

THE SWORD-SELLER

by

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The tiny sword-seller's booth was almost hidden behind a row of tinker's stalls and jewelry stands; Auridan very nearly passed by without seeing it at all. When he did notice it, he paused. Then he shouldered his way toward it with a smile. He needed a sword, and half the fun of a fair was hunting bargains in the smaller booths.

The booth's proprietor, an old man in a dark blue robe, looked up as Auridan ducked under the awning. Auridan braced himself for the usual exhortations, but the man regarded him with a silent, unblinking stare. Auridan gave a mental shrug and bent over the counter. He was surprised at the disorder he found; knives, daggers, and swords of all lengths were jumbled as randomly as a child's game of catch-straws. Some had sheaths, some did not; some were polished and sharpened, others were black with age. A cursory glance was enough to tell Auridan that nothing here was likely to be worth haggling over. He shrugged again, and turned to go. As he did, a glint of color caught his eye.

Auridan stopped. A blue stone winked at him through a gap in the crisscrossed pile of weapons. Auridan moved two swords

and four daggers and uncovered an ancient short-sword without a sheath. The blue stone was one of a pair set in the hilt, amid carving so clogged with grime that it was impossible to determine what the decoration represented. The blade of the sword was black with age, and thicker and wider than those Auridan was used to. Almost in spite of himself, Auridan lifted the sword, testing the heft. The hilt fit his hand as if it had been made to measure, and the balance of the blade was perfect.

"That sword is not for sale," a harsh voice rasped.

Auridan started and looked across the counter into the unfathomable eyes of the sword-seller. "If it is already spoken for, you should not display it with the rest of your wares," Auridan said in mild annoyance. He twisted the blade from side to side, studying it with regret. It would be a deal of work to clean and sharpen, but something about the weapon called to him . . . He shook himself, and held the sword out to the sword-seller.

The old man made no move to take it from him. "I did not say the sword was spoken for," he said.

"No, I suppose you didn't," Auridan replied with a smile. "But what else am I to think when you refuse to sell it?"

"Think as you will," the man said, "so long as you do not think to buy that sword."

"As you will," Auridan said. Again he held out the sword. The old man sat watching him with the same unblinking stare.

"Very well, then." Auridan set the sword down gently atop the welter of other weapons in front of the old man. His fingers uncurled reluctantly from the hilt, and as he stepped away from the counter he was surprised to find that his breathing had quickened. "Good day, and fortune follow you," he said, and turned away.

"Wait."

Auridan looked back, but kept one hand poised to lift the fringe of the awning. "What is it?"

"The sword is not for sale. It is given. Today, it is given to you. Take it."

Auridan stared. Was the old man mad? Even an old and battered sword was worth a good deal, and this weapon was well made. The sword-seller looked as though he could make good

use of whatever coin it would bring. "Why would you give me the sword?"

"That is my affair," the old man said. "The sword is yours. Take it."

Auridan heard finality in the sword-seller's voice, and the man's eyes were bright and knowing. They did not look like the eyes of a madman. Auridan reached for the hilt of the sword, then hesitated. Whatever the reason for this strange offer, he could not take such advantage of an old man. His hand went to the pouch at his belt and removed half of the scanty coins remaining. He held them out to the sword-seller. "Here. It's not the worth of such a weapon, by any means, but—"

"The sword is a gift!" the old man snapped. "Did I not say it?"

"I'll take it as a purchase, or not at all," Auridan said. Briefly, he wondered if he had not run as mad as the old sword-seller. Forcing a merchant to take coin at a fair! Whoever heard of such backward bargaining?

The old man snorted. "Take the sword and go."

Auridan shrugged. He tossed the coins onto the counter, where they made tiny noises as they clinked against the jumbled weapons and fell into the spaces between them. Only then did he put his hand to the hilt of the ancient sword.

"For your courtesy, I give thanks," Auridan said, and picked up the weapon.

He thought he saw a flash of worry in the sword-seller's eyes. Then the man said, "You are a blank shield. I am sometimes asked to recommend such men to those who seek to hire them. If someone asks, where shall I send him?"

Auridan blinked in surprise, but said courteously that he could probably be found in the serving tent after sunset. He thanked the man and left, wondering why he had bothered. He doubted that anyone would seek to hire a mercenary by such roundabout methods. Still, he thought the suggestion had been well meant. He put the matter out of his mind and began looking for a leather-maker's booth where he could buy a sheath for the sword.

For the next several hours, Auridan strolled among the booths and tents, enjoying the warm sunshine and watching the

eager, noisy crowds. The annual Fyndale fair had been resumed shortly after the end of the long war with the Hounds of Alizon, and it had grown every year since. Ten merchants' flags had flown above the booths at that first fair; now, four years later, there were thirty or more, and the tents and carts and tables of the lesser tradesmen sprawled in a disorderly semicircle around the gray stone pillar where men swore to keep the peace of the fair.

Auridan remembered that first fair well. Unlike so many of his erstwhile comrades in the war against Alizon, he'd been restless and disinclined to settle down. By a lucky chance, he'd met one of the lords from the south who'd been dispossessed during the war. Auridan had taken service with him, and they had spent several years fighting in the southern part of High Hallack. Eventually, the lord and his men had prevailed, but the substance of his keep had been wasted in the struggle, and Auridan was not of a mind to squat there waiting for the man to rebuild his fortune. He had taken the lord's blessing, and the few coins that could be spared, and come back to Fyndale in search of another patron.

He studied the crowd as he walked along, and for the first time began to doubt the wisdom of the decision he had made with such blithe confidence. Most of the fairgoers looked prosperous and contented—good signs for the merchants, perhaps, but not so promising for a blank shield mercenary looking for someone in need of a guard or a soldier.

Well, if nothing else, he could hire on with a merchant returning home from the fair, Auridan thought philosophically. Merchants were notoriously nervous about bandits, particularly when there were profits to protect, and from the look of things, this fair would be profitable for nearly all of them. Feeling somewhat more cheerful, Auridan headed toward the serving tent, to purchase a cup of wine and consider what to do next.

Two drinks later, he had still not thought of anything. He was just beginning his third when a light, musical voice said, "Fair fortune to you, traveler. Are you the blank shield the sword-seller told me of?"

Auridan looked up, and his reply died on his lips. The woman who stood beside him had the kind of beauty song-

smiths broke their strings over. Her thick, butter-colored braids coiled into a high knot above a classic oval face. Her skin was fair and flawless, her eyes a serene hazel. She was tall and slender, and her cloak and robe were of fine wool, heavily embroidered. She could be no more than twenty, but her bearing proclaimed a confidence beyond her years.

She must be daughter to one of the Dales lords, Auridan thought dazedly; then his bemused wits began working again and he rose to his feet and raised his hand palm-out in greeting. "Fair fortune to you, lady. I am Auridan; how may I serve you?"

The woman's lips compressed very slightly; then she sighed and motioned for Auridan to seat himself once more. She took the place beside him and said, "I wish to hire a man to guide and guard me on a journey. I have been told that you are a man of honor, and would suit my purposes."

"I have done such work before," Auridan admitted. "What direction do you travel, and with how large a party?"

The woman bit her lip and looked down; suddenly she seemed much younger, barely out of girlhood. Then she raised her chin and said defiantly, "I wish to go north, to Abbey Norstead. And the party will consist of we two only; I will take no others with me." She added solemnly, "It is why I particularly wish to hire an honorable man."

Auridan swallowed a chuckle, but shook his head. "I fear you have not considered, lady," he said gently, even as he wondered why such a girl as this would wish to enter the abbey. "The effects of the war linger; travel is still not safe. I cannot believe your kinsmen would allow—"

"The last of my kin by blood is at Abbey Norstead," the girl broke in pointedly.

"Then you'd do far better to stay in Fyndale for a week or so, until the fair ends, and hire passage in a merchant's train. I'm sure that at least one or two will head toward Norsdale."

"I've no mind to wait so long," she retorted. "Nor do I wish to move at a snail's pace, stopping at every village and hamlet in hopes of another sale."

"I see you've journeyed with merchants before," Auridan said, amused.

"Two travelers alone may well be safer than a larger group," she persisted. "For two can hide, or slip away silently in darkness, where more cannot."

"A single guard may also be easily taken by two or three outlaws, who would never think to attack a stronger party," Auridan pointed out. "And with such a one as you to tempt—"

"I am not helpless!" she interrupted angrily. "I know the use of a sword, though I am better with a bow."

Without thinking, Auridan raised a skeptical eyebrow. The girl saw, and her eyes flashed. "You think that because I am beautiful I have no thoughts in my head save silks and jewelry, and no skill in my hands but embroidery!" she said scornfully. "Faugh! I'm sick to death of men who see nothing but my face!"

Before Auridan could answer, a man's voice cut across the hum of talk surrounding them. "Cyndal! There you are at last!" The girl stiffened, and Auridan looked around for the source of the cry.

He found the speaker quickly—a tall, brown-haired man of perhaps thirty years, dressed in a tunic of fine crimson wool. He was making his way quickly through the crowd, his eyes fixed on the girl beside Auridan. "Hervan," the girl muttered, and she spoke as if the name were a curse. "He would!"

The brown-haired man reached the table. He ignored Auridan and said in a chiding tone, "My dear Cyndal! What do you here, and in such company? My lady has been frantic since she found you missing!"

"I don't believe you, Hervan," the girl replied, unmoved. "Chathalla knew I was going out, and I've barely been gone an hour. She wouldn't fuss over such a thing."

"Chathalla's nerves are particularly fragile just now," the brown-haired man said defensively.

"Your concern for your lady wife does you credit," Cyndal said in a dry tone.

"I could wish you had had as much consideration. What she will say when she knows where I found you . . ." He glanced disapprovingly around the serving tent, and his eyes came to rest on Auridan.

"Don't tell her," Cyndal suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous, Cyndal. You shouldn't be wandering around the fair alone; you know that. Come on, I'll take you back to the tent."

"I haven't finished my discussion with Auridan," Cyndal said.

"Cyndal, be reasonable!"

Hervan's tone was patronizing, and Auridan felt a wave of dislike for the young Dales lord. He decided to intervene. "But she is," Auridan put in pleasantly. "Being reasonable, I mean."

Hervan stared at him in blank astonishment, and Auridan gestured at the cup of wine he had been drinking. Fortunately, it was still three-quarters full, and he had set it down between Cyndal and himself, so that it was impossible to tell to which of them the cup belonged. "My lady has not yet finished her wine. Surely you do not think it would be reasonable for her to leave it behind?"

"Indeed." Hervan looked from Auridan to Cyndal, and the question in his expression was clear. Cyndal's lips tightened, but she presented Auridan as graciously as if they were at the court of one of the High Lords of the Dales instead of in a serving tent at a fair. She did not, Auridan noticed, mention what she had been discussing with him.

Hervan's expression cleared before Cyndal was half finished with her explanation. "A blank shield? How fortunate! I am in need of a Master of Arms; come to me tomorrow and we'll talk of it."

"Why, thank you, my lord," Auridan said, forcing his lips into a smile. "Tomorrow evening, perhaps? I would not wish to interfere with your fairing."

"I will look for you then," Hervan promised. "Now, Cyndal—"

"But Lady Cyndal still has not finished her wine," Auridan cut in smoothly. "Surely it won't matter if she stays here a little longer. I will be happy to escort her back if you wish to return and reassure your lady wife."

Hervan hesitated visibly, but he could not refuse without giving the impression that he did not trust Auridan. That would make Hervan look foolish, since he had just offered to take Auridan into his service. Hervan bowed graciously, showered Auridan with insincere thanks, and left at last.

Auridan turned to Cyndal. She was looking at him with an expression of mingled resignation and scorn, and he wondered whether she thought he had believed Hervan's playacting. "I think that now I understand exactly why you wish to go to Norstead," Auridan said before she could speak. "But I thought you said that you had no kin outside the abbey. Lord Hervan does not act like a stranger."

Cyndal's eyes widened; then, suddenly, she smiled. Auridan swallowed hard. Cyndal had been lovely before, but the glowing expression of relief and gratitude increased her beauty tenfold.

"Hervan was my uncle's stepson," Cyndal said, and Auridan gave himself a mental shake. He *had* asked, after all. "When my uncle saw that he was unlikely to have children of his own, he made Hervan his heir. Hervan has been lord in Syledale since my uncle died two years ago."

"And it took you two years to decide that you'd rather enter an abbey than live in his household?" Auridan said skeptically.

She laughed, but her expression sobered quickly. "No, it's only in the last few months that he's been acting that way, since he's known Chathalla will bear him an heir after Midwinter. I decided on the way to Fyndale that it would be easier on everyone if I went away for a while. My mother's sister at Abbey Norstead is the only blood relation I possess, so it's reasonable for me to go there."

Auridan stiffened as wild speculations chased each other through his mind. If the impending birth of an heir had triggered Hervan's subtle persecution of his cousin-by-marriage, Hervan's actions might well be rooted in something deeper than mere distaste for Cyndal's presence. And whatever the cause, it was certainly not a safe situation for a mercenary to become involved in. He opened his mouth to tell Cyndal as much, and found himself saying, "Have you told Lord Hervan of this plan of yours?"

"Not yet," Cyndal admitted. "I thought I would have a better chance of persuading him if Chathalla and I had all the arrangements made before I spoke to him of it."

"I see." Auridan was more confused than ever. "And she agreed to your traveling with a single man-at-arms?"

"I didn't mention that," Cyndal said. "She'd worry. I'll just

tell her, and Hervan, that you've agreed to be my guide and head the men who'll accompany me. They won't think to ask how many men there will be."

"Why the need for all this subterfuge? Why don't you just take the five or six men you need with you?"

"Because Hervan wouldn't provide them, and I can't afford to hire that many!" Cyndal snapped. "And if you aren't going to help me, I don't see why I should answer any more of your questions."

"In that case, I shall escort you back to your cousin," Auridan said, rising. "I strongly recommend, however, that you explain matters to Lord Hervan before you approach me or anyone else on this subject again."

"That can be no concern of yours, since you do not wish to take me to Norstead," Cyndal said coldly as she rose to follow him.

Auridan scowled at her. "By the Nine Words of Min, lady, do you not realize how much trouble you would make for any man like me who accepted your offer unknowingly? Blood-kin or no, Lord Hervan stands as your protector! Were I to agree to take you to Norstead without his permission, I'd have to go on into the Waste and earn my bread by scavenging, for no lord would hire me afterward."

"Oh." Cyndal's voice was thoughtful, and she was silent for a long time. They had nearly reached the visitors' tents when she said, "I'm sorry; I hadn't thought of it that way. But if Hervan agrees, will you guide me?"

"Certainly," Auridan replied, then wondered whether the wine had not been stronger than he had thought. He gave a mental shrug. Time enough to worry once the girl got Lord Hervan's agreement to her plans; from what Auridan had seen, it did not look probable.

Cyndal did not appear to share Auridan's doubts. "Thank you," she said with a smile that took his breath away. "You are coming to speak with Hervan tomorrow, are you not? I'll talk to him before then."

Auridan nodded absently, and she directed him toward one of the tents on the outer perimeter of the camp. They finished their walk in silence, except for the obligatory courtesies ex-

changed when he returned her officially to her step-cousin's care. Then Auridan hurried away to his own campsite, feeling unreasonably relieved and irrationally anxious at the same time.

To give himself something to think about besides Cyndal, Auridan spent the evening worrying at the hilt of his new sword with polishing cream, strong soap, and a pile of old rags. He worked slowly to keep from accidentally dislodging the stones in the hilt. Even so, by the time he was ready to sleep he had removed most of the ancient grime from the carving that decorated the hilt. In the flickering firelight, all he could tell was that the two stones were the eyes of some wild-haired creature. Reluctantly, Auridan sheathed the sword, telling himself he could examine it more closely in the morning.

When he awoke, his first action was to reach for the short-sword. He was surprised to see how different the carving looked in daylight. The blue stones were indeed eyes, but what he had taken for hair was a crest of intricately carved feathers that stood out around the head of a serpentlike creature. The serpent's body twisted around the hilt of the sword, forming a series of ridges that made the sword less likely to slide in the hand. Auridan studied it, wondering from what tale the swordsmith had taken such a creature. A snake with feathers was strange enough to be a relic of the Old Ones . . .

Auridan shivered, then shook his head and smiled. The Dales were full of strange things left behind by the Old Ones, but one did not find them for sale at out-of-the-way booths in Fyndale. For while the leavings of the Old Ones might be dangerous indeed, there was always someone eager to take the risk in hopes of the power he might gain. Any merchant daring enough to traffic in such items would be charging enormous sums for them, not giving them away to mercenaries. Auridan pushed the remnants of his uneasiness to the back of his mind, and went off to get himself some breakfast.

When he finished eating, Auridan took the sword to a busy tinker's stall and had the blade cleaned and sharpened. It cost more than he had expected, but it was worth it to have a good sword at his belt again. He spent the day wandering through

the fair, but as soon as the sun disappeared behind the mountains he headed for Lord Hervan's campsite.

The guard who greeted Auridan did not seem surprised by his request to speak with Lord Hervan, and he was immediately ushered into one of the tents. He found Hervan, Cyndal, and a quiet, gentle-faced woman seated on small folding stools inside. Hervan rose, frowning, as Auridan entered.

"This is my wife, the Lady Chathalla," Hervan said, gesturing at the unfamiliar woman beside Cyndal. He paused, studying Auridan, then said abruptly, "My cousin claims she wishes to hire you to take her to Norstead."

"She mentioned the possibility," Auridan said cautiously. He saw Cyndal shift, and Chathalla put a restraining hand on her arm, and he wondered what he had walked into this time.

"Indeed." Hervan's voice was barely a fraction friendlier. "And you approve of this proposal?"

Auridan raised an eyebrow. "Approve? My lord, I am a mercenary. I approve when I am paid."

Hervan gave a bark of laughter. "Very good. Sit down, then, and we'll talk."

As Auridan turned, looking for a fourth stool, he heard a short, hissing intake of breath. He straightened hurriedly. Hervan was staring at the carved hilt of Auridan's short-sword, and his expression was curiously blank. "My lord?" Auridan said cautiously.

Hervan ran his tongue over his lips. "The decoration of your swordhilt is . . . quite unusual."

"Really? I had thought it some whim of the smith who made it," Auridan said. "Have you seen similar work before, Lord Hervan?"

"Possibly." Hervan's tone was carefully casual, but his lips were stiff with tension. His eyes darted up to Auridan's face, then as quickly away. "Enough. What is your price for escorting my cousin to Norstead?"

Auridan blinked, somewhat bewildered by this abrupt change in attitude, then named a sum he knew to be reasonable. Hervan nodded, but he did not look as if he was devoting much of his attention to Auridan's words. Instead, Hervan was watching Cyndal, and after a moment he said almost pleadingly, "You're

sure you want to take this trip, Cyndal? You won't change your mind?"

"Yes, I'm sure, and no, I won't change my mind," Cyndal said.

Hervan glanced at Auridan again and said heavily, "Very well. You wanted to leave tomorrow morning, didn't you? I'll see that everything is ready."

"You mean, you'll let me go without any more arguing?" Cyndal said, amazement and disbelief warring in her voice.

"I've no choice!" Hervan swung around to face her. He sounded desperate, and angry, and somehow frightened. "Cyndal . . ."

"What's wrong, Hervan?" Cyndal asked almost gently.

Hervan hesitated, and his wife leaned forward and said quietly, "Yes, please tell us."

Hervan jerked as if he had been stung, and his expression hardened. "Nothing. Nothing whatever." He looked at Auridan and said, "I'll have your payment ready in the morning."

Auridan nodded, and the bargain was swiftly concluded. He bowed his thanks and left, puzzling over the implications of the little scene. Hervan had all the earmarks of a badly frightened man, but why would the design of Auridan's swordhilt have frightened him? Auridan kicked at a rock in frustration. Hervan was lord of a Dale, however small; there was nothing Auridan could do to make him explain.

Briefly, Auridan considered leaving the sword behind, but he needed a weapon and he could not afford to buy another. Nor could he refuse to escort Cyndal, however uneasy her step-cousin's attitude made him. Even if he had not given his word to both Hervan and Cyndal, Auridan could not afford to pass up such a commission. His purse was nearly flat, and it would be at least a week before he could expect any income from an alternate position, supposing he could find one quickly. Auridan grinned suddenly. It was pleasant to have honor and necessity in agreement, for once, about his future course of action.

They left early the following morning, before the fairgoers emerged from their tents to crowd the space around the booths. Lord Hervan had provided a pretty chestnut mare for Cyndal

that Auridan thought would be more than a match for his own gray. Hervan had also arranged saddlebags full of supplies for both Cyndal and Auridan, and he had a purse with Auridan's fee ready and waiting. He even suggested a route—the old track near the top of the ridges. Auridan thanked him without mentioning that he had been intending to take the high trail anyway. At this time of year, any outlaws would be watching the main road for unwary merchants; the high trail would be far safer for so small a party. Hervan's farewells to his step-cousin were perhaps a little stiff, but Auridan had to admit that in everything else the man had done as much or more than he had promised.

Cyndal was in a sober mood after taking leave of her cousin, and for the early part of the morning she rode in silence. But the warmth of the day and the cheerful calling of the birds proved too much for her to resist, and by the time they stopped for a midday meal she was laughing and talking with Auridan as though he had stood guard over her cradle.

Auridan was surprised at how comfortable he was with her. His previous experience with noblewomen had not led him to expect anything remotely resembling this casual camaraderie. Before he thought, he said as much, and Cyndal grinned.

"You've probably only seen proper noblewomen, like Lady Chathalla," she said without rancor. "Penniless females like me aren't usually allowed out in public."

"Do the Dales hold any other women 'like you'?" Auridan asked, studying her with exaggerated admiration.

"Hundreds," Cyndal said, and her smile faded. "I'm one of the lucky ones. If Chathalla weren't so nice, I'd have been stuck in the kitchens or the back gardens with fewer prospects than a serving wench. I've seen it happen; Uppsdale isn't very far away, and I remember how Lady Annet treated Ysmay. And Ysmay had dowry enough to marry, in the end; I don't even have that."

"Surely your uncle—" Auridan stopped short as he realized that, camaraderie or not, this was not the sort of question a blank shield ought to ask of a noblewoman.

"My uncle didn't think of settling anything on me for a dowry," Cyndal said. "He was more concerned with making sure

no one would be able to object to Hervan as heir. And it was lucky he did; things were rather difficult for a while after he died. If he hadn't made such a point of Hervan's being his heir, blood-kin or not, I'm not sure what would have happened to any of us."

Auridan nodded sympathetically and changed the subject. He had seen enough in recent years to be able to guess more than he wanted to know about what Cyndal was not saying. The thought of this beautiful girl helplessly caught up in one of the sometimes bloody struggles over a Dales rulership made him wince. Then he smiled at himself. Beautiful Cyndal might be, but helpless? Little as he knew her, he knew she was not that.

Despite his enjoyment of Cyndal's company, Auridan grew increasingly uneasy as the day wore on. In the late afternoon, clouds began sweeping in from the west, turning the day gray and adding to his irritability. Finally Cyndal noticed his nervousness and demanded to be told what was wrong.

"I won't be treated like a porcelain ornament," she said. "And I can be dreadfully stubborn. So you might as well explain what's bothering you, and save us both the trouble."

"If I knew what it was, I'd tell you," Auridan replied. "It's just a feeling, that's all."

They rode until just before dark. A cold drizzle began to fall as they struggled to set up camp in the gloom, and they heard the rumbling of thunder among the nearby mountains. Auridan rigged an inadequate shelter for Cyndal from seven leafy branches and a blanket, then was exasperated when she insisted on joining him in hunting firewood.

The storm hit with a crash while they were heading back toward their camp with the second load. Rain slashed through the branches of the trees above them, soaking their cloaks in minutes and half blinding them. Auridan shouted to Cyndal to keep close; in the dark and the rain it would be all too easy to become separated and lose the way. He thought he heard Cyndal shout agreement, but a few moments later, a brilliant flash of lightning showed her forging through the trees ahead and to his right.

The thunderclap that followed drowned out Auridan's call.

Cursing, he blundered toward where he thought she was. He ran into a tree and lost several of the branches he was carrying. As he struggled to get a better grip on those that remained, he heard Cyndal scream.

Auridan dropped the firewood and leaped forward. The scream had come from just ahead of him; he ought to be able to find her easily enough. He heard Cyndal scream again, and another flash of lightning lit the woods.

By its light, Auridan saw Cyndal plunging wildly into the trees. Just behind her, its head a man-height above the ground, was a creature with a long, sinuous body like a giant snake covered with feathers. Auridan grabbed for his sword as the light faded, and forced his feet to move faster. The image of the enormous snake hung before his eyes, as though the lightning had etched the scene into their surface. Then he realized that the snake was glowing. It moved forward without hurry, following Cyndal.

Auridan stumbled after it, determined to reach the snake before it could harm Cyndal. The chase seemed to last for hours, the darkness punctuated by occasional flashes of lightning. Auridan was grateful for the storm; the brief flares of light were the only way he had of being sure the snake had not yet reached its prey.

Suddenly the snake disappeared, like a puff of smoke scattered by the wind. Almost at the same moment, Auridan heard Cyndal give another scream. Desperately he threw himself forward. He had an instant's confused impression of plunging through something like a thin curtain into dryness and warmth and flickering torchlight, and then he collided with Cyndal.

They teetered together in a tangle of dripping hair and soggy cloaks. Auridan recovered first and instinctively raised his sword. Then what he was seeing finally penetrated, and he stared in astonishment.

He was standing just inside a curtain of blackness that blocked the mouth of a huge cave. Torches burned in iron sconces hanging from the walls of the cave. Directly across from Auridan stood the statue of a plumed snake rearing up twice the height of a man, its mouth open in a silent hiss. Before the statue was a low table, and in front of it stood three

men. The first was an old man robed in green. Next to him stood the sword-seller in an identical robe of dark blue. Then Auridan stiffened in shock. The third man was Lord Hervan.

"Your champion has arrived at last, Sympas," said the first man. He laughed unpleasantly, and his eyes never left Auridan. "Not a very prepossessing sight, is he?"

"Appearances are not everything, Kessas," the sword-seller replied calmly.

Kessas snorted. "It took you long enough to get him here."

Auridan stared at the two men in bewilderment. Beside him, Cyndal raised her head to study their surroundings. Auridan felt her shudder against him as her eyes fell on the statue; then she went rigid with shock. "*Hervan?*"

Hervan looked at her with a miserable expression. "I'm sorry, Cyndal! I didn't *know!*"

"Didn't know what?" Cyndal demanded. She sounded more like herself, and Auridan grinned.

"I didn't know what Kessas would ask! I . . . made a bargain, I thought it was the right thing, the only way to be *sure* . . ."

"What are you talking about, Hervan?" Cyndal said sharply.

"This," Hervan said. He looked away from her. "Your being here."

"What your step-cousin is trying to tell you is that either you or he will die tonight," said Kessas. Auridan made an involuntary gesture with his sword, and the old man gave him an unpleasant smile. "Precisely," he said.

"Hervan, *why?*" Cyndal said urgently.

Hervan raised his head. "Syledale. You know what it was like, after your uncle died! I wanted—I wanted to be sure nothing like that would ever happen again. There had to be an heir no one could question, but Chathalla hadn't shown the slightest sign, not once in over three years. So I bargained. I didn't know!"

"Enough," said Sympas sternly. "You made your agreement, and you must abide by it. By your own will, you are Kessas's champion."

"And I suppose you intend me to be yours," Auridan said.

"I chose you for that purpose, yes."

"What happens if I refuse?"

"If there is no contest, the color of the serpent remains as it is, which is the green of Kessas," the sword-seller replied. "Since he is dominant, his will would prevail and the girl would be sacrificed."

Cyndal made a small noise and reached for the dagger at her belt. Auridan's eyes narrowed. "And if I agree?"

"The outcome of the contest determines the color of the serpent," Sympas said. "If Lord Hervan wins, Kessas remains dominant and the girl dies. But if you are the victor, the color of the serpent will change to blue, and you and the girl will go free."

"You leave me no choice," Auridan said.

"Then stop this chattering and let the contest begin," Kessas snarled.

Auridan raised his left hand and unfastened the clasp of his cloak. He let the soggy mass slide to the floor and stepped forward. Reluctantly, Hervan drew his sword and came to meet him. Auridan saw that Hervan's blade was a twin to his own, and his lips twisted. Not an identical twin, he thought; he would be willing to wager that the stones in the hilt of Hervan's sword were green, not blue.

Warily, Auridan circled his opponent. He had no idea how good a swordsman Hervan was, and still less what difference the two strange swords might make in the fight. Hervan was equally unwilling to close with him, but finally he could wait no longer. He stepped forward and swung.

Green and blue sparks flew as the weapons touched, and Auridan felt his sword arm tingle. He forced himself to concentrate on fighting. Hervan was an excellent swordsman; Auridan could not afford to let himself be distracted. He parried a vicious thrust, and more sparks flew. They grew thicker and brighter with each blow, until the very air seemed to shine with green and blue light.

Finally, Hervan broke through Auridan's guard. Auridan twisted aside, but not quite in time. The point of Hervan's sword grazed his left shoulder. Auridan felt a painful jolt in his left arm from shoulder to fingertips. He ignored the pain, for Hervan's desperate attack had left an opening. With all his strength, Auridan brought his sword down across Hervan's, just

above the guard. The force of the blow tore the weapon from Hervan's hand. Before he could recover it, Auridan's blade was at his throat.

Hervan stood motionless, staring at Auridan with wide eyes. Auridan hesitated, and heard the sword-seller's voice say, "You have won; now make an end."

Auridan shook his head. He stepped back, kicking Hervan's sword well out of reach, and lowered his own weapon. "If I have won, that is the end," he said. "There is no need for killing."

"You must!" Kessas's voice was frantic. "The power will not be bound unless the victory is sealed in blood!"

"I won't kill him," Auridan said stubbornly.

"Fool!" Kessas cried. "Kill him or we'll all die! Look there!"

Auridan looked up. The serpent statue was glowing. Blue and green light rippled up and down the carved plumes, the shimmering colors shifting crazily from one feather to another, and cracks were appearing in the stone. Kessas's face was a mask of terror. Then, with a loud grinding noise, a large chunk fell out of the nose of the statue. Another followed. "Run!" shouted the sword-seller.

Auridan ran. He heard Kessas shrieking curses behind him, but he did not look back. He saw the black barrier at the mouth of the cave vanish as Cyndal darted through it. An instant later, Auridan followed her, with Sympas right behind him. Auridan turned and pulled Hervan out just as the roof of the cave collapsed with a roar.

For a moment, they stood in the darkness outside, panting with exertion and coughing in the cloud of dust spewing from the mouth of the cave. The rain had subsided into a cold drizzle once more, which added to their discomfort. Sympas seemed the least affected; he stood staring almost wistfully back toward the cave. At last he looked up.

"The power of the serpent, for good or for ill, is broken, and I am free at last," he said to Auridan. "For that, my thanks."

"Thanks are well enough," Cyndal said with irritation, "but I want an explanation. What has all this been about?"

The sword-seller smiled. "A fair question, though perhaps not fairly phrased. The feathered serpent that you saw in the

cave was a . . . source of Power. In itself, it was neither of the Light nor of the Dark, but could serve either as its servants willed it.

"My brother and I were bound to the serpent long ago. We were intended to hold the serpent's Power for the Light, but over the years Kessas delved too deeply into the things of the Dark, and it swallowed him. Then he began searching for a way to bind the Power of the statue to himself alone.

"He found it in you." The sword-seller looked at Cyndal. "Your mother bore a trace of the old blood, and she passed it on to you. That and your beauty made you the perfect sacrifice, whose blood would bind the Power to Kessas. So Kessas made his bargain with your cousin: a son and heir in exchange for you."

"He didn't tell me what he was going to do!" Hervan said. "I wouldn't have agreed if I'd known."

"You did not ask," Sympas said sternly. Hervan looked down, and Sympas continued, "I learned of Kessas's actions too late to stop what he had set in motion. My only hope was to counter what he had done by choosing a champion of my own." His eyes met Auridan's, and he smiled. "I chose better than I knew."

"That was why you tried to give me the sword!" Auridan said.

"Yes. I was concerned when you insisted on paying, for it meant I had no hold on you to draw you here. So I sent you to Cyndal, hoping that you would become involved in her plans. In the end, it was as well that you were free to choose, for you could not otherwise have destroyed the serpent."

"I didn't—"

"The laws that governed the Power of the statue were very rigid. Blood sacrifice would bind its Power to Kessas; a contest to the death would bind its Power to the victor. You won the fight, but refused to kill your opponent. Neither Kessas nor I had won, and the conflicting Powers tore the statue apart. Had you taken the sword as I meant you to, I think you would not have been able to keep to your resolve."

Auridan looked at Hervan. The Dales lord looked cold and miserable and worried. Auridan still didn't like him much, but he was glad he had not been forced to kill the man.

"What about Chathalla?" Hervan asked urgently. "Will she be all right, now that . . ." He waved at the pile of rubble where the mouth of the cave had been.

"Your lady will suffer no hurt by this," Sympas assured him.

"You are luckier than you deserve, Hervan," Cyndal said.

"I know," Hervan said without looking at her.

"Then do not seek again to bend old Powers to your wishes," Sympas told him.

"I won't," Hervan assured him. Then he looked at Cyndal and said tentatively, "Will you still be going on to Norstead?"

"I think it would be best," Cyndal said gently. "If Auridan is still willing to guide me. But I will return before Chathalla has her child."

"Thank you," Hervan said.

The sword-seller looked at Auridan. "If you have no other questions for me, I must go."

"What about this?" Auridan said, holding out the short-sword.

"Keep it," Sympas said, and smiled. "You have paid for it twice over, once in coin and once in service."

"I'm not sure I want a sword that gives off blue sparks in a fight," Auridan said.

"The sword drew its Power from the statue; with the statue gone, you have no need to worry," Sympas assured him.

Auridan did not see how Sympas could be so positive, but he did not like to offend the man. He nodded and sheathed the sword, reminding himself mentally to clean it as soon as he was somewhere dry.

"Farewell, and again, my thanks." Sympas turned and started walking up the mountain.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Cyndal said.

The sword-seller looked back and smiled. "Home," he said, and this time when he walked away no one stopped him.