

THE NEW

MAGIC

Joseph Malik

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The New Magic is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, along with all characters, are products of the author's imagination. Any similarities to any person, living or dead, are products of the reader's imagination.

*For my father, who, when asked,
"Where did you grow up?"
still answers, "I never did."*

GLOSSARY AND CAST OF CHARACTERS

Adielle Riongoran-Thurdin: Eldest child of the royal family and Princess of **Falconsrealm**. Heir to the throne of **Gateskeep**.

Aever of Black Valley: Knight Lieutenant in the **Order of the Stallion**.

Carj of Bitter Lake: Knight in the **Order of the Stallion**.

Carter Sorenson: **Greatswordsmen** from Earth, friend to **Jarrold Torrealday** and Lord of Regoth Ur. Married to **Daorah Uth Alanas**. **Carter** accompanied **Jarrold** to **Gateskeep** half a year earlier.

Daorah Uth Alanas: Commander (highest ranking field officer) in the **Pegasus Guard** of **Gateskeep**.

Faerie: A long-lived people, northeastern neighbors of **Falconsrealm**. Although they refer to themselves as "**Faerie**," humans often refer to them as "elves."

Falconsrealm: **Gateskeep's** largest territory, a mountainous region traditionally ruled by the heir to the throne of **Gateskeep**.

Galè of Lor: A warrior-wizard and professional demon-killer from the southern nation of **Ulorak**.

Gateskeep: Northwestern country that encompasses **Falconsrealm** and Ice Isle in the north, and the **Shieldlands**, Long Valley and Axe Valley in the south. See map.

Gbatu: Collectively, all the races and tribes of subhumans. There are over a hundred subspecies of **gbatu**. The most common species range from three to four feet in height and are lightly-furred, tool-using, and intelligent. They live in tribes that consider themselves to be at war with every other species in the realm, including each other. Armed with weapons by **Ulo Sabbaghian** in a previous war, **gbatu** are a frequent nuisance for travelers.

Greatsword: A large, heavy warsword built for cutting with a wide blade and a spatulate tip. Typically wielded two-handed but balanced for one-hand use. A heavily customized **greatsword** is **Carter Sorenson's** weapon of choice. A smaller historical version, the *gran espée de guerre* (great sword of war), is **Jarroed's**.

Gwerian of Vella: A knight captain in the **Order of the Stallion**, and **Jarroed Torrealday's** highest-ranking local commander.

Jarroed Torrealday: Lord Protector of **Falconsrealm**, Lord of the Wild River Reach, and Knight Chief Lieutenant in the **Order of the Stallion of Gateskeep**. A former stuntman and Olympic saber hopeful from Earth, banned from competition for killing another fencer in a drunken duel. Jarroed has been in **Falconsrealm** for half a year, now.

Karra Talivel: A **Faerie** woman, bonded to **Jarroed Torrealday**. She met **Jarroed** before his mission into **Ulorak**, in which **Jarroed** rescued **Princess Adielle** and defeated the army of **Ulorak**.

Levy: A volunteer or conscripted soldier as opposed to a professional man-at-arms.

Longsword: A two-handed warsword often the length of a **greatsword**, but with a lighter blade, a thrusting tip, and a center of balance affording tremendous maneuverability. A **longsword** is effectively a **greatsword** built for fencing.

Order of the Falcon: Order of **Gateskeep** knights drawn from the Pegasus Guard. Knights of the **Order of the Falcon** have ridden a pegasus in combat.

Order of the Stallion: Order of **Gateskeep** knights officially responsible for the training of knights in other orders, though clandestinely tasked with counter-espionage missions.

Renaldo Salazar: **Jarroed Torrealday's** nemesis from Earth. A champion in the world of illegal underground dueling, **Renaldo's** attack on **Jarroed** several months prior originally resulted in **Jarroed** awakening in **Gateskeep**.

Rider: In **Gateskeep** and **Falconsrealm**, a chivalric title below true knight, merited by skill at arms or exceptional performance in combat. A rider will rise in social standing upon attaining knighthood. Knights often refer to each other as "**Rider**" as a term of respect.

Rogar Hillwhite: Head of the patrician, ore-baron Hillwhite family. Blames **Jarroed Torrealday** for the deaths of his brothers, Albar and Edwin Hillwhite.

Saril of Red Thistle: Knight of the **Stallion**. Second and Lord Chancellor to **Jarroed Torrealday**.

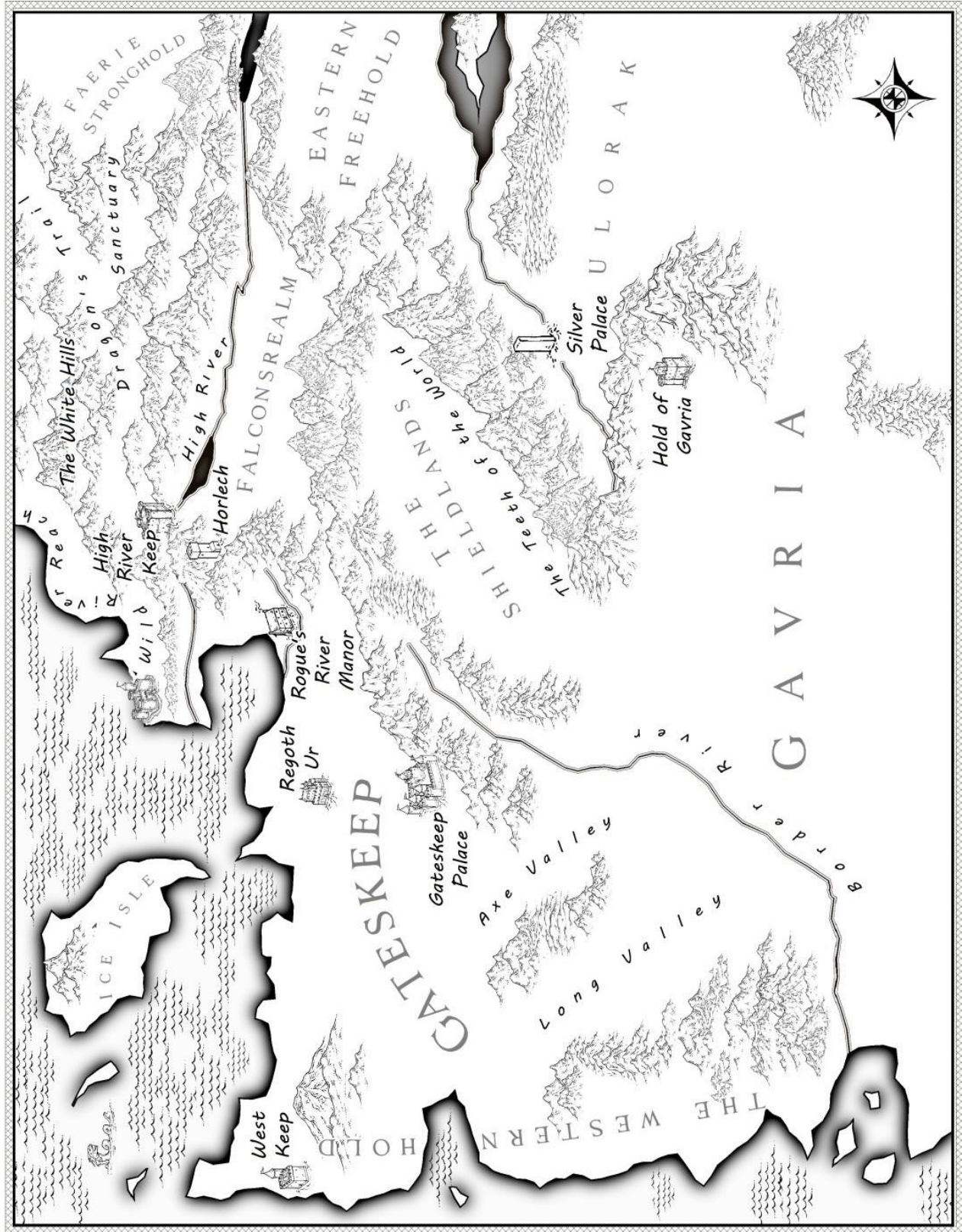
Saxe: A cleaver-like, single-edged shortsword. Used primarily in the **Shieldlands** of **Gateskeep**.

Sergeant: an officer commanding soldiers and levies. Soldiers and **sergeants** are considered an artisan-class profession, one step below nobility in social standing. **Riders** often serve as **sergeants** as part of their training.

Shieldlands: Southern territory of **Gateskeep**. See map.

Ulo Sabbaghian: King of **Ulorak**. Raised on Earth, **Ulo** is a former Las Vegas illusionist conjured as a demon into the **Shieldlands** twelve years prior. **Ulo's** father was once and briefly king of **Ulorak**, and the most powerful and feared sorcerer in living memory.

Ulorak: A trading crossroads with the Eastern Freehold, **Ulorak** was originally a commonwealth of **Gavria**. It became sovereign under Sabbaghian the Black, and was claimed by the Eastern Freehold after his death. Now ruled by **Ulo Sabbaghian**, **Ulorak** briefly became a **Gavrian** territory when **King Ulo** accepted appointment as Lord High Sorcerer of **Gavria**, but quickly seceded. **Ulorak** is once again sovereign. See map.



HEGGY THE FIRST

"It is better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war."

– Zen proverb

Heggy was a sloppy, mop-headed boy with a wonderful laugh and no last name. His given name, Hej, was his mother's father's name and a family name from five generations, but the town knew him as Heggy. "Heggy the First," he called himself.

Galè of Lor was a few shades older, a head taller, a wasteland leaner; a copper-skinned scarecrow clutching a candle in otherwise darkness. The night puffed into the cave, damp with distant winter and the itch of a chill at sandaled ankles.

"And this is safe?" asked Galè.

Heggy added some chalk to the jumble of circles and writing on the floor before a knee-high mirror and stepped back, careful not to disturb the inscriptions.

"The wards are what they are," said Heggy. He still had a child's voice, girlish and funny. "They've worked for a thousand years."

"And where did you learn it?"

"Magister's book. I wrote them down until I could remember them."

The candle sputtered, nearly died, then found itself again. "I don't trust you," said Galè. He had some magic—he'd been able to make things fly since before he could walk—but he had nothing like this.

"Light it," said Heggy, "and we'll see your father."

Galè touched the candle to each of the red and black candles that dotted the intersections of the inscribed figures.

"Nath of Tanol," Heggy called to the mirror. He did his best to lower the register of his voice. Galè thought it sounded silly. "Nath of Tanol, warrior of Lor," said Heggy. "Rise from death. Rise from rest. Join us in the dark. Your son is here."

The candles flickered in the stillness. The mirror appeared to shimmer. Galè could see the candle in the glass.

"I don't see anything," said Galè.

"Don't blink," said Heggy. "Nath of Tanol," he said again. "Rise from death. Rise from rest. Join us in the dark."

"Heggy, I don't th—"

"Nath of Tanol!" Heggy shouted, the words ringing off the rock walls. "Your son is here!"

"Heggy, I—"

And then he saw it.

A face in the mirror, distant, grayed; obscured as if by smoke and as tenuous as if the wrong thought or even a careless breath could banish it.

"Father?" asked Galè. He blinked, and it was gone.

Staring again, it reassembled, twinkling.

"Father?"

"My son," said the face in the mirror, still a blur and a glint. The voice seeped from all corners of the room.

"I miss you, Father," said Galè.

"Who is with you?" asked the voice.

"Heggy," said Galè.

"Greetings, Heggy. I miss you, my son," said the voice.

"I can't see you," said Galè. "And your voice is not your own."

"You must break the glass," said the face. "Break this glass and open the door. I will return."

Galè shot a sidelong glance to Heggy, who shrugged. "It's his mother's mirror," said Galè. "It's not mine to break, Father."

"A small price to pay," said the face. The voice was now definitely coming from the mirror.

Galè looked again to Heggy, who nodded. Galè, a warrior in his father's footsteps and now under the tutelage of the knights of their tiny crossroads hold of Lor, handed the candle to Heggy and slipped his father's axe out of its thong at his side.

"Go ahead," said Heggy.

Galè stood before the mirror, squared his feet, and drove his axe into the glass.

The mirror collapsed inwards, the shards tumbling multifaceted and breathtaking into a weightless black beyond. The cave erupted in billows of smoke and the roars of wild animals. Unseen hands wrenched the axe from him.

The last thing Galè saw before it all went completely dark was that he had kicked apart the wards.



Galè crawled for freedom in the dark. Images of demons and monsters drove him, his elbows and knees thrashing at the sand, sure of clawed vicious things inches behind him.

He found the opening and rolled down the hill, deafened, throat searing, sulfur on his tongue.

Caustic smoke surged from the cave, as if the world itself was on fire and the rocks burning.

"Heggy!" His voice was a hiss, the name held against a grindstone, uselessly small in the vast waste of stars and sand. The lilac glow of the ringed moon behind the hill cast the smoking cave in shadow.

"Heggy!"

His gut reaction was to run for the magister's house at Lor. He looked down the canyon, judging the amount of time it would take him to reach town, explain, and bring help.

Heggy staggered out.

"Heggy!" Galè started up the hill as Heggy lurched down the slope, stumbling, carrying Galè's axe.

"My father's axe," rasped Galè. He could tell that Heggy was possibly burned, or stunned, or injured. "I owe you a hundredfold."

The face that met his, once Heggy's, was horribly charred, eyeless on the right, hair blasted away, teeth showing through skin burned to tatters.

"Oh, Heggy," said Galè, choking on the words, the back of his throat in shreds. "We'll get you to the magister. You'll be all right. I can carry you."

Heggy raised the axe with a roar of a hundred voices joined in anguish, all the rage and longing of hell itself unleashed at the skies. The stars shuddered at the noise.

Galè threw out a hand and knocked Heggy into the dirt and briars with the force of his heart, the force of the world. He unlocked his knife from his belt and dropped to a knee and drove it, panicked, frantic, into his chest until the last of the voices from the Heggy-thing—no longer Heggy, he was sure—faded and gurgled.

Galè wiped the knife on Heggy's tunic and sheathed it, then took up his father's axe and ran.



Galè slammed his fist on the door to the magister's house, a grip in his gut. He'd killed Heggy. Poor, fat Heggy who loved books and jokes and the magister. His friend. Everyone's friend.

Magister Ramour was the town wizard, a slender, serious man in the manner of many magisters. He opened the door, which scraped on the floor, and the moon reflected on his wisps of white beard and his dark pate.

"Magister," shuddered Galè, "I've done something terrible." He went into a breathless explanation: stealing the mirror, summoning his father, breaking the wards, the mirror collapsing. And, lastly, killing Heggy, although he neglected the part about using his magic. Even Heggy hadn't known he'd had any magic.

Halfway through, Ramour had brought the boy inside and sat him down, made him some tea, and listened with his fingertips pressed together.

It was an odd house, Galè noted. Tidy and sparse and smelling of tea and candles, and yet from the inside it appeared that none of the angles quite came together. Corners met dispassionately and with no readily apparent regularity, and the roof felt like it sagged overhead. All in all, it had a lethargic, unindustrious feel, and Galè was surprised that the town magister couldn't have afforded to have someone build him a better home.

"It's likely that Heggy didn't know what he was doing," said Ramour. "A boy in that much pain may not even have known who he was. If you killed him defending yourself, I don't think anyone will question your actions."

"You don't think there was any chance that . . . that it wasn't Heggy?" asked Galè, sipping his tea, which was remarkable, strong and tinged with honey and whisky. Perhaps the magister had other priorities than straightening his walls, Galè thought. The chairs were comfortable, the larder stocked, and the tea was the best he'd ever had. "The face in the mirror?" he continued. "Was that—" he choked on the words, "—did it become Heggy? Was it the thing *in* Heggy?"

The magister chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous."

Galè felt ridiculous.

"There was no face in the mirror," Ramour explained. "When you stare into a dark mirror, you will see what you want to see. There is always a face in the mirror: yours. Your eyes adjust to the darkness and the face appears to become more visible."

"You kicked over a candle, which set fire to whatever it was that poor Heggy had made his wards from. Sugar, or sulfur, or somesuch. He should have used chalk, if anything at all. I'll have to see what's missing. That's very old magic, physical wards. Marks, as wards," he sighed. "Obsolete. I have to wonder where he learned it."

Galè didn't tell him that Heggy had mentioned learning it from the magister's own books. Had the magister not read his own books? The skin on the back of his neck tried to crawl off his spine.

"This was an unfortunate accident, two boys playing. Nothing more. That you came to me with it, instead of the town marshal, only certifies that you did what you thought was right. Sad about Heggy, though."

"It certainly seemed real," said Galè, finishing his tea. His hand trembled as he set the mug down.

"That's why I'm certain you imagined it," the magister assured him. "It's when it seems *unreal* that you need to worry. That's when you've done true magic. Now, we should go wake the marshal, and Heggy's poor mother. Who will replace her mirror?" he wondered, as he pulled on a long cloak and a cap.

"I will work for her until she feels it's replaced," said Galè. "I owe her much more than that,

though.”

“You’re a good boy,” said Ramour. “Your father did well with you.”

Galè grunted. He wondered how he’d tell Heggy’s mother, a town woman named Hun; no last name, no husband, and now no son. His mind spun at the obligation to a woman for taking all she truly had in the world. That’s what he was, now, he thought: a thief. He’d stolen Heggy from her, from all of them, in an instant of stupid, childish panic. Not warriorly at all.

He could ask if the small keep here in Lor that had taken him in would take in Hun, as well. He imagined how lonely Hun’s house would be without the girlish laughter and infectious smile of fat, funny Heggy.

The boy had been blessed with a laugh.

“I should have carried him home,” he said at the door. “I should have calmed him and carried him home.”

In a thundering howl that defied the still of the town, Heggy-That-Was smashed the door off its hinges and tore past him into the house.

Galè heard Ramour’s screams and the many-voiced wailing of whatever the hell Heggy had become as he ran.

He kept running.

FOUR YEARS LATER

RIDERS

"Tell me who you ride beside, and I'll tell you who you are."

– Falconsrealm proverb

Atop a burly black riding horse, tall and rangy in his green cape and dark woolen tunics, a black woolen watchcap tight to his head, Sir Saril of Red Thistle's face was bright and boyish except for hard slate eyes and a sharp jaw that ground in thought.

Sir Saril looked down upon the settlement of Grach far below, the furthest-flung inhabited corner of the Wild River Reach. The jagged peaks of The Reach, savagely high and sharp, rose against a sky of tarnished silver behind him.

He clicked his teeth together.

Far below the village, pewter breakers smashed at high cliffs, ponderous, blowing spray at a distant tower. The immense pause between rolling impacts betrayed the size of the surf; the waves would have inundated some castles.

The town of Grach was small. Saril counted twenty buildings. It wasn't so much a village as it was a farming and hunting cooperative—maybe a dozen families.

Red Thistle, his home, was such a place. Saril had been born into a town of five families; forty souls. And now, only a few years after leaving home, he was a knight in the King's Order of the Stallion, recently made second and Lord's Chancellor to Sir Jarrod the Merciful, Chief Lieutenant in the Order of the Stallion, Lord Protector of Falconsrealm and Lord of Wild River Reach.

He'd never been home again.

Sir Bevio, as young but rounder and broader and red-bearded, and with a heavy dark cloak pulled tight against the weather, came up behind. His mount, black like Saril's, led a smaller brown horse loaded with weapons, roundshields, and heavy bags shadowed with damp.

Bevio pulled his cloak tighter as the wind snapped its teeth at them.

"No fires," said Saril after a long time watching. "There's no smoke. We're freezing our asses off, and nobody down there has a fire going."

"Maybe their wood's well-seasoned," Bevio offered.

"We'd smell it. The wind's off the sea. That chill comes all the way from Ice Isle."

Bevio unwrapped a hunk of wine-colored cheese, took out a small knife, and offered a slice to Saril. They ate and stared at the village for a while. Nothing moved except the sound of the sea, its measured breathing like a man exhausted and at peace.

The wind screamed at them from time to time, but it brought no sounds of daily life from the valley.

"I hate this," Saril decided. "I hate everything about this, right now."

"So do I," Bevio agreed. "We have to go down there."

Saril watched the sea for a little while longer. It was a violent, unsecure, remote place, the edge of the world. Not a good place.

Not a good place at all.

"Armor up," he decided.



Outside the gate—what was left of it—the skies had darkened to slate with gangrenous eddies. The rain was close, the air tinged with the bite of snow.

Saril waved Bevio to a stop.

He'd never been to Grach, but he knew that the other towns in The Reach didn't have gate towers, or even walls. Grach, however, had been fortified. And, from the looks of it, hastily so.

The walls of the town had been cobbled together with squares of earth cut from a wide and deep trench on each side and augmented with sharp sticks at the top of the wall. It was enough to slow an attacker, but not stop one.

The towers, two men high, were also made of packed earth with simple stone battlements.

And they were empty. Many of the sticks had been trampled. The gate, made of lashed boughs, had been smashed; the ends, and the largest standing poles, chipped and gnawed by axes.

Bevio's voice echoed from behind a curtain of mail that draped from his helmet's spectacles. "What the hell happened here?"

Saril's voice was equally muffled from within a matching helmet. "Why didn't they send for reinforcements? If they had time to build this, they'd have had time to send a rider."

"Be careful," said Bevio. "There's old magic all through these mountains."

"This is not magic."

"No?" asked Bevio. He set his shield, a plain wooden roundshield rubbed dark with years of oil, on his thigh as Saril rode ahead and motioned at him to stay put.

Nothing moved inside the town. Saril could see the outlines of slain dogs and horses in the rain. A flock of birds flew up from the center yard.

Saril looked at it for a long time, one hand on his swordhilt. He rode back and forth from left to right, looking through the remains of the gate at the town, then reined his horse completely around and trotted it back to Bevio.

"Are we going in?" asked Bevio.

"There's not enough whisky in the world to make that seem like a good idea to me."

Bevio shrugged and patted his horse. "My horse isn't scared."

Saril sighed. "We just spent an entire morning getting his head out of a log."

Bevio shrugged again. "There was an apple in there."

"I'm not trusting your damned horse. Or mine. And I'm not going in there. Let's go check the tower."

The veil of rain whipped over them and they kicked their mounts into a trot.



Maceshadow's Tower had once been the refuge of Vanan the Marauder.

Legend held that Vanan had been a wizard powerful enough to calm the seas off this tower. He had then used the bay as a launching point for a fleet of magical raiding ships whose sailors always found calm waters around them, and as such, stomped the hell out of anyone living along the water for five hundred miles in any direction, until Vanan essentially owned most of the Gateskeep coastline.

The story went on that an enterprising knight named Sir Mathac Maceshadow managed to kill Vanan. This lifted the spells on the ships, which the seas then smashed to slivers against the cliff walls.

It seemed like a lot of work for such a place. Maceshadow's Tower was square, not terrifically tall, and battered to pieces by the world around it, with spiderwebs of dead ivy along the sea-facing wall, which enclosed a courtyard with a three-story manor house and some gabled areas for the daily goings-on that kept a small tower running.

Stubby saltgrass grew in clumps from the wall to the sea. A single-horse trail led back to Grach through a skeletal forest, the trees scattered and leafless.

Saril figured, seeing it now, that Vanan hadn't really been such a great marauder after all. From the stories, he'd expected this place to be magnificent.

The rain hammered sideways off the ocean. The surf was deafening as it shovelhooked the cliffs in long swells a hundred yards from them and not far below, the tide near its highest for the season.

The gate was closed. The windows in the tower, and the windows in the manor that they could see, were completely black. Nothing moved. Nothing glowed.

Saril yelled again at the guardpost; no response.

“They had to see us coming,” said Bevio. “There’s nobody here!”

Saril kicked his horse and disappeared around the wall. It was a small compound and he came from the far side some time later.

“Nothing!” he said, riding up to Bevio. “We’re leaving!”

SWORD DAYS

“Only a fool hopes to live forever by escaping his enemies.”

— Viking proverb

Jarrodd Torrealday awoke in the pink-gray light of morning in a comfortable bed high in the great tower at High River Keep, several days' ride from his own castle this time of year. The supple and luxuriously tanned body of Karra Talivel wrapped itself around him tighter, filling the bed with hibiscus and heat. He ran his hand through her hair, a snarl of blonde striped with brown.

“Do you enjoy my hair, lover?” she purred. Her accent was distinctly Faerie, sharp and precise on the consonants and slightly lilting. Exotic to him, even here, a million light-years from home.

“I love your hair,” he told her, kissing her forehead. “But I thought only predators have stripes.”

“I have stripes,” she purred, rolling on top of him, “because I hunt the bravest knights.” With an expert buck of her hips, they were one.

The room shrieked. The bed objected to the injustice. Gods railed from the beams overhead. Worlds ended and began again outside the window.

The Faerie word for mutual release translated to *the thunder and the rain*.

Grinning, panting, sheathed in candy-scented sweat, Karra rolled off him and dug her head into the pillow, burrowing as she drifted into whatever the Faerie did for sleep. He still wasn't sure. Eyes open, eyes closed, sitting up, lying down. She had said they didn't dream; they used downtime for remembering.

She spent a lot of time remembering.

He slipped out of bed, shook off needles of looming winter with a shuddered profanity, and wished for just one glass window. This was fall chill; winter loomed, silver-black and lethal. The bed beckoned.

An absurd strain of symbiosis had developed between them since their first night together at the start of summer. It was a structure he didn't grasp in its entirety, but it was immediate and effortless, and he shoved aside the occasional digs from his peers about elf magic and illusory charms. Whatever the cause, he was joined at the hip to a feral, magical being, her ferocity kept in check by a fathomless restraint and monastic gentleness, which in turn made her what he needed most: a hardened concrete tunnel under the blazing, collapsing house of himself. A place to forget about the string of bodies he'd left behind him across two worlds, now.

So many bodies.

Her arm snaked out to the spot in the bed where he wasn't.

Jarrood was not particularly tall, but lean and long-limbed despite his size, and hard-shaped with knots of muscle that appeared carved from rock by wind. Between a mat of dark blond dreadlocks and a tight sandy beard resided a pair of powerful eyes, periwinkle in the right light, and a row of perfectly white teeth that many knights here thought smiled too much. A curved scar crossed the muscles of his stomach.

The sky had erupted pink with morning across broken clouds that loomed storm-dappled and dark with cold. He set a log on the coals and blew on it until the fire burst to life.

His armor, a mosaic of bourbon-tanned leather and mail, rested on a mannequin in the corner beneath a banner from the Order of the Stallion, a gold horse's head over a golden key on a green tapestry. A massive warsword leaned against the armor, out of its scabbard and oiled.

Jarrood began his day as he usually did, dressing himself in the uniform of a knight off-duty, a black tunic with a gold officer's brocade at the stiff collar and a black velvet overtunic, known colloquially as "warrior blacks." He slipped his arm through a gold rank braid, tying it to a button atop his left shoulder, and attached the fourragere to his chest with a gold horsehead pin. Above the horsehead, which was roughly the size of a silver dollar, went a smaller pin, also gold: a crossed sword and key, the mark of a Lord Protector, bestowed by the King of Gateskeep for gallantry in defending a member of the royal family.

He buckled on a rapier and its attendant belt, slipping a medical kit in a black leather pouch and a Ka-Bar fighting knife onto it, first.

It was a hell of a sword, a long blade with a breathtaking swept hilt right out of Dumas, the satin-finished cage forged custom by a master smith in northern Maine. One

of the last affairs he'd handled before leaving Earth.

Leaving Earth.

The pink-purple moon, down to a sliver as the season ended, peeped through a break in the clouds on the horizon, its lone slender ring canted with oncoming winter. He took a deep breath, as he still did whenever the moon was out.

He'd left Earth.

Not a hundred days ago, he'd rescued Adielle, the princess of Falconsrealm and heir to the throne of Gateskeep, from captivity in the southern nation of Ulorak. He'd also killed Ulorak's most feared general, along with enough of his small army to stop in its tracks what would have been a costly and ghastly three-front war.

They'd given him an area bigger than Long Island for his troubles, a gorgeous, mountainous region north of here: the Wild River Reach, full of hardscrabble families and the country's largest silver mine. The king had taken it from the family of the late heir presumptive for colluding with the nation of Ulorak to kick off the short war in the first place.

Jarrold had no idea exactly how rich he was; no one on his staff was capable of counting that high. He owned the mine that produced the silver for the country's primary coinage, and coins not in circulation were stored in his castle's lowest basements, a fact that no one here at High River ever let him forget.

The wind slipped through the window, bringing a trace of damp dirt and the hint of rain, as if it stormed on the great ringed moon and he could just smell it here if he held perfectly still.

This was Jarrod's regular trip to the Falconsrealm capital to handle political affairs. He was at High River Keep so often these days that a steward had assigned him this apartment in the princess's tower, though the staff was evasive as to whether he was renting it, couch-surfing, or whether it came with the Lord Protector gig.

This morning's florid shade of hell involved a meeting with several lords from the Shieldlands, who would be airing grievances about Jarrod's proposed moratorium on scutage, the practice of sending paid mercenaries to fulfill the tours of duty expected from knights and lords in the king's service.

Their problem, as Jarrod understood it, was that the lords would send mercenaries to castle duty in their own knights' stead, instead of staffing their castles with mercenaries and sending their knights. As Jarrod had noted, often out loud, most of the mercenaries were cut-rate thugs with inferior gear, surpassed on every level by even the teenaged

goons that the border lords knighted. If the lords didn't want the mercenaries, Jarrod argued time and again, why should the king?

This was what the day was going to be about. He had a plan. He had notes tucked in his shirt. He was ready for this.

He closed the door behind him and stepped onto the landing.

A haggard soldier rounded the stairs with one of the chamberlains just as he turned, and several aspects were wrong with it all at once. He wasn't wearing the pin of The Reach knights—a tower with a wave about to batter it—though he had his goatee in fine braids, the style of men of The Reach. The lack of a chivalric pin meant he was a soldier, not a knight or a rider for an order, and he wasn't a soldier Jarrod recognized, although Jarrod's castle garrison was fewer than sixty troops in total and he was pretty sure he knew them all.

It was a long ride from Jarrod's castle at The Reach to High River Keep this time of year, and about to become much longer once the snows came. The soldier's eyes sagged in a wind-burned face. He had his helmet under his arm and he hadn't brushed the mud from his boots, so whatever he had to say, he hadn't stopped for breakfast or even a drink first.

A good man on a horse, sent from an outlying garrison, and sent fast.

"Lord Protector?" the soldier asked, as the chamberlain pointed to Jarrod.

Jarrod grumbled. One constant between worlds, he'd found, was that only trouble knocks before breakfast. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so, my lord," said the soldier. "The Hillwhites have just taken The Reach."



"You can ask him yourself," Princess Adielle was saying as Jarrod entered the audience chamber.

The royal audience chamber was on the eighth floor of the highest tower, and decorated in banners and tapestries, with the two largest on the wall framing either side of a polished wooden throne with a gilded cushion: the green banner of the kingdom of Gateskeep with its gold skeleton key, and next to it, the banner of the principality of Falconsrealm, sky-blue with a diving bird of prey in black.

Flames snapped and echoed from two large fireplaces along the curving outer wall, and the ceiling hung with fat candles in chandeliers lit even in the daylight. Along the

walls between the windows hung the smaller banners of the various chivalric orders, including Jarrod's own. The wooden floor was splintery timbers inlaid with stone in the diving-falcon sigil.

Princess Adielle Riongoran-Thurdin stood before her throne. Blonde, slightly taller than Jarrod, and appearing much younger, her eyes were bright blue and slightly watery, and she maintained a poise and grace that made Jarrod have to catch his breath sometimes. She wore a long braid and layered dresses in shades of blue with gold embroidery, along with a gray wolfskin mantle over her shoulders, several beaded necklaces in bright colors, and a sword at her side in a silver-embossed scabbard.

Jarrold knew the sword; he'd given it to her. It had started life on Earth as a leaf spring on a 1971 Cadillac, rescued from a scrapyard and reborn through heat and hammering as a late-medieval arming sword, gleaming, sure, and deadly.

Two Falconsrealm knights in heavy black hauberks flanked the room, their helmets on the ends of each table in puddles of mail. Jarrod recognized one from fight practice. New to the castle, he was young, aggressive, and stalk-thin, with a tight, clean jaw and narrow eyes. Jarrod remembered that he had good instincts, but he still needed help with his footwork.

The other was Lady Aveth from the Order of the Star, a broad woman, wide-faced beneath a dark bowl haircut. She'd fought beside Jarrod and Carter against Elgast's men a hundred days ago, a sergeant for the Order of the Stallion at the time but knighted to the Order of the Star for it and given the moniker Lady Aveth the Fearless. The Star was a top-tier unit composed of the most elite members of the royal orders, rough and dangerous riders responsible for finding lost travelers in a world made of monsters. It was exhausting, perilous, scary work, and knights of the Star often vanished without a trace. She nodded to Jarrod.

The soldier who'd come up to get Jarrod took a position near the door, pulled on his helmet, and rested both his hands on his sword handle.

Jarrold's eyes flicked around the room. It was quiet and still, which Jarrod knew was not good in a royal audience chamber, ordinarily a place rife with bustle and scribes. That the knights were armored was much, much less good.

He now knew enough about armor to know that knights didn't walk around the garrison in full war gear. Armor is uncomfortable, and it causes ringworm, and it gives you a headache, and nobody talks to you for long because armor stinks.

No one wears armor unless they have to, and even knights specifically tasked with

standing watch wore as little armor as they could get away with. Padded jacks were acceptable, as a shirt of mail could be thrown on in a crisis, and some mercenaries working scutage might own little more than a jack and a leather helmet anyway.

Further, Falconsrealm was not at war. High River Keep's vantage point overlooking a crescent of a lake far below meant that any knight would have had plenty of warning to get their armor on, or more armor, if needed.

A lot of people in this room, Jarrod noted, were wearing heavy armor. Also, the two knights in this room were from royal orders, not mercs. Heavy hitters.

A man sat at each table, well-dressed and warm, and Jarrod knew them both. The first was Lord Doravai, the Falconsrealm commonwealth marshal. Tall, thick-shouldered, in gray layered tunics and a black knit cape doubled over his shoulders, he had a heavy brow and a head and face shaved clean even in the chill of the end of fall. He was the levy commander, and essentially a reserve general. If he was in this meeting, the princess was contemplating calling up a yeomanry.

The other was a long-haired bulldog of a man in fine and bright clothing of burgundy and silver, his dark beard in braids. His name was Ravaroth Anganor, informally called Lord Rav. He was a former infantry commander and advised the princess on matters of state security.

A small session meant that this was also a confidential matter.

Jarrod bowed with a flourish to Adielle, fist over heart. "At your hand," he said, a Lord Protector's greeting to royalty.

"Lord Protector," said Adielle.

She had been addressing a man who stood away from the table, a man Jarrod didn't know. He had a tight dark beard, and he wore black baggy silks with knee-high boots and a beautiful black silk cape with gold embroidery on the edges and gold on the reverse, which Jarrod could just see when the man turned to face him.

Black clothes were expensive. Gold embroidery, much moreso.

Rich as hell, Jarrod thought.

He also had a large knight behind him in mail, dark furs, and a full helmet. It wasn't one of the Falconsrealm half-helms with its skirt of mail covering the face from the cheekbones down, but an expensive full helmet, vaguely Corinthian, the face slitted in a Y. Jarrod took him for a mercenary out of some trading crossroads and made a note to ask later.

The rich guy had a huge goddamn sword at his side, too, with a dark red handle

jutting nearly to his shoulder, much larger than would normally be allowed in the castle except for nobles, patricians, and knights on duty. Jarrod had to wonder how he'd gotten in, and more to the point, how he'd gotten that close to the princess with a sword that size. It set off every alarm in his body at the same time. All he could come up with was that the guy had to be on a first-name basis with the royal family.

There was a familiar set to his jaw, a unique slant to his nose. Jarrod couldn't quite place him, but he looked like . . .

"Son of a bitch," said Jarrod under his breath, in English. The Hillwhites, the disgraced patricians of Falconsrealm, had sent a representative to meet the princess. With a great big sword and a goon to back him up.

"You just stay right there," Jarrod warned him. "Keep your distance, Hillwhite. And keep your hands still."

The man, who was clearly kin to the late Edwin Hillwhite given his height, broad jaw, and shock of dark hair with flashing eyes, paled. "You," he stammered. "You're —"

"Yeah," said Jarrod. "I am. Which one are you? Nice sword."

"I'm . . . I'm Halchris Hillwhite," the man stuttered. "Cousin to Duke Edwin, the man you murdered."

"I didn't murder anybody," said Jarrod. "Are we back to this, again? We handed him off to the Faerie, who dealt—"

"You killed him!" the man shouted. "You murderous little prick!"

"The Faerie dealt him justice as they saw fit," Jarrod continued. "If you have a problem with that, you can go to war with them. In the meantime, I'm a Lord Protector of Falconsrealm, which gives you the right to meet me in one-on-one combat. Let's step outside."

The large knight—who was significantly larger than anyone in the room, with muscles evident even under his mail— shifted behind Halchris Hillwhite.

Halchris was big, as were most Hillwhites Jarrod had met. He was just over six feet, and Jarrod's boxer's eye put him right at two hundred pounds. The guy behind him, though, would present an interesting set of problems to solve.

"Duke Edwin broke the law," said Adielle. "His lands were forfeit to Gateskeep. My father, King Rorthos, awarded The Reach to Knight Chief Lieutenant Sir Jarrod, personally. Halchris, I give you five days to disband your armies and leave The Reach, or we will remove you."

"I'll be checking the ledgers and talking with the foremen at the mine," Jarrod added.

"If your guys take so much as a rock from that hill, you will give it back or I, personally, will come find you and break all your stuff."

The big guy stepped forward. Halchris put a hand on his shoulder.

"We can take The Reach," said Halchris, changing the subject and talking fast, now, because Lord Rav was, literally, growling. "We have it surrounded."

"Maybe," said Jarrod. "And your guys are going to camp through the winter? In the North?"

"No," said Halchris. "We've taken the villages of Grach, Astalia, and Walby, as well as your garrison at Maceshadow, and now Northtown." The town nearest The Reach. "The Reach is ours."



The room finally quieted.

"Halchris Hillwhite," said Adielle, sitting down on her throne. She spoke with a clarity and gravity that Jarrod had never heard from her and had hoped not to. "You have the right to audience with me to settle your grievance. You know the law."

"We're done with your laws," said Halchris Hillwhite. "And we're done with you, highness. We'll take what's ours."

The room went still except for Jarrod's fingers drumming on the grip of his rapier.

Lady Aveth picked up her helmet and seated it on her head, reducing her face to a curtain of mail below her eyes. The other knight followed suit. The message was unequivocal.

"Lord Jarrod," said Halchris, "tell your lord chancellor to surrender the castle. And the mine. And the vault with the coinage. We will take what's ours. And then, you come with us."

Jarrod grunted a short laugh and shook his head, smiling.

"What the hell are you smiling about?" snarled Halchris.

"You've signed your own death warrant," said Adielle to Halchris.

"At your hand," Jarrod assured her.

"Halchris Hillwhite, you've committed treason," said Doravai.

"We're past that," said Halchris. "Kill me if you want—"

"Okay," said Jarrod, stepping forward. The big guy behind Halchris shifted, and Halchris motioned for him to stay.

“—but we’ll still take The Reach,” Halchris continued, speaking fast, “And Gateskeep can’t reinforce you at The Reach and also fight us in the west.”

“The west?” Adielle asked.

“From Long Valley to the sea. We are The Western Hold,” Halchris announced.

“You can’t just declare yourselves a kingdom,” said Lord Rav. “I mean, you need . . . well, a king, for starters.”

“We are the Western Hold,” Halchris repeated. “Every lord in Long Valley has sided with us. We have enough troops to fight Gateskeep and win.”

“You’re jesting,” said Adielle.

“All we want is the stores at The Reach, which are rightfully ours. Surrender them without bloodshed. If you do so, we will remain a protectorate of Gateskeep in the west, we will control The Reach, and we will once again be your financiers.”

“Or,” offered Jarrod to Halchris, “I could just send them your head in bag and we could forget this ever happened.”

“We have dozens of families allied to us,” said Halchris, turning on Jarrod, exasperated. “Hundreds of knights. Gateskeep doesn’t have the troops to fight us. Falconsrealm certainly doesn’t. How are you going to fight without Hillwhite iron? Without Hillwhite silver? How are you going to field your knights?”

“How are *you* going to do it?” countered Jarrod. “If your men are *outside* my keep, and not *in* it, then the bridge is gone. We can stay in there for a thousand years. That keep survived the last Cataclysm.”

Adielle announced, “He knows this, Lord Protector. His family used to own it.”

She stood, then spoke clearly. “I’d say he’s here because their initial push failed. I’d say your chancellor held them off, Lord Protector, and now the bridge is gone. They need us to surrender The Reach because if we don’t, their forces will starve.” The mountains near The Reach gave way to what Jarrod figured was a good three miles of tundra and scrubby grass before ending at the rocks and the massive cliffs under his castle, which spouted stunning waterfalls like faucets for gods. There wasn’t much to eat. Or hunt. Or burn for heat.

Halchris’s face fell.

“Nice try,” Jarrod told him. “Go home.”

Halchris licked his lips with a very dry tongue.

“We will take The Reach,” said Halchris at last. “And you, Lord Sir Jarrod, if you won’t come with me to meet your rightful fate, I’ll kill you now.”

"I doubt that," said Jarrod.

The big guy in the helmet stepped forward.

"You're right," said Halchris Hillwhite. "He will."

And then Jarrod recognized the muscles, and the ringed guard of the longsword at his side, painstakingly forged and ground with loving detail by the same smith who'd made Jarrod's rapier.

"Hello, Jarrod," said Renaldo Salazar.



"Let me get this straight," said Jarrod, waving his hands to stop the conversation and addressing Halchris. "You go all the way to my homeland to find yourselves a champion, and you come back with *him*? This—" they had no word for *dilettante*, much less for *wannabe*. "—This? What did you do, lose a bet?"

"Lord Blacktree is our champion," said Halchris.

"Blacktree," said Jarrod. "Like 'Hillwhite,' only dumber."

"They made me a pretty sweet deal," said Renaldo, addressing Jarrod in English. "All I have to do is kill you."

"Yeah," said Jarrod. "Good luck with that."

The sword at Renaldo's belt was a four-foot longsword, and Renaldo, for all his muscleheaded, loinclothed, idiotic preening at Renaissance festivals—where Jarrod had mainly seen him—was gifted with it. He competed in longsword at the international level, and Jarrod knew that Renaldo had made quite a name for himself in the world of illegal underground dueling that had cropped up after "The Incident" in Paris, in which Jarrod had accidentally killed an Olympic saber hopeful in a drunken swordfight.

If they both drew, Jarrod knew he was pretty much screwed. His rapier, even with its heavy blade, would never get through Renaldo's mail, which was certainly welded steel and not the local riveted iron, which Jarrod would still have had trouble with.

Renaldo, facing the unarmored Jarrod, had no such concerns. He might as well have been carrying a chainsaw.

"You understand," said Jarrod, addressing Halchris and switching back to the local language. "If you kill me now, they'll hang you both."

"If we kill you all, we walk out," said Renaldo, in the same. His accent was guttural, monotone, slightly slurred. He hadn't been here long.

Jarrold drew his rapier, and the assembly moved in front of the princess as Renaldo's mammoth blade cleared its scabbard.



Time slows in combat. Men weep as seconds crawl by, as friends fall, as prayers fly and horses scream. A thousand things happen inside a blink of combat time. The world drags.

Jarrold Torrealday relished combat the way others relish dance: consecration of the body, an invitation for a greater power to shepherd worldbound incapable flesh to the realm of the sublime. The cage of his rapier flashed in the light of the chandeliers. His eyes hardened to coals.

He lived in combat time.

Both knights and the soldier plowed into Renaldo as Halchris closed with Jarrod. His sword was very big and very shiny for a Falconsrealm weapon, a massive two-hander even larger than Renaldo's.

A feint, an envelopment, and Jarrod sent the huge sword out of line, steel singing and scratching. He lowered a shoulder into Halchris's belt and lifted him by a handful of pantleg, dropping him heavy and hard. Halchris scrambled up and Jarrod punched him in the face with the cage of his rapier, sending him back to the floor. As he came up again, the tip of Jarrod's rapier, scalpel-sharp, snaked out and caught him under the chin and came out below his ear. The greatsword rang off the floor and blood fanned the room like a thumb over a garden hose as Halchris stumbled back, shrieking and clawing at the side of his throat.

Not ten feet away, Renaldo was fighting off all three troops at the same time, hitting them with armored shins and elbows and throwing them into walls. Jarrod watched the local swords bounce off Renaldo again and again, blow after blow that should have been fight-enders. One—the skinny kid—got to his feet and Renaldo stabbed him through the chest. The point of the longsword came out his back, tenting the mail. The local armor and weapons were just no match.

Beside Jarrod, Halchris's legs kicked as he made creaking noises, blood misting from around his clenched hands and pooling on the floor.

"Sorry," Jarrod said, and charged into the fray to interpose himself between Renaldo and Adielle, who had her sword out as two of the three troops rolled on the floor and the

third lay crumpled.

“Oh, really?” asked Renaldo, amused. Jarrod stepped back to make space, and Renaldo shuffled closer and tested him with a couple of feints, nothing elaborate; simple probing fakes sufficient to push Jarrod back.

The issue, Jarrod noted with consternation, was the track of the point of the longsword. No matter where Renaldo moved his hands, the point stayed directly on him. The blade floated, a far cry from the heavy smash-and-cutters he’d been used to fighting here in Falconsrealm.

It had been a long time since he’d actually fenced.

Jarrod circled, turning him around, at which point Adielle threw her mantle over Renaldo’s helmet and stabbed him in the back of the leg.

“Mother-FUCKER!” Renaldo roared.

She kicked him in the back, knocking him into the wall. Renaldo spun, fighting with the fur, and she stabbed him, both hands, feet planted—beautiful form, Jarrod noted—dead center in the chest.

For a moment, holy shit, Jarrod thought, she’d killed Renaldo, but all it did was run him back a few steps. Her sword snarled in his hauberk, and she dropped it and leaped back as Renaldo threw the mantle to the floor and came at her, longsword high, screaming, the arming sword dangling wildly and banging off his knees.

Jarrod stepped in, taking the longsword with his rapier, and kicked Renaldo in the chest, freeing Adielle’s sword with a yank and a twist. He tossed it to her with a whistle that tore through the room.

Renaldo moved out of Adielle’s attacking distance before spinning again to concentrate on Jarrod, heaving, clearly hurting, and out of sorts.

“Highness, run!” Jarrod shouted, at full extension, not taking his eyes off the longsword. “Run!”

“We’ve got him!” she answered, holding Halchris’s warsword. Renaldo backed away from them both, limping. *Goddamn right*, Jarrod thought.

“Run!” Jarrod ordered.

She wouldn’t run.

A couple of quick, probing engagements goaded the longsword forward. He caught it near the tip with the rapier, levering it far enough out that it took Renaldo a breath to recover.

Amazing sense of measure and distance, Jarrod thought. Truly gifted. No

overextensions, no overcompensations—at least, not while attacking. Surgical.

Scary.

He toyed with the tip of the longsword again, got Renaldo to pull it back into a tighter guard, and followed it in with a glissade, stabbing the inside of Renaldo's elbow. Renaldo shook his head and growled.

It was odd, Jarrod thought then, that Renaldo didn't take pain well. He lacked that measure of physical toughness that made an elite swordsman, and Jarrod could envision him as one of these oddly fragile lumberjack types who winced and swore walking barefoot in the yard. It wasn't much to work with, but he turned it over in his head.

Jarrod eked out another engagement, barely more than a feint, and thought he saw something in Renaldo's reaction that he liked. Another exchange and a scampering retreat out of long attacking distance, and he had it as the bigger man closed the gap and lunged.

Renaldo led with his hands.

It was a minor thing, a bad habit that some swordsmen pick up. Renaldo, like a lot of powerful and self-taught longsword fencers in modern schools, relied on his size and immense strength, and telegraphed his blows by moving his sword at the beginning of the blow instead of using the sword as an extension of his body. Renaldo announced every move a quarter of a second before he did it.

A quarter of a second was enough to keep Jarrod, an Olympic-caliber *sabreur* behind a world-class rapier, alive.

For now.

Renaldo attacked, hands-first again. This time, as Jarrod wrapped up the longsword, Renaldo connected with an elbow shod in mail. The world dissolved into sparks and prickling numbness as Jarrod hit the floor, rolled to his feet, and promptly fell over again.

The room had become a merry-go-round, blurring in the corners, gravity pulling at him in six directions as he watched Doravai and Rav closing with Renaldo and tried to remember what his feet were for.

The last two knights, slow on their feet, joined the fight behind Doravai and Rav. Jarrod rolled to all fours, crutched to a stand using his rapier and stood there a moment until the world slowed its spin, and then grabbed Adielle by the arm and threw her toward the door. "We're leaving!" he shouted. She opened it, and he followed her out at a run. He yelled down the stairs for help as he held the door shut, the wall before him still cartwheeling.

The door barred from the inside, not the outside; he would have to contain Renaldo through sheer force of will. He pulled until his hands ached and his shoulders burned. A tug on the other side would spell the end of the world.

He couldn't see. His eye hurt clear into his brain. He wondered if the socket was smashed and the eye bulging out of his head.

Adielle pulled at him as screams and crashes rang from the room. He shoved her back, then continued pulling on the door.

"If he gets loose in the castle, we all die," he warned. "You can't stop him. Those are weapons and armor from my homeland."

A knight in warrior blacks jumped in and helped Jarrod hold the door shut, while a second ran up the stairs to them with a spear, which they wedged into the handle and against the stone wall. A crowd had gathered, murmuring.

Behind the door, the fighting was dying down.

Jarrod looked Adielle up and down. "Where's the sword?" he asked.

"I gave it to Rav," she said. "What is his armor made of?"

"Steel," said Jarrod. "Good steel, from my homeland." *Case-hardened, welded chrome-moly, I'd bet. Same as mine.*

"Steel mail? How do we stop him?" asked Adielle.

Jarrod bit his lip in thought. "Hold this door until I return," he told the knights, looking up the stairs toward his room. "Keep him contained. You die holding this door if you have to."



"Lover?" asked Karra as Jarrod slammed open the heavy door to their apartment. She wore a gauzy white wrap around her diminutive yet resplendent body. She held his face in her hands and leaned up to examine his eye, which was turning a savage purple, the lid swelling closed. "My lover, heart of my eyes. Did you fight?"

"I fought," said Jarrod, easing her aside and stripping armor off the mannequin, throwing it on the bed. "An old friend, from my world. He's here to kill me."

"Your eye," she said. "Can you see?"

"I'm fine. I need my armor."

"You will fight again?"

"I need to kill him. We have him locked in a room downstairs." His arming jacket

was a motocross jacket of pebbled horsehide with inset carbon-fiber plates. He zipped it on. "If he gets loose, he'll kill us all."

Ten-inch military-grade work boots. Steel toes, speed laces, toggles.

Wrestling into a hauberk, probably the same stuff as Renaldo's but coated in black nitride, felt like it took a year. His mind screamed at him with images of Renaldo loose in the castle, butchering everyone, killing everything—his friends, his horse, the princess's dog—as he smoothed down the links and jumped up and down to seat it.

He locked a belt around the mailshirt, pulled the tie from his hair, and threw a mail coif of titanium over his head, black eighth-inch rings that fell across his dreadlocks like silk. Karra buckled one of his bazubands, a combination forearm and elbow guard, Persian in design, completely alien here and made of tooled leather in whisky and black, as he tucked his hair under the coif, swearing.

She handed him his helm, an enormous Barbute like Renaldo's, but with a locking faceplate and a skirt of heavy steel rings. He jammed it down and one ear bent in half.

He pulled it off, swearing louder, and tried it again. A matted lock of hair hung in his eye.

A third time, Karra helping, and everything seemed to fit.

He slipped the medical kit off his rapier belt and onto the belt of his arming sword, beside a subcompact pistol, and cinched it around the mailshirt, over the other belt. He considered just taking the gun and to hell with the rest of it, but he doubted if a nine-millimeter could drop Renaldo before he got across the room with that goddamn sword.

"This man," said Karra. "He can kill the entire castle?"

"Yes," said Jarrod, slinging his greatsword over one shoulder. He pulled on his gauntlets, which rightfully belonged on a magnificent suit of 15th-Century field armor that was in his bedroom back at The Reach.

"And you want to fight this man?"

"No," said Jarrod, and wiggled his fingers. Scales of steel clacked. "I want to kill him."

She kissed him, leaning up to do so. "Kill him, brave lover," she said. "Go fight him well."

She handed him his shield as casually as if she was his mother sending him off to school with a lunch box. It was a mighty teardrop affair nearly as large as she was, with the Lord Protector's crest on a green field, his sigil as a guardian of the realm. He slipped his arm through it and the world settled into place.

“Stay here,” he told her. “I’ll be right back.”

He slapped his faceplate down and buckled it, then took the steps at a run, six flights down, skipping the trip steps—steps larger or smaller than the others, invisible in a helmet but reflexive to castle inhabitants—which he now knew by heart but had been a real bastard for months. Especially drunk, as he’d often been.

The spear still pinned the door closed when Jarrod arrived. The princess had refused to leave and was surrounded by a group of men and women with knives, swords, and a few axes.

“It’s been very quiet,” one of the knights at the door said. Jarrod recognized him, a sergeant from the Order of the Star, Lady Aveth’s unit.

“Well, that’s bad,” Jarrod remarked. He fingered the plastic biteguard tethered around a bar inside the faceplate of his helmet, bit it, seated it, and shrugged his greatsword off his shoulder, drawing it with a flourish and dropping the scabbard.

It was a fantastic piece of gear, a reproduction of a 14th-Century *gran espée de guerre*, a great sword of war. Plain, gleaming, enormous. It was nearly four feet of hardened steel with a beefy edge designed to wreck armor and splinter bones beneath. Whether it would be effective against steel mail was anyone’s guess, but he figured at the least he could beat Renaldo unconscious in his armor with it, which sounded immensely gratifying.

Someone picked up the scabbard for him.

He wondered about Renaldo’s mail. He’d seen the local swords and even that two-hander bounce off it; only Adielle’s, that wicked old Cadillac leaf spring, might have dug in, but the rings had bunched up around the tip of her sword and gripped the hell out of it.

The mail hadn’t snarled on his rapier, which raised the question: what were the rings made of? Mild steel? Case hardened? Some kind of alloy?

Why didn’t it trap the rapier?

He ran the rapier and the arming sword through his head. They were different steels entirely: different carbon contents, different tempers, different hardnesses. Further, there were a hundred differences in the shape of the damned swords alone. It could have been a freak occurrence, some one-in-a-million confluence of edge geometry and distal taper.

Kill him, he thought. Just kill him and play with his armor later.

He focused on the moment ahead.

There’s going to be blood on the floor. Dark blood, dark floor. Slippery. Keep your balance. Drive from the hips, don’t trust the floor. And if you flunge— the airborne, panther-like saber

attack that combined a fleche and a lunge, and a short sabreur's lifeline against someone Renaldo's size—*you die*.

He spoke loudly and slowly, his voice muffled around the mouthguard. "After you pull the spear, stay behind me," he told the two knights at the door. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my lord."

"If he gets through me, do whatever you have to do to make sure he doesn't get out of the room."

"How shall we do that, Lord Protector?"

Jarrod motioned everyone back. "Hell, I don't know," he mumbled. "Be creative."

They slid the spear aside, and the castle went still. Jarrod's armor creaked in the held breaths of the group as he raised his shield, said a silent prayer behind his visor, and kicked the door open.



Jarrod was no stranger to human wreckage, but this was extraordinary.

He'd seen plenty of wet death in his few months here, and had handed out his own share. What Renaldo had done, however, was another realm altogether.

Blood patterned the walls, the tables, the tapestries. Doravai had been split from shoulder to hip, purple and gray organs glistening in an ocean of ick. Half of Lord Rav's skull above the nose lay upturned on the table, eyes wide, hair dripping.

Both knights and the soldier of the Reach were extremely and spectacularly dead, splayed out in various wide puddles still growing. In a clear space on the floor, a hand held a sword at the end of an armored forearm, the mail and bone sheared clean.

Above it all, the silence. He could hear his breath behind his visor.

No Renaldo.

Halchris was crumpled on the floor where Jarrod had left him, on his side in a quiet pool of black with his arm outstretched toward where Renaldo had been. It was a sad and peculiar way to end up, and Jarrod wondered what had been going through his mind in those last seconds; what he might have thought Renaldo could do for him as he bled out, the world dimming, Renaldo probably blind to him, still beating the shit out of all comers.

Boy, you're just slam-dunking Hillwhites left and right, aren't you?

Jarrood unlocked his faceplate and took a quick look left and right, then flipped it up. Renaldo was gone.

He spat out his mouthguard and whistled. Half a dozen men and women came running, followed by three men in brown robes. Healers. Castle wizards.

"Where is he?" asked Adielle, adding, "Oh, no," as she saw the mess. "Oh, no."

"I have no idea where he is." Jarrood sighed. "Are there any other doors?"

"No," she said.

"Then stay by me," he advised. Jarrood grabbed one of the wizards by the sleeve. The main healer for the castle, Durvin, was away, studying at Gateskeep Palace. Jarrood didn't recognize the man whose robe he was holding at the cuff. "Did Crius put wards on this place?" he asked.

Crius Lotavaugus, the Lord High Sorcerer of Gateskeep and arguably the most gifted sorcerer in the realm, had placed a series of what amounted to force fields around the great towers of the palaces, preventing anyone from projecting magic through the walls. The lack of these wards had originally been an oversight, leading to King Ulo Sabbaghian, the leader of the bordering nation of Ulorak, stealing Princess Adielle with a brilliant teleport in the early fall and firing the starting gun for a ten-day war, in which Jarrood had rescued the princess and then kicked the Uloraki army in its collective teeth.

Wards kept people from zapping in and out on commando raids.

Ulo hadn't had wards, either, allowing Jarrood to steal the princess right back.

The wizard was talking.

"What?" asked Jarrood.

"The wards," the wizard repeated. "They stop at the walls. He could—I mean, a man could have jumped, if there was a wizard to—I don't know, my lord. Maybe to catch him, and then teleport him."

Jarrood walked to the window, set his helm on the sill, and looked down. Nearly a hundred feet. Not enough to kill you, but it would make a mess if you landed badly. "How good would you have to be to do that?" he asked. "Catch him," he clarified.

"Better than I," said the wizard. "Far better."

These were castle wizards, part of the staff in simple brown robes and hoods, nothing showy or even notable about them. The other two had started to look over the fallen. One started to struggle with a knight's crushed helmet but the second checked for breath, then told him not to bother.

Jarrood picked up the big red sword from the floor, where it lay next to what had been

Lord Rav.

This was not a Gateskeep weapon. The handle was too long, wrapped in crimson leather; the blade was mirror-polished, with no weld lines where steel edging should meet patterned iron spine. Forged and ground from solid steel instead of hammered together from charcoal and iron, the clarity of line and the finish were jeweled compared to even the best Gateskeep swords.

It was a gran espée de guerre much like his own.

A sword from Earth.



Renaldo landed in a splashing heap, shattered by cold. He gasped at the shock, sucked in water, and spasmed. He flailed. He panicked.

He was drowning.

Then he found the bottom and realized that it was just a puddle, crusted with ice and shin-deep. He rolled to a knee and coughed muddy water until he threw up chunks of fish in a searing slop of wine and coffee.

He reached to pull his helmet off, and the world disappeared in flashes and pain, a hammer to his lungs when he moved his arms. Bending over, he shook off the helmet, rinsed it in the puddle, and hurled it away, then threw back his mail hood with a shake of his head, which shot black glass from his heart into his eyes.

He figured his sternum was bruised from the stab the princess had given him, and it crossed his mind that Jarrod might have broken a rib or torn one free with that damned savate kick. He rested an elbow on his knee and squeezed air into his lungs an ounce at a time, swearing. The world was the tang of wet horse manure blowing sideways with rain and snow mixed in.

This fuckin' land. When they give me my castle, I'm going to name it "Mudland," and I'm going to tell these hapless schnooks that in our language it means "shining city on a hill."

He recognized the place immediately; it was the inner courtyard of West Keep, a mighty gray castle overlooking the sea on the northwestern tip of Gateskeep. He knew the smell, the rain, and the twin high towers behind the wall. The weird pink tinge to the clouds. It was a hundred feet from where they'd left when teleporting to High River.

He tried to yell at a figure in blue on the hillside near the inner wall of the castle, but his voice was a pale rasp, little more than a squeak.

A man in a wool mantle heavy with rain pulled at the shoulder of a shorter, stumpier man in a cloak soaked shapeless. They came to him at a run, hands on their swords. "Lord Blacktree!" one yelled.

Well, it is nice to be appreciated.

Renaldo felt around in the water for his sword, found the handle, and threw it out of the puddle as the two soldiers waded in to help him up. The figure in blue strode toward them, moving so fast and gracefully as if appearing to hover.

He put his arms around their shoulders, limping and splashing to the muddy edge and then to the grass, swearing and wincing and holding his leg. His fingers came away covered in blood. That princess of theirs had fucked him up, and good.

His arm was bleeding and stiffening where the tip of the rapier had snuck through the mail. He wiggled his fingers and his thumb sparked with nerves.

One of the soldiers grabbed up his helm and coif and the other handed him his sword.

The two soldiers parted before the figure in blue, taller than either. "Lady Jerandra," one deferred, and added something else that Renaldo didn't grasp. It was a horrid language, simultaneously sung and gargled, like a leprechaun throwing up.

Jerandra was ebony-skinned, white-fanged, and almost as tall as he was, half-Faerie, her mother a desert elf from the Gavrian Wilds. She looked for all the world to Renaldo like a statue of a Nubian warrior princess come to life. A soaked blue dress clung to contours and angles of a magnificent body, and the points of her ears peeked through a chin-length, jagged cut of black hair drenched and dotted with stars of rain and hail. The cold didn't seem to bother her.

She looked down at Renaldo, her eyes flashing turquoise above the dark and knobbed Faerie cheekbones. "They injured you," she said.

"Worse than that," said Renaldo. "They killed Lord Halchris."

"Then you failed," she assumed.

"No," said Renaldo, his tone thoughtful. "He did." Still holding his sword, not wanting to sheathe it wet, he bade them to get him inside.