

Chapter One

A lazy blue sky hung over Prallyn and its surroundings, the sort of sky with nothing to do except blaze in summer's heat. Recently the days had grown hotter and hotter as the rains deep in the interior steadfastly refused to roll over Thrylland's capital city. Today proved no exception to the bout of unusual weather and the rising air above the Encircling Hills had again filled the wings of attentive raptors looking to pluck an early meal from the dry, brown fields below. Every now and then a surfhawk or a falcon folded in its wings and plummeted, diving between the copses of acacias and overgrown hedgerows. Off in the distance, out over the Southern Sea, a smattering of white, wispy, streaking clouds gently stained the otherwise indigo canopy.

Down below, the city lay in its wide bowl; an immense amphitheatre with Fortune Bay as its stage. Central Prallyn's sienna-coloured roofs arched around the citadel and out along the shores of the bay's North Arm. From so high up on the hills, one could clearly see the contrast between the parts of the city that circled the bay. On the east shore lay the mass of buildings of the Docks District and the slightly more respectable Sandy Town. On the west shore, beyond the old city walls, lay that part of town called Court; the owners of the grand houses spent much of their time seeking favour from the King whenever he held his audiences. The houses there did not clutter around each other. Rather, lavish lawns and expansive gardens kept intrusive neighbours at bay. Even further along Point Spray, beyond Prallyn's outer wall and its South Gate, lay High Court where the richest of all nobility had their summer estates.

Within the broad expanse of the walled city, several small orchards lined Hannan's Lake, that narrow strip of glitter that provided much of the city's fresh water. Elsewhere the occasional Guardian Church spire, a swath of green trees, or the swelling glass dome from some grand institution rose from the mass and broke the monotony of the rooftop pattern. At the very tip of the bay's North Arm, a grand rock rose from the surrounding city. Atop it sat the citadel and its fluttering pennants; one for the King, one for Thrylland, and one for the Guardian Church. The ruins of Old Pralyn lay outside the city's walls, at the end of the bay's East Arm. On the other side lay the jutting mass of Careful Reach with its small villages and ordered fields.

Scattered here and there, a small flotilla of fishing boats rode the waves. Rising from among the collection of dirty, ivory-coloured sails were the occasional masts of the larger naval and transport vessels that brooded in the harbour awaiting their next mission or their newest cargo. At the head of Careful Reach the fish-filled bay gave way to the rougher waters of the sea itself, the domain of much larger creatures.

As the day was still and calm, remote sounds wafted from the city's streets and drifted up the adjacent slopes. Nervous dogs barked warnings to imagined intruders, hooves clattered endlessly over cobbled stones, and hammers thudded as they built Thrylland's largest city. The myriad sounds of the sea also crept up from the emerald tropical waters of the bay and into the bright sky. On the upper slopes of the Encircling Hills, however, the sounds of city and surf merely hinted at another world lying beyond the bounds of nature. Here the gentle breeze and the bleating of sheep held sway. Just below the ridge-line of the hills, a narrow trail climbed from a shallow ravine and made for a collection of flat-topped acacias. From back along the path floated the bright, clear song of a lady's laughter. A slim brown-haired woman darted from the ravine,

her flowing locks scattered all about her face as she dashed up the trail. Upon her delicate features, a gleaming smile and sparkling eyes confirmed her gaiety. The short sleeves of her blouse revealed her bronzed arms that she held low, grasping the dark blue pleats of her skirt, pulling them away from her rapidly-moving feet. At the top of the rise she pulled up and turned her head, breathlessly glancing down the trail behind her. Another laugh broke from her finely-crafted lips as she darted off towards the acacias.

Back by the head of the ravine, another figure sped up the trail; a tall, golden-skinned, brown-eyed man with broad smile on his noble face. A short length of multi-coloured cloth held his long dark hair in a ponytail that swung back and forth over his shoulders as he ran to catch up. His own purple blouse was half unlaced and it caught at the air as he ran. He too held his arms low, as one hand gripped a pair of soft leather boots while the other grasped the handle of a broad wicker basket. The turquoise trousers he wore were covered with dark, clinging mud. Also caked in mud, his bare feet thumped into the warm, rich dirt as he ran after the lady.

Once under the shadow of the leaves and branches, the lady rapidly touched the smooth bark of each tree, spun to face her slowing companion and gave a little jump of glee. As her dark chestnut eyes followed his progress, an enchanting smile lit her face like dawn's first touch on a clear spring day. Her chest heaved from the effort of pulling the clean air into her lungs. He too, took deep breaths while he walked towards her. Upon reaching the copse, the man stopped in the shade cast by the leaves. Still clutching the boots and the basket, he bent low in a formal bow.

“Congratulations lady, you have me bested,” he declared through heavy breaths. “You have me in your debt,” he added in mock seriousness.

The lady laughed again and the sound was the sound of happiness itself. “As ever,” she replied in a clear, harmonious voice. “And what of payment?”

The man dropped his boots and the basket and he opened his arms wide. “You have but to claim it.”

“Oh no!” she shook her head, “You’re all filthy! *I* have no intention of soiling my clothes with mud. Douse yourself in yon spring and I shall consider allowing you to come closer.”

Smiling, the man asked, “And what of my lady? Is she in no need of a refreshing dip?”

“My needs are not such, sir,” she said with a wicked smile. “But, in this heat, a refreshing dip might serve to cool me. *Then* you can tend to my needs.” Slowly she crossed to him and laid her palms upon his chest. “The spring is one bowshot away and you, sir, are no longer burdened with our lunch. What do you wager that I can beat you there as I beat you here?”

“Come now, lady,” the man said with a smirk, “you cannot beat me again as you beat me here for there are no pools of mud here into which you can push me whilst I help you up a rocky crag. Puddles of mud aside, I doubt you could best me a second time.”

She leaned forward and strained her neck, offering her lips to him. He bent his head lower. She murmured, “Very well, my lovely publican,” and she pushed hard against him, propelling herself off towards the pool, while, with a startled cry, the man stumbled backwards and fell over. When he rose to his feet, she had already crossed a quarter of the distance to the spring. Her crystalline laugh floated back over the field as he rushed off after her. Steadily he closed the gap between them, but she had too great a lead. When he pulled to a halt, she stood on the lip of the short drop into the deep, clear pool of frigid water with her hands on her hips, smiling another of her glorious smiles. “I have you again, sir.”

Sincerity, and emotion, flashed across his happy face, “Indeed you do have me, my beautiful Agaryn violet.” They stood there for a brief moment, each etching the moment into their soul. Then he gave her a push and sent her flailing towards the spring water with a startled cry that was immediately cut off with liquid certainty. The spray of her entry shot into the air below the chuckling man. Then she broke the surface flailing about with her arms. “Ah! You treacherous beast! I’m soaked!”

“Tis normal, lady,” the man replied. “You are in water.” He smiled as he unlaced his shirt.

“What of my apparel?” she snapped.

“Take them off and set them on the stones over there,” he suggested with a straight face and a gleam in his brown eyes.

A mischievous look replaced her anger as she retorted, “No! *You* take them off.”

The man arched an eyebrow and said, “Alas! It seems the fates have doomed me to a life of servitude.”

“Ah, yes. But I pay well.”

The man grinned and leapt into the air. He savoured every moment of the experience; the pressure of the balls of his feet against the rocky brink, the long moment when he hung at the crest of his flight, the dramatic plunge downwards, the fleeting impact on the palms of his hands, the caressing touch of cold all about, then darkness, then light, and finally rebirth. He breathed deeply and shook his head before reaching out. Her hand met his and she pulled him towards her.

Afterwards, both man and lady lay upon a blanket not far from the acacia copse. They basked together in the hot sun, restoring to their bodies some of the warmth drained from them by the icy waters of the pool. She draped an arm across his bare chest and turned her naked torso

onto his own. He pulled his eyes from the soaring, gliding figure of a fish eagle high above and he looked into the eyes of his lady. She spoke, "I see your thoughts are far away from me."

"I cannot lie, my lady. At times my thoughts drift when we are together; when I feel happy. For only then do I feel at peace enough to consider some other matters. I hope you understand me, but my mind does not stop. When we are together, my thoughts must travel far afield to find a worry upon which to dwell."

"Well said." She ran the tips of her long, slim fingers over his cheek and down his neck.

"And what of you, lady? What worries has your King set upon your beautiful shoulders?"

"Why is it, pray tell, my love, that you ever insist upon mentioning my King during our rare moments together? Could you betray some unnatural interest therein?"

He smiled and stroked her hair, "I take interest in you, Lady Rathila. You are an important advisor to the King. It is part of you and I would be remiss to ignore it."

"Again sir, well said," she replied as she rolled off his chest and onto her back. "My duty is becoming too large a part of me, unfortunately."

"How so? Has Jerryn spread about his indecision any quicker than usual?"

"Ha! I swear the man's a fool. He ignores his responsibilities when he can and ensures we share his misery when he can't. He has all but ignored the worries of our entire landed class!"

"He still refuses to call an Assembly of Barons?"

"The mere idea is anathema to him. It is long overdue, of course, but a majority of barons must sign a petition to force the King's hand. As long as the succession is in doubt such a petition seems unlikely. Hells, if a petition was dropped into Jerryn's lap tomorrow by one faction, it would probably precipitate a string of baronic killings by the other faction."

The man rolled onto his side and ran a finger between her breasts to her stomach. “So you *do* believe that the rash of noble deaths is murder?”

“Of course! There’s no proof, but can there really be any doubt? Whoever replaces Jerryn must have the support of the Assembly. Rushara and Praylaar are both clever dukes, but neither is clever enough to have more than a third of the Assembly behind them, so they continue to court the barons. Neither can afford to force the King’s hand until he is secure.”

“Why so? Surely they cannot abide the King’s misrule? Their own interests are at stake.”

“Ah! But the King can add items to the Assembly’s order of business *and* decide which item will first be considered. He told both contenders in private that he will have no children, and he told them that he would make the barons debate the succession as the first item of the new Assembly’s business. It is a ploy, of course. He merely wants to continue ruling without any meddling from the barons. They are unhappy about his many expensive banquets and his habit of throwing titles about, titles that invariably come with an official pension. They would also demand that a host of legislation be repealed, and they would be right to do so. Do you know that the only laws the man has passed were to increase estate taxes for his damned troubadours!”

“I take it the King pays you no heed in cabinet?”

Her indignation rose, “Oh, he pays heed to me, certainly. He decides to do the opposite of whatever I counsel him to do. He enacts whatever legislation I tell him is in the worst interests of the land. He routinely sets aside for later consideration matters I say are pressing. In short, he cares more for outlandish receptions and the foreigners who supply him with his wine than for the landed class which supports his authority.” She shook her head with fiery anger.

“Come now, Rathila, you speak to such a foreigner,” the man purred in response. Then he smiled and added, “Hark! Do you not hear the cry of the savage sheep of Prallyn? It reminds us that we should not allow talk of Jerryn and his court to spoil our day.” Then he put on a haughty, nasal voice, “Otherwise another vile person shall feature in this talk.” As he spoke he flicked a small stone into a spinning arc.

Her mirth, an involuntary giggle at first, broke into a hearty cackle that seemed most inappropriate for such a fair lady. She joined the mimicry of the haughty voice, “And I am so *very* sure that you would *love* to dwell on that person. Then you would, doubtless, dream of ramming that shiny little coin of his up his hairy backside!”

The man smiled and replied in a note of mock shock, “*Lady*, how unseemly!” She lay on the ground cackling while the man rose and took a deep pull of the fresh air into his lungs. Then he bent and hoisted the lady to her feet. He brought the blanket beside the picnic basket, under the shade of the acacias, and settled her down upon it. From the basket he removed a bottle of wine and two chalices. He uncorked the fine vintage, poured it and handed the lady her wine. “I toast your fire, lady. A fire that burns bright within you and of which I find myself enamoured.”

Again she smiled. Then she sipped from the chalice and looked out over the golden fields, the city, the bay and the sea. “Thank you for bringing me here, Charano. I love it so.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. Then again opened the basket and brought out grapes, cheese and bread. For the duration of the day, they enjoyed each other’s company and talked no more of King Jerryn the Fourth of Thrylland - nor of anyone else.



Royal guards led five women past the warrior sentries at the edge of the Great Enclosure and into its narrow, roofless passages. On either side of the main pathway, a towering mass of neatly-stacked stones easily reached up beyond the height of two men and dwarfed the group. So too did they cut off the probing tendrils of warm evening sun. Above, reaching branches and verdant leaves cut off the passageways from the clear sky. Here, inside the enclosure on a hill clinging to the edge of the Kaquyth Mountains, the air touched the cheek with a cooling sigh and hinted at a chilly night to come. Only in single file could the figures move along the corridor, and so, one guard marched out in front of them while another brought up the rear. Each of the royal protectors carried a spear and a long, thin shield trimmed with the skin of a large cat. Even with the cold that occasionally gripped their lands, Baranthu warriors never wore more than their leather loincloths, sleeveless leather vests, the beads and gold they strung around their jet black necks, and short fur cloaks to show their rank.

Unlike the guards, the women wore more protective garb to counter the elements. By custom, traders offered the M'para and her consort their choice of any foreign loot or truck brought from abroad, but witches received the next choice. Therefore, not only did they sport the skin cloaks of their compatriots, they each wore an assortment of odds and ends from around the eastern world. One wore a long black robe favoured by holy men in Laran, another had a light, brightly coloured blouse of the sort preferred by Thrylls in their hot clime. Yet another wore the round, broad-rimmed hats of the Ortha. Aside from their cloaks, the only similarities between the

women's garb was that each carried about her waist a collection of small pouches and ornaments, and each carried a tall, dark staff of teak.

M'biri, the proud warrior who had led them from the mountains, passed openings in both sides of the corridor's walls that gave way to small, rounded clearings in which sat the stone houses of some important family or another. Often a fire burned in a shallow pit before the house or in a brazier atop its flat roof, warding off the evening's creeping cold. Women and girls, clad in the wrap-around gowns common to the Baranthu, swept doorways clean or bent double over cooking pots. If they looked up at the passing delegation, their stony faces betrayed the knowledge that a weighty trouble lay upon the shoulders of their M'para, a trouble that demanded the attention of those wisest in the ways of the spirits.

Further along, the women passed an intersection where another corridor ringed around the immense enclosure and cut across the main pathway. A group of small children saw the witches with their armed escorts and ran away down the passage, giggling in joyous terror. Even the littlest ones knew that the M'para had summoned strange, powerful women to counsel her. The group passed under a long, heavy archway and into the royal family's inner enclosure. Another corridor ran around the inner ring, leading to clearings in which the M'para's brothers or cousins kept their families. Loud voices of many people filled the air. The main pathway ploughed on between towering structures and then finally opened onto a large, round expanse.

Great trees rose from the space and provided a natural roof for the elders and the warriors amassed in a circle underneath. A large fire burned at the centre of the circle within the confines of a hearth raised up upon a squat dais. Warriors held their spears over the flames, taking turns roasting strips of meat. Their laughing and unimportant talk died down to a whisper as M'biri led

the five witches through the throng, across the cut grass, towards the platform at the other side of the clearing. As they neared the rostrum, the youngest witch, Siko Bikoyo, noticed the dozens of miniature figures that had been carved into its rich, dark wood. She marvelled at the intricacy and skill of the work, which easily surpassed any other piece she had seen. Wooden women worked the fields, men herded livestock, children played together with branches, all sights common to any village in the lands of the Baranthu.

They rounded the wooden structure and M'biri then led them up its four steps. He led them to five short stools to the side of a great wooden seat, then he stood before them and held his cupped hands to his face. He stepped down from the platform and melted into the silent, staring crowd. Resolutely, the witches stared back. Thus they remained until the sun slipped behind Mount Njagigiri. Then the drums boomed. They reverberated through the corridors of the Great Enclosure and echoed off the boughs above. Warrior dancers entered into the clearing from each corridor that opened onto it and they moved in frantic patterns to the loudly pounding rhythms. They converged on the large fire at the centre of the space and they wove and swayed around it. Then, suddenly the drumming stopped and the dancers froze in place. A tall, large woman, M'Para Bunitala, emerged from the corridor behind the platform and everyone in the clearing rose to their feet; all but the witches as witches are strange and rise for no one.

Bunitala, a woman of no more than thirty years, had clad herself in a fine robe of red silk tied about the waist by a length of leopard skin. On her brow she wore the silver tiara adorned with Kaquyth diamonds and worked by the finest Baranthu metal wrights. Against her black skin, the silver band shone like a constellation of the brightest stars on a moonless night. Ever

since she had first set it upon her head her people had taken to calling her *Usima manyamali*, the second night sky.

She swept up the steps and onto the dais where she thanked the dancers by holding her palms to them. Then she sat upon her smooth wooden chair and spoke in her husky voice, “The charms that legend says once protected our warriors no longer hold enemy spears at bay. The rains do not come when we call them. The winds no longer push our boats to good fortune. The seasons no longer tend to the needs of the tillers of the land and the workers of the wave. Only carrion birds and scavengers multiply. No longer does the lion or the griffin rule the savannah. Now the hyena and the jikawolf reign. A time of uncertainty is upon us.” Bunitala paused to peer at the canopy of leaves above, allowing her statement to sink in to the audience below.

She again looked down upon the gathering of village chiefs, wise women and renowned warriors. “Even so, our traders yet ply the waters of the world and bring us not only riches, but stories of what our father the sun and our moon-mother see. As it is here, it is so elsewhere, but less so. A force is at work upon the earth and it slowly poisons our magic, rendering it impotent. Our holy men and our witches toil longer over their cauldrons to less effect. The powerful magics of our ancestors are now but rumours of our history. Even the mystic powers of other peoples fail.

“Long during our struggles with the Wolds did we call the mystical forces to our aid,” she continued. “Indeed, that we were masters of the hidden ways preserved us from the fate of the Altapi - expulsion from our lands and the rule of foreigners. This gave us many children. But now the Wolds have returned to fight us for control of the land. They know no reason, and seem bent upon ridding the world of us. Each year they grow in numbers and in ferocity, while we

grow weaker. Our warriors are yet plenty but we no longer keep the Wolds at bay with our powerful spells. We must think upon what we must do while we yet have the strength to accomplish what needs doing.

“And now, at our time of need, into our hands falls an unexpected clue to our weakness. A captain of one of our dhows bartered goods for knowledge. It returned to us with an ancient stone palette carved with the words of far-off Karow. Our trader spoke the foreign words in our tongue and they lament the fall of their once-great city, Rejoe. A strong place, was Rejoe, until it was ruined by foreign plunderers, reduced by plague and then rent by the shifting earth. So speaks the palette to us.

“I worry that the fate of Rejoe might be visited upon us, for we walk down the path of future ruin. But if you hold proudly that such a fate could never touch us, if you think that a piece of stone need not bring us worry, then hear the words carved upon the back of this palette:

‘Mother Church has failed us

And our magic has fled.’

“As the rains fly from us, we are told the Wolds amass anew. We must consider the Wolds and all other forces that harm us. We must speak together and reveal what needs doing.” Bunitala sat back in her chair and allowed the debate to flow.

Proud warriors and chieftains stood and declared that while they lived, the lands of the Baranthu would never fall to the Wolds. Those few dhow captains who had come to the gathering spoke of alliances with other peoples. Elders spoke of constructing elaborate defences.

Not once did the witches speak. Then, as the moon rose overhead, M'biri stepped forward and spoke in his plain manner: "My M'para, I have passed two moons in the mountains seeking the wise women who sit beside you. I did so because you asked it of me. I would hear them."

M'Para Bunitala nodded gravely but said nothing. A hush fell over the clearing. All that could be heard was the crackling of wood in the fire and the lonely dirge of a far-off owl. Though she was not the eldest of those who sat beside the M'para, and should have deferred to the witch who was, Siko Bikoyo stood and attracted the eyes of all. Her defiant features seemed to glow darkly in the firelight. Though young, many had heard of her ability to work the unseen forces. She always spoke with a fiery voice and her mind keenly penetrated the murkiest problems. She lifted her staff of teak for all to see and then she spoke and when she did her voice rang with the tones of one used to pronouncing on matters of great import: "I tell you now why we five sit beside our M'para. You may all talk deep into the night of the warrior art, of defences you will construct, of alliances with other peoples. It has always been so. But the ravens and the crows, the jikawolf and the hyena, the drought and ill winds are all signs for us to read. The spirits tell us that if we continue to live as we always have, then we shall follow the path taken by the lion. We must change, or perish. Therefore it must *not* be as it always was in our councils.

"There is another path we can follow, different to that of the lion; but it leads first into the past. We cannot yet see where this path begins. To regain the strength we once held in unseen forces, we must learn why we have become weak. This stone text hints at where we may find the beginning of the other path. Our people have many witches and holy men, but none who can yet work magics of old as can we five. Only we can uncover the dark secrets of these words. *That* is

why we have come. We have come to find the beginning of the second path.” As Bikoyo sat down again upon her stool, the other four witches nodded in sombre unison.

M’Para Bunitala sat forward, “I see wisdom in these words. Do any here speak against them?” No one spoke and again only the sound of the fire filled the clearing. She turned to the witches, “Then, while we plan against the Wolds, while we show them the spirit of the warrior that burns in Baranthu hearts, you five shall seek the answers to our questions.” She raised her hand and a servant climbed onto the platform and passed her the stone palette. She in turn handed it to Bikoyo. “Delve into this secret. Go abroad and find for us the beginning of that second path. Help me lead our people down it. Take what you require from my household. Go before the light of morning. You shall each have a dhow placed at your service for you may need to travel as far abroad as our traders; perhaps further. I shall also send with each of you a warrior of your choice, from those collected here before us, to protect you when you sleep.”

Bunitala beckoned to the assembled crowd, “All the warriors stand before the platform.” The mass of people writhed and the area at the front of the clearing filled with over two-score warriors standing tall. The M’para turned to the witches, “Whom do you choose?”

The five witches rose from their seats and scanned the collection of men. One by one the women selected muscled guardians, starting with M’biri. Then when it fell to Bikoyo to choose she turned to Bunitala and said, “I choose to go alone. Where I go, a warrior might bring unhelpful eyes upon me. I also do not wish to weaken our forces who fight against the Wolds.” Then each witch saluted her M’para in Baranthu fashion, lifting her palm to the M’para’s radiance before leaving the gathering.



Leather creaked and sinews strained. Quiet, clinking sounds of metal on the large boulder slipped into the night like assassins dispatched to kill a king. A mighty arm slung across the wide girth of the expansive stone flashed a fleeting view of veins swollen with exertion. Mighty legs pressed against a long beam that served as a crude lever. All the while a sense of foreboding - deep, painful foreboding - descended on the watching youngster. Other sounds joined that of the armour's metal rings; the terrible tearing of tree roots and the baleful grinding of stone on stone. Slowly, very slowly, the boulder shifted. Directly below, on the valley floor, small orange flames faded, flickered and emerged in the blackness of night as shadowy figures moved back and forth. As the flames ebbed and surged, the youngster, Ruknor, thought they looked like winking eyes signalling their awareness of the impending attack. Fuelled by his frightful, forbidding foreboding, he wondered whether or not the travellers below yet sensed their peril. The whispered tremors of the ground went suddenly still with the defeat of a final few ground creepers sent sailing into the night as they tore loose from the earth. For the briefest of moments the boulder sat squat on the side of the hill as gravity beckoned to it.

Many times the teenager had watched this happen. For a moment the rock clung by invisible threads to the side of the slope before slowly turning upon itself and beginning its deadly rampage down the hillside. The boulder's first impact with the incline would seem like the instant breaking of a storm that would quickly become a rolling wave of thunder. In such a valley, with its echoing spires, the travellers would scarcely have time to realize the direction

from which the noise raged before the giant stone burst from amongst the trees at the camp's edge and hurled itself into their midst. Leaving a trail of ruin, the stone would pass. If fortune favoured the attackers, the bent forms of crushed men, beasts, wagons and tents would lie in its wake. If the aim were true, the large central fire set inside the camp would burst apart in a shower of angry sparks and those fortunate enough to escape the rock's passage, would find themselves plunged into darkness. Invariably the travellers, gripped by panic, would trip in the ensuing inky night over rubble sure to follow the boulder's devastating charge down the hillside. If the aim were poor, the fires would remain to cast light upon the ensuing carnage. In either event, the attackers would only leave their victims a few brief moments of incomprehension and bewilderment. Large shapes would surge from the shadows on legs like the trunks of trees and with bulging arms seemingly hewn from stone. Then the screaming would begin.

As the giant stone hung above the travellers for the briefest of moments, the youngster's foreboding transformed into venom, making the boy's limbs heavy with dread. Fear came not from any sense of sympathy or pity for the targets below; even at such a tender age, the violence and savagery of his kind had left their mark. No, this time, he knew, the aim would not matter, and the spoils would not compensate enough. The battering of skulls would hold no satisfaction.

A small stark circle winked in the moonlight. Instantly the feeling of terror contracted to a single round link in a chain, dangling from a grieve, wrapped around the straining arm and snagged on a great root twisted about the boulder. The youngster's hand shot out too late. A final push from those powerful arms dispatched the rough boulder into the night. Taken completely off-balance, the youngster's father only had time to grunt in a vain effort to tug loose his arm before he, too, vanished into the darkness.

Later that night, lamenting women pawed at the body, as the fallen chieftain's comrades carried the litter past the boy and into the feasting hall. While he stood watching, Magaar laid a heavy hand upon the lad's shoulder. Rarely did their people show such emotion, and never before had the old warrior felt inclined to do so himself. The youth, however, took no comfort from the gesture; grief overwhelmed him. Rather, bitter stabs of frustration and guilt penetrated his soul. He clenched his hands to keep his rage against Hanironan, the God of the Underworld, in check. His acute feeling of doom always preceded disaster and each time the cause had revealed itself a fraction earlier than the time before. Equally, however, the insight had always come too late. Though each fragment of time seemed an eternity, each eternity had never been long enough for the youth to avoid disaster. His impotence insulted his fierce pride; how could someone burdened with impotence hope to lead the tribe?

In the entire history of the tribe, none ever had such *skanslart*; insight into the currents of time. Magaar turned and walked to the edge of the cliff that looked down over the tribe's ancient hunting territory, the Eastern Flats that the invaders now called Thrylland. He looked out from among the peaks and pondered the uncertain future. If the youth could hone his skills, then he might become a formidable leader, perhaps the most formidable ever in a family that traced its blood all the way back to Krüylla. If he could not, then the boy likely faced death at the end of a Thryllish pike.



The dark haired man jerked his horse around and spurred it down the lane towards the smouldering remains of the cottage. His aggressive equestrian manner, as well as his full head of hair, were more common to a man of thirty, not fifty five, but anyone who saw his white robes fluttering in the air behind him would have known him for a prelate and guessed that he was much older still. Had anyone seen the design of a golden beaker embroidered on the trim of the cloak, the mark of the God Keldain the Healer, they could have guessed that the man came seeking justice.

On his right, the woods crept up to the path while on the left, a paddock lay empty, but his bright, grey eyes took in only the horror looming closer in front of him. The Prelate of Holydale tugged his steed to a skidding halt before the first body and looked down into the face of a young man who had not been much older than seventeen, about the same age as his daughter. "Damnation!" he cursed to himself above the buzzing hum of insects that filled the air; swarms of flies and other flitting, black pests hovered in the air above the corpse. Dried blood from a half dozen wounds was caked to the young man's clothing and stained the earth all around. The prelate's service with the Fourth Brigade had taught him enough of battle to realize that this youngster had not died without a fight. A short club lay beside the body. A look of anger, not fear, had frozen upon the youthful face. The torso had nearly been cleft in two from the right shoulder down to the abdomen. Numerous crimson punctures dotted the youngster's tunic and the skin of his right leg. Even from atop his horse, the stench revolted the prelate and he fought to keep from retching.

Another rider, his short-cropped blonde hair mussed from the gallop and his penetrating green eyes taking in the conduct of his troops, reined in his horse beside the prelate. He took off

his black riding gloves, ran his fingers through his thin beard, before speaking in his rich, deep voice, "I am sorry but as you can see they have lain there some time now, Your Grace. I gave orders that nothing should be disturbed. I wanted you to see exactly what happened."

The prelate swallowed and nodded before responding in a quiet voice, "I understand."

The other man, the Seventh Duke of Blackabbey, dismounted and knelt beside the corpse. With his hand in the air, he traced the broad slash through the torso and said, "It is unheard-of for the Altapi to use slashing weapons in these parts. Perhaps one of their double-headed axes could have made this wound, though I doubt it. However, as I myself have seen such rare occurrences as this in battle, I shall not read too much into this cut." Then he reached across and flicked at the edges of the small holes in the cloth that adorned the young boy's body. "While we had the word of a witness, it was these marks that convinced us. People in these parts tell tales long on venom and short on fact, but the bolts of the Fourth Brigade are difficult to come by."

Holydale strained as he dropped himself down from his mount. "Let me guess - small entry wounds with three radiating tears."

Blackabbey arched an eyebrow and nodded. "Yes," he replied, "I had forgotten that you spent time with the Ecclesiastical Guard. Indeed, the size of the punctures tells me that no Altapi killed this lad. Spears have larger heads; they inflict larger wounds. It wasn't simply a crossbow, Your Grace. In this part of the world, only the Ecclesiastical Guard use three-edged bolts. Also, Altapi do not bother to remove their arrows after their attacks."

Holydale looked away in the face of Blackabbey's gaze. Instead he looked at the duke's soldiers as they spread out among the smouldering structures. He walked slowly towards the burnt cottage that yet sent a slender trail of acrid smoke into the sky. The duke rose from the

body, signalled to a retainer to take care of the corpse, then he followed the prelate into the hot ruins. Two more small bodies lay charred and clinging to one another. To get closer to the corpses, Holydale stepped over a blackened beam that had fallen from the roof. Blackabbey said, "I am told they were sisters to the young man outside."

Beneath what had once been the only window to the single-roomed cottage, another scorched figure lay on the floor. Blackabbey crossed to it.

"We can't know for certain whether this was the farmer or his wife. You can see from the stumps that whoever it was tried to escape through the window." Blackabbey looked outside through the burnt shell of the portal. "Normally a sound plan, really. When confronted with a fire, flee. Sadly, this time someone waited outside the window and hacked the poor fool's reaching hands off at the wrist. The hands lie outside.

"I understand that another body lies in here somewhere. It's probably under that rubble there." The duke gestured to a heaping pile of charred wood and crumbled stone that lay underneath a gaping hole in the ceiling.

Holydale lost himself in the smouldering wreckage. His mind reeled from the sight, but he could not pry his eyes from the burnt remains of the peasants or the cottage. On the edge of his awareness he heard Blackabbey observe, "Perhaps they failed to invite the guardsmen in for a drink on a hot day, though anything could have caused this." Tears ran from the prelate's eyes and down his withered cheeks. He thought of the fire, of the consuming heat, of the pain.

"The Seven alive! Why do they yet follow our guidance?" the prelate said to himself.

The duke sifted through some debris nearby. "They are terrified of your Church, Your Grace." Holydale turned and looked with sadness into the lean face of the duke, a man that the

prelate had always considered haughty and over-proud of his role as the kingdom's defender from the Altapi.

Blackabbey continued, "You have turned a proud people into a collection of pious, fearful sheep. They dare not contest the Church, for if they did, they would endanger their families, as the fate of this family proves.

"You know I do not share your beliefs," the duke continued. "I will never divulge who observes my ancient religion for fear that this might happen to them. As long as I throw my full and blind allegiance behind my cousin the King, and as long as I keep the Altapi at bay, I shall never be forced to tell anyone who shares my beliefs. I can tell you, however, that these poor folk were of *your* flock, not mine."

Holydale paused a sombre moment. Then he observed, "I never knew that you gave much thought to the plight of our believers."

The duke let fly a curt, cynical breath before replying, "Giving thought is one thing, Your Grace. Reining in murder and rape is quite another. I need both sinners and saints to guard the borders of our realm. You can tell that to your masters in Prallyn, or your masters' masters all the way in Laran for that matter. I am an attentive duke and I live up to my responsibilities without regard for religion."

Slowly they picked their way through the ruins and out into the courtyard. While the duke spoke with a group of his soldiers, Holydale inspected the empty barn. Every single living thing had been taken. He turned and stared at the destroyed cottage, before kneeling and praying to Keldain the Healer. Blackabbey watched from a respectful distance, and when it appeared that Holydale had finished, the duke's voice broke the prelate's brooding contemplation.

Holydale pried his attention away from the smouldering collection of roof beams, furniture and assorted household articles. “What?” he asked.

The duke walked forward with a harried-looking young boy in tow. “Usually these mysterious ‘Altapi’ leave no one alive. They go to extremes to hunt down and kill unfortunate onlookers, including the young. Your guardsmen have grasped all too well, Your Grace, the knowledge that the young are sometimes too foolish to hold their tongues. However, this time the attackers made a mistake. My soldiers found this brave lad nearby.”

The boy, a typical peasant child adorned in dirtied rags, cuts and bruises, looked up at the prelate and swallowed in fear. Holydale knelt and looked into the frightened eyes of the child. Once he had memorized the boy’s every feature, he asked, “What is your name, my son?”

“Wassyl, m’Lord,” the boy gulped.

“What did you see here, Wassyl?”

“Guardsmen, Lord.” The boy looked up at Blackabbey nervously; the duke nodded and gave the lad a calming smile. Wassyl seemed all too aware that the guardsmen he had seen belonged to the same church as the man dressed in the prelate’s snow white robes. The child marshalled his courage and continued, “They comes up from the road in a group of about ten. I was up on the hill mindin’ the sheep when they starts settin’ the place on fire. Cardyn there,” he gestured at the dead young man, “he comes down off th’ other hill and tries to kill ‘em. Gave ‘em a good scare too ‘cause he would’ve hurt ‘em good had that one guard not seen him and slowed him up with the arrow.”

Holydale nodded and patted the boy’s back before straightening. The duke passed Wassyl into the care of a soldier and both men returned to their steeds and mounted. Holydale kicked his

beast into a canter but allowed the duke to catch up. Together they rode down the lane onto the road. Then the prelate reined in and turned his horse about. He let the horrid image imprint itself on his mind one last time. Then he asked, “Do you know how often this has occurred?”

The duke cast his green eyes up onto the surrounding hills steeped in twilight’s golden embrace. “It is hard to tell, Your Grace. Your guardsmen are skilled at covering their tracks and providing each other with fail safe stories. The Altapi *do* still attack settlements here. I believe that the Ecclesiastical Guard commits perhaps one or two such atrocities every few months.”

“Good Gods!” Holydale gasped. Then he took a long last look at the sunset, “Though it saddens me to no end to have seen this, I am grateful to you nonetheless. Otherwise I would never have believed it could happen, and I would have lingered in ignorance. Keldain, the Healer, works through you whether you believe in Him or not.”

“Well, it was good you arrived in your prelatic today, Your Grace, taking everyone by surprise. The Guard would never have done this if they had thought you were about. Until now it has proved impossible to convince your subordinates to inform you these atrocities occur.”

Holydale wiped a grimy hand over his face and replied in sorrow, “Indeed it is fortunate I am here. I should be so more often. *Then* I could take care of these matters personally.”

The Duke of Blackabbey laughed. “Indeed you should, Your Grace. Perhaps then you could instruct your Ecclesiastical Guard to lend a hand fending off the Altapi every now and then. Perhaps even that would do little; I understand that Laran rules the Guard directly with the guidance of your colleague, the Prelate of Prallyn.” Blackabbey spurred his horse into a trot and called back over his shoulder, “Heretics like myself have their uses, eh?”