

The States Trilogy - Book 1

Chapter 1 - Talent

Glib sneezed.

Flour puffed up from the sack Glib had been carrying.

"I told you not to drop it."

"I didn't mean to..."

"Flour is money. We can't afford such mistakes."

Glib thought it wise not to argue that the bakery had made a profit every month for the past year. It would do nothing to curb his foster-father's temper.

Glib's foster-father jerked his head towards the bakery's storeroom. "Go and get another bag. We need to get this bread done."

Not wanting a cuff on the ear, Glib obeyed instantly. Entering the storeroom's darkness he coughed and squinted, stray flour drying his throat and getting into his eyes. It was just his luck to be in here working while Cinch - the only person he could really call his friend - was out having fun. Or was he? Glib imagined Cinch hunched over a small desk learning the history of The States. His father would not forgive any mistakes he made. Such was life when you were the son of a tutor...

"Glib! Get out here *now!*"

...And such was life when you were the foster-son of a baker. Hefting a flour sack in his two thin arms, Glib stumbled out of the storeroom towards the table where Surl was kneading dough. He set the sack beside the table and stood up, bracing his aching shoulders with his hands.

"You can get to pouring the flour in the mixer." Surl jerked his head irritably towards a strange object in the corner of the room.

Glib resignedly lifted the sack of flour and bore it towards the mixer. Setting the sack firmly on his shoulder, he tipped the lip of the sack into the mixer's large opening and poured.

More flour came than he had expected. It poured into the mixer, over Glib's clothes and onto the cold cement floor. Glib tried to regain control of the sack but coughed again, the mealy flour rasping his lungs. A small pile of flour began to form at his feet.

"What have you done now?" Surl's words were tempered so no one in the shop could hear him, but Glib still covered all the same. Didn't his foster-father know by now that he was no good as a baker?

"I was only trying to pour the flour in and..."

Surl snorted. "Even Abbey's better at baking than you."

But Abbey isn't your daughter - and you don't have a true son either, Glib thought with the venom of a scorpion.

"Go and get some wood from the woodpile - it's the best place for you. The oven's getting low."

Glib looked at the oven like he was expected to, ducked his head at the guttering weak flames and retreated from the rear of the bakery as quickly as possible.

The shop was nothing like the bakery proper. A pleasant aroma wafted in the air, and tasty breads and pastries were displayed inside large glass cases which formed the shop's counter. It was hot, but that one indiscretion could be forgiven for the heavenly smell in the air.

"Hi Glib."

He tried to ignore Abbey. Ever since coming to work at the bakery two years ago she had been Surl's favourite. *Probably fancies himself with her*, Glib thought, and knew that would not be an unlikely thing. Seventeen years of age, Abbey had a homely demeanour and an attractive, ripe figure. Notwithstanding that she was foreign. Glib hadn't done anything but treat her with respect ever since she had arrived in the shop, but he still couldn't deny the jealousy he felt towards her whenever he thought of how much attention she was paid by Surl. She was pretty, she was foreign and she was two years older than Glib... and she was a girl.

Glib didn't grace his co-worker with a response, instead walking into the heat of the Colour Gash day. He'd managed not to say a word to her - that was good. Only problem was he had to return to the shop with an armful of wood for the stove. The wood was already cut, and Glib thought he was fortunate that he didn't have to cut it himself. Surl would make him do something like that. Loading the wood in his arms so that it almost reached his neck, Glib tottered back into the shop. Abbey was still there.

"Have you had tiffin yet?" she asked amiably.

"Just go away." *I don't have time to eat like you. All you do is stand behind that counter and wait for customers to come in - I have to work all the time.* In a shop Glib knew some things were better left unsaid - the diplomacy between co-workers was just as important as customer relations. Glib's and Abbey's diplomacy wasn't going very well at the moment - and Glib knew he was the result of it - but couldn't she see his point of view?

No, she couldn't. She didn't have her mother die when she was born, then have two cousins - who were married *to each other* - come and take her under their wing, even though they did not want the responsibility of a child. She didn't know what it was like to grow up with her foster-family only tolerating her presence, and then when a young usurper comes along...

You moved from the Commonlands to The States because you wanted to, Glib thought bitterly, *not because your mother died.* He stacked the wood into the oven then turned his attention back to the sack of flour which was lying forlornly on the ground. Surl was nowhere to be seen. Picking up the sack, Glib poured the rest of the flour into the mixer.

Most of it recoiled into his face. Flour spread across the bakery in a white cloud, making it look as though snow had come to Colour Gash. If kids had been doing this, they would have laughed and danced about and pretended they were in the snow-capped mountains in the south of The States. Glib's only thought was that he would get a beating if Surl caught him - and a lecture to always put water in the mixer *first*.

Glib retreated from the bakery and into the shop covered by a powdery white skin. He did not even stop to see what Abbey thought of him, instead going straight out the door and onto the Colour Gash street. Two mistakes in a matter of minutes was an invitation for a beating, but there was no way Glib planned on staying around for it. There were places he could go which were not as painful as staying at the bakery. He could always head home - a small but well-equipped building a couple of doors down from the bakery - but Delilah would most likely send him straight back to Surl as soon as she realised what had occurred. He could go for a walk, eat tiffin while staring up at the graceful spires of the Tower of the Six, but there were always popular and rich merchants' kids there... Glib did not want to court a beating from them either.

Cinch, he would go to Cinch's.

The town of Colour Gash opened up before him as he walked. Shoppers streamed through the busy street, while foreign merchants heavily laden with goods trudged about on some business or other. Shopkeepers who recognised Glib waved and made jokingly disparaging remarks about the flour which covered him, while an odd assortment of priests, beggars, tinkers and thieves added to the spectacle of the town.

The wares on Baker's Way were for the most part culinary, but as soon as he left that street behind and turned onto Cortz Street the merchandise became more exotic and expensive. Colour Gash was a centre for trade in The States, and virtually every item that *could* be sold *was* for sale somewhere in the city. Rich silks, the finest of tapestries, exquisitely painted pottery from Colour Gash itself, everything was here on display.

Turning off Cortz Street Glib weaved through half a dozen back alleys, always directing his steps towards the tutelage hut where Cinch and his father lived. Though he was perhaps the most popular person in the whole of central Colour Gash, for some strange reason Cinch had decided to make Glib his best friend. That confused Glib - his foster-parents were married cousins, and he wasn't exactly the most popular of boys.

Cinch, on the other hand, was.

But he did not look it when Glib entered the tutelage hut. Cinch's hair, usually golden as the finest weave in Colour Gash, hung limp and lank about his shoulders. His perfectly-featured face was beaded with perspiration, and his head faced towards the desk where he was seated as though he did not want to look up. Stern was standing over him with a ruler held in one hand.

Glib cleared his throat.

When Stern noticed him, he immediately left off bothering Cinch and moved to the newcomer. "Glib, how are you? Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I had a bit of a disagreement with the, ah, mixer," Glib explained.

"Oh. Well, I'm glad you're here. Cinch has been having trouble learning his geometry - I swear that boy only has a half a brain sometimes. I was wondering that seeing you are here perhaps we might have a geography lesson?"

"I don't know... I don't want to be gone too long. Surl will get mad."

"Education is more important than learning how to bake good bread.

Education is what The States is built upon. Without education, we would still be living in the neolithological oblivion which perpetuated our existence before unification. Do you agree?"

"I... suppose."

Cinch got up and stormed out of the home.

"Hi Cinch."

Cinch did not warrant Glib with a reply.

"Never mind him," Stern said, "he's sulking. Can't understand big words." The tutor put a comforting hand behind Glib's head. "Not like you, my boy. Many's the time I wished that you were my son and Cinch was not - but don't ever tell him I said that. It will only strain tensions between us further."

"Glib's my friend." Glib hoped that Stern recognised the faint trace of protest in his voice, but was not confident of the man having the subtlety to do so. Stern was never one for subtlety, the same as Surl.

"So, be seated." Stern used his ruler to point out different places on the map

which rested against the farthest wall. "The States, as you know, is comprised of nine separate political and social divisions, each running under their own unique form of government. Our state, Outlend, is the largest and most populous, however we do not have access to the sea like the others. The nine states are unified under the treaty of 615. Are you taking all this in?"

"I already know all this stuff - I've read it in the books you have."

Stern sat on a vacant desk and looked at the floor. "It's a pity Cinch isn't as eager to learn as you are."

"What I want to know," Glib continued, "is why The States are so aloof of each other. I thought Outlend was a separate country until I was twelve."

"Religion." The tone Stern used for the word expressed his disdain. "Religion is dividing us at it has divided us before. It's fortunate that Outlend is such a powerful state - otherwise we could be looking at invasion by now. You've heard of the petty squabbles between the coastal states? They're getting larger, and I doubt if it will be long before some states declare outright war on each other." Stern shook his head. "I can't understand how this has happened."

Standing up and walking to one corner of the room, Stern looked at a pine shelf which almost reached the ceiling. Upon it were statues of gods, the Outlendian god, thin and careful and wise, the Morrowian god, a many-armed thing which only a Morrowian could love, and the Centarian god, a warrior. There were also the gods of the lesser states, the Wind Batteredds and the Rocks territories which had claimed statehood themselves. A different god for each state...

"Did you know that when I was a child you could walk into another state with a statue of your own god and have people blessing you? But now, if you walk into Colour Gash with the statue of the Morrowian god, for example, you're more likely to be spit upon than anything else."

"Maybe it's the same everywhere?" Glib suggested. "My foster-mother and Abbey - from the Commonlands - they're often considered lesser. Especially because Delilah hasn't got her aura yet."

Stern made a small sound in the back of his throat. "Hhm. Another way you can tell a foreign woman immediately - see if they've got an aura or are with child. I'm afraid The States is becoming more insular every day."

"I've never been able to understand auras."

"That's magic, Glib - a lesson for another time. Perhaps you would like to discuss it when you next come here to be tutored?"

"I would like that," Glib confessed.

"Very well." Stern put his hands behind his back. "I think that concludes our lesson for today. Have you learned anything?"

"Some... I don't know."

Stern nodded in satisfaction. "It is better to appear stupid and honest than smart and a fool."

Glib stood up and walked to the door of the tutelage hut. Stern stopped him with a wave. "Your foster-father's like that, Glib. Just because he doesn't believe in learning doesn't mean you should stop being tutored by me. Remember, he was the one who sent you here in the first place. He wanted you to learn mathematics."

"I know. I wish he'd be more supportive though."

"We all have obstacles to overcome. Perhaps one of yours is your foster-father?"

More than perhaps. With a wave to Stern and a smile, Glib walked out the

tutelage hut's door into the heat of the Outlendian day.

Glib knew exactly where he'd find Cinch. His friend was so predictable like that - when he was angry he went to the same place every time. Maybe that was because of his unoriginality? Maybe all the popular boys in Colour Gash were unoriginal, and that's what made them so popular, because they were exactly the same as everyone else. Glib couldn't understand where his thought was leading so he canned it.

He'd decided to visit Cinch before returning to the bakery. Cinch was his friend - and Glib had an idea he had somehow hurt him in the tutelage hut. It was through no fault of his own, Glib knew, but he had found Cinch's awkward outburst unnerving. Cinch was simply not like that. Glib was the one to have tempers and hold grudges and search for scapegoats. Cinch just took all of his life in his stride.

Whenever Cinch was angry he went to the Colour Gash suburb of Prim. Glib had learned that a long time ago about his friend. Prim was a five block section of the city which for the most part was deserted. There were of course people living there, but in the daytime most of them were at work. Prim was a residential section of Colour Gash, not a commercial one.

A couple of ladies hauling their washing and half a dozen children playing in the dust was all Glib had to avoid as he walked along Prim's main street. He ducked his head forward each time he passed another alley, hoping he saw Cinch nursing his pain in one of them.

Finally his persistence paid off. Cinch was picking up stones and throwing them at steel cans he had aligned on a dividing fence. Glib left the main street and watched his friend with crossed arms. Cinch picked up a stone and threw it at a can. It veered to the left of its target.

"Nice try."

Cinch looked behind him. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching you."

Cinch picked up three stones and aimed them at the three cans on the fence. The stones hit each one.

"Impressive. You always were better at throwing than me."

"But you're better at me in basically everything else."

Glib cast his hands over his clothes which had once been navy blue but were now dusted with white. "I bet you're better than me at baking. And you've always bested at me at woodwork - you know if I picked up a saw I'd probably end up cutting off my own hand."

"The things that matter," Cinch snapped. "When we play football... you're always the one who's there to score the goal. You're the one who delivers the perfect pass. When we wrestle, even though you're smaller you manage to knock me to the ground four times out of five. And learning - I try to learn about the history of The States a dozen times and still can't remember anything. All you have to do is look at a page, and there, you know it."

"I enjoy reading The States' history."

"Do you enjoy being showered with glory by my father? Do you enjoy replacing me?"

"I don't replace you!" Glib was shocked to hear the condemning words which were coming from Cinch's mouth.

"Yes you do. Every night when we sup, Father's always Glib this, Glib that. He never congratulates me on anything. He never congratulates me when I make an

attractive birdhouse, or..." Cinch's bottom lip was beginning to tremble. His eyes glistened like diamonds, and he struggled hard for his voice not to crack. "At least you have a family who care about you! At least you have a family who don't go on about academics, and don't try to push you to be someone you're not."

"My foster-father does. He tries to make me a baker, and..." Glib showed Cinch his clothes in explanation. "And he likes Abbey better, anyway. And they aren't my real family. They didn't want me. My real father and mother.... well, you know what happened to my real mother. You should be glad - your real father is still with you, and your real mother... at least you had her for five years."

Cinch swallowed his tears. "I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so mean."

"We're friends, Cinch. It will take more than that to come between us."

Cinch smiled wryly. "Yeah."

Glib picked up a stone and threw it at one of the cans. It passed to the left. "Damn." He picked up another and this time threw by instinct alone. The stone smashed the can from its perch.

"Good shot."

Glib smiled in pride at his work. "Hey Cinch?" he said as he picked up another stone. "Can you come sup at my place tonight? Less likely to get a belting from Surl if you do."

"Sure. What's to eat?"

"Soup, bread. Left over bakery stuff if there's any of it."

"You're lucky, you know that. You get bakery treats every day, unless it's a public holiday and they all sell out."

"Which is the time I *most* want to eat sweet stuff."

Cinch and Glib laughed, and for a while they tried in silence to work out the logic of it. Then Cinch said, "Is Abbey going to be there?"

"I think so."

"Mmm.... rich and creamy like an apple tart."

"I still don't know what you see in her."

"I still don't know what you *don't* see in her."

"Stop making me sick."

"Ripe as a plum."

"Shut up."

"Curved as a melon."

"Yuck."

"Sexed as a fox."

"You're really grossing me out."

"I know."

Glib chuckled and threw a stone at the last remaining steel can. His aim was true. He went to fetch the fallen cans with a tight smile on his face. Cinch was still his best friend.

Sup was as civilised as an aristocrat's dinner party. Surl sat on one side of the table with a navy blue frock and serviette tucked under his collar, Delilah sat in a pretty dress set off by plain but well-made jewellery, while Abbey remained in her working clothes but with a serviette tucked under her collar as well. Glib and Cinch sat together like co-conspirators, talking and whispering to each other while the two

adults prepared the meal. Upon the table was set an array of five soup bowls, six crusts of bread and an apple charlotte that had been left over from the shop. Dessert was going to be meagre tonight. Also on the table was a good bottle of Wind Battered wine, and goblets for Surl, Delilah, Abbey and Cinch. Glib, Surl had deemed, was still too young to drink alcohol.

Damn Cinch being a year older than me, Glib thought. It was something that had niggled him since they had become friends, but Glib had never mentioned anything more than jokingly about it. Their slight age difference didn't cause much problem - except when it came to friends. People immediately flocked to Cinch before they even noticed Glib.

Surl started sup by breaking a piece of bread and dropping it into his soup. He picked up a steel spoon and sipped at the hot liquid. The others replied in kind, Glib with a little more clumsiness than his companion diners.

He tapped the china bowl with his hand and wondered what it would be like for a poor person who had to eat off wood. Cinch's father had some wooden bowls - and Delilah and Surl too - but he could only shudder when he thought of ages-old food being ingrained into the wood and unable to be removed. How... unhygienic.

"Outlend is at war again." Surl spoke the words quietly, a conversation piece.

"Oh?" Delilah mock-asked. "How large?"

"Only a small one. With one of the Wind Battered states - Tern. That's why I brought out this wine. It's going to get expensive if the war continues. May as well enjoy it while we can."

"Surely Outlend is able to defeat Tern?" Delilah replied. "I mean, Tern only has a population of six, seven thousand."

"And controls the trade from the other two Wind Batteredes," Surl continued. "Still, I think you're right. With an army the size of ours..."

Glib considered the standing force of five thousand Outlendian soldiers. How many would Tern be able to raise? Five hundred? Outlend's future was still firmly secure. Still, he listened with the rapt attention that all boys do when it comes to matters of war.

"There are also rumours - and these are only rumours - that barbarans have been probing into the southern reaches of Morrow."

Delilah laughed. "Hah. First they'd have to get *over* Morrow's mountains. And then they have to go through Ref, unless they want to drive through that narrow Wind Battered corridor to the south. I think we're safe."

"The barbarans are only legends now - just about." Surl spooned a piece of bread from his soup and chewed it. "Even if they do break through, we'll have The Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf to inform us."

Delilah visibly shuddered when she heard that organisation spoken of, and not for the first time Glib didn't know why. Abbey looked frightened, but not in dread of the organisation.

"We also have to remember the land bridge between the southern continent and our peninsula. It's only twenty-five or so metres wide... and open only for two hours of each day."

"Thank God for the four tides," Delilah said, pressing her hands together and bowing her head in prayer.

"And thank God for the two moons."

"They're out now," Glib said, leaning on his chair towards the nearest window. He wondered if that was where the Outlendian god Delilah and Surl had just

mentioned lived - and the other gods of The States as well.

"Back to matters at home." Surl spoke as he scoured the last of his soup from his bowl with a piece of bread. Reaching for the apple charlotte he broke a piece off and chewed it thoughtfully. "I've decided something about you, Glib." Surl continued, nodding at Abbey and Delilah. "It is clear to us, and especially me, that bakery work does not suit you. I would have liked you to continue helping me, but obviously you don't have the aptitude."

"So?"

"I can't let you work in the bakery anymore."

Relief flushed Glib's face. His foster-father had finally seen *his* perspective. Now was the time to push for more freedom. "If I could learn at Stern's..."

"No." Surl held his serviette and dabbed at the corners of his mouth where some cream had been smeared. "What I would like you to do is work in the shop. Beside Abbey."

"Beside Abbey? Yuck!"

Surl reached over the table, drew back his hand and cuffed it against his foster-son's ear. "Don't you ever speak that way about another person again! What has she ever done to you?" Surl grimaced. "And you have the gall to call yourself a fifteen year old."

Abbey looked understandably anxious. She reached for the apple charlotte then drew her hand back, afraid that Glib might snap at her if she tried to take some of the dessert. "If you want I can work in the bakery..."

"No. Bakery work is too hard for a woman. You couldn't lift the sacks."

"Glib's smaller than me and he can lift them..."

"The only reason Glib is smaller than you is because he doesn't do a man's work. He tries to shirk all the time. And whenever he *does* lift a sack he spills the flour from it most often."

"What are you going to do in the bakery?" Delilah asked. "If there's only one-"

"I'll do all of the work myself. If I'm not interrupted by customers I'll be able to bake much more quickly." Surl directed a contemptuous gaze Glib's way. "Put Glib to what he's good at doing. Adding up numbers. Writing accounts and keeping records."

"I don't *want* to work in the shop."

Surl leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table. "There is only one class of person who has the privilege of saying they don't want to do something. The nobility. We're *not* nobility, Glib. We're a trading family and we do what needs to be done. Understand?"

"Understand," Glib replied sullenly.

Cinch finished the piece of apple charlotte he had picked for himself and said, "Ah, I guess I better go."

"Glib, be a gracious host and escort Cinch to the door." Delilah removed the serviette she was wearing and dabbed at her lips.

Glib got up and beckoned Cinch to follow. "Bad luck," his friend said.

"About what?"

"You having to work in the bakery."

"I'll get over it."

The pair reached the home's door and Cinch stepped outside. The older boy kicked his feet in the dust. "Don't look so worried. Working in the bakery can't be worse than what you're already doing."

"Yeah, true. But I don't want people complaining - I don't want to serve

customers."

"We all have to make sacrifices we don't want to. I guess this is one of yours."

"You sound like your father." Glib simpered at his friend. "Well, you better be getting home. Brigands will be wandering the streets soon."

"Mm. Goodbye Glib."

"Goodbye."

Glib waited until his friend had disappeared from view before he turned away and shut the door. His foster-parents had dispersed, he noticed. It also appeared that they had agreed to let Abbey - yet again - stay the night. As usual she had been placed in the room closest to Glib's, the room that Delilah and Surl had once chosen for their own child. But with Delilah growing older they both knew Glib would be as good as they'd get.

Glib lay down on his bed in his room and held his hands behind his head. Abbey was right beside him tonight - and tomorrow he faced ten long hours of working in the shop with her for company. His burdens were only getting worse.

Glib's list of grievances against the shop: it was hot; he had to battle flies that threatened to alight upon the merchandise; bossy ladies, mothers with their auras for the most part, came in and demanded this and that, oh this wasn't fresh enough, do you call that a stick of bread?; working here made him lose valuable lesson time with Stern, and; he had to share the place with Abbey.

She was a bore. So what if she had a ripe figure? She was always trying to be so nice, chatting about the weather and the people that came in and the war with Tern. Why didn't she just shut up? She didn't even have the sense to realise that she had replaced Glib in Surl's eyes. Why had he been relegated here in the first place?

"Customer's coming in."

Well, there was one thing they could agree on. Each of them took the customers in alternates, first Abbey, then Glib. The only time this plan didn't work was during the busy parts of the day - very early in the morning and at lunch - when several customers in the shop at once was not a strange occurrence.

"Is it a policy of this store to keep customers waiting?" The girl who was standing before Glib took on a disaffected air, then clasped her hands in front of her waist.

"Oh. Sorry. What would you like?"

"Five loaves of bread - white, not that disgusting grain staff. Two bread sticks - and a custard slice. One with the sweet vanilla on top, not the normal custard tart, silly."

This was another bad thing about working in the shop. When Glib and Cinch were together they could ogle and comment upon girls as much as they wanted to. But here, Glib had to maintain *customer relations*. The term sickened him. The girl he served was comely - though she wore a thick navy blue overcoat which would trap the Colour Gash heat, Glib could see she was attractive. She was slight as a riverbank willow, and the smile she had on her face was as cheeky as red. Pity he couldn't stare straight at her.

"My two bread sticks as well, please."

Glib fumbled with the bread in the racks behind the counter. "Sorry." He returned to the counter and mentally added up the price of the bread. "That's seventy-three chinks."

The girl counted the coinage into the palm of Glib's hand then turned and

smiled. "Well, thank you." She left with the bread tucked under her arm and without giving Glib any further farewell. Glib watched her as she walked. She was slightly taller than him, but Glib was confident that in a couple of years he would catch up to her. Her hair was mousy brown, but her face... oh, she had an exquisite face. Clear as vanilla and smiling like an acolyte's.

Abbey struck Glib on the bicep. "What are you looking at?"

Rubbing his arm and frowning Glib said, "You didn't have to hit so hard."

"What if she had turned and saw you leering at her? Would that have been good for business?"

Ignoring Abbey's question Glib asked, "Does she come in here often?"

Abbey turned to the counter and began wrapping up two long icing buns in rolls of paper. "Why do you want to know?"

"She's... pretty."

Abbey remained dangerously silent.

Glib watched her, sighed in exasperation, then placed the coins he had just received from the girl into a drawer below the counter. When he turned back to the rows of sweets and desserts, Abbey was still staring antagonistically at the door where the girl had just left.

This was what Glib had been waiting for all week. He sat in one of Stern's desks, his hands clasped on the table before him and his attention focused solely on his tutor. The room was devoid of other people.

Stern had long since given up on teaching Glib in a classroom situation. He excelled in his studies and often left the other students behind. He needed special and extra attention if he was going to get the full benefit from learning while he was young. Though Glib was only fifteen, Stern saw the same intelligence in him as he did when he taught students from the Colour Gash university. Stern had no doubt that Glib could get into Frog university, on the west side of Ref, if he had the desire. Frog university was long regarded as the centre of learning in the known world.

"So. Magic."

Even the word itself held a mystical charm. Glib leaned forward attentively and waited for the lesson to begin. In universities and tutelage huts throughout The States this was what the most intelligent people studied - magic and philosophy, anthropology and history, the arts, the hallmarks of a civilisation's greatness. And now Glib was about to learn magic as well.

"The magic of the peninsula is very elaborate and complex." Stern was pacing from one side of the classroom to the other as he spoke. "I think we'll begin with what we spoke about at the end of our last lesson - auras. I trust you know quite a bit about auras already, being a hot-blooded fifteen year old boy."

"Yeah..." Glib yawned and slumped on the desk.

"Recite!"

Glib sat up straight. "An aura is present on a woman who has given birth to a child. Auras are only present on women of States heritage. This is believed to be a gift from our gods."

"Very well." Stern veered in direction and headed towards Glib. He knelt beside the boy's table. "A woman with an aura is attractive, isn't she? Knowing that another man has been with her, and that she has given birth by another man, and hoping that you will be with her as well."

Glib swallowed his knotted throat. "Yes."

"Seeing her aura flicker about her. Incandescent blues, flames of purple and green, a magical radiant presence."

"Yes."

Stern slammed his hand on Glib's table. "Wrong! A woman's aura is not meant to be a charm to entice men. A woman's aura is a gift from the Outlendian god - or whichever god she worships at the time. It is to show the sanctity of her body, that she has continued to propagate the species."

"But heaps of men look at women who have auras. There are some brothels with women who-

"You've visited these brothels, have you?"

"I've... heard."

Stern stood up and pinched the bridge between his eyes. "I'm sorry. Since my wife died... I remember her with her aura." Seeming to put his wife and auras out of his mind, Stern turned on the ball of his left foot and strode back to the front of the classroom. "There are two kinds of magic on the Peninsula. One is remnant magic, where certain ingredients - remnants - must be used to complete a spell. The practitioners of this type of magic are called sorcerors."

"I have heard of those."

"But you have never seen them. They ply their trade wandering throughout The States, doing the odd jobs no one else wants to touch. They are poor for the most part, but there are an elite few who-

"Can you tell me about the remnants?"

"Very well. Say I want to light a fire. I gather together some wood - that is one remnant - and place a torn piece of my clothing in the centre of the wood. I close my eyes and chant the correct runes - and we have flame." Stern hadn't even realised he had closed his eyes until he opened them again. "That is a very simple spell. There are many that are more difficult."

"You are a sorceror, aren't you?" Glib questioned Stern with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"I dabble in it somewhat, yes. But I learnt the craft years ago... and much of it has been forgotten by me now."

"Tell me about the more powerful spells. Tell me what spells you can rune."

"Well there is the *inconflagration*, for a large fire. The *stone golem* - to raise a living creature out of the earth. And the *globes of wrath* - that spell can be used for either good or bad, as there is a variant to it. In one instance the *globes of wrath* can create milky white illuminant balls to guide a person's way - or turn into burning, melting sizzlers of flesh. I have never used the *globes of wrath* myself. And I never will."

Glib closed his eyes. "The *globes of wrath*. Two globules of glass. A candle. A sparking firefly. Milk. Sticks. And a rune book. These are the remnants for the *globes of wrath*."

Stern moved away from Glib towards the front of the room. "Tell me, have you learnt this spell before?"

"My step-father..."

"Yes, your step-father. He wouldn't let you learn magic, would he? And yet you got the remnants of the spell exactly right. I have never heard of adding milk to the spell, though."

"It's a variant. The milk helps the globes diffuse, if you need them to do that."

Stern put his finger to his lips. "Hmm. I shall have to try that myself someday. But Glib, how did you... know... the remnants for the *globes of wrath*?"

Glib shrugged. "I just knew. It wasn't as if I cheated or anything. When I heard you say '*globes of wrath*,' I immediately knew what went into the spell."

"And the *stone golem*? *Inconflagration*?"

"I don't know those yet," Glib admitted.

Stern crossed his arms over his chest and returned to where Glib was sitting. "We might make a sorcerer out of you yet. My favourite student."

Glib beamed in Stern's praise, although he would later deny it to Cinch. So he knew how to perform the *globes of wrath* - but he didn't know the correct runes to complete the spell. Still, he wasn't going to tell Stern that. Let him figure it out that he didn't know.

"The other type of magic on the peninsula is much more powerful - and much rarer - than remnant magic. The practitioners of remnant magic are called sorcerers. The practitioners of high magic are called magicians. They do not need remnants to complete their spells. Their power comes from within themselves. Of course they need something to focus their magic - which is why you will often see a magician with a stick or pointing his finger when he incants - but they are and always will be much more powerful than sorcerers. There are only seventy *true* magicians in the whole of the peninsula that I know of - and all of them are wealthy beyond our dreams."

"What are they like with each other?" Glib asked. "Do they enjoy each other's company? Or do they prefer to stay to themselves?"

"Magicians - true magicians - are renowned for their reclusive natures. There are exceptions of course, but most often the only time you'll see magicians together is when they are locked in a feud."

"So they don't get along well with each other, hey?"

"No."

Glib sat back in his chair and considered all he'd been taught. Most people thought magic was archaic and complex... but Glib understood everything that had been told him. He'd started to get a little confused when Stern started speaking about high magic, but that was probably normal. This *was* only his first lesson. And he was pleased with himself for understanding remnant magic immediately. Stern had seemed surprised - and that made Glib smile to himself. The more Stern taught him the more the tutor was impressed by his knowledge. Perhaps Stern would be able to vouch for him at Colour Gash university? If that happened he wouldn't have to work in the bakery for a while.

"There is one more thing, one more magic at work in the peninsula."

Glib's eyes again focused on Stern. His arms were crossed over his chest as he listened. "What?"

"Animals. Many of the animals on the peninsula are possessed of their own special magic. And there are three - no, four - levels of this magic. Good, intermediate, base and dormant." Stern cleared his throat, which had begun to dry since he'd started the lesson. "The good animals are obvious to us all - the unicorn, the dragon, the phoenix."

"But all of those animals are rare. The only sightings of those are in the islands to the north."

Stern's lips rose at the edges. "I know. It is a pity that man has so sought to take advantage of them, killing them for trophies and sport, and for the properties of their magic. For this reason most of these creatures are close to extinction."

"The base animals?" Glib broke in, wanting to move the conversation along. Judging by the sun outside it was at least two hours past tiffin already - and Glib wanted to spend at least some of his afternoon in leisure.

"Yes. The base animals. We all know of these - they ply the unpopulated highways and byways of The States preying on weary travellers. Their inherent natures are evil. The sunstalker, and its close relative the nightlayer, the goblin, the arachnid - and the werehound. You have heard of the werehound, haven't you Glib?"

"I have. They're most common in the plains outside of Colour Gash, aren't they?"

"Your words ring true. Many a merchant has heard a call from his guards, 'Ware the werehound.' The animals I speak of are those to avoid. Evil runs through their veins."

"Some say the werehound is the resident of another plane."

"You have been doing your research, haven't you? And I believe you are right. Recent studies have provided evidence that the werehound may be the native of a plane other than this one. I am glad you keep so up-to-date."

Glib bathed in Stern's praise and cracked his knuckles, glorying in his own satisfaction.

"The other two animal magics," Stern continued. "The intermediates are solely that - neither good nor bad, but depending on how humans treat them they can swing either way. If a person intrudes on an ice golem's territory it will not be satisfied until that person is dead. But if it meets the same person on neutral ground it will treat him with respect. The same applies for icetusks - however they are more dangerous simply because they consider most dry land their ground."

"What about the final type? The dormants?"

"The birds of the air, the mammals of land, the fish of the sea. These creatures have no active magic. However, it is believed," Stern said as he placed his hands behind his back and strolled between the tutelage hut's desks, "that every creature - even a human - is possessed of some inborn magic. What do we say when an old dog stiffens, and his eyes bulge and all life seems to depart from him, but then he returns to this world alive? We call it the dog's strength of will, but magic is the controlling force. *Magic*. How did you know the remnants for the *globes of fire*? Some may say it was your cognition or insight, but magic no doubt played a part."

"What about in battle," Glib asked, "in the tides of blood and death when an army begins to gain ascendancy over the other? When the flux of a battle is turning... is that magic?"

Stern cast his hand directly towards Glib. "I will not have that spoken of in these walls! Battle magic is evil - it desecrates magic's purpose." Stern's fingers left off Glib and went to his throat as he cleared it.

"And if the side the sorcerors or magicians are fighting on is right? What then?"

"All magic used in battle is evil."

"What-"

"I will discuss it no more. This lesson is over. You may leave."

Glib packed the books that were resting on his desk and headed towards the tutelage hut's door. "I'm sorry if I upset you, Stern."

Stern shook his head as if the matter held no importance. "Do not worry. I only want magic to be used for good purposes, not bad."

"Where is Cinch? Do you know?"

"Last I heard he said he'd be in Forest Park to the south of here. Enjoy your afternoon."

"I shall." Reflecting the eager child he almost still was, Glib skittered out the door and ran into the hot Colour Gash day. His work in the shop was over, his lesson was over... and now it was time to have fun.

In the tutelage hut Stern packed up after his student. *Glib Baker*. Never before had he seen such promise in a boy. There had been a girl, once - who was perhaps smarter than Glib - but she had died. Died in an alchemy experiment that Stern had not set up for her properly.

He would not make the same mistake with Glib. The boy... had an inherent knowledge, an awareness Stern had never seen in a person of this young age. Stern had told him about the *globes of wrath*, and Glib had been able to recite the remnants as if he had been studying the spell for the past six months.

He had just known...

Stern rarely visited Delilah and Surl. Surl was glad to pay Stern to teach Glib in accountancy, but soon rebuked any other lessons Stern suggested. *Trying to get more money out of us?* he'd say. Well perhaps this afternoon he'd swallow his words.

As Stern expected Delilah was in the home, knitting a sweater for Colour Gash's fast approaching winter. Though in Colour Gash it did not get cold in winter even in the middle of the day, at night the temperature dropped like a stone.

Delilah was pleased to see Stern at the door, and stood up to let him in. "What brings you here? I haven't seen you for weeks."

"Glib," Stern replied as if that answered everything. He wiped his shoes on the doorstep's footmat and stepped into the comfortable sitting room.

"He is doing well in his studies, isn't he? There's nothing wrong...?"

Stern lounged in a wide chair, stretched his arms across its length and said, "No, there's something very right. That's why I've come. I would like to talk to Surl about it too, if I could."

"Surl is working..."

"It's mid-afternoon. Shouldn't all his bakery work be finished by now?"

"I'll check." Delilah stood up and hurried out the front door. Her face was pinched with worry.

Stern regretted doing this to the woman, but it was something that needed to be done for Glib's sake. They couldn't just stand back and let such innate talent go to waste. Glib needed nurturing, otherwise he was going to turn into a delinquent. *Like my own son*, Stern thought bitterly. But no, Cinch wasn't a delinquent yet. However Stern believed the way he was going he soon would be.

The tutor took time to admire the tasteful decor of Delilah and Surl's sitting room. The lounge he sat upon was padded cloth, decorated with a motif of the sea. *An original touch*, Stern thought, *seeing that Colour Gash is as far away from the sea as you can get*. A matching lounge rested across the room, while the chair Delilah had been knitting in complemented its two larger companions.

A pine coffee table rested in the centre of the sitting room, although admittedly it was battered and worn. Tapestries and paintings, not expensive but tasteful nonetheless, decorated the bare stucco walls of the dwelling. Stucco was the best material for Colour Gash's hot climate - although it did not hold the heat in well during winter nights, in summer it was definitely a boon. Stern found himself wishing he lived as wealthily as Delilah and Surl. Though he made enough to get by from his tutoring,

he always seemed to end up with few chits at the merchant banker's at the end of each month.

Surl entered the sitting room. Acknowledging Stern with a nod of his head he sat in the lounge opposite the tutor. Dough was caked under his fingernails and flour covered his arms up to his elbows. "We don't often see you here. Not after the last time you came and recommended advanced tutoring for the boy."

"I'm only trying to do what's best for Glib."

"What's best for your purse," Surl retorted.

"Hm. Well. Maybe. But I've come here to speak to you about Glib again today. The boy is a talent - we can't let him go to waste. He is one of the most intelligent students I have ever seen."

"You've told us this before. What do you think makes him a talent this time?"

"This afternoon I taught Glib in magic - not detailed stuff mind you, just the basics. I told him about remnant magic, and that I know a few spells including the *globes of wrath*. He was able to recite the remnants for the *globes of wrath* instantly."

"Probably cheated. Probably looked them up in a book. And why are you teaching him magic anyway? I'm paying you to teach mathematics."

Stern nervously clasped his soft hands. Glib knew everything he needed to know about mathematics - Stern could teach him no further. But if he told Surl that Glib did not need any more tutoring Surl would immediately withdraw him from Stern's care. But as a tutor, *as a teacher*, Stern was oath-bound to tell Surl how his foster-son was progressing. "Glib... is excelling at mathematics. He rushes a little sometimes and makes mistakes, but I believe I can fine hone him until he creates ledgers as perfect as a clerk twice his age."

Surl ran his flour-covered hand down his matted chest. "I run a business. I don't want mistakes. Keep teaching him."

Stern gave a slight bow of acquiescence. "Very well. I will. But I recommend magic lessons for him. He has a talent in the area."

"As I have said before," Surl replied stiffly, "you are employed to tutor Glib in maths, nothing else. If we *did* want our foster-son tutored in other areas we would tell you. Understand?"

Stern's mouth opened and he was about to speak, but Delilah grabbed Surl's arm and dragged him back to a comfortable sitting position. The ridges above her eyes and the lines of her cheeks were pinched with worry. "Surl, give Stern a chance. If he says Glib has a talent-

"You know what sorcerors are like," Surl snapped. "Practising strange rituals and drinking the blood of lambs. I wouldn't be surprised if they sacrificed virgins by the light of the moon."

"Actually sorcerors are-

"Shut up Stern! I know what you're trying to do - you're trying to corrupt Glib. Make him into one of your own evil number. I won't dismiss you from our service - simply because you've done such a good job so far. But be warned, if Glib gets it into his head that he is to become a famous sorceror I won't hesitate to send him to another, more suitable tutor."

Stern became formal, standing up as though he had just been refused by a girl at a promenade ball. "You have made yourself clear. I shall not bother you again. I only thought to ask-

"We appreciate it," Surl said. "But no."

"Thank you for your hospitality. I must go." Stern left the house and stepped

onto the street outside, which was now cooling a little with the approach of evening. Back in the house he could hear Delilah slapping Surl's arm, no doubt berating him for refusing the opportunity Glib had been presented. Surl would soon roll over her though - people like him always did. People like him were not satisfied until they got their own way. People like him could not see anyone else's point of view.

As Stern wandered through the streets he thought of Glib and the spells he had learned. He had just *known* the remnants for the *globes of wrath*. That was one of the strangest occurrences Stern had ever seen. He'd never witnessed anything like it before. Of course, Stern had told him he didn't know the variant with the milk as a remnant. But he did. That variant to the spell had been created by another sorcerer. One of the most powerful sorcerers The States had ever seen.

Chapter 2 - Camaraderie

Cinch was exhausted - he had spent hours teasing squirrels with Glib. Cinch liked his best friend - he didn't fawn like a puppy, followed no one but himself, and liked what he liked and thought '*stuff everyone else.*' That's how Cinch would like to be, but he was blessed (cursed?) with popularity and so had to conform.

His friend had tired and headed back to his bakery home, but Cinch still felt exhilarated in the warm morning air. Some of his friends were waiting for him near the Tower of the Six. He was supposed to be with his friends an hour earlier, but had got so caught up in his game with Glib that he'd almost forgotten about them completely.

Luckily Glib had reminded him just before he was about to go home.

The Tower of the Six was foregrounded with magnificent trained gardens. The architects who designed the Tower had originally wanted a large pond in the foreground, but due to water restrictions in Colour Gash that plan had to be scrapped. They had wanted pines and trained hedges to occupy the foreground, but those plants grew well only in temperate and cooler climates like the Wind Batteredds and Morrow.

However the architects had done a marvellous job with the Tower itself. It reached into the sky and almost threatened to touch the heavens, so tall it was. Four spires, each tipped with a red diamond-shaped arrowhead, pointed at the clouds like guards in salute. Another spire in the centre of the four was much smaller and stumpier than the others. To one side of the Tower more rooms were being added, although the workmen who usually toiled on the scaffolding like ants on cheese were enjoying the public holiday. There was one main entrance to the Tower and two smaller ones. In the recesses of the main entrance statues of the great orators and historians of The States rested in majestic poses, ever-ready to leap to the defence of their nation. The whole vista of the Tower was one of magnificent grandeur.

Cinch's friends stood at the end of the road which led onto the Tower's grounds. The Tower of the Six was a popular meeting place for young people, and lovers as well as friends could be found strolling and laughing through the verdant gardens. Today Cinch's friends did not look very friendly, though.

"Taken a new interest in architecture, have we?" That was Baramny, the boy Cinch had always thought wanted to wrest control of the group out of his grasp. He was a bully and mean, and whenever Glib went near him he usually got a lashing from Baramny's tongue. The worst thing was he matched Cinch for height and over-matched him for size. Usually the other boys in the group stayed clear of him and sided with Cinch, but today they seemed to be siding with Baramny for some reason.

"Spending time with pretty-boy, are we? Felt his butt up in the moon light?"

"Baramny, go away."

Baramny crossed his arms in a defiant gesture. "No, why should I? There's no ban on me standing here. Really there should be a ban on *you* - you hardly spend any time here now. You're probably a faggot."

"Glib's my friend. That's all."

"He's your friend over us."

"He's my best friend. And you should make him your friend as well."

Baramny bridled at Cinch's remark, and the boys behind him looked like dogs snarling to be let off their leashes. Cinch was already beginning to consider escape possibilities. He targeted the weak point in the group. "Con, you know Glib. He's good isn't he?"

Con, a boy who was not much taller than Glib and whose head was covered with a thick mat of black hair, said nothing.

Cinch considered his dwindling possibilities. He either could run away from them and be called a coward or charge right into their ranks and risk a beating. There were six of them - five if he did not include Con. He was certain he could down all of them except Baramny. Individually maybe he could, but with the weight of four other bodies helping Baramny he had no chance. And why was he thinking like this anyway? He was the leader of this group - they should be looking up to *him*.

Cinch strode forward, muscles flexing in his lanky legs and his golden hair whipping in the breeze. It was time to re-stamp his authority.

"You spend too much time with Glib!" Baramny shouted. "And not enough time with us! Admit it, you don't think we're good enough for you. Unlike Glib we're not smart or as good at sport. Unlike Glib we're not pathetic orphans who need pity the way Glib does."

Cinch had thought it would be Baramny who started the fight, but as soon he heard Baramny's comment about orphanage he lost all sense of self. How could he criticise someone just because they had lost their parents when they'd been born? He swiped at Baramny but the punch did not connect. Baramny ducked in low and tackled Cinch. Air exploded from Cinch's lungs and he tried in vain to dislodge his larger assailant. He felt his head crack and his back slam into a rough-hewn wall. Baramny punched him in the stomach once, then another two times. In retaliation Cinch lifted his arms above Baramny's head and brought his fists slamming into the bully's shoulders. Baramny stumbled back with the pain of the blow.

More boys advanced into the fracas, all of them on Baramny's side. Cinch dispatched them one by one, his back against the wall and his fists weaving a deadly path.

Then Baramny was on him again. The bully was unstoppable. An immigrant from Ref, Cinch had known him since he'd been young. Baramny had been a bully as a child. As he grew older Cinch had expected him to grow out of it. But as Cinch felt blow after blow thud into his stomach, he knew Baramny was one of those people who would never grow out of their bullying ways. Cinch felt like vomiting and he wondered how Baramny would react if he did. Probably not well.

Cinch sank into the dirt, protecting his stomach and cowering each time Baramny delivered a savage kick to his body. His back was bruised, his face was bleeding, and he thought that his friends turned enemies had connected several times with his genitals. The other boys were on top of him now, pummeling as though this were the most enjoyable game in the world.

Except Con. Cinch could see Con through the crowd, frightened and worried and alone. He never did think Con would lift a boot against him - but that meant he wouldn't lift a boot to help him either.

Why wasn't anyone helping him? There were people strolling in the gardens of the Tower of the Six, there were people on the road. Maybe this road was too small. Then Cinch thought of what the fight must look like: he was only sixteen. No one would want to intervene to save a sixteen-year-old. Most people probably thought he deserved what he was getting.

"How do you like this?" Baramny yelled. "How does this feel?"

Cinch could only whimper in reply. Red began to weep in front of his eyes. The pain was becoming distant, as though the beating was happening to somebody else. His vision was two circles bordered by black through which he could see his assailants, but faraway as though he were peering into a spyglass. The black closed. His eyes opened, then closed again. The way he was feeling he could welcome the blackness forever.

* * * *

Glib thanked the lady for her custom and counted her change. The lady paid Glib barely a sideways glance before she turned and headed out the door. It was the bakery's busy tiffin period. Glib yawned and sat behind the counter near Abbey, who was consuming a custard and vanilla slice. "Mind if I have a bit of that?"

Abbey wiped crumbs from her mouth and broke off a piece of slice for her co-worker. Glib took it and bit into the deep, rich custard. Okay, so there were *some*

good things about working in the shop.

Despite only having worked in the shop for four hours Glib's shoulders ached. He had started in the shop at dawn this morning when the first rush of customers came in, mucked around with Cinch for a while then returned to work at the bakery for the tiffin period. He already wanted to get away from the shop and not come back until this evening.

"How is your tutoring going?"

"Well. Stern is starting to teach me about magic. But don't tell Surl that - he's not supposed to know."

Abbey spared her friend an empathetic look. "I won't tell him. I know how I'd feel if I told someone I was visiting Sarria's bordello and they doxed me in."

"You're *what*?"

Abbey laughed and leaned back in her chair. "I'm only going there to learn how to put on make-up. Not to become one of the 'ladies' - or use their services."

Glib wiped his brow in mock relief. "That's lucky. For a while there you had me worried." Glib paused. "But why do you need to know how to put make-up on anyway?"

"I need to get boys to like me, don't I? I'm not going to find a husband or get a boyfriend if I stay looking like this." Abbey turned the flats of her palms towards her face. "I'm ugly."

"You're not ugly. You're... very pretty in fact."

Glib didn't like to admit that his and Abbey's relationship had went from one of cold-hearted hostility when Glib first started working in the shop to kind-hearted tolerance. But that didn't mean Glib was going to allow himself to like her - she was Surl's pet, and as such deserved no favors.

"... The little creases around my eyes. You see those? Boys won't like them, will they? And see, there's little pimply things around my lips."

"I can't see them."

"Look closely. They're like goosebumps - except they're red."

"They probably *are* goosebumps." Glib was glad he had not heard *all* the features of the imperfections on Abbey's face. And if this was what girls were always like he didn't plan on getting married anytime soon.

Abbey frowned and pouted. "And I've got big hips."

"No you haven't."

"Glib, *I have*."

Glib took a bite of his custard and vanilla slice and spoke around his chewing. "This is going to be difficult for me to say this, but you're pretty. All right? There are plenty of boys who like you." Glib scowled to make sure Abbey did not get the wrong idea. "I'm just not one of them."

"Okay, if you say that boys like me, you'll be able to name one who does."

"I can't tell you that myself." Glib scowled again, more angry this time. "You know I'm not that popular. But take it from me - you're pretty, okay?"

"But I'm not beautiful," Abbey replied sullenly.

"Okay! You're beautiful!"

The same girl Glib had served a few days ago entered the bakery, the one Glib had been attracted to. The one Abbey seemed to have something against.

Glib stepped up to serve her. There was no way he was going to let Abbey butt him out of the picture. The girl selected half a dozen loaves of bread which were set on racks against the wall of the bakery and spread them on the shop's counter.

Then she observed the desserts in the glass display cases.

"May I help you?" Glib asked. It took all of his calm for his voice not to crack.

"Why don't you have canolli here? I love canolli."

"Canolli... what are they?"

Abbey swooped in for the rescue. "This bakery has a trade deal with the bakery near Parc Güell. Generally we stock cream products and Parc Güell stocks the chocolate."

"Oh. May I have an apple charlotte then?"

Abbey moved to filled the customer's request.

"I was speaking to the boy," the girl said pointedly. "He was here first to serve me."

Instead of cleaning the shop and doing all the odd jobs that need to be done when there are no customers to serve, Abbey returned to the seat where she had been resting. She stared at the girl icily.

Glib felt like an imbecile. Surl had talked about their contract with the Parc Güell bakery *hundreds* of times. Now he looked like an idiot in front of the girl he was serving and an ignoramus as well. She probably didn't even think that he was part of the baker's family - she probably thought he only worked here.

"You are handsome."

The girl's three words were just as effective as a blow from the flat of a sword - they mentally knocked him off balance and made him search for some riposte. Perhaps the girl was trying to make fun of him. As he modestly accepted her praise he did not notice Abbey's stare turn from ice to fire.

The girl was not making fun of him. When he looked at her she had a demure smile on her face, and a nervous cast as though she were waiting for agreement or approval. Or was that just the masquerade she was trying to present to him?

"I'd... like an answer."

Glib was so tense he even forgot to say sorry. "You're very pretty. Your face... it's so smooth." Glib almost choked over what he said next. "I would like to kiss your face."

Glib's words were enough flattery to make the girl almost swoon over. *But*, Glib thought as he waited for the girl's response, *it's not flattery. It's the truth. Maybe I should tell her that it's the truth? Maybe-* It took him a few seconds to realise that the girl was searching for but unable to come up with an answer. So he said, "Would you like to have a late tiffin at Forest Park? We have bread - we have desserts. I can get some cold meat from the butcher's down the street and some fruit juice from the closest tavern."

"Ale. Ale would be better."

"Okay - ale." Glib's worry and nervousness was turning into triumph. He'd never kissed a girl before - he wondered what it felt like. He'd never had any form of relationship with any girl except Abbey, but his relationship with her had always been filled with enmity. "When shall I meet you?"

"When do you finish working here?"

"I'm not supposed to be finished until this afternoon, but Abbey can help me." Glib turned to the Commonlander. "Abbey, can you?"

"Yes. I can." Abbey's teeth gritted against each other.

"At midday then," Glib continued, "at the entrance to Forest Park. How does that sound?"

"I'll see you then." The girl paid her chinks for the bread and her apple

charlotte and headed for the door. She turned just before she reached the exit. "Oh, I forgot to ask your name."

"Glib Baker. Yours?"

"Girl," the girl replied. She smiled. "My parents don't have much imagination."

Glib stood at the entrance to Forest Park like a gentleman waiting to escort a lady to a dance. He was dressed in the finest clothes he owned, a pair of long black pants, a buttoned white shirt and a long-sleeved black shirt over it. Much different from his flour covered pantaloons and creased white shirt of a couple of hours ago. He was thankful to Abbey for helping him. If Surl entered the shop and saw Glib not working there, Abbey was going to say that he was relieving himself in the lavatory. Surl would appear in the shop no more than two or three times.

At his feet on Forest Park's emerald grass were spread two bottles of ale, a beaker of fruit juice and a selection of cold meats he had filched from Delilah's kitchen. Delilah would get angry when she saw that the meats were gone - and probably suspect him - but as long as he didn't confess his hide would be saved from a tanning. He had been wondering about Girl ever since she had left the bakery. What was her last name? That thought was the main one which spun in Glib's mind. If he got hold of her last name he would be able to tell what sort of family she came from, if she was rich or poor or somewhere in between. His second thought (one that occurs to all males despite race, age and colour) was of how she looked beneath her clothes. Despite trying to flay the thought from his mind (he wanted to think of Girl as a person, not as a body) he couldn't help it being an omnipresent spectre.

Glib straightened from his reverie when he saw Girl approaching. She had changed well - whereas this morning she had been dressed in comfortable and functional day clothes, now she wore a long summery flower-print dress which swirled about her legs and showed off her slim and attractive figure. She carried a basket filled with bread under one arm. Glib could also see the large apple charlotte she had purchased in the basket, its lid sliding off the cream.

"I couldn't think of a more perfect day for having tiffin in Forest Park," she said as soon as she got close enough to Glib to talk.

"Me neither," Glib replied. He offered Girl his arm and tried not to shake.

"Shall we walk?"

"If you want."

Glib picked up the foodstuffs on the ground, and the pair strolled arm-in-arm under the metal frame archway which signalled the entrance to Forest Park. On either side of them deciduous trees dropped leaves as brown as the crusts on the bread Girl carried. It was a credit to Forest Park's gardeners that they could get deciduous trees to grow in such a hot climate.

The road Glib and Girl walked on was cobbled so well that the joins in the cobbles could hardly be seen. It led straight from the entrance to Forest Park all the way up a mild incline before it reached the crest of a small hill and descended to another entrance to Forest Park on the hill's opposite side. Glib veered off the road to the right and led Girl towards a small rise where a large shade tree waited to protect parkgoers from the sun's heat.

Once Glib and Girl reached the tree they realised it was casting its shadow towards the back of the park, where there was no interesting scenery. If they wanted an enjoyable view while they ate they would have to sit in the sun. Glib did so, and Girl soon followed suit.

"Thank you for inviting me for tiffin," Girl told her companion. "I did not expect to be invited."

"I wouldn't have invited you had you not said that I was handsome. I would have been too scared."

"But I'm here now. And that's what matters."

Glib broke a piece of bread from one of the loaves that Girl had been carrying and laid two pieces of corned beef across it. "I'm sorry... I forgot butter."

"It doesn't matter at all. I don't really like butter anyway."

Glib chewed his sandwich in silence for a moment, then started and began to prepare one for Girl.

"Thank you," Girl said, seemingly surprised at Glib preparing her meal for her. "I didn't expect to be treated so well while I was here."

Glib ignored Girl's gratitude. "You didn't tell me your last name when we were in the bakery. What is it?"

"Chandler - but my parents are not chandlers. My grandparents were - they worked their way up from making ropes for ships until they had a profitable mercantile venture. My parents are merchants, traders. What about yours?"

"I don't really have parents. My mother died when I was born and... I don't know what happened to my father. My two cousins look after me. They own the bakery where I work."

Girl caressed Glib's face. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

Glib looked away. "No. You didn't. I'm used to being asked questions like that."

"I truly am sorry."

"How about we get tucked into some of that dessert?"

"Sounds good."

The two of them drank and ate in silence, Glib trying not to look at his companion more often than was polite. She seemed to be enjoying the meal so far, but perhaps she was just being complaisant. Perhaps...

A figure approached Glib and Girl. Glib immediately recognised the figure as Cinch. Glib stood and ran down the hill. Blood was smeared across Cinch's face, one of his arms dangled uselessly and he climbed the hill with a severe limp. "What happened?" Glib demanded.

"My *friends*... Baramny. They did this." Cinch collapsed on the ground.

"Why did you come here?" Glib asked as he knelt down to help his friend.

"Why didn't you go straight to your father?"

Cinch gave Glib no reply. He had blacked out.

Glib and Girl carried Cinch between them. Cinch still had not woken up. He looked like he had been in battle, not just a fight with friends. Friends wouldn't hurt one of their own so badly. *Baramny*. As soon as Glib thought of the bully he knew he had something to do with it. He was the type of boy to do something like this - and get other people to egg him on.

Girl looked alarmed at having to carry a bloody body. Already her dress was stained red in half a dozen places, and she had to give up her basket at the park to carry Cinch. It would probably be gone by the time they returned to the park to retrieve it.

"Where are we going?" Girl could not help keeping the urgency out of her voice.

"My home. Surl. When he was younger he fought in wars. He was a surgeon. When he was eighteen he joined the Outlandian army - it paid well, and he planned on opening a business once he'd served his time." Glib spoke between harsh puffs. "I can't think of anyone better to take him to."

As Glib and his companion carried Cinch through Colour Gash's streets people stared at them. But none came to help. Even a pair of city guards who were on patrol paid them little attention before they decided the matter was not important enough for them to let off their talking. Glib felt a stitch beginning to spike below his left lung.

Glib's arms were aching by the time he reached home; he had no doubt that Girl's arms were aching as well. He was worried about his friend. He could not hear him breathing, and he *still* hadn't recovered from fainting in the park. He dragged Cinch over his home's doorstep and into the foyer. Delilah and Surl were in the kitchen eating lunch.

"Surl!" Glib lurched forward with his burden and almost dropped Cinch. Then he held his friend so Surl could see exactly what shape he was in. "Some boys beat him up."

Surl immediately got up. He laid his hands on the table. "Delilah, get towels soaked in warm water - and a bowl of hot water." He turned to Glib. "How long ago did this happen?"

"I don't know. I was at Forest Park having tiffin with Girl," he indicated his friend, "and then he just came. He said that his friends bashed him."

"I bet Baramny was amongst that lot." Glib's grim expression was all Surl needed to know his assumption was true. "A good lad, but uses violence to express his emotions too much." Without missing a beat in his speech Surl said, "Set him on the bed in the guest room. He needs to lie down."

As if to agree with that fact Cinch's head slumped forward and he moaned. Glib dragged his friend like a heavy sack into the guest room; Girl followed quietly. No one had introduced her yet - not properly - but politeness had not yet crossed Glib's mind. There were other, more important matters to attend.

The guest room was dark and smelled musty. The room's shutters were closed and the sheets which lay on the bed had not been aired for over a month. Dust motes floated in the air like dandelion seeds. The bed's pillow was not fluffed but Glib did not have enough time to prepare the bed for comfort as he lay Cinch down. Delilah entered the room and set a jug of hot water and wet towels on the dutches which sat near the entrance of the room. "I'll get Abbey. She'll want to know how Cinch is faring. It won't matter if we close the bakery for the rest of the afternoon."

"Get Stern as well," Glib added. "I don't think he knows about this yet."

Almost as soon as Delilah left the room Surl entered. He snatched up one of the towels on the dutches and strode to the bed. He knelt by Cinch's side and with gentle care began to wipe the excess blood from Cinch's face. "We need to know just how bad his injuries are," he explained. As Surl wiped away Cinch's blood Glib and Girl clearly saw the cuts and wounds on his face. The incisions were thin and fine as if they had been sliced there by a razor.

Bruises littered his face - Glib had a strange thought that his friend looked like a bearing plum tree.

Surl stripped off Cinch's shirt and felt the boy's torso. Glib thought that Cinch might have winced once, but knew that could easily be his imagination. The bruises here were easily worse than those on his face - most of them were at least twice as large and there was almost as much purple and red skin as white.

"He's got two broken ribs," Surl said matter-of-factly. "Perhaps three."

"Will he be okay?" Those were the first timid words Girl had spoke since she entered the house, but Surl answered her politely.

"At the moment I can't say."

Abbey entered the room, rushing with her skirts held in her hands. "Cinch! Is he well? Is-"

Surl turned to Abbey. "I suggest you quieten down. Cinch is sick - he can't have loud noises disturbing him."

Abbey lowered her head demurely. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind." Surl reached for Cinch's pulse, then checked his heartbeat. He lay his head on the boy's bruised and bleeding chest and listened. "His breathing is shallow."

"Is that good?" Glib asked.

"No."

"What about his pulse?"

Surl leaned back on the balls of his knees and braced his aching shoulders. "I can hardly feel it."

Girl cleared her throat to gain everybody's attention. "I... think I should leave. If you don't mind."

Glib nodded and waved Girl away, not really paying attention to her words. "I'm sorry about this. I'll see you next time."

Girl bowed her acquiescence and retreated from the guest room's door. Glib watched her as she left. So much for a perfect tiffin.

Stern stormed into the room. "Where is my son?" As soon as he saw Cinch resting semi-naked in the guest bed he rushed to him, kneeling down and clasping his hands. "I'm so sorry, my son. Are you all right?" Without saying anything more he gently disengaged his hands from Cinch's and clasped them in each other. Then he began to pray...

Cinch still had not come out of his coma. He lay on the bed, his hands resting gently on his chest. He looked like a dead king about to be prepared for burial. He looked as though he had already lost his battle for life. For once Cinch looked more pallid than his friend. Cinch had always tanned nicely in the sun, while Glib - he either got sunburnt or stayed pale. There was no in-between for Glib.

Glib could hear the murmur of voices coming from the sitting room. He recognised Stern's voice choked with worry, and Surl's low rumble. Occasionally he heard Abbey's husky voice or Delilah's concerned one. They had eaten supper and retired to the sitting room to make sense of what happened. Glib had volunteered to stay in the guest room and maintain a vigil over Cinch. There were many questions to be asked, most of which could only be answered when Cinch awakened. If he ever awakened...

Baramny had something to do with Cinch's injuries. Glib would like Baramny to be here now so he could fight him then show the bully *exactly* what he had done. He would also like to know why Cinch had found them in Forest Park instead of going to his father or searching for help.

Cinch stirred. Glib leaned forward attentively, searching for signs of animation in his friend's body. But instead of Cinch awakening or his body showing signs of life, his chest suddenly started to rise and fall in rapid, short bursts. Glib started. Surl had

told him to report any changes in Cinch's condition, however... Glib rose and caressed a lantern which rested on the dutchess. He opened one of the dutchess' drawers and took a candle which he knew to be kept there for visitors. Then he headed out of the guest room and into the kitchen. He found a jar of honey and several herbs that Delilah used whenever anyone in her family got influenza or whooping cough. *Remnants... Remnants...* Glib thought of the remnants needed to complete the spell as he searched for them. *Fire breath.* It was one of the most common spells used in The States, and Glib was surprised that Stern had not yet tried it.

Once he was sure he had all the remnants he stood in the door of the sitting room. "Stern, may I speak to you please?"

Stern stood immediately and walked out of the room. The pair spoke in soft undertones so the other people in the house would not hear. "*Fire breath,*" Glib said. "His breathing is getting worse."

"That spell can have an adverse effect. It can do the opposite of-

Glib pointed towards the guest room. "Cinch's breathing is becoming more ragged. He could die. Magic has a better chance of helping him than physics or science. I need the runes for the spell."

"If you must. I have a rune book in the bag I brought over. I'll get it now."

Glib waited by the guest room's door for Stern. Only a few minutes passed before Stern returned, carrying a large rune book under his left arm. He placed the book reverently in Glib's hands.

Glib thanked his tutor for the book then entered the guest room. He turned and held up his finger at the last moment when he realised Stern was following him. "Uh! Privacy."

Stern graciously acceded to Glib's wish. Glib shut the door firmly behind him and walked to the bed where Cinch was resting. What would Girl think of what he was doing now? He was trying to save a life, so he supposed she would think good things. But sorcerers had long been shunned in The States. Glib hoped that she wasn't too worried about their interrupted tiffin, but Glib could do nothing about it and if she didn't accept his concern for his friend... Glib placed Girl firmly out of his mind and, taking hold of the candle he had found before, walked to the lantern on the dutchess. He placed the candle's wick in the lantern's fire. The wick lit instantly; Glib walked back to the bed, the candle's flame winking.

Cinch's breathing was still harsh. One of his hands had fallen from his chest and now rested by his side, his fingers giving an occasional twitch. Sweat beaded his skin. Glib smeared honey over Cinch's chest, then sprinkled the herbs he had selected from the kitchen onto the honey. He set the rune book on the side of the bed, opened it to the page which described the chant for *fire breath* and began to murmur the words. As he did so he tipped the flaming candle over Cinch's chest so that wax dripped into the honey and congealed with it. The candle's flame licked Cinch's chest.

Cinch moaned in his sleep and swatted at the candle. Looking down, Glib saw the scorch mark which had formed where he placed the candle. Cinch's breathing was slightly better, but his skin was not meant to burn. The runes were supposed to protect his skin. Which meant Glib had not chanted the runes properly. But at least he had improved his friend's breathing a little.

Glib extinguished the candle between his thumb and forefinger and walked to the guest room's door. When he opened it he saw Stern waiting outside. "How is he?" Stern asked.

"Somewhat better. But I burned him."

Stern raised his left eyebrow.

"Not severely," Glib explained. "But I should not have burnt him at all." Putting his own anger behind him Glib said, "You can maintain vigil over him now. I'm tired."

Stern barely waited for Glib to finish his sentence before he strode into the guest room. Glib stood outside the room for a moment, confused as to what to do. He could go into the sitting room and speak with Surl, Delilah and Abbey, or he could go to bed. Glib felt pain - and anger - when he realised he was not as good at magic as he first thought. Endless days in the bakery were all his future held... For Glib going to bed began to sound like a very good idea.

This was the second morning since Cinch had been in his coma. Glib kept a close watch on his friend, sponging his forehead with a wet rag. Surl had acceded to Glib's wishes that he be left to look after Cinch, but if his friend showed no sign of improvement by tomorrow he would have to return to the bakery.

"Glib, you have a visitor." Delilah's melodious voice sang through the home.

"Who is it?" Glib called back.

There was a pause and the murmur of voices, then Delilah said, "It's Con. One of Cinch's friends."

"Let him in."

Glib waited patiently for Con to enter the room. He squeezed the sponge he had been holding and set it in a tray by the guest room's bed. When he turned Con was standing in the doorway. Even though Con was small his frame blocked most of the light which came into the room.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

"I thought I might come and see how Cinch is doing. I went to Stern's, but..."

"He told you to come here?"

"Yeah."

Glib stroked his friend's straw-coloured hair. "Before Cinch went into his coma, he said his friends beat him up. You're one of his friends, aren't you?"

"I didn't hurt him! It was Baramny... He was getting angry because Cinch was spending so much time with you, and he encouraged Cinch's other friends..."

"Baramny was angry because Cinch was spending too much time with me?"

Con remained silent, as if to speak would be to admit his guilt in the matter.

Glib indicated Cinch. "Baramny did this because of me?"

Con jerked his head up and down.

Glib swallowed. He looked at Cinch then at Con. He swallowed again. "So this is all my fault."

Con replied timidly. "You didn't hurt him."

Glib watched Con in the darkness. "Where did this happen?" he demanded.

"The Tower of the Six. Baramny started it, then the others... I didn't touch him, honest. He's been too good a friend."

Glib rested his chin on his fist and ignored Con's words. Stern's tutelage hut was closer to the Tower of the Six than Forest Park, and the bakery was closer still. "So you didn't hurt him?"

"No! He might not be my *best* friend, but he doesn't tease me like the other boys. And he defends me when he can."

"Sounds like Cinch," Glib whispered. He took the sponge he had been holding before Con entered the room, squeezed it and wiped it across Cinch's brow. The

sponge's moisture mingled with the sweat on Cinch's forehead. "Thanks, Con. But you can go now, if you want to. Unless you'd rather stay here."

"No... I'll go. I've got people... waiting." Con held the side of the door, said, "I hope Cinch gets better," then turned and left the room.

Glib was left alone with only Cinch and the darkness for companionship. His lips pressed together, and he crumpled the sponge he held. Cinch had been beaten up because of him...

Cinch was awakening. Glib sat over his friend, anticipation clear on his face. No one else was in the guest room, which made Glib glad. He wanted to witness Cinch's recovery himself, not have half a dozen people staring over his shoulder. Cinch's eyes fluttered open - though Cinch's eyes were blue like the colour of ice they looked dark now - and moved from side to side. "What time is it?"

"It's night-time," Glib replied. "A couple of hours past sup."

Cinch yawned then caressed his head. "It hurts."

"I guess it would. Do you remember what happened?" Cinch's vacant look was all Glib needed to know that his friend didn't remember anything. "You've been in a coma for three days."

"Three days?" Cinch propped himself on his pillow and laughed. "I've been asleep for three days? What a good way to get out of work."

"Not really. Take a look at your chest, Cinch."

While Cinch pulled back the guest bed's sheets Glib moved to the lantern on the dutchess and increased the flame. Then he lit two candles to add to lantern's glow. He returned to the bed and snatched a glance under the covers where Cinch was already looking. Many of Cinch's bruises had turned from blue or red to yellow. Every now and then a brown ring surrounded the bruises, showing their severity. "Your friends did this."

"My friends? They wouldn't-."

"Baramny."

At the mention of Baramny's name Cinch started a little. He clenched his fist "I think I'm beginning to remember."

"About the fight?"

"Baramny was the one who started it."

"I already know that."

"He got my other friends to beat up on me, didn't he? No wonder I lost."

Cinch held his right arm in the lantern-light and flexed it. His fingers answered stiffly to his instruction. "I could beat Baramny one-on-one anytime. But with his friends..."

It was fortunate that Cinch had not made the connection that the reason he was beaten up was because of Glib. Glib suspected Baramny told him the reason, but that would have been just before the fight and Cinch probably had a foggy memory of that time. Glib considered telling Cinch why the fight had erupted. But telling Cinch that would be like admitting he was somehow inferior to his friend. Telling Cinch that would be like admitting he needed his friend to defend him.

"I'm going to get back at those bastards."

Glib was surprised by the venom in Cinch's voice. His friend was so easy-going, so relaxed. The voice Cinch had just used was so different to his usual self. "Be careful. They beat you up once - there's no reason why they shouldn't beat you up again."

"The city watch?"

Glib grimaced angrily when he remembered how the watch had passed himself and Girl when they were carrying Cinch. "What are they going to do? They're corrupt. The only way you're going to get protection from them is if you pay them a couple of gold coins."

"Still..."

Wanting to move the subject on quickly Glib said, "I'm glad you're okay. For a while there you had us all worried."

"My father?"

"He was just as worried as the rest of us - if not *more* worried."

"Where is he now?"

"In bed, I imagine. He stayed for the past three nights, but knew he was only going to become more worried as days passed by, so he returned home. He needs to work, you know."

"Whatever."

"But he'll be glad you're awake," Glib added.

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I'm hungry. Can you get me something to eat?"

"Sure." Glib stood and walked from the guest room. He couldn't bring himself to say *why* Baramny had beat up his friend. Glib only hoped Cinch did not discover the reason himself. Walking into the kitchen and finding some left-over porridge and honey slice, Glib scooped the mash into a bowl and returned to Cinch. As he set the bowl on Cinch's lap he realised there was another good consequence of his friend recovering. He could again concentrate on courting Girl.

Chapter 3 - Kiss

Parc Güell was much different from Forest Park. Whereas Forest Park had majestic trees and wide expanses of lawn, Parc Güell had neatly manicured hedges and pebbled paths. It was the perfect place for a romantic meeting. Glib and Girl strolled along one of the paths. Glib was glad to be out of the guest room for a day - and glad that Surl had given him the day off. Though Surl had been angry when he discovered that Abbey was covering for him the day Cinch was beaten up, under the circumstances Surl forgave him and allowed him to start with a clean slate.

"How is Cinch?" Girl interrupted the silence which had punctuated the walk for the past several minutes.

"He's getting better. He still can't walk yet - but Surl is confident that in a few weeks he should be back to normal."

"That's good."

Glib had petitioned Delilah to give him a haircut before today. His neck-length hair was now a manageable scruff which did not need constant combing to be kept under control. Glib thought that Girl approved of the haircut.

"He is a good boy, Cinch. I would like to have a brother like him."

"Brother?" Glib looked straight ahead and tried not to scowl. "You don't mean 'boyfriend'?"

Girl laughed. "Oh no. Not someone like him. He'd hardly have any time for me, would he?"

"I... guess not." In his heart Glib rose a fist in triumph.

"Where shall we go now? We've seen most of the park. I know - the Tower of the Six! That's where heaps of people our age go."

"I don't know, Girl. There's a lot of people..."

Girl smacked Glib on the arm. "Nonsense. Come on - it'll be fun. Can you think of a *better* place to go?"

Glib's pause was costly. Girl grabbed him by the arm and dragged him towards Parc Güell's entrance. "We can see Parc Güell at the front of the Tower anyway, where all the gardens are. I don't see why we *shouldn't* go there."

"Is everything going well with your family?" Glib asked. "Is-"

"Yes! Come on!"

Girl dragged her companion out of Parc Güell and onto the street. Together they rushed through Color Gash, Girl barging ahead of her friend. They avoided Stern's tutelage hut and the bakery, instead cutting a diagonal path across the city which made them arrive at the Tower of the Six much sooner than if they had taken the main boulevards.

As always the gardens in front of the Tower were filled with young people. Couples and groups strolled through the gardens, talking and laughing with each other about matters of little importance. Girl walked in front of Glib, guiding him. Though the architects of the Tower of the Six had not been able to place a lake in the garden like they had wanted, rocks and cactuses were strewn tastefully around more leafy plants. We come from a dry environment, they had thought, so why not plant a garden that reflects Color Gash's climate?

Girl led her friend through crowds of people, always heading in the direction of the Tower. The only times Glib got this close to the Tower was when his foster-parents decided to have a picnic or take him here on an excursion. For Glib, going to the Tower of the Six alone was dangerous. No one paid any attention to him now. He was with Girl and so was not a target. Girl was in effect providing him with a 'shield' from the more popular boys in Color Gash.

"Have you been inside the Tower?"

"When I was a baby, I think. But I can't remember anything about it."

"We're going to have to take you back in there, then, aren't we?"

"I don't know if I really want-"

Girl jerked Glib's hand, causing him to stumble forward. "Hurry."

As they approached the Tower's main entrance Glib felt as if the structure might swallow him. "I feel bad about Cinch. He's still back at my place - and he can't even walk yet. He must be bored out of his skull."

"No excuses, Glib. Your foster-father *agreed* for you to have the day off."

They stepped into the entrance of the Tower. The sculptors of orators, statesmen and politicians, which Glib had only ever seen from a way off, seemed to come alive. The top-most statue, set on a ledge yards above the ground, was holding a sword; immediately below that statue was another with its fist punched towards the sky.

"We can't go in there," Girl said, quickly pointing to the main entrance. "Well, we can if you want, but... all you see is the foyer and the halls to different politicians' quarters."

Glib was a little confused. "Where do we go, then?"

"There." Girl pointed to a dark culvert which hid to one side of the entrance.

"Are we *allowed* in there?"

"Of course we are." Girl smoothed the dress she was wearing and said,

"You've never checked out Color Gash from the observation platform?"

Glib responded, "I can't remember ever going up there, no."

"Where have you *been* these past fifteen years?"

"My foster-parents might have checked it out when I was a baby-"

"Yeah yeah. Whatever you reckon... Come on!" Glib felt Girl snatch his hand and again found himself stumbling behind her. Girl led him into the culvert and through a large doorway. Stairs led upwards - the only illumination Glib could see was from slits in the Tower's wall.

"The observation platform was built fifteen years ago as a gift from the Six to the citizens of Color Gash. You're the one who gets tutored - you should know Color Gash's history better than I do. Are you sure you actually know who the *Six* are?"

"Rulers of Color Gash," Glib answered quickly.

"Ruling *council* of Color Gash."

"Whatever."

By the time Glib reached the top of the stairs his legs were aching. He bent down to touch his toes, then walked towards the wide slit in the Tower's wall that Girl was pointing to. Glib peered through the slit. The view of Color Gash was magnificent. The city was covered by a thin haze - as all cities are when viewed from a great height - and Glib could see all the way to the city's extremities. "It's... pretty," Glib said.

"I thought you might like it."

"Thank you... for taking me here."

There was no one else on the observation platform. Girl came forward and Glib felt her take his hand. He squeezed her hand gently and worried that his palm might become sweaty.

"Are you glad you came here?"

"Yes. Very much."

Girl suddenly disengaged her hand from Glib's and put her arm around his waist. "Do you have any way to repay me?"

"I have an idea in mind, but I don't know if you'll actually like it."

"Tell me your idea and I'll judge for myself."

"I would like your address. I want to see you again - regularly. When we had tiffin at Forest Park, we were interrupted... I couldn't spend time with you then. I didn't have any control over-"

Girl placed her index finger onto Glib's lips, ran it over his mouth and chin and onto her own lips. "Quiet. I would love to give you my address. Can you remember it without having a charcoal pen or ink?"

"I can remember anything you tell me."

"Three hundred and eighteen Pedables Street - or Strada Pedables as my snooty father likes to call it."

"Isn't that the street where all those tanneries, abattoirs are? Those sort of places?"

"As I said, my parents are traders. They own one of those businesses."

"Which one?"

"Chandler Factories."

"Your parents *own* Chandler Factories?"

"Mm-hh. My grandparents were its founders."

"That would..." Glib shook his head and stared at the ground. "I don't think I should be seen with you."

"Why not?"

"Chandler Factories is... huge. You must be rich. And your parents wouldn't like me courting you, either. They probably want you to marry a rich merchant's son."

Girl squeezed Glib's waist. "I can associate with - and marry - any man I choose. Now be quiet. Let's enjoy the view."

Glib was about to protest, but Girl cinched her arm around his waist so tight that he could not escape, and watched Color Gash with him. People completed their chores for the day while Glib and Girl watched them from above. Girl's arm stayed around Glib's waist - and they stayed watching Color Gash until dark.

At least Cinch's room smelled fresher. He lay in bed asleep while Glib and Surl watched him. "He's a tough lad," Surl said. "You should learn a few lessons from him."

Glib said nothing. He waited until Surl had left the room then walked to Cinch's bed. The curtains were drawn back and fresh light shone into the room. Delilah had even opened the window a little so Cinch could breathe clean air. Glib would like to wake up Cinch but was afraid that if he did his friend would only acquire more damage than he had already obtained. He waited until Cinch awoke by himself.

Blery eyed, Cinch said, "I'm still at your place?"

"Uh-huh. You still can't walk, remember."

Cinch, who had been propped on his elbows, slumped back on the bed.

"Damn."

Glib took a beaker of water from the bedside and poured Cinch a glass. "Are you feeling any better today?"

Cinch considered the question then looked at his bare chest. "At least my bruises appear to be healing." He took a sip of his water, ran his tongue along his lips and said, "So, what's new?"

"Nothing much. I've got some information that might interest you." Before Cinch could reply Glib said, "Girl is the daughter of the owners of Chandler Factories."

"No." Cinch didn't need to say anything more to show he didn't believe his friend.

"She told me herself."

"She's lying."

"She gave me her address. If I turn up at Chandler Factories and ask to see her..."

"Perhaps she's not their daughter at all. If you turn up the workers might just give you odd looks and throw you out of the building."

"Possibly..." Glib admitted. He didn't want to concede that what his friend was saying might be the truth.

"How is my father?" Cinch asked the question stiffly.

"He is well. He is tutoring again, and as soon as you are better he says he's going to double your tutoring time."

"Double? He knows I'm no good."

"I can't make his decisions, Cinch."

Wanting to move the subject quickly along, Cinch rested his elbows on his pillow and flexed his right arm. His face was set in an intense scowl. "I'm not going to

get beaten up again. Not *ever*."

For the first time ever in their friendship Glib was frightened by Cinch's words. Cinch - the one who was so easy-going. The one who was not supposed to make vows like this - that was Glib's job. "Be careful what you promise," Glib warned.

"Baramny. He hurt me. And his friends. Even Con, that whining-"

"Con didn't hurt you. He came here and told me about what happened." Glib omitted telling Cinch *why* the fight started.

"I'm going to get back at them - *all* of them. It might take me a long time but I'll do it. They're going to regret they ever hurt me."

"I'll be by your side if you need me," Glib said. Being by his friend's side was the least he could do, especially after Cinch taking such a beating in his name.

"Thank you. I appreciate your support." Cinch sat up, albeit with pain. Then he swung his legs onto the floor. His legs were bruised and scabbed and pallid after spending so many days under a sheet, but beneath Cinch's skin muscles flexed as they prepared to support the weight of their owner. "The only reason I couldn't walk yesterday was because the bruises in my legs were still too sore," Cinch explained. Glib thought that maybe his friend was fooling himself but said nothing as Cinch tried to stand. A grunt of pain came from Cinch's mouth and he wilted towards the floor. Glib was beside his friend immediately, ducking his right shoulder under Cinch's left arm and grabbing his friend's left wrist. Grimacing in pain, Glib lifted his friend until he was standing.

"Thanks," Cinch said. "Sorry."

Cinch began to limp across the floor. His legs almost crumpled each time, but he clenched his teeth and focused on the door of the room. Glib stayed beside him, not saying anything but giving encouragement merely by his presence. His friend was making it to the guest room's door, although he was going very slowly. Finally they were standing just outside the guest room in the home's small hallway.

"That will do for now, Glib. I'm getting too tired." Glib gently let go of Cinch, who lay on the floor - he still didn't have enough strength to walk by himself.

"You made it."

"Barely."

"But the important thing is that you got here."

Cinch lay panting for several minutes. Glib didn't want to say anything, afraid that if Cinch answered it would make his recovery slower. He stood in the hallway with his hands on his hips, waiting on Cinch as though he were a servant and his friend the master. He was glad Delilah or Surl didn't come into the hallway, because they would have almost certainly condemned him for disturbing Cinch's rest. When Cinch finally did look up at Glib, there was burning passion in his eyes. "I *will* get better, Glib. I *will* get better."

Cinch walked. Actually, the better description probably would be, 'Cinch limped.' He gripped a crutch under both armpits and moved tentatively forward like a monkey with the knuckles of its front hands. Glib stood close beside his friend. The streets of Color Gash were awash with autumn color and the Emperor Day's festival. While The States had no emperor of its own, the festival had spread from the kingdom of Ref. Though Ref was known as a kingdom the *ruler* of Ref was called the Emperor, and was closest to absolute power as any ruler on the Peninsula could get. The Emperor's Day festival had almost stripped the traditional States holidays for splendor - and now that Color Gash was in the last month of autumn its citizens would have to wait at least until

October before the fruits and vegetables they ate became as fresh as they were now. The war with Tern would not help, either.

"Pity I couldn't be well to enjoy today," Cinch said.

"That's the way life goes," Glib replied. "You can't expect to be well for *every* major event of the year."

"I guess not."

Cinch hobbled along for a few more moments before announcing, "My arms are getting sore."

"If you want me to help-"

"No, no. I'll manage." Clenching his teeth Cinch continued along Color Gash's packed-earth street. In a way it was good they were traveling on packed-earth - the crutches had a chance to bite into the street and grip the dirt more firmly.

Glib watched playing children and men and women enjoying themselves. Some were running with colorful streamers trailing behind them, whipping in the slight breeze. Some were eating desserts or feasting on sumptuous lunches - the bakery was doing a booming trade, as Glib had discovered this morning when he worked. Glib wished he could be part of the holiday too. But he had his friend to look after, and his loyalty to Cinch was strong enough that he didn't care if he missed out on a bit of fun for one day of the year.

"I *am* going to get stronger, Glib. I *am* going to get stronger." Cinch started moving himself forward more quickly. "I'm going to become one of the strongest, fittest men The States has ever seen. I'm not going to let Baramny stop me."

"As long as you're careful - you're not better yet, remember."

"But I will be soon."

The two friends arrived at the tutelage hut. "Ho Stern!" Glib called. He stood with his hands on his hips waiting on the street. Cinch stood beside him.

A few moments passed before Stern hobbled out. He looked careworn and tired. Puffy blue lumps sagged under his eyes and it appeared he had not shaved for two or three days. When he saw Cinch he smoothed his wrinkled robe and walked to his son. "I'm glad you are home." When Cinch said nothing, only smiled and looked at the ground, the tutor said, "I'm glad you are well. I was worried, Cinch, very worried."

"I thought a true father would stay by his son's bed every second." Stern looked taken aback, but then his son continued, "But I understand. I know you need to earn money."

Stern seemed apprehensive. He stroked his adam's apple and ducked his head in acknowledgment of his son's words. "I didn't think you would be so... mature about this."

Glib saw his friend bridle, but Cinch's anger dissipated after a few moments. "I suppose you're going to get back to tutoring me now?"

"That's right. You've probably already heard Glib tell you that I am going to give you twice as much tutoring time as before. I've cut that down to one and half times - I think twice as much is too much. Of course I'll ease you into your lessons gradually - you need a while to recover." As soon as he finished talking to his son Stern turned to Glib. "Thank you foster-mother and foster-father for looking after Cinch. I know myself and your foster-father have our differences, but I am greatly appreciative of what he has done. I'll organize for you to have a week's free lessons - the same amount of time that your foster-father looked after Cinch."

"I don't think Surl will want any monetary payment."

"I'll still offer him the week's free lessons all the same." Stern turned to Cinch. "Well, are you coming into the house? It's warm out here in the sun."

"I think I might spend a bit of time with Glib first," Cinch said. "If you don't mind."

"Very well. I have lessons to mark anyway." Stern directed his words to Glib. "Again, thank you."

"You're welcome."

When Stern had re-entered the tutelage hut and closed the door, Glib punched his friend in the arm.

Rubbing his arm Cinch complained, "Hey, that hurts!"

"You should be getting rest, not standing out here with me."

"Can't I talk with you a bit first?"

"No."

Adjusting his crutches Cinch squinted against the sun and looked directly at his younger friend. "I mean what I said about exercise and getting fit. People will be too afraid to hurt me again if I'm strong."

"Why are you talking about this?" Glib interjected. "You're still not well. Even if you *do* decide to start exercising you won't be able to do so for at least another two weeks."

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt me again."

"No one *will* hurt you again. I'll be there to help you fight."

"I'm thinking about going for a run."

"Where?"

"Outside the walls of Color Gash."

"We go outside there all the time."

"Farther than that."

"How much farther?" Glib inquired distrustfully.

"As far as I can go."

Glib told himself he was growing quite sick of his friend's determination to punish himself. He needed to do something which would make Cinch stop and think for a while. He didn't intend for his friend to end up as a cripple - and himself as his dotting nursemaid. "All right. I have a dare for you."

"Tell me the dare before I decide to go through with it."

"You know the big gully outside of the city? About two miles to the north?"

"I've heard of it."

"In two weeks I want you to run all the way there."

"Two weeks." Cinch shrugged. "Sure, I'll do it."

Glib felt like a teacher whose student has just fooled him. Admittedly he had never expected Cinch to accept the dare - especially in the short time frame of two weeks. And now if Glib said it was all a joke and he wanted to call it off, Cinch would tease him for it. He had his pride - and he wasn't going to let his friend get one up on him. That would be like losing by forfeit. "We have a dare then," Glib said, trying not to let doubt creep into his voice. "I expect you to be there - I'll have to stay beside you to make sure you are running all the time."

Cinch's nod was filled with certainty. "I'll be there, Glib."

"The dare is agreed to." Glib knew there was no backing out of the dare now. Well, there was, but if he did back out Cinch would call him a coward for as long as they remained friends. Glib *had* to go ahead with the dare. The only problem was: he didn't know if he could run two miles himself.

Exhausted, Glib slumped on the ground. His lungs burned. His legs were racked with aching pain. Perspiration streamed down his face and soaked his clothes. A hammer felt like it was slamming against the side of his skull. Despite all his effort he could not regain control of his breathing even after he had been lying in the dirt for well over ten minutes. He wondered how Cinch was doing beside him.

Overall his friend was taking the pain better. Though his legs screamed their protest he regained control of his breathing quite easily and felt only a little light-headed, nothing more. They had carried the dare through to completion, but both of them now regretted it.

"I can suddenly feel all my bruises again." Cinch rolled in the dirt and spit out dust. His friend remained lying on his back.

"I couldn't think of a better day for a run," Glib said. Above them half a dozen cumulus clouds floated across the sky and the sun shone brightly on their bodies.

"I could. An overcast day that was showering and sprinkling a little. That's the type of day you want for a run like this."

"Unless you live in one of the Wind Batteredds."

"Unless you live in one of the Wind Batteredds," Cinch agreed. "It's cold enough there in broad daylight. Imagine how frigid it would be at night-time - or if it was raining."

Glib hugged himself and ran his palms down his sweat-slicked arms. "That sounds good at the moment."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"You know what we should have brought? Water."

"It pains me just to hear the word spoken," Cinch agreed.

Glib sat abruptly. "You know what? We're lying beside a dry gully. Why don't we try for water in the gully's bed?"

"That's an idea." Cinch dragged himself to his feet and stumbled towards the edge of the gully. "Do you have any idea as to when we're going to see rain again?"

"Not until September, I imagine," Glib said, joining his friend at the edge of the gully. The earth cut away so there was a two yard drop to the gully bed. A few stunted or dead trees occupied the gully's bottom. The earth was claggy and cracked and unsuitable for farming.

"I guess we better start digging."

Without hesitation Glib stepped off the gully's edge and leapt to the gully bed. He landed lightly, like a cat, then waited for his friend to join him. Together they made their way to the center of the gully.

"Where are we going to *start* digging?"

"This place looks as good as any." Without saying another word Glib knelt and began scooping soil with his hands. He worked slowly and inexorably, the run from Color Gash having drained him of most of his energy. Cinch did not work much quicker. "Watch for scorpions," Glib cautioned, then sharply drew his hand back as he felt something wet and slimy.

"What is it?" Glib asked with eagerness breaking through in his voice.

"I don't know. But I'm not touching it with my hand again." Standing up, Glib excavated soil from the gully bed with his shoe. Cinch soon got up and started helping him. Once Glib was sure he had quarried enough soil he flicked the slimy creature out of its nest with his foot. It landed on a clod of wet soil and lay writhing in the sun. Glib watched the creature with disdain. "Killifish."

"Do you know if they're poisonous?"

Glib let a quiet chuckle escape his lips. "*There's* one reason why you should pay more attention when your father is teaching you biology. You'd know if a killifish was poisonous or not." Remaining silent for a few seconds, Glib remembered what he had learned of killifishes. "None of those discovered so far are poisonous," he said. "But toxins have been found in their bodies. Alchemists do believe some may be poisonous."

"I hope this one isn't." Cinch leaned down and poked it with a finger. Then he began scooping some water from the hole he and Glib had created and sluiced it over the killifish to wash away the mud. Its color was mostly red, but iridescent blue sparkled at the edge of the fish's scales. "Pretty," Cinch commented.

"Maybe dangerous."

"Anyway, I'm having a drink." Cinch knelt beside the hole and scooped a handful of water into his mouth. The water was not the best quality he had ever tasted, but as thirsty as he was now he didn't really care.

When Cinch was finished Glib took his place by the hole. He cursed when he saw the hole's bottom. "Thanks for drinking all the water. Now I'm going to have to dig deeper." Glib began burrowing out more mud. "I hope I don't find another killifish. Ow! What was that?" Glib withdrew his hand from the hole. On the tip of his finger a bright bead of blood welled as though he had been pricked by a pin. He swore and sucked the blood with his finger, then spit it out. "See what you made me do?"

"An animal didn't bite you, did it?"

Glib stood and began excavating with his shoe again. "I can't find any."

"In that mess *any* animal would be hard to find." Cinch watched the muddy crater with distaste. "Anything could be in there, especially after you finding that killifish."

"At least I've scooped enough dirt for there to be clear water again." Glib directed an accusing glance Cinch's way, then knelt and brought cool water to his lips as though he were a man dying of dehydration. "Mmm. That's nice."

"Hope the killifish didn't pee in it."

"Cinch, you're disgusting."

"What's the deal with killifishes anyway? I thought it would die just lying under the ground like that."

"They're related to lungfish," Glib explained. "During autumn and winter they hibernate underground - and only appear when the wet season arrives. Their eggs hatch when rain comes too."

"Freaky things."

"You couldn't find many animals much stranger, could you?" Glib held up his index finger where a drop of blood had formed again. "Do you think a killifish could have done this?" He pointed to the killifish that was lying on the ground, the fiery sun slowly killing it. "Maybe this one has a mate. Maybe its mate bit me."

"There's only one way to find out." Cinch strode briskly over the gully bed and stopped at a dead tree. Splintering a reasonably strong stick from one of the tree's skeleton branches, he returned to Glib and placed one of his boots on the killifish's body. Then he tried to thrust the stick into the killifish's mouth, moving the stick from side to side like a burrowing mole to gain entry. Finally he prized the mouth open and peered inside. "It's hard to see in there," he said. "But I think we should call him Gummy."

"You mean he's got no teeth?"

"Nope. None that I can see. Your finger probably just hit a sharp rock or something. It's nothing to worry about." Cinch stood and arched his back. He yawned loudly. "You know, we should do this again. Running here was fun. You?"

"Painful."

"It's bound to be painful the first time you do it. But after another two or three times I reckon we'll begin enjoying the run." Cinch yawned again. With his friend he climbed out of the gully. "I think I might go back to town. My legs are recovered - and I want to get back before sup. Stern will kill me otherwise."

"I'll stay here for a while," Glib said. "Rest up a little bit." Glib was feeling tired like his friend - but he didn't want to bother with the run back to Color Gash. The tiredness he felt was not the exhaustion of having run a couple of miles - it was more a sleepy sort of tiredness. "Go on. I'll be okay."

"Whatever. See you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow after lunch."

Cinch turned and jogged away. Glib watched him as he left. His strides were easy, fluid. So much different from Glib's own jolting run. Finally, when Cinch was no more than a speck on the horizon with the walls of Color Gash looming above him, Glib turned away. He stumbled down the gully's edge. His eyelids drooped and he yawned. Sleep looked like the best answer for his fatigue.

He used the slant of the gully's edge as a pillow. If he had been more awake he would hate getting dirt in his hair - but he wasn't. He closed his eyes and yawned again, content with the warmth of the gully bed against his back. *This isn't the normal type of exhaustion for a two mile run*, he thought, but his mind was too incoherent to make any sense of the matter.

Sleep came quickly. He lay under the waxing Color Gash sun, so still he might have been mistaken for a corpse. His breathing became shallow and the speed of his pulse decreased until it was like a slow-running tropical river. His index finger curled in the dust.

The first hint Glib had of awakening was a cool breeze. It caressed his skin, stroked his body with fingers of insubstantial air. Glib stirred against the breeze, but that alone was not enough to waken him. The two moons shone full in the dark sky above him. Each was a romantic hue of cerulean, their surfaces crater-filled and scarred. Stars provided companions for the two moons, blinking on and off in the Outlendian night sky.

Glib stirred again. It was hot in the daytime all year round in Color Gash. But at night the temperature dropped like a stone. The breeze was turning from cool to cold, and Glib was beginning to have his first waking thoughts. He didn't know how long he had been here, he didn't know...

He awoke with a start. Abruptly he realized he was not in his bed at home. He had come to this gully with Cinch, and was still here. Why? What had possessed him to fall asleep in such a potentially dangerous place? Without considering what could have happened while he had been asleep Glib examined his surroundings. Nothing stirred. On the trees there were no leaves to be rustled, and the sand and soil here was protected from the caustic bite of the wind.

He looked directly to his left. No more than a foot from his arm was something... that had not been there before. It rested inanimate in the moonlight, its many legs protruding at odd angles from its body. Glib squinted and tried to recognize

the creature. He was glad he had paid attention to his biology and natural history lessons with Stern. It was a sunstalker.

Sunstalker... Glib wanted to move his arm away from the sunstalker's body but did not have the courage to do so. He was lost in fear - his left arm was shaking violently and sweat was breaking out on his face. If he had been a few yards away from the creature he would not hesitate to make a dash away from it, but as he was now... The sunstalker (and its nocturnal companion the nightlayer) was a close but bigger relative of the common spider. The sunstalker was as large as a medium-sized dog. Its body was yellow-orange, like a bee's, and fine orange fur covered its legs and abdomen. The sunstalker was deadly - anyone bitten by one was usually dead within an hour. What was worse was that they saved their catches for 'later.' The sunstalker hibernated at night. Fortunately its cousin the nightlayer was active *only* during the night, and though its venom was more poisonous it was much slower acting.

Glib knew that with the sunstalker hibernating he still had a chance to escape. However if the sunstalker awoke from its sleep and realized there was prey nearby... Glib did not want to think of what it was like to be eaten by a sunstalker.

Glib withdrew his hand slowly. He regained control of his shivering and tried not to make any noise as he watched the sunstalker stir, lifting one of its fur-covered legs and clicking with the bottom of one of its feet. Glib drew his hand to his side. The second stage of Glib's escape was much more delicate. He placed his hands on the soil behind him and slowly boosted himself to a sitting position. A bone in one of his elbows cracked and the sunstalker stirred, but then settled back into its hibernation. *Stand up*, Glib told himself. He couldn't help but think that he whispered the thought.

In his position Glib found it difficult to stand. The gully's slanting edge was at his head and back and if he stood up where he was he would most likely slip and fall to the gully's bed - which was sure to make the sunstalker awaken. He needed to shimmy his way to the gully bed without the sunstalker hearing him.

Every scrape of dust sounded like the grate of iron on stone. Glib reached the gully bed and stood up stiffly as though he were being presented to a king or queen. *Standing up may sound quiet in your bedroom or at a tavern*, Glib thought, *but try standing when there's a sunstalker next to you.* Still, it looked like Glib was successful. The sunstalker did not awaken and did not show any sign that it knew Glib was escaping. Step by step Glib began to walk away.

The sunstalker sprang after him. With a flailing of its legs and its miniature tail flapping behind it, the sunstalker tried to catch up with Glib.

Glib yelped and ran. The sunstalker's legs worked like pistons behind him, but Glib was certain that once he climbed to the top of the gully he would be safe. He was running away from the gully's nearest edge because the sunstalker was cutting off his escape. The problem was the gully's nearest edge was also the one nearest Color Gash - the gully ran like a scar against the Outlendian landscape parallel to the city. If Glib was to return to Color Gash he would need to re-cross the gully.

Glib was surprised that all these thoughts fit into a few terrified seconds. Near the edge of the gully the sunstalker clipped Glib's ankle with one of its legs. Glib sprawled in the dust and his chin scraped against the ground, but he got up and continued to run. He climbed the edge of the gully and boosted himself onto solid ground. Below him the sunstalker was climbing the gully as well. Glib backed away as the sunstalker's legs appeared. He could run, but sunstalkers were notoriously quick - if he ran he would probably die a few hundred yards away. Or he could face the

sunstalker and risk its venom. But as well as being notoriously quick sunstalkers were notoriously strong - and Glib knew his chances of injuring the creature enough for it to let him go were slim at best.

The sunstalker appeared. It watched Glib and approached him slowly, its legs carrying it forward. Glib stumbled backward in fear. Then he turned and began to run again. The sunstalker came after him, its legs clicking on the ground and its maw dripping venom with the anticipation of a new meal. Glib could feel the sunstalker catching up to him.

A figure barreled into the creature. Glib was shocked to hear the clash of bodies and he turned his head to look at the combatants - and tripped on a tree root. His hands scraped across the ground and his breath exploded from his lungs. Another tree root jabbed against his wrist and sliced it open. Unable to do anything to escape, Glib just sat and watched the combatants. He could not see them properly, but it looked as though the creature which had attacked the sunstalker was winning. It was snapping and growling and driving the sunstalker back towards the gully.

The sunstalker lost its purchase and fell down the edge of the gully. Its assailant sprung after it. There was the sound of savage growling, then everything subsided into silence. The creature which had attacked the sunstalker appeared at the gully's rim. It was limping badly. Glib's eyes widened when he saw it - a werehound. The creature was covered with a thin coat of black hair and had burning coal eyes. It was similar in shape to a greyhound, except bulkier. And its ears were pricked above its head as though it were listening for something.

The werehound approached Glib, who curled into a ball. He brought his hands up to protect his head but knew they would be no defense against the werehound if it meant to harm him. The werehound whined and a large pink salivating tongue lolled from its mouth. The werehound licked Glib across the cheek. Glib could feel the warmth of its tongue and its fetid breath. Then the werehound turned and sprinted away. Glib thought that maybe it would return, but it didn't. Soon the werehound had disappeared into the Outlendian night.

Wearily Glib stood up. It was a long trip back to Color Gash, especially after what he had just been through and how much his legs were aching. The encounter with the werehound had frightened him almost as much as the one with the sunstalker, at least until he realized that the werehound meant him no harm. Glib had always learned that werehounds were dangerous creatures. That was strange, that. The werehound had not attacked him...

The walls of Color Gash loomed above him. They looked foreboding in the night sky. Glib could not hear any noise coming from inside Color Gash's walls and the only movement he could see was the steady stroll of the city guard on the parapet. The main gate was closed. If Glib were to get home tonight he would have to announce his presence to the city guard. Sighing in resignation Glib strode to the gate and slammed his fist on the heavy wood. "Here! Let me in!"

Three soldiers immediately rushed to the part of the parapet immediately above him. "What is your business here?" one of the soldiers called down.

"I live here! My step-father owns one of the bakeries on Baker's Way."

"His name?"

"Surl Baker!"

For a while nothing was said, then a stooped soldier opened a small postern gate beside the main one. "Come in, come in."

Glib slipped through the postern gate past the old soldier.

The soldier grabbed him by his shirt collar. "Not so fast. By getting here late you're causing trouble for the city guard. What if a spy from Tern slipped by us while we were dealing with you? I think you'll have to go to the captain." The soldier began to drag Glib away from the streets of Color Gash and towards a set of stone stairs which led to the parapet. Glib considered trying to escape but decided against it - if he *were* caught again his punishment would be twice as severe.

The stairs led to the parapet and adjoined into a small room. Four soldiers were lounging around a table in the room, one of whom wore a closer-fitting, more respectable looking uniform than the others. "I assume you are the captain," Glib said, surprising himself by his own courage.

"That's right. And from now on you will speak only when you are spoken to. Understand?"

Glib wasn't sure if he had permission to speak so he only nodded.

"Is what you said about your step-father correct? Does he own a bakery on Baker's Way?"

"Yes."

"What is the name of the bakery?"

Glib shrugged. "It hasn't got a name. Just 'bakery.' It's about three quarters of the way down Baker's Way if you enter the street from the east."

"Thank you for your directions. I shall dispatch two soldiers there now. If your directions prove to be incorrect..." The captain stroked a leather which rested against one wall of the room. "Until my men return you can sit there against that wall. Go on."

Glib moved to the wall, sat down and watched the captain as he ordered two men to Baker's Way. They grumbled about having to leave off their card-playing but complied with the captain's orders. Each of them directed irksome glances at Glib.

The men in the room were silent for a few seconds, then one picked up a cigar he had been smoking and pinched it between his lips. "Coon-a-can? My deal." The other soldiers grumbled their agreement and tossed a few chinks on the table. The captain remained standing but threw in just over a chit to indicate he wanted to be part of the game.

Glib had difficulty seeing the table from where he was sitting. His vision was obscured by soldiers' arms and smoke that curled in the room like incense from a censer. The room was also filled with the reek of cheap, soured ale.

"Bobby's back from the Nomad Lands," one of the soldiers said as he laid some of his cards on the table. "Got a couple of scars on his chest and face to prove it."

"He win any medals?"

"Just one for serving there. Outlendian God knows it's enough for a medal if you decide to go there in the first place."

"Work your way up the ranks *before* you volunteer to fight there," the captain said. "That's what I'm doing." He chuckled. "Then you won't have as much a chance of getting injured."

Glib watched the captain. He didn't appear to mind his soldiers drinking on his watch. Admittedly they were not drinking heavily, but still... He considered telling the captain that he shouldn't let his soldiers drink while on duty but then considered the consequences of that.

One of the soldiers half-turned his head Glib's way. "Boy, you ever been outside of Color Gash?"

"O-Only when I was little. My parents were from the Commonlands."

"Ah, a Commonlander." The soldier spit some tobacco he was chewing on the floor. "Bloody tribal primitives. It was a good thing you came here."

"Barker, clean up that mess!" The captain shook his head in disgust, crossed his arms and indicated for one of the soldiers to select his cards for him. "Bloody son of a houndmaster." Barker took his tobacco outside and the captain looked at Glib, the expression of his gray eyes unreadable.

One of the soldiers continued where Barker left off. "There are rumors that Outlend might be at war with Centar soon. Imagine what that would do for our standard of living."

Another soldier shuffled his cards, dealt them and said, "Outlend against Tern *and* Centar? Wouldn't that be fun."

"I'm safe," the other soldier replied. "I've got a family and three children. They're not going to send me unless things get desperate."

"They'll send me." The captain still had his arms crossed and was leaning against the open door of the room, watching the Outlendian night sky. His voice and demeanor were pensive.

"Bye-bye captain." The soldier smiled.

Glib, whose throat was sore by now and whose heart was racing with the fear of an impending beating, finally spoke up. "Captain?"

The captain, who had just borrowed a smoke from one of soldiers, turned towards Glib. "What?"

"Please don't tell my step-father that I came in late."

The captain drew back on his cigarette. "Why's that?"

"He'll beat me."

The captain remained stone quiet; a few of the soldiers shifted uncomfortably in their chairs.

"He always beats me when I've done things wrong. When I don't do my baking properly he-"

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen, sir."

"Take your beating like a man."

"But-"

"Perhaps if you had spoken up before I sent two of my soldiers to fetch your step-father I would have let you go. But now - what can I do? If your step-father comes and demands to know where you are, and I say, 'Oh, I let him go because he was afraid of getting a beating from you,' what is that going to look like? It will not only make *me* a laughing stock, but the whole city guard as well. And it will make us look incompetent."

"Give the kid a break," the stooped soldier who had first accosted Glib said. "I remember my old man-"

"Your old man was a drunkard," another soldier retorted.

"Maybe this boy's old man is a drunkard as well."

"His old man owns a bakery. You don't usually see drunkards owning shops, do you?"

The stooped soldier addressed Glib. "Boy, what is your name?"

"Glib, sir."

"And this man is your step-father, *not* your real father?"

"Mm-hh."

The old soldier turned to his companions. "You know what step-fathers are like. Real bastards." He addressed Glib again. "What happened to your real parents?"

"*Sneaky*," the captain warned.

"Sorry cap'n."

The captain smiled. "You're forgiven."

"*Where is that boy?*" The shout echoed across the parapet. Glib and the captain could hear it clearly even from here. Glib could also hear the tramp of footsteps on soil.

"I assume that is your step-father," the captain said levelly.

"Yes sir." Glib tried not to cry.

The footsteps were coming up the stairs now. Glib could also hear the clank of armor from the two soldiers who had gone out to find Surl.

"Act like a man," the captain said.

Glib stood up. He held his arms straight by his side. He tightened the muscles in his face, blinked his glistening eyes, held his shoulders back, stuck out his chest and lifted his chin high in the air.

When Surl entered the room and saw his step-son's chin like that, he punched it. Glib crumpled to the ground. Tears stung his eyes but he did not show himself crying. When Glib opened his eyes again he saw the soldiers wincing in empathy.

"That's for being an idiot," Surl snapped when he saw that his step-son had regained full consciousness. "These soldiers got the wrong address - and had the neighbors complaining - before they got to myself and Delilah. And you're causing more trouble for them."

"Really," the captain countered, "it's no trouble."

"I won't allow Glib to bother you again." Surl snatched at Glib's ear and pulled him to a standing position. "Apologize to these men."

"Sorry," Glib gasped.

"Sorry *what?*"

"Sorry sirs."

"That's better." Surl addressed the soldiers and momentarily forgot about his step-son. "I can't apologize enough for this. If there is anything I can do - money, food from my bakery, anything - I will only be too happy to help you."

The captain waved Surl's offers away. "That won't be necessary. We are only glad that the boy's safe."

"Yes, well. Thanks." Surl dragged Glib from the room and down the parapet stairs. "You don't know what it's like in real life, do you?" he hissed. "If you cause trouble for the city guard they cause trouble for you."

"They seemed all right..."

Surl twisted his step-son's ear. "Shut up and walk."

Glib managed to snatch one last glance at the soldiers who were standing on the parapet behind him. They were watching him with sympathy.

Glib was bruised and could still feel the tender spots where Surl had struck him. His step-father hadn't spared anything in his beating of him last night. Surl had allowed him to have the afternoon off - at least the man had some heart. But Glib still felt anger at what Surl had done to him. The worst thing was that he was about to meet Girl. What if she noticed his bruises and asked what happened? What if he winced when she touched him? Glib didn't feel as nervous standing in the gardens in front of the Tower of the Six as he usually did. Though he got some odd looks for being

alone he killed his time admiring the different plants in the garden and the way the architects had landscaped them.

At last Girl arrived. She was wearing a simple blue skirt hitched about her waist with a belt of the same material. Her hair was done up and as usual she had a peaches and cream complexion.

Glib grinned when he saw her. "Did you get my message?"

"Would I have come here if I hadn't?"

Instinctively Glib laced his hand in Girl's. To his surprise Girl didn't respond in annoyance or shock - she kept her own hand resting in Glib's as though it were meant to be there. That pleased him.

"I heard that you came home late last night."

"Where did you hear that?" Glib was suddenly half-afraid.

"From Cinch. He came to see if I really *was* the daughter of the owner of Chandler Factories. He got a surprise when he discovered that I am. So, what was arriving home late like?"

"I saw a sunstalker."

"Out in the gully?"

"Yeah. It almost got me. I was terrified."

"You're saying that to impress me."

Glib crossed his arms but kept grinning. "It's true! No one was there but I saw it with my own eyes. I fell asleep and when I woke up it was right next to me."

"So why didn't it eat you while you were asleep?"

"Sunstalkers and nightlayers hunt their prey by movement alone - not vision or scent." Glib spoke as though he were reciting from a textbook, and Girl stamped her foot at not knowing if what Glib said was correct.

"So how did you escape?"

"I just climbed the side of the gully and it stopped following me." Glib shrugged. "That's all there is to it." Glib considered telling her about the werhound. But a werhound was generally regarded as a bad omen and anyone who befriended one was considered a witch, evil sorcerer or worse.

Girl clenched her teeth. "I can't say I believe you, but I can't prove you wrong either. Let's just say I have my suspicions."

Glib declared proudly, "Your suspicions are wrong."

Girl made a companionable warning sound in the back of her throat and began to walk along the garden path. Glib caught up to her and linked his arm in hers. She didn't complain about it like Glib first thought she would. "Do you want to go up to the observatory platform again?" she asked sweetly.

"That... would be nice." Glib allowed himself to grin. Many young men wanted the hand of Girl - at least that was what he believed - and *he* was the one she was interested in. That *must* say something about his personality.

The couple entered the foyer of the Tower and headed towards the dark alcove which led to the observatory platform. Girl spoke as they walked. "Your father... I know he has a bad temper sometimes. And according to Cinch you *did* arrive home pretty late. He didn't... do anything, did he? He didn't hurt you?"

Glib looked straight ahead and swallowed his dry throat. "Let's say I got no less than I deserved and leave it at that."

Girl took the formal approach to Glib's response - "Very well." Then, like a princess dressed in a dozen petticoats instead of a rich merchant's daughter dressed in a simple dress, Girl balanced one hand in Glib's and the other out by her side as she

began to ascend the observatory platform's stairs. A few times they had to squash up when people descended the stairs. Some of those people were men and Glib could feel the jealous looks they gave him - and the desirous looks they directed at Girl. Glib admitted that he was starting to feel smug.

They reached the observatory platform. One other couple was there, kissing in the darkest corner of the platform and paying no attention to the view whatsoever. On closer inspection Glib discovered they were past the kissing stage and well into fondling, too. Girl ignored the couple. She strolled to the viewing slit and watched Color Gash go about its business. Glib felt some vertigo this time - when they were here last the sun had been sinking and everything had not seemed so high. Now, with the city in broad daylight, Glib realized just how high they were. The haze over Color Gash was thin today, and Girl pointed to a section of the city far away from Glib's own. "There. There's my parents' factory. Can you see it?"

Glib couldn't make it out from the other buildings in the area that Girl had pointed towards. He told her so.

Girl made a resigned noise. "Don't worry - you'll see it one day. You'll see it from close up and you'll be able to meet my parents and everything." Glib looked alarmed at Girl's mention of her parents, and Girl suddenly looked reflective. She looked at the city for a while, snatched a glance at Glib then returned to looking at the city. "Do you remember last time we were up here?"

Glib said, "I do," considered saying 'How could I forget?' then decided it would probably sound too fatuous.

"Last time we were up here I was planning something." Girl looked at Glib. "But I didn't get around to doing it." She looked at Glib again and her eyes were filled with sparkling mischief. It was as though tiny winking stars or exquisite diamonds were buried in their pits. "I'm going to do it this time."

Glib tried to think of what she could mean but came up with no answer.

Girl leaned forward. She kissed him. The kiss was on the lips. Wet but not too wet, smooth but not too smooth, gentle and passionate all in one. After a fleeting space of time she disengaged her lips from his. Glib reeled back on his feet, stunned. He almost wiped his lips but then thought that might be taken as an insult. Girl had a smile on her face, cat-like, predatory, as though she had finally got her man. "We've been friends long enough don't you think?"

"Yes..." That was the only word Glib could say - he was too shocked and too happy to add anything else to the conversation.

"And if we're going to be more than friends, how about kissing again?"

Glib didn't mince with words. He leaned forward, kissed her with passion and without the surprise of their last kiss. Girl returned the kiss firmly, her mouth meeting his in a firm embrace. This felt wonderful. That was the only word Glib could use to describe it. If all kisses felt this good he wouldn't need to worry about making love - that would be a come-down from this. Glib continued kissing her for a long time. She was his girlfriend now, he supposed, and kissing her like this was natural. She put her hands about his waist - he winced in pain from where she touched his bruises but ignored it as best he could - and caressed his skin gently. So this was what kissing was like.

Chapter 4 - Pariah

Glib knew he shouldn't be here. It was foolhardy to wait in exactly the same place where the sunstalker had been. But Glib was too interested in the werehound. It had saved him and he was not able to figure out why. Werehounds were renowned for their attacks on caravans and lone travelers on the plains. What use did a werehound have with a fifteen-year-old boy?

Glib remembered the creature licking him. Its head had easily been as large as his own, narrow and elongated like a greyhound's. Its breath had stunk of unspeakable things, but it had only shown affection when it licked him. Glib remembered its sable coat and the burning charcoal of its eyes. A creature like that was not *meant* to be friends with a human.

Even though Glib was afraid he stayed waiting. He needed to see if his encounter with the werehound was a one-off event. Something inside him would not be laid to rest if he did not wait for the werehound. It was a stupid thing to do - if he met the sunstalker again there was a very real chance of the werehound not being nearby to save him - but he stood by the edge of the gully and waited. His foster parents would be getting suspicious, and Glib could only imagine what would happen once he returned to Color Gash and commanded the sentries to let him in.

Far off in the darkness a shadow moved. Glib caught only a fleeting glimpse of it, but he was sure it was there. And he was sure it was the werehound. He could tell by the shape of the creature, large and bear-like but padding with silent footfalls along the plain. That was one of the things which made werehounds so deadly: their huge size matched with their silent hunting instinct.

The werehound moved closer. Glib could see it through the stunted tufts of grass and gnarled trees which grew on the plain. The ground was flat so the werehound had no rises to hide behind, but it used the darkness just as effectively for camouflage.

Glib wanted to run but held his ground. He had heard the latest theories on werehounds being the residents of another plane. What did that mean if he was killed by the werehound? That he'd spend eternal damnation on a world not his own? Or that he'd just die, his corpse lying in the dry gully for the crows to pick clean? *The*

dead know not anything, some of the more primitive cultures to the south of The States proclaimed.

The werhound came into full view only ten or so yards from Glib. It stood in the light of the two moons with its hackles quivering and its whole body tense in readiness to fight. Glib backed away, but could not reverse any further than a couple of paces because of the gully's edge.

The werhound stalked forward. It lowered its head close to the ground and scented the soil in front of it. Its maw was closed and it blew sand from its nostrils whenever it had scented the ground in front of it too closely. Its claws - which Glib could see, or imagined he could see, even from here - dug into the ground on either side of its lowered head. Its shoulders were huge, larger than any human's shoulders ever were.

The werhound was yards away. Glib wanted to scream, run. He wanted to be in bed and wake up from this terrifying nightmare. If the werhound-

The werhound licked him. Licked him. It traversed the last two yards to Glib and licked his hand, then drew its immense tongue over his vest. It had no tail so to speak, but the stump it wore moved rapidly back and forth. It tapped its front paws on the ground and whined at Glib, who tried not to stumble into the gully. Any sudden movement might set the werhound off.

Glib held out his palm as if offering the werhound food. "How are you? You found anything to eat today? This week?" Glib kept his voice comforting. He was afraid that if he stopped talking the werhound might take it as a sign he were becoming hostile. "Where's all your friends? Or do you hunt alone? Were you the one who saved me from that sunstalker a couple of nights ago?" (Glib was sure it was).

As if sensing Glib's fear the werhound lowered itself onto its haunches and whined again. It rested its massive head across one of its legs and directed its stare upwards at Glib. It looked like it was sulking.

Glib almost sat down but then realized the vulnerability of that position. If the werhound suddenly turned nasty, he had no chance. Not that he had any chance now.

Tentatively Glib reached out. He ran his palm across the werhound's smooth, flat head. Then he scratched behind the werhound's ears. The creature tilted its head to one side in appreciation and allowed itself a loud whine. Confident that he was gaining its trust Glib scratched behind its ears harder. He stroked the hair along its neck but as soon as he reached its shoulders the werhound's appreciative whine turned into a low, warning growl. Glib drew his hand away.

The werhound leapt up.

Glib stumbled back, his feet slipping off the gully's edge. He tumbled down, his hands clawing for purchase on the low precipice. He slipped and slid all the way to the gully bed. If the werhound was going to try something it would do it now. Glib crouched and looked at the gully's edge, ready for the werhound to bound after him. But it didn't. For minutes Glib waited and heard nothing.

Finally curiosity got the better of him. He climbed out of the gully, fearful that the werhound might attack him, and stood up. The werhound *was* still here. Except it had a stick in its mouth and was flinging it into air, then chasing after it. When it saw Glib it snatched up the stick and bounded to him. Dropping the stick at Glib's feet, it then ran half a dozen yards away and waited for Glib to throw it.

Glib reached down and picked up the stick. It was covered in the werhound's saliva. The saliva was warm and dripped from the stick in several places. Briefly Glib wondered if werhound saliva might be poisonous.

The werehound barked. Its bark sounded like it came from a much smaller dog, a family pet or an average-sized ratter. The werehound barked again and ended its bark with a growl, and Glib realized he had to throw the stick - just in case. He grinned and instead of throwing it over the werehound and away from the gully, threw it into the gully itself.

The werehound bounded after it and leapt from the gully's edge. Glib watched in admiration as it did. Its muscles flexed under deeply toned skin, a well designed creature working the gifts that had been given it perfectly. Werehounds were considered one of the strongest creatures on the peninsula, and for a moment Glib imagined what he could do if he owned one. Werehounds were not as strong as dragons but there weren't that many dragons around anymore. A werehound would put up a good fight with a unicorn, could easily beat a goblin or an arachnid (as long as it didn't get injected with venom), and this one had already shown it could handle sunstalkers. A werehound could be a very useful tool indeed.

The werehound returned the stick to him. Glib smiled and knelt down, patting the creature. It looked like he had a new friend.

Glib had already got through the most frightening part of the night, so this was going to be nothing. He approached the main gate of Color Gash and rapped smartly on the treated wood. "Let me in!"

For a while there was no sound. Then the shuffle of footsteps hurrying to the parapet above the gate. "Who is it?" one of the soldiers called down.

"Glib Baker!"

"You? Again?"

Glib thought it best to remain silent.

There were more shuffles on the parapet above him then the captain bellowed down, "Who gave you permission to be here? Didn't your father discipline you enough the last time?"

"I..." Glib's voice faltered. What could be his excuse? That he was making friends with a werehound? That wouldn't go down too well - and they wouldn't believe him either.

"Open the gate for him," the captain commanded one of the soldiers. "I'll have a good talk to him."

In imitation of two days ago the portcullis gate opened with the old soldier waiting on the other side. "Heh. Here again?"

Glib tried to scuttle past the old soldier, failed, and was dragged up the parapet stairs towards the same guardhouse he had been incarcerated in last time. The captain was waiting at the top of the stairs. "What are you on about? You said your father beat you and... *Did* he beat you?"

"For last time, yes," Glib said sullenly.

"So why have you returned to the city late tonight?"

Glib shrugged. He could not think of anything else better to do. Perhaps the captain would be lenient with him.

"Come with me." The captain directed his next order at his soldiers. "Get back into the room." The captain led Glib a short way along the parapet and stopped once he was sure no one could hear. "I'm not going to report you to your step-father. I saw him last time, and I think he's a bastard. But-" The captain rose his finger "-we can't have you arriving here late all the time. It disturbs us from our duties. What is your name again?"

"Glib Baker."

"Mine is Captain Trix Vulgàr. That is what you will address me as from now - Captain. If I hear you address me as anything else I *will* report you to your father. And I *will* make sure you get the beating you deserve."

"Why are you saying this... sir?"

Trix glared at the boy.

"Captain!"

"For not getting back to Color Gash before the gates close you'll work off your duties. You'll be allowed to go before dawn - and you should be in bed long before your step-father and step-mother ever get up."

"Surl is a baker. He gets up early in the morning. He... Captain!"

"Has he ever checked on you?"

"When I was helping him, captain. But since I've been working in the shop and not the bakery, he hasn't. He checks on Abbey though, when she stays over. She works at the shop, and - he looks at her."

"Enough talk. You've got work. Come on." The captain led Glib back along the parapet and into the guard room. Soldiers were already playing at games of dice and drinking cider. The captain wrinkled his nose and glared at the men under his command. He cleared his throat.

Nothing happened.

He cleared his throat louder.

The soldiers looked at him, pausing mid-game.

Satisfied he had their attention the captain said, "The boy's name is Glib. He'll be working here for the next couple of weeks. If you have any problem with him come to me. And don't try to take advantage of him. If any of you do..." The captain didn't need any actions to accentuate what he had just said.

"Can I stay here tonight, Captain?" Glib asked. "I'll serve them - drinks, cigarettes, their armor. Please."

"All right. Just make sure they don't rope you into playing with them. They'll strip you clean." The captain turned his gaze directly towards one of the men sitting at the table. "Barker, it's your turn to patrol in ten minutes. No more cider."

"Aye-aye Captain." Barker grinned.

"I mean it Barker." The captain's voice lowered. "I have to go on my rounds." The captain walked out of the guard room.

Barker looked at Glib and laughed. "So the captain has left you with us, has he?"

Glib tried to shrink under Barker's gaze.

Barker's hand came round and slapped Glib on the back. "Don't worry! We're not going to bite. The captain is a good man - he wouldn't leave you with anyone who might hurt you."

"Are... you going to drink any more cider?" Glib asked.

"No. I only said what I did to the captain to rib him. He knows what I'm like. He doesn't mind." Barker pointed towards a suit of chainmail on the wall. "Get my purse out of there. It's hooked just under the inside of the neck. And don't steal anything, you little urchin." Barker laughed again.

Glib obeyed Barker's order and gave his purse to him. Barker opened the purse and spread his coins on the table. "Time for one quick game," he said. The other soldiers agreed heartily. "I've stripped them all of a day's wages many times," Barker said. "And the captain - like taking a woman without her aura."

"Hard?"

"Easy! Haven't you seen the captain play cards? You can tell when things aren't going his way just by the expression on his face."

"But he's a good man," another soldier added. "And we won't have a bad word said about him in here."

The old soldier who had accosted Glib twice at the postern gate addressed Barker. "If taking a woman without her aura is so easy, how come you've never been able to accomplish it?"

Barker grimaced and the other soldiers laughed.

"I *know* you've taken young men, but-"

Barker got up and lumbered to the old soldier. His fist was clenched. "If you say anything-"

The old soldier waved Barker away, laughing. "Don't worry Glib. He hasn't taken the virginity of men - at least I don't think he has."

Glib shifted uncomfortably as he listened to the soldiers' foul-mouthed talk and witnessed their rowdy behavior. Perhaps *this* was what he would like to be when he was a few years older. Except Glib was intelligent, and he didn't know how many soldiers got to use their intelligence. What became of an intelligent soldier?

One soldier who had remained quiet throughout the entire exchange between Barker and his older sparring partner said, "Outlend is driving back Tern. Last I heard the Outlendian army was far into Tern territory. It won't be long before they seize the capital."

"Don't scare the boy," the old soldier reprimanded him.

"Why should I be scared?" Glib retorted.

"Wars. Deaths. The two go hand in hand."

"Why should I be scared of that?"

"If you're not scared of war and death you've got a lot to learn, my boy." The old soldier grunted and turned to the table. "Let's get this game a-rolling. I've only got fifty-two chinks and I need to win back all the pay I've lost."

Glib knew when he was dismissed. He retired to the far wall of the guard room, sat down, drew his knees up to his chest and clasped them, and watched the card game quietly. Wars and death. The Outlendian army driving back Tern's. The army returning to triumphant fanfare in Color Gash and Core. The scenes conjured vivid, romantic images in Glib's mind. Being a soldier would show Surl his mettle. But Glib decided he didn't want to be a soldier. He wanted to be a conqueror instead.

The day was warm. Glib walked through the streets of Color Gash with Girl at his side. Their hands were clasped in each other's. Glib could not think of a better day than this in a long time. He was *finally* getting used to Abbey, he had the afternoon to himself, the captain and his soldiers gave him tips sometimes, and he was with Girl. And Cinch was slowly healing.

"Did I tell you I'm helping the city guard at night?"

"No you didn't, Glib."

"It's punishment for me arriving at the city gate after it was closed. Surl doesn't know about it - only the city guard." Glib looked at the ground and scraped his feet through the dirt. "I have a confession to make."

"What...?" Girl's tone of voice was half suspicious, half warning.

"I went to the gully again."

"The one you went to with Cinch?"

"Yep."

"I thought you said there was a sunstalker there. You'd have to be *stupid* to go there again."

"But I did! There's something... there."

"What do you mean there's something there?" Girl's voice lowered dangerously. "Another girl?"

"No! Not another girl! There's... something."

"I'm finding it very hard to understand you, Glib."

Glib stopped and stamped his foot on the ground. "I find it easier to think at the gully. It's quieter. The gully is like a world totally removed from our own."

"With a sunstalker prowling the area."

"I didn't see it this time. But don't tell Surl I went to the gully again - and don't tell Cinch either. He might let it slip to Surl."

"He wouldn't be a good friend if he did."

"Unintentionally, I mean."

"Oh." They continued to walk along the street. After a few minutes spent in silence Girl pointed at two people coming towards them. "Look, my parents!" She gripped Glib's hand more firmly and dragged him. Glib tried to pull back but knew that if he resisted she would only pull harder - and if he broke away she would inevitably become angry. Glib felt nervous approaching Girl's parents. They were the owners of Chandler Factories - and close to being the richest people in Color Gash. So different from Surl's little bakery. It made a profit, yes, but Girl's parents would probably consider the profit from the bakery a mere pittance compared to what they made.

Girl halted in front of her parents and held Glib out for inspection. "Mother. Father. This is Glib Baker. I've told you about him."

Girl's mother was a once-attractive woman who was starting to lose some of that attractiveness. She appeared to be in her mid-forties. She wore diamond-drop earrings and her hair was nestled under an pearl-colored hat. Her face was pasted with make-up and her nose was a little hooked. She had blue eyes. She studied Glib as though he were a bull on display - the way Girl was presenting him - and smiled, then held out one of her white-gloved hands. "Pleased to meet you."

Glib took the woman's hand. "Pleased to meet you too, sir - ma'am!"

Surprisingly Girl's father was much easier to deal with. He was tall and stooped with a hawk gaze and yet he smiled warmly when he saw Glib. "So this is the man my daughter has talked so much about. I can say that she's made a fine choice."

Glib shifted nervously under the praise.

Girl's father reached out and clapped Glib on the shoulder.

"Oh! You don't know my parents' names." Girl held out her hands towards her mother. "This is Demur."

"Short for Demure," Girl's mother added.

"And this is Young," Girl said as she indicated her father.

"Respectable States names," Glib commented.

"We are proud of our States heritage," Young told him. "As I am sure you are."

Glib knew this was not the time to tell them that he was an orphan from the Commonlands, and that Abbey and Delilah were from the Commonlands as well.

"Glib is studying under the tutor Stern," Girl rescued her boyfriend. "He is studying mathematics and history, and is also studying magic."

Young raised his eyebrows. "Magic? I studied a bit of magic when I was

young."

Girl said, "I bet you weren't as good as Glib."

Young smiled. "It may be that you're right." He turned back to Glib. "Do you have plans to go to university? In Color Gash, perhaps?"

"I hope to go to Frog University," Glib said. "But I'm not so sure about that."

"Only the most talented students go to Frog University. But if all that Girl has said about you is true I'm sure you will have no problem getting there."

"Thank you, sir," Glib said demurely.

"And what do you plan to do with your life? Do you have any chosen occupation?"

Glib thought about Young's question. Two days ago he might have said sorcerer or mage, or a tutor like Stern. But now he wasn't so sure. He summed up all the thoughts in his mind, took a deep breath and said, "I want to be an officer in the Outlendian army."

"Really? Fighting wars, defending the honor of Outlend? A noble occupation, but one that is dangerous too."

Glib listened to Young's glowing praise and covert warning. But he did not see Girl's expression. It was angry.

Captain Trix Vulgâr stalked the parapet with his charge. Glib followed him dutifully. When it looked like the captain was about to request a light or a drink of water Glib was always there to help him. Glib had only been given light duties so far but he took them as seriously as any of the more important duties assigned to the other soldiers. Glib considered himself a soldier - although he was not allowed to wear a sword and all the armor the captain had was too large for him.

"You might think I'm a good soldier now," the captain said, "but I wasn't always like that." The captain remained silent for a few seconds. Glib said nothing, knowing the captain would speak when he chose. "I remember my first battle. I was afraid. I was terrified." The captain looked at the parapet stone. "I was a coward. I hid under a wagon until the heat of the battle had ebbed, then came out from my den and attacked enemy soldiers who already had half a dozen of our own soldiers beleaguering them."

Glib remained a silent listener.

"After that I served in a few border patrols but could never get the knack of it. I always seemed to choke whenever something dangerous happened. And you don't only have human enemies along the borders. Species like goblins make appearances from time to time. Arachnids."

"Why were you afraid?" Glib asked. "I thought the more you faced your enemies the less afraid you'd become."

"That was the problem," the captain said. "Every time I faced a goblin horde or a group of bandits I became *more* afraid. Soon I was unable to stand it. That's when I came here, to Color Gash. I enlisted as the lowliest grunt in the city guard and tried to learn to control my fear. Fighting a couple of drunken university students is different from having a dozen trained soldiers draw swords on you." The captain sighed. "And now I've worked my way up to captain."

"You've done pretty well," Glib said.

"But I want to go back to soldiering. I want to prove to myself that my first days as a soldier were due to inexperience, not because I was afraid." The captain swallowed and looked across the distant plains. His hand rested on his sword. "My

father was a soldier."

"What rank did he attain?"

"He was a lieutenant - one rank higher than me."

"I thought captain was higher than lieutenant."

"Maybe in Ref. Not here. Try putting a regular army lieutenant against a city watch captain - and see which one comes out better. My father was famous in his day. People sang his praises... Why am I telling you this?"

"Because I'm here, Captain."

From below the parapet wall came the sound of someone vomiting. The captain swore and ran along the parapet, then down the nearest set of stairs. He oozed confidence and command as he approached the hunched-over figure of a man.

Two other soldiers leaned over the man. One looked up. "It's Barker, Captain."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's drunk."

The captain stopped, crossed his arms and stared at Barker. "Isn't his watch in fifteen minutes?"

"Yes Captain."

"And he's drunk."

"Yes Captain."

"Barker, get up!"

The soldier obeyed his captain. He swayed on his feet and tried to focus on the captain's face. "S'sorry Captain. I didn't... think it was this late."

"But it is. Do you realize this is the third time you've turned up for your watch drunk?"

"Yes Captain. Sorry Captain."

"Sorry isn't good enough. Maybe the first time, but..." The captain nodded at the two soldiers who escorted Barker. "Bring him to the parapet. Prepare Old Screamer."

"Captain..." one said.

"Why are you hesitating?"

"Yes Captain!"

The two soldiers struggled with Barker up the parapet stairs. The captain remained on the ground with Glib for a little while. "Old Screamer?" Glib asked.

"Old screamer has kept ill-disciplined soldiers in line for many, many years. If a soldier can't obey orders he visits Old Screamer."

"What is Old Screamer?"

"You'll see. And keep addressing me as 'Captain' - this isn't excuse enough for you to drop my title."

"Captain! You said that Barker has turned up for his watch drunk three times. Why not sack him?"

"The army - and the city watch - is different from a normal job. With a normal job you can come and go as you please. With the army you sign up for a term. It may be five or ten years. But for as long as you sign up the army owns you. And if a soldier refuses to work he risks court martial and imprisonment. In extreme cases he risks death. I'm doing Barker a favor. He *should* be served a court martial by now. But I don't want to see that happen to him. He's a good man under his bad skin." The captain began to ascend the parapet stairs.

Glib followed him.

The captain reached the parapet and approached Barker. The drunk soldier was tied over a stone which Glib had always assumed was just part of the city wall. Now Glib thought it looked more like a sacrificial altar. Barker's clothes had been stripped back so that his torso was bare in the moonlight, and the muscles in his arms tensed against the ropes which bound him. He said nothing. Another soldier was holding a long whip - and Glib realized what Old Screamer was. He tried not to look panicked and shuffled behind the captain so the other soldiers would not see him.

The captain nodded at the soldier who was holding the whip. "Do the honors."

"How many Captain?"

"Twenty-five."

The soldier clearly did not like what he was doing. Hesitantly he lifted the whip and moved closer to Barker's prostrate form.

One of the other soldiers spoke up. "Captain. The boy... maybe we should get him to close his eyes. Or turn around."

"He watches. He must learn."

The whip struck Barker. The three soldiers who were not participating in the punishment grimaced; the captain remained stone-faced. Glib forced himself to witness the work of Old Screamer. Every time he heard - and saw - the whip strike home, he winced in imagined pain.

Glib waited by the gully again. It was late in the afternoon: the sun glowed orange through low mare's-tail cloud which traversed the horizon. The ground was still warm from the day. Glib asked himself whether the werehound would come back again. Perhaps the last two meetings were just flukes. But Glib knew that if the werehound came again it would mean they *were* forming a friendship.

The werehound came. Padding across the ground, it approached Glib in a zig-zag course. It paused to scent at a cactus then continued its approach, looking from side to side as though it expected a trap to spring up at any moment. Finally the werehound sat only yards in front of Glib.

Glib had a better view of the werehound this time. Their two previous meetings had been at night - one had been filled with terror and the other with wariness and fear. This time Glib could see the werehound's features perfectly. It was not dissimilar from a large dog. From a distance it could easily be mistaken for a greyhound. What made the werehound different was its sable hair. A thin coat of fine black hair covered the werehound's body, except on its underbelly where the creature's skin showed through. The creature looked sexless and Glib became even surer that the hypothesis about werehounds coming from another plane was true. The werehound stood and approached Glib, who held out his hand. The werehound licked it.

A bond was formed. The werehound moved closer to Glib and ran its muzzle along his arm. Its wet nose tickled Glib's arm and he laughed. Impulsively Glib reached out and hugged the animal, encircling its giant muzzle in one of his arms.

Glib did not realize Cinch was coming. And that Cinch was with several of his friends. Several of his friends including Baramny and Con. They arrived on the other side of the gully, the one closest to Color Gash. Cinch shouted across the gulch. "Glib, is that you?"

Glib turned and looked at Cinch and his friends. As soon as the werehound realized they were not alone it turned and dashed away. When Glib looked back at the werehound it was running from him, already too distant for him to call it back. Again he faced Cinch. "Yeah, it's me! What do you want?"

"What were you doing with a werewolf!?"

Before Glib could reply Baramny shouted, "Glib is a werewolf worshipper! And we all know where werewolves come from - other planes. And we all know what lives on other planes - *demons!* Which means Glib is a demon worshipper!"

The other boys in the group took up Baramny's belief. Some hurled abuse at Glib, while others simply picked up stones and hurled them instead. Glib lifted his arms to shield the stones being pelted at him, but some still met their mark.

"Demon worshipper, demon worshipper!"

Baramny's taunts hurt Glib. And obviously Cinch did not know Baramny had instigated the attack which had knocked him unconscious for several days, otherwise he would not be with him. But minutes after coming out of his coma Cinch had *told* Glib that he knew Baramny was the one who attacked him. So who was Cinch siding with? His best friend was Glib - but he might side with his other friends now that he had seen Glib petting a werewolf.

Baramny suddenly ran towards the gully and descended the gully's edge, his other friends closely following him. Cinch ran after the bully too. Glib hesitated. He could stay and get in a fight which he would inevitably lose or he could run. But if he ran Baramny and the others would call him a coward. Cinch might even be tempted to say that. Glib waited. He pulled up the sleeves of his long shirt and tensed himself for the imminent fight. He almost hoped the werewolf returned but knew that was not likely - their bond wasn't close enough for it to risk fighting with humans. Not yet.

Baramny ascended the edge of the gully closest to Glib - who was ready for him. As soon as Baramny reached the precipice of the gully Glib slammed into him. Baramny tumbled back and slid to the gully bed.

But while Glib was disposing of Baramny two other boys reached the top of the gully's edge and surrounded him. They came at him from both sides. Glib avoided a blow from one of them but the other boy rammed into him. Pain exploded in Glib's lungs and he was driven to the ground.

Cinch leapt from the gully and dragged Glib's assailant off him. With a massive swipe Cinch punched the boy from his feet. The boy fell on the ground with blood spurting from his nose and a busted lip. He stirred on the ground but did not rise.

Which still meant there were five more of Cinch's friends to deal with. Glib rose dazedly to his feet and attacked the boy who had tried to down him the first time. He kicked the boy in the stomach then drove his shoulder into the boy's chest and jostled him back football-style. Glib threw the boy into the gully.

Four to go. Cinch saw an excellent opportunity when Baramny crested the gully's edge again. The bully was bleeding from a cut on his elbow and scrapes covered his skin. Dust was ingrained into his skin and hair. "Glib!" Cinch yelled, then ran towards Baramny and tackled him.

The bully was ready this time and held Cinch's tackle steady, wrestling with his supposed friend on the precipice of the gully's edge. Glib ran to help his friend. He deftly avoided one of the other boys and tackled Baramny from side-on. Glib and Cinch and the bully tumbled down the gully's steep slope together. They stopped in the dirt of the gully bed and Glib rose above the bully immediately. He punched Baramny in the face once, twice, three times. The other boys halted above the gully to watch.

Straddling the bully Glib punched Baramny again and again. Blood and dirt covered Baramny's face. Cinch rose groggily to his feet and tried to pull Glib away. "Come on Glib. Let off. We won." Glib continued to hit the bully.

Finally, with the help of Con who had just come down the slope, Glib was dragged from Baramny's still figure. "I hope you didn't kill him!" Con said.

Baramny stirred.

Glib stared at the bully in satisfaction. "Nope. Didn't kill him. Pity."

Baramny opened his eyes. They were caked with dirt and half-closed because of bruises which were already beginning to form there. Blood leaked from his nose and his lip was cut in several places. Scrapes littered his skin and his scalp was also bleeding. It seemed he could hardly move.

Baramny got to his feet, albeit slowly, surprising Glib with his toughness. He limped away. The limp was severe but Glib did nothing to help him. When Baramny tried to ascend the gully's edge nearest Color Gash he had difficulty - every time he reached the steeper part of the edge his leg gave way on him and he slid to the gully bed. Eventually one of the boys took pity on him and helped him up the rise.

One by one other boys left to help Baramny. He would need their help if he were to return to Color Gash safely. Cinch stayed with Glib; Glib just crossed his arms and looked sternly at Baramny's retreating figure. Occasionally he smiled. As far as he was concerned Baramny had got exactly what he deserved.

When Baramny and his friends were no more than distant dots on the horizon Glib turned on his friend. "You broke our pact!"

"What pact?" Cinch's question was just as indignant as Glib's accusation.

"No one else was supposed to come here! This was our special place, just for you and me."

"You speak as though I'm your lover. I'm *not* your lover, Glib."

"Didn't you love the quietness of here? The tranquillity. I thought we had an unspoken agreement that no one would ever come to this gully but us. I thought..."

"You didn't tell me, Glib."

"Well you should have *known* I meant it. You should have had the brains to work it out. Don't you know that Baramny beat you up? I've already told you that once - why can't you get it into your thick head?"

"I *do* know that Baramny and his friends were the ones who beat me up. I took them here for a reason."

"*What* reason?"

Cinch smiled, moved to the edge of the gully and sat on the warm earth.. Crossing his arms over his knees he watched his friend. "I knew we could get back at him. When Baramny attacked me, I was by myself. But I knew that if you and I fought against him together we could win. And we did."

"So... you deliberately led him here?"

"Would *you* want to stay friends with someone who beat you up?"

Glib sat beside his friend. He should have reason to thank Cinch - at least they wouldn't be bothered by Baramny any longer. But Cinch had still come to the gully with his ex-friends and broke the *magic* of the place. Could he be forgiven for that? Glib knew he would not be a good friend if he *didn't* forgive Cinch. "What's past is past," Glib said. "It might take a while before Baramny starts annoying us again."

"People like him can't resist bullying. He'll be back."

"Cinch... what did you think when you saw me with the werehound?"

"I was surprised."

"But you don't hate me, do you? You don't think I'm a demon worshipper or something?"

Cinch laughed. "Would I be sitting here if I thought you were?" Cinch lay on his back in the gully. "I don't trust werewounds, and I feel a bit queasy about you making friends with one. But if that's what you want - fine. Just don't expect me to go patting the damn creature."

Glib was relieved. He slapped his friend on the back and got up. If he and Cinch wanted to avoid nightslayers now would be a good time to go home - the sun was starting to sink much too quickly for Glib's liking. He held out his arm for his friend, who took it by the wrist and got to his feet. The two of them climbed the gully's edge nearest Color Gash and stood looking at the city. Glib wondered if Baramny and his friends would tell anyone about what had transpired today.

Sup was simple, a bowl of soup and a bun to go with it. A beaker of water was the only beverage provided for Glib's and Delilah's consumption - juice and alcohol was being held in stock by Surl due to the war with Tern. He planned to sell it at a profit in the bakery if the war with Tern dragged for too long. The bakery had sold most of its desserts today so there was nothing sweet to try either. Surl was busying himself closing the bakery and Abbey was with her family so Delilah and Glib were sharing sup alone.

Delilah dabbed at her face with a napkin. "What did you do today, Glib?"

Glib paused with a spoonful of hot soup just below his lips. "Nothing. Had to work in the bakery this morning."

"This afternoon?" Delilah grinned. "Did you see Girl?"

"Saw her yesterday," Glib replied. "Went out with Cinch today."

"Oh? What did the two of you do?"

"Went for a run. We *did* go outside the city walls but don't worry, we didn't get into trouble."

Delilah's expression became stern and she played with the pieces of bread in her soup. "It's good that you didn't arrive home late. If you did... Surl... I don't like it when he hits you but when you do something like making the city guard open the gates for you - I can't help but think you deserve it. Sometimes I think you want everything your own way and don't care about anyone else."

Glib set his spoon on the table. "I just want to do what I'm best at! I don't want to work in some stupid bakery all my life."

"Glib, settle."

"I don't want to settle! You're just like Surl. Both of you think I'm an inconvenience and the reason why you hate me is because I'm a reminder that you haven't been able to give birth to your own son." Glib's tone of voice turned from angry to sulky. "I wish my real parents were here."

"We have raised you from when you were two hours old, Glib. Both Surl and I love you. We've only tried to bring you up to the best of our abilities. But if you are not appreciative of that, there's nothing we can do."

Glib's arms were crossed, his forehead was wrinkled and the bridge of his nose was creased in anger. His voice was low as he said, "The reason why you haven't given birth to a child is because you and Surl are cousins."

Delilah stiffened in her chair. She sat up straighter and brought a spoonful of soup to her mouth. "Eat your sup." After saying that she ate her own meal in silence.

Glib didn't mind the lack of conversation. At least this way he didn't have to put up with pretending to enjoy a conversation. Beneath it all Delilah was just like her husband. She showed Glib love - and probably did love him deep down - but if she

and Surl had another child it would be shown truer love than what Glib was. At least Surl said what he thought and displayed what he thought through his actions. On the other hand at least Delilah didn't beat him.

Surl entered the room. His brawny arms hung in readiness by his side. His white apron was covered with flour and his face was also dusted white. He walked with the slow, tired gait of someone who has been working all day. Slowly he pointed at Glib. "I want to speak to you." Surl remained where he was for a few more seconds, breathing slowly and waiting for Glib's reply. When Glib said nothing he prompted: "Well?"

"What?"

"Before coming home I spoke to the priest of the Fastness god. He had been speaking with Con." Glib's heart tightened. "I believe Con is one of your friends?"

"Cinch's friend more than mine," Glib replied.

"Con had a little story to tell. A story about going with his friends to the gully outside Color Gash's northern wall and discovering you there. *With a werehound!*"

Delilah looked alarmed when she heard her husband's tone; Glib's eyes widened and he tried to find somewhere to hide.

"What in the underworld did you think you were doing? Cavorting with a werehound. Gods, Glib, don't you know werehounds come from another plane? I thought that's what Stern was meant to teach you - to avoid the damn things. All I can say is that I'm glad you're not my real son. And that no werehound-lover could even be called a *step-son* of mine."

"That's not what it was like," Glib defended himself. "Ask Cinch. He was there. He-"

"I can't think of a punishment off-hand," Surl continued without even paying attention to Glib. "You've never done anything this stupid before. I've got out the rod for you many times - but you know that was for your own good. This... I've a mind to take you to the Tower of the Six and trial you there."

"Surl!"

Surl looked at his wife in annoyance. "What?"

"If he's found guilty... you know. If he's found guilty of sorcery - harmful sorcery - he... dies."

"Maybe that's what he deserves." Surl crossed his meaty arms and stared at his step-son. "I tried to do the best I could with you, Glib, I really did. But if you rebel against correction all the time, I'm afraid I have no choice. I haven't decided how I will punish you yet, but tomorrow morning you will know what's going to happen."

Glib counter-attacked. "Why don't you go to the Tower of the Six for leering at Abbey when she's only seventeen? Or monopolizing the different suburbs of Color Gash in conjunction with the other bakeries?"

Surl's eyes bulged and the muscles in his arms flexed involuntarily. He almost took a step towards Glib but stopped himself at the last moment. Delilah put a hand on her husband's arm. "Surl, please."

Surl straightened his back and regained some of his composure. He pinched his lips together, crossed his arms again and took on a strict, paternal demeanor. "Glib, go to your room. *Now.*" Glib stood with his soup bowl and the remaining piece of his bun but Surl stopped him with a glance. "Put it down. Have a drink of water but nothing else. You will have no sup tonight."

Glib - who was furious but did not want to show his anger too much just in case Surl decided a beating was in order - slammed the bowl on the table, threw the

leftover piece of bun in the soup and ran towards his room. He was glad to get away from his stupid step-father and step-mother. As far as he was concerned he was glad that Surl knew he had been caught with a werehound.

There were many words expressing anger in the Outlendian dictionary, and Glib felt all of them. He was furious; he was irate; he was indignant; he was pissed off; he was irascible; he was red-faced, red-hot and red-tempered. He got some grim satisfaction in knowing that Surl probably couldn't spell half the words which Glib knew meant 'anger', but that satisfaction wasn't enough to null the pain of the fight with his step-father. He admitted to himself that he had lost the fight, and that made him even angrier. As long as Glib lived under this roof and was dependent on Surl, the big baker would always lord it over him. And Delilah would be right there backing him up.

Glib loved his room. The bed he slept on each night was lumpy and the blankets which covered it scratched at his skin but he loved the warm, fuzzy familiarity of it. Glib had some toys from when he was young, and even a dagger which Surl had bought him for his thirteenth birthday. But this room was phony. He was Delilah and Surl's step-son - which meant he was a phony to them too. *Step-son*.

Surl would be concocting his punishment now. There was a very real chance of Surl trying him at the Tower of the Six. If that happened Glib didn't know how he would be punished. Death was a very real possibility, especially if Baramny and his friends spoke against him. Cinch might try to defend him but he did not have the same bullying nature as Baramny - who was the type of person who would do anything to get his own way. Sorcerers had been sighted with werehounds before but sorcerers could defend themselves against any accusations which were flung at them. Glib was fifteen years old and had no one to back him up except Cinch and - maybe - Girl.

Would Girl back him up? Or would she be ashamed her boyfriend had been caught associating with a werehound. Her parents would definitely think he was a bad influence. Glib wasn't sure if he wanted to meet Girl again, and knew he would feel that way until all of this had blown over. He was unpopular enough as it was. This would make him a despondent inhabitant of the lowest depths of the social abyss.

The only alternative to being tried at the Tower of the Six was receiving a *major* beating from Surl. He didn't want that. He didn't want to be tried either. There was only one solution to avoiding the punishment that Glib knew would come - he had to leave. Not just home and as a citizen of Color Gash, where he would be found by someone who knew him sooner or late, but Color Gash altogether. Surl and Delilah were starting to get sick of him - he could tell by the way they acted. But if he left he wouldn't get in their hair.

Glib worked quickly and hoped his step-parents didn't hear him. He bundled some of his favorite clothes into one of the blankets on his bed and tied the blanket together. Then he took the dagger which had been given him for his thirteenth birthday and a custard tart which he had swiped from the bakery (it could be eaten later). Admittedly that was all he needed, but he also took a *book of runes* he had borrowed from Stern - the tutor would not miss it.

The window in Glib's room backed onto an alley. With his makeshift sack slung over his shoulder Glib climbed out the window and into the alley beyond. A cold wind cut through his clothes. He did not close the window to his room or turn to look homes at tat it. This home was behind him now. Hundreds of boys had probably left their his age. But Glib was not sure how many had left their homes on pain of death.

Glib was afraid of the life spread before him. From now on he would not have Surl or Delilah to look after him; he would not have Abbey or Girl to ask after his welfare; he would not have Stern to gently encourage his lessons. The only person he could go to was Cinch. He did not want to knock on the front door of Stern's tutelage hut - if Stern discovered him out at this time of night he would escort Glib home, and that would only complicate matters further. He needed to meet Cinch without Stern knowing.

The streets of Color Gash looked different at night. More... dangerous. It still wasn't very late and there were people walking in the streets, completing their business for the day or enjoying the night. This was not a festival day so the taverns were doing a quiet trade, making their coin from their regular patrons. Glib stayed away from the taverns, afraid that someone who was drunk might want to fight him. Also, the sack he carried was an invitation to be robbed.

Stern's hut was dark. That was good - it meant Stern and Cinch had probably gone to bed. Cinch's room was on the eastern side of the hut, facing a small sidestreet which people rarely used. Glib made his way to this sidestreet and paused outside Cinch's window. Stern's room was on the northern side of the house - facing the den of backstreets which existed behind the homes of Color Gash. Glib knocked on Cinch's glass window lightly. When no one answered Glib knocked on the window again.

A face peered through the dirt-smudged window. Cinch looked surprised when he saw his friend but then he opened the window, taking care not to make too much noise. He looked at Glib pointedly. "*Well?*"

Glib felt nervous about telling Cinch what he planned to do. "Can we talk?"

"What about?"

"Something."

"What do you mean 'something'?"

"Come for a walk with me. I'd like to talk with you that way."

"I'm going to bed." Cinch began to close his window, but Glib placed his left hand on the window's sill and yelped in pain when the window pressed down on it. He hoped Stern did not hear his cry. Cinch opened the window again. "*What?*"

"I'm leaving home."

Cinch looked at his friend. He said nothing for a while, but then shook his head and glanced at Glib as though he were delusional. "You can't leave home."

"What's stopping me?"

Cinch didn't warrant Glib with a reply. Instead he lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling of the hut. He left the window open, and Glib poked his head through so he could look at his friend. "May I come in?"

"If you want. You've already interrupted my sleep enough."

Glib did not wait for Cinch to withdraw his invitation. He climbed through the window, stood at the foot of Cinch's bed, then sat beside his friend on the bed instead. "Surl knows about me and the werehound."

"Oh." Cinch's expression was sympathetic as he looked at his friend. "Did he... did he hurt you?"

"He hasn't decided my punishment yet. He said he may even take me to the Tower of the Six."

"*For trying?*" Cinch sat up and said the words loudly, suddenly more interested in what Glib had to say.

Glib waved his friend to quietness and looked at him angrily, gesticulating towards Cinch's door in the direction of Surl's room. "For trying," Glib confirmed. "I may even be killed if I'm found guilty." Glib sat with his friend in the darkness of the room for a while and listened to a band of drunken revelers pass on the street outside. Everything sunk into silence again. "You'd defend me at the trial, wouldn't you Cinch?"

Cinch remained staring at the ceiling. He took a moment before answering his friend. "I'd defend you. But I don't know what good it would do - I'm not exactly the most powerful man in Color Gash."

"Just the most popular."

"Just the most popular," Cinch repeated, and there was chagrin in his voice.

"So, are you going to come for a walk with me?"

"I don't see why not. Just wait until I get some of my things."

It only occurred to Glib once he and Cinch were out of the tutelage hut and far down the street that Cinch had no reason to carry any of his belongings with him. Cinch didn't even have a reason to leave home. Maybe he had problems with Stern but every child has some problem or another with their parents. It was just that some children had more problems with their parents than others.

The streets of Color Gash were beginning to empty now. The last of the drunken revelers - university students and tradesmen finished work for the day - were going home to their dormitories or wives to sleep off their drunkenness there. Now the streets would start to be filled with cut-throats and brigands, and prostitutes for those who could not find the services of anyone else. Glib admitted that he was becoming a little afraid.

Cinch, however, looked cheerful beside him. He strode down the street as though this were an opportunity for new adventures, looking this way and that, leering when he saw a prostitute propositioning a man in a side-alley, laughing when a drunken university student was chased by a mangy dog who'd had enough of being teased. Glib would feel bad when Cinch turned around to go home.

"Why don't you ask Girl's father and mother to represent you?" Cinch asked. "They're prosperous - they've got some power."

"I doubt very much if they would represent someone who had been caught with a werhound. Especially when that someone is the boyfriend of their own daughter."

Cinch mused on what Glib told him, smiled and said, "You're probably right."

"Oh." Glib stopped in the middle of the street and stared straight ahead. "I forgot. I was supposed to help the soldiers at the city wall tonight." So much for them being able to trust him. So much for the faith Captain Trix Vulgàr had placed in him and the camaraderie he was beginning to feel with the soldiers. Tonight he'd wanted to see if Barker's back was healing.

"They can't expect you to be there all the time," Cinch eased him. "You're there by choice. What are they going to do if you don't turn up one night - or at all?"

"Tell Surl I arrived at the city gates late again."

"Oh."

Glib sighed and continued walking. The night sky was clear and the peninsula's two moons shone with their full effulgence. Each moon was tinged with a hint of cerulean blue, although the moons' colors were often much brighter. Both moons were full - as usual. The times when they became half-moons and crescents were regarded with as much interest as when the sun was eclipsed - both events were rare. "Surl was

angry, you know."

"I know what Surl's like," Cinch said empathetically.

"You should have seen him. Any angrier and steam would have been coming out of his ears." Glib scraped one of his boots along the ground and looked at his feet plodding ahead of him. "That's why I'm leaving."

"Are you sure you want to leave? I mean, after a week or so all of this will pass over. Surl's hurt you before... and you've always been able to get over it."

"This is different. Even if Surl doesn't take me to the Tower of the Six for trying he'll still beat me. He'll probably break my back. Or my arms."

"But it will pass over."

"Nope. Girl won't want to speak with me, and everyone who knows me will regard me with suspicion. Even Surl and Delilah will treat me as though I'm an outcast. Abbey..."

"What about my father?"

"He's different, he's realistic. He... accepts things as facts, and listens to both sides of a person's story. He doesn't go accusing people of witchcraft or evil sorcery just because of an idiotic superstition."

"He might be like that with you, but I wish he was like that with me." It was Cinch's turn to kick dust. "He still treats me as though I'm a fool. Do you know that he teaches me the same mathematics he teaches eight-year-olds? I know the sums but he thinks I bluff my way through them, *but I don't*." Cinch's voice lowered dangerously. "He calls me an asinine dolt." Cinch stopped speaking as he and Glib passed a group of three university students. "And he praises you all the time. I know it's not your fault, but I wish he'd stop talking about you so much."

"If you think you've got it bad, try living in my house. Surl thinks you have diamond deposits growing in the upper cavities of your..." Glib's voice trailed off, "... well, I can't say where. It's better than having rusty steel deposits up there, I suppose."

"We should swap families."

"Even if we did we wouldn't like it," Glib said matter-of-factly. "We've grown up with our own families and we'd probably hate living in anyone else's."

"I don't know..."

"You might feel that way now but once you tried it out for a few days you'd get sick of it."

"Maybe." Cinch said nothing else and Glib did not bother with a reply either. Each got companionship simply by being close to the other, and did not need to fill the silence with meaningless conversation. They had passed that stage long ago and were at the point where they could stay for minutes on end not saying anything, sharing each other's presence. "Glib?" Cinch asked.

"Yes."

"You know how you said you were leaving home?" Cinch paused, waited for Glib's response and when none was forthcoming said, "I'm coming too."

The city wall was an obstacle to getting out of Color Gash. Guards - probably guards that Glib knew - strolled the parapet and anyone who neared the base of the city wall was questioned immediately. The captain was doing his job, controlling the flow of people into and out of the city, which made escape for Glib and Cinch all the more difficult.

At least Glib was aware of the postern gate. He knew the postern gate was their best opportunity of escape - and that if needed the old man who guarded it could

be overpowered. Briefly Glib thought about Surl and Delilah. Delilah would be worried when she discovered he wasn't home; Surl wouldn't care. Abbey...? Abbey was nice, and would be worried about him, but now Surl would be able to have his way with her. Now Surl could do what he wanted and pretend Glib had never been an obstacle to the seventeen-year-old girl.

"We can't get through there," Cinch spoke matter-of-factly. "Look at all the guards on the wall."

Glib turned towards his friend and grinned. Moving from the woodpile they were hiding behind Glib scooped up a stone and ran back to his friend. "They might not notice us if they hear this hit a roof." Without waiting for his friend's approval Glib hurled the stone at one of the houses across the street. Instead of bouncing from the roof it shattered one of the home's windows. The guards were drawn towards the noise and Glib dragged Cinch with him. They traversed the street in a crouch, running towards the postern gate which was now unguarded. The city guard was milling near the broken window or watching from the wall above. Glib was becoming more confident they would reach the postern gate and slip through it without being detected.

Someone crash-tackled Glib. Another person caught Cinch as well. Glib thrashed in his captor's arms but knew that even if he did escape other guards would pursue him. When he looked at his captor's face he was surprised. "Barker!"

"Who did you expect it to be? The postern gate is for those who are being punished."

"But I thought... what about the old man?"

"Accepting bribes to let people through. His time is up."

"Please Barker," Glib breathed, realizing an opportunity, "let me and my friend through. We won't tell anybody - we won't do anything."

"I'm in enough trouble as it is - I don't want to get in any more. Captain!"

The captain moved from the broken window to where Glib was being held. Glib noticed that Cinch was being held by another soldier, although Glib did not know this soldier's name. Captain Trix Vulgàr inspected Glib and Cinch, reached his hand out to touch Glib's chin then drew it back at the last moment. "You're late for your shift."

"I'm not doing any more shifts," Glib replied sullenly. "I'm leaving. I'm leaving Color Gash completely."

"Your foster-father?"

Glib challenged the captain with silence for a few seconds, then gave up his challenge and nodded.

"What do you plan to do when you leave Color Gash?"

Glib thought about the captain's question. "Seek my fortune. I don't know. But at least I'll be away from Surl."

"And your friend?"

"His father is like my foster-father."

The captain considered Glib's words, strolling back and forth before the two boys as though he were a headmaster deciding their punishment. Finally he turned with his finger held on his chin. He said, "I hope you find your fortunes. Both of you."

Glib stared at the captain. "You're letting us go?"

"I left home when I was eighteen years old. What difference does three years make?" The captain considered his own question and said, "A lot," but added nothing more. When Barker and the other soldier relaxed their grasps on Glib and Cinch the

captain asked, "What fortunes do you seek?"

"We'll find them when we reach them," Glib countered.

The captain stepped aside from the two boys and looked at his men. "Let them through."

The guards parted at their captain's command and Glib and Cinch walked towards the postern gate. Glib said, "Thank you," to the soldiers and the captain then ducked through the gate without looking back. Cinch followed his friend.

Outside the two moons shone full on the plains and the contorted limbs of cactuses and desert plants stood in stark relief against the Outlendian night sky. The plains were flat and smooth and blurred into the horizon. Glib started walking without looking back at Color Gash, and Cinch fell into step beside his friend. Glib allowed himself a small smile. Surl and Delilah were behind him now, Abbey and Stern were behind him now, Girl was behind him now (although it hurt to think of her). Color Gash was behind him now, and ahead of him was life.

Captain Trix Vulgàr was bone-weary ascending the parapet stairs. So many years in the city guard and all he had achieved was the rank of captain. His father would consider that a failure. He had performed no mighty feats in battle, had not made any truces or historic agreements with neighboring countries. He was just a city guard captain with a deflated sense of self-importance.

The captain reached the parapet and looked at the plains. The silhouettes of two boys - young men, really - were blurring into the darkness. Soon they would have adventure, soon they would be performing great feats in their lives. So unlike himself and his pathetic city guard captaincy.

The captain leaned forward so that his elbows rested on a bulwark of the parapet and looked at Glib and his friend. Such eager young men, going off to seek their fortunes in Outlend and wherever destiny might take them. The captain sighed. He wished he were going with them.

Glib trudged along the plain. He was glad Cinch was with him. Color Gash was at their backs and they would never have to visit the city again if they didn't want to. Glib had his doubts about Cinch. Though Cinch's father might criticize his lack of learning expertise he and Cinch were still a happy family in all other aspects. They would probably be happier if they had a woman to share their lives with, but most people don't get exactly what they want. Glib was certain that Cinch would turn around and go home after a few days.

It was lucky that he and Cinch had managed to pass Trix Vulgàr. The captain's sense of duty was so strong that Glib had expected to be returned to Surl and Delilah immediately. But Glib had seen a kinship in the captain's eyes and played on that. Glib wondered if the captain were regretting what he did now.

"We should have left the city with a caravan," Glib said.

"What caravan is going to hire us?"

"Not necessarily as guards, but as fellow travelers."

"We have hardly any money. A few days into the trip we'd be begging for food."

"You sound like me - a pessimist."

"At least I don't look like you."

That got a grin from Glib, and he swiped playfully at Cinch with his right fist. Surprisingly the blow connected and Cinch rubbed at his arm where he had been hit.

Glib thought about what Cinch had said. A caravan would be added protection from bandits, and caravans always carried a surplus of water just in case they got lost. But caravans always had set destinations, and Glib didn't know where he and his friend were going. In fact Glib just wanted to wander, at least for the moment.

"There's nothing for me in Color Gash now," Cinch declared.

Glib looked at his friend. "You say there's nothing for you. What about *me*? At least you have a real father and lots of friends."

"I have no friends in Color Gash," Cinch said. "Ever since Baramny decided to bash me. He's the bully, so everybody sided with him."

"Not everybody."

"Con, right. That poor kid is afraid of his own shadow. Con stays out of everything."

Glib speculated that maybe he and Cinch were unthankful teenagers who didn't realize just how lucky they were, but soon quashed that thought. If he were to make a clean break from Color Gash there was to be no returning to the city for at least six months. *Why did I have to be born into such a life?* Glib thought of his mother, his real mother, dying only hours after he had been born. She would have had her aura in those two hours, she would have been happy. But she died and left him to be raised by her two married cousins who didn't care about him, who just wanted a son of their own. Cinch could not know that pain. "I hope I have a better life than the one I had in Color Gash," Glib said simply.

Cinch thought about what Glib remarked upon, then said: "Me too."

Glib and Cinch reached the gully where Glib was caught with the werehound yesterday afternoon. The gully was a darker scar across dark ground. "I hope there's no sunstalker here," Glib said, but Cinch just shrugged and ran into the gully as though there were nothing to worry about. *Always the one who is unafraid*, Glib thought.

The gully was dry and looked different to what it did in the daytime. Everything was much more stark with the peninsula's two moons illuminating the entire vista; the dead trees which looked like desiccating bodies in daylight now looked like monsters and apparitional ghosts. *Now you're imagination is getting the better of you.*

"What are we doing here?" Cinch asked as he broke a branch from one of the gully's dead trees.

"The werehound."

Cinch stopped his environmental vandalism and stared at Glib as though he were insane. "What about the werehound?"

"I'm going to call it."

"Not with me here." Cinch climbed from the opposite side of the gully and stood with his hands crossed over his chest.

"I thought you were the one who was afraid of nothing," Glib retorted. "That time I wouldn't climb the roof of the bakery you called me a frightened mouse. What about now?"

"This is different! This is... I'm not having a creature from another plane lick me on the face. No way."

"Very well! Stay there then. I'm going to call my werehound."

Cinch remained perched on the edge of the gully, his muscles tensed and his legs ready to run. He watched Glib in the gully bed and hoped that the werehound his friend was talking about did not come. Glib paid little attention to Cinch. All he

noticed was his friend's straw-woven hair flapping in the weak breeze.

The breeze did not reach the gully bed; everything was still. Glib did not know how to summon the werehound. He considered taking off his pack, getting out the *book of runes* and finding a summoning spell but decided against it. The *book of runes* was for a trained sorcerer, and if something went wrong... Glib shrugged off his pack and put it on the ground instead. All he needed to do was call to the werehound.

His voice lifted above the breeze and the weird, mournful desert sounds. He repeated only what he could think of - "*werehound! werehound!*" - though there was a strange melody to his words, a mellifluous pitch that did not seem to be entirely of this world. Glib did not know if he was calling with his mind or with his words, if his voice had anything to do with the summoning, but the werehound came, padding out of the desert as though it were a traveler completing a long and arduous journey. Glib looked up and saw the werehound not far from him. He smiled when he recognized the werehound was the one who had come the previous three times.

Glib turned and looked back, and realized only now that he was standing on the precipice of the gully, when before he had been in the gully bed. Cinch was staring at him with amazement.

The werehound stopped a few paces from Glib. There was still a wariness about the creature's demeanor, as though it expected Glib to attack at any moment. But Glib came forward, stroked the werehound on its head and scratched behind its ears. The werehound growled in appreciation.

Cinch stayed at the edge of the gully watching Glib and the werehound. He hesitated before climbing into the gully bed, but then stopped and did not move any closer to his friend and his friend's pet.

The werehound suddenly bounded away from Glib towards Cinch. It growled and danced around him, scoring the ground with its claws. The werehound jumped on Cinch and knocked him down; Cinch scrambled along the ground away from the beast.

"He's saying hello." Glib moved to the werehound and settled it down. "I think he likes you."

"I don't like it. I thought it was going to attack me."

"You wouldn't attack him, would you?" Glib knelt and scratched his werehound on the cheek.

Cinch moved to his feet. He still watched the werehound cautiously and tried to position himself so that Glib was standing between him and it. "Father would be fascinated to see this. To see humans befriending a werehound. I don't know if this has ever happened before. With sorcerers maybe, but neither of us are sorcerers. We're just... kids."

Glib thought about Stern and how much interest he would place in this event. If it were only Cinch befriending the werehound Stern would probably pause in his studies then pass the matter away with a wave of his hand. But if it were Glib befriending the werehound Stern would show more interest. As Glib petted the werehound he looked at his friend, smiled and said, "One things for sure - we've picked up another traveler."

* * * * *

Three days. Three days under the broiling Outlendian sun. The inland vista of Outlend alternated between desert and plain. At the moment Glib and Cinch had just left a wide expanse of plain and were traveling through desert again. There was no water. Glib thought he and Cinch were traveling north, and if they kept to their bearings would end up somewhere west of the twin cities of Rondolli and Solet.

Glib and Cinch were dancing along the outskirts of the Pancake Plains. The plains were so-named due to the large pans of clay which cracked when starved of water for a few months and divided into a myriad of separate plates - pancakes. The nomad lands were to the north of the Pancake Plains, though Glib was confident the nomads would not dare make an excursion this far into Outland - and States - territory.

It was the middle of the day; sun beat mercilessly on Glib and Cinch. Both of them were already sunburnt, though Glib with his paler skin was more affected. Cinch's skin was turning from the natural deep tan it always was into lobster red. Glib had prepared a salve for their sunburn from aloes and cactuses growing on the plains although the sticky concoction did little to assuage their discomfort.

The sunburn would not be so bad if they had food. The custard tart Glib stocked when leaving home was long gone and the small amount of provisions Cinch had taken with him was running very low. The two boys rationed their food and ate plants and caught desert animals when they could. Eating too much plant made both of them sick - as they soon discovered - and it was very difficult to eat animals when neither of them knew how to make a fire. And the only creatures they could manage to catch were small and scurrying insects and lizards, and the occasional scorpion which they dared not eat.

Glib was glad he could see a large rock ahead protruding from the desert sands. The rock was just high enough to provide a bowl of shade. But instead of running towards it Glib stopped abruptly and looked at his friend. "We need to do something about food."

"I know."

After only three days Cinch was beginning to look weaker. There were sunken blue hollows under his eyes and his lips were parched from lack of water. His golden blonde hair which was usually so full of life hung limp against his cheeks. His breathing was shallow and even his expression was weak. His legs which were lanky when they left Color Gash could now only be described as thin. Glib wondered if he looked the same to his friend; he wondered if his mousy brown hair which was usually so hard to control was now plastered to his face. Glib realized his mind had been drifting and found the strength to answer his friend. "We need water as well."

"If we get food, there will be some water in it."

"I think we should move under that rock and rest for a while." With the dragging step of the truly exhausted Glib made his way to the shelter of the rock. When he slumped in the shade he felt he could lay down forever. Cinch collapsed beside him.

"It's not the best start to our trip," Cinch observed..

Glib remained silent; it hurt to speak.

Cinch encircled his knees with his arms and looked at the sweltering desert. He was standing up to the trek better than Glib. Though Glib had more endurance and when it came to the crunch would probably last longer than his friend, Cinch was taller and stronger and could *physically* stand up to more ill-treatment than his friend. Cinch fought pain with his body; Glib fought pain with his mind.

"I want to sleep," Glib said, and his voice was a gravelly, hoarse choke.

"I know a way we could get food - the werehound!"

Glib did not move, did not say anything.

"We could get the werehound to forage for us," Cinch reiterated.

Glib thought about his friend's suggestion. Over the past three days the werehound had come and gone as it pleased. Not once had it brought back any food.

Glib was confident he and the werehound were forming a bond but if he asked the werehound to hunt food it would be asking too much of the friendship too soon. "We can't do that," Glib answered his friend. "He doesn't understand what a human needs for nourishment."

"We can try. We're going to die anyway so we may as well go down fighting."

Glib saw the truth of Cinch's words. "All right! But if the werehound doesn't find a thing I'm not taking the blame."

"Fine," Cinch said, a little annoyed. "So call to it."

"*Werehound! Werehound!*" Glib's voice sounded like it had been dragged over sandstone.

"The werehound can't hear you like that. Louder!"

"It comes," Glib said, then moved his head to the caressing sand.

The werehound looked strange in broad daylight. Cinch was sure it did not like the sun, and Glib was looking at it with the same concern. The werehound was walking with a limp today but apart from that it appeared in good health. It could always have got in a fight with a nightlayer or sunstalker - or even been bitten by a scorpion - so Glib wasn't too worried about its leg. It would probably heal in a couple of days.

"Tell it to find food."

The werehound stood above Glib, who reached up and touched it. His touch was weak, and Glib had a suspicion the werehound sensed that weakness. "You need to get us food," Glib said. "Humans need food every day. Go and find us some food." Glib reached to stroke the werehound along the full length of its body but lost his equilibrium and toppled over. He stared at the werehound. "Go."

The werehound suddenly darted away, and Cinch shrunk into the protection of the rock overhang. The werehound ran from the two boys until it was no more than a blurred shape. Then it was gone. Had it run so far away that it was too distant to see or had something else happened - had it disappeared? Glib was too tired to guess.

Glib lay on the ground and closed his eyes, but Cinch remained awake - he would stand guard over his friend while the werehound searched for food. Glib was happy to let Cinch do that. The pain from his sunburn subsided as Glib courted sleep. His mind was filled with visions of his friends and family in Color Gash and the unknown future which lay ahead. Finally the only thing he could see in his mind's eye were the comforting hands of sleep and appetizing visions of food.

They waited. Glib spent most of his time sleeping, but Cinch remained constantly awake. Even so, Glib thought about more than Cinch. His sleep was peaceful for the first three hours, but then dreams started to come. He had visions, one of a decrepit old woman, a hag whose teeth were missing. But then she wasn't a hag. She was growing younger, teeth began to reform in the gums, the wrinkles which covered her like the bark of a tree began to smooth and take on more contoured lines. She was still old when the metamorphosis was complete, but she was more handsome now. The dream (*nightmare?*) was punctuated with a vision of Glib's foster-family and friends in Color Gash, Surl, Delilah and Abbey, and even Con and Stern. The dream showed another woman, this one young, her skin smooth and white like alabaster and her features aquiline. She was wearing the same clothes as the old woman - but Glib knew they were not the same person. The vision of the beautiful woman (twenty-one years old, perhaps) faded and Glib saw a battlefield. There were dead and dying everywhere, and Glib saw he was one of the fighters. He was going about the battlefield with a

bloodied sword, dispatching wounded soldiers who pleaded for mercy. Some of the soldiers he murdered were on his side. And now came the last part of the dream: he was facing off with Cinch. Glib was standing in one state - Outlend - and Cinch was standing in another - Centar. They were wrestling, and Glib could feel his own anger and violence and hate pulsing inside him. Wrestling, wrestling...

... Shaking, shaking... Cinch was shaking him. "Glib, your werehound is back!"

Glib opened bleary eyes. He yelped in pain when he felt Cinch's hand around his sunburnt forearm. "Cinch, that hurts!"

"Sorry. But look." Cinch pointed.

The werehound was trekking through the desert. It had the carcass of an animal clenched in its jaw. Glib and Cinch waited until the werehound stopped and dropped the animal in front of them. "A plains bustard," Glib said. "Can't do much better out here."

"It isn't cooked though."

The werehound looked angrily at Cinch, snarled, snapped up the bustard, ran from the overhang of the rock and leapt into the air. The air's fabric parted and a gaping hole formed above Glib's and Cinch's heads. The werehound leapt through the hole and disappeared. Moments later it returned, but now the bustard it carried was on fire. Landing on the desert sand the werehound threw the burning creature at Cinch's feet.

"Bustard fricassee," Glib commented. "Can't get much fancier than that."

Cinch kicked the burning bustard in the sand until all the flames were quenched. Then he guided the carcass towards the shade of the rock with one of his boots. He knelt and scented the crisp flesh. "Do you think it's cooked all the way through?"

"Even if it isn't the flesh near the skin will be nice." From his sack Glib took his dagger and plunged the blade into the bustard's skin. His carving skill was messy, but both he and Cinch were so hungry they didn't mind eating the crumbs of meat which fell off the dead bird. The werehound growled, and Glib sawed off the bustard's head and threw it onto the sand; the werehound snapped up the head but continued growling. Glib muttered to himself and sliced a tender, thick piece of breast which he threw to the werehound, who seemed more content with this morsel.

Cinch took a piece of breast and a leg for himself. He chewed on the leg thoughtfully. "This is really nice." He turned towards the werehound. "Thanks."

The werehound growled and continued to gnaw on its piece of meat.

Their lunch did not go on for a long time. When they finally finished all of the bustard and there was nothing but bones, claws and a beak remaining, Glib settled in the shade of the rock with a hand draped over his belly. The sun was moving across the sky and soon the shade which the rock provided would be gone, and then they would have to travel again. The werehound would be an invaluable tool if they were to reach Rondolli and Solet. Still, Glib was under no reservations about his and Cinch's trip - they had a long way to go yet.

Thirsty. So thirsty. Another three days. The last stream Glib and Cinch passed was two days ago, and even that was only a thin line in the ground. Glib and Cinch both filled their water bottles at the stream but already most of that water was gone. Cinch only had a sticky puddle in his bottle while Glib's bottle was only one-fifth full. Some of the water would have soaked into the animal skin of the bottle and Glib wished he

could suck that moisture out for himself.

There was a rock ahead, similar to the one Glib and Cinch ate the bustard under three days ago. Glib became aware of a clammy feeling that he and Cinch might be heading in circles but knew it was probably his own imagination. They were traveling north - Glib could judge the time by the sun and knew how to keep his bearings if he gave the sun a close eye. Both he and Cinch would prefer to travel at night but they had agreed that it was more important to keep their bearings than maintain their comfort, even if it did mean drinking larger amounts of water and getting even more sunburnt.

"We're more likely to find water here than anywhere else," Glib said. He reached the shade of the rock and began to dig. "Water should concentrate near shaded areas, especially in a desert like this. If we dig deep enough we should find at least some moisture." The werehound was doing a good job of providing Glib and Cinch with food, but water was another matter. Glib did not know if the werehound even needed water to survive. Without the werehound he and Cinch would probably be dead - or dying - by now anyway.

Glib started to dig. He scooped dry sand but every time he excavated some it only fell back into the hole. After making a small depression and realizing his friend was not helping him, he looked up. "Well?"

Cinch knelt down and began to dig too. Glib was certain his friend was becoming thinner - Cinch's arms were mere sticks protruding from his sapling body and the bones of his knees strained against his skin. Cinch's face was becoming more sunken every day.

Glib was aware of the werehound before it ever appeared. Over the past week their bond had grown stronger, and Glib found he could sometimes communicate with the werehound's mind - not structured sentences, but thoughts and feelings and requests. Sometimes the werehound had requests of its own, although these rarely went beyond getting scratched behind the ear or playing a game of fetch with a stick. Glib even had to give up that game now - he was too weak to play it any longer.

A gila monster hung limp in the werehound's jaw. There was a gash on the werehound's muzzle, probably where the gila monster had bitten it, but apart from that Glib's companion was in good health - the limp which the werehound was struggling with three days ago had since disappeared. Glib regarded the gila monster with distaste and his expression turned to one of disgust when the werehound dropped the reptile at his feet. Gila monsters were poisonous and Glib certainly wasn't going to eat one without cooking it first. "I don't think sup is going to be very nice tonight," Glib commented to Cinch.

Cinch was looking at the gila monster with the same expression as his friend. "Yuck."

The werehound visibly bristled at Cinch's remark. Cinch backed away and Glib watched his friend and the werehound in earnest. It was as if the werehound could understand everything he and Cinch said - yet even when Cinch said nice things about it, it still remained aloof and haughty as though it did not trust Cinch, as though it believed Cinch were only saying those things to keep on its good side. Admittedly the werehound was doing as best it could - even if it did only provide gila monsters sometimes - and Glib was happy he had the werehound instead of nothing.

Realizing that water would go well with gila monster meat Glib continued to dig. Glib's hand touched moisture. Glib wasn't sure of it at first - it might be the same as a mirage except by touch and not sight - but as he dug deeper he was certain he felt

wet sand. The sand felt cool on his palm and the backs of his hands. Even though his hands were sunburnt and hurt when they came in contact with anything he could not think of anything better than this exquisite feeling. He began to dig with both hands, deeper and faster. "I've found water here," Glib told his friend.

Cinch began digging more enthusiastically beside him.

A shooting pain blazed along Glib's left hand and arm. He withdrew his hand from the excavation quickly then slapped Cinch's hand away. Glib held his left arm with his right and inspected his hand. A small red mark showed against the back of Glib's hand although the redness was quickly spreading. Brushing wet sand away Glib discovered the red mark covered perhaps a quarter of the back of his hand. The bite was burning. "Check what's in there," he told Cinch as he nodded towards the hole.

Cinch stood and began to dig sand with his boot. He kicked a creature onto the pile of sand by the side of the excavation. Cinch looked at the creature closely. "Scorpion."

Glib looked at the creature himself. "Desert scorpion." Tears springing to his eyes Glib stood and kicked the creature; the scorpion slapped into the large rock which provided Glib and Cinch with shade and bounced harmlessly onto the sand. Glib cursed and crushed the creature with his boot. "Why did this have to happen?" he hissed.

The werhound moved to the scorpion and sniffed it. Finally, blowing grains of sand from its nose, it turned away and slumped down in the shade. Resting its great muzzle on its forelegs it watched Glib with concern.

"Why did this have to happen?" Glib repeated. "I thought we might be able to make it. But with a scorpion sting..."

"A scorpion sting doesn't have to slow us down," Cinch assuaged his friend. "If you rest for a while and just ignore it."

"It will slow you down," Glib said grimly.

"I'll put up with that. If I leave you behind I'll die anyway - your werhound is providing all our food. And if I have you and the werhound I've got more protection. It works both ways."

Glib considered what his friend said. "You're right, Cinch. But I won't rest here for any amount of time - that will just make me sicker." Glib's hand moved to his stomach. "I'm already feeling nauseous and faint."

"Don't spew on me."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Glib beckoned the werhound to his side. It came when it was called, slumping down beside its master (*companion*) and looking up at Cinch with huge eyes. Glib was happy patting the werhound. If he were alone he would have no chance of surviving this scorpion sting - he would have no one to keep him going. Cinch might help him for a while, but his sixteen-year-old friend would not be able to call on Glib's reserves of strength like the werhound could. Glib was glad of the werhound's presence - if the werhound was with him, Glib was sure the twin cities were not an impossible goal..

Glib and Cinch walked through the desert. Their steps dragged through the desert sands and the werhound trailed behind them. There was little variance to the scenery here. Most of the desert was sand dunes, *up and down, up and down*, with occasional patch of pebble desert to replace that monotony. Even cactuses had difficulty growing here - only the hardest of plants were able to survive. The only animals which existed

were reptiles and insects, snakes, lizards and other such creatures, and the occasional predatory bird which drifted on the wind currents and found small pickings of food. Even though the scenery was so monotonous Glib thought he could see every individual grain of sand - each was magnified a thousand times, shifting with the desert wind, changing the patterns of the dunes.

In the distance, far, far in the distance, Glib could see the blue haze of mountains. Glib thought the mountains were those of the nomad lands, because the only other mountain range in this area was to the north of Rondolli, with a few patchy ranges to the south. Glib felt a brief fear that they might be accidentally heading into the nomad lands - he could only imagine what the nomads would do if they caught him and Cinch. And if the nomads found them with a werehound... Perhaps it would be better if Glib had stayed at home. He wondered what Surl was thinking at this moment. The baker was probably angry - of course - and embarrassed that his foster-son had left home at such a young age. Or did he care? Maybe he was happy that Glib was gone - now he could prey on Abbey as much as he wanted and not worry about having to retain respectability with Glib. Was Abbey getting on with Girl yet?

Thinking of Girl made Glib cry. He could only imagine how much pain he had caused her. Her parents had probably disowned her by now, disowned her for being the girlfriend of someone who was caught with a werehound..

Girl, Surl, Delilah, Abbey... If he died out here he would never see any of these people again. Surl might be a cruel foster-father but that didn't mean Glib wished death upon him. Surl had provided him with the necessities of life for over fifteen years. Glib thought of his foster-father's solidly built frame, the gray hair which formed a halo around his bald pate and the way he always spoke in short, one syllable commands. Surl was developing a paunch - and Glib knew Surl was angry at himself for growing older.

Delilah. The Commonlander who did not have her aura. A figure of pity for many of those in Color Gash. She had provided for Glib too, although always with reluctance as though it were a burden to look after him. Delilah was only thirty-five years old but already she had gray hair which was done up in a tight bun most of the time. She was slim - no, thin - and seemed to be always working. Her wrinkles were those of a fifty-year-old, not someone who was only thirty-five. She tolerated Glib but did not like him. No one in that household liked him.

Abbey: she was different. Here in the desert Glib began to regret he'd ever treated her badly. After all, what had she done? It was only because Glib was afraid of Abbey replacing him in Surl's eyes that he'd treated her with contempt. And now that he began to think Abbey had never said anything bad about him the whole time he abused her. Glib thought he knew why but his mind was wandering too much to form any structured thoughts. Abbey was any teenage boy's dream come true. She was blonde and she was growing curves in all the right places. Some people said she wore figure-hugging dresses, but that wasn't true - the dresses she wore were the same as anyone else's, except her body hugged *them*. Blue.... hazel eyes, smooth skin except for those pimply things near the corners of her mouth (and Glib didn't mind those anyway). Glib missed Abbey.

Stern. Stern was someone Glib truly missed and who he knew he *would* miss for quite a long time. When Glib didn't have any other adults who would believe in him, Stern had. He might be poor but he always tried to give Glib the best education he could. Stern was taller than Surl, except he was thin and had a hawk-like visage, unlike Surl's which was that of a bully. Stern with his close-cropped gray hair,

voluminous robes and a book always under one arm. Stern with his erect walk. Glib felt afraid without Stern. In Color Gash he always had Stern to protect him, but now he was facing the rest of life he could no longer rely on Stern's protection. He would have to do without the proud fifty-five-year-old tutor.

And he would have to do without Trix Vulgàr. The captain who was a coward. Glib asked himself whether he would ever be involved in a battle and what he would do if he were. It would be a nightmare to lose his nerve and hide like the captain - a dash in the face for any self-respecting man. Glib estimated the captain to be in his late thirties. Twenty years, and still he had not forgiven himself for what had happened in those battles. But he was a good captain now and perhaps one day when he overcame his fear he would return to being a soldier. Trix Vulgàr with his short gray hair, his harrowed expression, his gray stubble and his neat, tucked-in uniform. And his gray eyes. He might be a coward but if Glib wanted to fight beside someone he was sure the captain would be his first choice.

And Girl... The person who made him think about all his lost companions in Color Gash. Girl with her mouse-brown hair, her clear skin (a sure mark of the nobility, who could afford poultices and creams to obscure any blemishes) and her girl's body which was slowly, gradually becoming a woman's. Girl rarely wore any clothes that were revealing, so Glib could not yet see how her body had developed thus far. Her sweet brown eyes; her liquid laugh and smile; her clear white face which Glib loved to run his hands over. His first girlfriend. He loved her so much and yet he betrayed her. If Glib had not been caught with the werhound none of this would have happened, and Girl would be still by his side. Girl hated him now - Glib didn't need Girl to tell him that. And yet Glib still loved her, and would remain loving her for as long as she lived. Even if neither of them knew where the other was.

Glib forced himself from his introversion and looked ahead. The sun was blinding, the glare blotting Glib's view of everything in front of him. The sand was coming up to meet his face... Glib felt shade, and someone began dragging him through the sand. Glib was too weak to protect himself. It was probably nomads, they probably planned to hold him prisoner or kill him - and eat him. That's what nomads were like. They ate people; they were cannibals. Glib smiled and felt the smooth sand caress his cheek. Being killed and eaten by cannibals wasn't so bad. At least his death would be without pain.

Cinch was bone-weary tired. His skin tingled from sunburn and even though he applied the soothing salves which Glib prepared, the sunburn only got worse. Cinch felt sick most of the time now but did not tell Glib about his nausea - that would only add to his friend's worry. Cinch looked at his friend and grimaced. Glib was staring straight ahead with his eyes vacant and a slack-jawed expression hanging over his face. Glib was turning towards his own inner world. Cinch remembered Glib nursing him when he was sick and told himself that he would not leave Glib alone. Though Glib was slowing them down (the scorpion sting had something to do with that) Cinch remained loyal to his friend. Though his legs ached and he found it hard to breathe, Cinch would die with Glib if need be. Cinch regretted leaving Color Gash but was sure it had been the right decision.

Glib was his best friend, and yet why had his best friend led him here? Cinch always had confidence in Glib - whenever it came to consulting someone about the intelligence of something Cinch always went to his friend. And yet Glib had led them here, into a desert where food was scarce and water even scarcer. Granted they had

the werehound to provide food but how long before the werehound became sick of them and left them alone? Cinch was becoming angry with his friend. It was Glib's duty as the leader of the expedition to guide them from any unknown dangers - but was Glib really suited to being a leader? Cinch did not know.

Why not give up? That would be the best solution to their problem. They could turn around and head back to Color Gash but they would probably die before they reached the city. Alternatively they could keep heading north but the end result would most likely be the same - death. If they sat down and just waited for death to come they would have no more pain. Cinch - Cinch's mind - always looked for the easiest solution. The easiest solution was death. Cinch considered snapping Glib out of his delirium and telling him about the idea. But then he imagined what Glib would say. Glib was not the type to take death lying down (even in these dire circumstances Cinch could find humor). Glib would rail at Cinch and talk about not giving up and what they may achieve in the future. *Easy for him to say*, Cinch thought. *He's got talents; I have none.*

Even though death was inviting Cinch continued to walk, step by dragging step. Glib unconsciously matched pace beside him. Ahead of them Cinch could see rocks. No, these were larger than rocks - they were boulders. They cast their shade over a large patch of sand and stood yards above the desert like sentinels guarding their domain. Perhaps this was a gift from the Outlendian god, or one of the other gods of The States. Or perhaps it was just luck.

Cinch began to stumble towards them. He noticed Glib drop beside him. His friend was lying face-down in the sand, and it was obvious he could go no further. Cinch moved to his friend, took hold of his arms and began to drag him. He reached the boulders and stood breathing heavily. Sweat beaded his skin even more profusely now that he had been exercising strenuously. His shirt was soaked. Cinch looked down at Glib and steeled himself. Glib would not want to die here - his friend would want to go on. Cinch could not die here himself and allowed Glib to die as well. That would be akin to murder. If he struggled with his friend over his shoulders, maybe he could reach one of the twin cities or a settlement where he and Glib would be looked after.

Cinch's vision blacked out and he almost fell. Steadying himself again Cinch squinted at the endless horizon. Maybe he could reach Rondolli or Solet with Glib in tow. But he did not have much time to think about that, because the blackness came again, stronger this time. Lights flashed on and off in his vision. He felt his legs crumpling and his body falling towards the sand. His head hit the sand next to Glib's own, and with that thud Cinch's mind blacked out. He did not know if he would ever see consciousness again.

Chapter 6 - Rescue

A plain somewhere in the Commonlands. A village. All the people of the village gathering in the main square. A baby about to be born. The naming of babies was different in the Commonlands than in The States or the kingdom of Ref. In The States a child would be observed, and then named after the way it acted. In Ref a child was named after the animal it was most like. But in the Commonlands the naming of a baby was a communal decision - everyone in the village or town decided the baby's name. The birth of a child was a cause for great joy among Commonlanders.

And today was one of those days. A woman lay in a drinking trough designed for horses. Pillows were propped behind her back and her dress was hitched around her thighs. Her dark hair was plastered to her face, sweat beaded her skin and the expression she wore was one of excruciating pain. She was looking between her legs and wishing the midwives would finish this agony, but at the same time experiencing a

great sensation of joy - soon she would have a child, soon she would have an aura. Though she was a Commonlander she was related to many people in The States, and was sure that by association with them she would be blessed with an aura.

Her husband had left her, but no one begrudged her that. Her husband was a soldier in the Commonlands army. He came into the village like a breath of fresh air for her, and a month later they were married. Three months later he was gone. He did not say where he was going. For a long time she thought that he had gone to defend the Commonlands, to a border patrol along Outlend or the nomad lands, but after half a year she knew that was not so. Her breath of fresh air had left forever.

But she had the remnant of him inside her. This baby would remind her of him always. She was going through this excruciating pain for him and though he was not there, she still loved him. She could do nothing but love him.

The contractions intensified. She could feel the baby trying to force its way out. The baby was big and strong, just like its father. She thought she could feel its little fists punching as it tried to break into the world. It was so big, it was... too big! She wailed. Her scream echoed across the village and all those gathered in the main square shuddered and whispered about who the woman's husband truly was. There were rumors that her husband was a wizard, or sorcerer, and that the only reason he had married was to implant his seed into her and carry on his line. Those were only rumors and no one paid much attention to them - but they will still there.

In the drinking trough the woman closed her eyes and bit down on a piece of cloth one of the midwives had given her. The baby was coming. She could feel it entering the world, leaving her body behind and... it felt like her body was tearing apart, ripping in two because of this demon that she was bearing. She looked between her legs and could see blood, blood everywhere. She was feeling weak, faint, but she would hold onto her baby.

The baby was born. One of the midwives lifted the baby as though it were a precious jewel and nursed it quietly to her breast. The baby cried. This was the first it saw of the world: midwives huddling around its little body, its mother lying exhausted in the drinking trough, the faces of people in the square trying to catch a glimpse of it. The baby was a boy.

The woman looked at the baby she gave birth to. He was beautiful. No, he was more than beautiful; 'beautiful' was how all mothers described their new-borns. Her child was... beauteous. His father was intelligent, and that was the word he would use for his son. So she would use it too, part in humorous affectation and partly because she truly believed he was. She reached out her arms for her son, silently asking the midwives to deliver the baby into her care.

Her body convulsed. She felt like vomiting and almost did, forcing her retch down at the last moment. She had given birth to the baby, what more...? Aura. She was about to receive her aura. Though she was physically and mentally drained she waited for her aura to come. She welcomed her aura. This was almost - but not quite - as beautiful as giving birth to her child. Selfish women looked forward more to their aura than their child, but this woman was not selfish. Her skin tingled; it felt like vines were crawling along her arms. She became light-headed. Her eyes closed. When she opened them again, she could see the colors of her aura. There was a lot of blue, a static, liquid sort of substance which wasn't really there. Her aura surrounded her, always close to her skin but never quite touching. There was some red and some yellow - and some pink as well - but mostly there was blue. The combination of giving birth to a child and receiving her aura was too much. She fainted.

The baby knew he would never see his mother again. Now he was being taken away from his mother. The midwives were passing him one to the other, then leaning over his mother in concern. He had stopped crying, but began again. They were taking him away from his mother and into the town square. Why were they taking him away from his mother?

Glib's next thoughts were of lying in a cot. The cot was warm and the house the cot belonged to was peaceful. Three people were staring down at him - a midwife, Delilah and Surl. Surl had a distasteful expression on his face; Delilah watched Glib with a mixture of concern and impatience. Glib heard the midwife speak.

"His mother may not live. We have revived her from what happened but she is not of herself. She may harm anyone who comes too close to her. To leave her with her son-" the midwife shook her head "-is too dangerous."

"Serves her right anyway," Surl said. "A Commonlander thinking she can have a States aura."

"Surl," Delilah said, putting a hand on his arm admonishingly.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm thankful to you for looking after him," the midwife said. "He has nobody else."

And then the midwife was going, and Glib was left with these two people who didn't really want him. He didn't want them either - he wanted his mother! He reached towards the midwife and began to cry. But the midwife left the small house and shut the door firmly behind her. And Glib was left here with his foster-parents - never to know his mother. His mother who Delilah and Surl would later tell him was dead.

Cinch dreamt. He dreamt of nightmarish things. There were monsters in the darkness of his mind, dragons with long necks and curling mains, sharp teeth and nostrils which spouted fire. He dreamt of undersea creatures - all of them wanted to attack him, but he would not let them. He swam away from them, but he was in the depths of the ocean and everything was black. He did not know which way was up. The monsters were too fast for him. This was their native habitat and Cinch was only an intruder, to be dealt with accordingly.

His dream drifted to more realistic - yet no less frightening - things. His mother. Oh, she had been so beautiful. She had blonde hair much like Cinch's own (except straw colored and not golden weave like Cinch) and an infectious smile. Their home was a place of laughter before she died. Stern had been less somber and serious then. He was still strict and maintained a constant vigil over his students, but his wife quieted him. His wife turned him into someone who enjoyed living and smiled often. Of course his wife - Cinch's mother - had died.

A mother dying affects little boys in ways that cannot be known. The first thing Cinch was aware of - when he joined his father's tutelage lessons at the age of six - was that he did not have a mother like the other children anymore. They did not tease him but he still felt hurt. Every time a mother came to pick up one of her children it only reminded Cinch of the fact he had no mother himself. Stern could remarry if he wanted but no matter how wonderful his step-mother was Cinch knew he would still treat her with contempt. He wanted his real mother back.

No one knew how she died. She was working in the kitchen early one hot afternoon - and fell. She had never got up again. It hurt Cinch not to know how his mother had died.

The son of a teacher is generally treated as either an outcast or the most

popular boy of all. Cinch was glad he fell into the latter category. Not that his popularity came of its own accord - he had to work at it, and make sure he was friendly with everyone. Accordingly people were always around him, which he became sick of many times.

When he met Glib at the age of twelve - Glib was eleven - he was envious of his younger friend. There was never anybody who bothered him. So they became friends and looked after each other in their own unique ways. Cinch took care of Glib by protecting him from the bullies in the neighborhood; Glib took care of Cinch by showing him quiet places where he could be alone, and teaching him about everything he had learnt over the years. It was a good basis for a relationship.

Cinch felt consciousness returning. He did not know how long he had been lying under these boulders, but there was no shade anymore. The sun beat furiously against Cinch's skin and into his eyes. Cinch looked at his arm and saw his sunburn was worsening. Glib was lying beside him. Glib's lips were twitching and small, weak sounds were coming from his mouth. Cinch sank back to the sand and felt unconscious begin to swallow him again.

His head jerked upwards. He should not lie here and allow Glib to die. Glib was his responsibility. If he rested on the sand and did nothing he would be committing manslaughter. He must get up and carry Glib to Rondolli or Solet. But the sun and his own weakness was too much for him. He lay his head in the hot sand. And was unconscious again. He dreamed of something that happened only a year before he met Glib. He and several of his friends were talking after class.

"Do you want to come to my place?" Baramny asked Cinch. At that time Baramny had not been a bully, but was showing signs of becoming one.

"If Father will let me."

"We can go hunting for ant lions before we get home. Wait until the cover of darkness before we sneak in. Mother won't mind."

"We'll have to get our own sup if we arrive home too late."

"Mother will make it." The matter-of-fact way Baramny said that was like an arrow in Cinch's heart. "Even if we got home in the middle of the night she'd make it."

Cinch thought of Baramny's nationality - Refian. Refian mothers were regarded as such wonderful creatures, such angels. A Refian mother would put her own safety and comfort on the line for her children. But not only occasionally like mothers from The States, Commonlands, nomad lands and the natives in the northern islands. A Refian mother would put her own comfort on hold every day.

Except Cinch had no mother at all. And Stern could barely function as a father - taking on a mother's duties was impossible for him. Cinch sank fully from consciousness again and his dreams turned into delirium. For a moment Glib flared brightly in Cinch's mind, then his image subsided. It was much easier to dream of his own misery than save Glib's life.

Glib's dreams continued. With the poison from the scorpion sting subsiding he began to drift in and out of consciousness. Often he was aware of the heat. Sometimes he felt the sun burning his skin and other times he felt the welcome caress of shade, but it was always hot. Sweat lined his brow. Another day and he would be dead. Despite his feverish mind Glib judged himself to have fainted under this set of boulders yesterday shortly after noon - which meant he had been lying here for over twenty-four hours. Death wasn't such a bad option; it would be an end to pain. But Glib was not like Cinch - he did not give up easily. As long as Glib had life in his body he would

fight.

In his delirium Glib thought he heard hooves striking sand. He rose his arm feebly for help then felt it touch sand again. The sound of horses and armor jangling was just another part of his delirium. If he opened his eyes all he would see was the scorching sun and nothing else. The sound of a man getting off his horse and boots crunching on sand was delirium too. The sounds of men talking were delirium. Glib felt sick and had to clutch his stomach to hold in his spew. He opened his eyes and thought he saw a man. A man who was dressed and acted like a soldier. *Nomad!* If Glib had any strength left he would scramble over the sand, but he did not have the energy to do even that. And there was more than one soldier anyway. Glib had little hope against one soldier, let alone half a dozen.

"Can you speak boy?" The soldier looked at Glib and nudged him with his boot. "Boy?" He nudged Glib a little harder.

For Glib it felt like a kick. The touch of the soldier's boot on his sunburnt skin made Glib writhe in pain. Only a nomad could do this. He may as well face the fact that his life was coming to an end now.

"Who's your friend?" Glib heard the soldier walk away and pause where Cinch was lying. "You're both as red as a slut's herpes sore. You know that?"

Even if Glib wanted to speak he did not think he could. Without drinking water for a day and spending so long in the sun Glib thought the only sounds that would come from his mouth were rasping, dissonant monosyllables.

"You must be thirsty." The soldier returned and tipped water on Glib. The water struck his face like a slap and Glib could tell the soldier was tipping the water from a distance. Didn't the soldier know how painful sunburn is when even cool water touches it? The water felt at once heavenly and stinging - like acid. Glib cried involuntarily and opened his eyes. The man looking down at him appeared dangerous. He had curly auburn hair and a face weathered by the sun. A sword lay across his back and the clothes he wore spoke of utilitarian functionalism. He seemed at once concerned and irritated that Glib had awoken.

"My... friend," Glib whispered. "Water."

The soldier stood and tipped water on Cinch's face. "Is this what you want?"

Glib nodded weakly. Lights twirled in his head and he thought he might faint again. If he did Glib wondered whether the soldier would still be here looking after him when he awoke. Or would he and his companions take Glib and Cinch to the nearest town and dump them like stray dogs. Probably.

"Your sunburn is bad," the soldier commented when he returned to Glib. "You need to put some aloe on it."

"I have... some," Glib managed.

More soldiers were surrounding Glib now. Their faces were staring down at him. Some were kind and some were unkind, but all showed curiosity. Glib wanted to fight them off. If they were nomads... But they were helping him so far. And they did not speak with an accent. If they *were* nomads he and Cinch would be dead by now.

The faces were swirling in front of Glib's eyes. There was a grizzled old campaigner, a man in his mid-thirties watching in concern and a dark-haired man who watched Glib with shrewd, calculating eyes. And there was the soldier who first helped him. This was too much for Glib. All the strength he had gained he lost. He felt his head hit the sand.

When he came to again, he was being lifted. Callused hands grasped his legs and arms, leaving white marks against his red skin. They seemed to have little pity for

Glib's injuries. Glib tried to protest at the rough treatment but was too weak. The hands bore him into a litter and Glib felt the kissing touch of shade. It was cooler here. Glib blinked his eyes and saw that the curtains which enclosed the litter were soaked.

A soldier poked his head through the curtains. "Is your friend alive?"

"Y-yes," Glib choked. But he had not checked on his friend for over a day. "I think so."

The head disappeared and Glib was left alone. After another ten minutes the litter lurched into motion. Glib opened his eyes again and looked one way to the other. Cinch was not here. If the soldiers were going to carry wounded people it stood to reason they would put their charges in the same litter. But they hadn't - which could only mean one thing. It came as a shock to Glib that Cinch was dead. Over the past four years Cinch had always been there for Glib, his companion and protector. And now he was gone. But that was not a certainty. Glib was basing his suppositions on the fact that Cinch had not been placed with him. There was probably another litter which Cinch was using. Maybe his friend was well enough to ride. To believe that Cinch was dead simply because he was not in the same litter was ludicrous.

Even in the curtains-soaked litter it was hot. Glib felt sleep - proper sleep - courting him like a lost friend. In the sun Glib's sleep was the sleep of pain. There was never any true sleep in the sun. Glib could still feel the sun basting his skin, the heat and grit of the sand and the constant fear of attack. Under a nest of boulders in the desert a lot of things can happen, but now Glib was in custody of a group of soldiers he felt sleep calling him. Maybe the soldiers were enemies. Maybe they planned on killing him in a couple of days' time. But until then Glib was safe.

Was Cinch safe? Maybe he was still lying under the group of boulders with ants eating his flesh and scavenger birds picking his eyes. Maybe he was still lying under the group of boulders and reaching towards Glib, who was no longer there. Cinch was the type of person who gave up, Glib was not. Cinch was more likely to be lying under the group of boulders, dead. All things considered it did not bode well for Cinch. And with Cinch dead, Glib confronted the prospect of having to face the future alone.

The sway of the litter rocked Glib like a mother with her babe. Glib was aware the litter was rocking him back into consciousness. He did not know how long he had been asleep. Perhaps it was the following morning. Perhaps he had slept all afternoon and all night and woken up only now.

Glib was aware of different noises, smells and visions in waves. First he was aware of the heat, a suffocating ultratropical atmosphere which made Glib sweat and dirty the linen he was resting on. Then he became aware of sounds: the slow cllop of horses' hooves on sand; the jangle of harnesses and wheels; and the slow talk of the soldiers as they rode along. Then he was aware of water dripping on his forehead. He opened his eyes and saw a man sitting next to him. Glib tried to back away but in doing so knocked his head on the back of the litter.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the soldier said. The soldier reached out his hand and Glib cringed. Then Glib looked at what the soldier held and saw it was a wet cloth. Taking the cloth gratefully Glib dabbed at his face and shoulders. "You haven't had a bath for a while," the soldier observed. When Glib did not reply the soldier said, "Oh well, better than those stinking Refians who put on a years' worth of perfume for their lack of bathing. And those jungle tribes in the north. It says much about Ref and Refians in general when their actions imitate those of the natives who live on the

northern islands."

Glib could not reply even if he wanted to. He opened his mouth and the only noise that came from the back of his throat sounded like it had been scraped over a washboard half a dozen times. Glib swallowed a drip of water that fell from the wet ceiling of the litter, then indicated to the soldier that he wanted more.

"Be back in a moment," the soldier said, and was gone.

While the soldier was gone Glib had a dangerous realization. What if all that was happening was just delirium? Maybe he was still lying under the boulders and dreaming this; maybe his subconscious mind was feeding him this incorrect information, weaving a tapestry in which Glib thought he would come out alive. Maybe he and Cinch were already dead.

The soldier returned with a skin of water. He was not as rough as the soldier Glib saw when lying under the boulders. He held the waterskin to Glib's lips and waited patiently until Glib drank his fill. Much of the water spilled from the sides of his mouth but that did not worry Glib. He'd listened to Surl and Trix Vulgàr enough to know that anyone who was without water for a long time should not try to drink too much, too soon. Unless they wanted to spew it all up.

The soldier watched Glib with an eager sort of concern. Every time Glib's body jolted the soldier fluffed Glib's pillow and settled him into a comfortable position again. Glib wished the soldier would leave him alone. Glib wanted to ask the soldier questions but judged his throat too sore to conduct any extended interrogations. Another thing. Glib needed to know if Cinch was alive. He could ask the soldier who was taking care (*sic* - guarding) him. But what if the soldier would not answer? The only way Glib could know for certain was to find out himself. He would have to wait until his guard fell asleep or left him alone. Judging by the way the soldier looked at him Glib thought that might take a while. Best to feign sleep and wait until he was gone.

Glib closed his eyes. As he waited he had to tell himself not to fall asleep for real. He was still very tired and sleep was courting. To counter his exhaustion he began to think of other things to do while out of the litter. He could judge the size of the group of soldiers who held him captive. He could try to judge which nationality they were and if they meant harm. He could also try to pinpoint their leader.

"The boulders we found you under are known as the Five Sisters," the soldier said. Obviously he thought Glib was still awake. "We mercs have a legend about those boulders." The soldier chuckled. "It doesn't go down too well in polite quarters but we mercs like it.

"One day a man went looking for a wife. He could not find any in the city where he lived so he went into the desert, hoping to find even an old hag who might have him. Instead he met five beautiful sisters. They lived in the desert because their father had told them the city was a dangerous place, where men sought to take advantage of young ladies at every opportunity. But they were all in their womanhood and looking for someone to marry, and this man was the first that had come their way. The man made clear his intentions of finding a wife; the women made clear their intentions of finding husbands for themselves. So the man and the sisters made each other a deal. The sisters would allow the man to try each of them out and decide who he liked best once he sampled all their wares." The soldier stopped for a moment and laughed. "You can understand why this story is frowned upon in more polite quarters, can't you?"

"The first sister was tall with silky black hair and emerald eyes. The man tried

her for a night - and enjoyed her. The next sister was somewhat shorter; she had flaming red hair and green eyes like her taller sister. The man tried her for a night, and liked her. The next sister was of average height, and that is how her looks could best be described as well. Chestnut hair, chestnut eyes - like yours - and freckle-dusted skin. The man tried her for a night, and liked her. There were two sisters left. One was very beautiful; though she was shorter than her other three sisters her body was well-rounded, she had flawless olive skin and her hair was shiny and black. The man sampled her wares for the night, and liked her. Finally the last sister came. The man knew he would soon have to choose. The last sister - who was the shortest of them all - was not very attractive but the man still lay with her and enjoyed it. After all, when it comes down to it, it doesn't matter what a woman looks like, just the feel of her -"

Glib coughed.

The soldier continued. "The last sister felt as nice as the others and the man could not make up his mind. 'Give me two days,' he said, 'and that will make a week that I have spent with you. I will decide at the end.' Surely enough the two days passed and still the man could not make up his mind. Finally he confessed: 'I want all of you.'

"Naturally the sisters were angry at this. They told the man he must choose one of them or none at all. So the man - who was a wizard - got out his wand, waved it around in the air a few times and turned them to stone. Punishment, he said. The motto of this story? I don't know, but there is another version going around in which the sisters turn *themselves* to stone because of the man's indecision."

Glib fought hard to keep a straight face. He listened to the soldier's steady breathing and the noises of the caravan outside. The soldier leaned forward and touched Glib on the face. "Looks like you're asleep. Hope you enjoyed the bedtime story." Glib heard the soldier part the curtains of the litter and jump to the sand. He opened his eyes and looked this way and that to make sure no one else was in the litter with him. He should wait before attempting to leave the litter, perhaps until the sun was down and he could move about the cover of darkness. But that would look like an escape attempt. Best to get out of the litter during the day when they thought his wandering was because of his delirium.

Glib had difficulty sitting up. Though he had rested for a day his sunburn still hurt - it took longer than a day for sunburn pain to subside. He was also dizzy and disorientated, and still did not know where the soldiers were taking him. Glib parted the litter's wet curtains. Outside he saw desert and the horizon, and mountains in the distance, but nothing else. He peered backwards and forward along the caravan and could see half a dozen soldiers marching through the sand, their faces long. He slunk back into his litter. The curtains were a dirty brown color and thick - they were not meant for a nobleman or nomad princess. Perhaps the litter actually was designed for transporting wounded.

A long time passed before Glib finally found the courage to leave the litter. The sun was setting; it was red and blushed the entire horizon with scarlet and pink as it struggled to stay above the desert horizon. However Glib took little time to notice the scenery. He stalked forward over the still-hot sand. No one had seen him yet. Most soldiers were talking or setting one foot in front of the other, not watching where they were going. That was to Glib's advantage.

Glib took half a dozen paces before he started feeling dizzy. He stumbled forward and just managed to prevent himself from falling on his knees. The world was swirling. He looked up and saw a man, who said, "The boy! He's out of his litter."

The man was seated on a horse and pointing at Glib as though to say, 'That one should die.' Glib's eyes flicked back and forth between the half a dozen soldiers who were suddenly approaching him. Glib stared at the long caravan. And saw Cinch. The older boy was peering from the curtains of another litter. He appeared to be in good health. Glib waved, but then his dizziness overwhelmed him. He fell flat in the sand.

Glib was aware of people handling him. Then he heard the booming voice of the man who he thought was the soldiers' leader. "Get him back in his litter. He's probably got a fever. Probably doesn't even know what he's doing." Then, after a long pause which made Glib think the soldier had already departed, he suddenly added, "We'll be able to look after him better once we get to Rondolli."

Another day in which the caravan made good progress. Even from his litter Glib was aware of the winding down and relaxation of the soldiers. Those who occasionally sat beside him in the litter were happy and nonchalant, when only a day before most had went about their duties with a grim determination. Glib knew why the soldiers were like this when he heard them call "Rondolli!" to each other.

The caravan was heading down a slope. Glib felt sick as the litter negotiated its way down the gentle incline. This was the worst day for his sunburn yet. His skin flamed red and though soldiers often applied aloes to the affected areas it did little to ease the pain. Glib could not wait for the sunburn to peel. Then he would know the worst pain was over.

Glib stayed awake most of the day now. He wished that he didn't - the sunburn was so painful that often it was the only thing that filled Glib's mind. He had massive headaches too. That was probably from the sun. Sunburn, sickness in the stomach and headaches. Not the best way to start his adult life. Delilah would look after him if she were here. So would Surl. And so would Abbey, with her gentle, delicate hands and soft touch. So soft... Glib felt an uncomfortable sensation and forced himself to think of other things. He should not think of Abbey anyway. When he left Color Gash he was with Girl - he should be thinking of her.

Glib thought the worst of his adult life was already over. That was one good thing about the pain, he supposed. But what if there was worse to come? Glib tried not to think about it. He and Cinch would plan their travel more methodically now, and always make sure there was sufficient drinking water and adequate food wherever they went.

Thinking about food made Glib think of his werehound. The werehound had not appeared since Glib was taken with the caravan. That only stood to reason - the werehound would be foolish if it risked discovery by twenty or more soldiers. Glib could only hope his werehound was living well and that he had not scared it away.

With the cries of "Rondolli! Rondolli!" increasing in number and crescendo Glib parted the curtains of his litter and looked outside. The city of Rondolli was there. Its massive brown walls rose out of the desert. Towers and parapets stood twice as high as Color Gash's, although Rondolli was several times smaller than that city. The hills that surrounded Rondolli were barren, with little water or food to be had. Water was taken from wells under the city and food was brought in from large plantations west of Solet. Rondolli's huge walls were there for a reason - Rondolli was the city nearest the nomad lands and the most likely to be attacked. The city never had been, but The States had always believed in being a nation that was safe. If the Commonlands decided to invade Outlend, Rondolli would be a first line and base for defense - but the Commonlands were so peaceful that no one expected them to

conduct any military campaigns.

The ground leveled off when the caravan neared Rondolli's wall. Even from this distance Glib could hear the hubbub of voices and trade going on behind the walls. As if an answer to his wonderment a soldier pulled open a curtain and smiled at him. "They call Rondolli the *City of Echoes*. This is because of the valley it rests in - there are hills on all sides of Rondolli. Shout in the city square and the whole city will hear you. Even speaking normally sounds loud."

The caravan joined the queue of people wanting to get into the city. Stringent military checks were conducted here, much different from Color Gash where everything was treated with an easy-going approach. Draconian security was needed - if the nomads were somehow to wrest control of Rondolli they would be in possession of one of Outlend's greatest cities. The nomads were usually a disorganized rabble, but that was no excuse for laxness.

The soldier who told Glib about Rondolli spoke again. "Your friend is well. Sick, but well. What I mean is that I don't think he will get any worse."

"Water," Glib said, and the soldier quickly obliged with his own flask..

"Gate check is coming up," the soldier said. "I have to go."

Glib was left to his own devices in the litter. He did not like the amount of noise around him. It made his head thud and his eyes water. He only wanted a place where he could lay down and rest. Somewhere quiet. At least he and Cinch made it to Rondolli like they planned. They may not have reached Rondolli the *way* they planned, but now Glib was here he felt a sense of achievement. Glib wondered what Cinch felt. Perhaps his friend was too sick to even know they were here.

The caravan lurched forward. Suddenly the litter's curtain was snatched back and two guards appraised Glib. "Who's this?" one of them asked.

"Injured," Glib heard someone reply. "We lost him and his friend on maneuvers. It took us three days to find them. By then..."

"Bit young isn't he?"

"Never too young for our job," the voice answered.

"Very well." One of the guards snatched the curtain back into place and allowed Glib to rest in the absolute darkness.

Another ten minutes and the caravan was entering Rondolli. Glib admitted to feeling tired. The hubbub of noise was deafening here. Glib would like to look out of his litter and see Rondolli. After all, this was his first trip to a different city. But his head pounded and he wanted to sleep. That was the only thing he could think of now.

The caravan drew to a halt. Glib was glad; now he could rest and not be jolted from sleep every time his litter hit a bump. He got up and opened his wet curtains. A large building sat to the left of the caravan. It was perhaps four times the size of a normal home and people entered and left the establishment in a never-ending stream. The windows were not shuttered like in most taverns, but covered with a thin gauze. A soldier spoke to Glib. "That is where we will be staying for the next few weeks. The Yanchepp Inn."

Glib dreamed he was at home. He dreamed of his warm bed, the dining room and spare room where he nursed Cinch back to health. He dreamed of his foster-parents. They were sitting in the living room, both with gentle smiles on their faces. They were happy Glib was gone.

Glib jerked from his dream. He was in a large bed covered with red sheets. Glib propped his pillow and looked at the bed. Three people could easily sleep in this

bed, let alone one. The room was also large, and well furnished. The red carpet on the floor was thin; near the walls of the room the carpet gave way to wooden floorboards. A duchess sat to one side of the room, containing an assortment of hygiene products and clothes. In another corner of the room were Glib's belongings. The room's windows were covered with a thin gauze so Glib could not see out, however he could hear the monotone buzz of cicadas outside. It was hot and balmy and Glib judged it to be near sunset.

"I see that you're awake."

The soldier approached Glib from the open door of the room. He wore leather armor and held a drawn sword. He set the sword carefully on the floor. Glib watched the soldier as he approached the bed. What struck Glib most about the soldier was his white hair. It was curly and cropped close to his skull, and even though the man looked no more than forty his hair only showed a few pigments of other colors, mostly charcoal and gray. He was short and his build was that of a seasoned veteran, solid but going to fat now that he was reaching middle years. He sat on the bedside, and Glib could not drag his gaze away from the soldier's blue eyes. "My name is Snow Angler. Many people call me Scarz. You may use whichever name you wish."

"I think I prefer Snow." Glib bit upper lip. "Why do people call you Scarz?"

"Look closely." Snow pointed at his chin and cheeks. "Some are from chicken pox," Snow explained, "but most are from when I was held captive by the nomads for a month. They are not kind people." Snow stood and began to pace back and forth. "I am the captain of the mercenary outfit who saved you. The outfit's name is Snow's Blood. We do anything from running narcotics to fighting wars for petty nobleman to exacting revenge on anyone who harms our men or their families. You were lucky we passed you."

"You... saved me?"

"Barely."

"Thank you. Can you get me some water?"

"A moment. I told the staff to leave a jug on the duchess." Snow left the room and Glib relaxed. So far the mercenary captain was friendly. But would he be the same when Glib and Cinch were fully recovered? Maybe he would demand payment for looking after them. After all, he was a mercenary - what more could he expect? Snow returned, a jug in one hand and a glass in the other. He poured water into the glass and set the jug on the duchess. He gave the glass to Glib. "Drink up."

The water felt cool. At the bakery Glib had tasted many different drinks, but nothing compared to this. He was awake enough to appreciate the water and thirsty enough to know just how little one glass was. "More please." Water dribbled down Glib's chin and soaked the front of his shirt. The mercenary captain seemed amused by Glib's thirst and refilled the glass. "How long have I been in this room?" Glib asked as he took his second glass of water.

"Since yesterday afternoon when we arrived in Rondolli."

"And I've been sleeping ever since?"

"Yes."

Glib thought back to when he saw the Yanchepp Inn. He fell asleep a short while later and could not even remember being transported to this room. The last Glib recalled was the soldier telling him the Yanchepp Inn's name. "How's Cinch?" he asked suddenly..

"You mean your friend."

Glib nodded.

"He's recovering well. When we first found you and your friend, I thought you would be quickest to recover. But another two days and I think your friend will be as fit as he ever was. Once his sunburn peels he won't even remember his experience in the desert. Your sunburn and health, on the other hand."

Glib undid the buttons of his shirt and stared with morbid interest at the 'V' of red which covered his chest. "I look like a tomato."

Snow chuckled. "You'll find that the skin under your shirt is sunburnt, too. When sunburn gets really bad it goes straight through material. It won't look like it is sunburnt though because your exposed skin is so red."

Glib inspected his left hand. "There is another thing. I was bitten by a scorpion."

"Gods!" The mercenary captain's expression reflected his words. "You are tough."

Glib said nothing.

"How bad was the sting?"

"After it bit me I felt dizzy. And sick in the stomach. Headaches."

"What type of scorpion was it?"

Glib thought back to digging the hole with Cinch, but could not frame the picture of the scorpion in his mind. After spending almost a week alternating between delirium, unconsciousness and sleep, his memories immediately before that time were quite blurred. "I can't remember."

"Never mind. But you do know how long ago you were bitten?"

"Five, six days."

"Some poison may still be near the bite. I'd say you were bitten by a desert scorpion - it's the obvious answer to getting a bite out there. Show me the bite area."

Glib held his left hand towards the mercenary captain. He indicated the fleshy part of skin between his thumb and forefinger. "It bit me there once." Then he indicated the back of his hand. "And there as well."

"Two bites? You must be a sorcerer."

"I didn't realize it bit me there," Glib said as he indicated the fleshy part of his skin. "The pain from the back of my hand was too much."

"I can still see the bites," Snow said. "That's not a good thing. I'll have to dig in there with a knife to get any poison out."

Glib's looked at the mercenary captain.

"If you leave the poison in there you risk it going to your brain. I've seen people bitten by scorpions who would not allow anyone to cut the poison out. First they start acting happily. Then they lose control of their limbs, fall on the ground and shake uncontrollably." Snow was grim as he gave the bites a final inspection. "Then they die. I'll be back soon."

For a moment Glib wished he was never rescued by the mercenary company. Then he considered the alternative. Cinch was lucky - he had not been stung by a scorpion. If Glib stayed at home in Color Gash this would not have happened. Every hour that passed made him regret leaving Color Gash even more. Perhaps the Outlendian god was punishing him for leaving home so young. Delilah and Surl accepted a big responsibility when they agreed to take care of Glib. Though they could not be described as the best parents, they always provided for him. The best meal he had since leaving their household was a plains bustard that his werehound caught.

Snow returned with a dagger gripped in one hand. His teeth were clenched and

his lips pressed together. He sat on the bedside, closer to Glib this time. Grabbing hold of Glib's hand, Snow said, "Don't struggle. You'll make it worse." Snow plunged the dagger into Glib's skin. Glib cried in pain and sweat broke out on his forehead. "It's easier to remove the whole chunk of skin here," Snow explained rationally. "I'd say a lot of the poison has already seeped into your veins, but as long as we contain the nest of poison where the scorpion first bit you..." And then the chunk of skin was gone. Snow looked at the skin distastefully and set it on the duchess. "We pay the staff good money to look after us. They'll clean the skin up." For a moment Snow looked concerned. "Is it hurting?"

"Badly." Glib had to grit his teeth and steel himself not to cry. Snow was a mercenary captain; if Glib cried what would he think? He would not be a man in Snow's eyes if he cried.

"The second sting is going to be more painful," Snow explained.

"I'm in enough pain as it is."

"The poison needs to be removed." There was sternness in Snow's voice.

"Do it then."

Snow took Glib by the wrist. His dagger hovered over Glib's skin, searching for the best entry point. Glib closed his eyes. He did not want to watch a dagger burying itself into his skin. Having a chunk of flesh cut away was bad enough, but to have a dagger enter the skin on the back of his hand, burrowing through flesh and digging up gore, was too much for the fifteen-year-old. Glib felt the tip of the dagger. He gasped in pain. What were the words Stern taught him? There were spells against pain, litanies which could strengthen the mind. *Speak*, Glib told himself, *speak in your mind. Pain is in the mind, not the flesh. Pain is in the mind, not the flesh.* But the pain was still there. He could feel it, could feel the dagger vivisectioning the back of his hand. Why was the mercenary captain doing this? It was too painful, it wasn't worth it to remove a little scorpion poison, *Pain is in the mind, not the flesh.* Glib needed a healing remnant to subside the pain. With his right hand he reached out and grabbed Snow's armor near his heart. "Pain is in the mind, not the flesh. Pain is in the mind, not the flesh." The pain was subsiding. Glib was starting to become stronger.

Glib opened his eyes. His vision was hazed, but he was well enough to make the room out in detail. He looked at his hand. The mercenary captain had removed the sting, although a large wound now punctured the back of Glib's hand. The spell had worked. If the spell were not affecting Glib he would be feeling every nuance of pain the wound could produce; as it was the sensation in his hand was only a dull throbbing. He looked at Snow's face, ready to thank him for removing the sting.

But Snow was watching him in amazement - and fear. Then Glib remembered the litany he chanted when trying to combat the pain. Glib was filled with dread when Snow whispered the words: "*Sorcerer.*"

The mercenary captain treated Glib with more respect now that he thought Glib was a sorcerer. Whenever he came into the room to refill Glib's jug or to pour him a glass of water, he always treated Glib like a stray dog, one that may bite at any moment. But that respect was tempered by Snow's bravado. He did not get to be the captain of a mercenary company by being a coward. Sorcerers frightened him but he would not let them lord it over him. Glib thought it amusing how he was treated by the captain. He considered telling Snow he only knew a few spells and wasn't a trained sorcerer, but that would not be as much fun as the way it was now.

The staff of the inn treated him with respect too - and fear. Glib did not know

how Snow let it slip that Glib might be a sorcerer. People like Snow Angler knew how to hold their tongue. There was a chance that one of the inn's staff had been watching the day Snow cut the poison from Glib's hand. Snow might even have talked to Cinch about Glib's magical skill. Glib found it amusing how the staff treated him, but it was off-putting as well. When the serving girls came into Glib's room they curtsied and left the jug of water on the duchess, then scurried away. None of them ever said hello. One of the girls came in more often than the rest and Glib thought she was losing some of her fear. She served the three meals - pranz, tiffin and sup - and returned an hour or so later to take what Glib did not eat. She stared at Glib a lot. But she never smiled.

It took Glib two days before he felt well enough to have a bath. His ordeal in the desert had taken its toll. No matter how many days a person suffers like that it always takes them a long time to recover. How long had Glib been recovering now? *Almost a week*, he thought. *I've been a burden on Snow Angler for almost a week.* He still did not feel like all of his meals. Some he left entirely alone. He slept for a long time too. Last night he dropped off not longer after sunset, and today... He blinked his eyes as he came into wakefulness. It was hot. The day was bright. He judged it to be near midday. So much for him waking early. He looked at the duchess and saw this morning's breakfast set there. Another uneaten meal for the serving girl to clean up.

Glib took a moment to realize he had not been on his feet for over a week. With trepidation he drew back his sheets and prepared himself to swing his legs over the bedside. He felt a sense of *deja vu* when he remembered how he helped Cinch to walk after the fight with Baramny. Glib was sick in the stomach and still very sore. He did not know if his legs would hold his weight.

They did. His legs felt shaky but he was determined not to fall. He was determined not to be a burden on the mercenary captain. The quicker he was away from this inn and Snow Angler the better. If he stayed longer Snow might demand that Glib join his company. But as he stumbled to the door of his room and crashed painfully into the doorknob, Glib knew he would have to stay here for at least another couple of days. He opened the door and saw a young woman passing outside. "I need a bath," Glib said.

The woman paused with the bundle of white laundry she was carrying, then nodded and said, "I'll get someone who can help you."

"Thank you." Glib's voice was hoarse. He leaned against the doorframe while he waited for the woman to return. But the term 'woman' was wrong. She was about the same age as Glib. Just a girl.

Glib was about to return to bed - or go in search of a bath himself, he did not know which - when a woman came to him. She was dressed much differently from the girl he saw. The girl wore a functional white uniform, a dress that ended mid-thigh; this woman wore something... much different. She was clothed in a brassiere of interlocking gold-colored chainmail. Her midriff was bare and the long dress she wore was split along the entire length of one leg. Glib was well enough to experience an uncomfortable sensation.

"You requested a bath?" the woman said. Her voice was honey, as was her skin.

"Yes," Glib croaked. "And a change of clothes."

"Follow me," the woman told Glib, and Glib followed her. Her eyes were dark, her eyelashes dusky and her hair black as a raven's. Glib followed her past screened rooms, trying to determine the layout of the inn. He also kept an eye out for Cinch. A mercenary soldier passed them at one point and nodded and smiled at Glib, who

nodded and smiled back. But mostly he kept his eyes on his escort's back.

Finally they entered a room which was much cooler than the others. A rectangular pool sat in the middle of the room. For the first time since Glib had been at the Yanchepp Inn he thought something was amiss here. A normal inn would provide a pump and bucket for bathing - or a half-cut barrel. Glib waited for the woman to go. She didn't. "Um... I must undress."

"That's fine," the woman said. "We have others here. We can bathe you. Wait a moment." The woman left the room.

Glib allowed himself to relax. She was attractive. She was dressed alluringly. It was difficult not to think of her. But Glib was too sore to think of that sort of thing - and he still loved Girl. Today he would bathe, wash the grime away and get into a new set of clothes. Then he could sleep.

The woman returned with three others. Glib watched them. They were all dressed similarly to the first woman, and all seemed glad that Glib was here. Overglad. The woman who first spoke to Glib walked over to him. "You can't take those clothes off yourself - you're sunburnt all over. You're just going to hurt yourself more."

Glib looked at his arms. His sunburn was peeling away in large strips. The woman was right. If he bent to take his clothes off his sunburnt skin would stretch and cause him even more pain. Best if he let the women take his clothes off for him. The four women were adept at doing their job. Glib thought they might cause him even more pain, but they had a gentle touch. Especially the dusky-skinned woman who first spoke to Glib.

Finally he was standing naked before them. He felt self-conscious. He descended the pool's stairs as quickly as his body would allow. The water was... heavenly. The four women followed him. Glib made his way to the opposite side of the pool and let the cool water caress his skin. *One is not truly appreciative of a bath until one has been in the desert for two weeks*, Glib thought.

The four women surrounded him. Two were at his back and one at his side, and the dusky-skinned woman was directly in front of him. The four women were still wearing their scanty clothes... but this was not the standard fare most inns offered. Glib should be thinking of Girl. She was not like these women. She was... sweeter. Glib loved her. But then he betrayed her by being caught with a werewolf. She hated him now. She was probably already with someone else. She could even be with Baramny.

"Is it true," the dusky-skinned woman asked, "that you are a sorcerer?"

"No. People might think I am, but..."

The dusky-skinned woman gently plashed the water near Glib's chest. "All of us were amazed when Snow came out of your room that night. He was afraid. For Snow to be afraid... I have never seen him afraid before."

"He is a strong man. He wouldn't be afraid of me."

"It is because you performed a spell, and you are so young. Sorcerers do not usually perfect their art until they are in their late twenties. What age are you? Fifteen?"

"My spells are erratic," Glib deferred. "Nothing to inspire fear." The dusky-skinned woman was uncomfortably close now. Glib felt her hands brushing along his chest, her body so close to his own. "What is your name?"

"Rosan."

Snow Angler entered the room. He was cleaner than when Glib last saw him, and looked more relaxed. He strode to the edge of the pool. "I see you're fully

recovered."

"Hardly. My head and stomach still ache. My sunburn is still bad too."

"Mm." Snow glanced at the four women surrounding Glib then walked around the pool to where Glib was resting. He knelt near the young man. "I need to speak to you."

"What about?" Glib was certain Snow would demand payment for taking care of him.

"Snow's Blood will be gone in one and a half weeks. We will leave the Yanchepp Inn and Rondolli."

Glib listened politely. The demand would come soon.

"We can't stay in Rondolli forever. Our job is fighting and staying here will do us no good. We pay for the rooms in this inn with the gold we earn. You need to get better by the time we leave. I've already had this conversation with Cinch. I'm confident that both you and he can recover fully by that time. I do not mean to leave you out on the street, but mercenaries live by a time frame. We've already done more for you than a lot of other people would have."

"I understand," Glib answered.

"Good. That's all I needed to tell you." Snow stood. "I'll leave you alone. I see you're enjoying... other company."

"Snow," Glib said.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for looking after me. And thank you for looking after Cinch too, if he hasn't said that himself."

Snow stared at Glib for a moment, then turned and left the room. His face did not change from its stony expression.

The woman surrounding Glib relaxed, and Glib relaxed himself. He did not know what he could do when the mercenaries left and he and Cinch were thrown onto the street. Returning to Color Gash was out of the question - Surl would kill him and Girl did not love him. These women, on the other hand... Glib watched their bodies swaying under the water. He had not seen more attractive women - except maybe for Girl. His side brushed against the pool wall and he grimaced. The sunburn was still taking revenge. He could do nothing with these women today. "Thank you for helping me," Glib told them. He began to walk towards the pool's stairs. All the grime he wore was not scrubbed away - he was in too much pain for that - but at least he *felt* clean. "May you fetch me some clean clothes?" Glib asked Rosan, and Rosan rushed to do his bidding.

When she returned Glib dressed in the light-weight cotton clothes she provided and went to his room. He and Cinch would have to get together and plan their path of action before the week and a half ran out. Rosan farewelled him at the door to his room with a kiss on his cheek, and Glib made his way to his bed. He was tired. He would have to meet with Cinch soon. He fell on his bed, and minutes later fell asleep.

Snow stood in the door of Glib's room. "I think it's about time you saw Cinch. Both of you are well enough to meet up with each other."

Glib yawned. Another two days were gone and he was actually beginning to feel a little better. He could walk now, albeit stiffly because of his sunburn. His stomach and head still ached, but another day or so of rest would cure that. "Where is he?" Glib asked.

"Next corridor. I'm surprised you haven't spoke with him before this."

"So am I." Glib got out of bed and grunted - he still wasn't *completely* better. "Lead me to him." Glib followed the short and stocky figure of Snow. He was surprised that the soldiers who passed them did not salute Snow or acknowledge him in any form. In fact they mostly ignored him. Glib thought that in a mercenary company discipline would be paramount, held in higher regard than anything else. Here it seemed like nobody cared. The pair turned into a corridor and Snow knocked on the second door down. He held his hands behind his back and waited for an answer.

"Yes?" That was Cinch's voice. Despite its hoarseness Glib recognized it immediately.

"It's Snow Angler. Glib is here."

"Come in - the door is unlocked."

Snow opened the door and escorted Glib into the room. Cinch smiled and lay back on his pillow when he saw Glib; Glib just smiled. "I need to get you two together before you forget each other," Snow said. "You must have been apart for over a week now."

Glib thought that Snow had somehow reflected his emotions exactly. Meeting Cinch was like meeting someone he had not seen in ten or fifteen years. It was as if their ordeal in the desert created a gulf between them, and they would take some while to build a bridge across it. At least that was the way Glib felt. Cinch's hair was more golden than Glib had ever seen it. Cinch's eyes were bright in his sunken skin, which showed a few remaining signs of peeling sunburn. Cinch's body looked frail under the thin sheet which covered it.

"I'll leave you two alone," Snow said. "I'm sure you don't want me here eavesdropping." Snow left the room and closed the door.

Glib did not know what to say at first - what do you say to someone you almost killed because of your stupidity? He scuffed his feet on the carpet and waited for Cinch to speak, but unfortunately Cinch was not saying anything. Finally Glib moved nearer Cinch and sat on his bed. He said the first thing that came into his mind: "You look awful."

"So do you. I thought you were puny when we left Color Gash. Now..."

"I must look like a starving nomad."

"Worse."

Glib lay on the bed beside his friend. "Mmm. Comfortable." Then Glib sat up again, suddenly serious. "Cinch, there's something I need to ask you. Did you tell Snow anything about me being a sorcerer? Or about the werehound?"

"I didn't say anything about the werehound - he saved us, remember. But I did tell the captain you knew a bit of magic. Why are you asking this?"

"When Snow was removing the scorpion stings-"

"*Stings?*"

"Yeah, I got two. They're all right. When Snow was removing them I cast a spell to alleviate the pain. I gripped Snow's chest near his heart and chanted... and when I opened my eyes he was staring at me strangely. He said: 'Sorcerer.' I thought someone like Snow would keep it a secret, but the serving maids who come into my room look at me as though I'm going to attack them."

"I may have spoken to some of the women about your... abilities," Cinch admitted.

"What?" Glib scowled. "You're an idiot. You know how sorcerers are treated. Most of the time people think them equal to warlocks and devil-worshippers.

How could you be stupid enough to..." Glib shook his head. "Gods you're an idiot."

"*Well sorry.*" Cinch's words were far from sincere. "Excuse me if I told a woman about you because she asked. I thought she might like you."

"Did you tell her about the werehound?"

"I'm not that stupid."

"So what put you in a position to talk to her about me?"

Cinch went so red it looked like he was sunburnt again.

"Cinch?" Glib asked with austerity in his voice.

"Um... you do know what this place is, don't you?"

"The Yanchepp Inn. One of the soldiers told me its name when we got here."

"It's a bordello. What do you think a bunch of mercenaries do when they're on rest and relaxation? It's an inn as well - those who come here don't know about its darker side - but it makes most of its profit from its other trade. That's why they can afford such large rooms. And that pool."

Glib looked part-way shocked and part-way amazed. "Have you... been with any of the women?"

"Yes - and it's free. The captain is paying for everything until he leaves next week."

"Which one have you been with?" Glib asked.

"The woman with the dark skin. Not black, but it is like she's a nomad or from the rainforests to the north."

"Is her name Rosan?"

"That's it."

Glib felt sick. He liked Rosan... and now she had made love with his best friend. But it was her duty and he could not blame her for what she did. And Cinch did not know that Glib liked her. It would be silly if Glib held it against Cinch for using Rosan's services. But Glib still felt jealous. "A couple of days ago I had a bath with four women. I thought it a bit odd, especially because we were in such a large pool. I also thought it a bit odd that they were all wearing similar clothes. I know it's hot in Rondolli, but they weren't the type of clothes you see on the street. I had my suspicions but did not say anything because I was afraid I might offend someone."

"For someone who is supposed to be more intelligent than me, you take a long time to catch on."

"What did it feel like?"

"Too good," Cinch replied. "Rosan was good. But I've made it with others as well. Some of them are probably better than Rosan."

"You've never even kissed a girl. How could you be so lucky to sleep with one before me?"

"You can sleep with one if you wish - until next week."

Glib felt even more jealous of Cinch. He expected to be the first to sleep with a woman. Cinch was romantically inept. To have Cinch sleep with a woman before he did was a crushing blow to Glib's pride. Glib was intelligent and good at sport; Cinch was popular, handsome, good at trades *and* he slept with a woman before Glib. It was easy to see who was getting most from the world. But he could not feel jealous - that would only drive him and Cinch apart.

It could not stop Glib being curious, though. He wondered what it was like to do what Cinch *had done*. Two days ago when he bathed and the woman surrounded him, he felt uncomfortable sensations he was only too familiar with. In Color Gash he watched the girls he liked from a distance - except for Girl, and Abbey if Cinch had any

say in the matter. Here in Rondolli the women were so close. He could reach out and touch their skin, caress their bodies...

That was for another day though. He and Cinch still had a lot of catching up to do.

"How well do you feel?" Glib asked.

"Could be better. But I've improved since the day we arrived here."

Glib smiled. "So have I. I'm sorry I almost got you killed in the desert. I didn't mean to. It's just that... I wanted to get away from Color Gash. I didn't think of the burden we would place on each other if we traveled together."

"If we traveled alone we would have died."

Glib's lips creased into the semblance of a smile. His friend was right - and Glib was glad to see Cinch's loyalty to their friendship was still there. "It was lucky that Snow found us."

"Very lucky. We owe him and the whole company a great deal."

Glib smiled wanly. "Except I can't think of anything to give them."

"They'd probably kill both of us if they knew about you and your werehound. And your werehound is the only thing we have that could be useful to them."

"I will not use the werehound as a bargaining tool." Glib's words were firm, but then he softened them. "I miss Color Gash. I regret leaving Girl behind. Do you have any regrets, Cinch?"

"No, I don't think so. I miss Color Gash. I miss my father, even though he hated me and probably still hates me. I don't miss my former friends. I don't care about them at all, to tell you the truth. I mainly miss Color Gash and the safety of being in my father's home."

"I don't miss my family," Glib admitted.. "My *foster-family*." Glib seasoned the words with spite. He thought of Surl and the beatings he received at the older man's hands. None of the beatings were severe but every time Surl hit him Glib knew what his foster-father was trying to do - crush his spirit. He withstood Surl's beatings and triumphed against them. He thought of Delilah and how she never disagreed with her husband. Tight-lipped, she watched on while Surl said (or did) what he wanted to Glib. Glib thought of the boys who would not be friends with him, partly because he was a foster-child, partly because he originally came from the Commonlands and partly because he was intelligent and gentle, not like them. And he thought of Abbey, who he now admitted felt more like a sister than anything else. Glib wished he treated Abbey better while he was at the bakery. She was a good person at heart. His family probably thought him dead; now he had to prove to them - especially Surl - that he could succeed in life without them looming over his shoulder.

"We may not even be men yet," Cinch said, "but we are shaping our future. Not many people our age get the chance to do this. We are existing without our parents - and surviving - and I am proud of that."

"*You* may not be a man," Glib said, "but I am."

"A man with arms the size of twigs," Cinch sniggered.

"I'm starting to get tired. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yep. Whatever."

Glib left Cinch's room and headed back to his own. So Cinch had made love with Rosan. And the Yanchepp Inn was a brothel. He could not believe his luck. Tomorrow - or maybe even this afternoon - he would sample the Yanchepp Inn's wares. He was in the midst of every virile boy's dream. He could choose half a dozen women if he wished. But as he climbed into bed and let his head sink into his pillow's softness, he could only think of one person: Girl.

Glib felt well enough to have a meal. Not one of those pre-prepared meals that was served to him as though he were an invalid, but a proper meal. And the best place he could find a meal like that was in the inn's common room. His legs and arms ached as he got up from his bed. But he had experienced worse pain before and knew he would probably experience worse pain again. He walked stiffly, but that was the only sign he was not completely better. Moving into the corridor Glib nodded and smiled at the people he saw.

There was Rosan. He lowered his eyes, smiled and looked up at her like a shy doe. Rosan returned the smile. Glib was jealous - Cinch had slept with her. He had slept with the body Glib could see. Glib let his eyes wander to the dress Rosan wore, the gentle swell of her breasts and her swaying hips. Cinch had had that body pressed close to his.

Glib continued through the corridor towards the inn's common room. Snow's Blood soldiers smiled at him but the looks the inn staff gave him were part curious, part full of fear. Glib felt like he commanded a certain amount of power over the staff by the time he entered the inn's common room. The common room looked like any other inn anywhere in Outlend. A barkeep served behind a counter and barmaids served customers and cleaned tables. Some of the barmaids were attractive and some were not. The inn was perhaps quarter-full. None of the patrons would have any idea that a brothel was being run behind the common room's facade.

Glib moved across the common room floor and tried to find a table for himself. He finally selected one that was against the darkest wall in the room. He sat down and waited. He had only been to an inn several times before - all with his foster-father - and did not know whether to go to the bar to order his meal or wait until a barmaid served him. His indecision was answered when a barmaid appeared at his table and asked what he would like.

"A hot meal," Glib said. "With meat and gravy. And a cup of orange juice to go with it."

The barmaid moved to prepare his order but four soldiers at an adjoining table clicked their fingers at her. "Scrap that order," one said. "Everything except the meal. Give him ale instead of orange juice."

The barmaid looked at the soldiers, then at Glib, then curtsied to the soldiers and hurried away. Glib had a good idea of whose order she would follow.

One of the soldiers whistled. "Hey boy, come her."

Glib rose from his seat tentatively and moved towards them. There was a red 'V' on the arm of the men's uniforms, which Glib recognized as the Snow's Blood crest. He relaxed a little.

"I see you're well enough to get out and about," one of the four soldiers said.

"I'm a little stiff," Glib deferred.

The soldier shrugged. "I'm going." He nodded at the other three soldiers at the table. "These fellas wanted to talk to you." He laughed, then went to bar, ordered a beer and stumbled into the hot Rondolli sun.

The youngest of the remaining soldiers said, "Don't get nervous because of him. He's a joker, a lark." The soldier extended his hand. "My name is Leesh. Yours must be Glib."

Glib nodded. Leesh did not look like a soldier. He was no older than twenty-five, and his hair was curly brown. He had chestnut eyes like Glib's own, but his hands were soft, supple - not the hands of a soldier. Leesh gave Glib an odd look. "Are you

sick?"

"No. Just a dizzy spell. I get them sometimes."

"To be expected after spending so long in the desert." Leesh indicated the other two soldiers at the table. "This is Scarz, and this is Triffett."

Scarz gave a broad smile and shook Glib's hand; Triffett just grunted. "I thought the captain was called Scarz," Glib said.

"He is - or at least used to be. Scarz arriving is one of the main reasons people started calling him 'Snow' again."

Glib thought the mercenaries had it right. Scarz definitely looked more like his name than Snow. Scarz was bulky but not overly tall. His face was covered in white blemishes. Hair grew on his shoulders (he was wearing only a sweat-stained singlet) and his smile revealed broken teeth.

"A lovable bear," Leesh said.

Triffett grunted again.

"Don't mind him," Leesh said. "He gets like that sometimes."

Triffett, Glib thought. *Short, gray curly hair, slightly overweight, sunken eyes, sunken overall expression.* Glib did not like Triffett from the outset - and Glib thought that Triffett did not like him.

"Are you enjoying the Yanchepp Inn?" Leesh asked Glib.

Scarz laughed, a grunting, ape-like sound, and nudged Leesh with his shoulder. "I bet. Probably screwed one of the women up their tight perky ass."

Leesh frowned. "Scarz, peace."

"I'm only mucking around."

"The boy is probably nervous," Leesh reprimanded him. "We don't want to make him any *more* nervous. Poor kid." Leesh turned his full attention back to Glib. "I assume you don't want me to ask about your past, where you came from and how you ended up sleeping under some boulders in the middle of the desert. You probably don't want me to ask how you and your friend - Cinch, is it? - got here."

"I would rather not talk about it," Glib said.

"Then neither would I." Leesh leaned back in his chair, turned towards the bar and frowned. "Where's that meal Glib ordered?"

A moment later the barmaid who served Glib rushed to the table and placed a steaming plate full of meat and vegetables in front of Glib. She placed a glass of ale next to it. Glib took the wooden spoon she provided and began to shovel food into his mouth. He looked at Leesh to see what the soldier had to say next.

"You don't want to talk about you, but do you want us to tell you about *ourselves*?"

Glib shrugged, nodded. It didn't really matter to him.

"My name is Leesh Sailor," Leesh said. "My name comes from when I was a child and my father had to tie a leash around me to stop me following him to the docks. I originally came from Spire, in the state of Centar, but have been part of Snow's Blood for five years. At the moment I hold the position of corporal first class but I'm hoping to improve that position soon." Leesh nodded towards Scarz. "He doesn't talk much, so I'll fill in the details you need to know about him. His name is Scarz Cooper. He was born in a village on the border of Outlend and the Commonlands and left home at the age of fifteen to become a prize-fighter. He is not as quick now and is too old to fight, so three years ago he enlisted in Snow's Blood. The dolt spent all the money he won prizefighting." Leesh nodded to the last of the three soldiers. "And this is Triffett."

Triffett scowled. "Do you tell every orphan kid your life history?" Triffett moved from the table and walked out the common room door. Scarz saw Trivet's beer glass was half full and drained it for him.

"As I said, don't mind Triffett. He comes from the Commonlands - you get a lot of Commonland immigrants in cities like Solet, Rondolli and Color Gash. He thinks the world has something against him. His full name is Triffett Frederick Smiths. He was the son of a village-ruling family in the Commonlands. When his older brother was bequeathed the bulk of the family inheritance, Triffett left his village. Said he would prove who the real hero was. He's been part of Snow's Blood for two years. He's all right once you get used to his moods. I don't know why the captain doesn't discharge him. Feels a kinship or empathy with him, I guess."

"What do you mean by that?" Glib asked.

"The captain had a hard life as a child. He felt betrayed by his family." Leesh sipped at his drink. "Anyway, another time. We need to drink our beer before it goes flat."

Glib said, "I'm a Commonland immigrant too."

Leesh looked surprised. "So you *are* going to tell us something of your past. But 'Glib' is a States name - why were you given a States name if you're a Commonlander?"

"My Commonland mother died in childbirth. Two of my Outlend cousins - my foster parents - adopted me."

"Oh," Leesh whispered. "I'm sorry."

Glib shrugged and continued shoveling his food. Leesh and Scarz fell silent, and Glib thought about the three soldiers he'd met. Rough men, especially Scarz and Triffett. They might be rough but Glib doubted if they would harm him even if he met them as strangers. They were a good sort of rough, a trustworthy sort of rough. Leesh... was different, more disciplined. He was an officer type, and Glib deduced he wanted to rise higher in the ranks of the mercenary company. After all, he spoke about his hopes for promotion. Glib felt uncomfortable beside these men but glad of their presence. Without them he would be the target for all sorts of jibes from men coming into the common room. Most especially if they knew the inn's dual purpose. Glib thought these soldiers were a lot like the guards on the wall at Color Gash. A bit rougher, maybe, but cut from the same cloth. They were all soldiers and acted as such - with firmness and discipline and professionalism, and pride in their jobs. At least when they were *doing* their job. When they were on rest and relaxation they could be excused if they slackened their guard a bit.

Glib finished his meal and began drinking the ale set before him. It stung the back of his throat, but warmed his belly and made him crave more. He liked this ale. But too much was not good for him, especially because he was still recovering from his desert ordeal.

"Slow down, soldier," Leesh said. "Don't drink it like juice - it's not meant to be had like that. Just sip it."

Glib finished his first glass and rose his hand to indicate he wanted more. A barmaid approached but Leesh slapped down his hand. "Not that many, not yet. Bedrest is what you need. Go back to your room. Remember that once Snow's Blood leaves here, you must leave too. You need to be as well as possible when that time comes."

Glib realized the truth of Leesh's words. His face was downcast as he got up and exited the common room, although Leesh and Scarz both smiled and waved and

Glib felt like they had become true friends. The corridors were subdued. Not many soldiers were in sight now, mostly maids and Yanchepp Inn's other workers. Glib was too dizzy to smile straight at them - that one drink had made him weak and disorientated. But as he collapsed on the floor with a crooked smile on his face and the Yanchepp Inn's staff rushing to help him, he was sure of one thing. He was going to become a conqueror - and he was going to do that by starting as a mercenary.

Glib was lying in bed. His day had been good so far. It consisted of fruit, porridge and punch for breakfast, a brief swim in the indoor pool, a tour of the city around the Yanchepp Inn, and rest. One sheet covered his body but Glib did not feel hot - the screened windows allowed a cool breeze to pass into the room. And the sheets were satin, a material which never grew warm.

Glib thought about his family and friends back home. They were his past now. He would never be beaten by Surl again and Delilah would never stand idly by and watch. He would never have to tolerate the feeble attempts Abbey made at friendship and would never have to skulk and hide from the local boys. He would never have to listen to one of Stern's lessons - but admittedly he felt sad because of that. And he would never feel one of Girl's kisses again. That was the worst part. His family and friends were his past now... but what was his future?

Three days remained before Snow's Blood left the inn. Three days in which Glib and Cinch would make up their minds about what they wanted to do. Glib knew they would stay together. They were too young to leave each other yet - they did not have the life skills or experience to make it on their own. Cinch was older and perhaps better-equipped for adult living, but Glib was more adept at trying to survive. Glib *was* a survivor.

Glib considered joining Snow's Blood - if Snow would have him. Life as a mercenary would not be that bad. It would be dangerous, but what occupation was *not* dangerous? Glib's life would be at risk even if he were apprenticed to a baker. The only occupations that were not dangerous were those of clerkly pursuits - or tutors like Stern - but there was still a risk of a pen going through your eye, or a student becoming angry and killing you in a fit of rage. Life as a mercenary was attractive. It called up romantic images similar to the visions a young lady might have of her lover. It was dangerous and there was a good chance of dying, but there were many benefits to the mercenary life. High pay, attractive women and chances for promotion. And once promotion was achieved, Glib thought he would not have to worry about dying as much. Grunts would do that, not commanders.

But the only worry was that Snow Angler would not have him. Glib was fifteen years old, barely a suitable age for entry into a mercenary company. Glib's youth allowed him the benefit of being easily trained, but he would be smaller and more gangly than any other soldier on a battlefield. And his adolescent indecision would be a hindrance if his life were at risk. Then Glib thought of his games of *football*. He had been one of the best players of *football* in Color Gash - and knew it. A battle was not that dissimilar from a *football* game. Each company (or player) was laid out strategically in a set area, and each had certain objectives they needed to reach. Of course deliberately trying to harm other players was illegal in a *football* game - but that was one of the *objectives* in battle. Due to his competitive nature Glib might be better at soldiering than he originally thought.

He could only wonder how Cinch would stand up to soldiering. Cinch was taller and stronger than Glib, but did not have as much will to live. And he was not as

good at *football* and was uncoordinated and did not have the vicious streak that Glib thought was required for mercenary life. Cinch was like a lion without a bite; Glib was a rabid fox.

There was the question of where a mercenary company would take them, too. If Snow's Blood operated in the desert they would remain near the cities of Solet, Rondolli and Color Gash most of their lives. If Snow's Blood was willing to fight in other countries they could end up in the Commonlands or Ref, the nomad lands or even the eskimo lands to the south of Morrow. But if Snow's Blood went wherever the fighting was - which was most likely - it meant Glib and Cinch could turn up anywhere.

Snow Angler had not asked either of them to become part of the mercenary company yet, so Glib wondered why he was thinking all this. Glib and Cinch had no experience and Snow Angler would not want anyone with so much youth. Until Snow asked them to become part of the mercenary company it was futile to daydream.

Someone knocked on Glib's door. Glib felt a little annoyed - he was enjoying thinking to himself and the interruption coincided with his thoughts to give him a bad fright. He sat in his bed with a confused expression on his face (sleep had been courting), looked at the door and frowned. "Who is it?"

"Rosan. I want to speak with you."

Glib got up from his bed. "A minute. The door is locked." He moved to the door and undid the latch. Then without waiting for Rosan to open it he returned to bed and slumped on top of his sheets. He listened to Rosan as she opened the door and shuffled into the room. The shuffles were demure - her feet must be moving a little at a time, because Glib could not make out individual steps. Finally the shuffling stopped, and with his eyes closed Glib waited for what she would do next.

Rosan clasped her fingers in front of her. She looked at the floor and bit her bottom lip. She wore a simple mauve dress sashed about the waist. "I've missed you since the day we bathed together."

"I've missed you too." Glib's words were muffled by the pillow where his face was buried - he could not get over his jealousy of Cinch.

There was a pause. Rosan pulled her gown from her fine shoulders, then undid her sash. She revealed small and perfect breasts, a flat stomach, and, lower... Glib noticed the door was closed. Rosan was naked. Glib could only watch.

Glib wondered what his foster-mother would say about this. And he wondered what Girl and Abbey would say. He was mostly worried about Girl, though. There had been no formal end to their relationship - it was a matter of circumstance that pulled them apart. Glib could not speak to her that day he was found with the werhound. If her parents knew about his indiscretion... and Girl would have called him a devil-worshipper or worse. He already had skills as a sorcerer - any other magical skills was an invitation to be ridiculed. Glib tried to keep these guilty thoughts in his mind as Rosan approached his bed.

Then Rosan climbed languidly beside him, and Glib found trying to maintain his guilt was extremely difficult. Rosan's body was slight, lithe, thin, possessing a degree of sleekness and simplicity. Glib was still wearing his clothes but *desperately* wanted to get out of them. He *needed* to get out of them.

And he did. The day was hot but the sheets were cool, and he held Rosan close. Her body was soft against his, so soft... Glib could feel her nipples pressed against his chest, tight and brown. He could feel the softness of her hips, the fineness of her hair, the warmth of her breath, the beating of her heart.

He was making love. He had waited a long time for this - too long - and now that it was happening he could not believe how pleasurable it actually was. *This is part of my passage to manhood*, he thought. It was a strange thought (one usually does not think of anything when making love for the first time) but Glib did not dwell on it overmuch. He was more concerned with other matters.

Glib had wanted to do this with Girl, not a prostitute like Rosan. But Rosan was gentle and loving and Girl hated him now, so what difference did it make? Rosan was as good a channel as any. Anyway, who cared about Girl? She was in his past, she *was* his past. His and Girl's relationship was one destined not to be and the only thing he could do was live for the moment. He continued making love with Rosan, thrusting gently, with Rosan responding to his thrusts with jerks of her body and whimpers of sensual delight. It was wonderful inside Rosan, making love. Glib's pleasure was heightening and was so intense that he knew he would soon experience release. And the best thing was: he no longer thought about Girl.

Chapter 7 - Mercenary

It was the day Snow's Blood was due to leave, and the inn was a hive of activity. Soldiers moved back and forth through the corridors, and the women who worked at the inn said their farewells. Glib lay in his bed waiting for someone to tell him that Snow's Blood was leaving and he was to be expelled from the inn. He was covered by a few remaining scraps of sunburn and the dagger wounds in his left hand were healing, but they were the only reminders he had ever been unwell.

He wanted to say goodbye to Rosan. That day with her had been exquisite. He had forgotten about Girl completely that day - and now when he thought of her the pain was not as keen-edged. He owed Rosan a great deal. Little matter that she was paid for what she provided, because Glib thought she provided something more. Something that could not be bought with coin. And that was love.

The door to his room opened and Glib saw Captain Snow Angler standing there. He watched Glib for a moment. "Snow's Blood is going soon."

"I know. And you want me out of the inn."

Snow's lips pressed together and he looked at Glib without saying anything for a long time. "Come. We must get Cinch."

Glib knew he had no choice. He got out of bed and took the satchel that had been provided him, then moved behind Snow and out the front door. He walked behind Snow like an obedient dog. Snow did not pay attention to Glib, so concerned he was with giving orders to the soldiers he passed. Most of the rooms were open for inspection now - maids tidied the rooms and made the beds inside. Glib saw Rosan in one of the rooms. His stride faltered, then he stopped walking completely. "Snow."

Snow turned around.

"Can you fetch Cinch alone? I need to talk to someone."

Snow nodded and left. Glib moved into the room where Rosan was making a bed, fluffing a pillow then setting it near the bedhead. She was in plain work clothes today, not the attire Glib usually saw her in. He cleared his throat when Rosan did not realize he was inside the room.

Rosan jumped. Her hand went to her heart and she smiled in relief. "I didn't see you there."

"I've come to say goodbye," Glib said.

"You are going? Where?"

"I don't know. Wherever I can find money or food, I suppose. I can't stay here forever. Snow's Blood has already done too much for me."

"I've enjoyed your company," Rosan admitted. "Even if you are four years younger than me."

Glib smiled. At least he knew her age now. This was a sad farewell, the farewell he could never give Girl. He felt bad because of that. Girl had been his faithful girlfriend; Rosan was just a whore. And yet he was giving her a farewell which Glib did not know if she actually deserved. "I love you," Glib said. "And I know you love me."

Rosan looked embarrassed.

"Will you kiss me?" Glib asked. "Once?"

Rosan moved into Glib's arms and planted her wet lips on Glib's own. She drew away quickly.

"What's the matter?" Glib asked. "I thought-"

Rosan shook her head. "It's too sad," she told him. "It's too sad to hug you and kiss you and..."

"But if you love me that sadness should be courted, not forced down." Glib's surprise at her reluctance turned to fear. "Rosan, what's the matter?"

"I don't love you." Her words were spoken quietly. "It's my job to make people *feel* like I love them. I care for them and I care for you, but I don't love you. If I loved you, continuing my work would be impossible."

Glib swallowed broken pride. So Rosan's actions and words had all been a ruse. And there was no way he could extricate himself from the snare. He expressed what he felt and now could only accept what Rosan thought of him. She might even be laughing at him inside. He really believed that Rosan loved him and was confident of *her* confession of love. Instead he had his heart torn from his chest while it was still beating. Girl and Abbey never did that to him - they were better than this *whore*. Glib's confused and hurt expression changed to a scowl and he turned and walked from the room without saying another word. If he stayed any longer it would only complicate matters. The battlefield of love was a treacherous one, and Glib knew he was routed.

I could forget about Rosan, Glib thought as he walked through the inn's corridor, *forget about women in general*. But that would be nigh on impossible after that night with Rosan. He could look at women without taking any action towards them - but that would be frustrating. Or he could return to Color Gash and keep courting Girl. But Girl hated him and she was part of his past now, anyway. Best to forget about women and concentrate on survival. Best not to pay any attention to women at all.

He joined Snow and Cinch. Cinch smiled at Glib, who admitted to himself that he felt safer when Cinch was by his side. Cinch spoke quietly to his friend as they walked. "Snow's Blood is assembling in the common room. I don't know what for."

"Probably to organize the company," Glib replied. "I can't think of any other reason they might want to spend time there."

"Have a drink before they go?"

"Maybe."

Snow Angler led the two boys into the common room, which was packed mostly by Snow's Blood soldiers. The soldiers paid little attention to Snow, who moved to the bar and ordered three frothing pots of ale. Snow led the two boys to a vacant table and sat down. He waited until the barmaid brought their mugs of ale before talking. "You're both fully recovered, as far as I can tell. Glib, those dagger marks will get infected if you don't bathe them every day, but apart from that you're

fine. Cinch, you're fine too. So what do you plan to do now that you won't be spending time in the Yanchepp Inn?"

Glib took on the spokesman's roll. He shrugged. "I don't know... Maybe get a job working here, if I can." Glib regretted the words as soon as he said them - he did not want to be anywhere *near* Rosan, not after what she told him.

"I can assure you the Yanchepp Inn wants *female* staff, not men."

Glib said, "Oh."

"You don't have anywhere you can go," Snow said matter-of-factly.

"Not really," Glib admitted.

"But you both have talents." The captain looked appraisingly at Cinch.

"You're tall and strong for your age. Lanky, but we can iron that out. Would you like to become part of my company? I can think of worse things to do."

Cinch thought about Snow's request then said, "I'll join your company if Glib joins as well."

"He was the next person I was going to ask." Snow rested his chin on his clasped hands and looked at Glib. "There is something different about you. You deny being a sorcerer, and yet I know you have magical abilities. Many mercenary companies shun wizards and sorcerers - that is foolish. A mercenary company must always seek ways to improve its fighting skill. Employers do not care if you have sorcerers in your employ - they care only if you can *win* battles. Not only that, but you are physically capable as well. You have a strong resistance to physical pain, a will to fight it. I am confident that you will be a good fighter. Not in the front line, but in reconnaissance and minor scuffles." Snow took a sip of his ale. "So, what do you say? Would you like to be part of Snow's Blood?"

Glib considered what the mercenary captain said. It was nice to hear so many complimentary remarks. But Glib was in no doubt that mercenary life would be dangerous, too dangerous perhaps. Of course, what else could he say? He was a stranger in a strange city and should jump at any offer of employment. So he did. "I'll join Snow's Blood," Glib said calmly. "As long as Cinch comes along for the ride.

Snow looked at the older boy. "Cinch?"

Cinch spread his hands. "As I said, if he is coming I'm coming too."

"That's settled." Snow drained his mug of ale and got up from his chair. "We leave in two hours. Make sure you are ready."

Glib and Cinch looked at each other once Snow had left. This was something entirely unexpected. Glib thought he would never go anywhere near a mercenary company, let alone be part of one. He wondered what the soldiers on the wall in Color Gash would think of what he was doing. Trix Vulgàr would probably be envious; the soldiers probably would not even care. It was Glib's decision as to what he wanted and he made that choice. Now he would have to live by the rules of Snow's Blood, and be treated no differently from any other mercenary. Glib thought about what Snow Angler was giving him: a new life.

The plain was not foreboding now that Glib was part of a mercenary company. He held his staff in front of him and waited for Snow to attack. The mercenary captain did so, his own staff a blur of movement. Glib tried to parry but found his staff almost knocked out of his hand, so he jumped back and waited for Snow to come again. The plain was excellent for sparring - the ground was flat for miles. Of the six bouts he and Snow had so far, Snow drove him back at least twenty yards each time, and won each time as well. But this time Glib was starting to take Snow's measure. Snow's staff

whirred towards Glib's stomach, but Glib jumped back and ducked under the moving oak. His own staff snaked towards Snow's legs - but Snow's staff cracked Glib in the chin. "That was a foolish move," Snow called. "Make sure you have unbalanced your opponent before you strike, otherwise he will read your moves too well."

Glib's hand moved to his chin. The blow from the oak staff was painful - Snow Angler did not forgive mistakes. Glib felt the wetness of blood but knew there was no more than a trickle running down his chin. He could add this welt to the half a dozen bruises he'd already received. The mercenary captain was a hard man, but fair. He might punish Glib for mistakes in training but he never did so with spite. In fact Glib thought the mercenary captain had a soft spot for him. The training Snow gave him now would serve him in good stead when Glib was in a real battle, so he appreciated it.

"Right, that's all for staves," Snow said.

Glib's shoulders slumped and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now it's time for the pummel-horse."

Glib's shoulders slumped even more. One thing Glib learned early on about Snow was that he expected his men to endure. He would often finish one training session then announce they must immediately move to another. The men grumbled but Glib suspected the men loved Snow. He increased their stamina by announcing snap training sessions, and increased their discipline and loyalty as well. Snow was a good captain.

The pummel-horse awaited. Glib's legs ached but he did not complain - that would be a mistake. Once he got past this exercise he could sleep for the rest of the day, or at least what was left of it - the sun was already beginning to set. Snow might announce snap training sessions but he would never force someone to pass their physical limit. He seemed to know exactly how far a man could go before training became counter-productive.

Glib liked the pummel-horse sessions the least. Until three days ago he had never ridden a horse, and the two times he tried riding since then were painful affairs. But Snow would not let up on the pummel-horse training until Glib was adept at it. As Snow said, it was better to get pummeled in training than get a spear ran through your torso in battle.

Snow moved to a khaki tent where a horse was tethered. He led the mount to Glib, who watched the dappled gray with caution. This was the same creature Glib had ridden the first two times, and he could testify that the gray did not like him. Glib did not care for it either. They were mutual enemies, and realized it.

"Mount," said Snow.

Glib obeyed. He struggled into the saddle and tried to sit in a comfortable position. The horse jittered, its hooves striking dust. The insides of Glib's thighs chafed and he had to use all his strength to keep the horse under his control. But Glib knew better than to complain. If he did Snow would only find him a wilder horse, one that was impossible to control. *Harsh, but fair*, Glib thought of the captain. *But sometimes too harsh*.

The mercenary captain led Glib away from the tents and to the pummel-horse ground. There were three pummel-horses set up, none of which was currently in use. Snow strode to the pummel-horse furthest from the camp then turned around.

Glib watched the captain. As soon as Snow rose his arm - and lowered it - Glib must ride towards the pummel-horse. Failure to do so would mean cleaning out latrines for a week. The mercenary captain was right to be so strict - if Glib were in a battle he would have to follow orders immediately. Except this was only training, and

Glib had only been on a horse twice before... and had two bruises on his back to testify his ineptitude.

Snow's arm swooped down and Glib heeled the horse to a canter. He knew better than to disobey. The horse was prancing towards the target, its head held high and its strides haughty. Glib would have to build up more speed. He heeled the horse again and felt reassured when it broke into a steady gallop. In other mercenary companies Glib would be given a lance to aim at the target - the pummel - but this was Snow's Blood. Snow had ordered that Glib must lean out of the saddle and punch the target with his hand. If he were to perform the task wrongly his wrist would be broken - or he would break ribs by landing on the pummel. Glib steeled himself as his mount galloped towards the pummel. He stood up in his saddle, leaned to the left, reached his hand towards the pummel and slapped it back. The slap sent a shock up his wrist but he managed to stay on his mount. The pummel whirred around and slammed Glib in the back.

Glib was knocked to the ground. He rolled, not trying to fight against the momentum of his body. Scratches and bruises covered him but it was better than getting a broken bone. Finally he came to a stop in the prickly grass. He lay there, unable or unwilling to stand up. It felt good to know his training session was over. Snow ran to him. The mercenary captain knelt beside his young student and rolled him over. "Are you well?" Snow checked Glib's pulse, then inspected Glib's eyes when he opened them.

"Of course I'm not well," Glib murmured. "Would you be well if you'd just fallen from a galloping horse and been pummeled in the back?"

Snow smiled. "Come on, training is over for today. Back to the camp." Snow proffered his hand.

Glib looked at Snow's hand for a moment. He could refuse to accept Snow's assistance but that would be bad form. When Snow offered charity Glib would take it. If Glib did not there was no telling what Snow might do. He was not a man known for his kind ways - and refusing his charity one afternoon may end up with Glib having to run an extra mile the following morning. Best not to refuse anything Snow offered.

"Bet you're looking forward to a bath tonight," Snow said.

"Don't play with me. There's not enough water for a bath here."

Snow looked offended. "Yes there is. Men should be clean. We bring enough water with us for short baths and soaps. What sort of mercenary company do you take Snow's Blood for?"

Though Snow's words were edged with seriousness Glib knew the captain was joking. The past nights he always had baths, but now they were leaving well-watered areas Glib thought he must grow accustomed to his own sweat. Obviously he was wrong.

Snow led Glib through the camp and into a tent next to Snow's own. The ceiling of the tent was stitched fine and dappled sunlight bathed the plants which sheltered in the tent. There were all manner of shrubs and blooms. Some Glib had seen growing in a myriad of places in Color Gash; others he had never seen before. Most of the plants were growing well, although there were a few which struggled. The color of the blooms ranged from red, yellow and orange to white and pink. Glib even saw a black orchid hiding amongst the brighter flowers. "You have never been in here, have you?" said Snow.

"No."

"This is my respite from the everyday world," Snow continued. "My heaven on

earth." He took a watering can from a bench and tenderly poured water over the black orchid's foliage. "Here you can find plants from all over the peninsula. This fellow is from the native islands in the north." Snow watered another plant which had thick, fleshy leaves and large white flowers. "This specimen you can find growing in the snow-capped mountains on the northern range. I have plants from Outlend, the Commonlands, Ref and Morrow, all growing in peace. There are even some plants from beyond the Dragon's Tail and the barbaran lands."

Glib marveled at the beauty of the greenhouse. He did not believe Snow was the sort of person to do this sort of thing, and wondered what the other mercenaries thought of their captain because of this. Obviously they placed at least some trust in him otherwise they would not be working under his employ. But a mercenary captain who enjoyed tending plants was unheard of. "Why do you do this?" Glib finally asked. "This is for gardeners and farmers, not mercenaries."

Snow cast his hands over his microcosm. "This is for everyone. I am sure the Outlendian god did not intend this beauty to be reserved only for florists and farmers. I love the beauty here." Snow shook his head. "I kill so many, yet here I can create life. Everything here is under my control. I am like a god here, except I am not a god. I am just a caretaker. In this tent I give life, whereas most of the time I take it. This place makes me feel sane."

Glib licked dry lips. The beauty of the place was undeniable, but not all mercenaries would agree with the extra work required carrying a load of plants and water around. The only beauty most mercenaries took interest in was a soft whore and new arms and armor. Glib doubted whether they would see eye-to-eye with Snow and his plants.

"You must be tired," Snow said. "Take a bath - and visit Cinch if you like. I think he is participating in ax-training. He is coming along nicely with that weapon."

Glib was intelligent enough to realize he was dismissed. He strode from the tent and walked towards the weapons training ground. He would visit Cinch before he took a bath. Cinch was going well as a mercenary so far. He got along with the other soldiers - something Glib could not say - and was good at weapons. Unfortunately he lacked discipline and often found himself being punished. But Glib was confident his friend would grow out of that soon.

The weapons training ground was on the opposite side of the camp from the pummel-horses. One does not want horses stampeding through men holding axes and swords, Snow had explained. It was late in the evening and there were few people still training, but Cinch was one of them. Unfortunately he had drawn Triffett as his tutor. Glib moved towards where Cinch and Triffett were sparring. Though Triffett had a technical advantage and more experience, Cinch was giving much of his own back. Glib stopped at the side of the arena and watched the event.

Triffett charged at Cinch, who ducked and moved backwards. Glib felt his heart miss a beat - if this were a real battle Cinch's head would be lopped off by an experienced fighter by now. But Triffett did not see the opportunity and was now circling Cinch with a predatory look on his face. He darted in again, but Cinch brought his ax up in a sweeping arc and parried the blow. Cinch and Triffett were both using real axes, not dummies. Any accidental blow could result in the death of one or the other.

Cinch rushed at Triffett's legs. Glib saw Triffett grin, reverse his grip on his ax and knock the flat of the blade against Cinch's neck. Cinch slumped to the ground. "As I said," Triffett shouted, "going in low will put you off-balance. Do *not* go in

low."

Cinch did not move. Glib ran from the sideline and knelt beside his friend.

"Cinch, are you well?"

Cinch rolled over. He was dazed and his face was covered by soil, but he was alive. However the lump forming on the back of his neck was not pretty. "Third time I've done that today," Triffett said with satisfaction. "If I get him a fourth it's a new record."

"Which other places did you strike him?" Glib asked.

"Ribs, chest. He guards his vitals poorly."

Glib stripped off Cinch's shirt. The bruise on his chest was not bad, unlike the bruise on his ribs. It was angry purple and the size of a grapefruit. There was the beginning of infection around the bruise. "This should have been treated when it first happened."

"Who outranks whom here?" Triffett asked.

"Sorry. Sergeant."

"One more time," Triffett said to Cinch. "Then you can get some rest."

Cinch struggled to his feet.

"He's sick," Glib said.

"That does not matter. Give him back his ax."

Glib obeyed the sergeant, handed Cinch his ax and steadied him for a moment. "You'll be right. Don't worry." Glib walked to the sideline and turned. The sergeant indicated for Glib to commence the bout. Glib nodded and waved his hand, and the fight began.

It was over in a mercilessly short time. Triffett moved towards Cinch like a wolf, the handle of his ax lashing out and striking Cinch on his bruised ribs. Cinch cried out and fell to the ground. Glib ran to him. He wanted to say something to the sergeant but knew he could end up with latrine duties if he did. Best to let the matter go and look after Cinch tonight. The captain would give him a day off when he saw how bad Cinch's injuries were.

Glib helped his friend up and together they limped away from Triffett, who was grinning. Glib delivered a murderous glance back at him but knew that would only strain tensions further. It was infuriating to know he could do nothing to help his friend. Glib felt relieved when they reached the edge of the camp. He could no longer feel the sergeant's eyes on him and Cinch was regaining some of his strength. Glib was in no doubt about what Triffett thought of Cinch and himself. They had already made an enemy.

This was a peaceful time for Glib. He could think of nothing better than sitting in front of an open campfire with the stars and two moons shining above and the soft murmur of other mercenaries around him. Glib and Cinch sat alone. Earlier in the evening Leesh and Scarz were with them but they had both drunk too much and were now in bed. However Glib liked the companionable silence with Cinch. "You're drinking too much ale," Glib told his friend.

"I know."

"You should go to bed. If you wake up tomorrow and can't work properly you know what the captain will do."

"He won't bother me." Cinch took another long swig from his ale bottle. "I'm injured. My ribs ache like hell."

"Glad I don't have a bruise there."

"You should be. And the bruise on my neck is giving me a massive headache. I need this ale to calm myself."

Glib considered this and took a sip from his own ale bottle. He felt empowered drinking alcohol; he no longer needed to answer to Surl or Delilah. He could drink as much or as little alcohol as he wished. "You're right when you say the captain won't make you do anything. He is a good man. We are fortunate to have someone like him commanding us."

"He is a good man," Cinch agreed. "Unlike Triffett."

"Why are some men like that?" Glib asked. "We have done nothing to him. And yet he seems to punish us for all his problems in life. We've known him for less than three weeks - what has he got against us?"

"And why doesn't the captain dismiss him?" Cinch added.

Triffett walked into the firelight. "Good evening ladies. May I inquire as to what you are talking about?" His words were said amiably but Glib could feel venom dripping from them.

"We're talking about the captain," Glib said smoothly.

"Ah. Nothing treasonous I hope. Otherwise I may have to report you."

Triffett turned and stalked from the campfire.

Glib and Cinch waited for a moment. Then Glib said, "He has that sort of effect on you. One moment you think he's snoring in his tent, the next he's right in front of you."

"Maybe that's why the captain keeps him around," Cinch mused. "Skilled at surprise. If I had a mercenary company I'd want someone like that."

"But not with that sort of personality."

"Aye."

"The question is," Glib said, "what can we do about him? I'm sure he has it in for us - especially you. I can avoid him mostly, but you have to train with him. Chances are he's going to punish you just as severely every time he teaches you."

"Which is why I must become better at fighting than him," Cinch said grimly.

"That may take a while," Glib warned his friend. "And I don't want you getting hurt. I caused you too much pain when I led you into the desert. I don't want to cause you pain again."

"No matter. I chose to follow you and I faced the consequences. If I were given the choice again, I would still follow you."

Glib reached out and took Cinch's hand. "You're a good friend, Cinch."

"So are you."

Their hands unclasped and they both gazed into the firelight. Glib thought of Triffett and the mercenary company, but eventually his mind wandered to his family in Color Gash. Then he began to think of the stars and the peninsula's two moons. Finally, he slept.

Glib's eyes blinked open. He looked from one side to another. He could see no movement, which was good - he did not want to be caught. His body was stiff from hours of sleep but he tensed and relaxed the muscles in his legs and arms, stretching them without making noise. Other soldiers slept on pallets beside him. The sun was yet to crest the horizon and the camp patrols had been relaxed today. This was the only chance Glib had. He rose from his pallet as quietly as possible and moved to where Cinch was sleeping. Glib shook his friend awake. Cinch sputtered, then stared at Glib. "What is it?" he asked.

Glib placed a finger in front of his lips. Then he indicated that Cinch should follow him. Cinch shrugged and got up, making too much noise for Glib's liking. But Glib wanted Cinch to be with him, and Cinch would be angry if Glib went alone. Though what they were doing was borderline to breaking a military rule Glib did not care. This was something he *needed* to do.

Glib stalked from the tent with Cinch behind him. There were no guards in the darkness. He and Cinch walked through the aisles of the camp and tried to act as though they weren't skulking. Finally they came to the outer edge of the camp and hid behind a tent. There was only one guard stationed on this side of the camp. Glib's plan was laid out perfectly. He walked towards the guard, who raised his crossbow and called a warning. When Glib said nothing the guard's hands began to tense on his weapon. "Take another step and I will shoot you."

Glib stopped. He held up his hands and waited until Cinch was standing beside him. "Glib Baker and Cinch Tutor, sir." Glib did not know if the guard outranked them but thought it might swell his ego if they addressed him as a superior. "We just want to do a pee and have a crap, sir."

"It takes two of you, does it?" the guard countered.

"Have to be careful. This is nomad country. Don't want to get gutted while I'm squatting. There'd be too much of a mess to clean up."

The guard laughed. "We're between Rondolli and Solet now, so 't isn't nomad country. Still, nomads do come here every now and then. Go, but make sure you are back in quarter of an hour."

Glib thanked the guard and passed him. The first part of the plan had worked perfectly. There was nothing else to do but find a suitable distance from the camp and call the werehound. Glib had not called his werehound since the day he was found by the mercenary company and transported to Rondolli. He was not sure if the werehound would come. Maybe it had already moved to a different area of the peninsula and forgotten about Glib completely. Glib could not blame the creature if it had.

Glib wanted to call his werehound every day he traveled with the mercenary company, and now he finally had the chance. But if he called the werehound in view of the mercenary company they would kill it - and him. He needed to call his werehound in secret, and the only person he could trust to be with him was Cinch. Finally he halted on a rise not distant from the camp. He knelt down and called. His voice was low but it carried in the morning air. Beside him Cinch shivered and mentioned the guards at the camp might hear his voice. Glib ignored his friend.

Five minutes passed and the werehound did not come. Glib felt despair overwhelm him. He once shared a bond with the werehound but now that bond was broken. He had neglected the werehound for too long. But he still called. Then, padding out of the west, it came. The werehound's tongue lolled from its mouth and it looked tired, happy. The werehound loped up the small rise and almost bowled Glib over in its enthusiasm. It licked at him and pawed his chest and for the first time ever Glib saw its eyes light up with simple joy. The werehound was with its partner.

Glib stroked the werehound's head and looked at Cinch. His friend did not think the werehound would come - Glib could read Cinch's mind like that - but it had. It had come because Glib called it. Glib knelt on the ground and tried to think of a name for his werehound. *Every creature should have a name*, Glib thought. The sun was lightening the sky and Glib knew he would soon have to leave. He would not endanger his werehound's life to spend a few more moments with it. If Triffett saw

him with the werhound Glib could not bear to think of what might happen. Glib stood and looked at his friend. "We need to think of a name for it," he declared.

"I was thinking that too." The werhound moved to Cinch, who scratched it behind the ear.

"The werhound is liking you more," Glib commented.

"I'm beginning to like *it* more."

"I can't think of a name," Glib said.

"Pity. Neither can I."

"We'll have to leave it for the moment. The sun is rising and I want to be back for breakfast." Glib stroked the werhound's head. "Goodbye. I don't know when I will see you again. Do you understand that?" Glib waited for an indication that the werhound understood but received none. Finally he turned and walked towards the camp.

Cinch walked with him. "Your werhound is becoming more of a friend to me," Cinch commented.

"It is becoming more of a lover to me."

"Yuck."

"Figuratively speaking," Glib said quickly. "You know, I can't live without it."

"Whatever you reckon."

Glib continued walking towards the camp. He said nothing else. He was thinking of the werhound. He was thinking of when he would see the werhound again - he could not wait for that time.

Cinch was relieved. Sup was eaten, digested and deposited. Now all he needed to do was have a drink of water and go to bed. Belching loudly, Cinch admitted he was enjoying mercenary life. He had no one to tell him what to do. He had no one to tell him not to belch when he wanted. Life without his father was wonderful.

Not so for Glib. Cinch was worried about his friend. Though Glib tried to pretend he was enjoying himself it was obvious he wanted something more. The thought often crossed Cinch's mind that Glib wanted to return to his family. But every time Cinch mentioned this Glib denied it vehemently. So if Glib did not want to return to his family what *did* he want? Perhaps he had his eye on the captaincy of the mercenary company. Perhaps he wanted to become a merchant and make hundreds - or hundreds of thousands - gold coins. Cinch did not know with Glib. He was such a moody person that he might change his mind about something one day to the next. But he was still Cinch's friend.

And Cinch could not be responsible for Glib's decisions. He could only be responsible for his own life. He had enough problems with Triffett at the moment without worrying about Glib. Glib was better adept at surviving life than Cinch - Glib could look after himself. Cinch had to find a way to quell Triffett's violence before he was seriously injured. If an inquiry were called many people would support Triffett; not as many would support Cinch.

Something hit Cinch's shin. He stumbled forward and almost fell. Callused hands dragged him into the shadows of a tent. A fist cracked against his chin and Cinch brought up his arms to ward off his assailant. He was punched again, this time in the stomach. Cinch tried to return a punch but his fists struck solid forearms. Another punch cracked against Cinch's chin and he fell. The ground was a mixture of dust and prickly grass. He tasted the dust as his assailant started kicking him. Cinch did not know how long he could last if this continued.

There was the flash of a lantern and a familiar voice. "Glib," Cinch called weakly. His friend was here, somewhere. Cinch felt somebody leap over him and smash into his assailant. Cinch looked up. His assailant was running from Glib, who leapt and tackled his legs. Cinch stood and scrambled to help Glib despite the pain he felt. Glib was smaller than Cinch and had no chance of winning if he tackled the man alone.

It took several moments before everyone disentangled themselves from each other. The lantern had extinguished itself during the melee and the face Cinch looked at was obscure in the shadows. But there was no doubting who it was: Triffett. The sergeant groaned and tried to rise but Glib had his legs pinned down. The sergeant pawed at Cinch, who grabbed his wrists and did not let go. "We are going to the captain," Cinch said.

In the darkness Triffett looked frightened. "Please, no."

"Give me one reason why I should not."

"If the captain learns of what happened he will dismiss me. I will be disgraced. I have nothing apart from Snow's Blood. I have nothing in the Commonlands. I have no friends and my family hates me. If I am dismissed from Snow's Blood I must become a vagabond or beggar." Triffett drifted into silence. "Do you think anyone heard the fight?" he asked finally.

"Tell me why you have something against me."

"I have nothing against you," Triffett answered.

"You're a liar."

Cinch looked at his friend. "Glib, are his legs tensed?"

Glib smiled and said, "No. He's given up."

"Good." Cinch turned back to Triffett. "Now, tell me."

"I followed Snow's Blood for seven months before they let me in their company. The first day I saw Snow's Blood I went to Captain Angler and said I wanted to join. He said go away. I came back three days later and asked again. And he said go away. I did this for seven months before they finally let me in. And by that time I was experienced with weapons, tactics, logistics - everything. Meanwhile you join after two weeks of being nursed back to health by the captain. A person must prove they truly want something before they can have it. That is why I am being harsh with you, Tutor. You must prove that you really want to be a mercenary."

Cinch's grip on the sergeant relaxed. "I don't believe you but I will let you go. The reason you are punishing me is because it was so hard for you to join Snow's Blood. Life doesn't always work out the way you want it. I won't tell the captain, but if you do anything like this again..."

"I won't do anything like this again," Triffett said. "You have my word on it."

"Your word means little, but it is good to hear you say it. And good night."

Cinch stood up, turned and walked from the tent's shadows. Glib followed him.

"You should consider yourself damn lucky that I was nearby," Glib said.

"Why *were* you here?" Cinch asked his friend.

"I was looking for you. You were taking quite a long time at the latrines."

"The runs."

Glib rose his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Camp food," Cinch explained.

"Camp food," Glib agreed.

"Thank you for saving me from Triffett."

"You looked like you needed saving." The pair walked in silence until they

were just outside their tent.

"Do you think the sergeant will try something like that again?" Cinch asked.

"He will try again," Glib said. "People like him always do."

This was more like it. Glib pirouetted on his feet and sent his staff arcing towards the captain's torso. Snow parried, but Glib quickly disengaged his staff and thudded its padded end against the captain's chest. The captain grunted and waved his hands to indicate a temporary truce. "You're quick with the stave," he said.

"I like it," Glib replied.

"But you can't use it in battle. A stave is good at disabling people after half a dozen good blows. In battle you want your person to be disabled after one blow. You don't want him getting up behind you and sending a sword through your back."

Glib shivered at the imagined pain.

"Which is why, though you show extraordinary skill and dexterity with the stave, I'll continue training you with the recurve bow and horse. You are suited to reconnaissance, Glib. You are light and small and know when to keep quiet. You would be excellent as a scout. Shall we train you with the bow today?"

"I need the practice," the young mercenary admitted.

Together Glib and the captain moved to the target area of the camp. Snow's Blood had been on the move for the past three days, and they set up this camp east of Solet only this morning. Snow Angler had an excellent formula for traveling through peaceful territory: march hard for three days, set up camp and rest for two. During this time the mercenaries could train and keep their skills at an optimum level. Glib would not be as good a bowman if he did not practice every time the targets were set up.

Glib was past liking the mercenary captain. He felt his like transmuting into something stronger. Love, in a sense. He loved the captain so much that if he were told to march into the nomad lands and infiltrate every nomad chiefs' tent, he would. His love was borne of loyalty and faith and a desire to please. Glib thought the captain had a special kinship with him, as well. Though he liked Cinch and the other soldiers well enough he reserved most of his training time for Glib. But perhaps this was for a selfish purpose - the captain knew Glib was adept at magic, so maybe he was seeking how to exploit that talent.

Glib and the captain arrived at one of the targets. The captain took a recurve bow that was resting on the ground, nocked an arrow resting beside it and shot at the target. The arrow hit the first ring from the center. "See if you can do better," the captain said as he handed the bow to Glib.

Glib took the bow from him. "Why are we heading east?" This was the first chance he had to ask this question. Before the captain answered he aimed at the target and shot. His arrow hit the third ring from the center.

"Matters between Centar and Outlend are heating up," Snow explained.

"Naturally, if there were a war Snow's Blood will side with Outlend. If Centar invades Outlend they will conduct rigorous sweeps along the nomad lands, robbing most of Snow's Blood's income. And the members of Snow's Blood are primarily Outlendian."

"But they're mercenaries," Glib said.

There was anger in the captain's expression. "They are people. Many of them have wives. Do you think they could stand to see their families raped or enslaved?"

"Centar wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't they?" the captain asked. "War does funny things to people. It has

done funny things to me. Trust no man who is a soldier. Much of the time I don't trust myself."

Glib picked up another arrow and nocked it. The conversation was depressing him. He aimed the arrow and shot. The arrow hit the outer ring of the target. Not bad for someone who had only been practicing for a couple of weeks, the captain said. And he would get better.

Snow drilled Glib harshly in the arts of the bow. When the twelve arrows ran out Snow made Glib fetch them and return by the time he counted to twenty. Glib barely made it, but Snow did not expect Glib to keep under the time limit. The aim of his counting was to express the urgency required of a bowman in battle.

When Snow finally finished the lesson Glib was exhausted. He wanted to have a bath then retire to bed. Two weeks ago the captain introduced something else to Glib's life that annoyed him - watches. Every month he was expected to take the perimeter watch for three days. Glib could not think of anything more boring. Fortunately Glib did not have a watch tonight, but when they came it only added to his tiredness. Before Glib had a bath he would visit Cinch. The pair kept closely together and looked after each other when they could.

Triffett was training Cinch again. Cinch was parrying successfully with his ax, but sometimes one of Triffett's blows still slipped under Cinch's guard. *The sergeant should consider himself fortunate that Cinch did not report him*, Glib thought. Glib moved from the perimeter of the tents until he was standing on the sideline watching Triffett and Cinch. The sergeant had a snarl on his face and was looking for an opening in Cinch's defense.

Cinch lunged forward with the haft of his ax held in both hands. Triffett moved back. Cinch swung his ax-head towards Triffett then reversed the maneuver, showing dexterous skill. Triffett saw the ax coming and moved to parry, then found the haft of his own ax colliding with air. He overbalanced and stumbled forward. Cinch placed his ax gently on the sergeant's back. "You're dead," Glib heard Cinch say. "Shall we start again?"

"Let's." Triffett moved into a ready posture and waited until Cinch did the same. Then he attacked. His speed was blistering - he drove Cinch back as though he were no more than a child playing with his father. His ax haft was a blur, and Glib started to become worried that Triffett might forget this was only a practice session. "This is what you get for beating me," Triffett said, his upper lip curled. Cinch was on the edge of the arena now. "Are you going to forfeit, coward?"

Cinch rallied. He ducked under Triffett's blade and tackled the sergeant's legs. The sergeant was surprised by the move but recovered quickly. He slammed the end of his ax haft against the back of Cinch's shoulder. "Exactly where you got me last bout," Triffett said. Cinch looked dizzy but got up. He stumbled to the left and Glib saw the flat of Sergeant Triffett's ax whack into Cinch's stomach. Cinch knelt on the ground and gagged. "Do you yield?" Triffett asked, then struck him with the flat of his blade again.

Cinch could not reply because of the bile in his mouth. Glib ran to his friend and stood over him. "What are you doing this for?" he asked Triffett. "We could still tell the captain about what happened."

"He would not believe you. It happened over three days ago. The captain would ask why you haven't reported the incident until now."

Glib knelt beside his friend. Cinch was winded and he looked sick, but Glib did not think anything else was wrong with him. But there was no doubt about one thing -

Triffett's training sessions were getting more brutal. Glib did not know if Cinch could withstand further training sessions from the sergeant. It would not be long before he was seriously injured. Glib helped Cinch to his feet. "The training session is over for today."

Triffett clenched his ax tighter. "No it isn't."

"It is. Cinch needs attention to the wounds you gave him. If you dispute my decision you can tell the captain. And I can show the bruises you gave Cinch."

"Captain Angler does the same to you," Triffett said. "On the pummel-horse."

"But he does it without maliciousness."

"We are packing up the camp and moving tomorrow. Cinch must be trained before a major battle arrives. Despite him being pathetic, I do not want to see him die."

Cinch limped away from Triffett's glowering figure. Glib thought about what Triffett said. Snow's Blood would be hired sooner or later. And if they were hired to participate in a major battle Glib did not know if he and Cinch would survive. Glib was still far from perfecting himself with the horse and bow. And Glib's magical knowledge was still erratic - he could barely class himself as a battle mage. Cinch was going very well with the ax, but he had never been in battle and there was a chance he would freeze. And if that happened, he would die. There was truth in Triffett's words. Glib was smart enough to realize that. But surely there was a better way of being trained than what Triffett was doing to Cinch. Glib thought of himself in battle. He would not die as easily as Triffett might think. He was adept with the staff, and he could shoot an arrow. And if all else failed he could quickly prepare remnants and cast a spell. The only problem was that Glib did not know if the spell would work.

The mercenary camp packed up quickly and efficiently. Snow Angler watched his company with pride. Glib and Triffett sat on horses to either side of him. Glib felt uncomfortable being so close to Triffett, but obviously Snow did not think there was anything amiss with the pair. He seemed to hold Triffett in high regard, yet Glib could not work out why. He turned his attention back to the dismantling camp. Snow had told him to watch and learn how the camp was dismantled and Glib knew he would be questioned once the mercenary convoy was on the road. Each tent was made up of smaller sections. They were numbered and rolled into separate bundles. When the camp was ready to be set up again all the mercenaries needed to do was find the correctly numbered bundle and take their tent out. The mercenaries worked industriously. Each had preassigned duties and none slacked in their work - if they did they were severely punished. If they continued to be slack they were dismissed. The columns of men looked like ants from Glib's vantage point.

Glib wondered why Snow had invited him here. Why should he learn the finer points of military strategy? He had only joined Snow's Blood a few weeks ago and the captain was already singling him out for special attention. Perhaps it was because of his knowledge of sorcery. Or perhaps it was because Snow Angler thought of him as a pet. No matter what the reason Glib was determined to be the best he could.

Once the front of the mercenary column started to move Snow smiled and reined his horse towards the column's van. Snow's Blood was not far from Solet yet the captain planned to bypass the city - the company needed to make money before wallowing in decadent pleasures again, as they did in Rondolli. The soldiers did not like that fact but accepted it. The captain would do only what was best for them. While Snow was riding towards the front of the column he spoke to Glib. Though

Glib was having difficulty with his horse he still managed to keep pace with the captain. "Name one of the reasons why the camp took such little time to be packed away."

"Each unit... was already assigned their duties?"

"Yes. And?"

"The tents were numbered."

"Another thing."

Glib could not think of anything else. He told the captain so.

The captain did not scold him. He liked people who admitted they did not know something. "The soldiers were working to a timeframe," Snow said. "I wanted that camp packed away in half an hour. They managed forty minutes."

"But there is no way they could have done it in half an hour," Glib said.

"I know. But men like besting themselves, testing their limits. Undoubtedly some of the men thought they *could* pack the camp away in half an hour. They were disappointed when they couldn't. They will try to go faster next time."

"But surely setting timeframes makes them apt to make mistakes?"

"An astute observation from someone so young," Snow said. "But what is the worst that could go wrong? Getting tent numbers mixed up? A few unfastened pegs falling on a man and injuring him?" Snow paused, then began again. "Now what if they were in enemy territory and needed to pack the camp away in a hurry? What is the worst that can happen? Death. Or torture. I'd rather injure a couple of men in peaceful times than have my whole company die because they're slow. Understand? But always say what you think, Glib. Otherwise I might miss out on information I can use."

Triffett sneered at Glib, then said, "The boy is young. He has a lot to learn. He does not understand that men must be trained hard."

"He understands," the captain said. "He is one of the best minds I have come across. I almost think that you have had military training before, Glib. Am I right?"

"No. But my step-father was in the Outlendian army. And before I left home I visited the guards on the city wall. I liked their stories."

Snow smiled. "You are giving information on yourself. In Rondolli you did not want to say where you came from. Now I know that you came from a city large enough to have a wall, and that your father was a soldier. Be careful, Glib. People can ferret information from anything."

My step-father, Glib thought. And my father too. Eventually the whole mercenary convoy was moving. They traveled throughout the morning and passed Solet early in the afternoon. Snow called a halt every now and then, but pushed his troops hard. They only stopped for a drink of water and a five-minute-rest before continuing. The captain showed no tiredness. He wiped sweat from his brow and drank water while seated in his mount. He ignored patches of shade.

Glib tried to judge the number of Snow's Blood. Four hundred, perhaps. That was a formidable company, large enough to turn the tide of a battle. No wonder Snow and his soldiers had been able to live in such luxury at the Yanchepp Inn. But four hundred people could not have stayed at the Yanchepp Inn. Glib guessed that many of the mercenaries had wives and homes in Rondolli, and that the city was used as a base for Snow's Blood's operations. Otherwise the company's numbers would place too much pressure on the Yanchepp Inn.

It was in the middle of the hot afternoon when Snow, Glib and Triffett saw riders approaching from the east.

"Who are they?" Glib asked.

"Regulars, by the looks," said Triffett, his words showing his disdain.

"Regular what?"

"Soldiers," said the captain. "Outlendian soldiers. Come." He heeled his mount to a canter and headed towards the four galloping riders. Glib and Triffett heeled their mounts and pulled in behind and beside their captain.

"Looks like they're in a hurry," Glib said to Triffett.

"Regulars always are. They think a mob of kids lighting a fire at a *football* match is a threat to state security."

The dust being kicked up by the horses made Glib cough. Finally the two groups were near each other, and both slowed and moved their horses forward. The Outlendian soldiers were different from the mercenaries. Their uniforms were in pristine condition. They wore navy blue trimmed with yellow as opposed to the red of Snow's Blood. Each was clean-shaven and issued with the same style sword and dagger. That was the major way the soldiers differed from Snow's Blood - the soldiers of the mercenary company were given the weapon they were most adept with, not a standard military issue short sword and dagger. All four of the Outlendian soldiers, Glib thought, looked to be of the officer class. His suspicions proved correct.

Snow nodded at the eldest soldier. "Major-General. It has been a long time since we have seen each other."

"Quite," said the major-general, a middle-aged man with a tanned, wrinkled face and a body going to paunch. "It has been a long time since I needed you."

"You need me again?"

"Centar. They have declared war. Their force is massing on the Outlend border."

"What about Tern? I thought Outlend was fighting with Tern."

"Tern has withdrawn its threat for the time being. We now have only Centar to concentrate on."

"Surely the regular Outlendian force can cope with Centar," the captain said. "Unless the other states are providing them with support."

The major-general nodded. "The other states have not committed troops yet, but they are supplying logistical, political and moral support to Centar. They say that Outlend is too big. They say Outlend seeks to stamp its authority on the rest of the states. They say Outlend wants to declare sovereignty over the entire States area."

"They are fools to think that," the captain said.

"But they are still planning to invade Outlend. We must stop them."

"And for that you need help."

"Yes. I know I can rely on Snow's Blood to join the army."

Snow licked his bottom lip. "Wages?"

"Regular army. Regular officer."

"We could make five times that amount ridding nomads from the borders and participating in petty lords' feuds. But if Centar invades we will have no income. We will join."

The major-general nodded towards Glib. "What about him? Is he an officer?"

"No. Not yet. But I am teaching him military strategy."

Glib felt nervous under the major-general's scrutiny. At first he did not realize the man was such a high rank. Now that he knew he remained quiet. The regular army officers on the other side of him remained quiet too, although most gave him an occasional odd look. Glib realized the major-general was one of the men his step-

father may have served under.

"When can you have your men ready?" the major-general asked.

"When do you want them?"

"Immediately. Centar is on the border now. I rode here specifically to find you. However you will need to pick up your convoy's pace."

"We can be at the border within five days," Snow said.

"Intelligence reports suggest that Centar will launch an attack a week from now. Five days is acceptable. However you will not have much time to settle in before you are expected to fight."

"My men are experienced," the captain said. "They can handle it."

"I certainly hope so." With that the major-general turned his horse in the direction he had come. "I must return to the border quickly."

"Do you need extra mounts?" Snow asked.

"No, I have mounts waiting. But I appreciate the offer."

Glib sat thinking on his own mount. So it looked like he would be heading into battle very soon. "Why is Centar acting against Outlend now?" Glib asked the major-general before he could leave. "Why not two months ago? Or why doesn't Outlend wait another two months to attack?"

"One reason is that Centar now has the other states on its side; the other reason is land rights. The valley they are advancing into is part of Centar, but once belonged to Outlend. The valley is very fertile. Mild weather, warm rains. We are taking our own land back."

"How large is the valley?"

"Approximately two miles across, thirty long."

A war for sixty square miles of land, Glib thought. It did not seem worth it. But if Centar took that sixty miles without resistance they would seek to move further into Outlend's territory. The border needed to be protected. The major-general and his officers galloped away, leaving Glib with Captain Angler and Triffett. Both looked grim. "Well," the captain said as he turned to Glib, "looks like you're going to have a look at war first-hand."

Chapter 8 - Battle

Glib was surprised to be in the command tent of Outlend's army. General Sure Armorer, a bulky man with gray hair and a stern expression, stood straight-backed in the tent surveying the scale model of the landscape on the table before him. Snow Angler was there, as well as other officers. Triffett was nowhere to be seen. Glib decided he was the most junior soldier amongst this group - and that made him nervous. What if they asked him a question to which he did not know the answer? But the officers ignored him for the most part. They treated him with respect but did not burden him with the finer points of military detail. It was his duty to observe.

The army pieces laid on the table showed Outlend had a distinct numerical advantage over Centar. Anywhere Glib looked he could only see an Outlendian victory. There were three companies of Centarian soldiers - three and a half thousand men in total. With Snow's Blood, Outlend's soldiers numbered seven and a half thousand. Centar may be getting logistical and moral support from the other states but none were willing to commit troops. This would be an easy victory for Outlend. But the officers present did not treat it as such.

"We could move two companies to the left and right," one officer suggested. "One could hide in the forest here," he pointed his finger, "and another could use these rocks as cover. They could pincer Centar's force while three more companies drive through the center."

"I do not think that is wise," Snow Angler said. "If Centar discovers the maneuver they can destroy two companies individually. That's somewhere above two thousand men."

"We must remember that none of the soldiers - on either side - want to be here," Sure Armorer said. "None of them want to fight their own countrymen. We are from different states, not different nations. Moral, especially amongst Outlend's soldiers, will be low. Moral for the other side will be higher. They believe they are fighting for something worthwhile. Not all Outlendian soldiers believe that."

Snow grimaced. "You can only imagine what Ref and the Commonlands must think, seeing us fall into civil war."

"They know Outlend is the strongest state," another officer said. "They will not attempt to invade."

"But if the other states provide military support they could raise a force half as big again as Outlend's," Snow countered.

"I doubt if Morrow would join the war," the major-general added smoothly. "They have always run much as their own country. And I doubt if the territories to the north would add much substance to Centar's force. The main group of states we have to worry about joining Centar's cause is the Wind Batterededs. If it comes to a war between them and us, it will be atrocious."

"I haven't heard much of Centar's politicking," Snow said, "but the news that they declared war on Outlend came as a surprise. When civil war in The States is spoken of I thought everyone would hear about it. Instead no one told me about the war until Snow's Blood was needed."

"Such is politics," the major-general sighed. "The military and government of Outlend has not permitted much information to get through from the other states. The government wants a calm populace, not a panicked one. If that happens trade will decrease with the other states and other countries too."

"Sounds worrying," Snow remarked.

"We must not worry about what *might* happen," the major-general assured him. "We must worry about what *is* happening. Currently there are three and a half thousand Centarian soldiers on our doorstep. The man who leads them - Rocks Fisher - is a good man. But he does not have the experience nor the strategic genius to best us. We must lure him into a pitched battle. If we throw six thousand of our soldiers against him at once, keeping one and a half thousand in reserve, we can break him. His force will retreat to Spire and we can pursue. Then, once we are in Spire, our diplomats can take over and force Centar's wrist for a treaty."

"A siege on Spire would be costly and time-consuming," Glib piped up.

"I know boy," the major-general said amiably. "But I should not be worrying about that now. All our minds must be focused on the battle ahead. I plan for it to be in two days' time. And I plan for it to be in the midst of the Green Valley. Let Centar's blood spill on the land that is rightfully ours."

Glib felt nervous at the major-general's rhetoric. He was not looking forward to the battle. The only thing which interested him was coming out alive. It would be useful to learn troop movements and formations, but Glib would prefer to be as far away from the battle as possible. As it was he would be in the midst of the carnage. Maybe some last-minute negotiations with Centar would halt the forthcoming battle and save him the nerves. Or maybe they would not.

Glib walked from the tent with Snow when the meeting was over. He was becoming good friends with the captain but felt bad because he was neglecting Cinch. He promised himself he would spend time with his friend before the battle started. *Two days*, he thought. *Two days and then I might end up as carrion for the crows. And my foster-parents will not even know what happened to me.*

"You look pensive," Snow said.

"That's because I am." Glib did not mean for his words to sound curt, but that was the way he spoke them.

Snow did not take offense. "Two days from now will be a big moment for you."

"As long as I survive."

"Don't worry. I've been fighting for almost twenty years and I'm still alive. And I'm sure if you get in trouble, you'll use some of that magic of yours."

The captain still did not understand Glib could not control his magic. When Glib thought of the coming battle he considered summoning his werhound if he were in trouble. But doing that would be fatal to his werhound as well as himself. He would be on his own in the battle, except for Cinch. Cinch would be with him. Glib made a vow to protect Cinch if he could; hopefully Cinch would return the vow.

"You are dismissed," the captain said simply.

Glib walked towards the mercenary camp's tents while Snow headed for the officer's quarters. Though Glib was invited to all the strategic meetings he was in no doubt as to what place he occupied. Snow was grooming him, nothing more. If he died there would be someone else to take his place. When the battle came Glib would be placed amongst the grunts where the fighting was done; Snow and the other higher-ranking officers would be waiting at the back of the force. They would not risk their lives in the front line.

Glib looked at the mercenaries as he walked through the camp. Most were older than him. Most probably had experience in battles. Not major ones like this, but skirmishes and pitched fights with outlaws. Glib did not know how well they would

handle a real battle but thought they would do better than him. Glib considered himself lower than all these mercenaries - they had been in battles before while he had done nothing. But two more days would change that. There were only two more days remaining until he was involved in his first pitched battle. Two more days until he became a man.

It had begun to rain. Despite the steady precipitation campfires were still lit amongst the army camp, flickering and guttering wildly. Glib and Cinch sat at one of these campfires with Leesh and Scarz. It was the night before the battle. None of them denied they were scared.

The Green Valley was much more lush than the terrain Snow's Blood traversed to get here. There was moist woodland and gentle slopes of rich green grass. Sheep usually grazed on these hills, but the coming battle had made all the graziers in the area disappear. There were many freshwater streams in the valley and food was abundant. Even a force as large as Centar's could live off the forest, but unfortunately for Outlend's army supplies had to be brought in.

Glib thought about the positions he and Cinch were assigned today. Both were stationed next to each other in the center of the army. Glib was going to use his bow and a short stabbing sword. When Glib's arrows ran out or the enemy got too close Cinch would get up and use his ax to good effect. Snow seemed pleased with the positions he assigned the two teenagers. Glib was pleased as well - despite being in the center of the melee Glib would rather be with his friend than anyone else. If he were more skilled at riding a horse he would have been placed in a flanking position, but unfortunately his riding lessons were coming along slowly.

Leesh and Scarz spoke little. They were stationed in the mid-left of the Outlendian force, both assigned short swords. They had fought in battle before and though Glib did not think they had experienced one this big, they handled their nerves well. They drunk little alcohol and remained quiet, thinking of tomorrow. Glib admitted he and Cinch were doing the same. "You don't know about my foster-parents, do you Leesh?" Glib asked.

Leesh shook his head.

"Do you want me to tell you about them?"

"If that takes your fancy."

"My mother was a Commonlander. The man who fathered me left her. She died shortly after birth and I was taken in by two of my cousins, who also happened to be married. Their names are Surl and Delilah Baker. I lived in Color Gash and helped them out with their business."

"A bakery I assume," Leesh said.

"Yes."

"So why did you leave at such a young age?"

"Surl was not the kindest of foster-fathers. And..." Glib considered telling Leesh about the werhound, decided against it. He could not be stressed the night before this battle - neither of them could. It was best to make it look as if his running away was none of his fault. "... And some of the kids I knew didn't like me. In fact they once beat Cinch up."

Cinch looked at Glib. Then he said, "There was a bully named Baramny. He was from Ref - you know what Refians are like. I befriended Glib but because he was an orphan and a Commonlander he was not popular amongst the boys. I didn't care about that. So one day Baramny and his friends accused me of liking Glib more than

them. I told Baramny that Glib deserved to be my friend as much as anyone else. That's when he and the others attacked me. The boys who were with Baramny were *my* friends too. After that..."

Glib listened silently to Cinch's tale. He felt nervous hearing Cinch speak about it - Leesh and Scarz would not treat him as a man if they knew the real story of how he came to join Snow's Blood. But so far there was only empathy in the two mercenaries' eyes. Glib did not realize they might have come from difficult backgrounds too.

Despite Glib not telling Cinch *why* Baramny attacked him, his friend had pieced together the truth. It was better this way - Cinch could know that the blows he suffered were because of Glib and nothing else. Glib had to put up with the fact that another boy defended him while he skulked and hid. Once Cinch finished speaking and there was only the crackle of the campfire and the sounds of murmuring men, Glib continued. "After that Cinch and myself left Color Gash. We had nothing there. My step-parents didn't care for me and Cinch's father expected Cinch to be something he was not. We agreed to leave Color Gash together."

"What did you plan to do after you left?" Leesh interrupted quietly.

"We didn't know. We thought to wander until adventure came our way." Glib bridled at the juvenility of that remark. He hoped Leesh would not think less of him.

"Your parents must miss you," Leesh said.

"My *foster*-parents," Glib corrected. "And I doubt if they miss me. Especially Surl." *Would you miss your son if he were caught with a werewolf, Leesh?* "Surl thought nothing of the magic I could perform. He paid my tutor to teach mathematics and accounting. When my tutor - Cinch's father - suggested that I learn remnants and sorcery you can imagine how my foster-father reacted. He is only interested in someone capable to run the bakery when he dies."

"There is merit in that," Leesh mused.

"I am not born to be a baker," Glib insisted. "But I still think about my foster-parents." Glib fell silent. He could not go into a battle without them knowing. Maybe Surl would think him redeemed if he fought for Outlend's cause. "They provided me with food, clothes and shelter for the first fifteen years of my life. I cannot turn my back on them." Glib looked up. "Leesh, if I die tomorrow is it possible that you could travel to Color Gash and tell them what happened? If I am dead I want them to know."

"What are their full names?"

"Surl and Delilah Baker. If you can't find them speak to Abbey Novak or Girl Trader. They will find my foster-parents."

Leesh waved his hands dissuasively. "I haven't said I will do it yet." At Glib's look of alarm Leesh grinned. "But I will. I remember when I first left home. I sent notes and letters to my mother whenever I could. She is the sort of woman who insists on keeping in contact at least once a month."

Cinch spoke up. "If I die, can you do the same? My father may think little of me but he deserves to know if I die. His name is Stern Tutor. If you can't find his hut go to the university and speak there. I am sure you will find someone at the university who knows him."

"I haven't said I will help you yet, either!" Leesh smiled. "But I will. However what if all three of us die? I can't take messages to your parents if I am dead myself."

Scarz's voice rumbled. "I will take them. I know what it is like to be lonely."

"You're the most likely of us to survive," Leesh muttered. "Lucky strong bastard."

"I am no more a man than you," Scarz said. The ex-fighter turned his attention to the younger men at the campfire. "Fight well tomorrow. If you don't you may not see the sunset. I will look after you if I can."

"Well," Leesh declared, "it's time for me to go to bed. There's a big day ahead of us. We should all get our rest." Leesh rose from the campfire and headed into one of the tents.

Glib yawned and rose too. The rain had eased but despite this he was still wet. He did not feel like sitting by one of the campfires in the tents and waiting until he was dry - he felt like sleeping. He moved into his preassigned tent past bunks of sleeping mercenaries. Finally he settled down on his own bunk and took off his shoes. It was not a cold night but he was wet and the air chilled him. He slipped under his scratching blanket and settled his head on the crude pillow made from his sack. He heard Cinch lying down in the bunk adjacent to his. "Ni-ni Cinch."

"Goodnight. Sleep well."

Glib made a conciliatory noise and murmured, "Sweet dreams."

"You too."

Then Glib was only thinking of the battle. He imagined a field of blood, severed limbs and screaming men. Horses whinnied and fell riderless to the ground. Arrows sliced through the air and gouged into flesh. Swords, axes and spears cleaved the enemy. There was the glory of a last stand and the final, triumphant thrill of victory. Glib's view of battle was an idealized one because he had never experienced it before. But he could only think there was victory ahead. Even if that victory meant he would never see Surl, Delilah, Abbey or Girl again.

The two forces were moving into place. Sun broke through the clouds but by the time the battle commenced Glib judged it would be raining again. That may be good for agriculture and grazing but soldiers did not appreciate the risk of slipping at a crucial moment or their bowstrings getting wet. Nearly all soldiers preferred sunny conditions in which to fight. Glib did not care either way - he had never been in battle before so did not know which condition he preferred.

The battlefield was not flat; nowhere in Green Valley was flat. Two small but long hills formed an elongated 'V' where the armies would meet. Glib could only imagine the chaos that would result once the Centarian and Outlendian soldiers were embroiled with each other. He thought the 'V' might hold the blood from both sides like a cup, then shivered and told himself not to let his mind focus on such things. To Glib's left the battlefield flattened and a copse of forest provided a possible ambush point. Further on the forest led to tall cliffs and precipices. To Glib's right was a steep hill with rocks and boulders which seemed out of place in Green Valley. No ambushes would be attempted from there.

Glib stood in the midst of Snow's Blood, his arms locked with his comrades. He was uncomfortable with the manly camaraderie shown by the Snow's Blood mercenaries. Cinch fit more into place - his left arm was wrapped tight around Glib's right and he sang a marching song which was soon taken up by the mercenaries near him. In two hours Glib would be fighting. He wondered what he would feel when that was happening. Fear? Yes. Nerves? Yes. Bravery? No. He was an untested conscript and did not know if he could handle the heat of a battle. He only hoped that he could.

"Glib Baker!" One of the officer's shouted for silence then called his name. "Where is Glib Baker?"

Glib unlinked his arms from Cinch's and held them up. "Here sir!"

"The command tent. Immediately!"

Glib realized it was Captain Snow Angler speaking only when he turned around. Instead of forcing his way back through the mercenaries he skirted the fore and side of the company. He managed a parting touch and word with Cinch before he left. Glib marched to the captain, who was seated on a charger and dressed in military splendor.

"There has been a change of plans. You will no longer fight where I assigned you. Sure Armorer wants the cavalry to make a left flanking movement and hit the Centarian side hard. To do that we need more horsemen."

"You know how poorly skilled I am with a horse, sir. I couldn't-"

"You will not start the battle with a horse. The Outlendian army does not have enough spare mounts to give you one. You will have to capture a Centarian horse or fetch a stray Outlendian mount after the battle commences."

Glib did not think he could do what the captain ordered. However he did not say so. It would show how little discipline and adaptability he had if he tried to avoid his assigned duties. He nodded at the captain and saluted briskly.

Snow Angler unseated his mount. "Come," he said as he walked towards the Outlendian command tent. The major-general was standing outside as were half a dozen senior officers. Snow Angler moved next to the major-general and surveyed the gathering Centarian army. "They're disciplined," he commented.

"Not as disciplined as us."

Glib watched the Centarian army too. It was much easier to see them from here than where Glib had first been stationed. The Centarian force looked more colorful than the Outlendian one - they wore shining black and red. The only Outlendian counterpoint was the carmine uniforms of Snow's Blood. The Centarian army was smaller than Outlend's but looked compact and well disciplined. The soldiers marched in neat ranks and the whole layout of the force was orderly and planned. The commanders of the Centarian army stood behind their men but had no command tent in which to parley. Glib could not see the Centarian commanders' faces from this distance. .

"A flanking movement of one thousand cavalry will hit them hard," the major-general said. "A flanking movement of one and a half to two thousand will break them. We *need* those extra horses."

The officers said nothing. Obviously the discussions on this maneuver were already over and Sure Armorer had decided what he was going to do. Glib stood quietly watching the opposing army and the Outlendian officers. Snow moved to a place his hand behind Glib's back but drew it away as if bitten. "This is one of the most dangerous times for a soldier," he said quietly. "You must be careful not to lose your calm. Keep a level head, but always be fearful. The day you stop fearing is the day you die."

The captain's words flowed straight through Glib. He was concentrating on the battle, not on the advice given him. "Which position should I move to?" he asked.

"Left flank, amongst the archers and cavalry. You will find others like yourself there. They will be searching for mounts as well. Don't get in fights with them over the mounts - it is your and their job to work quickly and efficiently. That is all." Snow moved to discuss something with Sure Armorer without even checking to see if Glib walked away.

The fifteen-year-old was downcast as he walked back to the position newly

assigned him. He would no longer have Cinch by his side. However he was out of the melee area of battle and supposed he should be glad for that. He should tell Cinch that he was assigned a different position but knew there was no time for that - it was paramount he get to his position as quickly as possible. Glib could not rely on Cinch's help and protection now. Instead he needed to rely on his own skill. He was also far away from Leesh and Scarz and wondered what they would think if they didn't see him during the battle. They would probably believe him dead.

It was difficult to see amongst the archers and cavalry and Glib could not even catch sight of the Centarian force. Horses pawed the ground and archers casually checked their bows one last time before the battle began. Not long to go now. Glib thought he must check his recurve bow too. It was strung and the arrows that rested in the quiver on his back were the best he could find. He hoped they would fly true if he used them. In the midst of the cavalry Glib could not judge when he should start shooting his arrows - he had no reference point. He did not want to shoot an arrow into the air only for it to slice into his comrades or to land far from the enemy. He would have to wait until the cavalry in front of him cleared. But what if an officer gave the order to shoot before then?

A drum sounded. It was coming from the Centarian force. Glib froze for a moment. The battle was not supposed to start this early. He was ill-prepared and didn't know what to do. Glib heard the sounds of marching men and the nicker of horses around him. A couple of archers exchanged jokes before they readied their bows. Glib tried to gain control of his shaking limbs. He thought he would have at least some time to prepare for the battle. As it was he would barely be accustomed to his position before the Centarians attacked.

He would not run. He would hold his position and die if need be, because that was his duty. But if he ran when the Centarians attacked no one would notice - he could be away from here and no one would be wiser. The captain would accept that he was missing in, probably dead. Cinch would do the same. His jelly-legs wanted to retreat through the ranks of Outlendian soldiers. He wanted to get away from here before the battle began. Then Glib thought of Surl. Surl was the type to believe Glib would run. Glib would stand and fight just to prove Surl wrong. He would show Surl he wasn't a coward.

"They're coming," an archer beside Glib told him wryly.

Glib gripped his bow. "They'll be going very soon."

The drumbeat was picking up. It boomed across the small valley and the stamp of booted feet on soil was growing louder. Glib's heart raced with fear. The soldier beside him casually nocked an arrow to his bowstring. Glib knew that any moment the battle would begin. There was no turning back. Soon two human tides would be locked against each other. It could take all day to decide the victor.

It began to rain. Glib felt raindrops spattering his face and arms. He was worried about his bowstring getting wet. The drumbeat faltered. The sound of marching Centarian soldiers faltered. Then there was a great cry as they surged forward. Ahead Glib could hear arrows being shot into the air. A man screamed but Glib could not see who it was. The Outlendian cavalry suddenly broke forward and Glib had to crouch with his hands covering his head to avoid being trampled. When he looked up again most of the cavalry were locked in battle with Centar's right flank. An arrow struck the ground between Glib's fingers. It pierced his skin and Glib snatched his hand away. He sucked at the welt the arrow created.

"Come on lad," one of the archers called, "get into it!"

Glib obeyed. He took his bow, nocked an arrow and aimed it in a lazy arc. The arrow landed somewhere amongst the enemy cavalry. Glib did not know if he hit anyone. He ran forward in a crouch, nocked another arrow and shot. He was assigned to find a mount and needed to get into the melee as quickly as possible - if he remained on foot he would be at a disadvantage. He was close to the rear of Outlend's cavalry and shot another arrow before taking a moment to look at the battle's epicenter. The fighting was fiercest there. Men slashed at each other with axes and swords and it looked like the earth was moving. Glib was glad he was not there.

Glib spotted a mounted enemy soldier. He was fighting against an Outlendian cavalryman with his sword flashing up and down. Glib almost tried to stab the horse's underbelly before he realized the horse was what he wanted. He quickly nocked an arrow and shot at the Centarian soldier. The arrow ricocheted off the man's helmet but it was enough to unbalance him; he fell and was trampled by horses' striking hooves.

Glib climbed into the vacant saddle and discovered he was hemmed in. He needed to get out of this confusion and find somewhere he could think as well as fight. But the other soldiers would not let him. Centarians slashed at him and he slashed back. Outlendian soldiers trying to find room for themselves only made his situation worse. Glib swore and tried to guide himself away from the danger. Despite kicking and slashing and spurring his mount viciously with his heels, it was to no avail. He was still as hemmed in as ever.

Glib realized he would get nowhere if he continued to do what he was doing now. He stood on his quivering mount, almost slipped, then leapt onto a Centarian soldier's back. With strength and foul mood he wrested the soldier away from his mount and tossed him to the ground. He maneuvered the mount towards the edge of the tangle and thrust his sword at another Centarian. The tip of Glib's sword glanced off the soldier's helmet but the strike was enough to unbalance him. Glib seized the opportunity.

Sitting on his third mount Glib was very near the edge of the melee. But instead of trying to find other horses he slipped off the steed. The Centarian soldier who first seated the mount was beginning to rise; Glib kicked him in the face. He forced his way towards the edge of the fighting. Finally he was on the edge but realized he still did not have a mount. He saw a Centarian soldier fighting two Outlendians. Calmly nocking his bow Glib shot an arrow at the soldier's chest. The arrow struck true, but the Centarian was wearing scale armor and Glib didn't know if it reached his heart. However the Centarian clutched at the arrow and slid from the saddle as though he were wounded.

Glib climbed onto the mount. Here at the edge of the fighting he could survey the battle more accurately. As he expected Outlend was pushing the Centarians back. Many Centarians were down but Outlend was suffering losses as well. No one would gain a true victory today. Glib shifted his gaze from the epicenter of the battle to other units and scuffles. Near Glib the Outlendian cavalry was doing a superb job of defeating the Centarian horsemen. Glib looked at the copse of forest and saw Outlend not faring so well there. Some fighting had moved into the forest itself and it looked like Centar outnumbered the Outledians, who were fighting desperately. Glib needed to help them.

An arrow struck Glib just above the collarbone. He did not know it until he felt a burning sensation explode near his neck. He looked around dizzily and tried to see who shot him. That was foolish of course - it could have come from any number of directions. The wound was not a life-threatening injury but it hurt and would take

Glib's mind away from fighting. Which would not help when Glib aided his comrades in the forest.

Glib guided his mount towards the forest's darkness. He lay low in the saddle to make as difficult a target as possible. He deserved the arrow betwixt his shoulder and neck. He had been sitting proud and erect surveying the battle without paying attention to anything that might harm him. An experienced soldier would not make such a mistake. Glib was only glad he would live and fight again. But Glib didn't know if he wanted to fight again - after seeing what was happening today he was sure battle glory was a fictitious thing.

The copse of forest was dark. It was perpetual twilight here. The men who fought looked like shadows... phantoms, not real soldiers. This was a place where magic happened. Glib dismissed those whimsical thoughts and cantered his horse towards the nearest Centarian soldier. The screams that echoed throughout the forest were not magical. The clashes of blade on blade were not magic either. If Glib were to survive he needed to forget about such fancy notions.

The soldier Glib fought was physically more capable than him, and more experienced too. He lashed at Glib's mount, striking a blow across the horse's muzzle. The horse screamed in disappreciation and kicked at the Centarian, who was also mounted. That put Glib off-balance and the Centarian leapt at him. Glib was knocked to the ground. Without hesitating Glib rolled on the leaf mold and struck his fist into the Centarian's face. The Centarian reeled with the blow but recovered quickly. Glib had never been in a life or death situation like this before but was quietly confident he could win. He was a scrapper - if he died he would make sure the Centarian did not forget him.

The soldier punched him but Glib rocked his head back and rolled with the blow. Then he butted the Centarian in the head. He got up and ran towards the deeper parts of the forest. The Centarian recovered quickly and ran after him. Glib smiled, then wiped that smile from his face and reminded himself this was not a game. But Glib was at an advantage now - he was quick and agile and could trick the soldier if need be. In the darkness on uneven ground Glib was confident of his abilities. Glib waited for the Centarian to pursue him and thought the soldier was stupid for doing so. If Glib was routed then so what? Shouldn't he go back to the midst of the battle? Glib thought he knew the answer - the man looked like an experienced veteran. One who was not accustomed to being humbled by anyone, let alone a fifteen-year-old sprig.

He took the soldier on the run. He moved out of the soldier's way at the last moment then tackled him while he was off-balance. Surprised at his own strength, he drove the soldier further into the forest. Glib was a tenacious terrier nipping at a bull's heels. He would not let go if the soldier pleaded mercy or if someone shouted for him to stop. The soldier was too experienced to let an opportunity like that slip by. Glib realized he might have to kill this man. Glib hadn't killed anyone in the battle so far - at least he didn't think he had - and was nervous about how he would fare if it became necessary to kill now.

Glib wished he had a dagger or some other small weapon. And his bow - where was his bow? Sometime during the battle he must have dropped it. Glib and the Centarian grappled with each other but neither gained an upper hand. Realizing he might have to fight dirty Glib kned the Centarian in the chest. The Centarian's breath exploded from his lungs and he lay on the ground sucking air. Glib followed up his advantage by cracking his fist into the Centarian's chin.

But the Centarian was not done with yet. He rolled to the side and kned Glib in

the groin. Then he drew a poniard from his belt. Glib moved back and drew his sword. In single combat a small blade was much better than a sword - it could be maneuvered easily but required a skilled person to use it. Once the small blade wielder struck his opponent once that was usually the end of the fight.

The Centarian thrust the poniard at Glib, who held his sword two-handed and smashed the blade away. The Centarian was driving him further into the forest, away from the battle. Outlend may have already won but that mattered little to the pair fighting here. The Centarian thrust his poniard again but this time Glib took a risk. He ducked under the blade, grabbed the Centarian's meaty wrist and dug his fingernails into the man's skin. The Centarian swore and dropped his weapon.

There was a race to get it. Quick and agile, Glib plucked it from the ground first and held it towards the Centarian. Glib's opponent moved to draw his sword but Glib leapt forward and thrust the poniard into the man's exposed neck. Blood bubbled and frothed from the Centarian's throat and he started gasping for air. The soldier clutched at his throat and reached towards Glib. He staggered forward, then fell backward. He was dead.

Glib stood in front of the body. He had done this. He could no longer say he never killed anyone in his life. This man might have a wife and children back in Spire. He might believe what he fought for was right. But now his flame had been snuffed out by Glib's interest in self-preservation. Glib felt ashamed. He stepped back from the body - and fell.

There were many deadfalls and drifts of leaves in the forest, and this was one of them. Glib scabbled for purchase but found none. As he slid down a carpet of leaves he prayed death did not wait at the bottom. He was gaining velocity and knew if he went only a little faster he would at least break a bone. Saplings, branches and rocks struck him. He grunted from the impact with each one. In a way he was glad he was falling - now he was more interested in saving his own life than worrying about the man he just killed.

He did not have to worry about saving his own life for long. He was slipping towards a rock and there was no way he could avoid it. His temple struck the rock and pain exploded in his skull. Though his eyes were closed he saw flashes of red. Then black... Then void.

Cinch stood with his ax in hand. He didn't know where Glib went but was not going to worry about his friend now. His mind should be on the job. As he watched the Centarian force preparing to charge Cinch was confident he would perform well against them. He had his ax - what more did he need? He would not die today.

Cinch saw a man he thought he recognized. He stood in the second row of Outlend's foot soldiers. He looked much like Snow Angler except shorter, more solid. The man held a spear and his lips were set in a grim scowl. He was looking at the Centarians as though they had something personally against him. "Hey," Cinch said jovially, "don't I know you?"

The soldier looked at Cinch. "No. I don't think so."

Cinch saw the soldier swallow and thought he was very nervous for someone who looked like he was experienced at this sort of thing. *All good soldiers get nerves*, Cinch reminded himself. "You're Trix Vulgàr, aren't you? My friend Glib used to visit you when you captained on Color Gash's wall." Cinch paused and thought about what he said. "You're a captain. What are you doing in the second line?"

"I... volunteered. I'd spent too much time as a civilian. I wanted to see some

action again."

"Ah." Cinch waited while the veteran soldier glanced furtively at the men near him. Why was he so nervous? Cinch's head was turned away from the Centarians and he could see the Outlendian officers mounted and talking near the parley tent. He recognized Captain Angler in his splendid carmine uniform. It made Cinch proud he was wearing the same. It made him feel he belonged.

The captain dismounted his horse. He crouched near the ground in obvious pain. Cinch looked at the other soldiers. "What's wrong with Captain Angler?" he said. If Cinch were a more experienced soldier he would not mention the captain's illness at all - it would be a savage blow to moral - but he was only concerned for the captain's welfare. Unfortunately other soldiers began to turn around and murmur to each other. One of the officers taking ill before the battle was not a good sign.

The Centarians charged. Cinch had not taken any notice of the beating drum or the rain. He was caught off-guard, and when the first Centarian soldiers clashed against the Outlendian center he barely managed to parry their slashes and thrusts. The entire Outlendian line bowed in the middle as the Centarians sought the upper hand. Cinch stepped back over fallen soldiers, his ax held ready. Somehow he was quashed back behind Outlendian's first line. In fact he was probably in the third or fourth line of defense now. Outlendian soldiers jostled him on all sides and he did not have enough room to swing his ax. He could do nothing but watch as the people in front of him fought.

Cinch saw Trix Vulgàr. He looked afraid. He jabbed his spear into a soldier's stomach but two more Centarians climbed atop dead bodies to attack him. Trix moved back and tripped. He lay on dead bodies with his face buried in them. His spear lay forgotten by his side. Cinch was not so sure if the officer tripped or fell deliberately.

The Outlendian line was still bowed and if things kept going the way they were Cinch saw no outcome for Outlend except mass slaughter. He stepped forward. With his feet planted between the arm and torso of one body and on the chest of another, Cinch swung his ax in a wide arc. He partially severed the neck of one Centarian but his ax-blade glanced from the armor of two others. "To me!" he yelled as he waded through the Centarians. Two more went down beneath his ax. He grinned and realized how well his first battle was going.

Then the flat of a Centarian sword struck his arm and knocked the ax from his grasp. He stood motionless for a moment. His arm was numb and he was unarmed amongst a swarm of Centarian soldiers. He had to decide what to do *now*. He played dead. He fell and lay on the ground amongst lifeless bodies and let other soldiers fight for him. He tasted the coppery blood of the bodies' deaths and flinched as faces stared vacantly at him. He was in Hell.

Cinch felt ashamed. The only sacrifice he made was allowing his comrades to stand on his back. He killed three Centarians - that should count for something. But Cinch knew that was not an excuse. A true soldier fought until the battle was over. Then Cinch saw Trix Vulgàr doing the same as him, and felt embarrassment and empathy collide. The older man was staring at him wide-eyed and trying not to wince as men stepped over him.

If Glib were here it would be better, because they could operate as a team. Cinch hoped his friend was well and that they would see each other after the battle. The only indication Cinch had of how the battle was progressing was that in this area the Outlendians were driving Centar back. Apart from that he didn't know anything. Except that someone was shouting above the noise of battle, "The captain is ill.

Captain Angler is ill!" Cinch hoped the dire news would not be bad enough to allow Centar to gain the upper hand again.

Birds chirped and sang. There was a gentle morning breeze. All around Glib was peace. Unfortunately Glib did not know that yet. His eyes were closed and there was an abominable throbbing in his head. He felt along his scalp until he reached a lump the size of a large piece of coal. Glib was lying in the sun on cool grass. He blinked open his eyes and tried not to let the sun pound them too severely. The grass was mint green.

Glib considered getting up but decided to stay here for a while. Judging by the sun's position he had been here for almost a day so another few minutes would not hurt. The singing birds and droning insects were a nuisance - they annoyed Glib no end. He was in some kind of clearing. The trees surrounding the clearing were green and healthy. Glib wondered why the grass here was not overgrown but decided there were probably enough grazing animals - cavies, deer and sheep - to keep everything nicely trimmed.

He remembered yesterday's battle. It would most likely be over by now. He wondered who won and how Cinch fared. He also wondered if everyone thought him dead. Enough of that. It shouldn't take that long to return to the battlefield and the Outlendian camp. Even if the Outlendian force traveled throughout the night Glib was sure he could catch them up.

Time to rise. Glib gained his legs stiffly. He cursed his aching back then reprimanded himself for doing so. Centarian soldiers might be listening for Outlendians hiding in the forest. He yawned and thought. His first battle was over and he did not feel like a man. So much for that belief. He was about to leave the clearing when five men stepped into it. There was no use kidding himself - Glib knew he could not defeat them all. If they wanted him to die he would. But not after he gave as good as he got.

The thieves appeared to be renegade Centarian soldiers. Each wore a scruffy Centarian uniform and each had not shaved for at least a week. Glib considered telling them he did not have anything of value but thought they would kill him anyway. His sword was worth something: that was the only excuse they needed..

"Good day to you," one of the soldiers-cum-thieves said. "You are far from your camp."

"How did the battle go?" Glib asked. "Who won?"

"Outlend. Myself and my companions watched from a safe distance."

"Of course you didn't participate in the battle yourself."

"Oh no," the man said. "We knew Outlend would beat us before we even entered Green Valley. That's why we deserted. Looks like our prediction proved true." He smiled. "Who knows? I might even start a career as a prophet. Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"Depends on what you intend to do to me," Glib answered easily.

The man nodded at Glib's sword. "Unbuckle that. Then we may let you go."

"If I unbuckle my sword you will kill me," Glib said.

"There are five of us and one of you. There is no possible way you can beat us all. If you were some hero from another age - like Snow Angler - you could, but by the looks of it you haven't even shaved before. So give me and my friends your sword."

"No."

"Then we will have to take it from you." Without pause the thief drew a long knife

and danced towards Glib. He lashed at Glib's chest but the young soldier moved back and drew his sword in one fluid movement. There were no thieves behind him and he retreated so that his back was firm against a tree. The thief snarled and lashed at him again. His companions joined him.

"Why are you doing this?" Glib asked urgently. "True men do not-"

"We are doing this to survive," one of the thieves cut Glib off.

Three thieves darted towards him at the same time, each with a long knife in their grasp. Glib knew he could not parry them all but slashed his sword in a wide arc. The thieves fell back but as Glib was recovering dashed towards him again. Glib knew it would be impossible for him to regain control of his sword before they gutted him.

Then the werehound was amongst them. It snarled and mauled the arm of one of Glib's attackers. The man screamed, dropped his knife and tried to wrench his arm away from the werehound's salivating maw. Glib followed up on his advantage. He murmured the words of a spell, imaging different remnants in his mind. Then he pointed at the man who first attacked him. Fire burst from Glib's finger and struck the man in the chest; Glib's attacker screamed and batted ineffectively at the flames. He fell and rolled on the grass, trying to extinguish his blazing jerkin.

The werehound was satisfied that his first opponent was maimed so he leapt on two others. That left Glib with only one man to contend with. Glib felt his confidence growing as he and the man circled each other, his sword and the man's knife poised. Glib had his skill as a fighter, his magic - and *his* werehound. The man Glib faced would not be able to stand up to that.

The man rushed towards him and Glib stepped to meet his blow. Unfortunately the blow was not timed well - Glib's sword was still in midair when the man's rusty knife scraped against his chest. It felt as though his skin were being peeled off. Glib gritted his teeth, scrunched up his face and tried not to shout while keeping a close eye on his opponent. They were circling each other again.

Glib's werehound took the man from behind. Its massive front paws slammed into the man's back and knocked him to the ground. Without apparent mercy the werehound's muzzle dipped and its teeth bit deep into the man's neck. The werehound's head rose with flesh and blood dripping from it. Glib watched in shock at what the werehound had done. The pain from the wound on his side was intense but that was a secondary consideration now.

Glib's werehound had killed a man. Just like Glib killed men. Glib felt repulsed at the werehound's viciousness but then looked at the situation from an objective point of view. Glib had killed men today; so had the werehound. What was the difference? It was that the werehound killed without discrimination or thought - it did what it wanted. Why should Glib be disgusted by that? It had saved his life. It had protected him. *Protector*. The name rang through Glib's mind. He would name the werehound Protector.

Glib looked at the blood-spattered clearing a moment longer. The peace and tranquillity of a few minutes ago had been shattered. Glib did not know how long it would take for the clearing to return to its sleepy reverie. Then Glib turned and began to walk away.

But there was someone else in the clearing - a woman. Glib sensed her before he saw her. When he looked up the woman was standing in the shadows near the far edge of the clearing. She was dressed entirely in black. She was watching Glib but Glib could not see her face, which was concealed by a cowl. She was a short woman.

Protector did not like her so close. The hairs on his back were risen and he growled deep in his throat. He stood between Glib and the woman, and Glib was sure

that if she tried to approach Protector would spring to his defense. Glib lifted a hand towards Protector as though that would calm him (Glib had come to think of the werehound as a male). "Protector, now. She may be a friend."

"Or I may be an enemy," the woman answered. "That is for you to decide."

"I would like to know who you are," Glib countered, keeping himself on a level footing with the woman.

"I think it would be wiser if I asked *you* that question." The woman nodded at the bodies scattered around the clearing. "You have just killed or injured five trained soldiers with the help of a werehound and magic. I thought you only knew sorcery, Glib."

"I would like to know who you are," Glib repeated. *Don't let her stray from the topic. Find out her name.*

"I do not have to tell you who I am, but I will." The woman hunkered down on a tree stump. "It may make things easier in the future. Are you ready to know who I am, Glib?"

Glib nodded. "Yes."

"I am Prudence, abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf."

Chapter 9 - Goal

After the abbess's announcement the silence in the clearing was palpable. Glib stood rock-still while he watched the old woman. He did know her exact age because of the cowl, but her voice was harsh and gravelly and her shoulders were hunched. She sighed and murmured several words. A gnarled staff appeared in her hand. "We will need this soon," she said. When she saw Glib was not becoming any less tense she laughed. "I am your friend. I will not hurt you. Nor your werehound. You can send him away now, if you want to."

Glib flicked his head at Protector. He didn't need words to say the werehound could leave. Protector was thankful for the allowance. He snuffed the ground and wandered into the forest, leaving Glib and the woman alone. "I have never had much

to do with the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf," Glib admitted. "I know little of your order."

"We Sisters prefer to keep it that way. Even young Grace - and she would be considered the most worldly sister in the Morrowian chapter."

"Were you watching while Protector and myself fought?" Glib asked.

"Because if you were, you could have helped us."

"Me? An old woman? A hag? Expected to defend a strapping young boy and his majestic werehound? I think not."

"The Sisterhood knows magic. You could have stopped the fight without any bloodshed."

"Mayhap that you're right. But the scuffle is over and we are both standing here alive. So let's not worry about it."

"What is a Sister - an abbess - of Morrow doing here on the border of Outlend and Centar? There was a battle yesterday. It is not a safe place for you."

"I just wanted to visit a friend," the abbess said. "Come." The woman rose and with the aid of her staff began to hobble from the clearing. She seemed to move with difficulty but when Glib offered help she waved it away. "Can't be a burden to others in my old age," she said. "Must do these things for myself." They left the clearing and plunged into the darkness of the forest. "So, are you proud of your kill yesterday?"

"What kill?"

"You know. The Centarian you stabbed in the throat."

The abbess's blunt words shocked Glib. "I don't know what you are talking about," Glib said. "You must be confused..." He faltered then said, "How did you know?"

"I saw the body on my trip here. I just assumed you were responsible. Your pause after I mentioned it only confirmed my belief." The old woman did not speak for a matter of seconds. Then: "How did the kill go?"

"I felt ashamed when I killed him."

"Would that more people felt the same. Do you know why you felt ashamed, Glib?"

"Because I took his life."

"Because you snuffed out his magic. His aura." When the abbess saw that Glib was about to protest she continued. "Men have auras too. But they aren't as visible as a woman's. When a woman gives birth and gains her aura she is aware of what she has created. She is aware she has added to the magic of the world. She becomes linked to the world, you might say. And with this heightened awareness she gains her aura. Am I confusing you?"

"Yes, a little."

"Good. A man who admits he can't understand something is a wise man indeed. If I were talking to a woman it would be easier." The abbess laughed. "Yes, men have auras too, Glib. So do animals and plants. Every living being has magic within itself. Living beings are sentient creatures - and would not be magical if they were inanimate."

The pair was traversing up a hill now. The forest was thinning and the plants that grew here looked more stunted and hardy than those that grew further down the slope. The canopy of the forest was not as thick, either, and a cold sun shone onto Glib and the abbess.

"Sorcery, on the other hand, is different," the woman continued as if there had

not been a pause in their conversation. "Sorcery requires the use of inanimate objects to create magic. You are one of the few people who can combine sorcery and magic. I saw it in the clearing - that was magic. Though you used sorcery as a base by thinking of remnants, you still created magic because you did not have those remnants on hand."

"Why have you come to tell me this?" Glib asked. "I'm only fifteen years old. You're wasting your time."

"I will show you why I have come." The pair reached a rocky precipice. Though the grass extended to the edge of the cliff, below that were stones and crags. Glib could see land for miles. It was windy here, the breeze plastering his hair to his face. Prudence's black robes flapped and Glib tried not to feel sick. This was like standing on the city wall in Color Gash overlooking the plains - except tenfold that excitement and height. The trip here had been hard. Glib was panting and the air was a little thinner than what it would be at sea level. Glib looked at the woman. Her breathing wasn't labored and she appeared sprightly and alert.

"The fertile plains of Outlend." Prudence gazed over the land spread below. "I can understand why the people who migrated to Outlend did so. You have never been in Morrow, Glib. In Morrow there are mountains and snow, a few villages and little else. Look at this place. It is magnificent."

"I feel like a king surveying his kingdom," Glib said. In fact Glib felt even more than a king - he felt like a god. This is what the Outlendian god must feel like when he looked over the entire vista of Outlend. "It is a beautiful view," Glib told the abbess, "but I see no reason why you have taken me here."

"Shall we fly?" The woman held out her hand.

Glib reeled back. If the abbess thought she and Glib could fly she was insane. Maybe she was looking to kill Glib. It was a paranoid thought but Glib could think of no other reason why the abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf would visit him. She was most likely seeking to manipulate a series of events that would start with Glib's death. The Sisterhood's plans always had an ulterior motive.

"You are not going to die," Prudence assured him. "Use sorcery."

"Only if we stand five yards away from the edge," Glib answered. He was not going to take any chances with this woman.

"We can stand fifty yards away if you like. It doesn't bother me. Now, are you going to take my hand or not?"

Glib's sweaty palm clasped Prudence's soft and dry one. He felt a jolt of strength go through his body, but nothing else happened. He and Prudence stood together near the edge of the precipice staring at the plains of Outlend.

"Close your eyes," the abbess told him..

Glib did so. Red fireballs burst in front of his vision and Glib realized the vulnerability of his action. The abbess could push him off the precipice at any time.

"Relax. You're not going to fly if you are frightened. Think of weightlessness. Imagine remnants associated with flying and think of those."

Glib thought about remnants, although he did not tell Prudence the only spells associated with flying he knew were those that caused a person to float for only a short time. He wanted to show Prudence he was just as powerful as her. Prudence had told Glib he melded sorcery and magic together - he did not want to let her down by revealing that he couldn't fly. Glib relaxed his arms and shoulders and allowed the muscles in his body to loosen. He thought of the remnants of flying: feathers; wind

trapped in a bottle; sails. He thought of lightness and spreading his weight across the air much the same as a person spreads his weight across water to float. Glib started feeling a little lighter.

His stomach was queasy and he blinked open his eyes. He was floating half a yard above the ground, Prudence's hand still clasped in his own. Despite an initial fear he then felt exhilarated. So far he was matching the old abbess.

"You have yet to accomplish the most difficult task," the abbess said. "You are floating above land - that is easy. But you must still fly over the mount's precipice and into the air. Fear will grip you then."

"I can only try," Glib said matter-of-factly.

"You must have faith." Prudence pulled Glib forward so that they were slowly heading towards the precipice. "*Believe* that you will fly. I must show you many things and the only way I can do it is for you to fly. *Believe*."

Prudence and Glib went over the precipice hand-in-hand. Glib felt himself falling slowly at first, like a feather. Fear thudded in Glib's heart and he almost lost his confidence. To do that would be to fall hundreds of yards and die - but Glib was not done with yet. He regained his self-assurance and began hovering near Prudence. He and the old abbess still held hands, though. "This is the best and most terrifying experience in my life," he told the abbess.

"Just as long as it isn't the *last* experience of your life."

"It's like learning to walk... except in the air."

"Mmm. Now I must show why I brought you here. Come, fly." The abbess and Glib moved further into the air, and Glib watched the old woman with awe. She seemed more adept here in the air than she did on land. "Outland is to our left," Prudence said, "and Centar is to our right. We are flying north." The pair flew in silence for a while before the abbess continued her commentary. "See Centar? Magnificent green land. Gently sloping hills rich in pickings for livestock and crops."

Glib watched Centar. It was a magnificent state, judging by what he saw of it. He and the abbess were traveling at incredible speed now and Glib thought his skill at flying was not all his doing. Flying was a difficult talent and Glib had been quite sick when he discovered himself floating. That was forgotten as he and the abbess traveled north and the landscape changed. Whereas in Centar the land had been plush green, here much of it was barren and hilly. *The territories*, Glib thought. Population in the territories was sparse and most of the people who inhabited the rocky terrain made their living either from animal trapping or mining the rich minerals, gems and ores that could be found in the sides of the territories' hills.

"I guess you want me to say why I am showing you this," the abbess broke into Glib's thoughts. "With your combination of sorcery and magic you could visit all these places. You could be one of the most famous sorcerers ever."

"If I don't want to?" Glib was wise enough to know what the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf was like - they always worked to their own ends. They might offer such temptations as these then demand he give something in return. The best path was to be totally mistrustful of the Sisterhood.

The abbess answered Glib's question. "If you don't want to you will remain a soldier in Snow's Blood. And within a year you will die." Glib opened his mouth to protest but the abbess cut him off. "I have scried it."

The woman's words were harsh and Glib attacked them every way he could. Prudence had basically prophesied that if he did not acquiesce to the Sisterhood's demands his life would be forfeit. What if he didn't want to become a famous

sorcerer? The abbess wasn't giving him a choice in the matter. Glib clutched the abbess's hand tightly but it was not out of kinship. Let the woman know Glib disapproved of her methods *and* her position.

"Come," she said, "I will show you something that may interest you more."

Glib and the abbess turned and swooped south, overtracking where they had already been. They passed Centar and flew along the border of the Wind Battered. Though it was cold here, the Wind Battered states had fertile soil and produced fine sheep and grew fine crops. Not to mention the exquisite wine and cloth they made. It was these states who would most likely commit troops to Centar in the event of a major conflict with Outlend. Fortunately they had not done so thus far.

They passed the Wind Battered and crossed over the mountains of Morrow. Glib felt the abbess slow a little as she passed over her home state. "I have not been to the abbey in three months," Prudence said to herself more than Glib. "I wonder if Grace is handling her duties well." Glib saw a large building which may have been an abbey, but then Prudence snatched him away and continued flying.

Glib expected them to alight somewhere in Morrow but they passed over the mountainous state completely. They passed over the eskimo lands and saw villages of animal skin huts, but little else. Finally Glib and the abbess reached a polar cap. It would have been freezing cold but at some stage Prudence had enwrapped them in a warm cocoon. It was growing dark too. The polar cap was not a mass of solid ice - it was a series of ice islands breaking away then reforming with its fellows. In the middle of the polar cap was a small land bridge. Four times a day the tide flooded over the causeway, cutting off communication between the peninsula and the lands beyond. Four times a day the tide receded and land was revealed for a couple of hours. People had to traverse almost two miles in those couple of hours if they wanted to cross to the other mass of land. "You know what is beyond," Prudence said.

"The barbaran lands."

"Shall I show you?"

"Lead ahead."

The abbess did so. She guided Glib above the flooded causeway and into the barbaran lands. There was tundra and then cold plains. It was night-time now. Glib and the abbess reached one of the barbaran's tent cities. Glib was amazed at how large it was. The city seemed to fill the whole plain. The only thing which stopped the tents spreading further was a mountain range that boxed the tents in and kept them compact. Campfires guttered in the cold night air. Glib could not see individual people from here but didn't need to - he knew that the population of this city was huge.

"There are many more of these," the abbess said. "The barbarans breed prolifically. Their land is three times as big as the peninsula, yet there is so many of them they still need to expand. And they are looking towards the peninsula. They are looking towards the Commonlands, the States and Ref. All they need to do is get past the eskimo lands and the mountains of Morrow. It may take a long time but eventually they will succeed. They are like locusts; if their army loses a thousand men their commanders don't care. What may frighten you more, Glib, is that they will kill or enslave the citizens of our free nations. They did it to a land east of their own. I know because I witnessed that atrocity myself."

"I thought the Dragon's Tail and beyond was controlled entirely by the barbarans," Glib said.

"Not until twenty years ago. A young man wrested control of one of the large barbaran tribes at that time. He seeks only conquest."

"What about the barbarans who don't want to fight? Why don't they stop him?"

"Because if they attempt to soldiers kill them. The soldiers are on too good a plain to give up - they gain riches, fame and security from their conquests. And women."

"It doesn't sound like security if you are fighting all the time."

"You must look at it from their perspective. But I suspect what I tell you now will interest you more than anything I have just said. I have told you the barbarans will eventually invade the peninsula. The peninsula needs strong men to repel that invasion. Men like you.."

"I am not a man," Glib defeated her. "I am a boy."

"By the time they invade you will be a man. The reason I want you to pursue your sorcery studies is for the sake of all the peninsula. What say you, Glib Baker?"

"You want me, a fifteen-year-old boy, to help protect the whole of the peninsula from a horde intent on destroying us all? Sounds like something I'd read in one of the States' histories."

"It will happen again."

"Sorcery *does* help me," Glib mused. "But you must understand why I cannot decide. I am only young. I have much to do in my life. But I will think hard about what you have said."

"Think fast," the abbess suggested. "It takes a long time to master the arts of sorcery and magic. Though the barbarans will not come for many years, you will still be cutting time short if you begin lessons now."

"Who will teach me?" Glib asked.

"Yourself. You are the greatest teacher you have." The abbess turned in the air and hovered facing the polar cap. "Shall we return to Green Valley? You may be flying without effort but that is only because I am supporting both of us. My old body tires."

The abbess and Glib returned over the cold plains and tundra of the barbaran lands. Everything was dark yet Glib could see the bright ice islands of the polar cap. The tide over the causeway had receded and a section of land could be seen linking the two expanses. Glib thought about what it would be like if barbarans crossed that causeway. They would sweep into the eskimo lands and murder all they came across. Then they would face the mountains of Morrow but that would only be a temporary obstacle. The mountains were treacherous and the paths that could be found there accommodated men only in single file, but once the barbarans found several ways through they could easily take over the Morrowian villages.

And then they would invade Ref and the Wind Batteredes. Glib watched the sleeping kingdom and the Wind Battered states as he and Prudence flew over them. It was night here as well. Ref was a proud kingdom with a strong army but Glib doubted if it could withstand an onslaught from the barbarans. Ref, the Commonlands and Outlend would need to be united if the peninsula even stood a chance of surviving. But the abbess said the barbarans would not come for years. Why worry about repelling an invasion now? There was plenty of time to prepare.

Prudence's suggestion that Glib teach himself sorcery and magic was different. Glib was interested in learning the magical arts - and didn't *need* to use his talents to defend the peninsula. He could use his talents to help the poor and heal people. But Glib's mentality wasn't that way inclined. He believed people should help themselves. What would he do when he became proficient at both sorcery and magic? Who would benefit from his skills?

Glib and Prudence arrived at the edge of the precipice in the Green Valley. Prudence slumped when her feet touched soil and it was all she could do to stop herself falling. Glib watched her with concern. The abbess was obviously not as strong as Glib thought. And despite her position in the Sisterhood and her skill at flying she was still an old woman. She needed to be looked after. "You can share camp with me tonight," Glib said. "If you want."

Prudence waved Glib's offer away. "No. I must not be a burden on others. I will find my way myself." Prudence straightened herself and looked at the young man opposite her. "Remember, Glib, think on what I have said."

When the old woman disappeared into the forest Glib was happy to be left alone. The abbess had told him too much for him to digest it all immediately. Even the abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf thought he was going to become a powerful sorcerer-wizard. There was merit in that, and Glib felt proud. His life might yet turn out to be more than he expected it.

But first Glib needed to catch up with Snow's Blood. He turned to leave the clearing, but then looked at the night-time sky, the stars and two moons. Ever since the peninsula was created wizards and sorcerers, alchemists and astronomers had dreams of going to those celestial realms. But no one had ever succeeded. No one Glib knew, anyway. *Who knows?* Glib thought to himself. *Maybe I will be the first.*

Cinch was angry. He didn't know where his best friend was - what happened to him during the battle - and that was worrying. But now he had to contend with Triffett taking command of the mercenary company. *Triffett*. The sergeant didn't know what he was doing. Triffett ruled with an iron fist and an iron glove, letting no one break through his defenses. That was not a good thing. His discipline far exceeded Snow Angler's. Triffett thought his rigid inflexibility would make a more cohesive fighting unit but he was wrong, which he would realize when he actually walked amongst the men. Cinch wished Snow Angler was still in charge.

But he wasn't, and did not look like resuming the captain's position for quite a while. The captain had been sick these past five days. Cinch had mostly seen him clenched over, moaning to himself or demanding a stop to visit the toilet. The sickness had begun moments before the battle with Centar and was still affecting him. Outlend's commanders suspected poison. Snow Angler was an integral part of Outlend's defense and disabling him was almost like disabling his entire company.

Now Triffett was in charge and that made everyone miserable. Trix Vulgàr had joined Snow's Blood after the battle. He had survived, but barely - his face was covered in bruises and cuts where soldiers and horses had trampled over him. Cinch thought Trix Vulgàr would make a good substitute captain and had even suggested it at a meeting where Snow Angler and Triffett were both present. The captain had been too sick to comment; Triffett had ridiculed Cinch's idea from the outset, claiming that Trix Vulgàr only knew city guard matters and should leave real fighting to real men.

Triffett punched Cinch in the face. "That's for not paying attention. Ever since the battle you haven't been training well. What's wrong?"

"Glib," Cinch murmured. "I wonder where he is. If he survived."

"A good soldier does not think about those things when he is sparring. He concentrates on the fight."

Cinch scowled at the stand-in captain and rushed him. Triffett moved to the side and tripped the younger man easily, then sent his fist thudding into Cinch's stomach. Cinch gagged and almost lost his morning's breakfast.

"You're not concentrating," Triffett said matter-of-factly.

"That's because I *can't* concentrate," Cinch snapped.

"Be careful," Sergeant Triffett told him, "or you may be called up for insubordination. I'm sure Captain Angler would not agree with you speaking like that to your ranking officers."

"You're not an officer," Cinch whispered so that Triffett could just hear.

It sent the sergeant into a frenzy. Triffett dashed forward before Cinch could raise hands to defend himself. Triffett punched Cinch's stomach then cracked his other fist against Cinch's skull. The blow sent Cinch reeling. Triffett ran after his opponent and tripped him. Cinch's head hit the ground and Triffett kicked him without respite. Cinch curled into a ball to defend himself but his parries were feeble at best. The sergeant continued kicking him.

Then stopped. "That was for telling me I'm not an officer," Triffett said. "Make sure you don't mention it again."

Cinch considered retaliating verbally but thought about the consequences of that. Triffett would not hesitate to beat him again. Triffett was that sort of person - the one who could only win, and when he didn't win blamed the nearest person for his own mistakes. *Just stay on the ground in a ball and maybe he'll leave you alone*, Cinch thought to himself.

"Get up," the sergeant said.

"I... don't know if I can." It was a struggle for Cinch to say even those few words.

"A real soldier gets up - unless he is dead. It's no use lying on the ground."

Fear pinched Cinch when he thought that maybe the sergeant had seen him the day of the battle. Outlend had won, decimating the Centarian force, but it was no thanks to Cinch. He had lain on the ground while other people fought for him. Trix Vulgàr had witnessed his cowardice - but the captain was doing the same thing. If Triffett had caught sight of him, however...

"Your training session is over for today," Triffett said. "You may leave."

Cinch left thankfully. He staggered to his feet and tried not to fall once he was erect. He would not give the sergeant the pleasure. He stumbled towards the tents of the camp without looking back, knowing the sergeant would have a grin on his face. Snow's Blood had returned to the plains of Outlend but was still close to Centar's border in case tensions rose again. However if Snow's Blood was called up for another battle Triffett would be in the lead. The consequences of the sergeant's leadership might be devastating.

Cinch thought about ways he could disable Triffett for a while, but none were very good. All he needed to do was find something that would keep Triffett away from the captaincy until the tensions with Centar were over. Once that happened Cinch would put up with Triffett for a while, Snow Angler would eventually resume command and everything would be put to rights. Cinch thought of only one idea that might truly work. And it was idea which appealed to him. *He* could take control of Snow's Blood. He could take them into a major battle and rely on the company's officers for directions and recommendations. It was an idea which truly appealed to Cinch, one that might make him a hero - or least well-known. One that might make his father sit up and pay him some respect.

The tracking of Snow's Blood was going well. Glib was sure he was gaining on them and was confident that within a few weeks he would be back with his companions and

most importantly, back with Cinch. Until then Glib had decided to concentrate on learning sorcery and magic, like the abbess said. He had Protector with him most of the time and that seemed to help his magical ability, probably because the werehound was from another plane. Or perhaps it was because Glib felt safer when Protector was there to watch over him.

It was dusk and Glib's traveling was finished for the day. It was best to rest at night instead of continuing to travel and getting waylaid by brigands. Glib sheltered in the overhang of a large boulder. A campfire crackled a couple of yards from his feet. Glib took solace in the warmth of the campfire, the flames' brightness and the reassuring noise it made. With the campfire before him and Protector next to him he felt almost cozy. Even though he wanted to catch up with Snow's Blood he was glad of this time alone - he wanted to learn as much sorcery as possible before he was assailed with the problems of a mercenary company.

This was the best place to learn sorcery and magic. Alone, with no disturbances, far away from any cities and towns. Protector was here but Glib wasn't worried about the werehound - it knew when to keep quiet. Mostly Glib thought about sorcery and magic and what he should be learning first. The abbess said he had talent with both skills, but Glib thought it might be better if he concentrated on only one skill for a start. Sorcery was his stronger talent, so maybe he should focus on that.

But Glib could not resist trying a combination of both. The campfire crackled and hissed and Glib thought heat and flame might be a good place to start his training. He looked at a section of earth a yard away from the campfire. The fire's light barely illuminated the place, but there were dry leaves on the ground. Glib closed his eyes and imagined the fire jumping to those leaves. The branches of the fire were remnants in his mind; *a combination of both skills*. Glib opened his eyes.

Nothing had happened. Glib looked at the cold patch of ground and tried to decide if he'd done anything wrong. Then Glib looked at Protector. The werehound cocked his head to one side and regarded Glib inquisitively. Glib shrugged and went back to staring at the campfire. If he were to combine the talents of sorcery and magic he still had a long way to go.

This town barely rated a mention on any of Outlend's maps. It was situated near the western border of Tern, twenty miles from the city of Intersect. The town's name was Wayward. Glib trudged into the town with a satchel over his shoulder and dust covering his face. Protector had retreated now that Glib was entering an inhabited area. The town looked like it had a population of about five hundred and though it was not large, it was still up-to-date with the latest news and fashions. Intersect, its larger neighbor, was situated on the hub where the borders of Tern, Centar and Outlend met.

Wayward had two taverns. Glib chose to visit the one nearest him. The buildings along the main street were mostly timber, although there was an occasional structure made of wattle and daub. The main street was dust. Glib walked past tethered horses and into the tavern. He had been traveling for five weeks and though he was exhausted he still had not managed to catch up with Snow's Blood. Protector found Glib a dead body a few weeks back and the man's pockets had been rife with coins (that was lucky). Glib tried not to think that Protector may have killed him.

Glib approached one of the maids behind the bar. "Good afternoon. I'll have an ale. Watered." Despite his coins Glib thought he could not be lax with money - watered ale would have to do.

The barmaid moved to a keg and turned its tap. Glib watched her as she filled his mug. She was attractive, but in a homey sort of way - her nose was slightly too large and her face was covered with several pockmarks. Glib shook his head and thanked the maid when she turned to serve his drink.

"Twenty chinks," the barmaid told him.

Glib paid the coins then looked for a table. He did not wish to sit at the bar. The tavern was crowded and Glib found it difficult to get a seat. Finally he had to settle on a table already occupied by three other men but with two seats spare. He nodded a greeting at the men, then sat down and ignored them completely. He took a long sip of his ale. He had missed this refreshing liquid.

Glib was mentally more than physically aware of the young boy slowly unhooking his purse from his belt. Glib judged him to be about eleven or twelve years of age. He looked down at the boy but showed no sign he was aware of what the boy was doing. But Glib needed the money and would not let the boy escape with his entire savings. Glib smiled as the boy's hands snaked over his purse and the boy retreated through the tavern. Glib watched the boy as he walked. If the youngster were to become a thief he still needed a lot of practice.

Glib closed his eyes. He envisioned the crowded legs and feet of the tavern. It was difficult to make a person thrust any of his limbs into the boy's way, but Glib was taking a different tack. He pictured a rope and a block of wood in his mind. Then he pictured the block of wood in front of the boy's ankle. Glib opened his eyes and pointed at the boy.

He tripped. He stumbled over an imagined obstacle and fell hard on the wooden floor. Glib's purse was still gripped in his hand. Glib immediately stood and walked towards the boy. "Ah, thank you for finding my purse, good sir. I didn't know *where* I put it!" Glib's good-natured jests brought a wave of laughter from the crowd and Glib returned to the table with his pouch. If this had happened to anyone else they would have grabbed the boy and cried thief. Glib didn't want to see someone only three years younger than him put in jail, drafted into the army or worse.

The three people at Glib's table treated him with more camaraderie now. One slapped him on the back and said and laughed hard. Glib bowed to the man's praise and continued sipping his ale. He had no wish to make friends but he needed information about Snow's Blood. If he could make these people talk...

"What brings you to Wayward?" one of the men asked. "You look like a traveler. And a young one at that."

"I am a soldier," Glib explained simply. "I lost track of my company in the battle with Centar six weeks ago and have been trying to find my way back to them ever since."

"What name does your company go by?" the same man asked.

"Snow's Blood."

"You're in luck," the man said. "Snow's Blood passed through here three days ago. Both taverns did a roaring trade."

"What color uniforms were they wearing?" Glib asked. He did not want to be sent off in the wrong direction by someone who was drunk, so he was asking questions to see if Snow's Blood *really* passed through here.

"The soldiers had a red 'V' on their chest," the man answered.

"Crimson," one of his companions added.

"And their commander's name?"

The man doing most of the talking frowned. "Mercenary companies like that

don't come waltzing into town and announcing who their commanders are. But I think his name was Trent... Triffett. That was his name. And his second-in-command was Cinch Tutor. I remember because Cinch came here to have a couple of beers. He was all right. Be about the same age as you, I guess. Bit older maybe."

"Cinch is my best friend," Glib told the man. Glib did not say when he had last seen Cinch he was equally ranked with him. What could have happened in the past month for Cinch to be promoted to second-in-command? And for Triffett to be promoted to commander? It didn't make sense. But Glib was gaining on the company and was sure that within a week he would be reunited with his best friend. He just had to keep traveling hard.

Glib finished his ale and left the tavern. The sun was still at its zenith and despite the heat Glib knew he must push himself if he were to rejoin Snow's Blood. He would walk out of town and as soon as people were behind him Protector would appear. Then he could talk with the werehound as he walked and time would not seem so important. Glib was worried about the developments at Snow's Blood, though. Triffett in command of the company could only be a bad thing. Cinch as second-in-command...? That could be either good *or* bad. But Glib was still determined to catch up with the company. He only hoped that when he arrived Cinch would still treat him as a friend, and not another lowly soldier.

There it was. The mercenary company of Snow's Blood. Or should it be called Triffett's Folly now? Glib would not be surprised if people renamed it that. He and Protector had been traveling for six more days and they had caught up to the company only now. Of course Glib could not bring Protector into the camp itself - that was an invitation for Protector to be killed. Glib and his werehound would have to make a parting of the ways, at least for a while.

Glib didn't want to go into the mercenary camp yet. His magic and sorcery skills were coming along nicely, and Glib was afraid that in the camp he might revert to being as ignorant about his talent as he was before. Should he tell Cinch that he met the abess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf? Would Cinch believe him?

It was no use worrying - he had to rejoin the company. Glib rose from his crouching position and began to pick his way down the hill where he was standing. The hill was steep, rocky and barren but there were enough paths that with a little effort a man could find a way down. Protector hugged the side of the hill, his long claws (talons, almost), extending and gripping into rock and soil. The werehound slipped more than Glib but regarded the descent as a enjoyable challenge more than a dangerous chore. Glib felt a brief moment of envy for his werehound.

Finally Glib and Protector were at the bottom of the hill looking at the mercenary camp from an even keel. The camp was still a couple of miles distant but Glib was confident with a little hard walking he would be able to reach it soon. It was late afternoon with the sun just beginning to set and the camp set up for the night - Snow's Blood would not be moving until tomorrow morning.

Between Glib and Protector and the mercenary camp was a stretch of plain. Patches of grass grew in some places but mostly the plain consisted of rock. Glib began walking over it. The few trees that grew were stunted and looked sickly, skeletal in the late afternoon sun. Protector padded beside Glib with his tongue lolling from his maw and his nose close to the ground. Glib felt glad of the werehound's company. Glib was a pariah from the mercenary camp now - at least that was how he

felt - and did not know if they would accept him back. He had been gone for over six weeks and the mercenaries might think him a deserter.

And Glib was afraid of Triffett and Cinch. Glib did not know where Snow Angler worked into the equation now but he wasn't in command, so obviously something had happened. Glib was most worried about Triffett. The man was a bully interested only in getting his own way. He did not understand what common soldiers felt. Glib could feel Triffett waiting to accuse him of desertion. The sergeant would probably want him flogged and strung up for it. Glib admitted he was afraid.

Glib was afraid of Cinch too but the fear wasn't bad. He was mainly worried Cinch might not treat him like a friend. When a man is promoted to an officer position he often loses contact with the lower ranks. Glib did not want Cinch and himself to drift apart - he wanted their friendship to remain strong. But now that Cinch was second-in-command of Snow's Blood he might not feel the same way.

I am afraid, Glib thought.

You should not be afraid.

Glib looked at his werehound. It was still padding beside him, though its head was now thrust straight out. It showed no sign it had performed mindspeak. *Did you say that?* Glib asked.

The werehound moved its great head towards Glib. *I did.*

You can mindspeak.

A fascinating observation, the werehound replied.

Glib stopped walking and thought, not only of the comradely benefits of his werehound being able to converse but the alchemical benefits as well. Alchemists, sorcerers and wizards had long tried to unlock the secrets of werehounds. But none had ever come close - werehounds were regarded as reclusive creatures. With Protector Glib could discover secrets about werehounds no one knew... and become famous for it.

I will not help you if you think like that, Protector said. *I am not a specimen for your appraisal. You and I are together. We share a bond.*

Yes, Glib said. *But there are so many things I would like to know about your kind. Like-*

Shush! We are nearing your human camp. It is best I go. Protector broke off their contact and ran in the direction he and Glib had just come. Glib watched the werehound until it was a smudge on the horizon. Today was a magnificent breakthrough. When Glib got to spend time with Protector again he would see if mindspeak still worked. The only problem was Glib did not know when he and Protector would have the time to be alone.

Before that Glib decided he must think of Snow's Blood. Changes had happened at the mercenary camp and it was best if Glib mentally prepared himself for them. With a renewed spring in his step, Glib walked even more quickly towards the camp.

The mercenary camp was not far away. Another five hundred yards and Glib would be there. Guards had not called out a challenge yet, which was bad - a good mercenary company would have their perimeter secure. Glib put the mistake down to Triffett's stupidity and Cinch's inexperience. Maybe he could fix some of the mistakes Triffett and Cinch made when he reasserted himself as one of the company's soldiers.

Sweat streamed down Glib's face. He looked at the clouds beginning to build in the west. Some were dark and some white, but Glib was sure they would soon

coagulate and build into a storm. There was a distant rumble of thunder and Glib thought he would like to be in the camp in a warm tent before the storm hit. He did not think highly of being rained upon or killed by lightning. Especially because Snow's Blood was so close.

Glib saw something in the clouds. At first the face was indistinct and Glib thought for a moment it was his werhound, but the face's lines became clearer and Glib recognized the person as the abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf. Glib looked in awe at the abbess's face. Her smile was benevolent and she was looking at Glib. Her eyes were filled with compassion and she looked like she was watching over him. Glib shivered and tried to stay calm.

Glib's thoughts were broken by the shouts of mercenary perimeter guards. "Halt! Who goes there?" When Glib didn't answer their voices became more urgent. "Halt! Who goes there? Announce yourself or we will shoot!"

Glib watched the guards' crossbows with disdain. Crossbows were good for guarding against three or four people, but what if a company struck the camp? Traditional longbows and recurve bows should be placed beside those crossbows in case the guards had to deal with a large assault. Realizing the guards might shoot at him Glib held up his hands and said, "I mean no harm. It is Glib Baker."

The guards paused. They lowered their crossbows and looked at each other. Then they looked at Glib. One of them demanded tentatively, "You've been gone for almost two months. Why have you come back now?"

Instead of demanding to see Triffett or Cinch, Glib believed it would be better if he told the guards the truth. "I got separated from the battle with Centar," he said. "I found myself in the forest to the north of the battle and was knocked unconscious fighting a Centarian soldier. When I woke up two days had passed. I have been trying to catch up with Snow's Blood ever since."

"It has taken you a long time."

"Aye. It has."

The guards stood caressing their weapons and regarding Glib with curiosity. They did nothing else.

"I wish to be welcomed back!" Glib said. "I have spent six weeks traveling on rations and you offer no hospitality? I want a tent and a hot meal. Or is that too much to ask?" Glib's temper was already frayed - he did not want two junior soldiers getting in his way. A moment passed before Glib reminded himself that he was a junior soldier too.

"I will get the commander," one of the guards said. "And Cinch Tutor." The guard left while the other scraped his boot in the dust. He said nothing to Glib and Glib said nothing to him. A short while later the other guard returned. "The sergeant and Cinch will be here soon. You must wait until then."

That 'soon' turned out to be a quarter hour. The clouds had built considerably and a dark wall was approaching the mercenary camp. Glib could feel the wind from the storm at his back. Triffett strolled from the mercenary camp and stopped in front of the young man. He looked at Glib the way a noble might look at something they trod upon in the street. "You have been absent from the company for seven weeks," he said. "Without permission."

"I was knocked unconscious during the battle with Centar."

"More likely you found a watering hole and drank ale until you passed out. I know people like you, Glib Baker. People like you always want more. I would like to hang - or at least whip - you, but Captain Angler is still alive and I will have to seek his

counsel. Despite his illness he will pass fair judgment."

"Where's Cinch?" Glib asked.

"Here." Cinch walked up behind Triffett's back. His uniform looked in good condition and his bearing was more dignified than when Glib had seen him last. He inclined his head slightly at Glib then stood behind and to the right of the sergeant.

Glib extended his hand, thinking his friend might shake it. "Cinch. It's been a long time."

"Possibly too long," Cinch said. "And from now on, I would like to be addressed as 'sir.'"

Triffett and Cinch may have taken over working command of Snow's Blood, but Captain Angler still demanded he remain in his commander's tent. A litter had been made for him as well as a large, plush bed. It took a long time to assemble and disassemble but the mercenaries did not complain - they had served under Snow Angler for many years and their loyalty to their captain was unquestionable.

Cinch felt uncomfortable with his new duties. Triffett had come to command Snow's Blood due to a number of maneuverings by himself and his allies; Cinch was placed as second-in-command because Snow Angler requested it. He had originally asked for Glib, but when Cinch informed the captain Glib had been missing since the battle he had given Cinch the job. That bridled the sixteen-year-old. He was physically more capable than Glib, and got on well with the other mercenaries. Cinch saw no reason why he should not be second-in-command ahead of Glib. He had no regrets about telling Glib he must be addressed as 'sir.'

Cinch entered the command tent and watched the captain in his bed. Cinch was still in training and was about to start a bout with Triffett, however the captain requested to see him first. Cinch walked towards the captain. A thin gauze of material covered him from the eyes of the outside world. He could still be seen although his figure was muted by the gaze. Even with the gauze between them Cinch could tell the captain was sick.

"Come in," the captain said. It sounded like he was inviting an old friend into his room.

Cinch obeyed and parted the gauze. He tried not to balk at the captain's body. Blue marks covered his face and arms. His skin was sallow, his face sunken deep against his skull and his eyes almost closed. The captain clawed feebly at his sheets as Cinch came closer. Gone was the man with energy and vigor, firmness and command. He had been replaced by an invalid who looked like he might die within days. *Which might be true*, Cinch thought.

"So Glib has returned," the captain said. There was a remnant of power his voice, though it sounded like the captain struggled to keep it.

"Yes Captain," Cinch said. "He returned yesterday."

"Good. I began to think he deserted, but I knew in my heart Glib Baker wasn't like that. I suspect he fought bravely in the battle with Centar?"

"He did. He gave a full report last night. He disabled three mounted Centarian soldiers and killed one on foot. At least that is what he said in his report. His memory of the battle is hazy."

"As can be expected," Snow Angler said. "Your memory of the battle is hazy too, isn't it Cinch?"

"Yes... sir."

"Good - it shows fear." The captain lapsed into silence for a few minutes. The

only sound was that of his harsh breathing and his fingernails scraping across the sheets of the bed. "I have asked you here to speak about Glib... and my death."

Cinch took a step forward. "Sir?"

"I am a man who holds no illusions, Cinch. I will die soon." Cinch was shocked by the bluntness of the captain's words but kept his peace. "When I am dead I will need someone to look after Snow's Blood. I built this company from when I was young. I could have created it much more easily than I did - I had friends who were interested in war and plunder. But I did not want that. I wanted men who acted professionally in their dealings. I wanted mercenaries who acted like soldiers. *Professional* soldiers. The first men I found were men like me, men of like mind. Though all but one was older than myself we considered each other's skills and abilities and it was decided I had the best strategic mind. There was no doubt about my leadership - even if my strategical skill had been lacking they would have served under me and I would have taken counsel from them. They would have served under me because I have charisma.

"Now that I am going to die I don't want my lifelong work to go to waste."

"You will not die," Cinch insisted. "The Snow Angler I know would *challenge* Death. You *will* not die."

"It is nice to see you are loyal, Cinch. But I know when I am going to die. I do."

"If you die the men will miss you," Cinch said. "All of us will miss you."

"I hope." Snow Angler struggled to sigh. "I have asked you here to announce a replacement captain for Snow's Blood. I have already decided who."

Cinch hoped the captain did not say Triffett. If he did Cinch was going to tell him exactly what the sergeant was like - even if meant risking the captain's happiness. Perhaps the captain would name Cinch as his successor. Cinch felt a brief flutter of pride. He would continue the work that Snow Angler had done but would make Snow's Blood even greater. Snow's Blood would become the most feared and respected mercenary company on the peninsula.

Snow said, "I would like Glib Baker to take over the captaincy."

Cinch straightened his back and said nothing.

"When I learned of Glib's magical prowess I knew he would be a suitable candidate. He may be only fifteen years old but there is greatness in him. Snow's Blood would flourish with him as captain." The captain drummed his fingers on the sheets of his bed. "A woman came to me. A time of death and blood is coming to the peninsula. The woman said that had I not been poisoned I would have been one of the men to confront this bloodshed and death."

"You were poisoned?" Cinch asked.

"By Centarian spies. The poison wastes me away until my heart cannot withstand it. That's how I know I will die." The captain steered the conversation away from his own ill health and back to Glib. "The woman said Glib was to be one of the men who combats this evil. She said you were to be one of the men, too. And she also said there is another in Snow's Blood. A man who will become a hero. She added that he would be a reluctant hero. She told me Snow's Blood would become the best-known mercenary company on the peninsula. She said Snow's Blood would perform deeds no other company would dare try. She said Snow's Blood would be written in the annals of history."

"I think you're delirious, Captain," Cinch said cautiously as he touched Snow Angler's brow.

The captain's hand shot out with surprising speed and grabbed Cinch by the wrist. "I am *not* delirious. Listen to me. Glib Baker is to be promoted to captain. The woman told me Snow's Blood will make an impression only *after* I die. I will know I have done something worthwhile and that I'll be remembered."

"Why don't you tell the whole company this?" Cinch asked. "Then there could be no dispute of your command."

"Triffett." Snow's words were pained. "He has designs on the captaincy. But he is a bully and is good only in a subservient role - *never* as a commander. I have allowed him to be working captain because I can still keep an eye on him. And I promoted you to second-in-command because between us we can wedge any stupid things he does. Triffett is an experienced and competent soldier and that is the reason I said he could command. When I die, however..."

"When you die you would like me to say that Glib is now captain of the company."

"Yes."

"And if people dispute the claim?"

"I will speak to you when I am about to die. I will bequeath the captaincy to Glib then. You will tell the men immediately after my death. At such a poignant moment they will accept my will. Except maybe Triffett. Another thing, Cinch Tutor. Another reason I do not want to tell every soldier my bequeath. I don't want to be like some dying wolf with vultures and werewolves scavenging around me. I know the men don't think of me like that but that is how I would feel. I would like to die with nobility."

"If you want it, Captain, it shall be done."

Snow smiled weakly at the young man. He clasped Cinch's hand in his own. "Yes, Cinch, I do want it. Thank you."

Cinch saluted, turned and left the command tent. The captain remained lying on his bed, his body wracked with disease and poison, his limbs stiff from lack of use and his mind no longer his own. He was waiting to die.

Cinch was furious when he left the command tent. How dare Snow Angler hand over the reins of command to Glib? Glib might be intelligent and skilled at the mystic arts but he didn't have any leadership skills. Putting Glib in charge of the company was like putting a child in charge of Outland. People would seek to manipulate and take advantage of him from the start.

Cinch grudgingly admitted that in class with his father Glib had always shown a sound understanding of The States' politics. But that was in class in a tutelage hut. This was real life. And there were close to four hundred men's lives at risk. If Glib made one mistake he might kill them all. Cinch decided the captain was losing his mind as his sickness intensified - he really meant for someone else to take over the reins. The only reason he bequeathed Glib the captaincy was because Glib was his pet. The captain liked Glib because of his skill in sorcery, and was trying to show that by giving Glib what meant most to him.

As Cinch stormed towards the training area he thought of the beating he would give Triffett. The sergeant was going to be very sore this time. Cinch imagined *exactly* what he would do to the violent sergeant. Today his violence would be repaid in kind. He imagined his fist thudding into Triffett's stomach, then bringing his knee up to crack Triffett's ribs. The mercenary experience was not an easy one and Cinch planned to show Triffett what he had avoided for so many years.

Cinch left the camp and walked over the sparse stretch of land which separated it from the training area. Snow Angler had asked him to announce Glib as captain of the company. Why hadn't Snow Angler spoken to Glib himself? What reason was there to use a mediator? A number of reasons, Cinch thought. When Snow died - it was a question of when now, not if - Glib couldn't come forward and declare himself as the new captain. That would be hypocrisy. And Snow hadn't told Triffett - who was second-in-command - because the sergeant had designs on the captaincy himself. If the captain *did* tell Triffett, the sergeant would find a way to twist his words. Cinch stormed into the training ring where Triffett was standing. *I deserve to be captain*, Cinch thought as he approached the seasoned commander.

"You're late," Triffett declared.

Cinch struck the sergeant on the chin.

Triffett reeled back and brought his hand to his face. He wiped away a thin line of blood where his bottom lip was split. "That's good," Triffett lisped. "You show pride today."

Cinch didn't care about anything Triffett said. Before the sergeant realized he must parry Cinch struck his upper throat. The sergeant reeled back again and gagged. He coughed and made gargling sounds and fell to his knees in the dust. Cinch watched in satisfaction as the sergeant panted and choked.

"It was a dirty trick," Triffett said, "but I still approve of your methods. When in battle you must take every opportunity you can." Triffett lunged forward. He took Cinch off-guard and drove him back in a crushing tackle, lifting him from the ground and carting him as though he were a sack of potatoes. He finally threw Cinch down outside the ring. "I win thanks to one smart move," Triffett said. "No matter how many little victories you have it is the major victory that counts."

Cinch lay in the dust and watched Triffett the way a beaten and raped female slave might watch its male master. He was younger and more flexible than Triffett - he should be able to beat the wily soldier. However Triffett had more experience and was wiser to the ways of battle. What Cinch had to do was fight like Triffett - dirty - but use his youthfulness and speed to full advantage. Cinch watched Triffett's ankles and wrists. Those were the parts he should aim for. Cinch scrambled in the dust towards Triffett's legs.

Triffett's fists crushed each of Cinch's shoulders. The young man cried out and fell to the ground, twitching. "You should not show your opponent where you plan to attack."

Cinch was lying immediately beneath Triffett. He could taste dust in his mouth and there were scratches on his elbows and knees. His shoulders ached. If he lost now Triffett would continue to lord over him. The more Cinch lost the stronger Triffett would become. Cinch reached up and grabbed Triffett's testicles. The man winced and tried to disengage from Cinch's grip, but the more he pulled the more painful it was. Cinch pulled even harder and sent his fist flying into Triffett's abdomen. The sergeant moaned in pain.

Confident the sergeant was disabled for a while, Cinch got up and punched Triffett in the stomach, then in the chest. He struck Triffett in the face and blood sprouted from the sergeant's nose. He struck both of Triffett's eyes. The sergeant was dazed but remained standing while Cinch continued his assault. His blows were borne of the experience and strength he had gained over the past months with Snow's Blood and his hate of Triffett. It was impossible for the sergeant to withstand more.

Triffett fell to the ground. Cinch watched the sergeant's face. It was a mess.

The skin around both his eyes was already beginning to swell. Most of his face was already covered with alternating red, yellow and blue. Triffett's nose was pumping blood. Both his lips were cut. And Cinch thought there might also be blood coming from one of the sergeant's ears. Cinch could not see any lower body damage because of Triffett's clothes but could imagine what his testicles must look like. He winced in empathetic pain but then didn't care. If it were any other person Cinch would feel sorry for them, but Triffett...

"Do you yield?" Cinch asked.

"I... yield." Triffett's words barely managed to escape from his injured lips.

"You will not be cruel to me anymore."

"No."

"And your words will not be full of mocking sarcasm. And spite."

"No."

Cinch's strictness eased for a moment and he looked at Triffett with innocence written large in his eyes. "Why have you been so cruel to me all this time?" he asked. "What have I done to you? Do you find pleasure in the pain of others?"

Triffett opened his eyes to cracks. "You're a spoiled little boy," he said.

"Spoiled little boys do not belong in Snow's Blood."

A shouting man left the camp and ran towards them. Cinch turned his attention away from Triffett and watched the man approach. Runners did not run like that unless something extremely important had happened. "Triffett, look," Cinch said, then continued staring at the running man. Finally the runner halted before the pair: the battered sergeant and the young victor above him. "What is wrong?" Cinch asked.

"It's the captain," the young runner panted. "He is dead."

There was silence for a long moment, punctuated only by Triffett's sphinctered breathing. "How did he die?" Cinch asked finally.

"From his illness. At least that is what we think."

Cinch looked at Triffett's beaten figure. Here was the perfect opportunity. "Morale is getting low," he said to the sergeant. "None of the men like you. And with Captain Angler dead we must find a new captain." Pause. "That will be me." Cinch turned and walked away, leaving the sergeant and runner watching him with disbelief - and awe.

Chapter 10 - Alive

Prudence entered the city of Color Gash. The joints in her left leg were aching badly and she needed to rely increasingly on her gnarled oak walking stick for support. The rain and darkness wasn't helping her aching leg, either. She would like to be back at the abbey in Morrow right now. But she couldn't do that. Prudence had entered the city through the postern gate - she was already irritated at having to be out on such a rainy night and didn't want any guards accosting her, so had cast a spell to keep from being seen. Winter was drawing near and Color Gash was very cold at night-time. It usually didn't rain in Color Gash during winter but Prudence believed the Outlendian god had it in for her. She muttered a curse and began to walk.

The mercenary Leesh had come to Color Gash four days ago and reported Glib's probable death. That made Prudence angry. Because of Leesh, *she* had to see Glib's family and set the record straight. This wasn't a matter of compassion - the family *needed* to know Glib was alive for certain events to fall into place. Without those events the barbarans would have a better chance of taking over the peninsula.

The streets of Color Gash were quiet. No one wanted to be caught in the sheeting rain. Children who would enjoy it were now tucked in bed listening to the rain drum on their home's roofs until morning. Thieves and whores had retired, knowing their clientele would not be about on such a foul night. The only people who remained active at this time were the city guards (who detested the rain) and innkeepers (who loved the rain because it brought more profit). Prudence smiled when she saw the lights of the bakery still on. Surl fit the shopkeeper's bill perfectly - he was anywhere a profit might be had.

There was a cheery atmosphere inside the bakery. Prudence had already learnt the names of Glib's family and acquaintances, and knew the young woman behind the

counter was named Abbey and the person talking to her was Girl. Prudence wondered how Girl would react to the news that Glib was alive. She admitted to being fearful as she approached the two young women. Then she reminded herself that she was an abbess of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf. A fifteen-year-old and seventeen-year-old girl were not going to scare her. "Are you Abbey Novak?" Prudence asked. "And Girl Trader of the Chandler Factories family?"

Abbey looked at Girl, who waited patiently for Abbey to take the lead. Abbey turned back to the Prudence. "We are."

"I have news concerning Glib Baker."

"Glib is dead," Abbey said quietly.

"I am the abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf," the abbess answered swiftly. "Before I came into this room you were talking about Glib and thinking of how much you miss him. You hate the messenger, Leesh, for the bad tidings he brought." Prudence knew it was a gamble - but if the girls thought she had psychic powers they would treat her more respectfully.

"You're right," Abbey said. "Glib's step-father thought there might be a trade in baked goods and ale tonight but he was wrong. We've been chatting to kill time."

"Do you want the news of Glib."

Both girls responded positively.

"Maybe you should call Surl and Delilah Baker. They *are* his guardians."

"I'll get them in a moment," Abbey said. She ran out the bakery door into the driving rain.

Prudence inspected Girl while she waited. Girl was pretty but not beautiful. Prudence couldn't envision her as a princess or queen or any other ruling rank of nobility; she couldn't even envision Girl as the wife of one of The Six. It was difficult to understand what Glib had seen in her. There was nothing to her, really. Average height, slim build, mousy hair - the type of teenager you could see on any street in Color Gash. Prudence frowned. By her calculations Glib would be sixteen now; that made Girl sixteen as well, not fifteen as she had previously thought.

"You must have come a long way," Girl said. "Would you like anything to eat?"

"No thank you," Prudence said in a severe tone of voice. "Although I would appreciate some water."

Girl smiled. "It's easy to get water tonight." The sixteen-year-old took a mug from behind the bakery's counter and moved outside. She set the mug on a seat where rain was rushing in. "Wait a few minutes," Girl instructed as she came back inside.

"I think I should tell you the news about Glib before the others come," Prudence said. "If that's what you'd like."

Girl moved to the counter, boosted herself onto it, looked at the floor and dangled her legs. "Whatever news you bring it can't change what has already happened. It can't change that he is dead."

"That is the point, my dear. He is alive."

Girl looked up at the abbess. "Please say that you're not lying."

"I'm not. He has caught up to his mercenary unit and is alive as he ever was."

Surl and Delilah burst through the bakery door closely followed by Abbey. "What news of Glib?" Surl demanded.

"The abbess says he is alive," Girl said.

Surl stared at the abbess. "Is this true?"

"You may visit the mercenary company yourself, if you wish. You will find

him there."

Surl shook his head. "I finally thought he had found honor. I thought he died in the battle with Centar. Now it looks like he must have run away. The last cowardly act of a cowardly boy."

"On the contrary, I met Glib after the battle. He downed at least four men - and killed one. Bear in mind that I think killing is repugnant, Surl Baker."

"Why was a messenger sent to inform us of Glib's death?" Surl challenged.

"Glib hadn't returned to the company for weeks. It was only natural to think he perished in the battle. Snow Angler - the captain of the company - knew Glib would not desert. That's why he thought Glib was dead. The captain is also in ill health and his mind is not entirely his own."

"How do you know all this?" Surl questioned. "I know what the Sisterhood is like. Your kind are a pack of witches."

Prudence met this sort of man at least once every couple of months and when she did she couldn't stand it. But what they were talking about was important and Prudence knew she would have to swallow her caustic remarks - just this once - and try to keep the conversation as civil as possible. Prudence did not consider herself melodramatic but Glib's own destiny as well as that of the peninsula rested on her actions here. She needed to make Surl believe her, otherwise future events would not go exactly as Prudence and her Sisters had scribed it. "The Sisterhood may serve its own agenda a lot of the time," Prudence said truthfully, "but it does so for the good of The States. I would not lie to you, Surl Baker."

"Is there any way you can prove that Glib is alive?"

"I shouldn't have to *prove* anything," Prudence said. "But I know what men like you are like. Come, I will prove it." Prudence leaned on her walking stick as she walked towards the bakery's door. She stood on the doorstep and waited for Surl to catch up with her. "See that puddle?" Prudence pointed with a staff to a puddle immediately below the doorstep. It was illuminated by lamps in the street but little else. "Watch what happens." Prudence pointed her staff at the puddle and murmured a few archaic words. She could have just envisioned Glib but it was more impressive if she added some theatrics to her performance.

The ripples of the puddle began to gel and form a picture. Surl leaned over and watched the puddle. Prudence looked at Surl and smiled in satisfaction. The gruff baker was suitably impressed. The puddle began to form a picture of the Snow's Blood mercenary camp. Glib was erecting a tent. Prudence watched Surl closely for his reaction. Glib had been thinner when he left Color Gash. He had been less tanned and not as well proportioned. The months had honed Glib's skin until it was honey-colored and rippled with muscle. Prudence smiled. Most of the time Glib's skin burnt and he was still quite short, but Surl didn't pay attention to his foster-son's shortcomings. He was proud that Glib was a soldier... even if it was only as part of a mercenary company.

Surl rounded on the abbess. "How do I know this scene is real? You could have concocted it to make me believe Glib is alive."

Prudence grimaced. She was getting very impatient with the stubborn baker. "This is as much as I can do. I can't magically transport Glib here for you to see him." (Of course, she could, but it would take a huge amount of power and she was getting sick of Surl.) Prudence sighed and moved back into the bakery. "Mr. Baker, give me one good reason why I should lie about Glib being alive? I have traveled hundreds of miles from my own home. Now I just want to leave. I did not come here to be

disbelieved. But I have come and done what I was assigned. Whether you believe me or not is up to you. Good night, Mr. Baker. I doubt that you'll offer me hospitality for the night."

"You're right there," Surl said grimly.

Prudence moved from the bakery into the rain, leaving Surl and the three women staring after her. Well, she had done what she could. She planned on visiting Glib again - and then returning to the abbey. She looked forward to seeing Grace and the other Sisters. And she looked forward to a long sabbatical. The destiny of the peninsula - and The States - could look after itself for a while. She thought of Surl, who she could feel watching her back. There were men like him everywhere. They stunted destiny, although none of them ever realized it. Prudence shook her head and wiped her rain-covered face. Some men never learned.

Surl, Delilah, Abbey and Girl sat around the kitchen table in the Baker's home. Surl was copiously drinking a mug of coffee from the hot northern tropics; Delilah also had a cup of coffee but she sipped at her drink more sedately. Abbey had a mug of warmed water and Girl had a cup of warm milk. Abbey could feel the tension in the house. She thought news that Glib was alive would cheer Surl and Delilah, but to her it looked as though it complicated things. Surl and Delilah had got on with their lives after Leesh's news but now they were suddenly thrust into a quagmire of doubt - again.

"So Glib is alive." Surl's words sounded strangely flat. He took a sip of coffee and placed the mug back down on the table. "We looked after him for fifteen years and he left us. We thought him dead and he came back alive. I'm beginning to think it would have been best had we not fostered him at all."

Delilah touched her husband's arm. "Surl..."

Surl shrugged his wife away. "I looked after him for fifteen years! Do you think I am going to accept his lack of respect? Glib is responsible for his own actions, like everyone else. If you want to exist with other people you must mind your own actions *because* of them! You can't do what you want all the time."

"Do you think we could have made him stay here? Do you think we could have treated him better?"

"I treated him no worse than I would my own son," Surl replied.

Delilah looked at her porcelain cup. "Sometimes I think I'm the wicked step-mother in all of this. But I only did what I could."

Surl put his hand on Delilah's arm, a rare sign of affection. "Peace, love. We did what we could. No more."

Abbey watched the couple arguing. They never had the advantage of an outside observer watching how they treated Glib - at least one who would speak their mind. Stern came the closest but he never spoke too boldly against Surl for fear of the baker withdrawing Glib from lessons. Abbey had observed, too, but she worked for Surl and was afraid of what the baker would do if she contradicted him. And Girl was only newly-arrived on the scene.

It was plain to Abbey that Glib was poorly-treated by his foster-parents, especially Surl. The baker may be strict and good at his job - which Abbey had no problem with - but with Glib he had often been *too* strict. Getting beaten up was what Glib usually received as punishment for any misdoings. And poor Glib was not suited to being a baker: he was short and slight (you needed to be strong to lift sacks of flour) and his hands were too tender to withstand the hot loaves of bread that came from the oven. Glib was as suited to baking bread as Girl was to shifting rocks in a field.

Delilah had treated Glib more civilly than her husband but there was still animosity there. Delilah didn't have her aura and Abbey could see the jealousy written on her face sometimes. Having an aura was a mark of prestige. Those without auras were shunned and considered a lesser caste than other women. Abbey remembered Glib speaking about female cats when they were working in the shop once. He said the more kittens a cat has, the more prestige it gains. So a cat with five successful litters would be a *very* attractive proposition to any toms in the area. Abbey stared at her cooling water. Delilah looked after Glib and though he was her son in most ways, she still did not have the one thing that mattered *most* to a mother.

Abbey tasted her water and found it lukewarm. She hated lukewarm water. "Surl, Delilah, may Girl and I be excused? It's been a big night. We would like to sleep."

Surl nodded paternally. "The bed is set in the guest room. You may use it."

Abbey stood up and beckoned her friend to follow. They had actually learned to treat each other with respect since Glib left; in fact they were probably close to being best friends now. But there was still some animosity between them. Abbey had finally admitted to Girl that she liked Glib, and though Girl had acted indifferently to Abbey's statement there had been a subtle change in their relationship. They were much like two cats trying to gain the favor of their master.

Abbey hesitated outside the spare bedroom. It didn't hold the same warmth and coziness since Glib left. Surl often invited her to the house and she suspected he might be physically attracted to her. She shuddered at the thought. Before she went to sleep she and Girl had many things to discuss, though, not least of all their feelings for Glib. Abbey took in a breath and held her head high as she walked into the spare bedroom. She and Girl were going to settle the matter once and for all.

When she entered the room Girl hugged her fiercely. All the pent-up happiness and relief that had been quelled while Girl was with Surl and Delilah now came to the surface. Abbey returned Girl's hug just as fiercely. Somehow both of them knew that Glib was alive - who cared what Surl said about the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf being a pack of witches?

"He is alive and when I find him I am going to kiss him." Girl jumped up and down, then settled a little bit. "I'm so glad he is alive."

"It doesn't bother you that he was caught with a werhound?" Abbey said.

"Werhounds are scary but that's no reason to dump him. Some people like snakes, but does anyone persecute them? I'd rather be with someone who is friends with a werhound than someone who is friends with a snake."

"Even if the werhound is from another plane?"

Girl shrugged "Doesn't matter."

Abbey sat on the guest-room bed and thought about what had occurred tonight. When news of Glib's death filtered through she had concentrated on saving her coin to buy her own shop, with a house above it. Now that she knew Glib was alive... she wanted to see him. And so did Girl. "Do you think we could find Glib?" Abbey's words were meek compared to the way Girl might have said it.

"What do you mean?" Girl settled on the bed next to her friend and watched her expectantly.

"I mean, could we travel to meet Glib? We both miss him and I'm sure he'd be glad if we visited. And we could say hello to Cinch too."

"Would your parents like that?" Girl asked.

"They wouldn't have any say in the matter. I'm earning more money than them. They wouldn't like to see me leave but I'm old enough to do what I want."

"Would *my* parents like it?"

"Probably not," Abbey admitted. "But your family is rich. You could hire a retinue of guards if you wanted."

"My parents are very traditional, Abbey. They respected Glib until they learned his secret with werewounds. They would not agree to what you propose."

"They don't have to. We could just leave."

Girl grinned. "You sound like me." She picked up the guest bed's pillow and knocked Abbey in the head.

"Ow!" Abbey reeled and blinked to steady herself. "I do sound like you! It's just because... I love him so much."

"I love him too. And I want to do what you propose. My love would not be as strong as it should if I stayed and waited for him to return. When you want something you must pursue it. Agreed?"

"Agreed. But there is one problem."

"What's that?"

"There are two of us, but he is only going to want one of us. I don't want us to fight over him. I like you and we shouldn't let men - boys - get in the way of our friendship."

Girl pursed her lips in thought, and Abbey gripped the side of the bed, though she did not let Girl see it. Girl looked concentrated for a moment. "I don't know what we can do. But I have an idea. This is probably going to sound stupid but if you're willing to listen I'm willing to tell."

"It won't sound stupid," Abbey assured her. "We're friends - and if I laugh..." Abbey shrugged and smiled.

"When we catch up with Glib we should let *him* decide. Not pressure him or anything, but stay near him and wait to see who he chooses. Who knows? He might choose a woman he has met on his travels." Girl went silent. "I don't want us to fight over him, Abbey."

There were many problems with Girl's proposal, Abbey thought. She and Girl were friends, but when it came to Glib there would be problems. There was no use denying what they felt for him. Abbey didn't tell Girl that sometimes she would rather it if she had not come into Glib's life at all. They were friends but animosity was still there. "I'd like to go with you, Girl. But two of us traveling alone...?"

"You think it might be dangerous?"

"Well, yes."

"You wouldn't risk that danger to see Glib?"

"Girl!"

Girl smiled. "It might be dangerous but we will travel with safety in mind. We'll stay on the busiest roads and travel at daytime. We'll stay in taverns at night and buy some weapons before we leave Color Gash - just in case we need them."

"How do we get the money to do all this?" Abbey asked.

"You've saved a lot of chits from your job at the bakery. And I have a lot of money. My parents own Chandler Factories, remember." Girl held her chin higher and said, "I think we'll be able to pay for everything and still have quite a bit of coin left over. What do you think?"

"Mm." Girl didn't realize most people had to work for their money. The fund Abbey saved was accumulated over a period of years. The money Girl had was gifts

from her parents and family. And Abbey wasn't sure if she would enjoy traveling with Girl. The two were good as friends living in separate houses but if they were on the road together every day their relationship might change. There was also the underlying factor of their love for Glib. They might travel peacefully for the first part of the journey but when they neared - and reached - Glib, things could change.

I have no other choice. Abbey loved Glib and Girl loved Glib and they had a much better chance of seeing him if they traveled together. Her parents could look after themselves. She had provided for them for the past two years and now she was nearing her eighteenth birthday it was time for her to start making her own decisions. She smiled at Girl and with obvious relish that she had decided on her course of action, said, "Let's get ready to go."

* * * * *

Glib watched the abbess approach him. He was standing on a hill some distance from the camp. The hill was covered in rocks and the only vegetation that grew here was stunted and sickly - the perfect place for someone like Prudence to make an appearance.

Prudence struggled up the hill. Her staff couldn't find purchase amongst the rocks and she stumbled more than once. Glib felt an urge to run down the hill and help her, but stopped himself before his thoughts made it to action. The woman could look after herself. He had thought his meeting with Prudence in Green Valley would be the last he saw of her, but he was wrong. His foster-father was right about one thing - once the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf got you involved in their affairs they would not let you go.

The abbess's face looked even more worn than last time Glib saw it. Her mouth was pinched and she stared at the ground as though she was trying to will the rocks out of her way. She looked less an abbess today and more an elderly woman. Prudence reached the top of the hill and came to stand in front of Glib. There was silence for a long moment. Then the abbess said, "Have you accepted your fate?"

"'Destiny' might be a better word."

"Whatever." Prudence looked at the ground and murmured to herself. "I have come to ask if you accepted what I proposed. I will not leave until you answer."

"Yes." Glib held his head high and regal - Prudence may be abbess of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf, but he wasn't going to be frightened by her. If he was to become everything Prudence thought, he would act like a man.

Prudence considered Glib's words with a curt stare then said, "Good. Now we can move on with the next stage of your development."

"I thought you were going to leave me alone now."

"You will be left alone when the Sisterhood deems it. After I speak to you I will return to the abbey in Morrow for a sabbatical. I don't know when the Sisterhood will seek you out again, but it will happen. It may not be me who speaks to you. But I have come here today to accomplish a task, and I am going to accomplish it and then go home. Understood?"

"Yes."

Prudence smiled. "First I must say that your foster-parents and Stern, Abbey and Girl know you are alive. They miss you. Even Surl."

"That's a surprise."

"The second thing I must tell you is more important than the first. It is about what you will become. It is about what will happen to you now."

The abbess paused and Glib thought that she was waiting for him to say

something. He opened his mouth and closed it - he didn't really have anything to add to the conversation. He could only listen to what the abbess said. Maybe he could come up with a suitable response then.

"You know you are talented, Glib. You are good at fighting and you are good at sorcery."

"I'm not good at fighting," Glib rebuffed. "I was terrified in the battle with Centar."

"But you downed three men and killed one more. Your first battle - and you disabled more men than many veterans do." When Glib didn't answer the abbess continued. "And you are good at sorcery. Imagine what you could do if you combined these talents. The reason Snow Angler welcomed you into his company was because he saw potential in you. Strangely enough, Glib, there are other people like you. Not to your extent, but they are there. Imagine a unit of people like you. If you combined sorcery and physical skills, you would be one of most powerful units on the peninsula, if not *the* most powerful."

"And so?" Glib was suspicious of the abbess's motives. It was the Sisterhood's way to keep their dealings wrapped in a shroud of secrecy. It was best not to trust the Sisterhood.

"I would like you to form a unit, Glib. A unit of people like you."

"I don't see why you are getting me to do this. I'm hardly old enough. Why don't you get someone else? I'd be happy to remain part of the Snow's Blood and follow wherever it leads without forming units or whatever." Glib was starting to get angry - why didn't the Sisterhood just leave him alone?

"The unit would be a division of Snow's Blood," Prudence explained. Suddenly her manner became stern. "And you have no choice in the matter. If you do not begin forming the unit you will die in four months, in a battle with a group of nomads. I have scried it."

Prudence didn't need to ask, 'do you understand?' and Glib didn't need to disbelieve her. What she was saying was true. When the Sisterhood said they had scried something they usually meant it. So it looked like Glib would have to accept the mantle that was thrust upon him. A *reluctant leader*, Glib thought. And there would be the additional job of convincing Cinch that another unit should be added to Snow's Blood. Glib straightened himself and looked directly at the decrepit abbess. "I will do it," he said. Then he turned and began walking down the hill. The abbess stayed where she was. "You may leave," Glib said. "I will say no more." Glib's words were carefully planned. He wanted to leave Prudence with a sense that he was in charge - that he could walk away without her permission if he wished. According to Prudence he was going to become one of the most respected and well-known men on the peninsula. It was about time he started acting like he was in command.

Glib thought a lot as he walked down the hill. He thought about what might have happened had he not left Color Gash. Would events still have conspired to put him into this situation? He didn't know. But now that he was here he could do nothing to change it. This was the path he had chosen and despite the obstacles which might be in the way, he had to keep going.

First of all he would have to convince Cinch to allow a new unit to be formed as part of Snow's Blood. That might be difficult. Cinch's promotion to captain after Snow Angler's death was surprising to everyone. Most people had expected Triffett to take up the captain's mantle. Cinch had perhaps been unnecessarily strict the first few

weeks of his reign, but not brutal like the sergeant. Cinch had slackened off now and was carrying the captain's duties with honor. He didn't rule with the same firm hand and easy camaraderie as Snow Angler, but that would come with time.

Cinch treated Glib strangely, though. Cinch acted as though he was still superior, but sometimes Glib thought Cinch feared him. He couldn't work out why. They had been friends but now that friendship was dissipating. Glib didn't want that; Glib didn't want adulthood to get in the way of their friendship.

Glib reached the bottom of the hill and strode towards the camp. He had once again settled back into mercenary life. There was increasing tension between Outlend and Centar. The other states were morally siding with Centar but still not providing troop support. If the other states *did* provide troop support, it could plunge The States into a civil war while the Commonlands, the nomads and Ref watched with greed-filled eyes. The worse thing was that Snow's Blood would be in the thick of any problem.

Mercenaries waved at Glib as he entered the camp. Some still held animosity towards him - thinking he had deserted them during the battle - but most accepted his story. Glib was not the type of person to lie. He had unofficially made it to the rank of lieutenant. Though he was no higher than any of the common mercenaries, his battle with the Centarians and his talent at sorcery set him apart.

Everything had been so simple before Snow Angler became ill. He was their leader and no one dared question his authority. Now he was gone. The funeral was held with full military honors, and even some high-ranking officers of the regular Outlendian army had been in attendance. Though no one shed tears there was sadness that day. Everyone knew a great man was being laid to rest.

Now there were maneuverings and jockeying for position that would disgust the captain if he were alive. Triffett was jealous of Cinch, Cinch was suspicious of Glib. Leesh and Scarz were all right, unaffected by power as they were. If Snow Angler were alive he would drive discipline back into the company and not relax until he was sure all his mercenaries were in line.

There were two guards standing outside the (new) captain's tent. Glib called one of the guards and asked to speak with Cinch. The guard opened the tent flap and disappeared inside. He returned moments later and continued standing beside the flap as though nothing had happened.

"Is he coming?" Glib asked.

"He said he will be with you shortly," the guard answered. He seemed too nervous to say anything else.

Glib bridled at having guards stationed at the entrance to the captain's tent. Snow Angler never had guards anywhere near his tent, so why should Cinch? The only time Snow used guards was when a battle or skirmish was approaching - it always paid to be careful; a mercenary company without a captain was like a body without a heart.

It took over ten minutes before Glib's ex-friend arrived. "Glib. You haven't spoken to me for a while."

"Yeah, well, I have to speak to you now."

"Whether I speak to you or not depends on the importance of your news. The captaincy of a mercenary company is not an easy job. I don't expect people like you to understand."

"Captain, come on! I haven't spoken to you about anything else. But this is something I *must* tell you. Please."

"Very well." Cinch turned and strode back into his tent. "You may come in."

Glib was fuming as he walked into the tent. He could barely stand Cinch's easy superiority. He was close to tackling Cinch, driving him to the ground and telling him exactly what he thought. The mercenary company was divided between the two young men - Glib was the hero who had downed half a dozen (tales were always exaggerated) Centarian soldiers, lived in the wilds for two months and still managed to return to the company. There were some people who thought he deserted but those were in the minority. Cinch, on the other hand, got along better with the mercenaries and was not tainted by the aura of sorcery.

Cinch turned and sat at his command table. "What is it, Glib?"

"I would like a new unit to be formed and made part of Snow's Blood." Glib noticed there were two guards lurking in the tent's shadows. That was another addition since Snow Angler died.

"What sort of unit?"

"A spellword unit. A unit that knows how to cast and weave spells *and* how to fight with weapons."

"Why should I even consider allowing this unit to join Snow's Blood? This company is one of the most successful in Outlend already. Why tamper with something the late captain created?"

"Because the abbess of the Morrowian chapter of the Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf scried it." Glib's words were firm. He was sure he would put Cinch off-balance with that remark. His older friend needed someone to keep him grounded.

"The Sisterhood of the Ebony Leaf has nothing to do with Snow's Blood," Cinch retorted. "There is no reason why I should even consider what you propose."

"There is. If the spellword unit is not formed I will die - in four months. Snow's Blood will take a turn for the worse. And there is another reason. Captain Angler wished it."

"How do you know this? You were not with him on his deathbed!"

Glib wondered whether he should argue with Cinch, but decided something simple was better. "I know," Glib said, putting mysticism into his words. "I know this is what he wanted." Glib walked towards the tent flap.

Cinch stood up, held out his hand. "Glib, wait. You may form your spellword unit. I give you permission."

Glib smiled and looked back at the new captain. "When may I start?"

"Whenever you want."

"I will start now."

The start of the spellword unit was not looking good. So far Glib had only been able to find seven men with potential. Of those seven, only five could perform effectively in a unit situation - the sorcery of the other two was too erratic or weak to be considered useful. Still, Glib was doing what the abbess said and he was proud to have come this far.

Glib's own skill at sorcery was far superior to anyone he trained. It was good when a commander was better than anyone else in the unit - people looked up to him more. People were less likely to be jealous or discontent. Most of the men Glib trained were young, in their late teens or early twenties. There were a few in their mid-twenties and these men were the most adept at practicing sorcery and combining their sorcery with fighting. None in Glib's unit was above the age of twenty-seven.

When the company stopped to camp every couple of days, Glib took his men to

a remote place far-removed from the camp and trained them. The spellsworn unit needed the utmost of quiet and tranquillity. Here, behind a hill which protected them from the camp's view, was the best place Glib was able to find for today. The men had been training well.

As Glib walked along the row of seven, watching them combine their sorcery with fighting skills, he thought of Triffett. The sergeant was suspicious of what he was doing. He had even gone so far as to publicly decry sorcery around a campfire one night. Glib's unit cared little for his accusations. Cinch allowed Glib free reign with his unit and that was all that mattered. He even showed some support for the idea.

Today Glib was debating whether he should reveal his werehound. These people were adept at magic, like him. Maybe one of them had a bond with a magical creature like himself. But even if Glib called his werehound, he was not sure if Protector would come. Werehounds were regarded as furtive creatures - being called out in front of seven humans was not something they would usually enjoy.

Glib's thoughts were interrupted by Cinch. He rounded the hill and walked towards Glib and the unit. He was holding the hand of a young boy. Cinch was usually aloof now but it looked like he was guiding this boy with tenderness. Glib stopped his training, put his hands on his hips and watched as the new captain approached. "We can't pick up orphans," Glib said matter-of-factly.

"He's not an orphan," Cinch said. "His mother comes from the village just south of here. She said her son has some talent with sorcery. I thought you might want to try him out."

"He looks like he's only twelve."

"You're having enough trouble finding men to join your unit as it is. I wouldn't refuse this one, even if he is only twelve years of age."

Glib grudgingly said, "All right." He looked at the pre-pubescent boy. "What's your name?"

"Cleft, sir."

"An interesting name. Why are you called Cleft?"

"Cause I can do this." Cleft kneeled down, selected a pebble and stood back up. He murmured a few words then threw the pebble hard against the ground. There was no sound but the earth around the pebble cracked. Glib leapt back, and Cleft beamed at what he had done. "I can use rocks and stuff, 'cept they make bigger cracks."

"Dangerous but useful," Glib mused. He looked at Cinch. "Thanks for bringing him. It is much appreciated. Are you going to tell his mother he's joining Snow's Blood?"

"I'll handle it," Cinch agreed. "It's better than the life he's living at the moment. His mother is a washerwoman, his father a laborer. Both want something better for their son."

"Cinch, before you go, we must talk about Centar. I would encourage you to angle Snow's Blood towards Centar as we travel. The state is building up reserves against us. If we let it get too strong we will have to go through another meaningless battle."

"Since when have you become captain of Snow's Blood?"

"We should hit Centar while they're down."

Cinch held back his shoulders and stared at Glib. "I am the captain and I will decide what is final."

"The abbess said we must do this! She said you and I were going to become

two of the best-known men on the peninsula. To do that we must accomplish the tasks that are set for us. *We must not* shy away from them." Glib silenced himself and looked sheepishly at his spellsword unit. The men were either looking away or staring straight at the two combatants. Glib felt bad - a leader should not lose his temper in front of his men. And he just had. He would have to remedy the situation. "Thank you for finding a new addition to the unit," Glib said formally. "It is much appreciated." Glib indicated that Cleft should fall into line with the other mercenaries.

Cinch turned and left the spellsword unit without saying another word. The expression on his face was unreadable and he kept his shoulders held stiffly back. Glib watched the new captain with spite. Everything had been better when Snow Angler was alive.

Once Cinch had rounded the hill Glib turned back to his men. This was the core of his unit and he couldn't let his run-in with Cinch upset their routine. After training was over he would have to introduce Cleft to the other men. Glib crossed his arms and stared at those waiting for him to give instruction. "Did I tell you to stop?" At Glib's prompting the mercenaries suddenly started training again. Glib looked away in embarrassment - he was only sixteen years old and he was already acting like a short-tempered sergeant.

Sweat lathered Glib. Midway into the training session with his men he had decided to join them. He couldn't watch while they suffered - he needed to keep up his fitness as well. Unfortunately he found it difficult to stay with some of the older men - their superior size, strength and stamina overwhelmed him. None had said anything to him though. Glib was the most adept at magic in the unit and was fair to everyone. None of the mercenaries had reason to complain about Glib.

The mercenaries had returned to camp but Glib remained behind the hill. He had a friend he needed to call. He knelt close to the rocky ground and shouted Protector's name. He saw the werehound only rarely - most of the time he was too busy training his unit. Protector arrived not long after Glib first called him. Glib smiled and gave Protector a fierce hug, then stood and pointed at the top of the hill. *We're going up there.*

Protector didn't need further encouragement. He broke away from Glib and loped up the hill, sending a shower of pebbles and rocks down the slope. The hill was not steep and the top was easy to reach; this was the best place Glib could get a good view of the landscape. He also wanted to pray. He had ignored the Outlendian god in the past few months, which shamed him. The Outlendian god kept him alive - Glib at least owed prayer in return.

The muscles in Glib's legs strained as he climbed the hill. If he were back in Color Gash he would struggle with this climb, but after his months of training it was an easy hike. He soon neared the top of the hill. The hill was not tall but in such flat country Glib could see a large distance. Below him was the mercenary camp, where small human figures moved back and forth. Glib was worried those figures might be able to see Protector, but from this distance they would think the werehound a boulder or trick of the light.

Glib turned the other way. The plain stretching before him was flat. In the distance he could see a green mountain range, but before that there was only rocky terrain. In that direction lay Centar. Glib wanted Cinch to angle Snow's Blood towards there if he could.

Glib turned to the south-west (towards the southern part of Centar) and knelt.

The rocks hurt his knees but he ignored the discomfort. He closed his eyes and could feel a cool breeze brushing against his skin. He was aware of Protector's presence and could hear the werehound panting heavily. Glib prayed. He prayed to the Outlendian god first, then the gods of other states. It felt good to be here alone, sharing with The States' gods .

No visions came to Glib; there were no spectacular revelations. But whenever Glib spoke to The States' gods it felt as though his head were cleared. He could think better after praying to The States' gods. He opened his eyes and felt the rocks against his kneecaps. Once again he became aware of his shirt flapping in the breeze. He stood and admired the view for a few minutes, then decided to head back to camp.

He began to descend the hill. Above him the werehound howled, a soft, mournful cry. Glib doubted whether those in the mercenary camp could hear it. Perhaps Protector was praying to the god of werehounds, Glib thought. But the werehound's voice did not sound like a prayer. It sounded like a lament. It sounded like mourning.

Protector cut off his howling and bounded after Glib. He showed no sign of what he had just been doing. He darted around his master on the slope (almost causing Glib to fall), his tongue hanging from his maw and his manner playful. But Glib thought he saw chagrin in the werehound's eyes. Those cries Glib heard were not cries of happiness or bonding. There was something much more primal and much despondent about them. Glib was determined to find out what those howls meant. *What's wrong?* Glib asked.

Death is coming to this land. I am sad.

Don't be, Glib said. *We share a bond.*

Glib ignored the werehound and continued down the hill. With many unnecessary thoughts now gone from his mind, Glib was able to understand what the Outlendian god wanted of him. During his prayer time he realized something: that Outlend should invade Centar, except Cinch should not be the leader of Snow's Blood. If Cinch led Snow's Blood into Centar the mercenary company would come to a bloody end, but if Glib attained co-leadership they would survive. It was Glib's duty to help lead Snow's Blood into Centar. He was the only person who could lead Snow's Blood into the enemy state and out again without them being completely destroyed.

Glib was well-pleased with his work. He sat in a chair next to Cinch's command table and arched his fingers. Some of the mercenaries may have doubted Cinch's and Glib's youth but their skepticism was being proved wrong. Though Cinch still thought he controlled Snow's Blood, Glib had been adding innovations to the company and silently undermining Cinch's authority. Glib was certain he could make the company more efficient.

Despite ignoring Glib's advice at first Cinch had come to grudgingly accept it. Snow's Blood was angling towards Centar and it would only be a matter of days before the company was on the Centarian border. At the moment Glib and Cinch were forming several contingency plans. If Snow's Blood crossed into Centar there could be all sorts of unforeseen circumstances, and it was best if responses to these threats were made before they actually happened. Triffett was also in attendance at the meeting, occupying the unofficial rank of third in command (he had originally been second but Glib had successfully supplanted him).

"We should hold off entering Centar until we have word from the Outlendian army," Glib said.

"Sure Armorer thinks he not only controls the Outlendian army," Cinch answered, "but the Outlendian mercenary companies as well. He must learn that we aren't as weak a force as he thinks."

"If we enter Centar it will plunge us into a war we don't want. It is acceptable to station ourselves near Centar's border, but any further..."

Cinch rose and slammed his fist on the command table. "Are you the captain of this company, Glib? Ultimately it is my choice as to what happens. Come." Cinch walked around the table and out of the tent.

Glib rose and followed; Triffett slunk behind the young man. When Glib reached the outside of the tent Cinch pointed to the east. The green hills of Centar dominated the horizon. Beyond that - though they could not be seen - were emerald fields, so different from the brown plains of Outlend. Glib put his hands on his hips and looked at where Cinch was pointing.

"They will seek to destroy us if they can," Cinch said. "The coastal states have always hated Outlend. They think it an insult that we are stronger than them. We have plains for grazing cattle and sheep, and trade advantages with Ref, the Commonlands, the nomads and even the natives in the rainforests to the north. The coastal states - especially Centar - would destroy us if they had the opportunity. We must act quickly. We must show them how powerful we are, even if it means dancing across Centar's border."

"Stop thinking of Centar as another country," Glib scolded the captain. "The States is powerful because of its unity. Outlend is the only state that could survive on its own, but even then our lifestyle would be sorely affected. We can't act too heavily-handedly with Centar. I think you'll find they're willing to negotiate. We must always remember that we are part of the same *country*."

Cinch turned to Triffett, who was listening to the discussion with his arms crossed. "What is your opinion on this matter, Sergeant?"

"I have no opinion," Triffett grimaced. "I leave it to you and Glib to quarrel."

Cinch scowled and looked away from the sergeant. "You've changed a lot since we left Color Gash, Glib."

"So have you."

Shouts echoed through the camp. Glib's hand instinctively strayed to the hilt of the sword strapped to his side. Though he didn't enjoy wearing the sword he had come to don it whenever he was involved in discussions with Cinch. It gave him an edge over the new captain, he believed.

The shouts grew louder and the three commanders of Snow's Blood became more tense. Cinch had drawn his sword and was holding it in front of him. Triffett was armed with a long knife but did not draw it; instead he listened keenly to the sounds in the camp with his mouth set in a firm line. Cinch saw a soldier run from a tent and called him out. "What is happening?"

"Don't know," the soldier shouted, "but I'm getting ready just in case."

"Good man," Cinch murmured.

Glib positioned himself behind and to the right of Cinch, and Triffett moved to the left. If a raid managed to penetrate this far they would need room to fight. Glib had his sword drawn now. It felt awkward and heavy in his grasp. He wished for the simplicity of a staff and bow but knew he would not have enough time to reach his tent for those weapons. Glib was still confident he could fight well with a sword.

A horseman skittered around the corner of one of the tent aisles. His mount was lathered and the horseman was pushing it to the limit. Glib frowned - a horse that

tired would not be able to make a clean escape from the camp. Glib was ready to strike out at the horse but when it neared the three men, the horsemen reined in. His mount whinnied and its hooves scored the dust as it halted. The horsemen wasted no time in dismounting and stumbling to Cinch. He held a scroll fastened by a crumbling wax seal. He gave the seal to Cinch and between breaths said, "The other states are allying themselves with Centar. They think Outlend is forming an army to invade all of them."

"What makes them think that?"

The messenger pointed to the north. "Sure Armorer and his men are not far that way. There are another two mercenary companies further along the border of Centar. Also, Outlend is maintaining only a skeleton force along the Refian and Commonlands borders. The other states think Outlend will conduct an invasion."

"Has Sure Armorer told them they are wrong?"

"He has tried. It didn't work."

Cinch cracked open the seal and read the scroll. Then he handed the scroll to Glib, who perused it closely. When Glib saw what was written upon the missive he frowned.

"The other states are providing physical support this time," the messenger continued. "They are stocking the Centarian force with men and food and weapons. The Rocks and Caern Territories are using their gems and minerals to buy anything else that is needed."

"What is Sure Armorer planning to do?" Cinch asked.

"Invade. It's the only choice. Centar's force needs to be quashed before it can grow any stronger. That won't happen if Outlend hangs back and watches. The general is afraid that if Centar's army is allowed to grow too strong, it will seriously threaten the well-being of The States. Centar may soon have an army to rival Outlend's own."

Glib decided to speak. "I think it is about time we re-evaluated our situation, Cinch. Centar has formed alliances with Rocks, Mask, Caern and Tern, according to the message. It also says the other two Wind Batteredds are likely to follow Tern's lead. Which leaves Morrow as the only state not getting itself involved in the conflict."

"Cowards," Cinch murmured with a smile.

"Does the general want our assistance?" Glib asked the messenger.

"Any help he can get," the messenger said. "I wouldn't have killed my horse riding here if he didn't need the help." The messenger indicated his mount, which looked as though it was having trouble standing up.

It will need its throat slit soon, Glib thought. Then he looked at the messenger and Glib. The only real choice they had was to help Sure Armorer, and that involved invading Centar. Before this the situation had been different - the other states were not providing Centar with men, food and weapons then. Now Centar's power had to be quelled quickly and efficiently. If it wasn't many unnecessary deaths would be the only result. "I say we join Sure Armorer," Glib said. "Let Centar see that we're not going to let them get away with anything."

"Very different from your opinion of just a few moments ago," Cinch said, smiling. "So who was right? Myself, or you?"

Glib ignored Cinch's baiting. "The circumstances are different now. Although if we invade Centar we would only be confirming the other states' suspicions. They really would believe Outlend has been planning to invade them all along. If we stay on our side of the border, however..."

"If we stay on our side of the border they will raise an army and invade *us*," Cinch stressed. "That cannot be allowed to happen."

Glib felt like refuting Cinch's words, but calmed himself and nodded instead. As Cinch had told him, it was ultimately his decision as to the future of Snow's Blood and Glib had to respect that. And there was truth in Cinch's words - there was a fair possibility the alliance of states would invade Outlend if left alone. Glib spoke to the messenger. "We will have a scroll prepared saying we are ready to aid Outlend if need be. I think the captain will agree with me on this."

"Aye."

Glib was relieved that he and Cinch actually agreed on something. "Go and sponge down," Glib told the messenger. "There is a bath tent not far from here. The sergeant will escort you. While you are bathing a message will be penned. By the time you have finished it will be ready to go. We will provide you with a new horse." Glib grimaced at the messenger's wheezing steed. It fell onto the ground, its legs crumpling beneath it. Glib's face was grim. He took Triffett's long knife, walked to the horse, knelt down and slit its throat. "Somebody had to do it," Glib said when he saw Cinch looking at the horse in disgust.

Triffett led the messenger away and Glib and Cinch were left standing alone. It was less than six months after they had joined Snow's Blood and already they had worked their way up to become the company's commanders (although Glib's position was a nominal one). The invasion of Centar would test their mettle. Glib was afraid of what might happen, but felt he would be able to perform; he was not so sure of Cinch. Glib stood up and wiped the blade on his trousers.

Chapter 11 - Spire

Abbey and Girl were only now understanding how difficult it was for two girls to travel alone. They walked along the dusty road east of Color Gash and to the north of Core. Both were armed with staves and daggers and both had already used their weapons twice. One of the confrontations could hardly be classed as life-threatening - some miles outside of Core a drunkard had accosted them on the road. He had been interested in their bodies and tried to express that interest physically. Three hard strikes from their staves was all that was needed for the man to crumple over in pain.

The other assault was much more serious. It happened two days after their confrontation with the intoxicated man. Three bandits had leapt from behind rocks and accosted them. They wanted money and possessions but both women knew they would take something else if they could get it. Girl had been the one to save them, for which Abbey was glad. One of the men, an unkempt being with dirty shoulder-length hair and week's growth of beard, had come forward to rife through Girl's possessions. Girl had stabbed him in the gut. At their comrade's scream the other two men had run forward. Using the dead man as a shield Girl's dagger flashed out and scored one bandit across the face; the other bandit circled Abbey warily, then was blindsided by Girl. The only choice Girl had was to stab him in the heart.

Girl and Abbey had wondered what to do with the man with the face wound. They finally decided to steal whatever coin or valuables were in the bandits' possessions and leave them alone. They neutralized the wounded man's threat by tying him to his dead companions with a length of material. It would eventually give way but Girl and Abbey would be far-gone by then.

All this had happened two days ago and they were still laughing about it. Abbey was actually starting to feel sore from smiling. "Teach them to prey on innocent women," Abbey said.

"Did you see the drunk, the one near Core? Do that to any man and you won't have to worry about him for a while."

Abbey laughed. She had been laughing so hard and for so long she was beginning to get a stitch. It was difficult to journey while having so much fun. Ahead was a boulder surrounded by a copse of stunted bushes and trees. "Why don't we stop there for a while?" Abbey said, pointing. "I think we've earned a rest."

"It must be almost tiffin by now. And I'm getting hungry."

"What's to eat?" Abbey asked.

"Slices of ham with bread. Apple juice. I think we've got some saldi pastry for dessert."

"I wish we had something sweeter," Abbey lamented.

"Saldi pastry it is," Girl said. "It's nice, though."

"Salt mixed with oil. That's all it is to me."

"Glib likes it."

"Do you think Glib is thinking of us now?" Girl asked.

"I hope so. But if he's part of a mercenary company who knows what he might be doing? He could be fighting bands of outlaws, or scouting the land ahead of the company. He's probably not thinking of us, in truth."

"Do you think he has found another woman?"

"I hope not." Abbey shuddered at the thought.

"Abbey?"

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking of something."

If Girl had been thinking of something she usually would have said it by now. She must be nervous if she was introducing Abbey to the thought slowly. Subtlety and tact were two words not usually associated with Girl Chandler. "You can tell me what you've been thinking about," Abbey said quietly. "We are best friends."

"You know how we decided to give Glib the choice between us when we catch up to him? That way one of us will lose out. But what if we let Glib have *both* of us? Neither of us would lose him and I think he would be happy with the idea. How about you?"

Abbey frowned, the skin between her eyes wrinkling. "Abbey! How could you say something like that? Glib would never agree to it anyway. He would choose you above me. You know that."

Girl sat down and drew her knees to her chest. "I was always jealous of you and Glib. When you were in the bakery I always wondered if he was looking at you."

"I don't think so. You were his world. He hated me... at least until a few weeks before he left." Abbey sat next to her friend. "I was jealous of you, to tell the truth. *Very* jealous. I couldn't imagine you and Glib being together."

"I never realized you felt that way," Girl said quietly. "Not until we became friends."

"That's how it was," Abbey admitted, biting her lower lip.

"What do you think of my proposal? I know it sounds weird, but..."

"You were very thoughtful to suggest it to me. And very unselfish. But if that happened, wouldn't we get jealous of each other being with Glib?"

"I don't know," Girl said.

"We should wait until we meet Glib," Abbey recommended. "Then we can decide."

"I think you're right." Girl stretched out in the shade. "I feel like a rest after tiffin. How about you?"

"Sounds good." Abbey lay next to her friend and smiled. Since leaving Color Gash they were not governed by their parents' rules and strictures. Since leaving Color Gash they could do what they wanted. They could take as long as they liked to catch up with Glib. Abbey rested her head on a cool rock and took a bite of saldi pastry. For the moment this life suited her fine.

Abbey could understand why the town's name was Wayward. It looked as though somebody had thrown the place here as an afterthought. It was situated nowhere in particular and the sun that shone on the town was *hot*. Though Wayward was only small, it looked like a place that provided for itself. Stunted crops grew outside the town proper and there were shops along the main thoroughfare. Few men walked the streets at this time - most were working in the wheat and maize fields.

When Abbey and Girl entered Wayward's only tavern, they were pleased to find

it filled mostly with women. There was a male innkeeper and three other men sitting at a table in the corner, but there were about half a dozen women gossiping while their men were at work. Girl moved to the bar and asked for a mug of apple juice; Abbey followed her outgoing friend's lead.

They moved to a table near the bar and waited for their beverages. Abbey was a little afraid the men in the corner might approach them but none did anything. Soon Abbey began to relax. With so many women here neither of them was in danger. Her body lost some of its tenseness and she allowed herself to slump in her chair. She was sweaty and hot and wished for a bath, but her and Girl's coinage did not allow for such luxuries. Maybe they would find a cold stream outside the town.

The innkeeper served the requested drinks. His eyes lingered on Abbey but he held his high and tried to maintain some decorum. "Twenty-five chinks for both drinks," the innkeeper told them. "I'll make it a special."

Girl rested her pouch on the table and counted thirty chinks. She slid it across to the innkeeper. "We need some information," she said.

Abbey thought more information might be forthcoming if *she* had actually asked for it - even without the extra five chinks. Girl was a typical underdeveloped teenager, but Abbey had attained her womanly features much sooner than her best friend. She'd had to put up with unwanted male attention for four years now.

"What information would you be looking for?" the innkeeper asked as he scooped the chinks into the apron that covered his bulging stomach.

"Information about a man. Do you know if someone named Glib Baker passed through here? He might have been part of a mercenary company."

The innkeeper rose his eyebrows. "Snow's Blood? They passed through here not three days back. Right shame Captain Angler died. Still, did a roaring trade when they came. They've got a new captain - Cinch is his name."

Abbey and Girl looked at each other. This was all the information they needed. "Glib Baker is Cinch's best friend," Girl said, "so I assume we'll find them together."

The innkeeper frowned. "The captain was in the company of someone when he came through here, 'cept they weren't acting like best friends. They were arguing most of the time. The boy would have been about your age-" the innkeeper nodded at Girl "-same color hair as you, not very tall, wiry."

"That sounds like Glib," Abbey agreed.

"Do you know what direction Snow's Blood was taking?" Girl asked the innkeeper.

"East, towards Centar. There's trouble brewing. If I may be so bold, I don't think it wise that girls like you should be near Centar right now. It's going to get pretty hectic. I have rooms..."

"No thank you," Girl said, rising and finishing her apple juice. "That won't be necessary."

Abbey knew the innkeeper was trying to pitch his tavern and wisely followed Girl's lead. She finished the apple juice, thanked the innkeeper for his time and help and walked with Girl towards the tavern's door. She kept her voice low once they were out on the street. "Should we take the innkeeper's advice?" she asked. "If there is war in Centar..."

"We're almost there," Girl said. "Where's your sense of adventure? Come on."

Abbey shrugged and followed Girl. If they walked hard they could catch up to the mercenary company within a week, but Abbey thought it better if they both purchased mounts. She suggested this to Girl and was glad that her friend agreed. On

horseback they could reach Snow's Blood in three - at the most, four - days. Abbey imagined seeing Glib and Cinch again. Everyone would be happily reunited, but Cinch and Glib might have a lot on their minds because of the trouble with Centar. It looked as though they would catch up with Glib and Cinch only when the events that took place started to become interesting. Unfortunately Abbey didn't know if that was good - or bad.

The cream of Outlend's military was in the command tent. Such a concentration of generals and captains had not been seen in Outlend for over a hundred years. General Sure Armorer dominated the others. He stood head and shoulders above them, commanding them simply with his gaze. Glib felt respect for the general but was not cowed by him.

Cinch and Glib were in the command tent, as well as commanders from two other mercenary units. Triffett had wanted to join the parley but the general had not allowed him. Triffett had become angry, claiming that Glib did not even occupy a rank, but had soon calmed himself and walked away. Now there was only Cinch and Glib, the two other mercenary commanders, and a selection of Sure Armorer's officers. No Outlendian army had staged an invasion for over a hundred years and there was tension surrounding this one. Everyone knew full well that if the invasion went poorly, Outlend could open *itself* to invasion by Ref and the Commonlands. Everyone was determined to succeed.

The general moved to the table in the center of the command tent and moved a group of cast-iron units across the Centarian border. "It is my belief that the invasion must be executed carefully. We can't rush into Centar - doing so may cause high casualties. And with those casualties will come complaints from wives, mothers and families. Centar must be entered with care."

Glib didn't agree with Sure Armorer's statement. Still, he would see what the other commanders had to say before he voiced his opinion.

The commander from one of the other mercenary companies spoke. "Units should be sent to the north-western and south-western borders of Centar. If we don't occupy that territory Centar may succeed in outflanking us. They would cut us off from our supplies and we would have to forage the land while trying to fight the Centarian army on its own ground."

There was murmured agreement to the commander's words, especially amongst Sure Armorer's officers. The general nodded sagely and said to the mercenary commander, "You are right. I shall take that advice in mind."

"We must remember that the longer we leave Centar to rebuild, the stronger it will get," Cinch reminded them. "If we take too long deciding what to do we will be faced with a cohesive and well-trained force. But if we hit them hard..."

My thoughts exactly. Glib listened patiently as Sure Armorer agreed with Cinch, then conversed with his officers as to the weaknesses and strengths of each proposal. When Glib was confident everyone had finished voicing their opinions, he spoke up quietly. "May I suggest something?"

The general held up his hands. "You may. Everyone has equal voice here."

"I agree with my captain, Cinch Tutor," Glib said. "We should hit Centar hard and fast. If they are left alone too long they may even create a force numerically superior to our own - with better armor and arms. The Centarian alliance, as I believe it should be called - it is *not* a Centarian army - is forming a short distance outside of Spire, Centar's capital. That is where we want to strike. A company should dash into

Centar, foraging and staying mostly on horseback, and reach Spire as quickly as possible. The company may be only two or three hundred-strong but they can harry the Centarian alliance while waiting for the main force to catch up. Effectively we will be able to prevent the solid cohesion of the Centarian alliance, and defeat them while they are still scattered. Even if they retreat inside the city, we can lay siege to it."

"Have you studied military strategy, Glib Baker?" the general asked.

Glib swallowed. It sounded like the general was disdainful of him. "I studied some military strategy in a tutelage hut back in Color Gash. And a little of The States' history."

"You must have had an excellent teacher. The precision with which you presented your argument was... impressive. However we can't let this company you describe get too far ahead of the main force - it may be attacked by a large Centarian unit and be disabled."

The men who were present agreed with the general.

"And there is another problem. Which company will we assign this task? It will be dangerous."

"Snow's Blood will do it." Cinch stepped forward. There was fire in his eyes and a proud clench to his jaw.

"Are you sure about this?" Sure Armorer rose his eyebrows. He was a wily campaigner and had seen youth try to be courageous before. Most of the time youth ended up dead because of that courage. Glib could see the general doubted if Cinch knew the consequences of his actions.

But he stepped forward anyway. "I am forming a unit within Snow's Blood. It consists of spellswords - those who are adept at sorcery *and* fighting. Sorcelling skills will be needed, and my men will form the scouting group for Snow's Blood."

The general looked at Glib. "You will...? Really?"

Glib tried not to frown. The general was having doubts about him too. "I have seriously thought about this, General. I am sure it is the best thing to do."

The general suddenly turned and held his arms towards his officers. "Youth has shown us the way. Snow's Blood will be allowed to strike for Spire. And units of one hundred each will be sent to the north and south to prevent us from getting outflanked. The main force - which is where I will be - will follow behind Snow's Blood. I'm sure we can defeat the alliance and show the other states that Outlend is not as weak as they think."

Glib wasn't foolish - he knew the reason Sure Armorer agreed to his idea was because Snow's Blood took most of the risk. This way he would not have to sacrifice any of his own men's lives until victory looked to be certain. The general was adept at letting other men do his work for him.

The general dismissed those present and Glib and Cinch walked into the Outlendian day. There was a grim expression on Cinch's face, but he didn't say anything to Glib. There was a grim expression on Glib's face as well - he would be leading a unit of less than one hundred men (he had found many soldiers with sorcelling skills amongst the regular Outlendian army, although few were good enough to be considered adept) into the heart of an enemy state, when they had barely any training and no combat experience whatsoever. He didn't know what he had let himself in for.

This was the event that would test the unit's mettle. Glib gripped a longsword and watched the deserted village below. At least, it looked deserted. The spellword unit

was now across Centar's border and this was the first sign of civilization they had seen. The residents of the village looked to have been evacuated, but there was a fair chance this was an ambush. It was the spellsworn unit's duty to deal with it.

As Glib walked down the hill he admired the village - the cottages were white with brown thatched roofs. Each had its own vegetable and herb garden. The lawns around the village were emerald green and the village's crops were growing proudly. There was a slight chill in the air, but Glib liked it that way. If he ever got the chance he would enjoy living here.

Glib signaled to one of the men walking opposite him. "What is this village's name?" The man was from the regular Outlendian army - he had been assigned to the spellsworn unit to keep an eye on proceedings and report intelligence back to Sure Armorer.

"Arbor, I think. According to the maps."

Glib grunted in reply. He looked to the left and right - his men were descending the hill towards the village in a scraggly line. If they were hit by a cohesive force now they would be decimated, but Glib was confident he was doing the right thing. A wide sweep of the village was required. Glib was worried as he neared the village. There was no sound except for the chirrup of birds in the trees. This sounded too foreboding, too... inauspicious. Once Glib had stepped onto the road leading through Arbor he knew he couldn't turn back. His men were following him and they relied on him for leadership. Glib stopped and considered getting some of those who were adept at sorcery to source out human activity. Then he continued walking - it was best if the unit soldiered well before they started adding embellishments.

"Quiet," the man next to him said.

"Very quiet."

The man next to Glib had a crossbow and dagger; Glib thought that might be better than the longsword he was holding. With a crossbow, if an ambush occurred the soldier would be able to kill one man immediately. Not so with a longsword.

"Where do we go from here?"

"We check every house in the village." It was best if they were methodical - one of these houses might be holding a unit of fifty Centarians. If the spellsworn unit bypassed that house, the Centarians could wreak havoc on Snow's Blood - or even the main Outlendian force.

The village centered on the main road. All houses in the village faced towards the road regardless of their position. The main road was no more than a depression in the grass but most States' villages were like this. Glib judged there to be perhaps thirty houses in the whole place. He was angry he couldn't see any sheep, cattle or fowl. The Centarian alliance was stripping the land as they retreated. Glib grimaced. He would do the same thing if he was in their position, but it was still infuriating for him. Glib approached a house just off the main road. He nodded at the Outlendian soldier, indicating they were to investigate it. He then pointed to four other soldiers and indicated houses to either side.

The house Glib and the Outlendian soldier were about to enter looked the same as any other house in the village. It was a little bigger perhaps, Glib thought as he looked from the house to others in the village, and there were two steps leading to the door, but those were the only differences. Glib and the soldier approached the front door from either side. Doing this was much different from the pitched battle with Centar - this was more a battle of wills, a battle to see who was able to withstand the intense mental pressure. A pitched battle relied on unit cohesiveness and attrition.

Glib reached towards the door and wasn't surprised to find it locked. He nodded at the soldier again and kicked the door; his partner followed suit. On the third kick Glib and his partner broke through. Instead of rushing inside they kept their distance - it was best to treat everything with caution. The Outlendian soldier moved into the cottage first, his crossbow held cocked before him. Glib followed the soldier and was surprised to find the cottage well-lit. It looked like they were in some sort of living room. Glib moved through to the kitchen while the Outlendian soldier checked the bedrooms. They met each other back in the living room. "I saw nothing," the Outlendian soldier said. "You?"

Glib shook his head. "Deserted."

"This place looks pretty posh for a cottage, doesn't it?" the Outlendian soldier commented.

"I'd say the owner of this place might be the mayor of Arbor. And we must remember that Centar enjoys a higher standard of living than Outlend."

"Need we be reminded?"

Someone entered the front door and Glib whirled around with his sword held ready. The Outlendian soldier aimed his crossbow and was about to release its catch when he saw the newcomer was one of the spellsword unit. Glib lowered his sword. "What news?"

The young man crossed his arms. "Noise is coming from one of the cottages. Seeing nothing much is happening we thought we'd ask your advice."

"There's nothing here," Glib said. "We'll go." Glib recognized the man as someone they had picked up two weeks ago. He had been an apprentice cartwright - albeit not a very good one - who had a strange knack for straightening the wheels and joints he didn't make properly in the first place. Needless to say, his master had been glad to get rid of him (the apprentice was twenty-three years of age - far too old for an apprentice) and the apprentice was glad to be gone. Glib left the cottage and spoke to the apprentice. "Let's see what's going on." He followed the apprentice off the main road into the village. There was a cluster of people around one of the houses. The house looked a little more run-down than the others in the village. "I can't hear anything."

"Get closer," the apprentice said.

Glib obeyed the apprentice, moving near the cottage's wall. He listened quietly. He heard scratching inside, and the shifting of furniture across the floor. Glib considered assigning a platoon of men to investigate the cottage but then thought it would be better if he checked the cottage himself - leading by example would lead to respect from his men. Glib signaled to the Outlendian soldier. "Want to risk your life again?"

"We've looked in one cottage and didn't get killed. I don't see any problem looking in this one."

The cottage's door was unlatched; Glib opened it quietly.

Something large and dark bounded towards Glib, who panicked and thrust his sword at the spectral shape. The Outlendian soldier reeled back and released the catch on his crossbow. Men were behind Glib with their weapons drawn. Glib stumbled and fell backwards. He scrambled desperately for his sword. The dark shape was on top of him. The dark shape was-

-a dog. The hound licked his face, pleased to see a human being. More dogs left the cottage, as did cats and a few pet birds. Glib smiled in relief, then blushed red. He had fallen over while being accosted by a dog - that was sure to increase his regard

among the unit.

The Outlendian soldier looked red too. "I didn't hit anything, did I?" He moved into the cottage and looked around. Glib waited for him to answer. "My bolt's on the floor."

"That's lucky," Glib said. He got up and wiped the grass from his trousers. He could at least *try* to look dignified.

"A false alarm," the Outlendian soldier said as he came out of the cottage. "We should be thankful there weren't Centarians inside."

"I agree totally," Glib replied.

"Well, Lieutenant, where do we go now?"

Glib liked being called 'Lieutenant.' It made him sound important. He wasn't officially a lieutenant, but had been promoted to the honorary position so his judgment would not be brooked when he was leading the spellsworn unit. Glib was glad Triffett wasn't here - if Triffett heard him being called a lieutenant, Glib suspected it would be enough to make the Commonlander lose his temper. Glib thought of the soldier's question. "We return to Snow's Blood and tell the captain Arbor is secure. "Twenty men can go back; the rest will stay here. I'll stay here."

"I'll go back," the Outlendian soldier volunteered.

"Fine." Glib sat on a rock that formed part of the cottage's garden and watched the Outlendian soldier as he selected the men to be taken back to Snow's Blood. Soon a score of Glib's troops were returning the way they came. Glib ordered his own men to form platoons of ten and secure the borders of the village. A dozen people stayed with Glib. They stood talking, joking and watching the village they had just taken. They were still slightly wary, but their minds were at ease.

Glib's mind, however, was not. He was worried about the men who were returning to Snow's Blood - could they be ambushed on the way back? - and the men who were securing the perimeters of the village - would they be attacked by a Centarian force? Spire was still many miles distant, and Glib didn't know what state his mind would be in when he finally reached the city. Glib wished for the dried leaf the nomads smoked to relax themselves - he certainly felt nervy enough to have one. Glib knew exactly why he was so worried - the invasion of Centar had begun.

The grandeur of Spire. Glib thought the scene was magnificent; the view was certainly deserved. All the way into Centar, Glib's unit had to withstand the brunt of Centar's assaults. They had been infrequent and poorly-executed, but the spellsworn unit had acted as a buffer for Snow's Blood and the main Outlendian army. They had lost a dozen men in the skirmishes so far and a further ten were injured.

Glib was pleased with the performance of his men, however - whenever Centar and the allied states attacked, his men held their ground and fought grimly. It was true there was little risk of the unit being defeated (the strongest force to attack them was a cavalry unit of twenty), but these small victories would lead to larger ones later on. Glib was most pleased with the skirmish that occurred two days ago - the one involving the cavalry unit. The spellsworn unit had buckled first but then individual members of the unit had begun to perform sorcery. Not only did it spook Centar's horses, it also spooked her men. The spellsworn unit soon cleared the path for Snow's Blood and the Outlendian army.

Glib would have liked the sorcery to be performed at his *command*, but was still pleased with the way things were going. Snow's Blood was now within striking distance of Spire. Glib had been ordered to wait here while Snow's Blood caught up.

Glib was not complaining about that. He sat down, rolled a cigarette and looked at the grandeur of Spire. Spire was a coastal city that relied on trade with the other two Wind Batteredds and the territories for its prosperity. Its central position between the Wind Batteredds and the territories made it the perfect place for commerce. Along with Core it was the largest city in The States (Glib's home town was slightly smaller than these two, but larger than the twin cities of Rondolli and Solet). The tower of Spire (Centar's answer to the Tower of The Six) looked splendid in the distance. The tower was tall and conical, with alternating blue and white colors that curled all the way to its tip. It dominated Spire's horizon. *Soon we might be inside that tower*, Glib thought.

"Never thought I'd see Spire at the age of seventeen."

Glib started at the sound of Cinch's voice. He turned around and looked at the standing captain. Cinch was dressed in full battle armor and holding a spyglass in one hand. "You scared me."

"I thought I might. You should get that cigarette out of your mouth - it's not good for you."

"It's my choice."

"I suppose you're right." Cinch handed Glib the spyglass. "Look at the city through this. You might see something more interesting."

Glib took the spyglass from Cinch tentatively - spyglasses were expensive and if one was broken it was difficult to replace. "This must be the best invention anyone has come up with in the past hundred years," Glib commented.

"I agree with that," Cinch said. "Now look."

Glib held the spyglass to his eye. The walls of Spire looked closer and Glib couldn't help but flinch involuntarily. Then he moved the spyglass towards the scene below the city walls. An army was milling there. Units were training and there were preparations going on throughout the small villages outside of the city. When Glib had seen Spire without the spyglass all this activity had just blended with the horizon; now he knew the true extent of Centar's power. "I hope that's all the soldiers they have," Glib said.

"Undoubtedly there will be more in the city. It's our job to beat them - that's what I'm worried about."

"So am I," Glib told his friend. "So am I."

Glib felt safe back in the command tent in the midst of the Outlendian army. He couldn't help but think of the Centarian alliance training less than two miles away, but he was in the core of the Outlendian army now and it would take an atrocious battle for the alliance to penetrate this far. Glib was also glad his spellsword unit had been absorbed back into Snow's Blood. Sure Armorer, Cinch, Triffett, the two other mercenary captains and Sure Armorer's officers were all here. Each had a grim set to their countenance that had not been present when they were in Outlend deciding what to do. All of them knew that blood and death would soon come - and Glib was no stranger to that either.

"We chose this path for ourselves," Glib said quietly to Cinch, who was standing next to him. He was beginning to feel nervous about the upcoming battle and suspected Cinch might feel the same.

"I know. Did I tell you Trix Vulgàr joined Snow's Blood while you were away? Wasn't he the captain you spoke to in Color Gash? I was going to invite him to the command tent, but he isn't an officer so..."

Glib wondered if Cinch knew about Trix Vulgàr's past, when he hid under a

wagon in a battle until the fighting had abated.

"He is a good man," Cinch continued. "I would be honored if he occupied a higher rank. He is only a common soldier now."

"He is not only a good man, but an honorable one," Glib replied.

Sure Armorer called the meeting to order and everyone present fell silent. It was obvious the general was relishing this invasion - he was dressed in a suit of plate armor and walked with his hands behind his back, his very actions bespeaking command. He was also cultivating a fine, white mustache. "The operation we are staging has went well thus far. In part we have to thank Glib Baker and his spellword unit for that. And of course we cannot forget Cinch Tutor, captain of Snow's Blood." The general inclined his head towards Glib and Cinch respectively, and the officers present applauded. "We are close to Spire now, except there is an army blocking our entrance to the city. Even if there was no army and we besieged Spire, it would be a long and costly exercise. We must decide how to go about subduing Centar and her allies. I need suggestions from all of you." The general fell into silence as he waited for an answer.

Near one side of the tent was a table with a replica of Spire and the terrain around the city. Surprisingly, Triffett moved to the table and pointed to the cast-iron markers that represented the Outlendian force. "We must strike hard. Centar and the allies are still disorganized and if we decimate them now, they will not be able to recover. Once we are sure Centar's strength is broken we can demand that the gates of the city be opened and enter triumphantly."

"You make the conquest sound easy, Sergeant," the general said.

"I recommend we wait." Glib said the words forcefully but with quiet conviction.

"Your reasoning as to this?" the general asked.

"We don't know how powerful Centar and the allies are. They could have another force further south - or north for that matter. They would most likely have a contingency plan in case we attack, the same as ourselves. If we wait we will confuse them. They won't know what to do."

"A reasonable argument," the general mused, "but we must remember that the longer we leave Centar alone, the more powerful it will become."

Glib decided he liked the general. He considered all things equally and was never in a rush to come to a decision. He was the sort of general an army should have - competent and compliant, yet direct. Glib could see how he had attained his current position.

"Captain Tutor, do you agree with your subordinate's position?"

Although he's not amiss to reminding someone of their place, Glib thought.

"In part. What he says about gauging Centar's strength is true. But their strength cannot be gauged if we sit here and do nothing. Reconnaissance missions to the north and south - and towards the force immediately in view - would be an excellent idea. By deploying reconnaissance units we would be able to get a better feel for Centar's working strength."

"An idea," the general said. "But you must remember, Captain, that the Centarian alliance did the same thing as we traveled into their territory - and look what happened to them." The general turned to the other mercenary captains. "Do either of you have anything to add?"

Both shook their heads.

"Then I must consult with my officers. Decisions such as these are not to be

taken hastily, nor should they suffer from procrastination. I will inform all of you of the action to be taken this afternoon. A messenger will come to get you. Until then, you are dismissed."

Glib and Cinch walked out of the command tent together. Glib felt uncomfortable walking shoulder-to-shoulder with him. He wanted to get back to his own tent and rest and not speak to Cinch at all. Luckily Cinch solved that problem for him - the captain walked away without saying a word. Glib didn't mind; it felt better this way. Glib started walking back to his own tent. It was no use worrying about what might happen with the spellsworn unit and Snow's Blood - the matter was entirely in the hands of the general now.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Baker!"

Glib groaned and blinked in the harsh light. He got up and realized his tent-flap was closed and that a man was calling to him from beyond. "What is it?" Glib asked, more than a little angry.

"General Armorer has requested your presence in the command tent."

"I'll be there in a moment."

"Yes Lieutenant. I'll tell him Lieutenant."

Glib realized it was probably mid-afternoon. He ate tiffin a while ago and since then had been trying to fall asleep on his pallet. Unfortunately he wasn't having much success - Glib was never able to sleep in the daytime. He got up and felt pounding in his skull. The headaches had come periodically since he entered Centar, but were getting better. Glib thought it might be because he had concentrated on reading textbooks in Color Gash. He smoothed his crumpled uniform. It was cool, and his uniform did not stick to him as it did in Outlend. Glib liked the climate in Centar - it was mild. He left his tent and saw Cinch walking some distance away. He ran to catch up with him. "Captain."

"Glib. Lieutenant. Have you received your summons yet?"

"I have."

"I wonder what direction General Armorer will take."

"Whatever is best," Glib said.

"My recommendation, then."

Glib wanted to growl.

Glib and Cinch were the last two officers to arrive. All eyes were upon them as they opened the tent-flap. Glib felt decidedly uncomfortable. Perhaps the general had already told everyone about his decision? Glib moved next to Triffett, who was standing tall and proud and smug, and Cinch fell in beside Glib. None of them made any gesture of greeting.

Sure Armorer was standing in the middle of his officers. His bearing brooked no argument - Glib thought he might have made an unpopular decision and the way he acted was a sign of who was in charge. Glib doubted if Cinch would think of anything as subtle as that. "Now that everyone is here I will tell you of my decision." Sure Armorer spoke without asking permission; Sure Armorer didn't *need* permission to start speaking. "I don't know if all of you will agree with me but I believe my decision to be the best. I-

Someone shouted outside the command tent. Sure Armorer paused and looked at the tent-flap. When there were more shouts he cursed under his breath, and when there was a cacophony of sounds he said, "Could someone tell me what is going on?"

"I'll check, sir," Triffett offered. He strode to the tent-flap, opened it and

looked outside. He was silent for a moment. "I don't know, sir. I..."

Sure Armorer shook his head and tried not to curse. He returned to paying his full attention to the officers present. "As I said, it was a difficult decision to make but I-" There was a scream some distance away, then a crescendo of shouts that almost turned into the roar. "What the hell?" the general stormed.

Glib felt tense. His hand strayed to the sword at his side (he always wore a sword in Sure Armorer's presence) and his instinct told him to draw it. But there was no danger here and Sure Armorer's officers might even think Glib was trying to kill the general. They would disable Glib quickly if that was the case.

Glib was not surprised when a man poked his head through the tent-flap. He addressed Sure Armorer. "General. Centar is attacking."

This was the best place for a view of the battle. Glib stood midway up the forested hill with the other commanders, watching the movements of each force's troops carefully. Centar appeared to be only harassing the Outlendian camp at the moment. Outlend was dug into their position and Centar would be foolish if it thought it could gain a victory over its larger opponent. Glib could hear the screams of battle even from here. "It's different from the battle on the border of Outlend and Centar."

"How do you mean?" General Armorer asked.

"This is more carefully planned. You can see there is a pattern to the Centarian cavalry's movements."

"The reason why this battle is more carefully planned is because Centar is fighting for its life. They didn't have enough to lose in the first battle. Now they do."

"What can *we* do?" Glib asked. "Except sit here and look stupid."

"Yesterday's generals led their men into battle. But if the general fell, morale plummeted. Today, being a commander is more an administration role. There will always be men who like to lead from the front, but I'm not one of them. I'd prefer a better chance at victory than a glorious death in defeat."

"Hmm." Glib sat down, hugged his knees to his chest and watched the skirmish unfolding.

A green sapling whipped back into Girl's face. Girl cursed and bent the sapling so hard that it almost broke. "Why does this forest have to be so thick?" She hitched up her skirts and scratched her legs in a most unladylike manner. "Doing all this for Glib better be worth it. If we get there and he's married to another woman..." Girl didn't need to finish her threat.

"I doubt if he would be. He's been too busy soldiering."

"Yeah, but you know what soldiers do in their spare time."

"No."

"The people who follow mercenary camps around? Who are they?"

Abbey shrugged. "I don't know."

"Never mind." Girl continued leading the way through the forest. Though she might have come from a noble family she was more worldly than her friend - and that made her the leader of the expedition.

"We should count our blessings," Abbey said. "At least it's cooler here than in Outlend."

"In Outlend you could see where you were going," Girl said irately. "Here it's a wonder more people don't get lost." Girl pushed her way through a thicket of saplings - and saw only more foliage ahead. "Damn."

"Girl! Don't-" Abbey paused. "Do you hear that?"

Girl cocked her head in the air and listened. "I don't know. What am I meant to hear?"

"It sounds like... shouting. Maybe we're nearing Snow's Blood. Since we've entered Centar the villages we've passed all look like they've been used by an army."

Girl said nothing to Abbey, but listened instead. Finally she said, "I think you're right. I *do* hear something." With renewed vigor Girl held up her skirts and pushed through the forest. "Let's see what it is."

"Girl," Abbey called. "We should use caution. What if it's bandits? What if we walk into the arms of the Centarian army?"

“Then we go back into the forest,” Girl said. “Centar’s best tracker couldn’t find us in here.”

Abbey grimaced, hitched up her skirts and followed her friend.

“I wonder how many Outlendian women of our age can say they’ve visited Centar. Of course, Father goes there all the time on buying trips, but he never invited me along. He always said I would get into too much mischief.”

“Was he right?”

Girl smiled at her friend. “What do you think?” They continued walking for a while, and Girl said, “The first thing I’m going to do when we reach Snow’s Blood is order a bath. Then I’ll order the soldiers to put out fresh clothes for me, and scented leaves. *And* I will expect a tent of my own - I don’t want to sleep next to some snoring, smelly soldier.”

“The first thing I’m going to do when we reach Snow’s Blood is ask for some food.” Abbey said.

“Oh yeah, I’m going to do that too.”

The ground they walked on gradually began to slope downwards. Girl was glad of the extra gradient - her slight weight assisted her in pushing through the foliage. After walking for about ten minutes the forest became thinner, and she was confident it would soon give way to cleared ground. The shouts were becoming louder too. After walking for another ten minutes both Girl and Abbey could tell the sounds were those of battle. As well as shouts there were screams, and they could now hear the drum of horse’s hooves on packed earth. “How much do you bet that that’s Snow’s Blood?” Girl asked.

They continued walking, more quickly now, and when they saw a group of a dozen men sitting on the hill watching a military camp below, they paused. Girl was the first to recognize Glib and Cinch. She ran forward, beautiful despite her lank hair and the sweat that ran down her face. “Glib! Cinch! I’m here!”

Glib turned and the first thing Girl saw was the gleam of a sword. He got up and drove his shoulder into Girl’s chest; Girl fell to the ground and Glib rose above her, ready to finish her off. Abbey ran over and knelt beside her friend, covering Girl with her own body. “Glib, no! It’s us. We’re not enemies!”

Glib faltered. He lowered his sword, then slipped it into his sheath. He offered his hand to Girl. “I’m... sorry.”

Girl took Glib’s hand, stood up and hugged him. There were tears in her eyes, a mixture of pain and relief at having finally seen that Glib was okay. “We traveled so far to reach you,” Girl said. “And finally we’ve found you. It’s a relief that we have.”

Cinch moved to Abbey and shook her hand. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”
“It’s a pleasure to see you too, Cinch.”

“You will address me as ‘Captain.’” Cinch’s words were without malice but not without command.

“Captain,” Abbey said, curtseying.

“I am the commander of the Snow’s Blood mercenary company now. A far cry from what my father thought of me.”

“Your father loves you. He was glad to hear that you were alive.”

Cinch grunted, and Abbey moved to Glib. “How could you have ever left us? We missed you so much.”

“All of you? I don’t think so. My step-father...”

“He missed you too, even though he found it hard to admit. And Delilah... Despite everything, she still raised you as her own son.”

“A surrogate son for a woman who couldn’t have a son of her own. It’s no different from a woman marrying a man, or a woman just living with him. Which would you prefer?”

“Glib, I know how you feel, but don’t be like this as soon as we meet. We sacrificed a lot to reach here.”

“And if I had the opportunity I’d send you back. This is no place for a woman. There will be blood in the days to come.”

Cinch moved forward. “Glib’s right. You don’t want to see what will go on here soon. The fiercest part of the war has just begun.”

The general cleared his throat. “Would you like to introduce me to these friends of yours?” the general asked.

“This is Abbey and Girl,” Cinch answered bashfully. “We knew them in Color Gash.”

“Their full names. I would like to know their full names.”

“Abbey Novak and Girl Trader,” Cinch said bashfully.

“Girl Trader? Of the Color Gash Trader family?”

“That’s me,” Girl said.

“It is indeed a pleasure to meet you.” Sure Armorer moved forward and placed a delicate kiss on the back of Girl’s hand. Glib scowled. “I am General Sure Armorer, commander of this expedition against Centar and the rebel states. I happen to be an acquaintance of your father. In fact, he is supplying some of the material needed for the war effort.”

Girl didn’t quite know what to say.

Sure patted Girl on the back. “Come, we must get both of you cleaned up and give you a fresh meal before we discuss matters further. Now that you’re here we would appreciate you sitting in on our command tent discussions.” Sure Armorer began to walk down the hill with the rest of the officers following behind him.

“Why is he being so nice to us?” Girl asked quietly. “And why is he letting us in his command tent?”

“I don’t know,” Abbey whispered, “but I suspect we’ll soon find out.”

Glib and Cinch sat across from each other at a table in a vacant tent. Glib was drinking apple cider. Abbey and Girl arriving had upset everything. Glib had only recently forgotten about women and was concentrating on the war. Now that Girl was here emotions were flooding back into him. Had she been with anyone else while he was gone? Did she still love him? Did she want him only as a friend? Alcohol was the best cure to these problems, at least temporarily, but Glib could not drink too much because a command tent meeting was scheduled in one hour’s time.

Girl and Abbey were having their baths now. Glib could easily imagine what they looked like. He imagined watching Girl from the outside of the bath tent - he imagined her nude silhouette, her slim arms sponging her body. He imagined the shadow her erect nipples would make. He thought of Abbey too, but those thoughts were less cohesive and much less prominent than those of Girl. “Abbey and Girl are still looking beautiful,” he said.

“Captain,” Cinch said sternly.

“Abbey and Girl are still looking beautiful, *Captain*.”

“Abbey especially,” Cinch agreed. “When I saw her I almost couldn’t contain myself. I wanted to hug and kiss her, but I couldn’t do anything with the general there.”

“Why do you think she came, anyway?”

“To see me,” Cinch declared triumphantly.

“Back in Color Gash she never said anything about liking you,” Glib said.

Cinch rose to his feet and growled. “You will address me as ‘Captain.’”

“Sorry, Captain. I sometimes forget.”

“You shouldn’t forget.”

“Very well. I won’t in the future.”

Glib downed two more mugs of ale before he was ready to go. He was a little drunk but hoped the general wouldn’t notice. As soon as he and Cinch left the tent they were confronted by the two ladies.

“Sergeant Triffett said we’d find you here,” Girl said.

Glib looked them up and down. They smelled much better now, and their clothes were made of a fine weave as opposed to the rags they arrived in. Their faces glowed with the bath they’d just had and they did not look as ravenous as when Glib first saw them. “Shall we go to the command tent?” Glib offered his arm to Girl.

Girl took it appreciatively, and Abbey latched onto Glib’s other arm. Cinch looked away, disgusted.

Despite the problems Girl and Abbey presented Glib still enjoyed walking to the command tent with the two beautiful, young women. Girl looked very demure in the blue dress she wore, but Abbey’s lime-green robe hugged her figure unintentionally and attracted the unwanted attention of many soldiers. They soon looked away, however, when they saw that Cinch and Glib were escorting her. Glib admitted to being uncomfortably aware of what Abbey was dressed in. He was attracted to Girl’s personality but with a body like that right next to him... it was impossible *not* to be aware of Abbey. Cinch walked to the left and a little behind Glib, who took no notice of him. They reached the command tent in short time and joined the other commanders, many of whom looked at Abbey and Girl. Sure Armorer moved to the two women and shook both of their hands. “Now you will see what real men do,” he said.

Sure Armorer returned to his position at the head of the command tent’s table and spoke to his assembled commanders. “The Centarian alliance’s attacks have abated over the past hour, but we know they are not throwing all of their strength against us. What they are doing is intelligent. By constantly harassing us, they seek to make us fatigued. We need to strike back at them before they succeed. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

“If we took Spire,” Glib said, “the war would be over before it began. But the problem is getting *inside* Spire.”

“And that’s a very big problem,” Sure Armorer told him. “We’ve all see the city’s walls - higher than those of Color Gash and almost as high as those of Core. We’d need a massive invasion force before we could take the city by siege.”

“If we kept the Centarian and rebel states’ force pinned where they are now,” one of the commanders said, “we could starve them into submission.”

“It would take too long,” Sure Armorer disagreed. “We haven’t the manpower, and even if we did try it as you said, supplies would still get through to them. There are always smugglers looking to make money. Not only this, but if we stay away from Outlend too long, other nations may start seeing our state as ripe for invasion - Ref in particular. What we need to do is find a way to subdue the Centarian alliance quickly.”

“And the only way to do that is by taking Spire,” Cinch said. “But it is

impossible to take Spire without a giant invasion force.”

The general sighed. “If only it weren’t so difficult.”

“May I speak?” Abbey’s voice sounded squeaky next to the men’s.

“You may,” the general said. His hands were behind his back and his lips were set firm - he may be friendly with Girl, who was the daughter of one of his suppliers, but Abbey was a commoner. There was precious little she could do to change the course of the war.

“Why doesn’t Glib use his werehound?”

There was silence in the command tent.

Mistaking the commanders’ silence, Abbey said, “Glib’s werehound . We could use him to get into the city.”

Triffett was the first to speak. “What do you mean ‘Glib’s werehound’?”

“Glib has a pet werehound. I thought you knew - he is friends with one.”

“Is this true, Glib?” The general’s words were stern.

“Yes General.”

“Why haven’t you told us before?”

“For obvious reasons, General” Glib replied.

“Werehounds are vile creatures. And this young lady says you are friends with one? How did this friendship come about?”

“He saved me from a nightcrawler outside of Color Gash. Our friendship has bloomed... since then. His name is Protector.”

“Do you believe he could find a way into the city?”

Glib shrugged. “He could.”

“Then we will use him. A good general does not overlook any weapon in his armory. He would be foolish if he did.”

Triffett started forward. “Sir, we can’t have a werehound. Werehounds are... creatures of another plane. What will the men think if a werehound is aiding them? It will be an omen against us.” Several other commanders nodded in agreement with the sergeant.

“That is why they will not know!” The general’s words were sharp. “If word of this leaves the command tent I will personally see to it that the man responsible is hanged. Do you understand?”

“Yes... sir,” Triffett said.

“And the rest of you?”

The others who had started to complain shrunk back - they knew when their leader was not to be argued with.

“Good.”

“General,” Glib said, “how *are* we going to keep the werehound a secret? He will need men to back him up if he enters the city. And I don’t know if he’ll even agree to what we’ve planned. He has his own mind.”

“Your spellword unit has performed admirably so far.”

“Yes, but-”

“-I don’t see why they will have any problem with this. Your spellword unit is assigned to aid the werehound, Protector, in any way it can. Do you agree to this?”

“I do, but if Protector wants to have nothing to do with the assignment I will not force him into it.”

“That bridge shall be crossed when we arrive - if we arrive at all.”

Cinch sounded disdainful when he spoke. “We’ve decided that we’re going to use Protector to get into the city, but *how* are we going to use him? *How* is he going

to get into the city?"

Glib moved to the side of the tent and sat in one of the chairs provided there. None of the people here understood the intrinsic nature of his relationship with his werehound. They couldn't understand that his and Protector's bond was based on friendship, not masterdom. To them, Protector was only a tool to be used. For Glib, Protector was one of his friends - almost one of his family. But he was a soldier now, and it was his duty to serve Outlend as faithfully as possible. "Spire is a coastal city," Glib said. "We should focus on that."

"We cannot invade Spire by sea," Cinch snapped at him. "Or have you forgotten that Outlend is completely inland? We have no naval force."

"I wasn't talking about that. Being a coastal city - being *right on* the coast - there are bound to be drains running under the walls. Those drains will be full *only* when the tide is high. When the tide is low those drains can be accessed."

"I think I'm beginning to see what you mean," the general said.

"Most - if not all - of those drains will have a portcullis. From what I know of drains, the portcullis is built so debris is allowed to pass out of the city. There is usually a space at the top of the portcullis which allows people who may be washed into the drain to escape without drowning. Protector can leap that far."

"Those drains will be guarded," the general said.

"My spellswords will take care of it."

"What you suggest doing is dangerous."

"It is my duty," Glib told the general.

"Do you think your unit would agree to it?"

"They have to. It's their job."

The general grinned. "Spoken like a true leader. Very well. If we had more time I would consider other plans, but we don't. Every day we are away from Outlend is an invitation for Ref to invade. I want to get this operation over and done with, and I want to get it over and done with *now*. It will be conducted tomorrow night, at low-tide." The general looked at the other commanders with a dark gleam in his eye. "And what I said before repeats itself. Speak of this to anybody and you will be hanged. Understood?"

The commanders in the tent nodded and quietly agreed.

"Good. Tomorrow then. Glib, I expect you and your men to ready. You are dismissed."

It was the dark of night. Glib crouched in a copse of trees fifty yards from Spire's wall, his sword drawn. Behind him were fifty members of his spellsword unit. Glib would have preferred to use a staff, but General Armorer had convinced him that this operation would be dangerous enough for him to carry a sword. Protector was just outside the copse of trees, padding backwards and forward. It was natural that during this tense time Spire's parapet patrols would be heightened - Glib could see three human figures along the parapet. The spellsword unit would have to distract or disable those three men before Protector could enter the drain.

Glib planned to go into the drain with only Protector for company. The more men who went with him, the greater their chances of being discovered. But it was still reassuring to know that there were fifty spellswords waiting for any sign of trouble. Of course, Glib needed those spellswords to create the distraction. He lifted his arm and waved to the left, towards the rocky beach outside of Spire. The spellswords behind him rose and began to melt that way. Glib sat down and called Protector to

him. The werehound padded over, licked Glib's face and sat on his haunches.

Their plan was simple, but many things could go wrong. Once the distraction was created, Protector would leap over the top of the portcullis and wait for Glib inside (luckily he had agreed to go ahead with the idea). Glib would swim towards the drain, climb the portcullis and join his werehound. Together they would strike forth, Protector serving as Glib's eyes - Glib could not carry a torch, because people in the streets above might see. They would scout for a path that led to a quiet place inside Spire, then return the way they had come. Protector wouldn't know what to do once he leapt the portcullis but Glib planned to show him. The werehound would memorize the route so an invasion unit could enter the city. Simple, yet complex. Quiet, yet dangerous.

There was a sound like a firework from the beach near Spire. Glib looked towards the beach and saw a single flame strike Spire's wall - the spellswords were creating the distraction. What they were doing was dangerous - if a Centarian force cut them off from Outlend's camp they could either hide in the scraggly vegetation along the beach or swim out to sea. Either way, they had little chance of surviving. More flames hit Spire's wall, and colored lights began to flash in the sky. There were shouts from the city's walls. Soon the whole beach was illuminated by Glib's spellswords.

Glib stood up and ran forward, beckoning his werehound to follow. He waded into the drain and discovered it was only chest-deep. That was good - it was deep enough for him to duck under the water, but not deep enough to submerge him completely. He waved Protector forward and began to breast-stroke towards the portcullis. Protector ran like a forgotten shadow, a nightmare. He passed over the landscape without a sound and with only the barest hint that he was there. The sentries on the parapet had all moved towards the sound of the disturbance, and when Protector leapt the portcullis no one even noticed. His leap was graceful, his powerful legs arching towards the portcullis's crest. To either side of the covered drain there were two paths; Protector landed on the nearest of these.

Glib swam forward. The paths on either side would be wet and covered with slime - at high-tide each day they were underwater. Glib wasn't looking forward to walking along them, but knew they would provide little obstacle compared to other things he may encounter. He reached the portcullis without the sentries noticing him and began to climb. The climb was difficult - the steel was rusty and flakes cut into his hand. The steel was also slimy and he had trouble gripping it. His feet scrambled for purchase and he almost fell twice, his chin striking the portcullis's bars both times. But Glib was determined. He reached the top of the portcullis and began to climb down the other side. Protector was waiting for him at the bottom.

Before they moved further into the drain, Glib grabbed the hairs on Protector's neck - he would need to rely on the werehound completely now. Protector began to pad further into the drain, and Glib followed. Soon the darkness was complete - Glib couldn't see anything. He tried holding his hand in front of his face; all he could see was black. "I hope you know where we are," Glib said.

Protector turned in the blackness and looked at his friend. Glib saw the werehound's eyes burn like glowing coals. They continued further through the drain, further under the city. Small streaks of moonlight were beginning to appear ahead. Glib passed under a grate and looked up. He could see many people walking above, and was able to hear their words. It was late at night and this place was still busy - not suitable for an invasion unit to enter.

Grates now allowed light into the drain at irregular intervals. Glib guided his werehound off the main thoroughfare into one of the side-drains. Soon they came to a dead-end. The stench of the drain was overwhelming here. Glib looked up. There was a grate, but little illumination was coming through it, which meant that it was probably part of a building in the city. "Can I stand on you, Protector?"

The werehound's gaze looked baleful in the darkness. Glib climbed onto the werehound's back without asking further permission. Taking hold of the grate, he wriggled it vigorously. It moved, but rust flaked and showered into Glib's eyes. He blinked and cursed, and Protector growled and tried to balance his heavy load. Finally Glib punched the grate upwards - it gave way and popped open enough so that Glib could slide it open.

When he boosted himself into the room above the drain, he discovered he was in a latrine trench. Four lights penetrated the trench from above. Glib looked up, and guessed what they were. He gagged, unable to withstand the stench. Cleaners would come into the lavatories every day and throw buckets of water here; that way people's wastes would be washed into the drain. Glib looked at the openings above and judged them to be wide enough for a man. With aid, Glib could be boosted up there.

He leapt into the drain again, covered by sticky waste, and indicated that he and Protector should head back the way they came. The building might be Spire's guard house for all Glib knew, but no-one would suspect Outlend to enter through a latrine. The invasion of Centar would soon be complete.

The sounds of battle could be heard even from here. Glib looked at his men - there was Cinch, and Triffett. Trix Vulgàr. Leesh and Scarz. Cinch was technically the commander of the mission, but the soldiers looked up to Glib. They were outside the drain Glib and Protector had entered the previous night. The sounds of battle from Spire's western gate were fierce. Glib and the two hundred soldiers with him had a limited time to subdue Spire, otherwise the casualties at the western gate would be too severe. The unit needed to get the invasion over with quickly.

The tide was still high, but it was receding. Unfortunately, this was the darkest, quietest part of the night and Glib could not change his plans. He would rather the water be at a lower level but he had to make do. He scaled the portcullis first, his men following behind him. The sentries who usually patrolled the wall had been disposed of, victims of precision arrows from Glib's men. Glib warned the other soldiers not to put too much weight on the portcullis, otherwise it might snap and fall into the water with an unholy splash. Glib was the first over the portcullis and he ran without waiting for the others. Trix soon followed and caught up to him. "This better work, entering the city through a latrine."

"It will," Glib said grimly. When it got too dark, he stopped, lit a torch he had been carrying and continued to run. Then he felt... heat. "Everybody in the water!" he shouted. Without waiting to see if any of his men obeyed, Glib dove into the drain. He held his breath and closed his eyes, the water's foul humors trying to find their way into his orifices. On the water's surface he saw a blanket of flame pass over. The water began to bubble and Glib almost screamed until he realized he couldn't breathe. Then the flame had passed over.

He surfaced and looked at his men. Most were okay, but some weren't. Some hadn't reached the water in time. Triffett was one of them. His blackened remains sat against one side of the drain - the only way Glib could tell it was Triffett was because of his sword, which still gleamed. There were other charred bodies, not many, but

enough to make Glib sick. Despite his brutality, Triffett would be missed. He was a fine soldier.

“He was about to kill you,” Cinch said, bobbing in the water next to him.

“What?”

“He had his sword raised. He planned on killing you just before the flame passed over, so that everyone would think you were burnt to death.”

“How do you know?”

“Ever since he learned of Protector he has despised you. Couldn’t you see it? I saw him raise his sword just before the flame arrived.”

Glib looked away from Triffett and boosted himself onto the path beside the drain. He couldn’t let Triffett occupy his mind, even though he felt sick. “They know we’re here!” he shouted. “But now they think us dead! Towards the latrine!”

Then Glib’s werehound was among them, leading the way. His taut muscles flexed as he ran, and many of the soldiers fell back in awe. “Follow the werehound!” Glib called. “He knows the way!” As he ran, Glib considered what he was doing. Most people would say this war was Outlend’s fault. Glib firmly believed in fighting on the side of right. But *was* he fighting on the side of right now? Perhaps the Outlendian god was frowning on him, and willing the Centarians to victory. Glib blinked. He couldn’t think like that - thinking like that would be a jinx against Outlend.

A platoon of Centarian soldiers appeared further along the drain.

“Kill them!” Glib screamed.

A myriad of crossbow bolts came from the Outlendian force; the Centarians were cut down one after the other. One was left alive, screaming clutching his leg where a crossbow bolt protruded from it. An Outlendian soldier ran to the man and sliced open his throat. Glib and his men ran further along the drain, then followed Protector when he turned into an adjoining path. Glib recognized the stench as he ran through the darkness. He and the soldiers reached the drain under the latrine pit, and without saying a word began climbing into it. Glib and Cinch led them, as was their duty, with Trix not far behind.

Glib and Cinch were the first two to climb through the lavatories. The room was well-lit, and none of the lavatories were being utilized at the moment. Glib looked at the room’s decor - whatever this place, it was certainly not for the poor. The walls were made of marble and there were mirrors for those who wanted to primp themselves. Candles flickered in gold-painted candelabra. “Despite your choice of entrance, you certainly have good taste,” Cinch said.

“Thanks.” Glib moved towards the door, reached out... but had it opened for him.

A fat man threw up his arms in startlement. Glib dragged him into the lavatory and shut the door. Cinch drew his sword and readied himself to thrust at him. Glib waved Cinch’s attack down. “No! He is not guilty of anything. Are you a soldier?” he asked the man.

“N-no,” the man stammered. “I am a merchant.”

“We’ll keep him in the lavatory,” Glib said. “What harm he can do?”

“He is a Centarian,” Cinch scowled.

“Throw him into the latrine pit,” Glib suggested. “That is punishment enough.”

“Very well.” Cinch grabbed the merchant and did as Glib suggested without hesitation. Glib couldn’t bear to watch. He opened the lavatory’s door and stalked through the hallway outside. On either side of the hallway there were paintings of

nude women. The carpet was a deep, wine-red and the doors were all closed. “We’re in a brothel,” Glib whispered. The other soldiers were behind him now, and Glib spoke to him quietly. “We need to subdue every room in this building. Then we can use it as a base for our operations.”

The other soldiers fanned out. Glib opened the nearest door with four soldiers behind him, and saw two richly-dressed men being serviced by four semi-dressed women. Glib stormed into the room. “On your knees! Try anything and you will die!”

One of the men obeyed Glib immediately, but the other rose to his feet. “What is the meaning-?” He reached for a nearby candelabra but did not have time to touch it - he was dead.

One of the women reached for the candelabra and Glib ran forward, thrusting his sword between her ribs. “One good thing,” Glib said, “is that brothels have a no weapons policy.”

The subduing of the building continued, and finally Glib was sure all rooms were secure. Cinch and Trix returned to the hallway outside of the latrine. “Some men put up resistance. Not many though.”

“Grown men go weak at the knees when they are surrounded by beautiful women,” Glib said matter-of-factly. His hand shook a little when he recalled killing the women in the first room he entered, but then he composed himself - he could not look like this in front of his men. “Now we only have to capture Spire’s commanders,” he said, “and the city’s spirit will give up.”

“Where will we find them?” Cinch asked.

“Spire’s tower.”

Glib slashed at a Centarian, and felt strange contentment when he saw the man’s throat open red. Beside him, Protector rend anything that stood in his path. Snow’s Blood was making a steady, bloody advance towards the tower. Most of the Centarian alliance’s force was dealing with General Armorer’s attacks at the western gates, and had not even realized there were Outlendians *inside* the city. That was the way Glib wanted it. Glib ran forward another twenty paces, and in unison with Protector dispatched a Centarian who came at them. The tower was not far away now. The Centarian force was faltering against Snow’s Blood - their bedraggled fifty men was barely able to cope with Outlend’s overwhelming numerical superiority. A section of Snow’s Blood broke through Spire’s shaky resistance and ran towards the tower. Glib followed the mercenaries with Protector at his side.

The tower was ahead of them. There was no drawbridge, just a massive oaken door. The door was closed. The mercenaries slowed and waved their swords at the door, but could do nothing else. Glib walked forward and examined the door. Then he shouted, “I want my spellswords! Now!” As soon as his spellswords began to assemble around him, he said, “Do as I do. Now!” He stooped down and collected twigs lying on the paved ground. Then he ran to the door and set the twigs against its base. Stray arrows flew from overhead, but none of them hit Glib. Luckily the tower was designed so that it was impossible to drop objects from above onto people below.

Glib ran away from the door and called his spellswords to him. Then he raised his arms and whispered arcane words. The twigs began to smolder, then crackle, then burn. Glib’s voice grew higher in pitch and urgency; the twigs began to move and hiss and gain a life of their own. Glib screamed, the power flowing through him too much even for him to bear. Then the door exploded. Fragments of wood showered inwards,

striking the soldiers immediately behind the door. Glib ran forward with his mercenaries following. There were half a dozen Centarian sentries inside the tower's door and they were easily overcome. The room branched into two sets of stairs - Glib moved to the left stairs and indicated that Cinch should move to the right.

Glib and his werehound made a formidable sight as they climbed up the stairs. More of Glib's spellsword unit was behind him, but they would be of little use if they encountered resistance - the stairway was narrow and allowed only two people to stand abreast. The Lord Mayor of Spire and some of Centar's generals - including Rocks Fisher - would be in here. There was bound to be some resistance.

They met that resistance at the top of the stairs. A group of liveried sentries had formed a defensive formation in the room the stairs led to. The room was filled with a sea of bodies and Glib was not sure if his spellsword unit could break through. But Glib and Protector led by example and drove the sentries back. They fell away in confusion at seeing their werehound, who tore at the sentries mercilessly. Then Glib's spellswords were behind him, filling the room with the tingling crackle of magic. Sentries fell, and soon there were only half a dozen left. They threw down their swords one by one and surrendered. Glib leveled his sword at the nearest sentry. "Where are the mayor and generals?"

The sentry pointed. "Next room."

Glib looked at the door the sentry indicated. It was open and beyond he could see a group of cowering men. Some had swords drawn but most were hunched over as if they did not want to be seen. Glib walked into the room. "Which one of you is the Lord Mayor? And Rocks Fisher?"

One man, slightly plump and balding, rose his hand tentatively. "I am." A stony-faced man also stepped forward.

"My name is Glib Baker, of the Outlendian spellsword unit, under the banner of Snow's Blood, under the standard of the Outlendian army. Your army is defeated. Do you give up?" He addressed Rocks Fisher.

"I do," Rocks Fisher answered formally.

Glib stepped onto the table in the center of the room, scattering the goblets placed there. Protector leapt onto the table next to him and surveyed their captives, who shrunk away upon seeing the werehound. The campaign was complete, the invasion was successful. It was time to return home.

Glib walked through the aftermath of the battle. The city was a smoldering ruin. Protector walked beside him, padding this way and that, sniffing at anything that he became interested in. Yesterday's battle was a success - General Armorer had lost two hundred men, but that was a small number considering the whole campaign. Cinch had found nothing in the tower but storerooms, and Trix Vulgàr had only obtained cuts and bruises and a fractured arm in his bid to quell the poorer quarter of Spire. Glib and Abbey had been allowed into the city only now. They were currently residing in a chamber in the tower, one where no blood had been spilled. Glib remembered the prostitute he killed the night before. Strangely enough, he didn't feel any remorse now. She was Centarian; she had got in the way of Outlend's invasion.

Despite the relative ease of the battle, some of Outlend's soldiers had got out-of-hand - several razed buildings testified to that. Spire was a city in defeat. Its residents walked with injured pride and Spire's once majestic skyline looked pathetic now. A messenger approached Glib through the smoke. He wore a week's stubble and his eyes looked weary. He walked with a bowed gait. "Glib Baker?"

Glib nodded. "Yes."

"I am a messenger from The Six in Core." The messenger took out a cylinder containing a sealed letter. He opened the cylinder, broke the seal and read the message. "You are under arrest for treason. The Six have learned of your maneuvering within the Outlendian army and Snow's Blood and believes your reasoning behind this is to take control of the Outlendian army. General Sure Armorer has been ordered to arrest you."

"The only reason I helped the Outlendian army was to protect them from Spire!" Glib yelled, stunned at the accusation.

"I'm not the person you should be talking to," the messenger said.

"Does General Armorer know he must arrest me?"

"He does. He has given you two hours' grace."

"Good." Glib spit on the ground. After helping the Outlendian army invade Centar he was repaid like this. "What do The Six in Color Gash think?" he asked.

"They follow Core's lead."

"Damn." There was only one thing Glib could do. It was dangerous - potentially suicidal - but it was the only option open to him. The alternative was to spend his time in Outlend as a fugitive. He understood why The Six in Core might think he was trying to wrest power for himself, but *how* they had obtained that information was what confused Glib. Messengers would take over a month to reach Core and come back again. Unless Core was informed of Glib's maneuvering all the time... Triffett? He wasn't powerful enough. Cinch? Maybe. Sure Armorer...? Glib knew with certainty that it was the general who had done this.

"Can you send a message for me, to Sure Armorer?" Glib asked.

"If you would like me to."

"Tell him: he should learn to fly like a bird."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Go."

The messenger obeyed.

Glib turned and began striding towards Spire's tower. He had a lot to do and little time in which to do it. Most of the Outlendian army - including the general - was still outside Spire's gates. If the gates were closed quickly the Outlendian army would have to conduct a siege all over again. Glib knew what he was doing was risky - but risk was necessary sometimes. He needed to speak with Cinch, he needed to assemble his spellwords, and he needed to speak with Abbey and Girl. The general would soon learn that Glib could not be manipulated the way he thought.

Chapter 13 - Flight

Spire's tower was like a fort - guards were everywhere. Due to his unique position, Glib walked into the tower without being challenged. Most of the guards in the tower were either from Snow's Blood or Glib's spellword unit, and if orders were given to arrest him most would disobey. Glib walked up a set of stairs which led to the room Cinch was using as his chamber. He pounded on the door. "Cinch, open up!"

Cinch opened the door moments later. "I am not 'Cinch'," he said. "I am 'Captain.'"

“Captain. I would like to meet you in the central chamber where we found the mayor and Rocks Fisher.”

“I need time-”

“Now!”

“Is it important?” Cinch asked.

“Very.” Glib turned and walked along the hall to Abbey and Girl’s room. He knocked on the door. “My ladies?”

Girl opened the door first. “Glib! We didn’t expect you. We thought-”

“You must come to the central chamber. Now.”

“But we need time to get ready...”

Glib clasped Girl’s hand. “Please. You know I love you.” Glib leaned closer to Girl and kissed her on the cheek. While he was still close to Girl’s face he whispered, “My life is in danger.”

Girl’s eyes widened. Then she turned into her room. “Abbey. Glib requests our presence in the central chamber. We must get ready *now*.”

Confident that Girl would convince Abbey to come Glib walked back along the hall. Whenever he saw a spellsword he ordered them to the central chamber. Most look confused but obeyed their commander. Anger broiled inside Glib as he walked. After all his work he was repaid like this. People had died in this campaign; if Glib were arrested it would not only be a mark of shame upon him, but the other spellswords as well. They would have died for nothing. What Sure Armorer and The Six in Core were doing to him was not right. And they were soon going to be punished. If they believed he was trying to take power from them, that was exactly what he would do.

Glib went through the entire tower, calling his spellswords to him. By the time he reached the central chamber, Cinch, Abbey and Girl were already there. So was Trix Vulgàr - that was good because the common soldiers believed in him. The common soldiers followed the example he set. Glib was also pleased to see all his spellswords assembled - almost one hundred men waiting for orders. Many had died during the battle but in a way that was good - those that *had* died were magically inferior to those who survived. His best spellswords were here.

Glib moved to the head of the table. He spoke plainly. “The Six in Core has ordered my arrest.”

The chamber burst into indignant cries.

“At this moment General Armorer is moving against me.”

The cries became louder.

“The Six say that I plot treason. I have never plotted treason. And if I am arrested, it will be a mark of shame upon all of us. Do any of you believe I have plotted treason?”

The spellswords’ answer was as Glib expected.

“If you try to defend me, you will be butchered. There is only one alternative. For decades those who have practiced sorcery have been persecuted. All of us in this room have been persecuted. Even now the other soldiers look at us as though we are inferior. If you allow General Armorer to arrest me, we will be persecuted even more.”

Protector padded into the chamber. He moved to Glib, who kneeled down. *Go to Color Gash, my werehound. I’ll see you there.* Protector padded out of the chamber and Glib stood up, pointing to the departing werehound. “I am persecuted because I share empathy with this creature. And he has *helped* Outlend - he has done

no harm. What do I propose? We go to Core and show The Six what we can do.”

“How do we get to Core?” a spellsword shouted. “General Armorer’s army is outside the gates.”

“We will fly to Core!” Glib announced. “We are sorcerers; we are spellswords. We have the ability. While we are in Core, Captain Tutor and Snow’s Blood will close Spire’s gates and defend the city. We can annex Outlend while Captain Tutor holds Centar for us. What say you, Captain?”

“Your plan holds wisdom,” Cinch said. “I feel betrayed by Outlend myself. I will do it.”

Glib was suspicious of Cinch’s words. Glib was suggesting that he become the leader of Outlend. Cinch had liked the idea that he was a higher rank than Glib. For him to accept Glib’s proposition so easily was odd. However there was nothing else Glib could do - Cinch was the only person he could rely upon. But there was also Trix Vulgàr - Leesh was naive and Scarz was dull-witted. “Trix,” Glib addressed him by his first name, “where would you like to go?”

“I would like to go with you,” he said.

“My spellsword unit has enough power to carry you... and two more.” Glib moved close to Girl and Abbey. “Would you like to come with me? You have heard my position. If I stay here I will be arrested - and most probably be killed. I missed both you while you were in Color Gash.” Glib clasped the two girls’ hands and looked meaningfully at Abbey. “I missed *both* of you. Would you like to come?”

“We traveled across half the continent to reach you,” Girl said proudly. “Do you think we’re going to refuse a trip back?”

“Thank you,” Glib said. He turned to his spellswords. “We need to take flight. And we haven’t enough time to find remnants. All of you know the difference between sorcery and magic - sorcery requires remnants; magic requires the mind. If you do not feel comfortable with the idea of flying on magic alone, then leave. Remember, we have a long way to fly.”

Glib was pleased when not one person walked out of the chamber.

“Good. Link hands.”

The chamber was round with a round table in its middle. The spellswords linked hands around the table; Glib linked hands with Abbey and Girl, sure his power would be enough to carry them both. He nodded towards another spellsword with strong magical power and indicated that Trix Vulgàr should link hands with him. He nodded towards Cinch standing outside the circle. “There will be light,” he said, “and energy. Don’t get too close to the circle.”

Cinch moved back.

Glib closed his eyes and told the other spellswords to do the same. He lowered his head. “Think of flight. That’s all you need to do.” Quietly he said, “You too, Abbey and Girl.” Soon Glib began to feel lighter. He opened his eyes - he was rising. He looked at Cinch, who was staring up at him and the others. Glib smiled. His spellsword unit was rising higher, going closer to the chamber’s glass ceiling... What would happen when they reached the glass ceiling? “Magic,” Glib whispered, and the ripples of the word emanated around the circle of spellswords. “With magic there is no glass. You can go through.”

And they did. They passed through the glass as though it was not even there. They rose higher and began to move forward. Glib could feel some weak links in the circle already and knew they would not be able to withstand the journey to Core - they would either fall to their deaths or plead exhaustion and descend to the ground. There

was nothing Glib could do about them. Soon the spellsword unit would break away and fly individually - each person would have to judge their own strength. The spellsword unit passed over Spire's wall and over Outlend's army. Soldiers looked up at them but did nothing; they were entranced by the sight.

"Break up now," Glib said. The spellsword unit did as their leader obeyed, except for Abbey and Girl, who stayed clinging to Glib, and Trix Vulgàr, who stayed with his guide. It would take them several hours to reach Core.

The spellsword unit was over the Outlend/Centar border. Outlendian settlers had already begun to move into Green Valley, and the forests that dotted the area were being harvested for lumber. Again Glib thought that maybe Outlend was the wrongdoer in all this - Green Valley had been exquisite when controlled by Centar. Now it would most likely end up looking like the rest of Outlend in a few years' time.

Two spellswords had given up, pleading exhaustion and descending into forested areas of Centar. Glib was pleasantly surprised that only two had given up so far, but the longest part of the journey was still ahead of them. Several others were gritting their teeth and showing signs of fatigue, but not voicing it aloud. Glib conversed with the other spellswords by mindspeak. He already had a good idea of what they would do when they reached The Six's palace in Core. The unit would alight at strategic points around the palace, enter the rooms and kill The Six. All of them. The crime of treason carried the death penalty and that was what Glib planned to do to The Six. Some of the spellswords had expressed doubt at his plan but it was simple to exert a little mindspeak influence over them and make them believe his plan was the best.

The only question was whether the spellsword unit had enough numbers to invade the palace. By the time they reached Core they would be tired. Some of them might not be able to fight. Glib might only have a force of twenty to invade the palace with - and there were bound to be more palace guards than twenty. Glib looked to the north and saw a hawk gliding on thermal air currents. The hawk whistled. "How are you feeling?" Glib asked Girl and Abbey.

"Queasy," Girl replied. "My stomach..."

"You will get used to it. Abbey?"

"The view is beautiful from here."

"We're going to bring a few friends along. I just thought I'd warn you." Glib looked at the hawk. It was a majestic creature. Glib remembered his lessons with Surl. Goblins were evil, unicorns were good, golems were intermediate... and creatures such as this hawk were dormant. They had magic in them but that magic was dormant. However Glib thought a hawk's dormant magic would be lying close to the surface. Lions and horses would be the same. There were some dormant creatures whose magical ability was easier to bring through. And Glib was confident that at least half of his spellswords had the ability to mindspeak with animals.

Glib tried mindspeak with the hawk. He got a confused reply, the hawk's mind filled with thoughts of its next meal, the glory of riding the air currents and its mate far to the north, then... it began to change course. It began to mark time with Glib's spellsword unit. Glib thanked the hawk, and the hawk replied that it would convince any of its own kind it met on the way to come with it. The hawk was not being forced to fly with Glib - Glib had explained the injustice of the situation and the hawk had agreed to correct the wrong. It refused to kill a person but it would use its talons and claws in the defense of order. Glib thanked the hawk again and felt a deep satisfaction

- a small amount of power resulted in a hawk willing to convert more of its own kind to Glib's cause, without any further expenditure of power from Glib.

Glib sent out mindspeak to the other spellswords. Every animal they thought might have magical power, every animal they thought they could convert to their cause, the spellswords were to speak with. Most of the creatures would be birds but they would speak with the occasional land animal as well. The spellswords agreed and they called on every animal they saw from then on. The animals called to each other and it was not long before they outnumbered the spellswords. Glib watched the birds in wonder - eagles and hawks, swallows, plovers and sparrows. Almost every type of bird that lived in Outlend was represented here. The eagles flapped their wings languidly and glided, while the swallows allowed themselves to be caught in the wind currents and were carried along. Glib asked his spellswords through mindspeak if they were faring well; some said they were tired, but most said they were okay.

"What do you think?" Glib asked Girl and Abbey.

Girl replied. "I'm not queasy anymore. The birds... It is wonderful."

By the time Core was in sight the spellsword units and the birds cast a shadow over the ground. Core was the capital of Outlend, the seat of government for all of The States. Many of the buildings in Spire were made of marble or white-washed stone. Prominent above all other buildings was Core's palace, the home of Core's six ruling members. The palace's chambers were spread over a vast expanse of ground; in the center there was the seat of government building and a marble pillar commemorating the unification of The States. Stairs led to the seat of government on all sides. Glib and his spellswords headed towards those. Guards and citizens alike milled below the spellsword cloud. Glib doubted they could even see himself and the spellswords - the birds were so thick now that it was difficult for Glib to navigate. Glib descended and his spellswords followed. No guards challenged his descent. He alighted on the stairs near the seat of government and drew his sword, which had been resting in his sheath while he flew. The other spellswords imitated his action.

Glib walked into the seat of government and the birds followed him. The noise they made was deafening in the vast halls, and many stunned themselves flying against mirrors and shiny statues. Glib was amazed by the opulence of the chambers. Everything was marble and trimmed with gold, counterpointed by plants hanging in baskets and quiet fountains. It was painful to know The Six in Core were accustomed to such luxury while many of Outlend's citizens struggled for food.

The spellsword unit met its first resistance. A group of a dozen guards appeared under an arch leading to another section of the palace. "What business do you have here?" one called.

"I would like to speak to The Six."

"Drop your weapon, and tell your men to do the same." The guard indicated the sword Glib was carrying.

"And what will you do if I obey?"

The guard remained silent.

The birds swarmed forward. Eagles tore at the guards' clothes and swallows and sparrows pelted the guards' skin with their small beaks. Glib, Girl, Abbey, Trix Vulgàr and the spellswords watched, stunned. Glib felt a deep sense of satisfaction as he watched the birds attack. He had awoken the magic in these dormant creatures. He didn't need to petition unicorns or dragons to help him, and he didn't need to bend goblins, arachnids and golems to his will. He had been able to *awaken* the magic in these creatures. How many other sorcerers - how many wizards - could say they had

done that?

Glib strode past the attacking birds. He knew they would not kill the guards, only occupy them long enough for Glib and his spellswords to do what they must. “Does anyone know the layout of Core’s palace?” Glib asked his spellswords. “Does anyone know where The Six might be hiding?”

“As a city guard captain you study the layout of strategic buildings,” Trix Vulgàr said. “The seat of government chamber is to the left, in the center of the palace. The Six will be there.”

Glib led his men the way Trix Vulgàr indicated. When Glib saw a large force of palace guard milling outside a grand doorway he knew they had arrived. He stopped and lowered his sword. He could still hear the screeches of birds but that noise was abating. “Are The Six behind you?” Glib addressed the men in front of him.

All remained silent.

“My name is Glib Baker,” Glib said. “I have come to surrender.” Glib dropped his sword and spellswords gasped behind him. Glib turned to them and held up his hand. “This bloodshed has gone on long enough. I wish no more. Do not try to save me.” He turned back to the palace guards. “I will walk towards you now.” Glib walked slowly, not wishing any of the palace guards to mistake his intentions. When he was just yards away they swarmed on him. They knocked him to the ground and Glib felt the cold marble floor strike his face. The guards frisked his clothes and threw away a nicked dagger they found - the one Glib had left home with. Then they hauled Glib to his feet, pulled back his hair and faced him towards his own spellswords. The spellswords looked frightened - they would most likely be tried with him.

The palace guards parted and six men walked forward. Most were old but all looked shrewd. A thin, stooped man stopped in front of Glib. “We are The Six in Core. We sent a message to The Six in Color Gash and learnt about your demon-worshipping. Don’t try to deny it. Your own step-father reported you to Color Gash’s Six. We can try you properly here. Not only for that, but for treason as well. We know what you have done.” The man nodded to the guards holding Glib.

The guards escorted Glib into the next chamber, the seat of government. The other palace guards followed and the spellswords were allowed into the chamber as well. The chamber was bare except for a polished oak table which sat at its far end. The roof of the chamber was made of glass, similar to the central chamber in Spire, except the glass of this roof was different... Crystal. The chamber was not decorated in any other way.

The Six took their respective seats at the table. Glib stood on the floor below them, two guards holding his arms. The elderly man who first spoke cleared his throat. “It is clear to us that you are a traitor to The States and have participated in unholy acts with creatures from other planes. But first we must decide what to do with those under your command. I do not believe them to be evil; on the contrary I believe them to be good citizens. Unfortunately they have been led astray.”

Glib looked at his spellswords and the three others who traveled with him. Glib was crying.

A small flock of sparrows entered the chamber. They flew over the spellswords’ heads and over the palace guards. They passed over The Six who ducked and tried to get out of the way. Glib stared hard at The Six. They had no intention of trying him fairly. They were only concerned with their own struggles for power. The sparrows had helped him, but Glib didn’t know if they would agree with what he was

going to do now. Glib's captors were distracted enough that he was able to break from their grasps and run forward. He leapt onto the dais and table, confident his youth would serve him. He grabbed the throat of the elderly man and began strangling him. He relaxed his pressure and turned to the palace guards. "Take one step forward I will kill him! I swear I will kill him!"

The palace guards hesitated, then faltered.

Glib frowned in satisfaction. "Drop your weapons." He nodded to his spellswords. "When they drop their weapons, you take them."

The clatter of swords, pikes and halberds sounded throughout the chamber. The spellswords ran forward and collected the weapons. "Shuffle the guards into a corner of the palace." The spellswords obeyed his command, and when they were finished Glib nodded to his nearest man. "Bring me your weapon."

The spellsword walked forward and placed the weapon he was carrying - a ceremonial palace guard sword - in Glib's hands. Glib loved the feel of the sword's hilt against his palm. He loved the feel of the sword's hilt against his skin and its finely balanced weight. He kicked the elderly man he was holding captive forward, drew his sword high in the air and stabbed him in the back. The palace guards broke into angry cries and the remaining members of The Six scattered in all directions. *They wouldn't have shown mercy to me*, Glib thought.

One of The Six drew a dagger he had concealed and approached Glib; realizing their superior numbers the other four men approached Glib. Glib was trying to get his sword out of the elderly man's back; the man who held the dagger was close and he did not even know.

Then Trix Vulgàr was among The Six. He thrust his sword into the dagger-holding man's chest and kicked out at another member of The Six. Glib managed to slide his sword out of his victim's body and dispatched another of The Six with a savage blow to his head. Two of the remaining three men cowered on the floor, but one stood his ground. Glib lifted his sword... then faltered. He wanted to kill the man for being so proud, but how would that look to his spellswords? He wanted to kill the groveling men but if he did, what would that look like? He allowed the tip of his sword to touch the ground, then nodded at his spellswords. "Arrest these men."

Glib didn't notice his spellswords arresting them - he was concentrating on other matters. He may still be small of frame but his muscles were finely honed and his tenacity would see him through. He moved to the polished table and *pushed*. It slid along the marble floor with a loud groan, teetered on the brink of the dais and fell. The table made a tremendous noise when it hit the floor. Glib looked at the upturned table in satisfaction, then turned to the chairs. There were six of them; there should only be one. He threw five of the chairs off the dais and onto the floor. Then he turned and seated himself on the remaining chair. He was Outlend's and Centar's ruler now - The Six had no power at all.

Glib looked at the chamber, his seat of government. It was slick with blood. But this place was not the seat of government any longer - it was his throne room. And the chair he was sitting on was his throne. He could get a better one made in the weeks to come but for now he would be content with this. Glib's gaze shifted to Girl and Abbey. He was the ruler of Outlend now. And he could not think of anybody better to rule Outlend with than them.

The throne room had been refurbished to the point of decadence. The marble floor was covered with red carpets now. The walls of the room were covered with banners,

standards, paintings and flags. The framework of the crystal ceiling had been painted gold. The dais was now decorated with intricate carvings of everyday life in The States. And a throne had been made - the legs and armrests were gold and its cushions were red. Glib found it uncomfortable and he often asked for pillows to soften the throne. He was annoyed with the craftsman who made the throne - he had specifically requested that the throne be made *comfortable*, but the craftsman had failed. Of course the craftsman thought he had done well, putting extra padding on the throne and measuring the contours of Glib's back, but some people weren't mean to craftsman - and Glib knew this man was one of them.

Core had been subdued quite easily. As soon as its citizens realized The Six were either dead or imprisoned their resistance crumbled. There had been a temporarily flare-up when Glib announced that he was ruler of Outlend *and* Centar, but that resistance died when Core's citizens realized Glib's spellwords *and* the palace guards were backing him up.

Of course, Glib couldn't say he was ruler of Centar now - Cinch had that honor. Glib had suspected it might happen but was surprised it had happened this quickly. Cinch had shut the gates to Sure Armorer's soldiers, of course, but had then announced that *he* was the new ruler of Centar, not The Six in Core, and not Glib either. Glib had only learnt of that three days ago and though he would like to march on Centar immediately, knew he had to consolidate his position in Outlend before he began trying to expand his borders.

Some of Sure Armorer's men had deserted in favor of Cinch, but most stayed with the general. Sure Armorer was now laying siege to Spire - again - and it would be some time before Cinch could worry about what was happening with Outlend and Glib. During that time Glib planned to consolidate his position in Outlend - Color Gash had already acknowledged his rulership despite The Six in that city putting up some initial resistance (which died down after a visit from twenty of Glib's spellwords) and messengers were being sent to Rondolli and Solet as well. Ref had also acknowledged Glib's leadership, which was encouraging.

Of course, not everything was going well. The nomads were taking advantage of Outlend's confusion and raiding into Outlend's territory, and the Commonlands - usually the most peaceful nation on the peninsula - was building its military presence along Outlend's border. Not only that, but the southern state of Morrow had sent a message to Glib saying some of their villages had been attacked by a strange tribe, not from the eskimo lands, but someone else. Glib guessed it to be one of the barbarian tribes. The attacks had been repelled with few casualties but it was still one more thing to worry about.

And there was the question of what Glib would call himself - 'King' sounded too arrogant, 'Emperor' invited criticism and attack. 'Ruler' still seemed the best word. It showed his position immediately, but didn't sound arrogant like 'Emperor' and 'King.' 'Ruler Glib' - it sounded good in his mind's ear.

Girl and Abbey walked into the room. Anger flared in Glib at first - how dare they walk into the throne room unannounced? - but he settled himself and waited for what they had to say. Girl shuffled to the center of the throne room, Abbey moving slightly behind her. Girl curtsied. "Your majesty."

"You don't need to speak like that with me," Glib said, although in truth, he liked it.

"I have come to ask you a question."

"Then ask."

Girl bit her bottom lip. "I still love you, Glib. You said you loved me in Core. Do you still love me?"

Glib gripped his throne's armrest. He had been waiting for this announcement. Now that it had come he didn't know what to do. The pain of him leaving Color Gash had been too much. After his affair with Rosan at the Yanchepp Inn he had vowed not to be affected by women again. But Girl was here and she was beautiful... Glib didn't need to become smitten with her again. He could still enjoy her company but hold a mental distance, a barrier, between himself and her. There was only one thing that would Glib refuse her. "While I was away, Girl, did you have another boy?"

"No!" There was sincerity in Girl's voice.

But Glib still wasn't sure if he believed her. "How can I trust you?"

"Ask Abbey! Ask your step-parents or my mother and father - ask anyone!"

That was enough for Glib. He was still suspicious but knew Girl was probably telling the truth. "I love you Girl." He watched her hair and her skin and her sincere eyes. Soon he would be able to touch her again.

"Abbey loves you too." Girl said the words quietly, but there was no mistaking them. Girl's head was lowered and her eyes downcast but she had spoken the words with a firm conviction.

"Is this true, Abbey?" Glib asked.

There were tears in Abbey's eyes. "Yes. I've always loved you... You should know that."

Glib turned back to Girl. "What do you think of this?"

"I think love should be shared."

Glib thought. Girl was allowing Abbey into their relationship; she actually seemed to support the idea. Glib didn't love Abbey with the same passion as Girl, but what if he refused Abbey's advances? He needed allies, and any enemies he had - even ones like Abbey - would be a blow to his quest to subdue Outlend. And if he refused Abbey's advances, Girl would most likely be angry with him. Of course, he couldn't wed both of them - what would Outlend's population think? What would the gods think?

A royal concubine. It was the only way. The monarch of Ref was allowed concubines; what difference should it make to the ruler of Outlend? Glib loved Abbey - even if it was not with the same intensity of his love for Girl - and what Girl was suggesting allowed Glib to have both of them. Also, Glib now had to consider the political ramifications of such actions. His relationship with Abbey would show he had not forgotten his common roots, and his gentle love for both young women would garner him respect from Outlend's populace. What better way to start his reign than with a marriage, to which the whole of Core was invited.

Epilogue

A shower was falling. Color Gash was much as Glib had remembered it - low buildings, a myriad of shops, alleyways where boys could hide and get into trouble. It was early morning and the foul weather was keeping people off the streets; in fact Glib could not see anyone in the streets nearby. He faced the bakery and inhaled deeply. Protector was by his side. Together the sixteen-year-old and the werehound walked towards the bakery. No one knew Glib had come here; no one had announced his arrival. He was alone except for his werehound.

A bell jangled when Glib entered the shop and wiped his boots on the sawdust spread on the floor. Protector padded into the shop after him. Glib looked at the desserts in the glass display cases. His mouth watered when he saw a custard slice and his nostrils savored the scent of freshly-baking bread. Delilah was behind the counter. Not recognizing Glib at first, she stormed around the counter while undoing her apron. "Who said you could bring that filthy animal in here?" Then: "Oh..."

Glib smiled weakly. "I'm back."

“And this is your... werehound?”

“His name is Protector.”

Delilah pursed her lips. “What are you doing here alone? I thought you would be in Core? What if people have been following you? You are a ruler now.”

“If people have been following me I’ll deal with them,” Glib said nonchalantly. “Where’s Surl?”

“In the bakery section with this morning’s bread.”

Glib walked into the bakery without further invitation from his step-mother. He saw Surl tipping a bag of flour into the mixer. Glib winced and remembered when he tried to tip bags of flour into the mixer - they always seemed to spill everywhere. Glib watched his step-father as he worked, his brawny arms, bull neck and the frown he permanently wore. He looked no different from when Glib had left Color Gash. Glib cleared his throat.

Surl looked up, then returned to tipping his flour. “If you’ve come to gloat it’s no use. I’ve got to get this bread ready for this morning.”

“I haven’t come to gloat,” Glib said. “I’ve come to make you an offer.”

Surl paused, set down the bag of flour and turned towards Glib. He dusted his hands on his apron. “Where’s your retinue? Where’s your retainers and servants and chefs? Congratulations on your engagement to Girl Trader, by the way. You always thought you could marry into a family higher than ours, didn’t you?”

Protector chose to enter the bakery at that moment. Pink icing covered the werehound’s maw and Surl stumbled back. “Get that thing out of here! Get it out of my workspace!”

“Protector,” Glib said. “Please.”

The werehound lowered its great head and walked back into the shop.

“Come outside with me for a moment,” Glib said.

Glib and Surl walked through the shop, where Delilah was feeding Protector an iced bun, and into the rain. Water glistened on Surl’s bald head as he slapped his hands together and looked at Glib. “Well, what have you got?”

“I would like you to become head baker at my palace in Core.”

“Hasn’t the palace already got a baker? Isn’t there other men you would rather choose?”

“No. You make the best bread. You make the best desserts. I choose you.” Glib’s statements would sway Surl - and he would make another ally - but more than that, he was telling the truth. Surl’s breads and desserts were the best he had ever tasted. He hadn’t been able to admit that when he left home, but now he knew it was true. After risking death and imprisonment - and escaping unscathed - Glib was finally able to admit that Surl’s pastries, breads and desserts were the best..

“What is the pay like?” Surl asked.

“Thirty-two chits a month. And you have permission to open a bakery in Core as well as servicing the palace.”

Surl frowned and Glib knew he was calculating the profit to be made. “Just wait until I get my things,” Surl said, and walked back towards the bakery. There was a smile on Surl’s face.

A lot would have to be cleared up before Surl left - the bakery needed to be sold, as well as their house and many of their belongings - but Glib had recognized the eagerness in Surl’s eyes. The profits to be made in Core far surpassed those he was making in Color Gash. Glib had been sure Surl’s greed would win over. Glib watched Surl’s departing back and admitted that although the man was bad-tempered, violently

traditional and generally unpleasant, he could still be relied upon. Glib would need men he trusted in the days to come. And Surl was one of