

FORGOTTEN REALMS

HEIRS OF PROPHECY

Lisa Smedman





PROLOGUE

The Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR)

Crowned by the horns of a rising crescent moon, the stone stood in the forest, dappled with shadow and enfolded deep in the whispers and creaks of trees moving in the wind. Four times the height of a person and wider than extended arms could reach, it had been hewn from a single slab of gray granite, then polished by ancient crafters until it was as smooth and glossy as the surface of a still lake.

A solitary figure kneeled before the stone, his knees and bare feet denting the loamy ground. Dressed in short leather breeches with fringe at the knees and a leather vest tooled in an oak-leaf pattern, he held a bow, the ends of which had been carved in the shape of acorns. The fingers and thumb that gripped that bow were dark, though the hand itself was no ruddier than was usual for his race.

The figure's dark auburn hair was pulled back in a single braid, revealing sharply pointed ears, the left one pierced near its tip with a length of gilded bone. The elf's face was long and narrow with almond-shaped eyes, and framed by bangs that hung in a series of tiny fringelike braids. A small black feather was woven into the tip of each braid and fluttered against his forehead in the wind. At his throat was a glint of gold: a ring that hung on a leather thong.

With his free hand he reached out, touching the stone with slender fingers. As they rested upon its surface, moonlight revealed the delicate tracery of ink on skin that made the digits appear darker than the rest of his hand. A single, broad line had been tattooed along the back of each finger, another along the thumb. Smaller lines feathered out from these root lines, giving his digits the appearance of dark quills.

Feather-fingers moved upon the Standing Stone, tracing the words that had been inscribed upon it more than thirteen centuries before. Twining around the base of the stone like a vine around a tree, the inscription—written in *Espruar*, the flowing script of the elves—commemorated the ancient pact between Cormanthor and the humans of the Dales.

The kneeling figure whispered it aloud, from memory. "For thus have the humans of the East solemnly sworn: No axe shall fell the Forest, nor road cross it, nor settlement or farm reduce it, nor invasion claim it, so long as there are elves in this Wood. In return, the Elven Court grants the humans from the East full title to the lands surrounding Cormanthor, to tend and sow as they will. Let this stone stand as a permanent monument to this our solemn pact. For so long as the friendship and trust between our two races endures, so long this stone shall . . ."

Where the final word should have been was only a dark, empty space. The flowing script vanished into a split in the stone. More than four fingers wide at the

base, the crevice rapidly narrowed, but a thin crack continued up the front of the monument, marring its smooth surface.

Tracing this crack with a fingertip, the elf slowly stood. The line ended at a point even with his heart.

The elf drew a bone-handled knife from the belt at his waist and tested its tempered steel against a smooth section of stone. Metal grated against granite once, twice, thrice, eventually etching a faint line. Lowering his knife, the elf peered at the scratch he'd made, watching as it began to glow with a faint, silver light. As the wound in the stone healed itself, the elf slowly nodded. The magic of the Standing Stone was still intact.

Movement at the base of the monument caught the elf's eye. Sheathing his dagger, he kneeled swiftly. He reached into the crack in the stone with a slender finger and felt something round and rough that had an opening in its side. After a moment, he recognized it as a carefully woven ball of twigs and leaves: a hidden nest. The crack must have been there for some time, perhaps a month or more.

Gently probing inside the nest, his fingertips brushed against the soft back of a tiny bird with an upturned tail—a wren—who protested the intrusion with a sharp peck of her beak. Ignoring the warning, the elf quested further. Inside the nest were two tiny eggs, tucked under the wren's downy chest. A third egg, pushed to one side of the nest, was cold.

Dead?

The elf closed his eyes and turned his head, seeking out the direction of the breeze by its feel against his skin and the flutter of the feathers in his bangs. He whispered a prayer, letting the wind take his words. A moment later, the sound of a distant flute blew back on the wind. He inhaled sharply, taking it into his lungs, then concentrated its energy from lung to heart to veins to fingertips. Slowly, the egg grew warm under his touch. When it was the same temperature as the others, he nudged it back under the wren's warm chest.

The elf withdrew his hand, then stood. He turned away from the stone to peer through the darkened wood. No more than a few dozen paces from where he stood was a gap in the forest—the wide, bare slash that was Rauthauvyr’s Road. It was a wound in the forest that was growing wider, becoming more putrid, with each passing day.

As the clouds overhead thickened, the elf scowled. The Elven Court of years long past was wrong to have capitulated to the humans of the south, to have allowed the trees to be felled and the road to be built, breaking the sacred pact. It was a wonder that the stone had not split then, with the first stroke of the axe.

He spat. If he had been born five centuries earlier . . .

But he had not.

For four hundred and fifty years, human feet had stamped along that road, tramping through the Vale of Lost Voices and troubling the sacred sleep of those laid to rest between the roots of the mighty oaks.

A blight was spreading along that road, destroying the forest to either side and worming its way deeper into the wood with each passing day. Like fleas on a dog the blight must have been carried by humans.

It had to be stopped.

Trees creaked against one another as the wind picked up, and clouds scudded across the face of the moon, throwing stone and elf into shadow. Closer to the road, one of the blighted trees groaned as it was bent by the wind, then it cracked and came crashing down in a tangle of broken limbs. After a silence that stretched for a heartbeat or two, thunder grumbled in the sky to the east. The clouds overhead thickened, and the first drops of rain began to fall.

The elf turned his face up to the heavens, allowing the tears of the Leaflord to mingle with the tears flowing from his own eyes.

“These humans,” he vowed, in a voice as twisted as a gnarled tree root. “They will pay for what they have done.”

He slung his bow over his shoulder and squatted beside the stone, thrusting hands out to either side. A faint tingle began at his splayed fingers, and a shivery chill rushed up his arms. The transformation began. Tattooed fingers flattened and became feathers, arms elongated, changed articulation, and grew into wings. Vest and breeches turned into a covering of sleek black feathers. As the elf's head grew rounder and his nose and lips hardened into a beak, his body shrank, continuing the shift until he stood on three-toed feet.

Shaking the rain from his feathers, the elf-become-crow gave a single loud caw. A heartbeat later, the cry was echoed by a bright flash of lightning.

The crow launched itself into the air, circled the Standing Stone once, then winged its way to the southeast through darkening skies.



CHAPTER 1

Larajin stared at the face that looked up at her from the pages of the leather-bound book she held in her lap. The woodcut image, printed more than a century before, showed a wild elf with a long, narrow face and high forehead. Tucked behind his pointed ears were braids tied with bits of bone and feather. Feral, almond-shaped eyes glared above cheeks tattooed with thick, black lines.

Bare-chested and clad only in rough leather breeches, the elf stood in a forest, surrounded by the trunks of massive trees, thick ferns hiding all but the top of his fringed moccasins. He gripped a knife with a hilt made from a deer's hoof in one hand, a short bow in the other. Underneath the illustration was the caption: *Wild Elf Warrior of the Tangled Trees.*

Larajin ran a finger along the top of her own ear. It was smooth and round—a legacy of her human father, Master Thamalon Uskevren the Elder. From her mother—a “wild elf” of the Tangled Trees—Larajin had inherited her rust-colored hair, slim build, and impulsive nature.

What had her mother been like? Beautiful, certainly, to have lured the master’s affections away from his wife. Well respected by her people, Habrith had said, but Habrith—who was like an aunt to Larajin—had refused to tell her more. She said only that Larajin would find out on her own in due time, when the moment had ripened.

Larajin knew she would one day travel to the Tangled Trees, but something was holding her back. It was fear, perhaps, or the comforts of Stormweather Towers, or the fact that the few Elvish words she’d managed to glean from dusty old tomes would not enable her to make her complicated story understood.

A thud startled Larajin out of her reverie. She peered around the high back of the armchair in which she sat, thinking that someone had entered the library—that she was about to be caught handling the master’s precious tomes. She saw with relief that the door to the library was still closed and realized the noise had just been a book falling over on one of the shelves. From elsewhere in Stormweather Towers came the sound of raised voices, but in the hall outside the library, all was quiet.

On the carpet at her feet, a tressym sighed contentedly, eyes closed. The catlike creature sat like a sphinx, forepaws extended and wings tucked tightly against her back. Even folded flat, the wings were exquisitely beautiful. Unfolded, they rivaled a peacock’s feathers, with spots of brilliant turquoise, vibrant yellow, and ruby red, all edged in tabby-stripe black.

As if sensing Larajin looking at her, the tressym opened luminous golden eyes and inclined her head.

Brrow? she asked quizzically.

Larajin bent down to stroke silky, blue-gray fur. As

always, she was amazed at how the tressym trusted her. Anyone else foolish enough to try to pat the creature would have had her hand shredded by those sharp claws.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she chided. “You’re a wild creature—you should have flown back to wherever you came from, after I healed you. Why do you keep sneaking into Stormweather Towers? Don’t you know your being here is dangerous—for both of us?”

The only answer was a rumbling purr. The tressym closed her eyes and in a moment was fast asleep.

Larajin settled back into the armchair and turned the page, wrinkling her nose at the musty smell of age-spotted paper and old leather. The book was a history of the founding of Sembia, an unfortunately rather dry account of what must in fact have been truly heroic events. Larajin would liked to have learned more, for example, about the great clash between humans and elves at Singing Arrows in the year 884 DR. What had prompted the historians to give such a bloody battle so poetic a name? Also given short shrift was the visit to the Elven Court of Sembia’s first Overmaster, Rauthauvyr the Raven, in 913. Instead of describing elven customs, the author dwelled interminably on arcane legal arguments about whether or not Sembia had the right to construct a road.

There was one tantalizing detail, however. A footnote at the bottom of a page containing a list of the members of the council noted that these were not the “true names” of the elves. It added that every elf was given both a true name and a common name by his parents on the day that he was born.

Larajin had been named by her adoptive human mother, the servant Shonri Wellrun. Now she wondered—had the elf woman who died giving birth to her twenty-five years ago lived long enough to give her daughter a true name?

Lost in thought, Larajin heard the tressym hiss, but she paid it no heed, assuming the creature was reacting to something in a dream. A long shadow fell across the

pages, and a hand reached down and jerked the book out of her lap, causing Larajin to shriek in alarm.

"This is the final stone, girl," a deep voice growled.

Blushing furiously, Larajin looked up into the stern face of her nemesis: Erevis Cale, head servant and butler to the house of Uskevren. Tall and implacable as a tower, he glared down at her, a terrible wrath in his deep-shadowed eyes. The sleeves of his gray shirt were smudged with what must have been soot, judging by the strong odor of smoke that clung to him, and there was a small cut on his bald scalp, as if he'd banged his head on something.

"B-but, Sir," she sputtered, "it's long past dark, and my chores are done. I know that's a rare and valuable book, but I took great care with it and didn't bend any—"

"And what of the tallow you were melting on the stove?"

The quiet words stopped her cold, more than any shouted rebuke might have done. Her eyes widened as she remembered the last task she'd been assigned that evening: softening tallow for the servants who topped up the lamps in the evening. Despite the close summer warmth of the library, her stomach felt like sharp icicles had suddenly sprouted inside it. A question rose in her mind, one she dared not whisper aloud: How much of the kitchen had been burned?

Behind Cale, the tressym launched herself into the air, seeking the safety of the rafters. For the first time since the creature had followed Larajin back to Stormweather Towers, some eighteen months before, the butler ignored the fact that it had once again crept indoors. Instead he merely stared at Larajin, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Get up," he ordered. "This time the master himself will deal with you."

As she was marched to the door, Larajin heard him add, under his breath, "And this time, by the gods, I'll finally be rid of you."

The hallway to the master's study had never seemed so long. Steered by Cale's heavy hand on her shoulder, Larajin dragged her feet along the plush carpet, unwilling to face the disappointment she knew she would see in the master's eyes. Gilt-framed portraits of the Uskevren ancestors glared down at her from either side, and a suit of plate mail holding an axe stood as if waiting for Larajin to place her neck on the chopping block.

From behind the heavy oak door of the master's study came the murmurs of two voices. As Larajin and Cale approached, the door opened. Through it came one of the kitchen staff—Aileen, a girl with wispy blonde hair who hid a shrewish disposition behind pretty smiles—carrying an empty decanter. She wore the formal Uskevren servant's uniform: a white dress slashed with blue, and a gold vest and turban bearing the Uskevren crest with its horse-at-anchor design. Tiny silver bells sewn onto her turban tinkled as she stopped short, obviously surprised to find Cale and Larajin in the hallway.

Larajin was suddenly aware that she had mislaid part of her uniform—again. Her own turban was lying forgotten in the library, and her long hair hung uncombed and tousled about her shoulders. Aileen noted this with a quick glance and crinkled her nose.

Aileen had halted with one hand still on the door behind her, which remained open a finger's width.

"The master has a visitor, Sir," she told Cale in a mincing voice. "He instructed that . . ."

Her eye fell on Larajin's shoulder, and the sooty mark Cale's hand had left there. Her lips twitched into a smirk.

"The master instructed that whoever caused the fire atop the stove be brought to him straight away."

Larajin turned to Cale to protest, but her words died on her lips when she saw the hard gleam in his eyes. He either couldn't see that Aileen was ensuring that the master would deal with Larajin more harshly after being interrupted, or he didn't care.

As Aileen scurried away down the hallway, Cale

marched Larajin to the study. As his hand fell on the door latch, a snatch of conversation came from behind the door.

“ . . . such drastic measures,” the master was saying. “Surely the Merchant Council must realize the reaction this will prompt. It came as no small surprise to me that the Hulorn encouraged this folly.”

Cale paused, obviously reconsidering the wisdom of an interruption. As a frown creased his brow, Larajin allowed herself a tentative shred of hope. Perhaps the butler would be forced to wait until morning to bring her to the master. By then, both their tempers might cool.

From the study came a second male voice, this one with a slight wheeze to it.

“The Hulorn was not the only one to cast a vote in favor. The council will stand behind its decision, come what may. Your opinion is that of the minority—even the Overmaster recognizes the necessity of responding to the attacks with swords, not words. The Dales have declared themselves neutral, and Cormyr has shown no interest in the squabble.”

The voice paused, then added in a seductive tone, “Thamalon, I hope you will give this matter careful thought. This may provide Sembia’s only chance to push the Red Plumes north. It may even provide an excuse to march on Hillsfar itself—an opportunity you’ve long been waiting for, or so I’m told.”

The master’s voice grew thoughtful. “We shall see.”

From inside the study came the clink of a glass being set upon a metal tray. It was followed an instant later by the rustle of robes and the *thunk* of a staff against the floor as someone approached the door. Cale’s hand dropped from the latch, and he moved away from the door, pulling Larajin with him as he made room for the departing visitor.

As the door swung open, Larajin’s eyes widened in alarm. The master’s visitor was a tall, dark-skinned man wearing smoke-gray hose and a doublet with crimson-slashed sleeves. Perhaps fifty years of age, he had eyes

that glittered like polished jet, dark, wavy hair, and a neatly trimmed beard that was no more than a thin line framing his jaw and chin—a Sembian affectation he had adopted, together with the doublet, since the last time Larajin had seen him. He leaned on a knotted bloodwood staff studded with dark thorns that had been pushed point-first into its blood-colored wood like tacks, forming a spiral design. A halo of upturned thorns crowned the top.

A tiny corner of Larajin's mind screamed at her to drop her eyes, as Erevis Cale was doing, to play the part of servant, to avoid drawing attention to herself. Instead she stared, mesmerized, at the staff. She had seen first-hand the deadly black bolts of magical energy that staff could produce, had watched in horror as they reduced a wild elf to a smoking husk in the Hunting Garden—and all because Larajin had seen what the Hulorn had done to himself with his foul magic.

Please, Goddess, don't let him recognize me, Larajin silently prayed, dropping her eyes at last and staring hard at the carpet. I'm a servant, only a servant. Invisible and silent.

If only she had stopped a moment to put her turban on. Perhaps he would not recognize her, even with her hair unbound. She'd been wearing different clothes then, had . . .

The Hulorn's wizard paused, directly in front of her. Ice flowed through her blood as his gaze slithered down, then up her body, coming to rest on her face.

"You look familiar to me, girl," he wheezed. "Do I know you?"

Somehow, Larajin found her voice. "I do not think so, sir. I'm just a servant. Perhaps you saw me waiting tables, during a previous visit to Stormweather Towers."

"This is my first visit to your master's house."

"Or you might have seen me on the streets or in the market," Larajin quickly added. "I'm often sent to do the shopping."

The wizard's eyes grew bored. "Perhaps that was it," he agreed.

Inwardly, Larajin sighed with relief as the wizard turned to leave, but just then, a familiar sound echoed down the hall.

Mrow?

The tressym padded out of the open library door, into the hallway. Head turning, she looked in Larajin's direction—and her ears flattened as she spotted the wizard. Baring her teeth in a hiss, she backed slowly away, then suddenly spun and leaped into flight, her brilliant wings flapping furiously. Landing delicately on a window ledge, she batted at the latch with a paw, opened the window with a shove of her head, then disappeared through it.

Erevis Cale muttered, "That's enough of you, cat."

He strode down the hall to snap the window shut.

Larajin froze, unable to speak, as the wizard turned back to her with narrowed eyes. He tipped his staff until the head of it was under her chin. Its thorns pricked her skin, causing her to flinch and jerk her head up.

Recognition burned in the wizard's eyes as they met hers.

"Does your master treat you well?" he asked in a whisper. "Would you like to come and serve the Hulorn, instead? Perhaps you could feed his pets."

Larajin's mind flew back to the rats she'd encountered in the sewers under the Hulorn's Hunting Garden. Misshapen monstrosities, they'd been altered by the Hulorn's dark magic to grow hooves, wings, horns—even a tiny human head. Larajin shuddered at the memory of their sharp teeth worrying her flesh. She'd fought them off once—and didn't want to face them again. The Hulorn's wizard was subtly letting her know what her fate would be, now that he knew who she was.

"Sir, I . . ." was all she could manage in response. Gods, was this all she could do—cower before him, meek as a mouse? At last she found her voice. "My master is too fond of me. I am like a daughter to him. He would never allow—"

“A pity,” the wizard answered, withdrawing his staff from under her chin. “You seem like a good servant—one who knows the value of being seen and not heard.” His voice dropped. “Of course, there are other, more certain ways to ensure silence, aren’t there?”

He turned away with a chuckle as Erevis Cale strode back to where Larajin stood. Cale gave the wizard a sharp look, and followed him with his eyes as the wizard made his way down the hall.

A moment later, the master appeared in the doorway. He appeared not to have overheard the exchange and merely nodded at the departing wizard’s back.

“Erevis,” he said, “please see Master Drakkar to the door.”

Cale glanced up sharply at this command, then turned and walked smoothly down the hall. The moment he was out of sight, the master said, “Larajin, a word if you please.”

Still shaking from her brush with the wizard, Larajin immediately launched into a defense of her actions. Now, more than ever, she needed the master’s goodwill.

“Master Thamalon,” she said, “I only meant to leave the tallow untended for a moment. The fire in the stove had burned down to coals. I didn’t realize it would—”

The master held up a hand, demanding silence. Deep green eyes blazed down at her from under a thick crop of wavy, snow-white hair. Surprisingly, though the conversation Larajin had just overheard seemed like a matter of state, the master was casually dressed, wearing a doublet with solid sleeves and soft leather house shoes over plain white hose. He’d obviously not been expecting a visitor so late at night. He closed the door of the study, then turned and spoke in a stern voice.

“Larajin, I would ask that you refrain, in the future, from describing my affections for you in the terms you used tonight.”

Braced as she was for a reprimand about the kitchen fire, Larajin was surprised by his words.

“Master, I don’t—”

“You don’t understand? No, I suppose not. I shall have to put it plainly, then. I am asking that you not, at any time or in any company—noble or common—describe my feelings toward you as being like that of a father for a daughter. People might draw . . . the wrong conclusions.” Heavy eyebrows frowning, he let his eyes bore into hers. “Do you understand me now?”

Biting her tongue, Larajin nodded. She understood all too well. Since that day last winter when Habrith had revealed that Thamalon Uskevren was Larajin’s father, Larajin had kept this secret close to her heart—like the obedient servant she had been raised to be. The only one she had confided in, so far, was Talbot.

She’d tried to summon up the courage to tell the master that she knew that he was her father, but whenever she’d been about to speak, the words fled from her lips. Now she could see the response they would have incurred. Not what she’d prayed for—acceptance and acknowledgement—but anger. The last thing the master wanted was to acknowledge the fact that he had sired a child on a wild elf of the Tangled Trees. Larajin was nothing more than an embarrassment to him. She was a thorn he deliberately pricked himself with, day in and day out, by keeping her as a servant—a reminder of something in himself that he abhorred.

The master accepted her silent reply with a nod, probably not even seeing the anger that was starting to smolder inside her. His lips parted, as if he were about to add something more, but whatever he was going to say was interrupted by a knock at the study door.

“Yes?” he asked.

The door opened, and Erevis Cale stepped into the study with a bow.

“Master Drakkar has departed Stormweather Towers,” he announced. “I’ll ensure that the driver of his carriage gets a good tip.”

“Very good, Cale.”

Larajin had heard master and butler use this code in the past, and understood what it meant. Cale had just assured the master that Drakkar's movements would be noted and reported. The master's suspicions about the wizard would do her little good. She could hardly tell him about Drakkar attacking her in the Hunting Garden without bringing up her wild elf heritage and with it, Thamalon Uskevren's indiscretion. After his stern warning never to even allude to this secret, she could hardly turn to him for help.

She would have to seek help elsewhere. Now that Drakkar knew who she was, Stormweather Towers was no longer a safe haven. She had to leave Selgaunt, and as soon as possible.

She dropped her eyes to the carpet as Cale folded his arms across his chest and scowled at her.

"Now then, Larajin," he began. "There is the matter of the fire atop the stove—a fire that could have spread to the rest of the kitchen, had it not been spotted—and the disciplinary action to be taken." He turned to the master, and added, "In light of the gravity of the error, I would suggest, Master Thamalon, that—"

The master sighed, and once again held up his hand. Cale fell into an obedient silence.

"I think we'll keep her away from the kitchen for the next little while," the master said. "Perhaps getting her out from underfoot will give you some relief. Assign her to serve in young Thamalon's tallhouse for the next month, and see how she fares there. As her punishment for causing a fire that could have burned Stormweather Towers to the ground, had it spread beyond the stove, Larajin is to immediately undertake the task of cleaning the mess in the kitchen. She is not to stop nor rest until the stove is returned to full working order and the pots are gleaming. She must do this alone, without assistance from any of the staff."

This last was directed at Larajin, who was meant to quail under the imagined enormity of the task, but her mind was on more pressing concerns—like whether the

Hulorn's men would arrest her the next time she ventured out onto the streets.

"Master Thamalon, I must protest," Cale sputtered. "The punishment is not severe enough. I would suggest—"

"Erevis Cale," the master said. "I am not interested in hearing your suggestions."

Larajin blinked in surprise. In all her years at Stormweather Towers, she had never heard the master use that tone with Cale. For the first time in memory, he was speaking to his butler as a servant.

Cale's face flushed, but he held his tongue. "As you wish, Master."

His eyes, however, spoke volumes as he turned to Larajin.

"Kitchen," he spat. "Now!"



Larajin studied her reflection in the mirror in Mistress Thazienne's bedroom. The emerald-green gown she wore was stiff with gold embroidery and seed pearls, its sleeves tight to the elbow and flaring with slashes of white from elbow to shoulder. The bodice was high and thrusting, the hemline low.

The gown was Thazienne's, the color designed to complement her sea-green eyes. It was a little long on Larajin—a good thing, since it hid the serviceable leather boots she was wearing—and a little loose in the bodice. With a bit of padding, it fit her well enough.

She'd tucked her hair up into a bun, and covered it with an elaborate cap hung with lace and trailing peacock feathers. Looking in the mirror, the only thing that gave her disguise away was her work-roughened hands, the nails still black with soot. Otherwise, she looked like her half-sister. It ought to work. The gods only knew how many times Thazienne had disguised herself as Larajin, when she wanted to creep about the city in the guise of a common servant.

She yawned, then stretched to ease the aching muscles in her neck and back. She'd spent long hours scrubbing the kitchen, under Erevis Cale's baleful glare. She was exhausted, but she couldn't afford to sleep—she had to get away from the city first.

Cracking open the door to Thazienne's room, she made sure the hallway was clear. She picked up the leather bag she'd packed for her journey and slung its strap over her shoulder. She'd raided the pantry after she finished cleaning the kitchen, and had filled the bag with enough food to see her through the next few days. The bag also held a kitchen knife, candles, flint and steel for kindling a fire, a light summer blanket, and a change of clothes.

Also inside the bag, tied into a handkerchief, were the few coins she'd been able to save over the years: mostly pennies and a handful of silver ravens. She hoped they'd be enough for a seat on a carriage to the neighboring city of Ordulin—perhaps even as far as Essemбра.

She crept down the darkened hallway to Tal's bedroom and slipped a folded letter under his door. She'd left a similar letter for her adoptive parents in the stables, where her father would find it in the morning. Their letter had been vague, saying only that she was in danger, and had to leave Selgaunt for a time—that she would send word to them later. She told her parents they shouldn't worry; she was going to a place where she would be under the goddess's protection. It wasn't exactly a lie. Her destination—the Tangled Trees—was watched over by Hanali Celanil.

Her parents, however, would assume that she meant the goddess Sune and that she was traveling to the House of Firehair—Sune's temple in the city of Daerlun. When they reported their daughter's sudden and seemingly inexplicable departure to the master, he would no doubt send agents after Larajin—and they would head west. Drakkar, if he followed them, would be thrown off the scent.

The letter she'd slipped under Tal's door included

more detail than the one she'd left for her parents. She'd included a description of her encounter with the Hulorn's wizard, whom she now was able to put a name to. Tal knew about Larajin's earlier brush with Drakkar in the Hunting Garden. He would understand the threat, why she needed to leave—and the need for secrecy.

Making her way through the wide halls to Stormweather Towers's grand front entrance—if Drakkar did have men watching the house, they'd probably be expecting her to slip out through the servants' door at the rear—she peered out a leaded-glass window at the darkened street. The time was halfway between midnight and dawn. At that hour, Sarn Street was virtually deserted. A boy walking on stilts tended the street lanterns, trimming their wicks and topping up their oil, and a solitary carriage clattered past on a side road, but the tallhouses that lined the street were, for the most part, dark and silent.

She was just about to open the door when the gleam of metal in a doorway across the street gave her pause. The lantern boy noticed it, too. He bent at the waist to peer down into the doorway, then straightened and moved away at a rapid clip. Inside the doorway, a figure shifted. It was a man clad entirely in black but with a helm that caught the lantern light. He was a member of the city guard.

Larajin had been right. The Hulorn's men were watching Stormweather Towers. They must have expected her to try to slip away, perhaps even counted on it. That way, she could simply be made to disappear, and Master Thalamon would never be the wiser about who took her or why. The gods only knew how many of the guard were out there, waiting and watching. Larajin wasn't going to make it on her own—even in disguise. She needed help.

She was only an initiate of the goddess Sune, not even a real cleric, and what little she knew of Hanali Celanil's worship was entirely self-taught from tomes in the master's library that had been written by human authors who hadn't been initiated into the goddess's mysteries, but perhaps . . .

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a heart-shaped locket. It was made of cheap metal, probably brass, that had been burnished to look like gold. Most of the finish had rubbed off long ago, and the original chain was long gone. Larajin had replaced it with a short circle of red embroidery thread, just wide enough to slip over her hand. She'd paid only a few pennies for the trinket, which she'd found in a peddler's stall in the market. Its value to her, however, was immeasurable—not because of the locket itself but because of what it held.

Larajin lifted the locket to her nose. From within came a faint, floral scent, as fresh as the day she'd placed the petal inside the heart. She knew that if she opened the locket, the petal would still be a bright red, flecked with gold.

The flower from which it had come—known as Sune's Kisses to humans, and Hanali's Heart to the elves—was sacred to both goddesses. Drawing its scent into her lungs, Larajin released it in the form of a whispered prayer.

"Sune and Hanali Celanil, hear my plea and shield me from my enemies. Cloak me with your breath, and make my footsteps as light as a lover's whispers."

The locket in her hand grew warm. From inside her clenched fingers came a faint red glow: the sign of magic at work. Thankful that her prayers had been answered—by Sune, it would seem, since the floral scent that accompanied Hanali Celanil's blessing was absent—Larajin slipped the string of the locket around her wrist.

She squared her shoulders and opened the door, trusting in the goddess to protect her. Even so, her heart was pounding in her throat as she descended the front steps that led to the street.

The air had a thick quality to it. A mist that glittered as though it were flecked with droplets of gold formed whorls and eddies in the street, obscuring the tallhouses on either side. Across the street, the guard stepped out of the doorway and squinted. He raised a hand, prodding

the air ahead of him like a blind man, and took a hesitant step into the swirling fog.

“Hey, lads, look sharp!” he called out. “Something’s up.”

Larajin smiled. She could see him, but he, it seemed, could not see her. Gathering up her gown so it wouldn’t rustle, she crept up Sarn Street on tiptoe, barely daring to breathe. Cloaked in the magical fog, she was all but invisible to the guard who was bounding up the front steps of Stormweather Towers, tripping in his haste to block the door. She was likewise unseen by the guard at the corner, and a third, who had been approaching down the cross street, only to be confronted by a cloud of golden mist. The latter drew his sword, and used it like a cane to probe the air ahead—a cane with a deadly point. He cocked his head as Larajin’s boots made a faint scuffing sound on the cobblestones, and he turned in her direction.

Larajin froze, watching with wide eyes as he moved toward her. If she kept utterly still, he might pass by her, allowing her to slip away. He came closer, sword probing, until he was within a pace of where she stood, then he walked by, continuing up the street toward the corner.

Then, like a man suddenly remembering something, he stopped. Larajin heard him sniff.

Too late, she realized that Thazienne’s gown was thick with perfume. In another instant, the guard would find her. Larajin did the only thing she could think of—she turned quickly in place and began walking toward Sarn Street, then deliberately blundered into the guard.

“Hey there!” he exclaimed, grabbing her shoulder. He leaned closer, and peered at her face through the swirling fog. “Who are you, woman?”

Remembering whom she was impersonating, Larajin squared her shoulders and gave the man a haughty glare.

“‘W-woman?’” she sputtered. “That’s ‘Mistress,’ if you please.”

As she spoke, she glanced out of the corner of her eye.

The other guards were still somewhere around the corner on Sarn Street, lost in the gold-flecked fog. She prayed that the man's startled question hadn't been loud enough for them to hear.

"Ah . . . Mistress, then," he said, nodding at her gown. Close enough to see her now, his eyes missed nothing—not the heavy bag over Larajin's shoulder, nor the toe of the boot that was peeking out from under her hem. His eyes narrowed. "What urgent business compels you out of your home and onto the streets this late at night?"

Larajin stared at him for a long, silent moment, imitating the way Thazienne had once stared down a young serving girl who had caught her climbing out a window late at night. The serving girl—Larajin—never reported it to the master.

"I am returning to Stormweather Towers after a . . . liaison," she said, falling into a flawless imitation of noble speech. "The business I was about was legal and therefore none of your concern. I am Mistress Thazienne, of House Uskevren, and when my father hears how you roughly accosted me and tore my sleeve, he will be sorely displeased. You can imagine what conclusions he will draw and what reports will reach the Hulorn's ears."

As she spoke, she grabbed a handful of slashed sleeve and yanked on it just enough to cause a small rip. The soldier's eyes widened at the sound of tearing cloth, and he took a step back. He bowed, sweeping a hand in the direction of Stormweather Towers.

"Mistress, I beg your pardon. Please proceed."

As haughtily as she could, Larajin swept by him, her gown rustling. After a few steps, a quick glimpse behind assured her that the guard could no longer see her. Immediately she gathered the skirts of the gown, turned silently around, and tiptoed past him—giving him a wide berth, so he wouldn't smell the perfume this time.

When she was certain she'd left the guard well behind, she broke into a jog, then a run. As she ran, she tried to decide which way she should go. The High Bridge lay to

the north, along Galogar's Ride. It was the only way out of the city for travelers bound for Ordulin, but Larajin could hardly head there. In another moment the guards would realize they'd been duped and would start searching for a "noblewoman" in a green gown. She needed somewhere close, somewhere she could change into a different disguise.

Habrith's bakery was just a few blocks away.

As she hurried there, Larajin chided herself for not thinking of Habrith earlier. Not only was the baker someone she could trust, she also knew the route to the Tangled Trees. It had been Habrith who set up the trading mission that took Master Thamalon there twenty-five years before. Larajin suspected that Habrith had made the journey more recently than that, as well. More than once, over the years that Larajin had known her, the baker had left her shop in the hands of apprentices who were able to say only that their mistress was "on a journey to the north."

With luck, Larajin might even be able to persuade Habrith to accompany her. If not, Habrith would at least be able to provide her with a fresh disguise and tell her how to reach the Tangled Trees—and what to expect when she got there.

Habrith's bakery was certain to be open, even at so early an hour. Bakers were early risers who began work while the rest of the city still slept, so that their loaves would be ready at dawn. Habrith was a perfectionist, who liked to supervise the baking herself. Her loaves might look simple, but the exotic mix of ingredients that flavored them demanded absolute precision in measuring—something her newest apprentice was still struggling to learn.

As Larajin rounded the corner onto Larawkan Lane, the smells of yeast and baking bread drifted down the road toward her. Mixed with them was the sour smell of the dung that a street sweeper was pushing to the side of the road with his broom. Larajin passed the front of the

shop, which had a closed sign on its door and its curtains drawn, and turned into the alley that led to the delivery door at the rear.

She'd no sooner stepped out of the street light than she heard a faint noise on the rooftop to her left. It sounded like a foot scuffing against roof tiles. Larajin caught a glimpse of what might have been a person crouching. She flattened herself against the wall and tried to decide what to do. Run the last few strides to Habrith's back door, and risk being taken down from behind? Or stay with her back to the wall, and attempt another spell?

Before she could begin her prayer, something hurtled down from the rooftop. Larajin spun to meet it, then heard a familiar sound.

Brrow?

The tressym landed in the alley and stared at Larajin with eyes that were twin pools of reflective gold, her head cocked slightly to the side. She folded her wings and padded toward Larajin, then butted her head into Larajin's leg through the stiff fabric of the gown, purring loudly. The tressym sat down and looked up, as if expecting to be scratched under the chin.

Her heart still pounding, Larajin let out a heavy sigh. Instead of patting the tressym, she flicked both hands at her.

"Shoo! You already got me into enough trouble tonight. Go away!"

The tressym's ears swiveled back, but she refused to budge.

Larajin didn't appreciate the tressym following her. She could ruin any disguise Larajin might adopt with one affectionate rub against her leg. Larajin might as well wave a banner with her name on it over her head. If the tressym hadn't been sacred to Hanali Celanil, Larajin might have tried to cast some sort of spell upon the creature.

A door opened behind her, spilling light into the alley. The scent of baking bread wafted out, making her mouth

water. From inside came the clatter of pans and the squeaking of a water pump.

“Larajin—is that you?” an older woman called. “By the gods, it is—and in a noble’s gown! What brings you to my shop in the middle of the night? Is something wrong? Are you in danger?”

Embarrassed at having her disguise seen through so easily, Larajin turned to face Habrith. The baker was in her late sixties, older than Larajin’s adoptive mother, but unlike Shonri Wellrun, she was hale and hearty for her age. Her face was wrinkled, but her dark brown hair, bound in a simple braid down her back, had yet to see a single strand of gray. A large apron covered her clothes. Against it, on a thong around her neck, hung a silver pendant in the shape of a crescent moon.

“You know me too well, Habrith,” Larajin answered, “and you’re right, I am in trouble. The wizard I told you about—the one who attacked me in the Hulorn’s Hunting Garden a year and a half ago—has discovered who I am and where I live. He’s threatened to . . . to ‘silence’ me.” She swallowed nervously and glanced up and down the alley, then shifted the strap of her bag slightly. It was biting into her shoulder. “The Hulorn’s men are looking for me even now. I need to leave Selgaunt as quickly and as quietly as possible.”

Thankfully, Habrith didn’t argue, though her forehead crinkled with concern.

“I knew this time would come,” she said quietly. “Where do you intend to go?”

“North, to the Tangled Trees.”

That got a nod of approval.

“I don’t know how to get there or how to introduce myself to the elves,” Larajin continued. “I thought you could help.”

Habrith glanced at the tressym, which was rubbing back and forth against Larajin’s legs, rustling the fabric of her dress.

“Isn’t that the creature you rescued from the Hunting

Garden? Are you taking her with you?"

"Not if I can help it."

That brought a wry smile to Habrith's lips. "I see. I think the tressym might have other ideas."

Larajin dropped her voice, even though the tressym was just an animal and couldn't possibly understand her words. "Perhaps you might offer her a bowl of cream in a room without windows and a lock on the door . . ."

As Habrith started to chuckle, the rubbing against Larajin's ankles suddenly stopped. Larajin looked down—just in time to see the tressym stalking away down the alley. An instant later she spread her wings and launched herself into the night. Larajin watched her disappear behind the rooftops.

Habrith shrugged, then gestured with a flour-dusted hand. "Come inside."

Larajin followed her into the delivery room of the bakery, piled high with sacks of flour and barrels of fresh milk. Habrith closed and latched the door, then pitched her voice low so the apprentices in the next room wouldn't hear her.

"Tell me, Larajin, have you scattered starlight upon the Pool of Reflection?"

"Habrith! Do you serve the Lady of Love also?"

The baker chuckled, and shook her head.

"Then how do you know about the first initiation ritual?"

Habrith smiled. "You've obviously taken it, then. That's good. It means you can wear the crimson robes."

Larajin absently fingered her heart-shaped locket, which was hanging against her palm. She'd taken her vows and pledged her love to Sune and had received formal training in those few spells the goddess had already seen fit to bestow upon her—simple healing, charms, and commands, and the obscuring mist she had just conjured up—but had yet to don a cleric's robes. She'd been hesitant to commit herself fully to just the one goddess, lest Hanali Celanil become jealous. She wondered if Habrith

was suggesting she become a full-fledged cleric of Sune and take shelter in the temple, turning her back on the elf goddess.

"It won't work," she said, thinking out loud. "I can't hide inside the temple for the rest of my life."

"How about just until dawn, then?"

That brought Larajin up short. "What do you mean?"

"A Heartwarder from the temple in Ordulin has been visiting our local temple for the past tenday," Habrith said. "She returns to Ordulin this morning, accompanied by four novices who will serve in that temple. One more novice wouldn't be noticed by the city guard, and even if she was—and was recognized—the guard wouldn't dare risk the wrath of the goddess by interfering with a Heartwarder."

Larajin smiled. It would work—she was certain of it. She was as good as out of Selgaunt.

"Once you get to Ordulin, there's a tailor I know who can help you," Habrith continued. "He's a half-elf, himself. He can give you the name of an elf in Essembra who can guide you to the Tangled Trees."

"Could you . . . accompany me yourself?" Larajin asked hesitantly. "At least as far as Ordulin?"

Habrith shook her head. "There's too much to attend to here in Selgaunt."

"The new apprentice, you mean?"

That brought a twinkle to the older woman's eyes. "Not exactly—let's just say I'm making sure the bread is buttered on the correct side, and leave it at that."

Larajin wondered what Habrith meant by that, but she knew better than to ask. Habrith often spoke in riddles, using plain language only when it suited her.

Habrith paused. Her eyes grew worried, and she fingered the pendant at her throat.

"I'm glad you came to me before leaving, Larajin. It's a dangerous time to be journeying north. The Heartwarder will see you safely to Ordulin, but once you pass there, you'll fare better under our protection."

Exhausted at having been up all night scrubbing the kitchen, Larajin took a moment to register this remark.

“Under whose protection?” she asked at last.

Habrith’s voice dropped to a whisper. She touched the pendant at her throat and asked, “Would you recognize this symbol, if the harp was still there?”

Larajin blinked in surprise as she realized what Habrith was referring to. The pendant, which Larajin had assumed was merely decorative, had a rough patch along the inside of the crescent where another portion of the design had broken away. Put a harp at the center of the crescent moon, and it became much more. It became the symbol of the Harpers, a vast network of clerics, rangers, and bards who worked silently and secretly to thwart the plans of unscrupulous mortals and evil gods alike. Larajin had been right—Habrith was no mere baker.

Larajin chastised herself for being such a fool. Why hadn’t she made the connection before? Then she realized the answer. Habrith seemed so innocuous, so nondescript, not a noble or a cleric but a baker, a common tradeswoman. She was widely traveled, it was true, but those travels could be explained as nothing more than trips to gather the spices and herbs that flavored her breads. All the while, she must have been secretly carrying out other, more pressing missions.

Habrith watched the understanding grow in Larajin’s eyes, and smiled. “There is more I could tell you about the Tangled Trees, Larajin, and about yourself, but that would just complicate things. You know what I always say.”

Larajin nodded, and recited Habrith’s favorite saying. “Simplest is best, and all ingredients in balance.”

“Exactly,” Habrith agreed. “Some things in life turn out better if allowed to come to fullness on their own time, like rising bread. I can tell you this, however. When you reach the Tangled Trees, you will be more than welcome. The forest elves have a surprise in store for you.”

“What is it?” Larajin asked.

Habrith held up a hand, and quoted her other favorite saying. “All in due time, and not a moment before.” She winked. “You’ll find out, soon enough.”