

Book One of the Last King of Osten Ard

The Witchwood CROWN

New York Times Bestselling Author

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Foreword



Rider and mount glided down the slope through stands of Kynswood trees, larches, shiny-leaved beeches, and oaks festooned with dangling catkins. Silent and surprising, the pair appeared first in one beam of bright sunlight then another at a speed that would have startled any merely mortal eye. The rider's pale cloak seemed to catch and reflect the colors all around, so that an idle or distracted glance would have seen only a hint of movement, imagined only wind.

The warmth of the day pleased Tanahaya. The music of forest insects pleased her too, the whirring of grasshoppers and the hum of busy honey-makers. Even though the smell of the mortal habitation was strong and this patch of forest only a momentary refuge, she spoke silent words of gratitude for an interlude of happiness.

Praises, Mother Sun. Praises for the growing-scents. Praise for the bees and their goldendance.

She was young by the standards of her people, with only a few centuries upon the broad earth. Tanahaya of Shisae'ron had spent many of those years in the saddle, first as messenger for her clan's leader, Himano of the Flowering Hills, then later, after she had made her worth known to the House of Year-Dancing, performing tasks for her friends in that clan. But this errand to the mortals' capital seemed as if it might be the most perilous of all her journeys, and was certainly the strangest. She hoped she was strong and clever enough to fulfill the trust of those who had sent her.

Tanahaya had been described as wise beyond her years, but she still could not understand the importance her friends placed on the affairs of mortals—especially the short-lived creatures who inhabited this particular part of the world. That was even more inexplicable now, when it seemed clear to her that the Zida'ya could no longer trust any mortals at all.

Still, there was the castle she had been seeking, its highest roofs just visible through the trees. Looking at its squat towers and heavy stone walls, it was hard for Tanahaya to believe that Asu'a, the greatest and most beautiful city of her people, had once stood here. Could anything of their old home be left in this pile of clumsy stone that men called the Hayholt?

I must not think of what might be true, of what I fear or what I hope. Horse and rider moved down the slope. I must see only what is. Otherwise I fail my oath and I fail my friends.

She stopped at the edge of the trees. “*Tsa, Spidersilk,*” she whispered, and the horse stood in silence as Tanahaya listened. New noises wafted up the slope to her, as well as a new and not entirely welcome scent, the animal tang of unwashed mortals. Tanahaya clicked her tongue and Spidersilk stepped aside into shadow.

She had a hand on the hilt of her sword when a golden-haired girl dashed into the sunlight, a basket of winter flowers swinging in one hand, daffodils and snowdrops and royal purple crocuses. Tanahaya’s senses told her the child was not alone, so she stayed hidden in the shadows between trees as a half-dozen armed soldiers followed the child in gasping, clanking pursuit. After a moment, Tanahaya relaxed: it was clear the mortals did not mean to harm the little one. Still, she was surprised that mortal soldiers were so heedless of danger: she could have put arrows in most of them before they even realized they were not alone in the Kynswood.

A mortal woman in a hat with a brim as wide as a wagon’s wheel followed the armored men into the clearing. “*Lillia!*” the woman cried, then stopped and bent to catch her breath. “Do not run, child! Oh, you are wicked! Wicked to make us chase you!”

The child stopped, eyes wide. “But Auntie Rhoner, look! Berries!”

“Berries! In Marris-month? You little mad thing.” The woman, still trying to catch her breath, was handsome by mortal standards, or so Tanahaya guessed—tall, with fine, strong bones in her face. By the name the child had given her, Tanahaya guessed this must be Countess Rhona of Nad Glehs, one of the mortal queen’s closest friends. Tanahaya did not find it strange that a noble of high standing should be minding a child, though others might have. “No, you come back with me, honey-lamb,” the countess said. “Those are owlberries and they’ll make you sick.”

“No they won’t,” the child declared. “Because they’re forest berries. And forest berries have lots of magic. *Fairy magic.*”

“Magic.” The woman in the hat sounded disgusted, but even from such a distance Tanahaya’s sharp eyes could see the smile that played across her face. “I’ll give you fairy magic, *mu’ harcha!* You wanted to search for early flowers, and I brought you. We have been out for hours—and by Deanagha’s spotless skirts, look at me. I am filthy and bepricked with nettles!”

“They’re not nettles, they’re berry bushes,” said the golden-haired girl. “That’s why they have thorns. So nobody will eat the berries.”

“Nobody wants to eat those berries but birds. Not even the deer will go near them!”

The heavily armored soldiers, still struggling for breath in their heavy mail, faces gleaming with sweat, began to straighten up. The girl had clearly led them a long, wearying chase over the hillside. “Should we grab her, your ladyship?” asked one.

The countess frowned. "Lillia, it is time to go back. I want my midday meal."

"I don't have to do anything unless you call me 'Princess' or 'Your Highness'."

"What silliness! Your grandparents are away and I am your keeper, little lion cub. Come now. Don't make me cross."

"I wish Uncle Timo was here. He lets me do things."

"Uncle Timo is your sworn bondsman. No, he is your helpless slave and lets you get away with everything. I am made of harder stuff. Come along."

The girl called Lillia looked from the countess to all the dark bushes full of pale, blue-white fruit, then sighed and slowly walked back down the slope. If its handle had been any longer, her basket would have dragged in the loamy soil. "When Queen Grandmother and King Grandfather come back, I'm going to tell on you," she warned.

"Tell what?" The countess frowned. "That I wouldn't let you run away by yourself in the forest to be eaten by wolves and bears?"

"I could give them berries. Then they wouldn't eat me."

The woman took her hand. "Even hungry bears won't eat owlberries. And the wolves would rather eat *you*."

As the small party vanished back down the deer trail into a thick copse of oak and ash trees farther down the slope, Tanahaya watched with a kind of wonder. To think that little creature named Lillia would reach womanhood, perhaps marry and become a mother and grandmother, grow old and even die—all in not much more than one of her people's Great Years! It seemed to Tanahaya that being mortal must be like trying to live a full life in the space between falling from a high place and hitting the ground, a rush through wind and confusion to death. How did the poor creatures manage?

For the first time it occurred to Tanahaya of Shisae'ron that perhaps she might learn something from this task. It was an unexpected thought.

So this young creature was Lillia, she told herself, the granddaughter of Queen Miriamale and King Seoman—the objects of Tanahaya's embassy. She would be seeing that proud little bumblebee of a girl again.

Bumblebee? No, butterfly, she thought with a sudden pang. A flash of color and glory beneath the sky, and then, like all mortals, too soon she will become dust.

But if the fears of Tanahaya's friends proved accurate, she knew, then the end for that butterfly child and all the rest of the Hayholt's mortals might come even sooner than any of them could guess.

As she reined up again to examine the castle, she could still hear the faint rattle of the retreating soldiers and the golden girl's voice, no words now but just a musical burble rising from the forest below. The wind changed, and the stink of mortals, of unwashed bodies and unchanged garments abruptly deepened; it was all she could do not to turn around and retreat. She would have to accustom herself, she knew.

Tanahaya had never liked the squat, cheerless look of men's buildings any more than she cared for men's odor, and the Hayholt, this great castle of theirs, was no different. Despite its size, it seemed nothing more than a collection of carelessly built dwellings hiding behind brutish stone walls, one wall set inside another like a succession of mushroom rings. The entire awkward structure perched on a high headland above the wide bay known as Kynslagh, as though it were the nest of some slovenly seabird. Even the red tiles that roofed many of the buildings seemed dull to her as dried blood, and Tanahaya thought the famous castle looked more like a place to be imprisoned than anything else. It was astounding to realize that a few mortal decades earlier—an eyeblink of time to her people—the Storm King's attack on the living had ended just here, only moments from success. She thought she could still hear the great crying-out of that day and feel the countless shadows that would not disperse, the torment and terror of so many. Even Time itself had almost been overthrown here. How could the mortals continue to live in such a place? Could they not feel the uneasy dead all around them?

Watching the girl had brought her a moment of good cheer, but now it blew away like dust on a hot, dry wind. For a moment Tanahaya's hand strayed to the Witness in her belt-pouch, the sacred, timeworn mirror that would allow her to speak across great earthly distances to those who had sent her. She didn't belong here—it was hard to believe that any of her race could in these fallen times. It was not too late, after all: she could beg her loved ones in Jao é-Tinukai'i to find someone else for this task.

Tanahaya's impulse did not last. It was not her place to judge these short-lived creatures, but to do what she had been bid for the good of her own people.

After all, she reminded herself, a year does not dance itself into being. Everything is sacrifice.

She lifted her hand from the hidden mirror and caught up the reins once more. Even from this distance, the stench of mortals seemed unbearably strong, so fierce she could barely stand it. How much worse would it be when she was out of the heights and riding through their cramped streets?

Something struck her hard in the back. Tanahaya gasped, but could not get her breath. She tried to turn to see what had hit her, simultaneously reaching to draw her sword, but before it cleared the scabbard another arrow struck her, this time in the chest.

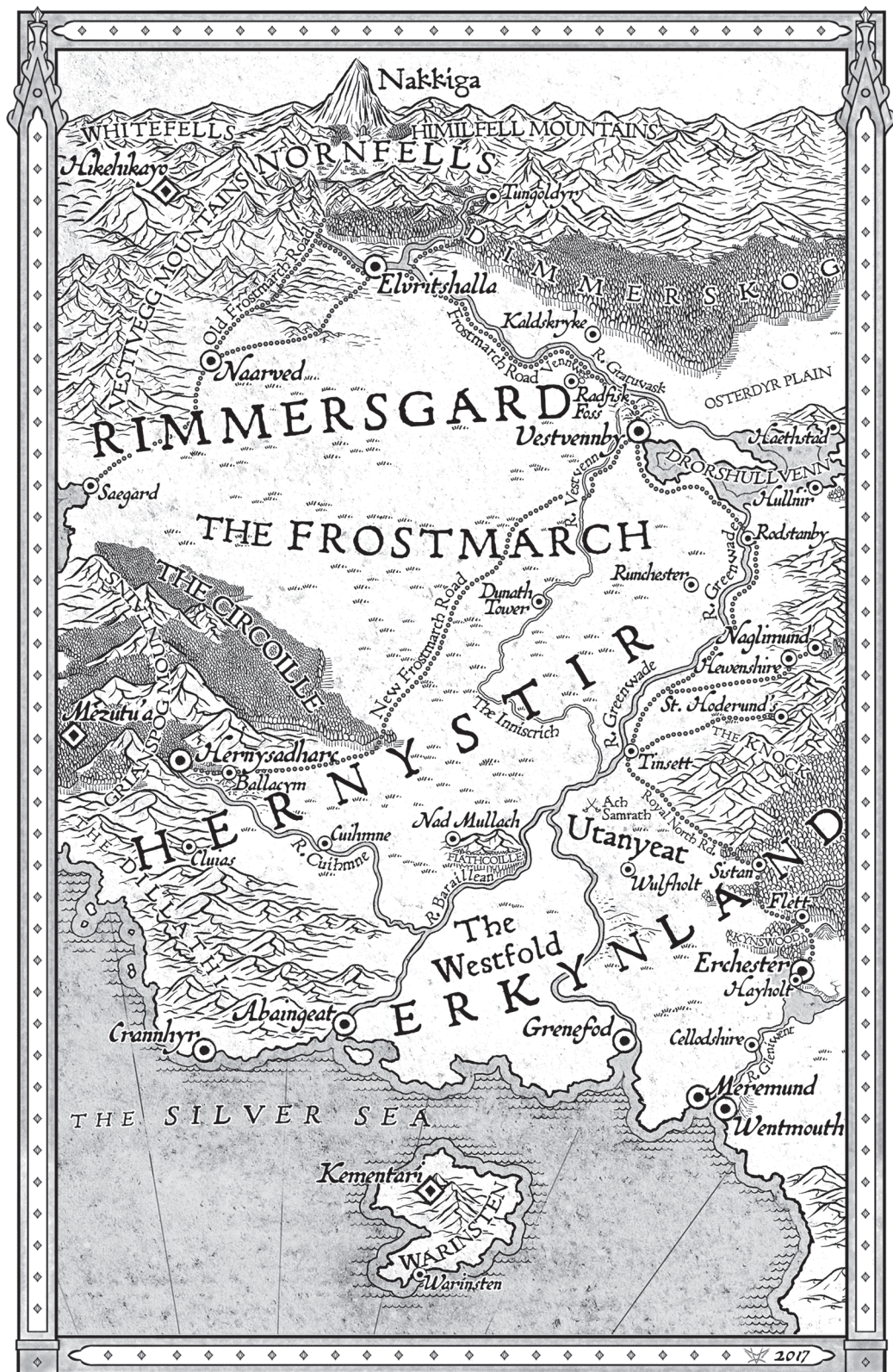
The Sitha tried to crouch low in the saddle but that only pressed the second arrow more agonizingly into her body. She could feel something like a cool breath on her back and knew it must be blood soaking her jerkin. She reached down and broke the second shaft off close to her ribs. Free of that obstruction but still pulsing blood around the broken shaft, she threw herself against Spidersilk's neck and clung tightly, aiming now only for escape. But even as she clapped her heels against the horse's side a new arrow hissed into the animal's neck just a handspan from Tanahaya's fingers. The horse reared, shrilling in

pain and terror. As Tanahaya struggled to hang on, a fourth arrow took her high in her back and spun her out of the saddle. She fell into air, and for a mad moment it seemed almost like flight. Then something struck her all over and at once, a great, flat blow, and a soundless darkness rushed over her like a river.

PART ONE



Widows



*Locusts laid their eggs in the corpse
Of a soldier. When the worms were
Mature, they took wing. Their drone
Was ominous, their shells hard.
Anyone could tell they had hatched
From an unsatisfied anger.
They flew swiftly toward the North.
They hid the sky like a curtain.
When the wife of the soldier
Saw them, she turned pale, her breath
Failed her. She knew he was dead
In battle, his corpse lost in the desert.
That night she dreamed
She rode a white horse, so swift
It left no footprints, and came
To where he lay in the sand.
She looked at his face, eaten
By the locusts, and tears of
Blood filled her eyes. Ever after
She would not let her children
Injure any insect that
Might have fed on the dead. She
Would lift her face to the sky
And say, "O locusts, if you
Are seeking a place to winter,
You can find shelter in my heart."*

—HSU CHAO

"The Locust Swarm"

The Glorious



The pavilion walls billowed and snapped as the winds rose. Tiamak thought it was like being inside a large drum. Many people in the tent were trying to be heard, but the clear voice of a young minstrel floated above it all, singing a song of heroism:

*“Sing ye loud his royal name
Seoman the Glorious!
Spread it far, his royal fame
Seoman the Glorious!”*

The king did not look glorious. He looked tired. Tiamak could see it in the lines of Simon’s face, the way his shoulders hunched as if he awaited a blow. But that blow had already fallen. Today was only the grim anniversary.

Limping more than usual because of the cold day, little Tiamak made his way among all the larger men. These courtiers and important officials were gathered around the king, who sat on one of two high-backed wooden chairs at the center of the tent, both draped in the royal colors. A banner with the twin drakes, the red and the white, hung above them. The other chair was empty.

As a makeshift throne room in the middle of a Hernystir field, Tiamak thought, it was more than adequate, but it was also clearly the one place King Seoman did not want to be. Not today.

*“With hero’s sword in his right hand
And nought but courage in his heart
Did Seoman make his gallant stand
Though cowards fled apart*

*“When the hellspawned Norms did bring
Foul war upon the innocent
And giants beat upon the gates
And Norm sails filled the Gleniwent . . .”*

"I don't understand," said the king loudly to one of the courtiers. "In truth, my good man, I haven't understood a thing you've said, what with all this shouting and caterwauling. Why should they have to lime the bridges? Do they think we are birds that need catching?"

"Line the bridges, sire."

The king scowled. "I know, Sir Murtach. It was meant as a jest. But it still doesn't make any sense."

The courtier's determined smile faltered. "It is the tradition for the people to line up along the bridges as well as the roads, but King Hugh is concerned that the bridges might not stand under the weight of so many."

"And so *we* must give up our wagons and come on foot? All of us?"

Sir Murtach flinched. "It is what King Hugh requests, Your Majesty."

*"When armies of the Stormlord came
Unto the very Swertclif plain
Who stood on Hayholt's battlements
And bade them all turn back again?"*

*"Sing ye loud his royal name
Seoman the Glorious!
Spread it far, his royal fame
Seoman the Glorious!"*

King Simon's head had tipped to one side. It was *not* the side from which he was being urgently addressed by another messenger, who had finally worked his way to a place beside the makeshift throne. Something had distracted Simon. Tiamak thought that seeing the king's temper fray was like watching a swamp flatboat beginning to draw water. It was plain that if someone didn't do something soon, the whole craft would sink.

*"He slew the dragon fierce and cold
And banished winter by his hand
He tamed the Sithi proud and old
And saved the blighted, threatened land . . ."*

Murtach was still talking in one royal ear, and the other messenger had started his speech for the third time when Simon suddenly stood. The courtiers fell back swiftly, like hunting hounds when the bear turns at bay. The king's beard was still partly red, but he had enough gray in it now, as well as the broad white stripe where he had once been splashed by dragon's blood, that when his anger was up he looked a bit like an Aedonite prophet from the old days.

"That! That!" Simon shouted. "It's bad enough that I cannot hear myself think, that every man in camp wants me to do something or . . . or not do

something . . . but must I listen to such terrible lies and exaggerations as well?" He turned and pointed his finger at the miscreant. "Well? Must I?"

At the far end of the king's finger, the young minstrel stared back with the round eyes of a quiet, nighttime grazer caught in the sudden glare of a torch. He swallowed. It seemed to take a long time. "Beg pardon, Majesty?" he squeaked.

"That song! That preposterous song! '*He slew the dragon fierce and cold*'—a palpable lie!" The king strode forward until he towered over the thin, dark-haired singer, who seemed to be melting and shrinking like a snowflake caught in a warm hand. "By the Bloody Tree, I never killed that dragon, I just wounded it a bit. I was terrified. And I didn't tame the Sithi either, for the love of our lord Usires!"

The minstrel looked at up at him, mouth working but without sound.

"And the rest of the song is even more mad. Banished the winter? You might as well say I make the sun rise every day!"

"B-But . . . but it is only a song, Majesty," the minstrel finally said. "It is a well-known and well-loved one—all the people sing it . . ."

"Pfah." But Simon was no longer shouting. His anger was like a swift storm—the thunder had boomed, now all that was left was cold rain. "Then go sing it to all the people. Or better yet, when we return to the Hayholt, ask old Sangfugol what really happened. Ask him what it was truly like when the Storm King's darkness came down on us and we all pissed ourselves in fear."

A moment of confused bravery showed itself on the young man's face. "But it was Sangfugol who *made* that song, Your Majesty. And he was the one who taught it to me."

Simon growled. "So, then all bards are liars. Go on, boy. Get away from me."

The minstrel looked quite forlorn as he pushed his way toward the door of the pavilion. Tiamak caught at his sleeve as he went by. "Wait outside," he told the singer. "Wait for me."

The young man was so full of anguish he had not truly heard. "I beg pardon?"

"Just wait outside for a few moments. I will come for you."

The youth looked at the little Wrannaman oddly, but everyone in the court knew Tiamak and how close he was to the king and queen. The harper blinked his eyes, doing his best to compose himself. "If you say so, my lord."

Simon was already driving the rest of the courtiers from the pavilion. "Enough! Leave me be now, all of you. I cannot do everything, and certainly not in one day! Give me peace!"

Tiamak waited until the wave of humanity had swept past him and out of the tent, then he waited a bit longer until the king finished pacing and dropped back onto his chair. Simon looked up at his councilor and his face sagged with unhappiness and useless anger. "Don't look at me that way, Tiamak."

The king seldom lost his temper with those who served him, and was much loved for it. Back home in Erkyndland many called him “the Commoner King” or even “the Scullion King” because of his youthful days as a Hayholt dogsbody. Generally Simon remembered very well indeed what it felt like to be ignored or blamed by those with power. But sometimes, especially when he was in the grip of such heartache as he was today, he fell into foul moods.

Tiamak, of course, knew that the moods seldom lasted long and were followed quickly by regret. “I am not looking at you in any particular way, Majesty.”

“Don’t mock me. You are. It’s that sad, wise expression you put on when you’re thinking about what a dunderhead one of your monarchs is. And that monarch is nearly always me.”

“You need rest, Majesty.” It was a privilege to speak as old friends, one that Tiamak would never have presumed on with others in the room. “You are weary and your temper is short.”

The king opened his mouth, then shook his head. “This is a bad day,” he said at last. “A very bad day. Where is Miriamele?”

“The queen declined any audiences today. She is out walking.”

“I am glad for her. I hope she is being left alone.”

“As much as she wishes to be. Her ladies are with her. She likes company more than you do on days like this.”

“Days like this, I would like to be on the top of a mountain in the Trollfells with Binabik and his folk, with nothing but snow to look at and nothing but wind to hear.”

“We have plenty of wind for you here in this meadow,” Tiamak said. “But not too much snow, considering that there is still almost a fortnight of winter left.”

“Oh, I know what day it is, what month,” Simon said. “I need no reminding.”

Tiamak cleared his throat. “Of course not. But will you take my advice? Rest yourself for a while. Let your unhappiness cool.”

“It was just . . . hearing that nonsense, over and over . . . Simon the hero, all of that. I did not seem such a hero when my son . . .”

“Please, Majesty.”

“But I should not have taken it out on the harper.” Again, the storm had blown over quickly, and now Simon was shaking his head. “He has given me many a sweet hour of song before. It is not his fault that lies become history so quickly. Perhaps I should tell him that I was unfair, and I am sorry.”

Tiamak hid his smile. A king who apologized! No wonder he was tied to his two monarchs with bonds stronger than iron. “I will confess, it was not like you, Majesty.”

“Well, find him for me, would you?”

“In truth, I think he is just outside the tent, Majesty.”

“Oh, for the love of St. Tunath and St. Rhiap, Tiamak, would you please stop calling me ‘Majesty’ when we’re alone? You said he was nearby?”

"I'll go see, Simon."

The minstrel was indeed near, cowering from the brisk Marris winds in a fold of tent wall beside the doorway. He followed Tiamak back into the pavilion like a man expecting a death sentence.

"There you are," the king said. "Come. Your name is Rinan, yes?"

The eyes, already wide, grew wider still. "Yes, Majesty."

"I was harsh to you, Rinan. Today . . . I am not a happy man today."

Tiamak thought that the harper, like everyone else in the royal court, knew only too well what day it was, but was wise enough to stay quiet while the king struggled to find words.

"In any case, I am sorry for it," the king said. "Come back to me tomorrow, and I will be in a better humor for songs. But have that old scoundrel Sangfugol teach you a few lays that at least approach the truth, if not actually wrestle with it."

"Yes, sire."

"Go on then. You have a fine voice. Remember that music is a noble charge, even a dangerous charge, because it can pierce a man's heart when a spear or arrow cannot."

As the young man hurried out of the pavilion, Simon looked up at his old friend. "I suppose now I must bring back all the others and make amends to them as well?"

"I see no reason why you should," Tiamak told him. "You have already given them all the hours since you broke your fast. I think it might be good for you to eat and rest."

"But I have to reply to King Hugh and his damned 'suggestions,' as he calls them." Simon tugged at his beard. "What is he about, Tiamak? You would think with all these nonsensical conditions, he would rather not have us come to Hernysadharc at all. Does he resent having to feed and house even this fairly small royal progress?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's not so. The Hernystiri are always finicky with their rituals." But secretly Tiamak did not like it either. It was one thing to insist on proper arrangements, another thing to keep the High King and High Queen waiting in a field for two days over issues of ceremony that should have been settled weeks ago. After all, the king of Hernystir would not have a throne at all were it not for the High Ward that Simon and Miriamele represented. Hernystir only had a king because Miri's grandfather, King John, had permitted it under his own overarching rule. Still, Tiamak thought, Hugh was a comparatively young king: perhaps this rudeness was nothing more than a new monarch's inexperience. "I am certain Sir Murtach, Count Eolair, and I will have everything set to rights soon," he said aloud.

"Well, I hope you're right, Tiamak. Tell them we agree to everything and to send us the be-damned invitation tomorrow morning. It's a sad errand that brings us this way in the first place, and today is a sad anniversary. It seems pointless to dicker about such things—how many banners, how high the

thrones, the procession route . . .” He wagged his hand in disgust. “If Hugh wishes to make himself look important, let him. He can act like a child if he wants, but Miri and I don’t need to.”

“You may be doing the king of Hernystir a disservice,” said Tiamak mildly, but in his heart of hearts he didn’t think so. He truly didn’t think so.



“Can we swim in it, Papa?”

The black river was fast and silent. “I don’t think so, son.”

“And what’s on the other side?” the child asked.

“Nobody knows.”

It was a mixture of Simon’s dreams and memories, made partly from the time he had taken young John Josua down to Grenburn Town near the river to see the flooding. In the wake of the Storm King’s defeat the winters had grown warmer, and in the years after the fall of the tower, spring thaws had swollen the rivers of Erkyndland until they overflowed their banks, turning fields on both sides of the Gleniwent into a great plain of water, with islands of floating debris that had once been houses and barns. John Josua had been nearly five years of age when Simon took him to Grenburn, and full of questions. Not that he had ever stopped being full of questions.

“Don’t cross the river, Papa,” his dream-son told him.

“I won’t.” Simon didn’t laugh, but in life he had, amused by the boy’s solemn warning. “It’s too wide, John Josua. I’m a grown man but I don’t think I could swim so far.” He pointed to the far side, a place where the fields were higher. It was farther than Simon could have shot an arrow.

“If I went across, would you come after me?” the child asked. “Or if I fell in?”

“Of course.” He remembered saying it with such certainty. “I would jump in and pull you out. Of course I would!”

But something was distracting him, some dream noise that he knew he should ignore, but it was hard not to notice the hard-edged baying of hounds. All his life since the weird white Stormspike pack had chased him, Simon had found that the noise of howling dogs chilled his blood.

“Papa?” The boy sounded farther away than he had a moment before, but Simon had turned his back on the river to look out across fields that were darkening as the sun disappeared behind the clouds. Somewhere in the distance a shape moved across the ground, but it moved like a single thing—no hunting pack, but a single hunting *thing* . . .

“Papa?”

So faint! And the little prince was no longer holding his hand—how had that happened? Even though it was only a dream, though Simon half-knew he was in bed and sleeping, he felt a dreadful cold terror rush through him, as if the very blood was freezing in his brains. His son was no longer beside him.

He looked around wildly but at first saw nothing. In the distance the

mournful, scraping noise of the hounds grew louder. Then he saw the little head bobbing on the dark river, the small hands lifted as if to greet some friend—a false friend, a lying friend—and his heart shuddered as though it would stop. He ran, he was running, he had been running forever but still he came no closer. The clouds thickened overhead and the sunlight all but vanished. He thought he could hear a terrible, thin cry and the sound of splashing, but although he threw himself toward the place he had last seen the child, he could get no closer.

He screamed, then, and leaped, as if he could cross all that uncrossable difference by the sheer strength of his need . . . of his regret.

“Simon!”

A cool hand was on his forehead, not so much soothing him as holding him back, imprisoning him. For a moment he was so maddened with terror that he reached up to strike the obstacle out of his way, then he heard her gasp, surprised by his sudden movement, and he remembered where he was.

“M—Miri?”

“A bad dream, Simon. You’re having a bad dream.” When she felt his muscles unknot, she took her hand from his head. She also had an arm around his chest, which she loosed before letting herself back down beside him in the disordered bed. “Shall I call for someone to bring you something?”

He shook his head, but of course she couldn’t see him. “No. I’ll . . .”

“Was it the same dream as last time? The dragon?”

“No. It was about John Josua when he was little. Of course—I haven’t been able to think of anything else for days.”

Simon lay staring up into the darkness for a long time. He could tell by her breathing she had not gone back to sleep either. “I dreamed of him,” he said at last. “He got away from me. I chased him but I couldn’t reach him.”

She still didn’t speak, but she put a hand against his cheek and left it there.

“Seven years gone, Miri, seven years since that cursed fever took him, and still I can’t stop.”

She stirred. “Do you think it is any different for me? I miss him every moment!”

He could tell by her voice that she was angry, although he did not know exactly why. How could the priests say that death came as the great friend when instead it came like an army, taking what it wished and destroying peace even years after it had withdrawn? “I know, dear one. I know.”

After a while, she said, “And think—we have the ninth of Marris every year from now until the end of time. It was such a happy day once. When he was born.”

“It still should be, my dear wife. God takes everyone back, but our son gave us an heir before we lost him. He gave us a great deal.”

“An heir.” The edge in her voice was brittle. “All I want is *him*. All I want is John Josua. Instead we are lumbered with *her* for the rest of our lives.”

"You said yourself that the Widow is a small price to pay for our granddaughter, not to mention our grandson and heir."

"I said that before Morgan became a young man."

"Hah!" Simon wasn't actually amused, but it was better than cursing. "Scarcely a man yet."

Miriamele took a careful breath before speaking. "Our grandson is seventeen years old. Much the same age that you were when we were first wed. Man enough to be taking his fill of the ladies. Man enough to spend his days drinking and dicing and doing whatever takes his fancy. You did not do the same at that age!"

"I was washing dishes, and peeling potatoes and onions, and sweeping the castle, my dear—but not by choice. And then I fought for Josua—but that was not really by choice, either."

"Still. With ne'er-do-well companions like the ones he has, how will Morgan grow? He will bend to their shape."

"He will grow out of this foolishness, Miri. He must." But Simon didn't entirely believe it. Their living grandson sometimes seemed as lost to him as the son who had been swept away into the black river of death.

After another silent time in the dark, she said, "And I miss our little one, too. I mean our granddaughter." Miriamele put her arm across her husband's belly, moving closer. He could feel the tightness in her muscles. "I wish we hadn't left her home. Do you think she's being good for Rhona?"

"Never." He actually laughed a little. "You worry too much, my love. You know we could not bring Lillia. It's still winter in Rimmersgard and the air will be full of ice and fever. We brought the grandchild who would benefit from being with us."

"Benefit. How could anyone who has already lost a parent benefit from watching a good old man die?"

"Prince Morgan needs to learn that he is not just himself. He is the hope of many people." Simon felt sleep pulling at him again, finally. "As are you and I, my wife." He meant it kindly, but he felt her stiffen again. "I must sleep. You, too. Don't lie there and fret, Miri. Come closer—put your head on my chest. There." Sometimes, especially when she was unhappy, he missed her badly, even though she was only a short distance away.

Just as she began to settle her head on his chest, she stiffened. "His grave!" she whispered. "We didn't . . ."

Simon stroked her hair. "We did. Or at least Pasevalles promised in his last letter that he would take flowers, and also that he would make certain Archbishop Gervis performs John Josua's *mansa*."

"Ah." He felt her stiff muscles loosen. "Pasevalles is a good man. We're lucky to have him."

"We are indeed. Now we should both sleep, Miri. It will be a busy day tomorrow."

"Why? Is Hugh finally going to let us in?"

"He'd better. I'm losing my patience."

"I never liked him. Not from the first."

"Yes, but you don't like many people at the first, dear one." He let his head roll sideways until it touched hers.

"That's not true. I used to." She pushed a little closer. The wind was rising again, making the tent ropes hum outside. "I had more love in me, I think. Sometimes now I fear I have used it all."

"Except for me and your grandchildren, yes?"

She waited an instant too long for Simon's liking. "Of course," she said. "Of course." But this anniversary had always been blighted since their son had died. Small wonder that she was bitter.

Somewhere during the wind's song, Simon fell asleep again.