

PART 2
of

THE LAST GIANT: TRANSGRESSION

by

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Chapters 1-3

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CHAPTER I

(SUMMER OF THE WORLD 6097)

MENANNON STOOD FACING A LARGE METAL GATE whose surface was incised with ancient runes of power. In its exact middle was carved the word 'Kalyria.' He halted uncertainly, facing the gate. As he stood there, he could almost hear Grandmaster Blackmore speaking softly, his words as clear in his mind now as when he heard them: "There is a choice. You can still turn back; the way is on the vellum I gave you."

He paused before taking that fateful last step, reconsidering. He could turn around, retrace his steps through the Straight Paths, return to the harper hall in Aridion city and complete his master's trials. Or, he could take that step forward and ... what? The future on the other side of that gate was utterly unknown and fraught with danger, yet in that place were his sire and the woman he loved and they were in danger. No, *master, there is no choice. I must go to them and do what I can, though it cost me my life.*

With that thought still echoing in his mind, Menannon stepped forward into the unknown. The gate cracked down the middle and ground open. He stepped through and it closed behind him, shutting out the cobalt light, leaving him almost blinded in a chamber dark and silent.

A quick glance around revealed he had emerged in the sanctuary deep within the solid stone walls of Kalyria's harper hall. There were no openings to the world outside, and it was lit only by the vigil lamp hanging above the high altar, its light almost lost within the groin of the great vault above it. For all the warning of his heart, the presence of the High One's consecration created a peaceful hush in the great chamber and calmed his fears for the nonce. As long as the vigil lamp burned, nothing truly evil could enter this place.

He looked about and found nothing amiss. The sanctuary was just as he remembered it from his apprentice days here. There was a small side door almost hidden in back of the titular throne set behind the high altar for the use of the priest

officiating at the services. This door led to, among other places, a tunnel built into the very wall of the sanctuary and thence to the rear of the building hard by the east side of the Kidron Gorge. Were he ever in need of total secrecy in entering or exiting the harper hall, that is the way he would use, but for now, he did not wish to call any attention to it and so chose to leave the hall in the normal manner.

He bowed to the lamp acknowledging the High One, silently asking for His protection and guidance and thanking Him for bringing him back to Kalyria. Now he must seek out his sire and satisfy himself that all was well with him. If all was not well ... nothing would be able to protect Azuron. With that resolve burning in his heart, Menannon turned and hurried to the chamber doors. There he halted and listened intently. There was no sound from without.

Kalyria's harper hall was a day school which housed very few members of the guild itself. Only the Master, his few journeymen and serving men actually dwelt in the hall, as most of the students and apprentices returned to their parents' homes at the end of the day. The few exceptions to this were the small group of students from the outlying villages of the island. These boys alone slept in the dormitory wing.

The young Giant eased open the door to find the outer hall deserted, though there was the sound of a low-voiced conversation coming from around a sharp curve in the corridor which led to the classroom wing. He quickly darted across the hall and out the front doors into the shadows of the tall pillars supporting the portico. He was just in time, for the door had barely closed when the sound of feet could be heard just beyond it and the panel nearest him began to swing open.

Two figures emerged—one a harper in full robes, Elder Journeyman Davin, and the other a workman in the cotte and leather apron of a tanner. Menannon willed himself to be unseen in his shadow and watched as the twain passed down the wide front steps, made their way across the close and disappeared out of the gate into the surrounding night. He breathed a small prayer of thanks and set himself to follow in their footsteps as silently as only a Giant can.

His stomach tightening into knots again, Menannon hurried silently up the Idrian way and across the connecting bridge to

the Citadel. The thought that he would soon be in his sire's presence after all these months of uncertainty lent wings to his feet. He halted in the shadows of the bridge's guy rope pylons, wondering which was the safer course... to follow the King's road on up to the top of the Citadel or stay on the thoroughfare and cross the hill's face past the humbler shops and homes gracing its sides? He needed to reach his sire's villa unseen. Despite the lateness of the hour there were lights aplenty at scattered points along the thoroughfare. Though there would be actual guards on duty at the Citadel's crown there would be fewer eyes to stray in his direction as the wealthy watched not the darkness without for their store of gossip and information. They were their own source of such entertainment and thus sought no farther than their own villas. Of what interest to them was a lone figure striding along in the night. Menannon turned right and set his course upward.

Careful not rouse the attention of the doorwards on duty at the font of the council hall, he halted at its back corner and looked down towards the harbor. The city was alight as usual with no lack of movement along the lower streets and near the docks, but the sounds of the night were hushed as if enfolded in a heavy, muffling cloak. Menannon looked beyond, to the twin towers of the Crescent to see their lights shining bravely into the darkness, but beyond them there was no sign of the strange, all-encompassing mist of which Grandmaster Blackmore had spoken. Above, the sky blazed with the stars of the Bridge. Menannon was puzzled, for he expected the mist to be as visible from the island as it was from the sea, yet it was not.

Menannon quickly crossed the plaza, allowing himself only one quick glance at Nirna's darkened window. Tomorrow, he promised himself. Tomorrow would he call upon her and tell her the joyous results of his researches on their behalf. He had to force himself not to throw pebbles at her shutters now and blurt out his news.

Resolutely he forced himself to turn away, cross the plaza and run lightly along the Mathematical bridge to the Equian and up the road towards his sire's villa, his pack bumping against his shoulder. The night was so still he could hear the passage of small animals through the bushes along his path and

the muted sound of voices coming from the gardens behind the walls of the villas he passed, not unusual for this area of the city was normally peaceful at night. Yet there was a quality to the silence that was rather more like the muffled, waiting stillness before a storm.

Menannon quickened his pace. At the last corner below his sire's villa, he halted and listened. At first, he heard nothing save the beating of his own heart. He forced his senses past himself into the darkness beyond. Then he heard it: breathing and slight movement, a foot turning against gravel, sounds quickly hushed. There were others abroad this night watching Gorlandon's villa for some purpose of their own, one which could not but bode ill for his sire.

At this thought, his heart began to pound painfully as his sense of dread increased. How could all be well with his sire if there were watchers in the night? Forcing himself to breathe lightly so that the sound did not carry, Menannon eased back away from the curve in the road and slipped into the bushes between two ancient walled gardens and circled around his sire's villa keeping well below the wall. It took him the better part of a half turn of the hour to reach the back wall hard by the hill enclosed within. Even here, there were parties of armed men stretched full length on the ground, watching the walls. Almost he stepped on one such, though by the High One's blessing, the monotony of the night had had its way with the fellow and he was snoring softly.

Forcing his racing heart to still, Menannon stepped over the prostrate figure and continued on until he reached the lowest spot in the wall and felt its face for a small set of shallow toe holds which made a set of crude stairs to the top. He had himself in his childhood chiseled them to ease his re-entry into his sire's villa when he had gone exploring without his sire's knowledge. The holes that had served well enough for the foot of a six-summer old child were barely adequate for the toes of that self-same child now grown. It was a chancy thing, but he made it and managed to roll soundlessly onto the top of the wall where he lay still once again, forcing himself to listen for sounds beyond the pounding of his heart.

Within were only normal sounds, a smattering of laughter coming from the kitchen where the scullery servants would be

finishing up getting the kitchen ready for tomorrow's work. The rest of the house was dark and silent, the household having retired for the night. Menannon was struck by the difference in time between Aridion City, where it had been evening when he left, and Kalyria where it was closer to the mid-of-night, something he had never really thought about before this. Being further east, Kalyria was obviously several hours later than Aridion City, but it took the instantaneous travel of the Paths to bring this fact to his attention. Well enough. There would be occasion for rumination on the oddities of time later, but now he needed his wits about him, for danger lurked in the darkness without.

The sound of a lute came softly from the summerhouse which, though it was dark, was apparently in use with the windows closed and the screens lowered to ensure privacy. Who was playing? Menannon knew no lutenists among his sire's folk. There were also the muffled sounds of children's voices coming from an open, though dark, window in one of the bedchambers in the west wing of the house. Whose children could they be? Surely Firod's wife and family had not returned from Pedura so long as danger lurked here! Though danger waited without, he sensed a peaceful calm within. Well, whatever was going on outside the walls seemed to have no effect inside.

Menannon heaved a soft sigh of relief, his pulses quickening with anticipation as in moments now he would be with his sire and his questions would be answered. He rolled over and lowered himself from the wall, dropping lightly into the shadows behind the summerhouse. He started to stand, but the prick of a spear point at the hollow of his throat halted him mid-movement.

"So, what have we here? A spy? An assassin?"

The words were spoken in a soft murmur just barely above a whisper so they would not carry to any who might be interested without the walls.

"Or is it a blockheaded harper who should be hundreds of leagues away from this place in the safety of the royal city of the Men of the Long Ships? Perhaps Mid-summer's day has come early this season?" At this, Menannon jerked his head up and tried to see who held the other end of the spear, but all he

could see was a dark shape. At his movement, the point dug in just slightly, drawing blood.

“Easy now, stand up and go into the summerhouse. You know the way and no tricks or I’ll make sure Gorlanndon allows me your discipline for disobeying him. Now, move!”

From this last, Menannon realized that he was being confronted by none other than Skendrin himself for more than once in his childhood the steward had been tasked with his discipline. The one drawback to dealing with men who had helped to raise him was that they could all remember him as a child. The spear pricked again at his hesitation causing Menannon to follow the instructions given with alacrity.

He circled soundlessly around the summerhouse to its stairs and climbed them two at a time. The spear never ceased to be in contact with some part of his anatomy the entire way. He reached the door and found it locked.

“Knock twice, count to three and open it,” Skendrin murmured from the vicinity of his shoulder.

Menannon did as he was bid. His knock was followed by the sound of a chair moving within, then the lock turned, grating softly. There was no other sound.

“Count.”

Menannon began to count mentally.

“Aloud.”

Menannon cleared his throat. “One...”

“Quietly.”

“One...two...three!” he murmured, then gently pushed the door open on darkness though he could sense the presence of people within.

Skendrin gave him a slight shove inside and the door was shut behind them. He heard the sound of the lock grate again and the central Dwarf lantern was instantly unshuttered, its light nearly blinding him after the darkness of the night.

“What in all Hella is the meaning of this?” Gorlanndon’s outraged growl demanded at his elbow.

“It would seem thou dost possess a most disobedient son, old friend.” The voice of Lord Lonier sounded from the far side of the table.

Menannon’s eyes grew accustomed to the light and he looked up into his sire’s face. After all the sevendays of worry

and uncertainty, the sight of his sire sitting there at ease in his own summerhouse strong and in good health made Menannon's knees go weak with relief. Only the nearness of the table allowed him to keep his feet as he reached out a quick hand to its edge.

He glanced about to see that there were three other people in the summerhouse besides his sire and Skendrin at his back: Firod, Irenos and Lord Lonier. The Teluri was holding the now silent lute he had heard from the wall. All were staring at him with varying degrees of anger reflected in their eyes. Skendrin pushed him rather unceremoniously to stand directly in front of his sire. His reception was exactly as he had expected it would be.

At the sight of his son, Gorlanndon was instantly so furious his eyes began glowing slightly red and his face blanching white to the lips. More swiftly than Menannon would have credited, his sire lunged at him and had his right arm in a vicelike grip twisting it up behind his back nearly breaking it.

"No lies, boy! What in all Hella are you doing here and more to the point, how by the very throne of the High One Himself, did you get here? Your master's trials are not to be held for at least a sevenday yet!"

Menannon forced himself to ignore the pain in his arm and looked his sire eye to eye, his own anger rising out of his fear to nearly match his sire's.

"Suffice it to say, my father, I am here!" he snarled. "And I will not return hence without you! We swore an oath, you and I, the day we left Lornennog that we would ne'er be parted, no matter the cause, until the day Kaalamar is restored to the realms of this world. For my own good, you forced me to be foresworn and leave your side to train at the harper hall in Aridion City. That training is now complete and I am free to choose my path. I have chosen to leave the harper's guild and return to you. You may have chosen to be foresworn, but I have not!" Menannon's voice rose at the end and all present shushed him.

The elder Giant sat still a long moment studying his son's face, then he relaxed. He glanced at Skendrin beyond Menannon's shoulder and shook his head.

"As the High One is my witness, what can one do with

such a son?" He released his hold on his willful son and very gently took Menannon's face between his hands and kissed his brow. "I love you, boy, more than I could ever tell you. I sent you away because I sought to keep you safe. I now know why you came back, but I still know not how you returned. There are no ships"

"I came not by ship, though of how I made the journey I am not at liberty to speak, for it is not my secret to tell. Suffice it to say I am come and can go back the same way with any who desire to leave this place."

"That is a useful bit of knowledge, youngster," Lord Lonier spoke up, "but it is hardly wise to make plain that there is at least one other way on and off this island. So how shall we explain your sudden appearance among us once more?" The old lord looked around at the others only to see Irenos grinning slightly and glancing at Gorlanndon as though they shared some jest between them.

"I see nothing humorous in this, sirrah," Lonier snapped, giving the Teluri a sour look.

"I" Irenos began, turning to his inquisitor, but Gorlanndon halted him with a hand on his arm and answered himself.

"Not humorous, yet it is ironic. Irenos is simply reminding me that one ne'er knows what useless skill will one day become useful and therefore any skill should be learned e'en if it cannot in all good conscience be practiced."

At this statement, Irenos began to grin outright.

"So, allow all present to enjoy this ... irony," Lonier was not quite sure the Teluri was not having him on.

At the look the old lord gave him, Irenos swallowed and grew serious though his grey eyes still twinkled.

"Many summers ago, I discovered an ancient scroll containing many lost arts practiced by Gilarian, one of our most ancient kings. Among these arts was that of Distance Bending. I found this art fascinating and spent many summers perfecting its use much to the displeasure of my sire. Though my Lord Gorlanndon was ever encouraging to my studies." He glanced at the Giant again and raised an expressive eyebrow, which brought an answering grin.

Watching the exchange, Menannon realized there was

much more in the relationship of these old friends than met the eye.

Irenos turned back to Lonier and continued. "In truth my sire has forbidden me to Distance Bend as it is a fey and dangerous practice."

"Unless one is a True-Vision Farseer," Menannon whispered to himself.

"Thou knowest of the practice then?" Irenos grinned at the youth's words.

"Aye, it is mentioned in several of the sagas." Menannon colored nicely at having been overheard.

"Thou hast been well taught," Irenos approved.

"What exactly is this practice and how can it aid us in this pass?" Lonier asked, bringing the conversation back to their immediate needs.

"Thy pardon," Irenos inclined his head to him. "Distance Bending as an art by which anyone with sufficient will power and concentration can step across any distance to any known place in an instant of time."

"What makes this art dangerous," Gorlanndon continued for him, "and why his sire has forbidden him to use it is this: should there be anyone or any object in the very spot to which he steps, there would be an detonation which would destroy the entire district and any within it!"

"But that would be only if he could not see ahead to know that the space was empty," Menannon interrupted. "Gilarian King was a Sunfire Golden, or True-Vision Farseer, and thus able to see clearly across space and time and could therefore step with impunity."

"True enough" the Teluri agreed. "Howe'er that may be, I am not a farseer of any sort, neither true-vision gold nor the vision-of-many-paths silver. Thus for me to distance bend can be dangerous beyond imagining."

Gorlanndon nodded at that.

"That being understood, though my sire would disapprove, may I propose that we find a semi-private place where we are sure to be watched by Azuron's spies and I shall distance bend with thy son in my company and thus seem to appear with him from the mainland and thou shalt have thy plausible excuse for his presence. What thinkest thou?" Irenos inquired

of Gorlanndon.

“Can this be made safe?” Gorlanndon turned his troubled gaze upon Menannon who sat silently contemplating both of them.

The Teluri considered the issue in silence for a moment then glanced up and, with only the slightest hesitation, nodded. “If the place be chosen carefully and the timing perfect, there is little danger, but I will not say no danger, for there is always the possibility of a happening not looked for.”

“Can anyone think of an alternative?” Gorlanndon glanced about at Firod, Lonier and Skendrin who but shook their heads. “As my muddle-headed son has necessitated this extremity, let it be done.”

The elder Giant gave Menannon a slight wink which took some of the sting from his words, but he was still upset that his efforts to keep his son safe and beyond Azuron’s reach had been brought to naught. “When shall we assay the attempt?” He turned his gaze back to Irenos.

“I deem now would be a good time, as under cover of darkness would appear to be an attempt to conceal his arrival and that would be well within our grasp.” Irenos replied at which Lonier stood before anyone else could object and was followed by Gorlanndon who reached up and shuttered the Dwarf lantern plunging the summerhouse into darkness.

Gorlanndon’s voice was soft as he issued his instructions. “Come, let us go to the Speakers Grove, as that place should be deserted at this hour and our walk there will give Azuron’s minions ample time to follow us. Give us exactly one full turn of the hour, Irenos, and then come to us. The High One be with you both.” Gorlanndon opened the door to the summerhouse, speaking softly to Menannon as he passed by, “You and I shall have some speech later.”

They stepped outside ere his son could reply. Firod left last, closing the door softly leaving the young Giant to face the Teluri prince alone.

Ere the darkness in the summerhouse could become too oppressive, Irenos searched out a small Dwarf lantern from his belt pouch and set it upon the table as he opened it, as neither of them desired to climb upon the table in the dark to reach the one Gorlanndon had shuttered. The Teluri motioned

Menannon to a seat. When both were settled to wait, Menannon turned to the Teluri and sought to apologize for placing him in danger.

“I am sorry ...,” he began, but Irenos cut him off, not unkindly.

“Knowest thou this: in thy situation I would have done the same. Our sires deem themselves invincible and we, their sons, of little use, yet little use is better than no use. Learn from this that nothing done out of kindness and love is ever ill done,” he said.

“Perhaps not, but lacking in wisdom ...” Menannon shrugged, causing Irenos to grin.

“Wisdom and the heart are ever strangers, lad, but enough. I deem that thou didst use the Straight Paths to gain access to us?”

“Aye, but how ...?”

“All Teluri royalty know of their existence, but none save my father, Liélindar of Lilientharien and Lindren King of Gilaria use them with any regularity. The kings of the other four realms prefer not this mode of transportation. I myself know not their workings as my father has not deemed me ready for such knowledge.” He grinned widely and continued, “And he is probably right. The temptation to, ahh, explore would be more than I could bear, I fear. Should I e’er have the misfortune of becoming king of Blue Hill, I shall no doubt need to seek out the Grandmaster harper and ask his guidance in their use, but until then, I deem this something best left to harpers.” Irenos leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Howe’er, that said, the fact that thou dost know their ways is a blessing of the High One. There are those among us here on Kalyria who have made a pact to rescue as many as may be from the machinations of Azuron’s Doomcriers and his twisted travesty of justice.”

“Is my father one of you in this?” Menannon had to ask, although he already knew the answer.

“Nay, he and Lord Lonier are still convinced the rule of law will prevail.” Irenos shook his head.

“And you deem it won’t.”

“It has already failed, as e’en now two of Kalyria’s seven high judges are under house arrest awaiting trial on charges of

sedition.” The Teluri's face was grim.

“Surely you jest!” Menannon was stunned at this news, for the integrity of these seven judges was beyond question.

“I would that I did, lad.” The Teluri raised his gaze to squarely meet the Giant’s. “They were both arrested yestereve. Their crime is supposedly to have caused broadsides to be posted calling for the resignation of Azuron, though all know that it is actually because they refused to sign charges against thy sire and Lord Lonier for the murder of Lord Normanus. Thou hast heard about that, hast thou not?”

“Aye, the Princess Nirna sent me word of it through Paulus Muellen.”

“There will be more arrests and assassinations now that Azuron has gotten away with these initial assays. Markest thou my words.” Ire nos shook his head and leaned back against the wall behind him.

“But . . .,” Menannon began at which the Teluri held up a hand forestalling him.

“On the morrow come to lowest level of thy sire’s trade hall at the hour of nine. There will be time enough then for far too many questions and far too few answers. For now, let us relax a bit ere we join the others.” With that, he closed his eyes and soon relaxed into a light drowse.

Menannon was too keyed up to relax, but he kept his silence out of respect for the prince, though it cost him dear.



IN THE DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT beyond the summerhouse walls, Gorlanndon strolled amiably along with Skendrin talking softly as though they were in a long debated conversation, all the while keeping an eye out for any other Doomcriers who might be lurking about. They had at least one follower, of course, but that was not enough for their plan. Lord Lonier and Firod had departed surreptitiously one at a time from the villa, not wanting to be seen together just yet, Lonier to his home and Firod to the palace where he would be going on duty in less than a full turn of the hour. They had become

quite skilled at evading the notice of their watchers.

The Giant and the steward were over half way to their destination ere Gorlanndon finally spotted a group of Azuron's sycophants lounging outside a small pub. They seemed content to stay where they were, which did not serve the Giant's purpose at all. Their attention needed to be attracted so Gorlanndon raised his voice and spoke distinctly for their benefit.

"Azuron is" he lowered his voice again and moved on knowing that the Doomcriers would be duty bound to follow them and discover what the Giant had been saying about their leader.

After a few more minutes, he glanced back to see that the Doomcriers had indeed disappeared from their bench. He listened carefully and heard what he expected to hear: the sound of people pushing their way through the undergrowth below the road. From the muttering, it was apparently not an easy thing to do in the dark. Gorlanndon could not help grinning to himself when he remembered the thorn bushes which in the old days had grown in profusion across the sides of the Aureun. Their descendants were apparently still here to judge by the language being employed by their shadowers.

Making sure that they did not outdistance their clumsy shadows, Gorlanndon and Skendrin attained the Aureun gardens and settled down on a bench in the center of the Speakers Grove. They had arrived perhaps a half turn of the hour ahead of the time appointed to Irenos. The Doomcriers could be heard settling down in the darkness as close as they dared to hear the conversation. Luckily, they had chosen to sit amidst the blackwood grove and were thus presented no obstacle to the prince when he bent distance. The Giant began to regale the steward with stories of debates held in the Privy Chambers which involved Azuron so that the Councillor General's name was mentioned often enough to require his henchmen to remain where they were, but nothing damning was said for them to report.

It was exactly on the turn of the hour when there was a loud sound like a crack of lightning and Irenos appeared in the middle of the Speakers Grove with Menannon held by the arm. Despite the fact he was expecting it, the suddenness of the

noise and its volume startled Gorlanndon and nearly frightened the Doom-criers out of their wits as one of them let out a shriek almost at the Giant's elbow. The fellow was immediately silenced with a cuff to the side of the head to judge by the thud that sounded. Both Gorlanndon and Skendrin rose quickly and moved to greet the newcomers as though the Doomcriers had made no sound.

"You're late, gentlemen," Gorlanndon growled just loud enough for the Doomcriers to hear. "You were supposed to arrive this evening. What held you?"

"My lady mother wished to complete her order of sorak that I might bring it with me and give it unto thee for fulfillment," Irenos returned, not skipping a beat, though this part of their plan had not been discussed. "I have it here."

He produced a scroll from his belt pouch and handed it to Gorlanndon. He also withdrew his small Dwarf lantern and opened it as though to allow the Giant to see the contents of the scroll, but in reality, he made sure that the light shone on Menannon's face as well so that it could be reliably reported that the young Giant had come with him. Gorlanndon opened the scroll and perused its contents in a leisurely fashion. The fact that it actually contained a song Irenos had been writing was not something discernable to the Doomcriers.

"Your lady mother's list shows her usual exquisite taste, my friend and luckily all but one of these bolts lie in my main warehouse." Gorlanndon nodded and re-rolled the scroll, handed it to Skendrin, then turned to Menannon.

"Menannon, it is good to see you, boy," he said heartily his voice slightly louder than needed as he stepped up and took his son's face between his hands and kissed his brow with real feeling, then released him and stepped back. "How was your journey from Aridion City to Blue Hill? Uneventful, I trust."

"It was, my father. The weather held well and the roads were dry. Though I must say it took far longer to get there than it did to come here just now from Blue Hill via the good offices of the prince," Menannon added in hopes of reinforcing the idea that he had come by Mythrian Magic to the island, which in reality he had, though not quite in the manner they were attempting to insinuate into their watchers' minds.

“Come then, gentlemen, it is high time we seek our beds, for the morrow will be a busy one.” Gorlanndon stretched expansively, the sound of his popping joints almost echoing in the silence.

All of them agreed and Irenos closed his lantern, plunging the grove back into darkness. Together, the four of them left the Aureun gardens and headed back to Gorlanndon’s villa leaving behind them a small company of Doomcriers eager to get back to the palace and inform their lord that the Giant’s son had returned along with the prince of Blue Hill by some arcane method. As they departed, Gorlanndon heard the Doomcriers whispering excitedly.

Well, so far so good. He laid his hand companionably on his son’s shoulder. Despite his misgivings and all his plans to the contrary, Gorlanndon could not help being glad of him.



THEY ARRIVED BACK AT THE VILLA and the great Giant led the way into the close, Irenos having parted from them at the crossing of the Equian Way to proceed to his own holding. Just within the gate, Gorlanndon halted and Skendrin took his leave. The elder Giant placed his hand upon his son’s shoulder.

“There will be a meeting of the council on the morrow at the hour of two,” he murmured. “Make sure you are there and appropriately attired. As you have returned, it is now time for you to take your rightful place as my heir, though Azuron will be greatly discomfited to find himself not only faced with two Giants rather than just one, but the vexing mystery of your arrival as well.”

Gorlanndon did not wait for an answer but gently squeezed Menannon’s shoulder and headed for the villa’s door where he halted with his hand on the handle.

“Welcome home, boy,” he said over his shoulder before disappearing within.

Menannon resolutely forced his mind away from speculation as to how that council meeting would go and sought his own chamber. He would not sleep, as he needed to

seek out Nirna ere the day broke and rendered access to her tower impossible with its myriad folk moving about the palace and its grounds. He could use the few turns of the hour ere then to think.

There was one Dwarf lantern open within when he entered his chamber, its light showing that the bed had been turned down in readiness for him. He set his pack on the hearth table and stretched out full length on the bed with a deep sigh, to rest a few moments before he got ready for the day. Despite his best intentions, he relaxed with the lifting of the tension of the last hours and his eyelids suddenly became leaden and he fell asleep almost instantly.



GORLANNDON HEARD MENANNON'S DOOR CLOSE and turned his steps to the kitchen where even at this hour the kettle would be on the hob. He entered the darkened chamber and halted. Clarinda was sitting by the hearth rocking in her favorite chair, her long grey braid falling over her shoulder down the front of her night robes and holding out to him a hot mug of tea.

"How do you always know what I am going to do even when I don't know myself?" he inquired with a grin and a shake of his head as he accepted the cup and sat down in the chair she had already pulled up for him.

In return, she only smiled her enigmatic smile and picked up her own tea. They sat in silence for many long moments sipping tea and contemplating the dance of the small flames about the embers of the hearth fire.

"So, he's come home," she said, breaking the silence at last as she poured both of them another serving of tea.

"Aye."

"What would you be intendin' to do about it?"

"Nothing," Gorlanndon's reply was a thoughtful growl. "He's a mind of his own and a will to match his lady mother's. Once she decided on a thing, nothing in Kaalamar or Hella would turn her and he's of the same mettle."

"Ya should have known that sendin' your collections and

the horses to him would be like waving the proverbial red flag. The lad's not dense. Ya knew he'd immediately figure out things were not well here and rush to your side whippity quick." She could not help scolding the Giant a bit.

"Aye, there was that chance, but I had to do something. There are irreplaceable things among my collections that all Linden would be the poorer were they to be destroyed. And there were the families of those working in the warehouses to be considered. And how could I possibly leave Georgi Grimaxe to face the machinations of Azuron? That Dwarf would burn down the palace if one hair in the mane of one of his beloved horses was harmed."

They shared a grin at the thought of the Horsemaster's volatile temper and his obsessive love for his charges. Gorlanddon quickly turned serious again.

"Though I would that Blackmore had been able to keep Menannon with him but a bit longer."

"Why is that?" She stopped rocking and looked up at him, a Dwarf's lust for battle glinting in her eyes. "Are ya finally goin' to assassinate the usurpin', blaspheming' ...!" She left the last word unsaid, but it still hung in the air between them causing him to grin down at her. Five generations of peaceful city living had not bred out of Clarinda the fighting spirit of her race.

"Nay," he said, setting his mug down on the warming shelf. "The High One forbids it." He hunched forward in his chair and steepled his fingers against his lips, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Humph," she snorted softly and went back to rocking, her disapproval a palpable force in the chamber.

"You can't pick and choose what you'll believe in the High One's Word Hoard," he murmured thoughtfully. "Either you believe and follow all of it or none. Even in those times when parts of it become...inconvenient," he finished, raising an admonishing eyebrow at her.

She just sniffed and looked back into the fire.

"At least ya could be rearrangin' his torc a bit. Surely that wouldn't be displeasin' to the High One," she murmured piously, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

"I'd best not, as I know in my heart once I got my fingers

around his scrawny neck I'd not be able to stop and I'd spend the rest of my life trying to convince myself I was justified in doing murder," Gorlanndon said with a strange look on his face the little cook could not begin to fathom.

There was a long silence again as each thought about the import of the Giant's words. At last Clarinda spoke, her voice as thoughtful as he had ever heard it.

"What you're tryin' to say is that the heart of the matter is blasphemy. This sorcerer has blasphemed the High One and turned against His will and if ya was after murderin' him ye'd be doin' the same." She glanced up at him then back to the fire.

"Aye! Basically to murder Azuron is to become Azuron. Not something that would please the High One in one of his true believers." Gorlanndon nodded reaching for his tea and settling back into his chair.

She filled their mugs again and sat watching him, her heart wrung with seeing his distress and indecision. Clarinda had loved and served Gorlanndon of Lornennog all of her long life and would until the end of her days. What ever decision he made in this pass she would abide by and defend to her last breath.

"This is not the first time I've been through this, Clarinda." He glanced at her over the edge of his mug then back into his tea. She kept her silence.

"Five hundred summers ago I was serving as the Council General to Boria and the eastern lands. It was the time of the Regency when the old king was ailing and his eldest son by his head wife was ruling in his stead. Yet there were other sons of the king by other wives who wished for the power of the throne and resented their brother. The situation would have been settled with the minimum of bloodshed and battle had not the Black Sorcerer come among them, seemingly out of nowhere. He was a Teluri possessed of a bald head, smoky eyes and a glib tongue filled with sweetness and venom."

"Azuron?" she more breathed the word than spoke it. He nodded and continued as though compelled now that he had begun to speak of the past.

"Azuron got the ear of one of the middle princes of the king's third wife. A boy of bright mind and little virtue. This

lad he persuaded to follow him promising all manner of power and riches. Together they began to subvert the people, providing bread and circuses for them in exchange for their sloth and indolence. Betting on the races and games became the way of making a living.

“Is this sounding familiar?” Gorlanndon raised his expressive brow again and Clarinda nodded. “Yet still there were those who did not take well to the new scheme and sought to halt the Black Sorcerer’s rise to power. The king’s eldest son brought in mercenaries from all over the lands and began to fight for his land. I counseled that he should call upon the might of Kalyria but he sought to solve his issues his own way. A way which included the murder of Azuron.”

Gorlanndon halted and Clarinda wondered if he would continue he was silent for so long. At last he did in a haunted voice.

“The king’s son and his closest followers cornered the sorcerer in the royal box at the circus and the lad took the sword of his fathers and ran the Teluri through the heart.

“Azuron stood swaying for a few moments then, rather than dropping dead at the prince’s feet he threw back his head and laughed and withdrew the sword from his own body and turning it, thrust it into the heart of the prince, saying— *Reap what thou hast sown* as he did so.

The prince fell dead at his feet and all Hella broke loose in Boria. Clarinda, in full battle of true war, I myself severed Azuron’s head from his shoulders only to see it attach itself back again. From that, I learned that he is warded by Khalandria and the only blade that can kill him is one that has been forge-sung by the Teluri and thus imbued with the presence of the High One.

“I possess such a weapon now, but I had it not then, for my lady wife had made me swear to cease the practice of arms on our wedding day. It lay here in its sheath as useless as the ingot of metal from which it was forged. And wish though I might, I could not call it to me.”

“The rest of the tale you know. The Black Prince of Boria won the day and turned his land and people over to the worship of Khalandria. And out of the ashes of their world arose a nation of brigands and pirates who are held in check

only by the might of Kalyria's navy. And...now it is our turn."

This time, the silence in the kitchen was brittle. A thing to be shattered by a single breath like the peace of their land.

"Master, you must be after killin' him," Clarinda whispered, forcing her words past lips stiffened by her understanding of what they portended. Gorlanndon drew his thoughts back out of his memories of battle and destruction.

"Nay, lass. I'll not commit murder. Until or unless Azuron declares open war, his life is as sacrosanct as any other man's."

The Giant tossed the last of his tea into the fire and setting the mug on the sideboard rose to go. Clarinda jumped to her feet and caught his hand, halting him.

"Master, what are we going to do?" she whispered, eyes wide with horror at the vision he had painted. He knelt down on one knee and took her hand gently in his.

"I know not, lass. All I know is that all things turn to good for those who truly believe in and follow the High One and so we will await his time. In this as in all things, His will be done. Now get on to bed as I have kept you up nearly to dawn." He gently touched her cheek and stood to his full height, stretched a bit and turned towards the door where he halted with an impish grin.

"Who knows, Lady Clarinda, perchance the High One will let me rearrange his torque for him." With this last comment, he was gone leaving her shaking her head and rolling her expressive eyes.

"Giants!"



CHAPTER 2

(SUMMER OF THE WORLD 6097)

THE CLOSING OF HIS FATHER'S DOOR woke Menannon with a start. The darkness outside of his garden window was noticeably lighter than when he had lain down. He should not have slept. Menannon lunged from the bed, grabbed his cloak and let himself out into the garden. He circled around through the kale yard to the front gate to avoid passing his father's window.

The gatewarden let him out with a softly murmured, "Good morrow, young Master. Be ye welcomed home," as he closed the gate behind him.

Menannon swung on his cloak and ran lightly down the Equian Way even as the first birds began to chirp the dawn. Just as morning's first grey glimmer was lighting the eastern sea, Menannon slipped silently into the palace close through a side postern normally used by the servants. He halted for a moment to survey the area. It seemed devoid of life, but he knew that the doorwards on the farther side of the palace's many-pillared portico would be alert at their posts as Firod brooked no dereliction of duty among his men. The young Giant took a deep breath and stepped out into the close and circled around the back of the huge building until he reached the base of Nirna's tower. There he stopped and reached into his belt pouch for the small stones he had quickly gathered as he went through the kale yard.

With one last glance about, he stepped out away from the tower just far enough so that he could see the window at its top and launched a small pebble at the shutters. It struck with a soft thunk and Menannon jumped back against the stone and held still, barely breathing to make sure there was no reaction from any of the men on duty. There was no sound for several long moments, so he braved another throw. Again, the small stone struck the wooden shutters, this time with something of a clatter as it must have hit on the edge of two of the cross pieces of which the closure was made. Still there was no reaction from without or within. The eastern sky was lightening quickly. He must soon be gone. One more stone

flew up and struck. This time there was a reaction. The shutter flew open and clattered back against the fabric of the tower and a voice called out.

“What do...!” it began snapping with displeasure. Mati stuck her head out far enough to look down, her grey hair, not yet bound up for the day, swirled around her with the suddenness of her movements.

Menannon glanced about and seeing no one, took the chance of stepping back into the gooddame’s view.

“Here now what do you...!” she started to call down, then seeing who it was, turned back to call into the chamber without skipping a beat, “...think of that ,my lady. The sun is already up and it promises to be a right gorgeous day for a walk in the garden behind the council hall this afternoon. ‘Tis sorry I am that you’ll not be being able to get out into the fresh air ere that as you’ve got too many duties this morning, but by the hour of four of the clock ye’ll be able to get out there.”

The gooddame raised her voice on this last sentence and Menannon heard Nirna’s trilling laugh as the shutter clattered back into place.

The message was clear: Nirna would meet him at four of the clock in the garden! His heart had wings till then. Menannon glanced about quickly, then retraced his steps back out of the postern and fairly flew down the road to the Cokeyna to break his fast and listen to the gossip of the sailors.

A single pair of eyes tracked his movements until the postern gate closed behind him. Firod stood on the arch above the central gate which overlooked the yard below and had a clear view of the base of Nirna’s tower. He shook his head half in understanding, half in vexation. Youth and stupidity were near kindred it would seem. Gorlanndon would have to put a leash on that one before the young fool got them all in trouble as it seemed the princess’s nurse had no more sense than the youngsters, her words having carried clearly to him in the silence of the dawn.

A HALF TURN OF THE HOUR before the time appointed by Ireos discovered Menannon standing without his sire’s tradehall facing it’s magnificent doors, his stomach full of

victuals and his head full of sailors' discontent and strange tales. He had intended to enter the tradehall from the dock level, but had found it barred from the inside so perforce had climbed back up the Idrian to the public doors. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders and entered, expecting to have to fend off the greetings and questions of his sire's serving folk but found himself brought up short in total surprise...the place was empty!

For the first time in living memory, there was no one there working or buying or even just strolling. Menannon walked into the center of the atrium, his footsteps echoing hollowly in the silence for even the fountains had been turned off. All of the decorations and plants were in their accustomed places, but there were no wares to be seen anywhere, not even on the balconies above. Menannon walked about looking into chamber after chamber and it was the same in each one.

His path eventually led him to his sire's office where, strangely, nothing was missing, his mother's portrait was still in its accustomed place, even the scrolls were still in the pigeon holes behind the desk. Menannon wondered if there was anything in any of them to explain what had happened and stepped quickly around the desk and took out the first scroll that offered. He unrolled it and glanced at its contents. It was written in Giantish which surprised him as he had never known any of his sire's business transactions to be carried out in that language, since it was not spoken outside the Giant lands by any save a few Teluri and the folk of New Belitarra.

He briefly began to read and halted, shaking his head. None of the words were making sense as business, they were nonsense words and childish rhymes. He read it again sure that he must have misread it the first time as it had been many summers since he had used his sire's language. No! He had been correct. The scroll was gibberish. Carefully he re-rolled the scroll and returned it to its place then chose another at random, it was the same thing...pure Giantish gibberish. By the time the water clock in the atrium chimed the ninth hour, he had perused nearly a dozen scrolls only to find that none of them held any business information at all, only the doggerel and verbal doodling one might expect from a bored day schooler. As the clock finished chiming, Menannon returned

this last scroll to its place and ran to the lift along the back wall of the atrium intent upon finding Irenos and getting some answers to even more questions.

With as desolate as the building felt, he was actually surprised when he pulled the lever that the grate lowered and he could step into the lift, where the Dwarf lantern was still shining. He quickly raised the grate and took hold of the descent lever. The lift glided into motion taking him down to the lowest floor above the dock level where Irenos had instructed he would be. The central hallway was dark beyond the circle of light provided by the lift's Dwarf lantern. Menannon stood motionless his hand still on the lever and wondered anew where everyone was and why, if there was no one working here any longer, the front door had not been locked? He listened intently but heard nothing. Almost reluctantly, he let go of the lever and, taking down the lantern, exited the lift to explore the level and find the Teluri.

Menannon had but stepped out of the lift when his ear was caught by a slight sound. He halted and instinctively closed the shutters on the lantern plunging himself into total blackness. He held his breath wondering if the sound would manifest itself again. Almost instantly he heard a soft rumbling noise and then a muffled clank from along the back wall of the level. That was the side buried deep into the hill on which the tradehall was built. Then a door opened nearly beside him flooding the lift area with light, temporarily blinding him.

"Thou didst come," a voice spoke out of the light making him flinch with surprise. "I was afraid that thou wouldst change thy mind."

Before he could say or do anything, a hand took his arm and pulled him, nearly blind, into the light and he heard a door shut with a thud. When Menannon's eyes adjusted, he saw that it was indeed Irenos who had spoken and still held his arm to steady him. Behind the Teluri, in the chamber he had just entered, he could see several other folk standing and sitting around a table cluttered with scrolls, scroll cases and various maps. There were five others; two Dwarves, two Humans and another Teluri. Of these he recognized only the Humans, Turanio and Tullio, both stilt walkers of the Orlando clan, though he had never actually met them.

The chamber itself proved to be a small storage space possessed of an access door to the lower tunnels honeycombing the bowels of the Aureun. These tunnels had been used for centuries for moving the heavy marketables from the warehouses at the docks to the various shops and tradehalls dotting the hill, as none of the other tradehalls extended all the way to the docks nor possessed lifts as his sire's did. Menannon had not realized his sire had at least at one time made use of them as well, though why this surprised him, he was not sure.

"Join us, we have much to plan." Irenos indicated a tall stool at the far end of the table, cutting short Menannon's musing. The Teluri returned to his seat while Menannon took the indicated stool next to a tall Dwarf.

"Menannon, allow me to acquaint thee with the rest of our company. Conar, son of Corin."

Irenos indicated the Dwarf whose red beard was just barely reaching his silver-chased belt. His grey tunic and leggings were of fine brocade bespeaking his family's wealth and status, for his sire, Corin, owned a fine mercantile business of his own with trading posts both on and off Kalyria. Though the Dwarf was obviously young, he was already as broad shouldered and heavily muscled as any of his race and his deep brown eyes were studying the Giant speculatively even as he nodded to him in acknowledgment of the introduction.

Next to him was the second Dwarf, Dink by name, who was also young to judge by the length of his brown beard, which was only just tucked into the front of his tunic as it did not yet reach his belt. This fellow was small for his race with a thin face and a large beak of a nose which made him look rather like a ferret. His dark amber eyes were darting restlessly around the chamber while Irenos introduced him, as though he preferred to look anywhere except at the young Giant. His rusty red broadcloth tunic was a bit worn at the armholes and frayed at the hem and his woolen hose bagged at the knees. From his clothing, there was no way to know what trade he plied. That and his restless gaze made Menannon wonder if he were perhaps one of the sharps who made a living by separating the unwary from their money in the pubs near the docks.

On the other side of the table stood the two Humans, their stilts making it difficult to sit in so small a space. Though there was a full ten summers between them, the elder, Turanio having five and twenty summers and Tullio, the younger having only fifteen, the Orlando boys could have been taken for twins so strongly did they bear the stamp of their sire Taratillo. All of the Orlando clan were of swarthy complexion and dark hair, ranging from black to red-brown, with green or blue eyes making it hard to ascertain in what part of the world the clan originated. The last member of the company sat beside the Orlandos, his fiery red head towering over his table mates.

“This is my swordbrother, Haalinoth of Taaliron,” Irenos nodded towards the other Teluri whose bright grey eyes were regarding Menannon with undisguised interest. The fellow was far taller than Irenos, being slightly over eight feet in height and was of the long light build that the Giant normally associated with the fellow’s race. His clothing and malinir were of a quality marking him as a member of the nobles of his land, a Teluri kingdom high in the southern Sythrin mountains above Rhonndia. The fellow’s name chimed a chord in Menannon’s mind as it occurred in the family appendix to the Teluri king list. Haalinoth was consort to the youngest sister of Lindren, King of Gilaria.

“All of thee knowest Menannon, Councilor Gorlanndon’s heir. He is a Journeyman Harper and has volunteered his services in our cause.” At this, Menannon glanced quickly at Irenos who answered his unspoken question with a slight shake of his head. Apparently, the Teluri did not desire the rest to know that Menannon deemed himself recusant having abandoned his guild. Only Dink appeared to have caught this interchange and glanced rather suspiciously at Menannon. The introductions made, Irenos immediately came to the point of their meeting.

“As thou dost all comprehend, Azuron has pandered his position as Councilor General into being named head of the Courts now as well and has placed Lady Rhyland and Lord Bannor under house arrest on charges of sedition.”

Menannon mentally shook his head but kept his own counsel as the rest exclaimed in protest, this being news to

them, but not to him. Irenos held up his hand to still the indignant protests.

“The list is far longer than just these twain,” he said, unrolling a scroll which already contained more than a hundred names of those who had been denounced by the Doomcriers. Most were folk of substance and placed to damage or even merely influence Azuron’s plans, but there were a goodly number of humble folk as well. The last name on the list was a jongleur from the market near the docks who had been so ill-advised as to name his performing monkey “Azuron.” Whether in honor or in jest no one knew, but the fellow was all of eighty summers old and nearly blind.

“Kha, is big threat that one!” Turanio muttered glancing at his brother with a shake of his head, when Irenos read this last name.

“All of us are being observed by the Doomcriers with any activities being reported to Azuron,” the Teluri continued, tossing aside the scroll. “We all stand in danger of being denounced and of those who have been denounced and taken...NONE...have been released!”

“How is this possible?” Menannon demanded, his stomach tightening in both anger and fear. “I have been led to believe that the Doomcriers were simply a disenfranchised sect that Azuron is encouraging!”

“As they were until a month since!” Haalinoth informed him with some asperity and the rest nodded agreement. “A riot broke out at the arena...”

“Is insult to family! Riot not in circus, she was outside!” Turanio interrupted slamming the flat of his hand down on the table. “Make no such affront to my papochka!”

“I intended no disrespect to thy esteemed sire, my friend,” Haalinoth inclined his head to the red-faced youngster with a slight smile. When it seemed as though the fellow would take offence at the smile, Tullio took a hold of his brother’s arm and began whispering in his ear at which point Turanio settled back with a “humph” but allowed the discussion to go on with no further interruptions.

“No matter its location,” Haalinoth continued, “the riot allowed Azuron to countenance the organization of a group of the Doomcriers into a troop of his own personal ‘peace

keepers.' The ranks of that troop have swelled out of all imagining as countless numbers of men, from all walks of life and guilds, have rushed to join it. E'en some of Captain Firod's city watch and palace guards have turned their coats and donned the new colors. The greatest of it's numbers have come from the lowest levels of society and they have brought their brutish ways with them."

Dink nodded to himself, but said nothing, his eyes taking in Menannon as though he did not quite think the Giant would be any use to their band.

"E'en me own cousin has gone an' joined 'em," Conar spoke up, his voice tinged with pure vexation, "though I'm after deemin' 'tis more to spite his da than bein' in sympathy with their cause."

"Many have joined for a lark among thy wealthy worthless," Irenos agreed with the Dwarf. Then held up his hand halting further comments. "Be that as it may, the rest of the Doomcriers not of the troop will also turn against any save Azuron when they are called upon to so serve. Mistake not this threat. Now we must plan this night's campaign."

Without further comment, they set to work figuring out their ways and means of getting Menannon into the villa of Lady Rhyland and out again with the lady and her household, it having been determined to begin their efforts with this judge. It was decided that the distraction would be provided by the stiltwalkers and two Dwarves while the Teluri stood shadow guard and escorted Menannon and his charges to the harper hall. That this was his destination, Menannon readily admitted, but more than that he would not divulge though all save Irenos pressed him hard.

"It is not my secret to tell." Menannon replied patiently for nearly the dozenth time when Dink pressed him again for the details of what he intended to do with their 'guests.'

"If thou dost intend to bespeak Penor for sanctuary thou art sadly deceived." Haalinoth spoke softly, raising a warning eyebrow at Dink when that worthy seemed about to come to blows with the Giant.

"Oh, I intend to bespeak sanctuary, though not from Penor." Menannon informed them, almost grinning at the puzzled looks around the table.

“How...?” Turanio began, but Irenos halted his words with an upraise hand.

“This is Menannon’s concern. Our portion is to aid him in getting our guests to the hall. What the harpers do with them after is within their writ, not ours.” Irenos glanced about him quelling all other comment.

The next half turn of the hour saw the finalizing of their plans and the assignment of the duties of each. As the others sat back in various poses of relief at finally being set upon a course, Irenos drew Menannon slightly aside.

“I deem it would be well if thou didst reclaim thine harper’s robes on thy trip to Aridion City as Azuron knows not that thou hast resigned from thy guild and it might just hold him in check a touch deeming thou dost still move under its protection.” Irenos gave this advice quietly so that the rest did not hear his words.

“But...,” Menannon began to protest, not wanting to claim a protection he no longer felt he possessed.

The Teluri halted his words with a slight shake of his head.

“In war, lad, all weapons are fair save those alone which would offend the High One. There are many kinds of armour and some is made of cloth and cords.” Irenos turned to the rest and raised his voice.

“Depart hence and we meet this night three turns of the hour past the mid-of-night at the back of Lady Rhyland’s villa and the High One willing, we shall speed her and hers to safety ere the Doomcriers and their despicable master are any the wiser. Away until then.”

As one, the small band filed out. The Orlando boys and Dink went out the back door into the tunnels while Menannon followed Haalinoth and Conar out into the hallway intent upon taking the lift. Irenos returned to his planning, closing the door softly behind them.

While the others took the lift down to the harbor level, Menannon stood silently in the darkness wondering how all of this would help as there were so few of them and so many in need. He stood quietly waiting for the rumble of the chains and their heavy counterweights to cease indicating that the conveyance had reached its destination. He waited several long moments more before pulling the lever to cause the lift to rise

back for his use. The glimmer of the Dwarf lantern coming up the shaft announced its arrival. Just as the young Giant entered it to return to the upper levels, he heard the chiming of the atrium clock echoing down the shaft. It was half past the hour of twelve. He had just enough time to return to his sire's villa to prepare himself for the afternoon's council session.

Outside once more, Menannon began to make his way along the Serpentine. The day was beautiful in the extreme with blue sky and sunshine highlighted with naught save a few white puffy clouds and birds winging about their business. All along the street, shoppers and strollers had emerged as though nothing were at all amiss in their land. And indeed, for many it was so, for Menannon noticed only a few who—like himself—wore no red. All shades of crimson and red adorned nearly everyone, be it a full robe or kirtle or just the wisp of a scarf adorning a lady's hair. How many of these folk were true followers of Azuron and how many were just following the new style out of a misplaced sense of fashion or out of fear? Indeed, that was the true question.

A short time later, Menannon was surprised to find himself back at the gate to the villa so deep had been his thoughts. He rang the bell and the gate was opened for him by one of the gatewardens whose grim countenance softened with a bit of smile for his master's son. Menannon nodded in return and made his way quickly to his chambers where he tossed his cloak onto the bed. Turning towards the bathing chamber he was halted by the sight of a golden councillor's robe hanging on the front of the wardrobe. It lacked an indigo fringe which marked it as belonging to a cadet councillor, a rank the body heir of all sitting councillors was awarded at fifteen summers thus allowing them to educate themselves as to the council's work and even to participate in the discussions and debates, though not to vote, a privilege reserved for full councillors. At twenty summers, Menannon was indeed late in assuming his place. He briefly touched the robe, the sorak soft against his skin, then let it drop.

There had been a time when the very thought of sitting in Kelyria's council would have thrilled him beyond measure, now his stomach almost tied into knots at the idea. A small voice in the back of his mind kept whispering that the council

was no longer a voice of leadership and sanity, rather it had become naught but a hollow echo of Azuron's mind and voice.

The water clock tinkled softly in its corner, telling him that there was still over a full turn of the hour to the beginning of the council. His mind still spinning from all he had heard this morning, Menannon decided to take a few minutes to relax in his favorite spot in the garden.

He walked almost sightlessly out and settled onto the bench beneath the branches of a blooming wisteria which had been artfully trained into a tree attesting to the nearly infinite patience of his sire's gardeners for it represented a labor of pure love with its need for constant pruning to keep its shape. He reached out and took one of the blossoms between his long fingers and raised it into the sunshine where it fairly glowed with life and a sense of peace. A thought occurred to him then that perchance that same labor of pruning which gave such grace to the wisteria was what was needed in the council to take out the folk who were determined not to deem for themselves and replace them with others with more spine. He let go of the blossom and it swung back up with its kindred as his mind began to dwell once more upon all that was happening.

How could the council stand by while Azuron's minions denounced folk left and right and made them disappear without so much as a by-your-leave from the High Court? An aged jongleur with a bizarre sense of humor, for the High One's holy sake! A baker whose only crime was a cake shaped like Azuron served on Fool's Night! A sail merchant who had been complaining about the taxes levied to build the arena? The list was endless. Folk were being persecuted because someone, often out of spite or personal grudge, put the largest possible view on their actions and claimed they were besmirching the person and reputation of the Council General Azuron!

Then there was the rest of it. Lord Normanus stabbed to death in the council chamber! Lord Lanier and Councillor Gorlanddon threatened with arrest! And now, even two of the High Court judges had been denounced and placed under house arrest! Where was the Queen in all of this? Surely she

could not be turning aside from the laws and traditions which had kept Kalyria great all these centuries? And why was his sire not acting? Gorlanndon was a king maker. He had ships, men and enough arms in his villa alone to outfit an army triple the size of Firod's guard and watch. He was arguably the most powerful person in the entire Kalyrian Empire—including the Queen— so why did he not step in and put a stop to the madness? Why?! Menannon shook his head in frustration and heaved a great sigh. This useless speculation was getting him nowhere. He had to talk to his sire.

The young Giant rose and re-entered his chambers to don the councillor's robe. He almost jerked it from its hanging place and draped it over his shoulders. It fell in perfect folds to his feet attesting to the fact it had been made specifically for him. He stopped for a moment and looked at his reflection in the peer glass. His sire must have known that he would come back when he sent his collections to Aridion City for it would have taken a fortnight and more to weave the cloth-of-gold to make this robe. Menannon found himself torn between love and exasperation at the thought of how well his sire knew him despite their summers of separation. He shook his head forcing the thought aside and left the chamber more determined than ever to make his way to the council hall and force his sire to talk to him, either there or in his seemingly abandoned tradehall.

That empty tradehall was another oddity. Why was the great Giant keeping his own counsel in public, yet moving all of his assets and employees off island in private? Nirna's letter apparently had not mentioned even the half of the wrongs here. Menannon found himself shaking his head again as he headed through the silent villa and back out into the courtyard. There were several grounds keepers and gatewardens about but no one else which was unusual, as Gorlanndon's villa was normally a hive of activity. As Menannon walked towards the gate, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to see Skendrin come out of his own villa and head purposefully towards one of the storage shed, a large scroll clutched in one hand. Menannon moved quickly to intercept him, but ere he could even open his mouth to ask his questions, the steward held up his hand halting him mid

breath.

“Don’t e’en get started, young master,” he said shaking his head. “I know no more of your sire’s mind than do you. I simply follow his orders.”

“And what have those orders been?” Menannon demanded rather more curtly than intended.

“Until a seven-day ago, they were to load and send shipload after shipload of goods and folk to his off island trading bases which represent nearly every port of call on the Dawn sea and several more on the Dusk. I’ve packed his collections until I’m blue in the face!” Skendrin looked up at Menannon with a deeply troubled frown creasing his forehead.

“What stopped them?”

“That!” Skendrin pointed towards the bay. Menannon followed his pointing finger and saw nothing but the sun sparkling on the sea.

“What?” he asked.

“That!” Skendrin pointed emphatically. “Unfocus your eyes, young master and look out there and ye’ll see it.”

Menannon did as he was bid, but still saw nothing despite Blackmore’s assurance that there was some kind of magic shroud enclosing Kalyria. He was about to turn away when he caught a mere waver in the air as though he were looking through a sheet of bad glass. As soon as he caught it, he realized that the waver seemed to stretch across the entire horizon. “What is it?”

“That is a good question, but what e’er it is, it appeared a seven-day ago and no ship has been able to come or go since. We’ve been calling it ‘Azuron’s Fortress,’ but other than the belief that our good Counsel General is somehow responsible for it, there is no real reason to call it anything save a total pain in the!” Skendrin cleared his throat with something of a growl and turned his gaze back up to Menannon. “Is there aught else you’d be wantin’?”

“No that’s more than enough,” Menannon muttered ruefully and shook his head. “I needs must attend upon my father at the council, so I will take my leave.”

He nodded to the steward, turned on his heel and strode across the courtyard to be let out the gate by the same gatewarden who had let him in only a little ago. Behind him,

Skendrin muttered something nearly inaudible which sounded greatly like...“tell yer sire to get off the mark.” Menannon glanced quickly over his shoulder, but Skendrin was already disappearing into the armament shed.



AS MENANNON WALKED UP THE STEPS to the portico of the Council hall he could not help the slight frisson of pride that crept up his spine to thus be here not as an observer, but as an actual part of this ancient assembly. Despite everything, he found himself walking a bit straighter as he strode across the portico to be bowed through the door into the outer hall by the duty doorwards.

The hall swept away in both directions lined all along its length with the doors of the offices and workrooms of the government which circled around the central chamber like jewels on a necklace. Directly in front of him were the great oaken doors of the council chamber itself. These, too, were flanked by two of Firod’s doorwards, who likewise opened the door for him and bowed him through as had their fellows without. Menannon stopped just inside the entrance, stepping aside to allow two fellow councilors to enter and cross to their seats. The chamber was just as he remembered it.

The great council chamber of Kirith Kalyria was an architectural wonder well able to match all the rest of the wonders of the city. It was a long pillared hall whose finely painted ceiling rose well over eighty feet above the heads of the councilors gathering there. The east and west walls were mounted with long lines of clear windows to provide light in the day and there were three great chandeliers hung with Dwarf lanterns for nighttime illumination. All about its edges rose tier upon tier of marble platforms forming a long oval. Dotted evenly along their length were seats carved into the stone itself. Each seat was brave with multi-hued cushions set there for the comfort of those who would use them. Half way up the north and south walls great balconies ran, providing seating for those who chose to watch their governors conduct

the business of state. Along this, high on the north wall opposite the entrance doors, was a special box for Kalyria's royal consorts should they choose to witness the proceedings.

The great paved oval of the speaker's floor filled the entire area between the rows of seating so that any who addressed the assembly could freely move about the chamber to see and be seen by all. Set opposite each other at the east and west sides respectively just above this floor were the king's throne and the huge seat provided for Gorlanndon seeming to embody in themselves the pillars upon which the stability of the kingdom rested. All was in perfect symmetry in the chamber's layout and space although rarely in its functioning.

Menannon glanced up towards his sire's seat and saw that Gorlanndon was already present and deep in conversation with Lord Lonier. Menannon stood still for several long heartbeats more taking in the scene before him. The arguing and shouting among the councilors hit him like a wall. He was not unused to the noise in the chamber as the council had always carried on its business rather loudly save when one individual was addressing the assembly, though he was not used to the strident tenor of it.

There was a sense of suppressed anger here that pressed against his senses like the coming of a thunderstorm. It seemed that this was going to prove a tempestuous meeting which, he sincerely hoped, would end before four of the clock, as Nirna had promised to meet him in the garden here at that time. At least, he hoped she had. For just a moment, he had a horrible sinking feeling that Mati had not really meant that Nirna would meet him, but no. Mati had been very clear in her words. Nirna would meet him.

To keep from further fruitless speculation, Menannon forced himself to turn his gaze about to the chamber once more and noticed that here, as well as in the streets without, the predominant color was red. Not only had most of the visitors donned kirtles, robes and tunics of red, the vast majority of the councilors had replaced the indigo fringe on their official robes with an edging of red! The cadet level like himself who wore no fringe had added shoulder straps of the color. The few spots where a person or persons did not sport some vestige of red stood out like islands in a sea drawing his

eye. The pure gold of the robes gathered around his sire's great chair positively glittered in their lack of crimson adornment. It was clear that those folk not following Azuron's lead were by far and away in the minority, even here. Obviously, things were getting out of hand rapidly and it was past time for Gorlanndon to act. Menannon could not help a quickly suppressed self-satisfied thought. At least he and Irenos and their friends were going to start doing something about all this this very night.

With that thought to bolster him, Menannon made his way quickly across the speaker's floor to a point directly below his sire. Gorlanndon glanced down and smiled in approval at the sight of him. He waved Menannon to an empty seat so set that when the young Giant sat, his head was nearly on a level with his sire's, and so Menannon found himself seated next to Lord Lonier almost in the middle of the golden island surrounding his sire. Lord Lonier gave him a brief nod, but did not speak, as his attention was riveted upon two other councilors across the way who were arguing in voices so loud their words carried across the chamber. Strangely, neither of them bore any red on their robes.

"I like not this idea of allowing Boria a place in our council and not just a place, but a voting seat and I deem Azuron is a fool for proposing it!" the shorter of the twain was shouting vehemently. "Borians have not been trustworthy since they served the Enemy in the Dim Times and nothing has changed...Nothing!"

In the sunlight streaming in the windows, the fellow's face was flaming nearly as crimson as his heavily jeweled red beard. His golden robe straining across his ample girth fairly threatened to split asunder with every wild gesticulation of his flailing hands as he spoke.

The fellow to whom he was speaking so passionately was a tall spare councilor with a brown beard heavily salted with wisdom's pale color. His golden robe hung off from his sloping shoulders like a horse blanket adorning a scarecrow. Menannon searched his memory for names to fit the faces and found them in Siluc and Korkin. Korkin, the tall fellow, was from Kirith Kalyria itself and had ever served her in the Weights and Measures office while Siluc was from Kalyria's

vassal kingdom of Hardura, near neighbor of Boria on the eastern shore of the Dawn sea. His family came from a long line of Marcher Lords ever tasked with the problem of keeping Borian interests beyond Hardura's borders and so could be well expected to hold a far more parochial attitude than Korkin.

"Now, Siluc. As a councilor yourself, you cannot let your own prejudice cloud your deeming," Korkin soothed, glancing around to see who had noticed their exchange. The answer to that was practically everyone, as nearly all eyes in the chamber were riveted on the twain. He glanced back hurriedly and raised his voice so that all could hear his reply.

"You must trust that Lord Azuron has reasons for what he is proposing and they are good reasons, I'm sure. His eyes see far more than ours and he has them focused on the future, not the past." Korkin's voice was tight and squeaky with strain as he tried to verbally distance himself from his vociferous friend.

"His eyes are fixed on something alright and it's not the future! He's far too interested in our Princess and I, for one, like it not!" Siluc's voice cracked across the chamber stilling all other comments.

Beside Menannon, Gorlanndon made a small noise deep in his throat and shook his head. Menannon glanced over to see him turn to a councilor on his right and nod his head indicating the two arguing across the floor.

"A right lively debate, deem you not?" He chuckled as though enjoying the differences of opinion. "I've heard the exact same words about Boria from both his grandsire and his great-grandsire in their day as well. Hardura and Boria are like siblings scrapping with one another ere they come in for dinner."

There were answering chuckles from several parts of the chamber and not just from the Giant's own faction. For a moment, some of the tension was removed from the charged atmosphere. Across the way, the two councilors had turned their backs on one another and returned to their seats in a huff at the reaction of the chamber to their words. Siluc cast a rather hurt look at Gorlanndon and was rewarded with a slight shake of the Giant's head. The Harduran settled back in his seat much chastened.

“When did this Borian proposal come about?” Menannon asked softly of the old lord beside him. “It seems foolish in the extreme unless the Borians are prepared to give over slave trading.”

“When islands fly!” Lonier murmured back and shook his head. “This particular proposal came about nearly a fortnight ago as Azuron seems intent on stirring up old sectional disputes with no better purpose seemingly than to make sure this assembly does not discuss anything of import. Divide and conquer, I should say. Unfortunately, a most effective device.”

Before Menannon could make further comment, there was an imperial bang upon the doors and a general hush fell across the chamber.

The doors were thrown open and two guards dressed in Doomcrier red fishscale armour entered and took up their positions on either side of the opening. That their armour was red was startling to Menannon. Azuron had certainly moved rapidly since the riot or perchance even before it, as Dwarven armour was not the creation of a moment. Menannon glanced to his sire, but found no reaction visible upon his face from which he ascertained these crimson guards were nothing new. He settled back in his seat with yet another question added to his store.

The guards were followed in turn by three ladies in waiting attendant upon the Queen, all dressed in bright red sleeveless round gowns and crimson veils. One was carrying a tray with covered bowls, the other twain were burdened with fans made of rare albino peacock feathers. They stepped to the side and bowed low as Azuron followed them with Queen Norilendra on his arm. The Queen was dressed in a long sleeved round gown of dark crimson while the Teluri wore his usual robe of many colors none of which, interestingly enough, was red.

At the sight of them, all in the assembly rose to their feet. With a slight bow, the Teluri escorted the queen across the chamber and up the stair to the heavily carved wooden throne and aided her to take her place upon it. He then stepped to a marble seat slightly lower and to the front of the throne.

He remained standing as the chamberlain stepped forth from the lowest row of councilors and rapped his iron shod staff upon the floor three times, then announced in a deep

booming voice, “Our noble Queen Norilendra is before us. This session of the Kalyrian Council is now begun. Bring forth all ye the questions of thine hearts and be answered fairly and without prejudice.”

Under cover of the noise of everyone again taking their seats a voice was heard to snicker.

“Fairly and without prejudice...my beloved Aunt Loony’s backside!”

At this comment, Azuron was stilled in his movement to take his seat and rose slowly back to his feet surveying the gathering for the source of the comment. At his movement, several folk in the far visitor’s balcony stepped forward and scanned the councilors below.

Doomcrier guards...or informants? Menannon wondered, startled, and moved to lean forward to see if there were any such watchers on the gallery behind and above them, but his sire’s hand on his arm stayed his movement.

“Welcome lad to your fist council session as a member,” Gorlanndon whispered in a stage whisper intended to be heard by all about them as though his movement had not been to keep his son from drawing attention to himself. With a slight warning squeeze, Gorlanndon settled back with a slightly bored air ready to listen to this day’s business.

The source of the comment being not immediately apparent, Azuron sat down and spread the sleeves of his robes along the arms of his seat and leaned back nonchalantly. When he was settled, Norilendra signaled the chamberlain to begin at which sign the man once more struck the floor three times and returned to his seat.

The work of the council was slightly less mundane than usual as several traders stepped forward to inquire as to why they were unable to sail more than a league beyond the Crescent where they were forced to turn back. While the leader of the group did not come out directly and accuse Azuron of some sorcery, his words hinted of it. All eyes turned to the Council General to see how he would react to this. There was no change in him as he remained sitting easily in his chair eating from a bowl of grapes on the tray held by one of the Queen’s waiting women who now knelt respectfully at his side, seeming to ignore the queen.

“I deem thou dost have captains that are indulging in too much volnaka ere they depart and find themselves unable to sail.” Azuron quipped with a chuckle and his followers guffawed along with him.

“But all at once?” queried a voice from the farther end of the chamber where a contingent of councilors from the western vassal kingdoms was seated. Though all of them sported red on their robes, they were clearly not totally allied with the Teluri.

“Sailors are a superstitious lot are they not?” Azuron replied. “Let one be unable to complete his voyage due to his own error and the rest will claim ill luck and refuse to sail. But we are not bereft in this, not left to our own devices and speculations. Have we not among us the most able merchant in all Kalyria?” Wiping his fingers delicately on a towel held out to him by the waiting woman, Azuron turned his attention to the Giant and addressed the ancient councilor in a voice that was almost gentlemanly.

“Lord Gorlanndon, have any of thy captains found themselves unable to sail in this last sevenday?”

The Giant looked briefly down at his hands then addressed the Teluri in all seeming innocence. “I have not found a need to send my ships forth in that time, so I cannot say if they would be able to sail beyond the Crescent or not.”

At this blatant falsehood, Menannon caught his breath, but before he could speak, Lonier gave him a swift kick on the shin. He shut his mouth and schooled his face into a bland look of observation, but Azuron must have caught the movement for he instantly turned his attention to him.

“I see that thy son has been able to grace us with his presence again. Surely he can tell us about sailing beyond the Crescent.”

Azuron glanced back at the queen as he spoke, for Norilendra had visibly stiffened at the sight of the young Giant. From the look on her face, the Queen was clearly not pleased with Menannon’s return to his homeland.

“What say thee young sir? Can ships sail to and from our island?”

“I...!” Menannon began, but Gorlanndon cut him off smoothly.

“My son came not by the sea, Councilor, as he came last night with Prince Irenos, who was instructed to bring him here by Ilenar King as a favor to me.”

There was a slight tone in Gorlanndon’s voice which clearly conveyed a warning to the Teluri not to interfere with the activities of the Blue Hill royalty should he wish to keep peace in the empire. With the mention of two such powerful Teluri, Azuron suavely changed the direction of his comments.

“In doing thee this favor, Ilenar King has also favored Kalyria, for we are the prouder by having thy son finally take his rightful place in this council.”

At this, Norilendra leaned down to speak to him. What passed between them no one could hear beyond the royal contingent, but the queen sat back abruptly and Azuron turned again to face the assembly.

“Our lady Queen bids me welcome thee, Gorlandon’s son and body heir, to thy rightful place among us.”

From the mutinous look staining the queen’s face, she had bid him no such thing. Despite this, Azuron rose and inclined his head to Menannon. Everyone else followed suit leaving the young Giant rather embarrassed by it all, but his training came to his aid. As the rest of the council took their seats once more, he put his best Harper performance mask in place, rose and bowed to the queen and her Counsel General.

“I thank you, your highness, my lord and all my fellow councilors.” He turned to include all in the chamber with a dramatic sweep of his hand. “Long and long have I looked forward to the day when I could stand with all of you in the service of our beloved empire.”

With Irenos’ words fresh in mind, he set out to remind the council and Azuron in particular the power that stood behind him by his next statement.

“The head of our guild, Grandmaster Blackmore, has given me leave to attend upon you and fulfill this, my bond and duty to my country and my people.”

Amidst the round of applause started by Azuron himself and many shouts of “Hear, hear,” Menannon returned to his seat with his mental fingers crossed that none here would fathom the real intent of his words and purpose. It was greatly to his advantage that Blackmore began pounding into his harpers

from their first apprentice days the subtle arts of diplomacy. From across the floor, the Teluri gave him a slight nod as though acknowledging a touché. Menannon relaxed just slightly. He had managed to pass the first test with a whole skin. Beside him, Gorlanndon carefully changed a soft chuckle into a slight cough.

The council returned to other unimportant business and talked in circles for nearly two turns of the hour more before the Queen rose abruptly and swept from the chamber followed by her ladies, thus ending the council in the middle of a speech of a merchant from Boria extolling the virtues of allowing them into the council and in a voting capacity.

The fellow turned to the rest of his entourage totally nonplused at this action of the queen, his ice-blue eyes flashing with indignation. He was clearly going to make an angry comment when Azuron glanced his way and his mouth stilled mid-motion and changed its position. Menannon, who had been watching the interchange carefully, had never seen anyone able to turn a frown into a smile so fast.

“Clearly our gracious queen is fatigued by all our arguing. I shall return again anon, for I would not wish to discomfort her for all the world.”

The Borian’s gruff voice managed to almost be soothing in this little speech, but the fellow nearly ruined his own efforts by turning with a swish of his robe and stamping from the hall before the chamberlain could dismiss all. Behind him, the chamberlain’s staff fell three times and all rose to stretch and begin talking among themselves as they turned to leave the chamber.

Menannon kept his eyes glued to Azuron during all of this and saw a brief look of distaste cross the Teluri’s features as he looked after the Borian, then rose and swept from the chamber, the doorwards following him out like a guard of honor. Menannon found it a bit disconcerting that they had not followed the queen as was their normal duty.

Before he stood, Gorlanndon motioned Menannon to him. “Well done today, boy. We’ll make a diplomat of you yet.” He winked at Lonier over his shoulder. “I will see you at home, for I have a few things to attend to here ere I leave,” he finished and turned purposefully to where a small group of

councilors was standing by the north wall leaving Menannon silently fuming.

Once again his sire had smoothly prevented him from talking to him. Menannon heaved a heavy sigh and turned away, remembering the promised meeting and began to make his way from the chamber with a lighter heart.

Despite his great height, the young Giant lost himself in the crowd of councilors and courtiers and slipped back into a small side chamber until all was still.

When he heard the last of the doors along the hall close and the main doors bang shut behind the departing councilors and guards and stillness return once more to the hall, Menannon cracked the door open and peered out.

There was no one in the hallway, so he eased out from his hiding place, closed the door with a soft click, turned and went silently down the hall. By dint of sheer gut will power, he managed to keep himself to a silent walk though his thoughts flew ahead on the wings of emotion intent upon a meeting with Nirna too long delayed. He managed to reach the side door which led to the small garden without anyone being the wiser. The sun spilling through the door when he opened it was nearly blinding after the dimness of the hall. Once he had stepped through and eased the door shut, his impatience overcame him and he ran into the garden softly calling her name.

The queen's pleasure garden was a lovely tangle of flowering vines, lacy ferns, exotic shrubs and green leaves ranging from the size of Menannon's fingernail to one plant with leaves the size of an elephant's ears. All this nestled under the protective cover of the branches and leaves of a night-blooming Peridüs. There was stillness within the garden as well as a peace which belied its location only a stone wall away from the activity of the busiest building in the entire governmental complex. Nothing was stirring save a small bird whose green wings and red breast glittered jewel-like among the leaves of the lowest branch of the tree. It flitted about, stopping every now and then to peer down at the intruder with a dew-bright eye as though to make sure the Giant had the right to be here. Menannon held still, waiting for the little sentinel to finish his inspection. At last, with a happy chirp and

a flick of its tail, the tiny fellow flew off into a tangled corner of the garden disappearing among the rose bushes and their attendant creepers. Menannon let his breath out slowly and began to circle the garden.

He had nearly made a full circle when a large-leaved shrub beside him erupted with a pink and gold vision which launched itself into his arms in a very unladylike fashion. He barely heard her words before Nirna began kissing him, torn between laughter and tears.

“Playfellow! You’ve come! I knew you’d understand my message.”

Menannon was not loath to answer her kiss for kiss for his heart demanded nothing less. At last, the first storm of their emotions and pent up loneliness eased and she settled her head against his chest with a sigh. He rested his chin upon her sun warmed hair and held her close, breathing in the fresh scent of peridüs water wafting from her curls which along with the scent of the other flowers about them, was a heady brew. He would have been willing to stand thus with her the rest of his life.

“Never has winter seemed so long, Playfellow,” she murmured against the cloth of his robe. “I thought you would never come...and speaking of that...How did you come, for no ship has been in or out of the harbor in more than a sevenday.”

She suddenly jerked, half turning in his arm.

“Did you come hither from Aridion City a full sevenday since and not come to me until now?” she demanded, the purple of her eyes turning darker with hurt and suspicion.

“Nay, Faeori, I came but last night with Irenos Prince,” he assured her, though telling her the story rather than the truth as he deemed it best for the nonce. “I would that it had been sooner,” he added, giving her a quick kiss on the head as though to seal his words.

She came back into his full embrace with a sigh and raised her face to him for another joyful kiss in which he obliged her.

The time had come to tell his own news, yet now that the moment he had dreamed of for so many months had finally arrived, he found himself strangely tongue tied.

“Faeori...” he began, then halted, hot color suffusing his

cheeks.

“What is it?” She opened her eyes and reached up to move a stray lock of hair away from his eyes. “What is troubling you?”

“I...well...I...”

He suddenly found himself stammering like a first summer apprentice being set a sum.

Knowing him well, Nirna kept her silence. He would find the words for which he searched in his own time.

At last he swallowed hard and spoke. “My beloved, liege lady, when I reached Aridion City, I researched long and carefully as I did not want to err in this above all things.” He had to stop and take a deep breath again before he could continue. “Faeori, I have found that it is not forbidden of the High one for Humans and Giants to wed. It was never common, but of old there were at least three such unions recorded on the books of lineage from my clan alone...”

“It is true then! We can be wed!” she whispered, interrupting him, her face shining with such happiness as he had never seen.

“The law will have to be changed,” he reminded her, but she swept away his objection with a wave of her shapely hand. “Pooh to the law! I will be queen when I come of age and I will change the law, then we shall be wed in the most magnificent ceremony this city or any city has ever seen. The hundred bells will ring out for us, Playfellow! For us!” She stood on tiptoe and kissed him long and passionately causing him to fervently hope that the eleven summers until she came of age passed quickly. When she released him, her smile was glorious.

Then, in one of her quicksilver mood changes, Nirna burst into a storm of silent weeping clinging to him as though her very life depended upon his presence. Not knowing quite what to do, Menannon simply continued to hold her and began to gently rub her back until her sobbing stopped and she was able to step back from him. He reached under his robe and withdrew a clean handkerchief from his belt pouch.

“Here, Faeori,” he mumbled, handing her the cloth. She wiped her tear-reddened eyes and blew her nose like an obedient child then turned away to play distractedly with one

of the huge leaves behind her.

“I’m sorry Playfellow. I didn’t mean to cry all over you. It’s just...” Her voice trailed off ending with a slight hiccough.

Menannon took her shoulders and gently turned her around.

“I took no offence, Faeori and will take none if you will just tell me what has happened to cause you such distress.” There was a low bench a little along the path and he led her to it and settled her there then knelt on one knee in front of her.

“Speak to me Faeori.” He kept his voice low and gentle as he did when treating with Aridion City’s orphans. She sat for several long heartbeats silently twisting the handkerchief between her fingers. At last she looked up through her lashes then ducked her head back down.

“I’m so happy with your news that I’m suddenly terrified that something will spoil it. It’s just that I...” she started then stopped and cleared her throat and tried again. “I feel like such a fool, Menannon, for there is really nothing I can mark and say ‘this is the trouble.’ Everything is wrong and nothing is wrong.” She glanced up at him again then took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “It’s just...there is in the very air here that which makes my skin crawl. There is an all-pervading feeling of something waiting to happen. Like a storm just over the horizon. It’s everywhere. Conversations are halted when I enter the room. Furtive looks are cast my way from the serving folk and doorwards. Everyone is whispering and no one is talking. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sadly, my lady, I do,” Menannon nodded. “For it’s the same in my father’s villa. The things not being said nearly roar in my ears.”

“Aye, that’s it exactly!” She said looking him in the eyes, her hand reaching out to clutch the sleeve of his robe. “E’en Mati just pats my hand and says that I’m imagining things when I say there is something wrong. Menannon, I am not a child any longer and I am tired of being treated as one!”

Nirna burst out, her sudden anger drying her eyes marvelous fast. She stood, nearly knocking him backwards and marched to the end of the garden and climbed up on the wall despite the delicacy of her gown and sandals.

This wall was tall enough that it still provided a bit of

privacy simply due to its height above the surrounding plaza though should anyone be looking out of the windows of the Council Hall they could be seen to be in conversation, a thing which he doubted not was still forbidden them. Despite that, he followed her swiftly and stood below her on the lower reaches of the wall, their heads thus almost on a level.

“Do you see it out there?” she pointed to the crescent.

Menannon looked along her pointing arm, out across the plaza and the harbor and saw again the strange shimmer.

“It surrounds our entire land and the sailors are frightened. They are saying no ship can leave nor come, that all are turned back without e’en a turn of the steering oar.”

“Do any speculate as to the cause?” Menannon asked, attempting to study the shimmer, but every time he looked straight at it, it disappeared.

“It’s sorcery! It’s him!” she almost snarled, her face hardening into angry lines.

“Him who?” he asked, keeping his voice level, despite the fact he was sure he knew the answer and it angered him. She glance around suddenly furtive, as if she expected the very leaves about them to be listening.

“Azuron!” Nirna spoke the Teluri’s name as though it burned her tongue to say it. She looked over her shoulder at him. The deep purple of her eyes turning nearly black with suppressed anger and not a little fear.

“Menannon he is a sorcerer and he has cast a spell over our land AND my mother!”

“Why deem you that?”

“Because she dotes upon him and she, who has ne’er asked the time of day from a clock, now cannot e’en decide what gown to wear in the morning without first asking him his opinion.”

Nirna fairly spat the words, so deep was her vexation with her mother’s actions. Menannon had to agree that this new activity of the queen’s was indeed out of character for her. He had never known Norilendra Queen to seek out any opinion save that of his sire and one other and even then it was only in a limited fashion and only when she had exhausted all her own devices.

The young Giant cast about in his mind for the identity of

the other to whom the queen was wont to turn for council and found it in a name that bore ill tidings. It had been Lord Normanus, the aged councilor who had been assassinated in the very council hall itself! He swallowed a bit convulsively. What if Normanus had been killed because he had been a confidante of the queen? Would his sire be the next prey? The thought made his blood run cold.

“How did your mother react to Lord Normanus’ death?” he hurried to ask though he already suspected the answer.

“She said he deserved to die a traitor’s death and a quick knife had been too good for him....” Nirna’s voice trailed off into a whisper.

“I have to agree something is indeed happening to your mother, for she was always one to set high store by the laws of this land and she would never have condoned murder ere this.” Menannon raised a puzzled eyebrow. “But perchance she did not know the truth of how Normanus died,” he suggested attempting to not let his own ill treatment by Nirna’s mother color his reasoning. The princess shook her head.

“She knew, for Captain Firod reported it to her exactly as it happened. I was attending upon my mother in the solar when he and Azuron sought an audience. The Teluri came and sat beside my mother as though he were her consort and faced the captain. Firod did not flinch or demur, but told her exactly how it happened and she looked at Azuron as if she wished him to confirm it. All that one said was that a cracked pot could not be mended and it is best to shatter it in the field and returns its essence to the potter’s mix to be made into something newer and better. As though there could be anything better than that good old man!” Nirna’s eyes sparkled with tears again.

Menannon had to agree with her that Normanus had been a kind and intelligent man well known to the young Giant, as he had been his tutor when Menannon had first come to Kalyria. Normanus had done much to ease his transition from the Giantish world to that of the island without ever letting the youngster feel as though he were an outsider.

He could still remember Normanus setting him up on the top of the wall at his sire’s villa the first afternoon he had

come to tutor him.

“Look yonder, Menannon. What see you?” Normanus questioned, pointing out across the city.

“I see houses and ships and the sea and the sky and the clouds,” Menannon answered, feeling rather puzzled by the question.

“Do you deem the High One can see as well as you can?”

“Of course! My father says the High One can see everything,” Menannon assured him with all of his five summer’s old wisdom.

“Is there anything down there that the High One cannot see?”

“I deem there is not.” Menannon shook his head for emphasis.

“Can He see you?” Normanus looked down at him earnestly.

“Aye.”

“No matter where you go?”

“Aye,” the child replied solemnly.

“E’en if you go inside or it’s dark?”

“Aye.”

“Then you must always remember, Menannon, that anywhere in the world a person finds himself is his home because all places belong to the High One and nothing is out of His sight or reach. You are not a foreigner anywhere because this is the High One’s world and he made all of it for us, his children.”

Menannon wrenched his thoughts back from his memories and looked earnestly at Nirna.

“His murderer will not go unpunished! The High One will not be mocked. He will not allow one of His children to be murdered and do nothing.”

“It seems as though He is doing nothing, for e’en now, our judges are being persecuted for performing their duties.”

Nirna sighed and turned back to looking out over the garden wall.

“Remember that we must sometimes be the High One’s hands and feet,” the Giant observed softly.

She gave him a quizzical look, but Menannon only grinned and lifted her down from the wall. She started to go past him, but he took her arm halting her. Nirna looked up at him questioningly.

“We must go now, Faeori, for we have tarried over long and one or both of us shall be missed.” He placed a restraining finger to her lips as she took breath to speak. “No. No more questions now. Meet me tonight at the mid-of-night in the brattice and you will get some answers.”

He leaned down and gave her a long kiss then stepped away only to turn back with a grin. "Make sure to be dressed for an adventure and you will see one of the High One's answers." Before she could reply, Menannon strode away and let himself back into the council hall.



HE MADE THE RETURN TRIP TO THE VILLA walking on air. Despite everything, the world was alright, Nirna loved him and would one day be his. That thought alone gave wings to his heart and made the afternoon, spent in weaving beautiful visions of life with Nirna was his lady wife, fly by. Strangely none of those visions included himself as the Prince Consort of Kalyria, for what they would do in the future never intruded into his fantasies. He thought only that, whatever the future held, they would do it together. They were, after all, fantasies.

Evening found him in the summerhouse still awaiting his sire's arrival. The elder Giant had apparently spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening talking to the few councilors still undecided about Azuron, although the thought uppermost in Menannon's mind was that he was avoiding conversation with his son. Reluctantly, he went inside and ate in the privacy of his own chamber the light dinner Clarinda had saved for him then went to bed, knowing he needed at least a little rest against the night's adventures.

It was a little over a full turn of an hour before he had intended to rise when he heard his sire walk past his chamber and then the door of his own chamber close. Menannon nearly rose and followed him, but stopped himself as he would not have time to pursue the conversation and still get to the meeting place on time. Reluctantly, he rolled back over and tried to sleep although it eluded him as his mind began to whirl with the what-ifs of tonight's undertaking. He finally threw off his covers and prepared himself for the quest.

As quietly as he could, Menannon donned his darkest kirtle and hose and a pair of soft boots, took up his old pack and let himself out of his chamber into the garden, heading for one of

the sheds near the stables. He slipped inside as quietly as he could and cracked open the Dwarf lantern just a bit so that only a sliver of light was loosed. By that glimmer, he was able to find what he was looking for: two heavily bladed fishing knives. He slid the sheathed knives into his pack and slung it onto his shoulders, then closed the lantern.

He peered out for a moment making sure none of his sire's guards had observed him. There was no motion in the close. He eased his way back out of the shed and shut the door and quickly headed for the back wall of the close. The moon was full tonight, not very auspicious for a quest better performed in darkness, but it did make it easier for him to find the toe holds he had carved in this side of the wall and make his way over. He lay on top of the wall for nearly a quarter turn of the hour until he was sure that should anyone be watching the villa this night, they must all be on the more accessible side. The back of the close had only a few feet of level ground ere it dropped off a goodly way down into a kind of saddle. It would have made attack from this side less than a desirable proposition. When he was sure all was as it should be, Menannon lowered himself down and disappeared into the darkness.

As careful and as silent as he had been, he did have one unseen watcher. Gorlanndon stood thoughtfully at his open window enjoying the warm softness of the night and watched his son's stealthy exit. Almost, he followed him, then decided against it, as the morning would be time enough to learn what the youngster had been up to.



CHAPTER 3

(SUMMER OF THE WORLD 6097)

MENANNON MADE HIS WAY to the near end of the Mathematical bridge by following the outer walls of the villas for as far as he could before stepping out onto the road. He had apparently gotten past anyone who might be watching and so felt confident enough to cross the bridge and make his way to the back of the palace and halt in the darkness under the brattice. There was no guard on the wall as there had been no need for well over a thousand summers.

He waited until he was sure that no one was in the plaza near him and then pulled out his fishing knives, unsheathed them and began to thrust them into the cracks between the great stones. They made a soft thunk as they went in and a slight scraping sound as they came out, but there was no help for it. He had no other way to climb the wall. Hand over hand, he managed to scale the wall and heave himself up through one of the murder holes into the brattice itself. He lay still, hugging the floor, his breath sounding excessively loud in his ears. Menannon looked around and saw no sign of Nirna, so he settled down in the darkest corner to wait.

It was perhaps a quarter turn of the hour before he heard the sound of lightly running feet coming along the wall. It was Nirna, but her approach was hardly stealthy. He wondered why, but had no time to speculate as she burst in upon him breathlessly.

“Playfellow?” she whispered. “Are you here?”

“Aye,” he murmured back, rising from his shadow and coming into a patch of moonlight gleaming through an arrow slit. She ran to him and threw her arms around him and halted anything else he might have said with a kiss.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” she said, pulling away to look up at him.

“As you can see I can’t accompany you,” she indicated the heavily embroidered robe she was wearing. It shone

silvery in the moonlight and chimed softly as she moved as there were small bells all along the hem.

“Mother has ordered a mid-of-night repast to be served in the solar to celebrate the full moon and Azuron is coming as the guest of honor. I swear, Playfellow, she would find it hard to e’en breath without his presence.” This last she said with disgust. “I must go back ere they miss me, but I had to come so that you would not deem I had abandoned you.”

“I would never deem that.” He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. “Perchance this is a good thing, as Azuron will be less interested in the happenings in the city tonight. Go then and the High One go with you.”

“And with you,” she whispered. “Come and I’ll stand watch while you use the stairs and the sally port in the side wall as you used to upon visiting me.”

Before he could protest, she took his hand and began tugging him out of the brattice and along the wall. They reached the middle of the east wall and came to the staircase. Nirna pulled him down and kissed him again then pushed him on his way. “Go! No one is watching.”

She continued to stand at the stair head until he had safely attained the shadows beside its base and found the sally port. With a last look up at her, he drew the bar free and slipped through the small door back out into the plaza.

Menannon made short work of leaving the plaza and crossing back to the Equian where, rather than going on up to his sire’s villa, he took the right hand fork and began making his stealthy way down towards Lady Rhylanda’s villa. He was a good three turns of the hour early for the intended gathering time for the conspirators, but he was too keyed up to return to the villa and wait. Just above the judge’s villa, he slipped off from the road and began making his way through the orchard surrounding it. At the very edge of the trees he settled down to wait. From this position, he had a clear view of the front gate and the southwest corner of the close wall. There was movement here and there all across his field of vision. Azuron’s Doomcriers were out in force making sure that no one entered or left the villa. It was going to take quite a distraction to give him a chance to get the lady and her

family out. Luckily there were only five members of Lady Rhylanda's immediate family living in the villa, the lady herself, her eldest son, Rhys, his lady wife and two grandchildren: two small girls. Her own consort had passed away several summers ago and her other two sons and their families served Kalyria at off-island posts.

Menannon counted guards and moving bushes around the wall. There appeared to be someone at about ten foot intervals all along. The long night would hopefully dull their senses or else more drastic measures were going to have to be taken to get the folk out. The young Giant thought of and discarded a score or more of possible ideas until all he could finally think of was knocking two or three of the Doomcriers cold on the backside of the close and having Haalinoth stand against the wall with Irenos on his shoulders to act as a living ladder for the folk to climb down. How they would get away after that was a matter of the wildest speculation at the moment.

The first birds were beginning to chirp and the air to smell of morning shortly after moonset, when at last he was joined by Haalinoth and Irenos, each dressed as he was in dark kirtle and hose. They nodded to him and signaled that they needed to withdraw and speak. Menannon followed the Teluri a little way back through the orchard so they could speak quietly without fear of being heard.

"What hast thou seen? Are there as many guards as was our fear?" Irenos murmured.

"Aye. They are as thick on the ground as caterpillars in spring." Menannon murmured back. "But I bethought me that if you twain would stand against the wall and let Lady Rhylanda and her folk climb down you, we could manage this if we knocked out a few guards at the back. What say you?"

The Teluri exchanged a glance then nodded. "It is a good plan." Haalinoth murmured. "As soon as our friends appear to spread inattention amongst Azuron's stalwarts, we shall set it in motion."

"Come, they shall be here soon and we must be ready," Irenos urged, turning to lead the way back to the edge of the orchard and around it to the side well away from the

gate.

They hunkered down to observe the Doomcriers and mark where each one was. The fellow nearest them was not hard to find, as his snores were carrying quite well in the night air. Next to him, two of his fellows were intent upon a game of dice in a small space of packed earth they had cleared for the purpose. The two Teluri indicated that they would deal with the guards and the Menannon should ready himself to get over the wall as quickly as he could. The one aspect of their plan that was chancy was that they had been unable to alert Lady Rhylanda as to their rescue attempt. Hopefully, the good lady would be quick to apprehend what was happening rather than raise an alarm.

While they waited the last few moments for the charade to begin, Irenos and Haalinoth faded into the darkness. Menannon barely heard three soft thuds and the Teluri returned as silently as they had left, bearing unconscious Humans, Haalinoth with two. They set them down and leaned them comfortably against the trunk of the tree and signaled Menannon to be ready. Again he took out his fishing knives and held them lightly, waiting for the disturbance to begin.

He had not long to wait, as suddenly a loud shout broke the stillness, startling a flock of starlings from their night's perch and threw the Doomcriers into confusion. The reek of Borian ale reached the villa before the riotous fools came into sight.

"Tiny catchrat Dink! Bringing back now!" Turanio's voice cut the night air from just beyond the last curve of the road.

"Catch me if you can, you wooden footed goats," came a cackling singsong reply and with that, the other four of their party burst upon the scene running down the road, the two stilt-walkers hot after the two Dwarves. Dink was waiving a full bottle of Borian ale and dancing about in and out around Turanio's legs. As soon as Turanio tried to lean down and catch a hold of it, Dink tossed the bottle to Conar who immediately started taunting Tullio in a similar manner.

"Ye'll never catch me! Yer too tall an' clumsy, an yer head is after bein' made of wood just like yer legs!" He ran

several steps towards the gate and stood waving the bottle above his head. "Here ye are, long shanks. Come an' get it!"

As the younger Orlando ran towards him, he tossed the bottle back to Dink and then ran after it to join him in a line dance around and around the two stilt walkers' legs. The Orlandos were making a great show of trying to stomp on the Dwarves as they danced and catcalled. These antics had the desired affect and soon all of the Doomcriers on guard at the front and most of them from the sides were standing around the gate rooting for each side and taking bets as to who would win.

At a signal from Irenos, Menannon broke cover and sped to the wall where he made good use of his knives and scaled it in a matter of seconds. He was up and over it into the back garden before anyone was any the wiser. Once inside, he spotted the kitchen door by its location fronting the kaleyard and made his way hastily to it, letting himself in. As the door clicked closed behind him, he whispered a brief prayer of thanksgiving that folk on Kalyria did not yet deem it necessary to lock their doors.

Though the kitchen was in darkness, there was a glimmer of light coming from the front reception hall declaring that at least someone had been disturbed by the noise from without. Menannon ran lightly down the hall and halted at the entrance to the chamber. Lady Rhyland and her son Rhys were standing near the front door in their night attire, listening intently. They had not noticed him. Menannon took a deep breath, said a brief prayer and stepped out of the shadowed hall.

"My lady," he murmured. They both whirled around in surprise, she grabbing up a vase and his hand moving to where his dagger would normally be.

"Hold! I'm a friend." Menannon held out his hands showing that he bore no weapons.

"Menannon?" Rhylanda quarried setting down the vase instantly recognizing the young Giant by his size and resemblance to his sire.

"Aye, my lady!" he inclined his head to her as was proper.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Rhylanda was still tall and willowy despite her nearly eight decades of life. Her white hair shone in the lantern light like a crown. She was a formidable figure even in her sleeping robe. Beside her, Rhys seemed to take in what was happening in a trice for his face cleared and a grin spread across it as he gave over reaching for his dagger and took his lady mother's arm instead.

"Mother, there is no time for questions," he said. "Go and dress quickly in something dark while I wake Missa and the children."

She turned to him startled and opened her mouth to question further, but he shook his head and propelled her past Menannon and down the hall, with a nod to the Giant. Menannon breathed a sigh of relief at the man's quickness and stepped to the window to look out and see how things were proceeding.

He could see through the lattice work of the gate that the "chase" was still going on and had now become something of a ball game with Dink as the ball. The little Dwarf had curled himself into a ball and the Orlando's were kicking him back and forth as though he were made of rubber. Conar was standing to one side waving the bottle and cheering them on. They needed to hurry, this could not go on much longer without Dink suffering some damage.

Menannon let the curtain fall back carefully and moved back along the hall to the family's quarters. Luckily the judge's villa was built along the normal lines of other fine Kalyrian homes and he found the family bedchambers with no trouble.

He could hear the soft sound of the parents waking and dressing their daughters from one of the chambers so he turned to the other that showed a light and knocked softly. The lady opened it, already garbed in a robe of black wool. She was just finishing tying up her hair.

"My lady, if you have a jewel box or treasury about, please give it me as you will need funds on the mainland and I know not what Azuron will do with your villa when he finds you fled."

She said nothing, only pointed to an iron bound chest about two feet square sitting upon her dressing table. She

stepped out of his way and began gathering a few items of clothing into a satchel. Menannon took up the chest and put it into his pack. It barely fit. He turned back to her.

“Lady, is there anyone else in the villa who needs to be taken with us?”

“Nay. I let my servants depart as soon as I was accused for I did not want them tainted with my disgrace.”

Menannon nodded and held the door for her. She threw a cloak about her shoulders and stepped out ahead of him, her satchel held firmly in her hand. Her son and his family were already standing in the hall waiting for them, the two girls wide-eyed with fear and sleep. Each bore a small satchel of clothing and the oldest girl held a basket with two cats in it. Menannon had not thought of that and whispered a prayer that the feline family members would recognize the need for silence as well as did their small mistresses.

Menannon nodded to them and led the way to the kitchen door and opened it a crack to make sure nothing was amiss. The sound of the “game” was still floating from the front and he saw Irenos signaling them from the top of the wall. He pushed the door open the rest of the way and led his little band to the back wall.

“Is there a ladder anywhere?” he murmured. Wordlessly, Rhys ran to a nearby shed and came back almost on the instant with a good stout ladder. This they set against the wall and Menannon climbed it and stood on its top, as it was not long enough to reach all of the way so they would need to climb over him to get to the top. They handed the girls up to him and he set them on top of the wall with the soft admonition to “hold still.” Lady Rhylanda came next and Menannon braced her foot with his knee so that she could climb over him to the top of the wall. Lady Missa followed quickly and then Rhys.

When all were up, Menannon followed and assisted them to climb down the living ladder on the other side. Rhys went first and then Menannon handed the girls down to Irenos one by one. He passed them to Haalinoth who handed them on down to their sire. The two ladies were a bit shaky climbing down the Teluri, but they made it and then Menannon simply jumped down and all of them faded

into the darkness as rapidly as possible. As soon as they were well into the orchard, Irenos gave a high piercing cry that was a fine imitation of a hawk and they moved on knowing that the other four would soon head on down to the harbor and meet them back at the tradehall in the Serpentine.

As quickly as possible, Menannon led his little party around the face of the Equian and across the lower bridge to the Citadel thence to the Idrian, thence by circuitous ways to the back of the harper hall. Here they halted again to catch their breath and take stock. It was still too early for any of the day students to be about and a full hour yet ere the dormitory bell would ring to awaken those who slept in. Only the kitchen staff would be about their business, so the likelihood of running into anyone inside the hall was slight.

“The High One’s blessing upon thee. We will take our leave here shortly,” Irenos whispered to Lady Rhylanda and the lady inclined her head to both Teluri in thanks for their service.

“Be assured, I and mine shall never forget what all of you have done,” she murmured and turned to Menannon who stood silently considering them.

“Ere we proceed any farther, each of you must all swear never to reveal anything you see or hear tonight to anyone,” he said, looking into the face of each person in the small group. “Do you so swear?”

Each nodded in turn.

Menannon took a deep breath and turned to open the secret door to the tunnel leading to the High Hall of Gathering and the gate to the Straight Paths.

“I shall return as soon as possible,” he whispered to Irenos and Haalinoth and the two Teluri nodded and faded into the last of the shadows in the close, their part done.

With a quiet admonition to hold hands and follow him, Menannon herded the family into the darkness of the tunnel.

The floor of the tunnel was smooth and level and easily negotiated even in the total darkness that filled it, as none of them had a light of any description, another oversight in their planning to add to the growing list of things they needed to improve upon. He came to the spiral stair leading

up to the door behind the throne and halted.

“We can still talk here, so listen carefully. We are going to ascend a spiral stair. When we reach the top, we will come out of a door in the wall behind the celebrant’s high throne on the dais of the Hall of Gathering. You have all seen the throne, so you will know where you are. To the side of it, there is a mosaic that is actually a gate. I will open it and the chamber will be flooded with brilliant cobalt light, blindingly so, especially after this darkness. Close your eyes or squint as best pleases you, but you must hold hands as we move along. If your hands come loose, cease moving immediately and sit down. It is imperative that you move no further until I come for you.

“Know that you are safe now, but we are going to utilize Mythrian magic of a very powerful order to convey you to Aridion City and once there, you may bespeak Grandmaster Blackmore for sanctuary. Come! We must hurry ere the priest comes to prepare for the morning service. Remember: do not loose hands no matter the provocation.”

It was strange giving orders and instructions in total darkness. He hoped all had understood him. There was no way to read their expressions, for they were naught but faceless, bodiless sources of breathing and of body heat in the pitch blackness that was their resting place.

Menannon turned and led the way up the stairs, feeling his way to the door. All followed him as quietly as possible. He eased it open a crack and the grey light of false dawn coming in the clerestory windows nearly blinded him. He waited a moment, listening to make sure the chamber was truly empty. There was a peaceful stillness within. He opened the door the rest of the way and ducked through. The family followed him closely.

Before anyone could say or do anything, he held a finger to his lips reminding silence and moved to face the mosaic. Overhead, the presence lantern glittered softly. He turned with a silent prayer and spoke the word of command. The gate ground open, the sound of its opening strangely muffled. All his charges gasped at the brightness and beauty of the light, but held their tongues. Together, they stepped into it and the gate shut behind them, the grinding sound of

its closing now faint and far away.

Menannon followed the pattern of steps Blackmore had given him giving it all the single-minded attention only a Giant can give, and they soon faced the gate to Aridion's harper hall. He took the last step and the gate opened on still starlit darkness. They stepped out and Menannon let go of Lady Rhylanda's hand and crossed the chamber to light the cresset above Blackmore's desk. He turned back and his heart froze. One of the girls was missing.

The eldest who had been carrying the cats had been in the back of the group with her little sister next in line. Frantically he banged on grandmaster Blackmore's door then ran back to the Kalyrian gate and opened it before the family realized that they had arrived less one. Even as he stepped back through the gate he heard Blackmore's voice welcoming the first of his refugees.

Menannon prayed fervently that the child had followed his directions and sat down when she became separated. He walked back along the path praying every step that he would find her, but he reached the Kalyrian gate with no sign. There he had to stop and take several deep breaths to still his racing heart. She had to be somewhere. He turned to retrace his steps with Blackmore's admonition ringing in his ears...*lost for all eternity unless you are found by accident...by accident...by accident.* He had not thought of the simple expedient of tying his charges together with a good stout rope and now a little girl was paying the price for his stupidity. He walked slowly back to the Aridion agate and still found no sign of her. There he almost stepped through to enlist Blackmore's aid, but suddenly felt that he did not have the time. He either found her now or she would be lost forever.

He turned back one last time and thought to call her name but realized that he did not know it. So instead he simply called, "Sunshine where are you? Sunshine can you hear me? Sunshine!" Each time he stopped to listen in hopes that he would be answered, but there was no response. He reached the halfway point back to the Kalyrian gate and halted again at a crossing.

"Sunshine!" he called and his time there was a sound. Strangely there was a slight rumble to his left.

“Sunshine!?” he repeated and the rumble got louder then a small black and white cat came out of a side passage. It was one of the cats the girl had been carrying in the basket.

“Sunshine?” he questioned. The cat purred loudly and rubbed his ankle. He dropped to on knee and scooped it up.

“Where did you come from and where is your mistress?” he asked, though he knew full well the cat could not understand him. It wiggled in his hands and he set it down. A soon as it was on the floor again it started back down the side passage out of which it had just come. It went a few feet then stopped and looked back as though it wanted him to follow it. Menannon took a deep breath and stood then looked about him to fix in his mind the passage he was now in and stepped out into new territory to follow the cat.

It led him a little way and then he heard another sound. It was the sound of soft crying though there were words in it as well. He stopped and listened carefully.

“Sunshine! Where are you?” a small child was saying. “Sunshine, come back. I’m scared.”

It was all he could do not to run toward the sound, but he knew he did not dare as he would court the chance of losing his way and then they would both be lost. Menannon forced himself to follow steadily after the cat and he rounded a corner just in time to see it jump into a little girl’s arms. She was sitting on the floor of the passage holding the basket with the second cat still inside, her face wet with tears.

“Hello there,” he said softly, walking up to her and kneeling.

She looked up, her heart in her eyes and gave one last hiccuping sob.

“Thank you for sitting down when you got separated, sweetheart. That and your cat Sunshine helped me to find you.” He smoothed his thumb across her cheek wiping away the tears. “Come, let us go find your family. Alright?”

She nodded and he picked her up, almost clinging to her in his relief at having found her. The High One be praised for having named a small cat Sunshine.

Menannon closed his eyes and retraced his steps back to the crossing by the vision in his mind so that nothing could

distract him. He arrived back at the crossing and turned gratefully onto the path to Aridion. He opened the gate and stepped out, nearly colliding with Rhys who stood staring white-faced at the gate. When Menannon appeared with his daughter, Rhys almost tore her from his arms in his relief at seeing her again.

“Papa, Whiskers jumped out of the basket,” she told her sire as he carried her across to where the rest of her family sat talking to Blackmore in comfortable chairs near the newly kindled hearth.

Menannon stood watching them with a sense of near bone melting relief that the quest had been fulfilled then quickly left the audience chamber and ran upstairs to his former chamber in search of his harper’s robes as Irenos had instructed.

He opened the door as quietly as possible, not wanting to awaken any of the other journeymen sleeping in the chambers near his. Long practice allowed him to find the cresset in the dark and light it with its attendant flint and steel. By its flickering glow, he crossed to his clothes press and had just opened its lid when a soft snore froze him in place. The sound was startling enough to his already raw nerves that he dropped the lid back with a loud whump and whirled to face the new danger. Across the chamber he found himself staring into the equally startled eyes of Lee, who until this moment had been blissfully asleep in the bed, under the watchful gaze of Pin the stuffed puppy.

“What are you doing here!?” they both questioned at exactly the same time. “I thought...!”

The absurdity of speaking simultaneously, mixed with the relief at seeing only Lee, was enough to release Menannon from the strain of the last hours and he suddenly had to sit down on the clothes press as he began to chuckle, which turned into a guffaw, which in turn became a full side-splitting laughing fit. Lee could not help joining in. Between them, they twain made enough noise to cause the journeyman in the next chamber to bang on the wall in protest.

“My apologies!” Menannon called through the wall as soon as he got himself back under control. He stood and

crossed to the bed.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked holding out his hand to the drummer in greeting.

“Well,” Lee took the Giant’s hand. “I...well, I...” he stammered, not wanting to admit he had changed chambers so that he would be on hand in the event Menannon came back for a brief visit or because he had forgotten something. He climbed out of bed to give himself a bit more time to think of a plausible excuse and in so doing, his eye caught Menannon’s black harp resplendent on its stand.

“It’s the harp’s fault!” he blurted out in inspiration. “That instrument of yours is too heavy to drag around, so I found it rather easier to move myself than it, if you take my meaning,” he finished with a rush, blushing to the roots of his hair.

“I do take your meaning and thank you for the care.” Menannon inclined his head and turned back to the clothes press, but not before Lee caught the glint in his black eyes and knew that the Giant had seen right through him as always.

“So, what are you doing back so soon?” Lee asked, coming to stand beside the Giant and watching as he reopened the clothes press.

“I returned for these,” Menannon reached out two of his harper robes and handed them to Lee as he smoothed the rest of the press’ contents back into order and closed the lid.

“These? What do you need them for?” Lee demanded, nonplused. “Surely you’re not planning on placing yourself under Penor’s command!?”

“Perish the thought!” Menannon visibly shuddered as he took the robes back from the drummer. “Nay, I need them for another purpose. I’ve not the permission to tell you what, though I would that I might, for I could sorely use your singularly inventive mind.”

Menannon nodded to him and let himself back out the door. Lee grabbed up his own harper robe and throwing it on to cover his nakedness, ran out the door after him.

“Whose permission do you need to speak to me?” he demanded, catching up to the Giant just as that worthy was beginning to descend the stair. He fell in step beside him,

his bare feet making no sound on the cold flags.

“Blackmore’s.”

“Blackmore’s? But you’re doing something on Kalyria so why are you in need of Blackmore’s permission to speak of it?”

“Because it concerns him most closely and is his secret, not mine,” Menannon halted at the bottom of the stair and looked hard at his friend. “Were it my choice, I would tell you all and even take you along, though I know not if your sire would brook placing you in danger.”

“Danger?!” Lee grabbed the front of Menannon’s kirtle halting him as he started to turn away. “What danger are you in? Now I have to know what is going on!”

The Crenanocian’s long line of warrior ancestors reared their spirit within him at the idea of danger to his dearest friend and sent Lee marching down the hall to the Grandmaster’s audience chamber where he knocked peremptorily and entered before the echo of the knocks had died in the corridor.

Blackmore was seated at his desk alone in the chamber, having sent his guests to the refectory under the care of Jondlin. Lee marched up to him and took a position foursquare in front of his desk, the look on his face brooking no lies or dissimulation. Menannon followed a bit behind, not quite sure what was going on as he had never seen Lee in this martial mood before.

“Grandmaster, what danger besets Kalyria that has threatened Menannon and his sire?” There was no hysteria or wheedling in the tone of either voice or question, only a flat demand for knowledge.

The ancient Valinga set down his reading spectacles and studied the young fellow before him. Gone was all trace of the genial scapegrace who had scrambled about the harper hall and its environs passing his classes and learning his art by the seat of his hose. Leènoviilek had suddenly grown up and now in the place of the boy stood a man, a Crenanocian warrior with a mind like a finely forged sword who desired answers and who would receive them.

Blackmore studied him thoughtfully for a moment, keeping a fatherly smile to himself. One of the joys and

frustrations of raising and training children was one never knew when the butterfly would break the chrysalis and emerge to stretch its wings demanding to touch the sky. For the drummer, that moment had come and thus for the first time in his life, Lee was beforehand of his friend, as Menannon stood beside him seeming still a bit coltish in comparison.

“To be honest, we know not the exact nature of the threats to Kalyria,” Blackmore treaded softly, not knowing how much Gorlanndon had confided in his son. “All we know is that this Azuron is strengthening his hold on the reins of power by denouncing as many of the folk in high places as he can. He has them thrown into the dungeon and from thence we know not what is happening to them.”

Raising an enquiring eyebrow to Menannon, he queried the young giant. “Have any yet returned, lad?”

“Nay, Grandmaster. None have been released according to Irenos Prince’s latest intelligence.”

“And how does this affect the Gorlanndon household?” Lee asked, glancing from Blackmore to Menannon and back.

Blackmore sat for a long moment, studying Lee, then nodded to himself.

“I have given Menannon permission to use the Straight Paths to rescue as many of these denounced folk as may be from Azuron’s clutches.”

Blackmore saw a slight flicker in the drummer’s eyes. So, the existence of the Straight Paths was rumored in the hall as he had long suspected. That was interesting and not truly unexpected and that Lee should have heard of them while Menannon had not was also not unexpected, as the Crenanocian had spent far less time studying and far more time socializing than had his dearest friend.

“For the time being, the House of Gorlanndon is in no great danger as the councilor is too powerful to be assailed yet, though how long that will last, I know not.”

Blackmore glanced at Menannon to see how the young fellow would take that bit of information and saw that Gorlanndon’s heir had already come to that conclusion.

“Now that you are in on one of the harpers’ great secrets, I have no recourse but to put your inquisitive self to work.”

Blackmore turned back to Lee, all business now. He reached out a clean sheet of vellum and hastily wrote a few lines, sanded it and handed it to the drummer.

“From this point on, I am relieving Jondlin of the duty of escorting the arrivals as they come. That is a pass allowing you access to the king at any time and you are now responsible for taking the Kalyrians to the palace and seeing them settled into the protection of Gilderon King, fourth of that name. So be off with you. Go to the refectory and find Jondlin and his charges.” The Valinga waved the drummer away and settled back to his interrupted business.

Lee glanced at Menannon to see that he had a very relieved look on his face.

“We will talk when next I come,” the Giant whispered and stepped out of the way so his friend could take his leave of their grandmaster and depart the audience chamber. When the door closed behind the drummer, Blackmore raised his eyes once more to Menannon.

“Tell him all that you will save only the way to work the Paths. That I do not want him taught as it would put him at risk of being lost for I know that soon or late he will take it into his head to join you on Kalyria and when he does I desire that you should take him there. Is that clear?”

“Aye, Grandmaster.” Menannon inclined his head in acknowledgment of this order.

“Good. Now hence with you. Irenos will be wondering at your long absence.” Blackmore waved him away and picked up his reading spectacles.

Menannon crossed to the gate and raised his hand to open it.

“How did you find the child, lad?” Blackmore halted him once more just as he was about to speak the words of command.

Menannon turned and faced his grandmaster, his head lowered in shame that his thoughtlessness had nearly cost the girl her life.

“I was led to her by a cat named Sunshine,” he said so softly he almost mumbled. “The creature answered my call and I followed it to the child where she had apparently caught her other cat and sat down to wait for me.”

“Ah, so you were able to leave the path you were treading to find her and then retrace your steps. How very interesting. Well done, lad.” Blackmore nodded his head approvingly then grinned at the look on his journeyman’s face. “No one is perfect, lad. Only the High One, so don’t be too hard on yourself. Just consider things more carefully the next time. Now be off with you.” He waved him away with a nod and went back to his documents.

Menannon inclined his head again to his grandmaster and returned thoughtfully to the Kalyrian gate where he spoke the word of command and entered.

Blackmore looked up just as it was closing and smiled his secret smile. “Well begun, lad,” he said. “Well begun.”



MENANNON MADE THE TRIP back to the tradehall in a state of near utter exhaustion after the nervous tension of the quest wore off. He mentally berated himself the entire way for being such a fool and not planning better. The thought of the little girl lost on the paths and starving to death would haunt his sleep for many nights to come. The one good thing that had come of this trip beyond its dubious success was that Lee was now part of the quest. Menannon knew in his heart that this fact would be of the greatest importance at some stead.

He reached his destination and stood without the door of the small chamber listening to the sounds of laughter and celebration coming from within. He stood there for several long moments gathering himself and arranging his comportment to better fit with the good humor within. There was no reason to spoil their well-earned good spirits because he had been a fool. He forced a smile to his lips, opened the door and stepped inside.

“Ah, here he is! How did it go? Are they after bein’ in sanctuary?” Dink queried from where he stood upon the far end of the table.

“Aye, thanks to the cleverness of all of you, they are in sanctuary and need never more worry about Azuron’s

machinations.” His reply brought relieved smiles all around.

“Three cheers for us” Dink shouted. “Hip...Hip...Hurrah! Hip...Hip...Hurrah! Hip...Hip...Hurrah! Hip...Hip...Hurrah!”

Only Menannon and Irenos did not join in, but they applauded.

“Enough now!” Irenos raised his hand with a grin when Dink appeared to take breath for another round. “A little less noise if thou wilt. We would lief as not have the Doomcriers without hear our cheer. Sit, sit and let us discuss our accomplishment.”

When all had found a seat, the Orlandos on the side board to accommodate their long stilts and Dink cross-legged on the end of the table, the Teluri continued.

“Are there any comments that thou wouldst make to improve our endeavors?” He looked around the table enquiringly.

“Well, I fer one’ll be after wearin’ some paddin’ on me nether parts!” Dink said rubbing his abused flesh. “Turanio here has a powerful left foot!”

“Kha! Foot of ironwood. Sorry.” Turanio reached over and ruffled the Dwarf’s hair just as he would his younger brother’s.

“I’ll be attestin’ to that, as I’ll no be sittin’ comfortable like fer a good sevenday!” Dink glared at the stilt walker and smoothed down his hair with a jerk. The others, save Menannon grinned at this sally.

“I vow there should be a good rope ladder added to our kit,” Haalinoth chimed in rubbing his shoulder. “Irenos is not a feather to be born lightly.”

“Aye. The weight was enough on thee ere we added the folk we were aiding,” Irenos agreed seriously, but Haalinoth would have none of seriousness in the euphoria accompanying their success.

“It was the basket of cats which nearly over taxed us!” He shook his head and grinned.

“Cats in basket?” Tullio asked, glancing up in surprise. “Taking pets also, yes?”

“Of course, simple one!” His brother tapped him on the head. “You not leave Ponga if leave forever, no?”

“No, would not,” the youth shrugged. “Not give thought

is all. But not carry leopard. He walk.” He sat back in a huff.

Before there could be any further discussion of the pros and cons of taking pets along, Menannon cleared his throat and everyone turned to him.

“I deem that we need to make sure that we find a way to inform our intended folk of our plans ere we arrive. They will be able to prepare and thus we will have a much shorter time in taking them from their homes. That would save more bruises to Dinks nether parts,” he grinned at the Dwarf who preened, “and assure that we arrive at the harper hall while it is still dark.”

Everyone agreed to this and set their minds to the task of figuring out a way to alert their quarry. It was finally decided that they would attempt to send a message to them hidden within a bouquet of flowers. Once that was settled, they chose their next party to rescue, set the time at just after the mid-of-night. Haalinoth volunteered to arrange the message and they went their separate ways feeling well pleased with the results of their night’s work. Irenos held back and put a hand on Menannon’s arm halting him. When the door had closed behind the others the Teluri turned to him.

“What in this has caused thee disquiet, my friend?” he asked locking eyes with the young Giant. Menannon took a deep breath ere answering him.

“I nearly lost one of the children,” he said looking down at the Teluri and expecting to be censured, but Irenos simply looked at him waiting for the rest of the story. “One of her cats jumped form the open basket and ran away. She followed. The High One blessed me and I was able to find her, but I ne’er want to go through that again. I did not bring this up earlier as I did not wish to dim their pleasure at our success.”

“Ah. Of course. What dost thou deem is the solution?” Irenos asked. It was obvious he did not buy Menannon’s excuse for not telling them earlier.

“I deem we must tie everyone together on a rope as well request them to hold hands and secure all pets so they cannot stray.” Menannon rolled his eyes and shuddered. Irenos nodded in agreement.

“Consider this a lesson learned. Is there aught else?”

“Only a need for a light in the tunnel leading to the secret door. That is dark as the belly of a whale and caused much stumbling and frightened the children.”

Before Menannon could say more, Irenos withdrew his small Dwarf lantern from his belt pouch and handed it to him.

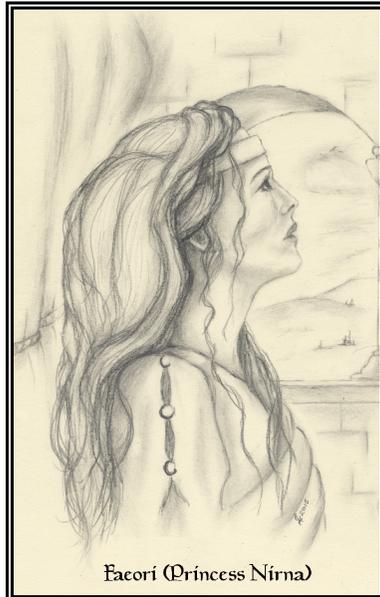
“This should solve that,” he said and stepped back allowing Menannon to reach the door. Just before the Giant opened it his countenance lightened.

“Grandmaster Blackmore has informed Lee of our designs and has enlisted him in settling the folk with the king.” He informed the Teluri with a grin.

“This is good news!” Irenos smiled back. “That lad has a devious mind indeed and will be to good purpose ere all is done. Now go home ere thy sire seeks thee,” he said and turned back to his lists and maps.

Menannon departed, the door closing softly behind him.

**YOU HAVE REACHED
THE END OF THIS PREVIEW**
of *The Last Giant: Transgression, Part 2*
Coming soon!



Facori (Princess Nirna)

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