

MARION
ZIMMER BRADLEY
DEBORAH J.
ROSS

The
Children of Kings

A
Novel of
Darkover®

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

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THE CHILDREN OF KINGS



A DARKOVER® NOVEL

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY
AND
DEBORAH J. ROSS



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Readers have asked me what it's like to continue the Darkover series, and after talking about working with Marion, I add that it's like writing historical fiction. I have to do my research, which means studying the previously published novels and as much other material—Marion's notes and letters. For this tale set mostly in the Dry Towns, I used not only *The Shattered Chain* but a very early (1961) "proto-Darkover" novel, *The Door Through Space*. *The Door Through Space* contained many elements familiar to Darkover readers, from *jaco* and the Ghost Wind to the names of people and places (Shainsa, Rakhal, Dry-towns). Marion was exploring a world in which Terrans are the visitors and adventure lurks in the shadows of ancient alien cities. She drew upon and further developed this material in *The Shattered Chain* (1976).

These books reflected the growth of Marion's vision, but each of them was also part of the times in which it was written. 1960s science fiction novels were often tightly-plotted, fast-paced, and short by today's standards. Most, although by no means all, protagonists were male, and female characters were often viewed from that perspective, what today we call "the male gaze." By the middle of the next decade, publishers were interested in longer, more complex works. Not only that, the women's movement and the issues it raised influenced genre as well as mainstream fiction, opening the way for strong female characters who defined themselves in their own terms. If Marion had written *The Shattered Chain* a decade and a half earlier, I doubt it would have found the receptive, enthusiastic audience it did. Her timing (as with *The Mists of Avalon* or *The Heritage of Hastur*) brilliantly reflected the emerging sensibilities of the times.

Now we live in a different world. This is not to say that the previous struggles have been resolved, but that much has changed in the social consciousness from 1976 to today. In writing *The Children of Kings*, I considered how Marion's ideas about the Dry Towns (and any patriarchal desert culture) might have changed over the last three decades. *The Shattered Chain*, with its examination of the role of women and the choices (or lack of choices) facing them, focused on only a few aspects of the Dry Towns culture. What if we went deeper, seeing it as complex, with admirable aspects as well as those we find abhorrent? With customs that we cannot truly comprehend but must respect, as well as those that resonate with our own? With men of compassion and women of power?

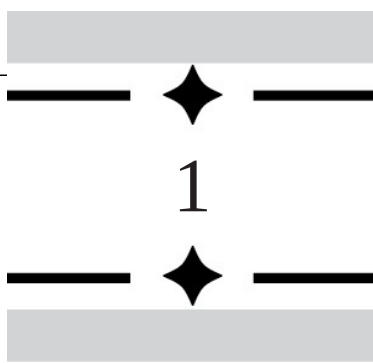
As the Dry Towns developed in my mind, I turned also to the theme that had characterized the early Darkover novels—the conflict between a space-faring technological race and the marvelously rich and romantic Domains, with their tradition of the Compact and the *laran*-Gifted Comyn. And now, adding to the mix, the ancient *kihar*-based Dry Towns.

I hope you enjoy reading this adventure as much as I did writing it.

Deborah J. Ross

DEDICATION

In Memoriam
Cleopatra Sanda (1962-2012)
Be at peace, dear friend



The disk of Darkover's Bloody Sun had barely risen beyond the walls and towers of Thendara, and icy chill still haunted the shadows. A brisk wind swept the sky clear of clouds. The branches of the trees in the gardens of the Old Town trembled. Lavender and white blossoms unfurled amid the new leaves. The air no longer smelled of old layered ice and sodden wool, but of fresh growing things.

The roads had been open for a tenday, even as far as the Kilghard Hills. Traders reached the city, bringing goods and gossip. The open-air markets offered spring onions and an array of early fruits, a welcome change from boiled roots and porridge.

The rising sun lit the ancient castle of the Comyn where it stood like a city unto itself, with its walls and spires, domes and courtyards, the barracks and training yards of the City Guard, and ballrooms and living quarters for the ruling families when they were in town. A crowd gathered outside the main gates. Their mood was festive, the dark hues of winter garb brightened by garlands of early-blooming ice lilies.

The gates swung open, and a contingent of City Guards came out, clearing an open path. Then came more armed men, mounted on sturdy horses. People waved and someone played a lilting air on a wooden flute. The leader of the Guards smiled and nodded, although his gaze never stopped moving across the assembly and one hand remained on the hilt of his sword.

Just inside the gates, a second, much smaller group gathered, household servants and a scattering of richly dressed Comyn lords and ladies. In the center of the courtyard, a party of riders mounted up. The horses stamped and snorted, their breath turning into plumes of white vapor. Servants and baggage handlers finished securing the coverings on a laden wagon.

From the shelter of an arched, deep-set Castle doorway, Gareth Marius-Danvan Elhalyn y Hastur watched the preparations for leave-taking. The slanting morning light touched his hair, which had darkened from childhood flaxen to red-gold, and the fine planes of his face, reflecting the compelling masculine beauty of his lineage. His cloak, although of soft lambswool, bore no badge or identifying mark, neither the blue-and-silver fir tree of his Hastur father nor the tree and crown of his royal Elhalyn mother. Neither of his parents was present, having passed the winter at Elhalyn Castle with his younger brother and sister. He was not alone, for he was rarely unattended, either by Castle

Guards, personal servants, or the courtiers who lived in Thendara or had journeyed here as soon as the roads were open. Ordinarily, he was so well guarded that he had never yet had occasion to use the sword hanging at his belt except in daily practice. Today, however, no one attempted to draw him into conversation. Perhaps the early hour caused his presence to go unnoticed.

The foremost rider was a man of middle years, the gold of his hair laced lightly with frost. Like the woman beside him, he wore warm, brightly colored travel clothing. His fur-lined cloak draped over the rump of his horse, one of the fabled Armida blacks. He smiled and lifted one hand in greeting to the crowd beyond the gates. They shouted and clapped.

“*Dom Mikhail! The Regent!*”

The woman colored a little. Her horse, a gray of the same fine breeding as her husband’s, pranced and pulled at the bit. She quieted the horse with a touch and, as she did so, the hood of her cloak slipped from her head, revealing a crown of feather-soft, coppery hair.

A sigh swept the crowd outside. The cheers diminished into whispers of awe.

“Lady Marguerida . . .”

Mikhail Lanart-Hastur gave his wife a crooked smile. “They cheer me, but *you* they offer greater honor. I don’t know whether to be relieved or proud.”

A trick of the acoustics in the courtyard carried their voices to where Gareth stood. He felt as if he were eavesdropping on a private family conversation and wished he hadn’t come. He pressed his back against the stone doorway.

“I wish they wouldn’t,” Marguerida Alton replied in a low voice. “I’d much rather be respected for what I’ve achieved than for the color of my hair. We can’t take a simple vacation without all this fuss.”

“It’s gratitude, *preciosa*.”

“Mik, the Trailmen’s Fever was two years ago!”

“Darkovans have long memories. Ah, Nico!” Mikhail smiled broadly as his eldest son and heir approached.

At twenty-two, Domenic Alton-Hastur was just a few years older than Gareth. By Comyn standard he was simply dressed, a jacket crossed by the Alton tartan, and trousers tucked into swordsman’s boots. He laid one hand on the black’s glossy shoulder, looked up at his father, and said with a perfectly serious expression, “It’s not too late to change your minds and turn back from this insanity.”

“Nico!” Marguerida exclaimed, then laughed. “Not us leaving, but you staying to run this place—that’s the real insanity!”

“The Castle is in good hands.” One corner of Mikhail’s mouth twitched. “I have no concerns on that score. We’re in your debt for making it possible for your mother and me to get away at the same time. It’s been far too long since all of us—most of us, anyway—were together at Armida.”

A peculiar sensation, part ache, part something else, tightened Gareth’s chest. He had never doubted the love his own parents had for him, but neither they nor anyone else in a position of power had ever trusted him as much as Mikhail trusted Domenic. It did no good to reiterate that Domenic was older, that he had been trained since childhood to assume the Regency, in addition to the discipline of his season in a Tower.

He has real work, work that matters. Nobody thinks of him as a useless ceremonial appendage.

Yet Gareth could not summon even a shred of resentment against his cousin. Neither of them could help their birth.

He will be Regent and I, the uncrownable King. As Grandfather Regis used to say, if we had wanted another destiny, we should have chosen different parents.

Meanwhile, Mikhail had nudged his horse forward and addressed the throng outside the gates. Pitching his voice to reach to the edges of the crowd, he thanked them and wished them a joyful spring.

and a bountiful early crop.

“I leave you in the care of my son and heir, Domenic Lanart-Hastur, and his equally capable advisors. I warn you, however, that he is a far sterner taskmaster than I.” At this, everyone laughed. “I bid you farewell until the summer Festival season!”

Mikhail signaled to the Guard captain to proceed. The crowd pulled back as they approached, heading for the road to the Alton family estate at Armida. Marguerida glanced back toward the castle.

“He’ll be fine,” Mikhail said. “Danilo will send word at the least hint of trouble.”

Lifting her chin, she nudged the gray forward until she was even with her husband. The party clattered over the paved street to renewed cheers, and the gates swung shut behind them. The onlookers began to disperse, servants hurrying back to their duties. The nobles milled around, exchanging comments and making sure they were seen as people of importance.

Gareth’s stomach rumbled, reminding him that he had not taken more than a cup of water since arising. Perhaps Domenic, now talking with one of the Castle Guards, might be persuaded to breakfast with him.

One of the minor lords brushed against Gareth’s cloak and drew back, clearly startled. “Your pardon, *vai dom!* How clumsy of me. I did not notice you standing there!”

Gareth schooled his features into a blandly pleasant smile. There was no point in telling the man to think nothing of it. Even though the Castle was echoing empty, gossip spread like a Hellfire wildfire.

“Gareth Elhalyn went to see the Regent and Domna Marguerida off, can you believe it?”

“Oh, yes, I bumped into him. He was looking very pale indeed.”

“Well, what do you expect—he’s an Elhalyn! He’s probably terrified of his own shadow. They’re all feeble-minded when they aren’t insane, the whole nest of them. Remember Prince Derik, a generation ago? As simple-minded as they come. And that business with Gareth after Regis died! You don’t suppose he’s losing what little sanity he ever possessed . . .”

No, his best hope was to avoid a conversation entirely. He inclined his head and murmured, “Excuse me.”

Gareth reached Domenic just as the Guardsman bowed and took his leave.

“Good morning, cousin!” Domenic said with a friendly nod.

Gareth’s grandfather, the legendary Regis Hastur, had been brother to Domenic’s Grandmother Javanne. In his youth, Regis had formally adopted her son, Mikhail, as his heir, trained him for leadership, and kept his promise even when his own son, Gareth’s father, was born. Dani Hastur had chosen a private life over one of public display, so the Regency now passed from Mikhail to Domenic.

“A good morning for everyone, I hope.” Then, feeling he ought to explain his presence, Gareth added, “I came to wish your parents a safe and speedy journey.” The words sounded pretentious, as if the difficulties of the road were subject to his amendment. *They had no need of my wishes. Half of Thendara came to cheer them. Why would they pay any attention to me, who did not even speak to them?*

Before Gareth could untangle his thoughts, they were joined by an older man who carried himself with the unconscious vigilance of a longtime paxman. Danilo Syrtis-Ardais was the namesake of Gareth’s father and had been his grandfather’s *bredu*, a term that meant “sworn brother,” but in this case carried more intimate connotations as well, and to this day remained his grandmother’s close friend. Danilo acted as Domenic’s mentor and advisor when he was not traveling about the Domains in search of latent telepaths.

“Tío Danilo!” Gareth came, somewhat shyly, into Danilo’s fatherly embrace. They hadn’t seen each other since the last performance of Marguerida’s opera. Danilo lived in his quarters in the Castle when he wasn’t traveling, while Gareth occupied the townhouse that had belonged to Regis.

Danilo thumped Gareth on the shoulder. “You’ve been regular in your sword practice.”

Gareth never knew how to respond to such comments. Did Danilo really think him such a sluggard? Even the most indolent prince must be seen to uphold the tradition of military training. He sparred, he rode, and he racked his brains trying to master both Darkovan and Federation languages. Danilo had encouraged him, as did Grandmother Linnea.

“Good lad.” Danilo turned to Domenic, and Gareth caught the edge of a telepathic question.

Is there more, Nico . . . you sensed . . . ?

Domenic’s eyes narrowed, the movement so subtle that if Gareth had not sensed Danilo’s inquiry, he would not have noticed it.

. . . earth tremors . . .

Gareth’s surprise almost betrayed him. Until recent times, each Domain had possessed a characteristic psychic Gift. Now the Gifts no longer bred true, and new ones arose unexpectedly. Domenic’s was one such, the ability to sense geological conditions, although not even Domenic knew whether what he felt arose from the crustal layers or deep within the planet. Perhaps the Gift was genetically linked to his dark hair, unusual for the offspring of a blond and a redhead.

Earth tremors, Gareth repeated to himself. He had studied a little planetology but could not remember any references to seismic activity in the Domains.

As if in answer to Gareth’s thought, Domenic pitched his voice low and bent toward Danilo. Gareth caught a few phrases: “Superficial . . . could be impact . . . if I didn’t know otherwise . . .”

“. . . not the Federation . . . no signals . . . Jeram’s radio project . . .”

Gareth knew of the *Terranan* renegade, Jeremiah Reed, who had remained on Darkover when the Federation departed and had taken the name *Jeram*. Their paths had not crossed, except for public events like the Midsummer Festival ball. Jeram had set up a radio listening post, using the abandoned equipment at the old Federation Headquarters.

“Let me know . . . happens again.” Danilo turned and nodded to Gareth in much the same way Gareth might dismiss a child. The two men headed for the city gate, heads inclined together, voices low.

Gareth schooled his features to reflect nothing of what he felt. He should be used to such treatment. If he ever expected to be taken seriously, to be treated with respect, then he himself must behave in a responsible manner.

“Your Highness? Is anything amiss?”

Gareth’s attention snapped to his immediate surroundings. Two courtiers peered at him from a respectful distance. One of them, a Vistarín of Temora, was newly arrived in Thendara and had not yet built a reputation. The man had a little money from his family’s salt trade and not a trace of *laran*. His companion, on the other hand, had been a minor fixture in Comyn society for as long as Gareth could remember. Stout and dressed unflatteringly in fur-trimmed yellow satin, Octavien MacEwain was always trying to insinuate himself into Gareth’s confidence.

“I was merely contemplating the vastly reduced evening amusements without *Domna Marguerida*’s musical compositions,” Gareth said with deliberately affected blandness. “*Lady Bruna* was the jewel of the season.”

“Her absence leaves us all poorer,” the Vistarín lord said.

“And yet . . .” Octavien cut in smoothly, “within every disappointment lies opportunity.”

Octavien’s features betrayed nothing of his purpose, but Gareth had grown up in the treacherous and convoluted world of Comyn politics. What Octavien meant was that the absence of the Regent would be an excellent time for Gareth to assert his claim to the throne. Next, he would suggest that although no one had anything to say against young Domenic, the Council would surely support a legitimate king over a mere Regent’s son. The Regency, begun two generations ago by Danvan Hastur, was never intended as a permanent transfer of power.

He thinks I'm sane enough to be crowned and weak enough to be controlled.

"Oh," Gareth said airily, "I'm sure we can all find something with which to amuse ourselves." With a suitably arrogant lift of his chin, he turned and headed for the nearest exit, which happened to be the gate leading to the city.

Not ten paces beyond the Castle walls, Gareth realized he was shaking. The back of his throat tasted of stomach acid, and his temples throbbed. The thought of food nauseated him, but he ought to eat something. Grandmother Linnea would know the moment he arrived for his lesson if he neglected the most basic self-care.

Gareth paused at a corner food stall where a red-cheeked woman stood over a small copper pot set on a portable brazier. The pot gave off the tantalizing aromas of sweet oil and fried dough. The clawing sensation at the back of Gareth's throat eased. His mouth watered, and his spirits lifted.

The woman used a long wooden skewer to fish out braided, palm-wide pastries, which she rolled in crystallized honey before placing them, steaming and fragrant, on a cooling rack.

"Apple buns, fine sir?"

Gareth bought two, wrapped in paper. Beneath the crisp shell, the buns were moist with bits of fruit and lightly seasoned with spicebark. The taste reminded him of Midwinter Festival treats. The apples had probably been stored since last fall, and the resourceful baker had carved out every useful bit.

From the dregs comes treasure.

"*Vai dom*," came a man's voice, heavy with long-suffering forbearance. "If you please, you should not be here alone."

Here meant out in the open, mingling with the populace. *Alone* meant without his bodyguard.

Nursemaid would be more like it.

Irritation flared, fueled by smoldering resentment. Gareth immediately regretted both. Narsin had served the Elhalyn family since before *Domna* Miralys, Gareth's mother, was born. The old man would have given his life for any one of them and did not deserve to be the target of Gareth's foul temper.

"I am sorry if my impulsiveness caused you distress," Gareth said. "As you see, I am in no danger. Truly, it was not necessary for you to leave the house at such an hour simply because I wished to stretch my legs on this fine morning."

Cragged brows tensed. The old man set his lips together, but Gareth understood his meaning.

It is neither safe nor seemly for the heir to the crown of the Seven Domains to be wandering around without an escort. Don't tell me you can defend yourself as well as the next man. Even a swordmaster can be taken unawares.

So Narsin had said a hundred times. Even as a boy, Gareth understood that an ordinary man had more freedom than a prince. And a prince who had once made a fool of himself in front of the Comyn Council must accept the consequences of his actions: suspicion and constant surveillance.

"Very well, then," Gareth said, "but don't hover at my elbow, glaring at every passer-by. There are no World Wreckers abroad this morning."

Without waiting for a response, Gareth headed back toward Comyn Castle, but slowly enough so that the old man could easily keep pace. It was early for his lesson with Grandmother Linnea, but he badly wanted to be off the streets. At the moment, he felt he'd had all he could tolerate of being watched over and whispered about.

There were no longer any World Wreckers, or any saboteurs, undercover agents, or Federation forces of any sort remaining on Darkover. Except, of course, the very few, like Jeram, who had stayed behind out of loyalty to Darkover when the Terrans withdrew their forces.

Gareth lifted his face to the sky, trying to imagine what it must be like out there, in the vast reaches of space. Darkover was an insignificant planet, considered irredeemably primitive by the Federation.

Only its strategic location on the galactic arm, and then later its potential for exploitation, had granted it any status. Even that could not justify the *Terranan* presence once the Federation erupted into interstellar war.

What was going on up there? Who was winning, who losing? Darkover had had few enough allies in the Senate, even before the war. *And will they ever come back?*

When they do, we will be ready for them. So Gareth had sworn more times than he could count. No, the words sounded hollow. If the Federation returned, with its advanced technological weapons, determined to seize whatever it wanted, who could stop them? And how?

Since childhood, Gareth had been drilled in the importance of the Compact, the ancient code of honor that forbade the use of any weapon that did not bring the wielder within equal risk. In many ways, the Compact was the soul of Darkover, of the Domains, anyway. The Dry Towns had never sworn to it, but their inhabitants did not possess *laran*.

Laran. As the rambling complex of walls and towers of Comyn Castle came into view, Gareth tried to imagine a world without *laran*. Darkover was unique in the strength and prevalence of psychic powers, powers that, when amplified by the psychoactive matrices called starstones, were capable of everything from sensing the emotions of another, to healing mind and body, to charging batteries that could light a castle or power an airship . . . or bring one crashing down.

The *Terranan* had thought the Compact the superstition of a primitive race. They had not realized it was aimed not at their own technology but at the far more devastating weaponry of the mind.

Once, Gareth had been taught, *laran* warfare had raged unchecked across the face of Darkover. Many of the techniques had been lost, and most people thought it better that way.

But if the Federation comes back, our laran may be the best defense we have.

Was it arrogant to think that *he* could somehow make a difference? Under it all, he supposed, he was a hopeless romantic, a prince who wanted to save his kingdom. Or to prove himself worthy of it.

If Gareth had been alone, he would have used one of the side entrances near Comyn Tower. That would only distress Narsin further, though, for the old man envisioned ambushes in the rosalys arbor. It was better to use the main gate, where armed Guards stood at attention. Gareth paused for a few moments to speak to them.

Gareth and Narsin crossed the outer courtyard, a flagstone square lined with benches and trees, the leaves still bright green. Beds of yellowheart gave off a subtle, spicy perfume. Although the sky had brightened to full morning, it was still chilly in the shadows. Narsin furtively pulled his cloak around his bony shoulders.

“You need not remain with me, old friend,” Gareth said. “Go home and get yourself a hot meal. I am safe within these walls.”

“But, *Dom* Gareth—”

“No harm will come to me, I promise. Look, see how the Guards watch over me.” *They are undoubtedly wondering what scandalous thing the mad Elhalyn princeling will do next.* “I have only to call out and they will be here to protect me. And I will be in my grandmother’s care.” *What could you defend me against, that a Keeper could not?*

Narsin’s shoulders sagged minutely. They had been through similar arguments a hundred times before, and he knew how far he could push Gareth. He nodded, bowed, and departed the way they had come.

Gareth breathed a little more freely as he hurried along the maze of passages leading to the Tower. For a few moments, he need not barricade his thoughts behind a granite shield. His life was like a puzzle. Grandmother Linnea knew part of it; as his friend and Regent-heir, Domenic knew another; his parents saw him as the boy they loved so dearly; the courtiers and Comyn lords regarded him as either yet another of those unstable Elhalyns or else a pawn to their own ambitions. Gareth supposed it was

like that for everyone, especially those cursed with noble birth. Perhaps his own father had taken the wiser choice in abdicating his claim to the Hastur Domain in favor of a private domestic life.—

Gareth paused outside the door leading to Linnea's private chambers. Carved with an interlacing pattern of branches, the door always made him think of an enchanted forest and his grandmother as a *chieri* queen who lived there. She had been queen in all but name, for no one would have challenged Regis if he had wanted the throne.

Before Gareth's knuckles touched the fine-grained wood, Linnea called for him to enter. He lifted the latch and stepped inside.

Linnea Storn-Lanart sat before the hearth where a fire sent up flickers of brightness. She had set aside her red Keeper's robes for a gown of undyed wool. The room with its mantle of opalized river-stone was proportioned for a small, delicate person. It fit her perfectly.

She lifted one hand from her knitting to greet him. The light streamed in from the mullioned windows and touched her silver hair. For a moment, with her face softened by shadow, he envisioned her as she must have been, a young woman with a heart-shaped face and deeply expressive eyes. Then she tucked the needles and ball of wool into a basket at her feet, and he saw her as she was. Years had pleated her skin like the withering of a flower, revealing the strength of her character.

"How good it is to see you, *chiyu*. I was beginning to think you weren't coming this morning."

Gareth squirmed, although there was no censure in Linnea's words, only a gentle reminder that she had waited up for him after a night's work in the Tower circle. He decided not to mention the courtiers. She'd had enough of such machinations in her own life.

"Forgive me, Grandmother." Gareth drew up a chair. "Shall we begin?"

With an expression of pleasure, Linnea took out her starstone from its locket lined with insulating spidersilk. Gareth caught a flash of blue-white as the gem touched her skin. Quickly he averted his gaze. The shifting patterns of energy, manifested as twisting light, could be dangerous to any mind other than the one to which the stone was attuned.

Gareth carried his own matrix stone in the old style, in a silk pouch tucked under his shirt. Simple geometric embroidery decorated the outer layer, a gift from one of his Elhalyn aunts. With a practiced tug, he loosened the cord, and the starstone fell into the palm of his hand.

The stone, carried so close to his body, felt warm. Blue-white brilliance lit the facets, dancing through the patterns he knew so well. Sometimes, when he was first learning to use the stone, those patterns had haunted his dreams.

Gareth closed his eyes, focusing his mind on the stone. As he had been taught, he envisioned a single point of light. He imagined it moving through a prism, gaining in power and clarity. The starstone would amplify his own innate talent, but it could not grant him a Gift he did not already have.

What was his Gift? The Ridenow were celebrated for their empathy, particularly with nonhumans. Their skill with horses and hawks was common knowledge. And the Altons . . . forced rapport was no a thing to be taken lightly, and the unchecked anger of an Alton could kill. Other Gifts had been lost through dilution and the passage of time. No one living knew what Gifts the Aillards and Gareth's own family, the Elhalyns, had once possessed.

The Aillards, he reflected, were all but extinct, their Domain represented on the Comyn Council by a distant, collateral branch. As for the Elhalyns . . .

After so many near-psychotic generations, it is no wonder we have no Gift!

Immediately, Gareth regretted the pettiness of his thought. True, his maternal grandmother had been stricken with depression, delusions, and who knew what else. His own mother, Miralys Elhalyn, had never been anything but sweet natured, constant, and loving. It was unworthy to condemn her in the same breath as Old Stefan or Derik the Insane.

Or me, as I could have been.

As he might still be?

Concentrate on nothing else, only this point of light . . . came Linnea's silent command, cool as silver. With a start, Gareth reined his thoughts back under control.

The light . . . think of nothing but the light . . .

With a sigh, he lowered his barriers and allowed his mind to merge with hers. She took control with a Keeper's deft touch.

Gareth floated in a sea of misty blue-white. He poured his mental energies through his starstone and into hers, keeping the stream of *laran* power steady and even. Peace such as he had rarely known suffused him. Here, in this place out of time, there was no deception, no need for disguise, no schemes or plots, no consideration of rank, no past . . .

His next awareness was the touch of his grandmother's mind on his, a gentle warning before she broke their rapport. He felt himself falling, as he always felt when ending a telepathic session. They had not worked nearly as long as an ordinary circle would, but their goal was not assembling a higher order matrix, mining rare minerals deep below Darkover's crust, producing fire-fighting chemicals or medicines, or any of the hundred things that could be accomplished with *laran*.

He wondered, not for the first time, if he should seek admittance to a Tower. Linnea believed he had the ability. Aldones knew the circles always needed more workers. That was why *Tío Danilo* spent the better part of each year searching out new talent.

To bury myself in such a world, a place of peace and fellowship . . . but one where nothing ever changed, where discipline and order were the rule.

No, he could not do that, either.

Linnea rose and stretched. "You did well, little one, once you settled down. I've rarely seen you so distracted."

"I—"

"No, don't tell me. It doesn't matter. We must leave all personal considerations behind when we work in a circle. That discipline is as necessary for you as for any Tower-trained *laranzu*."

Gareth hung his head, offering no excuse.

"Come now, you did not do badly. Did I not say so?" She brushed her fingertips against the back of his wrist in a telepath's feather-light touch. "We all have days when we are not our best, for are we not human? You are too hard on yourself. Sometimes I think you anticipate criticism by heaping it upon yourself first!"

"If I do not set high standards for myself, who will? Half the city can't wait for me to fail. The bet makers are likely making odds that I'll do it in some spectacular and unseemly fashion."

Linnea shook her head. "You were very young when Javanne got her claws into you. She no more had your best interest at heart than do those toadies who dog your steps. It is they who are to blame, not you, unless you constantly remind me of it by this wincing."

"It is an old habit," he admitted, smiling.

"And one I should be happy to see you rid yourself of."

"For you, Grandmother, I will try." Gareth leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. He bowed and stepped back, preparing to take his leave.

A thoughtful expression touched her face. "In some ways, you are very like Regis. He too had an adventurous spirit, although his rank forced him to set aside his own dreams. And he too expected more of himself than anyone else ever could."

"Grandfather Regis?" *The legendary Regis had stood against the World Wreckers and, if half the stories were true, became the living incarnation of Hastur Lord of Light when he destroyed the Sharran matrix.*

“Yes, he is best known for those things.” Linnea responded to Gareth’s unspoken thought, for they were still in light telepathic contact. ~~“Before that, he led the Allison Expedition. Oh, yes, he was a mountaineer as a young man. Even as a cadet, he went alone into the Hellers at the time of the first Sharra disaster, when Caer Donn was destroyed.”~~

“Are you saying . . .”

Linnea smiled. “I am saying that perhaps you need not hide your own dreams of adventure, at least not from me. It is natural for young people to strike out on their own. We all have private thoughts, and if you had been able to study at a Tower, you would have learned to keep yours close without drawing quite so much attention to them.”

“I don’t know what to say.” His cheeks burned.

“Nothing is required. I only wish you to know that you are not the first young Comyn to want something more from his life than Council business, marrying for political advantage, and producing heirs. Go on, now. It is time for me to rest. If you will, we will speak more of this later.”

There was no point in arguing. Besides, Linnea was right. With a Keeper’s unerring instinct for the uncomfortable truth, she had put into words the focus of his discontent.

There had to be more to life than being polite to bootlickers like Octavien MacEwain or trying endlessly to live down his own past and escape everyone else’s.

Gareth emerged from the Tower into sunshine. This part of the Castle was a jumble of architectural styles, an accretion of additions and remodeling that spanned centuries, perhaps millennia, and it bustled with activity. Servants chattered to one another as they hurried along the walkways, maids carried baskets of laundry, and scullions wheeled handcarts laden with barrels of apples, pottery jars of cooking oil, and braided strings of garlic. A nursemaid hurried along with a well-wrapped infant in her arms; from her expression, both of them had been up all night. Soon the place would be filled with children as the noble Comyn families began arriving for the Midsummer season.

Just as Gareth passed beneath the arched doorway leading to a garden courtyard, he spotted two men coming toward him from the opposite end. They were dressed alike in velvet hats and robes embellished with tartan ribbons. Copper links glinted around their necks. Gareth groaned silently as he recognized Rufus DiAsturien and Lorrill Vallonde. Only a few years ago, *Dom* Lorrill had schemed shamelessly to match Domenic with his daughter and, when that had failed, had shifted his ambitions to Gareth. Undoubtedly, one or the other of these two lords had influenced Octavien MacEwain. Gareth had heard rumors that some on the Council believed the time for a new Golden Age of Restoration had come. They would redouble their efforts to snare him with flattering talk and promises of power or a beautiful wife, because they believed he would be a puppet in their hands.

The two lords bent toward one another, speaking in hushed, urgent tones. Quickly, before either could recognize him, Gareth sidled back into the nearest doorway. His rising pulse sent a thrill through his chest. His vision sharpened. For a moment, he felt as if he were a boy again, pretending he was Special Agent Race Cargill of the Terran Secret Service, sent on a secret mission to save the Old Empire. He'd escaped his tutors on more than one occasion, prowling the back passages of Elhalyn Castle and pretending he was sneaking into Charin to root out *The Lisse*. Where Charin might have been and who or what *The Lisse* was, he had no idea, although his imagination had supplied many tantalizing possibilities. It often seemed as though he were living his life only through those adventures, and ordinary, real, daily events had nothing to do with him.

The two nobles passed through the courtyard and into the shadowed colonnade. Gareth made his way down one corridor through an older portion, once family quarters but now given over to offices,

and then ascended a short flight of stairs. From here, he could stay hidden until he emerged near one of the outer gates.

At the top of the stairs, he glanced down the narrow corridor just in time to see Domenic and Danilo hurrying in the opposite direction. They both wore cloaks of the serviceable, ordinary type to be seen anywhere in the city. Gareth skidded to a halt, but with their faces hidden behind their hoods, neither noticed him. Clearly, they wished to avoid notice.

A tedious day had just gotten a whole lot more interesting. Gareth took a moment to make sure his *laran* barriers were secure, so that no telltale mental aura might slip through. He moved as smoothly and quietly as he imagined a catman might prowl. Following at a distance, he watched the pair slip through the same side gate he had intended to use. He marked the direction they took, then raised his own hood and hurried after them.

Domenic and Danilo kept to a moderate pace through the Old Town, passing corner food stalls and *jaco* sellers without pausing. If they sensed Gareth on their trail, they gave no sign.

As they entered the crowded Kazarin Market, Gareth almost lost them. By this hour, the market thronged with people eager to enjoy the fine weather, even if they found nothing to buy. He wove through a jumble of peddlers crying out their wares, shoppers and gawkers, street urchins and City Guards. For a time, he lost sight of them when a wagon loaded with furniture crossed in front of him, and by the time it had passed, he could no longer see them.

A moment later, he spotted them at the far end of the square. Danilo halted and glanced back, his eyes narrowed. For an instant, Gareth felt utterly exposed. What should he do? Race Cargill would not have been so easily detected.

Gareth's muscles unfroze. He whirled around, ducking his head to hide his face in the shadows of his hood. Behind him stood a table of leather goods. He fumbled to pick up the nearest piece of merchandise.

I'm not here, he thought, hardly seeing the finely tooled belt. *You don't notice me.*

So strongly did Gareth project invisibility that the owner of the stall, who had headed over the instant Gareth paused, drifted past him to greet another customer. Gareth counted under his breath, replaced the belt on the table, and turned around in as casual a manner as he could muster. He was just in time to see Domenic and Danilo leave the plaza.

Shortly, Gareth found himself in one of the city's seedier areas, the kind of place Narsin would have forbidden him to go, had he known. The streets were crooked, their paving stones cracked and discolored. A sour smell hung in the air. Many of the structures had originally been built well but had fallen into disrepair. He noticed the powdery mortar between weathered stones, the splintered beams, the sagging eaves and flaking paint. Men with weather-reddened faces huddled around garbage fires, warming their hands. They followed Gareth's progress with their eyes, perhaps calculating the value of his cloak and boots. He swaggered a bit, throwing out his chest and swinging his cloak back to reveal the sword at his belt. Rationally, the last thing he wanted was a fight, but he felt a twinge of disappointment at the speed with which the men hunched their shoulders and looked away.

Gareth returned his attention to the chase. What were they up to in this part of the city? This could be no morning stroll, no eccentric way of taking exercise. True, Domenic had acquired a reputation for unconventional behavior. His mother, *Domna* Marguerida, had been educated off-world and encouraged him to think for himself. This approach was not met with universal approval among the old Comyn families. One of the ladies attending Miralys Elhalyn, Gareth's mother, relished any break of a scandal about Domenic.

"I heard," she had whispered to her friend when she thought Gareth was out of hearing, *"he consorts with common traders, Zandru only knows why!"*

"The Regent's son?" her companion had exclaimed. *"Shocking, positively shocking! But what do*

you expect from his lineage? I always say, Blood will tell . . .”

Indeed, they undoubtedly said the very same thing—or worse—about Gareth. Maybe that was why Gareth held a particular sympathy for the young Regent-heir.

Gareth flattened himself against the rough stone wall of a wine shop just as the two stepped inside a similar establishment farther down the lane. The two-story building seemed in better repair than its neighbors and, by the presence of other patrons, was open for breakfast. The aromas of sausage, fried onions, and fresh-baked bread wafted from the door.

Odd to come all this way for a morning meal . . . But perhaps the relief from prying eyes was worth the walk.

The front door, although battered, opened smoothly at Gareth’s touch. The interior was dark after the brightness of the street. He made out a bar running along the back wall. Three men in workers’ clothing sat around the largest table, bent over bowls of meat-laced porridge and mugs of *jaco*. Several solitary patrons occupied smaller tables.

As Gareth was debating what to do, a harried-looking woman burst from the kitchen, balancing a basket of nut-studded loaves, a pitcher, and two platters of lumpy gray stew. Perspiration darkened the scarf that held back her gray-streaked hair. Gareth could not take his eyes off the wart on the side of her nose.

“Another one, is it?” She threw the bread down on the large table and bustled around to the others, hardly glancing at Gareth. She sounded as if she’d been engaged in a screaming contest with the crows. “Of all the mornings, with the girl out sick and my man not yet back from the miller! You’ll be wanting breakfast as well, I suppose?”

It took Gareth a moment to realize she meant him. “No, nothing for me,” he mumbled, imitating the common accent of the Castle servants.

“Then get yourself upstairs before I trip over you!”

By this time, Gareth’s vision had adapted to the dimmer light well enough to make out a staircase at the far end of the common room. Places like this must have a chamber or two for private meals at a small additional fee. He went up. The stairs ended in a landing with two closed doors to either side.

Step by cautious step, Special Agent Cargill advances on the entrance to the secret chamber. Evil symbols glow on the ancient wood, but he must not shrink from his quest. The fate of worlds rests on him. He reaches out . . .

Which door? Both were perfectly ordinary, cheap coarse-grained wood. Gareth lowered his *laran* shields minutely, searching for the distinctive mental signatures of his friends. He tried to radiate as little as possible of his own presence.

An instant later, he sensed the familiar pattern of Domenic’s mind . . . then Danilo’s . . . and someone else’s. This third man was no Comyn; his mind had no *laran* beyond ordinary intuition. Just about everyone in the Domains had some minor degree of sensitivity, or so Grandmother said. That was why telepaths cropped up now and again in non-Comyn families. The Comyn themselves inherited their psychic Gifts from the offspring of the earliest settlers and the ancient native race called *chieri*. The old families no longer held themselves apart, and over the millennia, *nedestro* children had spread the talent through the general population. Domenic’s consort, Illona Rider, was one such, now working as under-Keeper at Comyn Tower.

Meanwhile, the third man presented questions. What was going on? A secret meeting? For what purpose? Danilo Syrtis had spent his life in serving the Domains, and Domenic was no less dedicated. Neither would have anything to do with criminal schemes or plots against the Comyn Council. Perhaps they met to prepare for the day when the Terran Federation returned to Darkover. Or to thwart some scheme of the Dry Towns lords? Whatever it was, it must be more exciting than the approaching summer social season.

And whatever it was, they would not be happy to find that he had followed them here. A man of honor, Comyn prince or commoner, did not spy on his friends. An image flashed across his mind of the door suddenly banging open and Domenic standing there, astonishment warring with disgust on his face, and beyond him, Tío Danilo reflecting disappointment.

I believed in you, Danilo said in Gareth's imagination. *I thought you were better than this.*

Cheeks flaming, Gareth scuttled backward so fast, he almost tripped on the edge of the stairs.

Idiot! Clumsy, stupid—

Hardly daring to breathe, Gareth hurried back down the stairs. Race Cargill would never have been so careless, not to mention so uncoordinated.

Gareth forced himself to slow down on the lowest stairs. It would do no good to escape notice only to attract it by suspicious haste. To his relief, none of the customers took any notice of him. The serving woman ignored him as she went about her work.

Taking a slow breath, Gareth ambled toward the door. At any moment, Danilo and the others might descend and find him here. He had not gone more than a short distance across the room when footsteps sounded on the stairs. Had he not been straining for any hint of pursuit, he might not have heard them. He dared not turn around or use his *laran*.

On a moment's impulse, he headed for the darkest corner, slid onto the bench, and pulled his hood over his face. Thus concealed, he hazarded a peek.

The man who emerged from the stairwell was of middle years, Gareth guessed, for his skin was darkly weathered. His hair glinted with the straw tints of Dry Towner ancestry, but he didn't look like one of the desert folk. His clothing was such as a trader or caravaner might wear, a quilted jacket slightly ragged at the seams, knit cap, riding trousers, and laced boots. Without a glance, he crossed the room and pushed through the front door.

Heart pounding, Gareth sagged against the wall. He'd been lucky this time, but he dared not linger. Danilo and Domenic might appear at any moment.

Outside, the brightness of the day stung Gareth's eyes. The burst of adrenaline had faded, leaving a sense of exhilaration. Every nerve quivered with aliveness. The air tasted more intoxicating than wine. Even the rough walls, ramshackle buildings, and the drabness of the people passing him took on a new clarity and brilliance. He could not remember feeling like this, certainly not in all the interminable seasons at court. Was this why men climbed mountains or fought duels or ventured into the depths of space?

As he went on, the neighborhood changed, becoming even less familiar. The spasm of elation dimmed. He found himself headed in no particular direction . . . just like his life.

What a pathetic fool he'd been to derive such pleasure from a childish escapade. Only by luck had he managed to not be found out and his irresponsible behavior exposed.

His feet slowed to a halt. Around him, the brightness of the street faded and the sounds of the passers-by, the riders and carts, the children at play, a pair of itinerant musicians strumming an old ballad, seemed to mock him.

I can't face them, Tío Danilo and Domenic. One look, one moment in my presence, and they'll know I've done something disgraceful, even if they don't know what it is. They're telepaths, both of them, and I don't have the strength to block my every thought.

A man in sheep's-hide clothing, bent under a sack slung across his shoulders, bumped into Gareth and mumbled what might have been an apology but sounded more like a curse.

How could he go back? And how could he *not* go back?

The consequences of returning would be humiliating and degrading, but would they be any worse than what he'd already endured? He had no good name to destroy and no honor to preserve. And absolutely no reason to indulge in this disgusting spate of self-pity. Whatever he had created of his

life, whatever he had done, was his responsibility. He would simply have to live with the results.

~~But if, oh, if only he could run away from it all! Join the Terran Secret Service, if there really was such a thing outside the tri-vids. Hop on a freighter bound for the stars, if the Federation ever came back to Darkover. Join a caravan headed for the farthest reaches of the Hellers, venture beyond the Wall Around the World or the sands of Ardcaran or Daillon . . .~~

Gareth came to a halt. Instead of heading back the way he'd come, toward the Castle, he'd wandered to the outskirts of the Old Town. The place felt vaguely familiar, so he must have visited it before. He moved out of the flow of traffic, his back against a rough-sided building, and studied his surroundings. In one direction, he saw stables and fenced yards, in the other, blocks of warehouses. The mingled smells of animal dung and fodder hung in the air. He noticed many more horses and other beasts of burden than in the more populated city areas.

He must be somewhere near the Traders' Gate, then. From where he stood, he caught sight of a string of laden ponies, although surely it was too late in the day for any caravan to be setting out. A trio of women in the mannish garb of Renunciates stood outside a saddle shop, two speaking with a man in a leather apron and the third surveying the street, one hand on the hilt of her long knife. Her gaze paused on Gareth and her face tightened. He pushed himself away from the wall and, with as nonchalant an air as he could muster, strode off in the opposite direction.

There was always the chance he might be recognized, for he was a public figure. People saw what they expected to see, however, and who would expect Prince Gareth to frequent a livestock yard?

Gareth made his way past the pens and stables to an open square crowded with picket lines. Pack and riding animals of every description crowded together, everything from cart horses with thick shoulders and densely feathered feet to antlered *chervines*, young horses, and shaggy ponies. Everywhere men were talking, bargaining, examining the animals, and arguing with one another. Here and there, a man trotted out a horse on a leading rein to show off its paces.

Gareth wandered up one lane and down another, taking in the sights and sounds of the horse market. He'd never imagined such a place existed, although he supposed people must buy and keep their mounts somewhere. His horses had always been provided for him, most of them bred especially for his House and then cared for by servants. They'd all been superbly trained, of the finest bloodlines. No expense was spared in their grooming or feed.

Some of these animals appeared to be in decent condition, but most were far inferior to those he was used to. He saw many with old whitened sores on their withers, others with dull eyes and staring coats, bowed tendons, crooked hocks, and ribs like slats. A few appeared to be on the brink of collapse.

"Looking for a nice piece of horseflesh?" a voice drawled from behind Gareth's shoulder. Turning, he looked down on a hunched little man who might have been thirty or sixty. Layers of ragged, grime-darkened clothing obscured the contours of his body. Gray stubble covered an unshaven jaw, and the next words revealed several gaps in the man's teeth.

"Cut you a deal, nice young man like you, I will."

Gareth's gorge rose at the unsavory smell arising from the man, but he smoothed his features into the insipid blandness he affected at court. "I'm not sure," he said with a little careless laugh of the sort that usually resulted in nothing he said being taken seriously. "I might want something suitable for travel."

"Up or down?"

"I don't follow you."

The man sighed. "Mountains or Dry Towns? Do you want a beast that can climb like a goat or wade through the sand?"

Dry Towns . . . I could buy a horse fit for desert travel . . . I could disappear . . .

Images swept through Gareth's mind. He saw himself riding along a trail, leaving behind his life in Thendara. ~~Out there, no one would know him. He could be whatever he made of himself.~~

He'd never been allowed to travel beyond the borders of the Domains, not even as far as Carthon. The very name hinted of perfume-laden night breezes, veiled women, men with strange accents and curved swords, exotic food and music—the stuff of tales of daring and courage.

He would need to be careful; like every other Comyn youth, he'd been brought up on stories of how treacherous the Dry Towns lords were. After the political machinations, the schemes and evasions and double-meanings of the Comyn courts, surely he knew how to handle himself.

It would be a brief visit, just long enough to clear his head and settle his nerves. Who knew what he might find, even in a day or two? He saw himself striding into Danilo's office, announcing, "*I overheard you speaking with the trader from Carthon, so I decided to investigate. I discovered—*" a dastardly plot by the Master of Shainsa or something equally spectacular, no doubt. In the next moment, he saw Danilo rising in astonishment and gratitude, and behind him, Mikhail and Domenic, Lady Marguerida and Gareth's own parents. "*Prince Gareth, your bravery and cunning have saved us all!*"

Getting a horse would be the easiest part. He'd need a disguise, a reason for his journey to Carthon. Maybe he could pose as a trader in small lenses or a buyer of whatever the Dry Towns had to sell—copper filigree jewelry? No, that would be too costly. Whatever he pretended to be interested in must not be worth the trouble of robbing him.

He'd also need a reason to be gone from home, should his absence be noted. *Narsin!* The old retainer fussed if Gareth was out of his sight for an hour, let alone a tenday!

The horse dealer was peering at him, perhaps calculating his next sales strategy. Gareth hardened his expression into disinterest. "I'll just look around a bit."

"You don't want to wait too long, young master," the dealer wheedled. "The best stock's already taken, 'cept for a few choice beasts I've set aside."

I'll bet.

"Then I'll come back another day." Without waiting for a response, Gareth turned and set off for another part of the horse market.

Gareth had not gone very far, no more than another row or two, when he recognized the man examining a dun mule. A youth held the lead lines of two sturdy horses the size of mountain ponies. He gestured in animated fashion with the older man, pointing to the mule's off rear hoof. It was the Dry Towns trader who had met with Danilo and Domenic.

Gareth froze in his tracks. A man leading a fractious, long-legged chestnut bumped into him, almost sending him spinning, and continued on with a curse at the idiocy of fools who got in the way. Gareth drew breath to demand an apology, but sense quenched his temper. Surely it was a good sign that he had been insulted and almost run down. No one here would dare to speak to him in that way if they'd realized who he was.

Feeling more confident, Gareth straightened his cloak and approached the Carthon trader. The boy noticed him first, stiffening. The trader straightened up from examining one of the mule's hooves.

"A fair day to you, friend." The trader's expression was mild but reserved, without any hint of the horse dealer's false affability.

"It is indeed," Gareth replied. "You look like a man who knows his way around horses."

"I have some skill with them, it's true."

Gareth was about to protest that anyone who earned his living by trading between Carthon and Thendara must have more than *some skill* with the animals upon which his livelihood depended. He stopped himself as he realized that the man's words amounted to reverse bragging.

"I'm in need of dependable travel advice," Gareth said. "It seems to be in short supply here."

The boy snorted and the trader looked amused. "What sort of advice?"

"I am to arrange transport to Carthon. The person—my employer's agent—who usually handles it is unavailable." Even as the words left his mouth, a story spun itself out in Gareth's imagination. The lens-seller pretext would work very well. Such articles were small, easily transported, and in demand. The Terrans had done much to improve the technology, especially for devices for detection of forest fires, but the scarcity of metal to construct proper furnaces still made the production of high-quality glass expensive. Growing up in a privileged family, Gareth had handled various kinds of lensed instruments. He owned a few such devices himself and could pretend to be showing them as samples.

“What would you be transporting to Carthon?” The trader’s expression shifted to guarded interest.

“~~Myself and a small pack. I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry, being already behind my master’s schedule.~~” Gareth tried to sound anxious.

“As it happens, I intend to depart the morning after next and can offer you the protection of my caravan. What’s your name and business?”

Gareth stopped himself before he blurted out his real name. “Garrin. Garrin MacDanil.” That was close enough to Gareth son of Danilo to make it easy to remember. “I’m to carry trade samples for my master.”

“Trade samples?” One sand-pale brow lifted.

“Polished lenses.”

“You speak with an unusually cultured accent for a merchant’s apprentice.”

Gareth tried to imagine having to earn his bread, what sort of work he might do. Even though he’d trained with a sword since boyhood, he wasn’t qualified to be a bodyguard. He wasn’t well enough educated to teach or fluent enough to translate. In truth, he wasn’t much good for anything. Without his family’s rank and wealth, he’d be extremely lucky to get a position as a merchant’s apprentice.

The trader, seeing Gareth’s confusion, dropped the matter and offered his own name with a bow. “Cyrillon Sensar, *z’par servu.*”

After discussing the fee for joining the caravan and appointing a meeting place and time, Cyrillon agreed to help Gareth purchase a suitable mount. After sending the boy off with the horses and mule, he wandered through the picket lines of riding horses, pausing now and then to study one of the animals. Gareth knew enough about horses to understand that Cyrillon was evaluating their soundness. A keen eye could quickly discern the more serious faults, even without the precaution of picking up a hoof or estimating the age of the horse by the condition of its teeth.

After some looking, Cyrillon recommended a mare with a glossy, dark brown coat and one white sock. She was of middling years, “old enough to have sense,” Cyrillon said, and was sturdy enough to carry Gareth easily. Her legs were strong and clean, and her hooves large and unusually hard. In addition, Cyrillon pointed out a second horse, a rusty black, to serve as a pack animal. Gareth thought it the ugliest horse he had ever seen, with its sway back, cow hocks, and ears so large it looked as if they were part rabbit-horn, but Cyrillon assured him that it was trailworthy. The dealer looked surprised that anyone was interested in buying it, so Gareth made a good bargain for the black as well as for its tack and a saddle for the mare.

Gareth paid for both horses and arranged for them to be stabled in the area. He didn’t dare take them back to the little stable attached to the town house for fear of arousing too many questions from Narsin.



Whistling, Gareth strode back toward the town house. His scheme might have arisen in a moment’s impulse and the soul-sick disgust for his life in Thendara, but it was coming together as if Aldones himself had commanded it. If Cyrillon Sensar had any doubts about Gareth’s story, he’d kept them quiet. His apprentice wasn’t exactly friendly, but what did that matter?

The sun had just passed midday, and the air was sweet and mild. He dropped his hood back over his shoulders and felt the warmth on his hair.

His hair . . . When he was younger, it had been as fair as a Dry Towner’s. There might be some lady’s product to lighten its color, but he wasn’t sure if that would draw more or less attention to himself. As it was, he’d have enough to do—finding suitable clothing, packing the lenses, and laying a series of misdirections so his absence wouldn’t be noticed. He doubted anyone in the Castle would

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