

# The Swordsman



MEL KEEGAN

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# *The Swordsman*

**MEL KEEGAN**

**DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia**

## **THE SWORDSMAN**

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# *The Swordsman*

*How shall I say that I have never known  
A thing more fair than life, than love, more rare?  
Yet must I say, more precious, still, than these  
Is friendship's very soul, and mateship's care.*

*A lie would pass these lips, were I to claim  
That I have never wooed — nor loved, nor lost;  
Yet all my lost affections leave me thus:  
Cherishing friendship's pleasure ... and the cost.*

*For, seldom do the years design this joy:  
Two hearts, two souls, around one cause entwined,  
Where friendship, courage, joy and all the rest  
Yield such sweet sorceries as soothe the mind ...*

*All this is surely true. Yet, still I say:  
When friendship turned to love, I bless'd the day.*

## Chapter One

A flock of crows and ravens still circled the bare hillside, but the battle was long over. It might have been fought in the dawn twilight, when men's eyes were at their worst, still full of sleep, untrustworthy in the half-light and blinded by the new sun. This battle had been modest, brief, but the dark-iron stains of blood would not quickly wash away from the slate flagstones. The travelers had made their last stand in the ruins of a shrine to some half-forgotten godling or saint. The two standing walls and few enduring columns were the only protection in five miles on this road. Their wagon had put a wheel into the ditch, broken an axle. They had no choice but to stop here for repairs, too close to dusk. They did not live to travel on.

Jack Leigh brought the tall black horse to a halt beside the ruins. Crows and ravens looked up at him from the debris of battle, but none flew away. Their red eyes were bright with challenge. He sat for a few minutes in the noon sun, grateful for the heat on his back and the bright sky as he studied the wreckage. No arrows feathered the broken wagon, no discarded weapons littered the old shrine. But the scavengers were busy, picking over the remains of men, mules, dogs, and those remains were scattered wide across the gray flagstones.

In the hour when this small battle was fought, Jack had been idling over breakfast at an inn called *The Wayfarer*, twenty miles west along the road. The locals were wary of any strange face, rudely curious about the business of any traveler, suspicious of every word he said. But it was not belligerence he saw in their eyes. It was fear. Jack spoke softly, courteously, and cocked an ear to their talk as he drowsed by the hearth. They would not give him a room, as if they did not trust him enough to let him get out of sight under their roof, but they provided stabling for the horse, a meal, and the warm chimney corner for himself and Marguerite.

The cat was under his cloak, riding the saddle there, but she was not asleep. He felt the tension in her as she smelt death on the air. Even Jack could smell it, with his dull human senses. He frowned at the road and the soft dirt beside it, looking for signs of the enemy, but this road was rocky, gravel-strewn, not easy to read. The attack had either come out of the woods, down the hillside, or from the road itself. Nothing Jack saw suggested which.



A finger of ice scampered down his spine and he looked up now, searching the line of the woods, the road ahead, and behind. He was alone even at noon. No one in this area seemed to travel between towns except in convoy, and the wagon convoys were a week apart. He had been aware of this for a week or more, but had never thought to question it: the majority of the peasants in these hills were bonded to their landlords, they needed a pass to travel from town to town.

But the road was not just quiet, it was *empty*, and the hairs on Jack's nape had begun to rise. Bonded peasant farmers and artisans would certainly make for quiet roads, but the gentry always went about at whim. He stood in the stirrups to look about in a wide circle, as far as he could see. No falcons in the air, belonging to a hunting party; no lady's carriage, no acolytes from the guild house out collecting herbs, no sorcerer or apprentice on the way to or from a glade in the woods after morning rites, no priest or friar or doctor making his or her way from croft to croft. In fact, no crofts, no outlying farms, not even a poacher's shed or a wayside shrine that was anything less than a ruin.

As if, Jack thought, people did not come out here except in great numbers, when a wagon convoy traveled this road of necessity, with an escort of cavalry. He sat back down and glared at the scene of battle framed in the tumbledown shrine, and his hackles prickled as they rose. He had unsettled the cat. She moved around as he sat, but only her nose emerged from his cloak. Her fangs bared and she hissed.

"I know," Jack whispered. His arm slipped about her. "I can see, Maggs. We're leaving now."

The horse needed little encouragement to move off. The feeling of safety in movement was false, and twice before the shrine was a quarter mile behind, Jack twisted to look over his shoulder, sure he was being followed. Nothing moved on the road but with some animal instinct he felt eyes on his back, and he had learned to listen to such instinct.

At the tavern last night he had listened while pretending sleep. One learned much more when people thought they were free to speak, and the locals murmured, never above a whisper, of the *bo'zhe*. The *bo'zhe* would visit in the night, they would carry off livestock, and take children if they were not home by twilight. They had been seen as close as the old Ramani chapter house ... they were hunting in packs this year, they had taken a group of acolytes on a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Saint Naomi of Bek.

But no one mentioned who the *bo'zhe* were, or what they were, and Jack had been pretending sleep. He could hardly ask without betraying his eavesdropping, and the locals' fear of strange faces could easily turn to violence.

Every mile he rode east into the Riverland, the people grew less welcoming, the forest thickened, the towns were further apart and the

road fell into ever-greater disrepair. In places it was barely passable to heavy wagons, and more than once he had ridden by a building that had once been a wayside coaching inn and was now deserted, abandoned. A small voice in the back of Jack Leigh's mind had begun to whisper about the wisdom of turning back. But the stories of the riches to be reaped in the Riverland called him on.

He had already plumbed the depths of the territories behind him, and if a fortune lay there to be found, it had eluded him. In every new town the advice was the same: if it's a fortune you're after, head east.

East, into strange lands where travelers were met with suspicion, and not even the gentry went abroad; where the forest was a dark tangle into the ramparts of the mountains, and the sorcerers guarded their magic so jealously, one would have thought they were afraid it was about to be stolen from under their noses.

The forest ahead was called Nimmenwald. In Jack's pocket was a map, much-used and heavily creased, sold to him for the price of a pint of ale in a town on the Brag River. It was the only map of the Riverland he had ever found, and it was old enough for its details to be obsolete. *Here*, a bridge was marked, but when he reached the place he found only a scatter of granite rocks. *There*, a hamlet was supposed to nestle in the fold between two hills, but only a cluster of burned-out foundations survived, a lonely memorial. The road itself had changed course twice since the map was drawn. Once, a rock fall cut it off; another time, one of the tributaries of the River Daena had flooded, washing it out. Jack had ceased to trust the map, and at the price of a pint of dark ale, he considered himself robbed.

Nimmenwald was growing. If the map were only as old as Jack himself, the forest had crept outward, east and south, in those three decades. Now its skirts had reached the watchtower, which on the map was called Eyrgriffin. A fire should have been burning at the crown of the watchtower, but Jack saw nothing as he came around the shoulder of the hill: only a neglected road, a forest that was being allowed to take over old farmland, and a darkness in the eastern sky which might have been a funeral shroud.

A storm was coming in. He felt its first breath on his face as he saw the dark, gray-purple mass of thunderheads. They reared like monstrous castle walls on the horizon, but the storm was still a long way out. It would not assault these hills before nightfall. The east wind stirred again, colder, stronger. He smelt the forest on it, and reined back. The horse did not want to stop this time but Jack insisted, and as Marguerite growled a question he muttered, "I need to look at the map. We could have a problem."

The Wayfarer Inn was far behind and he knew now, the road was not safe. Jack had never intended stopping overnight without the pro-

tection of an inn, but he had passed two derelict buildings already, where the map had promised taverns. He gave the old chart a glare as he folded it back on itself and studied the meticulous, erroneous detailing. He could trust only the general line of the road, the river, and the position of towns, cities too big to be burned out and abandoned.

A full day's ride behind him was Avenswyr, with its high walls and a watchtower garlanded with pennants. The River Daena was five miles to the south, where it had gouged out a canyon and the riverboats paddled between the ports of Chevalir and Breganza. The highroad was supposedly the fast route through these hills, and Jack was headed for Rhondia, which — if the map were to be trusted — lay an hour's ride on the other side of a twelve-mile tract of Nimmenwald.

The forest lay before him, poised, like an army in the field, and the road arrowed straight into it. The trees and underbrush were supposed to be kept cut back for twenty yards on either side of the road, as a buffer against brigands and cut-throats, but no woodsmen could have worked in these parts in years. The road was almost overgrown.

Even if he had not just passed a scene of bloodletting, and even if he had not listened to mutterings about the *bo'zhe* in the night, his hackles would have risen as he approached the tangle of forest. The voice in the back of his mind ceased to whisper and began to nag. *Turn back, it said. You can make it back to The Wayfarer before dusk.*

And then, in the morning? This was the only road into Rhondia. The only other option was to go back as far as Sundeport and get a riverboat, which was a delay of ten days on the road, and another five on the water. And Jack's pockets were close to empty. If he retraced his tracks, he would have to open his safe-belt, fetch out a gem, trade it for coins in some fleamarket where the deal would not arouse suspicion. He would certainly lose money on the trade, as well as time.

He could not quite bring himself to do it, but his options had dwindled alarmingly, and for some minutes he sat glaring at the dark line of Nimmenwald, until the horse was restless and Marguerite grew curious. The cat stuck her nose out from under his cloak; green-gold eyes narrowed in the daylight and she made a curious sound.

Jack was so intent on the feeling of being watched, and the darkness of the forest, he had not noticed the smell of woodsmoke on the wind. Maggs was right, and he scratched her ears as he turned to his left and looked up the shallow slope above the road. Sure enough, a finger of white smoke angled away into the west ahead of the growing wind. And he *was* watched: a figure stood at the top of the slope, outlined against the sky, where the first tendrils of cloud had just begun to flare like horses' tails.

The figure froze as he turned toward it. For a long moment neither the young man — it was surely a young man; every body-line said so

— nor Jack moved. Then the figure raised a hand, not quite a wave, and was gone, over the top of the rise in the direction of the smoke.

Someone was camped over there, and Jack did not have to ponder the decision. He turned the horse off the road and let him pick his own way through the brush. The slope was long, shallow, not a difficult climb. Almost at the top, he looked back along the road. He could see the ruined shrine with its flock of big black carrion crows, and nestled back into the forest was the abandoned Eyrgriffin watchtower.

He was high on the slope when he heard voices, the crackle of a fire, the soft snorts of tethered mules. He was not surprised to see a line of gaudy wagons pulled up along an old woodsman's trail, a dozen fresh rabbits spitted over a fire, the skins stretched to cure over a frame, a half-dozen dogs panting in the sun, and as many brown-skinned children playing tag between the mules' legs.

The young man who had waved to him was leaning against the tailgate of a yellow-dressed wagon. The woodwork around the door was carved into odd-shaped faces, and as Jack looked closer he saw bears, eagles, wolves, falling stars, crescent moons, a rack of antlers. He brought the horse to a halt on the edge of the camp, careful not to cross the line without invitation, and pinned on a smile.

Wide dark eyes looked up at him out of the young man's bronze face. The long hair was black, shot through with silver, no matter his youth, and his ears were heavy with rings. He dressed like most of the Riverland gypsies, in a patchwork of deerskin, rabbitskin and gaudy silks, but unlike the others he wore a odd necklace. Jack's eyes were drawn to it because he had only ever seen one other like it.

It was made of bear's teeth, and on each fang — the size of a man's small finger — was carved a rune. Richard Godwin's necklace was very old and had come to him from his teacher, Manzenin. Now, Jack wished he had listened more when Godwin told the stories of his youth, his student years, but at the time they had seemed unimportant. He recalled little but the necklace and the name of Manzenin, and the tales of the Nimmenwald Deep, where legend swore Manzenin had discovered his magic, how many years ago?

The young gypsy whose hair shone in the sun with strands of pure silver was of the same blood. Jack shivered, no matter the warmth of the early afternoon. The storm wind rose again, singing in the rigging of the big, conical tent which had been hoisted on the far side of the encampment, and the east was dim now, purple, smoky and brooding.

Dark eyes glittered at Jack in wicked amusement. "You're a fool to be on the road alone, and if you think you're headed into the forest by this road ... well, then, you'd better leave a letter here for your family, so they'll know why you committed suicide."

The words might have stung, but they were spoken gently, with

humor, and Jack managed a chuckle. "I'm a stranger. A *devre*, just blundering along east, taking advice where I can get it." He gestured at the shoulders of Nimmenwald, which looked solid as a fortress wall beyond the camp. "I'm trying to get to Rhondia, and if this isn't the road, I've forgotten how to read a map." He leaned down and offered his hand. "I'm Jack Leigh. And I'm very glad to see you."

"Jack Leigh." The young gypsy came forward, took Jack's hand, but his brow had creased. "That's not a name from this side of the water. You're from the far west, the islands?"

"From a place called Yulminster," Jack told him, looking down into deep brown eyes. The gypsy's palm was leathery with calluses but his face was smooth, unlined. "Am I welcome in your camp, or shall I ride on?" He indicated the incoming storm with a nod. "I want to be safe in Rhondia before *that* hits."

"You're welcome here for a while." The gypsy withdrew his hand and stepped back to make space for Jack to swing down out of the saddle. "I can't ask you to stay with us past sunset." He shrugged. "I didn't make the laws of my people, but I have to uphold them, even if they seem foolish to your ears ... and even to mine." He beckoned Jack to the fire. "You must be hungry."

"I am." Jack lifted Marguerite out from under the cloak and set her on the saddle. The cat kept a wide-eyed watch on the whole encampment as the horse ambled over toward the mules and put his nose into their mound of hay. "Do you mind?" Jack wondered.

"If your horse eats?" The gypsy gave him an odd, crooked smile. "I've a dried fish for your cat, if she'd like it. And a warning for you."

"A warning?" Jack had been about to set his buttocks on a three-legged stool between the curing rabbit skins and the fire. He paused now and pinned the gypsy with a frown, wondering what tribal law he was breaking by sitting down uninvited. "You didn't say your name."

"Janos." The gypsy hunkered down on his haunches, close to the cinders, and reached over the fire for a blackened can in which water bubbled. "And I should warn you before you ride any further along that godsforsaken road, if you go alone into Nimmenwald no one will come after you, and you'll not come out."

Chilled, Jack watched the gypsy's strong, leathery hands as he poured coffee. He took a tiny cup, smelt an aroma so strong it was dizzying, and set it aside to cool. "They didn't tell me any of this back in Avenswyr or Sundeport. I left The Wayfarer just this morning, and they knew where I was headed and didn't say a word."

"Ah." Janos scratched his ear, squinted against the sun as he looked up at Jack, and smiled crookedly. "There's a feeling among the folk north of the river and back as far as Sundeport. So long as Nimmenwald is taking strangers, it's not taking locals, and if it takes enough

strangers maybe it won't be hungry when a local comes along."

"Damn." Jack sat down on the stool and tried the coffee. It was strong enough to shrivel his tongue and make his eyes water. He had heard of the gypsy coffee, which came from the markets of Turqe, far in the east. "Then I'm just lucky," he said hoarsely as Janos ladled rabbit stew into a bowl and handed him a piece of dark bread to sop it up. The stew was full of herbs and cabbage, and as he smelt it Jack realized how hungry he was.

"Lucky you saw me." Janos took coffee for himself and sprawled in the grass by the fire.

"I passed the site of a battle," Jack told him. "Do you know the ruined shrine, back along the road?"

"The shrine of Saint Eleyyna." Janos closed his eyes against the sun. The wind had begun to thrash the treetops and the mules were growing restless. Marguerite spat at them from her perch on the bow of Jack's saddle. "The shine's been abandoned since before I was born," Janos was saying, "like so many places on the road. People don't travel far, except on the river. You should have taken a riverboat, if you want to get to Rhondia safely. Did no one tell you?"

"The boat is expensive," Jack observed as he tried the stew, found it rich and spicy, and soaked the bread in it. "Fare for myself and the horse ... the bastards even wanted to charge passage for the cat!"

Janos chuckled. "I wouldn't know about fares. I've never ridden the riverboats, but I've seen them. My people travel the Riverland from west to east and back, every year, always the same paths ... you're lucky, Jack Leigh. I know them all." His eyes glittered with the wicked amusement Jack had seen before. "I'll keep you alive, at least long enough to get to Rhondia."

"I'll be in your debt," Jack told him honestly. "I've nothing much to pay you with. My pockets are almost empty ... Avenswyr was not very profitable for the likes of me."

"What do you do?" Janos wondered. "Aside from wander from place to place and blunder into trouble?"

In answer, Jack half-drew the sword from the scabbard which rode at his left hip. "Call me a soldier of fortune."

"A mercenary," Janos mused.

"That's a harsh word." Jack finished the stew and set the bowl down. He cradled the coffee in both palms. "Bodyguard, courier, bounty hunter, duelist, *persuader*. I've been any number of things since I came over. But not a mercenary."

The gypsy only shrugged. "I've nothing against mercenaries. The Riverland armies are full of them, and if it wasn't for their efforts we'd be fighting barbarians in these hills again, as our grandfathers did."

"And the battle at the shrine of Saint Eleyyna?" Jack watched the

young man's expression darken. "It wasn't barbarians?"

"Not in these hills, nor in this season." Janos looked away. "Stay out of Nimmenwald and mind your own business in Rhondia. Don't hire your sword to a mercenary army, Jack Leigh ... guard a lady, fight a princeling's duel for him." He forced a smile and looked back up at Jack, narrow-eyed against the sky for a moment before a cloud passed across the sun and the brown eyes widened. "Come back out of Rhondia alive," Janos said softly.

Jack reached down to touch the gypsy's cheek. "Who are you?"

"Just a simple Zaparasti." Janos seemed to mock himself.

"Not with that necklace," Jack whispered. "Not simple, not *just* an anything, when you're wearing the same kind of necklace Manzenin gave to his finest student, Richard Godwin." He saw a flicker of recognition race through Janos's eyes. "You know the names?"

"Just the name of Manzenin." The gypsy sat up and tossed away the dregs of his coffee. He leaned closer to Jack. "Manzenin also was a Zaparasti. The last drops of his blood are probably in my own veins, but I'm a bastard, and only half Zaparasti ... though I know who my father is." He smiled, enigmatic, bewitching.

"And this?" Jack touched the bear's tooth necklace, with its scrimshaw runes and tiny, inlaid stones winking in the sun.

"From my grandmother's grandmother." Janos caught Jack's hand, opened it and looked curiously into his palm. "Kept safe in a box for seven generations, waiting for one to be born into this tribe who had the Gift." He paused. "What pains you, Jack Leigh? What brings you here? You should be so far away from Nimmenwald and Rhondia, you couldn't even find them on a map."

He was right, but for some reason a shiver traveled Jack's spine and he was reluctant to share his secrets. "Just tell me how I get to Rhondia before the storm hits, without taking the road through Nimmenwald. If it's so stupid to be on the road alone, I don't want to be caught out at night. You've already told me I can't stay here, so I don't have much time."

For some moments Janos fingered the necklace thoughtfully, his eyes unfocused, as if he were looking into another world though his face was turned toward Jack. He was a rare beauty, Jack thought, silver hair and all; but heaven help the man who tried to bring this one to heel and keep him there. If Manzenin's blood was in his veins and he was heir to the Gift, the *wyld* would be in him also, and if he had no teacher among the Zaparasti, he might never learn to control it.

How much did Janos know, how much could he do? If he were too ignorant, the Gift would control him like a puppet, and before long it would burn out his brilliance and leave behind a crippled husk. Jack frowned at the silver hair which threaded through the black, incongru-

ous and lovely, alongside such a young face. So the Gift had already exacted a toll from him, perhaps while Janos learned how to be its master.

"I have something for you." The gypsy stood, brushed grass off his deerskins, and gave Jack a curious smile. "Will you wait a moment longer or must you rush away?"

"You haven't told me where to rush away to yet," Jack reminded.

The smile widened, and then Janos vanished into his wagon. Jack murmured a curse of exasperation and settled to wait. Mallets were ringing as the camp battened down for the coming storm. The Zaparasti had been making fast for hours, he realized. They must have known the storm was coming since early morning — just as they knew the road was treacherous and Nimmenwald was deadly.

Yet they camped here as if they owned the hillside and were safe, within the range of a good, loud shout of a forest which made the hackles rise on Jack's nape, made the marrow chill in his spine. Faces turned toward him as he began to watch them; voices fell silent, hammers stilled as the Zaparasti returned his attention. He stood, smiled, dropped a courteous half-bow before them. The children giggled; a few of the old women smiled. One of the old men spat into the grass and made an odd hand-sign which Jack would never have recognized, if he had not grown up playing at the feet of Richard Godwin.

It was a banishing sign, to ward off evil. He looked down at himself, in that moment wondering why the old man would make such a sign, but before he could ask, Janos was back. In his hand was a rabbitskin pouch on a rawhide thong. This, he looped over Jack's head, and kissed both his cheeks.

"A charm," he said simply. His breath was warm on Jack's face. "It will get you to Rhondia by the woodsmen's way, if you keep a healthy distance between you and Nimmenwald, and get inside the city's skirts before sunset."

"I will." Jack pulled the drawstrings and peered into the pouch, eager to see the charm. He recognized it at once. It was a *gelfaea*, and while some of these pocket-magicks were ancient and priceless, this one looked new. The disk of white wood smelt aromatic, and the same hand had carved the runes into it as had carved the wolves, eagles and bears around the door of Janos's wagon. This *gelfaea* was inlaid not with precious stones, but with beads of colored glass, each of which signified a prayer, a mantra or invocation. "It's beautiful," Jack said honestly. "Your own work?"

"Of course." Janos seemed surprised even to be asked. He cocked his head at Jack, looked him up and down with overt appraisal, and gave him a rueful smile. "I wish you could stay the night, swordsman."

"With you?" Jack returned the appraising look, and glanced at the yellow-dressed wagon. "I'd be glad to stay, but I think I'd wake up



dead in the morning. One of your elders was making banishing signs at me as soon as your back was turned."

"Damn." Janos did not glare at the old man, but his mouth thinned in annoyance. "So we lose the night, Jack Leigh ... it's only a night. And I'll see you again."

"You will?" Jack could not resist the impulse to touch the silver that wound through the gypsy's hair. It would have been a wild night, he thought, but Janos Zaparasti was not for taming. This one was not for home and hearth, nor for vows which would last lifelong. Still, a wild night was a wild night, and Jack mourned the loss of it.

"Of course we'll meet again." Janos gestured at the gypsy clan, most of which seemed to have gathered to stare at the *devoe* with complete disregard for their manners. "We're headed for the Citadel of Rhondia ourselves, tomorrow or the day after. If you don't get yourself killed in Nimmenwald, look for me in the marketplace. Sure to Saint Eleyna, I'll be there. I always am, making *gelfaea*, empowering charms, reading cards and carving runes."

"Sure to Saint Eleyna," Jack echoed.

"Rhondia's patron saint of outcasts, bastards, scoundrels and ... soldiers of fortune." Eyes glittering, Janos offered not his right hand to Jack, but his left.

The left-handed clasp was no formal greeting or farewell, but the invitation to a tryst. Jack laughed and took it. He leaned over and kissed the side of Janos's neck, beneath the big gold earring. "Are you always this wicked, or is it me?"

"It's you," Janos told him without hesitation. "It's too long since I watched someone like you ride down this old road."

"And *you* swear by Saint Eleyna?" Jack still held Janos's wrist, and tugged him closer with it. "What are you, then, the scoundrel?"

But the gypsy only shrugged. "The bastard," he said easily, as if it were of no consequence. "I was born on the wrong side of the canal ... but as I told you, I know who my father is. It's all I need to know."

Something deep and dark and rich lay behind his eyes, and for a moment Jack was about to dig, see if he could winkle it out. But they were close enough for him to smell the herbs with which Janos had washed his hair, and the pine of his cologne. A familiar old throb coiled through his belly. Janos was warm, smooth with youth, with dark eyes full of invitation, and a smiling mouth that promised.

"If I could offer you the hospitality of this camp overnight," Janos said quietly, "you know I would. I'd like nothing better than tangled sheets and rose oil, and perhaps even a few bruises to keep awhile as souvenirs. But there are some elders among the Zaparasti who are so shackled by the ways of our ancestors, I'd be skinned alive for inviting an outsider among us after dark."

"Then I'll look for you in the marketplace." Jack leaned over the few inches separating them and laid his lips on Janos's mouth. The gypsy's throat made a little mewling sound and his tongue flicked into the kiss. Jack leaned into it, his right hand knotting into the dark hair, and he did not turn away until he heard the sound of giggling. The old, familiar ache uncoiled again and he might have glared at the mocking, but it was children. Two little boys, not six years old, were pecking at each other's cheeks, mimicking their elders and laughing.

"My nephews," Janos said resignedly. "Don't let them trouble you, Jack. They mock me just the same when I'm ghost dancing to set the perimeter and keep the camp secure. They mock the women the same way, when they're milking the goats." He touched Jack's cheek with his fingertips. "You'll make it safely through to Rhondia, but only if you leave soon."

"All right." Jack released him and stepped back. "Tangled sheets and rose oil, brandywine and firelight ... but I've learned not to trust the damned map, Janos, so tell me, how far ahead is Rhondia — by the woodsmen's way?"

"Two hills and the valley between. On a good horse ..." Janos looked sidelong at the animal. "You should be on the canals by late afternoon if you don't stop to chase shadows." His brow creased. "Don't stop on the trail, Jack. Remember. Put a healthy distance between you and the forest, keep moving, keep one hand on the *gelfaea* and the other on your sword."

"Chase shadows?" Jack caught the reins and tugged the horse away from the tethered line of mules. "Shadows out of Nimmenwald?"

Janos only nodded. The wind caught his hair, tossed it. The sun was gone now, lost in a high haze which was thickening by the minute. The bright disk wore a wide gold halo, a sure sign of heavy weather. "One hand on the *gelfaea*, one hand on your sword," Janos said softly, "and the shadows will let you pass by. Trust me."

"Shadows," Jack echoed. Still perched on the saddle bow, Marguerita was listening intently, ears cocked forward, green-gold eyes drawn to the necklace which lay on the bronze skin at Janos's breast. "I heard people at The Wayfarer talking in whispers ... *bo'zhe*."

The gypsy's eyes widened for a moment; his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Don't even speak the name aloud. Not here."

"But who are they?" Jack insisted. His only answer was a shake of Janos's head, and the young man stepped back to give him space to mount. Smothering an oath, he set boot to stirrup and swung up. The cat slithered back under the cloak, he felt her warm against his back as he settled the sword. He reached down and took the gypsy's hand. "I'll look for you in the market."

"You'll find me." With a rueful smile, Janos Zaparasti returned to

the hearth and sure enough, the old man who had made the banishing sign was there at once, muttering, wanting explanations.

With a soft curse of exasperation Jack turned the horse up, over the crest of the rise, around the gypsy camp and north, onto a well-worn trail. It skirted the edge of Nimmenwald at a respectable distance and as Janos had promised, it climbed a hillside in a switchback pattern. A valley and the hill beyond, and he would see Rhondia well before dark. Jack's fingers closed about the rabbitskin pouch, and the disk of the *gelfaea*. His eyes were drawn to the forest, where dense shadows seemed to writhe into shapes only to uncoil again and twist into others, each more forbidding than the last.

"Imagination," he muttered, and hurried the horse. The sky ahead seemed to brood under the burden of something known, something dreaded. Secrets Jack Leigh had no desire to know.

## Chapter Two

Moonlight gleamed whitely on the rooftops of the city, and the black and white banners of the House of Astaghir fluttered in a stiff north-west breeze. The wind was rising steadily, every gust adding to a growing gale, and by midnight the eaves would be rattling, shutters would be battened down tight, from the canals right up to the Citadel itself.

A few stars were still visible between the racing clouds, but the overcast was thickening by the minute. The canal dwellers and river folk would be preparing for rain, perhaps a full storm. The rising water would test the new containment walls, four massive dykes finished just a month before, after the spring torrents washed out half of the city's lower side.

At a window high in the east watchtower of the Citadel, Michael Sebastian d'Astaghir lifted aside a tapestry and looked out across the rooftops. The moon glared through a break in the overcast and lanterns shone like dull gold from the tangle of canalside streets. A thousand times he had seen nights like this. He had watched the same moon gleam, not on the chimneys and slates of this walled city but on the steppes, on the ice-capped mountains of Righa and Urail, while wolves and their cousins, the wolven, howled at these same stars and the wind thrashed like a live thing in the forest.

The very bite of the wind reminded him of those scenes. The bang of a shutter brought to mind the clatter of the armored wagons in which

the barbarians made war; the chime of the angelus bell made him think of the carillon sound of barbarian swords, shields and lances. The savages most often attacked in the hour following sunset, when the half-light was difficult, the growing twilight their ally. After seven long years in the field, years more would pass before Sebastian even began to forget the routine.

The sun was a quarter hour down, the angelus was being rung from the west turret, but his mind was a thousand miles away. The wind was fresh in his face, stirring the heavy tapestry which had been hung over the window to shut out the chill air. He breathed deeply, smelt the aromatic canals and the river which snaked about the bedrock feet on which the Citadel stood, and he felt the deep pangs in his leg — a sure sign of approaching rain, if not a storm.

The wound was well healed. The surgeon had done outstanding work in the field, under difficult conditions. When Sebastian was fetched back by litter, even the Duke's own personal physicians could do no more for him. And still he favored the leg. It was good enough to carry him through a day's march, but not a week's. Good enough for him to walk unaided for a considerable distance, but not for him to run or fight, or keep up the furious pace of the soldier.

The memory of pain made him flinch as he saw, in his mind's eye, the scarlet and gold of a banner, the silver-gray blade of a sword; the red of his own blood, spattering snow once fresh and virgin, now churned and sullied with mud and the life's blood of men and horses. Those memories were old, but they refused to fade. He was sure they would haunt his old age as they troubled his youth.

"Your grace?"

The voice jerked him back to the present with a start. Sweat sprang from his pores and his heart beat at his ribs. He swallowed hard, several times, and composed his face before he turned slowly to face the man. Faiola was no soldier. Though he had served with the regiment in his youth, his duty was not performed with a sword in his hand. He was as soft-bellied as any man who had spent a lifetime in the livery of a servant, master of a man's house, commander of maids and cooks, pages and grooms. Still, the man was good at his job, and he was concerned. Sebastian was not ungrateful, though he resented the intrusion into his thoughts.

Faiola was as tall as Sebastian, but by no definition was he muscular. He was twenty years older and his hair, once thick and red, was a mix of silver and sand, and sparse. He was proud to wear the colors of the Duke of Astaghir — sapphire blue, trimmed in white and silver — and his arrogance stemmed from his position in the household.

"Are you well, my lord?" Pale hazel eyes peered anxiously at Sebastian. A thin, hawk nose and even thinner lips gave Faiola a predat-

ory aspect. He was not aging well. In his youth he had looked quite striking — his was one of the few faces Sebastian remembered clearly from childhood days spent in his very fortress, summers wasted and winters endured in this mountain of granite. Time had not been kind to Faiola.

“I’m quite all right, Castellan,” Sebastian lied.

“But you called out, aloud,” Faiola insisted.

“Did I?” Even now Sebastian was surprised, though he had known for years, when the memories possessed him he was blind to the present, unaware of his company. More than once he had spoken to long-dead comrades, called battle orders to a regiment only he could see. The memories sometimes had more substance than the reality of the Citadel, the city sprawling along the canals, the dense tangle of people and their business which had grown up in this bend in the great River Daena.

“Your grace, are you quite all right?” Faiola seemed poised, about to summon help.

Sebastian thumped his right thigh with the flat of his hand. “This is giving me a little to swear about. It’ll be raining shortly — mark me well!” He forced a smile and began to march about the room, stamping his left foot as he tried to drive out the persistent ache.

“Shall I fetch you a physician?” Faiola asked solicitously.

The mere mention of the word could bring Sebastian out in cold sweats. He would never forget their knives, their needles, the giddiness of their drugs. “No,” he said quickly. “But I could drink a cup or three of brandywine.”

The Castellan bowed. “Then I’ll send a page with the cellar’s best, your grace. Where will you be?”

“In my rooms,” Sebastian said tersely, headed for the immense, brassbound door.

“The ... angelus bell is being rung,” Faiola prompted as he hovered in Sebastian’s wake.

In fact, Sebastian had been waiting for the observation. He did not even pause. “I can hear it. Send me the brandywine.” Did the old fool seriously expect him to climb six flights of stairs so as to kneel on a stone floor and pray to gods he had never believed in? Faiola was devout, and he seemed to think it was his duty to exhort everyone else to devotion, irrespective of their own frame of mind. Sebastian paced away from the man without another comment, but only his rank, the blood in his veins, made Faiola hesitate to insist.

The leg protested every step up the stone stairway, like a knife buried in his thigh. His rooms lay in the south tower, overlooking a courtyard rather than the city. Stone walls, eight feet thick, armored the Citadel, and Sebastian felt the immense weight of granite above him.

When the fortress was built every brick of it was a necessity, for seldom did a season go by without the barbarians striking up the river.

Now, those barbarians were thrust back beyond the forest. They hardly ever broke out of Urail, and these pennant-hung walls had not seen fighting since the time of Sebastian's grandfather. The fields of battle were in the north and east. Massive fighting was rare, but the skirmishes continued without pause. If the Legion were allowed to grow weak or lax, Sebastian had no doubt the barbarians would be back on these very walls and the sky would be smoke-dark along the river, as it had often been before Sebastian was born.

In the old Duke's day, every man was taught to fight, from the time he was a boy. He never knew when the skills would be all that stood between himself and oblivion. Now, it was harder and harder to find good recruits for the Legion, and Sebastian's father had been forced to hire mercenaries, to give criminals the choice between the dungeon and the army, which made for an infamous, unreliable regiment. And in the end he had sent his only legitimate son onto the battlefield, as an example for other young men.

The scheme misfired when Sebastian was brought home, injured, not expected to live long. What kind of an example had he set? The big, brawny young men who worked on the river and canals were hardly likely to rush into legionary service so they could be sent home lame, unable to return to work. Sebastian sighed over the state of affairs, for he knew — though it was never said — the Duke blamed him for being so inept as to be wounded.

The door slammed on his private rooms and he glared at his swords and the round, bossed shield, which were on the wall now, no more than a set of trophies. He would never use them again. Part of him was glad; another part of him, buried deep, where a man's honor lived, mourned. Did he believe he was somehow less a man, because he had been dismissed from the ranks of the fighters? Did he long for the freedom of the steppes and the forest, where there were no walls, no weight of granite and bluestone pressing him into the earth?

Or perhaps it was the comrades he longed for, the lovers he left behind. A pang assaulted him, more painful than the old wound, and he swiftly twisted it into anger lest he begin to mope. Was there anything more revolting than an 'old soldier' sulking over his lost glory?

His rooms were a curious mix of the plush, which befitted the Duke's son, and the austere, which befitted the warrior. The bed was enormous; the counterpane was not velvet but a patchwork of fur, wolverine, black bear, and an odd, gold-gray pelt which the hunter out of Urail swore was not wolf, but *wolven*. Sebastian had always wondered, and felt a peculiar thrill as he stroked his palm over the gold-gray squares between the bear and wolverine. The chairs by the bed were

plain wood, unupholstered, and the floor was bare; the writing desk was cherry wood and the three tapestries were sumptuous. Each depicted a scene from the history of his family, the House of Astaghir. Scenes of battle, of glory: an uplifted lance, a blue banner streaming over the proud head of Tristan d' Astaghir, under a purple, storm-thick sky.

The wind plucked at the shutter, thunder rumbled in the northeast, counterpointing the angelus bell. It was going to be an evil night. A night for a man to be drunk, and to sleep deep, with the fur counterpane pulled over his head. Not a night for him to sleep alone and lie awake, watching shadows cavort across the ceiling. Sebastian glared at the four candelabra which lit the room with six candles apiece, each as thick as his forearm and as long as his whole arm. The chamber seemed to shimmer with gold light, holding the shadows at bay, and on his pillow was a *gelfaea*, very old, very precious. It was rosewood and gold, with amethyst and topaz prayer beads. It had belonged to Sebastian's great-grandfather, and in the old tradition, came to the child Sebastian on his third birthday.

All this, Sebastian had long ago ceased to notice. He sat on the beside, rubbing his leg and waiting for the wine. The long muscle in his thigh had been cut right through, and a hank of fibers was destroyed. Doctor Lasky, the battlefield surgeon who treated him the instant he was dragged out of the skirmish, had worked for hours on it, with the finest of instruments. Sebastian had heard how the grime had been washed out, how a splinter of javelin-shaft was cut out, and the hedgehog spines of his own smashed thighbone were plucked, one by one, like salmon bones, from the wound. Now the scar was a sickle-shaped mark, only pink, no longer even livid. No foreign object remained embedded, and it would never heal more thoroughly. The muscles were simply damaged, and they retained the memory of the barbarian javelin which shattered the bone. No amount of cursing would mend them, and Sebastian's last option was to seek a special magic. The day would surely come, he knew. But not yet. Not quite yet. The cost was too high.

"Your grace?" The voice came from the door, deep and husky. Sebastian would have known it anywhere. "Your ... Seb, the castellan said you came up here." Knuckles rapped.

In this entire heap of granite which called itself Rhondia's bastion, no other man would call the Duke's son by his own name. No other man had earned the right, up to his knees in mud, half-fed, with fear for his bedmate and only the companionship of soldiers for warmth.

"Come in, Luc," Sebastian called through the door, "it's not locked. I'm waiting for a steward."

"With a pitcher of brandywine, I know." The door opened and Luc Redmayne appeared.

He never changed, Sebastian thought. Tall, rawboned, with the

sharp nose and cheekbones, the yellow hair straying about his collar, the wide, quirky mouth. For years Sebastian had envied Luc Redmayne his good looks. Luc was fair and yet brown-eyed, with the Rhondian 'hawk nose' which was so admired, it appeared in most formal portraits whether the subject actually had such a nose or not.

Tonight Redmayne was frowning as he stepped into Sebastian's rooms and let the door click shut behind him. He was dressed to go out, with a scabbard in his left hand and his hat in the right. He wore the colors of the House of Astaghir, and he wore them well. The sapphire blue suited him, and the wide, white hat with the three cassara feathers. Spurs gleamed in the lamplight as he set the scabbard and hat aside and turned the frown on Sebastian.

"I passed Faiola on the stairs. He's headed up to prayers, of course. I was going out." He gestured toward the gateway. "Drink a pint of ale, lose a few *shkel* playing crown-and-anchor, watch the boys dance at the Maid of Deepway ... that's the place where they strip to warpaint and feathers when the crowd's drunk enough." He arched both fair brows at Sebastian. "Faiola said you're not well. The leg. Come with me, Seb. Come and take your mind off it."

For a moment Sebastian seriously considered the proposition. Luc made a good point. It was rare for him to get out of the Citadel these days, yet the leg was never going to be any better, and on the streets and canals below Ten Dragon Bridge, who would recognize the face of Seb d' Astaghir? Even if he were recognized, the taverner or courtesan who knew him would count his presence an honor. In Redmayne's company he would 'come to no harm,' as Faiola would say.

The thought, and the words, rankled. When a man had been a warrior who had seen service on the ugliest, most notorious fields of battle, the need for a bodyguard was a sour cup to swallow. Still, Sebastian had threshed through this in the months after the surgeons finished with him. Sickness dogged him for many weeks, and Faiola, Lasky, Redmayne, all of them had reminded him, the canalside warrens were filled with *competitors*. The only legal blood heir to Rhondia was not safe to walk there, and it soon came to a choice: go out with a guard at his back, or don't go out at all.

He was on the point of agreeing with Redmayne tonight when the leg spasmed heavily. A white-hot knife seemed to sink into him, hilt-deep, and he sagged back onto the side of the bed. His fingers buried in his thigh, seeking the places where pressure would shut off the pain for a few seconds.

"Damn," Redmayne whispered. "You should see a surgeon, Seb. Will you let me call Doctor Lasky?"

"I've spoken with him already. An hour ago." Cold sweat broke from Sebastian's pores. "You know what he offered me? A sleeping



draft! A cup of poison to knock me on flat my arse for a day, Luc, until the old wound subsides and the pain goes away."

"Perhaps," Redmayne suggested, "you should have taken it."

But Sebastian shook his head savagely. Pain fogged his thinking but he fought it as he had fought any enemy on the frontier. "Lasky means well, but the drafts rob me of time, and they dull my wits for days, Luc. It takes so long for me to regain my brains, I hardly have any time left before the wound starts again, and it'll be Lasky and *another* sleeping draft. I'll take the brandywine!"

"You know best, Seb." Redmayne's voice was soft. He sat on the bed beside Sebastian and his hands began to rub the old wound, the corded thigh muscles, the locked joint of Sebastian's knee. "This helps, I know." Luc leaned closed and his lips brushed Sebastian's ear. "I'll stay with you tonight, if you like."

How many nights had Luc Redmayne been beside him? Before Sebastian's last battle they had shared a pavilion. Two braziers heated it, carpets hung on every side to shut out the cold, a dozen oil lamps drenched the interior with gold light, and a triple-vestibule kept out the wind. The banners and battle honors of the House d'Astaghir, the Rhondian Legion, and the Archangelsk Regiment flanked the entry, where secretaries, cohort commanders, legionary couriers and Sebastian's own staff jostled for space. The scents of lamp oil, spruce charcoal, spit-roasting pig and horse liniment blended together. To this day Sebastian could not smell any one of those odors without the demons rushing back to possess him —

Snow melted to slush and refroze; the hem of a man's cloak, and his tunic, were first wet with mist and drizzle, and then froze into knife-edges which let blood. And the *bo'zhe* could smell blood for miles. The forest had been bear-trapped, everywhere, and the traps snared men, dogs, horses, with the same indifference as they caught brown and black bears. But they never caught *bo'zhe*. The wolveren were too clever. It often seemed they were more clever than men, because Nimmenwald was their home: they knew it better than any 'Sudlander,' any Riverlander, or the men of Peresh and Turqe who would fight alongside the Rhondian Legions if the Duke was sweet-tongued and generous with his bribes. The barbarians were of no nation, but called themselves by tribal names. Kaahzach, and Lappai and Massendonae.

They came out of the harsh, unforgiving lands beyond Nimmenwald, and no mystery surrounded their coming. The northeast and northwest, and the far north itself, yielded only a grudging season-to-season survival to those who were fated, or cursed, to live there. The Great Northern Waste was known as Saihabara to its own people, and Sebastian had seen it only once. He was grateful never to return.

The bastion of Nimmenwald fell behind as a cohort rode north.

They moved through the forest by ways charted in the time of Sebastian's grandfather. Scouts went ahead, expert woodsmen, trappers, clearing the way for the horses and dogs. The russet and gold and flame colors of fall clothed the Riverland in the south, but Nimmenwald never changed. Black spruce and fir and pine fought for space as the mountains rose toward Righa and Urail. And then the great forest was left behind; the trees thinned, became stunted, twisted, as the earth grew too poor to support them, and the winds began.

The winds, and the ice. Summer rushed by in a few weeks; winter lasted a lifetime, and in the cold, in the endless twilight days, the tribes of Saihabara wreaked havoc. Men from the south could not make war in those conditions, but it was attempted more than once. The disasters were already written into legend. The pages of Rhondia's history were soaked in blood, and it was men like Sebastian, like Luc Redmayne, who had poured that blood into the snow.

"Seb. Seb, come back."

Redmayne's voice was a bare whisper, insinuating into the realm of memories like a wind off the glacier. Sebastian heard him with one part of his mind while another was still struggling with a bear trap on the ice at the northern edge of Nimmenwald, under stars so brilliant, they glared off the snow like diamond-light.

"Seb." Redmayne gave him a shake, and as Sebastian's eyes blinked back to reality Luc's arms went around him.

"I'm all right." Sebastian fought the memories away.

"You're not," Redmayne argued. "You're sick. In here." He rubbed Sebastian's chest. "Sick at heart. You need to come out, get drunk, watch the boys dance ... pick one and take him up to the rooms over the tapbar, *faich* until you can't any more."

"The way my father did?" Sebastian actually chuckled, though the sound was more of a bark.

"Your father wouldn't have hesitated, though," Redmayne admitted, "he'd have picked out a girl. One of the gypsy dancers. He had a grand passion for gypsy dancers, do you remember?"

"I was knee-high at the time," Sebastian said darkly.

"So was I." Redmayne hugged him. "Will you come with me?"

But Sebastian's dark head shook. "It pains me more than you know, Luc. But I appreciate the offer."

"You know best, as I said." Redmayne released him, and stroked Sebastian's cheek, his neck. "Or I can stay with you. You can get drunk just as easily right here. In fact, Faiola said you'd sent for the brandy-wine to do it with."

Sebastian leaned into his friend's shoulder. "I have. I'd be bad company, Luc, if you stayed. It'd be a waste of your evening."

"Maybe." Redmayne leaned down and kissed Sebastian's throat.

His lips feathered up and across Sebastian's mouth and he whispered, "Or I can help you dispose of the brandywine, and then —"

"*Faich* till we can't any more?" It was a gypsy word, learned in a gypsy camp when they were no more fourteen years old. Among the traveling people it was actually a coarse expression, but it always made Sebastian smile at the memory of two boys who had defied authority, slipped out of the Citadel in the early hours of the morning, and learned the finer arts of carousing before they were hunted down at noon. Sebastian reached up, taking Luc's face between his hands. "Don't waste your evening. I'm going to sink the brandywine as fast as I can swallow it, and be dead asleep till midmorning."

The fair head lowered and Luc kissed him again, deeply for briefly, before he stood. "Then I'll dose you for the head you're going to have! I know a couple of cures, if you don't mind something that tastes like boot-blackening and looks like a dog threw it up."

The wry, soldier's humor made Sebastian laugh a little, which had been Redmayne's intention. Luc was collecting his scabbard and hat as Sebastian twisted on the bed and stretched out the leg. "Go on, enjoy the dancers. Have a jug of ale for me."

"I will." Redmayne was at the door, frowning over Sebastian again. "And I think," he added, "you should seek another surgeon. Lasky is a good doctor, but he's not the only one in Rhondia, and every one of them seems to have a different opinion on a *hangnail*, let alone a wound like your own."

He was gone with that, and Sebastian was alone with his thoughts. He knuckled his eyes, and as he felt something hard and cold against his cheek he plucked the *gelfaea* out of the pillow. The rosewood and gold gleamed in the firelight; the prayer beads invited his fingers, though the prayers themselves defied his tongue. He had not spoken to any one of the multitude of Riverland gods and saints since Saihabara. This *gelfaea* was worn smooth with the constant handling. Sebastian's great-grandfather, Duke Leon, was very devout. How many prayers had been spoken over these amethyst and topaz beads? Sebastian had no memory of his third birthday, and of receiving the gypsy charm, but it had ridden with him on the disastrous campaign north of Nimmenswald. The goblins of memory returned again, and this time there was nothing to divert Sebastian from them until knuckles rapped sharply at his door.

The third knock roused him from his thoughts and as he called, "Come," he became aware of his parched throat. The only thing that dulled the edge of the ache was wine or spirits, and Sebastian had learned to acquire a taste for them.

The latch rattled and a girl stepped inside. She was dressed in the familiar peasant style. Many like her worked in the kitchens and wine

cellars. Wide, flounced skirts rustled as she walked, a clean white apron was tied off around her waist; above it, she wore just a filmy blouse, for within these thick stone walls the autumn night was still warm. An ample bosom swayed invitingly, but Sebastian did not even notice. Most of the peasant women were similarly clad, and he had been surrounded by them since he was a child, so long, it no longer fascinated. Peasant boys wore tight leather breeches and delighted to show off their muscular torsos; why should women not be equally delighted to show off their alluring roundness?

For himself, Sebastian wore soft brown leather trousers, the soldier's boots he had become accustomed to, a smock of priceless West-arian linen and the bracelets of his rank. On the left wrist, the bangle of a Colonel of Cavalry. On the right, the bracelet of the son and heir of the Duke d' Astaghir. Both were solid gold and heavy, but he had worn them for so long, he only felt them when he took them off and missed their weight.

"You sent for brandywine, your grace." The maid had a light, high voice and the thick canalside accent. She was probably a barger's daughter, fetched up to work in the Citadel because of her good looks. She leaned over to put the salver on the writing desk, unstoppered the bottle and filled him a cup.

He thirsted for the rich, sweet, amber liquid which would dull his senses, make him forget both the ache in his leg and the visions which haunted his mind's eye. The maid stepped closer, holding the cup in both hands. He took it from her and she waited, standing before him, lingering there as if she expected some command. She was trying to seduce him. Sebastian was unsurprised, and uninspired.

He drank, and at once the wine buzzed his head. His eyes were drawn to her as he drank again, swallowed the brandywine down fast, and his vision began to slip. He shook his head to clear it — he shouldn't be feeling the effects of the wine so soon. Since when had he been drunk on half a cup?

"What in Hel is this?" He heard his own hoarseness.

"'Tis the best in the cellar, your grace," she told him, as if he had accused her of bringing the dregs. "This brandywine is two hundred years old, and has the strength of a sorcerer's potion."

That must be it. Sebastian was hardly complaining. The faster the stuff took possession of his mind, the sooner would come the blessed release. He drank again and heard a vague roaring in his head. His veins seemed to expand, his belly warmed, and he blinked repeatedly at the maid. She was still before him, close to him, and he saw three of her. Three watchful faces swam before his eyes, he almost laughed as he wondered which was the real one.

He put out his hand for balance, wanting to prop himself on her

shoulder, but she stepped out of reach. He staggered slightly and the floor slithered under his feet like a basket of live snakes. He opened his mouth to protest, but his voice seemed to be gone. His throat made only an odd choking sound, and he felt a vague numbness between his tongue and his stomach.

The vision of the maid swam away, weightless, graceful, but at the door she paused and turned back. "Sleep well, *your grace*," she said, laughing, mocking him with the title. "You'll rest your head in Hel tonight!" The door clicked shut behind her and the chamber was quiet.

Her words came to him as if they echoed down an endless tunnel, but when they reached his brain they reverberated like shouts between the stone walls of the courtyard. Rest his head in Hel? What was she talking about? His mind clamored, his blood seemed to burn.

And then he knew.

The cup flung out of his hand and smashed against the wall. He saw the last amber drops scatter wetly on the floor and hauled himself to his feet. The room spun, his limbs were frozen while his head was hot. Poison. Some weird herb, a drug to deaden him, to plunge him into unconsciousness, where he would indeed sleep in Hel, and sleep there forever. His legs would hardly obey him and he forced himself across the room. He fell heavily against the door, wrestled with the latch and sobbed, for long seconds believing it was locked. Then sense reasserted and he swore soundlessly. His room locked from the *inside*, he could never be held prisoner that way! Where was his mind?

He threw his weight on the latch and felt the metal bruise his palm, but it gave at last and he stumbled out into passage. It was unnaturally dark, as if half the lamps and candles had been extinguished. Movement at the end, by the drapes, caught his eye and he waved since he could not speak, hurling himself in the direction of help.

He had taken two, three steps when the darkness became absolute, and it seemed the floor came up and hit him hard in the chest. He rolled, caught one glimpse of faces peering down at him, and then he was gone.

## Chapter Three

"Gimme six to one on Nizovsky!"

"Aye, and I'm giving eight to one on the *devre*!"

"Twenty *shkel* on the redheaded bastard!"

The shouts and cries of the 'sportsmen' made Jack Leigh smile. Some of these gamblers were going to leave the tavern with pleasantly full pockets; most were about to lose their shirts. To Jack it was all so much 'serendipitous income.' Fighting in the street was not legal, but so long as lookouts were posted so an early-warning of the Guard could be called from a rooftop at least two streets away, no one seemed worried.

And streetfighting was a most lucrative way to pass a few minutes, especially when he was so new to the city that he did not even know what to call it, and had not worked in weeks. His pockets were not quite empty — not yet. But a night's lodgings, a meal in a decent tavern where he would not wake up itching, and four new shoes for the horse would make a big hole in the little he had left. He saw no chance of proper employment in this canalside warren of bargers, traders, sailors and laborers. At least, not the kind of work he was looking for.

The sword fit his hand to perfection, as well it should. A thousand *shkel* was the price of it, and it was crafted to his own design, balanced for own his arm by Yulminster's master swordsmith, blessed and charmed by Richard Godwin himself. The narrow, flexible blade was engraved with the names of Galgaran, and Leigh, and Yulminster. The swordsmith; the swordsman; and the place of Jack's dreams. *Home*.

He breathed a faint sigh as he twisted the blade this way and that to get the feel of it. He practiced every morning when the rest of the world was still abed, and sometimes at night, if sleep eluded him. But practice was no substitute for a real match, and streetfighting was never predictable. There were risks. There were *always* risks. One learned to make light of them. The alternative, as Jack had always known, was to return to Yulminster empty-handed.

Go back without the fortune he had vowed he would find, three long years ago? Personal disgrace would be as nothing against the frustration of the town. Yulminster was in bondage, and its veneer of hope was worn paper thin.

"Oi, you ready yet, boy?" The fishmonger stuck his head into the yard behind the livery stable, where Jack had demanded a minute's privacy before the match.

Privacy was in a sense necessary, since it allowed him to focus his thoughts and skill. But more than that, it wove an aura of mystique about him. The stranger with the sword ... the accent of the foreign land ... the eyes as green as any cat's, which made these people wonder if there might be sorcerer's blood in his veins too, perhaps a little of the *wyld* in him. For a moment Jack thought fleetingly of Janos Zaparasti, and smiled.

To his knowledge, the Leigh bloodline held no hint of the *wyld*. Their considerable talents lay elsewhere. For many generations Jack's

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