



novels

The Falcon & The Wolf

Richard Baker



About the Author

Rich started as a game designer at TSR, Inc. in 1991, after serving as a deck officer on board the *U.S.S. Tortuga* for three years. He has published a number of accessories and adventures for the AD&D® game, as well as work appearing in both DRAGON® Magazine and DUNGEON® Adventures. Rich's work on the BIRTHRIGHT™ campaign setting began in the winter of 1994, when he and Colin McComb were given the job of creating the world of Cerilia.

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one

Stinging needles of ice and snow whipped across the frozen road, clawing at Prince Gaelin Mhoried. He shivered in the teeth of the bitter wind and drew his heavy woolen cloak closer to his body. Although the month of Pasiphiel was nearly gone, winter hadn't released the land of Mhoried from its grip. Nearly a foot of snow still lay over the countryside, and in places man-high drifts lingered in the shadows of the woods beside the road. It was unseasonably cold weather, even for Mhoried, a land accustomed to long and cold winters. Worse yet, the skies brooded with the promise of more snow.

Despite the cold and gathering gloom, Gaelin enjoyed the ride. The ancient forest on either side of the road was deep and dark, steeped in a sense of purpose that silenced his thoughts. Mhoried's wild places brought him solace and quiet reflection, an emptiness in which he could examine himself with unflinching honesty. The harsh weather only

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sharpened Gaelin's appreciation of the open lands; the frigid air scoured his body, reminding him that he was a part of the land, not a ghost only passing by.

The old Northrun was clear, if not in the best shape. The few wagons that came this way had beaten the snow into a thick, frozen slush over the black mud of the road. Gaelin was accustomed to winter travel; now twenty-six, he'd spent the greater part of his boyhood hunting and hawking in the lands around his father's castle, and he knew from experience just how miserably cold and wet a winter road could be. He reached down to pat Blackbrand on the neck, glad that the horse's feet and not his were in the freezing mire of the road.

The wind picked up again. Gaelin's shoulders were tense and tight from hunching his body against the cold, and a dull ache had been sinking deeper and deeper into his limbs for hours. The fine steel of his breastplate might turn an arrowhead or the blade of a sword, but the wind's edge this day was far keener than either. Trying to ignore his discomfort, Gaelin gazed off into the dark, snow-blanketed forest that stretched away from the road.

A violent gust snatched his cloak away and fluttered it behind him. The romantic solitude of a winter's ride in the woods was fading fast for Gaelin. He cursed and twisted in the saddle to catch the cloak's edge. "You'd think the trees would block some of this damned wind!" he growled.

Beside him, Madislav gave a booming laugh that brought showers of snow down from the branches nearby. "Is nothing!" the hulking Vos mercenary said, slapping one bearlike hand on his thick chest. "In my homeland, we call this spring!" Madislav was six and a half feet tall, with arms like gnarled oaks. He disdained the wool and linen favored in Anuire, dressing in the leathers and furs of his own people. Even his horse was bridled and saddled Vos-style. Gaelin, unlike many of his peers, preferred practicality over decoration, and his attire reflected his tastes. His only concession to fashion was a green surcoat with Mhoried's white falcon embroidered on his chest, the minimum expected of a prince of the realm.

Madislav drew in a deep breath, letting the frigid air sear his lungs, and then stood in his stirrups to pull open his jerkin. Gaelin winced. Madislav grinned and struck his thick-pelted torso with an exaggerated sigh of enjoyment. "When I

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was being small and my mother had no food, Kriyasha herself nursed me with an icicle!" he boasted.

Gaelin tried to imagine the Vos goddess of ice and darkness dandling a hairy infant on her knee and grimaced. "With any luck, we'll make Shieldhaven before the sun goes down. I've spent my last night under the stars this winter," he said. He scratched Blackbrand's neck again. The horse nickered and tossed his head, picking up his hooves. "Only two leagues more, Blackbrand, and there's a warm stable with fresh hay for you."

The road climbed the shoulder of a steep ridge mantled with a stand of weathered pines. A great portion of the Mhor's domain was still unsettled and wild, with vast reaches of trackless highlands and deep, forbidding woods. Years of riding and wandering, and then service as a squire of the Knights Guardian, had carved Mhoried's every copse and hilltop into Gaelin's heart. From the green fields of the Maesil valley to the forested flanks of the Stonecrown Mountains, fifty leagues from the kingdom's southern marches, he knew almost every inch of Mhoried. He and his brother had often hunted by this very ridge when they were younger, and home wasn't far now.

He fell silent, realizing that the end of his journey was near. For the past seven years, Gaelin had seen his family only in passing visits. Like all princes of the Mhoried blood for hundreds of years, he had been required to join the Order of the Knights Guardian, and subjected to the same discipline and regimen of exercise that any aspirant would face.

Gaelin had spent the winter campaigning in the northern passes of Mhoried, riding with a company of his fellow knights. The unusually cold weather had brought the goblins out of Markazor and the Stonecrowns in search of easy plunder once they'd depleted their own stores of food. Gaelin's band had skirmished with goblin raiders several times over the last month. Spring was nearing now, but a number of Gaelin's comrades lay under the snow in Torien's Watch and Marloer's Gap. The thought clouded his face and brought a hollow ache of exhaustion to his heart.

"You are not happy with going home?" Madislav said, riding closer. The Vos made a habit of exaggerating the guttural accent of his own tongue when speaking Anuirean. Ten years

ago, the Mhor Daeric—Gaelin’s father—had ordered the Vos to follow Gaelin and keep him out of trouble. As a teenager, Gaelin had chafed under Madislav’s watchful tutelage, but despite daily confrontations he’d never convinced Madislav to give up his task. After a time, the prince had come to view the outland warrior as a mentor and companion.

“I’ve grown accustomed to life away from the court,” Gaelin answered. “I haven’t spent two nights in a row in Shieldhaven for years. Even before I started training for the Order, I was happier out here.” Gaelin nodded at the forest. “I’m afraid of what my father might have in mind for me, now that I’m back to stay. You know we never saw eye to eye.” He rubbed his hands together to fight off the numbness that was setting into his fingers, and blew a warm breath into his cupped hands.

“Maybe you are marrying some pretty lass, eh?” Madislav said with a wicked smile.

“Hmmp. I hope my father hasn’t had that thought.”

“You are son of the Mhor, a great noble. I hear you are most—how you say—eligible prince in all Anuire, eh?”

“I’d think my brother is. He’s going to be the next Mhor, not me. A duty I wouldn’t wish on anybody.” Gaelin smiled and turned back to the road.

The two riders crested the ridge, breaking free of the ancient forest that surrounded the city and castle of Bevaldruur—Shieldhaven in Andu, the old tongue. The proud fortress slumbered on a rocky hilltop overlooking the town below. Wisps of smoke danced away from hundreds of chimneys and hearths, dissipating on the fierce northern wind. Gaelin reined Blackbrand in, drinking in the sight. The wind stung his eyes to tears. Madislav drew up beside him and watched in silence.

“I never thought this day would come,” Gaelin said slowly. With a wry smile Gaelin realized that he’d been brooding about his return to Shieldhaven for months without admitting it to himself. As a boy, he had fought for years to win free of his father’s iron discipline. Now he feared the old battle was about to be rejoined, but Gaelin had little heart for resuming the fight. “Bevaldruur looks the same, doesn’t it? Four years as a squire, three as an aspirant . . . Has anything changed?”

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“Ah,” Madislav said quietly. He followed Gaelin’s gaze to the cold, proud towers of the castle. “You have changed, Gaelin. You have proven yourself as a Mhoried and a knight. Your father is being proud of you.”

“Is he, Madislav? I didn’t say my oaths to the Order to please the Mhor. I did it because I knew that serving as a squire would get me out of my father’s house. I could have gone home the day after I received my spurs, but I’ve stayed away for more than a year now. He has to know I’ve been delaying my return.”

Madislav sighed and began to lace up his leather jerkin again. A fine rime of ice frosted his great beard. After a long moment, he spoke. “Gaelin, it is nature of sons to fight with fathers. With my folk, is war of strength and blades. I tried to be killing my father when I was fifteen.” He smiled and shrugged. “The *volnye vos*—we Vos—are strange that way, I am told. Other fathers and other sons, they fight wars with hard words and anger. Let me tell you Vos saying: ‘When I was man of twenty years, I could not believe how foolish was my father. When I was man of thirty years, I could not believe how much the old fool had learned in ten years.’ ”

Gaelin smiled despite himself. “I’ve heard that before.”

Madislav leaned out of the saddle to clap Gaelin on the shoulder. “I am thinking that you will be surprised to be seeing how much your father has learned in seven winters, Gaelin.”

The prince nodded, and drew in a deep breath. “It’s a league and a half from here. We won’t make it before dark, but we won’t miss supper.” He tapped his heels on Blackbrand’s flanks, and the warhorse pranced forward, kicking up slush and mud. Thin, dry flakes began to drift from the sky, swirling and darting with the wind, as the snow finally began to fall.

By the time Gaelin and Madislav reached Shieldhaven’s gatehouse, daylight was an hour gone and the first small snowflakes had grown into a stinging onslaught of icy shards. For all of Madislav’s bluster, Gaelin thought the Vos looked happy to be out of the weather. A dozen proud guards in the forest green and argent of Mhoried stood on duty at the gate, wrapped in thick cloaks against the weather. As the riders approached, Madislav cupped his hands to call out,

“Hallo the gatehouse! The Second Prince arrives!”

The guardsmen clattered to attention, striking the butts of their halberds against the cold stone in salute. Shieldhaven was a fine old castle, one of the strongest in the northern marches. Tower on tower rose up from the sheer hilltop, soaring into the sky from the dark bluffs below. The gatehouse was the only vulnerable point in the castle’s defenses, since a rocky bluff a hundred feet or more in height ringed the rest of the castle. The Mhors had held court on this hilltop for more than a dozen centuries, and a castle of one form or another had stood on this site for most of that time. The current structure had been started in Gaelin’s grandfather’s reign and finished only a dozen years ago.

The outer ramparts were low and thick, built to withstand bombardment by even the heaviest trebuchets, and the gatehouse itself was partitioned into an outer courtyard and an inner gate that was as strong as the first. The inner buildings of the castle were light and airy, decorated with intricate carvings and proud banners; they soared into the sky, marking the heart of the duchy of Mhoried. Gaelin let his eyes roam over the familiar battlements as he dismounted and shook the snow from his battered cloak. He gave Blackbrand an affectionate rub on the neck, and let a liveried groom lead the horse away.

Madislav dismounted and stretched, rubbing his backside. “Is good to be home,” he said with a tired grin. “Let us see what Master Miethen has in his kitchens, eh?”

Gaelin noticed a hollow pang in his stomach and realized he was famished. “A sound plan, Madislav,” he replied. He passed by the great hall and headed for the small door leading to the castle’s kitchens. Catching the eye of the hall’s doorman, Gaelin called, “Oesed! Please notify the Mhor of my return. I’ll have a bite in the kitchen and call on my father shortly.”

The doorman stood and faced Gaelin, drawing his cloak around his battered old frame. He held up his hand, shaking his head. “My apologies, Prince Gaelin, but the Mhor wishes to see you at once. He’s been waiting on your return.”

The spring faded from Gaelin’s steps. “At once?” The warm yellow light and friendly clatter of the kitchens tempted him. He sensed Madislav a pace behind him, wait-

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ing to hear his response.

“Lord Baehemon of Ghoere arrived today, my prince,” Oesed continued. “I am sorry.”

Biting back angry words, Gaelin glanced up at the castle’s pennons and noticed the red and blue banner of Ghoere’s ambassador, almost lost in the darkening skies. Lord Baehemon was one of the high nobles of Ghoere, Mhoried’s southern neighbor. Baehemon was known as the Hound of Ghoere; he was the captain of Ghoere’s army and a powerful figure in Ghoere’s court. Tuorel would not have sent him on any common errand.

“You’ll find appropriate dress laid out in your bedchamber,” Oesed added. “If you please, my lord?”

Gaelin sighed. “Very well. I’ll be there in a quarter-hour. Please have someone unpack my kit and bring my saddlebags to my chambers. They should be in the stables.” The chamberlain nodded and withdrew.

Madislav clapped him on the shoulder. “I will be in the hall, Gaelin. I am thinking there must be a pretty lass who is missing my company, no?” He set his face in a wry smile, and added, “Be glad you are home, eh?”

“Thanks, Madislav. I’ll be fine.” Steeling himself with one last glance at the door to the kitchens, Gaelin turned and set off toward his rooms. He passed a dozen or more familiar faces on the way to his apartment, along with a few he didn’t know—courtiers, guards, and servants who were new in Shieldhaven. Gaelin avoided conversations along the way; he didn’t want to keep the Mhor waiting.

Gaelin’s rooms were two floors up, in the southern tower of the keep. A doublet in green lay on the bed, with tight-fitting breeches, fine leather boots, and a shirt of Khinasi cotton to wear beneath the doublet. He peeled off the half-plate he’d been wearing since sunrise, relishing the relief that flooded his limbs. He’d have to clean and oil the mail and plate before he went to sleep. Then Gaelin washed his face and quickly dressed.

He stepped into the hall that linked the studies, parlors, and private chambers of the royal family. It was a dark and quiet corridor, panelled with rich teak from the forests of far Khinasi, decorated with portraits and tapestries illustrating the history of the Mhor’s line. Gaelin always felt uneasy be-

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fore the eyes of his ancestors, as if he didn't measure up to their standards. Shrugging his shoulders and tugging at his waist to smooth the doublet's fit, he rapped at the door of his father's study.

"Enter."

If the corridor represented Gaelin's heritage, the Mhor's study embodied everything that was his father. Tall bookshelves lined the room, crowded with samples of the finest literature offered by the fractured Anuirean kingdoms. A great fireplace of black marble filled one end of the room. Keepsakes and mementos of the Mhor's own travels from before the time he had inherited the crown cluttered the room, but it was a familiar and intimate clutter; each piece belonged in its own place. Opposite the fireplace, high, dark windows of leaded glass rattled with gusts of wind.

The Mhor stood before the fireplace, one arm propped on the mantle, gazing into the flames. Like his sons, Daeric Mhoried was tall and rangy, although the first touches of old age had brought a stoop to his shoulder and a softening of his muscles. His hair was silver, and he wore no beard or moustache. He resembled an old, proud eagle, with a fierce but deliberate strength of character in his face and gestures. The Mhor was dressed in a fine gray doublet that resembled Gaelin's in cut and fashion, but on his breast the emblem of a silver falcon was embroidered on a black patch. He glanced up as Gaelin entered.

"Hello, Father," Gaelin said quietly.

"Hello, Gaelin. You're looking well. It looks like you've filled out some."

"I have, I think. You are well?"

A bare, wintry smile creased the Mhor's face without touching his eyes. "I am," he replied. "Come, let's have some brandy against the cold." He indicated a great, padded chair by the fire, and lowered himself into its companion. Gaelin drew a decanter of Coeranian brandy and a pair of glasses from a nearby cabinet, joining his father by the fire. For a long moment they sat together in silence, until the Mhor cleared his throat to speak again. "How are things in the northern marches?"

"Well enough, for now," Gaelin replied, glad of the opportunity to speak without addressing the issues that lay be-

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tween them. “The goblin raids were bad this winter, but we’ve seen the last of them for this year. We’ll need more towers and garrisons along that border soon—too many goblins got past our pickets this year.”

The Mhor frowned and sipped at his brandy. “I told my father the same thing when I was your age, Gaelin. Every year I put more men in the north, and every year the goblins grow bolder. I fear a war with Markazor may not be far off.” The Mhor returned his attention to the fire, as the candles flickered in the draught. Gaelin waited, watching his father in silence. After a long time, the Mhor spoke again.

“Gaelin, as you’ve probably guessed, you’re not here to tell me how the skirmishes in the north go,” he began. “Your time as a Knight Guardian is at an end. Like your brother and myself, and most of the Mhorieds for a number of generations, you’ve won your place as a leader of Mhoried. There aren’t many kingdoms that require their heirs and princes to learn how to ride, how to fight—and most importantly, how to lead—the way we do. There are a number of good reasons for this, which I’m sure you’ve memorized by now.”

Gaelin recalled his first lessons with Lord Anduine, the knight with whom he’d first trained. Anduine believed that the *why* of being a knight was even more important than the *how*, and Gaelin had mucked out plenty of stalls learning those lessons.

“In any event,” Daeric continued, “it’s time you moved on to different responsibilities. You’ve learned how to be a follower, and that’s the first step of learning how to lead.”

“I had hoped to remain with the Order,” Gaelin said carefully. “I think I’ve done well with the Knights Guardian.”

The Mhor laughed with little humor. “I thought you might say that. It’s a noble sentiment, Gaelin, and one I’d probably have in your place—but there are more important duties for you to attend to. You are far too valuable to spend your days fighting as a foot soldier in Mhoried’s borderlands.”

Gaelin felt his shoulders tensing. This discussion was taking a turn for the worse. “The Knights Guardian are more than soldiers, Father. It’s not a waste of my time to devote myself to the Order. Isn’t that what you had in mind when you made me a squire?”

The Mhor ran a hand through his silver hair. “I know that

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servicing as a knight is no small thing, Gaelin. Once I stood where you stand now. But there are hundreds of young lords and nobles who can serve in your Order, and I have only two sons." He fixed his gaze on Gaelin. "By tradition, you're granted seven years to be your own man, to look out for no one but yourself, but those years are done now, and I have need of you." With a heavy sigh, he rose and stared out the window into the snowy night. "I thought we were done with this years ago."

Gaelin looked away, fighting down the cold anxiety in his stomach. He drained the brandy in his glass, but the warmth of the liquor did not dispel his unease. "All right. What would you have me do? I have no skill for statecraft or diplomacy."

The Mhor pulled his gaze away from the falling snow and faced him. In anger, he grew colder and more distant, his face setting into a stonelike scowl. "Seven years ago, you didn't know how to be a knight," he said. "In time, you learned. I know that thoughts of the throne are far from your mind, Gaelin, but I think it would be good for you to spend time here, with me, learning how to rule. I've only two sons, and should anything ever happen to Thendiere, I want to know that there's another who can take the oaths as the Mhor." He measured Gaelin with his piercing gaze, until the prince began to feel uncomfortable. "It's a matter of duty, Gaelin. You have a duty to Mhoried to make yourself ready. Who would rule in Shieldhaven if I died and Thendiere couldn't take my place?"

Gaelin ground his fists. "That will never happen."

"Even if I agreed, Gaelin, I am compelled to ask you to prepare yourself. It's my duty to ensure that Mhoried will not be left without a Mhor. And it's your duty to stand ready, should anything ever happen to your brother or myself. I thought that seven years as a Knight Guardian would have helped your sense of responsibility."

"I've learned more than you thought I might."

"You'll stay, then?" The Mhor's gaze refused to release him.

"I will."

"And you do so of your own free will, not because I am forcing you to do so?"

Gaelin grimaced. "Of my own free will," he said.

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The Mhor did not press his victory. "It may be more important than you think, Gaelin," he said, relaxing and turning away, his hands clasped behind his back. "You may not have heard, but Thendiere was nearly killed in Riumache a few days ago."

"What? How?" As the crown prince, Thendiere was the Mhor's right hand. He traveled constantly, speaking with his father's voice. Like Gaelin, he had trained in the Knights Guardian, although Thendiere had always been as responsible as Gaelin had been rebellious.

"He was thrown in a joust and broke his leg," the Mhor said, measuring Gaelin's reaction. "A very bad fall. The priests tended him immediately, of course, but he'll need some time to recover."

Gaelin shrugged. "It could have happened to anyone."

"Aye, but some accidents are more convenient than most, wouldn't you say?" the Mhor said darkly.

It took a moment for the weight of the Mhor's words to sink into Gaelin's mind. "You believe someone made a deliberate attempt on Thendiere's life?"

"I've no proof of it, but I have to consider the possibility. We've few friends, Gaelin, and many enemies. The goblin kingdoms north and east of us have no love for any Anuireans. They'd just as soon lay waste to this land from Riumache to Torien's Watch. West of us lies Alamie, an ally racked by civil war, and Ghoere is just across the Maesil. Lord Baehemon's here right now, in fact."

"So I'd heard. What does Baehemon want with us?"

The Mhor scowled. "I've no idea, but I expect him to bring it up soon. We'll be entertaining him with a banquet, and I want you by my side." His face grew hard. "If Baehemon had anything to do with Thendiere's accident, I want him to see that I've another son."

"I'll be there," Gaelin said.

"It's growing late," the Mhor said. "I know you've been traveling all day, and you probably want to get some sleep." Gaelin let out a small knot of breath he'd been holding clenched under his breastbone and headed for the door. Before he left, his father stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "One more thing, Gaelin," he said. "Be careful. Shieldhaven is not as safe as it used to be."

After leaving the Mhor, Gaelin stopped by the great hall. Since Baehemon's entourage had come to Shieldhaven, the Mhor's court stayed active until late at night, dancing, drinking, and making merry. The great audience hall, reserved for state business during the day, shifted to warm revelry by lantern light. Many of Mhoried's noble-born and wealthy visited the court for weeks at a time, and these lords and ladies missed no opportunity to be seen in the Mhor's hall. Despite Gaelin's virtual absence from Shieldhaven for years, he was quickly recognized and besieged by dozens of well-wishers and a handful of old friends and acquaintances.

At the center of attention, he found his sisters, the twins Liesele and Ilwyn. When he'd left Shieldhaven to begin training with the Guardians, they'd been a pair of giggling twelve-year-olds with a streak of calculated mischievousness. Now both were beautiful, intelligent, and witty ladies, unquestioned jewels of the Mhor's court. Despite Gaelin's exhaustion, Liesele and Ilwyn captured him for more than an hour with their tales of the doings of the court and their horde of suitors.

He was a little surprised to find his old friend Cuille Dhalsiel was especially interested in Ilwyn. Two years past, Cuille's father had died, leaving him the count of Dhalsiel—one of the wealthiest nobles of Mhoried. Gaelin was cheered by Cuille's presence, but he detected a note of cynicism and insincerity in his old friend's repartee. No one had ever made Cuille muck out a stall or stand shoulder-to-shoulder against a goblin charge. Cuille's banter held an undercurrent of contempt for Mhoried's institutions. It was a tone Gaelin found disconcerting, and he hoped Ilwyn would see through Cuille's practiced charm.

The next day, Gaelin spent the morning wandering through Shieldhaven's halls, rediscovering his home. He knew every passageway and chamber, and each one brought its own tale or memory to mind. In one parlor, Gaelin recalled a time when he and Thendiere had been thrashed for breaking a Khinasi vase. In another study, Gaelin had kissed his first girl when he was thirteen, the enthusiastic daughter of one of the guardsmen. That incident had led to a long and serious discussion with his father about the responsibilities of young noblemen in regard to young women of common lineage.

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Gaelin was nosing through a favorite book in the library, when he was surprised by the appearance of his father, accompanied by the old minstrel Tiery. The bard's seamed face lit up as he caught sight of Gaelin, and he placed his bony hands on Gaelin's shoulders. "Prince Gaelin! By Sarimie, it's good to see you again! Look how you've grown!"

"Master Tiery," Gaelin said with a laugh. "I finished my growing five years ago." Tiery was the minstrel of the Mhorieds, the herald of Shieldhaven. He wore the colors of the White Hall of Endier, a prestigious college of bards whose members served throughout the Heartlands. Tiery had been with the Mhors for almost fifty years, and if his voice no longer soared the way it had when Gaelin was a boy, his wit and wisdom remained undiminished. Gaelin knew that his father valued Tiery for his insight and years of experience far more than he valued him as an entertainer and poet. Looking closer at his old teacher, Gaelin was suddenly struck by Tiery's age and frailness. Tiery seemed as thin and dry as an autumn leaf.

"You've added twenty pounds of muscle since I last saw you, or my eyes are worse than I thought," Tiery said.

The Mhor smiled. "A few years with the Guardians will do that for a lad, Tiery."

"Aye, that they will. You turned out much the same, my lord." Tiery stepped back and appraised Gaelin from head to toe. "He bears a striking resemblance to you thirty years ago, Daeric."

The bard paced to the window, admiring the snow-covered countryside. The tower library had a commanding view over the highest part of the castle's bluffs, and sun on the pristine snowfall dazzled the eye. With a weak cough, Tiery settled himself into a chair in the sunlight. His gaze sharpened as he looked at Gaelin, and the light humor in his expression fell away. "Gaelin, I've a favor to ask of you," he said.

"Anything, Tiery." The bard's manner was beginning to disturb Gaelin. He sensed that not all was well with his old friend.

"It's time for me to find a successor," Tiery said. "My health is failing; this winter took it out of me. I've been corresponding with the White Hall, and I've chosen a bard to take my place. The Mhor shouldn't be without a White Hall min-

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strel, after all.”

“You’re in fine health, Tiery,” Gaelin protested. “You’ll be around to teach my children the harp and the old poems.”

Tiery shook his head sadly. “No, Gaelin. There’ll be another to teach them. Don’t be sad; I’ve lived a decade longer than most men do, and I’ve had good friends and fine deeds to sing. Now it’s time to see to the one who follows me.” He leaned forward to put a hand on Gaelin’s knee. “Would you do me the honor of bringing the next White Hall bard here?”

Gaelin glanced at his father, who nodded. “Of course, Tiery. It’s no trouble at all. Who is your successor?”

“A young bard named Erin Grayson. She is one of the most talented the White Hall has ever produced, I’m told.” He coughed again, and then stood. He clasped Gaelin’s hand and then the Mhor’s. “My thanks, sire. It’s a great honor you show me, by placing your son at my service.”

“Think nothing of it, Tiery. It is the least I can do.” The old bard smiled and shuffled out of the room, leaning on his cane. His father, lost in thought, watched Tiery leave.

“I’m surprised you’re sending me away from Shieldhaven so soon,” Gaelin offered.

The Mhor sighed. “It’s only for a couple of weeks. Besides, Tiery suggested you could use a little time to unwind after the winter’s fighting. I can do without you for a fortnight.” He stood and straightened his tunic. “Well, that’s in good hands, then. Oh, one more thing—I’ll need you in the council chamber in half an hour. Lord Baehemon’s requested a private audience. It seems a messenger rode three horses to ruin bringing Baehemon instructions from Tuorel last night.” He smiled, but his eyes remained hard. “We’ll soon see what the Hound of Ghoere has to say.”



TWO

The Mhor's council chamber was spartan compared to the rest of Shieldhaven. Unlike the other rooms favored by the lord of the castle, the council chamber was buried deep in the fortress, surrounded by massive stone walls. It was a brooding, threatening room that dampened levity and lent itself to dark designs. The Mhor sat at the head of an ancient oak table, flanked by old Tiery and the court wizard, Bannier.

Gaelin greeted Bannier warmly. Before he'd been sent away to the Knights Guardian, Gaelin had studied under the mage when his other duties and commitments allowed. The magician was just as tall as Gaelin or his father, but he was gaunt and bony, with a clean-shaven face and a receding hairline trimmed to stubble. His eyes burned with intelligence and force of will, giving him a hollow-cheeked, almost feverish, appearance. The wizard's face split into a wide grin when he spotted Gaelin, and he caught the young man's hand in a

surprisingly strong grip. "Gaelin! Are you back from the northern marches already?"

"Aye, and this time to stay," the prince replied. "My years with the Guardians are at an end. You'll see much more of me here in Shieldhaven, I suspect."

"Excellent! Will you resume your magical studies?"

"I don't know about that," Gaelin laughed. "I don't recall that I had much aptitude for your arts."

"On the contrary, you were a quick study. You have the intelligence to grasp the principles of thaumaturgy, and your Mhoried blood gives you the potential for harnessing true magic, not just illusions."

Gaelin noticed his father looking in their direction, and he nodded toward the table. "Baehemon's almost here. Let's see what he has to say." They found places by the Mhor's side, and Gaelin tugged at his tunic and squared his shoulders. He was a little flattered that his father had invited him to sit in on the audience, but he guessed he'd probably tire of such things in a few weeks.

A moment later, a chamberlain opened the panelled door and stood aside for the Ghoeran lord and his small entourage. Baehemon was a short, broad-shouldered man with a shaven head and a thick neck that vanished into knots of muscle around his shoulders. He was nicknamed the Hound of Ghoere, but he resembled a human bulldog, with a wide and powerful jaw and deep-set eyes that gleamed like frosted steel. Baehemon's gestures and speech were short and clipped, and his posture suggested explosive violence barely held in check. With a bare nod of his head, he took a seat at the opposite end of the table. The Mhor had deliberately kept him waiting an extra quarter-hour as a not-so-subtle reminder of who was master of Shieldhaven.

"Well, my lord Baehemon, you have requested this audience. How may we be of service to you?" the Mhor began.

"My lord Mhor, Baron Tuorel of Ghoere sends his greetings," Baehemon said. His voice was thick and gravelly, but his words were measured carefully. His eyes never left the Mhor's face. "He hopes this day finds you well and your duchy at peace."

"It does, Lord Baehemon. Please proceed."

The Ghoeran nodded briefly and continued. "Baron Tuorel

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praises the peaceful relations of our two countries, and sends his sincere wishes that our future dealings will be similarly blessed. However, he is also forced to observe that dark times have come upon the empire. Enemies are gathering who could destroy us all. Goblins and elves beset our borderlands. The Gorgon's armies grow stronger. The old outposts of the empire are falling to savages and outlanders. And in the midst of this storm, the lords of Anuire turn upon each other, engaging in petty squabbles when all are threatened by the forces of chaos and darkness." Clearly, Baehemon had rehearsed this speech. Gaelin's brows drew together, as he tried to puzzle out where the Ghoeran was going with all this.

"So you say, Lord Baehemon," replied the Mhor. "I must point out that Ghoere was recently engaged in one of these petty squabbles with the lord of Elinie."

Again, Baehemon nodded, as if to concede a point. "Be that as it may, darkness still threatens our land, a darkness against which we must stand together or fall. But who has stepped forward to lead us? Who can claim the Iron Throne?"

Mhor Daeric spoke dryly. "Your presence here makes it obvious, but I'll ask anyway: Who is this contestant for the Iron Throne?"

"You have guessed my purpose already," Baehemon said. "My lord Mhor, the Baron Noered Tuorel humbly advances his name as the next rightful emperor of Anuire and asks that you consider an oath of fealty to his cause."

The Mhor leaned forward, giving emphasis to his words. "Before I swear support to a candidate, he'll have to swear support to me. I agree that strife between Anuirean lands is terrible, but I stand on the borderlands of the empire, and I've no time, money, nor troops to spare in wars beyond my border. It's Mhorien soldiers who keep the goblins of the Stonecrowns at bay, Lord Baehemon."

Tiery snorted and added, "My lord Baehemon, you ask us to create another contender for the throne? Ghoere can't muster the support the claimants from Avaniil or Boeruine already have."

"Ah, but Mhoried is one of the most prestigious neutrals in Anuire. Should the Mhor endorse Baron Tuorel's claim, others will follow." Baehemon leaned back in his chair, placing his hands on the table. The Mhor eyed him, a thoughtful look

on his face.

Bannier leaned close to speak quietly. "My lord, Ghoere's offer may be worth considering. Avanil and Boeraine have nothing to offer you, but should you support Ghoere, you'll anchor your southern flank forever. Ghoere has strength enough to seize the Iron Throne. Mhoried would be well-off as an ally of Ghoere when that happens."

The Mhor glanced at Bannier. When he spoke, he made certain that Baehemon could overhear him, without directly addressing the Ghoeran. "I'll grant you that Avanil and Boeraine have done nothing for Mhoried, but neither has Ghoere. The only courtesy he's shown Mhoried has been in not starting a war with us."

Bannier persisted. "It costs you nothing to offer him allegiance, my lord."

The Mhor's face hardened. "On the contrary, it costs me a great deal to swear an oath of fealty to a cause I've little use for. I've seen nothing that indicates that Ghoere would be a better emperor than Avanil or Boeraine, and I'll have no hand in putting an unworthy successor in Roele's seat. The legends say that someday the line of Roele will reappear, but Baron Tuorel is not the emperor returned. I will not pretend that he is for the convenience of his friendship."

Baehemon's face darkened as he listened to the Mhor's discussion. "You may want to reconsider, my lord Mhor. There is a new power in the heartlands, one that stands to win the Iron Throne where others have fallen for five centuries. You can stand beside us in victory, *or you can stand in our way.*"

The Mhor stood and his eyes flashed. "Are you threatening me? Because if you are, Lord Baehemon, *you* may want to reconsider." Baehemon met the Mhor's glare for a long moment, before slowly rising to take his leave.

"The Baron Tuorel regrets any misunderstandings in this discussion," he said stiffly. "However, I must also point out the potential for—shall we say, unpleasant differences?—should you fail to make the right decision in this matter." He smiled in a sinister fashion, his eyes glittering. The Ghoeran warlord would relish those differences if the situation was not resolved to Tuorel's liking. He's straining at Noered Tuorel's leash already, thought Gaelin. Ghoere's army was powerful, well trained, and well equipped; Gaelin did not

dismiss the threat.

The burly lord turned slowly and walked toward the door. He halted in the doorway, his retainers flanking him, and spoke over his shoulder. "I hope you'll forgive me, my lord Mhor, but I have been summoned back to Ghoere immediately. I shall depart within the hour. My apologies for missing your banquet." With that, he left.

"That's a deliberate slight," Tiery observed. "And he doesn't even care if you're insulted or not, my lord."

"Tiery, what do you make of Lord Baehemon's generous offer?" said the Mhor.

"It seems to me that Ghoere's feeling like the cock of the walk," Tiery said with a wry chuckle. "Now that he's beaten Elinie into the ground, he's going to throw his weight around and see who grovels to him next." The minstrel rapped his knuckle on the table. "You should be careful of your court. There may be Mhorien lords who would disagree with the stand you just took."

"Lord Maesilar, certainly. His lands lie in Tuorel's path, should war come. Balteruine will follow where he goes. And possibly Dhalsiel," the Mhor replied absently. Gaelin looked up, surprised to hear that the Mhor regarded Cuille Dhalsiel as less than reliable, but his father was staring into his steeped hands. "Gaelin, what do you think?"

Gaelin considered his words carefully. "I think we should reinforce the southern garrisons, even if it means taking troops from the Stonecrowns," he said at last. "Baehemon might be in a hurry because he's got a war to get to."

The Mhor seemed taken aback by his assessment. "You think it's that serious? We'd have heard word of Ghoere's army gathering for a crossing of the Maesil."

"You may not like the man, Father, but by all accounts he is an exceptional general, and Ghoere started his war against Elinie with a sudden invasion. Baron Tuorel's a man of action, not words. This may be all the fair warning he considers necessary."

The Mhor leaned back in his chair. "You may be right, Gaelin. I'll give it some thought." He fell silent as he stared at the vacant seat opposite him, as if to force some slip from the dismissed lord. Gaelin, Bannier, and Tiery waited patiently.

Daeric blew out his breath and stood, scraping his chair

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across the stone floor. "Well, we'll see how it falls out. Tiery, send word to our men in Endier and Ghieste. I want to know where Ghoere's troops are. And send for Count Baesil, I want to discuss our troop dispositions." He smoothed the front of his tunic and turned to Gaelin. "Congratulations, Gaelin. Tonight's banquet is now in celebration of your return. I'll not cancel my plans because of Baehemon's rudeness. See to the preparations, gentlemen."

* * * * *

The banquet was one of the most extravagant events in the Mhor's court that Gaelin could recall. Literally hundreds of people stopped by the high table to welcome him back to Shieldhaven. He recognized only a few dozen of them. Some of the old faces he'd known were gone, and strangers held their places. Tiery sang a couple of sonnets for the court, his hands still quick and certain, though his voice quavered on the high notes. Gaelin sat beside his father, watching the crowded hall with a strange mixture of wonder and anxiety—it had been a long time since he'd been at the Mhor's side.

He caught himself studying his father, as the Mhor talked with an old courtier. The lantern light showed the deep lines in the Mhor's face and the subtle stoop to his shoulders. For the first time, he realized that the Mhor Daeric was growing old. Thirty years of rulership, vision, and strength in the treacherous morass of Anuirean politics had exacted their toll from the man, let alone the cost of raising four children without their mother—Aesele Mhoried had died giving birth to Liesele and Ilwyn. For the first time in a long time, Gaelin felt as if he understood his father and the uncompromising passion that drove him. He flashed a crooked smile at the Mhor. "I suspect you never thought to see this day."

"There were times that I doubted you would ever come home, Gaelin, but I hoped you'd return if I tried to stay out of your way." The Mhor signaled to a steward, who began to refill the goblets of the guests at the high table. "When do you plan to leave for Endier?"

"First thing tomorrow morning," Gaelin said. "It's four days to Riumache, and then a couple of days' sail to Endier. I'd like to get started."

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“Take Madislav with you,” the Mhor said.

Gaelin glanced at his father. “Do you expect trouble?”

The Mhor shook his head. “Just a feeling. I know Daene’s a fine squire, and Ruide’s along too, but I’d like another good man with you while you’re away from Shieldhaven. Besides, Madislav’s in the habit of watching your back. He wouldn’t know what to do if the castellan returned him to the duty roster.”

“I’ll be glad for Madislav’s company,” Gaelin said with a frown, “but I’m capable of taking care of myself. I’ve ridden to Endier before with no more company than a friend or two and Ruide to look after my things.”

“The world’s not as safe as it used to be.” The Mhor’s face darkened, but his voice did not betray anger. “Humor me, Gaelin. Some men in your position aren’t allowed to leave their homes without a company of soldiers. I know you’d rather not make this visit a grand procession, and I’d rather not show everyone that I don’t think my roads are safe enough for my son to travel. But I’d still like Madislav to go with you, and to tell the truth I’d feel comfortable with ten or fifteen guards more.”

Gaelin forced a shrug. “Madislav’s enough company. I’ll have Ruide draw some extra provisions.”

The Mhor nodded without looking at him. “Remember, Gaelin, you’ve a duty to the realm; not only to me, but to all Mhoried. You must expect me to be careful with you, not only for your own sake, but for the kingdom’s sake.”

Gaelin chose not to respond. The Mhor might be right, but the prince didn’t have to like it. He was going to have to get used to entourages and affairs of state. Fortunately, the years of training and study with the Guardians had taught him to accept onerous tasks in the name of duty. Mucking out stables or cleaning armor was never much fun, but he’d been able to make himself do it. That must have been part of the Mhor’s plans, he thought as he glanced over the crowd of well-wishers. I never learned to take orders from him, so he had Anduine take me under his wing, so I could learn from someone else.

His musings were interrupted by a ripple of applause that caught hold and grew throughout the room. By popular demand, Bannier rose with a rueful grimace and created a variety of spectacular and terrifying illusions to thrill the ban-

quiet-goers. The images fascinated Gaelin. Bannier's hands flashed as he commanded one illusion after the next to appear, each one greeted by gasps of shock or roars of approval. The mage may have dismissed illusion as mere fancy and trickery, but in watching him Gaelin recalled that Bannier mastered any skill that caught his interest.

After Bannier's display of magic, Gaelin excused himself to clear his head on the windswept battlements. The cold air refreshed him after the smoke and press of the great hall. Here and there, lords and ladies seeking some space to walk followed Gaelin's example. As he paced along the wall top, looking out over the yellow lights and snow-capped roofs of Bevaldruor-town, he found he was reluctant to go back inside. In his years as a Guardian, he'd been a guest of most of the landholding lords of Mhoried, and the houses of the highland lords seemed hopelessly rustic by comparison with Shieldhaven.

"Hey there, Gaelin! You look as though you need a drink!" Cuille Dhalsiel ambled toward him, at the center of a glittering ensemble of laughing rakes and beautiful ladies. The nobleman retained the nimble, athletic frame he'd had as a teenager, but Gaelin couldn't shake the impression that Cuille's silken grace and cynical smirk marked a decay of the spirit, if not of the body. Cuille disentangled himself from the slight girl by his side and came forward to throw his arm around Gaelin's shoulder. "Back from the northern wars a single day, and already brooding about something! The Gaelin I used to know wasn't half this serious!"

"Cuille. I see you're enjoying yourself."

"Of course! That's the point of nobility, isn't it?" Cuille laughed and pressed a flagon of wine into Gaelin's hand. Gaelin raised it to Cuille and his companions and took a swallow, finding the vintage excellent. "Now that you've finished your penance as a soldier, you'll have an opportunity to do some catching up."

"Well, I'm heading to Endier tomorrow," Gaelin replied. Moment by moment he was realizing just how far apart he'd grown from his old friend. He temporized. "After that, we'll have to see, although I don't think I'll be left to my own devices anymore. My father intends to keep me busy."

"The Mhor's keeping us all busy these days, it seems."

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“What do you mean?”

Cuille waved his hand in the air. “You don’t want to hear about it. It’ll only put you in an awkward spot.”

“No, go on.”

“Well, the word’s out that your father sent Baehemon back to Ghoere with nothing but angry words. I expect that he’ll be withdrawing troops from the Markazoran border, which means that my farms and towns will be burned while the Mhor’s army is waiting on the Maesil’s bank.” Cuille scowled. “And he’s moved up the spring muster, too. I have to send a thousand more men or pay a fortune in scutage to keep them at home.”

“Well, that’s the point of nobility, isn’t it?” Gaelin asked. He didn’t like the way Cuille referred to ‘his’ farms and towns. The Mhor had taught Gaelin that nobility was a privilege and a duty, not an inheritance. Cuille and the other Mhorien nobles were bound by law to place their swords at the Mhor’s service and provide armed and trained soldiers when called upon. Gaelin doubted Cuille remembered this obligation was the very reason lords had been granted their titles and lands in the first place.

“The Mhor could be less demanding,” Cuille complained. “He holds his position through our contributions.”

“You were right, Cuille. This conversation is placing me in an awkward position,” Gaelin replied.

Cuille glanced at Gaelin, and his expression sobered quickly. “You’ve changed, Gaelin. You fell for the whole charade, didn’t you? Knighthood, honor, chivalry, the whole thing.”

“I may have changed, Cuille, but I’m beginning to see that you haven’t.” Gaelin wrapped his cape around his torso. “I’m heading back inside.” With one last cool nod toward Cuille’s company, he returned to the banquet. He was conscious of the count’s measuring gaze on his back as he left. A little after midnight, he finally retired to his chambers.

The next morning, Gaelin rose before sunrise and checked to make sure that Ruide, his valet, had packed everything he would need. He intended to travel light, since he’d be gone no more than a dozen days. As usual, Ruide was efficient and thorough; the manservant had missed nothing. When he went downstairs, Gaelin found Madislav in the kitchen, devouring

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everything in sight. "Ah! Is good morning, no?" the Vos warrior boomed. "It snowed again last night! Afine day to travel!"

Gaelin helped himself to a good plateful of food. "Are Daene and Ruide readying the horses?" he asked.

"Aye." Madislav reached over to poke him in the chest. "You will get soft, letting others do your chores for you."

"I hauled Sir Sienden's armor around for four years, Madislav. I've done my time at squiring."

Madislav harrumphed. "Awarrior should be looking after his own weapons. Swords are jealous, no? If a man does not look after good blade, she might betray him when he needs her."

Gaelin looked him in the eye. "Madislav, you know damned well that I'd travel alone if I could. I'm not going to look for an argument with the Mhor that I'll lose. Besides, Ruide and Daene will help me to look the part of a nobleman and a knight. I don't want to embarrass Mhoried by embarrassing myself."

"Hmmmph. Excuses."

"Excuses or not, I'll take them. Now let's get going. I want to be in Riumache in four days, snow or no snow." Gaelin rose and walked out into the courtyard. The gray of morning was growing in the east, and the stars were fading overhead.

Near the front gate, Ruide and Daene were finishing their preparations. Ruide was a portly, gray-haired man dressed in the Mhor's livery. He was nearsighted and squinted through a pair of old Brecht spectacles. As Gaelin approached, the valet secured a small, blanket-covered crate of some kind to the horse's packsaddle. He glanced up from his work. "Oh, good morning, Prince Gaelin. Your father suggested that we bring a pair of carrier pigeons with us, just in case you need to get in touch with him quickly." Ruide grimaced and finished securing the case. "Have to be careful about where I put 'em."

Gaelin suppressed a flash of irritation—it was a sensible preparation. "Good idea," he observed, and turned to look after his own mount. He found that Daene, the squire assigned to him, had already readied Blackbrand. The squire was a strapping lad of nineteen years, with sandy hair and an honest face. He was the son of a minor lord of the southern counties, about halfway through his training with the Guardians. Gaelin had earned the privilege of a squire to look

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after his arms, gear, and a multitude of boring tasks, but in return he was supposed to teach Daene a thing or two about being a knight. He might have been intimidated by the responsibility, but he liked Daene and thought he'd become a fine knight without too much help.

Blackbrand nickered, stamping impatiently as Gaelin drew near. "Ready for a journey, eh?" Gaelin said, rubbing the horse's neck and checking the saddle and blankets. Satisfied, he swung up into the saddle and looked over his shoulder. Daene led a packhorse with Gaelin's armor and weapons, while Ruide led another with the provisions. "Do we have everything?"

"I believe so, my lord," Ruide answered. "I even brought an extra horse for Master Madislav's breakfast, in the event the castle's fare proved insufficient." Gaelin grinned in the darkness, while Madislav swore in Vos.

"I'm ready, Sir Gaelin," Daene said.

"Good." Gaelin led as they trotted under the great gatehouse and out onto the causeway that climbed Shieldhaven's crag. The wind was steady from the west, bringing a sharp edge of cold air across the snowy forests and fields below, and the white breath of both men and horses streamed away in the wind.

Gaelin tapped his heels against Blackbrand's flanks, and the stallion snorted and picked up his hooves in a gentle trot. "Come on, gentlemen," the prince said. "Let's put some miles behind us before the sunrise."



Three

By the end of the third day of their journey, the weather was beginning to warm again, but a steady daylong drizzle left them chilled and soaked to the skin. A number of inns catered to the traffic along the lower Stoneway, an old imperial road; Gaelin, Madislav, Daene, and Ruide enjoyed good dinners, mulled wine or hot cider, and warm beds each night. Gaelin kept his identity a secret, preferring to travel as an anonymous Knight Guardian. No innkeeper on the Stoneway was unnerved by putting up a knight and his retainers, but hosting a prince was another matter entirely.

Early in the afternoon of their fourth day of travel, they arrived in Riumache. The town was the second-largest in all Mhoried and one of the busier ports on the upper Maesil. It was half-circled by an old wall dating back to imperial days, almost five hundred years before, and the river itself protected the rest of the town's approaches. Gaelin planned to

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seek passage to Endier by boat, although he could also cross the Stonebyrn to Alامية and ride the rest of the way if he couldn't arrange passage. The city's harbor was full of independent captains and traders, so Gaelin sent Ruide to find a suitable vessel for the rest of their journey.

By morning, the servant had secured a good keelboat with enough room for his companions and all their mounts. Endier was another fifty or so leagues downriver, and the captain—a quiet, austere man named Viensen—hoped that they'd be in the Free City in two days.

Gaelin soon learned that traveling on the Maesil was no holiday in wintertime. While the river only froze once every ten or fifteen winters, a number of jagged cakes and sheets of ice remained. Some of these were large enough to damage a small vessel such as their own. It was very cold on the river, with little protection from the elements. As Viensen's deckhands raised the boat's sails and the gray walls and towers of Riumache slid away behind them, Gaelin and his friends abandoned the decks to the sailors and took shelter in the keelboat's small deckhouse. They passed the rest of the day and most of the next with a deck of Brecht playing cards from Ruide's belt pouch.

Late in the second day of sail, as the sun was setting, Viensen knocked on the cabin door and entered. "Excuse me, m'lords," he said, "but it's getting dark out, and I wanted you to know that I'll be setting on shore for the night."

"Where are we?" Madislav asked.

"Ghoere lies on the south bank, and Alامية on the north," Viensen replied. "I've got surer soundings on the south bank."

The other men looked to Gaelin. He folded his hand of cards on the table, thinking. "We'd prefer it if you stopped on Alامية's bank tonight, captain," he said, "unless there's significant risk to your boat involved."

Viensen shrugged. "M'lords, if it was that difficult, I wouldn't have asked your opinion. I can put us ashore now, or we can try for a landing in a town about an hour downriver, but it'll be pretty dark by then."

"Put us ashore, captain," Gaelin said. He didn't really think that stopping in an Alamien town would be a problem, but it couldn't hurt to be careful.

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Viensen brought the keelboat into shore skillfully and tied it up on a deserted stretch of riverbank. After checking on the horses and scouting the area around the boat, Gaelin and his companions took the deckhouse for the night, while the keelboat's crew slept belowdecks. The captain posted two sailors as deck watches, and despite the dropping temperatures he ordered no fires abovedecks. After a bland meal of fish and hot porridge from the crew's galley, the travelers settled down for the night. Gaelin drifted off almost immediately, the lapping of water against the boat's hull soothing him to sleep.

He was awakened some time later by a touch on his shoulder. Madislav's whisper came from the darkness beside him. "Something is happening," the warrior said. "Another boat approaches. The captain's sentries are speaking to them."

Gaelin rose quietly and picked his way past the sleeping Daene and Ruide to peer from the cabin's porthole. The moon was setting, so a thin silver gleam illuminated the decks and the water. Nearby, a yellow lantern shone over the river, bobbing up and down. He could make out the shape of a dark hull gliding nearer, but no one seemed to be on deck. While it was not unusual for boats to pass each other in the night—after all, the Maesil was the busiest river in all Anuire—piracy was also common, especially in the river's lonelier stretches.

"What do you think?" Madislav asked.

"It's probably routine," Gaelin replied. "Boats like—" Suddenly, Gaelin heard a muffled snapping sound as black-clad shapes rose from the other boat's decks, firing crossbows. The aft watchman clutched at a bolt in his chest and crumpled to the deck without a sound. From the bow, Gaelin heard the forward lookout cough once and then topple over the side, splashing into the icy waters. The pirates' boat veered toward them, its blunt bow aimed for the middle of the keelboat. Gaelin ducked out of sight before someone thought to shoot at the cabin's porthole.

"Get ready for a fight," he told Madislav. "Wake Daene and Ruide. I'm going below to wake the crew."

Madislav's eyes flicked toward the door, which led directly to the exposed deck. "Stay low when you go out," he said, and then turned to shake the others awake. Gaelin bent double, opened the cabin door, and threw himself flat on the deck just outside. The air was cold and clammy, and a dense fog

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wreathed the water.

“There goes one!” The twang of a crossbow sounded just as a bolt struck the cabin’s side, mere inches above Gaelin’s head. The other boat was no more than twenty yards away, near enough for the keelboat’s decks to be illuminated by the lanterns the pirates carried. Gaelin glanced fore and aft. Their weapons and armor were on the boat’s foredeck, where the horses were tied up, but the ladder leading down to the crew’s quarters was back by the keelboat’s helm. Muttering a curse, Gaelin scrambled aft, crawling and slipping over the damp deck. Several bolts hissed across the space between the boats, striking around him. With one last lunge he dove head-first into the ladderway, tumbling into the crew’s quarters with a deafening clatter.

Around him, the boat’s crewmen began to wake, some faster than others. “What in Azrai’s hells was that?” one said. “Someone took a tumble down the ladder,” another voice replied.

Gaelin regained his feet and started shaking the closest men. “Wake up! We’re under attack! Pirates are coming alongside!”

A dozen oaths filled the air as six men in a tiny compartment jumped out of their hammocks and pallets at once. A small door on the after bulkhead popped open, and Viensen emerged from his cabin, heading toward the ladder with a battered old cutlass in his hand. “Up and at ’em, lads!” he roared. “We’ll not lose our boat tonight!” Sailors seized any weapons near to hand and swarmed up the ladder after their captain.

Suddenly, the whole compartment pitched violently to one side, throwing everyone off their feet, as timbers creaked and popped in protest and the horses abovedecks whinnied in panic. Gaelin crashed into the opposite bulkhead, stunned a moment before he realized that the pirates’ vessel had rammed and grappled them. Viensen and his deckhands scrambled to their feet and started up the passageway again. Gaelin joined the press. He could hear shouting and the clash of weapons above. At the top of the ladder, the man immediately in front of him screamed and fell, curled around a quarrel buried in his belly. Gaelin picked up the man’s blade—a Rjurik fighting knife—and hurled himself into the fray.

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The keelboat was pitched over on her side, pinned against the bank by the larger vessel. It was a two-masted ketch, a common merchantman on the Maesil, and a dozen cutthroats had already boarded the keelboat.

Men shouted and cursed all around him. In the moonlight, it was difficult to tell Viensen's sailors from the boarders. Gaelin ducked and bobbed along the shoreward rail, sliding past the press of struggling men. He was almost clear of the fight on the afterdeck when a beefy Rjurik wielding a leaden maul struck him a glancing blow across the left shoulder, spinning him against the gunwale and numbing his arm. He gasped in pain as the world went hot and white before his eyes.

"He's over here!" the bandit called. "This is the prince!" He raised the maul again for a blow that Gaelin could not block. Gaelin wheeled and slashed at him with the knife, driving him back a step, and then Daene appeared. Roaring, he threw his body into the Rjurik bandit, crashing into his legs and knocking him down to the deck. The cutthroat rolled to his hands and knees to scramble to his feet, but Gaelin stepped forward and kicked him under the chin as hard as he could. The man's head snapped back and he collapsed, unmoving.

"Thanks, Daene," Gaelin said. He reached down to haul the squire to his feet. Daene started to stand, but at that moment a dark-clad bandit lunged forward and buried his cutlass in Daene's back. Daene grunted and sagged to the deck.

"Daene! No!" Gaelin reached past his squire and ripped a long, deep cut up the sword-arm of the bandit before he could pull his blade from Daene's body. The man screamed in a high-pitched voice and released the hilt, dancing backward. A moment later, one of Viensen's sailors stabbed him in the belly, and the brigand reeled to the side and went over the rail into the dark water. Gaelin grabbed Daene's arm and dragged him forward along the side of the deckhouse, getting him clear of the fight. He propped the squire against the bulkhead and knelt beside him. "Hang on, Daene! Let me see what I can find to bandage the wound and stop the bleeding."

"I think it's too late for that, Lord Gaelin." Daene said in a weak voice. He coughed and shuddered. "It's cold."

Gaelin tore a strip from his shirt and moved around to tend to the squire's injury. The back of Daene's shirt was soaked

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with blood from a deep wound between his shoulder blades. Gaelin looked away. Daene was right; Gaelin had seen enough battles to know a mortal wound. He laid his hand on Daene's shoulder. "I'll avenge you. They won't get away with this."

"Watch out for yourself, Gaelin. I heard the big one say they were looking for you." Daene smiled, a trickle of blood starting at the corner of his mouth. "I showed him, didn't I?"

"Yes. You saved my life, Daene." Gaelin bowed his head, closing his eyes. When he looked up again, the squire was gone. He sat back on his heels, trying to think of what he should do, but the decision was made for him. From the bow of the boat, a wild-eyed brigand in ragged clothing appeared ahead of him, a short axe at the ready. The pirate flashed a yellow-toothed grin in his dark face as he advanced.

Eyes narrowed, Gaelin stood and set his feet, waiting. The pirate's axe hand was hindered by the cabin beside him, while Gaelin's own blade was free, but the axe was a much more formidable weapon than the dagger Gaelin had appropriated. The pirate brought the axe across his chest in a back-hand cut, lunging forward to swing at Gaelin's head. Gaelin ducked, and the axe bit into the wooden bulkhead and stuck, just long enough for Gaelin to step forward and stab his opponent underneath the breastbone. Gaelin unceremoniously shouldered him over the side, snatching the axe out of his hands as the pirate lost his balance and fell. "There's another one for you, Daene," he breathed. He ran forward and peered around the deckhouse at the open bow.

Madislav stood there, roaring like a wounded bear as he held off three more pirates with his heavy sword. Two huddled forms on the deck attested to the Vos warrior's success so far, but he was bleeding from a long gash across his ribs. Despite Madislav's skill and strength, he was in trouble—the brigands had him surrounded and were waiting for a fatal mistake. None of them had seen Gaelin yet, and one had his back to the prince. Gaelin stepped forward and brained him with the axe. Distracted by Gaelin's appearance, another man took his eyes off Madislav at the exact wrong instant and lost an arm to Madislav's blade.

"I've got the prince up here!" shouted the remaining pirate, backing away from Gaelin and Madislav. "Crossbows! Quick!"

Madislav cursed in Vos and looked at Gaelin. "Excusing me," he said. He grabbed Gaelin's axe out of his hand and hurled it at the pirate with all his strength, at a range of only four paces. It wasn't enough for the blade to turn over, but the blunt side of the iron axehead struck the fellow right between the eyes. From the way he went down, Gaelin suspected that would do for him.

"Where's Ruide?" Gaelin asked.

"I left him in the cabin. Daene followed you." Madislav stepped forward to peer around the deckhouse at the pirate's ketch, and quickly drew his head back. "Two with crossbows on the other boat, coming this way."

"We've got two of our own with the horses," Gaelin said, nodding at the saddles and bags stowed on the deck. He dashed over, avoiding the stamping horses, and crouched down behind them while he fished out a dry string and readied a bow. Madislav followed him and started on the other bow. He finished stringing the bow, set his foot in the weapon's stirrup and cocked it. Three brigands clattered onto the bow of the keelboat, shouting, while Gaelin noticed dark forms appearing at the ketch's rail. "Damn," he muttered.

"The prince! Get him, lads!"

Madislav stood and leveled his bow at the cutthroat leading the charge, dropping him with a quarrel in the throat. Gaelin stood a moment later and fired at the second man. His bolt took the wretch between the eyes, and the fellow staggered back three steps before falling over the side with a cold splash. Gaelin discarded his crossbow and stepped forward to meet the attack of the last man, a fellow fighting with knives in each hand. The prince parried the first cut, blocked the second with his wrist, slashed at the rake's face, and then twisted away as the man riposted and nicked his side. Madislav worked furiously to reload his crossbow before the bowmen on the ketch could fire.

Gaelin dodged away from the knifeman again, taking two quick steps to get clear of his opponent. That was a mistake. For a moment, he was standing on the open deck, and a brigand on the ketch fired a crossbow at him. A heavy blow struck him low in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him, and Gaelin looked down to see a quarrel's fletchings jutting out of his belly, an inch or two left of his navel. The strength

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drained from his legs, and he went to one knee, cupping a hand around the bolt as warm, red blood ran through his fingers. He looked up and saw the knifeman moving close to administer the killing blow. "Madislav!"

There was another snap of a crossbow. A few feet away in the fog, Gaelin heard a choking cry and the sound of a body falling to the deck. Distantly, he realized that Madislav had just shot the man who had shot him. A burning, sickening pain was growing in Gaelin's belly, and he gasped in shock. Looking up, he saw the knifeman poised to finish him. But a moment later, Madislav bellowed a Vos war cry and slammed into the fellow like a blood-maddened bear, hacking at him with a berserker's fury.

"Fall back, lads! The prince is dead!" A hoarse voice called out from the ketch. Gaelin's knees failed, and he toppled to the deck, landing heavily on his side. With a curious detachment, he noticed that the sounds of the fighting aft had died down. The ketch was drawing back, and a handful of the pirates were climbing back aboard their own vessel. With a creaking of rope and timber, the keelboat righted itself, the canted deck returning to the horizontal.

Cursing bitterly, Madislav picked up the fighting axe from where it had fallen and hurled it across the widening gap of water. A shriek of pain and a splash rewarded the warrior's parting effort. The yellow halo of lantern light faded into darkness as the brigands' vessel vanished into the fog.

Gaelin found Madislav and Ruide standing over him. The valet bled from a long, shallow cut across his hairline, and to Gaelin he seemed a little incoherent. Madislav knelt beside him. "Gaelin, I am sorry. If I had shot a moment sooner . . ."

Grunting in effort, Gaelin struggled to prop himself up against the gunwale. Madislav helped him. "Pull out the quarrel," he said between his teeth.

"That could kill you!" Ruide exclaimed. "Gaelin, we need to find a physician. Maybe there's one in that Alamien town."

Madislav reached out to lay a hand on Ruide's shoulder. "No, Gaelin is right." When the old gods of Cerilia had been destroyed in a mighty cataclysm at the battle of Mount Deismaar fifteen hundred years before, their dissipating powers imbued the ancient heroes who fought in the battle. An ancestor of the Mhoried line had been among these heroes, and

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as a scion of that house, Gaelin had been born with the blood gift of accelerated healing.

"No! You could make the injury worse!" Ruide protested.

"Gaelin is right," Madislav repeated. "I have seen him recover from wounds before. Is best to let his gift repair the injury." He looked at Gaelin. "Although I have never seen you hurt this badly, Gaelin. You are sure you want to be doing this?"

Gaelin gasped and nodded. Madislav met his eyes. He set his hand on the bolt, took a moment to be certain of his grip, and pulled the quarrel away with one swift motion. Gaelin screamed and fainted from the pain, the world spinning away into harsh white light. He drifted in a dark void, seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

After a long time, he opened his eyes again. It was still dark, but he could tell dawn was near. The keelboat was underway again, drifting slowly down the river. *I survived*, he realized. He was lying in one of the deckhouse bunks, with Ruide nodding asleep in a chair beside him. He lifted the covers and looked down at his stomach; there was a dark, puckered depression where the wound had been. It ached horribly, and he could feel that the injury was still fragile. He guessed it would be several days at least before he completely recovered. I would be dead now, if not for the Mhoried blood, he thought. I never realized how fortunate I was. Groaning, he swung his feet out of bed and rose, moving carefully. Wrapping the blanket around his shoulders, he stepped outside, trying not to disturb Ruide.

The keelboat was listing to the port side, and it moved more awkwardly than before. Leaning against the deckhouse, he pushed himself aft and found Madislav and Viensen back by the boat's helm. The deck was still slippery with blood, but the bodies of the sailors who had fallen were wrapped in sail canvas and laid carefully to one side of the deck. The bandits' bodies were gone; Gaelin guessed Viensen had committed them to the river with little ceremony. Madislav grinned widely as he saw Gaelin emerge from the cabin. "Gaelin! How are you feeling?"

"M'lord Gaelin?" said Viensen. He couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

"I feel weak as a child. I've barely the strength to stand,"

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Gaelin replied. It was the truth—his limbs trembled, he shivered with cold, and his head floated with dizziness. “Where are we?”

“About twenty miles downriver from where we stopped,” Viensen said. “I thought it wise to keep moving, but we’ll have to make for shore soon. We sprang a seam when they rammed us, and we won’t be able to continue until we make repairs.”

Gaelin frowned. “At least we were able to move. They’ll have a hard time finding us again. How did your men fare?”

The captain grimaced. “Not well—I lost half my crew, but without your warning it would’ve been worse. They’d have cut our throats in our sleep.” He glanced at Gaelin, and shook his head again. “I can’t believe you’re standing here talking to me, m’lord. The only reason the brigands fled is because they thought they’d killed you.”

“Is good they were wrong,” Madislav said.

Viensen hooked one arm around the topmost spoke of the helm and tamped tobacco into his pipe. “M’lord, those were no common river bandits. They knew you were on board.”

Gaelin leaned against the rail. “I know, I heard them. And the first thing they did is go after the deckhouse, where you’d expect to find passengers. They knew I was here, no doubt of it.”

“Rivermen don’t kill nobles, m’lords. It’s bad business. First, they miss out on ransom. Second, nothing riles the constables like a dead noble.” Viensen paused. “Someone wanted you dead and sent these men after you, m’lord. This was no coincidence.”

Gaelin stood and looked out over the dark river. The silence was eerie now. The mist deadened the sounds of their speech and the boat, as if to erase the memory of the skirmish. Daene was dead in his place, a good friend and fine man who’d done nothing to earn the death he received. Who would want me dead? Gaelin thought. Ghoere? How could my death be of use to him, or to anyone for that matter? Or was I to be abducted, not killed? Gaelin felt cold and sick. Taking one’s chances in a clean fight was one thing, but waiting for assassins and cutthroats to strike in the dark was another matter entirely. “How much time do you need for repairs, Master Viensen?”

“I don’t like the way she feels, m’lord,” the captain replied,

indicating the list and the slow, heavy awkwardness of the boat. "We're taking on a lot of water. I'd guess at least one full day to work on the hull, and another day for pitch to set. In fact, I'm going to make for shore. We're pushing our luck now." He scowled and spun the wheel toward the Alamien bank. The keelboat yawed sluggishly but came about.

"In two days, we can ride to Endier or back to Riumache," Madislav observed sourly. "No point staying with the boat."

Gaelin nodded, and pressed a hand to his wounded abdomen. "I won't be able to ride fast for a day or two, but I think I can travel. Should we continue on to Endier, or return to Mhoried?"

"The bard can wait," Madislav said flatly. "Your father must know of this attack."

"There's a Mhorien consul in Endier. We can contact my father from there. Besides, if my enemies think I'm dead, they shouldn't trouble us again for a while," Gaelin pointed out. He considered the question while Viensen steered for the dark and lonely shoreline ahead. "Wait a moment! Ruide brought carrier pigeons! We can send a message to the Mhor at first light."

"But the Mhor cannot reply, since he is not knowing where you are." Madislav scratched at his beard. "You will have to tell him if you will make for Endier or Riumache. Then he will be knowing where to reach you."

"Endier," Gaelin said. "If anything has developed at Shieldhaven, my father will expect to find me in Endier." He attempted a weak grin. "Besides, I hate turning my back on something I've started."

"Hold on, m'lords," Viensen said. The dark shoreline was very close now, and the current pushed the boat up against the sandy bank. With a scraping sound, the keel grounded on the sandy bottom. "Can't sink now," the captain observed. "Sorry about the delay, m'lords."

"It's not your fault, Master Viensen," said Gaelin. The eastern skies were now streaked with ribbons of rose and gold; dawn was not far off. Suddenly, weakness flooded through his limbs, and he staggered against the rail. His injury was not yet healed, not by a long measure, and he fought to control a fit of trembling that threatened to bring him to his knees.

Madislav caught him before he fell. "Endier is being fine,

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but you are not well enough to ride yet," he growled. "You must rest, Gaelin. If your wound opens, it could kill you."

Gaelin nodded. "Help me back to the cabin. I'll rest a bit. Wake me an hour after sunrise, and we'll get going." The huge Vos half-carried him to the deckhouse, supporting the prince's weight until Gaelin collapsed into his bunk. Before he allowed himself to fall asleep, Gaelin insisted that Madislav bring him a scrap of paper to write his dispatch to the Mhor. The hulking warrior eyed him suspiciously but did as he asked and helped to steady Gaelin's hand. In a weak, spidery script, the prince wrote:

22nd day of Pasiphiel, 1456 HC

My lord Mhor:

We were attacked by river bandits between Riumache and Endier. Daene was killed, but I will be fine. We must leave our boat and continue by land; I expect to be in Endier in two days. We will await your reply there. I don't believe this was a coincidence.

*Your son,
Gaelin, Prince of Mhoried*

"Have Ruide dispatch this by pigeon as soon as it's light enough for the birds to fly," he said.

Madislav nodded. "It will be done. Now rest, Gaelin." He said something else, but Gaelin did not hear him; he was falling back into darkness already, sinking into the bunk as if it were a bottomless chasm.



FOUR

Gaelin awoke late in the day to the sounds of horses stamping and prancing on the foredeck. He sat up too quickly and was rewarded with a burning pain in the center of his stomach that doubled him over. Cursing weakly, he dragged himself out of the bunk and began to dress. By the slanting shadows outside the porthole, he guessed it was late afternoon.

Although each careless movement drove a jagged knife through the muscles of his belly, he forced himself to don his mail shirt, lacing the leather ties tightly to press against his injured stomach. It was stiff and awkward, but he hoped it would provide some support while riding. When he finished, he took a moment to smooth the pain out of his face before striding onto the deck to see what was going on.

Madislav, Ruide, and a pair of Viensen's sailors were carefully leading the horses down a makeshift ramp to the shore. The animals' hooves scraped and thumped on the wooden

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deck, and some rolled their eyes suspiciously at the planks and the water beneath. It was a clear, cold day, with a raw wind from the north raising whitecaps on the river. Gaelin made a long, careful sweep of the water from one bend to the next, but he saw no other vessels beating their way against the bitter weather.

"Prince Gaelin! You're looking much better," Viensen called from the quarterdeck. His face was red from the wind.

"I'm feeling a little better, Master Viensen," Gaelin replied. He noted pitch and sawdust caked on the boatsman's clothes. "How does the boat look?"

The captain's face fell a little. "The damage is not irreparable, but we're going to have to haul her up on the bank and cut some lumber to patch the hull. At least this weather'll help the pitch set quickly when we're ready."

Gaelin made his way forward, just as Ruide led the last of their horses, Daene's steed, down the ramp. Madislav had the horses tethered to a stand of bare cottonwoods on the shore, and the party's gear lay in a jumble of blankets, boxes, and bags off to one side. Gaelin picked up a pair of saddlebags, trying not to wince, and followed Ruide down the ramp.

"Gaelin! How are you feeling?" Madislav straightened from his work and came over to take the bags from Gaelin's hand.

"I thought you were going to wake me an hour after sunrise."

Madislav shrugged. "You were not saying which day."

"We've lost a day of travel!"

"You would not have been able to ride earlier, and you are knowing it," the Vos replied. He poked Gaelin in the stomach, and Gaelin grunted in pain. "You might not be able to ride now, but I guess I will let you try."

Gaelin decided to change the subject. "Ruide, did you send my message to the Mhor?"

The valet's head was swaddled in a heavy bandage, but he seemed much steadier on his feet than he had been the night before. He nodded in affirmation. "The Mhor may be reading your message even as we speak."

"Assuming there are no Ghoeran falconers between us and home," Gaelin muttered under his breath. Well, there was nothing to be done about that. Either the message would get through, or it wouldn't. He turned back to look over the

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horses and the gear. "Captain Viensen could use some help getting his boat out of the water. Let's see if our horses can make the job easier for him, and then we'll try to ride a few miles before sunset."

* * * * *

Rank upon rank, spearpoints glinting dully in the wan sunlight, the army of Ghoere stood assembled by the banks of the Maesil. If any of the soldiers wondered why they were mustered by the riverside, they restrained their curiosity; the companies and regiments stood silently, banners snapping and fluttering in the bitter wind.

Noered Tuorel, the Baron of Ghoere, cantered along the column on a great black courser. He was a man of average height, with lean hips and broad shoulders. His face was handsome if somewhat rugged, relatively unmarked by his forty years, but his eyes burned with a fierce yellow intensity, and his grin was feral and dangerous. Ghoere was sometimes called the Iron Barony, and Tuorel found that a fitting match for the Iron Throne of all Anuire. He meant to claim that seat for his own someday.

Lord Baehemon trailed him, a bulldog following a wolf, his stony face free of expression. Like his master, he was dressed for battle. He commanded the Iron Guards who surrounded Tuorel, a duty that had been considered ceremonial until Baehemon applied himself to the task of forging Tuorel's bodyguards into the fiercest fighters in Anuire.

At Tuorel's side another powerful, armored figure paced him on a red-eyed goblin hellsteed. The last rider stood half a hand taller than Tuorel, but he was every bit as stocky as Baehemon, with short, curved legs, long arms, and wide, spade-shaped hands. His face was flat, and his mouth was too wide to be human, and his skin was a deep olive-green. His eyes blazed with impatience as Tuorel rode forward from the siege and baggage trains that brought up the army's rear. "Impressive," the goblin growled. "Your pretty boys look good on parade."

"They're fighters, Warlord Kraith," Tuorel replied with an even smile. He was proud of his men, and he took pains to let his soldiers know how much he valued their service. As he rode past, the soldiers raised a hearty cheer, dipping their

banners and clashing spear on shield. They'd not been told much, but they sensed that war was near.

At the forefront of the army, Tuorel found the captains of his vanguard clustered around the shallow bluff that marked the Maesil's banks. The great river was more than a mile wide at this point, and the brown hills and fields of the Mhorien bank stretched away to the east and west as far as Tuorel could see. He reined in his war-horse and looked out over the river.

"I would like to know how you intend to cross that," Kraith remarked. "It's going to take you a week to ferry this many men to the Mhorien shore."

"The matter is in hand, Warlord Kraith." Tuorel dismounted and pushed his way past the lower-ranking officers. Baehemon and Kraith followed him. On the very edge of the bluff, a large area had been cleared and decorated with intricate circles and runes of unknown meaning. A gaunt man in a plain brown cassock busied himself with a device of frost-covered metal in the center of the ring. Tuorel's eyes narrowed; he had a knack for sensing sorcery, the legacy of his ancestral bloodline, and the air almost quivered with the power of the enchantment before him. He swallowed his distaste and called out, "Master wizard! How does your work go? I've every man of my army here and dressed for battle, as you instructed. Now how do we cross?" He nodded at the Maesil.

The river was too wide to bridge with pontoons or floats. Tuorel's conscripted laborers had been hard at work building barges, and his agents were confiscating every boat from Ghieste to Hope's Demise, but the wizard had promised a crossing of his entire army in a mere hour.

The brown-clad sorcerer completed a portion of his enchantment and stepped back to admire his work, examining the pattern of ancient glyphs and runes circling the site. In the center, an iron tripod supported a strange white stone that smoked with cold. Tuorel's eyes narrowed. What kind of sorcery was this? "You must be patient, Baron," the wizard said, interrupting Tuorel's suspicions. He sounded tired and old. "This is an enchantment of great power, and it is extremely taxing."

"You've only been at it an hour," Tuorel observed.

"On the contrary, I've been working at this spell for the better part of a month," the wizard countered. "Didn't you notice the unseasonable cold over the land this spring?"

Tuorel looked at him with new respect. "You mean that this weather was your doing?"

"Aye. You cannot comprehend the forces involved."

"Bah! Wizards! I should never have agreed to this," Kraith spat, pulling his iron gauntlets from his hands. With a snort of disgust, he thrust them through his belt and tucked his helmet under his arm. His hand rested on the hilt of his heavy, curved sword.

"Regardless of what you may think of our ally, you must agree that it's a sound plan," Tuorel offered.

Kraith fixed Tuorel with his fierce stare. "Don't take me for stupid, Tuorel. I've read Anuirean books on warfare, and my father and grandfather passed everything they knew of battle to me before I had them killed. While you diddled around in Elinie, I spent the winter harrying Mhoried's borders and bleeding the Mhor white." He grinned savagely. "I know a good plan when I see one. I also know that if you don't cross the Maesil, I'll be cut to pieces by the Mhor's concentrated troops. I want to see you on the other side with my own eyes before I commit to this war."

Baehemon spoke, his voice menacing. "We'll be there, goblin."

Kraith laughed. "I'll be at your throats in a year or two if you're not."

Tuorel turned to the mage. "Well?" he asked. "What wizardry are you working here?"

"You see this stone?" the wizard asked. He indicated the odd white rock supported in its stand. Tuorel noted that transparent runes were carved into the surface of the stone, winding and twisting around each other in a distinctly unsettling fashion. The iron tripod itself was white with frost. "This is a shard of true ice, ice from the great northern wastes that lie past the Thaelasian Sea. It is the focus for the enchantment I am working. When I am finished, you'll have a bridge of ice ten miles wide, or perhaps more if conditions are favorable. You'll be able to march your army across in as long as it takes you to walk from here"—he gestured to the far bank—"to there."

Tuorel chewed his tongue. "How long will the river be frozen?"

The sorcerer straightened and pushed the brown hood of

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his cassock back from his face, revealing his stubbled scalp, hollow features, and bright, feverish eyes. Banner, court wizard of Mhoried, studied the air, tasting the wind, and then chuckled drily. "Well, that depends on the weather. Once the ice forms, it will melt at whatever pace nature decrees. But it will be four feet or more thick, and it will stand for days even if spring returns this afternoon. I'd predict three days at a minimum, and perhaps as long as a week." Banner spared one more glance at the sky, and then carefully inspected the true ice in the center of the ring. "It's time," he finally announced. "Tell your officers to fall back at least fifty paces, or they may be frozen along with the river."

The Ghoeran nobles and captains didn't need Tuorel to tell them to move back once they saw the sorcerer was ready to complete his spell. Tuorel, Baehemon, and Kraith retired as well. Banner didn't bother to check on the Ghoerans; if any fool was standing too close, that was his own ill fortune. He began a sibilant chant, speaking unintelligible words in an even, measured pace as he circled the stone. The wizard's words rolled about Tuorel and his officers, a perversion of the very air that carried through the wind with preternatural clarity. "*Iagores nu thadazh khet aighur, iagores nu burzha'a tutholan,*" he droned. Tuorel suppressed a shiver. Granted, he didn't know much about magic, but he did know that most wizards used Sidhelien—Elvish—for their enchantments. He remembered enough of his schooling to know that those words were definitely not Elvish.

Tuorel shuddered again and was surprised to note that a fine film of ice had formed on the plates of his armor. As he watched, the rime whitened and spread like hoarfrost. The armor and clothes of the men around him were whitening as well. The chant continued, and now the cold seared Tuorel's nose and throat, and his fingers and toes ached as if they were on fire. But great white patches of ice dotted the Maesil as far as he could see in either direction, and they were slowly growing together, until only a spiderweb of dark channels separated the floes. At the sight, Tuorel forgot the bone-numbing chill, and forgot the pervasive, insidious words that coiled and slithered in his ears—the wizard's spell was working.

"*Iagores nu thadazh khet aighur, iagores nu ra'aghk kaidur!*" The wizard's voice was a resonant rumble, echoing in the

frozen stillness of the ice-rimed field. One last time he repeated the chant, and then he stepped forward and shattered the stone of true ice with his iron-heeled staff. A searing white light claimed Tuorel's vision for twenty heartbeats, even as waves of cold intense enough to bring him to his knees washed over him. By the time his sight cleared, Tuorel found that most of the men within three or four hundred yards had been similarly affected. He spun around, trying to quickly gauge whether his army had suffered any lasting damage—but then the Maesil caught his eye.

From bank to bank, the river was an unbroken sheet of ice.

"He's done it," Tuorel breathed. Shaking off the fear and nausea, he surged forward to grab his standard-bearer and shake him like a rag. "Raise the march, boy! We cross now!" The young herald brought the banner of Ghoere high over his head and swung it back and forth. Held by discipline stronger than their terror, the first ranks staggered forward, but in ten yards they'd found their stride and spirit. The master sergeant of the first company began to call a marching cadence in a rough voice, pitched high to carry. "Come on, you dogs!" he roared. "The way's clear before us!"

Company by company, the rest of Tuorel's army caught the mood and marched down to the river's edge, stepping off onto the ice. There was a sudden flurry of activity as Tuorel's officers and banner-leaders sorted themselves out and rejoined their units, leading them across. Tuorel left matters in their hands, called for his horse, and rode over to where Banner stood, leaning heavily on his staff. The wizard was unharmed by the spell he had unleashed, and a grim smile of satisfaction was engraved on his face.

"See, Baron? Your men are crossing, and Mhoried will be caught unawares. Where do you strike first?"

"Riumache. We'll need the harbor and the roads for our supply trains once the ice melts, and it guards our rear from any intervention." Tuorel grinned savagely. "If this ice goes all the way down there, the city's as good as taken. Her walls aren't made to keep foot soldiers from walking through her harbor."

The wizard looked away, examining his work. "That's for you to decide. The campaign's yours to win or lose."

Tuorel rode a couple of steps closer. "I remind you that your part of the bargain is only half complete. You promised

to deliver Shieldhaven to my hands, wizard.”

“Are your guardsmen assembled, as I instructed?”

Tuorel grunted. “Aye, five hundred of my best soldiers. They’ll be missed in the campaign ahead. How will they take Shieldhaven, staying behind in Bhalaene?”

“I’ll bring them to Shieldhaven when it’s time.” The wizard Bannier sighed and watched the army crossing the ice. “I must return now, to make sure the Mhor doesn’t escape my net. He’ll want to be on the march within a day. Have your troops ready at midnight tomorrow. I’ll be back for them.”

Tuorel stifled his questions. Bannier had committed himself to Ghoere’s cause. Even if the wizard led his five hundred straight into the Gorgon’s Crown, Tuorel’s lightning invasion would be sufficient to overwhelm Mhoried’s defenses—especially if Kraith’s armies struck where and when the goblin chieftain promised.

The wizard began to gather his baubles and instruments, stuffing them into an old rucksack. Tuorel turned his warhorse to join the army’s advance, but Kraith moved his hellsteed in front of Tuorel, blocking his path. “Wait,” said Kraith. “Tell me of the bargain again.”

Tuorel frowned, and shot a glance at Bannier. The wizard met his eyes and returned to his work. “Very well,” the baron said. “The Mhor’s kingdom is mine to take, with the exception of the provinces of Marloer’s Gap and Torien’s Watch. These I cede to you for your part in this war. Your warriors may pillage any lands your forces take before Mhoried is defeated, but if those lands fall in my territory after the war, you shall withdraw.”

“How do I know that you won’t take Marloer’s Gap and the Watch from me once you’ve consolidated your position?” the goblin demanded.

Bannier raised his staff. A wicked green glow sprang up from the head of the staff, and his voice took on a deeper tone. “I will guarantee the bargain,” he said. “Whoever breaks it first will answer to me. It’s a fair arrangement, Kraith, and you know it.”

The goblin’s eyes blazed like fire. “Aye, it’s fair enough for Tuorel and I. But what do you gain from it, wizard? What’s the price of your treason?”

“My purposes are my own,” Bannier snapped.

“What Bannier means to say, Kraith, is that I have agreed that the Mhor’s family is to be delivered into his hands.” Tuorel’s face twisted in a cold smile. “I can only guess that he means to slay them in order to seize the power of the Mhoried blood.”

Kraith barked laughter. “That’s it? Bloodtheft? And you humans call *us* barbaric!”

“The Mhor’s line is one of the oldest and strongest of Anuire,” Bannier replied. “He can trace his lineage all the way back to Deismaar. All the great nobles—such as Baron Tuorel, here—and quite a number of lesser lords and rulers—myself, Lord Baehemon, and you, Kraith—possess divine bloodlines. You may know that the spark of godspower can be wrested from the living descendants who hold it, but you have no idea of what can be done with the ancient strength of the great bloodlines.”

“I know more than you think,” Kraith snapped. “I ran my father through the heart to seize the power of our line. And I’ve a talent or two that manifested the day I usurped his power.”

“I see,” Bannier said. “The Mhor’s line carries a great deal of this divine power, and I have need of it.”

“The Mhor’s blood is tied to Mhoried itself,” Tuorel said. “As I am tied to Ghoere, and Kraith to Markazor. In order to rule the lands we propose to take from the Mhor, the strength of his blood is necessary to us, as well.”

“In time, by force of arms, you can pacify the lands you take and add them to your kingdoms. Besides, the Mhor’s blood is my price.” Bannier slung his sack over his shoulder and picked up his staff. “Now I’ve told you enough of my designs. It should suffice that you stand to gain vast new lands from my actions.”

“Be that as it may, it’s hard to trust a traitor.” Kraith laughed again and spurred his mount toward the east, cutting through the column of the march. His own guards joined him as he galloped back toward Markazor. Tuorel watched him go, considering how long it might be before he would have to fight Kraith himself.

Beside him, Bannier hesitated. “One more thing, Baron,” he said. “Gaelin, the Mhor’s second son, is heading for Endier. I need him killed or taken while I look after Shieldhaven.”

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“That’s your affair, Bannier. After all, you demanded the right to take the Mhor and his family in exchange for your assistance. Some would say that the Mhor’s blood is an even greater prize than Mhoried itself.”

Bannier fought to suppress his anger. “I have already attempted his removal. But the fools to whom I entrusted the matter failed me. Now I need your help.”

Tuorel’s face was cold and expressionless. “I may have agreed to let you have your price, but why should I help you to collect something I also have use for?”

The wizard stopped packing and whirled on the baron. “We have a bargain, damn you! You still need me if you want this war to be a quick one. Otherwise, you’ll be years in taking the Mhor and breaking his resistance.”

Tuorel smiled. “Aye, I still need your services,” he said quietly. “Very well, I’ll have my spies set on Gaelin. Chances are he’ll try to return to Mhoried when he hears of the war. We’ll catch him as he gallops home to the rescue.”

Bannier held the baron’s gaze a moment longer, and then smiled himself. “Then I must be going, my lord. Stand ready to lead your troops into Shieldhaven tomorrow.” With that, he turned and strode off, his rucksack slung over his shoulder. Tuorel watched as the wizard seemed to shimmer, and then appear somehow farther than he should have been, moving faster in a determined walk. In a matter of moments Bannier had disappeared toward the north. Tuorel’s jaw tightened as he considered the wizard’s words, and with a scowl he turned and joined his army.

* * * * *

Gaelin was dreaming.

He was standing in a place of darkness and power, a great citadel of jagged battlements and iron doors. Ash and smoke hung in the air, drifting over the stone and metal that surrounded him on all sides. Although he’d never been there in his waking life, in his dream he knew the place: Kal-Saitharak, the Battlewaite of the Gorgon’s Crown. He wandered from turret to turret, lost in the cyclopean maze of walls and gates. Something waited for him in the center of the fortress, something unspeakably ancient and evil. Each step

Gaelin took only brought him closer to the master of the dark place. Even as he finally found the escape he sought, red-glowing eyes appeared in a gaping black arch before him. The eyes transfixed him, tearing will and thought away from him, leaving only terror and dark madness as the monstrous creature stepped forward into the fiery light . . .

Gasping, Gaelin awoke, his heart hammering in his chest. It took a long moment before his mind registered the fact that he was lying in a cold, damp sleeping roll beneath a stand of cottonwoods, somewhere along Alamie's fog-shrouded riverlands. He rolled over onto his elbow and surveyed the nearby darkness. The horses dozed a few yards away, hobbled together to keep them from wandering away. They shifted and sighed heavily, a reassuring sound. Ruide and Madislav lay nearby, each wrapped in his own blankets. The small fire in the center of their camp had burned down to embers.

Sitting up, he rubbed his hands across his face and stared out into the darkness. "The Gorgon," he muttered to himself. "That's an ill omen, to say the least." For fifteen centuries, the Gorgon had been the deadliest enemy of the Anuirean lands—all of them, not just the wreckage left behind by Michael Roele's death and the fall of the Anuirean Empire. The monster was the most powerful of the awnsheghlien, creatures who carried sinister bloodlines of power derived from Azrai, the Face of Evil. The Gorgon's lands lay north and east of the Anuirean heartlands, in the impassable mountains known as the Gorgon's Crown. Gaelin recalled hearing that a dream of the Gorgon presaged mischance and ill fortune. Shuddering, he tried to banish the images from his thoughts.

One of the horses nickered in wakefulness.

Gaelin carefully reached over and set his hand on the hilt of his sword, stilling his own breathing to listen for any suspicious sounds. For a long time, he heard nothing, but then the horses shifted nervously, and he heard the muffled *clip-clop* of a horseman approaching their camp. "Madislav," he whispered. The Vos grunted and turned to face him. "Someone's coming."

Madislav fell silent, cocking his head to listen. "A rider, alone," he said a moment later. He rolled quietly out of his bedroll and rose, taking hold of a short-handled throwing axe. Gaelin stood as well, moving carefully to avoid pulling

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his injured stomach. "In middle of the night," the warrior whispered. "No honest man is abroad now." He stepped over to nudge Ruide awake with his toe and gestured for the valet to remain silent.

The footfalls grew louder, although the heavy mists had the curious property of muffling sound. Gaelin peered toward the old river road, a ribbon of gray barely visible in the darkness. They had made their camp about seventy or eighty yards from the track; a low hillock screened their fire from anyone passing by. As he watched, a dark shape emerged from the mists, edging closer to their camp, a cloaked rider on a gray charger. Madislav glanced at Gaelin, his eye raised in an unspoken question: hail the rider, or stay quiet and let him pass?

Gaelin shook his head. Let him pass by, he thought. But at that moment, one of their horses stamped and snuffled. The rider stopped, listening, and then turned his steed toward their camp and walked forward. Gaelin slid his sword from its sheath, deliberately allowing the metal to rasp against the wood and leather, and called out in a low voice: "That's close enough, stranger. What brings you to our camp?"

The cloaked figure paused, then replied, "Prince Gaelin Mhoried?" It was a woman's voice, high and clear, musical in quality.

"You are making mistake," Madislav growled. "There is being no one here by that name."

The woman paused. "I bring him tidings. Are you certain?"

Gaelin stepped forward, sliding through the shadows until he stood by Madislav. "Who are you?" he called.

The rider paused, and then drew the hood of her cloak from her face, shaking out a fiery red mane of hair. Her face was pale, and she seemed to glimmer in the cool darkness. Beneath her cloak, she wore a blouse of white cotton tucked into long riding pants. Gaelin noted the slender Brecht-style rapier at her hip. "I'm the master bard Erin Grayson," she replied. "Is Gaelin of Mhoried among you, or not? I've been riding all night, and if he's not here, I'll go my way and keep looking."

"You're speaking to him," Gaelin said. Cautiously, he stepped out into the open and met Erin's gaze. Her features were sharp and well defined, with high cheekbones, a delicate slant to her eyes, and subtle points to her ears. He real-

ized with a start that she had the blood of the Sidhelien, the elven folk, in her. Ignoring Madislav's suspicious scowl, he continued, "We were to meet you in Endier, Lady Erin. What brings you here?"

The bard sighed and slid from her horse, taking the reins in her hand and approaching. "I'm afraid I have ill tidings for you, my lord prince," she said. "I learned today that Baron Tuorel has invaded Mhoried. Riumache has fallen already, and the goblins of Markazor are attacking the northern lands."

Madislav barked bitter laughter. "Is impossible! Tuorel would need days to bring his army across the Maesil! And Riumache can hold him for weeks."

"Impossible or not, it's true," Erin said. "Yesterday morning, the Maesil froze solid. Tuorel's army crossed in an hour."

"The Maesil hasn't frozen in years!" Gaelin protested. "Look, you can see it from here. There's no ice on the river!" He gestured at the mistbound river.

Erin shrugged and looped the reins of her steed over a nearby branch. She looked at him, her face unreadable. "Maybe it only froze farther north. You're a hundred miles or more from Riumache. My sources are reliable, Prince Gaelin—Tuorel crossed in a single day because the river was frozen." She knelt by the campfire and carefully prodded it to life with a shiver.

Gaelin slammed his sword back into its sheath and took a seat across the fire, while Madislav and Ruide followed suit. He chewed his tongue thoughtfully. "We were in Riumache only two days ago, and there was no ice then. How could the river freeze in so short a time? Tuorel's army would need a foot of ice to support the wagons and siege engines."

Erin frowned. "Believe me, Prince Gaelin, I would not have thought it possible, either. But my college—the White Hall—has informants in Ghoere's camp, and there's no doubt that Tuorel marched into Riumache. Mhoried and Ghoere are at war."

Gaelin stood and paced away. The ground was cold and wet beneath his feet, and the water beaded on his cloak and his blankets. His head reeled at Erin's message. He had known that Ghoere meant trouble, but in his heart he hadn't really believed that Mhoried would be plunged into war so quickly. It was unreal. Struggling to grasp the implications of

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Erin's news, he complained, "Countess Tenarien should have been able to throw him back, or at least delay him, if he'd crossed by boat."

"Whatever else you can be saying about Tuorel, he is knowing how to start a war," Madislav rumbled. "Riutmache's sea walls were made to keep boats out, not men on foot." He shrugged helplessly. "Lady Tenarien's keep is strong. Stand a siege she can, even if she is losing the city."

"I doubt Tuorel will bother to dig her out," Gaelin replied. "If I were him, I'd leave some troops behind to keep her bottled up, and I'd keep going." He rubbed his hands against his arms, noticing the air seemed clammy and colder than it had earlier in the evening. Hundreds or thousands of Mhoriens would be killed or driven from their homes by Tuorel's army. Fighting the goblins who raided Mhoried's northern provinces was one thing—goblins were goblins, after all, and in lean times they'd rather steal from their neighbors than starve on their side of the border. He couldn't imagine what a real war would be like, let alone one fought on Mhoried's soil. Best worry about what's next instead of how to win the war, he realized. It's not in my hands at the moment. Deliberately, he faced Erin and asked, "How in the world did you find us?"

The bard grimaced. "When I heard the news, I thought your plans might change. I figured that I should set out for Shieldhaven on my own, and I didn't want to wait until the Mhor got around to sending someone to Endier."

Gaelin studied her, trying to conceal his surprise at her audacity. "It's dangerous for a woman to travel these lands alone, Erin. You might have been riding into a brigands' camp, for all you knew."

Erin shrugged. "I know how to take care of myself."

Watching her alert eyes, the poise and confidence of her face, and the easy way she wore the sword at her hip, Gaelin elected to take her at her word. Erin was not an ornament, not by any measure. He wondered what she would have done if she *had* encountered brigands or highwaymen. "So you set off for Mhoried, just like that?"

"I rode hard all day, making good time. I decided to stop for the night when I encountered Captain Viensen and his men. When I learned that you had been with him until just an

hour or two before I arrived, I decided to ride after you. Since Viensen didn't know about Tuorel's invasion, I figured that you might not have heard either."

Ruide spoke up from his seat by the fire. "You may want to reconsider your decision to continue to Endier, Lord Gaelin, especially since Lady Erin has spared us the ride already."

Erin watched him for a moment, and then added, "There's more news, Prince Gaelin. I've heard that the Ghoerans have been ordered to kill or take you. Although I guess you know that already—Viensen told me about the attack."

Madislav growled. "I would be liking to get my hands on those *kolturski* again." His brows drew together in a fierce scowl. "I am thinking they must have been hired in Riumache."

"I'm not naive enough to believe that every Mhorien is loyal to the Mhor, but I can't believe there are men in Riumache who would take gold to put a knife in me," Gaelin said.

"Think, Gaelin. They had to wait to see if you would take ship or ride to Endier. And they would also need to be knowing which road—or which ship—you would take to be making ambush."

Gaelin looked up at Madislav. "You're right. It would have been hard to get word of our route ahead of us, since we weren't sure of it ourselves. I wish we'd left at least one of those fellows alive. We could have found out exactly who was behind this."

"They got what they deserved," Madislav growled. "And if I am ever seeing their friends again, they will have company."

"I'd like to get my hands on those bastards for what they did to Daene, but I'd really like to find out who put them up to it," Gaelin said, staring into the fire.

"Now that is the *nyelnye'chik* I would like to be getting my hands on," Madislav observed sourly.

The conversation faltered as Gaelin wrestled with his thoughts. Erin shivered and warmed her hands by the fire. Finally, Gaelin spoke again. "I want to return to Mhoried as quickly as possible."

"Travel may be dangerous now," Ruide observed.

"As far as our enemies know, I'm dead already. They shouldn't be looking for me," Gaelin said.

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“That may not be true,” Erin interrupted, shaking her head. “Viensen told me that he’d had a visitor, earlier this evening. A man in brown robes, asking about you. The captain told me he tried not to say too much, but he just couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut when the man asked him questions. When this fellow had heard everything Viensen had to tell, he disappeared. ‘Withered up and blew away like smoke’ is the way Viensen put it.” She glanced over at Madislav. “Your *nyelnye’chik* may be closer than you think.”

“Then this is an excellent time to head back to Mhoried,” Gaelin said. “As far as Viensen knew, we were making for Endier. Whoever this man is, he’ll be looking in the wrong place. We’ll leave at sunup and try to outdistance Ghoere’s agent or agents before they figure out which way we’ve gone.”

Madislav nodded at Erin, “What about the bard? We did come here to get her, after all.”

“We can’t place her in the kind of danger we might be riding into, especially if Ghoere’s men are looking for me,” Gaelin said. “She’d be better off waiting a few weeks and traveling with pilgrims or traders. Erin, we’ll leave you with Viensen.”

“Don’t you think I should be allowed to make that decision?” Erin was watching him, her hand cocked on her hip, challenge in her posture and expression. “I am not so helpless that I need you to protect me. I am a bard of the White Hall, and I would be failing in my duties if I let you leave me behind.”

Gaelin glanced at the other men. Ruide shrugged. Madislav turned and asked, “You are being good rider?”

“Don’t worry,” she replied, “I won’t slow you down.” Madislav looked back over to Gaelin and shrugged as well.

Gaelin straightened up and looked off to the east. A grayish streak blurred the sky, the first sign of morning’s approach. “All right, then. We’ll break camp at sunrise.”



five

In a single day, Shieldhaven was transformed from a quaint highland court to a bristling fortress. On the Mhor's orders, the castle was readied for any attack. The guard was doubled at all posts, the mighty gates were closed and the portcullis lowered, heavy wooden shutters were fitted to the higher windows, and bolts, arrows, stones, and oil were laid by the embrasures and murder holes. More than half of Shieldhaven's lords and courtiers were gone. Some had simply left for safer lands, but most of those missing had returned to their manors and estates to raise the soldiers they owed the Mhor in time of war. Between Mhoried's mobilization and the abrupt departure of the court, Shieldhaven seemed empty and hostile.

The Mhor strode along the battlements, examining the castle's preparations. In truth, he'd left the defense of Shieldhaven itself to his lieutenants and captains. They knew every-

thing there was to know about defending a castle, and the Mhor trusted them implicitly. As far as he could tell, they had overlooked nothing. The only question remaining was how many troops he'd leave to hold the fortress.

At one of the minor turrets on the eastern wall, Mhor Daeric found Tiery waiting for him, bundled in a heavy cloak against the unnaturally cold weather. Beside him stood a tall, lean man with a square face and a short, iron-gray beard—Lord Baesil Ceried, the commander of Mhoried's armies. Baesil held the rank of count, which meant he belonged to the highest tier of nobility subject to the Mhor's rule. Each count held one of Mhoried's ten provinces in the Mhor's name. Many nobles accumulated titles and honorary positions to go with their hereditary lands, but Baesil had earned the right to lead Mhoried's army through years of campaigning. While Mhor Daeric was uncertain of several of his counts, he considered Baesil Ceried and his county of Byrnnor to be unshakable.

Baesil was armored in light half-plate, and wore a black, knee-length surcoat over his arms, embroidered with the falcon of Mhoried. Unlike many high officers, Baesil didn't pretend to any great skill at hand-to-hand fighting. He often said that he fought and won with his wits, not his sword. Both men bowed as the Mhor approached. "Good day, my lord," said Tiery.

"Gentlemen," the Mhor replied. "There is news?"

Baesil nodded, his face sour. "Ill news, my lord Mhor. The northlands are worse off than we had hoped. We've just received word that Markazor's hordes forced a crossing of the upper Maesil in Marloer's Gap, scattering Lord Ghaele's forces. Kraith has sent every goblin from the Sielwode to the Stonecrowns against us."

The Mhor kept his face calm, but his stomach turned. This was almost the worst news imaginable. Dealing with Ghore's army would have been difficult enough, but if Markazor had launched an invasion at the same time . . . for a moment, he teetered somewhere between rage, panic, and terror. He gripped the battlements and looked out over the deceptively peaceful countryside. "I may have worse news than that," he said after a moment. "It seems that Dhalsiel, Maesilar, and Balteruine refuse to answer the muster."

"Traitorous dogs," Baesil growled. "Maesilar and Balteru-

ine I expected, but what can Dhalsiel gain from sitting on his arse? Markazor's a stone's throw from his gates."

"He claims that he must keep his soldiers near at hand to guard his lands." Daeric glanced at Baesil. "Can we stand against Kraith and Tuorel without our full strength? Do we have a chance?"

"It's bad, my lord," Baesil said softly. "Ghoere and Markazor have caught us between the hammer and the anvil. This is no coincidence—they planned this as a joint attack. And I suspect Tuorel's been dealing with Count Maesilar for months, trying to find his price."

"Trust Tuorel to bargain with goblins," added Tiery wearily.

"We can't fight the full strength of Markazor and Ghoere at the same time," the Mhor said flatly. "One or the other, we could meet and stand against. Baesil? What's your opinion?"

The general thought for a long time, weighing his words. "You'll have to let the northlands burn," he finally said. "Ghoere's army is the greater threat, and they menace the lands that we can't afford to lose. If we defeat Tuorel, Maesilar might waver, since he won't want to face you without his master's help. Balteruine will follow where Maesilar leads. Besides, we've already got forces responding to the fall of Riumache. Calling them back to send them north will take too much time."

"At least they're at opposite ends of the country," Tiery observed. "We won't have to worry about facing both armies at the same time."

The Mhor rubbed his hands over his face and drew in a long breath. The bitter air stung his nose and throat, but the pain served to sharpen his attention. He hadn't slept since the reports of Ghoere's invasion had first arrived, a day and a half ago. Tuorel had taken Riumache by crossing the Maesil more quickly than any army in history. "How'd the Maesil freeze?" he wondered aloud. "I've seen ice floes in plenty of winters, but nothing an army could risk." Neither of his advisors could offer any insight.

"Your orders, my lord?" Baesil prompted.

"March south and engage Tuorel," the Mhor said. "Drive him back across the Maesil if you can, but I'll settle for bottling up his army in Riumache. Also, detach one company of

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Knights Guardian for duty in the north. I want them to lead the levies the highlanders raise against the goblins. If we have to give ground to Kraith to gain time, do it—I just want his advance slowed, so that the people in his path have a chance to flee their homes and muster their militias.”

“Very well,” Baesil said, bowing. “I’ll send the orders immediately.” He started to leave, and then paused. “I’ll set out at first light tomorrow, my lord. I need to be with the army going against Ghoere.”

“Do so. I will follow in a day.” The Mhor watched Baesil stride off across the wall, helmet tucked under his arm. The general was already calling for his captains and lieutenants and shouting orders. Daeric turned to Tiery and took him by the arm. “Come, walk with me a moment,” he said. They passed through the turret and crossed another section of battlements. When they were safely out of earshot on the open battlements, he stopped and said, “Tiery, I’ll need help to defeat this invasion. Baesil will try his best, but we’re too badly outnumbered. Arrange for couriers to be sent to Alamie, Diemed, and Roesone.”

“Will any of them help us?”

The Mhor sighed. “Daen Roesone’s not strong enough to risk war with Ghoere, not unless Diemed guarantees his borders, and I don’t think Vandiel will do that. Alamie is obsessed with Tuornen, and Diemed won’t want to act alone against Ghoere. I doubt any of them will come to our aid.”

“At least you have a claim of kinship with Vandiel of Diemed. He may be willing to support you.”

“We didn’t help him against Roesone.” Mhor Daeric ran his fingers through his hair. “Also, send for Banner. His magic may speed our messages or slow our enemies.”

“Very well, my lord,” Tiery said. He hesitated, watching the Mhor. “You are worried about Gaelin?”

Daeric spared him a single hard look. “Someone seems to be trying to kill my sons. Of course I’m worried.”

“He had sense enough to send word immediately,” Tiery said. “Do you think that Lady Tenarien was able to dispatch any of her men to meet him before she was invested by Ghoere’s army?”

The Mhor snorted. “Who knows? She may have received the message in time, or it may have been too late.”

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Sensing his anger, Tiery nodded. "I'll see to those messages." He turned and hurried away, leaning on a cane.

The Mhor watched him leave, his mind already churning with the next questions he'd have to address. Before he could make any decisions, a wave of exhaustion washed over him. He found his heart pounding as he leaned against the crenelated wall. I need to sleep, he realized, or I'll be no good to anyone.

Still, he hesitated before going inside. The battlement was cold and lonely, but it was a good place to think. He'd leave Thendiere to manage the court, since his oldest son's leg was still not sufficiently healed for hard campaigning. The arrangement would also keep Mhoried's heir in relative safety while Daeric rode against Ghoere in the south. Now, with warfare in the northlands as well, he needed Gaelin to lead the fight against the goblins.

Bowing his head, the Mhor breathed a silent prayer for Gaelin's swift and safe return.

* * * * *

In one corner of Bannier's conjuring chamber there stood a strange shadow that never disappeared entirely, no matter how the dim sunlight or the guttering oil lamps illuminated the cluttered chamber. Even as the Mhor's guardsmen hammered their sword hilts against the door to the wizard's tower, the shadow rippled and suddenly yawned deeper and colder. The dying red sunlight faded into umber gloom, disappearing into the hungry darkness, and in silence a lean, robed form appeared and stepped from the shadow. Tired and cold, Bannier closed the portal, and the dark door was only a shadow again.

The wizard's entire frame trembled in exhaustion, and he could no longer feel his hands and feet from a pervasive, bone-numbing cold. While the Shadow World was never a safe or certain passage, even in the best of times, it did allow those who knew its twisted paths to travel at amazing speeds. In the span of a day, Bannier had walked from the shores of the Maesil to his tower in Shieldhaven. It had taken a decade for the wizard to learn how to navigate the regions of the Shadow World that touched on his dark doorway in Shield-

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haven. Only the most skilled of sorcerers—and the halflings, who were somehow connected with the Shadow World—matched Banner's knowledge.

From below, the pounding on his door resumed. Banner frowned in distaste. If the fools tried to break it down, they'd regret it, but deaths of a magical nature certainly wouldn't endear him to the Mhor, who had probably been ransacking the castle looking for him since word of the invasion arrived. Banner needed the Mhor's trust for a few hours more. Before answering the door, however, he took a small vial from a locked cabinet and downed the contents. The elixir warmed and refreshed him, dispelling his exhaustion and restoring vitality to his palsied limbs.

With a deep breath, Banner circled down the stairs to his sitting room. He could hear the voices of the guards outside, debating whether they should seek the Mhor's permission to break down the wizard's door. "Can't have that," he muttered to himself. Striding across the room, he threw open the bolts, disarmed the magical traps with a word, and opened the door.

Four of Shieldhaven's guards stood outside, led by a young officer. The wizard's sudden appearance startled them all, and the soldiers recoiled a step. "Yes?" Banner asked confidently. "How may I be of service to you, lieutenant?"

The officer exchanged a wary glance with the sergeant of the guard, and then considered Banner with an openly suspicious look. "Begging your pardon, Lord Banner, but the Mhor requests your presence immediately."

"Of course. Please, lead the way."

Without a word, the officer turned and started off, the soldiers flanking Banner to either side. There was a time, years ago, when Shieldhaven's guards and servants had been more open and friendly, Banner thought. It seemed to him that he'd been greeted with smiles and pleasant words in the days before he expanded his research. Were the people he'd known before gone, or had they grown resentful of his presence? Whatever the reason, the black looks he received as they headed for the Mhor's study made it easier for Banner to contemplate the bargain he had made. People were ephemeral, but power—magical power, not the trappings of office or rule—that was a much more tangible comfort.

They arrived at the mahogany-panelled royal quarters in short order. The wizard was surprised to see a pair of fully armored guards standing before the door, swords bared. It seemed the Mhor was taking few chances. Inside, he found Mhor Daeric leaning over a map of Mhoried, with his first son, Prince Thendiere, by his side, and old Tiery as well. The Mhor glanced up, and his expression hardened. "Banner," he said. "We've sorely missed your counsel the past two days. I assume you've heard of Ghoere's attack?"

Banner chose his words carefully. "Indeed I have, my lord. I have just returned from the Maesil." When he put his mind to it, the Mhor possessed an uncanny ability to discern the truth of a person's words. It was one of the signs of the Mhoried blood, a gift inherited from his ancestors. With a grimace, Banner suppressed a quick flash of jealousy that coiled through his heart. He would have the Mhorieds' power soon enough.

The Mhor's brow furrowed at Banner's words and expression. "What were you doing there?"

"Ghoere's army had magical aid in crossing the Maesil," Banner said. "You must have noted the unnatural cold we've had this spring. Sorcery froze the river, and Tuorel crossed on foot."

"That confirms our reports," said Thendiere. He was a tall, thin man of about thirty. He had the Mhor's height but his mother's slightness of build. Thendiere's face was guarded, with a cautious intelligence glinting in his eyes. He leaned heavily on a thick wooden cane, and as he shifted position Banner noted that his right leg was immobilized by a splint under his loose-fitting breeches. "I didn't think that Tuorel commanded the allegiance of a wizard powerful enough to cast such a spell. There can't be more than a handful in all Anuire with that much strength."

Banner bowed his head. "You are correct, Prince Thendiere. I know the wizard called the Sword Mage aided Tuorel in his war against Elinie. He often visits Ghoere's court."

The Mhor paced away from the table, hands clasped behind his back. Despite the fatigue of nearly two days of meetings, councils of war, diplomatic messages, and other endless tasks, he still presented an appearance of calm dignity and

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strength. Even his gray tunic was carefully pressed. He stopped by the window, gazing out over the snow-capped battlements of the castle. "Banner, we have been allies for thirteen years now," he said quietly. "I have provided you with wealth, comfort, and prestige in exchange for your invaluable advice and assistance in magical matters. I know few wizards as competent as you. If the Sword Mage is using his sorcery to aid Ghoere's armies, I must have your skills to defend my own forces."

"You sound as though you doubt me, my lord."

Mhor Daeric looked over his shoulder, one eye fixing the wizard where he stood. "Banner, you left without notice at a time when I desperately needed your counsel. As it turns out, you probably did exactly what I would have wanted of you in exploring Tuorel's method of invasion, but the point remains that I had no idea where you were. In fact, in recent years I've seen less and less of you. I know you're no liegeman of mine, but I expect some degree of loyalty from you."

"My studies have consumed much of my time," Banner answered, truthfully enough. "And, to be honest, with Mhoried at peace there's been little for me to advise you about. Dealing with Markazor's raids or Alamie's troubles wouldn't have been the best use of my time."

The Mhor held his eye for a long moment, studying Banner's face. Despite himself, Banner grew uncomfortable beneath his unwavering gaze. Finally, the Mhor looked away, and Banner began to relax. Then Tiery spoke up from the corner of the room. "How did you know to go to the Maesil?"

Banner was not expecting the question. "What?"

"We received word of the invasion yesterday, but no one has seen you for days. You've been to the Maesil and back already?"

"I have my own sources of information," Banner replied. "I left when I suspected trouble."

"And you didn't see fit to warn us before you left?"

"They were only suspicions, unconfirmed. I had only the merest indication of sorcery at work and thought to investigate. I didn't know it was a prelude to war." Banner restrained a scowl. Tiery's questioning was placing him in danger. Even now, the Mhor contemplated him with renewed interest.

"That might have been a reasonable assumption," the

Mhor said. He gave Bannier one more hard look. "Well, it's in the past now. Tell me, Bannier, can you aid us in driving Gho-ere back across the river? If the Sword Mage is helping him, can you defend us?"

Bannier took up a cautious pacing, circling the room as he pretended to study the map. "I believe so," he said after a suitable length of time. "But I will need a day or two to consider my options."

The Mhor seemed to hope for something more substantial, but he knew magic of the sort that could affect the course of a war was dangerous and hard to come by. "Very well, then," he said. "I plan to ride for Riumache tomorrow, but if you think you might have some answers for me by tomorrow evening, I will delay my departure."

"Please, proceed as you have planned," Bannier said. "I can always contact you if I think of something." He feigned a yawn. "My lord, my journey was quite tiring, and I have much work to do. Would you please excuse me?"

The Mhor nodded. With a shallow bow, Bannier took his leave. The guards who had escorted him to the Mhor's quarters had left already; a bit of good fortune, since it indicated he wasn't under any serious suspicion. He made a conscious effort to suppress the spring in his step as he left.

Bannier first headed back toward his tower, threading his way through the great hall, taking care to be seen by a number of people. Then he abruptly changed his heading and turned to a set of disused stairs that led into the castle's lower levels. Shieldhaven's storerooms, wells, and cellars were carved into the heart of the rocky tor on which it rested. Vault after vault lay beneath the Mhor's halls. Only a few were in use, and Bannier avoided these as he descended into the belly of the fortress.

In a few minutes, he found the room he had marked. It was an old wine cellar, long and low, most of its tuns long since removed. Exits on opposite sides of the chamber led up to the cellars of the gatehouse and the keep itself. Bannier checked to make certain no one was within earshot and satisfied himself that he was unobserved.

Crossing the chamber, Bannier examined the few remaining tuns and found the one for which he was looking. He opened it with a hidden catch. Inside lay a small satchel of canvas.

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From the satchel, Bannier retrieved a dozen small pots of paint, along with an assortment of brushes. He selected a bare stretch of wall in the center of the room and quickly wiped it free of cobwebs and dust with the sleeve of his robe. Then, humming a strange and discordant melody, he began to create a pattern on the wall. First he drew a man-high circle of silvered paint and a second circle a handspan outside that one. Then, using first one paint and then another, he began to mark runes and diagrams around the ring. Some required him to chant spells of warding or passage softly under his breath; others he simply marked with rapid precision.

It took hours of exacting work to finish the gate's border and to speak the words that brought it to life. The last few words left him so weak that he could not stand; an enchantment of this power was never easy, and even more difficult considering the effort he had expended earlier. Somehow, he found the force of will to speak the last syllable.

A thin, blue aura sprang into being around the gateway, shimmering and dancing. The wall enclosed by the ring seemed to fade or vanish, and in its place a portal of swirling darkness and streaming azure fire opened. The air of the old cellar crackled with energy, and Bannier's breath was sucked away by the force of the air rushing past. He scrambled farther away, dragging himself to his feet by the row of great tuns opposite the gate.

With a flash of light, a man in armor appeared. He stood, disoriented for a moment, and then he spied Bannier and strode over to him. Before he reached the wizard, the gate flashed again, and another man—a common soldier—stood in the archway. The armored man reached Bannier, and with one gauntleted hand he raised his visor. Baron Noered Tuorel grinned at Bannier. "Well met, master wizard!" he said, speaking loudly to carry over the chaos of the gateway. "You were only a quarter-hour late."

"That door leads to the gatehouse," Bannier said, pointing. "The other leads to the keep. You know where the Mhor's chambers are?"

Tuorel nodded. "Baehemon's men mapped the castle when he visited. They'll be able to lead us. How long can you keep the gate open? I've five hundred men to bring through."

"If they move smartly, I'll hold it for them all," Bannier an-

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swered. Tuorel grinned again, and then wheeled about to give orders to the Ghoeran soldiers who were massing in the vault. With grim determination, Bannier concentrated on maintaining the gate to the end of his strength.

* * * * *

The small hours of the morning found the Mhor Daeric pacing restlessly in his chambers. In recent years, the nights had held less and less sleep for him; some would have said the cares of ruling a kingdom were wearing him down, but Daeric knew it was a deepening sense of loneliness. He missed his wife terribly, even after all these years. "Aesele, I could use your strength now," he murmured. "I've a long, hard labor before me, and I'm feeling my years tonight."

Daeric paused in front of the great shuttered window that looked out over the city of Bevaldruur, a glass of brandy in his hand. In the warm darkness of the chamber, he almost imagined he could hear her light footfalls. He cocked his head, listening, but decided his ears had been playing tricks on him. He sipped the liquor, hoping to calm his racing mind and find some semblance of rest before joining his army in the field on the morrow. Instead of drowsiness the brandy brought him a supernatural clarity of thought. With a sigh, he set down the empty glass and peered out into the darkness. His chamber overlooked the castle's courtyard, the gatehouse, and the fields beyond.

Shadows flitted along the battlements, and one of the lantern lights of the gatehouse flickered and went out. Daeric frowned. He'd almost thought he had seen armed men on the battlements, moving stealthily toward the gates. He extinguished his own light, an oil lamp, and stepped back to the window, using the shutter for concealment. As his eyes attuned themselves to the darkness, he searched the battlements for signs of movement.

There! There it was again. Squinting, Daeric could make out a half-dozen forms, now gathered before an iron-plated door that led from the open battlements into the castle itself. Light glinted from the edges of bared swords and knives. As the band of intruders quietly opened the door, dim lantern light flooded the battlements for a moment, and Daeric

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caught a glimpse of red and blue livery. He gasped and recoiled from the window. Ghoerans here? But how?

After he recovered from his momentary shock, Daeric darted across the room and opened the door leading to the hall. Two of the castellan's guards stood there in full arms and armor, assigned to protect him from a possible assassination attempt. Both clattered to attention in panic when he threw the door open—it had been a long and quiet watch until now.

The senior of the two, a battle-tempered sergeant, recovered first. "My lord Mhor?" he said. "Is there anything you need, sir?"

"Ghoerans have infiltrated Shieldhaven," Daeric said. "Sergeant, stay here with me. Trooper, I want you to rouse the guard captain immediately and sound the alarm."

Both guards stared at him blankly for a moment. Daeric realized they thought he'd taken leave of his senses. "I saw them on the battlements," he said. "Now, get moving! I have no idea how many may be inside already."

"Sir! At once, sir," the other guard said. With a worried glance at his partner, he sprinted off down the hall, bellowing at the top of his lungs. "Guards! Guards! Enemies in the castle! Awake!"

Daeric seized the other man by the shoulder. "I can only guess that Tuorel's men are here to kill Thendiere and me," he said. "I'll assume they know where to find our chambers. Get my son and daughters, and bring them here. I'll be ready in a moment." The sergeant nodded and hurried off to pound on Thendiere's door. Daeric stepped back inside his chambers and quickly threw on the first tunic he could find. As he dressed, his eye fell on an old sword hanging above the mantle. It was an ancient heirloom of the family; he snatched it from the wall and thrust the blade through his belt before stepping back into the hall.

In the thirty or forty heartbeats it had taken him to get dressed, the sergeant had literally dragged Thendiere and his sisters Liesele and Ilwyn from their respective rooms. All three had sense enough to keep quiet, although Ilwyn was shaking with fright. "What's happening, Father?" she asked in a fraying voice.

"Ghoere's men are in the castle. Come on—they'll be trying to reach the royal quarters, and we must move." With the

sergeant beside him, Daeric turned down a servant's passage and headed for the great hall. There were guardposts and visiting knights and courtiers there; with any luck, they'd find enough swordarms to organize a defense of the castle. The passage led to a tight staircase that spiraled down to the floor of the hall. Daeric allowed the sergeant to lead, while Thendiere brought up the rear, hefting his heavy cane as a weapon.

At the bottom of the stair, an old oaken door opened into the hall. The sergeant set his hand on the latch, but the Mhor caught his arm. "Carefully," he said. The sergeant glanced at him and nodded, edging the door open a few inches so Daeric could see the room beyond.

A hundred or more Ghoeran soldiers stood in silence in Shieldhaven's hall. A score of Mhorien guards, servants, and courtiers sat on the floor, hands on their heads, under the watchful eyes of Ghoerans detailed to watch over the prisoners. Scattered around the hall, there were a handful of bodies sprawled limply on the floor—guardsmen who had tried to fight for the hall, along with a Ghoeran or two. The Mhor studied the disciplined ranks of enemy soldiers standing in his own hall, astounded at their numbers. How in the world did that many men get inside without being seen? he thought. What manner of treachery was this? Carefully, he pulled the door shut again, hoping no one had spotted them.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Thendiere said.

"There must be a hundred Ghoerans in the hall," the Mhor replied. "How many more are elsewhere in the castle? For that matter, how many guardsmen do we have to lead against them?"

"My lord, there were one hundred and thirty of us on the duty roster tonight," the sergeant replied. "That's enough to man the gatehouse, the towers, and the battlements against an assault."

Mhor Daeric ground his teeth. "Apparently not." He looked around in the dark passageway, thinking. Whatever they did, they couldn't remain where they were for long. He considered the men he'd seen on the battlements and in the hall. "By my guess, the garrison's outnumbered two to one, or worse, and the enemy's seized the castle already," he said quietly. "I don't think we can retake the castle with the guards

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that are left. Clearly, our enemy knows us quite well, and they've made certain that we wouldn't be able to fight back." The Mhor paused, meeting the eyes of his children. It occurred to him that they were children no longer, but men and women with strengths and capabilities he could no longer measure. "Fighting for Shieldhaven is out of the question, and surrender strikes me as unacceptable. Our only remaining alternative is flight. If Tuorel takes our castle but we slip through his fingers, we'll call this night a stalemate."

"I hate the thought of abandoning Shieldhaven without a fight," Thendiere said.

The Mhor forced a shrug. "It's already happened, whether we like it or not. Now, let's see if they've thought to guard the old sally port under Bannier's tower." They backtracked down the passage and then chose a broad hallway running through a portion of the castle reserved for visiting nobles. Daeric would have liked to find a less well-traveled route, but unfortunately none headed the way they wanted to go. They had almost reached the bend at the end of the corridor when four Ghoeran guards abruptly turned the corner in front of them. Without hesitation, the Mhor threw himself forward, slashing at the lead man—these guards stood between them and escape. The guard sergeant and Thendiere followed a moment later.

"Careful, lads!" cried one of the Ghoerans. "The old one's the Mhor! Don't kill him!" Daeric's opponent was an excellent swordsman who parried his blows while looking for a chance to disarm him. Beside him, the sergeant felled his man with a sturdy thrust to the chest, but then spun to the ground a moment later as a Ghoeran slashed his face open. Liesele stooped and picked up the sergeant's sword, swinging it recklessly with both hands as she flailed away at the fellow who'd felled the sergeant.

Daeric's arm was growing tired already, and a dozen aches and protests were announcing themselves throughout his body. He snarled in frustration—the fight was noisy and was costing them time they didn't have. Thendiere hopped about awkwardly, barely defending himself with his cane, and lured his opponent into reach of Daeric's sword. The Mhor quickly turned from his opponent and stabbed Thendiere's foe under the arm. The man coughed and staggered back a

few steps before falling. Then the man he'd been fighting stepped close and landed a solid punch on the side of his head with his sword hilt. Daeric's world turned upside down and he reeled to the floor, stars flashing across his vision.

Daeric's arms and legs refused to work. Clumsily, he pushed himself to his hands and knees. He realized that it had suddenly become quiet; the clang of sword on sword was gone. Raising his head, he saw Liesele sliding down the wall, her face open with astonishment as her hands clutched at a spreading stain of blood in the center of her stomach. Her lips were blue and her face was white with shock. She tried to say something, but he couldn't hear it for the ringing in his ears. He was still watching her when her eyes went blank and she slumped over on the floor.

"Liesele," he moaned. With a cry of rage, he started to rise. As he looked around, he saw Thendiere standing by the wall, holding a maimed hand. The prince's cane and two of his fingers lay on the floor, but his pain was forgotten as he stared at his sister's body. Ilwyn was huddled a few steps farther back, petrified with terror. The remaining two Ghoerans were down as well, the leader with Liesele's sword buried in his chest. The Mhor let his eyes close for a long moment, shutting out the sight.

"Mhor Daeric."

Daeric looked up again. At the end of the hall, a dozen more Ghoeran soldiers stood, waiting. In front, a man in black armor with a helm worked to resemble a wolf's head watched him. Although his head still swam, Daeric somehow came to his feet, although he weaved drunkenly. A lean, brown figure stood beside the wolf-knight. Banner looked on, his eyes unreadable. "Prince Thendiere, Princess Ilwyn, my lord Mhor," he said flatly. "Please, do not exert yourselves. The sally port is guarded."

His mind drifting in and out of focus, Daeric forced himself to respond. "You betrayed me. I knew you lied when Tiery asked you what you had been doing. Tell me, was Ghere's invasion your work?" He noticed he had blood in his mouth, and his tongue felt thick. "Banner—*why?*"

The wizard merely looked away. Beside him, the armored man stepped forward and raised his wolf-visor. Baron Nored Tuorel's cruel features were fixed in bloodthirsty delight.

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“I have wondered why, as well,” he said. “But when Bannier offered to deliver Shieldhaven into my hands, I decided that his reasons meant nothing to me.” His eyes flicked past Daeric to the human wreckage at the end of the hall. “An admirable performance, my lord Mhor, besting four of my soldiers.” He strode forward, his soldiers following with readied weapons. His eyes fell to Liesele’s body, slumped on the floor. Tuorel frowned in distaste. “Just as well you defeated them,” he added. “I would have had them executed for killing your daughter.”

“Burn in Azrai’s hells,” Daeric said weakly. He looked past Tuorel to Bannier. “You, too, Bannier. I thought you were my friend.”

The wizard’s face tightened. He raised his hands and muttered some unintelligible phrase or command, and suddenly white light flashed from his fingertips. Daeric felt his knees buckling, but he lost consciousness before he hit the floor.



SIX

After a restless hour shivering in his bedroll, Gaelin rose at daybreak. The sunrise was obscured by the dense fog and steady rainfall, and the day began with a feeble lightening of the gray darkness that left Gaelin gloomy and irritable. Erin had rolled a heavy blanket over her shoulders and dozed lightly; she roused quickly when she heard Gaelin and his companions stirring. He noticed she seemed less fatigued than he might have expected of someone who had traveled most of the night.

They breakfasted on cold biscuits, wedges of dry cheddar, and tough hunks of summer sausage. Ruide had made sure that they were well provisioned before leaving Mhoried, but the weather made the food seem bland and tasteless. Half an hour after sunrise, they left their camp, riding north—toward Riumache—on the old river pike.

The weather dampened their spirits. Gaelin was preoccu-

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plied with the tidings of war, trying to imagine what his father might be doing in response to the Ghoeran invasion. Finally he decided he would put the matter out of his mind until he was in a position to do something about it.

He started paying attention to the ride, keeping a wary eye on the lands through which they rode. They remained near the river, following an old cart track that paralleled the Mae-sil a couple of miles inland. Alامية's riverbank was low and marshy, and the sodden countryside was only thinly settled. Low-lying stands of cedars and cypress dotted the landscape, with numerous creeks and bogs, and the track meandered around these obstacles. The morning fog persisted all day long, covering the land in gloomy mist.

They finally called a halt in the early afternoon to eat a mid-day meal and allow their horses to graze. As Gaelin gnawed on a hunk of dried whitefish, washing it down with sour beer, Erin walked over to sit on a low stump beside him. She drew back her hood and shook her head, running her fingers through her hair. "A fine day for riding, eh?" she ventured.

Gaelin smiled and shook out his own cloak. Rivulets of water ran down his arms and legs. "At least the weather's showing signs of warming." He offered her his flagon, and Erin took a long draught. He watched her drink, and the silence grew uncomfortable. He said, "I'm sorry we're traveling on a day like this. You shouldn't have had to spend all night searching for us."

"It had to be done," Erin replied with a tired smile. "I'm glad I found you when I did. Another hour and you would have been on the road again. I might never have caught up to you."

"Still, I can't help but feel a minstrel of your rank deserves a better welcome than skulking through the countryside in the rain all day." He took the flagon back, and shrugged. "I haven't extended a proper welcome."

"Gaelin, I'd have thought you a damned half-wit if you *hadn't* been preoccupied with events at home." Erin fixed her gaze on him, her eyes flat and hard as iron. "You've problems far more pressing than replacing your court bard."

Gaelin was taken aback by her directness. He had thought a southern minstrel would speak in flowery phrases and weave her words in subtle circles. "Be that as it may," he

began cautiously. "I'm sorry your stay in Mhoried has to start like this. Even at Shieldhaven, there won't be much of a court for you to attend. The Mhor may be campaigning against Ghoere's army all summer long."

"Then I'll sleep under the stars for a few months," Erin laughed. "It will do me good."

Gaelin snorted and gestured towards the gray shores of Ghoere, just visible across the river. "I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation. Tuorel's already tried to kill me once. And now Daene, a young knight who trusted me, is dead."

She shook the water out of her hair and regarded him with a steady, clear gaze. Her face was pale in the dim daylight; the rain and mist had dampened her long tresses and flattened them against her shoulders, but there was strength and fire in the delicate lines of her face. "I've seen bloodshed before and survived it," she said. "I know the value of my own life better than you might think." She glanced away for a moment, busying herself with her cloak's fastening. Then she looked up at Gaelin again and continued. "You can't blame yourself for Tuorel's actions. You're not responsible for Daene's death."

Gaelin started to protest, but bit back his words. Erin had cut to the source of his melancholy. It wasn't fair or right that he might endanger those near him, but he was a highborn noble, quite fortunate by any account, and his standing brought uncommon perils with it. The idea of Madislav or Ruide—or Erin—meeting Daene's fate sent a cold blade of anguish into his heart. "Why shouldn't I be concerned that someone else near me may be hurt or killed?" he answered. "I've only known you a few hours, but I wouldn't want to see you come to harm."

Erin smiled and looked out over the river. "I can take care of myself," she said quietly. She rose and stretched lithely before walking away. "I'd better check my horse's shoes. I think she might have picked up a stone."

Gaelin watched after her, his lunch forgotten, until Madislav came over and sat down heavily, chain mail jingling beneath his tunic. "I am wondering where we are going next," he said, chewing on a piece of hardtack. "The Mhor is expecting you in Endier, no?"

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Gaelin tore his gaze from Erin's form and glanced at the Vos. "Assuming the Mhor received my message yesterday, what would he do?"

Madislav didn't even pause to consider the question. "He will send a company or two of guards to meet you. And he will be trying to send word to you in Endier, probably to be telling you to stay put until the soldiers arrive."

Gaelin nodded thoughtfully. "Is there any reason he would want me to stay in Endier? Or would he want me back in Shieldhaven?"

Madislav spread his hands wide. "I am not knowing, but I think he will want you to come home. There are too many Ghoerans between you and Shieldhaven now."

"If he sends someone after me, we might as well stay on the road. If Riumache is lost, he won't send them by boat. Any soldiers or messengers will ride through Alamie, instead."

"They will be following the old river road," Madislav agreed. He tapped one finger on his temple. "You are thinking, Gaelin. That is good. River road is shortest route to Endier, and any men the Mhor sends to find you will be trying to make time."

Gaelin smiled. "We may meet them coming the other way, probably in a day or two."

"And if you are not finding any of the Mhor's men?"

"I don't know." Gaelin stood and brushed the water from his clothes and cloak. "It won't slow us down, but if someone's hoping to find me in Endier, they'll be disappointed." Stepping over to Blackbrand, he saddled the horse again and checked the tack and harness. The stallion snorted in annoyance, tossing his head. Looking over the horse's back, he caught Erin watching him.

"Ready to go?" he asked. She nodded and set about securing her own saddle. In a few minutes, they were riding, following the Maesil's broad easterly curve. They rode the rest of the day, through showers and unending mists, until daylight faded for good.

Toward evening, they made a spartan camp in the deserted countryside, just out of sight of the road. Gaelin cringed at the thought of a night of sleeping in the rain, but it seemed safer than advertising their location by staying in a town. Erin sang a couple of short elven ballads to fortify their spirits. Her

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voice had a high, keening quality that was both sad and beautiful. The delicate melody lingered in Gaelin's mind as he fell asleep.

The next day, the weather warmed, although the rain continued, a steady daylong drizzle. Gaelin was used to it; the Anuirean heartlands saw a great deal of rain, especially in the spring and fall. Erin rode beside him for most of the day, quizzing him about the Mhor's court. Gaelin answered to the best of his ability and surprised himself with what he did and did not remember. Several times he caught her nodding as if to confirm what he was saying. "You're testing me," he complained, after she asked him about the history of Mhoried. "You were trained in the White Hall. You know the histories better than I do."

"It's true that I've studied them," Erin said. "The masters of the Hall view the keeping of accurate histories and genealogies as one of our most important tasks. But for all that, they're only dry old tomes to most of us. For you, they're the tale of your family, a part of who you are. Even as we speak, you are continuing to shape history."

"I think you're exaggerating my importance," Gaelin replied. "My father's the Mhor, not me. And my brother will follow him."

They rode on a time, until Erin spoke again. "What will you do when you get home?" she asked.

"Me? I don't know." Gaelin frowned. "I'll wait to see what my father has in mind. I expect he'll want me to stay by his side for the campaign. Or he may tell me to stay in Shieldhaven."

"Doing what?"

"Trying to keep things running, I suppose. Despite the war, there should still be issues of trade, taxes, laws, diplomacy, and all manner of business for someone to look after." Gaelin rubbed at his chin. "Maybe Thendiere will run things."

"What if you had to make all those decisions? Or if your father put you in command of the army?"

Gaelin laughed uneasily. "He won't. I've little skill with affairs of state, or with the running of armies."

"Why not? It's tradition for lords to hand responsibility to their sons. After all, what better way for you to learn?" Erin measured Gaelin with a gaze that had suddenly grown quite

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serious. "I think you're going to find yourself with more to do than you think." She tapped her heels against her horse's flanks and rode ahead.

As they traveled north, the road skirted inland to avoid a stretch of marsh by the river. The river road followed the Maesil from the great city of Anuire itself all the way to the hills of Elinie. Once it had been one of the busiest trade routes in Cerilia, but after Michael Roele's death, the empire had disintegrated into bickering duchies and baronies. As traffic and trade on the river road tapered off, the people had drifted away. The travelers passed dozens of abandoned farms and empty inns, wreathed in thick green vines.

By the end of their second day of travel, they found themselves approaching the Alamien town of Taeren Crossing, lying just across the Maesil from the great Ghoeran port of Ghieste. They reined in their horses a half-mile or so from the crossroads in the crimson gloaming, peering toward the rambling buildings and yellow, mist-wreathed lights of the town.

"Well?" Gaelin asked his companions. "Do we take the chance of meeting Ghoerans who might be looking for us, or do we skirt the town and miss out on any news?"

"The town may be watched," Madislav observed with a dour look. "Is safer to camp someplace out of the way."

Erin rode over and responded, "That may be true, but we could learn a lot from the merchants and teamsters who pass through Taered Crossing."

Beside her, Ruide cleared his throat. "You're probably right, my lady. I'll attract the least attention. I'll go on into town and see what there is to see." The valet quickly threw an old cloak over his fine clothes and rode into the town, while Gaelin, Erin, and Madislav rode their horses beneath the trees. They waited for an hour or so as gloom settled over the countryside. The light drizzle grew into a hard, steady rain, and the temperature began to drop again. Gaelin waited in silence. Finally, as the wait dragged on, he began to wonder whether they should follow Ruide to make certain that he was all right. Before he decided to do so, Erin hissed quietly and pointed at the road.

"Lanterns, coming toward us," she said.

They retreated farther from the road, watching the lights bobbing up and down in the gray twilight. It was a large

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party of horsemen, riding south from Taeren Crossing. Gaelin peered through the rain and shadows, trying to make out their numbers and arms. There were several dozen of them, horsemen armed with crossbows and lances.

"Who are they?" he said.

"They're Ghoeran regulars," Erin whispered. "Hold still, or they may spot us."

"What? Are you certain?"

Erin gestured at her delicately sloped eyes, not quite human. "You forget, I've more than a little of the Sidhelien in my blood. I can make out their coats of arms. Let them pass."

Gaelin glanced at her, and then stepped back into the shadows. The horsemen thundered past. The lanterns they carried illuminated their kettle helmets, favored by Ghoeran cavalry, and Ghoere's red and blue banner furled on a staff. He watched after them until they were gone around a bend in the road and their hoofbeats faded to silence. "They were Ghoerans, all right," he said into the rain.

Erin nodded. Madislav scratched his bristling beard and grunted. "They are being on the wrong side of the river."

"Why am I so important to him?" asked Gaelin, half to himself. "What's he want with me? Does he hope to hold me as a hostage against my father?"

"There's another possibility," Erin said, close behind him. He twisted in the saddle to look at her. "It could be that he wants to claim the power of your bloodline by killing you. If you were to die by his hand, he'd gain a portion of the power of your line."

"Bloodtheft," Gaelin said. He had viewed bloodtheft as a thing of stories and legends. But . . . even if it was not common, it was still true that a noble's divine heritage could be wrested away by a blooded rival.

He stared down at his hands, trying to imagine the divine spark or essence that flowed through his veins. Gaelin had never thought much about it. His extraordinary ability to recover from injury had only manifested four or five times in his life, but now his wrists seemed to itch with the hidden risk they contained. "Wait, that doesn't make sense. When we were attacked on the river, the brigands were trying to kill me. There was no attempt to take me alive. In fact, they only retreated when they were certain they'd mortally wounded

me. If Ghoere—or whoever was behind them— wanted my bloodline, he would have to kill me by his own hand.”

Erin leaned forward to keep her words quiet. “If you were dead, that would be one less Mhoried to slay if he wanted to extinguish the entire line.” Killing the last living scion of a bloodline conferred all of that line’s power on the victor, instead of the portion one could claim by slaying an individual. Erin paused, and then finished her thought. “Ask yourself what could happen if your brother and father were to fall into his hands.”

“You’re suggesting that Tuorel wants nothing less than the annexation of all of Mhoried and the power of the Mhoried blood?” he said slowly. “But why start with us? Why not Elinie, a land he’s already defeated? Or Roesone or Endier, lands far less able to defend themselves?”

“Tuorel intends to build his strength as quickly as possible,” Erin said. “Therefore, he’s going to seize the most powerful bloodline he can reach—why go to all the trouble for a bastard line like Daen Roesone’s, or a weak one like Richard Endier’s?”

Madislav’s face was inscrutable in the shadows beneath the trees. “Erin may be right, Gaelin,” he said, his voice deep and slow. “The facts fit. He would not be caring whether you are dead now or later.”

“No, you’re both missing one important piece of the puzzle,” Gaelin said. “If Tuorel’s out to divest my family of lands and power, he must also have Thendiere and the Mhor in his hands. They’re surrounded by an army of loyal guards and servants.”

“Aye, they are, but Tuorel knows where to find them,” Madislav said. “You, he must look for.”

Erin forced a smile and swung herself up into the saddle. “Then we are just making sure that Gaelin is not to be getting found,” she said, doing her best to mimic Madislav’s rumbling basso. Suddenly, she cut off their laughter with a flash of her hand. “More riders are coming.”

Again, they retreated into the covering darkness. Gaelin mounted too, sitting on Blackbrand well behind a great oak. This party came from the crossing as well, but they were riding without lights, and it seemed like a great number of them. “More horsemen? How many Ghoerans are riding around

here, anyway?" Gaelin breathed quietly.

Erin stood in her stirrups, peering toward the road. "This is a larger party than the first," she said. "They're turning this way. Wait, there's Ruide. He's leading them."

"Are they in Ghoeran colors?" Madislav asked.

Erin sat back down and cantered out to meet the approaching horsemen. Madislav and Gaelin exchanged a look in the shadows. "Guess not," Gaelin said, and he followed Erin out onto the road.

In a few moments, they greeted a bedraggled Ruide, surrounded by five dozen Mhorien guards. The men had a tired, nervous look to them, and Gaelin could tell at a glance they'd seen fighting recently. Several horses with empty saddles were led by the men at the back of the column, and others wore bandages or splints over wounds. They were led by a young officer not too much older than Gaelin himself, with a long ponytail worn highland-style and a crooked grin. The captain's arm was in a sling, and he had a small cut over one eye. When he caught sight of Gaelin, he bowed from the saddle. "My lord prince," he said. "Captain Maesan of Riumache reporting, sir."

"Riumache? You're one of Lady Tenarien's men?"

The captain nodded. "She told me to tell you the Mhor received your message. He asked the countess to send some guards after you, since it would have taken an extra three or four days to send a party from Shieldhaven."

Madislav caught Gaelin's attention. "Does he know yet?"

The prince turned back to Maesan. "You know that Ghoere has invaded Mhoried?"

A shadow crossed Maesan's face. "We heard," he replied. "It's the talk of the heartlands already. We've been riding away from the fight for two days now, and it hasn't been easy. If we hadn't found you, my lord prince . . . it would have been hard to go home empty-handed, knowing we'd missed the fight."

"I know you were following orders, Captain," Gaelin answered carefully. He gestured at Maesan's wounded arm. "I see you haven't missed all of the fighting."

The captain pointed back the way they had come. "There are several parties of Ghoeran scouts and guardsmen scouring the old river road."

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“A squadron of cavalymen rode south not ten minutes ago.”

Maesan spat. “We fought the first two bands we came across, but after that I detoured to the pike to avoid trouble. It wasn’t in my orders to ride around Alamie sparring with Tuorel’s troops wherever I happened to find them. Though I didn’t think to see them on this side of the Maesil.”

“Nor did I,” Gaelin said. He rubbed his jaw as he considered Maesan’s news. Tuorel had him marked, that was for certain. He realized the soldiers as well as his riding companions were waiting for him to speak. Gaelin tugged on Blackbrand’s reins and turned the horse toward the north. “Let’s get a few miles away from here, and then we’ll camp till sunrise.”

Maesan saluted and called, “All right, boys! We’re on our way home!” With a few barked commands, he turned the column around and formed them around Gaelin and his party. They circled the town, staying well out in the fields, and picked up the road again on the other side of Taeren Crossing. After that they picked up the pace and rode about five or six hours more, until Maesan’s men were almost falling from their horses in exhaustion. Gaelin finally called a halt at moonset.

Another day of hard riding brought the Mhorien band to the town of Iered, across the Stonebyrn river from Mhoried. Leaving Maesan’s troops camped outside of the town, Gaelin rode ahead with Ruide, Madislav, Erin, and the captain to hire the boats they needed.

They glimpsed the ivy-grown towers and the crumbling walls of Iered Castle, but in the fields outside the town itself they found an encampment of Alamiens soldiers. Gaelin guessed that three or four hundred men were quartered here. Is Duke Alam sending a force to our aid, he wondered, or is he taking steps to keep the fighting on Mhoried’s side of the Stonebyrn?

A few moments later, his question was answered as a young Alamiens officer led a squad of a dozen halberdiers to Gaelin and his companions. The officer surveyed their party, and then addressed Maesan. “Captain, am I correct in assuming that you are in command of your column?”

Maesan, without glancing at any of the others, replied, “You are, sir.”

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The young officer—a lieutenant, if Gaelin read his insignia correctly—nodded. “I must inform you that your men are not permitted to enter the town, sir. There are Ghoeran troops here, and we have been ordered to make sure your war stays on your side of the river.”

“But the Ghoerans *may* remain in the town, where they enjoy access to your supplies and transportation?”

The Alamiens shrugged. “My apologies, Captain, but they were here first. They’re paying good gold for their foodstuffs and the use of the ferries. And, as long as your troops are in the area, the Ghoerans will not be permitted to leave Iered.”

Gaelin thought it a reasonable compromise for the Alamiens. Of course, that did not touch on the awkward subject of the status of Alamiens’ alliance with Mhoried. Duke Alam was sworn to offer aid to the Mhor and deny comfort to his enemies in time of war. He stared over the river, as if he could by force of will pierce the miles that lay between him and his home. What was Tuorel up to? He looked back to the Alamiens. “Do you have any idea how long the Ghoerans will be? We want to hire a boat as soon as possible.”

The lieutenant replied, “I’m not sure, Sir Knight. Their supply ferries have been crossing for three days.” With hard glances at the Alamiens soldiers, the Mhoriens turned and rode out of town.

“We could be days waiting for the Ghoerans to finish their business in Iered,” said Maesan. “I think we should ride into town in the middle of the night and steal their boats, supplies and all.”

“No, that’s not why we’re here,” Gaelin said. He chewed his lip, thinking. “Ruide, do you still have that atlas?”

“Of course, my lord.” Ruide rifled through his saddlebags for a moment before handing the well-worn book to Gaelin. Alamiens’ page was marked. Gaelin studied it for a moment, examining the lands along the Stonebyrn.

“Here,” he said, pointing at a village called Norbank. “There’s another ferry here, one Ghoere may not be using yet. It looks like a ride of forty or forty-five miles.” He thought for a moment, considering times and distances. “All right, we’ll keep going north, and we’ll cross at Norbank.”

In the cold hours before dawn, the Mhoriens broke camp, rode past Iered, and headed north at a breakneck pace.

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Horses stumbling in exhaustion, Gaelin and his company reached the tiny landing of Norbank hours after sunset. They sighted a handful of pickets or outriders through the course of the day, but no one had tried to stop them.

"If they kept up with that day's ride, they deserve to catch us," Gaelin announced as they trotted into the village. Despite the cool drizzle that had fallen all day, he felt hot, sweaty, and dirty. Forty miles in a single day was hard on both men and horses.

Madislav dismounted with a groan of relief and kneaded his backside with his hands. "Looks quiet enough," he said, nodding toward the village.

Gaelin agreed. In the darkness, he could make out a cluster of four or five small buildings by the riverbank. A blanket of fog covered the river, masking the cold waters under a field of white mist. The ferry itself was little more than a rough-hewn raft hauled up on the shoreline beside one of the buildings. "Well, let's wake the ferryman," he said. "I don't like the idea of waiting till morning to cross."

Maesan called out orders to several of his men, who began to thump on doors in search of the ferrymaster's home. As the soldiers woke the townsmen, Maesan posted guards to watch the road, and then divided his men into sixes to organize their crossing. "I want to get some of my men over before I send you, my lord," he said to Gaelin. "I've no idea what could be hiding on the far bank in the darkness."

"That's not necessary, Captain."

"My lord prince, your father instructed the countess to guard you well," Maesan said. "Please, let me do my job."

Gaelin scowled. "Very well. Send your scouts first. I'll wait until you're ready." Dismounting, Gaelin led Blackbrand over to an open stable in the courtyard of a small inn, off to one side of the ferry landing. He found some warm straw and started to rub the horse's legs down while the stallion happily drank his fill from a watering trough. In the darkness, he could hear voices rising in anger as the ferryman protested the hour and Maesan politely insisted on crossing immediately. A moment later, Erin appeared at the stable door, leading her own mount.

"It seems we have a little time before we cross," she said. Her face was pale and drawn in the darkness, and Gaelin

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imagined his own fatigue must be showing as well. With a sigh, Erin began to tend to her horse. "Poor girl," she murmured. "You've had a long day."

"We'll be able to rest a bit when we cross into Mhoried," Gaelin offered. "A few hours, at least. For that matter, we'll have an hour or so right now."

Erin looked up and smiled. "Right now, I think I'm too tired to sleep, if you can imagine such a thing."

A companionable silence fell between them as they both worked on their horses, rubbing the animals' legs and brushing their coats. After a time, Gaelin said, "You know, I don't know much about you. We've spent days talking about Shieldhaven and my family, but you've said nothing of yourself."

Erin glanced at him over her horse's back. "There's not much to tell. My mother was a minor noblewoman of Coeranys, and my father was an elf of Siellaghriod. A mixed heritage isn't looked on too kindly in some lands, but I was well cared for."

"I traveled through Coeranys once, a few years ago."

"I haven't been back there for years." Erin paused. "I miss the place. It doesn't rain as much as it does here, and the winters aren't as cold. There's something about the land that you're raised in. It becomes a part of you."

"I know what you mean."

"I suppose you would, prince of Mhoried. I'm looking forward to seeing your homeland." Erin loosened the saddle straps for her horse, but left the saddle in place.

"Don't you miss your family?" Gaelin asked. The minstrel stopped for a moment. Her back was to him, and even in the darkness Gaelin could see her shoulders tense. He straightened from his work.

"My mother died some time ago," she said carefully, resuming her work. "I've never met my father. My mother's kin sent me away as soon as they could, rather than raise a half-elven child born out of wedlock. The White Hall was the only place that would take me in." She turned her head, glancing over her shoulder at Gaelin. "Keep that to yourself, if you don't mind. I'd rather not be the talk of the court."

"I'm sorry for bringing it up." Erin didn't reply, and Gaelin finished his work on Blackbrand in silence.

"My lord Gaelin!" Ruide called from the ferry landing, his

voice high and clear.

Gaelin took up Blackbrand's reins. "Ready?"

Erin turned away and led her mare back into the mist and the night. Gaelin followed with Blackbrand a moment later. At the landing, they found Maesan directing a small knot of his men as they boarded the ferry. Half a dozen grumbling villagers worked the boat, waiting for the next load of soldiers. Maesan saluted as Gaelin approached. "Your turn next," he said. "I've sent twenty men over, and they signal that all's quiet on the Mhorien bank."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way," Gaelin said. He coaxed Blackbrand onto the boat, leading the horse to a hitching post at one end. The boat rocked beneath the animal's weight, and Blackbrand snorted distrustfully. Erin, Madislav, and two of Maesan's soldiers filed in behind him to fill the boat.

"All right, that's enough for this trip," the ferrymaster barked. "Shove off!" Grunting with effort, the villagers leaned into their poles and pushed into the current. The river fog closed in around them almost immediately, and it seemed to Gaelin that he was drifting in some mournful netherworld, cold, wet, and lightless.

"Gaelin, look!" Erin clutched his arm and pointed back toward the Alamién village. He peered into the darkness and saw dozens of bobbing orange haloes sweeping into the town. The fog obscured the details, but he could see that riders bearing torches were rushing onto the landing. Shouts and the ringing of weapons reached his ears, muffled and distorted by the clinging mists.

"The Ghoerans must have been closer than we thought," rumbled Madislav.

"Ferryman! Take us back!" Gaelin said. "We've got to get the rest of the guards out of there!"

"I counted thirty-odd soldiers with horses waiting to cross, boy," said the master of the boat. "We can't take them all in one trip. Besides, you probably don't want to be in the middle of that."

Gaelin gripped the rail. "Half my men are back there!"

"So? The six men in this boat won't make a difference, Mhorien. I'm not putting this ferry about until the fighting's over." The ferryman challenged Gaelin with an angry glare.

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“Thanks for bringing your war down on my head.”

Gaelin took a step toward the man without realizing what he was doing, balling his fist. The fellow stood his ground defiantly. For a tense moment, Gaelin held his gaze, until a heavy hand came down on his shoulder.

“He is right, Gaelin,” Madislav said. “We must be keeping you away from Ghoere, and Captain Maesan will have to fight without us.” He peered off into the darkness. “I think he is not outnumbered too badly. He may drive them off yet, eh?”

Gaelin stood, watching, as the bargemen continued to pull for the other shore. The fighting receded into the night as they drifted further into the river. He couldn't stand the idea that he was running from a fight in which Mhorien soldiers were standing against an enemy in his name. Deliberately, he turned his back on the echoes of the conflict and strode to the front of the boat. The Mhorien bank was just ahead, a black mass looming out of the shadow and mist.

“We'll wait until daybreak and then see who holds the town,” he said after a moment. Instead of the relief he'd expected, there was only a cold and ashen feeling in his heart as the boat grounded on Mhoried's shores.



seven

The cell door opened with a rusty creak of protest. Mhor Daeric blinked in the sudden light of lanterns that seared his dark-adjusted eyes. He'd lost track of how long he had been incarcerated in his own dungeons. He guessed it was only a day or a day and a half, but with nothing to measure but the darkness and silence, it was impossible to tell. His head still ached, and there was a throbbing knot of pain right at the hinge of his jaw, but his thoughts were clear, and he no longer felt dizzy or nauseated. As best he could, he rose to confront his guards.

"Baron Tuorel wants to see you," grated a voice behind a lantern. The soldiers dragged him from his cell and escorted him from the dungeons to the lower levels of the castle. Daeric did his best to mask his shock at the number of Ghoeran soldiers who had mysteriously appeared in his castle.

The guards led him into the castle's chapel. The black-clad Iron Guard of Ghoere lined the walls, silent as oiled steel. By

the chamber's doors waited a handful of Ghoeran knights and lords, the leaders of Tuorel's armies. They watched Daeric enter with mingled contempt and triumph on their faces. The Mhor let his eyes slide past these lesser wolves, but he spied a face he knew. "Dhalsiel?" he said, pausing in his stride. "I see you've finally found companions suited to you. What was your price?"

The young count sneered. "I received no bribe," he said in a contemptuous voice. "I serve those who are strong enough to deserve my allegiance. Baron Tuorel will set matters right in Mhoried."

"If you betrayed your allegiance for that, you're stupider than I thought." Daeric turned his back on the Mhorien lord and marched ahead to the center of the room to meet his foe.

Baron Tuorel was standing in the center of the room, waiting for him with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes smoldered with a fierce hunger, a tangible desire for power that leaped to Daeric as he entered the room. Daeric glanced past Tuorel to take in the rest of the room. The emblems of Haelyn had been replaced by the signs of Cuiráécen, the Anuirean god of war. Red-robed priests clustered around the altar, watching him.

The baron nodded. "Good day, my lord Mhor," he said. "I trust your accommodations have not been too intolerable?"

"Forgive me, baron," Daeric replied. "I just smelled something that turned my stomach, and I'm in no mood to banter."

"Ah, young Count Dhalsiel. I suspect that your Baesil Ceried will sorely miss his troops in Cwllodon." Tuorel smiled. "My army should meet yours within the day, I expect."

"I'm surprised you're not there to lead your army in person."

"Lord Baehemon is capable of supervising the destruction of Ceried's force. Besides, I have matters requiring my attention in Shieldhaven, as you can see."

"Well, get on with it, then." The expectation of his imminent death did not disturb Daeric—he felt only sadness that his beloved Mhoried would fall under the heel of a conquering tyrant without a Mhor to defend it.

Tuorel's false grin faded. "Very well, I'll set to business." He stalked forward, halting an arm's reach from the Mhor. His eyes were cold as a serpent's. "It is my intent to divest you of the rule of Mhoried," he said. "You will participate in

the ceremony of investiture and pass to me the lordship of your kingdom.”

Daeric managed to contain his surprise, keeping his face an iron mask. Blooded lords who ruled kingdoms—as the Mhor did, and Tuorel, for that matter—enjoyed a mystical link to the lands they ruled, above and beyond the innate power they inherited from their ancestral lines. In a very real sense, the Mhor was Mhoried, and the strength of Mhoried’s wild and untamed lands, the hardiness and character of her people, surrounded him. The union of bloodline and realm lived in his veins. Presumably, Tuorel shared the same sort of bond with Ghoere.

Frowning, Daeric sought a glimpse of what was in Tuorel’s mind. Any blooded scion could wrest the power of his bloodline from Daeric by committing bloodtheft. In fact, the power of all the Mhorieds could be claimed by the lord who killed the last Mhoried. But if Daeric died heirless, the tenuous link between him and the country he ruled would simply dissipate. By acquiescing to Tuorel and willingly transferring the mystical link to the baron, Daeric would pass the divine right to rule Mhoried to Tuorel intact and unweakened. There was something much more important than himself, or his family, at stake here.

“Why, Tuorel? What do you hope to gain from this?”

Tuorel paced away, his gestures betraying a growing impatience. “One way or another, I mean for Mhoried’s strength to be mine. Isn’t it obvious? With Mhoried anchoring my northern flank, and Elinie my eastern marches, I can bring the rest of the heartlands to my banner within a year.”

“To what point?” asked Daeric.

“I mean to have the Iron Throne,” Tuorel said. “Once Anuire was the greatest of nations, an empire that stretched from the Sea of Storms to the Sea of Dragons. Now, look at us. Five centuries of strife and disorder have brought us to our knees. I will end that. If peace must be found at the point of a sword, then so be it.” He stepped close to Daeric, close enough that only the Mhor would hear his words. “*I am the one, Daeric,*” he said, a glimmer of feverish intensity showing in his eyes. “It’s been shown to me. I must have the strength. I *will* have the strength.”

The Mhor met Tuorel’s gaze. “My question remains unanswered,” he said. “You cannot rule Mhoried until I allow it. You may hold the lands, you may murder and threaten the

people, you can even wrest the power of the Mhoried blood from me and my children—but the divine right to rule the land will not be yours until I hand it to you. You will be an occupier, an invader, but never the king.”

“My lord Mhor, is it really necessary for me to remind you that I hold your children, your servants, and hundreds of your subjects here? I will have my way. Sooner or later, you will stand before Cuiráecen’s altar and you will speak the oaths that will make me the ruler of Mhoried.”

“After which, of course, you will slay me for my bloodline. I expected no less.”

Tuorel’s lips twisted in a bitter smile. “Actually, no. Our friend Bannier has requested that you be delivered into his hands, without a blade in your heart. Your bloodline would be quite a prize, but I decided it was a fair price.”

The Mhor considered his words. Tuorel was more ambitious than he had thought. The kingdom would be virtually worthless to him until he subdued the provinces that still held out for the House Mhoried. It was a surprising strategy, a move that declared his intent to fight for and *keep* his conquests in Mhoried. I expected him to kill me and then exact tribute and allegiance from Thendiere or whoever succeeds me, he thought, but I never believed that he would seek the throne for himself. Given that, the idea that Tuorel would simply allow Daeric himself to fall into Bannier’s hands was equally surprising. The baron need Daeric’s blood to strengthen himself enough to rule two kingdoms. “I’m surprised you haven’t run me through already, bargain or no bargain,” he said. “No one feels bound to keep his word to a traitor, after all.”

Tuorel actually looked as if he’d been wounded by the Mhor’s words. “I made a promise. I shall keep it. If Bannier desires the power of the Mhoried blood, it’s his hand that will claim it. For my own part, I am satisfied with the taking of your kingdom.”

“I am the invested ruler of Mhoried,” Daeric said. “You cannot divest me as long as I do not allow you to.”

Tuorel only smiled. He moved closer, lowering his voice so that only Daeric could hear him. “There’s our struggle, now, eh? I don’t doubt that you’d withstand any duress I could bring to bear against you—the stubbornness of the Mhors is

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legendary. But let's dispense with civility for a moment: *your children are in my hands*. And I've more than one, which means I could torture Ilwyn to death in front of your eyes, and then promise to do the same for Thendiere or Gaelin." He reached one gauntleted fist to Daeric's face and seized his jaw in a vise-like grip. Daeric reeled and gasped in pain as Tuorel's thumb ground into his swollen jaw. "I don't believe any man could watch more than one of his children die that way, do you?"

"Bastard," choked the Mhor. "When did you capture Gaelin?"

"My men took him at Iered. They're bringing him here now."

With crystalline certainty, Daeric knew Tuorel had lied. "You don't have Gaelin," he said. "He's still free."

Tuorel's eyes went hard. "I forgot about that damned truth-ear of yours," he muttered quietly. He let go of Daeric's face and turned away, only to bring his other hand flashing in a silver arc to slam into the Mhor's jaw. Daeric spun and fell to the cold marble of the floor, lights flaring in his eyes as he gasped in shock. He coughed blood and broken teeth onto the chapel floor, and then the pain came, burning hot and white in his mouth and jaw. Tears leaked past his swollen eyelids, but he didn't cry out. With the pain came a fierce joy and hope: if he could resist, if he could find death before Tuorel wrested his kingdom away from him, Gaelin would have a chance to win it back. As long as Gaelin remained alive and free, Ghoere's victory was incomplete.

Tuorel stalked away. He glared at the priests and the guards in the chapel, daring them to speak. He reached the open area before the altar and wheeled. "Take what comfort you can now, old man," he spat. "With your son roaming the land, I've no choice but to break you with torture until you scream for the chance to hand me your lands. And you won't be the only one to suffer, I promise. Thendiere and Ilwyn will pay for every heartbeat of your silence." He nodded to the guards on either side of Daeric. "Take him away," he said. "Give him some time to consider the circumstances of our next encounter."

The guards lifted Mhor Daeric by his arms and dragged him to his feet. He stumbled between them as they led him to the door and back down to the dark dungeons. Despite the

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pain that filled his mind, a sense of purpose dawned in his heart. If I find death before Tuorel breaks me, he thought, the divine right passes to Thendiere, and from him to Gaelin. A Mhor will follow me to rule Mhoried, even if the land is held by our enemies.

He held on to that thought as they dragged him back to his cell. Again, he was chained in the dark and left to the silence and the pain of his injuries. Hours or days passed, as he waited for his next meeting with Tuorel. He left his aching body and wandered in the corridors of his memory. Eventually, exhaustion overtook him, and he slept again.

Mhor Daeric was awakened by a clatter and thump outside his cell. Even as his eyes opened, he knew he'd just heard the guard fall to the floor, and he shook the cobwebs from his head. The sound of the lock turning brought him to full consciousness. Although spears of agony pinioned his arms and legs, he forced himself to sit up and swing his legs to the floor. "Who's there?" he asked quietly, eyes straining into the darkness.

"It's Thendiere, Father. Can you walk?" The door eased open, and the first prince appeared. His hand was heavily bandaged, and his face was bruised. Despite his injuries, a fierce gleam burned in his eyes, and in his good hand he held a highland fighting-knife, a long blade nearly the size of a small sword.

"Whether I can or not, I'm bloody well going to now," Daeric answered. He pushed himself to his feet, gritting his teeth against the pain that flared in his joints. "How did you get out of your cell?"

"I'm afraid it's my work, my lord." Tiery shuffled past Thendiere to take Daeric's hand. "I couldn't leave you in Tuorel's hands for another day." The old minstrel was pale with fatigue, and his breath whistled unevenly between his teeth. Behind him, a pair of Mhorien servants—a gaunt stablekeeper named Caede, and a short but powerful Brecht fletcher named Hans—bowed as Daeric emerged. Two Ghorans lay sprawled on the floor. With a grimace of pain, the Mhor stooped to take one man's sword.

"Excellent work, Tiery," he said.

"Hold your thanks until we escape," Tiery replied. "Tuorel's doubled the guard by night, just to make sure things like this don't happen. Getting out of Shieldhaven

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without a fight is going to be damned hard.”

“How about Ilwyn?”

“She’s being held in the south tower, my lord.”

The Mhor frowned, peering down the shadowy corridor as he weighed his options. He loathed the idea of leaving his daughter in Tuorel’s hands, but getting himself and Thendiere killed in an attempt to rescue her was certainly no better. Besides, if he and his son escaped, Ilwyn became a valuable hostage against the Mhorieds. Killing her after they escaped would be spiteful and shortsighted, even for Tuorel. “We’ll have to leave her for now, then,” he said at last. “We may be able to ransom her later.”

Thendiere’s face grew grim, but the prince nodded. “We should get moving,” he said.

With Caede leading the way and Hans bringing up the rear, they hurried down the hallway to the guardroom that controlled the dungeons. No less than six Ghoerans were there, but they were sprawled on the floor or slumped by tables, snoring loudly. The Mhor gave Tiery a strange look. “This is your doing?”

“Aye. In my younger days, I learned a trick or two of the magician’s art. Many bards do, you know.” Tiery chuckled. “Don’t worry; these fellows won’t wake for an hour or more, as long as we don’t rouse them.”

“Wouldn’t want to be in their shoes tomorrow,” Caede observed. “Tuorel’s likely to hang them for dereliction of duty.” At the far end of the room, they found the stairs leading up to the castle proper. The stableman halted and peered up the steps, looking and listening to see if anyone was coming down.

“Where do we go from here?” Thendiere asked. “The postern, over the battlements, out the gatehouse?”

“The gates will be guarded,” Daeric said, thinking. Suddenly, an idea struck Daeric, and he smiled. “Ah, I know! I almost forgot it was there! Make for the keep.”

The other men exchanged puzzled glances. The walls there were sheer stone, overlooking a hundred-foot drop. After a moment, Tiery laughed softly. “The secret stairs! I haven’t set foot there in forty years!”

The Mhor nodded to Caede. “To the keep, if you please. Let’s not get caught here talking about it.”

The stableman sprang up the stairs, taking them two at a

time as he hurried up into the gloomy passageway. The rest followed him, moving more slowly. Both Thendiere and the Mhor were weakened from their imprisonment and rough treatment, and Tiery's age was quickly wearing him out. The halls were dark, with lanterns burning at long intervals, just barely close enough to dispel the shadows that lay between them, and the silence was ominous. The familiar chambers and passages seemed filled with menace, as if Shieldhaven itself, not the soldiers of Ghoere, had become their enemy. They skirted the great hall by following a passage that ran near the castle's outer walls, past a long gallery of low stone arches filled with foodstuffs, water, and arms. Upon entering the keep's lower floors, they turned into one of the tower's turrets and followed a winding stair up.

At the next floor, they came to an ironbound wooden door that led into the keep's outermost passages. This floor of the tower was one level beneath the royal quarters, and contained chambers used by advisors and courtiers in times of peace. Across the hall stood a door leading into a unused archer's gallery. "Into the gallery," Daeric instructed Caede.

At that moment, one of the doors opened in the hall behind them, and a battle-scarred old captain emerged. He took one glance at the Mhorians and immediately backpedaled. "Guards! Guards! To the keep!" he bellowed.

Hans rushed forward, swinging a small hand axe, but the fellow twisted out of the way and caught Hans's weapon hand. The fletcher and the captain struggled over the axe, while the captain continued to shout for help.

"Damn the luck!" swore Daeric. "Caede, help Hans! Tiery and Thendiere, follow me!" He stepped forward and threw open the door, racing into the archer's gallery. Behind him, he heard the captain's cries suddenly cut short as Caede ran him through while his arms were pinned by Hans. But doors were slamming open throughout the keep, and men were shouting and running, filling the air with the clatter of mail and heavy footsteps.

The gallery was a long, narrow room with four wide, shuttered embrasures overlooking the fortress's outer walls. It served as a simple storeroom in times of peace. The Mhor ran forward, looking for the concealed stair. If he remembered correctly, there was a trapdoor hidden in the floor of an archer's perch. He searched quickly, conscious of the fortress

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waking around him. Behind him, the two servants slammed the door of the room shut and set their shoulders against it. "Hurry, my lord!" called Caede. "There's a squad of guards right behind us!"

Thendiere looked ahead, toward the gallery's opposite door. "They'll be around to try the other door in a moment. Whatever you're looking for, you'd better find it soon."

Daeric dropped to his knees, searching for the hidden iron ring that he knew was there. He groped in the darkness for an agonizing eternity before he felt the cold metal. "I've got it!"

He started to lift the trapdoor, but a voice spoke in the shadows: "My apologies, my lord Mhor, but I cannot permit you to escape. You are far too valuable to me." From a black shadow at the far end of the room, a figure suddenly rose, somehow *emerging* from the darkness, like a man standing up from a shallow stream. Strange wisps and streamers of shadow ran down Banner's dark cloak, and he stepped forward with a sinister smile. "Did you think I would trust your safekeeping to nothing more than fools with swords?" he said. "I thought it wise to place wards upon your cells in case something like this happened."

The Mhor slowly stood, raising the sword he'd taken from the guard. "Banner. I should have guessed you'd look after your prize." The shouting and rush of footsteps now surrounded them, as Ghoere's soldiers moved to surround them. In a matter of minutes they'd force the doors open. Daeric had to neutralize the wizard, and quickly, or they were all lost.

Banner knew it, too. He quickly raised his hands and opened his mouth to speak a spell. But before he voiced more than a syllable of his incantation, Thendiere roared and threw his heavy cane at the wizard. The cane turned once in the air before striking Banner's outstretched arms, breaking his concentration and the spell. Thendiere threw himself on the gaunt wizard, tackling him on the stone floor. Banner slammed into the stone flags with a grunt of surprise.

At the other end of the hall, the door flew open, and Ghoerans poured into the room, swarming over Caede and Hans. The two servants valiantly held their ground for a moment before they were overcome. With a mighty effort, Daeric heaved the trapdoor open, revealing a dark shaft leading straight down into the wall. Rusted iron rungs marked the

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ladder to the hidden door. Daeric barked at Thendiere. "Come on! We've not a moment to lose!"

The prince was still struggling with the wizard. Even as Daeric watched, Bannier freed a hand. The wizard shouted an unrecognizable word, and an aura of crackling blue energy formed around his fist. Seizing Thendiere by the shoulder, Bannier punched him awkwardly in the side of the neck, a weak and glancing blow—but the blue energy detonated with an actinic flare of light and a sharp *crack!* that left the Mhor's ears ringing. By the time the glare faded from his eyes, Bannier was rising from Thendiere's twitching body.

"Not again, you bastard," Daeric breathed. He rose to his feet. Behind him, the Ghoeran guardsmen closed in carefully, but Daeric didn't spare them a glance. Hot tears of rage flowed down his cheeks, as his mind dissolved in white-hot fury. "*Not again!*"

Screaming like an animal, he threw himself at Bannier and caught the wizard by the neck. His powerful rush carried the two halfway through an embrasure in the wall, battering open the wooden shutters. The guards clutched at his back, his legs, trying to restrain him.

With all the strength he had left, Daeric kicked and turned, deliberately hurling himself over the edge. With his hands locked around Bannier's throat, he dragged the wizard with him. The world spun crazily as they twisted, stars and walls flying past, but Daeric saw nothing but Bannier's face gagging for air. The ground rushed toward them, wind roaring in Daeric's ears as he fell spinning to the white snow and black rock hundreds of feet below. In the last moment of his life Daeric felt the wizard's body *change*, melting through his fingers like black ink as the shadows took him, and then the Mhor struck and bounced from the brutal rocks of Shieldhaven, his body tumbling into the dark forests below.

Aesele, I'm here—and the darkness came for him, too.

* * * * *

At that moment, Gaelin was standing by the banks of the Stonebyrn, gazing over the river. He peered through the fog, trying to make out what was happening on the other side by the landing of Norbank, but the Stonebyrn was a good four

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or five hundred yards wide at this point, and even Erin's elven-sight couldn't pierce the gray mists. The guards nervously talked and jested in low voices as they tended to their mounts or oiled their arms and armor. Something in the set of Gaelin's shoulders must have warned everyone he desired privacy, for his companions stayed clear of him.

He was surprised to discover his thoughts were turning to his childhood and upbringing in the court of Shieldhaven. The darkness and the cold, clinging river mists brought him to somber introspection, a sense of melancholy. He thought of the day his mother had died, the stern and unyielding face of his father as the Mhor broke the news to his young sons. The spark in his father's eye left and never returned. The only comfort Mhor Daeric took from that day forward was in cold, harsh duty.

"Gaelin."

He looked up, startled. No one was nearby; the soldiers had a small fire going about thirty yards away, and Erin was softly strumming her lute over there, but the voice had been very close. "Who's there?" he called in a low voice.

"Gaelin, it is your father." A shape was forming in the fog, a spectral image. It was coming nearer, striding over the waters and the mists, and now he saw a pearly, opalescent light playing in the fog. The figure that stood before him was the Mhor, but Daeric was a silver apparition of mist and moonlight, somehow brighter than the surrounding night, and yet more faint and distant than he could imagine.

Cold fingers of fear grew in Gaelin's heart. "Father? Is that you? Am I dreaming?"

A soft smile formed on the shade's face. *"We dream more than we know, Gaelin."* The ghostly shape drew nearer, reaching for him, and Gaelin felt a cool touch along the side of his face, even though there was nothing there.

A strange, cold certainty dawned in his heart. "You are dead," he whispered. "I can feel it."

Mist swirled and danced around the figure of his father. *"Bannier betrayed and killed us, Gaelin. Only you and Ilwyn are left. You are the Mhor now."*

Gaelin realized that he had fallen to his knees before the spirit. In the periphery of his awareness, he saw his companions surging to their feet in alarm at the apparition, and their cries of concern sounded faintly in his ears. He tried to deny

the spirit's words, but a thin, icy blade of grief pierced his chest. It grew stronger and colder with each passing moment. "No," he said. "No, it's not supposed to be this way. You have years to live yet, and Thendiere is to follow you. It can't be!"

The shade of Daeric grew colder, and a hint of the old sternness appeared. "What has happened is what was meant to be," he whispered. "Mhoried is in your hands, Gaelin. You must heal her wounds, and scatter her enemies. You must be her heart, her soul, her strength. She needs you, Gaelin, and if you refuse her call she will perish as surely as I have. You are the Mhor." The voice began to recede, growing more distant, and the apparition dimmed and drew back. "You are the Mhor."

"No! Wait!" cried Gaelin. He dug his fingers into the cold, dark dirt of the riverbank. A great racking sob escaped from his lips. "Father, come back, please!"

The apparition faded until it was no more than the glimmer of moonlight in the fog. Gaelin lifted his head to look after it, and saw one last silver mote dancing in the night. Very faint now, the voice of his father came to him one last time: "You are who you are. You cannot deny it." And with that, the apparition was gone.

For a long moment, Gaelin gazed after it. His companions were hurrying toward him, rising from the fireside and drawing their weapons. He rocked back on his heels, and held his hands to his chest, as if to crush the earth and soil to his heart to stop the pain. Through his tears, he saw the black rich dirt begin to glow, a leaping purple nimbus of faerie-light so faint and delicate that in an instant he was captivated without a thought. The purple halo grew brighter and darted up his arms, over his shoulders, and in a moment he was encased in the violet aura. He drew a deep, ragged breath; he was breathing living flame.

Suddenly the faint halo blazed furiously into a brilliant corona of searing fire. The heat and light flooded through his body, tearing from him an inhuman scream of ecstasy as his blood became liquid fire, hotter and purer than molten silver. In a moment of transcendent lucidity, he saw the great sweep of Mhoried, from the rich and ancient lands by the river through belts of forest and into the wild, snow-capped highlands of the north. He felt the pulse of life and vitality that swelled as the land itself welcomed and acknowledged him,

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a supernal extension of his own senses and body to include everything from the tiny circle of firelight where he knelt to the farthest reaches of the Mhor's domain.

"YOU ARE THE MHOR." A thousand voices spoke in his mind. "YOU ARE THE BLOOD OF MHORIED, THE HEIR TO THE THRONE OF BEVALDRUOR. YOU ARE THE MHOR."

The fire, its beauty, its awesome scope, terrified him. He felt as if he were standing on the edge of a bright abyss. He understood that if he embraced it, he would surrender his soul to an ancient and unknowable mystery. He covered his eyes to block out the raging brilliance. "I refuse," he said, his voice small and discordant.

"YOU CANNOT REFUSE."

"No! By Haelyn's grace, I beg you, find another!"

"YOU MUST BE THE ONE." The chorus was implacable, surrounding and crushing him with its power. A thousand rivulets of fire streamed from the ground over his body, crackling with a brilliance and heat that threatened to sear his mortal flesh to ash and desiccate his soul. Gaelin screamed, a howl of living fire that blazed like a beacon in the night.

And suddenly there was silence and darkness, and Gaelin found himself kneeling in the wet dirt of the Stonebyrn's banks. Madislav knelt to one side, shouting his name over and over, while Erin held his hand, weeping in fright. His vision cleared, and he slumped forward into her arms, exhausted. He could *feel* his blood, the ancient blood of the Mhorieds that had gained the divine fire of the fallen god Anduiras fifteen centuries ago. It raced through his veins and hammered in his heart and his temples, singing in his ears. Everywhere he looked, a shimmering violet tracery surrounded him, clinging to the earth like dew, streaming through the trees like sunshine.

Erin's voice called him back to the present. "Gaelin! What happened? Are you all right?" Her long red hair hung over her shoulders, cowlng her face as she leaned over him.

He closed his eyes, slowly sat up, and then climbed to his feet. His companions stepped back as he moved away, staggering into the night. He tried to gather his thoughts, to turn and face the others, but his legs gave out and he fell to his knees again. "What did you see and hear?" he asked over his shoulder.

Madislav was the first to answer. "We heard you speaking,

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and then you cried out," he said. "When I looked . . . you will say I am losing my mind, but I thought you were talking with your father."

"I saw someone, too," Erin said. "And then a moment later, there was a fire all around you. You fell to your knees, and . . . I don't know what I saw. Gaelin, what does it mean? What was it?"

He looked down, studying his fist. "My father has fallen by a traitor's hand," he said, "and my brother with him. The Mhor is dead." He raised his eyes and met their gazes, and he could tell that they sensed the truth of it too.

"Daeric and Thendiere are dead," Madislav said slowly. The Vos warrior rolled the words from his mouth, as if speaking them made it so. "Gaelin, you are Mhor."

There was a long silence then, broken only by the whispering of the wind in the trees. Then, toward the back of the group, one of the guards—a young woman named Niesa, whom Gaelin barely knew—suddenly drew her sword. The rasp of the steel on leather seemed harsh and loud. She pushed her way forward to stand in front of Gaelin and then dropped to one knee, offering her sword by the hilt. "By the Lord Haelyn and the Red Oak, I pledge my faith and service to you, Mhor Gaelin," she declared. Niesa looked up, and tears streaked her face. "For all my living days, I am your servant."

The other guards glanced at each other, and one by one they dropped to their knees and drew their swords, offering their oaths. Madislav and Ruide joined them a moment later, and then Erin knelt too. "By the White Hall, I pledge my faith and service to you," she said in a clear voice. Gaelin accepted their oaths, moving with a curious detachment, almost as if he were walking in a waking dream. When the last of his companions had stood again, he was surprised to see the first gray light of dawn tint the eastern sky.

"What shall we do, Mhor Gaelin?" asked one of the guards.

Gaelin looked around, searching for an answer. Finally, he said, "We'll wait one hour and see if Captain Maesan and the rest of the troop join us. Then we ride for Shieldhaven."



eight

Bannier stormed through the halls of Shieldhaven, his black cloak trailing behind him. His customary reserve was gone, and raw fury contorted his face. Dawn was an hour away, but Ghoere's soldiers crowded the passageways. The entire fortress had been roused by the fighting and alarms, and parties of armed Ghoerans still roamed the castle, seeking spies or collaborators who might have aided the Mhor's escape attempt.

The wizard swept around a corner and came to the door leading to the Mhor's audience hall. Noered Tuorel had claimed the chamber as his own headquarters and oversaw the occupation of Shieldhaven and the progress of the war from the room. Half a dozen of Tuorel's finest guards stood before the door. "Out of my way!" Bannier hissed.

The lieutenant sketched a shallow bow. "The Baron can see you now," he said. Bannier strode forward and roughly

shouldered the man aside, ignoring the murderous looks Tuorel's guards shot at his back. Inside, he found Tuorel standing beside a table of rich, ancient wood, a parchment map of Mhoried pinned to its surface by sturdy knives. Officers of the baron's army were gathered there.

Tuorel glanced up, his face betraying no annoyance at the interruption. "Well, Bannier, I see that you survived your encounter with the Mhor without injury. Quite remarkable, considering the fall." His smile vanished and a hard look came into his eyes. "What do you want with me this morning?"

"Do you have any idea what your bungling cost me today?" Bannier said in a loud voice. The officers fell silent. Some took a step or two back, fingering the hilts of their swords. "The Mhor and his son lie dead, you idiot! All we have to show for it is one frightened girl, and she's of absolutely no value to us as long as Gaelin remains free!"

Tuorel's face tightened. "I don't care for your tone of voice," he said. "Remember your manners, Bannier."

"And you remember that we had a bargain, Tuorel! The Mhor was to be delivered to my hands!" Bannier took a step forward, sweeping his staff over the table with a two-handed swing. The map tore in half, the wooden markers flying across the room. "All this is meaningless now!"

"Not to me, it isn't," Tuorel snapped. "Instead of running around screaming like a child, I'm planning to take this wretched land with or without the Mhoried line. It may be long, and difficult, and bloody, but if I have to put half of Mhoried to the sword to rule the other half, I can and I will. Now, make yourself useful, or get out of my way! I'll not be threatened, wizard."

"Is this how you keep your word, Tuorel?"

"Bannier, as I recall, Thendiere died by your hand, and the Mhor met his death while locked in hand-to-hand battle with you. If you find the Mhorieds are dying too quickly, perhaps you should stop killing them."

The wizard's eyes narrowed. "Strange, isn't it? I help you to take Shieldhaven, fulfilling my part of the bargain, but before you live up to your end, the Mhor and his son meet their deaths. An unfortunate coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"You've had them for three days and done nothing with them."

Bannier exploded. "*Because I need all the Mhorieds, you dolt!*"

"For what? You must be blooded, or you could not wield the sorcery I have seen you employ. And you have an impressive command of the magical arts. How much more can you want?"

"I have a debt to pay," Bannier hissed. "And I fulfill my obligations, no matter what it takes. You would be wise to do the same."

Tuorel folded his arms in front of his armored chest and regarded the wizard evenly. "If you must take the bloodline of the Mhorieds, you need only slay the last living Mhoried. There are two left now: Princess Ilwyn, here in Shieldhaven, and Prince Gaelin. Your designs haven't been thwarted, Bannier, merely delayed. For that matter, I can still invest myself as king of this miserable land. I couldn't coerce the Mhor into handing me the kingdom, but I may break Gaelin."

Bannier stopped his pacing to glare at the baron. "He's mine, Tuorel. I've already seen how your prisoners fare."

Tuorel's eyes blazed, but he spoke quietly. "Then go get him yourself. Clearly, you've no further use for my cavalry. I'll find more pressing business for those soldiers, I think. Good luck in your search for the prince." He turned away deliberately, taking up the study of a map hanging on the wall.

Bannier fumed in silence. Finally he scowled and said, "You said Gaelin could hold the key to a quick victory, Tuorel. How long will it take you to reduce Mhoried town by town?"

The baron didn't turn, but he shrugged in his heavy armor. "A few months, I would think."

"And what will Mhoried be worth to you, if you have to rule every square foot of it with a soldier? Will the Mhoriens march under your banner, or murder your soldiers in the dark of night?"

"I'll not argue the point, Bannier. The crown is no mere symbol—if I wrest the right to rule from Gaelin, my victory is complete."

"Then you'll agree that it suits both our purposes to capture the prince as swiftly as possible."

Tuorel eyed the wizard contemptuously. "Considering the way you've threatened me, I'm not sure how much longer I should trust you. But, for the sake of argument: Yes, I agree Gaelin must be captured. Do you have any suggestions?"

Bannier smiled, a serpentine expression that showed no hint of warmth. "Sooner or later, the prince will surface. I know Gaelin; he won't stay away from Mhoried, not if he thinks the land is in danger. Give him time to get his feet under him, and he may even claim the Mhor's seat and stand against you, Tuorel."

"That would be unacceptable. It will take long enough to pacify this land without a figure like the Mhor's son for the Mhoriens to rally around. Even if he's an idiot, he'll be dangerous to me."

"Make certain Gaelin isn't killed, baron," Bannier said quickly. "Remember our bargain—do not deny me the prince. Believe me, it's in your best interest to make certain I remain your ally. You can't even guess at the resources I command." The wizard whirled in a flutter of night-black cloak and strode away, leaving a noticeable chill lingering in the air.

Ignoring hostile glares from the Ghoeran lords and officers he encountered, Bannier stormed back to his tower. He passed the wards that guarded his chambers and barred the door behind him. Pacing his chamber absently, he considered his options. After a moment's thought, he selected a book of divinations from the shelf and paged through until he found the spell he wanted. "It will do," he murmured. He sat down to study the spell's cryptic symbology.

By sunrise, he was ready to begin. The first rays of dawn streamed into Bannier's conjuring chamber, striking fiery gleams from a spiral of argent runes inlaid in the floor of the room. The wizard circled the design, pausing to speak a phrase or two of a forgotten language or throw a pinch of metallic powder into the air. In the center of the design stood a black bowl, filled with a dark liquid. Reading from a book cradled in his left arm, Bannier circled the bowl one last time, and spoke the spell's final word. Gleaming silver energy coalesced around the spiraling runes, swirling toward the center where the bowl waited.

Bannier set down his tome of spells, and hurried over to peer into the dark pool within the bowl. Spells of seeking and spying did not come easily to him. This enchantment was the most potent scrying-spell he knew. Inside the bowl, the dark fluid rippled strangely, and its surface suddenly became a single sheet of gleaming silver.

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The wizard rubbed his hands together in satisfaction, and then gazed into the reflective surface. In his mind's eye, he conjured an image of Gaelin as he had last seen him—a tall, broad-shouldered man, dark hair marked by the white streak of the Mhoried blood. As his mind brought the image to life, an identical image appeared in the pool before his eyes. The face was a little more drawn and unkempt, and the image of the pool showed Gaelin saddling his horse, preparing for the day's journey. Behind the prince, Banner spied the sparkle of water. He recognized the Stonebyrn's mighty flow. He returns to Mhoried already! the wizard thought.

With a feral grin, Banner let the spell lapse and stepped away from the silver basin. "So, you're coming to me, are you?" he said quietly. "You'll save me a great deal of trouble, Gaelin. Now, how do I set the hook?" Banner descended into the darkness of his chambers to prepare for Gaelin's return.

* * * * *

The dawn soon cleared the mists from the Stonebyrn, burning the fog away within an hour of sunrise. Gaelin felt more alert and alive than he could ever remember; he wondered if some new legacy of the Mhoried bloodline was now emerging, or if it was nothing more than exhaustion and delirium that lied to his senses. Something in his perception, in his mind, was different this morning—he knew that much. The air seemed crisper, the sounds and sights registering in his eyes and ears with preternatural clarity.

When the fog cleared, Madislav sent two scouts back across the river. They landed and met with some of the townspeople, then returned almost immediately. "I'm sorry, my lord, but neither our men nor Ghoere's hold the town now," they reported. "The townsfolk say that Captain Maesan was forced to flee, but the Ghoerans rode off soon afterward."

"They may have been worried that the Alamiens would come after them," said the first sergeant of the guards, a weather-beaten old war-hound named Toere. With Maesan out of reach, he commanded the remnants of Gaelin's escort.

"Maesan might be trying for the next landing," Gaelin said. "Failing that, he could probably swim the horses across the river to Winoene. Either way, we'd only be guessing if we

tried to meet up with him again." He ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "Sergeant, give the order to mount up."

In a few minutes, they were on their way again. For the first time in a week or more, the weather was good; the temperatures were cool, but not unseasonable, and the rains of the last few days were gone. The guards formed a close cordon around Gaelin, Erin, and Ruide, while Madislav scouted ahead. The gentle, rolling hills and broad farmlands of Cwll-don were a welcome sight for Gaelin. For a brief moment, he could pretend that all was well in Mhoried.

They followed a worn cart track leading away from the ferry landing and quickly found themselves on the Old Stoneway, an ancient road that followed the Stonebyrn's path from Riumache all the way through Torien's Watch to the passes of the Stonecrowns. "Let's head south," Gaelin said. "If I remember right, the Cwll-don Pike meets this road about ten miles down the Stoneway. I don't know this area well enough to head cross-country."

"The pike leads to Shieldhaven?" Erin asked.

Gaelin nodded. "It's the quickest way from here."

"What do you expect to find there?"

Gaelin gave her a helpless look. "How should I know? Once I get home, maybe I can decide what to do." He looked away, studying the road. Lord Anduine, Count Baesil, Tiery . . . someone at Shieldhaven would be able to tell him what he should do next. Erin watched him, but she kept her opinions to herself.

To keep up a fast pace, the party alternated between easy canters and walking. After an hour, they spied a gray smudge in the sky to the south. Eventually, they made out a half-dozen or more twisting pillars of smoke.

"There has been fighting," Madislav observed. "We are maybe riding into trouble, no?"

"Those are homes and farms burning," Gaelin frowned. "Better keep our scouts on their toes."

"I will check on them," Madislav said. He spurred his horse and rode ahead, vanishing over the next rise.

The pillars of smoke drew Gaelin's eye like an accusation. Can I live up to this burden? he thought. I know nothing of ruling. He dropped his eyes as he considered what had happened. His mind kept returning to one thought: Why did this

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have to fall to me?

He didn't notice Erin riding closer until she reached out to touch his shoulder. Startled, he straightened and met her eyes. Her red hair gleamed in the sun, wreathing her head in a copper halo. "Your heart is heavy this morning, my lord Mhor?"

The title set his stomach to fluttering. He could believe it had all been a dream, as long as he was left to his own reflections, but hearing the words on Erin's lips made it real. "Don't call me that, please. I'm no different than I was yesterday. 'Gaelin' was fine then, and it's fine now." He looked away, studying the young green fields around them.

"That's not true, you know," said Erin quietly. "Whether you wanted it or not, you have inherited this land. Of course you are different. Your bloodline, the blood of the House Mhoried, is inextricably linked with the land. I saw it happen, last night; the land poured out its power, waking your blood, and today you are the Mhor, for better or worse. Until you die or forswear your birthright, there can be no other. You must face that, for yourself and for your homeland."

He turned to face her. "And how should you know? My heart, my mind, my body, they're all the same. I haven't become anything I wasn't a day ago, Erin. And even if I've inherited my father's throne, no one came along last night to tell me how to rule. Haelyn didn't appear from the skies while I was sleeping to give me the courage of a legendary hero or the wisdom of one of the ancient kings. *I don't know anything more than I did before this happened.*" He twisted his arm out of her grasp.

Erin's eyes flashed. "If you feel that way, I suggest you learn, and fast. You're the Mhor, and these people need you." She kicked her mare into a trot and rode away.

In another mile, they came to the crossroads of Pikesend. In the village green, at the meeting of the Pike and the Stoneway, they found a battered group of Mhorien cavalry. There were more than one hundred men on the green, many wounded, and it only took a glance to tell they'd recently fought and lost. The set of their shoulders and their haunted eyes were signs enough. Gaelin absorbed their injuries, the ragged look of the men and the bloodstained surcoats, and did not allow himself to look away.

Sergeant Toere led the party through the scattered squadron

to an open space near the village's covered well. A muddied standard was thrust into the ground at a slight angle, marking the location of the commander. A captain with a bandaged torso watched them ride up, his eyes searching the group for another officer. When he spied Gaelin's armor and coat of arms, he saluted. "Welcome, Sir Knight," he said. "You're a long way from the army."

Gaelin returned his salute. "What unit is this, Captain?"

"Lord Caered's cavalry, under Count Baesil. You are?"

"I'm Prince Gaelin." He ignored the captain's startled look. "We've just returned to Mhoried. Can you tell me where Ghoere's army is now? Or Count Baesil?"

"Of course, my lord." The captain stood and pointed south. "The main body of Ghoere's army camped about seven miles that way last night, though I expect they're moving by now. Count Baesil's withdrawing north." He looked back the way Gaelin had come, but farther east. "I'd guess he's maybe twelve miles off in that direction." The captain dropped his arm, and seemed to sag a little before meeting Gaelin's eyes. "The war's not going well, my lord. Baesil tried to stand against Ghoere at Cwllodon Field, yesterday morning. It was a hard fight, and we lost a lot of men. It's a miracle Baesil saved any of us from that disaster."

Gaelin felt his heart lurch. He swung himself out of the saddle and dropped to the ground, taking Blackbrand's reins in his hand. "And the Mhor, and Prince Thendiere?"

The captain blinked. "They weren't there, Prince Gaelin. Count Baesil brought Shieldhaven's muster to Cwllodon, but the Mhor's party never arrived. We guessed they'd been held up somewhere."

Gaelin found this inexplicable. Bannier must have struck down his father and brother in Shieldhaven's halls, but what about the loyal guards and knights all around them? Even if they had been killed, why had the army of Shieldhaven missed the march? More than ever, he needed to get back to the capital and learn for himself what had happened. For the moment, he set the issue aside. "What about Baesil? What's his plan?"

"I wouldn't know, my lord," the captain replied. "He's drawing back, though. The army's been mauled, and he doesn't stand a chance of engaging Ghoere's host and winning. He's running for the highlands, to hole up and lick his

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wounds. Our orders were to screen the retreat.”

Gaelin asked, “You said the losses were bad. How bad?”

The captain shook his head. “Baesil led six thousand men onto the field, including the levies of Tenarien and Cwlldon. I don’t think half that number escaped.” He glanced at his men, and lowered his voice. “There were lords who didn’t show up for the battle, my lord. Maesilar, Balteruine, and Dhalsiel didn’t answer the call to arms.”

“Dhalsiel, too?” Gaelin closed his eyes. If the army of Mhoried had been beaten that badly, it would be nearly impossible to hold the river provinces against Ghoere’s attack—Tenarien and Cwlldon were lost for sure, and probably Byrnnor as well.

Madislav spoke up. “What happened to you?” he said, sweeping a thick-muscled arm to indicate the squadron.

“We met up with a squadron of Ghoeran marauders last night. They’re all over the province, riding down stragglers from the battle, encircling the wagons and footsoldiers in the rear.” The captain grinned fiercely. “Cwlldon Field might have been a disaster, but there’s a hundred less Ghoerans to boast of it. We cut ’em to pieces, my lord. I don’t believe they thought we’d have any fight left.”

“Good work,” said Gaelin, raising his head. These men deserved whatever praise he could give them; they had a long, hard fight ahead of them. “We’re heading for Shieldhaven to find out what’s keeping them out of the fight. Send a messenger to Count Baesil tonight, telling him that I’ve returned. I’ll try to join him in a couple of days, or send word if I can’t.”

“I’ll send a man right now, if you like.”

“Very well. Good luck, Captain.” Gaelin swung himself back up into Blackbrand’s saddle, and waited for Sergeant Toere’s men to set out along the Pike. For the rest of the day, they followed the Cwlldon Pike east from the village, striking across the fields and forests of Mhoried’s heartland. They passed a great number of farms, bordered by ivy-grown walls of fieldstone and broad thickets or copses. They encountered no more Mhorien soldiers, or any scouts or marauders from Ghoere’s forces, but Gaelin was conscious of tension in the air. Too many fields and houses were empty. Even the small animals and birds seemed scarce.

By the day’s end, they were near the ancient belt of forest

that ran through Mhoried's heart; the hills in the middle distance were dark with woods. Madislav found a good campsite in a hollow a little way off the road, screened by a large copse. After tending to Blackbrand and eating a light supper, Gaelin excused himself and wandered away from the red glow of the campfire. Idly, he wondered how far away the light could be seen. It was a clear night, but the trees would screen the light well.

Just over the hollow's lip, he encountered the sergeant's pickets, two young soldiers who stood silently under the shadow of the trees, keeping watch. Gaelin greeted them quietly and moved on, letting his feet carry him where they would. He tried to think ahead to what he would do when he returned to Shieldhaven. Thendiere, Liesele, his father . . . Gaelin realized he had not even begun to confront their deaths. He'd lost few friends or relations in his lifetime, not since his mother had died, and suddenly, in the space of one week, his life seemed three-quarters emptied. He slumped to the ground, leaning against a weathered oak. "What am I going to do?" he said aloud.

The silence and darkness held no answers for him. He buried his head in his hands and tried to fight through the grief, feeling hot tears escaping from the corners of his eyes. A long time later, Gaelin was roused from his thoughts by excited cries from the camp. He shook himself, rubbed his face, and rose to face the dim firelight. "What on earth?" he muttered. He made his way back toward the hollow, picking up speed. A man on horseback sat across the fire from Gaelin, speaking urgently with the soldiers nearby. Erin and Madislav crowded close, questioning the fellow. "I must be getting Gaelin," the Vos said.

"No need, Madislav, I'm here." Hearing his voice, the other soldiers edged back, clearing his path.

"Prince Gaelin," said the man on horseback, bowing deeply. "I'm glad I found you." He was dressed in a doublet of green and white, and wore a slender sword by his side. A courier from Shieldhaven! Gaelin realized. Of course. The Cwllodon Pike would be the fastest route between the capital and Baesil's army. "I am Walden of Bevaldruur, my lord. I bear messages for Count Baesil, from Lord Anduine."

"What news have you of the Mhor?" Gaelin demanded.

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The courier's face fell. "My lord prince, I don't know how to tell you, but . . . the Mhor is dead. Ghoeran assassins slew him in Shieldhaven, last night. These are the tidings I bring Count Baesil."

"I know," Gaelin replied. "How did it happen?"

Walden struggled to find words. "A traitor opened the postern gate to a band of cutthroats, in the dark of night. They overcame the Mhor's guards before anyone realized they were in the castle."

"What of Thendiere?"

"The First Prince requires your presence immediately, my lord," the courier said. "He is holding Shieldhaven now."

"Thendiere is not dead?" Erin's brow furrowed, and she stole a glance at Gaelin.

"No, my lady." Walden returned his attention to Gaelin. "My lord prince, Count Baesil must hear my tidings. I am sorry for the Mhor's death, but I must go."

Stunned, Gaelin dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Of course. You'll find Baesil retreating to Byrnnor." Without another word, the courier rode out of the camp and spurred his horse to a gallop once he reached the pike. The hoofbeats faded quickly in the heavy night air. Gaelin felt his way to a seat by the fire and sat down, staring into the flames.

"Could you have been mistaken, Gaelin?" Erin sat down beside him. "You were right about the Mhor, but maybe you misunderstood about Thendiere."

"No, I know what I heard," he answered. "And I felt the land's power, too. You saw that. It wouldn't have happened if Thendiere still lived."

He stared into the fire. "We have to get to Shieldhaven to find out what happened."

* * * * *

The evening of the following day, Gaelin and his friends caught sight of the proud towers of Shieldhaven, the Mhor's banners fluttering overhead in a stiff breeze. They'd found the road empty of traffic, meeting only a handful of peasants and woodsmen during their ride.

The day was brisk and slightly overcast, returning to the common weather of a Mhorien spring—cool and wet. Gaelin

was looking forward to a night of sleeping in a real bed after a week of traveling, although he knew he'd be lucky to find the time to sleep at all for the next few days. The sun was setting as they emerged from the forests and started across the broad belt of farmland that surrounded the city of Bevaldruor and Shieldhaven itself. The valley seemed empty as well, although they could see a few people abroad.

At the foot of the causeway, Gaelin paused for a moment, gazing up at the fortress on its rocky hilltop. The road snaked back and forth under the commanding gaze of the battlements, climbing a hundred feet to the hilltop in four stone-buttressed switchbacks. Atop the gatehouse towers floated the twin standards of Mhoried and the Mhor.

"Thendiere must still live," Ruide observed. "The Mhor's banner is still flying."

"I know it happened," Gaelin said, almost speaking to himself. "There can't be any doubt of it, can there?"

"Or they've been deceived," Erin said.

Gaelin scowled. "There are hundreds of minor lords, men-at-arms, courtiers, and attendants in and around the castle. I can't conceive of a conspiracy so far-reaching that my father and brother could be killed and the assassins would be able to hide the truth."

They started up the causeway, following Toere's guards. The brooding battlements possessed an air of watchfulness that Gaelin found threatening. He found himself looking at the fortifications and noticing just how formidable were the castle's defenses. At the top of the causeway, they found a detachment of guards, dressed in the ceremonial arms of House Mhoried. They snapped to attention and saluted as Gaelin rode past. He followed Toere and his men into the courtyard beyond the gatehouse, and started to dismount.

In the lengthening shadows, it took him a moment to spot the gibbet that stood at the far end of the court, beside the entrance to the great hall. A dozen bodies hung from the gallows, turning slowly from creaking nooses. He stopped dead, one foot still in the stirrup. "What happened here?" he said softly. He recognized several of the men—the Brecht smith, Hans, was hanging at one end, with the groom Caede beside him. In the center, one frail body twisted far enough on its rope, and despite the coming darkness Gaelin knew it was Tiery.

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A terrible suspicion was dawning in Gaelin's heart, but it was Madislav who caught on first. "Vstaivgate l'yud!" he shouted. "It is a trap! The castle has been taken!"

From the innermost arch of the gatehouse, the mighty portcullis dropped. The capstans clattered in protest as the gate fell, striking the ground with a deafening crash. Three or four of Toere's guards were trapped inside the gatehouse tunnel; a moment after the gate's fall, their screams rang in the stone passageway as hidden archers cut them to pieces. Gaelin whirled in panic; everywhere Ghoeran soldiers were appearing on the battlements, crossbows at the ready.

Shieldhaven's battlements and towers may have been primarily intended for defense against a foe outside the walls, but as last resort the battlements also faced *inward*, providing overlapping fields of fire and channeling an enemy into a great stone coffin from which there was no escape.

Gaelin swung himself back into the saddle and cast about desperately, seeking some way out. With the portcullis in place behind them, a dash back out the front gate was out of the question—and even if it weren't down, it would be suicide to run the gauntlet of arrow slits that lined the passage. Blackbrand reared and snorted, all too aware of Gaelin's panic as he wheeled the horse, his eyes darting everywhere. Toere and his guards backed themselves into a tight circle around Gaelin, Erin, and Ruide. How did Shieldhaven fall? thought Gaelin. How could Tuorel have brought this many men to take the castle?

"Lord Gaelin! What do we do?" called Toere, his voice hard and shrill. A few of his men had their own crossbows ready, pointing ten bows against the hundred or more that held the battlements against them.

"Why aren't they shooting?" Erin muttered beside him.

"I don't know," he said, responding to both questions.

There was a sudden stir on the battlements of the keep itself, overlooking the great hall. Bannier strode out onto the wall, flanked by a distinctive figure in black armor, decorated with a wolf's-head symbol.

Tuorel of Ghoere raised his arm, and the sharpshooters on the battlements placed their weapons to their shoulders. He lifted his visor and leaned forward, studying the tiny knot of Mhoriens in the center of the courtyard. "So, Prince Gaelin, you have returned home at last!" he called. "I am Baron Noered

Tuorel, lord of Ghoere." He gestured at the wizard standing beside him, and added, "I presume you already know Bannier."

"I see my courier found you," the wizard observed. "Good. It saves me the trouble of tracking you down."

"I've nothing to say to you, traitor!" Gaelin called. A brilliant, white-hot fury was building in his heart. The sight of Tuorel and Bannier standing on the battlements of his home, beneath his father's banner, and playing at courtesy suddenly inflamed Gaelin past all semblance of fear or reason. He met Tuorel's eyes. "Tell your men to shoot, jackal! I'll not plead for my life with you!"

Erin whispered, "Gaelin, I grant you we're in trouble, but don't give him ideas! Hear him out first. You never know what he might have to say." She grasped his hand in a surprisingly strong grip. "*You can't avenge your family if you're dead.*"

Tuorel smiled at Gaelin's defiance, but his eyes remained cold as marble. "All right, Gaelin. I can see that you're not without courage, and I respect that, so I'll get to the point. You hold the key to Mhoried; I want you to surrender your regency of Mhoried to me in a ceremony of investiture. If you agree, I will spare your companions and your guardsmen. They will be free to leave Mhoried, unmolested."

"And what of Prince Gaelin?" Erin called. "After he gives you the land his family has ruled for a thousand years, what then?"

Tuorel shrugged. "He knows I can't allow him to leave. He will be Bannier's prisoner. But he can spare many lives by cooperating, I assure you. Including your own, woman." Tuorel paused a moment. "Gaelin, your sister Ilwyn still lives. She will be spared with the others."

Gaelin's fury burned brighter and purer, like a song of rage that danced in his blood, infusing his whole body with iron strength. Distantly, he recognized this must be a blood-gift brought about by the inheritance of Mhoried's power. But while his muscles seemed almost ready to burst with the brilliant fire, his mind transcended the anger that had sparked him. His thoughts ran with a clarity and depth he had never before experienced, a marvelous comprehension that worked so swiftly it seemed that time itself had slowed. And in this state, an idea came to him, an idea so desperate and mad that it must have been born of insanity. He spoke quietly, carefully pitching his voice to carry only a few feet: "Listen, everyone.

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In a moment or two, on my signal, we're all going to charge the great hall. Stay on your horses and follow me. We've got to get out of the courtyard."

Madislav chuckled drily. "We'll be killed for certain. Ah, well, I am not trusting Tuorel to let us go, anyway."

Erin drew in her breath. "Gaelin, that's insane."

"I can't give this bastard Mhoried. My life's nothing against that." He tapped Blackbrand's flanks and walked the horse a step or two ahead, glaring up at Tuorel. "Tell me one thing, Tuorel: What happened to my father and brother? How did they die?" Toere and Madislav sidled close up beside him. He realized that they intended to use their own bodies to screen him from the hail of crossbow fire that would follow his first move.

The baron frowned, and weighed his words. "Very well, Gaelin. Bannier helped us take Shieldhaven almost a week ago. We captured your father, your brother, and your sister then, although Liesele died in the attack. My apologies—that was an accident. Two days ago, your father and brother managed to escape their cells. They died in the attempt to leave Shieldhaven." He shook his head. "I regret their deaths, Gaelin."

"Baron, you invaded Mhoried, and you picked this fight. There are no accidents here—the blood of my family is on your hands, and I intend to see you dead for it!"

"Brave words, Prince Gaelin, for a man who stands a word away from death. Now, lay down your weapons and dismount. I'm growing tired of this conversation."

Gaelin realized he was never going to get the chance he was looking for. At the top of his lungs he bellowed, "*Bannier—NOW!*" and spurred Blackbrand for all he was worth. The horse leaped forward, the rest of the Mhoriens a step behind him.

On the battlements surrounding the courtyard, dozens of crossbowmen hesitated, looking up to Tuorel for orders. A good number of those closest to the wizard spun to train their bows on him, expecting treachery from the sorcerer. Even Tuorel whirled to face the wizard and had his sword half-out of its sheath. Bannier himself stood absolutely still, momentarily taken aback. In that brief instant, Gaelin's party galloped for the steps leading to the great hall.

For every Ghoeran who hesitated or looked away, two kept their aim on the Mhoriens. From every side, crossbows

thrummed, and the air hissed with bolts. Fifteen of Sergeant Toere's guards surrounded Gaelin, Erin, and Ruide; nine fell in the first volley, wounded or killed by the deadly rain of quarrels. In one flashing moment of confusion and terror men and animals were falling and screaming in the courtyard.

A bolt struck Gaelin in his left hand, punching through his leather-and-steel gauntlet like paper. He ignored the burning fire that raced up his arm, and suddenly turned Blackbrand from the steps to the great hall, toward the door to the kitchens. He saw Toere lurch in his saddle, crumpling around a bolt buried in his breastplate. The soldier sagged but somehow clung to his saddle, raising his shield to try to screen Gaelin against the deadly fire. A couple of steps behind him, another quarrel took Ruide's horse in the neck, and the animal stumbled and fell, pitching the valet heavily to the stone flags. The horse rolled over Ruide, crushing him.

Gaelin ran Blackbrand into the kitchen door, hard, the horse rearing and turning his head aside to burst the door off its hinges. Thanking Haelyn that the baron's men hadn't barred the door, he spurred the stallion down into the roaring heat and smoke of the castle's kitchens. Servants scattered from his path. "One side!" Gaelin called, ducking over Blackbrand's neck and galloping through the room. Pots and pans clattered and fell in his wake. Behind him, Erin followed on her gray mare, with Toere and his surviving guards driving their horses after them.

Gaelin paused and looked over his shoulder to see how many had managed to follow him into the keep. At the doorway, Madislav's horse balked at going inside and reared. Cursing loudly, the Vos swung down from the animal, trying to use it for cover, but a bolt suddenly appeared in the side of his chest. He grunted and fell back against the wall, and a moment later another whirring dart struck a glancing blow across his forehead. Madislav spun and fell in a loose heap.

"Madislav! No!" Gaelin started to turn Blackbrand, but Erin caught his reins.

"Gaelin, you can't! Lead us out of here, or none of us will live to see the morning!" Gaelin noticed that a quarrel was sticking out of her calf, just below the knee, and her face was pale as china. "The others are gone, Gaelin, Madislav too. You can't do anything for them."

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He hesitated a moment longer and then jerked the reins away and turned Blackbrand toward the passages leading into the castle's depths. With a loud cry, he kicked the horse into a stumbling, awkward run, ducking beneath the low archways that divided the passages and chambers of the great hall.

He turned into a long, stone-dressed passageway that ran across the keep's lower floor, toward Bannier's tower. At the far end of the passage, a pair of Ghoeran guards appeared. Gaelin urged Blackbrand into a thundering charge. The passage was just large enough for him to rise in the saddle and swing his sword, cutting down the man on his right, while the fellow on the left was knocked flying back by the horse's charge. At the end of the passage, he paused to see who was still with him.

"Gaelin! Where are we going?" said Erin.

"The sally port," Gaelin replied. "We can't go back the way we came, and we can't ride around in Shieldhaven forever. It's the only way out, as far as I know."

Toere was hunched over his saddle. His lips were blue, and a trickle of dark blood leaked from his mouth. "It'll be guarded."

"I know. But we don't have any other choices."

Toere nodded. He gestured at two of the guards with them. "Take the lead, we're heading for the sally port." Looking back to Gaelin, he said, "Stay behind these two, my lord Mhor, and let me bring up the rear."

Gaelin didn't argue. The soldiers led the way, turning down another passageway. They encountered a few scattered servants but no more guards for the moment, until they came to a small door of iron plate at the end of a hall. A pair of Ghoerans stood there, manning two arrow slits that looked out over the foot of the wall. Shieldhaven's sally port was designed to give the castle's defenders a place from which they could sortie if the main gatehouse was under attack. There was a band of only fifteen or twenty feet of negotiable slope between the castle and the hillside; an enemy who bypassed the main gate to attack the sally port would find himself clinging to a cliff's edge, just under the battlements of the castle.

The Ghoerans turned in astonishment at the clatter as six horsemen thundered into the small chamber. Their crossbows weren't even cocked, and they had no chance against Toere's soldiers. In a moment, the troopers had the door unlocked and unbarred. Gaelin opened the door carefully, glancing up

at the dark battlements overhead.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Erin asked.

"Tuorel or Banner may have guessed we'd come this way. There might be men on the battlements who can fire at us the moment we set foot outside," Gaelin said.

Erin smiled grimly. "As you pointed out a moment ago, we certainly can't stay here." She thought for a moment. "I may have something I can do to help." Tilting her head back, she began to sing a strange song, using words that sounded elvish. Gaelin realized that she was casting a spell of some kind. In a moment, she finished, and gloom settled over the room, as impenetrable as black ink. In a moment his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could see again, although only in shadows and gray silhouettes.

"Erin? What is this?"

"Aspell of invisibility, a lesser magic I learned a few years ago. We must hurry, Gaelin—it won't last long."

"But I can still see you," he protested.

"It's impenetrable from the outside. Those who look at us will see nothing. They'll have a tough time finding targets for their crossbows in this, I believe."

Toere rode a little closer and slid down from his horse, coughing. He leaned on the animal's side and said, "Go now, Mhor Gaelin. I'll stay behind to hold the gate."

"Toere, you'll be killed," Gaelin said.

The sergeant grimaced and coughed again. "I've not got much longer, anyway. I may be able to discourage them from following you for a few minutes." He staggered over to one of the Ghoerans and began winching the fellow's crossbow. "Go on, Prince Gaelin, get going!"

Gaelin bowed his head. "My thanks, Toere." He tapped Blackbrand's flanks and rode out into the open again, under the looming walls. Gaelin could hear the men moving around up there, shouting to each other. Erin stayed beside him.

"Don't move too far from me, or you'll be seen," she said. "And keep silent! We can still be heard."

Gaelin walked Blackbrand to the cliff's edge and peered down. "Good, it's still here," he whispered. "Follow me exactly—this is a damned dangerous stunt, but we don't have time to ride around the castle."

Erin leaned out of her saddle and looked down the rocky

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slope. "You must be kidding," she hissed.

"I tried it once, years ago," he replied. "Tuorel's men would have to be fools to follow us, right?" Blackbrand balked at first, but Gaelin coaxed him over the edge, and instantly found himself sliding down the slope sideways. Blackbrand neighed in terror in a scree of dust and gravel. He reached the first outcropping and turned the horse to the other side, scrabbling desperately for the next foothold.

The voices above shouted an alarm. Gaelin could only guess what they might be seeing, but he knew that the rockfall and the horses' panicked whinnies made it fairly obvious that they were here. Erin gasped in fright as her horse lurched and slid. "Gaelin! This is madness!"

Behind her, one of the remaining guards lost control of his horse. Both animal and man toppled forward, their descent turning into a lethal plunge. Gaelin ignored them, since every ounce of his attention was devoted to keeping himself alive. Then the slope leveled, and in a few heartbeats Gaelin and Blackbrand were plunging downhill through the pines that clung to Shieldhaven's flanks. The castle seemed impossibly high and distant, and the forest now screened them from view.

At the foot of the hill, Gaelin reined in Blackbrand and looked around. Erin was still with him, along with two guardsmen. He was stunned. That's it? he thought. Twenty of us rode into Shieldhaven, not half an hour ago. The brilliant white madness that had preserved his life through the ambush and the wild escape died as quickly as it had come, and the pain of his injury—the bolt that transfixed his hand—came surging back.

Erin trembled in terror, pain, and exhaustion. "I don't believe I did that," she said, looking back up the hillside.

Gaelin winced. "When I was fifteen, I made a bet with Cuille Dhalsiel that it could be done. I killed the horse trying it." He met her eyes and added, "What other choice did we have?"

In the distance, he could still hear the clatter of the castle readying a pursuit—horses whinnied, and men shouted orders at each other.

"We'd better go, and quickly."

One of the guards spoke. "Which way, my lord?"

Gaelin swayed in the saddle, suddenly dizzy and weak. As the brilliant fire died in his heart, exhaustion flooded his body and clouded his mind. "Anywhere but here," he said.



• Nine

High on the battlements overlooking the sally gate, Tuorel stood impassively, his arms folded across his chest. Down in the shadows of the forest, he thought he could catch a glimpse of motion or the glint of light on armor, but it was too dark to be certain. The guards who surrounded him kept their silence and their distance. Quietly, he grated, "Are we in pursuit yet?"

One of his officers nodded. "Yes, my lord baron. A squadron of cavalry is riding down the causeway this very moment."

"Good. No one will rest until the prince is recaptured." He waited patiently, and after a few minutes was rewarded by the footfalls he'd been expecting, a light tread punctuated by the sound of a staff striking the stone.

Bannier peered down the hillside after the fleeing Mhoriens. His mouth tightened in disgust. "Bah! A simple bard's trick. If you hadn't insisted on holding me at swordpoint, I could have dispelled it easily."

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Tuorel turned slowly, watching the wizard from behind his wolf-mask visor. "It's your own doing. No one trusts a traitor, after all."

"I warned you Gaelin would return, didn't I? I made certain that a messenger lured him here. Your own oafish soldiers covered me with their crossbows, when I could have worked a spell to stop Gaelin in his tracks." Banner's eyes blazed. "Call me a traitor if you like, but you owe me your thanks, Tuorel, not your contempt. Without me, your army would be bottled up in Riumache. Without me, you'd not have taken this castle, and the Mhor would be leading his troops against you."

Tuorel smiled in a dangerous way. "Who am I to fathom the heart of a wizard? For all I know, it suited your purposes to let Gaelin escape." He shrugged. "I'll say this for the lad: he has courage. Riding through the castle and down that hillside, that was inspired. I've more respect for Gaelin than I did an hour ago."

Banner looked down into the forest and scowled. "Call it what you want, once again my part of our bargain remains unfulfilled."

"My men have orders to capture Gaelin and avoid killing him at all costs. If you're concerned that they might not have your best interests at heart, maybe you should follow them."

"Indeed." Banner wheeled and strode away. Tuorel didn't watch him leave.

* * * * *

Dawn was approaching, and the four of them—Gaelin, Erin, and the two guards who survived from Toere's company—rested in an old barn in some farmer's field, twenty miles from Bevaldrur.

"Think they're on our trail?" Erin asked quietly.

"Tuorel must have trackers or scouts in his army. But there are only four of us, and we know the countryside." Gaelin winced as she tugged at the crossbow bolt that had penetrated his hand. "I know that I would have had a hard time following our trail, but it would not be impossible. Especially if Banner has some magic he can use to find us."

Erin handed him a piece of leather. "Here, bite down on

this," she said. "I'm ready to take out the bolt." She called one of the guards over. The fellow took a strong, sure grip on Gaelin's forearm, and turned his torso so that Gaelin's upper arm was locked under his own arm.

"Sorry, my lord," he said. Gaelin didn't reply—he had the leather strip clenched between his teeth. He raised his eyes to the barn's dilapidated roof, fixing his sight on the patches of dark sky overhead.

Without warning, Erin grasped the head of the quarrel and drew it through his broken hand in one smooth motion. Gaelin gasped and jerked away, but the guard held him securely, and a moment later Erin held up the bloody bolt. "Your hand's bleeding again, but it won't kill you," she said. "I'll bind it for now."

The guard released him with a sympathetic look, and stood up. "Thanks, Boeric," Gaelin said, spitting out the leather.

"Thank you for getting us out of that fix, Lord Gaelin," Boeric replied. He was a plain, stoop-shouldered man with lank blond hair and a round face. He looked like a cobbler, not a soldier. "A lot of my mates didn't get away, but none of us'd be seeing the sun today if you hadn't led us out of Ghoere's trap."

"I wish it were that easy, Boeric. We're not out of the woods yet." The guard nodded and resumed his watch of the fields nearby. The other guard, a young, stocky lass named Niesa, was already snoring soundly, having drawn the second watch of the day.

Erin finished wrapping his wounded hand. Gaelin examined her work and decided that she knew what she was doing. His fingers remained free to grasp with what little strength they had, but the injury was covered and dressed. "Let's have a look at your leg," he said when she finished.

Erin arched an eyebrow. "Your calf," Gaelin amended. "We should clean and dress the wound." She looked like she was considering an argument, and then sighed and sat down. "No one ever shot at me before I met you," she complained.

Gaelin carefully began cutting her fine riding boot to pieces. In a few minutes, he was able to draw the lower two-thirds of her boot away and let the rest drop to the ground. Blood soaked the leather, and Gaelin frowned. "It didn't strike the bone, and I don't think you've injured any tendons, but it's bleeding freely. We should have looked at this before."

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"I wasn't going to stop to deal with it last night, not with Ghoere's soldiers a quarter-hour behind us." Erin grinned widely. "But I'm glad your escape plan allowed us to keep the horses. I couldn't have walked a mile on this leg."

"Some plan. Four of us left, out of twenty? I'd have been better off going to Endier. My guards and friends certainly would have been." Gaelin bound the wound and cinched it tight to help stanch the bleeding.

Erin lowered her voice. "It was a bad situation, Gaelin. You made the best of it."

"And what a mess that was. I could have had Toere scout the castle, or stopped to ask around in Bevaldruror." He bowed his head. "If I had surrendered, there'd be fifteen men alive this morning who aren't right now. Including two of my truest friends." His hands were shaking too badly to draw the bandages around her leg.

"Those deaths are on Tuorel's hands, not yours. How were you to know that the castle had been taken?"

"I knew my father was dead. That should have put me on my guard." He sighed and looked away. "It never occurred to me that the castle itself could have been taken."

Erin massaged the dressing on her calf, wincing. "The question before you now is, what next?"

Gaelin fell back against the mud-chinked wall and sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I have no idea. Have you considered our situation? Mhoried's army is defeated, wrecked at Cwll-don Field. Shieldhaven has fallen, and with it many of the knights and noblemen who could have mustered a new army to face Ghoere. The Mhor is dead, the first prince is dead, my sister Liesele is dead, and Ilwyn is still a prisoner of Tuorel. Bannier's turned his sorcery against us." He picked up a handful of straw and dropped it again with a sigh. "There's nothing left. How can I even start to put it back together? I'm a fugitive in my own country."

Erin regarded him in silence. The first rays of the sun were shining on her hair through the open door. "So what are you going to do?"

"What can I do? Mhoried's beaten. I'll be lucky if I escape the country with my head still on my shoulders."

"You're going to flee? Why?"

"Haven't you been listening? Ghoere's won. Tuorel crushed

the army, he captured the capital, half of the Mhorien lords have abandoned the fight or been overrun, and the Mhor's dead—”

Erin cut him off. “No, he's not.” She glared into his face with a fiery intensity. “I'm talking to him.”

“Who in their right mind would call me the Mhor now?”

“If you're not the Mhor, then who is?” Erin countered. Gaelin stopped, a scowl twisting his face as he searched for a response. “Well?” Erin continued. “Two or three of the Mhorien lords have forsworn their oaths, but what of the others? Some will recognize you, if you claim the throne.”

“If I claim the throne, Tuorel will hunt me down and kill me,” Gaelin said. “He'll destroy anyone who supports me.”

“If you don't claim the throne, Tuorel wins without opposition. Your family dies unavenged, your lands become part of Ghoere.” She reached out and grasped his good hand. “Could you live with yourself if you let that happen?”

At the barn door, Boeric stood suddenly and drew back into the darkness. “Someone's coming, my lord,” he said quietly.

Gaelin twisted to look. “Ghoerans?”

Boeric shook his head with a smile. “Not unless Tuorel's sent farmers to invade us.” He quickly roused Niesa, who started pulling her mail shirt back over her tunic.

Gaelin pushed himself to his feet and moved up beside Boeric, peering through a missing board in the wall. A dozen men were walking across the fields toward the barn, led by a stout old fellow in a leather jerkin studded with small bronze plates. They carried an assortment of weapons; about half were armed with powerful longbows, a couple carried old woodaxes or boarspears, and one ham-fisted giant carried a twenty-pound mattock over his shoulder. The motley band halted about thirty yards from the barn, and the leader stepped forward.

“All right, then, you in the barn! Come on out and show yourselves!”

Gaelin looked at Boeric and shrugged. He stayed back in the shadows. “Who are you?” he called.

“I'm Piere of Sirilmeet. These are my fields, and that's my barn you slept in. Now show yourself, or I'll shoot you for a goblin.” The archers among the band nocked arrows and held them half-drawn, searching the shadows for targets.

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“The town militia,” Boeric observed. “What do we do?”

“I can’t believe that they’d hand us over to the Ghoerans,” Gaelin said. He nodded at the others, and stepped out into the morning sunlight. “My thanks for your hospitality, Master Piere, and I apologize for not asking your leave first,” Gaelin said. “We were pursued by Ghoere’s men.”

Piere nodded. “I knew that someone’d borrowed my barn this morning, so I rounded up some lads to see who was sleeping under my roof.” The farmer squinted and peered at Gaelin’s surcoat, examining the device. “Begging your pardon, Sir Knight, but I can’t make out your heraldry. You’ve got the emblem of the Guardians, I can see that much.”

“I’m Gaelin Mhoried, son of the Mhor Daeric.”

Some of the townsmen and farmers stood gaping, while Piere awkwardly went to one knee. The others followed suit. Piere looked up at Gaelin, and asked, “My lord, is it true that the Mhor’s dead, and Prince Thendiere too? And that Shieldhaven’s held by the Ghoerans?”

Gaelin nodded, meeting Piere’s gaze evenly. “I’m afraid it’s all true, Master Piere. How did you hear of it?”

“Word’s been around the countryside, my lord. Ghoere’s soldiers hold the roads leading into Bevaldruur, but I guess they couldn’t keep the rumors from leaving.” The old farmer shook his head. “Even seeing you here, my lord, I can’t believe it.”

Gaelin recalled the Mhorien servants he had seen in Shieldhaven. I don’t expect he brought many from his own castle, he thought. Even if the Mhoriens weren’t allowed to leave Shieldhaven, they’d have family and friends in Bevaldruur-town who would hear what happened. And every road in Mhoried leads to Bevaldruur. He scratched at the stubble on his jaw. “By now, the news of the Mhor’s death must be all over the countryside,” he said, musing aloud. “The only reason we missed it is because we were moving fast and riding through regions that had been abandoned to Ghoere’s armies.”

Piere glanced at his fellows, and said carefully, “So, my lord, you are the Mhor now?”

Gaelin looked across the fields, to where the sun was coming up. The morning was slightly overcast, and the clouds painted the sky in scarlet and gold. Drawing in a deep breath, he said, “For now I am, Piere. You said that Sirilmeet was near?”

“Only a mile west, my lord.”

“Castle Dhalsiel’s a few miles north of the town,” Gaelin said to Erin. “We may be closer to help than we thought we were.” He turned back to Piere and asked, “Have Ghoere’s armies moved into Dhalsiel yet?”

“Not that I’ve heard, my lord.” Piere glanced at the men around him and added, “They haven’t done much about the Ghoerans, though. It seems that Tuorel’s scouts and raiders have free passage of Dhalsiel for now, even if the main armies haven’t come any farther than Shieldhaven.”

Gaelin scowled, looking away over the fields, now red and gold with the sunrise. The brittle husks of last year’s corn littered the field; in a week or two, it would be time for the year’s crops to go into the ground.

“Where will you go now, my lord Mhor?” Piere asked.

“Castle Dhalsiel,” Gaelin said. “We’ll see what we can learn from the count.” From the way the Sirilmeet men shifted and exchanged looks with each other, Gaelin suspected that they weren’t particularly fond of their lord or the stand he’d taken so far in the war. Erin gave him a cautious look as well, but she didn’t say anything.

“We’ll see you to the castle, my lord,” Piere said. “Don’t worry about any Ghoerans.”

“My thanks, Master Piere.” In a few minutes, they had the remnants of their gear gathered together. Gaelin insisted that Erin ride Blackbrand as they followed Piere and the militiamen. The other horses were still exhausted, but the big stallion possessed a remarkable endurance. On either side, the Sirilmeeters escorted them like palace guards on parade, swinging their arms with their tools and rusty old weapons slung over their shoulders.

As they started off across the fields, Gaelin walking beside Erin, she leaned down and said quietly, “Count Dhalsiel didn’t send any troops to the Mhor’s muster. Do you trust him?”

“Before I started my training in the Knights Guardian, Cuille Dhalsiel was one of my best friends. We got into all kinds of trouble together when we were fourteen or fifteen.” Gaelin smiled for a moment, recalling some of their escapades. “He’s a rake and a rogue, but I don’t believe he would hand me over to Ghoere.”

“I hope you’re right,” Erin said.

They crossed the fields worked by the villagers, and then

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took to winding cart tracks that led to outlying farms and shepherds' pastures. About an hour after noon, they reached the town of Beldwyn, the site of Castle Dhalsiel. The castle was modest compared to Shieldhaven, consisting of a keep, hall, and chapel surrounded by a low stone wall, pierced by several small gatehouses. It was familiar to Gaelin; he had visited frequently when he was younger. Now, studying the battlements, he found he was hesitant to enter.

"Do you expect another ambush?" Erin asked.

"No, but still . . ." Gaelin forced a smile onto his face. "Let's go on inside. We have nothing to fear here." Piere and his fellows turned back for home as Gaelin, Erin, and their two guardsmen rode up to one of the castle's side gates.

A pair of guards manned the portcullis. They watched with studied disinterest as Gaelin led his small party into the courtyard. He noted as they entered that the interior wall dividing the upper bailey from the lower bailey had been torn down to increase the size of the castle's hall, and new construction had also masked the fields of fire of several towers. Gaelin caught a scowl of contempt on Boeric's face, and realized the soldier had reached the same conclusions: Dhalsiel had neglected the fortifications in his care.

Still unchallenged and unannounced, they stabled their horses and entered the castle's hall, guarded by two more lackadaisical halberdiers. A chamberlain finally stopped them as they stood in the doorway. "You're just in time for the noontime meal, Sir Knight," he said. "May I announce you to the count? Your retainers can find something to eat in the servant's quarters."

"Tell the count I bear a message from Shieldhaven for his ears alone," Gaelin said to the chamberlain. "Can you show me a private room in which to wait?"

The chamberlain gave him a skeptical look but did as he was asked. "Gather what supplies you can," Gaelin whispered to Boeric. "Make sure we're ready to remount and leave within minutes, if necessary." The soldier nodded and trotted back into the courtyard, Niesa in tow. Then Gaelin and Erin followed the chamberlain to a small, disused shrine in the castle's old hall.

After a quarter-hour Gaelin caught the footfalls of several people in the hall outside, with the tones of Cuille's voice. A

moment later the young lord appeared, dressed in his usual finery. A short knight in blue-lacquered armor and a middle-aged woman in a brocade dress followed him. Cuille took one step into the room, and his jaw dropped in astonishment as he met Gaelin's eyes. "Gaelin! What on earth are you doing here?"

"It's good to see you, too, Cuille. Is this a safe place to talk?"

"Of course." The count quickly recovered. He waved a hand to indicate his two advisors. "I have the utmost faith in Trebelaen and Viersha, here." He moved forward and took Gaelin's hand in a firm grip, vigorously shaking his hand. "I can't believe you're alive, Gaelin. This is great news!"

"You expected to hear of his death, instead?" Erin asked. "Why would you have thought Gaelin dead, Count Dhalsiel?"

Cuille pulled away and examined Erin. "I do not believe I have the honor of your acquaintance, my lady."

"This is Erin Graysong, of the White Hall," Gaelin said. "You may recall that I traveled to Endier to escort her to Mhoried."

"Ah! Of course!"

"She raises an interesting question, Cuille," Gaelin continued. "Why should you expect me dead?"

"Well, I heard of the fall of Shieldhaven and the Mhor's death. I thought you might have been taken as well."

"You knew I was in Endier," Gaelin pointed out. "I told you I was going, the last time I saw you in Shieldhaven."

"Gaelin, I don't know what to say, where to begin. So much has happened, in the space of a single week." Cuille clasped his hands behind his back and paced away. "What are you going to do? I mean, where are you going to go?"

"My father and brother are dead. I am the Mhor."

Cuille glanced at Gaelin. "You don't want to be the Mhor. You were never interested in statesmanship. Besides, if you go about saying that you're the Mhor, Tuorel's going to run you to ground. You'd be wise to leave Mhoried while you can. Seek shelter in Diemed—you've family there—or maybe the city of Anuire. Better yet, head east and lay low in Brechtür somewhere. Get out of Tuorel's reach."

"A life in exile, always waiting for Tuorel's assassins to strike again?" Erin observed. "That's not particularly courageous."

"Courage is a mask for stupidity," Cuille retorted. "Tuorel's

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got all of the southlands, from Tenarien to Balteruine, and he'll hold Cwllon and Byrnnor before the month's out. The war's done with already."

"Would you back me if I decided to fight?" Gaelin asked.

"Gaelin, that's—"

"Answer the question, Cuille! If I declare myself the Mhor and fight Tuorel, would you stand behind me?"

"I don't know, Gaelin," the lord replied uneasily.

"Which means no, except you don't have the stomach to say it to my face."

"Gaelin, be realistic. Your entire army consists of two soldiers down in the stables, and your court is one bard. How can I set myself against Ghoere now? I would be crushed."

"Then you should have thought of that before you elected to keep your soldiers at home instead of sending them to Cwllon!" snapped Gaelin. "Cuille, you wouldn't have to be afraid of Tuorel if you had helped my father stand against him. Some of his blood is on your hands."

"Wait! Gaelin, I had nothing to do with his death!"

"It seems you had nothing to do with anything," Gaelin replied.

"How could I know Tuorel meant to kill him?" Cuille said, throwing his hands in the air and turning away.

There was a moment of silence in the room. In a small, cold voice, Erin said, "What did you say, my lord count?"

"I said, 'How could I know—' "

"You knew Tuorel was going to attack Shieldhaven," Gaelin said. "You knew, and you didn't say anything." He turned away, his chest aching as if he'd been physically struck. "Let me guess. Ghoeran emissaries promised you something if you would just stand aside. Was it money? Lands? Or something else?"

"Gaelin, you have to understand the position I was in. You don't know everything that was going on!"

"Cuille, I don't want to know what your price was. I hope that whatever Tuorel gave you was worth it." Gaelin looked at Erin and said, "Come on, let's go. There's nothing here for us."

He pivoted and marched to the door, turning his back on the count. He didn't even glance over his shoulder, but suddenly Cuille muttered a vicious oath under his breath and spoke.

"It was Ilwyn," Cuille said. "I asked Tuorel to spare her. I

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knew he was going to attack, and I told him I'd refuse the Mhor's summons if he didn't harm her."

Gaelin stopped and turned to face Cuille. The count shifted his weight nervously. Quite deliberately, Gaelin drew his sword, the steel hissing as it slid out of the sheath. "You bought my sister by betraying my father?"

Erin stepped forward quickly and grabbed Gaelin's sword arm. "Gaelin, don't! If you kill him, you'll be dead in minutes." She spared the count a single contemptuous glance. "Besides, he's miserable already. Look at him, Gaelin!"

Cuille made no move to defend himself. His advisors, Trebelaen and the Lady Viersha, stood frozen. Gaelin took another half-step forward, feeling cold and sick inside. He raised the sword, and held it for a moment before slamming it back into its sheath and turning away in disgust. Without a word he left Cuille standing in the center of the room. Erin gave the count one last withering glare and then followed him out.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"I have no idea," Gaelin replied. "I can't stay here, though."

In the courtyard, Gaelin found Boeric and Niesa waiting, their horses laden with full saddlebags. He patted Blackbrand on the neck, swung up into the saddle, and rode out of the castle without looking back.

* * * * *

Bannier stood in the dark heart of his tower, contemplating the work that lay before him. The door into night stood waiting in the corner of the chamber, and before the shadow the Princess Ilwyn trembled like a pale white flower. Her head was bowed, and her hands were bound behind her back with thin silver chains, looped gracefully over one wrist and under the other. The cold metal was far too delicate to restrain her physically, but it concealed powerful enchantments that deadened Ilwyn's will. Her blank gaze wandered off into the darkness. "Wait here, Ilwyn, and do not move," Bannier said. It might have been a trick of his eyes, but the girl's shoulders seemed to sag a little lower, and her head nodded forward.

The wizard smiled with satisfaction and left the room. In the chamber below, his sitting room, Bannier entertained another guest. Sprawled out in the center of the room lay

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Madislav, his chest slowly rising and falling.

The wizard examined Madislav again, reassuring himself that all was ready. He had been able to preserve the Vos warrior's life the night before, using an elixir that was nearly irreplaceable. Still, he considered it a worthwhile investment. Tuorel had goaded him into taking matters into his own hands; Bannier was determined to do so in the time and manner he saw fit.

He reached into the pouch at his belt and withdrew an acrid red powder. Measuring just a pinch, he tossed it into Madislav's face. The warrior's eyes flew open, and he drew in a great breath, then spat out a string of Vos oaths. "*Slavnyi boi!* Where am I?"

Bannier leaned into his field of view. "You're in my tower, Madislav. You recognize me, don't you?"

Anger contorted the Vos's face. "Bannier," he snarled. Then, a moment later, his face paled. "I cannot move."

"Aye," the wizard agreed. "Not until I allow you to, and I've no wish to see whether or not you have enough strength left to break me like a stick."

Madislav closed his eyes. A moment later, he seemed to regain some of his composure. "What is it you are wanting of me?"

"I have a task for you," Bannier said. "You are going to help me track down Gaelin and capture him."

The Vos laughed, but the sound came out as a ghastly chuckle. "I am not thinking so," he said after he finished.

"Trust me, Madislav, you'll have little choice in the matter. In fact, I intend to borrow your body for a time. Your mind will be held in this gem." Bannier held up a large emerald, perfectly cut, with myriad flashing facets. "I will send my mind into your body. To all outward appearances, I will be Madislav. That may allow me to find our elusive prince and get close to him before Tuorel's hounds run him to ground."

Madislav grimaced. "And where will your body be?"

"Someplace safe, I assure you. A place where I keep many things of value to me. In fact, we'll be going there soon." Bannier gestured into the darkness, and Madislav heard a strange scraping and clicking sound. The air seemed stale and cold. Two skeletons lurched into the chamber, moving with a mechanical precision. At the wizard's direction, the horrid things seized Madislav's arms in their yellowed talons and

lifted him easily, dragging him up the stairs. The warrior's head lolled like a corpse, and his nerveless legs trailed behind him uselessly, but he did not utter a sound.

Bannier turned to follow the skeletons and their burden, but at that moment he became aware of intruders approaching his chamber door. He scowled, but turned and headed back down into his sitting room. A moment later, a heavy sword-hilt thumped his door vigorously.

"Bannier!" called a muffled voice. "Baron Tuorel wants to see you at once! Princess Ilwyn is missing!"

"Tell Tuorel I took her, in accordance with the bargain we made," Bannier responded. "Now, run back to your master!"

He waited until the renewed pounding paused for a moment, and said, "I will return shortly, gentlemen, and I will speak to the baron then. In the meantime, I must warn you that there are magical wards of some power that guard my chambers. I guarantee the first man to set foot in here will die, instantly and horribly. The second and third men . . . well, it may be they will wish they had been first. Good day." He trotted up the stairs behind the skeletons, savoring the thoughtful silence that fell outside his door.

In the chamber upstairs, Ilwyn stood where he had left her, now with Madislav and his skeletal bearers a few paces behind. Bannier stepped in front of Ilwyn to face the disturbing column of darkness, and spoke the words of an ancient invocation. The room grew dark and cold as the shadow yawned deeper, waiting. "You will follow me, Ilwyn, remaining two paces behind at all times," he said over his shoulder. The princess nodded again, her eyes on the floor.

From behind her, Madislav somehow summoned up enough strength to raise his head and glare at Bannier. "Where are you taking us?" he rasped.

Bannier smiled coldly. "There is a world that exists beside this one. I've studied it for years now. The roads are strange there, and I can cover a mile with a few steps on the other side. And there are powers in the darkness with which I have become familiar." He returned his attention to the portal of darkness. "You may know it as the Shadow World."

What little color remained in Madislav's face drained away. Then the wizard turned and stepped into the cold and the dark, the shadows enfolding him like umber-scaled serpents.



Ten

The weather took a turn for the worse as Gaelin, Erin, Boeric, and Niesa rode out of Beldwyn. The temperature began to drop toward the freezing mark, while a stiff westerly wind brought low, angry clouds and stinging cold rain to slow their travel. Gaelin ignored the needles of icy water pelting his face and the chilling gusts that raked him. He stared sightlessly at the road, grappling with the sea of betrayal and grief that surrounded him.

A few miles west of Beldwyn, they overtook Piere and his kinsmen. The Sirilmeeters listened attentively as Erin recounted their visit to the count.

"You must remember, my lord Mhor, we view ourselves as Mhoriens first and Dhalsielans second," Piere said, when she was done. "I think most common folk feel that way, these days. It's a shame the lords can't see it the same."

Gaelin brooded silently. As far as he was concerned, the

only reason to continue back to Sirilmeet was the fact that the road led in that direction. Toward nightfall, they found themselves approaching the village again. After hours of riding in the freezing rain, they were shivering and blue with cold. As Piere and his cousins took their leave of Gaelin, the stocky farmer looked him up and down and said, "My lord Mhor, can I ask where you'll be staying this night?"

Gaelin shook himself out of his reverie. "What?"

"My lord, if you don't have a place to go, you're welcome to sleep under my roof. It's a miserable night, and you shouldn't have to spend it sleeping in the cold and the rain."

"Master Piere, I'm a marked man. If you put me up, I could bring the Ghoerans down on your head."

"It's the least I can do, Mhor Gaelin. Come this way." Piere led them to his home, a sturdy lodge of stone, turf, and timber. It was warm and crowded inside, and Gaelin was instantly set upon by a horde of Piere's grandchildren. One lad of only four or five asked him over and over, "Are you *really* a prince?" After a filling dinner of warm bread and stew by the fire, Gaelin felt better.

As the hour grew late and Piere's youngsters dropped off one by one to sleep, Erin quietly drew Gaelin aside. "Where are we going next?" she asked.

He laughed humorlessly. "I have no idea. There doesn't seem to be a point in going anywhere."

She leaned forward, forcing him to look her in the eye. "Don't you think you've spent enough time feeling sorry for yourself?"

He glanced up, his face darkening.

"Go ahead, Gaelin. Deny it if you want, but you know and I know you've been looking for excuses ever since you set foot in Mhoried again." Her eyes blazed. "You make a poor victim, Gaelin Mhoried. Stop playing the part."

"That's not fair," he said, an edge in his voice. "You have no idea what I've been through in these past few days."

Erin sighed and sat back, changing her tactics. "Listen. Do you have a plan, a place you want to go next?"

"Frankly, I don't."

"Well, why not? Are you looking for someone to tell you what to do, a place to go and drop your burdens? Do you think that all of this will just go away once you find the right

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person to pick up where your father left off?"

Gaelin stood up. "I don't have to listen to this." He stalked out into the black, cold night, slamming the door behind him.

The air seared his nose. He noticed the clouds had cleared, and the sky was full of bright, clear stars. He stood in Piere's farmyard, too angry to do anything but shiver and fume helplessly. After a time, the door creaked, and he heard light foot-falls behind him. "Are you ready to continue?" Erin asked.

"When I leave the room, it's a good sign I consider the conversation at an end," Gaelin replied.

"Gaelin, I understand you're hurt. All I'm saying is that you have to take control of events, instead of letting events control you. You can't blow around Mhoried like a dead leaf in the wind forever. Sooner or later, you need to decide what you're doing."

"Those are easy things to say, Erin." He turned to face her, a twisted smile on his face. "I don't know where to begin."

"Do you want to fight Tuorel or give up?"

Gaelin chewed on his tongue, biting back his response. After a moment, he said slowly, "I want to fight Tuorel. For my family, for the kingdom, for me—I want to fight him. I want to see he doesn't get away with this."

Erin sighed. "Well, that's the first step of the march. Clearly, you need to find some help, and quickly. What are your best options?"

Gaelin thought. "We're not too far from the Abbey of the Red Oak. High Prefect Iviena has always been an ally of my father's, and the priests of Haelyn have money, lands, and a small army under their command."

"The Oak recognizes the Mhoried blood, doesn't it?"

"I'm not truly the Mhor until I stand before the Oak and swear the oaths of allegiance."

"We'll want to visit the abbey soon, then. What next?"

"Torien's Watch. Lord Torien is loyal, and I know him personally—I wintered under his roof this year, finishing my training in the Knights Guardian. I could at least find refuge there for a time."

"And what then?"

"I don't know. Try to build up an army to drive Tuorel out, I suppose. Although Torien is not the best place for that. It's awful remote, and raising an army that far north would be hard."

Erin wrapped her arms around her body, warding off the cold. "Any other options?"

"I could leave Mhoried and try to raise help from Diemed or Alamie."

"You'd be a puppet, or an unwelcome guest. It would be difficult to win support if you had none at home."

"That occurred to me." Gaelin glanced to the west. "My last option is trying to locate Baesil Ceried and the rest of Mhoried's army. We know some of his forces escaped Cwll-don. And my father was always certain of his loyalty." Gaelin considered the plan, thinking it through. "If we make for Castle Ceried, we'll pass right by the abbey. Yes, that's what we'll do. We'll ride for the abbey first thing tomorrow, and then continue on to Ceried."

"Good," Erin said. Gaelin could just barely make her out in the darkness now, a slender silhouette with her thin cloak snapping and fluttering behind her in the bitter wind. "At least you know what you're trying to do for the moment."

"You didn't really care what I decided, as long as I decided something," Gaelin said. Erin didn't reply, but he thought he saw a shy smile on her face.

Next morning they rose and saddled the horses in the gray, icy hour before sunrise. As the sun touched the horizon, Gaelin took his leave of Piere. "My thanks, Master Piere. That's twice in two nights I've enjoyed your hospitality."

"The house is yours any time you wish, my lord Mhor. Or the barn, if you prefer." Piere sent them off with the broad-shouldered giant they had seen the previous day, to guide them to the abbey. He called himself Bull, and like almost everyone they had met in Sirilmeet, he was Piere's kinsman—in this case, the husband of Piere's youngest sister.

Bull proved a capable guide. He led them away from Sirilmeet by old trails in the woods, staying away from the main roads. "No sense looking for trouble," he said. "Ghore's horsemen are sweeping every road from here to Cwll-don, my lord." They rode for several miles as the sun climbed into the sky. The air was still and clear, the winds of the previous night fading quickly. Sirilmeet was close to the old forests of Bevaldruur, and they skirted the northern eaves of the wood as they headed westward.

Early in the afternoon, they came to a muddy road cutting

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through the woods. Gaelin recognized it as the Northrun. To avoid Ghoeran patrols, Bull led them to a cart track running between the freesteads and sheep farms. They could see the old highway from time to time, just over a low ridge or knoll, but for the most part they were well out of sight.

After an hour or so, they found the fields taking on the neat, ordered appearance of carefully tended land, plowed and planted with grain just starting to break ground. The track led through a bare apple orchard, winding under the shining white branches, and then ended in a small square of green before a long, low wall of stone. The roofs and domes of the temple glinted in the sunlight, rising up behind the sturdy outer walls.

Bull dismounted and ambled over to a door in the wall. He thumped one meaty fist on the wood. "Hey! Wake up in there!" There was a brief delay, and then with a clatter a viewport in the door was drawn back. Gaelin could see the cold steel glint of a crossbow's arms in the shadows of the doorway.

From the door a voice called, "Go around the front, louts!"

Bull hammered on the door again, doubtless ringing the ears of the fellow standing behind it. "I'm Bull from Sirilmeet, and this is the Mhor Gaelin! Now, open up! Ghoere's men are all around us!"

"The Mhor Gaelin?"

Gaelin stepped forward, leading Blackbrand. "Prince Gaelin until I stand before the Red Oak," he said. "I mean to speak with the high prefect as soon as possible."

After a moment, the door rattled with the working of bolts and locks and opened slowly. A round-faced monk in the militant garb of the Knights Templar appeared and leaned a large crossbow against the door. "I expect the lady'll want to talk to you, too. Come inside, and quickly—Ghoerans have been about all day, asking after you."

Leading their horses, they followed the monk into the abbey. The monastery was really a small castle. The walls were capped with stone-faced battlements, and the courtyard presented the appearance of a parade ground. Across the bailey, Haelynite priests in plain brown cassocks practiced with staves and padded cudgels. The door warden bolted and locked the door behind them and then led them into a stable along the inside of the low wall. He ordered a pair of young

aspirants to look after the horses and then led Gaelin and his companions to the abbey's hospice.

Like many monasteries, the Abbey of the Red Oak offered travelers shelter for the night and a hot meal. To his surprise, Gaelin noticed it was empty. He would have thought refugees would be clogging every available sanctuary. "Where is everyone?" he wondered aloud.

The door warden shrugged. "With the war, most of the travelers and tradesmen have remained in one place," he said. "After all, who wants to be dragged into one army or the other, or have his goods confiscated? Few roads in Mhoried have been safe for travel for more than a week now."

"Haven't any refugees come this way?"

The door warden shook his head. "We've been turning them away, on the lady's orders." He showed them into a barren dining hall, a long, low room with a roaring fire in the hearth at the far end. "Please have something to eat. I'll be back soon."

He ambled off at a dignified pace. Several brothers manned the refectory, and they scraped together a warm haunch of meat and some dry bread for Gaelin and his friends, along with leather jacks of potent ale to wash it all down.

"I'm surprised the prefect wouldn't open the doors to those in need," Erin said when they were left to themselves.

"Can't say I like it," Bull agreed. "The folk around here have always looked to Haelyn's priests for protection."

Gaelin frowned. "We'll see what Iviena has to say," he replied. He, too, found it disconcerting.

A few minutes later, the round-faced monk returned, accompanied by a tall, bony man in elegant robes. His pate was shaved, but he wore a jeweled cap of office. With a slight bow, he said, "My apologies for your informal welcome, Prince Gaelin, but I'm sure you appreciate the circumstances. I am Brother Superior Huire, and you already have met Brother Maegus. The high prefect can see you now, my lord."

Gaelin rose and stepped away from the table. "Erin, will you please join me?"

"Of course, my lord." Staying a half-pace behind him, Erin followed Gaelin through the twisted, dark halls, limping slightly from her injury. Without Brother Huire to lead the way, they would have become lost in the abbey's labyrinthine

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halls. The place was nearly the size of Shieldhaven, but it lacked the castle's great halls and straight corridors. They passed many militant monks, wearing Haelyn's robes over their armor.

Brother Superior Huire led them to a reception room, near the main chapel. It was a splendid chamber, richly appointed with tapestries and arras of gold and white. The High Prefect Iviena waited by a table of gleaming maple, her hands folded in her lap. She wore a white robe, her gray hair concealed by a plain habit. Her face was lined with care, but her eyes still sparkled with keen intelligence. "Thank you, Brother Superior," she said to Huire. "Prince Gaelin, welcome."

Gaelin crossed the room and knelt beside the table, kissing her offered hand. "Lady High Prefect," he said, "Thank you for your hospitality. I won't pretend the past few days have gone well for my family." He stood and gestured to Erin. "This is the minstrel Erin Graysong, master bard of the White Hall."

Erin stepped forward, knelt, and repeated Gaelin's greeting.

"Please rise, child," Iviena said. She looked up at Gaelin. "What has become of Tiery, then?"

"Baron Tuorel hanged him three days ago," Gaelin said. "He was trying to help my father to escape Shieldhaven."

Iviena's face fell. "And the Mhor perished as well."

"You have heard of Shieldhaven's fall, then?"

"We've known for nearly a week now. Haelyn revealed to me the circumstances of your father's death, Prince Gaelin." Her voice softened. "You have my sincerest condolences. The Mhor Daeric was a good man and a fine Mhor. He rests now in Haelyn's glory, I am certain." She fell silent for a moment and bowed her head in prayer before lifting her eyes to meet Gaelin's. "And what happened to you, Prince Gaelin? How did you learn of your father's death?"

"Lady Iviena, I saw the spirit of my father on the banks of the Stonebyrn four nights ago, as I returned to Mhoried from Endier. He told me Bannier had betrayed House Mhoried." He found his voice growing thick, but continued. "He also said that Thendiere and Liesele were also dead at Tuorel's hands."

"And after that?"

"I . . . I felt the power of the land, my lady. The divine right passed to me, then and there. I felt my blood *singing*. I don't

know how else to explain it." Gaelin gave up with a shrug. "We rode to Shieldhaven to see what had gone wrong, but Tuorel nearly trapped us there. I made for Dhalsiel to seek Cuille's aid, but . . . he was unwilling to help."

Iviena measured Gaelin's features, her eyes sharp as swords. Gaelin met her gaze without looking away. "So, as the surviving son of Mhor Daeric, you are a claimant to the throne," she finally said. "Did you come here to swear the oaths before the Red Oak?"

"I did, High Prefect, although that was not the only reason. I also hoped to convince you to stand with me against Ghoere. I will need your aid to drive Tuorel out of my father's castle, and Haelyn's temple has always been a staunch ally of Mhoried."

Iviena sighed, and stood up. She paced away from them, her hands behind her back. "I am not certain you understand what you are asking of me," she said quietly. "As far as I can tell, House Mhoried is already defeated. If I support you against Ghoere, I place the faith itself in jeopardy. Tuorel is not a man to forgive those who stand against him." She turned and faced him. "I am sorry, Prince Gaelin, but I will not take the field against Tuorel."

Gaelin was stunned. "You just acknowledged my claim, not a moment ago! Tuorel is a usurper, a murderer! You can't allow him to take this land as his own!"

"I acknowledge that you have a claim to the Mhoried, Gaelin. Baron Tuorel is no friend of mine. But I have a responsibility to the temple, an entity that exists above and beyond the duchy. We may be your subjects, but we must accept the fact that with the fall of House Mhoried we could become subjects of Ghoere, whether or not we find that a pleasant development."

Gaelin rose from his seat. "What of Haelyn's tenets? You owe fealty to the lawful lord of Bevaldruur. If you acknowledge that I am the Mhor, then aid me!"

The dignified priestess flushed, but kept her own temper in check. "You are not yet the Mhor, Prince Gaelin. You may recall you are only a claimant to the throne until you speak the oaths before the Red Oak. As the leader of Haelyn's temple in Mhoried, I will decide if and when you may do so." She regarded him with an even gaze. "I will offer you shelter and help you if I can, Prince Gaelin. However, I will not risk the

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destruction of Haelyn's faith by setting it in opposition to Baron Tuorel."

Gaelin drew in a breath to continue, but Erin caught his arm with her hand. "Excuse me, your Grace," she said, "But will you administer the oaths to Gaelin?"

Iviena frowned. "I have here a letter from Baron Noered Tuorel. He refers to the tragic circumstances of the Mhor's death and also claims that through a marriage made two hundred years ago he is a legal claimant to the throne of Bevaldrur." She picked up a parchment from her writing desk and tapped it against her palm. "While it is customary for the Mhor's eldest son to be recognized as the foremost claimant, it is not necessarily the law. In fact, there are dozens of nobles throughout Anuire who can lay claim to Mhoried's throne, just as Gaelin here could lay claim to the throne of Diemed or Alamie through old marriages."

"In other words," Erin said, "anyone who can prove a blood tie to House Mhoried can claim the throne, but the person with the best claim normally becomes the Mhor."

"Precisely," Iviena agreed. "My scholars have already investigated the genealogical records. Tuorel's claim is legitimate, if somewhat tenuous."

"Clearly, Gaelin's claim is superior to Tuorel's."

"It would be, if he chose to claim the throne."

"Why shouldn't I?" Gaelin asked.

"Gaelin, once you swear the oaths Tuorel will have no choice but to hunt you down. Mhoried can have no other legal ruler while you live. If you do not press your claim, you are not truly the Mhor, and you could flee. There are many courts where you could live in safety." Iviena's face softened. "I have no wish to see the last of the Mhorieds dead. Do not force Tuorel's hand, I beg you."

"What happens if two people claim the throne?" asked Erin.

"By law, all candidates stand before the Red Oak to see which claimant the Red Oak recognizes. I must tell you that there has been no contested succession in many centuries. For hundreds of years, each Mhor has stood alone before the Oak."

"Does the law require both candidates to take the test of the Oak at the same time?" Erin asked quickly.

"I do not believe so," Iviena said, watching the bard.

"I see your point, Erin," Gaelin said. "I could attempt the Red Oak this very moment, while the high prefect could say she was merely observing the ancient laws for resolving rival claims. Tuorel couldn't argue against her ruling, since it's perfectly legal." He smiled and turned back to the priestess. "Very well, then. I claim the throne of Mhoried and request the test of the Oak as soon as possible, your Grace."

Iviena held up a hand. "It will anger Tuorel, but if Prince Gaelin has already received the land's blessing, the Red Oak is sure to recognize him." She looked at Gaelin. "I may not be able to give you swords and gold, but that does not mean I will not look for other ways to oppose Tuorel's taking of this land. Are you certain this is what you want to do? Think before you answer."

Gaelin glanced down at his hands again, scratching unconsciously at the ache in the center of his injured hand. He had no doubt the priests of Haelyn could find a way to spirit him out of the country if he did not claim his father's throne. He also realized Iviena was risking the destruction of her order by defying Tuorel. She was doing as much to help him as he could reasonably expect, so he did as she asked and carefully considered the question of whether or not to press his claim. He tried to imagine leaving Mhoried to live in exile, but his heart told him that was the easy way out. It felt like giving up, and Gaelin knew he would be dishonoring his family and his country by abandoning Mhoried to Tuorel. "I am certain," he said. "I don't know how I can defeat Ghoere, but I refuse to let him seize the throne while I live."

"Then we shall perform the ceremony at sunrise," Iviena replied. "You may remain here as long as you like, but I cannot guarantee your safety. The temple's sanctuary is worth only whatever Tuorel decides it is worth."

"I'll be leaving tomorrow," Gaelin said. "In the meantime, I would like to borrow the services of your messengers or carrier pigeons; I've some letters to draft. And could one of your brothers tend Erin's wound?"

"Of course," Iviena said. A sad smile creased her face, and she sat down again. "Gaelin, you know I bear you no ill will. I have found the Mhors to be honest and honorable rulers. I hope you understand that I cannot help you if I provoke

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Tuorel's wrath and bring about the ruin of my temple."

"It's not the answer I hoped for, but I understand it," Gaelin said. He knelt and kissed her hand again. "I suspect that Tuorel may force you to take sides sooner or later, anyway."

"I will deal with that when it happens," she replied. With a nod to the brother superior, she dismissed them. Huire held the door open for Gaelin and Erin, and drew it shut behind them. The grave monk paused just outside the high prefect's chambers, and faced Gaelin.

"Be patient, Prince Gaelin," he said, keeping his voice low. "The high prefect charts a cautious course, but many of us feel that we owe the Mhor any help he asks of us. In time, we may be able to change the high prefect's mind." With a slight bow, he turned and led them back to the visitors' rooms.

* * * * *

Argent moonlight and cool shadow surrounded Gaelin. He was standing in a courtyard in the heart of the abbey, the most sacred spot in all of Mhoried. He remembered being here before—on one or two special occasions, his father had brought him to this place. It was silent and still, with a gleaming silver dew beginning to form on the grassy lawn. He turned and looked on the Red Oak, spreading its mighty branches from the center of the yard. It stood more than one hundred feet in height, and its bark gleamed white in the moonlight.

He was aware he was dreaming again. Everything had a strange, ephemeral quality, a sense of unreality about it. Gaelin could see through his own body as if looking through a silk screen. The abbey walls shimmered and danced as if to indicate they, too, were not permanent. But the Red Oak glowed with strength and endurance. Everything Gaelin could see would pass in time, but the tree would remain.

He felt a presence near him. Beside him, a silver shadow materialized into the form of his father. Daeric stood still for a long time, gazing upon the tree. "Do you know why it is named the Red Oak, Gaelin?"

"No. I thought no one knew."

His father smiled. "I do, now. Hundreds of years before Deismaar, this land was settled by our ancestors, the Mhora. It was a wild and fair land, and the forests around Bevaldruror

covered all of it, from the Stonebyrn to the Maesil. Elves lived here, and goblins in the north, but the Mhora drove out the goblins, and this became their land. This tree was old even then, and each Mhor came here to swear his oath of loyalty before Reynir and Anduiras, the ancient gods.

"After Deismaar, Prince Raedan returned to speak his oaths beneath the tree. Raedan had been close by Roele and Haelyn when they battled Azrai's champions, and like many who survived that dreadful battle, Raedan had been infused with the remnants of the divine power. When his blood fell on the roots of this ancient oak and he spoke his oath, something miraculous happened. The Mhor and Mhoried became linked, joined by a drop of blood that carried the power of the gods themselves." Daeric paused, his eyes fixed on events far beyond Gaelin's knowledge. "This is the blood that runs in your veins, Gaelin."

Gaelin discovered the abbey itself had almost faded away. The open fields and hillsides gleamed as far as he could see. Two shining silver rivers traced the borders of the land, each a hundred miles away, and to the north, dark, forbidding mountains raised fierce stone battlements over the forested foothills. "I will take the oaths tomorrow," he said.

"I know," Daeric said. "And now you know why the Mhors come here to speak the oaths of service." With a smile, he began to fade away, his form becoming translucent. "Rule well, Mhor Gaelin," he said, and then he was gone.

Gaelin's eyes snapped open, and he stared up into the darkness of his chamber. The last slivers of moonlight were stretching across the floor of the room. He quietly rose and moved over to peer out the window, into the night. His window looked over a rooftop and down into the Court of the Oak, and he gazed at the tree, his thoughts still and deep, before returning to bed.

He woke in the cold darkness before dawn and dressed himself. After a cold breakfast in the hostel's refectory, he went to the inner courtyard, where Iviena waited, attended by a pair of lesser priests. He found his own entourage in attendance—Erin, Bull, Boeric, and Niesa stood back respectfully, witnessing the event.

The ceremony was swift. Iviena led him through the oaths, first in Old Andu, then again in the modern dialect. As he

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spoke the words, Gaelin found that a strange, otherworldly vision came over him. He vividly imagined the ancient scene of Mhor Raedan touching the Oak with his bloodied hand, and the Oak stirring with the land's acknowledgement of the Mhoried blood. At the end of the invocation, Iviena offered Gaelin a dagger, holding it across her palm. He took the weapon and cut his hand. Stepping forward to touch his bloodied hand to the smooth old bark, he spoke the words of his oath as the first rays of the sun set the Oak's leaves to a brilliant, burning scarlet. With that, the oath was finished, and Gaelin was Mhor.

An hour after sunrise, the companions were on their way again, riding west from the abbey toward the Cered estate. The entourage surrounding Gaelin was growing. On Iviena's insistence, the dour Brother Superior Huire had joined his party—ostensibly to provide spiritual guidance in Gaelin's hour of need and maintain a representative of the Temple of Haelyn in the Mhor's court. Gaelin guessed Huire was assigned to report his plans and situation to the high prefect at the earliest opportunity, but he accepted the gaunt monk into his confidence. Four Haelynite soldiers templar accompanied the priest.

Count Baesil's castle and lands were located in the western reaches of the province of Byrnnor, and no major roads crossed this region. They traveled from village to village along muddy cart tracks and overgrown paths. Most people here were still in their homes and continued their daily work, watching over rolling fields of grain and corn or tending sheep on green hillsides.

The fine weather faded through the day as a leaden overcast darkened the sky, threatening rain. The wind turned to the north and cooled noticeably, and by the time they halted to water the horses and eat a scanty lunch from their packs, Gaelin's face was red with windburn. While they ate, he motioned for Erin to join him on a lichen-frosted boulder, a short distance from the others. "I saw my father again last night," he said quietly.

Erin bit into a small green apple and gave him a thoughtful look. "Go on," she said.

"We were standing in the Court of the Oak. He showed me how the Oak was named, hundreds of years ago." He paused,

then turned to the bard. "Am I losing my mind? Or is my father's spirit still watching over me?"

"The Mhor Daeric perished with Mhoried in great danger," Erin said. "Perhaps he watches over you, hoping to see you restored to your rightful place, and the enemies of the land defeated." She shrugged, and took another bite of her apple. "And even if you're imagining these meetings, what does it matter? You are as sane as I am, or just about anyone I know, for that matter. At worst this is your own way of saying good-bye to your father."

They sat a while in a companionable silence. They had stopped by an abandoned farmhouse, its roof long since gone. The fields were strewn with boulders and the remnants of an old stone wall. Gaelin stood, stretched, and brushed off his breeches.

Erin started to stand as well, but she suddenly stopped and cocked her head. Then she scrambled for her horse. "Riders coming!" she cried. There was a moment of blank confusion, as some of the Haelynites looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. Gaelin dropped his food and ran for Blackbrand. In one smooth motion, he pulled himself into the saddle.

At the top of the hill, Boeric was standing watch. He leaped to his feet and zigzagged down the grassy slope. "Ghoerans, just behind us, and coming fast!" he yelled.

"How many?" Gaelin called.

"Too many to fight, that's for sure," Boeric replied. He hauled himself into his saddle and seized the reins. His placid expression was gone, replaced by a bright-eyed alertness.

Gaelin glanced around. Most of the party was mounted again. "We'll try to outrun them!" he said. "After me!" He kicked his heels into Blackbrand's flanks and let the stallion have his head. Mud and turf flying from his hooves, the horse broke into a strong gallop down the rutted cart track. In ones and twos, the others followed, spurring their own steeds after him. In a matter of moments, they were strung out over a couple of hundred yards of countryside, each rider coaxing the best speed he could from his animal. Blackbrand outpaced the others, and Gaelin stood in his stirrups to look over his shoulder.

Black-clad cavalymen swept through the old homestead, in hot pursuit. The trailing riders, a pair of Huire's guardsmen, were only a hundred yards or so ahead of the Ghoerans,

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but they seemed to be holding their lead. Some of the Ghoerans were firing after the Haelynites, but their bolts flew wide of the mark.

Gaelin turned back to mind his own path. If the Ghoerans had been riding hard all morning to catch up to them, they might not be able to sustain this pace for long, especially since Gaelin and his band had just rested their horses. "Keep up the pace!" he called. "We'll wear them down!"

Blackbrand's hooves thundered beneath him. The track wound over several shallow hills, then plunged into a dense thicket, the trees pressing close in a dark tunnel. Gaelin risked another backward glance. Some of the Ghoerans were falling out of the race, but a few still clung doggedly to their trail, whipping their horses like madmen.

They burst from the copse into an open field, horses foaming at the mouth. The lead Ghoerans finally began to fall back. One persistent fellow stayed with them for another mile, but eventually he too dropped out, shaking his fist as his horse pulled up limping. Gaelin slowed his own pace and settled into an easy canter for another couple of miles, the rest of the Mhoriens following suit. Finally they turned off the road, finding another track leading in the general direction in which they wanted to travel.

"Think they're still with us?" Erin asked. Clods of mud were stuck in her hair, and she grimaced as she pulled one from her tresses and dropped it to the ground.

"They won't give up so easily, now that they've caught our trail," Gaelin said. "We'd better keep moving quickly. That band may not catch us, but they'll report to their superiors."

The horses were exhausted from the long run, and Gaelin decided to dismount and lead them for a bit. They should have let the animals rest, but he didn't think it would be wise. He patted Blackbrand's neck and promised himself he'd find an extra apple for the big stallion that night. Baesil Ceried's army was still somewhere ahead, but he noticed everyone was looking over their shoulders as they marched on in the gray drizzle.



eleven

Riding as fast as they dared push the horses, Gaelin and his companions covered fifty miles on the first day of travel from the abbey. They encountered no more Ghoerans, but they ran across the work of marauders and raiders in several places. Gaelin was surprised to find black-feathered goblin arrows by one homestead near the border of Dhalsiel and Byrnnor. Even in the worst winter raids, the goblins of Markazor didn't come this far west into Mhoried.

They camped for a few hours in the ruins of a long-abandoned estate in the countryside, stabling their mounts in the wreckage of the manor's hall. Before sunrise, they rose and continued on their way, blundering through a dense, wet fog that shrouded them in gray mist.

After a morning of cutting across the broad, open fields of Byrnnor, Gaelin spied the dark turrets of a castle looming out of the rain, a few hundred yards ahead. Castle Ceried was not

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as large or modern as Shieldhaven, but it was still a well-built motte-and-bailey fortress, slowly improved over the years by the counts of Ceried. The fields around the castle were crowded with the white tents and smoky fires of the army of Mhoried.

They rode beneath the castle's rain-streaked battlements. Gaelin led the way under the castle's gatehouse, followed by the rest of his entourage. A detachment of men-at-arms in the colors of House Ceried manned the gate. The sergeant in charge held up his hand to stop Gaelin as he rode into the courtyard. "Halt, sir," he said in a rough voice. "Your name?"

Erin spoke up from beside Gaelin. "The Mhor Gaelin and his company, sergeant."

The sergeant hastily saluted. "I'll send word to the count immediately, my lord." He sent a young page running off toward the keep at once and called for the stablehands to help with their horses. While Gaelin and the others dismounted, stretching and kneading the kinks in their legs and backs, a crowd of off-duty soldiers and servants gathered, pointing and whispering.

A few moments later, the doors of the keep burst open across the courtyard, and Count Baesil appeared, striding purposefully across the bailey in his black armor. A dozen knights, officers, and lords flanked him, talking excitedly among themselves. Gaelin stepped out from behind Blackbrand and walked forward to greet the count. "Count Ceried. It's good to see you."

"I thought you dead or captured, Gaelin," Baesil rasped. "I certainly didn't expect you to show up on my doorstep." He looked past Gaelin at the curious spectators and barked, "Go on, get on with your business!" Reluctantly, the commoners and off-duty soldiers broke up and went their own way.

Gaelin looked around, frowning. "You didn't have to do that on my account. Friendly faces have been hard to find lately."

"Come with me, Gaelin. We've much to discuss." Without waiting for Gaelin's reply, Baesil turned on his heel and strode off through the gatehouse, dismissing his guards with a curt wave of his hand. Gaelin stared after him, glanced at Erin, and then hurried to catch up. The bard followed a respectful distance behind him. The count didn't speak as they

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walked out of the castle's gate and started toward the camp, skirting the moat.

"Well?" said Gaelin as he drew abreast of the count. Baesil's long, shanky stride was difficult for Gaelin to match, and must have left shorter men in the dust. "How do things stand?"

"You have no idea how much harder you just made things for me," Baesil snapped.

"What? What do you mean?"

"With you dead or captured, there was nothing for me to do but make the best terms I could with Tuorel. He's beat us in the field, he cut out Mhoried's heart when he took Shieldhaven and killed the Mhor, and he's got half the southern lords bending their knees to him. Now I have to decide what I'm going to do with you." The old lord didn't even glance at Gaelin as he finished his declaration with a bitter stream of foul oaths.

Gaelin caught Baesil by the arm. "Stand still and talk to me, damn it! I didn't spend the last ten days fighting my way through ambushes and skulking through the countryside to let *you* decide what you're going to do with *me!*"

Erin touched Gaelin's arm softly. "Gaelin, it may be wise to hold your temper in check."

Baesil's eyes bored holes in Gaelin, as he studied the prince. "I have no time to coddle a hotheaded young rake who has the gall to call himself Mhor. Your father was the Mhor, Gaelin. You will be treated as an honored guest until I decide where you should be, but you will not stray out of my sight until I figure out what to do." Baesil jerked his arm from Gaelin's grasp and turned his back on him.

Gaelin clenched his fists. "I swore the oaths before the Red Oak yesterday morning, Baesil. I'm the Mhor, whether you like it or not. You hold these lands from me, and that is *my* army camped in those fields. I'll ride down there and tell them to storm your castle if that's what it takes to get your attention."

"I'm their commander. How many do you think would follow you?"

"I'm Daeric's son, and I swore the oaths. I think most of them would."

"You'd pick a fight with a Mhorien lord, while Ghoere's army stands only three days' march away?"

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Gaelin returned his gaze evenly. "My father always spoke highly of you, count. He said that you were one of the three or four lords he'd trust with his life. I'm beginning to wonder what he saw in you."

Baesil held Gaelin's eye a moment longer. Then, slowly, his face split into a fierce grin, and his eyes flashed. "Good," he said. "You've iron in you, boy. More than I remember. That's good."

Gaelin was still shaking with anger. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right. Let's try this again. How do matters stand?"

"In a minute. First I want to hear how you found your way home from Endier."

"Very well." Gaelin related the entire tale, starting with the appearance of Lord Baehemon in Shieldhaven. Baesil constantly interrupted with curt questions, until Gaelin found himself growing furious.

"Well, it sounds as if you're the Mhor." Baesil inclined his head. "I'm afraid that Mhoried's been gutted like a fish, my lord."

"Go on."

Baesil started walking toward the camp again, this time at a slower pace. "Ghoere sent damn near their whole strength against us, starting with Riumache. We'd always thought Tuorel would attack there, but we figured the town could hold out for a couple of weeks at least, time enough to muster the lords and relieve Lady Tenarien."

"But the Maesil froze," Erin said.

"I see you've heard the story. Tuorel took the town in an afternoon, and he was off and running." Baesil swore under his breath. "The man knows how to run an army, I'll grant him that. He caught us with our forces dispersed and drove straight up through Tenarien into Cwllodon on the Old Stoneway. Within two days of the fall of Riumache, I took the army of Bevaldruor south to meet him, trying to gather up as many of the lords' musters as I could. But the northlords were busy with a horde of goblins that crossed over from Markazor at the same time that Tuorel invaded, and half the southlords decided to sit on their collective behind and watch Ghoere cut their rightful lord to pieces."

"So you had to face Tuorel with half the army you should

have had," Gaelin said.

Baesil's vitriolic scorn failed him, and he turned away. "I met him at Cwllodon Field. That was a mistake," he said. "I never should have engaged Baehemon there. I *knew* we didn't have enough men, but I thought I might be able to out-manuever him or fox him somehow. All I did was get a lot of good men killed and barely put a dent in Baehemon's army. And on top of that, I learned of Shieldhaven's fall the next day. That was a week ago."

"It's in the past," Gaelin said. "What's left of the army?"

"I've about two thousand men," Baesil replied. "Two hundred Knights Guardian, another two hundred knights and heavy cavalry—those are the retinues of the southlords, mostly—about three hundred light horse, four hundred archers, three hundred pike, and a couple hundred infantry and skirmishers. We've also started to raise the levy of Byrnor, so there're five or six hundred farmers with pitchforks and bailing hooks scattered among the real troops."

"How many more could we raise?"

Baesil glanced at him. "Oh, if we turned out the countryside, probably two or three thousand in the next week. But they wouldn't be worth a damn. I'd be sending them to slaughter if I threw them into a battle without some equipment and a little training."

"What do you know of Ghoere's forces?" Erin asked.

Baesil looked at Gaelin and then the bard. Gaelin said, "Go ahead, Baesil. Erin's been with us from the start in this thing, and she's a White Hall bard, like Tiery. She's had plenty of chances to betray me already."

The general cleared his throat and nodded. "Well, after Cwllodon Field, Ghoere's army dispersed to run down the scattered units we've got all over the place. They've kept a portion of their fighting strength together, maybe four thousand heavy troops, but the rest of their forces are engaged in securing the countryside." He pointed across the rain-soaked fields toward the south. "The main body camped about twenty-five miles that way last night. They're making for us with the best speed they can manage, but it's getting a little harder for them."

"When will they be here?"

"Three days, if they hurry, but if I were Baehemon, I'd get

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close and then camp a mile or two away." Baesil gave Gaelin a dark look. "I'll have to decide whether to retreat again."

Gaelin weighed the information. They were in among the tents now. He was surprised by the number of units in the camp—there were standards and banners from dozens of different households, levies, and royal companies. But each was decimated, reduced to a fraction of its strength. This was an army that had been mauled.

"What do you want to do?" he asked the count.

"Well, I want to stand and bloody Baehemon's nose. If we retreat, these are my lands he'll be pillaging. But I don't think we can beat him. We'll need to fall back, up into the highlands, and try to rebuild our strength. There's no sense taking him on until we know we can win."

There was silence for a moment. Gaelin felt out of his depth in discussing strategy with Baesil. His own military experience was limited to a few years of raid and counterraid against the goblin marches.

"Here's my suggestion," he offered. "I don't think we're going to win this war in three days, no matter how badly we maul Baehemon, so let's not try. We'll fall back before he gets here, help the northlords chase the goblins from their lands, and try to build up an army strong enough to face Ghoere."

Baesil nodded. "That's my plan, but I'm leaving a few volunteers behind to hold Castle Ceried. No sense in letting Ghoere take it without a fight."

"Good," Gaelin said. "There's one more thing: Before we go, I want to give Baehemon and Tuorel something to remember us by. We have seven hundred mounted troops?"

"That would be about right," Count Baesil agreed.

"What if we visited their camp in a day or two, when Baehemon gets a little closer? The infantry can pull out beforehand to get a head start, and we'll give them reason to sleep light at night."

Baesil frowned, thinking. "We're not likely to do them any lasting harm. No, I'm not going to do that."

Gaelin stepped past Baesil, and scratched at his chin, looking out over the army's camp. "Count Ceried, I know I only showed up on your doorstep a few minutes ago, and I appreciate the fact that you have a better grasp of the situation than I do. I will give your *recommendations* a great deal of con-

sideration. I understand your advice, but think about a raid.”

“It’s a stupid idea, Gaelin. We’re outnumbered, and our chance of achieving surprise is negligible. Therefore, I won’t do it.”

“Count Ceried, that is not the Ceried muster out there. It’s the army of Mhoried, and it’s my concern as well as yours. I don’t need you to lead it. I need you to help *me* lead it.”

Baesil crossed his arms in front of his chest and stood his ground. “Who do you think you are, Gaelin? I built that army with my own hands, and they won’t march a mile until I say so.”

“Whom do you recommend as your relief?”

“What?”

Gaelin held Baesil’s eyes. “I asked, who else can run the army? I don’t know how, and you’re relieved of command.”

Erin drew in her breath. “Gaelin, have you lost your mind?”

“Aye,” Baesil agreed. “Have you lost your mind, boy? My men are nearly half of Mhoried’s army.”

“I didn’t say that I was releasing you from your feudal obligations, Baesil. Those men stay in my army. But I don’t need you to lead them if you don’t get it through your head that I am not your puppet, your spokesman, or your rallying cry. I am the Mhor, and, by Haelyn, that means I am going to lead the fight to free my country.” He advanced to stand nose-to-nose with the count and lowered his voice. “Well? How do you want to handle this? I need you, Ceried.”

Baesil’s jaw hung open in surprise. Deliberately, he swallowed and scowled. “All right. We’ll do it your way. If you need my help, I will continue as the general of Mhoried’s army. But I still advise against a raid on Baehemon’s camp.”

Gaelin released his breath and nodded, keeping his face neutral. “I will be honored to accept your service, Count Ceried. Now, let me ask you a question: Are you hesitant to attack Baehemon because you’re afraid of being defeated again?”

The general stiffened, his nostrils flaring. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Then, I want you to plan an attack of some kind against Baehemon before we withdraw.” Gaelin looked away, softening his stance. “It’ll make our troops feel good to throw a punch back at Ghoere after the pounding they’ve taken. And if we’re successful, we’ll take two or three hours away from Baehemon’s march every day, since he’ll be forced to fortify

his camps.”

Grudgingly, Baesil nodded. “All right, then. We’ll mount a raid.”

“I’ll leave the details to you,” Gaelin said. “And I’ll need to talk to you at greater length about the military situation.”

Baesil nodded. “Give me a couple of hours to get the information together. Also, it would be a good idea for you to review the troops. They’ll be heartened to see the Mhor with their own eyes.” With that, he turned and left.

The moment he was out of earshot, Erin wheeled to face Gaelin. “What on earth were you thinking? You can’t show up out of the blue and expect to command the loyalty your father did. You almost drove him to revolt!”

Gaelin nodded shakily, trying not to show his fright. “If I’m going to do this, Erin, I’m not going to be a figurehead. You asked me before if I was looking for someone to tell me what to do. Well, that’s exactly what Baesil had in mind from the moment he saw me. Mhoried can pull together to follow the Mhor—but I don’t think Mhoried would follow Baesil Ceried, who happens to have the Mhor’s heir stashed in his breast pocket.”

Erin rubbed her temples. “There must have been a better way to do that. And why did you insist on mounting an attack against his advice? Baesil Ceried knows more about fighting a war than you ever will.”

“The raid’s immaterial at this point. I asked him to do it, and he said no, so it turned into a demonstration of power. He cornered me, so I stood my ground.”

“So? Find an excuse to cancel it in a day or two, and do what he suggests.”

“I don’t think I can, now.” Gaelin ran his hand through his hair and drew a deep breath. “I had really hoped to rest an hour or two once we got here.”

“Rest?” Erin laughed without humor. “There’s no such thing for the Mhor, Gaelin.”

* * * * *

Gaelin learned the truth of Erin’s words over the next three days. Each day, he was up an hour before sunrise, and each night audiences and councils of war ran long after midnight.

He was certain he could find three or four more hours a day if he only had some idea of what he was doing—he'd never seen his father looking as tired as he did when he glanced into a mirror. After a day of utter chaos, Brother Superior Huire surprised him by requesting the privilege of serving as his appointment secretary. "As you can imagine, the high prefect is extremely busy, too," he said. "I've served as her chamberlain for years, and I believe I could help you."

"I'm concerned Lady Iviena may have orders for you that might cloud your allegiances," Gaelin replied warily.

Huire nodded. "Of course, my first loyalty is to the Temple. But the high prefect told me to give you counsel and aid, and it seems to me I can do both by acting as your secretary."

"Will you swear before Haelyn to keep secret what I tell you in confidence?"

"I will, my lord Mhor." Huire's calm reserve slipped for a moment, and a note of anger crept into his voice. "You may forget that I, too, am a Mhorien. Lady Tenarien of Riumache is my first cousin. When Baehemon burned her keep to the ground, he murdered dozens of my kinfolk."

Gaelin designated Huire as his secretary, and within hours a semblance of order crept back into his life. The monk was intelligent and thorough, carefully organizing appointments and recording Gaelin's pledges and requests, helping him keep track of what he said to whom. While Gaelin relied on Huire to help him manage his time and the day-to-day business of gaining control of Mhoried's government, Erin helped him in his diplomatic correspondence and meetings with other nobles. She spent two days canvassing Mhoried's counts and lesser lords, writing dozens of letters and dispatching messengers to all corners of the kingdom.

Late in their second night at Castle Cered, she appeared in Gaelin's private chambers, dark circles under her eyes. "I've dispatched letters to every lord worth writing and talked to every lord or envoy here," she informed him. "Of the counts, Torien, Marloer, Cered, and Hastaes acknowledge your coronation."

"That means that I hold the counties of Torien, Marloer, Byrnnor, and Winoene," Gaelin mused. "That's only four out of ten. What of Tenarien, Cwllon, and Bevaldrur itself?"

"I can't say. They're all occupied by Ghoeran troops, so

their sympathies are probably of no matter." Erin shrugged. "Sir Vaerad Cwll is here with a company of sixty-odd Cwll-doners. He may be the count, if old Count Cwll is dead. He's on your side."

"What of the lesser lords?" asked Gaelin. Just as the Mhor commanded the allegiance of the counts, each count had dozens of minor estates, titled peers, knights, and other such lesser nobles who owed him fealty.

"Almost all the lesser lords of the four counties you hold are with you," Erin told him. "A small number from the overrun counties have joined your banner—like Vaerad Cwll—and a handful who didn't shift their allegiance, though their counts turned their coats."

"I have to find a way to bring more of these men to my side. Especially the ones who are backing Ghoere." Gaelin buried his head in his hands and sighed. "How on earth do I do that?"

Erin only shrugged. "You knew this wasn't going to be easy, Gaelin. It's hard to convince people to join the losing side."

When the army of Ghoere was two days away, Count Bae-sil sent footsoldiers north by tens and twenties, slipping out of the camp in small groups to maintain the illusion that all of Mhoried's soldiers were still there. His men made a show of constructing earthen ramparts and fieldworks outside the castle, as if they were planning to engage Baehemon's army from fortified positions. To add detail to the deception, Gaelin toured the defenses, pretending to inspect them.

While the army prepared to move, Gaelin found an increasing amount of time was taken up in dealing with matters of court. In peacetime, the Mhor heard cases of high justice, authorized the use of royal lands for private enterprises, granted special dispensations such as licenses and agreements, and juggled the fragile alliances and fealty of the lords around him. The routine business of the kingdom had consumed hours of Mhor Daeric's time in the form of audiences, hearings, and meetings each day. Still, it astonished Gaelin that there were nobles, merchants, and royal officers who expected him to deal with these mundane affairs. "Doesn't anyone realize that we have a war to fight?" he complained to Erin and Huire after one lengthy session.

Erin's advice on this matter was direct. "Declare a royal stay on matters of state," she said. "All permits, sentences, pardons, and other agreements are to continue in force until you declare the emergency has come to an end."

Gaelin agreed wholeheartedly and had Huire prepare the pronouncements. Naturally, most of the petitioners were unhappy with this arrangement, but for the most part they understood the reasons behind it. Some ministers and officials persisted in trying to get Gaelin to review their troubles, but the royal stay reduced the torrent to a reasonable number of requests and interviews.

A similar problem existed with the handful of foreign diplomats who drifted into Castle Ceried by ones and twos. These were people Gaelin dared not offend, and most had their own agendas they were determined to present, regardless of the demands on Gaelin's time. Fortunately, most of the diplomats and ambassadors of Mhoried's court remained in Shieldhaven, the recognized capital of the country, and bided their time—they dealt with neither Gaelin nor Tuorel.

Last, and certainly not least, Baesil Ceried thrust Gaelin immediately into the bottomless morass of problems involved in the war effort. The volatile old general, still smoldering with resentment, took a diabolical pleasure in browbeating Gaelin with a barrage of technical details and issues. He claimed he was trying to school Gaelin in the art of war between nations and give him an appreciation for the obstacles that faced the losing side. Simply *feeding* the three thousand soldiers, camp followers, and courtiers who filled Castle Ceried and its surroundings was a problem of nearly insoluble dimensions. With the fall of Shieldhaven and the southern provinces, vast amounts of supplies had fallen into Tuorel's hands. "Early spring's a miserable time to fight a war," Baesil told Gaelin. "The granaries and storehouses are empty from winter, and the first plantings won't be ready for weeks. In fact, even if Ghoere's army wasn't coming here, we might have to move just to find food."

Somehow, Gaelin muddled through the longest three days of his life and survived it. There were many people who were unhappy with the way things were run, but at least they were being run, and Gaelin had to satisfy himself with that. On the morning of his third day in Castle Ceried, he was in the mid-

dle of an audience with a southern lord, discussing the possibility of raising the countryside against Ghoere, when Erin gracefully entered the room, dressed in her finest White Hall garb.

Words died in Gaelin's throat when he caught sight of her. Erin's red hair cascaded to her shoulders, and she wore a sweeping gown of brocade and silk that accented her tall, graceful body without seeming festive or overly decorative. "Please excuse me, my lords," she said, "but I have learned that an emissary from Diemed is on the way here at this very moment."

"Diemed!" said Gaelin. "Vandiel's reply, already? Lord Waere, I hope you'll forgive me for taking my leave?"

"Of course, my lord Mhor," the nobleman replied. "I know how important Diemed may be to our cause." He bowed and made his way out of the chamber.

"You may want to change," Erin said. "By all accounts, Baron Tuorel is declaring to anyone who will listen that you are a bloodthirsty brigand. There's no reason to look the part."

"Do we know anything about Diemed's ambassador?"

"I believe it's the Princess Seriene," Erin replied.

"Vandiel's daughter?" Gaelin stopped and glanced at Erin. "That's surprising."

"I'll leave you to prepare, my lord," Erin said frostily. She slipped out the door, not even sparing him another look.

Now what in Cerilia was that about? he wondered, staring after her. In a moment, he gave up trying to decipher her words and actions, and set about pulling out his finest robes of state. Huire had found decent clothing for the new Mhor, and he settled for a tunic of dark green to wear over soft gray hose and fine black boots. He buckled on his sword belt and wore his long sword by his side. He didn't want Seriene to think he was a bandit lord, but neither did he want her to think he was a helpless dandy who survived only by the wit of his generals.

Checking his appearance one last time in a small mirror by the door, he left the room and headed for Castle Ceried's hall. Brother Superior Huire fell in beside him. They entered the great hall, which was unusually full—a number of minor lords and knights had apparently found some business at the

court in order to be on hand for the meeting between Gaelin and Princess Seriene. The conversation came to a halt as Gaelin appeared and stepped up to the dais.

At the far end of the room, a chamberlain stepped forward and announced, "My lord Mhor, the Princess Seriene of Diemed!"

Two footmen opened the doors and bowed. The Dieman entourage filed in, their faces carefully reserved as their eyes darted about, taking in the scene. In the middle of the group, Seriene stood, her hands clasped before her. She was little more than five feet in height, but her cold and regal bearing drew all eyes in the room. A long gown of rich blue silk displayed her figure to great effect, and a small golden tiara gleamed in her raven-dark hair. Gaelin drew in his breath at the sight of her.

Seriene paused for a moment, then advanced to meet Gaelin. Her own guards stopped a good twenty feet short, grounding their gleaming halberds and settling into an impressive parade rest, while a pair of ladies-in-waiting and one silver-haired priest in the robes of the temple of Avanalae followed her. Before the dais, Seriene curtsied while her attendants kneeled. In a cool, clear voice, she said, "Hail, Gaelin of Mhoried. My father, Prince Vandiel Diem of Diemed, sends you his warmest greetings and hopes this day finds you in good health. I am the Princess Seriene Diem, and I am honored by this meeting."

Gaelin had rehearsed his response. "Welcome, Princess Seriene. Your presence here graces Mhoried's rightful court and demonstrates the true friendship of Diemed and Mhoried. You are our honored guest." The weight of Seriene's dark and measuring gaze on him made Gaelin acutely conscious of the words, and he nearly stumbled over them.

The Avanalite priest, a high-ranking clergyman introduced as Prelate Edoeren, began a long-winded oratory on the traditional alliance of the two countries. As Gaelin's herald, Erin parried with a dignified response. Their words were meaningless in his ears; he couldn't take his eyes from Seriene's face, and he thought he saw a hint of interest in the set of her mouth, as she returned his gaze without shying away.

The formalities concluded, Gaelin invited the Dieman emissaries to join him for a light meal to rest from their jour-

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ney. As they left the room, Baesil Ceried leaned close and said, "Now the real diplomacy begins. We'll soon see what the Diemans can offer us."

Withdrawing to the small council room that had been prepared, they made a pretense of light conversation while they dined on roasted venison and capers, potatoes, cabbage, and stuffed pastries. The Diemans had come by boat, sailing up the Maesil and then the Stonebyrn to the western shores of Byrnnor, with a day of hard riding to reach Castle Ceried. All in all, the journey had taken them a week. "You must have left as soon as my letter from the Abbey of the Red Oak arrived," Gaelin observed.

"Actually, your father dispatched a letter two weeks ago. When I heard that Shieldhaven had fallen, I altered my plans and decided to seek you out," said Seriene. "We made the best time we could." She raised a glass of south coast wine and sipped at it demurely. "My thanks for your hospitality. I feel I am sufficiently rested to discuss the issues your father raised in his letter, Prince Gaelin."

Gaelin glanced at Erin, but she was watching the princess. "Very well. The war has not gone well for Mhoried. Baron Tuorel obtained the services of Bannier, our former court wizard and a very capable mage. In addition, the goblins of Markazor attacked at the same time."

"Resulting in a catastrophic defeat of the army of Mhoried and the loss of Shieldhaven," Seriene said evenly. In the corner of his eye, Gaelin could see a thin line of anger cross Count Baesil's face, but the general held his tongue.

"As matters stand now, Tuorel holds most of the southern provinces as well as Bevaldruur," Gaelin continued. "The goblins have been pushed back to Markazor, for the most part, and the northlands are still in our hands. We can hold them against Tuorel indefinitely, but Diemed's aid would help us greatly in winning back the lands we have lost to Ghoere."

Seriene brushed that aside for the moment. "With all due respect, my lord prince, how is it that you claim the title of Mhor? Tuorel's ambassadors say your father capitulated to the baron when he took Shieldhaven and that you are nothing more than a disinherited pretender."

Gaelin didn't doubt Tuorel was telling all of Anuire about

the so-called justice of his actions. He rose from the table. "Tuorel is lying," he said quietly. "I can see you have no way of knowing which story is true, so I won't try to convince you. But I will tell you this: Tuorel murdered my father, my brother, and one of my sisters. The last living member of my family—my other sister, Ilwyn—is held captive in her own home."

"If Tuorel killed your father, why didn't he force him to divestiture? Or try to take his bloodline, for that matter? The Mhoried line is one of the oldest and strongest of all Anuire," asked the Prelate Edoeren.

Gaelin turned and shook his head. "I don't know, Prelate. I suspect my father decided his kingship and the continuation of the line of the Mhors were more important than his own life." He gestured at the white streaks over his temples. "You recognize the bloodmarks of Mhoried?"

"I don't debate your identity, Prince Gaelin," the prelate said. "You are who you say you are. My question is, are you *what* you say you are?"

Erin leaned forward. "For whatever reason, Tuorel obtained neither the Mhor's blood nor his regency. The Mhor Daeric chose death over divestiture, giving Prince Gaelin a chance to continue the reign of the Mhors." She nodded at Gaelin. "A week ago, he took the oaths of the Mhor before the Red Oak of Mhoried. He is the lawful ruler of this realm, and he still holds the divine right to Mhoried."

"Granting you that," Seriene said, "Tuorel is still right about one thing: you are a hunted man in your own kingdom. His army outnumbers you by three to one, and he holds the richest lands of your realm. You may be able to elude him for a time, but in the long run he will grind you to nothing."

"That is precisely why we need your help," Count Baesil replied. "Ghoere has almost his entire army in Mhoried, engaging us on all fronts. If Diemed's army threatened him, he would be forced to withdraw some of his forces to meet you, giving us the chance to defeat him entirely."

"You realize, of course, that we would have to secure the cooperation of Endier or Roesone in order to engage Ghoere?"

"They're no friends of Tuorel. They may be willing to help."

"My father anticipated this request," Seriene said, her face

unmoving. "His reply is this: Assuming Diemed joins you in a war against Ghoere, can you guarantee you will be able to threaten Ghoere enough to hold at least half his army here? Diemed can muster about four thousand men for an invasion of Ghoere, which means Ghoere can meet and defeat our attack with only a portion of his strength."

Baesil Cried snarled in disgust. "In other words, you don't want to jump in on what you perceive as the losing side, regardless of old friendship or treaties."

Serienne's eyes flashed in anger, but her voice remained cool. "You could look at it that way," she replied. "The truth of the matter is simple—if by helping you we do nothing but become Ghoere's next victim, we have neither helped you nor served our own purposes. Diemed has enemies of its own to worry about; Prince Avan of Avanil, the new barony of Roesone, even pirates from Mieres across the straits. We dare not weaken ourselves by allying with a weak power."

Gaelin thought for a moment, staring out over the Mhorien camp from a shuttered arrow embrasure. "Your concerns are understandable," he said after a moment. "If we were to demonstrate we have at least the capability to keep Ghoere's attention engaged in Mhoried, would that change your mind?"

Serienne glanced at the prelate before answering. "My lord Mhor, we would have to see you make some effort to retake the lands you've lost. So far, you have not been able to stand up to Ghoere's army. Show us at least the promise of success in a future campaign, and we will do what we can."

"I suppose that's the best we will get for now," Gaelin said with a sigh. "Would you consider aid that didn't directly involve your forces in the fight?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"We can use arms, equipment, and supplies of all kinds," Gaelin said. "If you want to see us become strong enough to stand up to Ghoere, deliver these things to us. Of course, we will pay for them when we can."

Serienne's eyes narrowed. "I feel confident that my father will be willing to help you in this fashion, but you must realize that there's no easy way to reach you. It may be a while."

"Then the sooner we start, the better," Baesil replied.

Serienne stood and smoothed her gown. "I will prepare a dispatch for my father," she said. "We are agreed that Diemed

will wait until Mhoried is in a better position before committing troops to the war? And that we shall undertake to help you with arms and equipment as we can?"

Gaelin nodded. "I wouldn't say we're agreed on both points, but we will accept it."

Serienne smiled a little more warmly. "It's a fair measure of what my father thinks of Tuorel that I'm here talking to you at all," she continued. "In fact, he has requested I remain here for a time to act as Diemed's representative at the court of the Mhor in exile." She dropped her gaze demurely.

"We will be delighted by your company," Gaelin replied. "As you see firsthand how things are going, you may be moved to increase your efforts to help us throw Tuorel back across the Maesil."

Serienne bowed gracefully. "Then we shall withdraw for now." She paused a moment before addressing Gaelin by his rightful title. "Mhor Gaelin, my time is at your disposal." She raised her eyes to Gaelin's with a direct, disarming expression and a slight smile on her perfect lips before turning away. Gaelin watched the Diemans leave, holding his thoughts until they were gone.

Later that same day, in the evening, Baesil reported that the footsoldiers and the remaining baggage train were on their way, and Baehemon was camped only four miles away. As the sun set, he took Gaelin up to the battlements and pointed out the twisting lines of smoke that marked the Ghoerans' cooking-fires. "We'll give them a couple of hours to get nice and comfortable, and then we'll hit them," the general said.

"I'll ride with you on the raid," Gaelin said. His stomach was twisted and tight with nervousness, but he offered Baesil a smile. "I want the men to know I won't send them some place I wouldn't send myself."

The general scowled. "Damn it, Gaelin, this isn't some kind of game! There's every chance Baehemon might have caught wind of our plans and we'll be riding into an ambush! Or even if he hasn't, some Ghoeran might pop up when you're looking elsewhere, and then where will we be? You're the last hope we have of getting the throne back, lad. Don't take it into your head to get yourself killed in a raid that won't matter one way or the other!"

"I'll be careful and keep out of the thick of things," Gaelin

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promised. "Sorry, Baesil, but my mind's made up."

The general snorted. "Bah! I should have known you'd be thinking of this." He turned and poked Gaelin in the chest with one finger. "You'd better not be doing this to impress that Dieman princess who showed up today!"

Gaelin returned to his borrowed chambers and managed two hours of sleep in the early evening. As the hour of the raid approached, he rose and began to arm himself. Boeric appeared as he struggled with the last awkward pieces. The guardsman had been promoted to sergeant and would carry Gaelin's standard in the upcoming fight. "Are you ready, my lord?"

"Almost. Here, give me a hand." Flanked by his guards, he strode into the courtyard and found Blackbrand had already been dressed for battle in a skirt of chain mail and stiff, metal-studded leather. He mounted smoothly, took up the reins, and rode into the night with his guards arrayed around him. They, too, were dressed in their heaviest armor, with lances stepped by their stirrups and swords hanging in easy reach by the saddlehorns. He noticed Bull among his personal guards; two days before, the beefy farmer had decided to enlist in Gaelin's cause.

Outside, they joined Count Baesil's command group, a knot of fifty or so guards, officers, and messengers, along with standard-bearers and musicians. All around the field, knights and cavalymen sat in even ranks. There were three divisions, each marshalled together under a standard. Even as Gaelin rode up, the first division was moving away into the darkness, riding slowly with no lights showing.

"Good evening, my lord Mhor," Baesil said, raising his hand in salute. "As you can see, we're on the march."

"Excellent," Gaelin replied. "Think we'll catch Lord Baehe-mon's army off guard?"

Baesil shrugged. "We won't know until we get there, will we? I've got scouts combing the path before us. With luck, we'll have early warning of any Ghoeran scouts or patrols. The next hour will tell."

The ride was strange; clouds hid a waning moon, so it was dark, and none of the Mhoriens showed any lights. Instead, the lead elements of each division were guided by scouts on foot, men of Ceried who knew the area well. Count Baesil had also ordered extraordinary measures taken to quiet the

march, and each man had muffled his horse's hooves by swaddling them in soft cloth. No talking was permitted, and even loose pieces of armor were padded for silence. The night around Gaelin was filled with creaking and rustling, broken by the snort of a horse and a few muted clinks and jingles. For almost an hour, they crept along at a slow walk.

Under the shadows of a dark, tangled wood, they drew up in ranks for the attack. The fires of Ghoere's army could be seen a half-mile or so off, drawn up in the center of a broad, open field. "Not a bad place for a camp," Baesil observed quietly. "Excellent visibility for hundreds of yards all around. But, on the other hand, this big field is perfect for mounted troops."

"Could they be waiting for us?"

"I've heard two reports of Ghoeran patrols. One our scouts were able to silence, man for man. The other, we're not sure of." He lowered his visor. "Cover your face, lad. No sense waiting for a stray arrow in your eye."

Gaelin shut his own visor. There was a whisper along the ranks of the horsemen, and slowly the line began to move forward. Gaelin, Baesil, and their guards followed about twenty yards behind. Twisting in his saddle, Gaelin could see a hundred light cavalry waiting by the woods, guarding their escape route and standing by as a reserve. "When do we charge?" he asked Baesil.

"I'll walk right up to the camp if they don't give an alarm," the general replied. He held his men to a walk. They were three hundred yards from the Ghoeran camp when they heard the first few panicked shouts of alarm from the firelit tents ahead. "That's our signal," Baesil said. "Captain, sound the charge!"

From beside Gaelin, a bugler let loose with a deafening blast that split the night. With a great roar, the knights and light horse spurred their mounts, thundering ahead toward the camp. The command company picked up their pace to a gentle canter, staying well back of the front lines. Bright yellow light flared as horsemen uncovered lanterns and pitch pots, turning the night into a chaos of shadows and glinting steel. Ahead of them, Gaelin saw men inside the camp racing to man the earthworks surrounding the tents. He swore in disgust—the Ghoerans hadn't been surprised. "They're wait-

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ing for us!" Gaelin yelled. "Call it off!"

"Too late now," Baesil replied. The charging line slowed and swirled for a long moment, held up by the shallow ditch and palisade of stakes surrounding the camp. Ghoeran crossbowmen and pikemen were still streaming up to man the dike, and at point-blank range they wreaked havoc in the leading ranks of the Mhorien charge. Horses reared and plunged, screaming, impaling themselves on the stakes or the pikes of the Ghoeran defenders. Gaelin found himself pressed in on all sides as the attack faltered, and in a nightmarish chaos of shadow and fire he fought to keep Blackbrand beneath him.

Suddenly, the ranks around him opened up, and he spurred ahead into the fight. Although the Ghoerans had held them for a moment, the weight of their attack had punched a hole in the enemy line, and with shouts of fierce glee the Mhoriens dashed into the camp. Within moments, dozens of Ghoeran tents were fired, and Mhoriens were galloping through the camp, cutting down anyone in their path.

The command group rode down one lane between the tents. Gaelin realized he'd completely lost his bearings in the smoke and noise of the fight. Beside him, Baesil growled in disgust. "What a fiasco!" he shouted over the screaming and rising roar of flames. "If we'd been any slower, they would have cut us to pieces on the dike!"

"Well, we're here now. Let's fire his supplies!" Gaelin replied.

Baesil nodded. "All right, but we stay away from any big fights." They rode around the perimeter of the camp. Their guards were soon caught up in a series of small melees with bands of Ghoerans, and arrows and crossbow bolts began to pelt through the company at random as unseen archers fired at the Mhoriens.

They passed a corral where several hundred horses reared and whinnied in panic, and Baesil sent several men to tear down the fence and drive the animals away from the camp. They continued to circle the camp and came to a great swirling melee of fire and fighting men around the Ghoeran supply train. Gaelin guessed that there were a hundred or more wagons drawn up in neat lines, surrounded by the tents and rough lean-tos of several companies of infantrymen and

guards. These men were waiting for the Mhorien attack, and as far as Gaelin could see in the smoke and the darkness, men rushed to meet the attacking horsemen or to fight the fires that had already been set. The first division had been assigned to head for the wagons, and they were embroiled in a bitter fight to finish their job of destroying Baehemon's supplies.

"They're waking up now," said Bull.

"You're right, soldier," Baesil replied. "Time for us to leave."

Gaelin looked around. It was a scene of hellish confusion, and acrid smoke burned his nostrils and stung his eyes. The din was deafening: weapons beat on shields and armor, men screamed orders from all sides, and flames roared hungrily. Suddenly, from behind them, furious war cries filled the air, and an onslaught of half-dressed footsoldiers armed with whatever weapons they could find overtook their guards. Gaelin turned his horse to face the men who poured through the screen of guards. "Baesil, watch your back!" he cried.

A few feet in front of him, Bull leaned away from his saddle and smashed one spearman to the ground with a monstrous blow from his long-handled maul, but a fellow swinging a battle-axe over his head dodged aside and came for Gaelin with an angry roar. Gaelin twisted in the saddle to catch the first blow on his shield, and then brought his sword across his body in a heavy chop that split the Ghoeran's skull. He wheeled to look for another foe, but suddenly a heavy flail struck a crushing blow across his shoulder blades, smashing him out of the saddle. The world spun and went dark as Gaelin crashed heavily to the ground, breathless and stunned.

Gasping for air, he rolled over to his hands and knees in the mud and looked up just in time to see the Ghoeran raising his weapon for the killing blow. Gaelin lunged out of the way. His Mhoried blood might help him to recover from crippling injuries, but a well-aimed blow could kill him before his ability had time to repair the damage. "Blackbrand!" he yelled.

Like many war-horses, Blackbrand was trained to protect a dismounted rider. The great stallion reared and lashed out with his hooves, driving back a pair of Ghoerans who were advancing on the fallen prince. Gaelin used the momentary break to regain his feet, snatching his sword out of the mud.

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The flail-wielder shortened his swing and leveled a deadly blow at Gaelin's head, but Gaelin ducked and stabbed him through the chest. Spots still danced in front of his eyes, and he couldn't draw a breath, but he groped his way to Blackbrand's side and heaved himself back into the saddle. Around him, Baesil's knights and guards were driving the foot soldiers away. "Gaelin! Are you all right?" Baesil's voice was hollow behind the iron mask of his helmet.

Gaelin managed a nod. He was still out of breath, his chest aching as he tried to find his wind. Baesil dispatched another man with a skillful blow to the throat. "Enough of this! Sound the retreat!"

The horn sounded again, and in the distance Gaelin heard the faint response of the other divisions as they replied. Count Baesil stood in his stirrups and yelled, "Forward! Let's go! Leave these bastards behind!" The command company disengaged, and almost before Gaelin knew it, they were galloping away into the darkness surrounding the camp. Arrows fell among them, clattering from armor or plunging to stick in the ground. Baesil led them in a curving circle away from the burning camp.

A few hundred yards off, well out of bowshot, Baesil held up his hand and brought the group to a halt. Gaelin looked around the company. He could see they were missing a number of men, maybe a third of their number, and many more were injured as well. Behind them, roaring fires raced through the camp, and he could still hear the occasional clash of arms as Ghoerans fought Ghoerans in the confusion. "I'd say we bloodied their nose," Gaelin said to Baesil.

"Aye, we did, but we lost a lot of men we couldn't afford to lose," Baesil replied. He lifted his visor, and Gaelin was surprised to see a line of blood trickling down the side of the count's face. "Don't believe that we did anything more than make them mad. Maybe we killed a few and burned some wagons, but that's still a formidable army behind us, and they'll be after blood now."

"Let them follow us," Gaelin said. "We'll give it to them."



twelve

Bannier caught up with the retreating army of Mhoried in the southern borderlands of Winoene. The gem in which the warrior's soul resided, the princess Ilwyn, and Bannier's own mindless body were safely hidden in his secret place of power, deep within the Shadow World. It was a mere step away from the world of sunlight, but no one save a wizard or a halfling could ever locate Bannier's retreat. For two days he had ridden Madislav's body mercilessly to catch up to the Mhorien army.

It was the evening of the day after the raid, and the Mhoriens were strung out over ten miles of winding track as they climbed north into the highlands of the country. As he joined the main body of the march, Bannier glanced at the troops with a critical eye. They seemed exhausted, and many struggled along with wounds or battered gear. But there was a spring in their step, a rough and ready wit in their speech,

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that Bannier didn't like. The Mhoriens were beaten, but they hadn't been broken yet. He snorted in disgust—that was Tuorel's problem, not his.

He settled into an easy canter and rode alongside the army as it snaked up into the green, rocky hills. Now and then he was hailed by a passing soldier or knight familiar with Madislav, but to each he waved and called out, "I cannot be talking now!" as he cantered past. In a mile, he came upon a knot of knights and lords, the banners of Mhoried flying proudly from the standard-bearers. It was late in the evening, and the vanguard was already stopped for the night.

He spied Gaelin sitting atop his horse beside a nobleman he recognized as Baesil Ceried, with a small number of guards watching over him. In fact, one of these watched him approach for a long moment before raising his visor for a better look, blinking in disbelief. "I don't believe it," he said. "Mhor Gaelin! It's Madislav!"

Gaelin turned at Boeric's call, breaking off in midsentence. "Madislav! Is that you? By Haelyn, how did you escape? Where have you been?"

Bannier pasted a broad grin on his features and focused on Gaelin. The prince knew Madislav as well as anyone, and if he'd inherited any of his father's talent for seeing through deceptions . . . the wizard would have to be careful to speak no lies. "Hah! Is good to see you, Gaelin! I could not believe you got away!"

Gaelin swung down from the saddle, and Bannier did likewise. The prince hugged him, slapping his back. "How did you manage it, Madislav? I thought you'd been shot dead in the courtyard."

Bannier showed an exaggerated wince. "I thought so too, but this body is harder to kill than most. I just was *looking* dead."

Gaelin drew back, concern on his face. "I'm sorry, I should have been careful of your wounds. Do you need someone to look after them?"

"I have seen to them already. I will live."

"So they took you for dead? Did you just get up and walk away when no one was looking?"

Bannier smiled broadly and clapped Gaelin on the shoulder. "How were you getting away, Gaelin?"

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The prince missed the reversal and quickly related the story of his escape with Erin, Boeric, and Niesa and their subsequent journey. "So, here we are," he concluded. "I'll be glad to have your counsel again, my friend."

Bannier bowed. "Is yours as long as you need it," he answered. "Now, begging your pardon, where can I find something to eat?"

Gaelin smiled. "Same old Madislav," he laughed. "Boeric, have one of your men show Madislav to the mess tent. I'm sure they can find something for him." He turned back to Bannier and grinned. "Get yourself something to eat, a little sleep if you need it, and come by later. I'll want to hear all about your escape."

"You will be seeing me later," Bannier promised. "We are having much to discuss, no?" He noticed Erin was staring at him, an odd look on her face. He looked away and rode off in search of the mess tent.

* * * * *

They climbed higher into the downs and hills of upper Winoene. Unlike the lowlands of Mhoried, these regions were mostly wild; villages and farms were few and far between. Often they found themselves flanked by rocky foothills whose sheer sides streamed water from patches of melting snow high on their barren crowns. It was a desolate and unforgiving land, but Gaelin loved the wild beauty and solitude.

Baesil led them into deep, trackless valleys hidden in the hills, places of heather and boulders where they encountered no one save a few shepherds with their flocks. Gaelin quickly understood why Baesil had run for the highlands—it was hard going for an army, and forage was even scarcer than it had been in the lowlands. They could outwait and outmaneuver any larger force that pursued them into the hills. In fact, Gaelin spotted a dozen or more good places to make stands or set ambushes for the armies that followed.

Erin was moved by the beautiful scenery, as well. One morning, when the frost was thick on the grass and the red light of dawn shone from the stark peaks that fenced them in, she asked, "How much of Mhoried is like this, Gaelin?"

"The highlands run a hundred miles or more, from the

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headwaters of the Stonebyrn to the springs of the Maesil," he told her. "And from here it's still fifty miles north to the Stoncrowns and Torien's Watch. It's the better part of a third of the kingdom, and most of it's just like this."

"It's spectacular," she murmured, drawing a deep breath. "I'm glad I got a chance to see it, regardless of the circumstances."

"I could stay up here forever," Gaelin agreed. He stretched and worked his knuckles into the small of his back. "Well, we'll see more of the scenery over the next day or two." He gave her a tired smile and saddled Blackbrand for the day's ride.

During a halt on the third day of the march, Gaelin and his usual riding companions—Erin, Huire, Madislav, and the Princess Seriene—climbed a short way from the track to eat a light meal of cheese and bread on a hillside. Gaelin's back still hurt from the fall he'd taken during the raid, and he didn't mind finding an excuse to rest between marches. Erin softly strummed her lute as they ate. After a quarter-hour or so, Seriene reached over and touched Gaelin's arm. "It seems that your lunch is about to be interrupted. There's a messenger heading this way."

Gaelin groaned and stood up. "It never stops." The rider, a young northland lad with a mud-splattered tunic, slid off his horse a few yards away and presented a wax-sealed parchment to Gaelin with a bow. Gaelin thanked him and moved away, examining the seal. "It's from the Count Rieve of Torien's Watch," he announced. He opened it, read the letter, and reread it to make sure he understood.

"What is it?" asked Erin.

"Torien says there's trouble with Cariele. The queen doesn't want to take sides by supporting my claim or allowing food and arms to cross her borders," Gaelin said. He crumpled the letter and threw it to the ground in disgust. "We need her complicity, if not her active cooperation. Damn!" He sighed. "Well, Baesil's going to tell me that we've got to have those supplies. I'll have to go on up to Cariele and call on Queen Aeriele, see if I can talk some reason into her."

"You don't have time for that," Erin said. "If you leave Mhoried for any reason, nobles will desert your banner. They'll think you're running out on them."

"I don't see that I have a choice."

"I'm your herald, Gaelin. It's my job to represent you when you can't be there yourself. I'll go." Erin stood and tucked her riding pants back into her boots.

Gaelin grimaced. "You're right. Convince Aeriele to open her borders, and offer her whatever you think is reasonable. I trust your judgment."

Erin smiled. "Three days there, three days back, and I'll figure on a week or so to convince the queen to see reason. I should be back in two weeks. Can you manage without me?"

"I'll have to. Take a detachment of guards with you, at least ten men. I don't want you to run into trouble in the Stonecrowns."

The bard gracefully swung herself onto her horse and bowed low from the saddle. "It shall be as you wish, my lord Mhor." Then she turned and rode off, heading down toward the road. Gaelin watched her leave, unease shadowing his heart.

On the fourth day of their march, one day after Erin's departure for Cariele, they came into a small region of gentler hills and sparse forestland, the southern fringes of the mighty Aelvinnwode. Here they found a ruined keep by a cold lake. "The old Caer Winoene," Baesil told them. "Sacked and burned four hundred years ago, by goblin tribes out of the Five Peaks, during the chaos that surrounded the fall of the Roele line in Anuire. House Winoene met its end here, and much of the land was never restored. Lord Hastaes holds the county now, but it's only a shadow of what it once was." He took a deep breath. "It's home for a time. My scouts report that Baehemon's a good ten days behind us, and probably more like three weeks if he waits for reinforcements to come after us up here."

"What do we do if he follows us?" Gaelin asked.

"Well, we have a couple of weeks to turn our farmers into soldiers and to see about filling out the ranks with the musters of the northlords. In fact, with your permission, I was going to send our cavalry out to Marloer's Gap and Torien's Watch to help the highlanders turn the goblins back for good. The sooner we end the threat to the northlands, the sooner we can add their levies to our army. And those highlanders know something about fighting, unlike these farmers we've collected so far."

“Do you think we’ll have time to get ready for Baehemon?”

Baesil shrugged. “It will have to do. We’re running out of places to retreat to.”

After spending one cold and uncomfortable night sleeping in the ruins of the castle’s hall, Gaelin found that Huire had requisitioned a small horde of carpenters and masons to set about repairing the worst of the damage and building an improvised keep. Within a couple of days, he was holding court again in a rather drafty hall, but at least it had a roof and wasn’t choked with rubble anymore.

For the first time in what seemed an eternity, Gaelin’s life developed a routine again. The helter-skelter pace of the first weeks of the Ghoeran war slowed to a crawl as spring began to show the first hints of summer. Over the next ten days, the weather became warmer and drier, and the endless rains of Pasiphiel and Sarimiere came to an end as the month of Taliénir approached. From day to day, Gaelin spent his time repairing the damaged arms of Mhoried’s government, courting southern and northern lords and requesting their support, dealing with ambassadors from neighboring powers, and consulting with Baesil on matters of strategy and supply.

Count Baesil’s scouts reported that Baehemon was advancing slowly into the upper reaches of Byrnnor, gathering his strength for a major expedition, but the Ghoeran army was still fifty miles away and traveling only four to six miles a day.

“Should we oppose his march, or wait for him?” Gaelin asked.

Baesil grinned wolfishly. “I mean to dog his every step once he sets foot in the highlands,” he said. “In fact, I’ve got nearly a thousand skirmishers and raiders moving into position, mostly northlanders who know these hills like the backs of their hands. I won’t try to stand against him in open battle, but I’ll make certain that he’s tired of fighting by the time he gets here.”

“You believe he’ll try to finish us off?”

“Well, he can’t let you put together a court-in-exile and gather an army up here, can he? Sooner or later, he’ll want to show everyone that Mhoried belongs to Tuorel.” Baesil smiled. “Of course, he’d be better off to wait us out, even if it took years. But I don’t think Tuorel or Baehemon has the pa-

tience for it.”

After Baesil left to attend to other duties, Gaelin spent an hour practicing his swordsmanship, sparring with some of the Knights Guardian who had trickled into Caer Winoene. He looked forward to his time on the practice field—when he was dodging blows and flailing away with a wooden sword, it felt like he was nothing more than a young squire, just beginning his training.

He finally called the session to a halt when the low-lying mist increased to a steady rain. He discarded his padded ake-ton, dunked his head in a barrel of cold water, and drew on a worn, loose-fitting shirt of Khinasi cotton. Still sweating, he started back up toward the castle, studying its jagged turrets and piecemeal battlements with a critical eye. He almost walked past Seriene, who sat watching him on her trim roan riding horse. “Seriene! I didn’t even see you there.”

“Some women might take offense at that, Gaelin,” she said with a smile. He noticed that she was dressed in a fine riding outfit, with creased pants, high leather boots, a white cotton blouse, and a long coat of fine blue wool. As always, her appearance was perfect. She rested her eyes on him for a moment before looking back at the field. “You’re quite a swordsman. Did you fight in many tournaments?”

“Not that many, to be honest. Most of my skill I learned with the Knights Guardian. It’s tradition in Mhoried for the Mhor’s sons to train in the order.” He held up a hand to catch the rain. “You shouldn’t be out riding in this. You’ll catch cold.”

“Will you walk me back to the stable?”

“Certainly.” Seriene slid one leg over the saddle and paused while Gaelin quickly stepped up to take her by the hand and help her down, though he knew she needed no assistance. She flashed a quick smile and, with her horse’s reins in hand, started toward the castle’s yard. Gaelin stole a side-long glance at her, admiring the delicate trickle of rainwater on the side of her smooth, even face.

She looked up, noticing his attention. Their eyes met, and Gaelin felt an unmistakable spark that set his heart racing. “I’ve noticed that you spend most of your time alone,” she said.

“You must be joking. I’m surrounded by people all day long. Lords, knights, messengers, diplomats . . . every time I

turn around, there's someone waiting to talk to me."

"I didn't say you weren't busy. I mean, outside of your immediate advisors, you don't seem to have many friends. Or any romantic interests."

"I haven't had time to even think about that," Gaelin laughed.

Serienne looked him full in the face. Her eyes were blue and clear, burning through his casual facade. "Not even a thought?"

He found the easy laugh fading in his throat. She was breathtaking, and the way she looked at him, thoughts of her were crowding everything else out of his mind. "I suppose the thought's crossed my mind," he admitted.

Serienne reached out and touched his hand. Her skin was cool and wet with rain. "I don't meet many men like you, Gaelin. I wouldn't say that my father shelters me, but some of the suitors who have called on me seemed so insincere. They wore their chivalry, their victories in the tournaments, like a cloak of nobility. I think they've forgotten why they practice the so-called knightly virtues."

"And I am refreshingly free of social graces?"

Serienne laughed, a light and sweet sound. "No, not at all. Watching your swordplay, I realized you learned how to fight to stay alive in a real battle, not to win tournaments. When you meet with some lord or ambassador, you don't try to demonstrate your courtliness. You're courteous because that's what you think is right."

"Isn't that how it's supposed to be?"

Serienne glanced up at him with a smile. "You'd be surprised at how many noblemen I've met who don't know that."

Gaelin's head whirled as they strolled into the open courtyard of the ruined castle. "It seems we're here," he said.

Serienne stepped close and pressed her lips to his cheek. "Thank you, Gaelin. I enjoyed our walk." She led her horse into the stable, with one last look over her shoulder. Gaelin stood looking after her, not even feeling the rain, for a long moment before he shook himself and headed back to his chambers to change.

Over the next few days, Gaelin and Serienne met for short walks around the battlements or rides about the camp,

watching the practice of the army. Gaelin discovered there were few places he could go to get away from the various errands and messages that always found him, and despite his best intentions, he was summoned away to deal with one matter or another. He found he was absentminded and distracted when she wasn't around, and her smile or the touch of her hand could tie his tongue in knots. Gaelin tried not to let it affect the serious tasks that he waded through each day, but he couldn't seem to help it.

One day, Madislav appeared on his doorstep, a lecherous grin on his bearded face. Gaelin suddenly realized he hadn't spoken to his old friend much in the last couple of weeks, although he'd seen Madislav hovering near him constantly. The Vos winked and said, "Gaelin, I am thinking that you are needing some time alone with the Princess Seriene, eh? Is a fine evening, and you have been working too hard! Go out and relax! You can ask Seriene to ride with you."

"Well, you may be right." Gaelin glanced out the window at the sun setting out over the moors and gave in with a shrug. He sent a page to Seriene, inviting her to take a short ride away from the castle, and as the daylight faded into a warm, starlit evening, they rode up into the hills overlooking the lake, accompanied by only a handful of guards. Madislav and his men drifted back out of earshot, trailing them at a discreet distance.

"I didn't know you were such a romantic, Gaelin," Seriene said quietly, as they stopped to admire the view.

"I've been cooped up in the castle for weeks now," he replied. "I love these highlands. The air is so crisp and cool . . . the smell of the heather and the rain . . . I could get lost up here, and never come back."

Seriene tossed her head, her dark hair streaming in the wind. "I almost feel jealous," she said, smiling. They rode a little further, just over a hilltop, and Madislav caught Gaelin's eye with a quick, approving nod. The Vos and his guardsmen casually fell back out of earshot, leaving Gaelin and Seriene to ride over the hillcrest and continue alone on the other side. The guards were out of sight, a couple of hundred yards away, but not too far for peace of mind.

"Your friend seems to want us to be alone," she observed with a shy smile. "Or was it your doing?"

“Madislav’s trying to encourage me to be more direct with you,” Gaelin answered. “Don’t pay him any mind.”

In a sheltered hollow, they dismounted and sat together on a mossy boulder, watching the stars come out one by one as the evening faded toward night.

As darkness began to fall, Seriene leaned close, and Gaelin kissed her, a long, slow kiss that seemed to last forever. Silently she drew away, and Gaelin found himself beginning to undo the fastenings of her dress, letting it fall from her white shoulders. Her body was soft and pale in the starlight, and Gaelin’s mouth went dry at the sight of her. “Seriene, I—”

“Shh.” She moved closer, touching her hand to his face. She nestled into his arms and guided his hands as he caressed her. Gaelin drank another long kiss from her perfect lips, and then pulled himself away, quickly standing and stepping away from her, his eyes on the distant hills. “Seriene, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’d like to be your lover, even if it’s just for this night—but I can’t promise you anything. It’s just not right for me to do this.”

He heard her as she stood and followed him, the soft whisper of her dress sliding away from her entirely, and she came up behind him and pressed herself close, her arms around his shoulders. “Gaelin, I’m not asking anything of you. I know you’re married to Mhoried, and that’s why I care for you.”

Gaelin was intensely aware of her closeness. Seriene’s arms were circling his body again, unfastening his shirt. “Seriene, I’m nobody. If I win back my father’s throne, then this would be a fine idea, a wonderful idea, but all this could be over in days.”

Seriene reached up to his shoulders and turned him to face her. “That doesn’t matter to me,” she said, and kissed him again, with a fierce abandon that swept his resistance away. Before he knew what he was doing, he was lowering her to the cool heather, and for a time the world ceased to be as he took her in his arms.

After a time, they lay side by side, looking up at the sky and the glorious vault of stars overhead. Seriene was warm and soft against him, breathing slowly. “Gaelin, do you love Erin?” she asked in a small voice.

“No, of course not,” he said. “I’ve never—” But even as he spoke, his conscience strummed a discordant note in his heart. He’d never kissed Erin, or seen anything more than

hints that she might have feelings for him . . . but there in the moonlight, with Seriene right there beside him more beautiful than a goddess, the image of Erin's face and her long, red-golden hair floated in his mind. "I've never held her like this, I promise you."

Seriene sighed, her breath warm on the back of his neck. "As a famous bard once said, 'I think thou dost protest too much.' " She let him go and moved away. Gaelin heard her dressing again.

He stood, reaching for his own clothes. "Seriene, she's a friend, and I've been through a lot with her, but I'm not lying to you. I haven't even kissed her," he said over his shoulder.

She laughed softly in the darkness. "I know you wouldn't lie to me, Gaelin. It's not in your nature. But anyone can lie to himself."

He turned and stepped forward, placing his hands on her shoulders and kissing her tenderly. Her bodice was still partly undone, but the princess was decently covered. He gazed directly into her eyes and said earnestly, "Seriene, I'm falling in love with you. But you're right, in a way. My heart's confused. It's not right for me to make any commitments until I'm certain of where my heart lies. There's so much happening to me . . . I don't want to make this decision in haste."

She smiled wistfully, and quickly kissed him on the cheek. "I suppose you know how I feel," she said. "As long as you're not certain of what is in your heart, then I should keep my distance. But when you think you've decided . . ." She laid her hand on his chest and swayed suggestively close. "I'll be waiting."

Gaelin flushed and carefully stepped back. "I feel like a fool," he said to no one in particular.

"At least you're an honest one." Seriene stooped to gather her things, and in a few moments they were leading their horses back over the crest of the hill. Gaelin could have sworn that Blackbrand was snorting derisively at him, as if to say, *What on earth is wrong with you, Gaelin?*

Seriene suddenly stopped, reaching up to catch Gaelin's arm. He glanced over at her. She nodded down the slope of the hill. "Where are the guards?" she whispered.

It was dark, but Gaelin's eyes were well adjusted to the gloaming, and the hillside was fairly clear. Down a little far-

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ther, he could see the half-dozen horses of their escort, standing around with their reins hanging loose. They hadn't been tied off or secured, just left to wander. And there was no sign of their escort, except for one dark form that rose and stretched as the two of them watched. "What is going on here?" Gaelin said quietly.

The man below them turned and started up the hillside at a steady pace, glancing up at them. It was Madislav, his features dark and shadowed in the starlight.

"Madislav, what's going on?" Gaelin called, pitching his voice just loud enough to carry. "Where are the others?"

"Them? Oh, I sent them away," the Vos replied cheerfully. "I did not need them around for this. I was getting bored waiting for you two."

Gaelin sensed something terribly wrong. Something about the way Madislav looked at them, the easy swing of his arms, the purposeful stride . . . there was danger here. He took a half-step back and reached across Blackbrand's saddle to put his hand on the sword hanging from the pommel. Seriene caught his worried look and stepped clear. "Madislav, what's going on?" he said.

The Vos climbed toward them. "I will explain in a moment," he said with an upward glance.

Gaelin drew his sword with one fluid motion, the steel ringing from the sheath. "Why don't you stop there and explain?" he said, his voice steady.

Madislav raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "Quick to draw steel on an old friend, are you not?" With an exaggerated gesture, he raised his hands and spread them open. "After all, I am unarmed." He mumbled something under his breath.

Seriene shrieked. "Gaelin! Watch out!"

With a word, the wizard circled his hands and flung a gesture at Gaelin. From his outstretched fingertips five coruscating spheres of blue light leapt away from him. Four spheres raced at the young prince, while one altered course and streaked toward Seriene. Before Gaelin could even blink, the bolts crashed into his body, striking the center of his torso. He barely noticed when the bolt directed at Seriene suddenly vanished in a flash of silent light.

Pain doubled Gaelin up and sent him tumbling headlong down the hill. He fell and rolled about twenty yards, sliding

to a stop against a set of low, mossy rocks that caught and turned his ankle viciously. His stomach burned as if he'd been branded with a torch, and the smell of burnt cloth and flesh reeked in his nostrils.

Dizzily, he rolled over and looked back uphill. He saw Madislav staring at the princess, a deep scowl on his face. "I did not know you were a mage," the Vos said in a menacing voice.

Seriene still stood between the horses, near the hill's crest. There was fear on her face, but she controlled it. "Nor had I thought you might study the art," she replied. "Or are you really Madislav at all?"

The Vos boomed laughter. "You are not thinking that I am being someone else in here?" he said. With deliberation, he began another enchantment, letting the ancient words roll forth in a resounding cadence. Seriene began one of her own, her voice high, shrill, and desperate. A heartbeat later, the night was split by a brilliant flash of light as a great bolt of lightning stabbed at Seriene with a crackling roar. But the spell did not strike her, as an invisible shield parried the blow and sent it streaking wide. Beside her, both horses reared in panic, and she ducked out of the way of their flailing hooves.

In that instant, Bannier sprang like a tiger, surging up the hill in three great bounds. Seriene saw him charging and started to bark out the words of another spell, but Bannier hammered her with one colossal fist. The sorceress spun and fell, knocked senseless by the blow. "Fight wizards with swords, and fight swords with wizardry," he remarked. He glanced down the hill at where Gaelin was just now regaining his feet. "Don't leave yet, Gaelin. We've places to go, you and I." He raised his hands, preparing another spell.

Gaelin stood unsteadily, one hand clamped over the burning wounds in the middle of his body, his sword still in his hand. The Vos was still more than fifty feet away, and uphill at that; he'd never reach him in time to prevent the spell, and he couldn't throw his sword with any accuracy. He took a step forward and demanded, "Who are you? What have you done with Madislav?"

Bannier paused, his hands still ready with the spell. Behind him, the horses still plunged and danced, whinnying in fright. He grinned at Gaelin. "This body is indeed Madislav,

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but I am not," he said. "The barbarian's mind is entrapped in a gem in my stronghold, and my own body sleeps there too."

"Banner," breathed Gaelin. "I should have known."

"Your observation is correct," Banner said. "Now, if you'll forgive me, I need to deprive you of your powers of movement and speech." He raised his hands again.

For an instant, Gaelin was transfixed by panic. Then he cried out, "Blackbrand! *Kick!*"

Behind Banner, the great black war-horse reared and lashed out with his hooves, hammering the Vos with a pair of crushing blows. One hoof clipped the side of Banner's head, and he pitched forward, rolling down the hillside in a nerveless tangle of arms and legs. He came to a stop spread-eagled on his back, a few yards away from Gaelin. Even before he stopped sliding, Gaelin was standing over him, sword poised at his friend's throat. Blood streamed down the side of Banner's face. "Banner! Release your hold on Madislav, or I swear by Haelyn, I'll—"

"You'll what?" coughed Banner weakly. "Run your friend through? Open his throat, instead? What will you do, Gaelin?" Banner's eyes were unfocused and filming, and his arms and legs trembled uselessly.

Gaelin blinked, still holding the sword at his throat. Tears blurred his vision. "I'll cut his tongue out before I let you speak another spell with his mouth," he promised darkly.

Banner managed a weak chuckle. "Don't bother. You've broken his back. Can't move. And my head feels funny . . . this body's ruined, I think."

Gaelin dropped to his knees, still threatening Madislav with the sword. "Be damned to Azrai's hells, then, Banner. If Madislav dies, he'll be glad to know you're dying with him!"

"Sorry, Gaelin . . . doesn't work that way. My own body's just fine . . . I'll be back there in a flash, faster than thought . . . though you've parried this thrust nicely."

Gaelin's voice broke in a heaving sob. "Damn you! Why?"

"Needed the Mhoried bloodline." With a great effort, Banner held off dying for a few more minutes, his eyes burning brightly in Madislav's sagging face.

"Banner, you were my friend, my teacher! How could you do this to my family?"

"If you'd continued your studies, I would have shown you

marvels, Gaelin. Terrors and glories unimaginable. I made a bargain, and the Mhorieds were the price I was to pay." He sagged back, blood welling up in his mouth. "Listen to me, Gaelin. *I have your sister.* And I'm growing tired of trying to catch you. Surrender yourself to me, or she will die in ways that you can't even imagine. It's you I want. Give up, and I'll let her go. I'll even make sure Tuorel never finds her." He coughed and spat blood. "I swear by the Face of Evil that she'll die by the next full moon if you don't leave this place and come to me." His eyes burned intensely into Gaelin's own for a moment and then began to fade. "Your choice, Gaelin," he breathed, and fell still.

Gaelin looked up as Seriene slid down the hillside toward him. An ugly purple bruise was already forming on her jaw. She knelt beside him, and looked up at his face. "Gaelin, I'm sorry," she said quietly.

He cradled Madislav's head in his lap and leaned forward, tears falling on the warrior's face. There was one brief flicker of life, the eyes opened, and for a moment the old Madislav was looking up at him. The expression, the cast of his eyes—Gaelin knew at a glance his friend had returned. Madislav breathed softly, "Gaelin?"

"Madislav! You're back!" Gaelin tried to show him a reassuring smile, but he bowed his head instead, weeping.

"Banner is dead?"

"No. He said that he'd return to his own body when . . ." Gaelin couldn't finish the sentence.

"I saw his stronghold. He took me into the Shadow World." Madislav's voice was growing weak. "He has Ilwyn . . . it is a cold place, Gaelin. I am glad I am not being there."

"We'll find a priest, Madislav, one of the Haelynites who knows the healing spells!" Gaelin started to pick him up, to carry him to help. "Don't give up!"

"Burn my body, Gaelin, in the Vos way," the warrior whispered. "*Destevnye дума*, my friend."

Gaelin laid Madislav back to the ground and turned away. He knelt in the cold, wet grass of the hillside, his hands over his eyes. After a long time, Seriene put her hand on his shoulder. "Come, Gaelin. It's time for us to go."



Thirteen

In the days that followed, Gaelin wandered the weathered battlements of Caer Winoene, pacing the castle's walls like an animal measuring the dimensions of a cage. He realized that Banner had deliberately avoided him except for a few brief conversations; the true Madislav had been absent for weeks. Over and over, he replayed the confrontation on the hillside in his mind's eye, trying to imagine how it might have gone differently.

In accordance with the custom of the Vos, Gaelin burned Madislav's body on a pyre two days after his death, as the moon was rising over the shadowed hills. Gaelin himself set the pile to flame, and he stayed hours after most of the others had left, watching the twisting pall of smoke curling up into the starry sky. It was also a tradition of the Vos to watch over a warrior's pyre until sunrise, and Gaelin stood by in silence all through the cold night.

As the sky was lightening in the east, Gaelin's reverie was broken by the arrival of Seriene. She rode up and stopped a respectful distance from the bier, dismounting and leaving her horse with her guards. Since Banner's attack, both Gaelin and Seriene had been much more carefully watched by their respective bodyguards, allowing them little time alone with each other.

Seriene was dressed in fine riding clothes, a warm fur cloak wrapped around her shoulders. She paused for a respectful moment of silence and asked quietly, "Am I intruding?"

"No, of course not," Gaelin replied. He shook himself a little and turned away from the smoldering ashes. His limbs ached with cold, and he knew he needed sleep, but he was not tired. Instead, his senses were alert. "I've observed the vigil, as he would have liked. I'm just daydreaming now."

"Thinking of Madislav?"

He nodded. "He was my best friend. I'll miss him."

"There was nothing more you could have done, Gaelin."

He laughed with acidic scorn. "I seem to be hearing that a lot lately. 'Sorry, Gaelin, it couldn't be helped.' It feels like a poor excuse for causing the death of my friend."

Seriene remained silent for a long time. "What are you going to do about Ilwyn?"

"I don't know," he replied. "If I do nothing, I don't doubt that Banner will do exactly what he threatens. And if I give myself up, how do I know that he'll keep his word?"

"Don't tell me you're thinking about surrendering yourself!"

He looked into the smoking ashes of Madislav's pyre. "How many people have died for me already? Daene, Ruide, Madislav, Tiery, my entire family! All the people who made Shieldhaven my home are gone." Although he fought to control himself, his voice grew higher and hot tears stung his eyes. "How can I let the last living member of my family die in my place?"

Seriene glared, with no hint of compassion in her face. "You're a selfish bastard if you think that you're the only one with a stake in this," she said angrily. "Don't you realize there are thousands of people who are counting on you to see them through to the end of this? What do you think Tuorel will do to those nobles and soldiers, their *families*, if you abandon them because you feel bad that you're alive? Tuorel will

slaughter them for rebels, and you know it.”

Anger burned in Gaelin’s chest as Seriene finished. Coldly, he said, “Ilwyn is the gentlest soul I know. The thought of Bannier torturing her makes me want to tear my own heart out. But he’ll do it, if I don’t surrender.”

“So you’d place one life against the hopes of an entire kingdom?”

Gaelin turned away. “What kind of monster would I be if I didn’t, Seriene? What kind of Mhor would I be, to hide here in safety while Bannier holds my sister hostage?”

Seriene snorted and tossed her head. “Gaelin, you’ve got to weigh the consequences of your actions. If that means you have to do things you don’t like, that’s too bad! You have a responsibility to more than your conscience. Ilwyn’s life is nothing compared to the life of Mhoried itself!”

He looked up and met her eyes. “Do you mean the life of Mhoried, or the life of Diemed’s northern ally?”

Seriene’s face turned white, as if from a blow, but her voice remained steady. “Do you think that’s all this is about? An alliance against Ghoere?” Her voice grew colder still. “Do you think I planned to give you my heart, Gaelin?”

Gaelin stared at her, his mind racing. She waited for his answer, fuming, fiercely beautiful. He was nearly overwhelmed by the desire to take her in his arms and drown his reservations in passion. “No,” he said carefully. “I believe your feelings are sincere. But whether or not you feel anything for me, your interests lie in keeping me alive—no matter what it takes for me to stay on the throne, what I have to give up for the sake of being the Mhor.”

“Of course, you idiot! Gaelin, I care about you! I don’t want to see you dead!” Tears glimmered in Seriene’s eyes. She stood there for a moment, too angry or upset for words, and then stormed off. She caught her horse’s reins and swung back into the saddle, kicking her heels into the animal’s flanks and riding off at a full gallop while her guards followed at a respectful distance.

Gaelin pitched a stone aside with a sigh, staring off across the moors. The orange rim of the sun climbed above the horizon. The vigil was over. He said one last goodbye to Madislav and then walked down the hill to join his guards and return to Caer Winoene for some sleep.

When he woke in the late afternoon, Huire informed him that Erin had returned from Cariele. Gaelin's dark mood dissipated immediately. He rushed to pull on his boots and throw a clean tunic over his shirt. He started toward the great hall with an excited spring in his step, Huire striding quickly to keep up with him. But as Gaelin hurried to greet her, his feet slowed. There was no reason he should feel guilty about his tryst with Seriene. Erin had no claim on Gaelin, and they had never spoken of any feelings between them. But Gaelin still felt as if he had betrayed her.

"I wonder what news Minstrel Erin brings from Cariele?" Huire offered, as he tried to hurry with dignity.

"We'll soon see," Gaelin replied. As usual, several dozen people were scattered throughout the chamber—minor lords, knights, and merchants engaged in settling hundreds of deals and compacts that characterized a royal court. Gaelin spied Erin's fiery hair gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight that slanted through the tall, vaulted windows. She wore her traveling clothes, dust and wear from the road marking her garments. Erin was already engaged in discussions with Seriene and Prelate Edoeren of the Dieman contingent. As Gaelin entered she glanced up, and their eyes met.

Erin excused herself from her conversation and approached, showing just a hint of weariness in her pace. Seriene smoothed her skirts and followed. "My lord Mhor," Erin said, curtsying. "I can report success in Cariele. Queen Aeriele has decided to recognize you as the rightful heir to the throne of Mhoried and intends to formalize relations with your court."

"Well done!" Gaelin said. "Will she aid us against Ghoere?"

Erin's face fell a little. "The queen was unwilling to commit any forces to the conflict, but she did agree to treat her border with your territory as the old border of Mhoried. She returned her tariffs and duties to the normal, prewar level."

"What did you have to promise her?" asked Gaelin.

"Freedom from tariffs for Carielan merchants bringing wares across the border for ten years. Queen Aeriele's purse strings are held by the trading costers of Cariele, and I knew they'd jump at the chance to undercut Mhorien merchants." Erin grimaced. "I tried to encourage her to show more support than mere recognition, but at least your supply lines are

secure. The materials we've already purchased are on their way now."

"I didn't really expect Aeriele to offer any military help," Gaelin said. "We'll let the Carielans make their money for now—this is still good news. We'll be able to keep the army supplied, even without the food and arms we lost in our retreat from Castle Ceried."

Erin smiled in satisfaction. "Maybe events are finally starting to favor us," she said. "What happened while I was away?"

Gaelin involuntarily glanced at Seriene. The princess met his eyes calmly. He felt his face growing warm. Deliberately, he returned his attention to Erin, searching for words. "Banner struck at us while you were gone," he finally said, the words harsh in his mouth.

A flicker of an unreadable expression crossed Erin's face. "Banner? But how?"

Gaelin indicated the crowded hall with the sweep of one hand. "Let's take up the discussion in the audience chamber," he suggested. He followed Huire, taking Erin's arm with one last look at Seriene. The princess coolly returned to her own business. In the privacy of the smaller room, Gaelin related the details of Banner's deception and Madislav's death. He omitted nothing but the passionate encounter with Seriene.

When he finished, Erin measured him intensely, her eyes piercing him like daggers. "What will you do about Banner's offer?" she asked suddenly.

"I don't know," he answered, truthfully enough. "It seems like the height of folly to deliver myself to his hands . . . but how can I stand by and do nothing?"

"You force the decision on Banner by ignoring his threat. He can carry it out if he wishes, but he loses his hold on you."

"You're right, of course. But if Banner sees that I won't let myself be threatened with Ilwyn's life, she becomes useless as a hostage, and he may decide to kill her to claim her portion of the Mhoried bloodline. For that matter, he may kill her to teach me a lesson, or out of sheer spite." Gaelin paced the small room helplessly. "I'm certain that I won't like what happens if I call his bluff, Erin. His threat against Ilwyn could very well be the only promise to me that he would keep."

"Well, you have two more weeks to decide. With your per-

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mission, I'll retire to my chambers. I've had five long days of riding, and I'm exhausted. My ear is yours, if you need to talk." She rose, stretched, and turned her back on Gaelin. "Although I suspect that Seriene would be glad to counsel you, too," she added from the door. She swept out of the room with regal disdain.

* * * * *

For the next week, Gaelin avoided both Seriene and Erin. Although he had to speak with both women several times each day, he was careful to keep the conversation purely impersonal. Seriene accepted his distance with nothing more than a slight, knowing smile, as if she saw through his tactic and was willing to wait him out. Erin, on the other hand, seemed confused at first and grew angry at him as he dodged her day after day. Gaelin threw himself into his duties, working from sunup to midnight with a madman's energy, but Bannier's ultimatum weighed on him, lurking spiderlike in his mind. Gaelin was delaying the inevitable decision, and he knew it. Hiding behind the title of Mhor was nothing more than an excuse not to think about the alternatives.

More troops trickled into Caer Winoene, and Gaelin noticed a grim smile on Baesil Ceried's face when he reviewed the army instead of the sullen scowl that had marked the general's features before. They were still desperately short on equipment, but Baesil had taken the most experienced men and broken them up among units of raw recruits to speed up the training process. "Wouldn't it be better to keep the trained men and the recruits segregated on the battlefield?" Gaelin asked him one afternoon. "If you have a company of archers, and half of them run away, won't the whole unit break? Aren't we taking a chance by dispersing our veterans like this?"

"Certainly we are," Baesil replied. "But, I've got no choice. Baehemon's on his way, and I have to be able to put as many men as possible into the field. I can't mollycoddle the recruits any more. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the experienced men, they'll learn faster than they would by training alone."

"I don't doubt that, Count Baesil. But a chain's only as strong as its weakest link."

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The grizzled old count gave Gaelin a measuring look. "This is the best answer I can find, my lord," he said. "I plan to put it to the test when the Ghoeran army reaches Marnevale. I want to see if we can stop Baehemon in his tracks at the high pass."

"You're not going to commit everyone, are you?"

Baesil barked laughter. "No, of course not. But a thousand men can hold the pass for three or four days, and I'm tired of Ghoeran soldiers marching about Mhoried with impunity. Let's make him fight for it."

By the end of the week, Gaelin found sleep was becoming impossible. On the surface, it seemed an easy choice to make. After all, Seriene's arguments were sound. It was best to consider Ilwyn dead and continue to lead the fight to free the country. The surviving forces of Mhoried had a chance, especially if Diemed were drawn into the conflict as an ally. And Gaelin knew that it would be irresponsible of him to risk his own life and the end of the Mhoried line if there was no one who could swear the oaths before the Oak. The southern lords wavered; their lands had been occupied for six weeks now, and they were beginning to question their fealty to Gaelin. If they didn't have an unchallenged Mhor to rally behind, they would fall to pieces. Some would fight among themselves for the title, others would kneel to Tuorel and give up hope of a free Mhoried, and a loyal few would fight to the bitter end. Seriene was not exaggerating when she said that Gaelin was the hope of his country.

On the other hand, Gaelin felt cold and sick when he thought about allowing Ilwyn to die through his inactivity. While he'd seen little enough of his sisters in the years he had been training with the Knights Guardian, he couldn't bear to decide whether Ilwyn lived or died. Seriene's words haunted him day and night. It was a matter of pride, of duty, and of doing the right thing. The Mhor should be prepared to lay down his life for any of his subjects, let alone his family. Deciding that his own life was of greater value than someone else's represented the first step down a long, dark road of expediency and excuses.

At night, he paced the battlements restlessly until the gray light of dawn seeped into the sky from the east. By day, he found it harder and harder to pay attention to his duties.

Countless times he glanced at the sky to see where the moon stood.

A week after Madislav's pyre, Gaelin stood on the battlements in the hours before sunrise. It was a cold, clammy morning; thick mists wreathed the cool, still waters of the lake before the castle, but from the heights of the ancient battlements the stars were clear overhead. He paused by one turret, leaning on the parapet and staring moodily out over the dark countryside. His reverie was disturbed by the light footfalls of someone approaching. Gaelin could make out a dark, slender figure advancing toward him along the walkway; frowning, he drew back into the shadows of a ruined cupola and set his hand to his sword.

A moment later, Erin appeared, gliding forward to stand where he had been just a moment ago. She looked out over the darkened landscape, engaged in her own silent reflections. Gaelin started to speak out, but decided not to startle her, and remained silent and unmoving in the darkness, watching her. Dew glistened in her long hair, now a gray sheen of shadow in the night, and her alabaster features seemed almost to glow with an inner radiance in the starlight. Her elven features were unmistakable, now that he studied her—the slender build, the easy grace of her movements, and the faerie quality of her face and long white hands.

"Spying on me, Gaelin?" she asked, speaking into the night.

For a moment, he felt embarrassed. Flushing, he stepped out into the open. "I might ask the same of you," he said quietly. "I'm surprised you noticed me. I thought I was well-concealed."

She laughed softly. "You forget my heritage," she said, gesturing at the subtle points of her ears.

"On the contrary, it's obvious in the starlight," he replied. "I could believe you to be a princess of the Sidhelien. The dew shines in your hair like diamonds." He stepped closer, leaning against the cold stone embrasure to enjoy the view while facing her. Before he knew what he was saying, he added, "I've never seen your equal."

Erin smiled and glanced at him. "Not even Seriene?"

"She's beautiful, too. But there's a hardness in her heart that I don't see in you."

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"You should fall in love with her, Gaelin. It's the best thing you could do right now, for yourself and for your kingdom. She already loves you."

"Why do you say that?"

Erin shrugged, glancing down at her hands as she twisted a fine gold chain that was draped around her neck. "You're the Mhor. That defines you. And you're too good a ruler to do anything except what's best for Mhoried. You know that you'll have to marry Seriene. It's an alliance you have to make." She smiled. "And she's beautiful, too. It works out well, wouldn't you say?"

Gaelin thought for a time, looking out over the white blanket of fog. "Not as well as I might like," he said.

"Don't lie to me, Gaelin." Erin started to turn away, straightening up and pulling her cloak tighter around her shoulders. "I know what happened between you and Seriene."

He felt as if he'd been struck. "You do?"

"I'm not stupid. The way you've been acting, the way she looks at you . . . it's not hard to figure it out." Erin laughed bitterly. "I wish the two of you well."

"I don't think I love her, Erin."

"What's that matter? She's a beautiful woman from a family as noble as your own. And you must have feelings for her if . . ."

Gaelin looked away, watching the mists rising from the lake. The cold and damp had chilled him to the bone, but the dark ache in the center of his chest held him transfixed, unwilling to leave and unable to face Erin. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let things happen the way they did."

"Why apologize? You don't owe me your faithfulness." Erin tried to maintain her sarcasm, but her voice broke. "I have no claim on you."

"Erin" he said softly. "I may have been Seriene's lover, but I can't stop thinking about you."

Her head dropped as she hugged herself against the cold stone, her hair spilling down around her face. Her voice a whisper, she said, "Gaelin, don't. Please. It's not in my heart to stop you." She straightened and turned away.

"Wait, Erin. Please don't go yet." He reached out and caught her arm gently. Erin let him turn her back to face him,

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looking past him, refusing to meet his eyes. He searched for something to say, but nothing came to mind as he held her, looking into her face. Her self-assurance was gone, stripped away, and she was trembling like a vulnerable child. "You told me that I could have your counsel when I needed it. I don't know what to do. I know what I *should* do—my duty—and I know what I think is *right*—my heart, my conscience—but they're not the same."

Erin glanced up, and a flicker of a smile showed itself on her face. "You're becoming familiar with that dilemma, aren't you?"

"I'm twice caught in it," he answered. "Do I do my duty to Mhoried, marrying Seriene and refusing to allow Bannier to threaten me with Ilwyn's life? Or do I do what's in my heart, making sure that Ilwyn is safe?" He stepped closer, looking into her eyes. "And falling in love with you?"

"Gaelin, please. Don't say that." She moved away, circling the ruined parapets, looking down at the wet stone of the turret. Her hair fell around her face.

"It's in my heart, Erin."

She drew back another step and sighed, glancing up to meet his eyes. "Listen to your heart, Gaelin," she whispered. "Somehow it will work out." She slipped past him and disappeared into the shadows, like a wisp of silver moonlight.

* * * * *

Bannier caught up to the Ghoeran army at dawn, riding a coal-black gelding he'd appropriated from Shieldhaven's stables. The army was camped in a high valley, surrounded by dark peaks and fells, and in the gray distance Bannier could make out the distinctive gap of Marnevale, a day's march ahead. Canterng past endless rings of earthworks and palisades, manned by vigilant sentries, he continued without challenge into the camp itself. It was a cool, foggy morning, and the acrid smoke of cooking fires stung his nose as the camp around him began to stir.

Near the center of the camp, he spied the wolf standard of Noered Tuorel. Bannier smiled grimly; this should be an entertaining encounter. After he had slipped out of Shieldhaven with Ilwyn, Tuorel's men had literally razed his tower,

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pulling it down stone by stone. He'd found armed guards standing watch over the ruins—the baron's men must have set off the traps and wards with which he guarded his tower. Fortunately, his shadow portal couldn't be damaged by petty vandalism, but many other possessions of value to him had not fared so well.

He cantered up to a large red pavilion surrounded by guards, and dismounted. A footman took the reins from his hand and led the horse away, while he briefly indulged in a stretch. "Tell Baron Tuorel that I have returned," he said. The officer glared at him but turned to perform his duties. A few moments later, he emerged from the tent.

"The baron will see you now," he said.

Bannier noted the man's abrupt manner and made a point of remembering his face, in the event the captain crossed his path again. "Very well." The officer led him into the command tent, ducking beneath the outer flap.

"Well, well," Tuorel said. "You've some nerve to show up on my doorstep, Bannier."

Four of the elite Iron Guards stood by the door, their swords bared; the nearest were already within striking range, but they made no move to attack. Across the tent from him stood Tuorel, dressed in his striking wolf-emblazoned armor. Bannier noticed a pair of small holes in the tent's far wall. With his preternatural senses, he detected a pair of sharpshooters training their crossbows on him from their concealed positions. More importantly, a slight woman in the robes of a Khinasi mage stood beside Tuorel. Although the spell would be invisible to the untrained eyes of normal men, Bannier noticed a subtle shield of some kind surrounding her.

For the moment, Bannier ignored Tuorel's assassins and his hired mage. "My lord baron," he said, bowing. "While our relations have not been cordial lately, I believe we still share a common cause."

Tuorel regarded him suspiciously. "And what do you want me to do for you this time?"

"Nothing you wouldn't do for yourself, baron. You march on Caer Winoene, the seat of Gaelin's government in exile. I wish to see the renegade Mhor's power destroyed as well, and I offer you my services toward this end."

Tuorel frowned. "As you can see, Bannier, I have already

retained the services of another wizard. I didn't believe we shared any more common purposes."

"I can assure your victory, my lord."

"Just as you assured my conquest of Mhoried?"

Bannier shrugged. "I delivered Shieldhaven into your hands, as I promised. You haven't even bothered to attempt the test of the Oak. I can't understand why you're surprised that the Mhoriens choose to dispute your righteous rule."

"You know the Red Oak would never have acknowledged me, not with the blooded heir to the Mhor alive and at liberty. I would have made a fool of myself if I'd tried! Now Gaelin has rallied the northlands against me. I would hardly say that you fulfilled your part of our pact."

"Nor did you fulfill your part of the bargain, by allowing Gaelin to escape when we had him in our clutches!"

Tuorel's eyes narrowed. "It would seem neither of us wishes to deal with the other any longer. Bannier, your presence here is no longer required." He dropped one hand, signaling.

Instantly, two crossbows thrummed, while the Iron Guards nearest Bannier turned and raised their swords to cut him down. The Khinasi standing beside Tuorel raised her hands and started chanting. Bannier merely smiled.

The bolts struck Bannier clean in the chest but passed completely through his body without resistance, leaving the wizard untouched. The Iron Guards who struck at him were not so lucky. Their blades tore great rents in Bannier's clothing but passed through his flesh as if he were insubstantial. Even as the swords slashed through his body, a double flash of virulent green energy blinded the Ghoerans standing nearby, and the guards screamed as their swords were blasted from their hands, the energy leaping up their sword-arms and shattering their very bones with a stink of burning flesh. Both men were thrown backward into the guards behind them, spinning like nerveless dolls.

Ignoring these distractions, Bannier concentrated on the mage. Speaking one quick word, his body shimmered and disappeared even as a bright blue flash of lightning snapped forward from her fingertips. It snaked through the doorway to strike some unfortunate guards standing just outside. Bannier appeared again an arm's reach from the sorceress, and he lunged forward, invoking one of the most damaging spells he

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knew. Even as she tried to twist away, a seething sphere of burning acid struck her right shoulder, instantly eating into her body. Banner stepped back and let her go; shrieking in pain, she stumbled out of the tent. Her cries diminished within a matter of seconds.

Banner turned to confront Tuorel, but found a gleaming sword point at his throat. The baron was standing before him, his weapon at the ready. "Most impressive, Banner. You are truly a master of your art. But this sword is Calruile, one of the heirlooms of my family, and enchanted to boot. I suspect its bite might sting more than the swords of my guards."

Banner held still, and raised his hands in a placating fashion. "In this, you are correct, my lord baron. However, before you do something rash, I must in turn inform you that the spell that felled your guards is still in effect. If you touch me with that blade, you will be slain as well."

Tuorel smiled. "An impasse, then."

"Indeed. Baron, I am willing to overlook this incident, and our previous difficulties, in order to see Gaelin Mhoried destroyed."

"What kind of deal do you want this time?"

"None at all. It suits my purposes to bring Gaelin down, and I realize that it is a matter of some importance to you as well."

Tuorel drew his sword back a handsbreadth. "Why on earth should I trust you?"

Banner snapped, "You've tried to kill me, Tuorel, and you wrecked my home as well. However, I will offer you a token of my good faith. Tomorrow afternoon, you will meet Gaelin's army in Marnevale, where he will try to make you pay for your passage into the highlands."

Tuorel nodded. "My scouts have reported this, Banner."

"In order to secure your cooperation, I offer to destroy the Mhorien army for you. You will not lose a single man."

Tuorel lowered his sword. "It will take me three days to fight through the pass, with heavy losses. Can you really do this?"

"I can. As a gesture of my good faith. All I ask is that you continue to press the attack—an action that you are even now undertaking."

Tuorel shook his head. "I don't see how this would profit

you at all, Bannier. Are you so vindictive that you want to see Gaelin dead just for the sake of spite?"

Bannier lowered his hands and smoothed his robes. "You might say that," he replied. "But, consider this: When Gaelin dies, Ilwyn becomes the last of Mhoried's blood, which means that the bloodline can be extinguished—or usurped—by killing one girl who is already in my power. I would have preferred to take them both alive, but I am beginning to doubt we will get the opportunity."

"Ah. Now I see." Tuorel grinned, appreciating the wizard's ruthlessness. "I thought you would be subtler than that, Bannier."

Bannier smiled in return; the lie he'd just told the baron was the right thing to say. Tuorel needed some motive for Bannier's actions, but now that he thought he was dealing with simple lust for power and gain, he would treat Bannier accordingly. "Gaelin's death helps both of us, my lord baron," he continued. "And I see that you are in need of a mage again."

Tuorel glanced out the opening of the tent. The half-eaten shape of a nightmare huddled on the ground before the tent. "All right, Bannier, we have a deal. If you destroy Mhoried's army tomorrow, as you say, then I will agree to cooperate with you in finishing Gaelin Mhoried once and for all. If you fail to deliver on your promise . . ." Tuorel left the threat unspoken.

"I understand, my lord baron," Bannier replied. "Now, with your permission, there is much I must do to prepare my spell. May I withdraw?"

Tuorel watched him a moment longer. "Of course. I shall be interested to see what you have in mind."

* * * * *

Gaelin finally enjoyed a restful sleep. He woke starving, and ate a huge breakfast of sausages, eggs, and biscuits in his own chamber. He knew he had been neglecting his duties lately—brooding sullenly for hours was no excuse for not paying attention to the important matters he was confronted with each day. He resolved to do better in the time he had left. He had just finished dressing when Seriene appeared at his door. "Gaelin? May I come in?"

"Of course," he said, settling his doublet over his chest. He glanced over his shoulder at her. The princess wore a narrow-waisted dress of red brocade and soft wool. She gave him a warm smile and slipped past the door, closing it behind her. He turned to face her.

"How do I look?" he asked.

"When you win this war, we'll have to find you a southern tailor," she laughed. "I suppose it's fine for Mhoried."

Gaelin glanced down at his clothes, and said, "I prefer to think of them as practical and unassuming." She advanced and circled him, pretending to admire his choice of tunic. "I doubt that you came here to critique my wardrobe," he added. "What's on your mind?"

Serienne moved closer, twining her arms around his torso and delicately brushing her lips against his neck. "Well, you are, Gaelin. You've been avoiding me for more than a week now. I didn't expect you to take up celibacy after our tryst."

He winced and tried to disengage himself from her embrace. Despite his feelings for Erin, Serienne's presence was intoxicating. His heart was racing as he found his arms starting to return her embrace, and with a deep breath he carefully stepped away. "Serienne, they're expecting me in the hall any moment now."

She gave him an unmistakable look. "No one would notice if you were a little late, Gaelin."

"Serienne, I . . . I shouldn't do this. You saw through me the other night, even before I'd seen through myself. You're beautiful, but I'm not certain you are the only one in my heart."

Serienne retreated, clasping her hands in front of her and turning away. "I'm sorry, Gaelin." She moved toward the door, and faced him again. "You know you can't avoid the question forever."

Gaelin watched her leave, fighting down the impulse to call her back. He sighed, and looked at himself in the mirror. "You're a fool," he told his reflection. Buckling his sword belt around his waist, he headed down to the hall for the day's meetings and audiences.

After several hours, Gaelin's attention wandered, despite his best intentions. He was just about to excuse himself to go see how the troops fared, when there was a commotion in the doorway. Several of his guards, including Boeric and Bull,

were engaged in a loud discussion with a highland herdsman. The fellow seemed half-mad, his actions and voice growing more desperate by the minute. "I must see the Mhor!" he sobbed, his voice cracking. "By Haelyn's mercy, let me in!"

Gaelin stood, muttering a quick apology to the merchant with whom he had been speaking, and glanced at Huire. The priest was heading toward the door to straighten out the matter, but on a sudden impulse Gaelin descended from the dais and followed Huire to the hall's entrance.

"Listen, friend, there are lots of people who have to see the Mhor," Bull said, a note of anger creeping into his voice. "Give me your name and wait outside, and we'll see what we can do." He had one beefy hand clamped firmly on the fellow's shoulder; the highlander was unconsciously trying to twist away from the guardsman's grip while he continued to plead.

"By the gods that died, don't you understand? *I've got to see the Mhor! It's killing me!*"

"What? What's wrong?" asked Boeric. He had the man's other arm. The sturdy sergeant glanced at the other guards in the chamber and jerked his head, signaling. Two more detached themselves from their posts along the chamber's walls and stepped forward, ready to tackle the man if necessary.

The herdsman coughed and doubled over in agony, falling to his knees. For a moment, Gaelin thought he had been struck by one of the guards, but neither Boeric nor Bull had hit the man, and no one else was near. He stepped forward to see what was wrong and then stopped in horror as the wretch vomited forth a great gout of black blood. The courtiers and knights surrounding the scene paled and stepped back quickly, murmuring in consternation.

"Summon a physician!" said Gaelin. He stood there a moment, staring at the scene. The herdsman—a youth not much older than sixteen or seventeen, with soft blond whiskers on his chin—howled in agony, slumping to the floor, where he vomited again, adding to the pool of corruption on the floor before him. He lapsed into a fit of trembling, his face pale as a sheet. Gaelin wrinkled his nose in disgust, trying to stand his ground.

Then the liquid on the floor seethed and moved. It trembled, and then gathered quickly, drawing itself up into a

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nightmarish figure that stood up and confronted Gaelin. The thing's skin was black, gleaming corruption, and the only feature in its misshapen face was a distended maw filled with needlelike teeth.

"Gaelin! Look out! It's a fiend of some kind!" shouted Seriene. Gaelin hadn't even realized she was near, but her warning was unnecessary—like everyone in the room, he had retreated about four or five paces without realizing it, and his sword had found its way into his hand.

On the floor beside the thing, the highlander weakly crawled away, retching in a more human fashion now.

"I bear a message for you, Gaelin Mhoried," said the creature, its face stretching into an evil grin. Its voice sounded like the mewling of a cat, but it was throatier and burbled and whistled through its foul mouth. "Banner wishes to remind you that you have six more days to decide your sister's fate. You know of a place called *Caer Duirga*?"

"I know the place," Gaelin replied.

"Go to *Caer Duirga* alone if you wish to see your sister alive. Banner will await you there. If you do not come, she has been promised to me. I will enjoy her a great deal." It laughed, a particularly horrible sound.

Gaelin took two steps forward, raising his sword. "I'll see that you won't have that opportunity, darkling."

"You would break the tradition that guards a messenger from harm, then, prince of Mhoried?"

"You carry no banner of truce that I see. And I won't let a thing like you walk out of this hall to terrify my subjects at will." Gaelin advanced cautiously, and following his example several other knights and guards drew their weapons and began to hedge the creature in. The fiend merely grinned and hissed, dropping into a crouch, its long talons clicking together as it readied itself for the fight.

"Banner laid no conditions on me after delivering his message, mortals," the creature said. "I can leave this hall full of dead knights and nobles, and there is nothing to stop me. Who will be the first to taste my kiss, eh?"

"No one here, fiend!" From behind Gaelin, Brother Huire stepped forward, the golden emblem of Haelyn raised high. Chanting an ancient prayer, the priest pointed at the monstrous creature, and a ray of brilliant light struck the fiend in the cen-

ter of its dark torso. The creature shrieked in rage, and sprang toward the priest with unbelievable swiftness—but in mid-leap, the golden light seemed to wither its body into ash that drifted away, like a cloud of foul smoke. Not a single trace of the thing survived, except for the hapless herdsman who had been forced to carry it into Gaelin's presence. Gaelin turned to look at Huire, astonished at the priest's show of nerve.

"My apologies for interfering," Huire said humbly, "But I was perhaps the only person here who could have dealt with the creature thus. It might have injured many people if you'd tried to defeat it with common steel."

"Apology accepted," Gaelin replied. "What of the lad?"

"A captive used by the monster, probably innocent. I'll tend to him immediately." Gaelin nodded his assent, and the priest knelt beside the youth and began to examine him. Letting out a deep breath, Gaelin sheathed his sword and looked around. Most of the court was watching him intently.

"Enough of this," he muttered. "I'm tired of Bannier's attentions. Princess Seriene, Erin, would you come with me? Boeric, you as well. Send word to Count Baesil that I need to see him at once. And Huire, please join us as soon as you can." He turned and strode away, heading for the room he had appropriated as his private audience chamber, while the others followed.

Gaelin stared out the window, deep in thought, waiting for the rest to arrive. Behind him, he noticed a pronounced silence between Erin and Seriene, while Boeric simply waited. In a quarter-hour, Huire and Baesil both appeared. Running his hand through his hair, Gaelin turned and faced his friends and advisors. "How is the herdsman?"

"He should be fine, my lord. He feels terrible about carrying that thing into your presence." The priest steepled his hands before him. "He's had a terrible fright, but the brave lad won't admit it. I hope he'll be all right." He tapped his temple.

"Do what you can for him."

"Of course, my lord."

Gaelin glanced over the others, and took a seat at the head of the table. "You are all aware of my predicament," he began. "Bannier holds my sister hostage and threatens to kill her if I don't surrender. If only my life were at stake, I would honor

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his bargain and deliver myself to his hands. But it would be wrong of me to leave Mhoried without a Mhor at a time like this, just as wrong as it would be to do nothing and allow Ilwyn to die at Bannier's hands."

"You've made a decision?" asked Seriene.

"Yes," Gaelin replied. "I will go to Caer Duirga. But I won't go alone, because I don't trust Bannier. If it lies within my power, I mean to free Ilwyn."

"What if you can't free her?" said Baesil.

"Then I will surrender myself to Bannier, and hope that he's more trustworthy than I shall have proved myself to be." Gaelin looked around the table. "If that happens, there must be another Mhor. That will be Count Baesil Ceried."

Baesil protested. "Gaelin, I can't! There's no way all the lords will follow me! When the Mhoried line dies, so does Mhoried!"

Gaelin looked into his face. "You're the finest noble in Mhoried. If it comes to it, Baesil, I know you'll do your best. Who knows, maybe enough of the nobles will follow you to keep Mhoried in the fight. But I hope it doesn't come to that." He smiled with grim humor. "I've something to live for myself, and I don't want to die unless I have to."

Without looking up, Erin said, "When will you leave, Gaelin?"

"Count Baesil's scouts report that we'll be fighting in the Marnevale pass tomorrow. I mean to be there, to see how that goes. It's two days' ride to Caer Duirga, so I expect I'll leave either the day after tomorrow, or the day after that. As to what happens next . . . I don't know. But I'm going to get Ilwyn out of Bannier's reach, or die trying."



fourteen

Early in the morning, Gaelin and his advisors joined Baesil Ceried as he left for Marnevale. The Mhorien general had already dispatched his troops; this last group consisted of his officers and the Knights Guardian. They set forth in a drizzle that lasted all morning, soaking them to the skin, but at least the day was fairly warm.

Baesil's plan was simple. At Marnevale, two steep ridges were separated by rocky walls only three hundred yards apart. The Ghoerans could ignore the gap and skirt the ridges, but this would delay them by at least a day, and the gaps at the far end of the ridges were just as defensible as Marnevale. Baesil's men had raised a long earthwork across the gap, which they would hold as long as they could. A second line had been built behind the first, so the troops holding the front would have the opportunity to fall back while a rear guard held the Ghoerans. Baehemon's great advantage—his

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armored cavalry and knights—would be neutralized by the fortifications, and he would have to take the line by hand-to-hand assault in the teeth of four hundred archers and six hundred infantry.

“Should we have committed more men to the defense of the gap?” Gaelin asked Baesil as they rode along. “After all, we have an excellent position here.”

The old count shrugged. “Baehemon might decline the battle and try to flank us. We’d be finished if he managed to engage us here while his cavalry swept around to surround us, which is why I wanted this force to be small and mobile.” He clapped Gaelin on the shoulder. “This isn’t the deciding point, not yet. I’m just going to see if I can blood Baehemon again.”

An hour after noon, they arrived at the gap, riding in a long column of mud-splattered armor and sagging banners. The rain had continued all day, and the single road that led through the gap was a river of mud. Baesil led the guards into the open stretch between the two walls, and dismounted to climb the earthworks and confer with the captain who commanded the troops on the scene. Gaelin followed, Erin and Seriene a few paces behind him.

“There’s the Ghoeran host, m’lords,” reported the captain. From their vantage atop the earthen dike—now soft and slippery from the rain—they could see rank upon rank of red and blue soldiery, seven or eight hundred yards downhill, gathering beneath a forest of banners. “As you expected, Count, Baehemon’s dismounted his knights to lead the attack, but he’s kept a number of cavalry mounted behind his lines.”

Baesil nodded. “He’s hoping to run us to ground after we abandon the line. Confident, isn’t he?”

“I’m surprised he’s coming up to meet us,” Gaelin said, as they watched the Ghoerans prepare for battle. “How far did they march today?”

“About five miles, Mhor Gaelin,” the captain replied.

“Baehemon didn’t want to give us the opportunity to strike at his camp again,” Baesil said. He looked up and down the line, surveying the defenses. Gaelin followed him, taking in the preparations. The men who had fortified the position had first dug a wide ditch about six feet deep, heaping the dirt on the far side so an enemy would first scramble down into the

bottom of the ditch before climbing back up a slope that was a dozen feet in height. Along the top of the ramparts, hundreds of mantles—huge, stationary wooden shields designed to shelter archers—had been placed to provide cover for the Mhoriens. Baesil grunted in satisfaction. “They’ll remember this place a long time.”

Gaelin looked up at the steep hillsides on either side of them. “Any chance of the Ghoerans scaling the bluffs?”

Baesil grinned. “We have parties of skirmishers holding the hilltops. They’ll have to work to go around us.”

“Mhor Gaelin!” Erin was calling him, from a few yards away. She hadn’t spoken a word to him during their entire ride from Caer Winoene, but now pointed toward one of the banners in the center of the enemy army. “That’s Tuorel’s standard.”

Gaelin squinted at the banner she had indicated. As usual, her half-elven sight was better than his, but he was just barely able to make out the wolf’s head on red and blue. “He’s finally taken the field. I wonder if he’s going to lead the assault.”

“Tuorel’s Iron Guards are as tough as they come,” Baesil grunted. While they watched, drums began to rattle in the Ghoeran ranks, and the enemy started forward. “It seems we got here just in time,” Baesil said. “All right, everyone except the soldiers off the ramparts.”

Although he considered standing his ground, Gaelin decided not to. In the first place, it would give Baesil and Boeric fits, and secondly, risking his own life in this action wasn’t a good idea, considering what would become of Mhoried and Ilwyn if he fell. He could use his personal guard as a reserve, and throw them into the fight if the wall was breached. And he hadn’t forgotten how things had turned out the last time he’d taken the field, in the cavalry raid on Baehemon’s camp. He resolved to leave the fighting to someone who knew what he was doing, and had his guardsmen fall back a short ways behind the rampart. They took up a position on the shoulder of one of Marnevale’s hills.

The Ghoeran ranks advanced, marching uphill in even rows. They were divided into three distinct columns; the left and right flanks were composed of solid Ghoeran infantry, carrying spears and shields, protected by chain and leather armor, while the center consisted of plate-armored knights

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carrying pikes, halberds, and battle-axes.

The knights were having a hard time of it, slogging uphill in the soft mud, and the other columns slowed their pace to keep close. Between the columns, companies of bowmen marched, but their bows were slung over their shoulders—Mhorien bows were more powerful than the lowland weapons of the Ghoerans, and with the disadvantage of height the Ghoeran archers didn't even pretend to threaten the Mhorien position. They carried mattocks and short swords for the hand-to-hand assault.

The drums grew louder and deeper, reverberating from the rocky walls of the defile. The shrill sound of Ghoeran fifes drifted through the air, setting ghostly claws to Gaelin's backbone. From where he sat on Blackbrand, he could see rank after rank of the enemy army. Tuorel was pulling out all the stops, and he guessed that somewhere between six and eight thousand men were mustered under Tuorel's banner.

"Ready the archers," said Baesil. One officer raised a distinctive red flag, and a trumpeter sounded a blast. Along the rampart, the Mhorien archers nocked arrows on their bows.

"Archers, draw," said Baesil. There was another trumpet-call, and the archers raised their bows, drawing the arrows to their ears. The Ghoerans were still a little far, but the leading troops were well within their range. Baesil started to speak the words to fire, but the Ghoerans halted, with a flourish of trumpets. The last rattling echoes of the drums rolled back from the hillsides, and then the battlefield fell silent. Baesil scowled. "What on earth? Archers, hold."

Along the line, the bowmen relaxed their aim and lowered their weapons, craning their necks to see what was happening downfield. In the center of the enemy lines, a dark figure stalked forward, leaning on a great staff. The soldiers nearby shifted and muttered restlessly as he passed by.

"Banner," said Gaelin. "What is he up to now?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out," said Baesil. "Archers, skewer that wizard!"

A moment later, a ragged flight of arrows rose from the Mhorien ranks, lofting high into the air. Banner continued forward, ignoring the missiles. Hundreds clattered to the ground all around him, but not a single one seemed to touch him, although a number of arrows flew astray and inflicted

casualties in the Ghoeran ranks near him. The wizard paused and grounded his staff into the earth, freeing both hands to begin a flamboyant invocation of some kind. I've got a bad feeling about this, Gaelin thought. "Seriene? What's he doing?"

The princess was whispering and making passes with one hand, involved in some spell of her own. She found a moment to reply nonetheless. "I'm not certain, my lord Mhor. I don't think I've seen anything like it. I'm taking steps to protect us here, just in case." She continued her enchantment.

Bannier's preparations continued for ten minutes or more. From time to time, a Mhorien archer would loose a carefully aimed arrow at the wizard, but somehow none of these managed to strike Bannier. The Mhorien troops were growing nervous, muttering to each other and subconsciously slinking backward a step or two, fearful of what the wizard's magic might do. Finally, he finished. With one glance at the Mhorien line, he picked up his staff and turned away, heading back down the hill.

"That was it?" said Erin in disbelief.

Seriene's face was pale. Her horse picked up on her nervousness and pranced, pawing at the ground. "I don't think that was it," the princess said quietly. "We'd better fall back to the second line."

Count Baesil shot a hard look at her. "Without even fighting for the first line?"

Seriene swallowed. "There's powerful magic at work here, and *I have no idea what it might be*," she said. "Give the signal for retreat. I beg you!"

Baesil looked at Gaelin. "Should I, Mhor Gaelin?"

Gaelin's stomach was knotted up. "All right. We'll give Bannier the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he didn't just bluff us out of our position. Fall back."

The bannerman raised the signal. Along the rampart, the Mhorien soldiers stepped back, hesitating. A few began to slide down the near side of the rampart, or milled about trying to keep in ranks.

In that moment, a black mist began to rise from the ground, surrounding the earthworks. Dark corruption welled silently out of the ground, a spring of blackness, as if the ground itself was burning and giving off smoke of purest midnight.

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The stuff *swelled* up from the earth, sending tendrils of inky fog racing ahead to catch and envelop the retreating Mhoriens. Men shouted and screamed in fright. Many broke and ran rather than face the darkness, while others held their ground on the ramparts while the sea of ebon mists lapped around their feet and then rose to overwhelm them.

“By Haelyn! What sorcery is this?” said Gaelin.

Serienne’s eyes were wide with terror. “It cannot be! No one is strong enough to do *that!*”

“Serienne! What is it? What’s he doing?”

The princess only shook her head in horror. “We must flee. Now! Or we are lost, too!”

Gaelin looked out over the battlefield, where his men were vanishing into the dark mists. He heard their screams and shouts, and a dim clangor that might have been the clash of arms heard from an impossible distance. Here and there, a few men were outdistancing the encroaching mist, fleeing the scene. Even as he watched, the center of his line was overwhelmed; a knot of sixty or seventy men stood on top of the rampart, back to back, while the mist surged and seethed over them. With the earthworks inundated in darkness, the mist started rolling uphill toward the rise where Gaelin and his guards waited. It moved with malign intelligence and speed. “I can’t leave them here!” Gaelin cried. “I can’t abandon them!”

Baesil Ceried leaned over and caught Blackbrand’s reins, turning the horse toward the rear. “That’s fine, my lord Mhor, but I don’t know how we can fight that. Let’s go!”

Gaelin threw one more glance over his shoulder. The mist was receding from the earthworks now, having flowed over and past the ditch and dike. *There was no one there.* The mantles and stakes still stood where they had been, unharmed, and here and there he saw a discarded helmet or a dropped bow—but of the men themselves, there was no sign. Eight hundred men had just vanished without a trace. And the thing that had taken them was now only a few yards short of Gaelin’s position, and gathering itself to lunge up the hill after him.

Gaelin spurred Blackbrand hard and fled for his life. Behind him, the Ghoerans cheered raggedly and ran forward in pursuit of the few Mhoriens that remained, although they

were careful not to follow the darkness too closely. Within another two hundred yards, the mist suddenly halted, roiling in place for a long moment, and then it sank down into the ground as quickly as it had risen. But now the Ghoeran cavalry was sweeping forward, charging ahead to ride down the surviving Mhoriens. They'd just barely missed annihilation by Banner's spell, but Tuorel's horsemen would quickly overtake them. Gaelin cursed viciously.

Erin halted abruptly, wheeling to one side as the rest of the royal party streamed by. She took in the scene with one quick glance, and then raised her hands, singing under her breath. In a moment, the coiling blackness returned, surging back up from the ground in the path of the Ghoerans who pursued them. In panic, Tuorel's troops bolted back the way they had come.

Gaelin stopped in amazement. "Erin! How did you—"

"It's an illusion!" she replied. "I guessed that the Ghoerans would want nothing to do with that mist, after watching what it did to us." She permitted herself a brief smile. "Let's get out of here while it lasts."

Beside her, Seriene nodded in appreciation. "Well done, Erin. I underestimated your talents for the Art."

Erin glared at the princess, but did not reply. As they cantered away from the gap, Gaelin asked, "What was that, Seriene? What did Banner do?"

The princess shook her head. "I don't know how he did it, Gaelin, but he summoned the Shadow World here. He must have a potent source of magic, in order to wield spells of that magnitude. And a dark source, at that."

"Source? What do you mean?" Gaelin knew they should be making the best distance they could while Erin's spell lasted, but this seemed important. He slowed down and stayed near the two women, as they picked their way back down the reverse slope of the pass.

Seriene replied, "A source is a place strong in magic, a place where a blooded wizard—or someone of elven descent, for that matter, since they're magical in their own right—can tap into the power of the land itself to cast spells. Most spells, such as the shields you've seen me cast, draw their power from the caster's skill and strength. But that's nothing compared to the power of *mehaighl*, the land's magic." She

looked at him oddly. "Why do you ask?"

Gaelin shook his head. "When you mentioned the idea of a source, a thought occurred to me: Why would Bannier want to meet me at Caer Duirga? It's in the middle of nowhere. And I have this sense that something's there. I can *feel* Mhoried, ever since I stood before the Red Oak, and now that I think about Caer Duirga, it feels like a sore that won't heal." He tried to find the words to continue, but gave up. "I guess that's not much help."

Serienne reached out and took his hand. "On the contrary, Gaelin, if Caer Duirga hides the source of Bannier's magic, I may be able to strike at him in a way he doesn't expect. Can you take us there now?"

"We're going there in a day or two anyway."

"The sooner, the better," Serienne said. "What I've got in mind could take several days."

"Even if there's nothing at Caer Duirga, we could use the time to prepare for your meeting with Bannier," Erin pointed out. "Maybe we can set a trap for him."

Gaelin considered it. "All right. We'd have to leave for Caer Duirga soon, in any event. We can cut across the highlands and make for it now." He rode ahead to where Count Baesil was, surrounded by a few surviving officers, and matched Blackbrand's pace with the general's. Baesil's face was an ashen mask of horror, but somehow he managed to keep control of himself and marshal the escaping Mhoriens. With curt orders, he hammered at the fleeing men and directed their retreat. The survivors—mostly men of the reserve—were quickly forming into patchwork companies and abandoning the camp as it lay.

"Go back to Caer Winoene, and organize a retreat," he told Baesil.

"Retreat? Where?" Baesil waved a hand at the northlands. "If we have to flee into Torien or Marloer, we won't be able to supply the army. We can't give up Caer Winoene."

"Well, what do you advise?"

"If I have some hope of relief, I'll try to wait out a siege."

Gaelin turned Blackbrand, circling Baesil as he looked for signs of the Ghoeran pursuit. Over the last month, he'd spoken with a hundred or more different lords, knights, and captains, but he had no idea how many would answer his call

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when the time came. "All right, then. Pull back to Caer Winoene and get ready to stand a siege. Somehow I'll find a way to relieve you, hopefully within a couple of weeks."

Baesil nodded. "I'll hold the ruins at least that long. Where are you going?"

"I'm heading for Caer Duirga. Do me a favor, and try to maintain the illusion that I'm still with your army for a few days." He grasped Baesil's hand. "Haelyn light your path, Baesil."

"And yours, Gaelin. We'll hold as long as we can."

Two miles farther on, Gaelin briefly rounded up ten of his guards, including Boeric and Bull, as well as Seriene and Erin. While Baesil led the remnants of the army back to Caer Winoene, Gaelin and his band split off from the main group and headed east, into the wilds and highlands, as darkness began to fall.

* * * * *

Two days after the victory at Marnevale, the Ghoeran army arrived at Caer Winoene and set siege to the ancient castle. Instead of retreating again, as Bannier expected, the Mhoriens stood their ground. Almost three thousand men garrisoned the ruins, a number far greater than the old castle could comfortably support, so the Mhoriens had expanded the fortifications to cover a good portion of their camp. Earthworks and newly repaired walls of stone surrounded the gray old towers in ring after ring of ditch and palisade.

Bannier was no judge of such things, but it looked as though Gaelin's army would be difficult to dig out of the ruins. Worse yet, the Mhoriens still held a part of the lakeshore and could pass supplies or small parties out of the siege lines by boat; Lake Winoene was almost ten miles long, which meant Lord Baehemon's men would have to patrol the shores vigilantly to keep the castle truly isolated.

After touring the camp and inspecting the preparations, Bannier returned to Tuorel's headquarters. The baron stood aside from the chaos outside the tent and surveyed the Mhorien defenses while discussing the strategy of the siege with Lord Baehemon. The squat general fell silent as Bannier approached, his impassive face displaying nothing more than

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a flicker of contempt. "Master Banner," he said gruffly, tilting his head by way of a greeting.

Tuorel turned and greeted him as well. "Good evening, Banner. What's on your mind?"

"How goes the siege?"

Tuorel snorted at Banner's ignorance of military affairs. "It's hardly started. Ask me again in a month."

"A month?" Banner affected mild astonishment. "It will take that long to overwhelm the Mhoriens?"

"At least that long," snapped Baehemon, allowing his temper to show. "Ceried has created formidable defenses for his army."

"Defenses?" Banner chuckled. "Those ditches and banks of earth can keep your vaunted Iron Guard at bay?"

Baehemon's face darkened. "Go back to your books and spells, wizard. This is man's work."

"It sounds like a tedious process," Banner observed. "You wish to be done with this sooner than that?"

Tuorel glanced at him. "Of course. What do you have in mind? More of your sorcery?"

The wizard smiled coldly. "Not the same enchantment I used at Marnevale, but a powerful one nonetheless. I can open a hundred-yard gap in the earthworks."

Tuorel exchanged a look with Baehemon. "All right, Banner. When can you do it?"

"I'll need a day or two to prepare. This is potent sorcery, and I've exhausted my reserves over these past months."

The baron returned his gaze to the Mhorien defenses, now cloaked by the falling twilight. Orange torches burned on the battlements. He looked back to the wizard. "I'm not certain I want to meet your price, Banner. Your charity alarms me."

"There is no price, baron. The sooner you break through the Mhorien lines, the sooner I will see Gaelin Mhoried dead." The wizard paused, and then added, "There is one condition for my service. There is a chance that Gaelin may come to us or seek to cross your lines under a flag of truce. If he does, summon me immediately."

"Very well. It shall be as you say."

Baehemon scowled. "My lord, do not trust him!"

"Baehemon, I've never trusted him." He met Banner's gaze without a trace of fear. "We have an understanding?"

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Bannier returned his predatory smile. "I believe we do." Satisfied, he turned and strode away, leaning on his ironshod staff. Again, he'd been less than honest with Tuorel. The spell he had in mind would require a few hours' preparation and no more. Before he set to work on the enchantment, he intended to visit Caer Duirga and make sure everything was ready. If he knew Gaelin, the prince would show up at the appointed time. The only question was how Bannier could deal with any guards or escorts who followed Gaelin to his doom.

* * * * *

Gaelin, Erin, and Seriene rode until moonrise, accompanied by their guards. They watched for signs of pursuit, but after six hours of picking their way through the darkness, they were certain the Ghoeran skirmishers and scouts had missed their trail. Gaelin called a halt only after one unfortunate trooper fell asleep in his saddle and tumbled off his horse in exhaustion.

It drizzled until dawn, and they were caught in the open with only bedrolls and cold supplies. They did not dare light a fire, and no one was equipped for more than a day in the field—an oversight on Gaelin's part, since he had expected to be back at Caer Winoene already. Still, they were so tired that most of them found a way to sleep for a few hours despite the rain and the mud.

By morning, the rain diminished into an early morning highland fog that lay thick and cold in the green glens between the hills. They were well into the wilds of Mhoried's foothills, with knife-edged ridges rising on all sides of them, flanked in fields of heather and draped with white-running streams. They struck across the most desolate territory of Mhoried, a trackless maze of stark hills and high, misty vales. Over the course of the morning's ride they passed only a handful of herdsmen's huts and the occasional turf lodge of a hunter or trapper.

Gaelin found the wildness and the chill, bracing air to be restful. Like a starving man, he drank in the scent and the feel of the rich heather and grass, a green so vivid it seemed more alive than he was. The mist that crowned the peaks around him was a cool touch on his face, and the water that gathered

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on his cloak and ran down his face tasted sweeter than wine. He wondered if the others felt it, too, or if his bond to the land gave him a sense they did not share.

When they finally halted at midday to rest the horses and chew on stale rations, Gaelin rode ahead a few hundred yards to be alone with his thoughts. He sat down on a grassy hillside, looking out over a broad gray valley, and listened to the trickle of water splashing downhill in a dozen tiny torrents. After a time, he became aware of someone's approach. "Hello, Erin," he said quietly.

"Gaelin? May I join you?"

He gestured at a small boulder beside him, and the minstrel sat down, looking out over the fields and the hills. They sat in silence for a time, taking in the view. Erin's eyes were bright and open, and her breath streamed away from her. "This is a beautiful spot," she murmured. "It makes me feel . . . *alive*, somehow."

Gaelin nodded. "I've always felt that way about the highlands."

Erin shifted to look at him. "Do you want me here?"

Sighing, Gaelin stood and shook out his rain-wet hair. "This is a dangerous business, Erin. You've seen how powerful Bannier is. Chances are, I'm leading you all into disaster." He raised his eyes to hers, vulnerable and guileless. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"That didn't stop you from bringing Seriene along."

"She's skilled in the magical arts. If anyone can figure out a way to defeat Bannier, she can." Gaelin picked up a rock and idly tossed it downhill, watching it clatter away. The drizzle was growing heavier, becoming a steady rainfall. "Besides, if nothing else works and I have to deliver myself to Bannier, Seriene's status may protect her; Bannier may not want to earn Diemed's hate by harming Vandiel's daughter. At the least, he'd consider holding her for ransom. The rest of you don't have that kind of protection. Bannier may do you harm just to spite me. I couldn't bear that, Erin."

Erin stood abruptly and walked away, turning her back to him. "This may be my last chance to see you, Gaelin. I know it's dangerous, but please don't send me away."

He moved over to where she stood, hugging her arms to her body, and gently turned her to face him, resting his hands

on her shoulders. The rain streamed down her face and plastered her hair to her skin. It made her look pale, fragile, as if all the barriers she created between herself and the outside world had been washed away. Beneath Erin's graceful and confident facade, Gaelin caught a glimpse of the frightened girl. His heart ached at her haunted eyes, and without thinking he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. "Swear to me you'll be careful. That no matter what happens to me, you'll still be safe."

She leaned against his chest and rested her head on his shoulder. "Gaelin, I don't know if I can," she said.

"It's the only way you can stay near me. I'll do what I have to do. Just promise me there's a reason for me to hope, that somewhere you're alive and well."

Erin didn't reply. They held each other for a long moment, as water ran from their cloaks and ran in icy trickles beneath their clothes, and then it was time to head back and ride on. Before they left, Gaelin kissed her again, and Erin responded with fire, locking her arms around his broad shoulders for a brief moment that seemed to last forever.

They continued for about fifteen miles more that day, pressing on until sundown. That night, they camped in the wreckage of an old freehold in the shadow of a steep-sided hill crowned with bare rock. The place had been deserted for decades, but the signs of a bloody fight or raid could still be found—doors kicked off their hinges, stone blackened with soot from a fire, a half-dozen stone cairns marked with goblin runes in the field behind the house. It seemed an ill omen, but no one complained about sleeping with cover over their heads.

After an unappealing dinner of hardtack and a bit of cold rabbit stew, Gaelin and his companions sought their bedrolls. The day's hard travel had tired everyone—no one was inclined to sit up around the small fire and make small talk. Gaelin fought off his drowsiness long enough to pull out a whetstone and sharpen his blade, just in case he might need it soon. The smooth repetition and scrape of stone on steel sometimes steadied his mind and helped him to think. When he finished, he applied a light touch of oil from a flask at his scabbard. He stood, stretched, and stepped outside for a breath of air before seeking his bedroll.

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The rain had slackened to a fine mist, and the night was cool and wet on his face. He drew in a deep breath, checking over the position of the sentries. Then he noticed that Seriene and Erin were standing nearby, engaged in a quiet but forceful discussion. Against his better judgment, Gaelin took two quiet steps to draw within earshot.

"Don't you see what you're doing to him?" Seriene was saying. "He loves you, and it's tearing him to pieces." Her voice seemed to catch in the darkness. "I beg you, Erin. You know that there can't be anything for you and Gaelin in a long romance."

"Can I help the way he feels?" Erin answered. "Or the way I feel? I can't walk away from him, Seriene."

"Erin, you have to. If you care for him as much as you say you do, you can't let him wreck Mhoried by falling in love with you."

Erin's voice was bitter. "It would certainly be convenient for you if I abandoned the fight."

Gaelin knew that he should slip away before they noticed him, but he couldn't stop himself from listening.

"What if you had no rival, Erin? You're a commoner, un-blooded. Mhoried is a grand duchy, and Gaelin must someday find a queen. Would you still hold his love, knowing that someday he must find a wife and raise children to continue the Mhoried line? Have you thought that far ahead?"

"What about you, Seriene? Would you love him if he had already won his kingdom back? If you didn't know that he may be gone in a few weeks, if things go badly?" Erin paced away, her arms crossed in front of her. "Are you just infatuated with him?"

Seriene was quiet for a long time. "I've never met anyone like him," she said at last. "Erin, you're ruining Gaelin's chance to be happy, and mine as well. He can't rule his own heart—no man can. You must show him you aren't interested."

"What if I can't?" Erin retorted, fire in her voice. "I'm not strong enough to deny my feelings."

"Then you must leave. Not right now, but sometime soon. If you truly care for him, Erin, you'll understand you can't keep his heart. It will hurt less if you do it sooner instead of later." Seriene settled into the logic of her argument. "You

know it must be this way," she added.

Erin paced anxiously, a dark shape against the dim sky. She did not speak, but she hugged her arms tightly around her body, as if containing a violent outburst. Gaelin strained to listen closer, but she remained silent. Finally, her shoulders slumped and she turned away. "I'll go," she said quietly.

"Thank you, Erin. You're doing the right—"

"Don't thank me, Seriene. I'm not doing it for you." Erin squared her shoulders and wheeled toward the open fields. Gaelin fled just in time, retreating to the campfire. He took out his whetstone and set to work on his sword, ignoring the fact that it was perfectly honed already. When Erin and Seriene came back inside about a quarter-hour later, neither even glanced at him. Gaelin abandoned the field altogether and retreated to the small chamber he'd appropriated for his own, a little way from the crowded main hall.

He found it difficult to sleep, and tossed and turned restlessly for an hour or more before falling into a fitful doze. In the middle of the night, Gaelin found himself lying awake, listening to the soft rain falling against the ruined roof. He could hear water trickling through the old beams and stones of the building. The moon had risen late, and a dim silver halo illuminated the room, barely penetrating the endless clouds overhead. Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the light, and he lay back tracing patterns of light and shadow with his eyes.

A furtive movement by the chamber's entrance caught his attention. Strangely, he was not alarmed; there was a dreamlike quality in his awareness, as if he still slept and only imagined that he was awake. He turned his head to look at the doorway. Erin crept into the room, moving with the silence of a falling leaf. She stopped a little distance short of his blankets, surprised to find him awake. Then, quite deliberately, she disrobed as he watched, until she stood revealed to his eyes, her long, slender body gleaming silver in the moonlight. She kneeled beside his pallet, gazing at his face. "We'll reach *Caer Duirga* tomorrow," she whispered. "We may never have this time again."

Gaelin sat up, leaning on one elbow. He let his eyes drink in her beauty, the soft curves and the fiery passion in her face. She glimmered in the moonlight, like one of the fabled

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queens of the Sidhelien. His heart thundered in his chest. “Erin, I—” He swallowed and tried again. “What did you and Seriene—”

She leaned forward, placing her fingers on his lips. “Shhhh. There’s nothing to say.” Slipping beneath the blanket, she drew his face close to hers and kissed him with fierce abandon.

Some time later, they lay quietly with their limbs tangled together, listening to the rain without speaking. There were all sorts of reasons why he shouldn’t have made love to her. It was cruel of him to accept her love when he knew he could be dead in a matter of days; he had nothing to offer her except struggle and risk, and even if he recovered Mhoried, it was inconceivable he could marry a half-elf with no lands or titles of her own. Yet all these objections seemed insubstantial as he listened to her heart beating, close to his own. For the first time in a long time, Gaelin felt at peace.



fifteen

Early in the afternoon of the following day, they sighted *Caer Duirga*, across miles of rolling, mist-shrouded fells. It took hours to cross the treacherous vale, since dense thickets of briars and rank bogs barred their way. Although the day had started with the promise of clear weather, as they came closer to the hill the weather grew unseasonably cold, and a leaden overcast obscured the sun. By the time they reached the foot of the mount, Gaelin was wondering what had happened to spring.

Gaelin discovered a sense of brooding menace as they neared the place. The green, vibrant vegetation of the surrounding highlands seemed pale and sickly here, as if the sun didn't shine with the same strength near the tor, and the air was unpleasantly clammy. Gaelin hadn't been bothered by the cold rains of the past few days, not even when he was soaked to the skin, but he shuddered at the heavy dew collecting on

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the wool and leather garments he wore beneath his armor.

Caer Duirga rose several hundred feet higher than most of its neighbors. It was, in fact, a small mountain, crowned with a distinctive jumble of dark stone visible for miles. In local legend, the hill had once been a goblin fortress, in the years before mankind had come to Cerilia. A mighty warlock had held Caer Duirga and the lands around, the story went, until the day of Deismaar, where the goblin hosts perished in uncounted numbers. The few highlanders who lived nearby avoided the area, claiming it was haunted.

They camped in the shadow of the hill, surrounded by a dire sense of foreboding that was nearly tangible. Even the horses were nervous, prancing skittishly and pulling at their makeshift hobbles. No one argued when Gaelin suggested a double watch that night. After they ate a cold and tasteless dinner of hardtack and dried beef, Gaelin took Seriene a little ways away from the others. "Well?" he asked. "Have you found anything?"

The princess frowned. "I haven't started to look. But I can sense something here. There's power in this place, but it's dark and twisted. This place draws *mebhaighl*, but it's corrupted somehow." She shivered. "What's wrong with this place, Gaelin?"

He told her what little he knew of Caer Duirga's history. A day ago, he would have scoffed at these stories as tales to frighten children. Now he was inclined to take them more seriously. "I've been up and down these highlands for fifteen years or more, since I was a boy of nine or ten," he finished. "But for some reason, I never passed by Caer Duirga. I might not have been so quick to bring everyone here if I had."

Seriene walked in a slow circle, surveying the hillside, and finally stopped and gazed up the dark flanks of the mountain, now shadowed with the deepening dusk. Its barren crest was easily three or four hundred feet above them, and she craned her head back to look at the peak. "*Mebhaighl*—the magic of the land—runs and collects like water, seeking the point where it belongs. We'll find what we're looking for up there. I'm certain of it."

"You're the authority. I'll trust your judgment." He paused, and added, "We only have three days before Banner plans to meet me here. For that matter, he could be here now."

“The powers of darkness are strongest at night, and this is a place where the powers of darkness are strong enough already. I won’t challenge them until the sun’s in the sky again.” Seriene pulled her gaze away from the hilltop—Gaelin noticed his own eyes had a tendency to wander that way, when he wasn’t paying attention—and sat down on a boulder, facing away from the hill. “Gaelin, what do you know about Bannier?” she asked.

He blinked. “Why, a fair amount, I guess. He was part of my father’s court for nearly as long as I remember. Fifteen years or more, I suppose. He’s intelligent and well-learned, but I’d expect that of a wizard.”

“Why did he serve your father?”

“The Mhor provided him with a stipend in exchange for his help—Bannier enjoyed both wealth and power as court wizard.”

Seriene smiled. “There are many forms of power, Gaelin. I’m surprised a man like Bannier would have considered political influence to be worth his interest when *real* power, magical power, was his to command. Think, Gaelin—was there anything else Bannier did?”

Gaelin struggled to recall something useful. “I’ve heard Bannier was the only true mage in Mhoried. I recall the Mhor helped him to maintain his place by giving Bannier a free hand to discourage other wizards from settling in the kingdom. Of course, there were dozens of magicians and illusionists who practiced lesser magic in the land, but Bannier was the only true mage.”

“Why would your father help him to keep other wizards away?”

“Back when my father was young, there were several wizards who competed for power in Mhoried. Bannier was one of these, and over the course of my father’s reign he defeated his rivals. Some of them were unsavory characters, so my father was glad to see them leave.” Gaelin laughed harshly. “Until this year it seemed a wise policy.”

“So no other wizards draw upon Mhoried’s *mebhaighl?*”

“I wouldn’t know about that. But I do know Bannier is the only mage of any power in Mhoried and has been for many years.” He thought for a moment, and asked, “Would that be why he wanted no other wizards in Mhoried? So that he

could control the land's power, uncontested by any rivals?"

Serienne nodded. "It could very well be. What kind of spells did you see him cast?"

"He didn't use his powers publicly, at least, not often. He knew what was happening all over Mhoried, and he could vanish and reappear hundreds of miles away in a matter of hours."

Serienne frowned. "The halflings can do that by traversing the Shadow World. I wonder if Bannier has learned how to find his way through the Shadow?"

Gaelin blanched at her words. He'd heard of the Shadow World before—any one growing up heard the stories, of course—but Serienne's earnestness terrified him. In legend, the Shadow World was a land that somehow *paralleled* Cerilia, existing alongside the daylight world. But it was a dark and dangerous realm, a land of spirits and ghosts, where things that couldn't abide the sun lurked and preyed upon passers-by. Sometimes the Shadow was only a step away, the stories said, especially in places of great evil or suffering, and it was possible for someone with a bit of knowledge—or misfortune—to find a way into the realm of darkness. "Do you remember what Madislav said, as he was dying?" Gaelin replied. "He said that Bannier had imprisoned him in the Shadow World. He also said that Ilwyn was there." He groaned in disappointment. "That could mean that we're in the wrong place. Ilwyn could be anywhere!"

"Not necessarily, Gaelin. Look at this place—the Shadow World almost touches us. The walls between the worlds are thin here. If Bannier has learned to make use of the Shadow World, this is a place that would attract his interest." Serienne looked away from the hilltop. "Is there anything else you can think of?"

"I studied under him for a time. He taught me a few cantrips, the barest start of the magician's art, but he seemed to think I showed promise." Gaelin shrugged. "He was a good advisor to my father for many years. I wonder what made him turn against House Mhoried."

"It doesn't matter now. It's enough to know that he's your enemy." Serienne glanced back toward the campfire and stood up, brushing off the seat of her riding pants. "I should get some sleep, so I can study my spells in the morning. I'll need

them all soon, I think." She threw Gaelin a sly look. "And besides, Erin might get jealous."

"Erin?"

"It's obvious, Gaelin. The way you've been looking at each other all day . . ." Her eyes flashed and her voice took on a sharp edge. "You know you can't stay with her forever. She's beneath your station." Then she turned and went back to the camp. Gaelin looked after her, struggling with his feelings. He glanced at the sky, seeking light, but the brooding menace of *Caer Duirga* returned all too quickly. As darkness fell, he went back to the camp.

That night, while the others slept, Erin came to him and silently led him away from the camp. There, out of sight and earshot, they made love again, fighting off the cold and the fear of the night. Before dawn, they rose and crept back into camp, masked by a simple illusion Erin wove softly under her breath. As they parted to return to their own sleeping rolls, Gaelin cupped her face in his hands and kissed her tenderly. She shivered in his arms, and slipped away.

In the morning, Gaelin rose and donned his half-plate armor over a rust-stained aketon and a set of sturdy leather leggings. He left off his greaves and brassards, to save weight; he still wore forty pounds of iron, but he wouldn't part with any more of his armor, even in the face of the morning's climb. At one point, he glanced up and caught Erin watching him, while she tugged on her own long boots. He found himself remembering their encounter just a few short hours ago, and the mischievousness in her glance told him that she was remembering as well. He turned back to the business of dressing and arming himself, smiling until he glanced up and saw *Serienne* watching him. She closed her eyes and turned away, throwing herself into an intense examination of her spellbooks.

After everyone was dressed and armed, Gaelin set two guards to watch over the camp. The rest of the group started up the steep, slippery hillside in single file. Bull led the way; he was a skilled outdoorsman, and probably the best climber of them all. He chose a sideways path that curved around the slope of the mount, allowing them to more or less walk upright, although in several places they had to scramble on all fours. *Serienne* followed Bull, a distant expression on her face,

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as if she listened for a sound no one else could hear. Gaelin helped her along, while Erin, Boeric, and the remaining guardsmen brought up the rear.

The hillside was not a very difficult climb, but it was an arduous hike. By daylight, Gaelin could see more of Caer Duirga. It wasn't a natural hill, or at least, it didn't look like it belonged among the knife-edged ridges that surrounded it. Caer Duirga was a mass of jagged stone that burst out of the surrounding hills, a titanic black claw emerging from a hidden grave. Tall pillars the size of castle turrets leaned drunkenly away from the main massif, hiding dark glens and chimneys in their shadows. In the lower reaches, impenetrable briars and stands of black, twisted trees made the going nearly impossible. Here and there, Gaelin thought he could make out the ruins of ancient walls, now fields of wreckage hard to distinguish from the mass of the hill itself.

Within an hour, they climbed two hundred feet while zig-zagging two miles across the hillside. Despite the clammy mists that surrounded them, Gaelin was sweating profusely. The view would have been impressive, if the day were clearer—but Gaelin suspected that there weren't many sunny days around Caer Duirga.

After two hours' difficult work, they neared the hill's summit. The hill grew steeper as it rose, and the relatively easy going of the lower slopes was now becoming a dangerous and time-consuming chore. Bull selected their path a few yards at a time, and they spent more time picking their way up with hands and feet. Gaelin could swear the hillside deliberately obstructed their way, as solid-looking handholds crumbled away in his grasp or his foot slipped suddenly on what seemed to be dry, sturdy stone. One of the guardsmen lost his grip, and a nasty slide deposited him fifty feet down the slope.

Three hours after they left camp, they found themselves standing on the black, crumbling rock of Caer Duirga's crest. The air was cold and clear, almost unnaturally so, as if the hill was crowned in dark ice. Gaelin's legs quivered in exhaustion, and his hands ached from a variety of small cuts and strains. Few of the others were in any better shape, and for a good twenty minutes they simply dropped onto boulders or flat spaces and caught their breath, shivering with the cold. The guards' jests and gibes fell flat in the desolate air of the

place, and they soon lapsed into silence.

Serienne stood and began to examine the area, circling around their impromptu campsite. The hill crest itself was easily three hundred feet in width, and ran for half a mile to the east before descending into a rough jumble of broken rock and wiry thickets. The land was surprisingly level, and Gaelin found himself imagining that the rocky spires rising from the top of the hill were indeed an ancient keep, ossified or engulfed by the hill long ago. Serienne moved off slowly, examining the rocks while she muttered to herself and made strange passes with her hands. With a groan, Gaelin stood and followed her; he wasn't about to let anyone wander out of sight.

For the next hour, Serienne carefully circled the whole hilltop, leaving no inch of ground uncovered. At length, she returned to the place where they had first scrambled up, her face tight with concern. "There's no doubt that this place conceals a powerful source of dark *mebhaighl*," she reported, grimacing. "I can well believe there was an ancient power that laired here. It stained the place with evil. Can any of you sense it?"

Erin nodded silently. Gaelin agreed. "The whole place gives me the shivers," he admitted. "I can feel it watching us."

Serienne nodded at the dark fissures that ran back mazelike into the hill's heart. "You feel the *mebhaighl*," she said. "Banner's source of power is very close."

"What? Is it here?"

"Almost, but not quite. It actually lies within the Shadow World, but this is the place that corresponds to its location on the other side."

"Could Banner harness such a thing?" he asked.

Serienne nodded gravely. "There are powers in the darkness, powers with which a wizard of skill and strength can ally himself."

Erin joined the conversation. "It would explain much, Gaelin. Think of the enchantment we saw Banner weave just a few days ago to destroy your army at Marnevale."

"What can we do about this? Is there any way to sever his connection with the Shadow?" Gaelin asked.

"Not from here, no," Serienne replied. "But within the Shadow, things may be different."

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"You can't mean to go there!" Gaelin cried.

Serienne's eyes glittered. "It's only a step away, Gaelin. Anywhere you go, it's right there. Behind the mirror, in the shadow of a tomb, we're never far from the twilight world. It's dangerous, yes, but I've been there before."

Erin nodded. "It's said that the last emperor, Michael Roele, led his army through the Shadow a number of times in order to confound his enemies." She looked at the overcast skies and the bleak stones of the hillside. "Although I doubt he sought out places like this when he passed the door of night."

"Well, Gaelin?" Serienne watched him, allowing him no respite. "Ilwyn may be imprisoned only a few dozen yards from where we stand."

He shuddered. "Very well, although I don't like it."

The princess said, "Gather everyone near. I will open a doorway—it shouldn't be hard, not here—and we will go inside. I'll be first, and then everyone else will follow, one at a time."

"Can we get back, once we go over?" said Erin.

Serienne raised her hands. "Unless there's something on the other side to preclude it," she replied. "Would you feel better if I scouted it out first?"

Gaelin stepped in. "No, we won't divide ourselves. If there's trouble, I don't want Serienne to face it alone." He called Boeric, Bull, and the other guards over, and explained the situation to them. Not surprisingly, the men were not pleased by the prospect, but they did an admirable job of restraining their protests.

"Time to own up to my word," Bull observed with a nervous laugh. "When I signed up I swore I'd follow the Mhor anywhere, and I guess he's decided to take me up on it."

Serienne stepped a little way from the soldiers, stopping in front of a black crevice in the rock. Facing the dark opening, she began to chant softly under her breath, her hands crooked into strange gestures. Gaelin wondered just how powerful a sorceress she was; it certainly seemed that this was no casual enchantment she wove. In a moment, the shadows between the stones suddenly grew darker and more tangible, seeming to writhe and flutter of their own volition as the princess finished her spell. Over her shoulder, she said, "Follow me, and

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stay close. You don't want to get lost on the other side." Then she stepped into the darkness and was gone, as if the gloom had swallowed her alive.

Gaelin hesitated. For a moment he wrestled with his fear, but then he realized that Seriene was waiting, alone on the other side. Steeling himself, he stepped forward quickly and followed, letting the darkness embrace him.

* * * * *

Within two days of setting the siege, the Ghoeran artillerymen had small engines ready for firing, and the great trebuchets were rising at a slow but steady pace.

Of course, the heaviest of boulders did little to earthen ramparts, such as those the Mhoriens had raised to bolster their defenses. Tuorel had already attempted one impetuous assault in the dark of night. The Mhoriens had repelled the attack after an hour of hard fighting. The baron's temper showed signs of fraying already; he muttered to himself and paced anxiously as he waited for Banner to complete his work. Beside him, Baehemon stood, as immobile as a mountain, his thick arms folded across his chest.

Banner supervised a team of artillerymen as they readied a catapult at his direction. In the catapult's sling lay a small cask, about twice the size of a man's head. He examined its seals and the runes carved upon its exterior. He'd spent the better part of a day preparing the vessel, and another day filling it with a potent incendiary. Unlike the spells he used at Marnevale or Shieldhaven, this particular enchantment required nothing more than a knowledge of the magical arts; he had no need to harness the land's *mebhaighl* in order to power the spell.

"By all appearances, you intend to fling brandy casks at the Mhoriens in the hope of getting them drunk," drawled Baehemon. "What agent is so noxious that a single blow from a tiny cask will bring the Mhoriens' defenses crumbling to the ground?"

Banner ignored the commander's scorn. "Be patient. And I didn't promise 'a single blow,' Baehemon. You may need to throw several of these for the desired results."

"So? What is it?" Tuorel turned, locking his eyes on Banner.

"You have heard of the hell-powder used by Khinasi

wizards?"

"Aye. It causes a great burst of flame and smoke, shattering anything near. But I've heard that you need a great hogshhead of the stuff to damage a castle or knock down a gate."

Bannier smiled. "Those fools just don't know how to mix it properly." He traced one last set of designs on the cask. "This is a perfect mixture, much more potent than the Khinasi dirt. And its power is augmented many times by the spells I've laid upon the vessel. The results should be spectacular."

Baehemon waved one hand at the Mhorien lines. "I still see no gates to breach with your hell-powder, wizard."

With a shrug, Bannier completed his last enchantments and stood back. He nodded at the captain in charge of the catapult, who set a couple of burly soldiers to the task of winching the arm back into its firing position. The wheel clanked and groaned against the strain of the powerful torsion. "I believe this mixture may be capable of leveling the ramparts, anyway," he observed. "Baron Tuorel, with your permission?"

Tuorel grinned in anticipation. "By all means, proceed."

Bannier nodded to the captain. The fellow leaned forward and knocked the restraining arm free with a single skillful blow of a small sledge. The machine bucked, and the arm slammed into its forward rest with a muffled *thump!* His eye caught the tiny shape of the cask hurtling through the air, tumbling headlong as it curved through the sky in a high, lazy arc. "Watch where it hits," he said, quite unnecessarily.

The cask began to descend toward the low earthen battlements, quickly vanishing against the background of dark hills. Then a colossal explosion in the center of the line threw a column of dirt a hundred feet or more into the air, with a mighty roar that slapped at their faces even from several hundred yards away. Stones and timbers rained down around the Mhoried lines. The captain standing next to Bannier shucked his helmet and rubbed his eyes in disbelief. "By Cuiracén's hammer!"

They waited for the smoke and dust to dissipate enough to survey the damage. A light drizzle helped settle the plume, and within a few minutes they could see that a ten-yard section of the earthworks was simply *gone*, blown to nothing. Even as the ringing echoes of the blast died, they could hear the cries of consternation drifting from the Mhorien lines. "A

well-aimed shot, Captain,” said Bannier. “You struck the rampart dead-on.”

“Thank you, my lord. It was tricky, with such a light projectile.” The officer signaled to his men, who started the tedious process of realigning the siege engine. Two more artillerymen brought up another of Bannier’s casks, handling it with more care than they had shown a few minutes ago.

Tuorel leaped up on top of the earthworks, to gain a better view. He smacked one fist into the other. “Excellent, Bannier! A few more missiles like that, and their rampart will be completely untenable! We will prepare for another assault at sundown!”

Bannier bowed. “I shall leave this work in the hands of your capable artillerymen, my lord baron. There is a sufficient supply of missiles to sustain the bombardment for a day or so.”

“You’re not staying to watch?”

“I am afraid I have an engagement elsewhere,” Bannier said. He bowed again, shouldered his satchel, and turned to go.

“Bannier, wait a moment,” Tuorel said. He joined the wizard and paced beside him. “Are you finished with Ilwyn?”

“Ilwyn? She is mine, by the terms of our agreement.”

“I know, I don’t dispute that. I ask because Count Dhalsiel of Mhoried has asked me about her.”

“Surely you couldn’t care less what Cuille Dhalsiel thinks?”

Tuorel looked out over the battlefield. “You may recall that I secured his neutrality with a false promise. If he realizes that I lied to him, he hasn’t dared to speak his mind. He knows his place now.”

“So, what did you tell him?”

“I told him that she was your captive, and I had nothing to do with her fate.” Tuorel returned his attention to Bannier. “He has guessed that the Mhoried bloodline is your prize, but he wanted me to ask you to consider stripping her of the bloodline through divestiture, instead of killing her outright.”

Bannier smiled. “I’m afraid the decision is out of my hands. If the young count asks you about her again, tell him that Princess Ilwyn died attempting to escape.”

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Tuorel nodded. "Very well." He watched Banner vanish among the tents and fires of the Ghoeran camp. A moment later, the catapult thrummed as another deadly bomb was hurled at the Mhorien lines.

* * * * *

The cold drew Gaelin's breath away as he stumbled through the door into darkness. All around him were shadows and a bone-numbing chill, but then Seriene's hand caught his arm, and she moved him away from the door. "Stand aside, Gaelin. The others will be following."

He noticed that her voice had a curious ringing quality, as if the very properties of sound were altered by the bitter air. He let her guide him a few steps away, and stood there blinking as he tried to get his bearings. Surprisingly, it wasn't completely dark. In fact, his eyes were rapidly adjusting to a deep gloom, similar to a winter night an hour or so after the sun goes down. The sky was clear and dark, but instead of the warm and friendly stars that should have been there, only a handful of dim and hateful lights flickered weakly in the heavens.

Gaelin turned slowly, peering into the shadows that surrounded them and gasped in astonishment. They hadn't gone anywhere! Everything was just as he had left it—the rise and fall of the land, the black towers of stone, even the bleak and twisted vegetation. The only thing that had changed was the preternatural darkness that lay over the landscape, and the gnawing cold. He could still see for several miles, taking in the surrounding hills and fields, but it was like looking at the world through smoked glass, and it hurt his eyes to peer too far.

Seriene, too, had changed subtly. She was limned by a strange blur, a soft and otherworldly radiance, while her fair complexion seemed paler and more brittle than bone. Alarmed, he examined his hands and torso, and found that he, too, was as insubstantial as the sorceress. But instead of the shimmering glow that surrounded Seriene, he seemed to blaze with a vital green fire, an aura that mantled him like a king's robe. The last time he had seen this manifestation of his bloodline was when he had inherited the regency of Mhoried, on the banks of the Stonebyrn.

There was a ripple of dim light in the air, and Erin stepped through. She was disoriented for a moment, until Seriene directed her to one side. "Help those who follow, Gaelin," Seriene instructed. "Keeping this doorway open takes most of my concentration."

Gaelin grasped Erin's hand and drew her away from the door. The minstrel's eyes glimmered with a strange violet light—her Sidhelien blood, Gaelin guessed—and she oriented herself much faster than Gaelin. Erin appeared as unnaturally pale as Seriene and himself, but her nimbus was not as strong as either of their own. A shudder racked her frame, and she gasped for breath. "So—cold," she breathed. "Gaelin, you're shining. You're more real here than I am."

"It must be my bloodline," he said. "Are you all right?"

Erin leaned into his body, seeking warmth. "So this is the Shadow World," she said. Her voice, too, had that strange clarity. "I don't like it."

"This isn't a place for us, that's for certain," Gaelin agreed. In short order, the rest of their party followed. Gaelin noticed that Bull, Boeric, and the other guardsmen had only the weakest of auras. When the last of the men stepped through, Seriene dropped her arms, her shoulders sagging, and Gaelin realized that her aura had dimmed noticeably since he had first come through—her exhaustion was tangible and visible here. She rallied and motioned for everyone's attention.

"Welcome to the Shadow World," she said with a weak smile. "This is an extremely dangerous place. *Don't wander off by yourself.* If you do, I will never find you. Perspective and distance are tricky here, and your sense of time can play tricks on you. Keep track of where you are, where your companions are, and most importantly, where I am. I can't shepherd you around and do what I need to do here.

"Do not get curious. Don't look behind boulders or trees. There are creatures here that can end your life in the blink of an eye, so don't go looking for them.

"Finally, stay awake and stay alert. There are powers in the darkness that can enter your mind when your defenses are lowered. You may find strange ideas and urges coming into your head. Don't listen to them!" Seriene paused. "Any questions?" A few guards shuffled their feet or glanced at each other nervously. Gaelin squeezed Erin's hand and was sur-

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prised to find her trembling in cold or fear. Seriene nodded. "Very well. Follow me, and stay close."

They set off, winding back toward the center of the hill. It was a march of only a couple of hundred yards on the other side, but here it seemed to take much longer. As they moved on through the darkness, Gaelin became aware of a watchfulness about Caer Duirga that was much more immediate and malevolent than the simple uneasiness he'd felt about the place in the daylight world. He caught up to Seriene. "Where are we going?"

"Banner's source," she answered. "Can't you feel it?"

"I feel something wrong here, but . . . wait, I do feel it. It's stronger up ahead, isn't it?"

Seriene nodded. "If you were a mage, you would be able to see what I see now. It's unmistakable." Glancing at Gaelin, she halted and took his hand. "Actually, you may be able to see it anyway. Close your eyes a moment, and then look again."

Gaelin did so. When he looked again, he saw a thin purple column of energy rising from behind the hillocks just ahead, arrowing into the sky. A few hundred feet overhead, the column suddenly divided into a dozen razor-thin lines of lambent fire that arched away into the darkness. "Haelyn's shield! What is it?"

"You're seeing the raw stuff of magic, *mebhaighl* caught and corrupted here by Banner's sorcery. The smaller ones are ley lines, running away from here to other places where Banner desires to tap this power." Seriene pointed at the low, dark rocks that blocked their view of the foot of the column. "His source must be just over that rise." Cold vapors formed from her words. She released his hand, and to Gaelin's eyes the crackling, thrumming energy slowly faded from view—but now that he knew where to look, he could still feel it on his face, just as a blind man can feel the heat of a fire without seeing its light.

They continued forward, climbing up the last hillside, a shelf of rock that crowned Caer Duirga like a turret on top of a castle. At its crest, they found themselves looking down into a small hollow, a bowl-shaped space in the mountain's center. There, a great ring of ancient standing stones leaned drunkenly around a black slab or altar. On the far side was a

gloomy mass of trees. Gaelin was certain no such place existed on the other side—the stones and the altar must have waited here in the Shadow for ages. He started to say something to Seriene, but then his eyes caught a pale wisp of white trapped in the menacing darkness. “Ilwyn!”

He drew his sword and started forward at once, but Seriene quickly caught him. “No, Gaelin!”

“But that’s Ilwyn!”

“It *may* be Ilwyn, Gaelin. Remember, things aren’t always as they seem here. And Banner has not left her unguarded.”

Gaelin halted, frowning. “I don’t see anything.”

“You don’t, but I do,” Seriene replied. “We must be very careful how we approach this place; Banner has woven traps all around this vale, and I can only guess he may have some here that even I can’t see.”

He growled in frustration, lowering the blade. “But we’re so close! Are we going to wait until Banner himself appears to show us the way in?”

“Of course not!” snapped Seriene. “But we can’t rush headlong into that place. Give me time to examine the spells he’s created around the stones. I’ll find a way to pass them.”

Erin moved up beside Gaelin and put her hand on his shoulder. “Be patient, Gaelin. Seriene knows what she’s doing. A delay of an hour or two doesn’t hurt us.”

Gaelin slammed his sword back into its sheath at his hip. Ilwyn was only about thirty yards away. She seemed more dead than alive, lying limply on the stone as if she were about to be entombed. “Fine,” he said. “But the sooner we get her and leave, the better.”

Seriere frowned, and paced forward to survey Banner’s defenses. “I’ll work as quickly as I can,” she promised. “Gaelin, make sure everyone stays near, and don’t let anyone nod off. Erin, stay with me. I may need your help.”

“Of course.” The minstrel moved forward to confer quietly with the princess. Gaelin snorted impatiently and set about dividing the guards into two-man teams and posting them as watches nearby. It looked as if they would be there for a while.



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Without sun or moon, Gaelin had no idea how long they'd been in the Shadow World. The bitter cold numbed his hands and feet and slowly chilled his torso, until he found himself shivering constantly and uncontrollably. To keep his mind from wandering, he continuously circled the hollow, keeping a close eye on the guardsmen who stood watch. The gloom was wearing on them all, deadening their senses and slowing their reactions.

In the hollow itself, Seriene had finished her initial survey of Bannier's defenses. With a silver powder she kept in a pouch by her belt, she had laboriously scratched grooves and whorls in the dark earth, creating a diagram that surrounded Bannier's standing stones. As he watched, she finished her first orbit of Bannier's source and began to embellish her design with various complications. He thought about going over to ask her what she was doing but decided not to—en-

chantments could be tricky, and he wouldn't want to ruin the spell by interrupting her.

After aiding Seriene in her first examination of the site, Erin hovered near the Dieman, waiting for opportunities to be useful. Gaelin knew enough about magic to recognize that some portions of Seriene's work were best performed with two people, especially the more complicated designs. After checking once again on the guardsmen, he walked over to stand beside Erin. "How is it going?" he asked quietly.

"Seriene's about halfway done," Erin replied. "It's a tedious task, but one that has to be done just right."

"What exactly is she doing?"

"I don't understand the details of the enchantment," said Erin. "Seriene tells me that it's beyond my skills. If I'm not mistaken, she's creating a barrier that will stop the flow of *mebhaighl* into Bannier's source, sort of like damming a river. Bannier's most potent defenses are linked to the source itself, and if she succeeds, they will fall." Erin watched Seriene for a short while, and added, "She's a more powerful sorceress than I would have guessed."

"As strong as Bannier?"

"We'll soon see." Erin reached over and grasped Gaelin's hand. Her fingers felt cold on Gaelin's, and he realized that with her lighter garb and smaller frame, she must be feeling the chill even more than he was. He undid his cloak and draped it over her shoulders, and she smiled gratefully at him. Suppressing a shiver, she spoke again, gazing off into the darkness. "Listen. About the last two nights . . . they've been wonderful. I can't stop thinking about you. But I don't know if it would be fair to you for things to continue as they are. Someday you'll have to marry. The daughter of a high-ranking noble, I suppose, or you'll risk losing everything you've been fighting for. Persuading the southern lords to return their loyalty to Mhoried will be difficult enough without the question of a commoner at the Mhor's side."

Even though he had been expecting this, Gaelin's heart wrenched. Thickly, he said, "What do you want to do?"

She considered her words in silence. "I'll leave, once we finish here. I've made a terrible mistake, coming between you and Seriene."

"I don't want you to go."

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“How can I stay?” she said. “As your mistress? Or would I see you day after day, pretending that I don’t love you?”

“You deserve more than that.”

He struggled to find something else to say, but no words came to him. Erin’s face, pale and radiant in the gloom, made Gaelin’s heart ache. She looked down and held his hand tighter. “I’ll have to leave, then,” she said.

“That day’s not here yet.”

“No, it’s not. But if I wait a few weeks, a few months, maybe a year or two, how much harder will it be?” Erin looked up into his face, but Gaelin couldn’t meet her eyes. “I don’t know if I could stay away from you, knowing that you’re somewhere nearby.” Her eyes softened for a moment, then she stood abruptly and stalked away, shrugging Gaelin’s cloak from her shoulders. He watched her leave, and bowed his head.

At that moment, Seriene struck Banner’s trap. A brilliant flare of light seared Gaelin’s eyes, leaving colored spots in his sight for a long moment. He blinked his eyes clear, drawing his sword by instinct and whirling to face the black stones in the heart of the hollow. The great column of dark energy seethed and crackled, a leaping pillar of noxious flame that pierced the blank sky like a steel rapier. Not only was it visible again, it was blindingly bright, a beacon that cast weird, dancing shadows over the entire hilltop. Gaelin gaped in awe. The light would be visible for dozens of miles, a beacon that shouted their position to anyone—or anything—nearby. The column flickered, as a dark band of matter rose along its length, then streaked outward along one of the faint ley lines, arrowing off to the west. A signal to Banner, he realized.

Seriene lay huddled outside the circle, a frail white doll discarded on the ground. Black energy danced and snapped in cold, lightless arcs all around her. Swallowing his amazement, Gaelin cautiously stepped closer, even though the roaring of the energy hammered at him with tangible force.

“Seriene!” he called. “Seriene! What did you do? How do we stop it?” But his voice was drowned by the shrieking storm of darkness that spouted from the ancient stones. He took another cautious step closer, and then his feet froze to the earth as he saw the true nature of Banner’s defense.

The unhealthy light of the raging magic was too bright to

look at directly, bright enough to throw surging shadows from the dark outlines of the old standing stones. Each of the seven rune-carved pillars was joined to a pool of darkness, and, as Gaelin looked on in horror, the shadows *opened*. From impenetrable depths of darkness, nightmarish shapes were rising, mist-cloaked wraiths with baleful eyes that exhaled streamers of cold vapor as their hungry maws yawned wide. The pervasive chill of the Shadow World suddenly became much more acute, as if the shadow things gathered and focused the twisted energies of the place. Gaelin's heart labored in his chest, trying to pump blood that was growing sluggish. The first of the shadow creatures stepped free of its prison beneath the earth and silently advanced on Seriene.

Whatever the shadow creatures were, Gaelin suspected that mere swords would not deter them. He prayed Seriene was only stunned and would know of a way to dismiss them. With a gasp that seared his nose and throat with cold, he broke free of his paralysis and scrambled down the shallow slope to Seriene's side. He arrived a step ahead of the shadow thing and launched a desperate assault of slashes and cuts, hoping to keep it at bay.

The creature roiled and flowed like living darkness, slithering away from the sword blows just as a patch of shadow might retreat from the advance of a man carrying a torch. As soon as the sword passed, its body returned to its former shape. With inhuman swiftness, it lunged forward and slashed its icy talons across Gaelin's chest, scoring his breastplate with four long, frosted furrows and sending a tremor of aching cold through his body. He stumbled back, giving ground to the monster's attack. Around him, he could make out the dim cries of his guards engaging the shadow thing's companions.

Ducking beneath a wild slash, he leaned forward and ran his sword clean through the shadow's center of mass, a strike it was unable to completely avoid. There was a curious tugging or resistance on the blade, as if he'd just stabbed a pool of water, and his hand was stung by a searing wave of cold that raced up the sword's hilt. The creature recoiled as if wounded, and Gaelin followed with a second sword thrust that passed directly between its baleful red eyes. This time, there was a little more resistance, and with a soft, hateful hiss

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the thing disincorporated, dissolving into an inky black vapor that dissipated to the ground. "Aim for their eyes!" he cried. "They're most vulnerable there!"

He glanced about, trying to get a sense of what was going on. All around him, men cursed and screamed as they fought the shadow monsters. Bull held one at bay with wild, two-handed sweeps of his sword, keeping the creature on the defensive as it deftly avoided the singing blade. A few feet away, Erin cast a dazzling spell of light that blew a creature into nothingness. But more were rising from the shadows beneath the standing stones, and already several of Gaelin's men were down. He growled a curse, not knowing what to do.

"Gaelin, help me." He looked down in surprise and saw Seriene struggling to stand. He reached down and hauled her to her feet. The princess looked weak and frail, and Gaelin could feel her entire body shaking in cold or exhaustion, but there was fire and fight in her eyes. "You'll never defeat them all," she coughed. "They'll keep coming until they overwhelm you."

"What do we do?" he shouted.

"Help me finish the spell," she replied. "When I seal the source, they will vanish." She pointed at the monoliths across the clearing. "I've prepared barriers for all the stones save one."

He nodded, and half-carried her over to the place she indicated. Even as he set her down, another of the shadow creatures flowed forward and launched itself at him. Gaelin slashed at it desperately, hoping to keep it away from Seriene. The entity took advantage of his distraction and sank its freezing talons into his left forearm. With a great cry, he wrenched free and brought his sword down on its head, striking it down, but his arm now hung limp and useless by his side, numbed by the creature's touch. He tried to shrug it off, but now two more of the monsters were sidling forward, preparing to attack. "Seriene! You'd better hurry!" he called.

Behind him, Seriene chanted the end of her spell, kneeling to scribe a pattern in the ground with her fingertip. She risked a glance up from her work, and found a free moment to snap, "Gaelin, hold them off! I'm almost done."

Gaelin gave a couple of steps to the shadow things, menacing them with his sword. One flowed smoothly to his right,

drawing his point away, while the other quickly slithered around him to the left, trying to get at Seriene. He had only a moment to make up his mind. With a yell, he turned his back on the creature menacing him and struck across his body at the monster that rushed at the princess. His blade caught the creature in the center of its torso, and it disintegrated into the mists and darkness from which it had come. But, before he could return his attention to the other foe, talons of searing cold raked at his face and throat as the creature leapt on his back.

Screaming, Gaelin staggered to his knees, flailing wildly with his sword. The monster's shadowy claws seemed to pass right through his armor, leaving white patches of frost where the weird substance of its body pierced the plates and mail. Shadow stuff clawed at Gaelin's heart within his chest. The cold seized him in a relentless grip, and he sank to the ground.

As his sight reeled and darkened, he caught one last glimpse of Seriene, her face twisted in distress. "Gaelin!" she cried. For a moment, she stood paralyzed, unsure of whether to rush to his aid or finish her spell; then she whirled away and shouted a long invocation in an ancient language. The enchantment rolled melodiously from her tongue, filling the air with its liquid syllables. The diagram that Seriene had scribed around the clearing blazed with silvery light, as the runes and patterns came to life. Instantly, the roaring chaos of energy that raged in the clearing's center fell silent, fading from view. As the wicked light disappeared, the shadows thrown by the stones died as well, and with them the shadow creatures vanished, hissing in anguish. The thing that clung to Gaelin seemed to dig in its claws one last time, trying to anchor itself to him, but then it faded into nothingness.

His ears rang from the noise, and he blinked to regain his sight. Agony racked his body, but with a herculean effort, he raised himself to his hands and knees. He hoped that his powers of healing were capable of stemming the damage; he felt torn and cold inside, as if he'd been stabbed with an icicle.

"Gaelin! Are you hurt?" Seriene was kneeling beside him, her arms around his shoulders.

"I'll live," he coughed. He tried to stand, but his strength failed him and he sagged back to the ground, a trickle of cold blood starting from his mouth.

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"You saved my life," Seriene whispered. "Gaelin, you could have been killed." Her face was open with astonishment.

He nodded, and gasped, "I had to, or none of us would have survived. How are the others?" Of the ten guards they'd brought with them, five lay on the ground, unmoving. In the clearing, all was as it had been before—but the brooding menace of the stones was gone, somehow screened or blocked by Seriene's enchantment. He looked up at Seriene. "That's it?" he asked.

Seriene sat back on her heels. "The barrier holds. Banner has been cut off from the land's *mebhaighl*."

"So he's helpless?"

"No. He possesses whatever skills and spells he had before and may still be a formidable enemy. But he's lost access to the most devastating spells he could wield, and as long as my shield holds, he's no more or less dangerous than any common mage or wizard might be." She gestured at the stone ring. "It should be safe to enter now."

Gaelin followed her glance. On the altar at the center of the ring, Ilwyn lay pale and still. Groaning, he pushed himself to his feet and advanced toward her, pausing to look back at Seriene before actually setting foot within the ring. She nodded, and he stepped inside, wincing in anticipation. Nothing happened. In a moment, he was by Ilwyn's side. The girl was barely breathing, and her skin was so cold that at first Gaelin feared she was dead. With his sword, he cut the ancient iron shackles free and used main strength to bend the manacles enough to slip her ankles and wrists free. The effort made his vision swim, and icy air seared his lungs as he panted for breath. Ilwyn stirred and murmured in her sleep. Gaelin picked her up in his arms and carried her out of the stone ring to his waiting companions. "Let's get out of here," he said.

* * * * *

Forty miles away and across the threshold of eternal night, Banner rode through a dark vale in the highlands, a dozen of Tuorel's Iron Guards following him. Tuorel's camp was two hours behind them, and this high in the hills of Winnoene there was little to see except for gray, rock-crowned hillsides and a dense overcast that promised more of

Mhoried's endless rainfalls.

As they rode forward, Bannier carefully scanned the hillsides for signs of the place he remembered, an old goblin barrow where a door to the Shadow World could be easily opened. He was accustomed to shifting himself across the boundary at any point he liked, but the task was much more difficult with a dozen soldiers following him, and he needed to find a weakness in the Shadow's barriers in order to bring the swordsmen along.

"Where are we going?" A keen-eyed, fierce young knight led the detail that accompanied Bannier. Bannier had already developed a distinct dislike for the man, but there was a chance the Ghoeran soldiers might prove useful. From the scowl on the fellow's face, Bannier suspected that the Ghoeran reciprocated his sentiments. "We've been riding in circles for an hour now."

"It's a shortcut," Bannier replied. "We'd have to ride a day and a half to get to Caer Duirga, but I mean to be there in an hour."

The Ghoeran barked laughter. "In these hills? Impossible!"

Bannier shook his head, smiling. "You'll see soon enough, Sir Knight." More than ever, he regretted the loss of his tower in Shieldhaven. In razing his conjuring chamber, Tuorel's men had also destroyed his scrying pool. Without his divinations and auguries, Bannier had no idea whether or not Gaelin had started for Caer Duirga, or even if he was coming at all. He felt blinded and helpless, at the mercy of events.

One of the leading Ghoerans reined in his horse and pointed. "Lord Bannier! Is that it?" A low, weed-grown mound rose in a small hollow, surrounded by rings of small, weathered rocks.

Bannier rode up beside the fellow. He could sense the nearness of the Shadow without seeing the mound. "This is it," he said. "Wait nearby until I call for you." He slid off the horse and handed the reins to the guardsman, stalking forward to examine the site. Without waiting to see whether or not the Ghoerans withdrew, he started to work the spells that would part the veil between the worlds.

He was nearly finished with his task when he felt the strident shock of his source's defenses waking. Caer Duirga's magical energy suffused his body, basking him in a dark ra-

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diation that only another wizard could perceive, and the signature he'd placed over the old stones was unmistakable. He straightened up, dropping his staff to the wet earth, and stared off to the east in astonishment. Who is it that challenges me? he thought. One of the Gorgon's fledglings? Or . . . No! Someone is trying to rescue Ilwyn! With a vicious oath, Banner wheeled and waved to the Iron Guardsmen.

"Come here! We ride now!"

Startled by his sudden outcry, the guards scrambled to their feet and mounted, springing into motion. The knight scowled and cantered toward Banner. "What? What is it?"

At that moment, Seriene's barrier severed Banner from his source. It was like a cold, keen blade slicing through his flesh, amputating part of him. He shrieked in pain and staggered, while the strength and power that he hoarded in the center of his being drained away like the blood of a man whose arteries have been cut. The Ghoeran backed away from the wizard, a startled oath on his lips, as Banner stumbled to the ground and caught himself on his elbows, floundering in the red mud. Banner was aware of the shouts of the Ghoerans around him, but his attention was focused inward, trying to assess the extent of the damage.

After an agonizing span of twenty or thirty heartbeats, Banner found a mere shadow of his strength returning, leaving him weaker than he had been. Mustering as much dignity as he could, he picked himself up and brushed the mud from his robes while he considered the implications of what had just happened. He *knew* Gaelin had struck at him, though he also recognized that because of the time distortion in the Shadow World, the attack might have actually occurred some time before. Banner allowed himself the luxury of a dire oath.

The men nearby blanched but stood their ground. "What is the problem?" demanded the Ghoeran knight, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Banner ignored the warrior, finishing his spell. He conjured a dark doorway of writhing shadow in front of the barrow's stone-choked face. "Follow me in single file," he said, dismissing the knight's anger. He hoisted himself into the saddle.

"Into that?"

"You'll be fine as long as you stay close by and don't lose

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sight of me." Bannier looked back and fixed the young Ghoeran with his glare. "Don't tell me you're afraid to follow where I go?"

The knight spat. "Go on, lead the way."

"Remember, stay close," Bannier said. "I will lead you on paths from which you do not want to stray." With his horse kicking up clods of dark mud, he rode into the Shadow.

* * * * *

While Seriene examined the strength of her shielding one more time, reinforcing the spell where she could, Gaelin and Erin tried to revive Ilwyn. She looked like a pale flower preserved by the snow, her face and limbs cold and imbued with only a semblance of life. Gaelin despaired of waking her; the fires of her life had cooled to embers, too dark to rekindle. He rubbed her arms vigorously, trying to warm her, while Erin trickled some strong brandy between her lips. "I think we need to get her out of here," the bard said. "This place is unhealthy. I don't think Ilwyn will recover until she's back on the other side."

"You're probably right," he replied. "It couldn't hurt to get away from here." He retrieved his cloak and wrapped it tightly around Ilwyn's torso, wincing. The talons of the shadow monster had scored him deeply, and his injuries still pained him. When he finished, he signaled to Seriene. "Can we get going? We need to leave this place."

Seriene's exhaustion was evident. Still, she finished her examination of the barrier before she allowed herself to slowly turn away, her stride unsteady. Watching her, Gaelin wondered what price she paid to gain her sorcerous skills; clearly they were not won or wielded lightly. "That should keep him busy for a time," she declared.

"What did you do?"

"Severing the ley lines dismissed the source. Think of it this way: If Caer Duirga is a well from which Bannier draws his power, severing the lines is like cutting the rope for the bucket. The well itself isn't damaged—I'm not strong enough to do that, no one is—but even after Bannier undoes this barrier, he'll have to spend a lot of time and effort calling Caer Duirga back to life."

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“What were the spells you just wove into your barrier?” asked Gaelin.

“Traps,” Seriene replied with a fierce show of her teeth. “He’ll want to be careful in approaching my work. Now, let’s get moving before he shows up to investigate. I don’t think I have the strength to face him now.”

Seriene led the battered party back to the doorway she had created to enter the Shadow World, while the rest followed as best they could. Boeric, Bull, and the three remaining guardsmen carried the bodies of their fallen comrades; no one wanted to leave the dead soldiers in the cold and gloom of the place. Gaelin carried Ilwyn—she felt light as a feather in his arms, as if she had grown close to insubstantiality as her life faded in Bannier’s black circle—and, with a dark look at Gaelin, Erin helped Seriene along. The Dieman’s fatigue was even greater than she let on.

To Gaelin’s eyes, nothing remained to indicate that Seriene’s door had pierced the barriers between the worlds, but Seriene seemed to know instinctively where she had left the gateway. She began the invocations needed to open the door again, but halted after a few syllables. “Damn,” she muttered. She looked around, her eyes flicking nervously from the gloom that surrounded them to the cheerless sky. “The gate’s gone.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Bull said, “Your Highness, what do you mean, gone?”

Seriene directed a withering gaze at him. “This is a deceitful place. The gate has shifted, vanished, or been closed by design. I’ll have to find another or ready a spell capable of forcing the passage again.”

Gaelin looked down at Ilwyn’s cold face. “I don’t know if my sister will last that long. How hard is it to find an exit back to our world? I mean, could there be one nearby?”

Seriene waved her hands in disgust. “I don’t know. I guess I should start looking.” Bowing her head, she stretched out her arm, extending her senses to search for another weakness or flaw in the dimensional barriers. Gaelin glanced around nervously. The withered trees and sere grass rustled and creaked, but he felt no breeze on his face. He could almost make out some kind of muttering, a voice whispering in the shadows, faint and hard to hear. He found himself straining forward to hear the words, words he must understand . . .

“Riders coming,” announced Erin. With a start, Gaelin realized that he’d let himself drift off. He shook himself, looking up at where Erin stood, gazing into the gloom. “They’re climbing the hill, back to the stones. I can hear their horses.”

Gaelin rose and moved to see where she was looking. He could discern nothing in the gloom. “Are you sure your mind isn’t playing tricks on you?” he asked.

“I’m certain of it,” she replied.

“It must be Bannier. Who else would come this way?” Gaelin carefully laid Ilwyn down on the cold stone, checking to make sure that his cloak covered her for warmth. The soldiers readied themselves, throwing cloaks back over their shoulders to clear their sword arms. Boeric and two of the other men still had their crossbows. They cocked and loaded the weapons with grim looks on their faces. Gaelin debated the advantages of flight, but he didn’t want to abandon their best route home.

“What should we do, Lord Mhor?” asked Boeric. In the gloom and the cold, the stoop-shouldered sergeant resembled an old, weather-beaten fence post, gray and featureless.

“Let’s wait here and keep out of sight,” Gaelin decided. “They may miss us. We’re in no condition for a fight.”

Erin nodded in agreement. Distantly, they could make out the rough voices of the intruders, as they shouted orders to each other and trampled the ground of the clearing, but the sound was far fainter than it should have been. After a moment, Erin’s mouth stretched flat in a dark grimace. “Bannier’s with them. They’re asking him what to do. I think—”

Suddenly, there was a flash of pure white light that illuminated the trees, blinding them all with its glare, and a rolling crack of thunder that echoed among the black rocks. Gaelin blinked spots out of his eyes and swore. “What in Haelyn’s glory was that?”

“My spell of warding,” Seriene answered. She paused in her divining to look back toward the stone circle, hidden by the dark shoulder of the hillside. “Bannier must have been impatient; I thought for certain he’d find and disarm it.” She frowned thoughtfully. “It was a powerful enchantment, Gaelin. It might have killed him or anyone else nearby.”

“Then we may find Bannier and his allies at a disadvantage,” Gaelin breathed, climbing to his feet. He studied the

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darkness. Cries of distress came faintly to his ears. He'd like nothing more than to take the fight to Banner in a direct fashion. In fact, he'd like to know for certain that Banner was not going to be a threat to anyone for whom he cared again. He glanced at Seriene. "Do you have any more spells of that sort at your command?"

"No. I've exhausted my powers. I'll be lucky to open the door again, once I find it."

Gaelin weighed their options. As long as Tuorel had Banner's magic to aid his powerful army, Mhoried didn't stand a chance. And he owed Banner for the deaths of his father and brother. "Seriene, you stay here," he decided. "We can't afford to risk losing you to a stray arrow or sword blow, not when you're our only way home." He picked out one of the surviving guardsmen, a fellow who had been wounded in the fray with the shadow monsters. "Hueril, you remain here to guard her and Ilwyn. The rest of you, come with me."

They retraced their steps back to the clearing, which still danced and glimmered with an eerie, pale radiance. Gaelin quietly drew his sword and held it bared in his hand as they cautiously climbed the last few feet to the lip of the hollow through the dead, twisted trees. His breath steamed in front of him, streaming away in the coldness.

The stone circle stood much as they had left it, the black altar waiting in the center of the ring, but around the stones a silvery light glittered dimly. It curved over the whole site in a shimmering hemisphere, looking like a great crystal dome that neatly covered the standing stones. Blue sparks rippled across its surface, arcing and spitting at odd intervals. A dozen Ghoeran guardsmen in the clearing were trying to calm their panicking horses. Four or five more men were scattered on the ground, victims of Seriene's enchantments.

Erin tapped his shoulder and pointed. "There's Banner."

Following her gaze, Gaelin spotted the wizard. Banner stood about forty feet away, with his back to them, surveying Seriene's barrier. He seemed completely unharmed; obviously, he hadn't been the one to set off the spell trap, or he'd had some way of eluding the spell's strike. The sorcerer muttered to himself and stalked back and forth, ignoring the wounded men around him.

"Well? What now? They still outnumber us two to one."

“Can you do something to frighten the horses? Scare them off?” Gaelin asked. “We have the advantage of surprise, but it would be helpful if a few of those men weren’t in the fight.”

Erin smiled. “I think I can do that.” The bard closed her eyes in concentration, and began humming softly to herself, making soft passes with her hands.

Gaelin looked back at the soldiers who waited in the shadows. “Fire at anyone who isn’t running away, and then follow me into the clearing,” he told them. “Wait for Erin’s spell before you shoot. Bull, stay by me and watch my back.” The Mhoriens acknowledged their orders with silent salutes and moved stealthily into the trees.

Erin’s vocalizations acquired a musical tone. She glanced at Gaelin, and then stepped forward and released her spell. There was a sudden flood of white mist in the clearing, and with a great bound, the largest and most terrifying wolf Gaelin had ever seen leaped into the center of the Ghoeran soldiers, snarling and slashing its teeth left and right at the soldiers’ mounts. Despite himself, Gaelin recoiled at the sight of the beast. He could *hear* the monster growling and snapping, the throaty rasp of its bellows-like roar, the snap of twigs under its heavy paws. The air reeked of wolf scent.

The Ghoerans’ steeds went mad with panic. Rearing and plunging, several threw their riders. Others wheeled and bolted in terror, blindly galloping into the black woods and endless night, as the wolf slavered and slashed at their heels. A handful of the Iron Guardsmen retained control of their mounts and turned on the wolf-thing in their midst, or managed to at least keep their animals from bolting or rearing, but at that moment Boeric and the other two guardsmen fired. Two more of the Ghoerans fell from the saddle, clutching at bolts that appeared in their chests.

Bannier whirled in surprise and suspicion. Erin’s illusion didn’t fool him for a moment; he instantly perceived the nature of the attack. “Stop! Stop, you idiots, it is merely a phantasm!” he roared. “It isn’t real!” The horses, however, were far more terrified than the soldiers, and the panicking animals were causing most of the chaos among the Ghoeran ranks. Nothing Bannier said was going to convince a bolting horse that the wolf wasn’t real.

Gaelin rushed the wizard, breaking cover and racing for-

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ward with a wild yell, Bull a step behind him. Banner raised one hand and pointed at Gaelin, speaking a spell. Gaelin felt his steps become slow and clumsy, as Banner's dark eyes glittered and the wizard's will sought to overcome his own. Gaelin's volition crumbled beneath the insidious assault. *Gaelin, stop. Lay down your sword. Stop. Hold where you are, and drop your weapon! Obey me!*

Beside him, Bull skidded to a stop in a blank daze, his mattock falling heavily to the ground from nerveless fingers. The big fighter's momentum carried him two more steps on failing legs, and then he stumbled and fell, groveling in terror. Gaelin went to one knee, struggling to find his courage again. Banner grinned in triumph, stepping forward and raising his staff to strike a blow while Gaelin was held motionless. The staff's ironbound head began to glow with angry purple light, a radiance of dire potency that burned with dark energy. "I didn't expect to find you still waiting for me here, Gaelin," Banner hissed. "But, since you've presented yourself to me, I'll count it as an unlooked-for blessing. What did you do with Ilwyn?"

Gaelin screwed his eyes shut and looked away, willing himself not to answer. Banner snorted in irritation. In Gaelin's mind, the sorcerer's will surged forward, dragging and tugging at his soul. *Answer me! What have you done with Ilwyn?*

"She's somewhere far from here," he spat, forcing the words through his lips and fighting to keep control over what he said. "She's safe and out of your reach."

"On the contrary, I think she must be very near," Banner said. He glanced around the clearing, ignoring the wolf and the attendant chaos it caused. The Mhoriens had felled several more of his guards, but a half-dozen men were brutally kicking and spurring their horses up the slope and into the trees. In moments they'd engage the hidden sharpshooters.

Banner's spell ripped an inarticulate gasp of resistance from Gaelin. The Mhor clamped his teeth together, holding his jaw shut by force of will. Scowling, Banner gave up the effort. "Your will is admirable, but it matters little. In a moment, I'll finish with you and your friends, and I'll find your sister again. And now, your reign is at an end, Mhor Gaelin."

Gaelin struggled to escape the paralysis that gripped his

limbs. Banner reached forward to bring the deadly staff in contact with Gaelin's head. Along its length Gaelin could see hateful runes crackling with power, the weapon filled with destructive potential. He knew that its touch would end his life. Distantly, he heard Erin scream in fear.

And somewhere, in a still place in the depths of his soul, a voice spoke out in protest. *You are the Mhor*. A small but bright flame ignited in his heart, a white point of light that suddenly blazed forward like a bonfire, racing through his limbs and overwhelming the wizard's malignant dolor. The shadows that imprisoned Gaelin's mind fled into the night, dissipating into ash as the power contained in his blood ignited in a blaze of glory.

As the staff came near his face, the purple radiance searing his eyes, he roared in protest and brought up his sword to block the killing blow. The clean highland blade met the sorcerer's dire assault, and turned it aside with an angry clang of iron on steel. "No!" Gaelin shouted, surging up from his knees. He recovered from his parry and lashed out in a low, wicked cut that Banner just barely managed to sidestep. The wizard's face was openmouthed in astonishment, but he maintained enough presence of mind to jab the venomous staff at Gaelin again, forcing the prince to parry in turn.

Banner attempted to back away, to find room to attempt another spell, but Gaelin was not to be stopped. His white wrath carried him forward, slashing with powerful blows that Banner was hard-pressed to avoid. Wielding his staff with surprising skill and agility, Banner gave ground. "Iron Guard! To me!" he shouted. "To me!"

Gaelin didn't look around. He trusted Erin and his soldiers had handled the rest of the guardsmen. He pressed his attack recklessly, his vision suffused with a glorious brilliance and the roaring of his blood in his ears nothing more than a sweet whisper of encouragement. Reversing his attack, he struck Banner with a long cut that gashed the wizard's side, and followed it with a high, backhanded slash that glanced from the wizard's skull, spinning him half around and opening a bloody wound across Banner's scalp.

In desperation, Banner shouted a word that directed a lance of pure violet energy at Gaelin. But Gaelin anticipated the move and deflected Banner's aim by stepping under his

guard and knocking the wizard's arm skyward. With his hand clenched around his sword hilt, he found a perfect opportunity to deliver a deep uppercut to the wizard's jaw, a solid punch that cracked bone and sent Bannier reeling backward—into Seriene's barrier.

Silver light flared and battled with purple fire, transfixing the wizard on an arcing bolt of energy. Bannier shrieked and danced, pinned where he was by the uncontrollable lashing of his limbs and the bright, burning magic. Gaelin paused a moment, looking on in astonishment, and then he took his bastard sword in both hands and hammered the wide, keen blade through the center of Bannier's chest. The wizard howled in inhuman agony, coughing a gout of black blood from his mouth, his hands scrabbling at the impaling sword. Gaelin wrenched the blade from Bannier's chest and watched him sprawl to the ground, cursing weakly.

Gaelin looked up and discovered that only a few of the Iron Guards still stood. Bull was flailing away with his great hammer, holding them at bay as he guarded Gaelin's back. From the shadows of the hillside, a crossbow sang, and one of the Ghoerans fell with a bolt wedged in the visor of his helmet. That decided the matter for the surviving guards. They took to their heels to escape the clearing, fleeing into the darkness. Briefly, Gaelin wondered where they thought they were going—without Bannier's guidance, they wouldn't get very far.

Erin emerged from the woods on the lip of the hollow, carrying a crossbow on one hip, her slender rapier in the other hand. One shoulder bled freely from a stab wound, but a fierce light burned in her eyes. There was no sign of the illusory wolf—she must have released the spell after chasing off most of the Ghoerans. Her eyes flicked over Gaelin, and relief flooded her face when she saw that he hadn't been hurt. "Is that all of them?" she asked, nodding at the retreating Iron Guards.

"I think so. Are you all right? You've been wounded."

Erin sheathed her rapier, but kept her crossbow handy. She tore a strip of cloth from her cloak hem and held it to her shoulder. "I'll be fine, although I'll have you know I went years between stabbings or puncturings before I met you." Her lighthearted banter sank. "I'm afraid the other guardsmen weren't as lucky."

“Boeric, too?” Gaelin scowled and turned away.

“Not quite, Mhor Gaelin.” Boeric appeared at the edge of the clearing, limping, his sword dripping red for nearly half its length. “Orel and Ciele fell in the fighting under the trees, but I’ll live to see another day.” He nodded at Erin. “Your spell gave us the victory, Lady Erin.”

Erin inclined her head in thanks, and turned to Gaelin. “I thought I saw you cut down Bannier.”

“I did. I suspect he’ll trouble us no more.” Gaelin turned and glanced at where the wizard had fallen. He started to turn away, and then looked back again, with an oath.

Bannier was gone. Only his black cloak remained, soaked with dark blood. Gaelin kneeled beside the spot, studying the ground. There were no footprints. It was as if Bannier had faded into the earth exactly where he had fallen. The others scattered and looked for some sign of the sorcerer, but they soon gave up—with only four of them left, it was too dangerous to remain. “I’d like to be certain that we’ve defeated him, but we can’t wait,” Gaelin said. “We’ve got to get Ilwyn out of this place.”

“Could he have escaped somehow?” Erin asked quietly.

“If he did, I don’t know how,” Gaelin replied. They commandeered several of the Ghoeran horses, lifting the fallen guardsmen over the saddles, and set out for the place where they’d left Seriene and Ilwyn. I hope she’s found the doorway again, Gaelin thought. I’ve seen enough of this place for now. He took one last look at the black circle of ancient, leaning stones, and shuddered. Whatever this place had once been, it had been bathed in blood this day. He resolved to return and raze the place, even if it meant another journey into the Shadow. He didn’t like the idea of a place like *Caer Duirga* left to itself in the gloom and darkness.



seventeen

In a dark chamber of hollowed stone, Banner awoke from a nightmare of pain and confusion. He was alone, lying on a cold floor, stripped of power and defenses. It had taken every reserve of his strength to survive his encounter with Gaelin—in fact, it had taken more strength than he possessed. That could only mean one thing: his patron had intervened to spare his life, for some purpose Banner did not understand and feared to face.

Opening his eyes, Banner examined his surroundings, like a drowning man who notices the quality and color of the water that ends his life. The chamber was vast, illuminated only by a pair of dim tapers set at his head and feet, and the feeble light was not strong enough to illuminate the walls or ceiling of the place. A breath of musty air, old and dry, swirled around Banner's tattered robes.

He recognized this place. It was the heart of his master's

power, a place of bargains and ancient compacts, redolent with the odor of dust and betrayal. Bannier fought to control his terror. He rose, contemplating flight, but his reason won out over his fear. He'd been brought to this place for a specific purpose, as a deliberate act, and it would show a lack of character if he attempted to escape now. Escape was, after all, impossible at this point. He waited.

Hours passed in the darkness before he heard the sounds he knew would come. An iron door creaked open, admitting a gust of dank air, and then a footfall echoed through the room. It was a heavy sound, the scraping of stone on stone. The footsteps were just a heartbeat too far apart to be human; their ringing impact suggested the approach of unstoppable power. Bannier quailed, but held his ground.

"Bannier, I am disappointed in you." The voice was close to human pitch, although deeper and stronger than normal, and possessed of a certain coldness. "You performed admirably in the beginning, but you failed to bring the Mhoried blood to me and failed to bring Mhoried to ruin. Imagine my displeasure."

"Yes, my lord." Bannier dared no other response. He felt a vast presence in the shadows, a hulking power that now edged closer to the light. In the darkness before him, he saw two baleful red eyes appear, half again his own height above the floor. He flinched, averting his gaze.

There was a snort of derisive laughter. "You do not care to look upon my countenance? Do you not trust me, Bannier? I trusted you. I went to great lengths to retrieve you from your precarious position and bring you here to my Battlewaite." Raesene—the creature men knew as the Gorgon—stepped into the candlelight. He was massive, with a deep chest and long, powerful arms. His legs were doubled back like a satyr's, and his feet were obsidian hooves; his flesh was a dusky gray that had the quality and feel of stone. The Gorgon's face was awful, a bestial visage crowned by sharp spikes or horns, but buried beneath the hideous features there could still be seen the outlines of the face of a man. He wore fine black breeches, and a matching tunic embroidered with gold designs. The garments were regal, befitting a lord, but they left the wide expanse of his chest and the rippling power of his arms bared, a veneer of civilization covering an ele-

mental force of destruction.

Resisting the urge to throw himself to the ground and grovel for mercy, Banner held his ground. Five hundred years ago, the Gorgon had finally brought down the empire by destroying Michael Roele, the last of the line. But his ambitions did not end there. With Anuire reeling in chaos and civil war, the Gorgon's domain grew in strength. Banner suspected that the *awnshegh* lord desired nothing less than the complete subjugation of the scattered Anuirean successor-states; Mhoried was the nearest of these to his reach.

In a rumbling voice, the Gorgon asked, "Well? Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Banner licked his lips. "My lord, while it is true that I failed to bring you the Mhoried bloodline, I aided Tuorel of Ghoere in defeating the Mhor Daeric and driving Gaelin's forces to the remotest reaches of the kingdom. Even as I left to defend Caer Duirga, Tuorel's army was finishing the Mhorien resistance."

"The siege progresses well, as you say. But due to your incompetence, I am now forced to take matters into my own hands. This makes me wonder what I have received in exchange for the formidable powers I placed at your command."

With an iron effort, Banner met Raesene's eyes. The Gorgon respected strength and courage. No matter what, the wizard must give him the impression he possessed both qualities. "Allow me to return to Mhoried, my lord. I am certain I can bring down Gaelin, given another chance."

Raesene stepped forward and laid his hand on Banner's shoulder, a familiar and patronizing gesture. The weight of his touch was more than Banner could bear; the wizard was acutely conscious that with the merest act of will, the Gorgon could snuff out his life. "I knew you would say that," the creature said. "Therefore, I have taken the liberty of making some arrangements for you. We will have this Mhorien situation resolved in our favor. Now, come with me."

Trailing a step behind Raesene, Banner followed obediently. He allowed the barest degree of optimism to creep into his thoughts.

The Gorgon led him through the black halls of the Battlewaite, moving with relentless purpose, never speaking a word. For his own part, Banner dared not open his mouth. Eventually

they came to a wide battlement, a terrace in the side of the tower that overlooked the fortress-city of Kal-Saitharak. Here the Gorgon stopped, dismissing a pair of trollish guards from the chamber. He gazed out over the towers and ramparts, the smoking forges and warrens of the city. "Bannier, do you wonder why I wish to see Mhoried destroyed?"

"I only presumed it pleased you, my lord."

The Gorgon smiled, a fierce expression. "Do not let my aspect deceive you, Bannier. I do very few things only because they gratify me. I bear Mhoried no particular malice, at least no more than any other Anuirean state. Mhoried is to be destroyed because it is one of a handful of linchpins, critical powers that hold Anuire together. And even more importantly than that, Mhoried is to be destroyed because it is necessary for Ghoere's elevation."

"All of this is for Tuorel's gain? I did not realize that he was in your favor, Prince Raesene."

"On the contrary, Bannier, I elevate Ghoere not for Tuorel's sake, but for my own. I will build him into a great power, a warlord so strong he will dare to claim the Iron Throne. This will lead to an inevitable conflict between Ghoere and his supporters on the one hand, and those who can resist him on the other. In a year or two, all of Anuire will be immersed in the greatest war since Michael set out to claim his throne. This will be to my advantage."

Bannier cleared his throat. "Why tell me this, my lord?"

The Gorgon turned his attention to the human sorcerer beside him. "Because the necessary first step of this plan, a step I relied on you to complete, remains to be taken. Tuorel has not yet finished his conquest of Mhoried. Had you pursued your duties with more diligence, this affair would be concluded, and I would be free to turn my attentions elsewhere. Now a Dieman host marches to Mhoried's relief, and Tuorel is about to be caught between Gaelin's rebels and Vandiel's soldiers."

"Diemed joins the war?"

"From what I understand, your treatment of Princess Seriene had something to do with it," the Gorgon said wryly. "When you struck at her and Gaelin in the form of his Vos friend, she decided you had to be stopped. Now I find I must commit Kraith of Markazor to Mhoried again to reinforce Tuorel."

"I am sorry, my lord. I did not mean to involve Diemed

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through my attempts to capture Gaelin for you." Banner could not restrain a shudder of fear—the Gorgon accepted few apologies.

The Gorgon's smile chilled Banner. "Fortunately, Kraith is available to counter the Dieman army. It is not a fatal mistake, Banner. Now, you must be wondering what role you have left to play. You will become my envoy in Tuorel's court. It is my desire that Tuorel and Kraith combine their forces in order to crush the remaining Mhoriens and Vandiel Diem's host. Kraith marches even as we speak, but Tuorel must be persuaded to accept the goblin's aid."

"Tuorel will be suspicious of me," Banner said.

"Then you will have to employ a ruse of some kind." Raesene let his baleful gaze rest on Banner for a long moment, until the wizard quailed and looked down. "You are also to see to it that Tuorel has the chance to meet Gaelin Mhoried face to face, on the field of battle. Allow the Wolf of Ghoere to slay the young Mhor and claim his bloodline and kingdom. In a year or two, when the time is right, I shall call upon Tuorel and absorb both the Mhoried and Tuorel bloodlines. Do you understand?"

"I do, my lord."

"Then you may go."

Banner bowed again and set off at once. He'd visited the Battlewaite on several occasions; he'd find his own way out. He had reached the doorway leading from the battlements when he heard Raesene's hooves scrape heavily on the stone behind him. "One more thing, Banner. I expended a great amount of energy and effort to rescue you from the mistakes you made at Caer Duirga. I shall not do so again."

"I understand, my lord," Banner replied. Backing away, he disappeared into the darkness of the Gorgon's citadel. It would take much of his remaining strength to walk the Shadow again, but he dared not linger one moment more in the Gorgon's halls.

* * * * *

Serienne located the portal again after a brief search. Although she was staggering with exhaustion, she managed to reopen the doorway and send Gaelin and his decimated en-

tourage through. They found themselves high on the slopes of *Caer Duirga*, an hour or so after sunset. The stars were emerging in a field of midnight blue overhead. Gaelin was relieved to count the normal number of lights in the sky; the warm, friendly constellations he knew were still here.

Gaelin was immediately aware of a change in the *feel* of *Caer Duirga*. The brooding menace and supernatural chill were gone, replaced by the sense of watchfulness common to any wild place. This was not a place for people to linger near, but the hostility had faded, leaving nothing but a memory. The ancient evil beneath the hill slept once more.

Three hours after sundown, they stumbled back into the camp they'd left at the foot of the hill. The two guards were still there, nervous and alert. They greeted Gaelin and their fellows with obvious relief. "We wondered if you were ever coming back," one said.

"We were only gone for a day," Boeric observed sourly. "We left at dawn and returned at sunset."

"Begging your pardon, Sergeant, but you've been gone for three full days," the guard told them. "You left the camp the morning of the day before yesterday."

Gaelin exchanged a long look with *Seriene*. The princess merely frowned and shook her head. As she had told them, time ran differently in the *Shadow World*. Although Gaelin regretted the lost days, he decided not to make any effort to begin their return trek. They were all exhausted, physically and spiritually. He allowed Boeric to build a bright and cheerful campfire that night. Enemies or no enemies, no one wanted to lay awake for a night in a cold and empty place without light and heat.

Ilwyn rallied once they left the *Shadow*, but she was still semiconscious, as if black and hidden ice in her heart had only now begun to thaw. She couldn't manage anything more than monosyllables and was too frail to stand or walk unaided. But through the night she made progress, gripping a steaming mug of coffee and staring into the fire with wide, dark eyes. Erin looked after the *Mhorien* princess, staying close beside her and comforting her.

That night, Gaelin slept alone. Erin stayed beside *Ilwyn*, holding her through the night as if the princess were a lost and damaged child. Even if Erin hadn't been looking after

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Ilwyn, he wasn't certain that their relationship was going to continue in the same manner as before. Already he felt an exquisite ache in his heart at the thought that he might not hold her in his arms again. He could see her from where he had set his sleeping blankets, facing away from him with her arms around the girl, and he gazed at the curve of Erin's hip and the firelight dancing in her hair until he fell asleep.

He opened his eyes in the great hall of Shieldhaven, a high chamber graced with tall, carved pillars and proud banners and tapestries. The hall was suffused with a soft, silver light, and things seemed dim or indistinct, as if he viewed only possibilities and not the hall as it really was. He was dreaming again, but the accuracy and strength of the phantasm were remarkable; the air was cold but clear, and he could feel each breath he took.

His feet carried him away from the hall, wandering the corridors and chambers of the castle. He explored many of his childhood haunts, drifting ghostlike through his memories. At length he found himself on the windswept battlements of the castle, but the air was still and quiet. His footfalls died away, and he had the strange impression that very little he did could disturb the silence of his dream. Gazing over the countryside, he saw little more than silver fog, and hints of dark forest beyond.

"Hello, Gaelin. I've been waiting for you." The Mhor Daeric stepped out of nothingness to join him on the battlement. His father appeared much as he had in life, dressed in the garments of soft gray that he preferred. But he seemed *younger* than Gaelin remembered, a tall, broad-shouldered man in the prime of his life, his hair streaked with silver, his face unmarked by the years that had worn him down. Daeric appeared as tangible as Gaelin himself, although limned by argent light.

"I haven't met you in my dreams for many weeks now," Gaelin answered. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Your attention was elsewhere, Gaelin. You had little time or need for me."

"I didn't mean to forget you so soon."

"The living go on with their cares and burdens, and yours have been heavier than most." Daeric's face glowed with a warm smile, and a humorous light danced in his eyes. "Be-

sides, you haven't forgotten me. Every day for months now, you've stood forward and done your best to heal Mhoried's injuries. As long as you do that, I'll never be forgotten." Daeric held out his hand to Gaelin. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" asked Gaelin.

"To Caer Winoene. You summoned me here because you needed me again. This is a way I can help you."

Gaelin tentatively reached out to take his father's hand. The moment he touched the phantasm, the castle of Shieldhaven melted into silver mists, and he found himself standing on the hillsides overlooking Caer Winoene, under the starlit night. The ethereal quality of Shieldhaven was gone; now he was the one who shimmered with silver light, much like his father beside him. Gaelin suddenly understood that they existed as phantoms in the real world, the waking world.

He could make out the trenches excavated by the Ghoeran soldiers, ringing the Mhorien stronghold. Campfires dotted the plain beyond, surrounding batteries of siege engines. He turned his attention to Caer Winoene itself. The castle had only been partially repaired in the time Gaelin had occupied it, and under the Ghoeran bombardment, it was not faring well. If Caer Winoene had been garrisoned by anything less than a full army, the Ghoerans would have been able to press the attack and storm the breached defenses. But the castle itself formed only the centerpiece of a ring of ramparts, trenches, and redoubts that concealed the Mhorien army.

Examining the Mhorien lines, Gaelin realized the outer ramparts—the first line of defense—had been abandoned already and incorporated into the siege lines of the attackers. He was appalled; the earthworks had been wrecked in only three days! No artillery he knew of could level an earthen dike that quickly. "They've lost the first line," he breathed aloud.

Beside him, the Mhor Daeric nodded. "Banner's sorcery wreaked a great deal of harm before he left to confront you at Caer Duirga. The Ghoeran army numbers more than seven thousand veterans. Baesil has a shade over three thousand men still, enough to hold the ruins and the earthworks for some time. But he has another, more pressing problem. If Tuorel exploits Banner's work, he can drive Baesil's men

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from the lakeshore, which would deprive Baesil of the water and food he needs to keep fighting. Caer Winoene won't last a week after that."

"I have to find a way to break the siege. I can't lose Caer Winoene or the people who are trapped here."

Daeric glimmered in the red torchlight of the hilltop. "I am afraid I cannot help you more," he said. "You're the Mhor now, and this is your battle to win or lose. But I have news that may hearten you." He reached forward to clasp Gaelin's arm, and the ramparts of Caer Winoene faded from view again.

This time, they appeared in a shadowed copse of trees, by the banks of a great river. Gaelin recognized it as the Stonebyrn, at a place close to where he had crossed into Mhoried while fleeing Tuorel's hunters. All around them, an army had set its camp for the night. Tents and fires filled a large field, and Gaelin noticed the black and silver standard of Diemed hanging from a pole before a great pavilion nearby. A slight, graceful man with aquiline features and midnight hair stood nearby, dressed in the armor of a great noble. "It's Vandiel of Diemed!" Gaelin said. "He's coming to our aid!"

"He's at least a week away from engaging Tuorel, and he only brought half of his army with him," said Daeric. "Ghore's army outnumbered both the Mhoriens and the Diemans together."

"Seriene said her father wouldn't come until we'd shown that we can defeat Tuorel. What changed his mind?"

"Apparently, Seriene did. She's much taken with you, Gaelin. She's employed her magic to speak with her father several times since coming to your court, begging him to intervene." Daeric faced Gaelin, his silver gaze weighing on Gaelin's conscience. "You should consider the advantages of a marriage to her."

"I'm not sure that I love her," Gaelin replied slowly.

"Love? That's beside the point. You have a duty to Mhoried."

"I know my duty." Gaelin squared his shoulders and faced his father. "I know what you would do in my place. But I am not you, and I will have to find my own way."

Daeric frowned, and their surroundings shifted again. They

were in Shieldhaven once more, in the panelled study with its shelves of books and great leather chairs. His father sat in his customary place, a thoughtful look on his face. "I think this is the last time you'll see me," Daeric said. "You'll make a good Mhor, Gaelin. You've been making your own decisions ever since the divine right passed to you on the banks of the Stonebyrn. Some have been bad, and some have been good, but they've been yours to make, and I won't question them. You are the Mhor now, not I, and Mhoried rests in your hands." Daeric's shade began to grow brighter and more translucent, while the study swirled away in mist and shadow.

"Wait! Please! How can I beat Tuorel?"

His father's voice was growing fainter. "During my life and reign, I was ruled by duty. You, Gaelin, take after your mother. You are ruled by your heart. I won't say which is better than the other . . . but I believe you should follow your heart. Duty never led me astray. I doubt your heart will betray you."

Gaelin found himself standing on the slopes of Caer Duirga, looking down on their campsite. The sunrise was not far off; he could feel the warm light glinting on the easternmost peaks of the land, even though it would be a few minutes yet before the sun rose where he stood. He heard one last, distant whisper: "Farewell." Then he knew that his father was gone.

A moment later, the sun touched his walking spirit, and Gaelin awoke again, this time in his own physical body. He sat up, alert and refreshed, looking around at the faces of his friends and companions. As dawn broke, Bull sighed and stood from where he'd been keeping watch, moving over to begin rousing the rest of the group. He stopped, surprised to find Gaelin already awake. "Good morning, my lord," he said. "You're quick to rise."

"Tell everyone to pack as soon as they can," Gaelin said. "We have a long ride ahead of us today."

Bull nodded. "If we push the horses, I reckon we can make Caer Winoene by nightfall tomorrow."

"We're not going to Caer Winoene," Gaelin told him. "At least, not right away. The time's come to raise the countryside against Tuorel."

From Caer Duirga, Gaelin led them southeast through the

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wild reaches of the highlands. He pushed them hard, knowing his friends and soldiers were exhausted. The haunting images of his vision and his father's words lingered in his mind, steeling him to do whatever was necessary to reach Caer Winoene with help. The brooding that had weighed on Gaelin during the ride to Banner's stronghold was gone, replaced by a sense of urgency and desperation. Mhoried was running out of time.

Through the morning, they picked their way through the stone-toothed hills and trackless heather-grown valleys. As they descended into the densely populated heartlands of Mhoried, Gaelin paused at each village and homestead to spread a call to arms. These people were highlanders, tough and quick to defend their scattered farms and herds. The lords, their knights, and their men-at-arms represented only a fraction of Mhoried's fighting strength; by raising the countryside Gaelin was drawing hundreds or possibly thousands of men to his banner. Each time he stopped, he asked the people to send someone to the next village so the summons would spread throughout the northlands.

"Why have we waited so long to do this?" Seriene asked as they rode away from a freestead. Behind them, the twenty-odd clansmen of fighting age were already scrambling to collect their weapons and begin their march. "Every village we've passed has answered your call, Gaelin."

"I wanted to, when we first settled in at Caer Winoene," Gaelin replied. "But how could we have fed them all? We needed these men at home, tending their crops and herds. And you might remember, Mhoried's levy was already decimated once, at Cwllodon Field. The folk of the southern counties were slaughtered there, and I didn't want to repeat that mistake."

"Goblin bands were riding roughshod over these freeholds and villages just a month ago," Bull added. "Many of these men have been fighting since early spring, looking out after their own homes."

By nightfall, Gaelin guessed they had ridden twenty or twenty-five miles. Although he was anxious to continue, he realized his companions were exhausted. He wondered if the strength of the Mhoried bloodline was buoying him, now that he needed every last reserve of his physical abilities, but even

if that was the case, Erin, Ilwyn, Seriene, and his guards required rest. They hadn't recovered from their harrowing ordeal in the Shadow World. As the sun sank in the green hills to the west, they camped in a stand of beech on a forested hillside.

Over a cold dinner, Gaelin noticed Ilwyn was a little more responsive, as if waking from a long sleep. When he finished eating, he brought her a tin cup of strong coffee and sat down beside her. "Ilwyn?" he said softly. "How do you feel?"

She shivered and looked up at him. For the first time since he'd brought her out of the darkness, he saw recognition in her eyes. "Gaelin? Where are we? What happened to me?"

"Hush. You're all right. Banner took you away, but now you're back." He glanced around and noticed that his traveling companions had drawn back a little to give him some privacy. "We're in Dhalsiel, maybe twenty miles or so from the Abbey of the Oak. I'm trying to raise an army to fight Tuorel."

"I dreamed that you stood before the Red Oak. Father and Thendiere died, but you're the Mhor now, aren't you?"

"I am. I wish I could have helped them, Ilwyn."

"It's not your fault. Father sent you away. I wonder if somehow he knew what was going to happen."

Gaelin shook his head. "I think he would have sent you and Liesele away, too, if that were true."

"What are you going to do, Gaelin? Have you been fighting on all this time?"

He sighed and sat down beside her. "All spring and summer, it seems. But it's nearly over. In five days, we'll either break the siege of Caer Winoene, or Tuorel will crush us for good."

Ilwyn put her hand on his shoulder. Somewhere behind her battered eyes, a flicker of her old fire and life showed. "You'll do it. After all, you were able to rescue me."

"I had a lot of help," he said, abashed. "I'm sorry I didn't try to help you sooner than I did. I should have found some way to get you out of Banner's hands."

Steadying her coffee tin with both hands, Ilwyn took a long drink, staring down into the cup. "I thought I was dead," she said quietly. "It was so cold, and so quiet, and those stones all around me . . . it was as if I were in a great, dark tomb." She closed her eyes, her face pale and still. "I don't know if I will ever be free of it," she whispered.

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Gaelin put his arm around her shoulders. "It's done now. Banner is gone, and you're free. We'll stay clear of the Shadow World for some time, I think," he said with a weary smile. "Now, put it out of your mind, and get some rest. We've a long way to travel tomorrow."

Ilwyn soon fell asleep, her cheeks regaining a hint of their normal color.

The next morning, they continued into the rolling plains of central Mhoried, leaving the hills behind them. They soon came across the muddy path of the Northrun, in the southwest corner of the province of Dhalsiel. The road seemed clear, and from a quick examination, Gaelin guessed it hadn't seen much use lately. Anyone who had fled from the Ghoeran occupation of the southlands would have passed this way a long time ago, and the road didn't lead near enough to Caer Winoene to be useful as a supply route for Ghoere's armies. Still, there was a chance that Ghoeran marauders might be loitering in the area, trying to disrupt Mhorien movements and looking for easy loot.

Gaelin decided to risk the road, since time was of the essence. Again, he raised the countryside as he passed, although many of the towns and settlements near the road had been abandoned because they were too easy for the Ghoerans to find and attack. He rode the others into the ground, keeping up a grueling pace that left both humans and horses exhausted; even Blackbrand's remarkable stamina was tested by the ride. Late in the day, Gaelin rode up beside Bull and asked, "How much farther to Sirilmeet?"

"About two miles ahead, there's a trail that cuts cross-country," Bull said. "If we hold this pace, we'll be there a little after dark."

The skies began to grow cloudy as they turned off onto Bull's path, and darkened throughout the remainder of the afternoon. For a time, they passed through wild, untended lands, held by no lords and only sparsely settled. The going was difficult, and they were tired; Boeric endured the pain of his wounded leg, but every now and then a hiss escaped through his teeth as his horse took a bad jolt. By sunset, they were stumbling along, too tired to think of anything except the next step. Gaelin welcomed the sight of Sirilmeet's quiet fields and farmhouses.

Riding into the center of the town, Gaelin discovered that word of his arrival had preceded him. A hundred or more of the villagers were assembled on the commons by torchlight, the fires leaping and crackling beneath the stars, and as the battered group appeared, the Sirilmeeters raised a resounding cheer. "Mhor Gaelin! Mhor Gaelin! Mhor Gaelin!"

Even in his exhaustion, Gaelin was profoundly moved. The crowd swirled around him, dozens of people pressing close to offer their hands. Blackbrand neighed nervously and pranced back as the crowd engulfed him. "What's going on?" Gaelin shouted to Bull.

"I guess Dhalsiel's lack of loyalty didn't sit well with them," the big farmer replied. "I told you Sirilmeet would fight!"

Gaelin glanced over at Erin. Her face shone in the firelight, and tears glistened in her eyes. Seriene sat a little way beyond her, a puzzled look on her face. He realized that the princess had a hard time understanding the loyalty commoners could feel for their lords. He reached down to return the handshakes and greetings as best he could. "Thank you," he murmured, over and over again.

"We're ready to march under the falcon banner, Mhor Gaelin!" Pushing his way through the crowd, Master Piere and his sons fought their way to Gaelin's side. "Just tell us where and when!"

"Piere! It's good to see you!" Gaelin leaned down and clasped the farmer's hand in a stout grip. "I need you at Caer Winoene, in five days' time. How many men can you bring?"

"Five hundred, or my name's not Piere," the farmer replied.

"Good," Gaelin replied. He was starting to feel that there might be a chance. "Now, can—"

"The count! The count is here!" From the edge of the commons, a confused cry arose as people turned to catch a glimpse of a long column of riders approaching the green. Gaelin looked over the crowd surrounding him. He could make out the red and blue of Ghoeran cavalry, a patrol of sixty or more riding into the village. His heart sank; they were too tired to flee, and the Ghoerans were already upon them. If he ordered the Sirilmeeters to attack, they would be slaughtered by the mounted troops in close combat.

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Erin drew in her breath. "Gaelin, look!"

Cuille Dhalsiel and a handful of his retainers rode in the center of the Ghoeran column. The Mhorien lord was armed for battle in a light suit of half-plate, wearing the yellow and black of Dhalsiel over his arms. The Ghoeran captain beside him spotted Gaelin and began to bark out orders, but Cuille caught his arm and silenced him.

"What do we do, Mhor Gaelin?" Piere was grimacing, his hand on the rusty old short sword on his belt. "Do we attack?"

"Wait a moment," Gaelin said quietly. He trotted ahead a couple of steps, and raised his voice. "Cuille! I want to talk!"

"Your fame's growing by leaps and bounds, Gaelin," Cuille replied, doffing his helmet and shaking out his mane of hair. There was a haunted look in his eyes, a look of bitterness and defeat. He laughed hollowly. "We heard you were coming here hours ago. Why Sirilmeet?"

"I knew there were loyal Mhoriens here," Gaelin answered. "I need them at Caer Winoene."

The Ghoeran captain growled in agitation. "That's the Mhor's son, Dhalsiel! We must take him!"

Cuille gave the fellow a pained look. "You are my guest, sir, and not my lord. Wait a moment." He looked back at Gaelin. "Tuorel's placed quite a bounty on your head. If I brought you to him, I'd triple my lands and holdings."

"Do you really want to betray me, Cuille? You let me leave your castle before."

Cuille fell silent for a moment, studying Gaelin. Their eyes locked, and he flushed and looked away. "Princess Ilwyn! I am delighted to see you alive and well. I feared that you had come to harm in Bannier's hands."

Ilwyn somehow drew herself up, banishing the exhaustion with an unconscious will and throwing back her head. "Lord Cuille. I see you've reached an accommodation with Ghoere."

The Mhorien turncoat gazed at Ilwyn, his face softening for a moment. "I did so for your safety. I'm sorry that Tuorel did not honor his bargain."

"Then why do you remain in his camp?" Gaelin asked. "What fealty do you owe him? It's not too late to honor your allegiance to Mhoried, Cuille. To honor your allegiance to me."

"Gaelin . . ." A glimpse of the Cuille Gaelin had once known appeared, though masked in dark cynicism. "I'm

damned already. How could I undo what I've done? How could you ever trust me again?" He returned his gaze to Ilwyn and bowed in the saddle. "My lady, I am forever unworthy of you."

The cavalry captain spat in disgust. "All right, Dhalsiel! I'm not going to wait on you all night!"

Cuille glanced at the fellow in irritation. "I said I want to talk to him, and I will. Now be patient, good sir." He tapped his horse's flanks and walked forward.

Behind them, the Ghoeran cursed. "That's it. Take them all!"

The cavalrymen spurred forward, slashing into the crowd of Sirilmeeters. In an instant, the scene was transformed into a mad, swirling melee of torchlight and flashing swords. Instead of fleeing, the villagers turned on the Ghoerans with the ferocity of a wounded bear. Armed with pitchforks, clubs, and staves, they surged forward to meet the attack, dragging Ghoerans down from their mounts even as the cavalrymen slashed and hacked with abandon. Gaelin kicked Blackbrand forward, hauling his sword from its saddle sheath and making for the nearest attackers. His small retinue followed in his wake.

Across the square, Cuille drew his sword and lunged after the Ghoerans sweeping past him. "Stop! Stop, I beg you! This is unnecessary!" He raised his arm, trying to interpose himself between the cavalrymen and the villagers, but the Ghoeran behind him leaned forward and rammed his lance into the count's back. Cuille gasped and spun out of the saddle, falling into the surging brawl of the square. A moment later, an archer on a nearby rooftop shot the captain through the throat. Gagging on blood, the Ghoeran officer fell forward and slid out of his saddle.

Gaelin met the first of the Ghoerans and engaged the fellow with a series of overhand cuts, but before he could strike a telling blow, the man was spitted on a pitchfork and dragged screaming from his saddle. As Gaelin looked for another man to engage, there was sudden brilliant light and a sharp *crack!* as Seriene unleashed a bolt of lightning that crashed through the main body of the Ghoeran column. In moments, the Ghoerans turned to flight, their front ranks drowned in a sea of angry villagers and their rear ranks raked by archers and magic. Gaelin watched in exhaustion as the

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Sirilmeeters streamed after the retreating enemy, brandishing torches and screaming in rage.

Behind them, dozens of dead and wounded, both Mhorien and Ghoeran, littered the town commons. Gaelin spotted Cuille Dhalsiel lying beside the dead captain. He slid down from Blackbrand's back and ran forward, dropping to his knees beside the dying Mhorien. "Cuille! Are you—"

Cuille looked up at him, his face pale and drawn. "Should have known a Ghoeran was going to stab me in the back, sooner or later," he said. He gazed up past Gaelin. "I'm sorry . . . didn't know it would be like this."

"It's not my place to forgive you, Cuille. Make your own peace with what you've done."

"I told you, Gaelin . . . I'm damned as a traitor."

"But you're not dying as one," Gaelin replied. Cuille smiled weakly in response, and then his eyes fixed on the dark skies overhead. Gaelin closed them, and stood, ignoring the tears that streaked his face. Regardless of what he might have done, Cuille had been his friend.

Ilwyn stumbled past him and knelt beside Cuille, cradling his head in her arms. She sagged back, numb with grief. "Ah, Cuille," she said. She closed her eyes and sobbed. Quietly, Gaelin raised her up and led her away. Already, the folk of Sirilmeet were tending to their dead and wounded, but in the midst of their grief there was also a fierce pride in their victory. The villagers had finally struck back.

That night, Gaelin and his party stayed beneath Master Piere's roof again. After the fight, no one slept well. Gaelin found himself staring at the darkness for hours. How many men was he leading into death? How many men like Piere and Bull would never return from the campaign? He knew it was pointless to brood over these questions, but he couldn't help it. Eventually he drifted off into a restless slumber.

In the gray hour before dawn, he rose and dressed himself, and awakened the others.

"Where will you go next, m'lord Mhor?" asked Piere. "Will you try to raise the southlands, too? From what I hear, they're ready to fight."

"There's no time," Gaelin said. "As it is, the muster of Sirilmeet will be hard-pressed to reach Lake Winoene in time. If I rode another half-day, the men I reached wouldn't be able to

make it to the fight.”

“Four days to Lake Winoene? Bah! We’ll be there in three,” Piere boasted. But he didn’t argue the point that anyone further away would not be able to join the levy of Mhoried. “Will you return to Caer Winoene, then?”

Gaelin nodded. “I’ve one more stop first, and then I’ll make all speed for the muster. I need to make contact with the Diemans.”

“We have about thirty lads with horses good enough to keep up with you,” Piere offered. “Let me send them on ahead with you, just in case. Five guardsmen just aren’t enough to stand between you and danger, should you meet a Ghoeran patrol.”

Gaelin thought of declining—larger parties always moved slower than small ones, and he was pressed for time—but acquiesced. “I’ll be proud to ride with the muster of Sirilmeet, Master Piere. Gather them quickly, though; we need to be on our way.” Within the hour, Gaelin’s small party grew into a band of forty. Most of the militiamen were unarmored, but a number had served as cavalymen in Mhoried’s army, and they knew how to use the lance and bow from horseback.

While they waited for the Sirilmeeters to gather their gear, Gaelin was surprised by the arrival of Castellan Trebelaen from Castle Dhalsiel. The stocky knight approached and dropped to one knee, removing his helm. “My lord Mhor, I wish to report that the Ghoerans were driven out of Castle Dhalsiel last night. We heard how Count Dhalsiel died, and . . . we feel the least we can do is offer our swords in your service.”

“Your family is the closest to the Dhalsiels, isn’t it?” Gaelin asked. “You have a claim on the county.”

“My lord, I press no claim now. I don’t feel that I have the right.” Trebelaen looked up, his face working with emotion. “Dhalsiel’s played a shameful part in this fight so far. I’d like to help make up for that.”

Gaelin looked over at Piere. “Master Piere? Do the folk of Sirilmeet have anything to say about this?”

Piere shrugged. “Mhor Gaelin, Count Dhalsiel’s men were under the orders of their lord, and they offered us no harm. We just didn’t care for the company Count Cuille kept.”

“Very well, Sir Trebelaen. We need all the help we can get.”

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Trebelaen stood and replaced his helmet. "Thank you, my lord Mhor. There are a few more of us who feel the same way. They wanted me to find out your mind first."

"How many?" Gaelin asked.

"About six hundred men-at-arms, my lord." Trebelaen smiled. "With your permission, we'll set out for Caer Winoene by noon."

Gaelin blinked. "That's almost all your strength."

"Mhoried needs us, my lord. I couldn't see holding back."

"Thank you, Lord Trebelaen. We'll see you at Lake Winoene in a couple of days, then." Gaelin reached forward and clasped the knight's arm. "It's good to have you on our side."

As the sun rose into the cloud-racked sky, Gaelin and his reinforced company set out again, riding into the wet, gray morning. Gaelin directed Bull to lead them to the abbey, and by midmorning they sighted the Haelynite stronghold across the downs and hills. The stone walls of the monastery bristled beneath the clouds like a knotted gray fist clenched in the hilltop, angry and warlike. Under the grim, glowering walls, Erin brought her horse alongside Gaelin and said, "You intend to ask the prefect for her aid again? She already refused to help you once."

"My circumstances were different then. Mhoried's army was smashed, and I was a fugitive accompanied by only a handful of retainers. Things might not be much better, but maybe Iviena's had a change of heart in the last month and a half." Gaelin glanced at her and smiled. "Besides, the abbey is along the way. What could it hurt?"

Riding to the front of the fortified retreat, they entered through the open gates and rode into the great courtyard in the center of the monastery. An unsettled feeling flitted through Gaelin's stomach as he recalled the ambush at Shieldhaven, but he had nothing to fear: the Haelynites welcomed his arrival with military honors. A gaunt, hatchet-faced captain wearing the garb of a brother superior over his armor personally escorted Gaelin and his immediate entourage into the temple.

High Prefect Iviena met him in the same audience chamber he had visited before, but instead of the humble habit she had worn on the previous occasion, she was dressed in gleaming ceremonial armor. He removed his helm, and strode forward

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to kneel before Iviena, kissing her hand. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," he said. "You were expecting me, Prefect?"

Iviena smiled, motioning him to rise. "The countryside is afire with rumors of war, Gaelin. From here to the Stonebyrn the militias are gathering. We may be cloistered to contemplate Haelyn's glory, but we aren't that sheltered."

"You know why I'm here, then?"

"I suspect that you wish to rally us to your cause, Mhor Gaelin."

"If I remember right, you have nearly a thousand men under arms here, including three hundred Knights Templar," Gaelin said. He met Iviena's eyes, letting her see a glimpse of the white fire that fueled him. "We have a hard fight ahead of us, and we'll meet Tuorel's army with or without your soldiers. But they'd be a great help, Iviena. They might even tip the battle in our favor."

The old priestess turned away, facing the small altar of Haelyn that stood at the end of hall. Closing her eyes, she breathed a silent prayer. Gaelin waited quietly. "The issue is still in doubt," she said at last. "But you are the Mhor now, not a pretender or fugitive, and you deserve our support. The soldiers of the faith shall join you against Ghoere."

Gaelin risked a quick glance at Erin; she offered a fiery grin, her face flushed. For the first time, he felt a sense of something greater than himself coming together. The events he had set in motion were gathering momentum, drawing him along with a newfound sense of gravity and history. His place was at the front of this rising tide, in the center of the storm, and they'd know in a few days whether he had done everything he needed to do.

He looked back at Iviena and clasped her hand in a warrior's handshake. "We've half a day's light left," he said with a bare smile. "How soon can your men march?"

* * * * *

Thick, black smoke wreathed the Mhorien lines, turning the battle into a swirling hell of fire, blood, and torment. Surrounded by the black-armored knights of his Iron Guard, Baron Tuorel rode forward with a grim smile of satisfaction

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hidden beneath his wolf-shaped visor. He delighted in the clash of arms, the fierce struggle for survival and victory, the ultimate test of who was right and who was wrong. He and his knights had spent the morning in a pitched fight on the Mhorien ramparts, driving Ceried's men back in a bitter struggle.

Water splashed around his war-horse's bloody hooves. He'd finally fought through to the shores of Lake Winoene, and all around him his knights were driving the Mhoriens back into the ruins. Here along the lakeshore, the smoke was thinner, and Tuorel raised his visor to gasp for breath while he watched the end of the fight. After a few minutes, a blocky form in red and black armor approached on foot, carrying a spiked mace.

"Lord Baehemon," said Tuorel. "I see you've lost your horse."

Baehemon lifted his own visor and bared his teeth in a savage snarl. "They know how to fight, all right. We must have lost half our force storming that dike." He looked around at the corpse-strewn battlefield, and grunted in satisfaction. "We've got the lakeshore. How long do you think old Ceried can keep his men going without water?"

"Three days," Tuorel said. "We'll have to reinforce this position. He has no choice but to try and take it back." He dismounted, his feet splashing in the cold, muddy water, and then reached down to wash the grime and mud from his face.

"What about the Diemans? They'll be here by then."

Tuorel smiled and looked at his general. "We'll hold what we've got with the foot troops and pull off the cavalry and knights to meet the Dieman attack." Catching his horse by the reins, the baron swung himself up into the saddle again, and walked his horse up on to the gravel shore. "Now, let's see if we can find the fight again. I'm not done with these dogs yet."



eighteen

The Haelynite column set off for Lake Winoene later in the afternoon, marching out of the abbey's courtyard in ordered ranks of cavalry and foot soldiers. Gaelin traveled with High Prefect Iviena and the leaders of her army, discussing strategy and preparing rudimentary plans. On Gaelin's advice, the Haelynite army traveled with doubled scouts and prepared rudimentary defenses every night. He didn't doubt Ghoeran marauders and spies were everywhere in the highlands—if he had been in Tuorel's position, he would have placed ambushers along the route of the approaching army.

Balancing the need for caution against the difficulties of moving nearly one thousand men over eighty miles in only four days, the Haelynites were forced to begin their marches well before sunrise, after sleeping only five to six hours a night. At first Gaelin was concerned that the soldiers would be too exhausted to be good for anything at Caer Winoene,

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but he soon learned they were excellent, well-conditioned troops, and dozens of priests accompanied the march to urge the men forward with their prayers and hymns.

The weather was fair, with warm afternoons and light rainfall, but the journey passed slowly for Gaelin. He was anxious to get back to Caer Winoene and see how matters stood, and Erin continued to hold herself at a distance from him. At least he had the pleasure of watching Ilwyn recover from her ordeal—the princess flourished under the care of both Erin and Seriene, who went out of their way to keep her mind engaged on anything except the nightmare she had endured.

At the end of their second day of travel, they camped along the Northrun, just inside the long, low ridge of hills that marked the border of Dhalsiel and Marloer's Gap. On the next morning's march, they would have to leave the road and travel through a series of passes and valleys to reach Lake Winoene. Tired but satisfied with their progress, Gaelin cantered up the grassy slope of a small rise to watch over the camp-building and enjoy the sunset. He sat down with his back to a tree, and let Blackbrand graze nearby. The clouds overhead were painted brilliant hues of red, gray, and gold as the sun hovered in the narrow space between the dark horizon and the overcast sky.

"A fair evening, wouldn't you say?"

Startled, Gaelin scrambled to his feet and reached for his sword, but he realized that it was only Seriene. The Dieman sorceress was watching him with a slight smile on her face. With a mischievous look to her eye, she rounded the tree and took the spot he'd just occupied, demurely arranging her skirts before looking up at him and asking, "Why don't you join me? I didn't mean to frighten you."

He sat down beside her. They watched the sun disappearing behind a distant peak, as the sunset deepened into dusk. Gaelin started to speak, but Seriene hushed him with a gesture and nodded at the marvelous sunset. With a shrug, Gaelin settled in to enjoy the sight. After another quarter-hour, the last sliver of the sun vanished. Gaelin stretched and faced Seriene. "I know you didn't come up here just for that," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Gaelin, you wound me. Don't you think that I might have no other motive than just enjoying your company?"

He chose not to reply. With a sigh, Seriene continued. "Tomorrow or the next day, we'll encounter my father's army."

Gaelin nodded. "I can feel them, nearby. They're a few miles in that direction. My link to the land, I guess."

"If you lift the siege at Caer Winoene, this war is won. Have you thought about your alliance with Diemed?"

He glanced at her. Golden light gleamed on her face, and her dark eyes seemed to see right through him. "You mean to say, have I thought about marrying you?"

She leaned forward and brushed her warm, soft lips against his. "Is the prospect that unappealing?"

In truth, Gaelin had to admit that it was not unappealing at all. When Seriene touched him, it set him on fire. But even as she nestled closer in his arms, he found his thoughts turning to Erin and the way she felt next to him. With a deep breath, he managed to pull back. Standing quickly, he paced a step or two away, not looking at her. "I'm sorry. Maybe someday, Seriene, but it wouldn't be honest or fair to you—or to Erin—for me to take you as my wife now. I can't honestly say you're the only woman in my heart." He started to offer some kind of consolation but stopped before he made a fool of himself.

Seriene rose, avoiding his gaze. "This isn't about politics and alliances, Gaelin. I truly care for you. I—" She suddenly gathered her skirt and started to stand. "I won't trouble you again."

"Seriene, wait. Don't leave like this," Gaelin said. "I care for you, too. We've been through a lot together, and no matter what happens, I don't want to have to avoid you."

With a bitter smile, she turned back to him. "You couldn't trust me." The tears glimmering in her eyes scored Gaelin's heart.

"Give me time," he said quietly. "I might find my common sense again. Erin's told me that she plans to leave."

Seriene hesitated. "Erin is leaving?"

"I—that is, we—thought it wisest. I know I can't marry her, Seriene." He smiled sadly. "I think she'll go back to the White Hall when the war's over."

Seriene looked up at him. "Gaelin, you would do that for me?"

"I couldn't trust myself if she stayed, Seriene. It's the best thing to do. Please . . . I'll see things more clearly in a few weeks."

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The night was growing cooler as the light faded from the sky. Gaelin shivered lightly, watching Seriene, now a soft white shadow in the dusk. After a long moment, she sighed. "Common sense isn't enough, Gaelin. If you send Erin away to make room for me, you'll hate me for it. Oh, you'd never say it, or even admit it to yourself, but deep in your heart you'd despise me for the rest of your life." She shook her head and sank to the ground, turning away from him and staring into the crimson sunset. "You're in love with her, and you can't ever really get over that."

Gaelin had no answer. He lifted Seriene to her feet and held her, cradling her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "You deserve better than this."

Her cheek was wet with tears against his neck. He closed his eyes and held her as darkness fell around them, stroking her hair. His heart ached for her, but he couldn't restrain the sense of freedom, of elation, that flooded him. "I wounded Erin when I told her that we had to stop seeing each other," he said after a while. "How do I set things right?"

Seriene snorted in the darkness. "I'll step aside, Gaelin, but don't ask me to plan the wedding. You'll have to address that issue for yourself."

He smiled. "We should get back down to the camp before everyone wonders what we've been up to. I have to think about how we're going to meet up with your father's army."

Seriene reached up and shyly kissed his cheek, moving away from him. Side by side, they walked back down to the camp as the soft night breeze dampened their hair with cool dew.

* * * * *

Riding a coal-black hellsteed, Bannier galloped into the Ghoeran camp with sparks flying from his mount's ironshod hooves. His long black cloak billowed behind him like a dark storm. He loathed the idea of acting as a simple courier for the Gorgon's purposes, but anything that would restore him to the *awnshegh's* good graces was worthwhile and necessary. He could not afford the smallest display of disobedience, and if that meant abasing himself in front of Tuorel, he would do so.

The Ghoeran camp seemed almost empty; few soldiers were in sight, and the ones he encountered were porters and

quartermasters, busily ferrying food, water, weapons, and other supplies to the lines in front of Caer Winoene. He also met the litter carriers who dragged the dead and wounded back to the camp from the fight. Despite the grim nature of their work, the Ghoerans seemed cheerful and excited. Bannier deduced that the siege was going well.

Slowing to an easy canter, he passed through the camp and into the maze of ditches and emplacements that ringed the Mhorien lines. From here he could see the battered walls of Caer Winoene rising a half-mile away, and the wreckage of line after line of earthworks between the camp and the castle. Off on the left flank, near the shore of the lake, he spied the banners that marked Tuorel's headquarters. Swallowing his distaste, he turned toward the pavilion and galloped over to it.

As he approached the tent, the soldiers of the Iron Guard watched him with mixed hostility and suspicion. Bannier dismounted slowly, holding his hands in the air. "Tell Tuorel I have returned and beg an audience with him," he said to the guards. They surrounded him with bared swords, but the captain disappeared into the tent, presumably to request instructions. After a quarter-hour, he returned and ordered the soldiers to escort Bannier inside. Although he couldn't keep the scowl of anger from his face, Bannier accepted with docility. The soldiers took him through the busy command center to the privacy of a small, empty partition beyond, leaving him there. Bannier resigned himself to a wait.

Nearly an hour later, the canvas flap was drawn aside by a guardsman, and Noered Tuorel entered, with Baehemon a step behind. The baron was dressed in full armor, and from the dust and mud Bannier guessed he'd been near the forefront of the fighting. The wizard bowed carefully. "My lord baron," he said.

"Bannier. I see that you have returned again. How did you fare at Caer Duirga?" Tuorel handed his helmet to the guard by the door and removed his leather and iron gauntlets. "The guardsmen you requested have not returned with you. Can I assume your adventure was less than successful?"

The wizard's eyes smoldered, but he kept his temper in check. "Gaelin defeated me," he said. "He freed Ilwyn, and killed or scattered your guardsmen. I was not able to bring them back."

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Tuorel smiled, savoring Bannier's discomfiture. "An unfortunate reversal for you, Bannier. However, Gaelin's heroics will not help him much. His army is dying of thirst even as we speak; in another day, or maybe two, the castle will have to capitulate." His smile faded and his eyes narrowed. "So, what is it you want of me?"

Baehemon moved around behind Bannier, lurking just at the edge of his peripheral vision, an anvil waiting for the hammer to fall. Ignoring the stocky warrior, Bannier focused on Tuorel. "I have news for you," he said. Baehemon growled and muttered. "Call it a peace offering, if you will. I was not able to defeat Gaelin, but I may still help you to do so."

Tuorel frowned. "I'm not inclined to accept your 'gifts' at this point, Bannier. It seems to me I can finish Gaelin Mhoried without any more of your help."

"Even if I can place Warlord Kraith's army at your command?"

"Kraith is at least ten days away, in Thak Mor Kadan. If you summoned him this instant, he'd be here too late to aid me in the fight ahead. Besides, I like the terms of my existing bargain with the goblin. If he helps me again, he'll exact a price I may not want to meet, especially since it looks as if I'll be able to crush the Diemans without giving up the siege."

"Kraith must abide by your agreement, Baron. He can demand nothing from you."

Baehemon rasped, "We neither need nor want him here, Bannier. Even if he could be here in time to help us."

"That is regrettable, Lord Baehemon. Kraith and his warband should be here on the morrow."

Tuorel's face was hot with indignation. "You presumed to summon Kraith without asking me? Bannier, you idiot! If the goblins appear on the battlefield, Kraith can hold me at sword point with the threat of changing sides! Do you have any idea of what that might *cost* me?"

Baehemon's fists clenched Bannier's arm with bone-crushing force. The stocky general spun the wizard about and glared into his face. "I told you this one would bring trouble, Tuorel," he grated.

Ignoring Baehemon, Bannier turned back to Tuorel. "Kraith will do whatever you bid him to. He has his orders."

The baron's eyes narrowed. "Orders? From whom?"

Bannier considered some kind of lie, but then it occurred to him that Tuorel would be shaken to the core by the revelation of the Gorgon's involvement. Bannier was damned, anyway—why let Tuorel believe he was his own master? He grinned at the idea of the mighty warlord, the great reunifier of the empire, learning that he was nothing more than a pawn. Deliberately, he said, "Kraith marches at the Gorgon's command, Tuorel. You are to do as Prince Raesene bids and cooperate with Kraith of Markazor."

Absolute silence reigned in the tent for a long moment. Tuorel's face was pale, and he blinked twice. Behind him, Baehemon gasped as if he'd been punched. Delighting in their horror, Bannier continued, "Why do you think Kraith was so eager to ally with you earlier this year, Tuorel? Not because he has any love for you, but because his master—and yours, now—commands it. You have championed the Gorgon's cause for years."

Behind him, Baehemon drew in a long, hissing breath. If Tuorel was shaken by Bannier's revelations, Baehemon was destroyed by them. The lord general might have been a faithful follower of Tuorel the warlord, but aiding Tuorel the Gorgon's pawn was something else entirely. Baehemon took one small step back, distancing himself from the truth.

Tuorel's eyes flickered past Bannier, and without warning he struck like a serpent, leaping forward to thrust his sword into Baehemon's throat. The blade passed only an inch or two from Bannier's face, and the wizard flinched as hot blood splattered the back of his neck. He gagged in revulsion and twisted away, while Tuorel followed Baehemon to the ground, clamping a hand over the general's mouth to silence the choking sounds of his death.

When it was over, he glanced up at Bannier with a feral gleam in his eyes. "Baehemon could never stand to serve me, after hearing that," he said. "For years he was content to follow without question, but he would have done everything in his power to bring me down, instead of serving the Gorgon."

Bannier turned to look at Baehemon's body. Bright red blood stained the general's gorget and surcoat. "Well, he'll never speak of it," the wizard said, returning his attention to the baron.

"Nor will you," Tuorel replied. He stood and with both

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hands drove Calruile, his fathers' sword, through Banner's chest. The force of the blow actually lifted the sorcerer from his feet and slammed him to the ground. "That's for making me kill Baehemon," Tuorel hissed. "I'll have to think of a way to explain Kraith's involvement, but you won't blackmail me with tales of your dark master. Betrayal's a dangerous path, Banner. Here's what lies at the end of it."

Banner coughed once, his hand pushing at the sword that pierced his breastbone. Almost an arm's length of steel protruded from his back. Darkness was coming for him, dimming his sight, and the light was whirling away from him. He reached out with one bloody hand and gripped Tuorel's shoulder, a horrible smile on his face. "Bastard," he coughed. "Hear my words: You'll never see the Iron Throne." Then the light faded, and he slipped off the cold steel as he fell to the ground.

Noered Tuorel studied the scene in silence for a moment. Outside, the guard called to see if he was well. His face twisting in barely controlled rage, the baron called the guards in. When they burst through the door and took in the scene, the soldiers halted in astonishment. "Are you hurt, baron?" asked one.

"No, I am uninjured," Tuorel replied. "But the traitor attacked and killed Lord Baehemon before I managed to cut him down. Treat Lord Baehemon with the appropriate honors and respect."

"And the wizard?"

"Quarter his body and throw it in with the rest of the offal," Tuorel said. "Then leave me be."

* * * * *

The weather was fine, cool, and clear as Gaelin rode into the Mhorien camp, beside the placid waters of Lake Winoene. Nearly two thousand men followed him. The armored soldiers of the Temple of Haelyn had been joined by hundreds of villagers and freesteaders answering the call to arms. It had been a hard march, but they'd made it with half a day to spare. Although the men were tired, Gaelin set them to fortifying the camp immediately—he didn't want his army smashed by a Ghoeran attack before they'd organized themselves.

On the bright side, their position was defensible. The southern end of Lake Winoene was boxed in tightly by the surrounding hills, unlike the open terrain by the castle of Caer Winoene, and strategically placed earthworks would suffice to guard the Mhorien muster. A long time ago, there had been a small village on this site and an old monastery high on a hill overlooking the lake. From the ruins of the monastery, Gaelin could make out the distant walls and towers of Caer Winoene, about seven miles away. Threads of dark, ominous smoke rose from the site of the siege. Gaelin found it unsettling to think the Ghoeran army lurked only a day's march distant.

A great number of Mhoriens had answered Gaelin's call in just five days. The ancient Count Torien had brought three-quarters of his fighting strength, five hundred cavalrymen and a levy of nine hundred archers, leaving only a handful of men to hold the precarious northern borders of Mhoried. Lord Ghaele, the husband of the Countess Marloer, led two hundred heavy knights and four hundred pikemen. A dozen more highland lords totaled about three hundred knights and retainers. However, the most impressive turnout came from the common folk of Winoene, Byrnnor, and Dhalsiel. Clan by clan, village by village, they came in bands of twenty or thirty, until more than two thousand were waiting for Gaelin to arrive. Many of these men were untrained and poorly equipped, but almost all carried the powerful Mhorien long-bow, and knew how to use it.

Trying to make sense of the milling crowds of men and keep peace among those who weren't friendly with each other consumed most of Gaelin's afternoon. Since the Haelynites were the most organized unit on the field, he had Iviena's officers divided among the detachments of the Mhorien lords and the horde of militiamen. The temple knights could use their common sets of orders and chain of command to control the various bands and militias they were attached to, although the Mhorien leaders kept command of their own units. Some of the minor lords and the villagers complained, but Gaelin realized it was the best he was going to come up with in the half-day he had to assemble the army.

Controlling the army was one thing; dividing his forces proved much more difficult. Even with the help of Iviena's

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knights, Gaelin was reduced to riding about, ordering each group of men to go stand on a different part of the field. Eventually, he hammered together something resembling military units from the freemen and managed to assign them to different commanders. It was a chaotic, frustrating afternoon; Gaelin was besieged with questions, demands, and helpful suggestions one after the other, the whole time shouting at the top of his lungs to make himself heard.

By the end of the day, Gaelin guessed that he had about three thousand trained, armored troops for the heart of his army, plus the same number of militiamen without companies or organization. Along with the Diemans, that would give him an edge over the Ghoerans. If he could coordinate a sortie from the defenders of Caer Winoene, he could create a significant advantage in numbers. But the Ghoeran army was generally better-equipped than the forces Gaelin had at his disposal, and, more importantly, they were one army to his motley assortment of highlanders, temple soldiers, and castle defenders.

Late in the day, the commander of scouts—an old Knight Guardian who led a tough band of highland freesteaders and huntsmen—reported they'd been able to signal Caer Winoene from a hilltop overlooking the castle. As Gaelin feared, Baesil's army had been pushed off the lakeshore and cut off from their main source of water and the hope of resupply. The scouts reported that Count Baesil had managed to stretch his water and food for a couple of days by catching rainwater in makeshift cisterns and going to short rations, but the Mhoriens couldn't hold out much longer.

Gaelin was much heartened by the arrival of a Dieman envoy around sunset. He reported the Dieman army was camped only a couple of miles away, tired but ready to fight after their march up along the Stonebyrn. Gaelin returned to the monastery and gathered Seriene, Erin, Count Torien, Lord Ghaele, and Prefect Iviena to visit Prince Vandiel.

"I never knew that assembling an army could be such a tedious task," he grumbled as they left, riding through the cool evening shadows. "We could be weeks getting ready."

"Regrettably, that's not an option for us," observed Lord Ghaele. "If we don't relieve Ceried soon, he's finished."

The Diemans were camped in a vale about three miles from

the Mhorien camp. As they approached, Gaelin envied the clean order and discipline of their camp. Escorted by Dieman guards, they were led to Prince Vandiel's pavilion. Gaelin was greeted by the lord of Diemed as he dismounted. With a slight shiver, he realized that the dream he'd had the other night had been uncannily accurate; Vandiel looked exactly as he expected him to. Dressed in a comfortable tunic of black and silver, Vandiel sketched a bow and said, "Welcome to my camp, Mhor Gaelin. It's good to finally meet you—Seriene speaks quite highly of you."

Returning his bow, Gaelin said, "Prince Vandiel, I am honored to be here. Thank you for coming to our aid. I am sorry that we had to meet under these circumstances." He nodded to Erin, and the bard made all the introductions of the Mhorien party; then Vandiel's own herald introduced the Dieman officers who accompanied the prince.

After the introductions, Vandiel took a moment to greet his daughter and then gestured toward his pavilion. "I understand that time is pressing," he said. "Let's step inside and discuss our strategy for tomorrow."

They followed him into the spacious tent and gathered around a sturdy table. Over a goblet of wine, Gaelin briefed Vandiel on the course of the war to date, beginning with the Ghoeran invasion and the treachery of Bannier, the disaster of Cwllodon Field, and the destruction of the army at Marnevale by Bannier's black sorcery.

"Do you have any plans for dealing with this necromancer, if he should employ his sorcery against you tomorrow?" Vandiel asked. "From what you've told me, we don't have a chance if he takes the field against us."

"A few days ago we struck at the source of his power," Gaelin told him. "Seriene was indispensable. Without her courage and her skill, Bannier would still hold my sister prisoner, and he would have the full command of his powers to use against us. But as far as we know, we either killed or wounded him so badly that we don't expect him to be able to oppose us tomorrow. We only have to worry about the Ghoerans—and that's enough, as far as I'm concerned."

Vandiel nodded. "That's one piece of good news, anyway. So what's our plan of battle?"

"It occurs to me that Tuorel has the edge in a set-piece bat-

tle,” Gaelin said. “Too many of our men are not trained or equipped for a fight on an open battlefield, so we have to give Tuorel a different kind of battle, a fight where he can’t use massed horsemen to smash us to pieces.”

“Unfortunately, Tuorel also has the advantage in one other regard,” Lord Ghaele added. “He can sit where he is and still win. The burden of action is on our side, which means we will have to go to him.”

“You are right, of course,” Gaelin said. “Here’s the plan I’ve come up with: First, we’ll divide into two forces, one to circle Lake Winoene to the north and thus come upon Caer Winoene from the back side of the siege lines, and one to circle the lake to the south and threaten Tuorel’s camp. Since the terrain to the south is more open, we’ll show Tuorel our heaviest forces there—the Dieman army, the Haelynites, and the Mhorien lords. To the north, we’ll use our militias. Since they’ll be fighting in and among the siege lines, we might as well use the men who aren’t used to fighting as part of an army on an open field.”

The room fell silent as the commanders and officers weighed Gaelin’s plan. Vandiel spoke first, frowning. “If Tuorel keeps his army together, he’ll outnumber either of your two forces.”

“You’re right,” Gaelin conceded, “but here’s Tuorel’s problem: He has to defend two places. You see, the northern force can break his siege lines and relieve the army in Caer Winoene, while the southern force threatens his camp. If he tries to smash just the one or the other, he will either lose the siege lines or he’ll lose his camp.”

Vandiel leaned back, steepling his fingers in front of his face. “Ah. I see. You’re right, Gaelin.”

“Well, he’ll have two choices,” Seriene observed. “He can split his army to meet each threat, or he can ignore one to face the other. From what I know of the baron, I don’t think he’ll just wait where he is.”

“If he splits his army, I’ll be happy. We’ll outnumber him on both sides, and I think we can win a hard fight,” Gaelin replied. “But I don’t think he’ll divide his forces. It’s a better move for him to pick one or the other and destroy it outright. I don’t think he’ll attack the northern army, because the terrain won’t favor his cavalry. He’ll probably try to isolate and destroy the

southern army in the open terrain south of his camp.”

Vandiel grimaced. “It could be a long day for my army, Gaelin. If Tuorel abandons the siege lines in order to throw everything he has at me, what will you do?”

“First, you’ll give ground in order to draw him out, and to preserve your own army as a fighting force,” Gaelin said, thinking. “Then, I’ll advance past Caer Winoene to attack his camp. I’ll also see if I can sortie the Caer Winoene army. We should have close to three thousand men behind those lines. If Tuorel doesn’t keep them engaged with his army, I’ll turn them to the attack as soon as I can.”

“What if Tuorel surprises you by attacking the northern army?” asked Erin.

“Then we’ll do the same thing from the south,” Vandiel answered. “We’ll burn his camp and go on to break the siege lines, while Gaelin backs away. We can bait Tuorel like a badger caught in a trap.” He looked at Gaelin with newfound respect. “I can see why Tuorel’s so desperate to finish you off, Mhor Gaelin. You’re a formidable enemy.”

“It seemed like the best plan,” Gaelin said, shrugging. Weeks of working with Baesil Cered had given him a knowledge of military strategy. Or was there something else at work, another hidden legacy of the Mhoried blood? He deferred his curiosity to another time—a good plan was one thing, but there was still a battle to be fought. “We’ll see whether or not it works. I haven’t beaten Tuorel yet. He’ll think of something that we haven’t, and we’ll have to adjust to it quickly.”

“There’s no way to anticipate inspiration,” Vandiel said. “We’ll respond when we see how the battle lies. Where will you be?”

“I’ll lead the northern force. They’re the troops that are most likely to break and run against hard opposition, and they’ll be encouraged more than the trained soldiers by my presence. If we can’t bring them to grips with the enemy, the battle’s lost.” He looked around the room at the various officers. “Prince Vandiel will command the southern army. But I’ll ask you to share your command with the high prefect, since her officers will be the liaison between your forces and the rest of the army.”

“Very well,” Vandiel said. “Now, I suggest we let our offi-

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cers work out the signals and other details. We've a lot of planning to do."

The discussions and debates lasted for hours, until well after midnight. Even when the last of the major problems had been worked out, there were still dozens of contingencies that could not be accounted for. When they finally returned to the Mhorien camp by the lake, dawn was only four or five hours away.

Despite the hour, Gaelin wasn't tired. The skies were clear, and the new moon was a bright sliver of warm light in the sky. A shallow ground mist blanketed the hillsides and valleys in shining silver. The night was still, and those around him seemed to sense his desire for reflection. The white falcon embroidered on his surcoat gleamed in the moonlight, and he found himself thinking of his father, and his fathers before him, all the men and women who had worn the falcon in the long years of Mhoried's proud history.

When they returned to the camp, Gaelin let a groom lead Blackbrand away and wandered to a hillside overlooking the lake, in the shadow of the old monastery. Light sparkled on the lake's placid waters, a shining trail of silver that dappled the dark bluffs and hills with beautiful reflections. It struck him as disrespectful to make a battlefield of such breathtaking beauty.

After a time, he heard Erin's light footfalls. She sat down on the cold grass beside him, admiring the view. They looked out over the landscape together in a companionable silence for some time before she spoke. "You should try to get some sleep," she said quietly.

He smiled. "It won't happen tonight. I'm not anxious, or frightened—well, a little frightened, perhaps. I feel as if this may be my last night, so why spend it sleeping?" He looked at Erin. Her hair seemed to gleam with its own fire in the moonlight, and her face was silver and perfect. Her Sidhelien blood was very noticeable, in the cast of her eyes, the delicacy and strength of her features, and the almost tangible aura of otherworldliness that seemed to dance around her. He found his heart racing, as he moved closer and took her hand. "Erin, if we triumph tomorrow, I want you to be my wife."

"Oh, Gaelin, why did you have to say that?" She leaned forward, hiding her face. "You know you can't promise any-

thing to me. You're the Mhor. Mhoried will demand you marry a princess of your own status, not a half-breed minstrel without a trace of the ancient blood."

"If all that didn't matter, what would you say?"

She looked up at him, a sad smile on her face. "You know already, or you wouldn't have asked. My heart has been yours, almost from the first time I saw you."

"Then I'll find a way to make it work."

Erin started to speak but hesitated. After a moment, her face darkened, and she stood up abruptly. "We might pretend for a while that it doesn't matter, Gaelin, but you know as well as I that it will. What will you do when someone like Baesil tells you he'll forswear his allegiance before taking a half-elf nobody for his queen? What will you say when Iviena declares you a heretic or tries to disinherit you?" She turned away.

"Why are you looking for a reason not to marry me?"

She stopped and whirled to face him, pulling her arm away. "It's not that! It's—you wouldn't understand!"

"Erin, I love you, and I want you to be my wife. I don't think I could ever give my heart to another woman, not after loving you." He touched her face, and raised her head to look into her eyes. "If I win tomorrow, and we drive Tuorel out of Mhoried, the lords and common folk will support me. They know you, and they like you." He lifted her chin and kissed her tenderly. "I don't need an answer tonight, Erin. Just promise me you'll think on it."

Erin laughed softly through her tears. "I don't see how I can avoid it." Sighing, she stood and paced away, pulling her cloak around her shoulders, silhouetted against the lightning gray of the eastern sky. "Dawn's not far off."

Gaelin nodded soberly. He stood and stretched. "I suppose it's time to get to work."



nineteen

Riding Blackbrand, Gaelin led the Mhoriens along the north shore of the lake. The hills came down to the water at the lake's western end, and Gaelin was afraid the Ghoerans would try to hold the narrow front between the heights and the lake, halting his advance before he even got started—but his fears proved empty, and the Ghoerans didn't oppose his advance. Tuorel wants us all within reach of his jaws before he strikes, he thought glumly, but he took the bait and continued his march.

The Mhorien militia had a greater distance to cover than the southern force, a march of almost ten miles, and Gaelin hoped that his men would not be exhausted by the time they reached the Ghoeran lines. The light equipment of the militiamen was to their advantage in the march. They weren't burdened by the heavy arms and armor of the Diemans or Haelynites and were much better off than the heavier troops would have been. The

weather was another advantage for Gaelin, a cool and fair day that made for an easy march.

About three thousand men marched with Gaelin's host, the majority of them equipped with little more than longbows or spears, and perhaps a rusty old sword or a boiled-leather helmet. Given a fair fight in an open field, Ghoere's professional soldiers and mercenaries would cut them to pieces, but Gaelin hoped that the swarming chaos of a brawl for the Ghoeran siege lines would prevent the enemy commanders from wielding their army as a cohesive machine. In a man-to-man fight, the Mhoriens would give as good as they got.

The heart of his force was a crack guard composed of one hundred and fifty of the Knights Guardian of Mhoried. In the beginning of the war, his father had dispatched many of the knights to aid the highland lords in repelling the goblin invasion; riding in bands of ten to twenty, the knights had fought long and hard against the northern threat. They'd been trickling into Caer Winoene over the past two to four weeks, depending on how matters stood in various places across the northlands. The knights may have been few in number, but they were perhaps the finest fighters on the field. More importantly, Gaelin knew almost every one of them from his years as a squire and a knight-aspirant, and he was reassured by their company. The Guardians were led by Gaelin's old master, Knight Commander Anduine.

Although Gaelin was unhappy about it, Erin and Huire had joined his retinue, while Seriene rode with her father in the southern force. Gaelin had argued with Erin in particular for most of the morning with little luck; she ignored his orders to remove herself from the army, instead pointing out that her magic might be useful in coordinating with Vandiel's host. "Besides," she had said as they rode out of the camp, "I'd never forgive myself if I let something happen to you." When Gaelin had pointed out he felt the same way about her, she replied, "We should watch out for each other, then."

Throughout the morning, Gaelin rode up and down the column, letting the men who followed him see him. His armor was resplendent; some of the Knights Guardian had taken the time during the night to repair his battered plate and refurbish his surcoat and coat of arms. Even Blackbrand's mail skirts were covered by a brand-new drape of green and

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white, with the argent falcon boldly displayed on each flank.

Around noon, they called a brief halt about three miles from the Ghoeran position. The men rested and ate a spare midday meal of dried beef and mutton, cheese, and hardtack. While they rested, Gaelin sought out the Haelynite captain who was his liaison with the rest of the army. The Knight Templar was a pious, severe man named Ulmaeric, and Gaelin found the fellow never volunteered anything except brief prayers to Haelyn. "Sir Ulmaeric, where's the southern army now?"

"They started their march two hours after we did, as planned, my lord," Ulmaeric replied. "They are almost directly opposite us, on the other side of the lake." He pointed at a low hilltop about three miles away, on the opposite shore. "We have signalmen on the hill, there."

There was a quick flash of light from the hilltop, followed by three more in succession. "You're using mirrors?" Gaelin asked.

"Haelyn smiled upon us," Ulmaeric said. "Mirrors or smoke allow us to stay in contact with Prince Vandiel's force, but if the day had been foggy or rainy, we would have been cut off from them. That signal you just saw reported that Prince Vandiel's army is confronted by a large Ghoeran host."

"See if you can find out if it's all of Tuorel's forces, or only part," Gaelin said. "If Vandiel's facing the entire Ghoeran army, we're going to have to move fast to threaten Tuorel's rear and keep him from destroying Vandiel's force."

Ulmaeric saluted and set off in search of a messenger. From the hilltops on the north side of the lake, they could signal the southern post, but Ulmaeric still had to get someone to carry the message to a place where it could be easily seen. Gaelin watched him ride off—they'd have to resume the march immediately, now that Tuorel was showing his hand. He started to give the order to his standard-bearer, but his eye fell on a small rock that overlooked the resting column. He rode over to the boulder, dismounted and climbed to the top.

"Soldiers of Mhoried!" he shouted, to get their attention. All along the column, men were sitting by the roadside or lying down with their heads on their packs. As they noticed Gaelin preparing to address them, they fell silent and turned or sat up to see him better. In a few moments, Gaelin had

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more than a thousand men looking at him.

“Soldiers of Mhoried! We’re about three miles from the Ghoeran lines. Tuorel does not want to face you—he’s gone south to meet the Diemans and the Haelynites instead!” That evoked a few chuckles from the waiting militiamen. “We’ll march about two miles more. When we reach the open lands around Caer Winoene, we’ll break out of the column, form a line, and advance. Stay with your companies, and listen to the Knights Templar! They’re my means for communicating with you. Our first priority will be to take the siege lines and free Count Ceried’s men. Once we’ve chased the Ghoerans away from the castle, we’re going to press forward and attack the Ghoeran camp, with Ceried’s men to back us up. It’s going to be a long day, but by the grace of Lord Haelyn, we’ll send Tuorel back to Ghoere with his tail between his legs!”

The men surged to their feet, cheering. When they quieted again, Gaelin finished. “I’d hoped to rest here for an hour, but we can’t give the Ghoerans too much time to hammer the Diemans. We have to press ahead to get to the fight in time. Good luck to you all!” With that, he waved once and jumped down to Blackbrand’s saddle, cantering back to the vanguard. The cheers of the freemen rang from the hillside out over the lake, a roar of defiance that could be heard for miles. Gaelin hoped Tuorel could hear it, wherever he was. As he came to the command company again, the standard-bearer raised his banner and signaled the march. The army surged forward again, following Gaelin to war.

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Baron Noered Tuorel sat astride his charger, dressed for battle. His Iron Guard held the center of the Ghoeran line, arrayed in rank upon rank of bright steel, like the fangs of a great armored dragon gaping wide in anticipation. Calruile rested in its sheath by his pommel, and he caressed the hilt absently. If he could bring Gaelin to personal combat, a thrust through the heart would wrest the power of the Mhoried blood away from the boy, settling the Mhorien rebellion once and for all. From there, an ambitious man didn’t have to stretch his imagination to see the Iron Throne of Anuire itself. Tuorel grinned in anticipation; one way or the other, the affair

would be settled today.

He turned to the captain of his guard, Lady Avaera. She was beautiful and deadly, like a well-made sword, and Tuorel admired her in the way he might admire a predatory cat. "Any reports on where Gaelin of Mhoried rides today?" he asked. "I must know, before I engage these fools in front of us."

Avaera glanced at him, and slipped her steel dragon-beaked helm over her face. "I'll check with the master of scouts immediately, my lord." She cantered away, leaving Tuorel to consider the army that opposed his own. The Diemans he knew well, having skirmished against them several times in the past decade in the frontier lands of Roesone and Endier. They were good troops, on a man-for-man basis probably the equal of his own army. The Haelynite troops he'd never fought before, and there was a scattering of minor Mhorien lords mixed in. All the troops on the enemy line seemed to be professional soldiers; he guessed the Mhorien levies he'd heard about were circling the lake to attack his siege lines from the north.

Even without the men he'd left behind in the trenches, his army outnumbered the Dieman and Haelynite force three men to two. The question in his mind was not whether he would win, but how many of the enemy soldiers his cavalry could ride down in the pursuit. Tuorel meant to smash his enemies so badly that no one in Mhoried would ever dare take arms against him again.

He spied Avaera returning, cantering in front of the Ghoeran lines. She rode up to his banner and saluted. "My lord, the master of scouts reports that the Mhor's banner has been sighted north of the castle. Apparently, the Mhorien levies are preparing to assault our lines while we're busy down here."

Tuorel nodded. "It's a good plan on their part, but the Mhor's showing a naive confidence in his conscripts. I've never seen a levy that could fight worth a damn, let alone storm a defended earthwork." He looked around at the battle; the Diemans were holding their ground, about eight hundred yards away, apparently hesitant to attack an army that outnumbered their own. No matter; Tuorel would make that decision for them, in just a moment. He rubbed his jaw and scowled. "What of our so-called allies?"

"The goblins are ready, my lord, but they're not happy

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with their position. They want to join the fight.”

“Kraith can keep them under control. All right, then, here are my orders: Avaera, take command of this force, and attack the Diemans with everything you’ve got, save the Iron Guard. You outnumber them, so bring the fight to Prince Vandiel. Capture the prince, if you can, but if he perishes in battle, I’ll not mind.”

Avaera swallowed. “Yes, my lord. Where will you be?”

“I’m taking the Iron Guard and going to the northern lines to confront Gaelin. I want the pleasure of killing him myself,” Tuorel snarled. He was not happy about leaving the southern battle, which he regarded as the more important of the two engagements, in Avaera’s hands; her experience was in skirmishing and raids, not open field battles. But with Baehemon dead, he had no one else he could trust to do as he ordered. As he had each day for the past week, he regretted killing the seasoned general.

“What shall I do about the Markazorans?”

“Don’t worry about that; I’ll handle Kraith. If you think you need him, send word to me first, and I’ll see what I can do.” He looked at her face, obscured by her sinister helmet device. “You’d better get to work; it looks like Vandiel’s getting ready to charge.” Tuorel pointed at the Dieman line, closing at a rapid trot. “Remember, take him alive if you can. And don’t disappoint me.”

Avaera saluted, and Tuorel rode off again with a curt gesture at the standard-bearer. The Iron Guards peeled off from the Ghoeran line, and followed him as he galloped north to confront Gaelin Mhoried’s attack. He didn’t even bother to spare a glance over his shoulder to see how she handled the massive shock of the first Dieman and Haelynite charge.

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“They’re waiting behind the ramparts,” said Boeric, squinting at the Ghoeran earthworks. The sturdy sergeant was serving as Gaelin’s standard-bearer; although his leg still pained him, he refused to sit out the battle.

Gaelin frowned, studying the maze of earthworks that confronted his column. “Well, I didn’t expect Tuorel would just line up his troops for us to shoot down with a few volleys of

arrows.”

Lord Anduine, the commander of the Knights Guardian, trotted close to Gaelin. “This could be a damned hard fight, my lord Mhor. Our lads have courage, but I’m not sure if I would ask the best-seasoned troops you could find to attack the siege lines without cover or heavy engines of some kind.”

“We don’t have the luxury of preparing a deliberate attack,” Gaelin replied. “It’s right now, or not at all.”

“I hope you have some kind of plan?”

Gaelin took off his helm for a better view and rode a few steps ahead. His army was lined up four hundred yards shy of the Ghoeran defenses, just outside crossbow range. He could see the Ghoeran soldiers standing on top of their wall, jeering and hooting as they tried to taunt the Mhoriens into a rash attack. The dark walls of Caer Winoene were visible just beyond.

What are our advantages? Gaelin asked himself. We’ve got nearly two thousand archers right here; we’ve got a thousand spearmen; we must outnumber the fellows in those ramparts by a long margin, if Tuorel is facing the Diemans. Now he just had to figure out how to cross the open ground and storm the ramparts without getting his men slaughtered. Gaelin realized he should have thought more about this part of the plan—in retrospect, he should have known it would come down to this. He glanced up and down the lines at his own men. Many of the farmers and herdsmen were leaning on their bows, or checking the flights on their arrows, and not a few were gazing idly in his direction to see what he would do.

Erin followed him. In a low voice, she asked, “I have some illusions at my command, but I’m not sure what I could do to affect so many.”

“Let’s save your spells for now. I think I know what we can do here.” Abruptly, Gaelin turned back to his officers. “Gather all our spearmen in the center, and send them to the attack. The archers on either flank will concentrate their fire on the positions the spearmen are going to attack. That’ll keep the Ghoerans down under cover, while our spearmen advance. Then, when our fellows hit the ramparts, we hold our fire. Once the spearmen are in the Ghoeran lines, they’ll keep them busy enough for our archers to advance in turn.”

Lord Anduine weighed Gaelin’s plan. “If I were the Gho-

eran commander, I'd hold back a heavy force of some kind as a reserve, a little ways off the dike."

"We'll use the Knights Guardian to hit any reserve they have nearby, while the spearmen secure the dike," Gaelin said. "I'll lead that contingent myself."

"My lord Mhor, that will be very dangerous," Erin said. "You have no way of knowing what the Ghoerans may have hiding behind those ramparts."

"Your concerns are noted, Erin," Gaelin said. "But I'll not linger in the rear while men are fighting in my name. Herald, pass the orders, if you please."

The Mhoriens shifted so the Knights Guardian held the center, just behind a broad wedge of militiamen with spears and shields. When everyone was in place, Gaelin gave the orders: "Spearmen, take the wall. Archers, advance and cover them."

With a ragged yell, the Mhorien levy surged forward in a disorganized, screaming mass, bunching and thinning as each man made his way forward as best he could. To any military commander's eye, it must have looked like a disaster—but Gaelin knew that even a line of disciplined troops would break on the earthworks, so the lack of order wasn't the disadvantage that it seemed. On either side, the archers trotted forward to get into bowshot of the walls.

A hail of arrows and bolts greeted the oncoming tide of spearmen, but as the Mhorien archers came into range, they replied with a barrage of arrows that darkened the sky above the Ghoeran position. Spearmen stumbled and fell, as Ghoeran bolts found them in the surging ranks of the charge, but before the Ghoeran crossbowmen could prepare for a second volley, they were driven from the top of the wall by the storm of Mhorien arrows. Gaelin let the spearmen get within a hundred yards of the wall and then nodded to Anduine. "Lord Knight, let's get to the walls on the heels of the spearmen."

"If they're thrown back, it will go badly for them," Anduine cautioned. "We'll trample them under our own hooves."

"I know. I'm gambling that they won't be repelled," Gaelin said. "Let's go."

Anduine sounded the charge, and Gaelin joined Blackbrand with the line of Knights Guardian thundering forward toward

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the lines. He had nothing left in reserve; every man was committed to the attack. Ahead of him, the spearmen waded through the ditch in front of the low earth mound, kicking and knocking down the sharpened stakes on the dike's face so that the cavalry could follow. As the spearmen struggled up the hillside, the Mhorien archers ceased firing and rushed forward themselves, sprinting toward the battlements with hand axes, knives, and short swords to join the fray.

The first ranks of spearmen made it to the top of the wall before they met any serious resistance. To avoid the deadly sweep of the Mhorien arrows, the Ghoeran troops had retreated to the reverse slope of the dike, and as the fire lifted, the Ghoerans surged back to reclaim the wall. But Gaelin's stratagem worked. Instead of catching the Mhoriens as they floundered in the staked ditch and soft earth of the dike's face, the Ghoerans missed their best chance to halt the Mhorien charge and had to meet them on equal footing. As ordered, Gaelin's spearmen made no attempt to push in from the wall, but instead turned left and right to push sideways and get out of the way of the Knights Guardian.

His trusted sword raised above his head, Gaelin raced Blackbrand down, through, and up the other side of the ditch, swimming through the loose dirt until he struggled up on to the wall top and dropped down the other side. Roaring a challenge, Gaelin led the charge as they crashed into the heavy Ghoeran infantry who were streaming forward to hold the line. In a matter of seconds, Gaelin's vision of who was where on the field of battle vanished, and he hewed wildly on either side of his saddle. Blackbrand plowed through dozens of men, trampling them to the ground as Gaelin parried and slashed his way through the press. All around him, the Knights Guardian made short work of the Ghoeran infantry—in a close-quarters fight, there were very few infantry who could stand up to the weight and power of a line of horsemen.

Finding himself in the clear, Gaelin stood and twisted in his saddle to see what was happening. He turned back again just in time to catch the fall of a halberd with his shield and knock it aside, leaning forward to spit the Ghoeran before the fellow could recover from his mighty blow. Gaelin glanced around again, and found several knights were clustered around him, screening him from the fight. The reverse side of

the dike was a gigantic, muddy brawl as the Ghoeran defenders found themselves in hand-to-hand combat with the Mhorien archers, who now streamed up and over the wall to join the fray. While the Ghoerans were better troops, the unexpected attack on their reserve had prevented an effective counterattack, and now weight of numbers and sheer hard fighting would decide the issue.

“Anduine!” Gaelin shouted. “Take half the knights and ride left. I’ll go right, and we’ll help out with the melee!”

Anduine’s helmet bobbed up and down, and the old commander drove his men along the base of the dike, riding down the knots of Ghoerans who waited to join the fray. Gaelin took his own knights and did the same, riding in the other direction. Embattled on three sides, the Ghoerans were pushed off the ramparts and into the no-man’s-land between their two lines of defense. Here, on the flat and open ground between the earthworks, they closed ranks and began to hold their ground with more discipline, while Gaelin’s disorganized levy suddenly found themselves facing troops experienced in close-order fighting. The attack began to stall, and Gaelin growled in frustration. They were so close!

“My lord Mhor! Look!” Boeric was leaning over to point at Caer Winoene. Even as Gaelin watched, the green and white emblem of Mhoried was run proudly up the highest flagpole, announcing his return. With a great peal of trumpets and a thunderous shout, a thousand pikemen surged up and out of the Mhorien defenses to attack the Ghoerans from the rear. The inward-facing trenches had been nearly abandoned in order to meet the attack of Gaelin’s militiamen, and Baesil’s infantry swept over the Ghoeran lines without breaking stride.

While Baesil’s men engaged the Ghoerans, Ulmaeric sounded the withdrawal to break his archers free of the hand-to-hand combat and managed to form up several companies of bowmen to menace the Ghoeran position. Now embattled on all sides, with archers in easy range to rake the center of their formation, the Ghoerans broke and retreated to the east, circling Caer Winoene as they were channeled away by their own ramparts. Gaelin’s exuberant forces pursued them closely, and as they swept around the castle, they rolled up the Ghoeran siege lines.

“Your timing is perfect, my lord Mhor!” Count Baesil rode

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up, surrounded by a small guard of cavalymen. "I'm glad to see you again, that's for certain."

"Baesil!" Gaelin leaned over to embrace the old count, thumping his gauntleted fist on the other man's back. "Thanks for the help. I don't know if we could have finished them without your sortie."

"It's not over yet. There's one hell of a fight about a mile south of here. The better part of Ghoere's army is down that way, engaging the Diemans and the Haelynites. Good timing for your allies, too, by the way."

Gaelin looked off toward the south, but the castle and its attendant fortifications prevented him from catching even a glimpse of Vandiel's fray. "Baesil, the Diemans are just trying to hold on until they get some help. How many men can you sortie toward the Ghoeran camp, and how soon?"

"I can throw fifteen hundred cavalry at him right now, followed by a thousand mixed troops. That'll only leave me five hundred to hold the castle, if things go poorly."

"If things go poorly, it won't matter how long we hold Caer Winoene. Get them ready, and bring every man you can spare." Gaelin looked around at the streaming mass of his militiamen and shook his head. "It'll be a miracle if I can get these lads back into fighting order before sundown. Ulmaeric, pass the word. Tell your officers to lead the militiamen to the south side of the castle and assemble them on the open field. I want them ready to march on the Ghoeran camp in half an hour."

Ulmaeric's jaw dropped. "Half an hour? It can't be done."

"We'll do it anyway," Gaelin declared. "Now pass the orders, and follow me." With Boeric holding his standard high, Gaelin spurred Blackbrand in a rapid canter, circling the castle's defenses. "Men of Mhoried! Follow me!"

Although they were little more than a mob, the Mhorien levy slowly began to surge after Gaelin, following in his wake. A number pursued the broken remnants of the Ghoerans, but everywhere Gaelin passed, the Mhoriens raised a cheer and ran after him, by twos and threes and dozens. On the southern side of Caer Winoene, Gaelin led them out over the Ghoeran dike and halted, giving his officers a chance to rally the shouting mob. Ahead of him, a half-mile across the trampled no-man's-land before the castle, he could see the tents, palisades, and

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siege engines of the Ghoeran camp. And beyond the camp, he could see the flash of steel in the distance, and he felt the thunderous shock of the armies clashing. Impatiently, he danced Blackbrand across the line, shouting orders and encouragement to the militiamen, directing them to one standard or the other to rebuild their organization.

“What next, Gaelin?” asked Erin, riding close. Her eyes burned with a fierce flame, and her long rapier was red with blood.

“We’ll let the spearmen pillage the camp, while I’ll lead the archers past the camp to come on Tuorel’s army from the rear. We’ve got to draw some of the pressure away from the Die-mans.” He struck his fist against his armored thigh. “Damn! We need more time!”

“The militiamen are recovering as fast as they can. You’re almost ready to advance again.”

“Haelyn help us if Tuorel’s had time to break the Die-mans,” Gaelin said. He pulled his gaze away from the battle and met her eyes. A chill of apprehension seized his heart—there was so much that could still go wrong. He moved closer and lowered his voice. “Erin, I beg you: Stay here, in the castle. The battle ahead of us is going to make the last fight look like a friendly tavern scrap. I want to know you’re safe.”

To his surprise, she nodded soberly. “All right. I don’t want to distract you. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’ll try,” he said, hoping that his visored helm would conceal the lie. Somehow, he doubted Tuorel would allow him the luxury of caution.



Twenty

Tuorel brought his Iron Guard to the edge of his camp, and peered toward Caer Winoene. Amazingly, his scouts reported that Gaelin's rabble of yeomen and farmers had stormed the lines and broken the forces he'd left behind to maintain the siege. Now the Mhor was reassembling his army to continue the advance, into the Ghoeran camp and on to the southern battle beyond.

Beside him, War Chieftain Kraith sat on his black-armored hellsteed, a massive battle-axe slung over one shoulder. The goblin watched the Mhoriens rallying, and leaned over to spit into the mud. "We should take them while they're mustering," he growled. "They're not ready to fight anyone yet."

"We'll wait," Tuorel grunted. "If we show ourselves too soon, they'll retreat back to the cover of the castle defenses, and you don't want to chase that many archers into the siege lines." He nodded behind him at the titanic struggle that still

continued on the dusty plain south of the camp. "Gaelin knows his allies are overmatched, and he'll be desperate to bring his army into that fray. He'll come to us."

Kraith waited impatiently. "Well, they'll be in for the Gorgon's own surprise when they attack your camp, Tuorel. I've got four thousand fighters hidden back here." He smiled grimly. "Although it's awful tempting not to sack your camp ourselves, as long as we're here."

Tuorel smiled cheerlessly. "I don't think your master would like that."

The goblin warlord narrowed his eyes. He settled for a mean-spirited gibe in reply: "He's your master, too, Anuirean. Why else would my warriors be at your command? And how would your loyal soldiers feel if they knew the name of the power you serve, heh?"

"I suspect I stand high in his favor, Kraith."

"Aye, but we've served Raesene for five centuries. When your kingdom's blown away in the wind, we'll still be his servants." The goblin straightened in his saddle, and pointed at the distant band of Mhoriens. "They're moving."

"That was quick," Tuorel said, surprised. "It can't be a levy. Could Gaelin have disguised regular troops?"

"Why would he do that?"

Tuorel chose not to answer, although his mind was working furiously to unravel the puzzle. Gaelin's head for strategy was extraordinary. Tuorel had heard of blooded scions who manifested uncanny gifts of strategy and battle-wits. The Mhoried line was descended from Anduiras, the ancient god of war.

"Where did he learn his skill at command?" Tuorel wondered aloud. "Gaelin's proved to be a much more able leader than I ever thought he would be."

Kraith smiled. "We have a saying in Markazor, Tuorel. 'It takes fire to make steel.' You've taught him everything you know about warfare, and he's survived and learned. Why are you surprised he's learned your lessons so well?"

Tuorel snorted. "Spare me your goblin platitudes, Kraith." He turned to one of the knight commanders nearby and asked, "How does the southern engagement go?"

"At last report, the issue is still in doubt, my lord. Captain Avera feels that she can wear down the Diemans, given time."

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“Baehemon would have routed them by now,” Tuorel snapped. “Very well. Kraith, we must prevent Gaelin from reinforcing Vandiel’s army. Between your warriors and my own Iron Guard, I believe we have sufficient force to slaughter Gaelin’s sortie, and we’ll attack when we know they can’t retreat back to the castle.”

“Fine,” Kraith replied. “Just let me know when you want to unleash my fighters.”

“One more thing. You will instruct your commanders to leave the Mhorien standard alone. Above all, you must not engage Gaelin’s escort, not unless he tries to flee the field. I and my Iron Guard will attack the Mhor’s standard.”

“That may be difficult for my warriors,” Kraith grated.

“I don’t care.” Tuorel drew his sword from its sheath, and laid the gleaming blade across his saddle. “Gaelin Mhoried must fall by my hand and no other.”

* * * * *

It wasn’t pretty, but Gaelin assembled the levied bowmen and spearmen in something resembling their original formations. The Haelynite soldiers were indispensable; with at least one or two of the Knights Templar in each band of Mhorien militia, they were able to position themselves roughly where Gaelin wanted them. The Knights Guardian of Gaelin’s bodyguard were now surrounded by nearly a thousand of Baesil’s cavalry, and the spearmen were led by hundreds of trained and armed Mhorien infantry. Despite the heavy fighting around the Ghoeran siege lines, Gaelin was able to build a column of nearly three thousand men to continue his attack.

“I think that’s about the best we’ll do, my lord Mhor,” Baesil Ceried said, observing the muster. “I hope they won’t break at first contact with the enemy.”

“They’ve already won one fight today,” Gaelin said. “They have the courage, if we lead them well.” He nodded at Boeric. “Signal the advance; we’ve left the Diemans and Haelynites to fight our battle for too long.”

Baesil’s soldiers included a contingent of signal drummers. With a stirring martial splendor, they hammered out the advance and settled into a slow march. Awkwardly trying to keep in step, Gaelin’s army slowly lurched forward, closing

on the Ghoeran camp. As it moved forward, his army divided. The spearmen and Baesil's foot-soldiers jogged to the camp to burn and ransack Tuorel's supply train and stores, while Gaelin led his archers and Baesil's cavalry toward the lakeshore to bypass the camp and head out to the raging battle to the south.

"Do you have any idea of how Vandiel fares?" Baesil asked.

"He's still fighting, so he hasn't been swept away by Tuorel's army, but I don't want to risk any more delay. The sooner we can get there and tip the scales, the better," said Gaelin.

Baesil gave Gaelin an odd look. "You've grown somehow in the past couple of weeks, lad. You've found the heart to be who you were born to be."

"I was tired of letting Bannier and Tuorel tell me how this war was going to be fought," Gaelin said with a shrug. "It was time to hit back."

"Did you plan to lure them up here for this fight?"

Gaelin laughed sourly. "No, I'm not that clever. Tuorel thought this up for me and then put my back against the wall. I'm only here because I have to be."

Baesil held his gaze a moment longer. "I'm beginning to wonder, my lord Mhor."

"When we get up to the fight, I want your cavalry to hit any reserves you see. I'll lead the archers—"

"Mhor Gaelin! Goblins!" Boeric interrupted him with a desperate shout, pointing at the seemingly deserted Ghoeran camp. From the hundreds of tents and the maze of trenches and earthworks, thousands of goblins were streaming into view, shrieking their high-pitched war cries and descending on Gaelin's army with unnatural swiftness. In an instant, Gaelin understood what had happened. Tuorel had concealed an army of his vile allies in his own camp, waiting for a chance to spring the ambush. And now Gaelin had set his foot squarely in Tuorel's snare. In a matter of moments, the men advancing on the camp were inundated by a tide of dark warriors. They fought for their lives, while the goblins swarmed past the Mhorien spearmen and raced toward Gaelin's column.

"May the gods have mercy on us," Baesil whispered in

horror.

“Lord Mhor! What do we do?”

Gaelin didn't know who shouted the question, but with blinding white fury building in his veins, there was only one answer.

“We stand here,” he said. Rising in his stirrups, he held his sword aloft and roared a challenge. “Knights Guardian, to me! Archers, fire at will!” With agonizing slowness, the Mhorien column turned to the side to confront the screaming wave of goblins that stormed at them. Arrows flew toward the oncoming horde, first as a ragged volley, then growing into a withering storm of steel that scythed into the goblin ranks. Gaelin bit his lip, watching the approach of the enemy horde. He turned to give Boeric an order for the standard, and found himself looking into Erin's face. Dressed in a borrowed soldier's cloak, the minstrel waited beside the Falcon standard. “Erin! What are you doing here?”

“I had a feeling you might need me,” she said. “And I didn't want to let you out of my sight.”

He glanced at the oncoming goblins. The archery was taking its toll, but it was too little to stop the horde in its tracks. Without time to set in position or organize their fire, the archers could only blunt the Markazoran charge. He lowered his voice. “Erin, promise me you'll stay out of the fighting!”

Erin drew her sword and moved up beside the standard. “I don't think the goblins are going to give us that option,” she said.

Gaelin whirled to watch the leading wave of goblins crash into the Mhorien ranks, swallowing his archers in a deadly, swirling melee. As the bowmen were forced into hand-to-hand fighting, the deadly missile fire withered and ended, and the rear ranks of the goblin army piled forward unmolested. In a matter of moments, Gaelin was looking out over a sea of struggling bodies; surging knots of goblins broke through his lines and cut into the free yeomen and highlanders who made up his levy.

“Baesil, get your right-flank cavalry out around in front of the camp and hit the Markazorans in the rear!” Gaelin shouted over the horrendous cacophony of screams, war cries, and the clamor of steel meeting steel. The horsemen who had screened the column's march on the left side were

already gone, embroiled in the goblin army, but the cavalymen who rode on the right side of the Mhorien march were protected by the lake; they were clear of the fight for the moment, though Gaelin could tell they wouldn't stay that way for long.

"Right!" Baesil wheeled his horse and bolted off toward the disengaged horsemen, followed by a band of officers and guards. Ignoring the dark tide that surged and boiled all around him, Gaelin peered over the battlefield, searching for some way to pull his men out of contact with the goblins, but it was hopeless; all up and down the line, the Mhoriens were at grips with their enemies.

Gaelin's thoughts raced as he tried to pick out the best place to commit his Knights Guardian and perhaps tip the tide of the fight. "Erin! This would be a good time for your magic!"

"I agree!" Erin sheathed her sword and began to weave an enchantment in ancient Elvish, her voice rising high and clear above the din of the battle. "*Rhadagh gealle allandalae!*" she sang, pointing at the center of the goblin line. At first, Gaelin detected nothing out of the ordinary, and for a moment he thought her spell had failed. Then he noticed the press of the fight slacked and stopped as the goblins in the leading ranks began to turn on each other, hacking one another to pieces with a fiendish delight. A few seemed to fight off the berserk fury that clouded their minds, but as they stood milling helplessly about, they were cut down by the raging madmen around them.

"Erin! What did you do?"

"I cast a spell of confusion on them," the minstrel replied, gasping for breath. "It only lasts a few minutes, but they can't tell friend from foe."

"Will it affect all of them?"

She shook her head. "No more than two or three dozen, Gaelin. That's the limit of my power."

He scowled and wheeled his horse, trying to see the progress of the whole fight. Streams of goblins were pouring through the flanks on either side, surrounding the Mhoriens.

"Gaelin, over there!" Erin called out a warning and pointed at the center of the goblin assault. Storming ahead of the chaos of the goblin horde, the Iron Guard of Ghoere thun-

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dered into view, surrounding the crimson wolf-standard of Noered Tuorel. With lances lowered, the Iron Guard charged directly for Gaelin's banner, riding down both militiamen and goblins in their path. Gaelin was pinned in place; the goblins swarmed around the companies around his Guardians, preventing him from maneuvering. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and wait for Tuorel to ride me down, he thought. The brilliant wrath of his bloodline caught fire in his veins, and with a ringing cry that carried over the entire battlefield, he shouted, "Knights Guardian! Take the enemy standard! *Charge!*"

He spurred Blackbrand ahead, leaping into the fray, as his friends and followers drove after him. Churning up divots of mud, the mighty stallion flattened anyone in his path. In an unearthly silence, Gaelin's world brightened and condensed until there was nothing beyond his body, the horse beneath him, and the line of Ghoeran knights only a spear's throw away.

His blood burned like molten gold in his heart, and the world came to a halt as each hoofbeat, each stride, carried him one step closer to glorious annihilation. The Wolf of Ghoere fluttered just beyond the front ranks, and beside it Gaelin saw the black, wolf-graven armor of Noered Tuorel. He screamed a wordless challenge, and the world went black as the two lines of knights collided in the center of the battle.

A lance point shattered on Gaelin's shield, jarring him to his toes and knocking the breath out of his body, and Blackbrand met another horse breast-to-breast and drove the smaller animal to the ground. Horses screamed, and men roared and shrieked in a hellish chorus. For a moment, Gaelin was lost in a senseless whirlwind of impact and chaos as he crashed through the Ghoerans, hammering his sword down on anyone nearby as the battle carried them out of his reach.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Boeric fall from the saddle, unhorsed by a Ghoeran lance, but Erin reached out to catch the Falcon banner before it fell. Shouting defiantly, she led the Mhorien knights toward Gaelin, while Lord Anduine guarded the standard against a furious attack.

"*Gaelin Mhoried!*" Despite the maelstrom of noise and confusion that surrounded him, Gaelin heard his name cutting through the chaos, ringing in challenge. Tuorel was fighting

his way toward him, and Gaelin turned Blackbrand with his knees and cut down a Ghoeran knight who stood between them. As the battle hung in the balance, he came sword-to-sword with Tuorel. "Are you ready to die, Gaelin?" Tuorel screamed. "Your reign ends today!"

Gaelin stood in his stirrups to smash his heavy sword down on the baron, but Tuorel parried the blow with a sword that gleamed with silver fire. With unearthly quickness, the baron returned Gaelin's blow, and only a desperate block with his shield saved Gaelin from injury. Tuorel struck again before Gaelin could manage a reply of his own, a blow that glanced off Gaelin's helm and left his ears ringing. The sword's enchanted, he realized. The flow of the battle pushed him past Tuorel, and he recovered his balance and readied his sword as he turned Blackbrand to face the Wolf of Ghoere again.

"You murdered my father, my brother, my sister! I will have vengeance, Tuorel!" Gaelin spurred Blackbrand ahead, resuming the attack. He closed within striking range and unleashed a fusillade of hacks and thrusts, trying to pierce Tuorel's guard. But the baron parried or deflected each blow, his sword leaping to meet Gaelin's steel with liquid speed and grace. As they fought past each other again, Tuorel managed to slip the blade under Gaelin's guard. The sword cut through Gaelin's breastplate like a razor through soft leather, gouging a long and bloody slash on his left side.

Gaelin bit back a cry of pain, reared, and spun around to follow Tuorel, attacking from the baron's left flank. Even without the enchantments of his blade, Tuorel was a superb swordsman, one of the best Gaelin had ever seen, and he twisted in his saddle to parry behind his back and then slash at Gaelin backhanded. While Gaelin tried to recover, the baron wheeled his own horse, and brought his weapon down in an overpowering blow that Gaelin could only meet with the flat of his blade.

Gaelin's sword shattered into a dozen pieces. Tuorel's blow slapped against his helm again, but most of the baron's strength had been spent by breaking the sword, and his stroke only dazed Gaelin. Tuorel shouted in triumph and unhorsed him with the next swing; Gaelin tumbled heavily to the ground and landed badly, losing his breath again as blood streamed through the rents in his armor.

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His vision blurring, Gaelin raised himself to his knees and shook his head. A few feet away, Tuorel slid down from his saddle and advanced, raising his sword for the coup de grâce. "The Mhoried blood is mine," Tuorel cackled. "The Iron Throne is in my grasp!"

"Not while I live, you bastard," Gaelin growled. Suddenly, it came upon him again, the crystalline certainty and divine fire that dispelled his pain and exhaustion like a white-hot flame shrivelling a scrap of paper. Beneath his hand, he felt the haft of a fallen knight's mace, a wicked weapon nearly four feet long, with a head of iron flanges.

"We'll remedy that in a moment," Tuorel snarled. He lunged forward, stabbing at Gaelin's heart.

Gaelin seized the handle of the mace and exploded into motion. The strength of his blood empowered him, quickened his reflexes and his aim. The world seemed to slow in comparison. The heavy mace was light as a willow switch in his hand, and as he rose he brought its iron head in a long swing that caught Tuorel under his raised arm and crumpled his armor like tin. The force of the blow threw the baron spinning through the air to land heavily ten feet away. Gaelin leapt after him, swinging again.

Tuorel wheezed, a great bloody exhalation from his shattered ribs, and turned to parry Gaelin's strike. But Gaelin beat down his guard and shattered Tuorel's shoulder, smashing the baron to the ground and jarring the enchanted sword from the baron's grasp. The blade spun away to lie in the mud, its gleam fading. Tuorel screamed in pain and rage. "No! He promised me! He *promised* me!"

In his white fire, Gaelin heard the baron's words. He raised the mace one more time and crushed the fearsome wolf-visage of Tuorel's helm. The helmet crumpled, as Tuorel's neck snapped and his corpse slammed into the ground. Gaelin sank to his knees, suddenly exhausted beyond his endurance, uncaring of the battle that still went on around him.

Behind him, the wolf-standard fell as Lord Anduine dragged it down. As his senses darkened toward unconsciousness, Gaelin heard the thunder of Baesil's cavalymen returning to the fray.

* * * * *

Gaelin remembered little of the rest of the battle. He suspected he'd relied too long on the brilliant wrath to sustain him, and he had driven himself past his human limits. His limbs were weak, his sight was dim, and sounds seemed distant and far away. It was as if some elemental fury had burned itself to ashes, leaving him as cold and empty as an autumn husk. Somehow, his guards and captains carried him through the rest of the day.

He wondered what it was in his blood, in his heritage, that touched him in battle. As far as he knew, no Mhorieds had ever manifested the divine wrath, as it was sometimes called. It had enabled him to survive the day, and he had harnessed its power to defeat Tuorel. Like many of the gifts of the blood, it was inexplicable, and Gaelin guessed he would have to leave it as a matter of faith. Within a couple of hours, another of his divine birthrights made itself felt—the mortal exhaustion that had nearly killed him after his fight with Tuorel faded quickly, as his unnatural knack for healing restored him to his normal vigor.

By sunset, Gaelin's armies commanded the battlefield. The stand of the Knights Guardian, combined with Baesil Cerie's flanking maneuver, had broken the goblin charge and set the Markazorans to flight. Although they were decimated by the goblin ambush, the surviving archers and cavalry continued on to the southern engagement and attacked the Ghoeran host in the rear. Leaderless and surrounded, the army of Ghoere was hammered to pieces on the anvil of the Dieman and Haelynite knighthood; Seriene's magic was of immense value in the resolution of the southern battle. Although hundreds of the Ghoeran marauders escaped the field, the bulk of Ghoere's army surrendered or perished by the shores of Lake Winoene.

That evening, Mhor Gaelin entertained his allies in the great hall of Caer Winoene with the most lavish feast he could arrange. Prince Vandiel, Seriene, and the leaders of the Dieman host attended, although Vandiel's arm was in a sling. The knights of Haelyn were there as well, but their mood was subdued; the high prefect had fallen in the fighting. Brother Superior Huire served as the leader of the Haelynite contingent, although he declined the title of high prefect until he could be installed in the Abbey of the Red Oak. Several of the

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Mhorien lords had perished as well, though Counts Torien and Cerie survived the day without hurt. For Gaelin, it felt as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Erin sat beside him during the feast, in the place reserved for the Mhor's consort.

Despite the Mhor's obvious involvement with his herald, Prince Vandiel still took the time to draw Gaelin aside and invite him to consider courting Seriene. "After all, she is a princess equal to your own station, and I greatly desire a more lasting union between our two ancient bloodlines," he said.

"Princess Seriene is a woman of great beauty, intelligence, and charm," Gaelin agreed. "But I am afraid my heart belongs to another. However, I understand your son is not engaged, and I will point out that my sister Ilwyn is a beautiful and charming girl. I'm not above a little matchmaking, if we're not obvious about it."

"Nor am I," Vandiel agreed with a sly grin. "I shall plan a hunting trip up here in the fall, and bring Aeran along. We'll see what happens."

After the meal, Gaelin leaned over and kissed Erin. It seemed to him she had never been as radiant as she was at that moment. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready? What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to announce our betrothal," he said.

Erin covered her mouth with her hand, and her eyes widened. "Gaelin, you can't! You don't know—"

He caught her hand in his. "Do you want to be my wife?"

"They'll never stand for it, Gaelin. You can't marry a commoner!"

"Erin, I wouldn't call you common. And you didn't answer my question. If it didn't matter, would you marry me?"

She held his eyes for a moment longer, and then her resistance gave out. "Yes. Yes, Gaelin, I would."

He brushed a tear from her cheek. "Then let's see what the lords of Mhoried have to say." He stood up abruptly, and raised his voice to carry over the laughter and music in the hall. "Lords and ladies of Mhoried! Honored guests! I wish to announce that I have decided to take a wife." The hall broke into wild cheers, as the gathered Mhoriens and Diemans applauded, and it was some time before it was quiet enough to continue. Gaelin paused dramatically. "I present the Lady

Erin Graysong, the next queen of Mhoried!”

He didn't have to be concerned. After a moment of surprise, Baesil Cerial stood and started to clap. Seriene stood a heartbeat later, her face streaked with tears, and joined the gruff old count. Slowly at first, but then with growing enthusiasm, the assembled lords, knights, and captains stood and cheered. As the hall resounded with their approval, Gaelin glanced down at Erin and offered his hand, lifting her to her feet. As she stood, the crowd roared and the applause rekindled. He smiled at the shy blush on her face. “I told you,” he said.

“What would you have done if no one approved?” she asked.

Gaelin smiled and looked into her eyes. “I would have convinced them.” He turned back to the crowd, just in time to shake Baesil's hand and accept the first of many congratulations. Behind him, he noticed Princess Seriene step up to Erin and embrace her, her face shining with tears. He met Seriene's eyes over Erin's shoulder, and the princess gave him a nod of approval before slipping away.

“So, Mhor Gaelin. When's the wedding?” Baesil said.

“I have no idea,” he replied. He thought about it. “There's a Ghoeran garrison in Shieldhaven that I'll have to take care of. Maybe I can talk them into leaving without a fight, if I offer them safe passage back to Ghoere. And then there are the Mhorien nobles who went over to Tuorel during the war. I'll have to do something about them. And we're halfway through the summer, with barely any crops in the ground, and half our peasants and freeholders living wherever they can.” He shook his head and groaned. “How in the world am I ever going to get things straightened out again?”

Erin suddenly caught his arm from behind and reached up to kiss him, provoking another round of cheers from the assembled Mhorians. “All that can wait,” she said.

A Brief Timeline of Mhoried

| Date | Event |
|---------|---|
| -515 HC | The Flight from Shadow. The human tribes of Aduria begin their migration to Cerilia. The Mhora, Third House of the Andu tribe, arrive and settle in the lands that will become Mhoried. |
| -508 HC | The first recorded Mhor, Maglan, swears before the Red Oak. |
| -400 HC | Height of the <i>gheallie Sidhe</i> . The Mhora fight against the elves and the goblin-kingdom of Kar-Durgar. |
| -166 HC | The Mhora raze Kar-Durgar, finally defeating the goblins. The lands between the Stonebyrn and the Maesil become known as Mhoried. |
| -2 HC | War of Shadow opens, as Azrai's forces begin an assault on all of Cerilia. |
| 0 HC | Battle of Deismaar; Mhor Daegan slain in battle, but his son Raedan touched by the divine power. |
| 1 HC | Upon taking the oaths before the Red Oak, Mhor Raedan forges the link between Mhor and land. |
| 70 HC | Mhor Endira, granddaughter of Raedan, offers allegiance to Boeric Roele, formally incorporating Mhoried in the Anuirean Empire. |
| 71 HC | Birth of Thendiere Mhoried, son of Endira and Boeric. The Mhoried claim to the Iron Throne is traced through him. |
| 229 HC | Prince Raesene, the Gorgon, launches an invasion of Anuire that is repelled along the line of the Maesil. |
| 500 HC | Height of the Anuirean Empire. |
| 502 HC | The Gorgon attempts another invasion but fails to force the pass through Caerlinien in Cariele. |
| 556 HC | Mhor Ulmaeric ascends to the throne. He becomes a powerful and unscrupulous sorcerer. |
| 568 HC | Ulmaeric deposed by his sister, the Princess Philiera. She institutes practice of Mhorien heirs training with the Knights Guardian. |
| 947 HC | Emperor Hadrian Roele dies; Archduke Arwyn Boeruine attempts to seize the throne from |

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- Michael Roele, precipitating the War of Succession. Mhor Raedan III supports Michael's claim.
- 959 HC Battle of Caer Daulton ends the War of Succession.
- 970 HC/ Death of Michael Roele in the Gorgon's Crown;
0 MR Mhor Raedan escapes from Battle of Kal-Saitharak. Beginning of Michaeline Reckoning.
- 65 MR Mhor Caelwyn leads expeditionary force to aid Cariele against goblins of Thurazor.
- 77 MR Mhor Oervyn fortifies Torien's Watch.
- 399 MR The Barony of Ghoere is formed from the old states of Ghieste and Bhalaene.
- 460 MR Birth of Gaelin Mhoried.
- 471 MR Baron Noered Tuorel comes to power in Ghoere.
- 476 MR Daen Roesone declares independence from Diemed.
- 484 MR Ghoere invades Elinie.
- 486 MR War between Ghoere and Mhoried, death of Mhor Daeric I. Beginning of the reign of Gaelin the Restorer.
- 528 MR Gaelin Mhoried steps down in favor of his oldest son, Daeric II.

HC refers to the dating system of Haelyn's Count. In this system, the Battle of Deismaar (and Haelyn's ascension to godhood) is considered Year 0.

MR refers to Michaeline Reckoning. This system marks the end of the Roele line as Year 0, which would be 970 HC.

THE FALCON AND THE WOLF
