

The Third Sign
By Gregory Wilson

PROLOGUE

Toric Illmone, the most recent member of a farmer's bloodline stretching back centuries, perhaps even before the Dreamer's first dream, wiped beads of sweat from his brow before bending again to drive his hoe into the earth. It was late summer, and already hints of the oncoming fall were in the air, but hot work was hot regardless of the season. The harvest had been particularly good this year—as good as any that even Toric's grandfather could remember—but that did little to alleviate his workload. Reaping the fruitfulness of the earth had left many wounds, and the soil had to be worked, turned, and coaxed back to its natural aerated condition if it was to yield similar results next spring.

This was tiring, tedious work for most, but for Toric it represented a kind of spiritual ritual, a bonding with the land he needed to experience each year to feel he was fulfilling the promise of his heritage. Land was meant to be tilled, dug, shoveled, filtered; it was meant to be used and cared for so that it could be used again, and Toric felt the weight of that responsibility keenly. All the Illmones did. He was perhaps not the most creative thinker, or possessed of the most ambitious, quick mind; but he was committed to his work and difficult to sway from a path he had set for himself.

Pulling back on the hoe handle again, Toric stood the implement in the earth as he straightened, sighing with the effort. He looked over his field, almost all resurfaced now from his efforts with the hoe, and beyond it to the borders of the wood that lay to the east of the Illmone farm. Tragsclaw Wood was the official name of the forest, but despite the rumors it seldom produced anything more dramatic than a wandering bear. Unnatural creatures were few, and unexpected events even fewer. Toric liked it that way, as did his neighbors; their lives were founded upon regular, predictable cycles, and their existence depended upon careful planning and the application of age-old wisdom. Successions, disasters, and wars certainly happened beyond the borders of his homeland, informally known as The Fields by its residents, but such occurrences made little impact upon its inhabitants. They were content to live as they had for

centuries, and it had indeed been centuries since anyone had bothered to interfere with that simple life.

Toric grunted with satisfaction as he leaned on his hoe, looking around the borders of his land. Far to the south lay the hills which ran between Tragsclaw Wood to the east and the southernmost area of Razorwood to the west, and even farther to the north were the major cities of the nation of Klune, but Toric, as ever, was most interested in his own space. In his grandfather's time the field had barely extended to ten acres, but now it was nearly double that, one of the largest farms in the area and expanding every year. He employed a group of laborers to help him with the upkeep, of course, but they had already been sent home. Toric wanted time to work the land alone, and the unusually good harvest had given him the luxury to indulge himself. This was the time he loved, a few hours of silent thought and careful tending of his ancestral ground.

Toric smiled and shook himself out of his late afternoon reverie. He didn't want to waste the remaining light. Bending again to his work, he drove his hoe into the earth. Then, quite suddenly, the air changed. A stillness fell across the land; the wind sank to a sigh, and the atmosphere seemed to close around Toric, who looked up with a frown. The weathermaster in the next village had told him there was not likely to be rain for at least another week, but they were notoriously inaccurate in their predictions—and even when they were right (and the one Toric had consulted was known for his precision), other weathermasters could generate rain at inopportune times when paid enough by jealous rival farmers. Still, such an occurrence had not happened for several years, and he could think of no reason for a weather call to be made now. He sniffed the air and caught a faint acrid scent—again, unusual for any normal storm. After a moment, he returned to his work, hoping to at least finish the field he was working on before the rain arrived. But only a few seconds passed before a low moan echoed across the fields.

Toric looked up sharply. The sound was fairly loud without any prior warning to have heralded it, and seemed relatively close by. Perhaps a bear had stepped on the wrong end of a

stick, Toric reasoned; but just as he was about to accept the logical answer and focus his attention back on the earth, the moaning came again, more loudly this time and closer. It seemed to come from Tragsclaw Wood, and Toric squinted in that direction. He saw nothing but the fences at the end of his land and the trees beyond. But the stillness seemed to grow more oppressive with every passing minute, and there were no clouds visible in the afternoon sky.

The moaning sounded again, louder and with a different timbre—Toric thought he heard some kind of a yowling, or screeching, like a cat whose late night caterwauls were silenced by a thrown rock or rival feline. Inadvertently he shivered. This was no storm, and there was no animal he knew that made such an unearthly sound. Dropping his hoe, he ran to his nearby cart and pulled out his scythe. It was hardly a weapon of war, but its blade was sharp, and he had killed a wolf with it one winter several years ago. But that wolf had been young and Toric had not been alone then; he had no idea what he was facing this time. In truth he had little wish to investigate the noise himself, but he was alone and had no time to run for others—and despite all his imaginings, the sound likely had a simple explanation, as sounds always did. Why give his neighbors the idea that he was imagining things? Gripping the scythe firmly, he ran towards the forest.

Toric was no coward, but as he approached the edge of Tragsclaw his steps slowed. Tragsclaw was not the darkest of woods, nor the densest, but today it felt different—ominous, imposing, heavy. With every step he took the air seemed to grow closer and more difficult to breathe. After a while he felt as if he were slogging through mud, so syrupy had the atmosphere become. Pausing at the forest's edge, the scythe's handle damp from his sweat, he peered cautiously into the greenery. He saw nothing but the trees standing silent guard on the forest border, scrubs and moss at their feet. But beyond its unnatural stillness, something struck him as wrong about the forest, though he could not put his finger on what it was. His nose and throat stung with the acrid tang of the air.

He was so focused upon the unnatural atmosphere that he had entirely forgotten about that which had drawn him to the forest in the first place—the sound. Suddenly the moan echoed again, but this time it seemed to be nearly on top of him, and far louder; and now, he clearly heard that it was more than a moan. It sounded like several creatures screaming or yelping at once, but—and this he could not understand—they seemed to be both opposed and combined in some way, like some kind of bizarre chorus of discontent. He froze and looked around slowly. Nothing stirred. And he suddenly realized what had eluded his notice before: he saw no living movement at all. No birds flew, no squirrels stirred, no fox darted from tree to tree. He bent down to the ground and dug experimentally. No insects could be seen in the earth, neither worm nor beetle. The land around him seemed utterly, entirely devoid of life.

Toric shook his head and turned away from the woods. Strange as it might seem to his neighbors, something was clearly wrong, and he would rather be labeled a coward than a fool. He headed back to his cart, but he felt as if he were walking through sand; it was now very difficult to breathe fully, and the air felt as if it were trying to crush his body into the earth. His mind swam, and his eyes darted from side to side. He had the odd feeling he was waiting for something.

All at once, a great moaning and screeching arose, seemingly all around him—the most terrible noise Toric had ever heard. Screaming and howling came from the forest, but not as isolated noises; rather they made up a noise together, one sound of painful torment. As Toric dropped to his knees in terror, he heard, for several seconds, what he swore were voices, human voices shrieking in the most wrenching agony he could have imagined. He struggled to rise, but all energy and strength had deserted him, and his brain seemed unable to command his legs to move again. His breath came in labored gasps. As he turned his head to look back at the woods, he caught a glimpse of swirling colors and odd shapes—and then, with one more deafening scream of agony, it burst out of the forest and was upon him.

The Soul Wall ravaged north. And there had never been any sound more horrible than that of its passing, now joined by one more, unreasoning, hideously distorted shout of agony, as if ripped from the lungs of a still-living man.

PART ONE

ECHOES OF THE PAST

“Lad, legends don’t come to life and walk the earth. Bards sing songs of heroes to give the rest of us scum some hope. But after the last strum of the lute, the hope fades as quickly as the rosy tinge in a pretty young barmaid’s cheek.”

—Nellius Windchym, owner of The Foolish Fortune Inn

<January, Year of the Toad>

CHAPTER ONE

THWACK!

The sound of near-death echoed around the young man as he stared at the quivering crossbow bolt embedded in a tree trunk only two inches from his face. His normally clear brown eyes were clouded in fear, his dark hair clung to his sweat-covered forehead; and as he turned slowly to face his attacker, his six foot, well-built frame displayed none of its usual confident movement. Calen Gollnet, in other words, looked like a thoroughly frightened young man.

Struggling to recover his wits, Calen began sinking to the ground in a halfhearted attempt to seek cover as his hand slipped to the knife at his belt, but he had not even made it to his knees when a voice boomed out from the brush.

“Stand and take your hand from your weapon!” Which he did. “What be your business in Razorwood?”

“I—” Calen stammered as his brain slowly formed the words, “—who speaks to me?”

“I hardly think you are in a position to ask questions,” came the voice again, more quietly—or mockingly? “What is your name, and what is your business here?” Calen racked his brain, then seized on a name no one would dare to dismiss—if anyone would believe it belonged to him.

“I am Rell Krollner, Freelanders. And I am not accustomed to having my progress hampered.” He hoped the slight quiver in his voice would be attributed to rage, not terror.

There was a long pause—during which Calen thought he heard a crossbow being cocked at least three times—before a low chuckle emanated from the green darkness. “And not particularly accustomed to lying either, eh?”

A man stepped forth from the brush. He was tall, taller than Calen’s father (a giant in his society at six foot three) and blond haired, with the fair skin of a man more used to treading dark forest pathways than smooth-stoned streets. His face seemed young, though Calen suspected he

was older than he appeared; and a neatly trimmed beard surrounded his not unpleasant smile. He wore a suit of light leather armor, over which a dark green cloak flowed, and at his belt hung a short, curved sword. He held a small crossbow in his right hand—unloaded, Calen noted with relief. But the most striking feature of the stranger was his sharp, clear, gray-green eyes that stared at—through?—Calen. There was no warmth in those eyes, nor any real emotions at all . . . simply clear, unwavering recognition of what they observed. Calen vaguely felt like a piece of cloth in his uncle's silk shop, and not the best one of the lot, either.

He swallowed hard. "What makes you think I'm lying?"

The other held his gaze for another few seconds, then chuckled again and sat on a flat rock near the edge of the undergrowth. "First, you're no Freeland. They can be overconfident, but not stupid. No Freeland would try to pass through Razorwood with neither armor nor a real weapon, even on a bet." The stranger paused, then turned his piercing gaze on the younger man again. "Second, Rell Krollner is my oldest friend, and as far as I know he's home in his castle many miles from here. So I know you're lying—and badly at that."

Calen looked at the man in shock as the forestwalker ran his finger over the crossbow string. Rell Krollner's oldest friend was . . . he hurriedly pieced together all the legends he could remember about Krollner the Freeland, legendary swordsman, prince, sometime wanderer—whose most famous friend was—

"Arvan Eleron!" he burst out at last. The man looked at him in mild surprise. "Er—I—you must be Arvan Eleron—there are legends about—uh—about you," he finished lamely. *Never reveal a weakness before you have to, lad, never demonstrate uncertainty at all if you can help it,* his uncle's voice drifted through to him, but he shoved it to the back of his consciousness.

The man looked at him for a moment, then with the trace of a smile rose and walked over to the bolt in the tree. "No, you don't lie well. But I don't think you're dangerous either, so I suppose I don't need to keep this thing here as a warning." He tugged at the bolt, then with one fluid motion drew a wicked-looking dagger from somewhere within the folds of his cloak and

worked at the edges of the bark around it. “And what if I am this Arvan Eleron? What would it matter?” For the second time in as many minutes, Calen’s mouth dropped open. The idea that finding the man rumored to have killed the Overlord himself wouldn’t “matter” was unbelievable, to say the least.

“What would it—how couldn’t it matter? Never bested in combat, could hit the eye of an aloch’h bird from two hundred yards, never without a weapon in any situation—finding such a person would be, well—incredible!” *You sound like a girl fawning over one of the city guards*, he thought, but the stranger only smiled as he worked on freeing the bolt.

“Such statements would be high praise for the King’s champion, or indeed a legion of them,” he remarked. “Spoken of a simple woodsman—well, that would seem to stretch the bounds of anyone’s credulity, don’t you think?” Calen opened his mouth to protest, but the man continued. “You keep referring to this ‘man’ in the past tense. Is he thought to be dead? Eaten? Retired and gone home?”

“Most think the first,” the young man admitted.

“But not you, eh?” the stranger replied as he removed the final piece of bark.

“No—” Calen paused, then threw caution to the winds and continued, “or at least, I have to hope not. I came here to find him.” The piercing eyes turned to him and stared once again, as if they could see the truth and falsehood within him (*maybe they can*, he thought anxiously); then they looked away.

“Well,” the man responded, “you found him. Him as he is, not as the legends make him. So what were you—” A low, rumbling growl interrupted him, nearly shaking the trees surrounding the pair. Arvan Eleron, the forestwalker and legend who seemed to Calen to be very much out of the past tense, looked up intently and sniffed the air. “Hmm,” he said finally, “the ralaar is on the hunt. We had best get inside before it finds us and decides we would make a particularly tasty tidbit.” Calen shuddered (the ralaar’s appetite was another legend he was all too familiar with) and nodded his assent. The man pulled the bolt free from the trunk and returned it

to a quiver at his belt. “Always retrieve your ammunition,” he explained as he slung his crossbow over his shoulder. “Let’s move.” With barely a whisper he crept silently into the dark underbrush. Calen stared at the spot the forestwalker had passed through—hardly a twig had moved—until the man’s voice came from the brush. “It’s a bush, friend. Not of particular interest, and not any reason to waste time, hmm?” Calen blushed and hurriedly plunged into the undergrowth, certain he was making enough noise to attract all the ralaars within ten miles.

He followed the man, stumbling and tripping here and there, until they came to the edge of a clearing. Tired but relieved, Calen stepped forward, stumbled on a particularly large root, and fell flat on his face. Groaning softly, and cursing himself for not having paid more attention to his woodland survival lessons at school, he pushed himself painfully to his knees. “Sorry, that was really stup—” And looking up, he stopped dead, for he was not staring into the woodsman’s gray eyes, but the large, brown, and decidedly non-human eyes of an enormous wolf.

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Had Calen had his way, he would have tried a deftly executed roll to his right, followed by a well placed rock to the wolf’s head . . . but unfortunately, he had considerable difficulty putting his elegant plan into action. The best he was able to manage was a loud yelp of surprise as he scrambled back from the wolf. Closing his eyes, he waited for the inevitable end, steeling himself for the beast’s vicious jaws closing on his neck—and then, realizing he shouldn’t still have been able to think of anything if the wolf had attacked him, he cautiously opened one eye. The wolf had not moved, but simply regarded him calmly. Calen would have sworn the gray creature was almost . . . well, faintly *amused* by him. This suspicion was confirmed when the wolf began to chuckle—no, not the wolf. With a grin on his face, Arvan Eleron stood next to the animal with his hand on its head.

“You seem to have had a slight spill.” He reached his hand out. “Here, let me help.”

“But—the wolf—” Calen stammered.

“Oh, him. Yes, I’m forgetting my manners. Allow me to introduce Elarr In’laar Caesiuwolf—Caes for short.”

“For—short?”

“Well, the whole name is inconvenient to repeat all the time, and is not a real translation from the wolves’ own language at any rate. Caes is more efficient. And it seems to suit him, so Caes it is.”

“Suit him?” Calen repeated as Arvan helped him to his feet. “Is he—yours, then?”

“Mine?” The forestwalker laughed. “No, of course not. Caes isn’t anyone’s but his own—he’d probably be offended if you suggested otherwise. No, we’re old friends, is all—and when I say the name Caes suits *him*, I mean just that.”

“Oh,” Calen replied, eyeing the wolf warily and wondering if he had committed some unconscionable breach of wolf etiquette. But the wolf seemed unperturbed, and continued gazing steadily at the young man.

“I’ve already told Caes what I know about you, though I don’t know much myself yet. So you can relax—you’re a friend.” Calen nodded, though he secretly assured himself that he wouldn’t be “relaxing” any time soon. Again the low growl rumbled through the forest air. “Shall we continue? The ralaar isn’t nearly as sociable as Caes here.” *I’ll bet*, Calen thought, but dusted himself off and followed the forestwalker as he turned and set off again.

They walked for at least twenty minutes in silence, punctuated only by the occasional growl of the ralaar, which grew fainter as they continued. Caes padded silently behind the two men, his brown eyes looking calmly but attentively from side to side as they went. Calen noticed a hawk soaring overhead. At length, Arvan began pointing out certain important features of the forest—the albin plant, famous for being a near miraculous healing aid when used in minuscule doses and a deadly poison when ingested in larger ones; the elba tree, capable of snapping off one’s arm if one was foolish enough to reach for the luscious fruit which grew inside the large holes in its trunk; the black renke, normal for all but two weeks of the year when it became a

fierce, vicious killer. Eventually Calen got up enough courage to ask some questions, though he kept his more important ones for later; he guessed those answers would take more time. Besides, there was a great deal about the forest that interested him right now. At one point, he asked the forestwalker about a tree that stood next to the path they were following, a dark and massive trunk with short, stubby branches and wrinkled, jagged bark. “Is that what the forest’s name comes from?” he inquired.

“No, although that’s not a bad guess. Razorwood’s name comes from the leaves of the entark tree. Here—” he carefully pulled a leaf from one of the many smaller gray trees Calen had seen throughout the forest—“you’ll see what I mean.” And picking up a recently fallen and sturdy looking tree branch from the side of the path, he took the leaf and yanked it across the branch’s side, slicing the wood nearly in half. “Not the best tree to climb, I should think,” he commented as he dropped the leaf and branch on the ground. Calen silently agreed as he watched Caes neatly sidestep the discarded greenery. Razorwood was living up to its considerably dangerous reputation in more ways than one.

A few more minutes passed before Calen noticed the same hawk overhead he had seen before, still circling. It was quite high up, but Calen found he was able to see it more clearly as he continued watching. In fact, he could almost swear it was getting . . . closer? It circled down farther and farther, faster and faster, until the light glinting from its beak was nearly blinding. It was heading directly for the forestwalker, and Calen had time to notice its color, a deep brown, with flashes of white under the wings, and its size—*very large for a hawk*, he thought in his panic—before shouting out a warning as he quickly backpedaled: “Arvan! Above you! The hawk!” But seeing the hawk in the middle of its dive, he knew it was already too late; and he turned away, bracing for the horrible scream he assumed would be the inevitable result of such an attack.

A minute passed as Calen imagined the wicked beak ripping through tendons, bone, while—*A minute?* he thought. Realizing that there should have at least been *some* noise on

impact, Calen turned slowly—and saw not the hawk enjoying its kill, but perched calmly on Arvan Eleron’s leather wristband. It gazed at him a moment haughtily before lowering its head to preen itself. *Wonderful*, Calen thought, *here I even bore the birds*, but he held his tongue.

“Sorry, Calen,” the forestwalker laughed, “but my friends aren’t used to company, I suppose. You must imagine that I live my life in mortal danger.”

“I guess I should stop wasting my time worrying about things here. You must be friendly with every beast and bird in the forest,” Calen replied, admiring the hawk’s wings as it spread them out for a moment.

“Hardly. There are probably ten or fifteen types of hostile creatures living here that I have yet to meet, and ten more I know of through experience—and know enough about to avoid a repeat encounter whenever possible. But with the friends I do have, Caes, and Squaar here,” Arvan said, lifting the hawk on his arm higher in the air, “the encounters I do have with things less friendly go much more . . . smoothly.”

“The name Squaar suits him, too?” Calen asked as he appraised the curve of the great bird’s beak.

“It seems to. Anyway, his full name is practically unpronounceable. Every time I try I only can get about halfway before he stares me down—I expect I’m calling his mother a pigeon, or something worse. So Squaar it is, and I think he finds it suitably intimidating. You think, Caes?” he addressed the wolf, who had sat down to his right and had observed Squaar’s arrival with his usual apparent aplomb. The wolf looked back as if in silent confirmation of the woodsman’s theory. “Well, now that we’ve all been introduced, I think we should press on—we’re close now.”

Five minutes more down the path led the group to a clearing, similar to the one in which Calen had found Caes. It was relatively unremarkable except for one enormous oak tree at the eastern edge, its branches spreading out and casting shadows over the entire area. Walking up to it, Arvan looked around the outside, then continued around the trunk, disappearing from view,

Squaar still perched on his arm as Caes followed behind. Hurrying to catch up, Calen ran around to the back. Pushing his way through a thin curtain of bushes, he stepped through to the tree's other side. "Arvan, have you—" he started, then stopped. Before his eyes was the curving trunk of the tree, solid bark everywhere. The forestwalker, the wolf, and the hawk were gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Calen stared at the tree, trying to comprehend what kind of creature could have eaten three living beings without sound or trace (and whether that kind of creature was generally hungry for more than three). He had just begun to consider the possibility that the stress of recent days had made him delusional, and his three companions nothing but illusions, when he heard a ghostly voice emanate from beneath his feet. “Coming, friend?”

Calen looked down. “To where?” he responded, feeling rather stupid.

“To—oh, of course. Sorry—I’m not used to inviting relative strangers into my home. Come closer to the trunk. Now look carefully at the roots, between the largest two.” Calen obeyed and peered between the roots. At first he saw nothing but dirt and a leaf or two, but looking closer (“Never accept what you see the first time,” was the first rule of merchant trade his uncle had taught him), he noticed a square pattern to the dirt, lighter around the edges and darker in the middle. “Do you see it?”

“I think so,” Calen replied, tracing his finger around the square. The square itself was not dirt at all but rough, almost perfectly blended stone . . . material he doubted very much was native to this region, or any other one close by that he knew of. *This looks like the stonework from the south my uncle showed me years ago, he thought, so this man has a few miles under his feet as well.*

“Then step on it, carefully,” the voice directed. Calen hesitated, quickly decided he didn’t have many other options, and took one step forward on to the square. There was a pause and then a clearly audible click—and a moment later, the ground dropped out from beneath his feet. He fell onto a steep ramp, and before he had even enough time to yell emerged, with a painful bump, into a brightly lit room. After a moment he heard a now familiar chuckle, and looking up saw Arvan Eleron leaning on a bookcase set into the wall. Nearby lay Caes on a large cushion, head on paws, and near him stood an ornate wooden perch on which Squaar perched, cold, unblinking

eyes boring into him. “You do have an interesting way of presenting yourself, friend—” The woodsman stopped. “Well, I don’t even know your name yet. Assuming, of course, that it isn’t Rell Krollner.” One eyebrow arched sardonically. Calen, in spite of himself, blushed.

“My name is Calen Gollnet. I’m sorry for not telling you earlier, but I thought it better to be careful.”

“So you selected a ‘legendary’ name on the theory I would back down, eh? Hoped I would present you with my weapons and armor, beg your pardon for the intrusion, and go my merry way?”

Calen looked up sharply.

“All right, Calen, I’m not truly mocking you. It is indeed wise in these days to be cautious—indeed, much more cautious than you’ve been up till now. But in future you had better know who you’re referring to when you want your identity to intimidate others . . . and be certain you fit the part.” Arvan walked into another room to the left of the bookcase, where Calen saw the vague orange flicker of a fire reflected off the inner walls. “I assume you’re hungry?” The question startled Calen from his mixture of surprise and annoyance at the forestwalker’s rather biting sarcasm, despite the latter’s assurances to the contrary; and he thought that after being lost, shot at and frightened out of his wits on three occasions within the past hour, he was actually ravenous.

“Starving. And thirsty, too,” Calen said as he got to his feet and stretched back, feeling his sore shoulder muscles relax.

“I can alleviate both conditions, if you can wait a few minutes,” Arvan said from the other room.

“Fine,” Calen said; and it *was* fine, for now he had a chance to look around the inside of Arvan’s tree—or rather, Arvan’s home. Though it was the inside of a tree too, cunningly carved around, and sometimes into, the different areas on the walls. The room was surprisingly large considering where it was located; but then again, the outside of the tree was enormous, and Calen

guessed the roots must extend below the floor. Ahead of him, past the cushion on which the great wolf lay, was a fireplace set into the wood itself; the inside, like the rest of the floor, appeared to be the same textured stone as that of the pressure plate which granted access to the tree's interior. Several logs lay on a small iron grate seated in the fireplace's center, but Calen saw no ashes; evidently, it had not been used since the winter months. He wondered how far the stone extended upwards—he didn't recall seeing a hole that could serve as a flue in the trunk's outside—and whether that was why the tree itself didn't catch on fire every time the fireplace was used. But he quickly forgot about these details as his gaze wandered farther.

To the left of the fireplace left hung a large, ornate shield, looking more decorative than useful, though several deep nicks in its checked, blue and gray face suggested otherwise. On the shield's other side was an entranceway to a smaller, well-lit room, with what looked like a mattress, night table, and a full-sized wardrobe set against the two walls within his field of view. This, too, struck him as odd, but he couldn't put his finger on what made it so.

"Drat!" The forestwalker's voice from the other room, coupled with a horrendous crash, startled Calen from his reverie.

"Are you all right?" he called.

"Yes, yes—blasted hot water. I so seldom cook for more than one that I forget how to handle more than one of these pots at a time," came the reply.

"Oh," Calen said, enjoying a moment of satisfaction. He had dropped a pot or two more than once in his kitchen at home, and the excuses he had given at those times for his clumsiness seldom sounded much better than Arvan's did to him now. *Though right about now you'd rather be in your kitchen, dropped pots or not, than anywhere else, wouldn't you*, his inner voice reminded him; and with a twinge of worry and sadness at the memory, he continued looking around.

To the left of the smaller room, a large alcove was carved into the tree wall; strangely, though, unlike everything else he had seen, much of the space seemed to be wasted. Only two

swords hung horizontally on the wall at the back of the alcove, both long, curved, and sheathed, the tops red, the bottoms black; everything else was bare space. *Then again, it certainly keeps them out of the way yet still accessible*, he thought as he turned his attention to the back wall. Behind him and to the left hung a large forest map, perhaps of Razorwood itself (though he couldn't be sure, since he hadn't the faintest idea what, or where, any of the various landmarks the map displayed were or where they stood in relation to Arvan Eleron's home). Not that he could have told which landmark was which even if he knew of them; the map legend and place names were written in an odd, angular, runic script he had never seen before—though the letters looked fairly similar to some old desert Iornac runes his father had shown him several years ago. *Yet your studies always came second, didn't they, Calen?* his father's voice said; and he, angry at the recollection, grunted and looked away from the map.

Directly behind him was the end of the slide from which he had made his undignified entrance, made of the same stone as the floor; but unlike them it had been polished to a smooth finish (*not a soft one, though*, he thought ruefully). He saw no light emanating from the slide's shaft—evidently, the plate that granted access to the tree had snapped shut after his entrance. *Useful for keeping one out . . . or in*, he thought with a twinge of his earlier nervousness. To its left, and standing against the “corner” of the tree, was a beautifully fashioned suit of chain mail hanging on a roughly carved wooden dummy. It was not simply the workmanship of the mail's thousands and thousands of rings, linked without a visible flaw or break, that fascinated Calen, but the color: it was a deep sea-green that rippled and sparkled like waves of the ocean itself—or as Calen imagined the ocean would appear, since he had seldom gone more than fifty miles outside of his city's walls. Still, whatever the ocean really looked like, he was sure this mail looked as close to it as one could get, and he marveled at its constantly altering, shimmering greenish hue in the room's steady light.

Wait a moment, he suddenly thought—*what steady light?* And as he turned again to survey the room, he realized what had struck him as strange about the smaller guest chamber: he

shouldn't have been able to see into it, or indeed anything at all. There were no visible light sources anywhere. No torches, lanterns, even the self-fuelling fire-plants his uncle had told him he had seen fellow merchants use in other lands. The room had no light sources within it, and could not possibly be bright—yet there it was, the fireplace alcove, map, chain mail, and Caes and Squaar, all perfectly visible. Calen added the host of questions this realization raised to a growing list in his mind, and turned back to his survey.

On the right wall stood a large, oak desk, simply but practically carved, with a few papers and a quill pen on its top, and one large, leather-bound book sitting closed in its center; its title, which Calen saw printed in block letters of Arcadian Common (the language spoken by almost all natives of Klune), read *Herbal Disease, Large Growth Forests—Volume II*, by Ilyan Stensor, a name Calen vaguely remembered as an expert on herbs and plants of all descriptions. A plain but strong oak chair sat behind the desk. To its left, extending to the end of the right wall before turning left and following the wall to the entranceway where Arvan busily cooked, was a large bookcase, five shelves high and carved into the tree walls. There were perhaps five hundred books there, Calen guessed, not even a fifth the size of his father's library at home but still respectable—*especially several feet underground*, he thought wryly. Moving closer, he saw some titles he could read, from various books of forest lore to *The Creation of a Just Arcadian State*, by Lord Elnar, and the *History of the Troll Wars*, by an anonymous author, written in Arcadian Common. Most, however, were written in languages unfamiliar to him, though he could with difficulty pick out a few words of what was perhaps High Arcadian on a cover or two, something about sword making or door construction. And finally, as Calen's survey came full circle, Squaar's stand rested on the other side of the kitchen (where Arvan was ladling something onto two plates) and to the right of the fireplace. Its occupant's eyes, Calen noted with some relief, were now closed. In all, the room had an eclectic but symmetrical air; it spoke of a man at home in many places, all of which, paradoxically, he seemed to need reminders of to create his own

abode. It was a home, Calen thought, that provided more questions than answers about its resident.

That resident now came through the open kitchen doorway, steaming plates in hand. “Well, I think the final product came out rather well, even if I am unused to cooking for guests,” Arvan said with some satisfaction as he carefully placed one of the plates on the ground. “I’ve only one chair, so I’m afraid we’ll have to eat on different levels.”

“What about Caes?” Calen asked.

Arvan chuckled. “He’ll be off later to eat, I suspect . . . he tends to prefer his food a bit more . . . raw.” And as the wolf yawned wide, revealing two rows of sharp wide teeth, Calen shuddered involuntarily in assent.

Calen sat in the oak chair as Arvan (after casually brushing the papers to one side) laid the remaining dish on the desk in front of him and went back to the other room, returning with two tall, elaborately carved wooden flagons,. He placed one of them on the desk next to Calen’s food before gracefully sinking to the ground in front of his own plate and digging in, a generous slab of bread assisting him as he chased the stew around the plate. Calen’s stomach gave a terrific growl as he turned to his own dish, reminding him of how long it had been since he had last eaten; and little was said for some time as both men fell to with a will. Caes stirred slightly and lay his head between his large paws.

Each mouthful made Calen feel more comfortable and at ease than he had in many days. The stew, a mix of vegetables and rabbit, was simple but nourishing, and by now a stale crust of bread would have tasted like the finest Illarian delicacy. After the last morsel was cleaned from his plate, he took a long swig of pure, cold water from his flagon and sighed.

“Yes, I’ve heard such sighs before,” the forestwalker’s voice came from behind him, and Calen swiveled in his chair to look at him. Arvan, also finished with his food, leaned back on one elbow as he regarded his younger companion with some amusement. “Such is the sigh of a man

who hasn't eaten in far longer than he would like. Particularly given a host of disturbing encounters between his last meal and this, eh?" He chuckled as Calen blushed again.

"Well, perhaps so, but the food itself was good enough to make anyone feel relaxed after eating it. Even my sist—" Calen stopped abruptly. He *thought* he was with the legendary Arvan Eleron—all signs seemed to point to it—but he was not yet entirely certain.

Arvan eyed him with interest. "Your sister, you were going to say? A good cook, I suppose. But indeed . . ." Arvan's face grew thoughtful. "There's much we need to speak of, Calen. Why you were in Razorwood in the first place, and why you needed to find me. Such ventures aren't boys' games, and you don't strike me as someone out for fun and adventure in any case." He paused and appeared to be thinking of how to phrase his next question, but Calen hurriedly jumped in.

"Fun and adventure hardly ever come to me—at least not as much as they must come to you." He waved at the surrounding room. "Collecting all of this must have taken quite a lot of effort."

Arvan laughed. "Effort? Yes, I suppose you could say that. But one's home is his center, and without it we lose our tie to our own identities. Any effort in making this place my own was more than repaid by the refuge I find within it."

"But how did you build it?" Calen pressed on. "Who helped you? And why did you pick this tree? And how do you get out once you're—"

Arvan held up a hand, chuckling. "Easy, easy, lad. I might as well write the whole story out on paper for you if we're to get all these answers all at once. It was a long process. I didn't *pick* the tree, as you put it, as much as we picked each other. This tree was old enough to remember the time Razorwood consisted only of saplings, but its roots were rotten. We healed it, my friends and I, and in exchange—you might even say as part of the healing—the inside of the tree itself became my home."

"But it's alive, isn't it?" asked Calen, looking around and feeling rather stupid.

“Of course—now. Its bark is imbued with the spirit of the Elminar, and no tree strengthened in such a way can easily be harmed. It doesn’t make the tree invulnerable, certainly—an axe may bite its bark, and fire scorch its leaves and branches. And against nature’s judgement it has no defense, for that is the way of living things. Lightning, fire, created within the natural world; these can endanger the tree’s existence. But otherwise, it thrives, and in return it provides both safe and secret shelter.” Arvan paused momentarily. “I find I often need both.”

Calen had heard only vague rumors of the Elminar, strange faerie creatures that lived deep in the ancient woods of the world, but what he had heard hardly inspired confidence. Their words were treacherous to those who did not have the training to see through the half-truths they told, and even those skilled in their language seldom understood all its meaning. “These Elminar . . . I was always taught they were dangerous,” he ventured.

“Dangerous? Indeed they are dangerous. Many creatures of power and wisdom are dangerous. But not evil. The Elminar are an ancient race, and there is little they have not seen or heard in their days upon the earth. They were here at the coming of men, and before—they walked first upon the mossy ground beneath these very trees, and were the first to see the starry sky. Then, their song was strong, and their harmonies flowed through both stream and branch.” The forestwalker’s piercing eyes were distant, focused on some long ago memory, and his voice grew deep and resonant. Calen listened intently, fascinated. Of all subjects, he loved history the most, and though he knew the origins of the world as his schoolmasters had taught him, it was quite another thing to hear the tales told by one who had communicated with those who had lived at the beginning.

“They were the first of the Dreamer’s imaginings,” Arvan continued as if in recitation, “the first of his thoughts to take shape in moving, walking form. In those days the forests of the world were still young, and their leaves newly green; and the Elminar walked among them with delight. For they understood all they saw around them to be a part of their own beings, part of the fabric from which we are all woven. They felt their common essence with moss and stone and

sky, and they were content. When they sang, their music flowed within the land around them, and gave it strength and structure. In turn, the land gave back its bounty—water, food, shelter. It did so gladly, for in giving of itself it was merely receiving it back in other forms.

“Names and separate identities meant little to the Elminar in those times, for all were part of the same *orestil* or essence. Nor was there need to call each other by name, for at all times the Elminar reached out to others of their kind and faced them with joy. Their lives were eternal, but not full of weariness, for there was so much to understand, help create and care for. Perhaps one could have explained the concepts of grief or anger to them, but they would not truly have understood the meanings. For such disharmony was not part of the pattern they wove and of which they were a part. They embraced each other without pretense or malice, and parted with the joy of certain reuniting later. In all things they were both simple and wise, for they could conceive of no distinctions among themselves, yet well understood the differences between they and the other forms of life which surrounded them. In them, it is said, joy flowed like gentle water, and from them light sprang like a sudden fountain.”

Arvan trailed off, eyes half closed and head bowed. The fire was lower, and Caes and Squaar slept on their pillow and perch as if lulled to deeper sleep by their companion’s tale. Calen felt drowsy, but still wished to know more. “But they betrayed mankind, didn’t they?” he asked. “It was because of them that man lost everlasting life.”

“Only fools believe so,” Arvan replied sharply, opening his eyes fully and fixing them on Calen, who wavered and lowered his gaze. “Fools who understand little of the past and less of the present.” He paused, gathering himself, then continued more mildly. “When the race of men first walked the earth, the Elminar welcomed them, as they did all living things, with happiness and celebration. For they perceived that man, too, was filled with *orestil*, and that members of that race were part of the same dream from which they had been born. And man, though less wise and less fair, heard the songs of the Elminar and was both calmed and fascinated, and for many ages both races lived in common celebration of their existence. Indeed, mankind gave more life to the

songs of the Elminar, for theirs was a faster melody, one of excitement and discovery, and together the two races created great works of stone and wood—living wood, for the Elminar would not have allowed harm to be done to living trees, had they even understood what it meant to hurt and harm. Such were things for a darker time.

“But despite their common bonds, men were not wholly like the Elminar. They were more inquisitive than their older cousins, and more uncertain; for though their lives were long as we tell it now, still they grew old as the Elminar did not, and lost energy while the Elminar continued to sing with as much joy as before. They were also more individual, and felt and understood the presence of their brethren less. So it was that men began to name themselves differently, and to name the things around them as well—each tree, each animal, each stone. The Elminar saw these things and were surprised, but not disturbed, for they perceived that mankind had its role to play. And it played that role for many more ages. All before the coming of the Sorrow.”

A shadow passed over Arvan’s face as his voice faltered, but it strengthened as he spoke again. “None now remember the exact time when Olaric came forth, when he was named. But come forth he did, and the others rejoiced in his coming, for he was wondrously fair almost as the Elminar themselves, and wise beyond the reckoning of man. As he grew, he showed himself to be filled as much with strength as wisdom, and with inquisitiveness too; for he talked long with the Elminar, and asked earnestly after the source of their songs, and of their histories and legends. And most of all, he desired knowledge of their source of life; for it seemed hard to him that he should be forced to leave such a beautiful world with no knowledge of what lay beyond it. He asked such questions of the Elminar, but they laughed and simply responded in song, for his words held no meaning to them, and they did not perceive his thoughts. That he would return to *orestil* seemed likely, but whither then they could not say.

“But this answer was not enough for Olaric, and he grew frustrated with the Elminar’s vague musings and bright songs. ‘If you will not tell me what you know,’ he said, ‘I will find the

answers for myself.’ But they simply smiled as if in a dream, and continued their wanderings. Then he left them in great anger, and returned to his people. ‘We have been betrayed by the Elminar,’ he said, ‘for they do not pass out of our world as we do, and yet they refuse to tell us from where their life flows, and how we may also take joy in our world for time eternal. So I will find out the answers for myself, and gain such life for all of us. I would that you would come with me and help me in my search.’ Most that heard him turned away in sadness and said nothing, for they feared his fiery spirit and anger, and were amazed at its passion. But a few were swayed by his words and came with him, and he and they went north, to the ice and snow of the first beginnings. They disappeared from all knowledge for many ages, and after some time were forgotten entirely by mankind.

“But Olaric did return one day—nearly alone, all but for five companions. The Elminar perceived his return as they sang, and though they did not fathom how he could have survived so long came to him swiftly to embrace him and celebrate his return. But upon seeing him they recoiled, for he was not the same creature who had left them. His face was hideously distorted, blue-black, as if burned and frozen at the same time, and his body was covered in ice and blackness; and his followers, though not so strong, were each covered in the same cloud of ice and dark. ‘What news, brother?’ they asked. ‘What have you found in the frozen north?’

‘Sadness and pain, and life eternal, though you would withhold it from us,’ he replied; and drawing a sword made all of ice, he smote the one who had first spoken to the ground. Then the earth itself writhed in torment, as did all of the Elminar, for none had ever been killed or struck down in anger or hate, and they knew no way to explain or reason it. His followers rose up, and Olaric and they slew many more of the Elminar, whose song now began to falter for the first time since the beginning of the Dream. Now the race of men, which had grown greatly in strength in the ages since Olaric’s disappearance, heard the earth’s rumble and the sound of strife for the first time, and came to the place of conflict, and there they found the stricken Elminar and Olaric’s band, and in horror they fought back against him—not with steel and fire, for such things

were still unknown except by Olaric himself, but with rocks and wood, the stuff of the earth. He slew many of them, for he had greater might and much anger, but there were far more of them than of his band, and soon only he remained alive of his company, bruised and bleeding of many wounds. As the other humans closed in on him, he lifted his sword to the sky, and they quailed before his horrific splendor. 'Though the Elminar have held life from you, you fools would be their cattle and do their bidding,' he shouted. 'But I have seen the truth of existence, and it is mine alone now to understand. My blood will curse this land forever, and my bones will not remain in the sleep of death. I will be born again, and at that time all will learn the truth and despair!' So saying, he plunged the sword deep into the earth, and from it great shards of ice sprang. Pierced by the largest one, Olaric gave a great shout and died, and walls of ice rose about him upon the hill.

“So ended the battle of Olaric’s Betrayal, or so the Elminar call it. Horrified beyond understanding at the death of so many, the Elminar withdrew from the confused survivors of the race of man, and vanished into the forests and deep places of the world. Some of those mortals who remained grew deeply suspicious of the Elminar then, and said that Olaric might have been right; but most damned his name, and called him Ek’thon, or *ice-cursed* in the ancient tongues; and they withdrew from the ice that covered his body and shunned that place for centuries after, until they finally built walls around it and a city around those walls to guard the place. But even this pain and loss did not turn the Elminar entirely away from their mortal cousins, for one came forth and spoke to the last few leaving the battleground. ‘Olaric’s curse will be fulfilled,’ he said, ‘and it shall be repeated in the ages of the world more than once, but it shall not triumph in the end. For one of your race will come forth, and through much loss and sadness you will rise up and defeat him; and the songs shall be sung anew in the cursed places, and the ice shall melt and be restored to the earth from which it sprang. For there is understanding deeper than what even Olaric may have learned.’ And with this he vanished into the forest, never to be seen again. And so mortals and Elminar were separated, and so did our own sad existence begin.”

Arvan fell silent and lowered his head. Calen blinked back a tear and looked about. The light in the room seemed to have dimmed, and a spell seemed to hold all in its grip of silence. But he could not remain quiet with this unfinished tale, and burst out, “But you knew of the Elminar! Did they abandon us all together?”

Arvan started and looked up. “Eh, what?” He blinked for a moment and then sighed. “Have you heard nothing, lad? The Elminar did not abandon us—it is we who abandoned them, if such a term even holds in this case. But they may be found, if one knows where to look. The Elminar still sing in the ancient places, and their melodies still flow through our land and hearts. But never again shall we walk with them freely, not until many prophecies are fulfilled. And many loremasters say they will never be fulfilled, and were simply a lie told by the Elminar to keep us from despair. It may be, but I cannot imagine it . . . I have spoken to them, and there is no lie in their hearts. But there is sadness, now, sadness as much as joy, and I do not know what could heal it.” He paused and looked down again. “I believe, though, that the prophecies will be upheld at some time. Whether we will be ready when they are is another matter.”

Calen’s mind raced as he considered the import of these last words, and he realized that even if this were not Arvan—a possibility which now seemed unlikely—he had delayed as long as he dared in revealing what he knew, a risk though it might be. “I don’t know if we are ready,” he said carefully, “but I think the time may have come.” He paused as Arvan looked at him quizzically. “The tomb of Ek’thon has begun to melt.”

Far off in the woods, almost beyond perception, he thought he heard the ghostly hunting call of the ralaar.

CHAPTER THREE

Drawing his black cloak close against the biting rain, Belezion Drolnar hurried down the nearly deserted city street and, not for the first time, cursed his bad fortune.

It had been bad enough when Duke Illarian had imposed a curfew on an all-too-willing populace nervous from the increasingly dire news arriving from outside Klune Illar, cutting down city traffic and distractions for the night watch as he did so; now this latest patch of bad weather made it almost inconceivable that anyone would have a good reason to be out this late. But Drolnar did have a good reason—just not one he could share with the typical city guardsman. Far too many questions would result, and he had no time for any of them.

The wind whipped the bottom of the cloak around his ankles painfully as he walked, and Drolnar stifled the urge to rip the damned thing off. Without it he would be soaked to the skin—or at least more soaked than he was at the moment—and would stand out even more than he feared he already did. He knew his way around the streets of Klune Illar as well as anyone, and was used to changing routes as necessity demanded; but he was no rogue or assassin, and the merchant garb beneath his cloak was as noticeable as a campfire in the wilderness on a clear evening.

As he reached the corner of the main market street, the familiar clank of metal sent him scurrying into a small alcove, his cloak drawn tightly around him. A moment later two guardsmen appeared, armed with halberds and short swords that hung at their belts, one carrying a hooded lantern that swung back and forth in the wind. As they rounded the corner, the other stopped and put a hand on his companion's shoulder, wiping his face with his other hand.

“Why they don't want to issue full gear is beyond me,” remarked the guard who had first stopped. Wet whiskers plastered on his face made him look vaguely like a waterlogged rat. “Without visors we can barely see ten feet in front of us, and I don't know how they expect people to fight when they're drenched.”

“I’ve heard the treasury is running low, and they don’t have much left to get gear out to those who need it,” said his somewhat shorter and clean-shaven companion. “Most of the full gear’s out to the arlics at the border, from what I hear—and the pay too, I reckon. We’ll be the last to get restocked, mark me.”

The other man snorted. “If they’re saving their coin for the arlics, they’re wasting their money,” he said, removing one cloth glove and trying vainly to shake some of the moisture out of it. “From what I’ve heard, they aren’t likely to stay at their posts much longer no matter how much gold you throw at them, and there’s no way of knowing when they’ll decide to give up the whole business and leave.”

“Better hope you’re wrong, Revif,” the other said, “or you’ll have a lot more than being wet to worry about. What you think’ll happen if they do leave? You’ve heard the rumors, same as I have, and you know the other side’s been building up forces a lot more powerful than the captain’s willing to tell us. Who’s going to stop them if the arlics let them through?”

“Pheh!” Revif spat, who having wrung out one glove was now squeezing the other. “Whoever’ll stop them later can’t be worse than what we’ve got now. It’s not like the border’s been impossible to get over, at least the past five years. More than one’s gotten through, and a few of them, I hear,” he said as he looked at the other man meaningfully, “might be giving the orders up top even now.”

“Shut your mouth!” the other whispered urgently, looking around him nervously. “That’s traitor talk, and you know it. Besides, you don’t have proof. The captain’s been at his post the past ten years, and sounds the same now as he ever did.”

“*Sounds* the same, aye,” Revif said, undeterred, “but that doesn’t mean he *is* the same. You remember that Marlow? Third regiment? Friend of mine said he sounded like the same old Marlow, till one day he murdered half his company in their sleep. And they never found him, neither—he just sort of ‘vanished,’ my friend said. Who knows where he got to, or who or what

he really was? And even if the captain is just the same, he's got someone he answers to himself. And whoever *that* is could be giving the orders he wants, if you follow me."

"Pah, you're being a fool," the other man scoffed. "The city's got its own people to look after that sort of thing, and it's done it for a long time. So Marlow lost his grip one night—that don't mean he was one of *them*. And even if you're right, you want more of them coming through? I don't much see you standing up to a bunch of shapeshifters or worse any more than I see you getting promoted to captain any time soon. The arlics, now, they've been willing to do it, and they've beat 'em before, too."

"I might be a fool, Sellitna," Revif retorted, pulling his glove back on with a frown, "but at least I see what's around me. If the arlics leave the border—and they will leave it, mark me—you'd best be ready to stand and fight if need be, cause the enemy'll hit Klune Illar first. If this city falls, you'll need a lot more than arlics to stop the storm that blows up next. And if we do have to fight, I'd rather it be with full gear than with this peasant wear." He punctuated this last remark with a hearty shake, like a wet dog trying to dry its fur.

"Have it your way, Revif," Sellitna replied, "but as for me, I'm a guardsman, not a border soldier. And I'd rather the arlics worry about the border than us. In the meantime, we've still got streets to patrol and a report to make, and we're late as is. If there *is* to be pay I'd like to be around to get it."

"Aye, all right," Revif said reluctantly. "Not much chance of getting dry anyway."

The pair moved off down the street, still talking, and turned another corner at its end. Drolnar allowed himself a wry smile as he left the alcove and continued the opposite direction. Guardsmen weren't known for their intelligence, but these oafs were a lot closer to the truth than they knew. But only part of the truth; in the end, they had more to worry about than a few shapeshifters and others from the enemy getting through the border. Finding out how much more, in fact, was his purpose this evening.

Drolnar quickened his pace as he heard the bell from the town center ring ten times. He had no wish to be late for his appointment; those he worked with were not particularly forgiving of lateness (or anything else, from what he could tell), and their meeting was scheduled for ten minutes past the hour. Two more streets passed before Drolnar turned right on to a narrow lane. Counting the buildings as he went, he soon began to pass a series of squat, ugly homes. He wrinkled his nose in disgust from the stench—*like a combination of rat droppings and blood*, he thought with a shudder—and hurried on. He had no idea why the meeting had to take place in this part of the city, an area he came to as little as possible, but he was not in a position to ask questions (*yet*, he reminded himself grimly).

After another minute, he stopped in front of an unremarkable wooden door on his left and peered down the street in both directions. Other than a rat scurrying behind a barrel, the lane appeared deserted. Satisfied, he leaned over and whispered into the keyhole. A few moments passed—during which time Drolnar wondered a bit nervously if he had miscounted the houses—before the door opened a crack.

Dim light streamed out from within. “His coming is known to us,” a harsh and guttural voice growled from inside.

“Our knowledge is our strength,” Drolnar replied promptly. Another moment passed before the door opened wider.

“Enter and be quick,” said the voice, and Drolnar wasted no time. He was relieved to be out of the rain, and the warmth was welcome, but otherwise this was hardly the most comfortable of meeting rooms. Three hard wooden chairs waited near the fireplace, all unoccupied, and a cheerless fire flickered in the hearth behind them. Another door was on the far wall, and one closed and shuttered window was set in the wall next to the front entrance. A small wooden table sat against the opposite end of the room, upon which a rusty lantern and three rough wooden mugs rested.

Drolnar started as the door closed behind him with a rather loud bang. “You’re late,” the voice said as a lock clicked, and he turned to see who was speaking.

Drolnar regretted his decision to look almost as soon as he had done so, for the voice was mild compared to the appearance of its owner. He was of medium height, and wore a rough woolen cloak, unhooded, with a scarred and burned leather tunic that had clearly been through more than one conflict. A short sword in a pitted leather sheath hung at his side. But far more noticeable was the face—scarred, burned, blue-black in color, with one eye socket entirely closed—and not well—by what looked like a simple flap of skin. The other eye, brown and cold, glared at Drolnar with malice and cunning. A huge scar ran from the dirty brown hair that fell about the man’s skull like weeds to the edge of his mouth.

All in all, Drolnar thought he was looking at quite possibly the most ugly and disturbing face he had ever encountered—and Drolnar’s profession ensured that he had seen thousands of examples of ugliness in his time. But his profession had also trained him in the art of deception on the highest scale, and he had long ago learned not to betray his feelings openly. So he buried his disgust and looked at him calmly. “I came as quickly as I could,” he said, “but this is not the easiest part of the city to find or get to. And I had some work to do to avoid the patrols, as well. This would all have been easier if we could have met at the place I suggested first.”

The other man spat as he walked to the table. “Aye, in the middle of the merchant district, where there are more guards than merchants,” he said, taking one of the mugs. “And where you could lay an ambush for me and my lads with your mercenary scum if you wanted more money out of the deal. No, we want no part of your places, sellthief.” He chuckled before taking a long drink of whatever the mug held. Drolnar’s mouth tightened and he inadvertently gripped his fist underneath his cloak—as much for the term *sellthief* as for how close the other man had come to the truth of Drolnar’s thoughts—but he quickly regained control and smiled grimly.

“You’re much too suspicious, friend,” he replied. “In the merchant district my guards are paid by me, not the city. And they get paid enough to keep their mouths shut about whatever they

happen to see, or they get their mouths shut for them—permanently. You hardly think,” he continued pleasantly, though with the subtlest edge of iron underneath, “that you and your people are the first ones I’ve dealt with from outside the city? I know more about foreigners than you do, I’ll wager, and I understand how to deal with them . . . if you follow me,” he finished with the quiet of a blade being loosened from its sheath.

The other man lowered his mug and looked at Drolnar through his one good eye. “And I know how to deal with a fat cutpurse who gets above himself, sellthief.” He moved his hand down to the hilt of his short sword, almost casually. “We’re not friends, and won’t be. I don’t have to buy mine.”

Drolnar smiled and shrugged off the insult, though inwardly he added the man to his list of those he would deal with when he had the chance as he looked back at the other’s scarred face. “Your own choice. I meant no offense. But we have business to conduct, and the hour is late; I have much to do. We should get started. And I don’t deal with shadows,” he added as the other man moved his hand away from his sword hilt. “I need a name to use, since you already know mine.”

“It’s not hard to know your name, with you shouting it at any one you think will remember it, Belezion Drolnar,” the other man sneered. “And I’m the one callin’ the shots here, not you. But since you’ll hear it anyway soon enough—most people call me Rix. That’s good enough for you.” He leaned against the wall near the table and took another long drink. “As for getting started, that’ll happen when we’re all here, and not before.”

“As you wish,” Drolnar replied smoothly, though inwardly his stomach tightened a bit. He had known he would be dealing with more than one person, but he had hoped for a single contact within the city. More people meant more variables, and he hated the variables he couldn’t influence. Drolnar had built his success on knowledge—who sold what, who controlled what trade routes, who could be bought, sold . . . and eliminated. The city should have moved against his circle of contacts years ago, and would have if Drolnar were not aware of nearly every tryst,

double deal and sordid activity of the city's officials. The Duke himself had more than one skeleton in his closet, though Drolnar had to be careful not to overuse that knowledge; Illarian was concerned about his public image, but more concerned with his own power, and he had his own network of spies and informants—only a couple of whom were actually on Drolnar's payroll. It was a dangerous game, but one with rich rewards, and Drolnar had played it to perfection for almost ten years. During that time more than one pretender aspiring to political and economic power had appeared on the scene, but almost always proved to be nothing more than a puppet backed by a local guild house, or sometimes just a fresh-faced young merchant with delusions of grandeur—and both kinds were easily dealt with. The last such pretender had done fairly well for himself, actually, until he went too far by wanting to put Drolnar's network out of business. He was soon found in the South Quarter in an alley behind a local inn, his throat horribly torn out and his mouth full of coins. Things had quieted down considerably since then.

Still, Drolnar could never afford to be overconfident; his power was based entirely on who and what he knew, and when he knew it. When he had gotten wind of a new power rising in the city he had been inclined to dismiss it as a series of drunken hallucinations. Even he couldn't afford to track down every dead end story. But the rumors persisted, and other signs began to appear—the disappearance of usually reliable contacts, reduction of normal commerce, protracted silences from the city's other merchant leaders. And of course there was the political situation outside the city, the problem with the arlics and the threat of war. A general climate of unease had descended upon Klune Illar, and that was bad for both business and political maneuvering. So Drolnar had taken it upon himself to track down the meaning behind the disturbances, and determine both what threat it posed and how he could turn that threat to his advantage. Weeks had passed before he had turned up any leads at all, beyond the usual rumors and vague mutterings of a few tavern locals. He had begun to despair of discovering anything significant about the matter until it had, so to speak, sought *him* out.

Five days ago, on the evening Drolnar was supposed to have met one of his most reliable contacts in one of his counting houses, the merchant was startled out of his musings on the problem by a cry on the street outside, suddenly cut short. By the time Drolnar had reached the door, his two guards (both city guardsmen by profession, though in fact on his payroll) had arrived from their posts and were crouched over a body on the street, an arrow protruding from its back. As Drolnar ordered the two to circle the perimeter of the house looking for the assailant (he himself was always protected by more than just guardsmen), he noticed a small note attached to the arrow—which was in the fresh corpse of his unfortunate informant—and unfolded it. *Call off your dogs, merchant, or we'll bring them to heel ourselves*, the note began. *If you want to know who we are and why we're here, be at the meeting in five days. If not, stay clear, or the next arrow lodges in your heart.* Crude directions followed, along with a password for entry.

Drolnar had not reacted visibly, but his mind raced with a mixture of admiration for the group's work and anger at the position in which he found himself: uncertain, for the first time in an age, as to what to do next. Certainly he could not ignore the threat, as there were few in the city who could attack his operatives with impunity and, he was sure, anonymity . . . since he doubted his guards would find any sign of the attacker. The message had been sent by a professional, and professionals covered their tracks. The loss of the informant was inconvenient, to be sure—creating reliable and loyal contacts was not an easy thing—but contacts were replaceable in time. And Drolnar had been threatened more times than he could remember, by groups considerably more dangerous than an assassin in the shadows; he was not concerned about his own safety. What was most troubling was that *he* had somehow been connected to the search, highly unusual given the care with which he conducted his investigations; and that meant that for the first time, someone had as much or more information than he did. After hearing the reports of his unsuccessful guards, and ordering them to dispose of the body quietly, Drolnar had resolved to close the information gap, quickly. And here he was, five days later, with little more

information now than when he had started. Still, he had a name—Rix—and a face to put with it, and that was itself an advantage. Patience, he reminded himself, would reveal the rest.

A whispered hiss suddenly emanated from the front door's keyhole, and the man who called himself Rix pushed himself away from the wall and silently set his mug on the table. Drawing his sword he moved quietly over to the door and after a short pause cracked it open, peering through the narrow slit. "His coming is known to us," he whispered.

A deep and rattling voice replied, "Our knowledge is our strength." Rix sheathed his sword and opened the door wide—as wide as it could go, in fact, for the creature that entered needed every inch to squeeze through.

Drolnar's eyes widened as the huge being, at least eight feet tall and as solid as an ox, made its way through the opening into the house. It was covered in a sopping wet black cloak, like Drolnar's (the size of three of them, in fact), though as the creature removed the garment, the merchant thought he caught a glimpse of an odd symbol inscribed on the cloak's lining. But he barely had time to process the thought, as it was all he could do to keep his mouth from dropping open at what had worn the cloak. The creature was covered in short brown hair that bristled as he brushed the raindrops off, and his lower legs—impossibly rippled with muscles—ended in cloven shoes, iron shod and with one wicked iron spike at each shoe's tip. The upper legs and torso were covered in a kind of sturdy, dark brown hide armor carved with a host of strange symbols and runes. The arms were bare, and covered in the same coarse brown hair; muscles like iron knitted and relaxed as the creature cleaned itself of the rest of the moisture. But what most amazed Drolnar was the creature's head—massive, covered in hair, and with a protruding, bull-like snout. Saber-like teeth extended outside the mouth and onto the sides of the lower jaw, and two short but sharp horns emerged from the powerful skull, which ducked low to avoid hitting the ceiling. The eyes, yellow with black pupils, glared out from beneath two bristling eyebrows, and Drolnar had the uneasy sense of being examined both inside and out. He had never seen one of these creatures, but he had heard them described many times—sometimes with respect, often with fear,

occasionally with admiration. But no description did justice to the truth. Drolnar was unquestionably staring at an arlic.

Rix closed the door and slid the bolt closed before turning back to the new arrival. “You’re late, Sikkarb,” he muttered, “and you know the schedule’s tight.”

The creature turned its baleful eyes back to the one-eyed man, and stared at him for a moment—had even Rix quailed slightly in the face of that gaze, Drolnar wondered?—and then snorted, its nostrils flaring slightly. “I come at my own time, Rix,” Sikkarb replied in a deep, bass voice that rattled as it exhaled, “and only the Destroyer wills when that will be. I had to avoid the guards. The city must have doubled the watch in the past month, and not many work for us yet. And time is with us and against our enemies. None can stop the Return.”

“Whether or not they can,” Rix replied, “they can make things difficult for us to speed its coming. And my lads won’t be patient for long. I can only beat sense into so many of them, and the rest are hungry for the pay they’ve been promised. Some of them are wondering when this will all happen.”

Again the arlic paused before answering, breathing deeply. “None can stop the Return,” he repeated. Then, as if struck by a thought, he turned his head a little to the side and opened his eyes wider. “Unless you doubt it will occur?” he inquired, his voice rising slightly with the question as his muscled arms tightened nearly imperceptibly. Drolnar was no warrior, but no one read body language better than he, and a barely concealed threat clearly lay below the surface of the question.

Rix did not miss the point, and chuckled slightly—though in a somewhat forced way. “I have faith in the Return, and the reward promised. But my lads have seen nothing of either so far, and they’re getting restless. We need to move soon.”

Sikkarb moved his head upright again. “We will act as the Destroyer wills. Our moment will come in due course.” He paused, then turned his head back towards Drolnar, his eyes widening and nostrils flaring slightly as he observed the merchant. For his part, Drolnar hoped his

evident shock at seeing the arlic had subsided enough to prevent comment . . . because it was quite evident to him that despite Rix's claim, the one-eyed man was not in fact "callin' the shots" in this affair, any more than Drolnar could have survived more than a few seconds in a fight with the beast who regarded him now with obvious contempt. Sikkarb clearly did not particularly care about Rix one way or the other, and Drolnar hoped to use that information to his advantage when he could.

"Who is this?" Sikkarb said at last, a low growl in his throat.

"Belezion Drolnar, merchant, at your service," he replied, bowing low. "I was told I might be interested in your proceedings here tonight, and—"

"I was not informed of others being involved," Sikkarb said, turning to Rix as the merchant, *very* unused to being both interrupted and ignored all within the space of a sentence, sputtered as he tried to regain his composure. "And you were warned about the need for care."

"This—*merchant*," spat Rix, "has more or less run a good part of this city for nigh on ten years. And he started askin' around about us. 'Course we could have just killed him, but there was no need for unnecessary questions, and his influence could prove useful. He was told either to back all the way off or get all the way in, and you can see what he chose for yourself."

"I see," said Sikkarb, turning his massive head again back to Drolnar, who had now regained his placid demeanor. "Then you know why we are here, and what we intend to do. And you know what steps must be taken to make it happen."

Drolnar hesitated for a split second under the arlic's withering gaze. It was dangerous to admit ignorance, but to lie—and be wrong—could have even more dangerous consequences. Rix, however, saved him from having to make the perilous choice by answering for him. "He knows almost nothing, Sikkarb—nothing more than any fool could discover by keeping his eyes and ears open. All of Klune Illar knows something's up, something serious, but not many know what to do about it, except cower in their beds and hope someone else fixes things for 'em. As for this one, he—"

Now it was Drolnar's turn to cut the other off, which he did with gusto, ignoring the other's murderous glare as he spoke. "I'm no ordinary citizen cowering in a bed, friend," said Drolnar, "and I know more than you think. I've been more closely connected to this city and its workings than the Duke himself for years now, and I know when things are—" he chose his words carefully, "—unusual. It's bad for business when they are and I know nothing about it, and so it's my business to ensure I do know. Specifics and details, well—" he chuckled "—that's what I'm here to discover. But the basics? I know those as clearly as I knew the password to get in this room. You risk no lost confidences by speaking in front of me." The last two statements were absolute lies, but despite what Drolnar did not know, he certainly knew a foreigner when he saw one . . . and it was evident to him that both of the other two he faced, especially Sikkarb, had little knowledge of city politics or networks. This was a gamble, but a reasoned one, and Drolnar seldom played a hunch wrong.

Rix spat loudly. "This sellthief is a liar, Sikkarb, and knows little more about this than the informant of his we skewered last week. I—"

Sikkarb raised one massive arm, silencing Rix, and stared for what seemed an eternity at the merchant.

"Perhaps not," Sikkarb finally said, "but we act as the Destroyer wills, and it is not clear to me what role this merchant must play. Certainly he is lying about some things. But he is telling the truth about others, and if he learned enough about you that he became a threat there may be others who followed a similar path." He moved closer to Drolnar, towering over him despite having to crouch below the low ceiling, and glared down at him, hot breath flowing from his nostrils. "If what you know of Klune Illar is of use to us, you will be allowed to live upon the Destroyer's return—indeed, you may even become a part of it. If it is not," the beast continued in an almost gentle rumble, lowering his great head to right above the merchant's, who was paralyzed by a mixture of fear and fascination with the arlic's great yellow eyes, "you will die

with all the others, your own heart's blood drowning your cries for mercy. None can stop the Return, and none will.”

An hour later, a shaken Belezion Drolnar emerged from the small house and hurried down the street the way he had come, trying to avoid splashing in the puddles left from the now-ended rainstorm. But even his anxious glances, darting from side to side, could not catch the shadow of a creature that silently slipped out from behind a barrel to follow him—a shadow which, had he been looking at it directly, he would have sworn had changed from that of a rat to that of a hooded man. The merchant and shadow both made their way down the deserted streets of the city.