

From the Worlds of Andre Norton

Rusted Armor

By Caroline Fike

**Under the close tutelage of
Andre Norton**

**Edited by Jay P. Watts of
Andre-Norton-Books.com
The Official Website of
The Estate of Andre Norton**

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By Caroline Fike

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Chapter ~ One

As the lone figure, clad in the tattered and begrimed remains of a surcoat, moved with aimless, dragging steps into the depths of the forest, none bore witness but tiny denizens of the wilderness. The only eyes observing his collapse at the foot of a moss-coated giant of the wood were those of a curious badger emerging from his set in search of an evening's foraging. Almost like a frightened child, the man curled in upon himself, as if to ward off blows and passed into the sleep of exhaustion—sleep that carried him into a dream world—a world of things that had been.

The light from two tall candles cast a warm glow against the shrine above the solitary young man who knelt before the altar. Shadows painted the surrounding walls like unseen watchers ranked along the loftily vaulted Lady Chapel. Huon imagined witnesses just beyond the range of his senses, gathered to observe his preparations.

He had drawn his sword, grasped it by the blade just below the hilt, holding it before him like a cross. Placing his unadorned helm before the altar he slowly bowed his head. Beneath his long cloak was a simple white linen tunic. The traditional words of the prayer with which he began his vigil came softly to his lips.

“Pure of heart, may I be
Devoted, serving, firstly Thee,
And next all those whose need I see.
So, may I never give a cause
To stain the honor, break the laws
Of those I serve,
From this time forth, without a pause.”

The knightly candidate lapsed into silent contemplation and, as many before him, pondered his life. While the hours marched in silence past his kneeling figure, Huon found himself walking in memory through the days leading up to his vigil. One memory still puzzled him.

It had been on a late autumn afternoon following a particularly difficult passage at arms. The young man had walked out to cool down and let muscles recover from the vigorous action. He thought little of his direction, but wandered along a series of pathways from the training ground, past the kitchens to a sheltered garden he had long ago discovered while on boyhood explorations of the castle grounds. He passed through a low arched gate of woven vines. Huon had earlier marked a small glade beyond, found it a peaceful place where he could rest and think, however this afternoon, to his considerable surprise, it was not so quiet.

He was not alone on that soft autumn afternoon. From a small form huddled on a bench in one corner of the garden had come a low whimper of weeping. He had frozen in mid step, then backed softly away, intent on escape, when the form jerked upward as a slight girl looked to him, her face wet with tears and momentary fear lines etched there. The squire had raised a hand in apology for the intrusion and smiled at the young woman. This was clearly no servant. Her garments were of the finest cut and fabric; even Huon could see that, though seldom did squires associate with such noble guests as those frequenting Stamglen.

“For—forgive me, Lady. I did not mean to intrude.” He had managed to stammer out. She quickly brushed her cheek to hide the evidence of her tears.

“No, don’t go! I know you, Huon of Rennay. I watched you at arms practice, a day gone.” She smiled shyly.

A blush crept unbidden from Huon’s collar. He had no idea his practice had been observed. “Y—you did?”

The girl laughed now, an enchanting sound that seemed to bubble up within her. “I was on the ladies’ balcony that overlooks the practice ground. You were far too busy to notice.”

“Oh,” was all Huon could answer. What to say? He decided that the gallant thing to do was offer assistance worthy of a knight. “Lady, I know not what your difficulty may be, but if I may serve, you need only ask. May I have the privilege of your name?”

His companion looked intently at him for a long moment. “You really mean that! I am Arin, recently of Gamlin. Like you, I am here to further my training.” Then seeming about to add something, she suddenly clapped a hand over her mouth smothering further words. He could do

no more than bow and retreat. What had caused such grief in Arin of Gamlin? The question remained and seemed to echo in Huon's mind as he abruptly came to himself.

The Lady Chapel candles burned steadily, sending ripples of wax to puddle on the stone beside their holders. Suddenly Huon realized that his recollections had wandered in a dangerous direction. He was here on vigil, not to dream of a woman he could never approach in any fashion other than to salute her formally.

Now the candidate prostrated himself before the altar and prayed fervently for power to take his vows with a heart unfettered by any base emotion or motive. In truth, Huon's greatest desire was to bring honor upon his house, his future knightly order and his lord!

The young man raised his head and stood to his feet, hardly believing the night had passed so swiftly. In moments he would be summoned to the ritual bath and thence to the ceremony toward which his whole young life had been directed, however before he could turn, there struck him from behind such a frigid gust of air that instantly drove life from the great candles. Had there indeed been a witness to his vigil?

Passing his hand over his eyes, Huon shook his head. Long hours of forced wakefulness must be playing tricks with his mind. The morning light that streamed now through the deep-set windows of the chapel penetrated the dusty corners revealing nothing but the silent effigies guarding Stamglen's ancient dead. The knight candidate turned and paced slowly toward the beckoning day, but as he passed through the nave a sharp sound seemed to burst above him and all familiar surroundings disappeared from his vision.

Darkness far deeper than the mere absence of light suddenly cloaked Huon. It was as if he had been plunged from the haven of the holy chapel into a cold and barren space. Reaching out blindly to touch the column that he thought was just before him in the clogging gloom, he stumbled forward.

No longer was there an altar, no longer a stoned flagged chapel floor; Huon found himself in a faintly dawn-lit glade, surrounded by forest, from which strange shadows crept away into hiding. The silence was split by the harsh blast of a horn and he suddenly became aware of the crashing of hooves in the mist behind him. Gripped by confusion,

he instinctively lurched forward then, entangling his foot with something in the grass, he sprawled against a dark object looming in his path. Slowly his wits began to clear. The vigil—yes, it was a dream from the past—but now—!

Realizing he had stumbled against bole of a fallen tree, he crouched beside it, looking back just in time to see a mighty hart o'er-leap the log at some distance. Once more the sound that had shattered his dream pierced the air around him—a hunting horn! A pack of coursers, followed by mounted men thundered past in pursuit of the animal. At the fore was—Sir Lazarous! Lazarous—followed by a lovely woman mounted sidesaddle on a silver mare. As they galloped by, unaware of his presence, bitter words broke harshly from Huon's twisting lips, "Lady of beauty, Lady of lies!"

With all the crushing weight of a ballista's missile, full memory fell on him, clear now, not as the dreaming of the chapel vigil. Wan light shone in a ragged splotch around him. The forest giant, brought to earth in a spring storm, had borne with it lesser trees, opening a space to the sky. Huon sprawled with his back propped against the fallen trunk. Not far away lay his twisted and be-grimed sword belt. It was this that had entrapped his feet in the gloom. Once again shame and bitter powerlessness enwrapped him.

A stone cut above his eye throbbed painfully, the gift, near to the last, of a villein's strong and skillful arm. His ragged surcoat stank with clotted dung. Memory once more surged through him, bringing with it all the agony of the hours just past.

At the very first he had felt the confusion and panic of a helplessly trapped beast. Yet still he had clung to hope, for had he not lived under Lord Stormund's eye since, as a bewildered child of eight the Vacks had taken him in as a fosterling? Surely his lord knew well what sort of man he was—enough to question the lies flung against him!

His accusers had gripped the cross Father Corman held, even as he himself had, had given their oath—even as he did—then spouted vicious filth against him. How could they use a sacred symbol so? Had they sunk so low in their intended evil that all conscience was dead and no truth ritual carried meaning?

Then had come the last and most potent accuser—the Damsel Arin. She did not need to swear; it was plain to all watching that she came in abject fear. Her head had lifted, so that she stared straight at him,

her face a mask of terror. Dropping her eyes from his, she spoke in a low but distinct voice, “Yes, that is the man. He did it.” Then, with hands lifted as if to ward off attack, she had turned and run—assuring all assembled in the quadrangle of his guilt.

He rested his head against the lichen-coated bark of the fallen tree and stared up at the fraction of sky. Huon strove to shut out the scene, even as he knew that closing his mind to memory was no way to deal with pain and humiliation. Absently he raised his left hand to the stinging wound on his brow, but before he could touch it, there passed over him a wave of warmth, not from the watery sunlight.

Fool was he to wallow in shame, where none was deserved. He would not cower like a beaten pup and flee again, tail against his hindquarters. No! As he thought back over the agony of the travesty he had endured, a flinty determination began to flower in him. He would be vindicated—and avenged! No matter if it might take a life span of years. Lazarous and his lovely conspirator would pay! Now Huon near reveled in acceptance of that.

The courtyard held him now, the greasy scullion coming from the kitchen to play a part. As the lowest of servants knelt to hack the spurs from his heels, his shield bearing the arms of his birthright, an emerald-eyed black pard rampant against all foes, was propped against a wall. Those, among whom he had proudly served for so short a time, wheeled their mounts and rode with ready lance points well aimed to strike repeatedly until the Pard in Pride was but a dim, much dented outline.

His sword—in spite of the heat of anger, a low moan escaped Huon’s throat, betokening a sorely wounded spirit. The sturdy blade had been smashed into shards by the blows of the smith’s great hammer. Then, as if by a signal, a path straight through the gathered watchers had opened to the great castle gate. By strength of pride alone, Huon had managed to walk out as each of his sworn brothers-in-arms deliberately turned back on him.

The village folk, gathered outside, had rained clots of dung and stones on him. Somehow he was able to gaze straight ahead ignoring their assault. He had willed himself deaf to shouted obscenities and threats until the forest swallowed him.

His raging anger gradually lessened to be replaced with cool purpose. He had been lied against; the greatest of powers had been evoked

against him. Lord Stormund had believed a twisted tale of Dark devising. However, Huon was so near to the very edge of the forest, all he needed to do was take the step that would set him in the wilderness. He was free of liege-oath. Now his life was his own to order. Gasping painfully, he leaned forward and supported his forehead on crossed arms where they rested on his knees. At last his control broke and tears he could not withhold spilled from his half-closed eyes. He fought fiercely to suppress the grief of loss, thrust away memory and arouse anger. Very well: the ceremony to break him of his knighthood was death of a sort, the death of Huon of Rennay—then let it be so!

Mercifully shadows enveloped him, bringing a measured sleep. Awakening at last from slumber, un-rested and lethargic, the night sky overhead shone with countless cold, starry jewels.

The Sword of Victory! The star pattern was said to have been visible on his birth night, prompting the midwife to prophesy. She had foreseen great things in his future that night.

He laughed harshly. Great things indeed! Yes, he would go down in the rolls of family history—the first knight to be broken of rank and eternally shamed. Well, Huon had been thus dishonored, but that Huon was now dead.

The rank smell of his befouled surcoat sickened him. He tore it off, leaving the mail and quilted harqueton underneath. Suddenly he realized how thirsty he was; he must have water for his painfully dry throat.

Somewhere out in the wood the pack-song of wolves pierced the night. A light breeze began to tease the crowning branches of the surrounding trees and he could hear the gurgle of a stream. With the inviting sound as a guide, the no-longer-knight soon found its banks.

Huon remembered the great hart that had leapt over the fallen tree. Hart? He paused to free himself of his mail. Hart, stag, buck—prey for any hunter. Humph, he thought, I too, am now the hunted. Why not? I will become “Hart,” a suitable name for a lord-less man.

Freed of his filthy sweat-stiffened clothing, he drank deeply from cupped hands before he waded knee-deep into the stream. He stooped now and again to gather sand from the bottom to scrub thoroughly, almost drawing blood from his abraded skin. Somehow he felt oddly lighter, as though free from more than just rubbed-away

grime. Curiously the wound on his brow had ceased to pain him. He felt for it and found not even a scab to mar the skin, but hunger overcame his need to think of that.

Recognizing a familiar plant along the stream's edge, he pulled some cress and chewed it, forcing himself to swallow. He then tore handfuls of rough grass to dry his smarting body. Curtained by the shadowing trees, he dressed with shirt, quilted and padded harqueton, drawers and boots. But the mail Hart left where he had dropped it and returned to the small clearing.

Settling once more beside the fallen giant, the man burrowed into the leafy litter of countless seasons. All at once he was overcome with such a weariness as would follow a day's ride on some foray.

The broken knight fumbled at a sleeve pocket and brought out a knife—sorry weapon indeed, but all that had been left him. Though, if he died under wolf fangs, what mattered it now?

Hart slept and as he did he dreamed, anguished dreams that drenched him again with the sweat of fear. Always he came eye-to-eye with peril in those night visions, yet in none of the confrontations did he retreat. The final two nightmares ended in his bringing down a largely faceless enemy. A very real shriek, not of any dream, startled him awake to stare up into the mid-morning sky as a hawk rose into sight with a furred body struggling in its talons.

Slowly Hart levered himself up from the moldy mass of leaves, remembering where he was and why. He would survive—this was his inner oath—with no one to care now but himself. This much he knew, and he locked the thought about him like buckling on the discarded mail. He was innocent; the evil lay with others and not him. Therefore, he must accept his present guise yet struggle to regain what had been ripped from him.

At the edge of the pocket clearing a bush moved. Hart, knife in hand, leapt to his feet. Rimmed by a collar of green leaves, a gray head appeared. Wolf! And he, backed against the massive fallen tree, could not flee.

The beast moved forward, staring fixedly at him. A spear? He might as well wish for a horse; yet he gripped the knife firmly, crouching further as the bush, half hiding the wolf, shook once more.

Gray as the wolf's hide, but showing well above the animal, a fold of cloak swung free and a man pushed through, stepping fully into the open. As did his four footed companion, he gazed at Hart. Deep age lines creased the brown flesh of his face and his hair was a dusky halo of grayish-black. However his blue eyes were piercingly alert and Hart sensed the wisdom behind them, assessing him.

"You are no hunter," the woodman spoke in a castle-accented voice. For all his drab and tattered garb, this was no peasant gleaned fallen wood as was the villagers' right. Nor was there any sign of a weapon, save a knife like to Hart's, thrust into a battered sheath hanging from the length of rope that belted his waist.

Hart swallowed. An answer was needed, but he could not word one.

"I am Owlglass," the wolf's companion finally broke the over-long silence.

"The hermit!"

"Just so. And who are you—or should I ask, what?"

Hart forced himself to a truthful answer. "A broken man," he replied with the label the world now would lay upon him. "As for a name—let that of the hunter's prey be mine—Hart."

Owlglass advanced. Cords fastened a half-filled plump bag to his shoulders. His four footed companion melted once more into the brush.

"Out of Gamlin—or Stamglen?" Owlglass shrugged off his burden. His gaze swept beyond Hart to a yellowish, puffy growth on the downed tree.

There was no need to conceal the truth. "Stamglen."

With a sudden swing of his knife, the hermit slashed, slicing off a yellow growth rooted onto a dead trunk and twitching it aloft on the tip of his blade.

"A lucky day." He might be addressing Hart or reassuring himself. "This be Bloodclear. If there is pus in a wound, a decoction of this banishes it." He re-sheathed his knife after tossing his find into the bag. "Now," he turned his full attention on Hart again, "a broken man—liegeless I presume—and out of Stamglen. I would suspect that you have come afoul of Sir Lazarous."

Hart tensed.

Owlglass's many wrinkles creased into a smile. "Oh, yes, am I astounding you by guessing right? The mighty Champion is well known for weaving tangled games to rid himself of any hint of a rival. Though," he seated himself back against the downed tree and, with a wave of his hand as might a comrade, well-met in a hall, signaled Hart to join him, "you are young to be swept out of his path so permanently. Indeed he must have taken a strong dislike to you."

Hart could only believe that the hermit knew the shameful manner of his banishment from Stamglen. But how—old knowledge? Stories were still told of far sight. Also, about the personage of Owlglass there had gathered a number of tall tales. But—unlike his former comrades at the castle this man seemed immediately to recognize the true source of his trouble.

The hermit turned to rummage again in his bag and, bringing out a smaller pouch from which he took a hand-sized brown cake, he offered it to Hart.

"Eat." He made the word an order.

It was coarser than castle bread but tasty and Hart ate gratefully. Owlglass produced a second cake and, holding it between his teeth to free his hands, lifted a leathern bottle also from the bag.

Thus, without further words between them, Hart became oddly linked with the man who, as he chewed and swallowed, spoke, not of castles or outlawry, but rather of the forest. There was something in that flood of words, picturing many things, which kept the younger man absorbed. His familiar world had vanished; he had come anew into this strange one.

Chapter ~ Two

As Owlglass strode a pace or so in advance, inhabitants of the wooded world came and went. Hart watched the great wolf emerge again from the brush to pad alongside the hermit like a docile hound, watching and listening to his companion—with seeming understanding. Squirrels scuttled down to run along low hanging branches, pausing for the space of a breath or two, quite within reach of the older man, unafraid.

Hart slipped gratefully into this new peaceful existence as easily as into a soft new jerkin. When Owlglass had beckoned to him, the former knight readily obeyed and followed the hermit without question, as if he had always trod the woodland ways, a companion to a grizzled old man and a wolf.

Now and then the hermit paused to harvest a twist of leaves or a knob of gum that oozed from a scar in the bark of a tree, always carefully explaining to the young man the use of each find. When there came a deep throaty grunting from the underbrush, Owlglass brought them to a halt. A long-snouted head appeared, clacking wickedly curved tusks against upper jawbones. Hart froze. Wild boar—to face one on foot—!

Unperturbed, Owlglass fronted the ugly animal straightly, hands on his hips as if he were an arms master calling a lazy archer to task. Though the man made no sound, but simply stared, the boar snorted once and was gone.

“Impudence! That one is getting above himself again.” Shaking his head, the hermit moved ahead, as surely as if following a well marked trail, though none was evident to Hart.

Not long before dark they reached a down-slope descending so rapidly that each had to clutch at the scattered bushes for anchorage now and then as their boots skidded in the leaf mold. When they reached level ground, Hart could just make out that they had arrived in the bottom of a gully between high stone walls. And those were not entirely natural, but showed evidence, even in the dimming light, of tooling. Seeing this Hart guessed where they must be.

Hunters and patrols out of Stamglen told dark stories of this place and no amount of urging would entice them to pass here. Indeed, Huon would have hesitated to enter, but Hart, having faced the worst he felt that life could exact, pressed on with hardly a care.

On the right rose jagged heights, or perhaps the road was merely cut deeper and deeper; he could not guess which in the enveloping darkness. The way curved sharply and he could just glimpse ahead a tower silhouetted against the sky, chiseled from the living stone of the cliff. Owlglass's hand fell at length against a door of stone that had once been wood. It swung open soundlessly and he entered, holding it for Hart to follow.

What lord or master stonemason had wrought this, Hart would not chance a guess. Plainly it was the hermit's domain, looking as if it had sheltered him for years out of time. Now it might also serve Hart as a refuge, but at present that was but a wisp of thought. No weapons hung on the wall within. What need was there for armed defense? Legend, rumor and fear served quite well to keep away troublemakers.

Beside a wide fireplace, in what appeared the great hall, rested three reed baskets: one held a treecat with her two small kittens pressed against her, the other a wolf cub with a bandaged forepaw, and the third a rare lemur. All these were greeted cheerily as the hermit stirred coals of a fire into greater heat.

The life and duties of Huon that had measured his days from childhood, no longer existed. Where there should have been familiar weapons, now ledges protruded from the stone walls, lined with leather- and wood-bound books, more than the young man had seen, even in Father Corman's cell where the priest tutored the pages and princes.

Indeed Hart found himself in school again, like an un-lessoned lad. He learned by day in the forest's shade-dappled pathways and at night by pitch-light from the hermit's great store of books. Owlglass gave no reason for taking on a pupil well beyond the usual age for learning craft. It made little difference to Hart what the hermit's reason was for welcoming him, sufficient was the fact that his studies began to build a wall against past memories, one the young man had no intention of breaching.

As the days merged into weeks and weeks into months, little remained in the look or manner of Hart to link him with his past life as a Knight of Stamglen. His black hair, once neatly cropped at the bottom of his ears, grew to shoulder length. Gone, too, was his clean-shaven face, a rule of his knightly order. Now the “broken” man sported a heavy black brush on his face that would pass among the fiercest barbarian clan. Soon he might even be able to wear cheek braids. It fit his purpose to put far behind him all that linked him with his former profession.

But, though he gladly pursued a new learning and appearance, Hart’s determination for vindication lay at the root of all his efforts. To that end he delved deeply into the histories of the realm, seeking a reason for Sir Lazarous’s blow.

One day Hart stumbled on something in a volume that piqued his curiosity. The battered book contained records of noble families and their fiefs. To his surprise, he found no mention of a house of Moorced listing Sir Lazarous’s patent. Strange! He had always assumed that so influential a knight from a supposed illustrious clan would have that clan well listed among the Great Houses.

“So, you never learned much of his origin?” Hart gave a start as Owlglass now stood by his shoulder looking at the book page the young man kept smooth by two fingers.

“You have found something to remark on?” The hermit added a second question to his first.

“I chanced upon this record of the Great Houses but there is no mention of Moorced.” The student responded.

“Then you must seek farther,” Owlglass remarked with a slight quirk of his mouth, not quite a grin.

“Just how? I am not learned as a scribe or delver of records.”

“If I were seeking such information, I would lay out a plan. Try old maps, death records, namings and the like.” The grin took over. Clearly the teacher was delighted at the direction Hart’s curiosity was leading. He swept out an arm to indicate the bulging shelves. Not for the first time Hart wondered who had assembled this ill-stored library in such a remote place.

One afternoon, a seven-day after his discovery of the book of noble families, Hart decided to climb to a favorite spot he had noted on one

of his circuits of the stronghold. Wrapping a borrowed cloak well about him against the biting wind of the heights above the keep, he started up a twisting set of narrow steps carved from the living stone.

As he neared the top of the rampart, Hart reached a wide ledge that cut back like a torn pocket into the cliff side. Under the overhanging rock he had found a small pool of the clearest and purest water he had ever tasted. It was here, where he knelt to quench the thirst brought on by the vigorous climb, he froze, like a frightened fawn at the sound of danger, staring at the unruffled surface of the water.

Shaking himself, he bent lower. Surely this was only a trick of the light. No—he continued to gaze at his reflection, his eyes—something was very different! His left eye no longer matched in color the steel blue of his right eye, but had become a vivid emerald green. He blinked and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and looked again. They remained the same. There was an emerald eye. A curious sensation ran through him, not quite physical—more like a mental quivering. This was nothing he could understand. What was happening to him?

Making his way back down the stair to the great hall of the hermit's keep, the young man shouted, hoping his host had not gone trekking again. "Owlglass! Where are you? I must show you something!"

"No need to bellow, youngling." The hermit spoke almost at Hart's elbow, causing the former knight to start like a frightened hare. "My, you're as fractious as a yearling buck. What passes?"

"My eye—look, Master! It is altered." Hart almost shouted again in his agitation.

"Hmmm. 'Tis passing strange." Owlglass grasped the young man's face between his gnarled hands and turned it about to catch the best light. "I've never seen the like of that."

"But—but why? What can I do? It may be an evil portent." Hart fidgeted and, for all his size and bearded face, looked like a scared boy.

"Well, lad, I'd say you ought to start at the same place you do whenever you want to know something new. Go to the books!"

"But, Master, there are scores and scores of them. Where do I start?"

“I seem to remember one that might well serve to point you right. It’s called Gifts, Mysteries and Other Oddities, or was it Curiosities? No matter, you’ll get the idea. I think it has a dark red leather binding with a symbol of a wheel burned on the spine, or some such.”

Without further comment, the hermit turned and left Hart to seek his answers.

Hart fairly ran to the room where the precious books were kept and began to scan the shelves for a red leather volume. He found, to his frustration that there were at least a score or more of that color. He took each one in turn, searching for the mark of the wheel and, after much searching and sneezing at the dust he disturbed, at length found what he was seeking. It was surprisingly small, but then how many oddities were there to be recorded so?

He could have wept when he opened the book, for it was written in a crabbed and cramped hand. So small were the letters that his head began to ache after scarcely a candlemark of reading. In frustration he had to give up for the night, realizing that he needed full daylight to research this source.

Hart had not eaten in some hours, being so engrossed in his probing that he had forgotten all else. Now his belly demanded attention. He entered the larder and gathered some bread and a flask of goat’s milk and carried them to his room. The puzzle of the change in him kept him awake long into the night and troubled his dreams when finally he did sleep.

Morning brought no useful inspiration, only a nagging sense that he must get to the root of his strange metamorphosis. First asking Owlglass’s permission, he fetched the book of oddities and found a sunny perch beside the parapet of the tower in which he had his room.

Hours passed and with them Hart was alternately amused, skeptical and sometimes chilled by what he read. He began to lose hope of finding the answer he sought when he turned a page and reading nearly to the bottom, almost shouted with excitement. The first clue of any kind fairly sprung at him. The words on the yellowed, brittle page were partially obliterated, yet his study of them brought again the quiver he had felt on the rampart: “Tok of The Emerald Eye” and then “...age of Tchur...”

Hart almost dropped the book in his excitement as he leaped up to go and find Owlglass. "Master, I have it." He could not hold the book for trembling and the hermit took it from the young man to read for himself.

"I believe you do. But what to make of that last part?" He peered closer. "I think you must take a quill and work it like a child's puzzle game. Find all the words that could fit by putting in missing letters. Then we will have something to take farther."

Hart snatched up a pen and sharpened the nib. He began writing furiously as he spoke the possibilities: "cage, rage, sage, mage! That could be it! Tok of The Emerald Eye could be a mage. But what of Tchurk...?" The young man chewed on the end of his quill, then spit in disgust as he realized he would have to cut a new nib.

The hermit pulled at his beard, "It could be part of a place name or a family name or even a wizardly order."

"I know," Hart sighed with resignation, "more books."

His teacher chuckled, "I will help you this time and if we find nothing, there is perhaps another way to get at the puzzle."

When after two full days and part of a third, neither could find aught to solve the riddle of the incomplete name, Owlglass closed the book he was scanning with a snap. "Lad, it is time for a trip."

"A trip?! Now? But we have no time for trekking. I will go through every book here until I find an answer!"

"Nay, but what if the answer lies elsewhere?" The hermit peered over the volume he was holding.

"It must be here. Have you not taught me that books hold great knowledge?"

"Aye, but not all knowledge. Betimes we must find another way. Trust me, youngling. I have not given over the search. Tomorrow we travel!"

Daylight found Owlglass and Hart far distant from the hermit's Cliffside dwelling. The former knight knew better than to quiz his mentor about their destination or his reason for the trek. He would learn in due time, Owlglass's time, not his. As always when they went abroad their shadowy lupine companion was not far from them as they moved on foot into strange territory. Hart learned soon after

entering his new life that the wolf answered to the name of Softstep. Truly, for one so large of foot, his tread was amazingly silent, no matter the terrain.

They spoke little as the day progressed, too intent on the trail and its tricks. Moving steadily higher in elevation, the two men stopped at high-sun to eat some of the travel cakes that the hermit had prepared. Hart could see ahead a steep mountain range cut by a pass that appeared no more distant than a turn or two of a sand glass to reach. He ventured a question. "Do we enter that pass soon?"

"It is farther than it seems, lad, but our destination lies elsewhere." Owlglass seemed disinclined to elaborate, so the younger man did not press him. He would know soon enough.

Their climb continued and some distance from the pass, the hermit turned abruptly from the path they had been following and struck off through a treacherous tumble of boulders. "There was a landslide here in the last thawing season, beware your stepping," came his warning.

When it seemed that they could not possibly go more than a few more paces, a hitherto unseen crevice opened in the vertical face of the mountain. Wordlessly the old man slipped into its darkness, motioning Hart to follow.

From his carry pack, Owlglass produced the flickering light of a small taper. He moved forward again, not needing to caution Hart against the danger of the moisture-slicked stone underfoot. At length they came to a tangle of brush that all but blocked the end of the crevice and marked the beginning of a place unlike any the former knight had ever known.

The hermit motioned Hart to assist him and pressed against the blockage. Instead of being hopelessly entangled in briars, to the younger man's astonishment, the mass seemed to part and draw back not unlike a cluster of snakes fleeing flames. The young man rubbed his eyes. Had he truly seen the briars and vines writhing away from Owlglass's staff? He did not have time to consider, for the hermit launched into a rapid descent making Hart lengthen his strides to keep pace. The older man was clearly set on a familiar place. He neither looked left nor right to scan the surroundings.

"A camping place is near, but we must hasten. Darkness comes early here." The hermit gave a low whistle to Softstep and was instantly

answered by a soft whine from a short distance ahead. “Ah, our friend has found it.”

Hart wanted nothing more than to quiz Owlglass, but decided to hold off until they had made camp. When they had settled before a tiny fire, appetite sated, Hart turned with a lift of his eyebrows to his companion. Before he could form a question, the hermit chuckled. “I know you are fair bursting with questions, lad, but trust me. All will become clear in due course. This much I will say. We enter a place where learning comes from much deeper than books. You have been an apt pupil. Now we will see what you are truly made of.”

When the old man would say no more, Hart grunted and settled into his sleep roll. It was clear that he must be patient, though it fretted him much to hold his peace. Darkness closed in like a soft drape and he slipped into a sleep, of which, though peopled by many strange beings, he could name none and remember little when he awoke in the misty pre-dawn. A sensation of something akin to what he could only describe as heart hunger was all that remained for his night journeying.

Chapter ~ Three

Daylight waged a slow battle with the enfolding mists and eventually revealed a steep sided vale in which many small hillocks thrust up their rugged tops above the clinging whiteness. Hart could see little besides these knobs that almost seemed to be floating in a blanket of softly carded wool. After a hasty breakfast of journey cake and water from a nearby stream, he and his new master broke camp and plunged into the now thinning mist.

Softstep was nowhere to be seen, perhaps seeking his own morning meal. As the sunlight burned off the final wisps, strange birdcalls wafted from the tops of slender trees that filled the gaps between the hills. These were draped with something like a cross between a moss and a vine. Long feathery strands hung near to the reach of a tall man and were the color of the earliest green of springtime, though it was now nigh to the harvest season.

Owlglass moved ahead with the assurance of one familiar with his path and Hart could only follow, all the while gazing around him. He nearly stumbled into the hermit's back when his companion stopped abruptly.

"This is where we go to ground, lad." The old man stepped into a low opening formed by two great stones that had long ago tilted their tops together beside one of the hillocks to mark the entrance of a hollow in the mound.

The flesh on Hart's neck and scalp crawled as he recognized what this was. "This is a barrow!" Owlglass merely chuckled and lighting his taper, moved into the darkness.

The new trail began to wind downward until Hart could hear but not see a gurgling stream nearby. Finally the scent of smoke and a soft glow signaled the end of their trek. In a large chamber deep underground huddled a tiny hut from which a curl of smoke spiraled upward to a distant crevice in the rock overhead.

A voice rattling not unlike the sound of dry reeds in a windstorm greeted them. "All hail, Owlglass, what brings you to the Crone?"

"A weighty purpose, old dame." The hermit responded, "I bring someone who seeks knowledge."

A tiny bent figure emerged from the hut, to lean upon a gnarled staff and stare at them. She was scarcely taller than Hart's waist. Nearly bald, she bore only scanty strands of white hair and her face was seamed by so many wrinkles that it was difficult at first even to see her eyes.

As the two men drew closer to her, she turned to beckon them on into the hut. Hart ducked under the low lintel of the doorway to stand amazed. He had expected a rude space with few comforts. Instead he entered a room that would have satisfied a noble lady. All furniture was small, yes, but the table and chair beside it were finely carved. There were also an ornate chest and a tiny curtained bed, a miniature of one he had seen in Lord Stormund's castle.

What was more, the room was well lit with candles and a hearty fire burned on a stone hearth. The young man sensed Owlglass's amusement.

"Surprised, aren't you?"

"You might say that," Hart managed to reply.

The hermit bowed deeply to the crone as if to address a noblewoman of many quarterings. "This be Hart, once in service to the Lord of Stamglen. He has a question for you."

The tiny woman gestured for Hart to step closer. He stooped low to face her eye to eye, not being quite sure how to begin. Getting a full look at his face, she uttered a high-pitched screech that fell somewhere between laughter and a cry of unexpected anguish.

So astounded in turn was Hart that he tumbled backward to be seated directly on the floor. Owlglass roared his amusement, joined by the old woman and finally by Hart himself, releasing the tension that had been building in him from the moment of entering the barrow.

"So, young man, you want the Crone of Kolroven to reveal to you the truth of your 'Emerald Eye'". She came straight to the point!

"Y—yes, m'lady. I know so little. The need for discovery burns in me."

"Well it may burn you, youngling. We will see if you are equal to it. What know you of a single green eye, if anything?"

"I have found only the words 'Tok of the Emerald Eye, ...age of Tchurk...' scribed in a volume of curiosities in Owlglass's library."

The old woman drew up a low stool, perched on it and reached out to touch Hart's forehead with her wizened hand. "Yes, yes, there is a gift here, but as yet un-realized. When came it to you?"

"I discovered it scarcely a fortnight ago." Hart remained seated on the floor as Owlglass made himself comfortable on the room's only chair.

The crone looked toward the hermit, a quizzical expression on her craggy features. He nodded wordlessly, as if understanding perfectly some question she did not utter aloud. Her wisps of white hair fluttered as she jerked her head and then spoke.

"Yes, there was a mage of Tchurk, one Tok by name, who, in time of great danger to his people, was granted the gift of the Emerald Eye. So far in the past it was that few living but I even know of such a place, man or the whole of the tale. The gift was great but costly. With it he was possessed of a natural mind shielding that guarded him against any probe or attack. What was more, with it he could instantly recognize deception of any sort, conspiracy, illusion or spoken lie. He could 'see' falsehood as an aura about the author of it, though it did not follow that he knew the truth beneath. The gift further provided him a weapon: he could silence an enemy's lie with a single meeting of eyes, to the point of choking the liar on his own words."

"A very useful skill, I'd say." Owlglass commented with a twist of lip.

"Indeed." The crone turned to prod the coals of her fire and add some wood. "But, that was not all. The 'Emerald Eye' gave him the power to 'look off' wild beasts. When fixed with that green stare, they would turn and run."

At this Owlglass gave a start. It was the first time Hart had seen him so surprised. Could the hermit possess a measure of the same gift?

Seeming not to notice, the old woman continued, "The final use of the gift enabled the mage to read hidden meanings, such as coded writings, secret details in maps and diagrams."

Hart's eyes must have grown very round with awe at these revelations, for the crone leaned close to him and fixed him with a long stare. Finally she added, "Such a gift comes not without cost, especially when wielded as a weapon. As in all magical arts, and this is true magic of the inner ways, the drain of the user's strength is great. Furthermore, you may never lay hand to a weapon of steel, once you have entered into the responsibilities of this gift. To do so would

mean total downfall. But, that is not the half. To come into the full realization of the gift and to make it yours, you must undergo a series of ordeals as did your forbear. Yes, by the evidence of your eye, you are a direct descendant of Tok, Mage of Tchurk."

"Then why has no one in my family ever evidenced the gift until now?" The question had been troubling Hart as he listened.

"Two reasons: one, the gift only appears in one generation in ten, and two, even then it comes only for defense against some great evil. Often it appears after great personal loss when the receiver's life has been completely altered."

Hart swallowed, staring into the flickering fire as he digested that answer. Again he turned to the small withered woman. "I am no mage by training; only a man learned in war. If steel is not my safeguard, then I am as a child again, weaponless and open to attack. Must I now turn my back on the only life I have known?"

The crone raised her hand and before he could move, she tapped his cheek just below the green eye. "There is no choice left to you, but to follow the path Tok set so long ago. To do it willingly is best, but do it, you will!"

Hart jerked back from her touch. The woman looked to Owlglass. "Well, hermit, what think you? Is this youngling equal to what he must do?"

"Surely with the gift comes a measure of enabling." The hermit gazed now at Hart as if he had given a battle order he knew the youth would carry out in victory.

In return the young man found himself strangely warmed by the older man's show of confidence. He realized then with a new hollow feeling that no one had ever really cared about him in this way. Always in the past he was reckoned by his small successes or failures, not his inner needs. Owlglass clearly understood his bewilderment and the challenge which the young man faced, at the same time showing belief in Hart's inner strength.

Yes, he would go through the ordeals and if he came out victorious it would be in large measure because of Owlglass's support.

The day was already well spent and now the crone directed the men to search outside for certain herbs that would be needed to prepare Hart for his ordeal. As they wound about the hillocks in the Vale of

Kolroven, Softstep joined them carrying a fat hare, which he dropped at the hermit's feet.

"Ah, supper!" Owlglass thanked the silent beast, but did not pet him as one would a dog. One did not treat the forest king with such familiarity, yet the great head brushed against the hermit's palm.

As they returned, the animal refused to enter the barrow with them, taking up a place of watching just outside the entrance, content to wait for his companion's return. There he lay licking his huge paws as if to say, "I have done my duty, now you be about yours."

Returning to the crone's fireside Owlglass presented her with the fresh dressed hare for the evening's meal while Hart dropped the bundle of newly harvested herbs. She inspected the finds and clucked with pleasure as she set about the preparations. The young man turned to his mentor. "I have one more question, one that has been nagging me since we came here."

"Mayhap I know what it is." Owlglass spoke before Hart could form the question. "You are curious about all this." He gestured at the room about them.

"Tell me, who is this bit of a woman, to possess things as splendid as might a castle dweller?"

Glancing toward the crone, who winked at him, Owlglass launched into an answer. "Many, many years ago a lady of high rank bore a girl child, one who never grew past half the normal size of others. To the family, who were superstitious, resting greatly on omens and fears, such a child was cursed."

"Surely just being small is no cause to believe a curse is laid on." Hart watching the tiny woman in her preparation of the meal, felt a pang of sympathy.

"To make matters more difficult, the child began to give evidence of strange abilities frightening her people. She could 'see' things beforehand—an animal's death or an armsman's injury, and such like. Even worse, she begged to be taught her letters and numbers. Then it was unseemly for a girl to seek such learning. She should be well satisfied with the skills of the lady's chamber, to say nothing of the bedchamber."

"Did she get her way?"

“After a time she found an old monk who was willing to teach her. Before long the girl was sneaking into the library of the abbey on her father’s land and devouring the books there—even as you found worth the reading, the books of my collection. From a traveling herbalist she gained knowledge in healing, showing uncanny skill that set folk to whispering.”

“How came she here?”

“A strange sickness broke out in the castle and village where she lived. She had warned of it’s coming, so when the abbot called a council to determine the ‘cause’ of the evil that had befallen, the finger of blame was swiftly pointed at her.”

“But surely she was not guilty. If they had listened to her, perhaps the sickness could have been avoided.” Hart said almost angrily.

“Just so. But when folk are stirred up with fear and the loss of loved ones, all they care is to find someone to accuse.” Owlglass’s face took on a grim cast.

Hart felt a chill pass over him. How well he understood that!

“Her own family thrust her out of the castle and the villagers drove the girl into the wild lands, much as you were driven out of Stamglen, lad. How she was able to survive is another story, but suffice it to say she did and by mercy came to this hidden place, here to make a home for herself these many years.” The hermit smiled and laid a hand on Hart’s shoulder.

“And you chanced upon this lair on one of your treks, no doubt.” The young man grinned back.

“Aye, and it was a fine day when I did. I will ever be thankful for the chance of meeting the Crone of Kolroven.” At that point they were summoned to the more pressing matter of supper, which the lady in question handed to them in great steaming bowls.

“One thing more,” Hart added brashly, “how did you find these noble things here in the wilderness, lady?” He looked around at the small but fine furnishings.

“That was the work of your friend here,” she replied. “He managed to pack them in piece by piece over a period of months, seeing I had so little to comfort my solitary life then.”

“It would seem that there is no end of surprises when dealing with you, Owlglass!” Hart laughed as he set to with his bowl of stew.

Long before daylight had touched the hidden vale, the crone, whose name, Hart had learned was Soorta, led the two men deep into the nether reaches of the barrow that sheltered her cottage. Bearing a smoky brand, she now thrust it toward a jagged opening in the floor, half hidden by another tilted slab of stone. “This, Youngling, is the entrance to the Labyrinth of Lonegar. You must descend to the bottom of this shaft where you will find the beginning of a track. Follow that and face what lies before you, and do not stray or your life is forfeit. You will face challenges that must be met by might, by mind and by magic.”

Hart stood still “Magic! I—I know none of that!” He had been warned of old against dabbling in the unknown.

“Be not so hasty, lad. There are magics and magics. Not all are of the Dark!” Soorta responded with such anger that for a moment he forgot his uneasiness.

“But, how—” He felt as if he were venturing into a vast chasm. Indeed, perhaps that was exactly what he was about to do.

“I have prepared a potion that will aid you. It has not the power to fully awaken your gift, but it will serve to open to you a Door—passing through that, you will find things become more clear as you journey.” The crone’s answer was small comfort. So much remained unknown.

Hart strove to steady his hand as he took a small flask stoppered with a strangely luminous carved stone.

“Take now but a single swallow,” Soorta cautioned. “You must hoard the supply as long as you may. Use it only in extremity. The effect will sharpen the senses you must have to survive, but there is little enough to last for your journey.”

“That’s comforting.” Hart couldn’t resist that answer.

Owlglass hooted, “You’ll do, youngling! Feistiness serves when skill is wanting.”

Pulling the amber colored stopper from the flask, the young man dared a sip and nearly dropped the bottle. The liquid was at once fiery and yet sent a chill through his mouth and throat, even seeming to pass like a vapor up the passages to his ears. Strangely he noticed

instantly that his natural senses were far sharper than ever in his experience. The murky darkness of the barrow chamber took on an eerie detail. Sounds and smells, hitherto unnoticed, crowded upon him.

Hart's companions stood patiently beside him as though waiting for him to come to terms with these new sensations. Owlglass nodded, reached into his pouch and brought out a tightly coiled cord, handing it to the young man. "You will have a need for this. It is very strong, treated against any damp you are like to encounter below."

Hart mumbled thanks, almost overwhelmed at the flood of sensation reaching him through eye, ear, nose, touch and especially taste. He turned to the crone, "How will I know what I am to do?" Was there no map, no instruction to guide him?

"You will know when the time is proper. The path you follow is not a random one. There is a greater purpose. Remember the 'Emerald Eye' is a gift, and one you must prove worthy of receiving." Soorta's voice had taken on a gentleness that strangely quieted Hart's growing anxiety. Looking first at Owlglass and then to the tiny woman, Hart realized that he must trust these two, and, yes, his own destiny. What else could he do? He had come too far now to turn back. There grew in him another sense, one which he only briefly tasted, a tugging, thrilling awareness in the very fiber of his being.

"Enough!" With an abrupt shove, the crone urged the young man toward the gap in the floor. He smiled briefly, grasped his short staff, hitched his cloak tightly about him, thrusting the coiled cord through his belt, and lowered himself into the opening.

The journey had begun in earnest.

Chapter ~ Four

Now Begins the Chronicle of a Wanderer:

Darkness folded around me as I slipped into the mouth of the narrow passage. Even with the effects of Soorta's philter still on me, I could see no further than the reach of my staff and was soon glad that, on arising, I had thought to exchange my stiff-soled boots for supple leather footwear.

The defile soon dropped sharply, becoming little more than a chimney of stone into which I must wedge myself. While the rock forming the walls was layered like stacks of old books placed carelessly atop one another, edges jutted out just enough to provide finger and toe holds. My nails first dulled, then wore away until I could feel fingertips growing raw in my struggle to maintain a purchase on outcroppings. I dared not think what would be the fate of my soft boots.

Stopping to rest, I gulped dank air. It was cold and thick, with a flavor to it as if I had pricked my tongue to taste blood. Wedging myself against the left side of the funneling passage, I noticed just above my head, a small projection of rock in shape and size much like a man's fist. It spurred an idea.

I pulled Owlglass's cord from my belt and let the ends drop into the darkness below, holding the loop made by doubling it in the middle. This I hooked over the outcrop, laid the doubled cord across my right shoulder, passed it under my left arm and through my belt. Thus I could in a measure secure my descent, for now it was necessary to inch my way downward with back against one wall and feet against the opposite.

The stone no longer rasped my fingers, but I had to take care that the cord did not burn flesh as I allowed it to slip slowly through my hands. Progress was agonizingly slow, but in time I felt, rather than saw a change in the walls, so close upon me that it was necessary to draw my knees almost to my chin, fearing that at any moment I might become hopelessly wedged, to end my quest here before it had scarcely begun.

Such thoughts were swept away, when I was suddenly catapulted, like a violently birthed creature, from the now slime-slicked crevice. Owlglass's cord was all that kept me from sure death on the floor

below. Even clinging to the life-saving rope, I was descending far too rapidly, with very little of its length remaining to hold me.

I had knotted one end of the cord and as my burning palms clutched this, the other end of it flew aloft, to release itself from the rock fist far above. It must have twirled about the outcrop for a moment, for my plunge was broken by it just enough. Landing hard on the surface below, I felt my breath explode from me and knew nothing more for a space.

Slowly, with needles dancing before my eyes and playing all through my body, I became aware of my surroundings. Almost fearing the result, I gingerly moved my legs and arms: nothing broken! Oh, but there was pain! Every muscle and bone in me protested, but I soon forgot such complaints as realization grew that I had landed in an eerily glowing chamber, though there was no visible source of that blue-green light.

Pulling myself up with the aid of my short staff, which had also survived my descent, I turned slowly to face a wonder. Before me towered a wall that curved like the soft flank of a hind, glowing and shimmering, seeming almost to undulate. Hesitantly I stumbled toward it, holding out my hands, in my amazement forgetting caution. It was—cold! Ice! Yet it seemed almost alive in its beauty. The light emanating from its depths awoke such a deep longing within me, I would have plunged into it, had it been liquid. I placed my open palms against the alluring surface and there stuck fast!

I don't know how long I stood there peering into the great ice surface, my hands seeming to sink into the ice, no longer feeling the coldness. In time the common needs of my body drew me to sensibility once more. I reluctantly twisted to jerk sharply from the glowing wall, aware now of a vicious stinging pain in my palms.

Folding my arms across my breast, I thrust my hands under armpits to warm them and still their aching. Pain seemed to creep along my bones and anchor itself like a living fire deeper into my body. I could do no more than hunt a dry spot to collapse and fumble for some of the journey cake in my small pouch. Weariness at last made me simply curl up in a shallow nook of the chamber's stone wall and sleep, numbing at last the fiery agony within.

I awakened, pain free, to sounds of grating and cracking, together with a strange scurrying all about me. My seeking gaze riveted on the

great ice wall and sealed there as if I were at one with its substance. The ice had cloven and was parting to form a jagged cleft. Meanwhile the rustling noises increased and. I realized masses of small creatures hurtled toward the ever-enlarging opening. None of them appeared to pay any attention to me, some even scuttling, two-legged across my feet in their haste to reach what could only be a gate of sorts for them.

Hunched as they were, I could have spanned the back of one with my two hands. Long pelts of grayish-fawn fur covered them and hid any hint of head or limbs. I had only limited time to consider them, though, for now I was compelled helplessly to rise, snatch up staff and pouch and rope, staggering after the fast disappearing creatures into the jagged passage through the ice wall. As I went, I felt shards of ice slicing at my boots while I gritted my teeth against the pain in my feet.

I had gone only a few score paces when the fissure dropped into a glassy chute, through which a torrent of melt water rushed. Like the creatures ahead of me, I plunged feet first into this, allowed now no way to turn back. The torrent bore me like a hapless bit of drift, down the surging, twisting, watery tunnel. Gasping for breath, I was spewed out into the blinding light of the outer world, splashing into a turbulent pool of the coldest water I had ever encountered.

No mean swimmer, I now found my arms and legs refusing to answer me in the fight to keep my head above the swirling water. As if caught in some dark dream, I sunk slowly into the frigid depths, near to surrender when dozens of small white hands appeared, to tug me upward. Had I already entered death's domain and met with guides to the next world?

But no! When I broached the surface in a spasm of coughing, I realized these were my rescuers, come to pull me to a shore within a deep-cut valley—open to the sky. I was drenched, bruised and bloodied, but alive. Fully spent, I lay, shuddering, not just from the cold, but with the sure knowledge of how close I had come to death once more. Soorta had spoken true when she foresaw my ordeal.

At length I looked up to see who had brought me from the edge of oblivion. Standing in a silent array some paces from me were a growing throng of—not the fur-pelted animals I thought I had seen in the ice cavern, but small pearl-white folk, delicate of feature with large gray eyes and no sign of hair on head or face. Even as I watched,

more and more of them emerged from the water, shedding the silky pelts I had seen below. One by one, all came to join their fellows and stand quietly, watching me with unreadable expressions on their milky faces.

As I continued to gaze bemused at this growing company, one of their number stood forth and approached me. Quite obviously a female, she tipped lightly along the pebbly shingle. My attention was thus drawn to her delicate feet that almost seemed to float across the glittering strand. The myriad of small stones rippled with fully a thousand hues and dazzled my eyes.

The tiny woman, seeming to take no thought that she wore no garment other than her pearly skin, spoke at last.

“Hail, He of the Promised Gaze! Long have you been awaited.” Her voice sounded like nothing less than the fluting of many of reed pipes.

I could only stare in speechless amazement; each moment of this journey brought new wonders!

“Your Green Gaze has unlocked our prison and set my people at liberty after many long ages of bondage in the Dark. But there is no time for our tale now. You must hasten on, for much awaits you before you reach your destiny.” The woman stooped and selected one of the glistening pebbles.

“Receive this token of the gratitude of the Dhroghii. You will learn of its use when need arises.” With that she turned and beckoned to her people. As one they lifted the small white hands that had so surely delivered me from drowning. Giving a curious undulating salute and then clearly pointing, they indicated the way I should take.

Swallowing some uneasiness and many questions that rose unbidden, I nodded in return and scrambled once more to my feet to resume my journey. The direction pointed out by the Dhroghii was marked by a faint path that led away from the shining shore to an ever more green and fertile landscape.

Following that trace, I passed through a constantly changing series of growths. Spotty patches of brown and reddish moss gave way to thick waves of spiky grasses, reaching to my knees and making me thankful for the path, small as it was. In time even the track seemed to disappear and I could only guess what should be my direction. Judging by the way I had traveled thus far, I continued northward.

As the daylight faded, I entered curious terrain indeed. The ground beneath my thin boots grew wetter and wetter, at length causing small oozing pools where I had trod. The grasses parted from place to place, revealing the gleam of still water in the lowering gloom. Having no desire to walk this forbidding place in darkness, I looked about for some safe resting spot. Not far from where I stopped stood one lone, twisted tree, long dead from the drowning of its roots, I suspected.

Wading across a narrow stretch of stagnant water, I reached the snag, determined to suppress the revulsion I felt at the stench of the place. Whatever might live here, one could believe was not wholesome and most like wholly unfriend to intruders.

Flipping one end of the hermit's cord over the highest large branch, I pulled myself up to straddle a bone white remnant of the tree's limbs. As a precaution against falling in my sleep, I lashed myself to the trunk and settled as best I could for some rest. Vain hope! As darkness spread fully across the great marsh I had glimpsed, as I gained my perch, the very air seemed to breed and bring forth a pestilential horde, bent on taking all my blood.

Fairly suffocating with tiny flyers seeking food, I drew my cloak over my head, warm though it had now become—better being too hot than choking on the pests. If I had thought that leaving my lofty place would deliver me from their attacks, I would have gladly dived into the murk below, but ominous splashings and gruntings warned me off that course of action.

Twice in the hours I sheltered there, I was jarred by some creature using the trunk for a scratching post. I did not care to think how large an animal or just what it might be that could shake the tree so. Dead, it was, but still solidly rooted, and I praised all that was holy for this fact.

Daring to peer out from under my hooding cloak, I could not make out more than a darker patch below, but something off to my right made me tense. Bobbing and jiggling, scarcely a hundred paces from my haven, were dozens of strange orbs of yellow light, if light it was. I could put no other description to what I witnessed and was even unsure if I truly saw with physical sight what was there.

I know not what prompted me, but I suddenly thought to close first my blue eye and then my green eye to observe the orbs. With the blue, they were so faint as to almost disappear, but with the green—

I gave such a start that would have tumbled me from my perch, had I not taken care to tie myself there. As clearly as if seen on the brightest of sunny days, I saw! And what I saw—prancing across the surface scum were—I could not put name to the sight. These were no part of the world I knew.

Great ball shaped bodies on long stick legs—too improbably thin to hold such—cavorted, bobbing downward from time to time to open what must be mouths in order to scoop wiggling creatures out of the slime. What sickened me most was the sight of the prey inside the bodies, which resembled over-full bladders. Small things writhed, clearly visible through the skin of the predators. As the writhing slowed and ceased, the meal seemed to burst into a dull yellow glow, causing the bladder beasts to shiver in a kind of obscene pleasure.

As the ball creatures moved much closer, I realized another unsettling fact. With each mouthful, they were growing in girth, some now fully as large as a cow. And what was worse, they seemed suddenly aware of me! One straightened its two stilt-like legs, bringing it almost level with my place on the branch.

I found myself fighting back an insane urge to scream in fear. Convulsively I clutched my few belongings, as though they might give comfort by their ordinary feel. As I did this, my hand came to rest on the small pebble gifted me by the Dhroghii. Nearly dropping it in shock at its reaction to my touch, I tore my gaze from the predator below and saw the stone was beginning to blaze brightly. Unbidden, the hand which held it, rose to place it on my left temple, next to the Emerald Eye.

A silent explosion of green light shot from the stone or my eye, I was unsure which. Piercing the darkness, the beam seared straight through the bladder-like body. Not my ears, but my mind, heard a single screech as the repulsive thing burst, scattering yellow ichor in an ever-widening circle about it. Where the stuff landed on its fellows, each in turn burst also, until, where there had been the feasting creatures, now only wave after wave of their remains spread across the marsh.

Fairly hanging from my safety cord, I found only enough strength to store the pebble once more in my pouch. What was happening? I understood so little, yet the power of the Gift must be coming into control. Not my control, rather it seemed to control me! Could I

withstand much more of this? I clamped down hard on my thoughts—they led me on a path I'd rather not tread just then.

In time exhaustion took over again and I slept for a period, to awaken wet through with sweat as the steamy heat of day enveloped me. There was no visible sunlight, but a strange mist covered the swamp. After eating a bit of my fast depleting rations and drinking sparingly from the water skin I had filled from the melt water, I untied the cord, stowed it and slid down the trunk of the lonely sentinel snag.

Trying to avoid the putrid water as much as possible, I hopped from clump to clump of marsh grass, praying fervently that none hid some unpleasant surprise. As I reached a large expanse of water, however, there was nothing for it, but that I must wade through. Hitching my tunic and supply pouch as high as I could, I slogged into the murky water, sounding out the path ahead with my staff.

Congratulating myself that I encountered nothing bigger than a sluggish snake the size of my leg, which fortunately seemed uninterested in me, I pressed on. My staff proved my most valuable tool; with it I barely avoided stepping into a bog trap. I could feel the ooze clutching at the slender rod as it suddenly sunk so deep that my arm followed it into the water. I jerked backward and nearly fell, my heart pounding.

Carefully prodding to the left, I managed to stay on firm ground until I passed the bog spot. I could see a bank rising from the far side of the water now and increased my speed. I wanted nothing more than to be free of this place! At last I dragged myself from the water and crawled to a relatively open space under a tall overhanging tree fern, the largest I had ever seen.

I rested there for a time and must have slept. Foolishly I neglected to check myself when leaving the water and paid dearly for that oversight, for I did not come alone from the swamp. As I awoke in the late afternoon, something was very wrong. Why was I so weak? Surely I had not expended that much effort. Waves of dizziness struck me and I lifted my hands to clutch my spinning head. It was then that I realized the cause.

Hanging from my wrists and arms were leeches, already swollen with a feast of my blood. In panic I stripped off my garments and found many, many more! When I attempted to pull them from my flesh, I found them to be lodged fast. What could I do? Being forbidden the

use of iron, I had no knife to cut them. I tried to think, meanwhile the pests had robbed me of more than blood. My mind was skittering away like a fractious colt at breaking time.

I looked about me for something, anything I could use, when my eye lighted on the bottle of philter given me by Soorta. In desperation I snatched it with trembling fingers, fumbled with the stopper and managed to raise it and take a long swallow. A sharp pain surged through me and seemed to pass from me to the leeches. One by one, they quivered, went rigid and dropped off my body. I was aware of a vast relief as I once more lost consciousness.

Chapter ~ Five

The Chronicle Continues:

Day four found me sore and weary, in desperate need of food. The journey bread was gone and the cost of engaging my Gift to destroy the bladder beasts, saying naught of the leeches feasting on my blood, had brought me very near the end of my strength. I must use cunning to locate nourishment, else there would be no day five for me; of this I was certain.

A scrap of something Soorta had said about the Eye came to me. Had she not prophesied I would be able to “look off” dangerous beasts? What if—I might not simply stop a threatening animal, but actually turn the skill upon one, freezing it in place to be caught and slain for food? She had made no mention of such a possibility, but perhaps—

I found a hiding place in the undergrowth near a stream bank, where it pooled beside the gently sloping verge. Surely in time an animal might come for water, or to fish for its dinner. Moments dragged into hours and the heat of the day gave way to a cooling breeze from the northwest. The dense brush in which I crouched, began to cast long shadows. Soon— Ah—there it was! A small bristly creature, like to the wild pigs I had seen in the wilderness outside Stamglen—but somehow different—waddled to the water’s edge and thrust its snout into the shallows.

Trembling, lest any movement should startle the animal I eased along the slope with painful slowness until down wind but close enough for the creature to see my Eye. I pursed my lips and chirruped like a waterfowl I knew. The pig lifted its head to stare in my direction—just as I hoped! Cautiously lowering myself to all fours, on a level with my prey, I stared. The animal must have had poor eyesight, for it did not seem to react. Closer, closer—now! Catching sight of me, the pig huffed and tossed its head, but too late. I had it!

With my green Eye seeming to vibrate in its socket, there came an almost physical click as my gaze locked into the pig’s. I concentrated fiercely on binding it in place. The animal stood immobile as I inched toward it. Almost, I lost the contact when the thought struck me that I had no weapon to slay the beast. Would I be able to twist its head, breaking its neck? I felt for the cord at my belt. It might at least back

up the hold I maintained with the green gaze, long enough to reach for its jaw.

In the end, I did not need the cord, for the look from my Emerald Eye had sent it into a deep sleep-like state. It was no trouble to grasp its head and swiftly snap its neck, but the bleeding and butchering were another matter. It was an agonizingly slow and messy affair, using some sharp edged stones I found in the streambed, but I managed finally to worry enough meat from the carcass to cook over a small fire I built on the bank. I cared not for any who might see its smoky banner aloft. I must eat!

When at last my hunger was satisfied, there was little left of the day, but an early moonrise invited me to move on. The remains of the pig would most surely draw other beasts that I had no desire to confront. Holding my prospective meal in thrall had further sapped my energy and even the meaty feast would not instantly restore me. Still, I could travel carefully and with measured pace in the uncertain moonlight. Fortunately the stream accompanied my chosen direction and I had no want for water.

Sometime in the night even the moon deserted me and I must needs stop to rest and wait for day. Before I set out again, I discovered some familiar tuberous plants that Owlglass had shown me weeks earlier. These promised to sustain me for a while and by now enough of my strength was returning that I took more interest in the countryside about me. I stuffed as many tubers in my pouch as it would hold and continued my journey.

The stream I had been following disappeared into a fissure, but I soon spied another, more shallow and sluggish. The reason for the slowness of the flow soon became apparent. Its water had to find a way through a series of strangely encrusted bowl-like pools. I realized that the water seemed to be issuing from beneath a rocky formation, a short distance up a low incline.

I knelt to examine the pools more closely, for they were at once both beautiful and frightening. Where the other river's water had been clear and colorless, this was fraught with color. Vivid reds, deep greens, yellows and swirling mixtures of these and many other colors glinted from the myriad small pools. Each of them was outlined with harshly jagged crusts of something that must certainly have been deposited by the water.

Taking a chance, I dipped the tip of my finger in the water and touched one drop to the end of my tongue. Ugh—briny! Never had I tasted such potent saltiness! There were hints of other things in the flavor that I could not identify, but I was sure that somewhere within the earth from which the water flowed, there were substances being gathered by it to deposit here.

Another thing I noticed as I dabbled my fingers in the colorful basins: the water was so warm as to feel almost hot. Another mystery! As I moved, carefully, lest I slip and suffer serious damage from the sharp edges of the pools, I began to notice tiny creatures under the water, moving almost too slowly for me to be sure they were not part of the bottom. I squatted beside a largish bowl and, closing my ungifted eye, simply watched for a while. Yes—these were alive. They looked, as best I could describe them, like the blossoms of a thistle, save that they moved on their own, contrary to the motion of the water. I bent closer and saw yet more wonder—the tiny creatures seemed to glisten with golden glints.

I carefully reached into the warm water and scooped up one into my palm—again venturing without due caution, but I was entranced by the beauty of these minute water dwellers. I looked even closer and nearly tumbled over. Unless I was sorely mistaken, the glints I had seen were bits of gold! I reached in my pouch for a small stick I had saved for a tool. With this I scraped gently across the creature and indeed found that small flakes of gold came away in my palm.

Placing the animal once more in the water, none the worse for my “harvesting” of its decoration, I emptied the moisture from my cupped hand, holding back the gold with the flattened stick. I began to work the bits as I had once seen a castle cook work butter. Like butter, the substance was soft and readily clumped together.

Was this another “gift” to support me further in my quest? I scarcely knew what to think, but not being too great a fool, I set about harvesting more of the valuable metal against—who knew what? By nightfall I had acquired a respectable number of golden gobbets, which I tucked in the very bottom of my carry pouch.

With aching back from so much stooping and bending over the brine pools, and with hands that shriveled and stung from too much contact with the strange water, I trudged up beyond the rocks from which the stream issued, found a small hollow and curled up to sleep, too tired to eat any of the tubers I had gathered.

Strange dreams troubled my rest, one repeatedly drawing me back into the moment in the wilderness when I had caught sight of the Lady Arin riding to the hunt with the man who had apparently brought ruin to my other self. I had had no waking thought of that time in all the months since meeting Owlglass. I sat up with a knot of cold anger growing deep inside me. Chiding myself, I tried to put away that haunting memory, but only succeeded in dulling it.

Now as I began climbing into higher and more rugged country, dreams were constant nightly visitors, each more intense, more disturbing than the one before. On the second night of dreaming I no longer viewed my enemies but could see the form of a peasant boy wending his way through the forest, a dog at his side. He seemed to bend from time to time to gather something, stuffing it into a bag. As I watched, from where I could not tell, a pair of men in knightly garb approached him. Those men, they look—! Before I could quite make out the faces I awoke and found myself sweating. What was happening to me?

Almost, I dreaded to fall back into sleep, but, as it had been when fascinated by a book of lore from Owlglass's strange collection, I was compelled to reenter the dream. There was more to learn.

Again the forest scene spread before me, this time the lad and his dog stood trembling as the tall men in hauberk and surcoat had increased in number to five. I could clearly see them now and indeed, they were knights I knew—Sir Koil, Sir Mandred, and three more with whom I had ridden, all part of Sir Lazarous's following. What had these bold men to do with a pitiful boy scouring the woods for a few sticks to use for firewood? As the dream progressed, I could see expressions of scorn on their faces, mingled with a dark amusement.

I could have cried out in disgust as one of the knights, having questioned the child, delivered a heavy backhand blow that sent the lad sprawling. When the dog would have come to his small master's aid, a second man seized it by its throat and calmly snapped one of the animal's forelegs! Words floated to me through the vaporous dreamscape, "...catch you poaching again, sirrah and it will be your leg, nay mayhap even your neck!"

Questions crowded my mind as I once more came awake. Was this a true "seeing"? Had my former comrades truly used a helpless peasant so cruelly? Even if there had been proof of poaching, it was likely naught but a coney. Somehow I knew I had been shown an actual

happening. I ill-liked what it revealed. There was much I did not know while I abode in Stamglen. Some I had honored were not worthy of it.

Perhaps, I thought, these dreams have been sent as a message to me. Having put that possibility forth, I suddenly felt a jolt in my deepest being, not unlike the feeling that had come when the green Gaze laid hold of the hunted. Yes, there was really some unfinished business back in Stamglen. Perhaps my miserable degradation was for a purpose far beyond that of my enemy. If I survived the next and likely most challenging ordeal, which I somehow knew lay just ahead, I would return to that place of shame and injustice and—what?

On making the decision to return to Stamglen, I was only slightly surprised to find my sleep once more untroubled. With a strangely lighter heart, I pressed on into the mountains that loomed in my path, however, wishing for some warmer clothing. As I climbed, the cold intensified and before long I had to resort to stuffing moss inside my tunic and woebegone boots. These were sorely bedraggled from the abuse they had taken on my trek and I twisted a length of Owlglass's leathern cord about my feet to hold the last shreds together.

I wrapped my cloak about me as best I could and ducked my head against the steady onslaught of the bitter wind. I did not need to be schooled in the ways of seamanship to read the promise of the sky. Before many hours had passed, I would face yet another test: snow!

Still scrambling up the ancient remnant of a path, I barely had time to seek shelter when the storm descended with almost judgmental fury upon the mountain. I held a corner of my cloak up to shield my face from the slashing wind and so, nearly missed the mouth of a low cave that yawned some yards from the trail. It was partly hidden by a rock fall, but I was in no position to pass by its promise of refuge.

I sniffed the musky air inside as I wriggled into the opening. Some animal had denned here, not too long ago. If it returned—? A fire—I needed one quickly, not just to ward off unwelcome visitors, but to warm my near frozen hands and feet. My heart leaped when I discovered, not just litter for a beast's nest, but some sticks of wood.

It took far too long to get a blaze going: my hands trembled so, but, oh, how welcome was the heat of it! I drew as close as I dared and all but embraced the flames. Outside my hiding place the winds shrieked with the voices of a thousand souls in torment, but inside I hunkered

down, chewed on tubers and soon drifted into a dreamless sleep, warm for the first time in many hours.

Fully two days the wind and snow lashed the mountaintop. My water supply having run out the first night of my taking shelter, I resorted to using snow to quench my thirst. All that remained of a large store of brush and branches from the back of my cave was a few embers when the silence announced the passing of the storm. I almost felt regret as I pushed my way through the drift that had closed me in.

The glare of the white world was so great that I cringed. Ducking back into the cave, I found a partially burned stick and used it to blacken my cheeks. It would provide a small measure of relief from the painful brightness that struck me from all sides.

The air was cold, but the sun and absence of wind served to make my morning climb not too unpleasant. Clouds having spent themselves and flown on the wind, I could see clearly the lands surrounding my lofty vantage point. My enjoyment of the scene below nearly proved to be my undoing. So intent was I on the distant beauty, I failed to notice a subtle change in the atmosphere.

A sudden dense fog seemed to roll down from the peak above me, as though someone had released a giant tapestry and let it unroll from its hangings. At the same moment I felt a chill, entirely unrelated to weather. I suddenly realized this was the chill of foul magic! A pain of such intensity knifed through my Gifted Eye that I dropped to my knees in the snow, almost retching. I wanted nothing more than to curl up and let the cold have its way—finish me!

No—it would NOT end this way. Before me, somewhere curtained by that bank of mist lay my final test. I could not give up now! I felt inside my pouch for Soorta's philter. Grasping the stopper in my teeth, for my hands were too numb to hold it securely, I jerked it loose and spat it away. I tilted the bottle and drank all that remained. Its contents slid down my throat in a fiery gulp and seemed to ignite something deep within me.

There! I could see a bit better now, though not so clearly as I would have wished. Still, my vision was sharp enough to make out a shadow in the fog. Something very, very large was moving slowly down a long slope toward me. I could hear a crunching as if a great weight was steadily breaking through the icy crust. An odd flickering of blue

lightning began to dance across the space between me and the approaching form, bringing a sharp response from my Emerald Eye.

Suddenly, I remembered the effect of the Dhroghii's stone and snatched it from my pouch. I didn't even get it to my temple before a beam of intense green fire lanced from my Eye, to bounce off the stone and slice through the fog. There came a hissing as if someone had poured cold water on a very hot rock. The mist curled away in all directions from the beam of light and I saw at last my opponent.

Standing on great trunks of legs, it or' topped me by nearly twice my height. The blue lightning was dancing about the beast's body, which seemed to be covered with layers of blue ice, yet not the unyielding hard ice known to me, but such as was supple and moved like rippling muscle. There was no feature in the face of the thing, save for two great black eyes centered on me.

All this I noted in the space of a moment, for the creature was now beginning to move much faster. It dropped from its two-legged stance to four, lowered its head, from which I could see grew an immense jagged ice horn. It was to this horn that the blue flickering seemed to gather and before I could think of defense, the blue fire shot out toward me, true as any arrow.

Unbidden, my hand and Eye met the attack, green fire smashing into blue. The resulting blast sent out waves of heat and force that staggered me backward, but did not seem to affect the beast—at first. Then I realized that, though the creature seemed not to notice the force, the heat that accompanied it had begun its work.

The beast shuddered and seemed to shrink, only slightly. I realized that, if indeed this was a creature of ice, my only hope of victory lay in making things far too hot for it to survive, or tolerate. I would settle for just making it uncomfortable enough to leave!

Another thought: along with the gold I had collected from the brine creatures, I had gathered some of the salt encrustations. Salt and ice are unfriend! I reached again into my pouch and came out with a fist full of the salt crystals. Rubbing them with the Dhroghii's rainbow pebble for good measure, I hurled them at the ice beast, which was now far too close for my peace of mind.

I danced back as a set of icy claws swung toward my gut. Backing for room to maneuver, I swung my Green Gaze upon my opponent. Where the salt crystals had fallen on its body, the beam from my eye

seemed to ignite them, sending the creature into a twisting, howling frenzy. It was no longer interested in me, for great holes were opening in its blue hide. Like the many-colored brine pools, I saw the ice beast turn from a blue-coated menace to a melting mound that trickled away, as it slowly was consumed, leaving puddles of red, yellow, rust, and green.

Strangely, as the creature disappeared, so did the snow. In place of a wilderness of white in the cleft of the mountain was a high meadow, riotously carpeted with flowers. As I gazed entranced, I realized that at the far end of the meadow stood a low stone arch. Once more the compulsion, that had driven me these many days, laid hold on me and I could only seek to pass through that arch.

It opened on a stone flagged circle, in which stood a low column. As I walked slowly to the center of the circle, I could see that a niche had been carved in the column. Nested in the niche lay a finely wrought silver headpiece. It consisted of a thin circular band with strange writing upon it, such as I had never seen. Inset into the band at center front and back was a second band that was arched in form. As I lifted it from its resting place, there came into my mind a command, so sharp that it might have been spoken aloud, "Put it on!"

Obeying an order that brooked no opposing, I set the piece upon my brow and found nothing amazing in the fact that it fit me as though crafted for my head. As the silver band settled in place, I was possessed with a knowledge, never more sure, that I had passed my ordeals and come fully into the realization of my Gift. As I turned to look back up toward the arch, I realized that I was no longer alone.

A faint tingle surged from the headpiece through my skull and a voice, this time audible, addressed me. "Well done, Hart! You are a worthy successor to the Line of Tok."

I whirled around, but could see no one. Then I closed my ungifted eye and looked carefully at the stone arch. Just within its shadow was a form, not quite solid, but nonetheless that of a man.

"Yes, Hart, my son. It is I, Tok, Mage of Tchurk." The figure appeared that of a tall man, garbed in a flowing robe of green and holding a tall staff.

I held my peace. What could I say to a specter of my forebear, dead these many hundreds of years? Cold beads of sweat formed on my forehead and trickled down my neck.

“There lies a task ahead for you. Much evil has been done and still spreads unchecked in the land of your childhood. You are not the only one who has suffered because of your enemy. You know not the half of his deeds. He must be brought to answer for his crimes. You have now that which will enable you to take on this task. The Emerald Eye will serve you well, but you must hide it until the time is ripe. Besides that, you possess lesser Gifts, each to serve you in days to come. Last of all, the Cap of Knowledge has come willingly to you. Next to the Eye it is the most valuable of your Gifts. Wear it ever and use it well—” The last words faded as did the form under the arch.

“But—” Suddenly I found my tongue and when I would have poured out a flood of questions, it was too late; my ghostly forebear had returned whence he had come.

Chapter ~ Six

Hart remained in the lofty stone circle for many minutes, pondering the words of the spectral Tok. His emotions surged and settled more than once as he continued to stare at the now empty stone arch. Finally, he looked about for a way off the mountain that would not require him to retrace his journey. He almost missed what he sought, until, following the circle of stones the full way round, he spotted an ancient and worn stair spiraling down from the far side.

Cracked and crumbling in places from weather and age, the stone steps seemed to beckon him. Hitching up his belt and settling the circlet on his head for luck, he began to descend, staff clutched tightly in his right hand.

Edging cautiously downward for what seemed a lifetime, Hart reached a level place beside the stair and gratefully collapsed upon its knobby surface. He gazed around, still alert, for, though his ordeal here was accomplished, common dangers lurked in this wild country too. Not all fearsome things sprung from magic.

Satisfied that he was quite alone and not in immediate peril, he stretched out aching legs and closed his eyes, though he did not allow himself to fall asleep. Hart was not that secure. Once more turmoil filled his mind. How could he approach Stamglen? What guise might he use and how could he get close enough to Lazarous to learn more about him? What of the Lady Arin? Even to think of those names further stirred the coals of anger within him.

Shaking his head to clear it, he rose to continue down the mountain. First it would be best to seek Soorta's counsel. All her prophecies had proven true. Surely she was a seer of power and wisdom. Wryly Hart admitted to himself that he needed wisdom—how to manage the Power he now possessed, being most pressing. It would not do to enter a battle without weapon knowledge.

As he neared the foot of the mountain, the weary man discovered a well-traveled path, appearing to be made by the feet of animals, not man. He turned again to follow this and before long began to recognize territory explored with Owlglass. Taking a bearing on a familiar rock formation, he turned toward the distant hills and the pass, which led to the hidden entrance of the Vale of Kolroven.

When at length the Hart entered the barrow and hailed the ancient crone, he was greatly changed from the young man who had set out a fortnight before. Had she not been expecting such an alteration, even the old seeress would have been hard put to recognize him. Where he had been fit and well muscled, now he was lean to the point of gauntness. Hair and beard, once sooty black, bore wide streaks of silver and, in place of the ruddy bloom of healthy youth, lay a ghostly pallor.

But the most striking change visible to Soorta's other "sight" was that which rested in Hart's soul, for he returned, possessed of a serene and almost deadly calm. She sensed in him no less determination for the quest that bore heavily on his mind, but now he had learned a priceless skill—not magic, nor cunning, but patience. Hart the Hunted was now ready to become the Hunter. It was time to return to Stanglen.

Long into the night the two, so unlike, yet so bound in trust and understanding, sat before Soorta's cozy fire, sipping one of her herbal restoratives while Hart recounted his adventures. Sometime, not long into his telling, they were joined by a third. Owlglass entered quietly and settled beside Hart who paused long enough to take the hermit's hand in a firm grasp. The look the younger man gave him conveyed wordless thanks.

"Well, don't stop now, lad," prompted the old man. "The tale's a-coolin'."

Taking up the thread of his story, Hart shared it all with his only friends, wonder edging the tone of his voice. Soorta nodded and clucked as, one by one, he laid out the "gifts" he had received along the way.

"Prizes indeed, youngling. I could tell my own tale of the Dhroghii, but not tonight. Guard well their gift. It will yet serve you greatly."

"Yes, lady. Be sure I will ever hold close all that I have received, but will you not tell me more? I have so much to learn." Hart rested his head in his hands for a moment, suddenly overcome with weariness.

"Aye, that I will, but now you must rest. You have need of more than just restoration of your physical strength. Have you not seen your reflection since you left the mountain?"

"I—no!" Hart seemed taken aback at her question.

“Good thing! You might not like what you see.” Owlglass quipped.

Soorta gave the hermit a dark look and fetched a blanket from her carved chest. Wrapping himself gratefully in it, Hart curled up before the fire, asleep in an instant.

Soorta was bustling about a small pot that hung on a hook over her fireplace. Sniffing, she nodded in satisfaction and, grasping its handle with a bit of sheepskin to protect against the heat, she placed it on a roundel of hard clay on her low table. Sitting up and groaning at the ache and stiffness in his back, Hart spoke.

“From the feel of my bones, I have slept over long. What hour is it?”

“It lacks but one hour ‘til sunrise, lad. You have slept away near a day and a half.”

The crone reached for a carved wood spoon and dipped it into the pot, drawing out a hand-sized piece of limp leather. This she placed atop a stone that lay nearby. Taking a small wooden mallet she began tapping the leather as she stretched it over the smooth roundness of the stone. When the leather scrap was molded to the shape of the stone, she tucked under one end of it and set the whole aside to dry.

Catching the puzzled expression on Hart’s face, the tiny woman smiled. “It’s for you, youngling. You will “see” when I finish it.” Her emphasis of the word “see” sent small shivers down his back. Clearly the crone would say no more and he had to wait as usual for further explanation.

Stamping his feet to shed the clinging earth, Owlglass entered with a brace of meadow fowl and a huge grin. “Well, I see you have finally returned to the land of the waking. Slept well, son?”

“Too well, Owlglass. I feel as if I had met with a stone-spell caster, not quite strong enough to turn me to rock, but sufficient to transform my muscles to gristle.” Hart stretched and they could hear the popping of his tendons, confirming his words.

“Food is what you need most, both of you.” Soorta gestured to the bowls steaming on the table. “Then we will form a plan.”

Full, almost to the point of discomfort, Hart leaned back to regard his companions. The time for resting and waiting was over. Now he would gain a clearer understanding of his next task.

Taking the partially dry piece of leather from its form-stone, Soorta set about cutting narrow slits across its rounded surface with a tiny silver blade. "There is but one way for you to pass unnoticed among the folk of Stamglen. That Emerald Eye must not be seen!"

Hart looked startled, then nodded. "Yes, lady, you are right. It would at the very least cause talk and questions, which I could not answer truthfully and hope to remain safe."

"This should serve to hide your Gift and perform one other task." Taking a length of fine cord, the wizened woman threaded two pieces through holes she had punched in the ends of the leather. "The Dhroghii's gift—bring it out."

Grown accustomed to the crone's abrupt manner, Hart reached into his pouch and produced the small stone, glinting softly with many hues in the light of the fire. It fit easily in the palm of his hand, rounded and somewhat flat. He offered it to Soorta.

"No! I must not touch it, for it is bound to you only. Here, slip it into this fold." She indicated a tiny pocket inside the leather piece. "Now, tie this over your gifted Eye and tell me what you see."

Obeying her, Hart felt a thrill of anticipation course through him as he tied the leather cord across his cheek, however the patch lay too far from his Eye to fit properly.

Soorta pulled a face and peered closely at his face. "Ah, I have it!" She seized a handful of his beard. "This bush must go, for it prevents the shield from lying smoothly in place.

"My beard?" Hart's hand almost caressed the growth that had so changed his visage. If truth were told, he was proud of the fierce look of it. "But this helps to hide my identity."

"Which be the lesser evil, lad? Chancing recognition by your enemy, or hiding your gifted eye?" The crone's penetrating gaze was far from comforting.

"But, lady, I cannot shave; only steel will hold edge sharp enough for that." He knew he sounded not unlike a small boy trying to wheedle himself out of a dreaded task.

"Think you that I do not have an answer for such a problem?" Soorta rummaged in a small cupboard and with a grunt of satisfaction drew forth a dark, fist-sized box carved from glistening wood. "You will rub

some of this on your chin once each seven-day. It will remove and control the growth of hair on that stubborn chin of yours.”

“Now?” Hart looked uncertainly at the contents of the box. It could have been mud, for all he could tell, but it carried a potent scent that made his nose tingle. “But, my beard is long, surely it will not remove so much hair.”

“That’s where I come in, youngling.” Owlglass advanced toward Hart with a gleam of amusement. “Don’t worry, I will crop that brush to size, so the stuff can work, and you will not suffer the touch of my steel.”

Hart squeezed both eyes shut and submitted stoically to the denuding of his face. What must be done, must be endured.

When at length he was clean of face once more, the leather patch fit snugly in its intended place and Hart found that, instead of being sightless in the covered Eye, he could see with such sharpness that even the shadowy corners of Soorta’s hut held no secrets from his gaze. “How?”

“The Eye needs but a small chance to work its power. These slits in the leather eye patch, though too small to be noticed from without, are quite enough to serve you. What is more, the Dhroghii stone will ever work to enhance and strengthen your Gift, especially as you are not tutored in its uses.” The tiny woman bore a self-satisfied expression. Justly so, thought Hart.

“One thing more,” the seeress continued, “You must use the salve as I instructed. When your supply runs low, I will know, for I shall watch over you with the Pool of Knowing. I will send Owlglass with a fresh supply to meet you where the Kolroven track meets the Gamlin Road. There is an ancient tree there; hide in its branches and watch for his coming.”

“What is the Pool of Knowing?” Hart responded.

“A place of ‘Seeing’,” was all that the crone would say.

“Here is a more pressing question:” Owlglass seemed bent on a different subject. “How can you rejoin the community of the Manor of Stamglen?”

“There need be no fear of Hart being recognized as the broken knight.” Soorta observed. “Youngling, you are so changed, that what

you were a fortnight past is no longer obvious, let alone how you appeared when in service to Lord Stormund.”

“Aye, and the Eye will likely protect you from any magical probe.” Owlglass tugged thoughtfully at his beard and turned to the crone. “But what will explain his presence? Villagers are that suspicious of strangers. He must have a believable story, one that will provide safe conduct to join Stamglen once more, not as a noble, but as a common man.”

“I think I might have a way.” Hart interjected. “I was lessoned in letters and numbers by Father Corbin. It would be no lie for me to say that I am a Church trained scrivener.”

“Yes! That has a likely chance of winning you acceptance, but you must take great care,” Soorta cautioned. “Perhaps I should consult the Pool. Mayhap we can find a clue there to aid you.” Rising, she motioned the two men to follow, Owlglass shaking his head slightly as he glanced at Hart.

Turning in a direction opposite the way to the Labyrinth, the Crone of Kolroven led them to a great stone, where a tiny spring trickled, too slow to disturb the calm water pooled in a bowl carved into the rock’s surface.

As Soorta passed her tiny claw-like hand over the pool, a fine mist curled up to obscure it. Bending her head closer to the glassy surface, she intoned words in a language quite unknown to Hart and Owlglass. As the mist slowly parted, Hart could see figures moving like miniature mummers before his astonished gaze.

The crone beckoned him to lean nearer and stepped back to give way. What he saw seemed to grip him in a sort of trance. He viewed, in rapid succession, images of a great frothing boar’s mouth, a festive banquet, a tiny cubicle where someone bent over a great book, and, lastly, the eerie flickering of nightmare images upon the wall of what could only be a dungeon.

More confused than ever, Hart lifted his head at last and looked at Soorta. “Seeress, tell me, what means it all?” He swayed in place, feeling as if a great chasm was opening at his feet.

“I ‘see’, yes, but it is not always given me to interpret. This only may I tell you. The task that lies before you is in a way a far greater

challenge than any you faced in your ordeal. However, within you dwells the skill and strength to fulfill your destiny. Of that I am sure.”

Small comfort, Hart thought, but did not voice his opinion. Instead he turned to Owlglass and questioned, “Do you travel with me, hermit?”

“Nay, lad. There are those in Stamglen who know me all too well. To have me as your companion would name you unfriend there. You must go alone.” A look of deep sorrow passed over the old man’s face, such as Hart had never seen in all the months spent with the hermit.

“Very well, if I must go alone, go, I will.” The young man spun about and strode back to the crone’s hut, his determination plain to read.

“You’ll do,” muttered Owlglass to himself, no one to hear him but Soorta, who nodded her agreement.

The rest of the day was spent in final preparations for Hart’s departure. He would need food for the journey, fresh clothing including a hooded cloak to cover the headpiece and much of his face, boots and—a weapon? Dared he venture forth without the arms he had been trained to use? Surely the Eye was not to be employed at every threat! At this thought his hand sought the hilt of the sword he no longer carried.

Owlglass produced one answer to this quandary—a short bow and arrows tipped with razor sharp scales of some huge fish. No forbidden iron here. Next Soorta presented the young man with a small silver knife, tarnished but sharp of edge. At least he could cut his meat!

On the fifth day after his return visit to the Crone of Kolroven, Hart of the Emerald Eye set out on his journey to Stamglen. Gripping his staff to steady his trembling hand, he saluted the pair who stood at the entrance to the ancient barrow. Without a backward glance he turned, looking perhaps more resolute than he felt.

A day’s journey brought him to the well-traveled road that led from Gamlin to Stamglen, passing through Drowsing Wood. As he walked he remembered the tale of how the forest here had got its name. A shiver passed through him, so like that he had felt when, as a small boy, Father Corbin had told it to him.

Once long and long ago, a knight rode out on a quest to prove his courage and skill. His way lay through an unwelcoming wood, but he feared nothing in his youth and inexperience with the ways of the

Dark. Watching carefully for footpads or dangerous wild beasts, he neglected to notice the look of the trees about him. The day was warm, so he tilted his helm to allow a bit of air in, but so doing, he blocked his view of what hovered above.

A few days before, a hedge witch had traveled the path on which the knight rode and in a fit of spite against the Lord of the lands thereabout, she had netted the very trees with a sleep spell. As the hapless man jingled his way under the ever-lowering branches, one after another brushed his helm and finally sent tendrils beneath it to catch and hold him fast.

Snatched from his mount, the knight was already unconscious as he dangled from the weaving branches. Soon so ensnared was he, that none passing that way after him saw so much as a glint of his armor or a hint of his form. Thus ended the life and quest of the careless man.

Hart never quite believed the yarn, but now he was not so certain, in spite of hearing such tales only too often. He would have scarcely credited the things that happened to him on his trek from Labyrinth to mountain, had they been told of another. So, there might be some truth behind the foolish knight's story. It would not hurt to watch in all directions, especially above where the dense branches of the ancient trees intertwined to form a veritable roof over the roadway.

Increasing his pace, Hart continued, pondering once more the strange images that had passed before his gaze in the seeress's pool. Jolted suddenly from his musings, he heard a piercing cry and a furious huffing and grunting from just ahead. He broke into a run. Someone was in peril!

He rounded a turn in the road to discover just how great was that peril. A lone man was backed against a huge tree, too large to climb and void of low branches to grasp. Fronting him was the biggest boar Hart had ever seen. Its great slashing tusks were working against the upper plates of its jaw, sharpening for the kill. It huffed a challenge again, lowered a long and vicious snout for the charge. With a shout to draw the animal's attention, Hart sprang between the boar and its prey. Pushing up his eye patch, he loosed the full gaze of the Emerald Eye at the angry beast. Now he would see if its promise held true.

The wild hog gave a furious snort, attempting to toss its head, but the Green Gaze had caught him and he could not so easily shake it off. For

a long moment the man and beast were locked in motionless combat. At length with an almost contemptuous blowing, the boar spun to plunge into the dense undergrowth.

“H—how did you do that?” The rescued man stammered after a few breaths.

“Oh, it’s just a matter of showing the beast that I was not afraid of him.” Hart had once more replaced the eye patch and hoped the man would accept his somewhat lame explanation. So, it seemed, he did, being too relieved at escaping certain gory death.

“I am in your debt, man.” The shaken near-victim spoke again. “My name is Raif Attabirch, newly appointed Steward of Lord Stormund’s manor, now of the village of Under Stamglen.” He held out a trembling hand, which Hart grasped and shook, no less relieved himself.

“I am called Hart. It is to that same village I am bound, seeking employ.” This might be just the opening he needed.

“Well, what skills have you, friend Hart?” The steward was rapidly regaining his composure.

“I am Church trained in letters and sums.” Hart replied.

“Hmm, a scrivener.” Attabirch seemed to be in thought for a moment. “I may have just the place for you. Alas, I am bound for Gamlin, or we could company to the village. Nevertheless, take this and present it to the village reeve. He will direct you.” The man took a bit of parchment from his belt pouch and a stick of charred wood, scratching a few words on it before rolling it and handing it to Hart.

“My thanks, Steward!” Hart bowed. “I trust I shall serve you well.”

“No, my thanks go to you. Under Stamglen would have lost its new steward if you had not happened along. Now, I must hasten. I like not the thought of spending a night in this place.”

“I heartily agree! Fair journey, Steward.” Hart turned and resumed his trek, desirous also to be free of Drowsing Wood before day’s end.

Chapter ~ Seven

Hastening to quit Drowsing Wood, Hart came to an area where an assart had long ago been hacked from the heavy timber. He paused to survey the humble dwellings and noted with a tinge of sadness, someone's dream of freedom, won by hard labor, had clearly ended in defeat. Thatch roofs on the low buildings were sagging in, shelter now only for birds and small furtive animals. Had life here proven too harsh, driving the occupants back to village life, or had some darker fate befallen them?

As he stood at the edge of the road, a clear sweet sound, breaking his mood, floated to him on the late afternoon breeze. It was the voice of a woman singing, and such a voice! Not wanting to be seen just then, Hart ducked behind a hedge, once a fence for the assart.

Having not long to wait, he was startled when just before the singer came into view, words of her song filtered into his consciousness and with them, a sudden rapid twitching from his Emerald Eye.

*“And from the Eye there shot a beam
Of Light and Power—Emerald Green...”*

Holding his hand over the eye patch, Hart strained to see the songster through the thorny tangle of his hiding place. Barely making out the woman's slender form, he realized that she was not alone. Towering at her side was a man in the habit of a wandering monk, such as were often seen passing through Stamglen.

Cautious, but driven to learn more of the pair, Hart waited until they had disappeared around a bend in the path. Finding it easy to follow the snatches of song, he kept pace with the travelers until they reached their destination for the night, an inn scarcely a day's journey from Under Stamglen, The Purloined Goose, run by one Jacon the Elder. Here the young man could safely join the evening's guests and observe the others without attracting attention to himself.

Taking a seat in a shadowed corner of the smoky taproom, he ordered a pot of ale and some dark bread. Paying with a coin from those Owlglass had given him on parting, Hart settled back, the picture of a weary man enjoying his leisure after a hard day's travel. Relaxed, he might appear, but all senses were fully in play. What better place to

learn the present state of affairs in Stamglen, to say nothing of observing the singer and her companion.

Before long it became obvious that the influx of customers was far above that of a normal night on the Gamlin Road. Snatches of greetings and conversation soon indicated the reason. All were bound for a forthcoming festival to honor a handfasting among the gentry. *So much the better*, thought Hart. *No one will notice one more traveler*. He could move about freely until the time to present Attabirch's message to the Reeve.

Loud voices penetrated Hart's musing, when one of the crowd called out, "Give us a song, Bard Brydwen!" To this, many others added their support and the slender singer from the road lifted her voice, accompanying herself from time to time with a small rebec. Entranced, the young man drew closer to the front, the better to take in the beauty of the music and its maker.

Thus it was he found himself the object of her amber-eyed gaze, altogether a pleasant experience. Careful, man, he prodded himself. It would not do to let down his guard now, so he retreated to his corner. However, all thought of guards melted, when, on finishing her performance, Brydwen actually approached him. "May I sit here? The press is great by the fire and I have need of some space."

Hart bowed to the young woman. "Suit yourself, lady."

Throwing her head back in a peal of laughter, she responded. "It's no lady, I am, traveler, simply a bard seeking to earn what I can at yonder village festival."

"With skill as you display, Bard Brydwen, that should follow with ease." The young man felt a slight flush rise from his collar.

"Why, thank you! But you have the better of me. You know my name and my trade, while I know naught of yours." Her exquisitely molded brows rose to frame her question.

"I am called Hart. I too seek employment in Under Stamglen, but not for the festival. I am a scrivener." Why was it so easy to talk to this slip of a girl? "It is my turn for a question. Who is your traveling companion?"

Raising one of her rust colored brows, she favored him with a long gaze. "Been watchin' me, have you?"

"I— heard your singing back on the road and saw you pass. One must take care in traveling, you never know who might be lurking." Hart felt embarrassment grow with this stammering defense.

"'T would seem that my traveling companion and I should be takin' care, seein' we were being spied on!" With that the girl stood so abruptly that she overturned her stool. She spun to stalk through the crowded room, calling for the host.

Feeling utterly rejected without quite knowing why, Hart moved to the area where many of the company were bedding down on floor and benches. So much for gathering information, he thought with a sour taste in his mouth. He would need to learn greater subtlety if he were to satisfy his curiosity.

Not wanting to be part of the growing throng of travelers, Hart rose long before first light and set out, chewing on journey bread from his pack. He could ill afford to exhaust his slender store of coins. Then he remembered the gold tucked in the bottom of his pouch. But, how could he make use of that? To show such would mark him immediately for suspicion at best and attack at worst. No, there must be some way to convert his small treasure to a more common means of trade.

Striding through the growing dawn, Hart soon forgot troubling thoughts in the freshness of a fair morning. Forest gave way to undulating fields. As the demesne came into view, the pattern, which supported manor life, was evident. A patchwork of fields, outlined with hedgerows, some cultivated in narrow strips, spread almost web-like from a central cluster of buildings. Under Stamglen lay, as it had grown over countless years, astride the Gamlin Road, a busy trading route.

Above the huddle of low dwellings, fronting that meandering track, loomed the castle itself. Still in transformation from its ancient structure, new stone walls joined with wooden towers. Atop a great mound, thrust up by long dead generations of surfs, the principal seat of Lord Stormund awoke a painful memory.

Never would he ride proudly under the portcullis, through the barbican and across the massive drawbridge, resplendent in mail hauberk and surcoat. Shaking himself briskly, Hart turned his gaze from the heights to the village nestled beneath it. Here lay his future, at least for now; there was no room for dreaming of a past that might

not have even existed, so far had the young man come from his roots and training.

Signs of the coming festival sprouted everywhere. Knots of villagers and travelers gathered around an open field that had long served as jousting ground for the knights of Stamglen. Morning wind fluttered banners set on tall staffs as workers scurried about laden with bundles of wood and rolls of cloth. Already booths and tents sprouted along the perimeter.

Whoever was being feted here must be of high rank indeed, Hart thought, wondering who merited such honor. The identity of the guests of honor soon became evident, for, with a gut-wrenching wave of recognition, he spotted three riders slowly circling the parade: Sir Lazarous, the Lady Arin and another.

Trembling, Hart ducked into the shadow of a booth, to watch their progress. Engaged in animated conversation, the three passed close enough that he could have almost spat upon their horses' legs, when Lazarous's head suddenly jerked upward and he turned abruptly to look in Hart's direction. Forewarned by a tingling in his Eye, he moved quickly behind the cover, however. That was too close! Somehow the Champion seemed to sense a presence—though the look of puzzlement on the cold features told him that Lazarous was yet unsure.

Sweating profusely, the young man hastily left the field. He must exercise even greater care. More was at work here than perhaps he had guessed. Much remained to be uncovered.

Turning toward the village, he mingled with the arriving knots of travelers as carefully as he could, to simply listen. Thus Hart learned the festival was in honor of the handfasting of the Lady Arin to Norvill, cousin to Sir Lazarous. A piece of news, indeed! There was to be a banquet in the great hall of the castle on the morrow, followed the next day by jousting and games for the villeins. Lord Stormund had generously provided for the common folk to enjoy their own feast in honor of the Lady Arin and Norvill. To culminate the festivities, Norvill would be knighted by the Lord of Stamglen.

Hart wandered aimlessly along one the village's two streets. At one end the houses were sturdily built combinations of timber and daubed clay, newly whitewashed. Symbols above some of the doors indicated craft guilds, while another sprouted the staff and sheaf of

an inn where ale could be had in plenty, not that ale was unavailable elsewhere. Every woman in the vill turned her hand to the making of ale, some with fine results, others not so satisfactory.

Finally spotting what he sought, the young man turned to a dwelling that sported the crude outline of a quill and parchment. Here the surfs and freemen would come to have their fees recorded by the village Reeve. Entering the open door, he stepped into a small room. The floor was strewn with new rushes in honor of the occasion, presenting an uncommon cleanliness.

At one end of the room a lazy curl of smoke from a fire pit rose to a hole in the thatch roof; at the other stood a high table and stool that served for a desk. Seated hunched over a parchment at the table, a cadaverously thin man scratched away with a pen. Not bothering to look up he spoke:

“Well, don’t just stand there! What have you to declare? The fee is one tenth of your wares or twelve pence, whichever be greater.” The scribe continued his writing.

“Nay, Reeve. I have naught to declare, not being a merchant. I bring a message.” Hart nearly fidgeted, remembering the many times he had stood, as a lad, to give account of his actions to Father Corbin.

Looking sharply up at last, the Reeve squinted at him as one too long at his work in poor light. “Why didn’t you say so? Give it here.”

The man snatched impatiently the scrap of parchment Hart held out and studied it for a moment. “I see. So, you claim to be a scrivener? Ever work with accounts like these?” The Reeve indicated what lay in an untidy pile on his desk.

“No, I have not. My training has been from the Church, but I know sums and have a clear hand.” Hart’s confidence did not quite measure up to his words, but he must carry this off. Much depended on a valid reason for him to bide in Under Stamglen.

“That shall be seen. Here, let me see what you can do.” Motioning Hart to take his place, the Reeve stood aside. “Do you read the tally sticks?”

“I have some knowledge of them, but not in full.” Honest admission would serve best now, the young man thought.

"Of need they are simple, being the way in which unlettered surfs keep count of their stock." The Reeve, who finally told Hart that his name was Moklin, demonstrated the way to convert the tally marks to numbers.

Finding it simple enough, Hart took up the quill to begin entering figures in the columns on the parchment before him.

"One thing, more." Moklin added. "You will know the man by his mark. See here?" He indicated a distinct cutting on each tally stick. "Jock's is three slashes with a deep cut across. Rupert's mark is a circle cut around the top."

"Yes, I see." Hart felt a touch of excitement. "And at the head of each section of the record you have repeated the man's mark."

"You have it." The Reeve studied the youth for a few heartbeats. "You may be blind in one eye, but at least you show wit." With that the gaunt man turned to leave, calling back as he crossed the threshold: "I must pay a visit to the merchants and entertainers. Don't want anyone thinking he can slip in without a fee."

Hart smiled to himself. This Reeve was clearly the right man for the job; he seemed to take real pleasure in pursuit of would-be cheaters. Turning to his task, the new scrivener set to with a will, in frowning concentration.

Some time had passed, when, without warning, Hart's Eye came into play. The tally stick in his hand suddenly warmed, seeming to waver before him. Briefly an image, quite different from what his ungifted eye revealed, materialized. This record was false. The Gift of recognizing fraud was in play! But how could he expose the liar without putting himself in danger? It might serve best to bide his time and watch for an opportunity to confront the guilty one with some penetrating questions, to say nothing of the penetrating "green gaze". The new scrivener almost chuckled aloud. This just might prove enjoyable.

When Reeve Moklin returned, clearly pleased with his morning's ferreting, there was further cause for satisfaction waiting on the desk. All tallies had been entered and the figures crosschecked. "Well done, lad!" The older man forgot to maintain his gruff demeanor. "It would seem that you have earned yourself employment." He absently scratched behind his ear. "Now, I can't offer much of a wage, but

there is space in the loft for you to sleep and you can take meals at my table. Beyond that, we will see.”

Thinking rapidly, Hart nodded. “For now, it is enough. Perhaps I can make myself of greater value as time goes on.”

Though Moklin gave him a penetrating look, the Reeve said no more on the matter. Taking up the parchment, he rolled it and inserted it into a long pouch that hung from a peg behind the desk. “That is all for now. You are at liberty to join the festival. Little work will be accomplished, since celebration is on the minds of lords and commons alike!”

Laughing, Hart agreed and rose to leave his new situation, much lighter in spirit than when he had arrived. Striding back toward the tournament ground, he even whistled tunelessly, exchanging greetings with travelers that thronged the way.

Many more pavilions had sprouted since his earlier visit. Vendors of all manner of foods, ales and even some wines, lined the west side of the parade, while on the south there were sellers of exotic fabrics, unfamiliar spices and—he stopped in his tracks—even a jewel-smith! Perhaps here might be a means of converting his bits of gold into common coin. He must return later to pursue this.

Strolling past the preparations for the tournament, the former knight once more indulged himself; then the milling of heralds, placing names of their champions in the lists, tents to house visiting knights, the scents of leather, horse sweat and polish: all burst upon him with the power of a lance blow. Yes, he had to admit to himself, I do miss it! Memories surged through Hart, warming his blood.

Somewhere to his left a familiar voice rang out, breaking harshly into his reverie. “Hail, friend! Welcome back.” Almost, Hart responded, forgetting for an instant that he no longer belonged to the brotherhood. The greeting was not meant for him! Turning abruptly he fled from the scene of so many of his happy memories, sweat pouring from beneath the hood that hid his headpiece.

At length, slowing his pace, the young man began to notice the activity about him more sharply. He had crossed the parade ground to the north end where a low platform had been set up for entertainments. Jugglers and gleemen, mummers and beast tamers spread out on either side, waiting their turns at the center.

He looked about to see if Brydwen was present. The sudden thought of her bred a curious tingle in him, one which became a shiver as he glimpsed her at the far fringe of the crowd, playing a thin vertical reed flute. Strangely drawn, Hart edged toward the bard, her melody reaching him above the surrounding din. It seemed to enter his soul and block out all else but sweet sound, however, the moment she caught sight of him, the music ceased. With a frown and twirl of her flaming hair, the girl ducked behind the towering monk, ever her shadow, and was gone.

For long moments Hart stood bereft. What gift gave this woman such power over him?

Chapter ~ Eight

“Hart!” Moklin shouted, entering the room where the scrivener sat working at his desk. Excitement crackled from the Reeve as he paced back and forth, rubbing his hands like a miser over his hoard.

“Yes, Reeve. What is it?” Hart barely suppressed a grin at the thin man’s behavior, so out of character. Normally his employer was a somber soul with little on his mind but business.

“The feast! I am to assist in seating the guests and you—you are summoned to be a pourer.” He spoke as though announcing the highest of honors. “So many are invited to the celebration that Lord Stormund’s servants are unable to handle the crowd. A number of the village officials and their people have been pressed into duty. What a banquet it will be!”

“When must we attend?” Hart still fought to contain his amusement. He had not seen Moklin so animated.

“Preparations have been moving forward since long before daylight. We are to arrive just after the bell for Nones has sounded. In the meanwhile, we must go to be garbed as befits our task.” With that the wiry man spun and beckoned Hart to follow.

As they reached the steep wooden ramp leading up to the postern gate of Stanglen Castle, a long line of provisioners and villagers waited to make deliveries or be assigned tasks. Interspersed among the milling crowd, armsmen and castle retainers carefully inspected the contents of carts and watched for strange faces. It would not do for an enemy to slip unnoticed into the celebration, bent on trouble.

Hart gazed up at the immense fortifications. The new stone walls, at least twenty paces thick at the base, tapered to a width at the top that would allow a company of archers to pass. They were crowned with crenellations upon which carpenters labored to construct timber hoards. *Lord Stormund must truly fear attack*, Hart thought as he observed the men at work. *Woe be to any who might approach this fortification with evil intent. A fierce welcome would await from within the hoards—arrows raining, great rocks dropping, let alone a bath of boiling oil! Against whom were such preparations being made?*

Even above the postern gate a stone machicolation protruded like an eyebrow with similar defenses to discourage attack. At every corner lofty towers providing both lookout and defense fortified the great curtain wall. Memories threatened to flood Hart once more, but he thrust them from him, having no time to dwell on what had been; there lay before him now a task, one which was becoming slowly more clear each day.

Before they could reach their goal, a small figure would have collided with Hart had he not quickly sidestepped the headlong flight. Reaching out to steady the lad, he noticed a gleam of moisture, which was swiftly hidden as the boy flung his arm up across his face and darted away. *Now that is a very unhappy page, unless I sorely misread him*, Hart thought.

Jolted out of his musings by a clout on the shoulder, Hart followed Moklin up the ramp and through the postern. Crossing an all too familiar quadrangle to the great central keep, they came at last to the entrance of the guardhouse on the bottom level. Again the former knight had to suppress welling recollections.

Soon, however, the business of receiving livery and instructions exorcised the ghosts of past joys and agonies. Content to follow Moklin, Hart returned to the village until they must report for duty.

The remainder of the morning was taken up with personal preparation for the night's work. Hart fetched and heated water over the smoky fire in the Reeve's great room. Taking enough to meet his needs, he climbed to his loft and bathed thoroughly before donning the Stormund livery. Over a long sleeved shirt of sapphire blue, he pulled a silvery tunic, emblazoned with the charging boar, Lord Stormund's crest beast. To this he added bi-colored hose—one of blue and one of silver—soft black boots, ankle high, and a short black coat with flowing, slashed sleeves that reached to his knees. Finally, once he had combed his long hair and gathered it back with a bit of cord, he replaced the headpiece and was relieved to find that the high crowned hat of supple blue leather completely covered it. Retying his Eye patch, Hart was now ready for a very different kind of service to his one-time lord.

As the bell for Nones chimed, Moklin and his clerk returned to the castle, this time entering through the barbican, across a middle-height crenellated ramp and over the great draw bridge. As they passed under the portcullis, Hart felt a new stab of recollection. As a

small boy he had been certain that the giant teeth above were just waiting to drop and impale him. He had never quite overcome a vague sense of apprehension whenever he moved through the huge portal. Wondering if he would yet regret returning to this forbidding place, he shook himself mentally to be rid of dark thoughts.

Castle Stamglen seethed with activity, making Hart grateful that he was no stranger to its environs. However, he took care that Moklin would not guess his familiarity, but quietly followed the man to the antechamber where servitors gathered for instructions from the manorial steward. Finding his assignment, he took up his stand to await the beginning of the feast.

At a signal from Steward Attabirch, the retainers and pressed servers formed two lines along the vaulted corridor leading to the great hall. The clarion call of trumpets echoed through the castle, followed by a crier heralding the entrance of Lord Stormund and his honored guests. Cheers surged along the waiting ranks as the nobles and notables progressed slowly between them. Biting his tongue, Hart willed himself to stature stillness when Sir Lazarous, with the Lady Arin on his arm, passed so close that he could have reached out to grasp their garments.

Beautiful in her tall, bejeweled headdress, the bride-to-be swept through the admiring crowd. Her flowing gown of deep rose rippled with each dignified step, revealing soft blue inner sleeves and a high band belting her slender form just beneath small breasts.

Arin certainly seemed the picture of bright joy, however, to Hart's Emerald Eye, she presented quite a different aspect. He sensed in her, though only briefly, a deep despair. No such mystery was Lazarous. Resplendent in an ermine trimmed, pleated tunic of moss green gathered with a golden sword belt, he was the image of self-satisfaction. Bearing himself quite as regally as a prince, the Lord's Champion set Hart to wondering.

Could this knight have aspirations far beyond his station? The Eye failed penetrate beyond the Champion's suave surface, but somewhere in the depths of the young scrivener's mind a voice whispered: Lazarous has many dark secrets. Hart had only time to promise himself to search out those secrets, when he was plunged into a flurry of activity. Pouring wine and ale for such a thirsty lot kept him fully occupied for the next two hours.

Row upon row of trestle tables, covered with snowy linen cloths, groaned with food. Before most of the guests servers placed thick bread trenchers and large carven and polished wood cups. Before each noble, however, fine golden goblets stood, waiting to be filled.

Hart's duty was to approach the side of a guest and fill the empty cup or goblet, alternating by presenting a moist cloth for the cleansing of greasy hands and mouths. Despite all his strength, won in knightly training and trekking with the hermit, to say naught of his journey of proving, he was heartily glad when a second shift of servers took over. Guests were well into their cups and would little notice that the service was not quite the quality it had been at first, along with the drink.

He returned to the room set apart for the servers and, finding a spot on a bench in a shadowed corner, dropped wearily upon it. Far too exhausted to eat, Hart was content to give his protesting feet some relief. Even the din of the milling servants scarcely penetrated the haze that settled over him. For a few moments he drifted into sleep, only to be awakened abruptly by—he did not know what.

There it was! Low voices came from behind the column against which Hart was resting. "The master says to fetch her to the chamber before dawn." The words were barely audible.

"But the ceremony is only two days off. How can—?" The conversation was suddenly cut off and Hart dared not show his interest, though he was bursting to see who the speakers had been. Keeping his uncovered eye shut, he managed to peek through the shielding patch in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of—Lazarous's men, as he had suspected.

Dared he follow? Lord Stormund's livery would divert suspicion enough for him to move about the castle. He waited a moment or two, then stepped out in time to see the two men pass into a side corridor. Walking as if on an errand, Hart kept them in sight for a time. When one of them turned, he quickly reached up to adjust a rush light, as though it were his assigned task.

Wishing heartily that his hearing could be as acute as the vision in his gifted eye, he moved as close as he dared, to glimpse his quarry turning along a dark passage that led, from what Hart could remember, to a narrow stair spiraling down to storage vaults below.

He waited for a few heartbeats then began to descend. Just making out the murmur of voices, he continued following.

The stair opened into a series of cave-like chambers used to store wine and barrels of salted meats in winter. Cautiously creeping in a crouching position, Hart came to the end of the last chamber and found—nothing! Where—? The men could not have doubled back, of this he was sure, but how did they escape him? There must be some hidden way beyond the wine vaults, but now was not the time to seek it out.

A shrill whistle could be heard from an airshaft the led to the serving chamber above. It was time for Hart to return to duty, but he must certainly come again to explore. Somewhere beyond that seemingly solid wall lay clues to the growing mystery of Sir Lazarous.

An explosion of music and laughter greeted him as he entered the hall. Mummers cavorted in fantastic costumes representing mythical beasts while minstrels accompanied them on psaltery, vicle, rebec, pipe and tabor. When the gyrations of the dancers had subsided, a sudden quiet settled over the gathered banqueters. Brydwen the Bard stood forth and began a haunting tune on her flute. As its final notes echoed through the huge room, she launched into song.

“Come hear a tale of treachery and pain;
Of courage and sacrifice, glory and gain.
When Evil did triumph and hope was nigh lost,
As in a far kingdom, the people were curst.
Their wealth was all plundered; they saw only Death
Approaching, unhindered, o’er a stark grisly path.
When out of their midst stood a youth of their own,
Whom all did consider, but callow, un-grown.
Through the desperate throng he passed to contend
With Evil in battle, which all thought must end
In bitter defeat, for how could a lad
All weaponless, master a foe, where None had
With sword, mace or arrow, or even a spear

Done damage or staggered the Enemy near?
But out of the murk of the battleground shone
A brilliant light from the Youth, so alone.
All green was the gleam from his curious eye.
It pierced through the Darkness; in vain was the try
Of his Foeman to turn from that thrust, deadly true.
Thus triumphed the Light over Dark, but think you
That any will know when a Gift is at work
Like the Emerald Eye of Tok, out of Tchurk?

Thunderous applause, accompanied by the pounding of cups upon the trestle tables, reverberated throughout the hall when the Bard bowed before Lord Stormund. The old noble beckoned Brydwen to step forward. "Mistress Bard, a passing fair voice, you have and heroic, your rhyme! You pleased my guests and myself as well. Who is your master?"

"I have none, my lord. I am but a wandering bard, with no true home, but passing throughout the land collecting tales by which to entertain as I may." She curtsayed low, a lock of her auburn hair creeping out from beneath her wimple.

"What think you, then, of staying to become my court bard?" The old lord gazed kindly at the young woman.

"Why—I scarcely know what to say, Sire! It would be a great honor—however."

"Well, however—what?" Lord Stormund began to show an edge of impatience.

"If I may be so bold, my Lord. There is a monk, a near kinsman of mine, who has devoted much of his life to being my protector on my travels."

"Ah, I see. You would not wish to take a place where he is unwelcome. Then, lass, it is settled. There is ample room in Stamglen for another holy man. He may find work assisting Father Corbin."

A shy smile wreathed Brydwen's exquisite features. "Oh, thank you, my Lord! I—we—will gladly stay. With your permission?" At Lord Stormund's nod the lady bard curtsayed again and, lifting her skirts,

turned to scamper out of the room in search of her companion and protector Brother Belicaus.

Reeling from the effects of Brydwen's song, Hart, nevertheless, had discretely followed her exchange with Lord Stormund. *She's staying!* The sudden thought set his pulse pounding and left a decided lump in his throat.

Now he must win her confidence. Where had she come across the tale of Tok? Finding it difficult to concentrate on his duties throughout the remainder of the evening, Hart was never so relieved as when the noble host arose and posed one last toast to the Lady Arin and Norvill, then dismissed the company.

Remembering the snatch of conversation he had overheard, Hart hung back, on the pretense of assisting in cleaning off the trestles for guests to find sleeping places. He saw that Arin and some of her ladies were exiting the hall and hurried to follow. It might be dangerous, but he had to know what the men had meant. Would someone dare to take the lady this night against her will to—where?

Knowing where Arin's chamber was, he went in search of Moklin to tell him not to wait. The Reeve lifted an eyebrow at his announcement, but chuckled, supposing that Hart had found a wench for the evening. Indeed, it might be said that he had, but not for the purpose his master suspected. Hurrying to take up a secluded post in the corridor where the guest rooms were, he drew back into the shadow cast by a large chest.

Battling sleep and exhaustion, he nearly missed what he had come to observe. Well past the midnight hour, two cloaked figures furtively approached the lady Arin's chamber door and simply stood for long moments. What were they about?

At length the door opened just enough to allow a slender figure, clad in a flowing garment, to slip through—Arin! She seemed unaware of the men who moved to walk on either side of her. As the trio passed Hart's hiding place, he tasted bile. Arin's face might have been that of a corpse. Her eyes showed arcs of white, and her jaw hung slack, but her tread was firm as if she moved with great determination.

In torment as to what to do, Hart slipped out to follow. Dared he to intervene? How would he explain his presence? Best he should simply watch. There remained many undiscovered pieces of this twisted and growing puzzle in Lord Stormund's demesne.

It soon became obvious that Arin's attendants were confident that they were alone, for they never looked about, but paced on in a near trance themselves. Hart was not surprised to see them move down a stair to the same storage vaults from which they had earlier disappeared. This time he would stay close. They would not escape his notice again!

As the party passed ahead of him through the long aisle of wine casks, Hart became aware of a bone-chilling cold. This was not the normal chill of the stone chamber, but that of a much darker origin. Evil magic was at work here. It did not take the quivering response of the Emerald Eye to alert him to that danger. In spite of the freezing atmosphere, he found himself sweating with the effort to place one foot in front of the other.

A cloying mist began to rise from the stone paving beneath Hart's feet. Before he realized it, he was completely enshrouded in the unnatural grayness. A curse almost escaped his lips. Those he had been following had once more disappeared without his seeing how.

Passing his hand along the wall to his left, Hart nearly stumbled when it suddenly struck a slight out-crop and then—gave way. His arm plunged into a narrow opening, up to the elbow. Biting his tongue to silence an exclamation at the pain in his knuckle, the scrivener carefully withdrew his arm and attempted to examine the niche. A cleverly fashioned hinge operated an almost indistinguishable cover behind which a slim crevice provided a hiding place for—what?

Hart cautiously felt deeper into the slot and discovered the end of what must be a parchment scroll. Clasping it with shaking fingers he drew it forth and nearly sneezed at the dust that billowed from the hiding place. The scroll appeared to have been undisturbed for a very long time. With so little light, all he could discern on unrolling it part way was that it seemed to be a plan of the castle.

Long moments passed while he considered his next move. It was far too dark to examine the scroll here and even his gifted eye was so tired that he was unsure of what he was seeing. There was nothing for it. He must leave and return to the village.

A sudden thought occurred to Hart: the scroll! There might be a way to delve those walls without endangering himself just yet. The diagrams he had glimpsed promised much information that was not obvious to the natural eye. Carefully concealing the thin scroll under

his coat, he turned to retrace his steps. He would be back to delve the mystery that lay somewhere in the bowels of Stamglen Castle.

As the weary scrivener trudged down the winding track from the castle to the village nestled beneath it, he became aware of a dim glow from a grove of trees nearby. Soft music wafted to him, hinting at who might be there.

Approaching somewhat timidly, he glimpsed a small campfire, around which lounged several musicians, Brydwen in the midst. The inviting fragrance of roasting meat wafted toward him, reminding him that, though he had been long hours at a feast, None of it had reached his belly and he was hungry.

“May I join you?” He asked no one in particular.

Brother Belicaus, who leaned against a nearby tree, beckoned him to sit by the fire. “Long night, lad?”

“Aye, brother. My feet are not quite sure they are yet of this world.” Hart plopped gratefully beside a lutenist.

“Haven’t I seen you with the Reeve?” Another of the number asked idly.

“Yes. I serve as his scrivener.” Hart cut off a chunk of the mutton leg that was slowly dripping fat into the sputtering fire.

Turning to Brydwen, he swallowed and tried to think of something to say that would not get him in further trouble with her. She was mightily prickly when it came to him, though Hart was loath to understand why.

“Your lay of the hero was a fine one, bard. Have you known it long?” A compliment should be safe enough.

“Known it? Why, scrivener, I wrote it!” She stretched and yawned. “The day has been a long one. I’m to my rest. I bid you all a fair night and a jolly day tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Well, it is already tomorrow—our day to feast!” The lutenist brushed his strings in a flourishing chord. A player beat a rapid tattoo on his tabor drum as the group broke up to go separate ways to bed down for the remainder of the night.

Too tired to pursue his goal and clearly dismissed by the bard, Hart rose to go. As he passed close to the monk, Brother Belicaus smiled

and nodded. "Patience, lad. You will learn in time." With these enigmatic words, the tall man hitched his belt, grasped a tall staff and strode off in the wake of the lovely bard.

Chapter ~ Nine

“A boon feast! A boon feast! Lord Stormund has decreed a boon feast!” The shout echoed through the streets of Under Stamglen, bringing a quick response from all quarters. Villeins poured from their homes to answer the call. Children raced about their parents in a general din of excitement that energized Hart, though he had had precious little sleep.

The words of Brydwen’s “Lay of Tok” had woven their way through his dreams, calling up images, leaving him shaken as the tolling of the bell for Prime finally woke him. Determined to put such thoughts from him, Hart washed and dressed quickly to set out for the festival ground.

A rich scent of bacon and spices mingled with others, many far less appetizing, amid the rows and rows of booths. Most merchants and tradesmen were just beginning to seek their booths, calling greetings and requests to borrow across aisles. Hart paused at a cook’s table selecting a pasty filled with steaming turnips and a bit of ham. The air was still cool at this early hour and a pot of hot, spiced cider helped to warm him.

As he moved from the food-vendors’ row Hart crossed an area set aside for chapmen with exotic wares from distant lands. Goods varied from spices, common and uncommon, such as saffron, mace, cinnamon and cardamon, to fabrics and leathers. One booth in particular displayed bolts of cloth dyed in exquisite hues. A tall merchant bowed to him with a flourish, touching hand to brow and lips in salute. Dark skin and hair marked him as one from the distant lands to the east. When he would have engaged the scrivener in commerce, Hart smiled and shook his head, “Nay, my thanks, Chapman, but I have no need of your fine wares.”

The steady grind of a wheel drew the new scrivener’s attention as he passed into the craftsmen’s quarter. A bent-shouldered man curled over his work, putting edge to a fine blade. “Rare work, Master Cutler.” Hart complimented the obviously well-made piece.

“Aye, it is a throwing blade. The spice merchant ordered it for his son.” The man peered up at Hart, the grin twisting his face more a grimace than a smile. He himself had felt the edge of a like blade in

the distant past, for a long scar had clearly injured the muscles on one side of his visage.

“My name is Hart. I am scrivener to Reeve Moklin.” Hart was abrupt—the sooner he established his identity the better.

“So I know. Ye’ve been the subject of some curiosity, bein’ new come an’ wearin’ that patch. I be Sprell. Sit, if ye’re pleased to. Ye’re like to spill that drink, if’n ye don’ tak’ care.” The wizened man chuckled and motioned to an overturned bucket.

Having nowhere to go in particular, Hart sat contentedly, stretching his long legs before him.

“Thank you, Cutler. It’s a pleasure to watch a fine craftsman at work. I have no skill with handiwork, but one is always better for the seeing of it in the making.” Feeling good to just be companionable, Hart realized there had been scarce room in his life for idleness.

As he continued to watch Sprell deftly handling the dagger, another visitor arrived. “Fine day, to you, Cutler! Perchance I may interest you in some decoration for that trinket?” The portly man huffed a bit from the exertion of navigating the increasingly crowded festival ground.

“Think you that I need your baubles to enhance m’work?” The bantering tone clued Hart that these two were long time friends.

“A fine weapon, no doubt, Sprell, but it would be a work of art with some of my stones!” A throaty laugh rumbled from somewhere beneath layers of well-maintained fat.

“We’ll see, Glodrun.” The cutler gestured again and the newcomer kicked over another bucket to join Hart. “This be Moklin’s new scrivener, Hart by name.”

“Ah, a man of learning! Now there’s a fine profession.” It was clear that Glodrun was skilled in the glib talk that put folk at ease. Hart nodded to him and said nothing.

“As Sprell here has said, I am called Glodrun. Jewel Smithing is my trade. I deal in all manner of stones, fashioning settings myself in precious metals.” Smiling, he thrust out a chubby hand to display his wares. Every finger bore a different sort of ring, some simple, others portraying fantastical beasts. Any cathedral would proudly display the gargoyle that glared from the jewel smith’s thumb.

An idea suddenly occurred to Hart. This might be just the one to take some of his bits of gold! He would mark the man's booth and seek him out later. Rising, he bid the two craftsmen good day, and ambled off to continue his explorations.

He had gone only a short distance when a conglomeration of scents assaulted his nose, making him sneeze and rub his watering eye. Turning about, he located the source. From a small copper kettle nearby floated a thread of vapor. Behind it a tall woman was crushing some leaves to dribble the bits into a steaming mixture. Her hair grew thick and dark, though her face betrayed her advancing years. Smiling at Hart, she called out, "Herbs! Herbs to lighten your life? For health, for joy, for love, for hate: I'll share ancient secrets for a very small fee."

Without knowing quite why, Hart turned toward the herbalist. He surely had no need of her wares, but something about the woman drew him. Perhaps he had "seen" a brief glimpse of a greater knowledge in her. No matter, it would be informative to examine her products.

"Ah, young man, you do well to seek out Hesta. She holds many secrets!" Turning abruptly, the woman reached into a basket that lay behind her and brought out a small drawstring bag. "Perhaps you could use a potion for sleep? You look as if you have not had much rest."

"Perceptive, Herb Woman. I slept but poorly the night gone, but I fear a potion would not cure what ails me." Hart found it quite easy to talk to this Hesta. He took in a deep breath of vapor from her kettle.

"Then, we must look deeper." She stepped near and peered closely at his face, reaching out to touch his Eye patch. Hart jerked violently away. Too close!

"Your pardon!" The herbalist snatched back her hand. "I meant no harm. It's just—I have a gift for sensing when someone is troubled. You, my lad, are deeply concerned about something."

Hart looked at her with an expression of intense suspicion. "That is my affair, Hesta."

"Of course! And none of mine, but take advice from me, if you take nothing else. Tread cautiously. You walk a path that bears many

shadows.” Her gray eyes seemed to pierce Hart’s inmost thoughts. It was decidedly uncomfortable.

“I will give you one thing more: if you would prepare yourself for danger, come to the montjoy on the Gamlin-Tuckgrove crossroad after moonset three days hence. I know you are much more than you appear to be, nor are you alone in this.” Handing him a small piece of dark green stone, she continued, “Come, if you would meet others like yourself. Present this to the one who stands waiting by the montjoy. It is your safe passage.” With that, the herb woman turned to call out her wares to new prospects strolling by.

Feeling his scalp prickle where the headpiece rested, Hart moved away, palming the stone. As it warmed with the touch of his hand, a delicate fragrance wafted to tickle his nose. He had thought himself unsettled before. Now his mind seethed with questions and uneasiness. What power lay in his hand? Who was this woman, to see so deeply into him? Dared he take her advice? This would certainly bear some pondering.

In a deep study over the events of the past day and night, Hart wandered aimlessly until he found himself in the area of the beast sellers and tamers. Drawing near a row of cages, he suddenly cringed in pain as though an intangible shaft of fire pierced his shoulder and left him shaking. Before he could scarcely recover from the shock of the seeming attack, another, more intense penetrated his head and dropped him to his knees, gasping for breath. What—!

At the moment the pain was at its worst, he heard a shrill scream coming from no human throat. Something, some animal was in agony. But, where? Hart could see no activity. Staggering to his feet, he struggled along the line of cages. Nothing there. Then it struck again, this time in his legs.

In desperation he flipped up the Eye patch just enough to sweep the area around him. There! Just beyond the iron cages was a wooden fence, hastily set up for the beast tamers to work their animals before performing. Hart struggled to reach the gate and found it chained fast. Putting his gifted eye to a small crack, he viewed a scene that nearly made him retch. A huge man, clad in leather leggings, vest and gauntlets, circled a huddled form, bound and lying at his feet. A small black animal was snarling and writhing in a vain attempt to avoid the punishment being meted out by the tamer.

In one hand the shaggy-headed man held a whip; in the other, a slender rod with a tip that had obviously been heated on a nearby fire. Its tip was cherry red. As the tormenter uttered a series of guttural curses, he alternately lashed and prodded the creature.

Anger, such as Hart had never felt, even when ill-used himself, exploded within him. Leaping to grasp the top of the wood enclosure, he vaulted over and shouted to gain the man's attention. "Coward! Leave be! No beast deserves that. See if you are equal to someone who can fight back!"

With a roar, the man whirled, in the same motion flinging the rod at Hart, expecting to see it plunge into his chest, but the former knight had lost none of his reflexes. He leaped aside as the weapon lodged harmlessly in the wooden fence. The beast tamer mouthed another curse and charged at Hart, swinging the heavy whip in a vicious circle above his head. By this time Hart had calmed enough to realize that he was physically no match for the giant.

Moving the Eye patch fully up, Hart loosed an emerald blaze at the charging beast tamer. It struck him squarely in the forehead and, for all his bulk, flipped the man end-over-end, to land in a heap of dung left by some of his charges.

Hart knelt to examine him and assure himself that his foe was only unconscious, not dead. "Well," Hart thought, "*he will have more to think about than this poor animal, when he wakes up. His head will seem thrice normal size, I'll warrant.*"

Deserves it! The statement came, not quite in words, but Hart took well the meaning. Looking about to see who had spoken, his Eye came to rest on the abused creature. He realized, astonished, that the message had reached his mind from that of the beast. Gently the scrivener cut the cruel bindings from the small legs. "Why, it's a tiny pard!"

Demi-Pard, manling. The curious communication came once more. Hart shook his head, still unsure of what he was experiencing.

"Did you—?" He stuttered at the idea of speaking with an animal, but this was no stranger than much he had done of late.

Did. The green-gold eyes were fixed upon Hart now. **Hurt. Need heal!** The message came urgently, jolting Hart from his musing.

“Yes, my small friend, you are sorely hurt, but I think I know who can help you.” Carefully lifting the small black animal and cradling it in his arms, Hart strode to the fence, put the pard down for a moment until he could kick down the gate, then lifted it once more and moved swiftly in the direction of the herb woman’s booth.

“Hesta, Hesta!” Hart’s shout brought her from behind a curtain at the back of the enclosure. “Can you help this little one? It has been ill treated.”

“Oh, aye, lad. Hesta knows just what the wee beast needs. Ooch, who could treat it so?” Crooning to the injured animal, she took it from Hart and placed it carefully on her own cot inside the small sleeping chamber behind her sales table.

“A tamer did it,” Hart spoke through gritted teeth.

“I’ll care for it, never fear, but you’d best report this to the Bailiff. Such abuse is strictly forbidden here.” Hesta shooed Hart out. “When you come back later to check you’ll see a much improved patient. I promise.”

Loath to leave the tiny pard, Hart, nonetheless went off in search of the Bailiff. Hesta was right. The beast tamer, rather *beast tormenter*, must be punished and at the least banished from the festival and any further dealings in Under Stamglén. He would see to that!

When at length he found the Bailiff, there was no time to make his charge against the beast tamer, for cries and shouts from the food vendors’ quarter signaled trouble. Hart followed to see what the ruckus was about and to wait his turn with the Bailiff. They arrived at an alewife’s booth in time to witness the sturdy woman swinging an ale pot to fend off blows, all the while screeching at the attacker. “Petter Webster, you drunken sot! I gave you good ale in fair measure.”

The young man in question landed a blow on the woman’s jaw, toppling her to crash back onto her trestle table. Plunging into the fray before more damage could be done, the husky Bailiff seized the weaver’s son in a bear-like grip. “Cease! Shame, man! Weren’t you taught to respect womanhood?”

The youth continued to struggle so violently that Hart had to assist in subduing him. Finally there was nothing for it, but they must lift and carry the miscreant, squirming and cursing to a nearby horse trough.

Neatly dunking and holding him under the water for a moment or two, they hauled the youth, spluttering but much chastened, to sit on the edge of the stone basin.

“Now, what do you have to say for yourself, Petter?” The Bailiff stood with folded arms.

“She served me watered ale!” Young Webster almost whined.

“So? Is that cause to attack a woman?” The officer replied. “You need only lodge a complaint with me and she would have to answer at Hallmote. As it is now, you are officially charged with hamsoken.”

“Hamsoken!” The weaver’s son blanched. “B—but that names an attack in another’s home.”

“For the duration of the festival, this booth is her home. You have no excuse. You will appear to make an answer.” With that the Bailiff turned to Hart. “Now, Scrivener, you were making a charge?”

Looking back to make sure the alewife was being tended to, Hart nodded. “Yes, Bailiff, I wish to make formal accusation against a beast tamer, large, hairy man dressed in leather. I surprised him in the process of torturing a dwarf pard this morning.”

“Hmm, torture? Where is the animal?” The Bailiff motioned for Hart to precede him.

“I will show you. Hesta, the Herb Woman is caring for it.” They shoved their way through the knot of folk who had gathered to enjoy the excitement of the fight at the alewife’s booth.

When they reached the herbalist’s small cubby, Hart felt a wave of warm contentment. Greatly relieved, he hailed her. “Hesta, I have the Bailiff here. He has some questions and would see the victim.”

The tall woman parted the curtain and poked her head through. “Come in, then. See for yourself what a so-called man did to an animal. Me thinks the name ‘beast’ should be laid upon the one who made this poor creature suffer so.”

The Bailiff stood quietly, looking down at the now sleeping pard. It was clear just how severely the small cat had been abused. Through gritted teeth, the officer spoke, “It is as you say, Scrivener. I think I will pay a visit to the tamer. His welcome at Under Stamglen is, by his own act, withdrawn. Charges will be brought against him in the

Hallmote or, be he a free man, in the royal courts, and I venture a significant fine will deliver a much needed lesson.”

“Pity he can’t feel some of the same pain the cat suffered.” Hesta’s dry comment struck a chord with both men.

When the Bailiff had gone off in response to another urgent call to maintain peace in the turbulent festival ground, Hart smiled at the herb woman. “Thank you, Hesta. You have wrought well with the little one.”

“’Tis no more than any healer would do. I don’t claim much skill in that art, but such as I have, is gladly rendered.” She took a seat on a low stool beside the resting animal. “I will watch a while, in case a fever should develop. Those wounds were filthy, though I cleansed them as best I could. There is always a chance they will turn foul.”

The woman shooed Hart out of the booth. “Go, attend the feast, lad. You have earned a bit of pleasure.”

“I’ll be back in the morning. A fair evening to you, Hesta.” Hart ducked under the curtain and out into the bustling crowd, bound now for the groaning tables loaded with food for the night’s festivity. He looked about, hoping to see a particular face in the sea of villeins, only to be disappointed.

At the edge of the parade ground a huge pit had been dug, a fire laid many hours earlier, and a whole ox placed on an immense spit above the coals. Done now to the point of falling into pieces, the meat’s aroma did more to gather the people than shouting criers.

Hart snatched a thick slice cut from a dark loaf of wheat bread, a treat for the common folk who usually had to be satisfied with rye. He speared a dripping chunk of meat with his silver knife, placed it on the bread trencher, grabbed a pot of ale from a rapidly disappearing supply on a nearby trestle and wound his way out of the crush to find a spot to sit and enjoy his meal.

When the general confusion of the meal settled somewhat, musicians and jugglers, calling for attention, launched into the evening’s entertainment, somewhat more bawdy and free than Hart had observed the night before in the castle. A favorite subject of mummers was the not-so-subtle mimicry of nobles, the Champion in particular. Laughing until his side cramped, the scrivener thoroughly appreciated the comedy. In passing he thought, however, it would

Rusted Armor

never do for Sir Lazarous to learn the identities of those poking so much fun at him, but Hart admired their nerve.

When the last fun had subsided and a final round of drinks in honor of Lord Stormund and been raised, Hart levered himself up to head, somewhat unsteadily, home to bed. His small loft was welcoming as he dropped wearily onto his pallet.

Before sleep had quite claimed him, there came into his mind a near caress: **Good rest, manling. Make friend.**

Chapter ~ Ten

Wincing as he sat up, Hart gingerly rose and prepared to face the day. The previous night's celebration now demanded full payment in return. He ducked his head in a bucket of cold water and felt less bemused. When he had donned his clothing, he carefully placed the headpiece in its customary position, pulling on a knitted cap to conceal it. Instead of adding to the throb of his hangover, as he had feared, the thin band seemed to damp the unpleasant sensation, allowing him to think clearly on the day's forthcoming event.

Tournament: the very word brought an answering tingle to Hart's spine. How many times had he joined this same excitement with quickened pulses? Though such was now denied him, he could not escape empathizing with the youngest knights and squires who would be making ready for the joust, to say naught of charging into the following melee.

Snatching a pot of ale, some bread and cheese, the latter of which he thrust into his pouch, Hart hurried out to pay a visit to that new friend now recuperating at Hesta's booth, planning to eat on his way. The communication that had come to him as he drifted into sleep, was it real or did he dream it? *No*, he thought, *I made no mistake*.

As if to confirm his opinion, the odd mind voice came again: **Man-friend, come! Free-Claw wait.** There was a near command in the tone. Lengthening his stride, Hart hastened to answer the call.

As he entered the herb woman's booth, a tight-muscled black form hurled itself from behind the curtain, nearly bowling him over. At the last moment he opened his arms and catch the ecstatic pard. "Well, you seem to be quite recovered, my small friend!"

"Indeed he is!" Hesta was grinning widely. "This one has marvelous powers of recuperation. His only problem now is hunger. My fare ill-suits him." She chuckled.

Hart stroked the soft fur. "We will just have to see to that, then."

Hunt? Large green-gold eyes fixed Hart with an intense stare.

"I fear you will have to be content with a visit to the butcher's booth, small one." A smile played on the scrivener's face.

Do for now. Later, hunt. The small pard hopped from Hart's arms to weave in an impatient circle about his legs.

"Looks as if I have orders. My thanks, Hesta." Hart reached into his pouch and brought out some coins. "For your care."

"Nay, lad. That was for the little one. I did but try to undo what another of our kind had so cruelly done to him." She bent down and caressed the sleek animal.

"I think he knows that all are not like that tamer." Hart turned in the direction of the food vendors, motioning the pard to join him. The nimble cat bounded ahead, though not too far, clearly urging him to pick up the pace.

Laughing, Hart followed until they reached the long tables of the butcher, spread with quartered carcasses of fowl, pigs and sheep. Selecting several cuts of red meat, the pard's companion strode to where the bustle of buyers thinned. At the edge of the fair ground a small fire glowed in a cleared circle where several travelers took turns roasting chunks of bacon.

"Well met, sojourners! May we join you?" Hart hailed them.

Looking at the pard, the obvious leader of the group spoke, "If your beast there will mind its manners, welcome."

"You need not concern yourselves for him. He thinks of naught but the meal I just purchased him. He will be quite busy while I cook mine." As he spoke, the pard daintily took the meat Hart offered and all but minced to a shady spot beneath a nearby tree.

"How came you by such a pretty prize?" A gap-toothed forester cast a measuring glance at the cat.

"By fair means. He was like to be killed by an angry beast tamer. And I own him not; he is a free animal and goes where he pleases." Hart spoke with menace edging his voice.

"Peace, man! I was merely curious." The forester answered hastily.

Lingering only long enough to cook his bit of meat, Hart joined the pard beside the oak. **No fear, Man-friend. Free-Claw not be caught*

*again!** Licking his paws to carefully wash whiskers and face, the demi-pard exuded confidence. **Stay with Man-Friend. Him need.**

Hart raised his visible brow as the comment entered his thought. “I take that as an honor, Free-Claw. May we both never be caught! I think, though, that it would be wise for you to appear to be bound to me for now. There might be less trouble that way. The festival draws many who would think to fatten purse with the price you would bring.”

Free-Claw no forget to watch again. Once trap, enough.

“Yes, I doubt you volunteered to join that beast tamer.” Hart chuckled at the irony of such a thought.

Brought from many far away. Trapper took mate, young. They die on journey. Such desolation accompanied the thought message that Hart could have wept at the sense of loss.

“We share much, Free-Claw. Evil men took from me something too, though not a mate or child, simply my honor.” His words seemed wholly inadequate in the face of what the small pard had suffered.

“I have a question: how is it that I hear your thoughts?” Hart was not sure he should ask or that the pard could or would answer.

Eye! The bald, one word answer shook him.

“You mean, my left eye?”

Green. Gift from Great Pard. Free-Claw continued to groom himself.

“Great Pard? Who? Oh, is that your name for the Creator?” Intent on understanding the enigmatic statement, Hart waited.

Yes, Great Pard make all. The tone of the thought, if such could be said of the curious communication, was very like that Father Corbin had used to explain some truth to his young students.

“Ah, I see.” It did make absolute sense. The demi-pard would logically see the Creator in its image.

We go? Without waiting an answer, Free-Claw flicked the tip of his tail and set off toward the central parade ground. It was time to find a spot to view the tournament. Any sensible cat knew that!

Suppressing laughter at his companion’s behavior with an effort, Hart gladly joined him. The pull of the jousting field had been on him since

awakening. As the man and pard threaded through the growing crowd to find a place from which to watch the posting of the lists, he indulged himself in recollection. He could smell the leather, feel the coolness of hauberk, helm, sword and shield; feel the surging muscles of a good horse between his knees. But, no! Hart was a full-time scrivener, scarcely a part-time mage, but no sword wearer. His mission was discovery, not knightly service with all its excitement and privilege.

The former knight and his new friend found a tree near the covered seats placed along the tournament ground for nobles. A lone branch extended well above one end of the jousting arena. While the cat scampered up to settle comfortably on a higher perch, Hart managed to reach a position on the broad limb, from which he could observe not only the matches, but also the audience.

He had scarcely taken up his position, when a herald bawled for attention, to announce the arrival of Lord Stormund, the Lady Arin, Norvill and various notable guests. Next came the reading of the lists of competitors, many of whom Hart knew well, having served with them or met them in the jousts.

Prominent in the lists was Sir Lazarous, Champion for Lord Stormund, who strutted his destrier to the roar of the approving crowd. His great silver helm bore, as its crest, a cockatrice with head and legs of a rooster and wings and body of a dragon. The same device was echoed on his shield and surcoat. Even the caparisoning of his horse was covered with representations of the mythic beast in vivid scarlet.

Following the Champion of Stamglen, several squires on foot bore his lances and battle pennon. One page, Hart had heard, was to be assigned as squire to Norvill upon his knighting. The smallest of the group, walked proudly, waving a banner. *Why, it is the lad who nearly bowled me over*, Hart thought as the boy passed a group of other squires waiting to take their turn in the parade, a well-aimed clot of muck was flung from their midst to land on his chest. As the missile slid down his front leaving behind a trail of filth, hoots of laughter exploded from the assembled squires and pages, who called out, "Ho, Sir Muddy, like you your new emblem?"

His face so red, it could have oozed blood, the lad nonetheless continued to march rigidly until he reached the far end of the arena and could retire. Feeling a stab of sympathy for the youth, Hart remembered the insults hurled against him in this very spot. It would

do no harm to watch the lad closer, perhaps even speak a word of encouragement.

His attention returned to the arena below as trumpets sounded to herald the beginning of the jousting. Pair after pair of knights thundered at each other, lances leveled and helms shuttered. Sounds of splintering shafts accompanied thuds and grunts, even screams of pain as weapons occasionally aimed amiss and skewered a faceplate. Little by little the numbers of competitors shrunk until one pair remained: Sir Lazarous and a visiting knight from across the Narid Sea.

The stranger sat his huge steed easily as the herald bawled his pedigree. "Hear, hear! Now comes Sir Gheenor of Clotrund, Champion of Luse, Knight of the Storms! Know that he has bested a hundred score of challengers. All the Eastern Lands fear his prowess. Beware the Sword of Gheenor!" With each new degree, the knight, clad in black armor and checkered surcoat of black and white, pirouetted his horse and urged it to rear, delighting the crowd.

No need to employ his gifted eye to take the measure of this opponent, Hart was of the opinion that Sir Lazarous must needs look to his skills. He would be well matched. But as the joust began, the scrivener felt a dawning awareness. His Eye quivered and warmth began to radiate from beneath his cap where the headpiece rested. Lazarous was up to no good!

As the opponents met, however, Hart began to think the warning of his gifted sense unfounded, for neither of the knights seemed to gain an advantage. On first rush each shattered a lance on the opposite's shield, but managed to stay a-horse. On the second pass, both struck true again and kept their seats.

By the third lance, it was clear that each man was tiring. It had been a long day and both had participated in many jousts. After a brief rest, they laid on again, this time meeting with such force that both tumbled from horseback. A shudder passed through the watchers as each knight lay for a few seconds. Would one fail to rise?

No, Sir Lazarous staggered to his feet just as did Sir Gheenor. Squires rushed to bring swords and bucklers in preparation for the next round. Warily the combatants paced in a circle, facing each other. Gheenor lunged and thrust; Lazarous parried and counter-thrust. Clearly they were both struggling for breath and strength to continue.

Once more Hart felt the—what—a hint of magic coming into play? Yes! On the next thrust, when Gheenor should have easily turned Lazarous's sword, so awkward was the lunge, the foreign knight seemed to freeze in place. The weapon slipped in above his buckler and penetrated the one vulnerable spot where helm met hauberk, for, unlike many others, the Champion of Luse had scorned throat protection.

Like a great, felled oak, the knight in black armor toppled forward. Expecting to see a bloodless victory, the crowd fell strangely silent for a space, then as though prompted, broke into a ragged cheer for the Champion of Stamglen.

Attendants hurried to the fallen man with a stretcher, accompanied by the infirmarian of the Abby of St. Stam. Kneeling to examine the knight, he gravely shook his head, bidding the squires to cover his face. Sir Gheenor was dead.

Moving to break the mood of the moment, Lord Stormund dispatched his herald to announce the coming melee, which would take place in two hours following a break for food and refreshing. With that the people moved away, muttering quietly among themselves. *It's as if they too sensed evil*, thought Hart.

Much evil! Red killer bad man. Free-Claw had the right of it. The pard had his own gifts, or at least a keen instinct for sizing up human kind.

"Indeed, he is, my friend. It is well to beware of the 'red killer'." Hart swung down from his perch on the oak limb. "Come, Free-Claw, we have some exploring to do."

Thinking to locate Norvill's squire-to-be, Hart made for the cluster of brightly colored tents that ringed the parade ground, but the lad was nowhere to be found. "That is strange," he commented to the pard, "all the knights' attendants should be here to help their lords make ready for the melee.

Him need wash. Much dirty.

"Of course! That was a nasty mess and smelly, I expect. He has probably ducked out to bathe in the stream below the meadow." They would just have to find him later, but a vague prickle of apprehension disturbed Hart. The youngling was so like him in many ways, small for his age, the butt of much teasing by the older squires.

The former knight could almost taste the bitterness of memory. He knew what the lad was feeling.

Man and pard turned back toward the vendors' area. There would just be time enough to seek out Glodrun. Hart had a proposition for the jewel smith.

When they found him Glodrun was bent over his makeshift workbench tapping on a silver fitting. "Ah, we meet again, Scrivener. And what have you there? A fine beast, if I ever saw one." The jewel smith's glib greeting was not quite genuine. Hart easily recognized an undercurrent of apprehension.

"He is a demi-pard, but I did not come to discuss my companion. I have something you might find interesting." Hart stood quietly while the man carefully arranged his tools and seemed to ponder the statement. Again it was clear to the young scrivener that the jewel smith was more than he appeared.

"So, what would you have to show me?" The heavily jowled man peered up at him.

"May we seek some privacy?" Hart made an effort not to appear furtive.

"Ah, of course!" Rising with much puffing, the smith led the way into a large tent at the back of his area. "Now what is this all about?"

Reaching into his pouch, Hart brought out a palm full of the golden gobbets he had taken from the strange brine pool creatures. At the sight of these, the craftsman let out a low whistle.

"May I examine them more closely?" He reached out a pudgy hand. Taking the gold almost reverently, he turned the pieces about, biting one of them in the age-old manner for trying the metal's purity.

"It is genuine, Glodrun, you can be sure of that." Hart was not about to be taken for a fool. Dealing with the likes of the jewel smith clearly required firmness, to say nothing of caution.

"Indeed, indeed! But where—no, I shan't ask that. It is none of my affair. However, I would know how much of this precious metal you have for sale. You do wish to sell or you wouldn't have come to me. It is obvious that you don't need my assessment of the quality of your 'commodity'." A chuckle rumbled from the heavy man.

“Yes, I would like to sell a quantity of gold. I know well its value and wish to be paid in minted coin, not goods.” Hart stood with folded arms. He also had no intention of revealing how much more gold he possessed.

“Of course, of course. For this I am prepared to pay two guineas.” A calculating look easily gave away the man’s intent. There was no need to employ the Emerald Eye.

“Not likely.” Hart replied. “Three guineas and six shillings is my price. I do not haggle, nor will I abide dishonest dealing.”

“Yes, yes! You shall have your price, young man. Glodrun is honorable—never would I think to cheat you!” The be-ringed hands almost fluttered.

“Well enough. I will let you know if ever I have more to sell.” Taking the coins the smith handed them, the scrivener methodically counted them and put them into his pouch.

“Good day, Merchant. May your dealings always be so honest.” Hart made sure the jewel smith understood that he had some doubt as to the nature of the man’s usual transactions.

Not make happy! Free-Claw’s mental comment carried a definite tone of amusement.

“No, my four-legged friend, he would far rather have spent less and got more—gold and information.” Hart’s laugh rang out as he and the pard strolled toward the food vendors’ area. Both had acquired an appetite, since the morning meal was now but a dim memory.

After satisfying their hunger the former knight and his sleek black companion returned to the open parade ground and found a spot on a small knoll from which to observe the coming action. On either end of the area designated for combat, troops of knights were assembling.

One was led by Sir Lazarous and was comprised chiefly of knights with whom Hart had served. Opposing them was a gathering of outland knights from Gamlin, Tuckgrove and Rathermel; Hart could see by the arms displayed on pennons and surcoats. Scattered amongst them were a few plain shields, men without a lord, seeking to make a name and perhaps find service.

Cheers rose from the crowd that circled the field of honor as a single blast from a battle horn signaled the advance to combat. At once the

earth began to tremble with the pounding of hundreds of hooves as the two forces hurtled toward each other. Meeting in the center with the clash of armor and weapons, the knights laid about them with abandon.

A surge of something akin to blood lust rose briefly inside Hart, but was immediately quenched by memory of the very real agony that accompanied such mock battles. Mock, they might be, but often they turned to genuine disasters. This one was bidding fair to be no exception. Screams of men and squeals from warhorses mingled with battle cries as the scene was near blotted out by the clouds of dust churned by plunging hooves. From time to time a riderless destrier would emerge from the melee, indicating that a hapless knight was down and probably trampled or worse.

As Hart's exhilaration turned to distaste, he suddenly was struck with a shock of recognition. A blank shield he was watching seemed far too small for his equipage and mount. It was—no! Not the young "Sir Muddy"! He could not last many more seconds in that tumult. Even as the former knight gazed in horror, the youth's sword and shield were knocked from his grasp, leaving him defenseless.

With a mental command to Free-Claw to seek out Hesta, Hart pounded down the knoll and snatched the dangling reins of a riderless warhorse. Vaulting easily into the saddle, he kneed the skittish stallion into the melee. Dodging and ducking the randomly aimed blows of the milling knights, he was very aware of his own vulnerability. Beneath his tunic lay no hauberk, no greaves on his legs and no helm upon his head, save the hidden Cap of Knowledge. He needed no special knowledge to warn that Death stalked him.

Pouring all his strength into controlling his mount, he inched toward the spot he had seen the helpless boy. Now Hart must bring his gifted eye into play, for it was well nigh impossible to penetrate the maze of dust, thrashing warriors and plunging horses. There! He caught sight of the youth just as he tumbled from his horse and disappeared into a forest of legs. Swinging low from one side of his mount as far as he dared, the former knight managed to snatch the youngster's upraised hand, just before a huge destrier brought iron shod hooves down in a battle-plunge.

Tugging the slight form up to lie across the saddle in front of him, Hart pulled hard on the reins to spin his horse about. For a brief moment a small break opened before them and kicking the flanks of the now

exhausted mount, he managed to squirt out of the tumult and reach safety.

His charge lay limply now, fainted either from fright, blood loss or likely both. Hart slipped from the saddle and found that his own knees were trembling as he led the animal and its burden to a nearby pavilion. He sent out a hopeful call, "*Free-Claw! Are you near?*"

Near, Man-Friend. Healer with. The calm confidence of the mental response went a long way toward reassuring him.

He lowered the unconscious page to a pallet under an awning just as Free-Claw and Hesta arrived, laden with a basket-full of pots. An ominous red stain was spreading rapidly over the youth's unadorned surcoat. With Hart's aid, the woman stripped the lad of his armor and garments, down to his drawers. Cluck-clucking, the herb woman quickly began to staunch the bleeding from a jagged wound in the boy's side.

"It is a grave wound, Scrivener. There is only so much I can do for him. He needs greater help than I can offer, but I will do what I can." With no further comment the tall woman bent to keep her word.

Knowing that he would only be in the way, Hart paced out of the pavilion feeling more helpless than he had in many months. Why would the boy attempt something so foolish? He knew the danger, the consequence of impersonating a knight. If he survived, he faced a very serious charge, one that could ruin his life! Suddenly anger burned and boiled up in Hart. The torment heaped upon the lad, which he had witnessed: this was at the root. *They should be held accountable.* But, even as the idea formed in his mind, he knew its futility. No, the only thing he could do was see that no one discovered what the boy had done. It was the least he could do to right a wrong.

Chapter ~ Eleven

While the noise of the melee still clashed from the parade ground behind the herb woman's tent, Hart marched restlessly up and down, as if his sentinel steps might protect the injured lad's tenuous hold on life. When Hesta joined him after far too long a period for his peace of mind, she seemed noticeably aged.

"He has lost a great deal of blood. What's more, he has no will to live. It is as if a pall of hopelessness has settled on his soul." The herbalist sat heavily on a stool. "I have only a small Gift for reading the inner recesses of a person's mind, but it is evident that whatever prompted him to do so foolish a thing was somehow locked with a death wish."

Feeling as though someone had plunged a weapon into his own gut, Hart blanched. "But he is so young! Surely his despair could not be that great." However, as he spoke, the former knight knew that the woman had read true. Something must be done to reach the boy before he was entirely lost, mind, body and soul.

As Hesta rose to return to her patient, Hart felt the soft touch of his new companion at his side. **Good man help!**

"Who?" Hart was startled at the urgency of Free-Claw's thought message.

Man with music one. The explanation carried a tinge of impatience, as if the pard grew exasperated at his friend's denseness.

"Oh! You mean the monk Belicaus! But why do you think he can help?" The words were scarcely out of Hart's mouth when the sleek cat flicked his tail and bounded off. The bemused man could do nothing but follow as the animal wove between knots of spectators along the fringe of the parade ground.

Find gray man! The thought bore an undeniable urgency. **Time short!**

Even as the message entered Hart's mind, he spotted Brother Belicaus standing quietly some distance away from the press of people. He was clearly not engaged in the enjoyment of that violent sport. Head bowed, he seemed withdrawn inside of his voluminous cloak.

“Belicaus! Brother Belicaus!” Not quite sure how to make his request, the younger man hailed the monk. “We need your aid. A boy has been gravely hurt.”

Instantly the tall man responded, as though waiting for just such a summons. He snatched up a staff and pouch and followed Hart and the pard back to the herb woman’s tent.

“He’s near death, Brother. Hesta says he has no fight in him and seems to bent on leaving this life.” The words spilled out as they hastened through the grumbling crowd, which Belicaus elbowed aside none too gently.

“I will do what I may.” With this small assurance, the tall man ducked into the dingy space where the pale youth lay on a pallet. Beads of cold sweat had gathered on the boy’s brow and he seemed unconscious still. Hesta stepped aside with a soft sigh of relief.

Kneeling beside the lad, the monk gently passed his right hand over the bandage with which the herb woman had wrapped his wound, while resting his left hand on the boy’s forehead. Belicaus’s lips moved, but no sound issued until at length a subtle change became evident in both patient and care-giver. The pallor that had etched dark shadows across the youth’s face, subsided, giving way to a barely discernable glow.

In turn, the monk’s face now bore great drops of perspiration and his eyes seemed suddenly sunken in their sockets. His head bent nearly to his chest, as with obvious effort he rose to stand over the peacefully sleeping boy. “The crisis is past. He will live.”

Turning to leave, the tall man almost staggered and Hart noticed that he pressed his left hand to his own side as he ducked out of the enclosure.

“Brother, are you all right?” Hesta’s sharp glance missed nothing.

“Well enough.” The monk replied. “I need only rest.”

“Here, take this infusion of coolroot. It will help to restore your strength.” Pressing a small bottle into the weary healer’s hand, the herb woman watched him move away, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“He has a true Gift. Seldom have I seen one able to take to himself the ills of another with such power.” She spoke in a tone of genuine awe.

Free-Claw know. Him good man. Hart nodded in agreement and conveyed the sentiment to the herbalist.

“It would seem that the festival has been a magnet for many Gifted.” The tall woman responded. “Great need calls for great supply.”

With the young patient out of danger, the herb woman shoed Hart and the pard from her tent, declaring that quiet was what the lad needed most.

“I could do with a bit of quiet, myself.” Hart murmured ruefully. The day had more than fulfilled its promise of excitement. However, the sound of trumpets broke into his reflection, reminding him that the ceremony for which the festival had been planned was now about to begin. Rest and quiet would have to wait.

A herald bawled for all to witness the knighting of Norvill von Orstadt, of the House of Moorced. At the sound of the title, a tingle of memory stirred in the scrivener’s mind. *Moorced—the House unrecorded!* Hart thought of his fruitless search to locate Sir Lazarous’s credentials and knew that he must redouble his efforts to seek out the truth concerning the wily Champion.

By now the knights, who had survived the melee relatively unscathed, were assembling in mounted ranks on either side of a raised dais where Lord Stormund motioned Norvill to approach, with Sir Lazarous and Lady Arin standing on either side. The elderly nobleman directed the young man to kneel, then drawing his ornate sword from a jewel-encrusted sheath, bid the candidate swear to uphold the honor and purity of the rank upon which he was about to enter, before slowly tapping Norvill on each shoulder with the flat of the massive blade.

The Lord of Stamglen solemnly intoned: “By all the power that rests in me, I dub thee, Norvill von Orstadt, Knight of the Kingdom, servant of Light. Rise Sir Norvill!” As the words echoed round the parade ground, Hart all but cringed. How could any kin of the devious Champion truly serve the Light? But, perhaps he should not judge the youth by his relative. It remained to be seen whether the new knight would prove a good man and true.

Presenting Sir Norvill with a shield, Lazarous was the picture of a proud sponsor, while Lady Arin demurely strapped on the new knight a fine-tooled leather baldric from which hung a sheathed sword. Lord Stormund commanded a page to fasten spurs to the heels of the

newest knight and, stepping back, lifted his hand, a signal for all assembled to raise a lusty cheer.

“Hail, Sir Norvill! Stamglen! Stamglen!”

As the shouts died away, Hart caught for a moment a flash of something in Lazarous’s look. Was it exultation or speculation? Perhaps both. A subtle warming of the former knight’s Cap of Knowledge meant that he had not misread that. This was but a further step in some complex plan—a plan that could mean only grief for the pawns in the Champion’s game.

One more ritual remained. For this the participants and witnesses trooped in an undulating line from the festival ground, through the village to the Abbey Church of St. Stam. There before Father Corman at the door of the sanctuary, the handfasting of Lady Arin of Gamlin to Sir Norvill von Orstadt culminated the three days of celebration. To most who observed, the bride-to-be was the very picture of happy maidenhood, but to Hart’s Gifted Eye, she presented quite a different appearance.

Evident to only the young scrivener was an aura of Darkness surrounding the couple and lapping at the very portal of the holy chapel. Hart fought rising bile in his throat at this revelation. He could watch no more. Twisting from the scene that appeared outwardly joyful, but was not, he strode through the milling crowd. Before many paces he found himself running as though hounded by Evil personified.

The insistent mind voice of Free-Claw finally brought Hart to himself, but not until he had entirely quit the village and reached a grove of trees fringing a stream on the western edge of Under Stamglen.

Man-friend, eat? Free-Claw want hunt.

“Wha—oh, yes, my friend. It is high time for food. Go you and seek a meal. I will rest here. There is much I need to think on.” Dropping wearily beside a large willow that trailed its branches over the slow moving water, Hart rested his head in his hands. This was almost too much! How could he hope to thwart someone so evil as his old enemy? Who was he to think that he had power enough to combat the Dark?

Thoughts continued their downward spiral for Hart until a quiet tread broke into his moroseness. Looking up, he saw that the mysterious monk-healer, protector of the lovely bard, had followed him.

“Brother Belicaus! I—I didn’t expect—.” Hart stammered in sudden embarrassment at allowing himself to wallow in self-doubt. It felt as if the tall man could read his very soul. But, no, that was unfounded. The monk simply saw him tear out of the village and was showing concern.

“Scrivener, may I join you?” Not waiting for an invitation, the monk lowered himself to a large flat bolder edging the stream. For several long moments neither spoke.

“You are troubled by what has gone before this day.” It was a statement, not a question. Belicaus carefully unbuckled his sword belt, not the customary equipment for a man of the cloth, but useful when it came to providing safety to wandering young lady singers.

“Have I not a reason to be?” Hart could hear the bitterness tinge his own voice. “A fine lad is nearly killed trying to prove himself and put lie to his taunters.”

“Aye, that would have been a great tragedy.” The monk waited again.

“What’s more, I have been witness to things that have instilled a deep dread in me.” Fearing to give more detail, the former knight lapsed into silence.

“Methinks the time is ripe for a story.” With no more explanation than that, the monk dipped his hand into the clear stream, cupped some water, and when he had drunk, launched into an account that, for the time of the telling, quite drove Hart’s depression from him.

The Monk’s Story

Many years ago two babes came in one birthing to a prosperous virgator, a cause for great rejoicing. How potent, how blessed was the man who sired such sons! Surely it was a good omen. This it proved to be, for in time the children grew into stout lads, inseparable and indeed quite valuable to their father, who put them to shepherding his flocks. Living far to the north, they must needs range the sheep across great high fells where dwelled many dangers, especially in lambing time.

The boys, named Pax and Pudens, grew in stature and never failed to turn heads when they returned to the vill for supplies and occasional refreshment. It was thus that one day in the year they reached

majority that they happened to meet a newcomer. A merchant, once a citizen of the community, had returned from traveling far afield and determined to settle there again in his waning years. With him, to the eyes of the brothers, was a truly angelic vision: the merchant's daughter Klinda.

Now the man, having collected spices, fabrics and finely wrought metal wares in many lands, promptly opened a small shop to serve the more affluent villeins. Being well aware of his daughter's charm, he set her to minding the place for several hours each day. Before long, not surprisingly, the Shepherd brothers found reason as often as possible to visit the merchant's place of business, usually one at a time, since the sheep must not be left untended.

Nor was it a cause for wonder that both young men fell totally in love with the fair Klinda. But, what of the maiden? The brothers were so alike, that it was hard even for their parents to tell them apart, let alone those outside the family. How could the lass make a choice between the two fine fellows?

As was the custom and still is, fathers decided upon whom to bestow their daughters' hands in marriage, thus the merchant determined that Pudens (elder by some eight minutes) should be the lucky man. The wily businessman saw that the lad would be a fine mate for his cherished child, and the virgator recognized the benefit in uniting his family with so prosperous a house. What was more, Klinda was an only child.

Long so close, the two brothers suddenly found a wedge being forced between them, albeit a lovely one. Not given to anger, they never argued or fought, simply drew apart, having less and less conversation. Indeed, slipping away at every opportunity to pursue his love, the elder Pudens often left Pax alone to brood on the mountainside with none to share his misery but the bleating sheep.

The day came at last when banns were read followed later by the handfasting before the tiny village chapel. Joy was shared by all but one. The younger brother stood silently clenching his teeth as the words floated over the gathered witnesses to the happy event. In the heart of Pax dwelt no peace, only bitter disappointment—and a seed of a dark plan.

Who can say what happens to a young man thwarted in love? A sort of madness seemed to take hold of Pax. Brooding more and more on his loss, he decided to seek one moment of joy and revenge.

The day for the wedding was set to coincide with Candlemas. At a time when the flocks were safely in folds for the season of storms, folk were free to join the festivities. Alewives busily prepared for the bride ale, the brewing to be sold for the benefit of the happy couple. Klinda's merchant father generously offered free spices to the village women who would prepare the wedding feast, while the bridegroom's parents donated meat, cheese and bread. All was in readiness, including Pax's plan.

Carefully secreting a sleeping potion acquired from a traveling herbalist, the younger brother waited for the right moment to slip it into the groom's drinking horn. It would also cause a certain increase in the body's flow of water, so he watched with pounding pulses as Pudens excused himself from the table to visit the privy.

Few noticed Pax leave right after his brother, the festivities having reached a peak with music, dancing and laughter filling the merchant's greatroom where the wedding supper was progressing, to say nothing of the effects of great quantities of ale.

Lying in wait for Pudens to relieve himself, Pax silently slipped behind his now tottering brother and neatly enhanced the effects of the potion with a rap on the back of his head, not enough to injure, but sufficient to put him out for the purpose at hand.

Lifting the limp bridegroom, Pax easily carried his brother to an unused root cellar. There he divested Pudens of his wedding garments, exchanging them for his own. Leaving his slumbering brother he returned to the wedding feast with his plan well in hand, for none would know the difference.

Of the hours to follow, little detail need be given, save that Pax's absence from the feast was briefly remarked and set down to loser's pique. All knew that he had longed to be in Pudens's place, to no avail. How near the truth was the opinion of the guests, only Pax knew.

When at last alone with Klinda, he lost himself in the moment. A lifetime of longing and loving must be folded into those few hours and Pax did this with all the emotion that had built in him for many months. Lying spent and in a conflict of fulfillment, guilt, and impending loss, he softly kissed the flower petal lips that were so near.

The exquisite bride slept on his shoulder and murmured low in her contented slumber one word, a name, which pierced the pretender's consciousness with all the force of a lightening bolt.

Suddenly the full weight of what he had done crashed in on Pax. Cautiously lifting the sleeping bride's head from his embrace, he rose and snatched up the discarded clothing on the floor. "What have you done? What have you done!" The words thundered in his mind as he ducked out of the tiny cottage that was the virgator's gift to his eldest son.

Snow had begun to fall and none were about so late in the night. Good! He hastened to the cellar where Pudens lay drugged. With hands that trembled almost uncontrollably he once more exchanged garments with his brother, then grunting, he lifted the weight that somehow seemed much heavier than before. Sweating despite the biting cold, he managed to reenter the cottage.

Stripping Pudens of clothing before entering the bed place, he gently lifted the cover, holding his breath in a spasm of fear, lest Klinda should awaken. But, spent from the consummation of the wedding night, she slumbered on, oblivious to the perfidy. With a final effort, Pax managed to roll his brother onto the low bed and pull the cover over him.

With one last grief-filled look at the love he had held in stolen embrace, Pax ducked out into the swirling snowy darkness, fleeing as if all the demons of the Dark were on his trail.

The monk paused in the telling of the tale, his face pale with recalling. It was obvious to Hart that this was no random story, but rather the personal experience of a man bedeviled by memory.

Taking up the thread again, the tall man continued. "Yes, my friend, you have the right of it. I, who am now called Brother Belicaus, was once Pax, brother to Pudens Shepherd. I will not trouble you with the account of the years I wandered trying to rid myself of the guilt of my crime, my sin." A haunted expression passed like a fleeting shadow across the craggy features.

"I found no relief in any pursuit, whether of labor or war. Oh, I learned much, became skilled as a fighter, joining myself to a warring nobleman's guard. My strength developed in the years of sheep herding served me well, but my heart was still troubled. It was not until I met a lay brother who told me of a remote abbey where men

such as I could go and seek peace that my life took a different direction.

“As a final resort I went with him to see if it would hold true for me. For a time, it did. I found fulfillment in caring for sick and injured. It was then that my Gift became evident. In some small measure it helped, but never quite expelled the burden I carried.” The monk shifted his position and stared into the slow moving water of the stream.

“When I could bear it no more, I resolved to return to my village and suffer whatever consequences that might occur. I had to face those against whom I had done such wrong.”

At a lengthy pause, Hart ventured a question. “How many years had passed from the time of—of” he couldn’t quite put name to the event.

Belicaus scratched his chin and thought for a moment. “It would be nearly three hands of years. The journey from the mountain abbey to my childhood home took about a fortnight for, along the way I encountered a village in serious need of a healer. A bullock had run amok during one of the boon workdays, gored several men and trampled a young child. I did what I could, though some were too far-gone with wounds turned foul. It left me very weak and I had to rest for three days before resuming my travel.”

“I reached home—if it could yet be called that—just at dusk one evening in late summer. As I walked up the dusty street, a young lass bounded out of a door I remembered as belonging to the merchant’s shop. The shock I felt on seeing her was so great that it nearly undid me. It could not be—yet she was so like—Klinda!” A distant look lay on the monk’s face as he relived the moment.

“She hailed me brightly, ‘Brother, welcome! If you need lodging, rap on that door. My papa will gladly offer you food and shelter for the night.’ With that she hitched up her kirtle and darted down the street, calling over her shoulder, ‘Tell him Brydwen sent you!’”

“Brydwen!” Hart exclaimed, suddenly realizing that some pieces were falling into place making a clear picture.

“Yes,” Belicaus continued, “the same. I did as she had bid me, but my heart was near in my mouth when I knocked on the door. A stooped woman answered and peered up at me with rheumy eyes. When I

repeated Brydwen's message, she nodded and beckoned me to follow. Almost, I turned to run. Could I go through with this? Screwing up my courage I walked into the low ceiled room and approached a figure seated in the shadows, gazing out of an open window."

"'Yes, who is it?' A much shrunken, but still recognizable figure turned face to me—Klinda's father. I bowed and introduced myself as Brother Belicaus. I quailed at naming myself Pax in this house. He welcomed me and called for the servant woman to bring refreshment.

"When we had sat a while engaged in pleasant conversation, I ventured a question regarding the girl I had met on the street. 'Brydwen is your granddaughter?' I knew what the answer would be.

"'Yes,' he replied, 'the image of her dear mother, my devoted daughter.' A tear crept down his withered cheek.

"'Your daughter?' I struggled to keep the trembling within me from my voice.

"'Late daughter. She died when Brydwen was born, victim of a flux.'"

"'Wha—what of the child's father?' Now I could barely withhold the emotion that gripped me.

"'Pudens? Why, he has been dead these fourteen years. Took a chill the night Brydwen was born. Didn't seem to care for life when he lost Klinda. Even the babe could not draw him from Death's clutch.'

"All the grief and guilt that had festered in me suddenly burst forth and I wept openly and long. 'What ails you, Brother?' The old man struggled to his feet and reached a quivering hand toward me.

"'I am Pax' I said. At that he dropped as though pole axed."

Chapter ~ Twelve

Long moments of heavy silence hung between Hart and the monk. What response could he make to such a revelation? Almost the younger man felt the shock that had felled the old man. He waited for Belicaus to continue.

“I tried to break his fall and managed to grasp his shoulders before he could strike his head. *No!* I thought, *let me not be the cause of more evil on this family!* But, seeking for his life force, I found that he yet lived, but barely. I lifted the old man and put him on the bed at the far end of the room. Now I must needs exert my skill as never before. I could not allow this man to die! Much remained to pass between us—questions made and questions answered.

“At length he groaned and gazed up at me but not with the face of hatred I expected. ‘Pax? Pax, yes it is you. I see it now. But where have you been these many years? Why did you disappear that night?’

“I could only stare amazed. Could it be that he did not know? I shook my head, unable for a few moments to speak. ‘You know, sir, that I was greatly grieved when you chose my brother to wed your daughter.’ I began.”

“‘Aye, that is so.’ With effort the old man levered himself up. ‘But that was no reason to desert your family, your village and be as one dead to us!’

“‘Nay,’ I responded, ‘there is more. I should think you might have learned the true reason. Did not Klinda or Pudens ever speak—but no, they would not. Tell me this, old father, how went it for them during the time she was carrying? Did they seem happy?’

“‘Never more so,’ the old merchant gazed upward, seeming to search his memory. ‘Two young folk in love and joyfully awaiting their firstborn, how could they not be happy? But—wait, I have not thought of this in many years: while Klinda was lying-in, indeed as her life was slipping away, she bade me promise that should you ever return, I would give you a message. It seemed passing strange to me, but I took it for the rambling of a mind overwrought by what she was suffering.’

"I gripped the frail man's hand and leaned close. 'Tell me, by all that's holy, what said she?'

"A spasm of coughing wracked the frail man and I realized he was not far from his final journey too. *Oh, grant he will remember!* Within me warred so much: fear and guilt, pity and a deep need to know.

"'Sh—she said to tell you the last word you had heard her speak was no mistake. Then she made me promise to care for her poor babe.'

"Overcome with the remembered grief, the old man lay back on the bed. What could I say! The turmoil in me now was greater than any I had known since that cruel night. One thing was certain: I could not reveal to this dying man the full truth. Nothing would be served by such a confession. Let him think that my departure was from some hard word spoken or for—what? It scarce mattered now.

"At that moment the girl who was the very image of her mother burst in and, seeing her grandfather lying so, cried out and flung herself down beside his bed. 'Papa, Papa!' A wrinkled hand reached trembling to caress her flaming auburn hair.

"'My Heart, my Brydwen, I must leave you now.' Struggling for breath, he continued, 'Here is someone sent by the angels to care for you.'

"'Nooo—Papa, I want you!' Burying her face against the thin chest, she battled to hold back the sobs."

"'Don't cry, lass. This is your uncle, long lost to us. Once he was known as Pax; now you can see he has a new name, Brother Belicaus. Trust—him. He will—protect you.'"

"It had taken long tortuous moments to force those words and when finished, they proved the old merchant's last. I stood stunned. Scarcely an hour gone, I had entered, bent on relieving myself of a past burden of guilt and now—? The servant woman had returned to take charge of the weeping girl, but I knew that ultimately I must take up a duty laid upon me as—an uncle?

"No! It would be as a father—? I knew! You see, the name Klinda whispered as she lay in my arms was 'Pax'. *She knew!* Though I will never know what passed between husband and wife, it is likely that Pudens never knew, for she did not tell him. In so much she gave him one blessed happy year."

Faltering, the monk covered his face and wept unashamed for several moments, then continued, “How better to atone than to devote myself for what remained of my life to this lovely girl, so bound to me, by blood, by a trust laid on me by her dying grandsire and by, yes, love.”

When at last the monk ceased speaking, he looked at Hart with an expression of near pleading. “So now, you know why I travel with the bard and why I would gladly give my life for her.”

Hart sat wordless for some time. So many thoughts tumbled through his mind, but finally one question rose paramount: “Brother, why? Why share this with me, who am little more than a stranger to you?”

The tall monk pondered the question, as if not an unexpected one. “I am not quite sure myself, friend, but having observed you these past few days, I sensed in you someone who has known grief and loss. Though I long ago confessed my sin and believe I have been forgiven, I have been haunted by the need to share the story with one who would understand. I could not tell Brydwen nor her grandfather; it would have served no good purpose. Somehow, now I feel I may put this all behind me and experience the healing of my soul that I have sought so long.”

A deep chord seemed to reverberate in the younger man. “Thank you, brother. It is a gift you have given me, one that I will keep safe. None shall know from me what you have told.”

“Well taken, lad. One thing more: as he who bears the sacred task of ensuring the welfare of one Brydwen, I know that I can not only entrust my story to you, but my loved one as well—if need be.” With that the monk rose and, saluting the former knight, turned back toward the village, leaving Hart to sort out conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Dusk had begun to lay a soft tint to the huddled tofts that fringed the vill when Free-Claw joined Hart. Together they returned to the house of the Reeve, ending the long and eventful day. Already deserted by the scores of festival-goers from the outlying manors, Under Stamglen seemed to have settled back into its sleepy customs.

What secrets lie beneath your calm, little town? Hart thought as he passed along the twisting street. He wasn’t sure he wanted to discover, but knew he had little choice. A task lay before him, not of his choosing, but one from which he would not shrink.

The close of the festival required Hart's return to his tasks as scrivener to Moklin. The Reeve was busily totaling the monies received from chapmen and venders when his assistant took his place to address a line of villeins waiting to pay routine fees owed the Lord of the Manor.

First in line and none too happy at being kept waiting, came Alif Miller to report the amount of his multure for the year thus far. As the miller called out the quantities of grain he had ground and the portion legally withheld for himself, Hart's gift began to manifest. His Emerald Eye twitched once as he looked up.

"Miller, there is somewhat amiss with your accounts. I believe you have a mistake here." The scrivener spoke quietly, not wishing to broadcast an accusation to others in the room.

"What!" The man fairly shouted, "Nay, this is the right of it. There is no mistake!"

"You affirm that the volume of rye was so?" Hart indicated the figure the miller had given. "And of wheat and barley, this much?" Again the he sought to give the blustering man a chance to correct the amount.

"Of course! Think you that I would cheat Lord Stormund?" Aggrieved self-assurance wrapped like a cloak about the miller.

"That is just what I think." Hart returned even more quietly and in so doing loosed the full power of his Gifted Eye on the culprit, though he needed not to uncover it for so petty a thief.

Alif ceased to argue and would have been seen to go pale, had he not been already whitened from his milling. Streaks began to appear on his face where sweat trickled to wash away the flour dust. By now his odd behavior had caught the attention of all in the room, especially the Reeve.

"What passes?" Moklin asked, his brows arching.

"Ask the miller." Hart replied.

"Well, Alif?" The Reeve pressed the fidgeting man.

"False accusation—he—argh!" Seeking to deny his false accounting, the miller was suddenly taken with a fit of choking. When he finally

could catch his breath, he looked at Hart with an altogether different expression.

At length he ducked his head and spoke. "Reeve, the scrivener here has found a mistake in my account. I must return to my mill and correct it." Spinning on his heel, the dust-coated man fled the room as though pursued.

The Reeve watched him depart then turned. "I venture to say you earned your keep today, Hart." With that he resumed his own work and could be heard to chuckle softly.

Several more villeins made report to Hart, but others suddenly seemed seized by a need to postpone their business with the office of the Reeve. It was clear none cared to subject themselves to the scrutiny of this new scrivener.

When the morning's accounts were completed, Moklin rose and moved to the desk where Hart sat. "I think it might be well for you to accompany me this afternoon. I ride out to take stock of the local virgators. Not all have fulfilled their obligation to Lord Stormund. Quit rents and chevage are due for third quarter by the end of this seven-day and we must make sure that none have defaulted or 'forgotten'." He winked and called to the widow who served as his housekeeper.

When they had eaten and packed provisions for two days' trek about the Manor, Moklin and Hart mounted horses provided by the Lord of Stamglen for just such business. It took some coaxing and tight-reining to induce the steeds to accept Free-Claw, but the demi-pard was not about to be left behind. Passing through furrowed plots and into the open countryside, the Reeve spoke.

"On the morrow we cross over into the Manor of Lord Mory. Several of our villeins asked leave last quarter to take up plots in his vill of Tuckgrove. Seems there were a number of places emptied by a plague of summer ague three years gone, but to remain outside Lord Stormund's Manor they must pay a small fee. I don't want any thinkin' they can slip off and conveniently neglect what they owe."

"Is that why we lead an extra pack horse?" Hart had wondered at adding the animal, when they had small need of one to carry their supplies.

“Aye. Most pay with a capon or a ring or two of barley. Coin is scarce these days.” Moklin urged his mount to a pace more brisk. “We’d best pick it up. I’ve no desire to sleep on the ground, come night.”

“Nor I.” Hart readily agreed.

Stopping at several assarts that marked the western limit of the Manor of Stamglen, the officer and his scrivener had collected a respectable number of quarterly quit-rent fees when the early darkness began to descend. Still, they managed to reach a tiny inn that served the Tuckgrove Road. Fervently thankful to see the welcoming ale stake that beckoned them within, the two men saw to the stabling of their animals in a low byre behind the alehouse. The pard had melted into the surrounding woods bent on hunting. **Leave open window. Free-Claw join later.** The familiar, almost commanding, tone of the cat’s mind voice amused Hart.

A woman, clearly beyond her prime and stooped from years of labor in the fields, greeted them as they kicked the muck of the stable from their boots and ducked through the low door. “Welcome, Reeve! And who be this fellow?”

“Thanks, Mav. This is Hart, my new scrivener.” Moklin dropped the pack with his record sheets, quills and the few coins he had collected from the more affluent virgators they had visited.

“Pears this is my lucky day,” the alewife wiped her brow with a stained apron. “The Ale Taster and Reeve visit m’ humble inn, all same day.”

“Well, at least I won’t have to report you to the Bailiff for trying to pass off un-tasted ale.” Moklin chuckled. “Not that I was worried. Your ale is ever predictable, if not the best.”

Mav aimed a mock cuff at the Reeve, who easily ducked it. “I s’pose you’ll be needing a room.”

“Aye, you don’t expect us to sleep in here, do you?” Hart was in hearty agreement with his employer’s answer. He glanced about the room, noticing a pair of shadowy figures seated in a far corner.

The hostess brought bowls of mutton stew and some hard bread that was surprisingly tasty. “Ye can tak’ the best room then.” At that the woman cackled loudly and returned to her kitchen.

“Best room? Only room, she means,” came Moklin’s dry comment.

When they had consumed the meal and gone to check once more on the horses, Hart and Moklin withdrew to the small guest room, reserved for just such patrons on business for the Lord of the Manor.

Tossing his blanket on a pile of rushes in one corner, Hart yawned and stretched. "I could sleep on a bed of nettles. Must be growing soft with so much account keeping."

"You'll toughen up a bit before we've done this circuit, lad." The Reeve commented. "Road to Tuckgrove is no easy ride. I hear tell there were some washouts on St. John's Day. Rained somethin' fierce then."

Before pulling his cloak about him and wrapping in the blanket, the scrivener remembered to unlatch the shuttered window for his feline companion. Sleep was not long in coming to both men, however, Hart roused slightly when the pard slipped silently into the room and nestled comfortably against him. A softly vibrating purr signaled that Free-Claw's hunt had apparently been successful.

But an unbroken night's rest was not to be for the two men and one cat. Some time had passed before the door to the lone guest room softly opened and a hooded figure eased across the threshold, bent on—thievery or worse. As the intruder stood quietly for a moment and gestured for another to follow, a night-dark missile launched itself at the foremost one. Blended cat- and man-screams brought both Reeve and scrivener to their feet, knives to hand, but further defense was unnecessary.

One man lay cowering while his companion dove through the open window and clattered away into the darkness, certain, without doubt, that no less than a demon had attacked. No demon, but one very self-satisfied pard perched on the chest of the trapped would-be thief and rested a paw against the man's throat, a quartet of deadly claws unsheathed and at the ready.

"Get this cursed beast off me!" wailed the intruder. "I was only lookin' for a place to sleep."

"Likely tale. Looking for a bit of booty, rather." Moklin struck flint and steel to light a candle and thrust it near the quivering man, seeking to identify him. Beneath his shaggy beard, four thin red lines oozed blood.

Him bad! Hurt Free-Claw. The pard knew all too well who this was.

“Yes! It’s the beast tamer, only he’s changed his gear. I’d know that ugly face anywhere.” Hart’s hand twitched on his silver knife. He admired Free-Claw’s restraint. Another finger’s breadth and the man would be beyond mercy. Obviously the churl had recognized Hart as the pard’s rescuer and was seeking revenge for the break-up of his vicious session at the festival ground.

“Seems I remember the Bailiff ran you off. I can’t prove your intent, so I’ll let you go, but take this as fair warning: show your face on the Stanglen Manor again and you will end up much the worse for it.” Moklin’s voice carried all the authority of his office and no small amount of personal animosity.

Next time Free-Claw pay. The pard backed, stiff-legged and all hackles up, allowing the brutish fellow to scramble to his feet.

I think he knows you would not withhold just revenge another time, Free-Claw. Hart’s thought message was for the cat alone.

Without a backward look, the beast tamer lurched out of the door and was heard stamping across the common room and out into the night.

“Do you reckon he learned his lesson?” Moklin pushed the door closed and dropped a bar across it, just in case the answer might be not to his liking.

“Who knows?” Hart also closed the shutter and likewise barred the window. There was no need to further chance interrupted sleep.

Him gone this time. Big fear Free-Claw’s anger. Self-assurance rang in the pard’s comment as it entered Hart’s thoughts.

Settling again to try and sleep for what remained of the night, Hart was heartily grateful for the sharp senses of the small pard, to say nothing of his sharp defenses.

Chapter ~ Thirteen

Having had their night's rest disturbed, Reeve and scrivener lingered abed beyond their custom and so reentered the Tuckgrove Road long after sunrise. Hart thought it was just as well, for Moklin had spoken true when he warned of the difficulties they would encounter. Great sections of the track were gouged away by streams that had swollen from heavy rainfall; however the waters had fortunately subsided and no longer added to the perils of passing that way.

Several times they were required to dismount and lead their horses over particularly dangerous spots where fair sized boulders and piles of storm wrack blocked the path. "I like this not," Hart gazed about. "It looks a perfect place for outlaws. In fact, some of these piles of branches and such have the appearance of being placed by hands, not flood waters."

"Aye, it would be well for the Manor Lords to send men to clear this away. No decent traveler can be sure of safety otherwise." Moklin grunted as he thrust a stubborn log aside.

"Who is responsible for this road?" The scrivener tugged hard on his horse's bridle to aid the animal over a tricky bit.

"It is shared by both Lord Stormund and Lord Mory, since the road serves both manors equally." Having reached the end of the washout, the Reeve mounted and urged his horse into a swift trot. "Come, we must cover some leagues yet."

As they came within site of Tuckgrove, a red haired lad scurried away from where he had been poking about in the edge of the forest. "We will be announced." Moklin chuckled. "The Reeve of Stamglen is already known in these parts, so I venture there will be a welcome."

True to his prediction, a small group of villeins had gathered at the edge of the village, some with baskets and others clasping squawking chickens.

"We bin waitin' fur ye, Reeve." A toothless man bobbed his head in greeting.

“Just so, Tofter Butts.” Moklin dismounted and motioned Hart to join him. “This is my scrivener. He will record your chevage and mind, he misses naught.”

“We be all ‘ere, save Cadver. ‘E run off when ‘e ‘eared ye wer comin’.” The man fidgeted as though he would be held responsible for the missing man.

“We’ll make note of that, Butts. You can tell Cadver for me, that if he does not bring or send his fee by Michaelmas, he will be fined at the next Hallmote. Cheaper it is to pay the chevage when due.”

“Oh, aye, Reeve! We knows tha’.” The assembled tofters pressed forward, anxious to present their various fees as Moklin called out each in turn. Hart carefully notated the name and what was paid.

When all had been completed to the Reeve’s satisfaction, the two men moved to a small cottage where they purchased pots of verjuice and some maslin before quitting the village. Both were anxious to pass the dangerous portion of the return trip well before the sunset could catch them away from safe haven.

As they neared the crossing of the Gamlin-Stamglen Road, Hart was suddenly reminded of the Herb Woman’s invitation. “...come to the montjoy on the Gamlin-Tuckgrove crossroad after moonset....” He turned in the saddle to address Moklin.

“Reeve, by your leave, I wish to bide in this area for a time. I—I have business with someone I met at the festival.” He knew the explanation sounded lame, but he could think of nothing better at the moment.

Moklin raised an eyebrow, but nodded. “As you wish, Hart. You have discharged your duty well these past few days. You are entitled to some time of your own.” With that the Reeve turned his horse, leading the pack animal, in the direction of Stamglen.

A little way further along the Tuckgrove Road stood what was scarcely more than a hovel, but an ale stake proclaimed it a place of welcome for travelers. Hart urged his tired horse toward the low building, where withes showed knobbily through the eroding daub surface. A wisp of smoke curled from the peak of roof sorely in need of fresh thatch. *At least they will have ale and not that foul verjuice*, he thought hopefully as he dismounted.

As the scrivener entered he had to catch his breath at the odors assailing him. No stranger to such, he swallowed hard and reached in his pouch for his own ale pot. At least he knew it would be clean and the malt that the alewife served him seemed clear and fresh. To his surprise it was some of the best he had tasted since returning to Stamglen. "My compliments, Alewife! This is truly fine ale." He finished the pot full and held it out for a refill.

"Thank 'ee, Sor. Tatsy tries to make it good. Be n't much else to bring folk 'eer to me place." The woman grinned and poured more for him.

"Is there some place I can leave my horse for a few hours and find him safe when I return?" Hart looked about the smoky room, but saw that they were alone.

"Oh, aye. There be an old byre just at t' edge o' me plot. Ye can put 'im there, but there ain't no provender." She looked expectantly at him.

"That will do. I have some feed for him." Hart rose and, paying for his ale, gave the alewife an extra coin. "This is for the use of the byre and safe-keeping of my mount. Is there anyone who can keep an eye on him?"

"Me boy." She nodded, turning to call out in a strident tone, "Tad! Come tak this man's 'orse and see 'im safe in the byre."

"An extra coin will be yours when I come for him." Hart addressed the small boy who limped into the room at the call. The lad ducked his head and scrambled out to fetch the horse, the scrivener following close enough to hear him croon softly to the animal as he took hold of the bridle.

"There is fodder in the pack hanging from the saddle." Hart called as boy and horse disappeared behind the hut.

Free-Claw, who had been off hunting again, quietly joined him as Hart drew his cloak more closely, to stride back to the crossroad. It would be full dark by the time he reached the montjoy but moonset would be still an hour or so off. Feeling in his pouch for the token Hesta had given him, he found it and enjoyed the slight fragrance that drifted from it as it responded to the warmth of his hand.

Reaching the montjoy, the scrivener stood for a few moments looking up at the miniature tower-like monument in the faint moonlight. He wondered briefly who had erected this ancient marker and what

might be its significance, if any, beyond the marker for a crossroad. He remembered reading in one of Owlglass's volumes that crossroads were known to be places of Power, but no touch of Talent was evident to his Gifted sense.

Much Power, hide now. Free-Claw's evaluation made good logic. Not all Power was manifest until needed.

At length he sat on the wide pedestal of the montjoy and leaned back, appreciating the chance to relax after the hours of less than comfortable travel. When he dozed a bit, Hart was jerked alert by a distinct tingle in his headpiece. Free-Claw began a deep rumbling purr, definitely not a warning, however; someone was approaching.

The dense darkness that followed the setting of the moon covered the countryside, but Hart's Emerald Eye clearly distinguished the form of a cowl-draped figure. As it drew closer he could see that the long robe covering the—man it must be, for it was too large by far to be feminine—was dark red, almost the color of old blood.

Wordlessly the man beckoned to him with an open palm. As Hart stood and looked closer, he could see a stone lying there, the mate to the one he held. The scent of both seemed to visibly intertwine and surround them. Turning, the red-cowled guide stepped from the road onto a hitherto unseen path that wound toward a distant copse.

Hart followed, his otherworldly senses growing more intensely alert with every step. He became vaguely aware of small animals thrusting their heads out of the surrounding thicket from time to time to watch them furtively, then disappear as quickly as they had appeared. After a brief walk, the two men entered the grove of trees and wended their way toward what was now a faintly flickering glow beneath a giant oak.

Drawing near, the Hart could see that the glow was emanating from a large stone that nestled beneath the venerable tree. Almost it seemed to undulate with a myriad of colors as four figures, cowled as was his guide, stood waiting behind it. He did not need their voiced greetings to recognize who was gathered, tiny Soorta, Owlglass with his wolf friend, Hesta and even Brother Belicaus!

"Welcome, Scrivener Hart!" Four voices joined as one.

"It is well that you chose to respond to my invitation." Hesta stepped forward, throwing back her cowl as did each of the others.

“How could I refuse? Curiosity alone would have brought me.” Amusement tinted the younger man’s reply.

Turning to see who had been his guide, Hart felt a twinge of recognition, but took a moment to realize who was the tall fifth member of the Gathering of the Gifted.

“Yes, it is I, Ibed al Zahr.” The dusky skinned man bowed and executed his distinctive salute. His garb beneath the dark cowl hinted of the opulence of a successful merchant.

“The chapman! Of course. Now I remember you from the festival.” Hart bowed in return.

Gesturing all to take seats around the glowing stone, Hesta spoke. “We have called you here to add your Gift with ours, Scrivener Hart, because it would seem that grave need for the Power of Light has arisen.”

“Aye, lad, have you not sensed it?” Owlglass spoke for the first time. Did the wolf Softstep nod at his side?

All sense. Free-Claw added his thought and from the responses around the circle, Hart realized that he was not alone in receiving the message.

Soorta stood. “Each one here has a Gift of Power, all different from the others, but all vital. We have come because something is stirring, something of the Dark. Long have I ‘watched’ over this land. My Gift is ‘Seeing’ like the Sybil of old. I am, however, bound in what I may reveal from that ‘sight’. Often I know much of what is to come, be it grief or joy, loss or gain, death or life, but all that I can ‘see’ now is that a great evil is awaking. What think you, my friends? Have you sensed aught?”

As Soorta resumed her seat, Hesta took her place. “Something is gravely amiss. Never have I had such strange results in the employment of my herbs and simples. Those tried and tested remedies that have wrought cures and brought ease for time out of memory, now—they are somehow different. I am at a loss to know why. No longer can I be sure of the effect of a potion or a philter. For one who lives by such, I am afraid, not just for myself and my prosperity, but for those I serve. To bring harm when my sole purpose is to aid—is—unthinkable.” Overcome with the weight of her own words, the herb woman almost crumpled to her seat beside Owlglass.

The hermit rose in turn to give his report. “Long years have I moved freely about the wild lands, learning the secrets of what grows there, living peaceably with the beasts. Not so now. No longer can I be sure of my own safety. Were it not for Softstep here, I would not even have made the journey to this place. Fell beasts roam the forest, the like of which no one living has seen. Did I not have greater knowledge from the ancient records in my library—I would not recognize some of the creatures abroad in the wild. Yes, there is somewhat gravely wrong in the unseen fabric of our land!” Seeming almost to age before the eyes of the assembly, the rustic wanderer sat heavily on a mossy log.

A knot of cold fear coiled inside of Hart. What was happening? These people of Power had helped to make him what he now was. If they were so beset, what could he hope to accomplish, fronting the evil he knew dwelt in Stanglen?

Stepping forward now was Brother Belicaus. “It has been given me to assimilate for a time the ills and hurts of others that they might find healing. Like you, my friend,” he looked to Owlglass, “I have been staggered by the intensity of some deep disturbance in the souls and bodies of those I serve. Just the day gone, I was called to the bedside of a child, only to find that which had seized the little one was far too powerful for my Gift. Try as I might to delve into the source of its illness, I met with a wall of Darkness. The child died in my arms!” Shaking with silent sobs, the monk could say no more.

For long moments the group sat motionless, none speaking. The two Gifted beasts rose and paced about the circle, clearly joining in the pain of those united with the monk’s grief. Free-Claw moved to the monk’s side and laid a paw on his knee. In a rare display of compassion, the pard rasped a pink tongue along the tear-stained cheek.

Raising his head, Belicaus smiled. “Thank you, small one. You have ministered to me as I might to another in a time of need.”

Finally the chapman rose and cleared his throat, almost hesitant to speak. “I am not of this land, being come from a far country, but I too have a Gift. I bear the Touch that Tells, which came into play during my time at the festival. I happened to be in conversation with Sprell, the Cutler, when he asked my opinion of an object he had received on barter. I agreed to examine the thing, but soon came to regret that ever I had done so.

“Sprell drew out a slender leather sheath, no thicker than two finger widths. From it he drew a weapon of ancient craft, of that I was certain ere I had touched it. And, oh, when I dared take it in my hand—such evil as it nearly staggered me—flooded from the stiletto, for that is what I could see it was.

“With all the control I could muster, I carefully placed the wretched blade on the cutler’s bench and bent closer as though to examine it further. What had come to my Touch was all that I needed to know, however. A tool of the Dark, it was obviously designed to penetrate between the links of a knight’s mail, so slender it was. What was more, the hilt had been fashioned from the thumb bone of a prince of the Dark Arts; that hilt near writhed in my hold. I know not the name of the one whose bone it was, but never have I handled so evil an object. For something so old to bear still the force I sensed, it must indeed be truly in origin, most fell!” The chapman shuddered visibly at the memory.

He continued, “I gave some answer to Sprell about the great age of the piece, but said naught of its true character. Alerted, though, I made it my business to see what would become of the evil weapon. My suspicions were further roused when a furtive looking man approached the cutler later that evening and exchanged a fat purse for the slender instrument. I bid my servant watch my goods and slipped quietly after him to see where he was bound.

“I managed to follow him to the castle where he entered by the postern gate, seeming well known by the guard there. I slipped past the ramp to that gate and, approaching the wall of the castle, laid my hands thereon, seeking what knowledge I might gain. Little came to me in any detail, but the very real sense of a presence, deep within the bowels of Stamglen, gripped me with a fear I have not known since as a lad I was frightened by tales of demons and djinns. Sadly, this is no tale.” Great sweat beads stood on the dark skin of Ibed’s forehead. Hart knew well the touch of that sort of fear.

When the merchant from the East had resumed his place beneath the oak, Hesta spoke. “So, there we have it: nameless, faceless, evil forebodings, curious pollutions of healing herbs and potions, fell and fearsome beasts, ills that cannot be treated, weapons of the Dark. All point to a disturbance in the magical fabric that overlays this land, one that only those who are Gifted with Talent can detect. For this reason each of us in his or her own way has become aware, though

only in part. But, come, Scrivener Hart, what have you to add to this? Surely that Gifted Eye of yours has revealed much as you move about Stamglen.” Hesta paused and all turned to gaze on him.

Hart stood to give account of what he had thus far observed, but somehow felt a confusion rise within himself as to the true nature and source of his suspicions. He felt his Eye drawn to Soorta and caught the slightest shake of her head. No, he thought, *she does not wish me to speak yet of what I have seen*. Instead, he searched for words to share his fears without revealing what he had seen in the vaults below the castle. “Yes, I too have been made aware of evil in many forms in Stamglen. I believe I may have found clues to the source, but can not say surely until I have opportunity to delve further.”

Hesta nodded. “That is well, Hart. We will give you that chance. Only do not take too much upon yourself. You are but newly come to your Gift and have yet much to learn of Power. Perhaps the most important lesson you will ever learn is that some battles must never be fought alone. To that purpose we will form this night a pact among us. If any one of us finds need, we will seek the others for their strength—the strength of the Gathering of the Gifted.” Having spoken thus, she reached hands out to those on either side of her. One by one Soorta, Owlglass, Belicaus, Ibed and Hart joined hands with Hesta around the glowing stone. The circle complete, two silent forms pushed in to join the bond, Softstep at Owlglass’s left and Free-Claw on Hart’s.

Soorta spoke, “By the Light we here do pledge our Gifts in readiness against all that is evil. We come together to confront the Dark, by any Power we posses. So say we all?”

As one the assembled ones answered, “So say we all!” And the growls of four-footed members echoed the words confirming the pact.

As the circle of clasped hands broke apart Owlglass raised his voice, “If need arise, as many as can come will meet again at this place. The signal will be carried by these our friends-in-fur.”

We talk. Free-Claw made it clear that he understood as the company made farewells and parted with much to think upon and a plan of action, though scarcely specific, still one that offered a measure of reassurance to each.

Chapter ~ Fourteen

Choosing not to return to the road until daylight, Hart bedded down for a few hours with Owlglass and Belicaus under the ancient oak. Hesta, Soorta and the chapman had elected to seek more comfortable accommodations at the inn near the crossroad, though the hour was late. Dawn revealed that the hermit and his wolf companion had melted away before first light, so Belicaus and Hart set out for the Stamglen Road together.

Retrieving Hart's mount and purchasing a bit of bread and cheese to break their fast, they continued on foot, leading the horse and enjoying the peaceful countryside.

"What think you, Brother? Do we tread a path to peril?" Hart felt the need of the solemn monk's encouragement. There was a quiet strength about the man that reassured the scrivener, just by his presence.

"Life is fraught with peril, my friend." A slow smile played about the craggy features of the tall friar. "It is beyond question that we front Evil, Evil of which none of us has taken a true measure. We dare not face such alone!" He turned to gaze pointedly at Hart as though he knew the younger man might attempt just that.

"Well taken, Belicaus. I am not so brash as to think that I may engage the Powers of the Dark without aid."

Him Gifted, not stupid! When Hart relayed Free-Claw's comment both men laughed, glad for the lift in mood brought on by the pard's humor.

"I hear that the lad you rescued has been moved to Hesta's cottage. He is doing much better, but is still somewhat dazed by his close brush with death," Belicaus said as they parted to go their different ways in the vill.

"Aye, she bid me to check on him later today." Hart mounted the horse. "I will return this beast to Lord Stormund's stable and stop by her place after sext. 'Til we meet again, God speed."

"And you, young friend. Take care." The tall friar strode off toward the priory. As Hart reined his horse toward the keep, Free-Claw

bounded away, obviously intent on preceding him to the herb woman's hut.

Pondering the previous day's experiences, the scrivener rode slowly up the long incline to Castle Stamglen. What indeed had he gotten into? Never in his most unbridled imagination had Hart ever seen himself as he now was, an untutored would-be mage forced to deal with constantly emerging and changing Gifts, thrust into battles not of his choosing and worse, faced with an enemy whose Power he could scarcely fathom. Belicaus's words of warning were well spoken, but would he even have the option of picking his time and place of confrontation? It was a probability gravely to be doubted.

Saluting the armsman on duty at the portal to the castle, he dismounted and led the horse to stable, being sure that it was fed, watered and rubbed down. Hart's knightly training still governed many of his habits and care for his mount was paramount.

As he exited the precincts of the great keep, he glanced up toward one of the four tall watchtowers. All around him there was evidence of an almost siege mindset. Was Lord Stormund so fearful of attack? As far as Hart knew, there were no obvious threats from surrounding demesnes, nor was Stamglen at risk from sudden foreign invasion, being too far inland. It was just one more puzzle to add to his growing collection.

Reporting to Reeve Moklin, Hart helped himself to a jannock and a small mess of pulse prepared by Sal, the Reeve's elderly housekeeper. He washed all down with a measure of metheglin, a rare treat provided by a neighboring beekeeper. The spiced mead drink, made from honey was a welcome change from the common ale.

When Hart indicated his intention to visit the Hesta's young patient, Moklin reminded him, "It be time for the Hallmote on the morrow after terce. Best you check your records and be ready to give evidence then."

"I will be ready," Hart replied. He had prepared documents, but would review them in the morning before bringing charges on behalf of the Reeve.

The herb woman's tiny cottage lay at the far north end of Under Stamglen where a tiny streamlet provided water for the carefully tended patch of garden that surrounded her dwelling. As Hart approached he noticed that others had arrived before him. An

armsman stood just outside the open door and barely acknowledged the scrivener's greeting as he entered.

Standing with feet spread apart, a tall sergeant was speaking gruffly, "Dereliction of duty, failure to present yourself for the knighting of your new lord: these be serious offenses, Page Dicken. Ye'll not make rank of squire like that!" The man rhythmically slapped his high-topped boot with a short leather whip: a well understood threat.

Seated, cross-legged on a pallet near the hearth, the scrawny lad cringed. A low snarl could be heard from the dwarf pard lying curled against him. "I—I—"

Hesta reached a hand to the lad's shoulder, hushing him. "He was injured, Sir."

"Likely story!" The sergeant looked up as Hart pushed into the low-ceilinged room.

"True, though." The scrivener spoke, allowing a bit of the force of his Gifted Eye to enhance his words. "I found him, kicked by a passing horse at the melee. If it were not for the ministrations of the herb woman here and Brother Belicaus, Sir Norvill would have no new squire at all!"

"Oh?" The officer bent to examine the youth more closely but thought better of it as Free-Claw's growl was accompanied by a show of razor sharp claws, almost lazily extended. "Well, in that case, see that you report to the castle—"

"Just as soon as Hesta here feels he is ready to return to duty," Hart finished the sergeant's sentence and looked pointedly at the open door.

Ducking his head, the officer spun about and barking at the armsman without, strode off. Dicken expelled a shuddering breath as Hesta chuckled. "'Pears you handled that well."

Man friend good chaser! Free-Claw's talent for pithy comment almost unhinged Hart's attempt to maintain a grave demeanor. Glancing at Hesta, who had obviously also caught the pard's thought, he lost serious mien as both of them collapsed into gales of laughter.

The look of utter confusion on Dicken's face brought them out of their fit of mirth. "It's all right, lad. You need have no fear of punishment; your secret is safe with us. No one in authority will ever know what

you really did at the melee.” Hart sat beside the boy and slipped an arm around the thin shoulders.

As understanding broke on the youngster, a look of awe akin to adoration spread across his face. “I—I’ll be ever in your debt, Sir! It was just—”

“Nay, lad, you need not explain. I was once the butt of cruel taunting long ago. I think I know why you acted so foolishly. There’s only so much a man can take.” Hart smiled down as the pard’s deep rumbling purr vibrated against the boy’s side as if to confirm the reassurance.

“Just remember this: you now have friends. Do not hesitate to seek us out, Hesta, Brother Belicaus or I will do aught we can to help you.”

Free-Claw too! The pard lifted his head to look into the boy’s face.

“Yes! Dicken, the pard is also your friend.” Hart conveyed the message.

A look of amazement diffused the youth’s expression, “I heard!”

“You heard?” Hart was delighted.

“Yes. His name is Free-Claw!” The boy quickly brushed a tear that trickled down unbidden.

“Indeed you did!” Turning to Hesta, Hart lifted his visible eyebrow. “That means—”

“Aye. It means Master Dicken, the Squire, is among the Gifted.” The herbalist smiled. “But Gifted or not, he needs more mending, so you two had best be off and let him rest now.”

As if to confirm the herb woman’s words, Dicken’s head slowly dropped to his chest and he made no protest when she gently pushed him to lie back on the pallet. With a quick flick of his raspy tongue on the lad’s cheek, Free-Claw bounded up to join Hart as the scrivener departed.

Up with daylight the next morning, Hart bathed, applied the beard remover Soorta had provided and donned a new tunic he had purchased at the festival. He would need to look his best as representative of the Reeve in the village court.

After breakfast of eggs and a bit of boiled bacon and jannock cake, Hart set about putting his accounts in order for the purpose of presenting them in evidence before the Hallmote. He would be giving

testimony in the case of Alif Miller, who had somehow neglected to return and correct his multure account, among others. When satisfied that all was in readiness, he gathered up his scrolls and headed for the hall where the court would be held.

Free-Claw come? His furred companion questioned.

“Nay, friend. I think it best that you be elsewhere. Now might be a good time to go for a hunt. What say you?” Hart realized that the presence of the pard would cause no small stir in the court.

Always ready hunt. The pard flicked the tip of his long tail and was gone in a moment, with no more indication of his passing than the cawing complaints of a flock of rooks roosting in trees along the village common.

A procession of villeins and freemen was converging upon the village hall as Hart approached. It was little more than an oversized long house, with a higher roof than most and rows of benches and logs for seats. At one end of the single room a fire pit was arranged with kindling and wood for the soon-to-come cold season, though it was not yet needed. The opposite end boasted a low platform on which seats were arranged for the officers of the Hallmote and jurors, all chosen by the villeins from among their own ranks.

The accused ranged from those alleged to have committed Hamsoken to numerous violations of rules governing the making of ale. To Hart it was obvious that the one untaxed occupation, that of alewife, was simply compensated for by the many fines from a long list of inadequacies for which brewers were held responsible. One by one the women, who supplemented their living by making ale and barley malt, were paraded before the court and given their small fines, ranging from two or three pence to as much as ten or twelve for serious infringements. There was some protestation, as though it could make a difference, but for the most part the alewives appeared to take it as a normal part of doing business.

More serious complaints followed. Petter Webster stood forth to answer for Hamsoken upon Alewife Margot at the festival and, having meekly pled guilty, was fined the sum of two dozen eggs and a capon. One dozen eggs would go to the aggrieved woman and the remainder to the Lord of the Manor.

Never having been present at such a court, Hart realized as the morning progressed that it served a dual purpose, giving the villagers

power over maintaining order and adding revenue to Lord Stormund's demesne. All in all, it seemed a sensible process, though somewhat tedious.

At length his time came to present evidence against those he had caught cheating. Obviously the miller had thought to perhaps bluff his way through, but when once more fronted by Hart's penetrating Gaze, he wilted and submitted to the fine with only some mumbling under his breath.

Next came Cadver of Tuckgrove, brought by two of the Bailiff's men to give answer why he had not paid the chevage. When he tried to protest that he had done so, Hart stood and presented the court with his record of receipts taken on his trip with Reeve Moklin. Each time the new scrivener proved his worth, a murmur would pass through the room. Hart was not too sure he liked being the center of so much attention, but it was part of his duty and he must discharge that.

The final miscreant came before the court, a free holder, who had neglected paying his quitrent. When he began to complain, the Bailiff spoke up, "Gyll Freeman, it be best that you plead guilty and pay your fine, else you may find yourself put off your holding."

Sputtering, the man shook his fist at the court, "Nay, nay, that canna be! I am entitled to that holding from my da and his da before 'im."

"Aye, there is some claim for that, but it is no excuse for not paying of your just tax. So says the Hallmote of Stamglen." The chief juror smacked his open hand on the table before him, signaling the finality of the ruling. Calling for any more cases to be heard, he was about to adjourn the court when a disturbance at the door of the hall interrupted.

A man dressed in the rough garments of a shepherd burst in, shaking his fist and shouting, "A crime! A crime! There be no justice when such can be done!"

The Bailiff rose and gestured to his men at the back of the room. Two burly armsmen seized the frantic man by his elbows and escorted him to the bench. "What is this about? Have you a charge to make before this court?"

"Aye, Sor. It's me lad. 'E's bin ill used." At that the angry man shuddered in silence.

"Well, say it. What has passed?"

“E was only doin’ what is our right. Gatherin’ sticks in t’ forest and ‘e was set on by two fancy lords.” The shepherd stood more quietly now and turned to address the gathered villeins.

“All know the law. It’s no cause to treat ‘im so.” He spread his hands out as if to plead for help.

The Bailiff grew impatient. “Have done, man. What happened? This is no Royal Court in which to bring charge against the gentry, but I will hear your complaint—if you will spit it out!”

“Aye, Sor. They—that is the knights—they came on me boy and ‘is pup when they was in the forest gatherin’ firewood, just sticks, Sor! An—and—they grabbed ‘im.” The man paused for breath, struggling to control his emotion.

“They said ‘e were poachin’. And that weren’t the all o’ it. When ‘e tried to deny it, they beat ‘im. ‘E’s just a bit o’ a lad, Sor. ‘E lost two teeth from the blow and when ‘is pup tore after the man what struck ‘im, the great lord snatched the dog and broke ‘is leg right in front of me boy.” An angry growl echoed around the hall at the man’s words.

“Sor, they told th’ lad that ‘e best not be caught agin or they would break ‘is leg next time!” As he finished, the man stood defiant.

“Bailiff, will ye no recite the law fer me? The law about the villein’s right to gather sticks for firewood?”

“Aye, shepherd. I will: it is a right, granted by the Lord of the Manor, that any and all bondmen and their families may forage the woodlands of his demesne for such deadfall wood as they may carry in their hands, with which to build fires upon their hearths and thereby warm them and cook their food.” A somber silence fell upon the Hallmote as the recitation was finished. All knew that a right, granted by the Lord of the Manor, had been abridged, but there was small chance of those guilty being brought to justice.

“I will bring the matter before the Marshall.” The Bailiff intoned, knowing that it would be a futile effort.

Hart knew too, as with a chill he recalled the dream in the cave. He had dreamed true. It was no nightmare, but a “seeing” sent to expose the depths of evil that was pervading the ranks of Lord Stormund’s knights. For men, sworn to uphold right and protect the innocent, to so callously treat a helpless boy—no matter that he was a poor shepherd’s child—this was beyond conscience. Did they enjoy

tormenting the weak? Now that he had heard from the father's lips the account, he was certain that his night vision revealed just that.

From the mutters and even open comments he heard as he left the hall, Hart realized something further: discontent within Lord Stormund's demesne could prove yet another weapon of the Dark.

Chapter ~ Fifteen

There was nothing for it: Hart must find a reason to reenter the castle and continue his search for the source of the evil he sensed there. Pondering on this need, he turned about and returned to the village hall to seek out the Bailiff. He had an idea.

“Bailiff, is there aught I may do to assist you? Might I deliver records of the rulings of the Hallmote to the Steward? There is time, now that the end-of-year accounting is complete.” Hart spoke, trying not to sound too hopeful or to give away his anxiety to gain access to Stamglen.

“Hmm, in fact it would be well taken if you could do just that,” the Bailiff replied. “There is a report of wolfheads troubling travelers along the road to Coldbroke, south of here. I need to ride there right away, before the signs left by their raid have faded. So, it would serve me greatly for you to take these records to Attabirch.” He finished bundling the proceedings that had been duly recorded during the village court and handed them to the scrivener.

“I’ll see that they are safely delivered immediately.” Hart felt a surge of excitement and relief at the ease with which he had managed that.

Now to find a way to linger, once I reach the castle, he thought as he strode through the bustling village toward the looming walls of Castle Stamglen. As he passed, more than a few folk hailed him, but some merely stood and stared, not quite sure how to take this tall, hooded, one-eyed man with curious abilities.

How long before my enemy hears tales and comes looking? He drew the hood of his short cloak more closely about his face, knowing that it offered small protection against the growth of rumor. He must take greater care not to draw attention to himself, but it was difficult when so often his Gift demanded action.

When he reported to the Steward, Attabirch seemed heartily glad to see him. “Ah, Hart, the new scrivener! What have you there?”

“The records of fines levied at the Hallmote, Sir.” Hart pushed the roll across the table behind which the Steward sat. “Bailiff said he will bring the goods and monies later, but he had some urgent matter to attend to first.”

“My thanks. But tell me, how like you your new position? I have heard good reports from Moklin. You have a canny way of nosing out slipshod dealings and catching cheats.”

Hart shifted his weight. The conversation was not going in the direction he desired. “I only seek to get to the truth, Steward. Guilty conscience does the rest.” He deliberately belittled himself, hoping sincerely that Attabirch had not discussed him with his superiors.

“Indeed, I am right pleased that you have come today, Hart,” the Steward appeared almost jolly. “I have a task that well suites you, I think.”

“Aye, Sir.” Hart stood quietly, wondering.

“Do you think Moklin would mind sparing you for a time?”

“Nay, Steward. The accounting is up to date and no work presses for the nonce.” Hart felt a near prickle under his Cap of Knowledge. This might be just the opportunity he sought.

“Good, then! The Manor stores have been drawn upon quite heavily in the past fortnight, what with the festival and all. I want you to go down to the storage vaults and take inventory. Winter is nigh and we may need to take in extra food supplies to compensate for what we ate so heartily at the feast.” Attabirch leaned back and patted his belly as if in recollection of the delights of food and wine.

“Right away, Steward.” Hart almost saluted, but not quite.

“You will find parchment, ink and quills yonder.” The Steward gestured toward a carved wooden chest in a niche under a window. “Just leave the results on my bench here when you are done, if I am not here. It should take you the rest of the day. Oh, and there are extra candles there too. You will need more than rush lights to do your recording.” Attabirch smiled and turned to speak with a waiting retainer.

Gathering what he needed to accomplish his task, Hart added two handfuls of candles to his pouch. He might just be even longer in the vaults than the Steward expected. Taking a light from a smoky rush torch in the long corridor that led to the kitchens, he found the stair that descended to the lowest level where the constant coolness helped keep stores fresh for long periods. He set about counting butts of wine and barrels of ale, salted meat and fish, as well as bins of grains used to make bread and porridge.

His stiff back told him just how long he had been at the task, even if Hart had not been able to tell the passage of time from the diminishing supply of candles. He had used three stubs to the very end by pressing each on top of a fresh candle until it burned completely down and was well into the fourth.

When at length able to roll up his completed parchment inventory and leave it at the bottom of the stair to the upper level, Hart stretched and considered his next move. Trying to recall the path he had taken while following Sir Lazarous's furtive men and their prey, he moved down a long aisle of dusty casks. It should be thus and thus—if memory served.

Storage vaults rambled in a confusing maze and he would have been unsure of covering all of them had he not thought to drip a small amount of candle wax at the beginning of each section as he had entered to record its contents.

He turned to glance back the way he had come, trying to reconstruct the look of the place on that strange night, but nothing appeared quite the same. *Odd*, Hart thought, *I don't remember this section, but I know I must have come this way; there is no other!*

Frustrated at his inability to locate the spot where he had watched the passage of the Lady Arin, he flipped up his Eye patch and held aloft the candle. Nothing but row upon row of casks met his gaze until—a quiver in his Gifted orb alerted him. Again, all was not what it appeared here. Approaching the end of a line of barrels, he fronted an apparently solid wall, only—it wavered!

Where there had appeared to be solid stone in front of him a moment before, now yawned a low-arched opening. Ducking to protect his head, he thrust his candle before him. Tiny rustlings told of small creatures scurrying away from the unwelcome light.

Stepping carefully now, for the paving underfoot was of roughly cobbled and rounded stones. *Good thing I'm not a horse!* Hart's thought was punctuated by a painful twist of his foot that caused the scrivener to catch his breath. This was not a passage intended for much traffic but it definitely led somewhere.

Spiraling downward for a time the way grew noticeably more dank and moldy smelling. Funneled at last into a small chamber, Hart had to sweep away the work of countless ages of spiders at deft webbing to enter. The tiny room appeared to have been carved from the living

stone with walls oozing runnels of moisture, indicating perhaps a spring or stream, or even the seepage of water from the well he knew had been dug deep from the inner bailey to supply the castle occupants in the event of siege.

In a shadowy corner of the curious chamber he could just make out several roughly hacked niches. In one rested the remains of a mallet with a crude, rusted chisel, such as might have been used when the chamber was carved in a time far distant. In another lay a length of wood, gnarled and twisted, possibly the stem from a long dead vine, he suspected.

As Hart peered more closely at the wood, he realized, with a thrill across his scalp and an answering twitch from his Gifted Eye, that this was no ordinary stick but a thing of Power! But what sort of power? Dared he touch it? Cautiously reaching out one hand to hover over it, with the other he drew the Dhroghii stone from its pocket in his eye patch, and passed it over the object, knowing it would reveal Dark magic if any existed here.

A soft green glow began faintly to emanate from the wood. Letting out the breath that he had unconsciously been holding, Hart shifted the stone to his left hand and gently touched the piece with his right. It felt vaguely warm and almost alive to his questing fingertips. He lifted it and rotated it, inspecting it more closely. What had seemed only the twists of natural growth were, in fact, finely enhanced whorls and carven symbols.

A sudden jerk of the rod matched by a throb of the Dhroghii gift brought the two together. Like reaching fingers, the twisted wood at one end of the wand stretched open until, with a snap, the small ovoid stone attached itself to the tip. As if guided by an unseen hand, tendrils of wood braided themselves around the pebble, so snugly that it seemed to have grown there. For long moments Hart merely stared at what now lay on his palm: a focus worthy of the most Powerful mage!

Daring finally to stretch forth the wand at arm's length, the scrivener turned, step by step, to follow all the points of the compass as they formed in his mind. Reaching the final quadrant, a tiny beam of light from the entwined stone pierced the dusty shadows of the chamber to reveal another, deeper niche. There nestled inside, outlined in a greenish glow, lay what appeared to be a scrap of leather. As he brought his candle closer, careful not to drip wax, he could just make

out vague markings on the leather. To his Emerald Eye they appeared to crawl, like the glistening trails left by tiny slugs. He touched the wand tip to the leather, grasping one edge to lift it for a better view. *A map—but this is no place to examine it.*

Hart tucked the map into his pouch, having shaken some of the dust from its ancient surface and slipped the wand under the belt of his tunic, taking care to hide it behind his back. Whoever had formed this chamber and left the instrument of Power, must have stored this for some secret purpose. What was more, the mage, for mage it surely had been, had obviously gone to great lengths to conceal the existence of the hiding place. He did not think that purpose was evil, for nothing of the tiny room spoke of the Dark, though deeply shadowed by its location so far beneath the castle environs.

He dared not attempt to further examine the map here, for it would need great care to avoid damage, so, drawing his cloak over both pouch and wand and taking one more look about the hiding place, Hart turned to retrace his steps. He had not found what he sought, but perhaps something far more important.

No one was about when he reached the Steward's office, so he left the inventory scroll as instructed. It became evident as Hart left the area, however, why it was so empty at a time when there usually was a flurry of activity to complete the duties of the day before the call to vespers. Stepping out into the pale sunlight of the late autumn afternoon, he could hear a murmur of voices coming from the direction of the portcullis.

A small troupe of armsmen and about a dozen mounted knights milled about an ornate coach. A woman's voice could be heard protesting, "But, my Lord, I would far rather ride a-horse than have my bones rattled in this thing!"

Hart moved quietly closer to the gathering, his curiosity piqued. Lord Stormund stood, feet spread apart and hands on his hips in a posture of determined, but obviously diminished authority. Standing beside the coach, which, though beautifully painted and fitted with fine cushions within, appeared likely indeed to offer only the look of comfort. Large wheels attached to its belly by heavy straight axels would do nothing to soften the jarring of the rutted roads Hart knew thereabout.

Even more determined than her guardian, the Lady Arin looked up at a knight already mounted and obviously as anxious to move as his fellows. "Sir Norvill, by your care for me, make him understand!" She stamped her foot and thrust out her jaw, almost over-setting her tall headdress.

The hapless knight shrugged and looked at Lord Stormund in mute appeal. The elderly nobleman appeared about to explode. "Ladies of my household do not sally forth astride horses! They ride in the manner suited to their station."

"Even if it brings them great discomfort, my Lord?" The young woman's tactic appeared to change. "I should be ever so much safer riding with the men, cloaked and not bringing such attention to myself."

The Lord of Stamglen seemed to consider her words and she continued to press her advantage. "You know how good a horsewoman I am, Sir. I can handle any destrier in your stable."

"Aye, Lass, I'll give you that." The old man seemed to sag. She had him. "But what about your wardrobe and your attendants?"

"They can follow on the morrow with a cart. I have instructed my maid to place only what I need for the road to Gamlin on yonder pack animal. Besides, at my brother's home I will have need of little. His wife and I are of a size and she will gladly share with me the while I visit. I am not going to Court, after all. That is for Norvill here. Why doesn't he ride in the coach? It would impress the courtiers to see him arrive in such splendor." By now her words had taken on a decided edge.

The look of horror that passed over Norvill's face, at the thought of having to travel the long miles to the High Court in Lord Stormund's carriage, quite finished the argument. Arin had made her point, several times and with increasing effect. Hart could surely see her reasoning and it was obvious that all assembled could as well.

At a barked order from the elderly Lord, the carriage was taken away and a horse was hastily brought forward for the Lady. Stepping on a mounting block, she lightly settled in the saddle, her voluminous skirts flowing across the animal's sides and rump. A catch came in Hart's throat as he remembered the day, so many months ago, when that lovely horsewoman had swept past the broken knight lying dazed in a forest glen.

Truly this was a woman of mystery; so many unanswered questions swarmed about her like gnats around rotting fruit. Hart stood, hooded and unnoticed, watching the party spur their mounts to clatter across the drawbridge with plumes fluttering, arms clanking against hauberks and greaves, as armsmen thudded behind on foot.

Why would the maiden Arin be party to the injustice wreaked upon him? What power did Sir Lazarous hold over her? How could she change so drastically from almost one moment to the next? Somehow Hart knew that when these questions were answered he would find the source of the evil that had begun to infect Stamglen.

At least she is away from my enemy for now. Hart thought as he followed the departing party some time later. *Long would be his reach if he could touch her in Gamlin!* But even as the idea passed through his mind, he realized that the Dark knew few boundaries and distance might mean little in the battle for Light.

Chapter ~ Sixteen

Returning to the Reeve's house, Hart was met by Sal who carefully repeated a message from her master, "Ye must off to Tucket on the Gamlin Road, where the winter folds be and shearin' be done. There ye'll find a man, named Vorden. He makes the parchment for Lor' Stormund. Master needs a new stock for here and the castle." Hart had scarcely heard the old woman put three words together before. He smiled at the lengthy speech and took a sack she held out to him.

"Tell him Sal sends these 'taters. We 'uz sweet on one 'nother, long time ago." The old woman cackled loudly as she returned to her chores.

Still smiling at the thought of just how very long ago it must have been that the Reeve's servant had had a lover, Hart reached for a staff and set off for the Gamlin Road. There would be just enough time to reach his destination before dark, but he had no doubt that he might find lodging there for the night, in view of the gift he carried.

His errand took somewhat longer than Hart might have preferred, for Vorden insisted that he "bide a while and share a pot or two" the next morning. Fully as ancient as Sal, he was quite her opposite, full of tales of his youth. Hart leaned back against a bundle of hides that had been bound in preparation for delivery to the manor. Listening to the lonely old man was far from the most unpleasant task he had known.

Vorden sat cross-legged, scraping bits of flesh from the under side of a sheepskin. "Parchment be a forgivin' thing. It be! Did ye know, lad, if ye make a blot, it's a simple matter to scrap' it off and start fresh?"

"Aye, Vorden. That was one of the first lessons I had from my teacher. No scrivener could well complete his work without that knowledge." Hart well remembered hours in the cramped room above the priory at St. Stam with Father Corman watching over his shoulder as he labored at his letters and numbers.

When finally Hart neared home, soft mist had begun to rise from the stream that bounded the cultivated fields west of the village. Somewhere an owl greeted the coming night with a soulful cry. The scrivener fingered his latest find where it still lay beneath his cloak. A wand—mated to the Dhroghii stone—what history lay behind that curious discovery and who had so carefully concealed the objects in

the deep-delved chamber? Questions tumbled one after another through his mind, causing him to start when a familiar mind voice broke through his musings.

Man-friend! Healer calls. Big trouble! Free-Claw's message fairly crackled with urgency.

Where? Hart broke into a run. The demi-pard came into view near a toft at the edge of the upper common.

Inside. Many sick. Free-Claw ducked out of sight behind the low thatched building as Hart pounded after him.

The sight before him struck like a physical blow. Scattered across a small fenced enclosure that served to house the tofter's animals lay several bodies, some deathly still, others writhing in the throes of obviously wrenching illness.

Brother Belicaus knelt beside a small boy who retched and groaned. The monk lay his hand on the sweat drenched forehead of the child, but before he could intervene with his Gift, the small form jerked violently and lay still. Tears mingled with the moisture on the boy's face as the monk gently brushed his hand across it to close the eyes.

"Belicaus! What—?" Hart reeled at the stench that rose around him.

"I know not. But I fear the look of it." Moving to another sufferer, the monk sadly shook his head. In moments the rest of the stricken joined the boy in the sleep of death.

Even as they began the task of gathering the bodies, cries echoed from several nearby dwellings. In panic, a woman ran toward the road screaming, "A plague! Mercy! A plague!"

A very un-monkly oath escaped Belicaus as he leaped to catch her. "Cease, woman! You will make it worse." He managed to snag her garment and drew her to him, encircling her in his immense arms as she began to shake with violent sobs.

"Hart, fetch the Bailiff and I will do what I can here. It is clear that this is not the only toft to be stricken." The tall monk absently stroked the frightened woman's head.

"Aye. And I will send someone for the infirmarian." Hart spun about and ran toward the castle, hoping desperately that the Bailiff had returned from his earlier errand.

Still clutching the almost forgotten bundle of parchments, Hart came to the barbican of Castle Stamglen, in time to see the great portcullis slam shut. Frightened villeins milled about him as they gathered in the only place they knew to seek aid.

From his left a villager spat out an oath. "Fine lot! Let us die like so many swine, no matter! But one of the high 'n mighty falls to the sickness and look! They hide behind those great walls."

"What, man? Has one of the nobles died too?" Hart grabbed the man's tattered cloak.

"Oh, aye. Sir Keldwin came through the vill last evenin'. Stopped, friendly like, 'n even took a drink at well from Presten. Now he be dead and we be shut out!" The bitterness twisted the villager's face as he spoke.

"But, why?" Even as he asked the question, Hart knew the answer.

"Whoy? Whoy, ye say? I'll tell ye whoy! I heered it from a scullion, what listened at door while the gret ones was talkin'. 'E said there's talk of 'evil doin's in t'village. What's more 'e heered Lor' Stormund 'isself say that the vill must be 'cleansed'."

"Cleansed?"

"Oh, aye. We can drop dead by the score, but let one of they even stub 'is gret toe and we pay!" Shaking his fist at the closed and guarded portcullis, the villein stomped back over the bridge toward Under Stamglen.

Thwarted in his attempt to enter the castle, Hart turned back toward the village. Something didn't fit. The deaths were so sudden. Even a plague took some time to develop. A prickling in his scalp under the Cap of Knowledge confirmed his thought that more was afoot than an evil humor bearing disease.

As he reached the village common it was clear that the mysterious sickness had swept the west side of Under Stamglen. A crowd had assembled, passing about words like "curse" and "plague" as fear stalked the gathering.

A thunder of hooves announced the approach of a small party from the castle, led by the Champion himself. Shouting above the din of the crowd, his herald called for quiet. "Oyez, Oyez! Give ear to the Marshall of Stamglen, Sir Lazarous of the House of Moorced!"

“People of Stamglen! A great and terrible evil has befallen us. By the order of Lord Stormund, know that this evil will be rooted out and destroyed! All who have any part in bringing upon Stamglen this vile plague shall suffer the retribution of Lord Stormund’s wrath. I, Marshall and Champion of Stamglen, will accomplish this, though my own life be at grave risk by coming in your midst. BEWARE!” Jerking the reins of his destrier to make it rear before the stunned people, Lazarous slowly swept his gaze over the gathering before spurring back to the castle.

From his position in the shadow of an old tree, Hart mulled over what he had just observed. More sure than ever that the ‘evil’ lay, not in Under Stamglen, but above, within the castle itself, he turned away to see what help he could offer. Though Lazarous had not seen him, he was somehow sure that the Marshall was not unaware of his presence—though yet unsure of what to make of that presence.

Father Corman and the infirmarian from the Abbey of St. Stam clearly had their hands full with the effort to reassure the frightened villeins. At the suggestion of the elderly priest, the crowd trudged away to offer prayers at the chapel. There was little else to be done, for full darkness had begun to descend and with it a measure of quiet.

Hart returned to his loft at day’s end, weary from the clutter of events, to spend a restless night, haunted by dreams of chambers that seemed to move and transform into yawning chasms peopled with writhing serpents having fiery eyes.

When at last dawn produced a watery light, the scrivener was almost relieved to face the very real horror of a mysterious killer. At least he would likely be dealing with an evil with substance, not shadow borne.

He found Brother Belicaus in the alehouse, sitting at a rough oak table with his head in his hands. Hart settled beside the big monk and asked, “What news?”

“Four more dead in the night and several more on the brink.” The deep voice echoed the despair of a healer unable to stop the inevitable.

“Are there any cases beyond the western edge of the common?” Hart felt a slight tingle in the Cap of Knowing that rested beneath his hood. “The cause must lie somewhere on that side of the vill.”

“Aye, but where? True, there have been no deaths outside the upper common area, but what does that tell us?” Discouragement hung like a pall over the monk.

“You are exhausted, Brother. Go and get some rest. I will take Free-Claw and visit the area. Perhaps something will give us a clue.” Hart tried to sound optimistic.

Hoping fervently that his Gifts would somehow manifest in the search for the mystery killer, he sent a mind call to his companion and set off for the scene of so much grief and death.

As he reached the west side of the common, he could see clots of mourners following pitiful bundles carried in a ragged procession, which wound its way toward the Abbey. Fearful of being further stricken, the people hastened to bury their dead.

Much sad. The pard at his side expressed, in his simple way, the profound response that Hart experienced as he watched the mourners.

Indeed it is, my friend. Life for these people is often bitter. To be faced with so sudden and painful a death is tragic in the extreme. Hart’s response was as much a personal musing as an answer to the cat’s comment.

From all quarters of Under Stamglen billowing smoke arose as frightened villeins put torch to bonfires of aromatic wood in hopes of warding off the feared plague. So thick was its pall that Hart choked and had to wrap the corner of his cloak over his face to lessen its intensity. Free-Claw spat in displeasure. **Men make die from choke, bad as sick. Why make smell?**

“Men think to drive away the sickness, my friend. It is thought that evil stink draws evil spirits but certain good or wholesome odors dispel them and attract the good.” Hart explained with slight conviction as to the truth of the theory.

All stink evil in Free-Claw’s nose! As if to emphasize his thought, the pard sneezed prodigiously.

From toft to toft, cottage to cottage, the pair passed without the slightest indication of what could have caused the occupants to suddenly sicken and die. Even as they walked, a keening wail arose, signaling that the dying was not yet over.

In those few dwellings yet untouched by death, braziers glowed as the occupants sprinkled whatever plague remedy they could afford. From the more affluent homes the scent of rosemary, juniper or incense wafted, while even the poorest of the poor managed to boil a pot of vinegar in hopes of dispelling the evil humor that had brought such horror upon the vill.

By noon, the late summer sun had taken its toll and Hart's thirst propelled him to stop at an ancient well located at the southwest corner of the common, from which the tofters all took their water. He drew up a bucket-full and offered Free-Claw a drink.

The demi-pard lowered his head to lap with his raspy cat tongue and suddenly exploded into a hissing, spitting fit. **Bad—bad! Water poison!**

"Wha—? Poison?" Hart dropped the cup he had dipped into the bucket.

Bending over the edge of the stone enclosure, he peered into the depths, lifting his eye patch as he did so. "You're right! There's something in the water. I can sense it but not quite make it out. Quick, Free-Claw, fetch Brother Belicaus!"

The pard streaked away.

"And tell him to bring a rope!" Hart called as the cat disappeared like a black shadow before a blazing torch.

Hart straightened and restored his patch to its proper place. Warning off several women who had come to dip water from the well, he waited. Murmuring, the women backed off, but did not leave, curious at his insistence.

"Sor, what be it?" One old crone ventured a question.

"I am not yet sure. But it would be best to examine this well 'ere anyone else drinks the water." Hart responded, but would say no more as the women clustered around him trying to look down the shaft.

When at length Belicaus arrived, huffing slightly, Hart could see that Free-Claw had conveyed the situation quite well, for the monk had brought, not only a rope, but a crude ladder as well.

Tying the rope about his middle, the scrivener lowered the ladder into the water. Its top came to rest some distance below the rim of the

well. With Belicaus anchoring the rope, he climbed over the edge and carefully swung down to the ladder. Hunching over so that no one above could see what he was doing, Hart once more flipped up his Gifted Eye cover and looked more closely into the depths.

There it was—clearly visible at the bottom of the well—the coiled body of a huge snake. Hart called out to Belicaus, “Tie off the rope, Brother, and see if you can find a staff or a crook. There is something I must snag from the water.”

The monk located a billhook and cautiously handed it down to Hart. Turning it gingerly, so as not to sever the carcass, the scrivener managed on the third try to catch the snake’s body and raise it out of the water.

“Here, take this and beware.” He passed the repulsive burden to Belicaus.

When safely out on dry land, Hart shooed the chattering women back to their homes with instructions to pass the word that no one must use the well.

“Do you think this is the source?” Belicaus placed the dead snake in a basket.

“Probably, but we can’t be sure. Me thinks it is time to consult Hesta.” Hart looked about for something to seal the well opening and located a broken half-door leaning against the fence of a nearby toft. Taking a piece of charred wood from a fire pit he drew a crude skull sign on the door in a warning all would recognize.

“This should discourage the curious for now. By the time those women get out the word, fear will do the rest.” Hart picked up the basket and headed back toward the village proper.

“Ooch! Ye did not touch it?” Hesta’s words came in a rush when she spied the carcass coiled in the basket.

“No. We took great care. Could this be the source of the deaths?” The scrivener waited as the Herb Woman examined the snake.

“Aye. There’s no question. I have not seen the like o’ it in many years. It is a vile creature.” Hesta turned the snake over with a stick.

“See the ridges on its belly? They are special poison sacks. Not only is the bite of this beast fatal, but the touch of it can bring a terrible

death, to say nothing of drinking water contaminated by it. But there's more. It is no natural creature." She shuddered.

"Not natural. What do you mean?" Belicaus bent closer to the basket.

"It is a thing of the Dark. Only once in my life have I seen its like and then it was in the power of a wicked warlock. He took a common harmless snake and twisted it to use as a weapon. For this he was sorely punished, for the creature turned on him and he died a terrible death."

"But how did this one come to be in the well on the common?" Hart asked of no one in particular.

"How, indeed?" Hesta replied. "Whoever placed it there has Power, of that you can be sure."

The thud of hooves and jingle of harness broke into their conversation as a party of livered armsmen drew up outside of the herb woman's hut. A burly sergeant thumped his staff and announced with a loud voice, "Make way for Sir Lazarous, Marshall of Stamglen and Champion of Lord Stormund!"

Where joust? Him no need way, him need quiet! The demi-pard clearly was unimpressed by the unnecessary heralding.

It took all of Hart's powers of self-control for a few moments to avoid a very awkward display of mirth as the officious Marshall dismounted and strutted to where Belicaus, Hesta and the pard stood beside the scrivener.

"Where is this 'poison serpent'?" The tone of Sir Lazarous's voice was scarcely less poisonous than the creature that lay in the basket.

"Here, sir." Hesta thrust forward the container for inspection as the Marshall stopped abruptly and even backed up a pace. A murmur passed among the company of armsmen.

The pard's voice echoed in Hart's mind. **Him know something or him not very brave Champion.**

You may just have something there, Free-Claw. Hart responded silently.

"Just how do you know this is the cause of the deaths?" Sir Lazarous demanded.

The herb woman answered with quiet conviction, "I have witnessed just such a foul creature's effect, Sir. It is deadly. Do but touch it and you will soon know it is the source of Stamglen's woe."

At her words, the sergeant lifted his staff as if to strike Hesta, "Speak not so to the Marshall, woman!"

But before he could bring the heavy cudgel down on her shoulders, Belicaus stepped between them. "Peace, Sergeant! The herbalist simply sought to explain the danger."

"Well, get rid of the thing!" The Champion spat out and pointedly looked long and coolly at the assembled friends, especially Hart, before turning on his heel and gesturing for his horse to be brought up.

A deep chill passed over Hart as the men rode off toward the castle. He knew, full well, that his days of avoiding notice were now over. Word of his discovery and the delivering of Under Stamglen from further disaster had clearly spread abroad and drawn the attention of the one man he most wished to evade.

"Now, what do you suppose that was really all about?" Belicaus scratched his tonsured head in perplexity. "I don't need a Gift to smell deceit. That was an act if ever I saw one!"

"Aye, the high and mighty Champion wasn't the least bit surprised by that snake, nor did he care about the poor people who lost their lives because of it." Hesta growled. "Strike me for insolence, would that pig of a sergeant?"

"Not while we be around, he won't!" The monk chuckled.

Him be plenty sorry, if do! Free-Claw added, to the satisfaction of all who caught his thought message.

"What's clear is that we must begin tracing this evil." Hart indicated the contents of the basket. "But first, we need to dispose of it. Is there a way we can do this safely, Hesta?"

"Well, it will take more than just buryin' the creature. We need help." The herb woman stood for a moment, lost in memory.

Before she could speak, Hart snapped his fingers. "Soorta! She'll know how to deal with the snake. I think we had better pay a visit to the Crone."

“What’s more, she may help us seek the source. Whoever fashioned this evil is bound to have left some trace of the making of it.” The friar brightened at the suggestion.

“Why, Brother Belicaus, I believe you have something of the hound in you. You look happier than I’ve seen you in days, just at the thought of following a scent!” Hart laughed, relieved, too, at having a direction to take.

“I’ll be leavin’ the job to you two.” Hesta smiled. “I need to bide here and tend my herbs. What’s more the lad Dicken is not quite ready to return to the castle.”

“It would not do for all of us to suddenly disappear.” Hart mused. “No need to leave an open door for snoops, now that Lazarous is clearly suspicious, of me at least.”

Him not only one! We sniff his trail! The pard daintily proceeded to groom himself as if it were no strange thing to call in question the actions and motives of the Marshall of Stamglen and Champion of Lord Stormund.

Belicaus tucked a bit of rag over the carcass of the snake in the raged basket. “We’d best be off if we are to reach Kolroven before this corrupts and looses poisonous humors.”

Chapter ~ Seventeen

Pausing only to fetch a chunk of bread, some cheese and a flask of water for the trail, Hart joined the monk at the edge of the vill, calling to the pard to join them. Pushing the pace hard, the three reached the crone's vale by sunset the second day. The tiny woman stood at the entry to the barrow, clearly expecting them. Wordlessly she beckoned them to follow her to a great flat stone some distance from the opening of the ancient burial cave.

The expanse of rock seemed to glow under the dying rays of sunlight, giving it the look of a myriad colors appearing almost to undulate and writhe before the eyes of the two men as they placed their burden on the stone.

"Step back and behold." Soorta stretched her hands wide and brought palms together with a sharp slap that echoed in a thunderous explosion. A flash of light momentarily blinded monk and scrivener. When their ears and eyes had recovered, nothing remained of basket or snake but a dark smudge on the rock.

No more poison. The pard's flat statement restored a measure of reality to the scene.

"Aye, Free-Claw, that is one weapon of the Dark that has lost its edge." Hart smiled and bowed toward the Crone of Kolroven. "Lady, our thanks. I need not tell you what has passed, do I?"

"Nay, I have been at watch. The Evil grows more bold."

"But whence comes it, Soorta?" Belicaus posed the question that had been gnawing them all.

"It is not given me to reveal, but the time has come for our scrivener to look once more into the Pool of Knowing." Soorta gestured toward the stone basin.

Feeling a cold clutch at his vitals, Hart nodded and strode before the seeress to the pool. Throwing back his hood and removing his eye patch, he knelt to gaze into the mist-shrouded water. A warmth at his side drew his hand to the wand hidden in his belt. Withdrawing it he slowly passed the gnarled length of wood over the basin. A glow began from deep within the pool, to be answered by the Dhroghii

stone nestled in the wand tip. One after another, in rapid succession, a series of figures formed and faded before Hart's eyes.

When at length he lifted his head, a great wave of weariness swept over him and he would have slumped to the stone ledge beside the pool, but Brother Belicaus swiftly grasped him, lifting him bodily with no more effort than had Hart been a small child. Scarcely aware of being carried, the scrivener gave himself to enveloping darkness, thinking as he slipped into sleep, *It is far worse than ever I could have thought—Arin, Lord Stormund—all in the Shadow! The Dark draws near.*

As if from a great distance, the cry reached him, "Haarrtt! Help me!" Clawing his way through the blackness that seemed to carry the accumulated weight of the world's grief and pain, he thrashed about, grasping for a handhold that would aid his escape from—

"Have a care, lad! You are safe." Suddenly the warm glow of Soorta's hearth and the scent of herbs brewing in a great kettle broke through to the struggling man.

"Wha—oh, Brother Belicaus! It was—a dream." Beads of sweat glistened on the scrivener's face as he shook his head to clear it of the dregs of the nightmarish scene he had fronted but moments before.

"Here, take a sip of this possett. You look as if the very Hound of Hades were snapping at your heels." The monk handed Hart a cup.

The younger man took a deep draught of the warm liquid and nodded his thanks. "It was more than just a bad dream. I heard a call—"

Jumping to his feet, Hart suddenly blanched as recognition dawned on him. "It was Brydwen! She's in danger, Belicaus. I know it!"

"Brydwen? But how can that be? She is with the Lord Stormund this very hour. There was to be a fete in honor of Lord Stegward's visit. She told me that not two days ago." The tall monk looked at Hart with growing concern on his rugged face.

"I only know what I heard. It was her voice." Hart insisted. "What's more, the things I saw in the Pool made me realize that Lord Stormund is all but fully controlled by Evil now. There's a weaving of the Dark in Castle Stamglen and it grows more powerful by the hour!"

“Then we must hasten back.” Rising to his feet, the monk bowed toward the diminutive woman who sat calmly listening to their conversation.

“Our thanks, Lady, for your help. Have you any further counsel for us?”

“Only this, friar: have a care. Make very sure of your enemy before you seek to stand against him.” Her answer was to Belicaus, but Soorta looked pointedly at Hart as she spoke.

“Aye, Lady! We will be cautious. I think now to return to Under Stamglen and examine the map and chart of the castle precincts that I discovered there.” Hart reached for the wand that lay on Soorta’s table and made to tuck it in his belt.

“Don’t think that, because you now hold a Thing of Power, that you are ready to wield it! A wand does not make a mage.” The tiny woman’s warning lingered in Hart’s ears as he and the monk ducked out of the low door to begin their trek back to Stamglen. *Indeed*, the young man thought, *none is more aware than I, just how unready I am!*

Man friend make ready! A simple confidence penetrated Hart’s consciousness as the demi-pard moved to nudge his leg.

“My thanks, Free-Claw! That is just what I will seek to do.” With that the trio plunged into the cleft leading from the Vale of Kolroven, bent on learning all they could of their enemy.

As they walked, Hart spoke what was uppermost in his mind, “Brother, think you the cry I heard in my dream was of the now, or was it a ‘seeing’ of something yet to come?”

“That I cannot tell, lad, but this I know: we must gird on caution like a war belt and never be found to lay it aside.” The monk’s voice dropped low with the weight of his concern.

“Aye, there can be no letting down. Will you visit the castle to see for yourself that Brydwen is yet safe?” Hart felt fear clutch his heart. What could he do? Drag the bard away from her post at Stamglen? She would likely resist, causing a scene that would only draw more unwanted attention to him.

“There should be no trouble to find a reason to visit the lass. After all, Lord Stormund knows that I am her protector. He would expect me to

wish to see her.” The simple logic of the monk somehow comforted Hart. “Rest easy, I will watch as best I can. Perhaps I may discern the way the wind blows in the affairs of the castle.”

“Yes! Listen and learn, brother. It will go far to arm us for what I feel lies ahead.” Hart quickened his pace, intent on closeting himself with what he had discovered in the bowels of Stamglen.

But the scrivener met with the frustration of a mound of work awaiting when he reached the Reeve’s house. A bundle of tally sticks lay on his workbench beside a fresh roll of parchment. Clearly it was time to resume earning his keep.

When at length he could climb to his loft, the shadows of night made any study of the ancient charts difficult, but Hart drew out some of the candles he had hoarded against just such a time. Hours dragged by as he bent low over the ancient documents, attempting to decipher their meaning. To his Emerald Eye the parchment, containing the outline of the castle floor plan, was overlaid by a clouding, as though he viewed it through muddy water. Why couldn’t he penetrate this? The Gift he possessed was supposed to overcome such glammers.

Rubbing both eyes, Hart lit another candle and spread out the leather map, thinking he might have better success with it. Instead, he wearily met with even greater frustration. The closer he examined the faint outlines, the more his mind reeled and his very body rebelled, until almost sick with nausea he had to admit defeat for the night.

Crawling exhausted onto his straw pallet, Hart lay for a long time rehearsing the events of the past fortnight. No answers presented themselves, only more questions: what scheme lay behind the curious, nay, frightening events he had witnessed? Moreover, how could he, only an infant in his Gifts, front the Dark Power that seemed to be taking shape in Stamglen?

Finally losing consciousness, but hardly resting, Hart awoke to a thundering headache and the feeling as if his limbs were laden with great chains.

“What ho, lad? Linger too long in your cups?” Reeve Moklin’s comment took a moment to pierce Hart’s consciousness as he stumbled down the ladder from his loft. Tucked carefully under his arm were the charts he had carefully wrapped in an old cloak.

“Would it were only that, sir. I know not what ails me.” Hart poured a cup of ale from the pipkin that Moklin’s housekeeper kept filled on a shelf.

“Well, you have caught up your work, scrivener, so the day is yours. Use it as you see fit.” The Reeve nodded and walked to the door. “I’m away on an errand for the Bailiff.”

“My thanks, Reeve. There is a bit of study I would do.” Hart forced himself to eat a bit of cheese and cold meat, though his stomach rebelled, then sat at his bench. Spreading out the scroll and leathern map, he bent over them, daring to slip up his Eye patch, since he was finally alone. There must be some way to break through the secrets that lay so tantalizingly beneath his hand.

The wand! Hart thought and stepping to the door to assure himself that no one would come in to disturb him, he drew the ancient wooden rod from his belt to pass it over the scroll. The reaction of the tool of Power was so violent, that he nearly dropped it. Writhing in his grasp, as if to avoid the surface beneath it, the slender wand almost bent double.

Again a wave of nausea swept over Hart as he fought to control himself. Clearly this was not working! Thinking to take a different tack, he replaced the wand in his belt and took up a quill. Dipping it into his inkpot, he thought for a few moments before setting down a list of what he knew thus far. With his mind in such turmoil and his body in full rebellion, perhaps an orderly arranging of facts might help to give him some direction.

The longer he sat, the harder it became for the scrivener even to guide the quill across his bit of parchment. He finally gave up, to scoop a handful of sand from the container on his bench, scattering it over the inked words to blot them. Tipping the excess back into its box, he rolled the list in a tight curl and tucked it into his pouch.

Hart carefully returned the documents to a hidden crack in the beam above his pallet in the loft. It would not do for them to fall into the wrong hands. As an extra measure of safety, he passed the wand across the crack and visualized a cobweb to cover it. To his considerable surprise, a fat spider crawled from one end of the crack and proceeded to spin its web.

My thanks, small friend! The scrivener chuckled, not quite sure that his need had called forth the tiny creature, but grateful, nonetheless.

Calling to the pard, Hart reached for his cloak and strode out into the street. More than anything, he needed to clear his head and the Reeve's workroom was not the place to accomplish that.

Where go? Free-Claw bounded to Hart's side with all the energy that his companion seemed to lack.

"Anywhere, just away." Hart replied.

Hunt? The demi-pard's mind voice bore all the hopefulness he could pack into the thought.

"Perhaps." Hart couldn't help smiling. The small cat looked up at him with eyes that fairly gleamed with anticipation.

"Yes, all right. We will take the path to the wild lands just beyond the vill. But, have a care what you take. I don't know if the lord of the manor would approve your feeding on his game." Hart grinned, feeling better already.

Him thank Free-Claw to take gore-rats. They pests.

"That he would. Those beasts play havoc with the crop and it is near to harvest time. The ripening grain is drawing them." Hart turned to the south, settling into a lengthy stride, glad to feel the warmth of the afternoon sun, tempered by a soft stirring breeze. As the man and cat passed from the village, several tofters waved and called greetings.

Them friend now. The pard noted, aware of the lightening of Hart's mood.

"Aye, and it is in no small part, due to your finding the poisoned water and saving them from a painful death." Hart hastened to give the cat credit for his part in solving the mystery plague.

WE save.

"Ummm. Make a team, don't we?" The man responded as the pard suddenly perked up his ears and darted off through a field of ripening wheat.

"Mind the grain!" Hart called. "Don't tread it down too much."

Better tread than eat by rat. Came back the dry comment, followed by a flurry of squeaks, growls and a series of crunches.

As Hart waited in the shade of a large oak that grew along the verge of the field, he heard a distant hail.

“Scrivener! Salaam!” Seeming almost to float into view in his voluminous robes, the chapman waved as he led his laden donkey to where Hart rested.

“Ibed, peace to you to, my friend. Whence come you with all those bundles? Your poor beast will be bowed in the legs if he has to carry that load much longer.”

“Ah, as the Great One wills, I have just come from the port, a week’s walk! I have many fine things for the ladies at the castle and not a few needful ones for the villagers.” The dusky skinned traveler settled, cross-legged beside Hart and mopped his brow. Though the day was not hot, his efforts had clearly taken their toll of him.

“What new, youngling? Have you learned aught of the doings of the Dark in Stamglen?” The chapman looked carefully around before posing the question.

“Much! Come, let us find a place more private and I will tell you all that has chanced since our meeting beneath that other oak tree.” Hart rose and gestured for Ibed to follow. Taking a path that led to a broad meadow, the scrivener pointed toward a low sheepfold, empty until the time of wintering the flocks. The spot was deserted and too far of the main road for casual passers-by.

Seizing the opportunity to draw out his tiny brazier, the chapman lighted a fire and proceeded to brew a potent black drink that set Hart’s teeth on edge when he tasted it. “Now, tell me all.”

When the scrivener had finished his account of the events of his discoveries beneath the castle, the strange poisoning and his unaccountable inability in employing his Gifts, Ibed pulled at his thin beard and remained silent for several long moments.

Without speaking, he turned to a small pannier he had removed from his donkey and reached inside, murmuring to himself in a language unknown to Hart. In a few breaths he stood erect and drew forth a small gleaming object. It appeared to be in the shape of a leaf, about as wide as the span of the man’s hand, and made of finely polished brass. Intricate lines were scribed on it, perhaps runes, but of no pattern that the scrivener had ever seen, not even in all his exploration of Owlglass’s many books.

Still wordless, the chapman from the far eastern lands stepped across to stand beside Hart and motioned for him to rise. As he did, Ibed

passed the glistening brass leaf before and behind the scrivener, repeating the process three times. When he had finished he held up the bit of metal and grunted.

“Ummm. It is as I feared. Friend Hart, you have been the victim of Dark magic.”

Stunned, Hart almost fell back. “I? How can it be? I have been nowhere but with Brother Belicaus or in the cave of Soorta. Or—in my own loft to sleep!”

“Nonetheless, this tool does not lie. See?” The chapman held out the now dulled and besmirched brass. It was as if someone had dipped it in grease and then plunged it in an old fire pit. The surface that had almost glowed, not seconds before, was lifeless.

“It would seem that we need take greater care, lad. You are now come to the attention of the Enemy. Did you not say that Lazarous has become aware of you and may be curious?”

“Aye, it is to be feared. I took a very public part in the discovery of the poisoned well.” Hart felt a shiver pass over him.

“It stands to logic that the time you were unattended by your friends is most likely when you came under attack. Your Gifts would have been blunted, whereas others present might not have been.” A thoughtful expression crossed Ibed’s bronzed features.

“My loft! Perhaps someone planted a charm or even slipped a potion into my food?” The scrivener was beginning to feel all too vulnerable.

“Perhaps. It would be well to make a careful search. Mark anything that is out of place.” The chapman began to reload his small beast.

“There is little else we can do now. I will off to the inn. If you learn anything, seek me there.”

“Thank you, Ibed Chapman. I will take your advice.” Hart sat again, to allow some time for the merchant to make his way to the vill, before calling to Free-Claw and returning to initiate his search.

Chapter ~ Eighteen

Try as he would, Hart could find nothing amiss in his loft. All was as he remembered leaving it. Nor had anything strange been added, as far as he could determine.

“Well, Free-Claw, it would seem that Ibed was off the mark. I find no sign of tampering.” The scrivener returned to his bench and sat heavily, beginning to wonder if his Gift had somehow just deserted him.

Not know all. Man-Friend not lose power! The pard sat in a corner, grooming himself meticulously, as though there was no cause for worry.

“That be easy for you to say, my furry friend, but I feel more a cubling than a man. Believe me, it is not a good feeling.” Hart smacked his hand on the table before him, causing his quills to rattle in their holder.

Must wait. Answer come. Free-Claw carefully licked a paw and applied himself to long whiskers, combing each slowly.

Before Hart could respond to the cat’s quiet mind voice, the door burst open and Dicken, the page, burst in. “Hart, look what I found!”

The lad galloped across the room toward Hart’s bench, holding a dark object in his hand, but he was so intent on showing his find that he failed to see a low stool in his way. Tripping on it, he lurched full into the scrivener’s desk, dropping the stone squarely into the box of inker’s sand.

“Oof, I—I’m sorry, Hart. I just wanted you to see this wonderful stone I found at the stream. My wounds were so much better that Hesta let me go for a walk.” The boy’s explanation trailed off as a curious thing occurred before them both. Almost like tiny ants marching to their hill, a multitude of dark specs seemed to crawl out of the sand and affix themselves to the stone.

“Wha—what is that?” Dicken’s jaw dropped in amazement.

“Unless I am sorely mistaken, it is the action of a lodestone on iron, lad. And you just solved a mystery for us.” Hart near laughed as he realized the impact of this discovery.

“What is a lodestone?” The page gingerly reached toward the stone and fingered the tiny bits of metal that seemed to be sprouting hair-like from it.

“It has the power to draw iron to it, though I know not exactly how.” Hart made sure that he did not touch the object.

“Oh. But why did you say I solved a mystery?” Dicken lifted the rock and turned it about, rubbing off some of the bits.

“I can not tell you the whole of it now, but trust me. You have truly returned a favor to me and can serve me even further if you will bring your stone and follow my instructions.” Hart rose and led the youth to his loft.

“Take this and fold it over. Scrape off all the metal into it and see that none escapes.” Hart handed him a small scrap of parchment.

“Yes, scrivener. Then what?” The page did as he was instructed.

“Now, bring your lodestone and pass it over my bed place. See if you can find any more of those bits of iron.” Hart stood back and waited as the boy did as he was bid. Nor was he surprised to find that soon the stone bristled once more with metallic hairs.

“I think it best that you repeat the process. We must not take the chance of leaving any behind.”

Dicken obeyed, though he looked at Hart once or twice quizzically, but made no further comment. When he had finished and carefully removed all the metal into the parchment, he made one final pass over the straw pallet but the lodestone came away clean.

“My thanks, lad. You will know in time that you have rendered a service, not just to me, but to your lord as well.” Hart smiled and rested his hand on the youngster’s shoulder. “I’m truly grateful.”

“You are welcome, but it was really nothing I knew to do. It just happened.” Dicken appeared a bit embarrassed at the scrivener’s gratitude.

Not just happen. Was meant. From his corner, the pard had watched all with his customary calm.

Dicken looked toward Free-Claw and then back at Hart with raised eyebrows. “There is much going on that I don’t understand, but I will be patient.”

Hart laughed, feeling easier than he had in many hours. "Aye, lad. I must ask you one more favor. Promise me, on your honor, that you will speak of this to no one, not even Hesta."

"Not the herb woman?" The boy seemed shocked. "Don't you trust her?"

"Oh, aye. I trust her with my life, but I fear the ability of my enemies to hear what is spoken, even in the safest places." Hart walked with the page to the door. "Another favor, Dicken. Take the parchment with the iron to Belicaus, say only to him that I wish to speak with him. Will you do that for me?"

"It is done, Hart. I owe you my life." The lad waved as he darted off down the rutted street toward the priory.

"No, lad. You have discharged that debt." Hart murmured as the boy disappeared.

The monk did not come at once, but sent word that he would see Hart at the village inn after nones. In the meanwhile the scrivener decided to do a bit of investigating on his own. Finding Sal at the washing out back of Moklin's house, he sat cross-legged beside her and casually prodded the coals under her cauldron.

"Hot work, Mother Sal." Hart remarked.

"What woman's work is not?" She replied. "So, what brings you to Old Sal's yard? Must be somethin'. Men do not usually find her company so pleasin' these days." Laughing the aged woman peered at him with rheumy eyes.

"You're right. I need to know aught. And you are perhaps the only person who can tell me." Hart spoke honestly.

"Say on."

"Have you noticed anyone skulking about the Reeve's house?"

"Hmm, maybe. Why be ye askin'?" A calculating look came on the wrinkled face.

Hart nodded and reached into his pouch for a coin. "Would this help your memory?" He asked.

"Yesss, now that ye mention it. I did see sommat made me wonder t'other night. I 'uz comin' back from me sister's daughter's lyin'-in and

just as I rounded corner yonder, a man in a dark cloak ducked away. Thought it strange, but forgot it 'til now."

"Could you tell anything else about him?" Hart felt a prickle under his cap.

"Nay, can't say as I can. It was dark." She scratched her chin where a noticeable number of hairs sprouted.

"Well, my thanks, Sal. You have been a great help." Hart rose to leave. "Oh, one thing more. If you see anything amiss in future, will you let me know?" He smiled at the elderly servant.

"O' course. Ye be good to Sal; she'll be eyes for ye." With a wink, she turned to resume her work.

So, Hart thought as he strode back into the Reeve's house, there has been someone lurking about. I must take great care. If I am lucky, though, he will not know that I've discovered the iron.

Know what means? Free-Claw's question broke through Hart's musing as the pard came along side.

"What does it mean, friend?" Hart looked down at the sleek black form that paced beside him.

Means enemy knows Man-friend has Gift and steel stops Gift. The logic in the cat's mental speech could not be gainsaid. Hart felt a knife of fear.

"I had not stopped to think of that. What else does Lazarous know? To know that I am Gifted is one thing, but to know the nature of that Gift if quite another." Hart's words were braver than he felt.

Him know you Know.

"Yes, all of Under Stamglen has heard of my ability to uncover deceptions." The scrivener pondered the events of the past few days.

Man-friend's fame grows. Many remember you discover poison water.

"Thanks to you, Free-Claw. I would never have found that serpent without your skill. But—still—what the villeins saw was my bringing it out of the well."

Man and cat moved across the room to Hart's desk. As the pard passed under the ladder to the loft he spat violently.

“What is it, Free-Claw?” Hart followed the direction of his companion’s gaze. Clearly visible at the top of the ladder was the shadow of a bent human figure.

Scrambling up the ladder after the cat, who had taken the distance in one leap. With a fierce warning snarl, the pard bounded about the small space but soon halted and sat on his haunches, as puzzled as Hart, when no one was to be found.

Where man?

“Indeed, my friend. Where is the man? There is a—wait!” Hart moved back down the ladder to fetch fire from the coals on the hearth. He lit a candle and retraced his steps. Holding the candle aloft he turned slowly to mark the shadows it cast. Clearly visible were the forms of the pard and himself and—one other!

What mean? The cat moved cautiously to the wall and sniffed at the dark smudge, spitting again.

“It would seem that for some reason, our uninvited visitor has left behind something—his shadow.” Hart pummeled his memory for something he had read in one of Owlglass’s books. “I believe it happened when the one, who salted my bed with iron, had to leave very quickly. He must have come very close to being discovered, perhaps even just as we returned.”

What snag shadow? Free-Claw tilted his head to one side, as if trying to understand the strange happening.

“It may well be that my Dhroghii stone wand came to bear—so let us see what effect it will have on what was left.” Hart felt a tingle of excitement at the thought.

Removing the wand from his belt he slowly passed it across the faint image on the wall and nearly dropped it as the shape twisted and seemed to recoil as though trying to avoid the object of Power.

“Ah—methinks we are on the right track!” Hart moved a bit closer and, using the wand as he would a quill, scribed a circle around the shadow, which vainly attempted to draw in on itself each time it came in contact with the invisible boundary.

Again the scrivener passed the wand in a circle, this time well within the first one. This time the writhing shadow seemed unable to react further and froze in a posture that reminded Hart of a man trying to

protect himself from blows by arms crossed above his head. Finally able to outline the shadow itself, he tapped it once and the strange image came away from the wall with an audible popping sound and dropped in a small heap on the floor.

Hart formed a small packet from another piece of parchment and gingerly lifted the limp remains of the shadow with the tip of his silver knife and tucked it inside. "This may well prove valuable, Free-Claw. If what I remember from a book I once read, the owner of this shadow will suffer its loss and seek to retrieve it. If he does, we will be ready for him. I think it is time to find Ibed al Zahr and enlist his aid."

What him do? The cat sniffed at the packet and seemed satisfied that it no longer offered any threat.

"I believe he will help me put some safeguards on my nest place. I do not dare leave it unprotected. Will you bide here 'til I return?"

Free-Claw watch. The pard paced over and curled up in the center of Hart's pallet, turning round and round first, to make it comfortable.

Hart set off at a jog toward the inn where he hoped he would find Ibed resting before the chapman delivered his wares to Castle Stamglen. The scrivener was relieved to meet the merchant on the street leading his patient donkey toward his destination. "Hail, Chapman! Will you turn aside for a moment? I would have a word with you."

"With pleasure, Scrivener. How may I serve you?" Gesturing toward a shady spot on the edge of the common, Ibed hobbled his animal so that it might graze for a bit.

"I have discovered the source of the evil, and it is much as you suggested. Someone placed bits of iron in my inker's sand and what was worse, spread it in the straw of my pallet." Hart hastily recounted the manner in which the attack had been uncovered and his discovery of the shadow.

"Ah, it's as I feared. Your enemy is now on the attack." The chapman frowned.

"Aye, and I dare not leave my abode unprotected. Is there aught you can do to help me?" A touch of desperation crept into Hart's voice.

"Hmmm. I think there may be something. I will aid you in placing wards against further magical attack. I have collected more than

goods in my travels.” Ibed beckoned to a small lad who loitered at the far side of the common. Giving the lad a coin, the chapman bid him watch the donkey and promised another if he should find all in order on his return. The boy’s eyes grew large at the sight of the coins and tugging his forelock, he moved to stand guard beside the docile animal.

“You do not fear theft?” Hart asked.

“Nay. The people know Ibed al Zahr and will not violate his belongings. A reputation is a valuable thing.”

“Perhaps—but in my case a reputation may be a dangerous thing.” Hart spoke ruefully.

“Indeed. But, I think your reputation has just begun to develop, along with your powers. It is time to add something to your equipage.” As the chapman completed the observation, he drew from his voluminous sleeve a small drawstring bag. Whether arising from the leather of the bag or from its contents, Hart could not decide if its pungent odor was desirable or not.

Accompanying Hart to the Reeve’s house and climbing to the loft, Ibed reached into the bag and began to sprinkle a trail of dark red powder across the threshold. When he had done, he murmured several strange words and passed his hand over the trace. As he spoke, a barely visible mist rose from the powder to form a curtain from floor to roof. In the space of a few heart beats it disappeared and even the red trail was no longer to be seen.

“Hart, repeat these words after me and memorize them: *aspooth, tegnim, fayam!* When you would refresh the warding or form another, do as I have done.” With that he handed the bag of powder to the scrivener.

“May I ask what is this in the bag?” Hart wanted to know.

“It is from a root that grows in the lands that border the warm sea, where I grew up. It serves only as a focus. You may find a substitute for it, I know not for certain, but I suspect that the herb woman might aid you there.” With a bow, the chapman backed down the ladder and took his leave.

“My thanks!” Hart called as his Gifted friend passed out to resume his errand to the Castle.

Safe now? Free-Claw's mind voice sounded a bit unsure.

"As safe as we can be when the target of great Evil. We must be constantly on guard, my friend. Even the slightest slip could well prove fatal." Hart felt the weight of his somber words.

Man friend not worry. Free-Claw best guard. Once more the calm self-assurance of the dwarf pard served to comfort Hart. Granted, he did feel less exposed than he had scarce two hours gone. Strange what a difference could be made by a lodestone, some red powder and –Power!

Thinking on the curious chain of events that had propelled him to his present state, Hart experienced the shock of realization. *I am endowed with Power!*

Just find that out? Free-Claw's droll question brought the scrivener abruptly out of his introspection. Hart grinned and aimed a playful swat at the pard, which the cat adroitly dodged with his usual speed of movement.

"All right, my four-legged companion, I will cease chewing on things I can hardly swallow. You have put me in my place—that place is to get busy."

Carefully brushing aside the cobweb that covered the hiding place, Hart removed the chart and map and set about studying them with renewed ability, now that his Gifts were not dulled by encroaching iron. As the day wore on, layer upon layer of glamour seemed to melt away, leaving plain to him the deepest secrets of Castle Stanglen.

When at length he rolled up and stowed away the documents, Hart had committed to memory the path he must take when next he could find reason to visit the lair of his Enemy.

Chapter ~ Nineteen

Sal had come in and was bustling about the preparation of the evening meal when Reeve Moklin returned.

“Scrivener, I have another job for you. There are a number of virgators living some distance from here. Each year, just before harvest, it is customary to take inventory of their virgates—the numbers of their flocks, how they have made use of their land, adherence to the rules of pasturage and such like. Normally the task falls to me, but I believe your particular abilities might be quite useful in getting a true picture of their affairs.” Moklin chuckled at the thought of how some of the trickier of Lord Stormund’s surfs might squirm under Hart’s gaze.

“Aye, Reeve. When do I depart?” Hart would far rather have been posted to the Castle, but duty was not his to determine.

“At first light. I have requested of the Marshall two men at arms to accompany you. The task is not the most popular and it would be helpful for you, a new face to the virgators, to have the authority of the Castle at your back.” The Reeve moved to a low cabinet and drew forth a thick roll of parchment.

“This is a listing of the various outlying virgates, their occupants and the inventory from last season. It would be well for you to acquaint yourself with this to prepare for your trip.” As his employer handed him the bundle, Hart groaned mentally. It would be a late night for him.

On the morrow the scrivener stumbled somewhat blearily from his loft and took the bowl of porridge Sal offered. “Looks like ye should be makin’ for yer bed, not leavin’ it,” she cackled.

“Aye, Mother Sal. But there’s no help for it. I’m headed to the saddle and a long day’s ride.” As Hart finished his response, a pounding on the door announced the arrival of the armsmen with a horse in tow for the scrivener’s use.

Sal had already packed supplies at Moklin’s instruction, for the trip, so Hart needed only to relieve himself and splash some cold water on his face before mounting up and heading out of the vill.

He soon learned that the armsmen's names were Brod and Tacker. The former was quiet to the point of sullenness, but his companion more than made up for that silence by his steady chatter. "Beau'iful day, don't ye think, Scrivener? Nothin' like a fine day in autumn to make a man's blud get t'flowin'." And so he continued in the same vein until Hart would have gladly stuffed something, either in the man's mouth or in his own ears to get a bit of rest.

The three travelers made a nooning at the Purloined Goose and for once Hart managed to escape the constant flow of words. Tacker had spotted an old mate of his and the two retreated to a corner to catch up on news. With no small relief, Hart stretched out on a bench as far from the two as he could find. As he dozed off, however, he had a vague impression that Brod was also in conversation, but, taking no interest in the others' business, he fell asleep.

All too soon he was shaken awake by the silent Brod who jerked his chin toward the door. The message was clear: time to get back on the road.

As the afternoon wore on, Hart sent a mind message to his four-legged friend, "Free-Claw, do you follow?"

Follow. Came the reply.

"Good. I have an uneasy feeling about this trip. One man talks far too much and the other far too little." Hart also did not like the fact that his escort had been assigned by the Marshall. Naught might come of it, but he would remain vigilant.

"Stay out of sight, my friend, but close." Hart cautioned the pard.

Men no see Free-Claw. The cat responded, mentally confident, as was his habit.

The first night on the road found them at the edge of a deep stream, beyond which the old forest drew near as though guarding a boundary. The weather being fine, it was decided that the three would simply make camp on the bank and sleep in the open, wrapped in their cloaks.

Tacker looked nervously toward the ancient trees that crowded close to the far bank. "It's right glad I am that there's swift flowing water 'tween us and that wood. Ye never know what might be prowlin' them places."

“Humph!” Was Brod’s only response. His look of scorn would have cowed any but the garrulous Tacker.

“What do you suppose might be there?” Hart decided to lead him on a bit, find out what he meant.

“Well, there’s beasts what drink blud, I bin told. What’s more, me mate back there at the ‘Goose’ says a haunt’s been seen in these parts—wears a long gray cloak.” As he warmed to his subject, Tacker’s excitement grew.

“Hog swattle!” Brod clearly did not enter into the same excitement.

“What does this haunt do?” Hart inquired.

“’E steals folk. Why, just seven days gone, a man disappeared, not three breaths after tellin’ ‘is wife ‘e was goin’ t’ privy and would be back to chop wood.” The earnest look on the armsman’s face—was it for effect, or did he believe the story?

“Run off, more like, t’ avoid work.” Brod commented, putting together more words than Hart had heard from him all day.

“Well, I don’t think we need fear beasts or haunts tonight,” Hart said as he wrapped his own cloak closely about him and found a spot near the campfire. “I’m for sleep.”

When Tacker would have chattered on, a sharp look from his companion silenced him at last. Grumbling that “Folk better pay heed to such warnin’s. They be’ant just tales!” he followed the others and bedded down for the night.

A thought occurred to Hart before sleep shut off such: *If there is so much danger about, strange that no one has suggested posting a watch.*

In response to his drowsy musing, Free-Claw favored him with one final comment: **Men plan what is real danger.**

True, my furred friend. Danger that is directed need not be watched for.

But morning revealed nothing worse had developed in the night than sore backs from sleeping on the rough ground. Tacker grumbled loudly about “miserable duty” while Brod set about serving out bread and ale for breakfast.

A brisk ride, along the track that followed the river, brought the men in sight of a small cluster of houses lying close to the bank. "That be Nether Weir Set, Scrivener. Now the work begins." Tacker pronounced somewhat officiously.

"Nether Weir Set?" Hart lifted the brow that was not hidden by his eye patch.

"Aye. There was a pair of weirs built across the river hereabouts and, to tell 'em apart, folks took to callin' 'em "upper and nether weir'. So, the 'amlets what grew up close by took on the names too." Tacker explained, puffing himself up a bit at being able to impart information to the scrivener. He added, "the fish traps long ago rotted away, but t' names stuck."

"I see." Hart reasoned that the name was as sensible as any he had heard, even if out of date. He turned at the sound of a hail and saw a short, stout fellow approaching with a collection of men at his heel.

"Tak it ye're from 'is Lardship, come to mak us give account," the man said without preamble.

"Aye. My name is Hart, Scrivener to Reeve Moklin. I would appreciate being shown the village stores and flocks."

"Let's to it, then. Time's wastin'." Gesturing with his chubby hand, the village leader, for that was obviously his role, called up a lanky youth. "This be Stubbs. He'll tak ye about." With that the head man waddled off, not bothering even to give Hart his own name.

As Hart looked up at his tall guide the pard spoke in his mind, **If him Stubbs, what other man's name, Feathers?** The cat was hidden somewhere not too far to observe the meeting.

Hart choked to cover what would have been a most ill timed display of mirth. *Free-Claw, you are going to get me in real trouble yet!* The scrivener mind-sent to his feline companion.

Stubbs, as cooperative as his leader was not, called to a nearby cottage for a pot of ale and offered it to Hart.

"My thanks. It would seem that I took a bit of a chill sleeping in the open last night." Hart really did not feel quite at his best, but it was the first reason he could think of to explain his sudden fit of coughing.

The rest of the day was taken up in recording the content of Nether Weir Set's stores and taking note of the condition and number of Lord

Stormund's flocks that were in the care of the villagers. He even duly recorded that a fair amount of manure was piled in the pit outside the community fold, waiting for spring ploughing, to be spread on the Lord's fields.

As was intended, Hart's unannounced arrival did have one desired result: he was able to discover that several of the householders had been surreptitiously baking their own bread, for there was no mistaking the aroma that floated to him on the morning air.

When he directed Stubbs to take him to the offending cottages, no bread could be seen. However, it was an easy matter for his Gifted senses to ferret out the contraband loaves. With a warning to the guilty, Hart confiscated a large sack full of barley bread, which he would return to the Reeve for delivery to the castle.

"I will not bring a charge against you in the Hallmote this time," he warned the red-faced wives, "but don't break the law again. You know right well that it is forbidden to bake your own bread and thereby take from the village baker his rightful living."

Putting the subtle force of his Gifted Eye behind the admonition, Hart felt sure that it would be long and long before that particular law was broken in Nether Weir Set again.

Having completed the circuit of the half-score virgates and several half-virgates of Nether Weir Set, Hart and his armsmen found a bed for the night on the floor of a tiny taproom kept by the local alewife. He was heartily glad that the morrow would find them heading back to Stamglen. Enforcing the sometimes-mystifying rules of the manor was not the scrivener's favorite occupation. He much preferred the keeping of records, though even that brought him only limited satisfaction. He fell asleep musing on the curious turns and twists his life had taken over the months since—

Hart was a bit surprised when Brod insisted on taking a different way back to Stamglen, but not being familiar with that part of the country, the scrivener made no protest. After a long day's ride through an area of fens and brackish pools, they came out at last onto higher ground, which rose steadily until they reached a stone hut surrounded by stark moors.

Here the dour armsman indicated they would stop for the night and, for once, even Tacker seemed uninclined to talk. Wearily grateful for

the unexpected peace that brought, Hart thought nothing of this but supposed that the loquacious armsman was as tired as he.

During the night the wind began to rise and finally reached a howling fury that awoke Hart with a jolt. Confused from his heavy sleep, at first he failed to realize something amiss. Then looking about in the dim light of the evening's fire he saw. His armsmen were gone!

He leaped up and felt for a cudgel he had laid close to his pallet. It was missing. This did not bode well—a trap? Hart sent out a mind call: *Free-Claw! What passes?*

Men sneak away. The demi-pard's answer was swift.

Can you sense anyone? Hart's scalp tingled under the Cap of Knowledge. He had begun to sense someone's approach himself.

Gray cloak come.

The haunt of Tacker's tale. So, he had been brought here for an evil purpose. But perhaps the attacker was not expecting him to be able to defend himself. The armsmen had seen to it he would be weaponless—and, if this were what he expected—the enemy would expect to find him bereft of his magical gifts too, given the salting of his loft with iron. Well, he would play along for a bit and see what he could learn. It might be a grave risk, but—

Hart swiftly scraped a mound of straw from the dusty floor of the shepherd's hut and rolled it in his own cloak. Then, drawing his wand, he crept back into the far corner of the stone building opposite the embers of last evening's fire. As he reached his hiding place a faint glow alerted him that someone was just outside the door.

Making no sound above the shriek of the wind, a tall gray-cloaked and hooded form moved just within the doorway. From under the cloak a gaunt hand appeared and slender fingers moved in an undulating fashion, pointed toward the supposed sleeping form on the ground. A scarcely visible glow passed from the hand across the space and seemed to settle on the target.

Hart's cloak began to smoke and burst suddenly into blue flame. At that precise moment the scrivener brought his wand down across the attacker's hand and the resulting flash of pure emerald light near blinded him. The gray-cloaked figure whirled and issued a guttural cry, staggering back, one arm now limp.

Recovering from the surprising display of his wand, Hart was not quite sure what to do next. His opponent seemed to waver for a moment and, though the hood of the gray cloak remained in place, hiding the attacker's features, it was clear that the benefit of surprise was greater for Hart.

"Sssso, he ssstill hass mmagicsss!" The words issuing from beneath the hood were barely recognizable and the voice hardly human. The creature, for now Hart realized that this was no true man, began to circle to his right. The scrivener moved accordingly, careful not to permit his enemy to close the distance between them.

"Yes, I have my Powers!" Hart decided to challenge his opponent, goad it into revealing more. "Your master's plot failed, as you can see.

"Fffailed? We will sssee about that!" With the taunting words, the creature's uninjured hand swept back the limp sleeve and grasped something. In a move, almost too rapid to follow, it whipped the object forward as if to throw at Hart.

But, for all its speed, the move was not as swift as the leap of a snarling black pard. Free-Claw's leap was timed perfectly to smash into the attacker before it could launch its final weapon. Instead of hurling it at the scrivener, the gray-cloak crashed to the ground in a twisted heap. With an ear-splitting scream, the creature suddenly stiffened into an impossible backward arc, then fell to a heap, quite dead.

Hart moved closer to examine the body and saw what had been meant for him, a wickedly long dart embedded in the creature's own leg. For the space of a breath or two, a flicker of blue light danced over the weapon and then dissipated. Sitting down suddenly, the scrivener drew a deep breath. "I owe you my life, my friend. Had that been thrown at me—"

Life for life. If Man Friend no save Free-Claw. Free-Claw no able to save Man Friend. The pard sniffed at the corpse and spat, then gave a prodigious sneeze.

Having steadied himself after the close call, Hart reached to draw back the hood and see just what sort of attacker they had fronted, but as he did so, the body had already begun to melt away, leaving only the empty cloak.

“A construct, methinks. It is likely that this is what has been following me for some time and probably the one that put the iron in my sand and my bed.”

A sudden thought occurred to Hart. He withdrew from his pouch the small parchment packet he had thought to bring, for what reason he had not known, when starting out on the trip. Opening it, he shook the filmy gray contents out and for an instant the shadow rose up and took on the exact contour of the cloaked creature, then it too melted into nothingness.

At a low growl from the pard, Hart jumped up to gaze toward the doorway. In the dim light of dawn stood Brod and Tacker. Were they shocked to see him standing unhurt? To the scrivener’s Gifted Eye, it was just so, but the two quickly made to cover their surprise.

“Oh, scrivener! What happened?” Tacker finally found his voice.

“What indeed, armsman?” Hart looked coldly from one to the other. “It would seem that you left your post and exposed me to grave danger.”

“We—we heard something in the night and followed. We feared—” The lame attempt at explanation trailed off when Tacker realized that Hart would have none of it.

“I suggest you bundle up this gray cloak and return it to your superior. The owner has no further use for it.” With that Hart beckoned to the pard and strode out to mount his horse.

The armsmen were left with no option but to follow his instructions. When the Gifted command, the ungifted obey.

Chapter ~ Twenty

Still anxious about Brydwen's safety, Hart went in search of Brother Belicaus, once he had delivered his report to Moklin, along with the confiscated bread. He found the monk working in the small herb garden that served the Priory of Saint Stam.

"Brother! Well met. Have you been to the castle?" The scrivener's voice betrayed his concern as it trembled slightly.

"Aye, friend Hart, that I have." The hint of a knowing twinkle played around the tall monk's deep-set eyes.

"Well, what learned you?" Hart was nearly hoarse with impatience.

"The Bard Brydwen is quite safe. I found her performing a rather doleful *'In Nomine'* for Lord Stegward, who is visiting from Cladworth Manor. It would seem that he is quite pious and doesn't approve of 'frivolous music'." A laugh rumbled from the brother at the recollection of the scene at Castle Stamglen.

"I've heard of him—should have taken the cloth, some say." The scrivener chuckled.

"Lord Stormund insisted that the entire household attend the performance, even the Marshall. Needless to say, Lazarous was most uncomfortable at having to listen to a lengthy presentation of devotional music." Belicaus scratched his chin and seemed to ponder for a moment.

"Indeed, he would be out of place in such an assembly." Hart remarked.

"But what of your trip? Did you encounter anything amiss?" The monk asked.

"Yes. And as I fully expected, there was an attack. I believe a creature of the Dark was responsible for an attempt to blunt my Powers and, believing it had been successful, came to finish me off." Hart showed Belicaus a small remnant of his burned cloak.

"What passed?"

"On the third night of our trip, Sir Lazarous's men, who had been assigned to guard and assist me, conveniently disappeared after

having led me to an isolated shepherd's hut on the high moor. There I would have met my end, had not Free-Claw been quicker than my attacker. Instead of thrusting a poisoned dart into my flesh, he found it sunk in his own." Hart near shuddered at the memory of the night gone.

"But, you called this attacker 'a creature'. It was no man?" Belicaus had grown pale at the import of Hart's account.

"Nay. It was not by voice, nor any other measure, a man. The proof came in its death, for, as whatever life it had been given by the Evil that had made it, ebbed away, the thing simply melted!"

"Melted?" Beads of sweat now shown on the brother's brow.

"That is the best description I can give. Soon there was naught left but an empty gray cloak." Hart went on to recount the tale told by Tacker and his suspicions of the armsman's attempt to instill fear in the scrivener, thereby making him an easier target.

"Well, it tells us one thing certainly: Sir Lazarous must lie somewhere at the heart of these evil doings. All signs point to that." The monk looked thoughtful. "Furthermore, he is obviously now well aware that you have Powers."

"But, just how is he doing these things and why is he after me?" Hart's mind whirled as he tried to grasp the scope and pattern of the events and clues of the past fortnight and more.

"That is something we must try and discover."

"We? I think rather that it is for me to accomplish by penetrating the secret of the Castle." Hart tried to sound firm.

"Remember the Pact of the Gifted!" Belicaus retorted sharply.

"Aye, I remember. I must not try and go it alone. But, Belicaus, we cannot all march into Stamglen and storm the lair of the Dark which might lie there!" Frustration crackled in the scrivener's voice.

"That I know, but it is imperative that each of us be alerted to support you when you do delve there." The monk's returned slowly.

"This I promise: I will not venture without I first get word to the members of the Pact. I know my limitations." The scrivener bowed acquiescence to the somber faced monk.

"That is all I can ask." With that they parted.

The day soon arrived when all villeins and freemen of Stamglen Manor gathered to take part in the boon harvest. Few gruded the service they would render to the Lord Stormund, for his boons were renowned for their generosity. Furthermore, this was to be a “wet boon”; ale would flow in plenty to refresh the harvesters, along with ample supplies of food for the time it would take to cut and rick the barley, corn (wheat) and other grains that stood ripe in the fields.

Custom required that Reeve Moklin attend to supervise the workers, making sure none slacked or deliberately left too much fallen grain for later gleaning. He instructed his scrivener to follow with parchment and quill to keep a running count and serve as another observer to discourage cheating.

Lord Stormund’s fields stretched far, fanning around the village and out toward the moor to the west. Now presenting a contrasting palate of rich golds, tawny mustards, and vibrant browns, set against the still green of the far meadows, the scene Hart viewed in the early morning light was glorious. Favorable weather blessed the harvesters with brilliant blue skies and soft warm sunlight. Many years it had not been thus, as one gnarled-fingered old villein told him. The bane of the harvesters could be the autumn storms that often rolled across the moor to drench the crops and pound the ripe grain from the stalks, to be snatched up by hungry “critters”.

What was worse, the man told him, happened when the storms waited until the grain was in the ricks, but as yet not threshed. Then it was nigh on to impossible to get the job done before the soggy straw began to mold. If the grain soured, there would be precious little ale and folk might sicken and die from eating bread made from the barley, rye or wheat that had spoiled.

Hart began to realize that life for the peasants was a long and bitter struggle against the elements and presented few opportunities for pleasure. But this day promised to be an exception. Laughter and rude jokes filled the morning air among the fields and villeins seemed in a mood to vie with one another to see how swiftly each could accomplish the appointed task. But on the second day of the harvest, the friendly competition soon grew into a frenzy, however, with grave results.

Several half-grown youths, sons of prominent villeins, launched a contest to see who could scythe and stack the most ricks of grain in a single turning of the glass. They set to with a will and were soon flailing away at the edge of a lush field. Bent to the work, one lad failed to see nearby a young woman, who was also working the same area. Her back was turned while she swung a hand blade. The first warning of trouble came as she screamed and tumbled into the uncut grain, blood spurting from an ugly gash in her thigh.

Hart had been close enough to see when the youth's scythe caught her on a particularly energetic back-swing and laid open the wound on her leg. The scrivener dropped his parchment and rushed to her side, shouting mentally for Free-Claw to get help.

The boys who had been contesting their harvesting abilities stood about helplessly, some even ducking away at the sight of so much blood.

Having dealt with sword wounds, not unlike that on the woman's leg, Hart knew that he must staunch the flow of blood, or she would soon be dead. He swiftly tore a strip of cloth from her now ruined skirt and quickly bound it above the cut, using his wand to tighten the twisted rag. As he cinched it down hard, the flow ceased and only a small amount of blood now oozed from her thigh.

The scrivener knew that he could not long hold the injured leg thus, because the limb would soon die without a normal supply of blood. He had seen this result too in his days as a knight. The whimpering woman's only hope lay in the healing hands of the tall monk.

Healer come, Hesta too. The pard had done Hart's bidding with his usual speed.

In moments the Herb Woman and the monk arrived and set to work together to minister to the now fainting peasant. Belicaus took the tourniquet from Hart and gently eased it. As the flow of blood recommenced, Hesta handed him a poultice of wound-seal. The brother applied it to the gash and carefully bound the leg with clean strips of rag he had brought.

By this time Reeve had joined the circle of observers. "That is a bad cut. I venture she will probably die of the green rot." The dire prediction brought a groan from the lad whose carelessness had accidentally caused the wound.

“Well you might grieve.! Grieve for yourself—there will be a fine to pay, next Hallmote. This should never have happened, save for your foolishness.” Moklin’s words caused the lad to grow, if anything, paler than he already was.

“I—I didn’t mean to—” he stammered.

“Of course not. But that makes no difference. You lads were in a race, one that brought grief on this poor woman.” The Reeve beckoned Hart to pick up his parchment.

“Scrivener, record all the names of these careless harvesters. Charges will be brought against them and if this woman dies—” He did not need to complete the threat. All knew the consequences.

“She is not yet dead. While she lives, we may hope.” The soft words of the monk penetrated the murmurs of a group of watchers as he spread his hands over the now slowly crimsoning bandage and bowed his head. In a voice, audible only to the Herb Woman at his side, Belicaus offered a petition for his patient. When he had finished, he remained kneeling beside her.

Leaning low over the woman, the monk continued to press both hands against the wounded leg. Again, none was aware of what took place next, but Hesta, for she, too, crouched over the sufferer. The Herb Woman felt the hairs on her head prickle as the monk’s hands began to glow and the light from them seemed to settle into the very bandages. Nor was Hesta surprised to note that instead of spreading, the bloodstain was actually retreating.

At length the monk rose to his feet somewhat unsteadily and called for a litter. “She may now be moved. I think it best that she be taken to Hesta’s cottage. It would be well for her to be watched for the rest of the day and through the night.”

“M—may I serve a turn at watching?” The lad, who had caused the hurt, asked timidly.

“Why not? It would give Hesta a break.” Belicaus smiled at the troubled youngster. “What is your name, lad?”

“It’s Tode, Brother.”

“All right, Tode. Why don’t you finish your tasks here and come at dark to the Herb Woman’s cottage. She will tell you what to do.”

“Aye. I’ll be there.” Somewhat lighter in spirit, the youth picked up the offending scythe and returned to work, taking great care to see that none were in the way of its swing.”

Four of the older villeins came with a makeshift litter and the monk gently lifted the woman, placing her on it. She groaned and opened her eyes.

“Wha—what happened? Ooo—my leg!” Memory of the injury flooded back and she began to weep quietly.

“There, now, Meggon!” A burly villein patted her head. “Don’t cry, lass. Ye’ll be right as rain.”

Turning to Belicaus, the man asked, almost under his breath, “She will, won’t she, Brother? She’s m’wife and I—I do cherish her.”

“Her fate is in Greater Hands than mine, now, but she has a fine caregiver in Hesta here. You can take hope.” The monk spoke gently and gravely to the worried husband.

“If she dies—” The man looked toward the spot where Tode was once more working the grain. “He’ll pay!”

“Would that bring her back to you? Think man. It was an accident. If there’s to be any retribution, leave it to the Hallmote.” Hart thought it time to enter the conversation and defuse the growing anger. He secretly applied the force of his Gifts to his words, hoping fervently that they would be heeded.

“We’ll see,” was all that the tofter would say as he trudged after his wife’s litter toward the Herb Woman’s home.

When Hart turned back to his work, he saw with amazement that Brother Belicaus had quietly taken up Meggon’s fallen swing blade and begun to harvest in her place. *There moves a man who lives to serve, no matter the cost to himself*, the scrivener thought as he watched the monk move slowly and methodically along the edge of the standing grain, leaving behind a neat row of fallen stalks.

Him good man! came the pard’s mental agreement.

The evening’s harvest boon was far more somber than the one before. Workers gathered in small clusters discussing the day’s events. Clearly factions were forming that bode ill for the peace of Under Stamglen. Of this Hart was certain. After the meal he looked

about for the monk and, not finding him, decided to go in search of Belicaus to try and determine the true import of the accident.

Finding the monk in his tiny cell at the priory, too weak to do anything but sit and meditate, Hart put in words what had been weighing heavily on his mind.

“Think you that this is another piece of the puzzle of evil, laid upon Stamglen?” He looked earnestly at the quiet brother.

“Perhaps. Indeed it is not a common thing for harvesters to be so unobservant. They all know the danger of injury from the vicious edge of one of those scythes.” He replied thoughtfully.

“Surely Meggon would have heard the swinging and cutting as it came near her.”

“Aye, that is true. But, if, as you suspect, there is Evil afoot, her senses may have been momentarily dulled.” Belicaus stretched out upon the hard shelf that served him for a bed.

“Forgive me, Brother. You are spent from your ministrations this afternoon. I should not have bothered you now.” Hart felt embarrassed at barging in on the weary monk.

“Nay. Think naught of it. If there is more Evil at work, we cannot afford to waste time. My weariness will pass soon. It always does.” Belicaus smiled at the scrivener’s concern.

Hart spent a restless night brooding on the events of the day, coupled with the fact that his enemy was surely marking his movements and likely plotting another attack. At length he rose and lit a taper. If he could not sleep, at least he could go and check on Hesta’s patient.

The humble dwelling was lit only by the soft glow of a banked fire in the pit at one end of its only room. Meggon lay on a pallet nearby, wrapped in Hesta’s best cloak. The herb woman dozed in a chair, while the youth Tode sat cross-legged next to the sleeping patient. He looked up as Hart entered and smiled.

“She’s much better. Seems she doesn’t feel any more pain. Didn’t e’en tak the poppy syrup Hesta offered.”

“That’s good news indeed,” Hart responded quietly. He felt the woman’s brow and was pleased to discover that she had no sign of fever.

"It's a fair miracle, it is!" The youngster said in a voice husky with awe. "The Brother did it, didn't he?"

"He had a hand in it, I'm sure. His prayers have truly been answered." Hart sought to cool the youth's fervor. It would not do for more rumors to spread of supernatural happenings in Stamglen. There was enough talk in the aftermath of the poisoned well.

"You're a good lad to give Hesta a break." The scrivener turned to topic to safer ground.

"'Tis no more than I ought to do, seein I was the cause of this." Tode ducked his head.

"Well, I think you have learned a valuable lesson and being willing to face up to your mistake is worth something." Hart smiled. "I don't doubt that Hesta and Brother Belicaus will put in a word for you at the Hallmote."

"D'ye think so? It would help a power of a lot." Tode brightened noticeably.

"I'm quite sure. I will add my testimony, too. But, now I had better leave you to your watching. Much more talk and we might wake both Hesta and Meggon." Hart patted the lad's shoulder and stepped back into the nighttime quiet of the vill. He did not have to sense the familiar mind voice to know that his furred companion had joined him.

Sick better? Came the silent question.

"Much better, Free-Claw. I believe she has a good chance to recover fully." Hart felt far lighter in spirit than he had when he entered the cottage.

Healer much strong.

"That he is. And much compassionate, too. Did you see him take Meggon's place in the fields? He was sorely weakened by working the healing, but he still gave of himself." Hart's respect for the large monk grew with each encounter.

We need much power. Big hunt ahead. The cat always seemed to cut through to the heart of matters.

Rusted Armor

“Aye, my friend. There is surely a big hunt ahead.” With that the scrivener returned to his loft and had no further difficulty in falling asleep.

Chapter ~ Twenty-One

Wearier than he remembered being for a great while, Hart dragged himself from his pallet the final day of harvest. To his considerable relief, nothing more exciting than the discovery of a few gore-rat nests disturbed the day's tranquility. Free-Claw endeared himself to the harvesters by speedily dispatching the pests.

Harvest good! the pard exclaimed, for reasons quite different from the assessment of his human companion.

"If you mean the rat harvest, my friend, I could tell by all the crunching and purring I heard from your direction." Hart laughed at his four-legged friend's comment.

One event caused considerable excitement among the villeins. To the amazement of all, except Hart, Belicaus and Hesta, Meggon returned to her place in the fields and joined in the harvesting, with no sign of a limp and no lessening in the vigor of her swings with her blade. A mixture of delight and awe greeted her return, especially among those who had seen her wound the day before. The tall monk was the object of many furtive glances and when he calmly returned the looks, somewhat embarrassed grins wreathed the harvesters' faces.

"Another legend has been born, Brother." Hart remarked.

"Alas, it is unavoidable. It is quite impossible to hide the consequences of some Gifts and mine is no exception." Belicaus surveyed the workers ruefully. He would gladly have kept his work secret if he could.

Indeed the grain harvest was very good, great even. It would require many cart loads to convey the newly threshed barley, rye and wheat to the storehouses of Lord Stormund. At least the Evil, apparently long active in Stamglen Manor, did not seem to extend to ravish the fruits of the fields. For this Hart was exceedingly thankful. The prospect of a winter without adequate supplies stored up against the long lean months would not have been a pleasant one.

Even the scrivener could remember years during his fosterage when it had been just so. Though the occupants of the castle felt only a slight pinch in that they perhaps did not have quite as much ale to fulfill their needs as was wont, the peasants, he knew, suffered bitter

privation to the point of starvation and were reduced to eating whatever they could forage. The old, weak and very young often did not make it through such a season.

But this year promised to be far better. There would be rejoicing and celebration at the festival of winter solstice to come, for no one need go without food and drink.

Hart finished tallying the harvest and returned to his workbench to write up the accounts. Just as he finished, his employer strode in, a satisfied expression on his lean face.

“Well, Scrivener, a good job was done by all. I think this calls for a day off.” Moklin took the scrolls from Hart and did not bother to check them, such was his confidence in the scrivener’s work.

“My thanks, Reeve. I could use a bit of a break. The harvest, coming hard on the heels of my trip to Nether Weir Set, did set me back somewhat.” Hart cleaned his nibs and restored them carefully to their box. Nodding to Moklin, he paused to fetch a supper of bread, cheese and a pot of ale, then climbed gratefully to his loft, thinking how he might spend the morrow. *Ah, he thought, I know just what to do. There’s a quiet spot I discovered on one of my treks with Owlglass—*

Free-Claw come too? The pard never missed an opportunity.

“Aye, my furred friend, I would not dare to enter the forest without you at my side.” Hart allowed a mental chuckle to accompany his message.

Good. Now rest. In a few moments, the cat slipped through the open door and streaked up the ladder to join Hart in his loft. The scrivener offered him a bite of cheese in welcome, which the small pard received with relish, daintily consuming it and licking a paw afterwards to clean his whiskers.

All in all, it has been a good day, Hart thought as he nestled under the blanket on his pallet, joined by the warm shape of the demi-pard, whose purrs vibrated against his side lulling him into dreamless sleep.

Awaking to the weight of his four-legged companion on his chest, Hart felt the slight prick of the cat’s claws, kneading him. **Sleep all day, no have fun.**

“All right, all right. I’m up.” Hart laughed as he tumbled the pard off of himself and scrambled to his feet.

He bathed quickly, not wanting to waste any of the precious daylight, and slid down the ladder to the warmth of the room below. Sal and Moklin had obviously been up and busy much earlier, for a kettle of porridge was left simmering on a hook over the coals in the fire pit. Just enough remained for Hart to break his fast.

The scrivener placed his empty bowl into a wooden bucket, which Sal had filled with water and left in the corner by the door. Snatching his cloak from another hook, he strode out into the chill of the autumn morning and turned toward the Gamlin Road.

His destination was a brisk hour's walk away and he signaled for Free-Claw to leave the road where it was intersected by an almost indistinguishable path leading off to the left. Following the path until it disappeared into a thicket, he turned right and moved along the tangle of briars for a score of paces. Finding what he had been seeking, a gnarled tar oak, Hart ducked beneath its low hanging branches, being careful not to allow them to brush against him and deposit their dark sticky sap on his cloak.

Place must be very good. This trek much trouble. The pard grumbled.

"Why, Free-Claw, a seasoned hunter like you should not mind rough territory."

Not hunting now. Came the dry response.

"True, but we do seek a very special spot. You will see." Hart chuckled.

At length they came to a tiny stream that curled in and out among low growing willows and cone reeds. Before they had traveled more than a hand of paces, the pard flushed a rock coney.

Now hunt! was all that the cat conveyed before leaping off in pursuit of prey.

"Enjoy your hunt!" Hart called, relieved that his friend had found something to occupy him. He realized that the pard would probably not have appreciated his find since it didn't involve stalking or pouncing.

The scrivener continued on through the ever thickening forest, careful to keep the stream in view. He knew he was close to his destination when the small brook broadened out and the forest opened to form a

miniature glen. The mid morning sun cast a shaft of golden light across the opening and Hart's pulse quickened at the beauty surrounding him. Just beyond that large willow on the edge of the stream was what he sought, however—

Floating to him on the morning breeze came—music! An unmistakably familiar voice, accompanied by the haunting sounds of a *viele*: Brydwen! How—?

Annoyed at his secret place having been discovered, Hart plunged toward the music. He burst out onto a broad rock that overhung the lazy brook, to find the Bard stretched luxuriously across his place.

At his sudden appearance, she squeaked and bowed a discord on her instrument.

"You! How—what—?" Brydwen's eyes were large with astonishment.

"I might ask the same question." Hart couldn't suppress his disgust. "I found this place months ago. Little did I expect to find *you* here."

"Well, I don't see your mark of ownership upon it. I have as much right to be here as you!" The lovely bard's voice betrayed the heat of her anger.

For several moments the two glared at each other until—suddenly and simultaneously both burst into laughter. How ridiculous they both must appear!

When at length he could get his breath, Hart spoke. "I'm sorry. It—it was just such a shock to find you—anyone—here when I thought no one knew of it but me."

"It is a lovely spot, isn't it?" Brydwen's voice came more calmly now. "I discovered it quite by accident when my tree cat ran off."

"Tree cat? I didn't know anyone could tame one of them." Hart responded.

"I didn't tame her. She simply came to me one day when I was alone and grieving for—but that would not interest you." The bard quickly turned away, not wishing him to see the moisture that had slid down her cheek.

"Did you find her?" The scrivener somehow wanted her to keep talking.

“Well, she found me after I ended up here. You see, she has a lair nearby, up among those boulders.” She pointed to the far side of the brook where a scree of tumbled stones clearly offered many possible denning places.

“I thought they nested in trees.” Hart was puzzled.

“Normally they do, but she had been injured and when she was ready to bear her kits, she had to find a safe place that didn’t require climbing.”

“Oh. But where is she now?”

“I let her return to the wild. It would have been cruel to force such an independent creature to live confined in the castle.” She smiled timidly.

“That was kind of you. Not many folk would consider the feelings of an animal over their own desires.” Hart was really beginning to like this slender girl.

“What became of the kits?” he asked.

“Oh, they grew rapidly and all have ventured off on their own. My friend comes to visit me here from time to time, though. It’s as if we are—somehow—bonded.” A distant look passed over the lovely features.

“Yes. I know what you mean. My friendship with Free-Claw is like that.”

“Oh, that’s the demi-pard you rescued. Belicaus told me his story. That took a lot of bravery, standing up to the beast tamer.” Brydwen unconsciously fluttered her lashes as she complimented Hart, causing a responding tremble deep in his chest.

“I was just so angry, there was no time to think of danger, simply act.” A slight flush rose from the scrivener’s collar to spread over his cheeks.

“Nevertheless, you could have been seriously injured—even killed!” Brydwen’s voice drooped very low as though that possibility disturbed her greatly.

“Well, as you see, I came through it unscathed. What’s more I have made a lasting friendship with a loyal companion.” Hart tried to keep

his response light. He did not quite know how to handle the emotion that seemed to be rising between them.

Manfriend lucky! The pard's usual pithy comment nearly undid Hart.

"A certain pard was lucky too!" He shot back a mental reply, not to be outdone.

When no further communication was forthcoming from Free-Claw, Hart spoke to Brydwen again.

"Would you—would you care to play for me?" He gestured toward her *viele* where it lay beside her on the sun-warmed stone.

Smiling, she took up a crude bow and deftly executed an upward spiraling chord. "Have you a preference?"

"Something to match this place—quiet and beautiful." He replied.

With that she launched into a softly haunting melody that seemed to reach into Hart's very soul and set it to vibrating with the ancient fiddle's strings. What was happening to him? This flame haired girl had quite bewitched him—but he could not—would not be entangled in an affair of the heart! He knew not what another day might reveal, nor could he offer anything to her. As these thoughts roiled in his mind, the loveliness of the day seemed to sour about him.

Sensing the change in his mood, Brydwen suddenly stopped her melody. "Hart, what is it? You look as if you have seen a wight!"

"I—forgive me—it's just—" The words trailed off as he realized that he could hardly tell her the truth.

Before he could find a way to explain, a high pitched shriek tore through the quiet of the glade, nearly tumbling them both into the stream. Leaping up, they looked in the direction of the sound and saw two small shapes poised as though frozen, staring at one another, one black, the other tawny.

"Free-Claw!" Hart shouted.

Almost simultaneously Brydwen cried out, "It is my tree cat."

But before the two humans could move to interfere in what appeared an impending fight, the pard's mind voice reached Hart in an emphatic warn-off, **Seek mate! No come.**

"Oh." Hart responded lamely, then burst out laughing.

Brydwen rounded on him, "What is so funny? He could kill her."

"I think that is highly unlikely. He has something quite different on his mind. How long since she weaned her litter?"

"How—what has that to do with it? Oh—I see." Brydwen had the grace to blush as the two cats circled each other on stiff legs, then streaked off to disappear among the boulders.

"Yes, I think there will soon be some little tree pards, or is it demi-tree cats?" Hart chuckled.

"Semi-demi-pards, more like." Overcoming her embarrassment, Brydwen burst out laughing at her pun.

"Perhaps we could name one of them Quaver." Hart could scarcely speak for the mirth that seized both of them.

"How about Breve?" Not to be outdone, the bard continued the banter.

"Breve?" Hart looked puzzled.

"It is a long note, while quaver is a shorter one. See, it is made thus." She scratched with a pebble on the boulder where they had resumed their seats.

"I see. My knowledge of music is quite limited, it seems." He smiled at her.

"Not at all. Few would have understood my pun, let alone come back with that name so swiftly. Methinks you are more than you appear." It was Brydwen's turn to look quizzically at the scrivener.

"One picks up all sorts of knowledge when trained by a churchman," was all he would say.

"Perhaps, but you have not really responded to my comment." An even more calculating expression played about the piercing green eyes.

Anxious to turn the conversation away from himself, Hart asked, "But, tell me, how learned you so much of music?"

A thoughtful expression passed over Brydwen's features. "There was a gleeman who often visited my grandsire's shop when I was growing up. As far back as I can remember I was fascinated by his performing. He was truly gifted, for, not only did he sing, dance, act and play many instruments, he was also a luthier."

“A what?” Hart had much to learn, it seemed.

“A luthier—maker of musical instruments,” she replied.

“And he became your teacher.” It was not a question.

“Exactly. One year he was very late arriving at our village, so he had to winter over with us, the roads being no longer passable. I was about eight years old and must have made a very pest of myself plying him with questions and begging to touch just one of his instruments. He gently refused to let me ‘play’ with his large ones, but to my sheer delight and eternal gratitude, when Yuletide came around, I discovered what he had been doing out in my grandsire’s cow byre for so long.”

“What?” Hart was fully involved in her tale.

“He had built me a small viele, just my size!” The joy of the memory shown even now on her face.

“And then he had to stay long enough to teach you to play.”

“He remained even past the thaw and into spring. When he left, I had learned the rudiments of the viele, as well as several flutes, which he had whittled for me also. He taught me to read notation, such as is used in the great monasteries.”

“A wonderful gift indeed.” Hart shared in the pleasure of Brydwen’s memories, as though he had stood by and observed the events in person.

“Yes. It was a great comfort in my childhood and later. You see, my parents died when I was too young to remember them and, having no brothers and sisters, I was often lonely for companionship other than what my grandsire could offer, though he loved me dearly.” The lovely green eyes misted slightly.

“Then Brother Belicaus came on the scene.” Hart added.

“How—? Oh, he told you.” She smiled.

“Yes, he did share with me how he came to return just before your grandsire passed. Did you find it difficult to leave your home and go off with that strange monk?” Hart wanted to know.

“No—it was curious. From the moment I first saw him, I knew somehow that we were linked. It was not until some time later that I learned he was my uncle. But—I think I would have accompanied him,

no matter what, even if we were not kin. He is a wonderful man.” The simple conviction of Brydwen’s words touched Hart.

“Aye. I have never met his like before. It is a privilege to know him and to work with him, I might add.” Hart looked up to see the shadows beginning to creep across the glade.

“Yes, it grows late and we’d best be going,” she put in.

“It would not do to be caught out in this country in the night. There are many dangers hereabout.” Hart knew that from experience.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Two

It was some time before Hart could return to the study of the ancient documents in his possession. When last he had looked at them, it had been clear that they contained more than the natural eye could fathom. Wishing to be very certain of his suspicions, he now spread them out beside his pallet and set several candles around the edges, being careful not to allow wax to drip on the precious pages.

Laying aside his eye patch and shifting his Cap of Knowledge to rest more securely on his head, he thought to add one more step to his preparations. He took a thread he had pulled from the hem of his cloak and attached it to the handle of his wand. Now he had a seeking tool that might just help him hone in on the secrets of Castle Stamglen.

Sitting cross-legged on the edge of his pallet, Hart leaned closer to the chart of the castle's storage area. As before, the outlines, evident at first glance, were of row upon row of storage bins and places for barrels, but in a few moments these disappeared completely, leaving quite a different view.

It was as if a page had been turned revealing a diagram of rooms and passages Hart knew were not in any area where he had ever been. Bending lower, he traced a fine line that seemed to be a guide of sorts. It looked almost like the slime trail a pit snail might leave, but it was no random wandering. It appeared to begin just at the place he had last seen Lazarous' men with their lovely captive.

But how did they access that lower level? Hart could clearly define the secret area, but was no closer to discovering its entry. Straightening up to rest his protesting back muscles, he pondered the puzzle.

In a moment or two the scrivener resumed his study, this time grasping the thread and holding the wand, stone end downward, above the plan of the castle. Slowly the tip, with the Dhroghii's gift clasped inside, began to swing in uneven arcs across the face of the ancient parchment. With each pass more detail became visible. Finally the magical tool shuddered and stopped, pointing rigidly at a single spot. Even the thread clasped in Hart's hand went stiff as though becoming part of the wood.

Nearly dropping the wand in his excitement, Hart twisted around to see the place it revealed. As he expected, it indicated the spot where his quarries had been lost to him, only now there glowed on the page a tiny sigil. It was like none he had ever seen, but he recognized it nonetheless: an eye, colored not unlike his own, gazed up at him, so vivid, he expected it to blink. This must be the key!

Knowing that he had only begun to delve the mysteries, Hart spread out the scrap of leather he had discovered with the wand. Smoothing it carefully, he once more applied the wand as a pendulum. Faint outlines began to sharpen and he realized he was looking at a map of the entire castle precinct. Again the peeling back of layers, in response to his Gifted Gaze, led him deep beneath the central keep. But this time something further was revealed by his wand.

The glowing tip pointed unerringly at a small chamber, so deep that it appeared to lie many levels below the storage vault. At first it showed as a dark blot, but as the Dhroghii stone acted upon it, the area seemed to come alive in a repulsive way, roiling and churning like the cauldron of some ancient necromancer. One moment it was sooty black and the next it transformed into the color of—blood!

Curious symbols began to manifest around the edges of the leather unlike any the scrivener had seen before. Neither runes nor letters, still they seemed to convey meaning—but none that he could fathom.

A deep chill passed over Hart as he realized the significance of what he was now seeing. If the wand showed true, the danger he faced was far greater than any he had imagined. Trembling, the scrivener lifted the wand away from the aged map. Leaving the scrap of leather lying on the floor, he stood and slowly moved about to snuff all but one candle. Finally, when the documents had returned to their normal appearance, he placed them once more into their hiding place, bowing in appreciation to the tiny spiders that seemed to be waiting for him to finish.

Tucking the wand into a small leather sheath he had purchased for it, Hart stretched on his pallet. *I must have help, he thought. I dare not front such Evil alone!*

Long and long it was before the scrivener slept and when he did, his dreams were tense and troubled. Scenes passed through his mind that caused him to recoil and curl in on himself like a defenseless babe. Sometime in the night the pard slipped softly in to join him and,

sensing the man's turmoil, rested his head on Hart's chest. The Gifted animal began to purr, at the same time sending quieting thoughts to his friend's mind, so that finally the scrivener was freed from the grip of nightmares.

When his work was completed the next day, Hart set out in search of the Chapman Ibed Al Zahr. Somehow, he knew that the merchant, who had traveled so many strange roads, would have wise counsel for him.

Finding him behind the inn, feeding and grooming his donkey, Hart spoke softly, "Ibed, my greetings to you. Have you time to talk with me? I need your advice."

"Of course, Scrivener. I would be honored. Will you join me in a meal?" The merchant bowed and executed the ritual salute of his people.

"If we can take it somewhere to speak privately," Hart responded.

"That offers no problem. I will instruct the alewife to put some food in a pack and we will find a quiet place." The dark man smiled and strode back into the inn to carry out his intent.

The two walked for some time until they came to a solitary oak that spread its branches beside a low dry stone wall, forming a shady nook that sheltered them from the incessant wind that swept across the moor above. Settling down, Ibed handed Hart a portion of bread, hard cheese and some cold mutton. To this he added a small wineskin and bid the scrivener partake.

When they had both satisfied the hunger sharpened by their walk, the chapman spoke. "So, my friend, what is your request? I will endeavor to help however I may."

Hart recounted what he had uncovered in his latest examination of the ancient chart and map, ending by spreading his hands wide in a gesture of pleading. "I know that which lies beneath Castle Stamglen is well beyond my small Power. I have been admonished, more than once, not to venture into danger without support. So, I seek just such from you. How am I to enter that place of the Dark and remain safe?"

"A deep and desperate question, indeed!" The dusky skinned man replied. "What you have described puts me in mind of something that chanced in my life many, many years ago."

“Does it have bearing on the present Evil?” Hart wanted to know.

“In the sense that all Evil is related, it does. Furthermore, such Dark Power must be fronted with purity of motive and unity of purpose.” The merchant looked thoughtfully at his companion.

“By all that is holy, my motive is simply to bring an end to the gnawing blight that threatens the good folk of Stamglen!” Hart responded earnestly.

“I know that and so do all the members of the Pact. We are bound together by the same desire.” Ibed smiled.

“You spoke of your own experience. Will you share it with me that I might perhaps learn thereby?” The scrivener waited quietly for an answer.

Moments passed as if the chapman battled with memories too dark to call forth, but at length he nodded. “It is not something I take pleasure in remembering. However, my first brush with the Power of Evil opened a door to my own Gift and for this I am grateful.” Settling himself more comfortably against the ancient tree trunk, Ibed Al Zahr began his account.

It was in the year 605 after the Crossing, when my ancestors had ventured over the vast warm sea to seek new lands. I was the proud first son of a tribal chieftain among the Sylmyaad. As I approached the day of my initiation into the mysteries of manhood, my mind was full of dreams—dreams of the great golden city of Ab-Mendalym.

Counting the days until my trip that would culminate in a solemn ceremony to proclaim to all the world that I had reached my full stature, I could scarcely sleep at night for excitement. For twelve summers I had dwelt in the tents of my mother and her maidens, subject to the whims of the female members of our clan. Mind, it was not an unpleasant life, but one I felt was quite beneath me, now that I was a man-grown!

Before dawn on the momentous day, I arose, bathed and donned the traditional black robe of the man-candidate. My father stood outside of the tent, two tall camels towering over him. A shiver of foreboding passed through me, but I shook it off, thinking it only the nervousness of anticipation. Little did I know!

We rode together toward the distant city, passing through miles of desolate country peopled by naught but four legged denizens of the wasteland. At least, this was what I assumed. The length of our journey required that we spend one night camped on the way, so my father led me to a low cave where he had spent the eve of the initiation ceremony in his youth. This he recounted in a soft voice as we sat before a small fire that warmed the chill night and served to warn off any inquisitive animals.

Though I was certain I would never find sleep, the weariness of long hours astride the great swaying beast took its toll and I nodded off soon after finishing our evening meal.

Sometime in the night I was violently awakened by a piercing scream and something that stank of sweat and beast scent was dropped over my head. Trussed like some prey animal, I was tossed, belly down, over a pack animal. I could tell by its odor, this was not my camel.

Fear and misery replaced all of my previous joyful anticipation as the hours dragged painfully by. I must have passed in and out of consciousness several times, for it was dark when my captors finally came to a halt. Someone grabbed me roughly and I could feel a bony shoulder in my stomach as my head dangled low, keeping the blood pounding in my temples.

The cover that had blinded me was removed, but the place of my imprisonment was so dark that I still could see nothing. More hours in an agony of thirst and confusion passed. I could hear distant murmurs, but no voices were clear enough to determine even the language spoken.

My hands and feet were tightly bound with leather thongs before the odorous blindfold had been removed, so that I could scarcely bear the pain in them by the time someone finally came to fetch me.

I squinted, trying to make out the face of the man who entered my miserable cell, but the glare of the rising sun behind him blinded me. I cringed and tried to shield my eyes from the pain of the light.

“On your feet, knife-meat!” came the harsh command.

I would have scooted away, but a long whip snaked out and sliced my bare leg, for my proud robe had been torn away, leaving me only a loin cloth for a covering. Biting my tongue against the sting, I rose.

With the keeper's whip flicking at my heels I stumbled out into the light. When my eyes grew accustomed to the brightness, I realized that I was being shoved toward a line of youths, not much different in age from myself. In moments we were all shackled together and forced to march toward the west.

I remember little of the remaining journey only that it grew more painful with each mile. When we were allowed a few moments of rest, but still nothing to quench the roaring thirst, the ragged line would collapse in the dust.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of shuffling along, we reached a high walled enclosure. Here we were unshackled and examined by an immensely fat man in a red robe. He prodded each youth and mumbled something to a scribe who followed in his wake, making marks on a tablet of clay.

When the examinations were complete, several of us were herded toward a pen and told to sit on the ground. Grateful for a respite, most drifted into a near stupor, but I could find no way to rest. When the gate to our pen opened it revealed a large, high wheeled wagon standing outside. We were then directed to climb up into this conveyance, to be drawn by a team of mules to—we did not yet know where.

The sun was setting when we recognized our destination—the fabled Ab-Mendalyim! I knew it from descriptions my mother had recounted from the time I could understand spoken words. But this was not the way I had expected to enter the golden city!

Rumbling along a narrow street, I could see that much of the glitter of the place was only in the telling of tales. Filth and foul odors surrounded us until our wagon entered what seemed to be the back gate of a great stronghold, perhaps even a palace.

Herded into a narrow chamber, we were relieved of our shackles at last and most sat rubbing the sores that had so quickly developed beneath them. After a brief interval two men in short robes passed among us dispensing water and the first food I had seen since capture. Without speaking, the servants (for this was clearly their position) bent to apply a sticky substance to our chaffed ankles and wrists. The unexpected kindness came closer to breaking my determination to remain aloof than any of the harsher treatment I had experienced.

At length we were taken, one by one, from the chamber to what I soon discovered was a bathing room. There we were scrubbed clean and given tunics similar to those of the serving men.

Next we were directed into a room filled with shelves on which rested pots and basins of many sizes, each containing some mysterious substance. From most of these there rose odors that mingled and caused our noses to tingle and eyes to water. In the far end of the space stood a low bench on which were spread instruments equally unrecognizable to me, save to realize that most bore extremely sharp edges or points. The hairs on my neck began to prickle and I was seized with a deep and nameless dread.

There were about a score in the group I had been thrust into. Fearing our fate, I edged slowly to the back rank of the gathered youths. Trying to appear disinterested, I cautiously swept my gaze about the room. Near where I stood there was a dark and soot stained opening in the stone wall, clearly a fire pit.

In front of the group of imprisoned boys, a crook-backed man began to speak in a quavering voice. "Young men, you have this day been chosen to enter the service of the great Caliph Rugeem, Supreme Ruler and Potentate of Ab-Mendalym!" His words came slowly with emphasis on the titles as if to put his audience in awe and cause them to forget fear and anger at having been taken violently.

A corporate intake of breath gave evidence that most were indeed impressed, but I, for one, was not. Deep within me rose a certain knowledge that such service would surely come at a terrible price.

I drew further back into the shadows, thankful that no one was behind us, so confident were they that we could and would not attempt to flee. After all, whence should we turn? All knew the impregnable stronghold of Rugeem. His captives did not escape, not alive at any rate.

Managing to slip into the maw of the fire pit, I narrowly missed the entry of several huge men. I could see two of them take hold of the first of the youths and march him to the bench, while others pushed the remaining group back, pinning them in a tight bunch near my hiding place.

What occurred next confirmed my deepest fear. Chanting in a strange guttural language, the crouch-backed man held aloft a gleaming knife

while the servants thrust the boy onto the bench, two holding his arms and shoulders and two spreading apart his legs.

I could not see what occurred next, but the scream of the victim and the answering cries of the waiting group were enough to tell me what lay in store. None of the captive youths would ever know manhood or father sons of their own. In an obscene ceremony, totally opposite of that I had been anticipating, the youngsters were being made eunuchs.

Panic seized me and I groveled in the ashes, covering myself with the grime of many past fires, praying all the while that I would escape discovery and somehow manage to evade that terrible knife!

My greatest fear was that the master of the knife would count heads and realize that one of his subjects was missing, however when the last boy had been taken screaming from the chamber, he dismissed the rest of his assistants and stood looking at his dripping knife.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Three

I scarcely dared look but, gripped by a morbid fascination; I managed to observe the bent man lift a bowl filled with the bloody remains of his vile work. This he held aloft and began once more to chant in a throaty voice, clearly invoking a name—one too evil for me to repeat here, but one I had heard once around a shepherd's fire long ago. I had thought it but a fable, but now—I was not so sure.

The master of eunuchs paced slowly in a halting gait toward my hiding place and from sheer panic I curled in upon myself, striving with all my might to avoid detection. I soon realized I need have no fear of being seen, for the man was blind! He carried the abominable container and carefully placed it almost at my feet, just inside the place of fire.

Backing away a few paces, he continued his incantation and soon there came from the very stones of the pit before me a sheet of yellow flame that coiled snakelike around the offering in the bowl. I thrust my right hand into my mouth and bit down hard to keep from crying out. Already the heat of the fire had begun to wrap me in agony.

Knowing that soon I would succumb to the blaze, I built in my mind a final image of my home. Wishing to die like a man, though uninitiated, I called up the faces of my family and silently bade each goodbye.

As the heat of the conjured fire reached the point of burning away my garment, searing my flesh, I suddenly felt a rush like cooling liquid that seemed to pour over me and pool around my pain wracked feet. In moments the burning ceased and where there had been roaring fire, now a soft grey mist drifted about me.

Thinking I had passed into the next life, I rose and stepped deeper into the welcoming coolness of the clinging cloud. How long I walked, or where—I never knew. Perhaps I lost consciousness from the terrible shock I had experienced in the Caliph's palace, but in time I seemed to awake, finding myself no longer within stone walls, but lying beside a clear pool into which water trickled musically from rocks above.

How I had come there was an even greater mystery, but I soon discovered that I was not in the afterlife, but very much alive and—hungry. Finding nothing to stay my hunger, I contented myself with

taking a deep drink from the pool and looking about to try and determine where I was.

Pacing about the crevice that held the water, I became aware of a musical jingling some distance away. Peering cautiously around the jutting boulder that offered me some cover, I saw a very ancient donkey accompanied by an equally elderly man. Without thinking that there might be danger, I stepped out and called to him.

Strangely the man seemed not at all surprised to find me before him, almost naked and trembling with the effects of fire, hunger and the horror of the past two days.

He spoke softly to his animal and looked at me, compassion wreathing his lined face. "Ah, lad, you look as if you need a friend. Don't be afraid. Kadiir will help you."

Thus began my life with the wisest man I have ever known. When at length I could tell him what I had endured, he simply nodded. I begged him to take me back to the place where my father and I had been attacked, but on hearing me describe it, he sadly shook his head.

"My son, there is no point in returning. I know the place; indeed I paused there a day gone. Your father is no longer of this world. The men who took you have seen to that."

"Th—then he must be given burial rites." I stammered.

"Be comforted, youngling, for I have seen to that. I have spoken the sacred words and placed him beneath a great high mound of stones. Nothing will disturb his resting place, you can be sure."

Near overcome with grief, I sat and held my head in my hands. "What am I to do? I have nothing to offer my mother and sisters. They would fare better to find another protector. I am no man initiated."

The wanderer replied kindly, "You are far more than that. If I read you aright, you will yet serve mankind when the Gift that lies within you matures."

"Gift?" I replied.

"Yes, it has left its mark upon you. Go yonder and observe." He pointed back to the pool.

Puzzled, I followed his gesture and gazed into the rippling water. The reflection of my face, though somewhat distorted by the water's

movement, near caused me to tumble in with shock. My hair that had been raven black was now the color of flame and the skin that framed my face appeared as if someone had taken a hot iron and drawn the outline of two broad wings.

Ibed Al Zahr paused in the telling to catch his breath and Hart leaned closer to see if he could trace what the chapman had seen so long ago. But if such marks lay there now, they were covered by heavy beard and hair.

“But—but your hair is not the color of flame.” The scrivener protested.

“Nay, that is easily hidden with an application of certain herbs. It would not do for me to announce to the world that I had been so marked.” The chapman smiled.

“Aye, for such a reason I wear this patch.” Hart commented. “But, who was that old man?”

“Kadiir? Merely a wandering merchant like myself now, however he too had Gifts, his greatest being to recognize Power and guide a novice into the proper use of his own Ability. From him I learned both a trade and how to employ my Gift.”

“Like Soorta and Owlglass.” Hart’s comment was not a question.

“Just so.” Ibed agreed.

“How long were you with him?”

“We traveled together for several years, coming finally to the Narid Sea. It was on the shore of that turbulent body of water that he took his leave of me and bade me cross to seek my destiny. I never saw him again, but I carry his image in my heart just as I do that of my lost family.”

The chapman lapsed into silence that Hart was loath to disturb. The scrivener understood the depth of loss surging up within the dark skinned traveler. Had he not felt the similar pain of forfeiting all that had once been dear to him?

“Enough of the morbid past!” Ibed stated with finality. “We must need look to the future. Rest assured that I will link with you, offering what help I may, when you essay to enter the lair of the Dark.”

Meal and tale done, the two men turned back toward Under Stamglen, each lost in thought. They parted, Ibed to return to the inn and Hart to resume his duties for the Reeve.

Moklin was waiting somewhat impatiently when the scrivener arrived, "About time! We are expected at the castle. The harvest report must be tendered to the Steward."

Tossing a sack of scrolls at Hart, the Reeve strode out of the low doorway and headed up the twisting path to Castle Stamglen. The scrivener followed, mentally shaking off the somber mood that lingered from his nooning with Ibed.

Preparations for Michaelmas were evident when they arrived at their destination. A successful harvest was cause for celebration and dwellers in vill and castle alike would take full advantage of that. More to the point of Hart and Moklin's visit, was the completion of the Manor's annual cycle and the beginning of a new year of record keeping.

Steward and Bailiff both met them, appropriately jolly, having already begun partaking of some of the harvest bounty. A newly brewed keg of malt ale occupied a place of honor in the center of the room that served for the management of business at Stamglen Manor.

"Well met, Reeve, come share a pot of ale and let us hear your report." Attabirch beckoned to a low bench. "You too, scrivener. I hear you have acquitted yourself quite well."

"That he has!" Moklin took a long pull on the rich flavored ale and leaned back comfortably. "Ask those who have been exposed by this young man and you will hear that he has proven himself indeed valuable to the Manor." The Reeve beamed as though he were responsible for Hart's success.

In a way, he was entitled to bask in the scrivener's accomplishments. Did he not enlist Hart when newly come to the vill? Some might not have been willing to employ a one-eyed scribe who looked somewhat suspicious, always keeping a hood drawn low over his forehead.

"Well, Scrivener Hart, you have not disappointed me. I knew you were a man to be reckoned with when you stood down that beast that would have made mincemeat of me!" Steward Attabirch chuckled at the memory of his narrow escape in the Drowsing Wood.

“He what?” The Bailiff turned to stare more closely at Hart. “I have not heard that tale.”

“That is because you have been off tramping the Manor and enforcing the Lord’s peace.” Attabirch commented. “Everyone else has heard how this fellow arrived to stare down a raging boar that had me in a very dangerous spot.”

“Seems you have no lack of courage, Hart.” The Bailiff comment dryly. Hart fidgeted at the uncommon attention he was drawing. “I did but do what any man would.”

“Most unarmed men would have taken heel and left me to my fate.” was the Steward’s answer.

“What say you to taking up a post here at the castle, lad?” The Steward inquired, a speculative expression on his face.

“Hold, now!” Reeve Moklin stood abruptly, knocking over his bench. “I need him in the vill!”

“I scarcely think we need his services here, Steward.” The Bailiff joined in. “We have a fine garrison of armsmen and a full complement of servitors.”

Hart could feel a trickle of sweat under his hood as relief spread over him. He wanted access to the castle, but not the opportunity for scrutiny that a fulltime posting would afford.

“I suppose you are right,” Attabirch stood, bringing an end to the meeting. “Come, it is time to make the presentation of the harvest report to Lord Stormund.”

The four men moved, in order of their rank of service, out across the quadrangle to approach the great hall where Stamglen’s Lord and his household assembled for the Ceremony of Harvest Bounty.

Both as a means of providing light for the gathering and warmth against the deepening chill of late autumn, great fires had been lit in either end of the long room. Smoke curled upward toward openings far above in the vaulted ceiling. In honor of the occasion newly sewn banners were stretched across the back of the dais where the elderly Stormund sat on an ornately carven chair.

When at length the four men approached close enough for Hart to get a clear view of the Lord of the Manor, he almost cried out at what

his Gifted Eye revealed. Could this be the vigorous man he had served not a year gone? Where he had once been alert to all that occurred about him, the old man now seemed scarcely conscious of being formally addressed by the Steward of Stamglen.

“My Lord Stormund, Protector of Stamglen, Keeper of the Kingdom’s Peace, we beg your leave to present the fruits of the labor of your loyal villeins.” The words of ceremony echoed around the great chamber bring a murmur of approval from the gathering, but had little effect upon the Lord of the Manor.

Hart could see that his face was almost gray and lined more deeply than his years might suggest. When at last one of his household bent over and spoke to him, Stormund seemed to come to himself and spoke in a monotone, stumbling over words.

“You may present—the—the, what did you say? Oh, yes—the harvest bounty.” Unable to complete the response without prompting, the nobleman subsided into a blank expression.

So upset by the faltering answer, Attabirch nearly forgot his next speech. “My—my Lord, we make bold to report that the fields—fields and flocks of Stamglen have yielded plenty.”

At this those gathered in the hall burst into the expected applause, shouting their delight at the news of a successful harvest. When the noise had subsided, servants moved through the throng passing out wine to those of high rank and pots of ale to the lower.

With their task completed and the ceremony concluded, Steward, Bailiff and Reeve withdrew, Hart trailing gratefully in their wake. All were sobered at the evidence of Lord Stormund’s decline. The scrivener did not need his Gift to ascertain that the running of Stamglen Manor had passed from its Lord’s hands to—whom? He feared the answer of that question.

When they had reached Attabirch’s workroom, the Bailiff sat on a bench near the window and sighed heavily. “A sight to fill the heart with dread. What has passed to change our Lord so?”

None answered, so he continued. “Perhaps there is a curse upon this place. Some strange happenings have occurred of late.”

“Are you thinking of the poisoning of the well?” Moklin put in.

“That and other curious things. I cannot remember when harvesters were so careless as to injure another worker at their side. It may be that we have only been victims of ill luck, but I wonder—”

“Well, Bailiff, have you any suggestion as to how we might ward off this ‘ill luck’?” Attabirch asked sharply.

“Mayhap. What if we were to call upon Brother Belicaus to come and recite a blessing over Stamglen Castle against evil, and in so doing bring good upon all the Manor?”

“Yesss. That could not hurt and indeed it might help.” The steward replied thoughtfully.

“Hart, the monk is a friend of yours, is he not?” Moklin asked.

“Aye, we met soon after coming to Stamglen.” Hart felt a prickle in his scalp.

“Then seek him out and ask if he will do this.” The Bailiff gestured impatiently as though to dismiss Hart straight away.

“Yes, sir. I will see to it immediately.” With a sense of deep relief, the scrivener ducked out of the room and left the castle that had taken on a distinct air of doom to his heightened Senses.

It took Hart some time to locate Belicaus, for the tall monk had been called to the bedside of a sick child. The fame of his gift for promoting the healing of others had spread swiftly among the villeins and ensured that he be kept busy ministering to their illnesses.

“Brother, I hesitate to ask you now, for I know you must be weary, but I bear a request from the Bailiff and the Steward of Stamglen.” Hart spoke softly as the monk stretched his long legs from where he had knelt over his patient.

“Oh? What could they want of me? Is someone in the castle ailing?” The firm voice belied the exhaustion that showed all too clearly on his features.

“In a manner of speaking. The whole of Stamglen is sick, my friend, not the least of whom is its Lord himself.” Hart spoke earnestly.

“I fear that such a sickness is beyond my Gift to absorb.” The reply came ruefully.

“True, but the officers’ request is that you simply come and speak a blessing over the Demesne of Lord Stormund.”

“Ah, I see. Perhaps it might be of service. I can but try, though I fear there needs to be a much greater effort expended before the pall of Evil is lifted.” Belicaus face reflected the gravity of his words.

“Yes, of that I too am sure. But, the time is not yet ripe for that. We must prepare carefully for such a confrontation.” Hart knew he spoke truth.

“Then let my service be the beginning of that preparation. Give me some time to regain my strength.”

“Of course. I will take your message to the Bailiff. Rest well, Brother.” Hart gripped the monk’s large hand and left him.

In two days time Belicaus sent word that he was ready for the blessing of Stamglen, but requested that it be kept private. “We need not draw too much attention to ourselves,” was his reasoning.

Meeting in Hart’s favorite glen, the monk, chapman, herb woman and scrivener were joined by Free-Claw. Bidding the pard pass the news to their confederates of the Pact, Soorta and Owlglass, the assembled members stood in a silent circle.

In moments a mist coiled up before them to take the form of their distant companions. “So, it begins,” came the faint voice of the Seeress.

“Yes, Lady Soorta. We will call on the Light to favor us and bless Stamglen.” Belicaus responded.

“It is but a first step.” Hart hastened to add.

“A good one, though!” came the brusque comment of Owlglass who appeared in the mist beside Soorta.

“So, let it be done!” Ibed Al Zahr’s words came with all the force of a proclamation.

Joining hands for a moment before parting, the circle turned and paced silent through the retreating shadows as the false dawn brought a faint glow to the eastern horizon.

Still well before any but the lowest of servants were awake, Belicaus trod softly up the ramp and through the postern gate of Castle Stamglen followed by his friends. All were well known to the gatekeeper, who, though he thought is strange to see them abroad so early, kept his peace and admitted them with a nod.

The small company climbed to the ramparts of the highest of Stanglen's towers and stood looking over the great castle's precincts.

"By all that is holy, I call upon the Light to bless, guard and protect this place and all who serve righteousness herein," intoned the monk who seemed to grow in stature with each word.

He continued, "May Evil find no root and bear no fruit in our midst. Amen!"

"Amen!" echoed the assembled members of the Pact as Hart heard with his mind the like response from Free-Claw and the distant companions.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Four

Hart was awakened by a great commotion in the room below his loft. Loud invectives floated up his ladder.

Watch step, Manfriend! Woman not happy. Free-Claw warned as both crawled from beneath the sheepskin cover that served to warm them on the cold nights of Stamglen's winter.

"Aye, Free-Claw. It would appear that she is indeed upset, but there's nothing for it; we must descend and face her wrath. At least it is not likely directed toward us this early." Hart quickly drew on his warmest hose and tunic, wrapping a heavy cloak about his shoulders. The reeve's cottage, built from wattle and daub, was somewhat leaky in its joints allowing wind to whistle eerily through cracks in the walls.

It was obvious that the wind was at the bottom or, rather the top of Sal's distress, for as they scrambled down the ladder Hart could see her vainly attempting to light a fire. The wind that swirled about the drafty room kept snuffing her taper necessitating it to be re-lit repeatedly before she could use it to ignite the cook fire laid in the pit the evening before. What was worse, snow flakes had begun to blow in through the smoke hole to dampen the kindling.

Near the end of her patience, the agitated woman called down dire imprecations upon the stubborn wind and wood as Moklin shoved through the door with a small kettle held on the hooked end of a stout stick.

"Here, here, Sal. Don't take on so. I have the solution to your problem. Had a feeling that you might find it no easy task to get the fire going this morning, so I took the trouble to step over to the inn and beg some coals." The reeve tipped the contents of the kettle into the midst of the small stack of kindling and soon the steam from the damp wood was replaced with a heartening crackle as flames licked upward.

"Thank 'ee, Reeve! I was like to give up and go back to bed." Sal commented as she set about preparing the morning meal.

"Looks to be a bad 'un out there," Moklin reported while the porridge was simmering.

"It's a deuced inconvenient time for a storm," came Sal's reply.

"Reminds me of the year me man passed. Snow piled up to the tops of the windows and drifted in s'bad we couldn't keep warm with the hottest fire."

"I remember that year," Moklin looked thoughtful. "I was but a lad."

"Near a quarter of the villeins lost folk in that 'un." Sal spooned up generous dollops of her thick porridge into three wooden bowls and tossed a chunk of bacon to Free-Claw who purred his gratitude between bites.

"Well, this bids fair to be near as bad as that was. We'd best make for the castle. Most like, Steward Attabirch will be needin' our aid." Moklin rose and stretched.

"I supposed this will put paid to the Feast of Yuletide." Hart felt a tinge of disappointment. He remembered the many happy times that occasion had brought to his childhood days in Castle Stamglen.

"Nay. We will do well to ride this one out without serious loss." The somber expression on Moklin's face lent weight to his words. "Storms that come hard on the heels of Michaelmas are called by some the 'Wrath of St. Michael', being the warrior angel."

"Well, 'ee must be fightin' somethin' fierce, cause it's a vicious time out there!" Sal commented.

Hart peered ahead as he and the reeve fought their way out of the wind pressed door and struggled against its biting force, made all the more sharp by needles of sleet intermingled with the snow. Already the great trees lining the approach to Stamglen Castle had taken on a coating of ice and the scrivener felt for a moment as if they were passing into a vast ice cave. The wan light of the winter morning scarcely illuminated the scene before them, giving an almost eerie dreamlike cast to the road ahead.

By the time they reached the castle, snow was over their boot tops, turning feet into soggy lumps of pain. They were met by Steward Attabirch and Lord Stormund's harried bailiff, who wrung his hands, as much from distress as from the penetrating cold that grew in intensity with each passing moment.

Attabirch's voice sounded muffled against the howl of the wind, "This one has taken us by surprise. We will be fortunate to survive it unscathed!"

"Aye," Moklin replied, "best send word to the vill that those who have not enough supplies or wood to last through this blow may come to the castle."

"But what of the beasts?" Hart wanted to know. "Can we not make a safe place to shelter the flocks and herds?"

"Yess, that might be well," the steward responded thoughtfully, "though where, I'm not sure."

"How about the tournament ground? It is partially fenced already and it would be a simple matter to make it secure." Hart brightened at the thought.

"Granted, and the grain and fodder is stored nearby. But we must hasten and enlist the villeins. It will take a fair number of men to gather and drive the beasts here." Attabirch turned and beckoned to an assistant. "You, Heक्टर, go with Reeve Moklin and his scrivener. Get some men to help you secure the jousting field for the animals."

While Moklin left with several armsmen to spread across the vill and dispatch drovers to bring in the cattle and sheep, Hart set out toward the tournament ground with his helpers, stopping to gather ropes and timbers to finish enclosing the area. As they pushed through the rapidly deepening snow, a message came from Free-Claw who turned abruptly and disappeared into the storm.

Must find mate! Bring to safety.

"Be careful!" was all that Hart had time to call out as his companion streaked away.

Within an hour the villeins began to straggle into the castle environs, some carrying squalling children, others assisting elderly family members. The more fit men of the vill had eagerly pitched in, helping gather the Lord's beasts as well as their own and before long the tournament ground just beyond the high curtain wall of Castle Stamglen was alive with milling, bleating and lowing beasts.

Hart and his assistants had fashioned makeshift shelters from the knights' pavilions at one end of the field nearest the towering castle wall. These they lined with straw, reinforcing them with pine bows.

Animals huddled gratefully under the cover, protected somewhat from the bite of the wind driven ice and snow.

From all around the Castle grounds echoed the cracking and groaning of ancient trees as branches strained and gave way under the ever increasing weight of ice. Hart felt a tinge of regret for the toll he knew would be exacted upon Lord Stormund's fruit trees. The storm of winter foretold a lean bearing season and all would feel the loss, noble and common alike.

Satisfied that everything possible had been done for both animals and people, Hart slogged through the snow and passed beneath the high portcullis of Stamglen. Strange, he thought, *I have seen not the first sign of any of the nobles taking part in preparing for the storm. Surely they know the danger. Could it be—? Such lethargy has never been typical of Lord Stormund's household before. Something is deeply amiss here.*

The scrivener's musing was abruptly broken with the call of a horn, the warning signal. Hastening to the source of the clarion, Hart arrived to hear a chilling report. The lady Arin and her party from Gamlin had been expected to return to Stamglen and indeed were many hours overdue.

The Bailiff of Stamglen climbed up on a mounting block to be heard the better, "I need men to form a search posse! Who will come forth?"

Without hesitation Hart stood forward, along with some men at arms.

"Good! Fetch stout staves and take several kegs of ale with you. If you find the missing folk, they will most likely be in need of restorative."

As the men set out for the Gamlin Road, Hart was gratified to find the outline of a tall figure looming beside him. Brother Belicaus, wrapped in a heavy robe and bearing a tall staff joined step with him. "Pears you could use some aid, friends."

"Gladly!" Hart had to shout to be heard above the wind. As the party crossed the drawbridge a low dark form appeared from the swirling whiteness.

"Free-Claw! Is all well?"

Mate safe. Not long, Free-Claw be father! The pard announced, a touch of pride in his mind voice.

“Good! But now we must find the lost travelers. Can you help?” Hart was grateful to have the cat at his side. The demi-pard’s senses, even allowing for Hart’s Gifts, were far superior and would prove invaluable in the difficult search conditions.

Free-Claw find. The confidence of the response came as no surprise to either monk or scrivener.

In truth, had not the pard been leading them, the searchers would soon have joined the ranks of the lost themselves. Increasing in intensity, the storm rapidly blotted out all but the closest shapes and, before they had traveled half a league, the road disappeared beneath an ice crusted blanket of white.

Going became more and more difficult as the icy coating broke unevenly, plunging men thigh deep in the wet snow. Hose soon became tattered and damp, exposing tender skin to the frosty air and ice cuts. Hart gritted his teeth at the pain and, bending almost double, kept a tight mental link with Free-Claw.

“How far, Friend? Have you any hint of our quarry?” Hart knew the other searchers were growing more and more skeptical of success in finding the lost party.

Have scent. Not too far. Much trouble! The cat’s mind voice had never felt so desperate.

“The pard has made contact!” Hart shouted, egging on the weary men.

At length they reached a tight copse of fir trees, beneath which huddled those whom they had been seeking. It soon became clear why the Lady Arin and her group had not reached Stamglen. For five people—the Lady, her brother and three armsmen—there was but one remaining horse.

“My Lady, what happened?” Hart bent close to her to make himself heard.

“Some strange beast from the wildwood burst upon us just after the storm broke driving our mounts fair mad with fear. We were all tossed from the saddle and my brother Dunken struck his head. I fear—!” Her words died as the toll of the hours, spent in cold and fear, came full upon her.

The monk crouched over the still form of the Lady's brother, passing his huge hands over the man's chalk white face. "He is almost gone. We must get him to shelter soon!"

There was nothing for it but to tie the injured man upon the one remaining horse and turn their faces back toward Stamglen. Two of the castle armsmen took charge of the mount, being careful to keep its burden as secure as possible as the animal struggled through the drifting snow.

Belicaus took Arin under his voluminous cloak and, ducking his head, plowed steadily along behind the horse, while Hart and another castle man assisted Lady Arin's exhausted and near frozen retainers to follow.

How they managed the screaming, frigid agony of the wild winter storm to reach safe haven in Stamglen, Hart was never quite sure. He found himself drawing strength from a shadow presence, barely sensed, dimly aware of Free-Claw's mental encouragement:

Pact with us! Make safety.

As the party finally staggered across the drawbridge, their footsteps swallowed by the howl of the storm, shouts rang out from those brave enough to keep watch for them. Welcoming warmth was near too much for frostbitten hands, feet and faces, but in time the pain subsided and Hart settled into a cozy haze brought on by generous drafts of hot mulled cider.

The scrivener awoke to the sounds of weeping. He sat up from his pallet before the fire in the castle kitchen and listened. Did he truly hear that or was it from the world of his dreams? Intent upon finding the source of the sense of grief and loss that now flowed over him in near palpable waves, Hart rose somewhat unsteadily and walked into the dark corridor leading to the family quarters.

He could see ahead a cluster of figures outside a chamber door. Hastening as best he could with a slight hangover, Hart mingled with the servants that stood talking among themselves. Paying little attention to the scruffy appearance of the scrivener, they continued their conversation.

"Never 'ad a chance, I says. 'E was good as dead when they brought 'im in."

“Oh, aye. ‘Twas the look of death, I’ll warrant.” Two serving women seemed to relish the dire exchange.

“Please,” Hart interrupted, “can you tell me what has happened?”

“Where ‘ave ye been, mon? ‘Is Honor, Sir Dunken has died in the Lady Arin’s arms. Even the tall Brother could na’ save ‘im.” A wrinkled face looked out at Hart from beneath a severely drawn wimple.

“Strange,” the second woman put in, “M’ Lady didn’t seem to care a bit neither. She just stood up and, patting down her skirts where they was rumpled, sort of marched out of the room and never looked back.”

“What’s more, it’s bruited about that there was Dark magics involved!” The younger woman seemed to take delight in the recounting of the juicy rumor.

“I—I see. Is the monk still within?” A chill, not from the drafty cold of the castle, passed through Hart. This was not what he wanted to hear, especially the account of Arin’s reaction.

“Nay, ‘e went up t’ chapel not more than a turn of the glass after the word came out.” His informant rolled her eyes as if it was a hopeless task Belicaus had set himself, going to pray.

“My thanks.” Hart turned and hurried to find the Brother. He must hear what Belicaus had to say about the rumor.

Finding the tall monk kneeling before a tiny altar, illuminated by several smoking candles, Hart stood quietly for some moments, waiting for his friend to acknowledge him. He knew that Belicaus was fully aware of his presence. At length the low murmur of the Brother’s voice ceased and he rose wearily, turning a face upon the scrivener that clearly showed the toll of the hours just past.

“You have heard?”

“Aye. But is it true? Do you believe Dark Arts are behind Dunken’s death?” Hart dreaded the answer.

“There is no doubt. When I attempted to join with his mind and spirit, I found only a seared trail of destruction.” Belicaus sank heavily to a bench at the rear of the small chapel. “It was far too late to undo the damage. Indeed his life winked out the instant I tried to reach him.”

Before Hart could respond to the monk's revelation, a sharp voice cut through the quiet of the room.

"You there, Belicaus! You have much to answer for! I charge you with misuse of your Order. You dabble in things forbidden and now a nobleman has paid with his life!"

The strident accusation thrust Hart and his friend near into shock as the short, stout form of Father Corman waddled toward them.

"Father Corman! You are mistaken," Hart spoke up immediately, remembering to put all the force of his Gifts behind the statement. "Brother Belicaus was merely seeking to minister to a badly injured man, one who was already at death's door."

"Well—that's not—" The portly priest began to stammer as the full force of the Emerald Eye played upon him.

The monk beckoned toward the bench beside him and the little priest sank gratefully to the seat. "I—forgive me. It's just that I was so upset when I heard the report that Sir Dunken was dead!" Father Corman mopped his brow with his sleeve despite the chill of the chapel.

"Indeed, it is cause for much grief whenever a young and promising knight is lost." Belicaus returned.

"It is far more than that!" The priest snapped.

"Oh?"

"Yes. You see, since I am keeper of the records of births, deaths and the like at the Abbey of St. Stam, I am in the position to know things." Father Corman seemed to hesitate before saying more.

"And?" Belicaus encouraged him to continue.

Looking around as though fearing to be overheard, the corpulent priest burst out, "This is a great disaster! Sir Dunken's death means that there is now no male heir to the Lordship of Stamglen. He was the only survivor of the last remaining cadet line. With him died our hopes!" Dropping his head upon his chest, the stout man was overcome with sobs.

"But—surely there is some hope?" Hart joined in.

"Nay. There is only the certainty that Lord Stormund's Manors will pass to the Crown and all the holdings will most like be broken up and distributed among other Lords. Life as we have known it for

generations in Stamglen will end when Lord Stormund passes.” The words echoed with a doleful sound from the high ceiling of the chapel.

Hart and Belicaus looked at one another and though no words were spoken, each knew the other’s thoughts: *the net of Evil is drawing inward*. Surely as though declared from the highest tower, it was obvious that a Dark plan lay at the bottom of this tragedy.

“I—I must go and pray,” stammered Father Corman. Rising shakily he continued down the aisle to lower himself with a grunt to the kneeling rail before the altar. With a glance and a nod Belicaus also resumed his feet and slipped quietly out of the thick oaken door, Hart close on his heels.

“We can put it off no longer. The time has come to seek the malevolent source that lies in the bowels of this castle.” The monk’s words were so quiet that had Hart not been at his shoulder, he would have missed them altogether.

“Aye, Brother. Now that we are shut in for the duration of the storm, perhaps there will be opportunity for just such a quest.” Even as he responded, Hart felt a bone deep chill and the stirrings of fear such as he had not known, even during the days of his Ordeal.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Five

No further evidence of the Dark influence upon Stamglen being forthcoming, Hart found no immediate opportunity to delve in the bowels of the castle. In a hand of days all ice had receded from the trees and roads, allowing surfs to return to their homes to discover what the storm had left in its wake.

The scrivener was thankful to find that the Reeve's house and grounds had come through relatively unscathed, save for some broken branches lying about. More fortunate than many of the poor villeins, who had lost most of the thatch from their roofs in the fierceness of the storm winds, Moklin was able to take up residence again with a bit of cleanup.

Hart did discover, however, that his piliasse had been thoroughly soaked by the melting of snow and ice, which had filtered through cracks under the eaves. With a sigh of resignation the scrivener tugged the sodden pallet down the ladder and turned its contents into the dooryard. Hanging the cover to dry near the fire that Sal now kept roaring at all hours, he called to her that he was off to fetch more straw.

"Bring a bit extra, if 'e will, lad. Reeve Moklin could use some," she responded.

"All right. I'll have it here by Vespers." Hart replied as he pulled the door shut.

Evening found the scrivener trudging from the byre looking like nothing more than a walking haystack. Free-Claw paced at his side.

Friend need chase mice?

"Very funny, Sir Pard! But methinks all self respecting creatures have long since deserted this particular straw pile." Hart had to chuckle at the cat's droll comment.

Pausing to offload a portion of his burden for Sal to refresh Moklin's bed, he snagged his own bed sack from its drying spot and struggled to haul the bulky load up the ladder to his loft.

"At least I need not fear iron saltings in this bed tonight." Hart commented to the pard who took up a spot as far as possible from

where the scrivener scuffled to push the stubborn straw inside the bed sack.

The comment served to trigger Hart's thoughts, opening a floodgate of recollection and speculation. His mind wandered back to what had, for him, signaled the beginning of so much grief, pain and confusion.

For me, it all began with the breaking. But was that truly the beginning of the Dark workings in Stamglen? I wonder.

Dark work longtime came the pard's sober response.

I fear you are correct, my friend. But one thing is certain: since that time the evidences of such activity have grown apace. Think on it: mysterious poisonings, curious upheavals among the peasants, the attempt on my life by the Marshall's men, even the wild storm so early in the season. Such things cannot easily be explained away.

No try explain. Hunt!

Indeed! The hunt will come; only, I know not just how or when. Another thing that troubles me deeply is what I see happening to Lord Stormund. He is not so old as to warrant the total decline in his powers. While we were waiting out the storm in the castle, I myself saw how agitated and confused he has become. One evening I came upon him in the great hall wandering from one end of that huge chamber to the other, lifting the edges of the great tapestries that hang there, peering behind them as though searching out some lurker.

Him know something. Free-Claw's mental comment came, not as a question.

Perhaps, but I fear that if he does, it lies so deep within his tortured mind that even he could not say what it is. He has become so restless that none seem able soothe him save Bard Brydwen with her music, and that only for short periods.

Maybe him worry about who be new Lord.

That is possible, but I am not sure he is even was aware of the significance of Sir Dunken's death, or indeed that the only male heir to Stamglen had passed.

Not good.

No, it is a very bad sign. And think on the other strange happenings. Even that ice storm had a Dark feel about it. What about the

mysterious beast that attacked Arin's party? And Belicaus is certain that foul magic was employed to hasten Dunken's end.

The longer Hart pondered the situation, the more fear clutched at his vitals. How might one man have such far reaching evil influence? There was no question in the scrivener's mind as to who was behind all of the unexplained events. But what could possibly be empowering Lazarous in such magnitude?

Free-Claw, I think it is time to dig into the Marshall's past. This much I know: he is not who he claims to be. That much I uncovered in Owlglass's library.

How search?

I believe this calls for a council of the Pact. Will you pass on the summons to Softstep that we need to make a link?

Free-Claw call.

Some days passed before an answer was relayed through the pard. In the meanwhile Hart resumed his careful sweeping of the loft in the chance that another attempt might be made to render him Powerless. To his relief, no evidence was forthcoming.

One evening just past Whitsuntide, the scrivener sat at his writing bench going over some accounts for Moklin, but found it increasingly difficult to keep his mind on his work. It was not that some outside influence had altered his ability, but the inner workings of his own mind pulled his attention elsewhere.

Word had come earlier that day of a mysterious illness seemed to be sweeping through the ranks of Castle Stamglen retainers, especially those in positions of responsibility. Fear nibbled at Hart. What if Brydwen fell to the strange malady? Could Belicaus reach her in time? The report indicated that several had sickened and died with alarming speed.

If the sickness was of Evil origin, there was no doubt that Brydwen would be a likely target, if for no other cause than to bring distress upon Lord Stormund who had so come to depend upon her skills. What was more, the friendship between her uncle Belicaus and Hart was no secret in the castle. That alone could well condemn her.

A cold sweat broke upon the scrivener's brow. He must find some way to protect the lovely Bard, even to begging her to leave the

castle. But even as the thought passed through his mind, Hart knew that to be a futile hope. His influence upon the strong minded young woman was far from powerful.

Word finally came that Owlglass and Soorta were ready to join in a meeting of the members of the Pact. Set for the same spot they had used when Hart was introduced to the company, the scrivener took care not to be seen leaving the vill with the others, save for his cat companion.

The early dusk of winter was lowering when he arrived at the ancient oak. There waiting stood Ibed, Hesta and Brother Belicaus. The monk had lit a smokeless fire, shielded by a ring of moss covered stones. Its glow was safely screened by a heavy thicket that served to encircle the venerable tree. Even Hart would not have been able to penetrate the circle without the guidance of Free-Claw, despite having visited it earlier.

Those gathered had just enough time for brief greetings before hermit and crone arrived, shadowed by the immense wolf. "Well met, friends!" Owlglass called out heartily. "It has been too long."

"Long enough for much mischief to be wrought, I fear." Hart announced, proceeding to outline his fears to the gathering.

"Yes, lad. Much as I hate to agree, you have the straight of it. Most like the picture is far darker than you know." Soorta leaned heavily on Owlglass's arm. The tiny woman seemed, if possible, more shrunken than ever.

"Then we are agreed. Lazarous is at the bottom of the Dark doings in Stamglen?" Belicaus queried.

"No doubt. But knowing this does naught but give us a starting place. The true question is 'HOW does he manage his evil?'" Ibed's words bore an edge that penetrated to the very core of each listener.

"All of you know about the discoveries I have made. Do you not?" Hart looked from face to face.

"Aye. We have been kept abreast of happenings here, especially your investigations." Owlglass responded for the group.

"Then it is time to push deeper." Soorta took the lead. "Let us join the link. Hesta, have you brought the herbs?"

"Aye, M' Lady." The herb woman held out a small leathern bag.

“Then cast them upon the fire. All of you—LINK!”

The resultant burst of greenish fire gave way to a fine mist that encircled the group, blocking out the world beyond them so completely that each felt as if he or she had entered a totally foreign realm—one not entirely of the present.

The stooped Crone of Kolroven chanted what sounded to Hart like an ancient lay he had heard in childhood, but he could not quite make out the words. Slowly there rose between them, as it were a miniature of Castle Stamglen, accurate in every detail, so that the watchers soon realized that they were “Seeing” the ancient pile itself from a vast distance.

Larger and larger the “Seeming” grew, until the members of the Pact felt as though they had truly entered the environs of Lord Stormund’s demesne. Corridors opened before them and passed soundlessly.

At length a broad stair yawned before them and descending this they saw ahead the entry to the burial vault of the Lords of Stamglen, long dead. From within the circle of watchers a glistening green globe seemed to float upward and make its way unerringly toward a freshly hewn slab that lay upon a tomb.

An intense reaction within Hart’s Gifted Eye nearly caused him to break the link with his companions. The globe settled upon, no—it sunk through and into the grave place.

With a sudden jolt that left the Pact members literally reeling in their places, the scene disappeared and they were once more simply staring into the glowing coals of Belicaus’s fire.

“So—we have all ‘Seen’.” Soorta declared. “An answer of sorts lies in the Stamglen burial place.”

“I—I suppose it falls to me to pay it a visit.” Hart’s voice faltered as his spirit quailed at the import of what they had observed.

“You will not go alone.” Belicaus spoke quietly.

“Yes, there needs to be a reason for your being there, in case someone finds you.” Hesta put in.

“They go to pray at the grave of the recently departed. None can gainsay that.” Ibed knew the custom of this land, though he called another his home.

“Very well. Let us go forth and obey the guidance we have received.” The monk took his long staff, bowed to the Lady Soorta and disappeared into the forest.

“We meet tomorrow after Lauds at the ale house.” Hart called as the tall brother strode off.

“Take great care, youngling.” Owlglass looked closely into the scrivener’s tense face. “You front massive Evil; a misstep could mean the loss of everything.”

“I—I know, Master. If it were not for each of you, I would have been lost long since.” Hart felt the sting of tears and ducked his head to hide the sign he perceived as weakness.

“Do not fear. You are a sworn servant of the Light, lad. No false accusing can alter that. Your allegiance to righteousness will be your surest weapon, your strongest armor.” Soorta handed Hart a box of his beard remover, bringing him back to the mundane and leaving him the more grateful for that.

“Until we meet again,” Ibed called, “peace be to each of you!”

Anxious to discover what lay in the burial chamber at Castle Stamglen, Hart rolled out of his warm bed to the displeasure of Free-Claw, who would have liked to slumber at least until the light of day.

“Come on, sleep lover, we have a task to complete and the fewer who happen to be up and about, the better.” Hart encouraged the drowsy cat while pulling on hose and tunic and donning his Eye patch, Cap of Knowledge and hooded cloak.

No have to like. The pard grumbled.

“Well, I don’t much like poking about among the departed, either,” was the scrivener’s rejoinder.

They found the monk sipping warmed cider and munching on a plug of dark bread. “Best take time to break your fast, Hart. We may need every scrap of strength we can garner for this day’s work.”

Nodding his agreement, Hart helped himself to the food and drink that had been placed on the low table in front of Brother Belicaus. “What think you of our chances?” He asked.

“As fair as may be. Every step we take from now on is fraught with risk. You know that.” The monk drained his cider pot and wiped his mouth with a capacious sleeve.

Time go! At last fully awake, the pard was anxious to get on with it.

Now familiar visitors to the castle, the trio had no difficulty gaining access as they entered the barbican and crossed the drawbridge. The hour being yet early, they had to call thrice before a sleepy guard responded and opened the portcullis for them.

“Humph, the castle could be stormed and taken before that lout was half awake,” mumbled Belicaus, recalling his days spent in warfare and defense ere taking the cloth.

“Methinks it is all a part of the general decline of Lord Stormund’s demesne,” Hart remarked as they passed across the quadrangle toward the entry that led to the memorial vaults. No one accosted them as they passed a number of guard posts, in fact they saw not the remotest sign of watchfulness anywhere.

Their steps echoed hollowly in the long descent, but at least someone had taken care to trim the rush lights that lined the way to the last resting place of countless generations of the Stamglen rulers. As they drew closer to the long vault, Hart’s hairs prickled slightly beneath his Cap – a sure indication of more than mundane happenings thereabout.

Taking a rush light from its holder, Belicaus led the way through the high arch that opened onto the burial chamber. Having been present at the entombment of Dunken, he passed quickly to the hapless knight’s new grave.

By now all of Hart’s Gifts had begun to manifest, so intensely that he almost reeled at the Power, which seemed to coil within him as though readying for a strike.

“What is it?” Belicaus had come to stand at the foot of Dunken’s tomb.

“I—I am not sure.” Hart reached out to steady himself against the smooth surface to the stone capping the free standing vault. As he did, there came an audible “snap” and beneath his trembling fingers a soft green glow began to emanate from the stone.

It was as if the process, begun by the linked Pact, simply continued, offering a guide to Hart's questing hand. The tiny globe of emerald light rose and spread, enclosing his hand in a glistening glove, then began to move. Had he wished to resist, the scrivener could not have withstood the tugging. Crab-wise his fingers inched across the lines and whorls that formed an ornate decoration of the stone.

As his green clad hand reached an almost undetectable notch in the massive top of Dunken's resting place, Hart's fingers were suddenly thrust downward. Gritting his teeth in anticipation of the pain he would suffer when they smashed into unyielding rock, the scrivener was almost thrown off balance as his hand slipped neatly into the seemingly solid surface.

In an instant a portion of the cap stone lifted slightly and rotated to the left, revealing a declivity large enough to hold—a shield!

"That's it!" Belicaus's voice was edged with excitement.

Unable to contain his curiosity, the demi-pard leaped to the lid and peered over Hart's shoulder. **What be?**

"What it is, I think, is the evidence we need to know that there is a definite plot to place Stamglen under the Power of the Dark!" Hart replied, his voice near shaking with the import of what lay before them.

"Does it mean what I think it means?" Belicaus face mirrored the distaste with which he formed the question.

"It means that someone, and we know who that 'someone' is, has long and long planned to seize the Lordship of Stamglen and is well on his way toward doing just that!" Hart responded.

Explain! Free-Claw lashed his tail in frustration.

"What lies hidden here is a shield, bearing the arms of the next Lord Stormund, and it reads like a map to the evil intent of Marshall Lazarous."

How?

"See the quarterings? One depicts the house of Gamlin, but notice; it is differenced to indicate, not the male line as would Sir Dunken's, but the female line—the arms are blazoned upon an oval. The next quarter is that of Sir Norvill's device, of the House of Moorced. Another shows Norvill's assumption of the heirship of Gamlin, which

we know is the cadet line through which Stamglen's inheritance now passes. You see, no female may inherit the rule of a manor, but she may pass the right on to her spouse only, under the laws of the land."

"And the final quarter?" Belicaus prompted.

"That is the most damning of all. The last quarter depicts the bearer's right to rule and shows the Stamglen boar combined with Norvill's arms."

"Most disturbing is the fact that this shield is not new formed, but in its intricacy must have been fashioned long before Sir Dunken died!" The monk's voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

"Of this I am certain," Hart put in. "It is clearly the work of a gifted smith named Kellon Armorer, who died from the poisoned well! See, here on the back is his mark."

Battle come soon. The pard's mind voice echoed the thoughts of both men as Hart carefully replaced the shield and closed its compartment.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Six

Scarcely had the last of the winter storms abated when the villeins of Under Stamglen were called to Lord Stormund's fields for Plough Monday. The newly thawed soil had dried barely enough for workers to lay down the straight furrows in narrow strips needed for the spring planting.

The Steward of Stamglen rarely had trouble gathering the peasants for the Boon Work, with its ample ale and cider provided for all, as well as a hearty meal on the first day of plowing. The tradition had wisely been established to allow surfs the means to keep up their energy for the demanding work. Strangely, however, this day's tale of villeins was noticeably lacking, prompting Moklin to summon Hart.

"Scrivener, go through the vill and see if you can locate any layabouts. We seem to be seriously short of plow hands this day."

"Aye, Bailiff, straight away." Hart responded and, chirping to the pard, set off toward the likeliest place to find the missing men. Bending to pass under the low lintel of a disreputable hut, which displayed a ragged ale sheaf, Hart was not surprised to hear loud laughter from within.

"Aargh, we ducked 'im, we did!" A pock faced villein swaggered about the smoky room waving an ale pot and splashing its contents over his audience.

"Right, Bottoms! 'e showed 'em." Half a dozen men sprawled on benches, clearly so far gone in their cups as to be quite unaware of Hart's entering. The scrivener stood quietly for several moments, listening to the increasingly rowdy talk.

Men fight soon. Free-Claw's mental observation was, as usual, right on target.

"*Aye, my four-footed friend, this has a bad feel about it.*" Hart responded in like speech only the pard could perceive.

Before the thought was fully formed, a curse was accompanied by a crash as a drunken villein stumbled headlong across the table where several others sat. In the time it took to draw breath, the entire population of the tap room happily joined in all-out battle.

“Free-Claw, quick, fetch the monk. Tell him to bring the Bailiff and a hand of armsmen. This is more than we can handle alone!” Hart reached for a bucket of water that stood by the door and aimed it at the nearest cluster of men.

The scrivener soon found himself the sole object of the drunken brawlers. Spinning out of reach of a cudgel swinging giant, he ducked behind an oaken column supporting a low arched beam, which ran lengthwise down the room. Hitting the wood with such force, the man yowled in pain and dropped his weapon.

Near despairing for his own safety, Hart felt a wash of relief as Moklin and his men burst in, followed by Brother Belicaus, poised to swing his huge staff at the nearest head.

Bailiff and assistants made short work of pacifying the truants, herding them off to a lockup where they could sit, sleep off their ale and ponder the error of their ways until fit to answer to the officer of the manor for their offenses.

“Strange,” Belicaus commented as he and Hart walked back toward the edge of the vill where the more lawfully minded were pursuing their appointed tasks, “it is not the custom for villeins to forsake a Boon Work day to spend their own hard won coins on bad ale.”

“Think you as I do?” Hart asked.

“That this smacks of more meddling of a certain plotter, bent on mischief?” Belicaus responded.

“Just so. It’s as if there were an ill humor laid upon the people, the land, the beasts and—even the weather!” Hart’s voice grew more tense as realization of the seriousness of the threat grew upon him.

“I fear it is much worse than a simple humor.” The tall monk looked perplexed.

“Brother Belicaus, I know you and the others have counseled me not to venture into the depths of Castle Stamglen alone, but I must try and learn what I can.” Hart looked earnestly into dark eyes that reflected the monk’s concern.

“Perhaps. But you must maintain a link through the pard. I will seek out Ibed Al Zahr and warn him to be on the alert.” Belicaus tentatively agreed.

“Of course. I have no desire to walk into a trap!” Hart spoke with some heat.

“All right. Wait until just after Compline. We must know the precise time when you enter the castle.” The brother rose from a bench in the now empty tap room and laid a work-coarsened hand on Hart’s shoulder for a moment before departing.

The Abbey bells of Saint Stam had scarcely ceased vibrating when Hart, accompanied by the sleek dark form of the pard, slipped quietly along the corridor leading from the still room toward the entrance to the storage vaults below.

The scrivener’s mental question brought quick response from Free-Claw.

Link is up.

“Good. Now to seek the sign I showed you from the old chart.” Hart envisioned the tiny green eye his wand had revealed.

Free-Claw look.

But before the two searchers could reach the end of the vault, a soft sound froze both in their tracks. Someone was descending the long stair behind them. With barely enough time to duck behind a large ale butt, Hart could feel cold sweat beading his forehead.

One by one, the rush lights illuminating the dank chamber seemed to shrink in upon themselves and sputter out, leaving a thickening darkness. Slowly, with a soft susurration that Hart could not quite identify, came a figure surrounded by a dull yellowish glow, like the light given off by some unspeakable bog denizen.

As the apparition drew closer to their hiding place, the scrivener became aware of an almost inaudible humming, so soft that it seemed to come from inside his own head. But the closer the light progressed, the more pervasive grew the sound. Even the pard at his side was responding to it with a low throated growl.

When the figure reached the cross aisle in which man and cat had taken refuge, it stopped and turned slowly to face in their direction, bringing a moan from Hart as he finally saw clearly.

“*Preserve us!*” were the only words his mind could form as a powerful impulse to break and run surged through him.

Free-Claw spat softly as if to echo his thought. Fronting them was the form of the Lady Arin, but Hart knew somehow that this was not the lovely, lively maiden he had met so many months before in the hidden garden. Here stood a husk, face drawn and pasty as any corpse might possess, eyes—nothing but ghastly pale orbs, shot through with streaks of the yellow miasma that swirled like a nest of writhing serpents. Hands raised, as though feeling her way sightless toward an unspeakable doom, the shell that had once housed a vibrant girl, turned and shuffled toward the far wall.

For long moments Hart crouched, frozen by what he had seen, unsure whether that had been a true representation or perhaps a vision of what awaited the hapless Arin. He swallowed bile that rose to his throat at the revelation and, forcing his reluctant feet to trace the steps of the maiden, followed on.

The humming had stopped while the girl paused, but now resumed, continuing to intensify, knifing into the scrivener's head with a gut-wrenching disorientation. He reeled like one of the drunks he had encountered earlier in the day, barely noticing the pard beside him was finding it equally difficult to walk a straight line.

Tearing off the Eye patch, Hart squinted to keep the faint yellow glow in sight. He dare not lose contact as he had done once before and drew as close as he dared, but need not have worried, for the young woman seemed totally unaware of her surroundings. Stopping before the rough hewn wall, the obscene glow around her spread in an ovoid that appeared to merge with the very stone itself.

Where there had been a solid expanse of rock, now yawned a narrow opening through which Arin passed oblivious to the ugly scratches left on her pale arms by the jagged stones framing the entry.

Anxious to pass through behind her, ere the way closed once more, Hart bent low and almost stumbling, followed his quarry. The passage immediately began to waver around him as an ominous grinding sounded almost on his backside. Suddenly something hit him from behind thrusting him downward and into absolute darkness.

How long he lay curled in upon himself, Hart could not tell. He knew only that all sense had been taken from him—until—

MAN FRIEND! MAN FRIEND! Free-Claw's mind call rang like a thunder clap through Hart's returning consciousness.

"Don't shout. I hear you." The scrivener responded.

Keep talk. I find. Came the urgent request.

"I'm here. Where—where are you?"

In answer, though still unable to see, Hart felt the rasp of the pard's tongue on his cheek. *"Wh—where are WE?"*

Trap in wall, Free-Claw think.

"Tr—trapped? How—oh, no!" Panic nibbled at Hart as he struggled to rise, thrusting out his hands in much the posture he had seen from Arin just moments before. His fear was hardly lessened when, in less than two pace widths in any direction, he encountered unyielding stone.

Battling to regain a measure of calm, the scrivener dropped once more to the cold floor of the now sealed passage. *"I—I'm sorry, my friend. I seem to have got us into a fine mess with my haste."*

Not dead. The pard's gift for simple statement of fact went far toward bringing Hart back to sanity.

"No, you're right. We still have life, though no light or freedom. Say—can you sense the Link?" Hope grew like the tingle of feeling returning to a numbed hand.

Give touch. The pard drew closer so Hart could rest his hand on the sleek fur. For what seemed a very long time, the cat remained silent, questing for the thread that might well mean survival for them both.

"Well?" Hart could not tell if the call had gotten through—he couldn't even sense the mind voice of his friend.

Must make sharp point call.

"Oh, you mean you must narrow the call to make it stronger?" It did make sense.

Yes. Ibed answer. Free-Claw's words carried a strong impression of self satisfaction.

"Well done! What said he?"

Him come. Make way.

The intense relief at the pard's response began to fade as hour after hour dragged by with still no sign of the chapman.

“Are—are you sure he is coming?” Hart cared little for the whining tone of his own voice. “Did he say how long?”

No say. The cat could be forgiven a touch of exasperation. He was beginning to feel the strain too.

“Well, I, for one, can sit no longer.” The scrivener stood again and felt in his belt for the Dhroghii stone wand. Perhaps there was some way—

Holding the slender rod before him, he turned slowly to make a sweep of the imprisoning stone pocket. At first the wand gave no hint of life, but when Hart directed it toward the floor just beyond the spot of entry, a faint green glow began to emanate from the nested tip. Thinking to enhance the focus by touching it to his forehead, he near staggered as a brilliant emerald flash blinded both man and cat for a moment.

“Did you see?”

Hole. The pard inched cautiously forward as the light steadied and became more bearable.

For a moment Hart gulped at the thought of finding the opening the hard way. It required no great imagining to see himself lying broken somewhere far below the level they now occupied. But—shaking off the dark thought, Hart thrust the wand into the fissure.

“It seems to have carven steps, though I like not the look of them.” Indeed the stone notches descending the near vertical wall were slimy with the dampness that pervaded the space. Noticing a dark smudge on the top step he bent closer to examine it. “Look, Free-Claw. This is the way she went.”

Foot mark. The pard sniffed the small print. **We go?**

“Yes. If Ibed comes, he can follow us. I must know where Arin is bound.” Hart twisted around and lowered himself into the opening backward. The notches were so steeply cut that he must descend ladderwise.

“Wait here for Ibed, Free-Claw. I cannot carry you and it is far too steep for your paws.” Tucking the wand into his belt, the scrivener cautiously began to lower himself by touch alone.

No like! The pard growled as his companion disappeared.

Before long Hart's hands felt as though he had plunged them into a fetid midden, nor did they smell much better. Moments dragged and still his questing foot found no landing, simply one after another of the worn notches. He nearly lost his purchase on the stone when something slithered across his left hand leaving it tingling slightly. Dared he stop and withdraw the wand to examine it? No—there was no time. He must not allow his quarry to outdistance him more than she had already.

When he had near despaired of reaching level ground, Hart suddenly felt his reaching foot strike something—soft! Snatching it back up to the notch just vacated, the scrivener paused, heart thundering in his ears. What was that!

Knowing he must have light, he gripped a rock outcrop with his right hand and slowly edged the still stinging left under his right arm and just—about—reached— With immense relief he drew the wand and, unable to hold it to his head, simply concentrated upon calling forth light.

Not the flash seen above, but a steady green glow now spread about him as Hart turned his head as far as he dared to sight what lay below. At the base of the wall to which he clung grew, if such a word could be used for that beneath him, a mass of fungus. Where his foot had touched there spread an oozing patch that reminded him of the look of a wound gone foul.

The scrivener had no desire to tread again on the repugnant growth, but it seemed to cover the surface as far as his wand light spread. The wand! Perhaps it would serve him here. Pointing the Dhroghii stone tip toward the mess, he flicked it awkwardly in a whipping motion. The answering flash struck the fungus and seemed to catch—fire would have been too nice a word. It sizzled and undulated, slowly turning dark as a choking stench rose.

Seized with a fit of coughing at the evil smell, Hart nearly lost his wand and his grip on the stone. Clinging desperately for several moments until he could breathe comfortably once more, he peered again at the effects of his working.

Where there had been spongy growth now spread a clear, though charred surface. The way opened none too soon for Hart, for his cramping hand and feet loosed their hold of their own accord, tumbling him to the floor below with a jolt.

Manfriend safe? Came the urgent mind call from above.

“Y—yes. I think so. You would not like it here, my friend. This is truly of the Dark.” Hart paused to get his bearings, lifting the wand for light.

He had come to a moderately large chamber with the appearance of having been hewn from the bedrock upon which Castle Stamglen stood. A faint path of sorts led into the darkness to his right. As the scrivener turned to follow that, an almost urgent sense of immediate danger surged through him.

With each step he took, the feeling intensified until his scalp beneath the Cap of Knowledge was prickling furiously. Someone—some—thing was in the darkness pacing him step for step! If only he had a decent light.

A sharp pain in the back of his left hand reminded him where the invisible creature had touched him. Indeed he could feel an angry welt across it swelling alarmingly. No time for this, Hart thought as he gritted his teeth against the pain.

Once more lifting the wand to rest it against his forehead above the Emerald Eye, he endeavored to see more clearly. As before, light burst from it piercing the darkness, but this time the intensity had diminished. Hart had no choice but to move ahead, straining to hear if truly he was being followed. The way through the chamber funneled at length into a low and twisting passage.

Bending to avoid banging his head against its ceiling, he put out his left hand to steady himself against the wall. Again the pain struck, this time surging up through his arm and shoulder with fiery intensity. Hart bit his tongue to avoid crying out. Whatever had left its mark upon him was not through with him yet, likely a servant of the Dark, which ruled here in the bowels of Stamglen.

He had gone some distance when the pain seemed to subside, but in its place came—numbness. Fear stirred in Hart’s gut, fear that whispered fell things in his mind.

You are dying—slowly; poison spreads and will soon leave you to feed the fungus!

No longer able to distinguish the steady mental touch of his friend-in-fur, Hart stopped again and focusing all his mental energy, called desperately, *“Free-Claw, answer! Do you hear me?”*

Nothing—it was as he suspected. Some power was blocking him, perhaps toying with him before—attack?

Hart blundered ahead in the dwindling hope that he might somehow find where Arin had gone. His strength near forsaken him, his wand light shrunken alarmingly, he peered cautiously around a sharp bend in the passage. Ahead, at a remove of perhaps a score of paces, the narrow confines of the space opened once more into an area the scrivener could not fathom, so immense it appeared.

Faint reflections flickered all about him as he eased a step or two into the chamber. As best he could determine, the walls and distant roof were wrought from some substance that fractured his wand light into myriad bits and flung it back at him, all save for one spot. Toward this Hart moved with an effort that far exceeded what the short walk should have cost him.

As he drew closer to the place he had noticed, it seemed that all light was instantly swallowed by a section of the wall. Not exactly an opening, it was unlike the surrounding crystalline surface, but appeared the embodiment of blackness, dull, roiling and curiously obscene to Hart's Emerald Eye.

Stooping to pick up a chunk of rock from the littered chamber floor, the scrivener tossed it toward the dark splotch. Not surprisingly it passed into the coiling darkness and disappeared from sight. Dared he seek to follow?

Holding out the wand in his right hand, Hart drew closer to the portal, for this he now knew it to be. But the instant the tip came into contact with the black surface, he was struck with a mighty wave of Power, like none he had ever encountered. With it burst forth the humming sound he had heard before, this time grown to the level of a mind breaking scream.

Hart's last thought as, deafened and helpless he tumbled backward, was: *too far—I have come too far!*

Chapter ~ Twenty-Seven

With agonizing slowness Hart seemed to be struggling upward through a torrent of black viscous liquid. Each time he neared the beckoning light above him, an unseen force would drag him deeper until he sagged, limp and choking into the morass.

“Hart! Hart! Come out of it!” A voice penetrated his consciousness at last and the scrivener opened his eyes to see that he was no longer in the clutches of the Dark but lying in Hesta’s hut, his left hand swathed in an immense bandage.

“H—how?” The one word question sounded as though it had come from a throat barely human.

“Ibed found you in the bowels of Castle Stamglen, writhing and screeching like a madman.” The face of the Herb Woman showed deep concern. Beside her crouched Belicaus who was absently stroking the sleek black head of the pard.

“It was a near thing, lad. What happened in that chamber?” The monk asked.

“I—” Hart coughed, swallowed and tried once more to form words. “I discovered what must be a portal to some further hiding place beneath the castle. But, when I would have entered that foul blackness, there came such a blow—”

For a long moment the scrivener seemed to withdraw into himself as if trying to recall the scene that had cost him so dearly. Hesta dipped a cloth into a bowl beside his pallet and laid it across his brow. Hart lifted his left arm to peer at the bandage and cried out in pain.

“Yes, that hurts most evilly, I fear. But the very pain is a good sign. When Ibed brought you here the hand had already begun to blacken with the poison. It was necessary to cut deeply and then burn away the proud flesh, else you might soon have become a one armed man.”

“S—something crawled across it in the darkness, stung like a thousand nettles!” Hart shuddered at the memory.

“Enough! It is best for you to rest now. That blow which felled you doubtless came from some ward previously set to keep out any who might offer threat to the Dark workings there.”

“Aye, Brother. Wise words. This ‘un came much too close to leavin’ us for good and all, but now is not the time for talk. Sleep’s what ‘e needs.” Hesta shooed monk and pard before her as she withdrew from the sick chamber.

Waiting for them outside the hut stood the chapman, concern etching his dark features. “Is it well with our young friend?”

“Twill be in time. I’ve done all I can for him. Now what he needs most is quiet. The effects of such an assault as was launched at him this day might well have laid low the mightiest mage.” The Herb Woman shook her head at the thought of Hart’s narrow escape.

“He was near gone when I reached him. It took every bit of the skill I have gained these many years to draw him from the pool of Darkness that had surrounded him.” Ibed visibly paled at the memory. “If it were not for your meeting me, Brother Belicaus, as I carried the lad through the storage vault, he would surely have been lost to us.”

“This is far more serious than any of us could have imagined,” the tall monk put in. “We must be certain never to enter that part of the castle, save by twos.”

“Aye, you have the right of it.” The merchant responded. “When Hart has recovered, he will be chafing to return and I shall insist upon joining him! I saw something in that chamber that both frightened and encouraged me, something that needs further examination.”

For several days Hart hovered in that grey realm between occasional delirium and fitful sleep. He was vaguely aware, at times, of a soft warm body pressed close beside him, but not until a full week had passed, did he hear the welcome greeting in his mind.

Manfriend back?

“Aye, Free-Claw, thanks to you and my friends, I am back.” With an effort the scrivener levered himself to a sitting position, wincing when he put pressure on his damaged left hand.

“I trust your ‘manfriend’ is sommat wiser for his troubles.” Hesta remarked from across the small room.

"I know that what lies beneath Stamglen is beyond my small abilities to confront!" Hart could not keep the rueful tone from his words.

Then you be much wise. The pard arched his back and rubbed against the scrivener's side, being careful to avoid his injury.

"Free-Claw has some news, Hart." Hesta interjected, desiring to move from the somber subject.

"Oh?" Hart looked more closely at his companion.

New family. Much proud! The demi-pard puffed himself noticeably as he paced across the room to a basket in the corner opposite Hart's pallet. The scrivener had not noticed it before.

From inside the large container came a trilling in response to the cat's throaty purr. With all the care of a proud father, Free-Claw gently lifted a small furry bundle in his jaws, carrying it and placing it in Hart's lap.

Mewing softly, the tiny kitten snuggled closer to him, to be joined in rapid succession by two more.

"Oh, Free-Claw! They're beautiful. One is just like you and the other two—"

Be like mother. They female. The black pard lowered his head and began licking his offspring. In a moment another small form crept across to join the scrivener on his pallet.

This Lipeta, mate.

"Hello, Lipeta. Your children are truly lovely." Hart extended his right hand, palm upward, toward the timid tree cat who nosed it and then extended a small pink tongue to briefly rasp his fingers.

"She approves of you, though I can't imagine why." Another voice joined the conversation. Brydwen had quietly entered as all were admiring the new kittens. "Lipeta does not take easily to 'two-legs', you know."

"I am honored!" Hart replied. "And thank you for taking your valuable time to visit me," he added somewhat lamely.

"Oh, I came to see the new family," Brydwen quickly responded, "but I am glad that you are better." The girl seemed to realize that her first words had sounded a bit callous and tried to make amends.

Hart simply laughed, knowing the Bard for her vaunted independence. He suspected that she was at least mildly interested in his welfare, but far be it from her to reveal this fact to him!

After the passage of two more days under the watchful nursing of Hesta, Hart could stand the confinement no longer. The Herb Woman protested in vain as he rose and awkwardly wrapped his hooded cloak about himself, pulling it well down to hide the telltale Eye, for he had lost his patch in the castle.

“Have a care, lad!” Concern was writ large on the weathered features.

“I will, Hesta. It’s just that I need some exercise. My back feels as if it has turned to stone and my wits are not far behind it.” Hart’s tone spiraled upward into a near whine.

“Oh, all right! Get you gone and take the pard with you. At least he will use some wisdom.”

Hart paused to plant a quick kiss on the surprised woman’s cheek, then laughing for the first time in days, he picked up a clay pot and scooped something into it before striding out into the sunshine, grateful to be alive.

“And don’t go near the—you know where!” Hesta called after him.

“I won’t,” the scrivener responded, but his feet seemed to turn quite on their own toward the towering walls of Castle Stamglen.

No go in! Free-Claw’s thought bore the weight of a command.

“I’m not. It’s—it’s just that I have had this strange drawing since yester night—” Hart’s words trailed off as he sought a path long remembered from his boyhood days.

There—just past a clump of hawthorns a narrow track twisted down the embankment that served as foundation for the great curtain wall of the stronghold. Hart paused to pick up a short length of wood to steady himself, then began to work his way cautiously along the path.

Where go? The pard’s question carried a touch of peevishness.

“I remembered that, when I was a boy hereabouts, I used to play in a sort of cave beneath the castle wall. It was not very big, but it looked to have been worked by crude tools. I wonder if it might prove to be another way into the deeper levels, one that does not carry a warding.” As he spoke, Hart thrust the stick he carried into the tangle

of brambles that had spread to every available patch of soil along the rocky bank.

“Ah, there it is!” The scrivener’s right hand, stick and all, disappeared in a cluster of brush. Retrieving it quickly, he managed to lever a small opening and poke his head through to confirm his suspicion.

“It is as I remembered. Come, Free-Claw, there’s just enough room to squeeze through.” Ignoring the twinges coming from his injured hand, Hart crouched low and wiggled into the space he had made.

Hissing in complaint, the pard followed, not at all sure of the wisdom of this venture. When both had passed through the briary barrier, they found themselves facing a low chamber filled with the detritus of years of small creatures sheltering there.

Having thought to bring a few coals from Hesta’s fire pit, Hart scraped together some twigs and leaves and turned out the contents of the clay pot to light a small fire. The cave had a chill, damp feel about it and was dark enough to need the welcome addition of the flames.

“The place, I think most likely to hide an entry into the castle, lies just beneath that boulder.” Hart felt a surge of excitement, not unlike what he had experienced as a boy exploring a mysterious cave.

Using his length of wood for a lever, the scrivener grunted as he labored to move the large rock. At first it stood firm, but then slowly it gave way revealing the hint of another opening. But before he could secure the stone against settling back into its niche, Hart was rocked back on his haunches, clutching his head and moaning.

Manfriend! What wrong? The cat scrambled to his side and brought his nose level with the man’s face.

“The—the, oh, I cannot bear it!” With a shudder Hart crumpled into the litter lining the floor of the cave.

For a few moments the scrivener lay half conscious and near to retching as wave upon wave of despair assaulted his tortured mind. At length the rasp of the pard’s tongue seemed to break the grip of whatever had attacked him and he sat up.

“Free-Claw, never have I known such grief and torment, not even when I was falsely accused and banished, nor when I passed through the dire tests required for me to come into the full use of my Gifts!” Absently wiping his forehead with his bandaged left hand, Hart leaned

back against the boulder which had settled back into place hiding the opening once more.

Free-Claw no feel.

“I believe whatever that was, was aimed solely at me—a message—a plea. Someone is in torment of mind, body and soul in that foul pit below the castle! I believe it to be the Lady Arin. Perhaps she did sense me following her that night and is trying to reach me.”

Maybe trap. Ever practical, the demi-pard sought to warn his friend.

“True. It may indeed be a trick of my enemy, knowing that I will not give up until I find the source of this working of Evil. I must find a way into that portal!”

No safe. This time could die.

“Somewhere there is a weapon I can use against this Dark Power. I—I must—find—it!” Hart’s voice rose to the scream of battle rage as he pounded his fists upon the rock beside him, oblivious to the pain that answered his fury.

Aware that he was in no shape to pursue his search farther, Hart reluctantly followed Free-Claw out of the cave like crevice and took care to see that the brambles showed no sign of having been disturbed.

It took considerably longer to climb back up the path than to climb down, for Hart’s strength had been full spent in the attempt to move the large rock. What was more, he realized, the wave of despair he had felt, had left him seriously drained.

As man and pard emerged from the path and gained the roadway that led to the vill, an anxious Ibed al Zahr met them. “Hart, lad! Where have you been? You look almost as bad as when I fetched you from that foul pit!”

“I know. I’m sorry, Ibed. Truly I only meant to prove or disprove a theory.” The scrivener paused and leaned heavily on his stick.

“From the looks of you, the theory almost proved your undoing,” was the curt reply.

“Aye, that I know now. Why is it so hard to admit to weakness? I thought I could handle a simple search.” Hart meekly submitted to the chapman’s supporting arm as they returned to Hesta’s hut.

“From what I have seen beneath this castle, no one person is equal to fronting what has taken hold there.” The somber words caused the scrivener to stop and stare up at the be-turbaned man.

“What saw you?”

“That can wait. I have asked for another council of the Pact, but since Owlglass and Soorta cannot join us, we must be content with the skills of the four of us.”

Five! The pard’s hackles lifted briefly at the omission.

“Sorry, my four legged friend. Five! Indeed we will depend upon you to inform our absent members of the results or our meeting.” The chapman urged Hart to continue his labored pace, offering what assistance he could.

It was not until after all had eaten a filling meal prepared by the Herb Woman and were settled about her small fire pit, sipping on hot cider, that Ibed spoke of what was uppermost in all their minds. “The time has come for the telling of tales and uncovering of mysteries.”

“Tales?” Belicaus responded.

“Aye, there is one among us who has withheld facts that bear upon the situation facing Stamglen.” The chapman looked pointedly at Hart.

The scrivener bowed his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, and you all know that it is I who have not told all concerning my connection with the castle, its lord and his marshal.”

“Say on.” The tall monk put in quietly.

“Owlglass and Soorta know most of my story, having sheltered me just after it happened—” Hart swallowed, more to clear his mind than his throat.

“Hart is not my birth name; that was Huon—Huon of Rennay. I lost my parents at a very early age, due to a strange sickness, one never seen on their manor, as far as anyone knew. My father was a knight banneret, enfoefed to Lord Stormund and somehow kin, though quite distantly so.

“There was no question but that I should be sent to Stamglen to be fostered here and eventually become a knight in the lord’s service. I was but eight years of age when the local priest brought me, along with the document that granted my father’s lands to the Stamglen Manor. For, without a man grown to look after the Manor of Rennay, it would have soon been overrun by brigands and looted of its small wealth.

“All of this Father Corman told me when I came of age. By then I had become such a part of life here that it little mattered to me what became of a place I could no longer remember and a people who would care little if they served Rennay or Stormund.

“I excelled in the knightly training given me, as well as other skills that are rarely acquired by squires. For some reason Father Corman took it upon himself to lesson me in reading, letters and numbers, though I did notice that no other squires were so tutored, only a couple of princelings who were also fostered here for a while.

“The time came at last for me to receive my spurs, a moment of great pride and some pain. After preparing myself in the vigil, bathing and donning the white garments signifying my readiness to take my place among the ranks of the pure knights of Stamglen, I stood before Lord Stormund.

“Strangely, as if someone had spoken in my ear, words came into my mind: ‘Beware, son of Rennay, lest you follow your father.’ I stammered over the oath of fealty, so shocked I was at this strange thought.

“Indeed, I pondered over the meaning of that warning later when the older knights were celebrating the elevation of the new members to their exalted fellowship. However, I came to think it simply the nervous reaction to the hours spent fasting and keeping vigil.

“Soon the business of serving as a new knight swept away all other consideration and I settled into my new life with a measure of contentment. But it was not to last.

“Scarcely half a year after my knighting, was I awakened from a sound sleep where I bedded with the other knights in the Great Hall of Stamglen. Two armsmen seized me and jerking me to my feet, marched me ahead of them into the quadrangle. When I angrily questioned them, my only answer was a sudden cuff to the jaw that brought my teeth down hard on my tongue.

“The taste of blood in my mouth and a growing dread in my heart accompanied me as I was brought to stand in the midst of a crowd of knights, armsmen and some villeins. In a matter of no time at all, I was accused by none other than the Lady Arin, whom I had thought to be my friend, of the most foul of crimes.

“No, she did not say in words that I had violated her, but when Lord Stormund’s Champion asked if I was the man, she nodded, fear etched on her face. How could I answer? To shout my denial would have served not at all, so I kept my peace and submitted to the most degrading experience I shall ever undergo.” At that Hart bowed his head, shaken by the memory that surged through him.

“We all know what the ‘breaking’ is like.” Belicaus spoke softly. “You were disgraced, stripped of your knightly equipage and banished.”

“Aye. I was driven into the wild lands where I met the hermit Owlglass. Had he not understood my plight and taken pity upon me, I know not where I would be today. Somehow, he knew the moment he saw the wretched condition of my garments and heard that I was out of Stamglen, that I had fallen afoul of Sir Lazarous.”

“It would seem that our Marshall has a well deserved reputation for getting rid of those whom he either perceives as a threat, or cannot manipulate.” Hesta near spit out the words.

“The question is: why did he think you a danger to him?” Ibed scratched his beard with an expression on his face that none could read.

“Perhaps he feared Hart would supplant him in Lord Stormund’s service. Men of power often guard their rank with great jealousy.” Belicaus put in.

“I was but a very junior knight. How could I be a threat to the mighty Champion? I had never even won in a tournament. I was ever one of the first to be tumbled from his mount in the lists.”

“Mayhap he recognized your budding ‘Gift’?” Ibed raised his eyebrows.

“How? I knew nothing of any Gift, let alone had given any evidence of special Powers.” Hart wondered aloud.

“But if he sensed something in you, say the ability to shield your mind from probing—?” Hesta’s voice betrayed her excitement.

“Yes! That might well have been part of it. But, I think Lazarous would not have been content with so slender a cord. To falsely accuse a knight is an unforgivable crime, one not entered upon lightly.” This was the monk’s comment.

“What if he discovered something else, something that ran counter to his own plotting—? We know full well that this man has been laying down a plan; the hidden shield is ample proof of that.” Hart had now begun to enter into the speculation with a will.

“Then it is our task to determine what it was that triggered his attack. I think when we do, the knowledge will bring with it other pieces of the puzzle, like iron to a lodestone!” Ibed al Zahr spoke with a growing force behind his words, smacking his hands together for emphasis.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Eight

The chapman raised his hand to silence the gabble of voices erupting in response to his speculation.

“There is yet another key to the mystery—one I discovered when responding to Free-Claw’s urgent call in behalf of the scrivener. As I descended into the crystalline chamber and approached the dark portal before which Hart lay, I saw, etched above that vile opening, symbols that chilled my very life blood.”

Once more everyone began speaking at once, but Free-Claw’s mind voice silenced them all.

Marks of Ancients.

“Yes, friend pard, you have the measure of it. But, how knew you this?” Ibed looked puzzled.

Much long ago, when Free-Claw taken captive, saw same marks on bad men’s skin.

“And you, linked with the Pact, saw them again through my eyes!” The chapman’s voice betrayed growing tension.

Never forget! The intensity of the pard’s thought near pained those gathered about him.

“I, too, have a memory of those particular symbols, etched deep into my being. They represent an unspeakable name that was invoked long ago while I crouched hidden, for fear of my life, in the fire pit of the Caliph’s palace.” At Ibed’s words, Hart drew in a sharp breath.

“The master of eunuchs!” The scrivener exclaimed.

“Aye. What I did not tell you when I recounted my story was what my mentor later revealed to me. The slavers, who provided youths as slaves for the Caliph’s hareem, worshiped a most vile and ancient being. It is said that their rites date back over a thousand years and involve the darkest of ceremonies.” The chapman spat on the ground as if even referring to such evil was distasteful to him.

“You spoke of the answering fire that rose when the master of eunuchs called upon the—name.” The import of a connection,

between Stamglen and the long ago doings in Ab-Mendalym, near took Hart's breath away.

"Indeed—it came of an eldritch Evil, one that would seem also to have roots beneath Lord Stormund's castle. You see, the symbols upon that portal tell me that beyond it lies a temple, sacred to—one I will not name!" Once more Ibed al Zahr reacted to his own words in a gesture of warding against the Dark.

"C—can you tell us what sort of magic might be at work there?" It took no small amount of determination for the scrivener to pose the question.

"My knowledge is limited. Any curiosity about such was burned from me in the fire pit of Rugeem! However, I do know that the foulest rites are said to be practiced by the followers of—the Unspeakable—blood magic." The chapman's voice had dropped as though he was loath to mouth such words.

"May all that is holy preserve us!" The monk was heard to intone.

"Well you might pray," Ibed replied. "We front an adversary of immense Power whose resources grow with every hour he remains unchallenged."

"B—but how can we hope to challenge him?" Hesta asked in a voice that trembled slightly.

"We must bind ourselves to the Light and to each other!" Belicaus near shouted, causing the others to start.

"I believe I may be of service in this." Ibed responded.

"How?" asked the others in chorus.

"There is a solemn ritual, almost as ancient of the Evil we must front, one which will unite us in so close a bond that each may readily call forth the Gifts of any other so bound." The turbaned merchant allowed his gaze to pass from one face to another in turn, waiting for the import of his words to dawn fully upon them.

"S—so, if needed, I might—" Hart could not bring himself to speak further.

"Might exercise the Gift of Belicaus' healing, my travel by means of the mist, even Free-Claw's far-speak—" Ibed put full words to the scrivener's thought.

“And any one of us could perceive with Hart’s Emerald Eye or ‘see’ with Soorta’s vision!” Hesta spoke in awe.

“Yes, all of these things would be possible and more besides, for, you see, to be thus ‘Bound’ means that we of the Pact, in uniting our Powers, will become something far greater than the sum of our individual Gifts.” Spoken slowly, the chapman’s words brought no elation to his listeners, for each knew without asking that such a working would not come without cost.

Much danger! The Pard was swift to signal a warning.

“Aye, Free-Claw. There is danger and a price to be exacted for entering into so mighty a Bond.” The merchant responded.

“Then say on, Chapman. We would know it—now!” Belicaus’s voice rang with unaccustomed heat. “The price can be no greater than that which will be exacted by our enemy if we fail to act.”

“Just so.” Ibed returned.

“I think I can guess what may happen,” Hart put in. “Whenever such Power is exerted it places an immense drain on the strength of the user. In our case it would affect whoever wields the Power as well as all other members of the Bond. Am I right?”

“Aye. For the most part, you have deduced correctly, however, there is one thing further. Say, if I were to employ Hart’s Gift for ‘looking off’ a wild beast, he would be bereft of that Power for a time.” Ibed explained.

“How long a time?” The scrivener wanted to know.

“That is dependent upon the intensity and duration of the employment of the ‘borrowed Gift,’” came the answer.

“And if the one, whose Gift is being borrowed, is present and taking part in the confrontation—then what?” This from Belicaus.

“That is where the intensifying of the Powers comes in.” Ibed sought to portray assurance in his answer, but something in the way he formed it left a nibbling doubt in Hart’s mind.

“So—when do we enter into this Bond?” Hesta seemed satisfied and was all for getting on with the process.

“I say that we call upon Owlglass and Soorta before attempting anything.” Belicaus cautioned.

“Of course! Naught can be done without their agreement and participation.” Ibed responded.

“Must they physically be present?” Hart asked.

“That would be best. I fear I do not have sufficient Power to bridge the distance between us and them and still be sure of success.” The chapman stood and directed his words to the pard. “Free-Claw, will you far-call our friends and ask them to meet us in three days time beneath the oak when the moon has set?”

Done! The cat responded instantly, then in the space of a few breaths: **They come.**

The intervening three days were taken up in preparation for the Binding, each having his or her particular assignment. Hart was given the task of gathering as much salt as he could without drawing undue attention to himself. This he did by paying visits to the great kitchen stores of Stamglen Castle and engaging the cooks and drudges in conversation.

Carefully exerting his Gift at influence, the scrivener was given free access to the large bins and crocks of cooking and pickling salt. He soon tucked three fat sacks of the valuable condiment in a corner of his loft to await the meeting.

In the meanwhile, Hesta busied herself in preparation of certain aromatic herbs and brewing of a concoction that stretched even her legendary skills, for the recipe given her by Ibed was like none she had ever known. As a measure of the trust she had come to place in the chapman, she refrained even from questioning his directions.

Belicaus’ task included a trek to the Koildom Mountains, a day’s journey distant, there to locate a certain icy spring, trickling from a high fissure near the summit of the tallest peak. Here he collected a measure of the pure liquid in a silver flask. Having done so, he spent an entire night in meditation culminating with a dawn blessing of the contents, for, in Ibed’s words, “Only sacred water will serve for the Binding.”

As for the task the chapman set himself, Hart knew only that Ibed was seen taking a bolt of fine cloth from his store of merchandise and heading off toward the home of a widow woman, known for her skill with a needle.

Much talk! Grumbled the pard as they settled to rest on the night before the appointed day of Binding.

“Oh, Cat of few words. Just think: none but you could fulfill such a task.” Hart laughed.

Head hurt from far-speak. Free-Claw was unmoved by the scrivener’s compliment.

“It is for the best of causes, though. If not for your Gift, one of us would have had to travel all the way to Kolroven to summon our friends and much time should have been lost!” Hart reached into his pocket for a tidbit of cheese he had saved from his supper, knowing how the pard relished the treat.

Some better now. If a cat could look hopeful, Free-Claw certainly now wore such an expression as his luxurious whiskers quivered slightly.

“Oh, all right. Take the lot.” Hart unwrapped a chunk he was planning to eat when they rose to prepare for the Day of Binding. “How is your head now?”

Good now. Could make more talk. The pard’s lip curled slightly in his imitation of a human grin.

Hart flung the blanket at him and the two rolled in a mock-fight like two juveniles. But soon the seriousness of what lay ahead of them damped the momentary merriment.

“The things Ibed instructed you to tell Owlglass and Soorta to bring: what possible use has he for drape moss and stinkbark?” Hart grew thoughtful.

Blackrock and stoneworms? The pard added his questioning to the puzzle.

“All we can do is wait and see, though I cannot help but wonder.” Hart snuffed the single candle that had lit their way into the loft and with a sigh rolled himself in the blanket.

At various times throughout the day members of the Pact slipped away from Under Stamglen, deliberately going in different directions to deflect curiosity. They dared not be seen as traveling anywhere together. Indeed, Ibed had given each the words of a warding spell to further shield themselves.

Late evening found the Stamglen contingent gathered beneath the gnarled oak, eating journey bread and sipping some watered wine that Ibed had provided.

“We must not weight ourselves with over much food, nor muddle our heads with drink. Too much rests upon what we must accomplish to risk failure,” the chapman said.

When they had finished the meal Ibed instructed each to set forth what he or she had prepared, the better to explain the coming ceremony. While engaged in arranging the supplies before the large flat stone that lay beneath the tree branches, Owlglass, Soorta and Softstep arrived with their contributions to the growing collection.

Greetings being exchanged, the company was bidden to take seats in a circle around the boulder. Ibed spoke: “My friends, first I must give you my thanks for the unquestioning trust you have shown in me these past three days. None is more aware than I how curious my instructions must have seemed. Even for you who are not unfamiliar with the workings of enchantment, they could not have made any sense.”

“Little that has faced us of late has carried any logic, magical or otherwise.” Hart remarked.

“That is true. To understand what has occurred in Stamglen, we must reach far with our minds and even farther with our spirits.” The chapman responded.

“So, let us be about the business at hand!” Belicaus’ voice bore an edge of impatience.

“Indeed. The task can be put off no longer. I will endeavor to guide you through the Rite of Binding. Much of what must be done will fall to me. Though it will seem extraordinary to you at times, take care to maintain the strictest discipline of concentration. Never allow your thoughts to drift from what will be taking place in the center of this circle, especially upon this stone.” Ibed looked slowly around the group, pausing to make eye contact with each and receive their nod of agreement in turn.

This done, the chapman took each of the sacks of salt and, pacing slowly poured the contents in a wide swath around the outside of their circle. Next he crushed bits of the stinkbark, momentarily

releasing its pungent odor. This he scattered about inside the circle, even at and upon the feet of his companions.

When all were near to gagging at the smell, Ibed rolled a large bundle of the drape moss and, dropping to hands and knees, carefully swept the remains of the stinkbark into a small pile, which he then gathered and cast out of the circle.

Pausing, he took a moment to explain, "The salt acts as a purifying barrier against anything that might seek to penetrate from without. The bark and moss have the effect of cleansing our circle of the least trace of Dark magic."

Taking up a wooden box Ibed tilted its contents onto the center of the large stone. Slowly a pair of stoneworms raised their snouts and seemed to be waiting for a signal. Seeing this, the chapman gently tapped the rock between them with a small brass rod. Immediately the small creatures lowered their heads and fastened themselves to the seemingly impenetrable surface.

With instinctive efficiency the tiny worms began to excavate a shallow depression in the boulder that in a surprisingly short time became a pit the width of a man's fist and twice as deep. Ibed carefully retrieved the distended carvers and placed them once more in the box.

"Behold, a receptacle made by no man's hand!" The chapman spoke with a tone that denoted a prescribed declaration.

While Hart and the others of the Pact watched in fascination, the dusky skinned man took three chunks of the blackrock and, using a small brass hammer, pounded one into a powder. All this he placed carefully into the depression carved by the stoneworms.

Turning to Owlglass, Ibed called for the hermit to bring flint and steel to strike fire to the waiting powder. A scarlet flame answered the sparks, rising with avid intensity, which Ibed proceeded to feed with the remaining blackrock. When the fire was fairly roaring, he beckoned to Hesta.

"Herb Woman, bring forth the potion."

She obeyed and with a slightly trembling hand passed to Ibed what she had labored two days to prepare. The chapman took the heavy crock and set it in the midst of the flame upon the rock. Leaving this to heat for a time, he turned and opened a pannier that lay waiting at

his side. From it he drew forth six white cloaks and two smaller drapes of the same fine linen.

“Draw these over yourselves, my friends, for they represent the righteousness of our cause.” With that Ibed placed the drapes across the backs of the pard and the wolf, who took it quietly as though it was no uncommon thing to be so garbed.

“We draw near the crux of our working. If any of you have so much as the smallest doubt, speak it now.” The dark eyes scanned each face.

“No? Then let us proceed.” With a long hook, he next drew the crock from the fire and, using another clump of drape moss, grasped it and held it aloft, reciting words understood by none present.

“Hold forth your cups!” came Ibed’s command and the gathering responded, each with a silver cup he had provided. The chapman poured a draft of the potion into each cup, taking care to include some in bowls set for the four legged members of the group.

A heavy steam rose from each container, curling aloft in streamers that wove together above their heads. “Drink!” The sharp command rung out and as one the Pact members drank the fiery liquid, yet felt no discomfort from it.

All stood in silence, not quite sure what to expect from their libation. Slowly a tingling began in Hart’s middle and he could see from the expressions of the others that they too had begun to experience the potion’s effects.

Simultaneous howls burst from the four footed members, echoed by gasps of surprise from the humans. As best as the scrivener could have described the sensation, had he tried, it was like to a fountain, at once fiery and icy, bursting forth from within to rise upward through his body and spread to the mind—bringing—a sudden—what?

“Seek not to express what you now feel. There exist no words, no means open to man nor beast to do so. Simply know that each of us is now in the Bond.”

With an air of finality the chapman held out his hand to Belicaus, who handed him the vessel of blessed water.

Shouting, “Behold!” Ibed al Zahr dashed the water upon the fire that yet burned steadily on the great stone in their midst. The answering explosion of steam near tumbled all from the circle, but when they

would have fallen backward, they found themselves enclosed within an impenetrable wall.

Before he realized what he was doing, Hart drew his wand from his belt and touched the misty enclosure. As the nested stone contacted the walling bubble, the whole was suddenly infused with a brilliant emerald glow that cleared to reveal—they were not alone!

Standing, arms linked in close rank, completely encircling the group, were a company of Dhroghii. No one spoke, but at a bow from Ibed, the Dhroghii Queen stood forth, her white skin glistening in the dying green glow. She nodded and held up her hand, a gesture that was mirrored by the scores of others with her. In each there flashed responding green fire from stones the duplicates of that which now flamed from the tip of Hart's wand.

"So, it is done!" Ibed spoke at last. "The Bond is set, but what allies have you called forth, Scrivener?"

By now the misty wall had faded, leaving the way open to approach the newcomers. "These be friends, whom I met on my journey of proving. I and they both benefited by the blossoming of my Gifts," Hart explained simply, bowing low to the diminutive people.

"Hail, friends!" The Dhroghii Queen stepped into the circle and faced Soorta. "My Lady, we meet again."

"Y—you know each other?" Hart stammered.

"Aye, we do. But that is another story." Soorta smiled. "Know this: the Dhroghii are indeed allies to be valued. Their valor is legend among the peoples of the Elder Kingdoms."

The tiny Queen inclined her head in acknowledgement of Soorta's words. "And we pay our debts." At this she pointedly looked at Hart.

The scrivener blushed slightly, ducking his head to hide his embarrassment. "No debt is owed."

"None save the price of the liberation of my race!" Replied the chalky skinned woman with some heat.

"This sounds like the making of a fine tale!" Belicaus interjected. "One that calls for a hosting."

"That we can provide," Hesta laughed and, beckoning to Belicaus moved to where she had left a bundle.

In a short time, all were settled beneath the venerable oak, sharing drafts of ale and portions of bread, cheese and cold mutton. Hart looked around the strange assembly and marveled at all that had occurred to bring together such different peoples. Standing to his feet, he prepared to recount to his friends how he had come to meet the Dhroghiis.

Chapter ~ Twenty-Nine

By agreement the members of the Pact each carefully went his or her own way following the Binding. Knowing full well that the energy expended to accomplish so major a working was immense, they wisely sought to replenish themselves.

It was thus that Hart, finding himself free for a few hours, decided to pay a visit to the archival library at the Abbey of St. Stam. There could be found records of families, histories of the various rulers of the manor and some rather obscure writings that Brother Belicaus had hinted might be tucked in a little used room.

From the time of his stay with the hermit Owlglass, Hart had not lost his interest in the written word. The many hours spent reading the older man's books during his strange apprenticeship in the rockbound fortress had fostered a curiosity that nothing could satisfy quite like a book.

Having lost his Eye patch, the scrivener was pleased for an excuse to allow his facial hair to grow once more. Now sprouting a beard and wearing his usual hooded cloak, he bowed to the sacristan of the abbey, stating his wish to spend some time in meditation and study in the library.

The librarian peered at him with a skeptical expression, but nodded at length when he discovered that Hart was known to Brother Belicaus.

"Take care that you replace the books exactly where you found them. And mind you don't damage the pages. Some of these volumes are irreplaceable!" The aged man shook a bony finger at the scrivener and shuffled away mumbling to himself.

With a wink at Belicaus, who turned toward his duties in the herb garden, Hart entered a place, more sacred to him than any sanctuary. Row upon row of racks and shelves held every sort of volume and scroll he could imagine. With an almost childlike excitement, the scrivener began to pace the long aisles, noting the titles and mentally marking which ones he would return to draw forth.

Carefully marking each book with a bit of parchment tucked inside, the mate to one he had numbered and left in the book's place upon the shelf, Hart carried several to a reading desk that stood beneath a

clerestory window. Light from its northern exposure made his study easier than if he depended upon candles alone.

Curious as to why he had not been able to find any record of the House of Moorced in Owlglass's book of families, Hart pored over volume after volume of namings, births and deaths. He found the long lineage of the House of Stormund, noting that branch after branch of that illustrious clan had died off as heirs were either slain in battle or died childless as was likely to happen to the present Lord.

None of this was news to the scrivener, having picked up as much during his years of fosterage at Stamglen Castle. Unsatisfied with his research, he looked about to make sure no one had come into the library to check on him. When he was sure that he remained alone, he turned to the small chamber Belicaus had mentioned. Perhaps there he might find something to still the strange unease he felt regarding the House of Stormund and its fate.

Moving among the stacks of books in the musty room, he noted that most were simply tossed or shoved in with none of the respect shown the volumes in the main part of the library. Perhaps these were not considered authentic or of much value.

Hart was about to leave when his Emerald Eye reacted with a sharp twinge as he spied a very small book standing on end in a corner at his feet.

He stooped to pick it up and experienced a further tingle in his scalp on reading title: *A Record of the Lines of Stormund and Related Houses*. Hurrying with the book to the desk, Hart began to read the lists. At first it seemed merely to confirm what was known concerning Dunken of Gamlin, that his had been the only male line with any claim to Stamglen, but—wait!

What was this? Hart rubbed his eyes, Gifted and non-gifted. The volume that lay open before him contained the records of birthings from a time long past and included the Manors of Stamglen, Gamlin and Cardorn. What was more, before the scrivener's astonished eyes lay proof incontrovertible. Another direct line existed with superior claim to the lands and titles of Lord Stormund: the House of Rennay!

Furiously flipping back pages to find the source of the claim, Hart discovered that, some eight generations before the present, one Carlis of Rennay married the first son of the House of Stormund. From this union came twins, Caslet and Cailon. The elder Caslet inherited

Stamglen and fathered the line from which the present Lord was descended, while Cailon received the lesser lands and holdings of Rennay, by virtue of his mother's right.

Returning to the tiny room, Hart looked about frantically. The first book made reference to a companion volume that set forth the actual history of events in the Family Stormund. When at length he found the mate to the genealogy, sure enough it contained an account answering the question that sprang to his mind immediately: why would Cailon not continue the Stormund name, being of that House?

The second book recorded a controversy that had arisen between the twin brothers in which they both had fallen in love with the same woman. The faded writing made reading more difficult, but the scrivener was just able to make out that Caslet and Cailon had agreed to meet in friendly combat for the right to court the lady in question. When Caslet won, Cailon accused him of cheating and swore that he would no longer carry the name of one who had forfeited honor so.

Hmm, Hart thought, he took his loss passing hard.

Reading on he followed the subsequent line of Rennay to a point just before the birth of his grandsire, when the records suddenly seemed just to stop. Now this was strange. The House of Rennay was indeed minor in the general scheme of things, but it warranted not to be lost to memory because of the failure of a scribe!

Looking more closely at the book before him, Hart realized that perhaps the loss was not from the carelessness of a scrivener, but the deliberate intervention of—suddenly the import of what lay on the desk in his view struck with all the force of a blow.

If Huon, as heir to the House of Rennay was also rightful heir of Lord Stormund, it stood to reason that one who sought to displace him, would also seek, not only to have him dishonored and banished, but to take care to eliminate all evidence of his position in the lineage of the Manor of Stamglen! The page which probably held the final record of the right of Rennay had been neatly cut from the book. Looking closely with the full Power of his Gifted Eye, Hart was now certain it had been tampered with.

Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. How many and how long grew the tentacles of his enemy? And how, in the name of all that was holy, could he hope to expose the man's plottings?

Hart almost laughed out loud.

Foolish I am. The danger before me is far more than a manipulation of records! The Power of the Dark lies at the root of Stamglen's peril—my peril—I shall do well to survive, let alone hope to expose some plot.

Being careful to leave a tiny marker in the books at the point of his discoveries, Hart replaced most of the volumes on the shelves, save for the two smallest and most crucial, which he tucked into his pouch, and slipped silently out of the quiet library. He knew that none would miss them, judging from their condition and the room in which he found them.

Stepping into the herb garden, he gave a wordless signal to Belicaus to meet him later. Then with a nod to the gatekeeper the scrivener went out, his mind reeling.

Trouble, Manfriend? The pard came alongside as Hart walked slowly toward the boundary road leading to the high moor.

"No more than we have faced all along." His friend responded quietly.

Was with mate. No hear. What be trouble? It was a lengthy speech for Free-Claw.

"It seems that I am the true heir of Stamglen." Hart's voice sounded flat.

So! Surprise rendered the pard once more a cat of few words.

"At least it begins to make some sense of the breaking of Huon the Knight." The scrivener lapsed into silent reflection as they drew near to the place where gnarled tree branches reached over the roadside wall.

The two had not long to wait, for in moments both Belicaus and Ibed strode from opposite directions to join them, questioning expressions upon their faces.

Nodding, Hart beckoned them to squat with him in the shade of the branches. "I have made a discovery that bears heavily upon matters here in Stamglen."

"Before you tell us of it, there is something I must report!" Ibed broke in.

“Speak.” Hart looked up at the merchant, who was fidgeting with suppressed excitement.

“I have just come from the castle, where I delivered spices to Cook and I learned from one of my friends among the servants that there has been much clamor in the past few days among the ‘gentles’ of the household. It seems that a number of them have become alarmed at the decline in Lord Stormund.” The chapman paused to catch his breath.

“And they are fearful that he will die before naming his heir.” Belicaus put in.

“Exactly! The cries at table just yester night became almost rowdy in their intensity, I am told.” Concern etched the dark features.

“After what we found in the burial chamber, can there be any doubt as to the one being put forward as Lord Stormund’s successor?” Hart joined in.

“Norvill of Gamlin, by virtue of his coming marriage to the Lady Arin.” Ibed repeated, as if parroting the voice of one of the hangers-on to be found ever in the company of Sir Lazarous.

“There is one with a much stronger claim.” Hart’s quiet words might have been thundered, for they had the stunning effect of a lightening bolt in the midst of his listeners.

“How say you?” Belicaus near shouted. “Oh—the archives!”

“Aye. There I believe I was led to find—this.” Hart drew out the two small age-worn books, opening each to the place he had marked.

For a few moments the other men examined them in silence, then almost as one, they drew breath sharply and looked at the scrivener.

“The House of Rennay!” was all that Belicaus could say.

“Yes, it would seem that you are looking at the one with the greatest right to inherit the Lordship of Stamglen.” The words clearly did not come easily to Hart’s tongue.

“Now it all makes sense,” Ibed breathed, “Lazarous knew!”

“What better way to ensure the removal of the one person standing in the way of his plans, than to dishonor that one—having him banished from the Manor for all time?” The bitterness of Hart’s words was so sharp it could almost be tasted by his listeners.

“But did Lord Stormund know of the succession?” Belicaus wanted to know.

“Does it matter? The moment Huon was driven from Stamglen, all rights of inheritance dissolved.” Hart knew the laws that governed rights of the nobly born, having had them drilled into his head by Father Corman.

“But the Breaking was done under false accusation. Huon would have every right to appeal that judgment and receive restoration.” Ibed, too, knew the law.

“Huon is dead!” Hart snapped.

“Is he indeed?” Belicaus poured all the compassion of a healer into his question.

“The man that he was is far wiser now to the ways of chivalry.” Bitterness and disillusionment played across Hart’s face.

“Not all defile their oaths. To damn all is no better than to condone all.” The chapman had an annoying way of penetrating beyond an argument to expose its weakness. Hart merely grinned wolfishly at him and held his peace.

“It makes small matter who knew what that day. What does matter is that we now know the truth and it has for once and all exposed the Dark plotting of our very dangerous enemy.” The monk ever served as peace maker.

“You have the right of it, Brother.” Ibed replied. “Now it falls to us to fashion our response. Regardless of who becomes the next Lord Stormund, we cannot allow the wealth, power and welfare of countless people to fall into the hands of one so evil!”

“We can no longer put off the day of battle. The longer we tarry, the more Lazarous grows in power and position.” Belicaus stated.

“Aye, he has situated himself to claim the loyalty of every armsman in Stamglen, by virtue of his rank as Marshall. Should it come to a matter of challenge, we are sorely outnumbered.” Hart felt the weight of the immense odds stacked against the Pact.

“I think that it will never reach the mere passage of arms. Our fight lies in the realm of Power and Gifts,” said the chapman. “Great care must be taken to pick the time of confrontation—our time.”

"I have heard that a large party of nobles with their retinue is at this moment preparing for a journey to the Royal Court. Lord Stormund gave permission for it for some weeks ago, though I doubt he fully understands what all the fuss is about." Belicaus looked thoughtful. "It is also known that because the old lord is so fearful of unexpected attack, he has instructed Sir Lazarous to remain behind to protect the castle."

"I daresay that the Lady Arin is not expected to attend." Hart put in.

"Nay, it is also a matter of gossip that she is ailing and keeps to her bed. Some say she pines for Sir Norvill, who has not returned these many weeks from Court." Belicaus was a font of information.

"Oh, she is ailing, all right, but it is not for missing her handfasted knight. When last I saw her, it put me in mind of a shade walking, so near dead she looked." Hart shuddered at the memory.

"If what I fear is true, the lady has not long to live in this world and may well be destined for a living death in the next!" Ibed spoke in a tone of dread. "Things are speeding toward a confrontation indeed."

"It seems to me that you and I are best suited to be the vanguard in this fight, Chapman." Hart said slowly, even reluctantly.

"Aye, Scrivener. Would that we could avoid it altogether, but such is not to be. When the travelers have departed for the Royal Court, we must be ready." The chapman laid his hand on Hart's shoulder, griping it for a moment. "We must trust to the rightness of our cause. Evil cannot be permitted to thrive here, nor even to exist in the manner it has for far too long."

"B-but how can we best make use of the Binding?" Now that it had come to the actual planning, Hart felt a cold knot forming in the pit of his stomach.

Make chain! Free-Claw cut to the heart of the matter with a potent simplicity.

"Yes! A chain built from the members of the Pact." Belicaus expanded upon the pard's suggestion enthusiastically.

"Hart and I will descend to the portal, while you, Monk, wait at the place of descent. Free-Claw, you had best be at the entrance of the storage vault, there to relay any message from Brother Belicaus." Ibed knelt to scratch a rough outline in the soil at his feet.

“Hesta can wait in the small cave I showed Free-Claw.” Hart was beginning to feel a bit more hopeful, when he visualized the chain of Power represented by the chapman’s diagram.

“What of Soorta and Owlglass?” Belicaus wanted to know.

“Soorta is as near as our left ear, using that scrying pool of hers.” Hart pronounced. “I doubt not that, with the addition of the Binding, she and the hermit will be able to lend aid with the same ease that they might, being here with us.”

“Then let us hasten to tell Hesta of our plan. She may have other suggestions to aid in our preparation.” The monk called back over his shoulder as he strode off, first to leave the council of battle.

“We will meet at her cottage after vespers.” Hart sung out as the tall form dropped from view in a dip of the road. Nodding to the other two, the scrivener, accompanied by the demi-pard, set out in a few moments, taking a more direct path across the greening meadow.

Dusk found them crowded into the herb woman’s hut being careful not to tread upon the pard kittens, who had discovered the use of their legs, with a large measure of bold curiosity into the bargain.

Laughing, Belicaus scooped up all three of Free-Claw’s wriggling offspring and carefully deposited them into the basket with their mother. “Lipeta, best you should restrain your little ones, lest my great lump of a foot make cat pie of them!”

For a brief space the gathered Pact members joined in the merriment as the pardlings tumbled about, using their mother for a climbing post. But, all too soon the assembly must turn to the somber business at hand.

When Ibed had explained to Hesta the plan of attack, she nodded thoughtfully. “I may have something to add to the venture. There be an ancient potion taught me by my grandmam just before I reached the full stature of an herbalist. She said it would be my only inheritance, one I could use only once in all my lifetime.”

“Once only? Must be powerful.” Belicaus opined.

“Aye, I asked her how I would know when to use it. Youngun’s bein’ never so patient, and I was young.” The herb woman smiled, as if at some recollection she chose not to share with her listeners.

“So—what does this potion?” Ibed had begun to grow impatient, a sure sign of the pressure all were feeling.

“I know not the full of its powers, but Grandmam let me know that it would bring the user’s faculties to a height far beyond the ordinary. Normal senses become so sharp—like—like the nose of the finest scent hound or the vision of the highest flying gyrfalcon.”

“Does it extend the Gifted Powers also?” Hart wanted to know.

“Mayhap. She did not tell me all, saying when the time came to use my inheritance all would become clear.” Hesta shrugged.

“Sounds a bit risky to me.” Belicaus grumbled. “We face an Enemy whose Power is rooted in the Dark—vast Power, most like. Do we dare employ a tool or weapon untried?”

“Wait! It is not untried.” Hart broke in. “Just such a philter did Soorta give me when I entered the realm beneath her barrow, there to undergo the ordeals required to release my Gifts.”

“Why did not you tell us?” Ibed snapped.

“It—it did not occur to me until this very moment. Truly, when I partook of the philter the blackness of the underground became as the brightest day. What’s more, I could hear, feel and scent my surroundings to a degree I never thought possible to a mortal.” The scrivener’s excitement grew with the telling.

“Perhaps we should have Hesta consult with Lady Soorta regarding the ingredients of her potion. It could not hurt.” Belicaus added wisely.

“Aye, Free-Claw can far speak for her when he lays out the plan for our assault upon the Dark lair.” Hart turned to the pard who sat proudly beside his family, fondly watching his offspring at play.

“Meets this with you approval, Friend in Fur?”

Free-Claw speak. With that the cat paced sedately to sit facing the human members of the Pact. **Give message!**

Thus it was that the plan of attack came together, save for the actual hour it would begin. This could only be determined by a foray into the castle itself. As the group sat discussing the possibilities, Belicaus snapped his fingers.

“I near forgot! There is to be a farewell garland ale tomorrow in the quadrangle just before the nobles depart for Court. Brydwen told me this just this morning and in all the excitement it fair slipped my mind. There is to be a pole dance and other entertainments.”

“Perfect!” Ibed exclaimed. “We will all have reason to be within Stamglen and once the travelers have quit the castle, we can ‘melt’ from notice until after dark. Free-Claw, inform our friends that the time is set!”

Chapter ~ Thirty

Villeins crowded into one end of the quadrangle while their betters took bench seats on the three sides, reserved for their pleasure. To the lively strains of pipe and tabor came a score of dancers, decked in their finest garb, with long streamers of ribbons tied at elbows and trailing from collars and hems. About each girl's head rested a crown of flowers.

At the center of the grassy area in the heart of Castle Stamglen stood a tall pole, newly erected, reaching near as high as the top of the surrounding curtain walls. At its crown a banner, displaying the Boar of Stormund, proudly announced to all that the Lord of the Manor was in residence. Spaced below the fluttering pennon were hung several shields identifying the ranking families present for the garland ale.

As the colorfully dressed young women wound in and out among the spectators, loud cheers rose in greeting and several inebriated members of the audience attempted to join in the gaiety with somewhat less success than intended. Gales of laughter erupted when a particularly large nobleman managed to split his hose while executing a deep bow to the lovely garlanded performers.

Several pairs of dancers carried long withes bent into giant wickets and entwined with more colorful ribbons and flower garlands. As the dance progressed, the young women performed intricate steps, weaving in and out of the wickets, never missing a beat of the joyful music.

Finally the ale reached its climax with dancers passing into the audience, noble and common alike, seizing the hands of likely subjects and drawing them back toward the great pole. Then each young woman took hold of one of the wide ribbon bands that depended from a point just below the shields. Linking arms with their none too reluctant partners they began a stately procession around the pole.

Half the group moved in one direction and half in the other, being careful to alternate in a pattern known to the watchers as a hey. The resulting pattern of colors that adorned the pole, brought another

delighted cheer from the watchers as the dancers curtsied low to their partners, signaling the end of the ceremony.

In scarcely a turn of the glass, the caravan began its slow and noisy progress out of the great gate, across the barbican and onto the road that would take it eventually to the Royal Court.

Hart stood in the shadow of a watch tower as he observed the departure from atop the great wall. Even at this height he could hear the babble of voices, shouting to be heard over the barking of dogs, neighing of steeds and the incessant squeak and rattle of cart and carriage wheels.

As the procession passed out of sight, a deep and somber silence seemed to settle over the great castle. Perhaps it was the scrivener's knowledge of the task ahead, but the very atmosphere took on a deathlike pall in contrast to the gaiety of the afternoon gone.

Sighing, Hart turned and ducked through the low entry onto the spiral stair that would take him below and the beginning of the mission to which he now knew he had been pointing for many months.

Hide now? Came the subdued mind voice of his friend in fur.

"Aye, Free-Claw. There is naught we can do now but wait until the agreed upon time, after the last chime of Compline, when we must take up our posts."

Eat? A decided pang of hunger accompanied the word.

"Not a bad idea. Let us to the kitchen. 'Tis as good a place to 'hide' as any." Hart chuckled. His cat companion would never let a small matter of a battle with the Dark keep him from food.

As evening settled over the castle bringing with it a chill to the early spring air, Hart was grateful to be seated in front of the cavernous fire pit in the central kitchen, from which all meals were served to the knights and nobles.

Since Lord Stormund had elected not to join the progress to Court, a contingent of knights remained with him at Stamglan to act as guard. It was for these that the servants were preparing a fragrant stew seasoned with onions and afloat with chunks of beef, a rare treat. Hart looked hopefully at the garrulous cook and was not disappointed.

“Right, so a scrivener needs a ‘earty meal too?” Laughing, the portly man ladled a generous portion into a wooden bowl and set it before Hart. Adding a large chunk of dark bread and a pot of ale, he grinned and hurried away to assure the drudges were at their job of scouring out the great kettle, now empty of stew.

Hart could feel the warm pressure of the pard against his leg where his companion kept out of sight beneath the rough hewn table where the scrivener sat to eat his meal. “I’ll not forget you,” he whispered. “I just don’t need to call undue attention to your presence. There are some who would not approve, though not my friend Paggins there. He is far too friendly to be concerned about the odd beast or two paying a visit to his kitchen.”

Free-Claw’s only answer was a purr as he consumed chunk after chunk of meat spirited out of Hart’s bowl. When at length both had satisfied their hunger, Hart curled up under the table with the pard to catch what rest he could before Compline. He well knew that this promised to be a long and sleepless night.

The fire was banked for the night and quiet reigned for a short space as the distant bell of St. Stam chimed the final canonical hour. Stretching cramped muscles, Hart flexed his hands and winced as a sharp pain in his left hand answered. “It’s well that I no longer heft the weapons of a knight. This hand is all but useless to me,” Hart remarked, mostly to himself.

Manfriend weapon not of hand, but soul. The solemn response surprised him slightly. The scrivener never ceased to be amazed at the workings of the cat’s mind.

“Let us hope that weapon is at the ready!” Hart stated with some heat.

While the conversation had been progressing, man and pard were moving stealthily along the corridor that lead to the vaults below the kitchen wing of the castle. There they met monk and chapman, who was carrying a thick bundle.

“I have brought cloaks—cloaks that possess certain ‘properties’,” Ibed explained. “They will serve to blur the enemy’s vision somewhat, though only until he is fully aware of our presence. We need every scrap of advantage we can muster.”

“Aye, you have the right of it there, Chapman.” Brother Belicaus agreed.

“Is Hesta stationed at her post?” Hart was beginning to feel very anxious.

“She is that. What’s more, she had brought a small cauldron to use as a mate to Soorta’s scrying pool—the better to communicate.” The monk reported.

“Excellent!” The chapman exclaimed as he drew out three small flasks from his pouch. “Here, take this but do not drink it until the last possible moment. The effect is temporary.”

“The potion?” Hart reached for one of the containers and tucked it carefully into his own belt purse.

“Aye. You and I will need to partake of ours when we descend into the lower level. We need to avoid the striking of a light and this will aid us to see.” Ibed turned to the monk. “Belicaus, use your best judgment as to when you should employ the potion. We know not what tricks the enemy may have waiting.”

“Think you he knows we are coming?” The tall man’s features were near hidden beneath the cowl of the cloak Ibed had provided.

“Yes. He knows, though probably not the hour. It is up to us to see that he is unaware of our approach until the last possible moment.” The chapman’s statement thrust home the full gravity of their peril. Hart felt his stomach clench as though from a blow.

Reaching to clasp each of the others’ hands, Ibed spoke once more: “The time has come; we can delay no longer. Be safe, my friends. I pray that each of us comes through this, if not unscathed, most surely victorious!”

“Amen!” was Belicaus’s deep voiced answer echoed by Hart’s scarcely audible voice.

So be it! Free-Claw stood on hind legs and placed forepaws over the scrivener’s and chapman’s joined hands.

With that the monk hunkered down next to the wall where Hart had located the tiny sigil of a green eye. Laying one hand over the mark and the other over his own Emerald Eye, the scrivener spoke a word that came, unbidden to his consciousness: “Croache!”

In an instant there yawned before the two men a narrow opening and they lost no time slipping through this, the pard close on their heels. Retracing the path Hart, and later Ibed, had taken some days earlier, they came soon to the fissure that marked the way to the lowest level of Stamglan, indeed a place that seemed to be no part of the ancient castle—but another place altogether.

Hart paused and took the pard's head in his grasp, looking deep into the dark green eyes. "Friend of my heart, be safe, watch with care!"

Free-Claw watch. Good hunting, Manfriend! The pard turned about thrice and proceeded to sit demurely, curling his long tail about his feet, looking like nothing more than a magnificent feline stature.

Uncorking their flasks, Hart and Ibed quickly swallowed Hesta's potion. Expecting the rush of sensation such as he had felt in Soorta's barrow, he was only slightly disappointed. This did not course through him like fire, but in moments he was aware of a quickening of his senses, so much so that Ibed's whisper felt like a shout to his heightened hearing. "I will go first."

"B—but—" Hart was about to protest when the chapman swung out and down the sheer drop, confidently placing his feet in the notches chiseled there. There was nothing to do but follow in a moment.

As they descended more quickly, now that they could see clearly about them for the distance of a stone's throw, Hart determined that he would not allow the merchant to go before him into the portal—no this was his fight to carry to the enemy!

When at length the two men reached the bottom and followed the now clearly visible pathway, the scrivener was ready with his argument. As they entered the crystalline chamber, void of reflection now for want of light, Hart spoke softly, "Chapman, I must be the first to enter the portal!" When Ibed would have made argument, he held up his scarred hand, silencing the merchant.

"If, as we suspect, before us lies the place where Lazarous is dabbling in the Dark Arts, I must front him first! Don't you understand? He has brutally robbed me of my honor, my heritage, and now we know—my inheritance." Hart's voice shook with emotion. "If I do not face him and call him to account, I am not worthy to regain that lost honor."

Compassion was written large on Ibed's face as he looked for a few moments at the young man. "Very well, Hart. It is your right, just as it

would be mine to face those who so horribly wronged me in the distant past. Go—I will follow.”

“Give me the space of three score beats of your heart. That should allow me to pass the portal and t—take any blow that may come. If I do not survive that—well it will not matter much, will it?” Hart swallowed to still the dread that was rising within him.

“It will matter to me, to those who stand behind and about us!” Ibed gripped the scrivener’s shoulder. “You have more Power than you know, my son. Only when you have great need, will it manifest. I know that from experience, believe me.”

“Then I shall soon know the limits of my Gifts. There is no turning back. May this not be ‘farewell’ but ‘fare valiantly!’” With that Hart threw back his hood, revealing the gleaming golden Cap of Knowledge that had so long covered his head. Touching his belted wand that responded in a brief flash of brilliant green light, he plunged into the gaping blackness of the portal.

No sooner had he passed through the opening, then there came a loud crash, not unlike the sound of a lightning strike, far too close. Looking back over his shoulder, Hart could see nothing, however, for the darkness around him was so thick that even his enhanced vision could not penetrate it. There was nothing for it but to push onward in hopes of winning free from the wretched place. Even the air about him felt heavy as though it would weight his limbs and hold him back.

Moving slower and slower, the scrivener came at last to another entrance, also hewn from the primal stone and dripping with slime which stung his questing hand. The moment he contacted the repulsive surface, his left hand was engulfed in such pain that he nearly cried out, only avoiding a scream by shoving his right hand into his mouth and biting hard.

Hart stood for several seconds until the pain subsided somewhat before entering the room that stood before him. There was light of a sort, coming from flickering torches set around the filth spattered walls. Large, the space had the look of once being used for—he could not be sure. What was it that Ibed had said? An ancient cultic worship place? The scrivener could well believe such, for some distance ahead, in the very center of the room stood what could only be an altar.

Dark stains streaked the sides and bits of unspeakable offal lay scattered around its base. Clearly many innocent creatures had fallen prey to evil experimentation. But, as revolting as was its condition, what chilled Hart's soul lay atop the gory monolith. Bound with leathern cords, quite naked, lay the Lady Arin.

This time biting his tongue to hold back the nausea which surged up within him, Hart paused to look about the chamber. His enemy could not be far away; there was too much evidence of recent foul work.

The pitiful figure on the altar whimpered, shaking the scrivener from his frozen fascination. Lunging to reach the girl, he was suddenly jerked up short, as if by an invisible barrier. Indeed his forehead seemed to bounce from an unseen surface, unseen—but not unfelt. Reaching his hands out to trace this wall that could be felt only, he soon realized that there was no hope of reaching the girl by normal means.

Hart backed to the spot where he had entered the room and ducked behind a protruding stone column. He had to think. But before the scrivener could collect his thoughts, the humming he remembered hearing when he followed Arin before, began again, only this time it reached near a shriek and suddenly broke off.

Where the sound had seemed loudest now stood—Lazarous! But this was not the smooth Marshall of Stamglen, Champion of Lord Stormund. No, here was a creature, fully given over to the Dark. No longer the rod straight stance, but a crouch that seemed more fitting in a beast, announced his presence.

Drawing an involuntary breath, Hart stared. As he watched with a morbid fixation, Lazarous bent over the pale form before him. Guttural sounds issued from the champion's twisted mouth as he deftly drew a thin blade across Arin's arm. With all the skill of a leech, he cupped the wound and carefully collected the blood.

Hart began to shudder uncontrollably as he watched, when—

Whirling swiftly Lazarous screamed, "So, it is you!" As he gestured with the blade in Hart's direction, a fiery cord seemed to leap from its tip and encircle the scrivener, drawing him back out into the room.

A sound like the rending of glass came from the unseen barrier as it dropped by the evil marshal's will. Step by agonizing step, Hart was

drawn toward the man, whose smile became the more obscene as he flicked his tongue into the small bowl of Arin's blood.

A deathly cold fear knotted inside of Hart. Where was Ibed? Surely enough time had passed for the chapman to join him.

I cannot do this alone! Was the scrivener's desperate thought.

"So, my young friend, you do not know when you are beaten. It seems that I must teach you once and for all." With a twisted smirk, Lazarous turned the bladed wand, for this was what he held, toward Hart's head. In an instant the Cap of Knowledge grew intensely cold and then shattered, tumbling over the scrivener's shoulders to lie on the ground beneath his feet in a myriad of shards.

"So much for that toy, but—ah there is another!" This time the champion reached with the blade and slashed through Hart's cloak and belt to loose the Dhroghii wand. Not quite bold enough to touch this talisman, however, Lazarous was content to see it too at the scrivener's feet.

"Did you really think you could best me with such as that?" His maniacal laugh echoed about the chamber.

"Y—you w—won't get away with this!" It took every ounce of strength in Hart's frame to force the words from his lips.

"Oh? I won't? Just who is in command, my dear dishonored knight? Your feeble attempts to thwart my grand scheme—foolish, very foolish!" Lazarous fairly cackled with glee as he began to prance about the room, always facing Hart, however. He was not quite sure enough of his ascendancy to turn his back on the scrivener.

"Your grand scheme? To seize all of Stamglen for yourself, no matter what the cost?" Hart spat out the words.

"Stamglen? That is but the first step. My Power will take me much farther than a simple manor."

"Your Power? From what I see before me, you draw your Power from the darkest of the Dark—by blood magic!" Again the scrivener had to fight to express his thoughts.

"Yes. By whatever means that come to my hand, I intend to take what I desire, including this poor lump of quivering flesh." Lazarous gestured toward Arin, now more dead than alive, upon the harsh stone pedestal.

“But—before I consummate the rite that will call forth ‘he who must not be named’, I must dispense with you, once and for all. I should have done that long ago and saved myself much trouble. If you have a god, pray to him now, for you have but moments to live. But—wait! I prepare to take this virgin, whose blood has opened the way to the world below—”

Coming so close to Hart that his fetid breath near choked the scrivener, Lazarous purred: “Unless I guess amiss, before me stands yet another virgin—pure knight!” The champion’s laughter spiraled into a screech as Hart’s face reddened.

“What is better than a virgin sacrifice to the Dark? Ah, yes, I have it! Two virgins—one to take the other and both to become—I see you take my meaning.”

As Lazarous’s words sunk in, Hart twisted in a frenzied attempt to free himself from the invisible bond that held him imprisoned. Bond—could it be? With a mental shout so anguished that it portrayed all the horror filling his soul, with bowed head Hart called— Would any— could any answer?

Chapter ~ Thirty-one

No answer came, but within Hart it seemed as if something suddenly burst open, sending fire coursing through his veins. He found that he could now move, first his hands and arms, next his legs and finally, as the conflagration reached his forehead—

Lifting his head to fix Lazarous in his gaze, the scrivener could feel his own Power gathering, as though a storm prepared to lash out its fury. When it seemed as if his head would burst, from his Gifted Eye suddenly arched a blazing shaft of Emerald light straight at the champion's chest.

So stunned was Lazarous at the suddenness of the attack, he found time only to cast up a warding at the last instant, staggering back against the altar and its sad victim.

Emboldened a bit by the reaction of his enemy, Hart moved forward a pace or two, taking care to avoid the offal that littered the floor.

With a snarl of rage, the champion flung the bowl and its gory contents full in Hart's face, thinking perhaps to distract him long enough to gather his own weapons. However, when the blood struck the scrivener it had quite a different effect than that intended.

The moment Arin's life fluid touched the scrivener it lost its dull red color and in its place a glowing greenish-gold film spread rapidly, mist-like, over the scrivener forming—armor! Where he had stood a moment before in tunic and hose, now Hart presented quite a different aspect to his opponent.

In place of the shattered Cap of Knowledge, on the scrivener's head rested a helmet, in fashion like the head of a pard with twin gems for eyes, gleaming reflections of the Emerald light that streamed from Hart's own Eye. Covering his body was a mail coat of similar color, below which greaves of like hue shielded his legs.

Seconds passed as Lazarous stood, plainly confounded by the sight of a fully armed and armored knight before him. Then appearing to come to himself, the champion uttered a stream of profanity so foul that the very words seemed to take on substance and coil in the air between the two combatants. Backing around to keep the altar

between them, Lazarous pulled his own blood stained cloak about him and drew breath.

“So, it would seem that I have underestimated you. That will not happen again!” With the shouted words, Lazarous whipped out his dagger-wand, pointed it at Hart and began to chant, low and murmuring at first but soon rising in pitch and intensity.

As the incantation reached its climax a small vortex materialized around the tip of his wand. Hart watched transfixed as this expanded revealing within a grotesque form like none he had ever seen, still one he somehow recognized—the unspeakable was about to be loosed!

Breathing a prayer, the scrivener bent to retrieve his wand. It moved at his touch, near causing him to drop it. He clenched the ancient wood tightly in his left hand, an act that cost him dearly, for pain exploded from finger tips to elbow.

Instinctively his right hand went to his side where it met and grasped—a hilt! Without thought he drew the weapon in the smooth motion his arms master had taught him so long before.

Next Hart did the only thing he could think to do. Holding the sword, forged from no metal of this world, before him, he aimed the Drogthii stone at the center of the churning vortex, which by now had expanded greatly and was streaking straight toward him, and desperately pushed with his mind.

The answering spear of Power from the wand met the cloud of foulness just above the altar resulting in an explosive burst that would have flattened the scrivener had he not instinctively braced himself in a knight’s defensive stance. A faint scream could be heard as though from a very great distance, diminishing until silent.

All that remained of the vortex and its Dark occupant were a few dark wisps of smoke that curled in upon themselves and winked out, one by one. Seeing the failure of his working, Lazarous, too, burst into a maniacal frenzy, lunging past the altar with his blade outstretched. But as he rounded the vile stone monolith, his foot slipped in the slime at its base, throwing him off balance.

Thus, instead of impaling Hart on the bloody weapon, he twisted about, flailing to maintain his equilibrium, and fell forward. As he did, the scrivener deftly thrust his sword under the champion’s chin and held firm.

The answering cry that ripped from Lazarous ended in a gargle that near unhinged Hart, but he stood fast until the champion crumpled into a heap at his feet. When at length he disengaged his weapon he could see a gaping wound in the man's throat, but what had finished this servant of the Dark was in his own hand. In his fall the blade-wand had turned and passed deep into Lazarous's chest, piercing his heart.

Hart stood shaking for a few moments before remembering the tragic victim who lay before him on that vile altar. Dropping the sword he stepped over Lazarous's body to check for any signs of life in the gaunt girl. A tiny pulsation in Arin's throat and the faintest puff of breath told him that she yet lived, but clearly was near death.

What can I do! I have not the Gift of healing—

But, wait! The Bond! Could it work? Perhaps. He could only try.

Carefully covering the still form with his cloak, the scrivener bent lower so that he was resting partly on Arin's breast. Taking her small cold hands in his and resting his head over her heart, he called once more.

I call upon the Bond! Gift me with thy Powers that I might minister to this poor girl.

Gently kissing the clammy brow, the knight-that-was waited. Slowly, in much the way the Power had formed within him to battle the Evil one, now a quieter force surged through him.

A kernel of warmth seemed to break and spread through his arms and chest and pass, not unlike the glow he had observed during Belicaus's ministrations, into the body on the altar. Small hands began to warm in his large ones and the breath on his cheek came more evenly. As the restorative Gift passed from Hart to Arin, the scrivener felt the overwhelming weakness that he knew would follow.

Sinking down beside the stone, he was content to wait, for help would come. This Hart knew, as surely as he knew that his call had been heard.

Indeed the scrivener's first call had been heard, but Ibed had been helpless to respond, for the loud noise Hart had heard upon entering the portal was the dropping of an impenetrable barrier, leaving the chapman to batter his fists against it frantically.

In the moments that passed while the battle was joined below, Ibed had to content himself with sitting cross-legged before the impassable portal, there to focus all his personal Power upon his companion. The instant he did this it was as if his sight had been transported to blend with the scrivener's, for what Hart saw, Ibed saw.

Calling the Bond fully into play, the chapman acted as a funnel for the Power of the other members of the Pact he knew Hart would desperately need if he were to prevail. Thus it was, that the moment Lazarous lay vanquished, Ibed was not only aware of the victory, but was now able to rise and pass into the portal. All wards, glamours and Dark magics that had been maintained by the workings of the evil champion died with him.

Not only was Ibed conscious of the transformation, but in the same instant Belicaus and Hesta felt as though a great burden had been lifted and both hastened to make their way to the scene of battle.

As the herb woman passed into the castle and down the corridor leading to the deep vaults, she was astonished to meet Lord Stormund striding briskly at the fore of a small group of knights and armsmen.

"M—my Lord! Wha—?" Hesta snapped her mouth shut, realizing that hers was not the place to question the lord of the manor as to why he was walking through his own halls.

"Where am I bound?" The elderly man looked more kindly on the peasant woman than she knew she deserved. She blushed under his gaze.

"Forgive me, my Lord! It was just such a shock to meet you here, seein' as how you have been—" Again Hesta stopped before finishing her thought.

"Yes, woman, I know. I have not been myself of late. But, some moments ago it was as if a great veil had been lifted off me." Lord Stormund passed a hand across his eyes.

"Aye, sir, and you have been drawn, like others to seek the reason—below." The herb woman smiled and stepped back a bit to allow the men to pass before her. "If it pleases, m'Lord, I'll just follow," she said softly.

“As you wish.” Beckoning to his men, the Lord of Stamglen continued down the passage.

As they came to the first barrier, Belicaus stood waiting, the wall now open before him. He said nothing as the group paused in surprise, but simply turned and led the way through the narrow passage.

The growing party met with some delay when they reached the precipitous descent, but the torches carried by the armsmen, to say nothing of their aid, made the way far easier than it had been for Hart and Ibed. Even Free-Claw was assisted below by one who had thought to bring a rope.

Ibed, who had gone a little way through the portal, returned on hearing the murmur of voices, to meet Lord Stormund.

“You, too, Chapman? It seems that quite a troop has allied to ferret out the doings in my Castle. Quiet a troop, indeed!” The older man lifted an eyebrow as he fixed Ibed with a penetrating stare.

“The contest required it,” was Ibed’s quiet reply.

“Contest? Yes, there seems to have been some strange game afoot here. Well, lead on!” The old lord was clearly growing impatient.

But as he entered the chamber and took in the grisly scene, Lord Stormund staggered back and would have fallen, had not Belicaus grasped and supported him.

“B—by all that is holy! What has happened here?” Stamglen’s ruler finally managed to stammer.

Ibed stepped to where Hart lay in a heap beside the altar. “This man has battled the Dark, my Lord, and it seems that he has prevailed.”

“I—is that—my marshal?” was all that the elder man could say, seeing the crumpled remains of Sir Lazarous.

“It was.” Hart struggled to his feet with the chapman’s aid. “He was that and much more, my Lord.”

Placing his hand upon Hart’s shoulder, which slumped with exhaustion, the chapman recounted the evidences that had led to the exposure and defeat of Lazarous.

“Lord Stormund, Sir Lazarous has long and long plotted to usurp your position as Lord of the Manor. In so doing he has resorted to practices most foul.

“We stand on the site of an ancient temple, if such a word can be used to describe this place. I recognized certain carvings at the entry, which belong to a cult of demon worship, long thought to be the stuff of legend.

“But sadly, legends often bear the seeds of true happenings. So it was here. What is worse, the vile rites did not die with those who practiced them long ago, but have passed down through many generations, even into our times.

“I came afoul of them at the hands of slavers in my youth. The rites may have changed somewhat, but at the core has remained one vile practice, the use of blood magic, not just for its evil power, but to call into our world a being so foul that to name it is forbidden to all decent folk.” Ibed paused to draw breath.

“That’s all well and good, but how does this connect with my champion?” Lord Stormund was beginning to lose patience.

“Wherever the practice of that ancient Dark worship took place for any length of time, there linger vestiges of the Power. Methinks that Sir Lazarous, already a man greedy for supremacy, stumbled upon this chamber in his explorations of the castle. Perhaps he had a modicum of magical ability that triggered the entrance, which had been hidden for so long.

“He must have somehow learned how to use what lay here, but in truth was being used by the Dark entity instead. Whichever it was, he soon set in motion a plot to elevate himself at the expense of many innocent folk.

“His plan had a most serious flaw, however. He recognized a certain knight as a threat to himself and set about to remove him. Having already targeted a pure maiden for the purpose of his foul blood magic, it was a simple thing for him to force her to denounce that knight, falsely, I might add.”

Lord Stormund’s face blanched. “Huon!”

“Exactly. Lazarous put about that a lady’s honor had been besmirched and the one guilty was Huon of Rennay. He beguiled that maiden until he could gain control over her through the evil workings awakened here. It was then a simple matter to force her denounce him.

“Once that knight was broken, dishonored and banished, Lazarous had no difficulty gaining Lady Arin’s consent to marriage with his

nephew, thereby forging the next link in the champion's chain of ascent."

"But why Huon?" The old lord looked confused.

"I can answer that, my Lord." Hart reached into his belt pouch and drew out the two small books he had 'borrowed' from the archives."

As an armsman held a torch near, the lord peered at the marked pages.

"B—but this means that—!" He jerked up his head to stare more closely at Hart.

"You! You are—Huon of Rennay, my—my rightful heir!" The old man sagged to the stone floor in a faint.

When Brother Belicaus had gently revived him and assisted the lord to sit on a stone bench nearby, Stormund spoke: "I cannot believe Sir Lazarous could have done this! Surely you are mistaken!"

Before Hart could respond, a weak voice came from behind him, "Uncle, i—it is true. I—I was helpless in his power."

Astonished, those in the chamber surged toward the altar. There the Lady Arin had raised herself upon one elbow and reached a trembling hand toward Hart. "If—if you had not come—! C—can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"My Lady, my Lady, but I did come and your suffering is at an end. I now know that there is nothing to forgive." Hart bent to kiss her hand.

"Nay, noble knight, I must live with this for as long as I draw breath. There cannot be an end." She sagged back and, at a signal from Belicaus, two of the armsmen present lifted her gently from the gory stone.

"Take her to the herb woman's hut. There is no one better suited to minister to her now." The tall monk directed.

"But—she is noble—" One of the knights with Lord Stormund protested.

"And she will be nobly dead if this woman does soon care for her!" As Belicaus spoke, a nod from Lord Stormund reinforced his words.

Turning toward Hart, the old nobleman spoke, "Now it seems that I am deeply in your debt, Knight/Scrivener. But, first things first." With that the Lord of Castle Stamglen struggled to his knees before Hart.

"Sir Huon, if you can find it in your heart, forgive an old man's folly." Simply spoken, the words rang about the chamber.

"My Lord, you have Huon's forgiveness, but know this: the knight that was—is no more. I am now simply Hart, a man much the wiser for all that has occurred."

Indeed, to all who looked on, there was nothing of the knight about him. Standing now in blood stained garments, for the strange armor had vanished with the defeat of his enemy, Hart appeared anything but chivalrous.

Epilogue

For days following the vanquishing of Lazarous rumors flew about castle and vill. When at length they grew to such a proportion that they could no longer be ignored, Lord Stormund decreed that a Hallmote be called to deal with the talk, once and for all.

Since the meeting would include commons and nobles alike, it was set to be held on the great tournament ground, no other site being large enough to contain the crowd. An almost festive atmosphere prevailed, for all were aware that somehow a dark cloud had been removed from the manor.

When the castle's herald had shouted for quiet and the gathered throng turned all eyes toward the platform, Lord Stormund rose, at his left side the Lady Arin, pale and thin but erect as befitted her rank. To the right of the Lord of the Manor, looking decidedly uncomfortable in new doublet, hose and boots stood Hart.

Not a sound could be heard among the audience as all seemed to hold their breath while the old man spoke: "People of Stamglen, noble and common, surf and free, hear me this day. For long and long there was in our midst a great Evil. One whom I trusted betrayed me, broke his oath and near destroyed all that is good and upright in our Manor.

"I doubt that any by this time fail to know just who that one was and I will not now, nor ever in future speak his name. Suffice it to say that he has met his end at the hand of one of our own, one who deserves the honor due a Knight of Stamglen—Sir Huon of Rennay!"

With that the Lord of Stamglen reached down and grasped Hart's hand and drew him forward to the tumultuous cheers of all gathered. But no small amount of confused babble followed as the villeins recognized, not Sir Huon, but simply Hart the Scrivener.

Lord Stormund continued, "I bear you record this day that, having been falsely accused and broken in rank therefore, this man is hereby restored to his rank with full compensation—"

But before the old nobleman could continue, Hart raised his hand. "My Lord, good people of Stamglen, hear me. I take it as a thing to be treasured that you wish to honor me and return me to the revered

rank of knight. However, with no disrespect intended, I must decline to take up that title.”

Gasps rippled through the crowd and one or two of the knights present placed hands upon their hilts.

“Please, let me explain before you take offense. These many months while I lived as a common man among a common but worthy people, I learned much and, yes, suffered much. It has changed me deeply.

“In my heart I know that there lies before me a very different life than the one chosen for me by my family when I was sent here as a lad to be fostered by your Lord. Just what or where it may be, I know not, only that I must pursue it.” With that Hart turned toward Lord Stormund, knelt on one knee and taking the old man’s hand in his, kissed it, keeping his head bowed for a moment.

“I—if this is what you truly wish, my son, so be it. Know that my heart will go with you. Never have I had so loyal a knight. Go, with my blessing.” The elderly lord gave off speaking, knowing that to say more would open the gate to his tears.

When the crowd had dispersed and none remained to return to the castle but Lord Stormund, Arin and Hart, followed by a few of the household at a discrete distance, the old man spoke again: “My son, what of Stamglen—the inheritance. I now know from the records you showed me that by rights it is yours!”

“Aye, my Lord, but I am not cut from the cloth of rule. Better it should pass to the Lady Arin. She is next in line to inherit.”

“But she is a woman! She will become a prey to any unscrupulous man who covets the manor.” Perplexity was written large on the lord’s face.

“My Lord, may I speak?” Arin put in. When he nodded, she continued. “I am not altogether helpless, but since it is the custom that a woman who inherits a title must hold it by making a marriage, I may have an answer.”

“Say on,” urged Lord Stormund.

“Sir Norvill is not one whit like his evil uncle. Perhaps he is a bit more biddable than he ought to be, but I find that no impediment, rather a recommendation. I believe he will not be loath to listen to his wife in

matters of running the manor, when the time comes.” Lady Arin smiled and looked from one to the other.

“It would seem that it is settled, then,” said Hart, biting his tongue to keep from grinning too broadly.

“I bow to your wisdom. I will have my Steward draw up the document this day.” Shaking his head, the old nobleman took his leave.

“Huon—” Arin began.

“Nay, my Lady, simply Hart.” He objected.

“Yes—what can I say?” she asked.

“Say ‘farewell’ and I will be content.” Hart bowed and kissed her hand before turning to his quarters, now once more in the castle.

The day had dawned gloriously warm and sunny when Hart, accompanied by Ibed the Chapman and Brother Belicaus, walked out of the gates of Stamglen for the last time. They had passed under the portcullis and were crossing the barbican when a call stopped them.

“Just where were you thinking to go without me!” Flaming hair struggling to free itself from a kerchief announced the speaker. Bard Brydwen, with instruments slung over her back and lugging a pack, marched up to them.

“B—but you have a place here!” Hart stammered while the monk looked on, an unreadable expression on his long face.

“My place is—is—with my uncle here!” she said, the words tumbling out as though they were not exactly what she intended at first.

Hart looked at Brother Belicaus who shrugged. “She is of age. I could not say her ‘nay’ if I wished.” Then looking at the determined young woman, he smiled. “Come and be welcome, cherished child.”

So it was that the knight-turned-scrivener, a chapman from distant lands, a monk with warlike skills and a gift for healing and a somewhat headstrong young bard followed the track taken by that broken knight so many months before. Indeed as they paused near a certain stream at dusk to make camp, Brydwen exclaimed when she stumbled over something lying in the weedy tangle.

“Why, it’s an old hauberk! Look, how rusty—.”

Overhead as darkness descended a cluster of stars shown dimly, *The Sword of Victory*.