

magic of the rose



magic of the rose
scot noel



Story Copyright (s) 2013
by Scot Noel

The Magic of the Rose

by Scot Noel

"Imagine," said an impatient voice.

Upon hearing the word, Root choked. Without a move, it was as if his master had placed a hand about the young mage's throat.

"Imagine my discomfort," Palgrave continued, "at being presented this piece of evidence. His Majesty has sent inquiries. Representatives have called. It could mean your head!"

The voice came hard, a worn thing set as deeply as the stones in the hall. At the power of its sound, Root bowed low, an action his crippled frame could easily accommodate. The pressure about his throat eased, and he blinked, keeping the rheumy gaze of his better eye upon the chair Palgrave inhabited and the parchment the mage held between aged fingers.

"You have no right," Root said. His cheeks flushed as he recognized the missive. Caught off guard at first, his stubbornness quickly arose. He opened a clawed hand. The wrist turned back upon itself, as bent as the

rest of Root's young body. With a thought he caused a wind, and with the wind he drew the parchment to him. "The letter is mine!"

"Not this day!" Palgrave's hand rose. It shook, frightening the wind to stillness. "You will find me free of indulgence. Answer to me or to the Crown!"

Once again, Root bowed his head. He reached within, bringing a spark of magic to flame, but concealing it from his master.

"Allow me to continue," Palgrave said. He recited from memory: "To the Lady Fross. As if it makes no sense, or pales when next to reason, you call me mad for loving you. Is it reasonable at all to fall in love, with one who gives hope, and whose hope has eyes to see, and whose eyes..."

Anger rose within Root that he could not control.

"Those words are priv...privileged!" The faltering words inflamed him further. Root moved, the stumps of his legs lifting magically from the floor. Bringing his palms together, he filled the hall with a clap like the meeting of cymbals. Waves of blue light rippled from the hands of the defiant boy.

Palgrave reeled at the first touch of Root's magic, tumbling from his seat. Another bolt tore up stones from the floor. The sound was that of a dragon tearing headlong through a house on fire, but Palgrave was nowhere to be seen.

"Foolish," Palgrave said darkly from a refuge unseen. Though Root turned slowly, watching the corners, his hands ready to spout fire, when his

master reappeared it was as a great bird, a vision of wings assembling itself from the flickers of torchlight and the burning remnants of Palgrave's seat. Broad feathered shadows filled the room, and centered in the darkness, the eyes of a hawk peered down mercilessly upon him. Here was power beyond Root's summoning.

"Now, child, the game is done!"

Incensed, Root leveled blow after blow against his master, each more desperate than the last. They fell harmlessly against the shadowed wings, and yet still Root looked within for more. After a moment's hesitation, he unbent the fingers of his right hand. From inside that unclenched fist floated a pearl.

"Answer me," Palgrave's voice boomed in the hall. "Did you kiss her, a sister of the Rose?"

The pearl began to grow.

As it floated into the winged darkness, the milky orb drew out Palgrave's magic, imprisoning his power. The pearl expanded. The pulse within its lustrous surface became brilliant, drawing on the old mage's power to engorge the growing orb with explosive energies. With each heartbeat, the pearl redoubled in size.

The hawk eyes flickered. The shadows began to disperse.

Root turned, recognizing his chance for escape and knowing he must put as much stonework as possible between himself and the fulminating orb. He lurched along the stones, frightened by the result of his own anger.

Root was not prepared for Palgrave's counterstroke. After such exertion, he was powerless to stop it. The magic moved like fire, setting itself upon him, as might the burning claws of a gryphon, holding him fast.

Before him, falling across the shadow of his own cloak, Root saw the pearl tumble to the stones. It was no longer engorged with stolen power but much reduced. His master's boot came forward to crush the milky pellet.

"A sweet trick," Palgrave said harshly, close to Root's ear. "I had but to cease my struggles for a moment. Without the focus of my ambition, the pearl became nothing. Answer now. You kissed a sister of the Rose?"

Root settled.. It had never been his intention to injure Palgrave, for the struggle, no matter its means, had been temper and no more. Like the parent of a wild child, the old mage had regained control, and under the pressure of Palgrave's magic, Root choked out the answer, though still unwillingly.

"I kissed her once... not since... and not willingly by her."

"Against her will, then? Was there more?"

"No, Master, not as you think." Tears coursed down Root's cheeks. He sobbed. This surprised him as much as the sudden change in Palgrave's tone, for the next words came more softly.

"She is in danger, Root, as are all those at the abbey."

"Is it because of what I've done?" Root asked. At last he felt ashamed. "Tell me!"

"Then listen. Find the patience to hear."

As Palgrave spoke, Root felt the old mage's voice well up with a soothing magic. The gesture was not altogether unwelcome.

"For three centuries, the abbey has given Aranwae its finest men-at-arms. For a price, skills are honed and weapons blessed. By this result, no enemy has overcome the land."

"There are rumors of war," Root talked out of turn. "I have heard of it. The seers of the King dream of it. But," he fought to still his tongue, "tell me..."

"More than dreams. Battles have been lost. There are raiders on the coast. Thieves in the high mesa. We are losing ground. Because of it, ill feelings grow between the King and the Abbess."

"But I-"

"You must understand," Palgrave interrupted sternly. "Accusations have been made. Some implied. Others couched in twisted phrases. It is said the abbey has lost its hallowed place, that its magic falters. The abbey in its turn accuses the King. They say a monarch who scorns the blessings of the Rose has opened the land to evil."

"But what have I done?" Root insisted. "I saw her once, went to her."

"No one may touch a sister of the Rose! By doing so, and by writing this impassioned nonsense, you have made of yourself a suspect."

"Suspected of what, Master?"

"Of murder!"

###

Fross had stood in the presence of the Abbess once before, to learn that her work had fallen below the standards of the Rose. Of that encounter Fross remembered most the fear that had gripped her. The Abbess's pale blue eyes seemed filled with many things, but understanding was not among them. Fross had tried to improve her work, but the runic symbols she used were unpopular, and the painful dreams from which they came drew suspicion rather than sympathy.

This time, there could be but one reason for the interest of the Abbess in one so lowly, so often forgotten and ill regarded. Fross's hands trembled.

"Come closer," the Abbess demanded. "You don't expect an old woman to hear you mumble from half a league away. Closer!" When Fross complied, the Abbess stood, rising from a seat of royal appointment and dimension to further close the distance between them. In her right hand the Abbess held a curled staff, but she did not rest her weight upon it, and though more than one of the Abbess's footfalls seemed unsteady, Fross felt only the approach of weighted authority.

"How is it the boy saw you?" asked the Abbess Delafael. "The first time... how came he into your chambers?"

Unable to look into the eyes of the Abbess, Fross focused on a trinket about the old woman's neck, an amulet. Though crude in workmanship, it was rumored to be a focus of power, a gift given long ago by a young mage. Engraved about a circle of bronze, the iconography of the amulet revealed a book being opened in stages. At first the book lay closed within its binding straps. Next the straps appeared loosed, and in the icons to follow the book opened, stage-by-stage, until its knowledge lay full exposed. More than a symbol, the amulet bore testimony to the handiwork of a mage who had created in this one periapt a focus to redouble the powers of the Rose.

"Are you attending to what we say?" asked another voice. It startled Fross and she looked up involuntarily. "You heard the Abbess. Answer quickly."

Until that voice, she had not recognized the one standing in shadow behind the throne. To face the Abbess held terrors enough, to face Lady Beddoes as well brought words tumbling from her lips.

"It was innocent," Fross assured them, "and not in my quarters." She stuttered, knowing how damning her faltering voice must seem, the first pleading step on the road to an acknowledgment of sin.

"The day, the hour!" said Beddoes. She was a lieutenant to the Abbess, having risen to Administrator after the murders began.

"The festival in the spring," said Fross. "He came to my tent...."

"On the grounds of the Palace!" Lady Beddoes shouted. Her face was flushed with blood. Turning to the Abbess, she said, "I cannot keep them safe if this fool opens her tent to the devil!"

"How did he pass the guards?" asked the Abbess more calmly. Her voice was closer and coarser than Beddoes'. It needed neither anger nor impatience to threaten.

"Continue, young sister!" Beddoes demanded. "I am charged to make the abbey secure, and I shall not fail because of you."

Fross hesitated. She knew that to be a mistake. But how does one describe innocence?

"I know not what he expected," Fross said, "but I seemed to startle him. His actions were... I mean, as suddenly as he entered he fell to his knees, and for long moments thereafter would not look up." She could picture the moment as clearly as if it were happening before her now.

"As he knelt there," Fross continued, "something in his manner calmed me. I saw no need to cry out."

"Was it then he assaulted you?" asked the Abbess Delafael.

Fross cringed at the word "assaulted." Why could they not believe her? She fought to calm her spirit, and by that means show the truth of her words.

"Is he not a deformed beast?" hissed Lady Beddoes.

Ignoring the comment, Fross went on.

"In time," she said, "I too knelt. Mother Abbess, he was unlike any man for whom I have worked a blessing. His attention, even his eyes, downcast as they were, focused upon me, and upon me alone." Once again she hesitated, but this time it was not out of fear. She was trying to remember precisely.

"When he looked up, he kissed me. It was barely a touch. Quick and foolish. But in it lay something more. I could feel it. A commitment. It held there in the air between us and concerns me still."

"Now he pens impassioned words," said the Abbess, "and sends them winging to you by some vile magic."

And takes back my answers through the same arcane abilities, Fross thought. With eyes closed but for a moment, she recalled the winged flurry of a parchment opening upon her bed, saw in her memory how it folded in upon itself once more, bearing her few appended words, only to vanish as it flew toward the window of her cell. By her few penned notes she had replied, "you are a mad and foolish man," but with what gentle diplomacy her skills with language could allow.

"He is no threat," Fross assured them.

"And are you so assured of that?" Lady Beddoes scolded.

"How could he be?" Fross asked. Then, as the thought occurred to her, when she felt it reinforced by the silence of those before her, her heart

all but stopped. When her mind touched upon the recent events, she said, "You cannot think he is the one!"

"Our rules are strict, and for reasons beyond mere chastity," said the Abbess. "This boy who gained a foothold in your heart has won by that sorcery a foothold in my abbey. He uses it to stalk our corridors and--"

"No!" interrupted Fross. "You are wrong."

"We think not," said lady Beddoes. She and the Abbess turned to one another, speaking freely as though Fross were no longer in the room. "This boy," Beddoes continued, "could he prove an intrigue devised by the King? Could the enmity between Sovereign and Sisters have gone so far?"

"To murder us?" the Abbess asked. "Find the sense in such a plot, Beddoes."

"The cripple is known to be an apprentice of the King's mage, Palgrave."

"I know Palgrave, Lady. Neither the King of Aranwae, nor kings higher still could persuade him to harm us. But the King?" She stopped to reflect.

"He was a boy," said Fross, "a kind boy." The women before her had ceased to listen.

"Perhaps this," the Lady Beddoes went on, "His Majesty will cleanse us. That is his thought." She grew excited at the revelation. "Then, when we are few and pure, he will save us from the Beast. What undying loyalty the King must then expect in return!"

"And you see the boy as the King's agent?" the Abbess countered.

"If he is a boy at all," said Beddoes.

"Unlikely thoughts, Lady Beddoes, but continue the investigation," the Abbess directed.

Fross fought to look up. She tried to bring words of courage and innocence to the fore, but it was no use. The Abbess spoke before Fross could find her tongue.

"Through you a corridor has opened up," said the Abbess. "It matters not the hand behind the deed. This contact has allowed the Beast within these walls. Even now it preys upon us. You have given the enemies of Aranwae a chance to strike the first blow. Answer me this: have you given yourself to him?"

Tears met Fross's cheeks. They startled her, as did the sudden strike of brass upon wood. Someone was pounding upon the doors to the chamber.

The sound was a deep reverberation, raising dust from the planks at her feet. Behind Fross, thick doors pulled back. Light rushed in around a dark form. A voice followed.

"There is another!" The words came as ice. The mailed fist that had struck the door rose in salute to the Abbess as its owner entered the room.

"Another murder!" The Abbess appeared to stumble backward, catching herself as she reached the throne. "Were the guards not doubled, the supplicants ordered to abstain from sleep?"

"Who this time?" asked Lady Beddoes. She glanced menacingly at Fross.

"It was the Lady Valana," said the warrior. "Like the others."

Fross recognized the voice. Here stood Seton, the abbey's Captain-at-Arms.

"No trace of her remains," Seton finished, "neither body nor blood."

"And you, you are unharmed?" Beddoes asked, her voice gone soft, suddenly colored by concern.

"It was hours past and we knew nothing until morning. The son of Lord Torvil stood post outside her cell. He would have graduated on the morrow. The Lady Valana blessed his helm and gauntlets days passed. Of his remains there is evidence."

Fross made the sign of the Order without thinking. She prayed without knowing what else to do.

"He was opened?" whispered Lady Beddoes.

"Worse than those before."

"Captain, was there anything else?" asked the Abbess. "Any sign?"

Seton opened a hand. From it tumbled a flower. Turning her eyes, Fross saw a rose, a blossom not yet aged a single day.

"Like the others," Seton repeated.

"No threat is he, this young man?" said the Lady Beddoes accusingly, focusing her anger upon Fross. Her voice approached a frantic pitch. "The Torvils' support of the abbey is well known. This is a double blow! Was our reputation so in danger before this boy happened upon your tent? This creature that claims you and dares to touch his lips to yours!"

###

Root looked to Palgrave, his mind racing. "The best knights of the realm train at the abbey. All fear their Captain-at-Arms. How could anyone—"?

"Slip into the cell of a sister without being noticed," Palgrave interrupted. "Perhaps as easily as they might enter a tent under guard. And the Beast has already killed one Captain-at-Arms."

Root dropped his gaze.

"Yes, and by your dalliance you have become a suspect in murder. Did you lose all sense that night, all manner of reason?"

"You must let me go to her, Master." Root's voiced quavered. Sweat rolled down his cheeks.

"I *must* do nothing! Root, by the King's order I am to turn you over to his Guard. Further, I must determine how you committed these crimes, and which enemy seduced you to commit them."

"I take money for nothing," Root said proudly.

"Many do," said Palgrave. "And there are other seductions. King Leopold, unlike his father, is not known for reasoned judgment, or the best temper. There are those who would betray him for less.

"The true murderer is laughing even now," the old mage continued, "and you have provided the means for his amusement." Then came the question. "You love her, this little sister?"

At last Root looked up, so frightened the shadows swam before him in a blur.

"More than my life, Master. More than magic."

"Then we have no time to waste, neither you for your love, nor me for my...King. We go to the abbey."

###

Five days into the journey, Root felt his magic dying. It waned like strength itself wanes after the exertion of many miles.

His crippled legs no longer skimmed magically across the glitter of streams, nor did he rush in quick steps down open paths. He walked, painfully, on the stumps of legs the worst beggar might endure.

The weight of an oversized pack drew him down. Of its contents he had been kept deliberately ignorant.

Ahead, Palgrave moved as a flicker of shadows. A demon's black wings fluttered, closed into nothingness, and were gone. So it was that the old mage traveled.

"Master," Root asked at one resting point, breathless from his struggle to crest a rise, "why this route? The abbey lies two days east, closer by horseback."

"Closer still by certain magic," said Palgrave, "as you are aware."

"If I could send myself, I would do so. Is that what you wish to see? Are you testing me?"

Palgrave rose in a dark shape, and Root threw up his hands to ward off the coming blow. But words alone came, and they proved less than harsh.

"How often you forget to address me properly," Palgrave chided, then more seriously, "Your missives have done damage enough, but if we arrive unprepared the danger will have grown beyond reckoning. A test? No. This journey is a preparation. You need to harden your body against certain trials, and I must consider an old spell, one I have not revisited since my youth. No, if you love this little sister of the stolen kiss, hold that in mind and follow me."

Another day into the journey and Root could neither ease his tortured muscles nor conjure water for the burning of his throat. He stumbled to a halt.

"Is that all the strength you have?" asked Palgrave. The old mage floated down, graver than shadows, his black wings blotting out the sun.

"All I have?" Root gasped. "No, Master. I'll walk. Is there... water in the pack?"

"Good. Then you have done as I commanded and not looked within the pack. But go ahead, Root, see now if you can discern what lies within."

Root fought the urge to protest. He closed his eyes. Though the pack lay magically shielded, he worked to penetrate the barrier. He sensed metal. Wrapped in padding lay the edge of a blade. He perceived more: ringlets of steel and a circle that brought to mind the shape and weight of a shield. Of water, his thoughts found none, and finding none, his knees buckled. Root sank to the ground, the fire in his throat coming alive with every breath.

Talons closed upon Root's shoulders.

"Come, don't give up. Another step, boy, and we're there."

The claw dug in. His feet left the ground as a sharp pull took him skyward, as though a great bird of prey lifted him high. The sensation lasted forever, the pain in his shoulders more riveting than any fear of falling. Without warning, the earth reached up to claim him once again.

When Root opened his eyes, a blurred form stood before him. It was Palgrave, and the mage held a flask of water in his hands. Root took the proffered drink, downing it by half without thinking, or knowing anything beyond its welcome coolness. He managed a smile, a voiceless "thank you" for the much needed draught.

About them, the sun threw down curtains of light across the mesa known as Land's End. About a distant structure, the light coalesced into

rainbows of stained glass and faceted, crystal windows. Together stone and glass rose to the height of castle towers, and Root recognized the place at once though he had never before seen it.

"The abbey," Root said. Though his thirst had disappeared, he finished the flask's contents as he admired the structure in the distance. Here the air had thinned somewhat from their home in the lowlands, and Root found his quick breaths dizzying and insufficient. It took a moment to get used to.

But before that moment passed, he felt the stirring in his belly.

His eyes grew wide. Was this poison? He turned to Palgrave and saw the answer in his master's eyes. Not poison, but magic!

With his strength worn away by the journey, there was nothing Root could do to resist the power of the elixir.

"Yes, a cruel trick," said Palgrave, "but necessary."

The magic flowed within Root, moving about his limbs, in his lungs, pumping stronger than his heart until it filled him like a torrent. It ravaged him as a flood ravages the land, and what it left behind was not himself.

Root's hands went to his face. His cheeks felt rough and bearded as never before, but the lines were regular and strong. His nose had grown straight. His tongue probed teeth where before had been empty spaces. Hands and arms, though veined by middle age, were muscular.

Palgrave took Root by the hand, pulling him to his feet.

"Your name is Svehla, remember it," said Palgrave. His voice was strong with magic, a booming presence in Root's thoughts. "You are the King's Weapons Master, his envoy to the abbey. On your back you carry armor crafted for His Majesty's son. The Prince's metal is to be blessed by the sisters. With you comes the King's seal, to assure whatever payment the Abbess deems fitting."

"You've transformed me!" Root cried out. The sense of the new body overwhelmed him; the legs felt as stilts, the arms rough weights, and the clarity of vision resulted in a blessing no greater than stunning vertigo. Root fell to the ground, eyes closed, retching. But there was another aspect to the transfiguration, one more terrifying still. "My magic! You've taken it away!"

"Yes, but you have a sound body now," said Palgrave. "No one can recognize you as my apprentice, nor can you betray yourself through impetuous deeds."

"This body is old." Root wiped a calloused hand across his lips. "And sick."

"No," Palgrave explained, "you are stronger than ever before. I have given you the form of Ermoen Svehla, a man whose years have not slowed his sword. The sickness will pass."

"Return my magic!"

"I thought us past that minor point," said Palgrave. "Get used to the body, Root. Stand straight, like a warrior! Now listen. If asked, you may say the King has sent me to aid in their troubles. I will be along a day hence.

"You travel alone. The safety of the Prince cannot be jeopardized by the murders that have occurred at the abbey. As the King's Weapon's Master, you will take personal responsibility for training the prince in the ways of combat. It is a blessing alone you seek."

"Why did you trick me?" Root asked. He kept his voice firm, belying the betrayal he felt. Standing carefully, Root tried to brush the earth from his leggings, but his wrist bent back upon itself, as if in memory of the previous form.

"Stop that!" Palgrave warned. "Concentrate. Ah, you would never have agreed to this at my request. Believe otherwise and you do not know yourself."

"I would have taken a strong body," Root protested. "Not this... But why did you never tell me it was possible?" Straightening his wrist, Root turned toward the abbey, his anger forgotten, "May I go to her?" he asked.

"No! That is the one thing you must not do. Request of the Abbess the sister most experienced in blessing shields. If I am correct, there is a pattern to the deaths. I have learned the Lady Valana was taken but days ago. A practitioner of shield magic will be next."

"Am I to protect her?" asked Root. He stumbled forward as he tried to walk.

"I need you to observe, Root. I have chosen your guise carefully. Your appearance may delay the Beast's next move. And your request could inflame the Abbess into speaking freely about her feelings toward the Crown. That too we must know."

"You've made me a cursed spy." Root breathed deeply and looked out across the mesa, holding steady against the overwhelming brightness his new eyes beheld. "What about the Beast, this thing doing the murders. How do we kill it?"

"That problem lies at the end of many steps," Palgrave assured him. "There is a tool at the abbey, an old periapt of mine that could detect this creature in whatever guise it takes. But it is not mine to freely use, and its owner is as stubborn as you."

"I must see her," Root insisted, his meaning clear.

Palgrave came closer, making his presence a threat.

"Approach your little sister and you endanger both her and yourself. You would do me no good at all. The King's men search for you even now, as do agents from the abbey. Do you expect me to mislead them forever?"

"You told them I ran away?"

"Yes, boy. I gave them magic to lead them and potions to dispel your power. Pray for my success against the Beast, for that is your survival."

With that, Root's master unfurled his dark wings, banishing the sun. With the entire world consumed by shadow, Root felt his heart must burst. Then the shadows and the sensation were gone.

###

After the departure of his master, Root walked toward the abbey. It was miles away, but he needed every step to get used to the new body. At least the pack he bore seemed lighter, his shoulders more at ease with its weight. He concentrated to keep from bending low in the posture he had known since birth.

As the abbey grew before Root, across the distance came the sound of a drawbridge lowering. There followed the step of disciplined horses, of cavalry crossing the moat. He watched as a glitter of armored horsemen left the abbey, then angled toward him at a gallop.

Root stopped to watch, fighting to keep his head high and his shoulders broad. By the time he had steadied himself, the cavalry was upon him, their lance points shimmering in the sun. Root felt the heat of the horses as they circled within inches. He watched helplessly as sharpened steel swept to within a handbreadth of his cloak, then closer still.

Root raised an open hand, but fear kept his tongue from cooperating. The lead rider was already shouting at him.

"You weren't seen, I say! Who are you?" The voice fell down from a massive form, a soldier as wide as a stream and taller than a forest tree, or

so it seemed from Root's position. The man's horse was a giant of the Friesian breed. Both horse and rider wore plumed helms.

"I asked you a question, old man," said the horseman. "What are you doing on the mesa, alone?"

The words hung in the air between Root and the man, a gruff challenge of sorts. Trying to maintain his composure, Root forced himself to act the part Palgrave had set for him.

"Captain-at-Arms, lower that lance!" Hoping he had guessed correctly, Root filled his voice with what authority he could, yet the lance point loomed closer still. He looked up, squinting against the sun, but taking in the measure of the other horsemen. "I have no need of boys to guard my back, as you seem to."

An astonished laugh escaped the warrior. He appeared to relax slightly without letting down his guard. "You'll come with us, old man," he commanded.

"As your guest!" Root insisted. He tried to read the warrior's reaction, but the man's eyes remained hidden within the shadows of his helmet. Suddenly the lance point rose toward Root's throat, so close the random movements of the warrior's horse threatened to bury the blade in Root's flesh.

"Guests do not come unannounced," said the warrior.

"Then I announce myself," Root said, growing comfortable with his defiance. With that he dropped the pack from his shoulders. Reaching to unpend it, he spilled its contents across the ground. Shining mail and a mirrored shield caught the eyes of the soldiers now surrounding him.

The young horsemen drew closer, anxious to see the magnificent armor, highly polished, and with it the sword and scabbard of a prince. Root fought to keep his own surprise from showing. Instead, he pointed to the spot where, half covered by the shield, lay the dragon-emblazoned circlet of the King's Seal. He brought it into the sun.

"Then it's a King's mission brings you to us?" asked the warrior.

"Aye, and you'll honor it," Root said. Placing the seal on its chain about his neck, Root gestured to the rest. "Have your men gather it. Captain-at-Arms, I ride with you."

The leader lowered his lance. It was not acceptance of Root, but a mere pause for thought. A moment later he reached down with an armored hand toward Root. It was then Palgrave's apprentice trembled, for he had never before mounted a horse. What he had seen others do, he imitated with his strong new frame. Though the ascent proved clumsy, no one laughed.

"You seem to know me," said the plumed rider, "I am Seton, Captain-at-Arms for the abbey. "What should I call you?"

"As the King's envoy. You may call me Lord. Lord Svehla."

Seton stopped his horse. He gave a gruff laugh, as though not certain how to respond. Turning in the saddle, he locked his gaze with Root's: "I've not held my post long, it's true. But I would have expected the King's Weapon's Master to arrive on more than his shoes."

"Then the mission would hardly be a quiet one."

"Have you come to aid us in the present troubles?"

"I've come to aid my King and his son. The Prince is about to complete his training in the arts of war. This armor, once blessed by the sisters, is to be his father's gift. Now let us be on, you've given me grief enough for one hot afternoon."

Seton coughed and spat, cutting off the last of Root's words with the effort.

"The Prince must train here for such a blessing," said Seton. "That is the way of the Rose."

"Under the current circumstances, that would be impossible."

With those words, a silence fell between them. The sun pressed hot upon their backs and Root could hear the armor of the entourage jingling as they moved. No, it was more than the sound of steel jostled by the gait of the horses. The closer they drew to the abbey, the more they approached a sound of conflict, the cacophony of battle.

Root tried to look around the massive shoulders of the warrior before him. Certainly, Seton showed no signs of concern regarding the clash of

steel now so evident as they approached the abbey walls. None of the others spared a glance toward the sound.

A battle? No, for no voices cried out in anger or in pain.

Whatever it was, it seemed to emanate from the depths of a moat around the abbey, the great trench across which the drawbridge had been lowered.

At last, Root could stand his own ignorance no longer. "That sound," he asked, "what is it?"

Seton grunted, as though surprised by the question.

"Is the palace so far away as that?" the warrior asked. "You come to give us orders, but know so little." He said nothing more, for the noise had become a din and Root could barely hear the horses as they clattered across the drawbridge.

Below, Root caught sight of what at first appeared to be a stream, a channel of moving water filling the moat from side to side. It was brilliant with reflection, difficult to discern. Yet dust rose out of this water, as did the clash of metal on metal.

"By the gods!" Root exclaimed, for it was not water they crossed, but a procession of weapons.

Close below, a wall of bows took aim. Held by invisible hands, they let loose their arrows. The bolts flew, thick as flies, toward suits of chain mail

long emptied of human form. Between these adversaries a score of spears huddled in a defensive square.

Everywhere, things that cut, chopped, or fired deadly bolts moved against one another in an animated dance of death. Axes crashed upon helms. Swords led charging lines of hammers and morning stars. Glaives and maces met the rush, while behind them shields clattered into line.

Nowhere rose a single hand, for all that spoke of human flesh was the white of bone lying low in the swirling dust.

By the time the riders reached the portcullis to the abbey, Root realized he had forgotten to breathe.

"... and it's been that way longer than any man can say," said Seton. Suddenly, Root realized he had not been paying attention. "Swords and such, defeated by weapons blessed at the abbey, all thrown down there to fight amongst themselves. Quite a story, eh?"

"Cursed weapons," Root whispered, "eternally vengeful. I'd forgotten the tales. This is my first opportunity to see the truth of it."

Seton let out a weary sigh. "They can't defeat one another; that's the trick, you see. It makes them all the fiercer when they try. When something they can injure falls down there, well... It isn't something to think about.

###

As they crossed into the abbey, the sound of battle vanished, shut out by a magic Root could feel pass over him. Within the walls a vast space opened, a courtyard where several communities of tents had been established. Each section lay joined to the next by tiled paths, while about the whole rose the walls of the abbey, barriers lifting upward to such heights they would have blotted out the sun, if not for the adornments of colored glass set thickly in the battlements above. This was no building into which they rode, but a magnificent castle. At the center of the acres wide complex stood the cathedral building, the abbey proper.

Each tent about the courtyard bore a flag. Each flag represented a noble family, a rich merchant, or a knight of Aranwae. Here those who sought the blessings of the abbey lived out the weeks or months required to complete their training and to receive for their weapons a blessing.

At the center of the court they rode past men breathing heavily from practice combat. There was blood on the ground. Backs straightened as they heard the sound of Seton's voice.

"That's where your prince should be," Seton said low. "Risking life and limb, training for the right to receive a blessing." He raised his voice to those assembled. "Back to it, you nobles!"

"Call out the Master of the Hall," Root said, ignoring the comments. "Though my visit is to be secret, I shall require adequate accommodations."

"To the Abbess first, Lord Svehla."

Root swallowed hard. "No. No need to disturb the Mother Superior at such a moment. Tomorrow is enough."

"No disturbance. She awaits."

With a gentle movement of his spurs, Seton wheeled away from the tents and toward a portico. Beneath an ornate roof, a chair rested upon a triple dais. By all appearance, it was a throne, a magnificent seat worked in gold and set with precious stones.

Upon this place of honor sat a woman who seemed ill fitted to such opulent surroundings.

Simple in appearance, the Abbess wore no more than a robe of faded samite. Its hood protected her eyes from the sun. What Root could see of her face appeared worn, as ancient as that of his master. Her fingers bore no rings. Her feet were adorned by sandals.

Aside from the throne, the single symbol of her office lay in a curled staff she held in her right hand, but about her throat hung a bit of jewelry catching the sun. The piece seemed worn and unpolished, an amulet of brass.

Seton removed his helmet, a gesture of respect before the Abbess. He introduced Root by the identity that had been forced upon the young mage.

"Svehla," said the Abbess Delafael, as though greeting an old acquaintance, "have you come to aid me in these days of trial?" Her voice rose like a burst of flame from a long-burning pyre.

"No, I'm afraid. Not I," said Root, dismounting.

Heartbeat by heartbeat, the silence between them grew unbearable.

"Speak up!" commanded Delafael. "I know you can make these old ears ring if you want."

"For the aid you seek," Root said at last and loudly, "the King sends his personal magician. Palgrave. Has he not arrived?"

"Palgrave." The Abbess repeated the name, her left working at the amulet, as though by that action she were comforted. "When?"

"Soon," Root answered. "As for myself, I come to you in secret and alone." He opened his hands in the traditional way. "For this poor appearance, I offer what apologies I can. The truth of my words lies in the armor and weapons of the Prince, and in the seal of the King, which I have carried with me for many days. I seek a blessing for His Majesty's son."

"Approach us, Lord Svehla," said the Abbess. Impatient, she droned through the expected formula. "You come as envoy to His Majesty, King Leopold of Aranwae, our royal sovereign. The abbey serves Aranwae well, etcetera, etcetera."

"Aye," Root agreed. "In over three centuries no force of arms, gathered under the banner of Aranwae and boasting men trained and weapons blessed within these walls, has met its equal on the field of battle."

"Then you know we cannot accept your plea. Go back to your King."

Root smiled. His natural arrogance brought more comfort to the role than he had expected. Even as he fought to keep his head from bowing too low, he hoped the gesture came across as dismissive.

"I shall return having fulfilled the orders of my King," said Root.

"How foolish we would look," returned the Abbess, "were the Prince to fall in tournament or battle, wielding weapons blessed by this incomparable institution." The Abbess waved a hand as if to dismiss the matter entirely. "If we cannot train him, we cannot be certain he is worthy of the blessing."

"I am the guarantor of the prince's training! This abbey of yours has not outgrown its loyalty to Aranwae, nor to those who rule its lands!" Root's voice seemed to echo along the walls; at least he was certain the old woman heard him.

"There is no need of threats, Svehla. We know our loyalties, yet within these walls, my voice is law! What you ask cannot be done, unless the Prince submits to the training."

"Under the current conditions, you cannot guarantee the Prince's safety. Would you put the future ruler of Aranwae in danger?" asked Root. "Must I report to His Majesty that neither the spirit of consideration nor conciliation can be found here any longer?"

"I abide no insults!" the Abbess returned. With her staff she cut an emphatic swathe through the air.

"How do you explain," Root continued, "your insistence that the prince train here, while your own sisters and those awaiting blessings are murdered by an agent unknown?"

Silence. The Abbess eased back into her throne. What followed came as stroke and counterstroke in a battle of words lasting well over an hour. Root had never met another as obstinate as himself. She rarely gave in and yet steered the conversation with each acquiescence. By the time a compromise seemed achievable, Root realized he had enjoyed the match.

"We have no desire to put the Prince at risk," the Abbess said at last, "nor to widen the rift between us."

"Then let us agree on this," Root said. He made his voice friendly, confidential. "Bless the weapons and armor. Please the king in this regard, that the prince receives so great a gift as only the abbey can provide. Afterwards, once the matter of the intruder is settled, the Prince shall come here, to you, for his training."

"It would set a rude precedent," said the Abbess.

"He is the future ruler of Aranwae," Root reminded her. "If you cannot heal the rift between yourself and the present, it might be best to lay a balm against future wounds. It is said the King is not as his father was. It can be expected the young prince too will be his own man."

"I will have it in writing," the Abbess agreed, "and signed with the king's seal. Let it state that the Prince shall receive no quarter for his

status. He shall prevail in his training or lose all right to wield a weapon blessed at the Abbey of the Rose."

"Done."

"Now," said the Abbess, "share with me the boon you seek, so that I might consider the appropriate blessing."

"Understood, My Lady, but...." Root hesitated. He remembered Palgrave's words, but if he were to suffer this chance, if he were to face death, then he must be assured of his love's safety. "I must choose the sister for the blessing."

Delafael once again clasped a hand about her amulet. "It is not unheard of to do so, still...." She sighed. It was a strange sound, weary, and threatening all at once. "Forgive me, in these times, my suspicions are often too great. The best of our quarters shall be yours for the night. Tomorrow, you shall choose: a blessing worthy of Aranwae's prince and future king."

Root knelt before the Abbess and bowed low. He smiled. For a brief moment all the cares of the world lifted from his shoulders, for he could recall the features of his love with great clarity and knew that on the morrow he would be blessed by a vision of those features once again.

###

"Do you love him?" The Abbess's question was there still; Fross had never answered it, neither to the Abbess nor to herself. Fross knew hunger

and joy, sorrow and hope; she knew the discipline of work and the comfort of sleep. Many things she knew, but love was not among them. If asked why she answered the boy's letters, she could not have answered.

Fross organized the paints and brushes she used to work her blessings. This act calmed her. About her lay her cell, a simple compartment of stone. It held a straw mattress, some shelving, and a table. Its largest open space lay near a window, a rough opening that caught the day's sun from mid-morning through dusk. It was here that Fross worked.

Some sisters at the abbey claimed specialties, focusing their gifts on swords or shields. Some worked metal, specializing in sorts of armor such as mail, or in crested helms as opposed to the smooth style favored in Aranwae. Their arts included jewel work and embroidery. Fross knew her own calling to be far less specific. Her only skill lay in dreams and in the small clay pots she placed carefully on the shelving above her cot. At dusk Fross's prayers would rise up, departing her still form to brush past the pots on their way toward heaven. In the night, the prayers returned with dreams.

Each morning, Fross would sketch out the images proffered by these dreams, considering how to give the best blessing she could. Often, knowing the limitations of her art, Fross felt sorry for those assigned to her. It mattered not if they were sons of lesser nobles, or merchants whose wealth was not so great. No matter the client, Fross did her best, adorning

their weapons with icons that could heal wounds, quicken the blood, or banish fear. Yet so often she heard of the failure of her art.

At times good word would return to her. While the magic she worked failed to bring authority in battle, it often saved the life of the wielder at a critical moment, as if the blessing had been fashioned for that moment alone. A weak gift at best.

Against tradition, Fross preferred to have the man receiving his blessing kneel before her. She would ask that he hold the weapon or shield upon which she worked. In this closeness, there came a sense of things, an appropriateness as to how best the icons should be placed.

Over the last few weeks, a certain image had occupied Fross's dreams, a cross emblazoned within a circle of runes. With each night the design grew. It flowered with new colors, took on intricacies of which Fross had little understanding, but whose images she could not shake from her thoughts upon awakening. The design became an obsession, and Fross went so far as to sketch out the image, to plan for its use on a sword or shield when the occasion arose.

If nothing else, it pushed from her mind the young man who had come to her in the spring. Let her mind wander for a moment and it filled with memories of that encounter. She could remember the look of wonder on his half-hidden face. It was more than she could understand, and the feelings

that accompanied the memory were more than a Sister of the Rose should have to bear.

Another image occupied her of late, not in prayers, but in the depths of her routine. The image would come as she prepared paints, or worked to clean the grease pits in the kitchen, as was her current penance. It was the amulet of the Abbess, that circle of opening books that had more to say by its iconography now than ever before. The image frightened her, but Fross could not say why. She knew only that the truth of it lay as near as daylight and as easy to see, if only her eyes might glance in the right direction.

###

Root awoke with a start, angry that the sudden pounding at the door should be so impatient. He hobbled from the bed, his new body bending to the self-image he had known since birth. Only as his thoughts unclouded did he untwist wrist and arm, then straighten the strong back of his new form. He was still unused to standing tall.

When Root pulled back the bolt, it was to stare into the sullen visage of Seton. Behind the warrior stood two guards, no smile among the three of them.

Making his apologies, Root dressed as quickly as he could. They were to escort him through the abbey as he sought a sister to bless the armor of the Prince. It did not seem a welcome duty for any of them, nor was Root's search immediately fruitful.

As morning drew into afternoon, Seton's air of nervous impatience rose toward the breaking point.

"Lord Svehla," Seton said pointedly, "I have other duties."

"I am not unaware of your responsibilities, nor of the difficulties facing the abbey," Root said. "Please, attend to your duties. You have men to train, a night watch to organize. Your men can escort me as easily as you."

"I'm afraid that is not possible," came the grave response. "I have my orders."

They walked past another row of richly appointed rooms. Within awaited sisters dressed in silks, their arms wound about with bands of gold. Tapestries and cabinets adorned the walls. Root had not realized the sheer size of the abbey, nor the richness of the sister's quarters, nor that an entire day might be required to meet each of the sisters who worked their blessings in these halls.

Before each room, on the wall opposite the cell, a small altar had been installed in a niche. At some prayed young knights in robes of embroidered silk. At others, older men, some whose rings and circlets of gold marked them as traders, sat cross-legged on the stones. At still others, fierce warriors awaited blessings earned in battle and awarded by their sovereign lords. To a man they appeared veterans of battle, yet over all hung an uneasy silence, a quiet as if on the field of battle before the first charge has begun.

Root turned to the Seton.

"You are responsible for the training of all these supplicants?" he asked.

"Today being the eighth day, they pray. Tomorrow they train." Seton paused, considering his next words carefully. "A blessed weapon must be carried by a strong arm. The abbey will not be shamed by anything less."

Root stopped and looked directly into the warrior's eyes, challenging him.

"The Prince is the equal of any of these," said Root.

Frowning, Seton turned away without a word.

"What time of day does the Beast strike?" Root asked, thinking a change of subject the wisest course.

"Evening, more than day," Seton answered. "When it wants."

"I see fear in their eyes," Root observed. He gestured toward the supplicants.

"That fear rests as deeply in the eyes of the sisters," Seton replied, "had you bothered to look. Lord Svehla, today you have been honored to meet our greatest practitioners, yet you pay them little heed."

The concern in Seton's voice troubled Root. It might all too quickly turn to suspicion. But he knew of no way to find Fross without taking an even greater risk. He coughed, feigning a Royal's impatience.

"I confess, these rooms, so richly appointed, are not what I expected. They do not fit the abbey's reputation."

"Did you expect them all to sleep on straw beds in narrow cells?"

Smiling, Root knew Seton had delivered to him exactly the phrase he needed.

"Perhaps not. But how can these sisters, those we have seen in their lavish quarters, dressed in silks, offer up their attention to prayer, to the rigors of their art? No, I expect those who inhabit the barest of quarters to practice the purest form. Take me to them."

"My Lord!" said Seton, incredulous. "This blessing is for a future king."

"I know that, Seton. Take me where I say. Have your men bring the Prince's weapons and armor. I shall stand guard over the poorest of your sisters and pray to aid in the blessing myself."

###

Near day's end, Fross lit a candle so she might continue sketching at her desk. Soon after came the opening and closing of doors. At first it seemed distant. Voices and the sound of feet joined the disturbance, until it became clear a squad of soldiers was making its way hurriedly down the corridor. Her heart leapt, the worst occurring to her, that another murder had come close upon the last. But this was different.

Going to the door, she opened it a crack. Where she would normally have had to peer into darkness, torches wavered and the uniforms of the

abbey guard glittered crimson and silver in the light. The voice of a stranger boomed down the hall, impatient and earnest.

"No, not this one," said the anxious man. "Let me see the next."

The abbey's Captain-at-Arms stepped before the man, blocking his way. "May I respectfully suggest that you will not find what you want here, My Lord." Seton's voice brimmed with impatience.

"No, no," the man insisted. Fross saw the stranger brush past Seton. He reached out a hand, as if to brush away the darkness, then hurried forward.

The movement frightened Fross. She closed and bolted the door, hurrying to sit behind her desk. Though her heart beat quickly, she was uncertain as to the cause.

A moment later and the door pulled back against its bolt. A fist pounded on the wood. Fross heard the rush of feet and voices just beyond her cell.

"She's here. This one. Seton, have her come out." The voice held excitement, as though it sensed a long-sought treasure close at hand.

Nervous, Fross returned to door. There was something in the stranger's voice, some quality that frightened and comforted her at once. Was it someone she knew, someone from home? There was so little she remembered from childhood. The cottage of her birth remained clear in

memory, in the dreams of peace that only children know, but even the parents who had apprenticed her to the abbey seemed distant, irresolvable.

Fross heard Seton sigh and say, "My Lady, if you would be so kind as to open your cell."

Trembling, she did so.

Torchlight danced across the faces, but Fross recognized only Seton. Beside him stood the stranger, a man powerful of build, yet older and somewhat bent by the years.

"It is you," the old man said, smiling. His eyes took her in from head to foot and back again.

"Do I know you?" Fross asked. She backed away. Her eyes caught the steady gaze of Seton as he drew his sword. She saw confusion cross the old man's face, as if he had ignored his better senses or overstepped some boundary he could not now re-cross. Following their officer, the others in the party unsheathed their blades.

They formed into a circle about Fross's cell.

"He's come to her," said one man.

"As the Abbess said he might," ventured another.

"No," Root turned, forgetting to hold himself straight. His head canted sideways as he spoke. "This is the sister I choose. What's wrong with you? Seton?"

Seton said nothing. He lunged forward, his sword aimed squarely at the older man's belly. Everything happened more quickly than Fross could comprehend. She gasped, moving backwards into shadow.

The target of Seton's thrust skipped to the side with a speed that belied his age. The warrior's sword missed, clattering against stone, but Seton came on. He grasped Root, pulling him forward as he once again drew back his sword. The two men embraced in a deadly struggle.

It was then that something shifted in Fross's sight, as when smoke is dispelled by a breeze, yet what she saw she could not believe. On that instant, the old man became Seton and Seton the old man. As they turned, grappling and twisting, it became impossible to decide which was which.

###

It was not Root's magic that affected the transformation. In the instant the struggle began, Root recognized the signature of his master's spell. The same trick that had given him Svehla's form reawakened, molding flesh and bone more quickly than rain molds ice. But this time it affected the man holding him as well. Breathing hard, both Seton and Root pulled back, one from the other. Now holding the sword, the image of Svehla dropped it as if in fright. The image of Seton turned to run, while his men stood unnerved by the sudden transformation.

A confusion of voices filled the corridor.

"Get him!" screamed the image of Svehla. His bare hands shook with rage. "It's a trick. That is the Beast!"

By the time Root reached the courtyard, he was covered in sweat. Angry, confused voices trailed him. He could see torches flickering closer through the abbey's corridors. Ahead lay the tents of the supplicants, some lit by candles.

Confused, turning into darkness along the edge of the courtyard, Root continued into the night. A body intercepted him. He blundered headlong into the approaching guard, knocking the man from his feet. Root too tumbled to the ground.

"Sir, what is it?" the man asked as he stood quickly, helping Root to his feet. "What's going on back there?" The terror in the guard's voice grew as his own hands changed before him, as he looked up to see in Root's face a mirror image of his own.

Desperation his only strength, Root brought his knee into the guard's abdomen. His hands came down over the guard's helmet, the pain jarring Root's forearms as the man went down. There on the ground lay the image of Seton. His own guise, Root had no doubt, was now that of the guard.

Keeping away from the tents, Root moved swiftly along the walls of the abbey, keeping to shadow. Hands and heart both sought a dark corner, a niche, a close space into which he might draw himself up and hide forever.

At last he found what he was looking for, a rough area between two buttresses once erected to support a crumbling wall. By now the buttresses themselves were ancient, the space into which Root moved a long forgotten corner of dank walls and decaying leaves.

Moving too quickly for caution, Root was caught off guard when something gave beneath his feet. He fell. Emptiness swallowed him. He passed through a wall of air, a barrier holding back a stench that rose up as if from the throat of hell. Flailing, his hands caught at a tangle of rocks, root, and earth, but it could not stop him. The wind was knocked from his lungs by the fall.

When Root recovered sufficiently to gauge his position, he heard a rustle of movement in the dark. Peering ahead, he made out the shape of a crested helm, an artifact faintly aglow with magic fire. Around it danced scabbards from which swords without masters drew forth of their own volition.

The moat! Its stench washed over him, its sense of chaotic magic overwhelming.

The weapons closed the distance. As they approached, they hesitated, as if sensing Palgrave's magic about him and unsure of its strength. More weapons joined the advance. Fouchard forks and halberds swept forward from the darkness.

Ignoring scraped knees and bruised bones, Root turned to scramble back up the moat as quickly as he could. A clash of arms met the wall just below his feet. Rocks and wild vines provided foot and handholds. He made it safely back to the niche between the buttresses, and once there he huddled, breathing hard. Listening carefully, he could detect no pursuit from the denizens of the moat.

Root tried to think, to calm himself. But the abbey was alive with shouting voices. Twice, torches moved near his hiding place, close enough for the smoke to irritate his eyes, all but close enough to feel the heat.

In time, the voices died away; the torchlight faded. The sweat on Root's limbs grew cold, and the stone at his back grew colder still. He began to shiver.

"It is a sweet insanity." The words came as a whisper, the lips that spoke them within a handbreadth of Root's ear. A hand he could not see clamped across his mouth. Another, like a claw, grasped his throat as if to choke the life from him. Both met his struggles with unyielding strength.

"Settle, boy!" said the voice, and Root, recognizing the tones, relaxed his body into the clutches of the winged presence. The pressure vanished.

"Master, I'm sorry."

"Like always," Palgrave chided, "Still, you have some uses."

"I disobeyed you." Root's limbs trembled. He could not control them.

"Yes," said Palgrave. "You risked death, and not at my hands alone. You did it without a thought to your own safety. I underestimated you."

"Have I placed her in danger?" Root asked.

"No more than the danger faced by all the sisters. Still..." the voice raised, becoming as thunder between the two of them, "if you had done as I bid you!"

"Master, they will come."

Palgrave grasped Root roughly, drawing him into the courtyard, rushing him toward guards standing watch by the portico. Suddenly, Root found himself thrown at their feet. In the silence to follow, no one moved.

"They can't see you, Root. Nor me, nor can they hear us, for the moment. I gave you one spell to protect you. This is another."

Root looked up, the question formed by his startled features as clear as any words.

"Now that you have ruined the first course, this is the second."

Palgrave answered, drawing Root to his feet. They swept past the guards, moving on toward the abbey. "I had hoped to have a quiet moment with the Abbess tonight, but you have caused great confusion. In confusion there is opportunity."

"The Beast."

"Yes, Root. With your letters, you have given it one alibi, distracting the forces that might stop it. By this night's actions, you have done the same."

"Everyone is looking for me, for the form I have now."

"Your present form will pass in moments, Root, as will the change affecting Seton and the guard."

"I will return as I was? And my magic?"

"You will have Svehla's form and no magic," Palgrave said. "Attend. As long as they seek you, in whatever form, no one searches for the Beast. No one will be alert for something *other*, except us. Take me to the sister whose work in shields is best. If I am right, she is at risk."

Arguments and demands flowed naturally to Root's lips, but for once he held them back. "I know the way," was all he said.

Around the fringes of the courtyard, they moved at a brisk pace. The air rushed past, and the small fires before the tents became a dance of light. Then the darkness of the abbey engulfed them.

"Where?" Palgrave insisted, as though his demand would speed the way.

"Two levels up, Master. A richly appointed room. There will be guards, a supplicant before the door, a great warrior."

"Neither guards nor warriors have helped before. Move quickly!"

###

Fross snuffed out the last candle of the evening. She had sketched until it became impossible to focus, until the charcoal in her hand became a weight she could not bear. Runic symbols, curved shapes, notations to craft one image in yellow and another in blue, these filled her parchments.

The stranger and his struggle with Seton puzzled Fross. She had not been in the presence of evil, of that she was certain. No danger had presented itself. If anything, she sensed a search, a desperate quest ending at her door. Then came the struggle, the shape shifting, and the confused chase. She knew the Abbess and Lady Beddoes would make nothing good of it.

Fross lay down upon her mat, drawing its blanket to her chin. Her eyes were closed, her heart beating rapidly, and though she tried to sleep, the symbols she had been working appeared to harass her. They danced, each curving along an unseen orbit, coming closer, only to fall away into darkness.

The dance continued, heightening in intensity. Breath by breath, it became fiercer, unrelenting and insistent. When Fross tried to open her eyes, she could not. Though she tried to rise, her limbs refused.

Never before had the magic betrayed her, if a betrayal this was. Whatever the event, it overwhelmed her.

It then occurred to her. Was this the Beast? Was she under attack, to be spirited away to fates unknown? She tried to cry out, to wake, and to

move. But there was only the rise and fall of the images within her, as urgent in their press as if each pattern held the fate of the world.

###

Root moved quickly, for he had the memory of the previous day to guide his steps and the strength of Svehla's form to bound the many stairs. Palgrave followed, urging him on.

Soon they reached the third story of the Abbey, but here the flame in the sconces began to wane and gutter. The warriors keeping vigil before the rooms of the sisters lay still, seemingly asleep. Though their duty was to remain alert, an unaccountable torpor held them. When Root reached out to one of the men, Palgrave stopped him.

"Let them be," Palgrave said. "It is the sister we seek, she who blesses shields."

Root nodded. Before them the corridor turned through a series of arches, each darker than the last. As they made their way into the junction ahead, it came, a sickly thing, a stench as if from the depths of a charnel house.

Root paled. Something slammed him to the stones, brushing him aside as easily as a dragon might swat a toad, and in that instant the corridor erupted into a maelstrom of light. Sharp thrusts of energy flashed, there and gone again. It was lightning, wielded like a dagger, turned in the

air and slashed at enemies unseen. Of one thing Root was certain, Palgrave and the Beast were becoming acquainted.

As the opponents maneuvered, the stones of the corridor began to glow. Small bits of furniture burst into flame. Between the blows, weaving tendrils of a sickly, greenish light reached out for the walls. They snaked into the corridors as if searching for cover. A few more flashes of light and the tendrils were gone.

Before Root could collect himself, the battle was done. He saw Palgrave appear out of the smoke. His master's hands trembled, but though unsteady, Palgrave worked a spell to extinguish the flames left in the wake of battle. As the fire died, Palgrave collapsed to his knees.

"Is it dead?" Root asked, feeling helpless. Ahead, in the darkness, he heard a woman moan.

"The Beast is very much alive," Palgrave answered. "As am I." With a surge of strength, the mage regained his feet and swept on into the darkness ahead.

More by reflex than courage, Root stumbled after him. He searched within for a reserve of magic with which to strike the Beast, but Root's energies were still ensnared by Palgrave's restraining magic. He could do nothing until his master wished it.

As they reached the darkest part of the corridor, a reek of death met them, washed over them, and was gone.

Once more, the sound of a soft moan filled the corridor ahead. It was the Abbess. Root recognized her in the sudden light, for in the instant the stench passed, the sconces along the walls flared to life. He rushed to her, but before Root could touch the fallen form, he saw her pale blue eyes look right through him.

"She cannot see you," Palgrave whispered. "And she shall not, but on the next instant she shall see and hear me." At those words, Root held back, watching the Abbess gasp in surprise as Palgrave materialized before her.

"You are safe, My Lady." Carefully, Palgrave helped the Abbess to her feet, restored the curled staff to her shaking hand.

"Damn you, Palgrave," the Abbess said, her wits returning, "Kill it! The Beast is here. I tried to stop it—"

"Compose yourself, My Lady." Palgrave used his voice to work a calming spell. "The Beast has been driven off."

Root watched the Abbess reach out with an unsteady hand, as if to verify Palgrave's conclusion. "It wasn't in my power. Though I tried." She shook her staff for emphasis. "Your fought the Beast too? Ah, it's good to see you."

"My apologies for not announcing myself," Palgrave said. "I thought stealth might do well by the situation."

"This way, Palgrave. Lady Elliotcu is at hall's end."

Root followed the pair, but though the door to the Lady Elliotcu's cell stood open, the woman lay undisturbed upon her bed. The knight protecting her rested just inside the door, equally at ease.

"A sedative magic of some sort," Palgrave observed. "It seems to have taken most in this wing."

"We were together," said the Abbess, "on our way here. I knew the Beast's intent. It came to the abbey as Lord Svehla. So brazen! It has used one of us, worthless jade that she is, to breach our protections."

At those words, anger welled up within Root that he could barely control.

"There was a struggle with Seton," the Abbess continued. "The Beast was loose, and we came here to stop it. Lady Beddoes and the Captain-at Arms, they fell, one floor below. The sleep touched me, but I fought it... came here. Palgrave, I believe the Beast is stealing the powers of the sisters, taking them into its own strengths and form. Shields were the next... the next step. The Lady Elliotcu!"

"She is safe," Palgrave insisted. Again, he brought the power of calming to his words. "Forgive me, My Lady, but you must listen. The sleep spell will soon disperse. We have won a small victory, but we are too well matched to win with lightning bolts alone."

The Abbess backed away from Palgrave, shaking her staff. "Come at the last minute to tell me how you will solve this! Not a change in a stitch of

you, Palgrave. Your calming voice and arrogant ideas. I knew where the Beast would strike. Listen to me."

"Obviously, I knew as well, My Lady."

As Root watched, Palgrave reached out, and by a gentle touch took the Abbess's hand in his own, perhaps to redouble the influence of his words. She did not resist.

"My Lady, allow me an audience in secret, this evening. I have propositions, suggestions."

"Such as?"

"First, take no action against the girl, Fross. I have studied the matter, and I require her if I am to lure the Beast. Second, I need you to arrange a situation. The details can wait. Most importantly, I need the use of the amulet I once gave you."

Reaching to her throat, the Abbess found the comforting weight of the bronze periapt gone. She looked down, as if not believing the evidence of her touch.

"It was here. I wear it always!" She began to peer across the floor, as though the struggle had accidentally dislodged it. But Root saw his master's shoulders fall.

"The Beast has it," Palgrave said. "It *knew*, but how?"

"Look," said the Abbess as she stooped to retrieve something that had fallen behind the door to Lady Elliotcu's cell. A rose. "It's almost in full bloom, Palgrave. Does it mean the plan of the Beast is also?"

"Tell no one I am here," Palgrave said as the knight on the floor began to stir. "But tonight, we must plan. My Lady, the battle is far from won."

###

Root entered the niche behind the buttresses, the hiding hole he had found the previous night. Still in Svehla's form, but invisible, he had taken food from the kitchen to satisfy his hunger. While invisible, he had watched Fross sleep from the window of her cell. He saw only a dark form, restless on her cot, but the hours spent there satisfied a different kind of hunger. He longed to go to her, but knew the better of being an invisible suitor. Now, having lost track of the hour, he knew not whether he had missed his appointment with Palgrave.

"You are impossible," said an impatient, though familiar voice.

"So it has been said," Root agreed, using his hands to feel his way in the darkness. He moved to the corner where Palgrave awaited. "Did your meeting with the Abbess go well?"

"They never do," Palgrave said wearily. "After the incident in Fross's cell, it took hours to convince the Abbess your little sister should not be drawn and quartered."

"But you did?" Root asked desperately.

"Yes, I did. Instead we will use the girl to draw out the Beast, or so the Abbess believes. It is partly the truth. My true attention lies on Beddoes and Seton."

"Why, Master?"

"Do not dismiss the obvious. Both the Lady Administrator and the Captain-At-Arms have taken their posts since the murders began. Both enjoy newfound power and could go further still, especially if the abbey were to join itself to an enemy state. Both Beddoes and Seton control wards and securities through which either could have allowed the Beast to enter.

"But no matter the agents or identity of the Beast, the task is formidable. It has my amulet, and with it, the Beast may be hunting us!"

"Can you make another?"

Palgrave grunted, an unusual response from Root's master, a sound tinged with defeat. "I have known the Abbess Delafael for a lifetime, Root. Her powers attracted me before she became a sister of the Rose, long before. Under their influence, I crafted the amulet. I was a fearful mage then, young and wild." A sigh escaped Palgrave's lips. "Now I am an old man, and my magic seems powerful only because it is so long practiced.

"Regardless, I have a plan. Do you wish to be near your beloved?"

"Yes, my Master."

"No matter the cost? Think carefully before answering."

"No matter the cost," Root said without hesitation.

###

For Fross, each day grew more promising than the last. It was as though the strange visitor to her cell and the nightmare to follow had been high water marks in her personal trial. The Abbess sent word that Fross had been found without fault, and that to ensure her protection additional wards would be placed upon her cell. The retraction of punishment duties boosted Fross's spirit, and at night sleep came with a peaceful ease she had all but forgotten.

In contrast to the nightmare, Fross dreamed of a cottage in the foothills of Aranwae, poor in appearance, but comfortable in means and secure against the weather. Rich gardens rose from the soil about the place. Rare herbs grew wild. Flowers were everywhere. Trees of apple, plum, and nut brought shade. She recognized the place. It was the cottage of her youth brought to fanciful perfection, and the sense of it left her at peace. Yet in the dream, each path about the cottage brought with it the promise of meeting someone, someone who was never there, or who had been there but vanished.

Upon rising, Fross found little time to consider her dreams. A new client had been assigned to her, and from the moment word came to the time of her client's arrival, Fross's room must be cleaned and arranged perfectly. Everything must project an image of austerity and faith.

Fross took care to arrange her thoughts as well, clearing her mind so that the proper blessing would come once the prescribed prayers began.

Then he arrived.

The boy they brought was no more than eighteen, a lord's son whose armor and shield had known no battle, nor even the sweat and dings of training. He seemed unassuming. His frame spoke of no great strength, his face of few hardships, his eyes of the innocence of youth. At first, Fross felt uncomfortable in his presence, but knowing she could not allow the effect of the crippled boy to overshadow all of her relationships, she pressed on.

"Everyone seems so nervous," said the boy, "ever since I arrived. Is something wrong, My Lady?"

"You must be quiet," Fross advised. "The affairs of the abbey are of no concern. Attend to your training and to my commands."

"I'm sorry, My Lady. It's just that the guards, they seem ready to repel an invasion."

"Silence," Fross said. "Unless I speak first."

The boy bowed his head.

"Do you know what awaits you?" Fross asked. She bade him move to the clear area before her window, where she could begin work.

"I know very little, my Lady."

"Do you know your name?"

"Jason Algodier, My Lady. I come from the county of Weylan. My father is a lord there... a minor lord."

"Kneel here," Fross said, directing the son of the minor lord into the light. "Raise your shield so that I might look upon it and consider." As she looked, thoughts occurred to her, feelings as protective as a lioness in watchful gaze over her cubs. Fross all but reached out to touch the boy, but instead put voice to her concerns.

"Jason Algodier, your father has done you an ill service. These weapons are fresh from the towns below the mesa. You have not been prepared for what you must face."

"I am ready." He shied away, his eyes down.

"It is not me you must concern yourself with," Fross assured him. "For gentle though I may be, your days will be filled by more than gentleness and prayer. Do you know the course of it?"

"Today you consider the blessing," he answered. "With the sun tomorrow, I begin my training. Each night, I shall pray beyond your door."

Fross smiled. "You know the words," she said, then shook her head gently and said it again.

"Your days will be pain," she warned. "Your nights without sleep. And you may begin by kneeling there in silence until that shield, held before you, becomes a weight impossible to bear."

"I know what my father asks of me," said the boy.

Without another word, Fross began her task. She walked about young Algodier, eyes closed, feeling his presence, reaching out into the world beyond, the world from which her blessings came. After a time she made herself comfortable on the cot and let her prayers wind upward past the pots of paint on the shelf above, prayers in search of dreams and a blessing.

###

Morning came more swiftly than Root expected, and though he was not ready to move, he had little choice. His joints ached. Pain stabbed through his knees with each shift of weight. An entire evening had been spent kneeling, his arms burdened by the weight of a shield.

There was but one consolation. She was there. Palgrave had given him his dream, and to have that dream there was no price Root would not pay. And so he had knelt at her direction, in the guise of Jason Algodier, until the pain of the simple posture became agony.

The plan was Palgrave's, for the mage suspected Seton of something. If Seton was not the beast himself, perhaps he was in league with it. Then there was Lady Beddoes, who seemed all too keen on blaming Fross, and who was not pleased by the Abbess's sudden change of heart on the matter.

Root's job was to watch the captain and feel him out, and to report anything of interest. Palgrave himself would watch Beddoes

"Do you know the way?" Fross asked. She had arisen before first light, as if considering matters of great importance. Now hours had passed.

"Is it time?"

"It is time for you to go," she said. The shadows in the room had all but vanished. "Do you know the way?"

Root nodded, but countered with a question of his own. "Did the blessing come to you, My Lady?"

"No," Fross answered. Her frown cast a momentary gloom over Root as she turned away. "Tonight. When you return, we will make the attempt again."

Root tried to rise, unsteady in the effort. When a groan escaped his lips, Fross turned, grasped him by the shoulders and helped him to his feet. In that gesture he found the strength to face the day.

###

Fross moved through the day as if in a fever. Never before had she failed to receive a blessing.

There was no time to dwell on the failure. Duties beyond the blessing demanded her attention, from aiding the sisters in the washery to joining those in chapel for prayer. In each case, her inability to focus was noted and the fog about her thoughts brought sharply to her attention. The pleasant respite of the last few days was over.

What could she do?

For the Algodier youth, she had nothing. The only images that would appear to her were those of the nightmare, the cross and runes that had haunted her dreams in the weeks before.

Such urgency was more than she had ever known. It was reason enough to proceed with caution. How could she, no matter the overwhelming strength of the images, endow them as a blessing upon youth so slight he might never survive what awaited him in the coming day?

Fross endured her critics and moved on, pressing hard at each new task. From time to time she passed the portico, hearing beyond it, in the courtyard, a sound as familiar as the clink of her paint jars and no more frightening, until now. It was the sound of men in training, and above it all, the voice of Seton shouting orders as he put the supplicants to the test.

###

The training ground upon which Root stood proved sufficient to train fifty at once, though today a mere score awaited the appearance of Lord Seton.

From the outside, such drills appeared strenuous, but not unreasonably so. Still, from his apprenticeship with Palgrave, Root knew the difference between appearance and practice could be as wide as a river.

Though his body ached from the night's vigil, he let no sight of it show. After an hour at attention, from the corner of his eye he could see men slouching. Another hour, and some of those in the ranks sat down. They

complained of Seton's lateness, of the fact that no water had been brought onto the field. About these few lay a sense of arrogance and spoiled nobility.

Others made not a move from their attentive stance, neither to scratch nor to blink. A moment later, Root knew why.

Seton rode in from behind the assembly astride his warhorse, the Friesian giant encased in steel. The armor caught the light, sending the sun hurtling before it in flashes to daze the fearful and frighten the foolish.

The men who had seated themselves began to rise, but too late and too slowly.

A mace caught one man in the shoulder, spinning him about with a sound so strong his scream was lost in the clamor of the blow.

Another cleared his sword from its sheath. One wrist movement and the blade would have come to guard, but in the instant of the first twitch, Seton's mace caught the blade above the pommel and shattered it. As he passed, riding hard, Seton thrust out his shoulder, leaned down, and drove his elbow into another man's unguarded throat.

By now every back stood straight as iron. Every eye, fixed on a forward point, dared not blink.

Guards rushed in to carry away the wounded, but before they could reach the writhing forms, Seton began to speak. His voice was that of dark, rusted blades grinding one over another.

"New men among us, I see. Well, new men, I didn't have to break you all. That's good. Now listen, you sons of nobles, rich trader brats, and King's men among us. Listen!

"No man gains the blessing of the abbey by gold alone. Leave here with a weapon of enchanted means, and you shall know how to wield it well. If my words are not to your liking, fight me now. You may earn your blessing by this single combat."

In the silence to follow, Seton dismounted, handing over the reins to one of the abbey guard. He then strode forward to stand directly before Root, and though he did so, his words rang out to them all.

"In my care you will learn to march, to fight, and to breathe. A man who can breathe properly on the mesa can fight an army down below." Turning his attention to Root alone, he continued, "You're a weak one, boy. There's not a muscle on you. I'll break you early and send you home for supper."

With that the drills began.

The thin air of the mesa took its toll on Root, as did the fact that it required great concentration to hold himself well. Each slouch of the back or bend of the head was corrected with a blow. Straight, unfaltering steps were the order of the day, yet when these were mastered the marching ceased and the running began. The effort blistered Root's feet with

merciless precision. Ever greater feats of exertion and endurance lay ahead. Sword stances followed. Blocking practice extended long into the afternoon.

For a time Root tried to track the sun, to gain some idea of how much longer he must endure, but the question of time blurred into a question of pain. Sweat blinded him. The need to lower his arms became an all-consuming passion, yet at the first hint of relaxation the back of a mailed fist sent him tumbling to the ground.

As he rose to the sound of Seton's laughter, Root realized that day upon day of such torture stretched before him. No act of will could bear him through it. No thought of rest might ease the burning in every joint and muscle.

Root came to his feet as swiftly as his chain mail allowed. His sword had not left his hand, and in that fact he held great pride. Allowing the pain to wash over him, he raised the weight of the blade back into a high-rising block above his head.

Now, without thought of self or time, Root focused, waiting only to act on the instant of the next command.

###

When the boy returned, he entered Fross's room in a stiff posture, as if the parade ground still lay before him. He smiled. He walked in silence toward the space he had occupied the night before. Only as he knelt did the pretense break, and a cry of pain escape his lips.

Fross said nothing. She moved to light her candles. Then, as the candles added their flickering light to the room, she began to consider the supplicant. Though he fought to control it, his breath came shallower and sharper than it should. Blood lay caked along the side of his face, the cheek swollen and raw. Red lines trickled from his boots to mingle with the dust on the floor. Though he reached for his shield, he had difficulty maneuvering his hands through the grips on its back.

It was only when his eyes met Fross's that she felt, in one overwhelming wave, the one thing she had not imagined, that she could never have prepared for.

Adoration.

His eyes were not a question, but a declaration. He was pledging her his life, promising the endurance of all rigors and the conquest of all trials in her name.

There, in those eyes and in that instant, he gave up everything with no more reward asked than that he be allowed to lay down his life for *her*.

Fross drew a shocked breath. Tears came to her eyes before she could control them. The youth had said not a single word, but everything was as clear as if he had commissioned a thousand scribes to pen the visions of his heart.

"You're hurt," Fross said. She acknowledged nothing and kept her words simple. Nothing within her could understand his gift; nor could she

ever have acknowledged it. "I'm going to tend these wounds, but you must say nothing. Move only if I ask."

The boy dropped his head in the briefest of nods.

Fross made her way to the infirmary with quick and silent steps. When she was assured that no one saw her, she acquired a small basin and some rags. Her heart leapt as she thought of taking a small jar of ointment, but that seemed too great a risk.

What she was about to do was forbidden for a sister charged with working a blessing, but as she hurried back to her room she found she did not care.

How in all the world could two men long for her, love her, and promise her their hearts, and she less than all women and a sister of the Rose? The world was going mad, yet it had suddenly become very important to bandage a young boy's feet, to ease the swelling in limbs worked beyond endurance.

###

Days came and went. For Root, each passing of the sun brought with it pain and challenge beyond continuing. Seton pushed him mercilessly, concentrating on what the warrior perceived as the frailest of the supplicants. It was easy to push Root into the ground, easy to break the will of his muscles, but not so easy to break his spirit.

Root relaxed into the pain. With each new order, he moved quickly, unquestioning. Knowing Seton's blows would bruise him, he took them unflinchingly when they came. Knowing a slip of the foot in training could bring an opponent's sword down in a tearing of flesh or a crushing of bone, he pushed on.

The nights provided their own need to endure. Though it was obvious Fross worked with serious intent and patience, no blessing came.

It meant Root could get no sleep, at least according to the rules. Until Fross received the inspiration, he was to kneel before her, shield raised, and sword hand on the hilt of his blade. From time to time, his consciousness would fade, blink into darkness and then return.

In all that time, the only thing to keep him going was Fross. By kneeling in her presence, he felt, he knelt in the presence of grace itself.

One night, as Root's eyes closed and he drifted mercifully into sleep, a hand fell warmly upon him. For a moment he smiled, beginning to awaken, believing the touch to be Fross's, either gently rousing him to attention or simply comforting him.

When his eyes opened, the dark winged shape of Palgrave was all about.

"Where is she?" Root came awake, startled.

"No harm, boy," said Palgrave. He pointed to the cot nearby, to where Fross lay, her hands folded peacefully across her breasts. "A momentary

spell, one to ease her troubled spirit. Were you able to see within, you would know she struggles with her own kind of pain."

"How, what--"

"Ease yourself," Palgrave interrupted. "I am here to get a sense of things. What have you learned?"

"That even a whole body can be weak. Am I awake and hearing this truly?"

"You are awake, Root. At times this day, I wish that I were not. We have found the Beast. With the Abbess's help, I have conjured a spell tracing the murders to the Lady Beddoes. It has been a great blow for the Abbess. I see it weakening her."

"You care for the Abbess, Master?"

"Finally, you choose to address me properly, but with an improper question."

"Master," Root said, "return my magic. I am weaker now than ever. I cannot protect her."

Palgrave smiled. He turned, looked to the sleeping form of Fross on the straw cot and shook his head.

"That one is in no danger, my son. Look at her. Close the eyes of love and look at her with the eyes of reason. She is an innocent, but even more so than you think. There is nothing about her to attract the attentions of the Beast."

"Return my magic."

"No, and no argument," Palgrave answered. "After a lifetime of practice, I am certain I can shield my powers from the Beast. Though it knows I am close, it cannot find me. Your own abilities, were I to return them to you, would shine like a beacon."

"I am doing you no good anyway," Root said. "Seton has shown nothing to cause me to doubt him. From the start I have blundered. What good can I do now?"

Palgrave sighed. "The Beast is mine to deal with." He passed an aging hand across his eyes and looked away. "But I cannot deal with two threats at once, and Seton is under Beddoes' spell. When the time comes, you must keep him at bay. She will call on him, of that I am certain."

"I have no hope of defeating a warrior like Seton," Root said.

"Of course not, my son. Only give me time. When the battle commences and he comes to aid her, you must block his way." Palgrave turned once again, his eyes meeting Root's with a penetrating stare. "Six innocent sisters have been slain. More will die if we are weak in this, if we fail." He moved close, his voice a whisper. "The nation may fall, if the Beast survives."

"Then I am to die if necessary," Root said.

"If necessary," Palgrave agreed. "Now, I shall wake your love."

Root raised a hand as if to interrupt, the words of his question forming even as Palgrave answered.

"Patience. Endurance. I shall lay a trap, and when the time is right, you must be ready."

###

Fross awoke feeling the precise movements of her hand, of the brush she held touching the shield before it. She drew a shocked breath.

"Is something wrong, my lady?" asked young Algodier.

"I am working a blessing," Fross said, astounded by her own words. How long had she been in such a trance? She stumbled back, gazing with amazement at the nearly completed shield. She closed her eyes, trying to catch up, to remember.

"Yes, my lady. The blessing is all around us."

Fross felt it too, a lightness in the air, as if after a storm, and the ease that comes with the lifting of rain. Whatever had been done, there was no taking it back.

The images on the shield startled Fross. Here were the cross and the runic symbols that had so insisted themselves upon her.

When had she mixed the paints? When had the first stroke of the first curving line begun? The candles were all but done, their lights guttering, sending thick, angled shadows through the darkening room.

Fross's heart beat wildly.

"This blessing was not for you. How did you do this to me? What trick..."

"No trick, My Lady," said the youth, his voice thick with concern. "I have done nothing."

Fross believed him, but that did nothing to ease the mystery.

"I... I know not what blessing I have given," Fross said.

The last of the candles winked out.

"May God keep you safe," she finished, her voice falling into a darkness she did not understand. "For you, I can do nothing more."

###

The days came and went, without beginning, without end. Root heard nothing from Palgrave and wondered mightily about his master's progress. Seton's training he endured, putting forth what strength he could muster. In the evenings, Root prayed at the niche outside of Fross's cell, but no longer would she speak with him, and rarely did he catch a glimpse of her in passing.

The few hours of sleep now granted him seemed poor compensation, his tent in the courtyard a lonely place.

Then came an afternoon when Seton singled him out. The Captain-at-Arms drew his sword and stepped toward Root, blade at the ready.

"I've been watching you, boy." Seton's voice met Root like the shaking of the earth. "Your sword and your shield have borne a blessing now for some days. It is time to see if you are worthy."

Root stumbled back. His arms were weary, his eyes filled with sweat, and his mouth dry. This was no time for a test; he barely had strength enough to survive the day.

"Who shall I choose for your graduation combat?" Seton asked.

If there was anything of which Root was certain, it was not to be foolish enough to answer the question. In fact, there was no time to give the question thought, for Seton's blade drew back but a fraction before slashing toward Root's middle.

"I shall test you myself!" barked Seton.

###

Though it was midday and the sun shone brightly in her room, Fross lay upon her cot. The smell of straw and the warmth of the blanket comforted her. She tried to still her racing thoughts, and by these efforts she soon fell into a restless sleep.

The blessing for Algodier was done, completed days past, yet the images of her dreams came back again and again. They plagued her by night, insinuating themselves into her exhausted thoughts by day, and now, in this midday sleep they drew Fross back to that mysterious scene of the cottage and its gardens.

Once again came the sense of someone close, a figure unseen. She strolled the gardens, expecting to meet the stranger, turning corners where he must have stood but a moment before. Then, suddenly, amid the flowers, she spied a bent figure, a dark silhouette that stood from amid the blossoms with a single rose in its shadowed hands. She looked closer. The figure was nothing but shadow. As it moved from the fields toward the cottage, it neither drifted nor walked with smooth grace, but lurched forward in a fashion both ungainly and painful to watch.

When Fross reached the cottage, the shadowy figure was gone. Only the rose remained, placed across an open book on a small table. The juxtaposition of the symbols made her head swim, the sense of vertigo so intense it brought her to consciousness with a start. Fross's coarse blanket lay heavy with sweat. She tore it aside and stood, trying to catch her breath. She could not help but remember the amulet worn by the Abbess, could not help but recall its iconography of the opening books. Now, conjoined with that imagery in a way her excited thoughts could not separate were the roses left behind by the Beast, each a bloom more full, more open, than the last.

Fross had only to know if this clue about the Beast's identity were a revelation or a trick, the very influence of the creature that might murder them all.

###

It was not how Root imagined it. The strength of the gods did not course in his veins. No overpowering anger rose up from inside, driving him on. Fross's blessing remained silent, and what voices spoke to him were those of muscles wearied beyond endurance.

Breath, blood, and bone, every aspect of his being begged for rest, for a cessation of activity. If it meant injury, so be it; if it meant death, perhaps that was acceptable as well.

Seton's blow threw Root back. It came in an arc from below his waist, slashing upward. The blow unseen, Root had no chance to block it. His shield clattered away. Blood welled up where chain mail links had been torn.

"Fight, boy!" Seton bellowed, moving in as he brought his sword up, over, and down.

Root blocked the blow. He had no choice, for the sweep of Seton's blade would have cleaved a path between his ears. The impact numbed his arm, sent him reeling. Now he had neither shield nor the balance to properly maneuver. Seton moved in for another blow, a killing strike.

In that instant Root relaxed. He already knew pain. Of what future agonies should he be afraid? He was already defeated.

Root spun about, committing himself fully to the action while drawing his sword up and into the turn. For an instant Root's back was to Seton as he spun, the Captain-at-Arms' sword flicking toward his spine. In the next

instant, Root's sword rang out against Seton's armor as he completed the whirlwind turn.

"Good, boy!" Seton shouted. He jumped back, giving Root an instant in which to recover.

Root leapt to the shield and brought it high without losing balance.

Seton stepped forward, his blade sweeping for Root's foot. In chain mail, exhausted, Root brought his knees to his chest and spun again. His shield caught Seton across the side of his face. The Captain-at-Arms reeled, unable to complete his maneuver.

Relax, the blessing said. It seemed the recovered shield had whispered the word to him; no, it was more a gentle still, a magical vibration. *Relax*.

That it was the prompting of the blessing, Root had no doubt, for movements came to him without thought. His vision focused at a point a few inches below Seton's throat, and once there he held it, but let his sight blur into a comfortable haze.

It wasn't necessary to see things clearly, not Seton's hands, nor his feet, nor the blade he wielded. Seeing the arc of the sword even before Seton moved the hilt was the key. Seeing Seton's next step in the instant the warrior shifted his weight became Root's great advantage.

His muscles on fire with the pain of exertion, Root knew he could not outmatch Seton in a series of blows, for the warrior would soon smash the blade from his weakening grip.

Relax, the shield said. Breathe deep. Timing is everything. Now!

Pushing off his back foot, Seton surged forward, his sword coming overhead. Root conserved his strength, for it required no more than a sigh to side step the blow, though it came to within a finger's breadth of drawing blood. Root's movement took Seton by surprise. The Captain-at-Arms kept coming. There was no halt between one swing and the next, only the fluid movement of Seton turning, slashing, and advancing into Root's defense, each foot placed in perfect balance.

But to each attack there comes a pause, a last movement in the flurry of combinations. For Root, that weakness was what the blessing revealed. He saw it before Seton knew it, saw the Captain-at-Arms arc his blade through one last swing. In the instant Seton stopped to breathe, he was vulnerable.

Root knew the moment, had already begun to move. Vulnerable for less than a heartbeat, Seton was, nevertheless, out of position, off balance, and expecting nothing.

Everything within Root flowed together, all his energies mingling as a single stream. Two steps and he was inside Seton's defense, one more and he smashed the hilt of his blade against Seton's throat. It was a dance, and

spinning around behind the Captain-at-Arms, Root brought the flat of his blade down hard on Seton's shoulder. The Captain-at-Arms dropped his blade. His hand went to his throat.

Now, from Root's position of advantage behind the bigger man, it took no more than a kick to the back of Seton's knee to bring the warrior down.

Once down, Seton lay helpless before Root, Root who held his blade above the warrior's already injured throat.

"Enough!" Seton said. He coughed; tried to rise and failed. "You're ready, boy." Then, with an unexpected suggestion of pride, Seton finished: "The blessing is yours."

###

Shadows everywhere, lights flickering in unrevealing corners, that was how Root saw the quarters of the Abbess. She was not alone, but had surrounded herself with guards, and at her right hand stood the Lady Beddoes. Both feigned politeness. Both remained still, and except for their words might have been statues.

"You defeated Seton," the Abbess said.

"Is he going to be well?" Root asked.

"Master Algodier, it is our pride to acknowledge your graduation from training and to confer upon you the right to bear arms blessed by the magic of the Rose."

"Is Seton going to be well?" Root repeated.

The Lady Beddoes too seemed moved by the question. That is, she broke from her sculpted stiffness and turned to the Abbess, her eyes wide. The lights flickering along the walls caught her gaze and made it flare. She was asking Root's question over again with that gaze, and the Abbess recognized it.

"Your concern is admirable," said the Abbess. "Will you show the same for every enemy you defeat? There is no need to ask a third time. You landed blows no more injurious, I imagine, than a thousand such our Captain-at-Arms has inflicted upon a long line of trainees. Seton rests. Our best healers attend to his wounds."

Another slight shift forward, and Root saw the lips of the Abbess. They were thin, pale, and pulled tightly across aging teeth. When they moved, it was like watching stone move.

"Was it indeed the blessing?" she asked.

"Forgive me, Abbess," Root answered, "I don't understand."

"What I meant to say... Our Lady Fross has never before conjured a blessing to defeat a man of Seton's rank. Indeed, the Captain-at-Arms wears plate blessed by no less a practitioner than our Lady Beddoes. Was it indeed Fross's blessing strengthened you?"

"Aye, Abbess," Root said, proudly.

"Remarkable," said the Abbess. "We have underestimated you both."

There came a long pause. In the expansion of that silence, Root wondered whether he had been summoned for praise or an inquiry of the worst sort. But suddenly the Abbess stood, her hands lifting gracefully.

"These are trying days. Yet we shall not forget our proprieties. A dinner will be prepared to honor your accomplishment and the sister by whose blessing you were graced with victory. Before you return to your father, young Algodier, sit with us and receive our humble praise."

###

Upon leaving the Abbess, Root had but a single goal. Though his body was worn by the day's exertions, he felt light, almost giddy. He wanted to see Fross, and nothing would stop him from sharing this wonderful moment with her.

Nothing, save for Palgrave.

The mage appeared out of nowhere, grasping him by the arm. Palgrave drew Root hurriedly around a bend in an abbey corridor.

"Excellent, boy, you have done me a great service."

"Master?"

"Root, don't you see? You have wounded Seton, and now, concerned for his safety, Beddoes will meet with him. Perhaps send for him, or go to the infirmary herself."

"But, Master," Root said, suffering a mild blush, "have you not watched them together already?"

"Yes, but there is a proper time for everything. What I have observed is meaningless. Today, when they meet, there shall be matters of concern."

"Master?"

"There is the great power, unsuspected, in Lady Fross. There is your own prowess in smashing Seton's pride on the parade ground. I would think neither of you will be so honored as you think."

"Fross. The Beast will want her now." Root tried to bolt away, to run to the side of his love, but Palgrave held him fast.

"Yes, my son. But we will be in the presence of the Beast, two witnesses to hear it plotting. And when we hear the plot, we will know how to lay our trap. There rests your opportunity to defend the little sister."

"But Fross..." Root struggled with Palgrave. He brought his gaze fiercely against the mage. "Give me back my magic!"

"You shall protect her as I say," Palgrave insisted. "I can conceal my powers from the Beast. The aura of your young abilities would alert it immediately. Never forget, you are mine to command. Come with me now!"

Striking his hands together as though they were flint and he about to spark a fire, Palgrave again invoked a control of light so precise that he and Root vanished, became invisible to even the most discerning of magical eyes.

Invisible, they waited outside the Abbess's quarters, anxious for the Lady Beddoes to be dismissed. Nor could their voices be heard as anything more than the descent of a spider on its thread.

"My Lord," said Root. "I cannot defeat Seton in a true battle."

"You already have," Palgrave assured him. "Root, Seton's help means little now, but his presence means everything. If we confront Beddoes alone she will protect herself, and weave in her denial such a cloak of deceit that we will find nothing more than an ambitious woman with her eye on the Abbess's throne."

"Are they not stronger together?"

"No, Son. Together they are vulnerable. They must exchange confidences and plans. In hearing their plans we ruin them. In knowing their minds, we know everything we need to defeat them at the proper time, with the proper support."

Root took in a deep breath; he became hopeful. "Then we are not going to do battle with them tonight?"

"Not until the proper moment, Root. But," Palgrave smiled a sly smile, "you never know."

In time they heard the Lady Beddoes take her leave of the Abbess. The door opened. The Lady Beddoes peered out, then hurried into the hall. As she passed, Root and Palgrave began their invisible pursuit.

This they did, trailing behind the second most powerful sister in the abbey until she reached the infirmary. Once there, Beddoes dismissed the attendants, securing the door behind her. She thought herself and Seton alone, but close behind her, Root and Palgrave had slipped within.

Root and his master watched the scene in fascination, waiting only for the moment when Beddoes would betray both herself and the warrior she held in thrall.

When they entered the infirmary, they saw Seton upon a raised bed, apparently still and unaware. Beddoes approached him, her hands held out. Palms down, flickers of blue light danced from her fingertips.

When she reached the warrior, Beddoes placed her hands upon his head, then, with one finger, she stroked the hollow of his throat.

A visible shudder moved through Seton's shoulders and along his spine. It was the only hint of awakening before he reached out.

In watching, Root was not certain what he had expected, perhaps for Seton to bolt from the table, perhaps for him to grasp Beddoes' hand in one startled movement. He did neither, for when he reached out, it was to caress the hand that hovered gently above his eyes.

"It's nothing," Seton said. The words came not as a dismissal, but as a reassurance.

"If the lad were a touch stronger, such a blow would have taken your life."

Beddoes helped Seton to sit. The warrior coughed, spat, and cursed his luck.

"Were you clumsy?" Beddoes asked.

"No, the boy worked hard, became quick. It was his judgment, to know where to move and when. He had the feel of it."

"A talent you brought out?" Beddoes asked. She continued to bathe Seton in light, a light that now entwined the warrior in its gentle, flickering tendrils. "A talent stronger than the blessing I gave your armor?"

"No," Seton said, thinking it over. "Algodier gave me everything he had and more, but the skill to anticipate, to time the shifting of his weight. That was a blessing; I'm certain of it."

"It makes no sense," Beddoes complained. "I've studied that girl. Her blessings prove weak at best, often ineffectual. Then, as if by clumsy luck, the supplicant's life is saved at just the right...." She stopped ministering to Seton. Her gaze turned inward, as if looking for a thought misplaced. "As though her gift were to anticipate..." Beddoes' voice became quick, excited "The rarest of all possibilities: her blessings may foresee, contain an element of precognition. I'm certain she doesn't realize. The innocent doesn't know!"

For his part, Seton chuckled. "You misjudged her then, as you misjudged me, at first."

"But this is no time for mistakes!" Beddoes cried out. "Her life is in danger." She brushed Seton's hand from hers, her face flushed with anger, an anger suddenly turned inward. "Find your sword, warrior. You'll have no rest tonight."

Seton stood, but before either he or Beddoes could reach the door, a scream filled the corridor beyond.

Root chilled, as though death itself breathed upon him. He turned to Palgrave even as the door to the infirmary burst open; he grasped his master's sleeve before the first, breathless words escaped the sister at the door.

"Lady Beddoes!" The words held surprise. It was clear the sister had not expected the abbey's Administrator, yet she appeared relieved to find her. "The east wing. Lady Fross! She was trying... said she had something to tell. About the roses...." More shouts rang out in the corridor beyond the infirmary. The weighty step of the abbey guards filled the hall.

The Lady Beddoes drew the sister to her, comforting her by the embrace.

"The Lady Fross," said the frightened sister, her words now muffled by tears. "She asked to be excused, to come to you. We sent one of the guards." Her words became choked by sobs.

"There was a sound, like a tearing of cloth! I ran here, to the Captain-at-Arms."

A guard appeared at the door, shaken but maintaining a soldier's composure, he turned to immediately to Seton, something in his hand.

"The Beast has taken the Lady Fross. Two of our men are dead."

"Did anyone see it?" Seton asked. "Did anyone strike it?"

The same words, repeated, served to answer the Captain-at-Arms.

"Two of our men are dead. But there is this." Opening his hand, he displayed a rose in full bloom. "This was left."

Stunned he may have been, but Root was ready to act. In Palgrave, however, he found an old man whose eyes now stared at a point some thousand leagues distant. Defeated.

"Not this," Palgrave said, brushing away Root, brushing away Root's hands pulling at his frayed cloak. It frightened Root to see his stern master acting as if a mortal blow had fallen. Then, with head bowed, Palgrave sobbed, letting loose a single tear that, when it stirred the dust at his feet, sent out a shimmer to wash away their shield of invisibility.

The frightened sister screamed as they appeared. Beddoes drew a shocked breath. Seton, with sword drawn, put the blade to Palgrave's throat in an instant.

"What sorcery is this?" demanded the Captain-at-Arms.

"We're here to help," Root said, aware that he still bore the appearance of the young Algodier. At Root's side, Palgrave reached out a hand, and in one gentle movement drew Seton's blade closer still.

"I've failed," said Palgrave, "and in the bargain doubted your loyalty. The Beast has won."

"No," Root said, and he spoke quickly, aware that each word must fall in place as perfectly now as in any spell. "Captain, this is the King's mage, Palgrave. We have hunted the Beast in secret, unseen. We thought we traced the Beast to this room." He paused to make his voice grave with the truth. "We thought it was you, or Beddoes."

Seton glanced quickly from Root to Palgrave and back again. What Root saw in his eyes was a war of confusion. Seton's breaths came quick and heavy, his muscles tensed. Now two guards stood in the room to back him up, and one held his blade level with Root's belly.

"Captain," said Root. "I believe there is still a chance."

It was then Seton made his decision. Reaching down, the Captain-at-Arms grasped Palgrave's hand and brought it up to meet the edge of his blade. The cut was quick and severe, biting into bone. It drove Palgrave to his knees.

"You have my attention," Seton said. He turned to Root. "I've fought you, and he bleeds. We heard Palgrave was coming, and now the first we see him he tells us we are lost." That disgust had replaced fear in Seton's voice, Root took as a good sign.

Palgrave stood. The wound seemed to have cut through the fog of his thoughts, and when he spoke Root detected an element of magical authority

returning to his voice. It calmed those listening, even while delivering the worst of news.

“The Beast thinks it has won. It misdirected me. Now it has taken a sister, without cover of darkness, and apparently without employing the sleep spell by which it incapacitated your guards in the past. The rose left behind is in full bloom, marking the end of this murderous cycle and mocking us.”

Moving brusquely, the Lady Beddoes acquired a dressing for Palgrave’s wound. Though Root had seen Palgrave begin a healing spell, the cut was severe, and the mage had been unable to staunch the bleeding at once. She applied the dressing quickly, with some skill, and seemed satisfied when the old man winced. Having been suspect in the murders, Root guessed, did not at all please her. As Beddoes worked, she added her own reasoning to the mix.

“I agree with Palgrave. Fross is the last; her powers were much more valuable than we guessed. Precognition takes a part in her blessings; I’m certain of it. She is young, and the symbols that appear to her are bewildering, hiding the gift even from its owner. Algodier’s defeat of Seton made me think of it. I imagine the Beast was no less attentive.

“If the Beast is absorbing these powers to make them its own, the Lady Fross is a crowning jewel. The Beast may be unstoppable.” She

finished dressing Palgrave's hand. "There, old man, you'll live. We have to get to the Abbess."

"My Lady, the Abbess is no where to be found." The news came from the second guard to have entered the room. "We sought to alert her on the instant of the attack."

Seton swore, his arms and face flushed with the blood of irrepressible anger. "Ahh! Is there no way to find the damn Beast? Now that you know it isn't us?"

"There was," Palgrave admitted, "an amulet. But the Beast has stolen it as well."

"Master," Root said, addressing Palgrave directly, "return my magic. I can find her."

"I'm sorry, my son. I have failed you too."

"No, Master," Root objected, realizing the implication of Palgrave's words, "she is not dead. Even in this form, I would know if she were. Heed me. These are no love-weakened thoughts I speak. While she breathes, I know!"

"You believe you can find her?" Seton asked.

"Master, remember the letters? Remember the magic of the letters!" He grasped Palgrave by the shoulders, twisting him about so their eyes met. In that meeting, in the intensity of Root's indomitable gaze, there came a

new understanding between master and student. "Break this shielding magic away. Free me now!"

This Palgrave did. His hands came alive with magic. Flames danced from his fingers, and Root felt the shockwave take him back.

Root curled inward and down, his right leg shortening to its stump. The left side of his face, the waxen, near-blind side bent upward as before, and those in the room saw a twisted head on a twisted spine, with only the perfect lips of a young boy to mark the hunched shape as human. He had almost forgotten what it was like to be Root and nothing more.

The shock of the others meant nothing to Root. It was inside himself he looked, for the power. There it lay, needing barely a touch of his mind to free it, a white-hot pool of desperate energy now at his command.

His right foot stomped to the floor; his hands made the signs of a dozen arcane symbols in sweeps of magical dexterity the likes of which none but Palgrave had ever before seen.

"It is the Beast!" screamed the Lady Beddoes.

"No," said Palgrave. "It is not. This form is the lens of his power, the focus of his magic. As Algodier he may wield a sword; in this form the boy may put down demons! Let him work!" His words, backed by a powerful spell, stopped the warriors and silenced Beddoes. "Perhaps he is my better. Now stand aside, or you will deal with *my* magic!"

The others back away. They moved as if from the presence of evil, but in the space that opened between him and the others Root conjured forth a sheet of parchment. Upon its surface, inscribed by the will of his magic, were words of love.

"Go to her," Root commanded of the parchment floating between his hands. "Go to her, and be as an arrow, straight in flight, straight to the heart of my heart."

The air before Root's hands folded in upon itself, stealing away the parchment, as might a sudden gust of wind. In the silence after the message passed from sight, Root prayed.

"Let her be alive," he said silently. "Let her make some sign." After an agonizing wait of a minute or more, he breathed in, recalling the parchment, pulling his crippled hands back in toward his chest as though drawing his love into a tender embrace.

An instant later, the air split asunder, opening as if torn by a sword. With a twist of his clawed hand, Root retrieved the parchment. Hurriedly, he examined the piece. It had been marked, just above Root's magically imprinted signature, a smear of blood used to underline a single word. Root repeated it aloud.

"Love," he said, breathing in as he did so, drawing the parchment to his face and struggling to fight back the tears.

The scent of it caught him. Rust and blood, rot and the foul stench of an ageless sewer. The parchment in his hand had been there. But an instant before, it had floated in the air of the abbey's moat. Fross had caught it, and no matter her situation, she possessed still the presence of mind to send back a sign!

"I know where she is," Root said with certainty. "The moat. Come!"

With his good eye he fixed the gazes of Palgrave and Seton.

"Follow me," Root repeated, and with a will drew himself into the air, the folds of his mailed armor now floating below his feet. No matter the return of his magic, Root maintained in one hand the sword and in the other the shield, both emblazoned and made magical by Fross.

###

They danced and fought and wheeled through the stench-filled air. Glaive, pike, and pole-arm, lance and bow, sickle and scythe. Fross fought the urge to curl up inside herself and die. Arrows hissed by. They tore at her clothes, leaving bloodied tears across her skin. The sound of it all, of that jostling, whirling melee, was the sound of madness. And in that moment, when the exertion of staying alive seemed unendurable, it would have been with great ease that Fross could have closed her eyes for the final sleep.

"You hid your magic from me," said the Abbess. "No matter."

The voice held neither evil nor the sweet caress of patronage. It came with the same even, emotionless delivery characteristic of the Abbess. There followed nothing more, no words, no telling glance to show the events about to come.

Mailed gauntlets, animated by magic, held Fross at the wrists and ankles. A great many swords gathered about her. They formed an edged, floating cage that creaked and groaned as the blades comprising it drew closer. It was as if they cried out in longing for the blood of the victim who lay within their assembled cage.

Before Fross, lost in thought or in the weaving of spells, the Abbess fingered an amulet of bronze, that amulet depicting a circle of opening books. When Fross first connected the blossoms left by the Beast with the iconography of the amulet, she had not believed her own intuition. It still seemed a nightmare, and one from which she would gladly wake.

At a word from the Abbess, the clanging, hissing conflict in the moat stopped. A dozen shields rushed forward, forming an altar before her.

"Who made such a thing?" Fross asked, her gaze fixed squarely on the amulet. "Where is the magic you have stolen from us? In that thing, or in you?"

Fross fought to still her panicked heart. She repeated the questions, attempting to goad the Abbess into responding. Her attempts failed.

Nothing seemed to interrupt a single motion of the Abbess as she wove her hands through mystic patterns above the altar. Whatever fate the other sisters had met, Fross grew certain it was about to be hers as well.

Her breath caught in her throat when the parchment appeared. It floated before her. Fross grabbed it, clasping it to her breast without thinking. She could barely read it in the shadows of the moat, could not respond without quill and ink. What more could she do with this last testament of Root's love but hold it close for whatever moments her fate might allow?

"What is that?" asked the Abbess, at last distracted. "Who has found you?"

Her features livid, the Abbess began the words of a spell. The incantation picked Fross off her feet, supporting her back, turning her so as to lay her upon the mass of floating shields. An altar it was, and one seemingly made for sacrifice, for above it whirled a flight of daggers, their blades linked tip to tip by a magic that made them as luminous as a full moon.

The cage of swords reformed about the altar.

On the other side of the altar, the Abbess began to glow with a greenish light. It was enough for Fross to make out the words of the message. Even as she took in the words, Fross felt the parchment begin to

flutter, as it did when Root would recall it to himself. She tried to think quickly.

The Abbess produced a scornful smile, as if recognizing the origin of the letter. "It's easy to use them when they love so. In another time, I could have taught you much!"

###

Root cared not if the others followed, only that they did not hinder. He had no desire to injure Seton or Beddoes, but a spell already conjured in his hands would have done the job well. He pushed forward with an act of will, his crippled feet awash in light, a power to send him flying toward the spot he knew Fross must be.

Glancing back, Root saw Palgrave wrap the cloak of the-winged form about him. Seton bade the Lady Beddoes stay with the sisters, then called to his men, his voice hard and certain, whatever his reservations.

"Follow the wizards," Seton said. "They go to the lair of the Beast. Move! Quickly now!"

The Lady Beddoes grasped Seton's arm for an instant, then remained, the last force that might stand against the Beast if they failed.

Root went to the buttresses, to the hiding place he had found after the first struggle with Seton. He felt Palgrave close at his side, the old mage all but overtaking him as he pushed back into the dark maze of broken stone, until the stink of the moat reached up to assault his senses.

At the edge of the moat, Root gathered his strength and dived into darkness. There was no time for subtlety, no opportunity to plan. He landed in the twilight of the moat, shield in one hand, sword in the other, levitating forward with a single cry:

"Fross!"

This time, the weapons of the moat knew no hesitation. The cloak provided by Palgrave's magic camouflage was gone, and now the animated implements of death rushed to take down the sudden intruder.

A great ax swung in from one side, two spears hurtling from the other. Root blocked the first, stumbling back. The spears met their target with a crack, but Root saw only shadow, felt only the brush of Palgrave's black wing. His master had saved him.

"Watch yourself, boy," said Palgrave. "There! Ahead!"

###

Fross prayed. It was all she knew to do as the daggers circled about her, their blades glinting with light. Faster, closer, they swayed to the movements of the Abbess's hands. The gauntlets holding Fross were possessed with a magical strength, and in every glooming shadow of the moat, a power beyond any experience rose up to command the weapons about her and overwhelm her resistance.

When the daggers came against her skin, Fross stopped breathing. In the terror of disbelief, she watched them twitch and dance. It was as if, in

that contact, they became anxious, frenetic. Their hunger grew. That it was an appetite for more than her blood, Fross was certain.

"No, little one," said the Abbess Delafael, "Breathe." As if in demonstration, the Abbess drew an audible breath. "Relax," she said, and Fross watched as the Abbess banished the tension from her own shoulders.

"Pray," Delafael commanded. "Above all else, pray. Ask for a blessing. Let it come out of the darkness... to me."

Before Fross could prepare herself, the daggers bit into her flesh. They drove to the bone, the pain itself a torture the likes of which Fross could never have imagined; it rose within her, trying to escape.

The daggers drew out her soul. Fross could feel her being wrenched along each wicked cut and drawn toward the Abbess along tendrils of greenish light. For a moment she did not even recognize the power of her own voice, for the screams filling the air were hers.

###

To the right, Seton shattered a lance charging upon him from the sea of weapons. He spun, bringing his blade up to parry the downward thrust of a rusty, two-handed sword. The animated bastard sword shattered, a piece of whirling steel cutting Seton's cheek as it fell. The big warrior brushed away the pain without thinking and pressed on. His men fought to reach him.

To the left, Palgrave unleashed globes of iridescent light. They formed with impossible slowness, rising out of the darkness of his folded wings. Once formed, a cry sent them hurtling forward into the clank and rush of attacking weapons. At their impact, steel and iron dissolved like frost at the touch of rain.

Ahead, Root caught sight of Fross.

The altar, the blades, the blue robed form of the Abbess rising behind, each cut into his consciousness like the thrust of an angry blade. The sight of the Abbess surprised Root, relieved him at first, as though another rescuer had reached Fross before he. Only as he swept closer did her malevolence become apparent, in her gaze, in the motion of her hands, in the amulet the Abbess wore openly and by its power sent spellbound swords against him.

Though he parried it, the swing of one sword caught Root at the temple. The warmth of his own blood surprised him, blinding him as it flowed across his eye.

Arrows thudded into Root's shield, while ahead the Abbess moved her hands through a precise and magical rhythm. She turned to meet his rush. Flames danced between her fingers. A ball of smoke and crimson embers flew away from her. It grew in the instant of the assault to fill Root's blurry vision.

Off balance from the blow to his head, sidestepping the rush of a spear on his right, Root had no time to prepare a defense. With one last breath, he tensed to accept the blow.

It never came. The spell brushed past Root. He felt its heat, no more, while behind him, Palgrave withered beneath the weight of the impact. It engulfed and burned the wing-borne image of the mage.

Palgrave struggled. He dispelled the flames at last yet seemed the worse for it, having been reduced to his human form.

"Yield!" the Abbess declared. "I could have taken your life, Palgrave."

"I would have given it to you once," Palgrave returned. "But not this! Not this!"

"Swear your loyalty to me! The kingdom is mine."

"I swear by all grace and desire," said Palgrave, his voice become a power to overshadow the din of the moat, "that my devotion is to you alone, Delafael! Not to murder. Not to power without loyalty, not to avarice!. And if from this madness, I can save you, I put my life to it. Yield! I swear my protection though banishment results."

Sneering, the Abbess answered by means of a gesture defiled and obscene. "You are nothing. All of you," she said, and spat upon Fross.

"Get down, Root!" Palgrave shouted.

As he dove, tumbling between a rush of maces and morning stars, Root heard a thunder from behind. Palgrave released burst after burst of

foxfire, luminescent balls which cracked with thunder as they left the mage's hands.

Defiantly, the Abbess stepped away from the plane of shields on which Fross lay. She put the altar behind her, taking an aggressive stance before it.

With one hand, the Abbess drew a luminous shield. It hung there, floating on the air before her, and against it Palgrave's hardest blows fell like spring rain upon castle walls.

The greatest blessings fortified her; the strength of the slain sisters welled up inside her.

Glancing back, Root saw Palgrave draw himself up. The mage gathered all his strength. He threw his hands forward, his fingers widespread. They unleashed what seemed the power of the sun itself.

The ground trembled as the fireball hurtled above Root, annihilating lucern hammers and hook fauchards, crumbling to dust the animated armor and weapons in its way, passing through them like a scythe through grass before reaching the Abbess. Its lethal heat was undiminished. Still, this consummation of Palgrave's power glanced from the Abbess's shield. Deflected, the energy streamed away, rising in a column, high and out beyond the walls of the moat.

The amulet about the Abbess's neck began to glow, becoming white, incandescent in its power. From it, coils of energy leapt forward.

Unexpected, quick as rain, they moved to engulf Palgrave, crushing inward upon him as though their brilliant tendrils held the strength of giants. Root heard his master gasp in pain. There was a snapping of bones.

"My words ride the wind," Delafael said. "They come. The enemies of our once proud kingdom ride this way, and I shall provide blessings for them all."

"Raiders and thieves," Palgrave gasped.

"More than raiders, more than thieves. Entire nations heed my call."

A wall of armored suits, of plate mail and brigandine, of gauntlets and leathern helms fell upon Palgrave, bringing their wildly swinging weapons with them. There was a scream, and Root lost sight of his master beneath the mounting pile of burnished death.

With a wicked smile, the Abbess all but whispered, "Whom will you send against me now?"

Root brought his hands together as though in prayer.

He bowed his head to his fingertips, all the while concentrating his energies into a single magical burst the likes of which he had never before attempted. With Fross near death and Palgrave trapped, he had no choices greater than his own desperation.

Root exhaled.

He opened his mouth as if to shout, but in the silence to follow he unleashed death. A shape of darkness and shadow formed at his command.

An apparition, it materialized from the depths of his own despair. It was the conjured form of a giant, a warrior.

Held before the apparition, in hands of sorcerous might, was a scythe of such weight and power that it might level whole squads of men. It lashed out. Helms were torn from suits of animated armor in its passing. Shields buckled. Spears snapped, their gleaming heads sent spinning deep into the fouler regions of the moat.

Delafael crossed her hands, folding them beneath the amulet. When the scythe struck, she enveloped its shadow in light from the glowing artifact.

The scythe shattered harmlessly before her. In the next instant, she stared into the empty eyes of the apparition. She opened her mouth and swallowed the figure whole.

For Root, it was as if he had swung a sword into stone. The deflection of his magical attack resounded back upon him, sending him reeling with force enough to take the wind from his lungs.

It had taken everything to conjure the apparition.

He had nothing left with which to match it.

Flame. Mystical fire. It erupted from the Abbess's open mouth as though she were some dragon intent upon turning Root to cinders. Root drew up his shield and crouched beneath it. Though the action saved his life, his clothes began to smolder. He could not breathe.

Lowering the shield, Root took in the situation, saw the Abbess turn back toward Fross.

Behind him, Palgrave remained lost beneath a pile of weapons and armor.

The closest of Seton's guard had fallen, and the Captain-at-Arms battled alone within a circle of two-handed swords, their blades wet with his blood. His will to fight seemed undiminished by the advancing, slashing success of the soulless steel. Then all too suddenly, a spear pierced Seton's breast, a sword his ribs. He fell and was gone.

"Seton!" To his own astonishment, Root fought back tears. Remembering all he had endured with Seton, Root relaxed his muscles; cleared his mind. He knew what it was to struggle near the doors of death, and now came the time to teach that lesson to another.

As he rose, the shield spoke to Root, not in words, but in vibrations. It came like the certainty of memory or the awakening of skill. It was the same whisper that had come to him in his fight with Seton, and it spoke of the rhythm and timing of battle.

Ice. With the turn of the wrist, Root hurled a torrent of cold toward the Abbess. It would have frozen the heart of a man within a single beat, but the Abbess deflected its congealed mass easily. She gestured and sent it spinning away. Another bolt followed. For Root, the spell was not important; the rhythm of the attack was everything.

Root hit Abbess again, first with one then with two spells. Annoyed by the attacks, the Abbess focused on Root. A bolt cracked from within her amulet. Lightning. But Root was ready. He sidestepped the blow. The shield drew him on, infused his muscles with the instinct to move, anticipating the blows.

He hit her again. One. Two. Root could see the outline of the magical shield the Abbess used to sweep his attacks from the air. He saw her shoulders tense as she reached inside for an even more deadly blow, but before the Abbess could release hit it, Root threw more of his icy missiles.

One. Two.

Before the second of the missiles could be deflected, he released a burst of fire, low at the Abbess's feet. It was no more powerful than a torch, but the Abbess never saw it coming. The lure of the expected blows had grown too great, and no counter magic had been deployed to stop a simple trick, one to ignite her gown and, within the space of a breath, engulf her in flame.

As the flame wound upward, flickering from the Abbess's breasts toward her eyes, Roots saw Delafael's expression turn to rage. She rushed forward. With a motion of her hands she gathered up the fire from her clothing, tore it away to send it hurtling back toward Root. Against his shield it proved no more effective than her dragon fire had been.

Willing himself through the air, Root circled to the left of the Abbess. He hurled his projectiles of ice. One. Two. He cast a flame spell at her feet. She blocked them without a thought. The flame never reached her. She launched a coil of light at Root, the same as she had used to immobilize Palgrave. It spun around him, too vast for him to elude. The gyre closed in with crushing swiftness.

With a breath, Root braced for the blow. The coils closed about his deformed legs, crushing them against one another. The pain reached him, dazing him, but Root held fast. He threw two icy missiles and a gout of flame at the Abbess.

With the amulet held before her, the Abbess stopped them all in mid-flight and threw them back. The missiles hit him squarely in the chest, nearly freezing his heart within. He could no longer breathe. The fire blackened his hands and seared his eyes.

As consciousness threatened to leave Root, he released two more icy missiles and a gout of flame.

One. Two. Three.

But there was more. Between these weakening strokes came a single spell, little used. It was a pearl of magic absorption, and it slid unseen between the Abbess's blocking moves.

Her reflexes responded to the rhythm of the icy missiles and the flame. The Abbess failed at first to sight the pearl, and by the time she did, it was too late.

The tiny, white orb began to grow. As the aura of the Abbess's magic brushed against it, the orb's surface caught the power and drew it in. The power of her blocking shields, the power of the bright coil she was about to unleash, it all spiraled into the pearl, drawn down by its ever-increasing field of attraction.

In a rush the pearl expanded, its appetite for magic insatiable.

Suddenly it was upon her, rushing toward the amulet and the source of her power. Still not recognizing the nature of the attack, nor its ultimate danger, the Abbess screamed in rage and unleashed the full power of the amulet against the orb. The mighty blast coiled tightly around the pearl, the orb itself now having grown to the size of a great helm.

Root stumbled forward, his crippled legs still entangled in the Abbess's now disintegrating magic coils. He hoped but one thing, that the Abbess should prove too willful to do the obvious, for if she ceased her struggles even momentarily, the pearl would collapse.

He fell, pulling himself forward on hands and knees, dragging the shield behind him.

As he approached the Abbess, he saw her turn from the pearl to attack him, but the orb took in even this bolt.

Brushing past the screaming form of Delafael, Root reached the altar of shields upon which Fross lay. He pulled himself up, putting his body between Fross and the brilliant orb, positioning the shield as best he could to ward off what he knew must come.

Fross was pale, bloodied, yet her eyes gleamed at Root's approach. Behind them, the orb reached the greatest extent its expansion could endure.

It was as if the sea, the sun, and all the winds of the earth had suddenly burst free from a single, explosive point. The roar alone overwhelmed the world, for the power of the amulet had been absorbed whole and turned against itself. The blow hit Root. The last thing he saw was the altar of shields collapsing beneath him. His last act was to wrap his arms about Fross, for he would protect her with his life.

###

Fross was nowhere and everywhere, above the world and below it. She could feel her own presence and the presence of others, yet her eyes saw nothing more than a graying sky, while her body knew the darkness of the earth as it closed its cold arms about her.

Fross's last memory was of Root.

From the swirling whispers about her, a single voice circled closer, becoming in time as clear as if she met with its owner, face to face.

"Come to my voice. Hear the words and follow them. Do you understand?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Palgrave," said the voice, which rumbled like the falling of stones. "I am the King's mage and master of the boy named Root. Do you remember?"

"Palgrave." Fross said the name. "Where have you found me?"

"You are on your way, little sister, on your way to the land of the dead. Even so, I want you to turn back... toward me. Heed my voice. Focus on my words and let them draw you to us."

"Palgrave," Fross said the name again. Certainly the voice calmed her, bore a comforting influence unlike any she had ever known.

"What happened at the last?" Fross asked. I saw the light. . . then nothing. It was as if the world died. Where are you? Are you in the abbey?"

"Yes, my dear. I am still in the world, in the abbey."

"How did you survive?" Fross asked.

"Delafael did me the honor," Palgrave explained. "One of her spells took me down. There followed armor, sword, and glaive, a rush of metal towering over me, ready to take my life. That rush of steel became my shield."

"A shield?" Fross was curious. She suspected the role Root must have played, but she wished to hear the words. She urged Palgrave for the story, and when he told it she was not disappointed, for his tale of the boy's bravery and sacrifice brought a smile to her heart.

"Your blessing gave him the skill," Palgrave said. "Of that I'm certain. If not for the shield he wielded against the final blow, you would be well beyond my reach. The King owes you a great debt, as do I. We shall talk of it. First, though, you must make an effort to follow my voice. Do not wander further."

Fross could feel the tug, the physical urging that caught at her middle and drew her slowly toward Palgrave's voice.

"How is it you have such power?" she asked.

"The sisters aid me, the Lady Beddoes for one. This is no tournament trick, dear Fross. We stretch ourselves to the point of danger. Now hurry. Obey me if you would live!"

"Tell me of Root."

"He is beyond my help." The voice was blunt, without pretense or softening.

"Can you not try?" Fross asked. By her own will, she stopped her movement.

"No, do not stop, my dear," Palgrave warned. "We have not the power to return you both."

"Can you not try?" Fross asked again. Silence. "Is that how you repay your debts?" she asked, her thoughts grown harsh, insistent.

"Root would suffer. He is beyond the limits of our call."

"Bring him back." It was simple, a statement said with finality, a demand to which she added but a single modification "Or leave me to go to him."

"Have you not heard what I said?" The voice of Palgrave boomed in her ears. It scolded her. "I cannot do as you ask. The chance for life is yours, little sister. Now, once again, come to my voice. Root would want it so."

"No."

The words seemed to pass back and forth between them forever, but for Fross there was no giving in. She could not say whether or not she loved Root, for love had never been a part of her life. What she did hold, close in her heart, was every word of every letter he had written. They spoke to her in his voice. They touched her cheeks with the warm tears of memory.

For long moments it seemed Palgrave had abandoned her, had left her to drift back toward the unknown dissolution of death. Then images began to come to Fross, colors and shapes, crosses and flowering vines. They circled her consciousness with a winged certainty, remaining visible before her, brilliant even when she closed her eyes. The images became a multitude, each icon joined in flight with so many of its brethren that any

single image became impossible to discern. Together they became as points of color, of shade and of light, the whole of them coalescing into something, some vision, some vastness that Fross could not at once take in.

A painting. A scene. A dream unfolded before her, around her. There was no question of refusing it. She knew weight again and the soft earth beneath her feet.

Before Fross stood a cottage, a home poor in appearance, but comfortable in means and secure against the weather. Gardens rich in flowers, herbs, and vegetables rose from the soil about it. Trees of apple, plum, and nut brought shade. At her side, a towering, bird-like figure stood gazing out upon the same scene. In its presence, Fross did not feel fear. When it spoke, she recognized the voice.

"This is not life," Palgrave said. "This is a dream between life and death, but a place nonetheless. We fashioned it from your inmost desire."

"Why did you do this?" By her question, Fross meant *why did you disobey me? Why have you prevented death from taking me to the boy, to the one whose love was stronger than death?*

"It is not what we wanted," Palgrave answered. "A gift beyond measure rests within you, and we did not wish to lose it. Your blessings anticipate fate. In time, you would have been able to tell us of the days ahead--"

"I saw this place," Fross interrupted, "in my sleep."

A ripple of laughter escaped the winged form. "We summoned the cottage from your thoughts, from the depths of dreams. Perhaps it too was a vision of the inevitable."

"I did not want this!"

"Yes, Lady Fross, you did." With that the winged form gestured, a sweep of shadowed feathers toward the fields beyond the cottage, toward a bed of roses below the groves. There Fross saw a cloaked form, low and bending into the roses. It lurched as it proceeded along the rows.

Without thinking, Fross began to run, but Palgrave caught her. A weight of claws and wings held her fast.

"Understand," said the mage, "this is not life. I could not save Root, nor return him whole even to your dreams. He may not know himself, or recognize you."

"Let me go to him!"

"Lady Fross, perform your ministrations well. I too treasure young Root. Could he be healed, there may be powers within him undiminished... magic enough to bring dreams to life." And upon those words, Fross felt the claws and enveloping wings of Palgrave release her.

Covering most of the distance at a run, Fross slowed as she reached the flowers, stepping carefully beyond the border of roses and toward the hunched figure beyond. She stood watching as Root wandered the rose bed,

seemingly lost in its colors, unaware of her presence, perhaps unaware of himself.

The day grew long, the light waned, and in all that time Fross stood by Root, a Root who seemed aware of rose buds and leaves, of crimson petals and of the unexpected prick of thorns, but not of her. At last, as the sun dipped below the roof of the cottage and Root turned to follow it, he noticed something else. Fross peered deep into clouded eyes, into a soul for which the shock of battle had stolen its very identity. And as she broke down and cried before her crippled love, he reached within his cloak and produced for her a single rose.

About the dream, as the flowers closed and the warmth of the sun faded into darkness, vast wings shut out the sight of the stars and held the cottage and its inhabitants in the cradle of night.

END