

THE LORDS OF HARBENDANE

A man with long dark hair, wearing a red tunic, is shown in profile, looking towards the left. He is positioned in the foreground on the right side of the image. The background is a vast, snowy landscape with evergreen trees and distant mountains under a dramatic, colorful sky. The overall tone is epic and atmospheric.

Mel Keegan

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The Lords of Harbendane

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

THE LORDS OF HARBENDANE

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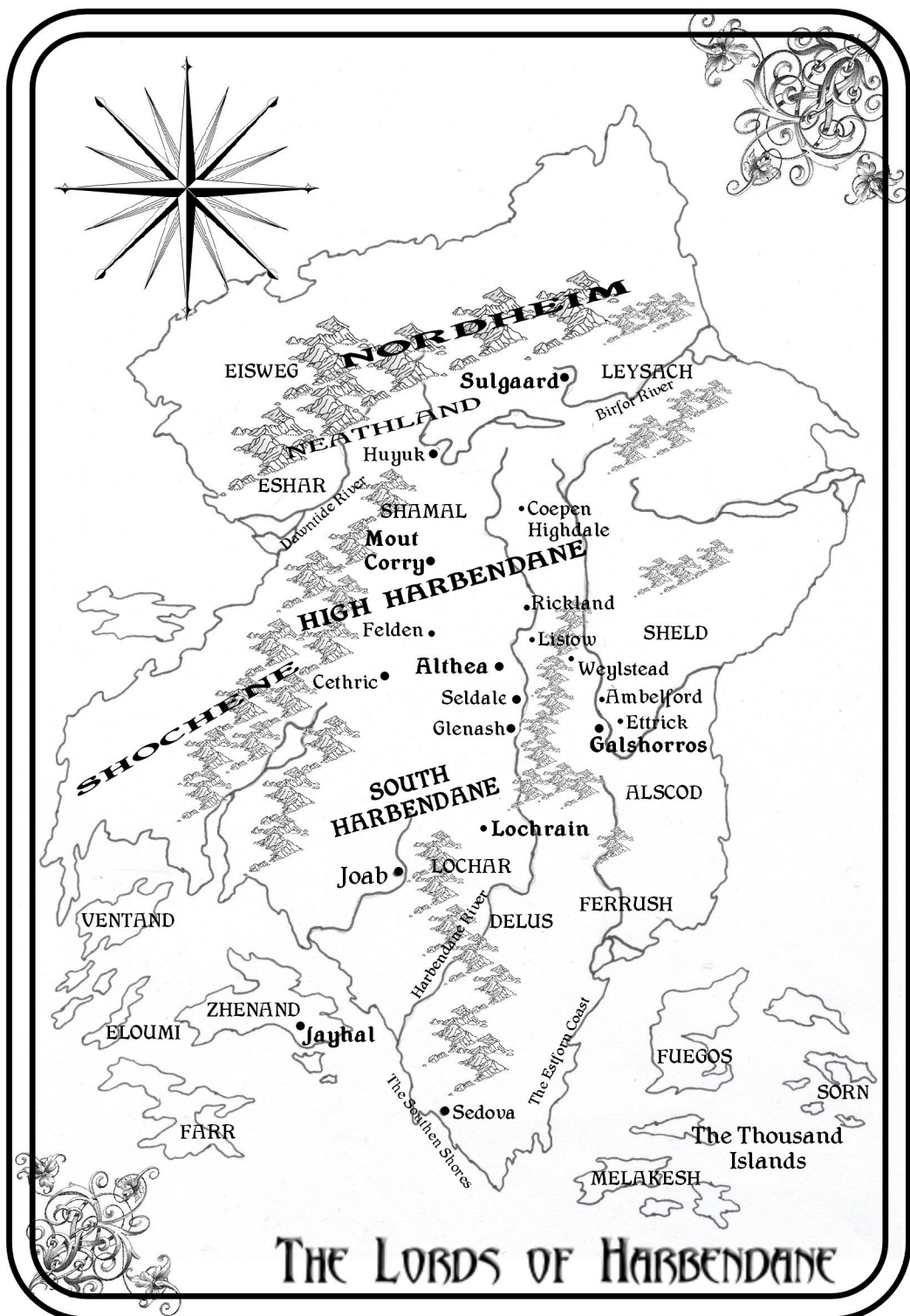
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Chapter One

Darkness lay across the vale of Sheld like a heavy indigo cloak, and Rogan Dahl would have sworn spirits walked abroad on this spring night, as they did on midwinter's eve. His hackles were up, his teeth were bare, and his right hand rested lightly on the hilt of his sword. He let the horse pick her own way in from the highroad, through a maze of inky shadows between the shambling, squat buildings of Weylstead.

No light and little sound issued from the houses. He passed by like a wraith, beneath low-thatched eaves and the acrid drift of hearth smoke. He had not seen the village in ten years, but nothing had changed. A yellow three-quarter moon glared from a rent in the dense overcast, and its light outlined a settlement where even the rain barrels, chicken coops and chained hounds seemed the same.

Big green-gold eyes peered at him from the shadows. A dog growled deep in its throat as the horse passed by, but some instinct told Rogan the wolfhound was not growling at him. His hand closed on the cold, rain-slick leather binding of the sword hilt, and he half drew it.

His voice was too loud, too harsh in the darkness. "Show yourself. Come out where I can see you, or go back to the rats." He shifted his weight in the saddle, and the mare stopped. She tossed her head and snorted through her nostrils — she knew the tone of his voice, and the rasp of steel on leather as the sword drew. "I said, show yourself, gods damn you," Rogan Dahl repeated, louder.

A dozen yards ahead, a shutter creaked open. An old woman's voice called out in the thick Sheld'in accent, "Who's that shoutin'? Let's 'ave some 'ush, fer gorsakes! It's gotter be gone midnight."

By the moon, it was closer to eleven, and Rogan was late. He should have made it into Weylstead by early evening, soon after the early spring twilight, but the mare had been walking on three shoes

since mid-afternoon, and the nearest blacksmith worked here. He would have spent the night at a tavern on the roadside, but the Magpie Inn was wreckage, still smoldering, stinking of the fire that had razed it only days before. The next shelter on the road to Galshorros was the Harper's Rest, on the other side of Weylstead, where the ancient hump-backed bridge spanned the storm-swollen Gunstrup River.

Rogan flexed his fingers on the sword hilt. His eyes were wide, fully dilated as the moon passed back behind the dense pall of storm cloud. Since dawn, rain had veiled the hills, the mountains were invisible, and the roads swiftly became treacherous. He was wet, cold, tired and aggravated enough to snarl at the shape crouching in the shadows.

"I see you there, you little weasel. Waiting to jump me?" The villages between Galshorros and the border were notorious. A traveler slept with one ear open and both hands on his purse. "Show yourself!" Rogan barked a second time.

The figure moved, uncurled and shuffled toward him, and for a moment he wondered if he might be wrong, and it was just a beggar, perhaps even the village drunk sleeping off a head full of ale before he went home to face his wife. He relaxed a tiny fraction — and it was enough.

In the next split second he felt his hackles rise again, prickling with the warrior's uncanny sixth sense, and then his skull seemed to split itself wide open. The world brightened for a blinding instant, and before he properly felt the pain, his vision darkened and he fell.

Many times, he had heard Althea's philosophers and alchemists say time was fluid, but he had never fully appreciated what they meant. He seemed to swim in the bottom of a blue-green lake, where the water was icy, murky, and incalculably deep. Currents carried him down, eddies took him into womb-dark recesses where voices whispered incoherently, and time caught him up in its backwash.

The peace was deeper than sleep, more profound than hobwort, until the first lance of pain sliced through the cocoon. Rogan caught his breath and both hands went to his head, which seemed to have been halfway severed from his spine. The full beheading would have been a mercy by comparison.

"Slow and easy, friend." The voice was quiet, full of an odd blend of compassion and wry amusement. It certainly belonged to a young man, but for the moment Rogan was blind. "Take it slowly," he was saying. "You were damned lucky."

"Lucky?" Rogan heard the rasp from his throat, and barely recog-

nized his own voice. "You call this — ah!" Talking at all seemed to be a mistake. Shouting was no less than stupid. He clutched his head and struggled for his bearings instead.

"You could have been dead," the young man told him. "I was on my way home, and I saw what happened. A dozen other men would be stone-cold dead before they hit the ground. You? You've a lump on your skull the size of a pigeon's egg, which you can expect when you've been hit with a well-aimed brick. But the rest of you seems fine."

With exaggerated caution, Rogan cracked open his eyelids. He knew he was lying prone. He felt something soft-coarse and yielding under his hip and shoulder; he felt the cool press of a wet cloth against his forehead; and the cracked-open eyelids showed him the rough-plastered corner of a room.

Firelight jumped on the wall a few yards before him. He smelt ale, and food. "Where am I?" At least he knew his own voice now.

"In the tavern. I yelled, scared off the rollers, bellowed for some help, and three strong men hauled you in here."

"Rollers?" Rogan echoed, and then remembered. "Tavern thieves."

"If you're lucky." The cold cloth was gone for a moment. He heard the sound of water splashing in a basin, and then the coolness was back, and he was grateful for it. "The rollers kill as often as not," the young man told him. "It's not wise to be on the road after mid-evening."

"I didn't do it by choice," Rogan growled. He stretched out his spine and listened to its snaps and crackles. His hip was bruised; his left wrist was stiff and sore — he would have landed heavily on the cobbles. "My horse?"

"We took her to the blacksmith's. He's keeping her overnight, and he'll shoe her in the morning." The young man sounded amused. "And before you panic, you still have your sword, your dirk ... and your virtue. The rollers didn't get their paws on you for long enough to lift more than your purse. I couldn't get to them in time to save your money, but a few coins is a small price to pay for your life. I told you, you were damned lucky."

He was right, and as Rogan came to terms with the pain slicing his skull, he did not argue. He flexed his fingers, got both hands under him and shoved. He was lying on his cloak, which had been tossed down over a mound of straw, to make a comfortable bed in the corner of the tavern's common room. Two men were asleep, heads down on the table, two more were dozing over tankards by the hearth, but at this hour the tavern was almost empty.

"Slow and easy," the young man cautioned. "There isn't a physician in Weylstead, and the old woman who sets broken bones and salves scraped knees is up in the crofts, delivering babies."

Rogan had already searched out his hurts, explored every inch of his body, and now pulled a breath to the bottom of his lungs. He would be wearing a bruise the size of his palm on his hip, the wrist would be sore for a few days, and his head would ring in the morning, but the remainder was unscathed. "I'll live," he said, mocking himself a little with a sound of humor. "The worst of my wounds is the great, bleeding gash in my pride! It's a fine thing, isn't it now, for a warrior to be laid out flat with — with a brick!"

He was blinking at his companion, waiting for his eyes to resolve, and as they did he saw dark brown hair, warm brown eyes, the pale skin of the easterners and northerners. And he was handsome, Rogan decided. Younger than Rogan himself by a few years, with much of the boy left in him, though he had a grown man's lean, hard body and angular face.

"Tris Carlin." The young man offered his hand. "Tristan Vaux Carlin ... for godsakes call me Tris."

"Dahl." Rogan took the offered hand for a moment, found it firm and warm, and let it go reluctantly. "Call me Rogan."

Curiosity creased Tristan's forehead. "You're an islander, aren't you? I mean ... big, and dark. What brings you so far from home?"

Big and dark? Rogan looked at his own hands, which were dusky brown and made Tristan's hands look more like those of a child than a grown man. "I'm from Althea," he said tersely as he pushed up to his feet and held out both arms for balance as the room spun.

"Easy. Hold onto me." Tristan was beside him at once, tucked under his arm, and Rogan unashamedly leaned on him. Tristan oofed beneath his weight on the way to the table.

With a curse, Rogan settled on the bench and held his head in both hands. He heard the slurp of liquid, and a cup of ale appeared before him as Tristan sat. "You said the rollers took my purse?"

"Before I could get to you."

"Then, I can't pay for this," Rogan warned.

Tristan seemed unconcerned. "We'll come to some arrangement."

An arrangement? Rogan carefully rotated his neck and peered at the younger, smaller man. "Meaning?"

For some time Tristan studied him with a deep frown. "You're a warrior, just come over from Althea? Then, you're a mercenary? I know

Althea hires a lot of mercenaries, and islanders are great warriors."

"No." Rogan lifted the cup and took a sip. The local ale was too sweet and too watery for his taste, but he drank half in one draught. "I'm from Althea, not a mercenary."

"You're an islander," Tristan began.

"I'm a Zhenander by birth," Rogan told him. "I was a child when they sent me to Althea as a hostage to guarantee my father's good behavior ... there had been fighting for decades, in the south. You know of the war?"

"Everyone knows about the war," Tristan mused. "It was the bane of our parents' young lives, just as this war brewing in the north will surely be the bane of ours."

Rogan's big shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I was four years old when they sent me to Harbendane. I grew up in Althea with Damiel and her brothers, and when my father died, and the peace between Zhenand and Althea was so old, so worn into its grooves that nothing would rekindle the argument between us ... by then, I called Althea my home. I don't even remember Zhenand."

"You speak with the accent of the west." Tristan's brows rose. "So, what brings you this side of the hills?"

The pain had settled to a steady throb in the back of Rogan's head. He massaged his eyes with thumb and forefinger as he finished the ale. "I have business in Galshorros."

"What kind of business?"

"Private business," Rogan said sharply. "Of a personal nature."

Some note in his voice warned Tristan off, but a moment later he said guardedly, "I have to go to Galshorros myself."

Rogan answered with a grunt.

"It's a two-day ride unless you hurry," Tristan added.

"I know." Rogan waited, knowing there was more.

"The rollers took your purse." Tristan leaned closer. "The decent inns, the houses where you dare close your eyes at night, cost dearly. And that's a fine horse, grain-fed, you don't want her coarse-grazing on the roadside. And then there's the ride home ... it's two more days through the hills from here to Althea."

"Oh, I know," Rogan assured him. "Come to the point, Tristan. My head is splitting, and of all the games I'd like to play with you, I desire word games the least."

Surprise made Tristan recoil, and then he gave Rogan a crooked smile. "Duly noted. The point? You've been robbed, you're far from

home, so you need money. And even if you're not a mercenary, you're a warrior. Yes?"

"Yes ... though you might not believe it on tonight's performance," Rogan said ruefully. He lifted a brow at the younger man. "I assume you're hiring?"

"Maybe," Tristan admitted. "If I could afford you. And if you'd take the job. It could be dangerous."

The remark inspired a chuckle, which Rogan regretted. He winced and held his head. "It's the nature of the soldier's trade. You want someone killed, is that it?"

"No!" Tristan was halfway to his feet. Faces turned toward them from behind the tapbar, and he sat down again slowly. "Quite the opposite, in fact. There's somebody who's *going* to be killed, and I need to get the bastard out of Galshorros before it happens."

"You call him a bastard, but you want to save his hide?" Rogan held out the cup. "Since you seem to be hiring me, I'll take another of these."

"And supper?" Tristan offered. "They roasted a pig in the evening."

It was noon since Rogan had eaten, and as his balance settled, he had begun to feel the emptiness of his insides. "Supper. And then tell me about this bastard I'll apparently be rescuing from certain death in Galshorros."

The food was plain, but there was plenty of it. A platter appeared before him, heavy with pork, stewed apples, baked vegetables and bread. He began to eat, though his attention remained on Tristan, who was fetching ale. He was tall for an easterner, lean and supple, and he dressed well. He was in tan leggings and a rich green tunic, embroidered about the cuffs and collar, and he wore the clothes with casual ease, as if he had long been accustomed to luxury. What he was doing in a village like Weylstead, Rogan could not yet guess. More than likely passing through and sheltering from the weather.

"This one you call a bastard," he prompted between bites. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Her," Tristan corrected darkly.

"A woman?" It was Rogan's turn to be surprised.

"A woman." Tristan buried his nose in his cup for a moment. "Sybella Brandel."

"Brandel," Rogan echoed thoughtfully. "I know the name."

"You know Sybella?" Tristan demanded.

"No. I said, I know the name of Brandel," Rogan corrected. "The

Brandels are nobility on this side of the hills. They're high caste, a warrior clan. Of course I know the name."

Tristan subsided, glaring into his cup. "The Brandels. Oh yes, they're high caste. A warrior clan. And Sybella is foremost among them, ranked right under the chieftains themselves."

For the first time his voice was steely, razor-honed with some emotion Rogan could not quite identify. He cocked his head at the younger man. "You speak as if you wished you could use the words to choke her."

"Do I?" Tristan sat back and sighed heavily. "Maybe I do. But if you can get her out of Galshorros, it's not going to be *me* dragged up before the Brandel chieftains and explaining how Corin Ferand died!"

"They fought?" Rogan hazarded. "I didn't think duels were legal."

"They're not." Tristan's eyes glittered in the firelight. "We all know the law, there's no secret. You kill an enemy warrior on the field of battle? Fine. It's war, and it's honorable. You kill the same warrior in a duel, and there's a word they'll use to describe the crime."

Murder. Rogan wiped his fingers on the rag by his plate and sat back to study Tristan. "Why is she in the city?"

An eloquent gesture with his cup, and Tristan looked away. "Corin Ferand is a second or third cousin of Bardolf himself. The Guard came calling the day after Corin was buried. They took Sybella away at swordpoint, three crossbows on her. If she'd shown them a fight, she'd have been shot dead and buried right beside Corin. Thank gods, she let them take her."

Bardolf Artus Alscod'in was old, but with age came power. He had sat in the rícon's hall in Galshorros for over twenty years, married six women, taken a dozen more as concubines, and sired more than forty children who were, Rogan knew, wedded into the noble houses of every city from Zhenand to Nordheim.

Power lay in Bardolf's hand like the mace which was the Alscod'in High Chief's seal of office. Sybella Brandel had killed his cousin? Then Brandel would surely die. Bardolf might give her the opportunity to stand up in the hall and say why she killed Corin Farand, but the headsman would already be waiting, the axe gleaming sharp.

As puzzled as curious, Rogan lifted a brow at Tristan. "What I don't understand is why you want Brandel out of Galshorros. If she killed Ferand, it's the block for her, according to your own law. What was Ferand to you?"

"Just a friend," Tristan said quietly. "Really. A friend since child-

hood, but no more than that. He wasn't my brother, my kinsman —"

"If he was, you'd be delighted to see Brandel's head rolling loose in a basket," Rogan snorted. "Instead, you want her out, and delivered to her own chieftains. You want her to stand up in front of the Brandel elders and — what, give account of her actions?"

The firelight danced in Tristan's eyes, turning light brown to liquid gold. Rogan was entranced, and made himself listen as Tristan said levelly, "When she killed Corin, she made trouble, bad trouble, for the Brandels. They'll be years winning back Bardolf's favor, if they ever do. They'll be the first called to war, when the time comes — and we all know it's coming, Hardendane's been waiting for it for years now. Every time the wind blows from Nordheim you can hear the grindstones, sharpening spears. The Brandels can expect to be the first ones thrown into the mire of the battlefield, and the last ones brought home from it. They'll get the rough end of every deal, the thin end of every wedge, when there's bounty to be divided. And as for winning a dispute? They can forget it. The Alscod'in have long memories. The Brandels are only Sheld'in, two rungs down the ladder."

The bitterness in his voice and face diverted Rogan from the stubborn ache in his own skull and neck. He touched Tristan's cheek, found it soft and smooth and warm. "And you? You're a Carlin. I don't know your house. I don't think Althea has done business with them in the years I've been there ... and I've been there a long time."

"My house?" Tristan's mouth quirked in an expression that was not quite a smile, but certainly mocked himself. "We're Delus'in, much lower down the ladder from the Sheld'in. *Much* lower. The Sheld'in look on us with contempt. The Alscod'in don't know we're alive ... until it's time to pay our tithes, and send our young people to war."

Again, the bitterness. Rogan heard resentment, disappointment, anger, woven together into emotions too complex to be torn apart. "You?" he asked quietly. "You were called to war?"

"Me?" The question jerked Tristan out of some reverie. "I was born to it, trained for it ... till I was fourteen." He slapped his right thigh. "There's a piece of steel in there, embedded in the bone. Part of a spearhead. We were *training* in the south of Nordheim. Being Delus'in, we were thrown to the wolves — and we expected to be. I was lucky. Three of us didn't come home. They brought a surgeon from Galshorros to dig the spearhead out of me, and I was young. I lived to tell the tale."

"You don't limp," Rogan began.

"Not till I get tired," Tristan said softly. "The first few miles are fine. Then the pain sets in, and ..." He shook his head. "My warrior days were over, Rogan, before I was fifteen years old. They sent me to a different kind of school — and again, I was lucky. I was also born with a brain in my skull. They made me over into a scholar, if you can believe it."

"I can believe it," Rogan murmured, though Tristan did not seem to hear him.

"I'm a scholar, scribe and teacher," he said saying. "I can earn my living anywhere, and it's an honest trade. Honorable."

"Who ever told you it wasn't?" Rogan wondered.

Tristan angled a look at him. "Sybella Brandel scorns what I do. It's not *manly*, or some such bilgewater. She tells me, the Sheld'in send their soft-headed, insipid little princesses to be *lettered*, and teach." He finished his ale in one draught and upturned the cup on the table.

For a long moment Rogan studied him, admiring the line of his nose, the angle of his jaw, the curl of the ebony-dark hair about his ears. "If you despise Sybella Brandel so, why don't you let Bardolf deal with her? It's the headsman for her, and an unmarked grave outside the city walls, and good riddance to her."

"I ... can't." Tristan rubbed his face hard with both hands, as if to wake himself up, drag himself out of some impending stupor. "No, I need her out of there, alive, standing in front of her elders and telling them, not Bardolf, why she killed Corin Ferand." He spoke with a startling vehemence, and then gave Rogan a faint smile. "It's private business. Of a personal nature."

"Of course it is." Rogan sat back and absently massaged his skull with one hand.

"You can get her out of there?" Tristan asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know," Rogan admitted. "I don't know Galshorros very well. I've been there, but I was a child at the time. I have a chart of the place. My own business takes me there, but I admit, I expected to walk in through the front gate, and leave the same way! Now? I might certainly walk in through the front gate, but getting out..."

The fire was burning down. A log shifted in the hearth and scarlet wreathed Tristan's face, like a sudden tide of blood. "I know Galshorros inside and out. I've spent too much of my life there. I know where she'll be. I just have no idea how to get her out."

"And she'll be ...?" Rogan prompted.

"The cells are under the ricon's hall. Bardolf has one great passion

in this life, and it's not his wives, concubines and children. It's pit fighting. There's a whole maze, a labyrinth, under the High Chief's hall. Prisoners for the headsman and captives for the pit fights, all are kept there."

Memory stirred, willful and reluctant. "I ... remember," Rogan said slowly. "I recall stairs leading down, and the banners of several clans and tribes. Falcons, jessed and hooded, and hunting dogs."

"You have it." Tristan was rubbing his eyes, and yawned deeply. "You said you have to go to the city anyway. At least look at Galshorros with the mercenary's eyes when you get there. Find Sybella. Find a way out." He cleared his throat. "I'll make it worth your while. I have some money set by. Do this for me, and it's yours."

"All right." Rogan considered his companion thoughtfully, missing nothing, from Tristan's rich beauty to the urgency of his business. "Though, I don't have much use for money. Daniel Thered'in calls me her brother, and Althea has always been good to me."

The scholar clenched both hands into his hair. "I don't have anything else to offer you. If money won't buy you —"

"I'm not for sale," Rogan said, soft and low. "I'm not a mercenary. I don't fight for pay. But ..." He gave Tristan a level, dark look. "There's not much I won't do for my friends and lovers, and those to whom I feel myself indebted." He touched Tristan's face lightly, traced the curve of his cheek, the line of his jaw. "I find myself in your debt. If you need Sybella Brandel out of the city, out of Bardolf's bloody talons, so be it."

A long breath whispered over Tristan's lips, and the brown eyes closed. "Friends and lovers?"

"Who are frequently both," Rogan added. He swept a small caress across Tristan's wide, full mouth, and Tristan breathed a soft groan.

"Do you believe in the Fates?"

"Yes." Rogan swung his long legs out from beneath the table. His leathers wore a crusting of dried mud, which powdered away as he ran his palms over them. "I also believe the Fates favor those who get up on their hind legs and fight to make their own fortunes."

"So do I," Tristan growled. "Can you walk now? We ... I live about a half mile up the road, but you can hear the rain. It's pissing down. I can ask Maggie for a couple of oilskins that'll get us home. You need to sleep till noon, if you can. Time enough to fret about Sybella tomorrow. Bardolf won't have her head off for a few days yet. He'll want the Alscod'in chieftains to come in from the far steadings to see it."

The room had spun only a little as Rogan stood, and settled at once.

The wrist and hip were stiffening, but a warrior ignored wounds which broke no bones, spilled no blood. "I'm fine," he told Tristan. "Get the oilskins. And then tell me your business with Brandel."

"It's personal," Tristan warned.

Rogan's dark head shook, shifting the thick mane of braids across his shoulders. "Not if I'm putting my own neck on the block right beside Brandel's. It's become my business, Tris. *Ours*. Get the oilskins."

He could see the rebellion in Tristan's face, but the point was inarguable, and Tris knew it. The oilskins were in the cloakroom beyond the tapbar, and Maggie, the stout old landlady who was dozing over her own hearth in the private parlor, just waved him in their direction. He gathered them in both arms and was back moments later.

His teeth were clenched, his lips sealed, as he and Rogan shrugged into the waxed, oiled leather cloaks and pulled up the hoods. He left a few coins on the bar to pay for dinner and ale, and went ahead of Rogan to the door. On the threshold he turned back, though he did not look up at Rogan. His face was shrouded by the hood as he growled,

"What do you want to know?"

"*Why* you need Brandel out of Galshorros," Rogan said baldly. "Why you can't let Bardolf take care of the thorn in your foot. What is it, Tris? What's Sybella to you?"

He was still as a carving for some moments, and then with one hand he lifted the bronze latch and let the door swing inward. Cold, wet air swept into the tavern, and in the back one of the sleepers woke with a curse. "What's Sybella to me? Interesting you should ask," Tristan muttered darkly as he stepped past Rogan, into the night. His voice was heavy with self-mocking resentment. "Gods help me, I'm wedlocked."

Chapter Two

Dawn light was crimson, bloody, on the grave marker. The simple wooden stake was hand-carved in the Sheld'in style, with angles and straight lines, where the same motifs in Althea would have been curved like ribbons and twisted up into knots. The name of Corin Ferand was engraved there, and below it was a date, two weeks in the past.

The rain had passed over in the night. A wedge of blue sky had opened up over the mountains, and Rogan was hoping for decent traveling weather. The ride to Galshorros was not long, but the high-road was notorious, little more than a track across the foothills, ditched at either side to keep it from flooding.

The house was white-walled, with a yellow thatch and — a sign of affluence — the windows were not merely shuttered but closed with glass. Poor people's houses were often not even shuttered, but draped with pigskin or deer hide. Tristan did not want for money, and Rogan accepted his hospitality without a qualm.

Sycamore, elm and ash clustered along the short edge of a tilled field, and beyond them, small with distance, he saw the bridge. They were half a mile from the river, with a little elevation to safeguard the steading when the Gunstrup rose in flood every spring.

Beyond the trees was a field already green with young barley, and a paddock where two horses grazed. One was a fine chestnut saddle horse with white-stockinged legs; the other was a heavy bay with feathery hooves, bred to work in harness. Beside the house were a haycart and a plow, beyond them, a gape-fronted barn, and a hill rising away to a stand of spruce and a gray stone well.

The property's geese honked at Rogan as he stretched his legs, but Tristan called to them and threw down a handful of corn. The lure of food distracted them, and Rogan swung up onto the low paddock

fence. He parked his buttocks there, pleasurably absorbed with Tristan.

Like any warrior, he had set aside the night's hurts. His pride was more bruised than his skull, and the loss of his purse smarted more than those bruises. He would have banished the whole episode from memory, save for Tristan.

And Tristan, he would never forget. The walk back to his home in the rain was silent save for curses, but the cottage was warm, the lamps bright. Tristan set the oilskins to dry, banked the fire and mulled a jug of wine. They sat by the hearth, but Rogan's head was throbbing and Tristan was rightly cautious.

His guest was a Zhenander, a stranger, taller, stronger, armed like a mercenary. Rogan might have flirted, if his skull had not been splitting like a watermelon, but Tristan had the skittish look of a colt who saw and recognized the horse breaker. Caution did not stop him looking Rogan over from head to foot, and Rogan knew he liked what he saw; but he dumped a sheepskin and blankets on the long, wide settle under the window, and retreated to the cottage's inner door.

He lingered there, looking long at Rogan, and when Rogan smiled at him with lazy, interested eyes, he was far from discomfited. He had a dark, almost gypsy sensuality, with the wide mouth, the warm eyes, the long limbs and honey skin of the Sovereign Hills, where Harbendane became Delus and then Teres and Estform. He was slender by comparison with the warrior, supple as an archer, with the hands of the scribe, the artist. Rogan could not help wondering what those hands knew, what art they could create on a man's skin.

And then Tristan stepped into the bedchamber, and with a sigh Rogan subsided on the couch. In fact, the drumbeat in his head would have ruined any scene Tristan invited — and Rogan had seen the first flickers of invitation. They would still be there in the morning.

His dreams were dark, bitter, filled with visions of battle, the color of blood and mud. Faceless landpirates swarmed out of the heather in an endless tide, and he knew he would be overrun, butchered, the moment his body was spent. Then Tristan's face appeared beside him, and a voice in his ear whispered, *Do you want to live?* Rogan jerked awake in a sweat, but the pain in his skull had eased. He sat up, rubbing his neck, and frowned at the bedroom door.

Was Tristan awake? Warm, still sleep-soft, wrapped in the counterpane and the last tendrils of his dreams. Rogan settled back into the blankets and looked into the last embers, still glowing dull red in the hearth. For some time he was reluctant to close his eyes, because he

knew the mirages of blood and battle would return; but sleep came at last, with dislocated, confused visions of Tristan.

By daylight, he was lovely. Sunlight brought out the gold flecks in his eyes, the honey tan of his pale skin, so unlike Rogan's own. He was in leathers this morning, with a great deal of work to do on the property. If Rogan was any judge, he had done this work before. He might have been a scholar, but his hands were hard, and he swung an axe easily, as if he had been doing it all his life. Rogan admired the fluid line of his back, the long legs and the curve of buttocks in the tight deerskin leggings.

In the spring landscape, only the fresh grave and the bitter look of brooding on Tristan's face were out of place. Rogan had not yet coaxed him to say a word, and he knew Tris was waiting for the inquisition. He angled a look at the warrior as Rogan swung up to sit on the fence, but still said nothing. Rogan watched him tip oats and bran into a pair of wooden pails for the horses, then fill a third pail from the rain barrel under the eaves, and head into the barn.

Chickens scratched among the straw. A black and white goat was waiting to be milked. From the fence, Rogan watched until Tristan returned with a basket of brown eggs and a brimming steel jug. His eyes creased against the sun as he looked up.

"Do you want to eat?"

"Yes. And to talk," Rogan added. "Everything I see here is a question, and I dislike mysteries intensely." He hopped down off the fence and studied Tristan's face closely. "You think I'm blind? I can see with one eye shut, something is badly wrong. The grave marker?"

"Here lies Corin Ferand," Tristan said acidly, "came to drink barley beer and lose a few coins over a hand or two of cards, left his blood on the stones right there, where you were standing a moment ago. She killed him," he said redundantly, "and there was not one damned thing I could do to get between them. I tried. Sybella is ... she can be a little insane."

"Mad or not," Rogan observed as they stopped on the threshold, "she had to have a reason to kill Ferand."

The polished cherrywood door opened onto a neat, clean common room with plastered walls, coffered ceilings and a smoldering hearth where bread was still baking. Tristan thumped the eggs and milk down on a wide table, between the mushrooms he had gathered before Rogan was awake and the herbs he had been trimming last night.

He leaned both palms on the wood and worked his neck to and fro,

as if he were stiff. "Sybella would tell you she had just cause to let a man's blood. But could you call it reason enough to kill?"

"Let me be the judge," Rogan suggested.

"They fought over me." Tristan would not look at him. "Sybella was so sure I was humping Corin, she was too wild to see sense or listen to reason. I warned Corin. I told him she'd go red-eyed with fury if he was still here when she got back."

A piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, but Rogan was not about to draw conclusions. "And were you? Humping Corin Ferand?"

Tristan's dark head shook slowly. "No. He was just a friend, the kind of man who whistled after every girl, pretty or not, and would talk his way into any woman's bed, if she were over sixteen and under sixty! He'd have had Sybella, given half a chance. Not me."

"So Master Ferand died for nothing." Rogan took a breath, held it, let it out slowly as he waited for Tristan to speak.

"He died for stupidity," Tristan rasped, "because he wouldn't listen to me, get on his bloody damned horse and get out of here while he was safe! And what makes it poison in my belly is ... damn. There *were* others. But not Corin. Sybella just fought the wrong one." He knuckled his eyes. "Corin had no chance. He was a warrior, but Sybella fights like a tigress, like a whirlwind. No one I ever knew could stand against her." He gave Rogan a haunted look, hollow-eyed and bruised. "There was a time I admired her for it."

Guilt was naked in his face. "You admired her enough to wed," Rogan said quietly. "It was a mistake?"

It seemed Tristan had to move, and keep moving. He filled the kettle, set it on the hob, sorted the eggs, hung up the herbs to dry near the hearth, fetched a long knife and began to slice the mushrooms. Rogan watched his face, his hands, the artist's dexterity, the freeman's spirit, as Tristan said,

"I wed in haste. In lust, if you must know. A big, rawboned swordwoman fires my blood occasionally. In a matter of weeks, I knew there was nothing left between us. Lust spent itself, as it always does, and all that remained was duty."

"And pride," Rogan guessed. "You said your clan is lower down the ladder than the Brandels? Your family warned you, tried to tell you it was a mistake? Then you wed against their wishes, out of your caste, and when lust was spent you found yourself in an empty union, with too much pride to let anyone see what it cost you."

Tristan looked darkly at him. "It hasn't been easy, and obviously I

had friends, lovers. Sybella was often away, she never knew, she *would* never have known, if Corin had believed a word I said, and left while he had the chance."

"Don't blame yourself," Rogan told him. "The worst sin you can be accused of is adultery, and where I come from, it's the national pastime."

"Here, as well," Tristan sighed. He was done with the mushrooms, and fetched a basin, a wire whisk, a slab of salted pork, a block of salt. "The Sheld'in will most often forgive you, if you play by the rules. I was unfaithful, though Sybella never knew it, but not with women. You know their lore? Some things, they'll forgive, some are forbidden to them. It's a strange old custom, but it's what they learn as children, and it sticks in the back of the mind the way fishbones get into your throat."

They were silent for some time as he whisked eggs, chopped meat and cheese, and greased a skillet. "Did you tell Sybella you were no longer happy?" Rogan prompted carefully. "Why won't she release you?"

The brown eyes darkened by shades, and Tristan looked away. "She wants me. Passionately, possessively. I don't say she loves me. I don't believe she ever did, but ... the wanting is powerful. She desires me, still, and you must know the law in Sheld. She's warrior caste."

"Which means," Rogan said slowly, "she believes she owns you. She couldn't imagine why you would want to be free. In fact, you're a prisoner in a silk and velvet cage, whose jailer regards him as a chattel, a — what? A toy for bed? She'll spoil you with clothes and frippery and fine horses. The only things you can't have are freedom and love. Oh, I know the law here. In a marriage between the high caste and the low, the contract is binding unto death."

"Wrong," Tristan said huskily. "It's binding *past* death. This is why I want Sybella out of Galshorros, before Bardolf can execute her. If she's dead, Rogan ... if she's dead, my contract passes into the hands of her clan. The Brandels don't care for me, but Sybella paid a high *hveldprice* to my clan, and the Delus'in took it with a smirk. It would pay their tithes, and maybe scootage as well, for five or ten years. A lot of money sealed the contract, and the bloody Brandels will have ten times the price out of me in service." He shrugged. "I'm a scholar, and I made myself a historian of sorts. I'm a scribe, I speak three languages. I'm a teacher, and a good one."

"Hence the high *hveldprice*," Rogan mused. "I've heard the term ... I'd say it meant 'dowry' or 'bride price,' if you were a girl." He looked Tristan up and down with a faint, rueful smile. "You're not a girl, thank

gods, not by any stretch of the imagination."

"I ... thank you. I think," Tristan said, momentarily flustered. "It means the same. *Hveldprice*. In Sheld, they don't make the distinction, boy, girl. Gender doesn't matter here, but —"

"Caste does," Rogan finished.

"Caste does." Tristan spread his arms wide and looked down at himself. "And here I am. A poor little Delus'in, of the blood-pacted clans of Vaux and Carlin, living in a house with glass in the windows and two horses in the paddock, and a well on the hill." He shook his head. "Too good for the likes of me. The Delus'in are target practice in wartime and laborers in peacetime."

"Rubbish," Rogan scoffed.

"Is it?" Tristan's lips compressed. "You don't know Sheld very well. Me? I'm the cuckoo in the nest. I was almost killed before I learned to shave, so my family sent me to school ... and I have a brain."

Rogan laughed. "It was never a crime."

"Perhaps not, but it's landed me in a puddle of shite three feet deep, and I might not get out of it." Tristan snatched the skillet off the fire as the fat began to bubble. He scraped the eggs into it, dumped in the mushrooms and meat, and stirred it vengefully. The pan slapped back onto the hob with an angry clatter. "If the Brandels get their talons into me — and they will, if Bardolf executes Sybella! — I'll be no more than indentured labor. They'll work me to death, because they never wanted Sybella to wed me in the first place. I wasn't good enough. Since when was a Delus'in good enough to wed a Sheld'in, and mingle his worthless blood with the blood of the *gotskind* themselves?"

The Zhenander warrior in Rogan rebelled, while the man who had been schooled and cultured in Althea recognized the law. "So run," he suggested, not at all glibly. "Get on that horse and get out. Vanish."

For a moment Tristan hesitated, then stirred the skillet again with jerky movements betraying the storm of his feelings. "You think they wouldn't come hunting? You think a bounty wouldn't be posted? Running out on a contract makes me a criminal. Where would I be safe?"

"In Althea," Rogan said promptly.

Dark eyes studied him while the food began to sizzle. "Damiel Thered'in regularly trades prisoners with Bardolf. I've written several of the transfer documents myself."

"But you're not a prisoner," Rogan purred, a bass rumble in his chest.

"I would be, the instant the Thered'in discovered I'd run out on an

indenture contract." Anger sparkled in Tristan's eyes.

Enjoying just looking at him, Rogan sat back. Anger looked fine as diamonds on him, revealing the warrior who might have been. "I told you, Daniel Halloran Thered'in calls herself my sister. If I whispered into her ear, she'd tell the Brandels where to go ... and what to do when they got there."

A look of longing replaced the fury, and Tristan's head tipped back. His eyes squeezed shut. "I wish to gods you were right."

"I am right."

But the scholar's dark head was shaking slowly again. "You know there's war brewing, like a storm just over the horizon. We had the news, Rogan — I know the Thered'in were fighting in Neathland not ten days ago. Daniel is going to want every ally she can woo, when the time comes. She'll want everything from Bardolf's own personal Guard to the lowliest Delus'in peasant farmer who ever picked up a pilum and dragged his boots to war. She can't afford to offend the Brandels."

The worst of it was, he was right. Tristan was as intelligent as he was beautiful, and he had thought through the whole proposition while their breakfast spat and crackled in the skillet. Rogan was silent until Tris had divided the food between two platters and pulled the bread out of the hearth. He slopped boiling water into a big, black iron pot, and poured a strong, aromatic tea. Rogan did not recognize the aroma, and gave it a dubious look as a splash of goat's milk lightened it to pale gold.

"So," he said then, before trying the food, "Sybella lives. I'll cheat Bardolf of his execution. And then?"

Tristan paused with a hunk of bread in one hand, a forkful of eggs in the other. "She'll answer to her own elders, and they," he said with rich satisfaction, "will skin her alive. She'll tell them she killed a sword-brother, brother warrior, because she thought I was humping him."

"They won't believe her?" Rogan tried the food, and liked it.

"They won't care, one way or the other," Tristan said around a mouthful of eggs. "Adultery is the national pastime, as you said. Get angry, if you're cuckolded. Be righteously furious, if you *know* the children you're raising are the brats of another man ... but it never happens, Rogan, because a woman won't betray her husband with another man, just as I wouldn't betray Sybella with a woman, even if I'd fancied one. Which," he added philosophically, "I didn't. I suppose I'd had my fill of women, after her.

"After Sybella, what could another woman be, to me? Sybella is the

best and the worst, in one human skin. Big and strong as a warrior, beautiful as the moment the dawn sun crosses the horizon, courageous as a lion, skilled as any swordmaster, fierce, brilliant, like the moon on the sea, full of passion like fire ... jealous, possessive, careless, arrogant, stubborn, petty, self-centered, vengeful, cruel, remorseless, with a molten, killing temper she never learned how to control." He washed the food down with a draught of tea. "The one thing you do *not* do, not ever, in Sheld, is butcher a swordbrother or swordsisiter, no matter what crime you think has been committed.

"And as for killing over adultery?" He drank the cup dry and poured another. "The Brandel chieftains will flay her alive. She'll lose her place in the bloodline, the lineage, until she can win it back again on the battlefield, *if* she can win it back, which is doubtful ... and as for me? I won't have to break my contract and run, Rogan. They'll tear it up and throw me out."

So this was what he wanted. Rogan leaned back into the tub chair and surveyed him with a smile. He liked everything he saw, from the curl of the dark hair on Tristan's brow to the long, slender legs thrust out alongside the table. If the city of Althea had not been waiting for him, he would have been happy to linger here. "You've reasoned it through. Clever boy. All right, I'll fetch her out for you. But I won't be able to deliver her to the Brandels."

"You won't?" Tristan hesitated in surprise.

"My business is urgent, Thered'in business," Rogan told him grimly. "You know there's been fighting in the northern steadings. You know we won at such a price, we can hardly call it a victory. Many are dead, and many more of us are badly injured, lingering, dying slowly of Nordheim wounds."

The brown eyes closed. "Nordheim archers poison their arrows," Tristan said, soft and husky. "Their axes and swords are tainted. The slightest nick, and death is almost certain, though it'll take some time to settle on a man's bones. They make death slow and lingering by design, you know? Because soft-hearted southerners like you, like me, will exhaust our resources, trying to care for and save our injured, instead of doing the merciful thing and putting the poor sods out of their misery." He tilted his head at Rogan. "Your business takes you to Galshorros?" Rogan nodded. "You're going there to meet Amadeus. Aren't you? After the fighting, there's nothing else would take you to Bardolf's court."

Amadeus. The sound of the name was like ice water, dumped over

Rogan's shoulders. He felt the squeeze of his chest, the knot in his belly, and took a deep breath as memories crowded in, surging out of the dark corners of his mind.

The Nordheim mountains were jagged, bleak, snow-capped even in summer, and the tribes who lived in the high valleys were wild beyond imagination, cruel beyond any understanding of savagery. Spring brought them south, where the steadings in the northern reaches of Harbendane were well provisioned and poorly fortified. Every thaw it was the same. About the time the ice began to break on the Churlai River, the tribes from the north grew hungry. The elk would return in a few more weeks, a month, but until then, their eyes turned south.

They fought like madmen. Every blow was meant to kill, and even a wound would eventually be fatal. The poison was known as *kaithe*, it was the venom of a cave spider and the juice of an arctic berry, blended together in a bronze bowl and heated until it smoked. Wounds dealt with a blade or arrow painted with the black, tarry *kaithe* paste never healed. They rotted, stank, and the only way to save a warrior's life was to take off the limb. Wounds to the body were a death sentence.

And what of the warrior whose limbs were forfeit? Few of the wounded would allow the surgeon to treat them. They would never fight again, nor even walk. Most preferred to pass peacefully out of the world, and leave the struggle to the survivors.

Like Rogan Dahl, and Damiel Thered'in and her real brothers, Stefan and Rigel, those who shared her blood as well as her affections. Rogan had been wounded in the fighting at Coepen Highdale, but the weapon that took him down, dislocated his right shoulder and left a wide, blue bruise across his back, was a staff. His skin was whole when the old women dragged him off the battlefield to the surgeon's wagon. The battle was almost finished then, and before he could swing a sword again, the landpirates retreated.

They vanished into the mist from which they came. Fog crept on light, fox paws, over the high moors. The Nordheim mountains were etched in black and white, stark and forbidding, and the fortified village of Coepen Highdale was still smoldering. Thatch had ignited in several places, but the roofing was still too sodden to burn easily, and water was plentiful.

Nineteen of Damiel's cavalrymen lay rotting in the towers above the city of Althea, tended by nurses and monks who could do little more for them than ice their festering wounds, quell their fevers, and

pray over them. Rogan might have been one of them, and he did not underestimate his luck.

"We used all the magicks we had," he said hoarsely. "We healed more than thirty of our outriders, but there are too many wounded. The magicks are gone, and so many are dying."

Tristan's face clenched in shared pain. "I've seen them. Smelt them. We fight in the north on this side of the hills too, and we Delus'in are the first ones Bardolf sends against ... them." He gestured into the far north, where Nordheim brooded beyond Harbendane. "It was there all my life, the threat, the fear of it." He slapped his thigh. "I was so lucky, no one could believe I lived. The spear that opened me to the bone wasn't poisoned." His brows rose in an expression of introspection. "They brought in an old monk, Brother Dyffraed. He prayed for my soul through two nights, and when I didn't sicken, when the leg didn't start to stink with the *kaitherot*, the Delus'in elders decided I must be blessed."

"And were you?" Rogan refilled his cup and drank.

"I was lucky," Tristan said sharply. "Blind lucky. The gods never took the time to notice I was alive, Rogan, and they sure as shite won't notice the day I die!" His mouth thinned to a determined line. "I've made my own fortunes — and made more than my share of mistakes."

He was referring to Sybella, and Rogan studied him silently for some time. Tristan had one chance at freedom, and they were both keenly aware of it. If Sybella were to live and be judged by the Brandels, she would be discredited, dishonored — dispossessed. There were obligations as well as privileges of rank, and when duties were failed, the house elders would be vengeful. Sybella's property would pass into the common ownership of the Sheld'in; her creditors would be forgiven their debts; and those under contract to her, from the laborers who mended her roof to the low-caste scholar she had literally bought in wedlock, would be released.

Free, Tristan could go anywhere, begin again, without watching over his shoulder for the bounty hunter who had come to haul him back to the Brandels. Sybella was a fool. She had brought the judgment on herself, and she should be the last one to try to lay the blame on Tristan. She would not talk her way out of the murder or Corin Ferand. Tristan might be scorned, chastised as an adulterer, but Sybella would carry the full brunt of the Brandel wrath.

High caste, warrior caste, she would be punished as one of the elite, who were supposed to be above the crass behavior of peasants like the

Delus'in — and like the Zhenanders, Rogan thought ruefully. In the islands, his own kinsmen knelt before strange gods, danced naked in the moonlight and fought the jaguar barehanded to prove their manhood. Warriorkind like the Sheld'in and the Alscod'in looked down on them with the same disdain they bore the tribes of Nordheim.

"I'll bring the Brandel woman out of Galshorros," he said slowly, musingly.

"Your fee?" Tristan licked his lips. "I have money." He shoved back his chair and beckoned Rogan toward the inner door, the bedchamber.

Curious, Rogan followed. He would have told Tristan not to bother, that when Tristan felt himself indebted, he was welcome to explore a myriad other avenues, none of which had anything to do with money. But curiosity took him into the wide, bright bedchamber, where the massive bed was strewn with sheepskins and quilts. He watched Tristan kick aside the rugs and stoop to pull a false flagstone out of the floor. Several leather bags lay in the cavity beneath. He lifted one out and tossed it into Rogan's hands.

"Name your fee," Tristan said darkly. "A fair price for the job. I trust you. All I ask is that you don't rob me! Believe it or not, I earned this money. The Brandels might not like to see my face at their tables, but they pay me well to teach their squalling little brats how to read and write."

The bag was heavy with an even mix of gold and silver coin. Rogan pulled the drawstrings, looked quickly inside, and took a dozen. "This will do. Enough to shoe the mare and get me to Galshorros and back."

"Us," Tristan corrected.

But Rogan shook his head. "You're not coming with me."

"The hell I'm not!" Tristan's fists clenched.

"You're *not*," Rogan repeated, louder. Lungs the size of his own could make a startling din in a confined space. He dropped his voice again as Tristan recoiled. "You're not," he said softly, "because I can't watch your back and my own, not in Bardolf's lair. And you," added, touching Tristan's face with careful fingertips, "are not a warrior. You were half-trained, fifteen years ago, and now you've a piece of steel buried in the bone of your leg. If anything goes wrong, Tris, and Sybella and I have to run — much less if we're on foot! — you could be the death of all three of us."

A little color seeped out of Tristan's face. "You're right." The words might have choked him. "You'll bring her back here?"

"Manacled, if need be," Rogan promised.

"All right." Tristan clenched both hands into his hair and pulled, to dispel the anger and focus his thoughts. "Watch her like a hawk, on the road home. Turn your back on her, and she'll have you. Also," he growled, "keep your wits about you at night. She'll try to seduce you."

"Me?" Now Rogan laughed, a genuine sound of humor. "She can try ... and she'll find her charms wasted on barren ground."

For a moment Tristan wrestled to understand what he meant, and then gave Rogan a crooked grin. "You don't warm to women?"

"No." Rogan's large, brown hand cupped Tristan's cheek. "I never have, so don't waste your time fretting over me. Worry about what you're going to do when I get Sybella back here, and hand you one end of the leash! Because I can't stay to help you. I'll have every magick Amadeus can give me, and I'll be on the road back to Althea so fast, you'll wonder if I was ever here at all."

"Leave her to me," Tristan said acidly. "She knows what I feel. She looked me in the face, just as they took her away, while Corin was still not even cold in the grave. I didn't say a word to her."

"I'd guess you didn't have to." Rogan pocketed the coins and tugged straight his tunic. "Tristan, I don't have time to linger ... much though I'd like to. You're very beautiful, and I dare say I desire you as passionately as Sybella does. But half of Althea is waiting for me. Everyone there has lost a son or a brother, a sister or a mother, in the fighting, and too many are dying."

Tristan gestured at the door. "Move, while you have the weather and the daylight. I'll walk back into Weylstead with you. I have to take back Maggie's oilskins in any case. Your horse should be shod by now. I'll show you where the blacksmith works."

He made to move past Rogan, but Rogan's hands on his shoulders stopped him. Tristan looked up, very fair in the morning light, filled with questions, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. Rogan's thumbs traced a caress about his neck, his face, and he leaned down to lay his mouth on Tristan's.

The kiss was far from chaste, and Tristan groaned. His hands clenched into Rogan's tunic, and with great reluctance Rogan held him off. Being so close to him was a delicate and exquisite form of torture. He smelt the young-man scent of Tristan, clean maleness full of desire and life and promise. Every nerve in Rogan's body responded, heat surged along his veins, but deliberately he held Tristan at arm's length.

"Not yet. There's no time, and when it happens, it's not going to be

rushed, like guilty pleasures stolen while no one's looking!"

"Damn," Tristan whispered, breathless, flushed, dark eyed. He took a breath, and another, and the fine, scholar's hands closed on Rogan's forearms. "Will you return from Althea?"

"Oh, yes," Rogan promised. "In a week or two. And if the Brandels are through with Sybella — and you! — sooner than this, make your way west. All roads lead to Althea, and I know which trail you'll be on."

"I will." Tristan gave him a determined shove and stepped away. His voice was taut. "The oilskins are still in the barn. Go on ahead, I'll catch you up."

He stepped out of the house a moment later, and Rogan watched the supple line of his back, the flex of long longs he had begun to imagine locked about himself. It would happen, and the day was not long in the future. He swore softly and forced his mind back to the moment.

On a whim, he stayed to look at the cottage, the rugs and furniture, the *things* which belonged to Tristan. The scholar's unmistakable touch was everywhere. Sybella would have contributed the shield and crossed spears on the south wall, the banners flanking the door, but the framed scrolls, the writing desk, the shelf of rolled parchments, the stack of eight or ten leather-bound books, were Tristan's. He had a rosewood writing box, and over the desk hung a pair of ink portraits, a man and a woman so like him, they could only be his parents.

"Well now," Rogan murmured, perplexed, delighted, intrigued, as he swung on his baldric and cloak. "Well now, indeed."

And then he banged shut the front door, on his way to Galshorros.