

STRAIT OF STORMS

by

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Four times a day riptides churned and twisted through the Strait of Storms from the Gulf of Hilarion to Oceax Bay and back again. Where passage through the strait was narrowest, a cluster of small islands, like spikes of iron, rose precipitantly from the sea. Owing to the tides, to the wide skirts of jagged coral surrounding the islands, and to their barrenness, they were uninhabited, save for a single young woman. Though she had not abided there long, her body might have been framed of the cherts and obsidian of the islands themselves, so bleak and flinty was her aspect. She clung to life by hatred and by guile, using an old charm to encourage the fish and marine iguana to regard her fingers as fat worms—worms that, at the last moment, snatched their prey from the water and dashed them upon the rocks. Often, however, she forwent eating, and her body had become gaunt; even her breasts had begun to dwindle. Soon she would go nude, for her frock, once a heavy, tapestried garment, was disintegrating a few threads at a time.

Each morning she climbed a spire of rock, central to the islands, that commanded a view of the strait from shore to shore. With her was a small, silent child, as gaunt as she, to whom she

spoke in conspiratorial tones as she searched the sea for ships. But the child never responded, nor, for that matter, did she remark upon any event whatever. At times vessels did dare to navigate the strait, and on those occasions one might have thought the child's silence to be born of terror, for the woman was such a sight as even a grown man might not look upon willingly. Glaring across the strait with almost inhuman malice, her body would grow rigid, and her lips draw back in an awful grimace. Then, with ability beyond her years, she would raise her fists far above her head and draw to them a writhing nimbus of force . . .

Duke Chastain, in his prime, had been a man of imposing proportions, but affairs of office had long blunted the edge of his vitality and he tended now to corpulence. Within the limitations of his imagination and of his ability, his reign had been a capable one. He had sent scribes to copy the moldering manuscripts of the Old Race in far western Lornt; he had initiated curbs on his own authority; and he had led expeditions to destroy the strongholds of the Sarn Riders. Now, however, he was more preoccupied with his digestion and with music. Recent events, unfortunately, had ruined the former and afforded him little time for the latter, and he sat in chamber in a foul temper, wishing he had been born a swineherd.

His chamberlain, Gestin Crabtree, was as sensitive as a wife to his moods. Since the death of the duchess, he was, in fact, the real backbone of the tiny duchy, inasmuch as he alone retained any ability to direct his lord's flagging attention to matters of importance. It was he who had arranged this morning's audience with a young man who, he judged, would do nothing to improve the duke's digestion.

The visitor arrived at the appointed hour, was announced, and approached the throne, halting at a respectful distance. The lad could hardly have seemed less certain of himself and was, Crabtree surmised, little more than fifteen or sixteen years of age, most likely an apprentice in his second year of sea duty. The duke studied him from head to foot for a long moment with evident reluctance to hear what he had to say.

"Well, fellow, what are you called?" he finally asked.

"Gar . . . er . . . Garth, lord," the young man quavered.

"Do I understand, Garth, that you have been witness to events of some moment?"

The brow of the young man wrinkled in perplexity at the unfamiliar words and usage. "Lord?"

"You saw something, something important?"

"Uh . . . yes, lord—that is, something—something terrible." He hesitated, evidently uncertain as to how to proceed.

Chastain frowned. "Well? Speak, lad, speak!"

Garth flushed. "Yes, lord. Well, uh . . . we was making passage through the Strait of Storms, all hands a-deck. We was looking for rocks, you see. It's shallow, and the rocks, you see, ain't always the same place twice. And we're going along and the boatswain shouts, he says, 'Look!' and he points at Merfay Island. And I looks, and I sees . . . uh . . ." The jaw of the apprentice seemed to lock, and he flushed again.

"Yes?" prompted the duke, somewhat intrigued now, despite himself.

"Well, I sees a woman, a lady, lord, with golden hair. Only she hasn't no clothes on . . ." A faraway look came to the eyes of the apprentice.

"Yes, well, I believe we've all seen women unclothed."

"Yes, lord. Well, Rolf looks too, and he sees, well, I guess he sees something like gold and gems and such as that; but the only lady he sees is ugly, with black hair, and skinny. But he sure sees gold. And the captain, he looks too, and he sees . . . well, I don't know what he sees, but he tells the helmsman, 'Hard a-port!' and the helmsman went quick to it! Well, the rocks, you know, was still there; but we forgot about those somehow, and there's a noise, a terrible noise! And the *Lucky Wind*, she ships water; and, you know, there's yelling, and we lets down the lifeboat, only the current is too strong and it keeps pulling the boat, back and forth, and only a few gets on. And the captain, he swears at the helmsman, only the helmsman fell into the water, and he don't hear nothing! Because the water pulled him under." He stopped for a moment. "That was Osbrey, lord. He was my friend . . . Well, the *Lucky Wind*, she founders, and I fall in, only I get hold of a spar, and I ties myself on with rigging. And . . . well, I walks back, you

know, and I . . . uh, steals some food, only a little bit that nobody wants, with mold, and all that . . . and, uh . . . well, I guess that's all."

The duke frowned meditatively. "Merfay Island, eh?"

"Yes, lord."

"You didn't note other ships? Wrecks, that is?"

"No, lord. But . . . well, the currents, you know, they wouldn't leave nothing grounded there for long."

"Mmm. I suppose not. No. And you say you saw a temptress, but Rolf saw a hag?"

"Yes, lord. Skinny, with black hair."

"Mmm. There's witchcraft in that, lad."

The apprentice gave what he hoped would be a wise-seeming nod. "My thought, exactly, sir."

"No doubt. No doubt. Well." Chastain studied the vaulting timbers above him abstractedly. "Lord Chamberlain, take young Garth here to the steward, see you that he has new clothing, and have him arrange an apprenticeship on a worthy craft—mind you, a tight ship, not a rotting bit of sea wrack like the *Lucky Wind*. We must discuss this matter when you've returned."

"Yes, lord."

The apprentice attempted a dignified bow. "Thank you, lord."

"Mmm."

Crabtree wasted no time seeing through this task and returned as quickly as possible, to find that the duke had made use of the interval to slip into a doze. The chamberlain took in the slack features of his lord resignedly, and after a moment forcefully cleared his throat.

Chastain blinked. "Eh? Wasn't sleeping. Must consider all aspects of this matter. Musn't overreact."

"Yes, lord. Have you reached any conclusions?"

"Eh? Well, no. But the lad's story lends support to Grenwall's report . . . Did he have any luck in making out who this hag might be?"

"Perhaps, lord. In Es he heard a sad and rather strange tale of a young woman whose luck turned bad. It seems she was taken in training by the wise women, having had an unusual

talent for the Power almost from the first. But they were ambitious, and they pushed her too far, too hastily. She broke in both spirit and body, utterly exhausted, and was given up by the witches as useless. Grenwall discovered that she wandered overmountain and was taken in by the Green People. They set her to work in a garden and there, after some months of weeding, hoeing, and such she seemed near recovery. She was noticed by a man of the Old Race shortly thereafter, and left with him. Grenwall was unable to discover where next they went, except that they traveled east, downriver; but she is described as being dark-haired."

The duke nodded thoughtfully. "That would establish her ability, and place her nearby—though that proves nothing. Still . . ."

After a time he heaved himself to his feet and slowly strode to the windows of the sunny eastern end of the chamber. Crabtree eyed him hopefully: this action he knew to be characteristic of Chastain at his most enterprising. After some time the duke turned and seated himself on the window ledge. "It's a pretty problem, Crabtree. We're effectively cut off, with half the fishing vessels stranded at sea and half the merchants trapped in port. We should have cut a channel to Merfay and fortified it to forestall just such an imbroglio."

"Easy to say now, lord, but it would have been a difficult and costly venture at best."

"Indeed, but hardly more costly than this affair has already proven. However 'should haves' never won the day—the question is, what do we do now? Do we assault the island?"

Crabtree shook his head. "I should think the cost in lives would be considerable. We cannot expect to approach undetected, and we possess no weapon with sufficient range to attack from shore. However, I have consulted in this matter with Grenwall, and he has put forward a proposal that I believe has some merit."

Chastain snorted. "I might have expected as much. I have never known the rogue to be in want of a proposal where some profit to himself might be garnered. What will this latest 'proposal' cost me?"

"Less, I believe, than any alternative. Consider this." He

handed the duke a watercolor that depicted a creature roughly human in form with, however, webbed hands and feet, gill slits, and glossy, mottled flesh.

The duke looked up, handed the picture back with distaste. "Sea-Krogan? Fah! They will not assist. They are still offended by our trafficking in Oceax Bay."

"Indeed, they will not, lord. I have already spoken to them and matters stand as you say. However, this was not what Grenwall had in mind."

"No? Then just what has our dear Grenwall hatched in that pregnant imagination of his?"

Crabtree studied the watercolor carefully. "He proposes a true shape-changing, lord. In such form he could swim to Merfay in the dead of night and be upon the hag before she knew what struck her."

Chastain stroked his white-streaked beard with fleshy fingers and considered the suggestion. "Ingenious, but the currents there are treacherous, and beneath the water it will be dark as a closet at night. I have no great liking for the man, yet I would not send him to his death. Can we do no better than this?"

"What would you propose, lord? I have considered the construction of a great ballista . . . but I am told that its fashioning would require more than a fortnight of toil, and there is nothing to say the hag could not destroy it. Or we might try to pit witch against witch, if we could find such to try; but that would entail greater danger than Grenwall proposes to risk." Crabtree shrugged. "No. On balance, I believe that what he suggests is best. True, he must needs watch the tides carefully. But, as for the other, Sea-Krogan are said to see the night as day."

Chastain returned to his throne and seated himself wearily. "And again I say, what will this cost me? Grenwall drives a notoriously hard bargain."

"He asks for the land from which he drove the Gray Ones—"

"What! That's the sweetest land in the duchy. I planned to build fish ponds there!"

"—and for Merthe's dowry," Crabtree concluded *impassively*.

The duke stared in mute disbelief. "My daughter doesn't

even know Grenwall . . . what am I saying? He is not even a noble. No, thrice horn the man, it's beyond reason!"

"Lord, Grenwall is a resourceful man. He has been trysting with your daughter for many months. She loves him. And where the risks are great, so must the rewards be. Remember, it is possible, entirely possible, that he will not return to human form. Think you: the man would remain half fish the rest of his days, with none but Sea-Krogan for company. Offer rewards to others of the nobility. If none will accept the risk, give Grenwall scope. This is my counsel."

Chastain studied his chamberlain for a long moment. "Grenwall is an opportunistic dog," he said bitterly. "Not half good enough for Merthe."

Crabtree sighed. "Perhaps, but at least his ability has been proved time and again, more than can be said of your other retainers. And Merthe . . . Merthe is Merthe. Even Grenwall will have his hands full, as you will admit if you think on it."

Chastain looked away, through the window, to the forest, and to the hills beyond. "You take me too lightly, Crabtree. You ruin my sleep and digestion, you counsel me to hateful action and insult my daughter, and you stand and blink and expect me to concur like some great, stupid eunuch." He stood. "Go from me now, Crabtree; I have much to consider. I could wish that I were not duke, and yet I am."

In the end Crabtree's advice prevailed, as the nobility little cared to risk what it already had, and Grenwall was selected for the task. He asked for, and was granted, various implements and a day in which to set his affairs in order. As he lived a simple life, however, the time needed was but a few hours.

Kenten Grenwall was a short, stocky man, with coal-black hair and brows, dark eyes, and a smile many women had found comely. As a child he had been rather slight of build, the butt of much taunting and bullying; in consequence he had learned to fight. Like his mates, he had been ignorant and superstitious; unlike them, he had somehow educated himself. And his parents, like the parents of his friends, had been poor. He had determined not to be, however, and fully expected events to work in his favor in this as well.

He rode now for a small fishing village in eastern Escore known as Coelwyn where there lived a wise woman of middle years who was well regarded and a healer of ability. Traveling the northern strand of the Gulf of Hilarion, Grenwall made good time and avoided the Sarn Riders who were preying once again upon the sole trade road. Here and there he was even able to supplement his provisions with sea-quasfi and occasional fish; but he was glad nonetheless to see, as he rode one morning, the quays and fishing boats of Coelwyn. As he drew nearer, a stiff salt breeze swept away the stench of the town, and the small but sturdy homes and stout little fishing vessels took on a certain charm. Grenwall knew, however, that life here was characterized by unceasing labor, discomfort, and, above all, interminable boredom. It was a matter of some wonder, even to him, who did not often wonder at human foibles, that Twyx, the healer, would choose such a town in which to live. He found her at home on the outskirts of Coelwyn in a tidy structure of dark timber and slate shingles. He was met at the doorway, as if expected.

"Ah, Kenten." She smiled. "I see that you have come after all. You had a safe trip, I trust?"

Grenwall smiled in return. "I did, lady. And I bring good news. The duke has charged me with undoing the hag."

The witch peered at him soberly for a moment from under her dark, arched brows. "Good news, Kenten? That it may be—or mayn't. You were able to bring that which I asked for?"

"Yes, everything. And the duke has agreed to the financing of aught else you may need."

Twyx motioned him within the house. "A resourceful man you are indeed. Anything I need, is it?" She shook her head. "Well, come in, sir, sit—a stew I'm making, with rabbit. We must eat and talk. More of the hag have I learned."

Grenwall seated himself on a squat wooden stool that sat before a short table of unvarnished beams. "Oh, yes? Tell me."

Twyx knelt before a black, round-bellied pot suspended above a small slate hearth, and stirred the bubbling contents. She looked up at him, then back to the pot. "A queer story it makes, Kenten, most queer, all in all." She tasted the stew. "Quite done, I think. Well, after you lost the trail in Green

Valley I took it up in my own fashion. She and her man of the Old Race took a boat east to Maddoc, where they wedded."

"Man and witch?"

"Aye, man to witch. But like Jaelith of old, she lost not the Power, though she little cared to use it. She begot a child, Drotha, whom she loved dearly; and for some years the three of them prospered, for her husband had secured Torgian stallions and mares, and their issue was much in demand.

"But there came a time when they made a holiday of delivering a gelding and mare downriver. And there was one aboard the boat who looked and listened, and noted their prosperity.

"One night, as they slept, this one came to their cabin, and when he left her husband was dead. Drotha had been struck in the head, and could not be awakened. The witch also was cruelly wounded, but she recovered and learned that this man who had done them so ill was a sailor—a sailor of your duchy, Kenten." She ladled his stew out upon a wooden plate. "I must own, enough fish have I eaten here for this lifetime and the next."

Grenwall took the plate from her. "That I can well believe." He took a tentative bite and found it better than anything he had eaten in weeks. "Truly, I can't understand why you have elected to live here, so far from Es."

She smiled and shrugged. "My needs are few, Kenten, and do not include an appetite for intrigue. Would you hear the rest?"

"Yes, please, go on."

"The woman took Drotha to many healers—that is where I got the story—but they could do naught. One day mother and child disappeared, and when they returned Drotha had the semblance of life, but not the substance. She never spoke, and responded only to commands. It was rumored that the woman had bargained with the Dark Ones to attain this half life for Drotha, and had paid a terrible price. The people of Maddoc began to shun her, and even the horses grew skittish. One day she seemed to go mad, and then the both of them disappeared, not to be heard from again."

Kenten chewed in silence for a moment. "A strange tale indeed. I have seen this Drotha in the distance-lenses . . . she never moved. Tell me, has this woman a name?"

"Aye, Miriel."

"Miriel . . ." Grenwall ate methodically until the stew was gone, then pushed back from the table. "You know, Twyx, it occurs to me that we have never settled the matter of your fee."

She pursed her lips in amusement and pulled her hair back from her face. "True, Kenten, true. Somehow I had imagined we would settle that, and other matters, before you accepted any commission from the duke."

Kenten studied her features closely, suspicion flickering alive within him. "You have a reputation for fair dealing, my dear Twyx. I took your goodwill for granted."

"Truly? So astute a man as yourself? I would have thought you took nothing for granted."

She is amused, thought Grenwall, *but does she jest?* "Well then, out with it. What is this hideous fee of yours?"

"Fee? There is none. I said only that we did not discuss any such. But I am not certain you understand the Power, Kenten. I can guarantee you nothing, neither a true shape-changing nor return to your present form. Did you represent these facts to the duke?"

"You underrate me, Twyx. I well understand the risk entailed, as does the duke."

"I am glad to hear that your grasp of the nature of the Power is so profound," she said wryly. "You also understand, then, why I do not use it for either personal gain, my own or another's, or in the service of unworthy causes?"

Grenwall's eyes narrowed. "The Power recoils against any who employ it in such fashion. But my cause is worthy enough: I would clear the strait so that husbands might return to wives and trade resume."

"Would you, indeed? It is well that this is the cause uppermost in your mind. And what of the girl, possibly bereft of reason, knowing not what she does? What would you do with her?"

Grenwall frowned. "I—I see. Perhaps . . . yes, just let me think for a moment." He stood and crossed the room to a narrow window opening toward the sea. Well, what *had* he thought to do with the girl? To cut her down, he realized, as he would a Sarn Rider or Gray One. But if, in her madness, she were innocent of guilt, the backlash of the Power might indeed prove

unpredictable. He would simply have to immobilize this Miriel woman somehow—she was a mere bag of bones, after all. And . . .

What else had Twyx implied? That personal gain was uppermost in his mind. . . ? Grenwall fingered his chin uneasily. Twyx received a modest recompense for her services, he knew. Evidently the Power did not begrudge her some sort of gain. Was it then a question of motive—of using others purely as means to ends? Grenwall began to realize dimly that he far more often acted upon his intentions than he appraised them. Still, he *did* care about the people of the duchy, and he even felt a certain tenuous sympathy for the girl and her child. *No*, he decided, *my motives are not by any means entirely selfish*. He turned from the window decisively.

"I am anxious to begin, Twyx. If we ride now, we might arrive at the strait by eventide, and I can spend the morrow studying the currents."

Twyx folded her arms, searched his face. "So . . ." she said with some surprise. "I must own, I thought you might change your mind. Still, if you are quite certain what you do, I am prepared to leave at any time. By all means, lead on, Kenten."

Though Grenwall was weary of riding, they made good time and arrived at the strait at dusk. He encamped with the practiced assurance of a mercenary, ate hurriedly, and took distance-lenses to the jagged lip of a bluff overlooking the shoreline. Here he squatted, a warm breeze from the sea stirring his hair, and scrutinized Merfay Island carefully.

Though he had once before seen the island, its wild and utterly forbidding appearance struck him forcefully. Nothing grew on the island, or on any of the others nearby, save thornwort; and nothing within sight moved, save the currents and an occasional, brooding marine iguana. Sharp-edged spires of rock, like the blades of so many broken knives, thrust against the sky. None of the islands appeared to have inlets or beaches of any kind, aside from narrow banks of scree. Grenwall shook his head slightly, then turned the lenses on the currents of the strait itself. He immediately received an impression of tremendous, uncontrolled power. Great twisting sheets of water shouldered over and boiled around black spurs of rock everywhere he

looked. Although he could not drown in Sea-Krogan form, to be hurled against stone here would be to risk being either killed or knocked senseless.

"Have you seen Miriel yet?" Twyx asked.

Grenwall put aside the distance-lenses and looked across at the witch. "No, but then I did not expect to. When last I came, her daughter kept watch by night; and in any event, there are many places to conceal oneself on Merfay."

The sea breeze blew Twyx's hair into a shimmering cloud about her face. "Can you do this thing, Kenten?"

He shrugged. "I have done more difficult things and have failed to do lesser. There is an element of luck and of the unforeseen in every venture."

"There is indeed." She folded her arms across her bodice. "At least, when you put on Krogan flesh, the water will become your element, and your strength will be the greater."

"A boon for which I shall, no doubt, be grateful." Grenwall stood. "I would sleep now. I will need my wits about me on the morrow."

"As will I," said Twyx.

Grenwall awoke slowly, the shrieks of sea birds and the sounds of rushing water in his ears. The smell of food was in the air, and he realized that he was hungry. Pushing aside the flaps of his tent, he found Twyx cooking breakfast.

"Up so late, Kenten? One might almost suppose you preferred sleep to the day's work."

He combed his hair with his fingers drowsily. "I *do* prefer sleep to this day's work. However, I prefer breakfast even to sleep. It would seem your magic extends even to cooking, lady."

She smiled. "In truth, it would seem the work ranks a poor third, if not lower."

They ate in leisurely fashion, and then Grenwall set himself in earnest to the study of the strait. He rode for some distance up and down the lightly wooded shoreline, stopping often to study the turbulent waters with the distance-lenses. Twice he risked observation by loosing arrows he had painted white, the better to observe their passage down current. As late afternoon

wore toward evening he took an axe in hand and notched a tree adjacent to the strait on its shoreward side. With a few more blows it would topple and slide into the water.

Twyx looked upon his labors with interest. "Would you ride it downstream to the island?"

"Perhaps." He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist. "Twice today, however, have boles gone past with such momentum as to make me doubt that they can readily be guided. Still, it may be worth trying. I will wait for the lull between tides." He rested his axe against the tree. "Tell me, Twyx, would I have anything to fear from this woman if she were bound and gagged?"

The witch shrugged. "That will depend upon how accomplished she is. Some with the gift of mind-touch can compel others against their will, and need not move or speak to do so, while others can weave illusions. Then again, she may be weakened, and if she has been stripped of her jewel she may be less effectual than otherwise."

"And if she acts against me in this fashion, can you be of any assistance?"

"Count not upon that, Kenten Grenwall. True shape-changing is no mean task, and I am not so young as once I was. I may well not have strength enough after your transformation to help."

"I see. You are nothing if not candid, Twyx."

She raised an eyebrow. "And that is ordinarily counted a virtue, sir."

He eyed her vexedly for a moment, reflecting that she had not once had a word of encouragement for him. "Then truly there must be few women so virtuous as yourself." He looked out upon the darkening silhouette of Merfay Island. "We must soon begin. I will need some time to accustom myself to the Krogan-form."

"As you say," she said coolly. "I am ready when you are."

They returned to camp, where Grenwall took a light meal. He felt restive, though he could not have said why, and he found himself wondering what he would do if compelled to spend the rest of his life as an amphibian. He watched the witch for a moment. "How often have you done this, Twyx?"

"What? Accomplished a transformation?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps a half-dozen times."

"And how many returned to human form?"

She laughed. "Why, they all did."

He stroked his chin uneasily. "Hmm. Well then, let us be about it."

The witch gathered various implements, and they rode to the spot where he had hewn the tree. Grenwall tethered their horses a good distance away and returned to find Twyx drawing a pentagram in the sand with a silver rod. He watched in silence as she unwrapped five small tripods and positioned them at each of the points of her diagram. From each hung a small censer that she lit with a tallow wick, one after another. When she was done, she took his hand. "Come, Kenten. It is time."

Twyx led him to the center of the pentagram, and then drew away a few feet. She closed her eyes and stood quietly for a few moments, and then, while smoke from the censers began to wreath about him, she began to croon a singsong chant in a tongue unknown to him. As the smoke twisted higher, Grenwall suddenly realized he could no longer see his body. There came, slowly at first, but then more rapidly, the impression that his very bones had become fluid and insubstantial. He tried to speak, to move, but found he could do neither; and then he felt his body altering—stretching, bending, flowing. If he could have cried out then, he would have; but, abruptly, it was over. He had become flesh and bone again. Grenwall felt certain, however, that this was not the flesh he had worn before. It was—different, peculiarly different, and—he couldn't breathe!

He gulped and choked convulsively for a moment, and then his body seemed to take over of its own initiative, using muscles he hadn't known he had. He drew air into lungs that had been empty; and he blinked and found he had an inner eyelid that moved sideways. Grenwall discovered that he could see well in the dimness of twilight, and realized now that Twyx had collapsed, though she was breathing normally. He shuffled awkwardly to her on webbed feet, and turned her over with a hand that also was webbed.

"Trrrggs," he said thickly. "Trrrggs . . ."

She blinked up at him wearily. "I am perfectly well . . . Kenten. How are you?"

He held his hand up before his eyes and flexed the strange-looking fingers.

"Geels . . . geels gunny."

She closed her eyes. "You will grow accustomed to it soon enough. Perhaps you should practice swimming—and breathing water."

"Brrging errtr . . ." The odd phrase startled him, and he reflected that he could now remain underwater indefinitely, and could go places few men had dreamed of going before. "Yeggs."

He stood and tried to get the feel of his new anatomy, swinging his arms, stamping his feet. When he felt more confident, he went to the bank overlooking the strait and climbed to the narrow shore below. Here the water would be shallow, the current readily negotiable. He waded into the dark, shifting water slowly, then held his breath and submerged. Uncertain as to how to proceed, he drew the water into his mouth and found once again that his body proceeded on its own, squeezing the liquid back over his gills effortlessly. He found that his sense of taste had become far more acute than he had ever dreamed possible.

Grenwall opened his eyes, his protective third eyelid sliding into place, and found that his vision readily pierced the shadows, though the color had been leached from everything. He could see the pebbles beneath his feet and, farther away, a number of fish. Launching himself from the bottom, he swam gracefully almost from the first stroke. As Twyx had promised, he was indeed stronger than he had been; and he found himself sliding through the water with surprising speed and ability. Grenwall began to feel that his task was perhaps not so formidable after all.

After some time he returned to shore and climbed up the bank. Twyx had wrapped herself in a blanket and rested her head on a bundle. "You must leave soon, Kenten," she said. "The lull in the tides has come."

"Yeggs," he said briefly, finding it strange to have air in his lungs once again. Taking his axe in hand, he finished felling the

tree and noted with satisfaction that most of its length had dropped into the water. He quickly strapped around his waist a bundle he had made up, and then turned to the shoreline.

"Kenten!"

"Yeggs?"

Twyx smiled wanly. "Good fortune!"

"Taggs."

With some difficulty Grenwall worked the fallen tree fully into the water, and then, clinging to it, kicked out into deeper water. As he had thought, it proved difficult to maneuver; but it would help him to conserve his strength and avoid underwater obstacles. At first there was no appreciable current; but he knew that the water was always turbulent, even between tides, and as he made his way into deeper water this was borne out. His tree shifted so that its bole pointed down current, and he clung to branches in the crown, finding it increasingly difficult to steer. As the tree gained speed its bole began to glance off of upthrusting rocks, and the sound of rushing water grew loud in his ears. His makeshift vehicle was drawn ever closer to the fastest part of the current, and he could see ahead the froth and spume of white water.

Judging it folly to remain longer with the tree, Grenwall pushed off and swam strongly across current. Something hard and unseen struck him a sharp blow in the rib cage, and he gasped in pain. Had he not been able to breathe water, he would have drawn it into his throat or lungs instead. As it was, he swam underwater for all he was worth, gulping and expelling the cold water frantically to keep pace with his desperate need for air. He soon noticed that the deeper he swam, the less the force of the current, and he quickly dropped to the bottom. Here even his dark-adapted eyes could hardly penetrate the gloom. The water was gritty and odd-tasting, but he was able to get back his breath and assess his injury. His side bled freely, and he would have a sizable bruise, but nothing seemed broken. He swam on more slowly for some time, coming now and again to an anchor or a trangled mass of rigging or a stove. Twice he saw enormous, armor-plated fish in the distance, hugging the bottom after his own fashion. After the second sighting

he began to look over his shoulder as he swam, uncertain what effect his still-bleeding wound would have upon them.

Grenwall long went on in this fashion, and then the water began to grow more shallow. Finally he risked rising to the surface to get his bearings and found himself near the jagged coral skirt of the islet adjacent to Merfay. If he bore to his left, hugging the coast of the islet, he would soon be upon his destination.

He resubmerged, hugging the bottom again, enormous coral heads visible in the shallower water to his right. As he passed a pitted outcropping of rock something shot forward toward him with tremendous speed. Grenwall spun to face it, his hand to his sole weapon, a long-knife. It closed quickly: he saw great, saw-toothed jaws gape wide, glimpsed its fleshy, hideously ugly head. He twisted to one side at the last possible moment, striking into the baggy belly of the thing as it passed. A dark cloud of blood spilled into the water immediately, but he was able to see that it was some species of eel, more than three times his own body length. The thing doubled back upon itself with incredible fluidity to strike at him a second time; but now Grenwall was above it, and he opened a second gaping wound along its back.

If it had struck at him a third time he could probably not have eluded it, but now it thrashed about insanely, coiling back upon itself and biting its own back. He pushed off from it convulsively and back-pedaled with all speed toward the surface. Fortunately, the animal showed no interest in pursuing him, and continued to thrash about in clouds of its own blood. Grenwall spotted one of the armor-plated fish moving in, and he swam as strongly as he was able toward Merfay.

During low tide Grenwall had observed but a single gap in the ring of coral surrounding the island. This was now his destination, for to approach the island from any other point would slow him, and force him to risk repeated laceration. He moved cautiously, fearing another eel or some other hungry denizen of the reef. Several times he did spot peculiar creatures, the like of which he had never seen in fish market or net; but none sought to deter him, and he came at last to the gap. This he swam through to shallower waters, where he fastened ill-fitting sandals to his feet and thence furtively waded ashore.

Lying behind a scrubby patch of thornwort he surveyed the island carefully. Narrow banks of scree shouldered up against the steep slopes of the nearest spire, and thickets of thornwort crowded its fissures. The rock underfoot and above was unnaturally dark and unreflective, like coal, while his flesh was glossy and mottled. Grenwall reflected that he would have to make careful use of cover. Neither the witch nor her daughter was within his view, though he watched carefully for several minutes. Nevertheless, he already felt uneasy. His injury drove sharp spikes of pain into his side with each breath, and much of his strength had been used in merely getting to the island.

When finally he broke cover, Grenwall made for the shadows at the foot of the spire, not for the heights. He could, he reasoned, climb once he sighted the witch. This, however, proved unexpectedly difficult. Though Merfay was not a large island, he could not explore it quickly without risk of disclosing his presence. The loose scree tended to slip out from underfoot and rattle away, and the spiny thornwort obstructed his passage everywhere. After some time, the landscape suddenly began to look familiar, and he realized that he had completely encircled the island. Had the two perished, or moved to another island, or did they perhaps wait in hiding, forewarned of his presence? He frowned, recalling that he had not seen the witch since his arrival. It now seemed that there was no alternative to climbing, and this, too, made him frown, for in circling the island he had discovered that his webbed feet and makeshift sandals were poorly suited to that purpose. Too, he had had to reenter the water to keep his gills from drying. The higher he went, the farther behind he left the water.

What choice, he thought, what choice? He reentered the strait briefly, and slowly began to make the ascent.

Long before he reached the summit, he discovered why he had not been able to see the pair: they were concealed in a depression on the highest spire of Merfay. Though they did not seem to note his presence, Grenwall doubted now that he could approach at all closely without alerting them: there was simply not enough cover. The sole possibility seemed to lie in ascending the sheerest side of the spire and dropping upon them from above. He doubted that this could be done in his present form, but decided to descend and at least examine the side in ques-

tion. When he reached bottom, a faint sound came to his ears, rising and falling, disappearing, to rise and fall again. He paused to listen more closely, and then realized that what he heard was the witch conversing with her daughter. Few complete sentences came to him, but what little he could hear was a kind of strange, incoherent stew of words. For the first time Grenwall became truly and uncomfortably aware that the woman whom he hoped to detain was deranged.

He moved toward her voice, then, almost too late, realized that she and her daughter were slowly descending. Dropping to one knee behind an outcropping of rock, he studied the broken terrain between himself and the woman, trying to decide which way she would come. He thought to detect a faint trail passing within a short distance of himself and, using what cover was available, worked his way closer.

Crouching tensely in his jagged pool of shadow, Grenwall listened as the voice of the witch drew nearer and nearer, its weird cadences and the strangeness of the thought it expressed unnerving him by degrees. Then, from somewhere nearby in the darkness, there came the hammering of wings followed by a sudden and complete silence.

Grenwall stirred uneasily, wondering what had happened, more certain with each passing moment that he had been seen. When he was no longer able to bear the tension he slowly peered around the edge of the outcropping that concealed him—and came nearly face-to-face with the witch. She recoiled, spitting maledictions, while Grenwall hesitated, paralyzed. Regaining himself, he sprang forward and grabbed the skinny arm of the woman. An instant later he held something else altogether: the limb of a flabby abomination such as he had never glimpsed in all the length and breadth of Escore. It fought and twisted in his arms with terrible strength, and he lost his grip on its gummy, fetid flesh. The creature twisted away, its cockroachlike mouth parts working furiously, then struck forward with a rock. Grenwall ducked and, bobbing upward again, clouted the thing's skinny jaw with all the force in his arm. His blow sent it reeling, and it collapsed to the ground, a woman once again.

Grenwall drew a ragged breath, and then something made

him look up. He found himself staring into the hollow eyes of the girl, Drotha, who stood, watching, a few feet behind her fallen mother. He started forward, not quite knowing what to expect, but the girl neither spoke nor moved as he approached. He reached out hesitantly to stroke her hair; but her forehead and cheeks were cold as snow, and nearly as white, and he jerked his hand away as if he had touched something unclean. Once—twice—before he had seen such a creature, and knew it for a sickly simulacrum of something living. "Please . . ." she said dully, with the appearance of having made a terrific, draining effort, "please . . . end . . . this."

Grenwall stared in horror for a long moment, and then reached for his knife, but his hand never reached its hilt. Something bat-winged and glossy hurtled out of the night, its razorlike talons stroking his jaw. He struck at it, but only fanned the air; and a moment later it was back, tearing at his scalp. This time he succeeded in slapping it away, and saw it long enough to know it for what it was: a familiar. He was bending over to pick up a rock to hurl after it when something clamped down upon his will with such force that he gasped. Though he fought as hard as he could, he found himself straightening against any intention of his own, and his right hand dropped to the hilt of his long-knife, grasping it firmly. Guessing what that other will would force him to do with the weapon, he abruptly shifted from fighting the pressure to acceding to it, and succeeded in throwing the blade a few feet from himself. He realized at once, however, that the ruse had only purchased seconds for him, as he was already being forced to retrieve the weapon. Opposing the pressure with all the powers of concentration he possessed, Grenwall was able to slow, but not stop, his involuntary movement; and he realized with sinking despair that unless he found some defense against this mind-meddling he would be dead within moments.

As his body jerked and hopped like a puppet on strings, he thought frantically; but he had no talent for the Power, and he danced onward, unimpeded, toward his doom. As his hand closed once more around the hilt of the long-knife, he tried to send forth a mental entreaty to Twyx—and there was a response, though it seemed faint. Now, however, there were

three minds locked in struggle, and Grenwall found that his own will was not so completely overmastered. Sensing that this was his last chance, he bent every effort toward turning about, and slowly succeeded in doing so. He could see the witch now, and her malevolent gaze locked with his. Though he felt as though he opposed the force of some powerful gale, he took step after difficult step toward her, and suddenly she broke, voicing an inarticulate wail of despair. For the first time, Grenwall realized that she probably expected the worst from himself; and indeed, in Krogan-form, with dried blood caking his side, and wounds about his head, he was a horrific sight.

Forcing her to the ground, he discovered that she still possessed a witch's jewel. He had supposed that she would have been stripped of it when the wise women had done with her; but, apparently, she had engaged in an act of theft or subterfuge. He quickly pulled it from about her neck, hoping that would serve to protect him from further attacks, and bound and gagged the woman. As an additional precaution, he took a vial from his packet and held it under her nose until she was forced to breathe the drugging vapors. This accomplished, he searched the bleak landscape for her familiar, but was unable to discover its location. It was only then that he realized that he was quivering with exhaustion. To attempt to return to shore across current this night would be madness, and very much against his inclinations, he set the idea aside.

Grenwall became aware that his gills felt dry and raw, and he waded a few yards out into the strait and submerged himself in the ice-cold water. *I've done it*, he thought dully, *it's done. Thank you, Twyx.* He surfaced and looked across the currents to the shore. There was no way to know what the effort of assisting him had cost her, but he knew the price could have been high. *Thank you*, he thought again, but there was no response. Was she dead or dying, or merely exhausted? There was no way to discover that this night.

Grenwall slowly waded ashore, and once again faced the girl, Drotha. She looked at him wordlessly, an expression of terrible weariness on her face. He shook his head, as if to clear it of his disinclinations, then drew his long-knife and did quickly what had to be done. Though giddy with exhaustion, he made a

small cairn for her wasted body with rock from the banks of scree.

Dropping heavily to the ground, he carefully wrapped the witch's jewel in a square of cloth from his packet. Using that as a pillow, his last glimpse of the world before the onset of sleep was of the witch, still lying facedown where he had left her among the rocks.

Far into the night, he awoke suddenly, knowing something was wrong. But what? He opened one eyelid a crack and found himself looking almost in the face of a small, but nightmarish, creature of glossy black pelt. He watched for a moment to see what it would do, and then realized that it must be searching among his scant possessions for the witch's jewel. When it turned away from him for a moment, he thrust forth a hand and grabbed the creature by the nape of its neck. It screamed and chattered like some tiny black imp, its glossy bat-wings beating furiously at the air. He bound it with twine from his kit, not without receiving a few shallow wounds, and then returned, muttering, to sleep.

Grenwall awoke slowly in the morning, stiff in every joint, his side one long aching pain. The familiar, he saw at once, was trying to bite through its bonds, and had almost succeeded. Suddenly it became aware that it was being observed, and glared up at Grenwall with one black, beady eye.

"What ugly Krogan scum do with Malef?" the thing asked in a tinny voice.

He stared at it for a moment in surprise, then shook his wounded hand at it angrily. "I'm going to gut you up and geed you to your mistress, you wretched little blagg maggot!"

The thing cackled gleefully, but made no further inquiry regarding its fate. It had, however, raised an important question in Grenwall's mind. What was he going to do with the witch? After a moment he shook his head resignedly. There was really only one thing to do: wait for another lull between tides and swim down current with her. He got more twine and went to retie the familiar; but when he picked it up, it bit him again and slipped loose of its bonds. Winging into the air, it circled him once, cackling. "Malef bite smelly Krogan scum!" it jeered. "Good Malef! Strong Malef!" As it veered off and flapped

swiftly out to sea, Grenwall picked up a stone and threw it after the creature.

"Malef a turd!" he shouted.

He secured his packet, making certain he still had the gem, and then waded into the water, searching for quasfi and eating them raw, until the lull between tides came. He then approached the witch cautiously. She was making an effort to get at his mind, of that he was certain; but it seemed that, without the jewel, her powers truly were dim and unfocused. He untied her bony ankles and helped her to her feet. She glared angrily at him; and after his experience with Malef, he decided to leave her gag in place.

"I mean gyou no garm," he said. "Do gyou understand? We must now swim to shore."

Her eyes slid toward the funeral cairn. She could not have seen what happened between Grenwall and Drothà, but perhaps she had surmised something of the course of events.

"She was . . . tired," Grenwall said softly. "She was not meant gor living death . . . or gor this place."

Perhaps he reached some spark of reason within her, or perhaps not. Tears dropped from her eyes to the stony ground, but she said nothing.

"Gome," Grenwall said. "We must go."

He was hampered by the necessity of supporting the witch and of swimming near the surface. On the other hand, however, he needed no concealment and did not have to make for any particular point on shore, and so he returned about as readily as he had come. As he waded into the shallows with his prisoner, he scanned the low bluffs for some sign of Twyx, but saw nothing promising. They walked a way along the narrow, stony beach, then, at a point of advantage, climbed to the summit above. Still there was no sign of Twyx, and they trudged on. At last they arrived at Grenwall's makeshift camp, and he pushed aside the flaps of Twyx's tent. An unmoving body lay inside, and he shook its shoulder gingerly.

"I am perfectly well, Kenten," the witch said, yawning. "No need to pull off my arm." She rolled to her knees and studied his companion. "You have made captive your victim, I see." Her eyes moved to his frame. "And she has made so much chowder of you, it seems."

"Spare me gurther gongratulations," Grenwall muttered. "I would eat."

"A worthwhile suggestion," she agreed. "But first you must give me the jewel."

"What jewel?"

She held out her hand. "You know very well what jewel. It is no mere bauble for you to bargain away or toy with. Women have given their lives that its like not fall into grasping hands."

Grenwall grimaced and fished it out. "Take it, then. I have had my gill of witches and witchery."

Her hand closed about it. "Thank you. Now . . . I will see to breakfast, and then . . . I must make a man of you again."

Grenwall muttered something a younger woman might have colored to hear, retied the ankles of his prisoner, and disappeared into his tent.

After eating, Twyx drew her pentagram in the soil again, and Grenwall attended to Miriel, drugging her once more to prevent any interference in the proceedings.

"Well, Kenten," Twyx said, "you make such a handsome Krogan it seems a shame to change you back . . . still, I suppose I would have to listen to your tiresome objections, so let us be about it."

"Let us indeed." He stepped into the pentagram and crossed his arms. "Please proceed."

Twyx lit her censers, and Grenwall reexperienced the dissolution of his body, but this time the experience was subtly different. Everything seemed to take longer, to proceed more grudgingly, and he sensed that the witch was fighting hard to keep the transformation on course. He felt his flesh congealing oddly, like once-molten metal that had cooled too far to be properly worked, and then the transformation was over. Twyx looked at him in tired dismay. "Oh, Kenten . . . I'm—I'm so very sorry. I tried so hard . . . but something was wrong from the start."

Grenwall looked down at himself, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Everything looked normal except—except his right foot, the toes of which were still webbed and—he felt his face. All was nearly normal there, except . . .

"Give me a mirror," he said hoarsely.

Twyx stood looking at him for a moment longer, then slowly

entered her tent. She reappeared with a small dish of polished metal and handed it to him silently. He examined his reflection grimly, and saw that the upper left half of his face and one eye had not transformed, had instead remained Krogan-flesh. The effect was unnerving.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, Kenten. Sometimes the Power simply fails . . . sometimes, sometimes it recoils against those who use it improperly."

He handed the dish back. "You think I abused it," he said accusingly, "don't you? You doubted my motives from the outset."

She frowned and looked away, and Grenwall suddenly realized that she was trembling with exhaustion or with anger, or both. "I *considered* them from the outset, Kenten Grenwall, carefully. Did you?"

He started to frame an acrid response, but stopped. Harsh words would not restore normalcy to his appearance.

"Can you not try it again?" he asked.

Twyx sighed. "I can, but when such has been tried in the past, it has as often made matters worse as it has made them better. I do not advise it."

He turned away bitterly. "So be it."

"Kenten?"

"Yes?"

She came to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "There is this: I can give you the appearance of normality. The time would come when the illusion would break down, but it would give you, and those you know, time to make the best of it. And there is also this." She gestured at the young witch. "Greater or lesser misfortune comes into every life at some time. Compared to this woman, yours is the lesser. I do not know that I can restore her mind to her, or if she will have any enjoyment of life if I can. Tell me, what did you do with her daughter?"

Grenwall shrugged. "What mercy required."

"I see. Perhaps I can create some healing illusion for Miriel also. And now, what do you say?"

He thought for a moment. "Perhaps it would be best," he finally said. "I would not care to greet Merthe looking like this."

* * *

Seasons came and passed, and with their passage the Sarn Riders grew bolder in their raids upon the northern trade road. The question arose as to how best to deal with them; and as it was evident that the duke would lead no further raids, his chamberlain's thoughts turned once again to Grenwall. Crabtree rode out to his new estate personally to sound him out, and in due time returned. He encountered the duke in the stables as he was mounting for the hunt.

"Ah, Crabtree," said the duke. "Back from your mission soon? What does Grenwall ask for this time? Stardust?"

"I believe some fee was mentioned," Crabtree said vaguely, "but come, put away your falcon, and I will tell you what was said."

Chastain frowned for a moment, but handed his bird down to his astringer. "Oh, very well. Let us stroll, it is a fine day."

Crabtree raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Certainly."

They passed through iron gates into a small garden. "Grenwall's estate is beginning to prosper, lord. He acquired Torgian horses from the relatives of his new bride, and their issue is well thought of. He asked, by the by, if Merthe thought much about him."

Chastain grunted. "You lied, I hope."

"Yes, lord. I said she asked often about him."

"Hmm. A bit thick, Crabtree. I doubt if Grenwall is so gullible as all that. I must say, I never thought the witch would recover, let alone wed—let alone wed Grenwall. It seems an odd pairing."

Crabtree shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps. They seem happy enough. He still walks with a cane, but he seems to have made peace with his looks."

"Mmm. Good. Good. I thought for some time that he might ruin his mind, what with all that racking his brain about motives. But enough of this. What did he say to your proposal?"

"Yes . . . well, he agreed to accept the commission. But . . . shall we say, he seems not unduly obsessed with motives these days."

Chastain scowled. "You refer to his fee? Well, out with it, Crabtree. What is it the scoundrel wants now?"

The chamberlain rubbed his bald spot, choosing his words carefully. "You recall the fish ponds you intended to build on Grenwall's land? Well, he has built them, and they brim with fish—quite tasty, by the way. We made several meals of them. I doubt if better can be had."

"Yes, tasty, go on."

"Well, it seems Grenwall wants you to buy them."

"Buy them? All of them? Buy the confounded fish the man is hatching on the property he cheated me out of in the first place?"

"Yes, lord. I should say there are several thousand."

Chastain's face reddened. "Thrice horn the man!"