

MISTRESS OF THE CATACOMBS

by David Drake

## DEDICATION

To Randy Long, who's not only been a friend for many years but who also acted as my son's coach during his bodybuilding competitions--a task for which I would've been hopelessly inadequate.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For many years now Dan Breen has been reading the rough drafts of my prose and making it better. *Mistress of the Catacombs* is the latest beneficiary of his attention.

I didn't, for a wonder, blow up another computer while writing this novel. Nevertheless my wife Jo found me a backup and my son Jonathan set it up for me. (Mark Van Name and Allyn Vogel, whom I believe have been cited for computer help in every book of mine for the past decade, will doubtless be back in the next one.)

Many friends provided this or that bit of information which will show up in the text of *Mistress*. Thanks very much to everyone who helped. Two whose contribution was even more considerable are Karen Zimmerman, my webmaster, and Sandra Miesel.

Stephanie Lane, my liaison with the machinery of Tor, is a continuing delight to work with. Contact with Stephanie is clear and pleasant, and she invariably follows up her end of whatever business.

And finally, I owe many debts to historians and to other fiction writers. Readers who are familiar with the work of Clark Ashton Smith will realize that I owe him in particular. Readers who *aren't* familiar with Smith should correct that gap in their education at their earliest convenience.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The common religion of the Isles is based on Sumerian cult and ritual. That is, the Lady equates with Inanna; her consort the Shepherd equates with Dumuzi; and the Sister fills the place of Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld.

Religion in the Isles (and generally, except perhaps in fantasy fiction) is separate from magic. The magic in *Mistress of the Catacombs* is based on the practice of the Mediterranean Basin in Classical times. The wellspring was mostly Egyptian, but there were admixtures from many other cultures (particularly the Jewish). What I've referred to as "words of power" are formally *voces mysticae*, words in the language of the demiurges who act as intercessors between humanity and the Gods.

I don't myself believe in magic, Classical or otherwise, but I know that reality doesn't always conform to my opinion of what it should be. Just to be on the safe side, I prefer not to pronounce the *voces mysticae* aloud.

As in the past, I've used Classical authors as part of the cultural underpinning of the Isles. Pendill is Ovid, who's given me much pleasure over the years and has also educated me as a writer; Tincer is Tacitus, about whom I would say the same; and I was thinking of Gildas by the reference to Ascoin. I suppose a writer can learn from everything he reads, but I do hope that less of Gildas stuck than others.

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## CHAPTER ONE

The spy, a stocky shipping agent named Hordred, looked at Garric and Liane with haunted eyes as he whispered what he knew of the planned secession of several western isles. His restless gaze flicked about the room with the randomness of a squirrel surprised on the ground.

"There's priests in it too," Hordred said. "They call themselves Moon Wisdom and have ceremonies in the temple of Our Lady of the Moon in Donelle. It's not just prayers and temple tithes, though. This is...."

He swallowed. Liane had found Hordred through associates of her late father, a far-travelled merchant before his wizardry first ruined, then killed him. In the normal course of things the agent must have been a man well able to take care of himself. A falling block might as easily have been the cause of his broken nose as a rival's cudgel, but the scar on his right forearm had to have been left by a knife. Mere physical threats wouldn't have frightened Hordred into his present state.

"I think there's something real," he said. He stared at his own hard-clasped hands on the patterned wood before him. "Something that comes in... dreams."

They sat at a round cedarwood table in a small conference room, part of Prince Garric's private section of the palace compound. A row of louvers just below the tile roof let in air and muted light, but no one could see those inside. Members of the royal bodyguard regiment, the Blood Eagles, stood unobtrusively in the surrounding gardens. Garric had told the guard commander not to let anyone pass while he and Liane interviewed their visitor; therefore no one *would* pass, not even Valence III, though he was in name still the King of the Isles.

"In *your* dreams, Master Hordred?" Liane said to jolt the spy out of his grim silence. "What is it that you see?"

Hordred looked up in bleak desperation. "I don't *know*, mistress!" he said. "There's not really anything, it's all gray. I'm dreaming, but it's just gray; only I know there's things there

reaching for me and I'll never see them because they're gray like everything else. And then I wake up."

"You're safe now, Master Hordred," Garric said, hoping to sound reassuring. He reached out, touching the spy's hand with the tips of his strong, tanned fingers. "You can stay here in the palace if you like, or you can go to any of the royal estates on Ornifal if you think you'd be less conspicuous out of the capital. The conspirators won't bother you here."

In Garric's mind, the spirit of his ancestor King Carus scowled like a cliff confronting the tide. *"And if I could put my sword through a few necks,"* the king's ghost said, *"the Confederacy of the West wouldn't bother anyone. Except maybe dogs fighting over the carrion."*

Carus grinned, reverting to the cheerful expression he most often wore. *"But I know, lad, cutting throats isn't your way; and maybe if my sword hadn't made so many martyrs, things would've turned out better in my own day."*

Carus had been the greatest as well as the last ruler of the Old Kingdom. When he and the royal fleet sank in a wizard's cataclysm, the Isles had shattered into chaos and despair. A thousand years hadn't been enough to return the kingdom to the peace and stability it had known in the age before the Collapse, and forces gathering now threatened to crush what remained into dust and blood.

*Not if I can help it!* thought Garric.

*"Not if we can help it!"* echoed the ghost.

"I'm not afraid of their bravos!" Hordred snapped. In the angry response, Garric caught a glimpse of the man he must usually have been: tough and self-reliant, able to handle himself in a fight and well aware of the fact.

Relaxing with a conscious effort, Hordred continued, "I wrote down the strength of the forces gathering on Tisamur and the names of as many leaders as I could find. That's in the books I gave you."

He cocked an eyebrow at Liane; she nodded back. Hordred continued, "There's contingents from Haft and Cordin, but the real danger's in the mercenaries the leaders've been hiring from all over the Isles."

Garric's face went hard. His formal title now was Prince Garric of Haft, Adopted Son and Heir Presumptive to Valence III, King of the Isles. What he really was... one of the things he really was... was Garric, the nineteen-year-old son of Reise the innkeeper in Barca's Hamlet on the east coast of Haft. The only contact Barca's Hamlet and the borough around it had with the outside world was the Sheep Fair every Fall and in Summer the Tithing Procession, when priests from Carcosa on the west coast rolled images of the Lady and the Shepherd through the countryside and collected what was due the temple.

Garric was a peasant from Haft--and he was also the real King of the Isles, though the authority of the central government didn't really stretch far from the capital here in Valles on Ornifal. If he didn't put down this Confederacy of the West promptly, he wouldn't rule his birthplace even in name.

"The notes are in Serian shipping code," Hordred added. "Can you read that?"

"Yes, of course," Liane said, touching the travelling desk in which she'd placed Hordred's notebooks. They looked like ordinary accounts, thin sheets of birchwood bound in fours with hinges of coarse twine. The inner faces were covered in a crabbed script written in oak gall ink.

"I should've stopped there," the spy muttered, sounding both angry and frightened. He clasped his hands again unconsciously. "I thought, 'Let's see what the cult's part in it is. Let's learn about Moon Wisdom.'"

He swallowed. "I got into one of the ceremonies," he went on, his voice dropping back to a whisper. "There were over a hundred people in the temple, some of them from as far away as Ornifal. They each had a symbol stamped on their forehead in cinnabar, a spider. I made a stamp for myself and nobody noticed anything wrong. But..."

Hordred fell silent again. Garric moistened his lips with his tongue and prompted, "What went on at the ceremony, Master Hordred?"

The spy shook his head, trying to make sense of his memories. "We chanted a prayer to the Mistress of the Moon," he said. "I didn't know the words, but I could follow well enough."

"Chanted Words of Power?" Liane asked, her face and voice sharper than they had been a moment before. She understood that wizardry was neither good nor bad in itself; like a sword, the power depended on the purpose--and the skill--of the wizard using it. But Liane would never forget the night that her wizard father had prepared to sacrifice her for purposes *he* had thought good.

"No, no," said Hordred to his writhing hands. "Just ordinary speech, a hymn like you might hear at any Tennight ceremony if you're the sort who wastes his time in temples. Only something happened, I don't know what. I could feel something. And I thought I saw something in the air in the middle of the room but there wasn't anything there except gray. Nothing!"

He clenched his right fist as though to bang the table, but his arm trembled and he lowered his hand instead. "There wasn't anything there, but it's been with me ever since. Whenever I go to sleep."

Garric stood. The discussion made him uncomfortable. He was as religious as any other youth in Barca's Hamlet. He dedicated a crumb and a sip of beer to the Lady and her consort at most meals, and once a year he'd offered a flat cheese of ewe's milk to Duzi, the roughly carved stone on the hill overlooking the meadows south of the hamlet. Duzi watched over sheep and the poor men who watched *them*; and if he did not, if Duzi was only the scars of time on rock, well... a cheese wasn't much to spend on a hope of help in trouble.

But this business of temples and the powers called down by them--this was wizardry or worse, and no place for ordinary mortals. Becoming king hadn't made Garric any less mortal, but he knew that this was a matter for kings regardless.

He grinned. There was a time that Garric or-Reise had imagined that nothing could be more unpleasant and frustrating than herding sheep caught in a sudden thunderstorm. Prince Garric knew his slightly-younger self had been wrong.

"Master Hordred," he said, "I've called a meeting of my council to discuss the conspiracy. You needn't be present--"

Not every member of the council loved Garric, but each councillor knew his own survival and the best chance for the Isles to survive depended on Garric's success. Even so, Liane had insisted that as few people as possible know the face of this spy or the other agents she had hired.

Garric accepted her judgment, as he did on most matters where Liane felt strongly and he did not. A boy from Barca's Hamlet didn't have the special skills needed to gather intelligence from across the kingdom's scattered islands.

"--but I'd like you to remain here for the time being in case we have further questions for you afterward. There are cushions if you want to sleep--"

He nodded to the built-in benches. The walls were wainscotted to the height of a seated man's shoulders and frescoed above with scenes from pine forests like those of northern Ornifal.

"--and I can have food and drink brought in if you choose. You'll be well guarded, of course."

"Sleep!" Hordred said. "I could sleep on broken lava, I'm so tired. If I dared!"

"You're in Valles now," Garric said. "You're as safe as I am myself. Or Lady Liane."

Hordred looked up at him, then toward Liane as she rose also. "Am I?" the spy said. He laughed bitterly. "I suppose I am at that. Well, it doesn't matter, I've *got* to sleep."

Liane had been taking notes of Hordred's information with a small brush in a vellum chapbook. Even though she was merely going with Garric to a larger bungalow ten paces distant, she placed her notes in the uppermost tray of the desk and locked it with a four-ward key.

"Yes, well...", Garric said. "We'll see you soon, Master Hordred. On my honor, the kingdom won't forget the risk you ran for its safety."

As Garric opened the door for Liane who carried the desk, he heard Hordred mutter, "I should've known better than to go into the temple. I thought it was just priests with a new trick to put money in their purses, but it's wizards' work or worse!"

*"There's no safety for anyone in the kingdom,"* said the wizard-slain king in Garric's mind, *"while there's wizards above the ground!"*

Carus was wrong in his blanket condemnation: without the aid of the wizard Tenoctris, Garric and the Isles would have been doomed long since. But Garric remembered the desperation in Hordred's eyes, and he knew that there was more than just prejudice to support King Carus' opinion.

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Cashel or-Kenset walked down the crowded street beside Tenoctris, protecting the birdlike little woman without really thinking about it. Tenoctris didn't seem frail any more than a wren does to somebody like Cashel who'd often watched those sprightly, tuneful little creatures. But she was old, seventy years or so; and small; and a woman.

Cashel himself was none of those things. People who watched where they were going didn't barge into him. In a busy city like Valles, there were always those who didn't watch. They bounced back from Cashel's shoulder or the arm holding his quarterstaff, placed for the moment in front of the old wizard.

"Huh!" said Tenoctris, stopping before the open front of a shop selling used metalwork. Nearest the street were bronze bedsteads with verdigrised statues further inside. Cashel knew that people paid good money for art, but time had eaten these figures to greenish lumps with here a torso, there something recognizable as a horse's head. Smaller--and therefore more easily stolen--items were racked against the back wall.

Tenoctris pointed to an octagonal pewter bowl, racked on its side so that passersby could see the niello symbols on the interior. She said, "Look at that, Cashel. I wonder how it got here?"

Cashel couldn't read or write beyond picking his own name out with care, but he recognized the flowing black marks as letters in the Old Script. Scholars, Garric and his sister Sharina included because their father Reise had taught them, could read the Old Script, but the only people who wrote that way now were wizards when they drew words of power for their incantations.

Cashel gripped his staff a little tighter. Wizards were just people. Tenoctris was a wizard, and she was a lot like the grandmother who'd raised him and Ilina when their father brought them home with no word--ever--of who their mother might be.

But there were wizards who thought their power let them push other people around. Cashel had met that sort too; and they'd all been wrong when they'd thought they could push Cashel or anybody Cashel happened to have put himself in front of at the time.

The shopkeeper noticed Tenoctris' interest and got up from his stool. He was a balding man with a wispy goatee who reminded Cashel far more of a weasel than anybody so fat should've done.

"You have excellent taste, madam," the fellow said. He lifted the bowl from its place and brought it toward them through the maze of corroded metal. "This is a genuine Old Kingdom antique, the prized possession of a noble family here in Valles. Only their present distressed circumstances persuaded them to part with it."

"It's a great deal older than that," Tenoctris said sharply. "This came from the grave of a priest of the Mistress, either on Tisamur or just possibly on Laut. There would have been a lid as well."

"I'm sure I can find madam a craftsman who can make any sort of lid madam wishes," the proprietor said, still smiling. "The workmanship is quite exquisite, is it not? And such a remarkable state of preservation."

Cashel blinked. The fellow was responding to what Tenoctris said, but he wasn't *listening* to her.

Tenoctris backed and raised her hand as the proprietor offered her the bowl. "No, I don't want to touch it!" she said. "You wouldn't either, if you had good sense. It held the priest's brain. The sort of thoughts that a priest of the Mistress might have aren't for sane humans--or humans at all, I'd say. Melt it down! Can't you feel the power in it?"

Cashel couldn't see swirls of power the way Tenoctris said she did, tangles that clung to objects the way foam boils below the rocks in a fast-flowing stream, but he knew when they were

there. Things used by wizards in their art held some of their power ever after; prayer permeated the stones of a temple; and scenes of blood and death held stains much deeper than those of the fluids that leaked from corpses.

The pewter bowl created a sort of pressure like that of air gone still before a storm. It didn't frighten Cashel any more than a storm would, but it was something to be wary of. Unconsciously he shifted his grip on the hickory quarterstaff that he'd shaped with his own hands as a boy and had carried ever since.

The shopkeeper blinked and looked at the bowl in his hands. Cashel wondered if the fellow really saw the object. More likely it gleamed in his mind like a stack of silver pieces or even gold Sheaf-and-Scepters.

"Well then," the man said in the same oily voice as before. "Perhaps madam would care to see some candlesticks from the palace of King Carus himself, preserved in the collection of a noble family linked by blood to the ancient royal house?"

"Come, Cashel," Tenoctris said, turning abruptly and continuing down the street with quick, short steps.

After a moment, she sighed and slowed to a pace more proper for an old woman and a youth accustomed to walking with sheep. She said, "In my own day I didn't get out into the world enough to realize how ignorant most people were, but I'm sure it was no better then."

Tenoctris had washed up on the shore of Barca's Hamlet one morning, thrown there by a storm not of wind but of wizardry. She said she'd been wrenched from the age a thousand years before, when King Carus ruled and the Isles were unified for the last time in their history.

"Well, people can't know about everything," Cashel said, calm as he usually was. "I don't know about much of anything at all, Tenoctris. Except sheep."

He grinned. He'd have given his quarterstaff a spin for the pleasure of it, except that the street was far too crowded. Seven feet of hickory take up a lot of room, especially when the hands of a youth as strong as Cashel were whirling them.

They passed a shop which sold new and used bedding: coarse wool covers to be stuffed with straw for folk with just enough money to sleep on a mattress rather than the rush floor; close-woven linen that their betters would fill with feathers; and blankets, coverlets, and bedcurtains to suit any taste or purse. Tenoctris didn't give the wares even a glance.

"Was the bowl what you were looking for?" Cashel asked. He was glad to escort Tenoctris through the city--though he didn't mind the palace, there wasn't anything for him to do there--but he was sure that the old wizard had more in mind than a change of scene for herself.

Tenoctris hadn't explained, probably because it hadn't crossed her mind to. Cashel was used to doing things simply because somebody asked him, but this seemed a good time to say something. He guessed he was about as curious as the next fellow, but he'd learned that a lot of times it was better to just keep his eyes open than to ask and be lied to--or be given a flip answer, the sort of joke people tossed at the dumb orphan kid.

Cashel's fingers tightened very slightly again. They hadn't laughed at him much since he got his growth, though.

"What?" said Tenoctris. It'd taken her mind a moment to come up from the depths of whatever mental sea it swam in. "Oh, dear, I don't think so, Cashel. But I'm not really sure. I did a guidance spell because there's something nagging at me, and it directed me here. I think."

She gave him an apologetic grin. "I'm not a very powerful wizard, you know," she said. "Even in times like these, when there's so much power everywhere."

Tenoctris had explained that every thousand years there was more of the sort of power that wizards used. In those times wizards could do far more than in the past, and generally far more than they'd intended. It was a peak like that which ended the Old Kingdom; and the forces were rising again.

Cashel and the wizard reached a building site from which the remains of the former brick and wattle structure had mostly been cleared. Though heavy construction wagons weren't allowed in Valles during daylight hours, the stacks of freshly-cut stone for the new foundation blocked part of the street.

Cashel paused, letting a group of housewives pass from the other direction with baskets full of greens bought in the produce market a little nearer the river. He could've pushed through the congestion easily enough, but he and Tenoctris weren't in any kind of hurry.

On the building site, men were already at work on the kiln which would provide lime for the cement; it was better to burn it here than to transport so dangerous a load through the city, with the chance of losing it to a sudden rainstorm besides. Piled as high as the quarried blocks was a load of broken limestone and marble to feed the kiln. Some of the bigger pieces had been ships' ballast at one time; those were dark and still slimy from bilge water.

The housewives passed; Tenoctris started forward, then stopped when she realized that Cashel was staring at the rubble. She said, "Cashel?"

Cashel's skin prickled, the same sort of feeling as when he got too much sun when plowing in early Spring. There was something about the stones.... Holding his staff out for balance in his left hand, he clambered onto the pile.

Several of the workmen glanced toward Cashel, but nobody shouted at him. He wasn't doing any harm by climbing around on a pile of rock, so only the urge of people to boss other people would've led them to speak. Cashel was too big for that to seem a good idea, even to a half-dozen burly workmen.

Tenoctris watched intently, but she didn't say anything that might have distracted Cashel from whatever he was doing. Cashel grinned. He didn't know what he was doing either, just that there was something about these chunks of stone that made his senses prick up. It was the way you could feel there was something wrong with your sheep, even before ewes ran out of the woods blatting because one of their sisters had managed to catch her neck in the fork of a sapling.

"Here!" Cashel said in triumph. He used his free hand and his staff's iron-shod tip to pry a piece of marble out of a litter of limestone gravel.

"Hey! What's that you're doing up there?" called the foreman of the building crew, a squat man of thirty with a bushy moustache and biceps that would've looked well on a man of twice the

size. The other workmen watched in interest, glad for an excuse to stop work and hopeful that there'd be more entertainment to come.

"I'm looking at your rock," Cashel said. The crew wouldn't own the building materials, but he guessed they'd still be willing to sell a chunk for the price of a round of ale. "This piece here."

He hefted it, noticing the foreman's eyes narrow. It was the torso of a statue, meant originally for a woman, Cashel guessed, though he couldn't swear to much in the shape the piece was now. The marble had weathered and worse, been buried in a forest where rotting leaves had blackened it and eaten at the surface during every rainstorm. In some places white foam had boiled from cancerous pits in the stone. A soaking in a ship's bilge had added final indignities.

Though the block was of no obvious interest--even to Cashel, except for the tingling it raised in him--it was still stone and weighed as much as a man of ordinary size. The foreman knew that and understood what it meant that Cashel held it easily in one hand.

"I want to buy it from you," Cashel said. "I'll pay you a, a...."

He didn't know what name a silver coin had. In Barca's Hamlet there was mostly bronze and little enough of that, except during the Sheep Fair when merchants and drovers came down the road from Carcosa. Ornifal used different coins; and though Cashel now carried a purseful of them on a cord around his neck, they weren't something he paid a lot of attention to.

"A silver piece!" he said, getting the idea out well enough. That'd buy a jar of wine that the whole crew could share at any of the open-fronted cookshops in this quarter of the city.

"For what?" cried a workman in amazement.

"Let's see his money," said another, slipping his masonry chisel into a pocket in his leather apron.

"What is it you want it for?" The foreman said, scowling like thunder. He was confused and because of that a little angry. He walked forward.

Instead of answering--because he didn't have an answer, just a feeling--Cashel said, "Tenocris, will you pay the man for me? I, ah...."

To pull out his purse and open it, Cashel would have to use both hands. He didn't want to let go of either his staff or the piece of statue until he'd gotten to a place where he had more friends than he did here.

"Yes, of course," Tenoctris said. She carried a small purse in the sleeve of her silk brocade robe. She squeezed a coin through the loosened ties, then held it up so that sunlight winked on the silver in the sight of all the workmen; then she gave it to the foreman.

"Deal?" said Cashel from his perch above the others.

"Deal, by the Lady!" said one of the workmen. "For that you can carry off the whole pile and we'll tell the boss the rats ate it."

The foreman rang the coin against the head of the hammer in his belt. It sang with the bright note of silver rather than something duller and leaden.

"Deal," he said, still a little doubtful. He spat in his palm and held it out to Tenoctris. She stared at the man blankly.

Cashel stepped down from the mound of rubble with the care required by bad footing and the weight he carried. "Shake his hand on the deal, Tenoctris," he said. "Ah, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course," said the old woman, nodding to Cashel in gratitude for having explained how you sealed a bargain. Nobles probably did it different. Tenoctris was of a noble house; though from what she'd said, in her lifetime they hadn't had money even by the standards of Barca's Hamlet. Still, she took the foreman's hand gracefully like an adult humoring a child and let him shake hers up and down.

Cashel cleared his throat. "Ah, Tenoctris?" he said. "I'd like to be getting back to the--"

Cashel's tongue stuck. He'd dressed this morning as he would have back in the borough, in woolen overtunic and undertunic. The garments were peasant's wear, though smartly cut and of the best quality--as they were bound to be, since his sister Ilna had woven and sewn the cloth. Nobody in the Isles, maybe nobody in all time, could do more with fabrics than Ilna could.

Tenoctris was in silk, but her robe was neither new nor stylish. The two of them would pass for a noblewoman fallen on hard times and the sort of rustic servant such a lady could afford. That was fine, but Cashel didn't want to use the word 'palace' here and cause all sorts of fuss and excitement.

"To go home, I mean," he said instead.

"Yes, of course," Tenoctris repeated. She turned, getting her bearings with a skill that a countryman like Cashel couldn't match in this warren of streets. "I think if we go..."

A few of the passersby had stopped to see what was going on. Cashel and Tenoctris weren't doing anything more exciting than hens did in a farmyard, but it was a little different from the usual. There were people in Valles--and everywhere Cashel had been in his life--who'd rather watch others work than do something themselves.

Through them came a clean-shaven heavy-set man, not a youth but still younger than his baldness made him appear. He wore a tunic of tightly woven wool, black with a stripe of bleached white slashing diagonally across the front. His face was set. He wasn't exactly angry, but he looked ready to snap into anger if something balked him.

"You there!" he said to the foreman. "Are you in charge? I want to buy this pile of stone. I'll pay--"

The workmen's eyes shifted from the newcomer to Cashel and Tenoctris. Cashel made a wry face, but he'd learned young that some days bad luck was the only kind of luck you were going to have.

Cashel squatted and set the block of stone between his bare feet rather than drop it on the cobblestones. Then he rose again, holding his staff with both hands and waiting for whatever might come next.

The newcomer's glance followed the workmen's; he looked at the piece of statue, then raised his eyes to Cashel's. "I believe you have some property of mine, my man," he said. His tone held a thin skin of politeness over fury. "I'll take it now, if you please."

"It's not yours," Cashel said. Tenoctris had stepped behind him, but he didn't know just where. He hoped she'd be clear if things started to happen, as they might. "I bought it, fair and more than fair."

"Yes, well," said the stranger, looking over Cashel appraisingly. He reached into the folds of his twisted silk sash. "I'll buy it from you, then."

"No," said Cashel, his voice husky. His hands were going to start trembling soon if he didn't do something, either spin the quarterstaff into the stranger's face or pick up the statue and run.

The stranger's hand came out of the sash with three broad, thin pieces of gold. He fanned them into the light between his thumb and two well-manicured fingers. "Look at this, my man," he said. "Yours for a bit of old stone."

"No," Cashel said. There was going to be trouble if Cashel didn't move away, but he couldn't leave the stone and he didn't want to be holding it if the stranger came at him with a knife.

Instead of attacking, the stranger swept the spread of coins under the foreman's nose. "Bring me the piece of marble," he said, pitching his voice so that all the workmen could hear, "and these are yours. Twice this, a gold piece for each man!"

The foreman scowled his forehead into even deeper ridges than before. The gangling, scarfaced workman beside him snatched a pole from the bundles of scaffolding and stepped forward. "Ansie, Blemm...", he called in a matter-of-fact voice. "All you guys. That's enough money to set us up for life."

"Right!" said the foreman, reaching for his hammer.

Cashel stepped forward, driving the tip of his quarterstaff into the foreman's gut. The fellow saw it coming and tried to jump back. He wasn't fast enough but the move may have saved his life. The iron-shod hickory flung him into the kiln, spewing his breakfast of bread sopped in wine lees, but it didn't punch through the muscle walls as it could've done if Cashel was really trying.

The stranger had ducked behind the stack of quarystone. Cashel ignored him and the shouting spectators both. It might be that a section of the City Watch would arrive, but Cashel doubted that. He sure wasn't trusting his safety and Tenoctris to that hope.

The workman with the pole swung at Cashel. The bamboo would've made a decent weapon if the fellow'd known what he was doing, but he didn't. Cashel blocked the stroke with the ferrule nearer his body, then spun the other end into the workman's side. He heard ribs crack.

Two of the men who'd been hesitating when things started to happen now backpedaled. Another had pulled out his chisel to use as a sword; he flung it as a dart instead. The heavy bronze tool caught Cashel on the right shoulder, a solid blow but not a dangerous one because the edge was sharpened to split rock rather than to shave wood.

Cashel grunted with anger and stepped forward, recovering the staff so that both his hands gripped the wood at the balance. The workman squealed and dodged behind the partner who held a heavy maul up in the air like a torch.

The fellow with the maul couldn't have been more open to a stroke from the quarterstaff if he'd turned his back and begged to be hit. Didn't anybody in Valles know how to fight? Cashel rapped him where he gripped the helve, breaking fingers on both hands and flinging the maul into a cart hard enough to tip it over.

Cashel kicked the screaming man he'd just crippled out of the way and went after the fellow who'd thrown the chisel at him. That one was scrambling off by now. Most times Cashel would've left him be; but his shoulder throbbed, and he knew that except for the bulges of muscle there he'd have had a broken collarbone.

The workman tripped on his leather apron and skidded into the stack of scaffolding. Cashel raised his staff for a straight-arm thrust that would've been fatal--then grimaced and instead gripped the apron's neck loop with his right hand to jerk the fellow upright.

"You like to throw things, do you?" Cashel bellowed. The workman's eyes were screwed shut: he couldn't change whatever was coming, but he didn't have to watch it.

Cashel straightened his arm and put his shoulders in it too, hurling the fellow over the basement excavation to slide through debris at the back of the lot. The man's arms and legs were moving before his body came to a halt. He hopped over a mound of dirt saved for backfill and continued running.

There was a blue flash from the other side of the pile of quarystone. The stranger who'd started the trouble sprang into view with a shriek. His robe was on fire. Instead of the grudging, half-hearted flames Cashel expected from wool, these were vivid and tinged with the same blue as the flash: wizardlight.

The stranger bolted down the street, tugging his garments off as he ran. Spectators lurched out of his way, pushing a path violently through their fellows the way they'd have done to escape a runaway horse--

Or maybe more violently yet. Wizardry scared lots of people worse than death did.

Tenoctris stood alone at the edge of the street, swaying and so weak she was about to fall over. Cashel, gasping with his own efforts, stumbled to his older friend and put his arm around her. His shoulder hurt as bad as it had the day Scolla's ill-tempered lead ox had flung its head around while Cashel was trying to yoke it.

"Are you all right, Tenoctris?" Cashel asked, speaking the words between one deep breath and the next. "You did a spell to send the fellow off, is that it?"

He'd split the back of his undertunic when his shoulders bunched; it looked like he'd broken his sash too. Well, it hadn't been a proper bout where he'd have had time to get ready.

"I interfered with his own spell," Tenoctris said, panting like a snared rabbit. Cashel had seen before now the wonders that wizards could do; but it took real effort to guide their powers, as sure as it did to use a quarterstaff the way Cashel used one.

Still clinging to Cashel's arm, Tenoctris hobbled around the stack of squared blocks. Spectators kneeling in the dirt there scattered like startled quail, looking over their shoulders at the old woman. Cashel guessed that the stranger had dropped the gold he'd offered. People in

this district weren't going to let a gold coin go to waste, no matter how much wizards frightened them.

Tenoctris pointed to symbols drawn on the ground where the stranger had been hiding. "He was going to send dust into your eyes, Cashel," she said. "I just opened his circle of protection before he'd directed the stroke."

Cashel felt a surge of warmth for the old wizard. Tenoctris was quick to say that she had very little power; but she knew things, knew what she was doing and generally knew what other wizards were doing better than they did. Cashel trusted Tenoctris the way he trusted his own ability to put an axe into a tree trunk where he meant it to go.

Strength was fine, but control was a better thing if you had to have only one.

"What's this made of, do you suppose?" Tenoctris said in surprise. She bent closer to the greenish-yellow rod lying beside the symbol the stranger had drawn with it. It was his athame, abandoned like the coins when he fled--and to a wizard, far more valuable than that gold. "It looks like the shell of an insect. A very large insect."

Cashel reached toward it with a bare toe. He could see the blurred texture of the soil through the athame, as though it was a sheet of mica.

"No, I don't think we'd better touch it," Tenoctris said, moving her slippered foot to block Cashel's. She scuffed the athame sideways, onto the cobblestones. "The wagons tonight will grind it to powder; I suspect that's the best choice. And I'll burn this slipper when we've gotten home."

"Let's be doing that now," Cashel said, looking behind him for the chunk of statue he'd forgotten during the fight. Quite a fool he'd feel if somebody'd made off with it... but they hadn't, nobody would. It was an ugly, awkward piece of stone whose only use was for burning into the living white fire of quicklime; but it was Cashel's piece now for sure.

"Will you be able to carry it yourself?" Tenoctris asked. "I mean, you must be tired from...?"

Cashel grinned. "Guess I'll manage," he said as he lifted the block, using his knees instead of his back for leverage. "The harder thing's going to be figuring out what to do with it now that I've got it, but maybe Sharina will have an idea."

And because he was thinking of Sharina, he grinned even broader.

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Ilna os-Kenset's fingers wove with a speed and skill that any woman on the island of Ornifal would have envied, but her mind wasn't on her work. In this fine weather she'd set her loom in the bungalow's courtyard, walled off from the rest of the palace. Bees buzzed about the flowers; birds chirped and pecked and fluttered for food among the plantings. Ilna didn't pay them much attention either, except to note that they were just as quarrelsome and snappish as they'd been back in Barca's Hamlet.

Not long ago Ilna had been the orphan girl who supported herself and her brother Cashel by skill and by working so hard even by the standards of a rural village that everyone marveled at her. She was a woman that everybody respected and nobody liked; nobody, or very few.

Sharina had liked her, even then; and she thought Garric liked her as well.

Ilna's fingers moved: opening the shed, feeding through the shuttle, and closing the shed again with the certainty of water pouring through the spillway of the ancient tidemill that had been her grandfather's. The pattern of the cloth she wove suggested a woodland at sunset, all buffs and browns and blacks shading into one another.

Today Ilna worked in naturally colored wools, her usual choice. She could have used silk, coarse hemp, or hard-drawn copper wire, and had the same effect on those who viewed the fabric. She'd always been a skilled weaver; since she returned from Hell, her skill had become inhuman.

Her fingers wove. She'd paid with her soul for the power to rule others in the way that evil would have her rule them. She'd been freed from the evil that came from outside her, but Ilna knew her heart well enough to be sure that the home-grown variety was sufficient to ruin more lives than even a city the size of Valles held.

If she let it; which she would not.

The garden was peaceful but not silent. At the quarter hour, criers called the time across the palace compound from the waterclock near the center. Occasionally servants laughed and chattered as they passed along the path on the other side of the back wall, and in the bungalow's atrium a music mistress was giving Lady Merota bos-Roriman her voice lesson.

The child--Merota was nine--had a clear voice and an instinct for craftsmanship. Ilna found her lessons as pleasant as a wren's warble, even when they involved nothing but repetitions of the scales.

Ilna was weaving a thin baize, almost a gauze. Even in its partial state it gave anyone who viewed it a sense of peace and tranquility. If Ilna wished--and once she had wished, had *done*--the same threads could have roused those who saw them to lust or fear or fury. The patterns of the cloth, the patterns of a man's life--the pattern of the cosmos itself--all were connected.

Anything Ilna wanted was hers for the taking. Anything at all; and she smiled with wry self-disgust because she didn't *know* what she wanted.

Once not so very long ago she'd wanted to be the wife of Garric, the innkeeper's son. He was Prince Garric now, but so great was Ilna's power that she could have him nonetheless.

The shuttle clattered across the loom; Ilna's smile grew harder still. She'd done things in the past that she'd be paying for throughout the future, no matter how long she lived; but she hadn't done *that* thing, and today she wasn't even sure she still wanted to.

Ilna os-Kenset, the orphan who couldn't read or write, didn't belong on a throne beside the King of the Isles; nor did Garric belong in a little place like Barca's Hamlet, for all that he'd been raised there with no reason to expect he'd ever travel farther than Carcosa on the other side of Haft. Garric was fit to be king, and a noblewoman like Liane bos-Benliman was a fit companion for him. As for Ilna--

Merota began *Once There Was a Servant Girl*--a song Ilina had heard before, but not from the child, and certainly not at the request of Lady Stolla, the music mistress. Ilina smiled, this time with a gentler sort of humor.

*"Early one evening a sailor came to me,"* Merota sang, *"and that was the start of all my misery."*

Chalcus had a tenor voice every bit as fine as Merota's high soprano. He was a sailor when Ilina and the child met him, as skilled at that trade as any soul else on the ship--though Chalcus would've been the first to say it was no honor to be first among that crew of thumb-fingered nobodies.

*"At sea without a woman for forty months or more...."* Merota sang.

"Lady Merota!" cried Lady Stolla, a decayed gentlewoman; as prim as she was proper, and clearly horrified to realize the thrust of the child's performance.

*"There wasn't any need to ask..."* Merota continued. Her birth was better than Stolla's as those who cared about such things judged it, and she wasn't about to let the older woman decide for her what a lady might choose to sing.

*"... what he was looking for!"*

Ilina sniffed. She was Merota's legal guardian now--one orphan caring for another. Despite that, Stolla persisted in treating Ilina as a jumped-up governess or perhaps a maid; and if the music mistress chose to be embarrassed, well, Ilina wouldn't pretend to be sorry about that.

Her face grew harder. Ilina wouldn't *pretend* to anything.

Instead of going on with the next verse, Merota squealed cheerfully and cried, "Chalcus!"

"And how's one of the two most lovely ladies in all Valles?" replied the cheerful, lilting voice of the man who must just have arrived at the bungalow.

Ilina rose from her loom and went to greet her visitor: a man of middle height with a broad chest and muscles that appeared flat until effort made them bunch. There was generally a smile on Chalcus' lips, the curve of it echoing that of the inward-sharpened sword thrust through his sash.

Ilna herself smiled less often than Chalcus did, at least as an expression of good humor; but she was smiling now.

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Princess Sharina of Haft spent most of her public life wearing the formal garb of an Ornifal aristocrat while receiving deputations from the provinces in place of her brother Garric. Thanks be to the Lady, there was no need of such rigid, stifling state at this meeting of the royal council--the real, working government of the kingdom.

Having said that, the dozen or so heads of the civil and military departments were all aristocrats. In Barca's Hamlet, casual dress meant an undertunic alone--worn without a sash on a summer day like this. Here the civilian councillors wore court robes of silk brocade with a sash, while their military colleagues replaced the sash with a sword belt bearing an empty scabbard. The Blood Eagles didn't allow anyone but themselves to enter Garric's presence armed, and the chief of the Blood Eagles--Attaper bor-Atilan--accepted the limitation himself to avoid friction with Lord Waldron, the equally high-born head of the army.

Sharina stifled a wan smile. To avoid worse friction, rather; Waldron, thirty years Attaper's senior, believed in his heart that he himself should be king. He was at best on stiff terms with Attaper, who didn't bother to put a diplomatic gloss on his disagreement with that opinion.

"There's more to this 'Confederacy of the West' than hick rulers on Haft, Cordin and Tisamur deciding they want to secede from the kingdom," said Chancellor Royhas, seated at Garric's right hand.

"Begging your pardon sir and lady--" Royhas nodded to Garric and Sharina, a cursory apology for the implied slur against the island of their birth "--but all the force of those islands isn't enough to delay the royal army any longer than it takes to sail there."

"They've got more force," said Attaper forcefully. "They're hiring mercenaries. We knew that even before this latest spy came back with the numbers."

"They still couldn't stand against us," Waldron snapped, though it didn't seem to Sharina that Attaper had suggested otherwise.

"And that's why I say there's more to it than just these three islands!" Royhas said. "Why, they scarcely know they're part of the kingdom as it is. When's the last time enough taxes came out of Carcosa to pay the salary of an underclerk here in Valles?"

"They may be concerned about the future," said Lord Tadaï. "We--by which I mean Prince Garric--have given Ornifal a real government for the first time in generations. They may realize that in time, we--"

The plump, wealthy nobleman had been royal treasurer until his rivalry with Royhas meant one or the other had to go for the sake of the kingdom. He'd accepted his removal with the good grace of a patriot and a man of great intelligence, but no one would deny him a seat on the council so long as he remained in Valles.

He nodded to Garric in smiling--but real--homage.

"--will unify the whole kingdom again, and they'll no longer be able to apply their own notions of justice and tax policy."

"Count Lascarg never thought beyond trying to keep Carcosa quiet and spending the revenues of the estates that he took over when the previous rulers of Haft died," Garric said with harsh assurance. "Died in riots it was his duty to put down as commander of the Household Troops. *His* foresight isn't behind this secession."

Sharina nodded, in agreement and in understanding for her brother's bitterness. The parents who raised them, Reise and Lora, had served the former Count and Countess of Haft until the night of the fatal riots; that much she and Garric had known since childhood. Only during the disruptions of the past months had they learned the other half of the story: that Count Niard was Sharina's father, and that Garric was the child born to Countess Tera, who traced her ancestry back to King Carus and the royal line of the Old Kingdom.

Niard had been an Ornifal noble, which explained for the first time Sharina's blonde hair and slender height. She'd always felt something of an outsider among the darker, stockier folk of Barca's Hamlet, but she'd still been shocked to learn the truth.

"They're getting money from outside," said Attaper, leaning forward with his hands clasped before him on the burl walnut tabletop. "The wages of the mercenaries gathering on Tisamur run to more than the revenues of all three rulers combined. And the troops *are* being paid--they're not staying on in hope of future loot."

"The Earl of Sandrakkan's behind it!" said Lord Waldron. "That's the only place the money could come from. Earl Wildulf doesn't dare face us directly, so he's setting up this confederacy as a stalking horse to see what we'll do!"

Waldron was an active, passionate man who was rarely comfortable sitting down. Now he rose so abruptly that his chair clattered over behind him. Normally a servant waited behind a seated noble, but Garric--though in truth Liane, Sharina suspected--had instituted a policy of greater privacy during discussions of such moment.

The noise startled everybody, even Waldron, who grimaced and tried to pick the chair up. He got the legs tangled in the robe of Lady Vartola, Priestess of the Temple of the Lady of Succor and today representing religious interests before the council.

Sharina sprang to her feet and stepped around Vartola. Waldron was about to fling the chair into the paneled wall in fury. She took it from him. With the skill of one who'd been serving in an inn before she could read, Sharina set the chair upright again and gestured Waldron into it. The old warrior obeyed, his hard face maroon with embarrassment.

Sharina sat down also. She kept from smiling, but only with difficulty.

"I believe Lord Waldron has the right idea," said Pterlion bor-Palial, the new treasurer, "but he's wrong about the source. The money's coming from Blaise, not Sandrakkan."

He stopped, waiting with a smug smile to be asked why he was sure. The treasurer was a clever man, but rather too fond of *showing* how clever he was instead of just getting on with the job.

"Explain," said Garric, his sharpness wiping the satisfaction from Pterlion's face. "And in the future, Lord Pterlion, please recall that there are no fools at these council meetings--and no time for foolishness either."

"That would be a good idea," said Lord Waldron, glowering as though he'd prefer to rip the treasurer's throat out with his teeth instead of using a sword on the fellow. "A very good idea."

Pterlion grinned in embarrassment. "Yes, ah, Prince Garric," he said. "Ah. There are two items of evidence. Merchants coming from Cordin and particularly Tisamur are paying their port duties in Blaise coinage, much of it fresh-minted--and I might add, with more lead than silver in the bullion. Whereas reports from Blaise itself indicate that trade is suffering because of a lack of currency on the island. Lerdoc, Count of Blaise, is behind this secession."

"I never thought Wildulf had the sophistication to mount a plan like this," Tadaï agreed, tenting his fingers before him. "Successfully, at any rate."

"They haven't succeeded," said Garric. "They won't succeed. And thank you, Lord Pterlion. Knowing where the trouble started will make it easier to end it."

"I want to know about this Moon Wisdom you mentioned," Lady Vartola said in a rasping wheeze. She was the color of old bone and so thin that Sharina wondered if she had a wasting disease. There was nothing wrong with Vartola's mind, however, save that she focused it wholly on the betterment of her temple rather than the common good of the kingdom. "Are they usurping ownership of temple property?"

Garric glanced over his shoulder. Liane's formal position was amanuensis to Prince Garric, so she wasn't qualified to sit at the council table proper. Instead she waited at Garric's right elbow, her lap desk open and her fingers ready to withdraw whichever scroll or codex might be required.

"We don't have direct information on that as yet," Liane said without bothering to consult the records this time. "The evidence suggests that may be the case."

Sharina's mind ticked back over a file of appointments already in her schedule for the next two weeks. For the most part they involved providing a high-ranking ear to which aggrieved citizens could complain: salt merchants protesting the new tariff on their product, the clothmakers guild demanding higher tariffs on silk from Seres, and a thousand variations on the theme of what the government was doing wrong.

Occasionally there was an exception. For example--

"An assistant inspector of temple lands has returned recently from Tisamur," Sharina said, loudly enough to cut through Admiral Zettin's question about the confederacy's naval forces. When everyone was looking at her she continued, "He's been demanding an audience with Prince Garric--"

Royhas snorted angrily at such presumption in a junior member of a department tangentially under his direction.

"--and gathered enough support from his superiors to be shunted to me, whenever I manage to get around to him," she continued. "I'll see him this afternoon."

A thought struck her. She added, "Unless you *would* like to see him yourself, Garric?"

He looked at Liane who gave a tiny shake of her head. "No," Garric said. "But I will want to know what you learn, Sharina. This Moon Wisdom may be more than--"

He glanced at the priestess. "Than a scheme by opportunists to defraud the temple of its proper revenues," he concluded. Only the slightest hesitation suggested that he'd intended to say something a little different from the words that actually came out.

Garric stood, ending the meeting. "Lords Waldron, Attaper, and Zettin," he said. "I'll need a report on the current readiness of the forces you command. By the end of the day, if you please."

He turned his eyes to the Chancellor. In the same tone of command, so different from anything Sharina had heard from her brother's lips during the years they grew up together on Haft, he continued, "Lord Royhas, I want all the information we have on the property and perquisites of the individual rulers of this confederacy. I realize that--"

Someone nearby shrieked like a hog nose-clamped for slaughter.

"What's that?" bellowed someone else, a guard because during the meeting nobody else was permitted near this building and the smaller one adjacent where her brother had interviewed a spy. "What's the matter in there!"

Garric was the first to the door and out it, drawing the sword that he alone wore in the council. Attaper and Waldron had the same instinct to run toward trouble, but Garric was younger and already standing.

*Another scream....* Sharina followed Attaper, leaping over the chair Garric had flung aside as he moved. Waldron was at the other end of the room, fighting his way through civilians who'd risen also but weren't as quick to learn for themselves what was causing such terror.

The pair of Blood Eagles posted at the door of the smaller conference room were banging their fists on it, apparently trying to get the attention of the man inside. He had other things on his mind, to the degree that fear let him think at all.

"Break it down!" Garric shouted. Before the guards could act, he slammed his own right bootheel into the latchplate. Sharina knew her brother wasn't Cashel for strength, but nobody who'd seen Garric lift free a bogged ewe would doubt he was a powerful man by most standards.

The bronze catch inside flew out of its staples. Garric rebounded from the impact, so the guards burst into the room ahead of him.

The spy, his face contorted, was wrestling with nothing at all. And yet there must be *something*, because both the man's feet were off the floor....

A Blood Eagle thrust his spear past the spy's ear; the steel point met only air. His partner dropped his weapon and tried to grapple with the screaming man.

The spy vanished with a sort of twisting motion, like the last of the foam being slung from the rim of a wash basin. There was an odd odor; it reminded Sharina of the way a stone might smell in the dead of winter.

For a moment she thought she could still hear the screams; then they too vanished.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Swing me on your arm again, Chalcus!" Merota demanded. "I want to go all the way over this time!"

Ilna didn't let her face react. In the sailor's presence the girl was sometimes either younger than her nine years or very much more mature.

"And so we shall," said Chalcus, glancing up at the square funnel that slanted rainwater from the roof into the pool here in the center of the entrance hall. "In the garden, though, for you're growing to such a fine woman that I fear your heels would smudge the ceiling."

He gestured the women ahead of him and out the south doorway, adding a little bow to Ilna. "And then," he continued in the same cheerful lilt, "you'll go back to your room and the lessons I've no doubt your tutors have set you. Mistress Ilna and I will speak alone after that."

They stepped past the loom, covered for the moment. In Chalcus' company, Ilna took in the colors and sounds of the brick-walled court, the richness that she generally ignored because it had nothing to do with her work.

Five generations in the past, Duke Valgard of Ornifal ruled the neighboring islands outright and claimed with as much justice as any other could to be King of the Isles. Valles was the kingdom's greatest metropolis then, while the palace compound housed thousands and was a city in its own right.

Those times were over, but workmen were restoring the buildings and grounds at the same rapid tempo as Garric rebuilt the government itself. The bungalow Ilna shared with Cashel and now Merota was meant for a senior gardener. It was a detached structure rather than part of a barracks housing the families of twenty clerks or servants, but it was neither spacious nor expensively decorated.

Ilna had chosen the residence herself, mostly for the garden courtyard that gave her good light on clear days. Even that was a needless luxury: *she* could weave in the dark with perfect assurance. The chamberlain--he'd been replaced since then--had tried to insist that someone of Lady Ilna's stature *must* have more luxurious accommodations.

Ilna's expression at the memory could have cut glass. There were many things that Ilna os-Kenset felt she must do, but none of those duties were imposed by others.

Chalcus extended his left arm, bare except for its scars. He wore as usual only a single short-sleeved tunic. Because he was in money, the present garment was of linen dyed with first-

pressing indigo. The hem and sleeves were embroidered in gold thread, and the sash was of fine black silk.

He wore it with a swagger; but then, Chalcus did everything with a swagger.

Merota gripped the sailor's thick wrist and the forearm. She jumped and Chalcus added a little toss, giving the girl the boost she needed to go over, shrilling delight as her tunics flapped like flags in a storm.

"Why do you always swing her with your left arm, Master Chalcus?" Ilna asked suddenly. He'd said he was here to have a private interview with her. One result of the discussion could be that they'd never see each other again.

"Swing me again, Chalcus!" Merota said.

Chalcus hugged the child to his left side, but it was Ilna he faced with a broad grin.

"Indeed, what would happen if some ill-wisher sprang from the lemon balm there--"

He nodded to the bed of herbs with tiny white flowers. None of the stems were as tall as Ilna's knee.

"--and my swordarm was all tangled with a lovely woman, eh?"

Chalcus wasn't wearing a sword, and the short curved dagger thrust through his sash was no bigger than the knife every man in a rural village carried for routine tasks. The steel of the blade, however, was as incomparably better than that of knives forged by travelling blacksmiths as Chalcus himself was superior to the common run of sailors.

"Then you'd kill him with your left hand!" Merota said, giggling.

Chalcus looked down at her. "Aye, perhaps I would at that, child," he said. "Now leave us, if you will."

Instead of arguing as Ilna had half expected the girl would do--expected until she heard the tone Chalcus used this time--Merota said, "Yes, Chalcus."

She turned and curtsied to Ilna. "Mistress Ilna," she said, then reentered the bungalow at a swift but ladylike pace.

Chalcus bent away from Ilina as though to smell the purple-tendrilled mint along the east wall. "I've been thinking over where I might go next, mistress," he said. "There's little use for my sort in a place like Valles, you know."

He turned and smiled at her. "You've a fine crop of herbs growing here," he added in the same negligent tone. "Those who you cook for are lucky folk indeed."

Ilina allowed no servants in the bungalow, though with the child's tutors traipsing in and out there was work enough to keep the place in proper order. Ilina hadn't met the cook or maid yet who performed to her standards; and in truth, even if such a paragon appeared, Ilina wouldn't want to share *her* dwelling with a servant.

"The garden's well enough," Ilina said. "If I were to stay here, I'd want a dovecote, though. I've never liked chickens running around my ankles."

What did Chalcus expect her to say? *Her!* Did he think Ilina os-Kenset would beg?

Instead of speaking, Chalcus took out his dagger and spun it from hand to hand. He caught it each time by the point, then spun it back.

"I wonder, mistress...", he said as though to the shimmering steel. The blade was slightly curved and sharp for a finger's length along the reverse edge. "If you were on a ship about to sink, would you save the tall man... or the short man...."

There was a rhythm to the blade, as crisp and regular as the dance of Ilina's shuttle across her loom. She found she was holding her breath; she grimaced angrily.

"... perhaps a middle-sized man like myself?"

The dagger slipped back into its scabbard as surely as water finds the drain hole. Chalcus met her gaze. His lips smiled, but his eyes did not.

"I don't like ships, Master Chalcus," she said, chipping her words out like hatchetstrokes. "The last time I was aboard one, there was a crew of a hundred but only one *man*: you yourself, as you well know."

Ilina turned away, wishing she believed enough in the Gods that she could curse and not feel she was being a hypocrite. "Master Chalcus," she said to the man behind her, "I regret to say that I don't know my own mind. Or perhaps I do, and I don't have the courage to act on it."

"Ah," said Chalcus, an acknowledgment in a tone stripped of all implication. "Well, mistress, I haven't met the person whose courage I'd trust further than I would your own. We'll talk again before we act, either of us."

Ilina spun to face him. "Chalcus," she said, "there are things I've done--"

"Aye!" he said, the barked syllable breaking off her confession. "And I have done things as well, mistress. But we won't have that conversation ever, you and I, for we each already know the truth the other knows. Now, go to your loom and settle your mind--"

*He did know her; not that Ilina had doubted that before.*

"--while I chat with your guards and perhaps open a jar of wine. In a while we'll talk about what we will do, leaving the past to take care of itself. Eh?"

Chalcus smiled; and he kissed her, which no one before in this life had done, and he swaggered back into the house calling to the pair of Blood Eagles at the entrance. Chalcus the sailor; Chalcus the pirate and bloody-handed killer.

Ilina swept the cover from her loom and resumed her work, pouring her soul into the pattern her fingers wove.

Chalcus the man.

Ilina's fingers played the threads without her conscious consideration while her mind grappled with questions that were beyond any human's certain grasp. A spindle of rich brown yarn was nearly empty. She replaced it with a full spindle, and as she did her eyes glanced over the fabric she'd woven.

To another it was merely a pattern of subtle hues and textures, an image that made the person who viewed it a little calmer, a little more happy. What Ilina saw in the muted shades....

She slid from her stool and strode into the bungalow's central hall. She heard the sailor from the porch beyond, his voice lilting a complex joke to the pair of guards on duty. Even at this moment Ilna found herself hoping that Merota wasn't listening in also.

"Chalcus!" she called. "Garric will be in the water garden. We've got to warn him. Now!"

She swept out the front door. The Blood Eagles stiffened to attention; Chalcus by contrast looked as supple as the long silken cord around Ilna's waist, a sash for now and a noose at need.

Ilna wasn't much of a runner, but she broke into a trot. This *accursed* palace was bigger than the whole of Barca's Hamlet, and she didn't know the terrain nearly as well.

Chalcus was just as quick and agile on dry land as on shipboard. He swung along beside her. The only sign that he too felt the tension was the way his left hand reached down to steady the curved sword that he wasn't wearing at the moment.

Chalcus didn't ask what the danger was, only grinned at her as they ran through a tunnel of pleached ironwoods. Maybe he didn't care.

What Ilna saw in her fabric was Garric frozen in a cavern. Around him, holding him so there was no escape, were the eight legs of a huge female spider.

And her mandibles were poised to suck Garric's life out.

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"A quarter past the seventh hour!" said the crier standing like a colorful statue on his podium beside the flagstoned pathway. As Sharina waited for Garric, she glanced through the columns of the pergola toward the call. The servant turned his eyes aside so that he wouldn't seem to be spying on Prince Garric and his companions even though it was his job to call the time in their direction.

On hot days Garric often worked in this corner of the compound with its tall hedges and fountains. Now he bent over the table, signing short parchment documents one at a time as Liane put them before him. A gaggle of aides and runners waited against need just outside the pergola, and a dozen Blood Eagles stood just beyond.

Half the guards were turned outward, watching for threats which might lurk among the structures and plantings; the other six kept their eyes on those inside the pergola. Sharina smiled sadly. It wouldn't occur to Garric to worry that his sister might try to assassinate him; it wouldn't occur to a Blood Eagle not to worry.

Fountains on each of three superimposed terraces splashed and gurgled as they fed a stream running in a channel of cut stone. The landscaping was as old as the palace compound, but recent repairs meant that some blocks of the soft volcanic rock were clean though most wore beards of moss that wobbled in the gentle current.

An ascetic-looking man in sea-green silk knelt on the other side of the streamhead, apparently in prayer. He was a stranger to Sharina but from his dress not a servant.

Garric finished the last of the patents and looked up; his eyes followed Sharina's. "That's the ruler of Laut," he said. "My next meeting." He shook his head in frustrated wonder. "I'm supposed to be talking to him now."

"Echeus, the Intercessor of Laut," said Liane, amplifying Garric's statement rather than correcting him. She filed the sheaf of completed documents and closed her little desk. "I'll ready the next group for your signature while you're with Echeus; those will be the judicial appointments for the three Ataras."

"Garric, if this isn't a good time--" Sharina said, a little irritated despite herself. She knew the demands on her brother's time, but the only reason she was here now was that he'd said he wanted to hear about Moon Wisdom as soon as possible.

Her brother raised his hands. "Sharina, without the weight you take off me, and the organization Liane provides...", he said. He covered Liane's hand on the table; she turned it palm up and squeezed back fiercely.

"Without those things," Garric went on, "the kingdom could better run itself than be in the muddle I'd make of it. I don't mean to complain about the part of the job that's left for me."

He nodded, putting an end to the apology. "Now," he said crisply, fully King of the Isles in tone and manner, "tell me about Tisamur and Moon Wisdom."

"The Inspector of Temple Lands has only three Assessors under him...," Sharina said. She'd taken notes during the interview, but she didn't need to look at them. "For some reason he decided to send one to Tisamur."

"His wife has property there," Liane murmured. "Well, perhaps that's fortunate."

"I talked to the Assessor, Kidwal bos-Kidrian," Sharina said. "I believe she's a trustworthy witness."

Kidwal was a young woman from the minor nobility; smart, well-educated, and very plain. It'd seemed to Sharina that the barely-suppressed anger in Kidwal's presentation was more a reaction to life in general than at her difficulty in getting anybody to take action on her present report.

"She says that the regular temples on Tisamur, at least those within several days' journey from Donelle--" the island's capital "--are either deserted or 've been surrendered to Moon Wisdom. Most of the priests and temple functionaries have joined the new cult, though a few have gone into lay businesses or are living on their personal wealth."

"Moon Wisdom confiscated temple *lands*?" Garric said, frowning. "Is the... who is the ruler, a count? Is he behind this?"

"A Council of Elders governs Tisamur," Liane said. She touched her desk but didn't need to open it to withdraw a reference. "Wealthy individuals; all of them landholders, though many depend on trade for most of their income."

"Moon Wisdom is the government now," Sharina said. "It's not imposed by force, it seems to be what people want. Lady Kidwal says she wasn't attacked even though she'd arrived openly without concealing her, well, duties. But those she questioned were derisive."

Sharina paused to recall the assessor's precise wording, letting her eyes follow the barn swallows darting above the water. She could see several mud nests plastered to the underside of the three-arched bridge crossing the artificial stream. Most of the meandering channel was narrow enough to step across, but the architect had provided a lotus-fringed pool so that the bridge didn't look absurd.

"She said," Sharina continued, "that one former Elder told her, 'Whoever saw the Lady, except as a statue being pulled by purse-snatchers in priestly robes? But I've seen *our* Gods and so have many others.' And everyone listening nodded agreement."

"Did he say what these Gods looked like?" Garric asked, pressing the knuckles of his fists together. Liane looked particularly intent also. Sharina guessed they'd learned more from the vanished Hordred than they'd had time to pass on to her.

"No," Sharina said. "Kidwal asked a number of citizens, in Donelle and also outside the city. That was the only question that seemed to disturb them."

Sharina cleared her throat. "There's one thing more," she said. "Kidwal was permitted to go where she pleased--not into the temple during services, but apart from that. She could talk to anyone, and she doesn't think she was watched or followed. She says very clearly that she wasn't threatened in any way."

"Go on," Garric said. His expression was still but not calm. When Garric was in this--mood? But it was more than a mood--he seemed less like the brother she'd grown up with than he did a great cat, waiting for prey to come a few steps closer.

"Despite all that," Sharina said, "Lady Kidwal was frightened. Frightened enough to convince her chief to get her an appointment with me."

She swallowed. "Frightened enough to frighten me, Garric," she concluded.

Garric stood and braced his hands against one of the cross-beams supporting the pergola's roof. He bunched the muscles of his shoulders and thighs, straining upward to work the stiffness out of them. Echeus, waiting across the stream, turned toward the group in the pergola for the first time. He didn't get to his feet yet.

"Hordred frightened me as well, Sharina," Garric said. He grinned wryly at her. "That was before we saw him disappear."

He turned his head and added, "Liane, can this Intercessor wait while I talk to Lady Kidwal myself?"

"I'll meet with him if you like, Garric," Sharina offered. "If it's just a formal audience, that is. But I really don't believe that Kidwal knows any more than she told me and I've passed on to you. It's what she feels that's important, and she can't give a reason for that."

"There are reports from Laut that something... odd is going on there also," Liane said. "The Intercessor's coming to see you could be an opportunity to learn what he wants, if not necessarily what he plans."

Sharina's eyes narrowed very slightly. Liane was too polite to give Garric a direct order, but she was ordering him nonetheless. Still, it was for his good and the kingdom's, of that Sharina was sure.

"All right," Garric said. He hitched up his swordbelt so that the heavy weapon rode more comfortably. "I'll talk to Echeus."

Echeus rose also, tossing a glitter of powder into the stream before he started toward Garric. The men would meet in the middle of the bridge unless one stopped for the other to join him.

Two guards tried to precede Garric; he gestured them back with a curt command. The under-captain in charge of the detachment eyed the Intercessor's aged dignity. He frowned, but he didn't argue the issue of safety with his sovereign.

Movement from the side drew Sharina's attention. Escorted by another group of Blood Eagles, Tenoctris and Cashel were returning from their foray into the city.

Cashel waved his quarterstaff in greeting. On his left shoulder he carried a lump of stone. From the way his ripped tunics fluttered loose, he'd been to considerable effort getting it.

Sharina smiled as she walked out of the pergola to meet her friends. Cashel's presence was a wall of security. For the first time since she'd seen Hordred vanish screaming, Sharina felt safe.

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Dragonflies and swallows whizzed over the sluggish stream, but they didn't get all the insects. When Garric stepped from sunlight into the shade cast by poplars near the water, a mosquito keened close to left ear. He swatted, hoping to drive it away if not kill it.

In Garric's mind, King Carus chuckled and said, "*There's more honesty in blackflies than in courtiers, lad. The bugs are just as quick to suck the blood of a shepherd as a prince.*"

Garric smiled. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine that he was herding sheep near the marshes fringing Pattern Creek. Mosquito bites weren't something he'd ever have thought would make him feel nostalgic.

The Intercessor came from the other direction at a stately pace. Garric frowned, wondering who Echeus interceded with. Probably he interceded *for* the people of Laut or at least claimed to do so.

Reise had given his children a classical education which couldn't have been bettered by one of the academies in Valles or Erdin on Sandrakkan. Unlike Liane, however, who *had* attended one of those academies, Garric and Sharina knew little more about current events than did any other peasant from Haft.

Garric smiled again. His education taught him that 'prince' meant 'first'. It was an honest claim, if not an humble one.

Again Carus guffawed. "*Princes don't have to be humble,*" he said, hooking his thumbs in his swordbelt and flaring his fingers. Carus was such a vibrant presence in Garric's mind that Garric had to keep reminding himself that others didn't see the ancient monarch--who had drowned a thousand years in the past.

The hump of the arching bridge hid Echeus from Garric when they were on the opposite approaches, though both men were tall. Garric looked over his shoulder. His detachment of Blood Eagles followed at a respectful distance. In the pergola, Liane and Sharina greeted Tenoctris and Cashel. They were looking at a rock--a small boulder--on the table. Whatever had Tenoctris found this time?

Echeus rose into view, step by step. He was an imposing figure: spare rather than powerful, but surrounded with an aura of enormous dignity. Garric had the impression of a person whose time scale was that of an oak, or possibly of the crag of a mountain.

"Lord Echeus?" he said when they were within a double-pace, right toe to right toe, of one another.

Echeus stopped and bowed slightly. "Thank you for meeting me, Prince Garric," he said in a thin, hoarse voice.

Unexpectedly Echeus turned and looked over the bridge coping. "What is that in the water, do you suppose?" he said.

Garric peered into the pool. A few leaves rotated slowly on the surface; at one stone edge glistened a mass of frog eggs. In the water directly under the central arch on which Garric stood--

For a moment, Garric thought he saw his reflection and that of the bridge he stood on. The reflected stonework was covered with lush, broad-leafed vegetation like nothing that grew on Ornifal, though, and the figure looking at him from the pool was--

*"Get back!"* King Carus shouted.

Too late. There was a flash of vivid red light like nothing in the natural world. The reflected figure was toppling upward and Garric was falling toward it.

They merged at the surface of the water. There was a crash like the cosmos splitting--

And Garric was alone in his mind.

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"Set it here," Liane suggested, waving Cashel to the table under the pergola.

He eyed the surface doubtfully before he set the statue there, but she was right about it being sturdy enough. Though small, the table was polished granite and at least as solid as the plinth the statue must originally have stood on. Cashel placed his burden with his usual care so that it didn't roll off; stone scrunched on stone.

Sharina hugged him. "Cashel," she said, "I was just thinking how lucky I am to have you. You make me feel safe."

Cashel blushed. *In front of everybody!* He was even prouder than he was embarrassed, but he was so embarrassed he couldn't breathe for a moment.

"I'm all black from the stone," he said in a hoarse voice. He raised his hands; they were smudged with the residue of decaying marble.

"Cashel...," said Tenoctris, scrubbing at the block with the hem of her robe. Cashel was enough Ilna's brother to cringe at such a use of a fine silk garment. "Look at this! I hadn't noticed."

The statue's right arm, apparently raised, was broken off at the shoulder, but the left hand had been placed on its girdle. The marble fourth finger wore a real ring, a ruby on a simple gold band. While Cashel carried the statue, he'd flaked away the crust of corroded stone which had been covering the jewel.

"It's a pretty little thing, isn't it?" Cashel said. He waited for Tenoctris to tell him what to do. Instead she turned away from the statue to stare abstractedly toward the fountains in the near distance.

"Tenoctris?" he said.

Ignoring him, she took a bamboo sliver from her right sleeve. She knelt and began to scribe on the gritty stone floor with it.

Many wizards used athames of exotic materials for their spells; the tool gained power each time it twisted the forces of the cosmos to the wizard's will. Tenoctris instead picked a simple twig or split of wood, casting each makeshift wand away after one use. She said that no one could be sure of what they were doing if they practiced their art with an object in whose fabric they'd overlaid and braided past wizardry.

Tenoctris claimed she wasn't a powerful wizard. Probably she was correct--it wasn't a matter Cashel could judge. But she was a very, very careful wizard; and in the past that care had saved her and the Isles as well, to Cashel's certain knowledge.

Sharina and Liane were watching him expectantly. "Go on, Cashel," Sharina said. "It's yours."

With a grin of acknowledgment, Cashel gripped the ring between his left thumb and forefinger and gave it a twist. He didn't expect it to come loose--not unless he used more strength than he planned to, anyway--but it turned easily.

Still wondering, he pulled. The ring slipped free in a cloud of powdered lime; Cashel sneezed.

"I wonder why someone put a ring on--" Liane said, bending slightly for a better look at the circlet in Cashel's hand.

Tenoctris looked up from the simple triangle of words in the Old Script which she'd traced in the grit. "Garric!" she cried. "Cashel, stop him!"

"Garric!" Cashel bellowed, but he was already in motion. Garric stood on the bridge arch near a well-dressed stranger, looking down at the pool. Tenoctris couldn't shout loudly enough for him to hear her.

Cashel burst out of the pergola at a dead run, holding his staff crossways and close to his body. He didn't call again because he'd popped the ring in his mouth for safe-keeping. In common with most poor folk, that's where he'd generally carried the few coins he came by until he paid them out again. Faced with a sudden crisis, he treated the ring the same way out of reflex.

Red wizardlight flashed, unmistakable even in the bright sun. For a moment the ruby glare shone through the ancient stone of the bridge. Even after the initial flash, a rosy haze hung over the water.

Garric toppled forward, over the railing and into the glow. He fell like a half-filled wineskin, limply unconscious. One of the Blood Eagles at the foot of the bridge immediately jumped into the pool--and sank.

The water was a good deal deeper than landscaping required. From the way it clouded as the soldier flailed desperately, the bottom was gluey muck like that of a marsh. The man was in half-armor: thirty pounds of steel, leather, and blackened bronze since he hadn't even taken

the time to unstrap his helmet. No amount of strength and good will was going to enable a man with no more fat than a rutting stag to swim while wearing that load.

Cashel wasn't going to be able to swim either: he was afraid of the water, so he'd never learned how. He was still afraid; that didn't make any difference now.

The distinguished-looking stranger who'd been talking to Garric raised his hands palms-upward. Two Blood Eagles grabbed his wrists and forced him down on his knees. The fellow didn't resist, not that it would have done him any good.

Cashel jumped as far out as he could get, the way he would've tried to cross a stream in spate. He landed feet first, legs pumping, as he sank through water and wizardlight. Holding his quarterstaff out to the side where he wouldn't slap Garric with it, he thrashed his way forward. He couldn't see properly. It had gotten dark and salt stung his eyes.

The staff was hickory and floated despite its iron ferrules. With luck it was long enough to touch bottom; if not, Cashel hoped to hold it out so that a soldier at the margin of the pool could seize it before he and Garric sank.

And if not that either, well, he'd tried.

The wind screamed. For an instant Cashel thought he heard Sharina call his name, but the gale carried her voice away.

Cashel's left hand caught fabric and closed on it. A lightningbolt lit the sky and reflected from the white frothing surf in which he struggled. More lightning slashed cloud to cloud. The shore was fifty double paces ahead of him and an undertow was trying pull him out.

Cashel didn't know where he was, but that could wait till there was more leisure. The person he dragged with him wasn't Garric; when the white flashes quivered from an upturned face, he saw he held a girl of more or less his age. Her expression was set but not panicky. She grabbed his sash with both hands.

Cashel set his quarterstaff on the firm holding behind him, then lumbered several steps forward on the thrust of the next wave. The girl managed to get her feet down and help, though when the water started to stream back she fluttered like a flag in a windstorm.

Cashel dug his staff in and waited, then resumed his march as a comber boiled over him and his burden. He didn't know what was happening but he knew what he had to do; that was all that mattered.

The reversing wave twisted him sideways. Over his left shoulder he saw a ship breaking up in the lightning-lit darkness. The surf sprang as high as the mast trucks from the fangs of a reef. More human figures struggled in the water, though it was hard to tell them from other flotsam in the blue-white glitter from the sky.

The current released him. Cashel and the girl strode forward, moving faster because the sea was no more than knee deep now. The girl lost her footing at the ebb, but Cashel continued to plod on. She pulled herself up on his sash, then scrambled the last few steps without his support.

Cashel heard a long, deep cry from out to sea. He turned, feeling wobbly. The effort of the last minutes had caught up with him now that he had time to be exhausted. He thought the sound was wind howling in the cavity of the ship as a hatch carried away and gave it passage; but he was wrong.

A reptile raised its wedge-shaped head from the breakers beyond the reef. Lightning gave its wet scales the sheen of opals. Then, with a sideways lurch seaward, the long body vanished again.

The girl had collapsed on the sandy beach. Cashel picked her up by an arm and staggered a few steps farther inland to where they'd be beyond even the strongest of the waves.

Cashel spat the ring into the wash leather purse he wore on a cord around his neck. His fingers were numb. His whole body was numb.

He'd build an altar to the Shepherd in thanks for his safety; but later. A little later.

### CHAPTER THREE

Garric hit the water face first. He wasn't unconscious, just numb as though he'd been drugged.

The shock and splash freed him. His throat had tightened for a shout when he looked into the pool; the sound turned into a choking gurgle from a mouth filled with water and leaves.

By reflex Garric's arms brought his head up with a breast stroke. He and Sharina both swam like otters, a skill that few of their neighbors in Barca's Hamlet had learned--not even the fishermen who took their dories out beyond the sight of land and every day risked an unexpected storm.

Leaf mold stained the water black. Great branches interlaced overhead, their lush foliage hiding all but speckles of the bright blue sky. He'd fallen from a ruined building into a meandering stream; the bank before him was completely overgrown.

His *body* didn't feel right!

A female figure leaped screaming to the cornice from which he'd fallen, shrieking, "Gar! What happen?"

He could understand her, but he shouldn't have been able to because she wasn't human. Not fully human, at any rate: she was one of the hairy half-men of Bight. "Tint save you!" she cried, and she dived into the water beside him.

"I'm all right!" Garric said, but that wasn't true--though he wasn't at risk of drowning, he could swim as well as he ever could. His arms were a deeper tan than they'd ever been except at the end of a summer's plowing; these last few months of living as a prince rather than a peasant had left him as pale as someone with a swarthy Haft complexion ever got.

He was alone; King Carus no longer shared his mind as a constant companion and advisor. Garric clutched for the ancient coronation medal that should hang around his neck. There was nothing, not even a tunic; he was naked except for a breech-clout of fabric as coarse as sacking.

Memories flooded in. They weren't Garric or-Reise's memories. *Wedge-shaped jaws the size of a bread oven closing on his head--*

There was a moment of disorientation as stunning as the shock that had paralyzed Garric on the bridge railing. His face slipped into the water.

Fingers strong enough to bend iron gripped his right shoulder and lifted him. "Tint save you!" the beastgirl screamed in his ear. "Tint save you!"

Tint paddled strongly for the bank from which he'd fallen. Garric stroked with his left arm, but he didn't try to break the beastgirl's grip on the other. He wasn't sure he could.

The stream's current was sluggish, but it had carried them past the ruins as Garric spluttered. The ornate building had ten feet of frontage on the water and was about that height despite the ruined condition of the cornice where he'd been standing, but it was only five or six feet wide. It was an altar or perhaps a monument, where statues had once sheltered beneath porches at either end. Thick vegetation hid any structures that might have been placed nearby.

A root was twisted over the bank. Tint caught it with her free hand and brought a gnarled, hairy leg up so that a prehensile foot could double her grip.

Garric put his legs down, expecting to touch bottom. Instead he stubbed his toe on the channel's masonry wall. He'd have gone under again had not the beastgirl raised him up like a sack of grain and deposited him on the bank.

She sprang up beside him and squatted on all fours. Her legs bent more naturally into that posture than they did when she stood upright.

"Tint save," she announced proudly. "Gar safe."

"Thank you, Tint," Garric said. The image of jaws closing on his head was still the most vivid of the new memories, though unfamiliar human figures also shuffled hazily through his mind. Most often the figures were shouting at him, striking at him, or kicking him the way some men would kick a dog.

Garric's belly muscles tensed over a cold lump. *He* wouldn't kick a dog; and nobody would kick him, unless they were trying to learn whether Garric could break their leg with his bare hands. Garric figured he probably could, if he were angry enough.

But the jaws....

Seawolves, giant marine lizards whose legs were little more than flippers to steer the beasts through the water, sometimes came ashore near Barca's Hamlet to prey on the flocks. Garric had killed seawolves, and once a seawolf had seized his leg and very nearly killed him.

He touched his calf. His body would bear the scars of those long fangs for the rest of its life, but *this* body did not. The muscles were rock hard, if anything stronger than Garric's own, but he no longer wore the form to which he had been born.

"Gar?" said the beastgirl nervously, sensing Garric's feeling of trapped horror.

"It's all right, Tint," he said, hoping he sounded reassuring. He stood up. There was nothing wrong with this body; it just wasn't his own.

There was nothing wrong with this *body*, but the mind that had used to wear it--

Garric raised his index fingers to his temples, probing gently. He found what he expected: a line of indentations on either side where the jaws of a huge seawolf had closed, driving its fangs deep into the bone. Into the bone, and into the brain beneath.

It was a wonder that Gar's body had survived a mauling like that. His mind had not survived.

"Gar, what wrong?" Tint said, standing also. Fully erect, she only came to the middle of Garric's chest. She began grooming him with her fingers. His scalp was as shaggy as a ram's fleece in winter, and now he had an unkempt beard as well.

"Nothing's wrong, Tint," Garric said, staring in bleak despair at the jungle of palmetto and larger trees choking the landscape around him. He saw squared stones under the network of surface roots supporting a large magnolia; as he'd guessed, there were extensive ruins in the vicinity.

"Nothing's wrong that you can help with," he added.

And very possibly no one could help. No one in whatever world this was.

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As he sat above the tide line, Cashel ran a swatch of raw wool slowly over his quarterstaff. In part he was polishing the hickory, but mostly he used the familiar task to settle his

mind. He carried the pad of wool under his belt. It'd sloshed through the breakers with him, but the fibers' coat of lanolin kept them free from salt water.

The girl was coming around. Cashel had wrung out his sodden outer tunic and rolled it into a pillow for her. The beach here was mostly sandy, but there were rocks in it.

"Mistress..." the girl murmured. Her left hand closed on the amulet hanging from her neck by a silver chain.

The storm had broken up; the remaining clouds scudded across expanses of clear sky. Cashel had already looked at the amulet by the light of the stars and the waxing moon: a lens of rock crystal whose silver mounting mimicked a spider lying on the disk and encircling it with her legs.

It wasn't something Cashel would have wanted to wear; but then, nobody was asking him to.

The girl sat up sharply. "Are we safe?" she said, peering at Cashel. She knuckled her eyes, trying to rub away the salt that blurred her vision. "Are you one of the sailors?"

"I think we're safe enough," Cashel said. He sounded hoarse and his stomach felt queasy; he must have swallowed seawater while he was fighting the surf, though he didn't remember it now. "I'm not a sailor, but there's other fellows here with us. I guess some of them may be sailors."

The light wasn't good enough to tell much, and Cashel didn't have the energy to go about meeting strangers in a place so new to him. Debris from the ship, human as well as cordage and timber, littered the beach. Not all the bodies were alive, of course, but some of them were starting to move.

"Ah," Cashel said. "My name's Cashel or-Kenset."

The girl was quickly regaining her composure. She touched the ground lightly, apparently judging whether her muscles had recovered enough from her struggle to shore that she could stand up again.

They hadn't; she didn't try. "I'm Lady Tilphosa bos-Pholial," she said with dignity. "Are we on Laut, Master Cashel?"

Cashel frowned. "Laut?" he said. "I don't think so, ah, Lady Tilphosa. But I'm not from around here either."

Up the beach had grounded a great wooden lump, either the ship's dinghy or a portion of the hull; one end rose and sank in the pull of the surf. A ball of blue light flickered beside the wreckage, then rolled a ghostly course down the sand toward Cashel and the girl.

Cashel hadn't been planning to move for a while yet. He decided he would after all, rising to his feet in a smooth motion. He gave his quarterstaff a trial spin. Funny how something like that brought his strength back better than a day's rest.

"Master Cashel!" the girl called. "What's the matter?"

"The light coming this way," Cashel said. "That's wizard's work."

He stepped forward to keep Tilphosa clear of the staff if he had to move quickly. Cashel and his seven feet of iron-shod hickory took up a lot of room.

The ball of light was the size of a man's head. It half-floated, half-bounced; never quite touching the ground, but never rising a hand's breadth above it. It was a blue haze just bright enough to show the texture of the pebble-strewn sand it crossed.

"It's all right, Cashel," the girl said. She grunted softly as she stood. "That's just Metra trying to find me."

"Lady Tilphosa!" called another female voice from the shelter of the wreck. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Metra!" the girl said. She started up the beach, wobbling for the first few steps but then getting full control of her legs. The glowing ball dissolved like a shadow in sunlight.

Cashel followed, grimacing because he'd been worried about something that wasn't a threat after all. Still... he slanted his quarterstaff across his chest instead of leaning it on his shoulder as he walked. Metra might not be a danger, but there was danger enough in this place: the great serpent writhing out beyond the breakers for one.

Coming toward them was a youngish woman, in her early twenties perhaps. She was plump, dark-haired, and wore a black robe slashed white across the front. The garment was much the worse for the usage it got during the wreck.

Cashel's eyes narrowed. The light wasn't good, but the woman looked a lot like the fellow who'd set the workmen on him this morning.

"Lady Tilphosa!" the woman said. "Thank the Mistress you're safe!"

Tilphosa embraced her and said, "Yes, She saved me through the agency of Master Cashel here. Cashel, this is Metra, Daughter of the Mistress. She's an acolyte at the Temple of the Lady, Mistress of the Moon, in Donelle--and accompanies me as advisor until the marriage."

"I'm Lady Tilphosa's guardian," Metra said in a distinctly cool tone as she appraised Cashel. "Who are you, sir?"

"I'm Cashel," Cashel responded, setting his feet a little wider. His voice was growing hoarse again, but his bath in sea water was no longer the cause. "I'm from Barca's Hamlet. Do you have an older brother, lady? The sort of guy who thinks if he can't buy what he wants, he'll buy toughs to take it for him?"

"What?" said Metra in surprise. "I have three sisters, two still-born and one died as an infant. What are you talking about?"

She held a knife-shaped thing covered with symbols in the Old Script. It was a wizard's tool, an athame. Well, Cashel already knew Metra was a wizard, even if she claimed to be a priestess besides.

"I met a man in Valles," Cashel said, still harsh but now embarrassed again; this time by the women's identical expressions of puzzlement. "He looked like you. And he was dressed like you, too."

Metra lifted her chin in a gesture of denial. "I know nothing of Valles," she said curtly. "As for my robe, it's what the Children of the Mistress wear. Perhaps another of us has journeyed to Valles, but he wasn't a relative of mine."

Her eyes locked with Cashel's again. "Now, sir," she said. "Tell us what *you're* doing here."

"I'm not sure," Cashel said, wishing that he didn't feel so defensive. Other survivors were moving in groups. Light winked; not wizardry this time but an honest bonfire kindled with handfuls of dry grass and fed with pandanus stems. "I went to help a friend who'd fallen into a pond, and then I was here."

"Where is 'here'?" Metra demanded. "Are we on Laut?"

One of the men around the fire stood up. In a loud voice he called into the darkness, "Did the priestess get to shore? Get her over here if she did! I want to talk to her."

One of his companions called in an equally loud voice, "I don't want to talk to her. If there's any justice, she's feeding that demon snake that wrecked us. You know it was because of her!"

Metra turned toward the fire, her lips forming a hard line. Her expression reminded Cashel again of the fellow who'd tried to take the statue from him in Valles. She didn't speak.

The sky had continued to clear. Cashel could recognize most of the constellations, but they didn't look quite right. The space between the Calves was too wide, and the feet of the Huntsman were above the Drinking Cup instead of below the way they should've been.

Metra's eyes focused again on Cashel. "Well?" she said. "Are we on Laut?"

"He says he's a stranger too," Tilphosa said, frustrated and a little angry because of her advisor's attitude. "Metra, he saved my life. He pulled me from the sea!"

Cashel cleared his throat. "I was in Valles," he said. "Something... brought me here. I don't know what."

"You're a wizard?" Metra said. She took a half step back and made an obscure movement with the athame. A splutter of blue wizardlight picked out the symbol the point had drawn in the air. "You *are* a wizard!"

"Cashel?" said Tilphosa in surprise, raising her eyes to look at him.

"I'm *not*," Cashel said. He'd growled and he didn't mean to. He planted his staff firmly in front of him and twisted it as if he was trying to screw the ferrule into the gritty soil. "I'm not a wizard, but I've been told.... Well, sometimes stuff happens when I'm around, that's all."

Cashel didn't want to think about what he was. He'd done fine being a shepherd and a man folks in the borough called on for heavy lifting. That's all he wanted to be: normal.

He sighed. The world had never much cared what Cashel wanted. This business was just another example of that.

"Mistress Metra!" bawled the leader of the men around the bonfire. "If you're alive, get over here or may the Sister take me if you don't wind up back in the sea!"

The fire was drawing the survivors together. Sailors from farther down the beach straggled by, eyeing the two women and Cashel as they passed.

"That's Captain Mounix calling," Tilphosa said. It was obvious that in a few moments someone would tell the captain that Metra was standing close by.

"Do you want me to go along when you talk to them?" Cashel said. He swung his staff level and brushed the ferrule clean with the hem of his inner tunic. He felt calm again, both because the subject had changed and because it looked like he'd have a chance to do something he understood.

"To handle them?" Metra sneered. "No, I'll take care of those fools myself."

"We're going to Laut because I'm betrothed to Prince Thalemos," Tilphosa said, in explanation but with a hint of understandable pride. "He's the ruler of Laut."

"Thalemos?" said Cashel. "I thought the ruler was named Echeus. I just saw him in Valles, talking to Garric."

Metra had started for the bonfire, but she was still close enough to hear Cashel's words. She turned sharply, holding the athame in a fashion that reminded Cashel it was a weapon-- though not a material one.

"What did you say?" she demanded. "What do you know of Echea?"

"Echeus," Cashel corrected. His hands slid apart on the shaft of the quarterstaff, one to either side of the center where they were ready to make it spin and strike. "And I don't know anything about him, lady, just that he was talking to my friend Garric."

There was a moment's tense silence. Tilphosa put her hand on Cashel's forearm. "Echea was an enemy of ours," she said calmly. "An enemy of the Mistress, really. But she's dead now. You're sure of that, aren't you, Metra?"

"I was sure," the priestess said, with slight emphasis on *was*. "You saw someone named Echeus in Valles, you say? Was he the wizard who sent you here?"

Cashel made an angry gesture with his right hand, then gripped his quarterstaff again. "I don't know who put me here," he said. "I don't know where I am."

Instead of shouting, Captain Mounix crunched over the sand toward Metra and her companions. Most of the gathered survivors came with him.

Cashel looked up at the skewed constellations. "Who's the King of the Isles?" he said. "Do you know?"

"The king?" Tilphosa repeated. "Why, King Carus, of course. Who did you think it was?"

The arriving sailors saved Cashel from answering that question.