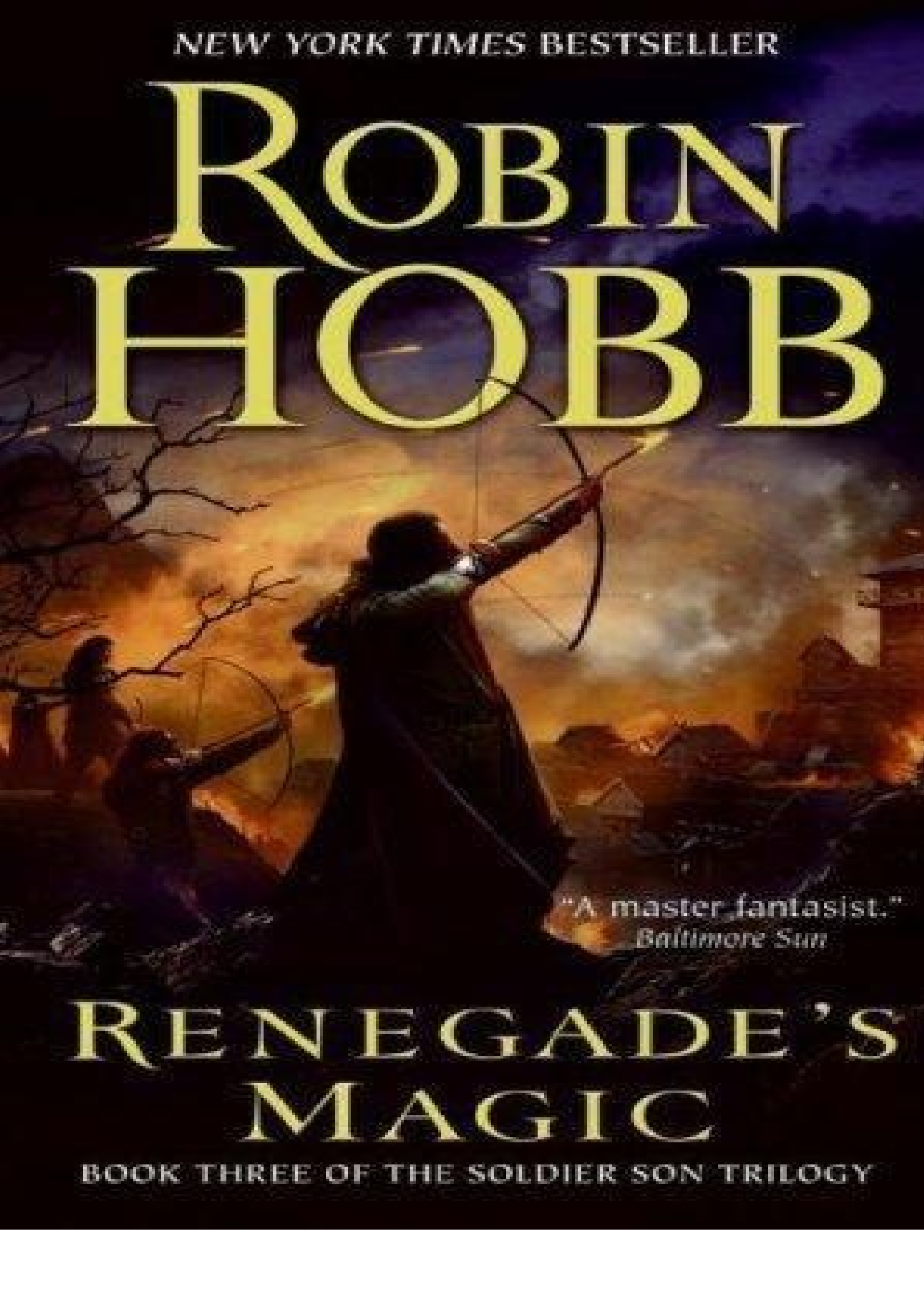


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ROBIN HOBB



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Baltimore Sun

RENEGADE'S MAGIC

BOOK THREE OF THE SOLDIER SON TRILOGY

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

ONE

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

Soldier's End

I never spoke up for myself at my court martial.

I stood in the box where they put me, and tried not to think of the agonizing bite of the lead irons around my calves. They were too small for a man of my flesh, and the cold iron bit deep into the meat of my legs, burning and numbing at the same time. At the moment, the pain mattered to me more than the outcome of the hearing. I already knew how it would end.

That pain is chiefly what I remember of my trial. It hazes my memories in red. A number of witnesses spoke against me. I recall their righteous voices as they detailed my crimes to the assembled judges. Rape. Murder. Necrophilia. Desecration of a graveyard. My outrage and horror at being accused of such things had been eroded by the utter hopelessness of my situation. Witness after witness spoke against me. Threads of rumor, hearsay from a dead man's lips, suspicions and circumstantial evidence were twisted together into a rope of evidence strong enough to hang me.

I think I know why Spink never addressed any questions directly to me. Lieutenant Spink, my friend since our Cavalla Academy days, was supposed to be defending me. I'd told him that I simply wanted to plead guilty and get it over with. That had angered him. Perhaps that was why he didn't ask me to testify on my own behalf. He didn't trust me to tell the truth and deny all the charges. He feared I'd take the easy way out.

I would have.

I didn't fear the hangman's gibbet. It would be a quick end to a life corrupted by a foreign magic. Walk up the steps, put my head into the noose and step off into darkness. The weight of my falling body would probably have jerked my head right off. No dangle and strangle for months. Just a quick exit from an existence that was too tangled and spoiled to repair.

Whatever I might have said in my own defence would have made no difference. Wrongs had been done, ugly, evil things, and the citizens of Gettys were determined that someone had to pay for them. Gettys was a rough place to live, a settlement half military outpost and half penal colony on the easternmost boundary of the Kingdom of Gernia. Its citizens were no strangers to rape and murder. But the crimes I was accused of went beyond the spectrum of passion and violence into something darker, too dark even for Gettys to tolerate. Someone had to wear the villain's black cape and pay the toll for such transgressions, and who better than the solitary figure of a man who lived in the graveyard and was rumored to have doings with the Specks?

So I was convicted. The cavalla officers who sat in judgment on me sentenced me to hang, and I accepted that. I had shamed my regiment. At that moment, my execution seemed the simplest escape from a life that had become the antithesis of every dream I'd ever had. I'd die and be done with disappointment and failure. Hearing my sentence was almost a relief.

But the magic that had poisoned my life was not about to let me go so easily.

Killing me was not enough for my accusers. Evil would be punished with as cruel and as vicious a vengeance as they could imagine. Darkness would be balanced with darkness. When the second half of my sentence was pronounced, horror froze me. Before I ascended the gallows to make that final drop, I'd receive one thousand lashes.

I will always recall that stunned moment. The sentence went beyond execution, beyond punishment, to total destruction. As it stripped the flesh from my bones, it would strip away a

dignity as well. No man, no matter what his courage, could grit his teeth and keep silent through a thousand lashes. They would mock and cheer me as I shrieked and begged. I would go to my death hating them and myself.

I'd been born to be a soldier. As the second son of a nobleman, the good god had decreed that I should be a soldier. Despite all that had befallen me, despite the foreign magic that had infected and poisoned me, despite my ejection from the King's Cavalla Academy, despite my father's disowning of me and the scorn of my fellows, I had done my best to serve my king as a soldier. This was what it had earned me. I would scream and weep and plead for mercy before folk who saw me only as a monster. The lash would strip my body naked of both clothing and flesh, exposing the sagging layers of fat that had been their first excuse to hate me. I would faint and be revived with a dash of vinegar on my back. I'd piss myself and dangle helplessly from my manacled wrists. I'd be a corpse long before they hanged my remains. They knew it and so did I.

Even my corrupted and maimed life seemed a better choice than that death. The magic had sought to take me from my own people and use me as a tool against them. I'd fought it. But the final night in my cell, I knew the magic of the Speck folk offered me my only opportunity to save myself. When the magic tore down the walls of my prison, I took the opportunity. I escaped.

But neither the magic nor the good folk of Gettys were done with me. I think the magic knew that I'd given only lip service to my surrender to it. But it demanded all of me, my entire life, with no ties left to bind me to this place and this people, and what I had never given willingly, it now took from me.

As I fled from the fort, I encountered a troop of returning cavalla soldiers. I knew it was not my bad luck that put Captain Thayer in charge of the troop. It was the magic that put me in the hands of the man whose dead wife I had apparently despoiled. It had ended predictably. The tired and frustrated men he led had rapidly degenerated into a mob. They had killed me in the streets, his soldiers holding me for him while he beat me to death. Justice and vengeance were sated on the dusty street in the small hours of the morning. Then, slaked with violence, they had dispersed to their homes and beds. They did not speak to one another of what they had done.

And in the hour before dawn broke over Gettys, a dead man fled the town.

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

TWO

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

Flight

The huge hooves of my big horse made a steady drumming as we fled. As we passed the last outlying farms of the scattered town that surrounded the King's fort at Gettys, I glanced back over my shoulder. The town was silent and still. The flames on the burning walls of the prison had subsided, but a dark smear of smoke still smudged the graying sky. The men who had fought Epiny's sabotage all night would be trudging home to their beds now. I kept my gaze fixed on the road before me and rode grimly on. Gettys had never been my home, but it was hard to leave it.

Ahead of me, light began to spill over the mountaintops. The sun would soon be up. I had to reach the shelter of the forest before men began to stir. There would be some early risers today, people anxious to secure good vantage points to watch my flogging and execution. My mouth twisted, imagining their disappointment when they heard of my death.

The King's Road, that ambitious undertaking of King Troven of Gernia, unfurled before me dusty, rutted, pot-holed but arrow straight. I followed it. It led east, ever east. In the King's vision, it threaded through and over the Barrier Mountains and on, until it reached the far sea. In my king's dreams, the road would be a lifeline of trade for land-locked Gernia. In reality, his road ended only a few miles past Gettys, its growth foundered at the edge of the vale where the Specks' ancestor trees grew. For years, the indigenous Specks had used their magic to incite fear and desolation in the road workers and halt the road's march. The spell the Specks cast varied from a deep terror that made men crawling cowards to a deep despair that sapped them of all will to work. Beyond the end of the road, the forest awaited me.

On the road ahead of me, I saw what I'd been dreading. A horseman was coming towards me at a weary walk. The rider sat tall in his saddle, and that as much as the brave green of his jacket labeled him a cavalla soldier. I wondered where he was coming from and why he rode alone and if I'd have to kill him. As I drew closer, the rakish angle of his hat and the bright yellow scarf around his throat betrayed what he was; one of our scouts. My heart lifted a trifle. There was a chance he'd know nothing about the charges against me and my trial. The scouts were often out for weeks at a time. He showed no interest in me as our horses approached one another, and as I passed him he did not even lift a hand in greeting.

I felt a pang of sharp regret as I went by. But for the magic, that could have been me. I recognized Tiber from the Cavalla Academy, but he did not know me. The magic had changed me from the slim and fit cadet I'd been. The fat, disheveled trooper lolloping along on his ungainly mount was beneath the lieutenant's notice. At his current pace, it would be hours before he got to the town and heard of the mob that had killed me in the streets. I wondered if he'd think he had seen a ghost.

Clove cantered laboriously on. The cross-breed draft horse was no one's idea of a mount built for either speed or endurance. But he was big, and for a man of my height and bulk, he was the only possible steed that could carry me comfortably. It came to me that this would be the last time I'd ride him; I couldn't take him into the forest with me. Pain gouged me again; he'd be one more beloved thing that I'd have to leave behind. He was running heavily now, nearly spent by our mad flight from Gettys.

Well outside Gettys, a wagon trail diverged from the King's Road and led up to the cemetery. Clove slowed as we approached it, and I abruptly changed my plans. The cabin I had

called home for the past year was up that trail. Was there anything left there that I'd want to carry forward into my new life? Spink had removed my soldier-son journal and taken it to his home. I was grateful for that. My journal held the full tale of how the magic had entered my life and how it slowly taken it away from me. There might still be letters in my cabin, papers that could connect me to a past and a family that I needed to abandon. I would let nothing tie me to either Lovell or Burvelle; let my death shame no one except myself.

Clove slipped into his ponderous trot as he laboured up the hill. It had only been a couple weeks since I'd last been here, but it felt like years. Grass was already sprouting on the many graves we had dug for the summer victims of the plague. The trench graves were still bare so they had been the last graves to be covered, when the plague was at its height and we grave-diggers could no longer keep up with the steady influx of bodies. They would be the last scars to heal.

I pulled Clove in outside my cabin. I dismounted cautiously, but felt a mere twinge of pain. Only yesterday the leg irons had cut into my tendons; the magic was healing me at a prodigious rate. My horse blew at me, shuddered his coat and then walked a few steps before dropping his head to graze. I hurried to my door. I'd quickly destroy any evidence of my former identity and then be on my way.

The window shutters were closed. I shut the door behind me as I stepped into the cabin. The door opened and I recoiled in dismay as Kesey sat up in my bed. My fellow grave-digger had been sleeping with a stocking cap on his bald head to keep the night chill away. He knuckled his eyes and gaped at me with his hanging jaw revealing gaps in his teeth. "Nevare?" he protested. "I thought you were going to hang today!"

His words fumbled to a halt as he realized exactly how wrong it was for me to be standing outside my cabin.

"Hang today," I finished the sentence for him. "Yes. A lot of people thought that."

He stared at me, puzzled, but continued to sit in the bed. I decided he was no threat to my escape. We'd been friends for most of a year before everything went wrong. I hoped he would not judge me for my duty to interfere with my escape. Casually, I walked past him to the shelf where I'd kept my personal possessions. As Spink had promised, my soldier-son journal was gone. A wave of relief washed through me. Epiny and Spink would know best how to dispose of those incriminating and accusatory pages. I felt along the shelf to be sure that no letter or scrap of paper had been missed. No. But my sling was there, the leather straps wrapped around the cup. I put it in my pocket. It might be useful.

The disreputable long gun I'd been issued when I first arrived at Gettys still rested on its rack. The rattly weapon with the pitted barrel had never been reliable. Even if it had been sound it would soon have been useless when I'd expended the small supply of powder and ball I had. Leave it. But my sword was another matter. The sheathed blade still hung from its hook. I was reaching for it when Kesey demanded, "What happened?"

"It's a long story. Are you sure you want to know?"

"Well, of course I do! I thought you were going to be lashed to pieces and then hanged today!"

I found myself grinning. "And you couldn't even get out of bed to come to my hanging. You're a fine friend you are!"

He smiled back uncertainly. It wasn't a pretty sight, but I welcomed it. "I didn't want to see you hang, Nevare. Couldn't face it. Bad enough that the new commander ordered me to live out here and keep an eye on the cemetery because you were in prison. Worse to watch a friend die, and know that I'd probably meet my own end out here. Every cemetery sentry we've ever had has met a bad

end. But how'd you get out of it? I don't understand.”

“I escaped, Kesey. Speck magic freed me. The roots of a tree tore the stone walls of my dungeon apart, and I crawled out through the opening. I nearly made it out of Gettys. I made it past the gates of the fort. I thought I was a free man. But then I met a troop of soldiers coming back from the road's end. And who should be in charge of them but Captain Thayer himself.”

Kesey was spellbound, his eyes as round as bowls. “But it was his wife—” he began, and nodded.

“They found Carsina's body in my bed. You know, if not for that, I think the judges might have realized there was very little to link me to Fala's death. But Carsina's body in my bed was just too much for them. I doubt that even one ever considered that I might have been trying to save her.

“You do know I didn't do any of those things, don't you, Kesey?”

The older man licked his lips. He looked uncertain. “I didn't want to believe any of that about you, Nevare. None of it fit with anything Ebrooks and I had ever seen of you. You were fat and a loner and hardly ever had a drink with us, and Ebrooks and I could see you were sliding towards the Speck way. You wouldn't have been the first to go native.

“But we never saw nothing mean in you. You weren't vicious. When you talked soldiering with us, seemed like you meant it. And no one ever worked harder out here than you did. But if someone did those things, and there you were, right where they happened. Everybody else seemed so certain. They made me feel a fool for not believing you done it. And at the trial, when I tried to say that you'd always been a stand-up fellow to me, well, Ebrooks shoved me and told me to shut up. Told me I'd only get myself a beating trying to speak up for you, and do you no good at all. So, I kept quiet. I'm sorry, Nevare. You deserved better.”

I gritted my teeth, and then let my anger go with a sigh. “It's all right, Kesey. Ebrooks was right. You couldn't have helped me.”

I reached for my sword. But as my hand came close to the hilt, I felt an odd tingling. It was an unpleasant warning, as if I'd just set my hand on a hive of bees and felt the buzzing of the warriors inside. I drew my hand back and wiped it roughly down the front of my shirt, puzzled.

“But you escaped, right? So me keeping quiet, it didn't do you no harm, right? And I'm not going to try to stop you now. I'm not even going to tell anyone that you come this way.”

There was a note of fear in his voice that wrung my heart. I met his eyes. “I told you, Kesey. It's all right. And no one will be asking you if I came this way, because I met Captain Thayer and his men as I was leaving town. And they killed me.” He stared at me. “What? But you—” He stepped forward quickly. He flinched from my touch, but I set my hand to his forehead as he cringed away. I put my heart in my words. I wanted to protect him, and this was the only way to do it. “You're having a dream, Kesey. It's just a dream. You'll hear about my death next time you go to town. Captain Thayer caught me escaping and beat me to death with his own hands. His wife is avenged. There were a dozen witnesses. It's over. Ebrooks was there. He might even tell you about it. He took my body and secretly buried it. He did the best by me he could. And you thought you had a dream of me escaping. It comforted you. Because you knew that if you could have helped me, you would have. And you bear no guilt for my death. All of this was just a dream. You're asleep and dreaming.”

As I'd been speaking, I'd gently pushed Kesey supine. His eyelids shut and his mouth sagged open. The deep breathing of sleep sighed from his lungs and in again. He slept. I heaved a sigh. He'd share the same false memories I'd left with the mob that had surrounded me. Even my best friend Spink would recall that I'd been beaten to death in the streets and he'd been powerless to stop it. Amzil, the only woman who'd ever looked past my fat and unlovely body to love me

would believe the same. They'd bear that tale home to my cousin Epiny, and she would believe it. ~~I hoped that they would not mourn me too sharply or for too long. I wondered briefly how they~~ would break the news to my sister, and if my father would care when he heard it. Then I resolutely turned away from that life. It was gone, over, finished.

Once I'd been tall and strong and golden, a new noble's soldier son, with a future full of promise. It has all seemed so clearly mapped for me. I'd attend the Academy, enter the cavalla as an officer, distinguish myself in the King's service, marry the lovely Carsina, have a fulfilling career full of adventure and valor, and eventually retire to my brother's estate to live out my declining years. If only I'd never been infected with the Speck magic, it would all have come true.

Kesey snorted and rolled over. I sighed. I'd best be gone. As soon as the news of my death spread, someone would ride out to tell him. I didn't want to expend any more magic; I already felt the aching pangs of hunger that using magic brought on. As soon as I had the thought, my stomach growled furiously. I rummaged hastily through the food cupboard but all the food looked unappetizing, dry and old. I longed for sweet berries warmed by the sun, earthy rich mushrooms, the spicy water plant leaves that Olikea had fed me the last time I'd seen her, and tender crisped roots. My mouth ran at the thought of such foods. Instead, I glumly took two rounds ofhardtack from the shelf. I took a large bite and, still chewing the loathsome stuff, reached for my sword. It was time to be gone from here.

The sword burned me. It all but jumped from my hand when I let go of the hilt, as if magnetically repelled from me, and clattered to the floor. I choked on the mouthful ofhardtack crumbs and sank to the floor, gasping and gripping the wrist of my offended hand. When I looked at my palm, it was as red as if I'd gripped a nettle. I shook my hand and wiped it against my trouser leg, trying to be free of the sensation. It didn't pass. The truth came to me. I had given myself to the magic. Cold iron was mine no longer.

I stood slowly, backing away from my fallen sword and a truth I was reluctant to face. My heart was hammering in my chest. I'd go weaponless into the forest. Iron and the technology that it made possible was mine no longer. I shook my head like a dog shaking off water. I wouldn't think about it just now. I couldn't quite grasp all it would mean, and at that moment I didn't want to.

I gave a final glance around the cabin, realizing belatedly that I'd enjoyed living here, on my own, having things my own way. It was the only time in my life I'd had such freedom. I'd gone from my father's house straight to the Academy, and then returned to his domain. Only here had I ever lived as my own master. When I left here, I'd begin a life not as a free man, but as a servant to a foreign magic that I neither understood nor wanted.

But I'd still be alive. And the people I loved would go on with their lives. I'd had a glimpse when the mob seized me, of a far worse future, a future in which Amzil's best hope was that the gang rape would leave her alive and Spink's that he would survive having his troops turn on him. My own death paled in comparison. No. I'd made the best choice, for all of us. Now it was up to me to move on, keeping whatever shreds of my integrity remained. I wished I wasn't going into my new life so empty-handed. I looked longingly at my knife and my axe. No. Iron was not my friend any more. But my winter blanket, folded on the shelf, I would take. One final glance around the cabin, and then I left, shutting the door firmly behind me on Kesey's rattling snore.

As I came out Clove lifted his head and gave me a rebuking stare. Why hadn't I freed him from his harness to graze? I glanced at the sun. I'd leave him here, I decided. It was believable that if the big horse had got loose in Gettys, he'd come back to his stall. I couldn't take off his tack; someone would wonder who had done that for him. I hoped whoever took him over would treat him well. "Stay here, old chum. Kesey will look after you. Or someone will." I gave him

pat on the shoulder and left him there.

I walked across the cemetery grounds that I knew so well. I passed the butchered remains my hedge. I shuddered as I recalled it as I'd last seen it, with the bodies jerking and twitching the rootlets thrust into them seeking nutrients and for a moment I was plunged back into the torchlit night.

It was rare but not unknown for a person who died of Speck plague to be a "walker". One the doctors at Gettys believed that such persons fell into a deep coma that mimicked death, rouse hours later for a final attempt at life. Few survived. The other doctor, an aficionado of the superstitions and psychic phenomena that so fascinated our Queen, believed that such "walkers" were not truly the folk who had died, but only bodies reanimated by magic to bring messages to the living from the beyond. Having been a "walker" myself, I had my own opinions. In my year at the King's Cavalla Academy, I'd contracted the Speck plague just as my fellow cadets had. Once I'd "died", I'd found myself in the Speck's spirit world. There I'd done battle with my Speck seer and Tree Woman, only returning to life after I had defeated them.

My erstwhile fiancée Carsina had also been a "walker". In my final night as cemetery guard she had left her coffin and come to beg my forgiveness before she could rest in death. I'd wanted to save her. I'd left my cabin, intending to ride to town and get help. Instead, I'd seen a unimaginable sight. Other plague victims had risen and sought out the trees I'd inadvertently planted. I'd known they were kaembra trees, the same sort of trees that the Specks claimed their ancestor trees. I'd known that when I'd seen the poles leaf out. How could I not have realized the danger? Had the magic blinded me to it?

Each "walker" had sought out a tree, had sat down, backs to the trunks, and then cried out in agony as the hungry little trees had sent rootlets thrusting into flesh. I'd never forget what I'd seen that night. A boy had cried out wildly, his head and arms and legs jerking spasmodically as the tree claimed his flesh and bound his body tightly to its trunk. I'd been unable to do anything for him. But the worst had been the woman who cried out for help and held her hands out beseechingly. I had clasped those hands and tried with all my might to pull her back, not from death, but from an extended life that made no sense to a Gernian soul.

I'd failed.

I remembered well which tree had seized her so irrevocably, thrusting roots into her back roots that would burst into a network of spreading filaments inside her, sucking into the young trees not just the nutrients in her body but her spirit as well. That was how the Specks created their ancestor trees. Those the magic found worthy were rewarded with such trees.

As I passed the hacked stump of the woman's tree, I noticed that it had already sent up a questing new sprout. On the stump next to hers, a red-wattled croaker bird perched, watching me intently. It opened its wings and thrust its ugly head at me. Its wattles shook as it croaked accusingly at me. I shuddered. Croaker birds were the emblem of Orandula, the old god of death and of balances. I did not wish another encounter with him. As I fled from it, I realized that Clove was following me. Well, he'd soon turn back. I entered the forest and felt it take me in. It was like a curtain swishing closed behind me, signaling that the first act of my life was over.

This part of the forest was young, a regrowth after a fire. Occasionally, I passed a blackened stump overgrown with moss and ferns, or strode through the shade of a scorched giant who had survived that blaze. Bushes and wildflowers grew here in the sunlight that filtered down between the trees. Birds sang and darted from branch to branch in the early morning light. The sweet scents of the forest rose up to surround me. Tension drained from me. For a time I walked without thought, listening to Clove's hooves thud dully on the deep forest soil as he trailed after me.

It was a pleasant summer day. I passed two white butterflies dancing together above a small patch of wildflowers. Beyond them, I came to a mounded tangle of blackberry vines competing for light in a small clearing. I stopped and gathered a double handful of the bash, black summer fruit. They burst in my fingers and stained my hands as I picked them. I filled my mouth with them, rejoicing in the sweetness that was both taste and aroma. I ground the tiny seeds between my back teeth, savoring them. Fruit such as this could take the edge off my hunger, but it could not satisfy me. No. As the magic had come to dominate my flesh and blood, I had learned to crave the foods that fed it. That was what I wanted now. I left the berry patch, hastening uphill.

The burnt-over forest gave way to ancient forest with shocking suddenness. I paused at the edge, standing in the dappling sunlight among the younger trees and looked into a dark cavern. The roof was a thick mass of intertwining branches. Ranks and columns of immense trunks marched off into the dimness. The dense overhead canopy absorbed and defeated the summer sunlight. There was very little underbrush. Thick moss floored the world, indented with a seemingly random pattern of animal trails.

I sighed and glanced back at the big horse. "This is where we part company, my friend," told Clove. "Go back to the graveyard."

He regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. "Go home," I told him. He flicked his ears and swished his badly bobbed tail. I sighed. Soon enough, he'd figure it out for himself. I turned and walked away from him.

He followed me for a short way. I didn't look back at him or speak to him. That was harder than I thought it would be. I tried not to listen for the dull thud of his hooves. He'd go back where the grazing was good. Kesey would take him in and use him to pull the corpse cart. He'd be fine. Better off than me. At least he'd know what the world expected of him.

There were no human pathways in this part of the forest. I felt as if I walked through an alien abode, richly carpeted in thick green, beneath an elaborate ceiling of translucent green mosaic, supported by towering columns of rich wood. I was a tiny figurine set down in a giant's home. I was too small to matter here; the quiet alone was enough to muffle me out of existence.

But as I hiked on, the quiet reinterpreted itself to me. The noises of men were not here, but the world was not silent. I became more aware of the birds that flitted and sang challenges to one another over my head. I heard the sharp warning thud of his hind feet and the muffled scamper of startled hare. A deer regarded me with wide eyes and spread ears as I passed its resting place. I heard its soft snuff as I passed it.

The day was warm and humid beneath the trees. I paused to unbutton my jacket and the top two buttons of my shirt. It was not too long before I was carrying my uniform jacket slung over my shoulder. Amzil had pieced the cavalla-green coat together for me from several old uniforms to fit my enlarged body. One of the tribulations of my magic-induced weight was that I was constantly uncomfortable in my clothing. Trousers had to be fastened under my gut rather than around my waist. Collars, cuffs and sleeves chafed me. Socks stretched out and puddled around my ankles, and wore out swiftly at the heel from my excessive weight. Even boots and shoes were a difficulty. I'd gained size all over my body, even down to my feet. Right now, my clothing hung slightly loose on me. I'd used a lot of magic last night, and lost bulk proportionately. For a moment I considered disrobing and simply going naked as a Speck, but I had not left civilization quite that far behind.

My way led me ever upwards, over the gently rising foothills. Ahead loomed the densely forested Barrier Mountains and the elusive Speck people who roamed them. I'd been told that the Specks had decided to retreat early to their winter grounds high in the mountains. I'd seek them there. They were not just my last possible refuge. That was also what the magic commanded me

to do. I'd resisted it to no avail. Now I would go to it, and try to discover what it wanted of me. ~~Was there any way to satisfy it, any way to win free of it and resume a life of my own choosing?~~ I doubted it, but I would find out.

The magic had infected me when I was fifteen. I had, I thought, been a good son, obedient, hard-working, courteous and respectful. But my father, unbeknownst to me, had been looking for that spark of defiance, that insistence on following my own path that he believed was the hallmark of a good officer. He'd decided to place me in a position where ultimately I must rebel against the authority over me. He had given me over to a Kidona plainsman, a "respected enemy" from the days when the King's cavalla had battled the former occupants of the Midlands. He told me that Dewara would instruct me in Kidona survival and fighting tactics. Instead, he had terrorized me, starved me, notched my ear and then, just when I'd found the will to defy both him and my father, endeavored to befriend me. I could never look back on those days without wondering what he had done to my thinking. Only recently had I begun to see the parallels between how Dewara had broken me and brought me into his world and the way the Academy harassed and overburdened the new cadets to press them into a military mold. At the end of my time with Dewara, he had tried to induct me into the Kidona magic. He had both succeeded and failed.

I had crossed into the Kidona spirit world to do battle with their ancient enemy. Instead, Tree Woman had captured me and claimed me. From that day forth, the magic had taken over my life. It had dragged, spurred and coerced me to the frontier. In Gettys, I'd made one last attempt to claim my life as my own. I'd signed my enlistment papers as Nevare Burv, and taken up the only position the regiment offered, guarding the cemetery. Even so, I'd put my heart into my task, doing all I could to see that our dead were buried respectfully and left undisturbed. I'd begun to have a life again; Ebrooks and Kesey had become my friends, and Spink, my cousin's husband and my best friend from our Academy days had renewed our friendship. Amzil had come to live in Gettys; I'd dared to hope she felt something for me. I had begun to make something of myself, even believing I could provide a refuge for my sister from my father's tyranny.

That life did not serve the magic's purpose for me, and as Scout Hitch had once warned me, the magic would not tolerate anything that ran counter to its plan for me. It had destroyed Hitch's life to make him its servant. I knew I had to choose death or serve the magic. Before Hitch died, he'd confessed all to me. Under the magic's influence, he'd killed Fala, one of Sarla Moggam's working girls, and left the evidence that would implicate me. He'd done that, despite being my friend, despite being an otherwise upright man. I still could not imagine Hitch strangling poor Fala, let alone betraying me so treacherously. But he had.

I didn't want to discover what the magic could make me do if I continued to defy it.

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

THREE

Soldier Son 3 - Renegade's Magic

Lisana

My path led me ever upward. Somewhere, I knew, the sun shone and the wind stirred light in a soft summer day. But here, beneath the trees, a soft green twilight reigned and the air was still. My footfalls were deadened by decades of leaf mold. Great trees, roots braced and humped against the rise of the hills, surrounded and shaded me, making the forest a many-pillared palace. Sweat ran down my face and my back. The calves of my legs ached from the steady climb.

And I was still hungry.

I'd had little to eat for the last ten days. My jail rations had been bread and water and disgusting grayish pudding that was supposed to be porridge. Epiny had smuggled a tiny fruit to me, precious because it contained berries picked in this forest. When Tree Woman had sent her roots to break the walls of my cell, she had brought me the mushrooms that had given me strength for my magic. Those, and the hard tack and the handful of berries I'd picked in the morning were all I'd had. Belatedly, I recalled that Amzil had told me she'd packed food in my panniers. Well, that last act of affection was gone now, carried off by Clove with my saddle. Strange to tell, the loss of that food did not distress me. I was hungry for the foods that would feed my magic rather than the ones that sustained my flesh.

I had early realized that restricting my food and even fasting wrought little noticeable change in me. The only thing that consumed my fat was using the magic. In the last day or two, at night, I'd used the magic more than I ever had before, and my appetite for the foods that would feed the magic now raged proportionately.

"I'm hungry," I said aloud to the forest. I half-expected some sort of response: the mushrooms would spring up underfoot or a bush of berries would sprout nearby. But there was nothing. I heaved a sigh of disappointment, then paused and took a deeper lungful of air, breathing in through my nose. There. The faintest scent hung in the still forest air. I followed it, snuffing like a hound on a trail and came to a bank of deep blue flowers nestled against the underside of a fallen log. I could not recall that Olikea had ever fed me anything like them, but the fragrance from them inflamed my appetite. I lowered myself to the forest floor to sit beside them. What was I doing, thinking of eating something I'd never even seen before? I could poison myself. I picked one, smelled it, and then tasted it. It was like eating perfume, and the flavor was too strong to be appetizing. I chose a leaf instead. It was fat-stemmed and fuzzy-edged. Cautiously, I put it to my tongue. There was a tang to the foliage that counteracted the sweetness of the flowers. I picked and ate a handful of the leaves, and then abruptly felt that although I was still hungry, I'd had enough of them. Was this the magic finally speaking clearly to me, as Tree Woman had told me it would? I couldn't decide if that were true or if I were deceiving myself. With a grunt, I heaved myself to my feet and walked on. I reached the rounded top of a hill and the walking became easier.

I found and ate a cluster of bright yellow mushrooms growing in the moss on top of a tree root. I came to a place where parasitic vines had attacked an older tree. The tree was losing its leaves and patches of its bark had fallen away, revealing the holes and tracks of insects intent on rendering it down into soil. But the vine that cloaked the dying tree was lush with thick foliage and large teardrop-shaped fruit, so purple they shone black in the filtered sunlight. Some of the fruit was so ripe that it had cracked and lightly fermented. Purple juice dripped from them. Be-

and other insects hummed ecstatically round the vine, while over my head I could hear the competitive twittering of small birds. Some of the fruit had fallen to the forest floor. There was a busy trail of large black ants carrying off gobbets of fruit.

The other happy feasters convinced me that the fruit was edible. I picked one, sniffed it and tried a small bite. It was so ripe that juice and soft flesh gushed into my mouth as my teeth pierced the skin. It was far sweeter than a sun-ripened plum, almost sickeningly so. Then the flavour of it flooded my mouth and I nearly swooned with delight. I discarded the large round seed and reached for another.

I don't know how many I ate. When I finally stopped, the skin of my belly was tight against the waistband of my trousers, and my arms were sticky to the elbow with juice. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand and came back a little to myself. The pile of seeds at my feet numbered at least a score. Instead of feeling queasy, I felt only blissful satiation.

As I walked slowly away, I tingled with well-being. I became aware of the music of the forest, a symphony made by the subtle buzzing of insects, the calls of birds, the flutter of leaves in an unseen breeze over head. Even my deadened footfalls were a part of the whole. It was not a symphony of sound alone. The scents of loam and moss, leaf and fruit, meshed with the sounds I heard, and the physical sensations of walking, of brushing past a low branch or sinking deep into moss. The muted colors in the gentled light were a part of it. It was all an amazing whole, an experience that involved me more completely than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

"I'm drunk," I said aloud, and even those words intertwined with the sudden spiraling fall of a leaf and the soft snag of a cobweb across my face at the same moment. "No. Not drunk. But intoxicated."

I liked speaking aloud in the forest, for it made me more intimately a part of it. I walked on, marveling at everything, and after a time, I began to sing wordlessly, letting my voice be guided by all my senses. I spread wide my arms, heedless that my coat fell to the forest floor. I walked away from it, singing with my whole heart, with every bit of breath I could draw into my lungs. I was transported with joy simply to be me traveling into the depths of the forest.

Simply to be who I was.

Who was I?

The question was like recalling a forgotten errand. I was someone, going somewhere, on my way to do something. My steps slowed, and for a long moment I was intrigued with the idea. I was centered and certain, confident of myself, but I could not quite define with a name who I was.

Nevare. Soldier's Boy. Like a slow waltz of two halves that have joined to be a whole and then spin apart again, I felt that sundering. And with Soldier's Boy's departure from my awareness, I suddenly felt the gap he left in me. I had been a whole creature, peacefully content in that wholeness. And now I was less than whole, and I thought I could understand how an amputee felt. My keen pleasure in the forest dwindled to my ordinary awareness of its pleasant smells and gentle light. The communion I had felt with it became a handful of threads rather than a complex network. I could not recall the song I had been singing. I'd lost track of my place in this world. I was diminished.

I blinked slowly and looked around me, gradually becoming aware that this part of the forest was familiar. If I climbed the ridge before me and veered to the east, I'd come to Tree Woman's stump. I suddenly knew that was the destination I'd been walking towards all day. Home, I thought, and that was like an echo of someone else's thought. Soldier's Boy considered her home. I wasn't sure what Nevare considered her.

When I'd first encountered Tree Woman in Dewara's spirit world I saw a fat old woman with

gray hair leaning up against a tree instead of the warrior-guardian I'd expected to battle. ~~Challenging her would have gone against everything my father had ever taught his soldier son about chivalry.~~ And so I had hesitated, and spoken to her, and before I recognized her power, she had defeated me and made me hers.

I became her apprentice mage. And then her lover.

My heart remembered those days with her. My head did not. My head had gone to the Cavalla Academy, taken courses, made friends and done all that a loyal soldier son should. And when the opportunity came for me to challenge Tree Woman as an adversary, I had not hesitated. I'd destroyed that other self who had been her acolyte, taking him back inside me. And then I'd done my best to kill her as well.

Yet at both those tasks, I'd failed. The Speck self I'd taken back inside me lurked there still like a speckled trout in the deep shade under a grassy riverbank. From time to time I glimpsed him, but never could I seize and hold him. And the Tree Woman I'd slain? I'd only partially severed her trunk with a cavalla sword. That deed, impossible in what I considered the real world, had left its evidence here. Upon the ridge ahead of me was the stump of her tree. The rusted blade of my sword was still embedded in it. I'd toppled her. But I had not severed her trunk completely. The ruin of her tree sprawled on the mossy hillside, in the swathe of sunlight that now broke through the canopy of the forest there.

But she was not dead. From the fallen trunk, a new young tree was rising. And near her stump, I'd encountered her ghostly form. My adversary was still as alive as I was and the hidden Speck self inside me loved her still.

As Tree Woman, she was an enemy to my people. She was frank in her hope that something I would do would turn back the tide of "intruders" and send the Gernians away forever from the forest and mountain world of the Specks. At her behest, Speck plague had been spread throughout Gernia and still continued to afflict my country. Thousands had sickened and died. The King's great project, his road to the east, had come to a standstill. By all I had ever been taught, I should hate her as my enemy.

But I loved her. And I knew that I loved her with a fierce tenderness unlike anything I'd ever felt for any other woman. I had no conscious reason to feel that passion toward her, but feel it I did.

I toiled up the last steep stretch and reached the ridge. I hurried towards her, the anticipation of my hidden self rising with every step I took. But as I approached her stump, I halted, dismayed.

The stump of her tree had silvered and deadened. Even the unsevered piece that had been left with her falling trunk and kept the branches of it alive had gone gray and dull. I could not see her. I could not feel her. The young tree, a branch that had begun to grow upright after her trunk had fallen, still stood, but barely.

I waded through her fallen and dead branches to reach the supine trunk and the small tree that grew from it. When Tree Woman had crashed to the earth, her passing had torn a rent in the canopy overhead. Light poured down in straight yellow shafts piercing the usual dimness of the forest and illuminating the small tree. When I fingered the little tree's green leaves, they were flaccid and limp. A few leaves at the ends of the branches had begun to brown at the edges. The little tree was dying. I put my hands on her trunk. My two hands could just span its diameter. Once before, in a dream, I had touched this little tree and felt how it surged with her life and being. Now I felt only dry, sun-warmed bark under my hands.

"Lisana," I prayed softly. I called her by her true name and held my breath waiting for some response. I felt nothing.

A wandering breeze ventured in through the hole in the forest's roof. It stirred my hair and made pollen dance in the shaft of light where I stood.

"Lisana, please," I begged. "What happened? Why is your tree dying?"

The answer came to me as clearly as if she had spoken. Last night, I'd been able to escape my cell because the roots of a tree had broken through the mortar and stones. As I'd climbed those roots to escape, I'd felt Lisana's presence there. Had the roots of her tree grown all that way from here to Gettys, and then torn down the walls to free me? It was impossible.

All magic was impossible.

And all magic had a price. Only a few days ago, Epiny had stood here by Lisana's stump, and they had summoned me in a dream to join them. In hindsight, Lisana had been more ephemeral than usual. And more irritable. She'd been spiteful towards Epiny and merciless towards me. I tried to recall how her little tree had looked then. The leaves had been drooping, but not alarmingly so. It had been a hot day.

Even then, her roots must have been working their way, through clay and sand, rock and soil, to reach Gettys and the prison where I was held. Even then, she had been employing all the magic at her command and all her physical resources to reach me. I should have guessed that something of that sort was happening when I could barely perceive her in my cell. Why had she done it? Had the magic forced her to sacrifice her life to save mine? Or had that offering been her own?

I pressed my brow against the slender trunk. I could not feel her at all and suspected that the amount of life remaining in this little tree was not enough to sustain her being. She was gone, and it tormented me that I could remember we had shared a love but could recall no specific memory, no detail of how it had begun. I had dreamed of our trysts together, but like most dreams, I awoke grasping only bright fragments of memory. Such gossamer glimpses were too frail to survive harsh daylight. They did not feel like true memories to me, yet the emotions I felt were unequivocally mine. I closed my eyes and tried to will those memories to the forefront of my mind. I wanted at least to recall the love we had shared. It had cost her dearly.

In that focused contact, I felt a wisp of her being brush mine. She was feeble, a moon waning away to nothing. She gestured weakly at me, warning me back. Instead, I pressed closer. "Lisana! Is there no way I can help you? Without your intervention, I would have died.'

Her bark was rough against my forehead. I clasped the trunk of the small tree so tightly that it stung the palms of my hands. Abruptly, her image came more clearly to me. "Go away, Soldier's Boy! While you can. I gave my being to this tree. It consumed me and became me. That does not mean I can control its appetite. All things desire to live, and my tree desires life fiercely. Get away!'

"Lisana, please, I—" And then a red pain pierced my palm and shot up into my wrist.

"Get back!" she shrieked at me, and with a sudden burst of strength, she pushed me away.

I did not fall. The tree already gripped me too strongly for that. My forehead ripped free from the questing rootlets that had penetrated my brow. Blood ran bright red before my opened eyes. I bellowed in terror and with inhuman strength pulled my hands free. Dangling rootlets, red with my blood, pulled from my palms as I jerked my hands back. The tendrils dripped and twitched after me like hungrily seeking worms. I staggered back from the tree. With the back of my sleeve, I wiped blood away from my brow and eyes and then stared in horror at my wounded hands. Blood trickled from half a dozen holes in my flesh and dripped from my palms. As the drops fell to the forest floor, the moss at my feet hummocked and quivered. Tiny tree rootlets wormed up from the soil and moss, squirming towards the red drops that glistened like raspberries. I pressed my bleeding palms to my shirtfront and staggered backwards.

I felt dizzy with horror or perhaps blood loss. Lisana's tree had tried to eat me. My pierced

hands ached all the way into my wrists. I wondered how deeply the roots had wormed into me and then tried not to think of that as a wave of vertigo swept over me. I focused on taking another couple of steps backwards. I felt sickened and weak; I wondered if the roots had done more to me than pierce my flesh and absorb my blood.

"Move back, Nevare. Keep moving. There. That's better.'

Tree Woman was a misty embodiment of herself. I could see through her, but my sense of her was stronger. My head was still spinning, but I obeyed her, staggering away from the young tree.

"Sit down on the moss. Breathe. You'll feel better in a little while. Kaembra trees sometimes take live creatures as nourishment. When they do, they sedate them so they do not struggle. What you did was foolish. I warned you that the tree was desperate.'

"Isn't the tree you? Why would you do this to me?' I felt woozy and betrayed.

"The tree is not me. I live within the tree's life, but I am not the tree and the tree is not me.'

"It tried to eat me.'

"It tried to live. All things try to live. And it will, now. In a way, it is almost fitting. I took from it to rescue you. And it took from you to save itself.'

"Then — you'll live now?' My mind seized on that most important fact.

She nodded. It was hard to see her against the bright sunlight, but I could still make out the sadness in her eyes that contradicted her soft smile. "I'll live, yes. For as long as the tree does. I spent a lot of what I had regained to reach for you in that cell. It will take me a long time to rebuild my reserves. But what you have given me today has restored me for now. I have the strength to reach for sunlight and water now. For now, I'll be fine."

"What is it, Lisana? What aren't you telling me?"

She laughed then, a sound I felt in my mind rather than heard. "Soldier's Boy, how can you know so many things and nothing at all? Why do you persist in being divided against yourself? How can you look at something and not see it? No one understands this about you. You use the magic with a reckless power that in all my time I have never witnessed. Yet when the truth is right before you, you cannot see it."

"What truth?"

"Nevare, go to the end of the ridge and look out towards your King's Road. See where it will go as they push it onward. Then come back, and tell me if I will live."

The pain in my hands was already lessening. I wiped my sleeve over my forehead and felt the roughness of scabbing. The magic was again healing me with an unnatural swiftness. I was grateful, and also a bit surprised, not that the magic could heal me but at how easily I accepted it now.

I was full of trepidation as I walked to the end of the ridge. The soil there was stony and as I approached the end, the trees became more stunted until I stood on an out-thrust of stone where only brush grew. From that rocky crag I could look out over the valley below me. The valley cupped a lining of trees, but intruding into that green bowl, straight as an arrow, was the chaos of the King's Road. Like a pointing finger, it lanced into the forest. To either side of it, trees with yellowing leaves leaned drunkenly, their side roots cut by the road's progress. Smoke still rose from an equipment shed, or rather, from the ashes of one. Epiny had been thorough. She'd set off three explosions down there in an attempt to distract the town from my escape. Wagons and scrapers were a jumble of broken wood and wheels in one area under the scattered roof of a shed. Another collapsed building still smoldered and stank in the sweet summer air. And it looked to me as if she had exploded one culvert. The road had collapsed and the stream that had once been channeled under it now seethed through the rocks and muck. Men and teams were already at work

there, digging the muck away and preparing to lay a new conduit for the stream. They'd have ~~repair that section of road before they could push the construction any deeper into the forest.~~

My delicately raised girl cousin had struck in a way that I, a trained soldier son, had never even imagined. And she succeeded, at least for now, in halting the progress of the King's road builders.

But as I was smiling at her success, my grin suddenly stiffened into a sort of rictus. The road, cutting through the mountains and to the sea beyond them, was my king's great project. With that road, my king hoped to restore Gernia to greatness.

And I looked on its delay and destruction with pleasure. Who was I?

I gazed down on the aborted road again. It pointed straight towards me. Well, not precisely straight. It would cross the valley and then climb the hill I was standing on... Slowly I turned my head to the left, to look back the way I had come. Tree Woman. Lisana. Her stump and fallen trunk were exactly in the path of the road. If the tree cutting continued, she would fall to the ax. I looked back at the road, cold flowing through my veins. At the end of the construction, two freshly fallen giants sprawled in a welter of broken limbs. They'd taken other, smaller trees down with them as they fell. From my vantage point, the new rent in the forest canopy looked like disease eroding the green flesh of the living forest below me. And the gash was heading directly towards my lover's tree.

I watched the men toiling below. The sounds of their cursing and shouted commands could not reach me here. But I could smell the smoke of last night's fire and see the steady procession of wagons and teams and road crews as they toiled like ants mending a nest. How long would it take them to fix the broken culvert and patch the road? A few days, if they were industrious. How long to build new wagons and scrapers, how long to build new sheds? A few weeks at most. And then the work would press on. The magical fear that the Specks had created still oozed down from the forest to deter the workers and sap their wills. But, fool that I was, I'd given the command and the means to overcome even that. I'd been the one to suggest that men half drunk on liquor and drugged with laudanum would not feel the fear as keenly and could work despite it. I'd even heard that some of the penal workers now craved the intoxicants so much that they clamored to be given the work details at the road's end. The drugged and desensitized men would push the road on into the forest. I'd enabled that. It had almost earned me a promotion.

I recognized uncomfortably that my heart was turning more and more towards a forest way of thinking. The divide in me ran deep now. I was still a Gernian, but that was no longer sufficient reason to believe that the King's Road must be pushed through at all costs. I glanced back towards Tree Woman's stump. No. The cost to me alone was too high. It had to be stopped.

How?

I stood for a long time as the afternoon waned, watching the men and teams flailing away at their tasks. Even at this distance, I could see that the workers were impaired. No one moved briskly and mishaps abounded. A wagon trying to turn too tightly with a load of rock turned over and dumped its cargo. An hour later, another wagon mired, and a third driver, trying to get past the mired wagon, drove his team into the ditch and overset his load there. Yet for all that, the work was progressing. It might be tomorrow before they had replaced the culverts, and perhaps even another day before they had a drivable surface on the road there. But eventually, like patient insects, they would get it done. And then they would push on once more, cutting inexorably into the forest. Did it matter to me if they cut down her tree next week or three years from now? I needed to stop them.

Yet no matter how I wracked my brain, I could not come up with a plan. I'd gone to the Colonel before the plague descended on us and begged him to stop the road. I'd explained to him

that the kaembra trees were sacred to the Specks, and that if we cut them, we could expect an all-out war with the forest people. He'd dismissed me and my concerns. Silly superstitions, he'd told me. Once the trees were cut and the Specks discovered that no great calamity befell them, I believed they could more readily adapt to the civilization we offered them. Not even for a moment did he pause to wonder if there might be a grain of truth in what the Specks believed about their trees.

When I asked if the road could not go around the kaembra trees, he pointed out that the engineers had mapped out the best route, and it went past Gettys and through the mountain pass that traders had once used. For years, the resources of Gernia had been committed to building the road on that route. An alternate path had once been considered, one that would have gone past Mendy and the Fort to cut through the Barrier Mountains there. But to redirect the road-building effort to that route would mean adding years to the King's project, not to mention absorbing the waste of all that had gone into pushing the road as far as Gettys and beyond it. No. Nothing so trivial as a stand of ancestral trees would halt the King of Gernia's grand vision.

The Colonel was dead now, a victim of the Speck plague. The Specks had struck back at the tree cutters in the only way they had. They'd done the Dust Dance for the visiting officials from Old Thares and the inspection team, and in the process had infected everyone with the plague. I had warned him of that, too. If the Colonel had ever reconsidered my words, he'd taken all such thoughts to the grave with him. Even if I'd been able to go into Gettys and talk to the new commander, my words would make no impression on him. The two realities, Gernian and Speck, simply did not meet.

The Colonel had not even been able to grasp that the Specks were at war with us. He had thought that because they came yearly to trade with us, we'd reached an accord of sorts, and that they would slowly adopt our ways. I knew better. Each year, in the course of that "trading" time, they attacked us, deliberately spreading Speck plague among us.

Our peoples couldn't even agree on what constituted a war.

I doubted the Specks knew of the magnitude of the blow they'd dealt us with the late outbreak of plague. The Speck plague had struck down every visiting officer on the reviewing stand. General Brod, our Commander in the East had fallen, as well as his predecessor, the venerable General Prode. Those losses would echo throughout all of Gernia. And within the fort at Gettys most of our resident officers had fallen sick, drastically reducing the ratio of officers to enlisted men. The command at Gettys had been passed down three times in the space of a month. The man who had it now, Major Belford, had never commanded a post before. I wondered if the King would bother to replace him, and who would assume the position of Commander in the East. I wondered who would want it. Then I decided that such decisions no longer concerned me. I was a soldier no more. I wasn't even sure I was a Gernian.

A resolve formed in me slowly. I needed to stop the road, not just to preserve Tree Woman but for the sake of both peoples. I needed to make building the road an impossible task so that King Troven would either give up the idea, or would completely reroute his road far to the north through Mendy and the Fort. Once the King had diverted his energies to that route and passed Gettys as a military encampment would lose much of its value. It might be abandoned altogether. And that might be the end of the clash between Gernians and Specks. Perhaps we could go back to peaceful and sporadic trading; or perhaps it would be even better if all interaction between the two peoples ceased.

I felt like a curtain was rising in my mind. The time for trying to reason with either people was gone; it was time for me to simply destroy the road. It was a very rudimentary strategy, but I still felt a lift in my spirits to have devised it. I felt a bit foolish as well. Why had I not found this

determination before now? The answer to that was easy. Even if I now knew what I wished to do, I had very few ideas of how to implement my plans. There was small sense in planning to do a task that seemed impossible. Impossible for any ordinary man with ordinary means. But I was no longer an ordinary man, was I? I'd given way to the magic and accepted this task. I, Nevil Burvelle, was going to destroy the King's Road.

It was why I'd been given the magic. Lisana and Jodoli, the Speck Great Man I'd met, had both insisted that my task was to turn back the intruders, the Gernians. They had told me that the magic had chosen me, had made me a Great One for that very task. The conclusion was inescapable. I was to use the magic to stop the road.

The only thing I still didn't know was how.

The magic had been growing in me, like a fungus overtaking a piece of fruit, since I was fifteen years old. For several years, it had skulked beneath my awareness. Only when I left home to go to the Academy had I become aware that something strange lurked within me. And only after I'd contracted Speck plague and survived it did the magic begin to change my body so radically. It had cloaked me in the fat that had made me an object of ridicule and disdain and hampered not just my physical life but my military career. Yet in all the years that it had possessed me and changed me, I'd only managed to use it for my own ends a few times. For the most part, it used me.

It had used me to spy on my people, to better understand "the intruders" and how they might be fought. It had used me to spread the Speck plague in our capital city and all through the Cavalla Academy, destroying a whole generation of young officers. It had used me again to know when best to strike in Gettys, so that the entire inspection team of officers and nobles from the West might be wiped out.

Every time I had managed to use the magic, even with the best of intentions, the magic had found a way to turn it back on me. Both Lisana and Scout Hitch had warned me against trying to use the magic for my own ends. About the only thing I'd learned about how the magic was actually wielded was that it flamed in response to my emotions. Logic could not wield it, nor could wishful thinking ignite it. It only boiled through my blood when my heart was completely involved. When I was angry, or frightened or seething with hate, then the magic came to me without effort, and the urge to use it became well nigh irresistible. At any other time, attempting to bend it to my will was impossible. It bothered me, and not a little, that logic rather than emotion was prompting me to turn the magic against the road itself. Was not that a very Gernian reaction to a Speck problem? But perhaps that was why the magic had chosen me. Still, if I was going to use magic to stop the road being built, I would first have to find the heart to do it.

I turned my head and looked towards Lisana's stump. I thought of how I had nearly killed her, and what it had meant to me to discover that she was still alive. I thought of the sapling that had once been a branch, and how it rose from the fallen trunk of her tree. I'd seen that happen before. Nursery logs, they were called, when a row of branches on a fallen tree took to growing as if they were trees. But in Lisana's case, only one tree was rising from her fallen trunk. And if the road came through here, there would soon be none at all.

I held that thought as I walked down the hill towards the end of the road. It was steep going until I found the deer trail that cut across the face of the hill. I followed it down and the canopy of the forest closed over me once more, creating an early twilight. I walked in that gentle dimness, smelling the sweetness of the living earth. Life surrounded me. I had slowly come to understand that in my months of living by the eaves of the forest, but only today did the thought form itself clearly in my mind. All my life, I'd been accustomed to thinking of life as things that move like rabbits, dogs, fish, other people. Life that mattered had been life like me, life that breathed and

bled, life that ate and slept. I'd been aware of that other layer of life, of the still but living thing that supported it all, but I'd thought of it as the lower layer, as the less important stratum of life.

Empty prairie was for plowing or grazing; land that was too poor for farming or cattle was wasteland. I'd never lived near a forest like this, but when I'd come to one, I'd understood why it existed. The trees were to be taken for lumber. The land had to be cleared to become useful. The idea that forest or prairie or even wasteland should be left as it was had never occurred to me. What good was land until it was tamed? What good was a piece of earth that did not grow wheat or fruit trees or grass for cattle? The value of every bit of land I'd ever trodden, I'd reckoned in terms of how it could benefit a man. Now I saw it with the eyes of a forest mage. Here life was balanced as it had for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Sunlight and water were all that was required for the trees to grow. The trees made the food that fed whatever moving creatures might venture through this territory, and became the food that replenished the soil when their leaves fell to rot back into earth. This working system was as refined and precise as any piece of clockwork ever engineered by man. It worked perfectly.

But the road would break the clockwork of the forest system just as surely as an axe blow could shatter a fine watch. I'd seen the damage from the ridge and I'd seen it up close when I visited the road's end. It wasn't just the trees they cut to make a clear path. It was how the road builders made all the same in their path. Every dip in the earth was filled level, every rise cut to grade. The different layers of rock and gravel that made up the roadbed were inimical to the flow of the forest life. The road was a barrier of deadness bisecting the forest heart.

The swathe of death was wider than the road itself. Streams were diverted into culverts and blocked off. Brooks pooled and swamped land they had once drained and fed. The cut of the road severed roots beneath the earth, crippling the trees to either side of it. The construction slashed a great gash in the forest roof, admitting light where all had lived in gentle dimness for generations. The edges of the road were a crusty scab, and the road itself was like blood poisoning creeping up a man's veins towards his heart. Once the road had cut its way through the forest and across the mountains, the forest would never be the same. It would be an entirely new world divided, and from that division, other roads and trails and byways would spread out into the forest as if the road had its own anti-life network of roots and tendrils.

Men would make more paths, with trails and byways branching out from them. Beneath the ever-spreading network of roads and paths and trails, nothing lived. Could death grow? I suddenly perceived that it could. Its spreading network could cut the living world into small and smaller sections, until no section was large enough to survive.

I'd reached the bottom of the hill. There was a stream there, and I paused to drink long of its cool, sweet water. The last time I'd been here, I'd come only in spirit, and Epiny had been with me.

Epiny. For a moment, I thought of her, and for the moment, I was Nevare again. I hoped she would not mourn me too deeply or too long. I hoped her sorrow over my supposed death would not affect her pregnancy. And then I blinked, and those feelings and thoughts receded from the forefront of my mind. I became once more the forest mage, intent on my task.

I had to stop the road. I had to be ruthless. I had the power if first I could bring it up to strength.

It seemed weeks, no, months ago that I had hovered by this stream as a disembodied entity, and Epiny had picked and sampled some of the scarlet drupes. In real time, it had been but a few days, and the heavily laden berry bush still offered me a plenitude of fruit. After I had slaked my thirst, I sat down beside it and methodically began to strip it of berries. They were potent food for the magic, and as I ate them, I felt my reserves filling. I replenished the magic I had burned

escape the Gernian prison and the sustenance that Lisana's tree had drawn from me. The wound in my hands healed and the ache in the wrists quieted and then faded to nothing. I felt the sagging skin of my belly tighten as I consumed it. I filled myself with magic more than I did with food.

Large and heavy as I was, the magic leant me stealth. I moved through the woods with the same lumbering grace that bear and elk possess. In the lost sky above me, the sun was foundering to the west. The dimness in the forest deepened towards full darkness. I felt no weariness, even though I could not recall the last time I had slept a full and comfortable night. I was charged with both magic and purpose. Like a heavy shadow, I slipped through the forest towards the road's end.

I reached it as the crews were finishing their day's labour. Epiny's sabotage had been effective in its limited way. Today, the crews had not cut into any new trees or finished hauling away the bodies of the trees they had felled. Instead, all their time had been taken up with salvaging wagons and equipment and repairing the destroyed culverts to make the road passable once more. I stood in the gloomy shelter of the forest and watched them leave. Prisoners did the heavy labour of the road building, the backbreaking shovel, axe and saw work. The prisoners had their overseers, and in turn, the overseers were backed up by the soldiers. Now, as the day ended, the last load of ragged, sweating prisoners shuffled to the remaining wagons. Some of the crew wore leg irons and were shackled into teams. Others enjoyed relative freedom in manacles. A manacled man can still use a shovel or an axe. Their chains clanked loudly as they climbed awkwardly into the heavy wagons that would carry them back to Gettys and their confinement for the night.

I waited until night was full before I moved. I ghosted along in the shelter of the trees, surveying the work that had been done today. I was not pleased to see that they had set a guard. Epiny's sabotage had alarmed them, I supposed. A lantern burned in one of the surviving equipment sheds. I slunk closer, and perceived that four men had been left on watch there. They sat sullenly around the tail of a wagon, their lantern in the middle of it, and passed round a bottle of rum. I did not envy them their lonely vigil. If I opened my awareness, I could feel the insistent itching of the fear, the prickling sensation that evil watched them and waited its opportunity to pick them off, one by one. Their loaded long guns leaned upright against the wagon's open bed, one beside each man. I frowned at that. Drunken fearful men would be quick to lunge for the weapons. The magic could heal me very quickly, but did not make me proof against instantaneous death.

I resolved I would give them no cause for alarm. Not yet.

I took in a deep breath of night and held it. I turned my eyes away from the yellow lantern light of the watchmen. I breathed out slowly, expelling the darkness I had held within me. The blackness of night hovered round me in a cloud. Cloaked in darkness, I stepped softly forward. Deep moss cushioned my footfalls as I moved away from the watchmen. Tree branches drew aside from me, bushes swayed from my path silently lest they betray me with a rustle. I had no light but I did not need it. I was a part of the forest around me and I came into full awareness of it.

For a brief time, it overwhelmed me. I became aware of the deep carpet of life that extended around me in all directions. I was a mote in that intertwining net of living things. Life extended deep beneath my feet in the rich earth with the questing roots and the burrowing worms and the scuttling beetles. Trees surrounded me and reached far above my head. Rabbits, deer and foxes moved in the darkness just as I did, while overhead, birds both sleeping and wakeful perched on the branches.

As I began to comprehend that interconnectedness I became aware of a stabbing pain. I gritted my teeth against it and clutched at my belly, almost expecting to find a mortal wound.

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