



Karen Michalson

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Glory

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Arula Books

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ENEMY GLORY

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A division of the author's sullied dreams

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For Bill

For being there

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One

The first time I saw the scarefisher I thought he was a compost heap. Pieces of sun-browned flesh kept falling off him and rotting away into the soft brown sand that surrounded his hovel. Lush reeds grew out of his feet and delicate daisies nodded out of his forearms. Strange white grubs crawled in and out of his soft permeable belly. So many waterflies drowned his chest that from a distance it looked like his skin was growing the shiny scales of his prey. Two long gouges in his neck suggested gills.

Of course he couldn't speak. Of course he wasn't real. But he leaned against his hovel and slowly wove kelp nets out of wind. His weaving made me more nervous than the loneliness of the spot. You see, although I'm methodical by nature and used to feeling my way through slow bursts of logic, the slowness of his rhythms demanded that I slow my thoughts to match his, and I won't do that. Not for life itself.

Besides, it is especially dangerous to slow one's thoughts in the North Country. Here one is likely to mistake rabbit holes for oak trees, and fall toward infinity while grasping for strength. Or oak trees for wrens and bleed on rough bark while caressing soft contradictions. Or wrens for weather. Or weather for dreams. Or dreams for all you've ever envied. Or a scarefisher, weaving down your thoughts, for the real thing.

Or, cruelest of all, here the sun might make you believe you are beautiful. And if you're not careful, you'll embrace the light and joyfully throw your life away to gaze at your deadly reflection. And then you'll die while the Northern light chants that it was all a trick, that you were really dust and maggots all along. I mean, I've made something of a career out of destroying beauty, enough to establish a reputation as an evil cleric, but here in the North the sun's cruelty could transform even me into a poet, the kind of poet who writes precarious verses as the sun destroys them.

I guess I am becoming a poet. The North does that to people. You begin to even describe the North, and you're more than half gone. I watched the scarefisher weaving kelp out of wind for what might as easily have been weeks as minutes. The magic that animated him was still strong and sure; someday it would pull the world as I knew it through his resilient and formless fingers. In the meantime I would sit and catch the kelp as it turned darkly back to wind.

A heavily shod foot thudding into my back probably saved the remnants of my reason, although I've no idea if this was my attacker's intent or if I was grateful. An old fisherman leaned over me, roughly grabbed my collar, and tossed me to my feet, away from the scarefisher. The movement startled the waterflies into a spurt of confusion. I tried miserably to gain some balance on the slippery sand. My knees were traitors. My breath was stone. I fell and rose again unsteadily. The fisherman stood watching me through dull eyes, eyes of sticky amber that held a paralyzed remnant of his youth like a dead fly. In my heightened sensitivity I knew he had once been kind and innocent and generous and simple. I also knew that *something there is that punishes simple men*, for this was the phrase that swirled through my brain as I helplessly read his inner life. I groaned and heard the sun creating beauty on the water with tiny explosions of light.

"Isulde . . . ?" I gasped in explanation, immediately feeling my weakness intensify. What was I doing in this cold, charm-laden country, so far from the warm realities of southern climes? Nobody is real in the North. Even if one wanted to be real up here, there is very little the North Country will do to encourage such an ambition. My heart was splitting mountains and my stone breath was avalanching into pebbles of pain. Pain was real here. And Isulde, perhaps, could be real here. But what if she were really here, to see me like this?

"She ain't here." The old fisherman was sad and wistful. It was queer to realize that this was probably her foster father, this lonely beach her home. "How ye know Isulde?"

Hearing her name on his lips stunned me out of any reasonable answer.

"What's yer name then?" the fisherman asked to prod my silence. He looked me over, his eyes and mouth narrowing suspiciously at my black riding clothes and the silver crescent moon that pinned my cloak. "Where ye come from? You either mighty sensitive or mighty weak to adapt so poorly to our Northern energies. Speak, boy!"

I lowered my eyes and stared through the impression I had made in the sand. It was dark beneath the surface. It usually is. "My name is Llewelyn. I come from . . . nowhere . . . Sunnashiven in the south . . . the capital . . . I am a priest of Hecate, leastways I used to be. . . ." The memory of my horse sent me spinning into the sand again. "I think my horse became sea foam and I nearly drowned." Maybe I said this. Maybe I dreamed it.

"Yer nag is tethered in back, where I found and secured her. Ye had ridden her into a sweat. How do ye know my daughter?"

"I dreamt of her in the moonlight once."

A bitter smile tore open his leather skin. "Then enter and be welcome." He helped me to my feet and nodded towards the scarefisher. "Isulde made that one when she was a little girl. Still draws in the fish on a good day. Probably always will."

I nodded dumbly, leaning on his arm for support as we entered the hovel. Isulde was simply the best.

Of course, this was not her fault. The North Country bred magical talent, magic in these parts being as common as fish, and just as undisciplined. It's said that a Northern magician with the right training could rule the world with a smile, but again, try to train one. They'll have none of it, usually. And not from principle or moral qualms about the powers of chaos taking instruction. It's sheer laziness. Why build a fancy cottage when a makeshift hovel will do as well? Why hunt if food grows wild at your door? Why eat if the moon will sustain you?

The fisherman was handing me some porridge in a wooden bowl. He looked wistful again. I drank it eagerly. It was cold and sour and smelled of rotten fish. "Best of the house," he mumbled as I vomited porridge all over the sand floor. Tears of embarrassment scalded my eyes.

"I'm sorry. Maybe you can make it disappear?" I asked weakly.

"I'm not a wizard and my daughter ain't here to keep house." He took a little spade and began throwing shovelfuls of sand onto my retch. I watched helplessly, thinking how little I belonged anywhere north of the Drumun Mountains, how well that childhood curse against entering the North Country had held up. I would turn into something foul up here, a black squid squirting poison in the sand. I felt tentacles growing under my arms and summoned all my strength to wrestle away the illusion. The result was dry heaves. "Ain't often we get a priest of Hecate in these parts. Looks like yer monastic training ain't prepared ye too well for survival 'round here. Or don't your goddess *want* ye wanderin' 'bout outside Sunnashiven?"

"I came of my own accord," I managed to choke out through splashes of chest pains.

"And no doubt expect a poor man like me to offer ye shelter because ye serve the forces of evil and claim knowledge of my daughter." He paused, and added softly, "The latter is enough." I could hear the scarefisher weaving. The roof creaked in the wind, and somewhere a wild dog barked. I could see through the doorway that the sun was slain and falling into the far shore. Soon it would be night. I began to tremble violently. Evil though I am, I feared the North Country darkness, a darkness more impartial and demanding than all the shadows my masters had nurtured me on into evil. Hecate would not protect me here. That dog was not her dog.

The rapidly cooling air allayed my sickness enough to let me observe my surroundings. The hovel was darker than the failing sky outside, and the fisherman had already lit a yellow candle and placed it on a roughly cut pine table in the middle of the room. I sensed that he recognized my fear and was clumsily trying to offer me a modicum of protection for Isulde's sake. From where I leaned in a corner against a pile of worn sheep skins I could look up and see all manner of crazy fishing nets and hooks hanging from the ceiling. There were no windows, and when my host closed the door the candle burned brighter in the absence of outside light. I noticed a fireplace and cooking tools in the opposite wall. The fisherman was throwing driftwood on the red coals he had probably used to light the candle. The wall to my left was bare and drafty, admitting a delirium of east wind. There were gull feathers stuck in insane patterns in the plaster. No doubt Isulde had placed them there.

I felt my left hand resting against something smooth and wet. Slowly turning my head, I saw a small black altar stone, long disused, and covered with spray along the side which faced the door. It was probably Isulde's. The wind dropped tufts of gull feathers along its eastern edge. The furthest side was already glowing from the fire's warmth. On the side closest to me there was a thin hole in the stone, its bony darkness the slender blank of an ancient birth canal or an untimely grave. If she should come . . . if she should come . . . here would she claim her power and renew her spells; here would she sing to the Northern night and grow strong again.

And here would she think of me. It was with supreme effort that I tore off my riding brooch and placed it in the hole. In the flickering light the barest suggestion of silver betrayed its presence. The amulet would bless her altar with my energy and so she would know that I had been here. A dirty trick, I'll admit, but one born of desperation. My hand was light as a dying crocus, light as a lover's hint. My wrist plopped back on the sand like a dead thing. My brooch was a waning moon in a meager sky. It was my life for her to find.

After placing the brooch on the altar I noticed that along the wall to my right were some large storage chests which I guessed contained the old man's meager possessions. I suddenly realized this was the northern wall, and the thought sent my body into uncontrollable spasms. At the sound of my moans the fisherman, with some difficulty, dragged the table away from the fireplace, letting the light and warmth from the south wall engulf me where I lay. "Cain't do much more for ye, evil one from the south. Like I said, Isulde ain't here, an' I ain't much of a healer. It's a nine-day wonder ye journeyed this far past the Drumuns and kept any life to ye."

The pains had returned and I was rolling on the floor, clutching handfuls of sand in agony. He sat in a rickety chair by the fire and spooned porridge into his mouth, watching my convulsions.

Every cleric, no matter what his moral or spiritual alignment, learns early on how to protect his body from magical attacks. A priest's body is a living temple of his deity. Beyond a certain level of training, a true priest's health depends as much on acting in accord with his deity's demands as on diet and exercise. But nothing I had learned in the service of Hecate was of use to me here. So I went back in my mind to a time before I became a priest and an adept at destructive power.

And what I found was that when I was a child, before I ever dreamed of Isulde or studied magic or knew anything of the gods save what nature told me, I suffered from deathly headaches because I loved beauty too much. Flowers were beautiful, and so I loved flowers, and my love grew into a strange childish longing for the flowers to love me back. But every time I kissed a columbine or dragon-tongue, hoping that I could lick its colors into my dreams and that just that once the flower would sing and bloom and dance for me, the thunder-pain and nausea would sicken through my body, menace me away, and reduce all loveliness to a grimy hallucination. Then one summer, sick with love, I made a blood offering to the fields around Sunnashiven. I sat among new flowers and dug a hole in my palm with a pointed stick and chanted a poem I made up as my blood ran into the ground, forcing my clumsy images through the flowery bursts of pain my childish love of beauty always seemed to bring on. The flowers did not love me, but when I kissed a day lily at the end of my poem my headache vomited itself into the ground, and as my head cleared I felt the bright and empty sky embrace me where I lay. Perhaps I once was a poet, before I knew better. I had used my own language, my first unwitting word spell, to stop my own pain. I tried this now.

Within three breaths I had only succeeded in making my feet numb.

But their numbness caressed them into a fine susceptibility to the fire's soft heat. The heat rose through my legs and torso and swallowed my head, bringing a light reprieve from the torture. I rolled onto my stomach and buried my face in my arms, desperately willing the pain to completely cease. My will has always been especially strong, but I could work nothing here. My anguish was merely dulled.

As the pain lessened I heard the fisherman scraping his bowl, followed by the sound of his chair creaking as if he was getting up to stoke the fire. I heard him settle back in his chair, sigh in annoyance, and grumble that *he* had not had it this bad his first time North, nor ever heard or knew of anyone who had. "An' I used to play with *fairies*," he said shrilly, banging his spoon against the table. Each bang made my liver fly into my mouth. He was clearly waiting for me to respond, and he would not let up his imbecile banging until I did. An evil cleric's liver tastes remarkably like owl meat and cardamom pods, which is what many of us dine on the eve before initia-

tion. You have to rip open the owl yourself. I don't know where the tradition started, but it is not limited to Hecate's followers. Nearly all evil clergy follow it, even vegetarians like myself, just as nearly all good clergy eat something equally unspeakable at their initiation. Anyway, when I spoke it was in the breathless woodwind shrieks of a tortured bird. My life was dancing out of me like a fuzzy baby owl in its death throes.

"Who . . . helped . . . you?"

"No one, boy. I played with *fairies!*" That was that, I guessed. After a short pause he added pointedly, "Fairies in the *south!*" I had no idea what he was talking about, but it was crucial to me that I understand. I was dying and he was my only link with Isulde. "Big fairies. Womankind. Ye know what they do. Hooo hooo!" I wondered if he was drunk, if it was porridge he were drinking, or if porridge brewed from his Northern catch was naturally intoxicating. His supper clearly nauseated *me*, but that was no indication of how it might affect him. In or out of the North, a servant of evil must watch his diet as much as any other cleric. One priest's wholesome food is another's bane, and up here I had no way of guessing if the porridge was clean for me. Since I had been retching on my own food for three days, it probably didn't matter.

I waited for him to continue, but my patience was rewarded only with the sound of him rising from his chair again and swaying back and forth. I inwardly begged him to speak to me, to tell me everything he could about Isulde before I entered death. But my silent pleading turned my own throat to raw scabs and beetles, and he did nothing but hoot and bang his spoon.

If I hadn't been dying of my curse, getting him to speak would have been a fairly simple affair. It is a basic part of every cleric's training to calm and counsel in distress. We all know how to draw out the drunk, insane, and silent ones, how to entice people to speak their intimacies with us. We evil ones are less hesitant to calm an agitated person without his knowledge or consent than our good brethren are. Calm someone in a crisis and you make him ripe for conversion. Make converts and you rise faster in the profession. However, I am sure you will understand that in the present circumstances I was in no position to try any clerical magic. Merely hoping he would speak had turned my own throat against me. Actively attempting to influence him would involve drawing down my goddess's energy and invoking Her force through whatever conductive path I could create between my mind and his. The North Country is not the place for such magic because Hecate is a goddess who loves law and order and Her force tends to break up in the Northern chaos. I didn't want to think about what could happen to me if I tried to draw Her. A dying cleric is tender of his spirit, and I had risked too much of my spirit coming here in the first place.

Why did I come? The answer would be my doom and judgement once I brought it forth and owned it. Anyone with a farthing of magic in his shoes avoids the North Country like manticores avoid mice. Magicians such as Isulde who are *born* in the North bloom and thrive here, of course, but if your magic has another birth, the slow pounding of Northern energies will sooner or later wreak their havoc on you. Soldiers, merchants, farmers, fishermen—those who have no knowledge of magical arts—have little personal danger to fear past the Drumun range. An untutored wood cutter or a highly trained law interpreter, so long as he lives without magic in his heart and breath, will feel no ill effects here. Sure, he might see thistles turning into old men or onions into frogs, or hear colors arguing theology with the sunlight, or trip over a tree root and land back in his own root cellar. Such things frighten travelers and keep most folks south of the mountains, but such things do not kill. The ordinary traveler will not sicken and die here, except of his own fears.

Sometimes, though, the strength of the North is the strength of surprise. A merchant who never studied magic but has spent his life handling magical gems, a soldier who relies on magical weapons for survival, a child who pretends too earnestly at spells, might suffer here. Again, not to the point of death, but to various degrees of nodding acquaintance. Such people are also as likely to recover as to remain somewhat incapacitated during their stay. It is only wizards and clerics who are really vulnerable up here, but especially clerics. The closer you are to your deity the more you must safeguard yourself against outside forces anyway, because your power is in your god's protection. Yet nothing in the North is all that certain. I once read of a Master Wizard from Gondal who reportedly survived here for six months. The poor bastard did it with dandelions.

I once read a lot of things, none of them useful now. I was going to die . . . to die . . . to die . . . and none to know and heal me. I realized hazily there was a poem in that somewhere. Even Isulde, should she find my body split and wriggling, my corpse a hundred maniacal Northern fishes drying their gills before the southern fire, had no power to raise me from the dead, here or elsewhere. That would take a capacity for god energy and a formal discipline that no denizen of the North Country possesses. I wanted the strength of surprise. I wanted her to heal me. I wanted her to love me before I died as I once wanted the flowers to love me.

The fisherman was making buzzing noises. I turned my face toward him and could feel that the warmth in my mouth had reduced the beetles to sticky white eggs. I swallowed the eggs to clear my throat, threw up some white mucous with black buggy wings, and felt that I could speak again, although my head throbbed in seductive clouds of pain to express this new relief. I saw his mouth was ringed with purple, so perhaps he was drunk. I tested my throat with a moan, which came quite naturally and caught his attention. He sniffed and gagged in disgust.

"Yer ain't a fairy. Who ye be. Yer evil. I can smell it. Ye wanta woman. Ye wantsa fairy. Ye wasa fairy. I can smell it now. Bad!" He drank from a jug. "Ye die soon. I get fish."

"No doubt," I said thickly, then choked on my spit as he approached me with another bowl of porridge.

"Eats it down. Ye like. Ye wants. Good."

"No—" I lacked strength to scream loudly, and he had the loathsome mush down my throat and all over the front of my cloak. My gullet became a water snake, my heart a baby owl. When the serpent slid through my teeth my considerate host tripped over his feet and fell on me in fright. The owl's heart was now my heart. I told myself it wasn't real. It wasn't real. Nothing is real in the North. His fright was real. My pulse was a bird's—rapid and nervous and singing up a painful wind. My snake was a salamander. It found the southern fire and became a rainbow. My host slithered away in the sand.

And my language burned my tongue to half its size when I uttered the spell of revealing, "ea Hecaatus somani caeribe." *To me, by Hecate, you write your heart.* By forcing his wretched sup on me he had placed himself at my mercy.

The North is a realm which loves not force. If I had tried to wrestle coherency out of him through magic, it certainly would have killed me. But since he had tried to force his will on me, I could bend his energy back on himself to prop up the spell without hastening my death by much. Simple mathematics. And I might score points with Hecate on the other side. Although under ideal conditions I would invoke Her blessing and power in the spell, the words themselves had an energy of their own that might be sufficient to waylay a drunk. I had no energy of my own to impart but I have always understood intimately the uses of words. His energy turned back on itself and he spoke. My tongue expanded to its former size, but my mouth began to bleed like his purpled lips. There is always a price for success.

“When I was a child,” he began stupidly, haltingly, “I played with fairies.”

“Yes, of course. Please go on,” I said in my best nonjudgmental, clerical tone. If I could keep my voice this soothing, some of my monastic training was still worth something. How desperately my heart was cracking—the spell must hold.

He sat back on his haunches in the sand, a middle-aged puppy with eyes like moistening soil. “My brother and me” he grinned sloppily—“we used to like to fish, ye know. Back when we were kids.” He wiped the back of his hand on his mouth and smacked his lips.

I waited. Nothing. The fire popped. *Speak, damn you, I’m dying!* “We’re still kids, ain’t we brother?” I said softly.

“Yeah,” he continued. “Weir kids in the river. We called ‘em undines.”

“An’ we used to fish for undines?”

“When no one was looking. We weren’t supposed to go fairy fishin’. We didn’t have a license or nothin’, and usually it wasn’t legal. So we’d cross the river into the nomind’s lands where dey wouldn’t bother ye.”

Nomind’s lands? He means unorganized territory. Where? It figured that his most significant memory was of lawbreaking. Laws are sacred to all disciples of Hecate, because laws are so easily used to strangle individual power into weak conformity and that is one aspect of Hecate’s particular evil.

“Where were you born?”

“Near the River Kretch in East Angruk.”

That’s part of the Duchy of Walworth now. I smiled a little. Walworth was always one for laws himself, although he tried to hide it. I wondered what he would have thought of his own true love’s foster father’s proclivity for poaching, what he would have thought of the fisherman in general. *That* would have been a delicious meeting.

“We’d stolen some bass hooks, poles, the biggest ones we could get, ya know, we were just kids, and got them cross river.”

All the better to mangle undines with. I winced.

“An’ we hid in the reeds like. An’ we waited for dusk to see if we’d catch ‘em singin’.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah, we did. We did once! It was great.” He wiped his sweaty forehead with his hand and smiled shamefacedly, like a tongue-whipped child afraid to say he likes something. But his voice was full of relish. I hated him thoroughly for that. The bastard didn’t have to sound so enthusiastic. How in the name of Hecate and all that poisons joy did this dirty dim-witted son of an East Angruk ditchdigger gotten to hear the song of the water fairies when I hadn’t even been able to get a flower to love me? I was a sensitive child, too, with quite a fine mind. And I hadn’t become evil yet. And I hadn’t gone breaking laws. And I’d known how to love.

I should have been a high priest, or an archon at least, because despite the exquisite envy I was sampling I managed to keep my voice fluid and even. “And what did it sound like?” Being a lover of beauty I had to ask. I swallowed expectantly, prepared to interpret whatever confusion he threw at me, and thus die to something like fairy music. I was a swan. A black screaming swan.

The dolt couldn’t remember the music but swore up and down it was great. I sighed and coughed. There is no justice. There is only fiction. Nothing is real in the North.

“We heard the singin’ and we threw our hooks out.” *Anything to spoil the cadence, the slob.* “Bein’ kids we didn’t know.” *How blessedly innocent. Was I supposed to applaud his ignorance? Excellent maestro; when I was a kid I “didn’t know” either, but I never got to hear a fairy song, you bleeding jackanapes!*

“And did you catch your prize?” I whispered kindly, while tears of outrage writhed over my bloodied lips like crushed butterflies. I knew from my studies what kind of damage fishing hooks could do to fairy flesh. The child in me would have protected those beautiful, delicate creatures from such thoughtless violations, would have taken the hook in his own flesh first. I would have gladly drowned myself awake to hear such voices, not bait beauty with empty hooks like this half-wit cretin.

“I got pulled under. They caught me. ‘Pretty boy’ and ‘lovercake,’ they called me. ‘Here’s a golden ball to play with, from the frog-prince to you. Here’s a golden plate to share. Drink our sweet goo. Now eat with us and be our darling. Be our merman. Our luscious young man of the blue.’”

“And so you ate the food of fairyland?”

“They gave me candy and fins and told me I should be King of the Sandcastle. They called me sweet provender, and bale of good oats, and Bottom the waterbaby, and Tom o’ the wisp, and said the caddis flies would sing for me everyday and I would get great queens though I be none.” He farted and belched.

“And did you . . . get great queens?”

“Ah—the womanfish, my mother, yes, she wrapped her soft white flesh between my legs, she blew bubbles in my nose and ears, she smiled upon my cheeks and licked my neck with her rough dry tongue. I drank her clean milk and she drank mine.”

I was now feeling faint and wet. I was losing consciousness and would soon die. In a voice of unassuming desperation I begged, “And Isulde, did she come soon after?”

“Isulde, yes, it was on the beach. They left me here, the sweet clean fishes. I cast my nets and wept for them. For years I wept.” He sighed. Some coherence was beginning to creep back into his speech. “And one evening there was a little girl running to me on the shore, in the light of a full moon, rolling pebbles before her feet. I fostered her.”

So this little girl was Isulde and she was indeed half fairy herself. Anyone who knew her would find the old man’s story easy to believe, but I wanted more supporting evidence. The girl could have been an ordinary abandoned child, the old man’s memories jumbled. *Question the source and die.*

I tried one last time to speak. The spell was thinning and my only hope was that his own drunkenness would keep the magic buoyant enough to impel him to tell me something more of Isulde. “Did you teach your daughter fairy songs when she was a little girl?”

“No, she knows ‘em all already. She can sing ‘em.” He nodded his head in a curious gesture of awe and unearned pride. *I’ll bet she can, I thought ruefully, and no thanks to your careful tutelage. Damn your eyes! If I had in my charge a student with half her abilities, her mind’s growth would not be so abhorrently accidental!*

It was on the word *accidental* that my spell broke and I lost consciousness. Down went my spirit like a black feather falling in disgrace from the sun, helplessly yet logically drawn toward Hecate’s portal.

And on my way to death I had a dream.

And somewhere in my dream a door opens and shuts.

And somewhere a fine and noble voice echoes mine to ask, “Isulde?”

And somewhere I am a bird of prey dropping closer to the portal. There is a scroll on the portal. There is an essay on the scroll. There is a poem in the essay and I tear the paper hungrily with my beak.

A woman with three dogs, hunting dogs, bird dogs, gently opens the gate to let me in forever. She extends Her hand over the boundary. I perch there and croak something that seems to mean, “My love is darkness.” The gate begins to close.

And the voice which echoes mine comments wryly, “Then live and be damned.”

A violent surge split my chest and jerked me back to consciousness, where I hovered like a hummingbird between life and death, not moving too far in either direction. My eyes focused on a heavy sword poised sure and steady above my heart, a weapon I recognized, which caused me to raise my eyes with alarmed surprise to the cool gaze of its owner, the Duke of Walworth.

The duke’s features were as steady and professional as his weapon of choice, but his eyes had an unnatural brightness and his brow was covered with the sweat of fever. I noticed his skin had a strange pallor and a soft smile briefly crossed my mouth in spite of myself. Walworth was a highly experienced soldier who had fought with and slept with and loved too many magical weapons to travel through the North Country unscathed. The North wouldn’t kill him, of course, but it was having its effect. The magical sword he was holding me with now could not be healthy for him, and it was a rare event for me to see the duke look vulnerable.

Then I realized that his ability to use his weapon of execution to draw me from the point of death was a measure of his extraordinary skill and competence in everything he undertook. Only a highly superior, exceedingly disciplined fighter, perhaps only Walworth himself, would have the requisite skill and willpower to perform such a feat with a weapon created for other uses, and to do it in the confusing swarm of Northern energies. And the duke was clearly ill. My smile faded into an expression of utter neutrality, but I knew he could read resentment and envy in my eyes. Somewhere in the shadows the fisherman was clapping and howling, a drunken audience.

The duke’s control of his weapon’s power never wavered, but the noise drew his gaze to Isulde’s altar, where he saw the gleam of silver from my brooch. Keeping the sword perfectly poised above my heart, he deftly released the moon from its hiding place and tossed it onto my chest, saying evenly, “Yours, I believe.” He smiled with quiet amusement and added with pointed courtesy, “I should hate for you to lose something so valuable.” I must admit, from a purely aesthetic perspective, it was touching to hear him admit his own weakness and love for Isulde in such an elegant turn of phrase. He actually feared having a conduit for my energy on her altar.

Anyway, I was alive now and my enemy and liege lord was responsible. I even felt the power from his weapon imparting to me enough strength to speak, although physical movement was out of the question. He acknowledged my condition with a gently mocking smile that shadowed his hardened, weather-beaten features. “You will not die unless I sentence you to death, Llewelyn, and I do not choose to do so yet. Even the meanest of my subjects is entitled to a fair trial before they meet the executioner.”

“And you’ve ridden this far to give me one? I’m most obliged. Accuser, judge and executioner at your service and pleased to make house calls. I shall remember this courtesy for the rest of my life, my lord.”

“And so you shall.” He sounded grave and concerned. “Be careful what you say, Llewelyn. You court your spirit’s destruction to speak truth in spite of yourself. You could die blaspheming the powers you serve.” A hint of smile softened the deadly earnestness in his voice.

“And high priest too? You mean I get a bonus? O lucky day!”

Walworth’s face briefly softened to something approaching melancholy but quickly returned to its unyielding hardness. Once we had been friends. He was remembering. His sword arm swayed slightly but his weapon remained fixed. “Be careful. I move my hand a hair’s breath and nature takes its course. I may be all that stands between you and damnation.” His voice was most courteous and respectful.

He knew about the curse that had been laid on me in childhood. After all these years he remembered that as dedicated to evil as I was, I could claim no protection from Hecate in the North. My teachers claimed they cursed me for my own “good,” of course, to pre-

vent me and any other young student with magical ability from hurting ourselves beyond the Drumuns if any of us was foolish enough to go. These were my earliest teachers, the ones who had charge of me before I adopted an evil alignment. The absolute certainty of dying here, which the curse insured, was supposed to dissuade us from traveling to the North Country at all and potentially injuring ourselves. Not very logical, especially considering that Sunnashiven's citizens rarely traveled *anywhere* and the North was little more than legend to most of us, but that was the sort of argument that caught people's imagination in Sunnashiven. And it provided work for the hack wizards in the school.

Speaking of catching one's imagination, for me the curse against traveling north was especially heavy because, except for very special circumstances, any cleric risked displeasing his deity and consequent damnation by willingly embracing death. My body was still Hecate's temple, and I *had* come here of my own accord. Not to mention how vulnerable I was in the North Country as a dedicated priest. Walworth looked at me with steadfast pity, as if he could read my thoughts.

"Bring me a vessel of hot water," he commanded the old man. The fisherman staggered over to us with his wine jug. "No, get a clean pot and fill it in the lake." Our host smiled dopily and disappeared. I heard the clang of metal followed by the door opening and closing.

"You should have asked for the house special, my lord. Our host brews a most excellent mush, one I'm sure you can't get at home."

Walworth grimly surveyed my cloak, quietly appraising the damage the fisherman's sup had done to me. His expression was severe. "Save your speech. You haven't the strength to waste on banter now and I'm losing patience. Remember, you'll need your tongue to plead your case tonight."

He had correctly assessed my condition. My last outburst resulted in an explosion of weakness across my limbs, and it was all my enemy could now do to keep me conscious.

So we waited in silence for the fisherman's return, forming a most curious tableau. A young man dressed in clerical black lies helplessly before the altar of his love. His riding clothes are drenched in blood. The moon wanes upon his breast. A tall, imposing figure skillfully holds the younger man's life at sword point. His riding clothes are drenched in the sweat of fever, but his bearing is one of supreme discipline and his face is a study in concentrated attention. A tower of grace sheltering a black, crumpled wind. It is a broken flower that loves an ill moon.

It seemed like hours, but it could not have been more than a minute or so before the sound of the door told me that the fisherman had returned. The duke commanded him to warm the water over the fire and to do whatever he could to keep the flames blazing at their full power all night. The old man must have obeyed him because I soon began to realize that the room was growing warmer, although the heat was not helping me any now.

"There is a legend concerning kingship, Llewelyn, one I am sure you have encountered more than once in your studies. You have read of the peasant-king Aru, who banished the corn blight and became first true king of Arula, ancient capital of Gondal. You have read of the witch-queen Melga, who saved her people from the plague and became their first true sovereign. 'A true king is a healer' is a commonplace. What is not so common, and what learned scholars like yourself understand, is the meaning behind the legends. Aru banished the blight so the corn could grow as it would. It grew more abundantly, so legend honors him for feeding his people. The truth is he freed the corn. Likewise Melga is honored for bringing prosperity, but the truth is she freed her people from sickness, and so many of them prospered of themselves."

He paused to glance toward the fire and then returned his gaze to me. "I have no reason to free you of your curse or to save your life, even if such a feat lay within my skill. But I think I can prolong your life a little, enough to let you speak your case. Do you consent?"

"With all my strength," I said wryly.

The fisherman came over to us with the steaming pot in his bare hands. I wondered at his flesh not burning and decided it must be another Northern mystery. He placed the pot in the sand near my chest, and sat on the ground. Walworth tossed him a small brown leather bag while continuing to keep his sword motionless. "Empty the packet in the water." He did so and I could smell monkshood and kingsfoil. "Now stir the mixture with a burning stick." The old man sighed, went to the fire, grabbed a wine jug and then a stick, and returned to stir the brew. The odor grew increasingly pungent and I could feel a little strength returning already. "Now fill a small bowl and give it to him to drink. Do not sample it yourself. It isn't wine, and monkshood's a poison."

The old man put a little mixture in the mush bowl and held it to my mouth. I drank. Monkshood was Hecate's plant and I usually considered it a treat, although it was deadly for most folks. Kingsfoil was a healer and usually made evil clerics like myself slightly nauseated, but here the medicine appeared to be working. My sickness lightened considerably. Walworth noticed the change and firmly placed the point of his sword in the ground. "The effect will be temporary, but there's enough to get you through the night should the discomfort return. Also know that the more you drink the less effective it becomes. You are still dying, and your illness is still devouring your body. I've merely slowed it down a little."

I sat up slowly and once again noticed his fever-flushed skin. "Have some monkshood, my lord. Make a new man out of you."

"I'll live." This was probably true, all things considered. He smiled in cold appreciation and settled himself comfortably in a chair, his sword within arm's reach. "I, Walworth, Duke of Walworth and King of Threle—"

"King of Threle?"

"I won the war."

This was not encouraging news. I had hoped that he'd crossed the Drumuns to avoid capture or execution, to find Isulde and live in safe obscurity. When I'd fled from his duchy his side was losing. He continued, "I, King of Threle, do hereby charge you, Llewelyn, priest and scholar, with high treason against my person and people. To wit, with aiding Roguehan, our enemy, with using priestly arts to influence my critical judgement and that of my generals, and with the death of my cousin, Lord Cathe. The penalty for sabotaging our national defense is execution by the method of my choice. Do you wish to plead?"

“No, my lord. I wish to state that the border of Threle lies considerably south of the Drumuns and that the North Country has never had a ruler. I suggest that you have no authority to try me here, king or not.” I succeeded in making my voice sound bored.

He seemed to consider, but I got the distinct impression that he expected this argument. “Man,” he addressed the fisherman, “do you owe allegiance to any liege lord?” The fisherman looked uncomprehending. It was clear that the only allegiance he knew how to offer was to his wine jug. Walworth waited for an answer. The fisherman drank. “Who is your king?”

Our host waved his jug around. “The king of the fairies . . . no king at all . . . we are a free people.”

“Then you are free to sell me your dwelling?” The duke tossed him a gold coin.

“Your currency has no value here,” I objected.

“That coin has much value in my country, and it is our host’s right to determine what the value be to him.” Our host held out his hand again and Walworth tossed him another coin. “You can travel to Threle and live handsomely on those.”

The fisherman looked at the coins and nodded dumbly.

“A match. Then I, Duke of Walworth and King of Threle, do declare this, my lawfully gained property to be part of the Duchy of Walworth and under my sole jurisdiction.” He looked gently at the fisherman. “You have my leave to remain here for as long as you please.” He removed his sword from the sand and clapped him on the shoulder. “I appoint you seneschal of this property. Saving myself, here you are lord.”

The old man murmured, “Lord.”

“Good. I trust that takes care of your legal objections, Llewelyn?”

I was silent.

“The seneschal can stand in for jury. With his consent, of course.” He glanced at him and saw that he was almost passed out. “In the event that the jury cannot render a decision, I shall. Let us proceed. Do you wish to plead?”

I still refused to speak.

“Know that the court will allow you to plead your case. Because your life could be required, it is nothing less than your life that you may bring before us. You may tell us all your story and we will listen. You may also require us to relate our evidence against you.” He waited.

“My life is little more than that yellow candle’s, my lord. Because it is already forfeit, I have no desire to spend my last hours listening to your accusations. Yet I would satisfy the court’s sense of fairness and plead my life if my lord would consent to a dying man’s request.”

“Which is?”

“If you find Isulde, you tell *her* my story.”

“If she dwells on my soil, she shall have access to the trial records. That is Threlan law.” He took writing materials from a large pocket inside his riding clothes, set them on the table, and held his pen like a second sword.

And so to this extent the law was on my side. I must tell everything for her. I might reach her through this absurd performance.

Settling myself comfortably back against the sheepskins, I looked boldly into the coolly questioning eyes of my enemy, and began to speak my heart.