

A Dagger in the Spine

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1

At the Sign of the North Star

1

Over the slate-grey desert the sky was a blue so piercing that out of the corners of one's eyes it appeared almost violet. Across the sky were draped, rather shyly, wispy feathers of cirrus cloud, seemingly motionless against the brilliance of the background. The sun was a malevolent eye inching towards the horizon; above it could just be seen a thin crescent of moon, like a silver bow drawn near to snapping-point. A few stunted succulents, oily, yellow and bruised-looking, were all that interrupted the infinite expanse of the wastes.

Nothing moved. Not a whisper of a breeze stirred up the parched dust.

Then, suddenly, one of the clouds twisted momentarily, as if someone had twirled a finger in it. Almost immediately it resumed its former shape, but now there was what looked from the ground like a dark spot at its centre. Around the spot were clear signs of turbulence, as if strands of the cloud were being drawn in to weave a pattern in the air.

From nearer to, the spot could be seen as the figure of a young woman. Her narrow face was twisted in concentration as she moved her hands rapidly, pulling on misty threads from all around her to create a silver tunic, silver breeches that ended raggedly just below the knees, a silver sword at her silver belt, a silver hooded cape and, last of all, soft silver-coloured boots. Her costume complete, she thought for a moment about changing the colour of her short, coppery hair to match, but decided to leave it as it was, compensating by trimming her garments in ermine.

She commanded a small section of the air to reflect her image and admired herself, turning this way and that, letting the light cold wind billow her cape. She had been right to let her hair stay the way it was, she concluded; the colour went so well with her green eyes. She drew her lips back in a smile, showing two neat rows of little sharp teeth, and banished her mirror with a languid wave.

Ready to meet a king, she thought happily, *or even an innkeeper.*

She looked down towards the desolate ground, forty thousand feet below. She folded her arms, sang a few bars from a song that had been old a million years ago, and then -- with a wild whoop of ecstasy -- plummeted like a silver stone.

2

"*Yo-o-ou-ou-ouch!*" said a high-pitched voice in her mind.

Alyss had landed in a plume of dust. She looked around her concernedly.

"Is there somebody there?" she said tentatively. She could see further than most people, but there appeared to be nothing around her except the unhappy-looking plants.

"Not out *there*, you great heavy lump! Down *here!*"

Alyss was for an instant so vexed by being described as "heavy" -- she had always prided herself on the trimness-of-figure of this particular body -- that it took her a moment or two to absorb the meaning of the rest of the words.

When she did she took a swift pace backwards.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry." She squatted down and ran her hands across the surface of the dust. "Did I land on you?"

"Too true you did," said the small, high-pitched voice. "I think I'm dying. And dying far from my nearest and dearest -- they'll never know what's become of me. They'll think I've deserted them to find my fortune in the world."

There was a long, histrionic moan, its effect slightly marred by the fact that it came out as more of a squeak.

"I'm sure it can't be *that* bad," said Alyss brightly.

She dug into the dust with her fingers and pulled out a grey coiling creature, about a foot long and of the same hue as the waste. It wrapped itself tightly around her hand as she scrutinized it. The creature's rear half did look a bit flattened.

"I was just lying there, under the surface, waiting for the sun to set so I could come out and enjoy the coolth of the night and then -- thump! wallop! smash! -- *you* come and fall on me! The least you could say is 'sorry'."

"I already have," she murmured truthfully. "And I meant it, too," she added, crossing the fingers of her other hand. "Now, let's see if we can get you sorted out."

Her eyes squinted for a second and the creature was once again an even cylinder from top to tail.

"Aaargh!" it said. "The pain! The agony! The torm . . . That's odd, it's gone and . . . gone."

The animal flexed itself once or twice, testing, and then raised its head

to look Alyss in the face. It had two tiny points of blackness for eyes and a straight slit, narrower than any cut, for a mouth. A little black tongue, forked into three, darted out and then, in apparent panic, darted back in again.

"Well," she said, smiling reassuringly, "we seem to have started on the wrong footing. Let's begin all over again, shall we? First of all, the introductions."

She stood up, still holding the creature.

"My name is Alyss. You've probably heard of me."

"No."

"Ah, I forgot, news takes so long to travel out here to the sticks. Never mind: your time will come. And you?"

"Garna," the creature responded grudgingly. "A dustworm." It reared its head up a little higher. "One of the more important dustworms in these parts."

It swivelled to look around and then realized how far above the ground it was. Too fast to see, it coiled itself as tightly as it could around Alyss's hand again, squeezing so hard that the ends of her fingers turned red.

"It's all right. You're quite safe."

"Hmmmph."

"I'd rather like to have you as my friend," she continued, "and I'm sure you want to be mine. So let's form a fellowship -- just the two of us."

"Hmmmph."

"I'm on my way to Ragadorn because there's a man there I wish to speak with. Would you like to come for the journey?"

Ragadorn! That was something different.

All his life Garna had heard tales of the fabled riches of Ragadorn, capital of the Wildlands, but never had he expected to have the opportunity to go there. He lifted his head again, reckless of the dizzying distance of the ground beneath, and the tiny slits of his eyes glowed momentarily golden. If he could travel to Ragadorn and back, he genuinely *would* be one of the more important dustworms in the area -- no, *the* most important dustworm!

"I liked you from the start," he piped. "'What pretty boot-soles,' I thought when first I saw them . . ."

"Then let's be on our way."

Alyss carefully placed Garna in the hood of her cape, feeling his small weight nestling between her shoulderblades as she found her orientation and prepared to set off towards the east. Her plan was to follow the thick, sluggish River Dorn northwards until she came to the port of Ragadorn at its

estuary.

The dustworm squirmed around for a few moments, experimenting until it found the most comfortable position in which to relax, and then settled down to doze.

Alyss took a few steps, but found that yielding sands made walking tedious.

She looked around to make sure there was no one watching, then lifted herself a handsbreadth above the ground. Pulling a silver handkerchief from a pocket in her tunic, she blew her nose delicately before beginning to glide swiftly away across the smooth dust.

3

The outskirts of Ragadorn are not prepossessing, albeit rather more prepossessing than the inner regions.

Alyss looked around her with bright interest as she walked along the edge of the Dorn, whose greasy waters moved lumpenly towards the sea. She had followed the river for many miles, watching it as it grew from a reluctant trickle tentatively stumbling through the grey desert to the mighty waterway it was here, nearly two hundred yards across. The ground beneath her feet -- she was walking more conventionally again -- was now of packed red-grey mud. Small fishing craft were moored haphazardly to the bank. Ahead of her she could see taller masts clustering against the morning sky; that must be the port proper.

She murmured a meaningless word or two to Garna, who had coiled himself so that his head rested on her shoulder, the remainder of his body still being hidden in the flap of her hood. He, too, was turning his head from side to side, taking in all the sights and sounds of the dilapidated suburbs.

There were few people around and most of them seemed to be either dead or dead drunk. From time to time Alyss had to pick her way fastidiously around or over the motionless forms of sailors, fishermen, mercenaries and their molls. Some of the people were definitely dead: she saw more than one gaping gash where a throat should have been. Dogs roamed along the riverside ahead of her; they were stopping from time to time to examine the bodies. A crow swooped from the sky but she turned her gaze away, refusing to watch what it was doing. The reddish-pink light of the rising sun reflected brilliantly off the surface of the river, so that she had to squint to see the way ahead of her.

She narrowed the pupils of her eyes and glared at the sun. It dimmed

nervously.

On her left there seemed to be an endless stream of warehouses; to her right there was the clogging surface of the river. The only movement she could see came from the birds and the dogs and the rats. She put a hand behind her shoulder to tickle Garna's head; the creature's skin was cold against her fingertips.

"It won't be long 'til we're there," she said.

"'Til we're where?" asked the worm.

"At the North Star."

"You plan to fly?"

"No. It's an inn."

She giggled. A ladybird flew towards her face across the desolation. She flicked it away with her hand. Then she lifted her foot to step over another of the corpses that littered her way; she felt insulted by these interruptions.

"I would like to sing a song," said Garna. "Something about how I came to Ragadorn and saw all this."

Alyss stopped walking and knelt down by the riverbank; with difficulty she pulled some of the water away from the rest and then threw it up into the air. It became a grey gull that flapped its wings unhappily before flying off towards the timorous clouds.

"You have no song to sing," she said.

"I have a song to sing," said Garna, "about the way that I was and the way that I am. Say, I've just had a thought! I could sing about the way that I'm going to be, too!"

"Put it this way," said Alyss, "I'm not going to stop you *making* your song. But I'd be very glad if you didn't sing it."

"Oh. All right."

Alyss turned herself and looked out over the surface of the river. She saw its uneasiness. Then, by accident, she moved her silvered foot and found it nudging up against a human being's shoulder; his head had been almost severed by a blow from beneath. The body tumbled over on its side.

"Nice place, Ragadorn," Alyss said.

"The streets are paved with gold," Garna whispered.

"If they are, they're being remarkably unostentatious about it," said Alyss dourly. The towpath along which she'd been walking was very definitely made of mud. Lone Wolf had mentioned nothing about golden streets -- but, of course, his mind had been full of other things, so it was

possible he'd simply failed to mention the fact. Alyss somehow doubted it. She wondered whether or not to pave the streets in gold, just for the fun of watching the Ragadornians' reactions, but decided against. She had more important tasks ahead of her.

A little while later she found a cobbled road leading off to her left. This was in the general direction of the centre of the town, so she followed it. Lone Wolf had told her the North Star Tavern was on Barnacle Street, not too far from the main docks. If need be she'd ask someone the way, but she reckoned her own instinctive sense of navigation would guide her there. Since discovering that, in this universe at least, she was really only the leftovers of an agreement between Ishir and Naar, she had often been miserable; now she concentrated her mind on the advantages she possessed over mortals -- one of which was her usual ability to get to wherever she wanted to be.

Garna was unimpressed when she explained this to him.

"You mean you're lost," he said.

"No." She stopped at a crossroads, wondering which way to go. "I'll just follow my instincts."

She'd left the riverside warehouses far behind by now, and was walking down paved streets on either side of which were rows of terraced hovels; generally they were in poor repair, most of them lacking at least one window. Their roofs were of red tiling, but she could spot very few buildings that still had their full complement of tiles. There were also some shops, which looked even worse: clearly looting was a regular pastime in Ragadorn. She consoled herself with the thought that at least there were fewer visible corpses here.

She walked past the self-proclaimed Ragadorn Stables & Coach Station, which stank of horse manure. Lone Wolf had indicated to her that this place wasn't very far from the North Star Tavern. A couple of coaches stood in the courtyard, but neither had been fitted out with horses: presumably it was too early in the morning for anyone to want to start a journey. Illiterate placards advertised departure times; she scanned her eyes across them, noting that they all related to yesterday. Oh, yes, there was one promoting the joys of a seven-day journey to Port Bax -- a trip Lone Wolf had told her he'd taken and found to be remarkably lacking in joys: a priest called Parsion had poisoned him. Parsion had died thanks to the intervention of a mercenary called Viveka; according to Lone Wolf, she too was now dead.

Alyss was vaguely pleased about this. She had no particularly high opinion of Lone Wolf -- although she recognized the important part he'd played in saving Sommerlund from the tyranny of the Darklords -- but it had annoyed her that he considered other women more interesting than herself. The fact that she knew that at some point she'd fall in love with Lone Wolf's friend, Banedon, didn't ameliorate her peevedness.

Men, she thought to herself, *have such lousy taste.*

Barnacle Street was nearby, she abruptly knew. Her senses were telling her that, if she took the next turning on the left and then the second on the right, she'd find herself almost opposite the North Star Tavern. She told Garna as much, and the dustworm responded by moving its mouth backwards and forwards among the fine hairs at the back of her neck.

There was a shout in the empty, echoing street.

"Here! You! Boy!"

Alyss turned.

"I'm not a boy," she said mildly.

"Not exactly a grown-up."

The person who'd shouted at her came closer. He was almost twice as tall as her, and stockily built. His long, tangled, fair hair looked as if it had been saturated in the grease from a thousand messily eaten meals. He was wearing a helmet that sported two curved animal horns, and in his right hand was a sword even larger than the Sommerswerd Lone Wolf had brought back from Durenor. Around his bearded face swarmed busy flies. She not so much saw as smelled him approaching.

"I'm still not a boy," she said. "I may not suffer from an excess of steatopygia, but . . ."

"Duel with me, boy!"

The warrior aggressively waved his sword.

The flies loudly buzzed.

Garna shrank down timorously into her hood, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Why?" she asked politely.

"Because," said the man. "Because . . . Because that's my *job*. I kill people. I don't like the look of you. Besides, you might have some gold I could steal."

"I haven't got any gold. I've got a dustworm, but he's a friend of mine and I don't want to lose him." She traced the toe of her left boot from side to side across the ill fitting pavement. "So, all in all, I suggest you go away and

leave me alone."

"You dare to defy the mighty Thog?" shouted the warrior.

"Since you ask, yes. Can't you stop being such a pudding-brain?"

"Then -- *die!*"

The sword came whistling round, its blade seeking her neck. She moved her fingers and the weapon became a thatchwort, which missed her by an armslength. Her attacker looked at the vegetable in stupefaction.

"Could have sworn that a moment ago . . ." he began.

Alyss twitched her hands again.

The flies that had been buzzing around the mighty Thog's head regrouped purposefully. He looked at them, obviously aware for the first time of their existence. The swarm took on the shape of a clenched fist, directly in front of his face. All of the flies were now hovering, holding their position precisely, humming angrily in the air.

"Go away, please," said Alyss.

"Ha! -- not Thog the Mighty. I'll . . ."

The fist of flies caught him directly on the chin, so that his body flew backwards in a flail of limbs. The rear of his head cracked against the rough stone wall of a house and his eyes turned upwards; he flopped forwards onto his chest, unconscious. The flies once more swarmed aimlessly around him.

"I did say 'please'," remarked Alyss.

"You did," confirmed Garna. "I heard you. If anyone ever asks, I'll gladly tell them that you . . ."

"Oh, shut up."

Then, as an afterthought: "Please."

4

By now it was mid-morning, but clearly many of the citizens of Ragadorn habitually indulged in ale for breakfast, because Alyss could hear the tavern even before she came within sight of it. Barnacle Street was largely made up of litter, she discovered -- broken bottles, discarded bits of paper and scraps of food, a dead dog or two. She walked down the centre of the street: although there were a few people walking around, it was much too early for carts and waggons to be plying their trade. She followed the sounds of shouting and cracked song until she was standing in front of a large, ill tended building, perhaps sixty feet from one end to the other and seemingly the same distance deep. There was an inn-sign above her, creaking in the wind, but its image had long since been obliterated by the elements.

This looks like the place Lone Wolf mentioned, she thought.

She pushed against the heavy door, crudely crafted from ancient dark oak, and forced herself through. The noise and the smell were almost overwhelming. The place was packed out with customers -- pirates, ladies of dubious repute, smugglers, more ladies of dubious repute, sailors, cut-throats, ladies of (startlingly!) more dubious repute, pickpockets and, now, herself. There was a sudden silence as she walked in, but almost immediately the shouting and the singing started again.

She made her way to the bar.

"A pint of ale, if you please," she said with a smile to the innkeeper. He was a huge man. His ears were decorated with clusters of gold rings and his bald head had been tattooed with depictions of scenes that startled Alyss, even though Lone Wolf had warned her about them. One of the activities depicted seemed to her to be totally infeasible but, being polite, she made no comment.

There was a squeak from behind her.

"Sorry," she said to the innkeeper. "I'd like an extra gill of ale as well."

"Best ale or the stuff I normally sell?" he asked.

"The pint should be of the best."

"You're a funny-looking boy, you are," said the innkeeper, drawing ale from a barrel at the rear of the bar. "I don't remember having seen you here before."

Alyss was fascinated by the way his tattoos moved as the skin on his head flexed. He was concentrating on filling a tankard exactly to the brim.

"I'm not a boy," she said, rather tiredly. First Thog, now the innkeeper. She wondered if she ought to adopt a different body -- and yet she *liked* this one. Its slenderness appealed to her sensitivities.

"Well, you're not yet a man," said the innkeeper. He put the mug of ale down on the bar in front of her and absent-mindedly rubbed his fingers over her cheeks. "It'll be a few years yet before you'll have to shave."

A woman had started shouting in the background. She was yelling at the people around her, apparently making no discrimination among them. She had long dark hair and a strong chin. Alyss expected that a fight would break out when the woman took an earthenware tankard and smashed it over the head of a grey-haired, grey-bearded man who had apparently been doing nothing more offensive than quietly sipping his ale. However, he just looked surprised and confused, glanced around him, and settled back into

contemplation.

"Why's she so angry with everybody?" said Alyss, shoving a gold crown towards the innkeeper.

"She does that from time to time," he said, shrugging. "No one knows why. The gill of ale will cost you an extra penny."

"I can't hear you properly." Alyss leant forward, her hand cupped to her ear.

The innkeeper smiled, causing potential impregnations all over his head. "Just wait a minute," he said.

He went down to the far end of the bar, his flesh wobbling as he walked.

"If you don't shut up right now," he screamed at the angry woman, "I'll pull your head right off your shoulders and stick it down the cesspit."

There was silence. Then normal conversation began again.

The innkeeper came back to Alyss, still smiling. "It don't do to be too subtle," he explained. "Now, where were we?"

"The gill of ale for my friend," said Alyss, gesturing with a thumb towards the hood of her silver cape. "And I was telling you that I wasn't a boy."

"I'm not minding," said the innkeeper. "Lachlan's mercenaries -- may they suffer eternal torment when they die, and preferably a good dose of it in this life, too -- never come in here. If you want a drink of ale at your tender age -- well, as far as I'm concerned, you can . . ."

Alyss's eyes became tight.

"I'm a *woman*, you idiot!"

". . . order what you . . . Ah, yes, I see. I'd keep your voice down about that if I was you, 'less you *want* to get your bum groped, that is. Delighted to have your custom, ma'am. No soliciting on the premises, mind -- not without paying the house percentage. Rules is rules, as I always say. Here, your friend can have his -- its -- gill on me."

He filled the tiny glass. Alyss noticed he was drawing from the barrel containing the best ale. His hands were shaking.

"I'd like to speak with you later," she said, "about Lone Wolf."

For a moment he looked baffled, and then his face cleared. He put the little stemmed glass down in front of her and she held it up to her shoulder. Garna put his head to the surface of the liquid and began to suck noisily.

"The boy," said the innkeeper. "The Kai boy. I remember him. He was here -- oh, maybe a couple of years ago. Near to killed a man in the yard out

the back." A jerk of the head. "Don't know why he didn't -- the bastard deserved killing."

"Lone Wolf told me about you, Cloud Maker. He said you'd been trained in the ways of the Kai but that you'd departed the monastery to run a tavern here in this dump."

With her other hand she picked up her tankard and put it to her lips. The ale wasn't bad, but she thought it worth the effort of making it taste better, so she did. The abrupt scent of toa-nut made fellow-clients retreat from her on either side.

"Where do you want us to meet?" asked the innkeeper. "And when? And for the sake of Ishir don't say the name 'Kai' too loudly in here. The Kai aren't very popular in Ragadorn."

"You prefer the Darklords?"

"I'm not talking about what *I* prefer -- I'm talking about my clientele." One of the clientele hailed him at that moment from the far end of the bar, waving an empty tankard. "Look, I can't talk now. I won't be clear of here until long after midnight. Why not take a room for the night? Once I've got rid of everyone I'll give you a shout. We can talk then. You could help me clear up, if you liked."

"A room," said Alyss. "All right. That'll be another crown, I expect?"

Garna had finished his drink and was now snoring peacefully.

"Yes," said the innkeeper. "I have my rules and I keep to them." The customer at the other end of the bar was shouting quite loudly now.

She turned to the drinker nearest her. "Could I trouble you for a crown, please?" she asked sweetly.

The colossal sailor looked confused as her fingers danced a complex pattern in the air. He reached for his cutlass, and then his face changed and his hand went instead to his pocket.

"Certainly, young man," he said unctuously, giving her the coin.

"I'm not a young man," said Alyss wearily, "but thank you for your generosity, anyway."

She gave the coin to Cloud Maker.

"I have my rules, too," she said, "and one of them is, wherever possible, to pay for things with other people's money."

She turned on her heel, leaving her ale unfinished, and went out of the tavern to explore the byways of Ragadorn until evening.

"I remember the boy well," said Cloud Maker. It was late at night and the inn was deserted. The landlord had started to mop up the various stains on the floor, benches, walls and tables, but Alyss had impatiently clapped her hands and the place had suddenly become pristinely clean, every tankard and utensil neatly stored in the correct place. For the first time in its history the North Star Tavern also had hygienic lavatories: it was wonderful what a miracle could do.

"He stayed here overnight," said the innkeeper. He took a small draught from his mug of ale, then put it down carefully. They were sitting at the same table where he'd spoken with Lone Wolf, long ago. "He got very drunk. I got a bit rat-arsed as well, which is why I told him more than perhaps I should have."

"He said as much to me," Alyss confirmed. She was toying with a glass of wine. She sensed the stuff was of near-lethal potency -- not that this would affect her. Garna had taken a couple of sips and was snoring again; she hoped the dustworm wouldn't throw up in her hood. "He also," she continued, "told me about the Kai Lord who'd been here -- Swift Fox. I gather you knew him."

"Not well," said the landlord, "not well at all. I took his money when he wanted a meal or a drink, and we talked about the weather, but that was more or less it. He seemed a nice enough man, but we moved in different walks of life. Different walks of life. Yes, that was it."

"And you didn't know him any better than that?" A copper-coloured eyebrow was raised cynically.

"No. I've just told you." Cloud Maker took another swig of his drink.

"I think you *did* know him better than that."

"That's what the Kai boy seemed to think. He suggested I was really Swift Fox in disguise. But I'm not. I'm not, and I never have been. Apart from anything else, Swift Fox was quite a small person and, as you can see" -- he puffed out his chest expressively -- "I'm not. No, Swift Fox died when the Red Death visited Ragadorn. I mourned him. But things weren't all bad: the plague took Overlord Killean, too. The only trouble was that Killean's son, Lachlan, became the new overlord: Killean was bad, but Lachlan's worse."

Alyss tried a taste of her wine. It was rather sweet, but not unpleasant. She liked its golden colour, and so she drank a little more.

"You're not answering my question," she said. "I think you knew Swift Fox very well. I don't think he was just another customer in your

tavern. At a guess, he came here and confided to you that he'd been sent by the Kai to observe what was happening in Ragadorn. He knew you'd be sympathetic because he'd been told you'd once been educated at the Kai Monastery. Isn't that the real truth of it?"

There was a scream -- cut off in a rather ugly fashion -- from the street outside.

"Who are you?" said Cloud Maker. "Why are you here?"

Alyss told him briskly about the war the Darklords had waged against Sommerlund. She described with relish the death of the Darklord Zagarna and the banishment of the wizard Vonotar to the Dazhiarn. She glossed over her own role in all of these events, mentioning only in passing the part played by various members of the magicians' guild known as the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star -- some of whom, she added cryptically, suffered from acne.

Cloud Maker finished the contents of his tankard and Alyss automatically refilled it for him. The landlord looked a little startled and tasted the ale nervously; it obviously seemed good enough to him, because he took a deeper draught.

"You still haven't told me why you're here," he said. "Why do you want to speak to me?"

"Because you can help Lone Wolf. And Qinefer. They're working to rebuild the Kai Monastery. It's not very pleasant work, and they need help. I know it's a little impertinent of me, but I've decided to volunteer you."

Alyss put her pointy elbows on the table between them and concentrated on looking as charming as possible.

"Tough luck," she continued, "but you're *it*. A voyage from here to Holmgard will take you a couple of days -- no longer. King Ulnar will arrange for you to be given a horse so you can ride to where Lone Wolf and Qinefer are lugging stones. If only they'd ask me to help them . . . But then," she murmured, "they wouldn't, would they? Besides, I have other things to do."

"Why should I help them? I'm no longer one of the Kai. I don't care what happens to them."

Cloud Maker drank another deep draught.

"Ever seen Qinefer?"

Alyss put an image into Cloud Maker's mind.

"I recognize the direction in which my duty must take me," he said sombrelly.

Then he added: "Aw, bilge-rats, of course I'll give them whatever help I can." He seemed not to notice Alyss's fingers moving. "I don't want to see the Kai disappear. I'm not so good at the psychic skills after all these years, but at the very least I'll be able to hulk stones around. There are certain loyalties I've got to observe. You look a little feeble -- don't mind me saying so, do you? -- to be lifting rocks, but I suppose you'll be useful."

"Oh," said Alyss with a bright smile, "I won't be there. Most certainly not. Why did you think that?"

There was a long pause.

"I'd like to draw myself another tankard of ale before I answer that question," said Cloud Maker after a while. "You gave me the impression that Lone Wolf and Qinefer needed all the help they could get, persuaded me I should help them, and then now you . . ."

"I've got something more important to do. I told you."

"She did," piped Garna, waking suddenly.

Alyss cupped her chin in her hands.

"Give me your promise that you'll go to the monastery," she said.

"But I've got a thriving -- Oh, all right, I'll go. If you insist that the Kai need me."

The innkeeper looked sadly at his again almost empty tankard. If he were to re-enter the order of the Kai he would have to turn his attention to tamer drinks, most of the time. The graphic pictures on his head were now still, as were the bunches of golden rings dangling from his earlobes.

"If the Kai need me, I'll go."

"They do need you. Honestly they do."

Garna squeaked, but Alyss, hardly thinking, slapped the dustworm on the head. The squeaking stopped.

"I'll sell the North Star."

"Don't bother. Just leave. Ulnar will compensate you. Tell him from me that he should -- he's rather frightened of me, so he'll do what you ask."

She drank the rest of her glass of parsnip wine and felt the effect it was having on her body. Not a very pleasant effect, now she came to think of it. Her whole body glowed for an instant as she rid herself of the insidious stuff.

"You'll not be with me?" The innkeeper looked at her dubiously.

"No. No -- by the pastures of Ishir above, of course I won't. I keep saying, I've got far more important things to do. I'm not just talking about the odd game of samor."

"Wish you were," muttered Cloud Maker.

"I have something to do," said Alyss, "that'll take me away from Magnamund for a very long time. One or two eternities, in fact." She cocked her head on one side, as if listening. "No, on second thoughts, just the one."

"I think it's time for bed," said Cloud Maker, yawning. "I've got to get up early tomorrow. I know the place is clean -- and thank you for that, young miss -- but I have a rule not to lie abed in the mornings. And rules are rules, aren't they?"

"In the morning you're finding yourself a passage to Holmgard, aren't you?"

"Yes." He looked resigned.

"Good. Then can I have my gold crown back?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm not staying here tonight."

"Why not? Isn't this place good enough for you? Even the latrines are ..."

"Be like that."

She reached out her mind and plucked the crown from his till; she didn't need the coin, because she could always manufacture or extort a few more if need be, but she objected on principle to paying for something she wasn't going to receive. She held it between finger and thumb, making sure he could see it.

Then, with a grin, she swallowed it.

"Nice to have met you," she said, standing up. "Perhaps we'll meet another time."

As he watched, she doubled in size then shrivelled instantly until she was no more than a point of light, which itself swiftly disappeared.

A gold crown rattled down onto the table in front of him.

I was only joking about the money, said a faint voice in his mind.

2

Walking to Helgedad

1

Over seventeen hundred years before, this city -- Helgedad -- had been created by Vashna, the first of the twenty Darklords to be placed here on Magnamund. Earlier, he had sent out his loathsome armies to defeat the Drakkarim during the vile contest that would later become known as the War of Desecration. The cruel, human-like species had become his fiefs. Seven other vast fortress-cities had been founded at the same time, including Kaag, which the Darklord Zagarna had used as his stronghold.

Now Zagarna was dead, as was Vashna himself, so the numbers of the Darklords were reduced to eighteen. Their hatred towards the memory of the Sommlending Ulnar I, the slayer of Vashna at the Battle of Maakengorge, was as harsh as it had ever been. Even keener was their hatred towards Lone Wolf, who had just lately used the Sommerswerd to destroy Zagarna.

Yet they were glad Zagarna was gone. None had enjoyed his vicious domination, and each nurtured his own hopes of the succession.

The city was sited on an outcrop of granite surrounded by a huge lake of molten lava. All around it the air was filled with drifting motes of ash; the clouds above it glowered with an angry orange. The puffing sounds of the bubbling, angry lava were matched by the screechings of the spawn that circled around the highest towers of Helgedad, eagerly awaiting their evening meal. These beasts -- the Kraan and a larger species, the Zlanbeast -- resembled colossal bats but had steel-hard serrated beaks and, on each wing, claws that could sever a man from groin to throat with a single slash. When they waged war outside the Darklands their comrades-in-arms were Giaks and their provender mortals, but in times when their masters were unable to wage war they fed eagerly on Giak flesh, their brains too slow-moving to recognize their former allies.

Gnaag was approaching Helgedad across a desert of black ash. He was tall for a Darklord. He had few of the physical powers of the other Darklords -- his was a slight, insectile form -- and there was little reason for him to hasten his journey. The outer flesh of his body was invisible, so that his internal organs could be clearly seen: his lungs and his heart and his stomach. Blood oozed regularly from the dome of his bald head. He knew the rest of the Darklords would arrive in great flying convoys as they attempted to make a show of strength to each other. He also knew, however,

that he had little chance of success in the forthcoming dispute over who should inherit Zagarna's mantle, and so he preferred to abjure such histrionics. His instinct was that the successor as leader would be Haakon, Lord of Aarnak, or Slûtar, the new Lord of Kaag -- and he very much hoped so. Haakon and Slûtar were cast in the same mould as Zagarna: although physically quite dissimilar, they both had the late Archlord's unsubtlety of mind, and so, he was sure, would be destroyed as they made war against the peoples of Magnamund. Hurling huge armies over the Durncrag Mountains in an attempt to annihilate the Sommlending was, he believed, a policy doomed to failure. Instead, the only way to conquer Sommerlund was by the use of seduction, subversion. When Haakon or Slûtar failed in conquest, as Gnaag was certain either of them would, he would be able to put himself before the other Darklords as the advocate of a different approach.

As he walked slowly and easily towards Helgedad, his body feeling no weariness, his thin-toed feet tracing out shallow grooves in the ash, he allowed himself a smile.

The sky ahead was suddenly lit up by furious yellow-white flashes of light: clearly the volcano that Vashna had created beneath Helgedad was erupting, as it regularly did. One day there would surely be a great eruption that would spell the end of the fortress-city, but this would not be for millions of years. Around Gnaag, the endless wastes of ash testified to the previous eruptions of the great lava lake.

The city itself was a hell. In the dungeons beneath it were created the spawn -- the Giaks, the Crypt Spawn, the Doomwolves, the Vordaks, the Kraan, the Zlanbeast and the Helghast.

He smiled again, pausing in his stride. One day the sky over all of Magnamund would look like this: it could be only a matter of time. He would rule all of this world, thanks to the faithful service of troops such as the ones here, and he would do so in the name of his master, Naar, the God of Evil.

He wondered what it would be like to exist in Sommerlund. Vashna had been there, of course, as had Zagarna; both had lost their lives there. He'd been told that Sommerlund was a country where trees and grains and flowers flourished, and the thought filled him with revulsion.

Trailing behind him through the plain of dust were several Giaks bearing sacks filled with various heavy accoutrements the Darklord felt unable to do without. The grey faces of the little creatures were covered in a sickly green sweat; most of their mouths were open, revealing decayed

fangs. The Darklord paid them no attention at all. Behind the Giaks came a small party of Nadziranim, the right-handed magicians whom the Darklords controlled. They were creatures who somehow always avoided one's vision: they looked, at best, like wisps of smoke as they crossed the desert. Gnaag knew they were the greatest of all his allies. The other Darklords would ask their own Nadziranim to attack them, he had told them before they had left Mozgôar, but their role was merely to deflect the hostile magic rather than retaliate in kind. The Darklord had no wish to demonstrate his strength so early.

They walked on for many hours. The ominous dirty-orange flare over Helgedad now dominated the sky ahead of them. And now, too, even the Giaks could hear the screams of the Kraan and the Zlanbeast as they swooped down to feast on the beasts that had been staked out for them. The Darklord chuckled liquidly: there was no sound sweeter to him than the sound of cruelty.

On an impulse he stopped and turned. The leading Giak came gasping towards him.

Gnaag's skeletal hands moved swiftly. A sack clattered down onto the ashy ground.

A little later, Gnaag was feeling well fed. The remaining Giaks were too unintelligent to be concerned about the fate of their comrade, and the Nadziranim simply didn't care. The Darklord wiped the bones of one hand across his mouth and pulled himself back to his feet. Ichor stained the ash in front of the place where he'd been sitting. He picked up the sack the dead Giak had been carrying and tossed it easily to one of the others. The spawn grunted, but raised the sack onto its shoulder, accepting the double load without complaint.

Helgedad, thought Gnaag, looking at the sprawling city a few miles away, *soon you're going to be mine.*

He felt a surge of confirmation from his Nadziranim.

Then they started walking again.

2

Qinefer crouched low behind a scraggly bush and aimed her crossbow carefully. A year ago she might have found the weapon almost too heavy to handle, but she'd grown strong out here, helping Lone Wolf and the others they'd gathered around them rebuild the foundations of the Kai Monastery. She was dressed in a sleeveless grey woollen tunic -- a far cry from the

splendid garments she'd worn when she'd been Baroness of the Southlund Marches. Her tawny arms had always been strong; now they rippled with powerful muscle.

Squinting her eyes, she pulled the trigger.

Moments later there was a scream from above, and a dying Kraan was dropping towards the ground, a bolt through its head, its wings fluttering futilely even after its death.

She derived no pleasure from the killing. Over the past few months, she and Lone Wolf had taken it in turns to perform the chore of slaying the spying Kraan that still occasionally came to swoop above the monastery, doubtless recording the progress of the rebuilding and report back to their masters in Helgedad. During recent weeks the numbers of Kraan had decreased; she wasn't certain if this was because the depredations of her own and Lone Wolf's archery had deterred the Darklords or if, simply, the forces of Evil had become less interested in the Kai's activities. She suspected the latter.

Lone Wolf had initiated her into the Order of the Kai, and now she possessed many of the skills he had discovered within himself; moreover, she had discovered how to draw out her own innate skills. She sensed he was currently on the far side of the monastery, speaking with some of the young volunteers who'd come to help them, his face grinning now he'd heard the Kraan's death-screach. He was showing the acolytes how to chip away the angles of a misshapen rock in order to convert it into a neat cuboid. The ease with which he moved among the young people, patting them affectionately on the shoulder whenever they did something well, could hardly have been more different from his attitude a year or more ago; then, he'd bullied and intimidated the youngsters around him into doing as he commanded. Now they did what he asked because they wanted to help him. The change could hardly have been more profound. He'd been little more than an animal then: it had taken the combined efforts of Banedon and Alyss to talk sense into him.

And then, of course, there had been his foray into Kalte, the polar continent where Vonotar the wizard had attempted to create a new force of Evil in order to attack Sommerlund. Lone Wolf had rediscovered his true, Kai self during those weeks; he'd become the friendly, smiling person she'd known before, although she was always aware of his animal self lying not far beneath the surface, holding itself in readiness for whenever he might need it again.

She'd become a labourer, where once she'd been a noble. All in all, she approved of the change in her lifestyle.

She wandered over in the direction of where the Kraan had fallen. She was certain it must be dead, but wanted to make sure: some months ago they'd assumed a Kraan had perished, only to find it dragging itself insanely into their camp in the middle of the night. An adolescent girl had lost her life before they had been alert enough to slay the crippled beast.

Good. The Kraan was indeed dead. She looked at the shattered body as it lay on a bed of pine-needles. The ground was stained with the creature's ichor. Qinefer pushed her half-drawn sword back into its scabbard and headed back towards the monastery, her crossbow slung over her shoulder. Her soft leather boots made hardly a sound on the forest floor as she walked.

As she joined the others, Lone Wolf looked up with a laugh. He saw her dark skin, her rich ringleted hair, and the power with which she moved. She poked her tongue out at him, and his smile widened.

"We decided to stop work for the day," he said, "and play a few games until the evening."

"Not samor," she said quickly.

"No. Not samor."

"And not vtovlry?"

"Not that either."

"I'm relieved." She found both games intensely tedious. When Lone Wolf insisted on playing either of them, she would retreat back into the forest or go swimming in the river.

"Just skipping stones," he said.

Qinefer nodded. Skipping stones was a game she enjoyed. Chattering eagerly, the youngsters followed herself and Lone Wolf down to the bank of the broad river, and all of them began to look for flat pebbles. She herself preferred rather heavy stones, because she found she could make them spin more rapidly. Some of the younger people opted for lighter ones, believing they'd be more likely to dance across the water. Lone Wolf was very bad at the game, and simply picked up whatever likely looking stone came to hand.

A small boy threw his first pebble. It bounced three times and then sank. His face crumpled up in dismay. Qinefer pulled him to her and gave him a firm hug. He cheered up immediately. Like all the young people on the site, he liked Qinefer: she was soft and hard in all the right places, and she knew how to tickle you so that you laughed a lot without it hurting. When he'd first come to the monastery he'd been rather overawed by Lone

Wolf and her -- all of Sommerlund knew they were heroes -- but now he thought of them as friends.

The other youngsters threw their stones, and then it was Lone Wolf's turn. The sky was getting dark and a crescent moon had appeared over the treetops behind them. The opposite bank was no more than a hazy greyness.

Once, twice . . . nine times Lone Wolf's pebble skipped over the black water. He laughed, and flexed his arms like a successful pugilist.

Qinefer adopted a pose of wounded vanity, but couldn't keep it up for long.

"I can beat that -- easy!"

The children began to shout encouragement as she put her index finger and thumb carefully around the pebble. It was quite heavy, but beautifully flat on both sides. She rubbed her little finger over the rough smoothness of the stone's lower surface, then half-crouched, drew her arm back, and let fly, giving the pebble an extra flip as it flew out of her hand.

Lone Wolf, Qinefer and the youngsters saw the stone skip eleven times before it was lost in the gloom. They heard it hit the water three or four more times. She was just poking her tongue out at Lone Wolf for a second time that evening, laughing all over her face -- as was he -- when there was a sudden yell from the far side of the river.

"Hoy! What are you trying to do? Kill me?"

The little group was immediately silent.

"A shepherd or a herder perhaps?" wondered Lone Wolf, trying to see the far side of the river through the darkness.

"Sorry!" shouted Qinefer. "We didn't know there was anyone there!"

"I did!" came the voice.

"Did my stone hit you?"

"No! Well, not much! Glancing blow on the shoulder!"

"Who are you?" cried Lone Wolf.

"My name's Cloud Maker! I'm looking for the Kai Monastery -- what there is of it!"

"It's over here," the children chorused.

Lone Wolf realized it was far too late tonight for anyone to swim the river. The man would have to camp on the far bank. He shouted out as much.

"I remember you, friend!" he added.

"And I remember you!"

On the way back to the site of the monastery, Lone Wolf reminded Qinefer of the innkeeper he'd met in Ragadorn. The two were moving easily

through the trees, their Kai powers enabling them to keep perfect balance even on the rough ground. From time to time one or other would have to reach out to steady a youngster who had half-tripped on a fallen branch or a clump of bracken. Lone Wolf watched her out of the edge of his eyes as she moved confidently in the faint moonlight. She'd grown taller -- she was now almost as tall as he was -- and there was a firm grace about everything she did.

He was glad to have her as a friend. He was glad not to have her as a foe.

3

For a moment it was as though Alyss were being tortured by white-hot knives, and then she found herself in another place altogether.

Long before, the Gods Ishir and Naar had forged a crucible to represent the truce between them, the balance of Good and Evil. The truce had been short-lived. The vessel had become Aon, a universe of untold billions of worlds. Naar had very soon started out on his campaign of bringing Evil to supremacy on those worlds. Ishir and Kai fought against the God of all Darkness as best they could. At the time when the crucible had been created, some scraps of spirit had been left over, and those scraps had become the being called Alyss.

During her infinitely long lifetime she had been in many worlds in many different universes. She had seen empires rise and fall, green fields become sterile wastes, and worlds be conquered by the forces of Evil. The last of all the worlds on which she had dwelled was Magnamund, and she was content that -- for at least a while -- it was safe from the forces of Darkness. So now she wanted to return through all of eternity to witness her own birth into the universe of Aon.

She didn't know for sure exactly why she wanted to do this. Curiosity was certainly an important factor, but there was far more to it than that. She had always known that in this universe she could change the course of the future only a little, and that of the past hardly at all. This state of affairs seemed to her very unsatisfactory. If she could be there at the time she was born, perhaps she might be able to alter things more extensively, so that the whole history of Aon would be different. The notion was very exciting to her, and at the same time puzzling. Should she succeed in redirecting the course of history, would Aon exist at all? And would all of the billions of people who had died because of the onslaught of Evil never suffer those

agonies?

She wished that she knew.

And she would, she hoped, know once she had witnessed the birth of Aon, and of herself.

She found herself in the middle of a vast, greasily grey plain. Far in the distance mountains stabbed against the sky; closer to her was a great tract of diseased-looking grassland. She was, she realized, standing on the surface of time itself. If she walked in one direction she would be going into the future; if she walked in the other she would be going into the past.

There was something *wrong* about this plain -- not just the colour -- and it took her a little while to work out what it was.

There were no birds, no insects -- nothing that moved. She could see trees, a long way away, but every time she focused directly on them they melted away from her sight. She reached behind her to pat Garna, just to reassure herself he was still there, and was pleased to find the dustworm's cold little head. At least she would have someone to talk to.

"You're going a little further than just to Ragadorn, little friend," she muttered. "But don't worry. We'll be safe . . . I think. And when you get home you really *will* be the most important dustworm in all the Wildlands -- or anywhere."

The sky was completely black, and yet the plain was well lit. She kicked off her silver-coloured boots and felt the blades of cold grey grass between her toes.

"It's not going to be dangerous, is it?" squeaked Garna. "I really didn't like it, a few minutes ago, when we travelled to this place."

"Danger? Certainly not!" she lied glibly. It had been a while since she had told anyone a flat lie, and the experience was delicious, as if she had been extremely thirsty and had now drunk a tumbler of icy cold milk. She sighed her relief. Then, almost immediately, she felt repentant: it was reasonable to deceive a human being or any other halfway intelligent creature, but somehow wrong to do the same to a dustworm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have said that. I wasn't really thinking. I just don't know if there's going to be any danger or not. I don't think there will be. I can't sense anything living anywhere near us -- even the grass is dead -- so we should be safe."

She wished there could be the slightest puff of wind to create some sort of movement in the bleak expanse. She waved her hands accordingly, semaphoring instructions to the blank non-sky.

Nothing happened.

She stamped her foot, trying to persuade herself she wasn't feeling petulant.

"You're feeling petulant," piped Garna.

"All right," Alyss admitted. "I am. But only a little bit, and with a certain degree of justification. I hadn't realized that things might be a little different here from the way that they are in the . . . other worlds."

"But . . ."

"Be quiet a moment. I need to concentrate."

She sat down on a bump on the surface of time and thought. If the powers which she had come to take for granted in Aon were not available to her in this new dimension, perhaps the two of them really *could* be in danger. Only moments ago she had used her senses to probe the area around her for living creatures, and had been reassured to find no response. Now she worried. Could her senses be misleading her?

Ishir, she thought, *help me*.

There was no reply from the Goddess -- no cool voice speaking in her mind -- and now that silence terrified her. *Ishir* was in a way her mother and, although at times the two of them quarrelled, all through the infinite time since Alyss had been reified in this particular universe, she had been able to call on *Ishir* for help.

Now there was nothing.

Ishir, she realized miserably, had not yet been born in this dimension.

She made her mind up swiftly. She would return to Magnamund. The quest to witness her birth would have to be left undone -- it had been a silly idea anyway. She knotted her knuckles and wished her way back through the barrier between the dimensions.

Again nothing happened.

She was still sitting on a hummock beneath that baleful non-sky.

"I think, friend," she said, "that we're going to be here for a long time."

Despite her misery, she giggled over what she'd just said. "Long time" was a less than adequate description: she was confronting an infinity of time.

"Long enough for me to catch some sleep?" inquired Garna.

She laughed again.

"Long enough for you to sleep many times over. We -- I -- must walk to the creation of Aon, because we'll find *Ishir* there. She'll help me return to . . . where we were."

Alyss hoped so. How many miles -- billennia -- would she have to walk before reaching the creation of Aon? It could be an infinite distance, and take her an eternity of years. She wasn't certain whether or not she could die -- it was a possibility that had scarcely crossed her mind before -- but Garna's lifespan was likely to be only a few years. Or was it? If the "rules" governing this dimension were so very different that she couldn't even control the wind, perhaps the humblest dustworm could live forever.

"Which way do you think I should start walking?" she asked. She threw away the boots that had been sitting beside her feet. Here it was neither cold nor hot, so she felt no need of them. She considered discarding her clothes for exactly the same reason, but decided for the moment to retain them -- perhaps they might be useful at some later stage. Besides, she thought they rather flattered her figure.

"Which way?" Alyss repeated. "I want you to tell me, little friend."

"All directions are as good as each other -- or as bad as each other. The Wildlands had many attractions, you know. Not all of them immediately apparent to the casual visitor, that's true, but even so . . ."

"I'll take you back to your home if it's the last thing I do," Alyss said. *Which it quite possibly might be*, she thought.

"Then go whichever way you want," said Garna. "All ways from here must lead to the past, even though, if you wanted them to, they could take you to the future instead. If you look at it from the correct angle, you see, time's the same in both directions."

The dustworm shuffled around inside her hood, making itself more comfortable.

"Wherever you go," Garna said in his high voice, sounding as if he were about to yawn, "your steps will finally take you to the past, where Ishir is."

Alyss shrugged; there was a little squeak of protest from behind her neck. In this desolate place, every possible route looked equally unappealing to her. She plucked up a blade of the slithery grass and let it fall. There was no wind, but the shaft twisted in the air and spun slowly away towards her right.

Towards her right she would go, then.

Not allowing herself any time to think about the logic of her decision, she jumped to her feet and started walking quickly in that direction. She tried to hum a cheering little song she'd learnt a thousand years ago in an abattoir on a world an unseeable distance away from Magnamund. The lyrics

were not in the best taste, which was why the song always made her so happy as she sang it.

But it wasn't making her happy at the moment.

She looked around her at the grey-greenness, at the endless gloomy plain of non-grass and the trees that were really there, whatever her eyes told her, and realized that in truth there wasn't, right now, very much for her to be happy about.

The song died on her lips.

She plodded on for a few more paces, hating the sensation of the oily grass pressing against the soles of her feet.

The explosion caught her quite by surprise, throwing her thrashing backwards.

4

Cloud Maker joined them quite early the next morning, when the sky was still a greeny-orange because of the dawn. They were seated eating hot, spiced meat around an open fire that one of the adolescents had lit while the day had still been dark. Qinefer was laughing, her mouth full, at a remark of Lone Wolf's when the heavy man lumbered into the clearing; at once she was on her feet, sword drawn.

"He's a friend, Qinefer," said Lone Wolf quietly, tugging at her arm.

She looked at the newcomer with revulsion. In the dim light, the complicated pattern of tattoos on his head made him seem as if he were suffering from some sort of terrible skin disease. He grinned uncertainly at them both, and then his mouth opened more broadly as Lone Wolf leapt to his feet and embraced him about the shoulders.

"Well met, well met," said Lone Wolf.

"And the same to you, young friend," said the innkeeper. He was drippingly wet after his swim across the river.

He gazed with appreciative lechery at Qinefer's legs. She stared back blankly.

"What brings you here?" asked Lone Wolf, not noticing the exchange. "Come and have some breakfast and get dry." He ushered Cloud Maker towards the warmth of the fire.

"A friend of yours told me I should come," said the big man, ponderously lowering himself to sit on the dry grass and accepting a platter covered with steaming meat.

Lone Wolf was startled.

"A friend? Who?"

"This meat's good. Can I have some more, please?"

A young boy filled Cloud Maker's plate again.

"Hmmm," said the large man, the tattoos on his great bald dome flexing as he chewed. "It was a young girl. Something odd about her, I thought as soon as I saw her, but she paid for her drink and, as far as I'm concerned, that meant that she was welcome to my tavern. Rules are rules, after all. Said her name was Alyss, and I believed her. Came around six or more months ago and told me you needed her help. Convinced me, too, she did, so I sold the inn and came here."

"Alyss!" hissed Lone Wolf.

He looked at Qinefer perplexedly. She looked straight back at him, obviously equally mystified.

"But why?" said Lone Wolf. "Why should she think we'd be needing your help?"

Cloud Maker took his time over his next mouthful of food, which was enormous. Finally he stopped eating and explained to Qinefer about how he had spent his early years as an acolyte of the Order of the Kai, but had eventually reneged on his oaths and instead become a humble innkeeper in Ragadorn. Even so, he'd still considered himself to be in some way allied with his old Order, and had given covert assistance to many Kai Lords who had found themselves washed up in that sleazy city. Lone Wolf, who knew all this already, nodded impatiently at the end of every sentence.

"And then," concluded Cloud Maker, "this young slip of a girl minced into the North Star and told me that, because there were so few Kai still left alive, it was my duty to come here and use my pitiful powers to help you against the forces of Evil. I don't think anyone else could have persuaded me to do so, and I'm still not quite sure how it came to happen, but here I am."

Lone Wolf had to hide a smile. People often found themselves doing things Alyss asked them to, and then afterwards wondered why they had.

"How can you help us?" he said thoughtfully.

He was asking the question of himself rather than Cloud Maker, but the heavy man immediately answered: "I'm strong. You know that. I can lift a stone that it'd take three of your lads and lasses here" -- a not unfriendly indicative nod of the head -- "to carry. If I can't do anything else, at least I can do that."

"Yes," said Qinefer. For the first time since Cloud Maker had so abruptly appeared in the clearing she was beginning to sound remotely

amicable. "Yes, at the very least you could do that. But I don't think Alyss would have sent you to us just to haul rocks. She must have had some other reason. Didn't she give you any kind of a clue?"

Suddenly she was scrabbling away to her side, grabbing her crossbow. Cloud Maker moved as if to protect himself, then realized her eyes were no longer on him.

Moments afterwards there was an inhuman scream from far above them. A little later there was a crashing in the undergrowth a few tens of yards off to Qinefer's left.

The sounds persisted.

"Blast," she said, standing. She didn't seem much concerned. "I'll have to go and finish it off."

Cloud Maker looked significantly at Lone Wolf as the woman melted into the shadows. "*I* couldn't do that," he said, clearly impressed.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I could, either." Lone Wolf offered the huge man some more meat, but Cloud Maker shook his head. "Qinefer takes a little getting used to, but I'm sure you'll come to like her."

"That's what I thought about the Alyss girl," said Cloud Maker glumly. "And look at me now.

"Here."

5

In Helgedad itself there was tumult. The largest building in the entire city -- the fortress -- was a block of reddish-black granite that seemed to stretch indefinitely towards the sky; its colour echoed the light reflected from the oily clouds above. The rest of the city seemed, by contrast, to be rather like a collection of insects scuttling around the feet of a large animal: they were small buildings, hugging close to the ground and housing regiments of Drakkarim, Helghast and Giaks. The numbers of these had been vastly depleted by Zagarna's ill fated attack on Sommerlund. Many had died during the war; of those who had survived the return to the Darklands, many more had been slaughtered on the Darklords' instructions as traitors to Naar. Even now the remnants of those condemned were still being consumed by eager Zlanbeast and Kraan.

Haakon, the Lord of Aarnak, was seated on the great throne reserved for the Archlord, even though he had yet to be recognized as such. Soon the other Darklords would be here, and he would be forbidden to occupy this symbol of Archlordship, but for now he was safe in his arrogance. The walls

of the huge hall were blue-hot and gelatinous; it was as if they wished to hold no fixed form, but instead press in upon the Darklords' innermost chamber.

He had removed his helmet. Here in Helgedad, where the heat was sufficient to set a mortal on fire, the brightness enough to blind one, and the air foul enough to asphyxiate one, he felt secure. The helmet lay beside the throne. It was made of metal and rounded over the head; glass-covered slits had been made for his eyes, and at the front of the helmet was a curious pyramidal artefact that enabled him to breathe the vile air of the rest of Magnamund.

His eyes glowed red as he looked down on his faithful Nadziranim.

"You have your instructions," he said flatly. His voice was quite clear. The flickering shapes of his wizards, masters of the powerful right-handed magic, shrank in upon themselves and then expanded again. They were having difficulty in recognizing his voice, now that he was no longer wearing the helmet. Normally it was a painstaking bubbling sound, filtered through the breathing equipment he usually wore; now it was a steady monotone.

Also present before him were twenty or thirty Xaghash, the sub-Darklords. They were powerful reptilian creatures, their lizard-heads decorated with a cruel spike of bone. Their clawed feet skittered uneasily on the fused-granite mosaic squares of the floor. They required the flesh of warm-blooded mortals in order to keep their strength at its greatest; since the death of Zagarna, at the hands of Lone Wolf and the Sommerswerd, they had had to make do with Giak flesh. Some of these acolytes of Haakon had already died, and others were little more than shades of their former selves. Nevertheless, they still possessed considerable powers; besides, Haakon concluded, those Xaghash that owed their allegiance to the other Darklords must be similarly depleted by the lack of mortal-meat. He was not necessarily at a disadvantage.

In addition there were Drakkarim, Vordaks and Crypt Spawn, but he ignored them. If it came to civil war, they would be useful as battle-fodder; otherwise they were of no interest to him.

One of the flame-like Nadziranim, seemingly after a consultation with its fellows, came twisting towards him; for a moment it took on the physical form of a young man resplendent in a blue bejewelled costume so that it might kneel before his throne, and then it was once more an elusive pattern of smoky light.

"Soon my fellow Darklords will be here," said Haakon. He smiled chillily, and some of the Drakkarim looked away: although their race had long ago been conquered by the forces of Evil, even now not all of them loved the methods of the Darklords. "Each of them will bring his own retinue of Nadziranim. We have little need to fear most of my fellows -- Taktaal and Gnaag, for example, are too weak to present us with any threat."

Once again the magician briefly took human form. On his fair face there was a cocky grin. He swept his coarse brown hair back from his forehead nonchalantly. "We have *no* need for fear, Darklord," he said, waving a hand loosely to show how little the matter concerned him.

"Slûtar, however, is another question," muttered Haakon forcefully. "As are Kraagenskul and Dakushna. We may need to eliminate them if I am to become the Archlord." He picked at an engraving on the right arm of the lead-grey throne; his strong fingers tore away an embossed death-head. Irritated, he threw it off to one side.

"In order to do so," Haakon continued, "you will have to combat the Nadziranim loyal to those Darklords. Do you swear you can succeed in this?"

The youth was before him again, another somewhat mocking smile on his face.

"Haakon, we are more powerful than any sorcerers ever seen on this world before us."

"Except Vonotar."

The young man looked slightly discomfited.

"Yes," he said. "Vonotar. But Vonotar is dead -- or banished into the Dazhiarn, which is much the same thing. I don't think any of your rivals could rescue him from there."

This time, although there was a little sarcasm in his tone, he didn't change out of his assumed human appearance, but instead stood still, looking at Haakon worriedly. The two of them knew, as the whole of the world now did, about Vonotar. Raised by the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star to become their foremost adept in the arts of left-handed magic, he had studied also the right-handed magic of the Nadziranim and united the two disciplines to become the most powerful sorcerer Magnamund had ever known. It had been at his instigation that the great Zagarna had attacked Sommerlund, virtually annihilating the Kai and almost extinguishing that nation before Lone Wolf -- the sole survivor of the Order of the Kai -- had retrieved the Sommerswerd from Durenor and, by the use of his own powers combined

with those of the soulstuff the sword possessed, slain the Darklord. About a year later, Lone Wolf had tracked down the wizard, who had retreated to the icy fastness of Ikaya, the principal fortress of the polar continent Kalte. Vonotar had been returned to Sommerlund and, as punishment, thrust into the Dazhiarn -- the Shadow Gate. From the Shadow Gate there could be no return.

"I agree," said Haakon. "Vonotar is no threat to us. But what of the creature called Alyss?"

The youth suddenly grinned, and sat down on one of the steps leading up to the throne.

"There again we have no fear," he said.

"Why not?" If the Darklord was infuriated by the Nadziran's impertinence in adopting this familiarity, he didn't let his face or his voice show it.

"Because," said the youth, still smiling, "she's allied herself with the forces of Good."

"Might she not be bribed by one of my" -- the next word was spoken bitterly -- "fellows?"

"No," said the Nadziran bluntly. "She will remain the foe of the Darklords until Evil has conquered Good forever."

"So . . . she will assist Good?" The Darklord was ruminative.

"Yes."

"Then might she not think to aid one of my feebler rivals, help them to destroy me? If anyone other than myself becomes Archlord, the forces of Evil will be profoundly weakened."

Haakon leant forward, staring at the youth, his eyes brightly angry.

"Yes," said the Nadziran after a long pause. "Yes, that's true."

"Imagine if she helped a weakling like Gnaag against me: what would happen then?" Bony fingers rattled on the arms of the throne.

"Then," said the youth nervously, "Gnaag might become the Archlord and you might be relegated to become nothing more than one of his minions for the rest of eternity. Except that he might lose the war against the Sommlending, which would signal the defeat of our master, Naar."

"Precisely! So we need to know her plans. I command you to discover them!"

The image of the youth melted away, and the little cloud of multi-hued smoke returned to join its fellows.

Haakon glared. Even though he himself was possessed of great

powers, he didn't have the ability to eavesdrop on the Nadziranim's silent discussion. From the way the shapes of the clouds were shifting so rapidly and extremely, he realized the debate among them must be a heated one. It was many minutes before, once again, the young man stood before him.

His human face expressed perplexity.

"Sire," he said, all trace of sardonicism now gone from his voice, "we cannot obey your command."

Haakon's fury rose. In order to control it, he spent a few seconds glancing around the blue, fleshy walls of the great hall. They pulsed softly at him. There were no windows. Light came from Giak-oil lamps scattered sparsely about the room. The overall effect, despite the brilliance of the blue, was one of gloom.

He turned back to the youth.

"Cannot?" he thundered. "Or *will* not?"

"Cannot, Your Highness." If anything the youth's expression had become even more troubled. "Something has happened that we do not understand."

"Mighty sorcerers," taunted the Darklord. "More powerful than . . ."

The Nadziran interrupted Haakon to say, almost as if thinking aloud: "She's here, and yet not here."

"Here! What? In Helgedad? Make sense of yourself."

"No . . . no, we don't think she's anywhere near Helgedad. It's nothing like that. It's just that our senses tell us she's here on Magnamund somewhere, but at the same time she's *not* here. We don't understand it. The track of her life seems to have twisted over upon itself, as it were."

The youth looked up at Haakon.

"We shall do our best to solve this mystery, Master," he said, "and as soon as we've done so we shall tell you whether or not you need fear Alyss." His face cleared a little. "But we believe she will play no part in the confrontation between yourself and the other Darklords. We cannot be sure, but this is what we believe."

Haakon's eyes flared. Naar had given the gift of patience to few of the Darklords, and Haakon had not been one of them. He was frustrated, and yet he knew his Nadziranim were serving him as best they could; besides, he had no way of destroying them, even had he chosen to do so. He must accept the situation.

"Go!" he shouted. He flung one arm around to indicate not only the Nadziranim but also the others of his attendants gathered there. "Go, all of

you, go!"

They left the room hurriedly.

The Darklord rested his chin in the palm of his claw-like hand and brooded. Before he could make his bid for ultimate power he must be completely certain nothing unforeseen -- absolutely nothing -- could possibly impede him. The thought that Alyss might conceivably choose to play a part in the proceedings was like an itch he was unable to scratch.

He sat motionless for many hours. His body was hideous, the intestines being mounted in a transparent sack in front of his torso. This made his head -- which few had ever seen, because he rarely doffed his helmet -- seem all the more incongruous.

The Nadziran who had adopted human form had mimicked the face of his master.

3

Not Quite So Tall as Gnaag

1

Gnaag had been right: the other Darklords had chosen to make grandiloquent displays of their individual might. As he and his small band approached the edge of the red-hot lake of lava surrounding Helgedad they could watch the arrival of Slûtar with his cohorts. Countless hundreds of Zlanbeast and Kraan covered the sky like an ugly stain, and the noise was almost deafening. Each of the flying creatures bore a burden -- a Drakkar, a Xaghash, a Vordak, one or even two Giaks, all of them heavily armed. Wispy Nadziranim fluttered in and around the formation. At the head of this huge aerial army, mounted on a mighty Imperial Zlanbeast, its wingspan almost forty feet, rode the Darklord himself.

He was not quite so tall as Gnaag or even Haakon, but he was much bulkier, so that even his powerful mount needed all its great strength to bear him. His body was covered in luxurious blond fur, which whipped and snapped in the shrill wind as he urged the Zlanbeast on to even greater feats of speed. His wide mouth seemed to fill most of his face, so that the eyes were crushed up towards the corners. He had a larger pair of eyes, one at the front of each shoulder, and these flitted fretfully from side to side, observing everything yet showing few signs of intelligence. Remaining open even when he slept, these were linked to a secondary brain in his chest, which sifted the information from them and then relayed anything it considered relevant on to his primary brain. He had a long and very thick coiled tail that twitched seemingly uncontrollably. Like the rest of his body it was covered in long fair hair. It was powerfully muscled: when he uncoiled it in battle it could move so quickly as to be almost invisible, crushing opponents on every side.

Gnaag allowed his eyes to change so that the image of Slûtar became as clear to him as if it were close by.

He smiled again.

Yes, this was the Darklord who would challenge Haakon for the throne of Evil. Almost certainly one of them would succeed.

Gnaag was divided in his own mind as to which of them would win out in the forthcoming war of words. His inclination was publicly to support Slûtar, who seemed to be the more stupid of the two. Gnaag would have to bide his time as the Darklords' new leader repeated all the mistakes that

Zagarna had made, but in the end he would replace him. And then he would be able to follow his own plan to wrench Magnamund back from the shores of Good.

Naar would be pleased with him.

2

Even as she fell, bouncing end-over-end across the ground, Alyss remembered Garna, and she held up her hands behind her to try to protect him. She saw a rapid sequence of neutral colours as she rolled -- grey, brightness, black, brightness, grey again . . . For the first time in millennia she was feeling physical pain, as the ground hammered against her limbs. She tried to pull her elbows tight in towards her body while still using her hands to shield Garna from the worst of the impacts. Her ears were so filled with the din of the explosion that she wondered if she would ever hear again.

Or, come to that, live again.

Her mind was in utter confusion. How long had this been going on? It seemed that for hours now she had been hurtling across the plain, spinning uncontrollably like a child's ball. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend that none of this was happening, but she couldn't ignore the buffeting of the ground as she bumped painfully across it.

The blades of the grass were soft, but because of the speed with which she was being spun across it their tips were biting into her flesh, cutting her.

Suddenly the pell-mell tumbling stopped. Her buttocks rammed against a tree, sending a shock up her spine so that she curled around and screamed. Forgetting for a moment that Garna even existed, she clutched at her back, massaging some relief into it.

The bruised muscles responded slowly, but after a while she felt capable of sitting up, with her back resting against the coarseness of the trunk. Her rear end was still tender, but she found she was able to look around her. Thank Ishir the terror was over of being totally out of control of the actions of her own body.

Except that the tree trunk didn't exist.

Alyss discovered this some time after she'd got her breathing back under control. Garna was whimpering at her neck, and she told him tartly to shut up, while at the same time admitting silently to herself that she was glad he was still alive. She put her hands about her ears, and stared gloomily at her feet, wondering if she was about to find out what it was like to cry. Her feet were together and her knees apart, so that from her point of view her

legs formed a diamond-shaped frame through which she could see the gloomy grass. Ever since her birth -- her true birth, long before Ishir and Naar had brought Aon into existence -- she had been shielded from pain and from all the sufferings of mortals . . . although, even so, she'd almost died once. She'd always had a rather unsympathetic view of the way mortals were so fragile, and the way they complained about their sufferings so loudly. Now that she herself had experienced bruising -- and, most ignominiously, bruising all over this exquisitely designed body -- she was beginning to reconsider some of her earlier opinions.

She decided she wouldn't cry after all, and instead turned her eyes towards the black emptiness of the sky. *Ishir*, she thought, *if you can hear me, please take me away from this place. Pain is so boring. I don't want to be able to feel it any more.*

The Goddess was silent. So was Garna.

Alyss looked around her, on the basis that there might be something in the landscape that would cheer her up. What she saw was not inspiring: just the sight of endless miles of grey-greenness stretching out towards the horizon, where the oddly spiky hills stood.

"I'm not very happy," said Garna.

"That makes two of us," Alyss muttered.

She wondered if she was ready yet to push herself up to her feet. She decided to put the moment off for just a little longer, and started to look all around again, as a justification for delaying the moment she would have to force her aching body to stand up. It was then that she noticed the tree trunk she'd been leaning against didn't exist.

Earlier she'd seen how, every time she focused her eyes on the trees in this desolate place, they had melted away from her vision. Now she found that, if she swivelled her body around to look directly behind her, she could see the bole of the tree for only a few seconds before it shimmered and vanished. She concentrated her vision in an attempt to make the tree reappear, but the only result was that she started to have a headache.

"Can you see the tree, Garna?" she said.

"Not from down here," the dustworm whispered from the depths of her hood. "I don't much like trees. They . . ."

"Oh, don't be so silly. Have a look."

She felt Garna wriggling around, and then his little head was above her collarbone.

"What about the tree?" he asked.

"Can you see it?"

"Yes. We're only a couple of feet away from it. It doesn't look like a very friendly tree to me. I think we should leave it well alone."

He moved to withdraw his head.

"But you can *see it*?"

"Of course I can," Garna said. "Can't you?"

"Not really."

Alyss's silver costume was smeared all over with streaks of a revoltingly slimy grey mud. She glanced at her breeches, and then decided not to glance again. She knew it was a vain gesture, but she tried to get rid of the worst of the filth by wiping it off and then rubbing her hands against the grass-like stuff. If anything, she made herself look even worse. Once again she felt a prickling around her eyes and wondered if she was going to discover the experience of crying.

If she gazed at where the tree was she could see nothing. She could wave her hands in front of her, where the tree should be, and *feel* nothing. She found, though, that if she turned her back on it, and fumbled around with her arms, her palms would soon come in contact with the tree's trunk.

She let her fingers explore across the bark, feeling its various contusions and scars. She closed her eyes again to keep out the depressing sight of the light-sucking non-sky.

What her fingers were tracking felt like the trunk of a middle-aged tree.

Yet Garna could see it, and she couldn't. Having been able for eternity to do things that other people found impossible, she now found herself inferior to a humble dustworm. He would have to be her guide as they crossed the plain. And, if she was unable clearly to see trees, how many other things -- even predators -- might she be unable to see?

"Garna," she said, pulling herself wearily to her feet and trying to work out the direction in which they'd decided she should walk.

"Yes?"

"I'm very glad I became a friend of yours."

3

Haakon was Darklord of Aarnak, a fortress-city only a few tens of miles to the east of Helgedad; it was a place as bleak as any on the ash-covered plains of the Darklands, but a rich source of ore. There he ruled with a cruelty unknown anywhere else in Magnamund -- indeed, he hoped, anywhere else

in Aon. Even the most bloodthirsty of the spawn who formed his army secretly wished they could leave him to join a different Darklord. All of them lived in a constant state of terror -- which was exactly Haakon's scheme. Others of the Darklords might attempt to induce loyalty in their followers by various means, but Haakon, through sheer ruthlessness, held together his cohorts by fear. If a Giak dropped a sword during a minor parade, its instant sentence would be to be pegged out for the delectation of the Kraan and Zlanbeast -- which creatures were themselves far from immune from similarly severe punishments. Even the Xaghash that served in his court cowered and cringed whenever he was near: his wrath was legendary and easily kindled, his vengeance was swift.

There was no appeal.

Yet now he found himself in a position where he must show cooperation and even a certain measure of civility to those of his slaves he had brought with him from Aarnak to Helgedad.

His apartments in the capital were directly beneath the Archlord's Hall. The walls were of sliced and polished granite: the black surfaces of the great slabs reflected light almost like mirrors. White and yellow crystals gleamed in their smooth surfaces.

He had called his Helghast and Drakkarim here, and they had come, trembling. Several hundred strong, they filled the main chamber of his staterooms.

He strode from one side of the chamber to the other. Sixty paces this way, and then sixty paces back again. He was wearing his helmet, and the eye-slits were a fiery red. The assembled creatures quailed.

"Sit!" he suddenly shouted, his voice bubbling through the grid at the front of his helmet.

One Drakkar was slow to settle itself down onto the glass-cold floor, and it was with difficulty that Haakon restrained himself from slaughtering the creature at once.

"All of you," he said more quietly, once they had settled, "can pass yourself off as humans -- at least for a while."

They nodded obediently, and his eyes shone even more hotly than before.

"Then that is to be your task."

Again they all nodded.

"I order you to go out into Magnamund. I order you to burrow your way into the courts of every country in this world and work for the cause of

Evil."

Still he was pacing relentlessly from side to side of the room, locking the fingers of one hand into those of the other, releasing, then locking again. His exposed intestines followed the rhythm of his hands.

There was a certain sense of restlessness among the assembly. The Drakkarim knew that only in poor light could they deceive humans for long. The Helghast could use mental powers to make mortals believe they looked human, but they were soon betrayed by their innate bloodlust. Haakon was, in effect, sentencing them all to death. And yet it would be a death more kindly than any they would receive at his hands, should they choose to protest.

"Tell them," said the Darklord loudly, the echoes of his voice echoing around the room, "tell the rulers of the lands of Magnamund that the spawn of the Darklands are their friends, that only through dealing death to the Sommlending can their nations be freed."

Some of the more intelligent Drakkarim were baffled. Surely all the mortals in Magnamund knew the spawn were their implacable foes?

"Go among the poor people," continued the Darklord, oblivious, "and tell them the same. Many are starving, suffering under the yoke of their rulers. They will believe you. They will help you achieve my aim."

He stopped striding and looked around at them.

"It will not be easy. Many of you will perish. But we must do this if, in the years to come, we are to conquer this world for the one who is master of us all. Eat away from within, my slaves; then, when we attack, we shall be fighting against armies of straw."

For a few moments there was no sound except the wheeze of his breathing through the grille.

Then:

"Do not fail me," said the Darklord.

4

Months passed.

Qinefer grew to accept Cloud Maker, and he grew to accept her. Lone Wolf watched the whole process with amusement. The burly innkeeper had received several shocks during the past year. He had assumed, on first meeting Alyss, that she was nothing more than a precocious child: the very fact that he was now here at the monastery, helping them, showed how wrong Cloud Maker had been. Qinefer, who had decided on first sight that

Cloud Maker was nothing more than a crass boor, now laughed at his jokes. The three of them had become a tightly knit team, and they were drawing the youngsters along behind them. Cloud Maker even became quite good at skipping stones, although no one was ever able to equal Qinefer's skill.

From time to time Qinefer would slope off with her crossbow and shoot down another Kraan. The youngsters cheered each time she was successful, but for her own part she looked regretful. She despised killing: she resented the fact that it was necessary. Yet other times she would be laughing with Lone Wolf, Cloud Maker and the rest of their band as they made comprehensive fools of themselves, dancing around the fire or singing idiotic songs after the evening meal. Occasionally Lone Wolf would look at her with worry in his eyes, wondering what was going on inside her mind, but most of the time he just accepted and enjoyed her presence.

Then the Giak arrived.

They'd long ago stopped posting guards at night: it didn't seem necessary any more, now that the forces of the Darklords had been so thoroughly beaten off.

But one night, late in the spring of MS5053, Cloud Maker was woken by the sound of cracking twigs.

He was instantly alert, reaching for his sword and touching his other hand to the shoulder of Lone Wolf, slumbering nearby. The fire was no more than a soft glow of dark red embers.

Lone Wolf, too, was immediately ready for combat.

"Someone near," whispered Cloud Maker.

"I hear that," responded Lone Wolf.

They circled away in opposite directions from the fire, moving silently across the beaten grass. The moon gave them hardly any light, so the grass looked black. Soon they were standing on opposite sides of the clearing, Cloud Maker with his sword drawn, Lone Wolf with the Sommerswerd still sheathed in order to hide its golden light.

They waited tensely.

The youngsters were slightly protected by the partly completed walls of the monastery, but Qinefer was in open view, sleeping on rugs close to the remnants of the fire.

More crashings from within the forest.

Cloud Maker was moving his sword from side to side, slicing the air. To Lone Wolf he looked like nothing more than a greyish blur against the blackness of the trees.

Suddenly there was a Giak between them, and both men raised their swords and charged towards it. It darted away in the direction of the fire, moving much more quickly than any human being could hope to do.

Towards the fire.

Towards Qinefer.

Lone Wolf screamed, feeling the bloodlust rise instantly inside him. The bright glow of the unsheathed Sommerswerd lit up the whole of the clearing, so that Cloud Maker had to put up a hand to shield his eyes.

The Giak was standing by the fire, green saliva oozing from its mouth.

"I . . . you . . . friend."

"Carag!" exclaimed Lone Wolf.

"I . . . Carag . . . yes."

Cloud Maker was looking around wildly. All of the Sommlending had been instructed since birth to destroy Giaks on sight -- at least, to try to destroy them, because Giaks were vicious opponents. Yet here was Lone Wolf showing signs of comradeship towards one. Moreover, Qinefer had just rolled over, opened sleepy eyes, and said slurredly: "Hello, Carag."

But then she sat up suddenly and a smile covered her face. "Hello, Carag," she said again, this time in a far warmer tone of voice.

"This is a man called Cloud Maker," explained Lone Wolf slowly, beckoning the two towards each other, "and this is a Giak called Carag. Both of you are my friends, and so I'd like you to be friends with each other."

The two were obviously mutually suspicious. Cloud Maker declined to return his sword to its scabbard; Carag's right paw stayed in the near vicinity of the pommel of his own evil-looking, black serrated blade.

Humans and Giaks had slaughtered each other ever since, nearly two thousand years ago, the first Giaks had been spawned in the dungeons of Helgedad. The Giaks had been designed for one thing only: killing, although they also served as food for the spawn and the Darklords, and the oil extracted from their greenish flesh had many uses, especially for lighting. They had, at best, rudimentary intelligence, and without exception they were the sworn foes of all mortals.

No, not without exception.

Not quite.

The exception was Carag. If he would not have been the first to admit that his intelligence was limited, if asked, this was only because it would have taken him some time to formulate the answer. Yet he was far more aware than the average Giak. Some years earlier he'd been taken over by the

treacherous magician Vonotar, who had bent Carag to his will. At last, in Ikaya, the frigid capital of Kalte, Carag had realized that his future would look better if he aligned himself with Lone Wolf and, by extension, the forces of Good. He'd helped convict Vonotar and was now, apparently, prepared to assist Lone Wolf in other ways.

"What's brought you here, Carag?" asked Qinefer. She was looking at him rather as she might look at a favoured pet.

"I . . . got to . . . bring . . . warning . . . you."

The Giak dropped down beside the dimming fire, put his hand into it and pulled out a dully glowing coal, which he ate tranquilly.

"What warning?" This time it was Lone Wolf who spoke.

"I . . . I forget."

"Tell us!" shouted Cloud Maker, raising his sword again; but Lone Wolf put up an arm to fend off the blow.

"Carag will tell us as soon as he can," Lone Wolf said mildly. "In the meantime, friend, have you eaten? We have some meat."

"I . . . hungry," growled Carag.

"I . . . sleepy," parodied Qinefer affectionately, rolling herself up in her rugs and turning her face away from the fire. "See . . . you tomorrow . . . Carag."

4

A Welcome to Barrakeesh

1

Banedon had never travelled outside Sommerlund before; now he was beginning to wonder if he wouldn't have been wiser to forgo the venture for the whole of his life. His journey to Vassagonia had not enamoured him of the idea of travel. His ship had sailed from Holmgard through the Gulf of Durenor to reach Port Bax; Banedon had been seasick throughout most of his waking hours, and even more unpleasantly ill the rest of the time. They had stopped over for a couple of days in the Durenese port; his stomach revived a little, but he found the city unpleasantly alien and therefore rarely strayed more than a few hundred yards from the hostelry in which they were staying. He had had to endure the taunts of his fellow-travellers, all of whom had taken this route many times before.

Next they had embarked on a ferry down the Rymerift. This was a great gash formed millions of years ago by geotectonic forces; in places up to ten miles wide, it separated Durenor from the mainland of Northern Magnamund. In places it was spanned by gigantic stone bridges that had been built thousands of years before. Banedon would have been impressed by their architecture had he seen them; instead he'd stayed below-decks, finding the furious rushing of the Rymerift's water every bit as disconcerting as the rough waves of the Gulf of Durenor.

The ferry, after leaving the Rymerift, had come to the Kuri Sea, where the waves were considerably more violent than they had been in the Gulf of Durenor. Several fellow-passengers had told Banedon this; he had been barely conscious of the fact himself, his days and nights spent in a relentless torture that was like a black blot filling most of his mind, leaving him no spare mental capacity with which to think about anything else. One kind soul -- he never discovered the woman's name -- had fed him a few spoonfuls of a thin nutritious gruel. Shortly afterwards, he'd asked the passenger not to repeat the experiment.

Several eternities later their ship reached Barrakeesh, the capital and principal port of the Empire of Vassagonia. Banedon was not immediately aware of the fact; it was some hours before he noticed that the world wasn't rocking from side to side. He was awakened from his torment by the harsh cries of the gulls that swooped around the fishing vessels in the port as they unloaded their harvests.

Banedon blearily gathered together his meagre possessions -- a small bag containing assorted herbs and underwear (he checked inside the bag and discovered gloomily that they were now very assorted indeed), a few books, a staff and his robe. He fumbled his way into the latter, wishing he could have greater control over his limbs.

Through the filthy porthole he could make out only a smeared blur. For his first sight of Barrakeesh he would have to drag himself up the companionway onto the main deck.

A couple of the rungs were missing, and this added to the falteringness of his progress. In the end he gripped the top of the bag between his teeth and tucked the books under his left arm, then threw himself forwards, rung by rung, grabbing with his right hand, until at last he was able to crawl out onto the deck.

"Sleepy baby's been a-wakin' then," said a rich voice.

Banedon looked up, trying to muster as much venom into his eyes as he could. The sky was unbelievably bright; just a glance had stirred up all those feelings that had dogged his voyage.

"We been a-holdin' off gettin' thee from thee cabin these last hours, but soon'd haveta take thee ashore."

Gently the sailor helped Banedon to his feet.

"Barrakeesh id'n nicest place, not worst neider. Keep clear o' men, women, thee be all right. Friend. I help thee."

In moments Banedon found he'd been escorted down the gangplank onto the harbour's stone walkway, where people looked at him oddly as he staggered. The friendly crewman waved him farewell, then scampered back up the gangway onto the ship; within moments the gangway was being creakingly withdrawn over the stale brown water of the harbour. Banedon leant against a wall for a few minutes, watching as the ship cast anchor and began to pull away from the quay. He waved weakly, and a hand waved back.

Banedon wished he could have had the nerve to disobey the Guildmaster's instructions. Based in one of Sommerlund's major cities, Toran, the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star was a major college of the left-handed arts of magic. It had been almost destroyed during the unsuccessful war of the Darklord Zagarna against the Sommlending. Now Toran had been largely rebuilt, although there was still much to do. The Brotherhood had always assisted the Kai in any way it could, and Banedon had personally lent his magical and moral assistance to the last of the Kai, Lone Wolf. He had

rescued Alyss from the tapestry-world in which she had been incarcerated. He had felt he must have qualified for elevation to a higher level of the Brotherhood, and indeed the Guildmaster had promoted him to become an administrative assistant, albeit a lowly one. But then the Guildmaster had announced that he wished his administrative assistant to serve out the rest of his apprenticeship by travelling to Vassagonia, going among the sick people there, and helping to cure their ills.

Right now, Banedon felt it would be fine if he could just cure his own ills. And, anyway, the Guildmaster's selection of him for this mission seemed curious; in a way, Banedon was either too senior or too junior within the Brotherhood's hierarchy to be an obvious choice.

He shrugged. Who could ever puzzle out the Guildmaster's motives in anything?

He had a little money left over from the sum he'd been given to cover the fees and bribes required during the journey. He checked his pockets and was delighted to find he had more than he'd thought -- enough, certainly, to put himself up in an inn for some while. There he could enjoy a decent meal (eaten slowly, so that his stomach wouldn't rebel) and a night's lodging in a bed with clean, fragrant, crisp linen sheets, pillows soft under his head . . .

Banedon pulled himself back from sleep. If he dropped down here he'd be robbed during the night, perhaps murdered. Using his shoulders, he shoved himself away from the wall, wondering why it was he cared more about being robbed than about being murdered.

Yet he was surprised how well he suddenly began to feel as he walked along the edge of the port. The smell of the sea was a delicious tang in his nostrils: where before it had induced nothing but the bitterest nausea, now it elated him. He'd slung his bag over his shoulder and was holding his books in one hand. He looked around him eagerly, sampling the air. From time to time he paused, watching the fishermen bringing their cargoes ashore. He smiled in a friendly fashion at the people coming towards him, and a surprising number of them smiled back.

One of the ones who didn't was a tall woman dressed in black from head to foot. Banedon maintained his cheerful expression long after it had become obvious the woman would never return his greeting. He wondered for a moment why she was dressed in such sombre attire, then dismissed the worry from his mind. Soon he'd be confronting a decent meal, thank Ishir, and then a soft bed.

The first inn sign he saw was not reassuring:

THE POISONERS' ARMS

He decided to forgo this particular establishment and find an alternative. In the distance he could see another sign, although he could make out neither the picture nor the words. He trudged on until he came closer to it, then recognized the painting as a skull and crossbones and the lettering as

SERIAL KILLER INN

Serial killer in what? he wondered, finding himself reluctant to take lodgings here, either. He marched along swiftly, a little self-consciously, feeling the eyes of curious Barrakeeshans upon him, until he came to a third tavern:

NORTH STAR TAVERN

This confused him. Lone Wolf had told him all about his adventures in an inn with this name, but that had been in Ragadorn -- hundreds of miles from here. Of course, the name was not a very original one, yet Banedon felt drawn towards the place on the wholly illogical grounds that, if Lone Wolf had been well treated at an inn called the North Star Tavern, then Banedon could expect the same.

He shrugged annoyedly, told himself not to believe in superstition, and then decided to give the inn a try anyway.

The front of the long, low building had not long ago been whitewashed, so that Banedon had to screw up his eyes as he approached it. The panelled door, too, had been recently painted white, as he discovered on using his shoulder to push it open; still, he could always wash his robe later. He'd expected to find gloom, rowdiness or both, but instead he discovered that the place was comfortably furnished, well lit, clean and virtually empty. The only other person there, apart from a rather elderly barmaid, was the black-clad woman he'd seen earlier. She was sitting at a linen-covered table by one of the bay windows.

He tried not to stare at her. She must have cut around through back alleys to reach here; moreover, she must have been moving at some speed, because he'd been walking at a normal pace.

He bought himself a mug of fresh spring water with a dash of melon

and arranged for dinner and a night's lodging. Without deliberately deciding to, he presented himself beside the woman's table, politely asking her if he might join her.

She nodded sourly.

Sitting, he took a sip of his drink and looked at her. She pointedly turned to stare out through the window, offering him her profile.

She was drinking red wine frugally, as if expecting someone for whom the wait was likely to be long. Almost immediately Banedon realized this was simply a pose, but for the moment he said nothing. Instead he studied her face, the features of which were brought into prominence by the bright sunlight sparkling in through the window. Her cheeks were half-covered by the black scarf wrapped around her head, but he could see the sharp, high contour pushing out the smooth flesh beneath the hollow of her eye. Her chin was firm, yet not aggressive; her mouth generous, her nose rather too small. Her eyebrow was a thin dark line; Banedon knew little of the ways of women, but he suspected she used tweezers to pluck her brows. Her lash was long; she blinked rarely. From the bulking of the scarf around her head and shoulders, he guessed her hair was long, too; certainly it was black, to judge by the small part of it he could see fringing the top of her forehead. She seemed to be in her early thirties.

He took another sip of water.

"Are you a stranger here as well?" He was surprised he had had the courage to ask her the question.

She turned to look him straight in the face. Her eyes were so dark as to be almost black.

"I knew you'd come here," she said.

"How could you? I didn't know for certain I was coming here myself until I arrived."

He laid down his staff and his bag beside his wooden chair; his books he put defensively on the brightly white table between them, beside his pewter tankard.

She reached her pale hands towards him and, before he knew it, she had interlocked her fingers with his. He tried to pull away, but discovered she was too strong for him even to wriggle his hand.

"Listen to me, Banedon," she hissed. The pupils of her eyes seemed to grow larger. "You're in great danger in Barrakeesh. You shouldn't have come here."

"I didn't have any choice," he said in a small voice.

She paid no attention to his words. "Get out of this country as soon as you can. There are people -- people? -- yes, people here who would try to kill you."

The grip of her fingers on his tightened.

"How did you know my name? How did you know all these things? Why should I trust you? Who *are* you?"

Banedon felt perspiration running down his forehead. The first drops of it to reach his eyes stung him. He tried to remove a hand from her grasp in order to wipe the pain away, but she held him firmly.

"You *have* to trust me, if you value your life, you little fool."

Then she smiled at him. Earlier Banedon had been thinking that her face, while exquisitely contoured, was far too austere ever to be beautiful. Now that she was smiling, he saw how lovely she was.

He directed an inquiry at her mind, but all he found was a solid barrier. She was deliberately keeping thoughts from him -- either that or she was a spawn of the Darklords. He couldn't believe it.

"Who are you?" he repeated in a whisper.

For answer, she released his hands. Moving swiftly, she drew back the sleeve from her wrist.

At once Banedon understood, and he nodded quickly.

Tattooed in silver on her lower arm was the shape of a star. She was a member of his own Guild. Unlike him, she had chosen to come here incognito, rather than in the customary blue, star-embroidered robe.

"So that's why you were able to pluck my name from my mind," he said relievedly. Then he realized quite how advanced her magical prowess must be. Telepathic feats like this had become possible for him only after he had studied the second level of left-handed magic under an elderly sage called Loi-Kymar, who had died some months ago.

"Yes. I, too, knew Loi-Kymar. He died before he could teach you everything he knew."

She slapped a hand on the table. "Girl! Bring us some more to drink!"

Within moments the barmaid was beside them, bearing a goblet of red wine for the woman and for Banedon, this time, a tankard of a frothy brew he sniffed and discovered was ale.

"But I don't . . ." he began.

"Oh yes you do when you're drinking with me," said the woman firmly. She gave the girl a few coins. Then she smiled at Banedon again and touched the index finger of her right hand to the rim of his tankard. The

liquid changed its colour slightly. "It'll do you no harm now," she whispered to him, "but if you carry on drinking spring water in a place like this -- especially spring water with a dash of melon, yuk -- word will be all over Barrakeesh within minutes. Now drink up and pretend you like the stuff."

Banedon was interested to notice she touched the same finger to the rim of her goblet before she raised it.

"To be inconspicuous in this city you have to be very conspicuous indeed," she told him quickly, in the same low voice. Then she cried: "Well met, friend! A toast to all the sinful deeds we've done!"

"Together?" asked Banedon hopefully, imagining he was getting into the swing of the game.

She gave him a glance that would have curdled milk into cheese. "In your dreams, pipsqueak."

"To us!" amended Banedon as loudly as he dared. He hoped he sounded convincing.

Both of them drank deeply.

"My name," said the woman softly, putting down her goblet and wiping a smear of wine away from her upper lip, "is Jenara, and I've been here in Vassagonia for longer than a decade. The Guildmaster sent me here -- didn't he tell you that?"

"No."

She pulled in her lips between her teeth, thinking.

"That's *odd*," she said at last.

"He may have forgotten," Banedon said.

Jenara threw back her head and laughed. "*Him* forget! That old coot never forgets anything. If you've been deceived by his age and his mildness, you don't know him as well as I can see from your mind you think you do. And he never does anything unless there's some purpose to it. No, there must be some deliberate reason why he failed to tell you about me."

Her vivacity faded as she withdrew once more into contemplation.

"Why did he send *you* here?" asked Banedon tentatively.

"Hmm? Oh, yes."

She came back out of her thoughts. She raised the goblet to her mouth once more, as if its touch -- rather than the wine it contained -- would refresh her.

"Long ago," she said, "the Guildmaster began to suspect the Darklords were sending their emissaries out to infiltrate those nations that had little friendship for Sommerlund. Magador was one, the Wildlands another, and

Vassagonia a third. Of course, these weren't the only ones."

The goblet, which had been hovering near her lips, was now returned to the table; her dark eyes focused on it as if it were helping her concentrate.

"So he sent out members of the Guild to find out what was happening. They were adepts of the highest left-handed magic. The Guildmaster sent them in pairs. His idea was that they should imitate the servants of the Darklords by ingratiating themselves with the local people -- by pretending to be natives -- and then to keep a check on what was happening. My husband and I were sent here to Barrakeesh. It seemed that there wasn't anything going on -- but that was only the way it seemed. We were thinking of leaving, of going back to tell the Guildmaster his suspicions had been unfounded, when I returned home one evening to find my husband dead. It hadn't been a pretty death, and I don't want to talk about what they'd done to him."

Again the goblet rose.

"So now I knew the Guildmaster had been right," she hurried on, "and that the Darklords were indeed sending their spawn into Vassagonia. How they'd detected my husband and myself is something I just don't know -- something I'll probably never know."

"Why had you thought that the spawn weren't here?" He looked directly at her, but she turned her eyes away immediately. Clearly she still felt the pain of her husband's murder.

"We hadn't been able to detect *them*, you see," she said in a drawling voice, as if the matter were of only peripheral interest. "Magicians of our stature should have been able to 'feel' the emptiness of beings inhabited by Naar, but we hadn't done that. It was our own fault, I suppose."

Banedon let her sit in silence for a moment.

"I suppose," she repeated, so quietly he could hardly hear her. Once again she was looking sideways out through the window, as if someone dear to her might suddenly appear.

Banedon said nothing.

"We were young, you know." She spoke abruptly, startling him. "We'd been married only a few months when the Guildmaster sent us here to Barrakeesh. As far as we were concerned it was like a holiday. We didn't pay very much attention to the things going on around us."

Banedon, uncertain how to cope with the situation, reached out a hand to cover hers.

"After Findron was murdered," she said, "I began to think about my

magic rather than about my love. It was useless to hope for vengeance: the spawn are all alike, so there would be no sense in a vendetta against one of them. I decided to comb the city, seeking out the things that looked like people, but weren't. You can tell them by the cold nothingness of their souls."

Again she was looking him in the eyes.

"I've killed some of them, you know," she said. "It isn't easy, but I've done it. A Helghast disappears when it's slain; a Drakkar doesn't, and that's more difficult to deal with because you have to get rid of the body. The river holds a lot of secrets. Some of them are mine."

Her hands were shaking, and she knocked over her goblet. Fortunately there had been very little wine left in it, but still a red stain spread across the linen tablecloth. Banedon, embarrassed, called for the barmaid. Jenara's elbows were on the table, her cheeks between her hands, her eyes pressed shut. Automatically, having passed a sponge over the cloth, the barmaid brought them more to drink. This time Jenara failed to touch the rims.

She eventually controlled herself.

"Can you use a sword?" she said.

"Yes."

"Good."

"But not very well," Banedon added hurriedly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I think we're about to be attacked."

"That's inter . . . *What?*"

He spilled beer over much of the table.

Jenara leaned back with a smile.

"There's no danger, not at the moment," she said. "But if there had been, you would probably have been dead. Me? I'd have survived -- I'm good at that. The spawn don't attack me any more, because I've slain too many of them. I've become an expert at seeking them out and destroying them, so nowadays they stay well away from me. I think you ought to leave here, friend, because they're certainly not going to show you the same respect."

"Can you buy me some fresh clothes?"

Her eyebrows rose in astonishment. "Whatever for?"

"I've just realized why the Guildmaster sent me here."

2

Qinefer was the first of the mortals to wake in the morning; Carag, as a

Giak, could choose whether or not to sleep, and had decided on this particular occasion to stay awake. She looked at the remains of various forest animals scattered on the ground around his squatting figure and opted, with a shudder, to go elsewhere. The Giak's small, muddy green eyes followed her movements.

The morning light was brilliant, dazzling her. She stumbled through the forest in the direction of the river, occasionally bumping into tree trunks. She found the mild pain somehow stimulating, and began to smile. Soon she was singing, and by the time she'd reached the bank of the river, thrown off her clothes and dived in, she was whooping loudly enough to wake the birds. She felt the chilly water running across her flat stomach and the spray flying into her hair. She thrashed around for a long time, washing herself but at the same time just enjoying the sensations of the cold water and the bright air. A trout sped past her, the tip of its tail flicking her foot.

Lone Wolf turned up a while later. He grinned and threw a handful of mud at her, then hurled himself into the river. Both of them swept their hands around in great circles to splash each other. The droplets of water, refracting a multitude of colours, seemed to hang in the air for longer than gravity demanded.

After their swim they lugged themselves up onto the bank and dried themselves using their clothes. Qinefer pulled her crossbow up onto her shoulder; Lone Wolf buckled the sheathed Sommerswerd to his belt. They looked at each other and giggled like children as they made their rather painstaking way back through the trees to their camp by the site of the monastery.

Cloud Maker was just surfacing from sleep.

The big man's first sight, that morning, was the seated Giak. His instinctive reaction was to search around for his sword, which was nowhere to be found. He scowled as Lone Wolf and Qinefer, their hair still dripping, laughed at him.

A short time afterwards the youngsters emerged. Carag put up stoically with being treated as a pet, snapping at them only occasionally. The children brought eggs and a flat piece of slate on which to coddle them. Lone Wolf relit the fire and created a succession of dishes about which, as Qinefer pointed out acidly, the best that could be said was that some of them weren't too badly burnt. Carag eschewed the fodder offered to him and instead went off briefly into the woods to kill a few squirrels.

Later, a little later, and the youngsters were dragging great heavy

stones around, shouting instructions to each other. Lone Wolf, Qinefer, Cloud Maker and Carag were sitting around the fire, talking about minor matters.

At last Lone Wolf said: "Why did you come here, Carag? Can you remember what it was you wanted to warn us about?"

"I . . . can't," said the Giak.

And then: "Yes . . . now . . . I can."

3

By the time Banedon left the North Star Tavern he was a totally different person. His robe was a respectable dun brown, but on his head he wore a bright green turban decorated with an ostentatious jewel; only an expert could have told it was a cheap fake Jenara had bought in a nearby street market. He carried his staff in his right hand, hoping it looked sufficiently like that of a Vassagonian merchant that no one would query him. Jenara was hiding in the room he'd earlier engaged for the night.

It was plain to him now why the Guildmaster had sent him here. Jenara was obviously a very high-level magician, but she had become *known*. The enemy avoided her, terrified of her magical prowess, but this very fact limited her abilities to monitor their activities. A newcomer like Banedon, by contrast, they would regard as easy pickings, especially if he had no clear idea of the real reason he was here. The spawn wouldn't realize, until it was far too late for them, that Banedon -- with his ability to use the second level of left-handed magic -- was himself no mean foe.

He'd been sent to Barrakeesh as poisoned bait.

He smiled sadly.

He wished Alyss were here. He seemed to spend half his life wishing that. She'd have helped him. She was able to take the whole of reality, squeeze it this way and that, and change it -- at least a little -- according to her whims. If she were walking through the streets of Barrakeesh now, no one would see her unless she wanted them to. Instead, all he could do was his best to emulate her.

It was working, to a degree.

He could see that his muttered spells were causing most of the Vassagonians around him to ignore him completely: it was as if their vision somehow slid round the place where he happened to be. Some fixed him with a hard stare, however; each time this happened he would send out a tentative mental inquiry, wondering if it would be countered by the

nothingness of a being possessed by the great God Naar. So far, all he had discovered was that there were some people so stupid their brains were too rudimentary to be affected by any sort of psychic impulse at all. Fortunately, this also meant they were too slow on the uptake to see anything incongruous about a young magician from an alien land freely walking the streets of their capital.

Barrakeesh, Banedon eventually admitted to himself, was in many ways a magical place. All around him there was widespread evidence of poverty -- beggars, often crippled children, lined every road, and rats scuttled along the gutters; most of the buildings were in advanced stages of disrepair; women, babies under their arms, were offering themselves to passers-by for pitifully small sums of money.

Yet there was also a certain verve among the people. In the street markets -- of which there were many -- he saw men and women arguing furiously over the price of an aubergine or a chicken; once the deal had been settled, however, they would embrace each other as if they were fond siblings, and say their farewells with promises to meet again on the morrow. Small children ran among the crowds, yipping and shrieking -- and probably picking pockets.

Before he'd left the North Star Tavern, Jenara had told him that, in the previous months, more and more Drakkarim and Helghast had been gathering in Barrakeesh, but he was finding this hard to believe. Despite the misery and hunger of the poor, the city seemed quite stable: he could detect nothing of the influence of the forces of Evil. The beggars' bowls were being liberally filled with small coinage donated by passers-by -- and often there was a smile given with the coin.

He had walked the streets now for nearly two hours and hadn't once sensed anything that might indicate the presence of true Darklord Evil. The worst he'd encountered had been the necessity, a few times, of slapping away small hands from the pockets of his robe. From time to time he had looked out from the main streets up dark alleys and decided to stick to the major thoroughfares, but the same could have been said of any of the larger cities of Sommerlund.

And then he felt it.

A touch on the very fringes of his consciousness -- a cold finger of emptiness.

Somewhere near him there was one of the Darklords' spawn.

He stopped where he was, allowing busy Vassagonians to flow around

him like the waters of a stream around a rock. He put his head to one side, instinctively trying to listen, even though the sense he was using owed nothing to hearing.

Somewhere over to his right -- that was where the nothingness was coming from. But to his right there was only a row of low, flat-roofed houses.

Yes, but wait a minute: in the middle of the row there was a gash, a narrow place of shadows. It had to be an alleyway leading to a parallel street.

He'd been avoiding the alleys.

A picture came into his mind of the Guildmaster. The old man was frail and grey, more concerned with his two kittens than with deeds of courage. Yet Banedon knew what the Guildmaster would do in a circumstance like this.

Crossing the road and entering the mouth of the narrow sidestreet was one of the most difficult things he had ever forced himself to do.

Although the buildings on either side of him were not tall, their walls effectively blocked out most of the remaining sunlight, so that he found himself feeling his way forward cautiously in the gloom, sometimes tripping over heaps of garbage -- he gagged at one point when he realized that what he'd tripped over had been not a pile of rubbish but a corpse. The wall to his right seemed to be made of bricks; the one to his left was much smoother -- possibly squared blocks of stone covered by many coats of whitewash. It was hard for him to tell, because the darkness was so deep. He lurched uncertainly along the middle of the alley, cursing from time to time as he stumbled, his left hand brushing one wall as he tried to keep his balance, the knuckles of his right hand, still holding his staff, being skinned by the rough bricks every time he stumbled in that direction.

He looked upwards, then regretted the impulse. The bright sky dazzled him, so that now the darkness of the narrow passageway seemed even blacker than before.

Banedon tripped over yet another dustbin.

Even Alyss would have been impressed by his language this time.

And then suddenly he was out in the light again.

The street in which he found himself was by far the broadest he had yet seen in Barrakeesh. On either side of it were regularly placed poles bearing bowls of burning pitch, which glowed brightly, lighting up the thoroughfare. Throngs of Vassagonians, dressed in splendidly ostentatious raiment, were pushing against each other in both directions. Banedon

marvelled at the size and jewel-bedecked splendour of the turbans of some of the men; he was rather depressed by the way that the women seemed to have been condemned to wear drab, confining cloaks.

Considering the finery of the men, this must be a very rich part of the city. Presumably these were merchants, scurrying about their business. He tried to blend in as well as he could, pretending he had an urgent engagement somewhere.

No one took any notice of him.

The chilly mind was somewhere up ahead of him, he sensed. It hadn't yet detected his existence, but he was certain that if he got any closer it would do so. He hung back, moving slightly more slowly than most of the people walking in this direction; it wasn't difficult to do because everybody, men and women alike, seemed to be engaged in a race to reach their destination as soon as possible. Banedon was buffeted by elbows and knees as people shoved him aside.

Brightly lit shops were on either side of him. Earlier he would have looked at their wares with interest; now he just concentrated on tracing his way through the crowds, following the centre of coldness -- the non-mind of a Darklord spawn -- that he'd detected half an hour earlier. He was pleased to find his murmured spells were still effective: most of the people in the throng didn't even notice he was there.

After what seemed like a long while, the teeming crowd thinned. Banedon recognized he had left Barrakeesh's commercial heartland and was entering the suburbs. Here the houses were still squat and in poor repair, but they were more widely spaced, and some of them were surrounded by well tended gardens. There were few lamps, but luckily the full moon was high, so he had little difficulty finding his way. He darted between the black shadows and the patches of silver-cold light.

There was no purpose in pretence any more. If the Darklord spawn up ahead hadn't realized by now he was following, it very soon would. Banedon erected yet another mental shield, drawing on his minor knowledge of second-level magic, but even as he did so he knew the precaution was useless and that the effort was weakening him.

Left-handed magic *hurt*: that was why the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star found so few children -- however talented they were -- willing to become apprentices.

There was a wind blowing up. As Banedon hurried along the baked-mud street a tree bent over towards him, almost as if it were offering him an

obeisance.

There was a small tremor in his mind. He missed a step. The spawn had finally sensed there was somebody in pursuit.

Banedon began to run as fast as he could. If he didn't make contact with this beast soon he would lose it; then he would have to return to the North Star Tavern and wait until tomorrow before he could set out to stalk another. He wanted this first part of his strategy to be finished tonight.

Trees on either side of him. As he ran, the moonlight flickered through the branches of those to his right, so that his eyes were distracted. Up ahead of him he could hear the scrabbling of a heavy creature as it attempted to outpace him. He thought momentarily about throwing away his staff, then appreciated how stupid that would be.

His breath was loud in his ears.

Cold fingers of wind through his hair as he ran faster and faster.

To find waiting calmly for him, in the moonlight, a Helghast.

It was dressed in Vassagonian costume -- a turban, a long, belted robe, a sheathed scimitar, curled-toed shoes -- but its hideous face betrayed its real origins. Like Banedon, it must have been using magic in order to ensure that the people around it saw it as nothing more than a fellow citizen.

Banedon was panting. Too exhausted to take the offensive, he leant on his staff and just looked at the beast.

Its face split apart, revealing a toothless mouth and a throat of such darkness that Banedon vertiginously felt as if he might fall into it, be lost forever to the world . . .

"Can we do some kind of a deal?" he asked, knowing as he did so the folly of the question.

The Helghast chuckled.

Eyes glowed.

It sprang.

4

There was a "somewhere" in timelessness that Naar dwelt. The God of Evil, he was aware only in general terms of the things that were being done in his name on the many worlds of Aon. The most recent time he had had to respond to anything occurring there had been when the impertinent wizard, Vonotar, a denizen of Magnamund, had dared to unite his mind with that of the Darklord Zagarna.

Zagarna was dead, now.

Naar had brought twenty Darklords into being on Magnamund. He had little interest in them, in some ways; in other ways he had a great deal of interest.

The death of Zagarna had been nothing more than a minor setback. Naar watched Zagarna's successors as they fought among themselves, and the God of all Evil smiled. He saw that Slûtar was bringing a huge army to Helgedad, and that Haakon had done the same. Some of the other Darklords -- Nhorg, Lord of Gourizaga, was one of them -- had decided to retreat from the fray, on the grounds that it would be impossible for them to win the struggle. Gnaag . . . Gnaag was different. The subtlest of all the Darklords, he was playing a waiting game.

Naar watched the beasts he had created through Agarash the Damned as they circled around Helgedad. Their undersides were coloured orange by the flaring lava.

The God of all Evil watched, and was satisfied.

At the same time, though, he was . . . concerned. Lone Wolf and Qinefer were still alive, and that had never been part of his plan. Alyss he didn't understand. Banedon was yet another conundrum.

He swirled in the place where he was and wasn't.

Like all the Gods, he detested uncertainty. He would rather lose the war with the forces of Good, right now, than continue in this state of balance. True, he had helped create Aon -- the "Great Balance" -- but at the time he had thought the conflict would be over swiftly. Although the passage of time had little effect on him, Aon had existed stably for some fifteen billion years, Good and Evil neatly offset against each other, and Naar was becoming impatient.

He spoke to Ishir. Her mind was icy, but offered him a polite, formal welcome.

Are you willing to surrender? he asked.

Surrender? He felt the emotions of her derisive laughter. *No. You are doomed, Naar -- you and all of your servants.*

I disagree.

He retreated into himself again, blocking off all communications from the Goddess. It was possible -- just possible -- that Ishir was correct, but he banished the thought from his mind. The Evil he had created on Magnamund was surely sufficient to confound those forces that opposed him. He briefly considered the possibility of creating further Darklords, but knew Ishir would never permit it.

Instead, Naar looked forward to the dispute among the existing Darklords with a certain amount of excited anticipation. Some of them would possibly die, slain treacherously by their erstwhile allies; others would find themselves so ostracized that their influence would become as nothing.

He enjoyed watching treachery.

A stray thought from Ishir penetrated his mental defences.

Good will triumph.

5

The changing seasons had little effect in the Darklands: the skies were always grey.

Elsewhere in Magnamund it was spring. The first yellow-green leaves were appearing on the deciduous trees. Optimistic flowers were poking up from the chilly ground. There were lambs in the fields. In the Darklands, however, there was no change from the habitual gloom.

Haakon sat on the great throne of the Archlord, again aware that he had no right to be there but likewise knowing no one would as yet dispute his presumption.

Nadziranim seemed to fill the hall. Wherever he looked, there were coils of coloured smoke, moving fitfully, often flirting against the quivering blue walls.

Haakon pulled himself erect.

His voice was husky as he spoke through the grille at the front of his helmet.

"Are we united?"

His Nadziranim mingled among each other before they replied. The Darklord watched apprehensively. Should they choose to desert him he would be lost to the forces of the Darklords who opposed his accession -- most notably those of the Darklord Slûtar.

We are united, came a thought from the Nadziranim.

"Then," said the Darklord, "we must begin to move against Slûtar and his minions."

6

As the Helghast flew towards him, Banedon moved to one side.

Terrified, he forgot the vowels of the spell Jenara had so painstakingly taught him.

Instead, he swore.

The Helghast fell onto the baked mud of the road, but was almost immediately back on its feet. It roared its fury, and Banedon backed away, holding up his guildstaff in front of him.

He spoke a spell but immediately realized it was the wrong one. Birds dropped from nearby trees, but the Helghast was totally unaffected.

Banedon stepped aside again, and this time used his staff like a vtovlry bat on the creature's head. It slumped to the ground, moving groggily, giving Banedon a few moments to think.

Ah, yes: the words Jenara had drummed into him now came easily from his lips. As he clutched his staff with both hands the Helghast shrank until it was no larger than a mouse. Banedon pulled out from underneath his robe a cage Jenara had given to him and slid the still partly somnolent Helghast into it. As soon as the creature was there it began to attack the metal bars of the cage, doing its best to chew its way through them. Banedon spat another curse at it, and it curled up into a tiny ball.

He looked at the beast. Had he made it so small it could easily escape between the bars of the cage?

No. It was safely confined.

His spell would last for only a few hours, so it was essential he get back to the North Star Tavern as soon as possible, to give Jenara and himself plenty of time to interrogate the Helghast before -- and Banedon gulped unhappily at the thought -- they killed it.

He threw a spell so that any onlooker would see the unconscious Helghast as a cheerfully chirping yellow canary, and then headed back towards the centre of the city. It was by now completely dark, and he had to sing quietly to himself in order to keep his spirits up. Earlier, during his short struggle with the Helghast, he'd been glad the streets had been totally deserted; now the isolation made his spine icy. As he passed each turning he winced nervously, expecting an assault: his guildstaff and his knowledge of magic would give him adequate protection if he had sufficient warning, but they would be powerless to assist him if a thug pounced from behind.

Soon Banedon was back, safe, among the more populous streets. Once again, few of the pedestrians glanced at him; even fewer glanced at the cage he carried. He put on his face what he hoped would pass for a friendly, all-embracing, vacuous, slightly dimwitted smile.

He was moving as swiftly and as unobtrusively as he could down a major commercial street when he came across the first signs he had seen

since his arrival of the Emperor Zakhan Moudalla's repression. Four of his feared bodyguard, the Sharnazim, were gathered around a group of ragged beggars, whom they had obviously herded together preparatory to taking them off to prison. One of the beggars had dared to protest about this treatment, and was asking the merchants scurrying by on the pavement to intercede. Banedon looked away, sickened to his heart, as a scimitar rose and fell.

Not longer after that he reached the dubious haven of the North Star Tavern. He clambered up unsteady stairs to the room he'd booked. Jenara was waiting for him. She gave a little whistle of appreciation when she saw the shrunken Helghast in its cage.

The room was badly furnished. Aside from a narrow, sagging bed there was an armchair that looked to be on the verge of collapse; Banedon had earlier accepted tacitly that this was where he was going to sleep the night. Not an experience he was looking forward to: the upholstery of the chair showed a large dark stain where the hair oil of previous guests had seeped into it. There was also a bare, rickety table. Jenara paid no attention to his choked account of the beggar's summary execution as she put the cage on this table and crouched down to look at the shrunken Helghast.

"You've done well," she said approvingly, interrupting his babble.

". . . and then the . . . Why, thanks," said Banedon.

"Now we must torture the creature," said Jenara with a dismissive wave. "Go and ask the innkeeper for some boiling water."

"I can't do that!" said Banedon, appalled.

"He won't bite your head off," Jenara said, frowning, turning her head to look over her shoulder at him. "The worst he can do is ask you for some money."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Then what *are* you talking about?" She rocked back to sit on her heels, looking at him in genuine perplexity.

"I can't be responsible for the torture of a living creature," he said, calming. He was stripping his turban off and throwing it on the bed.

"It's only a spawn." She turned away as if that were the end of the matter.

"I don't care." He was struggling out of his borrowed robe, so his voice sounded rather muffled. "It may have killed a hundred people, for all I know -- perhaps even more -- but I still don't want to play any part in its torture."

"Then how are we going to find out what it knows?"

Jenara looked fixedly at the Helghast as Banedon pulled on his Guild robe.

"We could just ask it," he said, at length.

She laughed. "How old are you?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Do they keep you in cocoons in Toran these days?" she said, chuckling. "I don't want to torture the spawn, either, but I really can't see it simply saying, 'Yes, friends, I'll tell you all I know.'"

"We could *threaten* to torture it." Banedon felt far happier now he was in the garb of the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star. He didn't know quite why this should be: if anything, the borrowed Vassagonian robe (he shivered guiltily at the memory of how they had "borrowed" it) was the more comfortable of the two. Yet it was good to be back in his own clothing.

Jenara glared at him. He could see the reflections of the room's dim oil-lamps in her black eyes.

"Banedon," she said, "you're not a few runes short of an incantation, are you?"

"Sorry?" he stammered.

"If we just *threaten* to torture the Helghast once it's regained consciousness, what are we going to do if it declines to say anything despite all our threats? Let it go with a happy smile and a wave? 'Frightfully sorry, old chap; it was just a little misunderstanding.'"

Her voice, which had been light, changed suddenly.

"No, Banedon. This is the grown-up world you're living in now. It's vital we get from this creature every last scrap of information it might have -- otherwise Vassagonia might fall to the Darklords before the nation even knows it's been invaded. I hate cruelty as much as you do, but surely the fate of one of the Darklords' hellish spawn is less important than that of an entire nation?"

She was right, of course. Except, Banedon didn't want her to be right. And she was wrong, too, but for a moment he couldn't pick a hole in her logic. He wanted to find some other way of coaxing the information out of the Helghast. Surely there must be an alternative. Surely?

He sat on the edge of the bed. Jenara, seeing how miserable he looked, came across to seat herself beside him. There was a little puff of dust from the mattress as she dropped down, taking his hand.

"Banedon, if you can think of any other way, then let's take it. I can't.

Between us we possess considerable magic, but I don't reckon our abilities, even combined, are great enough to probe the nothing-mind of one of the spawn. All we can do is torment it in the hope it will tell us something before it dies."

"No!" he shouted.

"Think of the greater good."

"Of course I've thought of the greater good!" He ripped his hand away from hers. "But I'm not going to help you torture that beast -- in fact, I'll do everything I can to stop you!"

"Thanks, Banedon," she said, very quietly.

"What do you mean, 'thanks'?"

"I mean thanks for telling me you really are a member of the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star."

"I thought you knew that."

"I knew what you told me, and I knew what I could read from your mind, and really I didn't doubt you. But it was possible, always, that you were deceiving me. Remember Vonotar."

Banedon remembered Vonotar only too well.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No need for apologies," said Jenara briskly, standing up from the bed. She smoothed her black dress down and approached the table once more, going onto her knees to look at the minute Helghast, which was now showing signs of awakening. "It was my fault for testing you. If you'd agreed to torture the beast I'd have known that you were an impostor. Now, how shall we persuade it to tell us what it knows?"

"We could gamble with it," said Banedon.

Jenara gave him a furious glance.

"*Gamble* with it?"

"Yes. We could offer it good odds that *we* knew what was happening in Vassagonia while *it* didn't." Banedon smiled. "You fail to realize how stupid many of the spawn are -- and this one is unlikely to be any exception. When it wakes up, let's wager a crown that the Empire of Vassagonia contains not a single spawn except this one. And so on. I'm certain this'll lead us to the truth."

Three hours later, it led them to the truth.

Every level of Vassagonian society was permeated by Drakkarim and Helghast, including many of the advisers of Zakhon Moudalla himself. In effect, the nation was already almost under the control of Darklord Haakon.

The people of Vassagonia had yet to realize this, but the moment of recognition could not be too far away: when it came, there was bound to be a bloody revolution. Almost certainly the thralls of the Darklord would use the opportunity of the resulting chaos to take over the government, slaughtering the Zakhan and his loyal aides.

Jenara finally let the Helghast out of the cage.

It scurried across the carpet, looking for somewhere to hide. She brought her boot down, hard, and squashed it flat.

Banedon was, once again, horrified.

"Did you have to do that?" he said, saddened.

"Of course. Otherwise the beast would have escaped and told the others of its kind that we knew what was happening." She mused. "Useful to know, too, that this fool of a Vassagonian lord, Barraka, is going to mount a skirmish attack on the Sommerlund frontier within the next couple of years. Always nice to gain an additional nugget of intelligence that you weren't expecting. I think your friend Lone Wolf might be interested to hear about it."

Jenara scooped up the small, crushed corpse in her fingers and hurled it into the woven waste-basket. She looked around for somewhere to wash her hands.

7

A Giak was screaming, so all of the Darklords laughed.

At the head of the table was Haakon; at its foot was Slûtar. Down one side sat Dakushna, Kraakenskul, Chlanzor, Menashga, Tomogh and Unc. Gnaag sat beside Slûtar, and was hardly noticed: he ate his Giak stew fastidiously, and said almost nothing to the Darklords on either side of him. On the far side of the bench were Shebnar, Taktaal, Zhanshal, Ghanesh, Nhorg, Mrugor, Xog and Khatellu. Ghurch had temporarily absented himself. Drakkarim Death Knights lined the walls. Nadziranim flickered into and out of existence around the Darklords' shoulders.

"Naar is here," said Shebnar complacently. Behind him there was the bright blue of the pulsing wall. He was as plump as a squirrel, and much the same shape. "I know that our God is among us."

"I think you should go back to where you came from, Shebnar," spat Haakon viciously. The red eyes of his mask glowed threateningly. He wanted to rid Helgedad of all the less powerful Darklords as soon as possible. It was already clear to him that this was to be a contest of wills

between himself and Slûtar.

"I respect you," said Shebnar. It was manifest there was not a syllable of sincerity in what he said, yet he took only a few more mouthfuls before backing away towards the door, which was made of dark bronze. An attendant Drakkar threw it open and stood there attentively, the point of his sword touched to the floor, as Shebnar exited.

The door slammed shut.

Shebnar was the first of many Darklords to bow away during the next few hours, because of the combined force of the personalities of Haakon and Slûtar. Each of the departing Darklords attempted to leave with dignity, but it was clear they had been humiliated: the two great warriors made it plain that the rest were irrelevances, of barely more significance than the Xaghash, and that their presence was no longer necessary or even desired.

Finally there were only Haakon, Slûtar and Gnaag. The insect-like Darklord, on seeing this, made a few weak excuses and went -- as the others had done -- not allowing himself to smile until he had left the hall. Haakon and Slûtar were approximately evenly matched, so one would soon be destroyed by the other. Gnaag picked a piece of Giak flesh from his teeth as he strode down the corridor, pursued by his Nadziranim. He suddenly stopped and commanded the wraith-like wizards to use their magic to transport him immediately to his apartments at the far end of the citadel of Helgedad.

Once there he paced about impatiently, ignoring his attendants. Kraakenskûl had allotted to him an extensive series of rooms, the largest being the bedroom. This was a carefully calculated insult, since Gnaag -- like the other Darklords -- had no need for sleep. The only Darklord ever to have slept was Zagarna, who had been conjured into sleep by Vonotar the sorcerer.

In the hall, Haakon was seizing the initiative.

"One of we two must become the Archlord," he said in his soft, bubbling voice. "All of us know this. The others may ally themselves with us, but it is impossible for any of them to harbour hopes they could attain to the supreme throne."

"And so you believe that one of the two of us must die," agreed Slûtar, raising his goblet of wine.

"Yes! *You* are the one who will die!" Haakon shouted.

"I think not," remarked Slûtar calmly. "This is very good wine." He waved his hairy arm imperiously and the Xaghash that had been clustering

around them left abruptly. "But there is no real reason for either of us to perish."

"Yet you challenge my claim to be Archlord."

"Of course I do. As you said, who else might there be, apart from us two? We are of equal strength, and our Nadziranim are of equal power. Obviously it must be a contest between us. I am more intelligent than you are, so I shall win this contest. I have no wish for you to die simply because of this temporary dispute."

Now that the hall was empty except for themselves, the two Darklords were aware of the echoes. They hunched more closely towards each other.

"If I were the Archlord," said Slûtar quietly, "I'd appoint you to be at my side." There was a bowl of fruit on the table and he languidly helped himself to a peach, swallowing it in a single mouthful, stone and all. In so doing he was able to display the musculature of his hairy arm. The message was not lost on Haakon.

"But you're not going to *be* the next Archlord, are you?" A hissed question, full of menace.

"I think I shall be."

Slûtar beckoned towards one of his Nadziranim.

The smoky wizard approached and swirled on the table directly in front of Slûtar.

"Let's watch," said Slûtar.

"Let's watch," said Gnaag in his distant chambers, unaware that he was echoing Slûtar. His Nadziranim dimmed a little, and then conjured up the illusion for him that he was still sitting in the hall, ignored by Haakon and Slûtar. Gnaag smiled again. He saw his own clawing hand reach out towards a goblet of wine and then pass right through it.

There was a shimmering sound from the Nadziranim. The right-handed form of magic was much more powerful than the left-handed, yet it made considerable demands upon their energies. They were experiencing a sensation which a mortal would have described as pain. Yet they had little option but to serve the Darklord to whom they had given their allegiance. The Nadziranim barely possessed individual personalities, although on occasion they took human or other forms. Rather, they had something more like the collective mind of a colony of ants. And, also like ants, once their group mind had settled itself in a particular pattern, it was very difficult to change it. Gnaag knew his Nadziranim would obey his instructions until their energies faded to the point of their death, because this particular group

had decided to be loyal to him hundreds of years before, and nothing now could sway their loyalty.

But was that the truth? Gnaag was shocked that the question should have appeared in his mind. *Was it really the truth?* Could it be that the Nadziranim in attendance on other Darklords could be lured away?

He tucked the thought away for the moment and continued to eavesdrop on the conversation between Haakon and Slûtar.

"Let's watch," repeated Slûtar reflectively, "and see what happens between the two of us over the next few years. I don't pretend I can defeat your aims at once, but I predict with perfect confidence that, in the end, I shall be the victor."

The eyes in his head focused on Haakon's helmeted face; those on his shoulders were staring at the bowl of fruit. Or so it seemed. In fact his spinal cord was using their peripheral vision to concentrate on Haakon and the Nadziranim beside him, wary in case the hooded Darklord might suddenly choose to attack.

Gnaag, watching all this, recognized Slûtar's wariness, and nodded in approval. Haakon was one of the most savage of all the Darklords, and was not given to diplomatic half-measures. He was perfectly likely to end the discussion, once and for all, by simply plunging his sword into Slûtar's throat. The ape-like one was wise to be cautious.

But Haakon reacted in a way that Gnaag hadn't expected. He turned to his Nadziranim and said in his bubbling voice a single word: "Destroy."

Immediately Slûtar's Nadziranim formed a shield of force around him. The air between the two Darklords was tense with malevolent magic. Haakon looked furious and frustrated; he should have known that Slûtar would take precautions against exactly such an attack.

For his part, Slûtar reached out nonchalantly to help himself to another haunch of meat.

Gnaag, too, was annoyed with himself. He had underestimated Haakon -- a bad mistake. He reminded himself not to do so again. Although he was confident that in the long run he could become the Archlord of Darkness, he would surely fail if he didn't recognize the strengths of his adversaries. Had it been himself and Haakon at that great table, rather than Slûtar and Haakon, he might have been destroyed by the blast of right-handed magic.

He turned and looked at his own cluster of Nadziranim. Although he made no sound, his bony lips moved, mouthing the words: "I shall depend

on you."

Haakon slumped back in his ostentatious chair and waved his magicians away. His assault had failed: the contest between himself and Slûtar was obviously going to be a long one. He'd hoped to end it here and now.

Slûtar smiled in false innocence. He got to his feet, using his legs to throw back his chair behind him so that it went scraping across the floor to smack against the pulsing blue wall. Still protected by his Nadziranim, he uncoiled his long, powerful tail and struck away the table-leg at Haakon's left. One of the Drakkarim caught the column of wood, looked at it surprisedly, and instinctively crumpled it into splinters. Some of the dishes on the table, still half-filled with their gruesome contents, slid noisily to the floor.

"Next time," said Slûtar amiably, "that could be you."

"You're declaring war!" yelled Haakon, also getting to his feet.

"Only if you insist," said Slûtar. "Alternatively, we could agree that I should become the new Archlord -- the others, I repeat, are irrelevant -- with you serving me at my side."

"Never."

"We shall meet again, Haakon."

Gnaag instructed his Nadziranim to let his vision follow the hairy Darklord as he walked from the hall, his tail twitching from side to side. Slûtar strolled quietly down a huge corridor illuminated by Giak-oil lamps; he was followed by his Xaghash, Drakkarim and Nadziranim. Here the walls were made not of pulsing blue but instead of stern granite.

Slûtar was still smiling as he reached the end of the corridor, where there was a vast wooden double door.

The Darklord whipped his tail around and shattered both the door and the four Giaks who had been standing guard beside it. He ambled out into the perpetual red-orange dusk of Helgedad and waved towards the sky. Within moments several hundred fluttering Kraan and Zlanbeasts were swooping down towards him; at the same time a small army of Giaks rushed in his direction, their evil mouths half-open, their tongues licking backwards and forwards in anticipation.

The arrival on the ground of the winged beasts created a storm of ash, so that it was hard to see what was going on. Even the Darklord himself had to wipe a furry hand across all of his eyes. He walked, moving now with more purpose, towards the gigantic Zlanbeast that was his especial mount,

and threw his weighty leg over its back. The creature's wings made a curious small movement in recognition that its master was once more astride it.

Gnaag watched as Slûtar's myrmidons -- the Giaks, the Drakkarim, the Xaghash and the Vordaks -- mounted the flying creatures. The ground in front of the citadel was lit up not just by the distant glow of the lake of lava but also by the shadowy light of the Nadziranim that spun above the flock. The noise was overpowering.

Slûtar leaned forward and shouted into the ear of his Imperial Zlanbeast.

"Kaag!"

The creature's legs dug into the ash as it prepared for flight; its wings moved convulsively and then it was aloft. Within moments Slûtar was looking down on the great lava lake that surrounded the city. Behind him the other winged creatures were bearing away their earthbound burdens; the Nadziranim created such a brightness in the dull sky that it was no longer possible to see the glow of the volcano. Their reflected light painted the grey ashes of the Darklands in muted pastel colours.

Slûtar shouted at the sky, all traces of his former tranquillity cast away.

Haakon would lose the war.

Slûtar would become the Archlord.

It might take a little time, but that was indubitably what was going to happen. Slûtar's Nadziranim had been tested against Haakon's Nadziranim, and had won the contest clearly and decisively; Slûtar's army of spawn was at least as great as that of Haakon, perhaps even greater. The outcome was a foregone conclusion.

Gnaag waved away his own Nadziranim, and the image of Slûtar faded from the room. The insect-like Darklord smiled yet again.

Yes, it was a foregone conclusion.

8

Jenara and Banedon sat opposite each other at a small table in the North Star Tavern and raised their tankards before each taking a cautious sip of the ale. Their faces squirmed simultaneously.

"We'll, ahem, get something better than this storgh-piss next time round," she said.

"We could hardly fail," he agreed.

"I'm not so sure," she muttered, her black eyes flashing. "There was

the time when I was in Casiorn . . ."

Banedon could hardly hear her. The noise around them was deafening. It was five in the morning, but the place was packed. It seemed as if the heavy oak table-top underneath his elbows was vibrating in response to the racket.

"We might as well finish the stuff," he said morosely. "We've paid for it, after all. Besides, you could always transform it into a finer ale."

"Unfortunately not. Don't you think that was the first thing I tried?" She smiled ruefully, shaking her head in disbelief. "There are limits to what even the most powerful magic can achieve, it seems."

"I'd have been better sticking to . . ." he started. Then he stopped. Jenara was glaring at him in such a way that he realized that cutting the sentence short was one of his better ideas.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. The ale didn't get any better as they drank it, the way that most ale does.

"I've no great love for Vassagonia or the Vassagonians," she said finally, slanting her tankard as if to indicate that the truce between them had been renewed, "but we've got to think of some way of saving these people from the spawn of the Darklords."

"Yes," said Banedon, "but how? It would be easy enough if there were just a few of the interlopers, but the Helghast told us they're here in their thousands."

"We could inform Zakhan Moudalla."

"What good would that do? He's old -- he can't be many years away from the grave. The only reason he's been able to hold onto the throne is that there's no one sufficiently interested in taking it from him."

There was the sound of breaking glass and swearing at the far end of the tavern. Both of them made a conscious effort to disregard it.

"True," said Jenara reluctantly, speaking a little louder than before so that Banedon could hear her over the background din.

"Another thing," said Banedon with a swig and a wince, "is that I'm not sure the Zakhan is all that much better than the spawn. What I saw some of his Sharnazim doing tonight . . ."

"You've told me," said Jenara, bored. "I've seen it before. Human beings have an infinite capacity for being unnecessarily cruel to each other. There's no way you can change that. If you let it affect you, you'll find you end up being just as cruel as they are."

She leant forward on the table and covered her eyes with her hands.

Her long black hair seemed almost liquid as it ran down her arms.

"You don't believe that," said Banedon, horrified.

It was some seconds before she replied.

"No, you're right. I don't really believe it."

"Then why do you say it?"

"Because I have to *tell* myself I believe it. I have to *convince* myself. Otherwise, when I see what happens in the streets of Barrakeesh, I begin to *care*. And I can't afford to care."

Banedon put out his hand so that it cradled the side of her head. She kept her eyes covered, but didn't move away from him.

"This ale's lousy," she said in a low voice.

"You're being kind to it," he said. "It's not just lousy. It's worse than that. It's abominable."

"No. It's worse than abominable. It's filthy."

"Vile."

"Sewerish."

"Poisonous."

"You'll get letters from angry poisons if you say that. How about 'lethal'?"

"'Lethal'! Come on, Jenara, you can do better than this! Hanging's too good for this stuff."

"How can you hang ale?" she said. Her eyes were still moist, but she was looking at him with a smile on her face.

"I don't know. I'm sure we can find a way."

"Big talk."

"I've just knocked my tankard over. Oh, that's a pity. All the ale seems to have spilled on the floor."

"That's an odd coincidence. I seem to have done the same."

She giggled, looking like a young girl.

"Yes," said Banedon, "but the difference is that most of your ale has gone all over my robe. I'll have to wash it tonight."

He ducked instinctively as one of the other customers hurled a beer mug across the room on general principle. It shot over their heads and shattered against the wall behind Jenara. On impulse, Banedon used a trifle of second-level magic to reconstitute it and make it float through the air to rest on the table between them. He picked it up and looked around to see who had thrown it.

The man glowering at him was tall and bulky, with long greasy fair

hair and a beard; around him there was a cloud of flies. He was, Banedon discovered with a furtive mental probe, a travelling mercenary who had not long arrived in Vassagonia, having decided to leave the Wildlands a while ago for reasons he declined to explain. He'd trekked across Cloeasia on foot, his mind filled with images of a small, puckish girl, dressed in silver, who had in some way -- he couldn't exactly remember how -- wronged him.

"I challenge you to a deed of arms, milquetoast!" he shouted at Banedon.

Jenara fixed the warrior with an icy stare.

"Go," she said firmly, "away."

Thog the Mighty looked embarrassed, unable to meet her gaze.

"So sorry," he muttered. "I, um, didn't mean to, em, interrupt a private conversation."

He turned back to the bar, the slump of his shoulders expressing his views as plainly as if he'd spoken the words out loud. Women! The trouble with women was that they fought dirty. Unlike Thog himself, who just fought.

"The people you meet," said Jenara. "Where were we?"

"Spilling beer and trying to think of a way of getting rid of spawn."

"We could go directly to the Zakhan and tell him his life's in danger," she suggested again, but it was clear from her face she held out little hope for this ploy.

The old man was a steely autocrat who distanced himself as much as possible from commoners. Those of his subjects who wished to gain an audience with him often had to wait for years. The turbaned officers around him rarely took the trouble to pass on to him the nature of a commoner's grievance; if Jenara and Banedon tried to explain there was a plot afoot to kill him, it was quite likely the guards would have them immediately executed for threatening treason. Besides, many of the officers had by now been replaced by Darklands spawn and Drakkarim; even if they found one who was prepared to be cooperative, the slightest dropped word of his to his fellows might lead to his instant death.

"I think what we must do is find out how the emissaries of Evil are entering Vassagonia," said Banedon, trailing his finger idly through the puddle of ale on the table between them.

"They could be entering from all quarters," said Jenara, rather wistfully.

"But perhaps not."

"True, true, Banedon. At least we could stop any more of them entering the country -- although stamping on that Helghast was not pleasant." She shook her shoulders. "If there's only a single point of entry, though, we might be able to persuade one of the Zakhans' advisers to come with us and see what's happening. And then, of course, the Zakhans would be informed at once of what's already happened."

"My thinking exactly."

"But how are we going to find this out?"

Banedon toyed with his tankard, setting it upright again.

"Let's think about it while I get us some decent ale," he said. "Assuming you have the money."

She passed him a fistful of coins and he took the empty tankards to the bar. Thog the Mighty gave him a vindictive look, but he rather nervously pretended not to notice.

By the time he returned to the table, he had formulated the glimmerings of a plan.

"Look," he said immediately after Jenara had thanked him, "between the two of us, with our knowledge of second-level magic, we should be able to detect the empty minds of the spawn over a wide area."

"Yes. But that'd take time." There was a line of froth on her upper lip, almost as if she'd grown a wispy white moustache.

"I think we have to gamble on having that much time. If the rebellion happens within the next few weeks, we'll have to think of something else. But at the moment I can't imagine any alternative." He took a drink from his own tankard. This ale was definitely an improvement: rich and hoppy; no suspicion that a storgh's bladder had played any role in the brewing process.

"I don't like the Vassagonians very much," she said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Who does?" said Banedon.

For a second she was stuck for a response, then she said: "Other Vassagonians?" It was clear she was doubtful even about this.

"Still," said Banedon, "as you said, they're better than the Darklords. Quite a bit better, I suppose."

"Sometimes I wonder. Ever seen a public execution in Barrakeesh?"

"No." He looked uncertainly at his tankard. He'd heard a few hints from the Guildmaster, and hoped a Vassagonian execution was something he'd never be required to witness. He tried to banish the reported details from his mind.

"What we can do," he said after a while, "is find out where most of the non-minds are located. Obviously there'll be a lot of them in the Zakhan's palace, but if there's a concentration of them somewhere else . . ."

"That might be where they're entering the empire," she said. "Yes, it's at least worth a try."

"Is there somewhere we can live, apart from here? This place costs more than we can afford."

"I have friends outside Barrakeesh who'll let us stay for a few weeks. We can go there tomorrow."

"And we can use the breathing space to take second-level magic from each other's minds."

Banedon smiled at her, and she smiled back. He was struck again by the fact that, not only had he already come to like this woman very much indeed, but he'd come to appreciate how attractive she was. He envisaged problems during the weeks to come.

It didn't occur to him, at the time, that the weeks might become months.

As they left to go to their room upstairs, Thog the Mighty, who had been drinking heavily in order to anaesthetize himself after this latest humiliation at accursedly female hands, fell flat on his back and began to snore.

"Charity begins at home?" said Banedon to Jenara, quizzically.

"Yes." Again she giggled, realizing what he intended.

Banedon surreptitiously levelled his guildstaff in the direction of the fallen warrior and spoke a few short words.

9

In the morning Thog the Mighty woke up bruised and stiff from his night on the hard floor, but was amazed to discover he didn't have a hangover.

His reaction to this discovery was misery: it was the *duty* of berserkers like himself to have perpetual hangovers.

He felt cheated, and emasculated. Was he losing his touch?

Even after filling a spittoon the way berserkers always filled spittoons first thing in the morning, he could hardly pluck up enough morale to hack his way out through the locked tavern door.

5

Taken

1

"Yes . . . now . . . I can."

Carag had hardly finished uttering the words when there was an inhuman scream from above them. Shadows mottled the glade as winged creatures fluttered across the sun. Qinefer, furious with herself for her laxness, darted for her crossbow, but of course it was too far away; likewise, Lone Wolf was without the Sommerswerd.

Cloud Maker's fist punched into the belly of one of the descending Kraan, and the spawn squealed in fury, doubling up as it fell to the ground. The big man kicked the side of its head, breaking its neck. Just as he did so, he was attacked from above by another of the spawn, its wings whipping angrily. He turned around to face the creature directly, and found himself looking at several inches of hardened, bony beak, poised to stab into his chest. He responded by grabbing the beak and twisting it until there was a *snap!* from inside the spawn's skull and it collapsed at his feet. Immediately he put a boot on the Kraan's neck and ripped the upper part of the beak from its socket, so that now he was armed with a stabbing sword. He skidded on ichor as he ran across the stained grass towards Qinefer.

She was lying face-downwards on the ground, her hands attempting to protect her head, as the Kraan stabbed their beaks at her. She suddenly turned over onto her back and kicked upwards with both feet with such force that a Kraan literally exploded all over her, drenching her in the foul fluid of the Darklords' spawn.

Carag was now beside her. The Giak chuckled as he beheaded a Kraan. He glanced at Cloud Maker thoughtfully, glanced away again.

None of them thought to look and see how Lone Wolf was faring . . .

At this moment Lone Wolf was being clutched at the shoulders by a Kraan that was hauling him up into the air. He was kicking and flailing as the beast bore him away, but its grip was inescapable -- besides, he'd no real wish to fall: the sight of the rocking ground, far below him, was making him giddy. He felt rather than heard the sound of the Kraan's wings as he was dragged across the sky. Claws dug into him, like a dagger in the spine. He tried to roll himself over and kick at the underside of the beast, but all that happened was that the claws gripped him even tighter.

Carag had severely injured another Kraan. Wingless, it was doing its

best to totter around the clearing. A small flick of the Giak's serrated sword finished it. He instinctively raised his sword against Cloud Maker, who was on his back, slaughtering a Kraan, then remembered which side he was on.

The Kraan were avoiding Qinefer now. Too many of them were dead around her. She was clutching her two hands together and using them like a club. The clenched brown fists were destroying the spawn; they backed off. Besides, they beasts had already taken away the piece of property Haakon had sent them to obtain.

A fairly unimportant piece of property, according to Haakon.

This piece of property was called Lone Wolf.

Qinefer hurled a Kraan into the embers of the fire, where it screamed and died. She wanted Lone Wolf to be with her. There were so many things she wanted, and she was allowed so few of them. The next Kraan to die did so in spectacular fashion, its grey-green ichor spilling over a wide space.

2

As the Kraan flew him towards Helgedad, Lone Wolf himself felt like a fairly important piece of property, whatever Haakon might claim. The Darklords hated him. He'd destroyed Zagarna, who'd ruled them for many years.

He was looking down on the grey ashy plain of the Darklands, far below him. He struggled in the claws of his captor, but not for long; he didn't want to be dropped. He wished he had the Sommerswerd with him, so that he could kill the beast as soon as they reached Helgedad.

He was finding it difficult to breathe the air. The fanning of the Kraan's wings above him was thinning it; even more debilitating was the fact that the air smelt so sulphurous. Lone Wolf was coughing and retching as the creature laboriously dragged him through the sky.

He kicked behind him at the belly of the Kraan, but the beast just grunted and continued its flight. He screamed angrily, but the Kraan paid no attention.

Helgedad was near. Lone Wolf saw its lake of lava painting orange colours on the clouds; he swapped his gaze between the dizzying sight of the drop beneath him and the glow of the clouds. There was a shout in his ears, and he recognized that it was his own.

The Kraan glided towards one of the many portals of Helgedad. A troop -- perhaps twenty-strong -- of Drakkarim awaited. As it landed, Lone Wolf punched out at the Kraan that had been carrying him. His punch

missed, and the creature strutted away casually before lifting itself up into the sky.

The Drakkarim seized Lone Wolf, throwing him to the dusty ground. One of them stamped on his head, so that for a few moments he was unconscious, dreaming of a life far from Magnamund.

A short time later he was in the throne-room, in direct confrontation with Haakon.

He let his eyes open.

Resentfully, he shut them again. He was still finding breathing difficult.

The Darklord spat angrily. Lone Wolf looked blearily at him.

"You will die," said Haakon softly, his Nadziranim flickering colourfully in and out of the dimensions. "And I will force all of the Darklords to watch you die. Even Zagarna could not destroy you, but Haakon will."

For the first time in weeks, Lone Wolf began to laugh.

3

It was some long time later -- Alyss felt as if she had been walking for days -- when they at last noticed that the once-distant mountains seemed to be very close. The jagged, misshapen rocks had always before been just remote objects on the horizon; now, quite suddenly, they were rearing above Alyss's head, and she could see the details of their surfaces. Here there were browns and purples and reds, a blessed relief from the grey-green to which her eyes had become accustomed. Yet still, every time she looked too intently at a mountainside, she found her vision somehow *avoided* seeing exactly what was there.

Garna had served as an excellent guide. Over and over he had warned her that she should move left or right to avoid walking straight into some obstacle. She suspected this must have been what had happened at the time of the explosion -- that she had gone at full pace into a tree and thereby disrupted some integral part of the world she was in. Luckily there had been no explosions since. Her bruises had become less painful but, every time she sat down for a rest, she rolled up the legs of her trousers and investigated their colours, as they gradually changed from black to brown to a curious greenish yellow. They, too, offered visual relief from the omnipresent grey-green, but this was the only good thing she could find to say for them. The dustworm had at one point remarked, rather tactlessly, that it might be a

good idea if Alyss didn't look into a mirror; the swelling on her forehead was painful, and doubtless was going through the same range of hues as the rest of her abrasions.

When I was in the other world I could control things, she thought miserably, *but here . . .*

One relief was that neither of them felt hunger or thirst. Alyss, having discovered the experience of physical pain for the first time, had been worried about this. People had told her, from time to time during the many billions of years of her life, that the pangs of hunger and thirst were extremely painful and could lead to death, but she hadn't paid too much attention: she quite enjoyed the sensations of eating and drinking, but neither had been essential to her. In the early time that she and Garna had spent in this otherworld, she had looked around at the unappetising grass and wondered if the two of them would be reduced to having to try to eat the stuff. Not a pleasant thought. But in fact her throat felt as crisp and clean as if she'd just swallowed a cooling drink of crystal-clear water.

"How long is this going to go on?" asked Garna, his head perched on her shoulder, looking up at the steep crags.

"I don't know," she said. "I wish I did. As long as it lasts, I suppose. Look on the bright side. This place is better than the Wastelands, isn't it?"

"Not really."

Alyss agreed profoundly, but didn't like to say so. She tried to muster in her mind all the reasons why it was better to be here than in the Wastelands, and couldn't think of even one. In the Wastelands she'd been able to float rather than walk across the land. There had been the ever-repeating cycle of day and night to remind her that Ishir and Kai were looking down upon her. She had been able to watch things *moving* -- the waters of the River Dorn, the clouds in the sky, the puffs of dust blown up by the wind -- but here everything was still.

As she began to climb up into the gentle foothills of the mountains she discovered that the vegetation underfoot was different. As well as the ubiquitous grass there were clumps of feathery bushes; if she brushed her fingers against them they moved, but otherwise they were quite terrifyingly still. Some were reddish, others purple. All of them gave the disconcerting appearance of not really being alive, as if they had been set in their places rather than having grown there. The fronds of their tips, as she touched them, came away in her hands, disintegrating into a fine dust that she found difficult to brush off.

When she trod on an animal dropping she regretted having discarded her boots. She wiped her foot on the ground annoyedly and reminded herself to take greater care in future.

It was about a minute later that she realized the significance of the dropping. If there were animal droppings, there must be animals. Those animals could possibly be predators. Since, here, she couldn't sense their presence unless she saw or heard them, she was all too vulnerable should any of them try to attack her.

She stopped walking and gazed around.

A few hundred feet below her there was the vast plain, stretching out almost to the horizon, where she could distantly see sharp hills like the one she was now climbing. Her vision of the plain constantly changed as she let her eyes roam from side to side; whenever her gaze halted, the more prominent features of the landscape disappeared -- she could see them only sidelong. The black sky above her seemed heavy, as if at any moment it might come crashing down on her.

She shivered, and looked down at her filthy silver clothing. Dressing herself entirely in silver had seemed such a good idea at the time; now the ostentation of the garb appeared to mock her. She wiggled her toes, just to remind herself that they were there.

When she looked up the mountainside ahead she could see nothing moving. Yet, to judge by the dropping, there were animals there. What kind of animals? Friends or foes? Should she just surrender to her apprehensions and go back down onto the plain? As far as she could understand, she could live there forever, unmolested, safe . . .

. . . and bored.

The prospect of an eternity of boredom spurred Alyss as she scrambled further up the hillside.

4

Lone Wolf stared around him. His eyes felt numb as he looked at the bright blue walls. He was still having difficulty in breathing. Sitting on a throne above him was Haakon, smirking uneasily as he watched.

So Lone Wolf laughed again.

The Darklord's face became even uglier.

"Why do you laugh, fool?" he hissed in his bubbling way. "Your death will not be pleasant."

"What makes you think I fear death?"

"All mortals fear death."

"I don't."

The Darklord sat silently for a few moments. The Xaghash in the great hall shuffled unhappily; they wanted to kill the Kai who had fought against them, and they wanted to do so as soon as possible. Haakon realized this, and had difficulty persuading himself to stop them. However, he managed to wave a taloned hand in their direction, gesturing them away from the captive.

"Your death, when it comes, will be a long and painful one," said Haakon.

"There's a glory to be found in death," said Lone Wolf. He knew he should be shrinking, looking for some way to escape -- but there was no escape, and could not be, so his only option was to actively defy the Darklord . . . and hope.

"What glory?" said Haakon, feigning unconcern.

"The glory of knowing that your death hasn't been in vain."

"But your death *will* have been in vain."

"Nonsense! If I die, the Sommlending will destroy you -- you and all of the beings that surround you."

Lone Wolf knew this was untrue. It would at the least take months before the news of his death reached Sommerlund. Indeed, it might *never* reach there, and even if it did the Sommlending were unlikely to raise an army to avenge him. The warriors of the Darklords were plentiful and cruel; it was improbable that, depleted as they were by the recent war, the Sommlending could hope to combat them.

Death was near. He knew that. It required the Darklord to do no more than raise a finger -- one of those skinless fingers -- and Lone Wolf would be dead. But at the same time he sensed that Haakon wanted to keep him alive for a while, so that his execution could be used as a spectacle. There was more to it even than that, he suddenly realized: Haakon *needed* to make the best of the killing. It *had* to be a great event. Lone Wolf didn't know why; it was just something he picked up from the situation -- otherwise, surely, he'd have been butchered where he was. Haakon's forces had seized him for some greater purpose than merely his death: the Darklord could just have sent a squad of Drakkarim assassins into Sommerlund if that was all he'd wanted. Yes, there was something more to it all, even though Lone Wolf didn't know what it was. For the moment, however, he knew he was safe.

And there was always the chance of rescue.

A very small chance.

But a chance, nevertheless.

He bowed theatrically.

"Darklord, greet the cause of your destruction."

Haakon didn't know how to react to the impertinence. Since his creation, long in the past, the creatures around him had always accorded him the utmost respect -- except for Zagarna, who had been his acknowledged ruler, and Slûtar of Kaag, who was now opposing him. The sight of this . . . this *boy* seeming so defiant was almost more than the Darklord could accept. Yet he stayed his temper.

"I cannot be destroyed," he said.

"That's what Zagarna said."

"Zagarna was destroyed by the Sommerswerd."

"With respect, by the Sommerswerd and *myself*."

"But you no longer possess the Sommerswerd."

"That's a situation as may not last too long."

The Darklord chuckled. The sound wasn't pretty.

"Your *life* may not last too long," Haakon bubbled. He leaned back in his golden throne; behind his mask his youthful face was smiling as he watched Lone Wolf silhouetted by the walls.

Lone Wolf smiled. His Kai powers were as yet not fully developed, but he was capable of affecting the Drakkarim and Xaghash surrounding the room; the Nadziranim he ignored.

As the Darklord watched, the Drakkarim and Xaghash tumbled forwards, shrieking angrily. The air was full of the sound of them crashing down onto the marble floor.

The Nadziranim flared angrily.

5

Alyss reckoned that by now she was about five thousand feet above the surface of the grey-green plain. She was also feeling very tired, a sensation which she didn't enjoy. She sat down on the slope. Her bruises had disappeared, as she discovered when she pulled off her trousers to inspect herself: her legs were rather paler than she preferred them to be, but otherwise she was perfectly satisfied with them. She admired her pointy knees for a moment, congratulating herself yet again on the body she had chosen, before hitching her trousers back up around her waist.

Garna, bumped into wakefulness, had watched the whole manoeuvre

with interest.

"Funny things, legs," he piped. "I'm glad *I* haven't got any."

"Hum," said Alyss, and then she met the first animal.

From behind one of the bushes it sprang to confront her, almost nose-to-nose. Its eyes looked directly into hers; its tongue licked her chin.

Terror enfeebled her.

It was difficult to see what the animal looked like, because its face almost filled her vision. All she could gather was that it was large, covered in fur, and had very long, very sharp, very white teeth. It was slavering at the mouth, and its pink tongue flicked from side to side. A huge purple ruff of fur stood out around its neck. It seemed to be bigger than a Doomwolf.

She waited for her throat to be plucked out, hoping the experience wouldn't be too painful -- or at least that it would be short -- and shut her eyes. She hoped, too, that Garna would be able to escape, somehow.

Ishir, she thought, *why are you always somewhere else when I need you?*

It was a plea that had often been addressed to herself.

6

Lone Wolf had never known such power as that currently flooding through him. He whirled about the floor of the hall in Helgedad, his hands outstretched, and the Darklord could do nothing but watch in horror. The Kai Lord's fingers seemed to be flashing with flames; every time they touched the walls, the brilliant blue was reduced to a yellowish brown. The Nadziranim were powerless.

He began to sing, the echoes of his voice loud in the hall.

Finally he found himself in front of the throne.

Haakon looked down at him, hands clutching the armrests of his throne as if this was the only way he knew to stop himself from bolting.

"When shall I die?" said Lone Wolf tauntingly.

"When I decree it," said Haakon, after a pause.

"You are powerless to decree," said Lone Wolf.

A Vordak came up from behind him and grabbed him by the neck, Lone Wolf shouted in pain as the bony fingers bit into his flesh. He tried to use his powers against the agony, but there was no effect. They had left him as abruptly as they'd filled him.

He struggled hopelessly in the creature's grasp.

Haakon let a smile cross his hidden lips.

"You've defied me long enough, Lone Wolf," he said. "Long enough."

Lone Wolf found himself being dragged by the feet along a corridor, his head bumping on stones, his breath coming only fitfully. He reached for his sword, but his belt was empty. He tried to kick out at the Vordak, but the beast hardly flinched; it twisted his legs, so that now he was being hauled face-down.

A million miles later and he was being thrown into a dungeon. He tumbled across the floor, doing his best to protect his body and particularly his face, his hands covering his head. The door slammed firmly behind him, leaving him in darkness -- a darkness so complete that any of his Kai night-vision as might still have been functioning was powerless against it. For some while he just lay there, weeping almost soundlessly, feeling the filthy ground beneath him.

Then he realized that he wasn't alone.

7

Hello, said a voice in her mind. *I'm sorry if I startled you.*

Alyss opened her eyes again and looked at the creature with incredulity.

"What did you just say?"

I said, "Hello." The animal relaxed back onto his haunches. *I was only trying to be friendly.*

Alyss did her best to pull herself together. She took a pace or two backwards, so that she could see more of the beast. It was thumping its huge bushy tail repeatedly against the ground. "If ever you want a few tips on social etiquette," she said, "please feel free to ask me. I'm tremendously good on the subject."

Even seated, the animal was taller than an average man. Its tongue still licked around its jaws. Its ears were pricked up: obviously it was expecting her to say something more. The fur of its coat was grey apart from the ruff.

"I thought you were going to kill me," said Alyss.

What is "kill"?

The animal looked over its shoulder, saw its tail, and grabbed it between its teeth.

I only wanted to say we're all very happy that you've come to join us. None of us can ever remember seeing someone like you. You're a very odd shape indeed for a timehound. And you hardly have any hair -- and even that's a funny colour, don't you think?

The struggle with its independent-minded tail over, the timehound put its nose down to inspect Alyss's face more closely. Seemingly fascinated by what it saw, it licked her chin appreciatively.

"You can speak to my mind!" said Alyss, suddenly exhilarated. For billions of years she had been familiar with this means of communication, so that it was only now that she realized that, since her arrival in this otherworld, the power had left her along with all her other powers. She had tried to establish mental contact with Garna, but without any success. *And can you hear what I'm thinking?* she added.

Of course, said the timehound, cocking its head quizzically. *Although I can't understand why you have to make such peculiar noises while you're thinking things.* Its tongue lapped out to one side to probe an ear.

It took Alyss a moment or two to realize what the animal meant. Then she replied: *Where I come from, very few people can speak using thought. To understand each other they have to utter sounds, like the ones I was making. They call it "talking". It's quite easy once you get used to it, but of course it has many limitations.*

Like what?

Oh . . . She stamped her foot petulantly, and then was annoyed that, because of the softness of the ground, the gesture had so little effect. *When you're really annoyed with someone, and you want to tell them so, you can't unless they're close enough to hear what you're shouting at them.*

I don't understand "annoyed".

You will, now that I'm here, predicted Alyss with uncharacteristic frankness.

Oh good, thought the timehound to her. *It's always a pleasure to learn something new.*

It pulled itself up onto its feet and its tail started wagging again, the tip brushing from side to side across the straggly vegetation behind its rear legs. *Would you like to come and meet the others now?*

How many others are there? Alyss was abruptly nervous again. The beast seemed friendly, and was presumably very intelligent, as otherwise it could never have developed the ability to speak directly into her mind. However, the long teeth would seem to indicate that it was a carnivore: she had no wish to be lured by friendly conversation into becoming supper. Behind her shoulders, Garna squeaked, indicating that he, too, was considering this unwelcome possibility.

The timehound once more suddenly thrust its muzzle directly in front

of her face and licked her chin. The surface of its tongue was warm and moist.

There are four of us, of course, it thought to her. From your mind I find that you are scared we might dismantle you with our mouths and take bits of you inside ourselves. I do not understand why you think we would want to do anything like that. Do you ever take things into your insides? It seems very peculiar.

Alyss recalled that neither she nor Garna had felt any trace of hunger or thirst since reaching here, and deduced with a flood of relief that the timehound, too, never had to eat. No wonder ingestion was such a strange concept to him. *I'll explain as we go, she thought.*

The beast flopped down on the vegetation, its rear legs tucked under it and its forelegs stretched out in front. The tail whacked up and down loudly. *It might be easiest if you rode on my back.*

Alyss clambered aboard. The timehound's fur was much softer than it had looked, and with the beast's acquiescence she knitted her fingers into its ruff to make herself secure. Even so, she was almost thrown off as it came to its feet: its back was very broad and her legs not very long, so that her seat was precarious.

I'll go gently, the timehound promised.

It kept its promise, and the ride was much easier than she had anticipated. Even Garna overcame his nervousness and poked his head up out of her hood to look around. They went slowly and smoothly up over the side of the mountain towards a high pass which Alyss hadn't been able to see from her position in the foothills. Up here the vegetation became richer and more varied in colour -- quite the opposite of what one would have expected on Magnamund or any of the other worlds Alyss had visited. While the plants on the plain had looked rudimentary, as if no one had ever bothered to think out their forms, the ones up here were much more complex -- although Garna reassured her that, since there were no trees, she didn't have to worry about being knocked painfully from the timehound's back by a low-hanging branch. Alyss saw bushes with blossoms in bright yellow, red, brown, purple . . . she lost count of the colours. Some of the shrubs took fantastic forms: here there was one that looked exactly like a vast pink human hand, its fingers and thumb splayed towards the black sky; over there was another whose naked twigs made a tracery as symmetrical as a spider's web. Even the grass beneath the timehound's feet looked as if it were alive and growing, unlike the dead stuff back on the plain. The air smelled better up here, too,

and the light seemed brighter.

Alyss found that, for the first time since coming to this otherworld, she was beginning to feel quite cheerful. Perhaps things were going to improve.

As they went she explained, as she had promised, the phenomenon of eating. It was clearly utterly alien to the timehound, which asked her repeated incredulous questions. It took her a long time explain to it that, in Aon, all creatures -- aside from herself and a very few others -- had to have the energy of food because otherwise they would die. The need to drink amused the beast: she felt its laughter rippling around in her mind.

But if you don't eat, she asked, remembering the turd she'd trodden on, how come you have to excrete?

How else do you expect us to get rid of all the unwanted bits of the past? it answered enigmatically.

They came out of the other side of the pass, and Alyss almost fell from the timehound's back. Again they were confronted by a colossal plain, ringed by mountains, but this one was as different as could be from the one they had left behind them. At first she thought it must be a huge crater filled with molten gold. She had to hold a hand up in front of her eyes to protect them from the blazing reflection of yellowed light.

The timehound felt her thoughts.

No, it's not the metal you're thinking of.

Then what is it?

The grass in this plain is golden. We prefer it -- always have preferred it since we were created -- to the grass in the Plain of Darkness. That's why we so rarely go to the Plain of Darkness. You're lucky I was out roving for fun, as otherwise we'd never have met. Sometimes I like to stare at the Plain of Darkness, because it reminds me how lucky we are to live here, looking out over the Plain of Light.

Alyss's eyes were becoming more accustomed to the blaze of light. She lowered her hand and clutched the timehound's ruff anew. She still had to squint against the yellowness, but now it had become at least tolerable.

Are there other plains? she asked.

Certainly. We don't know much about them, because there seems little reason to stir far from our home. But one of us -- Xila, my mate -- has travelled across the Plain of Light and across three other plains. All of them are different. One of them has creatures which tried to dismantle her. Perhaps, like your friends on Magnamund, they kill to eat. Xila was not

dismantled, so she has no knowledge of eating. But she had to wound a creature to preserve her own life: it was something she had never done before.

Alyss, on hearing the timehound use a name, felt guilty that she had made no attempt to introduce herself or discover her new friend's name -- or even its sex. She sent a thought to the beast.

Mindor, came the answer. And I'm a man.

A male, she corrected.

No, a man. Don't forget, you're in a different world now. In your world human beings may be things with two legs that walk upright, but here, with only the four of us, a human being is someone who walks on four legs and has grey fur and a purple ruff, as I do.

The timehound was picking its way deftly down a slope of scree, taking care to make the passage as smooth as possible so that Alyss and Garna were safe on his back. From time to time he paused to lick a rock. Alyss realized he was performing an immensely skilled task, negotiating the scree while bearing an unaccustomed burden on his back. She tried to think towards him, but her thoughts were politely refused: he had enough on his mind picking his way through this terrain and following his instinct to lick the rocks without having to answer her questions.

Soon they were out of the scree, and not long after that they reached the timehounds' hillside camp. The other three came whooping up the mountainside to meet them, and examined Alyss, still seated on Mindor's back, with considerable interest. She forced herself to stay calm as the big pink tongues licked around her calves. Garna decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and squirmed down into the bottommost part of her hood. But Alyss could feel the soothing influence of these creatures' thoughts: they were as delighted as Mindor to meet her. It wasn't long before she was sitting cross-legged, her elbows on her knees and her grubby silver cloak spread around her, in a circle with them. Thoughts passed among them freely, as if they were all old friends.

And she had a great many explanations to make to these friends. The timehounds were curious to know everything about her and about Aon. The beasts didn't seem to have a leader, although Mindor was obviously the most dominant character among them. The other male was Zan, a hound even larger than Mindor, with a deep blue ruff and a way of managing to look as if he were smiling, despite those ferocious teeth; his thoughts in her head were loud, but his questions unsubtle. Zan's mate was Elde, whose thoughts

sang so sweetly and persuasively in Alyss's mind that she wondered if Mindor really was the dominant individual the others assumed him to be. Finally there was Mindor's mate Xila; she was less forceful than the rest, but there was a certain steady determination underlying all her thoughts. The smallest of the four, Xila moved with a grace that even Alyss herself could do nothing but envy.

What was it like in Magnamund? Who were these people she talked about -- Lone Wolf, Qinefer, Banedon, Vonotar, Zagarna and the rest? What was a sword? Why did the beings of Magnamund wish to make war on each other? (This was after she had been at some pains to explain what war actually *was*.) Then they turned to even deeper questions. Who were the gods -- Ishir, Kai, Naar? Who was Alyss herself? Why was she here, in what they called simply the Everness?

The questioning did not flow in only one direction, however. Alyss was able to discover (as was Garna, because the timehounds made a point of relaying all of the mental conversation to the little invertebrate) that the timehounds had been here, so far as they knew, since the beginning of all time, when they had been created. They had little to do but play across the slopes of the mountain, sometimes venturing down into the Plain of Light or the Plain of Darkness; only Xila had journeyed much farther afield. There had always been just the four of them, and that had seemed to them to be the natural order of things. The notion that, on the far side of the time barrier, there might be billions of living creatures shocked and, to a certain extent, repelled them.

There's so much I have to tell you, complained Alyss after a while. *Let's stop for a time and start again later.* She was beginning to feel a stabbing pain in one foot, and wondered if it had something to do with the fact that she'd been sitting in the same position for so long.

There is another way we could learn from you, thought Elde, rolling over onto her side and moving two of her legs luxuriously in circles through the air.

What? Alyss's question was sharp.

You could let one of us explore the whole of your mind.

Alyss laughed -- not patronizingly but simply at the outrageousness of the suggestion. *I'm beginning to feel great affection for each of you, but I don't think any of your minds is great enough to encompass all that I hold in mine. I mean, I've been alive for several billion years, you know. I have more memories than even I can understand.*

Mindor sat up and glanced around at the others. *Yes, but there are four of us. There's only one of you. When we want to we can link all four of our minds together. Perhaps this way we could equal you. I think we should try it. If we succeed it'll make things so much easier for all of us.*

Alyss felt more than slightly insulted by the suggestion that *any* four minds put together could equal her own. She knew she was infinitely more intelligent than anyone else -- except perhaps the Gods, and about some of those she was openly contemptuous. Hadn't she taunted Vonotar and even Naar himself? She spoke with Ishir on almost equal terms. These four animals -- and she was currently so annoyed with them that she had begun to think of them as animals again -- hoped to be able to discover all the secrets of her thoughts and memories. Ha! The idea was preposterous.

"Alyss," said Garna, piping in her ear, "it wouldn't hurt to let them try."

She looked at the black sky, at the golden plain beneath, and the faces of the eager timehounds around her. There was absolutely no reason she could think of why she shouldn't let them try to absorb all her knowledge. Garna was right. Nevertheless she was still reluctant: it would be as if her most intimate possessions were being in some way violated.

You're being illogical, boomed Zan's mind.

Yes, she thought sadly and humbly after a few moments, *I am.*

It was just it was so difficult to *remember* she was now in an otherworld. Things she'd taken absolutely for granted in the *real* world seemed to be quite different here. She wasn't accustomed to the fact that her powers were no greater here than a common mortal's back on Magnamund.

The four timehounds settled themselves around her, relaxing on the ground. Alyss herself, after shooing Garna out of the ring, lay face-downwards. None of them knew quite how exhausting or painful this process might be. The smell of the scratchy reed-like stuff was rank in her nostrils; she crinkled her nose, stood up, took off her cloak and spread it, then lay down once more.

I'm ready, she thought quaveringly. Her body seemed to be trying to shrink in on itself. *I'm ready.*

8

There was a soft hiss in the darkness.

At once Lone Wolf stopped sobbing; he rolled over onto his back, yet again reaching for a sword that wasn't there. Blinded in the blackness, he had

no clear idea where the hiss had come from, but he assumed the creature could see him. He used his feet to push himself as swiftly as possible away from where he'd been lying. Grit from the floor worked its way into the back of his head.

Another hiss.

Lone Wolf wished he were facing Haakon again. All the visible fury of the Darklord was preferable to this invisible menace. He found himself crammed up into a corner of the dungeon, his arms wrapped around his stomach, his feet underneath him. He tried desperately to see -- to see *anything* -- but the darkness was unrelieved.

He could hear something moving towards him. Whatever it was, the creature was moving slowly and confidently across the earthy surface of the chamber.

It *could* see him, he realized.

But still he himself could see nothing.

Once, in the long ago, he'd fought a burrowcrawler in the almost-darkness; the beast had come close to killing him. But then there had been at least a scintilla of light, and he'd been armed with an axe. Now he was defenceless. All he could rely upon were his wits.

He leapt to his feet and darted towards his left. After a couple of paces he went straight into a wall. He reeled away, the pain of the impact almost knocking him unconscious.

There was a wall at his back, too.

What was going on? The brief glimpse he'd had of the cell as he was being flung into it had shown him that it was spacious, yet now it seemed to be tiny. He dashed in a different direction and once again ran directly into a wall. There was another hiss; again it sounded several yards away from him.

Lone Wolf threw out his hands, his fingers fully extended, feeling for whatever might be there in the darkness.

He found crudely formed edges of granite blocks to his left and to his right; he found them also to his front and to his rear. He was in a space that had contracted until it was only a few feet across. He shouted something -- just a collection of syllables, not a real word -- and heard the immediate echoes of the noise.

And yet there was something moving towards him that was more distant than the walls.

He dropped to his knees and felt around the floor. He pushed out his right hand along the ground, and it seemed to him there was more space.

Although breathing was still difficult, the air seemed cleaner down here.

He crawled cautiously forward, reaching out his hands before him. He discovered the underside of a wall that seemed to have been suspended eight or twelve inches above the floor. The hiss was coming from whatever room lay behind.

For a moment he thought of retreating, but only for a moment. If the cell into which he had been cast continued to shrink, he would surely be killed; if he could somehow escape from it, though -- well, there was always the chance he might survive.

The wall was slowly lowering, too; he could feel its descent. He threw himself onto his back again. His hands dug into the floor as he pushed his body backwards. The wall was so close above his face it seemed as if it were breathing on him; he scraped his chest as he pulled himself through the narrowing gap.

Still total blackness.

Still there was a hiss.

He sat up looked around him, but as before there was nothing to see. Many times he'd slain the slaves of the Darklords, but at least then he'd been able to see them. Now he was confronted by a monster of which he knew nothing, and he was totally blinded.

Where was his sword? Where was the Sommerswerd?

Again he grappled at his belt

Again he realized he would have to fight for his life using nothing more than his bare hands.

Again there was a hiss.

6

She, The Spider

1

He threw himself forwards and was immediately entangled in a coil of squirming wormlike folds. This was no burrowcrawler: he'd have felt the Agarashi's claws beating at his chest. Instead, there was a solid, hard body wrapping itself around his neck, trying to throttle the life out of him. Lone Wolf did his best to force the coiling creature away from him; its flesh felt greasy against his palms in the darkness. Although he could see nothing, there were brightly coloured darts of light in front of his eyes as he struggled with the creature, his head being crunched along the floor.

A new fear.

If the creature pushed him back far enough, the descending wall could crush him.

He just wished he could *see*.

A long time afterwards he realized -- and it was only thanks to Qinefer that he did so -- why it was that he was inspired to spring to his feet, hurling the worm away from him. His instincts were telling him to find a *wall* -- something to help him define the space in which he was confined.

There was a sad, soggy, squashing noise in the darkness. Otherwise the worm died silently. Lone Wolf felt as if, in some way, his hands had been contaminated: they seemed to him to be filthy. He wiped off as much of the slime as he could on his cape, then moved warily in the direction in which he'd thrown his attacker.

He almost slipped and fell as he neared it. The creature's body had splattered against a wall, and it had literally burst: it must have been a boneless mass of muscle and fluid, held together by a thin, balloon-like skin. A stench like moulding milk filled his nostrils, and he stepped backwards. The creature's bodily liquids might be corrosive: they might eat through the soles of his boots and burn his feet. He took several slow paces sideways, his left arm up ahead of him to forestall walking straight into another wall. Then he slid his feet cautiously forwards, feeling for any trace of liquid underfoot, until he gently came to rest against the wall on which the worm had died. The stone surface was cold and rough, but he patted and stroked it tenderly as if he had encountered a long-lost friend.

A sudden apprehension gripped him. He'd no reason to believe the floor of the dungeon was solid: it would be quite in character for the

Darklords to gain sadistic delight from putting prisoners into cells where, as they explored them, they would discover that in places there was no floor, only a hole leading to an unthinkable drop.

He kept moving sideways to his left, his fingers guiding him along the wall in front of him, his left foot exploring each and every inch of the floor before he put his weight on it. The darkness seemed to become even more oppressive. He was embarrassed to discover himself on the brink of bursting into tears.

At last he came to an adjoining wall at right angles to the first. It seemed he had travelled ten or twelve yards to reach it, but his approach had been so slow and unnatural he couldn't be sure: it might have been only three yards or as many as twenty. Nevertheless, he was reassured to find it: now he was establishing bounds to his prison.

Almost at once, his head was filled with a blaze of light. He shut his eyes, but that seemed to do little to diminish the dazzling brilliance. Blinded by the glare almost as much as he had been by the darkness, he instinctively turned to face towards the centre of the cell, his shoulders lodged against the corner of the two walls.

He opened his eyes carefully.

When at last he could see properly he found Haakon standing in the centre of a large room, perhaps twenty yards on a side, staring at him. The red eye-glasses of the Darklord's mask flared, as if in glee. Two Nadziranim darted around the cell behind him.

"You have survived my little test," said the soft voice, "and you have killed my pet."

Haakon moved to the shattered remains of the worm and picked up a piece of its skin. Lone Wolf was thinking more about the fact that the floor was indeed solid -- his fears of invisible pits had been unfounded -- than about the Darklord's movements, and so he was caught unawares when Haakon suddenly turned and hurled the scrap of flesh directly at his face. He ducked at the last moment, so that the meat missed him and slapped against the wall. He staggered forward instinctively, getting as far as could from the corner, but even so a small droplet of the worm's fluids splashed onto his cheek, stinging as it burnt. Swiftly he wiped the cheek on the sleeve of his cape: he'd been wise to be so circumspect earlier.

Haakon laughed, enjoying Lone Wolf's moment of humiliation.

"You're in my power, boy," he said. "Completely in my power. Your execution will help me become the Archlord of Darkness on Magnamund.

You will be very useful to me. Ironic, is it not, that the person who has done so much to delay Naar's conquest of Magnamund will, by his death, help the forces of our God?"

"I'll kill myself rather than let that happen."

"How?" The Darklord gestured around him. The cell was a blank box.

"I could drink the gore of your dead pet," said Lone Wolf after a pause.

Haakon gestured to one of his Nadziranim, and immediately all traces of the worm vanished. At the same time a vast wooden throne, painted in gilt, appeared at the centre of the dungeon. The Darklord, moving ponderously, walked across to sit down on it. His bony fingers were twitching interestedly.

"Yes?" he said.

"If not that, there'll be some other way to get free of you," said Lone Wolf bitterly, although at the moment he couldn't think of any possibilities.

"No, there won't," said Haakon, his tone almost friendly. "Have you ever paused to wonder why you are able to breathe the air of the Darklands? Mortals can't, you know."

"I . . . I . . ."

"Well, let me tell you." Haakon was beginning to sound like a teacher of small children. "It's because I've ordered my Nadziranim to keep you alive by magical means. It's very difficult for them to do this and they have to expend a great deal of energy, but they've decided to obey my orders -- they always do, of course. Now, it would be very easy, Lone Wolf, for me to tell them to stop supporting your life, wouldn't it?"

Lone Wolf could think of nothing to say. Now he realized why, from time to time since being brought here, he'd felt as if he were being half-smothered: Haakon had been demonstrating his constant vulnerability. His life was in the Darklord's skeletal hands, and there was little he could do for the moment by way of retaliation: if Haakon decided to kill him in this way, the Darklord could announce to his fellows that Lone Wolf had been executed. It would be a triumph for him, albeit it not as great a triumph as the more public execution he planned.

"You see what this means?" bubbled the Darklord.

Lone Wolf nodded gloomily.

"The walls of this prison are ten feet thick, but they aren't what is confining you. You're in a prison whose walls are hundreds of *miles* thick -- the whole expanse of the Darklands."

2

Four of the young neophytes -- three boys and a girl -- had been killed by the Kraan, their small bodies left ripped inside the walls of the partly built monastery. Qinefer, Carag and Cloud Maker sadly dug shallow graves for them in the forest, and the community buried them with the full formalities of Kai ritual. Others had been injured; Qinefer herself had been gashed savagely all down the inside of her right arm, although that hadn't stopped her from killing seven further Kraan.

The next morning Carag disappeared, presumably returning to the Darklands, his mission having been in vain.

It was a bit of a mystery how the Giak had come to them in the first place. Like all Giaks, his allegiances were swayed by the presence nearby of a strong mind; this was why he had become the assistant of the treacherous Sommlending wizard Vonotar, and then later had shifted his loyalties to the magician Loi-Kymar, who had taught Banedon the arts of the second level. But it had always been assumed that, on his earlier return to the Darklands, he would have come under the influence of one of the Darklords, and so regain his previous hatred for all mortals. Yet this apparently hadn't happened. The two of them could think of no obvious explanation.

The matter was less urgent to them than that of Lone Wolf's well-being -- if, indeed, he was still alive, which Qinefer morosely doubted. Cloud Maker, on the other hand, was much more optimistic -- or, at least, he pretended to be, greeting her frequent sudden bursts of tears with bluff reassurances that he was certain that the Kai Lord, of all the people in the world, was the most likely to have survived. In the longer term, he pointed out a few weeks later, once he was sure Qinefer would be able to think more coldly and objectively, at least the Sommerswerd was safe. She herself, with his guidance, would soon possess sufficient Kai skills to handle it. In Lone Wolf's hands it had slain a Darklord and rescued Sommerlund from the brink of extinction; there was no reason she could not come to use it with equal effect.

She hit him in the face and ran off into the forest.

An hour later she reappeared, pale-faced, and quietly apologized to him. The big man pulled her to him and hugged her until her shoulders stopped shaking.

From the very day after the attack they continued their work rebuilding the monastery. The monotonous labour helped take their minds

off the memory of the bereavements the small community had suffered. Qinefer and the other wounded did light tasks around the camp while the others sweated under the weight of the great stones. For a while the work had gone ahead at only a snail's pace, but then the neophytes, with the emotional resilience of the young, had started to laugh again, and things began to return to normal.

Late one night, Qinefer and Cloud Maker were lounging on either side of the dying campfire, sipping mead, watching the bright stars in the sky and talking about nothing of very great importance.

Suddenly Qinefer sat up, pulling her knees to her chest and holding them in her arms. Cloud Maker looked across at her. It was a warm night, and the glow of the fire lit up the perspiration on her black, broad-cheeked face; her eyes, too, seemed to possess a light of their own. He could see, at her wrist, part of the ugly scar on her arm as a lighter line against the darkness of her skin. He'd come to love her as if she were his own daughter, he realized; Lone Wolf was very lucky.

"I most go to Holmgard," she said. Earlier she'd been speaking lazily, almost dreamily; now her voice was much more incisive.

"Why?"

"Ulnar will know by now of this incursion, but presumably he can't think it's important because he hasn't sent any of his people to us. Our messenger must have been too young to persuade the king that this attack could herald worse to come. The boy hasn't returned, so it may be that he never even reached the court -- that he'd dead in a ditch somewhere. I should have" -- she bit her lips vexedly and stared straight ahead -- "I should have gone myself in the first place."

"You were badly injured," said Cloud Maker quietly. "It was foolish of you to have helped dig the graves."

"I could have ridden a horse." She spat the words.

"I wouldn't like to have been the horse."

"Thanks."

There was silence between them for a short while. Cloud Maker listened to the whirring of the night insects in the forest nearby.

"But I should go now," she said abruptly.

"Yes, I think perhaps you should." He heaved himself ponderously to his feet and fetched another log for the fire. It crackled and flashed noisily as the resins in it boiled and caught light. "I don't see that there's anything Ulnar can do, except send additional patrols to the Durncraggs to combat any

parties of footsoldiery that might be sent across from the Darklands. But I can't see you settling down properly here until you've felt you've *done* something. Whatever you do won't bring Lone Wolf back, of course, but it'll make you *feel* that in some way you've contributed to the possibility of it happening. Sorry to be so blunt." The big man had rarely needed to explore tact during his long life, and he was finding it difficult to begin now.

"You think it's a fool's errand?"

"No."

"But you just said that . . ."

"For the sake of Ishir, Qinefer, I've just said that it's very important you should do this! The future of the Kai -- and for that matter the future of Sommerlund -- probably depends on you. If you're just lingering here, getting more and more miserable, you're betraying the people of this country. Do something positive! You're not much use to the rest of us if you spend half the time sitting around moping. If it'd make you happier to go and see Ulnar, then that's what you should do. We won't miss you while you're gone, you know." *And that's a lie*, thought Cloud Maker. "We can get just as much work done without you. Your arm might be able to help you ride a horse, but you still can't give us much help with the heavy work. So go, first thing tomorrow -- go!"

"Can't give us much help with the heavy work.' Hmmm. I think I hate you, fatso."

To his relief, she was smiling.

"Go on. Do it. If you think it's right, do it. I'll look after things back here while you're away. The brats'd get on better with a little strict male discipline for a while rather than all this namby-pamby maternal nonsense."

"Do you value your throat, Cloud Maker?"

"When I was in Ragadorn it was valued at about one and a half gold crowns, but I think I could charge a little more for it in Sommerlund."

"Oh, that I had one and a half gold crowns."

They were laughing together now. It was the first time for a while that Cloud Maker had seen Qinefer totally relaxed, and he was glad for her. Even as they'd been lazing by the fire, he'd felt the tenseness of her body.

"Look, I'll let you have my throat on the cheap," he said. "To you, lady, just a single crown. Special offer, one day only. A bargain you can't resist."

"I haven't got a crown."

"Then I'll lend you one."

They were very tired, and this seemed to the two of them the height of wit.

After they'd stopped snickering. Qinefer stretched herself easily, her hands stretched out behind her head.

"Time for bed," she said.

"Yes, time for bed," he agreed.

Soon they were rolled up in their respective rugs. Cloud Maker looked across at Qinefer's face for a long time after she had fallen asleep. Yes, it would be a good thing if she went to Ulnar at Holmgard: it would give her something to live for. Staying here, pretending that nothing had happened, was destroying her from inside: she was a person who had constantly to be *doing* something, no matter how futile that "something" proved to be.

She gave a little snore and rolled over onto her other side, so that her back was towards him. Just before she did so, however, he saw the trace of a smile on her dreaming face.

He smiled, too, and that was the way he fell asleep.

3

It had been taking Banedon and Jenara far longer than they'd expected to trace where the Helghast and Drakkarim were managing to enter Vassagonia, despite their united magical efforts. Each morning Banedon would dress himself in his disguise as a worthy merchant of Barrakeesh and leave the tavern to walk the streets, his mind trying to sense the presence of Darklands spawn. He was becoming increasingly resentful about this because, sleeping on the floor or in a chair, he spent the first few hours of each day aching all over his body. He'd suggested to Jenara that it might be fairer if they alternated nights in the room's sole bed, but she'd given him a look of such ferocity that he'd thought it better to change the subject. She, for her part, spent most of the time pent up in the room, like Banedon trying to detect where the spawn were coming from.

They killed several of the creatures each week. Banedon's mind revolted from the practice, but he agreed with Jenara that, if Vassagonia was to be saved from becoming a thrall-empire to the Darklords, it was something that had to be done. Every time he discovered the nearby presence of one of the spawn, he would track it down, use his magic to shrink it, and then stamp viciously on the rapidly scurrying body. And every time he would feel sick. The Brotherhood of the Crystal Star was not a warlike organization: its Guildmasters had always directed the use of left-

handed magic towards benevolent ends, such as curing and the prevention of Evil. Banedon knew that, by killing the spawn, he was countering the forces of Evil; but that didn't help him reconcile his frequent killings with his own conscience.

A summer morning in MS5053, and Banedon was walking down a street called Bir Rabalou Road. As always on these excursions, his mind was probing his surroundings, trying to feel the influx of a nothingness.

And, at last, he sensed one.

He stood stock-still, other Vassagonians bumping into his back or cursing as they made belated avoiding manoeuvres.

Banedon's head was tilted to one side.

Somewhere behind him, a non-soul had come into Vassagonia.

He turned, looking back along the street. At the far end he could see the palace of Zakhan Moudalla. Between him and the splendid building there were hundreds -- perhaps thousands -- of Vassagonians. It was unlikely he could reach the palace swiftly, but he decided to do his best: running around and beside horse-drawn carts, he fled down the street towards the palace. Its onion-domes grew larger and larger as he panted his way towards them, sweat dripping stingingly into his eyes as he forced his legs to keep moving. Vassagonians turned and stared at him, but none of them thought to resist the progress of someone they obviously regarded as touched by the midday sun.

The gates of the palace were tall and imposing; their tops towered far above his ahead as he reached them, gasping. He leant against a red-stone wall, struggling for breath, and one of the sentries posted at the gate approached him slowly. The man was swinging a scimitar in one hand and carrying a spear in the other. It was clear he suspected Banedon of some form of treason, because his weapons were ready for use.

"Your ruler," puffed Banedon, "your ruler's in danger."

"The Emperor is never in danger," said the Vassagonian stiffly. He was a rather small man with an aggressively curled beard and a slight squint. "We guard him with our lives."

"Nevertheless," gasped Banedon, rather pleased that he'd managed to utter the polysyllable despite his shortness of breath, "right now, spawn from the Darklands, one at least of them, maybe more, coming into the palace. Your Emperor, any one of them could kill him." He'd run so fast to get here that his heart was pounding away in his chest. His stomach felt uneasy and he wondered if he were going to be sick.

The Vassagonian guard looked uncertain. He led Banedon across to the palace gates and passed him into the custody of the other sentry.

"I'll see what's happening," he said threateningly. "If you've been lying to me, then your head may be the cost."

He pushed against the gates, and they opened.

Banedon propped himself against the wall, clutching his stomach. He offered the remaining sentry a smile, but was rewarded with nothing more than a stony glare of distrust. This man was much bigger, all over, than his comrade, and didn't bother brandishing his weapons; it was obvious he thought Banedon so insignificant that he could simply be crushed with bare hands. Even though he was exhausted, Banedon allowed himself an inward grin: his magical abilities would be more than enough to cope with the guard if he had to.

A few moments later, he discovered he would have to. The smaller guard reemerged through the palace gates, and now there were a couple of soldiers behind him.

"The Emperor has decreed this man to be an assassin!" he snapped. "Seize him!"

As all four moved in on him, scimitars aloft, Banedon twisted his fingers in a complicated knot and spoke an ancient word.

The guards collapsed in a faint.

One of them slashed his face open with his own sword as he fell, and Banedon's instinctive reaction was to heal the wound; however, he realized instantly that it would be better to get away from here. He turned and ran, cursing as the stitch in his side immediately made its presence painfully felt. There were shouts of consternation from high above him: the guards positioned at the top of the outer palace walls had been watching all that had been going on. The Barrakeesh citizens in Bir Rabalou Road were alerted; for a few seconds they were frozen, watching the young man fleeing among them, but then they moved swiftly into action, yelling shrilly as they pursued him.

Banedon was feeling sick again. The pain of the spell he had had to use on the guards had yet to ebb; he doubted he could summon up the courage to accept the agony that using the same spell on all these people would cause him. A thought went fleetly across his mind: if he, like Vonotar, had been able to adopt right-handed magic, there would have been no pain. But, as Vonotar had shown, right-handed magic corrupted mortals completely.

Off to the side, a narrow alley. Inn signs swinging high above the footway. Swerving around a fat man who had his arms outstretched, trying to seize Banedon. The footfalls of his pursuers sounding much louder now they were confined in this narrow space. A quick look over his shoulder and the discovery that he was slowly leaving all but the swiftest behind. The fat man tripping, so that others spilled around him. Looking ahead again now: concentrate on running as fast as possible, but the air coming into Banedon's lungs seemed white-hot. People emerging from the inns, houses, shops, some of them trying to seize him.

And then there was a silence. All Banedon could hear was the patter of his own feet as he fled along the cobbles.

"Quickly!"

Jenara was there, only a few yards in front of him. His vision swam.

"I can't keep this up very long," she said painfully.

Confused, Banedon looked around. Behind him, his pursuers were frozen in place, some of them in impossible poses. He looked upwards and saw a bird motionless in the sky.

"Quickly, I said!" Jenara angrily pulled at his sleeve.

"I . . ."

"Shut up and come with me!"

She dragged him into a cul de sac, at the end of which there was a waist-high wall.

"Over! For Ishir's sake, hurry, Banedon, you fool! We've got only another few seconds!"

He hoisted her over the wall, putting his hands under her feet; she groaned as she fell to the ground.

Behind him, he heard the tumult in the alley begin again. As quickly as he could, he hurled himself at the wall, rolling himself over its top, landing with a thud on what proved to be a lawn of thin grass. Jenara was beside him, twisting and moaning.

The two of them lay there, side by side, for a minute or more, coping with their pain.

"We've got to move," she said at last, her voice sounding strangled.

"Where?" A wheeze from Banedon.

"Back to the North Star. Back to our room. We should be safe there."

Her face twisted from the pain of each word.

"But won't they . . .?"

"No, they're like wild animals in a lot of ways. By evening they'll have

forgotten all about us. For Ishir's sake, let's get moving!"

They were in the enclosed back yard of a rather depressed-looking house. Fortunately, the house seemed to be empty, and they could see no windows overlooking them.

They stumbled towards a rear door, trampling flowers and vegetables; as they reached the door Banedon stretched a hand backwards and restored the plants.

Jenara was busy with the lock.

She attempted a spell, but evidently her body was still too racked with pain from her freezing of time to allow her to perform even this simple spell. She looked exasperatedly at Banedon, but he was watching the vegetables. In the end she broke the door open with a well aimed, flat-footed kick.

Together they scurried into a kitchen that stank of rot and overripe food. The walls had once been whitewashed; now they were a dismal stained yellow. There was a door on the opposite side of the room, and they shuffled through debris towards it as fast they could, gagging from the smell. Underfoot were pale orange and blue tiles, beautifully arranged in a complicated abstract mosaic.

This next door, they found, was not locked.

Beyond it was the great room of the house. It was filled with animals -- sheep and goats and a cow -- all terrified by the sudden intrusion of the two fugitives. The cow couldn't decide whether to be aggressive or flee, so that in the end it just stood where it was, stolidly still; Banedon ran smack into its pink-grey nose and, to his astonishment, found himself pausing to apologize. Jenara grabbed his hand and dragged him onwards to the door leading out onto the street.

The animals were making a huge noise, and so Jenara and Banedon had no time to scrutinize the street before throwing themselves out through the door. They trusted to luck and tried to look as collected as possible as they emerged: they were just two Barrakeesh citizens leaving their home to go about their business. The few pedestrians nearby hardly looked at them -- or at the sweat pouring down their foreheads.

Jenara carefully closed the door behind them, and a few more chips of its green paint spun slowly to the ground.

"Let's not do this again," she said as they strolled, apparently without a care in the world, up the backstreet.

Banedon maintained what he hoped was a dignified silence. He'd located where the spawn were entering Barrakeesh, hadn't he? -- something

that Jenara had been able to do. He had used his resources carefully and well in order to escape the aftermath of his discovery. If the Vassagonians were too stupid and ferocious to recognize their possible saviour . . .

"I wish you'd think less loudly," said Jenara. "Now, how do we get back to the inn from here? First left, I think."

4

Alyss, spreadeagled on her cloak. Around her, the four timehounds, lolling on the tough, straggly mountain vegetation. Overhead, the black nothingness of the sky. A wash of reflected yellow light from the Plain of Life colouring the girl, the timehounds and the mountainside. The feeling that somehow the air is being hauled in towards this focus.

Now!

5

. . . four cold little silver insects running all over her body, feeling her clothing, rubbing against her face and her back and her thighs, and then gathering at her mouth to move right inside her, scratching their way through her palate until at last they are in her brain . . .

. . . they are scattering out along the gossamer threads of the spiderweb that is her mind. She, the spider, holds herself back with difficulty from attacking the intruders, waits at the edge of the web as her anger rises almost uncontrollably, watches the tiny points of silver as they scuttle along the tracery so swiftly that they look almost like solid lines of light. They move faster and faster, so that now it is hard for her to watch the scene: the whole of the web seems to be shining brighter and brighter, dazzling her, but she can't close her eyes . . .

. . . brighter and brighter. And now, too, the swathes of heat are being thrown against her. At first they feel like soft bundles of cloth, but soon they are sticks, then rocks, and now it is as if her face is being lashed with a whip. The light is burning out her eyes. Her skin is shrivelling away. The agony is a high-pitched tone that gets higher and higher until it is a shriek. Nothing now but the light, the heat, the sound, the pain . . .

. . . no more . . . no more . . . no more . . . but there is more . . . and more . . . and more . . . and . . .

6

Alyss screams, drawing her body up into a tight little knot, clutching her

head between her hands. The scream seems to go on for so long that she wonders if she is going to die. But the pain is slowly pulled out of her until at last it is all gone, and she lies there sobbing on her cloak, feeling the wetness of her tears spread out through the fabric.

There is a cold touch at her cheek.

"Alyss?" whispers a shrill little voice tremulously in her ear.

She can't find the strength to stop weeping, but the tears are coming more easily now and her body has stopped convulsing.

"Are you all right?"

She manages to gasp out a "Yes", but that's all.

The back of her hand feels a soft warm caress, and she forces herself to open her eyes and turn her head -- to look straight into the face of Mindor. The timehound's eyes are heavy with fatigue, but he has enough strength to lick her again. Clearly he has defied his exhaustion to drag himself across the ground to comfort her.

Alyss. The thought in her mind causes her a bright twinge of remembered pain. *We have discovered there is a thing called sleep. We think we must all sleep, now. When we waken, we'll tell you . . .*

But then the great eyes slowly close.

And Alyss lets her own eyelids chop away the yellow light.

7

Exhibited Animal

1

The second raid came a week after Qinefer left for Holmgard.

Giaks chattered in their vile way as they and the Kraan they rode came spiralling down from the sky. It was early morning, and no one around the monastery was as yet stirring. Cloud Maker barely had time to awaken before a black, serrated sword tore into his throat. He fell to his knees in a river of bright blood. The last sound he heard was that of the neophytes screaming as they fled into the perimeter of the forest, trying their best to beat off the predators just long enough to find sanctuary in among the trees.

A few of them succeeded. A few.

After the carnage was over, the spawn prowled around the clearing, the Giaks in their waddling gait and the Kraan strutting clumsily, occasionally turning to throw a corpse over onto its back. After a quarter of an hour their movements became less certain, almost lethargic.

They had been sent to find the dark-skinned woman warrior, and she was not here -- neither among the dead nor among the wounded. They would have recognized her had she run to the forest with the youngsters; besides, they knew that she wouldn't have run -- she'd have fought them bitterly to try to save the others. Something had gone very wrong. They'd been told she would be here. Now they found their information had been wrong.

They would almost certainly pay with their lives -- just as they would have if they'd killed her.

Slûtar would be very angry, and in his rage he rarely listened to excuses.

In a dismal way -- quite in contrast to their yelling, exuberant arrival -- they left, one by one, struggling up into the skies.

A single Giak remained, hugging the forest edge so that he couldn't be seen by his fellows as they rode away.

When the raucous clatter of the wings had subsided and he knew that he was alone, the Giak called across the clearing: "Qin . . . efer."

"Carag," said a small voice behind him, and the Giak whirled, sword at the ready.

It was one of the neophytes, her face tear-stained, her hair tangled by her sleep.

"Carag?"

"Yes . . . I . . . Carag."

"Help us?"

"I . . . help. Where . . . Qinefer?"

"Qinefer's gone to see the king. She wants to tell him about how Lone Wolf was captured." The girl dragged the back of her hand across her eyes.

Carag nodded. So the woman he regarded as his friend was safe. He looked around at the littered bodies in the clearing and nodded again. The expedition had otherwise been a success, and he was dimly pleased about this. Like any other Giak, he was incapable of feeling sympathy for those who had died. And he liked being a part of an efficiently carried-out assault. It didn't occur to him that the slaughtered might have been loved by his friends. He felt a slight twinge of remorse only when he saw the body of Cloud Maker.

Yes, Slûtar would be angry. The Darklord had hoped to use Qinefer as a pawn in his struggle for ascendancy over Haakon, but clearly his hope would be frustrated. Slûtar had sent Carag here, months before, to warn Lone Wolf that Haakon was planning to capture him for exactly the same reason, but Carag's slow-wittedness had meant the warning had come too late. Carag had regretted the seizure of one of the few humans whom he genuinely *did* regard as a friend, and it was for this reason alone that he'd been able to pluck up the courage to return to Kraag and report to Slûtar what had happened. The Darklord had fumed for weeks, and then told Carag that his life might be spared if he could lead a party into Sommerlund to kidnap Qinefer. The forces of Darkness did not hate her as much as they hated Lone Wolf, but nevertheless her capture would add immensely to Slûtar's esteem among the less prominent Darklords.

Now the plan lay in ruins.

Carag wondered if he dared return again.

After a while, he said all this, in his cumbersome way, to the neophyte.

"But there's another way you could save Lone Wolf, and help Slûtar," she said, pushing back her blonde hair with both hands.

"How . . . I . . . do this?"

"I'll explain."

2

Lone Wolf had been kept in the dungeon for only a few hours. After that he was allowed to wander at will around Helgedad -- knowing that at any time

Haakon could give the command to end his life. He realized that he was, essentially, an exhibited animal. At times he was summoned to the great hall, so that the lesser Darklords could look at him and revel in his humiliation. On these occasions they'd laugh at him (not always with conviction; sometimes they looked at Haakon to make sure they were laughing at the right moments) and throw chewed Giak bones or heavy metal goblets at him, so that he had to dart and duck in order to avoid the missiles.

Escape. That was his first priority.

Yes. A good first priority to have.

But how?

Prayers to Ishir and Kai calmed his mind, but brought no inspiration.

And what was happening back in Sommerlund? Were the armies of the Darklords once again putting the country to the sword? He didn't know. And it was so disheartening that he didn't know.

At least three hundred miles to the Durncrag and, beyond them, Sommerlund. Skaror and Ghatan were much nearer, of course, but as far as he was concerned those nations were still an infinity away. As Haakon had said, Lone Wolf was trapped in a prison whose walls were infinitely thick. He could use his Kai powers to survive without breathing for as long as ten minutes, but how could he run three hundred miles in ten minutes?

So, for something to do -- for some way of expressing his grief and exasperation -- he resorted to irritating tricks. Grabbing Giaks by their slimy hair and hurling them out of high windows was fun for a while, but it soon became apparent to him that Haakon didn't care very much about a few Giaks: plenty more could always be spawned in the dungeons. Later, whenever the Nadziranim detected him killing a Giak, they cut off his breathing for a short time so that he had to strangle and cough and choke out a plea for clemency.

(The dungeons. The worm he had fought. Had it been a Giak larva? He didn't know. For some half-realized reason, he hoped it hadn't been.)

A more effective ploy, he soon discovered, was not to react during the ritual humiliations demanded by Haakon as demonstrations of the Darklord's might. Lone Wolf soon found he could use his Kai powers to deflect the missiles and simply stand there, arms crossed, watching with feigned disinterest as they fell all around him. This regularly drove Haakon into a fury, especially when Lone Wolf, surrounded by debris, turned to face the great table of the Darklords and gave a studiedly innocent smile.

These were, he acknowledged to himself, nothing more than tactics of

harassment. Unless he worked out some means of escaping from the clutches of the Darklord, there was little point in them.

He lost all track of time. Weeks, months or even years might have passed when one day he found himself walking along one of Helgedad's countless corridors, kicking the gelatinous blue wall viciously every few paces because it squealed so satisfyingly every time he did so, and saw a Giak approaching him. It looked nervous, shifting its gaze from side to side and both before and behind it.

The Giak raised a hand to halt Lone Wolf in his tracks.

"Think . . . you . . . safe."

"My friend," whispered Lone Wolf.

"I not . . . I not . . . sure," said Carag. "I . . . friend . . . Slûtar. He . . . my . . . master now. Maybe . . . he . . . you . . . friend?"

"I think not," said Lone Wolf, speaking cautiously. He looked up and down the corridor; none of the other spawn seemed to be within earshot. "But he and I might find each other useful."

"The . . . great . . . Darklord . . . my master . . . he think . . . so. That . . . why . . . I . . . here . . . Helgedad."

Carag grinned. As always, the sight was hideous.

Two of Haakon's Nadziranim darted towards them. Lone Wolf felt the sensation of a hammer beating at his brain as his legs gave way. Carag, too, was falling.

Next Lone Wolf found himself in a lightless dungeon once more.

"Carag!" he hissed. "Carag!"

3

"I thought you might have done this thing called dying.."

Alyss opened her eyes and groaned. For a few moments she was disoriented. Her mind had been filled with jumbling, disconnected, disconcerting images that had flashed in strange colours which had seemed somehow more intense than those of the real world. Her head was painful, and there were random aches all over her body.

You're awake. She recognized Xila's tone of thought.

Yes, said Alyss, forcing herself to collect her wits and getting up onto her hands and knees, *but I'm beginning to wish I weren't. Garna, when you wake people up in future, do you think you could try to speak in a lower-pitched voice? Or else I'm going to make a gag for you.*

The dustworm squeaked once, unhappily, and slid away.

Alyss sat back on her haunches. Zan was still asleep, snoring loudly, but the other three were up and about. Mindor and Elde she could see coursing playfully across the mountainside above her: their huge bodies were obviously not only immensely strong but also very lithe and manoeuvrable. Every few seconds one or other of them would pause to lick a rock or a bush that seemed for some reason appealing to them and then instantly be running again. Alyss smiled. Despite the vastness and vicious appearance of the timehounds, Mindor and Elde reminded her of nothing more than a pair of lambs gambolling in a field.

The thought abruptly saddened her. Would she ever see two lambs in a field again?

Xila was beside her, and idly she reached out a hand to stroke the timehound's fur.

I know what you're thinking.

Of course!

Don't despair. We believe we may be able to help you return to Aon again. Xila had obviously been refreshed by her sleep, but her thought was even quieter than usual. Alyss cursed her own selfishness -- which startled her, because it was something she had never seen need to do before. She had been wallowing in her own pain and misery, but clearly the transference of her knowledge to her friends had drained them, too.

How? she asked, making the thought a request rather than a straight question.

Xila relaxed beside Alyss, putting her forelegs out in front and stretching her body luxuriously. Alyss leant against her flank, feeling the timehound's warmth against her face and shoulder.

In your memories, Xila began, *we read all of your history, all of your knowledge -- everything.*

Alyss blushed. There were a few items -- um, quite a few -- in those memories that had not been designed to become common knowledge.

Xila ignored the embarrassment. *And we also discovered the powers that you enjoyed in Aon -- will enjoy again, we hope.*

Surely all you found were my memories of them?

Yes, you could put it like that. But that's enough, isn't it? I don't know how to explain it to you. Let me think. We found in your mind your recollections of things called "books". When someone finds out something important, they might write it all down in a book. The book is like a memory, but a memory that anyone who can read can share. When they read it, and

understand it, the original person's memory becomes the new person's knowledge. Xila settled herself still more comfortably, and Alyss moved to accommodate her, feeling the powerful muscles flexing beneath the fur. *At the moment -- here -- you're like someone who's written a book but can't remember what's in it. Something is stopping you from reading your own book. But we -- the four of us -- we've all read it, and so your memory has become our knowledge.*

Alyss became excited. She sat upright, and Xila turned her huge face to look at her. The timehound's great ruff was bright against the blackness of the sky.

Then you can give me my knowledge back? You can make it so I have all my powers again?

We . . . don't know. The great creature's head dipped towards the ground, and her tongue disappeared behind the walls of her teeth. *We think we can. But not now -- not for a while. We're so tired in our minds that making the attempt might cause us to die, and if we died that might break up the whole fabric of time -- and so destroy Aon. We just don't know. All of us must think about these things.*

Alyss's hopes had been high. Now they plunged into deepest despondency. She dropped down again, sitting with her back against Xila's side, rocking gently as the timehound breathed. Garna came slithering towards her, imagining that perhaps this was a good time to make a reconciliation: she raised her hand to slap the dustworm away, but instead picked him up and held him to her chest.

"I'm sorry I was so angry with you, little one," she said softly. "It was just that . . . oh, I can't explain."

He squirmed against her.

"Friends again?" he said hopefully.

"Yes, friends. Of course we are. And *good* friends."

He wriggled happily.

His happiness raised Alyss's spirits. Here she was, surrounded by five of the closest friends she'd ever known -- and yet she'd been feeling miserable. Even if she never returned to Aon, even if she never was able to achieve her destination -- her birth -- she could stay here in this strange otherworld for all of eternity, secure in the knowledge that there were those around her who loved her for herself. The idea had a great appeal.

But that can't be. Xila's thought came as an intrusion.

Why not?

We found in your mind that one day you will love a mortal called Banedon. You weren't -- aren't -- certain when that'll happen, but you know as a fact that one day it will. This means you will return not just to Aon but to Magnamund.

That hadn't struck Alyss before. Of course! Her limited knowledge of the future of Aon had told her quite firmly that she and Banedon would eventually become lovers. This meant there was no doubt that some time, in some way, she'd be in Magnamund again.

Unless he comes here, she suddenly wondered.

How? The left-handed magic of the Brotherhood of the Crystal Star will never become powerful enough to let him puncture his way through the barrier between Aon and this existence. Even the evil right-handed magic of the Nadziranim cannot bring a person here. Vonotar the wizard himself, who fused the two magics, would have been unable to breach the wall.

But the Gods? Her thought was a very shy one.

Yes, the Gods would be able to, mused Xila. *But would they ever want to?*

Alyss nodded her agreement. The Gods had more important things to do than make sure her own personal knowledge of the future was fulfilled.

Zan was awake. The great creature turned over on his side, looked up at the black sky, and let out a silent howl of glee that, mentally, almost deafened Alyss.

I'm alive! I'm alive! The words thundered through her mind.

Alyss thought spikily: *We're only too well aware of that.*

Oh. Sorry.

Mindor and Elde came scampering back to join the rest of them. They were panting deeply, but Alyss felt a happiness in their minds now that the last of the four timehounds had awoken. Both of them licked her face and then licked Zan's. Elde tried to lick Garna, but the terrified dustworm rapidly hid himself inside Alyss's clothing. She could hear him whimpering quietly.

What should we do? she thought at the four timehounds, once the greetings were over.

What would you like to do? came the voice of Elde.

The trouble was that Alyss just didn't know. If she were to be trapped in this otherworld for some while to come, until the timehounds found themselves able to find a way of letting her -- and Garna -- escape back to Aon, should she just enjoy life among her friends or should she continue her quest back to the origins of Aon and her own birth? She couldn't decide.

We learnt a lot of things from you. It was Mindor speaking. He stood stock-still for a moment, then reared onto his hind legs and slowly moved upwards into the air. He accelerated, so that in only a few moments he was so far above them he looked like a miniature wolf painted in brilliant tints at the centre of a vast black canvas. Abruptly his body stretched so that it ran from one horizon to the other, the colours thinning and melting. Then the image dissolved, and around them showered a rain of bright yellow buttercups, which stabbed themselves into the ground. The petals of the buttercups opened, the heads of the flowers turning towards the Plain of Life.

There was a moment of complete motionlessness. Then the buttercups, in a way that Alyss couldn't perceive, began to draw together. The little flowers moved quickly and more quickly, until there was a huge mound of them. Alyss could smell their sweet scent; she leaned back against Xila's flank and breathed deeply, closing her eyes momentarily.

When she opened them again the buttercups had gone and Mindor was standing there. His tongue was flicking and she could hear his laughter inside her.

As I said, Xila thought to Alyss, rather saltily, *we read your memories and that gave us your knowledge.*

Should I try to find the place where the crucible -- Aon -- was made? asked Alyss.

Yes. Four minds speaking to her at once.

But how can I get there?

All directions are the same. This time it was Zan who addressed her. *If you can go far enough, eventually you'll reach the sky, and it's in the sky that the crucible is.*

"Is"?

Yes, where it is. "Was" and "is" and "will be" mean the same thing here. Aon's future exists and its past exists -- they are all a part of "now".

Alyss put her arms around her knees. The golden light here, the light she had thought so beautiful when first she'd seen it, was now hateful to her.

We'll come with you, thought Xila, turning her head around to lick Alyss's ear.

Will you?

Yes -- all of us. That was Zan. He squinted at Alyss's garments and suddenly they were completely free from the disfiguring mud and non-grass stains to which she had almost resigned herself.

A small service, Zan added.

Suddenly Alyss grinned. She picked herself up onto her feet and, with no little difficulty, succeeded in dragging a trembling Garna out of her tunic. She popped the dustworm into her hood.

Let me carry you, thought Xila courteously, and Alyss agreed happily. It had been Xila, after all, who had reassured her after she had woken from the first sleep of her life. Besides, the timehound moved with such sinuous ease that Alyss assumed she would make the journey far more comfortable than any of the others could.

Thank you, she said courteously as Xila allowed her to climb up onto the high back. She took careful hold of the timehound's ruff.

Shall we run or fly? thought Mindor.

Run for a while, Xila replied. *I sense that Alyss might be nervous if we flew. Anyway, it would be nice to show her the Plain of Life.*

Alyss winced. If she fell off the back of a running timehound she'd be hurt. But if she fell off the back of one that was flying . . .

I really, really, really very much want to see the Plain of Life, she thought with all the urgency she could muster.

4

It was like wading through gold. The grass was on average about a foot tall, and the stems were so springy that they came erect again immediately after the timehounds' paws had left them. It was almost as if the blades were moving aside to let them pass, then closing up again behind them.

Alyss, her legs securely clamped to Xila's shoulders, felt the happiest she had been since coming to this otherworld. She didn't care if her exhilaration was born from true optimism or from the way the upflooding yellow light deceived her body into thinking it was being washed in comforting heat. Her smile was radiant, and she bestowed it generously on whatever caught her attention -- her friends, half-seen trees, anything. From time to time she found herself bursting into song; some of the ballads were very ancient and others used language so colourful that even she had difficulty working out the meaning of the lyrics, but all of them seemed to help reinforce her impression that circumstances were improving. Zan openly laughed at her as she sang, but she knew he wasn't mocking her; instead, he was laughing because it was good to see her recovering her *self* again.

She poked her tongue out at the huge timehound, and felt his smile.

There was a wind -- hardly more than a breeze -- blowing into their faces across the Plain of Life. It tickled through her short coppery hair, so that sometimes she gave a brief giggle. Xila loped beneath her, keeping up a steady rhythm, trying to move as smoothly as possible so that Alyss would have no fear of being thrown off. From time to time Alyss gently patted the timehound behind the ruff, using the gesture as well as her thoughts to convey her gratitude for the timehound's kindness.

Danger. It was Mindor.

The four timehounds pulled up so swiftly that Alyss was almost hurled over Xila's head; she thanked Ishir she had kept good hold of the timehound's ruff.

Where? she asked.

I'm not sure. Somewhere near here, but I'm not sure of the direction. It's just a sense I have of it.

I feel it too, said Elde. *Somewhere off to the right, I think.*

Can you dismantle this thing? Zan asked Alyss. Earlier the timehounds had explained to her they were rather disgusted by the purpose for which her sword had been designed. They had initially assumed it was some inexplicable appendage of hers; on discovering in her mind that its use was to kill other mortals, they had whiffled their unhappiness. She'd explained to them patiently that she had never used it to kill *anyone* -- indeed, that she had never knowingly killed a mortal at all -- but the four of them were still unhappy whenever they thought about the weapon.

How can I tell if I can dismantle it? I don't know what it is! She could feel no presence of danger herself, and so couldn't conjure up any image of the potential attacker, if there indeed was one. *Tell me anything you can about the danger.*

Large, came Zan's booming thought: *A lot larger than we are. And for some reason it's decided we hate each other. It's watching us right now.*

The four timehounds milled around slowly, sniffing the air and looking in all directions.

I think you're right, Elde, thought Mindor. *It's over there somewhere -- he gestured with his head -- but I can't work it out exactly. And I can't see anything through its eyes.*

Alyss reflected that, if the timehounds genuinely had discovered all her past knowledge and gained her lost powers as they rampaged through her mind, they should now be having no difficulty in locating the foe. Perhaps the experiment had been only partially successful. Or -- an

unpleasant idea -- maybe the explanation for their confusion was that this was a type of enemy unlike anything she had ever come across during all her time in the physical realm of Aon. She ached for the powers she had once known. She could have become a butterfly, flitting innocently across the plain until she saw the source of the hostility . . .

No, not a butterfly -- a bird. And each of the timehounds could do here all of the things she had been able to do in Aon.

She told this in a mental whisper to Elde, and the great creature nodded curtly. Moments later, where there had been a timehound there was now a chaffinch. It turned its head to one side and then the other, its small, bead-like brown eyes looking at each face in turn, and then it darted up into the air and away across the golden Plain of Life. Soon it was just a tiny fleeing dot.

It's strange, Xila was musing. When I came across this plain on my way to explore the Everness, I never felt any threat at all. I saw not a sign of life except for the golden grass. It's different in the next plain, but here . . .

Perhaps Alyss has attracted the attention of a predator? wondered Zan.

Alyss immediately felt paranoid. If she were the one attracting predators, it would be all too easy for the timehounds to leave her here and return to the safeness of their mountain camp. She'd hardly even blame them

. . .

The thought that entered her mind was as cutting as the north wind. *If you ever dare think of us like that again, said Xila, then we really will leave you here. We're your friends. We'll help you in any way we can. But there's a price you have to pay. You have to reward us with your trust! How can we trust you if you don't trust us?*

Alyss felt humiliated. She'd never completely understood this friendship business; Xila's acid comment explained to her more of it than she had ever known before. Yes, trust had to work both ways. She'd had no right to assume that her friends trusted her if she wasn't prepared to trust them back. She tried to convey her shame as well as the love she felt for them in words, but all that came out was a wave of emotion.

They understood, though. Their tense postures relaxed, and they sent her messages of affection. All of them turned to look towards the horizon in whose direction Mindor had disappeared.

It wasn't very long before they saw the chaffinch returning. It was flying somewhat awkwardly and making poor speed, but eventually it

collapsed down among the golden stems in front of them. Moments later Mindor was standing there, a great gash across his left shoulder. His chest shuddering, he breathed noisily and quickly.

What happened? Alyss was first to ask the question.

Evil, gasped the timehound, great Evil.

Can we run from it? asked Elde.

No. And we can't fly away, either. It won't let us fly. It wants to dismantle Alyss -- us, too, but Alyss most of all. Mindor lay down on the grass and began to lick his wound. Almost immediately the edges of the flesh began to knit together.

What does it look like? This was Zan. He was pacing from side to side angrily, looking as if he considered himself capable of fighting anything, no matter how huge or vicious. He was, after all, the largest and strongest of them. Saliva dripped from his jaws to fall loudly onto the ground, and Alyss recognized that the bloodlust had come into him. In conveying all of her memories to these friends she had given them not just powers that could be used for Good but also the knowledge of Evil -- the killing skills, the desire to slaughter. Perhaps these were new concepts she had introduced to *all* of the Everness, not just the timehounds. And maybe that was why there was an enemy here in the Plain of Life now, where there hadn't been one when Xila had trekked across it earlier. She felt as if she'd sullied the whole of the Everness.

What does it look like, this thing? repeated Zan.

Mindor, whose wound had by now almost completely healed, looked puzzled. *It's difficult to tell you, he said. It's not like anything I've ever seen before. It's not any sort of animal or plant -- nothing like that at all. It's more like a pattern of probabilities in time, all grouped together and acting together. When I saw it, it was settled into the bottom of a shallow dell, like a cloud of mist, but I could sense that it was intelligent and malignant -- that it hated us all, especially Alyss, simply for being here. It can change the whole nature of reality around it, if it wants to. All about its edges things were . . . flowing . . . as if they were only there when you weren't looking at them.*

Like the trees! Alyss exclaimed, and the others nodded. Although they could see the trees perfectly well themselves, they had read in her mind about her inability to do so.

I tried to get away as quickly as I could, Mindor continued, but I wasn't quick enough. The thing made a piece of cloud into a sharp blade,

which fell to the ground like a chopping sword. I only just escaped with my life.

Alyss looked around her and shivered. Although the weather was as always balmy, and although the glowing gold carpet they were standing on seemed to supply some extra warmth of its own, she felt as if she were standing in a gale.

I think we should try to run away, she thought softly.

We can't. Mindor was peremptory.

Why not?

If it were a normal living creature I'd say that flight would be our best plan. But this . . . entity . . . it seems to have the ability to alter the realities of this whole region. If we tried to flee, it could do something like simply make the distance between here and the mountains infinite, so that we'd never escape.

Xila thought: *We have no choice but to fight it?*

Yes.

But how? Elde asked.

The breeze made the bright yellow stems of grass whisper among themselves. A ripple spread across the plain, caused by an eddy of the breeze; Alyss was reminded of the way the fur of a cat looks when you stroke it the wrong way.

Mindor had no answer to Elde's question. He stood up and looked at each of the others in turn, his eyes worried, his tongue switching nervously from side to side. Zan had stopped his ceaseless pacing; it had become clear even to him that in this battle his great strength could not help them.

Alyss idly tapped the scabbard that hung from her waist, thinking her own gloomy thoughts. She was the one who had brought them to all this. No -- that wasn't totally fair. The three timehounds were fully sentient creatures who had made their own decision to come on this exploration with her. Still, if she had never had the impertinence to believe she could come safely to this otherworld, they would never have met her and so would even now be happily living out their eternal lives together on the mountain slopes. The friend she felt most guilty about was, curiously, Garna. The dustworm had trusted her completely; like an infant with a parent, he had assumed that, wherever they went, he would be safe just because she was there. And she had done nothing to disabuse him of that belief.

She drummed her fingers on the scabbard again. Her sword was utterly useless to them now. Unless . . .

She shut out the others from her mind and watched as an idea began to flower.

5

Qinefer tapped the shoulder of her horse and Janos responded immediately, speeding his gallop until she could make out few of the details of the scenery flashing past her. The huge white stallion had been given to Lone Wolf by King Ulnar's son, Prince Pelathar, as he died at the battle of Alema Bridge, some years ago. The steed nowadays declined to obey any riders save Lone Wolf, Qinefer and, for no immediately obvious reason, the neophytes of the Kai, with whom he was obedient, gentle and affectionate.

Janos was being none of these at the moment. They were within a few miles of the wooden palisades surrounding Holmgard, and the horse was galloping as fast he could. Qinefer's father had been born in Cloeasia, so her skin was dark, almost the black of her father's. Far from the cities, people didn't care about this; but here, near to Holmgard, the colour of her flesh seemed to mark her out as an enemy. The fact that she had played a large part in saving Sommerlund from Zagarna's attempted conquest of the country, and that she was now referred to in countless ballads as the "brown warrior", didn't affect the hostility of the local peasants. A year ago she had been Baroness of the Southlund Marches; now she was a fugitive from the mindless hatred of people whose lives she'd saved.

She ducked as yet another stone went swiftly over her back.

Some friends you are, she thought.

She could hardly believe the speed of the horse as he pounded down the stone road. He was breathing deeply and quickly, and directly in front of her she could see flecks of white sweat on the short hair of his neck. The mud and stones beneath them were just a rapid blur of changing greys and browns as they sped along the road. A shadow was cast across them for a few moments -- the road was passing through a copse -- and then they were out in the open again, with Holmgard plainly in view ahead.

"Move, Janos, move!" she shouted, and the stallion increased its exertions yet more.

Minutes later, she was at one of the great gates of the capital of Sommerlund, reining in Janos, whose breathing was ripping the air.

The gate swung open immediately, revealing a pack of soldiers.

"Lady Qinefer!" one of them shouted.

She was suddenly surrounded by a throng of friendly faces. Some

people cheered, some knelt. A senior officer rode forwards towards her and shook her hand gravely, then offered to escort her to Ulnar's palace personally -- an offer she accepted at once, remembering the abuse and excrement that had been hurled at her only a few miles away.

But she needn't have worried. The chant of "Qinefer! Qinefer!" was deafening as she and the officer moved with difficulty through turbulent crowds. Feeling embarrassed by the naked adulation, she waved shyly from time to time, smiling nervously. Now it was flowers, rather than stones, that were being cast towards her. She was in some ways gratified to know that the people of the city she'd helped save hadn't forgotten her, but at the same time she found the whole experience oppressive. For well over a year she had lived in the remote countryside, surrounded by only a few companions: now there were thousands of people jostling around her. It was hard to adjust from the calm of the forests to the pandemonium of the city.

Another problem was that she had ridden for hours today without stopping. There were personal reasons why she wished to reach the palace as quickly as possible.

Finally they arrived.

She lowered herself delicately from Janos and gave the great white stallion's reins to an ostler; the horse, reassured by Qinefer patting him gently on the cheek, trotted away meekly enough towards the stables. Qinefer brushed aside the attentions of the sentries, thanked the officer who had led her here, strode through the palace doors and, walking with as aristocratic a gait as possible under the circumstances, found the nearest privy.

A few minutes later she was in Ulnar's large, echoing courtroom, seated across from the king at a great table made of shining onyx. The onyx was, in fact, virtually the only thing in the room to be shining: the rays of sunlight coming in through the small, high windows were made into clearly defined shafts by the whirling motes of dust in the air. By contrast with this general atmosphere of neglect and decay, however, the king himself was looking somehow younger than he had when last she had seen him. That had been over two years ago, when Ulnar had been instructing Lone Wolf to travel to Kalte and bring back Vonotar to face justice. Now the king's face appeared to have lost a lot of its worry-lines. For the first time since he had come to the throne, there had been a long period of tranquillity in Sommerlund.

Qinefer's spirits sank. Her news would surely restore some of those

worry-lines. She felt awkward and guilty; she knew the emotion was unjustified, but that didn't make it any the less intense. She was going to add to the troubles of a man who had known so little happiness in his life.

Baron Tor Medar, a huge old man with a bearded pinkish face and a reassuringly paternal paunch, seemed to understand something of what was going through her mind, because he patted her encouragingly on the shoulder.

Ulnar saw this instinctive movement on the part of his oldest ally and his expression became stern.

"Qinefer," he said, "it's always good to see you, and you know your valour has earned you great respect at this court. But I sense you bear ill tidings."

"I do."

The king leaned forward, his elbow on the table, and put his forehead in his hand.

"Tell me," he said, not looking at her.

"The Kai Monastery has been attacked by spawn from the Darklands. Lone Wolf has been carried away. He may be . . . he may be dead." The full horror of it struck her all over again -- not just the personal tragedy of losing Lone Wolf, but the nightmare that the people of Sommerlund might suffer, all over again, the hideousness of the last invasion of their country by the Darklords. The raid must surely mean there was some kind of organization once more beyond the Durncrag.

Ulnar nodded, clearly realizing the implications.

"Is the Sommerswerd safe?"

Qinefer bridled at this. Surely the safety of Lone Wolf was more important? A second later she realized that Ulnar's concern as a king was -- had to be -- the welfare of his people. In this light the fate of a single man was trivial. At the same time, Lone Wolf was one of the few -- the very few -- who could save Sommerlund if the Darklords did indeed decide to attack again. She was glad she wasn't Ulnar.

"Yes," she replied. "We've hidden it. We've buried it near the monastery."

"Would *you* be able to use the sword?"

"I think so." She shrugged, and then explained that both Lone Wolf and Cloud Maker had been helping her discover more of the latent Kai skills within herself. She didn't feel she had yet attained her full potential, but she had come to accept she was now a part of the Kai Order.

"Then you must, if the need arises."

"I agree, Ulnar," said Tor Medar, puffing as he dragged a heavy wooden chair up to the table. "But there are more urgent matters to hand."

Qinefer turned angrily.

"More urgent than this? Than the possible invasion of Sommerlund by the armies of the Darklords?"

"Yes."

She slumped miserably backwards.

"Tell me."

"A messenger has brought us news from Banedon."

"His spots are getting worse?" Even as she spoke the words she realized the sarcasm was unworthy of her.

"No. Already the Darklords are invading the lands to the east of the Durncrag -- and in a much more serious way than carrying out a single raid."

Now Qinefer was alert again.

"Explain," she said.

The king was still staring at the floor, apparently oblivious to the conversation.

"Banedon is in Vassagonia," said Tor Medar.

Qinefer nodded, unimpressed. She knew Vassagonia was somewhere to the southeast of Sommerlund, but other than that the country was merely a name.

"The nation of Vassagonia is large and powerful," the baron continued, "and its warriors are of considerable cruelty. The Vassagonians have little liking for the Sommlending."

Qinefer thought a few moments. To judge by her experiences earlier in the day, some of the Sommlending had little liking for *her*. She wasn't feeling charitable.

"Then why should we care?" she said. "If the Darklords are our foes and the Vassagonians are our foes, a war between them can only be to our benefit. Surely. One or other must be defeated, which means that we in Sommerlund have one fewer enemy to threaten us."

She slapped her palms together and gave a smile.

"Um," said Ulnar, speaking for the first time in a while, "it's not quite as simple as that."

"Exactly," Tor Medar cut in. "According to Banedon's message, what the Darklords are doing is infiltrating the upper echelons of Vassagonia with

their spawned toadies -- Helghast and Drakkarim. When war comes -- and we have to recognize that it can't be many years away -- we'll be attacked on two fronts: from the Darklands and from Vassagonia. Besides, if the spawn are succeeding with their plots in Vassagonia, what's happening in the other nations around us? What's happening in the Wildlands? Maakenmire? Casiorn? Lyris? Even your father's home country, Cloeasia? If the Darklords succeed in gaining control over all of these, how can Sommerlund be defended?"

Qinefer tapped the hilt of her sword.

"Swords won't be enough," wheezed Tor Medar.

"No," said the king, standing up suddenly, his voice hard-edged. "Swords won't be enough. We must attack all this at root. Qinefer, you've sworn allegiance to Sommerlund in the past: will you swear it again now?"

"My Lord, how could you think otherwise?" Even Ulnar could never remember that she was as much a Sommlending as he was.

"Then do as I command."

"It is my pleasure to obey," she said formally.

"Go to Vassagonia. Go to Barrakeesh. Banedon and another member of the Order of the Crystal Star are there. Find them. Help them to extirpate the spawn that are trying to take the Zakhani's power."

Ulnar had for a few moments looked every bit the imposing monarch. Now his shoulders sagged.

"Please do this for me, will you?" he said in a subdued voice.

"It would be my pleasure," said Qinefer, rising to her feet. "But I have to care for the people at the monastery."

"Surely this man you mention -- Cloud Maker -- can do that?" said Tor Medar.

She paused briefly.

"Yes, I suppose you're right . . . but he's old, you know."

"This is more important."

She thought for a little while longer. The fate of the monastery or the fate of the Sommlending people as a whole? Her duty seemed clear, yet the decision was a painful one. But if Sommerlund was overrun, then her friends would be slaughtered anyway -- along with millions of others.

She put her hands on her hips and faced the two men. Her brown eyes were angry. It was a cruel trick of fortune that she should find herself in this invidious circumstance. It was illogical to blame the king and the baron, but she let herself blame them anyway. Her brown eyes, normally so friendly,

were now like little points of steel.

"I'll obey your command, My Lord," she said.

The last two words dripped with venom.

She stalked from the courtroom.

Outside, she called for Janos and hit a servant with the back of her hand when the horse was not immediately produced. She immediately picked the servant up and gave him a gold crown, telling him his king owed him another -- if not a bagful -- and the man grinned at her, despite the fact that his eye was swelling.

"Good luck in all your ventures," said the servant as Janos was led towards her.

Qinefer kissed the servant briefly on the nose.

"All I can say is 'sorry'," she said.

"No need, Lady Qinefer."

Astride Janos, she looked down on the man.

"Yes, there *is* a need. If I return, I shall recommend you to Ulnar. If I don't, then remember for the rest of your life that you have my gratitude for not hitting me back. I deserved it."

Leaving Holmgard took as long as entering it had, but soon she was heading south. It would take her some days of hard riding to get to the border with Casiorn and then cross that little country to reach Vassagonia.

Soon there was a smile on her face.

The wind was lashing through her curly hair and the day was cold, but all of a sudden she no longer minded.

Janos whinnied happily, and was momentarily startled when his rider gave a shrill cry in response.

Better than building walls, thought Qinefer.

6

Alyss asked Xila to kneel, and then clambered down from the huge shoulders of the timehound. She drew her sword from its scabbard and held it high in the air; it was the puniest of weapons and had never drawn blood, but if she was right it could save all their lives.

She sensed the disapproval of her companions.

The dismantling spike, came Mindor's hissing thought.

Yes, Alyss replied, *but I'd reckon a "dismantling spike" is a pretty useful thing for us to have right now*. She awarded Mindor with her second-sweetest smile; the sweetest of all was reserved for special occasions, such

as when she wanted something very badly indeed.

She remembered Thog the Mighty, the dimwitted berserker who'd threatened her back in Ragadorn. He had been convinced he could conquer her through his superior strength, yet he'd been defeated by a cluster of flies weighing little more than an ounce. The entity seemed to be much the same as Thog the Mighty: confident it could destroy them through its size and strength alone.

She jabbed the sword into the ground. It stood there, swaying slightly. The timehounds looked at it.

You say, remarked Alyss almost casually, that the entity is not really interested in you four -- that it's only me it wants to destroy?

Yes -- that's what I sensed, responded Mindor.

Then our task -- your task -- is easy.

Alyss grinned again. She always felt so *pleased* with herself when her wits proved quicker than those of the people around her, whoever they were. Since that was almost all of the time . . .

The four of you took the entirety of my memories, the entirety of my knowledge, and read them into yourselves. It was painful doing so -- painful for all of us -- but that was because I was alive, so a large part of my mind resisted what you were doing.

She paused. It was difficult for her to explain what she wanted them to do.

The sword isn't alive, she began. If you could unite your minds again and feed into the sword everything you've learnt from me, it would become, in terms of mentality, a sort of frozen simulacrum of myself. The entity would attack it and presumably destroy it (a pity, because I created the pommel with especial fondness -- don't you admire the filigree work?), and by the time it realized its error we could be miles away.

There was a long stillness.

That's a rotten plan, Elde eventually pronounced.

No, Alyss insisted. The sword hasn't any soul, so there'd be no pain involved in giving it my memories. Besides, since the entity alters reality all around itself, how's it going to know that the thing that looks like a sword isn't really me?

Again there was a long stillness.

Has anyone got any better ideas? asked Alyss.

"I wonder if we could just . . ." began Garna.

"Thank you, little friend," said Alyss, smacking her hand angrily

against her thigh, "but comments from you are not welcome at the moment. Perhaps another time?" She tickled his head to take the sting out of her words.

The timehounds reluctantly gathered around the sword. They touched their heads together above the place where Alyss had stabbed the weapon into the ground. All four of them closed their eyes simultaneously, and for a moment the black non-sky turned into a blazing white. Then the quartet retreated rapidly, leaving Alyss standing beside the sword.

Thanks. Thanks a million, thought the sword dourly.

Oh, good. Success, proclaimed Alyss happily to the others. She clapped her hands lightly. *Now I think we ought to be leaving here, don't you?*

The timehounds agreed hastily. Garna, with considerable difficulty, worked his way up the outside of Alyss's cape and lodged himself once more in her hood. Elde offered to carry her, and she agreed, wishing the timehounds could somehow be equipped with stirrups, because then she would have been able to climb up with fitting elegance, rather than scramble up as best she could.

The sword directed silent imprecations at them as they fled.

I didn't think I was capable of such language, remarked Alyss breezily to the timehounds as they sped across the Plain of Life. *You must have found out more about me than I know myself.* She tried desperately to make her chin dimple, something she had once learnt was attractive in human females and guaranteed to melt the heart of anyone; she'd been able to do it with ease back in Aon, but here it seemed to be impossible. She swiftly stopped her facial contortions in case any of her companions, looking at her, might come to the conclusion that she'd developed some kind of palsy.

Actually, thought Mindor to Xila, *the sword's remarks are surprisingly tame, aren't they?*

Yes, his mate replied, *bearing in mind the things we discovered in Alyss's memories. You remember the one about the . . .?*

Alyss shut out their banter and, rather nervously, looked down over Elde's flank to watch the ground streaking past. The timehound was moving so quickly it was as if she were looking down on the surface of a swiftly flowing river of gold. The sight chilled her, so she twisted around and looked back across the plain.

The sky seemed to have concentrated itself around the place where they had been such a short time ago; its blackness had, impossibly, become

even blacker. She had the feeling that the air had become almost a solid object.

She shivered. The foe was far more powerful than any she had faced before.

Alyss spent a moment feeling pity for her sword. Right now it possessed all the intelligence that she did, and was every bit as much a conscious entity as she was. Very soon it would die, killed by the foe. Although it had been nothing more than an inanimate object until very recently, it would presumably be feeling all the despair that she herself would have felt if told she would soon die. She tried to send the sword a mental message of gratitude, but there was no response.

Xila's ruff was scraping her palm, but she didn't mind. For perhaps the first time in her life, she began to think about the fact that she was responsible for her own actions. The sword was suffering terror because of a decision that she -- no one else -- had taken. Her long-range sympathy made no difference.

A gust of wind almost threw her off Xila's back; the timehound gave a growl of pain as Alyss tugged on the ruff. From all quarters the wind was converging on the spot where Alyss had stabbed the sword into the ground. The golden grass was whipping around, the heads of some of the stalks snapping off to go chasing across the ground. Alyss clung close to the powerful muscles of Xila's shoulders, but she couldn't take her eyes away from the scene behind them.

The timehounds were moving even more quickly than before, but the whine of the wind almost drowned out the thunder of their paws on the soil.

Whenever she tried to look directly at the place where the sword had been, her vision was deflected off to one side or the other. What she could see, though, was that the golden grass was changing colour, becoming a revolting green-grey. A circle of this dead colour was spreading out rapidly from the centre where the sword was. The Plain of Life was becoming like the Plain of Death.

The circle was spreading *very* rapidly.

Faster! she urged the timehounds.

The great crater of yellowness was becoming dark, dark, dark . . .

Zan was the first to reach the foothills of the surrounding mountains. He scrambled up the first few hundred feet of the slope, then collapsed, gasping, his tongue flipping from side to side. Mindor and Elde were soon beside him; they, too, looked exhausted. Xila, bearing the weight of Alyss

and anyway being the slightest of the timehounds, was far behind. The spreading circle of decaying grass was close behind her hind legs as she staggered onto the slope. Her head close to the ground, and rocking from side to side, she climbed up to join the others.

They watched the Plain of Life become grey beneath them.

I'm sorry I came here, thought Alyss. I've destroyed everything.

You've given us the greatest pleasure we've had forever, remarked Mindor. No need for apologies.

Alyss detected a certain insincerity in this remark, but decided to take it at face value. She almost fell off Xila's shoulders, keeping her balance with difficulty. Her scabbard was useless, so she unclipped it from her belt and threw it away; it bounced across the rocks and foliage and was swallowed by the decaying grass.

Next there is the Plain of Midnight, thought Xila. I've been here before.

They rested for a while, then began to climb.

7

Out of the darkness came the hoarse voice of the Giak: "I . . . here . . . Lone Wolf."

"Where are we? Do you know?"

"We . . . in dungeon . . . Lone Wolf."

"I guessed that, Carag. But where *is* this dungeon?" Lone Wolf struggled to control his temper. Talking with Carag could be frustrating, involving long delays as the Giak's rudimentary brain thought its way through each question.

"Under . . . Helgedad."

"Carag," said Lone Wolf, crawling forwards over the floor in the direction the Giak's voice seemed to be coming from, "that was another of the things that I'd guessed. But how far below? Whereabouts beneath the city? Can you tell me anything about where we are?"

"I . . . not . . . know. I have . . . nothingness . . . before . . . we . . . here. But . . . then . . . told why I am . . . left with . . . you."

Ah yes. The Giak had not previously been acquainted with unconsciousness. It would be a mystery to Carag as to how, at one moment, he had been awake and, the next, had found himself in a totally different place.

There was another mystery, and it tugged at Lone Wolf's mind. The

Darklords weren't known for their mercy. His own life had been preserved thus far by Haakon because he served as an emblem of Haakon's power -- he was a totem -- but the same couldn't be said of Carag. Why was the Giak still alive? Surely he should have been rent limb from limb, then offered to the hungry Kraan?

Still moving on all fours across the chilly floor, Lone Wolf said this to Carag.

"Haakon . . . think . . . I . . . loyal . . . to him. He . . . put me here . . . as . . . jailer. He . . . not know . . . you . . . friend . . . mine."

Lone Wolf paused. It was difficult to work out exactly what had happened on the basis of the information Carag was giving him, but it seemed likely that the Nadziranim, concentrating to exclusion on Lone Wolf's planned escape, had regarded Carag as just another Giak. Their mental blast had been directed at Lone Wolf alone; it had felled Carag simply because the two of them had been near each other at the time. Haakon had needed a jailer: what better than the Giak slowly and muzzily recovering nearby?

But why had Haakon needed a jailer? The dungeon must be miles beneath Helgedad. There was no route to escape.

Perhaps something had influenced Haakon's mind?

In the blackness, Lone Wolf grinned.

Carag had talked of Slûtar, and of the way the two Darklords were rivalling each other. Slûtar's loyal Nadziranim must have used a great amount of their energies, but they'd succeeded. The Darklord Haakon's thoughts had been altered -- subtly tweaked -- so that he no longer realized that Carag was a potential ally of Lone Wolf.

"Where are you, Carag?"

"Here."

"Where's 'here'?"

Moving into the wall of blackness. It seemed to be trying to push him back, but Lone Wolf forced himself forwards against its softness. Soon he was beside the Giak. Although Lone Wolf couldn't know this, Carag was looking at him in perplexity: Giaks could see in the dark, and so Lone Wolf's difficulties seemed totally abnormal to Carag.

Lone Wolf patted the Giak on the hip, then drew himself up to pat him on the top of the head.

"Are you going to be a cruel jailer?"

"No . . . I . . . find . . . way . . . getting away."

"With the help of Slûtar?"

"Yes . . . Slûtar . . . he help. His . . . Nadziranim . . . keep you . . . alive . . . think."

"Is there a door to this place?"

"Yes . . . I . . . open."

Lone Wolf felt the Giak move away from under him. He had few illusions -- despite the Giak's protestations of friendship -- about the transitoriness of Carag's allegiances, yet he recognized that Carag's loyalty might still save him.

There was a glimmer of light through the wall of darkness.

"I . . . at . . . door."

Lone Wolf coughed, then moved towards the light.

"You . . . quiet . . . please."

Lone Wolf stifled a further cough.

The hinges of the door squeaked, but fortunately not very loudly, as Carag inched himself forwards into the corridor outside. The Giak looked nervously to right and left, but the passage seemed to be deserted. He beckoned Lone Wolf to follow him, and then moved to the left.

"Slûtar's Nadziranim . . . watching . . . over you . . . now," said Carag nervously, as if he weren't quite sure this was really the case. "You . . . safe . . . can breathe . . . but . . . not safe . . . if meet . . . enemies."

The lighting was poor, but Lone Wolf had little difficulty in following the Giak down the passageway. At its end there was, at right angles, a broader concourse which was better lit. Carag gestured to Lone Wolf to keep back as they reached it; once the Giak had satisfied himself that the coast was clear, he signalled to Lone Wolf to follow him. Soon they were climbing a dusty flight of grey granite steps that seemed to last forever -- Lone Wolf was panting by the time they were halfway up it and gasping by the time they reached the top.

Still they hadn't met one of Haakon's slaves. Perhaps Slûtar's Nadziranim really had put Lone Wolf under their protection.

Perhaps not.

They rounded a corner on this new, higher level.

A Giak almost ran into them. Its ugly mouth opened and it turned to flee. It had half-uttered a shout when Carag's sword plunged into its neck. The yell petered out into a strangulated whimper as the spawn died in a gush of ichor.

"What'll we do with the body?" whispered Lone Wolf, his gaze

flicking fretfully around as he checked the killing had been unobserved.

"Leave . . . it. Follow."

Lone Wolf was just about to object when he realized that Carag was right: the last thing that would arouse suspicion in Helgedad was the corpse of a Giak.

Smoky orange daylight oozed in through a succession of windows to their left as they scurried the length of a long straight passageway. Here the walls were made of the same blue gelatinous substance that Lone Wolf had seen in other parts of the fortress.

At the end of the passage he reached out and grabbed Carag by the shoulder.

"Look," he said with difficulty, each word giving him a stabbing pain in the chest, "wouldn't it make more sense if we pretended I was your prisoner, that you were leading me somewhere on Haakon's behalf?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You . . . to die . . . today. No one . . . lead you . . . anywhere . . . except . . . execution grounds."

Lone Wolf wished he hadn't asked the question.

There was a Helghast in front of them. It towered over Carag.

The creature saw them but apparently, for a moment, couldn't believe its eyes. Its hate-filled stare twitched from Carag to Lone Wolf and back again, and then its right hand swept towards the pommel of its sword. It gave a grunt of disbelief as Carag's blade -- moving at dizzying speed -- punched up through the underside of its chin. It fell backwards, dragging Carag with it. There was a loud crash as the two of them collapsed to the floor.

"Good . . . work," said the Giak, grinning unpleasantly at Lone Wolf and putting a foot on the Helghast's face as he struggled to remove the serrated sword.

"Good work," agreed Lone Wolf dully, sickened. He was always pleased to see spawn die. At the same time, Carag's obvious pleasure in killing disheartened him. The Darklords had bred the Giaks and the other monstrosities conceived by Naar for their qualities of cruelty. Even now, Carag was taking pleasure out of twisting his sword as he extracted it from the Helghast's throat.

Ignoring all of these thoughts, Lone Wolf snatched the dead Helghast's sword and then the two of them sped on. The weapon was long and far too heavy for him to use to maximum effectiveness; the metal of

which it was made was matt black, yet its sharp edges shone brightly in the mixed light. The hilt was long enough that, if need be, he could use the weapon two-handed.

He felt much more confident now that he was armed.

And then they were running again. A Vordak fell in neatly jangling halves as they passed it. Lone Wolf was totally lost; he was content to follow Carag, who clearly knew the way out of the maze that was Helgedad.

Then they were in the open.

It happened very suddenly, so suddenly that Lone Wolf had to rub his eyes with his sleeve. One moment they had been sprinting down a corridor, indistinguishable -- as far as he was concerned -- from all the others, and the next they were on a plain of ash. Behind and above them was the vast wall of the fortress; ahead was a sky coloured in an angry orange. Yet, also ahead, there was a bridge.

The bridge was made of metal, and it was twisted in such a way that it looked almost uncrossable. But at least it was there. Carag and Lone Wolf exchanged a glance of understanding and then began to run towards its nearer end.

None of the spawn noticed them. It was feeding time for the Kraan, and that happened on the far side of the fortress. Lone Wolf tripped and stumbled as he waded his way through the ash in Carag's wake. *It must be that Slûtar's Nadziranim are helping me now*, he thought as he fell face-forward yet another time, *because otherwise I'd be dead*.

The sight of the great moat of molten lava surrounding Helgedad shocked him. Carag was scrambling ahead, moving easily across the distorted metal spars of the great bridge, but Lone Wolf had to stop for a few moments. He'd seen this from the air, but then it had been nothing more than an abstraction and his glimpses of it had been relatively brief: seen from the ground, it was a wonder. Red-hot lava was puffing and belching as far as the eye could see, the lazy bursts of the slow bubbles filling the air with a sullenly repeated sound. The heat was like a pair of hands firmly pushing him back.

Carag, turning to look over his shoulder and seeing Lone Wolf so far behind, shouted: "Come . . . now!"

Lone Wolf shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it, and woozily began to obey, ploughing through the ash until he reached the near end of the metal bridge.

The bridge looked to be some miles long. Above the bowl of lava, it

was burningly hot. In places it was so contorted that he would have to pull himself along by his hands, enduring all the pain of the metal. Yet what else could he do? Wait here and be slain by Haakon? Death held no fears for him, but the conquest of Sommerlund did.

He glanced behind him at the colossal edifice that was Helgedad and shuddered. He looked forward and shuddered again.

The Giak was urgently beckoning him.

Yes, the Giak was right.

He must cross the bridge.

The pain started as soon as Lone Wolf put a foot on the first girder.

8

Naogizaga

1

Alyss was riding on the back of what seemed to be a Kraan; in fact it was Xila. The four timehounds had decided that flight was easier for them if they adopted the appearance of flying creatures. Alyss herself, before she had come to the Everness, had been able to fly using whatever body she had currently adopted, but her friends were as yet unaccustomed to employing the skills they had gained from her mind. So now she was feeling the powerful movements of Xila's great batlike wings as they hurtled through the air.

They had crossed the Plain of Midnight. From above, it had looked like a vast motionless sea, as black as the sky. Xila had sent a thought to her through the hissing wind that in fact it was a huge field of glassy ice; when she'd been here before she'd skittered and skidded across it. Other plains were now behind them. One had seemed to have been suffering from suppurating wounds in which fires burned with a red fury, and the heat they'd experienced as they flew over it had been so intense that Alyss had felt she could *hear* it. A few of the plains had looked just like rolling grasslands, but one had appeared to be filled with fungoid growths that moved angrily as they crossed the sky far overhead.

It was almost unique that Alyss should feel so odd about flying. When she looked down at whatever landscape they might be crossing, her senses seemed to spin and she was filled with a fear of falling: she imagined dropping for minutes on end, anticipating her death as the ground rose up to hit her, and she shuddered. So for most of the time she simply looked straight ahead over Xila's cruelly beaked head, watching it as it rose and fell steadily with the pulse of the wings and seeing new terrain approaching from the far distance.

Garna quivered in her hood. The little dustworm had never before been more than a few feet off the ground. He'd taken one look down and decided that a few feet was more than enough. From time to time Alyss muttered words of reassurance to him; most often, however, she forgot to do so, her mind completely engaged in the exhilaration of the flight.

And it *was* exhilarating, however unnerving. When Alyss had flown above or between the worlds of Aon she had never felt the air blowing through her hair like this. The fear of falling, combined with the sensation of

the wind, made the whole experience so exciting that frequently she found herself licking her lips or yelling with sheer exuberation. *I love you*, she thought to the four timehounds. *If it hadn't been for you I'd never have known this.*

It's a pleasure for us, too, replied Zan, rolling easily over in the air, just for the pleasurable sensation of it. *If it hadn't been for you we might never have thought to fly.*

Alyss suddenly thought of Banedon. What was he doing now? No, that was the wrong question. She and the timehounds were travelling inexorably into the past, so that anything Banedon might be doing was located millions of years in the future. What was Banedon *going* to do? Was he going to be safe? She was infuriated by the fact that the questions mattered to her.

They crossed another ridge of hills. Over this next plain there was a mass of grey clouds. The timehounds flew straight towards them, and Elde laughed a thought. Her laughter stopped suddenly as they entered the fog: lightning flickered all around them, seemingly close by, and high winds buffeted them. Alyss pushed the top half of her body forwards so she could cling to Xila's neck; its stoutness helped her to think less of the tremendous distance they were above the ground. Garna squealed, and she vexedly told him to stow it.

Crossing this plain seemed to last forever. All they could see ahead of them was greyness. They had no idea of what was below -- or, for that matter, above. The powerful Kraan wings beat regularly, forcing them through the air, but often the four flying timehounds were battered far away from each other. Streaks of lightning created a maze in front of them as they caromed from side to side. Zan and Elde became completely irresponsible, dodging among the lightning, exchanging thoughts which Alyss heard clearly. Wet air covered her.

She didn't see the bolt of lightning that hit Zan on his right wing; all she heard was his mental scream as he began to tumble, flailing desperately, towards the ground. She tried to use her powers to save him, but of course they didn't work here, in the Everness.

Zan! she screamed. Xila's wings missed a beat.

Then Xila's thought came into Alyss's mind.

Back there, where we live, Zan is still alive. He always will be alive. It's just that he's not with us for the moment.

They flew free of the clouds. There was another ridge before them,

and the three timehounds rose in the air, flexing their grey-green wings easily. The sky was still black but the air seemed to be blue. Alyss breathed it and found it tasted like pure water. She glanced beneath her and saw a landscape of plants that stretched upwards towards them, ancillary leaves flexing as if in an attempt to clutch them.

The timehound flew on, but Xila's mind seemed to be . . . *receding* from Alyss.

A moment later, all three remaining timehounds disappeared, and Alyss found herself dropping like a stone towards a range of hills.

She screamed.

It was a long way down.

Her silver cloak was flapping around her head, rearing up like some kind of grotesque mantilla comb.

Dropping down through the skies.

She screamed again.

After that, all she was doing was throwing her arms and legs about in the air, desperately wondering if somehow she could land in such a way that she could survive. No -- that was a silly notion -- but . . .

The noise of her cape above her head was almost deafening. Her shirt was ripped away by the wind; in the midst of her horror, she found this the ultimate indignity. Garna had wrapped himself tightly around her neck. The sky's blackness oppressed her.

She landed gently on a soft palm.

Ishir, she thought, sinking into sleep.

Yes, little one.

Alyss slept.

2

Qinefer's journey through Casiorn was uneventful. Only later was she to discover quite how lucky she'd been that this was the case. The little country was barely more than a very large city, with, around it, great walls made of a pink stone that was knobbed and prickled so that it looked like coral. Casiorn had some agriculture, but essentially it survived through acting as the trading intermediary between countries that were often officially at war with each other. Politically the nation had little influence on the outside world; commercially, however, its influence was considerable. Its ruler, High-Mayor Kordas, was rumoured to be among the richest people in all of Magnamund. If she'd been warned in advance she'd have taken a rather

longer route, through Maakenmire, a nation of which little was known except that, there, life was generally nasty, brutish and short. Alternatively, she could have headed through the homeland of her father, Cloeasia.

Qinefer didn't like Casiorn very much. She'd ridden down through Sommerlund, spending her nights in various taverns and buying food as needed from farmers who were often surly and hostile because of the darkness of her face. In the Southlund Marches she'd been given a tremendous welcome by the Border Rangers, who had recognized her as their much-loved former leader; she'd spent a couple of nights among them, feasting until the skies grew pink, and had then reluctantly dragged herself away, still heading southwards.

It wasn't just the imposing wall that told her Casiorn was a foreign country. Everything she looked at was old. In Sommerlund, wars and other calamities meant that most edifices were little more than a century old, but here the buildings had, in the main, stood for the best part of two thousand years. In MS3074, only two years after the Darklords had first appeared in Magnamund, the then ruler of Casiorn had come to an accommodation with the forces of Evil: Casiorn was allowed to continue trading with all the other countries of the world; in return for this, the high-mayors would decline any invitations that were made to them to combat the forces of Evil.

Qinefer should have read some of this history. Ulnar or Tor Medar should have told her of it, but both of them had assumed she would have learnt about Casiorn during her schooldays.

She hadn't. She had never really had any schooldays. What education she'd been given had been cut short by the war.

She smiled at the people as she rode through the gates to the vast city-state, and they smiled back, not knowing who she was. The sentries hardly glanced at her, instead admiring the great white stallion she rode. She was able to entice Janos into a canter through what seemed like a million miles of streets as they crossed the small country, heading for Vassagonia. Some of the individuals she passed were Drakkarim, but she didn't recognize them for what they were and they didn't know she was the Lady Qinefer. If they had, she might have had to slay a lot of Drakkarim on her way through the country.

A few days later she was in Vassagonia, having passed out through the ponderous eastern gates of Casiorn. Janos, without requiring any urging, kicked from a canter into a gallop, and soon they were surrounded by a cloud of dust. She kept the horse travelling almost due east, towards

Barrakeesh, making regular reckonings by the sun. Around them was a desert populated by nothing more than vast numbers of depressed-looking succulents.

She called Janos to put on an even greater turn of speed: it was clear that oases were few and far between in this desert land, so it was important they covered the terrain as quickly as they could. Closer to the capital there would be cities where they could rest and refresh themselves.

That evening they saw, in the distance, an oasis. It looked less than welcoming -- a scruffy ring of trees -- but at least it was there. Qinefer tapped Janos on the neck, and the stallion gratefully eased into an amble. The slower pace made Qinefer impatient but she voiced no complaint. The horse had run long and hard with very little food or water; it would have been callous to insist now that he went any faster than he wanted to.

She was welcomed to the oasis by an arrow whizzing past her ear.

She grinned.

Arrows she could cope with.

In fact, she quite liked arrows.

She didn't even notice drawing her sword from her scabbard: it was just suddenly in her hand.

3

Beneath Lone Wolf -- a million million million miles beneath him -- there was a cauldron of boiling, molten rock. It was eager to embrace him, and so it was heating the metal spars of the bridge until he could hardly bear to touch them.

I will not feel the pain of my palms. I am hauling myself, hand over hand, across this expanse with ease.

The lake of lava coloured the clouds above it orange, but here, on the great bridge, the dominant colour was the vile-seeming off-brown of sulphur dioxide. Lone Wolf knew Slûtar's Nadziranim must indeed by now be acting as his guardians; otherwise the noxious mix of gases must have killed him long ago.

But they're doing little to stop the pain. How long will it be before the burning makes me lose my grip on one of these rods?

Carag, quite clearly, felt no pain at all. The Giak rushed ahead of Lone Wolf, jumping from twisted beam to twisted beam, pausing frequently to look back, obviously impatient, as Lone Wolf laboriously pulled himself forwards.

One hand -- the pain, but it's no worse than the pain I've already felt -- moves forward to grasp at a beam. The metal's roasting, and in the normal way I'd leave skin stuck to it.

A gust of hot wind almost tossed him away into the molten rock as he moved on to the next girder.

Pain is something I can control. The Kai powers I have discovered within myself can turn pain into something that is locked away into a tiny room in my mind, a place I need not visit unless I want to. I can control pain. I can tell myself to forget about it.

Then why does it hurt so much?

Reaching out with his right hand, grabbing at a skewed spar. His flesh hissed but he felt only a fraction of the pain.

Carag wanted him to hurry. Chattering angrily, the Giak ran back along the bridge, leaping nimbly. He put his face directly in front of Lone Wolf's and shouted a few incomprehensible words, then darted back out over the span.

I want to be there. My arms are in torment but I want to be there, on the far side of this moat. I can withstand the burning of my hands for an eternity, but the ache in my shoulders is more than any mortal should be expected to bear.

He'd started across the bridge on his feet, imitating Carag, but almost immediately the burning had made him fall, so that he'd been lucky to catch himself by his hands rather than flail all the hundreds of feet down into the redly glowing lava.

But wouldn't it be a release to fall? To know that the future of Magnamund had nothing more to do with you? Wouldn't it be better to leave this existence now, rather than endure any more of this? An instant of fire, and then an appointment with Kai or Ishir?

Right hand forward.

The heat from beneath him was a physical presence, pummelling him. He tried to ignore it. His powers allowed him to negate much of the pain, but the blast of the heat was more difficult to cope with. He swore viciously at Carag as the Giak once again ran back across the bridge to egg him on. Didn't Carag realize he was moving as fast as he could? Far more quickly than any other mortal might have?

Left hand forward.

The peace of dropping down through the air, watching the fiery orangeness coming towards me. Then there'd be only a moment of dying . . .

Right hand forward.

Lone Wolf began to smile.

It was something he couldn't help.

His hands felt as if someone had gratuitously flayed them; his shoulders were a solid mass of numb, grey, draining pain.

I'm smiling because I no longer feel as if I'm a part of myself. The thing that's hurting is a human body that's far distant from me. It isn't me -- it's just a moving object.

He hated the orange-red of the light all around him, but there was nothing he could do about it and so he did his best to ignore it. Closer to him were the hot metal beams. He couldn't any longer distinguish one from the next: he just watched his hands working as he pulled himself onwards.

Left hand forward.

Right hand forward.

Pain in both hands.

The worst of all pains, but "it doesn't matter" is the name of the game. The crest of the bridge -- I can see it. In a way I wish I couldn't, because I'd rather give up now and drift -- in a floating, flying, beautiful way -- away from all this agony and down into the welcoming endness of the boiling rock. But no. Now that I can see the highest part of the bridge I must be nearly halfway across. I swing myself to another spar and the sensation sears me.

Stupid Carag, unable to understand why Lone Wolf was moving so slowly. The Giak scampered hither and thither on the bridge, sometimes shouting at Lone Wolf, telling him to get a move on, and sometimes running far ahead, waving his sword at imaginary enemies.

Left hand forward.

There's a warm bed below, and it beckons.

Right hand forward.

There was a place here where he might be able to find a way of running across the girders of the bridge -- they were level for the next few hundred yards, as far as he could judge from his vantage point beneath them. He strained his shoulders and tried to heave himself upwards; all that happened was that his exhausted shoulder muscles refused to obey the commands of his brain.

"Carag!" he yelled.

A horrible oily scuttling over the metal rungs towards me. The beast may kill me. Right now, I don't mind. I don't.

And then Carag was directly above him, his grey-green face looking straight down at Lone Wolf's.

If a drop drips from his mouth I'll simply let go.

"Help me up, Carag," he said.

The Giak will haul Lone Wolf up through the gap between two of the beams so that the Kai Lord will be able to move for a while across the bridge walking erect. This has been preordained. There is no question that it will not happen.

The stench of my breeches singeing away as I kneel here. Quick -- up onto my feet. Run as fast as I can, skipping across the spars -- from one to the next -- before my shoes have time to burn away. Don't look down. It's a long way down, and if I look at what's there I might fall.

Lone Wolf did fall.

But by that time he and Carag were at the far side of the bridge.

4

There were four of them, plus a woman who wailed and retreated to hide herself among the soft-fleshed trees.

The Vassagonians were heavily armed. Only one of them had a bow, but the others were holding their scimitars high in the air.

Qinefer swept her own sword in a circle above her head. She smiled as she heard the whistle of the blade through the air. The four Vassagonian men began to look dubious, and the archer dropped his bow and fled. The other three stayed where they were. Janos charged on towards them for another few seconds, but then Qinefer reined him in.

"I wish you no harm," she said as the horse's hooves paced nervously in the sand, the soft sound irritating her. She rested her sword by her side, holding it loosely but ready to use it instantly should she have to.

"We, um, wish you no harm either," said one of the men hesitantly. A long time ago, his left arm had been severed at the elbow. The rounded knob protruded from the sleeve of his cloak, looking somehow impertinent.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Qinefer, still regarding all three of them alertly. "So why did one of you try to kill me with an arrow?"

The man couldn't find any words; he put out his arms to show that there wasn't any rational explanation.

"Do you always try to kill travellers?" said Qinefer.

Again there was no reply, but the three men threw their scimitars to the ground and bowed towards her. She looked at the tops of their heads

with contempt. Still, they might be useful . . .

"Will you take me to Barrakeesh?"

"Yes," muttered the man who had spoken to her earlier. "We'll take you -- we're headed there ourselves. But we cannot if you remain dressed as you are."

Qinefer was confused.

"What do you mean? I'm not a nudist or anything."

"Your shoulders, ma'am."

"What about my shoulders?"

"They show. It is forbidden by the Zakhan Moudalla that women should display their shoulders."

Qinefer looked at her shoulders -- first the left and then the right. As far as she could see, they were just . . . shoulders. In an ideal world she'd have chosen rather slimmer shoulders, but so far as she could see there was nothing especially offensive about them. Still, when in Vassagonia . . .

They gave her a cape. One of them produced it from a bulky pack that had been hidden away among the trees of the oasis. The cape was bright yellow and she worried it might make her too noticeable -- also that it would show dirt. Nevertheless, she smiled at the men and expressed her gratitude.

She asked their names, and after a short hesitation they gave them.

"Deran." This was the man who had spoken to her earlier.

"Permba," said the woman, now returned along with the archer, whose name was admitted to be Peem. The other two of Qinefer's would-be assailants were Rine and Kweint.

"I want water," said Qinefer.

They led her to a small pond at the centre of the group of trees and watched as she knelt down, using her cupped hands to scoop the lukewarm water up to her mouth. It was brackish, but it quenched her thirst. Janos, near to her, lapped busily at the surface of the pool.

Some while later Qinefer, who had still not sheathed her sword, looked at her new companions. It was difficult for her, kneeling there by the edge of the water, to see their faces clearly against the brilliant gleam of the blue sky.

"Let's go to Barrakeesh," she said quietly. That wasn't really what she wanted. The coolness of the oasis, after the heat of the desert, made her want to spend the rest of her life here. But she'd been commanded to assist Banedon and the other magician, and it wasn't a command she could lightly refuse, however unreasonable it might seem when the coolness of the water

shone up into her face.

"Yes," said Deran, "we'll take you with us."

There was something in his voice that made her reach for her sword, lying beside her at the edge of the pond.

"I mean," said Deran hastily, "we'll go with you willingly to Barrakeesh."

Once all of them were mounted again -- Permba sitting behind Peem -- the Vassagonians became much more friendly, their dour expressions melting into occasional smiles and then eventually into general good humour as their horses carried them across the desert. Deran handled his own steed skilfully, despite the fact that he had only a single arm; from time to time he turned to look at her and grin. She could see he could be an implacable enemy but also a devoutly faithful friend. Once again her spirits began to rise. She was safe among these people, and there were enough of them that only a well armed band would dare to attack them. Besides, her shoulders were now covered, weren't they?

Crossing the desert to Barrakeesh took them some days. The journey was much less arduous than Qinefer had expected it might be, because her new-found comrades proved able to navigate easily from one oasis to the next. She marvelled at their ability: as far as she was concerned, the desert looked the same in all directions and, while the position of the sun in the sky might give a general indication as to the orientation to follow across the rolling dunes, it hardly explained the precision with which, every three or four hours, the small party would come to a cluster of succulent trees and, most importantly, fresh water.

She asked Permba about this. The two women were washing in a pool preparatory to lighting the fire for the evening meal. Qinefer found it infuriating that the men expected her and Permba to cope with anything involving cooking, but had decided it would be wise not to make too much of a fuss about it: different cultures had different customs, after all. As with the concealment of her shoulders, it was a question of "when in Vassagonia . . .".

"We just *know*," said Permba. "All of us *know*."

Qinefer looked at her, smiling, little rivulets of water running from her chin to trickle into the shallows.

"How do you mean?"

"We just do."

"Do you calculate by the stars?"

"Is it possible to calculate by the stars? Their positions seem to change during the course of every night. Maybe the men have learnt this art, but I don't think so. I'm sure I would have been told." Permba laughed. "And, even if they hadn't told me, I'm sure I'd have found out anyway."

Qinefer began to explain how people could navigate using the night sky, and then stopped before she started. It wasn't her responsibility to spend weeks or months nurturing Vassagonian science into a new era. Much as she'd come to like her companions, she'd be saying farewell to them soon enough.

The meal that night was vile -- Qinefer, never the best of cooks, had decided quite reasonably that she was in a justifiedly bad mood -- but everyone pretended it was delicious.

She noticed that some pretended better than others.

A few days later they were on the outskirts of Barrakeesh.

5

I'm looking at a million little twinkling patterns of light that seem somehow brighter than normal light should be. They're all around me as I lie here, my cheek feeling the softness of Naogizaga's ash. I wonder what those patterns could be -- aurorae or comets or atmospheric effects -- but all I want to do now is shut my eyes again.

Blackness for a while, interspersed by dreams.

A clawed hand is tugging at my shoulder. I open my eyes and see a mass of colour -- there seems to be nothing else, wherever I look. No. That's not true. There's also Carag. He's looking at me worriedly. He wants me to live. My hands hurt. I wish my hands didn't hurt. But they hurt and they hurt and they hurt. The colours are trying to make my hands stop hurting. They want it to be that all the flesh that I've lost is returned to my hands, so that they'll be the way they were before they were the way they are now.

Look at hands.

Look at a piece of cooked meat.

I don't want to look.

I close my eyes again.

Beautiful, gentle, soft, embracing, velvet darkness for a little while longer.

Carag is still pulling at me, trying to make me move.

But I won't let him.

Why should I?

I don't really know if he's my friend.

He drags my arm away from my side and this time I manage to make it to my knees and look at the endless grey and the angry sky and there's something in the distance and it's a Kraan and I shrink away and Carag growls at me.

So I get up and he pats my side, watching me with those horrid little eyes of his, and we begin to walk.

We walk for a long time. My hands are a universe of pain.

The clever little clouds of colour follow us as we walk, but sometimes they go ahead of us. I do like the pretty colours. I think these things are real but I'm not sure because it might just be that my eyes are going bye-bye. I wish I liked Carag more and my ankle hurts a bit and my knees hurt like shit like my hands hurt . . .

The Kraan has seen us and is pulling its wings back ready to plunge down and attack us but one of the limitless blobs of coloured light has moved up towards it and the creature has fallen from the sky to land in a great cloud of ash and I think this is a good thing but I'm not quite certain because at the moment I'm not quite certain about a lot of things such as if Carag is a friend and what the flickering lights are.

We walk. I like walking, except when my hands hurt. I try to think if I'm enjoying walking right now. It's difficult to think when my hands are telling me to just lie down and die. I think I would enjoy this walk if there were somebody other than Carag at my side. No, why am I bothering to walk at all? I've done enough. I've killed Zagarna.

I think I've killed Zagarna.

Yes.

The person who killed Zagarna was . . .

By all of the Gods . . .

It *was* me.

I can remember standing on the roof of the watchtower and lowering the Sommerswerd so that it lit up the morning and the great scream of the Darklord as he died and it was *me* who did that.

Once upon a time my name was Landar. Then for a long time I was called Silent Wolf.

But since then I've been Lone Wolf.

That's who I am.

Lone Wolf.

Lone Wolf.

Lone Wolf Lone Wolf Lone Wolf LoneWolf LoneWolf LoneWolf
LoneWolf LoneWolfLoneWolfLoneWolfLoneWolfLoneWolfLoneWolf . . .

That's who I am.

My hands hurt.

6

They rode into Barrakeesh, and then the people whom Qinefer had come to regard as friends simply left her: one moment they were there and the next they were gone. Mounted on Janos, she looked around her at the profusion of coloured clothes and the dark faces. No one seemed to be paying any particular attention to her, which was exactly what she wanted. She nudged the horse with her knees and he pushed his way through the dense traffic.

Where are you, Banedon? she thought, trying to make the thought as loud as possible. Her Kai abilities were as yet only incompletely developed, but she believed there was a chance he might hear her.

She was more than a little surprised when there was an immediate reply. A voice in her mind told her exactly how to reach the North Star Inn. She memorized the instructions and, with some difficulty, obeyed them. After half an hour or more she was in front of the tavern, climbing down from Janos's back.

"Well met," said Banedon, smiling.

"You heard me?" said Qinefer, although she already knew the answer to the question. If he hadn't heard her thought she'd never have found her way to this place; if he hadn't been able to think back to her . . .

He shook her hand and touched her on the shoulder affectionately.

"Let's get your horse to the stables, and then you must come and meet a friend of mine."

Qinefer and Jenara took an instant dislike to each other. Neither of them, privately, could think of any reason for this: it was just a matter of chemistry. Banedon introduced them in the rather sweaty-smelling room that he and Jenara had been sharing, produced a bottle of mead and rattled around with some goblets, and smiled at both of them; but he could see there was something wrong.

Both women took their first sip of mead simultaneously. Somehow that seemed to intensify their mutual dislike.

"Ulnar has told me that the capital is infested with spawn," said Qinefer, pointedly addressing Banedon alone.

"Yes. He's right. The spawn are coming into Vassagonia somewhere

in the Zakhan's royal palace. We don't know exactly where because we can't get in there. It's possible you might be able to."

"How?"

"You're an emissary of Ulnar, aren't you? There's little love lost between the two rulers, but I think -- I *think* -- that Moudalla would receive you with all the courtesy that is your due." Banedon refilled Qinefer's goblet, trying to smile reassuringly and guiltily aware that his smile was about as reassuring as a storgh in heat.

Qinefer read his face accurately and began to giggle.

"What you're trying to say is that I might not survive," she said.

"Sort of," said Banedon, blushing. "But it's important that one of us make the effort. Neither Jenara nor I have any hope at all -- we can't get through the palace gates -- but you might. And, if none of us do, Vassagonia will be turned into a colony of the Darklands."

"I know," said Qinefer. "I know."

She felt a great weariness invading her limbs. The ride to Barrakeesh had drained her more than she'd realized.

"I have to sleep for a while," she said. She turned to Jenara and asked, with cold politeness: "May I borrow your bed for a few hours?"

"Yes." The word was made as short as possible.

Banedon and Jenara left Qinefer in the room and, for want of anything else to do, decided to go down to the bar. The usual crowd were there, so they sat as far away from them as they could, nursing tankards of the tavern's *better* ale.

"I don't *like* that woman," said Jenara.

"I noticed," said Banedon.

An uneasy pause.

"Why not?" he said.

Jenara couldn't think of any coherent answer, so instead of saying anything she took a long drink from her tankard.

"Is it because *she* doesn't like *you*?" said Banedon quietly, looking at the stained wooden ceiling.

"Don't be silly!"

"Ah."

"Even if she *did* like me, I *still* wouldn't like her."

"Ah."

"No, Banedon, I really mean it. There's a sort of scent of blood -- of killing -- about her. She seems so callous, somehow."

He looked at Jenara. Her face was twisted into something that was close to fury, and it was difficult to see her loveliness.

"She's had to become that way," he said. "During the war, she witnessed her parents and her younger brother being ripped to pieces by Kraan. She'd have died herself, but for luck. Soon after, a Helghast and a Giak tried to rape and kill her. Instead, she killed them -- almost with her bare hands. That's moulded the person she is now. She'd never slay anyone innocent -- she'd never even *want* to slay anyone innocent.

"And," he added, staring at the table, "she's one of my best friends. No, I don't mean that just loosely. She'd die fighting to save my life -- and, come to that, even though she doesn't like you very much, she'd die fighting to save your life, too."

Jenara put her hand on Banedon's.

"And would *you* die trying to save *her* life?" she asked.

Banedon couldn't think of a reply for a moment.

"Yes," he said at last, grudgingly.

"Why?"

"Because . . . because there are some people in this world who I know I can trust implicitly. You know there are. Lone Wolf, the Guildmaster, Alyss -- no, on second thoughts, I'm not so sure about Alyss. Others. You." He was wishing he'd never started this conversation. "Qinefer's the same."

"You're sure about that?"

"I'm very sure. I told you, she'd give her life to save yours if that was what she had to do."

"I wish I liked her more."

"I like her. In fact, I . . . I *love* her, really. She's kind of my sister."

Banedon felt cornered. He wondered why it was that, whenever a man told a woman that he liked another woman, it sounded like a confession of passion. Jenara had no great affection for him, yet she seemed to be attacking him because he enjoyed Qinefer -- her presence, her company, her conversation. The whole situation was so irrational. The important thing was to stop the influx of Helghast and Drakkarim into Vassagonia. These emotional tangles were a potentially dangerous distraction. He shook his head sadly.

Jenara drank some more ale.

"What are we going to do tonight?" she said.

"How do you mean?"

"It's been pretty bad, our sharing a room. We can't have Qinefer as

well. There's simply not enough space for three. Besides . . . um . . ."

Banedon began to laugh. He couldn't help it.

"Have you ever met Alyss?" he asked.

"No."

7

The Nadziranim picked up Lone Wolf by the shoulders, hauling him into the air. He thrashed his feet for the first few seconds as he rose above the dark grey plains before realizing that the right-handed magicians were preserving his life. He looked around and saw that Carag, too, was being transported through the air. They exchanged tremulous glances.

"We . . . go . . . Kaag," Carag explained unhappily.

Oh, well, that's all right then, thought Lone Wolf sarcastically. It was at least a mile to the ground. He was being conveyed through the sky by intangible collections of wavering light which might at any moment decide he was an inconvenience to the Darklord Slûtar.

He was lucky.

In a few hours he was in Kaag.

8

Qinefer kept to the shadows at the edges of the pavements, moving as softly as she could; her right hand never left the hilt of her sword. She pretended to herself that she was a cat, padding through the night, skipping out of the way of anyone who might come across her. She wanted to be invisible, and her pretence seemed to be being effective. There were dark alleys she didn't want to look down and brightly lit streets she avoided, but there were also minor roads where she felt safe.

It was a long and complicated route she took to reach the Zakhan's palace, but eventually she got there. The only person she met was a huge, burly, long-haired berserker whose head was surrounded by a cloud of flies; he took one look at her and fled, frenziedly throwing his two-handed sword from him, leaving her puzzled by the encounter.

It was eerie, here in the blackness of the backstreets of Barrakeesh. The Vassagonians, for religious reasons, retired to bed by midnight, so that the only people still likely to be out and about were foreigners like herself -- and they, by and large, kept to the main thoroughfares. The stillness was disconcerting. She felt as if the whole time there was somebody watching her from behind. The short hairs at the back of her neck prickled.

Another corner.

She came to it cautiously, checking she really was alone. It was difficult in the gloom to see anything, so she stopped, stilled her breath, and listened for the slightest sound. As far as she could hear there was no one else. Even so, she crossed the next road as quickly as she could.

She felt the mass of the palace wall when she came to it. A gibbous moon lit up a few wispy clouds, so she could see the even darker darkness of the barrier confronting her. She ran her fingers over its surface and hissed: this was not going to be easy.

Jenara had lent her a pair of small daggers -- not as weapons but as climbing tools. Checking yet again to make sure she was unobserved, Qinefer drew them from their sheaths and plunged one high above her head into a crevice in the wall. Luckily the blade lodged itself securely. She tested it with her full weight, then pulled herself upwards and dug in the other dagger a couple of feet above the first. This time, too, she was lucky.

Clinging with her left hand, she pulled out her first dagger and tried to jam it into the wall a little higher up. She seemed to have been successful yet again, but as soon as she put any weight upon it she started falling. She landed painfully on the shoddy pavement with a clatter that sounded deafening to her.

She lay there, not daring to move. If the Zakhan's sentries started to roam the streets, alerted by the noise, her best plan was to remain utterly silent and motionless.

But it seemed no one had heard her.

After several minutes she picked herself up and looked at the wall. She'd fallen a few feet. On reflection, she was glad it had been only her third handhold that had failed: the dagger might have slipped when she was fifty feet above the ground. Jenara's plan had been . . . not quite as good as it could have been.

Qinefer decided to adopt a different strategy.

She put the daggers away and drew her sword. A few minutes later she was standing outside the main gate of the Zakhan's palace. In the white moonlight, a pair of sentries regarded her uncertainly.

"Let me in or I'll kill you," she said, swishing the sword easily.

"We're glad to welcome you," said one of the guards in a choked voice. His comrade shot him a furious look, but acquiesced.

"Good," said Qinefer as the two men heaved one half of the great gate open. She strode past them, paying them no attention, pretending that she

was a queen. She tried to make out as much as she could of the buildings and outbuildings of the palace, but it was difficult to see very much in the moonlight.

"Hey! You two!"

The two men were still straining to close the heavy gate.

"Yes," said one of them resignedly.

"Take me to the Zakhan. He needs to see me."

"But it's after . . ."

"Take me to the Zakhan."

"Or you'll kill us."

"You've got the general idea."

She threw her cape back to expose a shoulder.

9

Slûtar was very pleased with himself.

Lone Wolf was far less pleased. Slûtar's Nadziranim were keeping him alive -- they were allowing him to breathe and they were protecting him from the white heat of the fortress's walls -- but at any moment the Darklord could change his mind.

Lone Wolf was a pawn in a game he didn't wish to be a part of. The Darklords hated him because he'd defeated Zagarna, and that was why he'd been captured by Haakon. Now he was a prisoner of Slûtar. So long as he was held here by Slûtar his life would be safe, because Slûtar wanted to insult Haakon with the fact of Lone Wolf's existence. Lone Wolf hoped so. Yet Slûtar would let him die at once if that seemed expedient to the Darklord. Or he would make a public display of Lone Wolf's gruelling execution, with the same aim as Haakon had nurtured.

Slûtar had abjured the ostentation that characterized the throne room in the days when Zagarna had reigned here in Kaag. Instead, the hall in which Lone Wolf now found himself was a mere ten or twelve yards across; however, the Darklord had retained Zagarna's vast and ornate platinum throne. Lone Wolf grinned covertly. The throne was disproportionately large for the room, so that it had crossed the borderline from imposing to ridiculous. Moreover, Slûtar was a much smaller figure than Zagarna had been, so that he looked rather like a child perched on a full-size chair, his feet barely able to touch the ground.

The momentary grin had not been as hidden as he had hoped.

"Foolish mortal!" shouted Slûtar, his voice booming in the enclosed

space. All four eyes glared ferociously at Lone Wolf. The chimerical Nadziranim shifted shapes and colours apprehensively all around him. "You dare to mock me?"

"Lordship," said Lone Wolf, bowing low, "I bring to you all the reverence and respect which is your due."

Slûtar thought about this for a moment. Eventually he decided he'd been paid a compliment by the Sommlending scum cowering before him.

"I've a gift for you, Lone Wolf," he said, less loudly than before, although the sound still made Lone Wolf's eardrums ache.

The walls of the room had been disguised, so that they looked as if they were faced by elegantly patterned designs in walnut. Lone Wolf peered at them, wondering why the Darklord should have concerned himself with this detail, then returned his gaze to the throne.

"I am honoured," he said, making a half-bow once again. "What sort of a gift?" His voice hardened. "A quick, painless death rather than a slow one? Is that it, Slûtar? You'll tell your Nadziranim to let me die? Or you'll throw me to the Kraan? Or maybe, instead of showing such mercy, you'll take your time and watch me as I'm gradually tormented until the life leaves me? I'm totally in your power. But, at the same time, you're totally in *mine*. However you kill me, Slûtar, I'll laugh as I die. I'll be laughing all the way into the arms of Ishir. For the years and centuries after I die, you'll remember me laughing at you -- and there'll be no way you can make the memory stop. Is that what you want, Slûtar?"

Suddenly confident, Lone Wolf sat down on the floor of the room.

The Nadziranim seemed, to judge by the clashing shades they displayed, to be terrified by the audacity he was displaying in front of their master.

"Is that what you want, Slûtar?" Lone Wolf repeated.

"I do not want you to die," said the Darklord.

Lone Wolf was astonished. He jerked his body forward.

"I can hardly believe that," he said. "When my usefulness to you is over, surely you'll want to kill me."

"No."

"Why not?"

The colours of the Nadziranim were changing again. The Darklord had accepted the impertinence of the mortal. It was unlikely, now, that they would be slaughtered simply for having been present.

"Because I want you to be returned to Sommerlund."

Lone Wolf could hardly believe his ears.

"You'll spare me?" he said incredulously. "You'll let me go back to my homeland?"

"Yes."

Slûtar shifted in the too-large throne. He waved the Nadziranim to a far corner of the room, and they obeyed him at once. They clustered together, spilling light and magic all over the floor.

"Yes," said the Darklord, "I wish to preserve your miserable life. Whether you survive or not is of no interest at all to me, after you've been sent back to Sommerlund. But I want you to reach that accursed nation. I want it to be known to Haakon that you are there. I want it to be known to the other Darklords that you are there. That you escaped the Darklands thanks to Haakon's incompetence."

And suddenly Lone Wolf realized Slûtar's strategy.

It was a risky gambit, but there was a certain sense to it. Slûtar had already inflicted a considerable defeat on Haakon by removing Lone Wolf from Helgedad, thanks to the good offices of Carag; the insult would be made even worse if Slûtar could report to the other Darklords that Lone Wolf had not only been spirited away from Helgedad but had somehow managed to make his way back to Sommerlund. There would inevitably be war between the two nations at some stage in the future, but Slûtar was prepared to take the risk of facing a Sommlending people led by a Kai Lord; that was better, as far as Slûtar was concerned, than forfeiting his present chances of attaining power over the remaining Darklords. He was thinking of the concerns of today; those of tomorrow could wait until tomorrow came.

"We're oddly mismatched allies," said Lone Wolf after a pause.

"We are indeed."

"When I return to Sommerlund, I shall of course do everything I can to destroy you."

"I am not frightened of you."

"Zagarna wasn't frightened of me either. Look what happened to him."

Lone Wolf was queasily aware that he was putting forward to Slûtar all the advantages of killing him forthwith.

"Zagarna was a fool," said the Darklord flatly. The eyes in his shoulders nictated, but those in his head were concentrated on Lone Wolf. "For the time it takes my Zlanbeast to transport you to your miserable nation, we are in alliance. After that -- after that we are sworn foes."

"I accept your terms, Slûtar," said Lone Wolf. "I shall look forward to your death."

"And I to yours," said the Darklord.

"Then both of us have something to look forward to," said Lone Wolf, beginning to laugh.

"Indeed we have."

9

The Birthplace

1

The Zakhan was much older and frailer than Qinefer could ever have imagined. It was with difficulty that the crooked figure found the strength to raise himself in order to greet her. He was dressed in the typical Vassagonian garb of turban and ankle-length robe, but both of the garments were spangled with glittering jewels and multicoloured scraps of precious metals, all arranged in convoluted patterns which Qinefer deduced -- correctly -- to have some sort of religious significance. His face was covered in deep creases and his threadbare beard was grey. His haughtily hooked nose and his brightly gleaming blue eyes were the only signs that once he had been a proud warrior.

He received her in a small room, at the end of which was a narrow bed from which, she suspected, he had arisen just a few minutes ago, when the guards had warned their ruler of her imminent arrival.

Zakhan Moudalla took her hand and kissed it formally, kneeling briefly. He was displaying a courtesy that surprised Qinefer. In Vassagonia women were more usually regarded as little more than chattels. The Zakhan was honouring her.

He led her across the mosaic floor to a collection of rather rickety-looking chairs. He gestured her to be seated.

Settling herself down, Qinefer looked around her. A vast guard stood at the door, his naked scimitar shining evilly; she ignored him. *All fat and no strength*, she thought. *I could take him easily*. The walls were of plain white plaster: despite the attempted magnificence of the rest of the palace -- she'd been led through corridors whose walls displayed a certain tawdry attempt at grandeur -- it was clear that Moudalla himself was content with simplicity. There was a single picture hung on the wall, directly over his rumpled bed: it showed the poorly painted image of a spider. *Logical*, thought Qinefer, *because the Zakhan weaves a web of intrigue through all the nations of Magnamund. Yet he has no knowledge of the web that is being woven by the Darklords in his own country.*

"I bid you greeting, Zakhan," she said.

"And I you," he replied. It was the formal response. His voice sounded like the dust of a long-deserted room.

With a wave of his hand the Zakhan dismissed the guard. The bulky

man looked astonished but was sworn to obey his ruler. He left, closing the door behind him a little more firmly than was necessary.

"I bid greeting to anyone who has the nerve to do what you've just done," said Moudalla, visibly relaxing.

He smiled.

Qinefer was amazed. His face had looked as if it was one that never smiled.

"You do realize," said the Zakhan, "that all the way from the gates you were in the sights of my archers, that every niche contained hidden swordsmen, that . . . but enough of the details. You could have been killed or captured a thousand times over. You'd have been powerless to resist. No one could have come to assist you."

He chuckled hoarsely.

"I could have assisted myself," Qinefer pointed out acidly.

"Could you?" he said.

She made no reply.

"Hm, *could* you?" he repeated, more quietly.

"I'm not powerless," she said, touching her hand to her sword.

"You impress me," he said. Qinefer wondered if there was a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"I've impressed many of the spawn of the Darklords," she said easily. "But, of course, you can't ask the ones whom I impressed the most."

The Zakhan nodded, taking her meaning.

"Why did you demand to see me?" he asked her, reaching out a thin hand to choose a sweetmeat from a bowl beside his chair. His attention seemed to be fully on the process of selection, but Qinefer knew he was watching her closely out of the corner of his eye.

"You're an enemy of the Darklords and their spawn," she said. She hoped she was simply stating fact.

"I have no love for them," admitted the Zakhan, peeling the white paper from a sugared comfit. "But then I have little love for most of the peoples of this benighted world."

His voice was soft, but Qinefer could sense the steeliness underlying it.

"Their spawn are here, right in your capital -- right in your palace," she said.

"Really?" he said, turning now to look at her, his eyebrows raised theatrically. His eyes seemed to become even bluer.

"Yes. I have . . . friends who know that the spawn are entering Vassagonia somewhere inside the palace."

She realized as she said them that the words sounded hopelessly inadequate. She sat up straighter in her chair to conceal her sense of impotence. This seemingly genial old man needed only to snap his fingers and her life would be forfeit. True, she would slay many of his guards before she herself died, but the thought gave her little consolation.

"I told you," came the sooty voice, "that I have little love for others. As the Zakhan, I must pretend to love my people, but in all truth I can't find it within myself to do so. I have perhaps a few more years left on Magnamund before I die. Why should I worry if the spawn of the Darklords are invading this country? For all I care, the Darklords can conquer the whole of Vassagonia and put its populace to the sword -- as long as it happens after I'm dead."

He picked out another sweetmeat and carefully unwrapped it.

Qinefer was astonished by what the Zakhan had just said. His piercing eyes were on her face. She tried to hide her confusion. Every monarch was supposed to act as a mother or father to their subjects. And then she suddenly realized the truth. This old man, with his courteous mannerisms and his jaws moving rhythmically as he slowly chewed his tidbit, was telling the absolute truth: he was concerned about only one person.

Himself.

He cared not a jot for anyone else on Magnamund. All he wanted was to live until he achieved a tranquil death -- after that, nothing mattered. All of his thoughts were centred on himself. So far as he was concerned, no one and nothing else mattered: people could live or die without stirring a glimmer of interest in him. He was betraying his role as Zakhan, but that was a fact that concerned him not at all.

She was shocked.

And then she thought: *Well, at least he was honest with me.*

"I'd like a sweetmeat," she said peremptorily, finding an excuse to give herself a moment or two to think.

He graciously offered her the thick pottery bowl, a sly smile on his face. She spent a little time fussing over the collection of diminutive packages, moving them hither and thither with her fingers, thinking furiously while trying to pretend that all she was concerned about were the colours of the paper wrappings. Eventually she selected one that was a pretty yellow-green.

But there are ways of making even the most self-centred people help you . . .

Aha!

"Your people would be horrified to learn that you'd allowed the spawn to enter your nation," she said casually.

"I'll be dead by then. What my people think of me after my death doesn't concern me."

"But you might *not* be dead."

"I'm not long for this world." He smiled with a complacent sadness. "Already I've lived five years longer than most men."

He smiled and patted her on the knee. The patronizing action brought blood to her face, but she forced herself to remain superficially calm.

"I think," she said coolly, "that you are an ignorant old man."

"What!" For the first time since she'd met him the mask of kindly courtesy slipped.

"How many of your advisers do you think are now Drakkarim or Helghast, using the powers invested in them by the Darklords to divert your gaze from them, so that you believe them to be Vassagonians? How many? Half of them? Maybe three-quarters? Or perhaps almost all of them? Who knows? Your court could be preparing to take your life this very night -- and *you just don't know*. But then why *should* the Zakhan need to know? His life is just another life, after all, isn't it?"

"My life is *not* just another life!" The old man was controlling his voice with difficulty, chopping the words as he spoke them so that they didn't become a shout. "I am the Zakhan. My life is sacred."

"Everyone's life is sacred," whispered Qinefer intensely, leaning forward in her chair and stabbing a finger at his face. "*Every* life -- to the person who owns it, whether they're a peasant or a beggar or a Zakhan. In death you're no more important than anyone else."

"I could have you tortured."

"And then maybe die by torture yourself the next day? No, you haven't the courage for that, you *dotard!*"

He stood up, his face pale.

He took the few necessary paces to his bed, where he sat down with a thump. All trace of majesty had vanished from his demeanour.

"You called me a dotard," he said wearily.

"You *are* an old dotard. You're nothing more than that. You may be a Zakhan, but for all that you're no more and no less of a man than . . . than . . .

than that fat slob you sent out of here a few minutes ago!"

She was aware that her voice was growing dangerously loud, and deliberately softened her tones.

"You are impertinent, child," said Moudalla.

"Does that offend you? Are you so little of a man that you can't accept a little impertinence from time to time? Are you the kind of man who bursts into petulant tears when he's been bitten by a flea. Aw, poor little bubba."

"You're close to death." The words were almost a whistle. "Very close."

"I know. Don't you see? You call me a child, and you probably think of me as *only* a woman, but at least I've got the guts to risk death if it'll save the lives of others. You don't. You're nothing, you know, despite all the tatty gewgaws you surround yourself with."

"I am the Zakhan."

Qinefer stood up, her eyes blazing. She looked taller than she actually was, dominating the room. The old man cowered away from her fury.

"The Zakhan -- ha! The emperor of a ratty little country that no one in their right mind would want to live in, let alone rule! Do you think the people who have the misfortune to be in this misbegotten apology for a nation respect you? Do you *really*? Oh, of course, they *pretend* to . . ." She waved her arm dismissively, as if pushing away an over-eager puppy. "They've *got* to pretend to, otherwise you -- the mighty little husk -- will courageously set your killers on them. I bet you enjoy watching the executions of the people who've offended you, don't you? Watching those sacred lives being taken away as slowly and as painfully as possible. Ah, you may think you're so important but you're not. You're just a . . . a stupid, self-centred little pipsqueak in fancy dress."

The Zakhan looked as if he were close to fainting.

"And now," thundered Qinefer, "call your guards to lead me out of this dump!"

The old man gave a thin, almost inaudible wheeze.

"Can't even call your own guards? Well, I'll do it for you -- yes, the *child* will do it for you. The *woman* will do it for you. Guards! Guards!"

A pair of soldiers tumbled in, their scimitars raised, ready for combat. They took one look at Qinefer, her feet set firmly apart, her whole body poised ready to move into instant activity, and doubt stopped them in their tracks.

"Wait," said the Zakhan weakly.

The guards assumed he was telling them not to attack. But Qinefer knew what he meant. He'd been able to accept philosophically the notion that soon he might slip peacefully into the arms of Naar: the thought that his death could instead be a prolonged and anguished one at the hands of the spawn had drawn all the spirit out of him.

"Wait," he repeated. "Wait, Qinefer."

She swivelled to look at him, consciously turning her back on the guards to indicate that she considered them of little or no importance.

"That's better," she said. "I'm waiting."

2

The Zlanbeast swooped down and dumped Lone Wolf unceremoniously on a patch of scabby turf, then immediately beat its wings and retreated into the sky. Lone Wolf, winded, lay on his back on the grass and watched the batlike creature until it was just a speck against the whiteness of the clouds. The black shape sped swiftly towards the west -- towards its home in the Darklands. For a few minutes longer he lay there spreadeagled, waiting until it no longer pained him to breathe, waiting until he could find his orientation, waiting until . . .

"Hello," said a young voice.

"Hello," Lone Wolf replied automatically.

The face of a little girl swam into his view, cutting away some of the reflected brilliance of the clouds. She had thinnish hair which would have been blonde if it had been just a little fairer. At some time she'd broken her nose and it had been poorly reset, so that there was a pronounced angle at the bridge. She was about twelve.

She was smiling.

Right now she was the most beautiful sight Lone Wolf had ever seen.

"I'm in Sommerlund," he said with difficulty, water coming to his eyes as he forced the words through the barrier of his harsh breathing.

"Course you are, Lone Wolf," said the child. "The others've told me all about you. I recognize you."

Wiping away the tears from his eyes with an ash-stained hand, he looked at her more carefully.

"Who're you?" he said.

"I'm Jaan," she replied. Her voice had the same sort of purity as the water from a mountain spring. "I know about you because I'm going to be a Kai when I grow a bit."

She added: "Like the rest of us."

With difficulty, his stomach protesting, Lone Wolf forced himself up into a sitting position. To his right there was the Kai Monastery -- or, at least, the rudiments of it. The walls had been built a lot higher since he'd been seized from here, although even his first glance showed that the masonry was less than expert. Several young people -- the oldest could be no more than nineteen -- were shyly emerging from the trees: they looked waif-like, their clothes tattered and stained. But they held themselves with a certain degree of dignity that Lone Wolf instantly respected. Some of them were disabled -- here there was a girl who'd lost a hand, here there was a boy who had to be supported by a friend because he had only one leg -- but Lone Wolf sensed the mental strength of them all.

And he, Lone Wolf, was lying on the ground pitying himself because the breath had been momentarily knocked out of him.

He felt humbled. These children were the Kai of the future. They might surpass him in all things . . . if they survived the years.

"Jaan," he said, "I'm very hungry."

He began to cough.

When he'd finished, Jaan, who'd been holding his shoulder solicitously, clapped her hands.

"Oh good," she said. "I'm hungry as well. I was just saying that to the others when we saw the Kraan . . ."

"Zlanbeast," Lone Wolf corrected before he could stop himself.

". . . that horrible creature coming towards the monastery. So we had to douse the fire and I think the meal might be a shambles because of the way it's been started and then stopped and then started again, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, Jaan, I know what you mean."

He was beginning to feel a little more normal now. Putting up a palm to tell her he could manage without her help, he pulled himself to his feet. Swaying slightly, as if the breeze were pushing him this way and that, he turned his bloodshot eyes to survey his raggle-taggle army of youngsters. Even if they might be the Kai of tomorrow, right now they looked like abandoned orphans.

"The Sommerswerd is safe?" he asked.

"Yes," said a youth who stood almost as tall as Lone Wolf himself. "We buried it in the ground."

Lone Wolf took his first easy breath since the spawn had dropped

him. For all the time since his capture he'd felt like only half a person, deprived as he'd been of the sword which was not only his weapon but also his other self.

"And Qinefer?"

"Qinefer went . . . far away. Cloud Maker told her she had to. He said he'd look after us while she was gone, but then the Kraan came and they killed Cloud Maker and some of the rest of us, so we just stayed here and went on building the monastery and waiting for you or Qinefer to come back to us."

Lone Wolf was fascinated by the way the youngsters spoke. Their long isolation in the forest, as a self-contained community, must have generated these complex speech patterns. Even little Jaan, on whose matted hair his hand rested, had used the same rolling sequences of clauses.

He shook his head, trying to make his thoughts come into focus.

"How long have I been away?" he said, addressing his question first to the gangling youth and then, as an afterthought, to Jaan. After all, it had been she who'd first welcomed him here.

"A long time," she said. "Since before I came here."

"And how long ago was that?"

"When I was . . ." -- she counted on her fingers earnestly -- ". . . when I was ten, because my parents said that I could, you see, and Qinefer wanted me to become a part of all this, so it must be that you've been away for about two years."

He was horrified.

Years!

In Helgedad the time had seemed to be creeping slowly, but he'd assumed this was only because of his boredom and the fact that he'd been an exhibited animal rather than a human being -- he'd been Haakon's pet and, like any pet, he'd grown unaware of the passage of days.

"That long," he said sadly to no one in particular.

"If you don't believe me," said Jaan brightly, smiling at him, "you could always ask Lorem, because he's so much better at counting than I am, although I think that I'd be better at counting if it weren't for this."

She held out her right hand and Lone Wolf saw that the little finger was missing. From the scar he assumed that Jaan had been lucky to escape with such a minor injury from an attack by the Kraan.

"Where's Cloud Maker?" His voice was dull. Wanting confirmation. Knowing the answer.

"Dead," said Lorem.

Leaderless, the youngsters had done their best to continue the work of rebuilding the monastery. In their own terms, they'd done well -- no, by the name of Ishir, in *anybody's* terms they'd done well. The work they'd done might lack finesse, but it was good, solid stuff. It crossed his mind that a purist might ask them to tear down some of the more recent work, so that the monastery walls would look more dignified, but then he shoved the thought away. Who was he to judge the achievements of these children? Wasn't it better to let the walls stay the way they were, slightly lopsided, as a monument to the incredible feat these young people had accomplished on their own?

He felt sick, but he didn't want to show it. Cloud Maker dead and Qinefer far away; the young people obviously eager and enthusiastic, but at the same time inexperienced.

"I think we should see if we can salvage something from that supper," he said, smiling. He put an arm around Jaan's head, pulling it towards his side. Her little crinkly ear felt good in his hand. Then he gave her a pat on the shoulder and told her to lead him to the place where the fire was.

She looked at him as if she'd been betrayed, but took his hand anyway and led him.

3

They'd left the Zakhan where he was.

Qinefer followed the guards as they descended narrow stairs spiralling downwards and downwards and downwards until it seemed to her that soon they must come to the centre of the world. The steps were made of a metal she couldn't recognize because of the patina of their age; she held fast to the smooth rail on her right, feeling it move through her palm as she watched the soldiers scamper down the seemingly infinite flight of steps. She was irritated by the way the tip of her sword's scabbard went clickety-click over the edges of the steps just behind her, but there was nothing she could do to stop it.

They were plunging down into total darkness. The torches the soldiers were carrying lit up the walls fitfully, so Qinefer could see that she was surrounded by grotesque carvings of heads and eyes and mouths -- but she could never see any of these images properly, because as soon as she looked at one the light would sweep away.

Down.

A few more steps.

A different stone face looking at her momentarily.

Clickety-click from the stair just behind her. Always the clickety-click.

The Zakhon might change his mind. He might seal up the hatch through which they'd entered this terrifying subterranean place. He'd have no compunction about the death of his guards, and he'd be glad to see the last of Qinefer -- she had, after all, spiritually emasculated him.

Ahead of them was a bottomless darkness which even the torches of the guards couldn't bring into light.

Qinefer felt cold. It was as if there was a chill sea-wind blowing against her, but the air was still.

"Where are we?" she whispered as the three of them came to a halt.

At last she didn't have to listen to the clickety-click.

"The Birthplace," said one of the guards in a hushed voice.

Clearly both of the Vassagonians were terrified. They looked shiftily over Qinefer's shoulder as if they longed to flee back up the metal stairs.

"Why does it have that name?" she asked harshly. Their fear was beginning to communicate itself to her.

"Because it's the place where people -- strange people, people we hardly recognize as people -- are born."

Yes, thought Qinefer, *"strange people" who are either Helghast or Drakkarim*. She felt pity for the guards. They might be -- almost certainly were -- capable of considerable viciousness, but they were as nothing compared with the spawn of the Darklords. Qinefer realized that these soldiers, now looking so woebegone in the unsteady light of their torches, were hardly more than boys.

She made a sudden decision.

"Go," she said. "Go on back up. This is for me to deal with."

The taller of the guards gave her a nervous smile and pushed past her as he fled back up the spiral staircase. She could hear his footfalls echoing as he retreated.

The other continued to stare into the black.

"You can leave, too, if you like," she said offhandedly.

Still holding his torch above his shoulder, the guard turned.

"I don't want to leave," he said.

His voice was rough-edged, as if he had only just learnt how to use his vocal cords. His face, which earlier she had seen as that of an adolescent

boy, was completely changed. From a skeletal mask, fiery eyes glowed sombrely.

A Helghast, she thought. She was resigned to it, almost relieved. *I might have known.*

Almost lazily she pulled her sword from its sheath and swished it round, back-handed, towards the creature's neck. The Helghast was momentarily startled by the speed of her reactions, but ducked away just in time. It stumbled backwards down a couple of steps, drawing its own sword as it threw its torch away into the darkness.

The light vanished.

The Helghast can see in the dark, thought Qinefer, *and I can't. Pretty shrewd for a spawn, pretty shrewd.*

She raised her sword as if it were an axe and advanced a few steps, swinging the weapon down in an arc.

There was a scream as the blade cut into flesh. A mist of ichor sprayed her eyes, so that she felt as if someone had thrown acid into them.

Qinefer forced herself to put the pain away from her. She pulled back her sword and struck out again into the darkness, twisting the blade as she drove it forwards.

Another shrill scream.

Agony as the tip of the spawn's sword slashed across the top of her shin.

Swiftly succeeded by rage.

The bloodlust was in her.

She didn't recognize her own shriek of fury as she advanced down the stairs into the blankness, sweeping her sword viciously from one side to the other, shouting words that had no meanings to her. Again and again she felt her blade bite into spawn-flesh; again and again she heard the Helghast scream its agony to its Archlord of all Archlords -- the God of Darkness himself, Naar.

And then there was a rapidly diminishing streak of light in her eyes and she was alone.

She tested ahead of her with the sword, but there was nothing -- only the dark.

Tottering, she returned her sword to its scabbard. The pain in her shin was like a slow fire, and she could feel the blood running down her lower leg.

She took a tentative step downwards, and then another, expecting at

any moment to trip over the body of the Helghast -- still alive, still waiting for her.

Then she remembered the shrinking light.

The Helghast was dead.

A long time ago she'd killed a Helghast on the banks of a stream, and she'd seen the creature disappear as if it had never been there.

She took another step downwards, and then another.

The afterimage of the fading Helghast was no longer in her eyes.

Another step.

Another step towards the Birthplace.

4

Months later, Lone Wolf was sitting with the youngsters around a blazing, crackling fire, watching the bright sparks being caught by the wind and tugged away up into the night sky like stars before they winked away. He'd been telling a story that didn't have a beginning and didn't have an end, but all of the acolytes had been listening to him anyway -- except Jaan, who'd fallen asleep sprawled across his thighs.

He heard nothing from behind.

A hand touched his shoulder and the tale ended at once. He reached for the Sommerswerd, pushing Jaan away so that she lolled against one of the older children.

He wasn't wearing the Sommerswerd.

He spun, pulling himself into a crouch.

"Hello, Lone Wolf."

"Qinefer! By all that's good under Ishir's skies!"

She sat down beside him as if she'd been away for just a few minutes.

The youngsters were as active as a nest of wasps, rushing this way and that, bringing her food and drink until, laughing, she had to protest that she wasn't a bottomless pit. Lone Wolf threw an arm around her shoulder as she ate and drank, feeling her muscles moving, watching her face in the reflected firelight.

A long while afterwards, when the two of them were alone -- aside from the slumbering Jaan -- and all that was left of the fire was a mass of orange embers, he asked her to tell him what had happened to her while he'd been a slave of the Darklords. She told her story fluently, pausing only occasionally to explain points she'd forgotten earlier.

Her words painted pictures. He could see her at the foot of a vast

spiral of corroded metal stairs, staring into the pitch darkness.

"The Birthplace," she said.

He suddenly realized she was crying.

For some reason he couldn't properly identify, he felt that the fault was his.

5

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

. . . says a voice that seems to come from some innermost part of her that Qinefer has never before known was there . . .

. . . tick, tick, tick, tick . . . you're touched by the colours and the colours stick . . .

And the colours in front of her are gleaming brighter than any natural colours could be, as if they'd been freshly dipped in water.

The Birthplace.

A moment ago there was a black void that stretched for an infinity in all directions, so that she was more alone than she'd ever felt before -- alone, feeling like a baby abandoned in the night. Now she wishes for that terrifying solitude.

The colours fill everywhere, as if someone has taken a paintbrush and daubed all of Aon in a frenzied fit of polychromatic insanity. Whichever direction she turns -- backwards, forwards, up, down -- she finds herself looking down a neverending corridor of overlapping, interweaving, constantly shifting planes of colour.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

Her eyes are playing tricks on her, because it seems to her for a moment as if the colours are coalescing to form pictures. She believes she'd be able to see the pictures quite clearly if she weren't looking directly at them.

She shuts her eyes firmly but that doesn't blot out the drifting gauzy colours. Hand on the pommel of her sword, she takes an instinctive pace forwards, automatically preparing to attack a foe -- as if the colours could be a foe . . . as if the colours would care if she tried to attack them. There's nothing beneath her feet, she realizes, but an eternal tunnel of colours.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

The Birthplace.

The place where the spawn come into Vassagonia.

The Helghast that attacked her knew the Birthplace was here. The

creature must have been born here, maybe years ago, maybe only a few hours ago.

She shakes her head angrily, trying to clear it. This is a mistake, because the colours obey her command and blend together to form coherent pictures -- this time clear pictures that she can see when she looks straight ahead.

Qinefer doesn't want to see what she's seeing, so she turns her head away. Dizzily, the tableau swings around with her. Again she shuts her eyes tightly, and again this makes no difference.

She is forced to watch as . . .

A girl called Qinefer was running, her long, crinkly brown hair whipping behind her. She had seen her parents and her younger brother ripped to pieces by Kraan. She herself had been lucky; sleeping in the sunlight, she had been ignored by the murderous spawn. She had been awoken by the screams of her family, and had without thinking rolled into concealment under the raised wooden floor of the house. There she'd cowered, trembling uncontrollably, weeping as she saw what was happening, knowing she was unable to do anything to stop it.

Her father had accounted for a Giak, spitting it with the pitchfork before the Kraan seized him, and after the spawn had done their filthy business and left the farm she'd recovered the dead beast's jagged sword. Her lips moving with terror and revulsion, she'd deliberately ignored the mangled flesh scattered about the farmyard while she put the sword in her belt.

She'd vaulted the fence with an expression of chill determination on her face. Some of her hair was pasted to her forehead by the seeping sweat of her recent fear. As she ran, her brown eyes were wide above her broad, dark face, her lips pulled back from her white teeth. She had a single intent: the slaying of as many as possible of the spawn that had killed her family . . .

That was years ago. She was barely more than a girl then. She's a woman now. But she's not just seeing the scenes all over again: she's living them. The screams of her mother as she runs across the yard, trying vainly to battle the loudly beating clawed wings of the great Kraan as they pluck the heart from the chest of little Shimar -- those aren't sounds she can hear with her ears, they're sounds from inside her. She's a girl again, shrinking back into the protective shade under the house, knowing she should be trying to aid her mother and her father and her brother, knowing it would be senseless to try because all that would mean would be an extra life lost, knowing that

however much she tries to rationalize it all she is hiding here because she is terrified.

She's ashamed.

Ashamed because of the memory.

It is fear that has driven her into concealment, fear that is keeping her there -- raw fear -- not any higher sense.

She's never admitted this to herself before, but the colours are making her confess the truth, bringing it into the open so that she can look at it. So that she can recognize herself as the person she really is.

Ah, the colours.

Brighter than the colours of any nightmare.

Brighter and more perceptive.

Yes, but, let's be just, in all fairness she was only a . . .

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

Right now, as she relives the horror, she still *is* a girl, no matter what the lines of her womanhood might be telling her. Yes, she's led troops into battle and she's slaughtered Giaks and Helghast and Drakkarim and Gourgaz . . . but for all that she's a frightened girl cringing under a rotting wooden farmhouse, watching her family being slain, covering herself with her own piss and shit as the terror forces her into soundless immobility.

The colours are not just outside her: they're permeating throughout her, softly shifting their focus as time passes from one moment to the next, touching her soul . . .

. . . and the colours stick . . .

. . . until she wants her soul to be dragged out of her like a damaged tooth from its socket, to accept the short pain in order to be relieved from the ache that never stops. Flailing her arms wildly, hoping somehow to drive the colours away, she takes a few steps forward, furious to that the veils of colours are insubstantial so that her hands pass right through them, affecting them not at all . . .

This is a timeless place.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

You're touched by the colours and the colours stick . . .

This is a timeless place but it's forced her back through time, drawing on her deepest memories to transport her to the place where she first confronted shame. Her body holds the same powerlessness it did then as she shrank away from the sights and the sounds and the blood . . .

She screams, and at once all the colours vanish.

She feels as if she's sitting, curled up tightly, in the corner of a small cell, but there's no sensation of a floor pushing up beneath her or walls pressing against her shoulders. She's in a half-slump, her eyes covered by her hands -- trying to block away the outside as much as to stop anyone seeing the tears that are flowing down her cheeks.

The silence is so profound that it seems noisy.

Forever passes.

The only sounds: her heartbeat, her breathing, her weeping.

She's wet herself, just as she did when she witnessed the death of her family. It seems less shameful now that she's an adult: she's learned what fear can make people do.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

There's no such thing as "forever". Well, in a way there is. Aon was born from Ishir's crucible "forever" ago, because before the birth of Aon there was no time here. But that's a "forever" that could be counted in years, if only one had the chance to count them. And someday Aon will die, and that'll be the end of this universe's "forever".

But that's different.

Qinefer knows that the time she's undergoing now is the *real* forever -- the one that stretches from the infinite past into the infinite future. It's the forever she glimpsed on the far side of the Birthplace before she refused to let her eyes see any more -- the far side, where lies the polycosmos, the World, the infinity of reified and potential universes, all of them with their own forever so that together they offered her an infinity of forevers.

Gave her an infinity of forevers in which to think, to remember.

She doesn't *want* an infinity of forevers in which to think or remember.

She wants to get away from here, out of this cell (she knows it's a cell, even though she hasn't looked and can feel no walls or floor), and above all the most important thing she wants is to *forget*.

In an infinitude of time, there is no difference between one moment and the next. She could move, but why move herself in *this* moment? If she's moved in an earlier moment or will move in a later moment, then perhaps she might feel the impulse to stir herself in this one.

Other things are happening, though.

Her personality is beginning to lose its definition, crumbling away at the edges. She can see, in her mind's eye, the fragments tumbling away into the darkness. They look rather like fireflies on a summer's night, brightly

coloured and moving with no apparent purpose. She watches them with interest, trying to play a gambling game with herself, betting silly sums of money on the direction one of them will choose to dart next.

And that's odd, because as soon as she starts to do this they begin to approach her again, clustering around her like a swarm of bees. And, like bees, they have stings. She feels stabs of pain as they rejoin her.

She has rejected the gift given to her by the Birthplace, by the polycosmos . . .

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

Since she betrayed her family the way she did, she seems to have done nothing but kill. Yes, yes, the things that she killed were evil -- themselves intent on killing -- but there must be more to her existence than this. And she's here to kill again.

Here.

It's a long time since the concept of "here" has entered her mind.

That's it!

She's somewhere under the palace of the Zakhan Moudalla in the city of Barrakeesh, which is the capital city of Vassagonia.

Hold on to that idea!

Remember your name.

Your name is Qinefer.

Her lips mouth the name silently: "Qinefer."

Then she shouts the name as loudly as her lungs will let her.

"QINEFER!"

And there's a floor beneath her once more, and walls against which she's been leaning.

She stands up and looks into an abyss of complete darkness. She draws her sword, feeling the tears drying on her cheeks.

No, the darkness isn't *quite* complete.

Far away, there's a mote of blue light.

Qinefer smiles.

Her sword feels good in her hand -- its weight is reassuring. She tries it out on the air in front of her. This place smells rank, as if it served for a thousand years as a dungeon into which prisoners were thrown and then forgotten about, left to die starving and thirsty, left to rot in their own excrement.

She walks towards the light, her confidence growing with every stride, a smile of anticipation beginning to twitch the corners of her lips.

Hey, battle-girl, she thinks, you're going to destroy the Darklords now.

She doesn't do that.

She's in a sleazy hotel room with two people whom she dimly remembers are called Jenara and Banedon. They offer her another glass of rather revoltingly sweet mead as if she's been sitting here with them all the time.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

It's clear to her, after a muddled moment, that as far as they're concerned she's never left them.

"The Birthplace," she mumbles.

"Sorry," says Banedon, passing a plate of honey-cakes towards her. "I couldn't make out what you just said."

"The Birthplace." This time she says it more firmly. She waves away the cakes.

Obviously offended by the violence of her gesture, Banedon plonks the plate huffily on a fragile-looking old three-legged table; it threatens to collapse under the force of the blow, and his anger dissipates swiftly as he feels the table nervously, trying to *will* it to stay intact.

"You're saying a word we can't understand," says Jenara.

"The Birthplace."

"Yes, I know the word means something to you, but we -- Banedon and me -- we don't know what it means."

Jenara is looking troubled. She leans forwards and pushes up one of Qinefer's eyelids, peering into the eye as if there might be some clue there.

"I've been to the Birthplace," says Qinefer. "I never want to go there again. It's the place where the spawn are coming into Vassagonia. If they can do it here, they can do it anywhere. No nation is safe from them."

"*Someone* will have to go to this thing you talk about," says Banedon sharply. He picks up a honeycake, makes as if to put it into his mouth, then impatiently throws it into the hearth.

"What's the time?" says Qinefer. The conversation is getting nowhere.

"Early evening," says Jenara. Her eyes are still filled with worry.

"How long was I away?"

"You haven't left us. We've been talking for hours about how we can best counter the infiltration of the spawn into the higher echelons of Vassagonia."

"Yes -- but that was *before* . . ."

"Before what?" asks Banedon brightly. He is now convinced that the little table is steady, and gingerly he places his goblet of mead on it. He smiles in satisfaction: he has repaired the piece of furniture without having to use a single iota of magic.

A moment later, his lap is full of mead.

"I wish you hadn't coughed like that!" he says sharply to Jenara.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

You're touched by the colours and the colours stick . . .

6

Jaan woke up as Qinefer told Lone Wolf all that had happened, and listened to much of what the warrior told him, her small thin arms circled around Lone Wolf's waist. Her eyes were bright in the almost-dead firelight.

When the words ran out and Qinefer slumped against Lone Wolf's shoulder, the little girl sat up eagerly.

"Tell me more, tell me more, tell me more!" she said excitedly. "What happened next?"

"Nothing much happened next," said Qinefer in a low voice. "There was nothing more for me to do. Someone else will have to go to the Birthplace -- or maybe I can return there when my skills are greater. I left Barrakeesh the next morning and rode until I was in Sommerlund. I told Ulnar what was going on."

In her voice there was a weariness beyond her years.

"Then I came here on Janos. He's tethered in the forest. He's happy where he is -- leave him 'til morning. That's the end of the story."

"No it isn't," said Jaan. "It *can't* be!"

"You're right," mumbled Lone Wolf sleepily. "Now, young miss, off to bed like the others."

Reluctantly, Jaan went.

7

All of the Darklords but one were there in Helgedad, but there was no doubt as to which among them was supreme.

Haakon seemed to radiate fury. He paced restlessly to and fro, the redness of his vizor directing venom and contempt to one or other of the lesser Darklords as the whim took him. There were other creatures in the great hall as well who wilted under the sting of his gaze -- Xaghash and Drakkarim and, unnoticed in a corner, a Giak.

"Where is Slûtar?" asked Haakon eventually. He threw himself into his richly ornamented throne.

No one knew.

They said so at length.

Haakon's impatience grew.

"Silence!" he said very quietly.

Instantly the hubbub ceased.

He looked at the blue walls and then at the cluster of Darklords. All of them seemed to be terrified of his power -- except perhaps the tall Gnaag, who seemed to be trying not to smile.

"I ask you again, where is Slûtar?"

Haakon held up one skeletal hand to silence the buzz of speculations before it had even begun.

He was answered by the crash of the huge door being thrown open with such force that it almost fell from its hinges. Slûtar entered surrounded by a cloud of flickering Nadziranim and a group of five stumbling Xaghash. The Darklord's four eyes were focused on Haakon as he and his coterie pushed their way arrogantly through the crush.

"So at last you have the courage to attend," said Haakon.

"I'm surprised," responded Slûtar swiftly, "that you have the courage to be here at all."

"And why should I not?"

Aside from the conversation between the two powerful Darklords -- the one speaking in a bubbling whisper, the other in a proud rumble -- the hall was entirely silent. All eyes were upon Haakon and Slûtar as they confronted each other.

There was a moment of total stillness. Then Slûtar spoke, a finger pointing accusingly at Haakon.

"You captured the accursed Kai Lord, but you failed to hold him. You -- a Darklord -- failed to hold a mere mortal! What sort of petty power do you claim to wield when you cannot achieve something so simple as keeping this . . . this *brat* in the Darklands?"

Haakon looked at Slûtar disparagingly.

"You're a traitor," he said.

Slûtar turned and, with a great sweep of his arms, appealed to the other Darklords.

"Haakon is reduced to calling me a traitor! Always the last refuge of petty minds!"

"But you are," said Haakon. He was relaxing now. Behind his mask his deceptively innocent face was smiling vindictively; the invisible smile was apparent in the way that he allowed his limbs to loll.

"Nonsense!" Slûtar began, and then he seemed to reflect. In a lower tone he said: "Haakon, once we were like brothers. Why do you accuse me of treason now?"

"We were never like brothers. I level the charge of treason because it is true."

The two Darklords were alone now in an open space. The secondary Darklords and all the spawn had retreated to the farthest corners of the hall; the Nadziranim flittered above them, their colours rapidly changing.

"None of our brethren will believe you," said Slûtar, dropping his voice so that it was no louder than Haakon's. Again he gestured with his arms at the others. "They know of your past follies. They know you held the Sommlending brat here for two years, that you failed to kill him, that you let him escape from your dungeons, that he's now back in Sommerlund . . ."

"And I shall tell them why all this happened," said Haakon smoothly.

"Because of your incompetence!" snapped Slûtar.

"No. Because of your treachery."

Slûtar laughed.

"This is the thing you keep saying -- but what proof do you have for these vile accusations? Treason? No Darklord could accuse me of betraying Naar!"

"No, perhaps not. But a Giak could."

"A Giak? I'm hungry! Ha! Bring me a Giak!"

"This is a Giak which you must not eat -- at least, not before it tells its story. Come here, Giak."

Carag's mind -- such as it was -- was in turmoil. He had been bred to be loyal to the most forceful personality in his vicinity -- which had meant that, before Slûtar's arrival, he had willingly obeyed Haakon's every command and had told the Darklord's minions everything that had happened: the release of Lone Wolf at the behest of Slûtar, the way that Slûtar's Nadziranim had protected Lone Wolf from the corrosive atmosphere of the Darklands as Kraan and Zlanbeast had carried them away to Kaag, and then Lone Wolf on to Sommerlund and safety . . . But here in the great hall, now that Slûtar and Haakon were together, it was all much more difficult for him. As each of the two feuding Darklords spoke, the Giak felt his allegiance shifting, backwards and forwards between them.

"Tell us your story," said Haakon softly.

Carag opened his mouth.

"He has no story to tell!" thundered Slûtar.

Carag closed his mouth again.

"Tell us your story."

Again that soft, insistent hiss.

This time Carag told his story.

Soon afterwards, a humiliated Slûtar strode from the gates of Helgedad and commanded an Imperial Zlanbeast to come to him. The huge creature swept down from the sky and landed in front of him, its wings twitching agitatedly as it waited for him to straddle its back. Around Slûtar's shoulders his hovering Nadziranim showed shades of deep indigo and darkest brown.

The Darklands had an unchallenged Archlord now.

Haakon.

United under him, their hordes could once again march against the nations of Magnamund.

For Slûtar, only an eternity of shame.

8

The thought that came into Alyss's waking mind was as cool and as white as milk.

You realize how foolish you've been, little one?

Alyss squirmed on a soft bed of moist flesh. She opened her eyes with difficulty and immediately shut them again. All she could see above her was a blaze of white light. She vaguely recalled falling down through the sky, knowing that she was about to die, and then being scooped out of the air by a palm.

She recognized the sound of the thought of Ishir.

Why have I been foolish?

Because, came the thought of the Goddess, you've altered reality -- and all because of your own vanity.

Alyss opened her eyes more cautiously this time, and found her surroundings weren't as dazzling as before. It still felt as if she were at the centre of a glowing globe, but now the light didn't seem to assault her in the same way. She turned over onto her back, spreading out her limbs and luxuriating in the softness of Ishir's hand. Garna crawled out of her hood, under her ear, over her throat and breast and down to coil himself up on her

stomach. It was clear that the presence of the Goddess impressed the dustworm not at all: he began to snore pointedly.

Alyss, do you know where you are? came Ishir's furious question.

At the end of the Everness, Alyss replied. *I've come to the place where time begins to discover the way I was born.*

She sat up on Ishir's hand and looked around her. The light dimmed -- no, not so much dimmed as *changed*. Now, instead of being a uniform wall of pearly whiteness it was a mass of swirling colours: greens, greys, oranges, blues, colours she'd never seen before. The only thing that seemed to have any fixedness was Ishir's hand. As the colours flexed in bizarre patterns across Alyss's vision, it was as if they were the ones staying still, she the one who was moving -- as if she were being thrown around all over the sky.

And yet there remained the reassuring pressure of the dustworm sleeping on her stomach.

Tell me, mother. The thought contained the sound of weeping.

Look around you, said the Goddess.

Fingers waved across the multicoloured emptiness. Alyss shivered, feeling very small. Soon the colours had gone, and in their place was a black nothingness as vacant as the sky she had seen above the Everness. Alyss looked at it, then at the whorls on the second knuckle of Ishir's index finger, then back at the emptiness again. As the timehounds had told her, the only way to reach the origins of Aon had been to travel across the Everness until they reached the sky. She wondered, sadly, what had happened to her four friends. Presumably Elde, Xila and Mindor had joined Zan back in the foothills at the edge of the Plain of Life as if nothing had changed.

All of Aon was made from -- this. The Goddess's voice was still like milk.

Garna was roaming restlessly across Alyss's silver-clad thighs. He piped occasional objections. It was hard to tell if his slit-eyes were closed or open; Alyss guessed he was keeping them closed.

Wherever she looked she could see nothing -- just an endless expanse of emptiness. She turned her head upwards, hoping to look into the eyes of Ishir; all she saw was more emptiness, stretching out towards infinity. The hand beneath her had faded away, so that she was poised precariously in the middle of nowhere.

This was the way it was before Aon came into existence, said Ishir's voice in Alyss's mind. *And then there came the great change.*

All at once the infinite emptiness had a voice.

The sound was huge, and it struck Alyss from all sides as if her body was being beaten by cudgels. She threw herself this way and that, trying to avoid the blows, but there was no escape. She screamed thinly, her eyes firmly closed.

"Ishir," said the voice, "our struggle is over and you have lost."

Alyss's soul tried to retreat in on itself. Never before had she fully realized the immensity of the void, the nothingness, that was the Evil God Naar. Again she screamed. Sweat ran across her forehead and down over the soft tufts of hair at her temples.

That is not true! Ishir's thought was calm but so forceful in Alyss's mind that she was almost stunned. *I have lost nothing. In fact, I have gained. I have defeated you. For all of eternity Evil has held sway among the Gods, but now my powers of Good have attained a balance. We are equal now, you and I, and one day I shall triumph over you.*

This time Naar's voice affected Alyss less.

"I shall never let you triumph completely."

I would not wish you to. Unless creatures like this poor, impotent little being can see Evil -- there was a mental indication of Alyss -- how are they to realize the need for Good?

"And you still think you can defeat me?"

Alyss opened her eyes and saw the absence of all things.

Yes.

"How?"

Let us create a truce. And let us at the same time create a million billion worlds. Between us we can allow those worlds to be populated by mortal creatures who have the choice between Good and Evil. I have no fear that they will not choose Good.

"Evil. Good. You use words loosely, Madam Ishir." The huge voice was sarcastic. "Evil is Good. These petty little mortals you want us to permit to come into existence -- surely they will choose the course of Evil. Evil brings pleasure, and surely pleasure is Good?"

Alyss swayed briefly towards Naar's viewpoint -- but only briefly. She had always enjoyed pleasure. And yet her pleasures had never been taken at any great expense to others. *There is no true pleasure if it can be attained only by the suffering of someone else*, she thought. The two Gods pointedly ignored her.

Let us make a wager, God of Evil, thought Ishir.

"Tell me your terms."

Garna squealed in pain. Although Alyss had adjusted to the sheer power of Naar's voice, the dustworm had been unable to do so.

If we create a million billion worlds, you and I, and we create mortals to inhabit them, we can watch what they choose. If they choose either Good or Evil, then our war is over. These "petty mortals", as you call them, can have the chance of deciding our conflict.

"And how would you suggest we could do this?" The great voice of the nothingness was sounding slightly truculent.

By creating a crucible, a vessel, into which both of us infuse our own spirits. The crucible will become a universe of worlds. We can promise that neither of us shall ever interfere with the matters of the mortals: we shall simply watch what they do. My wager is that they will choose the path of Good; if not, I shall cease to combat you.

There was a silence that seemed to Alyss to last almost forever. She wanted to tell Ishir that the struggle would be long and hard, that millions upon billions of the mortals she wanted to create would die in the most abject pain and misery. She tried to frame the thought, but was unable to do so. Instead she found herself recognizing that the suffering of those mortals had to be undergone if Evil were ever to be defeated.

"I accept your wager," the voice of Naar eventually boomed. Even the sound of the words sent shivers of cold through Alyss.

There was a stirring in the void. Once again Alyss found herself lying on a giant hand, and this time, when she looked up towards the wrist, she was gazing at a colossal but benevolent face -- the face of Ishir herself. The Goddess's eyes were brown and tender. They seemed to swallow up the whole of Alyss's vision, yet Alyss turned her sight away to crawl to the edge of the palm and look downwards. She saw the bright-white image of the Goddess extending away from her forever. She rolled over onto her back once more to look Ishir in the eyes once again.

Ishir, she thought, I have great love for you.

And I for you, little one. The Goddess's thought contained a fresh amusement. *Now you can join me as part of the crucible, and our spirits can together help Good in the wars that will rage in Aon. But you have sinned, my friend.*

Alyss crawled back to the hollow at the centre of the hand. *How have I sinned?* she thought. The thought was a humble one, although humility was the last of the emotions she was currently feeling. She had found her way into the time-plains, had returned to the moment of her birth, and was now

was being told she had committed some sort of crime. Her spirit rebelled, even as she looked at the face of Ishir.

You bumped into a tree, came Ishir's thought.

Well, that was easy enough to do for someone who couldn't see the trees. Alyss decided not to formulate that argument.

And later you killed an enemy on the Plain of Life.

This time Alyss shrugged. She still felt rather pleased about this particular incident, a triumph of cleverness over brute force.

And yet, the Goddess continued after a few moments, you've never once thought about the consequences of the things you've done. As you stumbled in your blind and foolish way across the Plain of Death, you touched a tree and never realized that doing so could alter the course of history. Anything that happens in the time-plains changes what happens in the future of Aon. You were personally responsible for the destruction of the Kai Monastery in Sommerlund. You should never have come here. And it was only your arrogance that brought you here -- was it not?

Alyss was filled with mixed emotions. She was rather proud of her arrogance. Also, she didn't like being reprimanded by anyone, even a Goddess. She glared at Ishir and said nothing.

By destroying the entity on the Plain of Life you allowed it to fall into the reality of Aon. Naar seized its soul, and moulded it into the form of Vashna, the first of the Darklords.

The face of the Goddess was kindly, despite the thoughts she was passing to Alyss.

And, finally, you caused the timehound called Zan to drop from the skies, so that he fell through the surface of the Everness to emerge on Magnamund as the worst of all creatures, Agarash the Damned. Naar turned your friend into a monster before letting him survive in Aon. Millions of mortals will lose their lives because you had the impertinence to beg the timehounds to bring you here to the timeless sky.

"I didn't beg them," muttered Alyss. "They volunteered."

You've changed the future, little one, said the Goddess wistfully. But that may be no bad thing. It could all have been worse.

"Ishir, I ask you to join me in the crucible! I accept your wager!" Naar's huge voice boomed again, filling all of the void.

I agree.

"But you are not alone! You have scraps of other spirits with you. If you do not relinquish them there will be no balance between us."

Alyss objected to being described as a scrap, but kept her thoughts to herself.

The great white shape of the Goddess turned, as if she knew where in the emptiness Naar was speaking from.

I give these scraps to Aon, she thought peacefully.

"No! One of them must remain with me!"

Why?

"So that we are equal."

Alyss was terrified. All of her long life she had attempted, she supposed wryly, to assist Good against Evil, although on occasion she had erred a little. Now there was a chance she might be offered up to Naar so that the two Gods could come to their concord. She had no wish to become one of the Evil God's pawns, to slaughter the innocent in an attempt to impose his rule on the worlds of Aon.

Then I shall return Alyss to Aon at the dawn of time, said the Goddess. She shall be free to roam Aon as she wishes, doing as she wishes. You may have the other spirit.

Garna raised his head. It was difficult to make out expressions on the dustworm's rudimentary face, but Alyss could detect signs of apprehension.

Yes, thought the Goddess, I give you this beast, Naar. See what you can do with it!

"Beast, what is your name?"

"Garna." The high-pitched voice was very faint.

"All of your name!"

"Z . . . Za-Garna."

Alyss, horrified, stared at the dustworm.

Her thoughts were still rattling around her head when Naar said: "Za-Garna, you may be tiny now -- the lowliest creature of all -- but in the future you shall return to Magnamund, where you shall become a mighty ruler, the greatest of all the Darklords."

"Couldn't I just go back with Alyss?" The worm could hardly speak.

Alyss admired her friend's courage. His head was weaving from side to side as he tried to discover the origin of Naar's huge voice.

"No. You shall become *my* creature. It will be many millions of years before I return you to Magnamund, and by then you shall be much changed. It will be your duty to conquer the world in my name!"

But we agreed that neither of us should interfere!

"Would you wish to destroy *both* of these spirits? You said you

wanted to return the ugly one to Aon. Is it not my right to take the other for my own?"

Alyss bridled. Ugly -- hah! Any remaining doubts about her future allegiance dissolved instantly. *I say it again: I love you, mother*, she thought.

And I you.

Then Alyss felt Ishir leaving her. There was a great pool of brightness below her, and it grew swiftly larger; at the same time, the black emptiness that had surrounded her seemed to shrink. She was falling towards the earliest of the time-planes, and she screamed in terror. At the same time, a part of her mind was oddly rational, realizing that Ishir had been tricked by the God of Evil. If he could take the innocent Za-Garna and remould him as the great Darklord Zagarna, who had so nearly conquered the whole of Magnamund, could he not do more? Zan would become Agarash the Damned. Yet, when she had arrived at the place before time began, she had been with the other three timehounds. These, too, Naar must have taken for his own.

She started to weep as she dropped. All four of the timehounds had been good friends to her: they had helped her unstintingly when she had needed them. And yet, in some future that might now never exist, she would be their bitterest enemy -- and she might not be able to recognize them. Who would they be? Would Xila -- affectionate Xila -- be the Darklord Gnaag? Would Mindor be Haakon and Elde be Unc?

Her mind spun in circles as the brightly coloured plain beneath her rushed closer and closer, until it filled all of her vision.

9

There was a moment of intense agony, and then Alyss found herself floating in space, surrounded by countless distant points of light.

She sensed another presence near her, as if Naar had further cheated Ishir -- as if, like the Goddess, he had sent some of his own spirit into Aon. She couldn't be sure, and the dim impressions of this other entity swiftly receded from her.

Alyss no longer had a body, but she was filled with the knowledge that she could create one for herself whenever she wanted to. She had a hazy recollection that this had not always been the case, that for a while she had existed as a mortal -- although the concept lying behind the word "mortal" was no longer utterly clear to her. And perhaps she had had some friends, somewhere, once upon a time. But what were "friends"?

She looked at the stars of Aon and her heart went out to them. Her overpowering emotion was zestfulness. The next few billion years promised to be fun.

One of the closer stars was a pretty colour, and so she headed towards it.