

THE STAFF & THE SWORD



A CAST OF
STONES

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To the three women in my life who made this possible:

Carolyn Carr,

for loving me and raising me;

Ramona Dabbs,

who never failed in her encouragement

and believed in me even when I didn't;

and ever and always,

Mary Carr,

who brings love and passion to my life

and demonstrates every day

that she really is God's gift to me.

1

ERROL

SMELLS OF EARTH and dung drifted slowly past the fog in Errol's brain. His skin prickled with cold. Water and ooze soaked his threadbare garments and he shivered. Cruk had thrown him out of the tavern. Again. Hanks of brown hair dripping muck hung across his vision. The ringing of Liam's hammer just across the street paused, then started again with light tapping blows, as if in laughter.

Cruk smiled down at him without malice. "Next time I'll carry you out back and throw you in the midden."

Dizzy from his flight and a little wobbly from drink, Errol picked himself up in stages. He closed his eyes against the glare of the morning sun, sluiced the worst of the mud from his clothes, and rubbed an aching hip. His tongue wandered the crevices of his mouth as he struggled to make it obey his commands. The effort made him reel.

"You didn't have to kick me so hard."

Tall, broad-shouldered, and ridiculously strong from long days working in the quarry, Cruk towered over him from his vantage

point on the porch. As always, his face put Errol in mind of a sack of potatoes.

Cruk barked once in amusement. “I didn’t, you little runt. If you don’t believe me, then come back here and I’ll have another go at it. If Pater Antil catches you drunk at this hour, you’ll end up back in the stocks.”

Errol darted a glance over his shoulder at the rectory where Callowford’s priest lived, but the curtains still covered the windows and no one stirred. Still, Cruk’s warning made his shoulders twitch with remembered pain. “Do you have any work I can do?” He backed away from the look on the big man’s face. “Away from Cilla and the inn, I mean. I’m hungry.”

“Then stop spending what you earn on ale.” He pointed to Liam, who watched the exchange with a smile on his face. “Why can’t you be more like him?” A heartbeat later, the harsh planes of Cruk’s face softened and his shoulders dropped a fraction as he exhaled in resignation or pity. “Wait here.”

He disappeared into Cilla’s tavern, returned with half a loaf of bread, and tossed it into Errol’s waiting hands. “Come ’round this evening. You can help clean up after dinner. Mind, you stay away from Cilla and her ale.”

Errol bobbed his head in gratitude as he stuffed the bread inside his shirt. He cleared his throat to ask for a small advance on his wages, but the thunder of hooves forestalled him. A man clothed in black robes and riding a dappled horse down the street of their village made for the tavern as though his salvation depended on it. A red armband emblazoned with a scroll and pen marked him as a nuntius, a church messenger—crows, they were called. Errol’s hand flexed, and he made the sign to ward off evil without thinking.

“Stop being superstitious, boy,” Cruk said. “They bear messages. Sometimes they take confessions of the dying.” He paused. “That’s not our usual messenger.” His voice ground the words, and his shoulders tensed as if he were about to throw someone else into the mud. “Anders rides a bay.” The

horseman neared. “And this rider”—his voice caught—“is of the first order.”

The horse skidded to a stop, threw its head in protest against the bit, and gave a little hop with its front hooves, splashing fresh mud on Errol in the process.

“Forgive my hindrance, my lord.” Errol’s mouth twisted around the words, and he wrung excess water from the front of his shirt for the second time that day. “I was just leaving.” He straightened and put out one dripping hand to lean against the horse’s shoulder to restore his balance. When he could focus again, he paused to survey the messenger’s face. The blunt nose and lack of cheekbones—so different from his own sharper features—proclaimed the nuntius’s ancestry as Lugarian, perhaps. Errol stifled a long-familiar stab of disappointment.

The nuntius peered down at him, his face wreathed with disgust. He twitched the reins, and the horse backed away, leaving Errol without his support. He teetered and struggled not to fall. Twisting, he spotted Liam, all eight perfect spans of him, standing a few feet away, his face the picture of innocent expectation. A ray of sunlight reflected off his hair.

Errol tottered away. He didn’t like standing near Liam. They were the same age, and proximity invited comparison.

The church messenger’s face registered his shock and disapproval. “By Deas in heaven, man, are you drunk? It’s not even noon.”

Cruk laughed. “It’s not even ten, my lord. Errol is a man of some talent.”

The messenger’s lips pursed, giving his face a fish-like cast. Urging his horse around the puddle until it stood at the hitching rail, he dismounted and retrieved a thick leather purse from his saddle.

“I’m told there’s a man who lives near here, a priest named Martin Arwitten. I have letters for him that must be delivered today.”

Cruk’s face paled at the mention of the hermit. He took a step

toward the messenger with a hand raised, as if trying to ward off a blow. “The king . . . ?”

The stranger shook his head in denial. “Rodran lives.”

Errol slogged out of the mud puddle to tug the churchman’s sleeve. “I can deliver your letters, my lord. I know exactly where Pater Martin’s cabin is.”

The nuntius backed away, inspecting his clothes. “Deliver? Hardly. I only need a guide.” He turned his attention back to Cruk. “A sober guide.” He pointed to Liam. “He can take me.”

Liam smiled, his teeth flashing under his blue eyes, and shook his head. “I’m sorry, my lord, I owe Knorl another six hours today.” He bowed and returned to his forge.

The nuntius huffed.

Errol drew himself up, brought his eyes up to the level of the churchman’s chin. “I may have had a drink or two this morning, my lord.” He did his best to ignore Cruk’s snort. “But no one knows the gorge as well as I. You can’t take a horse through there.” He gave the dappled mare a pointed glance and let his gaze linger on the legs. “Not if you want to ride her again.”

Cruk gave a grudging nod over the churchman’s shoulder. “He’s got the right of that. If the letters have to be delivered today, the gorge is the only way. Horses don’t go through there, and no one knows the area better than Errol.”

The nuntius drew up, squared his thin shoulders. “Very well, he can guide me on foot.”

“If you wish,” Errol said. “It’s a four-hour hike.” He looked at the churchman, noted the man’s delicate boots, and revised his estimate. “Possibly six. If we hurry, we can be there and back by dark.”

“Dark?” The messenger’s eyes goggled. “I have to be at Benefice Gustin’s by nightfall.”

Cruk shook his head. “Not going to happen. Pater Martin lives on the ridge. It’s surrounded by the roughest terrain, and any man fool enough to rush through it gets a broken leg for his efforts, or worse.”

Warmth blossomed in Errol's chest as Cruk pointed his direction. "You'll have to give your letters to him."

The nuntius barked a laugh. "A drunkard? You want me to give the most important messages in half a century to a drunkard? Look at him; he's barely a man. Only Deas knows what's keeping him on his feet." He waved a hand in dismissal. "How would I know he delivered them?"

Cruk shifted his massive shoulders. "You're willing to pay, aren't you?"

The nuntius drew up. "This is a matter of great urgency on behalf of the church. A loyal subject should—"

"Even a loyal subject needs to eat." Errol kept his expression respectful, barely.

The messenger rounded on him and stopped, staring, his mouth working. Errol watched the man's gaze start at his head and slide down his frame until it ended at his worn shoes. The man's eyes narrowed in calculation.

"How will I know you've delivered the message?"

Cruk's amusement resonated from the tavern porch. Liam echoed it from the forge. "You'll have no need to worry on that account," Cruk said. "Pater Martin doesn't stock ale. If you're willing to pay to have your message delivered, then you can count on Errol to be back here before dark to spend his hard-earned wages."

Errol tried to sketch a reassuring bow and nearly fell back into the mud puddle for his efforts. He straightened, arms out, swaying from side to side until he achieved a more or less vertical posture. "Will you return to Callowford, my lord?"

The nuntius nodded. "Yes, tomorrow morning." He drew himself up. "I am needed back at Erinon."

Errol ducked his head in a show of deference to flatter the man's ego. Who knew what a desperate church messenger might be willing to pay? A silver crown? Two? "If you like, I can bring receipt of your message in Martin's own hand."

The messenger's countenance lifted. "You seem possessed of

wits, sodden though they are. Yes, I think that would do well.” He proffered the thick leather packet.

Errol accepted the burden and waited, regarding the nuntius with a pronounced lift of his eyebrows.

The man flushed and threw back the right side of his coat. “Oh yes, your pay.” With practiced skill he dug into the purse at his belt with one hand. “Far be it from me to question your veracity, but I offer half your pay now . . .” He extended a coin, holding it at the edge between his thumb and forefinger.

Errol reached for the coin, but the nuntius dropped it before their hands could touch. A gold half crown came to rest on the leather packet. Errol struggled to keep his eyes from bugging.

“And a receipt in Pater Martin’s own hand will earn you another half crown,” the nuntius added.

Greed tightened Errol’s throat. “Yes, my lord, and a receipt. You are most generous, my lord, for a message across the gorge.”

“Generous?” Cruik’s laugh cut the air. “Indeed. You have my thanks as well. You’ve just guaranteed this tavern a most enthusiastic customer for the next week. It’s doubtful whether the lad will know up from down this time tomorrow.” He looked at Errol. “Wait a few moments before you depart. Pater Martin asked after bread and wine last week, and Anders should be here soon.”

The messenger’s head snapped up. “No need. I ran into your messenger at Berea. He asked me to deliver this to you.” He reached into his pack and brought forth a skin of wine and a thick packet of flat bread. “Your hermit priest still celebrates the sacrament, yes?”

Errol nodded. “Every day, from what I am told, and why would he not?”

The messenger’s face closed, keeping its secrets. “Why not indeed?” He forced a laugh and mounted his horse, favoring Errol with a last look. “I’ll see you tomorrow upon my return.”



Two hours later and a league and a half from Callowford, Errol paused at the edge of the gorge that marked the beginning of the Sprata Mountains. Water flowed through the cut that lay like a wound on the land. A hint of red against the deep green of a fern's pinnules caught his attention, and he left the path. On hands and knees he burrowed through the thick undergrowth toward the shrub. There. A stalk of crimsonweed grew from the node of the fern, meshing with the plant it would eventually kill. He smiled. Adele or Radere would pay him a silver mark for the herb, enough for two tankards of ale. Errol broke the stalk, careful not to damage the fern, and stowed the plant in the sack containing the letters and the bread and wine that hung from his back.

With two leagues to go, he stopped under a shelf of limestone and adjusted his load. Beneath the outcropping, the ponderous weight of the rock rose over him like a primitive sanctuary carved by the elements. He smiled. Only bandits worshipped there. Few enjoyed their liturgy of violence. His feet slipped in the dusty earth as he trudged the path that sloped toward the chasm on his right, threatening to pitch him over the edge.

He grabbed a walking stick as long as he was tall from beneath a nearby oak. Years of experience with the gorge and the Cripples had taught him to balance his passage with a stout length of heavy wood. Now no one could navigate the way as quickly.

The air, cooled and calmed by the towers of rock on either side, doused the last of the morning's indisposition from his body. Head clear, he eyed the river running below, impatient with runoff from the melting snows of the Sprata Mountains. He passed the Hollows and quickened his pace, thumping his stick into the ground. That collection of shallow caves blackened by unnumbered campfires had long been a favorite hiding place for outlaws in the winter. He doubted any of them still lingered this late into spring, and Errol would present little enticement as a target for robbery. But the unfamiliar weight of the half crown in his pocket troubled him, and he rushed for the heat and light of the sun up ahead.

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When he looked back to gauge his progress, a laurel branch bent and waved next to the trail some hundred paces behind. His heart lurched. No wind penetrated so deep into the gorge. He fought to keep his pace steady, weighing his options. If he ran now he'd alert his pursuer, but he could gain some time by shortcutting across the Cripples. The network of scars lacing his back itched, reminding him of past carelessness on those jagged stones. Crossing would take time, time he might not have, and he would have to ford the river that lay beyond. Keeping the sack dry would slow him down.

If the bandits came after him in numbers, they could catch him in the water. At the very least, the letters for Pater Martin would be lost along with his half crown. If the bandits knew how to swim.

If they just didn't shoot him outright.

Nothing moved on the trail behind, but he found little comfort in the fact. Prickles ran up and down his arms like ants. Unseen eyes swept across him, watching, tracking.

His head pounded, and the sour taste of bile and fear spilled across his tongue. *Think*. He needed to think. Maybe he could throw them off by taking the high trail. It might gain him the precious minutes he needed to cross the water; once in the trackless woods beyond the gorge, they'd never find him.

Errol quickened his steps, made for an outcropping to his left. Rocks scraped his hands as he hauled himself up the pocked face to the other trail. He grabbed his stick and ran in a low crouch along the dusty path. A prayer, half remembered from childhood, sprang to his lips, but the image of Pater Antil holding his whipping rod rose with it, and the plea died away.

Bent almost double, he bolted along the upper trail, darting from bush to tree. If the bandits spied him, they'd shoot arrows at his exposed position until they killed him or he surrendered.

And if he surrendered, they'd probably kill him anyway.

Fifty paces behind him, a heron broke cover with a glottal cry and flew out over the water.

Errol forced his legs into a run, rushing for the point ahead where the two paths rejoined, where the Cripples began. Twigs snapped in an accelerating rhythm behind him. A quick glance still showed nothing. He quickened his pace as the path turned downhill and widened.

The Cripples stretched before him—a hundred paces of slick, pitted rock glistened in the sun, eager to catch the reckless or unwary. He paused, searching for the best route. Even with care, the treacherous footing could turn or break an ankle. His stomach flipped at the thought of rushing through that maze. Behind him, a shadow ghosted among the trees.

A rustle of leaves broke his concentration. He floundered, his stick weaving frantic circles in the air. A man dressed in black regarded him from beyond the stretch of mossy rock, a short bow held in one hand. Not a twitch, not a blink of emotion disturbed the pale mask of a face under hair so light it looked almost silver. He reached back over his shoulder and an arrow of blackest hue appeared in his hand. Errol wrenched his gaze away, jumped for the ledge just ahead.

His feet slipped. Errol curled as he fell and gasped as new cuts joined old scars. The impact jarred his teeth, and he growled curses against the pain.

Sprawled across the stone, he angled away from his pursuer so the rock, his pitiful excuse for protection, shielded him as much as possible. He took a deep breath, darted a look back, and then smiled at his good fortune. The man in black was actually trying to follow him. It would be impossible to get off a decent shot standing on the treacherous stone.

Errol slithered around on his belly, reached for his staff when a whine like an animal's scream sounded behind him. An arrow arced overhead, then disappeared among the rocks and water beyond.

He grinned at his pursuer. "I've never heard an arrow make that sound before. You'll find the footing difficult for decent shooting. Why not go back and save yourself the trouble?"

The man in black stopped, considered him in silence, and slowly dropped to his knees. Then he nocked another arrow.

With a shock of realization, Errol leapt for the first shelf of stone, half missed, and slammed into it with his chest. His feet thrashed and slipped across the moss-covered rocks as he tried to thrust the rest of his body up the ledge. Fear filled him, wailed through his blood and bones. He scabbled at the ledge with his hands and feet. *Move.* He had to move!

The scream of the arrow grew until it filled his hearing. He screwed his eyes shut and pushed against the stones. His feet slipped, and he slid toward the scream. He squeezed his eyes shut, waited a fraction of a heartbeat that stretched to agony.

Behind him the bandit cursed.

A line of fire cut his shoulder before the arrow struck inches from his face. The impact cut the scream and a splinter of stone gashed his cheek. He put his arms under his belly and wiggled the rest of the way onto the outcropping, rolled behind a piece of jutting limestone, and ran to the far edge.

No bandit crossed the Cripples. A sprained ankle meant capture and the gallows. And they didn't use short bows. Errol's mouth went dry. Bandits were a murderous bunch, but they always tried to talk their victims into giving up. It rarely worked, but they always tried. Every now and then they even let one of the few who surrendered live to entice others to do the same.

The man in black hadn't tried to talk him into surrendering. Errol's feet came to the edge of the shelf as his thoughts brought him to an inescapable conclusion: The man hunting him was no bandit.

Errol twitched the sack strapped to his shoulders, and a picture of the nuntius flashed through his mind. Letters, he'd said, the most important in half a century. Important enough to kill for? Errol's heart hammered against his ribs. He looked over the next section of moss-slicked rock. If his hunter gained the shelf before Errol made it to the second outcropping, his aim, already too good by half, would find its mark.

Terror curled its way through his chest. The stranger moved across the Cripples with inhuman skill. Errol shuddered, considered surrender—giving up the letters, the half crown, everything. He shook his head, discarded the idea. The man wanted him dead.

Errol vaulted into the air, ignored the yammering from the part of his mind where he kept his common sense, and forced himself to keep his eyes open. He landed, tried to roll, slipped sideways, and crashed headfirst.

Spots swam in his vision, and he fought to keep darkness at bay. He crabbed sideways toward the next ledge. His ankle throbbed in time with his heart as he hobbled onto the ledge. A crunch of footsteps from behind warned him, and he threw himself flat. An arrow whined in disappointment overhead, pulling the breath from his lungs as it went.

This wasn't working. The next ledge lay less than half the distance across the Cripples, and already the man in black had managed to bleed and hobble him. At this rate he'd be lame in minutes.

Then he'd be dead.

The Cripples spanned the river in a wide arch before ending at a broad, shallow ford. To the right lay a sheer forty-foot drop into a pool fed by runoff that extended all the way to the far bank of the gorge. Water from winter melt spilled over the falls, splashing and churning in a series of whirlpools. Only an idiot would dare those icy depths—or someone desperate to live. The water's chill would leech the warmth from his body in minutes. If his hunter trapped him, forced him to stay in the pool, he would die.

Errol ducked behind a plinth of rock and ran for the far edge of the ledge, his mind racing. If he tried to make the security of each shelf in succession, the mossy pits would slow him, leaving him helpless. If he dared the chill waters of the pool, he'd be lucky to make the far side fifty paces away. Even if he survived, the letter to Pater Martin would be ruined, and with it his chances of keeping his gold.

He should have known not to get involved with the nuntius. “Stupid churchman.”

A glance behind told him all he needed to know. The assassin on his trail moved from the first ledge and stepped with goatlike skill across the rocks. The man didn't even have the decency to slip every now and then.

Errol moved from the security of the second shelf in a crouch, hoping to stay hidden long enough to make the ledge above the pool. The mossy coating seemed to writhe under his feet, conspiring to pitch him headlong onto the rocks. He balanced his weight, his hands groping for a staff he no longer held, and shuffled by inches toward his goal.

The space between his shoulder blades itched, and he tensed against the expected impact of an arrow—as if by tightening the muscles in his back he could keep it from killing him. With ten feet to go, he looked back to see the man in black climb onto the ledge he'd just left. In seconds, the man would nock another arrow. In seconds more, Errol would die.

Throwing himself into a flailing run, he made for the pool. A patch of green betrayed him, and he fell. He spun as the ground rushed up to meet him. When he rose, he found himself looking his would-be killer in the eyes. The man nodded. Then he reached back over his shoulder.

With a yell, Errol scrambled to his feet, took two steps and jumped to his right, soaring over the icy water that waited for him so far below. An arrow ripped through the air where he'd been, screaming as it passed his ear and flew out of sight to the far side of the pool.

Errol fell, amazed at the long, long time it took to meet the water.

The impact hit him like a blow to his stomach, forced the air from his lungs. Cold pierced him and light faded. Needles of pain stabbed him everywhere as he struggled to stay submerged, frog-kicking in desperation toward the far end of the pool. He opened his eyes to the sting of the water, but saw only blurred other outlines.

He reached and pulled for the far side of the pool, his strokes frantic with cold. Fire burned through his lungs with the need to surface. The man in black surely stood at the edge of the pool by now, bow drawn and waiting.

Errol swam until spots danced in his vision, his body begging for air. With a pair of strokes he surfaced like a fish breaking water, darted a glance behind before sucking air into his tortured lungs and diving again, away from the figure in black.

The sounds of his efforts and splashing filled his ears. He forced his trembling arms forward, jerked them back to his sides. Only the current against his face told him he advanced. Violent chills rippled the water as his body fought to stay warm. His shaking limbs lurched in a parody of his usual stroke. Bolts of pain shot through his calves and thighs. His legs refused to move. They hung from his torso, dragged him down. He reached out, struck mud. One shaking hand at a time, he pulled himself forward.

At last he broke the surface. His hands clawed forward until they brushed against rough bark. They clutched the thin trunk, locking around it as if it were his last hope. Water drained from his ears, and he listened for his attacker. Nothing.

Errol's body convulsed with cold as he clutched the sapling, straining to move, turn his head, anything. His muscles refused to obey. His hands clenched the tree, refused to let go.

Above and behind him the wail of an arrow began. He willed himself to let go, roll over, but spasms pinned him to the spot, left him helpless. The arrow's scream grew, its pitch rising until its keening filled his hearing.

Errol sobbed, tried once more to move, and failed.

He clenched his eyes against the blow.

2

SACRAMENT

THE IMPACT slammed him against the ground. He clung to the tree, waiting for a tearing pain that never came. He slid sideways, tried to roll and couldn't. When he slipped the sack's straps from his shoulders, he discovered the reason he still breathed. The assassin's arrow had lodged itself squarely in the center. Looking back and up at the ledge over the pool, he saw nothing. The man in black was gone.

He grasped the arrow with both hands and worked it up and down until the thick leather released it. With it tucked under one arm, he hurried away from the pool making for Pater Martin's cabin.

As he climbed higher into the ridge he assessed himself. His head hurt where he'd banged it against the rocks, and his cheek still oozed blood. Cuts and scrapes covered his midsection and . . .

He gave up. The exercise was pointless. If he needed help, it would be found at the priest's cabin. Pater Martin or his servant would know what to do. With one last glance behind, Errol forced himself to a shambling run through the woods.

Hours later, the sting of sweat marking each injury, Errol entered the clearing where Martin resided and paused. Humidity clung to him like a heavy cloak.

Martin sat beneath the giant oak that sheltered his cottage, his bulk sprawled across a crude ladder-backed chair. Errol looked away and coughed as he entered the shade of the tree from the priest's left. Martin sat nearly naked, his cassock nowhere in sight. He wore a plain linen under tunic hitched up in the moist air until it barely covered his thighs. At Errol's cough, the priest looked up from the book he held in one huge hand and gave a raucous laugh. Errol blushed and kept his eyes on his feet.

Martin loomed larger than life. Errol had never known the man before his hair silvered, but his eyebrows, dark as ebony, showed the color those loose curls would have been in his youth. A strong nose thrust forward aggressively from wide, high cheekbones over a mouth that was thin and full by turns depending on the state of its owner's thoughts. The deep dimple in his chin, rather than lending the face any expected charm, solidified the impression of dogged determination that Errol always felt whenever he came to visit Martin's secluded cottage. Yet for all the power that emanated from Martin's eyes, face, or bulk, he always greeted Errol with warmth.

"Come now, Errol." Martin called to him across the grassy space. "My under tunic satisfies the demands of modesty, and we are created in the image of Deas, after all." He slapped his paunch and looked Errol up and down in mock jealousy. "However, I seem to have been gifted with substantially more image than you." He pointed to the bulky sack slung from Errol's shoulder with a hand that would have looked more at home dangling from a blacksmith's wrist. "You have the sacraments?"

Errol stepped from the shade to stand before Martin. "Yes, Pater, and letters as well, but I'm afraid it's all ruined." Errol's voice sounded strange to his ears, as if he had forgotten its timbre during his struggle in the gorge.

Martin's smile transformed to a scowl as he took in Errol's

appearance. The old priest's gaze trickled from Errol's crown, paused at his scraped hands, and finished at his bleeding feet.

"Come, boy. Let's go inside. Only a fool could fail to see you have a story to tell. And I would not have it said I kept an injured man on his feet." He levered his bulk from the chair, placed a hand on Errol's shoulder, and guided him into the small cabin.

Errol sat at a small table at Martin's bidding. He tucked the attacker's arrow and his soggy leather pack under the broad oak bench while the priest went to a cupboard and rummaged through an assortment of bottles and earthenware containers. "This will take a few moments, lad, to prepare. Suppose you tell me what brings you here." His voice became stern. "Leave nothing out."

Errol told of his encounter with the nuntius and the man's offer.

Martin turned at the mention of the price, his face wreathed with disbelief. "One of the crows offered to pay you a gold crown? Surely not. Churchmen hate parting with money. It's against their religion. I should know."

Errol dug the coin from his pocket and placed it on the table. "Here's the half of it."

Martin's eyebrows made fair to climb up his forehead, and he moved across the cabin to pick up the coin and examine it.

"I'll have to give it back," Errol said. "I'm sure the message is ruined."

Martin eyed Errol's battered legs. "Boy, if any man's ever earned a crown for delivering a message, you have. Keep the coin, and demand the rest. I'll vouch for you to the churchman, if needed." He retreated to the cupboard and returned with a thick salve that smelled heavily of lemongrass, lamb's ear, and soulsease.

Cupping Errol's face in a beefy hand, he smeared the salve over the cut on his cheek. "Take your shirt off, lad."

When Errol did so, Martin whistled. "I think the churchman may owe you another crown. You know the gorge better than any man alive. How did you come to this state?"

Errol winced. The salve felt cool and hot at the same time, and

it stung. “A man tracked me from the overhang where bandits hide. I tried to shake him by crossing the Cripples, but he was nearly as fast across the rocks as me. Every time I made for a ledge, he tried to put an arrow in me.”

Martin scowled, his brows knitting together over the deep brown of his eyes. “It’s rare to find a bandit possessed of such determination.”

Errol shook his head, and strands of brown hair fluttered in front of his eyes. “I don’t think he was a bandit, Pater. Bandits don’t cross the Cripples, at least not to chase down the likes of me.” He reached under the table, grabbed the short black arrow, and laid it in front of the priest. “And I’ve never seen a bandit or anyone else shoot one of these.”

The priest reached out to run one considering finger along the arrow, starting at the point, moving down the shaft to end at the midnight fletching. “Tell me, boy. How fares everyone in the village?”

Errol shrugged. “Fine. Cruk threw me out of the inn again.”

Martin nodded without seeming to hear him. “Hmm. And Liam? Is he well?”

“Yes, Pater.”

The cabin grew still. At last Martin turned from the arrow and began daubing salve into the cuts on Errol’s legs and feet.

Martin’s gaze met his. “You should rest.”

Nothing else was said, but Errol knew what he had seen in Martin’s eyes at the sight of the arrow—recognition.

Errol descended into a slumber filled with dreams of stone and water. A face, pale and racked with pain, floated across his vision. He thrust himself from the memory, forced himself to wake.

He stirred to the sound of voices. His dream faded as the plain surroundings of Martin’s cabin came into focus. Shadows stretched and lengthened outside. It would be dark soon.

At the table, Martin and his servant, Luis, regarded the contents of Errol’s pack. Martin hefted the skin of wine. “At least the wine survived the boy’s adventure.” He nudged a folded

package of waxed paper. “What think you, Luis? Can the bread be salvaged?”

Luis nodded and by way of answer took that portion of the sacrament over to the fireplace. Unfolding the paper, he laid the thin wafers with care on a metal grill and rested it on the hearth. Then he added pieces of kindling to the bed of coals until a small fire blazed. Resting his hands just above the bread, he tested the warmth. Satisfied, he turned and gave Martin a small nod, holding up one finger. “I think it will dry soon. What of the boy?”

Seeing Martin turn to face his pallet, Errol closed his eyes. A momentary pang of guilt coursed through him, but he dismissed it with a mental shrug. If he could learn the identity of his attacker by feigning sleep, then so be it.

“He sleeps,” Martin said. “If I’d had to cross the gorge with someone shooting arrows at me, I’d sleep for a month.”

Luis snorted. “Yes, as would I, but we’re no longer young. Errol lies at the dawn of his prime.”

“Prime? The boy hasn’t had much chance at a prime. Look at him. He’s a handsbreadth shorter than Liam and thin as a wafer. A young man his age should not be so lean.” Martin paused in his assessment. “Yet as he has come of age there is something about his visage, the high cheekbones and the dimples that appear when he smiles, that almost reminds me of someone.”

A silence ensued, and Errol longed to open his eyes, to question Martin about the resemblance, but he could feel the two men gazing at him and wanted to hear more of what they might say, so he concentrated on keeping his breathing regular.

“He smiles rarely enough,” Luis said.

“The boy has no reason.” After a brief pause, Martin continued, “It’s time for us to return.”

Errol opened his eyes the barest fraction. Acceptance marked Luis’s face. Martin’s wore regret.

Luis lifted his shoulders a fraction, dropped them. “It’s been five years, Martin. I’m surprised the king lasted this long.”

The priest beat one hand on his thigh. “We’re not ready, Luis.

Why did I delay in coming here? I waited nearly a year after you cast for the village, telling myself there was no rush.”

Luis shook his head. “Not this again, Martin. All three of us had things to do before we left. We’re ready enough. I can complete my work in Erinon.”

Three? No one else lived in the cabin.

Martin turned toward him, and Errol quickly closed his eyes.

“You’re right, of course, but he’s not ready yet. Things will be more difficult now.”

Luis laughed. It sounded harsh in the confines of the small cabin. “You still have a gift for understatement. More difficult? They’re impossible, and you know it. Even the few friends you have left in the Judica won’t believe you.”

Martin’s voice grew cold. “They will have to believe. Once the lots are cast, they won’t have any choice.”

“It is not beyond doubt, my friend. They’re not perfect yet. We may be surprised in the end.”

“Is there a problem?” Martin’s voice sounded worried.

Luis chuckled. “No. I’m just tired. I’ve held the vision of the soteregia in my head for a very long time.” He sighed. “The secundus would have been better suited for this task.”

“I didn’t fancy sharing a cabin with Sarin Valon for five years,” Martin said.

Luis shrugged. “He is brilliant, the most gifted reader we’ve had in generations.”

Martin shrugged. “Perhaps, but there was something in me that balked at using him.”

Luis sighed. “We have more immediate concerns, anyway.” He lifted the short black arrow. “What do we do about this?”

Errol held his breath, strained to hear past the surge of his heart.

Martin sighed. “We’ve been found. I don’t know how, but the good captain will handle it.”

Errol started at that, then disguised the movement by rolling over on his pallet.

Luis laughed again. “After half a decade? Don’t you think he might be a little rusty?”

“Don’t underestimate him, Luis. He left a captaincy behind.”

Luis moved to stand before a heavy trestle table. He picked up a knife and began peeling a potato. A moment later he spoke, slow, almost conversational. “Who do you think sent him?”

Martin pulled at his jaw muscles. “It’s been five years. It could be anyone.”

“We’ll have to close the windows and take turns keeping watch.”

“I know. I hate closing the windows. It makes the cabin stuffy.” Martin reached under a cabinet on the far side of the cabin and pulled out a crossbow.

Errol waited for the conversation to resume. When it didn’t, he opened his eyes and sat up to stretch aching muscles. The price for his frolic at the Cripples would be days in paying. Everything hurt.

Martin, seeing him awake, smiled in welcome. “You see, your trip wasn’t wasted. Luis says the bread will be dry soon. We will be able to celebrate the sacraments tonight.”

A yawn worked its way up his throat, and Errol clenched his teeth around it, grimacing. “What about your letters, Pater?”

Martin sighed, then pursed his lips. “A total loss, I’m afraid. Of course, that means I will have to go to the village and meet your messenger on his return from Gustin’s.”

“But you never come to the village.”

Martin nodded. “Things change, lad, and any news that can separate a churchman from a gold crown is important enough for me to break my solitude—for a while anyway.” He gestured toward the door of the cabin. “You’ll have to spend the night here, I’m afraid. There’s not enough time for you to make it back to the village before dark.”

Errol’s stomach tightened at Martin’s words. *Stay?* He couldn’t stay. He needed to get back to the inn. He had agreed to clean up after dinner, and there were other . . . more pressing concerns.

“I can make it back across the Cripples before dark, Pater.”

He shrugged to emphasize his point. "Once I'm across, I can find my way along the path in the dark easily enough. I've done it at least a dozen times."

Martin and Luis looked at him with placid gazes, not blinking, until Errol squirmed. He felt as if he'd suddenly turned into glass and they could look through him and read his secret fear.

"No," Martin said. "You'll sleep here." He picked up the arrow and waved it in the air in front of Errol's face. "The man who fired this at you might still be searching for you. You'll stay with us tonight."

He shook his head in disagreement. "There's no reason for him to be looking for me, Pater. I am certain he was trying to make sure you didn't get your message. You didn't, although he might not know that. Either way, he knows he's either failed or succeeded and he won't be hanging around the gorge anymore."

Martin waved Errol's argument away and exchanged an inscrutable look with Luis. Again, Errol sensed undercurrents in the cabin that eluded his understanding, and the assassin's arrow lay at the center of it.

"Are you willing to bet your life on that, Errol?" Luis asked. The words were softly spoken, but a hint of steel lay beneath them.

Errol gave a twitch of his shoulders. "Nobody's cared about my life for a long time. The assassin's no different. I'll leave my pack here. If he's there, he'll see I'm empty-handed and leave me alone."

Martin turned to face him squarely. "No. You'll stay here tonight. I won't chance you getting killed. We'll lock the cabin. Luis and I will take turns keeping watch." His shoulders bunched and then eased under his linen. "In the morning, we'll all go back together. We'll go north to Berea and take the bridge across the Sprata."

Errol drew breath to protest. He wasn't about to stay in this small, ale-less cabin.

Martin drew himself up and his eyes glowered. "Don't make me invoke the authority of the church."

Errol laughed. "The church? It holds no authority over me.

What has the church ever done for me? Nothing. Pater Antil has put me in the stocks more times than I can count. If he ever puts anyone else in them, they'll have to ask my permission first."

Outside, the pace of the shadows increased. He had to leave soon if he wanted to make it back to the village before he got the sweats. Tremors would follow soon after. The mere thought of them made him want to dry the palms of his hands.

Martin stepped forward, pulling his vision from the waning sunlight. "If you stay, I'll make sure Antil never punishes you again." His voice dipped. "That I promise, Errol."

The earnestness in the priest's voice tempted him, but staying in the cabin meant cramps and pain until he could get to an ale barrel. He rolled his shoulders against the memory of the lash. It would almost be worth it to be free from Antil's punishments. Almost, but not quite. He turned toward the door. His hand had just closed on the latch when Martin's voice stopped him.

"I can help you with the shakes as well, if you'll let me."

He turned to see Martin and Luis staring at him, their eyes heavy-lidded with pity—a look he'd seen from friends and strangers a thousand times. Now it made him angry. "What would a priest know about the shakes?"

Martin laughed and shook his head. "Boy, I haven't lived in this cabin my whole life. Do you know how many postulates come to the church just to break the shackles that chain them to their wineskins?"

Errol shook his head. "No, and I don't care. I'll stay if you promise to get me through tonight."

That earned him another nod but no comment.

Martin turned toward his servant. "Luis, I think it would be best if we ate early. Can you prepare a quick supper?"

Luis nodded. "We've got some soup left and a bit of the rabbits we roasted last night." At a nod from Martin, he turned toward the cupboard.

"Errol, our bowls are in that cupboard. Would you get them, please?"

Floorboards complained as he crossed the cabin. When he opened the cupboard doors, Errol gasped, the bowls forgotten. Inside the cupboard, posed in miniature, stood a collection of animal figurines, each one sculpted in astonishing detail. He reached in, withdrew the figure of a dog, his fingers registering the fur painstakingly carved into the stone. He touched the nose, noting, almost in surprise, that it was neither wet nor cold. Replacing that figure he brought forth a bear that stood on its hind legs, its head tilted to one side, and its mouth open in a roar. He could almost hear the creature's deep-throated defiance.

A touch on his arm startled him, and he turned to find Martin there.

"Do you like them?"

He nodded, returned the carving to its place on the shelf. "They make everything else I've ever seen look clumsy. Who carved them?"

Martin gestured loosely toward Luis. "Your cook for the evening. He's not nearly as good with food as he is with stone, but we won't go hungry."

That earned a snort from his servant. "Humph, just because I don't drown everything in pepper the way you do."

The two men proceeded to argue over food. Errol closed the cupboard door. Beneath it was a large drawer, two hands high with heavy iron pulls. He leaned down and, straining, pulled it open a few inches.

The knife in Luis's hand stilled, and a small noise of protest escaped his throat. Martin's hand on his servant's arm kept him from speaking, but a flash of concern bordering on fear blazed in both men's eyes. Curious about what could spark such a response, Errol pulled the drawer open the rest of the way. It squeaked as the wooden runners protested at the revelation of its contents.

Martin appeared at his side. "You've discovered Luis's greatest work."

Errol stood, his eyes darting back and forth between the two men. What work of Luis's could be so precious that he would

object to Errol just looking at it? Martin stood with a half smile and a look of encouragement for Luis written large across his broad features. Errol knew that look. He had seen fathers in the village bestow that look upon sons who had just accomplished something difficult and important.

Errol hadn't received such a look since Warrel died. Unwilling to touch the memories that lay behind that train of thought, he leaned forward to gaze into the drawer that Martin and Luis regarded as if it held rare jewels. At first, he suspected the two men of making sport of him, but when he glanced their way he found them as before—Martin with a look of pride and a frown of concern pinching Luis's features.

The drawer lay open at his feet. Squatting, he examined the contents, tried to understand. Dozens of gleaming white spheres lay nestled on a thick blanket of blackest wool. Every orb reflected the muted light within the cabin, creating the illusion they glowed from within.

And they were all identical. Try as he might, Errol could find no difference between them. Each sphere, half a handsbreadth across, was bereft of feature, color, or imperfection. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. The effect of those identical objects reminded him of the times he'd suffered from split vision after a night of too much ale. Curious now, he reached to take one of the spheres in hand. He could almost feel the smooth roundness against his fingertips, cool against his skin.

"Don't touch!" The command, louder after the prolonged silence in the cabin, startled him, and he jerked his hand back from the drawer as if burned.

Martin squeezed Errol's shoulder with a chuckle. "You'll have to forgive Luis. He's probably afraid you'll break one."

Luis shook his head in denial. "Such dissembling ill becomes you, old friend." Turning to Errol, he continued. "The lots are carved from durastone. They're nearly indestructible. You probably couldn't break one if you tried, but the dirt on your hand would mar the stone's balance."

Errol checked his hands. The palms bore telltale nicks and scratches, but the winter runoff from the Sprata had scrubbed them clean. Not a speck of dirt or blood showed on his skin. His confusion must have shown on his face.

“These lots are as perfect as I can make them, Errol. The balance and shape is so wrought that if you were to place one on a perfectly flat, clean floor and nudge it, it would roll for hundreds of paces before it stopped. The slightest bit of dirt or grease from your hands would change its balance.”

Luis came forward, reached into a small cranny within the same cupboard, and produced a pair of gloves made from the same midnight wool whereon the stones rested.

He held the gloves by a loop attached to the wrist opening and offered them to Errol. “Here. Make sure you don’t touch the fingers or the palms of the glove. Use the loops to pull them on.”

Errol did so, and at a nod from Luis and Martin, he selected one of the white spheres and examined it. He’d heard of lots but had never seen one. The stone was indeed as perfectly round as Luis claimed. More, its whiteness was uniform beyond imagining. If he had not felt his hands turning the stone he wouldn’t have known it had changed position.

He shrugged. “It’s perfect. But what’s it for?”

Martin and Luis exchanged a glance that filled the space of a dozen heartbeats. In the intervening silence, Errol found his gaze drawn back to the pristine sphere nestled in his palm. What purpose or power had Luis crafted into the stone? He held it to the light, turning it in idle curiosity. And then he stopped. *Letters*. He blinked and looked up at Martin and Luis. Had he imagined them, or had he seen letters reflected in the stone’s glistening surface?

Slowly now, so that he wouldn’t miss them, he held the stone against the flickering lamplight, searching for whatever lay written there. Twice the letters flickered against his vision and were lost and he had to try again. On the third time he held the image.

Writing wrapped itself against the surface of the sphere, small

and the merest shade of white different than the background. Errol looked toward Luis. "There's writing here. What's it say?" Having never learned to read, he held it toward Martin's servant without thinking. "See? There are letters right there."

Luis just stared at him.

Curious to see what images or writing might show on the other stones, Errol moved to exchange the orb he held and draw another.

Luis came around the table, his movements, slow, deliberate. "Tell me, Errol, do you remember your testing day?"

Errol shook his head. "No." He reached for another stone.

Martin's hand covered his. "Let's wait for another time, Errol. Luis gets nervous when people handle his best work too much. Besides, I think you should eat. You've had a long day."

Errol shrugged his disappointment and snaked first one hand and then the other out of the black wool gloves and, holding them by their loops, replaced them in their nook.

But when he turned, Luis's expression bore little resemblance to nervousness. He stood, eyeing Errol in shock as though he'd become a puzzle to solve. After meeting Errol's gaze for a split second, he jerked away, turned his attention back to their meal. The knife resumed its work, though less rhythmically.

Their dinner bore testimony that Luis's skill extended to more than stonework. The rabbit stew, mixed with vegetables and delicately seasoned, might have been the best meal Errol had ever eaten. Martin took one taste and then, without looking, thrust out a hand, grabbed a spice jar, and proceeded to lace his stew with a generous amount of black pepper.

That earned him a glare from Luis. "Well, at least you tried it first. Why I ever agreed to cook for a fat priest from Ostliche is beyond me."

Martin grunted without raising his gaze from his bowl. "You didn't agree. You undertook the culinary duties by proclamation, exclaiming you'd rather go hungry than eat anything I might prepare."

Luis harrumphed and turned his attention back to his own meal.

Errol ate, gulped desperate bites of stew, hoping the meal would somehow mollify his body's demand for ale. Outside, the last purple rays faded from the sky and unrelieved darkness covered Martin's cabin. As if on cue, Errol's hands began shaking. His spoon rattled against the side of his bowl as he tried to take another bite. Martin and Luis turned toward the source of the noise and lifted their gazes to Errol's face. Embarrassed, he dropped the spoon and clenched his hands under the table. Perhaps they wouldn't notice the sheen of sweat that covered him. He felt the blood draining from his face, knew he would be sick if he didn't get ale soon.

He dropped his gaze to his hands. "Pater Martin, do you have any ale? I-I'm thirsty."

"I'm sorry, Errol. I don't." The priest's voice was soft. "And if this is what ale has done to you, my son, wouldn't it be better to forsake it?"

Errol laughed. Ale hadn't done this. Outside, the last of the purple disappeared into darkness. In the five years he'd served as Martin's messenger, he'd never attempted a crossing of the Sprata at night. But with luck it might be done. It would certainly take longer than the four hours it had taken to bring him here, but in five, possibly six hours he could be back at the inn and Cilla would still have time to sneak him a few tankards out the back window. In five or six hours he'd be fine . . . or dead from a fall.

He clenched his trembling hands, regretting his decision to stay. His stomach lurched, demanding ale. The meal sat on that demand, like dead weight. Then it moved.

His chair clattered, bounced on the floor behind him as Errol bolted for the door. Wrenching the handle, he jumped from the porch to land in the garden, his stomach emptying even as he moved. Cramps forced him to his knees, where he heaved again and again, the spasms forcing blood into his head until his face swelled and burned. Still they went on. He fell to his side.

Later, unsure how much later, his body at last noted his dry heaves, believed his stomach no longer held food. His throat burned, and he longed for something to drink, even water to wash away the bile. Crossing the Sprata was beyond him now. He doubted he could even drag himself back into the cabin. He tried to relax as much as his knotted stomach would allow. As his breathing slowed, images came to him, pictures of himself before he'd disappeared in the ale barrel.

No. He thrust himself from the ground, away from the stink of his meal, and staggered, hunched and aching, toward the cabin. As he set foot on the threshold, hands came to him, supporting his weight, and brought him back into the light and warmth. He found himself looking up into Luis's eyes, their deep brown dry but sympathetic.

"Come," he said, "Martin is ready to celebrate the sacrament."

Errol's memories swam before his eyes, superimposed themselves in a mismatched tapestry against the interior of the cabin. "What could I possibly have to celebrate?"

"Ah, Errol, there is always something to be thankful for."

His response died on his tongue as he saw Martin standing behind a narrow table. While he'd been throwing up in the garden, the priest had donned a chasuble and stole. They were wrinkled, but he wore them with dignity. The interior of the cabin reflected light from a trio of large candles on the table, and the rough furnishings took on an austere grace. Luis deposited Errol on the couch and then offered a dented hand bowl to Martin to rinse his hands.

The priest dried them on a towel Luis had draped over his arm and then took a stoneware pitcher and poured a cupful of water into an earthen goblet. Facing Errol, he intoned the familiar rite.

"May Deas be with you."

"And with all who gather in his name," Luis responded.

Errol had heard the rite hundreds of times, sometimes from inside the church but more often from a distance. Too many times he'd been forced to listen to Antil recite the liturgy from the

confines of the stocks. The memory galled him, and he clamped his mouth shut to lock the response behind his teeth.

Martin looked his way, but the old man's eyes held no re-
crimination that Errol could see. Softly—not looking out over
the heads of the gathered communicants, as a priest usually did,
but directly into Errol's eyes—Martin continued.

“Lift up your praises,” he encouraged.

“Do not be afraid; lift them up to Deas, and Eleison, and un-
knowable Auae,” Luis replied, speaking as though the response
were his own.

“Let us give thanks to the Father Deas,” Martin said. Errol
would have said the words were the priest's own had he not heard
them hundreds of times before.

“It is right for us so to do,” Luis responded.

“It is right and our bounden duty, in all times, in all places,
to give thanks unto thee, O Deas, Father, everlasting.”

Almost, the spell of Martin's sincerity held Errol, but memories
of loss and Antil's cruelty festered in his gut. His stomach roiled.
He curled over, his folded arms pressing into his midsection, try-
ing to ease new cramps. A metallic taste filled his mouth. A spasm
put him on the wooden planks of the floor, and he retched, his
stomach trying to rid itself of what was no longer there. Above
him, Martin intoned the measured cadences of the sacrament.

“For by Deas, through Eleison, and with the unity of unknow-
able Auae, the heavens were cast and the world found purchase
in the firmament. All glory be unto thee, Deas, Eleison, unknow-
able Auae, world without end.”

Errol pictured Antil's likely reaction at seeing him so indis-
posed at the altar and gave a bitter laugh. The priest would fall
over from rage. The image of him, red-faced and gasping, only
made him laugh harder, his breath wheezing past the cramps
that kept him on the floor.

“Lift your voices,” Martin said, but something in the priest's
voice broke. “Eleison, our champion, has triumphed.” The last
words were delivered just above a whisper. Errol curled tighter

around the pain in his stomach. He knew from experience what would happen next. No priest would suffer their office to be so disrespected. He didn't care—the lash or the stocks, what did it matter? Soon or late he would get back to Cilla and she would give him ale.

He heard footsteps coming toward him. He hoped Martin wouldn't kick him in the stomach. Antil had done that once.

A hand slid between his head and the floor, lifted him gently from the boards, and Martin's voice, so very close now, rested on his ears. "The body of Eleison, interposed to keep us safe so long as the world lasts."

Errol pried his eyes open. Martin held a wafer between his thumb and forefinger, offering, waiting for Errol to open his mouth and accept it. He shook his head. If he ate that, if he ate anything, he would throw up again. "I can't."

Martin nodded his understanding. The priest pulled his hand back, broke the smallest piece from the bread he could, scarcely more than a crumb, and offered it again. Errol opened his mouth, accepted it, and cheeked it with his tongue. Martin stood, retreated a step, and nodded to Luis, who came forward with the cup.

Tears glistened in the servant's eyes. "Errol, this is the offering of Eleison, the champion of our world."

Errol stared at the cup, his eyes just above the rim. Lamplight glittered off the surface of the red liquid. His need spoke for him and he reached out, put his shaking hands over Luis's and tilted the crude chalice until the wine flowed over his tongue.

Too soon, barely a swallow later, Luis lowered the cup from his lips and stood, but the mouthful Errol received flowed to his stomach and his cramps eased a portion. He let his head rest on the floor. In his state he was just conscious enough to feel gratitude for the lack of punishment.

"May Deas be with you." Martin's voice filled the cabin again, washing over him.

"And with all who gather in his name," Luis responded.

Errol opened his eyes, confused. What did Martin think he was doing? Hadn't they just done this? Too tired, too cramped to be curious he closed his eyes and let the priest's voice fill his thoughts. Besides, what did he care if Martin wished to recite his liturgy again?

Moments later, he felt himself lifted again, another crumb of wafer placed on his tongue. Luis crouched to offer the cup as before. Once more a mouthful of wine slid down to his stomach and his pain eased another fraction.

Errol lost track of how often Martin and Luis repeated the rite. Sometime before dawn, he slept.

3

CRIMSONWEED

A SOLITARY SHAFT of sunlight falling across his left eye woke him early the next morning. He sat up to the sounds of packing and turned to see Martin stuffing bread and cheese into a pack, his face serious. On the other side of the cabin, Luis emptied the cabinet of the strange spherical carvings. He wore the black wool gloves, each movement slow and methodical as he placed the balls one at a time into a heavily padded crate. The urge to lift the orbs and see their lettering came over him again, but neither Martin nor Luis looked as if they would tolerate any interruption. Martin's attention to the food seemed only slightly less intense than Luis's to his carvings. The two men didn't look at each other or speak, but tension crackled between them.

He stood, the floor creaking beneath his weight. Surprisingly, he craved food rather than ale. He probed his abdomen with the fingers of his right hand. How long would it be before his stomach remembered itself and renewed its demands for Cilla's brew?

Seeing him upright, Martin beckoned, holding out a piece of bread. "Here, lad, I don't think you're ready for cheese yet, but this should sit easy enough on your stomach."

Errol accepted it as the memory of last night's sacrament ghosted through his mind. "Why are you packing?"

The priest laid several apples into the bag and regarded him, his brown eyes thoughtful. "I don't think Luis and I will be coming back here, Errol. The message you delivered from the church yesterday was almost certainly intended to call me back to Erinon."

Martin's reasoning escaped him. "But you didn't read the message, Pater. How do you know what was in it?"

Martin chuckled. "Errol, how many times have you journeyed forth across the Sprata to make deliveries since we came here?"

He shrugged, his thin shoulders bunching up around his ears before falling. "More times than I can count, Pater."

Martin nodded at him. "And in all those times, how many messages from the church have you been commissioned to deliver?"

"None."

The priest held up a finger to show he'd made his point. "Exactly. In truth, I've been waiting for and dreading this message for the past five years."

Errol shook his head. He could still see the remnants of the message laid out on Martin's table. Tracks of ink like streams that fed the Sprata during the spring floods stained the parchment. Not one word of the letter retained its legibility. "But how do you know what was in it?"

Martin's eyebrows rose and he nodded in approval. "A fair question. Come." He walked over to the still-damp parchment and pointed. "Look at the lower left corner and tell me what you see."

Errol bent at the waist, his eyes searching. There, at the bottom, the parchment still held an imprint of a seal: three tongues of flame surmounting a rectangular block. He'd never seen its like before.

Martin's voice became serious. "That's the symbol of the arch-benefice's office at Erinon. I've been expecting his summons."

"For what?"

The priest's face became grave. "To help select a new king."

"Why would we need a new king?" Errol asked.

“Because Rodran has no heir.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. People died all the time. What was the need to select a new king to him? Nothing, really, but he would miss Martin, especially after last night. The priest was the only clergyman who’d ever been kind to him. “When are you coming back?”

Martin shook his head. “I’m not. I’ll be needed in Erinon.” He looked around the cabin before returning his gaze to Errol. “We’ll let the people in Callowford and Berea know that whoever wants the cabin may have it. We won’t need it anymore.”

Errol pushed away the thought of his life without Martin or Luis. People constantly left or died. That was the way of things. Unbidden, a craving for ale came over him, and he thought of leaving Martin and Luis to undertake the trek north to Berea by themselves so he could cross the gorge and get back to Cilla’s inn and the ale barrels it held.

“What about you, Errol?” Luis asked. “Have you ever thought of leaving Callowford? The kingdom of Illustra is far larger than you can imagine from here. Someday you might even see Erinon. Would you like that?”

The tension between Luis and Martin seemed to heighten at this, but Errol could see no reason for it.

“I will not travel far from Cilla and her inn.”

Martin nodded and turned away, but not before Errol saw the look of relief in his eyes.

Errol’s craving for ale strengthened a notch. “I was thinking I could go back across the gorge and meet you in Callowford,” Errol said. “That way, if the messenger comes back before you do, I can tell him to wait.”

Martin gave a self-assured laugh. “He’ll wait, Errol. He has to. The archbenefice has little patience for incompetence.” He gave Errol a look that seemed to plumb his soul. “Have you forgotten the man who tried to kill you?”

In truth, Errol had forgotten. But surely the man was gone by now. With the message ruined, he had nothing the man, or anyone else for that matter, wanted.

“Come, Errol, you carry the food. Luis will need me to carry his tools. He won’t trust his lots to anyone, I’m afraid. They’re practically like children to him.”

Luis smiled as he slowly hoisted the crate to his back, snaking his arms through a pair of ropes so that it rode just below his shoulders. “The stones require as much work as children, and sometimes they’re no better behaved than the meanest brats.” He glanced at Martin. “Someday you may learn that for yourself.” Without a backward glance he strode out of the cabin and into the early morning sunshine. Martin and Errol followed. Outside, Errol looked back once. The cabin door hung ajar and it was dark inside. Already, the life had gone out of it.

They picked up the path leading west toward the village of Berea, skirting the Sprata for most of the way. Two hours out, Martin called a halt, sweating and panting as they climbed another of the interminable hills that lay between them and their destination.

“How much farther?” Sweat plastered his gray hair to his forehead, and he dabbed the sides and back of his neck with a wet cloth. Dark splotches of effort marked the rough fabric of his cassock where it stretched over his bulk. Sunlight reflected off the itch vines to his left, giving his face a greenish cast. His chest heaved.

Luis wiped his brows, the tanned skin of his bald head gleaming wetly in the light. “It’s another hour to Berea, then, once we cross the bridge over the Sprata, two more to catch Falls Road and then another three hours back east to Callowford.” He gulped for breath between sentences.

Errol smiled. Aside from the occasional craving for ale, he felt better than he had in a long time. His sweat cleansed him, and after crossing the Sprata yesterday, this hike was insufficient to tire him. “It would have been a lot quicker to cut across the gorge. Even allowing for a trip across the Cripples, it would have cut this trip in half.” He made no effort to keep the overly cheerful tone from his voice.

A CAST OF STONES

Luis smiled, but Martin shot him a look of irritation as he brought the cloth forward to mop his face. “Speed is the least of our considerations. There is news I need before I meet with the church’s representative, and the priest of Berea is the closest source.”

Luis’s mouth drew to one side, and he gave a slight shake of his head. “You don’t even know if they’ve bothered telling the local priests what’s happening, Martin. Berea is so far off the beaten path they might not hear about it for a year or more.”

Martin nodded, as if conceding the point, but said nothing that would indicate he’d changed his mind. The priest sighed and levered his bulk off the rock he’d used as a seat and continued along the path. His steps faltered. He stumbled over nothing, then righted himself. “Luis, I think that messenger was sent just in time. My isolation in the cabin for the past five years has taken its toll.”

Luis, gray and sweating, nodded his agreement. “I seem to be feeling the effects as well. My legs feel like lead.”

Errol watched the two men struggle up the trail, suspicion and panic growing in his mind. He stood transfixed, looking on in horror as first Martin and then Luis fell panting to the dust. He ran to the priest, kneeling to pour water for him. The old man’s skin felt cool and clammy to the touch. He poured again. Martin drained the cup before nodding weakly toward Luis.

Errol raced over to Martin’s servant, offered water as his mind reeled. What was wrong with them? The walk, like any other in the Sprata foothills, tested a man’s endurance, but the pace had been easy and both men had seemed fine only a few moments ago. But they were old. They’d never mentioned any infirmities to Errol, but who knew what ailments the men brought with them to Callowford?

Luis drained the cup, his tanned skin blanched to the color of dust. He struggled to a half-sitting, half-lying position on the trail and took the waterskin from Errol. “See to Martin.”

The priest lay sprawled across the dirt and rock of the trail, his

eyes closed and his breath coming in shallow gasps. Errol put his hands on his chest, rocking him back and forth. "Pater Martin? Tell me what's wrong."

The priest's eyes fluttered open, and he rolled his head toward Luis. "Poison," he whispered.

A blow like the strike of a smith's hammer hit Errol in the chest. Pulling his pack from his shoulders he flung it open and dumped the contents on the ground, hoping against hope. He searched, throwing each item to the side. "Where is it? I just picked some." There. Smashed under the spare waterskin lay a damp clump of crimsonweed. He grasped the plant by the roots and in a single motion stripped the foliage with his spare hand. Discarding the stalk, he grabbed half the pulpy leaves that lay on the ground and rolled them between his hands until they massed into a wet lumpy ball and a sharp tang filled the air.

Opening Martin's mouth, he forced half of the wad into the back of his throat and then poured water across the old man's lips until he was forced to swallow. He waited, his heart hammering, just long enough for the priest to catch his breath before rushing over to Luis to repeat the process. Martin's servant seemed to be in better shape, if barely. His eyes were open and aware. His breathing was less labored.

When Errol placed the first wad of crushed crimsonweed between his lips, Luis roused himself. "What's wrong with us?" he gasped around the medicine.

"Martin says you've been poisoned."

Luis blinked and gave a sparse nod, then chewed twice, juice rolling down one cheek, and swallowed thickly. Errol tilted the waterskin, letting him drink.

Luis struggled, taking a deep breath. "You know Adele?" he asked.

Errol stilled, caught off guard by the question. He did know Adele. The herbwoman lived outside of Berea, seeing only those she trusted. Errol was one of those. He brought her the plants she needed that grew along the Sprata. If he was clever and managed

to procure the roots and mushrooms that grew in the cracks and caves of the river, she paid him enough to keep him in ale for a couple of days. She and her sister, Radere, who lived outside Callowford, did a fair trade with the villagers and farmers for a couple of leagues around.

The church barely tolerated the two women. More than once, needing some excuse to give Errol a beating, Antil had caught him coming from Radere's hut and put him in the stocks. Not Radere, just Errol.

"Boy." Luis's breathing slowed as the crimsonweed took effect. "Do you know Adele?" At a nod from Errol, he continued. "Then hurry."

He left each man a waterskin and raced away without a backward glance, his feet churning the dust on the trail. As he ran, his thoughts swam sluggishly in his mind and his peripheral vision blurred until the trees and plants at the side of the trail blended into an unbroken swath of green.

Luis and Martin were dying. The image of Martin, gray-skinned and sweating, flashed across his mind and he held it. Casting about for any sign that might help Adele decipher the poison, he called up the image of the two men over and over again. They had stopped to rest. At the time Errol had paid no attention, but now it seemed strange that they should tire so quickly—and on the easiest part of the trail at that. Then they had fallen.

Errol cudged his memory as he ran, trying to recall any detail, no matter how insignificant, that might help. But aside from their gray, clammy skin and the sudden onset of fatigue, he could think of nothing.

Sudden pains shot through his calves, and he grimaced, struggling against unaccustomed weariness. He shouldn't be tired. He'd run this trail and others as difficult a thousand times. The days when the pathways around the Sprata could challenge him were long past. Sweat blurred his vision. When he raised a hand to wipe it away, the chill of his skin surprised him. With a shock

he stared at the back of his hand. His mind recoiled at the pallor of his flesh.

The poison was in him too. He stumbled, stubbed his foot against a rock. *Keep moving.* Adele would know what to do. He ran on, forcing his legs to obey his will.

The twists and the turns of the trail conspired against him. The rocky pinnacles, so often his friends when he needed to flee his thoughts or memories, now hindered his path. Sweat poured from him. When it ran from his forehead, down his face and into his mouth as he sucked in great gasps of air, it gagged him with the taste of sulfur, its saltiness hidden by the unfamiliar odor.

His vision swam. The terrain distorted, became strange and unfamiliar. Where was he? *Adele.* He was trying to reach the old healer, but was this even the right path? He couldn't be sure. It looked strange.

He ran ten paces past the fork that led to her cabin before he stopped and reversed course. By the time he reached Adele's hut, dark spots filled his vision. He wanted ale. Weaving on his feet, he stepped under the worn, dirty thatch of her roof and up onto the gray stone threshold. His legs, surprised by the sudden lack of motion, stopped, then buckled, dumping him. His head fell against the rough oak planks of her door, sounding the first knock. He lay on the stone like a village girl's discarded rag doll, beating his fist against the door like a pendulum.

"Adele. Please be home."

The door opened and he flopped inside, lying on the packed earth of her floor. The smell of woodsmoke filled the hovel. Adele knelt beside him with a groan and lifted his head.

"Thorns and thistles, boy, you look awful." He pried his lids open. Her eyebrows, thick and iron-gray like the wild strands of hair that peeked from under her head cloth, knit in accusation. "What did you do, drink some bad ale?" Her hands stroked his sweat-stained hair back from his face.

He looked into her eyes, old and gray like the rest of her. "Poison. Pater Martin and Luis are on the trail."

Her glance sharpened, and her voice became curt. "Tell me, quickly!"

Errol cast back, trying to remember everything. The room spun, and it felt good to lie on the cool floor. A scent of earth ghosted through his nose, beckoning him to sleep. Yes, that was it. He'd sleep a little and then he'd tell Adele. He blinked, working to open his eyelids again. What was he going to tell her? The thought died. It could wait, he needed to sleep.

Cold water splashed across his face, and his head rocked to one side, his cheek stinging. He opened his eyes to see Adele's face over him, contorted with anger, her hand raised to strike him again. "Wake up, boy. I don't care for folks dying in my home." Her voice rasped across his ears.

Errol nodded, or tried to. His head didn't seem to want to move. "Poison," he said.

"I know that, boy. Now, tell me the manifestations."

Breathing, speaking, took a concentrated effort. "They got tired, so tired, and then they fell. By the time I got to them their skin was gray."

The herbwoman grimaced. Errol wondered how long it would take him to die. "I need more, boy. Any number of poisons could do that; yellowthorn, hemsting plant, bracken root. All of them attack the muscles and the skin."

Errol sighed. Slow waves of dizziness pulled him downward. Then he remembered. "Sulfur," he breathed, hoping Adele could hear. "Sweat . . . smelled . . . like sulfur."

Adele's mouth pinched, and she tugged at a stray lock of hair, thinking, as Errol had seen her do countless times before. "Sulfur? Are you sure, boy?"

Errol tried to nod. Had his head moved? "Yes. Strong smell. Sulfur."

She went to all fours and sniffed his skin, like a dog going to scent. "Phew, boy. You smell like an alchemist's shop."

His awareness blurred. Moments later, she was gone but he heard voices coming from behind her hut. One of them he knew

as Adele's, her speech soft now, yet surprised as well. He didn't recognize the other voice, couldn't have recognized it. It thrummed with authority, and the air breathed tones that encompassed and surpassed human hearing with the barest pauses. If the wind could have conspired to whisper its will through the stones and trees, he imagined it would have sounded like that.

Adele's astonishment drifted to him. "Him as well?"

The response dipped, lulling him. He closed his eyes and drifted. . . .

And woke to a presence in the hut that was not Adele's. An impossible wind, like the exhalation of earth, moved along him, registered his feeble movements with eddies that fanned out over his skin, tracing its way down his torso to his stomach.

Struggling, he opened his eyes, but there was nothing to see. His awareness of Adele's hut, the earthen floor, even himself faded to wispy insubstantiality. The rush of air filled Adele's hut as she mixed powders from earthenware pots, her ear cocked—listening, nodding.

Errol floated or slept, but when he opened his eyes he was alone with Adele. She knelt, lifted his head, and poured a draught that tasted like liquid earth down his throat. He coughed once, twice. A spasm shook him, and a sudden chill spread from his stomach outward until he shivered. His head cleared.

The herbwoman smiled, showing crooked teeth. "Nice to see you among the living, boy. You nearly killed yourself, running here with that poison working through your veins." The squint in her eyes warred with her smile. Adele considered him as though he'd become a stranger.

He rose, wondering if his legs and feet would obey him. "What about Martin and Luis?"

The healer's face clouded. "It was a miracle you survived, boy. It takes a young heart to survive moritweed poisoning. They are surely dead."