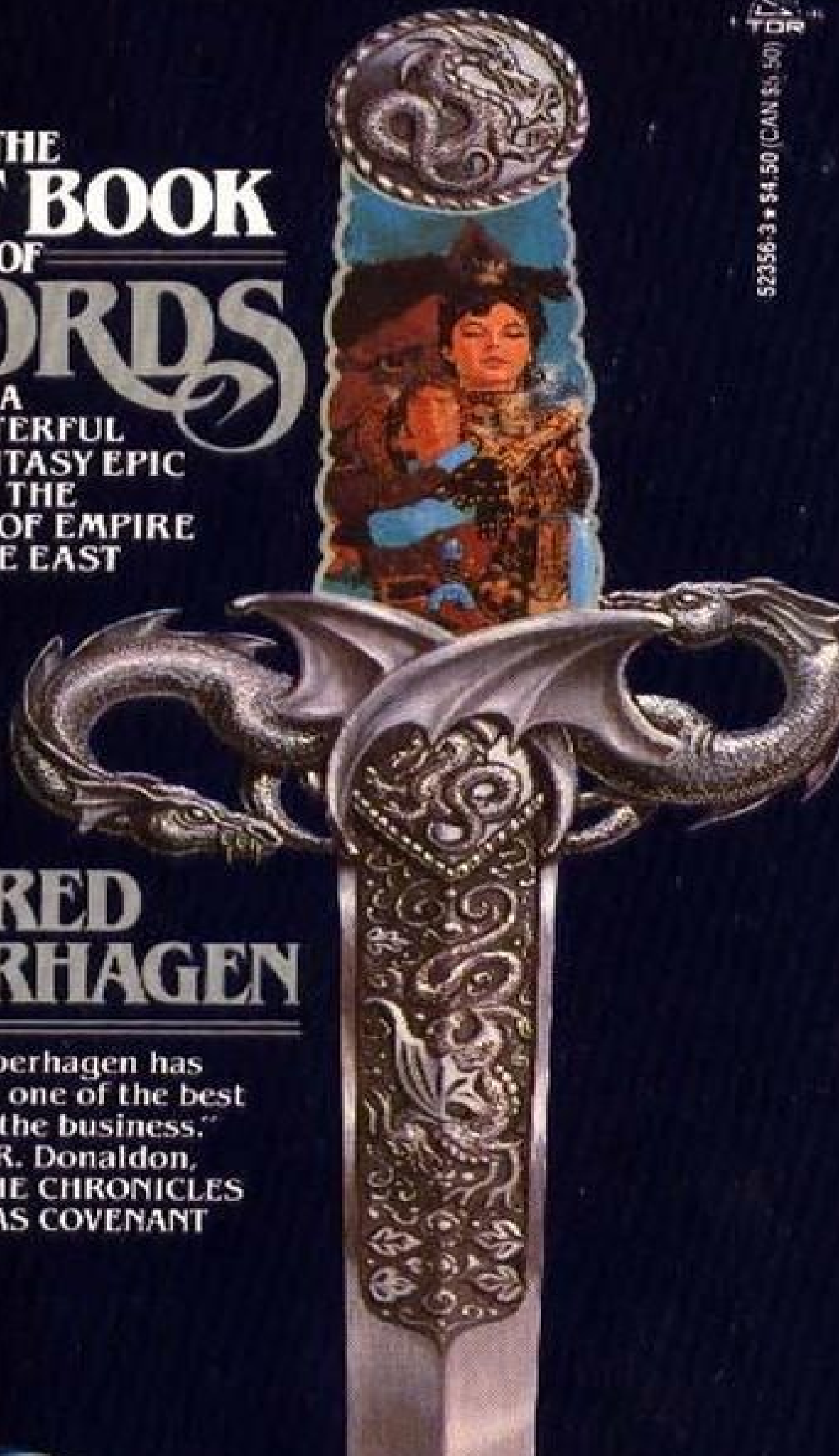


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PROLOGUE

In what felt to him like the first cold morning of the world, he groped for fire.

It was a high place where he searched, a lifeless, wind-scoured place, a rough, forbidding shelf of black and splintered rock. Snow, driven by squalls of frigid air, streamed across the black rock in white powder, making shifting veils of white over layers of gray ancient ice that was almost as hard as the rock itself.

Dawn was in the sky, but still hundreds of kilometers away, as distant as the tiny sawteeth of the horizon to the northwest. The snowfields and icefields along that far edge of the world were beginning to glow with a reflected pink.

Ignoring cold and wind, and mumbling to himself, the searcher paced in widening circles on his high rugged shelf of land. One of his powerful legs was deformed, enough to make him limp. He was searching for warmth, and for the smell of sulphur in the air, for anything that might lead him to the fire he needed. But his sandalled feet were too leathery and unfeeling to feel warmth directly through the rocks, and the wind whipped away the occasional traces of volcanic fumes.

Presently the searcher concentrated his attention on the places where rock protruded through the rough skin of ice. When he found a notable bare spot, he kicked; stamped with his hard heels, at the ice around its rim, watching critically as the ice shattered. Yes, here was a place where the frost was a trifle less hard, the grip of cold just a little weaker. Somewhere down below was warmth. And warmth meant, ultimately, fire.

Looking for a way down to the mountains heart, the searcher moved in a swift limp around one of its shoulders. He had guessed right; before him now loomed a great crevice, exhaling a faintly sulphurous atmosphere, descending between guardian rocks. He went straight to that hard-lipped mouth, but just as he entered it he paused, looking up at the sky and once more muttering something to himself. The sky, brightening with the impending dawn, was almost entirely clear, flecked in the distance with scattered clouds. At the moment it conveyed no messages.

The searcher plunged down into the crevice, which quickly narrowed to a few meters wide. Grunting, making up new words to groan with as he squeezed through, he steadily descended. He was sure now that the fire he needed was down here, not very far away. When he had gone down only a little way he could already begin to hear the dragon-roar of its voice, as it came scorching up through some natural chimney nearby to ultimately emerge he knew not where. So he continued to work his way toward the sound, moving among a tumble of house-sized boulders that had been thrown here like children's blocks an age ago when some upper cornice of the mountain had collapsed.

At last the searcher found the roaring chimney, and squeezed himself close enough to reach in a hand and sample the feeling of the fire when it came up in its next surge. It was good stuff this flame, with its origin even deeper in the earth than he had hoped. A better fire than he could reasonably have expected to find, even for such fine work as he had now to do.

Having found his fire, he climbed back to the windblasted

surface and the dawn. At the rear of the high shelf of rock, right against the face of the next ascending cliff, was a place somewhat sheltered from the wind. Here he now decided to put the forge. The chosen site was a recess, almost a cave, a natural grotto set into the cliff that towered tremendously higher yet: Out of this cave and around it, more fissurechimneys were splintered into the black basalt of the face, chimneys through which nothing now rose but the cold howling wind, drifting a little snow. The searcher's next task was to bring the earthfire here somehow, in a form both physically and magically workable; the work he had to do with the fire meant going deeply into both those aspects of the world. He could see now that he would have to transport and rebuild the fire in earth-grown wood-that would mean another delay, here on the treeless. roof of the world. But minor delays were unimportant, compared with the requirement of doing the job right.

From the corner of his eye, as he stood contemplating his selected forge-site, he caught sight of powers that raced airborne across a far corner of the dawn. He turned his head, to see in the distant sky a flickering of colors, lights that were by turns foul and gentle. Probably, he thought to himself, they are only at some sport that has nothing at all to do with me or my work. Yet he remained standing motionless, watching those sky-colors and muttering to himself, until the flying powers were gone, and he was once again utterly and absolutely alone.

Then he clambered down the surface of the barren mountainside, moving methodically, moving swiftly and nimbly despite one twisted leg. He continued going down for almost a thousand meters, to the level where the highest real trees began to grow. Having reached that level he paused briefly, regarding the sky once more, scanning it in search of messages that did not come. Wind, trapped and funneled here between the peaks, blasted his hair and beard that were as thick and wild as fur, whipped at his scorched garments of fur and leather, rattled the dragonscales he wore as ornaments.

And now, suddenly, names began to come and go in his awareness. It was as if he saw them flickering like those magical powers that flew across the sky. He thought: I am called Vulcan. I am the Smith. And he realized that descending even this moderate distance from the upper heights had caused him to start thinking in human language.

To get the size and quantity of logs he wanted for his fire, he had to go a little farther down the slope. Still the highest human settlements were considerably below him. The maplike spread of farms and villages, the sight of a distant castle on a hill, all registered in his perception, but only as background scenery with no immediate significance. His mind was on the task of gathering logs. Here, where the true forest started, finding logs was not difficult, but they tended to be from twisted trees, awkwardly shaped. It occurred to the Smith that an ax, some kind of chopping tool, would be a handy thing to have for this part of the job: but the only physical tools he had, besides his hands, were those of his true art, and they were all back at the site he'd chosen for his forge. His hands were all he really needed, though, clumsy though they could sometimes be with wood. If a log was too awkward, he simply broke it until it wasn't. At last, with a huge bundle that even his arms could scarcely clasp, he started back up the mountainside. His limp was a little more noticeable now.

During his absence the anvil and all his other ancient metal-

working tools had arrived at the forge-site, and were dumped therein glorious disorder. Vulcan put down his firewood, and arranged everything in an orderly array around the exact place where he had decided that the fire should be. When he had finished, the sun was disappearing behind the east face of the mountain that towered above his head.

Pausing briefly to survey what he had done so far, he puffed his breath a little, as if he might be in need of rest. Now, to go down into the earth and bring up fire. He was beginning to wish he had some slaves on hand, helpers to handle some of these time-consuming details. The hour was approaching when he himself would have to concentrate almost entirely upon his real work. He longed to see the metal glowing in the forge, and feel a hammer in his hand.

Instead, gripping one five-meter log under his arm like a long spear, he descended for the second time into the maze of crevices that ran beneath the upper mountain. Through this maze he worked his way back toward the place where fire and thunder rose sporadically through convoluted chimneys. This time he approached the place by a slightly different route, and could see the reflected red glow of earthfire shining from ahead to meet him. That glow when it encountered daylight seemed to wink, as if in astonishment at having found this place of air so different from the lower hell in which it had been born.

At one neck in this crevice the rocks on either side pinched in too much to let pass the Smith and his log together. He set down the log, and laid hands on the rocks and raged at them. This was another kind of work in which his hands were clumsy. Their enormous hairless fingers, like his sandalled feet, were splayed and leathery. His skin was everywhere gray, the color of old smoke from a million forge-fires. Now, with his effort against the rocks, the sandals on his huge feet pressed down on other rocks, dug into pockets of old drifted snow, crunched and shattered ancient ice. Presently the rocks that had narrowed the crevice gave way to the pressure of his hands, splitting and booming and showering fragments.

With a satisfied grunt, Vulcan the Smith took up his log again. One final time he paused, looking up at what could be seen from here of the day's clear sky—only a narrow tracery of blue. Then he went quickly on his way.

When he pushed one end of his log into the roaring chimney, the earthfire caught promptly and deeply in the wood. The log became a blazing torch when the Smith pulled it back from the inferno-fissure and tossed it spinning in the shadowed air. Its rosin popped and snapped with hot, perfumed combustion. Vulcan laughed, pleased with the forge-fire he had caught; then he tucked the log under his arm and quickly climbed again.

He built up his forge-fire quickly on the spot he had prepared for it. Now his anvil, a tabletop of ancient and enchanted iron, had to be positioned levelly and solidly in just the right spot relative to the fire. This took time. As he worked with the anvil, adjusting its position in small increments, the Smith decided that he'd have to make at least one more trip downslope for fuel before he'd be able to start his real work. After

he'd begun that in earnest, he'd want no interruptions. His eye fell on the waiting bellows. The sight made him frown. Yes, it would be very good, perhaps essential, to have some helpers.

The more he thought about it the more obvious it seemed. Yes, human help would be necessary at some stage, given the peculiar nature of this job. He now had earthfire burning in earth-grown wood, with the clean upper air of earth to lend its spirit to the flame. Opposed to this, in a sense, was the unearthly metal that he was going to work. At one side of the grotto, sky-iron waited, a lump of it the size of a barrow. It was so heavy that the Smith grunted when he took it up into his arms to look it over carefully. He could feel the interior energies of it waiting, poised in their crystalline layers, eager to be shaped by his art. He could feel the ethereal, unearthly magic of the stuff—yes, even crude-looking as it was, slagged and pitted on all sides by the soft fist of air that had caught and eased the madness of its fall, slowing the fall until mere crashing instead of vaporization had resulted when the mass struck earthly rock at last. Yes, the metal itself would bring enough, maybe more than enough, of the unearthly to the project.

Human sweat and human pain were going to be indispensable. The catalyst of human fear would help to refine the magic too. And even human joy might be put to use—if the Smith could devise any means by which that rare essence might be extracted.

And when the twelve blades had been forged at last, when he could raise them straight and glowing from the anvil—why, for their quenching, human blood would doubtless be best . . .

The keening pipe-music and the slow drum were borne to Mala's ears by the cool night breeze, well before the few dim lights of Treefall village came into her view between the trees ahead. The sounds of mourning warned her that at least some part of the horrible tale that had reached her at home was probably true. She murmured one more distracted prayer to Ardneh, and once again impatiently lashed with the ends of the reins at the flanks of the old riding-beast she straddled. Her mount was an elderly creature, unused to such harsh treatment, and to long night journeys in general. When it felt the sting of the reins it skipped a step, then slowed down in irritation. Mala in her impatience thought of leaping from its back and running on ahead, groping her own way along the lightless and unpaved road. But already she had almost reached her destination; now she could hear the cackling of the village fowl ahead as they sensed her approach. And now the first lighted windows were coming into view amid the trees.

Presently, on a main street every bit as small and narrow as the only street of her own town, Mala was dismounting under a million stars, whose light made gray and ghostly giants of the Ludus Mountains looming just a few kilometers to the east. Autumn nights in this high country grew cold, and she was wearing a shawl over her regular garb, a workingwoman's home-

spun trousers and loose blouse.

The music of mourning was coming from a building

that had to be the village hall, for it was the largest structure in sight, and one of the few lighted. Mala tied up her animal at a public hitching rack that was already crowded. Moving lightly, though her joints felt stiff from the long ride, she trotted the few steps to the hall. Her hair was long, dark, and curly, the loveliest thing about her physical appearance. Her face was somewhat too broad to be judged beautiful by most peoples standards; her body also was broad and strong, vibrant with youth and exercise.

Her quick step carried her onto the shadowed porch of the hall before she realized that a man was standing there already. He was in shadows, not far from the curtained doorway through which candlelight and music came out, along with the murmur of many voices and the soft thump of dancing feet. His bearded face was unfamiliar to Mala, but he had a certain look of importance; he must, she thought, be one of the elders here.

To simply rush past an elder without acknowledging his presence would have been impolite, and Mala halted, one foot in the shadow cast by the rising moon. "Sir, please, can you tell me where Jord the blacksmith is?" Since courtesy required speech of her, she would not waste the words. but instead try to use them to accomplish her urgent search.

The man did not answer her immediately. Instead, he only looked in her direction as if he had not clearly heard, or understood. As he turned his face more fully toward Mala, she saw that he was stunned by some great pain or grief.

She spoke to him again. "I'm looking for Jord, the smith. We were-we are to be married:"

Understanding grew in the tormented face. "lord? He still breathes, child. Not like my son-but both of them are in there."

Mala put aside the curtain of hides that half-closed the doorway, and went through, to enter the most crowded room that she had ever seen in her seventeen years of life. She guessed wildly that forty people, perhaps even more, were gathered here in one place tonight. Yet the hall was big enough for the crowd, even big enough to have at its center a sizable area free of crowding. In that central area stood five rude biers, each covered with black fabric, expensive candles burning at the head and foot of each. On each bier a dead man lay draped with ritual cloths; on several of the bodies the cloths were not enough to hide the marks of violence.

Near the foot of the central bier was a single chair. Jord was sitting in it. Mala's first glance at him made her gasp, confirming as it did another aspect of the eU story that had reached her in her own village: the right arm of her betrothed now ended a few centimeters below the shoulder. The stump was tightly wrapped, in fresh, well-tended bandages, lightly spotted with the bleeding from beneath. Jord's beard-stubbed face was aged and shrunken, making him

look in Mala's eyes like his own father. In his light hair there was a gray streak that she had never noticed before. His blue eyes were downcast, staring almost witlessly at the plank floor, and the dancers' feet that trod it slowly a pace or two away from him. The ring of village women who danced so slowly to the dirge went round the biers and chair, their feet hitting the floor softly in time to the drum, slow-beaten back in the rear of the large hall.

And outside the dancing ring, the other mourners—yes, there might really be forty of them—mingled and socialized, wept, joked, chatted, prayed, ate and drank, meditated or wailed in loss just as their spirits moved them, each in his or her own cycle of behavior. There was a priest of Ardneh, recognizable by his white suit, comforting an old woman who shrieked above all other sounds her agony of grief. Most of the crowd looked like folk of this village, as was only natural—the story had said that all the dead men were from here, as was Jord. Mala could recognize some of the faces in the crowd, from her earlier visits here to meet Jord and his kinfolk. But most of the people were unknown to her, and a few of them were dressed outlandishly, as if they might have come from far away.

Still standing near the doorway, looking over shoulders and between shifting bodies, Mala breathed a prayer of thanksgiving to Ardneh for Jord's survival; and yet, even as she prayed, she felt a new pang of inner anguish. The man she was going to marry had been changed, drastically and terribly, before she had ever had the chance to know him in his full health and strength and youth. Then as if trying to reject that thought she tried to step forward, meaning to hurry to Jord at once. But the thick press of bodies held her back.

At this moment she had the impression of an odd, momentary pause in the room—but it must have been only a seeming in her mind, she was not used to crowds, and when she looked at the faces in the crowd around her they were all doing just what they had been doing a moment earlier. But in that moment of pause, the hide curtain draping the doorway behind Mala had been put aside by someone else's hand. Amid the din of music and grief and conversation there was no way she could have heard that soft movement, but she did feel the suddenly augmented breath of the cold wind that at night here slid down from the mountains.

And then in the next moment a man's hand came to rest on Mala's arm—not insinuatingly, not harshly either, but just as if it had a right to be there, like the hand of a father or an uncle. But he was none of those. His face was entirely concealed by a mask, made of what looked like dark, tooled leather. The mask surprised Mala, but only for a moment. A few times in her life before, at wakes and funerals, she had seen men wearing masks. The explanation was that feuds could be exacerbated, friendships and alliances sometimes strained, if a man whose opinion mattered were

seen to be mourning openly for the enemy of a friend or ally; while at the same time, some conflicting rule of conduct might require him to do so. A mask allowed its wearer's identity to be ignored by those who did not wish to know it, even if it were not really kept a secret.

The masked man was somewhat on the short side, and well enough dressed in simple clothing. And Mala thought that he was young. "What has happened, Mala?" His voice, close to her ear, was almost a whisper. He knew her; so he was most likely some distant relative of Jord's. Or, thought Mala, noting the short sword at his belt, he might even be some minor lord or knight, one who had perhaps at some time been served by Jord as smith or armorer.

And the masked man must have come here from some distance, and must have just arrived, not to know already what had happened. In the face of such ignorance Mala stumbled over words, not so much trying to repeat the story as she had heard it as trying to find some reasonable explanation of the horror. But an explanation was hard to find.

She tried: "They . . . all six of them . . . they were called by a god to go up on the mountain. Then... " "Which god's call did they follow?" The quiet voice was not surprised by talk of gods; it wanted to nail down the facts.

One of the men who had been standing in front of Mala, unintentionally blocking her path to Jord, turned round at that. "They answered Vulcan's call. No doubt about it, the god chose them himself. I heard him-so did half the village-more than half. Vulcan himself came down here from the mountain in the night and called the six men out by name. The rest of us just lay low in our beds, I can tell you. Next day, when none of the six had come back yet, we gathered here in the hall and wondered. The women kept egging us on to find out what had happened, and eventually some of us started climbing . . . it wasn't pretty, what we found there, I can tell you."

"And what," the masked man asked, "if they had chosen not to follow Vulcans call?" The light in the hall was too uncertain, the shadows too heavy, for Mala to be able to tell if his hands looked like those of a worker or of a man highborn. The hair emerging from his jacket's cowl was dark, with a hint of curl, giving no clue about his station. Perhaps it was this very indeterminateness in his appearance that first raised in Mala's mind a suspicion that seemed to come out of nowhere: I wonder if this could be the Duke himself. Mala had never actually seen the Duke, but like thousands of his other subjects who had not seen him either she knew, or thought she knew, certain things about him. One of the most intriguing of these things was that he was supposed to go out in disguise from time to time, adventuring and spying among his people. According to other information, he was still a relatively young man; and it was also said that he was physically rather small.

Jord, Mala thought, might have worked for the Duke

at one time. Or some of the dead men on the biers might have. That could explain why the Duke had shown up here tonight . . . she told herself that she was making things up, but still . . . there were some stories told about the Duke's cruelty, on occasion, but then, Mala supposed, such stories were told about almost all powerful folk. Even if they were true, she thought, they didn't preclude the possibility that Duke Fraktin might sometimes take a benevolent interest in these poor outlying villages of his domain.

The solid citizen who had turned round to speak was plainly not entertaining any such exalted idea of the masked man's identity. Instead, he was looking him over as if not much impressed with what he saw, small sword or not. The citizen snorted lightly at the masked man's question, and shook his head. "When a god calls, who's going to stop and argue? If you want to know more about it, better ask Jord."

Jord had not noticed Mala yet. The brawny, young-old man with one arm and one bandaged stump still sat on his chair where ritual had placed him, almost as if he were one of the dead himself.

Mala heard the solid citizen saying: "His arm's still up there on the mountain, but he brought his pay for it back with him." Without trying to understand what this might mean, she pushed her way between the intervening bodies and ran to Jord. Inside the slow ring of dancers, Mala went down on one knee before the man she had pledged to marry, clutching at his one hand and at his knees, trying to explain how-sorry she was for what had happened to him, and how she had come to him as quickly as she could when the news of the horror reached her.

At first Jord said nothing in return, but only looked at Mala as if from a great distance. Gradually more life returned to his face and in a little while he spoke. Later, Mala was never able to remember exactly what either of them said in this first exchange, but afterwards Jord could weep for his friends' lives and his own loss, and Mala was able to comfort him. Meanwhile the dancing and feverish festivity went on, punctuated only by outbursts of grief. Looking back toward the entrance from her place near the center of the hall, Mala caught one more glimpse, between bodies, of the man in the tooled leather mask.

"All will be well yet, lass," Jord was able to say at last. "Gods, but it's good to have you here to hug!" And as Mala stood beside him he gripped her fiercely around the hips with a huge, one-armed blacksmith's hug. "I'm not yet destroyed. I've been thinking it out. I'll sell the smithy here and buy a mill elsewhere. There's one in Arin I can get . . . if I hire a helper or two, I can run a mill with one hand."

Mala said things expressing agreement, trying to sound encouraging. Closing her eyes, she hoped devoutly that it would be so. She told herself that when Jord healed he'd be a young man again, and he'd regain some part of his old strength. Being wed to a one-armed man would not be so bad if he were still a man of property . . . and now two small children, widower

Jord's by his previous marriage, came out of the crowd to lean possessively against their father's legs, and distract Mala from her other cares by staring at her. The hands of the small boy, Kenn, began to play absently with the rough cloth wrapping a long, thin object that stood leaning against his father's chair. Mala, without really giving it thought, had assumed this object was some kind of aid provided for the crippled man, a crutch or possibly a stretcher. Now that she really looked at the bundle she could see that it was certainly not long enough for either. Nor was there any obvious reason for a crutch or a stretcher to be wrapped up; nor, for that matter, did it appear that Jord would be likely to benefit from either one. Jord saw what she was looking at. "My pay," he said. Gently he eased his son's small hands from the wrapped thing. "Not yours yet, Kenn. In time, in time. Not yours to have to worry about, Marian." And with a huge finger he brushed his tiny daughter's cheek. Then he grabbed the upper end of the bundle firmly in his large fist, and raised it in the air and shook it, so that the rough wrappings fell free except where his grip had caught them. People on all sides were turning to look. The blade was a full meter long, and straight as an arrow, with lightly fluted sides. Both edges keened down to perfect lines, invisibly sharp. "What? Who?... " Mala could only stumble helplessly.

"Vulcan's own handiwork." Jord's voice was rough and bitter. "This is for me, and for my son after me. This is my pay."

Mala marveled silently. In the version of the story that she had heard in her own village, an obviously incomplete version, there had been nothing about a sword . . . Jord's pay? Even in the comparatively dim candlelight the steel had a polished look. Mala's keen eyes could pick out a fine, faint mottled patterning along the flat of the blade, a pattern that seemed to lead deep into the metal though the surface was flawlessly smooth.

The chain of dancers had slowed almost to a stop. Their faces wore a variety of expressions, but all were turned, like many in the crowd beyond, to look at the blade.

"My pay," said Jord again, in the same harsh voice, that carried through the sudden relative quiet. "So Vulcan told me, when he had taken off my arm." He shook the sword in his inexperienced hand. "My arm, for this. So the god said. He called this 'Town saver.'" The bitterness in Jord's voice was great, but still impersonal, the kind of anger a man might express against a thunderstorm that had destroyed his crops. His hand was beginning to quiver with his weakness now, and he lowered the sword and started trying to wrap it up again, a job in which he needed Mala's help.

"I must get something finer than this cloth to keep it in," he muttered.

Mala still didn't know what to say or think. The sword bewildered her, she couldn't guess what it might mean. Jord's pay, from Vulcan? Pay for what? Why

should the god have wanted a man's right arm? And why a sword? What would a blacksmith, or any commoner, have to do with such a weapon? She would have to discuss it all with Jord later, in detail. Now was not the time or place. Now the dance and the noise around them had picked up again, though at a lesser level of energy.

"Mala?" Jord's voice held a new and different note.

"Yes?"

"The dance will be ending soon. I must stay here, they're going to do some more healing spells and ritual. But maybe you'd better be going along now."

Jord was lying back weakly in his chair, letting his eyes close.

Mala understood. When a wake-dance like this one ended, there usually followed a final phase of the evening's community action: those mourners who were free to do so would pair off, man with woman, youth with girl, and go out into the fertile fields around the house or village, there to lie coupled in the soil from which the harvests came. Death would be, if not mocked, in some sense negated by that other power, just as old, of life-creation. Mala was still an unmarried woman, still free, in a strict interpretation of the rules, to join in the night's last ritual. But as her wedding was only two days off, it would be unseemly for her to do so with anyone but her betrothed. And Jord was still oozing blood, barely able to sit up in his chair. She said: "Yes, I'll be going. Tomorrow, Jord, I'll see you then." Now she would have a long ride back to her own village, or else she would have to try to find some place in this village to stay the night. She didn't feel confident about Jord's kinfolk here, how well they liked her, how welcome she'd be made to feel in their houses. Perhaps, except for the two small children, they didn't even know yet that she'd arrived. In accordance with custom, the marriage had been arranged by family elders on both sides, and there had been no long acquaintance between families.

Mala had liked Jord himself well enough from their first meeting. She had raised no objection when the match was made, and had no real objection to going on with it now; in fact his maiming had roused in her a fiercely increased attachment. But at the same time . . .

The center of the hall, with its burden of dead and wounded, seemed to her to stink of death and suffering and defeat. Mala gripped Jord once more, by his hand and his good shoulder, and turned away from him. Other people who like Mala were unable or unwilling to stay. were also leaving now. She went out through the hide-hung doorway with a small group of these, The group thinned rapidly, and somehow by the time she reached the hitching rack she was alone in the dark street. She took hold of her beast's reins to untie them.

"It is not over," said the calm, soft voice of the masked man, quite near at hand.

Mala turned slowly. There were only the massed stars to see him by, with the moon behind a cloud. He

was alone, too, holding one hand outstretched to Mala if she wished -to take it. Around them other couples passed in the dark street, moving anonymously out toward the fields.

Almost nine months had passed before Mala saw the dark leather mask and its wearer again, and then only among the other images of a drugged dream. She was traveling with her husband Jord to another funeral (this for a man who'd undoubtedly been her most eminent kinsman, a minor priest in the Blue Temple), and she'd got as far as a large Temple of Ardneh, almost two hundred kilometers from the mill and home, before the first unmistakable labor pains had started.

This being her firstborn, Mala hadn't been able to interpret the advance signs properly. Still, she could hardly have arranged to be in a better location no matter how carefully she'd planned. The Temples of Ardneh were in general the best hospitals available on the entire continent-for most folk they were actually the only ones. Many of Ardneh's priests and priestesses were concerned with healing, accustomed to dealing with childbirth and its complications. They knew drugs, and some healing magic, and in some cases they even had access to certain surviving technology of the Old World, enough of it to make possible the arcane art of effective surgery.

It was near sunset when Mala's labor began in earnest. And at sunset music began to be heard in that Temple, music that as it happened was not greatly different from what had been played at that village funeral eight and a half months earlier. It may have been the similar drumbeat that helped to bring that masked face back in dreams. The drumbeat, and of course Mala's fervent but so far utterly secret suspicion that the father of her firstborn was not Jord but rather that man whose face she'd never seen without its mask. Over the past few months she'd tried to find out what she could about Duke Fraktin, but apart from confirming his reputation for occasional cruelty, for occasional excursions among the common people in disguise, for wealth, and for magical power, she knew very little more now than she had before.

Tonight, lying in an accouchement chamber halfway up the high pyramidal Temple, Mala was questioned, in her lucid intervals between pain and druggings, about her dreams. Jord had been sent dashing out on some make-work errand by the midwife-priestess, who now asked Mala with brisk professional interest-and some evident kindness, too-exactly what she had dreamed about when the last contractions came. The drugs and spells reacted with pain directly, turning it into dreams, some happy and some not.

Mala described the masked man to the priestess as well as she could, his stature, hair, dress, short sword, and mask, all without saying when or where or how she had encountered him in real life. She added: "I think . . . I'm not sure why, but I think it may be Duke Fraktin. He rules all the region where we live:" And there was a secret pride in Mala's heart, a pride that

perhaps became no longer secret in her voice.

"Ah, I suppose the dream is a good omen, then."

But the priestess sounded faintly amused.

"YPU don't think it was the Duke?" Mala was suddenly anxious.

"You know more about it than I do, dear. It was your dream. It might have been the Emperor for, all I know."

"Oh, no, he didn't look like that. Don't joke." Mala paused there, her drugged mind working slowly. Everyone had heard of the Emperor, in jokes and anecdotes and sayings; Mala had never seen him, to her knowledge, but she knew that he was supposed to wear a clown's mask and not a gentleman's. When the priestess had mentioned that relic-title there had sprung into Mala's mind all of the town-louts, all the loafing practical jokers, that she had ever seen or known in any village. And next she thought of a certain real clown who for years had been appearing at fairs and festivals with a sad, grotesque face painted over his own features. Not that it had ever occurred to her that any of those men might really be the Emperor. In the anecdotes and jokes the Emperor was a very old man who was forever arguing an absurd claim to rule a vast domain, claiming tribute from barons and dukes, grand dukes and tyrants, even kings and queens. In some of the stories the Emperor was fond of pointless riddles. (And what if they had chosen not to follow Vulcan's call? echoed here, unpleasantly, in Mala's spinning head.) And in some of the stories he played practical jokes, some of which were appreciated as clever, by those who liked such things. There was also a proverbial sense, in which an illegitimate child of an unknown father, or anyone whose luck had run out, was spoken of as a child of the Emperor.

Mala had never had reason to consider the possibility of a real man still going about in the real world bearing that title, let alone that he might conceivably

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have ... no, she was drugged, not thinking clearly. The

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Duke-or whoever it had been-had been young, and he had certainly not worn the Emperor's clown mask.

TT
the hallucinatory haze that washed over

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her with the beginning of her next contractions, Mala could hear Jord coming back. Maybe, she thought, hopefully now, Jord was after all the baby's father. She couldn't see Jord very clearly, but she could hear him, panting from his quick climb up the many Temple steps, and sounding almost childishly proud of having successfully located whatever it was that the priestess had sent him after. And now Mala could feel his huge hand, holding both of hers, while he started talking worriedly to the priestess about how his first wife had died trying to give birth to their third child. What would Jord think now if he knew that it might have been the Duke . . .

And then the dream, into which this latest set of labor pangs had been transformed, took over firmly.

There was a shrill magical chanting in new voices, the voices of invisible beings who were marching round Mala's bed. Jord and the priestess and all other human beings were gone, but Mala had no time to be concerned about that, because there were too many purely delightful things to claim all of her attention, here in the flower garden where she was lying now . . .

The chanting rose, but other voices, in unmusical dispute, were intruding upon it, too loudly for any music to have covered them up: They sounded angry, as if the dispute was starting to get serious . . .

There were flowers heaped and scattered around Mala on all sides, great masses of blooms, including kinds that she had never seen or even imagined before, prodigally disposed. She lay on her back on a-what was it? a bed? a bier? a table?-and around her, beyond the banks of flowers, the gods themselves were furiously debating.

She was able to understand just enough of what they said to grasp the fact that some of the gods and goddesses were angry, unhappy with some of the things that Ardneh had been doing to help her-whatever those things were. From where Mala lay, she could see no more of Ardneh than his head and shoulders, but she could tell from even this partial view that he was bigger than any of the other deities. The face of Ardneh, Demon-Slayer, Hospitaller, bearer of a thousand other names besides, was inhumanly broad and huge, and something about it made Mala think of mill-machinery, the largest and most complex mechanism with which she was at all familiar.

She thought that she could recognize some of the others in the debate also. Notably the Smith, by the great forge-hammer in his hand, and his singed leather clothes, and above all by his twisted leg. For Jord's sake, Mala feared and hated Vulcan. Of course at the moment she was too drugged to feel very much about anyone or anything. And anyway the Smith never bothered to look at her, though he was bitterly opposing Ardneh. The argument between the two factions of the gods went on, but to Mala's perception its details gradually grew even less clear.

And now it seemed to Mala that her babe had already been born, and that he lay before her already cleaned and diapered, his raw belly bound with a proper bandage. Ardneh's faction had prevailed, at least for the time being. The baby's blue eyes were open, his small perfect hands were reaching for Mala's breast. The masked figure of his father stood in the background, and said proudly: "My son, Mark." It was one of the names Mala had discussed with Jord, one that appeared already in both their families.

"When the time comes," said the voice of Ardneh now, blotting out all other sounds (and the tones of this voice reminded Mala somehow of the voice of her dead father), "When the time comes, your first-born son will take the sword. And you must let him go with it where he will."

"His name is Mark," said the figure of the masked man in the dream. "My mark is on him, and he is mine."

And Mala cried aloud, and awoke slowly from her drugged and enchanted dream, to be told that her first-born son was doing just fine.

CHAPTER 1

One day in the middle of his thirteenth summer, Mark came home from a morning's rabbit-hunting with his older brother Kenn to discover that visitors were in their village. To judge from their mounts, the visitors were unlike any that Mark had ever seen before. Kenn, five years the older of the two, stopped so suddenly in the narrow riverside path that Mark, following lost in thought, almost ran into him. This was just at the place where the path came out of the wild growth on the steep riverbank, and turned into the beginning of the village's single street. From this point it was possible to see the four strange riding-beasts, two of them armored in chainmail like cavalry steeds, the other two caparisoned in rich cloth. All four were hitched to the community rack that stood in front of the house of the chief elder of the village. That hitching-rack was still an arrowshot away; the street of Arinon-Aldan was longer than streets usually were in small villages, because here the town was strung out narrowly along one bank of a river. 1

"Look," said Mark, unnecessarily.

"I wonder who they are," said Kenn, and caught his lower lip between his teeth. That was a thing he did when he was nervous. Today had not been a good day for Kenn, so far. There were no arrows left in the quiver on his back, and only one middle-sized rabbit in the gamebag at his side. And now, this discovery of highborn visitors. The last time the brothers had come home from hunting to find the mount of an important personage tied up at the elder's rack, it had been Sir Sharfa who was visiting. The knight had come down from the manor to investigate a report that Kenn and Mark had been seen poaching, or trying to poach, in his game preserves. There were treasures living in there, hybrid beasts, meant perhaps as someday presents for the Duke, exotic creatures whose death could well mean death for any commoner who'd killed them. In the end, Sir Sharfa hadn't believed the false, anonymous charges, but it had been a scare. .

Mark at twelve was somewhat taller than the average for his age, though as yet he'd attained nothing like Kenn's gangling height. If Mark bore no striking resemblance to Jord, the man he called his father, still there was-to his mother's secret and intense relief-no notable dissimilarity either. Mark's face was still child-round, his body form still childishly indeterminate. His eyes were bluish gray, his hair straight and fair, though it had begun a gradual darkening, into what promised to be dark brown by the time that he was fully grown:

"Not anyone from the manor this time," said Kenn, looking more carefully at the accoutrements of the four animals. Somewhat reassured, he moved forward

into the open village street, taking an increasing interest in the novelty.

"Sir Sharfa's elsewhere anyway," put in Mark, tagging along. "They say he's traveling on some business for the Duke." The villagers might not see their manorlord Sir Sharfa more than once or twice a year, or the Duke in a lifetime. But still for the most part they kept up with current events, at least those in which their lives and fortunes were likely to be put at risk.

The first house in the village, here at the western end of the street, was that of Falkener the leatherworker. Falkener had no liking for Jord the miller or any of his family-some old dispute had turned almost into a feud-and Mark suspected him of being the one who'd gone to Sir Sharfa with a false charge of poaching. Falkener was now at work inside his half-open front door, and glanced up as the two boys passed; if he had yet learned anything of what the visitors' presence meant, his expression offered no information on the subject. Mark looked away.

As the boys slowly approached the hitching rack, they came into full view of the Elder Kyril's house. Flanking its front door like a pair of sentries stood two armed men, strangers to the village. The guards, looking back at the young rabbit-hunters, wore wooden expressions, tinged faintly with disdain. They were hard, tough-looking men, both mustached, and with their hair tied up in an alien style. Both wore shirts of light chain mail, and emblems of the Duke's colors of blue and white. The two were very similar, though one was tall and the other short, the skin of one almost tar black and that of the other fair.

As Mark and Kenn were still approaching, the Elder's door opened, and three more men came out, engaged in quiet but urgent talk among themselves. One of the men was Kyril. The two with him were expensively and exotically dressed, and they radiated an importance the like of which Mark in his young life had never seen before.

"Ibn Gauthier." Kenn whispered the name very softly. The two brothers were walking very slowly now, their soft-booted feet dragging in the summer dust as they passed the Elder's house at a distance of some twenty meters. "The Duke's cousin. He's seneschal of the castle, too."

Seneschal was a new word to Mark-hen' never heard it come up in the village current-events gossip-but if Kenn was impressed by it, he was impressed also.

The third man in the little group, a graybeard like the Elder, wore blue robes. "And a wizard," added Kenn, his whisper falling almost to inaudibility. A real wizard? thought Mark. He wasn't at all sure that Kenn would know a real wizard if he saw one . . . but what actually impressed Mark at the moment was the behavior of the Elder Kyril. The Elder was actually being obsequious to his visitors, acting the same way some poor landless serf might when brought in to stand before the Elder. Mark had never seen the old man behave in such a way before.

Even during Sir Sharfa's periodic visits, the knight, who was actually the master, always spoke to the old man with respect, and listened to him carefully whenever village affairs were under discussion. Today's visitors were listening carefully too-Mark could see that though he couldn't hear what was being said-but gave no evidence that they regarded the Elder with respect.

The Elder's eye now happened to fall upon the two boys who were gaping their slow way past his house. He frowned abruptly, and called to Kenn by name, at the same time beckoning him with a brisk little wave; it was a more agitated motion than Mark could remember ever seeing the Elder make before.

When Kenn stood close before him, gaping in wonder, Kyril ordered: "Go, and take down that sword that hangs always on your father's wall, and bring it directly here." When Kenn, still goggling, hesitated momentarily, the old man snapped: "Go! Our visitors are waiting." To such a command, there could be only one possible response from any village youth. Kenn at once went pelting away down the long village street toward the millhouse at its far end. His legs, long and fast if lacking grace, were a blur of awkward angularity. Mark, poised to run after him, held back, knowing from experience that he wouldn't be able to keep up. And Mark also wanted to stay here, watching, to see what was going to happen next; and, now that he thought about it, he didn't want to have any part in simply taking down the sword, without his father's permission, from where it had always hung . . .

The three men of importance waited, gazing after Kenn, ignoring Mark who still stood twenty meters off and watched them. The blue-robed wizard-if wizard he truly was -figeted, glanced once toward Mark with a slight frown, and then away.

Kyril said, in a voice a little louder than before: "It will be quicker this way, Your Honor, than if we were all to go to the mill-house:" And he made a humble, nervous little bow to the one Kenn had whispered was the Duke's cousin. It was a stiff motion, one to which the Elder's joints could hardly have been accustomed. Now Mark began to notice that a few other villagers, Falkener among them, had started coming out of their houses here and there. There was a converging movement, very slight as yet, toward the Elder's house. They all wanted to know what was going on, but still were not quite willing to establish their presence in the street.

The man addressed by Kyril, whoever he might really be, ignored them as he might have sparrows. He stood posing in a way that suggested he was willing to wait a little, willing to be shown that the Elder's way was really the quickest and most satisfactory. He asked Kyril: "You say that this man who has the sword now came here thirteen years ago. Where did he come from?"

"Oh yes, that's right, Your Honor. Thirteen years. It was then that he bought the mill. I'm sure he had permission, all in order, for the move. He brought

children with him, and a new bride, and he came from a village up toward the mountains:" Kyril pointed to the east. "Yes sir, from up there:"

The seneschal, who was about to ask another question, paused. For Kenn was coming back already. He was carrying the sword in its usual corded wrapping, in which it usually hung on the wall of the main living room inside the house. Kenn was walking now, not running. And he was not coming back alone. Jord, his solid frame taller still than that of his slim-bodied elder son, strode with him. Jord's legs kept up in a firm pace with the youth's nervous half-trot.

Jord's work clothes were dusty, as they so often were from his usual routine of maintenance on the huge wooden gears and shafts that formed the central machinery of the mill. He glanced once at Mark-Mark could read no particular message in the look-and then concentrated his attention on the important visitors. Jord seemed reluctant to approach them, but still he came on with determination. At the last moment he put his big hand on Kenn's shoulder and thrust the youth gently into the background, stepping forward to face the important men himself.

Jord bowed to the visitors, as courtesy required. But still it was to Kyril the Elder that he first spoke.

"Where's Sir Sharfa? It's to him that we in the village must answer, for whatever we do when other high-born folk come here and-"

He who had been called the seneschal interrupted, effectively though with perfect calm. "Sir Sharfa's not available just now, fellow. Your loyalty to your manor-lord is commendable, but in this case misplaced. Sir Sharfa is vassal, as you ought to know, to my cousin the Duke. And it's Duke Fraktin who wants to see the sword that you've kept hanging on the wall."

Jord did not appear tremendously surprised to hear of the Duke's interest. "I have been told, Your Honor, to keep that sword with me. Until the time comes for it to be passed on to my eldest son."

"Oh? Told? And who told you that?"

"Vulcan, Your Honor." The words were plainly and boldly spoken. Jord's calm assurance matched that of the man who was interrogating him.

The seneschal paused; whatever words he'd been intending to fire off next were never said. Still he was not going to let himself appear to be impressed by any answer that a mere miller could return to him. Now Ibn Gauthier extended one arm, hand open, rich sleeve hanging deeply, toward Kenn. The youth was still standing in the background where his father had steered him, and was still holding the wrapped blade.

The seneschal said to him: "Well see it now."

Kenn glanced nervously toward his father. Jord must have signalled him to obey, for the lad tugged at the wrapping of the sword -a neatly woven but undistinguished blanket-as if he intended to display the treasure to the visitors from a safe distance.

The covering of the sword fell free.

The seneschal stared for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Give it here!"

What happened in the next moment would recur in Mark's dreams throughout the remainder of his life.

And each time the dream came he would experience again this last moment of his childhood, a moment in which he thought: Strange, whatever can be making a sound in the air like flying arrows? \

The Elder Kyril went down at once, with the feathered end of along shaft protruding from his chest. At the same time one of the armed guards fell, arrows in his back and ribs, his sword only a glint of steel half-drawn from its scabbard. The second guard was hit in the thigh; he got his spear raised but could do no more. The wizard went down an instant later, with his blue robes collapsing around him like an unstrung tent. The seneschal, uninjured, whirled around, drawing his own short sword and getting his back against a wall. His face had gone a pasty white.

The volley of arrows had come from Mark's right, the direction where trees and bush grew close and thick along the near bank of the Aldan. The ambushers, whoever they were, had been able to get within easy bowshot without being detected. But they were charging out of cover now, running between and around the houses closest to the riverbank. A half-dozen howling, weapon-waving men were rushing hard toward the Elder's front yard, where the victims of their volley had just fallen. Two large warbeasts sprang out of concealment just after the attacking men, but bounded easily ahead of them. One beast was orange-furred and one brindled, and both of their bodies, like those of fighting men, were partially clothed in mail. They were nearly as graceful as the cats from which half their ancestry derived.

Mark had never seen real warbeasts before, but he recognized them at once, from the descriptions in a hundred stories. He saw his father knocked down by the orange beast in its terrible passage, before Jord had had time to do more than turn toward his elder son as if to cry an order or a warning.

The seneschal was the beasts' real target. and they leaped at him, though not to kill; they must have been well trained for this action. They forced the Duke's cousin back against the front of fallen Kyril's house, not touching but confronting him, snarling and sparring just outside the tentative arc of his swordarm. When he would have run to reach his tethered riding-beast, they forced him back again. Now all four of the tethered animals at the rack were kicking and bucking, screaming their fear and excitement in their near-human voices.

Kenn, in the first instant of the attack, had turned to run. Then he had seen his father fall, and had turned back. White-faced, he stood over his father now, clumsily holding the unwrapped sword, with the blade above the fallen man as if it could be made into a shield.

Mark, who had run two steps toward home, looked back at his father and his brother and stopped. Now with shaking fingers Mark was pulling the next-to-last small hunting arrow from the quiver on his back. His

rabbit-hunting bow was in his left hand. His mind felt totally blank. He comprehended without emotion that a man, the soldier who'd fallen with an arrow in his leg, was being stabbed to death before his eyes. Now the charging men, bandits or whatever they were, had joined their warbeasts in a semicircle round the beleaguered seneschal, and were calling on him to throw down his sword and surrender.

But one of the attackers' number had turned aside from this important business, and was about to deal with the yokel who still stood holding a sword. The bandit grinned, probably at the inept way in which Kenn's hands gripped the weapon; still grinning, he stepped forward with his short spear ready for a thrust.

At that point Mark's shaking fingers fumbled away the arrow that he had just nocked. He knelt, in an uncontrolled movement that was almost a collapse, and with his right hand groped in the dust of the road for the arrow. He was unable to take his eyes from what was about to happen to his brother-
A moaning had for some moments been growing in the air, the sound of some voice that was not human, perhaps not even alive. The sound rose, quickly, into a querulous, unbreathing shriek.

It issued, Mark realized, from the sword held in his brother's hands. And a visual phenomenon had grown in the air around the sword. It was not exactly as if the blade were smoking, but rather as if the air around it had begun to burn, and the steel was drawing threads of smoke out of the air into itself.

The spearthrust came. The sound in the air abruptly swelled as the spear entered the swifter blur made by the sideways parry of the sword. Mark saw the spearhead spinning in midair, along with a handsbreadth of cleanly severed shaft. And before the spearhead fell, Townsaver's backhanded passage from the parry had torn loose the chainmail from the spearman's chest, bursting fine steel links into the air like a handful of summer flowers' fluff. The same sweep of the sword-point caught the small shield strapped to the man's left arm, and with a bonebreak snap dragged him crying into the air behind its arc. His body was dropped rolling in the dust.

Now Mark's groping fingers found his dropped arrow, and he rose with it in his hand. He could feel his own body moving with what seemed to him terrible slowness.

Townsaver had come smoothly back to guard position, the sound that issued from it subsiding to a mere purring drone. Kenn's face was anguished, his eyes were fixed in astonishment on the blade that grew out of his hands, as if it were something that he had never seen before. There was a vibration in his arms, as if he were holding something that he could not control, but could not or dared not drop.

One of the invaders, who must have been the warbeasts' master, aimed a gesture toward Kenn. Obediently the orange-furred beast turned and sprang. At that moment Mark loosed his arrow. Mark had not

yet learned to reckon with the animals' speed, and the streaking furry form was out of the arrow's path before the small missile arrived. As if guided by some profound curse, Mark's arrow flew straight on between two bandits' backs, to strike the embattled seneschal squarely in the throat. Without even a cry, the Duke's cousin let go of his sword and fell.

The sword in Kenn's hands screamed, almost the way a fast-gearred millsaw screamed sometimes when biting a tough log. Again it drew its smoking arc, to meet the leaping animal. One orange-furred paw leapt -severed in midair, with a fine spray of blood. The same stroke caught the beast's armored torso, heavier than a man's. It went down, as Mark had seen a rabbit fall when hit in mid-leap by a slinger's stone. Mark was fumbling for his last arrow as the furred body rolled on its back with legs in the air, claws in reflex convulsions taloning the air above its belly.

Now three men had Kenn surrounded. Mark, with his last arrow nocked, was at the last moment afraid to shoot at any of them for fear of hitting his brother in their midst. He saw blades flash toward his brother, but Kenn did not fall. Kenn's eyes were still wide with bewilderment, his face a study of fear and horror. Townsaver sang vicious circles in the air around him, smashing aside brandished weapons right and left. The sword seemed to twist Kenn's body after it, so that he had to leap, turning in midair, coming down with feet planted in the reverse direction. The sword pulled him forward, dragging him in wide-stanced, stiff-legged strides to the attack.

The sound of its screaming went up and up.

The swordplay was much too fast for Mark to follow. He saw another of the attacking men go staggering backward from the fight, the man's feet moving in a reflex effort to regain balance until his back struck a house wall and he pitched forward and lay still. Mark heard yet another man cry out, a gurgling yell for help and mercy. Mark did not see the brindled warbeast leap at Kenn, but saw the beast go running back toward the riverbank, in a limping but still terribly fast flight. It howled the agony of its wounds, even above the fretful millsaw shrieking of the sword. And now two of the invading men, weaponless, were also running away, leaving the village on divergent paths. Mark got a close look at the face of one of them, and saw wide eyes, wide mouth, an expression intent on flight as on a problem.

The other invaders were all lying in the street. Four, five-it seemed impossible to count exactly.

Mark looked up and down the street, to west and east. Only himself and his brother were still standing. A little summer dust hung in the air, played by a quiet breeze. For a long moment, nothing else moved. Then Kenn's quivering arms began to droop, lowering the sword. The machine-whine that still proceeded from the red blade trailed slowly down into silence. And now the atmosphere around the sword no longer smoked.

The swordpoint sagged to the ground. A moment

later, the whole weapon fell inertly from Kenn's relaxing fingers. Another moment, and Kenn sat down in the dust. Mark could see, now, how his brother's blood was soaking out into his homespun shirt.

Mechanically replacing his last arrow, unused, in his quiver, Mark hurried forward to his brother. Beyond Kenn, Jord still lay in gory stillness; his head looked badly ruined by the passing blow from a warbeast's paw; Mark did not want to comprehend just what he was seeing there.

Farther in the background, the blue-robed wizard was raising himself, apparently unhurt. In each hand the wizard held a small object, things of magic doubtless. His hands moved round his body, wiping at the air.

Mark crouched beside his brother and held him, not knowing what else to do. He watched helplessly as the blood welled out from under Kenn's slashed clothing. The attackers' swords had reached him after all, and more than once. Kenn's hunting shirt was ghastly now.

"Mark:" Kenn's voice was lost, soft, frightened, and frightening too. "I'm hurt:"

"Father!" Mark cried, calling for help. It seemed to him impossible that his father would not react, leap up, give him aid, tell him what to do. Maybe he, Mark, should run home, get help from his mother and his sister. But he couldn't just let go of Kenn, whose hand was trying to grip Mark's arm.

In front of Kenn, almost within touching distance, a dead bandit crouched as if in obeisance to his superior foe. Townsaver had taken a part of the bandit's face away, and his hands and his weapons were piled together before him like an offering. It did no good to look away. There was something very similar to be seen in every direction.

The sword itself lay in the street, looking no more dangerous now than a pruning hook, with dust blandly blotting the wet redness all along the blade.

Mark let out an inarticulate cry for help, from anyone, anywhere. He could feel Kenn's life departing, running out almost like water between his fingers.

Women were crying, somewhere in the distance.

Someone, walking slowly, came into Mark's view a little way ahead of him. It was Falkener. "You shot the seneschal," the leather-worker said. "I saw you:"

"What?" For a moment Mark could not understand what the man was saying. And now the wizard, who had been bending over the body of Ibn Gauthier, came doddering, as if in fear or weakness (though graybeard, he did not look particularly old) to where Mark was.

The small objects he had been handling, whatever they were, had now been put away. With what appeared to Mark to be unnatural calm, he rested a hand on Jord's bloody head and muttered something, then reached to do the same for Elder Kyril and for Kenn.

His manner was quite impersonal.

The women's crying voices were now speeding closer, with the sound of their running feet. Mark had not known that his mother could still run so fast. Mala

and Marian, both of them dusty with mill-work, threw themselves upon him, hovered over their fallen men,

began to examine the terrible damage.

"You shot the seneschal," said Falkener to Mark again.

This time, the hovering wizard took note of the accusation. With an oath, he grabbed the last arrow from Mark's quiver and strode away, to compare it with the shaft that still protruded from the throat of the Duke's cousin.

Other villagers were now appearing in the street, to gather around the fallen. They came out of their houses singly at first, then in twos and threes. Some, with field implements in hand, must have come, running in from work nearby. The Elder was dead, the village leaderless. An uproar grew, confusion mounted. There was talk of dashing off to the manor with word of the attack, but no one actually went yet. There was more talk of organizing a militia pursuit of the attackers, whoever they had been, wherever they had gone. Wild talk of war, of raids, of uprisings, -flew back and forth.

"Yes, they were trying to kidnap the seneschal. I saw them. I heard them."

"Who? Kidnap who?"

"Kyрил's dead too. And Jord:"

"But it was the boy's arrow that struck him down."

"Who, his own father? Nonsense!"

'...no...'

'... all wrong, havoc like this, must have been cavalry...'

'... no doubt that it's his arrow, I've found them on my land, near my woolbeasts...'

Mala and Marian had by now stripped off Kenn's shirt and were trying to bind up his wounds. It looked a hopeless task. Kenn's eyes were almost closed, only white slits of eyeball showing. Mala went to Jord's inert form, and with tears streaming from her eyes tried to get her husband to react, to wake up to what was happening around him. "Husband, your oldest son is dying. Husband, wake up... Jord... ah, Ardneh! Not you too?"

A neighbor woman hovered over Mala, trying to help. Together they put a rolled blanket under Jord's head, as if that might be of benefit.

Mark turned from them, and sat staring at the sword. Something less terrible to look at. It was as if thoughts were coming and going in his head continually, but he could not grasp any of them. Only look at the sword. Only look-

He became aware that his mother was gripping his arm fiercely, shaking him out of his state of shock. In a voice that was low but had a terrible power she was urging him: "Son, listen to me. You must run away. Run fast and far, and don't tell me, don't tell anyone, where you're going. Stay out of sight, tell no one your name, and listen for word of what's happening here in Arin. Don't think about coming home until you know it's safe. That's your arrow in the Duke's cousin's throat, however it got there. If the Duke should get his hands on you, he could have your eyes put out, or

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