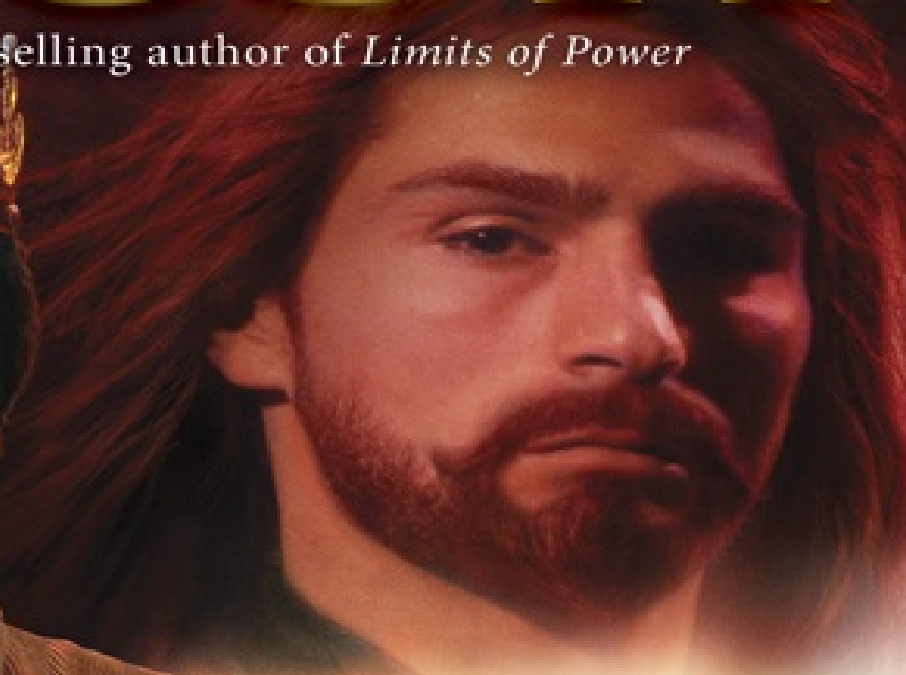
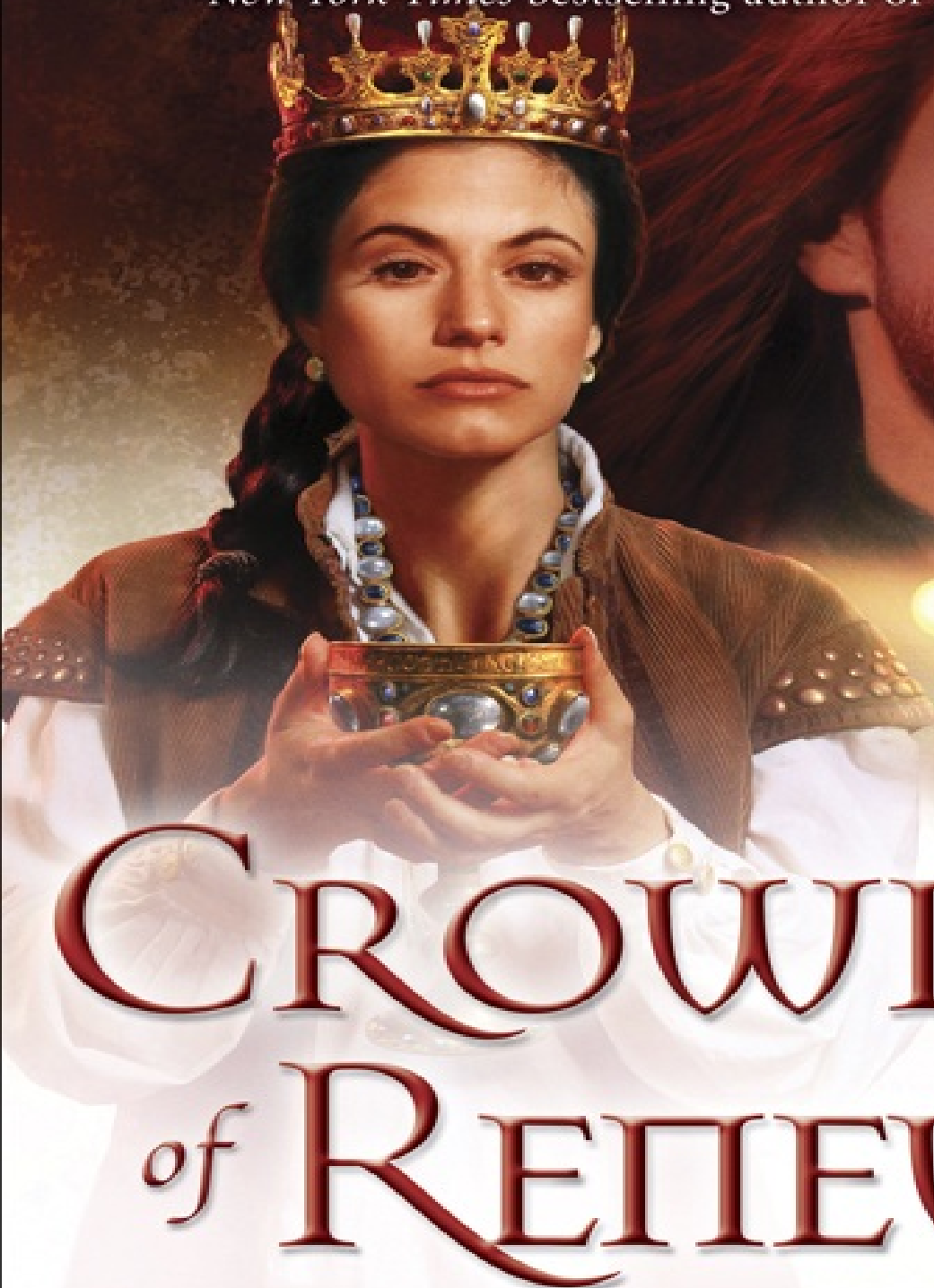


WINNER OF THE NEBULA AWARD

ELIZABETH MOON

New York Times bestselling author of *Limits of Power*



CROWN of RENEWAL

PALADIN'S LEGACY

CROWN OF
RENEWAL



ELIZABETH MOON



DEL REY • NEW YORK

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Dramatis Personae

Fox Company

Jandelir Arcolin, Commander of Fox Company, Duke Arcolin of Tsaia, and Prince of Arcolinfulk tribe of gnomes

Calla, his wife

Jamis, his adopted son

Burek, junior captain of first cohort

Selfer, captain of second cohort

Cracolnya, captain of third (mixed/archery) cohort

Andreson, captain of recruit cohort

Tsaia

Mikeli Vostan Kieriel Mahieran, king of Tsaia

Camwyn, his younger brother

Sonder Amrothlin Mahieran, Duke Mahieran, king's uncle

Selis Jostin Marrakai, Duke Marrakai

Gwennothlin, his daughter and Duke Verrakai's squire

Aris, his son and Prince Camwyn's friend

Galyan Selis Serrostin, Duke Serrostin

Daryan, youngest son and Duke Verrakai's squire

Dorrin Verrakai, Duke Verrakai, formerly a senior captain in Phelan's company, now Constable for the kingdom

Beclan, Kirgan Verrakai, formerly Beclan Mahieran

Oktar, Marshal-Judicar of Tsaia

Seklis, High Marshal of Gird

Lyonya

Kieri Phelan, king of Lyonya, former mercenary commander and duke in Tsaia, half-elven grandson of the Lady of the Ladysforest

Arian, Kieri's wife, queen of Lyonya, half-elven granddaughter of the elven ruler of the Lordsforest

Aliam Halveric, Kieri Phelan's mentor and friend

Estil Halveric, his wife

Elves

Amrothlin, the Lady's son and Kieri's uncle, elven ruler of the Lordsforest

Fintha

Arianya, Marshal-General of Gird

Arvid Semminson, former thief-enforcer, now Girdish

Camwynya, paladin of Gird

Paksenarrion, paladin of Gird

Aarenis

Jeddrin, Count of Andressat

Ferran, his son and heir

Meddthal, his second son

Visla Vaskronin, Duke of Immer (formerly Alured the Black)

Aesil M'dierra, commander of Golden Company

Poldin, her nephew and squire

Count Vladi (the Cold Count), commander of Count's Company

Kaim, Arcolin's squire this campaign season

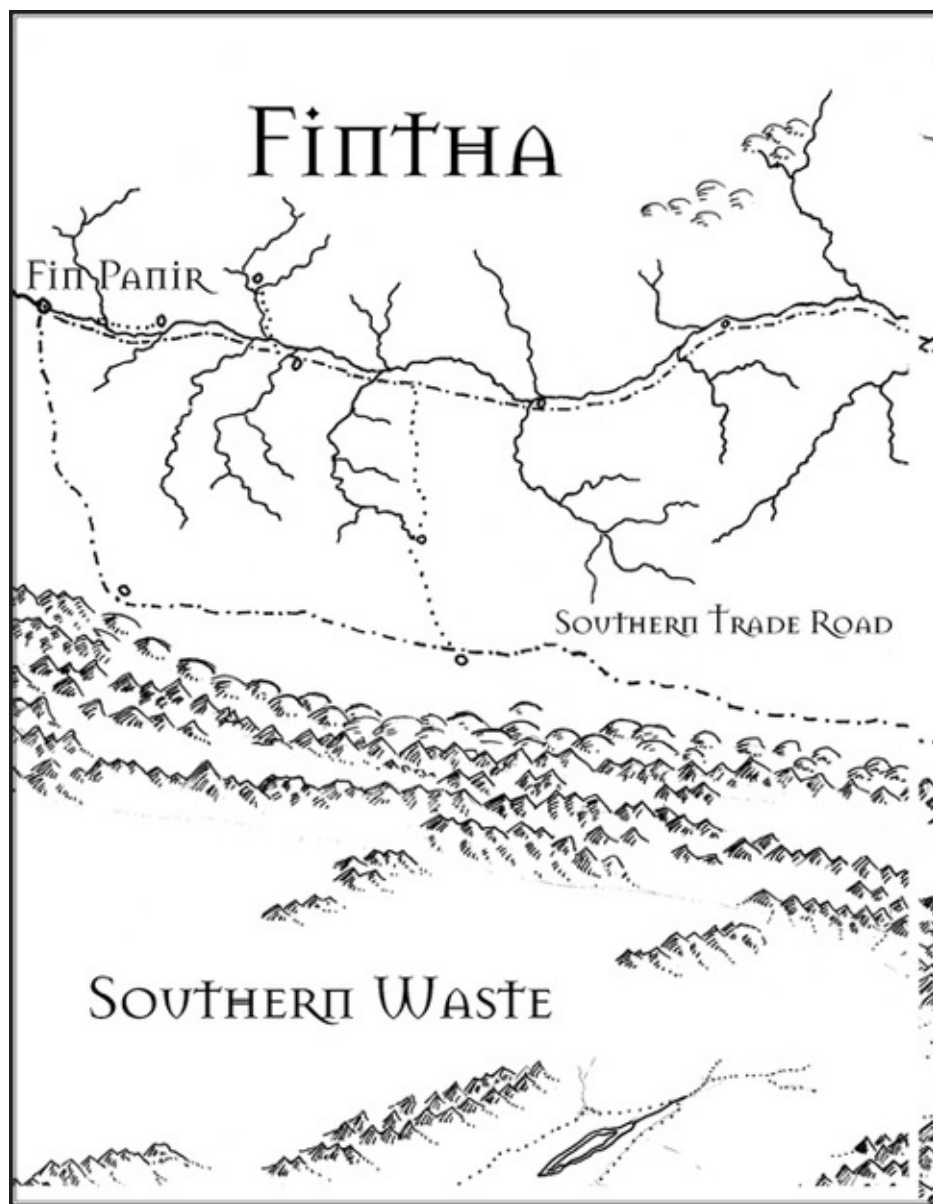
Kuakkgani

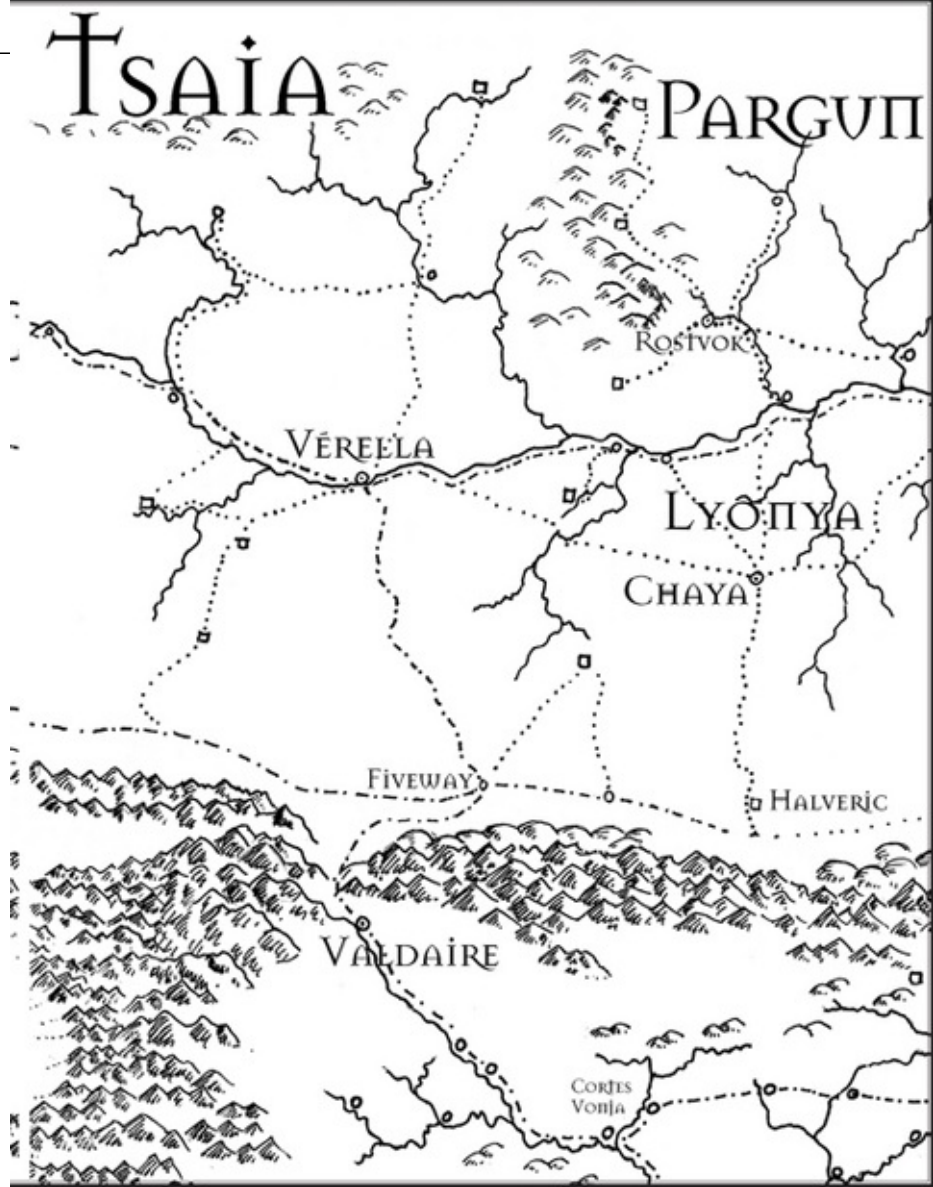
Sprucewind, itinerant Kuakgan

Gnomes

Dattur, Arcolin's hesktak (advisor of Law)

Faksutterk, envoy of Aldonfulk Prince





Crown of Renewal is the fifth and final volume of Paladin's Legacy, and not an entry point for new readers. *Oath of Fealty* is first.

This book presented some challenges in chronology. First, and simplest, readers need to know that *Crown of Renewal* begins a quarter-year before the end of *Limits of Power*, Midwinter in Aarenis. This allows the viewpoints of characters who were out of contact to catch up. Timelines converge as communication resumes.

The other chronological challenge most affects those who have read *Surrender None*, *Liar's Oath*, or the omnibus version of these two, *The Legacy of Gird*, which are otherwise very helpful to the readers of *Crown*. The end of *Liar's Oath* will not match exactly certain scenes in *Crown*. Assume an unreliable narrator.

Finally, this final volume of Paladin's Legacy pulls together those prequel books—the history of Gird and Luap from their own viewpoints—and connects them to present events. The flaws and the strengths in the Fellowship of Gird shown in the original Paks books began with Gird and his followers, fault lines that cause the schisms appearing in the books' present time.

So those who have never read either *Liar's Oath* or *Surrender None* will benefit from reading them—they enrich understanding of the new books. *Liar's Oath* is the book almost no one likes, but it's more palatable if read as a gloss on *Crown*—as a dry history. If you don't want to do that, there are some take-home things I can offer from the earlier books.

1. Luap is a classic tragic protagonist—a man of talents ruined by a fatal flaw: his inability to accept the truth of his faults. He lied, repeatedly. To himself and to others, about himself and others. He made up stories he thought were better than reality, including those about Gird's life and death. Gird's daughter managed to suppress that once, but as people died who had been there, Luap renewed his effort to tell the story his way. *Surrender None* (Gird's book) has the accurate version.

Luap could not accept Gird's judgment of him—that he was unfit for command—or that of the wise old magelady who knew his parentage. Because he was a king's bastard, he thought he had inherited the ability and the right to rule *somewhere*. Like so many, he told himself that lies didn't matter if (a) he meant well (and he always did) and (b) the truth would bother somebody (him, for instance).

Those lies led to disaster for those who followed him and to schism and confusion over the centuries. Knowing himself so little, he was a poor judge of character in others, so he was unable to determine whether the magelords who came with him to Kolobia were coming in good faith or not. Some weren't. And for the same reason, he was easy prey for iynisin, who convinced him that he was so important to the colony that he must not age. This led to his stealing life force (and age) from those around him and making it possible for the iynisin to escape their old imprisonment in the stone. When they felt strong enough, iynisin attacked Luap's magelords openly.

2. The last chapters of *Liar's Oath* (Luap's book) gives the viewpoint of Luap and some of his followers at the time the magelords in Kolobia were attacked and then put into enchanted sleep. None of the participants—enchanters or enchanted—had full understanding of the situation on either side. Luap himself was stunned by both iynisin attacks and the sudden demands of the Elder Races that he and his people leave at once, without the benefit of the magic transfer patterns. In the chaos of that day, he prayed for help and had a vision that resulted in the situation the much later Girdish expedition (including Paksenarrion) found: a great stronghold hollowed out of a mountain, with a large group of men and women in armor kneeling in its main hall. In *Liar's Oath*, events are seen from Luap's POV; in *Crown Renewal*, from the enchanter's POV.



Andressat, winter of the previous year

Winter storms, one after another, cut off the high plateau of Andressat from the lowlands around it as Midwinter Feast neared. On the morning before the nightlong vigil, Meddthal, Andressat, the Count of Andressat's second son and present commander in the north, woke to hear the thud of the inner door closing, then voices in the tower's main hall: exclamation, then quieter tones.

Someone, he gathered, had sent something to someone as a gift. Found it by the door. Sighing, he pushed back the covers, dressed quickly, and went out to see what was going on. Families did not normally come to the towers to leave gifts for their kin on duty, especially not during winter storms. Especially not without pounding on the door and coming inside. He thought immediately of treachery, poisoned food, perhaps, sent by an enemy.

"Whatever it is, don't eat it," he said, coming into the mess, then stopped short as he saw the wide eyes and horrified expressions turned toward him and the quick movement of men hiding something from their commander. "What?" he demanded. "Show me."

The sergeant who had served with him since Meddthal first gained command shook his head. "Sir, you don't want to see this."

"Of course I do. Stand aside."

"Sir, please. It's ... it's horrible ..."

Meddthal could feel the hairs on his arms rising; cold foreboding struck like a blow. His younger brother Filis had been missing since the previous summer, disappearing on a routine trip from Andressat to Cortes Cilwan. Almost certainly Filis had been captured by the one man in Aarenis who would want an Andressat son in his hands: Alured the Black, self-styled Duke of Immer.

"It's Filis," he said. "Isn't it?"

"There's a letter, sir. To Count Andressat."

Meddthal moved forward. "It's more than that by the way you're all acting. Stand aside. I must see to report to my father." He braced himself for horrors: Filis's head, Filis's body. Then he saw it, and his breath came short, his vision darkened.

The box had been made with great skill, leather laid over a framework of wood. Filis's face formed the top—skillfully padded enough to show the contours, like a mask, though much flattened, the ears—those distinctive ears—forming a hideously decorative border to left and right. Meddthal struggled to think about that, not that it was *Filis's* face, the familiar face of his brother he had loved and quarreled with. Not—absolutely *not*—about how it had been taken from Filis, whether Filis had been skinned before or after death.

He struggled to stay upright, to breathe, to hold back the nausea that threatened to shame

him in front of all. He became aware gradually that the sergeant's arm was around him, steadying him—a strong, warm arm, and most of all a *live* arm. That his men were looking away from him, giving him time to recover, stirring about as if it were a normal morning and they were getting ready for another day. He dragged in one lungful after another of the clean air—air that would never be warm after this. And looked again.

He could not unsee what he had seen. He could not unthink the thoughts that raced through his mind, deadly as a flight of arrows. He had known—they had all known—that Filis was likely dead, killed by Alured or at his command. They had told themselves that; they had even—as his father had said aloud first—hoped he was dead and past suffering. Had it been Filis's severed head ... even a body bearing marks of torture ... it would not have been so bad.

Filis's hair fell over the back of the box, carefully braided with ribbons in Immer's colors and formed into a decorative knot. On one corner was a scar Meddthal recognized from Filis's shoulder ... then he saw the fine stitching that had attached that piece of Filis's skin to the others. A tube—it must be the message tube with the letter to Count Andressat—protruded obscenely from Filis's mouth.

Rage shook him as suddenly as horror had. That scum had planned all this to the last detail ... to foul one of the year's holiest days, Sunreturn, with such horror ... to make of the day not the day of hope and joy Midwinter Feast had always been but to stain it with the memory of Filis's death.

"It was in a sack, tied with a green ribbon," one of the men said. "There was a message. Send it to Count Andressat as a Midwinter gift from his liege, it said." He pointed to the sack crumpled on the floor, coarsely woven, and the ribbon with a wooden tag still attached.

Meddthal shook his head. "He has no liege, and it would kill him." To his surprise, his voice sounded almost normal.

"You're never going to hide it from him—"

"No. I'm not going to hide it. But he will have word from me, to blunt the blade, before I send it. Now, however, I will open Immer's letter. Simthal, is the food ready?"

"For Midwinter, sir? I thought—"

"We have much to do, and days are short. We will eat, and we will prepare for the attack that is surely coming." Already his mind was working again, offering alternatives and their problems with each. In Midwinter, no one could ride from this tower to Cortes Andres in one day's light ... but had Alured's men sent a message directly to the Count? No ... they wanted to unnerve the border guards first. "Tell the cooks: breakfast now. And we will observe most parts of the Midwinter ceremony, though we will not be fools and exhaust ourselves in games this day. We will honor Filis's memory best by saving Andressat from the same fate."

They nodded. Someone handed him a mug of sib, and he sipped cautiously ... his stomach kept it down. The tears burning his eyes did not overflow. He took the tube from between the lips, leaving a gaping hole in the face, and untied the green and black ribbons.

It was written in blood; the rusty color could be nothing else. "Brother," he murmured, and kissed it. Filis had died, no doubt a terrible death, but this was proof he was no traitor, as some had thought. The words made it clear what had been done and when and how. A terrible death indeed. The box had not required all of Filis's skin ... the rest had been made into a rug for Alured's bedside—"and as I stand on it each day, so will I stand on Andressat's

master of all.” “The best parts” of Filis’s broken body had been cooked and force-fed to the Count of Cilwan and his wife before they were killed and their bodies fed to dogs, their skins added to the rug.

So Alured had killed not only Filis but their sister, and his father had lost two children. Thank the gods their child, the count’s grandson, was safe in Cortes Andres. A few tears slipped from Meddthal’s eyes. Nerinth had been married to Cilwan young, unwillingly and had endured years with that—Meddthal cut off the thought. It would do no good now to despise Cilwan’s timidity and avarice. He blinked back more tears and read on.

The rest was yet more boasts and threats. Meddthal thought of burning it, saving his father that knowledge, but the old man would not thank him. He rolled the letter once more and put it back in the tube, then put the tube into his belt pouch.

Cooks had brought in bread, porridge, pastries, roasts; for a moment his stomach turned again. But vengeance required nourishment. Starving himself, heaving his food out: neither one would help him defeat Alured. He forced down a bowl of porridge and a slab of bacon. Others ate after seeing him eat. He went to the door and opened it, shut it behind him, then opened the outer door. A gray day, just enough light to see, barely past dawn. Low clouds like a lid shut them away from the sun. Wind cut through his clothes like a knife. He went back into the vestibule when the wind had frozen the tears on his face, and brushed the tiny ice chips away.

Kolfin was his best rider, and his own horse the fastest. Meddthal wanted to go himself, but if Alured did plan to attack—and he himself would have—in the next few days, he needed to be here to command the defense. He went back inside. “Kolfin.”

Kolfin stood up from the table. “Sir?”

“Finish quickly. Take two days’ ration, and you’ll ride my horse to Cortes Andres with my letter. Be ready to ride when I’ve written it.”

“Sir.”

He sat down with pen and ink, and his mind blanked again. Filis. This ... the abomination ... but his father must know something, and as soon as possible. He wrote quickly, plainly.

Father. Bad news. Filis’s death proved; Alured has sent—

He paused. He could not say it all, not like this ...

—proof of what he did to Filis. It is beyond my words to say. Laid on our doorstep here last night; no doubt it is Filis. I expect attack when he thinks we are unmanned by grief; I remain here to command defense but will come at your command, bringing what was sent. I send also the letter he wrote you, written in what I am sure is Filis’s blood, admitting he killed the Count of Cilwan and your daughter as well.

He sealed that, put it and the letter from Alured in a message bag, and gave it to Kolfin who had already saddled Meddthal’s horse. “Take a spare horse,” Meddthal said. “Ride fast but warily. Those who did this may be looking to intercept any messenger.”

“Yes, sir.” Kolfin took the message bag; another soldier brought out another of the horses, saddled it, and transferred Kolfin’s saddlebags to the second horse.

When Kolfin had ridden away, Meddthal set about readying for attack. By midday, he had completed that chore as well as sending couriers to the two nearest towers to warn them. “Half of you must rest this afternoon,” he said. “If they attack, it will be when they think we have all spent a sleepless night in the dark after a day of grief and worry or perhaps drunken rage. Tomorrow—or even the day after—is when they will come.”

“What about tonight, sir?”

“Tonight we will do as we always do. Today and tomorrow, however, we will rest as much as we can, to be fresh when they attack.”

“And ... that? Him?”

Meddthal looked at the table, at Filis’s face staring upward from the top of the box. It felt—it was—indecent to leave it there like any other box. But he could not close it into the storeroom ... or put it outside ...

One of the youngest men, Dannrith, spoke up. “Sir, someone dyin’ or dead should have a candle and someone by. They wouldn’t of give him a candle ... We should.”

A scrape of boots on the floor as others considered that, and a low murmur, then they all looked at Meddthal. The silence lengthened as Meddthal tried to think, in a mind suddenly fuzzy, whether to say yes or no, where to put the thing, in here or in his quarters or ...

“I’ll stay with ’im,” said another. And then a chorus of offers.

That settled it. “In here, then,” Meddthal said. “Bring a trestle and a blanket. We’ll do this right.”

Very shortly the grisly box had been placed at one end of a plank, with a blanket laid flat below it and Meddthal’s best cloak spread over it, hiding the face and making, with the blanket, a pretense of a body laid straight for burial. Though it was not yet sundown, they lit a candle, and one at a time, as if for a new death, each spoke a word about Filis, for all had at least seen him, if they had not known him.

Then Meddthal sent half of them to bed, to be wakened at full dark, and the rest took up their duties except for the watcher. At each turn of the glass another took his place. At full dark, when all assembled, the hearth had been swept clean and a new fire laid but not lit. Only the feeble glow of one candle outlined the shape on the board and the face of the one who sat beside him. The others turned their faces from the light and began the long night watch for Sunreturn.

When it was Meddthal’s turn to sit beside his brother’s remains, he wondered if his father would send for him or for the box alone.



Jeddrin, Count of Andressat, looked at the face of his dead son and wept. Rage burned in his heart, but grief drowned it for the moment, and he made no attempt to hold back the tears. Let them fall; let them flow; let them be emptied like a bronze bowl so the flame of vengeance could burn higher.

When the tears ended, he looked more closely. Honoring the dead, especially those who died in war, required the mourners to see and respect every mark life had made on them. “We’ll give him his rightful colors,” he said, and began unwinding the complex knot that the braided hair had been coiled into. “He’ll not go under earth wearing that scum’s.” After the knot came the braids themselves. Three braids; his sons Narits and Tamir, Narits recalled

from Cha earlier in the year and Tamir recalled from the south ward, each took one, and he took the last. Deft fingers unbraided the hair, pulled out the black and green ribbons.

Narits finished first. "You'll want just one braid, won't you, Father?" he asked.

"Yes—we'll have to comb it all."

Narits took up the comb. "There's blood," he said.

"Of course there is," Tamir said. Next to Filis, he had been the hothead of the sons. "What did you expect—"

"The hair's clean," Narits said. "They must have washed it, or this didn't bleed much—" He had parted the hair and was peering closely at the scalp. "It looks ... almost like ... fingernails dug in. Not scratches."

The others had finished now and leaned over to look.

"Let me finish," Narits said. "I think there are more marks ..."

"Of pain," Tamir said, turning away. "What does it matter?"

Narits ignored him and ran the comb through the hair, parting it every half fingerwidth to look for marks. "It's code," he said finally. "Like the old scrolls. Father, can you read it?"

Andressat looked. "Not like this. Can you copy it, Narits, one mark at a time, onto paper?"

"Yes, Father."

When he had done that, it was clear that the marks—each a slightly curved line—formed a definite design. "Alured's work," Tamir said. "Maybe an evil spell?"

"No," Andressat said. "No, it's Filis's." His voice wavered. "He ... managed to give us a warning. He must have known—" He cleared his throat and went on. "Filis knew what was coming. With only his fingernails to use—knowing Alured was going to send me his skin—he used them where Alured would not see. Under his hair. Perhaps Alured told him he would leave the hair to make sure we recognized him. This—in the old language of Aare, the old writing—tells us that Alured is controlled by a demon inside him, a demon who looks out his eyes at times and has a different voice. That is like the stories from the north of the Verrakaien who stole bodies."

He looked around at his family and his most trusted servants. "Think on this, any of you who thought Filis might be a traitor. Captive, alone, tormented, yet he thought of us—saving us—and tore his own skin to warn us. Think what courage that took." He bent down and kissed the hair, then the forehead, and finally the lips. "My son, you deserve every honor that we can bestow on you. You will be remembered as long as our lives endure. And you will not go under the earth but be borne aloft in Camwyn's Fire, as if with a dragon for your mount. From Esea came all life; back to Esea you shall go."

"By Camwyn's Claw," everyone responded. "It shall be done."

"Though first I must write to the north," Andressat said. "Lord Arcolin must know of this and his king. Perhaps his captains in Valdaire can get word to the north even in winter."



Two days later, the funeral pyre stood ready on the cliff just outside the walls of Corto Andres. On it lay the box, now drenched in oil, and in the box was Filis's badge. "If it is Camwyn's will that this fire may send every bit of Filis left below, wherever it may be, or the same smoke rising to the sky, then I invoke Camwyn's Curse," Andressat said. "By the Claw and the dragon who bore it, and by the power of Camwyn and the dragon together,

invoke it.”

When they lit the fire, the flames roared up to the sky as if drawn by the air itself and burned the pyre completely; white ash lifted and swirled like snowflakes. Then far, far above, a white line of fire raced across the sky, from above Cortes Andres to the east, and vanished.

“Camwyn consented,” Andressat said. He felt hollow of a sudden, and then a pain as if a horse had kicked him in the chest took all his breath, and he knew he was falling.

Cortes Immer

A servant’s screams brought the Duke of Immer from his study to his bedroom to find the bedside rug—patched together of skin from Filis Andressat, the Count of Cilwan, Cilwan’s wife, and several other people he’d had flayed—in flames, flames that quickly spread to the bedclothes. More servants ran in with pitchers of water, but the flames could not be stopped until every flammable thing in the room had burnt to ash: stinking, black, oily ash that clung to and dirtied whatever it touched.

“How did you start the fire?” he asked the servant.

“I—I didn’t, lord. I swear—I was sweeping when it—it burst into flames. Then I screamed.”

“Nonsense. Leather doesn’t burst into flames by itself. You dropped a lighted spill if you didn’t start it by intention. And the way the bed burned—what did you do, splash oil on the bed?”

“No! I didn’t!”

He made a gesture, and one of the guards ran her through. Even as she fell, a commotion broke out in the courtyard below. Immer looked out the window to see a fire in the kennel. He looked back at the guards. “It seems we have more than one firestarter. See to it.”

Some time later the guard reported that the dogs in question had been seen to burst into flame while in the dog yard. Nothing burned but the dogs ... and not all the dogs. Only the dogs that had been fed human flesh. Immer shrugged. Someone had thrown a curse at him, clearly. Given the time of year—could it have been the old man, Andressat? He hadn’t thought the man had that much power—any power at all, in fact. He’d never been spoken of as a mage. But he claimed to be bred of Old Aare, a true line, so perhaps—perhaps he had been hiding it all these years.



Ferran Andressat, heir to the title, stood watch over his father’s body turn and turn with the others. No attack had come after all, and he had called Meddthal in from his guard post for the mourning. They must all be there; in the absence of a king to confirm any of them in the title, they used a ceremony passed down in the family for generations. But that would come after placing Jeddrin’s body in the appointed cave. Until then ... they stood watch.

While he watched, each of his brothers had other chores to complete. Narits received visitors, then ushered them one by one into the chamber where Jeddrin’s body lay. Meddthal organized the household for the reception that would follow the funeral, and Tamir organized the funeral itself. Ferran had given them those assignments. No one had argued.

As the day wore on and he took his turn at his own assignment—reviewing the status of his

father's governance—servants brought meals he ate, out of necessity, but did not really taste. He knew his father had insisted on the need for nobles to work, but he had not realized how much of the work of managing Andressat and its outlying lands his father had done personally.

He ate the last meal of the day with his brothers in the room where the body lay—it could not be left alone—and nodded his approval of what they had accomplished. “We are ready for the burial, then, thanks to you. How one manages alone—how our father managed—I do not know.”

“And how stands Andressat as a whole?” asked Narits. “I know he had been concerned about the costs of governing the South Marches.”

“Solvent and whole, thanks to him, and may we do as well now that it is up to us.”

“Indeed,” Narits said.

“Do you remember, Ferran, the time you told him you were not going to spend one morning in the library? You must have been ten or so.”

Ferran grinned. “I do indeed. As I recall, I spent that entire day copying lists and wishing I could do it standing up.”

“I was in awe,” Meddthal said. “Arguing with *him*? Amazing. But seeing the result saved me the trouble of trying it myself.”

They shared memories for a while ... times with their father, with their mother, with both. The candles around Jeddrin's body burned bright, flames standing up straight, without a flutter. At last Ferran said, “I need to stay with him tonight—go, sleep, and I'll sleep tomorrow, after—after it's done.”

When they had left, he sat by the body and began the old Song of Death his father had taught him. It was in the language of Aare, which he had been forced to learn, as had they all, though none could speak it but themselves.

The candle flames stirred. He sang on, the near drone of the song fitting his mood, fitting death itself.

There is a lord above all lords

And a death below all deaths

Go to the highest lord, to the court of that one

And be free of death, but never return,

Or lie in restful sleep, safe from harm

Far below, below the deepest death

And never return.

This night decide, before the death is done,

While still the spirit has will enough

Make that choice, make it soon,

For the sand runs through the glass

And candles shorten and daylight ends the night

Come, spirit, make that choice

So this body may be laid in honor

Where it should be laid

Then never return.

The cloth over his father's body quivered like the quivering candle flames. It lifted over his mouth, and Ferran quickly folded back the cloth. Out of Jeddrin's mouth came the spirit, a pale wraith of Jeddrin, shivering, trembling ... and then it steadied.

"Son?" The voice was softer than a whisper, the merest touch of sound on Ferran's ear.

"Ferran, Father. Death came suddenly, but not from an enemy."

"I choose light." The wraith leaned to a candle flame, and at once the candle burned brighter, a clear white light bright as summer sun, and the wraith was gone. But in the silence, inside Ferran's head, his father's voice said one more thing:

"I leave you my magery."

"What magery?"

No answer came.

CHAPTER TWO



Valdaire, Aarenis

Aesil M'dierra's nephew Poldin, beginning his second year as a squire in that company, rode over to the Fox Company winter quarters at least thrice in a fiveday. Everyone in Valdaire knew the boy had spent more than a quarter year with Fox Company. Golden Company and Fox Company had long been strong supporters of the Mercenary Guild Agreement, and the commanders were friends. This explained the trips back and forth.

So though the omnipresent spies noted the boy making yet another trip to Fox Company this time on one of his aunt's chargers, it meant nothing more to any of them than that Aesil M'dierra's horse needed exercise and the boy was thought skilled enough to ride it in city traffic. Poldin, for his part, paid attention to other horsemen and pedestrians both, alert for someone who might want to grab a rein or cut it. He found the potential for danger exciting.

"Morning, Squire," the Fox Company gate guard said. "That's your commander's horse, isn't it?"

"Yes," Poldin said. "It's the first time I've ridden him in the city. Is Captain Selfer here?" The stallion fidgeted under him.

"Yes, he is." The guard turned his head. "Tamis, hold the squire's mount while he speaks with our captain. Walk him up and down in the courtyard."

Poldin dismounted and handed the reins to the soldier who had come to take them.

"I swear you've grown a hand this quarter," the guard said.

Poldin grinned. "That's what my aunt—Commander M'dierra says. She threatened to put a rock on my head and hold me down."

"Well, you know where the captain's office is."

Poldin nodded and jogged quickly along the near side of the courtyard. He felt relieved to be in this safe place again, though when it had become "safe" he could not determine if Valdaire itself was more dangerous than when he'd first arrived, his aunt insisted. He could see some signs of that himself.

He knocked at the closed door of the captain's office and heard Selfer's familiar voice. "Come in."

"Squire M'dierra with a message from Commander M'dierra," he said as he opened the door and saluted properly.

"You grow a finger a day," Captain Selfer said. "Any news?"

Poldin closed the door. "Yes, Captain. A message from Count Andressat, very urgent my- Commander M'dierra says. And she asks when Duke Arcolin will be coming, if you are permitted to say."

"Immer's on the move?"

"I don't know what the message is, Captain," Poldin said. "It's for the north."

"The pass isn't open yet," Captain Selfer said. "Though I hear it may open in the next handful of days. Let's see."

Poldin put the leather message case into Selfer's hand, then stood back.

"Sit down, lad. I may have an answer to return." Selfer untied the strings and lifted the flap. Inside were two scrolls and a folded sheet, the sheet marked with M'dierra's sigil. He unfolded that. "So," he said aloud without looking at Poldin. "She worries for your safety, Poldin—and for the safety of the message. Adressat declares it most secret and most urgent and she advises me to find you something to do that will take a half-day and look as if you're idling. She will send a few men to escort you back later."

"I'm careful!" Poldin said, stung.

"I'm sure you are, but these are chancy times. The worst since Siniava. She says to tell you to expect an undeserved scolding—it's all for a reason."

"Yes, Captain," Poldin said. Would Captain Selfer open the other scrolls or wait until he was out of the room?

"I'll tell you what," Selfer said. "You rode her chestnut stallion over here, she says. Why not show him off to the troops—exactly what you wouldn't dare on your own. Have you practiced any fighting on horseback?"

"Only a little," Poldin said.

"Captain Burek's out with a troop at our practice ground—you know where it is. I'll write him a note for you to take, and then you dawdle about showing the horse off. That's something a boy your age with less sense than you have might do." Selfer scrawled a note and handed it to him. "Then you'll eat midday with us, and by the time the escort arrives I'll scold you for not returning right away, everyone will have seen a safe reason why."

Poldin reclaimed his mount, told the gate guard he had a message from Captain Selfer and Captain Burek, and—feeling very daring despite the permission—touched the stallion with his spurs. The horse was more than ready to prance along, in full view of the main road down the hill, to the east side of the compound, where Captain Burek and his cohort were doing mounted exercises.

"That's a fancy fellow you're on, Squire," Captain Burek said. "Your commander's favorite isn't it?"

"Yes, Captain; here's a note from Captain Selfer."

Burek halted, waved the troops on to continue their exercise, and took the note, nodding as he read it. "Well, then, your riding's improved a lot—let's see how you do with other formations. Unless you have to get back."

"I can't stay too long," Poldin said.

"Join up with that third group," Burek said, pointing. "See if you can keep an even line."

Jumping low obstacles—a row of rocks, a log—followed formation riding. Poldin had been through that with Golden Company, though not on this mount. The stallion had his own idea of the pace they should take and bucked after some of the jumps, apparently just for fun.

"Enough," Burek called, and the troop halted. "Our former squire's doing so well, I think we can risk a little weapons practice—if he wants to."

Poldin nodded. Soldiers fetched odd-shaped lumps—balls made of rag strips, he saw—and put them on top of poles standing along one long side of the exercise area.

“You’ll start with a wooden waster,” Burek said. “We don’t want to risk a cut on Commander M’dierra’s favorite mount. Start out at a walk, knock off two, then pick up a slow trot for the rest of the line.”

The stallion was jiggling before Poldin even got lined up and would not walk composed along the line. Poldin missed the first rag ball, knocked off the second. When he lifted the reins slightly, the horse charged forward, straight along the line but so fast that Poldin missed all but two of the balls and almost fell off when the horse skidded to a halt, wheeled, and charged back down the wrong side of the line at full tilt. Poldin reached across and caught two more balls, then concentrated on stopping his mount, this time managing a straight stop.

No one said anything. No one laughed. Captain Burek rode over, close enough to speak quietly. “I gather you didn’t plan that.”

“No ... sir.” He had a stitch in his side.

“I saw that horse pull the same trick on your commander three years ago. I thought he would have calmed down by now or she wouldn’t have let you ride across the city on him. You did well to stay on and take down four heads.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Take him across the field and walk him dry. I’m going to have one of the others walk with you.”

Poldin could feel the flush rising to his ears.

“Nothing to be ashamed of, Squire. That’s a top commander’s battle mount, and they can sometimes take over.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Kerin rode beside him as he guided the stallion across the field to the far side. “That’s some horse,” Kerin said. Poldin remembered him from his time with Fox Company. “Glad I wasn’t on him when he pulled that stunt. These fellows—” He patted his horse’s neck. “—are just transportation for the most part. Officers’ mounts learn that kind of thing.”

“Commander M’dierra will be angry with me,” Poldin said. “I didn’t touch him too hard with the spur, did I?”

Kerin looked down. “Not a scratch, not a rumple. Didn’t look like you used the spur at all. He’s just a warhorse, that’s all. Give him a bit more rein now; see if he’ll relax.”

They rode up and down the length of the practice field; Poldin relaxed enough to watch the others. Walk, trot, swiping at the rag-ball heads. Some missed even at the walk. He felt better. By the time the stallion was cooled out, the rest had finished, and they all rode back into the compound together. Kerin took Poldin’s horse as well as his own to the stables, and Poldin followed Captain Burek into the captains’ office.

Captain Selfer nodded to them both. “Squire, I have a message for you to take back when it’s time—two, in fact, one to be sent on to Count Andressat. For now, though, get yourself over to the mess hall. I need to talk to Burek in private.”

Poldin found the mess hall busy but sat down at the nearest table and helped himself to slabs of beef, redroots, and steamed grain.

“Growing lads,” someone said down the table.

“Did well staying on that horse,” said another.

He was watching unarmed practice in the courtyard when he heard the hail from the gate. He looked over his shoulder and gulped. His aunt had sent a sergeant and a full tensquad for

him.

The scolding began right then, in front of all the others. “You knew you were supposed to come straight back! What do you mean spending the better part of the day over here when there’s work to do with Commander M’dierra?”

“I just—”

“He was showin’ off that big stallion,” one of the men said. “Should’ve seen him ride—squire’s damn good. Even took off some heads in the weapons exercise.”

“You were riding *her* horse in a *weapons* exercise?” Sergeant Valud’s tone cut like a blade. “Boy, she’s going to take the hide off you, and you won’t sit down for a week, let alone ride. If he’s got a mark on him—”

“He don’t,” Kerin said. “Squire rode him easy; horse just took off.”

“Well, of course he took off: it’s how he’s trained. You know that,” he added to Poldin.

The scolding continued as he got the stallion out of the stable and mounted and as the squire rode out the gate, down into the city and across it. Boxed in on all sides by the tensquad, Poldin could do nothing but sit there, ears burning, as Sergeant Valud let all Valdaire know what he thought of spoiled boys taking advantage of their relationship to their commander, showing off when given the privilege of riding a high-bred, well-trained battle mount. One of Clart’s troopers, reining his own mount aside to let the tensquad pass, called, “Bet it was fun, though, wasn’t it, lad?” and Sergeant Valud yelled, “Don’t encourage him. He’s for punishment drill, he is.”

Despite all that and his fear that his aunt really would take it out of his hide, when he was in her office with the door closed and had handed over the messages from Captain Selfer, she read through them then gave him one of her rare smiles. “You stayed on—that’s well done, Poldin; he’s unseated more experienced riders with that maneuver. I really thought Storm would behave better for you.”

“You’re not angry?”

“Not with you. You won’t get to ride him again for a while—you’re being punished, after all—but you did exactly what I hoped you’d do. Gave people plenty to talk about other than why you might have gone over there again today when you’d been yesterday.”

“Do you really think it was too dangerous for me to ride back alone?”

She clasped her hands on her desk. “You know what happened to Andressat’s son.”

He shuddered; he couldn’t help it. “He ... his ... skin was sent to his father.”

“Yes. I don’t want such a package coming to me or to my sister, your mother. War is never safe, but this is more than ordinary war. Our enemy is a mage; he has powers I do not understand. Tell me what you saw on the way over and back.”

“On the way over, three thieves near an alley this side of the horse market—that one th angle off from the little fountain. Just standing there in those black clothes. A scuffle in the far corner of the main market, where the fruit sellers are, but I couldn’t see what, exactly. I watched for anyone coming too close.” Poldin scowled, trying to remember every detail he noted on the way over and back: known thieves, soldierly-looking men not in a recognizable uniform, the city militia, down to the fellow peering out an upper window and then flipping a bit of cloth twice. “And the smell is worse this afternoon, on the way back, and I heard one woman complain that the well in the fruit market square was low, two turns low.”

“A good report,” his aunt said. “And yes, there is danger, and danger to you more than

someone not related to me.”

When she said nothing more for a moment, Poldin said, “I understand.”

“That’s why I can’t tell you what Andressat sent me or what Captain Selfer wants taken from Andressat. We’re fairly sure Immer’s spies suspect you of carrying messages of more importance than a joint training exercise or a social engagement between captains. If you’re captured—and I pray Camwyn’s Claw that you’re not—you will not know anything that can harm the Fox Company. I thought of sending you home until this is over with—”

“Please don’t—”

She shook her head. “I won’t, because I don’t think you’ll be any safer there and because this is the life you wanted—you saw last campaign season what it’s like, and you said you wanted to stay.”

“I do!”

“You’ll spend a fiveday in camp, ostensibly punishment for your escapades today. The next time I send you out will be with a small escort, again on the grounds I need to make sure you don’t stray. Be especially careful any time you eat or drink away from camp, Poldin. Food and drink can be drugged, and a ‘helpful’ person helps the victim into an alley or a small room ... I don’t want to lose you.”

“I will eat here, then,” Poldin said. “But what about water—are the public fountains drugged?”

“No. That should be safe enough if you use your own mug. Don’t let anyone draw the water from a well for you. Do it yourself.”

“Do ... do we have spies?”

Aesil grinned. “Indeed we do, and very busy they are right now. But again—I cannot tell you who or what they’re doing.”



Six days later, one of Valdaire’s outbound scouts came back from the pass to report that the pass was open enough for foot and horse travelers, still not passable for wagons. A stream of couriers and scouts rode out at once, Fox Company’s official couriers among them.

“Wherever you meet Duke Arcolin,” Selfer told the couriers, “let him know the situation here, but be sure he understands this one—” He tapped the packet. “—is for King Mikeli and has not been opened. It must go on at once; Andressat thinks it’s urgent to the welfare of the Crown.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Selfer tapped the courier’s knee, and the man nudged his horse into a trot. The courier did not know—no one knew, he believed—that a gnomish courier had taken Andressat’s letter on to the north the very night it arrived. Having a commander who was also a gnome prince had many advantages, though it added complications.

Back in the stronghold, Selfer met Burek. “I have a word for you, Captain, now that the courier is off.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I have another letter from the new Count Andressat, to be handed to you once the pass opens, he said in his note to me. He says he is your father.”

Burek nodded. “He told me that when I was coming back from Cortes Andres.”

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