belgarath, dressed in his shabby old clothes, sat in one of the deep, comfortable chairs on the other side of the fire with his feet up and a tankard in his hand.

"You wanted to see me, Aunt Pol?" Garion inquired as he entered.

"Yes, dear," she replied. "Sit down." She looked at him somewhat critically. "He still doesn't look much like a king, does he, father?"

"Give him time, Pol," the old man told her. "He hasn't been at it for very long."

"You both knew all along, didn't you?" Garion accused them. "Who I was, I mean."

"Naturally," Aunt Pol answered in that maddening way of hers.

"Well, if you'd wanted me to behave like a king, you should have told me about it. That way I'd have had some time to get used to the idea."

"It seems to me we discussed this once before," Belgarath mentioned, "a long time ago. If you'll stop and think a bit, I'm sure you'll be able to see why we had to keep it a secret."

"Maybe." Garion said it a bit doubtfully. "All this has happened too fast, though. I hadn't even got used to being a sorcerer yet, and now I have to be a king, too. It's all got me off balance."

"You're adaptable, Garion," Aunt Pol told him, her needle flickering.

"You'd better give him the amulet, Pol," Belgarath mentioned. "The princess should be here soon."

"I was just about to, father," she replied, laying aside her sewing.

"What's this?" Garion asked.

"The princess has a gift for you," Aunt Pol said. "A ring. It's a bit ostentatious, but act suitably pleased."

"Shouldn't I have something to give her in return?"

"I've already taken care of that, dear." She took a small velvet box from the table beside her chair. "You'll give her this." She handed the box to Garion.

Inside the box lay a silver amulet, a bit smaller than Garion's own. Represented on its face in minute and exquisite detail was the likeness of that huge tree which stood in solitary splendor in the center of the Vale of Aldur. There was a crown woven into the branches. Garion held the amulet in his right hand, trying to determine if it had some of the same kind of force about it that he knew was in the one he wore. There was something there, but it didn't feel at all the same.

"It doesn't seem to be like ours," he concluded.

"It isn't," Belgarath replied. "Not exactly, anyway. Ce'Nedra's not a sorceress, so she wouldn't be able to use one like yours."

"You said 'not exactly.' It does have some kind of power, then?"

"It will give her certain insights," the old man answered, "if she's patient enough to learn how to use it."

"Exactly what are we talking about when we use the word 'insight'?"

"An ability to see and hear things she wouldn't otherwise be able to see or hear," Belgarath specified.

"Is there anything else I should know about it before she gets here?"

"Just tell her that it's a family heirloom," Aunt Pol suggested. "It belonged to my sister, Beldaran."

"You should keep it, Aunt Pol," Garion objected. "I can get something else for the princess."

"No, dear. Beldaran wants her to have it."

Garion found Aunt Pol's habit of speaking of people long dead in the present tense a trifle disconcerting, so he didn't pursue the matter. There was a light tap on the door.

"Come in, Ce'Nedra," Aunt Pol answered.

The little princess was wearing a rather plain green gown open at the throat, and her expression was somewhat subdued.

"Come over by the fire;" Aunt Pol told her. "The evenings are still a bit chilly this time of year."

"Is it always this cold and damp in Riva?" Ce'Nedra asked, coming to the fire.

"We're a long ways north of Tol Honeth," Garion pointed out.

"I'm aware of that," she said with that little edge in her voice.

"I always thought it was customary to wait until after the wedding to start bickering," Belgarath observed slyly. "Have the rules changed?"

"Just practicing, Belgarath," Ce'Nedra replied impishly. "Just practicing for later on."

The old man laughed. "You can be a charming little girl when you put your mind to it," he said.

Ce'Nedra bowed mockingly. Then she turned to Garion. "It's customary for a Tolnedran girl to give her betrothed a gift of a certain value," she informed him. She held up a heavy, ornate ring set with several glowing stones. "This ring belonged to Ran Horb II, the greatest of all Tolnedran Emperors. Wearing it might help you to be a better king."

Garion sighed. It was going to be one of those meetings. "I'll be honored to wear the ring," he replied as inoffensively as possible, "and I'd like for you to wear this." He handed her the velvet box. "It belonged to the wife of Riva Iron-grip, Aunt Pol's sister."

Ce'Nedra took the box and opened it. "Why, Garion," she exclaimed, "it's lovely." She held the amulet in her hand, turning it to catch the firelight. "The tree looks so real that you can almost smell the leaves."

"Thank you," Belgarath replied modestly.

"You made it?" The princess sounded startled.

The old man nodded. "When Polgara and Beldaran were children, we lived in the Vale. There weren't very many silversmiths there, so I had to make their amulets myself. Aldur helped me with some of the finer details."

"This is a priceless gift, Garion." The tiny girl actually glowed, and Garion began to have some hope for the future. "Help me with it," she commanded, handing him the two ends of the chain and turning with one hand holding aside the mass of her deep red hair.

"Do you accept the gift, Ce'Nedra?" Aunt Pol asked her, giving the question a peculiar emphasis.

"Of course I do," the princess replied.

"Without reservation and of your own free will?" Aunt Pol pressed, her eyes

intent.

"I accept the gift, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra replied. "Fasten it for me, Garion. Be sure it's secure. I wouldn't want it to come undone."

"I don't think you'll need to worry too much about that," Belgarath told her.

Garion's fingers trembled slightly as he fastened the curious clasp.

His fingertips tingled peculiarly as the two ends locked together with a faintly audible click.

"Hold the amulet in your hand, Garion," Aunt Pol instructed him. Ce'Nedra lifted her chin and Garion took the medallion in his right hand. Then Aunt Pol and Belgarath closed their hands over his. Something peculiar seemed to pass through their hands and into the talisman at Ce'Nedra's throat.

"Now you are sealed to us, Ce'Nedra," Aunt Pol told the princess quietly, "with a tie that can never be broken."

Ce'Nedra looked at her with a puzzled expression, and then her eyes slowly widened and a dreadful suspicion began to grow in them.

"Take it off," she told Garion sharply.

"He can't do that," Belgarath informed her, sitting back down and picking up his tankard again.

Ce'Nedra was tugging at the chain, pulling with both hands.

"You'll just scratch your neck, dear," Aunt Pol warned gently. "The chain won't break; it can't be cut; and it won't come off over your head. You'll never have to worry about losing it."

"You did this," the princess stormed at Garion.

"Did what?"

"Put this slave chain on me. It wasn't enough that I had to bow to you; now you've put me in chains as well."

"I didn't know," he protested.

"Liar!" she screamed at him. Then she turned and fled the room, sobbing bitterly.

Chapter Fifteen

GARION WAS IN a sour mood. The prospect of another day of ceremony and tedious conferences was totally unbearable, and he had risen early to escape from the royal bedchamber before the insufferably polite appointment secretary with his endless lists could arrive to nail down the entire day. Garion privately detested the inoffensive fellow, even though he knew the man was only doing his job. A king's time had to be organized and scheduled, and it was the appointment secretary's task to take care of that. And so, each morning after breakfast, there came that respectful tapping at the door, and the appointment secretary would enter, bow, and then proceed to arrange the young king's day, minute by minute. Garion was morbidly convinced that somewhere, probably hidden away and closely guarded, was the ultimate master list that laid out the schedule for the rest of his life- including his royal funeral.

But this day dawned too gloriously for thoughts of stuffy formality and heavy conference. The sun had come boiling up out of the Sea of the Winds, touching the snowfields atop the craggy peaks with a blushing pink, and the morning shadows in the deep valleys above the city were a misty blue. The smell of spring pushed urgently in from the little garden outside his window, and Garion knew he must escape, if only for an hour or so. He dressed quickly in tunic, hose, and soft Rivan boots, rather carefully selecting clothes as unroyal as his wardrobe offered. Pausing only long enough to belt on his sword, he crept out of the royal apartment. He even considered riot taking along his guards, but prudently decided against that.

They were at a standstill in the search for the man who had tried to kill him in that dim hallway, but both Lelldorin and Garion had discovered that the outer garments of any number of Rivans needed repair. The gray cloak was not a ceremonial garment, but rather was something thrown on for warmth. It was a sturdy, utilitarian covering, and quite a number of such robes had been allowed to fall into a condition of shocking disrepair. Moreover, now that spring was here, men would soon stop wearing them, and the only clue to the attacker's identity would be locked away in a closet somewhere.

Garion brooded about that as he wandered moodily through the silent corndors of the Citadel with two mailed guards following at a respectful distance. The attempt, he reasoned, had not come from a Grolim. Aunt Pol's peculiar ability to recognize the mind of a Grolim would have alerted her instantly. In all probability the attacker had not been a foreigner of any kind. There were too few foreigners on the island to make that very likely. It had to be a Rivan, but why would a Rivan want to kill the king who had just returned after thirteen hundred years?

He sighed with perplexity over the problem and let his mind drift off to other matters. He wished that he were only Garion again; he wished that

more than anything. He wished that it might be possible for him to awaken in some out-of the-way inn somewhere and start out in the silver light of daybreak to ride alone to the top of the next hill to see what lay beyond. He sighed again. He was a public person now, and such freedom was denied him. He was coldly certain that he was never going to have a moment to himself again.

As he passed an open doorway, he suddenly heard a familiar voice. "Sin creeps into our minds the moment we let our thoughts stray," Relg was saying. Garion stopped, motioning his guards to silence.

"Must everything be a sin?" Taiba asked. Inevitably they were together. They had been together almost continually from the moment Relg had rescued Taiba from her living entombment in the cave beneath Rak Cthol. Garion was almost certain that neither of them was actually conscious of that fact. Moreover, he had seen evidence of discomfort, not only on Taiba's face, but on Relg's as well, whenever they were apart. Something beyond the control of either of them drew them together.

"The world is filled with sin," Relg declared. "We must guard against it constantly. We must stand jealous guard over our purity against all forms of temptation."

"That would be very tiresome." Taiba sounded faintly amused.

"I thought you wanted instruction," Relg accused her. "If you just came here to mock me, I'll leave right now."

"Oh, sit down, Relg," she told him. "We'll never get anywhere with this if you take offense at everything I say."

"Have you no idea at all about the meaning of religion?" he asked after a moment. He actually sounded curious about it.

"In the slave pens, the word religion meant death. It meant having your heart cut out."

"That was a Grolim perversion. Didn't you have a religion of your own?"

"The slaves came from all over the world, and they prayed to many Gods - usually for death."

"What about your own people? Who is your God?"

"I was told that his name is Mara. We don't pray to him though - not since he abandoned us."

"It's not man's place to accuse the Gods," Relg told her sternly. "Man's duty is to glorify his God and pray to him - even if the prayers aren't answered."

"And what about the God's duty to man?" she asked pointedly. "Can a God not be negligent as well as a man? Wouldn't you consider a God negligent if he allowed his children to be enslaved and butchered - or if he allowed his daughters to be given as a reward to other slaves when they pleased their masters - as I was?"

Relg struggled with that painful question.

"I think you've led a very sheltered life, Relg," she told the zealot. "I think you have a very limited idea of human suffering - of the kinds of things men can do to other men - and women - apparently with the full permission of the Gods."

"You should have killed yourself," he said stubbornly.

"Whatever for?"

"To avoid corruption, naturally."

"You are an innocent, aren't you? I didn't kill myself because I wasn't ready to die. Even in the slave pens, life can be sweet, Relg, and death is bitter. What you call corruption is only a small thing - and not even always unpleasant."

"Sinful womanl" he gasped.

"You worry too much about that, Relg," she advised him. "Cruelty is a sin; lack of compassion is a sin. But that other little thing? I hardly think so. I begin to wonder about you. Could it be that this UL of yours is not quite so stern and unforgiving as you seem to believe? Does he really want all these prayers and rituals and grovelings? Or are they your way to hide from your God? So you think that praying in a loud voice and pounding your head on the ground will keep him from seeing into your heart?"

Relg was making strangled noises.

"If our Gods really loved us, they'd want our lives filled with joy," she continued relentlessly. "But you hate joy for some reason - probably because you're afraid of it. Joy is not sin, Relg; joy is a kind of love, and I think the Gods approve of it - even if you don't."

"You're hopelessly depraved."

"Perhaps so," she admitted casually, "but at least I look life right in the face. I'm not afraid of it, and I don't try to hide from it."

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded of her in an almost tragic voice. "Why must you forever follow me and mock me with your eyes?"

"I don't really know," she replied, sounding almost puzzled. "You're not really that attractive. Since we left Rak Cthol, I've seen dozens of men who interested me much more. At first it was because I knew that I made you nervous and because you were afraid of me. I rather enjoyed that, but lately there's more to it than that. It doesn't make any sense, of course. You're what you are, and I'm what I am, but for some reason I want to be with you." She paused. "Tell me, Relg - and don't try to lie about it - would you really want me to go away and never see you again?"

There was a long and painful silence. "May UL forgive me!" Relg groaned finally.

"I'm sure he will, Relg," she assured him gently.

Garion moved quietly on down the corridor away from the open door. Something he had not understood before had begun to become quite clear. "You're doing this, aren't you?" he asked silently.

"Naturally, " the dry voice in his mind replied.

"But why those two?"

"Because it's necessary, Belgarion. I don't do things out of whim. We're all compelled by necessity - even 1. Actually, what's going on between Relg and Taiba doesn't remotely concern you. "

Garion was a little stung by that.

"I thought well-"

"You assumed that you were my only care - that you were the absolute center of the universe? You're not, of course. There are other things almost equally important, and Relg and Taiba are centrally involved in one of those things. Your participation in that particular matter is peripheral at the most."

"They're going to be desperately unhappy if you force them together, " Garion accused.

"That doesn't matter in the slightest. Their being together is necessary. Yau're wrong though. It will take them a while to get used to it, but once they do, they're both going to be very happy. Obedience to necessity does have its rewards, after all."

Garion struggled with that idea for a while, then finally gave up. His own problems intruded once more on his thoughts. Inevitably, as he always did when he was troubled, he went looking for Aunt Pol. He found her sitting before the cozy fire in her apartment, sipping a cup of fragrant tea and watching through the window as the rosy morning sunlight set the snowfields above the city ablaze.

"You're up early," she observed as he entered.

"I wanted to talk to you," he told her, "and the only way I ever get the chance to do what I want is to leave my room before the man with my schedule for the day shows up." He flung himself into a chair. "They never give me a minute to myself."

"You're an important person now, dear."

"That wasn't my idea." He stared moodily out the window. "Grandfather's all right now, isn't he?" he asked suddenly.

"What gave you that idea?"

"Well - the other day, when we gave Ce'Nedra the amulet - didn't he - sort of -?"

"Most of that came from you, dear," she replied.

"I felt something else."

"That could have been just me. It was a pretty subtle thing, and even I couldn't be sure if he had any part in it."

"There has to be some way we can find out."

"There's only one way, Garion, and that's for him to do something."

"All right, let's go off with him someplace and have him try - something sort of small, maybe."

"And how would we explain that to him?"

"You mean he doesn't know?" Garion sat up quickly.

"He might, but I rather doubt it."

"You didn't tell him?"

"Of course not. If he has any doubts whatsoever about his ability, he'll fail, and if he fails once, that will be the end of it."

"I don't understand."

"A very important part of it is knowing that it's going to work. If you aren't absolutely sure, then it won't. That's why we can't tell him."

Garion thought about it. "I suppose that makes sense, but isn't it sort of dangerous? I mean, what if something really urgent comes up, and he tries

to do something about it, and we all of a sudden find out that he can't?"

"You and I would have to deal with it then, dear."

"You seem awfully calm about it."

"Getting excited doesn't really help very much, Garion."

The door burst open, and Queen Layla, her hair awry and her crown slipping precariously over one ear, stormed in. "I won't have it, Polgara," she declared angrily. "I absolutely won't have it. You've got to talk to him. Oh, excuse me, your Majesty," the plump little queen added, noticing Garion. "I didn't see you." She curtsied gracefully.

"Your Highness," Garion replied, getting up hurriedly and bowing in return.

"With whom did you wish me to speak, Layla?" Aunt Pol asked. "

Anheg. He insists that my poor husband sit up and drink with him every night. Fulrach's so sick this morning that he can barely lift his head off the pillow. That great bully of a Cherek is ruining my husband's health."

"Anheg likes your husband, Layla. It's his way of showing his friendship."

"Can't they be friends without drinking so much?"

"I'll talk to him, dear," Aunt Pol promised.

Mollified somewhat, Queen Layla departed, curtsying again to Garion.

Garion was about to return to the subject of Belgarath's infirmity when Aunt Pol's maid came in to announce Lady Merel.

Barak's wife entered the room with a somber expression. "Your Majesty," she greeted Garion perfunctorily.

Garion rose again to bow and politely respond. He was getting rather tired of it.

"I need to talk with you, Polgara," Merel declared.

"Of course," Aunt Pol replied. "Would you excuse us, Garion?"

"I'll wait in the next room," he offered. He crossed to the door, but did not close it all the way. Once again his curiosity overcame his good manners.

"They all keep throwing it in my face," Merel blurted almost before he was out of the room.

"What's that?"

"Well-" Merel hesitated, then spoke quite firmly. "My lord and I were not always on the best of terms," she admitted.

"That's widely known, Merel," Aunt Pol told her diplomatically.

"That's the whole problem," Merel complained. "They all keep laughing behind their hands and waiting for me to go back to being the way I was before." A note of steel crept into her voice. "Well, it's not going to happen," she declared, "so they can laugh all they want to."

"I'm glad to hear that, Merel," Aunt Pol replied.

"Oh, Polgara," Merel said with a helpless little laugh, "he looks so much like a great shaggy bear, but he's so gentle inside. Why couldn't I have seen that before? All those years wasted."

"You had to grow up, Merel," Aunt Pol told her. "It takes some people longer, that's all."

After Lady Merel had left, Garion came back in and looked quizzically at Aunt Pol. "Has it always been like that?" he asked her. "What I mean is - do people always come to you when they've got problems?"

"It happens now and then," she replied. "People seem to think that I'm very wise. Usually they already know what they have to do, so I listen to them and agree with them and give them a bit of harmless support. It makes them happy. I set aside a certain amount of time each morning for these visits. They know that I'm here if they feel the need for someone to talk to. Would you care for some tea?"

He shook his head. "Isn't it an awful burden - all these other people's problems, I mean?"

"It's not really that heavy, Garion," she answered. "Their problems are usually rather small and domestic. It's rather pleasant to deal with things that aren't quite so earthshaking. Besides, I don't mind visitors whatever their reason for coming."

The next visitor, however, was Queen Islena, and her problem was more serious. Garion withdrew again when the maid announced that the Queen of Cherek wished to speak privately with the Lady Polgara; but, as before, his curiosity compelled him to listen at the door of the adjoining chamber.

"I've tried everything I can think of, Polgara," Islena declared, "but Grodeg won't let me go."

"The High Priest of Belar?"

"He knows everything, naturally," Islena confirmed. "All his underlings reported my every indiscretion to him. He threatens to tell Anheg if I try to sever my connection with the Bear-cult. How could I have been so stupid? He's got his hand around my throat."

"Just how indiscreet have you been, Islena?" Aunt Pol asked the queen pointedly.

"I went to some of their rituals," Islena confessed. "I put a few cult members in positions in the palace. I passed some information along to Grodeg."

"Which rituals, Islena?"

"Not those, Polgara," Islena replied in a shocked voice. "I'd never stoop to that."

"So all you really did was attend a few harmless gatherings where people dress up in bearskins and let a few cultists into the palace where there were probably a dozen or more already anyway - and pass on a bit of harmless palace gossip? - It was harmless, wasn't it?"

"I didn't pass on any state secrets, Polgara, if that's what you mean," the queen said stiffly.

"Then Grodeg doesn't really have any hold over you, Islena."

"What should I do, Polgara?" the queen asked in an anguished voice.

"Go to Anheg. Tell him everything."

"I can't."

"You must. Otherwise Grodeg will force you into something worse. Actually, the situation could be turned to Anheg's advantage. Tell me exactly how much you know about what the cult is doing?"

"They've begun creating chapters among the peasants, for one thing."

"They've never done that before," Aunt Pol mused. "The cult's always been restricted to the nobility and the priesthood."

"I can't be sure," Islena told her, "but I think they're preparing for something major - some kind of confrontation."

"I'll mention it to my father," Aunt Pol replied. "I think he'll want to take steps. As long as the cult was the plaything of the priesthood and the minor nobility, it wasn't really all that important, but rousing the peasantry is quite another thing."

"I've heard a few other things as well," Islena continued. "I think they're trying to penetrate Rhodar's intelligence service. If they can get a few people in the right places in Boktor, they'll have access to most of the state secrets in the West."

"I see." Aunt Pol's voice was as cold as ice.

"I heard Grodeg talking once," Islena said in a tone of distaste. "It was before he found out that I didn't want anything more to do with him. He'd been reading the auguries and the signs in the heavens, and he was talking about the return of the Rivan King. The cult takes the term 'Overlord of the West' quite seriously. I honestly believe that their ultimate goal is to elevate Belgarion to the status of Emperor of all the West - Aloria, Sendaria, Arendia, Tolnedra - even Nyissa."

"That's not how the term was meant to be interpreted," Aunt Pol objected.

"I know," Islena replied, "but Grodeg wants to twist it until it comes out that way. He's a total fanatic, and he wants to convert all the people of the West to Helar - by the sword, if necessary."

"That idiot!" Aunt Pol raged. "He'd start a general war in the West if he tried that - and even set the Gods to wrangling. What is there about Alorns that makes them continually want to expand to the south? Those boundaries were established by the Gods themselves. I think it's time for someone to put his foot down on Grodeg's neck firmly. Go to Anheg immediately. Tell him everything and then tell him that I want to see him. I imagine that my father's going to want to discuss the matter with him as well."

"Anheg's going to be furious with me, Polgara," Islena faltered.

"I don't think so," Aunt Pol assured her. "As soon as he realizes that you've exposed Grodeg's plan, he'll probably be rather grateful. Let him think that you went along with Grodeg simply to get more information. That's a perfectly respectable motive - and it's the sort of thing a good wife would do."

"I hadn't thought of that," Islena said, already sounding more sure of herself. "It would have been a brave thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"Absolutely heroic, Islena," Aunt Pol replied. "Now go to Anheg."

"I will, Polgara." There was the sound of quick, determined steps, and then a door closed.

"Garion, come back in here." Aunt Pol's voice was firm. He opened the door.

"You were listening?" It wasn't really a question.

"Well-"

"We're going to have to have a talk about that," she told him. "But it doesn't really matter this time. Go find your grandfather and tell him that I want to see him immediately. I don't care what he's doing. Bring him to me now."

"But how do we know he can do anything?" Garion demanded. "I mean, if he's lost his power-"

"There are many kinds of power, Garion. Sorcery is only one of them. Now go fetch him at once."

"Yes, Aunt Pol," Garion replied, already moving toward the door.

Chapter Sixteen

THE HIGH PRIEST of Belar was an imposing-looking man nearly seven feet tall. He had a long gray beard and burning eyes sunk deep in their sockets beneath bristling black eyebrows. He arrived from Val Alorn the following week after the seemingly endless negotiations had finally produced the official betrothal document. Accompanying him as a kind of retinue were two dozen hard-faced warriors dressed in bearskins.

"Bear-cultists," Barak observed sourly to Garion and Silk as the three of them stood atop the wall of the Citadel, watching the High Priest and his men mounting the steps from the harbor in the bright spring sunshine.

"I didn't say anything about bringing soldiers with him," Garion objected indignantly.

"I imagine he took it upon himself," Silk replied. "Grodeg's very good at taking things upon himself."

"I wonder how he'd like it if I threw him into a dungeon," Garion said hotly. "Do I have a dungeon?"

"We could improvise one, I suppose." Barak grinned at him. "Some nice damp cellar someplace. You might have to import some rats, though. The island's reputed to be free of them."

"You're making fun of me," Garion accused his friend, flushing slightly.

"Now you know I wouldn't do that, Garion," Barak replied, pulling at his beard.

"I'd talk with Belgarath before I had Grodeg clapped in irons, though,"

Silk suggested. "The political implications might go a bit further than you intend. Whatever you do, don't let Grodeg talk you into letting him leave any of his men behind. He's been trying to get a foothold on the Isle of the Winds for twenty years now. Not even Brand has had the nerve to let him go that far."

"Brand?"

"Isn't it obvious? I wouldn't want to say that Brand's a cult member, but his sympathies certainly lie in that direction."

Garion was shocked at that, and a little sick. "What do you think I ought to do?" he asked.

"Don't try to play politics with these people," Barak replied. "Grodeg's here to conduct the official betrothal ceremony. Just let it go at that."

"He'll try to talk to me, though," Garion fretted. "He's going to try to make me lead an invasion of the southern kingdoms so that he can convert the Arends and Tolnedrans and Nyissans to the worship of Belar."

"Where did you hear that?" Silk asked curiously.

"I'd rather not say," Garion evaded.

"Does Belgarath know?"

Garion nodded. "Aunt Pol told him."

Silk chewed thoughtfully on a fingernail. "Just be stupid," he said finally.

"What?"

"Pretend to be a simple country bumpkin with no idea of what's going on. Grodeg's going to do everything he can to get you alone so he can wring concessions out of you. Just keep smiling and nodding foolishly, and every time he makes a proposal, send for Belgarath. Let him think that you can't make a single decision on your own."

"Won't that make me seem - well -?"

"Do you really care what he thinks?"

"Well, not really, I guess, but "

"It will drive him crazy," Barak pointed out with a wicked grin. "He'll think that you're a complete idiot - a ripe plum ready for picking. But he'll realize that if he wants you, he'll have to fight Belgarath to get you. He'll be tearing out his beard in frustration before he leaves."

He turned and looked admiringly at Silk. "That's really a terrible thing to do to a man like Grodeg, you know."

Silk smirked. "Isn't it though?"

The three of them stood grinning at each other and finally burst into laughter.

The official betrothal ceremony was conducted the following day. There had been a great deal of haggling about who should enter the Hall of the Rivan King first, but that difficulty had been overcome by Belgarath's suggestion that Garion and Ce'Nedra could enter arm in arm. "This is all in preparation for a wedding, after all," he had pointed out. "We might as well start off with a semblance at least of friendship."

Garion was very nervous as the hour approached. His princess had been smoldering since the incident with the amulet, and he was almost certain that there was going to be trouble. But to his surprise, Ce'Nedra was radiant as the two of them waited alone together in a small antechamber while the official guests gathered in the Hall. Garion fidgeted a great deal and walked up and down, nervously adjusting his clothing, but Ce'Nedra sat rather demurely, patiently awaiting the trumpet fanfare which was to announce their entrance.

"Garion," she said after a while.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember that time we bathed together in the Wood of the Dryads?"

"We did not bathe together," Garion replied quickly, blushing to the roots of his hair.

"Well, very nearly." She brushed his distinction aside. "Do you realize that Lady Polgara kept throwing us together like that all the time we were travelling? She knew that all this was going to happen, didn't she?"

"Yes," Garion admitted.

"So she kept shoving us at each other, hoping something might happen between us."

Garion thought about that. "You're probably right," he concluded.

"She likes to arrange people's lives for them."Ce'Nedra sighed. "Look at all the opportunities we missed," she said somewhat regretfully.

"Ce'Nedral" Garion gasped, shocked at her suggestion.

She giggled a bit wickedly. Then she sighed again. "Now it's all going to be dreadfully official - and probably not nearly as much fun."

Garion's face was flaming by now.

"Anyway," she continued, "that time we bathed together - do you remember that I asked you if you'd like to kiss me?"

Garion nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"I never got that kiss, you know," she said archly, standing up and crossing the small room to him, "and I think I'd like it now."

She took hold of the front of his doublet firmly with both little hands. "You owe me a kiss, Belgarion of Riva, and a Tolnedran always collects what people owe her." The look she directed up through her lashes at him smoldered dangerously.

Just outside, the trumpets blared out an extended fanfare.

"We're supposed to go in now," Garion sputtered a bit desperately.

"Let them wait," she murmured, her arms sliding up around his neck.

Garion tried for a quick, perfunctory kiss, but his princess had other ideas. Her little arms were surprisingly strong, and her fingers locked in his hair. The kiss was lingering, and Garion's knees began to tremble.

"There," Ce'Nedra breathed when she finally released him.

"We'd better go in," Garion suggested as the trumpets blared again.

"In a moment. Did you muss me?" She turned around so that he could inspect her.

"No," he replied. "Everything still seems to be in order."

She shook her head rather disapprovingly. "Try to do a little better next time," she told him. "Otherwise I might start to think that you're not taking me seriously."

"I'm never going to understand you, Ce'Nedra."

"I know," she said with a mysterious little smile. Then she patted his cheek gently. "And I'm going to do everything I can to keep it that way. Shall we go in? We really shouldn't keep our guests waiting, you know."

"That's what I said in the first place."

"We were busy then," she declared with a certain grand indifference. "Just

a moment." She carefully smoothed his hair. "There. That's better. Now give me your arm."

Garion extended his arm, and his princess laid her hand on it. Then he opened the door to the third chorus from the trumpets. They entered the Hall, and an excited buzz ran through the crowd assembled there. Taking his cue from Ce'Nedra, Garion moved at a stately pace, his face sober and regal-looking.

"Not quite so grim," she whispered. "Smile just a little - and nod occasionally. It's the thing to do."

"If you say so," he replied. "I really don't know too much about this sort of thing."

"You'll be just fine," she assured him.

Smiling and nodding to the spectators, the royal couple passed through the Hall to the chair that had been placed near the front for the princess. Garion held the chair for her, then bowed and mounted the dais to his throne. As always happened, the Orb of Aldur began to glow as soon as he sat down. This time, however, it seemed to have a faint pink cast to it.

The official betrothal ceremony began with a rolling invocation delivered in a thunderous voice by the High Priest of Belar. Grodeg took full advantage of the dramatics of the situation.

"Tiresome old windbag, isn't he?" Belgarath murmured from his accustomed place at the right of the throne.

"What were you and Ce'Nedra doing in there?" Aunt Pol asked Garion.

"Nothing," Garion replied, blushing furiously.

"Really? And it took you all that time? How extraordinary."

Grodeg had begun reading the first clauses of the betrothal agreement. To Garion they sounded like pure gibberish. At various points Grodeg stopped his reading to look sternly at Garion.

"Does His Majesty, Belgarion of Riva, agree to this?" he demanded each time.

"I do," Garion replied.

"Does Her Highness Ce'Nedra of the Tolnedran Empire agree to this?" Grodeg asked the princess.

Ce'Nedra responded in a clear voice, "I do."

"How are you two getting along?" Belgarath asked, ignoring the droning voice of the clergyman.

"Who knows?" Garion answered helplessly. "I can't tell from one minute to the next what she's going to do."

"That's the way it's supposed to be," Aunt Pol told him.

"I don't suppose you'd consider explaining that."

"No, dear," she replied with a smile as mysterious as Ce'Nedra's had been.

"I didn't really think so," he grumbled.

Garion thought about Ce'Nedra's rather open invitation to muss her during the interminable reading of the document which was firmly nailing down the remainder of his life, and the more he thought about it, the more he found the notion of a bit of polite mussing attractive. He rather hoped that the princess would linger after the ceremony and that they might go someplace private to discuss it. Following Grodeg's pompous benediction, however, Ce'Nedra was immediately surrounded by all the younger girls in the court and swept away for some private celebration of their own. From all the giggling and wicked little glances cast in his direction, he concluded that the conversation at their little get-together was going to be very frank, probably naughty, and that the less he knew about it the better.

As Silk and Barak had predicted, the High Priest of Belar tried several times to speak to Garion privately. Each time, however, Garion put on a great show of ingenuousness and sent immediately for Belgarath. Grodeg left the island with his entire retinue the following day. To add a final insult to the whole matter, Garion insisted that he and Belgarath accompany the fuming ecclesiast to his ship to see him off - and to be certain that no Bear-cultist might inadvertently be left behind.

"Whose idea was all of this?" Belgarath inquired as he and Garion climbed the steps back to the Citadel.

"Silk and I worked it out," Garion replied smugly.

"I might have known."

"I thought things went quite well," Garion congratulated himself.

"You've made yourself a dangerous enemy, you know."

"We can handle him."

"You're getting to be very free with that 'we,' Garion," Belgarath said disapprovingly.

"We're all in this together, aren't we, Grandfather?"

Belgarath looked at him helplessly for a moment and then began to laugh.

In the days that followed Grodeg's departure, however, there was little occasion for laughter. Once the official ceremonies were over, the Alorn Kings, King Fulrach, and various advisers and generals got down to business. Their subject was war.

"The most recent reports I have from Cthol Murgos indicate that Taur Urgas is preparing to move the southern Murgos up from Rak Hagga as soon as the weather breaks on the eastern coast," King Rhodar advised them.

"And the Nadraks?" King Anheg asked.

"They appear to be mobilizing, but there's always a question about the Nadraks. They play their own game, so it takes a lot of Grolims to whip them into line. The Thulls just obey orders."

"The Thulls don't really concern anyone," Brand observed. "The key to the whole situation is how many Malloreans are going to be able to take the field against us."

"There's a staging area for them being set up at Thull Zelik," Rhodar reported, "but they're also waiting for the weather to break in the Sea of the East."

King Anheg frowned thoughtfully. "Malloreans are bad sailors," he mused. "They won't move until summer, and they'll hug the north coast all the way to Thull Zelik. We need to get a fleet into the Sea of the East as soon as possible. If we can sink enough of their ships and drown enough of their soldiers, we might be able to keep them out of the war entirely. I think we should strike in force into Gar og Nadrak. Once we get into the forests, my men can build ships. We'll sail down the River Cordu and out into the Sea of the East."

"Thy plan hath merit, your Majesty," Mandorallen approved, studying the large map hanging on the wall. "The Nadraks are fewest in number and farthest removed from the hordes of southern Cthol Murgos."

King Rhodar shook his head stubbornly. "I know you want to get to the sea as quickly as possible, Anheg," he objected, "but you're committing me to a campaign in the Nadrak forest. I need open country to maneuver in. If we strike at the Thulls, we can cut directly across to the upper reaches of the River Mardu, and you can sail on down to the sea that way."

"There aren't that many trees in Mishrak ac Thull," Anheg protested.

"Why build ships out of green lumber if you don't have to?" Rhodar asked. "Why not sail up the Aldur and then portage across?"

"You want my men to portage ships up the eastern escarpment? Rhodar, be serious."

"We have engineers, Anheg. They can devise ways to lift your ships to the top of the escarpment."

Garion did not want to intrude his inexperience on the conference, but the question came out before he had time to think about it. "Have we decided where the final battle's going to be?" he asked.

"Which final battle was that, Garion?" Rhodar asked politely.

"When we meet them head-on - like Vo Mimbre."

"There won't be a Vo Mimbre in this war," Anheg told him. "Not if we can help it."

"Vo Mimbre was a mistake, Garion," Belgarath said quietly. "We all knew it, but there wasn't anything we could do about it."

"We won, didn't we?"

"That was pure luck, and you can't plan a campaign on the hope that you might get lucky. Nobody wanted the battle at Vo Mimbre - we didn't, and Kal Torak didn't, but nobody had any choice in the matter. We had to commit to battle before the second Angarak column arrived in the West. Kal Torak had been holding the southern Murgos and eastern Malloreans in reserve near Rak Hagga, and they started to march when he turned west from the siege of the Stronghold. If they'd been able to join forces with Kal Torak, there wouldn't have been enough men in all the West to meet them, so we had to fight. Vo Mimbre was the least objectionable battlefield."

"Why didn't Kal Torak just wait until they arrived?" Garion asked.

"You can't stop an army in unfriendly territory, King Belgarion," Colonel Brendig explained. "You have to keep moving, or the local populace destroys all the food and starts coming out at night to cut up your people. You can lose half your army that way."

"Kal Torak didn't want the meeting at Vo Mimbre any more than we did," Belgarath went on. "The column from Rak Hagga got caught in a spring blizzard in the mountains and bogged down for weeks. They finally had to turn back, and Torak was forced to fight at Vo Mimbre without any advantage of numbers, and nobody in his right mind goes into battle that way."

"Thy force should be larger by a quarter than thine adversary's," Mandorallen agreed, "else the outcome must be in doubt."

"By a third," Barak corrected in a rumbling voice. "By half if you can

arrange it."

"Then all we're going to do is spread out all over the eastern half of the continent and fight a whole series of little battles?" Garion demanded incredulously. "That could take years - decades. It could go on for a century."

"If it has to," Belgarath told him bluntly. "What did you expect, Garion? A short little ride in the sunshine, a nice easy fight, and then home before winter? I'm afraid it won't be like that. You'd better get used to wearing armor and a sword, because you'll probably be dressed that way for most of the rest of your life. This is likely to be a very long war."

Garion's illusions were crumbling rapidly.

The door to the council room opened, then, and Olban, Brand's youngest son, entered and spoke with his father. The weather had turned blustery, and a spring storm was raking the island. Olban's gray Rivan cloak was dripping as he entered.

Dismayed by the prospect of year after year of campaigning in the East, Garion distractedly stared at the puddle forming around Olban's feet as the young man talked quietly with Brand. Then, out of habit, he lifted his eyes slightly to look at the hem of Olban's cloak. There was a small tear on the left corner of the cloak, and a scrap of cloth seemed to be missing.

Garion stared at the telltale rip for a moment without realizing exactly what it was he saw. Then he went suddenly cold. With a slight start, he jerked his eyes up to look at Olban's face. Brand's youngest son was perhaps Garion's own age, a bit shorter, but more muscular. His hair was pale blond, and his young face was serious, reflecting already the customary Rivan gravity. He seemed to be trying to avoid Garion's eyes, but showed no other sign of nervousness. Once, however, he looked inadvertently at the young king and seemed to flinch slightly as guilt rose clearly into his eyes. Garion had found the man who had tried to kill him.

The conference continued after that, but Garion did not hear any more of it. What was he to do? Had Olban acted alone, or were others involved? Had Brand himself been a part of it? It was so difficult to know what a Rivan was thinking. He trusted Brand, but the big Warder's connection with the Bear-cult gave a certain ambiguity to his loyalties. Could Grodeg be behind all this? Or perhaps a Grolim? Garion remembered the Earl of Jarvik, whose soul had been purchased by Asharak and who had mounted rebellion in Val Alorn. Had Olban fallen perhaps under the spell of the blood-red gold of Angarak as Jarvik had? But Riva was an island, the one place in the world where no Grolim could ever come. Garion discounted the possibility of bribery. In the first place, it was not in the Rivan character. In the second, Olban had not likely ever been in a situation to come into contact with a Grolim. Rather grimly, Garion decided on a course of action.

Lelldorin, of course, had to be kept out of it. The hot-headed young Asturian was incapable of the kind of delicate discretion that seemed to be called for. Lelldorin would reach for his sword, and the whole business would disintegrate rather rapidly after that.

When the conference broke up for the day late that afternoon, Garion went looking for Olban. He did not take a guard with him, but he did wear his sword.

As chance had it, it was in a dim corndor not unlike the one where the assassination attempt had taken place that the young king finally ran Brand's youngest son down. Olban was coming along the passageway in one direction, and Garion was going the other. Olban's face paled slightly when he saw his king, and he bowed deeply to hide his expression. Garion nodded as if intending to pass without speaking, but turned after the two of them had gone by each other. "Olban," he said quietly.

Brand's son turned, a look of dread on his face.

"I noticed that the corner of your cloak is torn," Garion said in an almost neutral tone. "When you take it to have it mended, this might help." He took the scrap of cloth out from under his doublet and of fered it to the pale-faced young Rivan.

Olban stared wide-eyed at him, not moving.

"And as long as we're at it," Garion continued, "you might as well take this, too. I think you dropped it somewhere." He reached inside his doublet again and took out the dagger with its bent point.

Olban started to tremble violently, then he suddenly dropped to his knees. "Please, your Majesty," he begged, "let me kill myself. If my father finds out what I've done, it will break his heart."

"Why did you try to kill me, Olban?" Garion asked.

"For love of my father," Brand's son confessed, tears welling up in his eyes. "He was ruler here in Riva until you came. Your arrival degraded him. I couldn't bear that. Please, your Majesty, don't have me dragged to the scaffold like a common criminal. Give me the dagger and I'll bury it in my heart right here. Spare my father this last humiliation."

"Don't talk nonsense," Garion told him, "and get up. You look silly down there on your knees."

"Your Majesty-" Olban began to protest.

"Oh, be still," Garion told him irritably. "Let me think for a moment." Dimly he began to see the glimmer of an idea. "All right," he said finally, "this is what we're going to do. You're going to take this knife and this

wool scrap down to the harbor and throw them into the sea, and then you're going to go on about your life as if this had never happened."

"Your Majesty-"

"I'm not finished. Neither you nor I will ever speak of this again. I don't want any hysterical public confessions, and I absolutely forbid you to kill yourself. Do you understand me, Olban?"

Dumbly the young man nodded.

"I need your father's help too much to have this come out or for him to be distracted by personal tragedy. This did not happen, and that's an end of it. Take these and get out of my sight." He shoved the knife and the wool scrap into Olban's hands. He was suddenly infuriated. The weeks of looking nervously over his shoulder had all been so unnecessary - so useless. "Oh, one other thing, Olban," he added as the stricken young Rivan turned to leave. "Don't throw any more knives at me. If you want to fight, let me know, and we'll go someplace private and cut each other to ribbons, if that's what you want."

Olban fled sobbing.

"Very well done, Belgarion, " the dry voice complimented him.

"Oh, shut up," Garion said.

He slept very little that night. He had a few doubts about the wisdom of the course he had taken with Olban; but on the whole, he was satisfied that what he had done had been right. Olban's act had been no more than an impulsive attempt to erase what he believed to be his father's degradation. There had been no plot involved in it. Olban might resent Garion's magnanimous gesture, but he would not throw any more daggers at his king's back. What disturbed Garion's sleep the most during that restless night was Belgarath's bleak appraisal of the war upon which they were about to embark. He slept briefly on toward dawn and awoke from a dreadful nightmare with icy sweat standing out on his forehead. He had just seen himself, old and weary, leading a pitifully small army of ragged, gray-haired men into a battle they could not possibly win.

"There's an alternative, of cours - if you've recovered enough from your bout of peevishness to listen,"the voice in his mind advised him as he sat bolt upright and trembling in his bed.

"What?" Garion answered aloud. "Oh, that - I'm sorry I spoke that way. I was irritated, that's all."

"In many ways you're like Belgamth - remarkably - so his irritability seems to be hereditary."

"It's only natural, I suppose," Garion conceded. "You said there was an alternative. An alternative to what?"

"To this war that's giving you nightmares. Get dressed I want to show you something "

Garion climbed out of his bed and hastily jerked on his clothing. "Where are we going?" he asked, still speaking aloud.

"It isn't far,"

The room to which the other awareness directed him was musty and showed little evidence of use. The books and scrolls lining the shelves along its walls were dust-covered, and cobwebs draped the corners. Garion's lone candle cast looming shadows that seemed to dance along the walls.

"On the top shelf, " the voice told him. "The scroll wrapped in yellow linen. Take it down."

Garion climbed up on a chair and took down the scroll. "What is this?" he asked.

"The Mrin Codex, Take off the cover and start unrolling it. I'll tell you when to stop."

It took Garion a moment or two to get the knack of unrolling the bottom of the scroll with one hand and rolling up the top with the other.

"There," the voice said. "That's the passage. Read it."

Garion struggled over the words. The script was spidery, and he still did not read very well. "It doesn't make any sense," he complained.

"The man who wrote it down was insane, " the voice apologized, "and he was an imbecile besides, but he was all I had to work with. Try it again but loud "

Garion read: "Behold, it shall come to pass that in a certain moment, that which must be and that which must not be shall meet, and in that meeting shall be decided all that has gone before and all that will come after. Then will the Child of Light and the Child of Dark face each other in the broken tomb, and the stars will shudder and grow dim." Garion's voice trailed off. "It still doesn't make any sense," he objected.

"It's a bit obscure,"the voice admitted. "As I said, the man who wrote it was insane. I put the ideas there, but he used his own words to express them. "

"Who is the Child of Light?" Garion asked.

"You are for the moment at least. It changes. "

"Me?"

"Of course."

"Then who's this Child of Dark I'm supposed to meet?"

"Torak."

"Torak!"

"I should have thought that would be obvious by now. I told you once about the two possible destinies coming together finally. You and Torak - the Child of Light and the Child of Dark - embody those destinies."

"But Torak's asleep."

"Not any more. When you first put your hand on the Orb, the touch signalled his awakening. Even now he stirs on the edge of awareness, and his hand fumbles for the hilt of Cthrek-Goru, his black sword."

Garion went very cold. "Are you trying to say that I'm supposed to fight Torak? Alone?"

"It's going to happen, Belgarion. The universe itself rushes toward it. You can gather an army if you want, but your army - or Torak's - won't mean anything. As the Codex says, everything will be decided when you finally meet him. In the end, you'll face each other alone. That's what I meant by an alternative."

"What you're trying to say is that I'm just supposed to go off alone and find him and fight him?" Garion demanded incredulously.

"Approximately, yep "

"I won't do it."

"That's up to you. "

Garion struggled with it. "If I take an army, I'll just get a lot of people killed, and it won't make any difference in the end anyway?"

"Not the least bit. In the end it will just be you, Torak, Cthrek-Goru, and the sword of the Rivan King. "

"Don't I have any choice at all?"

"None whatsoever. "

"Do I have to go alone?" Garion asked plaintively.

"It doesn't say that."

"Could I take one or two people with me?"

"That's your decision, Belgarion. Just don't forget to take your sword "

He thought about it for the rest of the day. In the end his choice was obvious. As evening settled over the gray city of Riva, he sent for Belgarath and Silk. There were some problems involved, he knew, but there was no one else he could rely on. Even if his power were diminished, Belgarath's wisdom made Garion not even want to consider the undertaking without him. And Silk, of course, was just as essential. Garion reasoned that his own increasing talent for sorcery could see them through any difficulties if Belgarath should falter, and Silk could probably find ways to avoid most of the serious confrontations. Garion was confident that the three of them would be able to cope with whatever arose - until they found Torak. He didn't want to think about what might happen then.

When the two of them arrived, the young king was staring out the window with haunted eyes.

"You sent for us?" Silk asked.

"I have to make a journey," Garion replied in a scarcely audible voice.

"What's bothering you?" Belgarath said. "You look a bit sick."

"I just found out what it is that I'm supposed to do, Grandfather."

"Who told you?"

"He did."

Belgarath pursed his lips. "A bit premature, perhaps," he suggested. "I was going to wait a while longer, but I have to assume he knows what he's doing."

"Who is this we're talking about?" Silk asked.

"Garion has a periodic visitor," the old man answered. "A rather special visitor."

"That's a singularly unenlightening response, old friend."

"Are you sure you really want to know?"

"Yes," Silk replied, "I think I do. I get the feeling that I'm going to be involved in it."

"You're aware of the Prophecy?"

"Naturally."

"It appears that the Prophecy is a bit more than a statement about the future. It seems to be able to take a hand in things from time to time. It speaks to Garion on occasion."

Silk's eyes narrowed as he thought about that. "All right," he said finally.

"You don't seem surprised."

The rat-faced little man laughed. "Belgarath, nothing about this whole thing surprises me any more."

Belgarath turned back to Garion. "Exactly what did he tell you?"

"He showed me the Mrin Codex. Have you ever read it?"

"From end to end and backward and forward - even from side to side a couple of times. Which part did he show you?"

"The part about the meeting of the Child of Light and the Child of Dark."

"Oh," Belgarath said. "I was afraid it might have been that part. Did he explain it?"

Dumbly, Garion nodded.

"Well," the old man said with a penetrating look, "now you know the worst. What are you going to do about it?"

"He gave me a couple of alternatives," Garion said. "I can wait until we get an army together, and we can go off and fight back and forth with the Angaraks for generations. That's one way, isn't it?"

Belgarath nodded.

"Of course that will get millions of people killed for nothing, won't it?"

The old man nodded again.

Garion drew in a deep breath. "Or," he continued, "I can go off by myself and find Torak - wherever he is - and try to kill him."

Silk whistled, his eyes widening.

"He said that I didn't have to go alone," Garion added hopefully. "I asked

him about that."

"Thanks," Belgarath said dryly.

Silk sprawled in a nearby chair, rubbing thoughtfully at his pointed nose. He looked at Belgarath. "You know that Polgara would skin the both of us inch by inch if we let him go off alone, don't you?"

Belgarath grunted.

"Where did you say Torak is?"

"Cthol Mishrak - in Mallorea."

"I've never been there."

"I have - a few times. It's not a very attractive place."

"Maybe time has improved it."

"That's not very likely."

Silk shrugged. "Maybe we ought to go with him - show him the way, that sort of thing. It's time I left Riva anyway. Some ugly rumors are starting to go around about me."

"It is rather a good time of year for travelling," Belgarath admitted, giving Garion a sly, sidelong glance.

Garion felt better already. He knew from their bantering tone that they had already made up their minds. He would not have to go in search of Torak alone. For now that was enough: there'd be time for worrying later. "All right," he said, "what do we do?"

"We creep out of Riva very quietly," Belgarath replied. "There's nothing to be gained by getting into any long discussions with your .Aunt Pol about this."

"The wisdom of ages," Silk agreed fervently. "When do we start?" His ferret eyes were very bright.

"The sooner the better." Belgarath shrugged.

"Did you have any plans for tonight?"

"Nothing I can't postpone."

"All right then. We'll wait until everyone goes to bed, and then we'll pick up Garion's sword and get started." "Which way do we go?" Garion asked him.

"Sendaria first," Belgarath replied, "and then across Drasnia to Gar og Nadrak. Then north to the archipelago that leads to Mallorea. It's a long way to Cthol Mishrak and the tomb of the one-eyed God."

"And then?"

"Then, Garion, we settle this once and for all."

PART THREE

DRASNIA

[Image]

Chapter Seventeen

"DEAR AUNT POL," Garion's note began, "I know this is going to make you angry, but there's no other way. I've seen the Mrin Codex, and now I know what I have to do. The-" He broke off, frowning. "How do you spell 'Prophecy'?" he asked.

Belgarath spelled it out for him. "Don't drag it out too much, Garion," the old man advised. "Nothing you say is going to make her happy about this, so stick to the point."

"Don't you think I ought to explain why we're doing this?" Garion fretted.

"She's read the Codex, Garion," Belgarath replied. "She'll know why without your explanation."

"I really ought to leave a note for Ce'Nedra, too," Garion considered.

"Polgara can tell her what she needs to know," Belgarath said. "We have things to do and we can't afford to spend the whole night on correspondence."

"I've never written a letter before," Garion remarked. "It's not nearly as easy as it looks."

"Just say what you have to say and then stop," the old man advised. "Don't labor at it so much."

The door opened and Silk came back in. He was dressed in the nondescript clothing he had worn on the road, and he carried two bundles.

"I think these should fit you," he said, handing one of the bundles to Belgarath and the other to Garion.

"Did you get the money?" the old man asked him.

"I borrowed some from Barak."

"That's surprising," Belgarath replied. "He isn't notorious for generosity."

"I didn't tell him I was borrowing it," the little man returned with a broad wink. "I thought it would save time if I didn't have to go into long explanations."

One of Belgarath's eyebrows shot up.

"We are in a hurry, aren't we?" Silk asked with an innocent expression. "And Barak can be tedious when it comes to money."

"Spare me the excuses," Belgarath told him. He turned back to Garion. "Have you finished with that yet?"

"What do you think?" Garion asked, handing him the note.

The old man glanced at it. "Good enough," he said. "Now sign it and we'll put it where somebody'll find it sometime tomorrow."

"Late tomorrow," Silk suggested. "I'd like to be well out of Polgara's range when she finds out that we've left."

Garion signed the note, folded it and wrote, "For Lady Polgara," across the outside.

"We'll leave it on the throne," Belgarath said. "Let's change clothes and go get the sword."

"Isn't the sword going to be a bit bulky?" Silk asked after Garion and Belgarath had changed.

"There's a scabbard for it in one of the antechambers," Belgarath answered opening the door carefully and peering out into the silent hall. "He'll have to wear it slung across his back."

"That glow is going to be a bit ostentatious," Silk said.

"We'll cover the Orb," Belgarath replied. "Let's go."

The three of them slipped out into the dimly lighted corridor and crept through the midnight stillness toward the throne room. Once, a sleepy servant going toward the kitchen almost surprised them, but an empty chamber provided them with a temporary hiding place until he had passed. Then they moved on.

"Is it locked?" Silk whispered when they reached the door to the Hall of the Rivan King.

Garion took hold of the large handle and twisted, wincing as the latch clacked loudly in the midnight stillness. He pushed, and the door creaked as it swung open.

"You ought to have somebody take care of that," Silk muttered.

The Orb of Aldur began to glow faintly as soon as the three of them entered the Hall.

"It seems to recognize you," Silk observed to Garion.

When Garion took down the sword, the Orb flared, filling the Hall of the Rivan King with its deep blue radiance. Garion looked around nervously, fearful that someone passing might see the light and come in to investigate. "Stop that," he irrationally admonished the stone. With a startled flicker, the glow of the Orb subsided back into a faint, pulsating light, and the triumphant song of the Orb stilled to a murmur.

Belgarath looked quizzically at his grandson, but said nothing. He led them to an antechamber and removed a long, plain scabbard from a case standing against the wall. The belt attached to the scabbard had seen a certain amount of use. The old man buckled it in place for Garion, passing it over the young man's right shoulder and down across his chest so that the scabbard, attached to the belt in two places, rode diagonally down his back. There was also a knitted tube in the case, almost like a narrow sock. "Slide this over the hilt," Belgarath instructed.

Garion covered the hilt of his great sword with the tube and then took hold of the blade itself and carefully inserted the tip into the top of the scabbard. It was awkward, and neither Silk nor Belgarath offered to help him. All three of them knew why. The sword slid home and, since it seemed to have no weight, it was not too uncomfortable. The crosspiece of the hilt, however, stood out just at the top of his head and tended to poke him if he moved too quickly.

"It wasn't really meant to be worn," Belgarath told him. "We had to improvise."

Once again, the three of them passed through the dimly lighted corndors of the sleeping palace and emerged through a side door. Silk slipped on ahead, moving as soundlessly as a cat and keeping to the shadows. Belgarath and Garion waited. An open window perhaps twenty feet overhead faced out into the courtyard. As they stood together beneath it, a faint light appeared, and the voice that spoke down to them was very soft. "Errand?" it said.

"Yes," Garion replied without thinking. "Everything's all right. Go back to bed."

"Belgarion," the child said with a strange kind of satisfaction. Then he added, "Good-bye," in a somewhat more wistful tone, and he was gone.

"Let's hope he doesn't run straight to Polgara," Belgarath muttered.

"I think we can trust him, Grandfather. He knew we were leaving and he just wanted to say good-bye."

"Would you like to explain how you know that?"

"I don't know." Garion shrugged. "I just do."

Silk whistled from the courtyard gate, and Belgarath and Garion followed him down into the quiet streets of the city.

It was still early spring, and the night was cool but not chilly. There was a fragrance in the air, washing down over the city from the high meadows in the mountains behind Riva and mingling with peat smoke and the salty tang of the sea. The stars overhead were bright, and the newly risen moon, looking swollen as it rode low over the horizon, cast a glittering golden path across the breast of the Sea of the Winds. Garion felt that excitement he always experienced when starting out at night. He had been cooped up too long, and each step that took him farther and farther from the dull round of appointments and ceremonies filled him with an almost intoxicating anticipation.

"It's good to be on the road again," Belgarath murmured, as if reading his thoughts.

"Is it always like this?" Garion whispered back. "I mean, even after all the years that you've been doing it?"

"Always," Belgarath replied. "Why do you think I prefer the life of a vagabond?"

They moved on down through the dark streets to the city gate and out through a small sallyport to the wharves jutting into the moondappled waters of the harbor.

Captain Greldik was a bit drunk when they reached his ship. The vagrant seaman had ridden out the winter in the safety of the harbor at Riva. His ship had been hauled out on the strand, her bottom scraped and her seams recaulked. Her main mast, which had creaked rather alarmingly on the voyage from Sendaria, had been reinforced and fitted with new sails. Then Greldik and his crew had spent much of their time carousing. The effects of three months of steady dissipation showed on his face when they woke him. His eyes were bleary, and there were dark-stained pouches under them. His bearded face looked puffy and unwell.

"Maybe tomorrow," he grunted when Belgarath told him of their urgent need to leave the island. "Or the next day. The next day would be better, I think."

Belgarath spoke more firmly.

"My sailors couldn't possibly man the oars," Greldik objected. "They'll be throwing up all over the deck, and it takes a week to clean up a mess like that."

Belgarath delivered a blistering ultimatum, and Greldik sullenly climbed out of his rumpled bunk. He lurched toward the crew's quarters, pausing only long enough to be noisily sick over the rail, and then he descended into the forward hold, where with kicks and curses he roused his men.

The moon was high and dawn only a few hours off when Greldik's ship slid quietly out of the harbor and met the long, rolling swells of the Sea of the Winds. When the sun came up they were far out at sea.

The weather held fair, even though the winds were not favorable, and in two days' time Greldik dropped Garion, Silk and Belgarath off on a deserted beach just north of the mouth of the Seline River on the northwest coast of Sendaria.

"I don't know that I'd be in all that big a hurry to go back to Riva," Belgarath told Greldik as he stepped out of the small boat onto the sand of the beach. He handed the bearded Cherek a small pouch of jingling coins. "I'm sure you and your crew can find a bit of diversion somewhere."

"It's always nice in Camaar this time of year," Greldik mused, bouncing the pouch thoughtfully in his hand, "and I know a young widow there who's always been very friendly."

"You ought to pay her a visit," Belgarath suggested. "You've been away for quite some time, and she's sure to have been terribly lonely for you."

"I think maybe I will," Greldik said, his eyes suddenly bright. "Have a good trip." He motioned to his men, and they began rowing the small boat back toward the lean ship standing a few hundred yards offshore.

"What was that all about?" Garion asked.

"I'd like to get a bit of distance between us and Polgara before she gets her hands on Greldik," the old man replied. "I don't particularly want her chasing us." He looked around. "Let's see if we can find somebody with a boat to row us upriver to Seline. We should be able to buy horses and supplies there."

A fisherman, who immediately saw that turning ferryboatman would provide a more certain profit than trusting his luck on the banks off the northwest coast, agreed to take them upriver; by the time the sun was setting, they had arrived in the city of Seline. They spent the night in a comfortable inn and went the following morning to the central market. Silk negotiated the purchase of horses, haggling down to the last penny, bargaining more out of habit, Garion thought, than out of any real necessity. Then they bought supplies for the trip. By midmorning, they were pounding along the road that led toward Darine, some forty leagues distant.

The fields of northern Sendaria had begun to sprout that first green blush that lay on damp earth like a faint jade mist and more than anything announced spring. A few fleecy clouds scampered across the blue of the sky, and, though the wind was gusty, the sun warmed the air. The road opened before them, stretching across the verdant fields; and though their mission was deadly serious, Garion almost wanted to shout out of pure exuberance.

In two more days they reached Darine.

"Do you want to take ship here?" Silk asked Belgarath as they crested the hill up which they had come so many months before with their three wagonloads of turnips. "We could be in Kotu inside a week."

Belgarath scratched at his beard, looking out at the expanse of the Gulf of Cherek, glittering in the afternoon sun. "I don't think so," he decided. He pointed at several lean Cherek warboats patrolling just outside Sendarian territorial waters.

"The Chereks are always moving around out there," Silk replied. "It might have nothing whatsoever to do with us."

"Polgara's very persistent," Belgarath said. "She can't leave Riva herself as long as so many things are afoot there, but she can send people out to look for us. Let's avoid any possible trouble if we can. We'll go along the north coast and then on up through the fens to Boktor."

Silk gave him a look of profound distaste. "It will take a lot longer," he objected.

"We aren't in all that great a hurry," Belgarath remarked blandly. "The Alorns are beginning to mass their armies, but they still need more time, and it's going to take a while to get the Arends all moving in the same

direction."

"What's that got to do with it?" Silk asked him.

"I have plans for those armies, and I'd like to start them moving before we cross into Gar og Nadrak if possible and certainly before we get to Mallorea. We can afford the time it will take to avoid any unpleasantness with the people Polgara's sent out to find us."

And so they detoured around Darine and took the narrow, rocky road that led along the cliffs where the waves crashed and boomed and foamed, beating themselves to fragments against the great rocks of the north coast.

The mountains of eastern Sendaria ran down into the Gulf of Cherek along that forbidding shore, and the road, which twisted and climbed and dropped steeply again, was not good. Silk grumbled every mile of the way.

Garion, however, had other worries. The decision he had made after reading the Mrin Codex had seemed quite logical at the time, but logic was scant comfort now. He was deliberately riding toward Mallorea to face Torak in a duel. The more he thought about it, the more insane it seemed. How could he possibly hope to defeat a God? He brooded about that as they rode eastward along the rocky coast, and his mood became as unpleasant as Silk's.

After about a week, the cliffs became lower, and the land more gently rolling. From the top of the last of the eastern foothills, they looked out and saw what appeared to be a vast, flat plain, dark-green and very damp-looking.

"Well, there they are," Silk sourly informed Belgarath.

"What's got you so bad-tempered?" the old man asked him.

"One of the main reasons I left Drasnia in the first place was to avoid the possibility of ever being obliged to go anywhere near the fens," Silk replied crisply. "Now you propose to drag me lengthwise through the whole soggy, stinking expanse of them. I'm bitterly disappointed in you, old friend, and it's altogether possible that I'll never forgive you for this."

Garion was frowning at the marshland spread out below. "That wouldn't be Drasnia, would it?" he asked. "I thought that Drasnia was farther north."

"It's Algaria, actually," Belgarath told him. "The beginning of Aldurfens. Up beyond the mouths of the Aldur River is the Drasnian border. They call it Mrin marsh up there, but it's all the same swamp. It goes on for another thirty leagues or so beyond Kotu at the mouth of the Mrin River."

"Most people just call it the fens and let it go at that," Silk observed. "Most people have sense enough to stay out of it," he added pointedly.

"Quit complaining so much," Belgarath told him bluntly. "There are fishermen along this coast. We'll buy a boat."

Silk's eyes brightened. "We can go up along the coast then," he suggested.

"That wouldn't be very prudent," Belgarath disagreed, "not with Anheg's fleet scouring the Gulf of Cherek, looking for us."

"You don't know that they're looking for us," Silk said quickly.

"I know Polgara," Belgarath answered.

"I feel that this trip is definitely growing sour on us," Silk grumbled.

The fishermen along the marshy coast were a peculiar mixture of Algars and Drasnians, close-mouthed and wary of strangers. Their villages were built on pilings driven deep into the marshy earth, and there lingered about them that peculiar odor of long-dead fish that hovers over fishing villages wherever one finds them. It took some time to find a man with a boat he was willing to sell and even longer to persuade him that three horses and a few silver coins beside was a fair price for it.

"It leaks," Silk declared, pointing at the inch or so of water that had collected in the bottom of the boat as they poled away from the reeking village.

"All boats leak, Silk," Belgarath replied calmly. "It's the nature of boats to leak. Bail it out."

"It will just fill up again."

"Then you can bail it out again. Try not to let it get too far ahead of you."

The fens stretched on interminably, a wilderness of cattails and rushes and dark, slowly moving water. There were channels and streams and quite frequently small lakes where the going was much easier. The air was humid and, in the evenings, thick with gnats and mosquitoes. Frogs sang of love all night, greeting spring with intoxicated fervor-little chirping frogs and great, booming, bull-voiced frogs as big as dinner plates. Fish leaped in the ponds and lakes, and beaver and muskrats nested on soggy islands.

They poled their way through the confused maze of channels marking the mouths of the Aldur and continued northeasterly in the slowly warming northern spring. After a week or more, they crossed the indeterminate border and left Algaria behind.

A false channel put them aground once, and they were obliged to climb out to heave and push their boat off a mudbank by main strength. When they were afloat again, Silk sat disconsolately on the gunwale regarding his ruined

boots that were dripping thick mud into the water. When he spoke, his voice was filled with profound disgust. "Delightful," he said. "How wonderful to be home again in dear old mucky Drasnia."

Chapter Eighteen

ALTHOUGH IT WAS all one vast swampland, it seemed to Garion that the fens here in Drasnia were subtly different from those farther south. The channels were narrower, for one thing, and they twisted and turned more frequently. After a couple of days poling, he developed a growing conviction that they were lost. "Are you sure you know where we're going?" he demanded of Silk.

"I haven't the vaguest idea," Silk replied candidly.

"You keep saying that you know the way everywhere," Garion accused him.

"There isn't any certain way here in the fens, Garion," Silk told him. "All you can do is keep going against the current and hope for the best."

"There's got to be a route," Garion objected. "Why don't they put up markers or something?"

"It wouldn't do any good. Look." The little man put his pole against a solid-looking hummock rising out of the water beside the boat and pushed. The hummock moved sluggishly away. Garion stared at it in amazement.

"It's floating vegetation," Belgarath explained, stopping his poling to wipe the sweat from his face. "Seeds fall on it, and it grows grass just like solid earth - except that it isn't solid. It floats wherever the wind and current push it. That's why there aren't any permanent channels and there's no definite route."

"It's not always just wind and current," Silk added darkly. He glanced out at the lowering sun. "We'd better find something solid to tie up to for the night," he suggested.

"How about that one?" Belgarath replied, pointing at a brushy hummock that was somewhat higher than those surrounding it.

They poled their way to the clump of ground rising out of the surrounding water, and Silk kicked at it experimentally a few times. "It seems to be stationary," he confirmed. He stepped out of the boat and climbed to the top, frequently stamping his feet. The ground responded with a satisfactorily solid sound. "There's a dry spot up here," he reported, "and a pile of driftwood on the other side. We can sleep on solid ground for a change, and maybe even have a hot meal."

They pulled the boat far up onto the sloping side, and Silk took some rather exotic-seeming precautions to make certain that it was securely

tied.

"Isn't that sort of unnecessary?" Garion asked him.

"It isn't much of a boat," Silk replied, "but it's the only one we've got. Let's not take chances with it."

They got a fire going and erected their single tent as the sun slowly settled in a cloudbank to the west, painting the marsh in a ruddy glow. Silk dug out a few pans and began to work on supper.

"It's too hot," Garion advised critically as the rat-faced little man prepared to lay strips of bacon in a smoking iron pan.

"Do you want to do this?"

"I was just warning you, that's all."

"I don't have your advantages, Garion," Silk replied tartly. "I didn't grow up in Polgara's kitchen the way you did. I just make do the best I can."

"You don't have to get grumpy about it," Garion said. "I just thought you'd like to know that the pan's too hot."

"I think I can manage without any more advice."

"Suit yourself - but you're going to burn the bacon."

Silk gave him an irritated look and started slapping bacon slices into the pan. The slices sizzled and smoked, and their edges turned black almost immediately.

"I told you so," Garion murmured.

"Belgarath," Silk complained, "make him leave me alone."

"Come away, Garion," the old man said. "He can burn supper without any help."

"Thanks," Silk responded sarcastically.

Supper was not an absolute disaster. After they had eaten, they sat watching as the fire burned down and purple evening crept across the fens. The frogs took up their vast chorus among the reeds, and birds perched on the bending stalks of cattails, clucking and murmuring sleepily. There were faint splashes and rippling sounds in the brown water about them and occasional eruptions of bubbles as swamp gas gurgled to the surface. Silk sighed bitterly. "I hate this place," he said. "I absolutely hate it."

That night Garion had a nightmare. It was not the first he had suffered

since they had left Riva; and as he sat up, sweat-drenched and trembling, he was positive it would not be the last. It was not a new nightmare, but rather was one which had periodically haunted his sleep since boyhood. Unlike an ordinary bad dream, this one did not involve being chased or threatened, but consisted rather of a single image - the image of a hideously maimed face. Although he had never actually seen the owner of the face, he knew exactly whose face it was, and now he knew why it inhabited his darkest dreams.

The next day dawned cloudy with a threat of approaching rain. As Belgarath stirred up the fire and Silk rummaged through his pack for something suitable for breakfast, Garion stood looking out at the swamp around him. A flight of geese swept by overhead in a ragged V, their wings whistling and their muted cries drifting, lonely and remote. A fish jumped not far from the edge of the hummock, and Garion watched the ripples widening out toward the far shore. He looked for quite some time at that shore before he realized exactly what it was he was seeing. Concerned, then a bit alarmed, he began to peer first this way and then that.

"Grandfather!" he cried. "Look!"

"At what?"

"It's all changed. There aren't any channels any more. We're in the middle of a big pond, and there isn't any way out of it." He spun around, desperately trying to see some exit, but the edges of the pond in which they sat were totally unbroken. There were no channels leading out of it, and the brown water was absolutely still, showing no evidence of current.

Then in the center of the pond, without making so much as a ripple, a round, furred head emerged from the water. The animal's eyes were very large and bright; it had no external ears, and its little nose was as black as a button. It made a peculiar chirping noise, and another head emerged out of the water a few feet away.

"Fenlings!" Silk gasped, drawing his short sword with a steely rustle.

"Oh, put that away," Belgarath told him disgustedly. "They aren't going to hurt you."

"They've trapped us, haven't they?"

"What do they want?" Garion asked.

"Breakfast, obviously," Silk answered, still holding his sword.

"Don't be stupid, Silk," Belgarath told him. "Why would they want to eat a raw Drasnian when there's a whole swampful of fish available? Put the sword away."

The first fenling which had poked its head up out of the water lifted one of its webbed forefeet and made a peremptory gesture. The webbed foot was strangely handlike.

"They seem to want us to follow them," Belgarath said calmly.

"And you're going to do it?" Silk was aghast. "Are you mad?"

"Do we have any choice?"

Without further discussion, Belgarath began taking down the tent.

"Are they monsters, Grandfather?" Garion asked worriedly as he helped. "Like Algroths or Trolls?"

"No, they're just animals-like seals or beaver. They're curious and intelligent and very playful."

"But they play very nasty games," Silk added.

After they had stowed all their packs into the boat, they pushed it down the bank into the water. The fenlings watched them curiously with no particular threat or malice in their gaze, but rather a kind of firm determination on their furry little faces. The solid-looking edge of the pond opened then to reveal the channel that had been concealed during the night. The strangely rounded head of the fenling who had gestured to them moved on ahead, leading the way and glancing back often to be certain they were following. Several others trailed after the boat, their large eyes alert.

It began to rain, a few drops at first, and then a steady drizzle that veiled the endless expanse of reed and cattail stretching out on all sides of them.

"Where do you think they're taking us?" Silk asked, stopping his poling to wipe the rain out of his face. One of the fenlings behind the boat chattered angrily at him until he dug his pole into the muddy bottom of the channel again.

"We'll just have to wait and see," Belgarath replied.

The channel continued to open before them, and they poled steadily along, following the round-headed fenling who had first appeared.

"Are those trees up ahead?" Silk asked, peering into the misty drizzle.

"It appears so," Belgarath answered. "I suspect that's where we're going."

The large cluster of trees slowly emerged from the mist. As they drew closer, Garion could see a gentle rise of ground swelling up out of the

reeds and water. The grove which crowned the island appeared to be mostly willows with long, trailing branches.

The fenling who had been leading them swam on ahead. When it reached the island, it emerged half out of the water and gave a strange, whistling cry. A moment or so later, a hooded figure stepped out of the trees and moved slowly down to the bank. Garion did not know what to expect, but he was more than a little startled when the brown-cloaked figure on the shore pushed back the hood to reveal a woman's face that, though very old, still bore the luminous trace of what had once been an extraordinary beauty.

"Hail, Belgarath," she greeted the old sorcerer in an oddly neutral voice.

"Hello, Vordai," he replied conversationally. "It's been quite a while, hasn't it?"

The little creatures that had guided them to the island waded out of the water to gather around the brown-cloaked woman. They chirped and chattered to her, and she looked at them fondly, touching their wet fur with gentle fingers. They were medium-sized animals with short hind legs and little rounded bellies and they walked upright with a peculiar quick shuffle, their forepaws held delicately in front of their furry chests.

"Come inside out of the rain, Belgarath," the woman said. "Bring your friends." She turned and walked up a path leading into the willow grove with her fenlings scampering along beside her.

"What do we do?" Garion whispered.

"We go inside," Belgarath replied, stepping out of the boat onto the island.

Garion was not sure what to expect as he and Silk followed the old man up the path toward the dripping willows, but he was totally unprepared for the neat, thatch-roofed cottage with its small adjoining garden. The house was built of weathered logs, tightly chinked with moss, and a wispy tendril of smoke drifted from its chimney.

At the doorway, the woman in brown carefully wiped her feet on a rush mat and shook the rain out of her cloak. Then she opened the door and went inside without looking back.

Silk's expression was dubious as he stopped outside the cottage. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Belgarath?" he asked quietly. "I've heard stories about Vordai."

"It's the only way to find out what she wants," Belgarath told him, "and I'm fairly sure we aren't going any farther until we talk with her. Let's go in. Be sure to wipe your feet."

The interior of Vordai's cottage was scrupulously neat. The ceilings were low and heavily beamed. The wooden floor was scrubbed to whiteness, and a table and chairs sat before an arched fireplace where a pot hung in the flames from an iron arm. There were wildflowers in a vase on the table and curtains at the window overlooking the garden.

"Why don't you introduce your friends to me, Belgarath?" the woman suggested, hanging her cloak on a peg. She smoothed the front of her plain brown dress.

"As you wish, Vordai," the old man replied politely. "This is Prince Kheldar, your countryman. And this is King Belgarion of Riva."

"Noble guests," the woman observed in that strangely neutral voice. "Welcome to the house of Vordai."

"Forgive me, madame," Silk said in his most courtly manner, "but your reputation seems to be grossly inaccurate."

"Vordai, the witch of the fens?" she asked, looking amused. "Do they still call me that?"

He smiled in return. "Their descriptions are misleading, to say the least."

"The hag of the swamps." She mimicked the speech of a credulous peasant. "Drowner of travellers and queen of the fenlings." There was a bitter twist to her lips.

"That's more or less what they say," he told her. "I always believed you were a myth conjured up to frighten unruly children."

"Vordai will get you and gobble you up!" She laughed, but there was no humor in her laughter. "I've been hearing that for generations. Take off your cloaks, gentlemen. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. You'll be staying for a while."

One.1□TD□fenlings - the one.1w ho had led them to the island, Garion thought - chattered at her in a piping little voice, glancing nervously at the pot hanging in the fire.

"Yes," she answered quite calmly, "I know that it's boiling, Tupik. It has to boil.1r□it won't cook." She turned back to her guests. "Breakfast will be ready in a bit," she told them. "Tupik tells me you haven't eaten yet."

"You can communicate with them?" Silk sounded surprised.

"Isn't that obvious, Prince Kheldar? Here, let me hang your cloaks by the fire to dry." She stopped and regarded Garion gravely. "So great a sword for one.1so young," she noted, lookingat the great hilt rising above his shoulder. "Stand it in the corner, King Belgarion. There's no one.to fight

here."

Garion inclined his head politely, unbuckled the sword belt and handed her his cloak.

Another, somewhat smaller fenling darted out of a comer with a piece of cloth and began busily wiping up the water that had dripped from their cloaks, chattering disapprovingly all the while.

"You'll have to forgive Poppi." Vordai smiled. "She's obsessed with tidiness. I sometimes think that, if I left her alone, she'd sweep holes in the floor."

"They're changing, Vordai," Belgarath said gravely, seating himself at the table.

"I know," she replied, going to the fireplace to stir the bubbling pot. "I've watched them over the years. They're not the same as they were when I came here."

"It was a mistake to tamper with them," he told her.

"So you've said before - you and Polgara both. How is she, by the way?"

"Probably raging by now. We slipped out of the Citadel at Riva without telling her we were leaving, and that sort of thing irritates her."

"Polgara was born irritable."

"We agree on that point anyway."

"Breakfast's ready." She lifted the pot with a curved iron hook and set it on the table. Poppi scampered over to a cupboard standing against the far wall and brought back a stack of wooden bowls, then returned for spoons. Her large eyes were very bright, and she chittered seriously at the three visitors.

"She's telling you not to drop crumbs on her clean floor," Vordai advised them, removing a steaming loaf of bread from an oven built into the side of the fireplace. "Crumbs infuriate her."

"We'll be careful," Belgarath promised.

It was a peculiar sort of breakfast, Garion thought. The stew that came steaming from the pot was thick, with strange vegetables floating in it, and large chunks of fish. It was delicately seasoned, however, and he found it delicious. By the time he had finished eating, he rather reluctantly concluded that Vordai might even be as good a cook as Aunt Pol.

"Excellent, Vordai," Belgarath complimented her, finally pushing his bowl

away. "Now suppose we get down to business. Why did you have us brought here?"

"To talk, Belgarath," she replied. "I don't get much company, and conversation's a good way to pass a rainy morning. Why have you come into the fens?"

"The Prophecy moves on, Vordai - even if sometimes we don't. The Rivan King has returned, and Torak stirs in his sleep."

"Ah," she said without much real interest.

"The Orb of Aldur stands on the pommel of Belgarion's sword. The day is not far off when the Child of Light and the Child of Dark must meet. We go toward that meeting, and all mankind awaits the outcome."

"Except me, Belgarath." She gave him a penetrating look. "The fate of mankind is a matter of only the mildest curiosity to me. I was excluded from mankind three hundred years ago, you'll remember."

"Those people are all long dead, Vordai."

"Their descendants are no different. Could I walk into any village in this part of Drasnia and tell the good villagers who I am without being stoned or burned?"

"Villagers are the same the world over, madame," Silk put in. "Provincial, stupid, and superstitious. Not all men are like that."

"All men are the same, Prince Kheldar," she disagreed. "When I was young, I tried to involve myself in the affairs of my village. I only wanted to help, but very soon not a cow died or a baby took colic without my being blamed for it. They stoned me finally and tried to drag me back to the village to burn me at the stake. They had quite a celebration planned. I managed to escape, though, and I took refuge here in the fens. After that I had very little interest in the affairs of men."

"You probably shouldn't have displayed your talents quite so openly," Belgarath told her. "People prefer not to believe in that sort of thing. There's a whole catalogue of nasty little emotions curdling in the human spirit, and anything the least bit out of the ordinary raises the possibility of retribution."

"My village learned that it was more than a possibility," she replied with a certain grim satisfaction.

"What happened?" Garion asked curiously.

"It started raining," Vordai told him with an odd smile.

"Is that all?"

"It was enough. It rained on that village for five years, King Belgarion just on the village. A hundred yards beyond the last house everything was normal, but in the village there was rain. They tried to move twice, but the rain followed them. Finally they gave up and left the area. For all I know, some of their descendants are still wandering."

"You're not serious," Silk scoffed.

"Quite serious." She gave him an amused look. "Your credulity appears selective, Prince Kheldar. Here you are, going about the world in the company of Belgarath the Sorcerer. I'm sure you believe in his power; but you can't bring yourself to accept the idea of the power of the witch of the fens."

Silk stared at her.

"I really am a witch, Prince Kheldar. I could demonstrate if you wish, but I don't think you'd like it very much. People seldom do."

"That isn't really necessary, Vordai," Belgarath said. "What is it that you want exactly?"

"I was coming to that, Belgarath," she replied. "After I escaped into the fens, I discovered my little friends here." She affectionately stroked the side of Poppi's furry little face, and Poppi nuzzled at her hand ecstatically. "They were afraid of me at first, but they finally grew less shy. They began bringing me fish - and flowers - as tokens of friendship, and I needed friends very badly at that time. I altered them a bit out of gratitude."

"You shouldn't have, you know," the old man said rather sadly.

She shrugged. "Should and shouldn't have very little meaning to me any more."

"Not even the Gods would do what you did."

"The Gods have other amusements." She looked directly at him then. "I've been waiting for you, Belgarath - for years now. I knew that sooner or later you'd come back into the fens. This meeting you spoke of is very important to you, isn't it?"

"It's the most important event in the history of the world."

"That depends on your point of view, I suppose. You need my help, though."

"I think we can manage, Vordai."

"Perhaps, but how do you expect to get out of the fens?"

He looked at her sharply.

"I can open the way for you to the dry ground at the edge of the swamp, or I can see to it that you wander around in these marshes forever - in which case this meeting you're concerned about will never happen, will it? That puts me in a very interesting situation, wouldn't you say?"

Belgarath's eyes narrowed.

"I discovered that when men deal with each other, there's usually an exchange of some kind," she added with a strange little smile. "Something for something; nothing for nothing. It seems to be a sensible arrangement."

"Exactly what did you have in mind?"

"The fenlings are my friends," she replied. "In a very special way, my children. But men look upon them as animals with pelts worth the taking. They trap them, Belgarath, and they kill them for their fur. The fine ladies in Boktor and Kotu dress themselves in the skins of my children and give no thought to the grief it causes me. They call my children animals and they come into the fens to hunt them."

"They are animals, Vordai," he told her gently.

"Not any more." Almost without seeming to think, Vordai put her arm about Poppi's shoulders. "It may be that you were right when you said that I shouldn't have tampered with them, but it's too late now to change it back." She sighed. "I'm a witch, Belgarath," she continued, "not a sorceress. My life has a beginning and an end, and it's approaching its end, I think. I won't live forever, as you and Polgara have done. I've lived several hundred years already and I'm growing very tired of life. As long as I'm alive, I can keep men from coming into the fens; but once I'm gone, my children will have no protection."

"And you want me to take them into my care?"

"No, Belgarath. You're too busy; and sometimes you forget promises you don't care to remember. I want you to do the one thing that will make it forever impossible for men to think of the fenlings as animals."

His eyes widened as what she was suggesting dawned on him.

"I want you to give my children the power of speech, Belgarath," Vordai said. "I can't do it. My witchcraft doesn't reach that far. Only a sorcerer can make it possible for them to talk."

"Vordai-"

"That's my price, Belgarath," she told him. "That's what my help will cost you. Take it or leave it."

Chapter Nineteen

THEY SLEPT THAT night in Vordai's cottage, though Garion slept very little. The ultimatum of the witch of the fens troubled him profoundly. He knew that tampering with nature had far-reaching effects, and to go as far as Vordai wished might forever erase the dividing line between men and animals. The philosophical and theological implications of that step were staggering. There were, moreover, other worries. It was entirely possible that Belgarath could not do what Vordai demanded of him. Garion was almost positive that his grandfather had not attempted to use his will since his collapse months before, and now Vordai had set him an almost impossible task.

What would happen to Belgarath if he tried and failed? What would that do to him? Would the doubts then take over and rob him of any possibility of ever regaining his power? Desperately Garion tried to think of a way to warn his grandfather without arousing those fatal doubts.

But they absolutely had to get out of the fens. However reluctantly Garion had made the decision to meet Torak, he now knew that it was the only possible choice open to him. The meeting, however, could not be delayed indefinitely. If it were put off too long, events would move on, and the world would be plunged into the war they were all so desperately trying to head off, Vordai's threat to trap them all here in the fens unless Belgarath paid her price threatened not only them, but the entire world. In a very real sense, she held the fate of all mankind in her uncaring hands. Try though he might, Garion could not think of any way to avoid the test of Belgarath's will. Though he would reluctantly have done what Vordai wished himself, he did not even know where to begin. If it could be done at all, his grandfather was the only one who could do it-if his illness had not destroyed his power.

When dawn crept through the misty fens, Belgarath arose and sat before the fire, brooding into the crackling flames with a somber face.

"Well?" Vordai asked him. "Have you decided?"

"It's wrong, Vordai," he told her. "Nature cries out against it."

"I'm much closer to nature than you are, Belgarath," she replied. "Witches live more intimately with her than sorcerers do. I can feel the turning of the seasons in my blood, and the earth is alive under my feet. I hear no outcry. Nature loves all her creatures, and she would grieve over the

obliteration of my fenlings almost as much as I. But that's really beside the point, isn't it? Even though the very rocks shrieked out against it, I would not relent."

Silk exchanged a quick look with Garion, and the little man's sharp face seemed as troubled as Belgarath's.

"Are the fenlings really beasts?" Vordai continued. She pointed to where Poppi still slept, her delicate forepaws open like little hands. Tupik, moving stealthily, crept back into the house, carrying a handful of dew-drenched swamp flowers. With precise care, he placed them about the slumbering Poppi and gently laid the last one in her open hand. Then, with an oddly patient expression, he sat on his haunches to watch her awakening.

Poppi stirred, stretched, and yawned. She brought the flower to her little black nose and sniffed at it, looking affectionately at the expectant Tupik. She made a happy little chirping sound, and then she and Tupik scampered off together for a morning swim in the cool water of the swamp.

"It's a courting ritual," Vordai explained. "Tupik wants Poppi to be his mate, and as long as she continues to accept his gifts, he knows that she's still fond of him. It will go on for quite some time, and then they'll swim off into the swamp together for a week or so. When they come back, they'll be mates for life. Is that really so different from the way young humans behave?"

Her question profoundly disturbed Garion for some reason he could not quite put his finger on.

"Look there," Vordai told them, pointing through the window at a group of young fenlings, scarcely more than babies, at play. They had fashioned a ball out of moss and were rapidly passing it around in a circle, their large eyes intent on their game. "Couldn't a human child join that group and not feel the slightest bit out of place?" Vordai pressed.

Not far beyond the game, a mature female fenling cradled her sleeping baby, rocking gently with her cheek against the little one's face. "Isn't motherhood universal?" Vordai asked. "In what way do my children differ from humans?-except that they're perhaps more decent, more honest and loving with each other?"

Belgarath sighed. "All right, Vordai," he said, "you've made your point. I'll grant that the fenlings are probably nicer creatures than men. I don't know that speech will improve them, but if that's what you want-" He shrugged.

"You'll do it then?"

"I know it's wrong, but I'll try to do what you ask. I really don't have much choice, do I?"

"No," she replied, "you don't. Will you need anything? I have all the customary implements and compounds."

He shook his head. "Sorcery doesn't work that way. Witchcraft involves the summoning of spirits, but sorcery comes all from within. Someday, if we have the leisure, I'll explain the difference to you." He stood up. "I don't suppose you'd care to change your mind about this?"

Her face hardened. "No, Belgarath," she replied.

He sighed again. "All right, Vordai. I'll be back in a bit." He turned quietly and walked out into the mist-shrouded morning.

In the silence that followed his departure, Garion closely watched Vordai for some hint that her determination might not be as iron-hard as it seemed. It had occurred to him that if she were not blindly adamant, he might be able to explain the situation and persuade her to relent. The witch of the fens paced nervously about the room, picking things up absently and setting them down again. She seemed unable to concentrate her attention on any one thing for more than a moment.

"This may ruin him, you know," Garion told her quietly. Bluntness perhaps might sway her where other attempts at persuasion had failed.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded sharply.

"He was very ill last winter," Garion replied. "He and Ctuchik fought each other for possession of the Orb. Ctuchik was destroyed, but Belgarath nearly died too. It's quite possible that his power was destroyed by his illness."

Silk's gasp was clearly audible. "Why didn't you tell us?" he exclaimed.

"Aunt Pol said that we didn't dare," Garion said. "We couldn't take any chance of word of it getting back to the Angaraks. Belgarath's power is the one thing that's held them in check all these years. If he's lost it and they find out, they'll feel free to invade the West."

"Does he know?" Vordai asked quickly.

"I don't think so. Neither one of us said anything to him about it. We couldn't let him think for a moment that anything might be wrong. If he has one single doubt, it won't work for him. That's the main thing about sorcery. You have to believe that what you want to happen is going to. Otherwise, nothing happens at all - and each time you fail, it gets worse."

"What did you mean when you said that this might ruin him?" Vordai's face looked stricken, and Garion began to have some hope. "He may still have his power - or some of it," he explained. "But not enough to do what you've

asked of him. It takes a tremendous effort to do even simple things, and what you've asked him to do is very difficult. It could be too much for him; but once he starts, he won't be able to stop. And the effort may drain his will and his life energy until he cannot ever recover - or until he dies."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Vordai demanded, her face anguished.

"I couldn't - not without his hearing me, too."

She turned quickly toward the door. "Belgarath!" she cried. "Waitl" She spun back to Garion. "Go after him! Stop himl"

That was what Garion had been waiting for. He jumped to his feet and ran to the door. As he swung it open and was about to call out across the rainy yard, he felt a strange oppression as if something were almost happening - almost, but not quite. The shout froze on his lips.

"Go on, Garion," Silk urged him.

"I can't," Garion groaned. "He's already begun to pull in his will. He wouIdn't even hear me."

"Can you help him?"

"I don't even know exactly what he's trying to do, Silk," Garion replied helplessly. "If I went blundering in there now, all I'd do is make things worse."

They stared at him in consternation.

Garion felt a strange echoing surge. It was not at all what he ex pected, and so he was totally unprepared for it. His grandfather was not trying to move anything or change anything, but instead he was calling out - reaching across some vast distance with the voice of his mind. The words were not at all distinct, but the one word, "Master," did come through once quite distinctly. Belgarath was trying to reach Aldur. Garion held his breath.

Then, from infinitely far away, Aldur's voice replied. They spoke together quietly for several moments, and all the while Garion could feel the force of Belgarath's will, infused and magnified by the will of Aldur, growing stronger and stronger.

"What's happening?" Silk's voice was almost frightened.

"He's talking with Aldur. I can't hear what they're saying."

"Will Aldur help him?" Vordai asked.

"I don't know. I don't know if Aldur can use his will here any more.

There's some kind of limitation - something that he and the other Gods agreed to."

Then the strange conversation ended, and Garion felt Belgarath's will mounting, gathering itself. "He's begun," Garion said in a half whisper.

"His power's still there?" Silk asked.

Garion nodded.

"As strong as ever?"

"I don't know. There's no way to measure it."

The tension of it grew until it was almost intolerable. What Belgarath was doing was at once very subtle and very profound. There was no rushing surge or hollow echo this time. Instead, Garion felt an odd, tingling whisper as the old man's will was unleashed with agonizing slowness. The whisper seemed to be saying something over and over - something Garion could almost understand, but which tantalizingly eluded him.

Outside, the young fenlings stopped their game. The ball dropped unnoticed as the players all stood, listening intently. Poppi and Tupik, returning hand in hand from their swim, froze in their tracks and stood with their heads cocked as Belgarath's whisper spoke gently to them, reaching down into their thoughts, murmuring, explaining, teaching. Then their eyes widened as if in sudden understanding.

Belgarath emerged finally from the misty willows, his step heavy, weary. He walked slowly toward the house, stopping just outside to look intently at the stunned faces of the fenlings gathered in the dooryard. He nodded then and came back inside. His shoulders were slumped with exhaustion, and his white-bearded face seemed drained.

"Are you all right?" Vordai asked him, her tone no longer neutral. He nodded and sank into a chair by the table. "It's done," he said shortly.

Vordai looked at him, and her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"No tricks, Vordai," he said. "And I'm too tired to try to lie to you. I've paid your price. If it's all right with you, we'll leave right after breakfast. We still have a long way to go."

"I'll need more than just your word, Belgarath. I don't really trust you - or any human, for that matter. I want proof that you've paid."

But there was a strange new voice from the doorway. Poppi, her furry little face contorted with the effort, was struggling with something. "M-m.m-m-," she stammered. Her mouth twisted, and she tried again. "M-m-m-m-." It seemed to be the hardest thing she had ever tried to do. She took a deep

breath and tried once more. "M-m-m-motherrr," Poppi said.

With a low cry, Vordai rushed to the little creature, knelt, and embraced her.

"Mother," Poppi said again. It was clearer this time.

From outside the cottage there came a growing babble of small, squeaky voices, all repeating, "Mother, mother, mother." The excited fenlings converged on the cottage, their voices swelling as more and more of them emerged from the swamps.

Vordai wept.

"You'll have to teach them, of course," Belgarath said wearily. "I gave them the ability, but they don't know very many words yet."

Vordai looked at him with tears streaming down her face. "Thank you, Belgarath," she said in a faltering voice.

The old man shrugged. "Something for something," he replied. "Wasn't that the bargain?"

It was Tupik who led them from the fens. The little creature's chirping to his fellows, however, now had words mixed in with it - faltering, often badly mispronounced, but words nonetheless.

Garion thought for a long time before he spoke, wrestling with an idea as he pushed on his pole. "Grandfather," he said finally.

"Yes, Garion," the old man replied from where he rested in the stern of their boat.

"You knew all along, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"That it was possible that you couldn't make things happen any more?"

Belgarath stared at him. "Where did you get that idea?" he asked.

"Aunt Pol said that after you got sick last winter, you might have lost all your power."

"She said what?"

"She said that "

"I heard you." The old man was frowning, his face creased with thought. "That possibility never even occurred to me," he admitted. Suddenly he

blinked and his eyes opened very wide. "You know, she might have been right. The illness could have had that sort of effect. What an amazing thing."

"You didn't feel any - well - weaker?"

"What? No, of course not." Belgarath was still frowning, turning the idea over in his mind. "What an amazing thing," he repeated, and then he suddenly laughed.

"I don't see what's so funny."

"Is that what's been bothering you and your Aunt for all these months? The two of you have been tiptoeing around me as if I were made out of thin glass."

"We were afraid the Angaraks might find out, and we didn't dare say anything to you because-"

"Because you were afraid it might make me doubt my abilities?"

Garion nodded.

"Maybe in the long run it wasn't a bad idea at that. I certainly didn't need any doubts plaguing me this morning."

"Was it terribly difficult?"

"Moderately so, yes. I wouldn't want to have to try that sort of thing every day."

"But you didn't really have to do it, did you?"

"Do what?"

"Show the fenlings how to talk. If you've still got your power, then between the two of us, you and I could have opened a channel straight through to the edge of the swamp - no matter what Vordai or the fenlings could have done to try to stop us."

"I wondered how long it was going to be before that occurred to you," the old man replied blandly.

Garion gave him an irritated look. "All right," he said, "why did you do it then, since you didn't have to?"

"That question's rather impolite, Garion," Belgarath chided. "There are certain courtesies customarily observed. It's not considered good manners to ask another sorcerer why he did something."

Garion gave his grandfather an even harder look. "You're evading the question," he said bluntly. "Let's agree that I don't have very good manners, and then you can go ahead and answer anyway."

Belgarath appeared slightly injured. "It's not my fault that you and your Aunt were so worried. You don't really have any reason to be so cross with me." He paused, then looked at Garion. "You're absolutely going to insist?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I really am. Why did you do it?"

Belgarath sighed. "Vordai's been alone for most of her life, you know," he replied, "and life's been very hard to her. Somehow I've always thought that she deserved better. Maybe this makes up for it - a little bit."

"Did Aldur agree with you?" Garion pressed. "I heard his voice when the two of you were talking."

"Eavesdropping is really a bad habit, Garion."

"I've got lots of bad habits, Grandfather."

"I don't know why you're taking this tone with me, boy," the old man complained. "All right, since you're going to be this way about it, I did, as a matter of fact, have to talk rather fast to get my Master to agree."

"You did all of this because you felt sorry for her?"

"That's not exactly the right term, Garion. Let's just say that I have certain feelings about justice."

"If you knew you were going to do it anyway, why did you argue with her?"

Belgarath shrugged. "I wanted to be sure that she really wanted it. Besides, it's not a good idea to let people get the idea that you'll do anything they ask just because you might feel that they have a certain claim on you."

Silk was staring at the old man in amazement. "Compassion, Belgarath?" he demanded incredulously. "From you? If word of this ever gets out, your reputation's going to be ruined."

Belgarath looked suddenly painfully embarrassed. "I don't know that we need to spread it around all that much, Silk," he said. "People don't really have to know about this, do they?"

Garion felt as if a door had suddenly opened. Silk, he realized, was right. He had never precisely thought of it that way, but Belgarath did have a certain reputation for ruthlessness. Most men felt that there was a kind of implacableness about the Eternal Man - a willingness to sacrifice anything

in his single-minded drive toward a goal so obscure that no one else could ever fully understand it. But with this single act of compassion, he had revealed another, softer side of his nature. Belgarath the Sorcerer was capable of human emotion and feeling, after all. The thought of how those feelings had been wounded by all the horrors and pain he had seen and endured in seven thousand years came crashing in on Garion, and he found himself staring at his grandfather with a profound new respect.

The edge of the fens was marked by a solid-looking dike that stretched off into the misty distance in either direction.

"The causeway," Silk told Garion, pointing at the dike. "It's part of the Tolnedran highway system."

"Bel-grath," Tupik said, his head popping up out of the water beside the boat, "thank-you."

"Oh, I rather think you'd have learned to talk eventually anyway, Tupik," the old man replied. "You were very close to it, you know."

"May-be, may-be-not," Tupik disagreed. "Want-to-talk and talk did ferent. Not-same."

"Soon you'll learn to lie," Silk told him sardonically, "and then you'll be as good as any man alive."

"Why learn to talk if only to lie?" Tupik asked, puzzled.

"It'll come to you in time."

Tupik frowned slightly, and then his head slipped under the water. He came up one more time some distance away from the boat. "Goodbye," he called to them. "Tupik thanks you-for Mother." Then, without a ripple, he disappeared.

"What a strange little creature." Belgarath smiled.

With a startled exclamation, Silk frantically dug into his pocket. Something a pale green color leaped from his hand to plop into the water.

"What's the matter?" Garion asked him.

Silk shuddered. "The little monster put a frog in my pocket."

"Perhaps it was meant as a gift," Belgarath suggested.

"A frog?"

"Then again perhaps it wasn't." Belgarath grinned. "It's a little primitive perhaps, but it might just be the beginnings of a sense of humor."

There was a Tolnedran hostel a few miles up the great causeway that ran north and south through the eastern edge of the fens. They reached it in the late afternoon and purchased horses at a price that made Silk wince. The following morning they moved out at a canter in the direction of Boktor.

The strange interlude in the fens had given Garion a great deal to think about. He began to perceive that compassion was a kind of love broader and more encompassing than the somewhat narrow idea he had previously had of that emotion. The word love seemed, as he thought more deeply about it, to include a great number of things that at first glance did not seem to have anything whatsoever to do with it. As his understanding of this grew, a peculiar notion took hold of his imagination. His grandfather, the man they called Eternal, had probably in his seven thousand years developed a capacity for love beyond the ability of other men even remotely to guess at. In spite of that gruff, irntable exterior, Belgarath's entire life had been an expression of that transcendant love. As they rode, Garion glanced often at the strange old man, and the image of the remote, all-powerful sorcerer towering above the rest of humanity gradually faded; he began to see the real man behind that image - a complicated man to be sure, but a very human one.

Two days later in clearing weather, they reached Boktor.

Chapter Twenty

THERE WAS AN open quality about Boktor that Garion noticed immediately as they rode through its broad streets. The houses were not for the most part over two storeys high, and they were not jammed up against each other as they were in other cities he had seen. The avenues were wide and straight, and there was a minimum of litter in them.

He commented on that as they rode along a spacious, tree-lined boulevard.

"Boktor's a new city," Silk explained. "At least relatively."

"I thought that it has been here since the time of Dras Bullneck."

"Oh, it has," Silk replied, "but the old city was destroyed by the Angaraks when they invaded, five hundred years ago."

"I'd forgotten that," Garion admitted.

"After Vo Mimbre, when the time came to rebuild, it was decided to take advantage of the chance to start over," Silk continued. He looked about

rather distastefully. "I don't really like Boktor," he said. "There aren't enough alleys and back streets. It's almost impossible to move around without being seen." He turned to Belgarath. "That reminds me of something, by the way. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea to avoid the central marketplace. I'm rather well-known here, and there's no point in letting the whole city know we've arrived."

"Do you think we'll be able to slip through unnoticed?" Garion asked him.

"In Boktor?" Silk laughed. "Of course not. We've already been identified a half dozen times. Spying is a major industry here. Porenn knew we were coming before we'd even entered the city." He glanced up at a second floor window, and his fingers flickered a quick rebuke in the gestures of the Drasnian secret language. The curtain at the window gave a guilty little twitch. "Just too clumsy," he observed with profound disapproval. "Must be a first-year student at the academy."

"Probably nervous about seeing a celebrity," Belgarath suggested. "You are, after all, something of a legend, Silk."

"There's still no excuse for sloppy work," Silk said. "If I had time, I'd stop by the academy and have a talk with the headmaster about it." He sighed. "The quality of student work has definitely gone downhill since they discontinued the use of the whipping post."

"The what?" Garion exclaimed.

"In my day, a student who was seen by the person he was assigned to watch was flogged," Silk told him. "Flogging's a very effective teaching technique, Garion."

Just ahead of them a door to a large house opened, and a dozen uniformed pikemen marched out into the street, halted and turned to face them. The officer in charge came forward and bowed politely. "Prince Kheldar," he greeted Silk, "Her Highness wonders if you'd be so good as to stop by the palace."

"You see," Silk said to Garion. "I told you she knew we were here." He turned to the officer. "Just out of curiosity, captain, what would you do if I told you that we didn't feel like being so good as to stop by the palace?"

"I'd probably have to insist," the captain replied.

"I rather thought you might feel that way about it."

"Are we under arrest?" Garion asked nervously.

"Not precisely, your Majesty," the captain answered. "Queen Porenn most definitely wishes to speak with you, however." He bowed then to Belgarath.

"Ancient One," he greeted the old man respectfully. "I think that if we went around to the side entrance, we'd attract less attention." And he turned and gave his men the order to march.

"He knows who we are," Garion muttered to Silk.

"Naturally," Silk said.

"How are we going to get out of this? Won't Queen Porenn just ship us all back to Riva?"

"We'll talk to her," Belgarath said. "Porenn's got good sense. I'm sure we can explain this to her."

"Unless Polgara's been issuing ultimatums," Silk added. "She does that when she gets angry, I've noticed."

"We'll see,"

Queen Porenn was even more radiantly lovely than ever. Her slimness made it obvious that the birth of her first child had already occurred. Motherhood had brought a glow to her face and a look of completion to her eyes. She greeted them fondly as they entered the palace and led them immediately to her private quarters. The little queen's rooms were somehow lacy and feminine with rubies on the furniture and soft, pink curtains at the windows. "Where have you been?" she asked them as soon as they were alone. "Polgara's frantic."

Belgarath shrugged. "She'll recover, What's happening in Riva?"

"They're directing the search for you, naturally," Porenn replied. "How did you manage to get this far? Every road's been blocked."

"We were ahead of everybody, Auntie dearest." Silk grinned impudently at her. "By the time they started blocking roads, we'd already gone through."

"I've asked you not to call me that, Kheldar," she admonished him.

"Forgive me, your Highness," he said with a bow, though still grinning mockingly.

"You're impossible," she told him.

"Of course I am," he answered. "It's part of my charm."

The queen sighed. "What am I going to do with all of you now?"

"You're going to let us continue our journey," Belgarath replied calmly. "We'll argue about it, of course, but in the end that's the way it will turn out."

She stared at him.

"You did ask, after all. I'm sure you feel better now that you know."

"You're as bad or worse than Kheldar," she accused.

"I've had more practice."

"It's quite out of the question," she told him firmly. "I have strict orders from Polgara to send you all back to Riva."

Belgarath shrugged.

"You'll go?" She seemed surprised.

"No," he replied, "we won't. You said that Polgara gave you strict orders to send us back. All right, then, I give you strict orders not to. Now where does that leave us?"

"That's cruel, Belgarath."

"Times are hard."

"Before we get down to serious squabbling, do you suppose we might have a look at the heir to the throne?" Silk asked.

His question was artful. No new mother could resist the opportunity to show off her infant, and Queen Porenn had already turned toward the cradle standing in the corner of the room before she realized that she was being cleverly manipulated.

"You're bad, Kheldar," she said reprovingly, but she nonetheless pulled back the satin coverlet to reveal the baby that had become the absolute center of her life.

The Crown Prince of Drasnia was very seriously attempting to put one of his toes in his mouth. With a happy little cry, Porenn caught him up in her arms and hugged him. Then she turned him and held him out for them to see. "Isn't he beautiful?" she demanded.

"Hail, cousin," Silk greeted the baby gravely. "Your timely arrival has insured that I will be spared the ultimate indignity."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Porenn asked him suspiciously. "Only that his little pink Highness has permanently removed any possibility of my ever ascending the throne," Silk replied. "I'd be a very bad king, Porenn. Drasnia would suffer almost as much as I would, if that disaster ever took place. Our Garion here is already a better king by accident than I could ever be."

"Oh dear." Porenn flushed slightly. "That completely slipped my mind." She curtsied somewhat awkwardly, her baby still in her arms. "Your Majesty," she greeted Garion formally.

"Your Highness," Garion answered with the bow Aunt Pol had made him practice for hours.

Porenn laughed her silvery little laugh. "That all seems so inappropriate." She put one hand to the back of Garion's neck, drew his head down and kissed him warmly. The baby in her other arm cooed. "Dear Garion," she said. "You've grown so tall."

There wasn't much he could say to that.

The queen studied his face for a moment. "Many things have happened to you," she observed shrewdly. "You're not the same boy I knew in Val Alorn."

"He's making progress," Belgarath agreed, settling himself into a chair. "How many spies are listening to us at the moment, Porenn?"

"Two that I know of," she replied, returning her baby to his cradle.

Silk laughed. "And how many spies are spying on the spies?"

"Several, I'd imagine," Porenn told him. "If I tried to unravel all the spying that goes on here, I'd never get anything done."

"I'll assume that they're all discreet," Belgarath said with a meaningful glance around at the walls and draperies.

"Of course they are," Porenn declared, sounding slightly offended. "We do have standards, you know. Amateurs are never allowed to spy inside the palace."

"All right, let's get down to business, then. Is it really going to be necessary for us to go through some long, involved argument about whether or not you're going to try to send us back to Riva?"

She sighed and then gave a helpless little laugh. "I suppose not," she surrendered. "You are going to have to give me an excuse to give to Polgara, though."

"Just tell her that we're acting on the instructions contained in the Mrin Codex."

"Are there instructions in the Mrin Codex?" She sounded surprised.

"There might be," he replied. "Most of it's such unmitigated gibberish that no one can be absolutely sure one way or the other."

"Are you asking me to try to deceive her?"

"No, I'm asking you to let her think that I deceived you - there's a difference."

"A very subtle one, Belgarath."

"It will be all right," he assured her. "She's always ready to believe the worst about me. Anyway, the three of us are on our way to Gar og Nadrak. Get word to Polgara that we're going to need a diversion of sorts. Tell her that I said to stop wasting time looking for us and to mass an army somewhere in the south - make a lot of noise. I want the Angaraks all to be so busy watching her that they don't have time to look for us."

"What on earth are you going to do in Gar og Nadrak?" Porenn asked curiously.

Belgarath looked suggestively at the walls behind which the official spies - as well as a few unofficial ones-lurked. "Polgara will know what we're doing. What's the current situation along the Nadrak border?"

"Tense," she replied. "It's not hostile yet, but it's a long way from cordial. The Nadraks don't really want to go to war. If it weren't for the Grolims, I honestly think we could persuade them to stay neutral. They'd much rather kill Murgos than Drasnians."

Belgarath nodded. "Pass the word on to your husband that I'd like for him to keep a fairly tight rein on Anheg," he continued. "Anheg's brilliant, but he's a trifle erratic at times. Rhodar's steadier. Tell him that what I want in the south is a diversion, not a general war. Alorns sometimes get overenthusiastic."

"I'll get word to him," Porenn promised. "When will you start?"

"Let's leave that a bit tentative." The old man glanced once again at the walls of the queen's room.

"You'll stay the night, at least," she insisted.

"How could we possibly refuse?" Silk asked mockingly.

Queen Porenn looked at him for a long moment. Then she sighed. "I guess I should tell you, Kheldar," she said very quietly. "Your mother's here."

Silk's face blanched. "Here? In the palace?"

The queen nodded. "She's in the west wing. I've given her that apartment near the garden she loves so much."

Silk's hands had begun to tremble visibly, and his face was still ashen. "How long has she been here?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Several weeks. She came before the baby was born."

"How is she?"

"The same." The little blond queen's voice was hushed with sadness. "You'll have to see her, you know."

Silk drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. His face, however, was still stricken. "There's no avoiding it, I guess," he said, almost to himself. "I might as-right-get it over with. You'll excuse me?"

"Of course."

He turned and left the room, his face somber.

"Doesn't he like his mother?" Garion asked.

"He loves her very much," the queen replied. "That's why it's so ternbly difficult for him. She's blind-fortunately."

"Fortunately?"

"There was a pestilence in western Drasnia about twenty years ago," Porenn explained. "It was a horrible disease, and it left dreadful scars on the faces of the survivors. Prince Kheldar's mother had been one of the most beautiful women in Drasnia. We've concealed the truth from her. She doesn't realize how disfigured her face is - at least we hope she doesn't. The meetings between Kheldar and his mother are heartbreaking. There's no hint in his voice of what he sees, but his eyes-" She broke off. "Sometimes I think that's why he stays away from Drasnia," she added. Then she straightened. "I'll ring for supper," she said, "and something to drink. Kheldar usually needs that after he's visited with his mother."

It was an hour or more before Silk returned, and he immediately started drinking. He drank grimly like a man bent on reducing himself to unconsciousness as quickly as possible.

It was an uncomfortable evening for Garion. Queen Porenn cared for her infant son even while keeping a watchful eye on Silk. Belgarath sat silently in a chair, and Silk kept drinking. Finally, pretending a weariness he did not feel, Garion went to bed.

He had not realized how much he had depended on Silk in the year and a half he had known him. The rat-faced little Drasnian's sardonic humor and towering self reliance had always been something to cling to. To be sure, Silk had his quirks and peculiarities. He was a highstrung, complex little man, but his unfailing sense of humor and his mental agility had seen them

all through some very unpleasant situations. Now, however, all traces of humor and wit were gone, and the little man seemed on the verge of total collapse.

The dreadful confrontation toward which they rode seemed all the more perilous now for some reason. Although Silk might not have been able to help him when he finally faced Torak, Garion had counted on his friend to assist him through the terrible days leading up to the meeting. Now even that slight comfort seemed to have been taken away. Unable to sleep, he tossed and turned for hours; finally, well past midnight, he rose, pulled his cloak about him and padded on stockinged feet to see if his friend had made it to bed.

Silk had not. He still sat in the same chair. His tankard, unnoticed, had spilled, and he sat with his elbows in a puddle of ale and his face in his hands. Not far away, her face unreadable, sat the weary little blond queen of Drasnia. As Garion watched from the doorway, a muffled sound came from between Silk's hands. With a gentle, almost tender expression, Queen Porenn rose, came around the table and put her arms about his head, drawing him to her. With a despairing cry Silk clung to her, weeping openly like a hurt child.

Queen Porenn looked across the little man's shaking head at Garion. Her face quite clearly revealed that she was aware of Silk's feelings for her. Her look was one of helpless compassion for this man of whom she was fond but not in the way he wished - and combined with that was a deep sympathy for the suffering his visit with his mother had caused him.

Silently Garion and the Queen of Drasnia stood looking at each other. Speech was unnecessary; they both understood. When at last Porenn did speak, her tone was curiously matter-of fact. "I think you can put him to bed now," she said. "Once he's able to cry, the worst is usually over."

The next morning they left the palace and joined an east-bound caravan. The Drasnian moors beyond Boktor were desolate. The North Caravan Route wound through low, rolling hills covered with sparse vegetation and scanty grass. Although it was the middle of spring, there seemed to be a sere quality to the moors, as if the seasons only lightly touched them; the wind, sweeping down from the polar ice, still had the smell of winter in it.

Silk rode in silence, his eyes on the ground, though whether from grief or from the aftereffects of the ale he had drunk, Garion could not guess. Belgarath was also quiet, and the three of them rode with only the sound of the harness bells of a Drasnian merchant's mules for companionship.

About noon, Silk shook himself and looked around - his eyes finally alert, though still a bit bloodshot. "Did anybody think to bring something to drink?" he asked.

"Didn't you get enough last night?" Belgarath replied.

"That was for entertainment. What I need now is something therapeutic."

"Water?" Garion suggested.

"I'm thirsty, Garion, not dirty."

"Here." Belgarath handed the suffering man a wineskin. "But don't overdo it."

"Trust me," Silk said, taking a long drink. He shuddered and made a face. "Where did you buy this?" he inquired. "It tastes like somebody's been boiling old shoes in it."

"You don't have to drink it."

"I'm afraid I do." Silk took another drink, then restoppered the wineskin and handed it back. He looked sourly around at the moors. "Hasn't changed much," he observed. "Drasnia has very little to reoommend it, I'm afraid. It's either too wet or too dry." He shivered in the chilly wind. "Are either of you aware of the fact that there's nothing between us and the pole to break the wind but an occasional stray reindeer?"

Garion began to relax. Silk's sallies and comments grew broader and more outrageous as they rode through the afternoon. By the time the caravan stopped for the night, he seemed to be almost his old self again.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE CARAVAN WOUND its slow way through the dreary moors of eastern Drasnia with the sound of mule bells trailing mournfully behind it. Sparse patches of heath, which had but lately begun to bloom with tiny, pink flowers, dotted the low, rolling hills. The sky had turned cloudy, and the wind, seemingly perpetual, blew steadily out of the north.

Garion found his mood growing as sad and bleak as the moors around him. There was one inescapable fact which he no longer could hide from himself. Each mile, each step, brought him closer to Mallorea and closer to his meeting with Torak. Even the whispered song of the Orb, murmuring continually in his ears from the pommel of the great sword strapped to his back, could not reassure him. Torak was a God - invincible, immortal; and Garion. not even yet full-grown, was quite deliberately trekking to Mallorea to seek him out and to fight him to the death. Death was a word Garion tried very hard not to think about. It had been a possibility once or twice during their long pursuit of Zedar and the Orb; but now it seemed a certainty. He would meet Torak alone. Mandorallen or Barak or Hettar

could not come to his aid with their superior skill at swordsmanship; Belgarath or Aunt Pol could not intercede for him with sorcery; Silk would not be able to devise some clever ruse to allow him to escape. Titanic and enraged, the Dark God would rush upon him, eager for blood. Garion began to fear sleep, for sleep brought nightmares which would not go away and which haunted his days, making each worse than the last.

He was afraid. The fear grew worse with each passing day until the sour taste of it was always in his mouth. More than anything, he wanted to run, but he knew that he could not. Indeed, he did not even know any place where he could run. There was no place in all the world for him to hide. The Gods themselves would seek him out if he tried and sternly drive him to that awful meeting which had been fated to take place since the beginning of time. And so it was that, sick with fear, Garion rode to meet his fate.

Belgarath, who was not always asleep when he seemed to doze in his saddle, watched, shrewdly waiting until Garion's fear had reached its peak before he spoke. Then, one cloudy morning when the lead-gray sky was as dreary as the moors around them, he pulled his horse in beside Garion's. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked calmly.

"What's the point, Grandfather?"

"It might help."

"Nothing's going to help. He's going to kill me."

"If I thought it was that inevitable, I wouldn't have let you start on this journey."

"How can I possibly fight with a God?"

"Bravely," was the unhelpful reply. "You've been brave at some pretty inappropriate times in the past. I don't imagine you've changed all that much."

"I'm so afraid, Grandfather," Garion confessed, his voice anguished. "I think I know how Mandorallen felt now. The fear's so awful that I can't live with it."

"You're stronger than you think you are. You can live with it if you have to."

Garion brooded about that. It didn't seem to help much. "What's he like?" he asked, suddenly filled with a morbid curiosity.

"Who?"

"Torak."

"Arrogant. I never cared much for him."

"Is he like Ctuchik was - or Asharak?"

"No. They tried to be like him. They didn't succeed, of course, but they tried. If it's any help to you, Torak's probably as much afraid of you as you are of him. He knows who you are. When you meet him, he isn't going to see a Sendarian scullery boy named Garion; he's going to see Belgarion, the Rivan King, and he's going to see Riva's sword thirsting for his blood. He's also going to see the Orb of Aldur. And that will probably frighten him more than anything."

"When was the first time you met him?" Garion suddenly wanted the old man to talk - to tell stories as he had so long ago. Stories somehow always helped. He could lose himself in a story, and for a little while it might make things bearable.

Belgarath scratched at his short, white beard. "Let's see," he mused. "I think the first time was in the Vale - it was a very long time ago. The others had gathered there - Belzedar, Beldin, all the rest - and each of us was involved in his own studies. Our Master had withdrawn into his tower with the Orb, and sometimes months would pass during which we didn't see him.

"Then one day a stranger came to us. He seemed to be about the same height as I, but he walked as if he were a thousand feet tall. His hair was black and his skin was very pale, and he had, as I remember, greenish-colored eyes. His face was beautiful to the point of being pretty, and his hair looked as if he spent a lot of time combing it. He appeared to be the kind of person who always has a mirror in his pocket."

"Did he say anything?" Garion asked.

"Oh, yes," Belgarath replied. "He came up to us and said, 'I would speak with my brother, thy Master,' and I definitely didn't care for his tone. He spoke as if we were servants - it's a failing he's always had. Still, my Master had - after a great deal of trouble - taught me at least a few manners. 'I shall tell my Master you have come,' I told him as politely as I could manage.

"'That is not needful, Belgarath,' he told me in that irritatingly superior tone of his. 'My brother knows I am here.' "

"How did he know your name, Grandfather?"

Belgarath shrugged. "I never found that out. I assume that my Master had communicated with him - and the other Gods - from time to time and told them about us. At any rate, I led this over-pretty visitor to my Master's tower. I didn't bother to speak to him along the way. When we got there, he looked me straight in the face and said, 'A bit of advice for thee,

Belgarath, by way of thanks for thy service. Seek not to rise above thyself. It is not thy place to approve or disapprove of me. For thy sake I hope that when next we meet thou wilt remember this and behave in a manner more seemly.'"

" 'Thank you for the advice,' I told him-a bit tartly, I'll admit. 'Will you require anything else?'

"'Thou art pert, Belgarath,' he said to me. 'Perhaps one day I shall give myself leisure to instruct thee in proper behavior.' And then he went into the tower. As you can see, Torak and I got off on the wrong foot right at the very beginning. I didn't care for his attitude, and he didn't care for mine."

"What happened then?" Garion's curiosity had begun to quiet the fear somewhat.

"You know the story," Belgarath replied. "Torak went up into the tower and spoke with Aldur. One thing led to another and finally Torak struck my Master and stole the Orb." The old man's face was bleak. "The next time I saw him, he wasn't nearly so pretty," he continued with a certain grim satisfaction. "That was after the Orb had burned him and he'd taken to wearing a steel mask to hide the ruins of his face."

Silk had drawn closer and was riding with them, fascinated by the story. "What did you all do then? After Torak stole the Orb, I mean?" he asked.

"Our Master sent us to warn the other Gods," Belgarath replied. "I was supposed to find Belar - he was in the north someplace, carousing with his Alorns. Belar was a young God at that time, and he enjoyed the diversions of the young. Alorn girls used to dream about being visited by him, and he tried to make as many dreams come true as he possibly could - or so I've been told."

"I've never heard that about him." Silk seemed startled.

"Perhaps it's only gossip," Belgarath admitted.

"Did you find him?" Garion asked.

"It took me quite a while. The shape of the land was different then. What's now Algaria stretched all the way to the east - thousands of leagues of open grassland. At first I took the shape of an eagle, but that didn't work out too well."

"It seems quite suitable," Silk observed.

"Heights make me giddy," the old man replied, "and my eyes were continually getting distracted by things on the ground. I kept having this overpowering urge to swoop down and kill things. The character of the forms we assume

begins to dominate our thinking after a while, and although the eagle is quite splendid-looking, he's really a very stupid bird. Finally I gave that idea up and chose the form of the wolf instead. It worked out much better. About the only distraction I encountered was a young she-wolf who was feeling frolicsome." There was a slight tightening about his eyes as he said it, and his voice had a peculiar catch in it.

"Belgarathl" Silk actually sounded shocked.

"Don't be so quick to jump to conclusions, Silk. I considered the morality of the situation. I realized that being a father is probably all well and good, but that a litter of puppies might prove embarrassing later on. I resisted her advances, even though she persisted in following me all the way to the north where the Bear-God dwelt with his Alorns." He broke off and looked out at the gray-green moors, his face unreadable. Garion knew that there was something the old man wasn't saying -something important.

"Anyway," Belgarath continued, "Belar accompanied us back to the Vale where the other Gods had gathered, and they held a council and decided that they'd have to make war on Torak and his Angaraks. That was the start of it all. The world has never been the same since."

"What happened to the wolf?" Garion asked, trying to pin down his grandfather's peculiar evasion.

"She stayed with me," Belgarath replied calmly. "She used to sit for days on end in my tower watching me. She had a curious turn of mind, and her comments were frequently a trifle disconcerting."

"Comments?" Silk asked. "She could talk?"

"In the manner of the wolf, you understand. I'd learned how they speak during our journey together. It's really a rather concise and often quite beautiful language. Wolves can be eloquent - even poetic - once you get used to having them speak to you without words."

"How long did she stay with you?" Garion asked.

"Quite a long time," Belgarath replied. "I remember that I asked her about that once. She answered with another question. It was an irritating habit of hers. She just said, 'What is time to a wolf?' I made a few calculations and found out that she'd been with me for just over a thousand years. I was a bit amazed by that, but she seemed indifferent to the fact. 'Wolves live as long as they choose to live,' was all she said. 'Then one day I had to change my form for some reason or other - I forget exactly why. She saw me do it, and that was the end of any peace for me. She just said, 'So that's how you do it,' and promptly changed herself into a snowy owl. She seemed to take a great delight in startling me, and I never knew what shape I'd see when I turned around. She was fondest of the owl, though. A few years after that she left me. I was rather surprised to find that I missed her.

We'd been together for a very long time." He broke off and once again he looked away.

"Did you ever see her again?" Garion wanted to know.

Belgarath nodded. "She saw to that - though I didn't know it at the time. I was running an errand for my Master somewhere to the north of the Vale and I came across a small, neatly thatched cottage in a grove of trees by a small river. A woman named Poledra lived in the cottage - a woman with tawny hair and curiously golden eyes. We grew to know each other, and eventually we were married. She was Polgara's mother - and Beldaran's."

"You were saying that you met the wolf again," Garion reminded him.

"You don't listen too well, Garion," the old man said, looking directly at his grandson. There was a deep and ancient injury in his eyes - a hurt so great that Garion knew it would be there for as long as the old man lived.

"You don't mean-?"

"It took me a while to accept it myself, actually. Poledra was very patient and very determined. When she found out that I couldn't accept her as a mate in the form of a wolf, she simply found a different shape. She got what she wanted in the end." He sighed.

"Aunt Pol's mother was a wolf?" Garion was stunned.

"No, Garion," Belgarath replied calmly, "she was a woman - a very lovely woman. The change of shape is absolute."

"But - but she started out as a wolf."

"So?"

"But " The whole notion was somehow shocking.

"Don't let your prejudices run away with you," Belgarath told him. Garion struggled with the idea. It seemed monstrous somehow. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "It's unnatural, no matter what you say."

"Garion," the old man reminded him with a pained look, "just about everything we do is unnatural. Moving rocks with your mind isn't the most natural thing in the world, if you stop and think about it."

"But this is different," Garion protested. "Grandfather, you married a wolf - and the wolf had children. How could you do that?"

Belgarath sighed and shook his head. "You're a very stubborn boy, Garion," he observed. "It seems that you're never going to understand until you've been through the experience. Let's go over behind that hill, and I'll show

you how it's done. There's no point in upsetting the rest of the caravan."

"Mind if I come along?" Silk asked, his nose twitching with curiosity.

"Might not be a bad idea," Belgarath agreed. "You can hold the horses. Horses tend to panic in the presence of wolves."

They rode away from the caravan track under the leaden sky and circled around behind a low, heath-covered hill. "This should do," Belgarath decided, reining in and dismounting in a shallow swale just behind the hill. The swale was covered with new grass, green with spring.

"The whole trick is to create the image of the animal in your mind," Belgarath explained, "down to the last detail. Then you direct your will inward - upon yourself - and then change, fitting yourself into the image."

Garion frowned, not understanding.

"It's going to take too long if I have to explain it in words," Belgarath said. "Here - watch - and watch with your mind as well as your eyes."

Unbidden, the shape of the great gray wolf he had seen on occasion before came into Garion's mind. He could clearly see the gray - shot muzzle and the silver ruff: Then he felt the surge and heard the hollow roaring sound in his mind. For an instant, the image of the wolf curiously mingled with an image of Belgarath himself - as if the two were trying to both occupy the same space. Then Belgarath was gone and only the wolf remained.

Silk whistled, then took a firmer grip on the reins of their startled horses.

Belgarath changed back again to an ordinary - looking old man in a rust-brown tunic and gray, hooded cloak. "Do you understand?" he asked Garion.

"I think so," Garion replied, a bit dubiously.

"Try it. I'll lead you through it one step at a time." Garion started to put a wolf together in his mind.

"Don't forget the toenails," Belgarath told him. "They may not look like much, but they're very important."

Garion put the toenails in. "Tail's too short."

Garion fixed that.

"That's about right. Now fit yourself into it."

Garion put his will to it. "Change," he said.

It seemed almost as if his body had grown somehow fluid, shifting, altering, flowing into the image of the wolf that he had in his mind. When the surge was gone, he sat on his haunches panting. He felt very strange.

"Stand up and let's have a look at you," Belgarath told him. Garion rose and stood on all four paws. His tail felt extremely peculiar.

"You made the hind legs a bit too long," Belgarath noted critically. Garion started to object that it was the first time he'd ever done it, but his voice came out in a peculiar series of whines and yelps.

"Stop that," Belgarath growled. "You sound like a puppy. Change back."

Garion did that.

"Where do your clothes go?" Silk asked curiously.

"They're with us," Belgarath replied, "but at the same time they're not. It's kind of hard to explain, actually. Beldin tried to work out exactly where the clothes were once. He seems to think he's got the answer, but I never understood the whole theory. Beldin's quite a bit more intelligent than I am, and his explanations are sometimes a bit exotic. At any rate, when we return to our original shape, our clothing is always just as it was."

"Even Garion's sword?" Silk asked. "And the Orb?"

The old man nodded.

"Isn't it sort of dangerous having it floating around out there - unattached, so to speak?"

"It isn't really unattached. It's still there - but at the same time it's not."

"I'll take your word for it," Silk conceded dubiously.

"Try it again, Garion," Belgarath suggested.

Garion switched back and forth several times until his wolfshape satisfied his grandfather.

"Stay with the horses," the old man told Silk. "We'll be back in a little bit." He flickered and shimmered into the great gray wolf. "Let's run for a bit," he said to Garion. The meaning of what he said was conveyed directly from his mind to Garion's, aided only slightly by expressions and positions of his head and ears and a few brief barking sounds. Garion suddenly understood why the bond of the pack was so strong in wolves. Quite literally, they inhabited each others' minds. What one saw, they all saw;

and what one felt, they all felt.

"Where do we run to?" Garion asked, not really surprised at how easily the speech of wolves came to him.

"No place in particular. I just need to stretch out a few kinks." And the gray wolf bounded away with astonishing speed.

The tail was a definite problem at first. Garion kept forgetting that it was there, and its swishing back and forth kept jerking him off balance. By the time he got the hang of it, the old wolf was far out ahead of him on the gray-green moors. After a while, however, Garion found himself literally flying across the ground. His paws scarcely seemed to touch the earth as he bunched and stretched his body in great bounds. He marvelled at the economy of the running gait of the wolf. He ran not with his legs alone, but with his entire body. He became quite certain that, if need be, he could run for days without tiring.

The rolling moors were different somehow. What had seemed as desolate and empty as the dead sky overhead was suddenly teeming with life. There were mice and burrowing squirrels; in scrubby brown thickets, rabbits, petrified with fright, watched him as he loped by with his toenails digging into the springy turf. Silently he exulted in the strength and freedom of his new body. He was the lord of the plain, and all creatures gave way to him.

And then he was not alone. Another wolf ran beside him - a strangely insubstantial-looking wolf that seemed to have a bluish, flickering light playing about her.

"And how far will you run?" she asked him in the manner of wolves.

"We can stop if you'd like," Garion replied politely, dropping back into a lope and then a trot.

"It's easier to talk if one isn't running," she agreed. She stopped and dropped to her haunches.

Garion also stopped. "You're Poledra, aren't you?" He asked it very directly, not yet accustomed to the subtleties of the language of wolves.

"Wolves have no need of names," she sniffed. "He used to worry about that, too."

It was not exactly like the voice that had been in his mind since his childhood. He didn't actually hear her, but instead he seemed to know exactly what she wanted to say to him. "Grandfather, you mean?"

"Who else? Men seem to have a need to classify things and put names on them. I think they overlook some very important things that way."

"How is it that you're here? Aren't you - well -?"

"Dead, you mean? Don't be afraid of the word. It's only a word, after all. I suppose I am, though. It doesn't really feel all that much different."

"Doesn't somebody have to do something to bring you back?" he asked. "Like what Aunt Pol did that time when we were fighting with Grul in the mountains of Ulgo?"

"It's not entirely necessary. I can be summoned that way, but I can manage it myself if I have to." She looked at him quizzically. "You're really confused by all this, aren't you?"

"All of what?"

"Everything. Who you are; who we are; what you have to do."

"A little," he admitted.

"Let me see if I can explain it. Take him for instance. I never really saw him as a man, you know. There's something decidedly wolfish about him. I always rather thought that his being born in man-shape had been a mistake of some kind. Maybe it was because of what he had to do. The shape doesn't really matter, though."

"It doesn't?"

"Did you really think it did?" She almost seemed to laugh. "Here. Let me show you. Let's change." She shimmered into air and was standing before him then in the form of a tawny-haired woman with golden eyes. Her gown was very plain and brown.

Garion shrugged himself back into his natural form.

"Am I really any different, Belgarion?" she asked him. "Am I not who I am, whether as wolf or owl or woman?"

And then he understood. "May I call you Grandmother?" he asked her, a bit embarrassed.

"If it makes you happy," she replied. "It's a bit inaccurate, though."

"I know," he said, "but I feel a little more comfortable with it."

"Have you finally accepted who you are?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"But you're afraid of it and what you have to do, is that it?" He nodded mutely.

"You're not going to be alone, you know."

He looked at her sharply. "I thought the Codex said-"

"The Codex doesn't really say everything that's involved," she told him. "Your meeting with Torak will be the coming together of two enormous, opposing forces. The two of you are really just the representatives of those forces. There'll be so much power involved in your meeting that you and Torak will be almost incidental to what's really happening."

"Why couldn't somebody else do it then?" he asked quickly. "Somebody better suited to it?"

"I said almost incidental," she said firmly. "It has to be you, and it's always been Torak. You are the channels through which the forces will collide. When it happens, I think you'll be surprised at how easy it all is."

"Am I going to win?"

"I don't know. The universe itself doesn't know. That's why you have to meet him. If we knew how it would turn out, the meeting wouldn't be necessary." She looked around. "Belgarath's coming back. I'll have to leave you now."

"Why-"

"My presence pains him - more than you could ever know."

"Because-?" He broke off, not knowing how to say it.

"We were closer than others and we were together for a very long time. Sometimes I wish that he could understand that we haven't really been separated, but perhaps it's too early."

"It's been three thousand years, Grandmother."

"What is time to a wolf?" she asked cryptically. "The mating of wolves is permanent, and the grief caused by separation is also permanent. Perhaps someday-" Her voice trailed off wistfully, and then she sighed. "As soon as I leave, change back again. Belgarath will want you to hunt with him. It's sort of a formality. You'll understand when you're back in the shape of a wolf."

Garion nodded and began to form the image of the wolf in his mind. "One other thing, Belgarion."

"Yes, Grandmother?"

"I do love you, you know."

"I love you too, Grandmother."

And then she was gone. Garion sighed and changed himself back into a wolf. And then he went out from that place to join Belgarath in the hunt.

Part Four

THE RIVAN QUEEN

[Image]

Chapter Twenty-two

THE PRINCESS CE'NEDRA Was in a thoughtful, even pensive mood. Much as she had enjoyed the turmoil her periodic outbursts of temper had caused, she rather regretfully concluded that it was probably time to put them aside and make peace with Garion. They were going to be married, after all, and there was no real point in upsetting him any more than absolutely necessary. Her tantrums had established the fact that, although he might outrank her, she would not enter the marriage as his inferior, and that was really all she had wanted anyway. On the whole, the prospect of being married to Garion was not nearly as unpleasant as she pretended. She did love him after all, and now that he understood exactly how things were going to stand between them, everything was likely to be quite satisfactory. She decided to find him that very day and make peace with him.

The largest part of her attention that spring morning had been taken up by a book on protocol and a chart she was carefully drawing up. As Imperial Princess of Tolnedra and Queen of Riva, she would, of course, absolutely outrank every grand duchess of every house in the Empire. She was also fairly sure that she outranked Queen Islena of Cherek and Queen Silar of

Algaria. Mayaserana's status as co-ruler of Arendia raised some problems, however. It was entirely possible that she and Mayaserana were equals. Ce'Nedra made a note on a scrap of parchment reminding herself to have Ambassador Valgon direct an inquiry to the chief of protocol in Tol Honeth concerning the matter. She felt a nice little glow as she surveyed the chart. With the exception of Lady Polgara and the motherly little Queen Layla of Sendaria, to whom everyone deferred because she was such a dear, Ce'Nedra concluded that she would in fact outrank or at least equal every noble lady in the West.

Suddenly there was a shattering thunderclap so violent that it shook the very walls of the Citadel. Startled, Ce'Nedra glanced at the window. It was a bright, sunny morning. How could there be thunder? Another rending crash ripped the silence, and there was a frightened babble in the halls. Impatiently, the princess picked up a small silver bell and rang for her maid.

"Go see what's happening," she instructed the girl and returned to her study of the chart she had drawn. But there was another thunderous crash and even more shouting and confusion in the corridor outside. It was impossible! How could she concentrate with all that noise going on? Irritably she rose and went to the door.

People were running - actually fleeing. Just down the hall Queen Layla of Sendaria bolted from the door of Lady Polgara's private apartment, her eyes wide with terror and her crown very nearly falling off.

"What is the matter, your majesty?" Ce'Nedra demanded of the little queen.

"It's Polgara!" Queen Layla gasped, stumbling in her haste to escape. "She's destroying everything in sight!"

"Lady Polgara?"

Another deafening crash sent the little queen reeling, and she clung to Ce'Nedra in terror. "Please, Ce'Nedra. Find out what's wrong. Make her stop before she shakes down the entire fortress."

"Me?"

"She'll listen to you. She loves you. Make her stop."

Without pausing to consider the possible danger, Ce'Nedra went quickly to Lady Polgara's door and glanced inside. The apartment was a total shambles. Furniture was overturned; wall hangings had been ripped down; the windows were shattered and the air was full of smoke. Ce'Nedra had thrown enough tantrums in her life to appreciate artistry when she saw it, but the disaster inside Polgara's apartment was so absolute that it went beyond art into the realms of natural catastrophe. Lady Polgara herself stood, wild-eyed and dishevelled in the center of the room, cursing incoherently

in a dozen languages at once. In one hand she held a crumpled sheet of parchment; her other hand was raised like a claw before her, half clenched about an incandescent mass of blazing energy that she seemed to have summoned out of air itself and which she now fed with her own fury. The princess stood in awe as Polgara began a fresh tirade. The dreadful cursing began in a low contralto and rose in an awful crescendo into the upper registers and beyond. As she reached the limits of her voice, she began slashing the air with the blazing mass in her hand, punctuating each curse with a crackling burst of raw energy that sizzled from between her fingers like a bolt of lightning to shatter whatever her eyes fell upon. With a series of vile oaths, she detonated six teacups in a row into shards, then quite methodically she went back down the line, exploding the saucers upon which they had sat. Almost as an afterthought, she blew the table into splinters.

Ce'Nedra heard a strangled gasp directly behind her. King Anheg, the blood drained from his face, looked once through the door, then turned and ran.

"Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra remonstrated to the sorceress, trying not so much to reason with her as to minimize the destruction.

Polgara shattered four priceless vases standing on the mantelpiece with four precisely separate explosions. Outside the window, the bright spring morning vanished as if the sun had suddenly been extinguished, and there was a sullen rumble of thunder that Ce'Nedra prayed devoutly was natural.

"Whatever is the matter?" the princess asked, hoping to draw the enraged sorceress into explanation rather than more curses. It was the curses that had to be headed off. Polgara seemed to have a deep-seated need to emphasize her oaths with explosions.

Polgara, however, did not reply. Instead she merely threw the parchment at Ce'Nedra, turned, and blew a marble statue into fine white gravel. Wild-eyed, she wheeled about, looking for something else to break, but there was very little left in the smoking room that she had not already reduced to rubble.

"No!" Ce'Nedra cried out sharply as the raging woman's eyes fell on the exquisite crystal wren Garion had given her. The princess knew that Polgara valued the glass bird more than anything else she possessed, and she leaped forward to protect the delicate piece.

"Get it," Polgara snarled at her from between clenched teeth. "Take it out of my sight." Her eyes burned with a terrible need to destroy something else. She spun and hurled the incandescent ball of fire she had wielded out through the shattered window. The explosion, when it burst in the suddenly murky air outside, was ghastly. With her fists clenched tightly at her sides, she raised her distorted face and began to curse again. From roiling black clouds that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, shattering bolts of lightning began to rain down on the island. No longer satisfied with

localized destruction, Polgara expanded her rage to rake the Isle and the Sea of the Winds with sizzling fire and ear-splitting thunder. Then, with a dreadful intensity, she raised one fist and suddenly opened it. The downpour of rain she called was beyond belief. Her glittering eyes narrowed, and she raised her other fist. The rain instantly turned to hail-great, jagged chunks of ice that crashed and splintered against the rocks to fill the air with flying fragments and thick steam.

Ce'Nedra caught up the wren, stooped to grab the rumpled piece of parchment from the floor, and then she fled.

King Anheg poked his frightened face from around a corner. "Can't you stop her?" he demanded in a shaking voice.

"Nothing can stop her, your Majesty."

"Anheg! Get in here!" Polgara's voice rang above the thunder and the crashing deluge of hail that shook the Citadel.

"Oh, Belar," King Anheg muttered devoutly, casting his eyes skyward even as he hurried toward Polgara's door.

"Get word to Val Alorn immediately!" she commanded him. "My father, Silk, and Garion slipped out of the Citadel last night. Get your fleet out and bring them back! I don't care if you have to take the world apart stone by stone. Find them and bring them back!"

"Polgara, I-" The King of Cherek faltered.

"Don't stand there gaping like an idiot! Move!"

Carefully, almost with a studied calm, the Princess Ce'Nedra handed the glass wren to her frightened maid. "Put this someplace safe," she said. Then she turned and went back to the center of the storm. "What was that you just said?" she asked Polgara in a level voice.

"My idiot father, Garion, and that disgusting thief decided last night to go off on their own," Polgara replied in an icy voice made even more terrible by the superhuman control that held it in.

"They did what?" Ce'Nedra asked flatly.

"They left. They sneaked away during the night."

"Then you must go after them."

"I can't, Ce'Nedra." Polgara spoke as if explaining something to a child. "Someone has to stay here. There are too many things here that could go wrong. He knows that. He did it deliberately. He's trapped me here."

"Garion?"

"No, you silly girl! My father!" And Polgara began cursing again, each oath punctuated with a crash of thunder.

Ce'Nedra, however, scarcely heard her. She looked around. There was really nothing left to break in here. "You'll excuse me, I hope," she said. Then she turned, went back to her own rooms, and began breaking everything she could lay her hands on, screeching all the while like a Camaar fishwife.

Their separate rages lasted for several hours, and they rather carefully avoided each other during this period. Some emotions needed to be shared, but insane fury was not one of those. Eventually, Ce'Nedra felt she had exhausted the possibilities of her extended outburst, and she settled into the icy calm of one who has been mortally insulted. No matter what face his illiterate note put on the matter, it would be at the very most a week before the entire world knew that Garion had jilted her. The flight of her reluctant bridegroom would become a universal joke. It was absolutely intolerable!

She would meet the world, however, with a lifted chin and an imperious gaze. However she might weep and storm and rage in private, the face she presented to the world would betray no hint of how deeply she had been injured. All that was left for her was her pride, and she would never abandon that.

The Lady Polgara, however, seemed to feel no need for such imperial reserve. Once her initial fury had subsided to the degree that she allowed her private thunderstorm to pass, a few hardy souls assumed that the worst of it was over. The Earl of Trellheim went to her in an attempt to mollify her. He left her apartment moments later at a run with her crackling vituperation sizzling in the air about his ears. Barak was pale and shaken when he reported back to the others. "Don't go near her," he advised in a frightened voice. "Do whatever she says as quickly as you can, and stay absolutely out of her sight."

"Isn't she calming down at all?" King Rhodar asked.

"She's finished breaking the furniture," Barak replied. "I think she's getting ready to start on people."

Thereafter, each time Polgara emerged from her apartment, the warning spread instantly, and the halls of Iron-grip's Citadel emptied. Her commands, delivered usually by her maid, were all variations of the initial orders she had given King Anheg. They were to find the vagrant trio and bring them back to face her.

In the days that followed, Princess Ce'Nedra's first rage settled into a sort of peevishness that made people avoid her almost as much as they avoided Polgara - all but gentle Adara, who endured the tiny girl's

outbursts with a calm patience. The two of them spent most of their time sitting in the garden adjoining the royal apartments where Ce'Nedra could give vent to her emotions without fear of being overheard.

It was five days after Garion and the others had left before Ce'Nedra discovered the full implications of their departure.

The day was warm - the spring came eventually even to a bleak place like Riva - and the small bit of lawn in the center of the garden was a lush green. Pink, blue, and flaming red flowers nodded in their beds as bright yellow bees industriously carried kisses from blossom to blossom. Ce'Nedra, however, did not want to think about kisses. Dressed in her favorite pale green Dryad tunic, she bit rather savagely at an unoffending lock of hair and spoke to the patient Adara at length about the inconstancy of men.

It was about midafternoon when Queen Layla of Sendaria found them there. "Oh, there you are," the plump little queen bubbled at them. As always, her crown was a little awry. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Why?" was Ce'Nedra's somewhat ungracious reply.

Queen Layla stopped and looked critically at the princess. "My," she said, "aren't we cross today? Just what is your problem, Ce'Nedra? You've barely been civil for days now."

Ce'Nedra caught Adara's warning look to the queen, and that irritated her all the more. Her response was chilly. "I'm finding the experience of being jilted to be just a bit annoying, your Highness," she said.

Queen Layla's sunny face hardened. "Would you excuse us, Adara?" she asked.

"Of course, your Highness," Adara replied, rising quickly. "I'll be inside, Ce'Nedra," she said and went gracefully out of the garden. Queen Layla waited until the girl was out of earshot, then sat down on a marble bench. "Come here, Ce'Nedra," she said firmly.

The princess looked at the motherly little woman, a bit startled by the iron in her voice. Obediently she went to the bench and sat.

"You really should stop interpreting everything that happens in the world as a personal insult, you know," Layla told her. "That's a very unbecoming habit. What Garion, Belgarath, and Kheldar did has absolutely nothing to do with you." She looked sternly at Ce'Nedra. "Do you know anything at all about the Prophecy?"

"I've heard about it," Ce'Nedra sulked. "Tolnedrans don't really believe in that sort of thing."

"Perhaps that's the problem," Layla said. "I want you to listen very carefully, Ce'Nedra. You may not believe, but you will understand." The

queen thought for a moment. "The Prophecy clearly states that when the Rivan King returns, Torak will awaken."

"Torak? That's nonsense. Torak's dead."

"Don't interrupt, dear," Layla told her. "You travelled with them for all that time and you still don't understand? For a little girl who seems so bright, you're remarkably dense."

Ce'Nedra flushed at that.

"Torak is a God, Ce'Nedra," Layla continued. "He's asleep, not dead. He did not die at Vo Mimbre, much as some people might like to think he did. The instant that Garion touched the Orb, Torak began to stir. Haven't you ever wondered why Polgara insisted that Errand carry the Orb back from Rak Cthol? Garion could have carried it just as easily, you know."

Ce'Nedra hadn't thought of that.

"But if Garion had touched it - still on Angarak soil and without his sword - Torak might very well have jumped up and gone after him immediately, and Garion would have been killed."

"Killed?" Ce'Nedra gasped.

"Of course, dear. That's what this is all about. The Prophecy says that Torak and the Rivan King will eventually meet, and that in their meeting shall be decided the fate of mankind."

"Garion?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, stunned and disbelieving. "Surely you're not serious?"

"I've never been more serious in my life, child. Garion has to fight Torak - to the death - to decide the fate of the world. Now do you understand? That's why Belgarath and Kheldar and Garion left Riva so suddenly. They're on their way to Mallorea so that Garion can fight Torak. He could have taken an army with him, but he knew that would only cause needless deaths. That's why the three of them went alone. Now don't you think it's time that you grew up just a little bit?"

Ce'Nedra was greatly subdued after her conversation with Queen Layla. For perhaps the first time in her life, she began to think more about someone else than she did about herself. She worried constantly about Garion, and at night she had dreadful nightmares about the hideous things that could happen to him.

To make matters worse, there seemed to be a persistent buzzing in her ears that was at times quite maddening. It was rather like the sound of voices coming from a long way off - voices that verged just on the edge of being understandable, but never quite were. The buzzing sound, coupled with her

anxiety about Garion, made her moody and frequently short-tempered. Even Adara began to avoid her.

The irritating sound in her ears continued for several days before she discovered, quite by accident, the significance of it. The weather on the Isle of the Winds was never really very good, and spring was a particularly unpredictable time of year. A series of storms, following one after another in dreary progression, lashed at the rocky coast, and nasty little rain squalls swept the city and the island. One somber, rainy morning the princess sat in her chambers looking glumly out the window at the soggy garden. The fire which crackled on her hearth did little to warm her mood. After a while she sighed and, for want of anything better to do, she sat at her dressing table and began to brush her hair.

The silver flicker at her throat distracted her eye momentarily as she looked at herself in the mirror. It was the medallion Garion had given her just after her birthday. She had by now grown accustomed to its being there, though the fact that she could not take it off still caused her periodic fits of anger. Without actually thinking about it, she stopped brushing and touched the amulet with her fingertips.

"-but we can't do a thing until the Arends and the Tolnedrans are fully mobilized." It was the voice of King Rhodar of Drasnia. Ce'Nedra started and turned quickly, wondering why the portly monarch had entered her room. As soon as she removed her fingers from the silver amulet, the voice stopped. Ce'Nedra looked around, puzzled. She frowned and touched the amulet again. "No, no," another voice said, "you don't add the spices until after it starts to boil." Ce'Nedra again removed her fingertips from the talisman at her throat, and that voice too stopped abruptly. Fascinated, she touched it for the third time. "You make up the bed, and I'll straighten up. We'll have to hurry. The Queen of Cherek might come back at any minute."

Wonderingly, the princess touched the amulet again and again, and her ears ranged randomly through the Citadel.

"The fire's too hot. This iron will scorch anything it touches." Then she heard a snatch of whispered conversation. "What if somebody comes?" It was a girl's voice.

"Nobody's going to come." The young man's voice which replied had a peculiar wheedling quality. "We're all safe and cozy here, and I really do love you."

Ce'Nedra quickly jerked her fingers from the amulet, blushing furiously.

At first there was no direction to it; but as the princess experimented, she gradually learned to focus this peculiar phenomenon. After a couple of hours of intense concentration, she found that she could skim rapidly through all the talking that was going on in a given quarter of the Citadel

until she found a conversation that interested her. In the process she learned many secrets, some very interesting, and some not very nice. She knew that she should feel guilty about her surreptitious eavesdropping, but for some reason she did not.

"Thy reasoning is sound, your Majesty." It was Mandorallen's voice. "King Korodullin is committed to the cause, though it will take some weeks for his call to arms to gather the forces of Arendia. Our major concern must be the position the Emperor will take in the affair. Without the legions, our situation is perilous."

"Ran Borune has no choice in the matter," King Anheg declared. "He's bound by the provisions of the Accords of Vo Mimbre."

Brand, the Rivan Warder, cleared his throat. "I don't think it's that simple, your Majesty," he said quietly in his deep voice. "The Accords state that the Kingdoms of the West must respond to a call from the Rivan King, and Belgarion is not here to issue that call."

"We're acting in his behalf," King Cho-Hag asserted.

"The problem lies in convincing Ran Borune of that," Rhodar pointed out. "I know the Tolnedrans. They'll have whole battalions of legal experts working on the Accords. Unless Belgarion himself meets Ran Borune face to face and issues his command in person, the Emperor will take the position that he's not legally bound to join us. The Rivan King is the only one who can issue a call to war."

Ce'Nedra let her fingertips drop from the amulet at her throat. An idea was beginning to take shape in her mind. It was an exciting idea, but she was not at all certain that she could bring it off. Alorns, she knew, were stubborn and reluctant to accept any new ideas. She quickly laid aside her hairbrush and went to a small chest standing against the wall near the window. She opened the chest and began rummaging through it. After a moment she found the tightly rolled parchment she had been seeking. She unrolled it and read through it quickly until she found the passage she wanted. She read it carefully several times. It seemed to say what she wanted it to say.

She considered the idea throughout the rest of the day. The possibility that anyone might succeed in catching up with Garion and stopping him was remote, to say the very least. Belgarath and Prince Kheldar were too skilled at evasion to allow themselves to be easily caught. Chasing them was simply a waste of time. Since Polgara was not yet rational enough to see things in this light, it fell to Ce'Nedra to take immediate steps to minimize Garion's danger once he had entered the lands of the Angaraks. All she had to do now was convince the Alorn Kings that she was the logical one to take those steps.

It was still raining the next morning, and she rose early to make her

preparations. She must, of course, look positively regal. Her choice of an emerald velvet gown and matching cape was artful. She knew that she was stunning in green, and her circlet of gold oak leaves was enough like a crown to convey the right suggestion. She was glad she had waited until morning. Men were easier to deal with in the morning, she had discovered. They would fight her at first, and she wanted the idea implanted in their minds before they were fully awake. As she gave herself a last-minute check in the tall mirror in her dressing room, she gathered her determination and marshalled all her arguments. The slightest objection must be met instantly. Carefully she put herself in an imperial frame of mind and, taking the rolled parchment, she moved toward the door.

The council chamber in which the Alorn Kings usually gathered was a large room high up in one of the massive towers of the Citadel. There were heavy beams on the ceiling, a deep maroon carpet on the floor, and a fireplace at the far end big enough to stand in. Maroon drapes flanked the windows where tatters of rain slashed across the solid stones of the tower. The walls of the chamber were covered with maps, and the large table was littered with parchments and ale cups. King Anheg, in his blue robe and dented crown, sprawled in the nearest chair, as shaggy and brutish-looking as always. King Rhodar was vast in his crimson mantle, but the other kings and generals wore rather plain clothing.

Ce'Nedra entered the chamber without knocking and stared regally at the somewhat confused men who struggled to their feet in acknowledgment of her presence.

"Your Highness," King Rhodar began with a portly bow. "You honor us. Was there-"

"Your Majesty," she responded with a little curtsy, "and gentlemen, I find that I need your advice in a matter of state."

"We are all at your immediate disposal, your Highness," King Rhodar replied with sly little twinkle in his eyes.

"In the absence of king Belgarion, it appears that I must act in his stead," Ce'Nedra annaunced, "and I need your advice on how to proceed. I wish the transfer of power into my hands to go as smoothly as possible."

They all stared at her disbelievingly.

King Rhodar recovered his wits first. "An interesting proposal, your Highness," he murmured politely. "We have, however, made other arrangements. There's a long-standing precedent in the matter. We thank your Highness for her gracious offer nonetheless."

"It was not precisely an offer, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra told him, "and any previous precedents have been superceded."

King Anheg was spluttering, but Rhodar was already moving along smoothly. Ce'Nedra realized that the rotund Drasnian king was likely to be her most serious adversary - or her most effective ally. "We'd all be fascinated to examine the instrument vesting your Highness with royal authority," he said. "I presume that the parchment you carry is relevant?"

"It is indeed, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra declared. "The document quite clearly lists my responsibilities."

"May I?" Rhodar asked, extending his hand.

Ce'Nedra handed him the parchment and he carefully unrolled it. "Uh - your Highness. This is your bethrothal agreement. Perhaps you meant to bring a different document."

"The pertinent material is contained in the fourth paragraph, your Majesty."

Rhodar quickly read the paragraph, frowning slightly.

"What does it say, Rhodar?" King Anheg asked impatiently.

"Interesting," Rhodar murmured, scratching his ear.

"Rhodar," Anheg complained, "what does it say?"

King Rhodar cleared his throat and began to read aloud. " 'It is agreed that King Belgarion and his Queen shall rule jointly, and that in his absence shall she assume fully the duties and authority of the Rivan Throne.'"

"Let me see that," Anheg demanded, snatching the parchment from Rhodar.

"It doesn't mean anything," Brand declared. "She isn't his queen yet. She won't be until after the wedding."

"That's only a formality, my Lord Warder," Ce'Nedra told him.

"A rather important one, I'd say," he retorted.

"The precedent is well-established," she said coolly. "When a king dies, the next in line assumes the duties of the crown, doesn't he, even though there hasn't been a formal coronation?"

"That's different," Brand growled.

"I fail to see the difference, my Lord. I have been designated Belgarion's co-ruler. In his absence or an emergency, I am obliged to take command. It is my right and my responsibility. The formalities may have to wait, but I am the Rivan Queen. This is King Belgarion's will and intent. Will you defy

your king?"

"There's something to what she says, my Lord Warder," the Earl of Seline mused. "The document is quite clear."

"But look at this," Anheg said triumphantly. "In paragraph two it says that should the wedding not take place, all gifts are to be returned. The wedding has not taken place."

"I'm not sure that power is a gift, Anheg," King Fulrach suggested. "You can't give it and then take it back."

"There's no way she could rule," Anheg declared stubbornly. "She doesn't know the first thing about Alorns."

"Neither did Garion," King Cho-Hag murmured in his quiet voice. "She can learn the same way he did."

Ce'Nedra had been rather carefully assessing their mood. Most of them seemed willing at least to consider her idea. Only the two conservatives, Brand and Anheg, were actually resisting. It seemed the time now for a dignified withdrawal coupled with a disarming offer. "I will leave you gentlemen to discuss the matter," she declared somewhat loftily. "I would like you to know, however, that I realize the gravity of the situation confronting the West." She deliberately put on a winsome, little-girl face. "I'm only a young girl," she confessed, "unused to the intricacies of strategy and tactics. I could never make any decisions in that area without the fullest advice from you gentlemen."

She curtsied then to King Rhodar, choosing him deliberately. "Your Majesty," she said, "I shall await your decision."

He bowed in response, a bit floridly. "Your Majesty," he replied with a sly wink.

Ce'Nedra retired and literally flew down the corridors to her own quarters. Breathlessly she closed the door behind her and touched the talisman at her throat with trembling fingertips. She sorted quickly through random conversation until she found the one she wanted.

"-refuse to be a party to an absurdity," Anheg was saying.

"Anheg, my friend," King Fulrach of Sendaria said with surprising firmness, "you are my dear brother king, bu you do have a few blind spots. Wouldn't it be more statesmanlike to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the situation dispassionately."

"The Alorns will never follow her," Anheg declared. "That's a major disadvantage right there."

"The Alorns will follow us, though," King Cho-Hag said quietly. "She's only going to be a figurehead, after all - a symbol of unity."

"I suspect that Cho-Hag's hit the exact point we should examine most closely," King Rhodar urged. "My apologies, Baron Mandorallen, but the Arends are totally disunited. Asturia and Mimbre are hovering on the verge of reopening hostilities, and a call from King Korodullin could very possibly be ignored in northern Arendia - in which case the Mimbrate knights would almost be compelled to stay home to defend against possible Asturian uprisings. We have to have someone who can make them forget their squabbles and join with us. We need the Asturian bowmen and the Mimbrate knights."

"I must sadly concur, your Majesty," Mandorallen agreed. "My poor Arendia must needs be united in one cause from the outside. We are not wise enough to unify ourselves."

"Ce'Nedra can serve us there as well as Garion could have done," Barak reasoned. "I don't think anybody expected him to be a general. All we were going to do was put a crown on him and let him ride at the head of the army - and Arends get all gushy and romantic about pretty girls. That betrothal document makes her claim at least semi-legitimate. All we'd have to do is act as if we accepted her and talk very fast. Add the prospect of a nice little war someplace, and the Arends will unite behind us, I think."

"The main point to consider, though," King Rhodar emphasized, "is the impact she's going to have in Tolnedra. Ran Borune dotes on her, and he might agree to lend her his legions - at least some of them - which he'd never do, if we were the ones asking it of him. He'll see the political advantage of having her in command almost immediately. We need those legions. I personally don't like Tolnedrans, but the legions are the finest fighting force in the world. I'll bend my knee to Ce'Nedra if I have to in order to get them. Let her play queen if she wants to."

Ce'Nedra smiled. Things were going even better than she had expected. All in all, she was quite pleased with herself as she sat down at her dressing table and began to brush her hair, humming softly all the while.

Chapter Twenty-three

DELBAN THE ARMORER WAS a gruff, bald man with broad shoulders, huge callused hands and a grizzled beard. He was a craftsman, an artist, and he had absolutely no respect for anyone. Ce'Nedra found him to be impossible.

"I don't make armor for women," was his initial response to her inquiry when she, accompanied by Durnik the smith, entered his workshop. He had

then turned his back on her and begun pounding noisily on a sheet of glowing steel. It took the better part of an hour to convince him even to consider the idea. The heat shimmered out from his glowing forge, and the red brick walls seemed to reflect the heat and intensify it. Ce'Nedra found herself perspiring heavily. She had made some sketches of what she thought might be a suitable design for her armor. All in all, she thought it would look rather nice, but Delban laughed raucously when he saw them.

"What's so amusing?" she demanded.

"You'd be like a turtle in something like that," he replied. "You wouldn't be able to move."

"The drawings are only intended to give you a general idea," she told him, trying to keep a grip on her temper.

"Why don't you be a good girl and take these to a dressmaker?" he suggested. "I work in steel, not brocade or satin. Armor like this would be useless, and so uncomfortable that you wouldn't be able to wear it."

"Then modify it," she grated from between clenched teeth.

He glanced at her design again, then deliberately crumpled her drawings in his fist and threw them into the corner. "Foolishness," he grunted.

Ce'Nedra resisted the urge to scream. She retrieved the drawings. "What's the matter with them?" she persisted.

"Too much here." He stabbed a thick finger at the shoulder represented on the drawing. "You wouldn't be able to lift your arm. And here." He pointed at the armhole on the breastplate she had drawn. "If I make it that tight, your arms would stick straight out. You wouldn't even be able to scratch your nose. As long as we're at it, where did you get the whole notion in the first place? Do you want a mail shirt or a breastplate? You can't have both."

"Why not?"

"The weight. You wouldn't be able to carry it."

"Make it lighter then. Can't you do that?"

"I can make it like cobwebs if you want, but what good would it be if I did? You could cut through it with a paring knife."

Ce'Nedra drew in a deep breath. "Master armorer," she said to him in a level voice, "look at me. In all the world do you think there's a single warrior small enough for me to fight?"

He considered her tiny form, scratching his bald head and looking down at

her with pursed lips. "You are a bit undergrown," he admitted. "If you aren't going to fight, why do you need armor?"

"It's not actually going to be armor," she explained to him rather impatiently, "but I need to look like I'm wearing armor. It's sort of in the nature of a costume." She saw instantly that her choice of words had been a mistake. Delban's face darkened, and he threw her drawings away again. It took another ten minutes to mollify him. Eventually, after much wheedling and outrageous flattery, she persuaded him to consider the whole notion as something in the nature of an artistic challenge.

"All right," he surrendered finally with a sour look, "take off your clothes."

"What?"

"Take your dress off," he repeated. "I need exact measurements."

"Do you realize what you're suggesting?"

"Little girl," he said testily, "I'm a married man. I've got daughters older than you are. You are wearing underclothes, aren't you?"

"Yes, but "

"That will satisfy the demands of modesty. Take off the dress."

With a flaming face, Ce'Nedra removed her dress. Durnik the smith, who had watched the entire exchange from the doorway with an open grin on his face, politely turned his back.

"You ought to eat more," Delban told her. "You're as scrawny as a chicken."

"I can do without the comments," she replied tartly. "Get on with this. I'm not going to stand around in my chemise all day."

Delban picked up a piece of stout cord with knots tied in it at regular intervals. He took a great many measurements with the cord, meticulously recording them on a piece of flat board. "All right," he said finally. "That ought to do it. Go ahead and get dressed again."

Ce'Nedra scrambled back into her dress. "How long will it take?" she asked.

"Two or three weeks."

"Impossible. I need it next week."

"Two weeks," he repeated stubbornly.

"Ten days," she countered.

For the first time since she had entered his workshop, the blunt man smiled. "She's used to getting her own way, isn't she?" he observed to Durnik.

"She's a princess," Durnik informed him. "She usually gets what she wants in the end."

"All right, my scrawny little princess." Delban laughed. "Ten days."

Ce'Nedra beamed at him. "I knew you'd see it my way."

Precisely ten days later, the princess, with Durnik once again in tow, returned to Delban's workshop. The mail shirt the craftsman had fashioned was so light that it could almost have been described as delicate. The helmet, hammered from thin steel, was surmounted with a white plume and was encircled with a gold crown. The greaves, which were to protect the fronts of Ce'Nedra's legs, fit to perfection. There was even an embossed shield rimmed with brass and a light sword with an ornate hilt and scabbard.

Ce'Nedra, however, was staring disapprovingly at the breastplate Delban had made for her. It would quite obviously fit-too well. "Didn't you forget something?" she asked him.

He picked the breastplate up in his big hands and examined it. "It's all there," he told her. "Front, back, all the straps to hook them together. What else did you want?"

"Isn't it a trifle - understated?" Ce'Nedra suggested delicately.

"It's made to fit," he replied. "The understatement isn't my fault."

"I want it a little more-" She made a sort of curving gesture with her hands.

"What for?"

"Never mind what for. Just do it."

"What do you plan to put in it?"

"That's my business. Just do it the way I told you to."

He tossed a heavy hammer down on his anvil. "Do it yourself," he told her bluntly.

"Durnik," Ce'Nedra appealed to the smith.

"Oh, no, princess," Durnik refused. "I don't touch another man's tools. That just isn't done."

"Please, Delban," she wheedled.

"It's foolishness," he told her, his face set.

"It's important," she coaxed. "If I wear it like that, I'll look like a little boy. When people see me, they have to know that I'm a woman. It's terribly, terribly important. Couldn't you - well just a little bit?" She cupped her hands slightly.

Delban gave Durnik a disgusted look. "You had to bring her to my workshop, didn't you?"

"Everybody said you were the best," Durnik replied mildly.

"Just a little bit, Delban?" Ce'Nedra urged.

Delban gave up. "Oh, all right," he growled, picking up his hammer. "Anything to get you out of my shop - but not clear out to here." He made an exaggerated gesture.

"I'll depend on your good taste, Delban." She smiled, patting his cheek with a fond little laugh. "Shall we say tomorrow morning?"

The armor, Ce'Nedra decided the following morning as she inspected herself in the mirror, was perfect. "Well, what do you think, Adara?" she asked her friend.

"It looks very nice, Ce'Nedra," the tall girl replied, although a bit dubiously.

"It's just exactly right," Ce'Nedra said happily, turning so that the blue cape fastened to the shoulder pieces of the breastplate flared and swirled dramatically. The gleaming mail shirt she wore under the breastplate reached to her knees and wrists. The greaves covering her calves and the armguards reaching to her elbows were inlaid with brass; Delban had steadfastly refused the notion of gold. The armor did chafe a bit through the thick linen undershirt she wore, Ce'Nedra privately admitted, but she was prepared to accept that. She brandished her sword, studying the effect in her mirror.

"You're holding it wrong, Ce'Nedra," Adara suggested politely.

"Show me," Ce'Nedra said, handing over hex sword.

Adara took the weapon and gripped it firmly, its point low. She looked extremely competent.

"Where did you ever learn to do that?" Ce'Nedra asked her.

"We're given instruction," Adara replied, handing back the sword. "It's traditional."

"Help me on with my shield."

Between them, they managed to gird the princess in all her warlike equipment.

"How ever do you keep it from getting tangled up in your legs?" Ce'Nedra demanded, fumbling with the long scabbard at her waist.

"Hold on to the hilt," Adara told her. "Do you want me to go along?"

Ce'Nedra thought about that as she smoothed her hair and settled her plumed helmet more firmly in place. "I guess not," she decided rather reluctantly. "I think I'll have to face them alone. Do I really look all right?"

"You'll be fine," Adara assured her.

A sudden thought struck the princess. "What if they laugh?" she demanded in a frightened voice.

"You could draw your sword on them, I suppose," Adara replied gravely.

"Are you making fun of me, Adara?"

"Of course not, Princess," Adara answered with an absolutely straight face.

When Ce'Nedra reached the door to the council chamber, she drew in a deep breath and entered, once again without knocking. Knocking would have been inappropriate, suggesting somehow that she had doubts about her right to be there.

"Well, gentlemen?" she said to the assembled kings and generals as she stepped to the center of the room where they could all see her. King Rhodar rose politely. "Your Majesty," he greeted her, bowing.

"We were curious about your absence. The reason is now abundantly clear."

"Do you approve?" she could not help asking. She turned so they could all see her armor.

King Rhodar looked at her, his eyes speculative. "It is impressive, don't you think?" he said to the others. "Just the right touches in the right places. The Arends will flock to her, and the Tolnedrans - well, we'll have to see about the Tolnedrans."

King Anheg looked like a man having a serious struggle with himself. "Why do I feel that I'm being pushed into something?" he complained. "The very notion of this makes my blood cold, but I can't think of any rational

arguments against it." He critically scrutinized Ce'Nedra. "She doesn't really look all that bad, does she?" he conceded grudgingly.

"It's absolutely unnatural, of course, but the armor does add something. This might even work."

"I'm so glad I meet with your Majesty's approval," Ce'Nedra almost gushed at him. She tried to curtsy, but her armor made that impossible. She gave a helpless little laugh and fluttered her eyelashes at the brutish-looking King of Cherek.

"Don't do that, Ce'Nedra," he told her irritably. "I'm having enough trouble with this as it is." He almost glared at her. "All right," he said finally, "as long as we all understand that she's not going to make any decisions, I'll go along with the idea. I don't like it much, but that's beside the point, I suppose." He stood up and bowed to her. "Your Majesty," he said, looking as if the words nearly choked him.

Ce'Nedra beamed at him and instinctively tried to respond to his bow.

"Don't bow, Ce'Nedra," he advised her with a pained look. "The Overlord of the West doesn't bow to anyone." He turned in exasperation to the King of Drasnia. "That isn't going to work, Rhodar. What are we going to call her? The Overlady of the West? We'll be the laughingstock of the twelve kingdoms if we do."

"We call her the Rivan Queen, my dear Anheg," King Rhodar replied urbanely. "And we break the head of any man who refuses to bow to her."

"You can count on that." Anheg scowled. "If I bow to her, everybody's going to bow to her."

"I'm glad that's all been settled," a familiar voice came from a dim corner of the council chamber.

"Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra gasped with a certain confusion. "I didn't realize you were here."

"That's fairly obvious," Polgara replied. "You have been busy, haven't you dear?"

"I-" Ce'Nedra faltered.

Polgara carefully set down her teacup and moved into the light. Her face was serious, but there was a faintly amused twinkle in her eyes as she examined the armor-clad princess. "Very interesting," was all she said.

Ce'Nedra was crushed.

"Gentlemen," Polgara said to the council, "I'm sure you still have much to

discuss. In the meantime, her Majesty and I need to have a little discussion of our own. I'm sure you'll excuse us." She moved toward the door. "Come along, Ce'Nedra," she said without so much as a backward glance.

Trembling, the princess followed her from the room.

Polgara said nothing until the door to her own chambers had closed behind them. Then she turned and looked gravely at the princess in her armor. "I've heard about what you've been up to, Ce'Nedra. Would you care to explain?"

"They were all arguing so much," Ce'Nedra began lamely. "They needed somebody to unite them."

"And you decided to take that upon yourself?"

"Well-"

"How did you know they were arguing?"

Ce'Nedra flushed guiltily.

"I see," Polgara murmured. "You've discovered how to use my sister's amulet. How clever of you."

"Let me do it, Lady Polgara!" Ce'Nedra pleaded suddenly. "Let me lead them; I know I can do it. Let me prove that I'm fit to be Garion's queen."

Polgara gazed at her thoughtfully. "You're growing up very rapidly, Ce'Nedra," she said finally.

"You'll let me do it?"

"We'll talk about it. Take off your helmet and shield, dear, and stand your sword over in the corner. I'll make us a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me exactly what you've got in mind. I'd rather not have any surprises, once we get started in this."

"You're going with us?" For some reason that startled Ce'Nedra. "Of course I am," Polgara told her. She smiled then. "Possibly I can keep at least you out of trouble. I seem not to have had much success with Garion." She stopped and looked rather pointedly at Ce'Nedra's breastplate. "Isn't that a trifle overdone, dear?"

Ce'Nedra blushed. "I thought it would be more - well -" She floundered with it defensively.

"Ce'Nedra," Polgara told her, "you don't have to be so self conscious. You're still a young girl, after all. Give it some time. Things will

improve."

"I'm so flat," the princess wailed, almost in despair about it. A thought occurred to her. "Do you suppose you could - well -" She made a sort of a gesture.

"No, dear," Polgara said firmly. "That wouldn't be a good idea. It would do some very strange things to certain necessary balances within you, and those are not the sort of things to be tampered with. Just be patient. If nothing else, a few children will fill you out."

"Oh, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra said with a helpless little laugh, "you seem to know everything. You're like the mother I never had." Impulsively she threw her arms about Polgara's neck.

Polgara wrinkled her nose. "Ce'Nedra," she suggested, "why don't you take off your armor? You smell like an iron pot."

Ce'Nedra began to laugh.

In the days that followed, a number of people left Riva on important missions. Barak sailed north to Val Alorn to attend the outfitting of the Cherek fleet. Mandorallen left for Vo Mimbre to report to King Korodullin. The fiery young Lelldorin, who had received a pardon at Garion's request, took ship to return to Asturia to make certain preparations there. Hettar, Relg, and Colonel Brendig departed for Camaar, where they would separate and each would return home to oversee the final stages of the mobilization. Events, which always moved at their own pace, began to stir and quicken as the West moved inexorably toward war.

Chapter Twenty-four

PRINCESS CE'NEDRA SOON discovered that Alorns were a surprisingly emotional people. She was forced from the outset to abandon the stereotyped Tolnedran view of this northern race as brutish savages, ravening on the extreme edges of civilization. She found them instead to be an extraordinarily complex people often capable of an extreme range of highly subtle emotions.

There was nothing subtle, however, about the apoplectic fury of King Anheg of Cherek when he came bursting into the council chamber a few days later with his eyes bulging and his face aflame.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" he bellowed at Ce'Nedra.

"Done to what, your Majesty?" she replied calmly.

"To Cherek!" he shouted, his dented crown sliding down over one ear. "This little game you've been playing gave my wife the brilliant idea that she's going to run my country while I'm gone."

"She's your wife, King Anheg," Ce'Nedra pointed out coolly. "It's only proper that she should mind the kingdom in your absence."

"Mind?" he almost screamed. "Islena doesn't have a mind. There's nothing between her ears but empty air." "Why did you marry her then?"

"It certainly wasn't for her mind."

"She might surprise you, Anheg," King Rhodar suggested with an amused look on his face.

"The only thing that would surprise me would be to find anything left when I get back," Anheg retorted, collapsing in a chair. "And there's nothing I can do to stop her. No matter what I say, she'll assume the throne as soon as I leave. It's going to be a disaster. Women have no business in politics. They're too weak-brained for it."

"I'm afraid that suggestion won't endear you very much in this particular company, Anheg." King Rhodar chuckled, glancing at Polgara. One of her eyebrows had shot up at Anheg's last remark.

"Oh-sorry, Polgara," Anheg mustered, embarrassed. "I didn't mean you, of course. I don't really think of you as a woman."

"I wouldn't pursue it any further, Anheg," King Rhodar advised him. "You've blundered quite enough for one day already."

"That's all right, Rhodar," Polgara said in a frigid tone. "I find the observations of the King of Cherek most interesting."

Anheg winced.

"I really can't understand you, my friend," King Rhodar said to Anheg. "You've given yourself the finest education in the north. You've studied art and poetry and history and philosophy, but on this one subject you're as blind as an illiterate peasant. What disturbs you so much about the idea of a woman with authority?"

"It's - it's unnatural," Anheg blurted. "Women were not meant to rule. The whole idea violates the order of things."

"I'm not certain that we're getting anywhere with this," Polgara observed. "If you gentlemen will excuse us, her Majesty and I still have preparations to make." She rose and led Ce'Nedra from the council chamber.

"He's very excitable, isn't he?" Ce'Nedra said as the two of them passed

through the corridors of Iron-grip's Citadel toward Lady Polgara's apartments.

"He tends to be overdramatic at times," Polgara replied. "These outbursts of his aren't always genuine. Sometimes he behaves the way he does because he thinks people expect it of him." She frowned slightly. "He's right about one thing, though. Islena's not qualified to rule. I think we'll have to have a talk with her - and with the other ladies as well." She opened the door to her apartment, and the two of them went inside.

Most of the damage that had resulted from Polgara's vast rage had been repaired, and there remained only a few scorchmarks on the stone walls to testify to the violence of her fury. She seated herself at a table and turned again to the letter which had arrived that morning from Queen Porenn in Drasnia. "I think it's rather obvious that we're not going to be able to catch up with my father and the others now," she observed somewhat regretfully, but at least there's one thing we won't have to worry about any more."

"Which one is that?" Ce'Nedra asked, seating herself across the table from Polgara.

"There'd been some question about my father's recovery from that collapse he suffered last winter, but from what Porenn says, he's completely back to normal - although that's not an unmixed blessing." She laid Porenn's letter aside. "I think the time's come for us to have a little talk, Ce'Nedra. You've done a great deal of maneuvering and manipulating in the past few weeks. Now I want to know exactly what's behind it all. Precisely why have you seen fit to ram your new status down everybody's throat?"

Ce'Nedra flushed. "I am the Rivan Queen after all, Lady Polgara," she replied stiffly.

"Don't be absurd. You're wearing a fictional crown because Rhodar decided to let you wear it, and because he's convinced Anheg and Brand and Cho-Hag that you're not going to do any damage. Now what's behind all this?" Polgara's look was very direct, and Ce'Nedra squirmed uncomfortably.

"We have to bring in the Arends and my father's legions," she said as if that explained it.

"That's fairly obvious."

"But the Alorn Kings wouldn't be able to do it."

"Why not?"

"Because a committee can't win people's hearts." It was out in the open now, and Ce'Nedra rushed on. "Garion could have done it. The entire West would have risen at the call of the Rivan King, but Garion isn't here, so

somebody else has to do it. I've studied history, Lady Polgara. No army led by a committee has ever succeeded. The success of an army depends on the spirit of the soldiers, and the soldiers have to have one leader - someone who fires their imagination."

"And you've elected yourself?"

"It doesn't have to be anybody brilliant or anything - not really. It's just got to be somebody visible - and unusual."

"And you think that a woman's going to be unusual enough and visible enough to raise an army - and incidentally to pose enough of a threat to attract the undivided attention of Taur Urgas and'Zakath, the Mallorean Emperor?"

"Well, it's never been done before." Ce'Nedra felt a little defensive about it.

"A lot of things have never been done before, Ce'Nedra. That's not necessarily the best recommendation - and what convinced you that I wasn't qualified?"

Ce'Nedra swallowed hard. "You were so angry," she faltered, "and I wasn't sure how long you were going to stay angry. Somebody had to take charge immediately. Besides-" she hesitated.

"Go on."

"My father doesn't like you," Ce'Nedra blurted. "He'd never order his legions to follow you. I'm the only one who has a chance to convince him that he ought to join us. I'm sorry, Lady Polgara. I don't mean to offend you."

Polgara, however, waved that aside. Her face was thoughtful as she considered Ce'Nedra's arguments. "It would seem that you have given the matter some thought," she concluded. "All right, Ce'Nedra, we'll try it your way - for now. Just don't do anything exotic. Now I think we'd better have a talk with the ladies."

The conference that took place in Polgara's apartments that afternoon concerned matters of state. She waited quietly until the little group had all gathered, and then she spoke to them rather gravely. "Ladies," she began, "in a very short time the Alorns and others will be taking the field on an expedition of some importance."

"You mean war, Pol?" Queen Layla asked in a sinking voice.

"We're going to try to avoid that if it's at all possible," Polgara replied. "At any rate, the departure of your husband and the Alorn Kings will leave affairs at home in your hands - and the same holds true for each of you. I wanted to go over a few things with all of you before we left."

She turned to Queen Islena, who was splendidly gowned in red velvet. "Your husband is somewhat less than enthusiastic about any arrangements that will leave you in charge of Cherek, Islena."

Islena sniffed. "Anheg can be tiresome at times."

"Try not to agitate him. Drop a hint or two that you'll allow yourself to be guided by advisers he trusts. It will set his mind at rest a bit." Polgara looked around at them. "The campaign is not likely to take us so far away that you won't be able to stay in touch with us - not at first, anyway. If anything serious comes up, communicate with your husbands immediately. Deal with the day-to-day matters yourselves. I also think you should all stay in close contact with each other, once your husbands have left - and also with Porenn in Boktor and Mayaserana in Vo Mimbre. You all have your strengths and your weaknesses, but if you're not afraid to seek advice from each other, everything will be all right."

"Possibly we should arrange for some kind of network for communications," Queen Layla mused thoughtfully. "Relays of horses, messengers, fast ships - that sort of thing. The Tolnedrans have done that for centuries."

"I'm sure you'll be able to arrange it, Layla." Polgara smiled at her. "The one thing you all must remember is to pay close attention to anything Porenn tells you. I know she's very young and a bit shy about putting herself forward, but Drasnian intelligence will report directly to her, and she'll be aware of things long before any of the rest of you are. And I want you all to keep a particularly close watch on the Tolnedrans. They like to take advantage of periods of turmoil. Absolutely do not sign anything offered to you by a Tolnedran - no matter how attractive it looks. I trust Ran Borune about as much as I'd trust a fox in a henhouse - no offense intended, Ce'Nedra."

"I know my father too, Lady Polgara," Princess Ce'Nedra replied with a smile.

"Please, ladies," Polgara told them firmly, "no adventures while I'm gone. Just try to keep things running smoothly, and don't be afraid to consult with one another. You'll also want to keep in touch with Xantha. The Dryads have access to a great deal of information about what's going on in the south. If any real emergency arises, get word to me immediately."

"Will you want me to keep the little boy?" Merel asked. "I'll be at Val Alorn with Islena, so he'll be safe with me. My girls are very fond of him, and he seems happy with us."

Polgara thought about it for a moment. "No," she decided finally. "Errand's going to have to go with me. Aside from Garion, he's the only person in the world who can touch the Orb. The Angaraks may realize that and try to take him."

"I'll care for him," Taiba offered in her rich voice. "He knows me, and we're comfortable with each other. It will give me something to do."

"Surely you're not planning to go along on the campaign, Taiba," Queen Layla objected.

Taiba shrugged. "Why not?" she replied. "I don't have a house to keep or a kingdom to oversee. There are other reasons, too."

They all understood. What existed between Taiba and Relg was so profound that it seemed somehow outside the sphere of normal human attachment, and the Ulgo's absence had caused the strange woman something rather close to physical pain. It was now obvious that she intended to follow him - even into battle if necessary.

Ariana, the blond Mimbrate girl who had accompanied Lelldorin of Wildantor to Riva, cleared her throat in preparation to raising a matter of some delicacy. "The lives of women are circumscribed by proprieties," she noted. "Though battle doth rage about her and rude war turneth all to confusion, a lady must not be unattended in the midst of an army lest her reputation suffer. Lady Adara and I have of late held some conversation concerning this and have concluded that we must accompany Princess Ce'Nedra as her companions. We would do this out of duty even were we not impelled by love."

"Very nicely put, Ariana," Adara murmured without any hint of a smile.

"Oh dear." Queen Layla sighed. "Now I have two more to worry about."

"I think that covers everything, then," Polgara said. "Running a kingdom isn't all that much different from running a house, and you've all had experience at that. Don't change any major policies, and don't sign any treaties. Aside from that, just let yourselves be guided by common sense. I think we can join the gentlemen now. It's getting on toward suppertime, and men tend to grow restless if they aren't fed regularly."

A few days later, Barak returned to Riva, accompanied by a leanfaced Drasnian nobleman. The two of them immediately went to the council chamber to report to the kings. Princess Ce'Nedra considered following them into the conference, but decided against it. Her presence might inhibit the discussion, and she had another way to find out what was going on. She retired quickly to her rooms and touched her fingertips to the amulet at her throat.

"-going fairly well," she heard Barak's voice say after she had finally located the conversation she wished to hear. "The fleet's ready to move out of Val Alorn, and Queen Porenn's got the Drasnian pikemen gathering just south of Boktor. The mobilization's very nearly complete. I think we've got some problems, though. Count Kharel here has just returned from Thull Mardu. All the reports out of northern Cthol Murgos have been channeled to

him, so he can give us a fairly clear assessment of the situation there."

King Rhodar cleared his throat. "Kharel's a very senior member of the intelligence service," he said by way of introduction. "I've always found his reports to be extremely accurate."

"Your Majesty is too kind," an unfamiliar voice responded.

"Have the southern Murgos begun their march north?" King Anheg asked.

"It goes a bit farther than that, your Majesty," Kharel replied. "All reports I have indicate that the march is nearly completed. There are somewhat in excess of four million of them encamped in the vicinity of Rak Goska."

"What?" Anheg exclaimed.

"It appears that Taur Urgas began the march sometime last fall," the Drasnian told him.

"In the winter?"

"It seems so, your Majesty."

"I imagine that cost him a few of his men," King Cho-Hag said. "A hundred thousand or so, your Majesty," Kharel answered, "but human life doesn't mean that much to Taur Urgas."

"This changes everything, Rhodar," Anheg said tersely. "Our advantage has always been the time that march was going to take. We've lost it now."

"Unfortunately there's more, your Majesty," Kharel continued. "The western Malloreans have begun to arrive at Thull Zelik. Their numbers aren't really that significant yet, but they're ferrying in several thousand a day."

"We've got to cut that off as quickly as we can," Anheg growled. "Rhodar, can you get your engineers to the eastern escarpment within a month? I'm going to have to portage a fleet across to the headwaters of the River Mardu. We've got to get ships into the Sea of the East as soon as possible. If we don't head off Zakath, his Malloreans will swarm us under."

"I'll send word to Porenn immediately," Rhodar agreed.

"One wonders if the noble count has any good news," the Earl of Seline suggested dryly.

"There is some possibility of division in the enemy ranks, my Lord," Kharel replied. "Taur Urgas is behaving as if he considers himself the only possible choice as overgeneral of the Angarak armies; at the moment, he's got the advantage of numbers on his side. That may change if the Malloreans

manage to land a big enough army. There are rumors that 'Zakath would like to dispute the leadership of Taur Urgas, but he's reluctant to try it in the face of four million Murgos."

"Let's try to keep it that way," Rhodar said. "Taur Urgas is insane, and crazy men make mistakes. I've heard about 'Zakath, and I'd rather not face him in the field."

King Cho-Hag spoke wryly. "Even as it stands without the Malloreans, we're going to be taking the field at about a two to one disadvantage - and that's assuming that we can persuade the Arends and Tolnedrans to join us."

"It's a rotten way to start a war, Rhodar," Anheg complained.

"We'll just have to adjust our tactics," Rhodar replied. "We've got to avoid a pitched battle as long as possible to save as many men as we can."

"I thought we weren't even considering a battle," Barak objected, "and Belgarath said that all he wants is a diversion."

"The situation's changed, Barak," King Rhodar declared. "We hadn't counted on the southern Murgos or the Malloreans being in place this soon. We're going to have to do something a bit more significant than stage a few hit-and-run attacks. The Angaraks have enough men now to be able to ignore minor raids and skirmishes. If we don't make a major thrust - and very soon they'll spread out all over the eastern half of the continent."

"Belgarath doesn't like it when you change plans on him," Anheg reminded Rhodar.

"Belgarath isn't here, and he doesn't know what's going on. If we don't act rather decisively, he and Belgarion and Kheldar haven't a hope of getting through."

"You're talking about a war we can't win, Rhodar," Anheg said bluntly.

"I know," King Rhodar admitted.

There was a long silence.

"So that's the way it is, then," Brand said finally.

"I'm afraid so," Rhodar told them somberly. "There has to be a diversion, or Belgarion and his sword will never get to the meeting with Torak. That's the only thing that really matters, and we'll all have to lay down our lives if necessary to make it happen."

"You're going to get us all killed, Rhodar," Anheg said bluntly, "and all our armies with us."

"If that's what it takes, Anheg," Rhodar answered grimly. "If Belgarion doesn't get to Torak, our lives don't mean anything, anyway. Even if we all have to die to get him there, it's still worth it."

Ce'Nedra's fingertips slid numbly from her amulet as she fell back in her chair. Suddenly she began to weep. "I won't do it," she sobbed. "I can't." She saw before her a multitude - an army of widows and orphans all staring accusingly at her, and she shrank from their eyes. If she perpetrated this horror, the rest of her life would be spent in an agony of self loathing. Still weeping, she stumbled to her feet, fully intending to rush to the council chamber and declare that she would have nothing further to do with this futile war. But then she stopped as the image of Garion's face rose in her mind - that serious face with the unruly hair she always wanted to straighten. He depended on her. If she shrank from this, the Angaraks would be free to hunt him down. His very life - and with it the future of the world - was in her hands. She had no choice but to continue. If only she did not know that the campaign was doomed! It was the knowledge of the disaster that awaited them that made it all so terrible.

Knowing that it was useless, she began to tug at the chain that held the amulet about her neck. Had it not been for the amulet, she would have remained blissfully ignorant of what lay ahead. Still sobbing, she yanked frantically at the chain, ignoring the sting as it cut into the soft skin of her neck. "I hate you!" she blurted irrationally at the silver amulet with its crowned tree.

But it was useless. The medallion would remain chained about her neck for the rest of her life. Ashen-faced, Ce'Nedra let her hands drop. Even if she were able to remove the amulet, what good would it do? She already knew and she must conceal the knowledge in her heart. If the faintest hint of what she knew showed in her face or her voice, she would fail - and Garion would suffer for her failure. She must steel herself and face the world as if certain of victory.

And so it was that the Rivan Queen drew herself erect and bravely lifted her chin - even though her heart lay like lead in her breast.

Chapter Twenty-five

BARAK'S NEW SHIP was larger by half than most of the other Cherek warboats in the fleet, but she moved before the spring breeze like a gull skimming low over the water. Fleecy white clouds ran across the blue sky, and the surface of the Sea of the Winds sparkled in the sunlight as the great ship heeled over and cut cleanly through the waves. Low on the horizon before them rose the green shoreline of the hook of Arendia. They were two days out from Riva, and the Cherek fleet spread out behind them in a vast crowd

of sails, carrying the graycloaked Rivans to join the armies of King Fulrach of Sendaria.

Ce'Nedra nervously paced the deck near the prow, her blue cloak tossing in the wind and her armor gleaming. Despite the dreadful knowledge concealed in her heart, there was an excitement to all of this. The gathering of men, swords, and ships, the running before the wind, the sense of a unified purpose, all combined to make her blood race and to fill her with an exhilaration she had never felt before.

The coast ahead loomed larger - a white sand beach backed by the dark green of the Arendish forest. As they neared the shoreline, an armored knight on a huge roan stallion emerged from the trees and rode down the beach to the edge of the water where foamy breakers crashed on the damp sand. The princess shaded her eyes with one hand and peered intently at the gleaming knight. Then, as he turned with a broad sweep of his arm which told them to continue up the coast, she saw the crest on his shield. Her heart suddenly soared.

"Mandorallen!" she cried out in a vibrant trumpet note as she clung to the ropes in the very prow of Barak's ship, with the wind whipping at her hair.

The great knight waved a salute and, spurring his charger, galloped through the seething foam at the edge of the beach, the silver and blue pennon at the tip of his lance snapping and streaming over his head. Their ship heeled over as Barak swung the tiller, and, separated by a hundred yards or so of foaming surf, the ship and the rider on the beach kept abreast of each other.

It was a moment Ce'Nedra would remember for all her life - a single image so perfect that it seemed forever frozen in her memory. The great ship flew before the wind, cutting the sparkling blue water, with her white sails booming; the mighty warhorse on the beach plunged through the gleaming foam at the edge of the sand with spray flying out from beneath his great hooves. Locked together in that endless moment, ship and rider raced along in the warm spring sunshine toward a wooded promontory a mile ahead, with Ce'Nedra exulting in the ship's prow and her flaming hair streaming like a banner.

Beyond the promontory lay a sheltered cove, and drawn up on the beach stood the camp of the Sendarian army, row upon orderly row of dun-colored tents. Barak swung his tiller over, and his sails flapped as the ship coasted into the cove with the Cherek fleet close behind.

"Ho, Mandorallen!" Barak bellowed as the anchor ropes sang and great iron anchors plunged down through crystal water toward the sandy bottom.

"My Lord Barak," Mandorallen shouted his reply, "welcome to Arendia. Lord Brendig hath devised a means to speed thy disembarking." He pointed to where a hundred or so Sendarian soldiers were busily poling a series of

large rafts into position, lashing them together to form a long floating wharf extending out into the waters of the cove.

Barak laughed. "Trust a Sendar to come up with something practical."

"Can we go ashore now?" King Rhodar asked plaintively as he emerged from the cabin. The king was not a good sailor, and his broad, round face had a pale greenish cast to it. He looked oddly comical in his mail shirt and helmet, and the ravages of seasickness on his face added little to his dignity. Despite his unwarlike exterior, however, the other kings had already begun to defer to his wisdom. Beneath his vast rotundity, Rhodar concealed a genius for tactics and a grasp of overall strategy that made the others turn to him almost automatically and accept his unspoken leadership.

A small fishing boat that had been pressed into service as a ferry drew alongside Barak's ship, almost before the anchors had settled, and the kings and their generals and advisers were transferred to the beach in less than half an hour.

"I think I'm hungry," Rhodar announced the moment he stepped onto solid ground.

Anheg laughed. "I think you were born hungry." The king wore a mail shirt and had a broad swordbelt about his waist. His coarse features seemed less out of place somehow, now that he was armed.

"I haven't been able to eat for two days, Anheg." Rhodar groaned. "My poor stomach's beginning to think I've abandoned it."

"Food hath been prepared, your Majesty," Mandorallen assured him. "Our Asturian brothers have provided goodly numbers of the king's deer - doubtless obtained lawfully - though I chose not to investigate that too closely."

Someone standing in the group behind Mandorallen laughed, and Ce'Nedra looked at the handsome young man with reddish-gold hair and the longbow slung over the shoulder of his green doublet. Ce'Nedra had not had much opportunity to become acquainted with Lelldorin of Wildantor while they had been at Riva. She knew him to be Garion's closest friend, however, and she realized the importance of gaining his confidence. It should not be too hard, she decided as she looked at his open, almost innocent face. The gaze he returned was very direct, and one glance into those eyes told the princess that there was a vast sincerity and very little intelligence behind them.

"We've heard from Belgarath," Barak advised Mandorallen and the young Asturian.

"Where are they?" Lelldorin demanded eagerly.

"They were in Boktor," King Rhodar replied, his face still a trifle green from his bout of seasickness. "For reasons of her own, my wife let them pass through. I imagine they're somewhere in Gar og Nadrak by now."

Lelldorin's eyes flashed. "Maybe if I hurry, I can catch up with them," he said eagerly, already starting to look around for his horse.

"It's fifteen hundred leagues, Lelldorin," Barak pointed out politely.

"Oh-" Lelldorin seemed a bit crestfallen. "I suppose you're right. It would be a little difficult to catch them now, wouldn't it?"

Barak nodded gravely.

And then the blond Mimbrate girl, Ariana, stepped forward, her heart in her eyes. "My Lord," she said to Lelldorin, and Ce'Nedra remembered with a start that the two were married - technically at least. "Throe absence hath given me great pain."

Lelldorin's eyes were immediately stricken. "My Ariana." He almost choked. "I swear that I'll never leave you again." He took both her hands in his and gazed adoringly into her eyes. The gaze she returned was just as full of love and just as empty of thought. Ce'Nedra shuddered inwardly at the potential for disaster implicit in the look the two exchanged.

"Does anyone care that I'm starving to death right here on the spot?" Rhodar asked.

The banquet was laid on a long table set up beneath a gaily striped pavilion on the beach not far from the edge of the forest. The table quite literally groaned under its weight of roasted game, and there was enough to eat to satisfy even the enormous appetite of King Rhodar. When they had finished eating, they lingered at the table in conversation.

"Thy son, Lord Hettar, hath advised us that the Algar clans are gathering at the Stronghold, your Majesty," Mandorallen reported to King Cho-Hag.

Cho-Hag nodded.

"And we've had word from the Ulgo-Relg," Colonel Brendig added. "He's gathered a small army of warriors from the caves. They'll wait for us on the Algarian side of the mountains. He said you'd know the place."

Barak grunted. "The Ulgos can be troublesome," he said. "They're afraid of open places, and daylight hurts their eyes, but they can see in the dark like cats. That could be very useful at some point."

"Did Relg send any - personal messages?" Taiba asked Brendig with a little catch in her voice.

Gravely, the Sendar took a folded parchment from inside his tunic and handed it to her. She took it with a rather helpless expression and opened it, turning it this way and that.

"What's the matter, Taiba?" Adara asked quietly.

"He knows I can't read," Taiba protested, holding the note tightly pressed against her.

"I'll read it to you," Adara offered.

"But maybe it's - well-personal," Taiba objected.

"I promise I won't listen," Adara told her without the trace of a smile.

Ce'Nedra covered her own smile with her hand. Adara's penetrating and absolutely straight-faced wit was one of the qualities that most endeared her to the princess. Even as she smiled, however, Ce'Nedra could feel eyes on her, and she knew that she was being examined with great curiosity by the Arends - both Asturian and Mimbrate - who had joined them. Lelldorin in particular seemed unable to take his eyes from her. The handsome young man sat close beside the blond Mimbrate girl, Ariana, and stared openly at Ce'Nedra even while, unconsciously perhaps, he held Ariana's hand. Ce'Nedra endured his scrutiny with a certain nervousness. To her surprise, she found that she wanted this rather foolish young man's approval.

"Tell me," she said directly to him, "what are the sentiments here in Asturia - concerning our campaign, I mean?"

Lelldorin's eyes clouded. "Unenthusiastic for the most part, your Majesty," he replied. "I'm afraid there's suspicion that this might all be some Mimbrate plot."

"That's absurd," Ce'Nedra declared.

Lelldorin shrugged. "It's the way my countrymen think. And those who don't think it's a plot are looking at the idea that all the Mimbrate knights might join a crusade against the East. That raises certain hopes in some quarters."

Mandorallen sighed. "The same sentiments exist in some parts of Mimbre," he said. "We are a woefully divided kingdom, and old hatreds and suspicions die hard."

Ce'Nedra felt a sudden wave of consternation. She had not counted on this. King Rhodar had made it plain that he absolutely had to have the Arends, and now the idiotic hatred and suspicion between Mimbre and Asturia seemed about to bring the entire plan crashing down around her ears. Helplessly she turned to Polgara.

The sorceress, however, seemed undisturbed by the news that the Arends were reluctant to join the campaign. "Tell me, Lelldorin," she said calmly, "could you gather some of your less suspicious friends in one place - some secure place where they won't be afraid we might want to ambush them?"

"What have you got in mind, Polgara?" King Rhodar asked, his eyes puzzled.

"Someone's going to have to talk to them," Polgara replied. "Someone rather special, I think." She turned back to Lelldorin. "I don't think we'll want a large crowd - not at first, anyway. Forty or fifty ought to be enough - and no one too violently opposed to our cause."

"I'll gather them at once, Lady Polgara," Lelldorin declared, impulsively leaping to his feet.

"It's rather late, Lelldorin," she pointed out, glancing at the sun hovering low over the horizon.

"The sooner I start, the sooner I can gather them," Lelldorin said fervently. "If friendship and the ties of blood have any sway at all, I will not fail." He bowed deeply to Ce'Nedra. "Your Majesty," he said by way of farewell and ran to where his horse was tethered.

Ariana sighed as she looked after the departing young enthusiast.

"Is he always like that?" Ce'Nedra asked her curiously.

The Mimbrate girl nodded. "Always," she admitted. "Thought and deed are simultaneous with him. He hath no understanding of the meaning of the word reflection, I fear. It doth add to his charm, but it is sometimes disconcerting, I must admit."

"I can imagine," Ce'Nedra agreed.

Later, when the princess and Polgara were alone in their tent, Ce'Nedra turned a puzzled look upon Garion's Aunt. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"Not we, Ce'Nedra - you. You're going to have to talk to them."

"I'm not very good at speaking in public, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra confessed, her mouth going dry. "Crowds frighten me, and I get all tongue-tied."

"You'll get over it, dear," Polgara assured her. She looked at the princess with a slightly amused expression. "You're the one who wanted to lead an army, remember? Did you really think that all you were going to have to do was put on your armor, jump into the saddle and shout 'follow me' and then the whole world would fall in behind you?"

"Well-"

"You spent all that time studying history and missed the one thing all great leaders have had in common? You must have been very inattentive, Ce'Nedra."

Ce'Nedra stared at her with slowly dawning horror.

"It doesn't take that much to raise an army, dear. You don't have to be brilliant; you don't have to be a warrior; your cause doesn't even have to be great and noble. All you have to do is be eloquent."

"I can't do that, Lady Polgara."

"You should have thought of that before, Ce'Nedra. It's too late to go back now. Rhodar will command the army and see to it that all the details are taken care of, but you're the one who'll have to make them want to follow you."

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea what to say to them," Ce'Nedra protested.

"It'll come to you, dear. You do believe in what we're doing, don't you?"

"Of course, but "

"You decided to do this, Ce'Nedra. You decided it all by yourself. And as long as you've come this far, you might as well go all the way."

"Please, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra begged. "Speaking in public makes me sick at my stomach. I'll throw up."

"That happens now and then," Polgara observed calmly. "Just try not to do it in front of everybody."

Three days later, the princess, Polgara, and the Alorn Kings journeyed to the ruined city of Vo Astur deep in the silences of the Arendish forest. Ce'Nedra rode through the sunny woods in a state hovering on the verge of panic. In spite of all her arguments, Polgara had remained adamant. Tears had not budged her; even hysterics had failed. The princess was morbidly convinced that, even if she were to die, Polgara would prop her up in front of the waiting throng and make her go through the agony of addressing them. Feeling absolutely helpless, she rode to meet her fate.

Like Vo Wacune, Vo Astur had been laid waste during the dark centuries of the Arendish civil war. Its tumbled stones were green with moss and they lay in the shade of vast trees that seemed to mourn the honor, pride, and sorrow of Asturia. Lelldorin was waiting, and with him were perhaps fifty richly dressed young noblemen, their eyes filled with curiosity faintly

tinged with suspicion.

"It's as many as I could bring together in a short time, Lady Polgara," Lelldorin apologized after they had dismounted. "There are others in the region, but they're convinced that our campaign is some kind of Mimbrate treachery."

"These will do nicely, Lelldorin," Polgara replied. "They'll spread the word about what happens here." She looked around at the mossy, sun-dappled ruins. "I think that spot over there will be fine." She pointed at a broken bit of one of the walls. "Come with me, Ce'Nedra."

The princess, dressed in her armor, hung her helmet and shield on the saddle of the white horse King Cho-Hag had brought for her from Algaria and led the patient animal as she tremblingly followed the sorceress.

"We want them to be able to see you as well as hear you," Polgara instructed, "so climb up on that piece of wall and speak from there. The spot where you'll be standing is in the shade now, but the sun's moving around so that it will be fully on you as you finish your speech. I think that will be a nice touch."

Ce'Nedra quailed as she saw how far the sun had to go. "I think I'm going to be sick," she said in a quivering little voice.

"Maybe later, Ce'Nedra. You don't have time just now." Polgara turned to Lelldorin. "I think you can introduce her Majesty now," she told him.

Lelldorin stepped up onto the wall and held up his hand for silence. "Countrymen," he announced in a loud voice, "last Erastide an event took place which shook our world to its foundations. For a thousand years and more we have awaited that moment. My countrymen, the Rivan King has returned!"

The throng stirred at his announcement, and an excited buzz rippled through it.

Lelldorin, always extravagant, warmed to his subject. He told them of the flaming sword that had announced Garion's true identity and of the oaths of fealty sworn to Belgarion of Riva by the Alorn Kings. Ce'Nedra, almost fainting with nervousness, scarcely heard him. She tried to run over her speech in her mind, but it all kept getting jumbled. Then, in near panic, she heard him say, "Countrymen, I present to you her Imperial Highness, Princess Ce'Nedra - the Rivan Queen." And all eyes turned expectantly to her.

Trembling in every limb, she mounted the broken wall and looked at the faces before her. All her preparations, all the rehearsed phrases, evaporated from her mind, and she stood, white-faced and shaking, without the faintest idea of how to begin. The silence was dreadful.

As chance had it, one of the young Asturians in the very front had tasted perhaps more wine that morning than was good for him. "I think her Majesty has forgotten her speech," he snickered loudly to one of his companions.

Ce'Nedra's reaction was instantaneous. "And I think the gentleman has forgotten his manners," she flared, not even stopping to think. Incivility infuriated her.

"I don't think I'm going to listen to this," the tipsy young man declared in a tone filled with exaggerated boredom. "It's just a waste of time. I'm not a Rivan and neither are any of the rest of you. What could a foreign queen possibly say that would be of any interest to Asturian patriots?" And he started to turn away.

"Is the patriotic Asturian gentleman so wine-soaked that he's forgotten that there's more to the world than this forest?" Ce'Nedra retorted hotly. "Or perhaps he's so unschooled that he doesn't know what's happening out there." She leveled a threatening finger at him. "Hear me, patriot," she said in a ringing voice. "You may think that I'm just here to make some pretty little speech, but what I've come to say to you is the most important thing you'll ever hear. You can listen, or you can turn your back and walk away-and a year from now when there is no Asturia and when your homes are smoking in ruins and the Grolims are herding your families to the altar of Torak with its fire and its bloody knives, you can look back on this day and curse yourself for not listening."

And then as if her anger with this one rude young man had suddenly burst a dam within her, Ce'Nedra began to speak. She spoke to them directly, not with the studied phrases she had rehearsed, but with words that came from her heart. The longer she spoke, the more impassioned she became. She pleaded; she cajoled - and finally she commanded. She would never remember exactly what she said, but she would never forget how she felt as she said it. All the passion and fire that had filled the stormy outbursts and tantrums of her girlhood came into full play. She spoke fervently with no thought of herself, but rather with an allconsuming belief in what she said. In the end she won them over.

As the sun fell full upon her, her armor gleamed and her hair seemed to leap into flame. "Belgarion, King of Riva and Overlord of the West, calls you to war!" she declared to them. "I am Ce'Nedra, his queen, and I stand before you as a living banner. Who among you will answer Belgarion's call and follow me?"

It was the young man who had laughed at her whose sword leaped first into his hand. Raising it in salute, he shouted, "I will follow!" As if his declaration were a signal, half a hundred swords flashed in the sunlight as they were raised in salute and pledge, and half a hundred voices echoed his shout. "I will follow!"

With a broad sweep of her arm, Ce'Nedra drew her own sword and lifted it. "Follow, then!" she sang to them. "We ride to meet the fell hordes of Angarak. Let the world tremble at our coming!" With three quick steps, she reached her horse and literally threw herself into the saddle. She wheeled her prancing mount and galloped from the ruins, her sword aloft and her flaming hair streaming. The Asturians as one man rushed to their horses to follow.

As she plunged into the forest, the princess glanced back once at the brave, foolish young men galloping behind her, their faces exalted. She had won, but how many of these unthinking Asturians would she lead back when the war was done? How many would die in the wastes of the East? Her eyes suddenly filled with tears; but, dashing those tears away with one hand, the Rivan Queen galloped on, leading the Asturians back to join her army.

Chapter Twenty-six

THE ALORN KINGS praised Ce'Nedra extravagantly, and hard-bitten warriors looked at her with open admiration. She lapped up their adulation and purred like a happy kitten. The only thing that kept her triumph from being complete was Polgara's strange silence. Ce'Nedra was a little hurt by that. The speech had not been perfect, perhaps, but it had won Lelldorin's friends completely, and surely success made up for any minor flaws.

Then, when Polgara sent for her that evening, Ce'Nedra thought she understood. The sorceress wished to congratulate her in private. Humming happily to herself, the princess went along the beach to Polgara's tent with the sound of waves on the white sand in her ears.

Polgara sat at her dressing table, alone except for the sleepy child, Errand. The candlelight played softly over her deep blue robe and the perfection of her features as she brushed her long, dark hair. "Come in, Ce'Nedra," she said. "Sit down. We have a great deal to discuss."

"Were you surprised, Lady Polgara?" The princess could no longer contain herself. "You were, weren't you? I even surprised myself."

Polgara looked at her gravely. "You mustn't allow yourself to become so excited, Ce'Nedra. You have to learn to conserve your strength and not squander it by dashing about in hysterical self congratulation."

Ce'Nedra stared at her. "Don't you think I did well today?" she asked, hurt to the quick.

"It was a very nice speech, Ce'Nedra," Polgara told her in a way that took all the fun out of it.

A strange thought occurred to the princess then. "You knew, didn't you?"

she blurted. "You knew all along."

A faint flicker of amusement touched Polgara's lips. "You always seem to forget that I have certain advantages, dear," she replied, "and one of those is that I have a general idea of how things are going to turn out."

"How could you possibly-"

"Certain events don't just happen, Ce'Nedra. Some things have been implicit in this world since the moment it was made. What happened today was one of those things." She reached over and picked up an age darkened scroll from the table. "Would you like to hear what the Prophecy says about you?"

Ce'Nedra felt a sudden chill.

Polgara ran her eyes down the crackling parchment. "Here it is," she said, lifting the scroll into the candlelight. " 'And the voice of the Bride of Light shall be heard in the kingdoms of the world,' " she read, " 'and her words shall be as a fire in dry grass, that the multitudes shall rise up to go forth under the blaze of her banner.'"

"That doesn't mean anything at all, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra objected. "It's absolute gibberish."

"Does it become any clearer when you find out that Garion is the Child of Light?"

"What is that?" Ce'Nedra demanded, staring at the parchment. "Where did you get it?"

"It's the Mrin Codex, dear. My father copied it for me from the original. It's a bit obscure because the Mrin prophet was so hopelessly insane that he couldn't speak coherently. King Dras Bull-neck finally had to keep him chained to a post like a dog."

"King Dras? Lady Polgara, that was over three thousand years ago!"

"About that long, yes," Polgara agreed.

Ce'Nedra began to tremble. "That's impossible!" she blurted.

Polgara smiled. "Sometimes, Ce'Nedra, you sound exactly like Garion. I wonder why young people are so fond of that word."

"But, Lady Polgara, if it hadn't been for that young man who was so insulting, I might not have said anything at all." The princess bit her lip. She had not meant to confess that.

"That's probably why he was so insulting, then. It's quite possible that insulting you at that particular moment was the only reason he was born in

the first place. The Prophecy leaves nothing to chance. Do you think you might need him to help you get started next time? I can arrange to have him get drunk again if you do."

"Next time?"

"Of course. Did you think that one speech to a very small audience was going to be the end of it? Really, Ce'Nedra, you have to learn to pay more attention to what's going on. You're going to have to speak in public at least once a day for the next several months."

The princess stared at her in horror. "I can't!" she wailed.

"Yes, you can, Ce'Nedra. Your voice will be heard in the land, and your words shall be as a fire in dry grass, and the multitudes of the West shall rise up to follow your banner. Down through all the centuries, I've never known the Mrin Codex to be wrong - not once. The important thing at the moment is for you to get plenty of rest and to eat regularly. I'll prepare your meals myself." She looked rather critically at the tiny girl. "It would help if you were a bit more robust, but I guess we'll have to make do with what we have. Go get your things, Ce'Nedra. From now on, you'll be staying with me. I think I'm going to want to keep an eye on you."

In the weeks that followed, they moved down through the moist, green Arendish forest, and word of their coming spread throughout Asturia. Ce'Nedra was dimly aware that Polgara was carefully controlling the size and composition of the audiences to be addressed. Poor Lelldorin was seldom out of his saddle as he and a carefully selected group of his friends ranged ahead of the advancing army to prepare each gathering.

Ce'Nedra, once she had finally accepted her duty, had assumed that speaking in public would grow easier with practice. Unfortunately, she was wrong. Panic still gripped her before each speech, and quite frequently she was physically sick. Although Polgara assured her that her speeches were getting better, Ce'Nedra complained that they were not getting easier. The drain on her physical and emotional reserves became more and more evident. Like most girls her age, Ce'Nedra could and often did talk endlessly, but her orations were not random talk. They required an enormous control and a tremendous expenditure of emotional energy, and no one could help her.

As the crowds grew larger, however, Polgara did provide some aid in a purely technical matter. "Just speak in a normal tone of voice, Ce'Nedra," she instructed. "Don't exhaust yourself by trying to shout. I'll see to it that everybody can hear you." Aside from that, however, the princess was on her own, and the strain became more and more visible. She rode listlessly at the head of her growing army, seeming sometimes almost to be in a trance.

Her friends watched her and worried.

"I'm not sure how much longer she can keep up this pace," King Fulrach confided to King Rhodar as they rode directly behind the drooping little queen toward the ruins of Vo Wacune, where she was to address yet another gathering. "I think we tend sometimes to forget how small and delicate she is."

"Maybe we'd better consult with Polgara," King Rhodar agreed. "I think the child needs a week's rest."

Ce'Nedra, however, knew that she could not stop. There was a momentum to this, a kind of accelerating rhythm that could not be broken. At first, word of her coming had spread slowly, but now it ran ahead of them, and she knew they must run faster and faster to keep up with it. There was a crucial point at which the curiosity about her must be satisfied or the whole thing would collapse and she'd have to begin all over again.

The crowd at Vo Wacune was the largest she had yet addressed. Half convinced already, they needed only a single spark to ignite them. Once again sick with unreasoning panic, the Rivan Queen gathered her strength and rose to address them and to set them aflame with her call to war.

When it was over and the young nobles had been gathered into the growing ranks of the army, Ce'Nedra sought a few moments of solitude on the outskirts of the camp to compose herself. This had become a kind of necessary ritual for her. Sometimes she was sick after a speech and sometimes she wept. Sometimes she merely wandered listlessly, not even seeing the trees about her. At Polgara's instruction, Durnik always accompanied her, and Ce'Nedra found the company of this solid, practical man strangely comforting.

They had walked some distance from the ruins. The afternoon was bright and sunny, and birds sang among the trees. Pensively, Ce'Nedra walked, letting the peace of the forest quiet the agitated turmoil within her.

"It's all very well for noblemen, Detton," she heard someone say somewhere on the other side of a thicket, "but what does it have to do with us?"

"You're probably right, Lammer," a second voice agreed with a regretful sigh. "It was very stirring, though, wasn't it?"

"The only thing that ought to stir a serf is the sight of something to eat," the first man declared bitterly. "The little girl can talk all she wants about duty, but my only duty is to my stomach." He stopped abruptly. "Are the leaves of that plant over there fit to eat?" he asked.

"I think they're poisonous, Lammer," Detton replied.

"But you're not sure? I'd hate to pass up something I could eat if there was any chance that it wouldn't kill me."

Ce'Nedra listened to the two serfs with growing horror. Could anybody be reduced to that level? Impulsively, she stepped around the thicket to confront them. Durnik, as always, stayed close by her side.

The two serfs were dressed in mud-spattered rags. They were both men of middle years, and there was no evidence on their faces that either of them had ever known a happy day. The leaner of the two was closely examining a thick-leafed weed, but the other saw Ce'Nedra approaching and started with obvious fright. "Lammer." He gasped. "It's her - the one who spoke today."

Lammer straightened, his gaunt face going pale beneath the dirt that smudged it. "Your Ladyship," he said, grotesquely trying to bow. "We were just on our way back to our villages. We didn't know this part of the forest was yours. We didn't take anything." He held out his empty hands as if to prove his words.

"How long has it been since you've had anything to eat?" she demanded of him.

"I ate some grass this morning, your Ladyship," Lammer replied, "and I had a couple of turnips yesterday. They were a little wormy, but not too bad."

Ce'Nedra's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Who's done this to you?" she asked him.

Lammer looked a little confused at her question. Finally he shrugged slightly. "The world, I guess, your Ladyship. A certain part of what we raise goes to our lord, and a certain part to his lord. Then there's the part that has to go to the king and the part that has to go to the royal governor. And we're still paying for some wars my lord had a few years ago. After all of that's been paid, there isn't very much left for us."

A horrible thought struck her. "I'm gathering an army for a campaign in the East," she told them.

"Yes, your Ladyship," the other serf, Detton, replied. "We heard your speech today."

"What will that do to you?"

Detton shrugged. "It will mean more taxes, your Ladyship - and some of our sons will be taken for soldiers if our lords decide to join you. Serfs don't really make very good soldiers, but they can always carry baggage. And when the time comes to storm a castle, the nobility seem to want to have a lot of serfs around to help with the dying."

"Then you never feel any patriotism when you go to war?"

"What could patriotism have to do with serfs, my Lady?" Lammer asked her. "Until a month or so ago I didn't even know the name of my country. None of

it belongs to me. Why should I have any feelings about it?"

Ce'Nedra could not answer that question. Their lives were so bleak, so hopelessly empty, and her call to war meant only greater hardship and more suffering for them. "What about your families?" she asked. "If Torak wins, the Grolims will come and slaughter your families on his altars."

"I have no family, my Lady," Lammer replied in a dead voice. "My son died several years ago. My lord was fighting a war somewhere, and when they attacked a castle, the people inside poured boiling pitch down on the serfs who were trying to raise a ladder. My wife starved herself to death after she heard about it. The Grolims can't hurt either one of them now, and if they want to kill me, they're welcome to."

"Isn't there anything at all you'd be willing to fight for?"

"Food, I suppose," Lammer said after a moment's thought. "I'm very tired of being hungry."

Ce'Nedra turned to the other serf. "What about you?" she asked him.

"I'd walk into fire for somebody who fed me," Detton replied fervently.

"Come with me," Ce'Nedra commanded them, and she turned and led the way back to the camp and the large, bulky supply wagons that had transported the vast quantities of food from the storehouses of Sendaria. "I want these two men fed," she told a startled cook. "As much as they can eat."

Durnik, however, his honest eyes brimming with compassion, had already reached into one of the wagons and taken out a large loaf of bread. He tore it in two and gave half to Lammer and half to Detton.

Lammer stared at the chunk of bread in his hands, trembling violently. "I'll follow you, my Lady," he declared in a quavering voice. "I've eaten my shoes and lived on boiled grass and tree roots." His fists closed about the chunk of bread as if he were afraid someone might take it away from him. "I'll follow you to the end of the world and back for this." And he began to eat, tearing at the bread with his teeth.

Ce'Nedra stared at him, and then she suddenly fled. By the time she reached her tent she was weeping hysterically. Adara and Taiba tried without success to comfort her, and finally they sent for Polgara.

When the sorceress arrived, she took one brief look and asked Taiba and Adara to leave her alone with the sobbing girl. "All right, Ce'Nedra," she said calmly, sitting on the bed and gathering the princess in her arms, "what's this all about?"

"I can't do it any more, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra cried. "I just can't."

"It was your idea in the first place," Polgara reminded her.

"I was wrong." Ce'Nedra sobbed. "Wrong, wrong! I should have stayed in Riva."

"No," Polgara disagreed. "You've done something that none of the rest of us could have. You've guaranteed us the Arends. I'm not even sure Garion could have done that."

"But they're all going to die!" Ce'Nedra wailed.

"Where did you get that idea?"

"The Angaraks are going to outnumber us at least two to one. They'll butcher my army."

"Who told you that?"

"I - I listened," Ce'Nedra replied, fumbling with the amulet at her throat. "I heard what Rhodar, Anheg, and the others said when they heard about the southern Murgos."

"I see," Polgara said gravely.

"We're going to throw away our lives. Nothing can save us. And just now I even found a way to bring the serfs into it. Their lives are so miserable that they'll follow me just for the chance to eat regularly. And I'll do it, Lady Polgara. If I think I might need them, I'll deliberately take them from their homes and lead them to their deaths. I can't help myself."

Polgara took a glass from a nearby table and emptied a small glass vial into it. "The war isn't over yet, Ce'Nedra. It hasn't even begun." She swirled the dark amber liquid around in the bottom of the glass. "I've seen hopeless wars won before. If you give in to despair before you begin, you'll have no chance at all. Rhodar's a very clever tactician, you know, and the men in your army are very brave. We won't commit to any battle until we absolutely have to, and if Garion can reach Torak in time - and if he wins - the Angaraks will fall apart, and we won't have to fight them at all. Here." She held out the glass. "Drink this."

Numbly, Ce'Nedra took the glass and drank. The amber liquid was bitter, and it left a strange, fiery aftertaste in her mouth. "It all depends on Garion, then," she said.

"It always has depended on him, dear," Polgara told her.

Ce'Nedra sighed. "I wish-" she began, then faltered to a stop.

"Wish what, dear?"

"Oh, Lady Polgara, I never once told Garion that I love him. I'd give anything to be able to tell him that just once."

"He knows, Ce'Nedra."

"But it's not the same." Ce'Nedra sighed again. A strange lassitude had begun to creep over her, and she had stopped crying. It was difficult somehow even to remember why she had been weeping. She suddenly felt eyes on her and turned. Errand sat quietly in the corner watching her. His deep blue eyes were filled with sympathy and, oddly, with hope. And then Polgara took the princess in her arms and began rocking slowly back and forth and humming a soothing kind of melody. Without knowing when it happened, Ce'Nedra fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The attempt on her life came the following morning. Her army was marching south from Vo Wacune, passing through the sunlit forest along the Great West Road. The princess was riding at the head of the column, talking with Barak and Mandorallen, when an arrow, buzzing spitefully, came out of the trees. It was the buzz that gave Barak an instant of warning. "Look outl" he shouted, suddenly covering Ce'Nedra with his great shield. The arrow shattered against it, and Barak, cursing horribly, drew his sword.

Brand's youngest son, Olban, however, was already plunging at a dead run into the forest. His face had gone deathly pale, and his sword seemed to leap into his hand as he spun his horse. The sound of his galloping mount faded back among the trees. After several moments, there was a dreadful scream.

Shouts of alarm came from the army behind them and a confused babble of voices. Polgara rode forward, her face white.

"I'm all right, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra assured her quickly. "Barak saved me."

"What happened?" Polgara demanded.

"Someone shot an arrow at her," Barak growled. "If I hadn't heard it buzz, it might have been very bad."

Lelldorin had picked up the shattered arrow shaft and was looking at it closely. "The fletching is loose," he said, rubbing his finger over the feathers. "That's what made it buzz like that."

Olban came riding back out of the forest, his bloody sword still in his hand. "Is the queen safe?" he demanded; for some reason, his voice seemed on the verge of hysteria.

"She's fine," Barak said, looking at him curiously.

"Who was it?"

"A Murgo, I think," Olban replied. "He had scars on his cheeks."

"Did you kill him?"

Olban nodded. "Are you sure you're all right, my Queen?" he asked Ce'Nedra. His pale, blond hair was tousled, and he seemed very young and very earnest.

"I'm just fine, Olban," she replied. "You were very brave, but you should have waited instead of riding off alone like that. There might have been more than one."

"Then I'd have killed them all," Olban declared fiercely. "I'll destroy anyone who even raises a finger against you." The young man was actually trembling with rage.

"Thy dedication becomes thee, young Olban," Mandorallen told him.

"I think we'd better put out some scouts," Barak suggested to King Rhodar. "At least until we get out of these trees. Korodullin was going to chase all the Murgos out of Arendia, but it looks as if he missed a few."

"Let me lead the scouting parties," Olban begged.

"Your son has a great deal of enthusiasm," Rhodar observed to Brand. "I like that in a young man." He turned back to Olban. "All right," he said. "Take as many men as you need. I don't want any Murgos within five miles of the princess."

"You have my word on it," Olban declared, wheeling his horse and plunging back into the forest.

They rode a bit more cautiously after that, and archers were placed strategically to watch the crowd when Ce'Nedra spoke. Olban rather grimly reported that a few more Murgos had been flushed out of the trees ahead of them, but there were no further incidents.

It was very nearly the first day of summer when they rode out of the forest onto the central Arendish plain. Ce'Nedra by that time had gathered nearly every able-bodied Asturian into her army, and her hosts spread out behind her in a sea of humanity as she led the way out onto the plain. The sky above was very blue as they left the trees behind, and the grass was very green beneath the hooves of their horses.

"And where now, your Majesty?" Mandorallen inquired.

"To Vo Mimbre," Ce'Nedra replied. "I'll speak to the Mimbrate knights, and then we'll go on to Tolnedra."

"I hope your father still loves you, Ce'Nedra," King Rhodar said. "It will take a lot of love to make Ran Borune forgive you for entering Tolnedra with this army at your back."

"He adores me," Ce'Nedra assured him confidently. King Rhodar still looked dubious.

The army marched down through the plains of central Arendia toward the capital at Vo Mimbre where King Korodullin had assembled the Mimbrate knights and their retainers. The weather continued fair, and they marched in bright sunshine.

One sunny morning shortly after they had set out, Lady Polgara rode forward and joined Ce'Nedra at the head of the column. "Have you decided how you're going to deal with your father yet?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," the princess confessed. "He's probably going to be extremely difficult."

"The Borunes usually are."

"1'm a Borune, Lady Polgara."

"I know." Polgara looked penetratingly at the princess. "You've grown considerably in the past few months, dear," she observed.

"I didn't really have much choice, Lady Polgara. This all came on rather suddenly." Ce'Nedra giggled then as a thought suddenly struck her. "Poor Garion." She laughed.

"Why poor Garion?"

"I was horrid to him, wasn't I?"

"Moderately horrid, yes."

"How were any of you able to stand me?"

"We clenched our teeth frequently."

"Do you think he'd be proud of me - if he knew what I'm doing, I mean?"

"Yes," Polgara told her, "I think he would be."

"I'm going to make it all up to him, you know," Ce'Nedra promised. "I'm going to be the best wife in the world."

"That's nice, dear."

"I won't scold or shout or anything."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Ce'Nedra," Polgara said wisely.

"Well," the little princess amended, "almost never anyway."

Polgara smiled. "We'll see."

The Mimbrate knights were encamped on the great plain before the city of Vo Mimbre. Together with their men-at-arms, they comprised a formidable army, glittering in the sunlight.

"Oh dear," Ce'Nedra faltered as she stared down at the vast gathering from the hilltop where she and the Alorn Kings had ridden to catch the first glimpse of the city.

"What's the problem?" Rhodar asked her.

"There are so many of them."

"That's the whole idea, isn't it?"

A tall Mimbrate knight with dark hair and beard, wearing a black velvet surcoat over his polished armor, galloped up the hill and reined in some yards before them. He looked from face to face, then inclined his head in a polite bow. He turned to Mandorallen. "Greetings to the Bastard of Vo Mandor from Korodullin, King of Arendia."

"You still haven't gotten that straightened out, have you?" Barak muttered to Mandorallen.

"I have not had leisure, my Lord," Mandorallen replied. He turned to the knight. "Hail and well-met, Sir Andorig. I pray thee, convey our greetings to his Majesty and advise him that we come in peace - which he doubtless doth know already."

"I will, Sir Mandorallen," Andorig responded.

"How's your apple tree doing, Andorig?" Barak asked, grinning openly.

"It doth flourish, my Lord of Trellheim," Andorig answered proudly. "My care for it bath been most tender, and I have hopes of a bounteous harvest. I am confident that I have not disappointed Holy Belgarath." He turned and clattered back down the hill, sounding his horn every hundred yards or so.

"What was that all about?" King Anheg asked his red-bearded cousin with a puzzled frown.

"We've been here before," Barak replied. "Andorig didn't believe us when we told him who Belgarath was. Belgarath made an apple tree grow up out of the stones of the courtyard, and that sort of convinced him."

"I pray thee," Mandorallen said then, his eyes clouded with a sudden pain. "I see the approach of dear friends. I shall return presently." He moved his horse at a canter toward a knight and a lady who were riding out from the city.

"Good man there," Rhodar mused, watching the great knight as he departed. "But why do I get the feeling that when I'm talking to him my words are bouncing off solid bone?"

"Mandorallen is my knight," Ce'Nedra quickly came to the defense of her champion. "He doesn't need to think. I'll do his thinking for him." She stopped suddenly. "Oh dear," she said. "That sounds dreadful, doesn't it?"

King Rhodar laughed. "You're a treasure, Ce'Nedra," he said fondly, "but you do tend to blurt things out on occasion."

"Who are those people?" Ce'Nedra asked, curiously watching as Mandorallen rode to meet the couple who had emerged from the gates of Vo Mimbre.

"That's the Baron of Vo Ebor," Durnik replied quietly, "and his wife, the Baroness Nerina. Mandorallen's in love with her."

"What?"

"It's all very proper," Durnik assured her quickly. "I didn't understand it at first myself, but I guess it's the sort of thing that happens here in Arendia. It's a tragedy, of course. All three of them are suffering terribly." The good man sighed.

"Oh dear," Ce'Nedra said, biting her lip. "I didn't know - and I've treated him so badly at times."

"I'm sure he'll forgive you, princess," Durnik told her. "He has a very great heart."

A short time later, King Korodullin rode out from the city, accompanied by Mandorallen and a score of armored knights. Ce'Nedra had met the young King of Arendia several years before, and she remembered him as a pale, thin young man with a beautiful voice. On this occasion he was dressed in full armor and a crimson surcoat. He raised his visor as he approached. "Your Majesty," he greeted her gravely, "we have awaited thy coming with great anticipation."

"Your Majesty is too kind," Ce'Nedra replied.

"We have marvelled at the stories of thy mobilization of our Asturian cousins," the king told her. "Throe oratory must be wondrously persuasive to move them to lay aside their customary enmities."

"The day wears on, your Majesty," King Rhodar observed. "Her Majesty would like to address your knights - with your permission, of course. Once you've heard her, I think you'll understand her value to our cause."

"At once, your Majesty," Korodullin agreed. He turned to one of his men. "Assemble the knights and men-at-arms of Mimbre that the Rivan Queen may disclose her mind to them," he commanded.

The army which had followed Ce'Nedra down through the plains of Arendia had begun to arrive and was flowing down onto the plain before the city in a vast multitude. Drawn up to meet that force stood the glittering Mimbrate knights. The air crackled with suspicion as the two groups eyed each other.

"I think we'd better move right along," King Cho-Hag suggested. "An accidental remark out there could precipitate some unpleasantness we'd all prefer to avoid."

Ce'Nedra had already begun to feel sick to her stomach. The feeling by now, however, was so familiar that it no longer even worried her. A platform had been erected on a spot that stood midway between Ce'Nedra's army and the armored knights of King Korodullin. The princess, accompanied by all her friends and the Mimbrate honor guard, rode down to the platform, where she nervously dismounted.

"Feel free to speak at length, Ce'Nedra," Lady Polgara quietly advised. "Mimbrates dote on ceremony and they're as patient as stones if you give them something formal to watch. It's about two hours until sunset. Try to time the climax of your speech to coincide with that."

Ce'Nedra gasped. "Two hours?"

"If you need longer, we can build bonfires," Durnik offered helpfully.

"Two hours ought to be about right," Lady Polgara surmised.

Ce'Nedra quickly began mentally revising her speech. "You'll make sure they can all hear me?" she asked Polgara.

"I'll take care of it, dear."

Ce'Nedra drew in a deep breath. "All right, then," she said, "here we go." And she was helped up onto the platform.

It was not pleasant. It never was, but her weeks of practice in northern Arendia had given her the ability to assess the mood of a crowd and to adjust the pace of her delivery accordingly. As Polgara had suggested, the Mimbrates seemed quite willing to listen interminably. Moreover, standing here on the field at Vo Mimbre gave her words a certain dramatic impact. Torak himself had stood here, and the vast human sea of the Angarak hordes had hurled themselves from here against the unyielding walls of the city

gleaming at the edge of the plain. Ce'Nedra spoke, the words rolling from her mouth as she delivered her impassioned address. Every eye was upon her, and every ear was bent to her words. Whatever sorcery Lady Polgara used to make the Rivan Queen's voice audible at the farthest edge of the crowd was clearly working. Ce'Nedra could see the impact of what she was saying rippling through the hosts before her like a breeze touching a field of bending wheat.

And then, as the sun hovered in golden clouds just above the western horizon, the little queen moved into the climactic crescendo of her oration. The words "pride," "honor," "courage," and "duty" sang in the blood of her rapt listeners. Her final question, "Who will follow me?" was delivered just as the setting sun bathed the field with flaming light and was answered with an ear-splitting roar as the Mimbrate knights drew their swords in salute.

Perspiring heavily in her sun-heated armor, Ce'Nedra, as was her custom, drew her own sword in reply, leaped to her horse and led her now enormous army from the field.

"Stupendousl" she heard King Korodullin marvel as he rode behind her.

"Now you see why we follow her," King Anheg told him.

"She's magnificent!" King Korodullin declared. "Truly, my Lords, such eloquence can only be a gift from the Gods. I had viewed our enterprise with some trepidation - I confess it - but gladly would I challenge all the hosts of Angarak now. Heaven itself is with this marvellous child, and we cannot fail."

"I'll feel better after I see how the legions respond to her," King Rhodar observed. "They're a pretty hard-bitten lot, and I think it might take a bit more than a speech about patriotism to move them."

Ce'Nedra, however, had already begun to work on that. She considered the problem from every angle as she sat alone in her tent that evening, brushing her hair. She needed something to stir her countrymen and she instinctively knew what it must be.

Quite suddenly the silver amulet at her throat gave a strange little quiver, something it had never done before. Ce'Nedra laid down her brush and touched her fingertips to the talisman.

"I know you can hear me, father," she heard Polgara say. A sudden image rose in Ce'Nedra's mind of Polgara, wrapped in her blue cloak, standing atop a hill with the night breeze stirring her hair.

"Have you regained your temper yet?" Belgarath's voice sounded wary.

"We'll talk about that some other time. What are you up to?"

"At the moment, I'm up to my ears in drunk Nadraks. We're in a tavern in Yar Nadrak."

"I might have guessed. Is Garion all right?"

"Of course he is. I'm not going to let anything happen to him, Pol. Where are you?"

"At Vo Mimbre. We've raised the Arends, and we're going on to Tolnedra in the morning."

"Ran Borune won't like that much."

"We have a certain advantage. Ce'Nedra's leading the army."

"Ce'Nedra?" Belgarath sounded startled.

"It seems that was what the passage in the Codex meant. She's been preaching the Arends out of the trees as if she owned them."

"What an amazing thing."

"Did you know that the southern Murgos are already gathered at Rak Goska?"

"I've heard some rumors."

"It changes things, you know."

"Perhaps. Who's in charge of the army?"

"Rhodar."

"Good. Tell him to avoid anything major as long as possible, Pol, but keep the Angaraks off my back."

"We'll do what we can." She seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Are you all right, father?" she asked carefully. The question seemed important for some reason.

"Do you mean am I still in full possession of my faculties?" He sounded amused. "Garion told me that you were worned about that."

"I told him not to say anything."

"By the time he got around to it, the whole question was pretty much academic."

"Are you-? I mean can you still?"

"Everything seems to work the same as always, Pol," he assured her.

"Give my love to Garion."

"Of course. Don't make a habit of this, but keep in touch with me."

"Very well, father."

The amulet under Ce'Nedra's fingers quivered again. Then Polgara's voice spoke quite firmly. "All right, Ce'Nedra," the sorceress said, "you can stop eavesdropping now."

Guiltily, Ce'Nedra jerked her fingers from the amulet.

The next morning, even before the sun came up, she sent for Barak and Durnik.

"I'm going to need every scrap of Angarak gold in the entire army," she announced to them. "Every single coin. Buy it from the men if you have to, but get me all the red gold you can lay your hands on."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell us why," Barak said sourly. The big man was surly about being pulled from his bed before daylight.

"I'm a Tolnedran," she informed him, "and I know my countrymen. I think I'm going to need some bait."

Chapter Twenty-seven

RAN BORUNE XXIII, Emperor of Tolnedra, was livid with rage. Ce'Nedra noticed with a certain pang that her father had aged considerably in the year that she had been absent and she wished that their meeting might be more cordial than this one promised to be.

The Emperor had drawn up his legions on the plains of northern Tolnedra, and they faced Ce'Nedra's army as it emerged from the forest of Vordue. The sun was warm, and the crimson standards of the legions, rising from what seemed a vast sea of brightly burnished steel, waved imposingly in the summer breeze. The massed legions had taken up positions along the crest of a line of low hills and they looked down at Ce'Nedra's sprawling army with the tactical advantage of terrain in their favor.

King Rhodar quietly pointed this out to the young queen as they dismounted to meet the Emperor. "We definitely don't want to provoke anything here," he advised her. "Try your best to be polite at least."

"I know what I'm doing, your Majesty," she replied airily, removing her helmet and carefully smoothing her hair.

"Ce'Nedra," Rhodar said bluntly, taking her arm in a firm grasp, "you've been playing this on your veins since the first day we landed on the hook of Arendia. You don't know from one minute to the next what you're going to do. I most definitely do not propose to attack the Tolnedran legions uphill, so be civil to your father or I'll take you over my knee and spank you. Do you understand me?"

"Rhodar!" Ce'Nedra gasped. "What a terrible thing to say!"

"I mean every word," he told her. "You mind your manners, young lady."

"Of course I will," she promised. She gave him a shy, little-girl look through fluttering eyelashes. "Do you still love me, Rhodar?" she asked in a tiny voice.

He gave her a helpless look, and then she patted his broad cheek. "Everything will be just fine, then," she assured him. "Here comes my father."

"Ce'Nedra," Ran Borune demanded angrily, striding to meet them, "just exactly what do you think you're doing?" The Emperor was dressed in gold-embossed armor, and Ce'Nedra thought he looked rather silly in it.

"Just passing through, father," she replied as inoffensively as possible. "You've been well, I trust?"

"I was until you violated my borders. Where did you get the army?"

"Here and there, father." She shrugged. "We really ought to talk, you know - someplace private."

"I don't have anything to say to you," the bald-headed little man declared. "I refuse to talk to you until you get this army off Tolnedran soil."

"Oh, father," she reprimanded him, "stop being so childish."

"Childish?" The Emperor exploded. "Childish!"

"Her Majesty perhaps chose the wrong word," King Rhodar interposed, giving Ce'Nedra a hard look. "As we all know, she tends at times to be a trifle undiplomatic."

"What are you doing here, Rhodar?" Ran Borune demanded. He looked around quickly at the other kings. "Why have the Alorns invaded Tolnedra?"

"We haven't invaded you, Ran Borune," Anheg told him. "If we had, the smoke from burning towns and villages would be rising behind us. You know how we

make war."

"What are you doing here, then?"

King Cho-Hag answered in a calm voice. "As her Majesty advised you, we're only passing through on our way to the East."

"And exactly what do you plan to do in the East?"

"That's our business," Anheg told him bluntly.

"Try to be civil," Lady Polgara said to the Cherek king. She turned to the Emperor. "My father and I explained to you what was happening last summer, Ran Borune. Weren't you listening?"

"That was before you stole my daughter," he retorted. "What have you done to her? She was difficult before, but now she's absolutely impossible."

"Children grow up, your Majesty," Polgara replied philosophically. "The queen's point was well-taken, however. We do need to talk - preferably in private."

"What queen are we talking about?" the Emperor asked bitingly. "I don't see any queen here."

Ce'Nedra's eyes hardened. "Father," she snapped, "you know what's been happening. Now stop playing games and talk sense. This is very important."

"Your Highness knows me well enough to know that I don't play games," he told her in an icy tone.

"Your Majesty, " she corrected him.

"Your Highness, " he insisted.

"Your Majesty, " she repeated, her voice going up an octave.

"Your Highness, " he snarled from between clenched teeth.

"Do we really need to squabble like bad-tempered children right in front of the armies?" Polgara asked calmly.

"She's right, you know," Rhodar said to Ran Borune. "We're all beginning to look a bit foolish out here. We ought to try to maintain the fiction of dignity at least."

The Emperor glanced involuntarily over one shoulder at the glittering ranks of his legions drawn up on the hilltops not far away. "Very well," he conceded grudgingly, "but I want it clearly understood that the only thing we're going to talk about is your withdrawal from Tolnedran soil. If you'll

follow me, we'll go to my pavilion."

"Which stands right in the middle of your legions," King Anheg added. "Forgive me, Ran Borune, but we're not that stupid. Why don't we go to my pavilion instead?"

"I'm no stupider than you are, Anheg," the Emperor retorted.

"If I may," King Fulrach said mildly. "In the interests of expediency, might we not assume that this spot is more or less neutral?" He turned to Brendig. "Colonel, would you be so good as to have a large tent erected here?"

"At once, your Majesty," the sober-faced Brendig replied.

King Rhodar grinned. "As you can see, the legendary practicality of the Sendars is not a myth."

The Emperor looked a bit sour, but finally seemed to remember his manners. "I haven't seen you in a long time, Fulrach," he said. "I hope Layla's well."

"She sends her regards," the King of Sendaria replied politely.

"You've got good sense, Fulrach," the Emperor burst out. "Why have you lent yourself to this insane adventure?"

"I think that might be one of the things we ought to discuss in private, don't you?" Polgara suggested smoothly.

"How's the squabble over the succession going?" Rhodar asked in the tone of a man making small talk.

"It's still up in the air," Ran Borune responded, also in a neutral manner. "The Honeths seem to be joining forces, though."

"That's unfortunate," Rhodar murmured. "The Honeths have a bad reputation."

Under Colonel Brendig's direction, a squad of Sendarian soldiers were quickly erecting a large, bright-colored pavilion on the green turf not far away.

"Did you deal with Duke Kador, father?" Ce'Nedra inquired.

"His Grace found his life burdensome," Ran Borune replied with a short laugh. "Someone rather carelessly left some poison lying about in his prison cell, and he sampled it extensively. We gave him a splendid funeral."

Ce'Nedra smiled. "I'm so sorry I missed it."

"The pavilion is ready now," King Fulrach told them. "Shall we go inside?"

They all entered and sat at the table the soldiers had placed inside. Lord Morin, the Emperor's chamberlain, held Ce'Nedra's chair for her. "How has he been?" Ce'Nedra whispered to the brown-mantled official.

"Not well, Princess," Morin replied. "Your absence grieved him more than he cared to admit."

"Is he eating well - and getting his rest?"

"We try, Highness." Morin shrugged. "But your father's not the easiest person in the world to get along with."

"Do you have his medicine?"

"Naturally, Highness. I never go anywhere without it."

"Suppose we get down to business," Rhodar was saying. "Taur Urgas has sealed his western border, and the southern Murgos have moved into position around Rak Goska. 'Zakath, the Mallorean Emperor, has set up a staging area on the plains outside Thull Zelik to receive his troops as he ferries them in. We're running out of time, Ran Borune."

"I'm negotiating with Taur Urgas," the Emperor replied, "and I'll dispatch a plenipotentiary to 'Zakath immediately. I'm certain this can be settled without a war."

"You can talk to Taur Urgas until your tongue falls out," Anheg snorted, "and 'Zakath probably doesn't even know or care who you are. As soon as they've gathered their forces, they'll march. The war can't be avoided, and I for one am just as happy about that. Let's exterminate the Angaraks once and for all."

"Isn't that just a bit uncivilized, Anheg?" Ran Borune asked him.

"Your Imperial Majesty," King Korodullin said formally, "the King of Cherek speaks hastily perhaps, but there is wisdom in his words. Must we live forever under the threat of invasion from the East? Might it not be best forever to quell them?"

"All of this is very interesting," Ce'Nedra interrupted them coolly, "but it's really beside the point. The actual point at issue here is that the Rivan King has returned, and Tolnedra is required by the provisions of the Accords of Vo Mimbre to submit to his leadership."

"Perhaps," her father replied. "But young Belgarion seems to be absent. Have you misplaced him somewhere? Or is it perhaps that he still had pots to scrub in the scullery at Riva so that you had to leave him behind?"

"That's beneath you, father," Ce'Nedra said scornfully. "The Overlord of the West requires your service. Are you going to shame the Borunes and Tolnedra by abrogating the Accords?"

"Oh, no, daughter," he said, holding up one hand. "Tolnedra always meticulously observes every clause of every treaty she's ever signed. The Accords require me to submit to Belgarion, and I'll do precisely that - just as soon as he comes here and tells me what he wants."

"I am acting in his stead," Ce'Nedra announced.

"I don't seem to recall anything that states that the authority is transferable."

"I am the Rivan Queen," Ce'Nedra retorted hotly, "and I've been invested with co-rulership by Belgarion himself."

"The wedding must have been very private. I'm a little hurt that I wasn't invited."

"The wedding will take place in due time, father. In the meantime, I speak for Belgarion and for Riva."

"Speak all you want, girl." He shrugged. "I'm not obliged to listen, however. At the moment, you're only the betrothed of the Rivan King. You are not his wife and therefore not his queen. If we want to be strictly legal about it, until such time as you do marry, you're still under my authority. Perhaps if you apologize and get out of that stupidlooking armor and put on proper clothing, I'll forgive you. Otherwise, I'll be forced to punish you."

"Punish? Punish!"

"Don't scream at me, Ce'Nedra," the Emperor said hotly.

"Things seem to be deteriorating rapidly," Bank observed dryly to Anheg.

"I noticed that," Anheg agreed.

"I am the Rivan Queen!" Ce'Nedra shouted at her father.

"You're a silly girl!" he shot back.

"That does it, father," she declared, leaping to her feet. "You will deliver command of your legions to me at once, and then you'll return to Tol Honeth where your servants can wrap you in shawls and feed you gruel, since you're obviously too senile to be of any further use to me."

"Senile?" the Emperor roared, also jumping up. "Get out of my sightl Take

your stinking Alorn army out of Tolnedra at once, or I'll order my legions to throw you out."

Ce'Nedra, however, was already storming toward the door of the tent.

"You come back here!" he raged at her. "I haven't finished talking to you yet."

"Yes you have, father," she shouted back. "Now I'm going to talk. Barak, I need that sack you have tied to your saddle." She rushed from the tent and climbed onto her horse, spluttering with apparent fury.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Barak asked her as he tied the sack of Angarak coins to her saddle.

"Perfectly," she replied in a calm voice.

Barak's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You seem to have regained your temper in a remarkably short time."

"I never lost it, Barak."

"You were acting in there?"

"Obviously. Well, at least partially. It will take my father an hour or so to regain his composure, and by then it will be too late. Tell Rhodar and the others to prepare the army to march. The legions will be joining us.

"What makes you think that?"

"I'm going to go fetch them right now." She turned to Mandorallen, who had just emerged from the tent. "Where have you been?" she asked. "Come along. I need an escort."

"Where are we going, pray?" the knight asked.

"You'll see," she told him, and she turned her mount and rode at a trot up the hillside toward the massed legions. Mandorallen exchanged a helpless look with Barak and then clanged into his saddle to follow.

Ce'Nedra, riding ahead, carefully put her fingertips to her amulet. "Lady Polgara," she whispered, "can you hear me?" She wasn't certain that the amulet would work that way, but she had to try. "Lady Polgara," she whispered again, a bit more urgently.

"What are you doing, Ce'Nedra?" Polgara's voice sounded quite clearly in the little queen's ears.

"I'm going to talk to the legions," Ce'Nedra answered. "Can you fix it so they'll hear me?"

"Yes, but the legions won't be much interested in a speech about patriotism."

"I've got a different one," Ce'Nedra assured her.

"Your father's having a fit in here. He's actually foaming at the mouth."

Ce'Nedra sighed regretfully. "I know," she said. "It happens fairly often. Lord Morin has the medicine with him. Please try to keep him from biting his tongue."

"You goaded him into this deliberately, didn't you, Ce'Nedra?"

"I needed time to talk to the legions," the princess replied. "The fit won't really hurt him very much. He's had fits all his life. He'll have a nosebleed and a terrible headache when it's over. Please take care of him, Lady Polgara. I do love him, you know."

"I'll see what I can do, but you and I are going to have a long talk about this, young lady. There are some things you just don't do."

"I didn't have any choice, Lady Polgara. This is for Garion. Please do what you have to do so that the legions can hear me. It's awfully important."

"All right, Ce'Nedra, but don't do anything foolish." Then the voice was gone.

Ce'Nedra quickly scanned the standards drawn up before her, selected the familiar emblem of the Eighty-Third Legion, and rode toward it. It was necessary that she place herself in front of men who would recognize her and confirm her identity to the rest of her father's army. The Eighty-Third was primarily a ceremonial unit, and by tradition its barracks were inside the Imperial compound at Tol Honeth. It was a select group, still limited to the traditional thousand men, and it served primarily as a palace guard. Ce'Nedra knew every man in the Eighty-Third by sight, and most of them by name. Confidently, she approached them.

"Colonel Albor," she courteously greeted the commander of the Eighty-Third, a stout man with a florid face and a touch of gray at his temples.

"Your Highness," the colonel replied with a respectful inclination of his head. "We've missed you at the palace."

Ce'Nedra knew that to be a lie. The duty of guarding her person had been one of the common stakes in barracks dice games, with the honor always going to the loser.

"I need a small favor, colonel," she said to him as winsomely as she could.

"If it's in my power, Highness," he answered, hedging a bit.

"I wish to address my father's legions," she explained, "and I want them to know who I am." She smiled at him-warmly, insincerely. Albor was a Horbite, and Ce'Nedra privately detested him. "Since the Eighty-Third practically raised me," she continued, "you of all people should recognize me and be able to identify me."

"That's true, your Highness," Albor admitted.

"Do you suppose you could send runners to the other legions to inform them just who I am?"

"At once, your Highness," Albor agreed. He obviously saw nothing dangerous in her request. For a moment Ce'Nedra almost felt sorry for him.

The runners - trotters actually, since members of the Eighty-Third were not very athletic - began to circulate through the massed legions. Ce'Nedra chatted the while with Colonel Albor and his officers, though she kept a watchful eye on the tent where her father was recuperating from his seizure and also on the gold-colored canopy beneath which the Tolnedran general staff was assembled. She definitely did not want some curious officer riding over to ask what she was doing.

Finally, when she judged that any further delay might be dangerous, she politely excused herself. She turned her horse and, with Mandorallen close behind her, she rode back out to a spot where she was certain she could be seen.

"Sound your horn, Mandorallen," she told her knight.

"We are some distance from our own forces, your Majesty," he reminded her. "I pray thee, be moderate in throe address. Even I might experience some difficulty in facing the massed legions of all Tolnedra."

She smiled at him. "You know you can trust me, Mandorallen."

"With my life, your Majesty," he replied and lifted his horn to his lips.

As his last ringing notes faded, Ce'Nedra, her stomach churning with the now-familiar nausea, rose in her stirrups to speak. "Legionnaires," she called to them. "I am Princess Ce'Nedra, the daughter of your Emperor." It wasn't perhaps the best beginning in the world, but she had to start somewhere, and this was going to be something in the nature of a performance, rather than an oration, so a bit of awkwardness in places wouldn't hurt anything.

"I have come to set your minds at rest," she continued. "The army massed before you comes in peace. This fair, green field, this sacred Tolnedran soil, shall not be a battleground this day. For today at least, no

legionnaire will shed his blood in defense of the Empire."

A ripple of relief passed through the massed legions. No matter how professional soldiers might be, an avoided battle was always good news. Ce'Nedra drew in a deep, quivering breath. It needed just a little twist now, something to lead logically to what she really wanted to say. "Today you will not be called upon to die for your brass half-crown." The brass half crown was the legionnaire's standard daily pay. "I cannot, however, speak for tomorrow," she went on. "No one can say when the affairs of Empire will demand that you lay down your lives. It may be tomorrow that the interests of some powerful merchant may need legion blood for protection." She lifted her hands in a rueful little gesture. "But then, that's the way it's always been, hasn't it? The legions die for brass so that others might have gold."

A cynical laugh of agreement greeted that remark. Ce'Nedra had heard enough of the idle talk of her father's soldiers to know that this complaint was at the core of every legionnaire's view of the world. "Blood and gold-our blood and their gold," was very nearly a legion motto. They were almost with her now. The quivering in her stomach subsided a bit, and her voice became stronger.

She told them a story then - a story she'd heard in a half dozen versions since her childhood. It was the story of a good legionnaire who did his duty and saved his money. His wife had suffered through the hardships and separations that went with being married to a legionnaire. When he was mustered out of his legion, they had gone home and bought a little shop, and all the years of sacrifice seemed worthwhile.

"And then one day, his wife became very ill," Ce'Nedra continued her story, "and the physician's fee was very high." She had been carefully untying the sack fastened to her saddle while she spoke. "The physician demanded this much," she said, taking three blood-red Murgo coins from the sack and holding them up for all to see. "And the legionnaire went to a powerful merchant and borrowed the money to pay the physician. But the physician, like most of them, was a fraud, and the legionnaire's money might as well have been thrown away." Quite casually, Ce'Nedra tossed the gold coins into the high grass behind her. "The soldier's good and faithful wife died. And when the legionnaire was bowed down with grief, the powerful merchant came to him and said, `Where's the money I lent to you?' " She took out three more coins and held them up. " 'Where's that good red gold I gave you to pay the physician?' But the legionnaire had no gold. His hands were empty." Ce'Nedra spread her fingers, letting the gold coins fall to the ground. "And so the merchant took the legionnaire's shop to pay the debt. A rich man grew richer. And what happened to the legionnaire? Well, he still had his sword. He had been a good soldier, so he had kept it bright and sharp. And after his wife's funeral, he took his sword and went out into a field not far from the town and he fell upon it. And that's how the story ends."

She had them now. She could see it in their faces. The story she had told

them had been around for a long time, but the gold coins she had so casually tossed away gave it an entirely new emphasis. She took out several of the Angarak coins and looked at them curiously as if seeing them for the first time. "Why do you suppose that all the gold we see these days is red?" she asked them. "I always thought gold was supposed to be yellow. Where does all this red gold come from?"

"From Cthol Murgos," several of them answered her.

"Really?" She looked at the coins with an apparent distaste. "What's Murgo gold doing in Tolnedra?" And she threw the coins away.

The iron discipline of the legions wavered, and they all took an involuntary step forward.

"Of course, I don't suppose an ordinary soldier sees much red gold. Why should a Murgo try to bribe a common soldier when he can bribe the officers - or the powerful men who decide where and when the legions are to go to bleed and die?" She took out another coin and looked at it. "Do you know, I think that every single one of these is from Cthol Murgos," she said, negligently throwing the coin away. "Do you suppose that the Murgos are trying to buy up Tolnedra?"

There was an angry mutter at that.

"There must be a great deal of this red gold lying about in the Angarak kingdoms if that's what they have in mind, wouldn't you say? I've heard stories about that, though. Don't they say that the mines of Cthol Murgos are bottomless and that there are rivers in Gar og Nadrak that look like streams of blood because the gravel over which they flow is pure gold? Why, gold must be as cheap as dirt in the lands of the East." She took out another coin, glanced at it and then tossed it away.

The legions took another involuntary step forward. The officers barked the command to stand fast, but they also looked hungrily toward the tall grass where the princess had been so indifferently throwing the red gold coins.

"It may be that the army I'm leading will be able to find out just how much gold lies on the ground in the lands of the Angaraks," Ce'Nedra confided to them. "The Murgos and the Grolims have been practicing this same kind of deceit in Arendia and Sendaria and the Alorn kingdoms. We're on our way to chastise them for it." She stopped as if an idea had just occurred to her. "There's always room in any army for a few more good soldiers," she mused thoughtfully. "I know that most legionnaires serve out of loyalty to their legions and love for Tolnedra, but there may be a few among you who aren't satisfied with one brass half crown a day. I'm sure such men would be welcome in my army." She took another red coin out of her dwindling supply. "Would you believe that there's another Murgo gold piece?" she demanded and let the coin drop from her fingers.

A sound went through the massed legions that was almost a groan. The princess sighed then. "I forgot something," she said regretfully. "My army's leaving at once, and it takes weeks for a legionnaire to arrange for leave, doesn't it?"

"Who needs leave?" someone shouted.

"You wouldn't actually desert your legions, would you?" she asked them incredulously.

"The princess offers gold!" another man roared. "Let Ran Borune keep his brass!"

Ce'Nedra dipped one last time into the bag and took out the last few coins. "Would you actually follow me?" she asked in her most little-girl voice, "just for this?" And she let the coins trickle out of her hand.

The Emperor's general staff at that point made a fatal mistake. They dispatched a platoon of cavalry to take the princess into custody. Seeing mounted men riding toward the ground Ce'Nedra had so liberally strewn with gold and mistaking their intent, the legions broke. Officers were swarmed under and trampled as Ran Borune's army lunged forward to scramble in the grass for the coins.

"I pray thee, your Majesty," Mandorallen urged, drawing his sword, "let us withdraw to safety."

"In a moment, Sir Mandorallen," Ce'Nedra replied quite calmly. She stared directly at the desperately greedy legionnaires running toward her. "My army marches immediately," she announced. "If the Imperial Legions wish to join us, I welcome them." And with that, she wheeled her horse and galloped back toward her own forces with Mandorallen at her side.

Behind her she heard the heavy tread of thousands of feet. Someone among the massed legions began a chant that soon spread. "Ce-Ne-dra! Ce-Ne-dra!" they shouted, and their heavy steps marked time to that chant.

The Princess Ce'Nedra, her sun-touched hair streaming in the wind behind her, galloped on, leading the mass mutiny of the legions. Even as she rode, Ce'Nedra knew that her every word had been a deception. There would be no more wealth for these legionnaires than there would be glory or easy victory for the Arends she had gathered from the forests of Asturia and the plains of Mimbre. She had raised an army to lead into a hopeless war.

It was for love of Garion, however, and perhaps for even more. If the Prophecy that so controlled their destinies demanded this of her, there was no way she could have refused. Despite all the anguish that lay ahead, she would have done this and more. For the first time Ce'Nedra accepted the fact that she no longer controlled her own destiny. Something infinitely more powerful than she commanded her, and she must obey.

Polgara and Belgarath, with lives spanning eons, could perhaps devote themselves to an idea, a concept; but Ce'Nedra was barely sixteen years old, and she needed something more human to arouse her devotion. At this very moment, somewhere in the forests of Gar og Nadrak, there was a sandy-haired young man with a serious face whose safety - whose very life - depended on every effort she could muster. The princess surrendered finally to love. She swore to herself that she would never fail her Garion. If this army were not enough, she would raise another - at whatever cost.

Ce'Nedra sighed, then squared her shoulders and led the Tolnedran legions across the sunny fields to swell the ranks of her army.

Here ends Book Four of The Belgariad. Book Five, Enchanters' End Game, brings this epic to a brilliant conclusion as Belgarion confronts evil Torak to decide the fate of men, Gods, and Prophecies.

The Belgariad: Enchanter's End GameENCHANTER'S END GAME

And finally,
for Leigh, my beloved wife,
whose hand and thought have touched every page,
and who has joined me in this making - even as she joins me in all that
I do.

PROLOGUE
Being an account of beginnings-and endings
Excerpts from The Book of Torak~
HEAR ME, YE Angaraks, for I am Torak, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Bow
before my Name and worship me with prayers and with sacrifices, for I am your
God and I have dominion over all the realms of the Angaraks. And great shall be
my wrath if ye displease me.
I was, before the world was made. I shall be, after the mountains crumble into
sand, the seas dwindle to stagnant pools, and the world shrivels and is no more.
For I was before time and shall be after.
From the timeless reaches of Infinity, I gazed upon the future. And I beheld
that there were two Destinies and that they must rush toward each other from the
endless corridors of Eternity. Each Destiny was Absolute, and in that final
meeting, all that was divided should be made one. In that instant, all that was,
all that is, and all that was yet to be should be gathered into one Purpose.
#Editor's Note: This version, said to be from the dread Book of Torak, is one of
several circulated among the Nadraks. Since only the high Grolims were permitted
official copies of the work, it is impossible to establish that this version is
authentic, though internal evidence suggests that much of it may be. A true copy
of the complete Book of Torak is believed to be in the library of King Anheg of
Cherek, but this was not available for comparison.
And because of my Vision, I led my six brothers to join hands to make all that
is, in fulfillment of the needs of the Destinies. Thus we set the moon and the
sun in their courses and we brought forth this world. We covered the world with
forests and grasses and made beasts, fowls, and fishes to fill the lands and
skies and waters which we had made.
But our Father took no joy in this creation which I had caused to be.

He turned
his face from our labor to contemplate the Absolute. I went alone into the high
places of Korim, which are no more, and I cried out to him to accept what I had
made. But he rejected the work I had caused to be and turned from me. Then I
hardened my heart against him and went down from that place, fatherless
evermore.
Once more I counseled my brothers, and we joined our hands and brought forth man
to be the instrument of our will. We created man as many peoples. And to each
people, we gave a choice to select among us the one who should be their God. And
the peoples chose from us, save only that no people chose Aldur, who was ever
contrary and discontented that we would not grant him dominion. Then Aldur
withdrew himself from among us and sought to entice our servants away from us
with enchantments. But few were they who accepted him.
The peoples who were mine called themselves the Angaraks. I was well pleased
with them and I led them to the high places of Korim, which are no more, and to
them I revealed the nature of the Purpose for which I had caused the world to
be.
Then they worshipped me with prayers and offered burnt offerings unto me. And I
blessed them, and they prospered and grew numerous. In their gratitude they
raised up an altar to me and there made sacrifice to me of their fairest maidens
and a portion of their bravest youths. And I was well pleased with them and
again I blessed them, so that they prospered above all other men and multiplied
exceedingly.
Now the heart of Aldur was filled with envy for the worship that was given to
me, and he was driven with despite for me. Then did he conspire against me
within the secret places of his soul, and he took up a stone and breathed life
into it, that it might thwart my Purpose. And in that stone he sought to gain
dominion over me. Thus Cthrag Yaska came to be. And there was eternal enmity
sealed within Cthrag Yaska against me. And Aldur sat apart with those whom he
called his disciples and plotted how the stone should give him dominion.
I saw that the accursed stone had divided Aldur from me and from his other
brothers. And I went to Aldur and remonstrated with him, begging that

he lift
the wicked enchantment from the stone and take back the life he had breathed
into it. This I did that Aldur might no longer be divided from his brothers.
Yea, I did even weep and abase myself before him.
But already the evil stone had gained possession over the soul of Aldur, and he
had hardened his heart against me. And I saw then that the stone which Aldur had
created would forever hold my brother in thralldom. And he spoke slightingly to
me and would have driven me forth.
Then for the love I bore him and to save him from the evil course which my
Vision revealed, I struck my brother Aldur down and took from him the accursed
rock. And I bore Cthrag Yaska away to bend my will upon it and to still the
malice within it and quell the wickedness for which it was created. So it was
that I took the burden of the thing which Aldur had created upon myself.
Aldur was wroth with me. He went to our brothers and spoke to them falsely
against me. And each of them came to me and spoke slightingly to me, commanding
that I return to Aldur that which had twisted his soul and which I had taken to
free him from the enchantment of it. But I resisted.
Then they girded for war. The sky was blackened with the smoke of their forges
as their peoples beat out weapons of iron to spill the blood of my Angaraks upon
the ground. When the year turned, their hosts marched forth and onto the lands
of the Angaraks. And my brothers loomed tall in the forefront of the hosts.
Now was I greatly loath to lift my hand against them. Yet I could not permit
that they should despoil the lands of my people or loose the blood of those who
worshipped me. And I knew that from such war between my brothers and me could
come only evil. In that struggle, the Destinies I had seen might be sent against
each other before it was time, and the universe be shaken apart in that meeting.
And so I chose that which I feared, but which was less evil than the danger I
foresaw. I took up the accursed Cthrag Yaska and raised it against the earth
itself. And in me lay the Purpose of one Destiny, while the Purpose of the other
was affixed within the stone Aldur had created. The weight of all that was or
will be was upon us, and the earth could not bear our weight. Then did her

mantle rend asunder before me, and the sea rushed in to drown the dry land. Thus
were the peoples separated one from the other, that they might not come upon
each other and their blood be spilled.
But such was the malice which Aldur had wrought within the stone that it smote
me with fire as I raised it to divide the world and prevent evil bloodshed. Even
as I spoke the commands unto it, it burst into dreadful fire and smote me. The
hand with which I held it was consumed and the eye with which I beheld it was
blinded. One half of my face was marred by its burning. And I, who had been the
fairest among my brothers, was now abhorrent to the eyes of all, and I must
cover my face with a living mask of steel, lest they shun me.
An agony filled me from the evil that was done me, and pain lived within me,
which could never be quenched until the foul stone could be freed of its evil
and could repent of its malice.
But the dark sea stood between my people and those who would come against them,
and my enemies fled in terror of that which I had done. Yea, even my brothers
fled from the world which we had made, for they dared no longer come against me.
Yet still did they conspire with their followers in spirit form.
Then I bore my people away to the wastelands of Mallorea and there caused them
to build a mighty city on a sheltered place. They named it Cthol Mishrak, as a
remembrance of the suffering I had undergone for them. And I concealed their
city with a cloud that should ever be above it.
Then I had a cask of iron forged, and in it I bound Cthrag Yaska, that the evil
stone should never again be free to unleash its power to destroy flesh. For a
thousand years and still another thousand years I labored, contending with the
stone that I might release the curse of malice which Aldur had laid upon it.
Great were the enchantments and words of power which I cast at the obdurate
stone, but still its evil fire burned when I came near to it, and I felt its
curse lying ever upon the world.
Then Belar, youngest and most rash of my brothers, conspired against me with
Aldur, who still bore hatred and jealousy within his soul toward me. And Belar
spoke in spirit to his uncouth people, the Alorns, and set them against me. The
spirit of Aldur sent Belgarath, the disciple in whom he had most wholly

instilled his despite, to join with them. And the foul counsel of Belgarath
prevailed upon Cherek, chief of the Alorns, and upon his three sons.
By evil sorcery, they passed the barrier of the sea I had caused to be and they
came like thieves in the night to the city of Cthol Mishrak. By stealth and low
cunning, they crept through my tower of iron and made their way to the chest
that held the evil stone.
The youngest son of Cherek, whom men called Riva Iron-grip, had been so woven
about with spells and enchantments that he could take up the accursed stone and
not perish. And they fled with it to the west.
With the warriors of my people I pursued them, that the curse of Cthrag Yaska
not again be loosed upon the land. But the one called Riva raised the stone and
loosed its evil fire upon my people. Thus the thieves escaped, bearing the evil
of the stone with them into their lands of the west.
Then I pulled down the mighty city of Cthol Mishrak, that my people must flee
from its ruins. And I divided the Angaraks into tribes. The Nadraks I set in the
north to guard the ways in which the thieves had come. The Thulls, broad of back
for the bearing of burdens, I set in the middle lands. The Murgos, fiercest of
my people, I sent to the south. And the most numerous I kept with me in
Mallorea, to serve me and multiply against a day when I should have need of an
army against the west.
Above all these peoples I set the Grolims and instructed them in enchantments
and wizardry, that they be a priesthood to me and watch over the zeal of all
others. And them I instructed to keep my altars burning and to be unceasing in
their sacrifices to me.
Belgarath, in his wickedness, had sent Riva with the accursed stone to rule an
island in the Sea of Winds. And there Belar caused two stars to fall to earth.
From these, Riva forged a sword and set Cthrag Yaska into its pommel.
And when Riva gripped that sword, the universe shuddered about me, and I cried
out, for my Vision had opened to me, revealing much that had been hidden before.
I saw that Belgarath's sorcerous daughter should in time be my bride, and I
rejoiced. But I also saw that a Child of Light would descend from Riva's loins,
and he would be an instrument of that Destiny which opposed that other Destiny
which gave me my Purpose. Then would come a day when I must wake from

some long
sleep to face the sword of the Child of Light. And upon that day, the two
Destinies would clash, with only one victor alive and one Destiny thenceforth.
But which was not revealed.
Long I pondered this Vision, but no more was revealed. And a thousand years
passed, and even more.
Then I called to me Zedar, a wise and just man who had fled from the malice of
Aldur's teachings and had come unto me with an offer of service. And I sent him
to the court of the Serpent People who dwelt among swamps in the west. Their God
was Issa, but he was ever lazy and he slept, leaving the people who called
themselves Ny-Issans to the sole rule of their queen. And to her Zedar did make
certain offers, which were pleasing to her. And she sent her assassins as
emissaries to the court of Riva's descendants. There did they slay all of that
line, save only one child who chose to drown himself in the sea.
Thus did the Vision err, for what Child of Light can be born when none remain to
bear him?
And thus have I assured that my Purpose shall be served and that the evil of
Aldur and his brothers shall not destroy the world which I caused to be created.
The Kingdoms of the West which have harkened unto the counsel and beguilements
of wicked Gods and evil sorcerers will be brought unto the dust. And I will
harry those who sought to deny me and confound me and multiply their suffering.
And they shall be brought low and they shall fall before me, offering themselves
as a sacrifice upon my altars.
And the time shall come when I have Lordship and dominion over all the earth,
and all peoples shall be mine.
Hear me, ye peoples, and fear me. Bow down before me and worship me. For I am
Torak, forever King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and God alone to this world which I
have caused to be.

Part One
GAR OG NADRAK

Chapter One

THERE WAS, GARION decided, something definitely mournful about the sound of mule bells. The mule was not a particularly loveable animal to begin with, and there was a subtle difference to his gait that imparted a lugubrious note to a bell hung about his neck. The mules were the property of a Drasnian merchant named Mulger, a lanky, hard-eyed man in a green doublet, who - for a price - had allowed Garion, Silk, and Belgarath to accompany him on his trek into Gar og Nadrak. Mulger's mules were laden with trade goods, and Mulger himself seemed to carry a burden of preconceptions and prejudices almost as heavy as a fully loaded mule pack. Silk and the worthy merchant had disliked each other at first sight, and Silk amused himself by baiting his countryman as they rode eastward across the rolling moors toward the jagged peaks that marked the boundary between Drasnia and the land of the Nadraks. Their discussions, hovering just on the verge of wrangling, grated on Garion's nerves almost as much as the tiresome clanging of the bells on Mulger's mules.

Garion's edginess at this particular time came from a very specific source. He was afraid. There was no point in trying to conceal that fact from himself. The cryptic words of the Mrin Codex had been explained to him in precise detail. He was riding toward a meeting that had been ordained since the beginning of time, and there was absolutely no way he could avoid it. The meeting was the end result of not one, but two distinct Prophecies, and even if he could persuade one of them that there had been a mistake someplace, the other would drive him to the confrontation without mercy or the slightest consideration for his personal feelings.

"I think you're missing the point, Ambar," Mulger was saying to Silk with that kind of acid precision some men use when talking to someone they truly despise.

"My patriotism or lack of it has nothing to do with the matter. The well-being of Drasnia depends on trade, and if you people in the Foreign Service keep hiding your activities by posing as merchants, it won't be long before an honest Drasnian isn't welcome anywhere." Mulger, with that instinct that seemed inborn in all Drasnians, had instantly recognized the fact that Silk was not what he

pretended to be.
"Oh, come now, Mulger," Silk replied with an airy condescension, "don't be so
naive. Every kingdom in the world conceals its intelligence activities in
exactly the same way. The Tolnedrans do it; the Murgos do it; even the Thulls do
it. What do you want me to do - walk around with a sign on my chest reading
'spy'?"
"Frankly, Ambar, I don't care what you do," Mulger retorted, his lean face
hardening. "All I can say is that I'm getting very tired of being watched
everyplace I go, just because you people can't be trusted."
Silk shrugged with an impudent grin. "It's the way the world is, Mulger. You
might as well get used to it, because it's not going to change."
Mulger glared at the rat-faced little man helplessly, then turned abruptly and
rode back to keep company with his mules.
"Aren't you pushing it a little?" Belgarath suggested, lifting his head from the
apparent doze in which he usually rode. "If you irritate him enough, he'll
denounce you to the border guards, and we'll never get into Gar og Nadrak."
"Mulger's not going to say a word, old friend," Silk assured him. "If he does,
he'll be held for investigation, too, and there's not a merchant alive who
doesn't have a few things concealed in his packs that aren't supposed to be
there."
"Why don't you just leave him alone?" Belgarath asked.
"It gives me something to do," Silk replied with a shrug. "Otherwise I'd have to
look at the scenery, and eastern Drasnia bores me."
Belgarath grunted sourly, pulled his gray hood up over his head, and settled
back into his nap.
Garion returned to his melancholy thoughts. The gorse bushes which covered the
rolling moors had a depressing gray-green color to them, and the North Caravan
Route wound like a dusty white scar across them. The sky had been overcast for
nearly two weeks, though there was no hint of moisture in the clouds. They
plodded along through a dreary, shadowless world toward the stark mountains
looming on the horizon ahead.
It was the unfairness of it all that upset Garion the most. He had never asked
for any of this. He did not want to be a sorcerer. He did not want to be the
Rivan King. He was not even sure that he really wanted to marry Princess

Ce'Nedra - although he was of two minds about that. The little Imperial Princess could be - usually when she wanted something - absolutely adorable. Most of the time, however, she did not want anything, and her true nature emerged. If he had consciously sought any of this, he could have accepted the duty which lay on him with a certain amount of resignation. He had been given no choice in the matter, though, and he found himself wanting to demand of the uncaring sky, "Why me?"

He rode on beside his dozing grandfather with only the murmuring song of the Orb of Aldur for company, and even that was a source of irritation. The Orb, which stood on the pommel of the great sword strapped to his back, sang to him endlessly with a kind of silly enthusiasm. It might be all ver well for the Orb to exult about the meeting with Torak, but it was Garion who was going to have to face the Dragon-God of Angarak, and it was Garion who was going to have to do all the bleeding. He felt that the unrelieved cheerfulness of the Orb was - all things considered - in very poor taste, to say the least.

The border between Drasnia and Gar og Nadrak straddled the North Caravan Route in a narrow, rocky gap where two garrisons, one Drasnian and one Nadrak, faced each other across a simple gate that consisted of a single, horizontal pole. By itself, the pole was an insubstantial barrier. Symbolically, however, it was more intimidating than the gates of Vo Mimbre or Tol Honeth. On one side of the gate stood the West; on the other, the East. With a single step, one could move from one world into a totally different one, and Garion wished with all his being that he did not have to take that step.

As Silk had predicted, Mulger said nothing about his suspicions to either the Drasnian pikemen or the leather-clad Nadrak soldiers at the border, and they passed without incident into the mountains of Gar og Nadrak. Once it passed the border, the caravan route climbed steeply up a narrow gorge beside a swiftly tumbling mountain stream. The rock walls of the gorge were sheer, black, and oppressive. The sky overhead narrowed to a dirty gray ribbon, and the clanging mule bells echoed back from the rocks to accompany the rush and pounding gurgle of the stream.

Belgarath awoke and looked around, his eyes alert. He gave Silk a

quick,
sidelong glance that cautioned the little man to keep his mouth shut, then
cleared his throat. "We want to thank you, worthy Mulger, and to wish you good
luck in your dealings here."
Mulger looked at the old sorcerer sharply, his eyes questioning. "We'll be
leaving you at the head of this gorge," Belgarath continued smoothly, his face
bland. "Our business is off that way." He gestured rather vaguely.
Mulger grunted. "I don't want to know anything about it," he declared.
"You don't, really," Belgarath assured him. "And please don't take Ambar's
remarks too seriously. He has a comic turn of mind and he says things he doesn't
always mean, because he enjoys irritating people. Once you get to know him, he's
not quite so bad."
Mulger gave Silk a long, hard look and let it pass without comment. "Good luck
in whatever it is you're doing," he said grudgingly, forced to say it more out
of courtesy than out of any genuine good feeling. "You and the young man weren't
bad traveling companions."
"We are in your debt, worthy Mulger," Silk added with mocking extravagance.
"Your hospitality has been exquisite."
Mulger looked directly at Silk again. "I don't really like you, Ambar," he said
bluntly. "Why don't we just let it go at that?"
"I'm crushed." Silk grinned at him.
"Let it lie," Belgarath growled.
"I made every effort to win him over," Silk protested.
Belgarath turned his back on him.
"I really did." Silk appealed to Garion, his eyes brimming with mock sincerity.
"I don't believe you either," Garion told him.
Silk sighed. "Nobody understands me," he complained. Then he laughed and rode on
up the gorge, whistling happily to himself.
At the head of the gorge, they left Mulger and struck off to the left of the
caravan route through a jumble of rock and stunted trees. At the crest of a
stony ridge, they stopped to watch the slow progress of the mules until they
were out of sight.
"Where are we headed?" Silk asked, squinting up at the clouds scudding past
overhead. "I thought we were going to Yar Gurak."
"We are," Belgarath replied, scratching at his beard, "but we'll circle around
and come at the town from the other side. Mulger's opinions make traveling with
him just a bit chancy. He might let something slip at the wrong time.

Besides,
Garion and I have something to take care of before we get there." The old man
looked around. "Over there ought to do," he said, pointing at a shallow green
dale, concealed on the far side of the ridge. He led them down into the dale and
dismounted.
Silk, leading their single packhorse, pulled up beside a small pool of spring
water and tied the horses to a dead snag standing at its edge.
"What is it that we have to do, Grandfather?" Garion asked, sliding out of his
saddle.
"That sword of yours is a trifle obvious," the old man told him. "Unless we want
to spend the whole trip answering questions, we're going to have to do something
about it."
"Are you going to make it invisible?" Silk asked hopefully.
"In a manner of speaking," Belgarath answered. "Open your mind to the Orb,
Garion. Just let it talk to you."
Garion frowned. "I don't understand."
"Just relax. The Orb will do the rest. It's very excited about you, so don't pay
too much attention to it if it starts making suggestions. It has a severely
limited understanding of the real world. Just relax and let your mind sort of
drift. I've got to talk to it, and I can only do that through you. It won't
listen to anybody else."
Garion leaned back against a tree; in a moment he found his mind filled with all
manner of peculiar images. The world he perceived in that imagining was tinged
over with a faint blue haze, and everything seemed angular, as if constructed
out of the flat planes and sharp edges of a crystal. He caught a vivid picture
of himself, flaming sword in hand, riding at great speed with whole hordes of
faceless men fleeing out of his path. Belgarath's voice sounded sharply in his
mind then. "Stop that." The words, he realized, were not directed at him, but
instead at the Orb itself. Then the old man's voice dropped to a murmur,
instructing, explaining something. The responses of that other, crystalline
awareness seemed a trifle petulant; but eventually there seemed to be an
agreement of some kind, and then Garion's mind cleared.
Belgarath was shaking his head with a rueful expression. "It's almost like
talking to a child sometimes," he said. "It has no conception of numbers, and it

can't even begin to comprehend the meaning of the word danger."
"It's still there," Silk noted, sounding a bit disappointed. "I can still see the sword."
"That's because you know it's there," Belgarath told him. "Other people will overlook it."
"How can you overlook something that big?" Silk objected.
"It's very complicated," Belgarath replied. "The Orb is simply going to encourage people not to see it - or the sword. If they look very closely, they might realize that Garion's carrying something on his back, but they won't be curious enough about it to try to find out what it is. As a matter of fact, quite a few people won't even notice Garion himself."
"Are you trying to say that Garion's invisible?"
"No. He's just sort of unremarkable for the time being. Let's move on. Night comes on quickly up in these mountains."
Yar Gurak was perhaps the ugliest town Garion had ever seen. It was strung out on either side of a roiling yellow creek, and muddy, unpaved streets ran up the steep slopes of the cut the stream had gouged out of the hills. The sides of the cut beyond the town had been stripped of all vegetation. There were shafts running back into the hillsides, and great, rooted-out excavations. There were springs among the diggings, and they trickled muddy water down the slopes to pollute the creek. The town had a slapdash quality about it, and all the buildings seemed somewhat temporary. Construction was, for the most part, log and uncut rock, and several of the houses had been finished off with canvas.
The streets teemed with lanky, dark-faced Nadraks, many of whom were obviously drunk. A nasty brawl erupted out of a tavern door as they entered the town, and they were forced to stop while perhaps two dozen Nadraks rolled about in the mud, trying with a fair amount of success to incapacitate or even maim each other.
The sun was going down as they found an inn at the end of a muddy street. It was a large, square building with the main floor constructed of stone, a second storey built of logs, and stables attached to the rear. They put up their horses, took a room for the night, and then entered the barnlike common room in search of supper. The benches in the common room were a bit unsteady, and the

tabletops were grease. smeared and littered with crumbs and spilled food. Oil
lamps hung smoking on chains, and the smell of cooking cabbage was overpowering.
A fair number of merchants from various parts of the world sat at their evening
meal in the room - wary-eyed men in tight little groups, with walls of suspicion
drawn around them.
Belgarath, Silk, and Garion sat down at an unoccupied table and ate the stew
brought to them in wooden bowls by a tipsy servingman in a greasy apron. When
they had finished, Silk glanced at the open doorway leading into the noisy
taproom and then looked inquiringly at Belgarath.
The old man shook his head. "Better not," he said. "Nadraks are a high-strung
people, and relations with the West are a little tense just now. There's no
point in asking for trouble."
Silk nodded his glum agreement and led the way up the stairs at the back of the
inn to the room they had taken for the night. Garion held up their guttering
candle and looked dubiously at the log-frame bunks standing against the walls of
the room. The bunks had rope springs and mattresses stuffed with straw; they
looked lumpy and not very clean. The noise from the taproom below was loud and
raucous.
"I don't think we're going to get much sleep tonight," he observed. "Mining
towns aren't like farm villages," Silk pointed out. "Farmers feel the need for
decorum - even when they're drunk. Miners tend on the whole to be somewhat
rowdier."
Belgarath shrugged. "They'll quiet down in a bit. Most of them will be
unconscious long before midnight." He turned to Silk. "As soon as the shops open
up in the morning, I want you to get us some different clothing - used,
preferably. If we look like gold hunters, nobody's going to pay very much
attention to us. Get a pick handle and a couple of rock hammers. We'll tie them
to the outside of the pack on our spare horse for show."
"I get the feeling you've done this before."
"From time to time. It's a useful disguise. Gold hunters are crazy to begin
with, so people aren't surprised if they show up in strange places." The old man
laughed shortly. "I even found gold once - a vein as thick as your arm."
Silk's face grew immediately intent. "Where?"

Belgarath shrugged. "Off that way somewhere," he replied with a vague gesture.
"I forget exactly."
"Belgarath," Silk objected with a note of anguish in his voice.
"Don't get sidetracked," Belgarath told him. "Let's get some sleep. I want to be out of here as early as possible tomorrow morning."
The overcast which had lingered for weeks cleared off during the night; when Garion awoke, the new-risen sun streamed golden through the dirty window.
Belgarath was seated at the rough table on the far side of the room, studying a parchment map, and Silk had already left.
"I thought for a while that you were going to sleep past noon," the old man said as Garion sat up and stretched.
"I had trouble getting to sleep last night," Garion replied. "It was a little noisy downstairs."
"Nadraks are like that."
A sudden thought occurred to Garion. "What do you think Aunt Pol is doing just now?" he asked.
"Sleeping, probably."
"Not this late."
"It's much earlier where she is."
"I don't follow that."
"Riva's fifteen hundred leagues west of here," Belgarath explained. "The sun won't get that far for several hours yet."
Garion blinked. "I hadn't thought of that," he admitted.
"I didn't think you had."
The door opened, and Silk came in, carrying several bundles and wearing an outraged expression. He threw his bundles down and stamped to the window, muttering curses under his breath.
"What's got you so worked up?" Belgarath asked mildly.
"Would you look at this?" Silk waved a piece of parchment at the old man.
"What's the problem?" Belgarath took the parchment and read it. "That whole business was settled years ago," Silk declared in an irntated voice. "What are these things doing, still being circulated?"
"The description is colorful," Belgarath noted.
"Did you see that?" Silk sounded mortally offended. He turned to Garion. "Do I look like a weasel to you?"
"-an ill-favored, weasel-faced man," Belgarath read, "shifty-eyed and with a long, pointed nose. A notorious cheat at dice."
"Do you mind?"
"What's this all about?" Garion asked.
"I had a slight misunderstanding with the authorities some years ago," Silk explained deprecatingly. "Nothing all that serious, actually, but

they're still
circulating that thing." He gestured angrily at the parchment Belgarath was
still reading with an amused expression. "They've even gone so far as to offer a
reward. " He considered for a moment. "I'll have to admit that the sum is
flattering, though," he added.
"Did you get the things I sent you after?" Belgarath asked.
"Of course."
"Let's change clothes, then, and leave before your unexpected celebrity attracts
a crowd."
The worn Nadrak clothing was made mostly of leather-snug black trousers,
tight-fitting vests, and short-sleeved linen tunics.
"I didn't bother with the boots," Silk said. "Nadrak boots are pretty
uncomfortable - probably since it hasn't occurred to them yet that there's a
difference between the right foot and the left." He settled a pointed felt cap
at a jaunty angle. "What do you think?" he asked, striking a pose.
"Doesn't look at all like a weasel, does he?" Belgarath asked Garion. Silk gave
him a disgusted look, but said nothing.
They went downstairs, led their horses out of the stables attached to the inn,
and mounted. Silk's expression remained sour as they rode out of Yar Gurak. When
they reached the top of a hill to the north of town, he slid off his horse,
picked up a rock, and threw it rather savagely at the buildings clustered below.
"Make you feel better?" Belgarath asked curiously.
Silk remounted with a disdainful sniff and led the way down the other side of
the hill.

Chapter two

THEY RODE FOR the next few days through a wilderness of stone and stunted trees.
The sun grew warmer each day, and the sky overhead was intensely blue as they
pressed deeper and deeper into the snowcapped mountains. There were trails of
sorts up here, winding, vagrant tracks meandering between the dazzling white
peaks and across the high, pale green meadows where wildflowers nodded in the
mountain breeze. The air was spiced with the resinous odor of evergreens, and
now and then they saw deer grazing or stopping to watch them with large,
startled eyes as they passed.
Belgarath moved confidently in a generally eastward course and he appeared to be
alert and watchful. There were no signs of the half doze in which he

customarily
rode on more clearly defined roads, and he seemed somehow younger up here in the
mountains.
They encountered other travelers - leather-clad Nadraks for the most part -
although they did see a party of Drasnians laboring up a steep slope and, once,
a long way off, what appeared to be a Tolnedran. Their exchanges with these
others were brief and wary. The mountains of Gar og Nadrak were at best
sketchily policed, and it was necessary for every man who entered them to
provide for his own security.
The sole exception to this suspicious taciturnity was a garrulous old gold
hunter mounted on a donkey, who appeared out of the blue-tinged shadows under
the trees one morning. His tangled hair was white, and his clothing was
mismatched, appearing to consist mostly of castoffs he had found beside this
trail or that. His tanned, wrinkled face was weathered like a well-cured old
hide, and his blue eyes twinkled merrily. He joined them without any greeting or
hint of uncertainty as to his welcome and began talking immediately as if taking
up a conversation again that had only recently been interrupted.
There was a sort of comic turn to his voice and manner that Garion found
immediately engaging.
"Must be ten years or more since I've followed this path," he began, jouncing
along on his donkey as he fell in beside Garion. "I don't come down into this
part of the mountains very much any more. The streambeds down here have all been
worked over a hundred times at least. Which way are you bound?"
"I'm not really sure," Garion replied cautiously. "I've never been up here
before, so I'm just following along."
"You'd find better gravel if you struck out to the north," the man on the donkey
advised, "up near Morindland. Of course, you've got to be careful up there, but,
like they say, no risk, no profit." He squinted curiously at Garion. "You're not
a Nadrak, are you?"
"Sendar," Garion responded shortly.
"Never been to Sendaria," the old gold hunter mused. "Never been anyplace really
- except up here." He looked around at the whitetopped peaks and deep green
forests with a sort of abiding love. "Never really wanted to go anyplace else.
I've picked these mountains over from end to end for seventy years

now and never
made much at it except for the pleasure of being here. Found a river bar one
time, though, that had so much red gold in it that it looked like it was
bleeding. Winter caught me up there, and I almost froze to death trying to come
out."
"Did you go back the next spring?" Garion couldn't help asking.
"Meant to, but I
did a lot of drinking that winter - I had gold enough. Anyway, the drink sort of
addled my brains. When I set out the following year, I took along a few kegs for
company. That's always a mistake. The drink takes you harder when you get up
into the mountains, and you don't always pay attention to things the way you
should." He leaned back in his donkey saddle, scratching reflectively at his
stomach. "I went out onto the plains north of the mountains - up in Morindland.
Seems that I thought at the time that the going might be easier out on flat
ground. Well, to make it short, I ran across a band of Morindim and they took me
prisoner. I'd been up to my ears in an ale keg for a day or so, and I was far
gone when they took me. Lucky, I guess. Morindim are superstitious, and they
thought I was possessed. That's probably all that saved my life. They kept me
for five or six years, trying to puzzle out the meaning behind my ravings - once
I got sober and saw the situation, I took quite a bit of care to do a lot of
raving. Eventually they got tired of it and weren't so careful about watching
me, so I escaped. By then I'd sort of forgotten exactly where that river was. I
look for it now and then when I'm up that way." His speech seemed rambling, but
his old blue eyes were very penetrating. "That's a big sword you're carrying,
boy, Who do you plan to kill with it?"
The question came so fast that Garion did not even have time to be startled.
"Funny thing about that sword of yours," the shabby old man added shrewdly. "It
seems to be going out of its way to make itself inconspicuous." Then he turned
to Belgarath, who was looking at him with a level gaze. "You haven't hardly
changed at all," he noted.
"And you still talk too much," Belgarath replied.
"I get hungry for talk every few years," the old man on the donkey admitted. "Is
your daughter well?"

Belgarath nodded.
"Fine-looking woman, your daughter - bad-tempered, though."
"That hasn't changed noticeably."
"Didn't imagine it had." The old gold hunter chuckled, then hesitated for a moment. "If you don't mind some advice, be careful in case you plan to go down into the low country," he said seriously. "It looks like things might be coming to a boil down there. A lot of strangers in red tunics are roaming about, and there's been smoke coming up from old altars that haven't been used for years. The Grolims are out again, and their knives are all new-sharpened. The Nadraks who come up here keep looking back over their shoulders." He paused, looking directly at Belgarath. "There've been some other signs, too," he added. "The animals are all jumpy - like just before a big storm - and sometimes at night, if you listen close, there's something like thunder way off in the distance - like maybe from as far off as Mallorea. The whole world seems to be uneasy. I've got a hunch that something pretty big's about to happen - maybe the sort of thing you'd be involved in. The point is that they know you're out here. I wouldn't count too much on being able to slip through without somebody noticing you." He shrugged then, as if washing his hands of the matter. "I just thought you'd like to know."
"Thank you," Belgarath replied.
"Didn't cost me anything to say it." The old man shrugged again. "I think I'll go that way." He pointed off to the north. "Too many strangers coming into the mountains in the last few months. It's starting to get crowded. I've about talked myself out now, so I think I'll go look myself up a bit of privacy." He turned his donkey and trotted off. "Good luck," he threw back over his shoulder by way of farewell and then he disappeared into the blue shadows under the trees.
"You're acquainted with him, I take it," Silk observed to Belgarath.
The old sorcerer nodded. "I met him about thirty years ago. Polgara had come to Gar og Nadrak to find out a few things. After she'd gathered all the information she wanted, she sent word to me, and I came here and bought her from the man who owned her. We started home, but an early snowstorm caught us up here in the mountains. He found us floundering along, and he took us to the cave

where he
holes up when the snow gets too deep. Quite a comfortable cave really - except
that he insists on bringing his donkey inside. He and Pol argued about that all
winter, as I recall."
"What's his name?" Silk asked curiously.
Belgarath shrugged. "He never said, and it's not polite to ask."
Garion, however, had choked on the word "bought." A kind of helpless outrage
welled up in him. "Somebody owned Aunt Pol?" he demanded incredulously.
"It's a Nadrak custom," Silk explained. "In their society, women are considered
property. It's not seemly for a woman to go about without an owner."
"She was a slave?" Garion's knuckles grew white as he clenched his fists.
"Of course she wasn't a slave," Belgarath told him. "Can you even remotely
imagine your Aunt submitting to that sort of thing?"
"But you said-"
"I said I bought her from the man who owned her. Their relationship was a
formality - nothing more. She needed an owner in order to function here, and he
gained a great deal of respect from other men as a result of his ownership of so
remarkable a woman." Belgarath made a sour face. "It cost me a fortune to buy
her back from him. I sometimes wonder if she was really worth it."
"Grandfather! "
"I'm sure she'd be fascinated by that last observation, old friend," Silk said
slyly.
"I don't know that it's necessary to repeat it to her, Silk."
"You never know." Silk laughed. "I might need something from you someday."
"That's disgusting."
"I know." Silk grinned and looked around. "Your friend took quite a bit of
trouble to look you up," he suggested. "What was behind it?"
"He wanted to warn me."
"That things were tense in Gar og Nadrak? We knew that already."
"His warning was a great deal more urgent than that."
"He didn't sound very urgent."
"That's because you don't know him."
"Grandfather," Garion said suddenly, "how did he manage to see my sword? I
thought we'd taken care of that."
"He sees everything, Garion. He could glance once at a tree and tell you ten
years later exactly how many leaves were on it."
"Is he a sorcerer?"
"Not as far as I know. He's just a strange old man who likes the mountains. He
doesn't know what's going on because he doesn't want to know. If he really
wanted to, he could probably find out everything that's happening in

the world."
"He could make a fortune as a spy, then," Silk mused.
"He doesn't want a fortune. Isn't that obvious? Any time he needs money, he just goes back to that river bar he mentioned."
"But he said he'd forgotten how to find it," Garion protested.
Belgarath snorted. "He's never forgotten anything in his life." Then his eyes grew distant. "There are a few people like him in the world - people who have no interest whatsoever in what other people are doing. Maybe that's not such a bad trait. If I had my life to live over, I might not mind doing it his way." He looked around then, his eyes very alert. "Let's take that path over there," he suggested, pointing at a scarcely visible track angling off across an open meadow, littered with bits of log bleached white by sun and weather. "If what he says is true, I think we'll want to avoid any large settlements. That path comes out farther north where there aren't so many people."
Not long afterward the terrain began to slope downward, and the three of them moved along briskly, riding down out of the mountains toward the vastness of the forest of Nadrak. The peaks around them subsided into forested foothills. Once they topped a rise, they were able to look out at the ocean of trees lying below. The forest stretched to the horizon and beyond, dark green beneath a blue sky. A faint breeze was blowing, and the sigh of its passage through the mile upon mile of trees below had a kind of endless sadness to it, a regretful memory of summers past and springs that would never come again.
Some distance up the slope from the forest stood a village, huddled at the side of a vast, open pit that had been gouged, raw and ugly, in the red dirt of the hillside.
"A mine town," Belgarath noted. "Let's nose about a bit and see what's going on."
They rode warily down the hill. As they drew closer, Garion could see that the village had that same temporary kind of appearance he had noticed about Yar Gurak. The buildings were constructed in the same way - unpeeled logs and rough stone - and the low-pitched roofs had large rocks laid on them to keep the shingles from blowing off during the winter blizzards. Nadraks seemed not to be concerned about the external appearance of their structures; once the walls and

roofs were completed, they appeared quite content to move in and devote their attentions to other matters, without attending to those final finishing touches which gave a house that look of permanence that a Sendar or a Tolnedran would feel absolutely necessary. The entire settlement seemed to reflect an attitude of "good enough" that offended Garion, for some reason.

Some of the miners who lived in the village came out into the dirt streets to watch the strangers ride in. Their black leather clothing was stained red by the earth in which they dug, and their eyes were hard and suspicious. An air of fearful wariness hung over the whole place, seasoned with a touch of defiant bellicosity.

Silk jerked his head toward a large, low building with a crude painting of a cluster of grapes on a sign banging in the breeze by the double doors at the front. A wide, roofed porch surrounded the building, and leather-garbed Nadraks lounged on benches along the porch, watching a dogfight in progress out in the middle of the street.

Belgarath nodded. "But let's go around to the side," he suggested, "in case we have to leave in a hurry."

They dismounted at the side porch, tied their horses to the railing, and went inside.

The interior of the tavern was smoky and dim, since windows seemed to be a rare feature in Nadrak buildings. The tables and benches were rough-hewn, and what light there was came from smoking oil lamps that hung on chains from the rafters. The floor was mud-stained and littered with bits of food. Dogs roamed at will under the tables and benches. The smell of stale beer and unwashed bodies hung heavy in the air, and, though it was only early afternoon, the place was crowded. Many of the men in the large room were already far gone with drink.

It was noisy, since the Nadraks lounging at the tables or stumbling about the room seemed all habitually to speak at the top of their voices.

Belgarath pushed his way toward a table in the corner where a solitary man sat bleary-eyed and slack-lipped, staring into his ale cup. "You don't mind if we share the table, do you?" the old man demanded of him in an abrupt manner, sitting down without awaiting a reply.

"Would it do any good if I did?" the man with the cup asked. He was

unshaven,
and his eyes were pouchy and bloodshot.
"Not much," Belgarath told him bluntly.
"You're new here, aren't you?" The Nadrak looked at the three of them with only
a hint of curiosity, trying with some difficulty to focus his eyes.
"I don't really see that it's any of your business," Belgarath retorted rudely.
"You've got a sour mouth for a man past his prime," the Nadrak suggested,
flexing his fingers ominously.
"I came here to drink, not fight," Silk declared in a harsh tone. "I might
change my mind later, but right now, I'm thirsty." He reached out and caught the
arm of a passing servingman. "Ale," he ordered. "And don't take all day."
"Keep your hands to yourself," the servingman told him. "Are you with him?" He
pointed at the Nadrak they had joined.
"We're sitting with him, aren't we?"
"You want three cups or four?"
"I want one-for now. Bring the others what they want, too. I'll pay for the
first time around."
The servingman grunted sourly and pushed his way off through the crowd, pausing
long enough to kick a dog out of his way.
Silk's offer seemed to quiet their Nadrak companion's belligerence. "You've
picked a bad time to come to town," he told them. "The whole region's crawling
with Mallorean recruiters."
"We've been up in the mountains," Belgarath said. "We'll probably go back in a
day or so. Whatever's happening down here doesn't interest us very much."
"You'd better take an interest while you're here - unless you'd like to try army
life."
"Is there a war someplace?" Silk asked him.
"Likely to beer so they say. Someplace down in Mishrak ac Thull."
Silk snorted. "I've never met a Thull worth fighting."
"It's not the Thulls. It's supposed to be the Alorns. They've got a queen - if
you can imagine such a thing - and she's moving to invade the Thulls."
"A queen?" Silk scoffed. "Can't be much of an army, then. Let the Thulls fight
her themselves."
"Tell that to the Mallorean recruiters," the Nadrak suggested.
"Did you have to brew that ale?" Silk demanded of the servingman, who was
returning with four large cups.
"There are other taverns, friend," the servingman replied. "If you don't like
this one, go find another. That'll be twelve pennies."
"Three pennies a cup?" Silk exclaimed.

"Times are hard."
Grumbling, Silk paid him.
"Thanks," the Nadrak they were sitting with said, taking one of the cups.
"Don't mention it," Silk said sourly.
"What are the Malloreans doing here?" Belgarath asked.
"Rounding up everyone who can stand up, see lightning, and hear thunder. They do their recruiting with leg-irons, so it's a little hard to refuse. They've got Grolims with them too, and the Grolims keep their gutting knives out in plain sight as a sort of a hint about what might happen to anybody who objects too much."
"Maybe you were right when you said we picked a bad time to come down out of the mountains," Silk said.
The Nadrak nodded. "The Grolims say that Torak's stirring in his sleep."
"That's not very good news," Silk replied.
"I think we could all drink to that." The Nadrak lifted his ale cup. "You find anything worth digging for up there in the mountains?"
Silk shook his head. "A few traces is all. We've been working the streambeds for free gold. We don't have the equipment to drive shafts back into the rock."
"You'll never get rich squatting beside a creek and sifting gravel."
"We get by." Silk shrugged. "Someday maybe we'll hit a good pocket and we'll be able to pick up enough to buy some equipment."
"And someday maybe it will rain beer, too."
Silk laughed.
"You ever thought about taking in another partner?"
Silk squinted at the unshaven Nadrak. "Have you been up there before?" he asked.
The Nadrak nodded. "Often enough to know that I don't like it - but I think I'd like a stint in the army a lot less."
"Let's have another drink and talk about it," Silk suggested.
Garion leaned back, putting his shoulders against the rough log wall. Nadraks didn't seem to be so bad, once you got past the crudity of their nature, They were a blunt-spoken people and a bit sour-faced, but they did not seem to have that icy animosity toward outsiders he had noted among the Murgos. He let his mind drift back to what the Nadrak had said about a queen. He quickly dismissed the notion that any of the queens staying at Riva might, under any circumstances, have assumed such authority. That left only Aunt Pol. The Nadrak's information could have been garbled a bit; but in Belgarath's absence, Aunt Pol might have taken charge of things - although that was not like her, at

all. What could possibly have happened back there to force her to go to such
extremes?
As the afternoon wore on, more and more of the men in the tavern grew reeling
drunk, and occasional fights broke out - although the fights usually consisted
of shoving matches, since few in the room were sober enough to aim a good blow.
Their companion drank steadily and eventually laid his head down on his arms and
began to snore.
"I think we've got just about everything we can use here," Belgarath suggested
quietly. "Let's drift on out. From what our friend here says, I don't think it'd
be a good idea to sleep in town."
Silk nodded his agreement, and the three of them rose from the table and made
their way through the crowd to the side door.
"Did you want to pick up any supplies?" the little man asked.
Belgarath shook his head. "I have a feeling that we want to get out of here as
soon as possible."
Silk gave him a quick look, and the three of them untied their horses, mounted
and rode back out into the red dirt street. They moved at a walk to avoid
arousing suspicion, but Garion could feel a sort of tense urgency to put this
raw, mud-smeared village behind them. There was something threatening in the
air, and the golden late afternoon sun seemed somehow shadowed, as if by an
unseen cloud. As they were passing the last rickety house on the downhill edge
of the village, they heard an alarmed shout from somewhere back near the center
of town. Garion turned quickly and saw a party of perhaps twenty mounted men in
red tunics plunging at a full gallop toward the tavern the three of them had
just left. With a practiced skill, the scarlet-clad strangers swung down from
their horses and immediately covered all the doors to cut off an escape for
those inside.
"Malloreans!" Belgarath snapped. "Make for the trees!" And he drove his heels
into his horse's flanks.
They galloped across the weedy, stump-cluttered clearing that surrounded the
village, toward the edge of the forest and safety, but there was no outcry or
pursuit. The tavern appeared to contain enough fish to fill the Mallorean net.
From a safe vantage point beneath spreading tree limbs, Garion, Silk, and

Belgarath watched as a disconsolate-looking string of Nadraks, chained together at the ankle, were led out of the tavern into the red dust of the street to stand under the watchful eyes of the Mallorean recruiters.
"It looks like our friend has joined the army, after all," Silk observed.
"Better him than us," Belgarath replied. "We might be just a little out of place in the middle of an Angarak horde." He squinted at the ruddy disk of the setting sun. "Let's move out. We've got a few hours before dark. It looks as if military service might be contagious in this vicinity, and I wouldn't want to catch it."

Chapter Three

THE FOREST OF Nadrak was unlike the Arendish forest lying far to the south. The differences were subtle, and it took Garion several days to put his finger on them. For one thing, the trails they followed had no sense of permanence about them. They were so infrequently traveled that they were not beaten into the loamy soil of the forest floor. In the Arendish forest, the marks of man were everywhere, but here man was an intruder, merely passing through. Moreover, the forest in Arendia had definite boundaries, but this ocean of trees went on to the farthest edge of the continent, and it had stood so since the beginning of the world.
The forest teemed with life. Tawny deer flickered among the trees, and vast, shaggy bison, with curved black horns shiny as onyx, grazed in clearings. Once a bear, grumbling and muttering irritably, lumbered across the trail in front of them. Rabbits scurried through the undergrowth and partridges exploded into flight from underfoot with a heartstopping thunder of wings. The ponds and streams abounded with fish, muskrat, otter, and beaver. There were also, they soon discovered, smaller forms of life. The mosquitoes seemed only slightly smaller than sparrows, and there was a nasty little brown fly that bit anything that moved.
The sun rose early and set late, dappling the dark forest floor with golden light. Although it was midsummer now, it was never exactly hot, and the air was rich with that smell of urgent growth common to the lands of the north, where

summer was short and winter very long.
Belgarath seemed not to sleep at all once they entered the forest. Each evening,
as Silk and Garion wearily rolled themselves in their blankets, the old sorcerer
threaded his way back into the shadowy trees and disappeared. Once, several
hours past dusk on a night filled with starlight, Garion awoke briefly and heard
the loping touch of paws skittering lightly across a leaf carpeted clearing;
even as he drifted back to sleep, he understood. The great silver wolf who was
his grandfather roamed the night, scouring the surrounding forest for any hint
of pursuit or danger.
The old man's nocturnal roamings were as silent as smoke, but they did not pass
unnoticed. Early one morning, before the sun rose and while the trees were still
hazy and half obscured by ground fog, several shadowy shapes drifted among the
dark trunks and stopped not far away. Garion, who had just risen and was
preparing to stir up the fire, froze half bent over. As he slowly straightened,
he could feel eyes on him, and his skin prickled peculiarly. Perhaps ten feet
away stood a huge, dark gray wolf. The wolf's expression was serious, and its
eyes were as yellow as sunlight. There was an unspoken question in those golden
eyes, and Garion realized that he understood that question.
"One wonders why you are doing that?"
"Doing what?" Garion asked politely, responding automatically in the language of
wolves.
"Going about in that peculiar form."
"It's necessary to do it."
"Ah." With exquisite courtesy the wolf did not pursue the matter further. "One
is curious to know if you don't find it somewhat restricting," he noted however.
"It's not as bad as it looks - once one gets used to it."
The wolf looked unconvinced. He sat down on his haunches. "One has seen the
other one several times in the past few darknesses," he said in the manner of
wolves, "and one is curious to know why you and he have come into our range."
Garion knew instinctively that his answer to that question was going to be very
important. "We are going from one place to another," he replied carefully. "It
is not our intention to seek dens or mates in your range or to hunt the
creatures that are yours." He could not have explained how he knew what to say.

The wolf seemed satisfied with his response. "One would be pleased if you would present our esteem to the one with fur like frost," he said formally. "One has noted that he is worthy of great respect."
"One would be pleased to give him your words," Garion responded, a bit surprised at how easily the elaborate phrasing came to him.
The wolf lifted his head and sniffed at the air. "It is time for us to hunt," he said. "May you find what you seek."
"May your hunt be successful," Garion returned.
The wolf turned and padded back into the fog, followed by his companions.
"On the whole, you handled that rather well, Garion," Belgarath said from the deep shadows of a nearby thicket.
Garion jumped, a bit startled. "I didn't know you were there," he said.
"You should have," the old man replied, stepping out of the shadows.
"How did he know?" Garion asked. "That I'm a wolf sometimes, I mean?"
"It shows. A wolf is very alert to that sort of thing."
Silk came out from under the tree where he had been sleeping. The little man's step was wary, but his nose twitched with curiosity. "What was that all about?" he asked.
"The wolves wanted to know what we were doing in their territory," Belgarath replied. "They were investigating to see if they were going to have to fight us."
"Fight?" Garion was startled.
"It's customary when a strange wolf enters the hunting range of another pack. Wolves prefer not to fight - it's a waste of energy - but they will, if the situation demands it."
"What happened?" Silk asked. "Why did they just go away like that?"
"Garion convinced them that we were just passing through."
"That was clever of him."
"Why don't you stir up the fire, Garion?" Belgarath suggested. "Let's have some breakfast and move on. It's still a long way to Mallorea, and we don't want to run out of good weather."
Later that same day, they rode down into a valley where a collection of log houses and tents stood beside a fair-sized stream at the edge of a meadow.
"Fur traders," Silk explained to Garion, pointing at the rough settlement. "'There are places like this on just about every major stream in this part of the forest." The little man's pointed nose began to twitch, and his eyes grew bright. "A lot of buying and selling goes on in these little towns."
"Never mind," Belgarath told him pointedly. "Try to keep your

predatory
instincts under control."
"I wasn't even considering anything," Silk protested.
"Really? Aren't you feeling well?"
Silk loftily ignored that.
"Wouldn't it be safer to go around it?" Garion asked as they rode across the
broad meadow.
Belgarath shook his head. "I want to know what's going on ahead of us, and the
quickest way to find out is to talk to people who've been there. We'll drift in,
circulate for an hour or so and then drift on out again. Just keep your ears
open. If anyone asks, we're on our way toward the north range to look for gold."
There were differences between the hunters and trappers who roamed the streets
of this settlement and the miners they had met in the last village. They were
more open for one thing - less surly and distinctly less belligerent. Garion
surmised that the enforced solitude of their occupation made them appreciate
companionship all the more during their infrequent visits to the fur-trading
centers. Although they drank probably as much as the miners, their drinking
seemed to lead more often to singing and laughter than to fighting.
A large tavern stood near the center of the village, and they rode slowly along
a dirt street toward it. "Side door," Belgarath said tersely as they dismounted
in front of the tavern, and they led their horses around the building and tied
them at the porch railing.
The interior of the tavern was cleaner, less crowded, and somewhat lighter than
the miners' tavern had been, and it smelled of woods and open air instead of
damp, musty earth. The three of them sat at a table not far from the door and
ordered cups of ale from a polite servingman. The ale was a rich, dark brown,
well chilled, and surprisingly inexpensive.
"The fur buyers own the place," Silk explained, wiping foam from his upper lip.
"They've discovered that a trapper is easier to bargain with if he's a little
drunk, so they make the ale cheap and plentiful."
"I suppose that makes sense," Garion admitted, "but don't the trappers know
that?"
"Of course they do."
"Why do they drink before they do business, then?"
Silk shrugged. "They like to drink."
The two trappers seated at the next table were renewing an acquaintanceship that

obviously stretched back a dozen years or more. Their beards were both touched
with gray, but they spoke lightheartedly in the manner of much younger men.
"You have any trouble with Morindim while you were up there?" one was asking the
other.
The second shook his head. "I put pestilence-markers on both ends of the valley
where I set out my traps," he replied. "A Morind will go a dozen leagues out of
his way to avoid a spot that's got pestilence."
The first nodded his agreement. "That's usually the best way. Gredder always
claimed that curse-markers worked better; but as it turned out, he was wrong."
"I haven't seen him in the last few seasons."
"I'd be surprised if you had. The Morindim got him about three years ago. I
buried him myself - what was left of him anyway."
"Didn't know that. Spent a winter with him once over on the head waters of the
Cordu. He was a mean-tempered sort of a man. I'm surprised that the Morindim
would cross a curse-marker, though."
"As near as I could judge, some magician came along and uncursed his markers. I
found a dried weasel foot hung from one of them with three stems of grass tied
around each toe."
"That's a potent spell. They must have wanted him pretty badly for a magician to
take that much trouble."
"You know how he was. He could irritate people ten leagues away just walking
by."
"That's the truth."
"Not any more, though. His skull's decorating some Morind magician's quest-staff
now."
Garion leaned toward his grandfather. "What do they mean when they talk about
markers?" he whispered.
"They're warnings," Belgarath replied. "Usually sticks poked into the ground and
decorated with bones or feathers. The Morindim can't read, so you can't just put
up a signboard for them."
A stooped old trapper, his leather clothing patched and shiny from wear,
shuffled toward the center of the tavern. His lined, bearded face had a slightly
apologetic expression on it. Following after him came a young Nadrak woman in a
heavy, red felt dress belted about the waist with a glittering chain. There was
a leash about her neck, and the old trapper held the end of the tether firmly in

his fist. Despite the leash, the young woman's face had a proud, disdainful look, and she stared at the men in the tavern with barely concealed contempt.

When the old trapper reached the center of the room, he cleared his throat to get the attention of the crowd. "I've got a woman I want to sell," he announced loudly.

Without changing expression the woman spat upon him.

"Now you know that's just going to lower your price, Vella," the old man told her in a placating tone of voice.

"You're an idiot, Tashor," she retorted. "No one here can afford me - you know that. Why didn't you do what I told you to and offer me to the fur buyers?"

"The fur buyers aren't interested in women, Vella," Tashor replied in that same mild tone. "The price will be better here, believe me."

"I wouldn't believe you if you said the sun was going to rise tomorrow, you old fool."

"The woman, as you can see, is quite spirited," Tashor announced rather lamely.

"Is he trying to sell his wife?" Garion demanded, choking on his ale.

"She isn't his wife," Silk corrected. "He owns her, that's all."

Garion clenched his fists and half rose, his face mottled with anger, but Belgarath's hand closed firmly about his wrist. "Sit down," the old man ordered.

"But "

"I said sit down, Garion. This is none of your business."

"Unless you want to buy the woman, of course," Silk suggested lightly.

"Is she healthy?" a lean-faced trapper with a scar across one cheek called to Tashor.

"She is," Tashor declared, "and she's got all her teeth, too. Show them your teeth, Vella."

"They aren't looking at my teeth, idiot," she told him, looking directly at the scar-faced trapper with a sultry challenge in her black eyes.

"She's an excellent cook," Tashor continued quickly, "and she knows remedies for rheumatism and ague. She can dress and tan hides and she doesn't eat too much. Her breath doesn't smell too bad - unless she eats onions - and she almost never snores, except when she's drunk."

"If she's such a good woman, why do you want to sell her?" the leanfaced trapper wanted to know.

"I'm getting older," Tashor replied, "and I'd like a little peace and quiet. Vella's exciting to be around, but I've had all the excitement I need. I think

I'd like to settle down someplace - maybe raise some chickens or goats." The
bent old trapper's voice sounded a trifle plaintive.
"Oh, this is impossible," Vella burst out. "Do I have to do everything myself?
Get out of the way, Tashor." Rudely, she pushed the old trapper aside and glared
at the crowd, her black eyes flashing. "All right," she announced firmly, "let's
get down to business. Tashor wants to sell me. I'm strong and healthy. I can
cook, cure hides and skins, tend to common illnesses, bargain closely when I buy
supplies, and I can brew good beer." Her eyes narrowed grimly. "I have not gone
to any man's bed, and I keep my daggers sharp enough to persuade strangers not
to try to force me. I can play the wood-flute and I know many old stories. I can
make curse-markers and pestilence-markers and dream-markers to frighten off the
Morindim and once I killed a bear at thirty paces with a bow."
"Twenty paces," Tashor corrected mildly.
"It was closer to thirty," she insisted.
"Can you dance?" the lean trapper with the scarred face asked.
She looked directly at him. "Only if you're seriously interested in buying me,"
she replied.
"We can talk about that after I see you dance," he said.
"Can you hold a beat?" she demanded.
"I can."
"Very well." Her hands went to the chain about her waist, and it jingled as she
unfastened it. She opened the heavy red dress, stepped out of it, and handed it
to Tashor. Then she carefully untied the leash from about her neck and bound a
ribbon of red silk about her head to hold back her wealth of lustrous,
blue-black hair. Beneath the red felt dress, she wore a filmy rose-colored gown
of Mallorean silk that whispered and clung to her as she moved. The silk gown
reached to midcalf, and she wore soft leather boots on her feet. Protruding from
the top of each boot was the jeweled hilt of a dagger, and a third dagger rode
on the leather belt about her waist. Her gown was caught in a tight collar about
her throat, but it left her arms bare to the shoulder. She wore a half dozen
narrow gold bracelets about each wrist. With a conscious grace, she bent and
fastened a string of small bells to each ankle. Then she lifted her smoothly
rounded arms until her hands were beside her face. "This is the beat, scar-face," she told the trapper. "Try to hold it." And she began to clap her

hands together. The beat was three measured claps followed by four staccato ones. Vella began her dance slowly with a kind of insolent strut. Her gown whispered as she moved, its hem sighing about her lush calves.
The lean trapper took up her beat, his callused hands clapping together loudly in the sudden silence as Vella danced.
Garion began to blush. Vella's movements were subtle and fluid. The bells at her ankles and the bracelets about her wrists played a tinkling counterpoint to the trapper's beat. Her feet seemed almost to flicker in the intricate steps of her dance, and her arms wove patterns in the air. Other, even more interesting, things were going on inside the rosecolored, gossamer gown. Garion swallowed hard and discovered that he had almost stopped breathing.
Vella began to whirl, and her long black hair flared out, almost perfectly matching the flare of her gown. Then she slowed and once again dropped back into that proud, sensual strut that challenged every man in the room.
They cheered when she stopped, and she smiled a slow, mysterious little smile.
"You dance very well," the scar-faced trapper observed in a neutral voice.
"Naturally," she replied. "I do everything very well."
"Are you in love with anyone?" The question was bluntly put.
"No man has won my heart," Vella declared flatly. "I haven't seen a man yet who was worthy of me."
"That may change," the trapper suggested. "One goldmark." It was a firm offer.
"You're not serious," she snorted. "Five goldmarks."
"One and a half," he countered.
"This is just too insulting." Vella raised both hands up in the air, and her face took on a tragic expression. "Not a copper less than four."
"Two goldmarks," the trapper offered.
"Unbelievable!" she exclaimed, spreading both arms. "Why don't you just cut my heart out and have done with it? I couldn't consider anything less than three and a half."
"To save time, why don't we just say three?" He said it firmly. "With intention that the arrangement become permanent," he added, almost as an afterthought.
"Permanent?" Vella's eyes widened.
"I like you," he replied. "Well, what do you say?"
"Stand up and let me have a look at you," she ordered him. Slowly he unwound himself from the chair in which he had lounged. His tall body was as lean as his scarred face, and there was a hardmuscled quality about him. Vella pursed her

lips and looked him over. "Not bad, is he?" she murmured to Tashor.
"You could do worse, Vella," her owner answered encouragingly. "I'll consider
your offer of three with intentions," Vella declared. "Have you got a name?"
"Tekk," the tall trapper introduced himself with a slight bow.
"Well then, Tekk," Vella told him, "don't go away. Tashor and I need to talk
over your offer." She gave him an almost shy look. "I think I like you, too,"
she added in a much less challenging tone. Then she took hold of the leash that
was still wrapped around Tashor's fist and led him out of the tavern, glancing
back over her shoulder once or twice at the lean-faced Tekk.
"That is a lot of woman," Silk murmured with a note of profound respect.
Garion found that he was able to breathe again, though his ears still felt very
hot. "What did they mean by intention?" he quietly asked Silk.
"Tekk offered an arrangement that usually leads to marriage," Silk explained.
That baffled Garion. "I don't understand at all," he confessed.
"Just because someone owns her doesn't give him any special rights to her
person," Silk told him, "and those daggers of hers enforce that. One does not
approach a Nadrak woman unless one's tired of living. She makes that decision.
The wedding customarily takes place after the birth of her first child."
"Why was she so interested in the price?"
"Because she gets half," Silk shrugged.
"She gets half of the money every time she's sold?" Garion was incredulous.
"Of course. It'd hardly be fair otherwise, would it?"
The servingman who was bringing them three more cups of ale had stopped and was
staring openly at Silk.
"Is something wrong, friend?" Silk asked him mildly.
The servingman lowered his eyes quickly. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I just thought -
you reminded me of somebody, that's all. Now that I see you closer, I realize
that I was mistaken." He put down the cups quickly, turned, and left without
picking up the coins Silk had laid on the table.
"I think we'd better leave," Silk said quietly.
"What's the matter?" Garion asked him.
"He knows who I am - and there's that reward notice that's being circulated."
"Maybe you're right," Belgarath agreed, rising to his feet.
"He's talking with those men over there," Garion said, watching the servingman,
who was in urgent conversation with a group of hunters on the far side of the
room and was casting frequent looks in their direction.
"We've got about a half a minute to get outside," Silk said tensely.

"Let's go."
The three of them moved quickly toward the door.
"You there!" someone behind them shouted. "Wait a minute!"
"Run!" Belgarath barked, and they bolted outside and hurled themselves into
their saddles just as a half dozen leather-garbed men burst out through the
tavern door.
The shout, "Stop those men!" went largely unheeded as they galloped off down the
street. Trappers and hunters as a breed were seldom inclined to mix themselves
in other men's affairs, and Garion, Silk, and Belgarath had passed through the
village and were splashing across a ford before any kind of pursuit could be
organized.
Silk was swearing as they entered the forest on the far side of the river,
spitting out oaths like melon seeds. His profanity was colorful arid
wide-ranging, reflecting on the birth, parentage, and uncleanly habits of not
only those pursuing them, but of those responsible for circulating the reward
notice as well.
Belgarath reined in sharply, raising his hand as he did. Silk and Garion hauled
their horses to a stop. Silk continued to swear.
"Do you suppose you could cut short your eloquence for a moment?" Belgarath
asked him. "I'm trying to listen."
Silk muttered a few more choice oaths, then clamped his teeth shut. There were
confused shouts far behind them and a certain amount of splashing.
"They're crossing the stream," Belgarath noted. "It looks as if they plan to
take the business seriously. Seriously enough to chase us, at any rate."
"Won't they give up when it gets dark?" Garion asked.
"These are Nadrak hunters," Silk said, sounding profoundly disgusted. "They'll
follow us for days just for the enjoyment of the hunt."
"There's not much we can do about that now," Belgarath grunted. "Let's see if we
can outrun them." And he thumped his heels to his horse.
It was midafternoon as they rode at a gallop through the sunlit forest. The
undergrowth was scanty, and the tall, straight trunks of fir and pine rose like
great columns toward the blue sky overhead. It was a good day for a ride, but
not a good day for being chased. No day was good for that.
They topped a rise and stopped again to listen.
"They seem to be falling behind," Garion noted hopefully.
"That's just the drunk ones," Silk disagreed sourly. "The ones who are serious
about all this are probably much closer. You don't shout when you're hunting.

See - look back there." He pointed.
Garion looked. There was a pale flicker back among the trees. A man on a white
horse was riding in their direction, leaning far over in his saddle and looking
intently at the ground as he rode.
"If he's any kind of tracker at all, it will take us a week to shake him off,"
Silk said disgustedly.
Somewhere, far off among the trees to their right, a wolf howled. "Let's keep
going," Belgarath told them.
They galloped on then, plunging down the far side of the rise, threading their
way among the trees, The thud of their horses' hoofs was a muffled drumming on
the thick loam of the forest floor, and clots of half decayed debris spattered
out behind them as they fled.
"We're leaving a trail as wide as a house," Silk shouted to Belgarath.
"That can't be helped for now," the old man replied. "We need some more distance
before we start playing games with the tracks."
Another howl drifted mournfully through the forest, from the left this time. It
seemed a bit closer than the first had been.
They rode on for another quarter of an hour and then they suddenly heard a great
babble of confusion to the rear. Men were shouting with alarm, and horses
squealed in panic. Garion could also hear savage growls. At Belgarath's signal,
they slowed their horses to listen. The terrified squeals of horses rang sharply
through the trees, punctuated by their riders' curses and frightened shouts. A
chorus of howls rose from all around. The forest seemed suddenly full of wolves.
The pursuit behind them disintegrated as the horses of the Nadrak reward hunters
bolted with screams of sheer panic in all directions.
With a certain grim satisfaction, Belgarath listened to the fading sounds behind
them. Then, his tongue lolling from his mouth, a huge, dark-furred wolf trotted
out of the woods about thirty yards away, stopped, and dropped to his haunches,
his yellow eyes gazing intently at them.
"Keep a tight grip on your reins," Belgarath instructed quietly, stroking the
neck of his suddenly wild-eyed mount.
The wolf did not say anything, but merely sat and watched. Belgarath returned
that steady gaze quite calmly, then finally nodded once in acknowledgment. The
wolf rose, turned, and started off into the trees. He stopped once, glanced back

over his shoulder at them, and raised his muzzle to lift the deep, bell-toned howl that summoned the other members of his pack to return to their interrupted hunt. Then, with a flicker he was gone, and only the echo of his howl remained.

Chapter Four

THEY RODE EAST for the next several days, gradually descending into a broad, marshy valley where the undergrowth was denser and the air noticeably more humid. A brief summer shower rolled in one afternoon, accompanied by great, ripping crashes of thunder, a deluge of pounding rain, and winds that howled among the trees, bending and tossing them and tearing leaves and twigs from the underbrush to whirl and fly among the dark trunks. The storm soon passed, however, and the sun came out again. After that, the weather continued fair, and they made good time.

Garion felt a peculiar sense of incompleteness as he rode and he sometimes caught himself looking around for missing friends. The long journey in search of the Orb had established a sort of pattern in his mind, a sense of rightness and wrongness, and this trip felt wrong. Barak was not with them, for one thing, and the big, red-bearded Cherek's absence made Garion feel oddly insecure. He also missed the hawkfaced, silent Hettar and the armored form of Mandorallen riding always at the front, with the silver-and-blue pennon snapping from the tip of his lance. He was painfully lonely for Durnik the smith and he even missed Ce'Nedra's spiteful bickering. What had happened at Riva became less and less real to him, and all the elaborate ceremony that had attended his betrothal to the impossible little princess began to fade in his memory, like some half forgotten dream.

It was one evening, however, after the horses had been picketed and supper was over and they had rolled themselves in their blankets to sleep, that Garion, staring into the dying embers of their fire, came at last to face the central vacancy that had entered his life. Aunt Pol was not with them, and he missed her terribly. Since childhood, he had felt that, so long as Aunt Pol was nearby, nothing could really go wrong that she could not fix. Her calm, steady presence had been the one thing to which he had always clung. As clearly as if

she stood
before him, Garion could see her face, her glorious eyes, and the white lock at
her brow; the sudden loneliness for her was as sharp as the edge of a knife.
Everything felt wrong without her. Belgarath was here, certainly, and Garion was
fairly sure that his grandfather could deal with any purely physical dangers,
but there were other, less obvious perils that the old man either did not
consider or chose to ignore. To whom could Garion turn when he was afraid, for
example? Being afraid was not the sort of thing that endangered life or limb,
but it was still an injury of sorts and sometimes a deeper and more serious kind
of injury. Aunt Pol had always been able to banish his fears, but now she was
not here, and Garion was afraid and he could not even admit it. He sighed and
pulled his blankets more closely about him and slowly drifted into a troubled
sleep.
It was about noon some days later when they reached the east fork of the River
Cordu, a broad, dirty brown flow running through a brushy valley in a generally
southerly direction toward the capital at Yar Nadrak. The pale green, waist-high
brush extended back several hundred yards from either bank of the river and was
silt-smeared by the high waters of the spring runoff. The sultry air above the
brush was alive with clouds of gnats and mosquitoes.
A sullen boatman ferried them across to the village standing on the far bank. As
they led their horses off onto the ferry landing, Belgarath spoke quietly. "I
think we'll want to change direction here," he told them. "Let's split up. I'll
go pick up supplies, and the two of you go find the town tavern. See if you can
get some information about passes leading up through the north range into the
lands of the Morindim. The sooner we get up there, the better. The Malloreans
seem to be getting the upper hand here and they could clamp down without much
warning. I don't want to have to start explaining my every move to Mallorean
Grolims - not to mention the fact that there's a great deal of interest in
Silk's whereabouts just now."
Silk rather glumly agreed. "I'd like to get that matter straightened out, but I
don't suppose we really have the time, do we?"
"No, not really. The summer is very, very short up north, and the

crossing to
Mallorea is unpleasant, even in the best weather. When you get to the tavern,
tell everybody that we want to try our luck in the gold fields of the north
range. There's bound to be somebody around who'll want to show off his
familiarity with trails and passes-particularly if you offer to buy him a few
drinks."
"I thought you said you knew the way," Silk protested.
"I know one way - but it's a hundred leagues east of here. Let's see if there's
something a little closer. I'll come by the tavern after I get the supplies."
The old man mounted and went off up the dirt street, leading their packhorse
behind him.
Silk and Garion had little trouble finding someone in the smelly tavern willing
to talk about trails and passes. Quite to the contrary, their first question
sparked a general debate.
"That's the long way around, Besher," one tipsy gold hunter interrupted
another's detailed description of a mountain pass. "You go left at the falls of
the stream. It saves you three days."
"I'm telling this, Varn," Besher retorted testily, banging his fist down on the
scarred table. "You can tell them about the way you go when I'm finished."
"It'll take you all day just like that trail you're so fond of. They want to go
look for gold, not admire scenery." Varn's long, stubbled jaw thrust out
belligerently.
"Which way do we go when we get to the long meadow up on top?" Silk asked
quickly, trying to head off the hostilities.
"You go right," Besher declared, glaring at Varn.
Varn thought about that as if looking for an excuse to disagree. Finally he
reluctantly nodded. "Of course that's the only way you can go," he added, "but
once you get through the juniper grove, you turn left." He said it in the tone
of a man anticipating contradiction.
"Left?" Besher objected loudly. "You're a blockhead, Varn. You go right again."
"Watch who you're calling a blockhead, you jackass!"
Without any further discussion, Besher punched Varn in the mouth, and the two of
them began to pummel each other, reeling about and knocking over benches and
tables.
"They're both wrong, of course," another miner sitting at a nearby table

observed calmly, watching the fight with a clinical detachment. "You keep going
straight after you get through the juniper grove."
Several burly men, wearing loose-fitting red tunics over their polished mail
shirts, had entered the tavern unnoticed during the altercation, and they
stepped forward, grinning, to separate Varn and Besher as the two rolled around
on the dirty floor. Garion felt Silk stiffen beside him.
"Malloreans!" the little man said softly.
"What do we do?" Garion whispered, looking around for a way of escape. But
before Silk could answer, a black-robed Grolim stepped through the door.
"I like to see men who are so eager to fight," the Grolim purred in a peculiar
accent. "The army needs such men."
"Recruiters!" Varn exclaimed, breaking away from the red-garbed Malloreans and
dashing toward a side door. For a second it looked as if he might escape; but as
he reached the doorway, someone outside rapped him sharply across the forehead
with a stout cudgel. He reeled back, suddenly rubber-legged and vacant-eyed. The
Mallorean who had hit him came inside, gave him a critical, appraising glance,
and then judiciously clubbed him in the head again.
"Well?" the Grolim asked, looking around with amusement. "What's it to be? Would
any more of you like to run, or would you all prefer to come along quietly?"
"Where are you taking us?" Besher demanded, trying to pull his arm out of the
grip of one of the grinning recruiters.
"To Yar Nadrak first," the Grolim replied, "and then south to the plains of
Mishrak ac Thull and the encampment of his Imperial Majesty 'Zakath, Emperor of
all Mallorea. You've just joined the army, my friends. All of Angarak rejoices
in your courage and patriotism, and Torak himself is pleased with you." As if to
emphasize his words, the Grolim's hand strayed to the hilt of the sacrificial
knife sheathed at his belt.
The chain clinked spitefully as Garion, fettered at the ankle, plodded along,
one in a long line of disconsolate-looking conscripts, following a trail leading
generally southward through the brush along the riverbank. The conscripts had
all been roughly searched for weapons-all but Garion, who for some reason had
been overlooked. He was painfully aware of the huge sword strapped to his back
as he walked along; but, as always seemed to happen, no one else paid

any
attention to it.
Before they had left the village, while they were all being shackled, Garion and
Silk had held a brief, urgent discussion in the minute finger movements of the
Drasnian secret language.
I could pick this lock with my thumbnail-Silk had asserted with a disdainful
flip of his fingers. As soon as it gets dark tonight, I'll unhook us and we'll
leave. I don't really think military life would agree with me, and it's wildly
inappropriate for you to be joining an Angarak army just now - all things
considered.
-Where's Grandfather? Garion had asked.
-Oh, I imagine he's about.
Garion, however, was worried, and a whole platoon of "what-ifs" immediately
jumped into his mind. To avoid thinking about them, he covertly studied the
Malloreans who guarded them. The Grolim and the bulk of his detachment had moved
on, once the captives had been shackled, seeking other villages and other
recruits, leaving only five of their number behind to escort this group south.
Malloreans were somewhat different from other Angaraks. Their eyes had that
characteristic angularity, but their bodies seemed not to have the singleness of
purpose which so dominated the western tribes. They were burly, but they did not
have the broad-shouldered athleticism of the Murgos. They were tall, but did not
have the lean, whippetlike frames of the Nadraks. They were obviously strong,
but they did not have the thick-waisted brute power of Thulls. There was about
them, moreover, a kind of disdainful superiority when they looked at western
Angaraks. They spoke to their prisoners in short, barking commands, and when
they talked to each other, their dialect was so thick that it was nearly
unintelligible. They wore mail shirts covered by coarse-woven red tunics. They
did not ride their horses very well, Garion noted, and their curved swords and
broad, round shields seemed to get in their way as they attempted to manage
their reins.
Garion carefully kept his head down to hide the fact that his features - even
more than Silk's - were distinctly non-Angarak. The guards, however, paid little
attention to the conscripts as individuals, but seemed rather to be

more
interested in them as numbers. They rode continually up and down the sweating
column, counting bodies and referring to a document they carried with concerned,
even worried expressions. Garion surmised that unpleasant things would happen if
the numbers did not match when they reached Yar Nadrak.
A faint, pale flicker in the underbrush some distance uphill from the trail
caught Garion's eye, and he turned his head sharply in that direction. A large,
silver-gray wolf was ghosting along just at the edge of the trees, his pace
exactly matching theirs. Garion quickly lowered his head again, pretended to
stumble, and fell heavily against Silk. "Grandfather's out there," he whispered.
"Did you only just notice him?" Silk sounded surprised. "I've been watching him
for the last hour or more."
When the trail turned away from the river and entered the trees, Garion felt the
tension building up in him. He could not be sure what Belgarath was going to do,
but he knew that the concealment offered by the forest provided the opportunity
for which his grandfather had doubtless been waiting. He tried to hide his
growing nervousness as he walked along behind Silk, but the slightest sound in
the woods around them made him start uncontrollably.
The trail dipped down into a fair-sized clearing, surrounded on all sides by
tall ferns, and the Mallorean guards halted the column to allow their prisoners
to rest. Garion sank gratefully to the springy turf beside Silk. The effort of
walking with one leg shackled to the long chain which bound the conscripts
together was considerable, and he found that he was sweating profusely. "What's
he waiting for?" he whispered to Silk.
The rat-faced little man shrugged. "It's still a few hours until dark," he
replied softly. "Maybe he wants to wait for that."
Then, some distance up the trail, they heard the sound of singing. The song was
ribald and badly out of tune, but the singer was quite obviously enjoying
himself, and the slurring of the words as he drew closer indicated that he was
more than a little drunk.
The Malloreans grinned at each other. "Another patriot, perhaps," one of them
smirked, "coming to enlist. Spread out, and we'll gather him up as soon as he
comes into the clearing."

The singing Nadrak rode into view on a large roan horse. He wore the usual dark, stained leather clothing, and a fur cap perched precariously on one side of his head. He had a scraggly black beard, and he carried a wineskin in one hand. He seemed to be swaying in his saddle as he rode, but something about his eyes showed him not to be quite so drunk as he appeared. Garion stared at him openly as he rode into the clearing with a string of mules behind him. It was Yarblek, the Nadrak merchant they had encountered on the South Caravan Route in Cthol Murgos.

"Ho, there!" Yarblek greeted the Malloreans in a loud voice. "I see you've had good hunting. That's a healthy-looking bunch of recruits you've got there."

"The hunting just got easier." One of the Malloreans grinned at him, pulling his horse across the trail to block Yarblek's way.

"You mean me?" Yarblek laughed uproariously. "Don't be a fool. I'm too busy to play soldier."

"That's a shame," the Mallorean replied.

"I'm Yarblek, a merchant of Yar Turak and a friend of King Drosta himself. I'm acting on a commission that he personally put into my hands. If you interfere with me in any way, Drosta will have you flayed and roasted alive as soon as you get to Yar Nadrak."

The Mallorean looked a trifle less sure of himself "We answer only to 'Zakath," he asserted a bit defensively. "King Drosta has no authority over us."

"You're in Gar og Nadrak, friend," Yarblek pointed out to him, "and Drosta does whatever he likes here. He might have to apologize to 'Zakath after it's all over, but by then the five of you will probably be peeled and cooked to a turn."

"I suppose you can prove that you're on official business?" the Mallorean guard hedged.

"Of course I can," Yarblek replied. He scratched at his head, his face taking on an expression of foolish perplexity. "Where did I put that parchment?" he muttered to himself. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, yes," he said, "now I remember. It's in the pack on that last mule. Here, have a drink, and I'll go get it." He tossed the wineskin to the Mallorean, turned his horse and rode back to the end of his pack string. He dismounted and began rummaging through a

canvas pack.
"We'd better have a look at his documents before we decide," one of the others
advised. "King Drosta's not the sort you want to cross."
"We might as well have a drink while we're waiting," another suggested, eyeing
the wineskin.
"That's one thing we can agree on," the first replied, working loose the stopper
of the leather bag. He raised the skin with both hands and lifted his chin to
drink.
There was a solid-sounding thud, and the feathered shaft of an arrow was quite
suddenly protruding from his throat, just at the top of his red tunic. The wine
gushed from the skin to pour down over his astonished face. His companions gaped
at him, then reached for their weapons with cries of alarm, but it was too late.
Most of them tumbled from their saddles in the sudden storm of arrows that
struck them from the concealment of the ferns. One, however, wheeled his mount
to flee, clutching at the shaft buried deep in his side. The horse took no more
than two leaps before three arrows sank into the Mallorean's back. He stiffened,
then toppled over limply, his foot hanging up in his stirrup as he fell, and his
frightened horse bolted, dragging him, bouncing and flopping, back down the
trail.
"I can't seem to locate that document," Yarblek declared, walking back with a
wicked grin on his face. He turned the Mallorean he had been speaking to over
with his foot. "You didn't really want to see it anyway, did you?" he asked the
dead man.
The Mallorean with the arrow in his throat stared blankly up at the sky, his
mouth agape and a trickle of blood running out of his nose. "I didn't think so."
Yarblek laughed coarsely. He drew back his foot and kicked the dead man back
over onto his face. Then he turned to smirk at Silk as his archers came out of
the dark green ferns. "You certainly get around, Silk," he said. "I thought Taur
Urgas had finished you back there in stinking Cthol Murgos."
"He miscalculated," Silk replied casually.
"How did you manage to get yourself conscripted into the Mallorean army?"
Yarblek asked curiously, all traces of his feigned drunkenness gone now.
Silk shrugged. "I got careless."
"I've been following you for the last three days."

"I'm touched by your concern." Silk lifted his fettered ankle and jingled the
chain. "Would it be too much trouble for you to unlock this?"
"You're not going to do anything foolish, are you?"
"Of course not."
"Find the key," Yarblek told one of his archers.
"What are you going to do with us?" Besher asked nervously, eyeing the dead
guards with a certain apprehension.
Yarblek laughed. "What you do once that chain's off is up to you," he answered
indifferently. "I wouldn't recommend staying in the vicinity of so many dead
Malloreans, though. Somebody might come along and start asking questions."
"You're just going to let us go?" Besher demanded incredulously.
"I'm certainly not going to feed you," Yarblek told him.
The archers went down the chain, unlocking the shackles, and each Nadrak bolted
into the bushes as soon as he was free.
"Well, then," Yarblek said, rubbing his palms together, "now that that's been
taken care of, why don't we have a drink?"
"That guard spilled all your wine when he fell off his horse," Silk pointed out.
"That wasn't my wine," Yarblek snorted. "I stole it this morning. You should
know I wouldn't offer my own drink to somebody I planned to kill."
"I wondered about that." Silk grinned at him. "I thought that maybe your manners
had started to slip."
Yarblek's coarse face took on a faintly injured expression.
"Sorry," Silk apologized quickly. "I misjudged you."
"No harm done." Yarblek shrugged. "A lot of people misunderstand me." He sighed.
"It's a burden I have to bear." He opened a pack on his lead mule and hefted out
a small keg of ale. He set it on the ground and broached it with a practiced
skill, bashing in its top with his fist. "Let's get drunk," he suggested.
"We'd really like to," Silk declined politely, "but we've got some rather urgent
business to take care of."
"You have no idea how sorry I am about that," Yarblek replied, fishing several
cups out of the pack.
"I knew you'd understand."
"Oh, I understand, all right, Silk." Yarblek bent and dipped two cups into the
ale keg. "And I'm as sorry as I can be that your business is going to have to
wait. Here." He gave Silk one cup and Garion the other. Then he turned and
dipped out a cup for himself.
Silk looked at him with one raised eyebrow.
Yarblek sprawled on the ground beside the ale keg, comfortably resting his feet

on the body of one of the dead Malloreans. "You see, Silk," he explained, "the whole point of all this is that Drosta wants you very badly. He's offering a reward for you that's just too attractive to pass up. Friendship is one thing, but business is business, after all. Now, why don't you and your young friend make yourselves comfortable? This is a nice, shady clearing with soft moss to lie on. We'll all get drunk, and you can tell me how you managed to escape from Taur Urgas. Then you can tell me what happened to that handsome woman you had with you down in Cthol Murgos. Maybe I can make enough money from this to be able to afford to buy her. I'm not the marrying kind, but by Torak's teeth, that's a fine-looking woman. I'd almost be willing to give up my freedom for her."

"I'm sure she'd be flattered," Silk replied. "What then?"

"What when?"

"After we get drunk. What do we do then?"

"We'll probably get sick - that's what usually happens. After we get well, we'll run on down to Yar Nadrak. I'll collect the reward for you, and you'll be able to find out why King Drosta lek Thun wants to get his hands on you so badly." He looked at Silk with an amused expression. "You might as well sit down and have a drink, my friend. You aren't going anywhere just now."

Chapter Five

YAR NADRAK WAS a walled city, lying at the juncture of the east and west forks of the River Cordu. The forests had been cleared for a league or so in every direction from the capital by the simple expedient of setting fire to it, and the approach to the city passed through a wilderness of burned black snags and rank-growing bramble thickets. The city gates were stout and smeared with tar.

Surmounting them was a stone replica of the mask of Torak. That beautiful, inhumanly cruel face gazed down at all who entered, and Garion suppressed a shudder as he rode under it.

The houses in the Nadrak capital were all very tall and had steeply sloping roofs. The windows of the second storeys all had shutters, and most of the shutters were closed. Any exposed wood on the structures had been smeared with tar to preserve it, and the splotches of the black substance made all

the
buildings look somehow diseased.
There was a sullen, frightened air in the narrow, crooked streets of Yar Nadrak,
and the inhabitants kept their eyes lowered as they hurried about their
business. There appeared to be less leather involved in the clothing of the
burghers of the capital than had been the case in the back country, but even
here most garments were black, and only occasionally was there a splash of blue
or yellow. The sole exception to this rule was the red tunic worn by the
Mallorean soldiers. They seemed to be everywhere, roaming at will up and down
the cobblestoned streets, accosting citizens rudely and talking loudly to each
other in their heavily accented speech.
While the soldiers seemed for the most part to be merely swaggering bullies,
young men who concealed their nervousness at being in a strange country with an
outward show of bluster and braggadocio, the Mallorean Grolims were quite
another matter. Unlike the western Grolims Garion had seen in Cthol Murgos, they
rarely wore the polished steel mask, but rather assumed a set, grim expression,
thin-lipped and narrow-eyed; as they went about the streets in their hooded
black robes, everyone, Mallorean and Nadrak alive, gave way to them.
Garion and Silk, closely guarded and mounted on a pair of mules, followed the
rangy Yarblek into the city. Yarblek and Silk had kept up their banter during
the entire ride downriver, exchanging casual insults and reliving past
indiscretions. Although he seemed friendly enough, Yarblek nonetheless remained
watchful, and his men had guarded Silk and Garion every step of the way. Garion
had covertly watched the forest almost continually during the three-day ride,
but he had seen no sign of Belgarath and he entered the city in a state of jumpy
apprehension. Silk, however, seemed relaxed and confident as always, and his
behavior and attitude grated at Garion's nerves, for some reason.
After they had clattered along a crooked street for some distance, Yarblek
turned down a narrow, dirty alleyway leading toward the river. "I thought the
palace was that way," Silk said to him, pointing toward the center of town.
"It is," Yarblek replied, "but we aren't going to the palace. Drosta's got
company there, and he prefers to do business in private." The

alleyway soon
opened out into a seedy-looking street where the tall, narrow-looking houses had
fallen somewhat into disrepair. The lanky Nadrak clamped his mouth shut as two
Mallorean Grolims rounded a corner just ahead and came in their direction.
Yarblek's expression was openly hostile as the two approached.
One of them stopped to return his gaze. "You seem to have a problem, friend,"
the Grolim suggested.
"That's my business, isn't it?" Yarblek retorted.
"Indeed it is," the Grolim replied coolly. "Don't let it get out of hand,
though. Open disrespect for the priesthood is the sort of thing that could get
you into serious trouble." The black-robed man's look was threatening.
On a sudden impulse, Garion carefully pushed out his mind toward the Grolim,
probing very gently, but the thoughts he encountered showed no particular
awareness and certainly none of the aura that always seemed to emanate from the
mind of a sorcerer.
"Don't do that,"the voice in his mind cautioned him. "It's like ringing a bell
or wearing a sign around your neck."
Garion quickly pulled back his thoughts. "I thought all Grolims were sorcerers,"
he replied silently. "These two are just ordinary men." But the other awareness
was gone.
The two Grolims passed, and Yarblek spat contemptuously into the street. "Pigs,"
he muttered. "I'm starting to dislike Malloreans almost as much as Murgos."
"They seem to be taking over your country, Yarblek," Silk observed.
Yarblek grunted. "Let one Mallorean in, and before long they're underfoot
everywhere."
"Why did you let them in to begin with?" Silk asked mildly.
"Silk," Yarblek said bluntly, "I know you're a spy, and I'm not going to discuss
politics with you, so quit fishing for information."
"Just passing the time of day," Silk replied innocently.
"Why don't you mind your own business?"
"But this is my business, old friend."
Yarblek stared hard at him, then suddenly laughed.
"Where are we going?" Silk asked him, looking around at the shabby street. "This
isn't the best part of town, as I recall."
"You'll find out," Yarblek told him.
They rode on down toward the river where the smell of floating garbage and open
sewers was quite nearly overpowering. Garion saw rats feeding in the gutters,
and the men in the street wore shabby clothing and had the furtive

look of those
who have reason to avoid the police.
Yarblek turned his horse abruptly and led them into another narrow, filthy
alleyway. "We walk from here," he said, dismounting. "I want to go in the back
way." Leaving their mounts with one of his men, they went on down the alley,
stepping carefully over piles of rotting garbage.
"Down there," Yarblek told them, pointing at a short, rickety flight of wooden
stairs leading down to a narrow doorway. "Once we get inside, keep your heads
down. We don't want too many people noticing that you're not Nadraks."
They went down the creaking steps and slipped through the doorway into a dim,
smoky tavern, reeking of sweat, spilled beer, and stale vomit. The fire pit in
the center of the room was choked with ashes, and several large logs smoldered
there, giving off a great deal of smoke and very little light. Two narrow, dirty
windows at the front appeared only slightly less dark than the walls around
them, and a single oil lamp hung on a chain nailed to one of the rafters.
"Sit here," Yarblek instructed them, nudging at a bench standing against the
back wall. "I'll be right back." He went off toward the front part of the
tavern. Garion looked around quickly, but saw immediately that a pair of
Yarblek's men lounged unobtrusively beside the door.
"What are we going to do?" he whispered to Silk.
"We don't have much choice but to wait and see what happens," Silk replied.
"You don't seem very worried."
"I'm not, really."
"But we've been arrested, haven't we?"
Silk shook his head. "When you arrest somebody, you put shackles on him. King
Drosta wants to talk to me, that's all."
"But that reward notice said-"
"I wouldn't pay too much attention to that, Garion. The reward notice was for
the benefit of the Malloreans. Whatever Drosta's up to, he doesn't want them
finding out about it."
Yarblek threaded his way back through the crowd in the tavern and thumped
himself down on the grimy bench beside them. "Drosta should be here, shortly,"
he said. "You want something to drink while we're waiting?"
Silk looked around with a faint expression of distaste. "I don't think so," he
replied. "The ale barrels in places like this usually have a few drowned rats

floating in them - not to mention the dead flies and roaches."
"Suit yourself," Yarblek said.
"Isn't this a peculiar sort of place to find a king?" Garion asked, looking around at the shabby interior of the tavern.
"You have to know King Drosta to understand," Silk told him. "He has some rather notorious appetites, and these riverfront dives suit him."
Yarblek laughed in agreement. "Our monarch's a lusty sort of fellow," he noted, "but don't ever make the mistake of thinking he's stupid - a little crude, perhaps, but not stupid. He can come to a place like this, and no Mallorean will take the trouble to follow him. He's found that it's a good way to conduct business that he prefers not to have reported back to 'Zakath."
There was a stir near the front of the tavern, and two heavy-shouldered Nadraks in black leather tunics and pointed helmets pushed their way through the door.
"Make way!" one of them barked. "And everybody rise!"
"Those who are able to rise," the other added dryly.
A wave of jeers and catcalls ran through the crowd as a thin man in a yellow satin doublet and a fur-trimmed green velvet cloak entered. His eyes were bulging and his face was deeply scarred with old pockmarks. His movements were quick and jerky, and his expression was a curious mixture of sardonic amusement and a kind of desperate, unsatisfied hunger.
"All hail his Majesty, Drosta lek Thun, King of the Nadraks!" one drunken man proclaimed in a loud voice, and the others in the tavern laughed coarsely, jeering and whistling and stamping their feet.
"My faithful subjects," the pockmarked man replied with a gross smirk. "Drunks, thieves, and procurers. I bask in the warm glow of your love for me." His contempt seemed directed almost as much at himself as at the ragged, unwashed crowd.
They whistled in unison and stamped their feet derisively. "How many tonight, Drosta?" someone shouted.
"As many as I can." The king leered. "It's my duty to spread royal blessings wherever I go."
"Is that what you call it?" someone else demanded raucously.
"It's as good a name as any," Drosta replied with a shrug.
"The royal bedchamber awaits," the tavern owner declaimed with a mocking bow.
"Along with the royal bedbugs, I'm sure," Drosta added. "Ale for every man not too drunk to swill it down. Let my loyal subjects drink to my vitality."

The crowd cheered as the king pushed toward a stairway leading to the upper storeys of the building. "My duty awaits me," he proclaimed, pointing with a grand gesture up the stairs. "Let all take note of how eagerly I go to embrace that stern responsibility." And he mounted the stairs to the derisive applause of the assembled riffraff.

"What now?" Silk asked.

"We'll wait a bit," Yarblek replied. "It would be a little obvious if we went up immediately."

Garion shifted uncomfortably on the bench. A very faint, nervous kind of tingle had begun just behind his ears, a sort of prickling sensation that seemed to crawl over his skin. He had an unpleasant thought or two about the possibility of lice or fleas migrating from the scum in the tavern in search of fresh blood, but dismissed that idea. The tingling did not seem to be external.

At a table not far away, a shabbily dressed man, apparently far gone in drink, had been snoring with his head buried in his arms. In the middle of a snore he raised his face briefly and winked. It was Belgarath. He let his face drop back onto his arms as a wave of relief swept through Garion.

The drunken crowd in the tavern grew steadily more rowdy. A short, ugly fight broke out near the fire pit, and the revelers at first cheered, then joined in, kicking at the two who rolled about on the floor.

"Let's go up," Yarblek said shortly, rising to his feet. He pushed through the crowd and started upstairs.

"Grandfather's here," Garion whispered to Silk as they followed.

"I saw him," Silk replied shortly.

The stairs led to a dim upper hallway with dirty, threadbare carpeting on the floor. At the far end, King Drosta's two bored-looking guards leaned against the wall on either side of a solid door.

"My name's Yarblek," Silk's friend told them as he reached the door. "Drosta's expecting me."

The guards glanced at each other, then one tapped on the door. "That man you wanted to see is here, your Majesty."

"Send him in." Drosta's voice was muffled.

"He isn't alone," the guard advised.

"That's all right."

"Go ahead," the guard said to Yarblek, unlatching the door and pushing it open.

The king of the Nadraks was sprawled on a rumpled bed with his arms about the thin shoulders of a pair of dirty, scantily dressed young girls with

tangled
hair and hopeless-looking eyes. "Yarblek," the depraved monarch greeted the
merchant, "what kept you?"
"I didn't want to attract attention by following you immediately, Drosta."
"I almost got sidetracked." Drosta leered at the two girls. "Aren't they
luscious?"
"If you like the type." Yarblek shrugged. "I prefer a little more maturity."
"That's good, too," Drosta admitted, "but I love them all. I fall in love twenty
times a day. Run along, my pretties," he told the girls. "I've got some business
to take care of just now. I'll send for you later."
The two girls immediately left, closing the door quietly behind them. Drosta sat
up on the bed, scratching absently at one armpit. His stained and rumpled yellow
doublet was unbuttoned, and his bony chest was covered with coarse black hair.
He was thin, almost emaciated, and his scrawny arms looked like two sticks. His
hair was lank and greasy, and his beard was so thin that it was little more than
a few scraggly-looking black hairs sprouting from his chin. The pockmarks on his
face were deep, angry red scars, and his neck and hands were covered with an
unwholesome, scabby-looking rash. There was a distinctly unpleasant odor about
him. "Are you sure this is the man I want?" he asked Yarblek. Garion looked at
the Nadrak King sharply. The coarseness had gone out of his voice, and his tone
was incisive, direct, the tone of a man who was all business. Garion made a few
quick mental adjustments. Drosta lek Thun was not at all what he seemed.
"I've known him for years, Drosta," Yarblek replied. "This is Prince Kheldar of
Drasnia. He's also known as Silk and sometimes Ambar of Kotu or Radek of Boktor.
He's a thief, a swindler, and a spy. Aside from that, he's not too bad."
"We are delighted to meet so famous a man," King Drosta declared. "Welcome,
Prince Kheldar."
"Your Majesty," Silk replied, bowing.
"I'd have invited you to the palace," Drosta continued, "but I've got some house
guests with the unfortunate habit of sticking their noses into my business." He
laughed dryly. "Luckily, I found out very soon that Malloreans are a priggish
race. They won't follow me into places like this, so we'll be able to talk

freely." He looked around at the cheap, gaudy furnishings and red draperies with
a sort of amused toleration. "Besides," he added, "I like it here."
Garion stood with his back against the wall near the door, trying to remain as
unobtrusive as possible, but Drosta's nervous eyes picked him out. "Can he be
trusted?" the king demanded of Silk.
"Completely," Silk assured him. "He's my apprentice. I'm teaching him the
business."
"Which business? Stealing or spying?"
Silk shrugged. "It amounts to the same thing. Yarblek says you wanted to see me.
I assume it has something to do with current matters rather than any past
misunderstandings."
"You're quick, Kheldar," Drosta replied approvingly. "I need your help and I'm
willing to pay for it."
Silk grinned. "I'm fond of the word pay."
"So I've heard. Do you know what's going on here in Gar og Nadrak?" Drosta's
eyes were penetrating, and his veneer of gross self indulgence had fallen
completely away.
"I am in the intelligence service, your Majesty," Silk pointed out. Drosta
grunted, stood up, and went to a table where a decanter of wine and several
glasses stood. "Drink?" he asked.
"Why not?"
Drosta filled four glasses, took one for himself and paced nervously about the
room with an angry expression. "I don't need any of this, Kheldar," he burst
out. "My family's spent generations - centuries - weaning Gar og Nadrak away
from the domination of the Grolims. Now they're about to drag us back into
howling barbarism again, and I don't have any choice but to go along with it.
I've got a quarter of a million Malloreans roaming around at will inside my
borders and an army I can't even count poised just to the south. If I raise so
much as one word of protest, 'Zakath will crush my kingdom with one fist."
"Would he really do that?" Silk asked, taking a chair at the table.
"With just about as much emotion as you'd feel about swatting a fly," Drosta
replied. "Have you ever met him?"
Silk shook his head.
"You're lucky," Drosta told him with a shudder. "Taur Urgas is a madman, but,
much as I hate him, he's still human. 'Zakath is made out of ice. I've got to
get in touch with Rhodar."

"Ah," Silk said. "That's what this is all about, then."
"You're a nice enough fellow, Kheldar," Drosta told him dryly, "but I wouldn't go to all this trouble just for the pleasure of your company. You've got to carry my message to Rhodar. I've tried to get word to him, but I can't catch up with him. He won't stay in one place long enough. How can a fat man move so cursed fast?"
"He's deceptive," Silk said shortly. "Exactly what have you got in mind?"
"An alliance," Drosta replied bluntly. "My back's against the wall. Either I ally myself with Rhodar, or I get swallowed up."
Silk carefully set down his glass. "That's a very large suggestion, your Majesty. In the present situation, it's going to take a great deal of fast talking to arrange."
"That's why I sent for you, Kheldar. We're staring the end of the world right in the face. You've got to get to Rhodar and persuade him to pull his army back from the Thull border. Make him stop this insanity before it goes too far."
"Making my uncle do things is a little beyond my abilities, King Drosta," Silk replied carefully. "I'm flattered that you think I've got that much influence with him, but things have usually been the other way around between us."
"Don't you understand what's going on, Kheldar?" King Drosta's voice was anguished, and he gesticulated almost wildly as he spoke. "Our only hope of survival lies in not giving the Murgos and the Malloreans any kind of reason to unite. We should work to stir up trouble between them, not to provide them with a common enemy. Taur Urgas and 'Zakath hate each other with a passion so intense that it's almost holy. There are more Murgos than grains of sand and more Malloreans than stars. The Grolims can babble their gibberish about the awakening of Torak until their tongues fall out, but Taur Urgas and 'Zakath have taken the field for just one reason - each of them wants to destroy the other and make himself overking of Angarak. They're headed directly toward a war of mutual extinction. We can be rid of both of them if we just don't interfere."
"I think I see what you mean," Silk murmured.
"'Zakath is ferrying his Malloreans across the Sea of the East to his staging area near Thull Zelik, and Taur Urgas has the southern Murgos massed

near Rak
Goska. Inevitably, they're going to move on each other. We've got to stay out of
the way and let them fight. Make Rhodar pull back before he spoils everything."
"Have you talked with the Thulls about this?" Silk asked.
Drosta snorted with contempt. "What's the point? I've tried to explain this to
King Gethell, but talking to him is like talking to a pile of manure. The Thulls
are so afraid of the Grolims that all you have to do is mention Torak's name and
they go all to pieces. Gethell's a Thull through and through. There's nothing
between his ears but sand."
"There's just one problem with all of this, Drosta," Silk told the agitated
monarch. "I can't carry your message to King Rhodar."
"Can't?" Drosta exploded. "What do you mean, you can't?"
"My uncle and I aren't on the best of terms just now," Silk lied smoothly. "We
had a little misunderstanding a few months ago, and about the first thing he'd
do, if he saw me coming, is have me put in chains - and I'm almost certain
things would go downhill from there."
Drosta groaned. "We're all doomed then," he declared, seeming to slump in on
himself. "You were my last hope."
"Let me think a moment," Silk said. "We might be able to salvage something out
of this yet." He stared at the floor, chewing absently on a fingernail as he
turned the problem over in his mind. "I can't go," he concluded. "That's
obvious. But that doesn't mean that somebody else couldn't."
"Who else would Rhodar trust?" Drosta demanded.
Silk turned to Yarblek, who had been listening to the conversation intently with
a worried frown. "Are you in any kind of trouble in Drasnia at the moment?" he
asked.
"Not that I know of."
"All right," Silk continued. "There's a fur dealer in Boktor. Geldahar's his
name."
"Fat man? Sort of cross-eyed?" Yarblek asked.
"That's him. Why don't you take a shipment of furs and go to Boktor? While
you're trying to sell Geldahar the furs, tell him that the salmon run is late
this year."
"I'm sure he'll be fascinated to hear that."
"It's a code-word," Silk explained with exaggerated patience. "As soon as you
say that, he'll see to it that you get into the palace to see Queen Porenn."
"I've heard that she's a lovely woman," Yarblek said, "but that's a

long trip
just to see a pretty girl. I can probably find a pretty girl just down the
hall."
"You're missing the point, Yarblek," Silk told him. "Porenn is Rhodar's queen,
and he trusts her even more than he used to trust me. She'll know that I sent
you, and she'll pass anything you tell her on to my uncle. Rhodar will be
reading Drosta's message three days after you ride into Boktor. I guarantee it."
"You'd let a woman know about all this?" Drosta objected violently. "Kheldar,
you're insane. The only woman safe with a secret is one who's had her tongue cut
out."
Silk shook his head firmly. "Porenn's in control of Drasnian intelligence right
now, Drosta. She already knows most of the secrets in the world. You're never
going to get an emissary through an Alorn army to Rhodar, so forget that.
There'll be Chereks with him, and they'll kill any Angarak on sight. If you want
to communicate with Rhodar, you're going to have to use Drasnian intelligence as
an intermediary, and that means going through Porenn."
Drosta looked dubious. "Maybe," he concluded after a moment's thought. "I'll try
anything at this point - but why should Yarblek get involved? Why can't you
carry my message to the Drasnian queen?"
Silk looked a trifle pained. "That wouldn't be a good idea at all, I'm afraid,"
he replied. "Porenn was rather central to my difficulties with my uncle. I'm
definitely unwelcome at the palace just now."
One of King Drosta's shaggy eyebrows shot up. "So that's the way it is." He
laughed. "Your reputation's well-earned, I see." He turned to Yarblek. "It's up
to you, then. Make the necessary arrangements for the trip to Boktor."
"You already owe me money, Drosta," Yarblek replied bluntly, "the reward for
bringing in Kheldar, remember?"
Drosta shrugged. "Write it down someplace."
Yarblek shook his head stubbornly. "Not hardly. Let's keep your account current.
You're known as a slow payer, once you've got what you want."
"Yarblek," Drosta said plaintively, "I'm your king."
Yarblek inclined his head somewhat mockingly. "I honor and respect your
Majesty," he said, "but business is business, after all."
"I don't carry that much money with me," Drosta protested.
"That's all right, Drosta. I can wait." Yarblek crossed his arms and sat down in

a large chair with the air of a man planning to stay for quite some time.
The king of the Nadraks stared at him helplessly.
Then the door opened and Belgarath stepped into the room, still dressed in the rags he had worn in the tavern downstairs. There was no furtiveness about his entrance, and he moved like a man on serious business.
"What is this?" Drosta exclaimed incredulously. "Guards!" he bawled, "get this drunken old man out of here."
"They're asleep, Drosta," Belgarath replied calmly. "Don't be too harsh with them, though. It's not their fault." He closed the door.
"Who are you? What do you think you're doing?" Drosta demanded. "Get out of here!"
"I think you'd better take a closer look, Drosta," Silk advised with a dry little chuckle. "Appearances can be deceiving sometimes, and you shouldn't be so quick to try to throw somebody out. He might have something important to say to you."
"Do you know him, Kheldar?" Drosta asked.
"Just about everybody in the world knows him," Silk replied. "Or of him."
Drosta's face creased into a puzzled frown, but Yarblek had started from his chair, his lean face suddenly pale. "Drosta!" he gasped. "Look at him. Think a minute. You know who he is."
Drosta stared at the shabby-looking old man, and his bulging eyes slowly opened even wider. "You!" he blurted.
Yarblek was still gaping at Belgarath. "He's been involved in it from the very beginning. I should have put it together down in Cthol Murgos - him, the woman, all of it."
"What are you doing in Gar og Nadrak?" Drosta asked in an awed voice.
"Just passing through, Drosta," Belgarath replied. "If you're quite finished with your discussion here, I need these two Alorns. We have an appointment, and we're running a little behind schedule."
"I always thought you were a myth."
"I like to encourage that as much as I can," Belgarath told him. "It makes moving around a lot easier."
"Are you mixed up in what the Alorns are doing?"
"They're acting more or less on my suggestions, yes. Polgara's keeping an eye on them."
"Can you get word to them and tell them to disengage?"
"That won't really be necessary, Drosta. I wouldn't worry too much about 'Zakath and Taur Urgas, if I were you. There are more important things afoot

than their
squabbles."
"So that's what Rhodar's doing," Drosta said in sudden comprehension. "Is it
really that late?"
"It's even later than you think," the old sorcerer answered. He crossed to the
table and poured himself some of Drosta's wine. "Torak's already stirring, and
the whole matter's likely to be settled before the snow flies."
"This is going too far, Belgarath," Drosta said. "I might try to maneuver my way
around Taur Urgas and 'Zakath, but I'm not going to cross Torak." He turned
decisively toward the door.
"Don't do anything rash, Drosta," Belgarath advised him calmly, sitting in a
chair and taking a sip of his wine. "Grolims can be most unreasonable, and the
fact that I'm here in Yar Nadrak could only be viewed as the result of some
collusion on your part. They'd have you bent backward over an altar and your
heart sizzling in the coals before you ever got the chance to explain - king or
no king."
Drosta froze in his tracks, his pockmarked face going very pale. For a moment,
he seemed to be struggling with himself. Then his shoulders slumped and his
resolution seemed to wilt. "You've got me by the throat, haven't you, Belgarath?" he said with a short laugh. "You've managed to make me outsmart
myself, and now you're going to use that to force me to betray the God of
Angarak."
"Are you really all that fond of him?"
"Nobody's fond of Torak. I'm afraid of him, and that's a better reason to stay
on the good side of him than any sentimental attachment. If he wakes up-" The
king of the Nadraks shuddered.
"Have you ever given much thought to the kind of world we'd have if he didn't
exist?" Belgarath suggested.
"That's too much to even wish for. He's a God. No one could hope to 'defeat him.
He's too powerful for that."
"There are things more powerful than Gods, Drosta - two that I can think of
offhand, and those two are rushing toward a final meeting. It probably wouldn't
be a good idea to put yourself between them at this point."
But something else had occurred to Drosta. He turned slowly with a look of
stunned incredulity and stared directly at Garion. He shook his head and wiped
at his eyes, like a man trying to clear away a fog. Garion became

painfully
aware of the great sword strapped across his back. Drosta's bulging eyes widened
even more as the realization of what he was seeing erased the Orb's suggestion
that his brain not record what stood in plain sight before him. His expression
became awed, and desperate hope dawned on his ugly face. "Your Majesty," he
stammered, bowing with profound respect. "
"Your Majesty," Garion replied, politely inclining his head.
"It looks as if I'm forced to wish you good luck," Drosta said in a quiet voice.
"Despite what Belgarath says, I think you're going to need it."
"Thank you, King Drosta," Garion said.

Chapter Six

"DO YOU THINK we can trust Drosta?" Garion asked Silk as they followed Belgarath
along the garbage-littered alley behind the tavern.
"Probably about as far as we could throw him," Silk replied. "He was honest
about one thing though. His back's to the wall. That might make him bargain with
Rhodar in good faith - initially at least."
When they reached the street at the end of the alley, Belgarath glanced up once
at the evening sky. "We'd better hurry," he said. "I want to get out of the city
before they close the gates. I left our horses in a thicket a mile or so outside
the walls."
"You went back for them?" Silk sounded a little surprised.
"Of course I did. I don't plan to walk all the way to Morindland." He led them
up the street away from the river.
They reached the city gates in fading light just as the guards were preparing to
close them for the night. One of the Nadrak soldiers raised his hand as if to
bar their way, then apparently changed his mind and motioned them through
irritably, muttering curses under his breath. The huge, tar-smeared gate boomed
shut behind them, and there was the clinking rattle of heavy chains from inside
as the bolts were thrown and locked. Garion glanced up once at the carved face
of Torak which brooded down at them from above the gate, then deliberately
turned his back.
"Are we likely to be followed?" Silk asked Belgarath as they walked along the
dirt highway leading away from the city.
"I wouldn't be very surprised," Belgarath replied. "Drosta knows - or suspects -
a great deal about what we're doing. Mallorean Grolims are very

subtle, and they
can pick the thoughts out of his head without his knowing it. That's probably
why they don't bother to follow him when he goes off on his little excursions."
"Shouldn't you take some steps?" Silk suggested as they moved through the
gathering twilight.
"We're getting a bit too close to Mallorea to be making unnecessary noise,"
Belgarath told him. "Zedar can hear me moving around from a long way off, and
Torak's only dozing now. I'd rather not take the chance of waking him up with
any more loud clatter."
They walked along the highway toward the shadowy line of rank undergrowth at the
edge of the open fields surrounding the city. The sound of frogs from the marshy
ground near the river was very loud in the twilight.
"Torak isn't really asleep any more then?" Garion asked finally. He had harbored
somewhere at the back of his mind the vague hope that they might be able to
creep up on the sleeping God and catch him unaware.
"No, not really,'' his grandfather replied. "The sound of your hand touching the
Orb shook the whole world. Not even Torak could sleep through that. He isn't
really awake yet, but he's not entirely asleep, either."
"Did it really make all that much noise?" Silk asked curiously.
"They probably heard it on the other side of the universe. I left the horses
over there." The old man pointed toward a shadowy willow grove several hundred
yards to the left of the road.
From behind them there was the rattle of a heavy chain, startling the frogs into
momentary silence.
"They're opening the gate," Silk said. "They wouldn't do that unless somebody
gave them an official reason to."
"Let's hurry," Belgarath said.
The horses stirred and nickered as the three of them pushed their way through
the rustling willows in the rapidly descending darkness. They led the horses out
of the grove, mounted, and rode back toward the highway.
"They know we're out here somewhere," Belgarath said. "There's not much point
being coy about it."
"Just a second," Silk said. He dismounted and rummaged through one of the canvas
bags tied to their packhorse. He pulled something out of the bag, then climbed
back on his horse. "Let's go then."
They pushed into a gallop, thudding along the dirt road under a starry, moonless

sky toward the denser shadows where the forest rose at the edge of the scrubby, burned-off expanse surrounding the Nadrak capital.
"Can you see them?" Belgarath called to Silk, who was bringing up the rear and looking back over his shoulder.
"I think so," Silk shouted back. "They're about a mile behind."
"That's too close."
"I'll take care of it as soon as we get into the woods," Silk replied confidently.
The dark forest loomed closer and closer as they galloped along the hard-packed road. Garion could smell the trees now.
They plunged into the black shadows under the trees and felt that slight extra warmth that always lies in a forest. Silk reined in sharply. "Keep going," he told them, swinging out of his saddle. "I'll catch up."
Belgarath and Garion rode on, slowing a bit in order to pick the road out of the darkness. After several minutes, Silk caught up with them. "Listen," the little man said, pulling his horse to a stop. His teeth flashed in the shadows as he grinned.
"They're coming," Garion warned urgently as he heard a rumble of hoofs. "Hadn't we better-"
"Listen," Silk whispered sharply.
From behind there were several startled exclamations and the heavy sound of men falling. A horse squealed and ran off somewhere.
Silk laughed wickedly. "I think we can press on," he said gaily. "They'll be delayed for a bit while they round up their horses."
"What did you do?" Garion asked him.
Silk shrugged. "I stretched a rope across the road, about chest-high on a mounted man. It's an old trick, but sometimes old tricks are the best. They'll have to be cautious now, so we should be able to lose them by morning."
"Let's go, then," Belgarath said.
"Where are we headed?" Silk asked as they moved into a canter.
"We'll make directly for the north range," the old man replied. "Too many people know we're here, so let's get to the land of the Morindim as soon as we can."
"If they're really after us, they'll follow us all the way, won't they?" Garion asked, looking back nervously.
"I don't think so," Belgarath told him. "They'll be a long way behind by the time we get there. I don't think they'll risk going into Morind territory just to follow a cold trail."
"Is it that dangerous, Grandfather?"
"The Morindim do nasty things to strangers if they catch them."

Garion thought about that. "Won't we be strangers too?" he asked. "To the Morindim, I mean?"
"I'll take care of that when we get there."
They galloped on through the remainder of the velvety night, leaving their now-cautious pursuers far behind. The blackness beneath the trees was dotted with the pale, winking glow of fireflies, and crickets chirped interminably. As the first light of morning began to filter through the forest, they reached the edge of another burned-off area, and Belgarath reined in to peer cautiously out at the rank scrub, dotted here and there with charred snags. "We'd better have something to eat," he suggested. "The horses need some rest, and we can catch a bit of sleep before we go on." He looked around in the gradually increasing light. "Let's get away from the road, though." He turned his horse and led them off along the edge of the burn. After several hundred yards, they reached a small clearing that jutted out into the coarse brush. A spring trickled water into a mossy pool at the very edge of the trees, and the grass in the clearing was intensely green. The outer edge of the opening was hemmed in by brambles and a tangle of charred limbs. "This looks like a good place," Belgarath decided.
"Not really," Silk disagreed. He was staring at a crudely squared-off block of stone standing in the center of the clearing. There were ugly black stains running down the sides of the stone.
"For our purposes it is," the old man replied. "The altars of Torak are generally avoided, and we don't particularly want company." They dismounted at the edge of the trees, and Belgarath began rummaging through one of the packs for bread and dried meat. Garion was in a curiously abstracted mood. He was tired, and his weariness made him a bit light-headed. Quite deliberately, he walked across the springy turf to the blood-stained altar; he stared at it, his eyes meticulously recording details without considering their implication. The blackened stone sat solidly in the center of the clearing, casting no shadow in the pale dawn light. It was an old altar, and had not been used recently. The stains that had sunk into the pores of the rock were black with age, and the bones littering the ground around it were half sunk in the earth and

were
covered with a greenish patina of moss. A scurrying spider darted into the
vacant eye socket of a mossy skull, seeking refuge in the dark, vaulted
emptiness. Many of the bones were broken and showed the marks of the small,
sharp teeth of forest scavengers who would feed on anything that was dead. A
cheap, tarnished silver brooch lay with its chain tangled about a lumpy
vertebra, and not far away a brass buckle, green with verdigris, still clung to
a bit of moldering leather.
"Come away from that thing, Garion," Silk told him with a note of revulsion in
his voice.
"It sort of helps to look at it," Garion replied quite calmly, still staring at
the altar and the bones. "It gives me something to think about beside being
afraid." He squared his shoulders, and his great sword shifted on his back. "I
don't really think the world needs this sort of thing. Maybe it's time somebody
did something about it."
When he turned around, Belgarath was looking at him, his wise old eyes narrowed.
"It's a start," the sorcerer observed. "Let's eat and get some sleep."
They took a quick breakfast, picketed their horses, and rolled themselves in
their blankets under some bushes at the edge of the clearing. Not even the
presence of the Grolim altar nor the peculiar resolve it had stirred in him was
enough to keep Garion from falling asleep immediately.
It was almost noon when he awoke, pulled from sleep by a faint whispering sound
in his mind. He sat up quickly, looking around to find the source of that
disturbance, but neither the forest nor the brushchoked burn seemed to hold any
threat. Belgarath stood not far away, looking up at the summer sky where a
large, blue-banded hawk was circling.
"What are you doing here?" The old sorcerer did not speak aloud but rather cast
the question at the sky with his mind. The hawk spiraled down to the clearing,
flared his wings to avoid the altar, and landed on the turf. He looked directly
at Belgarath with fierce yellow eyes, then shimmered and seemed to blur. When
the shimmering was gone, the misshapen sorcerer Beldin stood in his place. He
was still as ragged, dirty, and irritable as he had been the last time Garion

had seen him.
"Is this all the farther you've managed to come?" he demanded harshly of
Belgarath. "What have you been doing - stopping at every tavern along the way?"
"We ran into a small delay," Belgarath replied calmly.
Beldin grunted with a sour look. "If you keep dawdling along like this, it will
take you the rest of the year to get to Cthol Mishrak."
"We'll get there, Beldin. You worry too much."
"Somebody has to. You're being followed, you know."
"How far back are they?"
"Five leagues or so."
Belgarath shrugged. "That's far enough. They'll give up when we get to
Morindland."
"What if they don't?"
"Have you been spending time with Polgara lately?" Belgarath asked dryly. "I
thought I'd gotten away from all the 'what-ifs."'
Beldin shrugged, a gesture made grotesque by the hump on his back. "I saw her
last week," he reported. "She has some interesting plans for you, you know."
"She came to the Vale?" Belgarath sounded surprised.
"Passed through. She was with the red-haired girl's army."
Garion threw off his blanket. "With whose army?" he demanded.
"What's going on down there?" Belgarath asked sharply.
Beldin scratched at his tangled hair. "I never really got the straight of it,"
he admitted. "All I know is that the Alorns are following that little redheaded
Tolnedran. She calls herself the Rivan Queen - whatever that means."
"Ce'Nedra?" Garion was incredulous, though, for some reason, he knew that he
shouldn't be.
"I guess she went through Arendia like a pestilence," Beldin continued. "After
she passed, there wasn't an able-bodied man left in the kingdom. Then she went
on down into Tolnedra and goaded her father into convulsions - I didn't know
that he was subject to fits."
"It crops up in the Borune line once in a while," Belgarath said. "It's nothing
all that serious, but they try to keep it quiet."
"Anyway," the hunchback went on, "while Ran Borune was still frothing at the
mouth, his daughter stole his legions. She's persuaded about half the world to
take up arms and follow her." He gave Garion a quizzical look. "You're supposed
to marry her, aren't you?"
Garion nodded, not trusting himself to speak.
Beldin grinned suddenly. "You might want to give some thought to running away."
"Ce'Nedra?" Garion blurted again.
"His wits seem a bit scrambled," Beldin observed.

"He's been under a strain, and his nerves aren't too good just now," Belgarath
replied. "Are you going back to the Vale?"
Beldin nodded. "The twins and I are going to join Polgara when the campaign
starts. She might need some help if the Grolims come at her in force."
"Campaign?" Belgarath exclaimed. "What campaign? I told them just to march up
and down and make a lot of noise. I specifically told them not to invade."
"They ignored you, it seems. Alorns aren't noted for restraint in such matters.
Apparently they got together and decided to take steps. The fat one seems fairly
intelligent. He wants to get a Cherek fleet into the Sea of the East to commit a
few constructive atrocities on Mallorean shipping. The rest of it seems to be
pretty much diversionary."
Belgarath started to swear. "You can't let them out of your sight for a single
instant," he raged. "How could Polgara lend herself to this idiocy?"
"The plan does have a certain merit, Belgarath. The more Malloreans they drown
now, the fewer we have to fight later."
"We never planned to fight them, Beldin. The Angaraks won't unite unless Torak
comes back to weld them together again - or unless they're faced with a common
enemy. We just talked with Drosta lek Thun, the Nadrak King, and he's so sure
that the Murgos and the Malloreans are about to go to war with each other that
he wants to ally himself with the west just to get clear of it. When you get
back, see if you can talk some sense into Rhodar and Anheg. I've got enough
problems already."
"Your problems are only starting, Belgarath. The twins had a visitation a couple
of days ago."
"A what?"
Beldin shrugged. "What else would you call it? They were working on something -
quite unrelated to all this - and the pair of them suddenly went into a trance
and began to babble at me. At first they were just repeating that gibberish from
the Mrin Codex - you know the place - where the Mrin Prophet's mind broke down
and he degenerated into animal noises for a while. Anyway, they went back over
that part - only this time it came out coherently."
"What did they say?" Belgarath demanded, his eyes burning.
"Are you sure you want to know?"
"Of course I want to know."
"All right. It went like this: 'Behold, the heart of the stone shall

relent, and
the beauty that was destroyed shall be restored, and the eye that is not shall
be made whole again."'
Belgarath stared at him. "That's it?" he asked.
"That's it," Beldin told him.
"But what does it mean?" Garion asked.
"Just what it says, Belgarion," Beldin replied. "For some reason the Orb is
going to restore Torak."
Garion began to tremble as the full impact of Beldin's words struck him.
"Torak's going to win, then," he said numbly.
"It didn't say anything about winning or losing, Belgarion," Beldin corrected
him. "All it said was that the Orb is going to undo what it did to Torak when he
used it to crack the world. It doesn't say anything about why."
"That's always been the trouble with the Prophecy," Belgarath observed. "It can
mean any one of a dozen different things."
"Or all of them," Beldin added. "That's what makes it so difficult to understand
sometimes. We tend to concentrate on just one thing, but Prophecy includes
everything at the same time. I'll work on it and see if I can wring some sense
out of it. If I come up with anything, I'll let you know. I'd better be getting
back." He leaned slightly forward and curled his arms out in a vaguely winglike
gesture. "Watch out for the Morindim," he told Belgarath. "You're a fair
sorcerer, but magic's altogether different, and sometimes it gets away from
you."
"I think I can handle it if I have to," Belgarath replied tartly.
"Maybe," Beldin said. "If you can manage to stay sober." He shimmered back into
the form of the hawk, beat his wings twice, and spiraled up out of the clearing
and into the sky. Garion watched him until he was only a circling speck.
"That was a strange visit," Silk said, rolling out of his blankets. "It looks as
if quite a bit's been going on since we left."
"And none of it very good," Belgarath added sourly. "Let's get moving. We're
really going to have to hurry now. If Anheg gets his fleet into the Sea of the
East and starts sinking Mallorean troop ships, 'Zakath might decide to march
north and come across the land bridge. If we don't get there first, it could get
very crowded up there." The old man scowled darkly. "I'd like to put my hands on
your uncle just about now," he added. "I'd sweat a few pounds off him."

They quickly saddled their horses and rode back along the edge of the sunlit
forest toward the road leading north.
Despite the rather lame assurances of the two sorcerers, Garion rode slumped in
despair. They were going to lose, and Torak was going to kill him.
"Stop feeling sa sorry for yourself, " the inner voice told him finally.
"Why did you get me into this?" Garion demanded bitterly.
"We've discussed that before. "
"He's going to kill me."
"What gives you that idea?"
"That's what the Prophecy said." Garion stopped abruptly as a thought occurred
to him. "You said it yourself. You're the Prophecy, aren't you?"
"It's a misleading term-,and I didn't say anything about winning or losing. "
"Isn't that what it means?"
"No. It means exactly what it says."
"What else could it mean?"
"You're getting more stubborn every day. Stop worrying so much about meanings
and just do what you have to do. You almost had it right, back there. "
"If all you're going to do is talk in riddles, why bother with it at all? Why go
to all the trouble of saying things that nobody's able to understand?"
"Because it's necessary to say it. The word determines the event. The word puts
limits on the event and shapes it. Without the word, the event is merely a
random happening. That's the whole purpose of what you call prophecy - to
separate the significant from the random. "
"I don't understand."
"I didn't think you would, but you asked, after all. Now stop worrying about it.
It has nothing to do with you."
Garion wanted to protest, but the voice was gone. The conversation, however, had
made him feel a little better - not much, but a little. To take his mind off it,
he pulled his horse in beside Belgarath's as they reentered the forest on the
far side of the burn. "Exactly who are the Morindim, Grandfather?" he asked.
"Everybody keeps talking about them as if they were terribly dangerous."
"They are," Belgarath replied, "but you can get through their country if you're
careful."
"Are they on Torak's side?"
"The Morindim aren't on anybody's side. They don't even live in the same world
with us."
"I don't follow that."
"The Morindim are like the Ulgos used to be - before UL accepted

them. There
were several groups of Godless Ones. They all wandered off in various directions. The Ulgos went to the west, the Morindim went north. Other groups
went south or east and disappeared."
"Why didn't they just stay where they were?"
"They couldn't. There's a kind of compulsion involved in the decisions of the
Gods. Anyway, the Ulgos finally found themselves a God. The Morindim didn't. The
compulsion to remain separated from other people is still there. They live in
that treeless emptiness up there beyond the north range - small nomadic bands,
mostly."
"What did you mean when you said that they don't live in the same world with
us?"
"The world is a pretty terrible place for a Morind - a demon-haunted place. They
worship devils and they live more in dreams than they do in reality. Their
society is dominated by the dreamers and the magicians."
"There aren't really any devils, are there?" Garion asked skeptically.
"Oh, yes. The devils are very real."
"Where do they come from?"
Belgarath shrugged. "I haven't any idea. They do exist, though, and they're
completely evil. The Morindim control them by the use of magic."
"Magic? Is that different from what we do?"
"Quite a bit. We're sorcerers - at least that's what we're called. What we do
involves the Will and the Word, but that's not the only way to do things."
"I don't quite follow."
"It's not really all that complicated, Garion. There are several ways to tamper
with the normal order of things. Vordai's a witch. What she does involves the
use of spirits - usually benign, mischievous sometimes - but not actually
wicked. A magician uses devils - evil spirits."
"Isn't that sort of dangerous?"
Belgarath nodded. "Very dangerous," he replied. "The magician tries to control
the demon with spells - formulas, incantations, symbols, mystic diagrams - that
sort of thing. As long as he doesn't make any mistakes, the demon is his
absolute slave and has to do what he tells it to do. The demon doesn't want to
be a slave, so it keeps looking for a way to break the spell."
"What happens if it does?"
"It generally devours the magician on the spot. That happens rather frequently.
If you lose your concentration or summon a demon too strong for you, you're in

trouble."
"What did Beldin mean when he said that you weren't very good at magic?" Silk asked.
"I've never spent that much time trying to learn about it," the old sorcerer replied. "I have alternatives, after all, and magic is dangerous and not very dependable."
"Don't use it then," Silk suggested.
"I hadn't really planned to. Usually the threat of magic is enough to keep the Morindim at a distance. Actual confrontations are rather rare."
"I can see why."
"After we get through the north range, we'll disguise ourselves. There are a number of markings and symbols that will make the Morindim avoid us."
"That sounds promising."
"Of course we have to get there first," the old man pointed out. "Let's pick up the pace a bit. We've still got a long way to go." And he pushed his horse into a gallop.

Chapter Seven

THEY RODE HARD for the better part of a week, moving steadily northward and avoiding the scattered settlements which dotted the Nadrak forest. Garion noticed that the nights grew steadily shorter; by the time they reached the foothills of the north range, darkness had virtually disappeared. Evening and morning merged into a few hours of luminous twilight as the sun dipped briefly below the horizon before bursting into view once more.
The north range marked the upper edge of the Nadrak forest. It was not so much a mountainous region as it was a string of peaks, a long finger of upthrusting terrain reaching out toward the east from the broad ranges that formed the spine of the continent. As they rode up a scarcely defined trail toward a saddle that stretched between two snowy peaks, the trees around them grew more stunted and finally disappeared entirely. Beyond that point, there would be no more trees.
Belgarath stopped at the edge of one of these last groves and cut a half dozen long saplings.
The wind that came down off the peaks had a bitter chill to it and the arid smell of perpetual winter. When they reached the boulder-strewn summit, Garion looked out for the first time at the immense plain stretching below. The plain,

unmarked by trees, was covered with tall grass that bent before the vagrant wind in long, undulating waves. Rivers wandered aimlessly across that emptiness, and a thousand shallow lakes and ponds scattered, blue and glistening under a northern sun, toward the horizon.

"How far does it reach?" Garion asked quietly.

"From here to the polar ice," Belgarath replied. "Several hundred leagues."

"And no one lives out there but the Morindim?"

"Nobody wants to. For most of the year, it's buried in snow and darkness. You can go for six months up here without ever seeing the sun."

They rode down the rocky slope toward the plain and found a lowroofed, shallow cave at the base of the granite cliff that seemed to be the demarcation line between the mountains and the foothills. "We'll stop here for a while," Belgarath told them, reining in his tired mount. "We've got some preparations to make, and the horses need some rest."

They were all kept quite busy for the next several days while Belgarath radically altered their appearances. Silk set crude traps among the maze of rabbit runs twisting through the tall grass, and Garion roamed the foothills in search of certain tuberous roots and a peculiar smelling white flower. Belgarath sat at the mouth of the cave, fashioning various implements from his saplings.

The roots Garion had gathered yielded a dark brown stain, and Belgarath carefully applied it to their skins. "The Morindim are dark-skinned," he explained as he sat painting Silk's arms and back with the stain. "Somewhat darker than Tolnedrans or Nyissans. This will wear off after a few weeks, but it will last long enough to get us through."

After he had stained all their skins into swarthiness, he crushed the odd-smelling flowers to produce a jet black ink. "Silk's hair is the right color already," he said, "and mine will get by, but Garion's just won't do." He diluted some of the ink with water and dyed Garion's sandy hair black. "That's better," he grunted when he had finished, "and there's enough left for the tattoos."

"Tattoos?" Garion asked, startled at the thought.

"The Morindim decorate themselves extensively."

"Will it hurt?"

"We're not really going to tattoo ourselves, Garion," Belgarath told him with a pained look. "They take too long to heal. Besides, I'm afraid your

Aunt would go
into hysterics if I took you back to her with designs engraved all
over you.
This ink will last long enough for us to get through Morindland. It
will wear
off-eventually."
Silk was sitting cross-legged in front of the cave, looking for all
the world
like a tailor as he sewed fresh rabbit pelts to their clothing.
"Won't they start to smell after a few days?" Garion asked, wrinkling
his nose.
"Probably," Silk admitted, "but I don't have time to cure the
pelts." Later, as
Belgarath was carefully drawing the tattoos on their faces, he
explained the
guise they were going to assume. "Garion will be the quester," he
said.
"What's that?" Garion asked.
"Don't move your face," Belgarath told him, frowning as he drew lines
under
Garion's eyes with a raven-feather quill. "The quest is a Morind
ritual. It's
customary for a young Morind of a certain rank to undertake a quest
before he
assumes a position of authority in his clan. You'll wear a white fur
headband
and carry that red spear I fixed up for you. It's ceremonial," he
cautioned, "so
don't try to stab anybody with it. That's very bad form."
"I'll remember that."
"We'll disguise your sword to look like some sort of relic or
something. A
magician might see past the Orb's suggestion that it's not there -
depending on
how good he is. One other thing - the quester is absolutely forbidden
to speak
under any circumstances, so keep your mouth shut. Silk will be your
dreamer.
He'll wear a white fur band on his left arm. Dreamers speak in
riddles and
gibberish for the most part, and they tend to fall into trances and
have fits."
He glanced over at Silk. "Do you think you can handle that?"
"Trust me," Silk replied, grinning.
"Not very likely," Belgarath grunted. "I'll be Garion's magician.
I'll carry a
staff with a horned skull on it that will make most Morindim avoid
us."
"Most?" Silk asked quickly.
"It's considered bad manners to interfere with a quest, but it
happens now and
then." The old man looked critically at Garion's tattoos. "Good
enough," he said
and turned to Silk with his quill.
When it was all done, the three of them were scarcely recognizable.
The markings
the old man had carefully drawn on their arms and faces were not
pictures so

much as they were designs. Their faces had been changed into hideous devil masks, and the exposed parts of their bodies were covered with symbols etched in black ink. They wore fur-covered trousers and vests and bone necklaces clattered about their necks. Their stained arms and shoulders were bared and intricately marked.

Then Belgarath went down into the valley lying just below the cave, seeking something. It did not take his probing mind long to find what he needed. As Garion watched with revulsion, the old man casually violated a grave. He dug up a grinning human skull and carefully tapped the dirt out of it. "I'll need some deer horns," he told Garion. "Not too large and fairly well-matched." He squatted, fierce-looking in his furs and tattoos, and began to scrub at the skull with handfuls of dry sand.

There were weather-bleached horns lying here and there in the tall grass, since the deer of the region shed their antlers each winter. Garion gathered a dozen or so and returned to the cave to find his grandfather boring a pair of holes in the top of the skull. He critically examined the horns Garion had brought him, selected a pair of them and screwed them down into the holes. The grating sound of horn against bone set Garion's teeth on edge. "What do you think?" Belgarath asked, holding up the horned skull.

"It's grotesque," Garion shuddered.

"That was the general idea," the old man replied. He attached the skull firmly to the top of a long staff, decorated it with several feathers and then rose to his feet. "Let's pack up and leave," he said.

They rode down through the treeless foothills and out into the bending, waist-high grass as the sun swung down toward the southwestern horizon to dip briefly behind the peaks of the range they had just crossed. The smell of the uncured pelts Silk had sewn to their clothing was not very pleasant, and Garion did his best not to look at the hideously altered skull surmounting Belgarath's staff as they rode.

"We're being watched," Silk mentioned rather casually after an hour or so of riding.

"I was sure we would be," Belgarath replied. "Just keep going."

Their first meeting with the Morindim came just as the sun rose. They had paused

on the sloping gravel bank of a meandering stream to water their mounts, and a dozen or so fur-clad riders, their dark faces tattooed into devil masks, cantered up to the opposite bank and stopped. They did not speak, but looked hard at the identifying marks Belgarath had so painstakingly contrived. After a brief, whispered consultation, they turned their horses and rode back away from the stream. Several minutes later, one came galloping back, carrying a bundle wrapped in a fox skin. He paused, dropped the bundle on the bank of the stream, and then rode off again without looking back.

"What was that all about?" Garion asked.

"The bundle's a gift-of sorts," Belgarath answered. "It's an offering to any devils who might be accompanying us. Go pick it up."

"What's in it?"

"A bit of this, a bit of that. I wouldn't open it, if I were you. You're forgetting that you're not supposed to talk."

"There's nobody around," Garion replied, turning his head this way and that, looking for any sign of their being watched.

"Don't be too sure of that," the old man replied. "There could be a hundred of them hiding in the grass. Go pick up the gift and we'll move along. They're polite enough, but they'll be a lot happier when we take our devils out of their territory."

They rode on across the flat, featureless plain with a cloud of flies, drawn by the smell of their untanned fur garments, plaguing them. Their next meeting, several days later, was less congenial. They had moved into a hilly region where huge, rounded, white boulders rose out of the grass and where shaggy-coated wild oxen with great, sweeping horns grazed. A high overcast had moved in, and the gray sky diffused the light, making the brief twilight that marked the passage of one day into the next an only slightly perceptible darkening. They were riding down a gentle slope toward a large lake, which lay like a sheet of lead under the cloudy sky, when there suddenly arose from the tall grass all around them tattooed and fur-clad warriors holding long spears and short bows that appeared to be made of bone.

Garion reined in sharply and looked at Belgarath for instruction. "Just look straight at them," his grandfather told him quietly, "and remember that you're

not permitted to speak."
"More of them coming," Silk said tersely, jerking his chin toward the crest of a
nearby hill where perhaps a dozen Morindim, mounted on paint-decorated ponies,
were approaching at a walk.
"Let me do the talking," Belgarath said.
"Gladly."
The man in the lead of the mounted group was burlier than most of his companions, and the black tattooing on his face had been outlined with red and
blue, marking him as a man of some significance in his clan and making the devil
mask of his features all the more hideous. He carried a large wooden club,
painted with strange symbols and inlaid with rows of sharp teeth taken from
various animals. The way he carried it indicated that it was more a badge of
office than a weapon. He rode without a saddle and with a single bridle strap.
He pulled his pony to a stop perhaps thirty yards away. "Why have you come into
the lands of the Weasel Clan?" he demanded abruptly. His accent was strange and
his eyes were flat with hostility.
Belgarath drew himself up indignantly. "Surely the Headman of the Weasel Clan
has seen the quest-mark before," he replied coldly. "We have no interest in the
lands of the Weasel Clan, but follow the commands of the Devil-Spirit of the
Wolf Clan in the quest he has laid upon us."
"I have not heard of the Wolf Clan," the Headman replied. "Where are their
lands?"
"To the west," Belgarath replied. "We have traveled for two waxings and wanings
of the Moon-Spirit to reach this place."
The Headman seemed impressed by that.
A Morind with long white braids and with a thin, dirty-looking beard drew his
pony in beside that of the Headman. In his right hand he carried a staff
surmounted by the skull of a large bird. The gaping beak of the skull had been
decorated with teeth, giving it a ferocious appearance. "What is the name of the
Devil-Spirit of the Wolf Clan?" he demanded. "I may know him."
"That is doubtful, Magician of the Weasel Clan," Belgarath answered politely.
"He seldom goes far from his people. In any case, I cannot speak his name, since
he has forbidden it to any but the dreamers."
"Can you say what his aspect is and his attributes?" the whitebraided magician
asked.
Silk made a long-gurgling sound in the back of his throat, stiffened

in his saddle and rolled his eyes gruesomely back in his head until only the whites showed. With a convulsive, jerking motion, he thrust both arms into the air.

"Beware the Devil Agrinja, who stalks unseen behind us," he intoned in a hollow, oracular voice. "I have seen his three-eyed face and his hundred-fanged mouth in my dreams. The eye of mortal man may not behold him, but his seven-clawed hands reach out even now to rend apart all who would stand in the path of his chosen quester, the spear-bearer of the Wolf Clan. I have seen him feed in my nightmares. The ravener approaches and he hungers for man-meat. Flee his hunger." He shuddered, dropping his arms and slumping forward in his saddle as if suddenly exhausted.

"You've been here before, I see," Belgarath muttered under his breath. "Try to restrain your creativity, though. Remember that I might have to produce what you dream up."

Silk cast him a sidelong wink. His description of the Devil had made a distinct impression on the Morindim. The mounted men looked about nervously, and those standing in the waist-high grass moved involuntarily closer together, grasping their weapons in trembling hands.

Then a thin Morind with a white fur band around his left arm pushed through the cluster of frightened warriors. His right leg ended in a clubfoot, and he lurched grotesquely as he walked. He fixed Silk with a glare of pure hatred, then threw both hands wide, quivering and jerking. His back arched and he toppled over, threshing in the grass in the throes of an apparent seizure. He went completely stiff and then he started to speak. "The Devil-Spirit of the Weasel Clan, dread Horja, speaks to me. He demands to know why the Devil Agrinja sends his quester into the lands of the Weasel Clan. The Devil Horja is too awful to look upon. He has four eyes and a hundred and ten teeth, and each of his six hands has eight claws. He feeds on the bellies of men and he hungers."

"An imitator," Silk sniffed disdainfully, his head still down. "He can't even think up his own dream."

The magician of the Weasel Clan gave the dreamer lying supine in the grass a look of disgust, then turned back to Belgarath. "The Devil-Spirit

Horja defies
the Devil-Spirit Agrinja," he declared. "He bids him to begone or he will rip
out the belly of the quester of Agrinja."
Belgarath swore under his breath.
"What now?" Silk muttered.
"I have to fight him," Belgarath replied sourly. "That's what this was leading
up to from the beginning. White-braids there is trying to make a name for
himself. He's probably been attacking every magician who crosses his path."
"Can you handle him?"
"We're about to find out." Belgarath slid out of his saddle. "I warn you to
stand aside," he boomed, "lest I loose the hunger of our Devil Spirit upon you."
With the tip of his staff he drew a circle on the ground and a five-pointed star
within the circle. Grimly, he stepped into the center of the design.
The white-braided magician of the Weasel Clan sneered and also slid off his
pony. Quickly he drew a similar symbol on the ground and stepped into its
protection.
"That's it," Silk muttered to Garion. "Once the symbols are drawn, neither one
can back down."
Belgarath and the white-braided magician had each begun muttering incantations
in a language Garion had never heard, brandishing their skull-surmounted staffs
at each other. The dreamer of the Weasel Clan, suddenly realizing that he was in
the middle of the impending battle, miraculously recovered from his seizure,
scrambled to his feet, and lurched away with a terrified expression.
The Headman, trying to maintain his dignity, carefully backed his pony out of
the immediate vicinity of the two muttering old men. Atop a large, white
boulder, twenty yards or so to the left of the two magicians, there was a
shimmering disturbance in the air, somewhat like heatwaves rising from a red
tile roof on a hot day. The movement caught Garion's eye, and he stared in
puzzlement at the strange phenomenon. As he watched, the shimmering became more
pronounced, and it seemed that the shattered pieces of a rainbow infused it,
flickering, shifting, undulating in waves almost like varihued flames rising
from an invisible fire. As Garion watched, fascinated, a second shimmering
became apparent, rising above the tall grass off to the right. The second
disturbance also began to gather shards of color into itself. As he

stared,
first at one, then at the other, Garion saw - or imagined that he saw - a shape
beginning to emerge in the center of each. The shapes at first were amorphous,
shifting, changing, gathering form from the coruscating colors flashing about
them in the shimmering air. Then it seemed that the shapes, having reached a
certain point, flashed to completion, coalescing quite suddenly with a great
rushing together, and two towering forms faced each other, snarling and
slavering with mindless hatred. Each stood as high as a house, and their
shoulders bulked wide. Their skins were multihued, with waves of color rippling
through them.
The one standing in the grass had a third eye glaring balefully from between its
other two, and his great arms ended in seven-clawed hands stretched out with a
hideously hungry curving. His jutting, muzzlelike mouth gaped wide, filled with
row upon row of needlelike teeth as he roared a thunderous howl of hatred and
dreadful hunger.
Crouched upon the boulder stood the other. He had a great cluster of shoulders
at the top of his trunk, and a nest of long, scaly arms that writhed out in all
directions like snakes, each arm terminating in a widespread, many-clawed hand.
Two sets of eyes, one atop the other, glared insanely from beneath heavy
brow-ridges, and his muzzle, like that of the other figure, sprouted a forest of
teeth. He raised that awful face and bellowed, his jaws drooling foam.
But even as the two monsters glared at each other, there seemed to be a kind of
writhing struggle going on inside them. Their skins rippled, and large moving
lumps appeared in odd places on their chests and sides. Garion had the peculiar
feeling that there was something else - something quite different and perhaps
even worse - trapped inside each apparition. Growling, the two devils advanced
upon each other, but despite their apparent eagerness to fight, they seemed
almost driven, whipped toward the struggle. It was as if there was a dreadful
reluctance in them, and their grotesque faces jerked this way and that, each
snarling first at his opponent and then at the magician who controlled him. That
reluctance, Garion perceived, stemmed from something deep inside the

nature of each Devil. It was the enslavement, the compulsion to do the bidding of another, that they hated. The chains of spell and incantation in which Belgarath and the white-braided Morind had bound them were an intolerable agony, and there were whimpers of that agony mingled with their snarls.

Belgarath was sweating. Droplets of perspiration trickled down his dark-stained face. The incantations which held the Devil Agrinja locked within the apparition he had created to bind it rippled endlessly from his tongue. The slightest faltering of either the words or the image he had formed in his mind would break his power over the beast he had summoned, and it would turn upon him.

Writhing like things attempting to tear themselves apart from within, Agrinja and Horja closed on each other, grappling, clawing, tearing out chunks of scaly flesh with their awful jaws. The earth shuddered beneath them as they fought.

Too stunned to even be afraid, Garion watched the savage struggle. As he watched, he noted a peculiar difference between the two apparitions. Agrinja was bleeding from his wounds - a strange, dark blood, so deep red as to be almost black. Horja, however, did not bleed. Chunks ripped from his arms and shoulders were like bits of wood. The whitebraided magician saw that difference as well, and his eyes grew suddenly afraid. His voice became shrill as he desperately cast incantations at Horja, struggling to keep the Devil under his control. The moving lumps beneath Horja's skin became larger, more agitated. The vast Devil broke free from Agrinja and stood, his chest heaving and a dreadful hope burning in his eyes.

White-braids was screaming now. The incantations tumbled from his mouth, faltering, stumbling. And then one unpronounceable formula tangled his tongue.

Desperately he tried it again, and once again it stuck in his teeth.

With a bellow of triumph the Devil Horja straightened and seemed to explode.

Bits and fragments of scaly hide flew in all directions as the monster shuddered free of the illusion which had bound him. He had two great arms and an almost human face surmounted by a pair of curving, needle-pointed horns. He had hoofs instead of feet, and his grayish skin dripped slime. He turned slowly and his burning eyes fixed on the gibbering magician.

"Horja!" the white-braided Morind shrieked, "I command you to-" The words
faltered as he gaped in horror at the Devil which had suddenly escaped his
control. "Horja! I am your master!" But Horja was already stalking toward him,
his great hoofs crushing the grass as, step by step, he moved toward his former
master.
In wild-eyed panic, the white-braided Morind flinched back, stepping
unconsciously and fatally out of the protection of the circle and star drawn
upon the ground.
Horja smiled then, a chilling smile, bent and caught the shrieking magician by
each ankle, ignoring the blows rained on his head and shoulders by the
skull-topped staff. Then the monster stood up, lifting the struggling man to
hang upside down by the legs. The huge shoulders surged with an awful power,
and, leering hideously, the Devil deliberately and with a cruel slowness tore
the magician in two.
The Morindim fled.
Contemptuously the immense Devil hurled the chunks of his former master after
them, spattering the grass with blood and worse. Then, with a savage hunting
cry, he leaped in pursuit of them.
The three-eyed Agrinja had stood, still locked in a half crouch, watching the
destruction of the white-braided Morind almost with indifference. When it was
aver, he turned to cast eyes burning with hatred upon Belgarath.
The old sorcerer, drenched with sweat, raised his skull-staff in front of him,
his face set with extreme concentration. The interior struggle rippled more
intensely within the form of the monster, but gradually Belgarath's will
mastered and solidified the shape. Agrinja howled in frustration, clawing at the
air until all hint of shifting or changing was gone. Then the dreadful hands
dropped, and the monster's head bowed in defeat.
"Begone," Belgarath commanded almost negligently, and Agrinja instantly
vanished.
Garion suddenly began to tremble violently. His stomach heaved; he turned,
tottered a few feet away, and fell to his knees and began to retch.
"What happened?" Silk demanded in a shaking voice.
"It got away from him," Belgarath replied calmly. "I think it was the blood that
did it. When he saw that Agrinja was bleeding and that Horja wasn't, he realized
that he'd forgotten something. That shook his confidence, and he lost

his
concentration. Garion, stop that."
"I can't," Garion groaned, his stomach heaving violently again. "How long will
Horja chase the others?" Silk asked.
"Until the sun goes down," Belgarath told him. "I imagine that the Weasel Clan
is in for a bad afternoon."
"Is there any chance that he'll turn around and come after us?"
"He has no reason to. We didn't try to enslave him. As soon as Garion gets his
stomach under control again, we can go on. We won't be bothered any more."
Garion stumbled to his feet, weakly wiping his mouth. "Are you all right?"
Belgarath asked him.
"Not really," Garion replied, "but there's nothing left to come up."
"Get a drink of water and try riot to think about it."
"Will you have to do that any more?" Silk asked, his eyes a bit wild.
"No." Belgarath pointed. There were several riders along the crest of a hill
perhaps a mile away. "The other Morindim in the area watched the whole thing.
The word will spread, and nobody will come anywhere near us now. Let's mount up
and get going. It's still a long way to the coast."
In bits and pieces, as they rode for the next several days, Garion picked up as
much information as he really wanted about the dreadful contest he had
witnessed.
"It's the shape that's the key to the whole thing," Belgarath concluded. "What
the Morindim call Devil-Spirits don't look that much different from humans. You
form an illusion drawn out of your imagination and force the spirit into it. As
long as you can keep it locked up in that illusion, it has to do what you tell
it to. If the illusion falters for any reason, the spirit breaks free and
resumes its real form. After that, you have no control over it whatsoever. I
have a certain advantage in these matters. Changing back and forth from a man to
a wolf has sharpened my imagination a bit."
"Why did Beldin say you were a bad magician then?" Silk asked curiously.
"Beldin's a purist," the old man shrugged. "He feels that it's necessary to get
everything into the shape - down to the last scale and toenail. It isn't,
really, but he feels that way about it."
"Do you suppose we could talk about something else?" Garion asked.
They reached the coastline a day or so later. The sky had remained overcast, and
the Sea of the East lay sullen and rolling under dirty gray clouds. The beach

along which they rode was a broad shingle of black, round stones littered with
chunks of white, bleached driftwood. Waves rolled foaming up the beach, only to
slither back with an endless, mournful sigh. Sea birds hung in the stiff breeze,
screaming.
"Which way?" Silk asked.
Belgarath looked around. "North," he replied.
"How far?"
"I'm not positive. It's been a long time, and I can't be sure exactly where we
are."
"You're not the best guide in the world, old friend," Silk complained.
"You can't have everything."
They reached the land bridge two days later, and Garion stared at it in dismay.
It was not at all what he had expected, but consisted of a series of round,
wave-eroded white boulders sticking up out of the dark water and running in an
irregular line off toward a dark smudge on the horizon. The wind was blowing out
of the north, carrying with it a bitter chill and the smell of polar ice.
Patches of white froth stretched from boulder to boulder as the swells ripped
themselves to tatters on submerged reefs.
"How are we supposed to cross that?" Silk objected.
"We wait until low tide," Belgarath explained. "The reefs are mostly out of the
water then."
"Mostly?"
"We might have to wade a bit from time to time. Let's strip these furs off our
clothes before we start. It will give us something to do while we're waiting for
the tide to turn, and they're starting to get a bit fragrant."
They took shelter behind a pile of driftwood far up on the beach and removed the
stiff, smelly furs from their clothing. Then they dug food out of their packs
and ate. Garion noted that the stain that had darkened the skin on his hands had
begun to wear thin and that the tattoodrawings on the faces of his companions
had grown noticeably fainter.
It grew darker, and the period of twilight that separated one day from the next
seemed longer than it had no more than a week ago.
"Summer's nearly over up here," Belgarath noted, looking out at the boulders
gradually emerging from the receding water in the murky twilight.
"How much longer before low tide?" Silk asked.
"Another hour or so."
They waited. The wind pushed at the pile of driftwood erratically and brushed

the tall grass along the upper edge of the beach, bending and tossing it.
Finally Belgarath stood up. "Let's go," he said shortly. "We'll lead the horses.
The reefs are slippery, so be careful how you set your feet down."
The passage along the reef between the first steppingstones was not all that
bad, but once they moved farther out, the wind became a definite factor. They
were frequently drenched with stinging spray, and every so often a wave, larger
than the others, broke over the top of the reef and swirled about their legs,
tugging at them. The water was brutally cold.
"Do you think we'll be able to make it all the way across before the tide comes
back in again?" Silk shouted over the noise.
"No," Belgarath shouted back. "We'll have to sit it out on top of one of the
larger rocks."
"That sounds unpleasant."
"Not nearly so unpleasant as swimming."
They were perhaps halfway across when it became evident that the tide turned.
Waves more and more frequently broke across the top of the reef, and one
particularly large pulled the legs of Garion's horse out from under him. Garion
struggled to get the frightened animal up again, pulling at the reins as the
horse's hoofs scrambled and slid on the slippery rocks of the reef. "We'd better
find a place to stop, Grandfather," he yelled above the crash of the waves.
"We'll be neck-deep in this before long."
"Two more islands," Belgarath told . "'here's a bigger one up ahead."
The last stretch of reef was completely submerged, and Garion flinched as he
stepped down into the icy water, The breaking waves covered the surface with
froth, making it impossible to see the bottom. He moved along blindly, probing
the unseen path with numb feet. A large wave swelled and rose up as far as his
armpits, and its powerful surge swept him of his feet. He clung to the reins of
his horse, floundering and sputtering as he fought to get back up.
And then they were past the worst of it. They moved along the reef with the
water only ankle-deep now; a few moments later, they climbed up onto the large,
white boulder. Garion let out a long, explosive breath as he reached safety. The
wind, blowing against his wet clothing, chilled him to the bone but at least
they were out of the water.
Later, as they sat huddled together on the leeward side of the boulder, Garion

looked out across the sullen black sea toward the low, forbidding coastline lying ahead. The beaches, like those of Morindland behind them, were black gravel, and the low hills behind them were dark under the scudding gray cloud.
Nowhere was there any sign of life, but there was an implicit threat in the very shape of the land itself.
"Is that it?" he asked finally in a hushed voice.
Belgarath's face was unreadable as he gazed across the open water toward the coast ahead. "Yes," he replied. "That's Mallorea."

PART TWO
MISHRAK AC THULL

Chapter Eight

THE CROWN HAD been Queen Islena's first mistake. It was heavy and it always gave her a headache. Her decision to wear it had come originally out of a sense of insecurity. The bearded warnors in Anheg's throne room intimidated her, and she felt the need of a visible symbol of her authority. Now she was afraid to appear without it. Each day she put it on with less pleasure and entered the main hall of Anheg's palace with less certainty.
The sad truth was that Queen Islena of Cherek was completely unprepared to rule.
Until the day when, dressed in regal crimson velvet and with her gold crown firmly in place, she had marched into the vaulted throne room at Val Alorn to announce that she would rule the kingdom in her husband's absence, Islena's most momentous decisions had involved which gown she would wear and how her hair was to be arranged. Now it seemed that the fate of Cherek hung in the balance each time she was faced with a choice.
The warriors lounging indolently with their ale cups about the huge, open fire pit or wandering aimlessly about on the rush-strewn floor were no help whatsoever. Each time she entered the throne room, all conversation broke off and they rose to watch as she marched to the bannerhung throne, but their faces gave no hint of their true feelings toward her. Irrationally, she concluded that

the whole problem had to do with the beards. How could she possibly know what a man was thinking when his face was sunk up to the ears in hair? Only the quick intervention of Lady Merel, the cool blond wife of the Earl of Trellheim, had stopped her from ordering a universal shave.

"You can't, Islena," Merel had told her flatly, removing the quill from the queen's hand, even as she had been in the act of signing the hastily drawn-up proclamation. "They're attached to their beards like little boys attached to a favorite toy. You can't make them cut off their whiskers."

"I'm the Queen."

"Only as long as they permit you to be. They accept you out of respect for Anheg, and that's as far as it goes. If you tamper with their pride, they'll take you off the throne." And that dreadful threat had ended the matter then and there.

Islena found herself relying more and more on Barak's wife, and it was not long before the two of them, one in green and the other in royal crimson, were seldom apart. Even when Islena faltered, Merel's icy stare quelled the hints of disrespect which cropped up from time to time - usually when the ale had been distributed a bit too freely. It was Merel, ultimately, who made the day-to-day decisions which ran the kingdom. When IsIena sat upon the throne, Merel, her blond braids coiled about her head to form her own crown, stood to one side in plain view of the hesitant queen. Cherek was ruled by the expressions on her face. A faint smile meant yes; a frown, no; a scarcely perceptible shrug, maybe.

It worked out fairly well.

But there was one person who was not intimidated by Merel's cool gaze. Grodeg, the towering, white-bearded High Priest of Belar, inevitably requested private audience with the queen, and once Merel left the council room, Islena was lost.

Despite Anheg's call for a general mobilization, the members of the Bear-cult had not yet left to join the campaign. Their promises to join the fleet later all sounded sincere, but their excuses and delays grew more and more obvious as time went on. Islena knew that Grodeg was behind it all. Nearly every able-bodied man in the kingdom was off with the fleet, which was even now rowing up the broad expanse of the Aldur River to join Anheg in central Algaria. The

household guard in the palace at Val Alorn had been reduced to grizzled old men and downy-cheeked boys. Only the Bear-cult remained, and Grodeg pushed his advantage to the limit.

He was polite enough, bowing to the queen when the occasion demanded, and never mentioning her past links with the cult, but his offers to help became more and more insistent; and when Islena faltered at his suggestions concerning this matter or that, he smoothly acted to implement them as if her hesitancy had been acceptance. Little by little, Islena was losing control, and Grodeg, with the armed might of the cult behind him, was taking charge. More and more the cult members infested the palace, giving orders, lounging about the throne room and openly grinning as they watched Islena's attempts to rule.

"You're going to have to do something, Islena," Merel said firmly one evening when the two were alone in the queen's private apartment. She was striding about the carpeted room, her hair gleaming like soft gold in the candlelight, but there was nothing soft in her expression.

"What can I do?" Islena pleaded, wringing her hands. "He's never openly disrespectful, and his decisions always seem to be in the best interests of Cherek."

"You need help, Islena," Merel told her.

"Whom can I turn to?" The Queen of Cherek was almost in tears. The Lady Merel smoothed the front of her green velvet gown.

"I think it's time that you wrote to Porenn," she declared.

"What do I say?" Islena begged of her.

Merel pointed at the small table in the corner where parchment and ink lay waiting. "Sit down," she instructed, "and write what I tell you to write."

Count Brador, the Tolnedran ambassador, was definitely growing tiresome, Queen Layla decided. The plump little queen marched purposefully toward the chamber where she customarily gave audiences and where the ambassador awaited her with his satchel full of documents.

The courtiers in the halls bowed as she passed, her crown slightly askew and her heels clicking on the polished oak floors, but Queen Layla uncharacteristically ignored them. This was not the time for polite exchanges or idle chitchat. The Tolnedran had to be dealt with, and she had delayed too long already.

The ambassador was an olive-skinned man with receding hair and a hooked nose. He

wore a brown mantle with the old trim that indicated his relationship to the
Borunes. He lounged rather indolently in a large cushioned chair near the window
of the sunny room where he and Queen Layla were to meet. He rose as she entered
and bowed with exquisite grace. "Your Highness," he murmured politely.
"My dear Count Brador," Queen Layla gushed at him, putting on her most helpless
and scatterbrained expression, "please do sit down. I'm sure we know each other
well enough by now to skip all these tedious formalities." She sank into a
chair, fanning herself with one hand. "It's turned warm, hasn't it?"
"Summers are lovely here in Sendaria, your Highness," the count replied,
settling back in his chair. "I wonder - have you had the chance to think over
the proposals I gave you at our last meeting?"
Queen Layla stared at him blankly. "Which proposals were those, Count Brador?"
She gave a helpless little giggle. "Please forgive me, but my mind seems to be
absolutely gone these days. There are so many details. I wonder how my husband
keeps them all straight."
"We were discussing the administration of the port at Camaar, your Highness,"
the count reminded her gently.
"We were?" The queen gave him a blank look of total incomprehension, secretly
delighted at the flicker of annoyance that crossed his face. It was her best
ploy. By pretending to have forgotten all previous conversations, she forced him
to begin at the beginning every time they met. The count's strategy, she knew,
depended upon a gradual build-up to his final proposal, and her pretended
forgetfulness neatly defeated that. "Whatever led us into such a tedious subject
as that?" she added.
"Surely your Highness recalls," the count protested with just the slightest hint
of annoyance. "The Tolnedran merchant vessel, Star of Tol Horb, was kept
standing at anchor for a week and a half in the harbor before moorage could be
found for her. Every day's delay in unloading her was costing a fortune."
"Things are so hectic these days," the queen of Sendaria sighed. "It's the
manpower shortage, you understand. Everybody who hasn't gone off to war is busy
freighting supplies to the army. I'll send a very stern note to the port
authorities about it, though. Was there anything else, Count Brador?"

Brador coughed uncomfortably. "Uh - your Highness has already forwarded just such a note," he reminded her.

"I have?" Queen Layla feigned astonishment. "Wonderful. That takes care of everything then, doesn't it? And you've dropped by to thank me." She smiled girlishly. "How exquisitely courteous of you." She leaned forward to put one hand impulsively on his wrist, quite deliberately knocking the rolled parchment he was holding out of his hand. "How clumsy of me," she exclaimed, bending quickly to pick up the parchment before he could retrieve it. Then she sat back in her chair, tapping the rolled document absently against her cheek as if lost in thought.

"Uh - actually, your Highness, our discussions had moved somewhat beyond your note to the port authorities," Brador told her, nervously eyeing the parchment she had so deftly taken from him. "You may recall that I offered Tolnedran assistance in administering the port. I believe we agreed that such assistance might help to alleviate the manpower shortage your Highness just mentioned."

"What an absolutely marvelous idea," Layla exclaimed. She brought her plump little fist down on the arm of her chair as if in an outburst of enthusiasm. At that prearranged signal, two of her younger children burst into the room, arguing loudly.

"Mother!" Princess Gelda wailed in outrage, "Fernie stole my red ribbon!"

"I did not!" Princess Ferna denied the charge indignantly. "She gave it to me for my blue beads."

"Did not!" Gelda snapped.

"Did so!" Ferna replied.

"Children, children," Layla chided them. "Can't you see that Mother's busy? What will the dear count think of us?"

"But she stole it, Mother!" Gelda protested. "She stole my red ribbon."

"Did not!" Ferna said, spitefully sticking her tongue out at her sister.

Trailing behind them with a look of wide-eyed interest came little Prince Meldig, Queen Layla's youngest child. In one hand the prince held a jam pot, and his face was liberally smeared with the contents.

"Oh, that's just impossible," Layla exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "You girls are supposed to be watching him." She bustled over to the jam-decorated prince,

crumpled the parchment she was holding and began wiping his face with it.
Abruptly she stopped. "Oh dear," she said as if suddenly realizing what she was doing. "Was this important, Count Brador?" she asked the Tolnedran, holding out the rumpled, sticky document.
Brador's shoulders, however, had slumped in defeat. "No, your Highness," he replied in a voice filled with resignation, "not really. The royal house of Sendaria has me quite outnumbered, it appears." He rose to his feet. "Perhaps another time," he murmured, bowing. "With your Highness's permission," he said, preparing to leave.
"You mustn't forget this, Count Brador," Layla said, pressing the parchment into his cringing hands.
The count's face had a faintly martyred expression as he withdrew. Queen Layla turned back to her children, who were grinning impishly at her. She began to scold them in a loud voice until she was certain the count was well out of earshot, then she knelt, embraced them all and began to laugh.
"Did we do it right, Mother?" Princess Gelda asked.
"You were absolutely perfect," Queen Layla replied, still laughing.
Sadi the eunuch had grown careless, lulled somewhat by the air of polite civility that had pervaded the palace at Sthiss Tor for the past year, and one of his associates, seizing upon his unwariness, had taken the opportunity to poison him. Sadi definitely did not appreciate being poisoned. The antidotes all tasted vile, and the aftereffects left him weak and light-headed. Thus it was that he viewed the appearance of the mail-skirted emissary of King Taur Urgas with thinly veiled irritation.
"Taur Urgas, King of the Murgos, greets Sadi, chief servant of Immortal Salmissra," the Murgo declaimed with a deep bow as he entered the cool, dimly lighted study from which Sadi conducted most of the nation's affairs.
"The servant of the Serpent Queen returns the greetings of the right arm of the Dragon-God of Angarak." Sadi mouthed the formula phrases almost indifferently.
"Do you suppose we could get to the point? I'm feeling a bit indisposed at the moment."
"I was very pleased at your recovery," the ambassador lied, his scarred face carefully expressionless. "Has the poisoner been apprehended yet?" He drew up a chair and sat down at the polished table Sadi used for a desk.

"Naturally," Sadi replied,absently rubbing his hand over his shaved scalp.
"And executed?"
"Why would we want to do that? The man's a professional poisoner. He was only doing his job."
The Murgo looked a bit startled.
"We look upon a good poisoner as a national asset," Sadi told him. "If we start killing them every time they poison somebody, very soon there won't be any of them left, and you never know when I might want somebody poisoned."
The Murgo ambassador shook his head incredulously. "You people have an amazing amount of tolerance, Sadi," he said in his harshly accented voice. "What about his employer?"
"That's another matter," Sadi replied. "His employer is currently entertaining the leeches at the bottom of the river. Is your visit official, or did you merely stop by to inquire after my health?"
"A bit of each, Excellency."
"You Murgos are an economical race," Sadi observed dryly. "What does Taur Urgas want this time?"
"The Alorns are preparing to invade Mishrak ac Thull, your Excellency."
"So I've heard. What's that got to do with Nyissa?"
"Nyissans have no reason to be fond of Alorns."
"Nor any to be fond of Murgos, either," Sadi pointed out.
"It was Aloria that invaded Nyissa following the death of the Rivan King," the Murgo reminded him, "and it was Cthol Murgos that provided the market for Nyissa's primary export."
"My dear fellow, please get to the point," Sadi said, rubbing his scalp wearily.
"I'm not going to operate on the basis of long-past insults or long-forgotten favors. The slave trade is no longer significant, and the scars left by the Alorn invasion disappeared centuries ago. What does Taur Urgas want?"
"My king wishes to avoid bloodshed," the Murgo stated. "The Tolnedran legions form a significant part of the armies massing in Algaria. If a threat just a threat, mind you - of unfriendly activity suddenly appeared on his unprotected southern frontier, Ran Borune would recall those legions. Their loss would persuade the Alorns to abandon this adventure."
"You want me to invade Tolnedra?" Sadi demanded incredulously.
"Naturally not, Lord Sadi. His Majesty merely wishes your permission to move certain forces through your territory to pose the threat on Tolnedra's southern border. No blood need be shed at all."

"Except Nyissan blood, once the Murgo army withdraws. The legions would swarm down across the River of the Woods like angry hornets."
"Taur Urgas would be more than willing to leave garrisons behind to guarantee the integrity of Nyissan territory."
"I'm sure he would," Sadi observed dryly. "Advise your king that his proposal is quite unacceptable at this particular time."
"The King of Cthol Murgos is a powerful man," the Murgo said firmly, "and he remembers those who thwart him even more keenly than he remembers his friends."
"Taur Urgas is a madman," Sadi told him bluntly. "He wants to avoid trouble with the Alorns so that he can concentrate on 'Zakath. Despite his insanity, however, he's not so foolish as to send an army into Nyissa uninvited. An army must eat, and Nyissa's a bad place to forage for food - as history has demonstrated. The most tempting fruit has bitter juice."
"A Murgo army carries its own food," the ambassador replied stiffly.
"Good for them. But where do they plan to find drinking water? I don't believe we're getting anywhere with this. I'll convey your proposal to her Majesty. She, of course, will make the final decision. I suspect, however, that you'll need to offer something much more attractive than a permanent Murgo occupation to persuade her to consider the matter favorably. Was that all?"
The Murgo rose to his feet, his scarred face angry. He bowed coldly to Sadi and withdrew without further conversation.
Sadi thought about it for a while. He could gain a great deal of advantage at a minimal cost if he played this right. A few carefully worded dispatches to King Rhodar in Algaria would put Nyissa among the friends of the west. If Rhodar's army should happen to win, Nyissa would benefit. If, on the other hand, it appeared that the west was about to lose, the proposal of Taur Urgas could be accepted. In either case, Nyissa would be on the winning side. The whole notion appealed to Sadi enormously. He stood up, his iridescent silk robe rustling, and went to a nearby cabinet. He took out a crystal decanter containing a dark blue liquid and carefully measured some of the thick syrup into a small glass and drank it. Almost immediately a euphoric calm came over him as his favorite drug took effect. A moment or two later, he felt that he was ready to face his queen.
He was even smiling as he walked from his study into the dim corridor

leading to
the throne room.
As always, Salmissra's chamber was dimly lighted by oil lamps hanging on long
silver chains from the shadowy ceiling. The chorus of eunuchs still knelt
adoringly in the queen's presence, but they no longer sang her praises. Noise of
any kind irritated Salmissra now, and it was wise not to irritate her. The
Serpent Queen still occupied the divanlike throne beneath the towering statue of
Issa. She dozed interminably, stirring her mottled coils with the seething dry
hiss of scale rubbing against scale. But even in restless doze, her tongue
flickered nervously. Sadi approached the throne, perfunctorily prostrated
himself on the polished stone floor, and waited. His scent on the air would
announce him to the hooded serpent who was his queen.
"Yes, Sadi?" she whispered finally, her voice a dusty hiss.
"The Murgos wish an alliance, my Queen," Sadi informed her. "Taur Urgas wants to
threaten the Tolnedrans from the south to force Ran Borune to withdraw his
legions from the Thullish border."
"Interesting," she replied indifferently. Her dead eyes bored into him and her
coils rustled. "What do you think?"
"Neutrality costs nothing, Divine Salmissra," Sadi replied. "Alliance with
either side would be premature."
Salmissra turned, her mottled hood flaring as she regarded her reflection in the
mirror beside her throne. The crown still rested on her head as polished and
glistening as her scales. Her tongue flickered, and her eyes, flat as glass,
looked at the mirror. "Do what you think best, Sadi,'' she told him in an
uncaring tone.
"I'll deal with the matter, my Queen," Sadi said, putting his face to the floor
in preparation to leave.
"I have no need of Torak now," she mused, still staring at the mirror. "Polgara
saw to that."
"Yes, my Queen," Sadi agreed in a neutral voice, beginning to rise.
She turned to look at him. "Stay a while, Sadi. I'm lonely."
Sadi sank immediately back to the polished floor.
"I have such strange dreams sometimes, Sadi," she hissed. "Such very strange
dreams. I seem to remember things - things that happened when my blood was warm
and I was a woman. Strange thoughts come to me in my dreams, and strange
hungers." She looked directly at him, her hood flaring again as her

pointed face
stretched out toward him. "Was I really like that, Sadi? It all seems like
something seen through smoke."
"It was a difficult time, my Queen," Sadi replied candidly. "For all of us."
"Polgara was right, you know," she continued in that expiring whisper. "The
potions enflamed me. I think it's better this way - no passions, no hungers, no
fears." She turned back to her mirror. "You may go now, Sadi."
He rose and started toward the door.
"Oh, Sadi."
"Yes, my Queen?"
"If I caused you trouble before, I'm sorry."
He stared at her.
"Not very much, of course - but just a little." Then she returned to her
reflection.
Sadi was trembling as he closed the door behind him. Sometime later, he sent for
Issus. The shabby, one-eyed hireling entered the chief eunuch's study with a
certain hesitancy, and his face was a bit apprehensive.
"Come in, Issus," Sadi told him calmly.
"I hope you aren't holding any grudges, Sadi," Issus said nervously, looking
about to be sure they were alone. "There was nothing personal in it, you know."
"It's all right, Issus," Sadi assured him. "You were only doing what you were
paid to do."
"How did you manage to detect it?" Issus asked with a certain professional
curiosity. "Most men are too far gone for the antidote to work before they
realize they've been poisoned."
"Your concoction leaves just the faintest aftertaste of lemon," Sadi replied.
"I've been trained to recognize it."
"Ah," Issus said. "I'll have to work on that. Otherwise it's a very good
poison."
"An excellent poison, Issus," Sadi agreed. "That brings us to the reason I sent
for you. There's a man I think I can dispense with."
Issus' single eye brightened, and he rubbed his hands together. "The usual fee?"
"Naturally."
"Who is he?"
"The Murgo ambassador."
Issus' face clouded for a moment. "He'll be difficult to get to." He scratched
at his stubbled scalp.
"You'll find a way. I have the utmost confidence in you."
"I'm the best," Issus agreed with no trace of false modesty.
"The ambassador's pressing me in certain negotiations that I need to delay,"

Sadi continued. "His sudden demise should interrupt things a bit."
"You don't really have to explain, Sadi," Issus told him. "I don't need to know why you want him killed."
"But you do need to know how. For various reasons, I'd like for this to look very natural. Could you arrange for him-and perhaps a few others in his household-to come down with some kind of fever? Something suitably virulent?"
Issus frowned. "That's tricky. Something like that can get out of hand. You might end up infecting an entire neighborhood, and there would be very few survivors."
Sadi shrugged. "One sometimes must make sacrifices. Can you do it?"
Issus nodded gravely.
"Do it then, and I'll compose a letter expressing my regrets to King Taur Urgas."
Queen Silar sat at her loom in the great hall of the Algar Stronghold, humming softly to herself as her fingers passed the shuttle back and forth with a drowsy, clicking sound. Sunlight streamed down from the narrow windows set high up in the wall, filling the huge, narrow room with a diffused golden light. King Cho-Hag and Hettar were away from the Stronghold, preparing a huge encampment some few leagues out from the base of the eastern escarpment for the army of Alorns, Arends, Sendars, and Tolnedrans approaching from the west. Although he was still within the borders of the kingdom, Cho-Hag had formally transferred authority to his wife, extracting a pledge of support from all of the assembled Clan-Chiefs.
The Queen of Algaria was a silent woman, and her calm face seldom betrayed her emotions. She had spent her entire life in the background, often so unobtrusively that people did not even realize that she was present. She had, however, kept her eyes and her ears open. Her crippled husband, moreover, had confided in her. His quiet, dark-haired queen knew exactly what was going on.
Elvar, Archpriest of Algaria, stood, white-robed and much puffed-up with his own importance, reading to her the set of carefully prepared proclamations which would effectively transfer all power to him. His tone was condescending as he explained them to her.
"Is that all?" she asked when he had finished.
"It's really for the best, your Highness," he told her loftily. "All the world

knows that women are unsuited to rule. Shall I send for pen and ink?"
"Not just yet, Elvar," she replied calmly, her hands busy at her loom.
"But "
"You know, I just had the oddest thought," she said, looking directly at him.
"You're the Archpriest of Belar here in Algaria, but you never go out of the
Stronghold. Isn't that a bit peculiar?"
"My duties, your Highness, compell me-"
"Isn't your first duty to the people - and to the children of Belar? We've been
terribly selfish keeping you here when your heart must be yearning to be out
among the clans, overseeing the religious instruction of the children."
He stared at her, his mouth suddenly agape.
"And all the other priests as well," she continued. "They all seem to be
concentrated here at the Stronghold, pressed into administrative duties. A
priest is too valuable a man for such tasks. This situation must be corrected
immediately."
"But "
"No, Elvar. My duty as queen is absolutely clear. The children of Algaria must
come first. I release you from all your duties here at the Stronghold so that
you may return to your chosen vocation." She smiled suddenly. "I'll even draw up
an itinerary for you myself," she said brightly. She thought a moment. "The
times are troubled," she added, "so perhaps I'd better provide you with an
escort - several trustworthy men from my own clan who can be depended upon to
make sure that you aren't interrupted in your travels or distracted from your
preaching by any disturbing messages from abroad." She looked at him again.
"That will be all, Elvar. You'd probably better go pack. It will be a number of
seasons before you return, I imagine."
The Archpriest of Belar was making strangled noises.
"Oh, one other thing." The queen carefully chose another skein of yarn and held
it up to the sunlight. "It's been years since anyone made a survey of the herds.
As long as you're going to be out there anyway, I think I'd like an accurate
count of all the calves and colts in Algaria. It will give you something to
occupy your mind. Send me a report from time to time, won't you?" She returned
to her weaving. "You're dismissed, Elvar," she said placidly, not even bothering
to look up as the Archpriest, shaking with rage, tottered away to

make
preparations for his roving imprisonment.
Lord Morin, High Chamberlain to his Imperial Majesty, Ran Borune XXIII, sighed
as he entered the Emperor's private garden. Another tirade was undoubtedly in
the offing, and Morin had already heard it all a dozen times at least. The
Emperor had an extraordinary capacity for repeating himself sometimes.
Ran Borune, however, was in an odd mood. The bald, beak-nosed little Emperor sat
pensively in his chair beneath a shady arbor, listening to the trilling of his
canary. "He's never spoken again, did you know that, Morin?" the Emperor said as
his chamberlain approached across the close-clipped grass. "Just that one time
when Polgara was here." He looked at the little golden bird again, his eyes sad.
Then he sighed. "I think I came out second best in that bargain. Polgara gave me
a canary and took Ce'Nedra in exchange." He looked around at his sundrenched
garden and the cool marble walls surrounding it. "Is it just my imagination,
Morin, or does the palace seem sort of cold and empty now?" He lapsed once more
into moody silence, staring with unseeing eyes at a bed of crimson roses.
Then there was an odd sound, and Lord Morin looked sharply at the Emperor, half
afraid that his ruler was about to go into another seizure. But there was no
evidence of that. Instead, Morin perceived that Ran Borune was chuckling. "Did
you see how she tricked me, Morin?" The Emperor laughed. "She deliberately
goaded me into that fit. What a son she would have made! She could have been the
greatest Emperor in Tolnedra's history." Ran Borune was laughing openly now, his
secret delight at Ce'Nedra's cleverness suddenly emerging.
"She is your daughter after all, your Majesty," Lord Morin observed.
"To think that she could raise an army of that size when she's barely sixteen,"
the Emperor marveled. "What a splendid child!" He seemed quite suddenly to have
recovered from the gloomy peevishness that had dogged him since his return to
ToI Honeth. His laughter trailed away after several moments, and his bright
little eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Those legions she stole from me are likely to
become fractious without professional leadership," he mused.
"I'd say that's Ce'Nedra's problem, your Majesty," Morin replied. "Or Polgara's."
"Well-" The Emperor scratched one ear. "I don't know, Morin. The

situation out
there isn't too clear." He looked at his chamberlain. "Are you acquainted with
General Varana?"
"The Duke of Anadile? Of course, your Majesty. A thoroughly professional sort of
fellow - solid, unassuming, extremely intelligent."
"He's an old friend of the family," Ran Borune confided. "Ce'Nedra knows him and
she would listen to his advice. Why don't you go to him, Morin, and suggest that
he might want to take a leave of absence - perhaps go to Algaria and have a look
at things?"
"I'm certain that he'd be overjoyed at the idea of a vacation," Lord Morin
agreed. "Garrison life in the summertime can be very tedious."
"It's just a suggestion," the Emperor stressed. "His presence in the war zone
would have to be strictly unofficial."
"Naturally, your Majesty."
"And if he just happened to make a few suggestions - or even provide a bit of
leadership, we certainly wouldn't have any knowledge of it, would we? After all,
what a private citizen does with his own time is his business, right?"
"Absolutely, your Majesty."
The Emperor grinned broadly. "And we'll all stick to that story, won't we,
Morin?"
"Like glue, your Majesty," Morin replied gravely..
The crown prince of Drasnia burped noisily in his mother's ear, sighed, and
promptly fell asleep on her shoulder. Queen Porenn smiled at him, tucked him
back in his cradle, and turned again to the stringy-appearing man in nondescript
clothing who sprawled in a nearby chair. The emaciated man was known only by the
peculiar name "Javelin." Javelin was the chief of the Drasnian intelligence
service and one of Porenn's closest advisers.
"Anyway," he continued his report, "the Tolnedran girl's army is about two days'
march from the Stronghold. The engineers are moving along ahead of schedule with
the hoists on top of the escarpment, and the Chereks are preparing to begin the
portage from the east bank of the Aldur."
"Everything seems to be going according to plan, then," the queen said, resuming
her seat at the polished table near the window.
"There's a bit of trouble in Arendia," Javelin noted. "The usual ambushes and
bickerings - nothing really serious. Queen Layla's got the Tolnedran, Bravor, so
completely off balance that he might as well not even be in

Sendaria." He scratched at his long, pointed jaw. "There's peculiar information coming out of Sthiss Tor. The Murgos are trying to negotiate something, but their emissaries keep dying. We'll try to get somebody closer to Sadi to find out exactly what's going on. Let's see - what else? Oh, the Honeths have finally united behind one candidate-a pompous, arrogant jackass who's offended just about everybody in Tol Honeth. They'll try to buy the crown for him, but he'd be hopelessly incompetent as emperor. Even with all their money, it's going to be difficult for them to put him on the throne. I guess that's about all, your Highness."

"I've had a letter from Islena in Val Alorn," Queen Porenn told him.

"Yes, your Highness," Javelin replied urbanely, "I know."

"Javelin, have you been reading my mail again?" she demanded with a sudden flash of irritation.

"Just trying to stay current with what's going on in the world, Porenn."

"I've told you to stop that."

"You didn't really expect me to do it, did you?" He seemed actually surprised.

She laughed. "You're impossible."

"Of course I am. I'm supposed to be."

"Can we get any help to Islena?"

"I'll put some people on it," he assured her. "We can probably work through Merel, the wife of the Earl of Trellheim. She's starting to show some signs of maturity and she's close to Islena."

"I think we'd better have a close look at our own intelligence service, too," Porenn suggested. "Let's pin down everyone who might have any connections with the Bear-cult. The time might come when we'll have to take steps."

Javelin nodded his agreement.

There was a light tapping at the door.

"Yes?" Porenn answered.

The door opened and a servant thrust his head into the room. "Excuse me, your Highness," he said, "but there's a Nadrak merchant here - a man named Yarblek. He says he wants to discuss the salmon run." The servant looked perplexed.

Queen Porenn straightened in her chair. "Send him in," she ordered, "at once."

Chapter Nine

THE SPEECHES WERE over. The orations that had caused Princess Ce'Nedra such agony had done their work, and she found herself less and less in the center of things. At first the days opened before her full of glorious freedom.

The dreadful anxiety that had filled her at the prospect of addressing vast crowds of men two or three times a day was gone now. Her nervous exhaustion disappeared, and she no longer awoke in the middle of the night trembling and terrified. For almost an entire week she reveled in it, luxuriated in it. Then, of course, she became dreadfully bored.

The army she had gathered in Arendia and northern Tolnedra moved like a great sea in the foothills of Ulgoland. The Mimbrate knights, their armor glittering in the bright sunlight and their long, streaming, many-colored pennons snapping in the breeze, moved at the forefront of the host, and behind them, spreading out across the rolling green hills, marched the solid mass of Ce'Nedra's infantry, Sendars, Asturians, Rivans, and a few Chereks. And there, solidly in the center, forming the very core, marched the gleaming ranks of the legions of Imperial Tolnedra, their crimson standards aloft and the white plumes on their helmets waving in time to their measured steps. It was very stirring for the first few days to ride at the head of the enormous force, moving at her command toward the east, but the novelty of it all soon wore thin.

Princess Ce'Nedra's gradual drift away from the center of command was largely her own fault. The decisions now had to do more often than not with logistics - tedious little details concerning bivouac areas and field-kitchens - and Ce'Nedra found discussions of such matters tiresome. Those details, however, dictated the snail's pace of her army.

Quite suddenly, to everyone's astonishment, King Fulrach of Sendaria became the absolute commander of the host. It was he who decided how far they would march each day, when they would rest and where they would set up each night's encampment. His authority derived directly from the fact that the supply wagons were his. Quite early during the march down through northern Arendia, the dumpy-looking Sendarian monarch had taken one look at the rather sketchy plans the Alorn kings had drawn up for feeding the troops, had shaken his head in disapproval, and then had taken charge of that aspect of the campaign himself.

Sendaria was a land of farms, and her storehouses bulged. Moreover, at certain seasons, every road and lane in Sendaria crawled with wagons. With an

almost
casual efficiency, King Fulrach issued a few orders, and soon whole caravans of
heavily laden wagons moved down through Arendia to Tolnedra and then turned
eastward to follow the army. The pace of the army was dictated by those creaking
supply wagons.
They were only a few days into the Ulgo foothills when the full weight of King
Fulrach's authority became clear.
"Fulrach," King Rhodar of Drasnia objected when the King of the Sendars called a
halt for yet another rest period, "if we don't move any faster than this, it
will take us all summer to get to the eastern escarpment."
"You're exaggerating, Rhodar," King Fulrach replied mildly. "We're making pretty
good time. The supply wagons are heavy, and the wagon horses have to be rested
every hour."
"This is impossible," Rhodar declared. "I'm going to pick up the per,"
"That's up to you, of course." The brown-bearded Sendar shrugged, coolly eyeing
Rhodar's vast paunch. "But if you exhaust my wagon horses today, you won't eat
tomorrow."
And that ended that.
The going in the steep passes of Ulgoland was even slower. Ce'Nedra entered that
land of thick forests and rocky crags with apprehension. She vividly remembered
the flight with Grul the Eldrak and the attacks of the Algroths and the Hrulgin
that had so terrified her that previous winter. There were few meetings with the
monsters that lurked in the Ulgo mountains, however. The army was so large that
even the fiercest creatures avoided it. Mandorallen, the Baron of Vo Mandor,
rather regretfully reported only brief sightings.
"Mayhap if I were to ride a day's march in advance of our main force, I might
find opportunity to engage some of the more frolicsome beasts," he mused aloud
one evening, staring thoughtfully into the fire.
"You never get enough, do you?" Barak asked him pointedly.
"Never mind, Mandorallen," Polgara told the great knight. "The creatures aren't
hurting us, and the Gorim of Ulgo would be happier if we didn't bother them."
Mandorallen sighed.
"Is he always like that?" King Anheg asked Barak curiously.
"You have absolutely no idea," Barak replied.
The slow march through Ulgoland, regardless of how much it chafed Rhodar, Brand,
and Anheg, did, however, conserve the strength of the army, and they

came down
onto the plains of Algaria in surprisingly good shape.
"We'll go on to the Algarian Stronghold," King Rhodar decided as the army poured
down out of the last pass and fanned out across the rolling grasslands. "We need
to regroup a bit, and I don't see any point in moving to the base of the
escarpment until the engineers are ready for us. Besides, I'd prefer not to
announce the size of our army to any Thull who happens to glance down from the
top of the cliff."
And so, in easy stages, the army marched across Algaria, trampling a mile-wide
swath through the tall grass. Vast herds of cattle paused briefly in their
grazing to watch with mild-eyed astonishment as the horde marched by, then
returned to their feeding under the protective watch of mounted Algar clansmen.
The encampment that was set up around the towering Stronghold in south central
Algaria stretched for miles, and the watch fires at night seemed almost a
reflection of the stars. Once she was comfortably quartered in the Stronghold,
Princess Ce'Nedra found herself even more removed from the day-to-day command of
her troops. Her hours seemed filled with tedium. This is not to say that she did
not receive reports. A rigorous schedule of training was instituted, in part
because large portions of the army were not professional soldiers, but primarily
to avoid the idleness that led to discipline problems. Each morning, Colonel
Brendig, the sober-faced Sendarian baronet who seemed utterly devoid of humor,
reported the progress of the previous day's training with excruciating
thoroughness, along with all sorts of other tedious little details - most of
which Ce'Nedra found extremely distasteful.
One morning after Brendig had respectfully withdrawn, Ce'Nedra finally exploded.
"If he mentions the word 'sanitation' one more time, I think I'll scream," she
declared to Adara and Polgara. The princess was pacing up and down, flinging her
arms in the air in exasperation.
"It is fairly important in an army of this size, Ce'Nedra," Adara calmly pointed
out.
"But does he have to talk about it all the time? It's a disgusting subject."
Polgara, who had been patiently teaching the little blond waif, Errand, how to

lace up his boots, looked up, assessed Ce'Nedra's mood in a single glance, and
then made a suggestion. "Why don't you young ladies take some horses and go for
a ride? A bit of fresh air and exercise seems definitely to be in order."
It took only a short while for them to find the blond Mimbrate girl, Ariana.
They knew exactly where to look. It took a bit longer, however, to wrench her
away from her rapt contemplation of Lelldorin of Wildantor. Lelldorin, with the
aid of his cousin Torasin, was struggling to teach a group of Arendish serfs the
basics of archery. Torasin, a fiery young Asturian patriot, had joined the army
late. There had been, Ce'Nedra gathered, some unpleasantness between two young
men, but the prospect of war and glory had finally been too much for Torasin to
resist. He had overtaken the army in the western foothills of Ulgoland, mounted
on a horse half dead from hard riding. His reconciliation with Lelldorin had
been emotional, and now the two were closer than ever. Ariana, however, watched
only Lelldorin. Her eyes glowed as she gazed at him with an adoration so totally
mindless that it was frightening.
The three girls, dressed in soft leather Algar riding clothes, cantered out
through the encampment in bright midmorning sunlight, followed inevitably by
Olban, youngest son of the Rivan Warder, and a detachment of guards. Ce'Nedra
did not know exactly what to make of Olban. Since a hidden Murgo had made an
attempt on her life in the Arendish forest, the young Rivan had appointed
himself the chief of her personal bodyguards, and absolutely nothing could move
him to abandon that duty. For some reason, he seemed almost grateful for the
opportunity to serve, and Ce'Nedra was glumly certain that only physical force
could make him stop.
It was a warm, cloudless day, and the blue sky stretched over the incredible
expanse of the Algarian plain, where tall grass bent before a vagrant breeze.
Once they were out of sight of the encampment, Ce'Nedra's spirits rose
enormously. She rode the white horse King Cho-Hag had given her, a patient,
even-tempered animal she had named Noble. Noble was probably not a good name for
him, since he was a lazy horse. A great part of his placidity arose from the

fact that his new owner was so tiny that she had virtually no weight. Moreover,
in an excess of affection, Ce'Nedra babied him outrageously, slipping apples and
bits of sweets to him whenever possible. As a result of his light exercise and
rich diet, Noble was developing a noticeable portliness.
In the company of her two friends, and trailed by the watchful young Olban, the
princess, mounted on her stout white horse, rode out across the grassland,
exulting in the sense of freedom their ride brought to her.
They reined in at the base of a long, sloping hih to rest their mounts. Noble,
pumping like a bellows, cast a reproachful look over his shoulder at his tiny
mistress, but she heartlessly ignored his unspoken complaint. "It's an
absolutely wonderful day for a ride," she exclamed enthusiastically.
Ariana sighed.
Ce'Nedra laughed at her. "Oh, come now, it's not as if Lelldorin were going
someplace, Ariana, and it's good for men to miss us a little once in a while."
Ariana smiled rather wanly, then sighed again.
"Perhaps it's not as good for us to miss them, however," Adara murmured without
any trace of a smile.
"What is that lovely fragrance?" Ce'Nedra asked suddenly.
Adam lifted her porcelain face to sniff at the light breeze, then suddenly
looked around as if trying to pinpoint their exact location. "Come with me," she
said with an uncharacteristic note of command in her voice, and she led them
around the base of the hill to the far side. About halfway up the grassy slope
there was a patch of law, dark green bushes covered with pale lavender flowers.
There had been that morning a hatch of blue butterflies, and the winged
creatures hovered in an eostatic cloud over the flowers. Without pausing, Adara
pressed her mount up the slope and swung down from her saddle. There with a low
cry she knelt almost reverently, gathering the bushes in her arms as if
embracing them.
When Ce'Nedra drew closer, she was amazed to see tears welling up in her gentle
friend's gray eyes, although Adara was actually smifing. "Whatever is wrong,
Adara?" she asked.
"They're my flowers," Adara replied in a vibrant voice. "I didn't realize that
they'd grow and spread this way."
"What are you talking about?"
"Garion created this flower last winter just for me. There was only

one - just
one. I saw it come into existence right there in his hand. I'd forgotten it
until just now. Look how far it's spread in just one season."
Ce'Nedra felt a sudden pang of jealousy. Garion had never created a flower for
her. She bent and pulled one of the lavender blooms from a bush, tugging perhaps
just a bit harder than necessary. "It's lopsided," she sniffed, looking at the
flower critically. Then she bit her lip, wishing she hadn't said that.
Adara gave her a quick look of protest.
"I'm only teasing, Adara," Ce'Nedra said quickly with a false little laugh. In
spite of herself, still wanting to find something else wrong with the flower,
she bent her face to the small, crooked blossom in her hand. Its fragrance
seemed to erase all of her cares and to lift her spirits tremendously.
Ariana had also dismounted, and she too was breathing in the gentle odor of the
flowers, although there was a slight frown on her face. "Might I gather some few
of thy blossoms, Lady Adara?" she inquired. "Methinks they have some strange
property concealed within their blushing petals that may be of some interest to
Lady Polgara - some healing agent too subtle for my limited familiarity with
unguents and aromatic herbs to discern."
Rather predictably, Ce'Nedra, having gone one way, suddenly reversed herself.
"Marvelous!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight. "Wouldn't it be
wonderful if your flower turned out to be a great medicine, Adara? Some
miraculous cure? We could call it 'Adara's rose,' and sick men would bless your
name forever."
"It doesn't exactly look like a rose, Ce'Nedra," Adara pointed out.
"Nonsense," Ce'Nedra brushed the distinction aside. "I'm supposed to be a queen,
after all, so if I say it's a rose, then it's a rose, and that's that. We'll
take the flowers back to Lady Polgara at once." She turned back to her tubby
horse, who was lazily regarding the flowers as if wondering whether or not to
eat a few of them. "Come, Noble," the princess said to him with extravagant
overstatement. "We'll gallop back to the Stronghold."
Noble winced visibly at the word "gallop."
Polgara examined the flowers carefully, but, to the disappointment of the
princess and her friends, she would not commit herself immediately concerning

their medicinal value. A bit subdued, the little princess returned quietly to
her quarters and her duties.
Colonel Brendig was awaiting her. Upon reflection, Ce'Nedra concluded that
Colonel Brendig was by far the most practical man she had ever met. No detail
was too small for him. In a lesser man, such concern with little things might
have been passed off as mere fussiness, but the colonel's belief that big things
were made up of little things gave his patient attention to detail a certain
dignity. He seemed to be everywhere in the camp; in his wake, tent-ropes were
tightened, cluttered heaps of equipment were arranged into neat stacks, and
casually open doublets were quickly buttoned up.
"I hope that her Majesty found her ride refreshing," the colonel said politely,
bowing as Ce'Nedra entered the room.
"Thank you, Colonel Brendig," the princess replied. "My majesty did." She was in
a whimsical frame of mind, and it was always a delight to tease this sober-faced
Sendar.
A brief smile touched Brendig's lips, and then he immediately got down to the
business of the midday report. "I'm pleased to advise your majesty that the
Drasnian engineers have nearly completed the hoists atop the escarpment," he
reported. "All that remains is the rigging of the counterweights which will help
to lift the Cherek warships."
"That's nice," Ce'Nedra said with the vacant, empty-headed smile she knew drove
him absolutely wild.
Brendig's jaw tightened slightly, but his face betrayed no other sign of his
momentary flash of irritation. "The Chereks are beginning to remove the masts
and rigging from their ships in preparation for the portage," he continued, "and
the fortified positions up on top of the escarpment are several days ahead of
schedule."
"How wonderful!" Ce'Nedra exclaimed, clapping her hands with a great show of
girlish delight.
"Your Majesty, please, " Brendig complained.
"I'm sorry, Colonel Brendig," Ce'Nedra apologized, affectionately patting his
hand. "For some reason you bring out the very worst in me. Don't you ever
smile?"
He looked at her with an absolutely straight face. "I am smiling, your Majesty,"

he said. "Oh - you have a visitor from Tolnedra."
"A visitor? Who?"
"A General Varana, the Duke of Anadile."
"Varana? Here? What on earth is he doing in Algaria? Is he alone?"
"There are a number of other Tolnedran gentlemen with him," Brendig replied.
"They aren't in uniform, but they have the general bearing of military men. They
say that they're here as private observers. General Varana expressed a desire to
pay his respects whenever it might be convenient."
"Of course, Colonel Brendig," Ce'Nedra said with an enthusiasm that was no
longer feigned. "Please send for him at once."
Ce'Nedra had known General Varana since her earliest childhood. He was a stocky
man with graying, curly hair and a stiff left knee that gave him a noticeable
limp. He was blessed with that wry, understated sense of humor so characteristic
of the Anadilian family. Of all the noble houses of Tolnedra, the Borunes were
most comfortable with the Anadiles. Both families were southern, for one thing,
and the Anadiles usually sided with the Borunes in disputes with the powerful
families of the north. Although Anadile was only a duchy, there had never been
any hint of subservience in the family's alliances with the Grand Dukes of the
House of Borune. Indeed, Anadilian dukes, more often than not, poked gentle fun
at their more powerful neighbors. Serious historians and statesmen had long
considered it a misfortune for the Empire that the talented House of Anadile had
not enough wealth to make a serious bid for the Imperial Throne.
When General Varana politely limped into the room where Ce'Nedra impatiently
awaited him, there was a faint smile hovering on his lips and a quizzical lift
to one of his eyebrows. "Your Majesty," he greeted her with a bow,
"Uncle Varana," the princess exclaimed, flying to embrace him. Varana was not,
in fact, her uncle, but she had always thought of him as such.
"What have you gone and done now, my little Ce'Nedra?" He laughed, enfolding her
in his thick-muscled arms. "You're turning the world upside-down, you know.
What's a Borune doing in the middle of Algaria with an Alorn army at her back?"
"I'm going to invade Mishrak ac Thull," she declared impishly.
"Really? Whatever for? Did King Gethell of Thulldom insult the House of Borune
in some way? I hadn't heard about it."
"It's an Alorn matter," Ce'Nedra replied airily.
"Oh, I see. That explains it, I suppose. Alorns don't need reasons for the

things they do."
"You're laughing at me," she accused him.
"Of course I am, Ce'Nedra. The Anadiles have been laughing at the Borunes for
thousands of years."
She pouted. "It's very serious, Uncle Varana."
"Naturally it is," he agreed, gently touching her out-thrust lower lip with one
thick finger, "but that's no reason not to laugh about it."
"You're impossible," Ce'Nedra said helplessly, laughing in spite of herself.
"What are you doing here?"
"Observing," he told her. "Generals do that a lot. You've got the only war
that's going on just now, so several of us thought we'd drop by and have a look.
Morin suggested it."
"My father's chamberlain?"
"I think that's his function, yes."
"Morin wouldn't do that - not on his own."
"Really? What astonishing news."
Ce'Nedra frowned, nibbling absently at a lock of her hair. Varana reached out
and took the lock out from between her teeth. "Morin doesn't do anything unless
my father tells him to," Ce'Nedra mused, once again lifting the curl to her
lips.
Varana took the lock out of her fingers again.
"Don't do that," she told him.
"Why not? That's the way I broke you of sucking your thumb."
"This is different. I'm thinking."
"Think with your mouth closed."
"This was my father's idea, wasn't it?"
"I wouldn't presume to say I knew the Emperor's mind," he replied.
"Well, I would. What's that old fox up to?"
"That's hardly respectful, child."
"You say you're here to observe?''
He nodded.
"And perhaps make a few suggestions?"
He shrugged. "If anyone cares to listen. I'm not here officially, you understand. Imperial policy forbids that. Your claim to the Riven throne is not
formally recognized in Tol Honeth."
She cast a sidelong glance at him through her thick eyelashes. "These suggestions you might make - if you happened to be near a Tolnedran legion that
seemed to need a bit of direction, is it at all possible that one of these
suggestions might be 'forward march?' "
"That situation might arise, yes," he admitted gravely.
"And you have a number of other officers of the general staff with you?"
"I think several of them do, in fact, serve occasionally on that body." His eyes
were twinkling with suppressed mirth.
Ce'Nedra lifted the lock again, and General Varana took it away from her once

more.
"How would you like to meet King Rhodar of Drasnia?" she asked him.
"I'd be honored to meet his Majesty."
"Why don't we go see him, then?"
"Why don't we?"
"Oh, I love you, Uncle." She laughed, throwing her arms about him again.
They found King Rhodar in conference with the other leaders of the army in a large airy chamber King Cho-Hag had set aside for their use. There was no longer any pretence of formality among the leaders of the army, and most of them sprawled in comfortable horsehide chairs, watching as the crimson-robed Rhodar measured off distances with a piece of string on a large map that covered one entire wall.
"It doesn't really seem all that far to me," he was saying to King Cho-Hag.
"That's because your map is flat, Rhodar," Cho-Hag replied. "The country's very hilly through there. Believe me, it will take three days."
King Rhodar made an indelicate sound of disgust. "I guess we'll have to give up the idea, then. I'd like to burn out those forts, but I'm not going to start ordering suicide missions. Three days' ride is just too far."
"Your Majesty," Ce'Nedra said politely.
"Yes, child?" Rhodar was still frowning at the map.
"I'd like for you to meet someone."
King Rhodar turned.
"Your Majesty," Ce'Nedra said formally, "may I present his Grace, the Duke of Anadile? General Varana, his Majesty, King Rhodar of Drasnia."
The two men bowed politely to each other, their eyes probing, assessing.
"The general's reputation precedes him," King Rhodar noted.
"But his Majesty's skill as a military man has been kept a secret," Varana replied.
"Do you think that satisfies the demands of courtesy?" Rhodar asked.
"If not, we can both lie a little bit later on about how excruciatingly polite we were to each other," Varana suggested.
King Rhodar flashed him a quick grin. "All right, what's Tolnedra's leading tactician doing in Algaria?"
"Observing, your Majesty."
"You're going to stick to that story?"
"Naturally. For political reasons, Tolnedra must maintain a neutral posture in this affair. I'm certain that Drasnian intelligence has briefed your Majesty on the realities of the situation. The five spies you have in the Imperial palace are thoroughly professional."
"Six, actually," King Rhodar noted in passing.

General Varana raised one eyebrow. "I suppose we should have known," he said.
"It changes from time to time." Rhodar shrugged. "You know our strategic situation?"
"I've been filled in, yes."
"What's your assessment - as an observer?"
"You're in trouble."
"Thanks," Rhodar said dryly.
"The numbers dictate that you take a defensive posture."
Rhodar shook his head. "That might work if all we had to worry about was Taur Urgas and the Southern Murgos, but 'Zakath is landing more troops at Thull Zelik every day. If we fortify and try to sit tight, and he decides to move against us, he'll be able to bury us in Malloreans by autumn. The key to the whole situation is putting Anheg's fleet into the Sea of the East to stop those troop ships. We're going to have to gamble a bit in order to pull that off."
Varana studied the map. "If you're going to go down the River Mardu, you'll have to neutralize the Thullish capital," he said, pointing at T'hull Mardu. "It's an island - like Tol Honeth - and it's right in the middle of the river. You'll never get a fleet past it as long as a hostile force holds it. You'll have to take the city."
"That had already occurred to us," King Anheg said from where he sprawled in his chair with his ever-present ale cup in his hand.
"You know Anheg?" Rhodar asked the general.
Varana nodded. "By reputation," he replied. He bowed to King Anheg. "Your Majesty," he said.
"General," Anheg responded, inclining his head.
"If Thull Mardu is heavily defended, it will cost you a third of your army to take it," Varana continued.
"We're going to lure the garrison out," Rhodar told him.
"How?"
"That's going to be up to Korodullin and me," King Cho-Hag said quietly. "Once we get to the top of the escarpment, the Mimbrate knights are going to move out and crush every city and town in the uplands, and my clansmen will strike down into the farming regions to burn every standing crop."
"They'll realize that's only a diversion, your Majesty," Varana pointed out.
"Naturally," Brand agreed in his rumbling voice, "but a diversion from what? We don't think they'll fully realize that Thull Mardu is our main objective. We'll try our best to make our depredations as general as possible. The

loss of those towns and crops might be acceptable at first, but it won't be long before they'll have to take steps to protect them."
"And you think they'll pull the garrison out of Thull Mardu to meet you?"
"That's the idea," King Rhodar replied.
Varana shook his head. "They'll bring Murgos up from Rak Goska and Malloreans from Thull Zelik. Then instead of a quick raid on Thull Mardu, you'll have a general war on your hands."
"That's what you'd do, General Varana," King Rhodar disagreed, "but you aren't 'Zakath or Taur Urgas. Our strategy's based on our assessment of those two men. Neither of them will commit his forces unless he's convinced that we pose a major threat. Each of them wants to save as much of his army as possible. In their view, we're only an incidental annoyance - and an excuse to put an army into the field. For them, the real war starts when they attack each other. Each of them will hold back, and King Gethell of the Thulls will have to meet us on his own with only token support from the Murgos and the Malloreans. If we move fast enough, we'll have Anheg's fleet into the Sea of the East and all our troops pulled back to the escarpment before they realize what we're up to."
"And then?"
"And then Taur Urgas will stay in Rak Goska as if his foot were nailed to the floor." King Anheg chuckled. "I'll be in the Sea of the East drowning Malloreans by the shipload, and he'll be cheering me on every step of the way."
"And 'Zakath won't dare risk those troops he already has at Thull Zelik by moving against us," Brand added. "If he loses too many men, Taur Urgas will have the upper hand."
General Varana considered that. "A three-way deadlock, then," he mused. "Three armies in the same region, and not one of them willing to move."
"The very best kind of war." King Rhodar grinned. "Nobody gets hurt."
"Tactically, your only problem is gauging the severity of your raids before you attack Thull Mardu," Varana noted. "They'll have to be serious enough to pull the garrison out of the city, but not so serious as to alarm 'Zakath or Taur Urgas. That's a very fine line to walk, gentlemen."
Rhodar nodded. "That's why we're so delighted to have Tolnedra's foremost tactician here to advise us," he said, bowing floridly.
"Please, your Majesty," General Varana interposed, lifting one

hand."Suggest, not advise. An observer can only suggest. The term advice implies partisanship that is not in line with the Empire's position of strict neutrality."
"Ah," King Rhodar said. He turned to King Cho-Hag. "We must make arrangements for the comfort of the Imperial suggester and his staff," he declared with a broad grin.
Ce'Nedra watched with secret delight as these two brilliant men began what was obviously going to be a firm friendship. "I'll leave you gentlemen to your entertainments," she told them. "Military discussions give me a headache, so I'll rely on you not to get me in trouble." She curtsied to them with a winsome little smile and withdrew.
Two days later, Relg arrived from Ulgoland with the contingent of his leaf mailed countrymen sent by the Gorim. Taiba, who had hovered silently in the background since the army had arrived at the Stronghold, joined Ce'Nedra and Lady Polgara to greet the Ulgos as the wagons which carried them creaked up the hill toward the main gate. The beautiful Marag woman wore a plain, even severe, linen dress, but her violet eyes were glowing. Relg, his cowled leaf mail shirt covering his head and shoulders like lizard skin, climbed down from the lead wagon and only perfunctorily answered the greetings of Barak and Mandorallen.
His large eyes searched the group gathered at the gate until they found Taiba, and then a kind of tension seemed to go out of him. Without speaking, he walked toward her. Their meeting was silent, and they did not touch, though Taiba's hand moved involuntarily toward him several times. They stood in the golden sunlight with their eyes lost in each other's faces, drawing about them a profound kind of privacy that absolutely ignored the presence of others. Taiba's eyes remained constantly on Relg's face, but there was in them nothing of that vacant, placid adoration that filled Ariana's eyes when she looked at Lelldorin.
There was rather a question - even a challenge. Relg's answering look was the troubled gaze of a man torn between two overpowering compulsions. Ce'Nedra watched them for a few moments, but was finally forced to avert her eyes.
The Ulgos were quartered in dim, cavernous rooms built into the foundations of

the Stronghold where Relg could lead his countrymen through the painful process
of adjusting their eyes to the light of day and training them to ignore the
unreasoning panic which assailed all Ulgos when they were exposed to the open
sky.
That evening another smaller contingent arrived from the south. Three men, two
in white robes and one in filthy rags, appeared at the gate demanding entrance.
The Algars at the gate admitted them immediately, and one guard was sent to Lady
Polgara's candlelit apartment to inform her of their arrival.
"You'd better bring them here," she advised the poor man, who was ashen-faced
and trembling. "They haven't been in the company of other men for a very long
time, and crowds might make them nervous."
"At once, Lady Polgara," the shaking Algar said, bowing. He hesitated for a
moment. "Would he really do that to me?" he blurted.
"Would who do what to you?"
"The ugly one. He said that he was going to-" The man stopped, suddenly
realizing to whom he was speaking. His face turned red. "I don't think I should
repeat what he said, Lady Polgara - but it was an awful thing to threaten a man
with."
"Oh," she said. "I believe I know what you mean. It's one of his favorite
expressions. I think you're safe. He only says that to get people's attention.
I'm not even sure you can do it to somebody and keep him alive at the same
time."
"I'll bring them at once, Lady Polgara."
The sorceress turned to look at Ce'Nedra, Adara, and Ariana, who had joined her
for supper. "Ladies," she said gravely, "we're about to have guests. Two of them
are the sweetest men in the world, but the third is a bit uncontrolled in his
use of language. If you're at all sensitive about such things, you'd better
leave."
Ce'Nedra, remembering her encounter with the three in the Vale of Aldur, rose
immediately.
"Not you, Ce'Nedra," Polgara told her. "You'll have to stay, I'm afraid."
Ce'Nedra swallowed hard. "I really would leave, if I were you," she advised her
friends.
"Is he that bad?" Adara asked. "I've heard men swear before."
"Not like this one," Ce'Nedra warned.
"You've managed to make me very curious." Adara smiled. "I think I'll

stay."
"Don't say I didn't warn you," Ce'Nedra murmured.
Beltira and Belkira were as saintly as Ce'Nedra remembered them, but the misshapen Beldin was even uglier and nastier. Ariana fled before he had even finished greeting Lady Polgara. Adara turned deathly pale, but bravely kept her seat. Then the hideous little man turned to greet Ce'Nedra with a few raucous questions that made the princess blush to the roots of her hair. Adara prudently withdrew at that point.
"What's wrong with your wenches, Pol?" Beldin asked innocently, scratching at his matted hair. "They seemed a little vaporish."
"They're well-bred ladies, Uncle," Polgara replied. "Certain expressions are offensive to their ears."
"Is that all?" He laughed coarsely. "This redheaded one seems a bit less delicate."
"Your remarks offend me as much as they offend my companions, Master Beldin," Ce'Nedra retorted stiffly, "but I don't think I'll be routed by the foul mouthings of an ill-bred hunchback."
"Not bad," he complimented her, sprawling uncouthly in a chair, "but you've got to learn to relax. An insult's got a certain rhythm and flow to it that you haven't quite picked up yet."
"She's very young, Uncle," Polgara reminded him.
Beldin leered at the princess. "Isn't she, though?"
"Stop that," Polgara told him.
"We've come-"
"-to join your expedition," the twins said.
"Beldin feels-"
"-that you might encounter Grolims, and-"
"-need our help."
"Isn't that pathetic?" Beldin demanded. "They still haven't learned to talk straight." He looked at Polgara. "Is this all the army you've got?"
"The Chereks will be joining us at the river," she replied.
"You should have talked faster," he told Ce'Nedra. "You haven't got nearly enough men. Southern Murgos proliferate like maggots in dead meat, and Malloreans spawn like blowflies."
"We'll explain our strategy to you in good time, Uncle," Polgara promised him.
"We are not going to meet the armies of Angarak head on. What we're doing here is only diversionary."
He grinned a hideous little grin. "I'd have given a lot to see your face when you found out that Belgarath had slipped away from you," he said.
"I wouldn't dwell on that, Master Beldin," Ce'Nedra advised. "Lady

Polgara was
not pleased by Belgarath's decision, and it might not be prudent to raise it
again."
"I've seen Pol's little tantrums before." He shrugged. "Why don't you send
somebody out for a pig or a sheep, Pol? I'm hungry."
"It's customary to cook it first, Uncle."
He looked puzzled. "What for?" he asked.

Chapter Ten

THREE DAYS LATER the army began to move out from the Algar Stronghold toward the
temporary encampment the Algars had erected on the east bank of the Aldur River.
The troops of each nation moved in separate broad columns, trampling a vast
track through the knee-high grass. In the center column the legions of Tolnedra,
standards raised, marched with parade-ground perfection. The appearance of the
legions had improved noticeably since the arrival of General Varana and his
staff. The mutiny on the plains near Tol Vordue had given Ce'Nedra a large body
of men, but no senior officers, and once the danger of surprise inspections was
past, a certain laxity had set in. General Varana had not mentioned the rust
spots on the breastplates nor the generally unshaven condition of the troops.
His expression of mild disapproval had seemed to be enough. The hard-bitten
sergeants who now commanded the legions had taken one look at his face and had
immediately taken steps. The rust spots vanished, and shaving regularly once
again became popular. There were, to be sure, a few contusions here and there on
some freshly shaved faces, mute evidence that the heavy-fisted sergeants had
found it necessary to vigorously persuade their troops that the holiday was
over.
To one side of the legions rode the glittering Mimbrate knights, their
varicolored pennons snapping in the breeze from the up-raised forest of their
lances. Their faces shone with enthusiasm and little else. Ce'Nedra privately
suspected that a large part of their fearsome reputation stemmed from that
abysmal lack of anything remotely resembling thought. With only a little
encouragement, a force of Mimbrates would cheerfully mount an assault on winter
or a changing tide.

On the other flank of the marching legions came the green - and brown - clad bowmen of Asturia. The placement was quite deliberate. The Asturians were no more blessed with intelligence than their Mimbrate cousins, and it was generally considered prudent to interpose other troops between the two Arendish forces to avoid unpleasantness.

Beyond the Asturians marched the grim-faced Rivans, all in gray, and accompanying them were the few Chereks who were not with the fleet, which even now was in the process of being prepared for the portage to the base of the escarpment. Flanking the Mimbrates marched the Sendarian militiamen in their homemade uniforms, and at the rear of the host, the creaking lines of King Fulrach's supply wagons stretched back to the horizon. The Algar clans, however, did not ride in orderly columns, but rather in little groups and clusters as they drove herds of spare horses and half wild cattle along on the extreme flanks of the host.

Ce'Nedra, in her armor and mounted on her white horse, rode in the company of General Varana. She was trying, without much success, to explain her cause to him.

"My dear child," the general said finally, "I'm a Tolnedran and a soldier. Neither of those conditions encourages me to accept any kind of mysticism. My primary concerns at this moment have to do with feeding this multitude. Your supply lines stretch all the way back across the mountains and then up through Arendia. That's a very long way, Ce'Nedra."

"King Fulrach's taken care of that, Uncle," she told him rather smugly. "All the time we've been marching, his Sendars have been freighting supplies along the Great North Road to Aldurford and then barging them upriver to the camp. There are whole acres of supply dumps waiting for us."

General Varana nodded approvingly. "It appears that Sendars make perfect quartermasters," he observed. "Is he bringing weapons as well?"

"I think they said something about that," Ce'Nedra replied. "Arrows, spare lances for the knights, that sort of thing. They seemed to know what they were doing, so I didn't ask too many questions."

"That's foolish, Ce'Nedra," Varana said bluntly. "When you're running an army, you should know every detail."

"I'm not running the army, Uncle," she pointed out. "I'm leading it.

King
Rhodar's running it."
"And what will you do if something happens to him?"
Ce'Nedra suddenly went cold.
"You are going to war, Ce'Nedra, and people do get killed and injured in wars.
You'd better start taking an interest in what's going on around you, my little
princess. Going off to war with your head wrapped in a pillow isn't going to
improve your chances of success, you know." He gave her a very direct look.
"Don't chew your fingernails, Ce'Nedra," he added. "It makes your hands
unsightly."
The encampment at the river was vast, and in the very center stood King
Fulrach's main supply dump, a virtual city of tents and neatly stacked
equipment. A long string of flat-bottomed barges were moored to the riverbank,
patiently waiting to be unloaded.
"Your people have been busy," King Rhodar observed to the dumpy-looking
Sendarian monarch as they rode along a narrow alleyway between mountainous heaps
of canvas-covered produce and stacks of stoutly boxed equipment. "How did you
know what to have them bring?"
"I took notes while we were coming down through Arendia," King Fulrach replied.
"It wasn't too hard to see what we were going to need - boots, arrows, spare
swords, and the like. At present, about all we're bringing in is food. The Algar
herds will provide fresh meat, but men get sick on a steady diet of nothing but
meat."
"You've already got enough food here to feed the army for a year," King Anheg
noted.
Fulrach shook his head. "Forty-five days," he corrected meticulously. "I want
thirty days' worth here and two weeks' worth in the forts the Drasnians are
building up on top of the escarpment. That's our margin of safety. As long as
the barges replenish our food supplies daily, we'll always have that much on
hand. Once you decide what your goals are, the rest is just simple mathematics."
"How do you know how much a man's going to eat in one day?" Rhodar asked, eyeing
the high-piled foodstuffs. "Some days I'm hungrier than others."
Fulrach shrugged. "It averages out. Some eat more, some eat less; but in the
end, it all comes out about the same."
"Fulrach, sometimes you're so practical, you almost make me sick,"

Anheg said.
"Somebody has to be."
"Don't you Sendars have any sense of adventure? Don't you ever do something
without planning it all out in advance?"
"Not if we can help it," the King of Sendaria replied mildly.
Near the center of the supply-dump a number of large pavilions had been erected
for the use of the leaders of the army and their supporting staff. About
midafternoon, after she had bathed and changed clothes, Princess Ce'Nedra went
over to the main tent to see what was happening.
"They're anchored about a mile downriver," Barak was reporting to his cousin.
"They've been here for about four days now. Greldik's more or less in charge."
"Greldik?" Anheg looked surprised. "He doesn't have any official position."
"He knows the river." Barak shrugged. "Over the years he's sailed just about any
place where there's water and a chance to make some profit. He tells me that the
sailors have been drinking pretty steadily since they anchored. They know what's
coming."
Anheg chuckled. "We'd better not disappoint them, then. Rhodar, how much longer
will it be before your engineers are ready to start lifting my ships ap the
escarpment?"
"A week or so," King Rhodar replied, looking up from his midafternoon snack.
"It will be close enough," Anheg concluded. He turned back to Barak. "Tell
Greldik that we'll start the portage tomorrow morning - before the sailors have
time to sober up."
Ce'Nedra had not fully understood the meaning of the word "portage" until she
arrived the following morning at the riverbank to find the sweating Chereks
hauling their ships out of the water and manhandling them along by main strength
on wooden rollers. She was appalled at the amount of effort required to move a
ship even a few inches.
She was not alone in that. Durnik the smith took one shocked look at the
procedure and immediately went looking for King Anheg. "Excuse me, your Honor,"
he said respectfully, "but isn't this bad for the boats -as well as the men?"
"Ships," Anheg corrected. "They're called ships. A boat is something else."
"Whatever you call them - won't banging them along over those logs spring their
seams?"

Anheg shrugged. "They all leak quite a bit anyway," he replied. "And it's always
been done this way."
Durnik quickly saw the futility of trying to talk to the King of Cherek. He went
instead to Barak, who was rather glumly considering the huge ship his crew had
rowed upriver to meet him. "She looks very impressive when she's afloat," the
big red-bearded man was saying to his friend, Captain Greldik, "but I think
she'll be even more impressive when we have to pick her up and carry her."
"You're the one who wanted the biggest warship afloat," Greldik reminded him
with a broad smirk. "You'll have to buy enough ale to float that whale of yours
before your crew's drunk enough to try to portage her - not to mention the fact
that it's customary for a captain to join in when the time comes to portage."
"Stupid custom," Barak growled sourly.
"I'd say that you're in for a bad week, Barak." Greldik's grin grew broader.
Durnik took the two seamen aside and began talking earnestly with them, drawing
diagrams on the sandy riverbank with a stick. The more he talked, the more
interested they became.
What emerged from their discussions a day later were a pair of lowslung cradles
with a dozen wheels on each side. As the rest of the Chereks jeered, the two
ships were carefully slid out of the water onto the cradles and firmly lashed in
place. The jeering faded noticeably, however, when the crews of the two ships
began trundling their craft across the plain. Hettar, who happened to ride by,
watched for a few moments with a puzzled frown. "Why are you pulling them by
hand," he asked, "when you're in the middle of the largest herd of horses in the
world?"
Barak's eyes went very wide, and then an almost reverent grin dawned on his
face.
The jeers that had risen as Barak's and Greldik's ships had been maneuvered onto
their wheeled carriages turned rather quickly into angry mutterings as the
carnages, pulled by teams of Algar horses, rolled effortlessly toward the
escarpment past men straining with every ounce of strength to move their ships a
few inches at a time. To leave it all to artistry, Barak and Greldik ordered
their men to lounge indolently on the decks of their ships, drinking

ale and
playing dice.
King Anheg stared very hard at his impudently grinning cousin as the big ship
rolled past. His expression was profoundly offended. "That's going too far!" he
exploded, jerking off his dented crown and throwing it down on the ground.
King Rhodar put on a perfectly straight face. "I'd be the first to admit that
it's probably not nearly as good as moving them by hand, Anheg. I'm sure there
are some rather profound philosophical reasons for all that sweating and
grunting and cursing, but it is faster, wouldn't you say? And we really ought to
move right along with this."
"It's unnatural," Anheg growled, still glaring at the two ships, which were
already several hundred yards away.
Rhodar shrugged. "Anything's unnatural the first time you try it."
"I'll think about it," Anheg said darkly.
"I wouldn't think for too long," Rhodar suggested. "Your popularity as a monarch
is going to go downhill with every mile - and Barak's the sort of man who'll
parade that contraption of his back and forth in front of your sailors every
step of the way to the escarpment."
"He would do that, wouldn't he?"
"I think you can count on it."
King Anheg sighed bitterly. "Go fetch that unwhole-somely clever Sendarian
blacksmith," he sourly instructed one of his men. "Let's get this over with."
Later that day the leaders of the army gathered again in the main tent for a
strategy meeting. "Our biggest problem now is to conceal the size of our
forces," King Rhodar told them all. "Instead of marching everybody to the
escarpment all at once and then milling around at the base of the cliff, it
might be better to move the troops in small contingents and have them go
directly up to the forts on top as soon as they arrive."
"Will such a piecemeal approach not unduly delay our progress?" King Korodullin
asked.
"Not all that much," Rhodar replied. "We'll move your knights and Cho-Hag's
clansmen up first so you can start burning cities and crops. That will give the
Thulls something to think about beside how many infantry regiments we're
bringing up. We don't want them to start counting noses."
"Couldn't we build false campfires and so on to make it appear that we have more

men?" Lelldorin suggested brightly.
"The whole idea is to make our army appear smaller, not bigger," Brand explained
gently in his deep voice. "We don't want to alarm Taur Urgas or 'Zakath
sufficiently to make them commit their forces. It will be an easy campaign if
all we have to deal with are King Gethell's Thulls. If the Murgos and the
Malloreans intervene, we'll be in for a serious fight."
"And that's the one thing we definitely want to avoid," King Rhodar added.
"Oh," Lelldorin said, a bit abashed, "I didn't think of that." A slow flush rose
in his cheeks.
"Lelldorin," Ce'Nedra said, hoping to help him cover his embarrassment, "I think
I'd like to go out and visit with the troops for a bit. Would you accompany me?"
"Of course, your Majesty," the young Asturian agreed, quickly rising to his
feet.
"That's not a bad idea," Rhodar agreed. "Encourage them a bit, Ce'Nedra. They've
walked a long way, and their spirits may be sagging."
Lelldorin's cousin Torasin, dressed in his customary black doublet and hose,
also rose to his feet. "I'll go along, if I may," he said. He grinned rather
impudently at King Korodullin. "Asturians are good plotters, but rather poor
strategists, so I probably wouldn't be able to add much to the discussions."
The King of Arendia smiled at the young man's remark. "Thou art pert, young
Torasin, but methinks thou art not so fervent an enemy of the crown of Arendia
as thou dost pretend."
Torasin bowed extravagantly, still grinning. Once they were outside the tent, he
turned to Lelldorin. "I could almost learn to like that man - if it weren't for
all those thees and thous," he declared.
"It's not so bad - once you get used to it," Lelldorin replied.
Torasin laughed.
"If I had someone as pretty as Lady Ariana for a friend, she could thee me and
thou me all she wanted," he said. He looked archly at Ce'Nedra. "Which troops
did you wish to encourage, your Majesty?" he bantered.
"Let's visit your Asturian countrymen," she decided. "I don't think I'd care to
take you two into the Mimbrate camp - unless your swords had been taken away
from you and your mouths had been bricked up."
"Don't you trust us?" Lelldorin asked.
"I know you," she replied with a little toss of her head. "Where are the

Asturians encamped?"
"That way," Torasin answered, pointing toward the south end of the supply dump.
Smells of cooking were carried by the breeze from the Sendarian field kitchens, and those smells reminded the princess of something. Instead of randomly circulating among the Asturian tents, she found herself quite deliberately searching for some specific people.
She found Lammer and Detton, the two serfs who had joined her army on the outskirts of Vo Wacune, finishing their afternoon meal in front of a patched tent. They both looked better fed than they had when she had first seen them, and they were no longer dressed in rags. When they saw her approaching, they scrambled awkwardly to their feet.
"Well, my friends," she asked, trying to put them at ease, "how do you find army life?"
"We don't have anything to complain about, your Ladyship," Detton replied respectfully.
"Except for all the walking," Lammer added. "I hadn't realized that the world was this big."
"They gave us boots," Detton told her, holding up one foot so that she could see his boot. "They were a bit stiff at first, but the blisters have all healed now."
"Are you getting enough to eat?" Ce'Nedra asked them.
"Plenty," Lammer said. "The Sendars even cook it for us. Did you know that there aren't any serfs in the kingdom of the Sendars, my Lady? Isn't that astonishing? It gives a man something to think about."
"It does indeed," Detton agreed. "They grow all that food, and everybody always has plenty to eat and clothes to wear and a house to sleep in, and there's not a single serf in the whole kingdom."
"I see that they've given you equipment, too," the princess said, noting that the two now wore conical leather helmets and stiff leather vests.
Lammer nodded and pulled off his helmet. "It's got steel plates in it to keep a man from getting his brains knocked out," he told her. "They lined us all up as soon as we got here and gave every man a helmet and these hard leather tunics."
"They gave each of us a spear and a dagger, too," Detton said.
"Have they showed you how to use them?" Ce'Nedra asked.
"Not yet, your Ladyship," Detton replied. "We've been concentrating on learning how to shoot arrows."

Ce'Nedra turned to her two companions. "Could you see that somebody takes care
of that?" she said. "I want to e sure that everybody knows how to defend
himself, at least."
"We'll see to it, your Majesty," Lelldorin answered.
Not far away, a young serf was seated cross-legged in front of another tent. He
lifted a handmade flute to his lips and began to play. Ce'Nedra had heard some
of the finest musicians in the world performing at the palace in Tol Honeth, but
the serf boy's flute caught at her heart and brought tears to her eyes. His
melody soared toward the azure sky like an unfettered lark.
"How exquisite," she exclaimed.
Lammer nodded. "I don't know much about music," he said, "but the boy seems to
play well. It's a shame he's not right in the head."
Ce'Nedra looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"
"He comes from a village in the southern part of the forest of Arendia. I'm told
it's a very poor village and that the lord of the region is very harsh with his
serfs. The boy's an orphan, and he was put to watching the cows when he was
young. One time one of the cows strayed, and the boy was beaten half to death.
He can't talk any more."
"Do you know his name?"
"Nobody seems to know it," Detton replied. "We take turns looking out for him -
making sure he's fed and has a place to sleep. There's not much else you can do
for him."
A small sound came from Lelldorin, and Ce'Nedra was startled to see tears
streaming openly down the earnest young man's face.
The boy continued his playing, his melody heartbreakingly true, and his eyes
sought out Ce'Nedra's and met them with a kind of grave recognition.
They did not stay much longer. The princess knew that her rank and position made
the two serfs uncomfortable. She had made sure that they were all right and that
her promise to them was being kept, and that was all that really mattered.
As Ce'Nedra, Lelldorin, and Torasin walked toward the camp of the Sendars, they
suddenly heard the sound of squabbling on the other side of a large tent.
"I'll pile it any place I want to," one man was saying belligerently.
"You're blocking the street," another man replied.
"Street?" the first snorted. "What are you talking about? This isn't a town.
There aren't any streets."
"Friend," the second man explained with exaggerated patience, "we have to bring

the wagons through here to get to the main supply dump. Now please move your
equipment so I can get through. I still have a lot to do today."
"I'm not going to take orders from a Sendarian teamster who's found an easy way
to avoid fighting. I'm a soldier."
"Really?" the Sendar replied dryly. "How much fighting have you seen?"
"I'll fight when the time comes."
"It may come quicker than you'd expected if you don't get your gear out of my
way. If I have to get down off this wagon to move it myself, it's likely to make
me irritable."
"I'm all weak with fright," the soldier retorted sarcastically.
"Are you going to move it?"
"No."
"I tried to warn you, friend," the teamster said in a resigned tone.
"If you touch my gear, I'll break your head."
"No. You'll try to break my head."
There was a sudden sound of scuffling and several heavy blows. "Now get up and
move your gear like I told you to," the teamster said. "I don't have all day to
stand around and argue with you."
"You hit me when I wasn't looking," the soldier complained.
"Do you want to watch the next one coming?"
"All right, don't get excited. I'm moving it."
"I'm glad we understand each other."
"Does that sort of thing happen very often?" Ce'Nedra asked quietly.
Torasin, grinning broadly, nodded. "Some of your troops feel the need to
bluster, your Majesty," he replied, "and the Sendarian wagoneers usually don't
have the time to listen. Fistfights and streetbrawling are second nature to
those fellows, so their squabbles with the soldiers almost always end up the
same way. It's very educational, really."
"Men!" Ce'Nedra said.
In the camp of the Sendars they met Durnik. With him there was an oddly matched
pair of young men.
"A couple of old friends," Durnik said as he introduced them. "Just arrived on
the supply barges. I think you've met Rundorig, Princess. He was at Faldor's
farm when we visited there last winter."
Ce'Nedra did in fact remember Rundorig. The tall, hulking young man, she
recalled, was the one who was going to marry Garion's childhood sweetheart,
Zubrette. She greeted him warmly and gently reminded him that they had met
before. Rundorig's Arendish background made his mind move rather slowly. His
companion, however, was anything but slow. Durnik introduced him as Doroon,

another of Garion's boyhood friends. Doroon was a small, wiry young man with a protruding Adam's apple and slightly bulging eyes. After a few moments of shyness, his tongue began to run away with him. It was a bit hard to follow Doroon. His mind flitted from idea to idea, and his mouth raced along breathlessly, trying to keep up.

"It was sort of rough going up in the mountains, your Ladyship," he replied in answer to her question about their trip from Sendaria, "what with how steep the road was and all. You'd think that as long as the Tolnedrans were building a highway, they'd have picked leveler ground - but they seem to be fascinated by straight lines - only that's not always the easiest way. I wonder why they're like that." The fact that Ce'Nedra herself was Tolnedran seemed not to have registered on Doroon.

"You came along the Great North Road?" she asked him.

"Yes - until we got to a place called Aldurford. That's a funny kind of name, isn't it? Although it makes sense if you stop and think about it. But that was after we got out of the mountains where the Murgos attacked us. You've never seen such a fight."

"Murgos?" Ce'Nedra asked him sharply, trying to pin down his skittering thoughts.

He nodded eagerly. "The man who was in charge of the wagons - he's a great big fellow from Muros, I think he said - wasn't it Muros he said he came from, Rundorig? Or maybe it was Camaar - for some reason I always get the two mixed up. What was I talking about?"

"The Murgos," Durnik supplied helpfully.

"Oh, yes. Anyway, the man in charge of the wagons said that there had been a lot of Murgos in Sendaria before the war. They pretended that they were merchants, but they weren't - they were spies. When the war started, they all went up into the mountains, and now they come out of the woods and try to ambush our supply wagons - but we were ready for them, weren't we Rundorig? Rundorig hit one of the Murgos with a big stick when the Murgo rode past our wagon - knocked him clear off his horse. Whack! Just like that! Knocked him clear off his horse. I'll bet he was surprised." Doroon laughed a short little laugh, and then his tongue raced off again, describing in jerky, helter-skelter detail the trip from

Sendaria.
Princess Ce'Nedra was strangely touched by her meeting with Garion's two old friends. She felt, moreover, a tremendous burden of responsibility as she realized that she had reached into almost every life in the west with her campaign. She had separated husbands from their wives and fathers from their children; and she had carried simple men, who had never been further than the next village, a thousand leagues and more to fight in a war they probably did not even begin to understand.
The next morning the leaders of the army rode the few remaining leagues to the installations at the base of the escarpment. As they topped a rise, Ce'Nedra reined Noble in sharply and gaped in openmouthed astonishment as she saw the eastern escarpment for the first time. It was impossible! Nothing could be so vast! The great black cliff reared itself above them like an enormous wave of rock, frozen and forever marking the boundary between east and west, and seemingly blocking any possibility of ever passing in either direction. It immediately stood as a kind of stark symbol of the division between the two parts of the world - a division that could no more be resolved than that enormous cliff could be leveled.
As they rode closer, Ce'Nedra noted a great deal of bustling activity both at the foot of the escarpment and along its upper rim. Great hawsers stretched down from overhead, and Ce'Nedra saw elaborately intertwined pulleys along the foot of the huge cliffs.
"Why are the pulleys at the bottom?" King Anheg demanded suspiciously.
King Rhodar shrugged. "How should I know? I'm not an engineer."
"All right, if you're going to be that way about it, I'm not going to let your people touch a single one of my ships until somebody tells me why the pulleys are down here instead of up there."
King Rhodar sighed and beckoned to an engineer who was meticulously greasing a huge pulley block. "Have you got a sketch of the rigging handy?" the portly monarch asked the grease-spattered workman.
The engineer nodded, pulled a rolled sheet of grimy parchment out from under his tunic, and handed it to his king. Rhodar glanced at it and handed it to Anheg.
Anheg stared at the complex drawing, struggling to trace out which

line went
where, and more importantly why it went there. "I can't read this," he
complained.
"Neither can I," Rhodar told him pleasantly, "but you wanted to know why the
pulleys are down here instead of up there. The drawing tells you why."
"But I can't read it."
"That's not my fault."
Not far away a cheer went up as a boulder half the size of a house and entwined
in a nest of ropes rose majestically up the face of the cliff to the
accompaniment of a vast creaking of hawsers.
"You'll have to admit that that's impressive, Anheg," Rhodar said. "Particularly
when you note that the entire rock is being lifted by those eight horses over
there - with the help of that counterweight, of course." He pointed at another
block of stone which was just as majestically coming down from the top of the
escarpment.
Anheg squinted at the two rocks. "Durnik," he said over his shoulder, "do you
understand how all those work?"
"Yes, King Anheg," the smith replied. "You see, the counterweight off balances
the-"
"Don't explain it to me, please," Anheg said. "As long as somebody I know and
trust understands, that's all that's really important."
Later that same day, the first Cherek ship was lifted to the top of the
escarpment. King Anheg watched the procedure for a moment or two, then winced
and turned his back. "It's unnatural," he muttered to Barak.
"You've taken to using that expression a great deal lately," Barak noted.
Anheg scowled at his cousin.
"I just mentioned it, that's all," Barak said innocently.
"I don't like changes, Barak. They make me nervous."
"The world moves on, Anheg. Things change every day."
"That doesn't necessarily mean that I have to like it," the King of Cherek
growled. "I think I'll go to my tent for a drink or two."
"Want some company?" Barak offered.
"I thought you wanted to stand around and watch the world change."
"It can do that without my supervision."
"And probably will," Anheg added moodily. "All right, let's go. I don't want to
watch this anymore." And the two of them went off in search of something to
drink.

Chapter Eleven

MAYASERANA, QUEEN OF Arendia, was in a pensive mood. She sat at her

embroidery
in the large, sunny nursery high in the palace at Vo Mimbre. Her infant son, the
crown prince of Arendia, cooed and gurgled in his cradle as he played with the
string of brightly colored beads that had been the ostensible gift of the crown
prince of Drasnia. Mayaserana had never met Queen Porenn, but the shared
experience of motherhood made her feel very close to the reputedly exquisite
little blonde on her far northern throne.
Seated in a chair not far from the queen sat Nerina, Baroness of Vo Ebor. Each
lady wore velvet, the queen in deep purple, and the Baroness in pale blue, and
each wore the high, conical white head-dress so admired by the Mimbrate
nobility. At the far end of the nursery, an elderly lutanist softly played a
mournful air in a minor key.
The Baroness Nerina appeared to be even more melancholy than her queen. The
circles beneath her eyes had grown deeper and deeper in the weeks since the
departure of the Mimbrate knights, and she seldom smiled. Finally she sighed and
laid aside her embroidery.
"The sadness of thy heart doth resound in thy sighing, Nerina," the queen said
gently. "Think not so of dangers and separation, lest thy spirits fail thee
utterly."
"Instruct me in the art of banishing care, Highness," Nerina replied, "for I am
in sore need of such teaching. My heart is bowed beneath a burden of concern,
and try though I might to control them, my thoughts, like unruly children,
return ever to the dreadful peril of my absent lord and our dearest friend."
"Be comforted in the knowledge that thy burden is shared by every lady in all of
Mimbre, Nerina."
Nerina sighed again. "My care, however, lies in more mournful certainty. Other
ladies, their affections firm-fixed on one beloved, can dare to hope that he
might return from dreadful war unscathed; but I, who love two, can find no
reason for such optimism. I must needs lose one at the least, and the prospect
doth crush my soul."
There was a quiet dignity in Nerina's open acceptance of the implications of the
two loves that had become so entwined in her heart that they could no longer be
separated. Mayaserana, in one of those brief flashes of insight which

so sharply
illuminated understanding, perceived that Nerina's divided heart lay at the very
core of the tragedy that had lifted her, her husband, and Sir Mandorallen into
the realms of sad legend. If Nerina could but love one more than the other, the
tragedy would end, but so perfectly balanced was her love for her husband with
her love for Sir Mandorallen that she had reached a point of absolute stasis,
forever frozen between the two of them.
The queen sighed. Nerina's divided heart seemed somehow a symbol of divided
Arendia, but, though the gentle heart of the suffering baroness might never be
made one, Mayaserana was resolved to make a last effort to heal the breach
between Mimbre and Asturia. To that end, she had summoned to the palace a
deputation of the more stable leaders of the rebellious north, and her summons
had appeared over a title she rarely used, Duchess of Asturia. At her
instruction, the Asturians were even now drawing up a list of their grievances
for her consideration.
Later on that same sunny afternoon, Mayaserana sat alone on the double throne of
Arendia, painfully aware of the vacancy beside her. The leader and spokesman of
the group of Asturian noblemen was a Count Reldegen, a tall, thin man with iron
gray hair and beard, who walked with the aid of a stout cane. Reldegen wore a
rich green doublet and black hose, and, like the rest of the deputation, his
sword was belted at his side. The fact that the Asturians came armed into the
queen's presence had stirred some angry muttering, but Mayaserana had refused to
listen to urgings that their weapons be taken from them.
"My Lord Reldegen," the queen greeted the Asturian as he limped toward the
throne.
"Your Grace," he replied with a bow.
"Your Majesty, " a Mimbrate courtier corrected him in a shocked voice.
"Her Grace summoned us as the Duchess of Asturia," Reldegen informed the
courtier coolly. "That title commands more respect from us than other, more
recent embellishments."
"Gentlemen, please," the queen said firmly. "Prithee, let us not commence
hostilities anew. Our purpose here is to examine the possibilities of peace. I
entreat thee, my Lord Reldegen, speak to the purpose. Unburden thyself of the

causes of that rancor which hath so hardened the heart of Asturia. Speak freely,
my Lord, and with no fear of reprisal for thy words." She looked quite sternly
at her advisers. "It is our command that no man be taken to task for what is
spoken here."
The Mimbrates glowered at the Asturians, and the Asturians scowled back.
"Your Grace," Reldegen began, "our chief complaint lies, I think, in the simple
fact that our Mimbrate overlords refuse to recognize our titles. A title's an
empty thing, really, but it implies a responsibility which has been denied to
us. Most of us here are indifferent to the privileges of rank, but we keenly
feel the frustration of being refused the chance to discharge our obligations.
Our most talented men are compelled to waste their lives in idleness, and might
I point out, your Grace, that the loss of that talent injures Arendia even more
than it injures us."
"Well spoken, my Lord," the queen murmured.
"Might I respond, your Majesty," the aged, white-bearded Baron of Vo Serin
inquired.
"Certainly, my Lord," Mayaserana replied. "Let us all be free and open with one
another."
"The titles of the Asturian gentlemen are theirs for the asking," the baron
declared. "For five centuries the crown hath awaited but the required oath of
fealty to bestow them. No title may be granted or recognized until its owner
swears allegiance to the crown."
"Unfortunately, my Lord," Reldegen said, "we are unable to so swear. The oaths
of our ancestors to the Duke of Asturia are still in force, and we are still
bound by them."
"The Asturian Duke of whom thou speakest died five hundred years ago," the old
baron reminded him.
"But his line did not die with him," Reldegen pointed out. "Her Grace is his
direct descendant, and our pledges of loyalty are still in force."
The queen stared first at one and then at the other. "I pray thee," she said,
"correct me if my perception is awry. Is the import of what hath been revealed
here that Arendia hath been divided for half a millennium by an ancient
formality?"
Reldegen pursed his lips thoughtfully. "There's a bit more to it than that, your

Grace, but that does seem to be the core of the problem."
"Five hundred years of strife and bloodshed over a technicality?"
Count Reldegen struggled with it. He started to speak several times, but broke
off each time with a look of helpless perplexity. In the end he began to laugh.
"It is sort of Arendish, isn't it?" he asked rather whimsically.
The old Baron of Vo Serin gave him a quick look, then he too began to chuckle.
"I pray thee, my Lord Reldegen, lock this discovery in thy heart lest we all
become the subject of general mirth. Let us not confirm the suspicion that
abject stupidity is our most prevailing trait."
"Why was this absurdity not discovered previously?" Mayaserana demanded.
Count Reldegen shrugged sadly. "I suppose because Asturians and Mimbrates don't
talk to each other, your Grace. We were always too eager to get to the
fighting."
"Very well," the queen said crisply, "what is required to rectify this sorry
confusion?"
Count Reldegen looked at the Baron. "A proclamation perhaps?" he suggested.
The old man nodded thoughtfully. "Her Majesty could release thee from thy
previous oath. It hath not been common practice, but there are precedents."
"And then we all swear fealty to her as Queen of Arendia?"
"That would seem to satisfy all the demands of honor and propriety."
"But I'm the same person, am I not?" the queen objected.
"Technically thou art not, your Majesty," the baron explained. "The Duchess of
Asturia and the Queen of Arendia are separate entities. Thou art indeed two
persons in one body."
"This is most confusing, gentlemen," Mayaserana observed.
"That's probably why no one noticed it before, your Grace," Reldegen told her.
"Both you and your husband have two titles and two separate formal identities."
He smiled briefly. "I'm surprised that there was room on the throne for such a
crowd." His face grew serious. "It won't be a cure-all, your Grace," he added.
"The divisions between Mimbre and Asturia are so deep-seated that they'll take
generations to erase."
"And wilt thou also swear fealty to my husband?" the queen asked.
"As the King of Arendia, yes; as the Duke of Mimbre, never."
"That will do for a start, my Lord. Let us see then to this proclamation. Let us
with ink and parchment bandage our poor Arendia's most gaping wound."
"Beautifully put, your Grace," Reldegen said admiringly.
Ran Borune XXIII had spent almost his entire life inside the Imperial compound

at Tol Honeth. His infrequent trips to the major cities of Tolnedra had, for the most part been made inside closed carriages. It was entirely probable that Ran Borune had never walked a continuous mile in his life, and a man who has not walked a mile has no real conception of what a mile is. From the very outset, his advisers despaired of ever making him understand the concept of distance.

The suggestion that ultimately resolved the difficulty came from a rather surprising source. A sometime tutor named Jeebers - a man who had narrowly escaped imprisonment or worse the previous summer - put forth the suggestion diffidently. Master Jeebers now did everything diffidently. His near brush with Imperial displeasure had forever extinguished the pompous self importance that had previously marred his character. A number of his acquaintances were surprised to discover that they even liked the balding, skinny man now.

Master Jeebers had pointed out that if the Emperor could only see things in exact scale, he might then understand. Like so many good ideas that had surfaced from time to time in Tolnedra, this one immediately got out of hand. An entire acre of the Imperial grounds was converted into a scale replica of the border region of eastern Algaria and the opposing stretches of Mishrak ac Thull. To give it all perspective, a number of inch-high human figures were cast in lead to aid the Emperor in conceptualizing the field of operations.

The Emperor immediately announced that he'd really like to have more of the lead figures to aid his understanding of the masses of men involved, and a new industry was born in Tol Honeth. Overnight lead became astonishingly scarce.

In order that he might better see the field, the Emperor mounted each morning to the top of a thirty-foot-high tower that had hastily been erected for that purpose. There, with the aid of a great-voiced sergeant of the Imperial guard, the Emperor deployed his leaden regiments of infantry and cavalry in precise accordance with the latest dispatches from Algaria.

The general staff very nearly resigned their commissions en masse. They were, for the most part, men of advanced middle age, and joining the Emperor atop his tower each morning involved some strenuous climbing. They all tried at various

times to explain to the beak-nosed little man that they could see just as well
from the ground, but Ran Borune would have none of it.
"Morin, he's killing us," one portly general complained bitterly to the
Emperor's chamberlain. "I'd rather go off to war than climb that ladder four
times a day."
"Move the Drasnian pikemen four paces to the left!" the sergeant bellowed from
the top of the tower, and a dozen men on the ground began redeploying the tiny
lead figures.
"We all must serve in the capacity our Emperor chooses for us," Lord Morin
replied philosophically.
"I don't see you climbing the ladder," the general accused.
"Our Emperor has chosen another capacity for me," Morin said rather smugly.
That evening the weary little Emperor sought his bed. "It's very exciting,
Morin," he murmured drowsily, holding the velvet-lined case that contained the
solid gold figures representing Ce'Nedra and Rhodar and the rest of the army's
leaders close to.his chest, "but it's very tiring, too."
"Yes, your Majesty."
"There always seems to be so much that I still have to do."
"That's the nature of command, your Majesty," Morin observed. But the Emperor
had already dropped off.
Lord Morin removed the case from the Emperor's hands and carefully pulled the
covers up around the sleeping man's shoulders. "Sleep, Ran Borune," he said very
gently. "You can play with your little toy soldiers again tomorrow."
Sadi the eunuch had quietly left the palace at Sthiss Tor by a secret doorway
that opened behind the slaves' quarters onto a shabby back street that twisted
and turned in the general direction of the harbor. He had quite deliberately
waited for the cover of the afternoon rainstorm and had dressed himself in the
shabby clothing of a dockworker. Accompanying him was the one-eyed assassin,
Issus, who also wore nondescript clothing. Sadi's security precautions were
routine, but his choice of Issus as his companion was not. Issus was not a
member of the palace guard nor of Sadi's personal retinue, but Sadi was not
concerned on this afternoon's outing with appearances or proprieties. Issus was
by and large uncorrupted by palace politics and had a reputation for unswerving
loyalty to whomever was paying him at the moment.
The two passed down the rainswept street to a certain disreputable

establishment
frequented by lower-class workers, and went through a rather noisy taproom to
the maze of cubicles at the back, where other entertainments were provided. At
the end of a foul-smelling hallway, a lean, hard-eyed woman, whose arms were
covered from wrist to elbow with cheap, gaudy bracelets, pointed wordlessly at a
scarred door, then turned abruptly and disappeared through another doorway.
Behind the door lay a filthy room with only a bed for furniture. On the bed were
two sets of clothing that smelled of tar and salt water, and sitting on the
floor were two large tankards of lukewarm ale. Wordlessly, Sadi and Issus
changed clothes. From beneath the soiled pillow, Issus pulled a pair of wigs and
two sets of false whiskers.
"How can they drink this?" Sadi demanded, sniffing at one of the tankards and
wrinkling his nose.
Issus shrugged. "Alorns have peculiar tastes. You don't have to drink it all,
Sadi. Splash most of it on your clothes. Drasnian sailors spill a lot of ale
when they're out in search of amusement. How do I look?"
Sadi gave him a quick glance. "Ridiculous," he replied. "Hair and a beard don't
really suit you, Issus."
Issus laughed. "And they look particularly out of place on you. " He shrugged
and carefully poured ale down the front of his tar-spattered tunic. "I suppose
we look enough like Drasnians to get by, and we certainly smell like Drasnians.
Hook your beard on a little tighter, and let's get moving before it stops
raining."
"Are we going out the back?"
Issus shook his head. "If we're being followed, the back will be watched. We'll
leave the way ordinary Drasnian sailors leave."
"And how is that?"
"I've made arrangements to have us thrown out."
Sadi had never been thrown out of any place before, and he found the experience
not particularly amusing. The two burly ruffians who unceremoniously pitched him
into the street were a bit rough about it, and Sadi picked up several scrapes
and abrasions in the process.
Issus staggered to his feet and stood bawling curses at the closed door, then
lurched over and pulled Sadi up out of the mud. Together they reeled in apparent
drunkenness down the street toward the Drasnian enclave. Sadi noted

that there
had been two men in a doorway across the street when he and Issus had been
ejected and that the two did not move to follow.
Once they entered the Drasnian enclave, Issus led the way rather quickly to the
house of Droblek, the Drasnian port authority. They were admitted immediately
and conveyed at once to a dimly lighted but comfortable room where the
enormously fat Droblek sat sweating. With him was Count Melgon, the aristocratic
ambassador from Tolnedra.
"Novel attire for the chief eunuch of Salmissra's household," Count Melgon
observed as Sadi pulled off his wig and false beard.
"Just a bit of deception, my Lord Ambassador," Sadi replied. "I didn't
particularly want this meeting to become general knowledge."
"Can he be trusted?" Droblek asked bluntly, pointing at Issus.
Sadi's expression became whimsical. "Can you be trusted, Issus?" he asked.
"You've paid me for up to the end of the month." Issus shrugged. "After that,
we'll see. I might get a better offer."
"You see?" Sadi said to the two seated men. "Issus can be trusted until the end
of the month - at least as much as anybody in Sthiss Tor can be trusted. One
thing I've noticed about Issus - he's a simple, uncomplicated man. Once you buy
him, he stays bought. I think it's referred to as professional ethics."
Droblek grunted sourly. "Do you suppose we could get to the point? Why did you
go to so much trouble to arrange this meeting? Why didn't you just summon us to
the palace?"
"My dear Droblek," Sadi murmured, "you know the kind of intrigue that infests
the palace. I'd prefer that what passes between us remain more or less
confidential. The matter itself is rather uncomplicated. I've been approached by
the emissary of Taur Urgas."
The two regarded him with no show of surprise.
"I gather that you already knew."
"We're hardly children, Sadi," Count Melgon told him.
"I am at present in negotiations with the new ambassador from Rak Goska," Sadi
mentioned.
"Isn't that the third one so far this summer?" Melgon asked.
Sadi nodded. "The Murgos seem to be particularly susceptible to certain fevers
which abound in the swamps."
"We've noticed that," Droblek said dryly. "What is your prognosis for the
present emissary's continued good health?"

"I don't imagine he's any more immune than his countrymen. He's already
beginning to feel unwell."
"Maybe he'll be lucky and recover," Droblek suggested.
"Not very likely," Issus said with an ugly laugh.
"The tendency of Murgo ambassadors to die unexpectedly has succeeded in keeping
the negotiations moving very slowly," Sadi continued. "I'd like for you
gentlemen to inform King Rhodar and Ran Borune that these delays will probably
continue."
"Why?" Droblek asked.
"I want them to understand and appreciate my efforts in their present campaign
against the Angarak kingdoms."
"Tolnedra has no involvement in that campaign," Melgon asserted quickly.
"Of course not." Sadi smiled.
"Just how far are you willing to go, Sadi?" Droblek asked curiously.
"That depends almost entirely upon who's winning at any given moment," Sadi
replied urbanely. "If the Rivan Queen's campaign in the east begins to run into
difficulties, I suspect that the pestilence will subside and the Murgo
emissaries will stop dying so conveniently. I'd almost have to make an
accommodation with Taur Urgas at that point."
"Don't you find that just a bit contemptible, Sadi?" Droblek asked acidly.
Sadi shrugged. "We're a contemptible sort of people, Droblek," he admitted, "but
we survive. That's no mean accomplishment for a weak nation lying between two
major powers. Tell Rhodar and Ran Borune that I'll stall the Murgos off for as
long as things continue to go in their favor. I want them both to be aware of
their obligation to me."
"And will you advise them when your position is about to change?" Melgon asked.
"Of course not," Sadi replied. "I'm corrupt, Melgon. I'm not stupid."
"You're not much of an ally, Sadi," Droblek told him.
"I never pretended to be. I'm looking out for myself. At the moment, my
interests and yours happen to coincide, that's all. I do, however, expect to be
remembered for my assistance."
"You're trying to play it both ways, Sadi," Droblek accused him bluntly.
"I know." Sadi smiled. "Disgusting, isn't it?"
Queen Islena of Cherek was in an absolute panic. This time Merel had gone too
far. The advice they had received from Porenn had seemed quite sound - had
indeed raised the possibility of a brilliant stroke which would

disarm Grodeg
and the Bear-cult once and for all. The imagined prospect of the helpless rage
into which this would plummet the towering ecclesiast was almost a satisfaction
in itself. Like so many people, Queen Islena took such pleasure in an imagined
triumph that the real thing became almost too much trouble. The victories of the
imagination involved no risks, and a confrontation with an enemy always ended
satisfactorily when both sides of the conversation came from one's own
daydreams. Left to her own devices, Islena would probably have been content to
let it go at that.
Merel, however, was less easily satisfied. The plan devised by the little queen
of Drasnia had been quite sound, but it suffered from one flaw - they did not
have enough men to bring it off. Merel, however, had located an ally with
certain resources and had brought him into the queen's inner circle. A group of
men in Cherek had not accompanied Anheg and the fleet to Algaria largely because
they were not the sort of men who made good sailors. At Merel's stern-faced
insistence, the Queen of Cherek suddenly developed an overpowering enthusiasm
for hunting. It was in the forest, safe from prying ears, that the details of
the coup were worked out.
"When you kill a snake, you cut off its head," Torvik the huntsman had pointed
out as he, Merel, and Islena sat in a forest glade while Torvik's men roved
through the woods harvesting enough game to make it appear that Islena had spent
her day in a frenzy of slaughter. "You don't accomplish all that much by
snipping pieces off its tail an inch or so at a time," the broad-shouldered
huntsman continued. "The Bear-cult isn't really that concentrated in one place.
With a little luck, we can gather up all the important members presently in Val
Alorn in one sweep. That should irritate our snake enough to make him stick his
neck out. Then we'll simply chop off his head."
Torvik's use of such terminology had made the queen wince. She had not been
entirely sure that the blunt, grizzled forester had been speaking figuratively.
And now it had been done. Torvik and his huntsmen had moved quietly through the
dark streets of Val Alorn for the entire night, gathering up the sleeping

members of the Bear-cult, marching them in groups to the harbor and then locking them in the holds of waiting ships. Because of their years of experience, the hunters had been very thorough in rounding up their quarry. By morning, the only members of the Bear-cult left in the city were the High Priest of Belar and the dozen or so underpriests lodged in the temple.

Queen Islena sat, pale and trembling, on the throne of Cherek. She wore her purple gown and her gold crown. In her hand she held a scepter. The scepter had a comforting weight to it and could possibly be used as a weapon in an emergency. The queen was positive that an emergency was about to descend on her.

"This is all your fault, Merel," she bitterly accused her blond friend. "If you'd just left things alone, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"We'd be a worse one," Merel replied coldly. "Pull yourself together, Islena. It's done now, and you can't undo it."

"Grodeg terrifies me," Islena blurted.

"He won't be armed. He won't be able to hurt you."

"I'm only a woman," Islena quailed. "He'll roar at me in that awful voice of his, and I'll go absolutely to pieces."

"Stop being such a coward, Islena," Merel snapped. "Your timidity's brought Cherek right to the edge of disaster. Every time Grodeg's raised his voice to you, you've given him anything he wanted just because you're afraid of harsh talk. Are you a child? Does noise frighten you that much?"

"You forget yourself, Merel," Islena flared suddenly. "I am queen, after alL"

"Then by all the Gods, be queen! Stop behaving like a silly, frightened serving girl. Sit up straight on your throne as if you had some iron in your backbone - and pinch your cheeks. You're as pale as a bedsheet." Merel's face hardened. "Listen to me, Islena," she said. "If you give even one hint that you're starting to weaken, I'll have Torvik run his spear into Grodeg right here in the throne room."

"You wouldn't!" Islena gasped. "You can't kill a priest."

"He's a man just like any other man," Merel declared harshly. "If you stick a spear in his belly, he'll die."

"Not even Anheg would dare to do that."

"I'm not Anheg."

"You'll be cursed!"

"I'm not afraid of curses."

Torvik came into the throne room, a broad-bladed boarspear held negligently in

one big hand. "He's coming," he announced laconically.
"Oh, dear," Islena quavered.
"Stop that!" Merel snapped.
Grodeg was livid with rage as he strode into the throne room. His white robe was rumpled as if he had thrown it on hastily, and his white hair and beard were uncombed. "I will speak with the queen alone!" he thundered as he approached across the rush-strewn floor.
"That is the queen's decision to make, not yours, my Lord High Priest," Merel advised him in a flinty voice.
"Does the wife of the Earl of Trellheim speak for the throne?" Grodeg demanded of Islena.
Islena faltered, then saw Torvik standing directly behind the tall priest. The boarspear in his hand was no longer so negligently grasped. "Calm yourself, revered Grodeg," the queen said, quite suddenly convinced that the life of the infuriated priest hinged not only on her words but even on her tone of voice. At the tiniest quaver, Merel would give the signal, and Torvik would sink that broad, sharp blade into Grodeg's back with about as much emotion as he showed about swatting a fly.
"I want to see you alone," Grodeg repeated stubbornly. "
"No."
"No?" he roared incredulously.
"You heard me, Grodeg," she told him. "And stop shouting at me. My hearing is quite good."
He gaped at her, then quickly recovered. "Why have all my friends been arrested?" he demanded.
"They were not arrested, my Lord High Priest," the queen replied. "They have all volunteered to join my husband's fleet."
"Ridiculous!" he snorted.
"I think you'd better choose your words a bit more carefully, Grodeg," Merel told him. "The queen's patience with your impertinence is wearing thin."
"Impertinence?" he exclaimed. "How dare you speak that way to me?" He drew himself up and fixed a stern eye on the queen. "I insist upon a private audience," he told her in a thunderous voice.
The voice which had always cowed her before quite suddenly irritated Islena. She was trying to save this idiot's life, and he kept shouting at her. "My Lord Grodeg," she said with an unaccustomed hint of steel in her voice, "if you bellow at me one more time, I'll have you muzzled."

His eyes widened in amazement.
"We have nothing to discuss in private, my Lord," the queen continued. "All that remains is for you to receive your instructions - which you will follow to the letter. It is our decree that you will proceed directly to the harbor, where you will board the ship which is waiting to transport you to Algaria. There you will join the forces of Cherek in the campaign against the Angaraks."
"I refuse!" Grodeg retorted.
"Think carefully, my Lord Grodeg," Merel purred. "The queen has given you a royal command. Refusal could be considered treason."
"I am the High Priest of Belar," Grodeg ground out between clenched teeth, obviously having great difficulty in modulating his voice. "You wouldn't dare ship me off like some peasant conscript."
"I wonder if the High Priest of Belar might like to make a small wager on that," Torvik said with deceptive mildness. He set the butt of his spear on the floor, took a stone from the pouch at his belt and began to hone the already razor-sharp blade. The steely sound had an obviously chilling effect on Grodeg.
"You will go to the harbor now, Grodeg," Islena told him, "and you will get on that ship. If you do not, you will go to the dungeon, where you will keep the rats company until my husband returns. Those are your choices; join Anheg or join the rats. Decide quickly. You're starting to bore me, and quite frankly, I'm sick of the sight of you."
Queen Porenn of Drasnia was in the nursery, ostensibly feeding her infant son. Out of respect for the queen's person, she was unspied upon while she was nursing. Porenn, however, was not alone. Javelin, the bone-thin chief of Drasnian intelligence, was with her. For the sake of appearance, Javelin was dressed in a serving maid's gown and cap, and he looked surprisingly feminine in the disguise he wore with no apparent trace of self consciousness.
"Are there really that many cultists in the intelligence service?" the queen asked, a little dismayed.
Javelin sat with his back politely turned. "I'm afraid so, your Highness. We should have been more alert, but we had other things on our minds."
Porenn thought about it for a moment, unconsciously rocking her suckling baby.
"Islena's moving already, isn't she?" she asked.
"That's the word I received this morning," Javelin replied. "Grodeg's on his way to the mouth of the Aldur River already, and the queen's men are

moving out into
the countryside, rounding up every member of the cult as they go."
"Will it in any way hamper our operations to jerk that many people out of
Boktor?"
"We can manage, your Highness," Javelin assured her. "We might have to speed up
the graduation of the current class at the academy and finish their training on
the job, but we'll manage."
"Very well then, Javelin," Porenn decided. "Ship them all out. Get every cult
member out of Boktor, and separate them. I want them sent to the most miserable
duty posts you can devise, and I don't want any of them within fifty leagues of
any other one. There will be no excuses, no sudden illnesses, and no
resignations. Give each of them something to do, and then make him do it. I want
every Bear-cultist who's crept into the intelligence service out of Boktor by
nightfall."
"It will be my pleasure, Porenn," Javelin said. "Oh, incidentally, that Nadrak
merchant, Yarblek is back from Yar Nadrak, and he wants to talk to you about the
salmon runs again. He seems to have this obsessive interest in fish."

Chapter Twelve

THE RAISING OF the Cherek fleet to the top of the eastern escarpment took a full
two weeks, and King Rhodar chafed visibly at the pace of the operation.
"You knew this was going to take time, Rhodar," Ce'Nedra said to him as he fumed
and sweated, pacing back and forth with frequent dark looks at the towering
cliff face. "Why are you so upset?"
"Because the ships are right out in the open, Ce'Nedra," he replied testily.
"There's no way to hide them or disguise them while they're being raised. Those
ships are the key to our whole campaign, and if somebody on the other side
starts putting a few things together, we might have to meet all of Angarak
instead of just the Thulls."
"You worry too much," she told him. "Cho-Hag and Korodullin are burning
everything in sight up there. 'Zakath and Taur Urgas have other things to think
about beside what we're hauling up the cliff."
"It must be wonderful to be so unconcerned about things," he said sarcastically.
"Be nice, Rhodar," she said.
General Varana, still scrupulously dressed in his Tolnedran mantle, limped

toward them with that studiously diffident expression that indicated he was
about to make another suggestion.
"Varana," King Rhodar burst out irritably, "why don't you put on your uniform?"
"Because I'm not really officially here, your Majesty," the general replied
calmly. "Tolnedra is neutral in this affair, you'll recall."
"That's a fiction, and we all know it."
"A necessary one, however. The Emperor is still holding diplomatic channels open
to Taur Urgas and 'Zakath. Those discussions would deteriorate if someone saw a
Tolnedran general swaggering around in full uniform." He paused briefly. "Would
a small suggestion offend your Majesty?" he asked.
"That all depends on the suggestion," Rhodar retorted. Then he made a face and
apologized. "I'm sorry, Varana. This delay's making me bad-tempered. What did
you have in mind?"
"I think you might want to give some thought to moving your command operations
up to the top about now. You'll want things running smoothly by the time the
bulk of your infantry arrives, and it usually takes a couple of days to iron out
the wrinkles when you set things up."
King Rhodar stared at a Cherek ship being hoisted ponderously up the cliff face.
"I'm not going to ride up on one of those, Varana," he declared flatly.
"It's absolutely safe, your Majesty," Varana assured him. "I've made the trip
myself several times. Even Lady Polgara went up that way just this morning."
"Polgara could fly down if something went wrong," Rhodar said. "I don't have her
advantages. Can you imagine the size of the hole I'd make in the ground if I
fell that far?"
"The alternative is extremely strenuous, your Majesty. There are several ravines
running down from the top. They've been leveled out a bit so that the horses can
go up, but they're still very steep."
"A little sweating won't hurt me."
Varana shrugged. "As your Majesty wishes."
"I'll keep you company, Rhodar," Ce'Nedra offered brightly. He gave her a
suspicious look.
"I don't really trust machines either," she confessed. "I'll go change clothes,
and then we can start."
"You want to do it today?" His voice was plaintive.
"Why put it off?"
"I can think of a dozen reasons."
The term "very steep" turned out to be a gross understatement.

"Precipitous" might have been more accurate. The incline made riding horses out of the question, but ropes had been strung along the steeper stretches to aid in the climb. Ce'Nedra, dressed in one of her short Dryad tunics, scampered hand over hand up the ropes with the agility of a squirrel. King Rhodar's pace, however, was much slower.

"Please stop groaning, Rhodar," she told him after they had climbed for an hour or so. "You sound like a sick cow."

"That's hardly fair, Ce'Nedra," he wheezed, stopping to mop his streaming face.

"I never promised to be fair," she retorted with an impish grin. "Come along, we still have a long way to go." And she flitted up another fifty yards or so.

"Don't you think you're a little underdressed?" he puffed disapprovingly, staring up at her. "Proper ladies don't show off so much leg."

"What's wrong with my legs?"

"They're bare - that's what's wrong with them."

"Don't be such a prig. I'm comfortable. That's all that matters. Are you coming or not?"

Rhodar groaned again. "Isn't it almost time for lunch?"

"We just had lunch."

"Did we? I'd forgotten already."

"You always seem to forget your last meal - usually before the crumbs have been brushed away."

"That's the nature of a fat man, Ce'Nedra." He sighed. "The last meal is history. It's the next one that's important." He stared mournfully up the brutal trail ahead and groaned again.

"This was all your idea," she heartlessly reminded him.

The sun was low in the west when they reached the top. As King Rhodar collapsed, Princess Ce'Nedra looked around curiously. The fortifications which had been erected along the top of the escarpment were extensive and quite imposing. The walls were of earth and stone and were perhaps thirty feet high. Through an open gate the princess saw a series of other, lower walls, each fronted by a ditch bristling with sharpened stakes and thorny brambles. At various points along the main wall rose imposing blockhouses, and within the walls were neat rows of huts for the soldiers.

The forts swarmed with men, and their various activities raised an almost perpetual cloud of dust. A party of Algar clansmen, smokestained and mounted on

spent-looking horses, rode slowly in through the gate; and a few moments later,
a contingent of gleaming Mimbrate knights, pennons snapping from their lances
and the great hoofs of their chargers clattering on the stony ground, rode out
in search of yet another town to destroy.
The huge hoists at the edge of the escarpment creaked and groaned under the
weight of the Cherek ships being raised from the plain below; some distance
away, within the fortified walls, the growing fleet sat awaiting the final
portage to the headwaters of the upper River Mardu, some fifty leagues distant.
Polgara, accompanied by Durnik and the towering Barak, approached to greet the
princess and the prostrate King of Drasnia.
"How was the climb?" Barak inquired.
"Ghastly," Rhodar wheezed. "Does anybody have anything to eat? I think I've
melted off about ten pounds."
"It doesn't show," Barak told him.
"That sort of exertion isn't really good for you, Rhodar," Polgara told the
gasping monarch. "Why were you so stubborn about it?"
"Because I have an absolute horror of heights," Rhodar replied. "I'd climb ten
times as far to avoid being hauled up that cliff by those contraptions. The idea
of all that empty air under me makes my flesh creep."
Barak grinned. "That's a lot of creeping."
"Will somebody please give me something to eat?" Rhodar asked in an anguished
tone of voice.
"A bit of cold chicken?" Durnik offered solicitously, handing him a well-browned
chicken leg.
"Where did you ever find a chicken?" Rhodar exclaimed, eagerly seizing the leg.
"The Thulls brought some with them," Durnik told him.
"Thulls?" Ce'Nedra gasped. "What are Thulls doing here?"
"Surrendering," Durnik replied. "Whole villages of them have been showing up for
the past week or so. They walk up to the edge of the ditches along the front of
the fortification and sit down and wait to be captured. They're very patient
about it. Sometimes it's a day or so before anybody has the time to go out and
capture them, but they don't seem to mind."
"Why do they want to be captured?" Ce'Nedra asked him.
"There aren't any Grolims here," Durnik explained. "No altars to Torak and no
sacrificial knives. The Thulls seem to feel that getting away from that sort of
thing is worth the inconvenience of being captured. We take them in and put them

to work on the fortifications. They're good workers, if you give them the proper
supervision."
"Is that entirely safe?" Rhodar asked around a mouthful of chicken. "There might
be spies among them."
Durnik nodded. "We know," he said, "but the spies are usually Grolims. A Thull
doesn't have the mental equipment to be a spy, so the Grolims have to do it
themselves."
Rhodar lowered his chicken leg in astonishment. "You're letting Grolims inside
the fortifications?" he demanded.
"It's nothing all that serious," Durnik told him. "The Thulls know who the
Grolims are, and we let them deal with the problem. They usually take them a
mile or so along the escarpment and then throw them off. At first they wanted to
do it right here, but some of their elders pointed out that it might not be
polite to drop Grolims down on top of the men working below, so they take them
some place where they won't bother anybody when they fall. A very considerate
people, the Thulls. One could almost get to like them."
"You've sunburned your nose, Ce'Nedra," Polgara told the little princess.
"Didn't you think of wearing a hat?"
"Hats give me a headache." Ce'Nedra shrugged. "A little sunburn won't hurt me."
"You have an appearance to maintain, dear," Polgara pointed out. "You're not
going to look very queenly with your nose peeling."
"It's nothing to worry about, Lady Polgara. You can fix it, can't you? You
know-" Ce'Nedra made a little gesture with her hand that was meant to look
magical.
Polgara gave her a long, chilly look.
King Anheg of Cherek, accompanied by the broad-shouldered Rivan Warder,
approached them. "Did you have a nice climb?" he asked Rhodar pleasantly.
"How would you like a punch in the nose?" Rhodar asked him. King Anheg laughed
coarsely.
"My," he said, "aren't we grumpy today? I've just had some news from home that
ought to brighten your disposition a bit."
"Dispatches?" Rhodar groaned, hauling himself wearily to his feet.
Anheg nodded.
"They sent them up from down below while you were getting your exercise. You're
not going to believe what's been going on back there."
"Try me."
"You absolutely won't believe it."

"Anheg, spit it out."
"We're about to get some reinforcements. Islena and Porenn have been very busy
these last few weeks."
Polgara looked at him sharply.
"Do you know something?" Anheg said, holding out a folded dispatch. "I wasn't
even aware of the fact that Islena knew how to read and write, and now I get
this."
"Don't be cryptic, Anheg," Polgara told him. "What have the ladies been up to?"
"I gather that after we left, the Bear-cult began to make itself a bit
obnoxious. Grodeg apparently felt that with the men out of the way, he could
take over. He started throwing his weight around in Val Alorn, and cult members
began to surface in the headquarters of Drasnian intelligence in Boktor. It
looks as if they've been making preparations for something for years. Anyway,
Porenn and Islena began passing information back and forth, and when they
realized how close Grodeg was to getting his hands on real power in the two
kingdoms, they took steps. Porenn ordered all the cult members out of Boktor -
sent them to the most miserable duty posts she could think of - and Islena
rounded up the Bear-cult in Val Alorn - every last one of them - and shipped
them out to join the army."
"They did what?" Rhodar gasped.
"Isn't it amazing?" A slow grin spread across Anheg's coarse face. "The beauty
of the whole thing is that Islena could get away with it, while I couldn't.
Women aren't supposed to be aware of the subtleties involved in arresting
priests and noblemen - the need for evidence against them and so on - so what
would be gross impropriety on my part will be laughed off as ignorance on hers.
I'll have to apologize to Grodeg, of course, but it will be after the fact. The
cult will be here, and they'll have no honest reason to go back home."
Rhodar's answering grin was every bit as wicked as Anheg's. "How did Grodeg take
it?"
"He was absolutely livid. I guess Islena faced him down personally. She gave him
the choice of joining us or going to the dungeon."
"You can't put the High Priest of Belar in a dungeon," Rhodar exclaimed.
"Islena didn't know that, and Grodeg knew that she didn't. She'd have had him

chained to the wall in the deepest hole she could find before anybody had gotten around to telling her that it was illegal. Can't you just see my Islena delivering that kind of ultimatum to the old windbag?" There was a note of fierce pride in Anheg's voice.
King Rhodar's face grew very sly. "There's bound to be some rather hot fighting in this campaign sooner or later," he noted.
Anheg nodded.
"The Bear-cult prides itself on its fighting ability, doesn't it?" Anheg nodded again, grinning.
"They'd be perfect for spearheading any attacks, wouldn't they?" Anheg's grin grew positively vicious.
"I imagine that their casualties will be heavy," the King of Drasnia suggested.
"It's in a good cause, after all," Anheg replied piously.
"If you two have quite finished gloating, I think it's time I got the princess in out of the sun," Polgara told the two grinning monarchs.
The fortified positions atop the escarpment bustled with activity for the next several days. Even as the last of the Cherek ships were raised up the cliffs, the Algars and Mimbrates extended their depredations out into the Thullish countryside.
"There aren't any crops standing for fifty leagues in any direction," Hettar reported back. "We'll have to go out farther to find anything else to burn."
"You find many Murgos?" Barak asked the hawk-faced man.
"A few." Hettar shrugged. "Not enough to make it interesting, but we run across one every now and then."
"How's Mandorallen doing?"
"I haven't seen him for a few days," Hettar replied. "There's a lot of smoke coming from the direction he went, though, so I imagine he's keeping busy."
"What's the country like out there?" King Anheg asked.
"Not bad, once you get past the uplands. The part of Thulldom along the escarpment here is pretty forbidding."
"What do you mean by forbidding? I've got to haul ships through that country."
"Rock, sand, a few thornbushes and no water," Hettar replied. "And it's hotter than the backdoor of a furnace."
"Thanks," Anheg said.
"You wanted to know," Hettar told him. "Excuse me. I need a fresh horse and some more torches."
"You're going out again?" Barak asked him.
"It's something to do."

Once the last of the ships had been raised, the Drasnian hoists began lifting
tons of food and equipment that soon swelled King Fulrach's supply dumps within
the forts to overflowing. The Thullish prisoners proved to be an invaluable
asset, carrying whatever burden they were told to carry without complaint or
hesitation. Their coarse features shone with such simpleminded gratitude and
eagerness to please that Ce'Nedra found it impossible to hate them, even though
they were technically the enemy. Slowly, bit by bit, the princess discovered the
facts that made the lives of the Thullish people such an unrelieved horror.
There was not a family among them that had not lost several members to the
knives of the Grolims - husbands, wives, children, and parents had all been
selected for sacrifice, and the thought uppermost in every Thull's life was to
avoid the same fate at any cost. The perpetual terror had erased every hint of
human affection from the Thull's makeup. He lived in dreadful isolation, without
love, without companionship, without any feeling but constant anxiety and dread.
The reputedly insatiable appetite of Thullish women had nothing whatsoever to do
with morals or lack of them. It was a simple matter of survival. To escape the
knife, a Thullish woman was forced to remain perpetually pregnant. She was not
driven by lust, but by fear, and her fear dehumanized her entirely.
"How can they live that way?" the princess burst out to Lady Polgara as the two
of them returned to their makeshift quarters in the stout blockhouse which had
been erected inside the walls for the use of the leaders of the army. "Why don't
they rebel and drive the Grolims out?"
"And just who's supposed to lead a rebellion, Ce'Nedra?" Polgara asked her
calmly. "The Thulls know that there are Grolims who can pick the thoughts from a
man's mind as easily as you'd pick fruit in an orchard. If a Thull even
considered organizing some kind of resistance, he'd be the next one dragged to
the altar."
"But their lives are so horrible, " Ce'Nedra objected.
"Perhaps we can change that," Polgara said. "In a way what we're trying to do is
not only for the benefit of the west, but for the Angaraks as well. If we win,
they'll be liberated from the Grolims. They might not thank us at first, but in

time they might learn to appreciate it."
"Why shouldn't they thank us?"
"Because if we win, dear, it will be because we've killed their God. That's a
very hard thing to thank someone for."
"But Torak is a monster."
"He's still their God," Polgara replied. "The loss of one's God is a very subtle
and terrible injury. Ask the Ulgos what it's like to live without one. It's been
five thousand years since UL became their God, and they still remember what it
was like before he accepted them."
"We are going to win, aren't we?" Ce'Nedra asked suddenly, all her fears
flooding to the surface.
"I don't know, Ce'Nedra," Polgara answered quietly. "No one does - not me, not
Beldin, not my father, not even Aldur. All we can do is try,"
"What will happen if we lose?" the princess asked in a tiny, frightened voice.
"We'll be enslaved in exactly the same way the Thulls are," Polgara replied
quietly. "Torak will become King and God over the entire world. The other Gods
will be banished forever, and the Grolims will be unleashed upon us all."
"I won't live in that kind of world," Ce'Nedra declared.
"None of us would care to."
"Did you ever meet Torak?" the princess asked suddenly.
Polgara nodded. "Once or twice - the last time was at Vo Mimbre just before his
duel with Brand."
"What's he really like?"
"He's a God. The force of his mind is overwhelming. When he speaks to you, you
must listen to him - and when he commands, you must obey him."
"Not you, certainly."
"I don't think you understand, dear." Polgara's face was grave, and her glorious
eyes were as distant as the moon. Without seeming to think about it, she reached
out, picked up Errand and sat him on her lap. The child smiled at her and, as he
so often did, he reached out and touched the white lock at her brow. "There's a
compulsion in Torak's voice that's almost impossible to resist," she continued.
"You know that he's twisted and evil, but when he speaks to you, your will to
resist crumbles, and you're suddenly very weak and afraid."
"Surely you weren't afraid."
"You still don't understand. Of course I was afraid. We all were - even my
father. Pray that you never meet Torak. He's not some petty Grolim like Chamdar
or a scheming old wizard like Ctuchik. He's a God. He's hideously maimed, and at

some point he was thwarted. Something he needed - something so profound that no human could even conceive of it - was denied to him, and that refusal or rejection drove him mad. His madness is not like the madness of Taur Urgas, who, in spite of everything is still human. Torak's madness is the madness of a God - a being who can make his diseased imaginings come to pass. Only the Orb can truly withstand him. I could perhaps resist him for a time, but if he lays the full force of his will upon me, ultimately I'll have to give him what he wants - and what he wants from me is too dreadful to think about."

"I don't exactly follow you, Lady Polgara."

Garion's Aunt looked gravely at the tiny girl. "Perhaps you don't at that," she said. "It has to do with a part of the past that the Tolnedran Historical Society chooses to ignore. Sit down, Ce'Nedra, and I'll try to explain."

The princess sat on a rude bench in their rough chamber. Polgara's mood was unusual - very quiet, even pensive. She placed her arms about Errand and held him close, nestling her cheek against his blond curls as if taking comfort from the contact with this small boy. "There are two Prophecies, Ce'Nedra," she explained in her rich voice, "but the time is coming when there will only be one. Everything that is or was or is yet to be will become a part of whichever Prophecy prevails. Every man, every woman, every child has two possible destinies. For some, the differences are not all that great, but in my case, they're rather profound."

"I don't quite understand."

"In the Prophecy which we serve - the one that has brought us here - I am Polgara the sorceress, daughter to Belgarath and guardian to Belgarion."

"And in the other?"

"In the other, I am the bride of Torak."

Ce'Nedra gasped.

"And now you see why I was afraid," Polgara continued. "I've been terrified of Torak since my father first explained this to me when I was no older than you are now. I'm not so much afraid for myself, but more because I know that if I falter - if Torak's will overpowers mine - then the Prophecy we serve will fail. Torak will not only win me, but all of mankind as well. At Vo Mimbre, he called to me, and I felt - very briefly - the awful compulsion to run to

him. But I
defied him. I've never done anything in my life that was so hard to do. It was
my defiance, however, that drove him into the duel with Brand, and only in that
duel could the power of the Orb be released against him. My father gambled
everything on the strength of my will. The old wolf is a great gambler
sometimes."
"Then if-" Ce'Nedra could not say it.
"If Garion loses?" Polgara said it so calmly that it was quite obvious that she
had considered the possibility many times before. "Then Torak will come to claim
his bride, and there will be no power on earth sufficient to stop him."
"I would sooner die," the princess blurted.
"So would I, Ce'Nedra, but that option may not be open to me. Torak's will is so
much stronger than mine that he may be able to take from me the ability or even
the desire to will myself out of existence. If it should happen, it may very
well be that I'll be deliriously happy to be his chosen and beloved - but deep
inside, I think that a part of me will be screaming and will continue to scream
in horror down through all the endless centuries to the very end of days."
It was too horrible to think about. Unable to restrain herself, the princess
threw herself on her knees, clasped her arms about Polgara and Errand, and burst
into tears.
"Now, now, there's no need to cry, Ce'Nedra," Polgara told her gently, smoothing
the sobbing girl's hair with her hand. "Garion has still not reached the City of
Endless Night, and Torak is still asleep. There's a little time left. And who
knows? We might even win."

Chapter Thirteen

ONCE THE CHEREK fleet had been raised, the pace of activities within the
fortifications began to quicken. King Rhodar's infantry units began to arrive
from the encampment at the Aldur River to make the tortuous climb up the narrow
ravines to the top of the escarpment; lines of wagons from the main supply dumps
freighted food and equipment to the base of the cliff where the great hoists
waited to lift the supplies up the mile-high basalt face; and the Mimbrate and
Algar raiding parties moved out, usually before dawn, in their now

far-flung
search for as yet unravaged towns and crops. The depredations of the raiders,
their short, savage sieges of poorly fortified Thullish towns and villages, and
the mile-wide swaths of fire that they cut through fields of ripe grain had
finally swung the sluggish Thulls into poorly organized attempts at resistance.
The Thulls, however, inevitably raced to the last point of Mimbrate attack and
arrived hours or even days too late, to discover only smoking ruins, dead
soldiers, and terrified and dispossessed townsmen, or, when they attempted to
intercept the swiftly moving Algars, they normally found only acre upon acre of
blackened earth. The raiders had moved on, and the desperate attempts of the
Thulls to catch up with them were entirely futile.
The notion of attacking the forts from which the raiders operated did not occur
to the Thulls, or if it did, it was quickly dismissed. The Thulls were not
emotionally suited to attacking heavily defended fortifications. They much
preferred dashing about, chasing fires, and complaining bitterly to their Murgo
and Mallorean allies about the lack of support they were receiving. The
Malloreans of Emperor 'Zakath steadfastly refused to emerge from their staging
areas around Thull Zelik. The Murgos of Taur Urgas, however, did make a few
sorties in southern Thulldom, in part as a gesture toward the notion of Angarak
unity - but more, King Rhodar surmised, as a part of their overall maneuvering
for position. Murgo scouts were even occasionally discovered in the vicinity of
the forts themselves. In order to sweep the area clear of these prying Murgo
eyes, patrols went out every day from the forts to range through the arid hills.
The parched, rocky valleys near the forts were randomly searched by Drasnian
pikemen and platoons of legionnaires. Algar clansmen, supposedly resting from
their long-range raids, amused themselves with an impromptu game they called
"Murgo hunting." They made a great show of their frequent excursions and piously
insisted that they were sacrificing their rest time out of a sense of
responsibility for the security of the forts. They did not, of course, fool
anybody with their protestations.
"The area does need to be patrolled, Rhodar," King Cho-Hag insisted. "My

children are performing a necessary duty, after all."
"Duty?" Rhodar snorted. "Put an Algar on a horse and show him a hill he hasn't
seen the backside of yet, and he'll always find an excuse to go take a look."
"You wrong us," Cho-Hag replied with a look of hurt innocence.
"I know you."
Ce'Nedra and her two closest companions had watched the periodic departure of
the lighthearted Algar horsemen with increasingly sour expressions. Though
Ariana was perhaps more sedentary in her habits and was accustomed, as all
Mimbrate ladies were, to waiting quite patiently while the men were out playing,
Adara, Garion's Algar cousin, felt her confinement most keenly. Like all Algars,
she felt a deep-seated need to have the wind in her face and the thunder of
hoofs in her ears. She grew petulant after a time and sighed often.
"And what shall we do today, ladies?" Ce'Nedra asked the two of them brightly
one morning after breakfast. "How shall we amuse ourselves until lunchtime?" She
said it rather extravagantly, since she already had plans for the day.
"There is always embroidery," Ariana suggested. "It doth pleasantly occupy the
fingers and eyes while leaving the mind and lips free for conversation."
Adara sighed deeply.
"Or maybe we might go and observe my lord as he instructs his serfs in their
warlike preparations." Ariana usually found some excuse to watch Lelldorin for
at least half of each day.
"I'm not sure that I'm up to watching a group of men murder hay bales with
arrows again today," Adara said a bit waspishly.
Ce'Nedra moved quickly to head off any incipient bickering. "We could make an
inspection tour," she suggested archly.
"Ce'Nedra, we've looked at every blockhouse and every hut within the walls a
dozen times already," Adara said with some asperity, "and if I have some polite
old sergeant explain the workings of a catapult to me one more time, I think
I'll scream."
"We have not, however, inspected the outer fortifications, have we?" the
princess asked slyly. "Wouldn't you say that's part of our duty too?"
Adara looked at her quickly, and then a slow smile appeared on her face.
"Absolutely," she agreed. "I'm surprised that we hadn't thought of that before.
We've been most neglectful, haven't we?"

Ariana's face took on a worned frown. "King Rhodar, I fear, would be most
strenuous in his objections to such a plan."
"Rhodar isn't here," Ce'Nedra pointed out. "He's off with King Fulrach taking an
inventory of the supply dumps."
"Lady Polgara would most certainly not approve," Ariana suggested, though her
tone indicated that she was weakening.
"Lady Polgara is conferring with Beldin the sorcerer," Adara mentioned, her eyes
dancing mischievously.
Ce'Nedra smirked. "That rather leaves us to our own devices, doesn't it,
ladies?"
"We shall be soundly scolded upon our return," Ariana said. "And we will all be
very contrite, won't we?" Ce'Nedra giggled.
A quarter of an hour later, the princess and her two friends, dressed in soft
black leather Algar riding clothes, passed at a canter out through the central
gate of the vast fort. They were accompanied by Olban, the youngest son of the
Rivan Warder. Olban had not liked the idea, but Ce'Nedra had given him no time
to object and definitely no time to send a message to anyone who could step in
and stop the whole excursion. Olban looked worried, but, as always, he
accompanied the little Rivan Queen without question.
The stake-studded trenches in front of the walls were very interesting, but one
trench looked much like another, and it took a rare mind indeed to find much
pleasure in the finer points of excavation.
"Very nice," Ce'Nedra said brightly to a Drasnian pikeman standing guard atop a
high mound of dirt. "Splendid ditches - and all those excellently sharp stakes."
She looked out at the arid landscape before the fortifications. "Where did you
ever find all the wood for them?"
"The Sendars brought it in, your Majesty," he replied, "from someplace up north,
I think. We had the Thulls cut and sharpen the stakes for us. They're quite good
stake-makers - if you tell them what you want."
"Didn't a mounted patrol go out this way about a half an hour ago?" Ce'Nedra
asked him.
"Yes, your Majesty. Lord Hettar of Algaria and some of his men. They went off
that way." The guard pointed toward the south.
"Ah," Ce'Nedra said. "If anyone should ask, tell them that we're going out to
join him. We should return in a few hours."
The guard looked a bit dubious about that, but Ce'Nedra moved quickly

to head
off any objections. "Lord Hettar promised to wait for us just beyond the south
end of the fortifications," she told him. She turned to her companions. "We
really mustn't keep him waiting too long. You ladies took absolutely too much
time changing clothes." She smiled winsomely at the guard. "You know how it is,"
she said. "The riding habit must be just so, and the hair absolutely has to be
brushed one last time. Sometimes it takes forever. Come along, ladies. We must
hurry, or Lord Hettar will be vexed with us." With a brainless little giggle,
the princess wheeled Noble and rode south at a gallop.
"Ce'Nedra, "Ariana exclaimed in a shocked voice once they were out of earshot,
"you lied to him."
"Of course."
"But that's dreadful."
"Not nearly as dreadful as spending another day embroidering daisies on a stupid
petticoat," the princess replied.
They left the fortifications and crossed a low, burned-brown string of hills.
The broad valley beyond was enormous. Dun brown and treeless mountains reared up
fully twenty miles away at the valley's far end. They cantered down into that
vast emptiness, feeling dwarfed into insignificance by the colossal landscape.
Their horses seemed no more than ants crawling toward the indifferent mountains.
"I hadn't realized it was so big," Ce'Nedra murmured, shading her eyes to gaze
at the distant hilltops.
The floor of the valley was as flat as a tabletop, and it was only sparsely
sprinkled with low, thorny bushes. The ground was scattered with round,
fist-sized rocks, and the dust spurted, yellow and powdery, from each step of
their horses' hoofs. Although it was scarcely midmorning, the sun was already a
furnace, and shimmering heatwaves rippled the valley floor ahead, making the
dusty, gray-green bushes seem to dance in the windless air.
It grew hotter. There was no trace of moisture anywhere, and the sweat dried
almost instantly on the flanks of their panting horses.
"I think we should give some thought to going back," Adara said, reining in her
mount. "There's no way we can reach those hills at the end of the valley."
"She's right, your Majesty," Olban told the princess. "We've already come too
far."

Ce'Nedra pulled Noble to a stop, and the white horse drooped his head as if on
the verge of absolute exhaustion. "Oh, quit feeling sorry for yourself," she
chided him irritably. This was not going at all as she had expected. She looked
around. "I wonder if we could find some shade somewhere," she said. Her lips
were dry, and the sun seemed to hammer down on her unprotected head.
"The terrain doth not suggest such comfort, princess," Ariana said, looking
around at the flat emptiness of the rock-strewn valley floor.
"Did anyone think to bring any water?" Ce'Nedra asked, dabbing at her forehead
with a kerchief.
No one had.
"Maybe we should go back," she decided, looking about rather regretfully.
"There's nothing to see out here, anyway."
"Riders coming," Adara said sharply, pointing toward a mounted group of men
emerging from an indented galley that lay like a fold on the flanks of a rounded
hill a mile or so away.
"Murgos?" Olban demanded with a sharp intake of his breath. His hand went
immediately to his sword.
Adara raised her hand to shade her eyes and stared at the approaching horsemen
intently.
"No," she replied. "They're Algars. I can tell by the way they ride."
"I hope they have some water with them," Ce'Nedra said.
The dozen or so Algar riders rode directly toward them with a great cloud of
yellow dust rising behind them. Adara suddenly gasped, and her face went very
pale.
"What is it?" Ce'Nedra asked her.
"Lord Hettar is with them," Adara said in a choked voice.
"How can you possibly recognize anybody at that distance?"
Adara bit her lip, but did not reply.
Hettar's face was fierce and unforgiving as he reined in his sweating horse.
"What are you doing out here?" he demanded bluntly. His hawkface and black scalp
lock gave him a wild, even frightening appearance.
"We thought we'd go riding, Lord Hettar," Ce'Nedra replied brightly, trying to
outface him.
Hettar ignored that. "Have you lost your mind, Olban?" he harshly asked the
young Rivan. "Why did you permit the ladies to leave the forts?"
"I do not tell her Majesty what to do," Olban answered stiffly, his face red.
"Oh, come now, Hettar," Ce'Nedra protested. "What's the harm in our taking a
little ride?"
"We killed three Murgos not a mile from here just yesterday," Hettar

told her.
"If you want exercise, run around the inside of the forts for a few hours. Don't
just ride out unprotected in hostile territory. You've acted very foolishly,
Ce'Nedra. We'll go back now." His face was grim as a winter sea, and his tone
left no room for discussion.
"We had just made the same decision, my Lord," Adara murmured, her eyes
downcast.
Hettar looked sternly at the condition of their horses. "You're an Algar, Lady
Adara," he said pointedly. "Didn't it occur to you to bring water for your
mounts? Surely you know better than to take a horse out in this kind of heat
without any precautions at all."
Adara's pale face grew stricken.
Hettar shook his head in disgust. "Water their horses," he curtly told one of
his men, "and then we'll escort them back. Your excursion is over, ladies."
Adara's face was flaming with a look of almost unbearable shame. She twisted
this way and that in her saddle, trying to avoid Hettar's stern, unforgiving
stare. No sooner had her horse been watered than she jerked her reins and dug
her heels into his flanks. Her startled mount scrambled his hoofs in the gravel
and leaped away, running back the way they had come across the rock-littered
valley floor.
Hettar swore and drove his mount after her.
"Whatever is she doing?" Ce'Nedra exclaimed.
"Lord Hettar's rebuke hath stung our gentle companion beyond her endurance,"
Ariana observed. "His good opinion is dearer to her than leer life itself."
"Hettar?" Ce'Nedra was stunned.
"Hath not throe eye informed thee how it doth stand with our dear friend?"
Ariana asked in mild surprise. "Thou art strangely unobservant, Princess."
"Hettar?" Ce'Nedra repeated. "I had no idea."
"Mayhap it is because I am Mimbrate," Ariana concluded. "The ladies of my people
are most sensitive to the signs of gentle affection in others."
It took perhaps a hundred yards for Hettar to overtake Adara's plunging horse.
He seized her reins in one fist and jerked her roughly to a stop, speaking
sharply to her, demanding to know what she was doing. Adara twisted this way and
that in her saddle, trying to keep him from seeing her face as he continued to
chide her.

Then a flicker of movement no more than twenty feet from the two of them caught
Ce'Nedra's eye. Astonishingly, a mail-shined Murgo rose up out of the sand
between two scrubby bushes, shaking off the sheet of brown-splotched canvas
beneath which he had lain concealed. As he rose, his short bow was already
drawn.
"Hettar!" Ce'Nedra screamed as the Murgo raised his bow. Hettar's back was to
the Murgo, but Adara saw the man aiming his arrow at the Algar's unprotected
back. With a desperate move, she ripped her reins from Hettar's grip and drove
her horse into his. His mount lurched back, stumbled and fell, throwing the
unprepared man to the ground even as Adara, flailing her horse's flanks with the
ends of her reins, plunged directly at the Murgo.
With only the faintest flicker of annoyance, the Murgo released his arrow at the
charging girl.
Even at that distance, Ce'Nedra could hear the distinct sound the arrow made
when it struck Adara. It was a sound she would remember with horror for the
remainder of her life. Adara doubled sharply, her free hand clutching at the
arrow buried low in her chest, but her plunging gallop did not falter nor change
as she rode the Murgo down. He tumbled and rolled beneath the churning hoofs of
her horse, then lurched again to his feet as soon as she had passed over him,
his hand jerking at his sheathed sword. But Hettar was already upon him, sabre
flashing in the glaring sunlight. The Murgo screamed once as he fell.
Hettar, his dripping sabre still in his hand, turned angrily to Adara. "What a
stupid thing," he roared at her, but his shout cut off suddenly. Her horse had
come to a stop a few yards beyond the Murgo, and she drooped in her saddle, her
dark hair falling like a veil across her pale face and both of her hands pressed
to her chest. Then, slowly, she toppled from her saddle.
With a strangled cry, Hettar dropped his sabre and ran to her.
"Adara!" the princess wailed, her hands going to her face in horror even as
Hettar gently turned the stricken girl over. The arrow, still standing out of
her lower chest, throbbed with the rhythm of her faltering heartbeat.
When the rest of them reached the pair, Hettar was holding Adara in his arms,
staring into her pale face with a stricken look. "You little fool," he was
murmuring in a broken voice. "You little fool."

Ariana slid from her saddle even before her horse stopped moving and ran to
Hettar's side. "Do not move her, my Lord," she told him sharply. "The arrow hath
pierced her lung, and shouldst thou move her, its keen edge will gash out her
life."
"Take it out," Hettar said from between clenched teeth.
"Nay, my Lord. To pull the arrow now will do more damage than to leave it."
"I can't bear to see it sticking out of her like that," he almost sobbed.
"Then don't look, my Lord," Ariana said bluntly, kneeling beside Adara and
placing a cool, professional hand on the wounded girl's throat.
"She's not dead, is she?" Hettar almost begged.
Ariana shook her head. "Gravely wounded, but her life doth still pulse within
her. Instruct thy men to improvise a litter at once, my Lord. We must convey our
dear friend to the fortress and Lady Polgara's ministrations immediately, lest
her life drain away."
"Can't you do something?" he croaked.
"Not here in this sun-blasted desolation, my Lord. I have neither instruments
nor medications, and the wound may be past my skill. The Lady Polgara is her
only hope. The litter, my Lord. Quickly!"
Polgara's face was somber, and her eyes as hard as flint when she emerged from
Adara's sickroom late that afternoon.
"How is she?" Hettar demanded. He had been pacing up and down in the main
corridor of the blockhouse for hours, stopping every so often to strike savagely
at the crudely built stone walls with his impotent fists.
"Somewhat improved," Polgara replied. "The crisis is past, but she's still
terribly weak. She's asking for you."
"She will recover, won't she?" Hettar's question had a note of fear in it.
"Probably - if there aren't any complications. She's young, and the wound looked
more serious than it actually was. I gave her something that will make her very
talkative, but don't stay too long. She needs rest." Polgara's eyes moved to
Ce'Nedra's tear-streaked face. "Come to my room after you've seen her, your
Majesty," she said firmly. "You and I have something to discuss."
Adara's porcelain face was framed by the tumbled mass of her dark brown hair
spreading across the pillow. She was very pale, but, though her eyes had a
slightly unfocused look about them, they were very bright. Ariana sat quietly at
the bedside.

"How do you feel, Adara?" Ce'Nedra asked in the quiet but cheerful voice one always assumes with the sick.
Adara gave her a wan little smile.
"Are you in any pain?"
"No," Adara's voice had a little dying fall to it. "No pain, but I feel very light-headed and strange."
"Why did you do that, Adara?" Hettar asked very directly. "You didn't have to ride right at the Murgo like that."
"You spend too much time with horses, my Lord Sha-dar," Adara told him with a faint smile. "You've forgotten how to understand the feelings of your own kind."
"What's that supposed to mean?" He sounded puzzled.
"Exactly what it says, my Lord Hettar. If a mare looked admiringly at a stallion, you'd know how things stood immediately, wouldn't you? But when it comes to people, you simply can't see at all, can you?" She coughed weakly.
"Are you all right?" he asked sharply.
"I'm surprisingly well - considering the fact that I'm dying."
"What are you talking about? You're not dying."
She smiled slightly. "Please don't," she told him. "I know what an arrow in the chest means. That's why I wanted to see you. I wanted to look at your face once more. I've been watching your face for such a long time now."
"You're tired," he said brusquely. "You'll feel better after you've slept."
"I'll sleep, all right," she said ruefully, "but I doubt that I'll feel anything afterward. The sleep I'm going to is the sleep one doesn't wake up from."
"Nonsense."
"Of course it is, but it's true nonetheless." She sighed. "Well, dear Hettar, you've finally escaped me, haven't you? I gave you a good chase, though. I even asked Garion to see if he could use sorcery on you."
"Garion?"
She nodded slightly. "You see how desperate I was? He said he couldn't, though."
She made a little face. "What good is sorcery if you can't use it to make someone fall in love?"
"Love?" he repeated in a startled voice.
"What did you think we were talking about, Lord Hettar? The weather?" She smiled fondly at him. "Sometimes you can be impossibly dense."
He stared at her in amazement.
"Don't be alarmed, my Lord. In a little while, I'll stop chasing you, and you'll be free."
"We'll talk about that when you're better," he told her gravely.
"I'm not going to get better. Haven't you been listening? I'm dying,

Hettar."
"No," he said, "as a matter of fact, you're not dying. Polgara assured us that
you're going to be all right."
Adara looked quickly at Ariana. "Throe injury is not mortal, dear friend,"
Ariana confirmed gently. "Truly, thou art not dying."
Adara closed her eyes. "How inconvenient," she murmured, a faint blush coming to
her cheeks. She opened her eyes again. "I apologize, Hettar. I wouldn't have
said any of this if I'd known that my meddling physicians were going to save my
life. As soon as I'm up and about, I'll return to my own clan. I won't bother
you again with my foolish outbursts."
Hettar looked down at her, his hard-angled face expressionless. "I don't think
I'd like that," he told her, gently taking her hand. "There are things you and I
need to talk about. This isn't the time or the place, but don't go trying to
make yourself unaccessible."
"You're just being kind." She sighed.
"No. Practical. You've given me something to think about beside killing Murgos.
It's probably going to take me a while to get used to the idea, but after I've
thought it over, we'll definitely need to talk."
She bit her lip and tried to hide her face. "What a stupid mess I've made of
things," she said. "If I were somebody else, I'd laugh at me. It would really be
better if we didn't see each other again."
"No," he said firmly, still holding her hand, "it wouldn't. And don't try to
hide from me, because I'll find you - even if I have to have every horse in
Algaria go looking for you."
She gave him a startled look.
"I am a Sha-dar, remember? Horses do what I tell them to."
"That's not fair," she objected.
He gave her a quizzical little smile. "And trying to have Garion use sorcery on
me was?" he asked her.
"Oh, dear!" She blushed.
"She must rest now," Ariana told them. "Thou canst speak with her further on the
morrow."
When they were back out in the hallway, Ce'Nedra turned on the tall man. "You
might have said something a bit more encouraging," she scolded him.
"It would have been premature," he replied. "We're a rather reserved people,
Princess. We don't say things just to be talking. Adara understands the
situation." Hettar seemed as fierce as ever, his sharp-angled face hard, and his

manelike scalp lock flowing over one leather-armored shoulder. His eyes, however, had softened slightly, and there was a faintly puzzled crease between his brows. "Didn't Polgara want to see you?" he asked. It was polite, but it was a dismissal nonetheless.

Ce'Nedra stalked away, muttering to herself about the lack of consideration that seemed to infect the male half of the population.

Lady Polgara sat quietly in her room, waiting. "Well?" she said when the princess entered. "Would you care to explain?"

"Explain what?"

"The reason for the idiocy that almost cost Adara her life."

"Surely you don't think it was my fault," Ce'Nedra protested.

"Whose fault was it, then? What were you doing out there?"

"We just went for a little ride. It's so boring being cooped up all the time."

"Boring. What a fascinating reason to kill your friends."

Ce'Nedra gaped at her, her face suddenly very pale.

"Why do you think we built these fortifications to begin with, Ce'Nedra? It was to provide us with some measure of protection."

"I didn't know there were Murgos out there," the princess wailed.

"Did you bother to find out?"

The entire implication of what she had done quite suddenly came crashing in on Ce'Nedra. She began to tremble violently, and her shaking hand went to her mouth. It was her fault! No matter how she might twist and turn and try to evade the responsibility, her foolishness had nearly killed one of her dearest friends. Adara had almost paid with her life for a bit of childish thoughtlessness. Ce'Nedra buried her face in her hands in a sudden storm of weeping.

Polgara let her cry for several moments, giving her ample time to accept her guilt; and when she finally spoke, there was no hint of forgiveness in her voice. "Tears won't wash out blood, Ce'Nedra," she said. "I thought I could at least begin to trust your judgment, but it appears that I was wrong. You may leave now. I don't believe I have anything more to say to you this evening."

Sobbing, the princess fled.

Chapter Fourteen

"IS THIS PLACE all like this?" King Anheg asked as the army trudged through one of the flat, gravel-strewn valleys with the bare, sun-baked mountains around it dancing in the shimmering heat. "I haven't seen a tree since we left the forts."

"The country changes about twenty leagues out, your Majesty," Hettar replied quietly, lounging in his saddle as they rode in the blazing sunlight. "We start to hit trees when we begin coming down out of the uplands. They're a kind of low, scraggly spruce, but they break up the monotony a bit."

The column behind them stretched out for miles, dwarfed into a thin line by the enormous emptiness and marked more by the cloud of yellow dust raised by thousands of feet than by the presence of men and horses. The Cherek ships, covered with canvas, jolted along over the rocky ground on their low, wheeled cradles, and the dust hung over them in the stifling heat like a gritty blanket.

"I'd pay a lot for a breeze right now," Anheg said wistfully, wiping his face.

"Just leave things the way they are, Anheg," Barak advised him. "It wouldn't take much to start a dust storm."

"How much farther is it to the river?" King Rhodar asked plaintively, looking at the unchanging landscape. The heat was having a brutal effect on the corpulent monarch. His face was beet red, and he was soaked and dripping with sweat.

"Still about forty leagues," Hettar replied.

General Varana, mounted on a roan stallion, cantered back from the vanguard of the column. The general wore a short leather kilt and a plain breastplate and helmet bearing no marks of his rank. "The Mimbrate knights just flushed out another pocket of Murgos," he reported.

"How many?" King Rhodar asked.

"Twenty or so. Three or four got away, but the Algars are chasing them."

"Shouldn't our patrols be farther out?" King Anheg fretted, mopping his face again. "Those ships don't look that much like wagons. I'd rather not have to fight my way down the River Mardu-if we ever get there."

"I've got people moving around out there, Anheg," King Cho-Hag assured him.

"Has anyone run across any Malloreans yet?" Anheg asked.

"Not so far," Cho-Hag replied. "All we've seen so far are Thulls and Murgos."

"It looks as if 'Zakath is holding firm at Thull Zelik," Varana added.

"I wish I knew more about him," Rhodar said.

"The Emperor's emissaries report that he's a very civilized man," Varana said. "Cultured, urbane, very polite."

"I'm sure there's another side to him," Rhodar disagreed. "The Nadraks are terrified of him, and it takes a lot to frighten a Nadrak."

"As long as he stays at Thull Zelik, I don't care what kind of man he is," Anheg
declared.
Colonel Brendig rode forward from the toiling column of infantry and wagons
stretched out behind them. "King Fulrach asks that we halt the column for a rest
period," he reported.
"Again?" Anheg demanded irritably.
"We've marched for two hours, your Majesty," Brendig pointed out. "Marching in
all this heat and dust is very exhausting for infantry. The men won't be much
good in a fight if they're all wrung out from walking."
"Halt the column, Colonel," Polgara told the Sendarian baronet. "We can rely on
Fulrach's judgment in these matters." She turned to the King of Cherek. "Stop
being so peevish, Anheg," she chided him.
"I'm being broiled alive, Polgara," he complained.
"Try walking for a few miles," she told him sweetly. "That may give you some
insight into how the infantry feels "
Anheg scowled, but remained silent.
Princess Ce'Nedra pulled in her sweating mount as the column halted. The
princess had spoken very little since Adara had been wounded. The dreadful sense
of her responsibility for her friend's nearly fatal injury had sobered her
enormously, and she had retreated into a kind of shell that was totally
unnatural for her. She removed the loosewoven straw hat that a captive Thull had
made for her back at the fort and squinted at the blistering sky.
"Put the hat back on, Ce'Nedra," Lady Polgara told her. "I don't want you
getting sunstroke."
Ce'Nedra obediently put her hat back on. "He's coming back," she reported,
pointing at a speck in the sky high above them.
"Will you excuse me?" General Varana said, turning his horse to leave.
"You're being absurd, Varana," King Rhodar told the Tolnedran. "Why do you
insist on refusing to admit he can do things you don't want to believe in?"
"It's a matter of principle, your Majesty," the general replied. "Tolnedrans do
not believe in sorcery. I am a Tolnedran, therefore I do not admit that it
exists." He hesitated. "I must concede, however, that his information is
surprisingly accurate - however he gets it."
A large, blue-banded hawk fell suddenly out of the broiling air like a stone,
flared his wings at the last moment, and settled on the ground directly in front

of them.
General Varana resolutely turned his back and stared with apparently deep
interest at a featureless hill some five miles distant.
The hawk began to shimmer and change even as he folded his wings. "Are you
stopping again?" Beldin demanded irascibly.
"We have to rest the troops, Uncle," Polgara replied.
"This isn't a Sunday stroll, Pol," Beldin retorted. He began to scratch one
armpit, befouling the air around him with a string of rancid curses.
"What's the matter?" Polgara asked mildly.
"Lice," he grunted.
"How did he get lice?"
"I visited some other birds to ask if they'd seen anything. I think I picked
them up in a vulture's nest."
"What could possibly possess you to go consorting with vultures?"
"Vultures aren't that bad, Pol. They perform a necessary function, and the
chicks do have a certain charm. The she-vulture had been picking at a dead horse
about twenty leagues south of here. After she told me about it, I went down to
take a look. There's a Murgo column coming this way."
"How many?" General Varana asked quickly, his back still turned to them.
"A thousand or so," Beldin shrugged. "They're pushing hard. They'll probably
intercept you tomorrow morning."
"A thousand Murgos aren't that much to worry about," King Rhodar said, frowning.
"Not to an army of this size. But what's the point of throwing a thousand men
away? What does Taur Urgas hope to accomplish?" He turned to Hettar. "Do you
suppose you could ride ahead and ask Korodullin and the Baron of Vo Mandor to
join us. I think we ought to have a conference."
Hettar nodded and loped his horse ahead toward the gleaming ranks of the
Mimbrate knights at the head of the column.
"Were there any Grolims with the Murgos, Uncle?" Polgara asked the filthy
hunchback.
"Not unless they were well-hidden," he replied. "I didn't probe too much,
though. I didn't want to give myself away."
General Varana abruptly abandoned his careful study of the hills around them and
turned his horse about to join them. "My first guess would be that the Murgo
column is a token gesture from Taur Urgas. He probably wants to get on the good
side of King Gethell; and since the Malloreans won't leave Thull Zelik, he can
pick up some advantage by committing a few troops to aid in the defense of the

Thullish towns and villages we've been destroying."
"That makes sense, Rhodar," Anheg agreed.
"Maybe," Rhodar said dubiously. "Taur Urgas doesn't think like a rational man,
though."
King Korodullin, flanked by Mandorallen and the Baron of Vo Ebor, thundered back
to join them. Their armor flashed in the sun, and all three were flushed and
miserable-looking in their steel casings.
"How can you stand all that?" Rhodar asked.
"Custom, your Majesty," Korodullin replied. "The armor doth inflict some
discomfort, but we have learned to endure it."
General Varana quickly sketched in the situation for them.
Mandorallen shrugged.
"It is of no moment. I will take some few dozen men and smash this threat from
the south."
Barak looked at King Anheg. "You see what I mean about him?" he said. "Now you
can understand why I was so nervous all the time we were chasing across Cthol
Murgos."
King Fulrach had ridden forward to join the conference, and he cleared his
throat diffidently. "Might I make a suggestion?" he asked.
"We eagerly await the practical wisdom of the King of the Sendars," Korodullin
replied with extravagant courtesy.
"The Murgo column doesn't really pose much of a threat, does it?" Fulrach
inquired.
"Not really, your Majesty," Varana replied. "At least, now that we know that
they're out there. We think that they're some kind of minor relief column sent
to placate the Thulls. Their presence in our vicinity is probably entirely
accidental."
"I don't want them getting close enough to recognize my ships, though," Anheg
declared firmly.
"We'll take care of that, Anheg," Rhodar told him.
"Any one of the elements of our army might easily overcome so slight a threat,"
Fulrach continued, "but mightn't it be better - from a morale standpoint - to
give the victory to the entire army?"
"I don't quite follow you, Fulrach," Anheg said.
"Instead of letting Sir Mandorallen annihilate these thousand Murgos all by
himself, why not select a contingent from each part of the army to deal with
them? Not only will that give us some experience in tactical coordination, but
it'll give all the men a sense of pride. An easy victory now will stiffen their

backs when we run into more difficult times later."
"Fulrach, sometimes you positively amaze me," Rhodar declared. "I think the
whole trouble is that you don't look that clever."
The contingents that were to turn south to meet the approaching Murgos were
selected by lot, once again at the suggestion of King Fulrach. "That way
there'll be no suspicion in the army that this is some kind of elite force," he
noted.
While the rest of the column pushed on toward the headwaters of the River Mardu,
the miniature army under the command of Barak, Hettar, and Mandorallen veered to
the south to intercept the enemy spearhead.
"They'll be all right, won't they?" Ce'Nedra nervously asked Polgara as she
watched them growing smaller and smaller as they rode off across the arid valley
toward the solid line of mountains to the south.
"I'm certain they will, dear," Polgara replied confidently.
The princess, however, did not sleep that night. For the first time, members of
her army were committed to a real battle, and she tossed and turned the entire
night, imagining all manner of disasters.
About midmorning of the following day, however, the special force returned.
There were a few bandages here and there and perhaps a dozen empty saddles, but
the look of victory shone on every face.
"Very nice little fight," Barak reported. The huge man was grinning broadly. "We
caught them just before sundown. They never knew what hit them."
General Varana, who had accompanied the force to observe, was a bit more precise
as he described the engagement to the assembled kings.
"The general tactics did work pretty much as we'd planned," he said. "The
Asturian archers swept the column with an arrow storm to begin with, and then
the infantry units moved into position at the top of a long slope. We
interspersed legionnaires, Drasnian pikemen, Sendars and the Arendish serf units
evenly along the entire front with the archers behind them to continue harassing
the enemy with arrows. As we expected, the Murgos charged. As soon as they'd
committed themselves, the Chereks and Rivans moved into position behind them,
and the Algars began slashing their flanks. When the Murgo assault began to
falter, the Mimbrate knights made their charge."
"It was absolutely splendid!" Lelldorin exclaimed, his eyes very bright. There
was a bandage around the young Asturian's upper arm, but he seemed to have

forgotten that it was there as he gesticulated wildly. "Just at the point when
the Murgos were completely confused, there was a sound like thunder, and the
knights came curving around the side of a hill with their lances advanced and
their pennons streaming. They bore down on the Murgos - a wave of solid steel -
and the hoofs of their horses shook the earth. And then at the last moment, they
all lowered their lances. It was like watching a wave break. And then they hit
the Murgos with a great crash, and they didn't even slow down. They rode through
them as if they weren't even there! They absolutely crushed them, and then we
all ran in to finish up. It was glorious!"
"He's as bad as Mandorallen, isn't he?" Barak observed to Hettar.
"I think it's in their blood," Hettar replied sagely.
"Did any of them get away?" Anheg asked.
Barak gave his cousin an evil grin. "After it got dark, we could hear a few of
them trying to crawl away. That's when Relg and his Ulgos went out to tidy up.
Don't worry, Anheg. Nobody's going to report back to Taur Urgas."
"He is likely to be waiting for news, isn't he?" Anheg grinned.
"I hope he's patient, then," Barak replied, "because he'll be waiting for a long
time."
Ariana, her face somber, took Lelldorin to task very firmly for his lack of
discretion, even as she tended his wound. Her words far surpassed a simple
scolding. She grew eloquent, and her lengthy, involuted sentences gave her
remonstrance a depth and scope that reduced her young man very nearly to tears.
His wound, admittedly minor, became a symbol of his careless lack of regard for
her. Her expression grew martyred, and his grew anguished. Ce'Nedra observed how
neatly Ariana twisted each of the young man's lame excuses into an even greater
personal injury, and filed this excellent technique away in a compartment of her
complex little mind for future use. True, Garion was somewhat brighter than
Lelldorin, but the tactic would probably work on him too, if she practiced a
little.
Taiba's meeting with Relg, on the other hand, involved no words. The beautiful
Marag woman who had emerged from the slave pens beneath Rak Cthol only to enter
a slavery even more profound, flew to the Ulgo fanatic's side upon his return.
With a low cry, she unthinkingly embraced him. Relg flinched away from her, but

the almost automatic, "Don't touch me," seemed to die on his lips, and his eyes
went very wide as she clung to him. Then Taiba remembered his aversion and
helplessly let her arms drop, but her violet eyes glowed as they drank in his
pale, large-eyed face. Then slowly, almost as if he were putting his arm into a
fire, Relg reached out and took her hand. A brief look of incredulity crossed
her face, followed almost immediately by a slow blush. They looked into each
other's eyes for a moment, then walked off together, hand in hand. Taiba's eyes
were demurely downcast, but there hovered about her rich, sensual mouth a tiny
little smile of triumph.
The victory over the Murgo column raised the spirits of the army tremendously.
The heat and dust no longer seemed to sap their energy as it had during the
first few days of the march, and a growing sense of camaraderie grew between the
diversified units as they pushed steadily eastward.
It took them four more days of steady marching to reach the headwaters of the
River Mardu and another day to push on down along the tumbling flow to a spot
where the ships could safely be launched. Hettar and his Algar patrols ranged
far ahead and reported that there remained only one more stretch of rapids about
ten leagues ahead before the river settled into tranquility on the Thullish
plain.
"We can portage around the rapids," King Anheg declared. "Let's get these ships
into the water. We've lost enough time already."
There was a rather high earthbank at that point, but the army attacked it
vigorously with shovels and mattocks, and it was soon reduced to a sloping ramp.
One by one the ships were rolled down the ramp into the water.
"We'll need a while to raise the masts," Anheg said.
"Leave that until later," Rhodar told him.
Anheg looked at him sharply.
"You're not going to be able to use your sails anyway, Anheg, and the masts
stick up too high. The stupidest Thull in the world will know what's going on if
he sees a forest of ship masts coming down the river toward him."
It was evening by the time the ships had all been launched and Polgara led the
princess, Ariana and Taiba on board Barak's ship. A breeze coming upriver gently
rippled the surface of the water and set the ship to rocking slowly. Beyond the
watchfires, the Thullish grassland stretched as if forever beneath a

purpling
sky where, one by one, the stars were emerging.
"How far is it to Thull Mardu?" Ce'Nedra asked Barak.
The big man pulled at his beard, squinting downriver. "One day to the rapids,"
he replied, "then one day to make the portage around them. Then about two days
after that."
"Four days," she said in a small voice. He nodded.
"I wish it was over," she sighed.
"All in good time, Ce'Nedra," he told her. "All in good time."

Chapter Fifteen

THE SHIPS WERE horribly crowded, even though scarcely half the army could
squeeze aboard them. The Algar clansmen and the Mimbrate knights patrolled the
banks as the Chereks rowed downriver toward the rapids, and those infantry
elements that could not be carried by the ships rode in close files on the spare
horses of the cavalry.
The Thullish grasslands on either side of the river were gently rolling, long
hillsides covered with deep, sun-browned grass. Just back from the river there
were sparse clusters of the twisted, sprucelike trees that had dotted the lower
foothills, and near the water itself rose thickets of willow and creeping
brambles. The sky remained clear, and it was still hot, though the river added
enough moisture to the air to alleviate the parched aridity that had plagued men
and horses alike in the vast, stony uplands. It was an alien landscape for all
of them, and the cavalry patrolling the banks rode warily with their hands close
to their weapons.
And then they rounded a wide bend and saw the white, tumbling water of the
rapids ahead. Barak swung the tiller of his big ship over and beached her.
"Looks like it's time to get out and walk," he grunted.
A dispute had arisen near the bow of the ship. The brown-bearded King Fulrach
was loudly protesting the decision to leave his supply wagons behind at the
rapids. "I didn't bring them all this way just to leave them sitting here," he
declared with uncharacteristic heat.
"They take too long to get anyplace," Anheg told him. "We're in a hurry,
Fulrach. I've got to get my ships past Thull Mardu before the Murgos or the
Malloreans wake up to what we're doing."
"You didn't object to having them along when you got hungry or

thirsty in the
uplands," Fulrach told him angrily.
"That was then. This is now. I've got to take care of my ships."
"And I'm going to take care of my wagons."
"They'll be all right, Fulrach," Rhodar said placatingly. "We do have to hurry,
and your wagons can't move fast enough to keep up."
"If somebody comes along and burns them, you're going to get very hungry before
we get back to the forts, Rhodar."
"We'll leave men to guard them, Fulrach. Be reasonable. You worry too much."
"Somebody's got to. You Alorns seem to forget that the fighting's only half of
it."
"Stop acting like an old woman, Fulrach," Anheg said bluntly. Fulrach's face
grew very cold. "I don't know that I care for that last remark, Anheg," he said
stiffly. Then he turned on his heel and stalked away.
"What's got into him?" the King of Cherek asked innocently.
"Anheg, if you don't learn how to keep your mouth shut, we might have to muzzle
you," Rhodar told him.
"I thought we came here to fight Angaraks," Brand said mildly. "Have the rules
been changed?"
The irritable bickering among her friends worried Ce'Nedra, and she went to
Polgara with her concern.
"It's nothing all that important, dear," the lady replied as she scrubbed
Errand's neck. "The upcoming battle's got them a bit edgy, that's all."
"But they're men," Ce'Nedra protested, "trained warriors."
"What does that have to do with it?" Polgara asked, reaching for a towel.
The princess couldn't think of an answer.
The portage at the rapids went smoothly, and the ships reentered the river below
the tumbling stretch of seething white-water by late afternoon. Ce'Nedra by now
was virtually ill as a result of the almost unbearable tension. All the months
she had spent in raising the army and marching eastward were about to come to a
final culmination. Within two days, they would hurl themselves at the walls of
Thull Mardu. Was it the right time? Was it, in fact, really necessary? Couldn't
they just portage around the city and avoid the battle entirely? Although the
Alorn kings had assured her that the city had to be neutralized, Ce'Nedra's
doubts grew with each mile. What if this was a mistake?
The princess worried and fretted and worried some more as she stood at the prow
of Barak's ship, staring at the broad river winding through the

Thullish grasslands.

Finally, just at evening of the second day after the portage, Hettar galloped back and reined in his horse on the north bank of the river. He motioned with his arm, and Barak swung his tiller over, angling the big ship in closer to the bank.

"The city's about two leagues ahead," the tall Algar called across the intervening space. "If you get too much closer, they'll see you from the walls."

"This is close enough, then," Rhodar decided. "Pass the word to anchor the ships. We'll wait here until dark."

Barak nodded and made a quick gesture to a waiting sailor. The man quickly raised a tall pole with a bit of bright red bunting nailed to its tip, and the fleet behind them slowed in answer to the signal. There was a creaking of windlasses as the anchors settled to the bottom, and the ships rocked and swung sluggishly in the current.

"I still don't like this part," Anheg growled morosely. "Too many things can go wrong in the dark."

"They'll go wrong for them, too," Brand told him.

"We've been over it a dozen times, Anheg," Rhodar said. "We all agreed that it's the best plan."

"It's never been done before," Anheg said.

"That's the whole point, isn't it?" Varana suggested. "The people inside the city won't expect it."

"Are you sure your men will be able to see where they're going?" Anheg demanded of Relg.

The zealot nodded. He was wearing his cowled leaf mail shirt and was carefully testing the edge of his hook-pointed knife. "What you think of as darkness is normal light for us," he replied.

Anheg scowled at the purpling sky overhead. "I hate being the first one to try something new," he announced.

They waited as evening settled on the plain. From the thickets at the river's edge, birds clucked sleepily, and the frogs began their evening symphony. Slowly out of the gathering darkness, the cavalry units began to group up along the banks. The Mimbrate knights on their great chargers massed into ranks, and the Algar clansmen spread like a dark sea beyond them. Commanding the south bank were Cho-Hag and Korodullin. The north was led by Hettar and

Mandorallen.
Slowly it grew darker.
A young Mimbrate knight who had been injured during the attack on the Murgo column stood leaning against the rail, looking pensively out into the twilight.
The knight had dark, curly hair and the snowy complexion of a young girl. His shoulders were broad, his neck columnar, and his eyes had an open innocence in them. His expression, however, was faintly melancholy.
The waiting had become unbearable, and Ce'Nedra had to talk to someone. She leaned on the rail beside the young man. "Why so sad, Sir Knight?" she asked him quietly.
"Because I am forbidden to take part in this night's adventure by reason of this slight injury, your Majesty," he replied, touching his splinted arm. He seemed unsurprised by her presence or by the fact that she had spoken to him.
"Do you hate the Angaraks so much that missing the chance to kill them causes you pain?" Ce'Nedra's question was gently mocking.
"Nay, my Lady," he answered. "I have no malice in me for any man, whatever his race. What I lament is being denied the chance to try my skills in the contest."
"Contest? Is that how you think of it?"
"Assuredly, your Majesty. In what other light should it be considered? I hold no personal rancor toward the men of Angarak, and it is improper to hate throe opponent in a test of arms. Some few men have fallen beneath my lance or my sword at diverse tourneys, but I have never hated any of them. Much to the contrary, I have had some affection for them as we strove with one another."
"But you were trying to cripple them." Ce'Nedra was startled at the young man's casual attitude.
"It is a part of the contest, your Majesty. A true test of arms may not be decided save by the injury or death of one of the combatants."
"What's your name, Sir Knight?" she asked him.
"I am Sir Beridel," he replied, "son of Sir Andorig, Baron of Vo Enderig."
"The man with the apple tree?"
"The very same, your Majesty." The young man seemed pleased that she had heard of his father and the strange duty Belgarath had imposed on him. "My father now rides at the right hand of King Korodullin. I would ride with them this night but for this stroke of ill fortune." He looked sadly at his broken arm.

"There will be other nights, Sir Beridel," she assured him, "and other
contests."
"Truly, your Majesty," he agreed. His face brightened momentarily, but then he
sighed and went back to his somber brooding.
Ce'Nedra drifted away, leaving him to his thoughts.
"You can't really talk to them, you know," a rough voice said to her from the
shadows. It was Beldin, the ugly hunchback.
"He doesn't seem to be afraid of anything," Ce'Nedra said a bit nervously. The
foul-mouthed sorcerer always made her nervous.
"He's a Mimbrate Arend," Beldin snorted. "He doesn't have enough brains to be
afraid."
"Are all the men in the army like him?"
"No. Most of them are afraid, but they'll go through with the attack anyway -
for a variety of reasons."
"And you?" she could not help asking. "Are you afraid too?"
"My fears are a bit more exotic," he said dryly.
"Such as?"
"We've been at this for a very long time - Belgarath, Pol, the twins and I - and
I'm more concerned about something going wrong than I am about my own personal
safety."
"How do you mean, wrong?"
"The Prophecy is very complex - and it doesn't say everything. The two possible
outcomes of all this are still absolutely balanced as far as I can tell.
Something very, very slight could tip that balance one way or the other. It
could be something that I've overlooked. That's what I'm afraid of."
"All we can do is the best we can."
"That might not be enough."
"What else can we do?"
"I don't know - and that's what worries me."
"Why worry about something if you can't do anything about it?"
"Now you're starting to sound like Belgarath. He tends to shrug things off and
trust to his luck sometimes. I like things a little neater." He stared off into
the darkness. "Stay close to Pol tonight, little girl," he said after a moment.
"Don't get separated from her. It might take you someplace you hadn't planned to
go, but you're supposed to stay with her, no matter what."
"What does that mean?"
"I don't know what it means," he retorted irritably. "All I know is that you and
she and the blacksmith and that stray child you picked up are supposed to stay
together. Something unexpected is going to happen."
"You mean a disaster? We must warn the others."
"We don't know that it's a disaster," he replied. "That's the whole

problem. It
might be necessary, and if it is, we don't want to tamper with it. I think we've
about run this discussion into the ground. Go find Polgara and stay with her."
"Yes, Beldin," Ce'Nedra said meekly.
As the stars began to come out, the anchors were raised and the Cherek fleet
began to slip quietly downriver toward Thull Mardu. Though they were still some
miles above the city, commands were issued in hoarse whispers, and the men all
took great care to avoid making noise as they shifted their weapons and
equipment, tightening belts, giving their armor quick, last-minute checks and
settling their helmets more firmly on their heads.
Amid ships, Relg was leading his Ulgos in a quiet religious service, muttering
the harsh gutturals of the Ulgo tongue in a scarcely audible murmur. Their pale
faces had been smeared with soot, and they looked like so many shadows as they
knelt in prayer to their strange God.
"They're the key to the whole thing," Rhodar observed quietly to Polgara as he
watched the devotions of the Ulgos. "Are you sure that Relg is all right for
this? Sometimes he seems a bit unstable."
"He'll be fine," Polgara replied. "The Ulgos have even more reason to hate Torak
than you Alorns do."
The drifting ships slowly rounded a wide bend in the river, and there, a half
mile downstream, stood the walled city of Thull Mardu, rising from its island in
the middle of the river. There were a few torches atop the walls, and a faint
glow rising from within. Barak turned and, shielding it with his body, he
briefly uncovered a muffled lantern, letting out a single flicker of light. The
anchors sank very slowly through the dark waters toward the riverbottom; with a
very faint creak of ropes, the ships slowed, then stopped.
Somewhere inside the city a dog began to bark excitedly. Then a door banged
open, and the barking cut off suddenly with a yelp of pain.
"I don't have much use for a man who kicks his own dog," Barak muttered.
Relg and his men moved very quietly to the rail and began to clamber down ropes
into the small boats waiting below.
Ce'Nedra watched breathlessly, straining with her eyes to see in the darkness.
The very faint starlight briefly showed her several shadows drifting down toward
the city. Then the shadows were gone. Behind them there was a faint

splash of an
oar, followed by an angrily hissed admonition. The princess turned and saw a
moving tide of small boats coming downriver from the anchored fleet. The
spearhead of the assault slid silently by, following Relg and his Ulgos toward
the fortified island city of the Thulls.
"Are you sure there are enough of them?" Anheg whispered to Rhodar.
The rotund King of Drasnia nodded. "All they have to do is secure a landing
place for us and hold the gate once the Ulgos get it open," he murmured.
"There's enough of them for that."
A faint night breeze rippled the surface of the river, setting the ship to
rocking. Unable to bear the suspense any longer, Ce'Nedra lifted her fingertips
to the amulet Garion had given her so many months before. As always, a buzz of
conversation filled her ears.
"Yaga, for gohek vilta." It was Relg's harsh voice, speaking in a whisper. "Ka
tak. feedh."
"Well?" Polgara asked, one eyebrow slightly raised.
"I can't tell what they're saying," Ce'Nedra replied helplessly. "They're
talking in Ulgo."
A strangled groan quite suddenly seemed to come from the amulet itself and then
was quickly and horribly cut off.
"I - I think they just killed somebody," Ce'Nedra said in a quavering voice.
"It's started then," Anheg said with a certain grim satisfaction. Ce'Nedra
pulled her fingertips from the amulet. She could no longer bear to listen to the
sound of men dying in the dark.
They waited.
Then someone screamed, a scream filled with a terrible agony.
"That's it!" Barak declared. "That's the signal! Pull the anchor!" he shouted to
his men.
Very suddenly beneath the high, dark walls of Thull Mardu, two separate fires
flared up, and shadowy figures could be seen moving about them. At the same
moment, there was a clanking rattle of heavy chains inside the city and a
creaking groan as a broad gate swung ponderously down to form a bridge across
the narrow north channel of the river.
"Man your oars!" Barak roared to his crew. He swung his tiller hard over,
steering toward the rapidly lowering bridge.
More torches appeared along the tops of the walls, and there were shouts of
alarm. Somewhere an iron bell began to clang a note of desperate

urgency.
"It worked!" Anheg exclaimed, gleefully pounding Rhodar on the back. "It
actually worked!"
"Of course it worked," Rhodar replied, his voice also jubilant. "Don't pound on
me so hard, Anheg. I bruise easily."
All need for silence was gone now, and a great roar went up from the massed
fleet following in Barak's wake. Torches flared, and the faces of the troops
lining the rails were bathed in their ruddy glow.
A great splash suddenly erupted from the river twenty yards to the right of
Barak's ship, showering everyone on deck with a deluge of water.
"Catapult!" Barak shouted, pointing at the walls looming ahead. Like a huge,
preying insect, the heavy-beamed frame of the siege-engine balanced atop the
wall, its long throwing arm already cocking back to cast another boulder at the
approaching fleet. Then the arm stopped as a storm of arrows swept the top of
the wall clean. A crowd of Drasnians, easily identifiable by the long pikes they
carried, overran the position.
"Watch out, down there," one of them roared into the confusion at the base of
the wall, and the siege engine ponderously toppled outward and fell with a crash
onto the rocks below.
There was a thunder of hoofs across the now-lowered bridge, and the Mimbrate
knights crashed into the city.
"As soon as we tie up to the bridge, I want you and the princess and the other
ladies to go to the north bank," King Rhodar said tersely to Polgara. "Get back
out of harm's way. This will probably take the rest of the night, and there's no
point in exposing any of you to any accidents."
"Very well, Rhodar," Polgara agreed. "And don't you do anything foolish, either.
You're a rather large target, you know."
"I'll be all right, Polgara - but I'm not going to miss this." He laughed then,
a strangely boyish laugh. "I haven't had so much fun in years," he declared.
Polgara gave him a quick look. "Men!" she said in a tone that said everything.
A guard of Mimbrate knights escorted the ladies and Errand perhaps a thousand
yards upstream to an indented cove on the north bank of the stream, well away
from the press of the horsemen rushing toward the beleaguered city. The cove had
a gently sloping sand beach and was protected on three sides by steep,

grass-covered banks. Durnik the smith and Olban quickly raised a tent for them, built a small fire, and then climbed up the bank to watch the attack.
"It's going according to plan," Durnik reported from his vantage point. "The Cherek ships are lining up side by side across the south channel. As soon as they get the planking in place, the troops on the other side will be able to cross."
"Can you tell if the men inside have taken the south gate yet?" Olban demanded, peering toward the city.
"I can't tell for sure," Durnik replied. "There's fighting going on in that part of the city, though."
"I'd give anything to be there," Olban lamented.
"You stay right where you are, young man," Polgara told him firmly. "You appointed yourself bodyguard to the Rivan Queen, and you're not going to go running off just because things are more interesting someplace else."
"Yes, Lady Polgara," the young Rivan answered, suddenly abashed. "It's just "
"Just what?"
"I wish I knew what was happening, that's all. My father and my brothers are in the middle of the fighting, and I have to stand here and watch."
A sudden great belch of flame shot up from inside the walls to illuminate the river with sooty red light.
Polgara sighed. "Why do they always have to bum things?" she asked sadly.
"It adds to the confusion, I suppose," Durnik replied.
"Perhaps," Polgara said, "but I've seen this happen too many times before. It's always the same. There always has to be a fire. I don't believe I care to watch any more of this." She turned her back on the burning city and walked slowly away from the riverbank.
The night was interminable. Toward dawn, as the stars began to fade from the paling sky, the Princess Ce'Nedra, drawn with fatigue, stood atop a grassy bank near the cove, watching with a kind of sick fascination as the city of Thull Mardu died. Entire districts seemed to be in flames, and great fountains of orange sparks belched toward the sky as roofs caved in and buildings collapsed.
What had seemed so stirring, so glorious in her anticipation had turned out to be something quite different in reality, and she was sick at what she had done.
She still, nonetheless, brought her fingertips up to touch the amulet at her throat. She had to know what was happening. No matter how horrible

the events
were in the city, not knowing what was happening was even worse.
"Sort of a nice little fight," she heard King Anheg say. The King of Cherek
seemed to be someplace very high - atop the walls of the city perhaps.
"Pretty routine," Barak, Earl of Trellheim, replied. "The Murgo garrison fought
pretty well, but the Thulls kept falling all over themselves trying to
surrender."
"What did you do with all of them?" King Cho-Hag asked.
"We herded them into the central square," Barak answered. "They've been amusing
themselves by killing the Grolims we flushed out of the temple."
Anheg suddenly chuckled, an evil sort of sound. "How's Grodeg?" he asked.
"It looks like he's going to live," Barak said.
"That's a shame. When I saw that axe sticking out of his back, I thought
somebody's solved one of my problems for me."
"It was too low," Barak said rather mournfully. "It broke his spine, but it
didn't hit anything else significant. He won't be walking any more, but he's
still breathing."
"You can't depend on a Murgo to do anything right," Anheg said in disgust.
"They did thin out the Bear-cult pretty thoroughly," Barak noted cheerfully. "I
don't think there are more than two dozen of them left. They fought pretty well,
though."
"That's what they were here for. How long do you think it will be before
daylight?"
"Half an hour, maybe."
"Where's Rhodar?"
"He and Fulrach are sacking the warehouses," King Cho-Hag replied. "The Murgos
had some supply dumps here. Fulrach wants to confiscate them."
"He would," Anheg said. "Maybe we'd better send somebody for them. It's getting
on toward the time when we'll want to think about pulling out of here. As soon
as it gets light, all this smoke's going to announce what we've done to anyone
within twenty leagues. It's about time to start the fleet moving, and it's a
long march back to the forts on top of the escarpment."
"How long will it take you to get to the Sea of the East?" Cho-Hag asked.
"A couple of days," Anheg told him. "You can move a ship pretty fast when you've
got the current behind you. It will take your army a week at least to get back
to the forts, won't it?"
"Probably," Cho-Hag said. "The infantry can't move all that fast.

There's
Brendig! I'll send him to fetch Rhodar." He shouted down to the
Sendar. "Colonel
Brendig, see if you can find Rhodar. Ask him to join us."
"What's that?" Barak asked suddenly.
"What's what?" Anheg demanded.
"I thought I saw something out there - way to the south - where you
can just
start to make out that hilltop."
"I don't see anything."
"It was just a flicker - something moving."
"Probably a Murgo scout creeping in for a look." Anheg laughed
shortly. "I don't
imagine we'll be able to keep what happened here a secret for very
long."
"There it is again," Barak said.
"I saw it that time, too," King Cho-Hag agreed.
There was a long silence as the sky imperceptibly grew lighter.
Ce'Nedra held
her breath.
"Belar!" Anheg swore in a stunned voice. "They stretch for miles!"
"Lelldorin!" Barak shouted down from the wall. "Brendig's gone to get
Rhodar. Go
find them and tell them to get up here at once. The plain to the
south is
covered with Murgos."

Chapter Sixteen

"LADY POLGARA!" CE'NEDRA Cried, jerking back the flap of the tent.
"Lady
Polgara!"
"What is it, Ce'Nedra?" Polgara's voice came from the darkness inside
the tent.
"Barak and Anheg are up on the walls of the city," the princess said
in a
frightened voice. "They just saw a Murgo army coming up from the
south."
Polgara came quickly out into the firelight, holding the sleepy
Errand by the
hand. "Where's Beldin?" she demanded.
"I haven't seen him since early last night."
Polgara raised her face and closed her eyes. A moment or so later
there was a
rushing sound of wings, and the large hawk settled to the sand not
far from
their flickering fire.
Beldin was swearing sulfurously even as he shimmered and blurred back
into his
natural shape.
"How did they slip past you, Uncle?" Polgara asked him.
"There are Grolims with them," he growled, still sizzling the air
around him
with oaths. "The Grolims could feel me watching, so the troops moved
only at
night, and the Grolims shielded them."
"Where did they hide in the daytime?"
"In the Thullish villages, apparently. There are dozens of

communities out there. It never occurred to me to pay all that much attention to them." He began to swear again, berating himself savagely for having missed the movement of the Murgo army.
"There's no point in swearing about it, Uncle," Polgara told him coolly. "It's done, now."
"Unfortunately there's a bit more, Pol," the sorcerer told her. "There's another army at least as big coming in from the north - Malloreans, Nadraks, and Thulls. We're caught right between them."
"How long have we got before they reach us?" Polgara asked. Beldin shrugged.
"Not long. The Murgos have some rough ground to cross - probably about an hour. The Malloreans will be here in quite a bit less."
Polgara began to curse fervently under her breath. "Go to Rhodar," she told the hunchback. "Tell him that we have to release Anheg's fleet immediately - before the Angaraks can bring up catapults and destroy the ships where they're anchored."
The deformed man nodded and stooped slightly, curving his arms out like wings even as he began to waver and change.
"Olban," Polgara called to the young Rivan, "go find Sir Mandorallen and Lord Hettar. Send them to me at once. Hurry."
Olban gave her one startled look, then ran for his horse.
Durnik the smith came sliding down the grassy bank onto their little beach. His face was grave. "You and the ladies must leave at once, Mistress Pol," he told her. "There's going to be fighting here, and the middle of a battle's no place for any of you."
"I'm not going anywhere, Durnik," she replied with a trace of irritation. "I started all this, and I'm going to see it through."
Ariana had gone back into the tent as soon as the situation became clear to her. She now emerged again, carrying the stout canvas bag in which she kept her medical supplies. "Have I thy permission to leave, Lady Polgara?" she asked with a certain cool professionalism. "In battle men are injured, and I must go make preparations for their care. This spot is somewhat too remote and confined to receive the wounded."
Polgara gave her a quick look. "All right," she agreed. "Just be careful not to get too close to the fighting."
Taiba pulled on her cloak. "I'll go with you," she told Ariana. "I

don't know
that much about it, but you can teach me as we go along."
"Go help them get set up, Durnik," Polgara told the smith. "Then come back
here."
Durnik nodded gravely and helped the two women up the steep bank. Mandorallen
thundered up on his charger with Hettar at his side. "You know what's happened?"
Polgara demanded.
Mandorallen nodded.
"Is there any possibility of withdrawing before the enemy forces arrive?"
"Nay, my Lady Polgara," the great knight replied. "They are too close. Moreover,
our purpose has ever been to gain passage for the ships of Cherek into the Sea
of the East. We must buy them time to sail beyond the reach of the siege engines
of the Angaraks."
"I didn't want this," Polgara said angrily and she began to mutter curses again.
Brand, the gray-cloaked Rivan Warder, accompanied by General Varana, rode up to
join Mandorallen and Hettar at the top of the steep bank. The four of them
dismounted and slid down the bank to the sand.
"We've begun evacuating the city," the big Rivan said in his deep voice, "and
most of the fleet is pulling anchor. We're holding just enough ships to maintain
the bridges across the south channel."
"Is there any possibility of putting the entire army on one bank or the other?"
Polgara asked him.
He shook his head. "There isn't time, Polgara."
"We're going to be divided by the river," she pointed out, "and neither force is
going to be strong enough to meet the Angaraks coming against it."
"A tactical necessity, my dear Lady Polgara," General Varana told her. "We have
to hold both banks until the fleet is clear."
"I think Rhodar misjudged the Angarak intentions," Brand said. "He was so sure
that Taur Urgas and 'Zakath would both want to avoid taking casualties that he
didn't consider this possibility."
General Varana clasped his muscular hands behind his back and limped back and
forth along the little beach, his face creased with thought. "I think I begin to
understand the meaning of that Murgo column we destroyed in the uplands," he
said.
"Your Grace?" Mandorallen asked, puzzled.
"It was a test of our commitment," Varana explained. "The Angaraks needed to
know when we were making our major move. One of the basic rules of

war is not to become involved in serious conflicts if what you're doing is merely diversionary. That column was bait. Unfortunately, we took it."
"You mean we shouldn't have attacked the column?" Hettar asked him.
Varana made a rueful face. "Apparently not. It gave away our intentions - let them know that this expedition was not a diversion. I underestimated Taur Urgas. He threw away a thousand men just to find out what we were up to."
"What now?" Hettar asked.
"We get ready to fight," Varana said. "I wish we had better terrain for it, but I suppose we'll have to make do with what we have."
Hettar looked out across the river, his hawk-face hungry. "I wonder if I've got time to make it over to the south bank," he mused.
"One side or the other," Brand said, looking puzzled. "What's the difference?"
"The Murgos are over there," Hettar replied. "I don't really have anything against Malloreans."
"This isn't a personal fight, Lord Hettar," Varana pointed out.
"It is with me," Hettar said grimly.
"We must needs see to the safety of Lady Polgara and the princess," Mandorallen said. "Mayhap an escort should be provided to convey them back to the forts atop the escarpment."
Brand shook his head. "The region is likely to be patrolled heavily," he disagreed. "It wouldn't be safe."
"He's right, Mandorallen," Polgara told the knight. "Besides, you need every man you've got right here." She looked off toward the northeast. "Then, too, there's that." She pointed toward a heavy cloudbank that had begun to stain the sky just above the horizon. The clouds were an inky black, seething and rolling and illuminated from within by fitful flickers of lightning.
"A storm?" General Varana asked, looking a bit surprised.
"Not at this time of year - and certainly not from that direction," Polgara replied. "The Grolims are up to something, and that's going to be my fight. Deploy your forces, gentlemen. If there's going to be a battle, let's be ready for it."
"The ships are moving," Durnik reported as he and Olban came back to the sheltered little cove, "and the troops are leaving the city."
King Rhodar rode up. His broad face was streaked with soot and perspiration.
"Anheg's leaving," he said, swinging down from his saddle with a grunt.
"Where's Fulrach?" Brand asked.
"He's taking the bulk of the troops across to the south bank."
"Isn't that going to leave us a little undermanned on this side?"

General Varana
inquired politely.
"That bridge is too narrow," Rhodar told him. "It would take hours to bring
enough men across to make any difference. Brendig's already got a crew
undermining the supports so that we can bring the bridge down before the
Angaraks get here."
"What for?" Ce'Nedra asked him.
"Thull Mardu's too good a vantage point, your Highness," General Varana
explained. "We don't want any Angaraks on the island if we can help it." He
looked at King Rhodar. "Have you given any thought to tactics?" he asked.
"We want to give Anheg a half a day, if possible," Rhodar replied. "The ground
along the river gets marshy about twenty leagues downstream, and the Angaraks
won't be able to get close enough to pester him, once he gets that far. Let's
form up a conventional infantry linepikemen, the legions, Sendars, and so on.
We'll put the archers in support and use the Algars to slash at the flanks. I
want to hold the Mimbrate knights in reserve until the Malloreans mass up for
their first charge."
"That's not a winning tactic, if your Majesty will forgive my saying so,"
General Varana said.
"We aren't here to win, Varana," Rhodar told him. "We're here to delay the
Angaraks for about six hours and then withdraw. I'm not going to waste lives
trying to win a battle I haven't any chance of winning." He turned to Hettar. "I
want you to send a force of your clansmen on a sweep downriver. Tell them to
uproot any Malloreans they find emplaced along the riverbank. The significance
of the fleet still may have escaped 'Zakath and Taur Urgas. Angaraks aren't good
sailors, so they probably don't realize what Anheg can do, once he gets into the
Sea of the East."
"Excuse me, your Majesty," Varana objected, "but all of your strategy - even the
fleet - is merely a delaying action."
"That's the whole point, Varana," Rhodar told him bluntly. "All of this is
really rather insignificant. What's really important is going to happen in
Mallorea when Belgarion reaches Cthol Mishrak. We'd better move, gentlemen. The
Malloreans will be here before long, and we want to be ready for them."

The cloudbank Polgara had pointed out was sweeping toward them with an alarming speed, a seething darkness of rolling purple, stalking forward on crooked legs of lightning. A hot wind seemed to flee out ahead of it, flattening the grass and whipping the manes and tails of the horses wildly. As King Rhodar and the others moved out to meet the approaching Mallorean army, Polgara, her face pale and her hair tossing behind her in the wind, climbed the grassy bank with Ce'Nedra and Durnik behind her and stood watching the approach of the cloud.

"Take the child, Ce'Nedra," she said quite calmly. "Don't let go of him, no matter what happens."

"Yes, Lady Polgara," Ce'Nedra said, holding out her arms to Errand. The child came to her immediately, his serious little face unafraid. She picked him up and held him close, her cheek against his.

"Errand?" he said, pointing at the approaching storm.

Then, among the ranks of their army, shadowy figures rose up out of the ground.

The figures wore black robes and polished steel masks and carried cruel-pointed short spears. Without pausing to even think, a mounted young Mimbrate knight swept his broadsword from its scabbard and swung the whistling blade at one of the steel-masked figures. His sword passed through the figure with no effect. As he struck, however, a sizzling bolt of lightning struck him, seeming to attach itself to the point of his helmet. He stiffened convulsively as the lightning, like a writhing snake of intense light, clung to the tip of his steel helm.

Smoke boiled out of the slits of his visor as he roasted inside his armor. His horse lurched forward onto its knees while the ghastly, flickering light engulfed them both. Then the lightning was gone, and horse and man collapsed, stone dead.

Polgara hissed and then raised her voice. She did not seem to be speaking that loudly, but the effect of her words reached the farthest edges of the army. "Do not touch the shadows," she warned. "They're Grolim illusions and can't hurt you unless you touch them. They're here to draw the lightning to you, so stay clear of them."

"But, Mistress Pol," Durnik protested, "the troops won't be able to hold ranks if they have to keep dodging the shadows."

"I'll take care of the shadows," she replied grimly. She raised both arms above
her head, her fists clenched. A look of dreadful concentration filled her face,
and then she spoke a single word, opening her hands as she did so. The grass,
which had been bending toward them in the hot wind preceding the storm, suddenly
flattened in the opposite direction as the force of Polgara's will rippled
outward. As that force passed over each shadowy Grolim illusion, the figures
seemed to flinch, then shrivel, and then with silent detonations, each shadow
exploded into shards and fragments of darkness.
Polgara was gasping as the last of the shadows on the farthest edge of the army
vanished, and she would have collapsed had Durnik not jumped to her side to
support her. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.
"Just give me a moment," she said, wilting against him. "That took a great deal
of effort." She smiled at him, a wan little smile, and then her head drooped
wearily.
"Won't they come back?" Ce'Nedra demanded. "What I mean is, it didn't actually
hurt the real Grolims, did it? Just their shadows."
Polgara laughed weakly. "Oh, it hurt them, all right," she replied. "Those
Grolims don't have shadows any more. Not one of them will ever cast a shadow
again."
"Not ever?" the princess gasped.
"Not ever."
Then Beldin joined them, swooping in with the wind tearing at his feathers.
"We've got work to do, Polgara," he growled even as he shimmered into his
natural shape. "We're going to have to break up this storm they're bringing in
from the west. I talked with the twins. They'll work on the southern side of it,
and you and I'll take this side."
She looked at him inquiringly.
"Their army's going to be advancing right behind the storm," he explained.
"There's no point in trying to hold it back now. It's got too much momentum.
What we want to do is break open the rear edge of it and let it spill back over
the Angaraks."
"How many Grolims are working on the storm, Uncle?" she asked him.
"Who knows?" He shrugged. "But it's taking every bit of effort they can muster
just to keep it under control. If the four of us hit the back side all at once,
the pressures in the storm itself will do the rest."

"Why not just let it pass over?" Durnik asked. "Our troops aren't children. They
won't fall apart just because of a little squall."
"This isn't just a little squall, blacksmith," Beldin said acidly. Something
large and white thudded to the ground a few feet away. "If you get four or five
of those hailstones on top of the head, you won't care how the battle turns
out."
"They're as big as hens' eggs," Durnik said in astonishment.
"And they'll probably get bigger." Beldin turned back to Polgara. "Give me your
hand," he told her. "I'll pass the signal to Beltira, and we'll all strike at
the same time. Get ready."
More of the hailstones thudded into the springy turf, and one particularly large
one shattered into a thousand fragments as it crashed down on a large rock with
stunning force. From the direction of the army came an intermittent banging as
the hailstones bounced off the armor of the Mimbrate knights or clanged down on
the hastily raised shields of the infantry.
And then, mixed with the hail, the rain squalls struck-seething sheets of water
driven before the wind like raging waves. It was impossible to see, and almost
impossible to breathe. Olban jumped forward with his shield raised to protect
Ce'Nedra and Errand. He winced once as a large hailstone struck his shoulder,
but his shield arm did not waver.
"It's breaking, Pol!" Beldin shouted. "Let's push it once more. Let them eat
their own storm for a while."
Polgara's face twisted into an agony of concentration, and then she half slumped
as she and Beldin unleashed their combined wills at the rolling sky. The sound
of it was beyond belief as the vast forces collided. The sky ripped suddenly
apart and lightning staggered and lurched through the smoking air. Great,
incandescent bolts crashed into each other high above, showering the earth
beneath with fireballs. Men fell, charred instantly into black, steaming husks
in the driving downpour, but the casualties were not only among the men of the
west.
The vast storm with its intolerable pressures recoiled as the combined wills of
Polgara and Beldin on the north bank and the twins on the south bank ripped open
the back edge of it, and the advancing Malloreans received that recoil full in

the teeth. A curtain of lightning swept back across their close-packed ranks
like an enormous, blinding broom, littering the earth with their smoking dead.
As the fabric of Grolim sorcery which had driven the stormfront toward the river
ripped apart, the gale winds suddenly reversed and flowed back, shrieking and
howling, confounding the advancing Angaraks with rain and hail.
From out of the center of the dreadful cloud overhead, swirling fingers of murky
black twitched and reached down toward the earth with hideous roaring sounds.
With a last, almost convulsive jerk, one of those huge, swirling funnels touched
the earth in the midst of the redclad Malloreans. Debris sprayed up and out from
the point of the dreadful vortex as, with ponderous immensity, it cut an erratic
course two hundred yards wide directly through the enemy ranks. Men and horses
were ripped to pieces by the insane winds within the swirling column of cloud,
and bits of armor and shreds of red tunics - and worse - showered down on the
stunned and terrified Malloreans on either side of the swath of absolute
destruction moving inexorably through their midst.
"Beautiful!" Beldin exulted, hopping up and down in a grotesque display of glee.
There was the sudden sound of a great horn, and the close-packed ranks of
Drasnian pikemen and Tolnedran legionnaires facing the faltering ranks of the
Malloreans opened. From behind them, his armor streaming water, Mandorallen led
the charge of the Mimbrate knights. Full upon the confused and demoralized
Malloreans they fell, and the sound of the impact as they struck was a terrible,
rending crash, punctuated by screams. Rank upon rank was crushed beneath the
charge, and the terrified Malloreans wavered and then broke and fled. Even as
they ran, the clans of Algar swept in among them from the flanks, their sabres
flashing in the rain.
At a second blast of Mandorallen's horn, the charging Mimbrates reined in,
wheeled and galloped back, leaving a vast wreckage behind them.
The rain slackened fitfully, little more than errantly passing showers now, and
patches of blue appeared among the racing clouds overhead. The Grolim storm had
broken and dispersed back across the plains of Mishrak ac Thull.
Ce'Nedra looked toward the south bank and saw that the storm there had also
dispersed and that the forces under the command of King Cho-Hag and

King
Korodullin were assaulting the front ranks of the demoralized Murgo army. Then
the princess looked sharply at the south channel of the river. The last bridges
of Cherek ships had broken loose during the violent storm, and there was now
only open water on that side of the island. The last troops remaining in the
city were streaming across the bridge over the north channel. A tall Sendarian
lad was among the last to cross. As soon as he reached the bank, he came
immediately upriver. As he drew nearer, Ce'Nedra recognized him. It was
Rundorig, Garion's boyhood friend from Faldor's farm, and he was openly weeping.
"Goodman Durnik," he sobbed as he reached them, "Doroon's dead."
"What did you say?" Lady Polgara demanded, raising her tired face suddenly.
"Doroon, Mistress Pol," Rundorig wept. "He drowned. We were crossing over to the
south bank when the storm broke the ropes holding the ships. Doroon fell into
the river, and he didn't know how to swim. I tried to save him, but he went
under before I could reach him." The tall young man buried his face in his
hands.
Polgara's face went absolutely white, and her eyes filled with sudden tears.
"Take care of him, Durnik," she told the smith, then turned and walked away, her
head bowed in her grief.
"I tried, Durnik," Rundorig blurted, still sobbing. "I really tried to reach him
- but there were too many people in my way. I couldn't get to him in time. I saw
him go under, and there was nothing I could do."
Durnik's face was very grave as he put his arm about the weeping boy's
shoulders. The smith's eyes were also filled, and he said nothing. Ce'Nedra,
however, could not weep. She had reached out her hand and plucked these
unwarlike young men from their homes and dragged them halfway across the world,
and now one of Garion's oldest friends had died in the chill waters of the River
Mardu. His death was on her head, but she could not weep. A terrible fury
suddenly filled her. She turned to Olban. "Kill them!" she hissed from between
clenched teeth.
"My Queen?" Olban gaped at her.
"Go!" she commanded. "Take your sword and go. Kill as many Angaraks as you can -
for me, Olban. Kill them for me!" And then she could weep.

Olban looked first at the sobbing little princess and then at the milling ranks of the Malloreans, still reeling from the savagery of the Mimbrate assault. His face grew exultant as he drew his sword. "As my Queen commands!" he shouted and ran to his horse.

Even as the decimated front ranks of the Malloreans fled, hurried by the sabre-wielding Algars, greater and greater numbers of their countrymen reached the field, and soon the low hills to the north were covered with them. Their red tunics made it look almost as if the earth itself were bleeding. It was not the Malloreans, however, who mounted the next attack. Instead, thick-bodied Thulls in mud-colored smocks marched reluctantly into position. Directly behind the Thulls, mounted Malloreans urged them on with whips.

"Basic Mallorean strategy," Beldin growled. "'Zakath wants to let the Thulls do most of the dying. He'll try to save his own troops for the campaign against Taur Urgas."

Ce'Nedra raised her tear-streaked face. "What do we do now?" she asked the misshapen sorcerer.

"We kill Thulls," he said bluntly. "A charge or two by the Mimbrates ought to break their spirits. Thulls don't make very good soldiers, and they'll run away as soon as we give them the chance."

Even as the sluggish forces of Mishrak ac Thull flowed like a mudslide downhill toward the solid line of pikemen and legionnaires, the Asturian archers just to the rear of the infantry raised their bows and filled the air with a solid, arching sheet of yard-long arrows. The Thulls quailed as rank after rank melted under the withering storm of arrows. The shouts of the Malloreans at the rear became more desperate, and the crack of their whips filled the air.

And then Mandorallen's horn sounded, the ranks of infantry opened, and the armored knights of Mimbre charged again. The Thulls took one look at the steel-clad men and horses crashing toward them and immediately bolted. The Mallorean whip-men were swarmed under and trampled in the panic-stricken flight of the Thull army.

"So much for the Thulls." Beldin grunted with satisfaction as he watched the rout. He grinned an evil grin. "I imagine that 'Zakath will speak firmly to King Gethell about this."

Mandorallen's knights thundered back to their positions behind the infantry, and
the two armies glared at each other across a field littered with Angarak dead.
Ce'Nedra began to shiver as a sudden chill swept the battlefield. Although the sun had broken through the ragged clouds as the Grolim storm
rapidly dispersed, there was no warmth to it. Even though all trace of wind had
died, it grew colder. Then from the ground and from the dark surface of the
river, tendrils of fog began to rise.
Beldin hissed. "Polgara," he snapped to the grieving sorceress, "I need you."
"Leave me alone, Uncle," she replied in a voice still choked with sorrow.
"You can cry later," he told her harshly. "The Grolims are drawing the heat out
of the air. If we don't stir up a wind, the fog's going to get so thick you'll
be able to walk on it."
She turned, and her face was very cold. "You don't respect anything, do you?"
she said flatly.
"Not much," he admitted, "but that's beside the point. If the Grolims can build
up a good fog bank, we'll have the whole stinking Mallorean army on top of us
before we can even see them coming. Let's go, Pol. People get killed; it
happens. You can get sentimental about it later." He held out his gnarled, lumpy
hand to her.
The tendrils of fog had begun to thicken, lying in little pockets now. The
littered battlefield in front of the infantry lines seemed to waver, and then
disappeared entirely as the fog congealed into a solid wall of white.
"Wind, Pol," Beldin said, taking hold of her hand. "As much wind as you can
raise."
The struggle which ensued then was a silent one. Polgara and Beldin, their hands
joined together, gathered in their wills and then reached out with them,
probing, searching for some weakness in the mass of deadcalm air that imprisoned
the thickening fog along the banks of the river. Fitful little gusts of breeze
swirled the eddying fog, then died as quickly as they had arisen.
"Harder, Pol," Beldin urged. His ugly face streamed with rivulets of sweat as he
struggled with the vast inertness of unmoving air.
"It's not going to work this way, Uncle," she declared, pulling her hand free.
Her face showed her own strain. "There's nothing to get hold of. What are the
twins doing?"

"The Hierarchs of Rak Cthol are riding with Taur Urgas," the hunchback replied.
"The twins have their hands full dealing with them. They won't be able to help."
Polgara straightened then, steeling herself. "We're trying to work too close,"
she said. "Every time we start a little local breeze, a dozen Grolims jump in
and smother it."
"All right," Beldin agreed.
"We'll have to reach out farther," she continued. "Start the air moving
somewhere out beyond their range so that by the time it gets here, it has so
much momentum that they can't stop it."
Beldin's eyes narrowed. "That's dangerous, Pol," he told her. "Even if we can do
it, it's going to exhaust the both of us. If they throw anything else at us,
neither of us will have any strength left to fight them."
"It's a gamble, Uncle," she admitted, "but the Grolims are stubborn. They'll try
to protect this fog bank even after all chance of maintaining it has gone.
They'll get tired, too. Maybe too tired to try anything else."
"I don't like maybes."
"Have you got a better idea?"
"Not right now, no."
"All right, then."
They joined hands again.
It took, it seemed to the princess, an eternity. With her heart in her throat
she stared at the two of them as they stood with their hands joined and their
eyes closed - reaching out with their minds toward the hot, barren uplands to
the west, trying with all their strength to pull that heated air down into the
broad valley of the River Mardu. All around her, Ce'Nedra seemed to feel the
oppressive chill of Grolim thought lying heavily on the stagnant air, holding
it, resisting all effort to dissipate the choking fog.
Polgara was breathing in short gasps, her chest heaving and her face twisted
with an inhuman striving. Beldin, his knotted shoulders hunched forward,
struggled like a man attempting to lift a mountain.
And then Ce'Nedra caught the faintest scent of dust and dry, sunparched grass.
It was only momentary, and she thought at first that she had imagined it. Then
it came again, stronger this time, and the fog eddied sluggishly. But once more
that faint scent died, and with it the breath of air that had carried it.
Polgara groaned then, an almost strangled sound, and the fog began to swirl. The

wet grass at Ce'Nedra's feet, drenched with droplets of mist, bent slightly, and
the dusty smell of the Thullish uplands grew stronger.
It seemed that the blanket of concentration that had held the fog motionless
became more desperate as the Grolims fought to stop the quickening breeze
pouring down the valley from the acrid stretches to the west. The blanket began
to tatter and to fall apart as the weaker of the Grolims, pushed beyond their
capacity, collapsed in exhaustion.
The breeze grew stronger, became a hot wind that rippled the surface of the
river. The grass bent before it, and the fog began to seethe like some vast
living thing, writhing at the touch of the arid wind.
Ce'Nedra could see the still-burning city of Thull Mardu now, and the infantry
lines drawn up on the plain beside the river.
The hot, dusty wind blew stronger, and the fog, as insubstantial as the thought
that had raised it from the earth, dissolved, and the morning sun broke through
to bathe the field in golden light.
"Polgara!" Durnik cried in sudden alarm.
Ce'Nedra whirled in time to see Polgara, her face drained deathly white, slowly
toppling to the earth.

Chapter Seventeen

LELLDORIN OF WILDANTOR had been nervously pacing back and forth along the ranks
of his bowmen, stopping often to listen for any sound coming out of the fog from
the field lying in front of the massed infantry. "Can you hear anything?" he
asked urgently of a Tolnedran legionnaire standing nearby.
The Tolnedran shook his head.
That same whisper came out of the fog from a dozen different places.
"Can you hear anything?"
"Can you hear anything?"
"What are they doing?"
Somewhere to the front, there was a faint clink.
"There!" everyone cried almost in unison.
"Not yet!" Lelldorin snapped to one of his countrymen who was raising his bow.
"It could be just a wounded Thull out there. Save your arrows."
"Is that a breeze?" a Drasnian pikeman asked. "Please, Belar, let it be a
breeze."
Lelldorin stared into the fog, nervously fingering his bowstring. Then he felt a
faint touch of air on his cheek.
"A breeze," someone exulted.
"A breeze." The phrase raced through the massed army.

Then the faint breath of air died, and the fog settled again, seeming thicker
than ever.
Someone groaned bitterly.
The fog stirred then and began to eddy sluggishly. It was a breeze! Lelldorin
held his breath.
The fog began to move, flowing gray over the ground like water.
"There's something moving out there!" a Tolnedran barked. "Get ready!"
The flowing fog moved faster, thinning, melting in the hot, dusty breeze blowing
down the valley. Lelldorin strained his eyes to the front. There were moving
shapes out there, no more than seventy paces from the infantry.
Then, as if all its stubborn resistance had broken at once, the fog shimmered
and dissolved, and the sun broke through. The entire field before them was
filled with Malloreans. Their stealthy forward pace froze momentarily as they
flinched in the sudden light of the sun.
"Now!" Lelldorin shouted, raising his bow. Behind him, his archers with one
universal motion followed his action, and the sudden release of a thousand
bowstrings all at once was like some vast, thrumming note. A whistling sheet of
arrows soared over the heads of the solidly standing infantry, seemed to hang
motionless in the air for a moment, then hurtled into the close-packed Mallorean
ranks.
The creeping attack of the Malloreans did not waver or falter; it simply
dissolved. With a vast, sighing groan, entire regiments fell in their tracks
under the Asturian arrow storm.
Lelldorin's hand flickered to the forest of arrows thrust point - first into the
turf at his feet. He smoothly nocked another shaft, drew and released. And then
again - and again. The sheet of arrows overhead was like some great slithering
bridge arching over the infantry and riddling the Malloreans as it fell among
them.
The storm of Asturian arrows crept inexorably across the field, and the
Mallorean dead piled up in windrows as if some enormous scythe had passed
through their ranks.
And then Sir Mandorallen's brazen horn sounded its mighty challenge, the ranks
of archers and infantry opened, and the earth shook beneath the thunder of the
charge of the Mimbrate knights.
Demoralized by the arrow storm and the sight of that inexorable

charge
descending upon them, the Malloreans broke and fled. Laughing delightedly,
Lelldorin's cousin Torasin lowered his bow to jeer at the backs of the routed
Angaraks.
"We did it, Lelldorin!" he shouted, still laughing. "We broke their backs!" He
was half turned now, not facing the littered field. His bow was in his hands;
his dark hair was thrown back; and his face reflected his exultant delight.
Lelldorin would always remember him so.
"Tor! Look out!" Lelldorin shouted, but it was too late. The Mallorean answer to
the Asturian arrow storm was a storm of their own. From a hundred catapults
concealed behind the low hills to the north, a great cloud of rocks hurtled into
the air and crashed down into the close-packed ranks along the riverbank. A
stone perhaps somewhat larger than a man's head struck Torasin full in the
chest, smashing him to the ground.
"Tor!" Lelldorin's cry was anguished as he ran to his stricken cousin. Torasin's
eyes were closed, and blood was flowing from his nose. His chest was crushed.
"Help me!" Lelldorin cried to a group of serfs standing nearby. The serfs
obediently moved to assist him, but their eyes, speaking louder than any words,
said that Torasin was already dead.
Barak's face was bleak as he stood at the tiller of his big ship. His oarsmen
stroked to the beat of a muffled drum, and the ship raced downriver.
King Anheg of Cherek lounged against the rail. He had pulled off his helmet so
that the cool river air could blow the stink of smoke out of his hair. His
coarse-featured face was as grim as his cousin's. "What do you think their
chances are?" he asked.
"Not very good," Barak replied bluntly. "We never counted on the Murgos and
Malloreans hitting us at Thull Mardu. The army's split in two by the river, and
both halves of it are outnumbered. They're going to have a bad time of it, I'm
afraid." He glanced over his shoulder at the half dozen small, narrow-beamed
boats trailing in the wake of his big ship. "Close it up!" he bellowed at the
men in the smaller boats.
"Malloreans ahead! On the north bank!" the lookout at the mast shouted. "About a
half a mile!"
"Wet down the decks," Barak ordered.

The sailors tossed buckets on long ropes over the side, hauled up water, and soaked the wooden decks.

"Signal the ships behind us," Anheg told the bearded sailor standing in the very stern of the ship. The sailor nodded, turned and lifted a large flag attached to a long pole. He began to wave it vigorously at the ships strung out behind them.

"Be careful with that fire!" Barak shouted to the men clustered around a raised platform filled with gravel and covered with glowing coals. "If you set us ablaze, you'll all have to swim to the Sea of the East."

Just to the front of the platform stood three heavy-limbed catapults, cocked and ready.

King Anheg squinted ahead at the Malloreans gathered around a dozen or so siege engines standing solidly on the north bank. "Better send in your arrow-boats now," he suggested.

Barak grunted and waved his arm in a broad chopping motion to the six narrow boats in his wake. In answer, the lean little boats leaped ahead, cutting through the water. Mounted at the prow of each arrowboat stood a long-armed catapult armed with a loosely packed bundle of arrows. Aided by the current, the narrow little boats sped past, their oars bending.

"Load the engines!" Barak roared to the men around the gravelbased fire. "And don't slop any of that tar on my decks."

With long iron hooks, the sailors lifted three large earthenware pots out of the coals. The pots contained a seething mixture of tar, pitch, and naptha. They were quickly dipped in tar barrels and then hastily wrapped in naptha-soaked rags. Then they were placed in the baskets of the waiting engines.

As the arrow-boats, speeding like greyhounds, swept in close to shore where the Malloreans struggled to aim their catapults, the arrow-bundles were suddenly hurled high into the air by the lashing arms of the Cherek engines. The arrows rose swiftly, then slowed at the top of their arching flight, separating and spreading out as they flew. Then, in a deadly rain, they fell upon the red-tunicked Malloreans.

Barak's ship, trailing just behind the arrow-boats, ran in close to the brush-covered riverbank, and the red-bearded man stood with both of his big hands on the tiller, staring intently at his catapult master, a gray-bearded old

sailor with arms like oak stumps. The catapult master was squinting at a line of notches chipped into the railing in front of his engines. Over his head he held a long white baton and he indicated direction by pointing it either to the right or the left. Barak moved his tiller delicately in response to the movements of the baton. Then the baton cut sharply straight down, and Barak locked his tiller in an iron grip. The rags wrapped around the pots leaped into flame as they were touched by waiting torches.

"Shoot!" the catapult master barked. With a thudding crash, the beams lashed forward, hurling the flaming pots and their deadly contents in a high arch toward the struggling Malloreans and their siege engines. The pots burst open upon impact, spraying fire in front of them. The Mallorean catapults were engulfed in flame.

"Good shooting," Anheg noted professionally.

"Child's play," Barak shrugged. "A shoreline emplacement isn't much of a challenge, really." He glanced back. The arrow-boats of Greldik's ship were sweeping in to rake the Malloreans with more arrows, and the catapults on his bearded friend's decks were cocked and loaded. "Malloreans don't appear to be any brighter than Murgos. Didn't it ever occur to them that we might shoot back?"

"It's an Angarak failing," Anheg replied. "It shows up in all their writings. Torak never encouraged creative thinking."

Barak gave his cousin a speculative look. "You know what I think, Anheg? I think that all that fuss you raised back at Riva - about Ce'Nedra leading the army, I mean - I think that it wasn't entirely sincere. You're too intelligent to be so stubborn about something that wasn't that important."

Anheg winked broadly.

"No wonder they call you Anheg the sly," Barak chuckled. "What was it all about?"

"It pulled Brand's teeth." The King of Cherek grinned. "He's the one who could have stopped Ce'Nedra cold if I'd given him the chance. Rivans are very conservative, Barak. I sided with Brand and did all the talking. Then when I gave in, he didn't have any ground left to stand on.

"You were very convincing. I thought for a while that your reason had slipped."

"Thank you," the Cherek King replied with a mock bow. "When you've

got a face
like mine, it's easy for people to think the worst about you. I've found that
useful from time to time. Here come the Algars." He pointed at the hills just
behind the burning Mallorean siege engines. A great crowd of horsemen came
surging over the hilltops to sweep down like a wolf pack upon the confounded
Malloreans.
Anheg sighed then. "I'd like to know what's happening to them back there at
Thull Mardu," he said. "I don't suppose we'll ever find out, though."
"Not very likely," Barak agreed. "We'll all get sunk eventually, once we get out
into the Sea of the East."
"We'll take a lot of Malloreans with us, though, won't we, Barak?"
Barak's reply was an evil grin.
"I don't really care much for the notion of drowning," Anheg said, making a
face.
"Maybe you'll get lucky and catch an arrow in the belly."
"Thanks," Anheg said sourly.
An hour or so later, after three more Angarak positions on the riverbanks had
been destroyed, the land along the River Mardu turned marshy, flattening out
into a sea of reeds and bending cattails. At Anheg's orders, a raft piled high
with firewood was moored to a dead snag and set afire. Once the blaze was going
well, buckets of greenish crystals were hurled into the flames. A thick pillar
of green smoke began to climb into the blue sky.
"I hope Rhodar can see that." The King of Cherek frowned.
"If he can't, the Algars will," Barak replied. "They'll get word back to him."
"I just hope he's got enough time left to make his retreat."
"Me too," Barak said. "But as you say, we'll probably never know."
King Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria, sat his horse beside King
Korodullin of Arendia. The fog was nearly gone now, and only a filmy haze
remained. Not far away, the twin sorcerers, Beltira and Belkira, exhausted by
their efforts, sat side by side on the ground, their heads bowed and their
chests heaving. Cho-Hag shuddered inwardly at the thought of what might have
happened if the two saintly old men had not been there. The hideous illusions of
the Grolims that had risen from the earth just before the storm had struck
terror into the hearts of the bravest warriors. Then the storm, its intensity
deafening, had smashed down on the army, and after that had come the choking
fog. The two sweet-faced sorcerers, however, had met and overcome

each Grolim
attack with calm determination. Now the Murgos were coming, and it was time for
steel instead of sorcery.
"I'd let them get a little closer," Cho-Hag advised in his quiet voice as he and
Korodullin watched the veritable sea of Murgos advancing against the emplaced
ranks of Drasnian pikemen and Tolnedran legionnaires.
"Art thou sure of thy strategy, Cho-Hag?" the young Arendish King asked with a
worried frown. "It hath ever been the custom of the knights of Mimbre to meet an
attack head-on. Thy proposal to charge the flanks puzzles me."
"It will kill more Murgos, Korodullin," Cho-Hag replied, shifting his weak legs
in their stirrups. "When your knights charge in from either flank, you'll cut
off whole regiments of the enemy. Then we can grind the ones who've been cut off
up against the infantry."
"It is passing strange to me to work thus with foot troops," Korodullin
confessed. "I have a vast ignorance of unmounted combat."
"You aren't alone, my friend," Cho-Hag told him. "It's as alien to me as it is
to you. It would be unfair of us, though, not to let the foot troops have a few
Murgos, wouldn't it? They did walk a long way, after all."
The King of Arendia considered that gravely. He was quite obviously incapable of
anything remotely resembling humor. "I had not considered that," he confessed.
"'Twould be selfish in the extreme of us to deny them some part in the battle, I
must agree. How many Murgos dost thou think would be their fair portion?"
"Oh, I don't know," Cho-Hag replied with a straight face. "A few thousand or so,
I imagine. We wouldn't want to appear stingy - but it doesn't do to be over
generous, either."
Korodullin sighed. "It is a difficult line to walk, King Cho-Hag - this fine
division between parsimony and foolish prodigality."
"One of the prices of kingship, Korodullin."
"Very true, Cho-Hag, very true." The young King of Arendia sighed again and bent
all his concentration to the problem of how many of the advancing Murgos he
could really afford to give away. "Thinkest thou that two Murgos apiece might
content those who fight afoot?" he asked rather hesitantly.
"Sounds fair to me."
Korodullin smiled then with happy relief. "Then that is what we shall allot
them," he declared. "I have not divided up Murgos before, but it is not nearly

so difficult as I had imagined."
King Cho-Hag began to laugh.
Lady Ariana put her arms about Lelldorin's shaking shoulders and drew him gently
away from the pallet upon which his cousin's body lay.
"Can't you do something, Ariana?" he pleaded, tears streaming down his face.
"Perhaps a bandage of some sort-and a poultice."
"He is beyond my art, my Lord," Ariana replied gently, "and I share thy sorrow
at his death."
"Don't say that word, Ariana. Torasin can't be dead."
"I'm sorry, my Lord," she said simply. "He is gone, and none of my remedies or
skill can bring him back."
"Polgara can do it," Lelldorin declared suddenly, an impossible hope leaping
into his eyes. "Send for Polgara."
"I have no one to send, my Lord," Ariana told him, looking around the makeshift
tent where she and Taiba and a few others were caring for the wounded. "The
injured men here command all our attention and care."
"I'll go then," Lelldorin declared, his eyes still streaming tears. He spun and
dashed from the tent.
Ariana sighed mournfully and drew a blanket over Torasin's pale face. Then she
turned back to the wounded men who were being carried in a steady stream into
her tent.
"Don't bother yourself with him, my Lady," a lean-faced Arendish serf told her
as she bent over the body of the man's companion. Ariana looked at the thin serf
inquiringly.
"He's dead," the serf explained. "He took a Mallorean arrow right through the
chest." He looked down at the dead man's face. "Poor Detton," he sighed. "He
died in my arms. Do you know what his last words were?"
Ariana shook her head.
"He said, 'At least I had a good breakfast.' And then he died."
"Why didst thou bring him here, since thou didst know he was already dead?"
Ariana asked him gently.
The lean, bitter-faced serf shrugged. "I didn't want to leave him just lying in
a muddy ditch like a dead dog," he replied. "In his whole life, nobody ever
treated him as if he mattered at all. He was my friend, and I didn't want to
leave him there like a pile of garbage." He laughed a short, bitter laugh. "I
don't suppose it matters very much to him, but at least there's a little bit of
dignity here." He awkwardly patted the dead man's shoulder. "Sorry, Detton," he

said, "but I guess I'd better go back to the fighting."
"What is thy name, friend?" Ariana asked.
"I'm called Lammer, my Lady."
"Is the need for thee in the battle urgent?"
"I doubt it, my Lady. I've been shooting arrows at the Malloreans. I'm not very
good at it, but it's what I'm supposed to do."
"My need for thee is greater, then," she declared. "I have many wounded here and
few hands to help with their care. Despite thy surly exterior, I sense a great
compassion in thee. Wilt thou help me?"
He regarded her for a moment. "What do you want me to do?" he said.
"Taiba is boiling cloth for bandages over that fire there," she replied. "See to
the fire first, then thou wilt find a cart just outside with blankets in it.
Bring in the blankets, good Lammer. After that I will have other tasks for
thee."
"All right," Lammer replied laconically, moving toward the fire.
"What can we do for her?" the Princess Ce'Nedra demanded of the misshapen
Beldin. The princess was staring intently into Polgara's pale, unconscious face
as the sorceress lay exhausted in the arms of Durnik the smith.
"Let her sleep," Beldin grunted. "She'll be all right in a day or so."
"What's the matter with her?" Durnik asked in a worried voice.
"She's exhausted," Beldin snapped. "Isn't that obvious?"
"Just from raising a breeze? I've seen her do things that looked a lot harder."
"You don't have the faintest idea of what you're talking about, blacksmith,"
Beldin growled. The hunchbacked sorcerer was himself pale and shaking. "When you
start tampering with the weather, you're putting your hands on the most powerful
forces in the world. I'd rather try to stop a tide or uproot a mountain than
stir up a breeze in dead air."
"The Grolims brought in that storm," Durnik said.
"The air was already moving. Dead-calm air is altogether different. Do you have
the remotest idea of how much air you've got to move to stir even the faintest
breath of air? Do you know what kind of pressures are involved - how much all
that air weighs?"
"Air doesn't weigh anything," Ce'Nedra protested.
"Really?" Beldin replied with heavy sarcasm. "I'm so glad you told me. Would the
two of you shut up and let me get my breath?"
"But how is it that she collapsed and you didn't?" Ce'Nedra protested.
"I'm stronger than she is," Beldin replied, "and more vicious. Pol throws her
whole heart into things when she gets excited. She always did. She

pushed beyond
her strength, and it exhausted her." The twisted little man straightened, shook
himself like a dog coming out of water and looked around, his face bleak. "I've
got work to do," he said. "I think we've pretty much worn out the Mallorean
Grolims, but I'd better keep an eye on them, just to be safe. You two stay here
with Pol - and keep an eye on that child." He pointed at Errand, who stood on
the sandy beach with his small face very serious.
Then Beldin crouched, shimmering already into the form of a hawk, and launched
himself into the air almost before his feathers were fully formed.
Ce'Nedra stared after him as he spiraled upward over the battlefield and then
turned her attention back to the unconscious Polgara.
The charge of Korodullin's Mimbrate knights came at the last possible moment.
Like two great scythes, the armored men on their massive chargers sliced in at a
thundering gallop from the flanks with their lances leveled and cut through the
horde of Murgos rushing toward the waiting pikemen and legionnaires. The results
were devastating. The air was filled with screams and the sounds of steel
striking steel with stunning impact. In the wake of the charge lay a path of
slaughtered Murgos, a trail of human wreckage a hundred yards wide.
King Cho-Hag, sitting on his horse on a hilltop some distance to the west,
nodded his approval as he watched the carnage. "Good," he said finally. He
looked around at the eager faces of the Algar clansmen clustered around him.
"All right, my children," he said calmly, "let's go cut up the Murgo reserves."
And he led them at a gallop as they poured down off the hill, smoothly swung
around the outer flanks of the tightly packed assault forces and then slashed
into the unprepared Murgo units bringing up the rear.
The slash-and-run tactics of the clans of the Algars left heaps of sabred dead
in their wake as they darted in and out of the milling confusion of terrified
Murgos. King Cho-Hag himself led several charges, and his skill with the sabre,
which was legendary in Algaria, filled his followers with an awed pride as they
watched his whiplike blows raining down on Murgo heads and shoulders. The whole
thrust of Algar strategy was based on speed - a sudden dash on a fast horse and
a series of lightninglike sabre slashes, and then out before the enemy could

gather his wits. King Cho-Hag's sabre arm was the fastest in Algaria.
"My King!" one of his men shouted, pointing toward the center of several close-packed Murgo regiments milling about in a shallow valley a few hundred yards away. "There's the black banner!"
King Cho-Hag's eyes suddenly gleamed as a wild hope surged through him. "Bring my banner to the front!" he roared, and the clansman who carried the burgundy-and-white banner of the Chief of the Clan-Chiefs galloped forward with the standard streaming above his head. "Let's go, my children!" Cho-Hag shouted and drove his horse directly at the Murgos in the valley. With sabre raised, the crippled King of the Algars led his men down into the Murgo horde. His warriors slashed to the right and to the left, but Cho-Hag plunged directly at the center, his eyes feed on the black banner of Taur Urgas, King of the Murgos.
And then, in the midst of the household guard, Cho-Hag saw the blood-red mail of Taur Urgas himself. Cho-Hag raised his bloody sabre and shouted a ringing challenge.
"Stand and fight, you Murgo dog!" he roared.
Startled by that shout, Taur Urgas wheeled his horse to stare incredulously at the charging King of Algaria. His eyes suddenly bulged with the fervid light of insanity, and his lips, foam-flacked, drew back in a snarl of hatred. "Let him come!" he grated. "Clear the way for himl"
The startled members of his personal guard stared at him.
"Make way for the King of Algaria!" Taur Urgas shrieked. "He is mine!"
And the Murgo troops melted out of Cho-Hag's path.
The Algar King reined in his horse. "And so it's finally come, Taur Urgas," he said coldly.
"It has indeed, Cho-Hag," Taur Urgas replied. "I've waited for this moment for years."
"If I'd known you were waiting, I'd have come sooner."
"Today is your last day, Cho-Hag." The Murgo King's eyes were completely mad now, and foam drooled from the corners of his mouth.
"Do you plan to fight with threats and hollow words, Taur Urgas? Or have you forgotten how to draw your sword?"
With an insane shriek, Taur Urgas ripped his broad-bladed sword from its scabbard and drove his black horse toward the Algar King.
"Die!" he howled, slashing at the air even as he charged. "Die, ChoHag!"
It was not a duel, for there were proprieties in a duel. The two kings hacked at

each other with an elemental brutality, thousands of years of pent-up hatred
boiling in their blood. Taur Urgas, totally mad now, sobbed and gibbered as he
swung his heavy sword at his enemy. ChoHag, cold as ice and with an arm as fast
as the flickering tongue of a snake, slid the crushing Murgo blows aside,
catching them on his sliding sabre and flicking his blade like a whip, its edge
biting again and again into the shoulders and face of the King of the Murgos.
The two armies, stunned by the savagery of the encounter, recoiled and gave the
mounted kings room for their deadly struggle.
Frothing obscenities, Taur Urgas hacked insanely at the elusive form of his foe,
but Cho-Hag, colder yet, feinted and parried and flicked his whistling sabre at
the Murgo's bleeding face.
Finally, driven past even what few traces of reason were left to him, Taur Urgas
hurled his horse directly at Cho-Hag with a wild animal scream. Standing in his
stirrups, he grasped his sword hilt in both hands, raising it like an axe to
smash his enemy forever. But Cho-Hag danced his horse to one side and thrust
with all his strength, even as Taur Urgas began his massive blow. With a steely
rasp, his sabre ran through the Murgo's blood-red mail and through the tensed
body, to emerge dripping from his back.
Unaware in his madness that he had just received a mortal wound, Taur Urgas
raised his sword again, but the strength drained from his arms and the sword
fell from his grasp. With stunned disbelief, he gaped at the sabre emerging from
his chest, and a bloody froth burst from his mouth. He lifted his hands like
claws as if to tear away the face of his enemy, but Cho-Hag contemptuously
slapped his hands away, even as he pulled his slender, curved blade out of the
Murgo's body with a slithering whistle.
"And so it ends, Taur Urgas," he declared in an icy voice.
"No!" Taur Urgas croaked, trying to pull a heavy dagger from his belt.
Cho-Hag watched his feeble efforts coldly. Dark blood suddenly spurted from the
open mouth of the Murgo King, and he toppled weakly from his saddle. Struggling,
coughing blood, Taur Urgas lurched to his feet, gurgling curses at the man who
had just killed him.
"Good fight, though," Cho-Hag told him with a bleak smile, and then he turned to

ride away.
Taur Urgas fell, clawing at the turf in impotent rage. "Come back and fight," he sobbed. "Come back."
Cho-Hag glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry, your Majesty," he replied, "but I have pressing business elsewhere. I'm sure you understand." And with that he began to ride away.
"Come back!" Taur Urgas wailed, belching blood and curses and digging his fingers into the earth. "Come back!" Then he collapsed facedown in the bloody grass. "Come back and fight, Cho-Hag!" he gasped weakly.
The last that Cho-Hag saw of him, the dying King of Cthol Murgos was biting at the sod and clawing at the earth with trembling fingers. A vast moan shuddered through the tight-packed regiments of the Murgos, and a sudden cheer rose from the ranks of the Algars as ChoHag, victorious, rode back to join the army.
"They're coming again," General Varana announced with cool professionalism as he watched the waves of oncoming Malloreans.
"Where is that signal?" Rhodar demanded, staring intently downriver. "What's Anheg doing down there?"
The front ranks of the Mallorean assault struck with a resounding crash. The Drasnian pikemen began to thrust with their long, widebladed spears, wreaking havoc among the red-garbed attackers, and the legions raised their shields in the interlocked position that presented a solid wall against which the Malloreans beat futilely. Upon a sharp, barked command, the legionnaires turned their shields slightly and each man thrust his lance out through the opening between his shield and the next. The Tolnedran lances were not as long as the Drasnian pikes, but they were long enough. A huge, shuddering cry went through the front ranks of the Malloreans, and they fell in heaps beneath the feet of the men behind.
"Are they going to break through?" Rhodar puffed. Even though he was not directly involved in the fighting, the Drasnian King began to pant at each Mallorean charge.
Varana carefully assessed the strength of the assault. "No," he concluded, "not this time. Have you worked out how you're going to make your withdrawal? It's a little difficult to pull back when your troops are engaged."
"That's why I'm saving the Mimbrates," Rhodar replied. "They're

resting their
horses now for one last charge. As soon as we get the signal from Anheg,
Mandorallen and his men will shove the Malloreans back, and the rest of us will
run like rabbits."
"The charge will only hold them back for so long," Varana advised, "and then
they'll come after you again."
"We'll form up again upriver a ways," Rhodar said.
"It's going to take a long time to get back to the escarpment if you're going to
have to stop and fight every half mile or so," Varana told him.
"I know that," Rhodar snapped peevishly. "Have you got any better ideas?"
"No," Varana replied. "I was just pointing it out, that's all."
"Where is that signal?" Rhodar demanded again.
On a quiet hillside some distance from the struggle taking place on the north
bank, the simpleminded serf boy from the Arendish forest was playing his flute.
His melody was mournful, but even in its sadness, it soared to the sky. The boy
did not understand the fighting and he had wandered away unnoticed. Now he sat
alone on the grassy hillside in the warm, midmorning sunlight with his entire
soul pouring out of his flute.
The Mallorean soldier who was creeping up behind him with drawn sword had no ear
for music. He did not know - or care - that the song the boy played was the most
beautiful song any man had ever heard.
The song ended very suddenly, never to begin again.
The stream of casualties being carried to Ariana's makeshift hospital grew
heavier, and the overtaxed Mimbrate girl was soon forced into making some cruel
decisions. Only those men with some chance of survival could be treated. The
mortally hurt were quickly given a drink of a bitter-tasting potion of herbs
that would ease their pain and then were left to die. Each such decision wrung
Ariana's heart, and she worked with tears standing in her eyes.
And then Brand, the Rivan Warder, entered the tent with a stricken face. The big
Rivan's mail shirt was blood-spattered, and there were savage sword cuts along
the edge of his broad, round shield. Behind him, three of his sons bore the
limp, bleeding form of their younger brother, Olban.
"Can you see to him?" Brand asked Ariana hoarsely.
A single glance, however, told the blond girl that the wound in Olban's chest
was mortal. "I can make him comfortable," she replied a bit evasively. She
quickly knelt beside the bleeding young man, lifted his head, and

held a cup to
his lips.
"Father," Olban said weakly after he had drunk, "I have something I have to tell
you."
"Time enough for that later," Brand told him gruffly, "after you're better."
"I'm not going to get better, father," Olban said in a voice scarcely more than
a whisper.
"Nonsense," Brand told him, but there was no conviction in his voice.
"There's not much time, father," Olban said, coughing weakly. "Please listen."
"Very well, Olban," the Warder said, leaning forward to catch his son's words.
"At Riva - after Belgarion came - I was humiliated because you had been deposed.
I couldn't bear it, father." Olban coughed again, and a bloody froth came to his
lips.
"You should have known me better than that, Olban," Brand said gently.
"I do - now." Olban sighed. "But I was young and proud, and Belgarion - a nobody
from Sendaria - had pushed you from your rightful place."
"It wasn't my place to begin with, Olban," Brand told him. "It was his.
Belgarion's the Rivan King. That has nothing to do with position or place. It's
a duty - and it's his, not mine."
"I hated him," Olban whispered. "I began to follow him every place. Wherever he
went, I wasn't far behind him."
"What for?" Brand asked.
"At first I didn't know. Then one day he came out of the throne room wearing his
robe and crown. He seemed so puffed-up with his own importance - as if he really
was a king instead of just a common Sendarian scullion. Then I knew what I had
to do. I took my dagger and I threw it at his back."
Brand's face suddenly froze.
"For a long time after that, I tried to avoid him," Olban continued. "I knew
that what I had done was wrong - even as the dagger left my fingers. I thought
that if I stayed away from him, he'd never find out that I was the one who'd
tried to kill him. But he has powers, father. He has ways of knowing things no
man could possibly know. He sought me out one day and gave me back the dagger
I'd thrown at him and he told me that I should never tell anyone what I'd done.
He did that for you, father - to keep my disgrace from you."
Grim-faced, Brand rose to his feet. "Come," he said to his other three sons. "We
have fighting to do - and no time to waste on traitors." Quite

deliberately he
turned his back on his dying son.
"I tried to repay his mercy, father," Olban pleaded. "I pledged my life to
protecting his queen. Doesn't that count for anything?" Brand's face was stony,
and he kept his back turned in grim silence. "Belgarion forgave me, father.
Can't you find it in your heart to forgive me too?"
"No," Brand said harshly, "I cannot."
"Please, father," Olban begged. "Don't you have one tear for me?"
"Not one," Brand told him, but Ariana saw that his words were a lie. The grim,
gray-clad man's eyes were full, but his face remained granitelike. Without
another word, he strode from the tent.
Wordlessly, each of Olban's brothers clasped his hand in turn, and then they
left to follow their father.
Olban wept quietly for a time, but then his growing weakness and the drug Ariana
had given him drained away his grief. He lay, half dozing on his pallet for a
time, then struggled to raise himself and beckoned to the Mimbrate girl. She
knelt beside him, supporting him with one arm about his shoulders and her head
bent to catch his faltering words. "Please," he whispered. "Please tell her
Majesty what I said to my father - and tell her how sorry I was." And then his
head fell forward against Ariana, and he quietly died in her arms.
Ariana had no time to mourn, for precisely then three Sendars carried Colonel
Brendig into her tent. The colonel's left arm was mangled beyond all hope of
repair.
"We were bringing down the bridge that crosses to the city," one of the Sendars
reported tersely. "There was a support that wouldn't give way, so the colonel
went down himself to chop it away. When it finally broke, the timbers of the
bridge fell on him."
Ariana gravely examined Brendig's shattered arm. "I fear there is no recourse,
my Lord," she told him. "The arm will have to come off, lest it mortify and
carry thy life away with it."
Brendig nodded soberly. "That's about what I'd expected," he replied. "I suppose
we'd better get on with it then."
"There!" King Rhodar shouted, pointing downriver. "The smoke - it's green!
That's the signal. We can start the retreat now."
General Varana, however, was staring at the riverbank upstream. "It's too late,
I'm afraid, your Majesty," he said quietly. "A column of Malloreans

and Nadraks
have just reached the river to the west of us. It very much looks as if we've
been cut off."

Chapter Eighteen

THE NEWS OF the death of Taur Urgas spread through the Murgo army in a vast
groan, and the heart went out of the black-robed troops. Taur Urgas had been
feared by his men, but his savage madness had lent them all a peculiar sense
that they were invincible. They had felt somehow that nothing could stand in his
path, and that they, as the instruments of his brutal will, shared in some
measure his apparent invulnerability. But with his death, each Murgo became
aware with a sudden cold touch of fear that he also could die, and the assault
on the armies of the west along the south bank faltered.
King Cho-Hag watched the crumbling of the Murgo resolve with a certain grim
satisfaction, then rode down to the lines of infantry and the milling Mimbrate
knights to confer with the other leaders. King Fulrach strode forward from the
ranks of his Sendars. The dumpy, brown-bearded monarch looked almost comical in
his burnished breastplate, but his sword showed signs of recent use, and his
helmet was dented in a couple of places, mute evidence that the King of Sendaria
had participated in the fight.
"Have you seen Anheg's signal yet?" Fulrach demanded as he approached.
Cho-Hag shook his head. "It should come any time now, though," he replied. "We'd
better make some plans. Have you seen Korodullin?"
"The physicians are working on him," Fulrach said.
"Is he hurt?" Cho-Hag was startled.
"I don't think it's too serious. He went to help his friend, the Baron of Vo
Ebor, and a Murgo hit him in the head with a mace. His helmet absorbed most of
the blow. He's bleeding out of the ears a bit, but the physicians say he'll
recover. The baron's in worse shape, though."
"Who's in charge of the Mimbrates, then?"
"Sir Andorig. He's a good man in a fight, but his understanding is a bit
limited."
Cho-Hag laughed shortly. "You've just described most of Arendia, my friend.
They're all good in a fight, and they all have limited understanding." Carefully
he dismounted, holding onto his saddle as his weak legs nearly

buckled. "We can make our decisions without Andorig's help, I think." He looked at the retreating Murgos. "As soon as we see Anheg's signal, I think we're going to want to get out of here in a hurry. The Murgos are demoralized right now, but they'll probably stiffen up again as soon as the shock wears off."
Fulrach nodded. "Did you really kill Taur Urgas in a duel?" he asked.
Cho-Hag nodded. "It wasn't really all that much of a duel. He was raving when he came at me and didn't even try to defend himself. When Anheg signals, we'll have the Mimbrates charge the Murgo front. The Murgos will probably break and run. I'll follow after them with my clansmen to hurry them along. That should give you and your foot troops time to start upriver. Andorig and I'll keep the Murgos off your back until you get clear. How does that sound?"
King Fulrach nodded. "It sounds workable," he agreed. "Do you think they'll try to follow us?"
Cho-Hag grinned. "I'll encourage them not to," he replied. "Have you got any idea of what's going on across the river?"
"It's hard to say, but things don't look very good."
"Can you think of any way we can send them help?"
"Not on short notice," Fulrach answered.
"Neither can I," Cho-Hag said. He began to pull himself back up into his saddle. "I'll go give Andorig his instructions. Keep your eyes open for Anheg's signal."
"Belgarath!" Ce'Nedra called out silently, her hand tightly clasped about the amulet at her throat. "Belgarath, can you hear me?" She was standing several yards away from where Durnik was trying to make the unconscious Polgara as comfortable as possible. The princess had her eyes tightly closed and she was putting every ounce of concentration into casting her thought to the sky, reaching out with all her heart toward the ancient sorcerer.
"Ce'Nedra?" The old man's voice was as clear as if he were standing beside her.
"What are you doing? Where's Polgara?"
"Oh, Belgarath!" The princess almost sobbed with relief. "Help us. Lady Polgara's unconscious, and the Malloreans are attacking again. We're being slaughtered, Belgarath. Help us."
"Slow down," he commanded brusquely. "What happened to Pol? Where are you?"
"We're at Thull Mardu," Ce'Nedra replied. "We had to take the city so that the Cherek fleet could go on down the river. The Malloreans and the Murgos crept up

on us. They've been attacking since early this morning."
Belgarath started to swear. "What's wrong with Pol?" he demanded harshly.
"The Grolims brought in an awful storm, and then there was fog. Lady Polgara and
Beldin made the wind blow, and then she just collapsed. Beldin said that she
exhausted herself and that we have to let her sleep."
"Where's Beldin?"
"He said that he had to keep an eye on the Grolims. Can you help us?"
"Ce'Nedra, I'm a thousand leagues away from you. Garion, Silk, and I are in
Mallorea - practically on Torak's doorstep. If I so much as raise my hand, it
will wake him, and Garion's not ready to meet him yet."
"We're doomed, then," Ce'Nedra wailed.
"Stop that," he snapped. "This isn't the time for hysterics. You're going to
have to wake Polgara."
"We've tried - and Beldin says that we've got to let her rest."
"She can rest later," Belgarath retorted. "Is that bag she always carries
somewhere about - the one she keeps all those herbs in?"
"I - I think so. Durnik was carrying it a little while ago."
"Durnik's with you? Good. Now listen, and listen carefully. Get the bag and open
it. What you want will be in a silk pouch. Don't open any jars or bottles. She
keeps her poisons in those. In one of the silk bags you'll find a yellow-colored
powder. It has a very acrid odor to it. Put a spoonful or so of that powder into
a pot of boiling water. Put the pot beside Pol's head and cover her face with a
cloak so she has to breathe the fumes."
"What will that do?"
"It will wake her up."
"Are you sure?"
"Don't argue with me, Ce'Nedra. She'll wake up, believe me. Those fumes would
wake up a dead stick. As soon as she's awake, she'll know what to do."
Ce'Nedra hesitated. "Is Garion there?" she blurted finally.
"He's asleep. We had a rough time last night."
"When he wakes up, tell him that I love him." She said it very fast, as if
afraid that if she thought about it at all, she wouldn't be able to say it.
"Why confuse him?" the old man asked her.
"Belgarath!" Ce'Nedra's voice was stricken.
"I was teasing. I'll tell him. Now get to work - and don't do this any more. I'm
trying to sneak up on Torak, and it's a little hard to sneak when you're
shouting at somebody a thousand leagues away."
"We aren't shouting."
"Oh yes we are - it's a special kind of shouting, but it's shouting all the

same. Now take your hand off that amulet and get to work." And then his voice was gone.

Durnik, of course, would never understand, so Ce'Nedra did what was necessary by herself. She rummaged around until she found a small pot. She filled it with water and set it on the small fire the smith had built the night before. Then she opened Polgara's herb bag. The blond child, Errand, stood at her side, watching her curiously.

"What are you doing, Princess?" Durnik asked, still hovering anxiously over the sleeping Polgara.

"I'm fixing something to make her rest easier," Ce'Nedra lied.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? Some of those are very dangerous."

"I know which one I'm looking for," she replied. "Trust me, Durnik."

The powder she finally located was so acrid that it made her eyes water. She carefully measured out a bit of it and dumped it into the pot. The steaming fumes were awful, and the princess kept her face averted as she carried the pot to where Polgara lay. She set the pot beside the lady's pale, sleeping face and then laid a cloak across her. "Give me a stick," the princess said to the smith.

Durnik, his face dubious, handed her a broken-off arrow.

Ce'Nedra carefully propped up the cloak, making a small tent over the pot and Polgara's face.

"What now?" Durnik asked.

"Now we wait," Ce'Nedra told him.

Then, coming from the direction of the battle, a group of Sendarian soldiers, evidently wounded, appeared at the top of the grassy bank surrounding the secluded little beach. Their jerkins all had bloodstains on them, and several of the men wore bandages. Unlike most of the wounded who had already passed that morning, however, these men still carried their weapons.

Under the tented cloak, Polgara began to cough.

"What have you done?" Durnik cried, snatching the cloak away.

"It was necessary," Ce'Nedra replied. "I talked with Belgarath. He told me that I had to wake her up - and how to do it."

"You'll hurt her," Durnik accused. With sudden, uncharacteristic anger, he kicked the fuming pot, sending it rolling down the beach toward the water's edge.

Polgara's eyelids were fluttering as she continued to cough. When she opened her eyes, however, her look was blank, uncomprehending.

"Can you spare us some water?" one of the wounded Sendars asked as

the group of
men approached.
"There's a whole river right there," Ce'Nedra replied absently, pointing even as
she intently stared into Polgara's eyes.
Durnik, however, gave the men a startled look, then suddenly reached for his
sword.
But the men in Sendarian jerkins had jumped down from the bank and were already
upon them. It took three of them to disarm the powerful smith and to hold his
arms.
"You're not Sendars," Durnik exclaimed, struggling with his captors.
"How clever of you to notice," one of them replied in an accent so guttural that
it was almost unintelligible. Another of them drew his sword and stood over the
dazed Polgara. "Stop fighting, friend," he told Durnik with an ugly smirk, "or
I'll kill this woman."
"Who are you?" Ce'Nedra demanded indignantly. "What do you think you're doing?"
"Actually, we're members of the Imperial Elite Guard," the man with the sword
answered urbanely. "And we're here, your Highness, to extend to you the
invitation of his Imperial Majesty 'Zakath, Emperor of Mallorea. His Majesty
requests the honor of your presence in his pavilion." His face hardened, and he
looked at his men. "Bring them," he ordered. "Let's get out of here before
someone comes along and starts asking questions."
"They're digging in," Hettar reported to King Rhodar, gesturing toward the west
and their now-blocked escape route. "They've already got a trench-line running
from the river for about a half a mile."
"Is there any chance of going around them?" Rhodar asked.
Hettar shook his head. "That whole flank's seething with Nadraks."
"We'll have to go through them, then," the King of Drasnia decided. "I can't
very well attack trenches with cavalry," Hettar pointed out.
"We'll storm them with the infantry units," Rhodar declared. "We'll have a
certain advantage. The Asturian bows have a longer range than the short ones the
Malloreans use. We'll move the archers to the front as we advance. They can rake
the trenches and then harass the Mallorean archers behind the lines. The pikemen
will go in first." The sweating fat man looked at General Varana. "Can your
legionnaires clear the trenches once we open a hole for you?"
Varana nodded. "We train extensively for trench fighting," he replied confidently. "We'll clear the trenches."
"We'll bring the wounded with the main force," Rhodar said. "Somebody

locate
Polgara and the princess. It's time to leave."
"What task hast thou for Lord Hettar and me," Mandorallen inquired. The great
knight's armor showed a number of dents, but he spoke as calmly as if he had not
spent the entire morning involved in heavy fighting.
"I want you and your knights to hold the rear," Rhodar told him. "Keep that army
out there off my back." He turned to Hettar. "And I want you and your clansmen
to go to work on the Nadraks. I don't want them to come swarming in while we're
working in the trenches."
"It's a desperate move, King Rhodar," General Varana said seriously. "Attacking
even hasty fortifications is always costly, and you're going to do it with
another army coming at you from the rear. If your attack is beaten back, you'll
be caught between two superior forces. They'll grind you to dogmeat right on the
spot."
"I know," Rhodar admitted glumly, "but our only hope of escape is breaking
through those lines that have us blocked off. We've got to get back upriver.
Tell your men that we have to take those trenches on the first charge.
Otherwise, we're all going to die right here. All right, gentlemen, good luck."
Once again Mandorallen led his steel-clad knights in their fearsome charge, and
once again the attacking Malloreans recoiled, driven back by the dreadful shock
as the mounted men of Mimbre struck their front ranks. This time, however, the
pikemen and legionnaires, as soon as they were disengaged from the enemy, turned
sharply to the left and, at a jingling trot, abandoned their positions to follow
the Sendars and Asturians who were already withdrawing from the field toward the
west.
The delaying action of the Mimbrate knights was costly. Riderless horses
galloped wildly about the battlefield, quite frequently adding to the havoc by
trampling through the Mallorean ranks. Here and there among the red tunics that
carpeted the field lay the single gleaming form of a fallen knight. Again and
again the Mimbrates hurled themselves against the advancing red tide, slowing
the Malloreans, but not quite able to stop them.
"It's going to be tight, your Majesty," General Varana advised as he and King
Rhodar rode toward the hastily drawn lines blocking their escape.

"Even if we
break through, the bulk of the Mallorean forces are going to be hot on our
heels."
"You've got a great talent for the obvious, General," Rhodar replied. "As soon
as we get through, we'll put the archers at the rear and let the Malloreans
march through a rain of arrows. That will hold them back."
"Until the archers run out of arrows," Varana added.
"After we break through, I'll send the Algars on ahead. Fulrach's got whole
wagonloads of arrows at the rapids."
"Which is two days march ahead."
"Do you always look at the dark side of things?"
"Just trying to anticipate, your Majesty."
"Would you mind anticipating someplace else?"
The Algars had moved out to the right flank of the retreating army and were
gathering in their characteristic small bands, preparing to charge the Nadraks
drawn up on the hills above the river. Hettar, his scalp lock streaming, moved
forward at a steady lope, his sabre drawn and his eyes like flint. The Nadraks
appeared at first to be awaiting his charge, but then, amazingly, they turned
away and rode rapidly toward the river.
From the midst of that sudden surge, a half dozen men riding under the Nadrak
banner swerved out toward the advancing Algars. One of the riders was waving a
short stick with a white rag tied to it. The group reined in sharply about a
hundred yards in front of Hettar's horse.
"I've got to talk to Rhodar," one of the Nadraks bellowed in a shrill voice. He
was a tall, emaciated man with a pockmarked face and a scraggly beard, but on
his head he wore a crown.
"Is this some trick?" Hettar shouted back.
"Of course it is, you jackass," the scrawny man replied. "But it's not on you
this time. Get me to Rhodar at once."
"Keep an eye on them," Hettar told a nearby Clan-Chief, pointing at the Nadrak
forces now streaming toward the Mallorean trenches lying in the path of the
retreating army. "I'll take this maniac to see King Rhodar." He turned and led
the group of Nadrak warnors toward the advancing infantry.
"Rhodar!" the thin man wearing the crown shrieked as they approached the
Drasnian King. "Don't you ever answer your mail?"
"What are you doing, Drosta?" King Rhodar shouted back.
"I'm changing sides, Rhodar," King Drosta lek Thun replied with an almost
hysterical laugh. "I'm joining forces with you. I've been in touch

with your
queen for weeks. Didn't you get her messages?"
"I thought you were playing games."
"Naturally I'm playing games." The Nadrak King giggled. "I've always got
something up my sleeve. Right now my army's opening an escape route for you. You
do want to escape, don't you?"
"Of course I do."
"So do I. My troops will butcher the Malloreans in those trenches, and then we
can all make a run for it."
"I don't trust you, Drosta," Rhodar said bluntly.
"Rhodar," Drosta said in mock chagrin, "how can you say that to an old friend?"
He giggled again, his voice shrill and nervous.
"I want to know why you're changing sides in the middle of a battle - particularly when your side's winning."
"Rhodar, my kingdom's awash with Malloreans. If I don't help you to defeat them,
'Zakath will simply absorb Gar og Nadrak. It's much too long and involved to
talk about now. Will you accept my aid?"
"I'll take all the help I can get."
"Good. Maybe later we can get drunk together and talk things over, but for right
now, let's get out of here before 'Zakath hears about this and comes after me
personally." The King of Gar og Nadrak laughed again, the same shrill, almost
hysterical laugh as before. "I did it, Rhodar," he exulted. "I actually betrayed
'Zakath of Mallorea and got away with it."
"You haven't gotten away with it yet, Drosta," Rhodar told him dryly.
"I will if we run fast enough, Rhodar, and right now I really feel like
running."
'Zakath, dread Emperor of boundless Mallorea, was a man of medium height with
glossy black hair and a pale, olive-tinged complexion. His features were
regular, even handsome, but his eyes were haunted by a profound melancholy. He
appeared to be about thirty-five years old, and he wore a plain linen robe with
no ornament or decoration upon it to indicate his exalted rank.
His pavilion stood in the center of the camp of the Malloreans, a vast sea of
tents standing on the plains of Mishrak ac Thull. The earthen floor of the
pavilion was covered with priceless Mallorean carpets, and the polished tables
and chairs were inlaid with gold and with mother of pearl. Candles filled the
pavilion with glowing light. Somewhere nearby, a small group of musicians played
subdued melodies set in a minor key.
The Emperor's only companion was a half grown cat, a common,

mackerel-striped
tabby with that gangling, long-legged awkwardness of the adolescent
feline.
While 'Zakath watched with a sort of sad-eyed amusement, the young
cat stalked a
scrap of balled-up parchment, her feet noiseless on the carpet and
her face set
in a look of intent concentration.
As Princess Ce'Nedra and her companions were escorted into the
pavilion,
'Zakath, seated on a low, cushioned divan, held up his hand for
silence, his
eyes still fixed on the cat.
"She hunts," the Emperor murmured in a dead voice.
The cat crept nearer to her intended prey, crouched and shifted her
hind feet
nervously, her bottom twitching from side to side and her tail
lashing. Then she
leaped at the parchment. The ball crackled as she pounced on it, and,
startled,
she jumped high into the air. She batted the ball experimentally with
one paw;
suddenly finding a new game, she bounded it across the floor with a
series of
soft-pawed jabs, scampering after it with awkward enthusiasm.
'Zakath smiled sadly. "A young cat," he said, "with much yet to
learn." He rose
gracefully to his feet and bowed to Ce'Nedra. "Your Imperial
Highness," he
greeted her formally. His voice was resonant, but there was that
peculiar
deadness in it.
"Your Imperial Majesty," Ce'Nedra replied, inclining her head in
response.
"Please, Goodman," 'Zakath said to Durnik, who was supporting the
still-dazed
Polgara, "let the lady rest here." He indicated the divan. "I'll send
for my
physicians, and they will see to her indisposition."
"Your Majesty is too kind." Ce'Nedra mouthed the ritual phrase, but
her eyes
were searching 'Zakath's face for some hint of his real intentions.
"One is
surprised to meet such courtesy-under the circumstances."
He smiled again, rather whimsically. "And, of course, all Malloreans
are
supposed to be raving fanatics - like Murgos. Courtesy is out of
character,
right?"
"We have very little information about Mallorea and its people," the
princess
responded. "I was not certain what to expect."
"That's surprising," the Emperor observed. "I have a great deal of
information
about your father and your Alorn friends."
"Your Majesty has the aid of Grolims in gathering intelligence,"
Ce'Nedra said,
"while we must rely on ordinary men."

"The Grolims are overrated, Princess. Their first loyalty is to Torak; their second to their own hierarchy. They tell me only what they want to tell me - although periodically I manage to have a bit of additional information extracted from one of them. It helps to keep the rest of them honest."

An attendant entered the pavilion, fell to his knees, and pressed his face to the carpet.

"Yes?" 'Zakath inquired.

"Your Imperial Majesty asked that the King of Thulldom be brought here," the attendant replied.

"Ah, yes. I'd nearly forgotten. Please excuse me for a moment, Princess Ce'Nedra - a small matter requiring my attention. Please, you and your friends make yourselves comfortable." He looked critically at Ce'Nedra's armor. "After we've dined, I'll have the women of my household see to more suitable clothing for you and for Lady Polgara. Does the child require anything?" He looked curiously at Errand, who was intently watching the cat.

"He'll be all right, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra replied. Her mind was working very rapidly. This urbane, polished gentleman might be easier to deal with than she had anticipated.

"Bring in the King of the Thulls," 'Zakath ordered, his hand wearily shading his eyes.

"At once, your Imperial Majesty," the attendant said, scrambling to his feet and backing out of the pavilion, bent in a deep bow.

Gethell, the King of Mishrak ac Thull, was a thick-bodied man with lank, mud-colored hair. His face was a pasty white as he was led in, and he was trembling violently. "Y-Your Imperial Majesty," he stammered in a croaking voice.

"You forgot to bow, Gethell," 'Zakath reminded him gently. One of the Mallorean guards doubled his fist and drove it into Gethell's stomach. The Thull monarch doubled over.

"Much better," 'Zakath said approvingly. "I've asked you here in regard to some distressing news I received from the battlefield, Gethell. My commanders report that your troops did not behave well during the engagement at Thull Mardu. I am no soldier, but it seems to me that your men might have stood at least one charge by the Mimbrate knights before they ran away. I'm informed however, that

they did not. Have you any explanation for that?"
Gethell began to babble incoherently.
"I thought not," 'Zakath told him. "It's been my experience that the failure of
people to do what's expected of them is the result of poor leadership. It
appears that you've not taken the trouble to encourage your men to be brave.
That was a serious oversight on your part, Gethell."
"Forgive me, dread 'Zakath," the King of the Thulls wailed, falling to his knees
in terror.
"But of course I forgive you, my dear fellow," 'Zakath told him. "How absurd of
you to think that I wouldn't. A reprimand of some sort is in order, though,
don't you think?"
"I freely accept full responsibility," Gethell declared, still on his knees.
"Splendid, Gethell. Absolutely splendid. I'm so glad that this interview is
going so well. We've managed to avoid all kinds of unpleasantness." He turned to
the attendant. "Would you be so good as to take King Gethell out and have him
flogged?" he asked.
"At once, your Imperial Majesty."
Gethell's eyes started from his head as the two soldiers dragged him to his
feet.
"Now," 'Zakath mused. "What do we do with him after we've flogged him?" He
thought a moment. "Ah, I know. Is there any stout timber in the vicinity?"
"It's all open grassland, your Imperial Majesty."
"What a pity." 'Zakath sighed. "I was going to have you crucified, Gethell, but
I suppose I'll have to forgo that. Perhaps an extra fifty lashes will serve as
well."
Gethell began to blubber.
"Oh, come now, my dear fellow, that just won't do. You are a king, after all,
and you absolutely must provide a good example for your men. Run along now. I
have guests. One hopes that the sight of your public flogging will give your
troops greater incentive to do better. They'll reason that if I'd do that to
you, then what I'll do to them will be infinitely worse. When you recover,
encourage them in that belief, because the next time this happens, I'll have
made arrangements to have the necessary timber on hand. Take him away," he said
to his men without so much as a glance over his shoulder.
"Forgive me for the interruption, your Highness," he apologized. "These little

administrative details consume so much of one's time." The King of the Thulls
was dragged sobbing from the pavilion. "I've ordered a small supper for you and
your friends, Princess Ce'Nedra," 'Zakath continued. "All the finest delicacies.
Then I'll make arrangements for the absolute comfort of you and your companions."
"I hope that this won't offend your Imperial Majesty," Ce'Nedra began bravely,
"but one is curious about your plans in regard to our future."
"Please set your mind at rest, your Highness," 'Zakath replied in his dead-sounding voice. "Word has reached me that the madman, Taur Urgas, is dead.
I will never be able to repay you for that service, and I bear you absolutely no
ill will whatsoever." He glanced toward one corner of his tent where his cat,
purring ecstatically, was lying on her back in Errand's lap with all four paws
in the air. The smiling child was gently stroking her furry belly. "How
charming," 'Zakath murmured in an oddly melancholy voice.
Then the Emperor of boundless Mallorea rose and approached the divan where
Durnik supported Lady Polgara. "My Queen," he said, bowing to her with profound
respect. "Your beauty quite transcends all reports."
Polgara opened her eyes and gave him a level gaze. A wild hope leaped in
Ce'Nedra's heart. Polgara was conscious.
"You are courteous, my Lord," Polgara told him in a weak voice.
"You are my queen, Polgara," 'Zakath told her, "and I can now understand my
God's ages-old longing for you." He sighed then as his apparently habitual
melancholy descended upon him once again.
"What are you going to do with us?" Durnik asked, his arms still holding Polgara
protectively.
'Zakath sighed again. "The God of my people is not a good or kindly God," he
told the smith. "If the arranging of things had been left to me, all might have
been different. I was not consulted, however. I am Angarak, and I must bow to
the will of Torak. The sleep of the Dragon God grows fitful, and I must obey his
commands. Though it wounds me deeply, I must turn you and your companions over
to the Grolims. They will deliver you up to Zedar, disciple of Torak in Cthol
Mishrak, City of Night, where he will decide your fate."

Part Three
MALLOREA

Chapter Nineteen

THEY REMAINED FOR nearly a week in the Imperial compound as the personal guests of the Emperor 'Zakath, who for some strange reason seemed to take a melancholy pleasure in their company. Quarters were provided for them within the labyrinth of silken tents and pavilions that sheltered 'Zakath's household staff, and their every comfort received the personal attention of the Emperor himself.

The strange, sad-eyed man puzzled Princess Ce'Nedra. Although he was the absolute soul of courtesy, the memory of his interview with King Gethell frightened her. His ruthlessness was all the more chilling because he never lost his temper. He never seemed to sleep either, and when, often in the middle of the night, he felt some obscure need for conversation, he would send for Ce'Nedra. He never apologized for having interrupted her rest. It apparently did not even occur to him that his summons might in some way inconvenience her.

"Where did King Rhodar receive his military training?" 'Zakath asked her during one of these midnight interviews. "None of my information about him even hints about any such talent." The Emperor was seated deep in the purple cushions of a soft chair with golden candlelight playing over his face and his cat dozing in his lap.

"I really couldn't say, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra replied, toying absently with the sleeve of the pale silk gown that had been provided for her soon after her arrival. "I only met Rhodar last winter."

"Very peculiar," 'Zakath mused. "We had always assumed that he was just a foolish old man doting on his young wife. We had never even considered him a possible threat. We concentrated our attentions on Brand and Anheg. Brand is too self effacing to be a good leader, and Anheg seemed too erratic to give us much concern. Then Rhodar appeared out of nowhere to take charge of things. The Alorns are an enigma, aren't they? How can a sensible Tolnedran girl stand them?"

She smiled briefly. "They have a certain charm, your Majesty," she told him

rather pertly.
"Where is Belgarion?" The question came without any warning. ''
"We don't know, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra answered evasively. "Lady Polgara was
furious when he slipped away."
"In the company of Belgarath and Kheldar," the Emperor added."We heard of the
search for them. Tell me, Princess, does he by any chance have Cthrag Yaska with
him?"
"Cthrag Yaska?"
"The burning stone - what you in the west call the Orb of Aldur "
"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, your Majesty," she told him rather primly,
"and I'm sure you're too courteous to try to wring the information out of me."
"Princess," he said reprovingly.
"I'm sorry, your Majesty," she apologized and gave him that quick, little girl
smile that was always her weapon of last resort.
'Zakath smiled gently. "You're a devious young woman, Ce'Nedra," he said.
"Yes, your Majesty," she acknowledged. "What prompted you and Taur Urgas to bury
your enmity and unite against us?" Ce'Nedra wanted to demonstrate that she too
could ask surprise questions.
"There was no unity in our attack, Princess," he replied. "I was merely
responding to Taur Urgas."
"I don't understand."
"So long as he remained at Rak Goska, I was perfectly content to stay at Thull
Zelik; but as soon as he began to march north, I had to respond. The land of the
Thulls is of too much strategic importance to allow it to be occupied by a
hostile force."
"And what now, 'Zakath?" Ce'Nedra asked him impudently. "Taur Urgas is dead.
Where will you turn now in search of an enemy?"
He smiled a wintry smile. "How little you understand us, Ce'Nedra. Taur Urgas
was only the symbol of Murgo fanaticism. Ctuchik is dead, and Taur Urgas is
dead, but Murgodom lives on - even as Mallorea will live on when I am gone. Our
enmity goes back for eons. At last, how-ever, a Mallorean Emperor is in a
position to crush Cthol Murgos once and for all and make himself undisputed
overking of Angarak."
"It's all for power, then?"
"What else is there?" he asked sadly. "When I was very young, I thought that
there might be something else-but events proved that I was wrong." A brief look
of pain crossed his face, and he sighed. "In time you will discover

that same
truth. Your Belgarion will grow colder as the years pass and the chill
satisfaction of power comes more and more to possess him. When it is complete,
and only his love of power remains, then he and I will move against each other
as inevitably as two great tides. I will not attack him until his education is
complete. There is no satisfaction in destroying a man who does not fully
comprehend reality. When all of his illusions are gone and only his love of
power remains, then he will be a fit opponent." His face had grown bleak. He
looked at her, his eyes as dead and cold as ice. "I think I've kept you from
your rest too long, Princess," he said. "Go to bed and dream of love and other
absurdities. The dreams will die all too soon, so enjoy them while you can."
Early the next morning, Ce'Nedra entered the pavilion where Polgara rested,
recuperating from the struggle with the Grolims at Thull Mardu. She was alert,
but still dreadfully weak.
"He's every bit as insane as Taur Urgas was," Ce'Nedra reported. "He's so
obsessed with the idea of becoming overking of Angarak that he isn't even paying
any attention to what we've been doing."
"That may change once Anheg starts sinking his troop ships," Polgara replied.
"There's nothing we can do at the moment, so just keep listening to him and be
polite."
"Do you think we should try to escape?"
"No."
Ce'Nedra looked at her, a bit startled.
"What's happening is supposed to happen. There's some reason that the four of us
- you, Durnik, Errand, and I - are supposed to go to Mallorea. Let's not tamper
with it."
"You knew this was going to happen?"
Polgara gave her a weary smile. "I knew that's where we were going. I didn't
know how, exactly. 'Zakath isn't interfering in any way, so don't aggravate
him."
Ce'Nedra sighed in resignation. "Whatever you say, Lady Polgara," she said.
It was early afternoon of that same day when the first reports of King Anheg's
activities in the Sea of the East reached the Emperor 'Zakath. Ce'Nedra, who was
present when the dispatches were delivered, felt a secret sense of satisfaction

as the icy man showed the first hint of irritation she had seen in him.
"Are you certain of this?" he demanded of the trembling messenger, holding up the parchment.
"I only carried the dispatch, dread Lord." The messenger quailed, cringing back from his Emperor's anger.
"Were you at Thull Zelik when the ships arnved?"
"There was only one ship, dread Lord."
"One ship out of fifty?" 'Zakath's tone was incredulous. "Weren't there others - perhaps coming along the coast?"
"The sailors said there weren't, your Imperial Majesty."
"What kind of barbarian is this Anheg of Cherek?" 'Zakath exclaimed to Ce'Nedra.
"Each of those ships carried two hundred men."
"King Anheg is an Alorn, your Majesty," Ce'Nedra replied coolly. "They're an unpredictable people."
With a great deal of effort, 'Zakath regained his composure. "I see," he said after a moment's reflection. "This was your plan from the beginning, wasn't it, Princess? The entire attack on Thull Mardu was a subterfuge."
"Not entirely, your Majesty. I was assured that the city had to be neutralized to permit the passage of the fleet."
"But why is he drowning my soldiers? I bear the Alorns no malice."
"Torak does - or so I'm told - and it is Torak who will command the combined armies of Angarak. We cannot allow your forces to land on this continent, your Majesty. We cannot give Torak that advantage."
"Torak is asleep - and he's likely to remain so for a number of years yet."
"Our information indicates that it will not be nearly so long. Belgarath himself is convinced that the time is near at hand."
His eyes narrowed slightly. "I must hand you all over to the Grolims, then," he said. "I'd hoped to wait until Polgara had regained her strength before subjecting her to the journey; but if what you say is true, there is little time to waste. Advise your friends to make their preparations, Princess. You will depart for Thull Zelik tomorrow morning."
"As your Majesty wishes," Ce'Nedra replied, a chill going down her spine as she bowed her head in acquiescence.
"I am a secular man, Princess," he said by way of explanation. "I bow to the altar of Torak when the occasion demands it, but I make no pretence at excessive piety. I will not involve myself in a religious dispute between Belgarath and Zedar, and I most certainly will not stand between Torak and Aldur

when they
confront each other. I would strongly advise you to follow the same course."
"That decision is not mine to make, your Majesty. My part in this was decided
for me long before I was born."
He looked amused. "The Prophecy, you mean? We Angaraks have one also, Princess,
and I don't imagine yours is any more reliable than ours. Prophecy is no more
than a trick of the priesthood to maintain its grip on the gullible."
"Then you believe in nothing, my Lord?"
"I believe in my own power. Nothing else makes any sense."
The Grolims who escorted them in easy stages northward across the summer-browned
plains of Mishrak ac Thull toward Thull Zelik were coldly proper. Ce'Nedra could
not be sure if their behavior was the result of warnings from the Emperor of
Mallorea or their fear of Polgara. The stifling heat was past now, and the air
smelled faintly of the dusty end of summer. The Thullish plain was dotted with
villages, random collections of thatch-roofed cottages and dirt streets. The
villagers watched, sullen and afraid, as the priests of Torak rode through the
little towns, their faces cold and aloof.
The plain to the west of Thull Zelik was covered with the red tents of the vast
staging area that had been erected for the Mallorean army. With the exception of
caretaker detachments, however, the huge camp was empty. The troops already in
Mishrak ac Thull were with 'Zakath near Thull Mardu, and the steady stream of
new arrivals had been quite suddenly cut off.
Thull Zelik itself was like any port town in the world, smelling of salt water,
fish, tar, and rotting seaweed. The gray stone buildings were low and squat,
almost like the Thulls themselves, and the cobblestoned streets all sloped down
to the harbor, which lay in the curve of a broad estuary and faced a somewhat
similar harbor on the other side.
"What city is that?" Ce'Nedra curiously asked one of the Grolims as she looked
across the dirty water toward the far shore.
"Yar Marak," the black-robed priest answered curtly.
"Ah," she said, remembering now her tedious geography lessons. The two cities,
one Thullish, the other Nadrak, faced each other across the estuary at the mouth
of the River Cordu, and the boundary between Mishrak ac Thull and Gar og Nadrak
ran down the precise center of the river.
"When the Emperor returns from Thull Mardu, I imagine he'll take

steps to
eradicate that place over there," one of the other Grolims added. "He was not
pleased with the behavior of King Drosta on the battlefield, and some
chastisement seems in order."
They proceeded directly down a cobbled avenue to the harbor, where but a few
ships were moored to the wharves.
"My crew absolutely refuses to put to sea," the Mallorean captain of the ship
upon which they were to embark reported to the Grolims. "The Chereks out there
are like a pack of wolves, burning and sinking everything afloat."
"The Cherek fleet is farther south," the priest in charge of the detachment of
Grolims declared.
"The Cherek fleet is everywhere, revered priest," the captain disagreed. "Two
days ago they burned four coastal towns two hundred leagues to the south of
here, and yesterday they sank a dozen ships a hundred leagues to the north. You
wouldn't believe how fast they can move. They don't even take the time to loot
the towns they burn." He shuddered. "They're not men! They're a natural
disaster."
"We will set sail within the hour," the Grolim insisted.
"Not unless your priests know how to man oars and handle the rigging," the
captain told him. "My men are terrified. They won't sail."
"We'll convince them," the Grolim said darkly. He gave a few orders to his
under-priests. An altar was quickly erected on the high stern deck, and a
brazier filled with glowing coals was placed to one side of it. The leader of
the Grolims took his place at the altar and began chanting in a deep, hollow
voice, his arms raised to the sky. In his right hand he held a gleaming knife.
At random, his cohorts selected a sailor and dragged him, screaming and
struggling, to the stern deck. As Ce'Nedra watched with horror, he was bent
backward across the altar and butchered with an almost casual efficiency. The
Grolim who had wielded the knife lifted the dead man's dripping heart.
"Behold our offering, Dragon-God of Angarak!" he cried in a great voice, then
turned and deposited the heart in the smoking brazier. The heart steamed and
sizzled horribly for a moment, then began to blacken and shrivel as the fire
consumed it. From the bow of the ship a gong clanged in iron celebration of the
sacrifice.

The Grolim at the altar, his bloody hands dripping, turned to confront the ashen-faced sailors crowded amidships.
"Our ceremonies will continue until the ship sails," he told them. "Who will be the next to give his heart to our beloved God?"
The ship set sail immediately.
Ce'Nedra, sick with revulsion, turned her face away. She looked at Polgara, whose eyes burned with hatred and who seemed in the grip of an overpowering interior struggle. Ce'Nedra knew her, and she knew that it was only by a tremendous effort of her will that Polgara was able to keep herself from unleashing a terrible retribution on the bloodstained Grolim at the altar.
Beside her, protected in the clasp of one of her arms, stood Errand. On the child's face was an expression Ce'Nedra had never seen there before. His look was sad, compassionate, and at the same time filled with a kind of iron-hard resolution, as if, had he but the power, he would destroy every altar to Torak in all the world.
"You will go below decks now," one of their Grolim captors told them. "It will be a matter of some days before we reach the shores of boundless Mallorea."
They sailed north, hugging the Nadrak coastline, fearfully ready to run for any beach that offered itself, should Cherek ships appear on the horizon. At a certain point, the Mallorean captain peered about at the empty sea, swallowed hard, and swung his tiller over for the quick, terrified dash across open water to the east.
Once, a day or more out from the Nadrak coast, they saw a dreadful column of thick black smoke rising far to the south, and a day or so farther on they sailed through a sea littered with charred debris where bodies, pale and bloated, bobbed in the dark waves of the eastern sea. The frightened sailors pulled their oars with all their strength, not even needing the encouragement of whips to row faster.
Then, one murky morning when the sky behind them threatened rain squalls and the air was oppressively heavy with the advancing storm, a low, dark smudge appeared on the horizon ahead of them, and the sailors doubled their efforts, rushing desperately toward the safety of the Mallorean coast ahead.
The beach upon which the small boats from their ship landed them was

a sloping
shingle of dark, salt-crusted gravel where the waves made a strange, mournful
sighing as they receded. Awaiting them some distance up from the water's edge
sat a mounted party of Grolims, their black robes belted at the waist with
crimson sashes.
"Archpriests," Polgara noted coldly. "We're to be escorted with some ceremony, I
take it."
The Grolim who had commanded their escort went quickly up the gravel stand
toward the waiting group and prostrated himself before them, speaking with a
hushed reverence. One of the Archpriests, an aged man with a deeply lined face
and sunken eyes, dismounted rather stiffly and came down to where Ce'Nedra and
her friends had just stepped from the small boat.
"My Queen," he said to Polgara, bowing respectfully. "I am Urtag, Archpriest of
the district of Camat. I am here with my brethren to escort you to the City of
Night."
"I'm disappointed not to find Zedar waiting," the sorceress replied coldly. "I
trust he's not indisposed."
Urtag gave her a quick look of irritation. "Do not rail against your
foreordained fate, Queen of Angarak," he advised her.
"I have two fates awaiting me, Urtag," she said. "Which one I will follow has
not yet been decided."
"I do not have any doubts about the matter," he declared.
"That's probably because you've never dared to look at the alternatives," she
replied. "Shall we go, Urtag? A windy beach is hardly the place for
philosophical discussion."
The Grolim Archpriests had brought horses with them, and the party was soon
mounted and riding away from the sea across a line of low, wooded hills in a
generally northeasterly direction. The trees bordering the upper edge of the
gravel beach had been dark-boughed spruces, but once they topped the first rise
they entered a vast forest of white-barked aspens. To Ce'Nedra's eyes, the
stark, white trunks looked almost corpselike, and the entire forest had a
gloomy, unhealthy quality about it.
"Mistress Pol," Durnik said in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper,
"shouldn't we be working on some kind of plan?"
"For what, Durnik?" she asked him.
"For our escape, of course."
"But we don't want to escape, Durnik."
"We don't?"

"The Grolims are taking us to the place we want to go."
"Why do we want to go to this Cthol Mishrak of theirs?"
"We have something to do there."
"From everything I've heard it's a bad sort of place," he told her. "Are you
sure you haven't made some mistake?"
She reached out and laid her hand on his arm. "Dear Durnik," she said, "you'll
just have to trust me."
"Of course, Mistress Pol," he replied immediately. "But shouldn't I know what to
expect? If I should have to take steps to protect you, I ought to be prepared."
"I'd tell you if I knew, Durnik," she said, "but I don't know what we should
expect. All I know is that the four of us are supposed to go to Cthol Mishrak.
What's going to happen there needs us in order for it to be complete. Each of us
has something to do there."
"Even me?"
"Especially you, Durnik. At first I didn't understand who you really are. That's
why I tried to keep you from coming along. But now I do understand. You have to
be there because you're going to do the one thing that's going to turn the
entire outcome one way or the other."
"What is it?"
"We don't know."
His eyes grew wide. "What if I do it wrong?" he asked in a worried voice.
"I don't think you can," she reassured him. "From everything I understand, what
you're going to do will flow very naturally out of who and what you are." She
gave him a brief, wry little smile. "You won't be able to do it wrong, Durnik -
any more than you'd be able to lie or cheat or steal. It's built into you to do
it right, so don't worry about it."
"That's all very well for you to say, Mistress Pol," he replied, "but if you
don't mind, I will worry about it just a bit - privately, of course."
She laughed then, a light, fond little laugh. "You dear, dear man," she said
impulsively taking his hand. "Whatever would we do without you?"
Durnik blushed and tried to look away, but her glorious eyes held his, and he
blushed even more.
After they had passed through the forest of aspen, they entered a strangely
desolate landscape. White boulders stuck up out of tangled weeds like tombstones
in a long-abandoned graveyard, and dead trees thrust their crooked limbs at the
overcast sky like pleading fingers. The horizon ahead was covered with a bank of

darker cloud, a cloud so intensely black that it seemed almost purple. Oddly, Ce'Nedra noted, the cloudbank did not seem to be moving at all. There was no sign anywhere of any human habitation, and the route they followed was not even marked by a trail.

"Does no one live there?" the princess asked Polgara.

"Cthol Mishrak is deserted except for a few Grolims," the sorceress replied.

"Torak smashed the city and drove its people out the day my father and King Cherek and his sons stole the Orb back from the iron tower."

"When was that?"

"A very long time ago, Ce'Nedra. As nearly as we've been able to determine, it was precisely on the same day that Beldaran and I were born - and the day our mother died. It's a bit hard to say for sure. We were a bit casual about keeping track of time in those days."

"If your mother had died and Belgarath was here, who took care of you?"

"Beldin, of course." Polgara smiled. "He wasn't a very good mother, but he did the best he could until father returned."

"Is that why you're so fond of him?"

"One of the reasons, yes."

The ominous cloudbank still did not move. It stretched across the sky as stationary as a range of mountains; as they rode toward it, it loomed higher and higher.

"That's a very strange cloud," Durnik noted, looking speculatively at the thick curtain of purple ahead. "The storm is coming in behind us, but that cloud doesn't seem to be moving at all."

"It doesn't move, Durnik," Polgara told him. "It never has moved. When the Angaraks built Cthol Mishrak, Torak put that cloud there to hide the city. It's been there ever since."

"How long is that?"

"About five thousand years."

"The sun never shines there?"

"Never."

The Grolim Archpriests had begun to look about with a certain apprehension, and finally Urtag called a halt. "We must make ourselves known," he declared. "We don't want the watchers to mistake us for intruders."

The other Archpriests nodded nervously, and then all removed polished steel masks from beneath their robes and carefully covered their faces with them. Then each of them untied a thick torch from his saddle and ignited it with a brief,

mumbled incantation. The torches burned with a peculiarly green-tinged flame and
gave off a reeking, sulfurous smoke.
"I wonder what would happen if I were to blow out your torches," Polgara
suggested with a hint of a mischievous smile. "I could, you know."
Urtag gave her a worried look. "This is no time for foolishness, my Lady," he
warned her. "The watchers are very savage with intruders. Our lives depend on
those torches. Please don't do anything to bring down a disaster on us all."
She laughed lightly and let it go at that.
As they rode in beneath the cloud, it grew steadily darker. It was not precisely
the clean darkness of night, but was rather a kind of dirty murkiness, a deep
shade hovering in the air. They crested a rise and saw before them a
cloud-enshrouded basin, and in its center, half obscured by the pervasive gloom,
stood the ravaged City of Night. The vegetation around them had shrunk to a few
sparse weeds and an unhealthy looking, stunted grass, pale and sick for want of
sun. The boulders thrusting up out of the earth were splotched with a sort of
leprous lichen that ate into the rock itself, and nodules of a white fungus
lumped in grotesque profusion, spreading out across the dank soil as if the
ground itself were diseased.
With a slow, careful pace, their sputtering torches held above their heads, the
Grolim Archpriests led the way down into the gloomy basin and across the
unwholesome plain toward the shattered walls of Cthol Mishrak.
As they entered the city, the princess saw furtive hints of movement among the
tumbled stones. Shadowy forms scurried from place to place among the ruins, and
the sound of their movements was the clicking scrape made by creatures whose
feet were clawed. Some of the shapes were upright, others were not. Ce'Nedra
grew cold and afraid. The watchers of Cthol Mishrak were neither beast nor
human, and they seemed to exude a kind of indiscriminate malice toward all other
living things. More than anything, she was afraid that one of them might
suddenly turn and confront her with a face that might rip away her sanity by its
hideousness.
As they passed down a broken street, Urtag began to intone an ancient prayer to
Torak, his voice hollow and shaking. The dank air grew colder, and the
diseaselike lichen ate at the tumbled stones of the ruined houses.

Mold seemed to cling to everything, and the pale fungus grew in grotesque lumps in corners and crannies. The smell of decay was everywhere, a damp, rotten stench, and slimy pools of stagnant water lay among the ruins.

In the center of the city stood the rusted stump of a vast iron tower, the broken-off girders which had supported it thicker than a man's waist. Just to the south of the stump lay a broad, rusted trail of total destruction where the tower had fallen, crushing everything beneath it. Over the eons, the iron had rusted down into a sort of damp red mud that outlined the enormous dimensions of the fallen structure.

The stump had eroded down, the years rounding off the broken edges. The rust mingled in places with a kind of thick black ooze that ran down the faces of the iron plates like gobbets of clotted blood.

Urtag, trembling visibly now, dismounted before a vast, arched portal and led them through a half open iron door. The echoing chamber they entered was as large as the Imperial throne room in Tol Honeth. Wordlessly, his torch held high over his head, Urtag led them across the pitted floor to another iron-arched doorway and then down a flight of clanging iron steps that reached into the darkness beneath. At the bottom of the stairs, perhaps fifty feet below the wreckage above, stood another door of black iron, studded with great, round rivetheads. Hesitantly, Urtag rapped his knuckles on the door, and the sound of his rapping echoed hollowly in the chamber beyond.

"Who comes to disturb the slumber of the Dragon-God of Angarak?" a muffled voice demanded from behind the door.

"I am Urtag, the Archpriest of Camat." The Grolim's voice was friughtened. "As commanded, I bring the prisoners to the Disciple of Torak."

There was a moment of silence, and then the rattling sound of an immense chain, followed by the grating of an enormous bolt. Then slowly, creakingly, the door opened.

Ce'Nedra gasped. Standing in the doorway was Belgarath! It was a moment before her startled eyes began to sort out the subtle differences that informed her that the white-haired man before her was not indeed the old sorcerer, but rather someone who looked so much like him that they could easily pass for brothers.

Subtle though the differences were, they were nonetheless profound. In the eyes
of the man in the doorway there was a haunted look - a look compounded of grief
and horror and a dreadful self loathing, all overlaid with the helpless
adoration of a man who has given himself utterly to a dreadful master.
"Welcome to the tomb of the one-eyed God, Polgara," he greeted the sorceress.
"It's been a long time, Belzedar," she replied in an oddly neutral voice.
"I've given up the right to that name," he told her, and his tone was faintly
regretful.
"It was your decision, Zedar."
He shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps not. Maybe what I'm doing is also
necessary." He pushed the door open wider. "Come inside, if you will. This crypt
is habitable - if only barely." He looked directly at Urtag then. "You have
performed a service, Urtag, Archpriest of Torak, and a service should not be
unrewarded. Come." And he turned and led them back into the vaulted chamber
beyond. The walls were of stone, massive blocks set without mortar, and bolted
to the topmost tier were great iron arches supporting the ceiling and the
immense ruin above. The great chill of masses of cold stone and iron was held
off by large, glowing braziers set in each corner. In the center of the room
stood a table and several chairs, and along one wall lay a cluster of loosely
rolled pallets and a neat stack of gray woolen blankets. On the table stood a
pair of large candles, their flame unwinking and steady in the dead air of the
tomb.
Zedar paused briefly at the table to pick up one of the candles, then led them
across the flagstone floor to an arched alcove set in the far wall. "Your
reward, Urtag," he said to the Grolim. "Come and behold the face of your God."
He lifted the candle.
Lying upon its back on a stone bier within the alcove lay a huge figure, robed
and cowled in black. The face was concealed by a polished steel mask. The eyes
of the mask were closed.
Urtag took one terrified look, then prostrated himself on the floor. There was a
deep, rasping sigh, and the recumbent figure in the alcove moved slightly. As
Ce'Nedra stared in horrified fascination, the vast, steel-covered

face turned
restlessly toward them. For a moment the polished left eyelid opened. Behind
that eyelid burned the dreadful fire of the eye that was not. The steel face
moved as if it were flesh, twisting into an expression of contempt at the priest
groveling on the flagstones, and a hollow murmuring came from behind the
polished lips.
Urtag started violently and raised his suddenly stricken face, listening to the
hollow muttering which he alone in the dim crypt could hear clearly. The hollow
voice continued, murmuring in Urtag's ears. The Archpriest's face drained as he
listened, and a look of unspeakable horror slowly twisted his features. The
hollow muttering droned on. The words were indistinct, but the inflections were
not. Desperately, Ce'Nedra covered her ears.
Finally Urtag screamed and scrambled to his feet. His face had gone absolutely
white, and his eyes were starting from their sockets. Gibbering insanely, Urtag
fled, and the sound of his screams echoed back down the iron stairway, as he ran
in terror from the ruined tower.

Chapter Twenty

THE WHISPERING HAD begun almost as soon as Belgarath, Silk, and Garion reached
the coast of Mallorea. It was indistinct at first, little more than a sibilant
breath sounding perpetually in Garion's ears, but in the days that followed as
they moved steadily south, occasional words began to emerge. The words were the
sort to be reckoned with home, mother, love, and death - words upon which
attention immediately fastened.
Unlike the land of the Morindim which they had left behind, northern - most
Mallorea was a land of rolling hills covered with a toughstemmed, dark green
grass. Occasional nameless rivers wound among those hills, roiling and turbulent
beneath a lead gray sky. They had not seen the sun for what seemed weeks. A sort
of dry overcast had moved in off the Sea of the East, and a stiff breeze, chill
and smelling of the polar ice, pressed continually at their backs as they moved
south.
Belgarath now rode with extreme caution. There was no sign of that half doze
that was his custom in more civilized parts of the world, and Garion

could feel
the subtle push of the old man's mind as he probed ahead for any
hidden dangers.
So delicate was the sorcerer's searching that it seemed only a slowly
expiring
breath, light, tentative, concealed artfully in the sound of the
breeze passing
through the tall grass.
Silk also rode warily, pausing frequently to listen, and seeming on
occasion to
sniff at the air. Often he would even go so far as to dismount and
put his ear
to the turf, to see if he might pick up the muffled tread of unseen
horses
approaching.
"Nervous work," the little man said as he remounted after one such
pause.
"Better to be a little overcautious than to blunder into something,"
Belgarath
replied. "Did you hear anything?"
"I think I heard a worm crawling around down there," Silk answered
brightly. "He
didn't say anything, though. You know how worms are."
"Do you mind?"
"You did ask, Belgarath."
"Oh, shut up!"
"You heard him ask, didn't you, Garion?"
"That is probably the most offensive habit I've ever encountered in
anyone,"
Belgarath told the little thief.
"I know," Silk answered. "That's why I do it. Infuriating, isn't it?
How far do
we have to go before we come to woods again?"
"Several more days. We're still a goodly distance north of the tree
line.
Winter's too long and summer too short for trees to grow up here."
"Boring sort of place, isn't it?" Silk observed, looking around at
the endless
grass and the rounded hills that all looked the same.
"Under the circumstances, I can stand a little boredom. The
alternatives aren't
all that pleasant."
"I can accept that."
They rode on, their horses wading through the knee-high, gray-green
grass.
The whispering inside Garion's head began again.
"Hear me, Child of Light."
That sentence emerged quite clearly from the rest of the
unintelligible
sibilance. There was a dreadfully compelling quality in that single
statement.
Garion concentrated, trying to hear more.
"I wouldn't do that, " the familiar dry voice told him.
"What?"
"Don't do what he tells you to do. "
"Who is it?"
"Torak, of course. Who did you think it was?"
"He's awake?"

"Not yet. Not fully at any rate - but then he's never been entirely asleep
either."
"What's he trying to do?"
"He's trying to talk you out of killing him."
"He's not afraid of me, is he?"
"Of course he's afraid. He doesn't know what's going to happen any more than you
do, and he's just as frightened of you as you are of him."
That immediately made Garion feel better. "What should I do about the way he
keeps whispering to me?"
"There's not much you can do. Just don't get into the habit of obeying his
orders, that's all. "
They camped that evening as they usually did in a well-sheltered hollow between
two hills and, as usual, they built no fire to give away their location.
"I'm getting a bit tired of cold suppers," Silk complained, biting down hard on
a piece of dried meat. "This beef's like a strip of old leather."
"The exercise is good for your jaws," Belgarath told him.
"You can be a very unpleasant old man when you set your mind to it, do you know
that?"
"The nights are getting longer, aren't they?" Garion said to head off any
further wrangling.
"The summer's winding down," Belgarath told him. "It will be autumn up here in
another few weeks, and winter will be right on its heels."
"I wonder where we'll be when winter comes," Garion said rather plaintively.
"I wouldn't do that," Silk advised. "Thinking about it isn't going to help, and
it's only going to make you nervous."
"Nervouser," Garion corrected. "I'm already nervous."
"Is there such a word as 'nervouser?' " Silk asked Belgarath curiously.
"There is now," Belgarath replied. "Garion just invented it."
"I wish I could invent a word," Silk said admiringly to Garion, his ferretlike
little eyes gleaming mischievously.
"Please don't poke fun at me, Silk. I'm having enough trouble as it is."
"Let's get some sleep," Belgarath suggested. "This conversation isn't going
anywhere, and we've got a long way to ride tomorrow."
That night the whispering invaded Garion's sleep, and it seemed to convey its
meaning in images rather than words. There was an offer of friendship - of a
hand outstretched in love. The loneliness that had haunted his boyhood from the
moment he had discovered that he was an orphan seemed to fade, to pass somehow
behind him with that offer, and he found himself rather desperately

wanting to
run toward that hand reaching toward him.
Then, very clearly, he saw two figures standing side by side. The figure of the
man was very tall and very powerful, and the figure of the woman was so familiar
that the very sight of her caught at Garion's heart. The tall, powerful man
seemed to be a stranger, and yet was not. His face went far beyond mere human
handsomeness. It was quite the most beautiful face Garion had ever seen. The
woman, of course, was not a stranger. The white lock at the brow and the
glorious eyes were the most familiar things in Garion's life. Side by side, the
beautiful stranger and Aunt Pol reached out their arms to him.
"You will be our son," the whispering voice told him. "Our beloved son. I will
be your father, and Polgara your mother. This will be no imaginary thing, Child
of Light, for I can make all things happen. Polgara will really be your mother,
and all of her love will be yours alone; and I, your father, will love and
cherish you both. Will you turn away from us and face again the bitter
loneliness of the orphan child? Does that chill emptiness compare with the
warmth of loving parents? Come to us, Belgarion, and accept our love."
Garion jerked himself out of sleep, sitting bolt upright, trembling and
sweating.
"I need help, " he cried out silently, reaching into the vaults of his mind to
find that other, nameless presence.
"What's your problem now?" the dry voice asked him.
"He's cheating, " Garion declared, outraged.
"Cheating? Did somebody come along and make up a set of rules while I wasn't
watching?"
"You know what I mean. He's offering to make Aunt Pol my mother if I'll do what
he says. "
"He's lying. He can't alter the past. Ignore him."
"How can I? He keeps reaching into my mind and putting his hand on the most
sensitive spots "
"Think about Ce'Nedra. That'll confuse him. "
"Ce'Nedra?"
"Every time he tries to tempt you with Polgara, think about your flighty little
princess. Remember exactly how she looked when you peeked at her while she was
bathing that time back in the Wood of the Dryads."
"I did not peekl"
"Really? How is it that you remember every single detail so vividly,

then?"
Garion blushed. He had forgotten that his daydreams were not entirely private.
"Just concentrate on Ce'Nedra. It will probably irritate Torak almost as much as it does me. " The voice paused. "Is that all you can really think about?" it asked then.
Garion did not try to answer that.
They pushed on southward under the dirty overcast and two days later they reached the first trees, scattered sparsely at the edge of the grassland where great herds of antlered creatures grazed as placidly and unafraid as cattle. As the three of them rode south, the scattered clumps of trees became thicker, and soon spread into a forest of dark-boughed evergreens.
The whispering blandishments of Torak continued, but Garion countered them with thoughts of his red-haired little princess. He could sense the irritation of his enemy each time he intruded these daydreams upon the carefully orchestrated images Torak kept trying to instill in his imagination. Torak wanted him to think of his loneliness and fear and of the possibility of becoming a part of a loving family, but the intrusion of Ce'Nedra into the picture confused and baffled the God. Garion soon perceived that Torak's understanding of men was severely limited. Concerned more with elementals, with those towering compulsions and ambitions which had inflamed him for the endless eons, Torak could not cope with the scattered complexities and conflicting desires that motivated most men. Garion seized on his advantage to thwart the insidious and compelling whispers with which Torak tried to lure him from his purpose.
The whole business was somehow peculiarly familiar. This had happened before - not perhaps in exactly the same way, but very similarly. He sorted through his memories, trying to pin down this strange sense of repetition. It was the sight of a twisted tree stump, lightning-blasted and charred, that suddenly brought it all flooding back in on him. The stump, when seen from a certain angle, bore a vague resemblance to a man on horseback, a dark rider who seemed to watch them as they rode by. Because the sky was overcast, the stump cast no shadow, and the image clicked into place. Throughout his childhood, hovering always on the edge of his vision, Garion had seen the strange, menacing shape of a dark-

cloaked
rider on a black horse, shadowless even in the brightest sunlight. That had been
Asharak the Murgo, of course, the Grolim whom Garion had destroyed in his first
open act as a sorcerer. But had it? There had existed between Garion and that
dark figure which had so haunted his childhood a strange bond. They had been
enemies; Garion had always known that; but in their enmity there had always been
a curious closeness, something that seemed to pull them together. Garion quite
deliberately began to examine a startling possibility. Suppose that the dark
rider had not in fact been Asharak - or if it had been, suppose that Asharak had
somehow been suffused by another, more powerful awareness.
The more he thought about it, the more convinced Garion became that he had
stumbled inadvertently across the truth of the matter. Torak had demonstrated
that, even though his body slept, his awareness could still move about the
world, twisting events to his own purposes. Asharak had been involved,
certainly, but the dominating force had always been the consciousness of Torak.
The Dark God had stood watch over him since infancy. The fear he had sensed in
that dark shape that had hovered always on the edge of his boyhood had not been
Asharak's fear, but Torak's. Torak had known who he was from the beginning, had
known that one day Garion would take up the sword of the Rivan King and come to
the meeting that had been ordained since before the world was made.
Acting upon a sudden impulse, Garion put his left hand inside his tunic and took
hold of his amulet. Twisting slightly, he reached up and laid the marked palm of
his right hand on the Orb, which stood on the pommel of the great sword strapped
across his back.
"I know you now, " he declared silently, hurling the thought at the murky sky.
"You might as well give up trying to win me over to your side, because I'm not
going to change my mind. Aunt Pol is not your wife, and I'm not your son. You'd
better stop trying to play games with my thoughts and get ready, because I in
coming to kill you. "
The Orb beneath his hand flared with a sudden exultation as Garion threw his
challenge into the Dark God's teeth, and the sword at Garion's back suddenly
burst into a blue flame that flickered through the sheath enclosing

it.
There was a moment of deadly silence, and then what had been a whisper suddenly
became a vast roar.
"Come, then, Belgarion, Child of Light, " Torak hurled back the challenge. "I
await thee in the City of Night. Bring all thy will and all thy courage with
thee, for I am ready for our meeting."
"What in the name of the seven Gods do you think you're doing?" Belgarath almost
screamed at Garion, his face mottled with angry astonishment.
"Torak's been whispering at me for almost a week now," Garion explained calmly,
taking his hand from the Orb. "He's been offering me all kinds of things if I'd
give up this whole idea. I got tired of it, so I told him to stop."
Belgarath spluttered indignantly, waving his hands at Garion.
"He knows I'm coming, Grandfather," Garion said, trying to placate the
infuriated old man. "He's known who I was since the day I was born. He's been
watching me all this time. We're not going to be able to take him by surprise,
so why try? I wanted to let him know that I was on to him. Maybe it's time for
him to start worrying and being afraid just a little bit, too."
Silk was staring at Garion. "He's an Alorn, all right," he observed finally.
"He's an idiot!" Belgarath snapped angrily. He turned back to Garion. "Did it
ever occur to you that there might be something out here to worry about besides
Torak?" he demanded.
Garion blinked.
"Cthol Mishrak is not unguarded, you young blockhead. You've just succeeded in
announcing our presence to every Grolim within a hundred leagues."
"I didn't think of that," Garion mumbled.
"I didn't think you'd thought. Sometimes I don't think you know how to think."
Silk looked around apprehensively. "Now what do we do?" he asked.
"We'd better get out of here - as fast as our horses can carry us," Belgarath
said. He glared at Garion. "Are you sure you don't have a trumpet somewhere
under your clothes?" he asked with heavy sarcasm. "Maybe you'd like to blow a
few fanfares as we go along." He shook his head in disgust and then gathered up
his reins. "Let's ride," he said.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE ASPENS WERE stark white and motionless under the dead sky, and they rose,
straight and slender, like the bars of an interminable cage. Belgarath led them

at a walk, carefully weaving his way through the endless stretches of this vast,
silent forest.
"How much farther?" Silk asked the old man tensely.
"Not much more than a day, now," Belgarath replied. "The clouds ahead are
getting thicker."
"You say the cloudbank never moves?"
"Never. It's been stationary since Torak put it there."
"What if a wind came along? Wouldn't that move it?"
Belgarath shook his head. "The normal rules have been suspended in that region.
For all I know, the cloud might not actually be cloud. It might be something
else."
"Like what?"
"An illusion of some kind, perhaps. The Gods are very good at illusions."
"Are they looking for us? The Grolims, I mean."
Belgarath nodded.
"Are you taking steps to keep them from finding us?"
"Naturally." The old man looked at him. "Why this sudden urge for conversation?
You've been talking steadily for the last hour."
"I'm a little edgy," Silk admitted. "This is unfamiliar territory, and that
always makes me nervous. I'm much more comfortable when I've got my escape
routes worked out in advance."
"Are you always ready to run?"
"In my profession you have to be. What was that?"
Garion heard it too. Faintly, somewhere far off behind them, there was a
deep-toned baying - one animal at first, but soon joined by several others.
"Wolves?" he suggested.
Belgarath's face had grown bleak. "No," he replied, "not wolves." He shook his
reins, and his nervous horse began to trot, the sound of its hoofs muffled by
the rotting loam lying thick beneath the aspens.
"What is it then, Grandfather?" Garion asked, also pushing his horse into a
trot.
"Torak's Hounds," Belgarath replied tersely.
"Dogs?"
"Not really. They're Grolims - rather specialized ones. When the Angaraks built
the city, Torak decided that he needed something to guard the surrounding
countryside. Certain Grolims volunteered to take on nonhuman shapes. The change
was permanent."
"I've dealt with watchdogs before," Silk said confidently.
"Not like these. Let's see if we can outrun them." Belgarath didn't sound very
hopeful.
They pushed their horses into a gallop, weaving in and out among the

tree
trunks. The limbs slapped against their faces as they rode, and Garion raised
his arm to ward them off as the three of them plunged on.
They crested a low ridge and galloped down the far side. The baying behind them
seemed to be closer now.
Then Silk's horse stumbled, and the little man was almost thrown from his
saddle.
"T'his isn't working, Belgarath," he said as the old man and Garion reined in.
"This ground's too treacherous for us to keep this pace."
Belgarath held up his hand and listened for a moment. The deeptoned baying was
definitely closer.
"They're outrunning us anyway," the old man agreed.
"You'd better think of something," Silk said, looking back nervously.
"I'm working on it." Belgarath raised his face to sniff at the air. "Let's keep
going. I just got a whiff of stagnant water. The area's dotted with swampy
places. We might be able to hide our scent if we can get into a big enough patch
of water."
They moved on down the slope toward the bottom of the valley. The odor of
standing water grew steadily stronger as they rode.
"Just ahead." Garion pointed toward a patch of brown water intermittently
visible among the white tree trunks.
The swamp was quite extensive, a broad patch of reeking, oily water trapped in
the bottom of a thickly grown basin. Dead trees thrust up out of the water,
their leafless branches seeming almost tike clawed hands reaching up in mute
supplication to the indifferent sky.
Silk wrinkled his nose. "It stinks bad enough to hide our scent from almost
anything," he said.
"We'll see," Belgarath replied. "This would probably throw off an ordinary dog,
but don't forget that the Hounds are really Grolims. They have the ability to
reason, so they won't be relying on scent alone."
They pushed their reluctant horses into the murky water and began to splash
along, changing direction frequently, weaving in and out among the dead tree
trunks. Their horses' hoofs stirred up rotting vegetation from the bottom,
filling the air with an even more powerful stench.
The sound of the baying Hounds drew closer, filled now with an excitement and a
terrible hunger.
"I think they've hit the edge of the swamp," Silk said, cocking his head to

listen.
There was a momentary bafflement in the baying behind them.
"Grandfather!" Garion cried, reining in sharply.
Directly before them, knee-deep in the brown water stood a slavering black
dog-shape. It was enormous - fully as large as a horse, and its eyes actually
burned with a malevolent green fire. Its front shoulders and chest were massive,
and the fangs protruding from its mouth were at least a foot long, curving down
cruelly and dripping foam.
"We have you now," it growled, seeming almost to chew on the words as it twisted
its muzzle into speech. The voice issuing from its mouth was a rasping, tearing
sound.
Silk's hand instantly flashed toward one of his hidden daggers.
"Never mind," Belgarath told him. "It's only a projection - a shadow."
"It can do that?" Silk's tone was startled.
"I told you that they're Grolims."
"We hunger," the fiery-eyed Hound rumbled. "I will return soon with my
pack-mates, and we will feed on man-meat." Then the shape flickered and
vanished.
"They know where we are now." Silk's voice was alarmed. "You'd better do
something, Belgarath. Can't you use sorcery?"
"That would just pinpoint our location. There are other things out there as well
as the Hounds."
"I'd say we'll have to chance it. Let's worry about one thing at a time. Did you
see those teeth?"
"They're coming," Garion said tensely. From far back in the sway he could
clearly hear the sound of splashing.
"Do something, Belgarath!"
The sky overhead had grown darker, and the air seemed suddenly oppressively
heavy. From far off there was an angry mutter of thunder. A vast sigh seemed to
pass through the forest.
"Keep going," Belgarath said, and they splashed off through the slimy brown
water toward the far side of the swamp. The aspen trees on the solid ground
ahead of them quite suddenly turned the silvery undersides of their leaves
upward, and it was almost as if a great, pale wave had shuddered through the
forest.
The Hounds were very close now, and their baying was triumphant as they plunged
through the oily, reeking swamp.
And then there was a brilliant blue-white flash, and a shattering

clap of
thunder. The sky ripped open above them. With a sound nearly as loud as the
thunder, they were engulfed in a sudden deluge. The wind howled, ripping away
the aspen leaves in great sheets and whirling them through the air. The rain
drove horizontally before the sudden gale, churning the swamp to froth and
obliterating everything more than a few feet away.
"Did you do this?" Silk shouted at Belgarath.
But Belgarath's stunned face clearly said that the storm was as much a surprise
to him as to Silk. They both turned to look at Garion.
"Did you do it?" Belgarath demanded.
"He didn't. I did." The voice which came from Garion's mouth was not his. "I've
labored too long at this to be thwarted by a pack of dogs."
"I didn't hear a thing," Belgarath marveled, wiping at his streaming face. "Not
even a whisper."
"You were listening at the wrong time," the voice of Garion's inner companion
replied. "I set it in motion early last spring. It's just now getting here."
"You knew we'd need it?"
"Obviously. Turn east. The Hounds won't be able to track you in all this. Swing
around and come at the city from the east side. There are fewer watchers on that
flank."
The downpour continued, punctuated by ripping claps of thunder and flashes of
lightning.
"How long will the rain last?" Belgarath shouted over the noise.
"Long enough. It's been building in the Sea of the East for a week. It hit the
coast this morning. Turn east."
"Can we talk as we ride?" Belgarath asked. "I have a great many questions."
"This is hardly the time for discussion, Belgarath. You have to hurry. The
others arrived at Cthol Mishrak this morning, just ahead of the storm.
Everything's ready there, so move."
"It's going to be tonight?"
"It will, if you get there in time. Torak's almost awake now. I think you'd
better be there when he opens his eyes."
Belgarath wiped his streaming face again, and his eyes had a worried look.
"Let's go," he said sharply and he led them splashing off through the driving
rain to solid ground.
The rain continued for several hours, driven before a screaming wind. Sodden,
miserable, and half blinded by flying leaves and twigs, the three of them

cantered toward the east. The baying of the Hounds trapped in the swamp faded behind them, taking on a baffled, frustrated note as the thunderous deluge obliterated all scents from the swamp and the forest.

When night fell, they had reached a low range of hills far to the east, and the rain had subsided into a steady, unpleasant drizzle, punctuated by periodic squalls of chilly, gusting wind and erratic downpours that swept in randomly off the Sea of the East.

"Are you sure you know the way?" Silk asked Belgarath.

"I can find it," Belgarath said grimly. "Cthol Mishrak's got a peculiar smell to it."

The rain slackened into a few scattered droplets pattering on the leaves overhead and died out entirely by the time they reached the edge of the wood.

The smell of which Belgarath had spoken was not a sharp reek, but rather was a muted, dank compound of odors. Damp rust seemed to be a major part of it, although the reek of stagnant water was also present, and the musty scent of fungus. The overall effect was one of decay. When they reached the last of the trees, Belgarath reined in.

"Well, there it is," he said in a quiet voice.

The basin before them was faintly illuminated by a kind of pale, sickly radiance that seemed to emanate from the ground itself, and in the center of that large depression reared the jagged, broken remains of the city.

"What's that strange light?" Garion whispered tensely.

Belgarath grunted. "Phosphorescence. It comes from the fungus that grows everywhere out there. The sun never shines on Cthol Mishrak, so it's a natural breeding ground for unwholesome things that grow in the dark. We'll leave the horses here." He dismounted.

"Is that a very good idea?" Silk asked him as he too swung down from his saddle.

"We might want to leave in a hurry." The little man was still wet and shivering.

"No," Belgarath said calmly. "If things go well, nothing in the city's going to be interested in giving us any trouble. If things don't go well, it's not going to matter anyway."

"I don't like unalterable commitments," Silk muttered sourly.

"You picked the wrong journey, then," Belgarath replied. "What we're about to do is just about as unalterable as things ever get. Once we start, there won't be any possible way to turn back."

"I still don't have to like it, do I? What now?"
"Garion and I are going to change into something a bit less conspicuous. You're an expert at moving about in the dark without being seen or heard, but we aren't that skilled at it."
"You're going to use sorcery - this close to Torak?" Silk asked him incredulously.
"We're going to be very quiet about it," Belgarath assured him. "A shape-change is directed almost entirely inward, so there isn't that much noise involved anyway." He turned to Garion. "We're going to do it slowly," he said. "That spreads out what little sound there is and makes it even fainter. Do you understand?"
"I think so, Grandfather."
"I'll go first. Watch me." The old man glanced at their horses. "Let's move away a bit. Horses are afraid of wolves. We don't want them to get hysterical and start crashing around."
They crept along the edge of the trees until they were some distance from the horses.
"This ought to be far enough," Belgarath said. "Now watch." He concentrated for a moment, and then his form began to shimmer and blur. The change-over was very gradual, and for several moments his face and the wolf's face seemed to coexist in the same place. The sound it made was only the faintest of whispers. Then it was done, and the great silver wolf sat on his haunches.
"Now you do it," he told Garion with the slight change of expression that is so much a part of the speech of wolves.
Garion concentrated very hard, holding the shape firmly in his mind. He did it so slowly that it seemed that he could actually feel the fur growing on his body.
Silk had been rubbing dirt on his face and hands to reduce the visibility of his skin. He looked at the two wolves, his eyes questioning. Belgarath nodded once and led the way out onto the bare earth of the basin that sloped down toward the rotting ruins of Cthol Mishrak. There were other shapes moving in the faint light, prowling, snuffling. Some of the shapes had a dog smell to them; others smelled faintly reptilian. Grolims, robed and cowled, stood watch on various hummocks and rocks, searching the darkness with their eyes and their minds for intruders.

The earth beneath Garion's paws felt dead. There was no growth, no life on this wasted heath. With Silk crouched low between them, the two wolves crept, belly low, toward the ruin, taking full advantage of rocky outcrops and eroded gullies. Their pace seemed excruciatingly slow to Garion, but Belgarath paid little attention to the passage of time. Occasionally, when they passed near one of the watching Grolims, they moved but one paw at a time. The minutes dragged by as they crept closer and closer to the broken City of Night.

Near the shattered wall, two of the hooded priests of Torak stood in quiet conversation. Their muted voices fell clearly upon Garion's intensely sharpened ears.

"The Hounds seem nervous tonight," one of them said.

"The storm," the other replied. "Bad weather always makes them edgy."

"I wonder what it's like to be a Hound," the first Grolim mused.

"If you like, perhaps they'll let you join them."

"I don't think I'm that curious."

Silk and the two wolves, moving as silently as smoke, passed no more than ten yards from the two idly chatting guards, and crept over the fallen stones into the dead City of Night. Once among the ruins, they were able to move faster. The shadows concealed their movements, and they flitted among the blasted stones in Belgarath's wake, moving steadily toward the center of the city where the stump of the iron tower now reared stark and black toward the murky sky.

The reek of rust, stagnation, and decay was much stronger, coming to Garion's wolf sharp nose in almost overpowering waves. It was a gagging smell, and he clamped his muzzle shut and tried not to think about it.

"Who's there?" a voice came sharply from just ahead of them. A Grolim with a drawn sword stepped out into the rubble-strewn street, peering intently into the deep shadows where the three crouched, frozen into immobility. Garion sensed rather than heard or saw Silk's slow, deliberate reach toward the dagger sheathed at the back of his neck. Then the little man's arm swung sharply down, and his knife made a fluttering whistle as it sped with deadly accuracy, turning end for end as it flew.

The Grolim grunted, doubling over sharply, then he sighed and toppled forward, his sword clanging as it fell.

"Let's move!" Silk ran past the huddled form of the dead Grolim sprawled on the stones.

Garion smelled fresh blood as he loped past, and the smell brought a sudden, hot taste to his mouth.
They reached the massive tangle of twisted girders and crumpled plates that had been the iron tower and crept silently through the open doorway into the total blackness of the chamber within. The smell of rust was everywhere now; coupled with it was a smell of ancient, brooding evil. Garion stopped, sniffing nervously at the tainted air, feeling his hackles rising on his ruffed neck.
With an effort, he suppressed the low growl that rose involuntarily in his throat.
He felt Belgarath's shoulder brush him and he followed the old wolf, guided now by scent alone in the utter blackness. At the far end of the huge, empty, iron room there was another doorway.
Belgarath stopped, and Garion felt again that faint brushing whisper as the old man slowly shifted back into the shape of a man. Garion clenched in his own will and let himself gradually flow back into his own form.
Silk was breathing a string of colorful curses, fervent but almost inaudible.
"What's the matter?" Belgarath whispered.
"I forgot to stop for my knife," Silk replied, grating his teeth together. "It's one of my favorites."
"What now, Grandfather?" Garion asked, his whisper hoarse.
"Just beyond this door, there's a flight of stairs leading down."
"What's at the bottom?"
"A cellar. It's a sort of tomb where Zedar's got Torak's body. Shall we go down?"
Garion sighed, then squared his shoulders. "I guess that's what we came for," he replied.

Chapter Twenty-two

"YOU DON'T ACTUALLY believe I'll accept that, do you, Zedar?" Garion froze in the act of putting his hand on the iron door at the foot of the stairs."You can't evade your responsibility with the pretence of necessity," the voice beyond the door continued.
"Aren't we all driven by necessity, Polgara?" a stranger's voice replied with a kind of weary sadness. "I won't say that I was blameless, but wasn't my apostacy predestined? The universe has been divided against itself since the beginning of time, and now the two Prophecies rush toward each other for their

final meeting
when all will be resolved. Who can say that what I have done was not essential
to that meeting?"
"That's an evasion, Zedar," Aunt Pol told him.
"What's she doing here?" Garion whispered to Belgarath.
"She's supposed to be here," Belgarath whispered back with an odd note of
satisfaction. "Listen."
"I don't think we'll gain anything by wrangling with each other, Polgara," Zedar
the Apostate was saying. "We each believe that what we did was right. Neither of
us could ever persuade the other to change sides at this point. Why don't we
just let it go at that?"
"Very well, Zedar," Aunt Pol replied coolly.
"What now?" Silk breathed.
"There should be others in there, too," Belgarath answered softly. "Let's make
sure before we go bursting in."
The iron door in front of them did not fit tightly, and faint light seeped
through the cracks around the frame. Garion could make out Belgarath's intent
face in that dim light.
"How's your father?" Zedar asked in a neutral tone.
"About the same as always. He's very angry with you, you know."
"That was to be expected, I suppose."
"He's finished eating, Lady Polgara," Garion heard Ce'Nedra say. He looked
sharply at Belgarath, but the old man put one finger to his lips.
"Spread one of those pallets out for him, dear," Aunt Pol instructed, "and cover
him with some blankets. It's very late, and he's sleepy."
"I'll do that," Durnik offered.
"Good," Belgarath breathed. "They're all here."
"How did they get here?" Silk whispered.
"I haven't the faintest idea, and I'm not going to worry about it. The important
thing is that they're here."
"I'm glad you were able to rescue him from Ctuchik," Zedar said. "I grew rather
fond of him during the years we spent together."
"Where did you find him?" Aunt Pol asked. "We've never been able to pin down
what country he's from."
"I forgot precisely," Zedar answered, and his voice was faintly troubled.
"Perhaps it was Camaar or Tol Honeth or maybe some city on the other side of
Mallorea. The details keep slipping away from me almost as if I weren't supposed
to examine them too closely."
"Try to remember," she said. "It might be important."
Zedar sighed. "If it amuses you," he said. He paused as if thinking. "I'd grown
restless for some reason," he began. "It was - oh, fifty or sixty

years ago. My
studies no longer interested me, and the bickering of the various Grolim
factions began to irritate me. I took to wandering about - not really paying
much attention to where I was. I must have crossed and crisscrossed the Kingdoms
of the West and the Angarak Kingdoms a half dozen times in those years.
"Anyway, I was passing through some city somewhere when the idea struck me all
at once. We all know that the Orb will destroy anyone who touches it with the
slightest trace of evil in his heart, but what would it do to someone who
touched it in total innocence? I was stunned by the simplicity of the idea. The
street I was on was full of people, and I needed quiet to consider this
remarkable idea, so I turned a corner into some forgotten alley, and there the
child was - almost as if he'd been waiting for me. He seemed to be about two
years old at the time - old enough to walk and not much more. I held out my hand
to him and said, 'I have a little errand for you, my boy.' He came to me and
repeated the word, 'Errand.' It's the only word I've ever heard him say."
"What did the Orb do when he first touched it?" Aunt Pol asked him. "It
flickered. In some peculiar way it seemed to recognize him, and something seemed
to pass between them when he laid his hand on it." He sighed. "No, Polgara, I
don't know who the child is - or even what he is. For all I know, he may even be
an illusion. The idea to use him in the first place came to me so suddenly that
I sometimes wonder if perhaps it was placed in my mind. It's entirely possible,
I suppose, that I didn't find him, but that he found me. " He fell silent again.
There was a long pause on the other side of the iron door.
"Why, Zedar?" Aunt Pol asked him very quietly. "Why did you betray our Master?"
Her voice was strangely compassionate.
"To save the Orb," he replied sadly. "At least, at first that was the idea. From
the moment I first saw it, it owned me. After Torak took it from our Master,
Belgarath and the others began making their plans to regain it by force, but I
knew that if Aldur himself did not join his hand with theirs to strike directly
at Torak, they would fail - and Aldur would not do that. I reasoned that if
force must fail, then guile might succeed. I thought that by

pretending
allegiance to Torak, I might gain his confidence and steal it back from him."
"What happened, Zedar?" Her question was very direct. There was another long,
painful pause.
"Oh, Polgara!" Zedar's voice came in a strangled sob. "You cannot know! I was so
sure of myself - so certain that I could keep a part of my mind free from
Torak's domination - but I was wrong - wrong! His mind and will overwhelm me. He
took me in his hand and he crushed out all of my resistance. The touch of his
hand, Polgara!" There was horror in Zedar's voice. "It reaches down into the
very depths of your soul. I know Torak for what he is - loathsome, twisted, evil
beyond your understanding of the word - but when he calls me, I must go; and
what he bids me do, I must do - even though my soul shrieks within me against
it. Even now, as he sleeps, his fist is around my heart." There was another
hoarse sob.
"Didn't you know that it's impossible to resist a God?" Aunt Pol asked in that
same compassionate voice. "Was it pride, Zedar? Were you so sure of your power
that you thought you could trick him - that you could conceal your intention
from him?"
Zedar sighed. "Perhaps," he admitted. "Aldur was a gentle Master. He never
brought his mind down on me, so I was not prepared for what Torak did to me.
Torak is not gentle. What he wants, he takes - and if he must rip out your soul
in the taking, it does not matter to him in the slightest. You'll discover his
power, Polgara. Soon he'll awaken and he'll destroy Belgarion. Not even the
Rivan King is a match for that awful mind. And then Torak will take you as his
bride - as he has always said he would. Don't resist him, Polgara. Save yourself
that agony. In the end, you'll go to him anyway. You'll go willingly - even
eagerly."
There was a sudden scraping sound in the room beyond the iron door, and a quick
rush of feet.
"Durnik!" Aunt Pol cried sharply. "No!"
"What's happening?" Garion demanded of Belgarath.
"That's what it means!" Belgarath gasped. "Get that door open!"
"Get back, you fool!" Zedar was shouting.
There was a sudden crash, the sound of bodies locked in struggle smashing into

furniture.
"I warn you," Zedar cried again. "Get back!"
There was the sharp sound of a blow, of a fist striking solid bone.
"Zedar!" Belgarath roared, yanking at the iron door.
Then within the room there was a thunderous detonation.
"Durnik!" Aunt Pol shrieked.
In a sudden burst of fury, Belgarath raised his clenched hand, joined his
flaming will with his arm and drove his fist at the locked door. The massive
force of his blow ripped the iron door from its hinges as if it had been no more
than paper.
The room beyond had a vaulted, curved ceiling supported by great iron girders,
black with age. Garion seemed to see everything in the room at once with a
curious kind of detachment, as if all emotion had been drained from him. He saw
Ce'Nedra and Errand clinging to each other in fright beside one wall. Aunt Pol
was standing as if locked in place, her eyes wide as she stared in stunned
disbelief at the still form of Durnik the smith, who lay crumpled on the floor,
and whose face had that deadly pale cast to it that could only mean one thing. A
terrible flood of realization suddenly swept her face - a realization of an
irrevocable loss.
"No!" she cried out. "My Durnik - No!"
She rushed to the fallen man, fell on her knees beside him and gathered his
still form into her arms with a heartbroken wail of grief and despair.
And then Garion saw Zedar the Apostate for the first time. The sorcerer was also
staring at Durnik's body. There was a desperate regret on his face - a knowledge
that he had finally committed the one act that forever put him past all hope of
redemption.
"You fool," he muttered. "Why? Why did you make me kill you? That's the one
thing above all others I didn't want to do."
Then Belgarath, as inexorable as death itself, lunged through the shattered
remains of the door and rushed upon the man he had once called brother.
Zedar flinched back from the old sorcerer's awful rage.
"I didn't mean to do it, Belgarath," he quavered, his hands raised to ward off
Belgarath's rush. "The fool tried to attack me. He was-"
"You-" Belgarath grated at him from between teeth clenched with hate. "You - you
-" But he was past speech. No word could contain his rage. He raised both arms
and struck at Zedar's face with his fists. Zedar reeled back, but

Belgarath was upon him, grappling, pounding at him with his hands. Garion could feel flickers of will from one or the other of them; but caught up in emotions so powerful that they erased thought, neither was coherent enough to focus the force within him. And so, like two tavern brawlers, they rolled on the floor, kicking, gouging, pounding at each other, Belgarath consumed with fury and Zedar with fear and chagrin.

Desperately, the Apostate jerked a dagger from the sheath at his waist, and Belgarath seized his wrist in both hands and pounded it on the floor until the knife went skittering away. Then each struggled to reach the dagger, clawing and jerking at each other, their faces frozen into intense grimaces as each strove to reach the dagger first.

At some point during the frenzied seconds when they had burst into the room, Garion had, unthinking, drawn the great sword from its sheath across his back, but the Orb and the blade were cold and unresponsive in his hand as he stood watching the deadly struggle between the two sorcerers.

Belgarath's hands were locked about Zedar's throat, and Zedar, strangling, clawed desperately at the old man's arms. Belgarath's face was contorted into an animal snarl, his lips drawn back from clenched teeth as he throttled his ancient enemy. As if finally driven past all hope of sanity, he struggled to his feet, dragging Zedar up with him. Holding the Apostate by the throat with one hand, he began to rain blows on him with the other. Then, between one blow and the next, he swung his arm down and pointed at the stones beneath their feet.

With a dreadful grinding, a great crack appeared, zigzagging across the floor. The rocks shrieked in protest as the crack widened. Still struggling, the two men toppled and fell into the yawning fissure. The earth seemed to shudder. With a terrible sound, the crack ground shut.

Incredulously, his mouth suddenly agape, Garion stared in stunned disbelief at the scarcely discernible crack through which the two men had fallen.

Ce'Nedra screamed, her hands going to her face in horror.

"Do something!" Silk shouted at Garion, but Garion could only stare at him in blank incomprehension.

"Polgara!" Silk said desperately, turning to Aunt Pol.

Still incapacitated by her sudden, overwhelming grief, she could not respond,

but knelt with Durnik's lifeless body in her arms, weeping uncontrollably as she
rocked back and forth, holding him tightly against her.
From infinitely far beneath there was a sullen detonation, and then another.
Even in the bowels of the earth, the deadly struggle continued. As if compelled,
Garion's eyes sought out the embrasure in the far wall; there in the dim light
he could make out the recumbent form of Kal Torak. Strangely emotionless, Garion
stared at the form of his enemy, meticulously noting every detail. He saw the
black robe and the polished mask. And he saw Cthrek Goru, Torak's great black
sword.
Although he did not - could not - move or even feel, a struggle, nonetheless,
raged inside him - a struggle perhaps even more dreadful than that which had
just plunged Belgarath and Zedar into the depths of the earth. The two forces
which had first diverged and then turned and rushed at each other down the
endless corridors of time had finally met within him. The EVENT which was the
ultimate conclusion of the two Prophecies, had begun, and its first skirmishes
were taking place within Garion's mind. Minute and very subtle adjustments were
shifting some of his most deeply ingrained attitudes and perceptions.
Torak moved, stirring restlessly, as those same two forces met within him.
Dreadful flashes of the sleeping God's mind assailed Garion, and he saw clearly
the terrible subterfuge that lay behind Torak's offer of friendship and love.
Had his fear of their duel drawn him into yielding, fully half of creation would
have shimmered and vanished. More than that, what Torak had offered was not love
but an enslavement so vile that it was beyond imagining.
But he had not yielded. He had somehow evaded the overwhelming force of Torak's
mind and had placed himself utterly in the hands of the Prophecy that had drawn
him here. With an absolute denial of self, he had become the instrument of the
Prophecy. He was no longer afraid. Sword in hand, the Child of Light awaited the
moment when the Prophecy would release him to join in deadly struggle with the
Dark God.
Then, even as Silk desperately tried to arouse either Garion or Polgara to
action, the stones of the floor buckled upward, and Belgarath rose from the
earth.

Garion, still abstracted and bemused, saw that all traces of the sometimes foolish old man he had known before were gone. The thieving old storyteller had vanished. Even the irritable old man who had led the quest for the Orb no longer existed. In their place stood the form of Belgarath the sorcerer, the Eternal Man, shimmering in the aura of his full power.

Chapter Twenty-three

"WHERE IS ZEDAR?" Aunt Pol asked, raising her tearstreaked face from Durnik's lifeless body to stare with a dreadful intensity at her father.
"I left him down there," Belgarath replied bleakly.
"Dead?"
"No."
"Bring him back."
"Why?"
"To face me." Her eyes burned.
The old man shook his head. "No, Pol," he said to her. "You've never killed anyone. Let's leave it that way."
She gently lowered Durnik's body to the floor and rose to her feet, her pale face twisted with grief and an awful need. "Then I will go to him," she declared, raising both arms as if to strike at the earth beneath her feet.
"No," Belgarath told her, extending his own hand, "you will not. "
They stood facing each other, locked in a dreadful, silent struggle. Aunt Pol's look at first was one of annoyance at her father's interference. She raised one arm again to bring the force of her will crashing down at the earth, but once again Belgarath put forth his hand.
"Let me go, father."
"No."
She redoubled her efforts, twisting as if trying to free herself from his unseen restraint. "Let me go, old man," she cried.
"No. Don't do this, Pol. I don't want to hurt you."
She tried again, more desperately this time, but once again Belgarath smothered her will with his. His face hardened, and he set his jaw.
In a last effort, she flung the whole force of her mind against the barrier he had erected. Like some great rock, however, the old man remained firm. Finally her shoulders slumped, and she turned, knelt beside Durnik's body, and began to weep again.
"I'm sorry, Pol," he said gently. "I never wanted to have to do that. Are you all right?"
"How can you ask that?" she demanded brokenly, wringing her hands

over Durnik's
silent body.
"That's not what I meant."
She turned her back on him and buried her face in her hands.
"I don't think you could have reached him anyway, Pol," the old man told her.
"You know as well as I that what one of us does, another cannot undo."
Silk, his ferretlike face shocked, spoke in a hushed voice. "What did you do to
him?"
"I took him down until we came to solid rock. And then I sealed him up in it."
"Can't he just come up out of the earth the way you did?"
"No. That's impossible for him now. Sorcery is thought, and no man can exactly
duplicate the thought of another. Zedar's imprisoned inside the rock forever -
or until I choose to free him." The old man looked mournfully at Durnik's body.
"And I don't think I'll choose to do that."
"He'll die, won't he?" Silk asked.
Belgarath shook his head. "No. That was part of what I did to him. He'll lie
inside the rock until the end of days."
"That's monstrous, Belgarath," Silk said in a sick voice.
"So was that," Belgarath replied grimly, pointing at Durnik.
Garion could hear what they were saying and could see them all quite clearly,
but it seemed somehow that they were actually someplace else. The others in the
underground crypt seemed to be on the periphery of his attention. For him there
was only one other in the vaulted chamber, and that other was Kal Torak, his
enemy.
The restless stirring of the drowsing God became more evident. Garion's
peculiarly multiple awareness - in part his own, in part derived from the Orb,
and as ever overlaid by the consciousness which he had always called the dry
voice in his mind - perceived in that stirnng the pain that lay beneath the
maimed God's movements. Torak was actually writhing as he half slept. An injured
man would heal in time, and his pain would gradually diminish and ultimately
disappear, because injury was a part of the human condition. A man was born to
be hurt from time to time, and the mechanism for recovery was born with him. A
God, on the other hand, was invulnerable, and he had no need for the ability to
heal. Thus it was with Torak. The fire which the Orb had loosed upon him when he
had used it to crack the world still seared his flesh, and his pain had not

diminished in the slightest down through all the endless centuries since his maiming. Behind that steel mask, the flesh of the Dragon-God's face still smoked, and his burned eye still boiled endlessly in its socket. Garion shuddered, almost pitying that perpetual agony.

The child, Errand, pulled himself free from Ce'Nedra's trembling arms and crossed the flagstone floor of the tomb, his small face intent. He stopped, bent and put his hand on Durnik's shoulder. Gently he shook the dead man as if trying to wake him. His little face became puzzled when the smith did not respond. He shook again, a bit harder, his eyes uncomprehending.

"Errand," Ce'Nedra called to him, her voice breaking, "come back. There's nothing we can do."

Errand looked at her, then back at Durnik. Then he gently patted the smith's shoulder with a peculiar little gesture, sighed, and went back to the princess.

She caught him suddenly in her arms and began to weep, burying her face against his small body. Once again with that same curious little gesture, he patted her flaming hair.

Then from the alcove in the far wall there came a long, rasping sigh, a shuddering expiration of breath. Garion looked sharply toward the alcove, his hand tightening on the hilt of his cold sword. Torak had turned his head, and his eyes were open. The hideous fire burned in the eye that was not as the God came awake.

Belgarath drew in his breath in a sharp hiss as Torak raised the charred stump of his left hand as if to brush away the last of his sleep, even as his right hand groped for the massive hilt of Cthrek Goru, his black sword.

"Garion!" Belgarath said sharply.

But Garion, still locked in stasis by the forces focusing upon him, could only stare at the awakening God. A part of him struggled to shake free, and his hand trembled as he fought to lift his sword.

"Not yet," the voice whispered.

"Garion!" Belgarath actually shouted this time. Then, in a move seemingly born of desperation, the old sorcerer lunged past the bemused young man to fling himself upon the still recumbent form of the Dark God.

Torak's hand released the hilt of his sword and almost contemptuously grasped the front of Belgarath's tunic, lifting the struggling old man from

him as one
might lift a child. The steel mask twisted into an ugly sneer as the God held
the helpless sorcerer out from him. Then, like a great wind, the force of
Torak's mind struck, hurling Belgarath across the room, ripping away the front
of his tunic. Something glittered across Torak's knuckles, and Garion realized
that it was the silver chain of Belgarath's amulet-the polished medallion of the
standing wolf. In a very peculiar way the medallion had always been the center
of Belgarath's power, and now it lay in the grip of his ancient enemy.
With a dreadfully slow deliberation, the Dark God rose from his bier, towering
over all of them, Cthrek Goru in his hand.
"Garion!" Ce'Nedra screamed. "Do something!"
With deadly pace Torak strode toward the dazed Belgarath, raising his sword. But
Aunt Pol sprang to her feet and threw herself between them.
Slowly Torak lowered his sword, and then he smiled a loathsome smile. "My
bride," he rasped in a horrid voice.
"Never, Torak," she declared.
He ignored her defiance. "Thou hast come to me at last, Polgara," he gloated.
"I have come to watch you die."
"Die, Polgara? Me? No, my bride, that is not why thou hast come. My will has
drawn thee to me as was foretold. And now thou art mine. Come to me, my
beloved."
"Never!"
"Never, Polgara?" There was a dreadful insinuation in the God's rasping voice.
"Thou wilt submit to me, my bride. I will bend thee to my will. Thy struggles
shall but make my victory over thee the sweeter. In the end, I will have thee.
Come here."
So overwhelming was the force of his mind that she swayed almost as a tree sways
in the grip of a great wind. "No," she gasped, closing her eyes and turning her
face away sharply.
"Look at me, Polgara," he commanded, his voice almost purring. "I am thy fate.
All that thou didst think to love before me shall fall away, and thou shall love
only me. Look at me."
Helplessly she turned her head and opened her eyes to stare at him. The hatred
and defiance seemed to melt out of her, and a terrible fear came into her face.
"Thy will crumbles, my beloved," he told her. "Now come to me."
She must resist! All the confusion was gone now, and Garion

understood at last.
Thts was the real battle. If Aunt Pol succumbed, they were all lost. It had all
been for this.
"Help her, " the voice within him said.
"Aunt Poll" Garion threw the thought at her, "Remember Durnik!"
He knew without knowing how he knew that this was the one thing that could
sustain her in her deadly struggle. He ranged through his memory, throwing
images of Durnik at her - of the smith's strong hands at work at his forge - of
his serious eyes - of the quiet sound of his voice - and most of all of the good
man's unspoken love for her, the love that had been the center of Durnik's
entire life.
She had begun involuntarily to move, no more than a slight shifting of her
weight in preparation for that first fatal step in response to Torak's
overpowering command. Once she had made that step, she would be lost. But
Garion's memories of Durnik struck her like a blow. Her shoulders, which had
already begun to droop in defeat, suddenly straightened, and her eyes flashed
with renewed defiance.
"Never!" she told the expectantly waiting God. "I will not!"
Torak's face slowly stiffened. His eyes blazed as he brought the full, crushing
force of his will to bear upon her, but she stood firmly against all that he
could do, clinging to the memory of Durnik as if to something so solid that not
even the will of the Dark God could tear her from it.
A look of baffled frustration contorted Torak's face as he perceived that she
would never yield - that her love would be forever denied to him. She had won,
and her victory was like a knife twisting slowly inside him. Thwarted, enraged,
maddened by her now-unalterable will to resist, Torak raised his face and
suddenly howled - a shocking, animallike sound of overwhelming frustration.
"Then perish both!" he raged. "Die with thy father!"
And with that, he once more raised his deadly sword.
Unflinching, Aunt Pol faced the raging God.
"Now, Belgarionl" The voice cracked in Garion's mind.
The Orb, which had remained cold and dead throughout all the dreadful
confrontation between Aunt Pol and the maimed God, suddenly flared into life,
and the sword of the Rivan King exploded into fire, filling the crypt with an
intense blue light. Garion leaped forward, extending his sword to catch the
deadly blow which was already descending upon Aunt Pol's unprotected

face.
The steel sound of blade against blade was like the striking of a great bell, and it rang within the crypt, shimmering and echoing from the walls. Torak's sword, deflected by the flaming blade, plowed a shower of sparks from the flagstone floor. The God's single eye widened as he recognized all in one glance the Rivan King, the flaming sword and the blazing Orb of Aldur. Garion saw in the look that Torak had already forgotten Aunt Pol and that now the maimed God's full attention was focused on him.
"And so thou hast come at last, Belgarion," the God greeted him gravely. "I have awaited thy coming since the beginning of days. Thy fate awaits thee here. Hail, Belgarion, and farewell."
His arm lashed back, and he swung a vast blow, but Garion, without even thinking, raised his own sword and once again the crypt rang with the bell note of blade against blade.
"Thou art but a boy, Belgarion," Torak said. "Wilt thou pit thyself against the might and invincible will of a God? Submit to me, and I will spare thy life."
The will of the God of Angarak was now directed at him, and in that instant, Garion fully understood how hard Aunt Pol's struggle had been. He felt the terrible compulsion to obey draining the strength from him. But suddenly a vast chorus of voices rang down through all the centuries to him, crying out the single word, "No!" All the lives of all who preceded him had been directed at this one moment, and those lives infused him now. Though he alone held Iron-grip's sword, Belgarion of Riva was not alone, and Torak's will could not sway him.
In a move of absolute defiance, Garion again raised his flaming sword.
"So be it, then," Torak roared. "To the death, Belgarion!"
At first it seemed but some trick of the flickering light that filled the tomb, but almost as soon as that thought occurred, Garion saw that Torak was growing larger, swelling upward, towering, expanding. With an awful wrenching sound, he shouldered aside the rusted iron roof of the tomb, bursting upward. Once again without thinking, without even stopping to consider how to do it, Garion also began to expand, and he too exploded through the confining ceiling, shuddering away the rusty debris as he rose.

In open air among the decaying ruins of the City of Night the two titanic adversaries faced each other beneath the perpetual cloud that blotted out the sky.

"The conditions are met," the dry voice spoke through Garion's lips.

"So it would seem," another, equally unemotional voice came from Torak's steel-encased mouth.

"Do you wish to involve others?" Garion's voice asked.

"It hardly seems necessary. These two have sufficient capacity for what must be brought to bear upon them."

"Then let it be decided here."

"Agreed."

And with that Garion felt a sudden release as all constraint was removed from him. Torak, also released, raised Cthrek Goru, his lips drawn back in a snarl of hate.

Their struggle was immense. Rocks shattered beneath the colossal force of deflected blows. The sword of the Rivan King danced in blue flames, and Cthrek Goru, Torak's blade of shadows, swept a visible darkness with it at every blow.

Beyond thought, beyond any emotion but blind hatred, the two swung and parried and lurched through the broken ruins, crushing all beneath them. The elements themselves erupted as the fight continued. The wind shrieked through the rotting city, tearing at the trembling stones. Lightning seethed about them, glaring and flickering. The earth rumbled and shook beneath their massive feet. The featureless cloud that had concealed the City of Night beneath its dark mantle for five millenia began to boil and race above them. Great patches of stars appeared and disappeared in the roiling middle of the surging cloud. The Grolims, both human and nonhuman, aghast at the towering struggle that had suddenly erupted in their very midst, fled shrieking in terror.

Garion's blows were directed at Torak's blind side, and the Dark God flinched from the fire of the Orb each time the flaming sword struck, but the shadow of Cthrek Goru put a deathly chill into Garion's blood each time it passed over him.

They were more evenly matched than Garion had imagined possible. Torak's advantage of size had been erased when they had both swelled into immensity, and Garion's inexperience was offset by Torak's maiming.

It was the uneven ground that betrayed Garion. Retreating before a

sudden flurry
of massive blows, he felt one heel catch on a heap of tumbled rock, and the
rotten stones crumbled and rolled beneath his feet. Despite his scrambling
attempt to keep his balance, he fell.
Torak's single eye blazed in triumph as he raised the dark sword. But, seizing
his sword hilt in both hands, Garion raised his burning blade to meet that vast
blow. When the swords struck, edge to edge, a huge shower of sparks cascaded
down over Garion.
Again Torak raised Cthrek Goru, but a strange hunger flickered across his
steel-encased face.
"Yield!" he roared.
Garion stared up at the huge form towering over him, his mind racing.
"I have no wish to kill thee, boy," Torak said, almost pleading. "Yield and I
will spare thy life."
And then Garion understood. His enemy was not trying to kill him, but was
striving instead to force him to submit. Torak's driving need was for
domination! This was where the real struggle between them lay!
"Throw down thy sword, Child of Light, and bow before me," the God commanded,
and the force of his mind was like a crushing weight.
"I will not," Garion gasped, wrenching away from that awful compulsion. "You may
kill me, but I will not yield."
Torak's face twisted as if his perpetual agony had been doubled by Garion's
refusal.
"Thou must, " he almost sobbed. "Thou art helpless before me. Submit to me."
"No!" Garion shouted, and, taking advantage of Torak's chagrin at that violent
rejection, he rolled out from under the shadow of Cthrek Goru and sprang to his
feet. Everything was clear now, and he knew at last how he could win.
"Hear me, maimed and despised God," he grated from between clenched teeth. "You
are nothing. Your people fear you, but they do not love you. You tried to
deceive me into loving you; you tried to force Aunt Pol to love you; but I
refuse you even as she did. You're a God, but you are nothing. In all the
universe there is not one person - not one thing - that loves you. You are alone
and empty, and even if you kill me, I will still win. Unloved and despised, you
will howl out your miserable life to the end of days."
Garion's words struck the maimed God like blows, and the Orb, as if echoing
those words, blazed anew, lashing at the Dragon-God with its consuming hatred.

This was the EVENT for which the Universe had waited since the beginning of time. This was why Garion had come to this decaying ruin - not to fight Torak, but to reject him.

With an animal howl of anguish and rage, the Child of Dark raised Cthrek Goru above his head and ran at the Rivan King. Garion made no attempt to ward off the blow, but gripped the hilt of his flaming sword in both hands and, extending his blade before him, he lunged at his charging enemy.

It was so easy. The sword of the Rivan King slid into Torak's chest like a stick into water, and as it ran into the God's suddenly stiffening body, the power of the Orb surged up the flaring blade.

Torak's vast hand opened convulsively, and Cthrek Goru tumbled harmlessly from his grip. He opened his mouth to cry out, and blue flame gushed like blood from his mouth. He clawed at his face, ripping away the polished steel mask to reveal the hideously maimed features that had lain beneath. Tears started from his eyes, both the eye that was and the eye that was not, but the tears were also fire, for the sword of the Rivan King buried in his chest filled him with its flame.

He lurched backward. With a steely slither, the sword slid out of his body. But the fire the blade had ignited within him did not go out. He clutched at the gaping wound, and blue flame spurted out between his fingers, spattering in little burning pools among the rotting stones about him.

His maimed face, still streaked with fiery tears, contorted in agony. He lifted that burning face to the heaving sky and raised his vast arms. In mortal anguish, the stricken God cried to heaven, "Mother!" and the sound of his voice echoed from the farthest star.

He stood so for a frozen moment, his arms upraised in supplication, and then he tottered and fell dead at Garion's feet.

For an instant there was absolute silence. Then a howling cry started at Torak's dead lips, fading into unimaginable distance as the dark Prophecy fled, taking the inky shadow of Cthrek Goru with it.

Again there was silence. The racing clouds overhead stopped in their mad plunge, and the stars that had appeared among the tatters of that cloud went out. The entire universe shuddered - and stopped. There was a moment of absolute darkness

as all light everywhere went out and all motion ceased. In that dreadful instant all that existed - all that had been, all that was, all that was yet to be was wrenched suddenly into the course of one Prophecy. Where there had always been two, there was now but one.

And then, faint at first, the wind began to blow, purging away the rotten stink of the City of Night, and the stars came on again like suddenly reilluminated jewels on the velvety throat of night. As the light returned, Garion stood wearily over the body of the God he had just killed. His sword still flickered blue in his hand, and the Orb exulted in the vaults of his mind. Vaguely he was aware that in that shuddering moment when all light had died, both he and Torak had returned to their normal size, but he was too tired to wonder about it.

From the shattered tomb not far away, Belgarath emerged, shaken and drawn. The broken chain of his medallion dangled from his tightly clenched hand, and he stopped to stare for a moment at Garion and the fallen God.

The wind moaned in the shattered ruins, and somewhere, far off in the night, the Hounds of Torak howled a mournful dirge for their fallen master.

Belgarath straightened his shoulders; then, in a gesture peculiarly like that which Torak had made in the moment of his death, he raised his arms to the sky.

"Master!" he cried out in a huge voice. "It is finished!"

Chapter Twenty-four

IT WAS OVER, but there was a bitterness in the taste of Garion's victory. A man did not lightly kill a God, no matter how twisted or evil the God might be. And so Belgarion of Riva stood sadly over the body of his fallen enemy as the wind, smelling faintly of the approaching dawn, washed over the decaying ruins of the City of Night.

"Regrets, Garion?" Belgarath asked quietly, putting his hand on his grandson's shoulder.

Garion sighed. "No, Grandfather," he said. "I suppose not - not really. It had to be done, didn't it?"

Belgarath nodded gravely.

"It's just that he was so alone at the end. I took everything away from him before I killed him. I'm not very proud of that."

"As you say, it had to be done. It was the only way you could beat him."

"I just wish I could have left him something, that's all."
From the ruins of the shattered iron tower, a sad little procession emerged.
Aunt Pol, Silk, and Ce'Nedra were bringing out the body of Durnik the smith, and
walking gravely beside them came Errand.
A pang of almost unbearable grief ran through Garion. Durnik, his oldest friend,
was pale and dead, and in that vast internal upheaval that had preceded the duel
with Torak, Garion had not even been able to mourn.
"It was necessary, you understand," Belgarath said sadly.
"Why? Why did Durnik have to die, Grandfather?" Garion's voice was anguished,
and tears stood openly in his eyes.
"Because his death gave your Aunt the will to resist Torak. That's always been
the one flaw in the Prophecy - the possibility that Pol might yield. All Torak
needed was one person to love him. It would have made him invincible."
"What would have happened if she had gone to him?"
"You'd have lost the fight. That's why Durnik had to die." The old man sighed
regretfully. "I wish it could have been otherwise, but it was inevitable."
The three who had borne Durnik from the broken tomb gently laid his still form
on the ground, and Ce'Nedra sadly joined Belgarath and Garion. Wordlessly, the
tiny girl slipped her hand into Garion's, and the three of them stood, silently
watching as Aunt Pol, past tears now, gently straightened Durnik's arms at his
sides and then covered him with her cloak. She sat then upon the earth, took his
head into her lap and almost absently stoked his hair, her head bowed over his
in her grief.
"I can't bear it," Ce'Nedra suddenly sobbed, and she buried her face in Garion's
shoulder and began to weep.
And then there was light where there had been only darkness before. As Garion
stared, a single beam of brilliant blue light descended from the broken and
tattered cloud rolling overhead. The entire ruin seemed bathed in its intense
radiance as the light touched the earth. Like a great, glowing column, the beam
of light reached down to the earth from the night sky, was joined by other
beams, red and yellow and green and shades Garion could not even name. Like the
colors at the foot of a sudden rainbow, the great columns of light stood side by
side on the other side of Torak's fallen body. Then, indistinctly, Garion

perceived that a glowing, incandescent figure stood within the center of each
column of light. The Gods had returned to mourn the passing of their brother.
Garion recognized Aldur, and he could easily identify each of the others. Mara
still wept, and dead-eyed Issa seemed to undulate, serpentlike, as he stood
within his glowing column of pale green light. Nedra's face was shrewd, and
Chaldan's proud. Belar, the blondhaired, boyish God of the Alorns had a roguish,
impudent look about him, though his face, like those of his brothers, was sad at
the death of Torak. The Gods had returned to earth in glowing light and with
sound as well. The reeking air of Cthol Mishrak was suddenly alive with that
sound as each colored beam of light gave off a different note, the notes joining
in a harmony so profound that it seemed the answer to every question that had
ever been asked.
And finally, joining the other columns of light, a single, blindingly white beam
slowly descended, and within the center of that radiance stood the white-robed
form of UL, that strange God whom Garion had seen once in Prolgu.
The figure of Aldur, still embraced in its glowing blue nimbus, approached the
ancient God of Ulgo.
"Father," Aldur said sadly, "our brother, thy son Torak, is slain."
Shimmering and incandescent, the form of UL, father of the other Gods, moved
across the rubble-strewn ground to stand over the silent body of Torak.
"I tried to turn thee from this path, my son," he said softly, and a single tear
coursed its way down his eternal cheek. Then he turned back to Aldur. "Take up
the form of thy bother, my son, and place it upon some more suitable resting
place. It grieves me to see him lie so low upon the earth."
Aldur, joined by his brethren, took up the body of Torak and placed it upon a
large block of stone lying amid the ancient ruins, and then, standing in a quiet
gleaming circle about the bier, they mourned the passing of the God of Angarak.
Unafraid as always, seemingly not even aware that the glowing figures which had
descended from the sky were not human, Errand walked quite confidently to the
shining form of UL. He reached out his small hand and tugged insistently at the
God's robe.
"Father," he said.
UL looked down at the small face.

"Father," Errand repeated, perhaps echoing Aldur, who had, in his use of that name, revealed at last the true identity of the God of Ulgo. "Father," the little boy said again. Then he turned and pointed at the silent form of Durnik.

"Errand!" It was in some strange way more a command than a request. The face of UL became troubled. "It is not possible, child," he replied.

"Father," the little boy insisted, "Errand."

UL looked inquiringly at Garion, his eyes profoundly unsettled. "The child's request is serious," he said gravely, speaking not to Garion but to that other awareness, "and it places an obligation upon me - but it crosses the uncrossable boundary."

"The boundary must remain intact," the dry voice replied through Garion's lips. "Thy sons are passionate, Holy UL, and having once crossed this line, they may be tempted to do so again, and perhaps in one such crossing they may change that which must not be changed. Let us not provide the instrumentality whereby Destiny must once more follow two divergent paths."

UL sighed. "Wilt thou and thy sons, however, lend of your power to my instrument so that he may cross the boundary?"

UL looked startled at that. "Thus will the boundary be protected, and thy obligation shall be met. It can happen in no other way."

"Let it be as thou wilt," UL agreed. He turned then and a peculiar look passed between the father of the Gods and his eldest son, Aldur. Aldur, still bathed in blue light, turned from his sad contemplation of his dead brother toward Aunt Pol, who was still bowed over Durnik's body.

"Be comforted, my daughter," he told her. "His sacrifice was for thee and for all mankind."

"That is slight comfort, Master," she replied, her eyes full of tears. "This was the best of men."

"All men die, my daughter, the best as well as the worst. In thy life thou halt seen this many times."

"Yes, Master, but this is different."

"In what way, beloved Polgara?" Aldur seemed to be pressing her for some reason.

Aunt Pol bit her lip. "Because I loved him, Master," she replied finally.

The faintest touch of a smile appeared on Aldur's lips. "Is that so difficult to say, my daughter?"

She could not answer, but bowed again over Durnik's lifeless form.
"Wouldst thou have us restore this man to thee, my daughter?" Aldur asked then.
Her face came up sharply. "That isn't possible, Master," she said. "Please don't
toy with my grief like this."
"Let us however, consider that it may be possible," he told her. "Wouldst thou
have us restore him?"
"With all my heart, Master."
"To what end? What task hast thou for this man that demands his restoration?"
She bit her lip again. "To be my husband, Master," she blurted finally with a
trace of defiance in her voice.
"And was that also so very difficult to say? Art thou sure, however, that this
love of throe derives not from thy grief, and that once this good man is
restored, thy mind might not turn away from him? He is, thou must admit, most
ordinary."
"Durnik has never been ordinary," she flared with sudden heat. "He is the best
and bravest man in the world."
"I meant him no disrespect, Polgara, but no power loth infuse him. The force of
the Will and the Word is not in him."
"Is that so important, Master?"
"Marriage must be a joining of equals, my daughter. How could this good, brave
man be husband to thee, so long as thy power remains?"
She looked at him helplessly.
"Couldst thou, Polgara, limit thyself? Wouldst thou become his equal? With power
no more than his?"
She stared at him, hesitated, then blurted the one word, "Yes."
Garion was shocked - not so much by Aunt Pol's acceptance but rather by Aldur's
request. Aunt Pol's power was central to her very being. To remove it from her
would leave her with nothing. What would she be without it? How could she even
live without it? It was a cruel price to demand, and Garion had believed that
Aldur was a kindly God.
"I will accept thy sacrifice, Polgara," Aldur was saying. "I will speak with my
father and my brothers. For good and proper reasons, we have denied ourselves
this power, and we must all agree to it before any of us might attempt this
violation of the natural order of things." And he returned to the sorrowful
gathering about Torak's bier.
"How could he do that?" Garion, his arm still about Ce'Nedra, demanded of his
grandfather.

"Do what?"
"Ask her to give up her power like that? It will destroy her."
"She's much stronger than you think, Garion," Belgarath assured him, "and
Aldur's reasoning is sound. No marriage could survive that kind of inequality."
Among the glowing Gods, however, one angry voice was raised. "No!" It was Mara,
the weeping God of the Marags, who were no more. "Why should one man be restored
when all my slaughtered children still lie cold and dead? Did Aldur hear my
pleas? Did he come to my aid when my children died? I will not consent."
"I hadn't counted on that," Belgarath muttered. "I'd better take steps before
this goes any further." He crossed the littered ground and bowed respectfully.
"Forgive my intrusion," he said, "but would my Master's brother accept a woman
of the Marags as a gift in exchange for his aid in restoring Durnik?"
Mara's tears, which had been perpetual, suddenly stopped, and his face became
incredulous. "A Marag woman?" he demanded sharply. "None such exist. I would
have known in my heart if one of my children had survived in Maragor."
"Of a certainty, Lord Mara," Belgarath agreed quickly. "But what of those few
who were carried out of Maragor to dwell in perpetual slavery-"
"Knowest thou of such a one, Belgarath?" Mara asked with a desperate eagerness.
The old man nodded. "We discovered her in the slave pens beneath Rak Cthol, Lord
Mara. Her name is Taiba. She is but one, but a race may be restored by such a
one as she - particularly if she be watched over by a loving God."
"Where is Taiba, my daughter?"
"In the care of Relg, the Ulgo," Belgarath replied. "They seem quite attached to
each other," he added blandly.
Mara looked at him thoughtfully. "A race may not be restored by one," he said,
"even in the care of the most loving God. It requires two." He turned to UL.
"Wilt thou give me this Ulgo, Father?" he asked. "He shall become the sire of my
people."
UL gave Belgarath a rather penetrating look. "Thou knowest that Relg hath
another duty to perform," he said pointedly.
Belgarath's expression was almost impish. "I'm certain that the Gorim and I can
work out the details, Most Holy," he declared with utmost self confidence.
"Aren't you forgetting something, Belgarath?" Silk asked diffidently, as if not
wanting to intrude. "Relg has this little problem, remember?"

Belgarath gave the little man a hard look.
"I just thought I ought to mention it," Silk said innocently.
Mara looked sharply at them. "What is this?"
"A minor difficulty, Lord Mara," Belgarath said quickly. "One I'm certain Taiba
can overcome. I have the utmost confidence in her in that particular area."
"I will have the truth of this," Mara said firmly.
Belgarath sighed and gave Silk another grim look. "Relg is a zealot, Lord Mara,"
he explained. "For religious reasons, he avoids certain -ah - forms of human
contact."
"Fatherhood is his destiny," UL said. "From him will issue a special child. I
will explain this to him. He is an obedient man, and he will put aside his
aversions for my sake."
"Then thou wilt give him to me, Father?" Mara asked eagerly.
"He is throe - with but one restriction - of which we will speak later."
"Let us see this brave Sendar, then," Mara said, and all traces of his weeping
were now gone.
"Belgarion, " the voice in Garion's mind said.
"What?"
"The restoration of your friend is in your hands now."
"Me? Why me?"
"Must you always say that? Do you want Durnik's life restored?"
"Of course, but I can't do it. I wouldn't even know where to begin."
"You did it before. Remember the colt in the cave of the Gods?"
Garion had almost forgotten that.
"You are my instrument, Belgarion. I can keep you from making mistakes - most of
the time anyway. Just relax; I'll show you what to do." Garion was already
moving without conscious volition. He let his arm fall from about Ce'Nedra's
shoulders, and, his sword still in his hand, he walked slowly toward Aunt Pol
and Durnik's body. He looked once into her eyes as she sat with the dead man's
head in her lap, and then he knelt beside the body.
"For me, Garion," she murmured to him.
"If I can, Aunt Pol," he said.
Then, without knowing why, he laid the sword of the Rivan King upon the ground
and took hold of the Orb at its pommel. With a faint click, the Orb came free in
his hand. Errand, smiling now, approached from the other side and also knelt,
taking up Durnik's lifeless hand in his. Holding the Orb in both hands, Garion
reached out and put it against the dead man's chest. He was faintly conscious of
the fact that the Gods had gathered about in a circle and that they had reached
out their arms, palm to palm, forming an unbroken ring. Within that

circle, a
great light began to pulsate, and the Orb, as if in answer, glowed between his
hands.
The blank wall he had seen once before was there again, still black, impenetrable, and silent. As he had before in the cave of the Gods, Garion
pushed tentatively against the substance of death itself, striving to reach
through and pull his friend back into the world of the living.
It was different this time. The colt he had brought to life in the cave had
never lived except within its mother's body. Its death had been as tenuous as
its life, and it lay but a short distance beyond the barrier. Durnik, however,
had been a man full grown, and his death, like his life, was far more profound.
With all his strength, Garion pushed. He could feel the enormous force of the
combined wills of the Gods joining with his in the silent struggle, but the
barrier would not yield.
"Use the Orbl " the voice commanded.
This time Garion focused all the power, his own and that of the Gods upon the
round stone between his hands. It flickered, then glowed, then flickered again.
"Help me!" Garion commanded it.
As if suddenly understanding, the Orb flared into a coruscating eruption of
colored light. The barrier was weakening.
With an encouraging little smile, Errand reached out and laid one hand upon the
blazing Orb.
The barrier broke. Durnik's chest heaved, and he coughed once. With profoundly
respectful expression upon their eternal faces, the Gods stepped back. Aunt Pol
cried out in sudden relief and clasped her arms about Durnik, cradling him
against her.
"Errand," the child said to Garion with a peculiar note of satisfaction. Garion
stumbled to his feet, exhausted by the struggle and nearly staggering as he
moved away.
"Are you all right?" Ce'Nedra demanded of him, even as she ducked her head
beneath his arm and firmly pulled it about her tiny shoulders. He nodded, though
his knees almost buckled.
"Lean on me," she told him.
He was about to protest, but she put her hand firmly to his lips. "Don't argue,
Garion," she told him. "You know that I love you and that you're going to be
leaning on me for the rest of your life anyway, so you might as well

get used to
the idea."
"I think my life's going to be different now, Master," Belgarath was saying to
Aldur. "Pol's always been there, ready to come when I called her - not always
willingly, perhaps - but she always came. Now she'll have other concerns." He
sighed. "I suppose our children all grow up and get married sometime."
"This particular pose doth not become thee, my son," Aldur told him.
Belgarath grinned. "I've never been able to slip anything past you, Master," he
said. Then his face grew serious again. "Polgara's been almost like a son to
me," he told Aldur, "but perhaps it's time that I let her be a woman. I've
denied her that for too long."
"As it seems best to thee, my son," Aldur said. "And now, I pray thee, go apart
a little way and permit us our family grief." He looked at Torak's body lying on
the bier and then at Garion. "I have but one more task for thee, Belgarion," he
said. "Take the Orb and place it upon my brother's breast."
"Yes, Master," Garion replied immediately. He removed his arm from about
Ce'Nedra's shoulders and walked to the bier, trying not to look at the dead
God's seared and twisted face. He reached out and laid the round blue stone upon
the motionless chest of Kal Torak. Then he stepped back. Once again his little
princess wormed her way beneath his arm and clasped him about the waist. It was
not unpleasant, but he had the brief, irrational thought that things would be
awkward if she were going to insist on this close embrace for the rest of their
lives.
Once again the Gods formed their circle, and once again the Orb began to glow.
Gradually, the seared face started to change, its maiming slowly disappearing.
The light surrounding the Gods and the bier grew stronger, and the glow of the
Orb became incandescent. The last Garion saw of the face of Torak, it was calm,
composed and unmarked. It was a beautiful face, but it was nonetheless still a
dead face.
And then the light grew so intense that Garion could no longer look at it. When
it subsided, and when Garion looked back at the bier, the Gods and the body of
Torak were gone. Only the Orb remained, glowing slightly as it lay on the rough
stone.

Errand, once again with that confident look, went to the bier. Standing on his tiptoes, he reached across the block to retrieve the glowing stone. Then he carried it to Garion. "Errand, Belgarion," he said firmly, handing the Orb back, and in their touch as the Orb exchanged hands, Garion felt something profoundly different.

Drawn together by what had happened, the little group silently gathered about Aunt Pol and Durnik. To the east, the sky had begun to lighten, and the rosy blush of dawn touched the few last remaining tatters of the cloud that had covered Cthol Mishrak. The events of the dreadful night had been titanic, but now the night was nearly over, and they stood together, not speaking as they watched the dawn.

The storm that had raged through the long night had passed. For years beyond counting, the universe had been divided against itself, but now it was one again. If there were such things as beginnings, this was a beginning. And so it was, through broken cloud, that the sun rose on the morning of the first day.

Epilogue
THE ISLE OF THE WINDS

Chapter Twenty-five

BELGARION OF RIVA slept very fitfully the night before his wedding. Had he and Ce'Nedra been married in some simple, private little ceremony shortly after his meeting with Torak, things might have gone more smoothly. At that time both he and his flighty little princess had been too tired and too overwhelmed by the events which had taken place to be anything but absolutely honest with each other. During those few short days he had found her to be almost a different person. She had watched his every move with a kind of patient adoration, and she was forever touching him - his hair, his face, his arms - her fingers gentle and curious. The peculiar way she had of coming up to him, no matter who was present or what was going on, and worming her way into the circle of his arm

had been,
on the whole, rather nice.
Those days had not, however, lasted. Once she had reassured herself that he was
all right and that he was really there and not some figment of her imagination
which might be snatched away at any moment, Ce'Nedra had gradually changed. He
felt somehow like a possession; following her initial delight in ownership, his
princess had rather deliberately embarked upon some grand plan of alteration.
And now the day upon which her possession of him was to be formalized was only
hours away. His sleep came in fits and starts with dreams mingling peculiarly
with memories as he dipped in and out of sleep like a sea bird skimming across
the waves.
He was at Faldor's farm again. Even in his sleep he could hear the ringing of
Durnik's hammer and smell the odors coming from Aunt Pol's kitchen. Rundorig was
there - and Zubrette - and Doroon - and there was Brill, creeping around a
corner. He half woke and turned restlessly in the royal bed. That wasn't
possible. Doroon was dead, drowned in the River Mardu, and Brill had vanished
forever over the parapet of mile-high Rak Cthol.
And then he was in the palace at Sthiss Tor, and Salmissra, her blatant nudity
glowing through her filmy gown, was touching his face with her cold fingers.
But Salmissra was no longer a woman. He had watched her himself as she had
changed into a serpent.
Grul the Eldrak hammered at the frozen ground with his iron-shod club,
bellowing, "Come 'Grat, fight!" and Ce'Nedra was screaming. In the chaotic world
of dreams half mixed with memories he saw Ctuchik, his face contorted with
horror, exploding once more into nothingness in the hanging turret at Rak Cthol.
And then he stood once again in the decaying ruin of Cthol Mishrak, his sword
ablaze, and watched as Torak raised his arms to the rolling cloud, weeping tears
of fire, and once again he heard the stricken God's final cry, "Mother!"
He stirred, half rousing and shuddering as he always did when that dream
recurred, but dipped almost immediately into sleep again.
He was standing on the deck of Barak's ship just off the Mallorean coast,
listening as King Anheg explained why Barak was chained to the mast.
"We had to do it, Belgarath," the coarse-faced monarch said

mournfully. "Right during the middle of that storm, he turned into a bear! He drove the crew to row toward Mallorea all night long, and then, just before daybreak, he turned back into a man again."

"Unchain him, Anheg," Belgarath said disgustedly. "He's not going to turn into a bear again - not as long as Garion's safe and well." Garion rolled over and sat up. That had been a startling revelation.

There had been a purpose behind Barak's periodic alterations.

"You're Garion's defender," Belgarath had explained to the big man. "That's why you were born. Any time Garion was in mortal danger, you changed into a bear in order to protect him."

"You mean to say that I'm a sorcerer?" Barak had demanded incredulously.

"Hardly. The shape-change isn't all that difficult, and you didn't do it consciously. The Prophecy did the work, not you."

Barak had spent the rest of the voyage back to Mishrak ac Thull trying to come up with a tastefully understated way to add that concept to his coat of arms.

Garion climbed out of his high, canopied bed and went to the window. The stars in the spring sky looked down at the sleeping city of Rivan and at the dark waters of the Sea of the Winds beyond the harbor. There was no sign that dawn was anywhere near yet. Garion sighed, poured himself a drink of water from the pitcher on the table, and went back to bed and his troubled sleep.

He was at Thull Zelik, and Hettar and Mandorallen were reporting on the activities of 'Zakath, the Mallorean Emperor. "He's laying siege to Rak Goska right now," hawk-faced Hettar was saying. There had been a peculiar softening in Hettar's face since Garion had last seen him, as if something very significant had happened. The tall Algar turned to Garion. "Eventually you're going to have to do something about 'Zakath," he said. "I don't think you want him roaming around at will in this part of the world."

"Why me?" Garion asked without thinking.

"You're Overlord of the West, remember?"

Once again Garion awoke. Sooner or later he would have to deal with 'Zakath; there was no question about that. Maybe after the wedding, he'd have time to consider the matter. That thought, however, stopped him. Strangely, he had no conception of anything that might happen after the wedding. It stood before him

like some huge door that led into a place he had never been. 'Zakath would have to wait. Garion had to get through the wedding first.

Half asleep, somewhere between dreaming and remembering, Garion relived a significant little exchange between himself and her Imperial Highness.

"It's stupid, Ce'Nedra," he was protesting. "I'm not going to fight anybody, so why should I ride in waving my sword?"

"They deserve to see you, Garion," she explained as if talking to a child. "They left their homes and rode into battle at your summons."

"I didn't summon anybody."

"I did it in your behalf. They're a very good army, really, and I raised them all by myself. Aren't you proud of me?"

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"You were too proud to ask. That's one of your failings, Garion. You must never be too proud to ask the people who love you for help. Every man in the army loves you. They followed me because of you. Is it too much trouble for the great Overlord of the West to reward his faithful soldiers with just a little bit of a display or appreciation? Or have you become too grand and lofty for simple gratitude?"

"You're twisting things, Ce'Nedra. You do that a lot, you know." But Ce'Nedra had already moved on as if the entire matter were settled. "And of course you will wear your crown - and some nice armor. I think a mail shirt would be appropriate."

"I'm not going to make a clown of myself just to satisfy your urges toward cheap theatricality."

Her eyes filled. Her lower lip trembled. "You don't love me any more," she accused him in a quavering little voice.

Garion groaned even in his sleep. It always came down to that. She won every single argument with that artful bit of deception. He knew it was not genuine. He knew that she only did it to get her own way, but he was absolutely defenseless against it. It might have nothing whatsoever to do with the matter under discussion, but she always managed to twist things around until she could unleash that devastating accusation, and all hope of his winning even the smallest point was immediately lost. Where had she learned to be so heartlessly dishonest?

And so it was that Garion, dressed in mail, wearing his crown and

self
consciously holding his flaming sword aloft, had ridden into the forts atop the
eastern escarpment to the thunderous cheers of Ce'Nedra's army.
So much had happened since Garion and Silk and Belgarath had crept from the
citadel at Riva the previous spring. The young king lay musing in his high,
canopied bed, having almost given up on sleep. Ce'Nedra had in fact raised an
army. As he had heard more of the details, he had been more and more astonished
- not only by her audacity but also by the enormous amount of energy and sheer
will she had expended in the process. She had been guided and assisted,
certainly, but the initial concept had been hers. His admiration for her was
tinged slightly with apprehension. He was going to marry a very strongminded
young woman - and one who was not overly troubled by scruples.
He rolled over and punched at his pillow, hoping somehow by that familiar act to
bring on more normal sleep, but once again he slipped into restless dreaming.
Relg and Taiba were walking toward him, and they were holding hands!
And then he was at the Stronghold, sitting at Adara's bedside. His beautiful
cousin was even paler than he remembered, and she had a persistent, racking
cough. Even as the two of them talked, Aunt Pol was taking steps to remedy the
last complications of the wound which had so nearly claimed the girl's life.
"I was mortified, of course," Adara was saying. "I'd taken so much care to
conceal it from him, and now I'd gone and blurted it out to him, and I wasn't
even dying."
"Hettar?" Garion said again. He'd already said it three times.
"If you don't stop that, Garion, I'm going to be cross with you," Adara said
quite firmly.
"I'm sorry," he apologized quickly. "It's just that I've never considered him in
that light. He's a good friend, but I never thought of him as particularly
loveable. He's so - I don't know - implacable, I suppose."
"I have certain reasons to believe that may change," Adara said with a faint
blush. Then she began to cough again.
"Drink this, dear," Aunt Pol ordered, coming to the bedside with a fuming cup.
"It's going to taste awful," Garion warned his cousin.
"That will do, Garion," Aunt Pol told him. "I can manage this without the
helpful comments."
And then he was in the caves beneath Prolgu, standing beside Relg as

the Gorim
performed the simple ceremony uniting the zealot and the Marag woman who had so
totally changed Relg's life. Garion sensed another presence in the underground
chamber, and he wondered if anyone had yet told Relg about the bargain that had
been struck in Cthol Mishrak. He'd thought about saying something himself, but
had decided against it. All things considered, it might be best to let Relg
adjust to one thing at a time. Marriage to Taiba was probably going to be enough
of a shock to the fanatic's system for now. Garion could feel Mara's gloating
exultation as the ceremony concluded. The weeping God no longer wept.
It was useless, Garion decided. He was not going to be able to sleep - at least
not the kind of sleep that would do him any good. He threw off the covers and
pulled on his robe. The fire in his fireplace had been banked for the night, and
he stirred it up again. Then he sat in the chair in front of it, staring
pensively into the dancing flames.
Even if his wedding to Ce'Nedra had taken place immediately upon their arrival
back at Riva, things might still have turned out all right, but the arrangements
for a royal wedding of this magnitude were far too complex to be made overnight,
and many of those who were to be honored guests were still recuperating from
wounds received during the battle of Thull Mardu.
The interim had given Ce'Nedra time to embark upon a full-blown plan of
modification. She had, it appeared, a certain concept of him - some ideal which
only she could perceive - and she was absolutely determined to cram him into
that mold despite all his objections and protests. Nothing could make her relent
in her singleminded drive to make him over. It was so unfair. He was quite
content to accept her exactly as she was. She had her flaws - many of them - but
he was willing to take the good with the bad. Why couldn't she extend him the
same courtesy? But each time he tried to put his foot down and absolutely refuse
one of her whims, her eyes would fill with tears, her lip would tremble, and the
fatal, "You don't love me any more," would drop quaveringly upon him.
Belgarion of Riva had considered flight several times during that long winter.
Now it was spring again, and the storms which isolated the Isle of the Winds
during the winter months were past. The day which Garion felt would

never come
had suddenly rushed upon him. Today was the day in which he would take the
Imperial Princess Ce'Nedra to wife, and it was too late to run.
He knew that if he brooded about it much longer, he'd push himself over the edge
into total panic, and so he stood up and quickly dressed himself in plain tunic
and hose, ignoring the more ostentatious garments which his valet - at
Ce'Nedra's explicit instructions - had laid out for him.
It was about an hour before daylight as the young king of Riva opened the door
to the royal apartment and slipped into the silent corridor outside.
He wandered for a time through the dim, empty halls of the Citadel, and then,
inevitably, his undirected steps led him to Aunt Pol's door. She was already
awake and seated by her fire with a cup of fragrant tea in her hands. She wore a
deep blue dressing gown, and her dark hair flowed down across her shoulders in a
lustrous wave.
"You're up early," she noted.
"I couldn't sleep."
"You should have. You have a very full day ahead of you."
"I know. That's why I couldn't sleep."
"Tea?"
"No, thanks." He sat in the carved chair on the other side of the fireplace.
"Everything's changing, Aunt Pol," he said after a moment of thoughtful silence.
"After today, nothing will ever be the same again, will it?"
"Probably not," she said, "but that doesn't necessarily mean that it will be a
change for the worse."
"How do you feel about the idea of getting married?"
"A bit nervous," she admitted calmly.
"You?"
"I've never been married before either, Garion."
Something had been bothering him about that. "Was it really such a good idea,
Aunt Pol?" he asked her. "I mean, arranging to have you and Durnik get married
on the same day as Ce'Nedra and I? What I'm trying to say is that you're the
most important woman in the world. Shouldn't your wedding be a special
occasion?"
"That was what we were trying to avoid, Garion," she replied. "Durnik and I
decided that we wanted our wedding to be private, and we hope that it will be
lost in all the confusion and ceremony that's going to surround yours."
"How is he? I haven't seen him for several days now."
"He's still a bit strange. I don't think he'll ever be the same man we all

knew."
"He's all right, isn't he?" Garion's guestion was concerned.
"He's fine, Garion. He's just a bit different, that's all. Something happened to
him that's never happened to any other man, and it changed him. He's as
practical as ever, but now he looks at the other side of things as well. I think
I rather like that."
"Do you really have to leave Riva?" he asked suddenly. "You and Durnik could
stay here in the Citadel."
"We want our own place, Garion," she told him. "We need to be alone with each
other. Besides, if I were here, every time you and Ce'Nedra had a squabble, I'd
have one or both of you hammering on my door. I've done my best to raise you
two. Now you're going to have to work things out on your own."
"Where will you go?"
"To the Vale. My mother's cottage is still standing there. It's a very solid
house. All it needs is new thatching on the roof and new doors and windows.
Durnik will know how to take care of that, and it will be a good place for
Errand to grow up."
"Errand? You're taking him with you?"
"Someone has to care for him, and I've grown used to having a small boy around.
Besides, father and I've decided that we'd like for him to be some distance from
the Orb. He's still the only one besides you who can touch it. Someone at some
time might seize upon that and try to use him in the same way Zedar did."
"What'd be the point? I mean, Torak's gone now. What good would the Orb do
anybody else?" .
She looked at him very gravely, and the white lock of her brow seemed to glow in
the soft light. "I don't believe that was the only reason for the Orb's
existence, Garion," she told him seriously. "Something hasn't been completed
yet."
"What? What else is there left to do?"
"We don't know. The Mrin Codex does not end with the meeting between the Child
of Light and the Child of Dark. You're the Guardian of the Orb now, and it's
still as important as ever, so don't just put it on the back shelf of a closet
somewhere and forget about it. Be watchful, and don't let ordinary affairs dull
your mind. Keeping the Orb is still your first duty - and I'm not going to be
here to remind you about it every day."

He didn't want to think about that. "What will you do if somebody comes to the
Vale and tries to take Errand away? You won't be able to protect him, now that-"
He faltered to a stop. He had not spoken to her about that.
"Go ahead and say it, Garion," she said directly. "Let's look it right in the
face. You were going to say now that I no longer have any power."
"What's it like, Aunt Pol? Is it like losing something - a sort of emptiness,
maybe?"
"I feel the same as always, dear. Of course I haven't tried to do anything since
I agreed to give it up. It might be painful if I tried to make something happen
and failed. I don't think I'd care for the experience, so I simply haven't
tried." She shrugged. "That part of my life is over, so I'll just have to put it
behind me. Errand will be safe, though. Beldin's in the Vale - and the twins.
That's enough power in one place to keep away anything that might want to harm
him."
"Why's Durnik spending so much time with Grandfather?" Garion asked suddenly.
"Ever since we got back to Riva, they've been together just about every minute
they were awake."
She gave him a knowing smile. "I imagine they're preparing some surprise for
me," she replied. "Some suitable wedding present. They both tend to be a trifle
transparent."
"What is it?" Garion asked curiously.
"I haven't the slightest idea - and I wouldn't dream of trying to find out.
Whatever it is, they've both worked too hard at it for me to spoil it for them
by snooping around." She glanced at the window where the first light of dawn was
appearing. "Perhaps you'd better run along now, dear," she suggested. "I have to
start getting ready. This is a very special day for me, too, and I really want
to look my best."
"You could never look anything less than beautiful, Aunt Pol," he told her
sincerely.
"Why thank you, Garion." She smiled at him, looking somehow almost girlish. "But
I'd rather not take the chance." She gave him an appraising glance and touched
his cheek. "Why don't you visit the baths, dear," she suggested, "and wash your
hair and get somebody to shave you."
"I can do that myself, Aunt Pol."
"That's not a good idea, Garion. You're a little nervous today, and

you don't
want to put a razor to your face when your hands are trembling."
He laughed a bit ruefully, kissed her, and started toward the door. Then he
stopped and turned back toward her. "I love you, Aunt Pol," he said simply.
"Yes, dear, I know. I love you, too."
After he had visited the baths, Garion went looking for Lelldorin. Among the
matters that had finally been settled was the marital status of the young
Asturian and his semiofficial bride. Ariana had finally despaired of Lelldorin's
ever making the first move on his own and had solved the entire problem by
simply moving in with him. She had been quite firm about it. Garion gathered
that Lelldorin's resistance had faded rather quickly. His expression of late had
been somewhat more foolish than usual, and Ariana's had been, although radiant,
just a trifle smug. In a peculiar way, they closely resembled Relg and Taiba in
that respect. Since his wedding, Relg's expression had been one of almost
perpetual astonishment, while Taiba's had that same smugness that marked
Ariana's. Garion wondered if he might not awaken tomorrow morning to see that
same self satisfied little smirk on Ce'Nedra's lips.
There was a purpose to Garion's search for his Asturian friend. As a result of
one of Ce'Nedra's whims, their wedding was going to be followed by a grand ball,
and Lelldorin had been teaching Garion how to dance.
The idea of the ball had been greeted with enthusiasm by all the ladies; the
men, however, had not been universal in their approval. Barak had been
particularly vehement in his objections.
"You want me to get in the middle of the floor and dance?" he had demanded of
the princess in an outraged tone of voice. "What's wrong with all of us just
getting drunk? That's the normal way to celebrate a wedding."
"You'll be just fine," Ce'Nedra had told him, patting his cheek in that
infuriating way of hers. "And you will do it, won't you, Barak - for me?" And
she had insincerely fluttered her eyelashes at him.
Barak had stamped away, muttering curses under his breath.
Garion found Lelldorin and Ariana doting on each other across the breakfast
table in their rooms.
"Wilt thou take breakfast with us, your Majesty?" Ariana inquired politely.
"Thanks all the same, my Lady," Garion declined, "but I don't seem to have much

appetite today."
"Nerves," Lelldorin observed sagely.
"I think I've got most of it," Garion rushed to the core of his problem, "but
that crossover baffles me. My feet keep getting all tangled up."
Lelldorin immediately fetched a lute, and with Ariana's help, walked Garion
through the complex procedure.
"Thou art becoming most skilled, your Majesty," Ariana complimented him at the
end of the lesson.
"All I want to do is get through it without tripping and falling on my face in
public."
"The princess would surely support thee, shouldst thou stumble."
"I'm not sure about that. She might enjoy watching me make a fool of myself."
"How little thou knowest of women." Ariana gave Lelldorin an adoring look - a
look he fatuously returned.
"Will you two stop that?" Garion demanded irritably. "Can't you wait until
you're alone to carry on that way?"
"My heart is too full of love for me to hide it, Garion," Lelldorin said
extravagantly.
"So I've noticed," Garion said dryly. "I've got to go see Silk, so I'll leave
you two to your amusements."
Ariana blushed, then smiled. "Might we take that as a royal command, your
Majesty?" she asked archly.
Garion fled.
Silk had arrived from the east late the previous evening, and Garion was anxious
for news. He found the little Drasnian lingering over a breakfast of partridge
and hot, spiced wine.
"Isn't that a little heavy for breakfast?" Garion asked him.
"I've never been that partial to gruel first thing in the morning," Silk
replied. "Gruel's the sort of thing a man has to work himself up to."
Garion went directly to the point. "What's happening in Cthol Murgos?"
"'Zakath is still laying siege to Rak Goska," Silk reported. "He's transporting
in more troops, though. It's pretty obvious that he's going to strike into
southern Cthol Murgos as soon as the ground's firm enough to move an army."
"Are the Thulls with him?"
"Only a few. Most of them are concentrating on finding the few Grolims left in
their kingdom. I always thought Thulls were a stupid people, but you'd be amazed
at how creative they can be when it comes to finding new and interesting ways

for Grolims to die."
"We're going to have to keep an eye on 'Zakath," Garion said. "I wouldn't want
him to come creeping up on me from the south."
"I think you can count on him not to creep," Silk said. "He sent you a message
of congratulations, incidentally."
"He did what?"
"He's a civilized man, Garion - and a politician. He was badly shaken by the
fact that you killed Torak. I think he's actually afraid of you, so he wants to
stay on your good side - at least until he finishes up in southern Cthol
Murgos."
"Who's in command of the Murgos, now that Taur Urgas is dead?"
"Urgit, his third son by his second wife. There was the usual squabble over the
succession by the various sons of Taur Urgas's assorted wives. The fatalities
were numerous, I understand."
"What kind of man is Urgit?"
"He's a schemer. I don't think he's any match for 'Zakath, but he'll keep the
Malloreans busy for ten or twenty years. By then, 'Zakath may be too old and
tired of war to give you any problems."
"Let's hope so."
"Oh, I almost forgot. Hettar married your cousin last week."
"Adara? I thought she was ill."
"Not that much, apparently. They're coming to your wedding along with Cho-Hag
and Silar."
"Is everybody getting married?"
Silk laughed. "Not me, my young friend. In spite of this universal plunge toward
matrimony, I still haven't lost my senses. If worse comes to worst, I still know
how to run. The Algars should arrive sometime this morning. They met
Korodullin's entourage, and they're all coming together. Their ship was right
behind mine when we left Camaar."
"Was Mandorallen with them?"
Silk nodded. "Along with the Baroness of Vo Ebor. The Baron's still much too ill
to travel. I think he's hoping that he'll die, to leave the way clear for his
wife and Mandorallen."
Garion sighed.
"Don't let it make you unhappy, Garion," Silk advised. "Arends actually enjoy
that kind of misery. Mandorallen's perfectly content to suffer nobly."
"That's a rotten thing to say," Garion accused the little man.
Silk shrugged. "I'm a rotten sort of person," he admitted.
"Where are you going after-" Garion left it hanging.
"After I see you safely married?" Silk suggested pleasantly. "As soon as I

recover from all the drinking I'll do tonight, I'll be off for Gar og Nadrak.
There's a great deal of opportunity in the new situation there. I've been in
contact with Yarblek. He and I are going to form a partnership."
"With Yarblek?"
"He's not so bad - if you keep an eye on him - and he's very shrewd. We'll
probably do rather well together."
"I can imagine." Garion laughed. "One of you is bad enough all by himself, but
with the two of you acting together, no honest merchant's going to escape with
his skin."
Silk grinned wickedly. "That was sort of what we had in mind."
"I imagine that you'll get very rich."
"I suppose I could learn to live with that." Silk's eyes took on a distant look.
"That's not really what it's all about, though," he noted. "It's a game. The
money's just a way of keeping score. It's the game that's important."
"It seems to me that you told me that once before."
"Nothing's changed since then, Garion," Silk told him with a laugh.
Aunt Pol's wedding to Durnik took place later that morning in a small, private
chapel in the west wing of the Citadel. There were but few guests. Belgarath and
the twins, Beltira and Belkira, were there of course, and Silk and Barak. Aunt
Pol, beautiful in a deep blue velvet gown, was attended by Queen Layla, and
Garion stood with Durnik. The ceremony was performed by the hunchbacked Beldin,
dressed for once in decent clothing and with a strangely gentle expression on
his ugly face.
Garion's emotions were very complex during the ceremony. He realized with a
sharp little pang that Aunt Pol would no longer be exclusively his. An
elemental, childish part of him resented that. He was, however, pleased that it
was Durnik whom she was marrying. If anyone deserved her, it was Durnik. The
good, plain man's eyes were filled with absolute love, and he obviously could
not take them from her face. Aunt Pol herself was gravely radiant as she stood
at Durnik's side.
As Garion stepped back while the two exchanged vows, he heard a faint rustle.
Just inside the door of the chapel, in a hooded cloak that covered her from head
to foot and wearing a heavy veil that covered her face, stood Princess Ce'Nedra.
She had made a large issue of the fact that by an ancient Tolnedran custom,
Garion was not supposed to see her before their wedding on this day,

and the
cloak and veil provided her with the illusion of invisibility. He could imagine
her wrestling with the problem until she had come up with this solution. Nothing
could have kept her from Polgara's wedding, but all the niceties and formalities
had to be observed. Garion smiled slightly as he turned back to the ceremony.
It was the expression on Beldin's face that made him turn again to look sharply
toward the back of the chapel - an expression of surprise that turned to calm
recognition. At first Garion saw nothing, but then a faint movement up among the
rafters caught his eye. The pale, ghostly shape of a snowy owl perched on one of
the dark beams, watching as Aunt Pol and Durnik were married.
When the ceremony was concluded and after Durnik had respectfully and rather
nervously kissed his bride, the white owl spread her pinions to circle the
chapel in ghostly silence. She hovered briefly as if in silent benediction over
the happy couple; then with two soft beats of her wings, she moved through the
breathless air to Belgarath. The old sorcerer resolutely averted his eyes.
"You may as well look at her, father," Aunt Pol told him. "She won't leave until
you recognize her."
Belgarath sighed then, and looked directly at the oddly luminous bird hovering
in the air before him. "I still miss you," he said very simply. "Even after all
this time."
The owl regarded him with her golden, unblinking eyes for a moment, then
flickered and vanished.
"What an absolutely astonishing thing," Queen Layla gasped.
"We're astonishing people, Layla," Aunt Pol replied, "and we have a number of
peculiar friends - and relatives." She smiled then, her arm closely linked in
Durnik's. "Besides," she added with a twinkle in her eye, "you wouldn't really
expect a girl to get married without her mother in attendance, would you?"
Following the wedding, they all walked through the corridors of the Citadel back
to the central fortress and stopped outside the door of Aunt Pol's private
apartment. Garion was about to follow Silk and Barak as, after a few brief
congratulations, they moved on down the hallway, but Belgarath put his hand on
his grandson's arm. "Stay a moment," the old man said.
"I don't think we should intrude, Grandfather," Garion said

nervously.
"We'll only stay for a few minutes," Belgarath assured him. The old man's lips were actually quivering with a suppressed mirth. "There's something I want you to see."
One of Aunt Pol's eyebrows raised questioningly as her father and Garion followed into the apartment.
"Are we responding to some ancient and obscure custom, father?" she asked.
"No, Pol," he replied innocently. "Garion and I only want to toast your happiness, that's all."
"What exactly are you up to, Old Wolf?" she asked him, but her eyes had an amused look in them.
"Do I have to be up to something?"
"You usually are, father."
She did, however, fetch four crystal goblets and a decanter of fine old Tolnedran wine.
"The four of us started all this together quite a long time ago," Belgarath recalled. "Perhaps, before we all separate, we should take a moment to remember that we've come a long way since then, and some rather strange things have happened to us. We've all changed in one way or another, I think."
"You haven't changed all that much, father," Aunt Pol said meaningfully. "Would you get to the point?"
Belgarath's eyes were twinkling openly now with some huge, suppressed mirth.
"Durnik has something for you," he said.
Durnik swallowed hard. "Now?" he asked Belgarath apprehensively. Belgarath nodded.
"I know how much you love beautiful things - like that bird over there," Durnik said to Aunt Pol, looking at the crystal wren Garion had given her the previous year. "I wanted to give you something like that, too - only I can't work in glass or in gemstones. I'm a metalsmith, so I have to work in steel." He had been unwrapping something covered in plain cloth. What he produced finally was an intricately wrought steel rose, just beginning to open. The details were exquisite, and the flower glowed with a burnished life of its own.
"Why, Durnik," Aunt Pol said, genuinely pleased. "How very lovely."
Durnik, however, did not give her the rose yet. "It has no color, though," he noted a bit critically, "and no fragrance." He glanced nervously at Belgarath.
"Do it," the old man told him. "The way I showed you."
Durnik turned back to Aunt Pol, still holding the burnished rose in

his hand. "I
really have nothing to give you, my Pol," he told her humbly, "except an honest
heart - and this." He held out the rose in his hand, and his face took on an
expression of intense concentration.
Garion heard it very clearly. It was a familiar, rushing surge of whispered
sound, filled with a peculiarly bell-like shimmer. The polished rose in Durnik's
outstretched hand seemed to pulsate slightly, and then gradually it began to
change. The outsides of the petals were as white as new snow, but the insides,
where the flower was just opening, were a deep, blushing red. When Durnik
finished, he held a living flower out to Aunt Pol, its petals beaded with dew.
Aunt Pol gasped as she stared incredulously at the rose. It was unlike any
flower that had ever existed. With a trembling hand she took it from him, her
eyes filled with sudden tears. "How is it possible?" she asked in an awed voice.
"Durnik's a very special man now," Belgarath told her. "So far as I know, he's
the only man who ever died and then lived again. That could not help changing
him - at least a little. But then, I suspect that there's always been a poet
lurking under the surface of our good, practical friend. Maybe the only real
difference is that now he has a way of letting that poet out."
Durnik, looking just a bit embarrassed, touched the rose with a tentative
finger. "It does have one advantage, my Pol," he noted. "The steel is still in
it, so it will never fade or wilt. It will stay just as it is now. Even in the
middle of winter, you'll have at least one flower."
"Oh, Durnik!" she cried, embracing him.
Durnik looked a bit abashed as he awkwardly returned her embrace. "If you really
like it, I could make you some others," he told her. "A whole garden of them, I
suppose. It's not really all that hard, once you get the hang of it."
Aunt Pol's eyes, however, had suddenly widened. With one arm still about Durnik,
she turned slightly to look at the crystal wren perched upon its glass twig.
"Fly," she said, and the glowing bird spread its wings and flew to her
outstretched hand. Curiously it inspected the rose, dipped its beak into a dew
drop, and then it lifted its head and began to sing a trilling little song.
Gently Aunt Pol raised her hand aloft, and the crystal bird soared back to its

glass twig. The echo of its song still hung in the silent air.
"I expect it's time for Garion and me to be going," Belgarath said, his face
rather sentimental and misty.
Aunt Pol, however, had quite obviously realized something. Her eyes narrowed
slightly, then went very wide. "Just a moment, Old Wolf," she said to Belgarath
with a faint hint of steel in her voice. "You knew about this from the very
beginning, didn't you?"
"About what, Pol?" he asked innocently.
"That Durnik - that I -" For the first time in his life Garion saw her at a loss
for words. "You knew!" she flared.
"Naturally. As soon as Durnik woke up, I could feel something different in him.
I'm surprised you didn't feel it yourself. I had to work with him a bit to bring
it out, though."
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"You didn't ask, Pol."
"You - I -" With an enormous effort she gained control of herself. "All of these
months you let me go on thinking that my power was gone, and it was there all
the time! It was still there, and you put me through all of that?"
"Oh, really, Pol. If you'd just stopped to think, you'd have realized that you
can't give it up like that. Once it's there, it's there."
"But our Master said-"
Belgarath raised one hand. "If you'll just stop and remember, Pol, all he really
asked was if you'd be willing to limit your independence in marriage and go
through life with no more power than Durnik has. Since there's no way he could
remove your power, he obviously had something else in mind."
"You let me believe-"
"I have no control over what you believe, Pol," he replied in his most
reasonable tone of voice.
"You tricked me!"
"No, Pol," he corrected, "you tricked yourself." Then he smiled fondly at her.
"Now, before you go off into a tirade, think about it for a moment. All things
considered, it didn't really hurt you, did it? And isn't it really nicer to find
out about it this way?" His smile became a grin. "You can even consider it my
wedding present to you, if you'd like," he added.
She stared at him for a moment, obviously wanting to be cross about the whole
thing, but the look he returned her was impish. The confrontation between them
had been obscure, but he had quite obviously won this time. Finally, no longer

able to maintain even the fiction of anger, she laughed helplessly and put her
hand affectionately on his arm. "You're a dreadful old man, father," she told
him.
"I know," he admitted. "Coming, Garion?"
Once they were in the hall outside, Belgarath began to chuckle.
"What's so funny?" Garion asked him.
"I've been waiting for that moment for months," his grandfather said, still
chortling. "Did you see her face when she finally realized what had happened?
She's been moping around with that look of noble self sacrifice for all this
time, and then she suddenly finds out that it was absolutely unnecessary." His
face took on a wicked little smirk. "Your Aunt's always been just a little too
sure of herself, you know. Maybe it was good for her to go for a little while
thinking that she was just an ordinary person. It might give her some perspective."
"She was right." Garion laughed. "You are a dreadful old man."
Belgarath grinned. "One does one's best."
They went along the hallway to the royal apartment where the clothes Garion was
to wear for his wedding were already laid out. "Grandfather," Garion said,
sitting down to pull off his boots, "there's something I've been meaning to ask
you. Just before Torak died, he called out to his mother."
Belgarath, tankard in hand, nodded.
"Who is his mother?"
"The universe," the old man replied.
"I don't understand."
Belgarath scratched thoughtfully at his short, white beard. "As I understand it,
each of the Gods began as an idea in the mind of UL, the father of the Gods, but
it was the universe that brought them forth. It's very complicated. I don't
understand it entirely myself. Anyway, as he was dying, Torak cried out to the
one thing that he felt still loved him. He was wrong, of course. UL and the
other Gods did still love him, even though they knew that he had become twisted
and totally evil. And the universe grieved for him."
"The universe?"
"Didn't you feel it? That instant when everything stopped and all the lights
went out?"
"I thought that was just me."
"No, Garion. For that single instant all the light in the universe went out, and
everything stopped moving - everything - everywhere. A part of that was the
grief of the universe for her dead son."

Garion thought about that. "He had to die, though, didn't he?"
Belgarath nodded. "It was the only way that things could get back on the right course. Torak had to die so that things could go toward what they're supposed to. Otherwise, everything would have ultimately wound up in chaos."
A sudden strange thought struck Garion.
"Grandfather," he said, "who is Errand?"
"I don't know," Belgarath replied. "Perhaps he's just a strange little boy. Perhaps he's something else. You'd probably better start changing clothes."
"I was trying not to think about that."
"Oh, come now. This is the happiest day of your life."
"Really?"
"It might help if you keep saying that to yourself."
By general consent, the Gorim of Ulgo had been selected to perform the ceremony uniting Garion and Ce'Nedra in marriage. The frail, saintly old man had made the journey from Prolgu in short, easy stages, carried by litter through the caves to Sendaria, then conveyed in King Fulrach's royal carriage to the city of Sendar and thence by ship to Riva. The revelation of the fact that the God of the Ulgos was the father of the other Gods had struck theological circles like a thunderclap. Entire libraries of turgid philosophical speculation had instantly become obsolete, and priests everywhere now stumbled about in a state of shock.
Grodeg, the High Priest of Belar, fainted dead away at the news. The towering ecclesiastic, already crippled for life by the wounds he had received during the battle of Thull Mardu, did not take this final blow well. When he recovered from his swoon, his attendants found that his mind had reverted to childhood, and he spent his days now surrounded by toys and brightly colored bits of string.
The royal wedding, of course, took place in the Hall of the Rivan King, and everyone was there. King Rhodar was in crimson, King Anheg in blue. King Fulrach wore brown, and King Cho-Hag the customary Algar black. Brand, the Rivan Warder, his face made even more somber by the death of his youngest son, was dressed in Rivan gray. There were other royal visitors as well. Ran Borune XXIII in his goldcolored mantle was strangely jovial as he bantered with the shavenheaded Sadi. Oddly enough, the two of them got on well together. The possibilities of the new situation in the west appealed to them both, and they were obviously

moving toward an accommodation of some sort. King Korodullin wore royal purple
and stood about with the other kings - although he spoke but little. The blow to
his head during the battle of Thull Mardu had affected his hearing, and the
young king of Arendia was obviously uncomfortable in company.
In the very center of the gathered monarchs stood King Drosta lek Thun of Gar og
Nadrak, wearing a curiously unattractive yellow doublet. The nervous, emaciated
king of the Nadrak's spoke in short little bursts, and when he laughed, there
was a shrill quality in his voice. King Drosta made many arrangements that
afternoon - some of which he even intended to honor.
Belgarion of Riva, of course, did not participate in those discussions - which
was probably just as well. The Rivan King's mind was a trifle distracted at that
moment. Dressed all in blue, he paced nervously in a nearby antechamber where he
and Lelldorin awaited the fanfare which was to summon them into the great hall.
"I wish this was all over," he said for the sixth time.
"Just be patient, Garion," Lelldorin advised him again.
"What are they doing out there?"
"Probably waiting for word that her Highness is ready. At this particular time,
she's far more important than you are. That's the way weddings are, you know."
"You're the lucky one. You and Ariana just ran off and got married without all
this fuss."
Lelldorin laughed ruefully. "I didn't really escape it, Garion," he said, "just
postponed it for a while. All the preparations here have inflamed my Ariana. As
soon as we return to Arendia, she wants us to have a proper wedding."
"What is it about weddings that does such strange things to the female mind?"
"Who can say?" Lelldorin shrugged. "A woman's mind is a mystery - as you'll soon
discover."
Garion gave him a sour look and adjusted his crown once again. "I wish it were
all over," he said again.
In time the fanfare echoed through the Hall of the Rivan King, the door opened,
and, trembling visibly, Garion adjusted his crown one last time and marched out
to meet his fate. Although he knew most of the people in the hall, the faces
around him were all a blur as he and Lelldorin walked past the peat fires
glowing in the pits in the floor toward the throne where his great sword once
more hung in its proper place with the Orb of Aldur glowing on its

pommel.
The hall was hung with buntings and banners, and there was a vast profusion of spring flowers. The wedding guests, in silks, satins, and brightly colored brocades, seemed themselves almost like some flower garden as they twisted and strained to watch the entrance of the royal bridegroom.
Awaiting him before the throne stood the white-robed old Gorim of Ulgo, a smile on his gentle face.
"Greetings, Belgarion," the Gorim murmured as Garion mounted the steps.
"Holy Gorim," Garion replied with a nervous bow.
"Be tranquil, my son," the Gorim advised, noting Garion's shaking hands.
"I'm trying, Holy One."
The brazen horns sounded yet another fanfare, and the door at the back of the hall swung wide. The Imperial Princess Ce'Nedra, dressed in her creamy, pearl-studded wedding gown, stood in the doorway with her cousin Xera at her side. She was stunning. Her flaming hair streamed down across one shoulder of her gown, and she wore the varicolored golden circlet of which she had always been so fond. Her face was demure, and a delicate little blush colored her cheeks. She kept her eyes downcast, although once she flickered a quick glance at Garion, and he saw the little twinkle that lurked behind her thick lashes. He knew then with absolute certainty that all that demure modesty was a pose. She stood long enough to allow all to look their fill at her perfection before, accompanied by the sound of gently cascading harps, she came down the aisle to meet her quivering bridegroom. In a ceremony Garion thought just a trifle overdone, Barak's two little daughters preceded the bride, strewing her path with flowers.
When she reached the dais, Ce'Nedra rather impulsively kissed the kindly old Gorim's cheek and then took her place at Garion's side. There was a fragrance about her that was strangely flowerlike - a fragrance that for some reason made Garion's knees tremble.
The Gorim looked out at the assemblage and began to speak.
"We are gathered today," he began, "to witness the last unraveling of the Prophecy which has guided all our lives through the deadliest of peril and brought us safely to this happy moment. As foretold, the Rivan King has

returned. He has met our ancient foe and he has prevailed. His reward stands
radiant at his side."
Reward? Garion had not considered it in precisely that light before. He thought
about it a bit as the Gorim continued, but it didn't really help all that much.
He felt a sharp little nudge in his ribs.
"Pay attention," Ce'Nedra whispered.
It got down to the questions and answers shortly after that. Garion's voice
cracked slightly, but that was only to be expected. Ce'Nedra's voice, however,
was clear and firm. Couldn't she at least pretend to be nervous just a little?
The rings which they exchanged were carried on a small velvet cushion by Errand.
The child took his duties quite seriously, but even on his small face there was
that slightly amused look. Garion resented that. Was everyone secretly laughing
at him?
The ceremony concluded with the Gorim's benediction, which Garion did not hear.
The Orb of Aldur, glowing with an insufferable smugness, filled his ears with
its song of jubilation during the Gorim's blessing, adding its own peculiar
congratulations.
Ce'Nedra had turned to him. "Well?" she whispered.
"Well what?" he whispered back.
"Aren't you going to kiss me?"
"Here? In front of everybody?"
"It's customary."
"It's a stupid custom."
"Just do it, Garion," she said with a warm little smile of encouragement. "We
can discuss it later."
Garion tried for a certain dignity in the kiss - a kind of chaste formality in
keeping with the general tone of the occasion. Ce'Nedra, however, would have
none of that. She threw herself into the business with an enthusiasm which
Garion found slightly alarming. Her arms locked about his neck and her lips were
glued to his. He irrationally wondered just how far she intended to go with
this. His knees were already beginning to buckle.
The cheer which resounded through the hall saved him. The trouble with kissing
in public was that one was never sure just how long one should keep it up. If it
were too short, people might suspect a lack of regard; if it were too long, they
might begin to snicker. Grinning rather foolishly, Belgarion of Riva turned to
face the wedding guests.

The wedding ball and the supper which was part of it immediately followed the ceremony. Chatting gaily, the wedding guests trooped through a long corridor to a brightly decorated hall which had been converted into a grand ballroom ablaze with candles. The orchestra was composed of Rivan musicians under the direction of a fussy Arendish concertmaster, who strove mightily to keep the independent Rivans from improvising on those melodies which pleased them.

This was the part Garion had dreaded the most. The first dance was to be a solo affair featuring the royal couple. He was expected to march Ce'Nedra to the center of the floor and perform in public. With a sudden horror, he realized - even as he and his radiant bride went to the center of the room - that he had forgotten everything Lelldorin had taught him.

The dance which was popular at that particular season in the courts of the south was graceful and quite intricate. The partners were to face in the same direction, the man behind and slightly to one side of the woman. Their arms were supposed to be extended and their hands joined. Garion managed that part without too much trouble. It was all those quick, tiny little steps in time to the music that had him worried.

In spite of everything, though, he did quite well. The fragrance of Ce'Nedra's hair, however, continued to work on him, and he noted that his hands trembled visibly as the two of them danced. At the end of the first melody, the wedding guests applauded enthusiastically; as the orchestra took up the second tune, they all joined in, and the floor was filled with whirling colors as the dance became general.

"I guess we didn't do too badly," Garion murmured.

"We were just fine," Ce'Nedra assured him.

They continued to dance.

"Garion," she said after a few moments.

"Yes?"

"Do you really love me?"

"Of course I do. What a silly thing to ask."

"Silly?"

"Wrong word," he amended quickly. "Sorry."

"Garion," she said after a few more measures.

"Yes?"

"I love you too, you know."

"Of course I know."

"Of course? Aren't you taking a bit much for granted?"

"Why are we arguing?" he asked rather plaintively.

"We aren't arguing, Garion," she told him loftily. "We're

discussing."
"Oh," he said. "That's all right then."
As was expected, the royal couple danced with everyone. Ce'Nedra was passed from
king to king like some royal prize, and Garion escorted queens and ladies alike
to the center of the floor for the obligatory few measures. Tiny blond Queen
Porenn of Drasnia gave him excellent advice, as did the stately Queen Islena of
Cherek. Plump little Queen Layla was motherly - even a bit giddy. Queen Silar
gravely congratulated him, and Mayaserana of Arendia suggested that he'd dance
better if he weren't quite so stiff. Barak's wife, Merel, dressed in rich green
brocade, gave him the best advice of all.
"You'll fight with each other, of course," she told him as they danced, "but
never go to sleep angry. That was always my mistake."
And finally Garion danced with his cousin Adara.
"Are you happy?" he asked her.
"More than you could ever imagine," she replied with a gentle smile.
"Then everything worked out for the best, didn't it?"
"Yes, Garion. It's as if it had all been fated to happen. Everything feels so
right, somehow."
"It's possible that it was fated," Garion mused. "I sometimes think we have very
little control over our own lives - I know I don't."
She smiled. "Very deep thoughts for a bridegroom on his wedding day." Then her
face grew gravely serious. "Don't let Ce'Nedra drive you to distraction," she
advised. "And don't always give in to her."
"You've heard about what's been happening?"
She nodded. "Don't take it too seriously, Garion. She's been testing you, that's
all."
"Are you trying to say that I still have to prove something?"
"With Ce'Nedra - probably every day. I know your little princess, Garion. All
she really wants is for you to prove that you love her - and don't be afraid to
say it to her. I think you'll be surprised at how agreeable she'll be if you
just take the trouble to tell her that you love her - frequently."
"She knows that already."
"But you have to tell her."
"How often do you think I ought to say it?"
"Oh, probably every hour or so."
He was almost certain that she was joking.
"I've noticed that Sendars are a reserved sort of people," she told him. "That
isn't going to work with Ce'Nedra. You're going to have to put your upbringing
aside and come right out and say it. It will be worth the trouble, believe me."

"I'll try," he promised her.
She laughed and lightly kissed his cheek. "Poor Garion," she said.
"Why poor Garion?"
"You still have so much to learn."
The dance continued.
Exhausted finally and famished by their efforts, Garion and his bride made their
way to the groaning table and sat down to take their wedding supper. The supper
was quite special. Two days before the wedding, Aunt Pol had calmly marched into
the royal kitchen and had taken charge. As a result, everything was perfect. The
smells from the heavily laden table were overwhelming. King Rhodar absolutely
could not pass by without just one more nibble.
The music and the dance continued, and Garion watched, relieved that he had
escaped the floor. His eyes sought out old friends in the crowd. Barak, huge but
strangely gentle, danced with Merel, his wife. They looked very good together.
Lelldorin danced with Ariana, and their eyes were lost in each others' faces.
Relg and Taiba did not dance, but sat together in a secluded corner. They were,
Garion noted, holding hands. Relg's expression was still slightly startled, but
he did not look unhappy.
Near the center of the floor, Hettar and Adara danced with the innate grace of
those who spend their lives on horseback. Hettar's hawklike face was different
somehow, and Adara was flushed with happiness. Garion decided that it might be a
good time to try Adara's advice. He leaned toward Ce'Nedra's pink little ear and
cleared his throat. "I love you," he whispered. It was difficult the first time,
so he tried it again - just to get the feel of it. "I love you," he whispered
again. It was easier the second time.
The effect on his princess was electrifying. She blushed a sudden rosy red, and
her eyes went very wide and somehow defenseless. Her entire heart seemed to be
in those eyes. She appeared unable to speak, but reached out instead gently to
touch his face. As he returned her gaze, he was quite amazed at the change that
the simple phrase had made in her. Adara, it appeared, had been right. He stored
that bit of information away rather carefully, feeling more confident than he
had in months.
The hall was filled with colors as the guests danced in celebration of the royal
wedding. There were, however, a few faces that did not reflect the

general
happiness. Near the center of the floor, Mandorallen danced with the Lady
Nerina, Baroness of Vo Ebor, and their faces mirrored that tragedy which was
still central to their lives. Not far from them, Silk danced with Queen Porenn.
The little man's face bore once again that same bitter, self mocking expression
Garian had first seen in King Anheg's palace in Val Alorn.
Garion sighed.
"Melancholy already, my husband?" Ce'Nedra asked him with a little twinkle. Once
again, even as they sat, she ducked her head beneath his arm and drew it about
her in that peculiar way of hers. She smelled very good, and he noted that she
was very soft and warm.
"I was just remembering a few things," he replied to her question.
"Good. Try to get that all out of the way now. I wouldn't want it interfering
later."
Garion's face turned bright red, and Ce'Nedra laughed a wicked little laugh. "I
think that perhaps later is not much further off," she said then. "You must
dance with Lady Polgara, and I will dance with your grandfather. And then I
think it will be time for us to retire. It's been a very full day."
"I am a bit tired," Garion agreed.
"Your day isn't over yet, Belgarion of Riva," she told him pointedly.
Feeling a bit peculiar about it, Garion approached Aunt Pol where she and Durnik
sat watching the dance. "Will you dance with me, Aunt Polgara?" he asked with a
formal little bow.
She looked at him a bit quizzically. "So you've finally admitted it," she said.
"Admitted what?"
"Who I really am."
"I've known."
"But you've never called me by my full name before, Garion," she pointed out,
rising and gently smoothing back his hair. "I think it might be a rather
significant step."
They danced together in the glowing candlelight to the music of lutes and pipes.
Polgara's steps were more measured and slow than the dance Lelldorin had so
painstakingly taught to Garion. She had reached back, Garion realized, into the
dim past, and she led him through the stately measures of a dance she had
learned centuries before, during her sojourn with the Wacite Arends. Together
they moved through the slow, graceful, and somehow melancholy measures of a

dance which had vanished forever some twenty-five centuries before, to live on only in Polgara's memory.

Ce'Nedra was blushing furiously when Belgarath returned her to Garion for their last dance. The old man grinned impishly, bowed to his daughter and took her hands to lead her as well. The four of them danced not far from each other, and Garion clearly heard his Aunt's question. "Have we done well, father?"

Belgarath's smile was quite genuine. "Why yes, Polgara," he replied. "As a matter of fact, I think we've done very well indeed."

"Then it was all worth it, wasn't it, father?"

"Yes, Pol, it really was."

They danced on.

"What did he say to you?" Garion whispered to Ce'Nedra.

She blushed. "Never mind. Maybe I'll tell you - later."

There was that word again.

The dance ended, and an expectant hush fell over the crowd. Ce'Nedra went to her father, kissed him lightly, and then returned. "Well?" she said to Garion.

"Well what?"

She laughed. "Oh, you're impossible." Then she took his hand and very firmly led him from the hall.

It was quite late - perhaps two hours past midnight. Belgarath the Sorcerer was in a whimsical mood as he wandered about the deserted halls of the Rivan Citadel with a tankard in his hand. Belgarath had done a bit of celebrating, and he was feeling decidedly mellow - though not nearly as much as many of the other wedding guests, who had already mellowed themselves into insensibility.

The old man stopped once to examine a guard who was snoring in a doorway, sprawled in a puddle of spilled ale. Then, humming rather tunelessly and adding a couple of skipping little dance steps as he proceeded down the hall, the white-bearded old sorcerer made his way in the general direction of the ballroom, where he was certain there was a bit of ale left.

As he passed the Hall of the Rivan King, he noted that the door was ajar and that there was a light inside. Curious, he stuck his head through the doorway to see if anyone might be about. The Hall was deserted, and the light infusing it came from the Orb of Aldur, resting on the pommel of the sword of the Rivan King.

"Oh," Belgarath said to the stone, "it's you." Then the old man walked a trifle

unsteadily down the aisle to the foot of the dais. "Well, old friend," he said, squinting up at the Orb, "I see they've all gone off and left you alone too."

The Orb flickered its recognition of him.

Belgarath sat down heavily on the edge of the dais and took a drink of ale.

"We've come a long way together, haven't we?" he said to the Orb in a conversational tone.

The Orb ignored him.

"I wish you weren't so serious about things all the time. You're a very stodgy companion." The old man took another drink.

They were silent for a while, and Belgarath pulled off one of his boots, sighed and wriggled his toes contentedly.

"You really don't understand any of this, do you, my friend?" he asked the Orb finally. "In spite of everything, you still have the soul of a stone. You understand hate and loyalty and unswerving commitment, but you can't comprehend the more human feelings - compassion, friendship, love - love most of all, I think. It's sort of a shame that you don't understand, really, because those were the things that finally decided all this. They've been mixed up in it from the very beginning - but then you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

The Orb continued to ignore him, its attention obviously elsewhere. "What are you concentrating on so hard?" the old man asked curiously.

The Orb, which had glowed with a bright blue radiance flickered again, and its blue became suddenly infused with a pale pink which steadily grew more and more pronounced until the stone was actually blushing.

Belgarath cast one twinkling glance in the general direction of the royal apartment. "Oh," he said, understanding. Then he began to chuckle.

The Orb blushed even brighter.

Belgarath laughed, pulled his boot back on and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Perhaps you understand more than I thought you did," he said to the stone. He drained the last few drops from his tankard. "I'd really like to stay and discuss it," he said, "but I've run out of ale. I'm sure you'll excuse me."

Then he went back up the broad aisle.

When he reached the doorway, he stopped and cast one amused glance back at the still furiously blushing Orb. Then he chuckled again and went out, quietly closing the door behind him.

Thus concludes The Belgariad, which began with Pawn of Prophecy. And while History, unlike mortal pen, does not cease, the records beyond this
point remain as yet unrevealed.