

SHADOW'S
LURE

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JON
SPRUNK



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Maps by Ed Bourelle.

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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2119

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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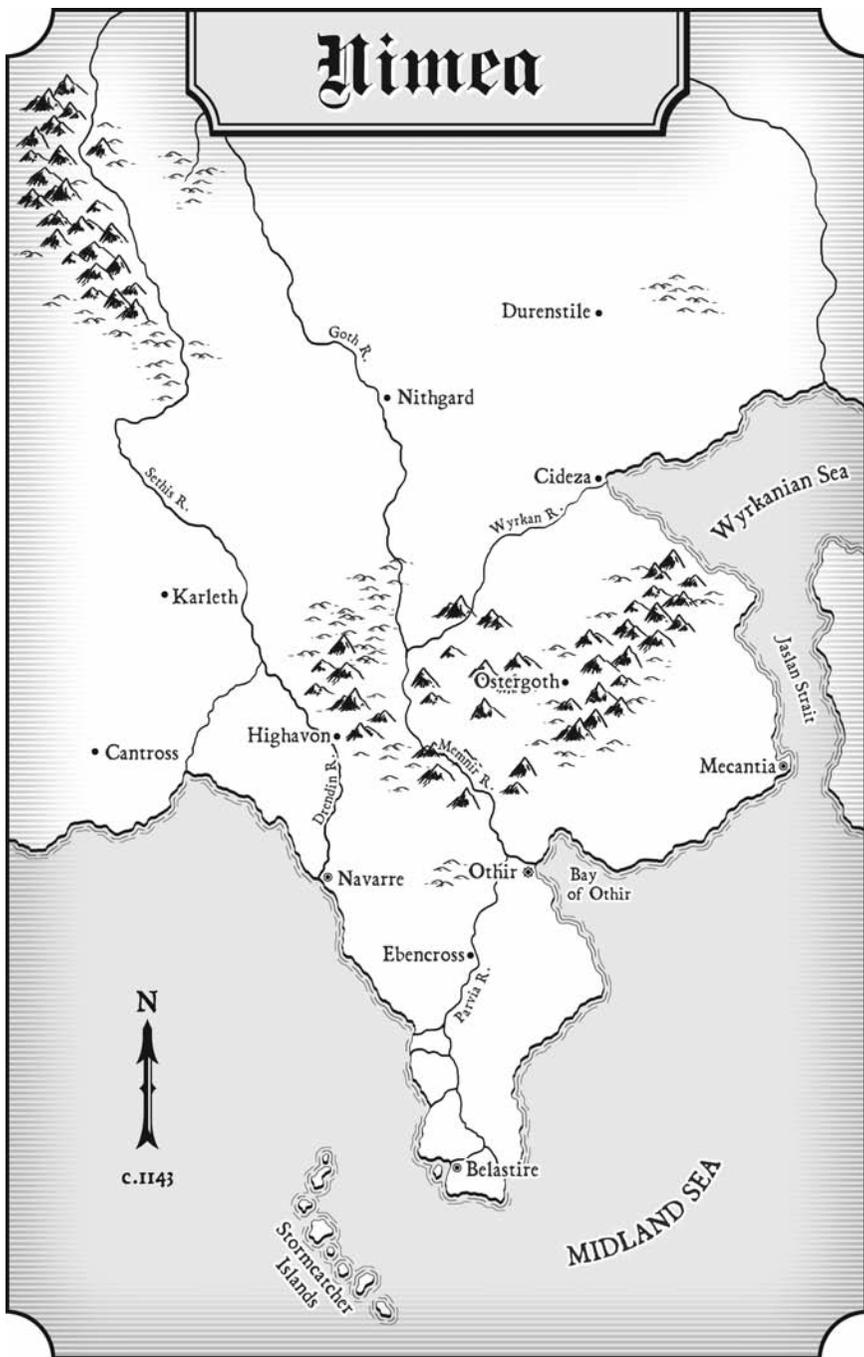
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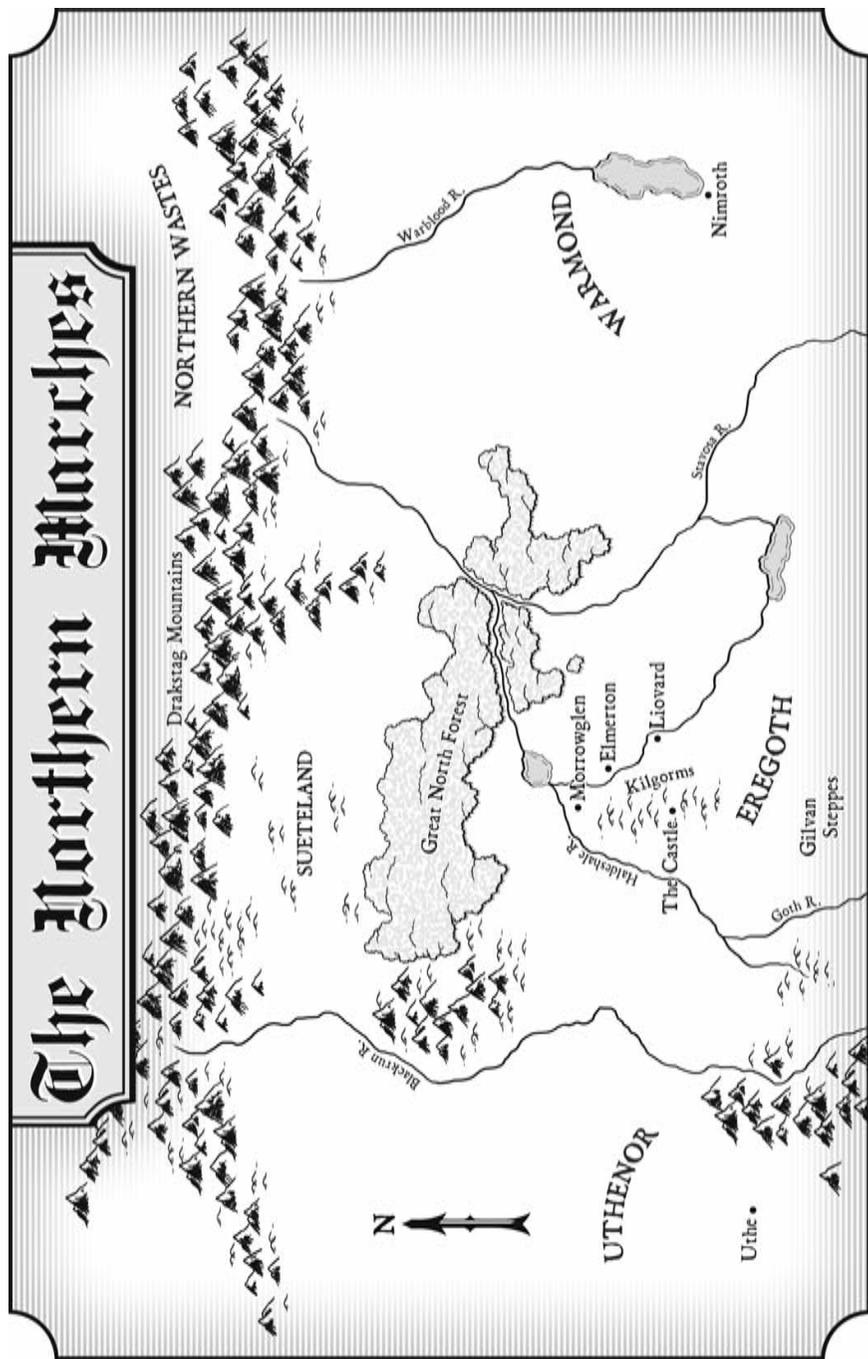
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This book is dedicated to my wife and son,
the twin centers of my universe;
and to the family and friends who enrich our lives every day.

Nimea



The Northern Marches



O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry.
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,
Take not Thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

—G K. Chesterton, 1906

PROLOGUE

A bitter north wind blew off the moors.

It sliced through Keegan's thick winter cloak and shirt as he handed over his sword to the gate-wardens. Faint moonbeams cast deep shadows across the weathered ramparts and frost-rimmed towers of Aldercain Keep. When the sentries were satisfied, he and his band were allowed to enter.

They passed between the close walls of the tunnel running under the ancient gatehouse, and Keegan didn't breathe easy until they emerged in a courtyard on the other side, where another pair of guards opened the door to the inner keep. Bright light flooded across the snow at their feet. Tromping after his comrades, Keegan entered.

Heat from four great hearths wrapped him in a sweltering embrace as Caedman, their war leader, led them to a table at the end of the hall. Keegan loosened his cloak as he took a seat under an open window and glanced around. This was his first peace-meet. Warriors and house-carls sat shoulder-to-shoulder. Their deep laughter shook the timber walls. At the other end of the hall, a long table sat on a riser above the rest. The five men at the high table were adorned with silver and gold. Their white fur mantles gleamed in the firelight.

One of Keegan's comrades gestured to a venerable man wrapped in a black bearskin cloak in the center seat. "That's Old Jevick."

"The Allastar thane?" Keegan asked.

"They say he hasn't stepped outside of this big pile of rock in years."

Keegan took in the banners hanging on the walls, the rows of trophies, and the roaring hearths. "I don't blame him. This is a good place for an old man to rest his bones."

As a cupbearer set down a double-handful of mugs before them, a loud thump echoed from the high table. Heads turned as Thane Jevick pulled himself to his feet.

“Welcome, sons of Eregoth.” His voice was shaky, but deeper than his years suggested. “I have called this peace-meet to discuss the troubles that plague our lands.”

Keegan looked around and saw heads nodding. Farms had been burned to the ground, men killed, and women and children taken away. Everyone knew from where the troubles came. He and his comrades had decided it was time to do something about it, and Caedman had brought them here to find out if anyone else felt the same.

The pounding of five hundred fists filled the hall as the aged chieftain returned to his seat. One by one, the other thanes introduced themselves. This took some time, as each attached numerous titles and accomplishments to his name. The last thane was a powerful figure. Flame-red braids hung down his leather breastplate.

“Many of you know me. I am Comarc of the Ragarson clan.” He rapped his knuckles on the table. “And I won’t bore you with the long list of my deeds.”

More fist pounding resounded. Everyone knew of the exploits of Comarc Ragarson and his Red Riders. His had been the driving force behind their country’s march to freedom, but that had been years ago, before Keegan’s birth. Would the Ragarsons ride again?

Thane Comarc looked around the hall. “But I will be the first to speak. We fought and bled to free our country. But now the ravens of war have come scratching at our windows again. Darkness lies heavy over our lands. And Liovard sits at the heart of it!”

There it was, spoken plain for all to hear. Keegan shifted on his seat as the assembly fell silent.

Taelish, the thane of the Nuodir, stood up. “You speak as if we can change things, Comarc. But this peace-meet is a waste of time. Clan Eviskine has grown too powerful. We must make an accommodation with them, or risk losing what we have left.”

Comarc spat on the table and ignored the pointed look it earned him from Jevick. “You Nuodir can go kiss Eviskine’s lily-white arse if you like, but the Ragarsons will fight to our last breath!”

A mighty roar shook the hall as a contingent of men jumped to their feet and pounded on the tables. The other thanes at the high table exchanged concerned glances behind Comarc's back. One voice rose above the tumult.

"Why fight alone?"

Old Jevick peered into the crowd. "Who speaks?"

The hall had quieted, but the looks cast in the direction of their table couldn't be called friendly. Keegan swallowed the last of his ale as his captain stood up.

"I am Caedman Du'Ormik, son of Londain."

Murmurs spread through the hall. Old Jevick turned to speak with the other thanes, but Comarc didn't wait.

"I've heard of you," the Ragarson chief said. "Most of my fighters cannot decide if you're a hero, or just a lucky fool. But only a clan thane has the right to speak here."

Bench legs screeched as two men from Keegan's band stood up and threw back their cloaks to reveal white mantles underneath. Tongues wagged at the sight.

"He speaks for Clan Indrig," Thane Samnus said.

"And for the Hurrolds," Thane Obern added.

Comarc snorted. "I see you've brought a pair of yapping dogs with you. Too bad they're squatting at your heels instead of sitting up here with their rightful peers."

"Go frig your mother, Comarc," Samnus said. "I'm here to make sure you don't run off with the women when the talking gets fierce."

Comarc laughed. "I see you, Du'Ormik. Speak your mind."

Caedman looked around the room. "I asked why we should fight alone. If every man stands only for his own hearth and clan as we've always done, then we'll be split apart and killed, and our families taken as chattel."

Keegan didn't know what chattel was, but it sounded bad.

The Nuodir thane threw his cup to land with a clatter somewhere on the floor. "I've heard enough. These fools are the reason Liovard burns our villages and chases off our people."

"If we unite," Caedman said, "we can defend ourselves and perhaps win a lasting peace for our country, like the one promised years ago when our fathers and uncles roused the Nimeans."

Every man in the hall was on his feet now, banging and shouting to be heard. Keegan couldn't tell what most of them were saying, in favor of Caedman's idea or against. The thanes at the raised table yelled alongside their men. Comarc bellowed something about the debt of Eregothic blood being repaid a hundred times over, but Keegan lost the gist of his argument in the clamor.

A noise had caught his ear, faint at first, but it grew to a keening howl. Men quieted as the ceiling timbers shook. The flames in the fireplaces flickered and threatened to go out as shrieking winds blew down the chimney flues. Keegan looked around, but everyone was absorbed by the chaos ripping through the hall. Then the doors of the hall shook. The impact echoed in Keegan's chest. Chairs fell over and table legs groaned as the warriors turned. Outside, a wolf howled.

A whisper rose from the crowd. "The Hunt!"

Keegan swallowed. With the second blow, the doors burst open and a crowd of intruders with gleaming steel in their fists rushed into the hall. Everyone stood gaping as the interlopers pushed through their ranks, shoving the clansmen back. Keegan climbed up on the table for a better view. The intruders towered over the warriors in the hall, with pale eyes glaring from under bestial helmets fashioned like wolves' heads. They carried axes and hammers of dark iron and broad shields. Keegan knew them at once from stories he'd heard from his father.

Northmen.

Keegan watched them with awe, but then another entered the hall, and a sick feeling uncoiled in his stomach. Clad from crown to foot in a shell of black steel, the new arrival stood even taller than the other Northmen. Keegan clenched his hands into fists. He knew this one from stories, too. Wherever he appeared, people died. The clans called him the Beast.

A pair of figures entered behind the steel-skinned giant. The man had a narrow build and a lean face with features some might call refined, and he wore enough guilt to bury a prince. But it was the woman beside him who stole Keegan's attention. The way she moved, and the curves under her sheer black gown, made his blood boil. Her skin glistened like wet silk. This was no ordinary woman. Upon her arrival, the hall fell into perilous silence.

Preceded by the Beast, the man and his lady walked arm-in-arm down the center of the hall, and the clansmen fell back before them. Those who did not move quickly enough were smashed out of the way by the Northmen. In that instant, Keegan understood who these people were. The man had to be Erric Eviskine, the Duke of Liovard. And that meant the lady at his side was . . .

The Witch. Sybelle, Queen of the Dark.

Keegan looked away from her eyes, not daring to meet them again even from this distance. The heels of the duke's polished boots clacked on the floor until he and his paramour came before the thanes.

"Eviskine." Comarc Ragarson's mouth twisted. "This peace-meet is for patriots of Eregoth."

The duke clasped the gold pommel of his sword. "Who dares to say I am no patriot?" He turned, and the large medallion around his neck swayed. "Am I not thane of one of the oldest clans?"

Mutters circulated through the crowd, but no one dared to speak up, not even Comarc, though he and the other chiefs glared back and forth. Then another voice spoke. Keegan's stomach shrank as Caedman pushed through the crowd.

"I name you traitor, Eviskine," Caedman said. "Even if no one else has the stomach to do it."

The duke made a half-smile as if he'd heard a poor jest. "Jevick, it seems your house is infested with vermin."

"I am a free man of Eregoth," Caedman said. "Again I name you a traitor. A traitor to this land, which you have sown with blood and fear. A traitor to your own people by the company you keep. While others fought and bled for their country, you rolled over like a whore and let the enemy in."

The lady laughed. For a moment, it seemed to Keegan that time stood still, and all he could hear was the cool melody of her voice. Then the moment was gone. He coughed into his sleeve. The back of his throat tasted like a burnt copper penny.

"Come, Erric," she said. "I told you they would be intractable."

The duke shook his head at the high table. "I would have saved you. Remember that."

Keegan watched with an uneasy feeling as the duke and lady departed.

They halted on the threshold and turned around. Keegan expected some parting words, some base insult. Instead, the witch whistled. The candles and hearth fires went out, plunging the hall into darkness.

Shouts echoed off the walls, punctuated by screams and the wet smacks of cleaving steel. A strange blue light flashed above Keegan's head. What it illuminated below was like a vision from Hell. The weaponless clansmen used table legs and eating knives—anything they could find—as they fought for their lives, but the axes of the Northmen rose and fell like threshers' flails, reaping a harvest that washed the floor in blood. Not three paces away, a warrior was cut down by a Northman. Keegan went for his belt knife, but the killer moved away to find another victim.

Samnus and Obert led the band into the mayhem after Caedman. Keegan started to go after them, but remembered his war leader's words from before they entered the keep.

No matter what happens, Keegan, you must survive. You must tell the clans what you've seen and heard this night, or we are all lost.

Keegan located Caedman in the fray. Dark patches of blood matted the war leader's leathers as he fended off the attacks of a Northman with his bare hands. Then Samnus and the others arrived and bore the invader to the floor. Keegan smiled, until the crowd parted as if drawn back by invisible strings, and a tide of dread filled his chest.

The Beast approached.

Steam rose from the giant's armored hide as he strode toward Caedman. Keegan yelled a warning to his comrades, but it was swallowed by the cacophony. Then the crowd surged, and he lost sight of the fighters. A moment later he glimpsed a body on the floor. It was Caedman, laid out on his back like a dead man. Bile flooded the back of Keegan's throat as he stumbled down from the table. He couldn't catch his breath. The air was thick with the stench of blood and sweat. He turned, looking for a way out, and spied the window above his head. He leapt to catch the stone sill. As he pulled his upper body over the ledge, his shoulders caught in the narrow casement. A frantic wriggle broke him free from the stone's embrace, and he pushed into the empty space beyond.

Keegan landed in a snowbank. A sour taste coated his tongue as he heard the cries from inside the keep. Then he was up and running across the frozen fields.

He didn't look back.

CHAPTER ONE

Caim drew in a breath and held it. The bow shaft creaked as he pulled the string back to his ear.

Forty paces away, the target turned his head, but then went back to his meal. Caim measured the distance again, allowing for wind and a slight difference in elevation. The temperature had dropped to near freezing with the sun's setting, which would affect the arrow's flight.

"Still playing around out here?" a voice whispered in his ear.

Caim shivered as Kit passed through him, and then she was beside him. Her hair gleamed like quicksilver in the dying light.

"You're going to shoot without giving him a chance?"

"Don't—" he said as she leaned across his field of vision to look down the arrow.

The mark glanced up again. Caim's hands were cramping from the cold, the bowstring biting into his fingers.

"—move," he breathed.

But it was too late. The stag gathered its legs and leapt away between two leaning evergreens. Snow from dislodged branches showered over its trail. Caim ducked away from Kit and tracked his quarry's movement through the thicket. Time slowed. In the space between two heartbeats, he found the target and shot.

The arrow spun in a tight spiral as the stag emerged from the trees, hooves churning in the deep snow. Caim leaned forward as the arrow and its target collided. The stag's high-pitched squeal startled him when the missile punched into its side. The arrow struck high and behind the foreleg. The stag foundered, but then it took off through the snow. How long could it run? By the brightness of the blood running down its tawny coat, the shot had punctured a lung.

Caim fumbled for his quiver as he ran after it, but the stag raced like lightning through the snow. In another few heartbeats, it would be gone. His breath burned in his chest as the creature passed behind a thick bole. What emerged on the other side nearly caused Caim to stumble in his tracks. It had the rough size and shape of the stag, but its coat was silky black like the fur of a jungle cat. Two slender horns of bone-white ivory rose from the back of the narrow skull. A twinge ached in Caim's chest, and the stag returned, galloping away through the snow. Without thinking about it, he reached out to the shadows gathering in the trees around him. The stag snorted as a ribbon of darkness fell over its face. It slid in the snow, just a momentary hitch in its gait, but that was enough for Caim to draw and fire. The second arrow went high. He shot the third almost without aiming. It looked like it was going to veer wide until the stag blundered into its path. This time the animal fell.

When Caim caught up, the stag was kicking weakly on its side. There was no sign of the strange transformation it had undergone. Caim drew one of the long *sute* knives sheathed in the harness at the small of his back and put the animal out of its misery. He tied its legs together while bright red blood pumped out into the snow.

Kit floated at his side and watched the animal's last throes. "Did you see the way it looked at you? It was the saddest thing I've ever seen."

Kit continued to chatter as Caim dragged the carcass in the direction of his camp. He hadn't known what to expect when he decided to come north. Eregoth loomed in his memory like a half-forgotten nightmare, but the last Nimean outpost was six days behind them and they hadn't seen another living soul since. Of course, he traveled cross-country, avoiding anything more established than hunting trails. Game was plentiful; he wouldn't starve if he could manage to keep from freezing to death. But he hardly slept anymore, and when he did the dreams were waiting for him, worse than before. And he saw things, too. Shadow things, like what happened with the stag. They appeared without warning, day and night. Ever since Othir.

"You're passing it," Kit chided over his head.

Caim stopped beside a screen of brush. Through the canopy of tree branches, the sky was a sheet of cobalt. The moon hung low, a slender sickle among the evening's first stars. He dropped his prize and knelt

down to clean it. With the bloody meat in hand, he kicked snow over the carcass and tromped through the undergrowth.

His camp was a lean-to and a fire pit, which had gone out in his absence. Once he got the fire going again, he spitted the meat and set it over the flames. Then he cleaned his hands in the snow and settled back against the tree supporting his impromptu shelter.

Kit appeared before him, standing in the fire. Her arms were folded across her chest, a bad sign. Caim took a deep breath to prepare for the onslaught.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Waiting for my supper.”

“You know what I mean!” She waved her hands over her head. “Why are we here?”

“You know why, Kit.” He broke a pair of semi-dry branches in half and tossed them into the fire. “You were all in favor of this before.”

“When?”

“Back in Othir. You heard me explain it to Josey. You didn’t have any objections then.”

“Yes, I did. I just didn’t voice them.”

He turned the spits. “Then you forfeited your chance.”

“I’m voicing them now! Look at you. You’re half frozen, living like an animal. And you don’t have any idea what you’re searching for. Do you?”

Caim grunted, but it came out like a clearing of his throat. *When was the last time you agreed with anything I did, Kit?* But she was always there, every time he fell down, even if sometimes it was only to throw salt in his wounds. “I’m tired, Kit. Let it go.”

She floated over to sit beside him and leaned against his arm. Ghostly tickles raised gooseflesh under his leathers. “Why don’t we go to Arnos? Just the two of us, down to the Midland shore. Bright beaches, clear waters. By the time we get there, it would be warmer—”

He scooted away from her. “Cut it out, Kit.”

“Fine.”

With a last glower, she vanished. No sparkles, no glitter. Out in the gathering darkness, an owl hooted. The air seemed colder when she was gone. What was he trying to prove? That he didn’t need anyone? He’d spent most of the first week after he left Othir looking over his shoulder,

hoping Josey had ignored his admonition not to come after him. Even after he stopped looking back, that didn't make his decision to continue north any easier. The encounter with Levictus was still fresh in his mind.

The wind died down for a moment, making the sorcerer's next words resound like thunder crashing over Caim's head. "She dwells in the peerless realm of her ancestors, beyond the veil in the Land of Shadow."

The Land of Shadow. Children's nonsense. But it wasn't. Caim reached out his hand and called to the darkness. A patch of shadow appeared in his palm. It came with hardly any effort. The shadows. The stag. His dreams. What else was changing?

Caim gave a mental push and the shadow slid away. After giving the spits another turn, he ducked inside the lean-to, where his few possessions were pushed against the canvas wall. On top of the pile lay a long bundle wrapped in burlap. He reached inside and pulled, and the sword slid clear of its housing with a whisper. The black blade reflected no shine from the firelight. It had lain in the ground behind Kas's cabin for almost twenty years, yet showed not the least sign of tarnish.

Where did you come from?

As if in answer, a tremble slithered up his arm. And then the night came alive. The sky lightened to milky gray. The trees stood taller and shed their shady cloaks, and the snow gleamed beneath him like a blanket of stardust.

Caim thrust the sword back into its scabbard. When his hand left the hilt, his vision returned to normal. With a grimace, he folded the burlap over the end and shoved the entire thing under a blanket, where it made a conspicuous hump. He pulled over the bulging satchel. Under layers of spare clothes, he found a narrow book bound in a black cord. It was Arch-priest Vassili's personal journal, given to him by Josey. There had also been papers for safe passage, but he'd burned them. From what he had seen journeying north, any document found on his person tying him to the new empress would do him more harm than good. If things had been bad in Nimea before the Church's downfall, they were worse now. There was no law beyond the length of a sword's blade. The nobles squabbled over land rights while the commons stole off to become brigands.

Caim cracked open the book, and a square of parchment slid out onto his lap. He held it up. A capital letter J was stamped in gold wax over the fold. A letter from Josey, tucked where he would find it. Was it a plea for him to come back? Or a warning to stay away and never return? He shoved it in the back of the book.

The lines on the book's smooth vellum pages were penned in Vassili's cultured hand. He read a page or two each night. So far he hadn't found anything useful, mostly passages about the archpriest's early days as a praetor in Belastire.

Caim touched the key-shaped pendant, another gift from Josey, under his shirt as he flipped through the pages until something caught his eye.

Eighth day of Atrius, 1123

We have arrived in Othir after fourteen days on the road. Despite the speed of our passage, I was the last of the conclave to arrive, a fact which shall no doubt be used against me.

We were received at DiVecci in the afternoon. Just as I suggested in my treatise, the Inquest has been expanded several times beyond their original . . .

The next couple words were indecipherable. Then:

The oubliettes beneath the castle stink of river water and are bursting with prisoners, many of them imperialist agitators, but one caught my attention. Something about his eyes. I have decided to return tomorrow and inquire about him.

Hearing the sizzle of dripping fat, Caim lurched forward and caught the meat before it fell into the fire. He peeled off strips with his teeth and hissed as he gulped down the steaming flesh, then turned back to the journal. The text went on to tell how Vassili liberated a young man from the torture cells beneath Castle DiVecci and decided to keep him as a ward.

The prisoner's name was Levictus.

By the time Caim finished the page, the sun had gone down. He put the book away, tossed another couple of branches on the fire, and crawled under his shelter. As he lay there, gazing up at the stars through gaps in the canopy, Josey intruded into his thoughts. What was she doing? Was she safe? Had she forgotten about him? But the more he thought of her,

the more he knew he'd made the right decision. She was an empress now, and he was a penniless freebooter without a home or history.

His last thoughts, as he drifted off, were about Kit. He regretted the way he had spoken to her. Promises of making it up to her lulled him into an uneasy slumber.



Caim could tell he was dreaming by the phosphorescent tint of the starshine and the springy softness of the grass underfoot. He stood beside a split-rail fence as tall as his chest. Beyond it stretched a long yard of tar-black earth. He was eight years old again. Small. Scrawny. Weak.

The fence rail was coarse under his palms. A big man knelt in the center of the yard. Caim's breath remained trapped in his lungs as he looked upon his father. Over him towered a cloak-shrouded scarecrow. Moonlight illuminated the face of a young Levictus, with a midnight blade in his hand. The scene played out as it had a thousand times before. The blade swooped down. Caim bit his lip to stifle the scream. He wanted to run away, but he could only stand and watch as his father crumpled to the ground, the familiar sword's hilt protruding from his chest.

Levictus turned, and another figure came into view, garbed in a black cloak like the wings of a giant bat. A cold finger of dread scratched down Caim's back-bone. He started as a dry branch snapped beneath his foot. The figures looked toward him from across the yard.

A sharp pain pierced his right ear. Caim tried to let go of the rail, but his hands wouldn't obey. Shadows swirled as the figures melted away into the night, leaving his father alone in the yard. Caim wanted to go to him, but his head hurt so much. He focused on his fingers, willing them to let go. His arms shook with the effort.

Just . . . let . . . go . . .

A titanic roar jerked Caim awake, to find a huge shape looming above him. Massive jaws studded with fangs opened beneath a snub nose. Tiny eyes peered from under tufts of dark fur. Caim started to lift his arms, but the bear's plate-sized paw knocked him sideways.

Rocks gouged his back as he skidded over the hard ground, and

another roar filled his ears. He reached for his knives, but his right arm was pinned underneath him. The fingers of his left hand were stiff with cold, but he made them curl around a hilt and pull it free. As the animal lurched over him, Caim thrust upward. The knife's point struck hide as hard as old timber, and the air rushed from his lungs as clawed paws came down on his chest. The bear's jaws gaped wide, spewing the stench of rotten meat into his face. Caim freed his trapped arm in time to wedge it between his throat and the bear's teeth. The jaws slammed shut on his forearm. Spots of light danced in front of Caim's eyes as he stabbed repeatedly into the animal's side, but he might as well have been chopping down a tree with a spoon. Growls pierced his skull as he was thrashed from side to side. Biting back on his fear, Caim reached out to the shadows. He could feel them lurking around the edge of the camp, but he couldn't summon the momentary calm he needed to call them. The spots began to swirl as his free hand swept back and forth across the ground, searching for . . . for . . .

I'm going to die.

With that realization, the terror receded long enough for him to detect a familiar feeling in his chest, a tugging he'd felt before. Then a horrific screech split the night, and a long, low shape rose above the bear's rugged shoulder. Blacker than the night sky, it clove to the darkness. Wide, lambent eyes gazed down as its mouth closed around the bear's neck.

The bear roared and threw Caim away. He rolled over several times before crashing into the base of a tree. He tried to sit up and sucked in a short breath as a sharp pain erupted down his leg. He lay still, gasping in the snow, as the two beasts rolled across the ground, clawing and biting at each other. The bear's struggles grew weaker by the heartbeat; its attempts to dislodge the huge shadow slowed until the great animal finally collapsed in a heap.

A cold dread settled in Caim's stomach as the shadow beast released the bear's throat and stared at him from atop the shaggy corpse. Then it climbed down out of sight and disappeared. Caim craned his neck, but there was no sign of it. The pressure in his chest faded.

Caim reached up to touch the side of his face. His fingers found a warm slick of blood and the loose flap of his earlobe attached by a thin

membrane. With a grunt, he tore off the skin and dropped it in the snow. His body hurt all over. His forearm throbbed where the bear's teeth had shredded his jacket sleeve and the flesh underneath. Lines of blood dripped down his hand to stain the snow. A darker pool was spreading under his left leg from a set of long parallel gouges.

Moving slowly, Caim crawled past the carcass to the remains of his fire. He blinked back the darkness from the edges of his vision. He couldn't afford to pass out. Even if he didn't freeze, he would bleed to death before morning. The warmth of the fire pit felt good against his face and hands. Working quickly, he shoved his knives into the bed of coals. Then he sat up, wincing, and pulled open the gashes in his pant leg and sleeve. Blood poured from both sets of wounds. He pulled the first knife out of the fire and slapped its glowing red tip against the raw meat of his thigh. Blazing pain shot straight to his brain. For an instant he was back on the roof of the palace in Othir. Josey's face hovered over him, saying something, but he couldn't hear a word.

Reality returned as he pulled the cooling blade away. The stench of burnt flesh clogged the back of his throat. The leg wound was blackened and puckered, but most of the bleeding had stopped. Before he could think it through, Caim pulled the second knife from the coals and placed it across the two larger bite marks on his forearm. The pain wasn't as bad the second time, or maybe he was getting numb to it. When he was through, he slumped back on the ground.

Stars twinkled overhead. Save for a low buzzing in his head, the night was quiet. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep, but he fought it off and started crawling. He snagged the straps of his gear as he passed the wreckage of his lean-to. Dragging the bundles, he pushed onward into the night. If he kept moving until morning, he might survive. If his wounds didn't reopen while he crawled. If he wasn't visited by any more uninvited guests.

If. If. If.

With the buzz droning in his ears, he took it one painful inch at a time.