Beyond the Hanging Wall

Sara Douglass

“A rousing fantasy adventure.” — BOOKLIST
For all those still trapped beneath the hanging wall.
To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven…a time to weep, and a time to laugh…
Ecclesiastes, III: 1, 4
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PROLOGUE

The hound jerked to a halt, his head raised, his body quivering. There. Again. The secret whistle he had been trained to obey from puppyhood. Without hesitation he bounded down a small trail through the trees, following the sound only canine ears could pick up.

The other hounds attached to the hunting party did not recognise the whistle, and so they paid it no heed. Maximilian pulled his chestnut mare to a halt, frowning. Why had Boroleas bounded off like that? His mare fidgeted, eager to run, and Maximilian’s frown relaxed into a grin. Perhaps Boroleas had picked up the scent of a hart. The hound had more than proved himself in the six months since he’d arrived at court, the gift of an anonymous well-wisher for the prince’s fourteenth birthday, and Maximilian trusted the hound’s instincts. He looked about, still hesitating. The rest of the hunting party had spurred their horses after the pack of hounds following the trail north, and in the excitement no-one paid the prince any attention.

Maximilian’s grin widened as he made his decision, and he swung his mare after Boroleas. Let the pack follow the hare, he thought, for when I corner the hart I shall earn a place in the first ranks of the hunt.

The mid-afternoon light faded into dull gloom almost as soon as Maximilian urged his mare down the narrow forest trail. She was fleet of foot and eager to run, and soon drew close enough to the hound to allow Maximilian to see Boroleas’ dim shape racing between the trees.

The scent of the hart must be strong, he thought, for Boroleas to race so unhesitatingly. Caught fast in the thrill of the chase, Maximilian leaned still further over the mare’s neck, urging her to greater efforts.

Only the sounds of the forest followed Maximilian down the forest path. As yet, no-one had noticed his absence from the hunting party.

Boroleas gave a bay of excitement and leaped into a small glade dappled with pale forest light. Maximilian pushed his mare after the hound, convinced that Boroleas had finally cornered the hart, then lost his grip on reins and saddle as his mare twisted sideways in a massive shy.

The prince hit the grassy floor of the glade hard enough to knock the breath from his body and force dirt between his teeth. He lay still for a moment, then spat the dirt out and rolled slowly onto his back, blinking ruefully at the light as it filtered through the forest canopy. “Father will surely have words for me now,” he muttered, slowly sitting up and wincing at the grazes on the heels of his hands.

Then he raised his eyes to look for his horse and all thoughts of his father’s retribution fled from his mind. He was surrounded by silent horsemen, the last of them just emerging from the shadows behind the trees. Boroleas gazed incuriously at the prince. He sat quietly by the side of a horseman idly swinging a small whistle to and fro in one hand.

“What?” Maximilian said softly, half rising to his knees. All of the horsemen were dressed in brown leather body armour, their heads encased in dull metal helmets; black cloths, wrapped about the lower portions of their faces, hid their features. None wore markings or insignia of any kind.

To the last man, their eyes were cold and unblinking.

For the first time in his life, Maximilian felt the glimmerings of true fear. As the only heir to the throne of Escator, Maximilian’s father kept him well protected—too well, as far as Maximilian was concerned—thus his rush of excitement earlier when he’d thought to corner a hart all by himself.

Now he wished he were safe at home with his mother soothing his black hair back from his brow and his father reading him yet another lesson on the art of kingship.

His movements slow, Maximilian rose warily to his feet.

If he felt afraid, it did not show on his aquiline face.

One of the horsemen kicked his mount forward. “Well, well, Prince,” he said, his voice roughened with outlander accents and heavy with sarcasm. “Lost yourself, have you?”

The prince took a small step backwards, a hint of fear finally shining from his deep blue eyes.

The horseman laughed, harshly and gutturally, and turned his head slightly to one side. “Have you heated the irons, Furst?”

“Aye, my lord,” answered a man standing unseen behind the circle of horsemen. “But would it not be easier to kill him? Have done with the brat here and now?”

Now openly terrified, Maximilian whipped about on his heel, seeking escape, but the encircling, blank cold eyes left no room for hope.

As he stopped, his chest heaving, the horseman slid to the ground, drawing his sword with a chill rattle. “A
tempting suggestion, Furst. But no. Even though it has been carved on a changeling, the mark guards him from a murder. Now, no hesitation. We have our orders. Seize him!"

They searched for days, then weeks, and hope only faded after months. The people of Escator mourned with their king and queen, for Maximilian had been a beloved prince, and his disappearance spelt the end of the Persimius family, who had ruled Escator for centuries. 

Two years later a woodsman, searching for spoor in an isolated quarter of the great forest, stumbled on a pile of bones at the foot of a ravine. Horse bones, his sharp eyes saw, and those of a dog. Several of the bones were scored with raking claw marks, and the horse’s left femur had been ground by powerful jaws intent on finding the marrow. The woodsman raised his eyes, suddenly wary. But curiosity overcame wariness. What had happened to the rider? He spotted a trail through the rocks and climbed forward, his movements slow and silent. A little further down the ravine he found a deep overhang of rock guarding the entrance to a small cave.

A bear’s den. Now his every movement stiff with care, the woodsman edged into the shaded recess. He paused and sniffed. The air was rank with the scent of bear, but he could not see or hear any movement, and so he crouched down, quickly sifting through a pile of bones to one side. They were broken and gnawed, and all but unrecognisable. The woodsman almost turned away, but his eye was caught by the glint of something golden underneath one of the heavier bones.

He pushed the bone to one side—and his eyes filled with sudden tears. A beautifully worked golden ring lay among the detritus of the bear’s hunger.

The woodsman picked it up. It bore the insignia of the Manteceros, the symbol of the royal family of Escator. The woodsman bowed his head, his tears running free. Here lay what remained of the last member of the ancient house of Persimius. Six months previously the king had died, followed three short weeks later by his queen. Neither had ever recovered from their grief at the loss of their only child, and the king’s distant cousin, Count Cavor, had succeeded to the throne. 

“And best they be dead,” the woodsman mumbled, wiping his eyes with the back of one hand. “For it would have pained them greatly to have known of this sad end.”

He pocketed the ring, wondering whether he should make some attempt to bury these bones. But he decided against it. With the bear likely to return to its den at any moment he could not afford the time, and from what he could see there were few human bones left in this sad pile anyway. What remained of the prince was surely scattered from one end of the ravine to the other by this stage. It was a wretched resting place for a prince, but there was little he could do about it.

The woodsman shook his head, said a swift prayer for the dead prince’s soul, then moved out of the ravine as quickly and as silently as he could.

For weeks he debated whether or not to pass the ring back to King Cavor. Finally he kept it, not really knowing the reason why.
ONE
THE SUMMONS

Fifteen years later…

“Feel it?” Joseph Baxtor asked his son in gentle tones.

Garth raised his head and met his father’s compassionate brown eyes. He nodded slightly, and Joseph could see the sickness flicker across Garth’s face. He was proud of his son; despite the pain and decay that he obviously felt through his hands, Garth had not flinched nor loosened his grip on the hand of the woman who sat on the chair between them.

Joseph touched the woman gently on the shoulder. “I will mix grinnock and juminar powders for you, Miriam, and you must take them four times a day mixed with milk. With milk, mind, otherwise they will irritate your stomach.”

Miriam, a small and delicately boned woman in middle age, sighed and stood. Garth let go her hand and stepped back. If he felt any relief at breaking the contact between them he did not show it.

“The ache is getting worse,” she said, and Joseph held her eyes steadily.

“I will not lie to you, Miriam. I can take the worst of it away with the grinnock and juminar mixture, but you have a wasting growth inside of you. I can do nothing to stop its spread.”

Her dark eyes were anguished. “Not even with…?” She glanced at his hands.

Joseph folded them before him. “I am sorry, Miriam. In your case I can soothe, but little else.”

Miriam’s eyes filled with tears and, unasked, Garth stepped forward and took her hand again. He had his father’s depth of compassion and now his face, as did Joseph’s, radiated understanding and sympathy.

Miriam blinked, then she composed herself, grateful for Garth’s touch. “You are a good boy,” she said quietly, and patted his hand. “Mind your father’s lessons.”

Then she turned and picked up her coat.

Joseph helped her slip it on, wincing at her fragile shoulders and arms, and grateful that his thick dark beard hid his expression. Despite his years of experience, it never failed to distress him when he was faced with a disease he could do nothing for. And Miriam was a close neighbour and a friend. It would be hard watching her die. “Garth will come around later this afternoon with your powders, Miriam. If you need anything more, let him know then.”

Miriam nodded, then turned and left the surgery, her rope-sandalled feet whispering across the stone-flagged floor, her thin fingers clutching the coat about her.

As the door closed behind the woman, Joseph looked at his son. “Are you all right, Garth?”

Garth turned away, fiddling with some instruments on a tray to one side. He was a rangy youth, tall and raw-boned, but with warm hazel eyes and an open and friendly face under a mop of curly hair as dark as his father’s beard. On his twelfth birthday, almost four years ago now, Garth had entered his seven-year apprenticeship in the craft of physic with his father.

It was a craft he had been born to. Not only because Joseph was a master physician himself, but because Joseph had bequeathed the Touch to his son. For generations the Baxtor physicians had aided their knowledge of diseases and herbal powders with their gifted and sensitive hands. The Touch could not heal by itself, but it aided understanding, soothed hurts, and encouraged the processes of healing. In Garth the Touch was stronger than it had been for many generations; Joseph knew that one day he would be a physician of note.

But the Touch also acted as a conduit for malignant tumours that sometimes afflicted people, and Joseph realised Garth would be feeling physically ill himself after holding Miriam’s hand for some fifteen minutes. The Touch was a wonderful gift, but when a Baxtor boy began to demonstrate his burgeoning powers around nine or ten, it sometimes took him years to learn to cope with the pain and the death that would all too often flood into his own body through his hands.

“It was worse today than I have ever felt it before,” said Garth eventually, his voice strained, and when he turned back to his father Joseph could see how pale his face was.

He stepped over to his son and put his arm about the boy’s shoulders. “Miriam’s growth is particularly virulent, Garth.” He hesitated. “I wish I could say that you will become used to the feel of death, that you will become inured to it, but you never will. You must learn to accept it.

“Now,” he forced some cheerfulness into his voice. “Mother will have boiled the pot and made us some tea. Come. We can mix the powders in an hour or so. For now we both need the comfort of your mother’s smile.”
Nona had both tea and raisin buns hot from the oven for her husband and son. She locked eyes with Joseph as they entered the spacious kitchen from the surgery next door, knowing Miriam had been to see them, then glanced at Garth.

The youth smiled for her, but Nona could see the strain about his eyes. Well, she had become used to the strain about Joseph’s eyes, but it was a hard thing to see the lines now appearing about Garth’s eyes as well. Nona turned back to the stove for the teapot, wishing not for the first time that she had managed to bear another child, a child she would not lose to the Touch and to the demanding craft of physic.

And, to add to her worries, there was the matter of the sealed letter the courier had delivered earlier.

“Well now,” she smiled, placing the pot on the table, “you have kept Garth in there too long, Joseph. Breakfast was hours ago. Sit down and have something to eat.”

Joseph and Garth sat silently, letting Nona bustle about them, their faces relaxing in the warm spring sunshine and the reassuring sounds of the street that flooded in through the open windows. When Joseph had set up his practice in the busy trading port of Narbon almost seventeen years ago he had purchased this house and surgery right in the heart of the town. “Easier for my patients to reach me,” he’d explained to his young wife, and both Joseph and Nona had quickly become accustomed to the noise and bustle of the town. Garth had never known anything else.

“Master Goldman said he would come to see me this afternoon, Garth,” Joseph said eventually, putting his empty mug back on the table. “His hands have several minor lesions caused by the chemicals of his craft. I would like you to treat him.”

Garth nodded. His father usually let him deal with most of the minor problems that came into the surgery. It had been easy to learn to treat the countless minor skin rashes, lesions or lacerations that presented themselves each day, and it relieved Joseph to concentrate on the deeper diseases that required years of knowledge and experience—and extensive use of the Touch—to be able to treat.

Joseph smiled slowly, his teeth gleaming behind his beard. “I’m proud of you, Garth. You did well with Miriam. Once you have treated Master Goldman and delivered Miriam’s powders—I’ll show you how to mix her particular preparation—you can have the rest of the day off. Enjoy the sunshine.”

Garth grinned, his face losing its seriousness and relaxing into boyish enthusiasm. “Really? Thanks, father!”

Joseph rolled his eyes at Nona. “No doubt the lad will rush down to the wharves and gaze moon-eyed at the cargo ship from Coroleas that docked this morning.”

But Nona did not smile as he expected her to. Instead she wiped her hands on her apron and licked her lips. “Joseph. A letter was delivered this morning. From Ruen.”

Garth’s face fell and he glanced at his father. Joseph’s own face had lost all traces of amusement and his hands had tightened about his empty tea mug.

Joseph sighed. “From Ruen.” It was not a question. All three knew what such a letter meant.

“Sometimes I hate spring,” he said into the silence. “With the sunshine comes the inevitable summons. With the spring warmth comes the inevitable three weeks of darkness.”

“It’s only three weeks,” Nona said, trying to put the best light upon it that she could. “Then you’ll be home again.”

Garth’s eyes flickered between the two of them. “Father? Can I come this year? I can help. Truly I can.”

Joseph shifted his eyes to his son. “If you knew what awaited you, Garth…”

“I can help,” Garth said. “It will lessen your load if I come to help. And I’ll have to go one day, anyway.”

Nona watched her husband with increasing consternation. Surely he couldn’t be considering…“Joseph! No!”

Joseph looked at her wearily. “He’s right, Nona. He will have to go some day.” And Garth would be a help. And it would relieve him of some of the stress. But was it fair to subject Garth so young to…

“The Veins,” he said quietly, returning his gaze to the mug, now turning restlessly between his hands. “Nona, let me see the letter.”

Any hope that it might be something completely different died the moment Nona placed the sealed parchment in his hands. A great blob of sky-blue wax sealed the flap, and impressed into the wax was the royal insignia of Escator, the legendary Manteceros. He hesitated, then broke the seal with his thumbnail and opened the letter.

“Physician Baxter,” Joseph read, and his voice was emotionless although the lines deepened about his eyes, “you are hereby summoned to your yearly service in the Veins. You shall arrive two weeks after the receipt of this summons and remain for three weeks. This duty will discharge your debt to the royal treasury.”

Instead of paying taxes, all physicians in Escator spent three weeks of the year treating both guards and prisoners of the Veins, the mines where gloam—the tarry black rock used as fuel—was mined.

All physicians would rather have paid tax.

“There’s more,” Joseph added, his forehead creasing. “You are also summoned to attend King Cavor at his
court in Ruen. You may attend the king on your journey to the Veins. Be there.”

He smiled wryly. “Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So, Cavor has need of me again.”

Nona sat down at the table. Eight years ago Cavor had also required Joseph to attend his royal person on his way to the Veins; her husband’s skill with the Touch was widely known and appreciated. “It is a pity you can’t discharge your duty to the royal treasury by your assistance to the royal person, Joseph.”

Joseph put the summons down on the table and smoothed it out. “To be frank, Nona, I’d rather use my skills on the prisoners of the Veins than Cavor. They need me more than he. Still,” he lifted his eyes and stared at Garth, “no doubt the boy will enjoy the spectacle of court.”

Garth sat back, both excited and nervous. It was a measure of his father’s trust that he would allow him to accompany him to the Veins, and a measure of his father’s pride that he would allow him by his side to court. He would see the king!

“Joseph!” Nona cried, distressed. “Let him wait another year or two, please!”
TWO
THE COURT AT RUEN

In the end Nona capitulated, although she was still unhappy about the idea, and Garth embarked with his father one balmy spring day on their journey first to Ruen and then to the Veins. They had spent a rushed two days preparing for their journey, making enough powders and preparations for their regular patients, and arranging for one of Narbon’s other physicians, Merton Fillis, to attend any who needed urgent attention. Garth tried to keep his excitement from flowering across his face as he kissed Nona goodbye. He knew his mother’s worries—indeed, he shared many of them—but nothing could keep his spirits from soaring on this fine day with such an adventure beckoning.

Nona patted her son on the cheek. “Be good, and mind your father,” she said. “And come home safe.”

“I will, mother.” Garth gave her one more quick hug, then climbed onto the rangy brown gelding his father had purchased for the trip. Not only was he going to court, but now he even had his own horse!

Apparent expressionless, Joseph tipped his head at his wife—only she could read the emotion in his eyes—then swung his horse’s head into the street. “Come on, Garth. Ten hours of solid riding will wipe that grin from your face.”

But Joseph underestimated his son. Ten hours of riding a day for the eight days it took them to reach Ruen dampened none of his excitement. This was the first time he had been beyond Narbon, and Garth was determined to enjoy every moment of it and store each memory away for a lifetime.

From their home they rode through the bustling main streets of Narbon, Garth given the duty of leading the packhorse. The streets were alive with traders and their customers, for Narbon was the main entry port into Escator for the exotic goods—and occasionally even more exotic news—which Corolean transport ships brought from the mysterious lands far to the west. From Escator a goodly portion of the goods were then transported to the nine inland kingdoms to the east; Narbon grew rich as the waist in the hourglass of east-west trade.

Once they had reached the town’s outskirts, Joseph led them onto the main road north and Garth turned curious eyes towards the extensive marshlands that extended along the coastline. Few lived in the marshes, for they were warm and humid, almost perpetually enclosed in mists, and the thousands of different species of biting insects were enough to keep most people at bay.

“Look,” Joseph pointed, and Garth saw a rudimentary hut leaning against a low marsh tree some one hundred paces off the main road. A woman and a girl were washing clothes in a great tub by the front door, and they paused and briefly stared at the distant riders.

Joseph tipped his hat politely and, following his lead, Garth nodded. “Why would anyone want to live there?” he asked his father, pulling his light cloak a little closer at the thought of swarms of insects descending on him.

Joseph stared at the woman and girl for a moment longer, then turned his gaze back to the road. “They like the life, I suppose. The tides swamp through the marsh twice a day and bring fish and eels, and they are constantly surrounded by the cries of the seabirds. They claim,” he hesitated, “that it is a pleasant and rewarding life.”

“But the marsh!” Garth muttered. At school he had heard countless tales of the thieving lifestyle of the marsh people.

“They are harmless enough,” Joseph said, and now there was a slight edge to his voice.

Garth stared at his father. “Do you know them?”

His father shrugged a little. “Sometimes I am called to attend one or two of the marsh people, although normally they look after their own ills well enough. Sometimes that woman,” he glanced back at the hut again, “asks for herbal powder that she can’t obtain in the marsh. Sometimes she even asks for advice.”

Garth’s hazel eyes widened, and he too glanced over his shoulder; both woman and girl had disappeared inside their hovel. “You know her?”

“Her name is Venetia,” Joseph said shortly, and Garth could get no more out of him on the matter.

From Narbon they travelled the Ruen road north for eight days, sometimes sleeping in the open on the mild nights, sometimes staying at one of the inns along the road. The road was well travelled and well protected by the Escator militia, and the Baxtors encountered none of the bandits that occasionally troubled some of the minor roads of the realm. To both sides of the road the fields stretched green and fertile under the spring sun and Garth found his lessons continued even on horseback, for Joseph spent much of each day’s ride pointing out the various plants in...
fields and ditches, explaining their medicinal value and, sometimes, their poisonous properties. If he spied a particularly unusual plant, Joseph would stop and insist they both get down from their horses so that Garth could lay his hands on the plant.

“Sometimes you can sense the poison within a plant that causes ill health or death in men and women, Garth,” Joseph explained late one afternoon as his son squatted down by a Whitespoon fern, his fingers lightly touching its pale-tipped leaves. “Tell me, what do you feel?”

Garth frowned in concentration, his brown curls flopping over his forehead, and ran his fingers lightly over the plant. Heavy pressure often destroyed the Touch; delicacy encouraged it. He shivered, then pulled his fingers away.


“Yes,” Joseph said, and stood up. Garth followed his example, grateful to put some distance between himself and the Whitespoon fern. “If ingested, this fern will cause gradual death. It will stop circulation to the extremities first, and the feet and hands will decay. Then, as the rot spreads, the body slowly dies.”

“Is there anything to counter its effects?”

Joseph shook his head, his eyes still on the plant. “No. If you touch anyone who has been poisoned you will feel much as you did just then.” He raised his eyes to his son’s. “Soothe, that’s all you can do. And counsel the patient to make his or her last testament if they haven’t already done so.”

Garth shivered again and turned back to his horse. Harder even than feeling malignancies through his fingers was coming to terms with the knowledge that there would always be some things he just couldn’t fix.

They reached Ruen on the afternoon of the eighth day from Narbon. Garth was astounded by the city. He had thought Narbon a bustling and important town, but compared to Ruen it seemed as insignificant as a marsh hovel.

Ruen had been the seat of the kings of Escator for centuries, and had grown wealthy because of the crown’s patronage and because it sat at the crossroads of the major trade routes for the realm. It nestled in the hollow formed by a low crescent of hills, and Garth’s first glimpse of the city was when he and his father rounded a bend in the road as it wound through the hills.

“It’s beautiful!” Garth gasped as he caught sight of Ruen spread out before him, and Joseph laughed at the awe on his son’s face.

“Its domes and minarets and belltowers hide a myriad sins, Garth. Keep a watchful eye to your purse when we enter its streets.”

But even the thought of pickpockets and cutpurses did not dim Garth’s wonder at the city. His head constantly twisting this way and that as they passed through the fortress-like gates and into Ruen’s bustle, Garth could not see enough at once. The people of this city dressed brighter, walked faster, talked louder and laughed more easily than the good folk of Narbon. The air was full, not only of the shouts of the city folk, but also of bells and music—the chimes of the minarets and towers rang out to mark the passage of the day and to call the faithful to prayers.

They took a room in an inn close to the city centre and only half an hour’s walk through the streets to the royal palace. Joseph sent word that he had arrived, and he and Garth spent the evening cleaning both themselves and their travel-stained clothes, trimming hair and, in Joseph’s case, his beard, and laying out the preparations that Joseph thought Cavor might require.

“He called me to his presence some eight years ago,” Joseph explained as he stared at the pots and flasks he had spread across his bed, trying to decide which ones to take.

“Why couldn’t his own physician treat him?” Garth sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed, trying to rethread the laces through one of his boots.

Joseph selected a flask, stared at it, then sighed and put it back on the bed. “Only a few of our craft enjoy the use of the Touch, Garth. Cavor’s own personal physician is one of them.”

Garth nodded. Unlike his father, who cheerfully treated the common folk of Narbon for nominal payment, most physicians who could use the Touch charged such high prices only nobles could afford their services.

“But…” Garth prompted as his father continued to pick up flasks of medicines; a few he put to one side, the rest back on the bed.

“But Oberon Fisk is not very proficient at it. My guess is he can only employ the Touch spasmodically, and then only rarely. Not,” Joseph paused, flask in hand, and grinned at his son, “that you’d know by his overrated opinion of himself.”

“Yes,” Joseph said, and stood up. Garth followed his example, grateful to put some distance between himself and the Whitespoon fern. “If ingested, this fern will cause gradual death. It will stop circulation to the extremities first, and the feet and hands will decay. Then, as the rot spreads, the body slowly dies.”

“Is there anything to counter its effects?”

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Garth shivered again and turned back to his horse. Harder even than feeling malignancies through his fingers was coming to terms with the knowledge that there would always be some things he just couldn’t fix.
“Now, as to why Cavor wants me, well, I can only wonder at the reason. But I would guess that it has something to do with the Manteceros.”

Garth frowned and put his relaxed boot down on the floor. “The Manteceros?”

Joseph tapped his upper right arm. “His tattoo, that which is engraved on all kings of Escator. Normally it is done as a child, a babe in arms, but Cavor unexpectedly came to the throne in his mid-twenties…”

“And tattoos don’t take well at that age.”

“Yes,” Joseph said. “I’m glad to see you’ve listened to at least one thing I’ve said.”

Garth laughed at his father’s gentle humour. Both knew that Garth had to be told something only once for it to sink permanently into his mind.

“When I saw Cavor’s mark eight years ago it had festered. The ink for the royal tattoo is slightly different to that normally used for body engraving. It has properties that are…well, dangerous.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know the royal colour is sky blue?”

Garth nodded impatiently.

“Well, the royal tattoo must be done in that colour. A babe takes it well, and heirs to the throne are normally marked soon after birth. But a grown man often reacts badly to it. Cavor has had constant problems since the mark was engraved on his biceps seventeen years ago. If the infection spreads too badly then Oberon is flummoxed. It needs a physician skilled in the Touch to heal it.”

“And you are the best in Escator,” Garth said.

“As you will be one day,” Joseph said, then grinned again. “Who knows, perhaps you will replace Oberon as the king’s personal physician in years to come.”

Garth laughed at the thought. “I will want to do more with my days than spend them with my hands wrapped about a king’s arm, father!”

If Garth had been moved to wonder by the noise and gaiety of Ruen, he was stunned into complete silence by the royal palace itself.

Its outer wall rose more than five windowless storeys from the street, a bare edifice of dark red stone, topped by prison-grey slate. Once they had been checked through the massive black iron gateways, they moved into another world; Garth completely forgot that a thriving and noisy city spread outside the red walls.

The walls surrounded a massive complex of buildings—all of the same red brick—and courtyards and gardens. Neatly manicured trees and hedges bordered walks that wandered by fountains and pools and riotous flowerbeds. Several gorgeously apparelled women strolled the walks, their eyes dark and seductive above lazy fans, cream and gold lapdogs gambolling at their heels.

A grey-uniformed servant led them silently down several of the paths, then into a dimly lit corridor. They halted and bowed as yet another lady passed them by, Garth’s eyes widening at both her silken dress and her exotic scent, then the servant handed them over to the king’s stout master of ceremonies in the ante-chamber behind the Throne Room.

“You will behave at all times with the utmost reverence,” the Master of Ceremonies said firmly, and fixed Garth in the eye.

Already uncomfortable in his best clothes and with nerves jolting about his stomach, Garth only nodded silently.

The Master of Ceremonies sniffed, and used the insides of his wrists to smooth back his already rigorously oiled iron-grey hair from his forehead. “You will bow when you enter, and again when you leave.”

“We understand,” Joseph said. He had instructed Garth as best he could last night, but it didn’t hurt to have his instructions reinforced by this man.

“And never turn your back on the royal person. And…ah!”

The Master of Ceremonies had suddenly spotted the small bag Joseph carried. “What have you got there?” His hands fluttered in alarm, and a guard rushed from his corner station.

“Only my powders and preparations,” Joseph said hastily, letting the guard inspect the bag.

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The Master of Ceremonies subsided slightly, but he still eyed the two suspiciously. Oberon Fisk was his good friend, and the court physician deeply resented the fact that the king had felt the need to call such a rustic physician in to treat his mark. Fisk had stayed away from court today, refusing to meet Baxtor.

“Well,” he huffed. “I shall ascertain if the king will see you now, or if he has more important matters to attend to.”

His tone left Joseph and Garth in no doubt that as far as the Master of Ceremonies was concerned, anything would be of more importance than them.

But it appeared that Cavor was impatient to see Joseph Baxtor, for the Master returned within only a minute or
two, his face red and his hands clenched slightly by his side.

“If you will,” he said stiffly, inclining his head, and Garth, unsuccessfully trying to suppress the nerves now careering wildly about his internal spaces, followed his father into the Throne Room.

The Throne Room was shaped in a great elongated oval, with the throne itself on a raised dais at the far end to which Joseph and Garth entered. The floor was of inlaid ivory and cherry wood, the walls hung with tapestries depicting heroic deeds and stitched in every conceivable hue, while great silver and crystal chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling far above their heads.

Spiced incense drifted about the chamber in a faint mist.

About the walls stood sundry silent courtiers, diplomats, and ambassadors—all escorted by beautifully accoutred and coiffured women. Garth swallowed, and hoped he would not be asked to speak. In this company he felt as graceful as a cart horse mired in mud.

The Master of Ceremonies led them a third of the way down the chamber, then halted.

“The physician Joseph Baxtor and his son, Garth Baxtor,” he announced with an audible sniff.

Joseph bowed gracefully beside him, and Garth hurried to do likewise. Where had his father learned such courtly manners?

“Come, come,” a pleasant voice said, and both Joseph and Garth rose. “Don’t hesitate. Come talk to me, Joseph. It has been many years.”

The Master of Ceremonies sniffed again, then stepped aside.

Joseph smiled encouragement at Garth, then he stepped forward confidently towards the throne. Precisely five paces from the dais he fell to one knee, bowing his head deeply. “Sire, I am yours to command.”

Garth almost fell in his haste to kneel a pace behind his father, and he heard several sniggers from the watching courtiers. His face flamed as he studied the ivory patterns in the floor in intimate detail.

There was a rustle of material from the dais, and the sound of steps, then a shadow as someone halted in front of his father.

“Joseph, arise from that knee. And this is your son? A fine boy, Joseph. Has he your Touch?”

Joseph rose to his feet, waving Garth to do the same. He bowed again, only slightly this time. “Garth trains with me, sire. He will make a gifted physician some day.”

Finally Garth dared look at the man before them. The king was in his early forties; a fit, well-built man who looked a warrior even in his court silks. He had a stern but just face, with dark grey eyes warm with humour, a straight nose above a thin mouth, and dark hair just beginning to silver with the burden of his office. He was, Garth decided, one of the handsomest men he had ever seen.

Cavor smiled at Garth’s stare, and even Joseph’s mouth curled in amusement.

“It is the boy’s first trip from Narbon,” he said quietly.

“Then I shall take care that he shall have only pleasant memories of Ruen,” Cavor said, his smile widening slightly. “Now, come,” he waved at a doorway to one side of the Throne Room. “I would speak with you in private, Joseph.”

Joseph hesitated and looked at Garth. “Sire…”

“Yes, yes, he may come. Two sets of hands with the gift are better than one, Joseph. Now, this way.”

Whispers and the lingering touch of incense followed them from the Throne Room.

The king led them into a small chamber furnished only with several chairs, a table, and a chest or two. Even so, Garth realised that the furnishings were richer than anything the best houses of Narbon could boast.

A servant waited inside, but Cavor waved him impatiently away. “You know the reason, Joseph?” he asked as the servant closed the door behind him.

“The mark,” Joseph murmured, and handed his bag to Garth.

“Yes.” The king’s face had lost its smile now, and Garth could see that pain underscored his eyes. He hunched off his brocade jacket, and his voice became suddenly harsh. “The cursed mark! It plagues at me both night and day. If I had known…” he hesitated. “If I had known, then I would have refused the damned throne!”

The king’s demeanour had changed, and Garth busied himself undoing the bag and setting healing powders and unguents across the table where his father could easily reach them.

Cavor glanced at him, then took a deep breath. “I apologise,” he said, his tone now mild again. “The pain…”

“Pain can make a demon of the most saintly mind,” Joseph said soothingly, his hands turning the king’s silken shirt down over his shoulders so that his upper body was exposed. He was as muscled as the wrestlers that plied their sport in Narbon’s market square on sixth-day, Garth noted, as he handed his father a small pair of scissors to cut away the stained dressing about Cavor’s upper right arm.

Both father and son stilled when they saw what lay beneath the dressings.

Every king of Escator was marked with the symbol of the royal house—the legendary Manteceros. Its bright
blue, thick-legged, stiff-maned form fluttered from every pennant atop the royal palace, and Garth had seen it any number of times emblazoned across the chests of the royal militia whenever a unit of them had passed through Narbon.

And so it should have been emblazoned across Cavor’s right biceps.

That the tattoo had originally been carved into the man’s skin was easy enough to see, but its clear blue lines were marked and blurred with festering sores. A sickening, sweet stench rose from the man’s flesh, and Cavor half-turned his head away, his jaw tightening.

No wonder the incense in the Throne Room.

Joseph shared a glance with Garth, then gently probed the flesh above and below the infection. “Sire, you should have called before now.”

“Oberon Fisk is a fool. For months he has been assuring me that he was but a day or two away from a complete cure.”

“I am sure he has done his best, sire.”

Cavor winced as Joseph probed a little too deep. “Are you willing to reconsider my offer, Baxtor? A place at court?”

“My home is in Narbon,” Joseph said, frowning at the sudden light of excitement in Garth’s eyes at the king’s offer. “But I will do what I can in what time I have. You know that Garth and I are on our way to the Veins.”

The king shrugged. “I can have your duty transferred to court, Joseph.”

Joseph hesitated. He did not like court, and thought his talents would be largely wasted here.

And despite the fact that he hated the Veins, he knew that the prisoners needed him there as much, if not more, than Cavor. “I can set you on the road to healing in but a day or so, sire, and check you on my return home again in three weeks’ time. Now, be quiet while I examine your arm.”

For almost twenty minutes Joseph worked on the king’s arm, mostly in silence, but sometimes murmuring to Garth. He probed with his fingers, and occasionally the entire surface of his hand, easing his way in from the edges of the festering area to its centre, Garth moving swiftly and efficiently with gauze to wipe away the exudate as Joseph’s fingers worked it out of Cavor’s flesh. Occasionally the king grunted in pain, but he kept his arm still and his face averted, letting Joseph do what he would.

Eventually Joseph had cleaned most of the inflamed flesh. Now the lines of the tattoo showed more clearly, although the sores still exuded yellow fluid.

“Now,” Joseph breathed, and he wrapped his hands about the king’s arm.

For long minutes he stood there, his face tight in concentration, his hands flexing and then contracting about the king’s biceps. Garth knew that his father was letting healing force flow with all the strength he had, encouraging and persuading the king’s flesh to heal itself. As he watched, Cavor started to relax, and his face lost some of its harsh lines.

“You are a wonder worker,” he eventually said.

Joseph, his own face lined now, stood back a half step. “Sire, would you let Garth touch you? He has the gift as much if not more than I, and his raw ability will only help you. It will not harm.”

The king nodded, and smiled at Garth. “Perhaps I can tempt your son, Joseph, if I cannot tempt you.”

Garth smiled uncertainly as he wrapped his hands about the king’s arm. Already he could see how his father’s Touch had helped. The skin was paler now, and the tattoo showed clearly.

“He still has several years of his apprenticeship left, sire,” Joseph said smoothly. “He will be free to go where he likes at its conclusion.”

Garth let the small talk flow over his head. Now that he was concentrating on the Touch, he forgot that it was a king’s flesh he grasped between his hands. He frowned, trying to feel the flesh, trying to feel its need, trying to understand what it was that it needed to heal.

His fingers and palms tingled, as they always did when he let the power flow through him. But something was…odd.

“Do you feel it?” Joseph asked softly at his side.

Garth was used to his father’s voice and questions while he was working, and it did not break his concentration.

He nodded. “Yes. It feels…unusual.” He couldn’t explain it any more than that. Each wound, each person, felt differently under his hands, but there was always an underlying “sameness”. With this wound it was, simply, different. The “sameness” was almost non-existent.

“It is the blue ink,” Joseph whispered. “Some say the original batch was made from the blood of the Manteceros itself. Whatever, the ink changes the flesh that it bonds with.”

“Curses it, more like,” Cavor muttered to the side, but his voice was relaxed, almost sleepy. Damn it, he thought, these Baxtors are good. What can I do to win either one to my court?
Garth worked for a few more minutes, sending Cavor’s flesh as much encouragement as he could, then he stood back, exhausted.

Cavor sighed, then turned his head to look at his arm. He jumped in surprise. It looked almost healed.

“I will rub this unguent into the tattoo, sire.” Joseph reached for a jar from the table. “And then bind your arm for you. Garth and I will examine you again in the morning—if it suits your majesty—before we leave for the Veins. Then we can see you again in some weeks’ time.”

“I will rise with the dawn if that is your wish, Joseph,” Cavor said dryly. “Now, come and dine with me.” He grinned at Garth. “I’m sure one of the courtier’s daughters will be only too pleased to serve your fine son.”

Garth blushed, and then silently cursed his stained cheeks as both men laughed.
The Veins lay three days’ ride north-east of Ruen, and Joseph and Garth left the next morning after they had attended Cavor. The king was patently grateful at the relief they had dealt him, and again pleaded with Joseph to reconsider his decision to remain in Narbon. But Joseph had been firm, if polite. Narbon was his home, and there he would stay.

Once they had left the city well behind them and their horses were jogging along cheerfully enough in the morning sunshine, Garth turned to his father.

“Where did you come from, father? I know you were not born in Narbon.”

Joseph grinned a little ruefully to himself. These questions had been almost sixteen years coming. “From Ruen itself, lad.”

Garth turned in the saddle for a last glimpse of the city. “Ruen? Why leave?”

His father shrugged. “Time for a change, Garth. Why? Don’t you like Narbon?”

Garth swivelled and surveyed the almost empty road before them. This north east road led to the small town of Myrna, and the Veins just beyond it. No-one travelled this road unless they had business at the Veins, and few wanted to have anything do with the place.

“I was just curious, father.” He paused. “How did Cavor know of you?”

“My father—and then myself for some years—treated the old king and his family.”

“What?” Joseph couldn’t have surprised his son more if he had tried. “You knew Prince Maximilian!”

As with most Escatorians, Garth was fascinated by the tragic tale of the lost prince.

Joseph’s face softened “Yes. I knew him well. When he disappeared, life changed. The palace and city was so sad, so grey, that I decided that Nona and I would make a life elsewhere. We moved to Narbon, and there you were born some five months later.”

But Garth did not want to hear of Narbon. He wiped his too long hair out of his eyes with an abrupt motion of his hand. Why hadn’t his father mentioned this beforehand? “Tell me of Maximilian!”

“He was too young to be lost the way he was,” Joseph snapped, “and Escator did not deserve to lose his line. Cavor is a good and fair king, but the ancient line…”

“I’m sorry,” Garth apologised, thinking he had annoyed his father with his over-enthusiastic questioning. “No, lad,” Joseph said softly, and leaned across the distance between them, patting his son briefly on the shoulder. “‘Tis I who should apologise. I so rarely speak of Maximilian because his loss still hurts. He was like a younger brother to me. With him gone, and with both the king and queen—nay, the entire city—in mourning, I decided to move south.”

He shrugged, and laughed shortly. “Whatever curse hit the royal palace with Maximilian’s disappearance still lingers. Cavor remains childless, and no-one knows what will happen when he dies.”

For a long time they rode in silence, the only sound the soft beat of their horses’ hooves as they thudded into the packed dirt of the roadway. On the west side of the road stretched grazing lands as far as the coast, but on the eastern side ranged the royal forests. It was there that Maximilian had been lost.

My age, thought Garth, or only a year or two younger. What must it have been like, to wander lost and afraid through the forests until you died from exposure or starvation, or until a bear grasped you in his hungry claws? As hard for a prince as for a physician’s son, he thought.

Ahead, a distant movement caught his eye. It was an empty cart, massive, drawn by a team of ten great horses. On its tray was bolted a huge iron cage. Even from a distance Garth could hear the faint clink of chains.

“How long do they have to work down there, father?”

Joseph’s face was drawn. “A prison transport, Garth. No doubt returning from the Veins for its next load of prisoners from Ruen’s gaols.”

Garth’s stomach turned over as the cart drew closer. A foul stench and a swarm of fat flies clung to it in a fertile cloud of pestilence. As it rumbled past, its driver shouting a cheerful greeting, Garth could see that the chains and irons littering its filthy floor were smeared with dried blood. For the first time he had an intimation of what awaited him down the shafts of the Veins.

“How long do they have to work down there, father?”

Joseph’s dark eyes were haunted. “For as long as it takes them to die, Garth. If a man is sentenced to the Veins, then it is a lifetime sentence.”
“That seems…cruel.”

“Gloam is Escator’s main export, Garth. Without it we’d be a poor nation indeed. But as no free man will work the Veins, so the condemned are sent there to labour out their lives.”

He looked back to the road before them, which was once again empty. “Few survive longer than two or three years. They are never allowed to the surface. Not even in death. There are great abandoned shafts within the Veins that reach into the bowels of the earth itself. They tip the dead bodies down there.”

Late in the afternoon of the third day they approached Myrna. The small town existed only to service the Veins, and it was a dank and cheerless place. The streets were almost deserted; only a few wives and children of the guards walked from shop to shop, and their posture was sloped and poor, as if the confines of the Veins somehow communicated itself to them through their husbands and fathers, or perhaps through the very atmosphere itself. This close to the coast the air was damp, and even spring seemed not to have made an impression on the cold air. The buildings, whether stone or wood, were uniformly dark and sooty, and it was not hard to see why. Black, sticky dust lay all about.

The early cold twilight made the town even more depressing and unwelcoming.

“Get used to it, Garth,” Joseph said as he watched his son try and brush away the thin layer of gloam dust that had accumulated on his cloak over the past few minutes. “You will eat, breathe and drink gloam dust for the next few weeks.”

Already sickened, Garth could do nothing but nod.

Joseph had spent three weeks a year for the past twenty years here, and he knew where to go. Fifteen minutes’ ride past the town, close to the Veins themselves, lay a small outcrop of buildings almost lost in the rapidly fading light. At the first of them Joseph pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted.

“Stay here, Garth. I’m just going to report to the overseer of the Veins. We won’t go down until the morning. Tonight, at least, we’ll sleep well.”

He disappeared into the building, and Garth took the time to take a deep breath—something he instantly regretted—and look about. To the west lay the Veins, and just beyond them stretched the long and lonely coastline of the Widowmaker Sea. Gloam was usually to be found along the sea coasts, and Garth had heard that in places the Veins stretched for half a league under the floor of the sea itself.

But between the coast and this depressing group of buildings lay the Veins themselves. Great black mounds reared into the darkening sky, disappearing into a thick clinging mist that was rolling in from the glassy grey sea, and Garth had to squint to make out the grotesque and shadowed humps. Piles of gloam, probably, waiting to be shipped down the coast where it could be transported to Ruen and even Narbon. Garth had often seen the dust-encrusted gloam ships unload at his hometown’s wharves, although previously he had never thought very much about where they came from.

Interspersed among the great mounds of gloam were the iron workings supporting the machinery that drove the carts and lifts of the Veins. As he watched, Garth could just discern great wheels and cogs churning among the fog, and hear chains sliding down, down, down. Something crashed, and he jumped, but it was only a cart tipping its load of gloam onto a growing pile of the rock before sliding back underneath the earth once more.

Somewhere beneath his feet there were thousands of men slaving away; from dawn to dusk, Garth almost thought but then realised that they would have no idea when dawn and dusk was, and probably worked until they dropped, rested, then rose to exhaust themselves once more.

And all about rose the rank smell of the gloam itself. Still damp from the mines, it gave off a sulphurous stench that Garth knew would take him days to get used to. Underlying the smell of the gloam was something else, and Garth had to concentrate to make it out.

It was the stench of the cart that had passed them on the road to Ruen; the stench of old blood and sweat and fear and despair, and it made Garth sick to the stomach.

Three weeks would be a lifetime for him under these conditions—yet how did men survive a year? Two?

Three?

Suddenly Garth could bear it no longer, and he turned and leaned down his horse’s side, choking and spluttering.

Underneath, the ground shifted and rumbled; Garth could not only hear it, but feel it through his horse’s flesh. He sat up, wiping his mouth, puzzled. Far into the mounds of gloam he saw tiny figures running about in the fog, gesturing wildly. Wheels started to turn faster, their pace frantic; carts clanged and crashed as they were hauled to the surface at twice their previous rate.

A door banged behind him and Garth jumped.

It was his father, and an older and stouter man behind him. Both wore horrified faces.
“By the gods!” the older man wailed. “‘Tis the wicked sea! She’s broached the hanging wall!” He turned and ran towards a group of men emerging from an abutting building.

Joseph grabbed the bridle of Garth’s horse. “Courage, lad,” he said, his voice clearly strained. “But we’re going to be needed this minute. There are men dying below, and others in danger of it.”

Behind them bells pealed madly into the thickening night.
“We can’t afford to lose many more prisoners,” the guard grunted as he buckled Garth’s helmet for him with sharp, economical movements. “We’re already behind our monthly quota of gloam production. There.”

Garth could feel his fear uncoiling in his stomach, but he refused to let it shine from his face. Once the bells had begun to peal, Joseph had hurried him from his horse, seized their bags of instruments and powders, and hustled him towards the nearest poppet head—the gaunt iron framework above one of the shafts that supported the winding mechanisms that sent cages and carts plummeting into the unknown depths below.

“I’m sorry, lad,” Joseph had muttered, feeling Garth’s fear through the hand he had about his son’s arm. “But you’re too useful to leave above.” His mouth twisted. “And you did plead and beg to come.”

Now they stood waiting for the great cage which would carry them down the shaft; they could hear its dull scream as it sped its way to the surface. Waiting to come down with them was a small group of heavily muscled guards, all armed with swords, knives and batons and wearing helmets and breastplates over brief leather wraps about their hips. All wore sandals on their feet, and all bore the scars of old wounds. The man who had helped Garth to fasten his helmet, a tall, balding man by the name of Jack, now indicated his cloak.

“Throw that to one side, boy. It’ll only hinder you below.”

Joseph nodded at Garth to obey, tossing his own cloak to one side and rolling his shirt sleeves up. “It’s warm below, Garth.”

The next instant the machinery above them screeched and groaned. A great shape, indistinct in the clinging fog and flickering torchlight, lurched out of the shaft yawning at their feet.

“Inside.” Jack gave Garth a shove, and the youth leaped into the cage beside his father, the other guards crowding in behind them. The cage was made of dense woven wire, thick with rust, stretched over a crudely welded iron framework. It rocked, and Garth couldn’t help wondering if the chains that held it were so corroded by the sea air the cage would fall free any moment, plunging them to their deaths below.

“Are there any other physicians below?” Joseph asked of Jack.

The man smiled maniacally. “Yeah. Five or six. But two of ‘em were in the sections of the Veins that have been broached. The sea and the gloam have eaten ‘em by now. A black and watery death it be, crushed against the hanging wall.” He shrugged their deaths aside. “They take their chances, as do we.”

Garth felt physically ill, and his father’s hand tightened about his arm in support. “Ah,” Joseph said. Fog drifted into the cage and curled about their bodies.

“Can that boy do anything?” Jack asked doubtfully. Again the cage lurched under their feet, and Garth felt his stomach lurch with it. Above them the machinery whined and screeched again.

“He’s my son and my apprentice,” Joseph said calmly, as if he were standing by the banks of a pleasant stream, discussing fishing prospects. “He can handle anything to broken bones, but not crushing injuries or internal bleeding.”

“Well, I’m sure we can find him enough broken bones and gashes to keep him busy ‘til breakfast time.” Jack laughed harshly, and two of the other guards joined in. “If he still feels like it, that is. This your first time down the Veins, boy?”

Garth nodded, unable to speak. The cage was slowly beginning to move.

Jack grunted, and the cage dropped.

It fell like a stone through a crazed whirlpool. Garth cried out and grabbed at his father. He thought the world had gone mad—and indeed it sounded like it, for Jack’s laughter rang out about him, and from beneath his feet rose the echoes of disembodied cries and the clink of even stranger machinery waiting below and the foul smell Garth had noticed on the surface but intensified ten times. But worst of all was the horrifying sound of surf breaking—from below their feet!

“Stop,” said Jack after a lifetime, and amazingly they did. Only then did Garth realise that there was some internal device that controlled the cage’s movement.

“Any further and we’d drown,” Jack said conversationally, and winked at another of the guards. He was chewing something, and the thin squelch of his mouth made Garth’s stomach heave.

“Are the pumps working?” asked Joseph.

Jack nodded, the torchlight flickering weirdly over his face. “Yeah, but it’ll take until morning for the mines to be cleared of the sea water. Longer, if bodies clog the pipes.”
Garth leaned against one of the cool iron bars of the cage and wondered if he could keep from being sick.

“Garth,” Joseph whispered urgently in his ear as Jack opened the door of the cage and motioned the guards out. “There are men dying down here. We can do nothing about the dead—and they care little if their bodies clog up some pipe—but the living are still alive and in pain and just as afraid as you. And yet you will be able to escape in the morning. Do you understand me?”

Garth nodded. “Yes,” he said, standing straight again. “I’m sorry, father. I’ll be all right.”

“Good lad.” Joseph squeezed his arm one last time and motioned him out of the cage.

They stepped into a cavern roughly carved from the black rock, the openings of several tunnels yawning hungrily out of the darkness. Moisture ran down the cavern’s rough walls in glistening, inky rivulets, and Garth started as a great drop fell on his helmet.

“The gloam always sweats, boy,” Jack said roughly. “The sea thunders another hundred paces below us. We’re safe enough here. From the waters, that is.”

Again he laughed, and Garth found himself wondering just how sane Jack really was.

A group of men huddled to one side, by the dark opening of a tunnel, and Garth looked them over curiously. There were nine of them, naked save for rough loincloths, their skin as black as the gloam itself. Dust, he realised, rather than natural skin colour. Chains bound their ankles.

“This gang was just about to descend when the sea, cursed be her name, broke through.” Another guard stepped forth from the tunnel and saluted Jack. He grinned. “‘Twas their lucky day.”

From the look on the men’s faces Garth thought their luck had run out a long while ago, but he said nothing.

“Where do you want us to go?” asked Joseph.

Jack sniffed and raised his eyebrows at the new guard. “They’re both competent, though the boy’ll only treat the broken bones and sliced flesh.”

“Well, we’ve enough for the both of them,” the guard said, wiping his nose along his arm. He looked as though he could use their help himself; there was a gash that ran the length of his cheekbone, and one, deeper, that had cut into his upper arm. “I’ll take the older man. There’s a portion of the tunnel that has collapsed on a gang further down. Jack, take the boy to Section 205. The sudden change of air pressure when the sea rushed in caused several sections of the hanging wall to collapse. A few broken bones, ‘tis all, but the cursed men mutter and refuse to move until they’re fixed.”

Separate? Garth looked at his father anxiously.

“You’ll be fine, lad,” Joseph said, his eyes holding Garth’s. “Just do as I trained you.”

Garth swallowed and nodded.

“Besides,” Jack said cheerfully, his chewing increasing noisily, “it doesn’t really matter if you lose one or two. The Veins is a good place to practise. Nothing fattens a graveyard like an apprentice physician—and best to fatten with the likes of these cursed souls than good folk from above.”

“Jack? The lad will need water. To wash wounds.”

Jack spoke to one of the other guards, and he hurried away. “Well, water at least we have in plenty. You ready, boy?”

Garth nodded again, gave his father one last glance, and then let Jack hustle him down a tunnel, several of the other guards following.

They walked down a rough sloping tunnel into a darkness that ate all sense of time. Every twenty or so paces a sad torch sputtered fitfully on the wall; all each did was lighten the pitch blackness into grey gloom for a pitifully small circle.

“How far do these tunnels extend, Jack?” Garth asked after an eternity. Perhaps conversation would serve to keep the darkness at bay better than the torches would.

“Another half a league straight down, boy. We’re already half a league under the surface.”

Garth stumbled, appalled. “But that would mean…!”

“Yeah,” Jack grunted. “We’re well under the level of the sea now. But we’re in no danger. The sea, curse her evil waves, will not flood in any further. ‘Tis the lower levels that have been dampened, not these upper courses.”

Garth hefted his bag in his hand. Behind him a guard had caught them up, carrying two pails of water slopping from his hands. Sea water, Garth supposed. “Does this happen often?”

“The sea broaching the Veins? Often enough. Generally once or twice a year. The tunnels stretch almost a league in either direction from the central shafts. Plenty of places for the sea to broach the hanging wall.”

“The hanging wall?” Garth panted, sweat running down his body in the warm and humid air.

Jack abruptly slapped the roof of the tunnel, only a hand-span above his head. “The hanging wall.”

“Oh,” Garth said inadequately. How many thousands of tonnes of rock were currently hanging above his head?
And how much sea water?

The tunnel narrowed, and the hanging wall drew closer the further they went. Small piles of gloam littered the floor, and soon Garth and the guards were forced to walk with their heads and shoulders hunched and at times twisted sideways in order to squeeze through the narrower portions of the tunnel.

"Why so narrow?" Garth gasped.

"Don’t need to build wider," Jack replied. "Just enough for one man and his pick and shovel to get through, 'tis all that's needed."

"Then how do they get the gloam to the surface?" Did they have to carry it back along these narrow veins by the fistful? Garth could not see any other way.

"There’s another shaft further along. Only narrow, but wide enough for the gloam baskets. It’s lifted to the surface from there."

Garth trembled. The closeness of the tunnel walls, as the hanging wall, was constricting. What would happen if something further went wrong? How would he escape? The darkness crowded him, while the air was stifling and the stench appalling. His lungs were desperate for air, yet Garth was loath to breathe in anything but shallow gasps.

"How could anyone live out their lives down here?"

"Ahead," one of the forward guards rasped, and Garth jerked in surprise. No-one had spoken for some time, and the sudden speech had startled him out of his despondent reverie. Ahead?

"Section 205," Jack explained, and Garth blinked. Section 205? Oh, yes, that’s where there were some injured prisoners. It seemed a lifetime ago that he and his father had descended into this crazed world.

Then he stumbled and would have fallen had not Jack seized his arm. At his feet was a drop of about a pace, and beyond that yawned a cavern the size of the kitchen at home—but so long had Garth been crawling through the narrow tunnels it seemed as big and as welcoming as a banquet hall.

He dropped down, almost falling again as his stiffened knees cramped, and looked about. Several torches burned here, and the extra light seemed luxurious.

Directly across from Garth the tunnel continued further into the earth, but to his left huddled a group of nine men—the gang that had been caught in a minor collapse of the hanging wall. All were chained, and all regarded him with either apathy or thinly veiled hostility. Who was this, come to disturb their lingering death?

The two guards, who had been standing watch until the party arrived, greeted their comrades with over-loud voices.

The prisoners remained silent.

"Well, hop to it," Jack said at his back, and Garth jumped yet again. Grasping his bag a little more tightly in his hand, he slowly advanced towards the huddle of men.

Gods, but they were filthy! Garth could not stop an expression of distaste flickering across his face, and the prisoner nearest to him sneered.

"If I’d known the pretty boy was coming, I would have washed and dressed."

"Enough!" Jack barked, and Garth could feel him raise his sword arm behind him.

"That won’t be needed, Jack," he said, turning his head, and Jack slowly lowered his sword.

"Don’t take no nonsense from them, boy," he said. "They’re lucky you’re here at all."

"If we were lucky we’d all be dead under the waters," the prisoner muttered, so low only Garth could hear him.

He squatted down by the man. "Are you hurt?"

The prisoner thought about sneering again, but didn’t have the heart. He pointed to his knee. "A falling rock caught it."

Garth motioned a guard to bring a torch, and the man pushed it into a slot in the wall above Garth’s head, then withdrew. Garth bent closer for a look, and only barely managed to restrain a gasp. The man’s knee had been badly mangled by the rock, and Garth did not know how he could sit there without moaning.

He did not yet understand that, in the Veins, constant pain was a condition of life itself.

Garth took a deep breath, and went to work.

The guard who had brought the water had left the pails by Garth’s side, and now he carefully washed away the tarry gloam dust and the blood from the prisoner’s knee—it came as a considerable shock to realise that the man’s flesh was sickly pale underneath its layers of gloam. Once the filth and blood had been washed away, Garth saw the injury was not as bad as he’d first thought. Several deep gashes, but not a crushing injury. He reached behind him to his bag, selected several suturing instruments and thread, and stitched the man back together again.

Then he laid his hands on the man’s knee.

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Then he laid his hands on the man’s knee.

The man’s eyes widened, and he stirred for the first time. "You have the Touch!" he whispered, and his whisper carried down the line of prisoners.

Garth tried to smile at him, but he felt such deep sadness flood into him from the man’s flesh that he found it all
but impossible. He had never felt this before. Malignant growths, yes, and pain and virulent infections—but overwhelming sadness? He realised that chronic sadness was so endemic throughout the Veins that it had literally seeped into this man’s flesh.

He lifted his hands from the man’s knee, unable to bear any more, but the man reached forward and touched his hands briefly. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Garth’s eyes swam with tears, and he had to blink them away as he moved onto the next prisoner.

Behind him the guards, grown bored with the proceedings, had settled into a circle and were tossing a dice.

Garth had no idea how long he worked. All he knew was that he worked his way silently down the line of nine prisoners. All had been wounded to some extent; two had suffered broken arms as they reflexively raised their arms against the collapse of the hanging wall; one had an indented skull (and was now so drowsy and unresponsive that Garth knew he was not long for this life; at least his escape was close); another had several of his teeth chipped away and his nose broken awry. On them all Garth laid his hands, and tried to impart what comfort and encourage what healing that be could.

From them all he felt the deep and almost overwhelming sadness that had become a part of their very flesh.

Finally he came to the last prisoner. The man had a bad laceration above his right elbow, and Garth pulled the second pail of water close. It was almost gone. He would have to be careful.

Wringing out the by-now bloody cloth, Garth carefully sponged away at the man’s arm, still vaguely surprised to find white flesh under so many layers of grime. The man winced, and Garth glanced at him. He had a finer face than the others, with a striking aquiline nose, and hair that seemed naturally black. For an instant their eyes caught, and Garth flinched at the misery he saw reflected in the man’s deep blue eyes.

The sadness from this one would be worst of all.

Garth bent back to the arm. He had cleaned most of the flesh about the wound now…but what was this? A further abrasion? He cleaned a little higher up the man’s biceps. There was something here…ah! An old scar. Garth peered a little closer.

“A burn,” he muttered. “And old. How did you get that?”

But the man turned aside his head, and Garth rubbed away at the rest of the old burn tissue in silence. It covered most of the man’s upper biceps. Gods, but he was lucky to survive that, Garth thought, for surely it must have become infected. Impelled by curiosity more than anything else, he wrapped his hands about the old scar, ignoring the fresher wound, feeling for the extent of the old injury.

What he felt seep through the scar tissue altered his entire existence.
Garth knew what it was instantly.

It had only been three days since he had last felt this...difference. The ink used to tattoo the image of the Manteceros into the flesh of the heir to the throne changed the flesh it was bonded to.

So Cavor’s flesh had been changed.
So this flesh had been changed.
His hands shook, and the man’s head turned back to him. “What’s wrong?”

Garth instinctively looked over at the guards. They were still involved in their game of dice and did not notice him. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. Something told him it would be death to suddenly shout to the world that this man was...was...

“Maximilian,” he whispered, and made himself meet the man’s eyes.

The man’s teeth bared in a gesture that was half grin, half snarl. “I am Lot No. 859. I have no name.”

Garth’s hands continued to shake; if anything they had got worse. Joseph had told them of this; all prisoners were assigned lot numbers when they arrived at the Veins. Their names and every record of their previous lives were struck from the record books.

“Maximilian,” Garth repeated, more strongly this time, but still only a whisper.

“Treat my wound,” the prisoner snarled, his hostility tangible, “and then leave me alone. The dark has made you demented.”

Garth’s hand tightened about the man’s biceps. “I can feel it! The Manteceros has been tattooed into your arm—and someone has made this cruel attempt to burn it out.”

Something flickered across the man’s face, but whatever it was had gone before Garth could recognise it.

“Is anything wrong?” Jack called, half rising from the circle of the guards. “Is he being insolent?”

“No,” Garth called hurriedly. “No. I am tired, that’s all, and I was resting before stitching the man’s wound.”

“Then hurry,” grumbled Jack, “for we have three other gangs for you to treat.”

Three more gangs? Garth almost collapsed at the thought, then, surprised, leaned back. Something approaching sympathy was shining from the man’s—Maximilian’s—eyes.

“Stitch my wound and then leave me,” he said softly. “There are others who need you, boy.”

“My name is Garth.”

“I do not need to know your name,” the man rasped, his hostility returning in the space of a breath. “I will never see you again. Now stitch me up and leave me.”

“Garth,” Garth said determinedly, “Garth Baxtor. Son of Joseph Baxtor.”

Again something flickered deep in the man’s eyes, but he turned away without answering.

Garth finally let his hands slip from the old scar. Somewhere beneath there the Manteceros yearned for freedom. He reached for his suturing gear and closed the man’s wound. If he had survived that horrific burn then he would survive this.

By the sun above, Garth thought suddenly, his fingers stilling, how long has he been down here?

The man’s arm tensed, and Garth hurriedly finished the job. As he tied the last knot, Garth touched the man’s arm again. “What are you doing here, Maximilian? You belong beyond the hanging wall.”

The man’s head turned back to his, and Garth realised that beneath the grime coating the man’s face were the most compelling blue eyes he had ever seen. “Your Touch has made you dim-witted, boy,” the man whispered fiercely. “There is nothing beyond the hanging wall. Nothing.”

“I—” Garth began, but the man continued, seizing Garth’s hand in his own.

“There is nothing beyond the hanging wall. No hope, no joy, no existence beyond what I currently enjoy.”

Garth winced at the intonation placed on that last word and at the denial he could feel swamping into him from the man’s flesh.

“Above me lies only blackness. Behind me lies only blackness. My life is gloam and pain, and then yet more gloam tempered by a little more pain.” He paused, and when he resumed, Garth could hear and, more terribly, feel the total despair of this man’s soul. “There is no outside world. Once I believed in it. No more.” He paused, then finished on a whisper. “No more.”

Garth’s face set into stubborn lines. “You are Maximilian, rightful King of Escator.”

The man’s teeth bared once more in a parody of a grin. “I am Lot No. 859. I always have been and I always...
Somehow Garth got through the rest of that terrible night. From that anonymous cavern in the ground where rested Maximilian, King of Escator, Jack dragged Garth to three more sites, all similar, all with chained gangs of nine men. Some men Garth could save, some he could not. But whoever’s face currently swam before his, all he saw was the face of the man with the aquiline nose and the dark blue eyes that stared into his so fiercely…the man with nothing but despair where his soul should have flourished.

_How…what was he doing in the Veins?_

Whatever had warned Garth to say nothing to Jack continued to prod him. Several times he opened his mouth and turned to the guard, only to turn away when Jack asked, “What?”

“Nothing.”

_What was he doing in the Veins?_

The young boy, lost in the forest. Seized by unknown assailants, the Manteceros scorched from his arm by some unimaginably cruel hand, then thrown down into the Veins. Safe. Hidden. As good as dead. Simply Lot No. 859.

Garth was ready to swear that whoever had thrown him down here probably thought him dead many years previously. Who would think that any man could have the reserves of strength and courage and even heart to survive _seventeen years in the Veins_! No wonder the man no longer believed in the outside world. He had lived the greater portion of his life in darkness—did he _remember_ anything about the outside world? No wonder the man refused to respond to his name.

Maximilian.

“Maximilian,” Garth whispered softly to himself, almost as a mantra. If Maximilian could survive seventeen years below, then he could get through the night.

And then he would rise to the surface and let the light wash over him and everything below would seem but a nightmare to be easily brushed away…

…but the fact that Maximilian laboured beneath his feet would never, never go away. And so he toiled through the night.

“Garth,” his father said, and Garth’s head jerked up. Father?

“Come,” Joseph said gently, seeing the darkness and pain hovering in the corners of Garth’s eyes. “We have done what we can for the moment. See? Here is the cage. Lean on me, yes, that’s it. Ah, we rise—feel it? Shush, Garth, shush. It’s over now.”

No, Garth thought as he leaned against his father and wept, it’s only just beginning, but how do I tell him that? How do I tell him?
Garth did not tell his father about his meeting with Maximilian. He knew what Joseph would do. He would go straight to the appropriate authorities, inform them that Maximilian, rightful King of Escator, lay beneath their feet—and then both he and Garth would themselves be condemned to the Veins for the rest of their lives.

Garth realised that someone in authority knew of Maximilian’s existence. Had to, surely, and until Garth knew who that someone was, knew who was safe to confide in and who not, he was not prepared to tell his father.

It was too risky, too dangerous.

But what to do?

The questions kept Garth awake at nights.

The pipes had remained clear, and within twenty-four hours the mine had been pumped clear of the sea water and the tunnel that had been broached was sealed with explosives. Once the danger had, literally, receded, Garth and his father spent most of their days down the Veins, attending the more routine injuries and the vivid and virile fungi that afflicted prisoners doomed to labour in the damp, sulphurous air of their eternal night.

Each further day he spent down the Veins Garth kept expecting to run into Lot No. 859 again, but they never went back to the section Jack had taken him to the first night, and apparently Lot No. 859 toiled nowhere but.

And now the weeks were sliding away. In his first few hours down the Veins Garth had prayed that he could escape as soon as he could; now he was desperate to stay…stay until he had something, some understanding of what it would take to get Maximilian out.

The first time he’d thought that, Garth had paused over the prisoner’s arm he was currently scraping free of the red and orange fungus that thrived among the gloam. Free Maximilian? Yes, that’s what he wanted to do. Get him out.

How?

Garth needed to talk to Lot No. 859 again. Maximilian must have some idea of who it was that had cast him down here, and might even have some idea of what it would take to escape.

Then why hadn’t he tried before now?

Yes, he had to talk to Lot No. 859 again. But Garth would only lose himself if he tried to find Section 205 by himself. What…ah!

“Jack,” he said on his third to last day as they were waiting for the cage to take them down; Joseph had already been down the Veins an hour. “Do you remember that first night I arrived?”

Jack grinned. “It made a man of you, that night.”

Garth forced a smile to his face. “You took me to a number of gangs. The first. I left a good pair of suturing forceps there.”

“By the gods!” Jack swore. “No doubt one of the prisoners swiped them! You’re a young idiot, boy. They’re undoubtedly planning to stick us with those forceps in an attempt to escape. Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“I only just missed them,” Garth lied, hoping Jack would believe him. “Section 205, wasn’t it?”

Jack narrowed his eyes at the youth as they waited for the cage to rattle and screech its way to the surface “You’ve an uncommonly good memory for a boy.”

“Oh,” Garth said brightly, “Father always makes me recite lists of herbs and powders every day. A good memory saves me from a good beating.” He stepped inside the cage.

It satisfied Jack, but he was still disgruntled. Section 205 was a good walk through the Veins. “Are you sure we can’t send one of the guards after them?” He slammed the cage doors closed and set the contraption in motion. In an instant they were hurtling downwards.

Garth swallowed. No matter how many times he travelled this cage he could not get used to its crazed dive through the earth—nor to the stench that met his nostrils when he reached whatever level he had to work on that day. “My responsibility,” he said. “Besides, I’d like to check some of those wounds. One of the men had a particularly bad knee. I’d like to make sure they’re healing well.”

Jack mumbled to himself, but he nodded his head, and Garth relaxed in relief. He hoped that Lot No. 859 hadn’t been moved to another gang.

Luck was with him. They found the gang working a slope relatively close to the main shaft.

“Halt!” Jack called to the two guards standing watch over the gang. “Is this the Section 205 gang?”

They nodded, and Jack waved Garth forward. “The lad claims to have lost some forceps back a couple of
weeks or so when he treated this lot. Search them.”

Garth winced, but there was nothing he could do. The two guards searched with enthusiasm, although there were few places a man could hide a pair of forceps wearing only a loincloth. Frustrated, eventually the guards stood back.

The line of prisoners stood sullen and resigned. Such searches were not uncommon.

Jack shrugged. “They could have hidden it anywhere along this tunnel.”

“Well,” Garth said slowly, “perhaps I dropped it elsewhere.”

“What?” Jack exploded. “I am not going to drag you about the entire cursed Veins looking for your forsaken pair of forceps!”

“No,” Garth hastened. “No, I don’t expect you to do that, Jack. I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused. Well,” his eyes slipped along the line to the last man, “perhaps I’ll just check their wounds while I’m here. Make sure there’s no fungus.”

Jack threw up his hands in despair, but he did not stop him.

Garth sidled past before he could change his mind. He examined each man thoroughly, laying his hands on their half-healed wounds, sending as much healing through his Touch as he could manage. They’d had to go through the ignominy of a search for the sake of his lie, and it was the best he could do for them as recompense.

There, the last in line, as before.

“Maximilian,” he whispered.

“I am Lot No. 859,” the man replied woodenly as Garth probed his wound with his fingers. Surprisingly his wound had completely healed, unlike those of the other men in the gang.

“You wear the Manteceros underneath the scar,” Garth said rapidly, softly, “and I, at least, believe in the world beyond the hanging wall. I am going to get you out of here. Back into the world where you belong. Tell me what to do.”

“I am not—” the man started to say again, but now it was Garth who interrupted.

“Tell me!” And the Touch burned fiercely from his fingers.

“I am not worthy,” the man mumbled reluctantly, his blue eyes wide.

“Why not?” Again the Touch flared.

Something in Lot No. 859’s mind stirred. “I am not Maximilian. I am a changeling.”

“A what?”

But now Jack was shifting impatiently and waving at Garth to leave the man, and Garth could not waste any more time. “You are Maximilian and I am going to get you out of here. Now, what can I do? Tell me!”

The man’s head dropped. “Find the Manteceros,” he mumbled, reluctantly and almost inaudibly. “The Manteceros will confirm the true king, none other.” He lifted his head, and Garth thought he could see a gleam of teeth. “He will not help me, though.”

“Who put you down here?” Garth whispered frantically, wondering when Maximilian would give him something to work with. “Who? You must know something!”

Lot No. 859 hesitated, resenting the strange memories that flickered at the touch of this boy’s hands. “There were voices. Shouts.” He shuddered. “But only one name. Furst.”

“What are you doing down there, boy?” Jack called. “Are you coming or not?”

“The man’s wound has broken open again,” Garth called in what he was amazed to hear sounded like a relatively normal tone. “I’m almost done.”

“Furst,” he said, his tone low now as he bent back over Lot No. 859’s arm. “All right, I have that. But what do you mean, ‘find the Manteceros’? The creature is only a legend…isn’t it?”

A muscle twitched beneath the man’s eye, and he mumbled a strange verse that Garth only barely caught.

“Come wind and fire and swollen sea,
Come fates that tear the sky from earth.
Release the dream; come, set him free,
So he can test the king’s true worth.”

“The dream?” Garth quickly wound a rough bandage about the man’s arm, even though his wound had healed cleanly.

Lot No. 859 grinned, but his smile was dark and humourless. “The Manteceros is a dream, boy. As is everything beyond the hanging wall. Everything is a dream. Everything. Nothing exists any more.”

There was a step behind him and Garth felt a rough hand on his shoulder.

“Boy?” Jack’s voice was tight, almost angry. “How much more of my time must you waste?”
“A dream,” Lot No. 859 whispered. “Nothing but a dream.”

“Sometimes dreams wake into reality,” Garth murmured, then he straightened up and turned about to face Jack. “I’m done,” he said.

Lot No. 859 turned away and grasped his pick more firmly in his hand, putting the boy and his words out of his mind as the feel of the Touch faded on his skin. The memories flickered and faded and he relaxed in relief. They’d been nothing but a dream. Nothing was real but the darkness.

Garth slept badly that night. Every time he drifted off he slipped into nightmares where Maximilian laboured in the Veins below him, in his arms and shoulder bunching and then relaxing as he swung his pick time and time again into the sticky black gloam-face before him. Towards morning Garth slipped into a deeper sleep, but his dreams only became more vivid, and he woke with a horrified shout when he saw Maximilian’s pick bite once more into the gloam-face only to break through into the glassy green sea beyond. The water surged forth with a vengeful roar, as if angry at this intrusion, and Maximilian bowed his head futilely as he was consumed by the maddened water.

“Garth!” Joseph, who occupied the bunk below his son’s, was on his feet and had his hand on Garth’s shoulder in an instant. “What is it?”

Garth swallowed, then tried to smile for his father. “A bad dream, father. Nothing more.”

“A bad dream?”

“I dreamed of the Veins. I dreamed the sea broke through again.”

Joseph’s hand relaxed a little on Garth’s shoulder. “Well, ‘tis no wonder the Veins give you bad dreams. The first few years I went down I suffered nightmares too. Garth, the horror will never cease, but you will learn to cope with it.”

Garth was silent a long minute, staring at the ceiling an arm’s length above his head. The dawn light was just beginning to creep through the window, and Garth could see cracks in the old plaster spreading like fault lines across the ceiling.

“Father?” he asked eventually, and Joseph, who had been about to sink back into his own bed, stopped at his son’s tone. “Father? Why is it so unfair?”

“What, Garth?” Joseph asked softly, although he knew what Garth meant. He had often asked himself the same question as well.

“The Veins. Why are those men condemned to such cruelty in the Veins, never seeing the sun again?”

Now Joseph was quiet a while. “I know it seems cruel to condemn men to such a fate, but the alternative would be to crowd them into prisons almost as dark and cruel as the Veins. Garth, there is nothing we can do about it.”

Garth sighed, and Joseph gave his shoulder a gentle shake. “Come on, Garth. We’re both wide awake now, so we may as well breakfast and go down for our day’s labour. At least we only have today and tomorrow. Then we’re home. Back to Nona and the bright sun of Narbon.”

Garth swung his legs over the side of his bunk and slid to the floor. “Yes, then we’re home.”

Joseph did not miss the slight inflection in Garth’s voice, but he chose to ignore it. Garth would have to come to terms with the Veins in his own way; Joseph could give him support, but little else.

Garth did not see Maximilian again. He thought of little else but the man, but there was no excuse he could use to hunt him out again, and Garth fully realised that to do so would only put Maximilian in danger. Jack had been suspicious enough when Garth had insisted on looking for his fictitious forceps, and Garth did not want to draw further attention to the man.

But soon he would leave, and Maximilian would be left to his continuing horror.

As he plodded up and down the dark tunnels of the Veins with his escort of guards, sometimes ducking his head to avoid the low hanging wall or squeezing through narrow spaces, Garth swore that when he returned next year he would somehow manage to free Maximilian.

A year. He would have to wait a year. Would Maximilian manage to survive a year? Would he still be here when he returned? And how was he going to release him when he found him again?

And what had that curious verse meant? Release the dream, set him free to test the king’s true worth? How was he supposed to find the mythical Manteceros? Questions flew about Garth’s head until it ached—and yet he could find the answers for none of them.

Nothing made sense, least of all Maximilian’s curious unwillingness to be rescued, and his even stranger remark that the Manteceros would not help him.

“Father?” Garth asked on the evening of their last day as they slumped wearily towards the overseer’s office. “What’s a changeling?”

Joseph regarded his son with some surprise. Garth had seemed curiously reluctant to come to the surface at the end of their shift, and Joseph had been forced to call him several times; the boy had finally edged towards the cage,
glancing repeatedly over his shoulder at the blackness behind him.

“A changeling?” The wind was blowing cold off the sea, and Joseph huddled closer into his cloak. “A changeling is a babe who is substituted for another.” He thought for a moment. “Perhaps for a stillborn child, if the mother is desperate enough to give her husband an heir. Why do you ask?”

Garth shrugged. “I heard it in a dream, nothing more.”

Joseph paused at the doorway of the overseer’s office, his hand on the door. His eyes were concerned. “Garth, do you want to talk to me about anything?” For days Joseph had wondered if Garth was holding something back. Even given the circumstances under which they currently worked, Garth had seemed overly quiet and withdrawn.

But now Garth flashed him a friendly grin, and Joseph relaxed a little. “Father, I’m fine. Really. Now, can we go inside out of this wind?”

The interior of the overseer’s office was warm and well-lit—and was, Garth immediately noticed, the cleanest place he had yet seen in this forsaken corner of Escator. He had never been inside the overseer’s office before, for Garth had always been occupied with something else whenever Joseph had made one of his rare visits.

But this evening Joseph had to sign off his duty for this year, and he had asked Garth to accompany him.

A large man with a head of exuberant red hair rose from a spacious desk before a roaring fire. “Joseph Baxtor! Finished already?”

Joseph smiled and shook the man’s hand. “Fennon, I’d like you to meet my son, Garth. This year has been his first down the Veins. Garth?”

Garth stepped forward, smiled politely, and shook the man’s outstretched hand.

“Garth, this is Fennon Furst. He’s been the overseer here for, what? Twenty years?”

Garth managed to keep the smile on his face only with the most strenuous of efforts, but he dropped his hand as quickly as he could.

Furst laughed. “Not quite, Joseph. King Cavor appointed me when he first came to the throne. Sixteen years, more like, although it feels like sixty!”

Garth let the men’s continuing banter wash over him. Furst? The same name as the man Maximilian said had been among those to put him down here. Had he meant only that Furst, as overseer, had literally put him down the Veins? But no, for Maximilian had been missing some seventeen years, and Furst had been here only sixteen years. Perhaps there was another Furst about…and perhaps not. Garth frowned, trying to make sense of it.

Joseph noticed, and his own smile died fractionally as he stood up from the book he had just signed. “Come on, Garth. A bath and a meal, and an early night. Then in the morning we leave.”
Garth found it hard to settle back into normal life once he and his father returned home. He worked and learned at his father’s side, and he smiled at his parents and the patients who came through the surgery door. The Touch flowed cleanly and in ever-increasing amounts from his hands. He laughed for his mother, and helped her about the house when Joseph gave him the occasional free morning or afternoon. Sometimes he spent these free hours carefully and nonchalantly asking some of the older and wiser men about Narbon’s marketplace and craft halls if they’d heard about the Manteceros, if it truly lived or if it was only legend, but the men just smiled at him and shook their heads, wondering at the preoccupations of youthful minds. And so, clueless, spring broadened into summer, and the days lengthened and were filled with the noise of the busy harbour town and the heady scent of the summer blossoms hawked by street vendors. Nona’s kitchen continued to be a haven of peace and of a seemingly endless supply of hot, sweet tea and raisin buns.

But everything had changed.

Maximilian haunted Garth’s waking moments, and continued to work the rock-face of his dreams. Every fourth or fifth night Garth would endure the recurring nightmare as the sea burst through the rock-face, drowning Maximilian. Never would he try to flee the water; always he stood calm and accepting as the waters consumed him. Sometimes it was not Maximilian who stood there, but a tiny baby, squalling among its woollen wraps as the sea rushed in.

Garth had learned not to wake screaming, for then his parents rushed in, but he still woke nevertheless, eyes wide and staring, mouth open and gasping for air, staring at the ceiling above his head and imagining he could see scores of hairline fractures splinter their deadly way across its surface.

After a month, Joseph took him aside one afternoon as the last patient left the surgery.

“Garth, what’s wrong? No,” he said firmly as Garth opened his mouth, “don’t try to tell me nothing’s wrong. Something is wrong, very wrong.”

They sat down on a pair of chairs close to the windows. A gentle breeze wafted in, carrying with it the muted cries of the wharves and streets. Garth studied his hands. Daily he asked himself if he should tell Joseph about Maximilian, but daily the sense of danger grew. Garth somehow understood that to involve Joseph at this time would be to endanger him. How he understood that Garth did not know—perhaps it had something to do with the Touch.

But if he could not mention Maximilian, then he could talk about the Veins—their horror bothered him as much as the man they had trapped.

His eyes still on his hands, slowly Garth found the words to speak. He spoke of his horror at the conditions of the Veins and of the men set to such cruel work within them. He spoke of the dreadful red and orange fungi that crept across their skins, feeding both on the gloam dust and on the darkness and which, if not treated, eventually ate into skin and muscle until infection and death followed. He spoke of the nauseating and ever present gloam dust itself, the tacky, sulphurous dust that infiltrated lungs and throats and eventually caused death by its simple presence—but a death wracked out over years as men hacked and coughed through the Veins until they coughed their very life out.

Joseph sat and listened to it all, then, as Garth stumbled into silence, he leaned over and embraced his son. Garth hugged him back, glad to have finally found the courage to talk to his father about the Veins—even doing this much had relieved some of his pent-up feelings about Maximilian.

“Now you know why your mother was so concerned about your first trip to the Veins,” Joseph eventually murmured, leaning back and smiling for his son. “She had to soothe me through many years of nightmares.”

“How did you learn to cope?”

Joseph used one hand to smooth some of his son’s unruly brown curls back from his forehead, then dropped his hand and patted the boy’s shoulder. “I did what most physicians learn to do, Garth. I forget about the Veins for most of the year. The three weeks that I am forced to work down them are the three weeks of my year that somehow exist outside of normal time.”

Garth nodded. No wonder every physician in Escator was compelled by law to spend three weeks of every year down the Veins—none would ever work down there voluntarily.

“How?” Joseph patted Garth’s shoulder one last time and stood up. “I’ve been working you too hard, Garth. Take tomorrow off. Run down to the wharves to spy out the ships, or find your friends and play a game of hoopball.
Now, I’m sure that I can smell dinner wafting through from the kitchen. Come on, let’s eat.”

Garth stood up, but he caught at his father’s arm as they walked towards the door. “Father, I want to learn all
that I can, as fast as I can. Next year I want to be able to do everything possible for those trapped beneath the
hanging wall.”

Joseph opened his mouth to say that Garth, as an apprentice, was not compelled to work down the Veins, but he
closed it slowly at the expression in his son’s eyes. He nodded, his eyes sober. “You learn almost faster than I can
teach you, Garth. At this rate you’ll have finished your apprenticeship two years ahead of schedule.”

“But—”

“And,” Joseph continued more firmly, “you’ll take an extra half day off from the surgery every week, Garth.
Look at you! You’re as pale and as drawn as if you’d been condemned to the Veins yourself. There’s a good
summer sun out there, and you need to catch more of it. Sometimes I forget that you’re still a boy. Come on now,
smile for your mother, and me. And learn to cope with the Veins, or give up the craft of physic.”

Joseph turned for the door, but Garth had one more question. “Father, how long can any man survive down the
Veins?”

Joseph paused, his hand on the door, his eyes gentle. “I’ve not known any man survive longer than five years,
Garth, and even that is an extraordinary effort. You’ve seen the conditions they work under. If they are not crippled
in an accident, then either the gloam dust or the creeping fungus will kill them eventually.”

Garth stared at his father, taking a deep breath. What had kept Maximilian alive for so long? It firmed his
resolve to rescue him next spring. If he was still alive.

He forced a smile to his face. “If mother keeps feeding us those raisin buns, father, neither of us will be able to
fit down the Veins next year.”

Joseph laughed, and they left the surgery for the peace of the kitchen and Nona’s serene smile.

The next day Garth spent the morning as Joseph had suggested, rounding up seven or eight of his friends for a
spirited game of hoopball in the alleyways behind Narbon’s marketplace, then joining them in a race for the wharves
to gaze admiringly at the latest Corolean transport ship to dock.

Garth found his preoccupation with Maximilian fading a little under the warmth of the sun and his friends’
companionship. They stood for almost an hour, examining over the brightly hued ship that bobbed gently against
the wharf. The Corolean ships were always painted in bright colours, and their crews—all tall fair-haired men with
dark eyes and secretive smiles—dressed in equally bright colours; from their belts hung small bronze statuettes of
the mysterious deities that they worshipped. One of Garth’s friends had brought a small spyglass, and they passed it
around the group, examining the ship in close detail, wondering about the lands so far to the west across the
Widowmaker Sea that some said it took six months to sail across.

Eventually Garth turned away. He was tired of trying to guess the unknown, and when his friends pressed him
to another game of hoopball, Garth smiled and said he wanted to spend the afternoon alone.

Thoughts of Maximilian returned as he wandered down dim alleyways alone. Find the Manteceros, the prince
had said, and Garth grinned wryly to himself. Find the Manteceros indeed. Maximilian had said so himself.

“Find the dream,” he muttered, and kicked a small stone with his boot, sending it scooting down the packed dirt
of an alleyway. Then he laughed, his natural humour reasserting itself. “Find the dream!”

A woman hanging washing on a line suspended across the narrow alley glared at him as her baby cried out in
the room behind her, and Garth stepped out, still grinning, in case she decided to throw a washcloth at him for
disturbing the peace of her day.

He reached the market then wandered for an hour or more, pausing now and again to chat to one of the stall-
holders that he knew, or examine some of the more interesting items for sale. A new style of lampshade, ingeniously
wrought from iron filigree, caught his attention for some minutes. His mother would love it, but it was too expensive
for Garth’s small allowance, and he regretfully shook his head at the street trader.

“For the young master, only thirty marks,” the man murmured.

Garth grinned. “Bring it down to three marks, and I’ll take it from your care.”

The middle-aged man, tall and spare with thick dark hair, regarded Garth carefully, liking the intelligent cast to
his face and his lively, inquisitive eyes. The man’s own eyes narrowed speculatively. Was it time? Was the youth
ready?

Well, ready or not, it appeared Fate had already claimed him with her cold fingers.

“Would the young master like to see this tray of medallions?” he said deferentially, and slid the tray from
underneath his counter. “Only recently arrived from Ruen itself, and of the finest workmanship.”

Garth, who was beginning to tire of his market wander, cast his eyes briefly over the tray. A minute or two
more, he thought, then he would be off. Perhaps he would join his friends for another game of hoopball, after all.

Then he stilled, almost in the act of turning away.

The street trader’s eyes narrowed even further. So…His suspicions darkened into absolute certainty.

Almost of its own volition, Garth’s hand stole towards a small medallion in the top left-hand corner of the tray. It was a small copper disc, plain enough in itself, but in its centre someone had traced an outline in blue enamel.

The canvas awning above their heads flapped in a sudden breeze, and in the resulting flash of light the Manteceros almost appeared to leap out of the medallion. Garth’s hand jerked, and he made a small noise of surprise.

“A trifle, nothing more,” the stall-holder said carefully. “I’m surprised you should find it interesting.” But you have been asking questions about the Manteceros, haven’t you, young master? I have heard you ask some of the older men in this marketplace…and how strange that you should begin to ask only after you had been down the Veins. How very, very odd.

“It’s the Manteceros,” Garth mumbled. His fingers finally touched the surface of the medallion, and they trembled fractionally before he could steady them.

The street trader did not fail to notice. “As I said, a trifle. But if it pleases you, young master, then I am pleased, too.”

Garth touched the medallion lightly, then raised his eyes. “It’s the royal insignia.”

The man nodded.

“Only to be worn by the king or his heir,” Garth said, his voice firmer now. “And the royal guard. No-one else.”

The man shrugged, pretending disinterest. “If you wore it under your tunic, then who would know? Besides, you’re hardly likely to stand forth in Ruen and lay claim to the throne yourself, are you, young master?” The man’s eyes were unashamedly sharp now. “Where’s the harm, that’s what I say. Wear it, and you show your loyalty to the true king.”

Garth glanced at the man. Had he slightly stressed the “true”? His eyes slipped back to the medallion. He was a little surprised to see that at some point in the last few minutes it had somehow worked its way into his hand.

It lay there, firm and cool against his warm skin. “How much?”

“Five marks, young master. Five marks and I’ll give you the thong to tie it about your neck as well.”

Garth’s fingers closed about the medallion. “Five marks? For this small bauble? I’ll give you two.”

The man grinned. Two was twice as much as it was worth. “Three, and a spare thong as well.”

“Three,” Garth murmured. He did not want to let the medallion go, yet three marks was close to his entire worldly wealth. A cart rattled behind him, and Garth flinched. For an instant it had sounded like the cage as it clattered its way into the depths of the Veins.

He made up his mind. “Three. Very well.” His free hand rummaged about in the pocket of his trousers, then he halted, confused.

The stall-holder had grasped his arm and was staring at him with a strange, almost fanatical expression in his eyes. Garth took a step back, but he could not dislodge the man’s grip. “What? Who are—”

“It’s of no matter who or what I really am,” the man hissed. “Keep the medallion. It’s yours. If you’ve found the dead, then don’t forget him! Help him find the dream, boy, help him!”

About him the market bustled cheerfully, but Garth and the dark, intense man seemed to exist in an isolated pocket of silence. The street trader—or whatever he really was—reached behind him and pulled a leather thong from a small holdall. “Here, take this. Tie the medallion about your neck.”

Still numbed by the man’s words about the dream, slowly Garth took the thong and threaded it through the small ring at the top edge of the medallion. As he tied it about his neck the dark man visibly relaxed. “Good, good. Now, slip it inside your tunic. Yes, just like that.”

Garth felt the cool disc against the skin of his chest, and he fingered it through the material of his tunic. “Who—” he began as he raised his head, then he started in fright.

The stall before him was empty, the canvas above flapping mournfully. There was nothing, not a single item of merchandise, not even the cloth used to cover the boards of the stall itself.

And certainly no sign of the tall, thin man.

Garth trembled and he slowly backed away from the stall.

“Hey, you! Watch out!”

He leaped aside only just in time to avoid a heavily laden cart, its driver gesturing angrily at him.

Garth turned and ran through the market and the back alleys until he was breathless—but when he finally stopped, leaning against a wall while he caught his breath, he could still feel the medallion pressing against his chest.
In his dark, sticky eternity, Lot No. 859 raised his pick and buried it in the rock-face before him. Gloam tumbled to the floor—already he was up to his ankles in the tarry substance, and 859 hoped that the gang whose job it was to cart the gloam back into the tunnel would shovel it away from his legs before he drowned in it. At his left shoulder Lot No. 65 toiled away; to his right loomed the tunnel wall.

It was a measure of his seniority—earned simply through his ability to keep on surviving—that 859 had the privilege of working at the head of the line. It gave him added freedom and privacy, for he could always turn his head to the right and encounter nothing but his own thoughts.

And the black rock.

He raised the pick again and again, his muscles bunching rhythmically, black dust floating about him and covering his body. The bandage about his right arm was so coated that it was indistinguishable from his equally blackened flesh.

Lot No. 859 had not removed the bandage since the day the boy had placed it there. He had not known why, for the boy had been irritating, and had probed painfully with his questions and assumptions. His insistence that there was a world—and a world worth returning to—beyond the hanging wall unsettled 859, and in those brief hours when he was permitted to sleep he dreamed of vistas and breezes that must have been the product of his imagination.

For Lot No. 859 knew there was no world beyond the hanging wall. He knew it. There was nothing, nothing, nothing but the rhythmic swing of the pick and the crumble of the gloam. Nothing but the rock-face before him and the blackness to his right. Nothing but the cursing and the sweating and the dying chained to his left ankle.

Lot No. 859 had no comprehension of the time he had been shackled beneath the earth. Had anyone muttered seventeen years to him he would have gone mad and buried the pick in his own skull.
He stood for a long time, his hand grasping the medallion through the material of his tunic, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Release the dream, Maximilian had said.
Help him find the dream, the strange dark man had urged.
And had given him this medallion with the outline of the Manteceros emblazoned across its surface.

Making sure no-one was looking, Garth slipped the medallion free of his tunic and gazed at it. It was of plain workmanship, but striking because of it. He ran his finger around the blue outline of the Manteceros, idly thinking that it was a strange creature for a royal line to take as its emblem. Almost ugly, certainly ungainly, the Manteceros surely was no creature of war, nor even of pageantry. Roughly the size and shape of a horse, the creature had a bloated body and legs that were thick and trunk-like. A shapeless head sat on a neck too thin for the body. There was a faint suggestion of a spiky mane and a thin, tufted tail. Garth shook his head slightly. He’d heard of royal houses that took bears or dragons or even one of the great cats as their emblems, but the royal line of Escator had apparently decided on this strange creature.

For the first time Garth found himself wondering at its true nature, then laughed at himself for assuming the creature existed.

But even to his ears, his laughter sounded forced, and Garth fell silent again, his hazel eyes reflective.

So, all he had to do was to find a dream.
“Well,” he muttered. “Where am I going to find a dream?”
He looked up, and for the umpteenth time that day, jumped in surprise.

His headlong flight from the marketplace had brought him to rest before the great library of Narbon. It was an imposing building, colonnaded in gleaming white marble and with scrolls and quills carved deep into the great portico at its entrance. Garth had never been inside, although he knew his father had. It was owned by the town itself, and run by an obscure religious order that kept the books and scrolls free from dust and sticky fingers.

Garth stared at the building, slipping the medallion back inside his tunic. Any citizen was supposedly allowed access to the building—although access to the books and scrolls themselves was controlled by the monks—but Garth had never had any excuse nor any desire to enter. What books he needed were shelved in his father’s surgery, and his mother’s store of legends and tales were enough to keep him entertained at night.

And what boy ever entered the library when an exciting game of hoopball called?

Garth shifted from foot to foot. To free Maximilian he had to find the Manteceros—and yet, as far as he knew, the beast lived only in legend. Well, what better place to start hunting a legend than inside the library? Perhaps one of the monks could help him.

And perhaps they’ll as soon chase me out of their beloved reading rooms with brooms and dusting cloths, he thought dryly as he slowly crossed the street and stood before the sweep of marble steps that led under the portico and to the door. It stood open, and ultimately that was what decided Garth to try his luck inside. If the doors had been closed, he would have turned his back and gone home to help his mother for the afternoon.

The monk who approached Garth as he hesitated in the cool and spacious entrance chamber surprised the youth. He had thought all monks to be old, fat and slightly demented, but the man who now strode towards him was only five or six years older than himself, and had a friendly grin that was reflected in his light brown eyes. Beneath such apparent friendliness, his austere habit looked slightly out of place.

Garth gaped, then recovered his manners as the monk halted before him and half bowed. He jerked his upper body in reply, not truly knowing if the monk expected it or not, then hesitated awkwardly.

“It is a fine day outside,” the monk said. “Perhaps too warm if you’ve come inside to read what inadequate material we can offer you. My name is Brother Harrald,” and he extended his hand.

Garth quickly shook it. “Garth Baxtor.”

“Well, Garth Baxtor, you stand there looking slightly lost. How may I help you?”

“Well,” Garth barely managed to avoid handling the medallion through his tunic again. “I’m possessed by a curiosity.”

“Well and good,” Brother Harrald said, his voice warm. Garth could not spot the faintest trace of condescension in it, and he relaxed.
“About…well, about a legend, really.”
Brother Harrald raised his eyebrows.

“About the Manteceros,” Garth said, and tensed, waiting for the inevitable question about why he was interested in the Manteceros.

But it did not come. “Ah,” Brother Harrald replied, and his eyes deepened in interest. “A fascinating legend. What exactly do you want to know about it?”

Garth smiled sheepishly. “Well, just about everything really. But,” he added hastily, “what I’d really like to find out is if the creature ever existed. Do you know?”

“No personally, Garth, but your question promises an enthralling hunt through the afternoon. Come, and we’ll explore further.” He stepped away, and motioned Garth to follow him. “Come.”

Garth followed the monk across the foyer, raising his head to run his eyes across its magnificent emerald-enamelled dome as he went. Their feet scuffed softly across the floor, and from a small antechamber to one side Garth could hear the murmur of several voices in discussion—but for that distant murmur, Garth could have sworn that he and Harrald were the only ones in the building.

Harrald led him through a doorway on the far side of the foyer and Garth stopped and stared in sheer wonder the moment he stepped through. Before him was an immense hall, lit by great rectangular windows that stretched from the ceiling some fifty paces above his head to the floor, and a skylight in the silvered dome that occupied the centre space of the ceiling. Soft golden light fell from the windows, dust motes dancing in its broad rays, illuminating rows upon rows of books in the centre portion of the hall. To the sides were ranks of cases that held scrolls stacked higgledy-piggledy behind glass doors. Somehow seeing those scrolls piled so casually reassured Garth; they made the library seem friendly and inviting, itching for some hand to come along and discover their secrets.

The hall was all but empty; to one side Garth could see several monks grouped about a large open book on a stand, exclaiming over a portion of text, and further down the hall there were two older men, perhaps scholars, examining the rows of books.

“You and I are the youngest by half a century in the library this afternoon,” Harrald said softly, but his eyes grinned merrily. “Just think, whatever secrets we discover we will remember long after the others in here are dead and gone to enjoy the afterlife.”

“Has anyone ever read all these books?” Garth asked, hurrying after Harrald as he turned down an aisle to their left.

“No-one ever reads all books, or even all of a book,” Harrald said, his tone now reflective as he walked slowly down the aisle, running a finger across the spines of the row of books as he passed. Their bindings glowed deep blue, red and green in the light, golden lettering skittering at odd angles down their spines. “Books are like keys, or doors. You begin to read one, then halfway through you find that it gives a clue to yet another door. So you leave that book without discovering all of its secrets, because the lure of yet another discovery, another door, leads you further down the aisle. Soon your life is littered with half-read books and open doors.” He smiled. “One of the monks here, Brother Nestor, calls it the lure of the threshold. Once caught by the lure, you are never free. There is always another threshold to cross.”

Garth glanced at the books with new-found respect. He stretched out a hand and ran his fingers lightly along a row of spines as Harrald was doing. They felt warm and alive, not dry and musty as he had thought. What secrets did they contain? What addictions lay awaiting?

“Ah!” Harrald’s voice broke into Garth’s reverie. “This will prove as good a starting point as any.”

Garth gazed curiously at the volume that Harrald lifted down. It was bound in the royal blue, and had The History of the Kings of Escator embossed across its front cover.

Harrald carried it down the aisle and set it on a reading table to one side of the hall. Garth hurried after him, impatient to start reading. Already the lure of the threshold had sunk its hooks deep into his flesh. He slipped onto the bench beside Harrald.

The monk opened the front cover, muttering to himself as his eyes skimmed the table of contents. Garth had only barely begun to read the titles of the first chapters before Harrald had folded back some forty or fifty pages.

“Here!” he exclaimed at last. “Folio forty-nine verso. ‘Origins of the Rites and Customs of the Escatorian Monarchy.’” He muttered to himself again, his finger skimming down the page faster than Garth could follow.

Garth wriggled a little in impatience. “Well?”


“Procedures?” Garth asked, puzzled, but Harrald ignored him.

“Curious,” he said, his voice slow. “Listen,” and he read from the text.

Eight generations after the family of Persimius... “That’s the family that only recently died out,” Harrald
explained in an aside, and Garth nodded impatiently. He would have read the text himself, but Harrald’s hand partly obscured the faded writing.

...succeeded to the throne of Escator, they adopted the Manteceros as their emblem. Nennius of ancient memory was the first king to adopt the Manteceros—he claimed it spoke to him in a dream—and he was the first to display the mark that only the reigning king and his heir are enabled to bear. He talked to it, sometimes. Historians disagree on the reasons Nennius chose the Manteceros to represent and protect his family. Nennius himself remained obstinately silent on the matter—even on his deathbed—and it is said that he only laughed whenever anyone asked him.

Harrald stopped, and tapped the page with his hand.

“Is that all there is?” Garth asked, disappointment clouding his voice. “That tells me nothing at all.”

Harrald glanced at Garth, but he bit back his questions. “It continues on for a line or two more only.”

Since Nennius’ reign the Manteceros has remained the symbol of the proud Persimius family, fluttering from masthead and castle door over the generations. Only the king and his heir are party to its secrets (and then only Nennius knew them all), and thus this writer holds his silence lest he betray his ignorance.

Garth sat back, bitterly disappointed. That meant only Cavor and Maximilian among all men alive knew any of the secrets of the Manteceros; yet Maximilian huddled lost within the Veins, denying even his own identity, while Cavor was hardly likely to let slip secrets that would see him lose the throne.

“But this is just a dry history,” Harrald said softly, watching the disappointment etch sharp lines into Garth’s face. “And perhaps we can do better for you. Come.”

Placing the book back on its shelf, Harrald again roamed up and down the aisles, Garth following him with a little less enthusiasm now. Finally Harrald selected a book, a much smaller volume than previously, with water marks splotching its ancient, faded crimson surface. Harrald tut-tutted as they sat back down at the reading table. “Someone in the past has done his duty to the library poorly, it seems. Now, let us see.”

He opened the book up and Garth read its title, Escatorian Bestiary—Facts and Conundrums. Examined and Recorded by Gregorius the Wise, Historian and Adviser to Kings and Gods.

Harrald smiled as he watched Garth read the title page. “Gregorius had a high opinion of himself it seems. Not one of our more humble brethren. Still, he lived during the time of Nennius, so perhaps he can cast some light on this mystery.” He quickly scanned the contents, then turned to a page towards the end of the book.

The Manteceros:

A creature of mist and dream, the Manteceros roams the byways of our imaginations even as it rides the battle standards of our kings. A product only of Nennius’ imagination, for none but he has ever claimed to have seen it, and any mention of it in his presence generally only elicited a giggle—a strange reaction from such a battle-hardened man. Once, when I pressed the issue of the Manteceros, Nennius informed me that a king’s sense of humour was his most valuable asset, and then he winked, but Nennius was old then, and I think his mind was addled by dementia. I would advise the reader to give his remark no credence. I consider it unworthy to waste more space, ink or time upon this ridiculous beast. I spent the last five years of his life counselling Nennius to pick a Flaming Dragon or a Raging Bear as the emblem of his family.

Why did he not listen to such sound advice?

Why?

Gregorius’ sad lament seemed to echo over the centuries and through the great library.

“Perhaps our trail ends here,” Harrald said, trying to soften the blow. “I can think of no more places to—

“Wait,” Garth said. “Does this verse mean anything to you?

‘Come wind and fire and swollen sea,
Come fates that tear the sky from earth.
Release the dream; come, set him free,
So he can test the king’s true worth.’”

Harrald frowned. “Where did you hear that? It sounds like something women use to lull their babes to rest. No, wait, I didn’t mean that. Let me think.” His fingers tapped on the now-closed bestiary, and his brow furrowed in thought. Finally he rose in an abrupt motion. “Wait here,” he said, and picked up the bestiary and disappeared among the stacks of books again.

This time he returned with a scroll. It was bound with a cord of faded purple, and when Harrald undid the cord and unrolled the scroll, Garth saw the creamy parchment was so old it had crumbled about its edges and its surface was fractured with tiny fault lines.

For an instant he was back at the rock-face, watching the fracture lines widen until the rock glowed glassy
green and the sea forced its way through.

“Are you all right?” Harrald’s concerned voice broke into the image, and Garth shook himself and nodded.

“Yes. What’s this scroll?”

“Something I’ve never read myself, but I remember Brother Rogem mentioning it once, many years ago when I was but a small boy embarking upon my novitiate. It is called A Calendar of Ordeals and Tests.”

“Ordeals and tests?”

“Yes, the last line of that verse refers to a test of some kind. So, perhaps we’ll find enlightenment here.”

There were no contents listed at the top of the scroll, so Garth had to sit, fighting his impatience, as Harrald skimmed through the scroll. It scratched across the surface of the table as the monk unrolled it further and further, and eventually cascaded over the far edge of the table. Garth made as if to lift it from the floor, but Harrald waved him back in his chair.

“The parchment is stronger than it appears, and, look, I think I have found something. Listen:

On sad occasion it may arise that there might be more than one claimant to the throne of Escator. If such occasion arises, then the Manteceros must be released to walk free from the shaded circle to administer the Ordeal to the rival claimants. It will be the Manteceros who will decide the Claim.

“And then follows another verse,” Harrald muttered irritably. Far from finding keys and open doors, the monk was finding that doors only slammed in his face.

“Who comes to Claim?
Who dares the Dream
And, daring, ----------”

“And, daring…?” Garth asked.

“And, daring nothing!” Harrald snapped, then apologised for his tone. “I’m sorry, but the last word is missing. There is only a line drawn across the parchment.”

“What does that mean?”

Harrald took a deep breath. “It means that whoever wrote that verse knew the last word, but declined to write it—or was forbidden to write it. Perhaps it forms part of the ordeal.”

Garth sat deep in thought. Everything came back to a dream. Maximilian had muttered about a dream. The street trader had talked of dreams. Verses and histories and indignant bestiaries mentioned dreams.

But where was he going to find a dream? And what was the shaded circle that the Manteceros had to step free from?

Over the following weeks Garth spent much of his spare time in the great library of Narbon, and when he wasn’t there Harrald searched on his behalf. But they found little more than they discovered on the first day. Fleeting and vague references to dreams and to creatures of unsubstantiated fact.

But even a single mysterious word or phrase cheered Garth. At least he was doing something, even if he didn’t seem to be getting very far. Perhaps he and Harrald were only an afternoon or an aisle from the book that would reveal what he needed to know—where to find the Manteceros. Hope kept him optimistic, and the library was so vast that Garth remained convinced that sooner or later he or Harrald would succeed in their quest.

Harrald never asked Garth why he was so driven to discover all he could about the Manteceros, and he never asked what the youth fingered so constantly through the material of his tunic.

Garth lost his pale and drawn appearance and, as the summer progressed and Joseph sent him outside as often as he could, he tanned under the blazing southern sun. He shot up another hand-span, and Nona’s good cooking filled out some of his rawboned ranginess. Joseph took him to a barber’s shop one day and watched as Garth’s boyish curls fell to the floor. When they came out Garth seemed more a man than a boy, and he walked with a relaxed confidence that made Joseph’s heart swell with pride. During those days that Garth spent by Joseph’s side in the surgery, he bent his will to learning as much as he could, and his father marvelled at his skill, his patience, and the apparently endless supply of humour and sympathy with which he dealt with those who came to sit under his hands.

Soon more and more patients were asking that Garth touch them rather than Joseph and, far from minding, Joseph’s pride in his son increased.

Joseph and Nona relaxed as the days lengthened and the shadows shortened. Whatever had been troubling their son, whether the horror of the Veins or something he had yet to admit to them, appeared to fade with each passing summer’s day.

Yet dreams still troubled Garth’s sleep, and he spent many a night awake and staring at the cracks in his ceiling, wondering if they had spread or if they remained quiescent.
And Lot No. 859 still swung the pick amid the tarry blackness of the Veins and, when he turned his head to the right for privacy of thought, he found the memory of the boy rapidly fading from his mind.

Eventually, what remained of the bandage about his right arm fell in tatters to the floor of the tunnel and was lost amid the ever-piling gloam, and the old burn on the man’s biceps was covered with a thick and tacky layer of gloam dust.
Sometimes dreams are found where one least expects them, and so it was for Garth.

Towards the end of summer, when the worst of the heat had passed, Joseph leaned across the breakfast table one morning and asked if Garth would pay a visit for him.

“It’s to one of the marsh families, Garth. I’d go myself, except that I’ve got to see Miriam.” Miriam’s condition was now so bad Joseph made almost daily house calls. “Besides, you’ll need to go out there sooner or later, anyway.”

“A marsh family?” Garth smiled at Nona as she pressed another fruit muffin on him, then turned his eyes back to Joseph. “I didn’t realise that you attended—”

He stopped short, realising he was wrong. On their journey to Ruen almost six months previously they had passed by the marsh, stretching for several insect-infested leagues along the coast, and Garth had noticed a woman and her daughter at a rundown hut a hundred paces back from the road. Then Joseph had said that he occasionally attended the marsh families.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you went?” Garth asked slowly, further remembering his father’s slight unease about the marsh woman. “What if it’s something I can’t handle?”

Joseph evaded Garth’s eyes and dismissed his concerns with a casual wave of his hand. “Venetia only ever wants some of the herbal powders that she can’t obtain within the swamp itself, and her message indicated the problem was not serious. Don’t worry, boy, she won’t bite. Now, I suggest that you take…”

And he leaned forward and gave his son detailed instructions. So it was that an hour later Garth found himself atop his brown gelding plodding steadily north along the road. Behind him bumped plump saddlebags—Joseph had not been entirely sure what it might be Venetia required, and so Garth had brought packets of half a dozen different powders.

The marsh people mostly lived to themselves. They rarely came into Narbon itself; if they required something then they either sent for it—as Venetia had—or pestered passing travellers to get it for them. They had a bad name among the Narbonese, many unfairly accused them of petty stealing, and Garth had more than a few qualms in his stomach as he turned his horse’s head towards the indistinct track that led off the main road.

Before him the marshlands steamed. The trees were stunted, growing only a little taller than the height of a mounted man, and at the moment their roots arched a full arm’s length out of the mud; at high tide they were fully submerged. The track wound between the trees on a narrow, raised gravel ridge; every so often the horse slipped and Garth’s heart lurched into his mouth, thinking he was about to be catapulted into the mud. But his horse managed to keep his feet, and Garth rode further into the marsh.

Although Venetia’s home was little more than a hundred paces from the main road, the track wound about through the trees for fully six hundred paces before Garth even caught sight of the tumbledown house. Biting insects hummed among the vegetation, and Garth was grateful he had taken his father’s advice and worn a cloak even on this warm day. Strange spiky flowers, some grey, some gold, poked here and there from the mud, and a thin layer of scum covered the exposed roots of the trees.

Even the light fell on the mud and through the trees in uneven splotches, as if it were diseased itself. Ropes of mist clung to leaves and roots, thick and stagnant. The distant cries of the seabirds sounded like the mournful sobs of souls lost in the maze of eternity.

Garth could not understand why anyone would want to live in the marshes. He’d heard that the town fathers had once planned to drain the marshlands and turn them into profitable farming land, but the project had been deemed too expensive to undertake, and so the marshes still spread along the coast, and still, if Garth’s eyes and nose were any judge, teemed with a variety of noxious vegetation and insect life.

A great fish lurched half out of the mud to his right, then fell back in with a sucking plop.

Garth’s gorge rose, and he wished he’d not eaten the third muffin his mother had pressed on him.

A movement in the trees beyond where the fish had displayed itself caught his attention, and he stared briefly. But whatever, it was now either gone or still, and Garth turned his head back to the narrow path, feeling as though a thousand different eyes watched him from the trees and mud.
Eventually Venetia’s hut loomed out of the trees, standing in the centre of a small island amid the mud. Her home was a ramshackle affair, built of odd pieces of timber nailed to a basic framework. Whoever had erected it had not done a particularly good job; gaps showed through in numerous places, and a thin chimney leaned precariously from the back wall. There was a door—standing half open—and two windows, small and dark, shaded by colourless hessian cloth.

Garth pulled his horse to a stop and slid to the ground. “Hello?” he called. “Is anyone home?”

Silence—except for the persistent hum of the insects.

“Hello?” Garth tied his horse to a post at one corner of the hut, and hoped the horse would not shy at anything and pull the entire structure to the ground. “Hello? I’m Garth Baxtor. Joseph’s son. Come with the herbal powders.”

There was movement within the dark interior, and the next moment a woman emerged.

Garth, who had been in the process of pulling the saddlebags from the horse’s back, paused in amazement.

She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen—even the exotic dancers who accompanied the travelling troupes through the major cities of Escator could not compare with this woman in beauty.

She was about his own mother’s age, and with the same dark hair, but there the similarity ended. She retained a girlish slimmness, and a paleness and firmness of complexion. Her eyes were the lightest grey that Garth had ever seen, and ringed with thick dark lashes, while her bone structure was so exquisite that Garth did not think even the most skillful sculptor could match it. She walked forward, her movements subtle and graceful.

She stared at him, then held out a long-fingered hand, palm uppermost. “So you are Baxtor’s son. He mentioned some years past he had a son who would take up the trade.”

“I…ah, my name is Garth.”

She smiled, and Garth made a faltering attempt to return it. If he had thought her lovely before, then it was nothing to what he thought her now.

“My name is Venetia.”

“Yes,” Garth managed.

Her smile widened, and for an instant Garth thought it slightly predatory. No wonder his father felt uncomfortable about coming out here.

“Will you come inside?” Her hand slowly fell to her side.

Garth nodded, and finally managed to pull the bags from the horse’s back.

She stared at him for a moment longer, then turned in one sinuous movement and disappeared into the hut.

Garth hesitated at the doorway. The hut was only small, yet the dimness of its interior gave the impression of spaciousness.

“Come,” Venetia’s voice called, slightly impatient.

Garth hefted the saddlebags over his arm, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

He blinked as he entered, his eyes struggling to compensate for the hut’s gloomy interior. For one moment he thought he stood in some vast, misty cavern, but then his eyesight cleared, and he saw that the interior of the hut was as listless and woebegone as its exterior. Did the woman make no attempt to clean or brighten her home? Apart from a rickety bed to one side, the only furnishings were a table, scratched and marred with countless knife-scores, and two old stools about a dusty hearth. How did she manage to live here?

“You’ve brought herbals?” the woman asked softly to one side, and Garth started, embarrassed at the thought that his face had so clearly mirrored his disgust.

“Yes, father wasn’t sure what you wanted, so…” his voice trailed off. For one heartbeat he thought the back wall had faded into nothingness, revealing yet more nothingness beyond, but the instant passed, and Garth stepped over and placed the saddlebags on top of the table. “I’ve brought a number of different herbal powders.”

Venetia smiled slightly, her pale eyes brilliant even in this gloom, and Garth bent over the bags, starting to undo their straps.

The woman glided to his side, her slim white fingers brushing his aside and undoing the straps with barely concealed impatience. Garth stood back quickly, his fingers tingling with her touch.

Again his vision blurred, and the back wall appeared to fade until only vastness replaced it.

Garth took a quick intake of breath, and Venetia looked up sharply. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Garth said hastily. “A little overheated from the ride, that’s all.”

Venetia stared at him, her eyes searching, then she pulled the first few packages out of the saddlebags. “Ah,” she breathed, “fultate, and here is some norstail. Your father has remembered my needs well.”

Garth finally found the courage to initiate some conversation himself. “What do you do with the powders? Do you use them to heal?”

Venetia smoothed the packs out before her, then raised her eyes. “Heal? Oh, occasionally, Garth Baxtor. Occasionally. Mostly I use them to dream.”
Garth took a sharp breath. “Dream?”
Venetia sighed, and Garth could see she was impatient. She had emptied the other packages out, and now had two or three of them clutched to her breast. She turned to look at him fully, her pupils dilating. “Thank you, Garth Baxtor. Tell your father that I’ll pay him in the usual—”
But Garth was no longer paying attention. “What?” he whispered, appalled, and grabbed for the edge of the table as a wave of faintness swept over him. “What’s happening?”
The table was no longer there, and Garth barely managed to keep himself from overbalancing. In the space of the blink of an eye the interior of the hut had changed—and now nothing made sense.
All walls and furniture had vanished. Now a vast cavern yawned about him. In one way it reminded him of the marsh outside, for mist roped about and he could hear the vague lap of water somewhere within its interior, yet at the same time it reminded him of the infinity of the night sky, for the shadows dancing about its boundaries hinted at eternities of distance, and slim, luminescent rays of light occasionally pierced the mist as moonlight sometimes pierses cloud.
“Garth Baxtor?” Venetia asked to one side. Her voice was puzzled, but it was also very, very distant.
“Ah…”
Venetia, watching him, took a deep breath. “Oh,” she said softly, and put the packages down and moved to his side. She laid a hand on his arm, her touch cool and soothing. “There is no danger, Garth.”
Both grateful and disconcerted by her touch, Garth looked at her, then hurriedly looked away again. Mist was tangled in her hair, and now he could see that it was exactly the same colour as her eyes. “Does my father…?”
“No. He has never seen it. Few ever see it, and now I wonder why you can, Garth Baxtor.” Her grip tightened.
He took a shaky breath. If anything, the impression of vastness was only increasing, and the mist seemed to be thickening. “Who…what is this…what are you, Venetia?”
Her lip curled softly. “This is the marsh and I am a marsh woman, boy. I inhabit dreams.”
Dreams? Garth opened his mouth but was forestalled by a movement in the door behind him. He turned, stunned that the door was still behind him.
A young girl—likely the daughter that he had spied on the road to Ruen—was standing in the rectangle of light. Behind her Garth could see daylight, safe and ordinary, and the shadow of his horse as it dozed in the sun. Venetia let his arm go.
“Ravenna.” The woman’s voice was warm, and she held out a hand for her daughter. “See who has come to visit. Garth Baxtor, son of Joseph.”
The girl stepped through the door, and Garth could see that she was slightly older than he had first thought—perhaps much the same age as he. She had her mother’s look, with sinuous movements and long dark hair framing a delicate face, but her eyes were dark grey rather than light, and her mouth was wider and friendlier. “He sees.”
“Indeed, he does, Ravenna. What do you think, then.”
“Unusual.” Ravenna stepped closer to Garth then, unexpectedly, she held out her hand and smiled. “How do you do, Garth Baxtor?”
Garth grasped her hand; her grip was cool and firm. “I am well, Ravenna.” He felt more than a little foolish, mouthing polite phrases in this most unusual of circumstances. “But…but I do not understand what I see in this hut.”
Now both her hands were wrapped about his, and her eyes widened curiously. “You have the Touch, Garth Baxtor, and you have a warm and courageous soul. I like you.”
Garth grinned. “I like you, too, Ravenna. But, please,” he pulled his hand free and waved about him, “will you explain?”
Ravenna glanced at her mother, then they both laughed.
“What you see is simply the marsh, Garth Baxtor,” Venetia explained. “The marsh is far more than the forest of low trees and the silted water you saw outside. That is merely its outer layer, put on to greet visitors until it decides whether or not it likes them.”
Garth frowned, some of his uncertainty returning. “The marsh is not what it appears?”
“No, boy, it is not.” Now Venetia’s voice hardened, and she abruptly stepped the distance between them and jerked the neck of his tunic apart. “And neither are you.”
Garth started backwards, but he was too late; her strong fingers had seized the medallion of the Manteceros. “Explain!” she hissed, and both her eyes and those of her daughter lightened until they were almost white. Power seeped through the spaces of the hut and Garth felt it probe at his mind. Strangely, its touch did not disturb him, even though both women were obviously on edge; the power was gentle and unobtrusive, persistently curious rather than forceful.
“A street trader gave it to me,” he said calmly, keeping his eyes steady on Venetia’s. “It is the Manteceros.”
Venetia’s lips parted and her eyes glittered, and Garth hurried on before she could interrupt.
“I seek the Manteceros, but he is but a myth...a dream.” Garth paused. Both mother and daughter still stared at him, but puzzlement was gradually replacing the hostility in their eyes. As their hostility abated, so their eyes darkened and the power about them faded. Release the dream, Maximilian had said, and the thought of Maximilian gave Garth the courage he needed to ask the right question.

“Yet you said you inhabit dreams, Venetia, and I think I might stand within one now,” he concluded softly. “Do you know where I can find the Manteceros?”

At his throat Venetia’s fingers trembled, then released the medallion. It fell back against his throat, warm from her grasp.

Venetia glanced at her daughter, then stared at the floor for a long moment. She raised her head. “Why do you seek the Manteceros, Garth Baxtor? What need do you have of its riddles?”

Garth shifted, and, surprisingly, felt the table against his hip. About him the misty spaces were slowly resolving back into the room. Neither Venetia nor Ravenna appeared to notice.

Garth dropped his eyes. What should he say? Could he dare say to these women what he could not tell his father? Why was his urge to trust them so strong when he had trusted no-one else?

Why? Because for the first time in months Garth felt the presence of hope. Here were women who understood dreams—and only a dream was going to help Maximilian. Without further hesitation, Garth risked his trust and Maximilian’s life with Venetia and Ravenna.

“Six months ago I accompanied my father to the Veins for the first time. While there I treated a man. On his right biceps,” Garth tapped his own arm softly, “was an old burn mark. Underneath—”

Venetia’s eyes widened in shock, and she grasped Ravenna’s hand.

“—underneath I felt the mark of the Manteceros. It had a strangeness about it.”

“Maximilian!” Ravenna breathed, and Garth looked at the girl, the last vestiges of his disquiet fading away. He was right to have trusted them.

“Yes. Maximilian.”

He paused, and took a great breath. “Help me. Please—help me.”
TEN QUESTIONS

“Tell us,” Ravenna said, and Garth did. He explained how he had found Maximilian, and he explained about Maximilian’s doubts, his denial of his own identity and his insistence that there was nothing beyond the hanging wall.

Both Venetia and Ravenna turned aside at that, obviously distressed at the thought of the man trapped for so long within the darkness of the earth.

Garth repeated the riddle Maximilian had told him. “Do you know what it means, Venetia?”

Venetia chewed her lip thoughtfully, her eyes guarded as she shared a glance with her daughter.

Garth shifted impatiently, both irritated and unnerved by the glances between mother and daughter. That they knew something was obvious, yet Garth feared they might just shake their heads and turn away.

But eventually Venetia replied. “The first two lines obviously refer to a time when need is great—and if it is Maximilian trapped beneath the hanging wall—”

“It is,” said Garth, low and fierce.

“If it is Maximilian trapped beneath the hanging wall,” Venetia repeated, irritated herself now, “then the need must necessarily be great.”

“And you were right to say that the Manteceros is a dream,” Ravenna said, her grey eyes steady on Garth’s face, “for he is nothing but.”

Venetia nodded. “And the last two lines, Garth Baxtor, indicate that we must set the dream free—”

“Set him free into this world,” Ravenna murmured. Now her eyes were distant and dreamy, and after a minute she lowered them and averted her face.

“So he can test the king’s true worth.” Venetia finished, and took a deep breath, adding almost to herself, “Is Maximilian a changeling, or is he true? And what form is the test?”

An ordeal, the scroll said,” Garth explained, and told Venetia and Ravenna what little he had discovered in the library. “If there is more than one claimant to the throne, then the Manteceros must administer an ordeal.”

Venetia shuddered, and her face became very still.

Garth hesitated. “Will you help me?” he asked again, looking between the two. “Can you find the Manteceros?”

Venetia stared at him, then nodded her head.

“Perhaps, boy. Come,” her tone turned brisk, and she turned to the table.

Garth blinked. He could have sworn that when last he looked the table held nothing but the saddlebags and the packages of herbs. Now bread, cheese and sausage were spread across thick white platters, while mugs of frothy ale stood to one side.

He jumped. Venetia had placed her hand in the small of his back and was gently pushing him towards the benches that had appeared as mysteriously as the food.

“I would that you share a meal with us, Garth,” she said gently.

“My father—” Garth began.

“Your father will not fuss if you stay the afternoon. Now, sit.”

Garth sat.

“And while we eat, Ravenna and I will attempt to explain the marshes to you.”

Venetia sat herself on a bench on the opposite side of the table, but Ravenna slid onto the bench that Garth sat on. He slid a little self-consciously to its far end. Neither Venetia nor Ravenna paid him any heed.

Venetia carved up the sausage and cheese, heaping generous portions on three plates, while Ravenna handed the mugs of ale around.

“Thank you,” Garth murmured as he accepted both food and ale, and took a quick sip from his mug. The ale was rich and foamy and soothing, and Garth relaxed. “What is it that I saw in this hut, Venetia?” There was no trace of mist or cavernous space left.

“You only saw the marsh, boy.” Venetia put down the piece of sausage she held and nodded at her daughter.

“The marsh is halfway land, a border land,” Ravenna said quietly to Garth’s side. “It lies halfway between the sea and the land, and is composed of both. Sometimes the land seems dominant, sometimes the sea.”

“And the marsh is also a border land between the land of wakefulness and the land of dreams.”

Garth swallowed his piece of bread and cheese. “There is a land of dreams?”
“Assuredly,” both marsh women said together.

“And I could reach the land of dreams through the marsh?” he said slowly.

Ravenna took a sharp breath and looked at her mother.

“You would find it hard, boy,” Venetia said softly. “You could see into the land of dreams—and did, when you saw the hut dissolve into mist—but you would find it all but impossible to walk alone into the land of dreams.”

“It is his Touch,” Ravenna said, and refilled Garth’s mug from a jug.

Garth frowned. “What?”

“Ravenna means that whatever gives you the ability to Touch probably also allows you to see into the land of dreams.”

“But you said that my father never saw the dream land.”

Venetia smiled, and Garth felt his shoulders tense again. “Your father commands not a fraction of the Touch you will one day, boy.”

Garth ran his tongue about his lips and pushed his plate away. “Will you take me into the land of dreams, Venetia? I must find the Manteceros and bring him out.”

Venetia laughed merrily at the vehemence in Garth’s voice. “You will not find that so easy, methinks, boy.”

Garth’s face set into determined lines. “Will you take me, Venetia?”

She waved a hand airily, and smiled a little at her daughter. “Perhaps, Garth Baxtor, but I would ask you a question or two first.”

Yet it was Ravenna who asked the first question, and when she did, it was not a question at all. She swivelled on the bench so that she faced Garth fully, and her face was expressionless and her eyes fathomless. “Your life seems full of coincidences, Garth Baxtor.”

Her expression did not change. “How strange that Maximilian has been down the Veins for some seventeen years, and yet none have discovered his identity until you went down.”

“And how strange,” Venetia continued quietly, “that within hours of your going down the Veins for the very first time you should find yourself with your hands wrapped about Maximilian’s arm.”

“When Joseph, as you have informed us, knew Maximilian in childhood and yet has never met him after some twenty years of attending those trapped down the Veins,” Ravenna murmured, her stare relentless.

“I—” Garth began, but Venetia gave him no chance to finish.

“And, stranger yet, methinks, that this street trader should press the medallion on you and speak of the dream. Who is he, I wonder?”

“Stranger still,” Ravenna whispered, and now her eyes were almost febrile, “that your father should send you out into the marshes this day. Send you to the only one who can find the Manteceros for you.”

Garth’s eyes shifted back to Venetia. “Venetia, I cannot explain these coincidences, and I had not even realised them myself until you voiced them for me. Venetia, will you take me?”

Again she interrupted, as if she had not heard him. Her eyes were as feverish as those of her daughter now. “He is caught up in some web, some plot, that I cannot see, Ravenna.”

“Nor I,” her daughter whispered. “Is he dangerous?”

Venetia’s hand suddenly snaked across the table and caught Garth’s wrist in a vice-like grip that belied her fragile bones.

Garth gasped, and instinctively pulled his hand back. But Venetia’s grip held firm. She took a slow, deep breath, her gaze riveted on Garth’s face. “No,” she eventually said slowly, “no, I think not. He is a good boy. And, as you said when you held his hand, Ravenna, he has a warm and courageous heart. I think that I like him, too.”

Garth wondered why they were unable to ever refer to him simply as Garth. “What do you mean?”

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Garth could feel Ravenna relax at his side, but he did not look away from her mother. “Please,” he said softly, “will you help me find the Manteceros?”

Venetia held his eyes, her own light grey eyes unreadable. Then her lip curled slightly. “No.”

Garth recoiled, and this time he did manage to tear his wrist from her grasp. “No?”

Venetia’s mouth curled into a full smile now. “No. I am not able to find the Manteceros for you. Wait, boy. Let me explain. I have not the power for it. But—”

The walls and ceiling about her dissolved back into mist. “But my beautiful, powerful daughter can. And that, boy, is the supreme coincidence. Among the marsh women there has not been one as powerful as Ravenna for three, perhaps four hundred years. A generation to either side, Garth Baxtor, and you would never have found the Manteceros and Maximilian would have mouldered to his death in the Veins.”
ELEVEN

SKIP, TRIP, MY PRETTY MAN

Ravenna took Garth by the hand and led him from the hut. Venetia watched from the doorway, her peculiar eyes following them for as long as she could. Then she sighed, cleared the table, and walked outside to spend the rest of the afternoon stroking and whispering to Garth’s horse.

For some minutes Garth followed Ravenna silently. The girl was dressed in a white robe of light weave which left her arms free; they swung a hand-span above her bare feet. About them the mist had thickened, and Garth could not help an apprehensive glance.

Aware of the mist, Ravenna stopped dead in her tracks. Startled, Garth jerked to a halt as well, but the girl ignored him. She dropped gracefully to one knee and bowed her head in swift prayer, her fingers laced over her heart.

“Forgive my intrusion, my Lord of Dreams,” she murmured. “I ask for your forgiveness and tolerance.”

As she rose, Garth frowned. Lord of Dreams?

As if she had heard his thoughts, Ravenna turned and smiled reassuringly. “All marsh women beg the forgiveness of Drava before we enter his realm, Garth Baxtor, and we ask him to tolerate the touch of our feet while we walk his paths.”

Garth’s eyes widened, and Ravenna grinned. “You need not fear, physician’s apprentice. Drava rests so deep in dream that even we, his handmaidens, have never seen him—although his presence often brushes our minds. Come, take my hand, and let me lead you beyond the border into the land of dreams.”

Her hand was warm and confident, and Garth let himself relax slightly as they walked along the same path he had originally ridden down. The gravel scrunched underneath their feet, and Garth wondered that Ravenna could walk so effortlessly across the sharp stones with no shoes.

“I do not feel them, Garth Baxtor,” she said, and before he had even fully exhaled his startled breath, she partly explained about the marsh.

“There are only a few of us left to inhabit the marsh, Garth Baxtor. All women. We stand guard along these border lands, and keep watch that nothing untoward crosses…either way.”

“You mean that creatures from our dreams can cross into this world?”

She smiled, and momentarily her face seemed very young. “Yes, they can.” She arched a dark eyebrow. “But is that not what you want? That the Manteceros will step from that land into this?”

“Yes,” Garth said somewhat uneasily. “I suppose so.”

“I see and feel your unease, physician’s son, and I understand it. It would not be pleasant if our nightmares crossed over, would it?”

“You can stop that?”

“We do the best we can. Now, hold fast, for I would lead you into the land of dreams.”

Her hand tightened about his, and Garth was grateful for the contact. He ran his eyes over the girl’s face, his thoughts well guarded now, and wondered if all the marsh women were as beautiful as she and her mother. “Where is your father, Ravenna?”

The question surprised her, and her step faltered. She turned to stare at him wide-eyed. “I have no father, Garth Baxtor. Now, stay beside me and do not let my hand go.”

Then she stepped forward again, and her hand jerked Garth after her.

At some point Garth realised they had left the main causeway for a small track that led deep into the marsh. Water and mud squelched to either side, and the occasional tree still loomed in the mist, but the noise of the birds had disappeared completely, and the sound of the surf sounded very distant, even though—as much as Garth could work out—they walked directly towards the coast.

“Where—” he began, then gave a cry as a great redwinged bird swooped low over their heads. Its beak snapped as it passed, and Garth reflexively ducked.

“Shush,” Ravenna whispered. “It will not harm you. It was merely the manifestation of someone’s dream.”

Garth moved a little closer to her, his eyes roving carefully from side to side. “Someone’s dream?”

“Yes. Somewhere, someone dreams, and they dream of that great red bird. Thus it appears here.”

Now even the trees had disappeared within the mist, and it clung cool and damp to their skin and clothes. Still the mud sucked and plopped to each side.

“Does someone have to be dreaming it for the creature to exist?”
Ravenna nodded. “Mostly, although some creatures can exist independent of a current dream. Such is the Manteceros.”

“Perhaps it is the mark that the king and heir wear,” Garth said slowly, “that keeps the Manteceros alive.”

Surprised, Ravenna glanced at Garth. “Yes. Perhaps.”

“How do we find him?”

She grinned, and tossed her dark hair about her shoulders. “We call, Garth Baxtor. What else?”

“Call?”

And Ravenna began to sing, and singing, ran lightly down the path into the formless mist, pulling Garth with her.

She sang clear and sweet, her voice underscored with the breathlessness of laughter and the anguish of a new widow; even so, it took Garth some time before he picked out her words.

Blue skin pitted with sadness
—Skip, trip, my pretty man—
Face drawn and lined with trial
—Skip, trip, into my hand—
And awkward formlessness, there
—Skip, trip, be frank and fair—
No beauty, grace, nor frailty
—Skip, trip, through the air—
Belongs in your face, despair
—Skip, trip, leap to the sky—
Clinging close and binds heart to fear
—Skip, trip, linger and die—
Cries who comes to Claim? Who dares
—Skip, trip, my pretty man—
The Dream, and daring ------
—Skip, trip, into my heart—

Infected with both her sorrow and joy, Garth laughed even as tears drifted down his cheeks, and he felt her hand clench yet tighter about his.

“Sing!” she cried, her hair whipping about her pale face, and Garth sang, his bass voice taking up the sad verse while Ravenna’s soprano, filled with laughter, sang the ridiculous refrain.

Skip, trip, my pretty man,
Skip, trip, into my hand,
Skip, trip, my pretty man,
Skip, trip, into my heart.

So mesmerised was he by her lovely face, by her magical, lightening eyes locked into his, Garth completely forgot that they were trying to find the Manteceros. He seized both of her hands in his, swinging her about the path, then gripped her waist and lifted her into the air.

Skip, trip, through the air,
Skip, trip, leap to the sky,
Skip, trip, my pretty man,
Skip, trip, into my heart.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” a terse voice said behind them, and in his surprise Garth almost dropped Ravenna.

In the middle of a breathless gasp of laughter, Ravenna instantly sobered, then abruptly pulled away from Garth’s grasp. Her eyes darkened back to their normal shade.

On the path behind them stood the strangest creature that Garth had ever seen, yet he recognised it instantly. The Manteceros.

It jerked its head in a curt greeting, then shuffled forward several steps, its thick legs creaking slightly. Its eyes
slid appraisingly over Garth before lingering on Ravenna, and Garth had the strangest feeling that the creature had appeared only when—because—Garth had wrapped his hands about Ravenna’s waist.

As the Manteceros looked at Ravenna it dipped its head again, more courtly this time. “Am I intruding? If so, then forgive my impoliteness. Perhaps I should leave…”

“Welcome,” Ravenna said, holding out her hand, and taking a step forward. Garth still stood with his mouth wide open.

“You are welcome,” Ravenna continued, “and wanted and needed.”

The creature’s lips twitched in what might have been a smile. “Oh,” it murmured, “I don’t know about that.”

Ravenna smiled, and stepped forward until she was close enough to touch the creature’s shapeless nose. “My name is Ravenna, and behind me stands Garth Baxtor.”

The Manteceros totally ignored Garth. “I have seen you, through the mists,” it said softly, relaxing as Ravenna continued gently to stroke its nose. “Skipping and laughing through dreams and border lands. Sad creature that I am, you skipped right by me. Ah, Ravenna, I have waited aeons for you to think of me, for your song to call me.”

“But I have sung for you now,” she whispered, and put her arms about its neck. “Here I am now.”

The Manteceros shuddered, and Garth wondered if it was close to tears. For the long minutes that the girl and the Manteceros clung close, he studied the strange creature that Maximilian had set him to find.

The Manteceros was every bit as ugly as the royal emblem depicted it. Shapeless head, bloated body, trunk-like legs ending in ungainly feet that were merely slight thickenings of the legs they protruded from. Everything, from its pock-marked skin to its stiff mane and square-nailed feet, was coloured in various shades of blue. Even its teeth, when Garth finally managed a glimpse of them, were blue-tinged.

And about it all hung an immense aura of sorrow—yet a sorrow tinged with wisdom, and Garth could not help wondering if its wisdom had caused its sadness.

Is the sum of all knowledge, he suddenly thought, utter despair?

“I must ask,” the Manteceros finally, regretfully, said, “what has disposed you to seek me now.”

“A sadness,” Ravenna said, stepping back.

“I am not surprised,” the Manteceros said. “Nothing but anguish surrounds me.”

“Garth?” Ravenna motioned with her hand, and Garth stepped forward. “Garth? Will you tell the Manteceros why you seek it?”

The Manteceros fixed its all-knowing eyes on Garth, and the youth had to clear his throat before he could speak.

“Manteceros.” Garth hesitated, then bowed jerkily from his waist. He wasn’t sure how to treat the creature, but he was the emblem of the royal House of Escator, and in itself that made the Manteceros worthy of respect.

The Manteceros acknowledged the bow with a slight movement of its head.

“Manteceros, I have come to ask that you step back into the world of living creatures.”

The Manteceros’ nostrils and eyes flared alarmingly. “Oh, I don’t know about—”

“Please!” Garth extended his own hands in appeal. “The true king of Escator lies trapped in the Veins, denied his throne, and denying even the existence of the open sky and the fresh air.”

“A king sits the throne,” the Manteceros said slowly, eyeing Garth carefully. “Fine claim.”

“Maximilian has your mark tattooed on his right arm—with blue ink,” said Garth, sure this would convince the Manteceros.

“Any competent artist could carve that in,” the Manteceros responded.
“But the ink!” Garth cried.

“Garth,” Ravenna murmured, slipping to his side as gracefully as a breath of breeze. “Please, try to understand. If there is a rival claim, then the Manteceros will have to come forth.”

“Absolutely,” the creature agreed, its eyes narrowing as it gazed at Ravenna and Garth. “But meanwhile Maximilian labours underground and I have no way of getting him out.” Garth’s shoulders were very tense, and Ravenna rubbed them gently.

“We’ll find a way,” she whispered almost inaudibly. “And then he can claim.”

“And how does one claim?” Garth asked, not mollified. He had believed the Manteceros would leap at the chance of rescuing Maximilian.

“Simple,” the Manteceros said. “Listen:

‘In crystal do drown me,
And drape me with truth.
Draw death up about me,
Loose blood o’er the silk.
With courage beneath me,
Let light bind me tight.
Find one who will name me—
One more to add weight,
Then show me inside,
The green shadowed parlour.
With the ring of my fathers
I carve deep into stone,
Trace life into lines,
Turn floor into bone.
Who comes to Claim?
Who dares the Dream,
And, daring, ——’"

“What?” Garth whispered. How was anyone supposed to make sense of that?

“That’s all there is,” the Manteceros snapped, baring his teeth. Ravenna moved away from Garth slightly, and the Manteceros relaxed and continued. “I’m growing tired of this addled tale about Maximilian trapped beneath ground. I don’t care if he has got my mark engraved on his arm. I don’t care unless he can present a claim. Now, Ravenna, would you like to stroke my nose again?”

Giving Garth a final, cautionary glance, Ravenna stepped back to the Manteceros and stroked its nose. The creature shivered in pleasure and leaned closer to the girl.

“If Maximilian claims,” she asked softly, “will you step forth?”

“Oh, assuredly,” the Manteceros replied.

“And will you test Maximilian and Cavor? Administer the ordeal?” Garth asked, his voice tight.

The Manteceros glanced at him. “You’re a well informed boy, for all your ill manners,” it said thoughtfully. “Well, if this Maximilian lays claim to the throne with Cavor still firmly in place, I suppose I’ll have to.”

Ravenna, her hand still on the Manteceros’ nose, looked back at Garth. “Then we have no choice,” she said, her voice soft but clear. “We must rescue Maximilian and persuade him to lay claim to the throne of Escator.”

“And then the Manteceros will see that Maximilian is the true king of Escator.” Garth glared at the Manteceros, as if daring the creature to contradict him.

The Manteceros’ mouth twisted humourlessly. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

It nuzzled at Ravenna’s shoulder, then turned and lumbered away into the mist.

During the shift the man chained to Lot No. 859’s left ankle collapsed and died as he coughed his gloamfilled lungs out. The guards called a brief halt as they unshackled the man, and Lot No. 859 sank gratefully to the rock floor, unmindful of the broken gloam lying about.

He flinched as the guard’s chisel slipped from his ankle ring and gouged a deep cut into his flesh, but he had learned to ignore such pain and inconvenience, and merely turned his head to the right, enjoying his privacy.

The chains fell away and Lot No. 859, although closely guarded, sat free of any encumbrances as the dead man was dragged away to the nearest shaft to be dropped into its pitted depths.

A feeling of nausea filled him, and he looked frantically about, convinced that the guards had left him to moulder here alone.
Lot No. 859 had a horror of being left alone—free—in the dark. But in the next instant a guard loomed with a length of chain in his hand and a new man attached to its other end. Lot No. 859 breathed in relief. He hated being unchained. Hated the feeling of space and freedom it entailed. His teeth gleamed momentarily as he felt himself being shackled to his new companion.

As the guards ordered the gang back to work, the old scar on his arm burned, and Lot No. 859 absently scratched it. Recently it had begun to bother him.

But even that was soon forgotten in the welcome swing of the pick and the bunching and relaxing of his muscles.

About him the gloam dust swirled.

In the Throne Room of the palace at Ruen, Cavor cursed low and viciously as he felt the abscess covering his mark burst and soak the bandages covering his arm. He barely managed to get through the remainder of his audience with the ambassador from the Eighth of the Eastern Kingdoms, then he hurriedly left the chamber.

“Where is Oberon Fisk?” he shouted at the guard. “Send for my physician immediately!”

“Damn!” he muttered as he slammed the door to his personal apartments behind him, “and damn again! Why won’t the thing heal?”

“When he finally went to bed that night, his arm packed in herbal powders that did nothing to relieve the pain, Cavor dreamed badly. He dreamed he was lost in a dark place, lost with no companions and with no chance of finding his way out. As he slept, his left arm groped across the bed sheets until he woke his wife.

“Where are you?” he muttered. “Where? Why aren’t you there?”

And when he had finally found his way free from that dark lost place, he dreamed he stood once more before the Manteceros to lay claim to the throne of Escator.

This time, however, the Manteceros did not automatically nod its head.

Instead, the creature frowned and shifted uncomfortably from side to side on its stumpy legs, and looked at something—or someone—standing behind Cavor’s right shoulder.

“Oh,” it muttered irritably, “I don’t know about that.”
TWELVE
THE ORDER OF PERSIMIUS

The next few months were the most frustrating of Garth’s life. Every nerve in him screamed that he had to get back to the Veins and rescue Maximilian—would he survive the year?—yet there was no reason for him to go, and even less opportunity, until his father was again summoned for his yearly three weeks’ work. Garth spent the time learning as much of his craft as his father could spare the time to teach him, knowing instinctively that Maximilian would need every help that he could provide—especially if he were to recover from his belief that there was no life waiting for him beyond the hanging wall. Joseph, as Nona, wondered at their son’s single-minded determination, but assumed it was only part of the process by which a youth began his transformation into a man.

Garth saw Ravenna on many occasions. Joseph sent him back to the marshes only one more time, at the beginning of winter when Venetia sent word she needed new stocks of herbs, but Ravenna slipped quietly into Narbon whenever she knew Garth would have a morning or afternoon free. As the weather closed in she took to wearing a dark grey cloak, pulling the hood well over her face, and no one realised that a marsh girl wandered the streets—some may have tried to have the watch remove her if they’d known. She still wore no shoes, and sometimes Garth’s heart clenched when he saw her cold and blue toes peeking from under the trailing hem of her cloak, but Ravenna refused any offer he made to buy a sturdy pair of boots for her.

“Marsh women wear no shoes,” she would say. “The dream paths are hard to walk when we have no intimate contact with their soil.”

Huddled underneath a dry overhang in the back alleys of the wharves or the marketplace, they talked endlessly about Maximilian. Ravenna questioned Garth closely about his every minute in the Veins—not only about Maximilian himself (and Ravenna apparently couldn’t hear enough about the man), but about the shafts and tunnels of the Veins, their proximity to the sea, and even the very feel of the air inside.

“Why do you want to know that?” Garth asked one day as they sat underneath the verandah of an abandoned warehouse along the wharves. The wind blew off the sea sharp and cold, and both were huddled deep into their cloaks.

“We have to get Maximilian out from the Veins,” Ravenna began.

“We?” Garth asked archly.

“And what plan do you have to rescue him?” Ravenna snapped, and Garth coloured slightly. Every so often Ravenna made him feel like a boy barely able to leave the safety of his mother’s skirts.

“And I suppose you have the perfect plan,” he retorted.

She pursed her lips and regarded him with her great grey eyes; Garth sometimes thought they were beginning to lighten to the same shade as her mother’s, but in this light they appeared as dark as ever.

“Perhaps I do. No, wait! I have to think more on it…but you will need me there. You can’t do this on your own.”

Garth sat silently for a few minutes, trying to dampen his resentment. “Your mother will let you go to the Veins?” he asked eventually.

“My mother trusts me,” she replied simply, folding cold white hands over her knees, “and has confidence in me. Besides, we are of an age, Garth Baxtor. If your father lets you go down the Veins, then why shouldn’t my mother do likewise?”

“It’s no place for a girl,” Garth grumbled, protectiveness overcoming resentment.

“Maximilian is going to need both of us,” Ravenna said quietly, and took one of Garth’s hands.

Garth forgot Maximilian at the feel of her fingers. “Ravenna!” he cried. “Your hands are like ice! Come on, we’ve got to go somewhere where you can warm up.”

“Where? Your mother’s kitchen?” Ravenna knew Garth still had not confided in his parents, and a small smile hovered about her mouth as she wondered how Garth would explain a marsh girl to his mother.

“I know!” Garth said, a smile lightening his own face. “Why don’t we try the library? Perhaps we can find the answer to that riddle the Manteceros gave us about making a claim on the throne.”

Ravenna let Garth pull her to her feet. “But you said that you and that monk—Harrald?—had searched every scroll and book that might prove remotely useful and yet found nothing.”

“Oh, yes, but,” Garth said, full of enthusiasm now. Why hadn’t he thought of this earlier? Briefly his free hand played with the medallion as it lay under his tunic.

“But…what?”
“But then I hadn’t heard the verse the Manteceros taught us. I haven’t looked for that in the library before now. Come on!”

Letting his enthusiasm pull her along the all-but-deserted back alleyways, Ravenna still protested. “Will they let me in? A marsh girl?”

“They’re a friendly bunch,” Garth said, waving the matter off, but Ravenna still wondered. Friendliness often faded as fast as a droplet of dew under a blazing sun when confronted with the townspeople’s prejudice about the marsh folk.

But all that the chubby elderly monk who greeted them in the foyer did was look both Garth and Ravenna up and down—seeming to disapprove of both of them—request that they wipe their feet and shake out their cloaks before they entered the main hall itself, then led them through.

“Is Harrald here?” Garth asked hopefully, glancing about the aisles. “Harrald has a winter fever,” the monk said, leading them to a spare table and indicating they should sit down.

“Oh? Perhaps I could help?”

The monk smiled a little patronisingly. “We have the best medical help for Harrald that coin can buy, young man. I doubt that you could do anything.”

Ravenna turned her head aside, hiding the small smile that flitted across her face.

“Now,” the monk folded his hands across his ample belly. “How can I be of assistance?”

Garth opened his mouth, then closed it again. He didn’t think this monk would be as sympathetic to his quest for information about the legend of the Manteceros as Harrald had been—and Garth was curiously reluctant to mention the Manteceros in front of the man.

“Could I have the scroll called *A Calendar of Ordeals and Tests*?” he asked eventually. Surely the Manteceros’ riddle would be in there.

“What do you want with that old thing?” the monk asked, his brow furrowed. “And can I trust you with it? It’s very ancient, and—”

“I’ll be careful,” Garth said, trying to look as responsible as he could, glad that he’d kept his brown hair short and free of curls. “I know its value and I’ll look after it.”

“Well,” the monk hesitated.

“Trust us,” Ravenna said carefully, and Garth thought he saw her eyes flash briefly.

“Well,” the monk grumbled irritably, “why didn’t you say so? I’ll fetch it now.”

The monk carefully placed the scroll down before Garth. “You will be careful, won’t you?” he asked, doubt returning to his face.

“Of course!” the monk cried, and he stalked away, his shoulders stiff with indignation.

At Garth’s side Ravenna’s entire body trembled, and he took her hands, concern in his eyes.

“Ravenna!”

“I’ll be all right,” she whispered hoarsely. “Now, look in the scroll!”

Garth took the jibe good-humouredly, and her expression softened. “Drava would not concern himself with such mundane chores,” she smiled, then waved at the scroll. “Come on. Does the scroll tell us anything?”

Garth carefully unrolled the parchment. Harrald had read it previously, and now Garth strained over the unfamiliar script. It was hundreds of years old, and its author had formed his characters with peculiar curves and hooks that made reading difficult.

“Well,” he grumbled, then bent closer, wishing there were an index or table of contents that appeared on the opening part of the scroll. Slowly he began to work his way through, Ravenna sitting patient and quiet at his side.

“How can I be of assistance?”

“Here,” Garth exclaimed, tapping the parchment after half an hour, “is the reference to two rival claimants and the ordeal that the Manteceros must administer.”
Ravenna bent forward. “Is there anything else? Anything about making the claim?”
Garth frowned, his finger tracing gently down the scroll. He mumbled under his breath and unrolled it further.
“Damn!” he muttered feelingly. “Nothing more. There’s a total different change of subject.” He turned to look at Ravenna and grinned. “How a woman may test which of two brothers would make the better husband.”
Ravenna’s mouth twitched, but all she said was, “Marsh women do not take husbands.”
Garth’s grin widened slightly, then he bent back to the scroll. There was still at least two thirds of it to work through, and he wanted to check every entry, just in case there was another reference to the Manteceros.
And then, he supposed morosely, they would have to check every book in the library one by one, for he and Harrald had already checked the obvious books and gleaned all they could. Somewhere there had to be a reference to the riddle…surely?
Well, checking every book would, at the least, keep them out of mischief until spring and the summons to the Veins arrived.
“It won’t do you any good,” a soft voice said, and both Garth and Ravenna, their heads bent close over the scroll, started violently at the feel of a hand on each of their shoulders.
A tall, thin monk with dark hair that fell over sharp black eyes stood behind them. As soon as he had touched them, the monk had withdrawn his hands and now they were hidden within the voluminous sleeves of his habit.
“What do you mean?” Ravenna asked, irritated and a little unnerved by the sudden intrusion. Neither the monk nor Garth took any notice of her question.
“You!” Garth breathed, profoundly shocked.
The monk smiled, a cold movement that did nothing to reassure either Garth or Ravenna.
The marsh girl looked between the two of them. “What is it?”
“It’s the street trader,” Garth whispered, wondering if he and Ravenna could flee. He shifted his feet beneath the bench. “The one who gave me the medallion.”
“And I still sense it about your neck, young master,” the monk smiled, and this time there was more warmth in his face.
“What?” Ravenna said again, still confused. “Did you say the trader?”
Now the fat monk who had originally brought the scroll appeared behind the thin, dark-haired one.
“Is there anything wrong, Brother Vorstus?”
Brother Vorstus—if that was indeed his name—turned to face his plumper brother. “Not at all, Brother Jorgan. My young friends here have completed their study of the scroll, so perhaps you could return it to its resting place.”
Garth opened his mouth to protest, but Vorstus’ hand was suddenly back on his shoulder, and all Garth managed was a small squeak of pain as Brother Jorgan leaned forward and gathered the scroll into his arms.
“Will you be staying with us much longer, Brother Vorstus?” Jorgan said conversationally as he carefully rolled the scroll.
Vorstus’ hand still gripped Garth’s shoulder tightly; Ravenna noticed that there was a peculiar symbol tattooed onto the back of his index finger. “A few more weeks, my friend. Perhaps until spring arrives. Then I shall undoubtedly find more pressing tasks to the north that need my attention.”
Jorgan was almost finished rolling the scroll. “We shall be sorry to lose you, Brother Vorstus. Your commentary on some of the more obscure works in our library has proved most enlightening.”
Vorstus gave a small bow and a self-deprecating smile. “I but do my best, Brother Jorgan. Tell me, is the rear discussion room still free? I would like to talk awhile with my young friends here.”
Garth was getting sick of being referred to as this man’s “young friend”, but he narrowed his eyes speculatively. The man wanted to talk?
“Assuredly, Brother Vorstus. Done! I’ll leave you to it then,” and Brother Jorgan bowed and was away, bearing the scroll back to its resting place.
Vorstus lifted his hand from Garth’s shoulder. “I can explain,” he said calmly, then he turned on his heel and walked towards the back of the great hall.
Garth and Ravenna shared one suspicious glance, then they pushed the bench back and hurried after him.
Vorstus led them through a small door set in the back wall of the hall, then down several narrow and dimly lit corridors until they reached a closed door.
He put his hand on the handle. “I can explain,” he repeated, and grinned, making his thin and hawkish face appear years younger. “Believe me.” Then he was through.
The room was small but comfortably furnished, with a large window that opened out into a little garden courtyard—Garth noted that it was still drizzling outside. A small fire crackled in a grate, and Vorstus motioned them to several armchairs grouped about it.
“Please, sit.”
“Who are you?” Garth asked firmly as he sat down.

Vorstus settled into a chair across the fire from Ravenna and Garth. “My name truly is Vorstus, and I truly am a monk.”

“Between masquerading as a street trader,” Garth mumbled, remembering how the man and his merchandise had mysteriously disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Vorstus’ smile expanded momentarily, but he did not comment. “And how strange that I should find a marsh woman here in this library. I thought, lady of dreams, that you had little use for the world of books.”

Ravenna’s eyes widened—and lightened, Garth noticed. “I am willing to search any way that might provide answers,” she said softly. “But you, methinks, are more mystery than answer.”

Vorstus took a deep breath and relaxed back into his chair, his fingers drumming lightly against the armrests. “Let me share some—not all, mind—of my secrets. Then you can decide if you are willing to share some of yours. Brother Jorgan only knows me as Brother Vorstus from a companion order of Ruen, come south to visit Narbon’s admittedly excellent library. True enough, as far as it goes. But apart from my regular order, I belong to a slightly,” he hesitated, “irregular order known—and I would thank you not to mention this to anyone else—as the Order of Persimius.”

“Persimius is the name of the old royal house,” Garth said slowly. “What is the connection to this secret order of yours?”

“Close, young man, very close. We were founded by an ancient king, Nennius by name—”

“He was the king who adopted the Manteceros as his emblem!” Garth cried.

“Shush!” Vorstus hushed, irritated. “These walls are only of one stone’s thickness. Yes, the same man. Our society is dedicated to the protection of the Persimius family itself.” He tapped the tattoo on the back of his right index finger that Ravenna had noticed earlier. It was the outline of a quill. “Our mark. You can always recognise our order by this.”

“And you are dedicated to protecting the Persimius family?” Ravenna smiled innocently, her toes stretching out gratefully towards the fire as her eyes locked into those of Vorstus. “Then you haven’t been doing a very good job recently, have you?”

Garth grinned behind his hand, and Vorstus grimaced guiltily. “Witch! But, yes, we have been remiss in our duty, and it stings our consciences. Garth,” he took another deep breath, and now Garth noticed that he trembled. “Garth, we know that you found Maximilian down the Veins.”

For a long minute there was no sound in the room save the crackling of the fire and the light rain against the windowpanes. “Ah…” Garth hedged, unable to stop an anxious glance at Ravenna.

“We know it, Garth,” Vorstus repeated softly. “For the past sixteen months we’ve had our suspicions about Maximilian’s whereabouts. We have kept the Veins and those who go in and out under close watch. Imagine our surprise when the young son of Joseph Baxtor should return from three weeks in the Veins to ask questions in marketplaces about the Manteceros, and search this library for any clue he could find about the creature’s relationship with the Persimius family. When I appeared in the market wearing the disguise of a trader, your hand and eye flew instantly to the medallion of the Manteceros—a small test I devised—and now, greatest surprise of all, you appear in the company of a lady of dreams. One who could take you to the Manteceros itself. Tell me, have you talked with it?”

Garth closed his mouth, but Ravenna answered, her eyes steady on the monk. “Yes. I took Garth to the Manteceros.”

Vorstus raised his eyebrows at her. “So much power in one so young. Interesting.”

“The Manteceros refused to help us rescue Maximilian,” Garth said bluntly. “No use keeping silent now that Ravenna had spoken.”

“I have no doubt,” Vorstus said softly. “It would already have verified Cavor’s claim to the throne when the man made it. The Manteceros will be displeased that another claim may well be made. It is a creature of order and will be discomfited by the mess of a counter-claim.”

“How did you know about Maximilian?” Ravenna asked.

Vorstus steepled his fingers and raised his eyes to study the ceiling. “We are a small and somewhat secretive order, but not totally unknown. Some sixteen months ago a minor nobleman—there is no point revealing his name here and now—aged and dying of the wasting disease, requested our abbot attend his deathbed.”

“Youself,” Garth observed, watching Vorstus carefully. The man had an aura of authority about him.

“Yes. Myself. He seemed anxious to confess a sin committed many years ago and which had weighed heavily on his conscience ever since. He said that years previously he had been involved in a…well, shall we say, an abduction? Yes, that will do nicely. An abduction. A young boy, no more than fourteen, was seized by a group of
men in the hire of a person that even the dying man was too frightened to name. They seized the boy, and subjected him to the horrific pain of having the mark on his right arm burned off.”

“It’s still there,” Garth muttered, close to tears, “under the scar tissue.”

“Is that so?” For the first time, Vorstus seemed excited. “Really? Well, all the more good.”

“And then what happened, Abbot Vorstus?” Ravenna asked, her eyes dark at the thought of Maximilian’s agony.

“Please, only call me Brother, lady,” Vorstus replied hastily, glancing about. “None here suspect my true identity.” He paused, then answered Ravenna’s question. “Three of the men tied the boy up—he had fainted by this stage—and carried him away. My dying sinner did not have a clear knowledge where…but he did have some idea.”

“The Veins.”

Vorstus nodded. “Yes, Garth, the Veins. But we could not be sure, and we had no way of seeing for ourselves. Even our arts could not penetrate beneath the surface…and there is no need for a monk below to confess the dying. From the Veins they go straight to the fire pits of the afterlife.”

At the mention of “arts”, Garth’s mind slipped back to Vorstus’ mysterious disappearance from the marketplace. “What ‘arts’?” he asked suspiciously, but Ravenna simply looked at Vorstus and smiled. “Our order is dedicated to the preservation of the Persimius family, true,” Vorstus said, “but for many hundreds of years we had little to do save study ancient arts and texts as the family waxed strong and ruled wisely under the Escatorian sun. Garth, once Escator was far more than it is now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Once Escator was the centre of learning in the known world—men travelled to study at our universities and academies from most of the Eastern Kingdoms. Narbon housed the largest university, but Ruen, Harton and even Sorinam to the north had well-established universities. All gone, now.”

“What happened—” Garth began, but Vorstus held up his hand.

“Shortly, my boy. Music and enlightenment, sciences and suppositions, dreams and knowledges were once Escator’s main exports. Now the filthy gloam feeds our populations and tinkles the coin into Ruen’s treasury.”

He paused and heaved a great sigh. “Ten generations ago, gloam was discovered in great deposits along the coast by Myrna. Initial excavations were so promising that the Veins were carved deep into the earth. The Persimius family withdrew funding from the arts to sink into the Veins—only in the past generations have prisoners been used to work the rock-face—and, hungry for the riches the gloam brought them, they allowed the universities and academies to fall into ruin.” He paused. “So much knowledge and learning was lost. Now this library is virtually all that stands from those once-heady days of knowledge. This library…and the Order of Persimius itself.”

Again there was silence for long minutes. Vorstus sat in a state of reverie, and neither Ravenna nor Garth dared to disturb him.

“Our arts, boy?” Garth’s eyes flickered from the fire back to the monk as he spoke again. “Arts? Simple, but sometimes effective.” Vorstus smiled with such genuine friendliness that Garth found himself responding in kind.

“But nothing like those that Ravenna here displays. Suitable for making fast disappearances from marketplaces and—sometimes—for reading thoughts. You are yet young, Garth, and have not yet learned to dissemble. Thus often I find your thoughts clear and easy to interpret. Yours, young woman,” he turned his eyes to Ravenna, “are clouded in mist as thick as that of your border lands.”

Her mouth twitched, and she inclined her head, pleased.

Garth turned the conversation back to the Persimius family. “The kings were responsible for the decline in learning and for building the Veins?”

“Assuredly, Garth Baxtor. I would find it ironic, if it were not so tragic, that one of them now labours below the hanging wall itself. Perhaps…” his voice trailed into silence.

Garth leaned forward. “Vorstus? Can you explain how Maximilian has survived so long in the Veins? My father tells me that men normally live no longer than five years at the rock-face—and even that is unusual.”

“It is the ink that his arm was marked with, Garth. Always a monk will do the tattoo, and always with the blue ink that we guard so carefully. The ink has…unusual properties. It protects against murder, for instance. Whoever abducted Maximilian could not have killed him, no matter their heartfelt desire to do so. No wonder they threw him down the Veins. But even there, even under the scar tissue, it appears the mark has worked to protect Maximilian.”

“My father told me the ink used to create the mark is rumoured to have been made with the blood of the Manteceros itself.”

But at that Vorstus only smiled slightly, and dropped his eyes.

“One of your number must have marked Cavor,” Garth said slowly.

“Yes. But then we truly thought Maximilian dead. And Cavor was closest in line to the throne—although in him the Persimius blood is thin indeed.”
Garth nodded, remembering. “My father and I treated his arm when we were in Ruen, Vorstus. The mark has not taken well. It festers, and causes him agony.”

“Really?” Vorstus sat up. “I did not know that.”

“Perhaps Cavor’s mark festers because the other mark in existence has been so badly damaged,” Ravenna said thoughtfully. She had been content to listen throughout most of the conversation, but now leaned forward, elbows on knees and chin in hand, so that the firelight trickled through her long black hair. “Perhaps the ink links both marks and both men.”

“Perhaps,” said Vorstus, looking at her with hooded eyes.

Garth ignored both remark and look. “Vorstus?” The monk swung his gaze back to Garth. “Maximilian claims that he is not the heir. He claims that he is not even Maximilian.”

Vorstus frowned. “Perhaps it is just that he has been lost below for so long that—”

“No. Not all,” Garth interrupted. “Maximilian said that he has no true claim to the throne because he is a changeling.”

“What?” Vorstus almost exploded out of his chair.

“Can it be true?” Ravenna asked. She had not moved at Vorstus’ violent reaction.

The monk’s hands trembled. “A changeling? I don’t know. Oh dear, this is dreadful…dreadful. Ah, let me think…his parents were old when he was born. Some thought his mother well past the age of childbirth when she produced Maximilian. A changeling?” Vorstus’ face had paled so badly Garth thought he might be about to faint. “Did she want to produce an heir so badly that she faked a birth—or even substituted a stillborn son with a healthy babe?”

“You would not have known when you saw the baby?” asked Garth.

Vorstus shook his head. “No. The mark can be carved into any arm with the ink, it does not have to be a Persimius arm.”

Garth and Ravenna exchanged worried glances. The Manteceros had said much the same.

Vorstus did not notice. “We were merely presented with the babe…and we marked him. No one thought that…the queen would have…” he was unable to continue.

“Well,” Garth said firmly, repressing his doubts. “I believe that the man who labours beneath the hanging wall is the true king. Can your “arts” confirm that, Vorstus?”

The monk shook his head again, his eyes haunted. “No. Only the ordeal that the Manteceros administers can determine the true king from two rival claimants.”

“Do you know what the ordeal is?”

“No, Ravenna. It has never been administered before.”

Garth quickly informed Vorstus about the riddle the Manteceros had told them. “Vorstus, do you understand it?”

Now the man’s dark eyes were slitted and unreadable. “Perhaps. But the question is, does Maximilian know what it means? If he does, then the Order of Persimius will back his claim to the throne. It will not be definite proof of his blood, but it will be enough to show that he is the man who was once prince.”

“Vorstus.” Now Garth leaned forward. “Will you help us free Maximilian?”

“Assuredly, Garth. It is why I have come to Narbon to see you.”
Garth had to fight with his parents to be allowed back down the Veins.

“But look at how you felt after last year’s experience, Garth,” Nona said, her worried eyes flickering to Joseph. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Your mother has a point,” Joseph said seriously. “Since you returned from the Veins you’ve become overly-serious. Too contemplative. Damn it, Garth! You’re still a boy! Enjoy life while you can!”

“I’m only two months from my seventeenth birthday,” Garth argued. “And well into my apprenticeship. And I’m good—you can’t deny that, father. I want to come.”

“After twenty years’ experience you won’t be so keen,” Joseph muttered, but he was giving way, and Garth could see it.

So could Nona. “Joseph!”

“He’s right, my love. He’s old enough to make up his own mind—and I can’t deny that I enjoyed his company last year. It made the horror more bearable.”

Joseph looked at his son. Garth had shot up another hand-span in the past year, his frame had filled out, and now he was more man than boy. His now-short brown hair added several years to his true age, and at some time during the past year Garth’s hazel eyes had become keener and more intense. Joseph dropped his own gaze, unable to bear the appeal in Garth’s eyes.

“Very well, Garth. You may come. Besides,” he grinned, trying to lighten the mood in the kitchen, “the summons also requires me to attend King Cavor again. No doubt the experience of court will amuse you, Garth. I remember that maid who caused your cheeks to blush bright red the last time we dined there.”

This time Garth’s cheeks remained pale—that too had changed, Joseph thought.

“Good. I look forward to seeing the king again.”

The day before Garth and his father were due to ride north, he hurried down to the wharves after his father had closed the surgery. He had thought Joseph would never finish, and he was worried in case he was late.

But he was just in time. The wharf cranes were still engaged in swinging great nets of supplies on board the ship, and passengers still milled about the wharf itself.

“Vorstus,” he breathed, relieved, as he approached the cloaked monk.

Vorstus swung around, his own face relaxing at the sight of Garth. “I thought you wouldn’t make it, boy!”

“Father kept me behind.” Garth’s eyes anxiously searched the small crowd behind Vorstus. “Is she…?”

“I’m here, Garth,” and Ravenna stepped forward. Both were travelling north on the supply ship, planning to disembark at the small port of Estorn, a day’s ride south of Myrna and the Veins. They didn’t want anyone remarking on their disembarkation at a place where they should have no business.

Garth eyed Ravenna carefully. Someone—Vorstus probably—had finally managed to persuade her to wear some thin-soled sandals, but she looked distinctly uncomfortable in them, and Garth guessed she would take them off the moment the ship was out to sea and clear of prying eyes. She still wore her simple white dress, but now it was covered with a well-cut cloak of red wool. Her hair was firmly plaited and wound about her head. She looked very much like what she was pretending to be—niece to Vorstus, and travelling north to visit family.

But her grey eyes were still mysterious—and ever lighter—and Garth hoped that Vorstus would take care of her.

Ravenna smiled as she saw Garth’s doubts “We’ll be careful, Garth,” and then she surprised and delighted him by leaning forward and hugging him fiercely. “When you get to the Veins, we’ll be there.”

Over the past month or two Vorstus, Ravenna and Garth had carefully discussed how they could rescue Maximilian from his living death. They had a plan, but Garth felt that it was so flimsy the slightest miscalculation would see them all condemned to the Veins with Maximilian.

“Your father will let you come north?” Ravenna asked, leaning back, and Garth nodded.

“Yes, after some arguments. Mother is unhappy, and she tries to overfeed me, but don’t doubt that I’ll be there.” He looked about again. “Is Venetia here?”

Ravenna smiled and let Garth go. “No. She would not come to town…but she said she would stand at the edge of the marsh and wave to me. I will see her.”

Vorstus took Ravenna’s arm. “Come, girl. The ship’s mate is waving us aboard.”
Garth hesitated, then held out his hand. “Good luck, Vorstus.”
Vorstus gripped it. “And you, my boy. Now, come, Ravenna.” He hurried the girl towards the ship, and she turned to look at Garth one last time.
He looked lost and lonely on the rapidly emptying wharf, waving as they hurried up the gangplank.
“Maximilian,” she whispered. “We’re coming.”

Whether or not she had waved her daughter goodbye from the coast, Garth did not know, but Venetia was standing by the doorway to her hut as he and his father rode by the next morning. She waved briefly, and Joseph raised his eyebrows at his son.
“You have made a friend, it seems, son.”
But Garth, waving back, grinned at his father. His spirits were high this morning. At last they were doing something. “Perhaps she waves at you, father. Perhaps she has missed not seeing you this past year.”
Joseph harrumphed in embarrassment, and turned back to the road.

The beautiful minareted city of Ruen captivated Garth as it had a year earlier. It was as bustling and as important as he remembered, and he could not stop the broad grin as they rode through the almost choked streets towards their lodgings, with the sound of the city’s bells cascading about their ears.
Perhaps soon Maximilian would reign here in place of Cavor.
“Remembering that bright-eyed maid, Garth?” Joseph winked, and Garth smiled at his father.
“I’m sure she has no reason to remember me, father.”
Joseph laughed at the wicked light in Garth’s face, and wondered if this year the maid would have a reason to remember the physician’s apprentice.

They settled quickly into their lodgings, ate a hearty meal, then spent a pleasant evening wandering about the city streets, laughing at the tumblers and standing for over an hour listening to a particularly talented minstrel.
As the minstrel’s soaring voice lapsed into silence, Joseph wiped an eye then turned away. “It’s been many a long year since I heard a minstrel that beautiful, son.”
They began to walk slowly through the streets, heading in the general direction of their lodging house.
“Do you miss life in Ruen much, father?”
Joseph thought about that a long time. “Some aspects, yes, although your mother prefers life in Narbon.”
They were quiet for some time.
“Tell me about Maximilian,” Garth eventually said softly, his eyes on the street before him.
Joseph glanced at him. “I wondered when you’d ask me about him again. But ever since you came through Ruen last year you’ve had Maximilian on your mind. You’ve never spoken of him, but a father knows.”
He was silent a moment, remembering. “Maximilian? He was a bright lad, fun-loving, always laughing. Courageous—and that would be the death of him eventually, spurring his horse away from the main hunting party like that. He and I spent many an hour playing hoopball—yes, your old father knows how to play hoopball!—and often just talking.”
His voice wavered, and Joseph cleared his throat. “Sorry. I rarely let myself think on Maximilian. To remember his stupid loss…” He turned his head away.
Garth struggled with himself. “Father, there’s something I should tell—”
“Baxtor, you old rogue!” A hearty laugh boomed along the street and a man hurried from beneath the overhang of an ale-house. “I’ve not seen you in years!”
The moment passed, and Garth shut his mouth and watched as his father embraced an old friend.

The red-walled palace was as grandiose and as domineering as Garth remembered. Again they walked the pleasant paths through the gardens and were shown into the palace itself.
But this time the servant hurried them along a side corridor away from the Throne Room.
“Cavor’s private apartments,” Joseph murmured to Garth. “He must be sicker than I realised if he keeps to his bed.”
But Cavor was up and staring out the window as they entered. Both instantly fell to their knees, their heads bowed.
“Joseph, I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you again!” Cavor’s voice sounded cheerful and full of vitality.
“Sire, I trust your arm does not bother you too much.” Joseph raised his head, and Garth followed, looking into the king’s face.
He looked as vital as he sounded, and a wide smile beamed from his face. “And you’ve brought your son—Garth, isn’t it? Well, welcome. Come sit with me by the window.”
Joseph risked a glance at his son. Sit with the king? Rarely was anyone allowed to sit in the royal presence. But Cavor waved them towards a table placed so that it caught a gentle breeze wafting through the open window. Spring was warm this year, and Garth caught the fragrance of both garden and the street markets beyond the palace walls. It was a heady but surprisingly pleasant mixture.

They sat as Cavor himself sank into a chair. Now that they were closer, and Cavor sitting in the natural light, Garth could see that thin lines ringed his eyes and ran from his nose to the corners of his mouth. And there were shadows lurking in his eyes, as if his sleep had been deprived recently.

“Are you well, sire?” Joseph asked carefully, and Garth saw his father shared his suspicions.

“Well enough, Joseph. Nevertheless, I am pleased to see you.”

“Your arm, sire?” Joseph murmured.

“Ah,” Cavor flicked his fingers through the air as if at some trifling matter, then his hand fell and his face darkened. “Joseph, I have lain awake through many nights waiting for your visit. I almost sent for you a month past, but…” his voice faded, and he finished on a whisper. “But that would have been giving in."

Concerned, Joseph rose to his feet. “Sire, let me see.”

Not bothering to attempt to conceal his pain now, Cavor shrugged off his jacket. Its loose fit had concealed the fact that the king’s right arm was swathed in a massive bandage—larger than Garth remembered from the previous year. Stained with a yellow effluent, it gave off a sickening stench.

Now Garth knew why the king had sat by the window. The scent from garden and market had concealed the scent of his own decay.

“Sire!” Joseph muttered, appalled. “You should have sent for me.” His deft hands quickly unwound the bandage, and he snapped his fingers at Garth for some surgical scissors. “Hurry, boy!”

Garth was already at his father’s side with the scissors extended, and forceps to follow that. Carefully Joseph lifted the final layer of dressings, then both he and Garth stiffened in shock at what lay beneath.

Cavor had turned his head to the left so he did not have to witness their horror.

Garth took a deep breath and managed to avoid taking a step back only through a supreme effort.

Large weeping blisters littered Cavor’s biceps. Much of the flesh was raw, some hanging in thin, blackened tatters from his arm. It looked almost as if he had been burnt.

Ravenna was right, Garth thought numbly. The ink links both marks, both men. Slowly Garth raised his eyes to Cavor’s averted face. Was it only the ink that made this mark fester to match Maximilian’s? How deeply did betrayal and guilt link the two men? For the first time Garth wondered at Cavor’s involvement in Maximilian’s abduction and incarceration. He’d surely had the most to gain from the prince’s disappearance.

“How do you live with the pain?” Joseph had reached into his bag and was now gently wiping cloth saturated with herbal disinfectants across the king’s arm. Garth quickly handed his father a clean cloth and stowed the stained and unclean cloth in an isolated side pocket of his father’s bag.

Cavor sighed. “I have grown used to it, Joseph.” He smiled wryly, trying to make light of his disability. “Kingship is never pain-free.” He paused. “I wish to the gods that Maximilian had grown to shoulder this burden and left me free to administer my estates and live a contented country life.”

At that last statement, Garth glanced at the king sharply again. Cavor’s voice had been tight, forced. Insecure.

Having cleaned the wound as best he could, Joseph wrapped his hands about the king’s arm. Garth could see the glimmer of distaste cross his father’s face as the evil feel of the infection flooded into his body through his hands. Garth shivered, anticipating Joseph’s request that he Touch Cavor as well.

“Ah,” Cavor relaxed a little, closing his eyes. “Joseph, you are a wonder worker.” He sat quietly, then opened his eyes. “I have come to a decision. You are wasted in Narbon, Joseph. I will that you move to court.”

It was not a request, and both Joseph and Garth knew it.

“No!” Garth cried. They must go to the Veins!

Joseph glared at him angrily, then turned to the king, wiping his face clean of any expression. “My King, I am flattered that you so crave my attentions. But I have responsibilities in Narbon, and Nona, my wife, enjoys it so much, and—”

“And nothing, Joseph!” the king snarled, and Joseph physically rocked at the expression on Cavor’s face. “You will move back to the palace. Your place is as the royal physician as it was years ago—and Garth seems to have the talent to be trained as a royal physician as well—despite his curious reluctance to do so.”

“My apologies, sire,” Garth said, bowing as gracefully as he could. “It’s just that my friends are in Narbon.
And—” he thought quickly, “and my father and I are on our way to the Veins for our compulsory three weeks’ service. Sire, I learn so much in the Veins that I would not like to miss out on the experience. Perhaps once my father and I have completed our duty we can return to the palace.”

And perhaps not he thought, keeping his face as expressionless as his father’s. Perhaps not.

Joseph did not know why Garth was so keen to get to the Veins, but perhaps it was not such a bad idea. Cavor might well forget about them once they had left. Three weeks was a long time to sustain a royal whim.

“I don’t know what you can learn down the Veins that you can’t learn here,” Cavor snapped.

“Well,” Joseph began, but Garth broke in, visited by sudden inspiration.

“Sire, the prisoners—curse their venomous souls—are subject to curious fungal diseases in the Veins. Perhaps…perhaps, sire, your arm has been infected with such as that.”

“I’ve never been near the Veins!” Cavor all but shouted, and both Joseph and Garth recoiled at the strange light in his eyes.

“No, of course not,” Garth hurried on, his previous suspicion of the king now flaring into near certainty, “but fungal spores are carried by the wind easily enough, sire, and who knows? On a day when the northerlies blew perhaps you were unlucky enough to have caught such a spore.”

“My son has a point,” Joseph murmured deferentially. Where had Garth learned to lie that well? “I would like one further chance to examine the fungal diseases of the Veins. It might help me discover a final remedy for your arm.”

Cavor subsided. “Three weeks, you say? Well, your Touch healed my arm for close on two months the last time you came through, so perhaps I can spare you for three weeks. And it would be worth it if you discovered a final cure for this damn mark.”

To one side Garth visibly relaxed, and Joseph risked a glance his way.

“But I shall send for your lady wife and your household goods while you are gone, Joseph. When you return your home shall be here.”

Joseph inclined his head in a show of acceptance, mentally cursing. Damn!

Cavor watched him carefully. “Perhaps after a week or so of the Veins, Joseph, you will regret your decision to see out your service. I shall provide you with a letter which will enable you to return early, should you so wish.”

“As you will,” Joseph murmured, then stepped back, and indicated that Garth should Touch the king.

Garth delicately laid his hands on the king, and only narrowly avoided flinching as he felt the foul corruption of the infected flesh flood through his fingers and palms. Joseph nodded quietly as he saw and recognised his son’s struggle.

Garth closed his eyes and tried to loose as much healing through his hands as he could—but it was hard, very hard, because the arm he wanted to do this to currently laboured down the Veins, and some part of him wanted to harbour his energy for that battle ahead.

He hoped he would never have to return to Ruen until Maximilian sat the throne.

But here he stood with his hands on the current and, according to the Manteceros, legal king and it presented a dilemma that Garth had avoided thinking about until now.

What to do about Cavor? In a boyish way, Garth had somehow assumed he would rescue Maximilian from the Veins, and the country would welcome him back with open arms and parades through the centre of Ruen.

But would Cavor welcome him back? No, Garth did not think so. Not at all. So what could he do?

Garth started slightly, realising the power of his Touch was faltering along with his concentration, and he put the question to the back of his mind. Maximilian and Vorstus would know what to do. He frowned, bending his attention to his task, and let the Touch flow unhindered through his hands.

“I’ve had bad dreams,” Cavor whispered. Startled, Garth opened his eyes.

Joseph paused in the act of laying out fresh dressings. “Yes?”

The king had his eyes closed, leaning back in his chair. “Very bad dreams,” he said, and his voice had a singsong quality about it.

Joseph stared at the king, wondering what haunted the man’s soul so badly it bubbled forth in his dreams. Joseph hoped it wasn’t anything too dark. Not if he was going to be forced to finish his working life in this artificial world.

“I dream of dark places,” Cavor muttered. “Of rock faces splintering with the pressure of an ocean of water.”

He shuddered.

Shocked, Garth’s grip loosened about the king’s arm. Joseph opened his mouth to remonstrate with him, then saw the expression on his son’s face. He slowly closed his mouth and shifted his gaze back to the king.

“I dream of being lost in this dark place. Unshackled and free, and yet not free. I despair.”

“Gods,” Joseph murmured, “the infection has touched his mind.”
But Garth knew better. He let go of the king’s arm.

“I raise my pick and strike the rock, then strike it again, and I know I am home.”

Tears filled Garth’s eyes and he had to turn away. Was the bond between Maximilian and Cavor so strong they shared dreams and experiences? Did Maximilian dream of wandering the palace corridors, smiling and bowing to the courtesans in flowing silk dresses as they passed?

“And sometimes I dream of the Manteceros.”

Garth turned back again, evading his father’s eyes.

“I dream I claim, and the Manteceros appears and asks who dares the dream, who comes to claim…but this time it refuses me, and it turns away into the mist, and I feel the mark flare into fire, and I wake screaming.”

Cavor’s voice had risen so that by the end he was shouting into the quiet chamber.

But his eyes were still closed, and so Garth dared the question, hoping the king would reply automatically. He wanted to gain Maximilian every bit of information he could to enable him to succeed.

“How did you claim, sire? How do you dare the dream? I—”

He got no further. With a roar Cavor lunged into full wakefulness and seized Garth’s arm in powerful hands.

“Who do you think you are, boy?” His hands twisted viciously, and Garth cried out and sank to his knees.

“Only kings are privy to that information! How dare you!”

“Sire!” Joseph lifted his hands, appalled, but hesitated to actually touch the king. “Garth meant nothing by the questions. He is but a curious boy.” His eyes flared and he hissed at Garth. “An utterly irresponsible boy who should apologise right now!”

“Sire,” Garth was almost crying with the pain now. “I meant nothing by the question! Truly! I apologise if I have trespassed into forbidden knowledge.”

Cavor’s grip lessened slightly. “Foolish boy.”

“Yes,” Garth’s voice cracked, through fear as much as pain. “I knew not what I said.” How could he have been so stupid?

“He is but country-bred,” Joseph said, his face pale as he watched Cavor’s grip gradually lose its intensity. Gods, but Garth had come as close as he could to a broken arm without actually experiencing it! “And witless for it, sometimes.”

Cavor recovered his composure. “Well,” he said, and let go completely. Garth almost slipped to his knees in relief. “He’ll have to learn some manners if he’s to survive at court. Now,” Cavor’s mood swung in the blink of an eye, “I have some sweetmeats here. Sure to please both you and the boy, Joseph. Here, taste. Now, which apartment would you prefer to live in, Joseph? The airy quadrangle suite that you had once before, or perhaps one of the remodelled apartments in the main building itself?”

“You stupid, stupid boy!” Joseph repeated once he had Garth alone. “What came over you?”

Garth was still pale. “Curiosity, father. I’d heard gossip about this claim, and I…”

“Well, stifle your curiosity boy, before it gets us both killed! The secret of the claim is shared between king and heir only! Not to a dim-witted physician’s apprentice whose artlessness will yet see him on the executioner’s block!”

And Joseph turned and stalked off, leaving Garth to hurry after him.
FOURTEEN
INJUSTICE CONFRONTED

They arrived at the Veins on one of those spring days that harkened back to the winter, for cold winds blew in heavy sea clouds, and they hung a veil of mist and drizzle and sadness about Myrna and the complex of buildings and machinery above the Veins themselves.

The weather matched Garth’s mood. He had not stopped cursing himself since he had left the king’s apartment with his life still miraculously intact. After a day of ignoring him, Joseph had appeared to forget the entire episode, and had chatted to his son about this and that along the lonely, northerly road to Myrna. Garth had replied in monosyllables, but Joseph had let that go as well, and left his son alone when it became apparent that Garth would prefer to ride in silence.

Joseph surely had enough to think about himself. How was he going to extricate himself from the king’s order to relocate himself to Ruen? The last thing he wanted was to move back to court and spend his time treating diseases caused by imbibing too much wine and food, and dallying too long in the wrong boudoirs.

And what would Nona say when the king’s men arrived on her doorstep with the order to move? Poor Nona. Joseph shuddered. Poor Joseph.

They arrived at the Veins as they had the previous year, at dusk with the day closing in about them and the noise and the smell of the shafts settling about their shoulders with cold, heavy hands.

Garth huddled close within his cloak as his father reported to Furst. Was Maximilian still alive down there? Had Ravenna and Vorstus arrived?

Would he be able to find Maximilian again?
Would their flimsy plan be enough to free him—and escape themselves?

After his experience with Cavor in Ruen, Garth knew none of them could hope for much mercy if they were caught. The more he thought about it, the more Garth became convinced Cavor would do whatever he had to, by whatever means he could, to prevent Maximilian’s return.

“Garth?”

His father had returned, and Garth shook himself out of his lethargy.

“We have the same lodgings as before. Come on boy, let’s go get something to eat and then crawl into our bunks. We’ll have an early start in the morning.”

Joseph climbed back onto his horse, waved briefly at Furst, who watched from the lighted window of his office, then he and his son swung their horses towards the quarters set aside for visiting physicians. The building was about fifty paces away from Furst’s office, set between two bleak mounds of gloam. Even though air would have been welcome, its windows were sealed shut so that the gloam dust could not penetrate inside; Garth remembered how hot and stuffy the building had been the previous year. Well, with luck, he would not have to endure the conditions either above or below the Veins for very long this year.

They left their horses with a groom in the lean-to stable behind the physicians’ quarters, then entered the front door. Another physician, a spare grey-haired man who introduced himself as Liam Bent, told them that every other physician currently at the Veins was down below.

“On nightshift,” he said, then chuckled at his own joke. “As if it’s anything else below this cursed soil.”

Joseph introduced himself and Garth, and then a servant emerged from the kitchen and took their cloaks.

“Sit, masters,” he murmured, his pale, round face turned aside deferentially, “and I will serve food.”

Joseph and Garth sat down at a table well away from the over-stacked fire and waited. Silent now, Liam Bent had slouched into a chair beside a lamp, reading a week-old edition of Ruen’s newsheet.

Joseph glanced at Garth and tried to smile, but the boy looked as if he were consumed by a stomach gripe, and Joseph looked away again. No doubt wondering why he wanted to come back, he thought.

The servant emerged from the kitchen carrying a laden platter and a stack of plates. Halfway across the room his toe caught the corner of a rug and he tripped, the stack of plates sliding from his hand and shattering across the floor.

Everyone in the room jumped, and the servant himself gushed effusive apologies as he sank to his knees and tried to stack what remained of the plates with his free hand.

Garth stood up and went to help, feeling for the man. “Here, let me take the platter,” he said as he bent down by the now red-faced and perspiring servant.

Patently grateful, the servant gave Garth the platter, but as Garth took hold of it, the man’s eyes caught at his.
“There’s an abandoned poppet head a hundred paces behind this building,” he whispered, and Garth froze. “Be there by the time the moon rises tonight.”

For an instant longer he stared at Garth, then he dropped his eyes and let the platter go. As he did so, Garth noticed the faint tattoo on his index finger, and his breath caught in his throat. Was Vorstus here?

He nodded imperceptibly then rose to his feet, returning to the table and setting the platter down. Neither Joseph nor Liam Bent had noticed a thing.

Garth lay in his bunk, every nerve afire, staring at the ceiling above his head. Every now and then he would turn and look out the window, waiting for the telltale glow of the moon—but would he notice it in this fog that now huddled so close and intimate between buildings and mounds?

Eventually he could stand no more and slid as silently as he could to the floor, hoping his father was asleep. But as he slipped on his cloak, Joseph turned over and opened his eyes.

“Garth? What are you doing?”

“Oh,” Garth said in as relaxed a voice as he could manage, “I cannot sleep and thought I’d take a walk.”

Joseph frowned and made as if to push his blankets back.

“No,” Garth stepped over to the door and opened it. “I won’t be long, father.”

Then he was gone.

He slipped quietly out of their quarters, grateful that Liam Bent had gone to bed, and walked quickly along the narrow path behind the building. It led between the two great mounds of gloam that reared to either side, and Garth’s feet crunched on the thick layer of rock and dust that blanketed the path.

He glanced anxiously to the sky, his heart pounding when he saw a vague luminescence shining through the fog. The moon was already well risen! He hurried his steps…would they still be there?

Garth thought he had gone at least three hundred paces before the skeleton of the old poppet head reared out of the fog before him. Its iron wheel hung drunkenly askew and broken chains swung in the slight breeze, clinking mournfully.

“Vorstus?” he whispered as he stepped underneath the structure, leaning to one side to avoid one of the swinging chains. His eyes scanned the night anxiously. “Ravenna?”

“You’re late, boy,” a gruff voice said behind him, and Garth swung around.

“Vorstus!”

Despite his rough tone, Vorstus smiled and gripped Garth’s hand in welcome. He was well cloaked and hooded, but underneath his thin face and sharp eyes smiled. “I’m glad to see you, boy.”

Garth smiled, then glanced behind him. “Ravenna?”

“Here, Garth Baxtor,” her soft voice said, and she loomed out of the fog at Vorstus’ back. Like the monk, she had her red cloak pulled tightly about her, but she smiled and leaned forward to give Garth a brief kiss of welcome on his cheek.

Garth took a deep breath. “Did you have any problems on your journey north?”

Vorstus shook his head. “No, all went well.”

Several figures emerged from the shadows about them, and Garth froze.

“It’s all right,” Vorstus hastened. “Several other Brothers of the Order of Persimius are here. You met Brother Rial this evening.”

Garth relaxed. “Yes,” and he nodded at the man who was masquerading as the servant to the physicians.

“And this is Gustus and Morton.” Garth nodded and shook their hands.

Vorstus smiled. “Both of whom seem to have obtained employment here in the Veins as guards.”

Garth’s eyes widened. “Then our plan does have a chance!” he breathed, and Vorstus laughed.

“Yes, I believe so. Now, listen, boy. There are, all told, some half a dozen members of the order secreted about the mines. All is in readiness.”

“When?” Garth said tightly.

His eyes were on Vorstus, but it was Ravenna who answered. “Tomorrow, Garth Baxtor. None of us want to linger about this pit of corruption,” and for an instant her eyes flashed, “and Maximilian has already spent long enough below, methinks.”

Excitement flowered in Garth’s chest, yet at the same time his heart thumped with nervousness. “Tomorrow…after all this time,” he whispered.

“Garth,” Vorstus’ tone was urgent, and Garth swung his eyes back to the monk. “Where was Maximilian when you went down last year?”
“Section 205.”
Vorstus turned and looked at Gustus. “Can you access Furst’s office tonight?”
Gustus nodded. “Yes. I’ll check the detail books. Make sure he’s still in the same gang.”
“Lot No. 859,” Garth said.
“I know, boy. Vorstus has passed on your information.”
Vorstus placed a reassuring hand on Garth’s shoulder. “We’ll all do the best we can boy, and, in the end, that’s all we can do. We’re as set to go as we can be.”
“And in the morning?”
“In the morning? Why, you go down the Veins as planned, Garth Baxtor. And think not to look startled when you notice the guards assigned to your detail.”

Garth took a sharp breath of excitement. “Ravenna?”
“As planned, Garth Baxtor,” she smiled, and took his arm. “As planned. Wish me luck and wait for the dream.”

Joseph frowned at his son as they made their way across to the waiting cage. Garth had been demonstrably nervous this morning, fumbling with his cutlery at breakfast, and then laying it down after only two or three bites of breakfast.

“Are you sure you want go down?” Joseph asked as they approached the waiting group of silent guards. “It’s not too late to—”
“No,” Garth broke in, and when he turned to look at his father Joseph’s frown deepened. Was that nervousness or excitement shining from his eyes? “No, I’m fine. Ah! Here we are. Jack? Is that you? Good to see you again.”
Joseph stared at Garth a moment longer, then turned to greet the guards huddled by the ironworks. Below them he could hear the cage rattling and screeching its way to the surface.

Jack had stepped forward to greet them, but Joseph’s frown—if possible—deepened yet further. What was wrong with Jack? The man had a slightly distracted air about him, as if his mind was elsewhere. And his eyes seemed…well, almost vacant.

Garth glanced at the guards behind Jack and grinned. The Order of Persimius might not command much in the way of magical arts, but apparently they commanded enough. He ran his eyes over the group. Gustus and Morton were here, both looking the part in their brief leather wraps and armour, but Vorstus was also masquerading as a guard, and Garth hoped that their group would not be scrutinised too clearly when they went below; Vorstus was patently far too thin for guard duty.

Behind Vorstus were two regular guards, their eyes as vacant as Jack’s.

“Fine,” Jack mumbled in a non-convincing way to Joseph, and the cage finally rattled its way to the surface.

“Well,” Garth said over brightly, “shall we get in?”

“Garth,” Joseph began, now running his eyes over the other guards. “Something’s not—”

“Into the cage we go,” Jack said, and he placed a meaty hand in the small of Joseph’s back and shoved.

Garth grinned quickly at Vorstus, then they were all in, the door closed, and the cage was spinning its way into the depths of the Veins.

As Garth only too well remembered, as soon as they sank below ground level the stench of the damp gloam mixed with the aroma of fear and pain and death rose about them like a noxious miasma.

“Section 205 needs our attention today, commander,” Vorstus mumbled almost inaudibly. Joseph stared at him, deep lines creasing into his forehead.

Vorstus noticed his stare, but said nothing. Joseph Baxtor would realise soon enough.

“Section 205?” Jack said, his voice querulous. “205? Yes, that’s right. It does need attention, doesn’t it… doesn’t it?”

Now Morton spoke quietly. “The fungus has spread among 205’s gang, Jack, and they can hardly work. Gloam production has fallen in Section 205 and Furst is angry.”

Behind Jack the two other regular guards nodded. Yes, the fungus had spread.


“What is going on here?” Joseph said angrily. Had he and Garth become involved in some plot of the prisoners to escape? He did not like the look in Jack’s eyes, and those other guards…what was it about them?

“Father,” Garth murmured, but it was Vorstus who stepped forward, seemingly unaffected by the cage’s continued wild plunge.

“My friend,” he said softly, and laid a hand on Joseph’s upper arm. “There has been an injustice done here and today we aim to set part of it to rights.”

Joseph, too shocked to reply, dropped his eyes to the guard’s hand clutched about his arm, thinking to wrench
himself free.

Then he stilled, his eyes riveted by the faint tattoo of a quill on the man’s forefinger.

“Trust me,” Vorstus said quietly. “Believe in me.”

“By all the gods in heaven,” Joseph whispered. “You’re of the Order of—”

“No!” Vorstus’ voice cut cross his sharply, although his tone was still soft. He dropped his hand from Joseph’s arm. “Do not say it.”

Joseph shifted his eyes to his son. “Garth?”

“It’s all right, father,” Garth said. “Please. Trust us.”

Oh gods, Joseph thought, stunned, leaning back against the rough ironwork of the cage and barely managing to stop himself sliding to the floor. Garth is involved in this too!

Then, as the first trickle of water through a gap in a dyke augurs destruction, memories flooded Joseph’s mind. He remembered how much Garth had matured this year. He remembered how withdrawn he’d been after returning from the Veins last year, and how he’d suffered weeks of nightmares. He remembered how Garth had fought to be allowed back to the Veins this year and the curious—and idiotic—question he had asked of Cavor.

And he remembered how Garth’s mind had seemed consumed with Maximilian, although he had mentioned him only rarely.

“Oh gods,” he whispered, his brown eyes wide and distressed. “Oh gods!”

“We’re here,” Jack grunted, and reached for the controls. The cage screeched to a halt, and it swayed violently as the brakes kicked in. “Section 205.”

The excitement and nervousness were now almost too much for Garth to bear. Where was Maximilian? How was he? He shifted from foot to foot, trying to disguise the movement as one of catching his balance as the cage finally settled, but Joseph stared at him.

“What didn’t you tell me?” he whispered as they filed out into the Veins.

“I wasn’t sure what to do,” Garth replied, his eyes flitting over the sentry waiting for them. “I didn’t want to get you into trouble.”

“Too late for that now!” Joseph snapped, angry at Garth—not so much for involving him in what was apparently a plot to free one of the prisoners (Maximilian?), but because Garth had not confided in him.

“Jack?” The sentry on duty by the shaft stepped forward. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“Got to go to Section 205,” Jack mumbled. “With the physicians.”

The guard looked about the group suspiciously. “Who were…?”

Then his shoulders slumped slightly. “Of course,” he mumbled. “They’re working close to the sea shaft.”

Garth felt Vorstus tremble slightly beside him. Concerned, he glanced at the man but did not touch him. Vorstus had told him that the order could control men’s minds to some degree, but not for long and at great cost to themselves. How long could he and the other two keep all of these guards in thrall?

Jack stumped off down the yawning tunnel without a further word, Vorstus hurrying their group after him.

It was darker and more confined than Garth remembered and within a few minutes he found he was gasping for air—but perhaps that was because excitement had gripped his chest in tight bands. Behind him he could feel his father, and Garth wished he’d told Joseph about Maximilian before they’d got this far. Well, too late now for confessions.

The two regular guards walked behind Joseph, and behind them Morton and Gustus. Pray we reach the gang relatively soon, Garth thought, before the monk’s control of these men slips.

The hanging wall scraped at their heads, and the walls of the tunnel sometimes crowded about to bump and bruise their bodies. No-one spoke, but the sound of heavy breathing and even heavier boots surrounded them in the gloom.

Every step was an effort, but every step brought them closer to Maximilian.

Jack led them eventually to a spot close to where Garth had first encountered the gang that worked Section 205. The gang were working in an offshoot from the main tunnel, and the spaces were even more confined than normal.

Jack paused, and those behind him jostled and stumbled as they halted.

“There,” he grunted, and indicated with his head.

Vorstus, and Garth behind him, peered over Jack’s shoulder.

“Where?” Vorstus asked, his voice tight.

It was Garth who replied. “There. See? That’s the light of the torch carried by the guard.”

“Ah.” Vorstus paused, glancing over his shoulder at Morton and Gustus, then spoke to Jack again. “Commander, best that you order the guard to bring the gang into this space here. That offshoot is too narrow for the physicians to work in. Bring them all out… the guards included.”

Garth heard the monk’s voice crack a little at the end. “Vorstus?”
“I’m all right, boy,” Vorstus whispered as Jack shouted for the guards to bring the gang back into the main tunnel. “But best we do this as quickly as possible.”

Surprised by Jack’s orders, the two guards assigned to the gang hurried them back to the tunnel. “Jack?” One of them asked. “What’s up?”

“The fungus,” Jack said. “Out of control. Production has slipped.”

The guard exchanged puzzled glances with his companion. “Fungus? This gang’s clear of fungus, Jack.”

Garth realised that the monks’ abilities must be so over-stretched that they could not manipulate these two guards’ minds. “Then it must have been a mistaken order,” he said brightly. “Oh well, might as well examine them while we’re here. Father?”

Joseph took the hint. “Yes, ah, line them up against that wall, guard. Yes, that’s good. Under the torch. Yes, thank you.” *Which one?* he thought frantically, *which one?* His eyes raced along the line, but he was careful to keep his face neutral. “Garth? Come.”

The men had sunk down to the ground as soon as the guards had pushed them back against the wall, taking the rare opportunity to rest. Covered in tarry dust, only the whites of their eyes showed that they were living men and not inanimate statues carved out of a single block of gloam.

As the guards—and pseudo-guards—sank to the floor for a game of dice, Joseph let Garth lead him to the last man in the line.

Garth squatted down, excitement making him stumble slightly. “Maximilian?”

Lot No. 859 glared at him resentfully. What was this boy doing? Had he come back to annoy him again? His dreams had been uncomfortable ever since this boy had whispered such disturbing things at him when he was last here…when? A month or two ago, perhaps.

Joseph sank down besides his son. Haltingly he reached out a hand and grasped the man’s chin. He turned the prisoner’s head slightly so that the light fell more evenly across his features.

“Maximilian!” Joseph whispered. “Gods…Maximilian!” His voice broke. “Maximilian, don’t you know me?”
“Go away,” Lot No. 859 snarled. “Leave me in peace!”

“He will not admit to who he is,” Garth murmured. “Father? Here, Touch his arm.”

But Lot No. 859 wrenched his arm to one side before Joseph could touch him. “Get away from me!” he hissed.

The prisoner to his left murmured and shifted.

“Maximilian,” Garth said quietly, “be still. I am Garth, remember? And this is my father, Joseph Baxtor. Perhaps you remember him from your childhood.”

“Maximilian?” Joseph muttered again. *How had this happened?*

“I am Lot No. 859, boy! Now leave me be!”

“We have come to free you,” Garth said determinedly.

It was the worst thing he could have said.

Lot No. 859 visibly recoiled. “Free?” he whispered, appalled. “No. No!” Freed to roam unfettered and lost within the warm darkness? To be driven to madness by his aloneness? “No!”

He took a great breath. “Guard!” he shouted. “Take these men away!”

Garth flinched as he saw Jack rise, but the next instant Vorstus had laid a hand on his shoulder and Jack sank down.

Vorstus scrambled across. He squatted in front of the small group—the rest of the prisoners were now regarding them with wide, frightened eyes—and, shockingly, inclined his head at Lot No. 859 in a gesture of deep respect.

“Prince Maximilian,” he whispered. “I am Vorstus. See?” And he extended his hand slightly.

Lot No. 859 had not appeared to recognise Joseph, but his eyes widened at the sight of the quill tattooed on Vorstus’ finger. He took a sharp intake of breath.

Yet still he cringed against the prisoner to his left, as far away from the three as he could get. Still his body was tight and tense, and his eyes fearful and hostile at the same time.

“Maximilian,” Garth whispered. “I found the Manteceros. He has a message for you.” Beside him his father stirred in amazement.

Lot No. 859 stared at Garth, a thin film of sweat covering his blackened face. He appeared to have stopped breathing completely.

“Listen, Maximilian,” and Garth recited the verse the Manteceros had given him.

“In crystal do drown me,
And drape me with truth.
Draw death up about me,
Loose blood o’er the silk.”

“No,” Lot No. 859 whispered. “Please stop.”

“With courage beneath me,
Let light bind me tight.
Find one who will name me—
One more to add weight,
Then show me inside,

The green shadowed parlour.”

“Stop!”

“With the ring of my fathers
I carve deep into stone,
Trace life into lines,
Turn floor into bone.”
Lot No. 859 whimpered, and covered his face with his hands. “No!”

“What comes to Claim?
Who dares the Dream,
And, daring, ------”

Garth took a deep breath and reached across to take the man’s hands. “Dare the dream, Maximilian, and stake your claim. Let the Manteceros decide whether you have a true claim or not.”

Maximilian let Garth envelop his grime-encrusted hands in his. Silent tears streaked down his face, carving deep channels into its covering of gloam. He was trembling. “In crystal do drown me,” he whispered, then choked on his tears, half smiling, half crying. “Oh, gods! I could surely do with a good wash!”

Vorstus took a shaky breath, emotion threatening to overwhelm him. Only a prince and an heir could have known what that line alluded to.

“Maximilian,” he said, “we have come to take you home.”
Then he rose to his feet and stared at the hanging wall.
“Ravenna!”

She slipped unseen through the impenetrable sea fog. It had thickened steadily throughout the morning, until those above moved carefully—if at all—with upraised lamps that blinded them as the light reflected off the moisture in the fog.

Ravenna had slipped the hood back from her head, and now her hair streamed black down the red wool of her cloak. Her feet were bare.
Her grey eyes were now almost colourless as she prepared to wield her magic.
Smiling, she skipped down the path leading to the poppet head above the main shaft, and opened her mouth in song.

Skip, trip, my pretty man,
Skip, trip, into my hand.

Her voice was clear and sweet, and her hands threw back her cloak so that it flew out from her shoulders like the wings of a great red bird.
About the ironworks and buildings that sat above the Veins, men slowed and rubbed their eyes. Some yawned, some glanced, curious but not anxious, into the surrounding mist—was it tinged blue now?—but all sank down where they stood, curling their arms under or about their heads as they closed their eyes in dream.

Skip, trip, be frank and fair,
Skip, trip, through the air.

In his office, Furst’s head sank down onto his desk and he emitted a rasping snore.

Skip, trip, into the sky,
Skip, trip, linger and die.

Now Ravenna stood at the very mouth of the shaft itself and she stared down into its blackness.
About her the fog swirled, and strange shapes moved noiselessly through its depths.
The surface of the Veins was silent as men slipped deeper into their dreams.
Fingers of mist dipped into the shaft itself, and Ravenna smiled.

Skip, trip, my pretty man,
Skip, trip, into my heart.

Her eyes were completely white now.

Vorstus waited until the first vestiges of the enchanted fog drifted into the chamber in which they waited, then he moved.
He handed Joseph a hammer, then indicated that Garth should take Maximilian’s pick from where he had
dropped it into the dust and rock at their feet. “Unchain him,” he said, and briefly turned back to the group of guards. Jack’s head, as did those of the four other guards, drooped in weariness.

Garth looked at his father. Joseph’s mouth was hard and determined. “The pick!” he snapped, and Garth fumbled about for a moment before he slipped the point of the pick into one of the links of the chain that bound Maximilian’s left ankle to that of the man next to him.

Maximilian stirred in agitation once more, although the other prisoners, like the guards, had fallen into a profound sleep. “No,” he murmured, his heart racing as he saw Joseph raise the hammer. “No.”

Joseph struck the pick as hard as he could. “We have to, Maximilian. We have to get you out of here!” And he raised the hammer again.

Maximilian stirred restlessly once more, and Garth thought he might attempt to pull his ankle away. He glanced at him anxiously, but even though the prince was clearly upset, he kept his ankle still.

Joseph struck again, harder this time, and the point of the pick slipped almost completely through the link. One more time, and it would snap.

Garth blinked, thinking for a moment that his vision was blurring, then realised that the small chamber in which they crouched had almost filled with sea mist.

Ravenna.

He looked at the hanging wall briefly, and smiled. Without her Maximilian would not have a chance. None of them would.

Joseph struck again, and the chain fell apart.

Maximilian whimpered, his eyes wide and frightened as they looked between Garth and Joseph. “Please, don’t leave me alone. Not in the darkness.”

“We’re going to get you out, Maximilian.” Vorstus had reappeared. “He’s free? Good. Maximilian, come, lean on me.”

“Out?” Maximilian mumbled, letting Vorstus pull him to his feet. “Out where?”

Garth laughed with sheer relief and exuberance. “Beyond the hanging wall, Maximilian!”

“No,” Maximilian shook his head, his face weary and sad once more. “No, there is nothing beyond the hanging wall. No. Please don’t leave me alone in the dark…please!”

“We’ve no time for this, boy,” Vorstus grunted as the prince leaned his weight on his shoulder. “Do you remember the plan?”

Garth nodded. “Yes. We’ll follow you to the chamber by the shaft with Jack and the two guards who came down with us. There, you—with Morton and Gustus—will take Maximilian to the surface and to the hiding place you’ve arranged. My father and I will stay down here.”

Joseph narrowed his eyes. When he had Garth alone the boy would surely have a lot of explaining to do.

“After two or three hours the effects of the dream fog will lift,” Garth continued. “Jack—as everyone else affected by it—will wake. He will think that we have only just descended the shaft and will lead us down to Section 205 to treat the prisoners for fungus…and while we are still only partly down the tunnel I have no doubt that we’ll meet one of the two guards assigned to this gang rushing to raise the alarm that one of the prisoners has escaped.”

“Good. Join us when you can—but be careful! I don’t want suspicion falling either on you or on your father. No-one will remember a few guards who were here one day, gone the next.”

“How long have you been planning this?” Joseph said as they made their way back down the tunnel, Gustus and Morton prodding the virtually sleepwalking Jack and his two companion guards behind them. Ahead of them Vorstus half supported, half carried Maximilian; the prince seemed dazed and confused without the eight other men chained to his left ankle.

“Long enough,” Garth said. “Look, father, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this before…but while we wait for the guards to wake after Vorstus has taken Maximilian above I will tell you everything. I promise.”

Joseph shook his head, trying to be cross with his son, but like his son he was too excited to feel anything but exultation at finding Maximilian. And the Order of Persimius were involved, too! That reassured Joseph. If Garth had come up with this plan all by himself then Joseph would have wondered at its sanity.

His eyes slipped to the mist that drifted through the tunnel. It was surely an enchanted thing, and Joseph stared at Vorstus’ back with vastly increased respect. He did not know much about the Order of Persimius only that they were devoted to the royal family and that they commanded subtle arts—but they must be infinitely more powerful than he had supposed if they could wield such power as this.

When they reached the shaft—the cage still waiting there—Garth was relieved to see the sentry crumpled in sleep at his post. Surely the entire Veins were asleep by this stage!

Garth grinned to himself as they waited for the others to catch up. Well, the prisoners deserved a good sleep for
a time. He would have liked to have been able to free all of the men, but realised that not all of them were as innocent as Maximilian (although some surely were; how many other men had been conveniently “lost” down the Veins?) and, in any case, a mass escape was out of the question.

Not when the priority of all concerned was to get Maximilian as far away from the Veins as fast as they could.

Now Morton and Gustus had caught them up. The guards they had gently herded along the tunnel slipped gently to the floor to dream undisturbed among the gloam dust.

Vorstus caught Garth’s eyes again. “You know where to find us?”

Garth nodded.

“Good.” He adjusted Maximilian’s weight a little as Morton opened the doors of the cage. “Join us when you can.”

Then he dragged an unresisting Maximilian into the cage, Morton and Gustus stepping in after him. The cage door slammed, and the next instant chains rattled and cogs whirred as the cage began its crazy ascent to the world beyond the hanging wall.

The last thing Garth heard was Maximilian’s frightened cry as the cage began to move.

He stared at the blackness of the shaft for a moment, then felt his father’s firm hand on his shoulder.

“Garth. I think you have some explaining to do.” Ravenna paced back and forth, back and forth, her cloak now clutched tightly about her in whiteknuckled hands, her teeth anxiously nibbling her lip. Below her she could hear the cage rushing its way to the surface.

She felt almost nauseous with worry. Had all gone well? The brief touch of Vorstus’ mind indicated that all was well, but so much could still go wrong.

Was Maximilian well? Would they be caught? Would they manage to finally escape this cursed place?

“Skip, trip, my pretty man,” she murmured, her eyes darkening now back to their original grey, and the cage rattled its way into the overhead framework.

Almost before it had stopped Morton had the cage door open and was helping Vorstus with Maximilian. Ravenna stepped forward, one hand to her mouth, one stretched towards Maximilian, trembling with her emotion.

“Is he...?”

“He’ll be fine, Ravenna,” Vorstus said, his mouth open to say yet more, when Maximilian raised his head.

His eyes widened in complete shock and his entire body spasmed in horror.

What was this netherworld that he had been dragged into?

Most of the fog had dissipated by now, and Maximilian could not comprehend the open spaces and the feel of the air moving against his body; he had completely forgotten the touch, let alone the name, of wind. As Maximilian looked wildly about, the clouds cleared momentarily and he caught a glimpse of the open sky.

The unending vastness was too much—where was the security of the hanging wall?

“Noooo!” he screamed, and tried to twist free from Vorstus’ grip.

“Morton! Gustus! Help me!” Vorstus cried, grunting with the effort of keeping Maximilian locked in his arms.

It took the three of them to subdue the man, Ravenna looking on helplessly, crying as she finally perceived the depth of the prince’s pain.

“Come,” Vorstus said eventually, once Maximilian had quietened down. “I had not thought he would react this badly. We’ll have to move fast. Ravenna, is the way clear?”

She nodded, took a deep breath then turned on her heel and led them away from the poppet head.

They walked as fast yet as silently as they could, knowing that time was passing, yet not knowing how much had been lost. When would the complex wake about them? Both fog and clouds had entirely gone, although the fog’s effects would linger for some time, and the sun shone clear and bright above them. If the complex woke from its magical sleep while they were still outside they would be caught within minutes.

Ravenna led them down a long, disused track. The monks of the Order of Persimius had kept watch on the Veins for almost two years now, and they had established several hiding places on the outskirts of the complex. Now Ravenna led them towards the most secret of them.

She glanced anxiously over her shoulder as they walked. Was that a faint noise in the distance? Voices? The cage in the main shaft rattling? The fall of pursuing feet? She locked eyes with Vorstus for a moment.

“Courage, girl,” he grunted, and she turned back to the path ahead.

Finally they reached a small hillock and Ravenna’s shoulders slumped in relief. They were beyond the perimeter of the Veins, but even here the ground was lightly dusted with gloam dust, and Ravenna, and those who followed behind her, were careful where they trod lest they leave footprints. Morton, who came last, carefully erased the slightest suggestion of any footprints with a loosely held sack.

“Here,” she muttered, and crouched down by a large rock that jutted out from the hillside. Without hesitating, Ravenna knocked on the rock once, then four times, paused, then twice again.
Instantly the rock rolled to one side and a worried face peered out at them.

“Thank the gods that you’re here!” the waiting monk exclaimed, and then they were all slipping below the level of the earth again, and the rock rolled silently closed to hide their secrets.

They were only just in time, for as the rock rolled closed eyes fluttered awake around the Veins, and Jack muttered and stirred as Garth and Joseph stood watching them silently.

“What?” Jack grumbled as he slowly rose to his feet. The other two guards and the sentry were also stumbling and yawning their way to their feet.

“We’re waiting for you to take us to Section 205,” Joseph said pleasantly. Garth had related an amazing tale in the two hours since the three monks had left with Maximilian, and Joseph had questioned his son closely. Joseph was proud of his son, although that pride was mixed with lingering resentment that Garth had not told him earlier, but he wondered if they would all live to enjoy the fruits of their adventure. Whoever had incarcerated Maximilian down here was not going to be pleased when he found out that the prince had escaped.

“Section 205?” Jack frowned, then his face cleared. “Oh, yes, of course. The fungus. Come on, then.”

And without another word he marched down the tunnel.

Joseph and Garth hurried after him, trying to look as if this was not the second time they had hurried down this tunnel today, and behind them came the two guards still rubbing sleep and confusion out of their eyes.

Part-way back to Section 205 they met one of the gang’s guards, his face alive with alarm.

“One of the prisoners has escaped!” he gasped, and Jack turned and bellowed down the tunnel.

“Sound the alarm!”

Above, warned by some guilty instinct, Furst’s head leaped from his desk in mid-snore and he stared wildly about his office.

Maximilian had relaxed once they were beneath the level of the earth again, although the well-lit chamber into which the monk led them made him blink and turn his head aside.

The interior of the hill had been hollowed out and lined with the rock that had been excavated so that it made a great and airy chamber. There were narrow shafts that led to the outer world for air—their mouths well hidden with shrubs—and lamps that flared from eight or nine brackets on the stone walls. Scanty but comfortable furniture stood about, enlivened here and there with the lively colours of cushions and rugs.

Ravenna helped Vorstus lay Maximilian on a bed, and pulled a blanket over him. He rolled away without a word so that he faced the wall, his eyes closed tightly.

“I’ll get some water,” she said softly, “so that we can see what the prince looks like underneath his grime.”

Then she tipped her head back and laughed, the sound so startling that Maximilian rolled back and stared at her.

She dropped her eyes. “And once we have that grime off you, Prince Maximilian, you will doubtless be able to walk about a free man, for no-one will recognise you as the escaped Lot No. 859.”

Her grin faded, and she reached out a gentle hand. “Lot No. 859 will disappear with that grime, Maximilian. Believe it.”

Men rushed about from building to poppet head, then back again. Guards rushed to form into units, then rushed for the cage. Orders were relayed that no ships were to leave the loading pier, and no new ships were to berth. Within the Veins themselves, gangs were chained to walls and hurriedly counted.

Furst rushed from his office to the shaft head. He seized the first guard who emerged from the cage. “Which one?”

“From Section 205,” the guard gasped, and Furst paled. “Lot No. 859.”

“Find him!” Furst seethed as the alarm bells pealed about the complex. “Find him!”

Then, releasing the guard, he turned and looked due south for a moment, as if he could see into the heart of Ruen itself.

Deep in his red-walled palace, Cavor writhed amid the silken sheets of his bed. He’d laid down after his noon meal, seeking some relief from the cursed festering of his arm, but now the dreams that claimed him were far worse than the waking nightmare of the mark.

He murmured and twisted some more. “No!” he cried, and his hands gripped the silk until it tore. “No!”

He was in a dark place, welcoming, familiar, but then cruel hands seized him and hauled him towards the sky in a basket woven of iron. A witch amid the clouds bared her teeth at him and the sun pierced his eyes.

“No!”
Now the hands of his tormentors were wrapped about his leg, sliding down, further and further, and nothing Cavor could do could dislodge their hold. One held a pick and the other a hammer, and they chortled with laughter as they raised their implements and crashed them down into his ankle.

“Noooo!” Cavor screamed into his chamber, and lurched out of his dream.
He scrambled into a sitting position, his chest still heaving with the terror of his dream, and stared at his ankle. It had a red and festering mark about it, as if it had been scored with hot iron.
Then the mark on his arm flared into white-hot agony, and Cavor screamed again, and this time the sound was enough to bring his servants running.
INSIDE THE HOLLOW HILL

They broke the iron band from his ankle with a hammer and pick, and threw it and its remaining length of chain as far away as they could. He refused to talk, lying still and with his head turned away, as Ravenna and Vorstus washed him and rolled him into a soft linen robe.

Instantly his hands began to pluck at it, as if it itched his skin.

Ravenna looked at Vorstus. “I can hardly believe that there was a man underneath that grime.” Maximilian’s skin had proved soft but pale, and his body lean but tightly muscled. Scars occasionally marred the beauty of his skin, reminders of the dangers of working so close to the hanging wall, and an ugly and thick burn scar rippled across his upper right biceps, but Ravenna and Vorstus found it hard to believe his obvious vitality after so long trapped within the Veins.

Vorstus sighed and beckoned her away from the bed. “Leave him be for a while, Ravenna. The others have prepared a meal for us. Maximilian,” he leaned close to the man’s head turned to the wall. “We will not be far away. Turn your head and you will see us.”

He received no reply but the plucking of the man’s fingers across the cloth of the tunic. Vorstus pulled a blanket over him and joined Ravenna and the other three monks as they sat at a table. Silently, they began to share a simple meal of bread and cheese and olives.

Maximilian lay for some time, his hands gradually stilling, listening to the silence. He was disorientated, unsure. Was this a dream? Would he wake any moment, wake to the security of the hanging wall and the labour of the eight men to his left?

His hand crept down his body and felt about his left ankle. It felt weightless…almost unclean without the comfort of the thick iron band that had been there.

And they had called him Maximilian.

Maximilian. He had not thought of that name for a very long time. When he lived in the darkness of the gloam it would have been to slide into madness to think that name and to remember that life, but here he allowed himself to first embrace the name, exploring all its nuances as he ran it silently about his mind, and then to…ever so gradually…embrace the idea that the name belonged to him.

His hands stilled.

Maximilian. Was he Maximilian? Was he?

“Maximilian?”

A soft voice sounded, and, startled, he turned without thinking. A young girl stood there, to his right, where before had only been silence and stillness and privacy. What was she doing there?

“Maximilian? I have something for you to drink. Here, take it, it must have been many hours since you last drank.”

Drink? Yes, he did feel thirsty. Warily, lest she trap him with some hidden device, he rose on one elbow and took the mug from her hand, careful not to touch her fingers with his own. It was warm, and his eyes widened in surprise. Could drinks be warm? Had there ever been a time in his life when drinks had been heated for his comfort?

He raised the mug warily to his lips, careful to keep one eye on the girl. But she kept her distance, even taking a step back as soon as he had accepted the mug, and he relaxed and allowed a tiny portion of the fluid to slip into his mouth.

He almost dropped the mug in surprise. The fluid was sweet! And had a peculiar tang…and a milkiness.

Milk. Milk?

The girl smiled at him, her hands laced across her white gown. “Drink,” she said.

He took another sip, and then one more, larger, allowing himself the luxury of a swallow. He frowned, wondering if he should know this taste, wondering if he should be able to assign a name to it. He drank again, then again, until he had finished the mug.

Hesitating, he held it out to the girl.

What was that fluid called? His brow furrowed a little more, and he did not notice when her fingers brushed his as she lifted the mug from his grasp. Maximilian would have known the name of that drink, he was sure of it. He looked up to ask the girl, but she had returned to the table.

She felt his eyes, however, and she turned a little as she sat down. “When you are ready,” she said quietly, “there is food waiting for you.” And she indicated a bench that sat between hers and the man next to her.
But he was not yet ready for that, and so he lay down again and turned back to the wall, wondering where his
companions were, wondering how he was to put his shoulders into the rock-face when they had taken the pick away
from him. He traced his fingers lightly over the rock wall before him. This rock was pale and smooth, and he did not
think it needed to be fractured and cursed and stacked into piles that made the small of his back flare in white-hot
agony.

His hand dropped from the rock as he realised that he was comfortable lying here. Comfortable. That was a
concept that he had not thought about for a long time. A very long time.

Not since he had been Maximilian.

He drew in a long, silent breath. Yes, he had been this Maximilian. Again he rolled the name around his mind
and then, ever so softly, about his mouth.

Maximilian. A good name. A name that was meant to be laughed and shouted and a name that had sometimes
—often?—been spoken with the nuances of love.

Maximilian. It belonged to a time long ago. A time before the darkness. A time he could not remember. Softly,
silently, he began to cry.

They sat at the table for many hours, listening to the silence across the room. They ate, then talked in soft tones, then
sat listening. Finally, as the day outside darkened into night, they laid the table for food again—more for something
to do than out of hunger.

“What can we do?” Ravenna asked softly as Vorstus sat down beside her. Of the other monks, Gustus had crept
outside to spy out the activities about the Veins and keep watch for Joseph and Garth, while both Morton and Isus,
the monk who had let them into the hollow hill, had laid down to rest themselves. Rial still laboured at his deception
in the physicians’ quarters.

“Nothing.” Vorstus cut himself some bread, then fastidiously cut a thin slice of cheese to top it. “He must
accept himself.”

Ravenna’s eyes flared with bright anger. “Who could have done this, Vorstus? Who could have been so…
pitiless as to imprison a young boy to such horror?”

Vorstus raised his eyes to hers. “If he remembers, then he can tell us. Until then…well, until then we must be
careful.”

Ravenna’s eyes blurred as they filled with tears. “Vorstus, I want to help him.”

“I know, girl, I know. But for now all we can do is—”

A shadow fell across the table, and both their hearts clenched as Maximilian calmly sat down on Ravenna’s
bench. The bench was reasonably large, but he sat close so that she could feel his warmth reach the distance between
them…and he sat so that she was on his left.

If Maximilian was aware of the reaction his appearance had caused, then he ignored it. He sat silently for a
moment, his eyes on the table, his hands resting flat on its surface.

Then he raised his gaze and looked at Ravenna. “Tea,” he said. “You gave me tea soothed with milk and
sweetened with honey to drink.” He said each word carefully, as if he enunciated words foreign to him, but he said
them with the pride of a man who had conquered some fearful enemy on the battlefield.

Ravenna battled with her own emotions, finally managing to smile for him. “Yes, Maximilian. I gave you tea to
drink.”

He stared at her then, stunningly, he smiled back, and both Ravenna and Vorstus took sharp breaths of utter
astonishment.

Maximilian’s face, plain although well-featured and pleasant when in repose, was transformed when he smiled.
His dark blue eyes danced with merriment, and the wideness of his smile invited all onlookers to laugh with him at
whatever joke he had discovered on the world.

It was not the smile one would expect from a man trapped for seventeen years in a living dungeon.

But it faded almost as quickly as it appeared. “There was a youth.” Maximilian paused, his voice faltering, and
his hands trembling where they rested on the table. “He appeared several times asking questions…demanding.”

“Yes,” Vorstus’ voice was soft. “His name is Garth Baxtor.”

“Where is he?”

“He will be here as soon as it is fully night.”

Maximilian nodded, accepting the answer. His cheeks, pale when he had first appeared at the table, were now
slightly flushed. “Where is ‘here’?”

Ravenna took a deep breath and looked away, unable to bear the pain in his eyes.

“We are in northern Escator, Maximilian, close to the sea.” Vorstus paused, wondering how much information
Maximilian could absorb at one time.
Maximilian frowned. “The sea?”
“Yes. Maximilian, we are within three hundred paces of the area they call the Veins.”
“The Veins?” Maximilian’s eyes had a wild sheen to them now. “The Veins?”
Ravenna took his hand, hoping her touch would give some reassurance. Apparently it did, for Maximilian went on in a more normal tone of voice, and the light faded from his eyes.
“Is that where…” He hesitated, unwilling to speak it. Vorstus and Ravenna were silent, holding his eyes with their own. “Is that the space below the hanging wall?”
“Yes, Maximilian.”
Maximilian thought for a very long time, his eyes grave as they stared at the table. “I liked it there,” he said eventually. “It was warm, and I was not alone. And the darkness was my friend. It kept me alive.”
Ravenna swallowed, and fought to keep her eyes steady. Now his hand squeezed hers slightly.
“My name,” he said slowly, “is Maximilian Persimius.”
Vorstus blinked at the surname. No-one had mentioned that in front of the prince.
“And,” Maximilian raised his eyes, “Maximilian Persimius does not belong below the hanging wall, does he?”
“No, Maximilian Persimius. No, he does not.”
Maximilian nodded, and withdrew his hand from Ravenna’s. He stood, and glanced about the interior of the hill. His discomfort was clear. “I shall lie down again, I think. When Garth Baxtor arrives, will you wake me?”
“Assuredly, Maximilian Persimius.”

The Veins was in uproar. Rarely did a prisoner manage to escape, but when they did, they were always found relatively quickly, cowering in some hole or beneath an overhang. No-one had ever managed to reach the surface before.

Now, not only had a prisoner escaped, but he could not be found, and Furst had slowly come to the unpalatable conclusion that Lot No. 859 (859, damn it!) had escaped far beyond the confines of the hanging wall.

The two guards who had been assigned duty to his gang had no idea how the man had escaped.
“He was there one minute,” one mumbled as a furious Furst had stalked back and forth in front of him, “and gone the next.”

His companion came to his rescue. “And Lot No. 859 was always pliable. Willing, always willing,” he said. “I can’t think why he of all prisoners should choose to make a dash for it.”
Furst, who could well understand why 859 might want to see the sky again, nevertheless refrained from comment. Gods! But he could lose his job over this!
He stilled. And more besides. Damn it, where could the man be! “No-one leaves the area unless he be searched,” he seethed. “And I want every man identified before he is allowed beyond the perimeter. If this man is not recaptured then it will be your miserable hides that will be flogged. Do you understand?”
The guards both nodded with enthusiasm.
“Then get to it!” Furst shouted, and they scrambled for the door.

Furst slowly sank into his chair, eyeing the guard duty roster on his desk. He had been working on it when… when the alarm bells had begun to peal. Then he had only cursed, thinking some poor wretch had managed to file his way to a brief interlude that would end only in his death.

But it had taken just one question for Furst to realise the danger was much, much more serious.
“Curses be heaped atop your soul, Maximilian,” he whispered, low and viciously, “for when I catch you I will make sure that you will be thrown down the deepest shaft of the Veins. I should have done it years ago. Damn it! I should have done it years ago!”

It was a sentiment that Furst was to repeat over and over again during the next few days.

Joseph and Garth left their quarters well after dark. Somehow they had managed to get through the day, although they’d not been given much to do. Indeed, in the fuss over the escape of the prisoner they had been sent to the surface relatively quickly—no point fixing fungus when the entire complex was in turmoil. Besides, there were no guards to spare to look after them.

And, both thanked the gods, no-one seemed to remember the strange guards who had appeared among their midst one day, and then completely vanished.

They tried not to look furtive as they left, and had in fact announced to the roomful of physicians as they stood from the table that they were going to take a stroll through the night air.

Lam Bent looked up from the newssheet that he’d already read thirty-five times from end to end and raised a speculative eyebrow. “And where could you be finding to go this late at night, my friends?”

One of the other physicians sniggered into his beer.
Joseph tried to look as uncomfortable as he could. “Well, ahem, Garth here has not yet seen all of the attractions that Myrna has to offer and, ahem, tonight appeared to be a good chance to slip through the back streets unannounced—if you get my meaning.”

They all laughed—all except Garth who just looked puzzled—and waved them out the door. “I’ll not expect you back before morning, then!” one called, and Joseph grinned shamefacedly as he hustled Garth out the door.

“What was that all about?” Garth asked as soon as it closed behind them.

“I hope you’ll not find out for a good many years yet,” Joseph mumbled, and, taking his son’s elbow, hurried him down the pathway leading towards Myrna.

They were stopped within a hundred paces by a detail of suspicious guards.

“Who are you?” one asked, leaning his pike dangerously close.

“Physician Baxtor and my son, Garth,” Joseph replied calmly. “Out for the night air.”

Another of the guards laughed and spat. “No one enjoys the night air in this forsaken slime pit,” he said. “Now, tell me the real reason.”

To Joseph’s utter shame, he blushed—an action that was, in the end, the saving of him and Garth. “I’m taking my son through to the, ah, Ladies’ House in Myrna. I thought it time he be introduced to some of the more exotic pleasures in life.”

The guards all roared in delight, relaxing at Joseph’s obvious embarrassment and Garth’s equally obvious puzzlement. “Ladies’ House?” he said. “What was his father going on about?”

“No. Not this far away. Father...how well do you know the Ladies’ House?”

Gustus spotted them as soon as they rounded the southern part of the hill and guided them inside.

“How is he?” Joseph asked an instant ahead of his son. Both had completely forgotten the embarrassing incident at the guard post.

“Washed, is all I know;” Gustus said as he rolled the rock silently away. Joseph stared at it briefly but curiously. It was operated by some ingenious mechanism that had been so cleverly hidden that unless you knew exactly where it was, you would never be able to find it. “I’ve been outside most of the evening watching for you.”

Both Joseph and Garth stared in silent amazement at the hollowed interior of the hill. It had a warm, homely air, despite its size, and had obviously been used by the order for some time.

Vorstus greeted them as they stepped into the chamber, and he noted their looks with some pride. “The order has many of these hollow hills about Escator, Joseph, Garth. And other, stranger, places besides. We find them... useful.”

But neither looked at him now; both stared beyond his shoulder to the still form lying with his back to them on a bed by the far wall.

“Yes,” Vorstus said softly. “He is well—as well as I could expect. He has acknowledged his identity, but little else.”

He smiled suddenly. “Little else but ask for you, Garth.”

“Me?” Garth was surprised. Surely Maximilian would have better things to think about. “He remembers only little bits, boy. He only wants to remember little bits, else he will go mad. But he remembers you, and he wants to talk to you.”

Garth made as if to step over, but he hesitated. “Vorstus, you remember the old king and queen, don’t you?”

The monk nodded.
“Well…does Maximilian look like them? Is he…?"
“Is he a true Persimius or is he the changeling that he claimed, Garth? Well,” Vorstus hesitated, and neither Garth nor his father liked the expression that came over his face. “The truth is, I can’t tell. The old king was tall and lean and with black hair. His queen had dark blue eyes. All of these Maximilian has…but no other resemblance that I can see. If he is a changeling—hold boy! I said if!—then the queen could easily have selected an infant whose parents were tall and dark with blue eyes.” He paused, and stared at his hands. “Garth, Maximilian said something down the Veins which makes me think he knows the meaning of the verse the Manteceros gave you. That is good. If he comes through that test, if he can make the claim on the throne, then I can speak for the entire order in saying that we will support him. But,” he repeated, “the Manteceros must make the final judgment.”

Garth accepted it. In his heart of hearts he knew Maximilian had to be the true king. “Can I…?”
“Yes, boy. Go and speak with him, and your father can come and sit with Ravenna and myself for a while and share bread and cheese.”

Garth walked towards Maximilian slowly, wondering what he would find. Before he had only seen Maximilian as a begrimed man huddled in the dark, even in his dreams the prince had worn a peculiarly faceless aspect.

So it was that when Maximilian rolled over at the sound of his step Garth was surprised at the pleasantness of the man’s face; surprised, because somehow he had expected a man with a heroic visage and a sternness of expression that reflected the trials of his life. But then Maximilian smiled, and Garth gasped as Vorstus and Ravenna had done.

“You are Garth Baxtor?” Maximilian asked slowly.
“Yes, I am Garth.” He hesitated, then sat down on the edge of the bed. He glanced with some concern at the prince’s face; it was flushed, feverish, and his eyes were too bright.

Maximilian slowly raised his hand, and Garth grasped it. “You were the one who found me, weren’t you?”
“Yes.” Garth kept his face clear of expression, but he did not like the feel of the man through his Touch.
“You demanded of me that I remember.”
Garth was silent, his eyes compassionate.
Maximilian licked his lips. “I remember that my name was once Maximilian Persimius, and I remember that once I lived in this strange world beyond the hanging wall. But I do not remember very much else.” A small smile flitted across his face again. “Except that I now remember the taste of tea.”

Garth wrapped both of his hands about Maximilian’s. “Do you remember speaking to me about the Manteceros?”
Maximilian frowned. “The Manteceros? No…no. Did I? Garth, I…” He halted, his face now twisted with the effort to remember. “Yes,” he said finally. “Yes, I do remember. You were so demanding. You insisted that I was this Maximilian. You wanted to rescue me.” He sighed, long and deep. “Yes, I remember the Manteceros now. And I remember that I told you the Manteceros would not want much to do with me. I am not worthy, Garth. I can remember that much.”

“You are alive again, Maximilian,” Garth said, low and fierce, his hands gripping the prince’s tightly. “You have your life ahead of you—have the courage to grasp it.”
Maximilian laughed bitterly. “I should resent you, Garth Baxtor, for it is your fault that I have been dragged from a life that I knew and understood and that knew and understood me. The darkness was warm and it was my friend, Garth Baxtor, and you have taken it from me.”

Garth was about to say something more when he felt his father’s hand on his shoulder.
“Peace, son,” Joseph said softly. “Memory can sometimes be a fickle lady. He has been through trauma such as you and I could not imagine, and he has been wrenched—as he has just pointed out—from the world he knew and understood into a world that he suspects is only a bad dream. His loss of memory is a shield, and if he is to lower that shield then he is going to need a friend to help him through.”
“I understand, father.” Maximilian had closed his eyes again, and Garth twisted about to look his father in the eyes. “I do not like what I feel through his flesh, father, yet I cannot understand it. Can you…?”
Joseph knelt down beside the bed. “Maximilian?”
The prince reluctantly opened his eyes to the light. “Yes?”
“My name is Joseph Baxtor. Once I was physician to your father. When you were a boy we played hoopball in the courtyard of your home.”
Something flickered in Maximilian’s eyes, but he said nothing.
Joseph grinned broadly and fingered his beard. “But I did not have this then, and I had fewer lines of care to bracket my eyes. I am not surprised you stare at me so uncomprehendingly. My Prince, both my son and I employ the Touch—you have already felt Garth’s power—and now I would like to Touch you as well. Would you permit
“Surely,” and Maximilian withdrew his hand from Garth’s and gave it to Joseph.

Joseph held it for a long time, running his own hands over it slowly. He kept his head bowed, his breathing slow and deep, and Garth knew that he was concentrating hard on the feelings that flooded into him from Maximilian’s body.

When he finally raised his eyes, his expression was blank. “Prince, may I Touch your arm?”

Maximilian was more doubtful this time, but eventually he jerked his head in assent.

Joseph rolled back Maximilian’s sleeve and exposed the thick burn across his biceps, then wrapped his hands firmly about the prince’s upper arm. He took a quick intake of breath, his eyes fluttering wide before he narrowed them again. After only a moment he let Maximilian go and rolled his sleeve down again.

“I thank you, Maximilian. Now, rest. Close your eyes, embrace the darkness again.”

Maximilian visibly relaxed. “Thank you, Joseph. I… I wonder if one day you would teach me to play hoopball again?”

Joseph guffawed with laughter. “Us? My Prince, I fear we are both too old to play hoopball again, but if it is your wish, then it is my command. Hoopball! Hah!”

Maximilian smiled, and Joseph’s expression stilled at the sight. “Rest well, my Prince.”

Maximilian nodded, and closed his eyes.

Joseph motioned Garth away from the bed.

“What did you feel?” Garth asked urgently. His father was adept at interpreting what he felt from someone else’s body; as yet Garth could only interpret the simplest of sensations.

But Joseph did not answer immediately, taking his elbow and guiding him back to the table where waited the monks—all four of them now—and Ravenna.

They shifted to make room as the two approached, and Garth and his father sat down between Isus and Morton.

“What’s wrong, Joseph?” Vorstus asked for all of them.

Joseph glanced back towards the bed, but Maximilian had turned to face the wall again and appeared to have gone back to sleep.

“He has been through great trauma during his life.” Joseph glanced about the table. “In part he has learned to deal with that trauma by forgetting. His rescue from the only life he could remember today has proved further trauma for him. He will need time and trust and friendship to have the heart to remember all that has befallen him.”

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Joseph fell silent, folding and then unfolding a table napkin in his hands. “But that is not all. Garth, you felt something strange.”

His son nodded.

“And I saw you both look at his flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes,” Ravenna said softly, her grey eyes intense.

Joseph looked at her strangely. He had seen her many times on his visits to the marsh, but it was strange to see her here now, and in this company. And her mother was so strange. “Yes, Ravenna. He is consumed by a fever, but it is no ordinary fever. My friends,” Joseph looked about the table, meeting each in the eye, “he is consumed by an inner sickness. I think…I think it is the mark of the Manteceros struggling to break free of the scar tissue that surrounds it. If it cannot escape, then I fear that Maximilian will burn up.”

“Die?” Gustus asked, astounded.

Joseph nodded. “Eventually, yes.”

“Can we help?” Garth asked urgently, leaning forward.

Joseph hesitated. “Yes, perhaps…but not here.” He looked Vorstus straight in the eye. “We—he—will have the best chance in the place where the mark was originally engraved.”

Vorstus smiled, but it was cool. “What are you saying, Joseph?”

“I am saying that Maximilian needs to be taken back to the forest. For many reasons.”

Vorstus’ smile warmed a little. “You are more acquainted with the customs of the Persimius family than I realised, Joseph Baxtor.”

“I knew Maximilian’s father well.”

“Very well.” Vorstus’ tone was dry. “Yes. I agree. Maximilian needs to be taken back to the forest from where he was originally snatched. For many reasons, but I agree with Joseph that the fever that builds within him is currently the most urgent.”

“And we will help you,” Garth said, his tone daring his father to disagree with him.

Joseph frowned. “Yes, we must. But Garth, if we disappear into the night then we will be too readily connected with Maximilian’s disappearance.”

“So?” Garth cried. “Are you afraid to have your name connected with that of the true king of Escator?”
“Fool boy!” Joseph cried. “Don’t think to question my courage! Have you forgot that Cavor will shortly have her within his grasp? I, at least, don’t want to put your mother in any danger.”

“Joseph,” Vorstus said urgently. “What are you talking about?”

Joseph gave his now-subdued son one last glare, then explained to the others that Cavor had ordered he and his family to move back to the palace. “He said he would be sending for Nona while Garth and I were here at the Veins.”

“And you think that Cavor would exact retribution if he thought you were connected with an anonymous prisoner’s disappearance from the Veins?” Vorstus asked carefully. After a long pause he spoke again. “Are you suggesting Cavor knew Maximilian was Lot No. 859?”

Joseph was silent many minutes, staring into a space somewhere beyond Vorstus’ shoulder. “I cannot know for certain, Vorstus. Garth has his doubts regarding Cavor, and I…well…” He was silent again, then cleared his throat. “But even helping an anonymous prisoner escape from the Veins is a crime, Vorstus. I do not want to put Nona in any danger through my or,” he shot Garth a hard glance, “my son’s actions.”

“I may be able to help,” Ravenna said quietly, so quietly that it took the others a moment or two to realise that she’d spoken.

“How?” Joseph asked doubtfully.

“Venetia,” Ravenna said, staring him in the eye, “can spirit her into the marsh. No-one will ever find her there unless she wants to be found.”

“But you will have to send Venetia a letter,” Garth began, “and Cavor’s men will surely be on their way south now. They will reach her before you can.”

“They will not have had time to reach her yet?” the girl asked, her colour high and her eyes sparkling. She shook her black hair back from her face.

“No,” Joseph said, staring at her. “No. It will take them another two or three days to reach Narbon from Ruen.” Ravenna smiled, and it was as predatory as any either Garth or Joseph had seen on her mother’s face. “But I can reach her tonight.”

There was utter silence about the table, then Vorstus grinned. “You are more of a witch-lady than I had realised, Ravenna. Save Nona Baxtor then, if you can.”

It was a challenge, and Ravenna knew it. “You have not seen half of what I can accomplish yet, Vorstus.” She paused. “Watch, if you dare.”

She turned for a moment to Joseph. “Venetia will need some message from you, something that will identify her as a friend to Nona and convince her of the urgency of the need to hasten away. What can I give her?”

Joseph thought, chewing his lip. “Tell Venetia that I asked Nona to be my wife on a seventh-day, and that we were married on a seventh-day, and that,” his colour deepened, “Garth was conceived on a seventh-day.” He cleared his throat as his son shifted uncomfortably. “It has always been a joke between us that seventh-day, the only day I take off from my duties as a physician, has been the only day of the week when I can be a true husband to her.”

Ravenna stared at him, then she leaned across the table and gently touched his hand. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Then she abruptly stood up from the table. “Isus, would you open the door for me? Only slightly, I will need but a small gap.”

As Isus moved across to the doorway and silently activated the mechanism that operated the rock door, Ravenna paced in circles about the centre of the chamber.

Maximilian, who all thought to have been asleep, rolled over and gazed curiously at her.

Ravenna folded her hands tightly before her; so tightly the others could see her knuckles gleaming white. She frowned, and began to mutter inaudibly, her voice a low monotone that murmured through the room. The only word that the others could occasionally make out was the name of her mother, Venetia.

After some time Garth stiffened, as did everyone else watching, save Maximilian; he still gazed at her with nothing more than curiosity.

A mist was forming about Ravenna’s tightly clasped hands and, as they watched, it solidified until it became a perfectly spherical silver ball.

Ravenna pulled her hands apart, but the ball remained, and the girl cradled it lovingly to her breast for a moment. She looked up, and Garth drew in a shocked breath. Her eyes were now so colourless they reflected the silver of the ball she held in her hands.

“Venetia!” Ravenna cried, and threw the ball into the air.

It circled about the room five times, increasing its speed with each circuit, then abruptly it dipped and rushed for the door. Isus stepped back hurriedly, avoiding a collision by only a breath.

There was a whisper of air as it passed through the doorway, and then it was gone.
“That was very pretty,” Maximilian said into the silence. Ravenna turned slowly and regarded him. “Pretty? Yes, it was, Maximilian. Thank you.” Maximilian smiled for her, his eyes feverish, then he lay down and went back to sleep.

“Nona will be safe by noon tomorrow,” Ravenna said, laying her hand briefly on Joseph’s shoulder, then she sat down, smiling slightly at the expression on the men’s faces. Of them all, Maximilian’s reaction had been the only one she valued.

“Well,” Joseph said, “if Nona is safe, then I guess that Garth and I will cast our lot in with you…and with,” he glanced over to the bed, “the rightful king of Escator, Maximilian Persimius.”

There were smiles all about. “Good,” Vorstus said. “Now, I suggest we discuss how to get Maximilian away from here and into the royal forests to the east. I thought that perhaps we could smuggle him out in a cart of supplies.”

Garth and his father exchanged looks.

“No,” Joseph said. “Fennon Furst, the overseer, well knows the true identity of Lot No. 859—Maximilian told Garth that was the one name he remembered from his kidnap. Furst is putting an effort into the recapture of this prisoner that has never been seen before—several of the guards are commenting on it. The upshot of it is that everything leaving this area is being searched, and anyone not recognised by the guards is not being allowed through the cordon that has been thrown about the Veins—and Myrna itself—without rigorous inquisition.”

The monks exchanged troubled looks. “Then what can we do?” asked Isus as he returned from closing the door. Joseph looked at the ceiling, then looked at his hands, then studied a minor whorl in the table surface in intimate detail. “I think I know a way,” he mumbled.

“Yes?” asked Vorstus impatiently.

“To effect his escape to the forest I shall have to visit the Ladies’ House in Myrna,” Joseph said, then blushed at the expression in his son’s eyes. “You can stay here, Garth, and sit with Maximilian as he sleeps. I’ll collect you as I return by here towards morning.” He looked about at the monks and Ravenna. “With luck, by tomorrow evening Maximilian will be well on his way to the forests.”
SEVENTEEN
THE FAIR LADIES OF MYRNA GO ON A PICNIC

Joseph and Garth scrunched through the sooty soil towards Furst’s office in the morning’s grey light. Both were silent, their faces tense even though they fought to remain expressionless.

Joseph had returned to the hollow hill late into the night, spoke quietly with Vorstus and Ravenna for some minutes, glanced at Maximilian’s sleeping back, then had collected a still-puzzled Garth and had returned to the physicians’ quarters—earning some sly grins at the lateness of their passing from the guards they encountered.

Garth had tried to question his father, but Joseph had only grunted that for the moment the least Garth knew the safer it would be. And with that Garth had to be satisfied.

At least he could guess the reason they visited Furst this morning.

The overseer was flushed and visibly nervous, his red hair standing in odd spikes where the man had run terse hands through it. Papers drifted across his desk as Joseph and Garth entered, and he mumbled a curse. “Yes?”

“Fennon,” Joseph said calmly, and Garth wondered that his father could speak so naturally. “The Veins is in chaos. None of the physicians are being allowed down at the moment, and we all sit pointlessly about the fire exchanging months-old gossip. Garth and I might as well go—”

“You can’t,” Furst interrupted tersely. “You’ve only just arrived. Three weeks is the minimum that you serve.”

“Ah,” Joseph murmured politely, and reached inside his cloak, pulling out a letter. He handed it to Furst. “You may not be aware, my friend, that the king has asked me to attend the court as his personal physician. This letter serves to cut short my service at the Veins if I so desire. Do you recognise his seal?”

Furst stared at the letter, then thrust it back to Joseph. “An elevation of some note, Joseph. Well, I suppose you can go. This has been a worthless trip for you; all the way from Ruen only for a day’s service.”

Joseph spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. “Well, the escape of this damned prisoner has thrown everyone’s routine into chaos, Fennon. If it had not been for him, well then, Garth and I would have been happy to stay here and study the fungal infections of the Veins in some greater detail.”

“Humph.” Furst stared back at the papers on his desk. The past night had been a bad one for him.

Where was he?

“Leaving this morning?”

Joseph nodded.

“Well, perhaps I’ll see you at court.” Furst paused, and both Joseph and Garth noted his pale face and the dark circles under his eyes. “This prisoner is proving hard to catch. If I can’t find him…” Furst’s voice trailed off and his eyes shadowed.

“No doubt he tripped and fell down one of the unused shafts within moments of his escape,” Joseph said soothingly.

“If only,” Furst whispered, then waved them out.

“Father?” Garth asked as they mounted their horses. “Will you tell me what’s going on?”

Joseph took a deep breath, the only sign of nerves that he had exhibited so far, and turned his horse’s head for the road. “We’ll no doubt meet up with them soon, Garth. On the road beyond Myrna, if not sooner.”

“But the guards…”

Joseph grinned, but it did not ease the worry in his eyes. “I have every hope the guards will not take too much notice of them, Garth. Now, come.”

Garth stifled his impatience as he urged his own horse forward and tugged at the lead rope of the packhorse. Several guards, en route to the shaft, waved unsentimentally; Furst had driven them through the night in his efforts to find Lot No. 859, and now both eyes and tempers were scratchy from lack of sleep.

Joseph waited until they were well past, then spoke quietly to Garth. “Be careful if we have to speak to guards, Garth. They’ll not be so ready to jest as they were last night.”

Garth nodded. The above-ground complex was tense and brittle, and he shuddered to think what it must be like underground. No doubt the guards wondered why Furst drove them so hard to find this particular prisoner, and doubtless Furst was in no hurry to enlighten them.

Whatever the reason, tempers would be short this morning, and Garth shivered again as he contemplated the consequences if the guards found Maximilian.

Joseph kept his horse to a fast trot. There was nothing more he would like to do than touch his heels to the beast’s flanks and flee the Veins as fast as he could, but that would only attract unwanted attention. He glanced
across at his son, and smiled reassuringly. “Look, we approach the outbuildings of Myrna. So far so good.”

The town was in as much turmoil as the Veins complex itself. Guards, in groups of three and five, patrolled the streets, while various townspeople stood about in nervous groups discussing the latest rumour about the escape. Like the guards, many were wondering at the unprecedented effort being put into the recapture of the prisoner…and how had he managed to escape anyway?

Rumours abounded, and the strongest of them was that one of the guards had helped in the escape. Must have, else how had the man managed to flee so completely?

Joseph and Garth attracted a few curious looks, but none gazed overlong—for which both were profoundly grateful. They turned their horses into the main street and Joseph nodded at a three-storey house on the corner of the first block. There were gay pennants hung from the balconies—incongruous in this greyest of grey towns—and secretive lace curtains in the windows. Several brightly apparelled and heavily rouged women stood on its verandah, their hair dressed in complicated ringlets and hung with ribbons.

One of them, a blonde with cynical eyes, called out to Joseph as they passed. “Up so early, Physician Baxtor? I would have thought you needed your sleep this morning.”

Joseph managed a grin as several heads—guards’ among them—turned in the street at the exchange. “My son and I thought to get a good start on the road, Erla. We have a way ahead of us.”

“That you have,” Erla said, and her tone softened somewhat. “That you have.” Her eyes locked with Joseph’s momentarily, then she turned aside with studied disinterest to gossip with one of her companions.

“Where are you going, Baxtor?”

A group of guards, their interest caught by the exchange, had stepped out in front of their horses, and Joseph and Garth had to pull their mounts to an abrupt halt.

“Ruen,” Joseph replied smoothly. “We have an order from the king…if you want to see it.” His hand crept to the pouch at his belt.

The guard who had spoken, his eyes flinty with suspicion, stared at the letter Joseph extended. After a moment he shuffled his feet and shifted his gaze back to Joseph. “Furst has seen this?”

“Yes.”

The guard hesitated a moment longer, but there was no need to detain the physician and his son. “On with you then…and best you keep that order handy. You’ll pass several more posts on the way through Myrna.” Then he turned on his heel and waved his patrol down one of the side streets.

As they kicked their horses forward Garth glanced over his shoulder. The three women on the verandah were staring at them, their faces tight with tension.

“Come on, Garth,” Joseph muttered. “Don’t draw too much attention to them or us.”

One more patrol stopped them as they rode down the main street, but it was at the junction of the main street and the road for Ruen that they struck the most trouble.

There was a patrol of ten guards here, and they were the most thorough of all in town. Several carts, riders and a man herding several dozen sheep were being held up as the guards meticulously checked everyone’s identity. The shepherd, a dark man who was tattered and dirtied by his exposure to the elements, was receiving more attention than most.

“Curses,” Joseph muttered feelingly, and Garth stared at him worriedly.

“Father?”

As they reined their horses in behind the tangle of carts, horses and sheep, Joseph leaned across to his son and hissed at him. “Whatever happens, follow my lead!”

Shocked by the tone of his father’s voice, Garth simply nodded and turned his gaze back to the crowd before them. Somewhere in here was Maximilian. His eyes drifted to the shepherd.

The man was shifting from foot to foot, his hands clutching nervously about his staff, as three of the guards interrogated him and inspected the small pack he had let slip from his shoulders. Garth tried to watch as inconspicuously as he could—then, realising that everyone on the road was staring at the man, gave up all pretence and stared himself.

The shepherd’s back was to him, but Garth could see that he was tall and lean, and had straight black hair that drifted about his face. The man’s hands where they clutched his staff were patched with dirt, and his clothes were similarly grimed. Garth’s stomach clenched and he fought not to look at his father. Was that Maximilian under all that grime?

Another of the guards wandered away from a cart and approached his companions standing about the shepherd, glancing at the new arrivals as he did so. As he stepped up to the small group around the shepherd, voices were suddenly raised and the shepherd attempted to take a step backwards before being seized by one of the guards.

Garth heard his father take a quick, shocked breath beside him.
Now the shepherd and the four guards were decidedly agitated, and Garth broke out in a sweat. The sheep had begun to wander off the road in search of grazing, and the shepherd was gesturing at them excitedly as the guards resolutely shook their heads. Their eyes were growing narrower by the minute.

Finally the fourth guard, who had noticed Joseph and Garth, raised his head and beckoned them forward. Garth’s stomach tightened.

“Physician!” he called, and Garth recognised one of the guards they’d spoken to last night. “Come here!”

Joseph risked a warning glance at his son, then rode forward, Garth immediately behind him. They pushed their horses through the crowd. Several of the people among the crowd waiting to be allowed through the checkpoint were complaining loudly about the delay, and a pretty girl with a sulky mouth called out from a wagon she shared with several female companions. “Here then! What about letting us through?”

The guards ignored her; now two of them had the shepherd in their tight hands, and all of the guards, whether or not they were grouped about the shepherd or standing by the side of the road, had eyes for no-one but their suspect.

“Baxtor,” said the guard as they reined their horses behind the shepherd. “We have a suspicious character here. No-one knows him, and see this dirt? Straight from the Veins, we think!”

The shepherd struggled and moaned.

Another of the guards indicated that Joseph and Garth should dismount. “It’s good that you’re here, physician. Will you examine this man? Some of these stains look like fungus to us. See? Here…and here.” He pointed to several stains on the man’s garments.

Gods! Garth cursed to himself. So close! This was the last patrol before the freedom of the road to Ruen.

But he kept his face as neutral as he could as he dismounted. Joseph was already leaning close to the shepherd, and Garth had to push past one of the guards to get a good look at the man’s face.

His heart thudded alarmingly in his chest. The man was well covered in dirt, but Garth recognised him instantly—Vorstus!

“And how old was this prisoner you hunt?” Joseph asked patiently as he made a pretence of checking the man’s eyes, ears and skin.

“Youngish,” muttered one.

“About thirty, Furst told us,” another said.

Joseph sighed and raised his eyebrows. “Well, you may have bagged a wandering thief, gentleman, but he’s not from the Veins.”

“Are you sure?” one of the guards asked, disappointment clouding his voice.

Joseph sighed again, more melodramatically and impatiently this time. Garth regarded his father with veiled admiration; he had not thought Joseph to be this good an actor.

“This man approaches old age,” he said. “Look, his finger joints are swollen with arthritis.”

“Could be from the constant swing of the pick,” a guard said hopefully, but Joseph glared at him.

“These stains are not fungus, but grass. No doubt the man sleeps with his sheep. And look here,” Joseph abruptly squatted by the man’s legs, and every eye followed him. “His ankles are smooth and unmarred by irons. You’ve all been down the Veins. You’ve all seen the festers and ridges the irons carve into a man’s ankles. This man has never been manacled in his life.”

“And look at this,” Garth put in, as eager to convince the guards as his father was. “His skin is tanned underneath this dirt. This man’s well acquainted with the sun.”

Joseph caught his son’s eyes momentarily, and nodded.

“Nevertheless,” the commander of the patrol said slowly, disappointment etching his voice, “he’s the right colouring…and none of us know him.”

“Then arrest him for being a stranger,” Joseph said disinterestedly as he stood up, “but not for being an escapee.”

His frustration making him testy, the guard now turned on Joseph. “And what are you doing here, Baxtor?”

Joseph silently withdrew Cavor’s order and handed it to the man. The guard read it through, then thrust it back at Joseph. “Well,” he said roughly, “let them through…and this filthy shepherd. We’ve better things to do than interrogate every peasant that wanders by.”

Vorstus wasted no time in wrenching his arm from the one guard who still held him, and waved his staff at the rest of them. “And who’s going to help round up my sheep?” he demanded.

“Get out of my sight,” the commander hissed viciously, “or I will throw you in gaol!”

Obviously deciding he’d taken the act far enough, Vorstus wasted no time in striding off mumbling to himself. He jumped down from the verge of the road and shooed his sheep back into the semblance of a flock, herding them as quickly as he could towards the south.
Joseph met his son’s eyes again, then looked back at the guards. “And Garth and myself?”

“On your way,” the commander said shortly, then turned back to the first wagon in line. “Well?” he demanded of its occupants.

Garth was just mounting his horse when he heard a sweet voice reply. “We’re on our way for a picnic, officer. A nice warm day and all, I thought several of the girls would appreciate a touch of spring sunshine.”

Garth glanced curiously at the wagon, then froze in the act of swinging his leg over the horse’s back. The wagon was packed with five or six women, all dressed in gaudy clothes and ringlets similar to the three who’d stood on the verandah of the house in Myrna. The woman who’d answered was the oldest of them, about forty, but the others were all young…and Garth recognised two of them instantly.

He slowly sank down in the saddle. “I’d have thought you had business aplenty back in Myrna, Anya,” the guard said, although his tone held no suspicion.

The older women arched well-drawn eyebrows. “Every able-bodied man’s been called to guard duty, officer. There’s nothing for us to do. So I thought,” she gestured at the landscape about her, “what a nice day for a picnic! If we drive far enough we’ll be able to find a spot that’s not covered in soot.”

The guard had noticed that Joseph and Garth had not yet ridden off. “What are you two waiting for?”

Both men jerked guiltily. “Ah,” Joseph began, but the woman broke in, smiling wickedly. “No need for them to hurry off, officer. Perhaps they might like to ride with us a while. Even share the picnic lunch we’ve brought with us. Who knows,” she dropped one eyelid in an exaggerated wink, “perhaps there might be some profit in this for us after all.”

The guard snorted, then turned his eyes to the other women in the wagon. Garth stiffened as the man’s eyes stopped. “I’ve not seen these two before.”

Anya smiled archly. “You’ve not yet had the opportunity—nor the purse—to work your way through all my rooms yet, officer. No doubt my house contains a few surprises for you yet.”

Both of the women were attractive, but the guard stared at the younger of them. She was stunning, with dark hair and peculiarly light grey eyes. “And what’s your name, girl?”

Ravenna smiled, and leaned down from the wagon. “Myst, officer. And when might I expect you to come a-calling?”

The guard reddened under her frank eyes, then turned back to Anya. “On your way, madam.”

Anya grinned and slapped the reins across the backs of the two horses pulling the wagon. The guard stepped back as the women rumbled past. “Next!”

Joseph and Garth fell in behind the wagon. Garth glanced across at his father; Joseph had a thin sheen of sweat across his face, and Garth guessed he didn’t look much better himself. Joseph noticed Garth’s look, and checked over his shoulder to make sure that the guards were well out of hearing distance.

“‘The women of the Ladies’ House are good friends of mine,’” he explained quietly, then hastened on at the look on Garth’s face. “‘Not in the way you think! I’ve helped them out over the years with several minor problems, and they were pleased to repay the debt with this small ruse.’”

Garth grinned weakly. A small ruse? They had an escaped prisoner sitting in the front of their wagon dressed as a woman! But Garth had to admit to himself that the ruse worked well. Maximilian had a fine-boned face, and his skin was pale and smooth after so many years away from the sun. Disguised with a wig and an artful application of face paint, it would have taken a very close examination to reveal him as a man. No doubt, Garth thought to himself, his grin broadening, he’d been given a particularly close shave this morning.

Joseph watched Garth’s face. “Vorstus agreed to act as a decoy. It were better that suspicion fell on someone immediately before the ladies’ wagon, for then it was more likely that the guards would let them through without too close an inquisition.”

Garth watched the wagon, but all of the “women” had their faces turned to the road ahead, and all he could see of Ravenna and Maximilian were their gently swaying backs. “And how did you manage to get the guards to call us forward?”

Joseph’s face relaxed into a smile. “Sheer luck, Garth. To be perfectly frank, I’d hoped that the women would be well through the guard post by the time we came through. Still, things have worked out well.”

They’d drawn level with Vorstus and his herd of sheep, but no-one called out to him and Joseph only nodded as they passed. “We’ll meet up later in the day,” he said quietly once they were well past Vorstus, and Garth nodded,
resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder.

“And the other monks?” he asked. “Are they sitting disguised in that wagon as well?”

His father shook his head. “No. Only Vorstus has come with us. Trying to smuggle out several other men as well would have been impossible. Vorstus said they’ll stay hidden in their hollow hill for the next few days, if not weeks, until security has been lessened.”

They had ridden in silence for some two hours when the wagon rumbled to a halt in front of them. Joseph and Garth pushed their horses up to the front.

Anya, businesslike and brusque now, pointed to an overgrown track that led eastwards. “If it’s the forests you want, Joseph, then that’ll get you there quicker than anything else. You’ll still have a hard journey ahead of you, and few excuses to explain your presence if you meet any suspicious questions, but some good walking will get you to the forests within a day or two.”

“I thank you, Anya,” Joseph said soberly. “You have helped right a great injustice here this day.”

Anya looked at Maximilian, sitting silent and expressionless underneath his wig and face paint. “I wish you luck, Joseph,” she said quietly.

Ravenna took Maximilian’s arm. “Come,” she said softly, “it is time to go.”

Maximilian rose obediently and climbed down from the wagon, turning to help Ravenna. The girl was surprised at his consideration, but she blinked it away and pulled down several large packs from the wagon, handing two to Garth and Joseph, and setting the other one on the ground beside her. “Will Vorstus be able to find this track?”

“Yes,” Anya nodded. “I explained what to look for earlier. Now, be off with you. My girls and I are off to enjoy a picnic.”

As Ravenna shouldered her pack, Joseph pulled his horse close to the wagon. “Anya, how will you explain the two missing girls when you return?”

Anya grinned, her eyes mischievous. “I shall tell the guards that you and Garth could not bear to be parted from such skilful ladies, and that you have paid well for them to accompany you to Ruen.” She laughed at the expression on the physician’s face. “Well, Joseph Baxtor, no doubt the loss of your reputation will be the least of your exploits that you’ll have to explain to Nona when you finally meet up with her!”
EIGHTEEN
THE ROYAL FORESTS

Joseph led the small group along the track which led into some low, rolling hills covered with stubby trees and long wild grass. As they set off Garth offered Maximilian his horse, but the prince’s eyes widened in alarm and he stumbled backwards at the sight of the large animal, so eventually Garth led his horse and walked by the prince’s side.

Maximilian was clearly exhausted, and Garth could see that under his face paint his cheeks were even more flushed than they had been the previous night. After ten minutes of walking, Maximilian stumbled and Garth took his arm, sharing a glance of concern with Ravenna, who was walking at Maximilian’s other side. But she said nothing, and Garth continued to talk in low tones with Maximilian, sharing some amusing tales of his life in Narbon, hoping to elicit some memories of his former life.

“How have you ever seen Narbon, Prince?”

“No,” Maximilian said shortly, his eyes darting apprehensively to the sky. The sky was cloudless now, and the prince had his eyes squinted almost closed. Garth could feel him trembling under his hand. “When will we reach shelter?”

Again Garth shared a glance with Ravenna.

“We go to the forests, Maximilian,” she said softly, and smiled as he lowered his eyes from the sky to her face. “Tonight, perhaps tomorrow.”

“I do not like the open spaces,” Maximilian mumbled, “but…” He fell silent, and he frowned. “What do I have to remember?”

To that Ravenna did not answer.

After half an hour Joseph called a halt. “We are well hidden from the main road here,” he said as he dismounted. “Come, we can make a small fire from brushwood while we wait for Vorstus.”

Maximilian sat obediently as Garth and Ravenna collected some dry brushwood. They quickly built a fire then, once water had boiled and tea steeped to one side, Ravenna washed the paint from Maximilian’s face.

“It’s beginning to streak,” she said as Joseph raised his eyebrows, “and his beard is beginning to shadow through. No-one who met him now would be fooled.”

Maximilian’s own eyes widened at the question, and Garth could see the anxiety they contained. “I…I…” His eyes flickered about the group, and his face tightened in distress.

Ravenna leaned over and handed him a mug of tea.

Maximilian grasped the mug as if it were a lifeline. “Tea,” he mumbled, “yes, this is tea.” He took a deep breath, and when he lifted his eyes they were calmer. “My name is Maximilian Persimius.” He paused for a long minute. “What do I remember of that life? I remember red walls and long corridors filled with laughter.” His eyes softened as his fingers shifted slightly about the mug. “I remember love. I remember that I was loved.”

“That is a good memory,” Garth said very softly.
“Yes…yes, it is, isn’t it?” Maximilian looked surprised, but also relieved. “Yes, I remember love and laughter.”
He took a deep breath and his shoulders relaxed. He sipped his tea thoughtfully. “Joseph Baxtor?” He spoke the name carefully, as if remembering it anew.

Joseph nodded. “Yes?”
“I remember you and an older man with a beard as heavy as yours is now.”
“My father,” Joseph nodded. “He died when you were about twelve.”
“Yes.” Maximilian took another sip of tea, as if he drew courage from it. “You and your father often came to dine with…with my parents and I.”

Joseph only nodded, his own hands now tight about his mug.
Maximilian turned back to Garth. “I remember my parents now, Garth. They loved me.”
“Yes,” Garth said, his voice thick. “They grieved when you were lost.”
“My father,” Maximilian said slowly, his eyes unfocused. “My father often read to me in the schoolroom. He read…he read from a book that I found boring but which my father insisted I study. It…it was called The Art of Wise Governance.”

There was a long silence, then Maximilian looked up at his companions. “My father was a king.” He took a deep breath. “And I was a prince then.”
“You are a prince now,” Garth said, reaching across and laying his hand on Maximilian’s arm. “And you are the rightful heir to the throne of Escator.”
Maximilian’s eyes hardened into flintiness. “No. I am not rightfully a prince at all.” He paused. “My father’s lessons are not all that I remember.”

“Maximilian,” Garth said urgently, but just then Vorstus arrived with his sheep, and Maximilian turned his head to the right and refused to say any more.
Within the hour they had packed up—Vorstus setting the sheep free to roam the hills—and were marching towards the royal forests to the east.

By mid-afternoon Furst had decided that he was never going to find Maximilian about the Veins. The guards had searched every square inch of the complex, both above and below ground—twice.
Nothing.
“How?” Furst cursed as he paced about his office.
“How could everything have gone so horribly wrong?”
“I should have had him killed,” Furst mumbled, pouring himself a generous drink from the decanter on a side cabinet. “Surely the mark’s protection would have faded under that scar? Orders or no, I should have murdered the brat!”

But he hadn’t, and that’s what currently mattered. And after seventeen years Lot No. 859 had unaccountably escaped and vanished into thin air.
And it was Furst who was going to have to make account.
“Damn!” he muttered, feeling cold nerves slice through his belly, and he threw the empty glass across the room.

The guard standing duty outside the overseer’s office flinched as he heard the glass shatter. The next moment he snapped to attention as Furst threw the door open and lurched down the steps.
“Fetch my horse and an escort,” he shouted into the night. “Now!”

They rode desperately through the night, their horses’ hooves slipping and sliding through Myrna, the sounds echoing about the empty streets.
In her house Anya heard them pass, and smiled at her girls. From Myrna they wrenched their horses’ heads onto the southern road.
For Ruen.
“Sire?”

Cavor turned from the window and frowned at the Master of Ceremonies. His face was drawn and pale, and when he moved to his chair he slightly favoured his left leg. “What is it?”

“Sire, you have a visitor.”

“Well? Do I have to grow old waiting for you to tell me who it is?”

The Master of Ceremonies fidgeted nervously. The king’s mood had been bleak these past days, and he spent most of his time inside his private apartments, admitting no-one but his wife and Oberon Fisk, his soon-to-be-replaced personal physician. He had specifically asked that he not be disturbed with visitors, but the man waiting outside had been so insistent.

“Well?” Cavor all but shouted as he lowered himself into his chair.

“The overseer from the Veins, sire,” the Master of Ceremonies hastily said. “Fennon Furst.”

Cavor stilled, his eyes boring into his Master of Ceremonies. Then he nodded abruptly. “Show him in.”

The Master of Ceremonies almost stumbled in his haste to exit the chamber.

Fennon Furst entered the king’s chamber as smoothly and as silently as the first hint of water through a fissured rock-face. His hands were folded tightly before him, his head lowered and his eyes averted. Five paces into the chamber he fell to one knee and bowed his head in deep obeisance. “Sire, I greet you well.”

Cavor regarded the man with barely concealed distaste. Furst had never been one of his favourites—thus his transfer to the Veins—but the man looked more dishevelled than Cavor could remember. Even from this distance Cavor could smell the rank odour of sour wine.

And there was something about Furst. Something nasty. Something dark. But that was a memory that Cavor, like the man he’d replaced, had buried as deeply as possible.

For years Cavor had refused to remember exactly why it was that he’d assigned Furst to the Veins in the first instance; why it was he’d asked Furst to keep watch there.

He shifted irritably, wishing he could find one chair in this damned palace that would prove comfortable. “Yes, Fennon Furst? What has caused you to rush to Ruen in such a state?”

“Sire,” Furst wrung his hands and risked a look up. “Sire, I have ill news to report. A prisoner has escaped.” He paused for effect, his eyes lit with a cold dark light. “Lot No. 859.”

Even in these apartments with the king as his only witness, Furst was loath to speak the man’s name aloud.

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Even in these apartments with the king as his only witness, Furst was loathe to speak the man’s name aloud. “Lot No. 859.”

Cavor stared incredulously at the man. “A prisoner has escaped? And you’ve ridden all the way to Ruen to inform me?” He took a deep breath of anger, the veins in his neck thickening and twisting. “If you can no longer handle your position, Furst, I can have you easily replaced. Now, get out of my sight!”

“Sire,” Furst’s voice cracked in nervousness. Surely Cavor remembered? “Lot No. 859…you had him personally incarcerated. It was your first act as heir…sire.”

“Maximilian,” Cavor exploded from his chair in fury, and strode across the chamber to a now shaking Furst. All traces of his limp were gone. He seized the man’s red hair in his hand and forced his head back. “I have imprisoned so many cursed souls in the Veins that I find it impossible to keep an inventory in my head!” he seethed.

“I have heard enough, Furst! Get out of my—”

“Surely you remember who Lot No. 859 is?”

Cavor exploded from his chair in fury, and strode across the chamber to a now shaking Furst. All traces of his limp were gone. He seized the man’s red hair in his hand and forced his head back. “I have imprisoned so many cursed souls in the Veins that I find it impossible to keep an inventory in my head!” he seethed.

“Maximilian?” he whispered.

“But if we have a Lot No. 859 suddenly vacant, then I can now think of the perfect name to fill it!”

“Maximilian!” Furst all but screamed in utter terror. “Maximilian Persimius has escaped!”

Cavor reacted as though he had been stabbed. He stumbled back several paces, his face grey, his eyes wide and shocked. “Maximilian?” he whispered.

“Twas not my fault, sire,” Furst grovelled, his face now flat against the cool marble floor. “Some guard, perhaps, derelict in his duty, failed. Not my fault…”

“Maximilian has escaped?” Cavor whispered again, not hearing a word that Furst said.

Furst peered from under his arms. Cavor had retreated to the window, but was still staring at Furst in disbelief. “We’ve searched everywhere, sire, but we cannot find him.” He remembered what Joseph Baxtor had said. “Perhaps he fell down a disused shaft and even now his body rots in cold black water.” He grinned, raising himself to his
knees again. “Now, that would be a relief, would it not, sire?”

Cavor sunk slowly down into his chair, and Furst took the opportunity to rise to his feet and make his way to a small fire burning in a grate. Even on the hottest day, the thick-walled palace remained cool. He turned to face his king again, his composure rapidly returning in the face of Cavor’s utter shock.

Cavor blinked, then looked at Furst. “Maximilian is still alive?” he rasped, horror underscoring his voice.

Furst sighed inwardly. “Yes, sire. If he has not died since his escape.”

“But how? How? No-one survives longer than a year or two down there. I had thought that…years ago…he would have died…surely…not even the mark could have protected against natural death…in the Veins…could it? Could it? Why didn’t you tell me Maximilian was still alive?”

“You never inquired,” Furst replied.

Cavor was silent for a long time, and Furst noted that he absently fingered his upper right arm.

“How?” Cavor asked finally.

Furst knew what he meant. “For seventeen years I have put Lot No. 859 in the most dangerous sections,” he said, his eyes steady on the king. “I have put him to work rock-faces that were so thin you could see the sea shadow behind them—and yet none of them cracked and ruptured until the day after I moved him somewhere else. I have chained him to gangs that were heavily infested with disease—fungus, plague, the sweating sickness, you name it, Lot No. 859 has been chained to it—but he remained disease-free. I have appointed the shortest-tempered guards to his detail, and they have beaten to death prisoners to either side of Lot No. 859, but he has remained unscarred. I have put him to work underneath hanging walls that have bulged with the weight of the earth above, and they have collapsed and buried every man but him. Somehow Lot No. 859 has lived.”

Cavor’s face was now gaunt. “The Manteceros,” he said almost to himself. “The mark has protected him.”

“You were there,” Furst grunted dismissively. “You saw the irons put to his arm. You heard him scream. You inspected the result. The mark has gone.”

Cavor was silent, but his fingers again scratched at his right arm. Furst’s eyes flickered over the king. “The mark has gone,” he repeated.

“Are you sure?”

“Once every two or three years I made sure I inspected the man, sire. A thick scar thrives where once reared the Manteceros.”

“I wonder,” Cavor whispered. What of his dreams over the past months? Coincidence?

“There is nothing to mark him or name him,” Furst replied. “If he still remembers who he is then there is absolutely nothing he can do about it. No-one would believe a madman escaped from the Veins.” Furst thought about that for a moment, then roared with laughter. “No-one!”

Cavor stared at the man, remembering why he disliked him so much. He also knew better than to believe his thin reassurances. Maximilian alive and free was nothing but disaster.

Strangely, coming to that realisation somehow bolstered Cavor’s resolve. He sat straighter in the chair, and his hand fell to the armrest. “We will recapture him,” he said, both voice and face now firm.

Furst shrugged. The problem was now the king’s. His mind turned to other matters. “Has Baxtor arrived, sire? He left some fifteen hours before I, and yet I did not pass him on the road. He must have ridden as hard as I to get here before me.”

“Hmm?” Cavor looked up, preoccupied with the problem of Maximilian. “What was that you said?”

“Joseph Baxtor,” Furst repeated patiently. “He should be here. He left the morning after he escaped.”

Cavor frowned. “But, no, Baxtor has not arrived.”

“Then where…?”

“Wait!” Cavor snapped, holding up a hand. “Let me think.”

It did not take long for the damming memories to flood back. Both Baxtors arguing persuasively to go back to the Veins just this once. Garth Baxtor asking about the way a man laid claim to the throne, and then Cavor remembered that Joseph Baxtor would have known Maximilian when he was a boy at court.

“Dear gods!” he whispered appalled. Why hadn’t he ever stopped the damned physician from going down the Veins? Because he’d thought Maximilian dead, that’s why.

He leaped out of his chair, shouting for his guards. Then he turned and seized Furst by the shoulder.

“What?” the overseer gasped.

“We’re going hunting,” Cavor said grimly, but there was a wild gleam in his eyes. “And if I have to tear the entire kingdom apart to find Maximilian, then I bloody well will!”

He reached the door and tore it open. “Guard!”
TWENTY
THE FOREST

In the end it took them almost three days to reach the forest because Maximilian tired so easily. His fever burned day and night, and they had to stop every half an hour to let him rest and to force cool water down his throat. Every time Joseph or Vorstus suggested he mount one of the horses, Maximilian reacted so violently they eventually gave up their efforts to get him to ride, and so their pace was slowed to Maximilian’s increasingly halting stride.

“It is the mark,” Joseph murmured to his companions on the third night out from Myrna as they huddled about a small camp fire, Maximilian rolled into a tight, blanketed ball to one side. “It burns from underneath the scarring, and the fever runs rampant through his body. If we can’t find a place to rest and shelter soon…”

Vorstus glanced at the eastern horizon, now hidden by the darkness. His concern at the time it was taking them to reach the relative safety of the forest nibbled at his peace of mind like a ravenous rat chews at a locked larder, but he fought to keep his expression calm. No point worrying the others more than they already were.

“We’ll be there tomorrow, Joseph. If we start several hours before dawn we can reach the safety of the forest by first light.”

“Will it provide safety?” Garth asked. He sat close to Ravenna, his hands extended towards the inadequate flames. His eyes were very calm and very steady as they gazed at Vorstus.

The monk dropped his gaze. “Better than these open hills, Garth. The order maintains a small house—no more than a woodsman’s hut, really—about two hours’ walk into the trees. It’s well hidden in the side of a cliff. We should be safe enough there.”

Garth nodded and lowered his eyes to the flames, watching their light flicker over his hands. Over the past days he’d expected to hear the sound of pursuing troops with every breath he took; all of them, with the exception of Maximilian, who was consumed with his own troubles, jumped at every unexpected sound or the shadow of a bird rising from the undergrowth.

Ravenna smiled for him, and reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “Garth, we will be—”

A glimmer of light to the south and a brief crackle in the night halted her mid-sentence. Her eyes flashed to Vorstus then, with the others, she rose and stared where the light had briefly illuminated the night sky.

“What could it be?” Joseph asked Vorstus, and Garth bent down and shook Maximilian awake. The prince grunted and rolled over, rubbing sleep from his eyes; he got to his knees as he saw the concern on everyone’s faces.

“I don’t know,” Vorstus said quietly. “Perhaps we’d better—”

The light flashed again, brief and silvery, and Ravenna exhaled in relief. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s Venetia.”

Garth stared at her, then turned back to the night.

“Oh,” Maximilian said, and sat down with a tired thump. “The silver ball returns.”

Ravenna smiled at him. “Yes, Maximilian. The light returns.”

“Does she send news of Nona?” Joseph asked. Worry about his wife had kept him awake for hours over the past few nights; now both anxiety and lack of sleep had puffed grey pouches under his eyes.

“We’ll see,” Ravenna said gently. She was sure that her mother could have spirited Nona out of Narbon safely, but she didn’t want to raise Joseph and Garth’s hopes until she had definite word. And Venetia wouldn’t have risked the light for any other reason, would she?

The silvery light flared again, much closer, then again, and within moments it rushed over the crest of the nearest hill like a racing moon and danced down into Ravenna’s hands. She smiled, then murmured, clasping the ball close to her breast. It flared once, brilliantly, then once again, lighting the landscape about them to a radius of some fifty paces—Vorstus swore softly and spun about on his heel; how far had the sudden radiance been seen? If there were soldiers within half a league of them…

“Peace, Vorstus,” Ravenna said softly, and the ball she clasped to her breast dulled and appeared to flatten and then fade; the flesh of her face and neck absorbing the light. “No-one sees.”

“And Nona?”

Ravenna turned to Joseph, the silvery ball and light now completely gone. “She’s safe, Joseph,” the girl smiled, and both Joseph and Garth visibly relaxed, “although she does not much like the misty marsh and she yearns for her kitchen.”

Joseph took a deep breath. “I thank you, Ravenna. You and your mother.”

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” she replied, glad to have been able to help.

“Except for the prince,” Garth said, very low, and all turned to look at Maximilian.
He stared back at them, his eyes flat and almost black in this light, then he lay back down and pulled the blanket close about him. Without a word he rolled himself once again into an unapproachable ball.

Vorstus and Garth shared the watch that night, silently agreeing to let Joseph sleep unhindered, then woke the others several hours before dawn. Vorstus stoked the fire silently, brewing tea for them and sharing out the remainder of the bread and fruit that the ladies of Myrna had provided. They ate and drank wordlessly, Garth encouraging Maximilian to take a few mouthfuls from the mug he held reluctantly, then Vorstus kicked the dirt across the fire and helped Maximilian to his feet.

They set out as silently as they had risen, both their thoughts and the chill air discouraging conversation, and moved only as fast as Maximilian could walk; Ravenna rode one of the horses and led the other. Not for the first time both Garth and Joseph, each with an arm about the prince, cursed the fact that he refused to ride.

Yet their pace was not too slow. The pre-dawn air was crisp and still, and it seemed to bolster Maximilian’s steps. With Garth and Joseph’s aid he managed a fair pace, and within an hour of leaving the camp site both father and son noticed that Vorstus, ahead by some five or six paces, was walking with loose-limbed ease.

“Vorstus?” Joseph called, wondering, for only a few minutes ago the monk had been moving far more cautiously.

Vorstus halted and waited for the others to catch up. “We’re not far away now,” he grinned, his relief evident. “In another half an hour we’ll have the trees for cover. Take a deep breath…smell it?”

Pushed into their faces by a gentle easterly breeze, the air was redolent with the scent of sweet pine and the musk of oak and beech. Ravenna reined in the fidgeting horses and closed her eyes momentarily, letting the breeze wrap about her face. “It is a rich scent,” she said, “but has not the tang of the salty marshes.”

Maximilian straightened and lifted his head, his eyes feverish. “It is the forest,” he said, “and it is where my life ended.”

“Then it will also be where your life will resume,” Vorstus said tersely, and strode forwards.

They reached the line of trees just as the first tendrils of daylight gilded their crests with gold. Maximilian shuddered once, violently, as they passed into the shaded walks of the forest, and he kept his head down and his eyes riveted on the leaf litter of the forest floor. But Joseph and Garth—and Ravenna, who had dismounted so her bare feet could touch the damp ground—gazed about curiously. Few were permitted into the vast expanses of the royal forests, for they were the preserve of the royal family; only on the occasion of the great hunts, when virtually the entire court accompanied the king into the forest, did the shaded ways resound to the trample of hooves and the clamour of hounds.

But Vorstus led the way confidently; closely connected to the royal family, the monks of the Order of Persimius entered the forest whenever an heir needed to be marked, or when an heir staked his claim to the throne of Escator. Yet the order also maintained a house within the forest, and as he watched a surefooted Vorstus stride down an unmarked trail, Joseph wondered what else the mysterious monks did within the secret silence of the trees.

It was cooler beneath the forest canopy, and the air was damp. In these lower regions the trees were mostly ancient beech and oak, although deeper into the forest the ground rose into a series of razor-spired cliffs and ridges, and there conifers clung to the thin soil, their pine cones tumbling to the base of the ravines to snag at the gentle feet of passing deer and the ragged fur of snuffling bears. But here the way was relatively clear. The trees, some with girths of eight or nine paces, grew well apart to give their gnarled limbs space to spread out, and so little light filtered through their thick canopy that undergrowth was sparse and stunted.

As they walked Garth asked Vorstus about the forest. “How often does the king and the royal court come to hunt here, Vorstus?”

“Several times a year, Garth. Generally during the summer and autumn.”

Garth thought about that a moment. “The forests are the royal preserve, Vorstus, but is it only because of the hunting?”

Vorstus paused before he answered. “No. The kings claim the forest as their royal hunting preserve, true, but there is a deeper reason the kings prefer to keep the forest as lonely a place as possible.”

“A deeper reason?”

“You will no doubt understand soon enough, boy.”

Garth nodded. The forest—or something within the forest—obviously played a vital part in the process whereby a man laid claim to the throne. “Does anyone inhabit this forest?” he asked after a few minutes’ contemplation. He was panting a little, for he and his father were now supporting virtually Maximilian’s full weight.

Perhaps too sick to pay attention, the prince was ignoring the conversation about him.

Vorstus grinned over his shoulder. “Apart from the odd monk, Garth?” His grin broadened slightly at the
“A few woodsmen in the employ of the king, that’s all. They keep an eye on the game, and fell any trees which are so badly damaged during the spring and autumn storms that they might topple on any unwary hunting party that thunders by. I doubt that we shall see any.”

“And if we did?” Joseph asked.

Vorstus shrugged, slowing his gait a little as he saw how Joseph and Garth struggled with Maximilian. “They are used to the visits of the order, Joseph.”

Ravenna, following slightly behind the rest of the group, laughed at the monk’s words. “And how would you explain the rest of us, Vorstus? Surely the sight of us would send any woodsmen scrambling to inform the king of the presence of unwanted visitors.”

Vorstus halted, allowing the others to catch up. “The woodsmen are loyal and true, Ravenna, and they understand the secrets of the forests far more than the king and even, I suspect, more than the members of my order. They will leave us alone.”

And with that they had to be content.

Vorstus continued to lead them deeper into the forest, striking northwards after an hour, and then north-east. The ground began to rise, the leaf litter giving way to stones and small rocks, and Joseph and Garth broke into a sweat with the effort of keeping Maximilian on his feet. The prince was breathing heavily and his face shone with sweat, but Garth, sharing a glance with his father, realised it was due to the fever raging within him rather than to the effort of walking. Ravenna, the horses scrambling behind her, kept close to them, occasionally murmuring encouragement to Maximilian, occasionally calling a soft question to Vorstus.

“It is not far now,” he finally snapped to her third inquiry. “Be patient.”

A few minutes later he led them into a small, blind ravine. A stream of water tumbled over the cliff at the end of the ravine, sparkling in the sun, and Vorstus led them to a spot close to the waterfall. The conifers thrived here, even in this stony soil, and in a clear space between two of them stood a stone hut, almost totally concealed behind a tumble of dead wood.

Garth and his father frowned—it scarcely looked large enough to hold one of the horses—but when Vorstus led them inside they saw that a spacious interior had been carved out of the cliff face behind the facade of the hut. Plain but comfortable furniture had been fashioned from pine and beech, and a hearth stood ready to be lit, a stock of pine wood and cones stacked nearby.

“I’ll take care of the horses,” Vorstus said shortly. “Lay the prince on that bed over there, and light the fire.” He paused, his sharp black eyes flickering over Maximilian. “And after a quick meal, Prince, we must see what remains beneath that scar of yours.”

Cavor slammed the door to the overseer’s hut behind him with a grimace of gratification. By the gods! The place stunk! And it was filthy besides. He mentally cursed Maximilian; if the damned man hadn’t escaped in the first place he wouldn’t have had to demean himself with a visit to this blighted sore. This, he seethed, was no place for a king!

He strode over to the chair behind Furst’s desk and sat down, leaning back and balancing the chair on its rear two legs. “Well, Commander Egalion? What are you doing to find this desperado? When shall you satisfy my order?”

There were three officers of the royal guard in the room, all armed and armoured, the blue Manteceros blazing from gleaming chest plates. The officer on the extreme right, a tall man with thick blond hair and the red and gold shoulder epaulettes of his command rank on his broad shoulders, stepped forward smartly and saluted. “Sire. A gnat could not move in northern Escator without it being noted.” Over the past three days the regions north of Ruen had been placed under a suffocating blanket of martial law; a dawn-to-dusk curfew had been imposed and all traffic on the roads monitored.

Cavor’s nostrils pinched and the commander suppressed a wince. “I do not want to know the movements of a gnat, Commander. I simply want this prisoner found.”

His tone was low, but Egalion did not fail to note the threat that underpinned it. The king had not been pleasant to be around since Overseer Furst had shattered the peace of the court. “Sire. If he moves, then we will find him. No-one could have moved further south than Ruen in the days since the escape, unless it be by ship—and we have searched every vessel plying the coastline thrice over. He is still in northern Escator—unless he has moved northwards beyond Surinam.”

Cavor tipped the chair still further back as he stared at the most senior commander in the realm. No doubt he wondered why he was being asked to do a policeman’s job; well, let him wonder. “No. He is still here. Somewhere.” Maximilian would want to claim, Cavor thought. He will not escape out of the realm completely. His Persimius-damned pride will keep him here.
Something niggled in the back of his mind, but Cavor was too intent on relieving his anger, frustration and, yes, he was prepared to admit it, his fear, on Egalion and his subcommand to pay it any attention. “What have you learned from the guards detailed to Section 205, sirrah?” he snapped, his eyes narrow and cold.

Egalion fought to keep his face mild and expressionless. Cavor had always been a fair man to work for previously—what had happened to him to drive him into such a pit of anger? Who was this prisoner?

“We have questioned them all, sire.” And those interrogations had been bad, very bad, because Cavor had demanded that all possible measures be taken to ensure the guards answered as truthfully and as completely as they were able. None, Egalion was sure, would ever be able to work down the Veins again—or anywhere else for that matter. “But their answers only add to the mystery. They speak of dreams and fogs, of witches and sweet songs. Nothing makes sense.” Now Egalion allowed some frustration to darken his face. “Nothing.”

Cavor stared at the man for several long minutes. Were enchantments involved in this? Few within Escator had the necessary knowledge to wield enchantments. Few. The king’s eyes narrowed still further until they were grey slits. Who?

Egalion, composed again, gave the king the only piece of good news he had. “We have one of the senior guards waiting outside, sire. A man who seems to have been associated more closely with Baxtor and his son than any others. I have left him until last, thinking that you might want to have a hand in, ah, be present for his interrogation.”

Cavor smiled, but it did not add any warmth to his face. “Good. The Baxtors appear to be the key to this mystery. What is this guard’s name?”

“Jack, sire.”

Joseph ran careful hands over Maximilian’s biceps. The prince was in obvious distress now, his breathing shallow and ragged, his cheeks bright with fever, his eyes dull and apathetic. Ravenna sat at the head of the bed, running cool cloths over the man’s forehead. He did not seem to be aware of her presence.

Joseph trembled, then withdrew his hands. He looked up to where Vorstus and Garth stood close by; both of their faces were creased with concern. “It burns…rages…beneath the scar tissue,” he said quietly. “It’s eating him up, consuming all his energy and will and hope. If we don’t do something then shortly Maximilian will be nothing but an empty husk, and then even that will succumb to the fever.”

“What is going on?” Ravenna asked, her voice made terse by her anxiety. “Why is the mark fighting for freedom now…after all these years?” Her eyes were very light.

Joseph took a deep breath. “I can only hazard a guess, Ravenna. All these years Maximilian has denied his identity. Suppressed it. And so the mark lay quiescent. But now…now that Maximilian has begun to admit to himself who he is, the mark yearns for freedom itself. Vorstus? You know more about the ink and the mark of the Manteceros than anyone else—am I right?”

Vorstus nodded. “I couldn’t have put it better myself, Joseph. The mark cannot be denied unless the bearer himself denies it. Joseph, Garth, you must remove the scar tissue. Set the mark free…and then perhaps Maximilian will find the heart to set the Manteceros free.”

Garth breathed in sharply, his eyes locking into those of his father’s. Surgery? Physicians rarely attempted anything like that; physical intervention of a surgical kind was always dangerous. Even the Touch could not always guard against the inevitable shock, pain and, all too often, infection. Yet what was the alternative? Watch Maximilian burn up before their eyes?

Joseph acknowledged his son’s concern with a small nod. “Vorstus? In what site did the order originally engrave the mark on Maximilian’s arm? If we can find the spot where the mark was originally made…”

His voice trailed off, but Vorstus understood his query. “He might stand a better chance? Yes, Joseph, you are right. The engraving of an heir is always performed in a site heavy with magic and under a thick veil of enchantment—a place we know only as the Pavilion. The ceremony itself is performed with the full Order of the Persimius present to witness and to add power. But,” he exhaled raggedly, and the skin of his face sagged, “even if I could get every one of our order here—and that is time we do not have—it would be pointless. The Pavilion is…” Vorstus hesitated, not knowing how to put it. “The Pavilion exists in its own world. Not this one.” He swung his hand in a sweeping gesture that included not only the room but the entire forest. “The Pavilion will appear in this world for only two purposes. To mark an heir and to make a claim.” He dropped his eyes to Maximilian, now virtually unconscious; the muscles of the prince’s face twitched as the fever took greater hold. “No-one can summon it for anything else. Not even to save an heir’s life.”

Garth stared at the monk. “Then Maximilian must make his claim!” What was this Pavilion that Vorstus was prattling on about?

Vorstus smiled humourlessly. “Maximilian? At the moment Maximilian could not swat a fly, Garth, much less make a claim. Until now I had not realised just how surely that scar has him trapped.”
Ravenna had sat silently as the talk of the Pavilion washed over her; now she put the damp cloth she’d been wiping Maximilian’s brow with to one side and folded her hands in her lap. Her face was very calm and very beautiful; her eyes had paled to the colour of the sheet folded over Maximilian’s body.

“You have spoken truth, Vorstus. The Pavilion will not appear in this world for any other reason than to mark an heir or to enable him to make a claim.” She paused, and her teeth gleamed. “But that does not mean to say that we—or at least, some of us—cannot visit the Pavilion in the dream world.”

Finally Garth could stand no more. “What in the name of the gods is this damned Pavilion?” he demanded.

“Your name is Jack?” Cavor asked mildly. He circled the man, his hands clasped behind his back.

Jack nodded. “Yes, sire.” He stood to attention, every muscle in his body straining, a thin film of sweat covering his face and shoulders.

“And what do you know of this escape, Guard Jack?” Cavor’s voice remained bland and his face smooth, but it was an effort for him to conceal his contempt for this dirty, sweat-stained man before him. He smelled of the Veins, and Cavor had to turn aside for a moment.

“All I remember is Adelm—the guard assigned to Lot No. 859’s detail—running down the tunnel, screaming of the escape.”

“And you saw nothing?” Cavor had his distaste under tight control now, and he turned back to the man.

“No, sire.”

But his voice was hesitant, and Cavor permitted himself a small, predatory smile. “Nothing, Guard Jack? Nothing at all?”

Egalion, who stood to one side with two of his command, glanced at his king’s face, then his eyes flickered back to the luckless guard currently at the centre of Cavor’s attention.

“It is nothing, sire. A trifle. I’m sure that it means nothing.”

“How dare you tell ME what means nothing!” Cavor abruptly screamed, and Jack rocked on his feet, his face blanching into colourless terror. Cavor seized the shoulder-strap of the man’s armour and hauled him so close their faces were only a finger span apart. “What do you remember?” he seethed, in a tone that, although quieter, was far more menacing than his full-blooded fury.

Jack opened his mouth and moved his lips, but nothing came out. His throat had gone tinder dry with fear…

“Skip, trip, my pretty man,” Jack whispered, his eyes round and terrified. “Skip, trip, into my heart!”

Cavor avoided screaming his frustration and anger only through a supreme effort. Was his whole realm populated with fools! His hands tightened about the hapless Jack. “Now I want you to tell me about the Baxtors, father and son. Everything you remember. Everything!”

“The green shadowed parlour,” Maximilian whispered, rousing, and everyone stared at him. “The green shadowed parlour is the Pavilion. Please,” he groped for Ravenna’s hand, and she clasped it tightly, “please, Ravenna, can you help me?”

Vorstus, shocked by both Ravenna’s and Maximilian’s words, nevertheless roused himself to whisper an explanation to Garth. “The Pavilion is the parlour of the Manteceros’ verse. Maximilian might not have remembered it from the day he was engraved as a babe, but he would know as heir that it is the place he would have to stake his claim to the throne.”

Garth tried to understand. “And if Ravenna takes him to the Pavilion in her dream world, can he stake the claim there?”

Vorstus shook his head. “No. Maximilian must summon the Pavilion here to do that. But perhaps his mark can be healed there. Joseph,” Vorstus turned to where the physician sat at Maximilian’s side, his hands still lightly touching the scar about the Prince’s arm, “can you heal Maximilian…”

He never finished. Ravenna interrupted, both her hands tight about Maximilian’s now. “No, he can’t help Maximilian,” she said calmly as Vorstus whipped his eyes towards her, “because he cannot come. I can only take Garth and Maximilian with me into the dream world. Garth because his own power is strong, far stronger than
Joseph’s, and Maximilian because he and the Pavilion are already bonded through that mark. Garth, you will have to remove that scar by yourself. Heal Maximilian by yourself. Can you do it?”

His mouth ajar, Garth looked at his father. “I’ve never done anything like this,” he whispered.

Joseph returned his son’s gaze levelly, his eyes gentle with pride and trust. “I will tell you what to do, Garth. All the power you need is already contained within your hands, and you will need no more than the basic skills I have already taught you. Maximilian,” his gaze shifted downwards, “will you trust Garth to help you?”

“Yes,” Maximilian whispered almost inaudibly. “Yes. He believed in light when I saw only darkness, and I followed him then. I will do so again.”
Unlike the last time Ravenna had taken Garth into the mists of the dream world, this time she just asked Joseph and Vorstus to stand back from the bed, uttered a soft prayer to the Lord of Dreams, grasped both Maximilian and Garth by the hands and began to sing.

The song she sang was so haunting it was almost unbearable, and Garth had to turn his eyes, although Maximilian kept his riveted on Ravenna’s face. She sang of tiles and columns and soaring domes, of the fairy creatures who girdled their handiwork with ancient enchantments and, as far as Garth could make out, she sang them directly into the Pavilion. All he knew was that one moment the bed they sat or lay on was surrounded by the homely interior of the forest hut, the next moment damp tendrils of mist had tangled through Ravenna’s hair and the interior—as had his father and Vorstus—had disappeared.

Like Maximilian, Garth stared at Ravenna, trusting her to bring them safely through the mists. As the last time he’d travelled into the dream world with the girl, strange creatures, only half-glimpsed, surged past them and, in one instance, underneath them. The sound of wings and soft, padded feet echoed about them, but Ravenna kept a light smile on her face and tightened her grip on Maximilian and Garth’s hands, and continued to sing.

Garth half wondered if the Manteceros might loom out of the mist, his sad face startled at being so abruptly confronted with the irritating pretender to the throne, but there was no sign of him, and before Garth could peer too closely about he became aware that Ravenna had stopped singing, and that she had relaxed her grip on his hand.

“We’re here?” he asked, then looked about at her nod.

If they were in a building then it appeared insubstantial—dreamlike for the dream world. Half-glimpsed columns soared into the mist about them, and Garth had a faint impression of a domed roof over their heads. When he looked down at the floor beneath the bed, he frowned. There was a floor there, he was sure of it, but there was a thin film of…water?…flowing over it. Green and blue shadows chased each other underneath his feet, and whatever the true nature of the floor of the Pavilion, it was hidden from his curious eyes.

Garth looked back at Ravenna, and took a quick breath of concern. Her eyes, back to their natural grey for the moment, were ringed with exhaustion, and her mouth was thin and pinched. “Ravenna!”

“I will be well, Garth Baxtor,” she said quietly. “I can rest while you heal Maximilian, and the return will not be half the effort the journey here was.”

Garth doubted her too-easy reassurance very much, but he did not say anything. After a moment longer he dropped his eyes to the prince.

Maximilian was staring at him, his blue eyes heavy with pain. “Help me, Garth,” he whispered. “Free this damned Manteceros that troubles me so sorely.”

Garth winced at the agony in Maximilian’s voice, remembering Cavor’s ravaged face and eyes. Joseph had taken him to one side before Ravenna had spirited them here, and whispered to him hasty instructions. None of them had reassured Garth very much. He had never caused an incision into anyone’s flesh before—and creating the wound instead of healing it was anathema to Garth’s training.

But it had to be done.

Garth took a deep breath and lifted the bag of instruments his father had given him. “Ravenna,” he said quietly, his eyes not leaving Maximilian’s face, “take his hands. Hold him tight.”

She nodded, and lifted Maximilian’s hands into her own.

The prince’s torso was already bare, and Garth folded back the sheet so that he would have easy access to his arm. Trembling slightly, he ran his hands over the thick scar that rippled over most of Maximilian’s upper right arm, trying to feel the outline of the Manteceros beneath it. He probed with the entire strength of his Touch, but, unlike the first time he had Touched the man beneath the Veins, it was useless. All he could feel was the hot angry ridged tissue beneath his fingers. The mark was buried deep, very deep.

“Maximilian,” he said very softly. “The scar tissue must be cut away. It will hurt.” He hesitated. “I am sorry.”

Maximilian, his face even paler than normal, if that were possible, nodded curiously, then turned his face away, burying it in the comforting folds of Ravenna’s gown as she sat beside him.

Garth clenched his hands momentarily to stop their trembling—how was he going to be able to get through this!—then took gauze and a flask from the bag beside him, liberally wiping disinfectant over the scar. He took a deep breath, focusing both mind and Touch as tightly as he could, then reached into the bag and withdrew a shiny scalpel.
It glinted wickedly, even in this misty light. His jaw tight with strain, Garth touched the blade to the lower portion of the scar tissue.

The door had just slammed behind Egalion and his two soldiers, the limp form of Jack dragged between them, when lightning agony knifed into Cavor’s arm.

Unable even to scream, his eyes and mouth open round in shock and horror, Cavor slipped from the chair to the floor and thrashed about, clutching his arm, his low, agonised moans inaudible to the guards outside the room.

At the first touch of the blade, Maximilian arched his body in shock and screamed.

Ravenna cried with him, her eyes wide with horror, and Garth, appalled by the prince’s reaction, dropped the scalpel from his hand.

It fell with an apologetic splash into the water that flowed gently about his feet.

Trembling almost uncontrollably now, Garth reached down, mentally cursing himself. The metal would be contaminated by whatever medium it had fallen into, and he would have to wipe it clean again. Gods but he wished this were over and done with.

Gods, but he wished his father were here to do this instead of him.

His hand groped about at his feet, searching blindly through the water—surely it was only a finger’s width deep? But however much his fingers scrabbled about, they found nothing. Garth met Ravenna’s eyes above the now silent prince. “What are you going to do?” she asked, and Garth wondered if her calm expression hid accusation.

He groped about a moment longer, his heart sinking icy cold within his breast, then he sat up. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “I have no other knife.”


“Believe?” Garth whispered, appalled.

“Believe,” she said gently, and leaned across Maximilian to kiss Garth gently on the cheek. “I believe in you, and Maximilian believes in you, and above all you must believe in your Touch. It is far deeper and far more powerful in you than in any before you. Joseph does not understand that yet, and neither do you. Believe in yourself, Garth. Trust in your ability. In you and in this place the Touch can be used in ways unimaginable.”

Garth stared at her, mesmerised by the touch of her lips and by the words she spoke. Believe.

“Believe,” he whispered and, his hands still trembling slightly, he Touched Maximilian’s arm just above the elbow.

His Touch was warm and dry, yet felt like the distant reverberations of a swarm of bees. Maximilian shuddered, trusting, and fought to relax under Garth’s hands.


Garth’s Touch felt strange, unsettling, but it did not hurt. Maximilian relaxed further, and Ravenna stroked the backs of his hands with her thumbs and crooned wordlessly to him.

Garth was now concentrating so hard he was hardly aware of the man beneath his hands or of the young woman across from him. The Pavilion faded into insignificance, and all Garth could feel was a throbbing that thrilled through his veins from the very centre of his being towards his palms and fingertips—which burned as though they had been engulfed in cold yet painless fire.


Cavor moaned one more time, then realised the pain had gone. He rolled over, his fine clothes dusted with the dirt of Furst’s floor, and stared uncomprehendingly at the floorboards as they stretched away towards the far wall. A feeling of warmth and comfort such as he had never felt before was spreading upwards from his right elbow.

Garth massaged Maximilian’s flesh between his fingers and thumbs, rolling it to and fro, probing deep and surely. Slowly his fingers moved up Maximilian’s arm towards the first ridge of scar tissue. His lips moved, although he made no sound.

Maximilian had relaxed completely, and Ravenna had let go of one of his hands and was now smoothing the hair back from his forehead. His head had lolled back on the pillow; his eyes now closed, a small smile lit his face, mirroring Ravenna’s own expression as she watched Garth work his miracle.

Garth’s fingers and thumbs had now reached the scar tissue, and he frowned. It was irritating, *irritating* beyond measure! Angry with the impure flesh beneath his Touch, he muttered and shifted slightly on the bed, changing his grip on Maximilian’s arm.

He dug his thumbs under the lower edge of the mass of scar tissue and slowly…achingly slowly…rolled and lifted it from the Prince’s arm as a dirty carpet is rolled away from a smooth floor.
Ravenna’s hand stilled on Maximilian’s forehead, and her lips parted slightly in wonder. Unaware of anything but the need to roll the offending tissue away completely, Garth continued to work his fingers further and further up Maximilian’s arm, submerging himself completely in the Touch, letting its power sweep through him and, through him, into Maximilian.

As the scar tissue buckled and rolled away it exposed white skin almost crystalline in its purity. Not a mark marred its surface.

Ravenna frowned slightly. But Garth continued to work. Now almost half of the scar had been rolled back, and it bunched and roiled above Garth’s fingers. Maximilian had relaxed so completely he seemed deeply asleep.

A few minutes longer and the scar was almost completely removed—yet still the skin beneath it remained white and pure. Ravenna opened her mouth to speak, thought better of it as she glanced at Garth’s face, and closed her lips slowly.

“Ah!” Garth grunted, and with an abrupt twist of his hand tore the loose scar tissue away from Maximilian’s arm completely. With a look of utter distaste, he flung it as far as he could from them.

There was a distant splash, and Maximilian’s eyes sprang open. They widened impossibly, and neither Ravenna nor Garth could read the expression in them nor understand what he saw in the mist surrounding him.

“Watch out!” he screamed, and twisted his head and shoulders away as if avoiding something charging out of the mists.

Too shocked even to scream, Cavor rolled violently across the floor until he rested against a wall, certain he was about to be trampled.

There was a thunder of beating feet, and Ravenna and Garth winced and hunched low, not sure what to avoid or even what direction the danger came from.

The next instant Maximilian cried again, tore his left hand from Ravenna’s clasp, and gripped his right biceps tight. His body rolled and twisted on the bed.

“Garth!” Ravenna cried, her hands to her face. “Look!”

Following the direction of her eyes, Garth looked at Maximilian’s hand where it gripped his biceps. He gripped so hard that his fingers dug into his pale flesh, but as Garth looked there was a flash of blue light from between the prince’s fingers. Maximilian convulsed, crying out yet again, and then he slowly relaxed, a look of wonder on his face.

His hand dropped slowly away from his arm.

Simultaneously, Garth and Ravenna took great breaths. Emblazoned across Maximilian’s right biceps in all its thick-legged, stiff-maned glory was the blue outline of the Manteceros.

Maximilian twisted his head and stared at the mark, then slowly shifted his eyes to Garth. “I remember,” he whispered. “I remember it all.”

Cavor heaved in great breaths, coughing as floor dust lined his lungs, then slowly, wonderingly, pushed himself to his feet. He stood a moment, his chest heaving, then he tore his jacket and then his shirt from his torso, twisting his head and arm to see.

His arm was completely healed. The mark of the Manteceros blazed forth clear and blue from skin rosy with health.

The pain that had plagued him for years had completely gone.

Gone.

Slowly his breathing calmed, and Cavor raised his eyes, staring sightlessly into the depths of the room. Intuitively he understood what this meant. If his mark had healed, then it meant Maximilian’s mark had been freed from beneath its scar tissue.

And if that had happened…

If that had happened then Maximilian was free to make his claim. And there was only one place he could do that.

“The forest,” he whispered. “He’s in the forest.”

Maximilian sat silently before the fire, a bowl of soup in his hands, lifting the spoon to his mouth in slow, thoughtful movements. He had said almost nothing since Ravenna had returned them to the rock hut, and now stared into the flames, coming to terms with the flood of his memories in his own way.

He wore only breeches and boots, and the firelight flickered over his pale, naked torso. Every so often the eyes
of the watchers would sweep over the proud blue mark on his arm, then they would sweep back to the prince’s face.

As his sickness had sloughed away from him and his memories had surged in to fill the vacuum, Maximilian had automatically assumed the demeanour and bearing of a prince. His shoulders, hunched and unsure ever since he’d been freed from the Veins (and for how many years before that?) were now straight and strong. His movements, although slow, were measured and deliberate.

His face, uncertain and haunted before, still had traces of pain lacing his eyes (and would probably all the rest of his life, thought Vorstus), but was now grave and calm, even curiously peaceful for the memories that must be coursing through him.

But then, Joseph remembered, even as a young boy he’d learned to keep his innermost feelings well to himself. Joseph’s own eyes swam with tears. The man before him was the boy he remembered grown into his true heritage. Who could doubt that he was a prince true-blooded and bred?

The soup finished, Maximilian put the bowl down on the hearth and turned to face the three men and the young marsh woman. “Will you listen if I talk?” he asked, and they nodded.

Maximilian shifted about on his stool a little, making himself comfortable. “The hound, Boroleas, that I’d been given for my fourteenth birthday,” he began, his eyes distant, “was a false gift.” His eyes shifted to the window, as if the path that had led him to his fate still stretched within sight. “He’d been trained to answer a whistle, and on the day appointed followed the whistle to lead me deep into the forest and into a glade peopled with traitors. They had planned well, and probably for over a year to have trained Boroleas for the purpose.”

His mouth quirked, and he looked down at his hands. “And they knew me. Knew that I would not be able to resist the thrill of cornering the hart by myself.” Pain flickered briefly across his face. “There were, oh, perhaps twenty or twenty-five of them in that glade. Faceless, featureless, and voiceless but for two.”

“Did you recognise their voices?” Vorstus asked softly.

Maximilian looked up, surprised but not angered by the interruption. “No. The leader had an unusual brogue, probably from one of the eastern kingdoms.” He winced in memory. “He was roughly spoken, and harsh of spirit.”

“A mercenary,” Ravenna said in a flat, angry voice. “Hired for the occasion.”

Maximilian stared at her for a moment. “Likely, lovely lady. Likely.”

“And the other voice?” Vorstus asked.

“Belonged to a man named Furst,” Maximilian said. “They…they had a fire going behind one of the trees—stoked by Furst. They dragged me there…and while the irons heated to their satisfaction—”

“You do not have to go on with this, Maximilian,” Joseph said, concerned for the naked pain he could see in the prince’s eyes.

“I must, Joseph,” the prince replied. “I must.” He took a deep breath. “While the irons heated to their satisfaction, as they laughed and passed about a jug of wine, the leader told me that I was a changeling.” He breathed deep again, but more raggedly this time. “He laughed, and said that my mother had birthed a stillborn son so small and featureless he looked like a skinned lizard. In desperation, she caused her maid to search Ruen for a new-born boy of blue-eyed parents, tall and dark.”

Maximilian stopped for a moment, and when he continued his voice was flat and featureless. “I was the son of a blacksmith, he told me, and my rightful future lay shackled to an anvil, not a throne. I believed him.”

“Why?” Garth asked. Compassion radiated out from his eyes and voice.

“Why?” Maximilian shook his head slightly. “I can’t explain it fully. I was scared…terrified. Perhaps I thought that if I believed it they might let me go. It was all such a nightmare…if they’d told me I was a toad dressed in a princeling’s clothes I think I would have believed them utterly. And then, lost in the darkness, I continued to believe them.”

“Do you believe them now?” Vorstus asked, his face expressionless in the firelight.

Maximilian met his eyes steadily. “No, Vorstus. Now I choose not to believe them. When Garth healed my arm Ravenna told us both to believe. To believe. When the mark was restored, so was my belief.” His voice deepened with inner strength. “Vorstus, I know who I am…and I am no changeling.”

Vorstus inclined his head, pleased. Relieved.

Maximilian dropped his eyes and passed a hand briefly over his face. “When…when the irons were hot enough, they decided they’d taunted me sufficiently.” His hand crept to his arm, his fingers running softly, absently, over the mark of the Manteceros. “Then…then the nightmare truly began.”

There was silence between them for a very long time. Eventually Ravenna stood up and poured each of them a glass of wine, pausing briefly by Maximilian as she handed him his, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. He smiled at her, and pressed her hand gratefully.

As she sat back down, Maximilian continued. “I remember little of the next week or so. The burn festered—the flesh above the elbow puckered and wept evil fluids. The pain…” his voice drifted off, then he roused himself.
Eventually my tormentors laughed and drank some more, then threw me in a great iron cage on wheels and fixed my ankles to its floor.”

Garth shuddered, remembering the loathsome transport carts he’d seen on the road between Ruen and Myrna.

“From there all became blackness. Blackness and pain for an eternity, until,” he lifted his eyes and flashed his extraordinary smile at Garth, “came the light of your presence and your words, Garth. ‘What are you doing here, Maximilian?’ you asked. ‘You belong beyond the hanging wall.’”

“And so you do,” Garth said emphatically.

Maximilian grinned at his tone. “And so I do,” he said.

Then the light died from his eyes. “Joseph. Memories have flooded back, memories from before my incarceration in the Veins. My time there seems only a hellish blur. How long…look at me. I am a man grown, yet I know that when I was thrown into the darkness I was but a beardless youth. And you, Joseph. You look almost as old as I remember your father. Joseph?” Maximilian’s voice almost broke, although his face remained stoic. “How long was I down there?”

Joseph rose from his seat and squatted by Maximilian’s side. “You were gone seventeen years, Maximilian. Seventeen years.”

Maximilian stared at Joseph uncomprehendingly, then his face cracked. “Seventeen years? I have lost seventeen years?”

Joseph nodded, tears running down his face, then he leaned forward and wrapped the prince in strong arms. “But you are back now, Max. You are back now.”

Maximilian finally broke down and wept, clinging to Joseph as the last remaining remnant of the life he had lost.

He sat fifty paces away from the rock-walled hut, gazing at it with thoughtful eyes. The trail had been faint, but traceable, and it had made him frown and then follow it. One or two from that most secretive of orders, perhaps, for he had seen them here previously. But others accompanied them. Two horses, a youth, and a man crippled by some debilitating injury. And a woman, as light as a fairy child on her feet—so light, he’d only realised she was with the group after a full hour of tracking.

Who did the order bring beneath the shade, when it was death for any layman simply to step beneath the treeline?

He smiled, thinking of this cleverly hidden hut. But not so cleverly that he hadn’t found it—and five years ago, now. The moment he’d spotted the trail this morning he knew where they’d be heading.

His smile died. What were they doing, that’s what he’d like to know. What were they doing so secretive like? Who had the order brought to this hidey-hole?

And why hadn’t he left before now to seek help and report the intrusion?

Unconsciously, his hand crept to the small pocket in his breeches.

“My parents?” Maximilian asked after a long time.

“You father died eighteen months after your disappearance, Maximilian,” Joseph said gently. “Your mother three weeks after him.”

Maximilian nodded and took a deep breath, bringing his emotions under tight control. It had been so long…he hadn’t truly believed they’d still be alive. “The throne,” he said suddenly as the thought occurred to him. “Who sits on the throne?”

Everyone else eyed him silently, and Maximilian narrowed his eyes at their reaction. “Who?”

“Cavor,” Vorstus replied calmly. “As abbot of the order I marked him myself, and watched through his claim.”

Maximilian was very still for a moment, then he nodded. “Of course. Cavor. He would have been closest in line.” He smiled, shocking the others. “I like Cavor. He was kind to me as a child, and I was always envious of his skill at arms and his flamboyance.” His smile turned into an easy grin. “He sometimes seemed more the prince than I.”

“No doubt he thought so, too,” Joseph muttered under his breath. Over the past few days the four had compared thoughts and suspicions as Maximilian had slept by the camp fire; all believed that Cavor’s hand was evident in Maximilian’s disappearance and incarceration in the Veins—why else appoint Fennon Furst as overseer? Why else the massive effort to recapture a single escapee?

Maximilian looked at the four of them. “What?” he asked softly but with the utmost authority. “What is it?”

Vorstus answered for the others. “Maximilian, we believe that Cavor was involved in your kidnap and incarceration.”

“No!” Maximilian shot to his feet and turned to the fire, hiding his features from them. “No! I will **not** believe
“Maximilian,” Vorstus said firmly. “For many years the Order of Persimius mourned you dead. But then I was called to the deathbed of,” he hesitated, then decided it was no longer necessary to keep the man’s identity secret, “Baron Norinum of the estates east of Harton.”

Maximilian turned back to them, his face flat and expressionless. “I know…knew him.”

“Yes,” Vorstus continued. “Norinum asked for the abbot of the order to confess him, because the sin that weighed his soul affected us most. Maximilian, Norinum was one of those featureless, anonymous men who circled you that day so long ago.”

Maximilian’s shoulders slumped. “No!”

“He told us little,” Vorstus continued remorselessly. “But he told us enough. The man who’d hired—or blackmailed him—into helping was of noble birth. So noble that even on his deathbed Norinum feared naming him. And you know as well as I that Norinum and Cavor were ever close.”

“Cavor has been troubled by his mark for many years,” Joseph took up the thread smoothly. “Sorely troubled. As Garth and the Order of Persimius crept closer to your discovery, his mark festered anew.” He shrugged. “Perhaps coincidence, perhaps not.”

“And who else would assign Fennon Furst to the Veins, Prince?” Garth argued, leaning forward. “Why else?”

“I will not believe it,” Maximilian said stubbornly. “Why else?”

“And will he continue to be your friend when you step into his throne room, Maximilian Persimius?” asked Ravenna quietly. “Will he welcome your return? Your claim?”

Silence. Then: “But you will claim,” Vorstus said, and it was not a question.

A longer silence, save for the crackle of the uncaring fire.

“Your father is dead,” Joseph said, enunciating each word carefully and clearly. “You are the rightful king of Escator.”

“Damn you!” Maximilian shouted, swinging back to face them. “You are hounds from the netherworlds to so bark at my heels! Yes! Yes, damn it! I will claim. Are you satisfied?”

“Good,” Vorstus said evenly, as if Maximilian had not just shouted into the room. “Then the order will back your claim, and those in this room will witness.”

His temper gone as suddenly as it had erupted, Maximilian sat down on his stool. A small and somewhat embarrassed smile flitted across his face. “I apologise for calling you hounds,” he said. “I owe you my life, and more.”

“Forgiven,” Joseph smiled, and Garth grinned good-naturedly to take the sting out of his words.

“You’ve done nothing but shout at me ever since I found you.”

Maximilian’s embarrassment deepened. “Then my father would chide me for my ill manners, my friends, for no king can afford to shout at those who so demonstrably prove their loyalty and friendship.”

He glanced at Ravenna, and she inclined her head gravely. “You have never shouted at me, Maximilian Persimius.”

“Nor would I ever want to, Ravenna,” he replied, equally as gravely, then he looked back at Vorstus.

“But how can I claim, Abbot Vorstus, when,” he wagged the ringless fingers of his right hand at the monk, “the ring of my father and of his forefathers has been lost? They tore it from my hand that day, and tossed it aside. You know, as do I, that my claim will crumble into uselessness without it.”

Disturbed, for he had never thought to question the ring’s absence, Vorstus opened his mouth to say something, but the words never came, for a terrible thundering at the door shattered the peace of the room.

“Open, now!” and a great crack splintered down the centre of the door. Whoever was out there had a weapon and was prepared to use it.

“I hear only one voice,” Vorstus whispered urgently. “And we are five. Surely—”

The door cracked wide open and a tall, broad-shouldered man stepped into the room, an axe swinging at the end of one well-muscled arm. He wore the rough clothes of an outdoors man, but his eyes were bright with keen intelligence clouded now by grave suspicion—and although he was grey-whiskered with old age he moved with the grace of a champion swordsman.
For several heartbeats everyone stared, then Vorstus took a hesitant step forwards. “Woodsman? I...we must apologise for disturbing the peace of your forest. But as a member of the Order of Persimius I have every right to be here, and—”

The woodsman did not let him finish; he had not taken his eyes from Maximilian. “I have no quarrel with you, monk, ’tis your friends here who have mistaken their way, methinks.” He narrowed his eyes even further. “And I can’t help wondering if one of them is the reason King Cavor has laid martial law so tight across northern Escator even cats are questioned for walking the streets at night.”

“I am the reason Cavor seeks,” Maximilian said, and Joseph could hear the almost concealed hurt in his voice. “I escaped from the Veins some days ago.”

“A prisoner,” the woodsman spat, and hefted the axe in his hands. “Wretch! I...by the gods! What is that on your arm?”

In the act of raising his axe to strike Maximilian down, the woodsman’s arm trembled and his hand slipped on the haft of the axe, the weapon sliding from his clasp and clattering to the floor. Joseph hesitated, then bent down and picked up the axe, placing it safely out of the woodsman’s reach.

Maximilian’s eyes did not waver from the shocked stare of the woodsman. “It is the Manteceros, friend.”

“But you died!” the man whispered. “You were taken by a bear!”

“What?” Vorstus ejected.

“Peace, Vorstus,” Maximilian said calmly, holding out a cautionary hand to the monk. “Let us hear what our friend has to say.”

“Two years after your disappearance,” the woodsman said, stumbling over the “your”, “I found what remained of your bones in a bear’s den not far from here.”

“And why did you think it was me?” Maximilian asked, although his heart grieved for the anonymous youth sacrificed for the sake of an evil pretence.

“Because of this, my Prince,” the woodsman said, calmer now, and he slipped to his knees before the prince. “Because of this.”

In his hand he held the Persimius ring.
TWENTY TWO

THE CLAIM

They shared a meal, then talked some more, then Maximilian laid himself down to sleep, for he would have a long night ahead of him.

“Has Cavor sent troops into the forest, Alaine?” Vorstus asked the woodsman.

Alaine shook his head and scratched his thick beard. “I last saw troop movements two days ago now, and they were spreading westwards and south towards Ruen. As far as I know the forest is clear.” He glanced at Vorstus, then at the back of the sleeping prince. A grin split his beard. “You’ve had the gods’ own luck, Vorstus, to avoid patrols in the open country before the forest.”

“Well,” Garth said quietly, staring at the gathering dusk outside the window, “Maximilian has finally earned some luck, methinks.”

Alaine sobered. He had been deeply affected by Maximilian’s story. “People will be glad to hear of his return.”

“He last night was all right, Alaine?” Vorstus asked sharply. “Cavor has been a good king by and large.”

“Ah,” said Ravenna softly to one side, the dusk gathering about her like a loving mist, “but Maximilian was a beloved prince.”

Alaine nodded. “You be right, m’Lady,” and Ravenna smiled a little at the title. “As a boy Maximilian walked in the gods’ own sunshine, and I think many will want to see that brightness about Escator again.” He turned to Vorstus. “Will he claim, Brother?”

Vorstus nodded. “He will prepare himself tonight, and will claim on the morrow.”

“Brother,” Alaine hesitated. “You have not said outright, but I am no fool. I have watched Cavor pull northern Escator apart in search of Maximilian. It was Cavor, was it not, who schemed to make away with the young prince?”

Vorstus indicated the other three, all watching the woodsman carefully now. “It is what we think, Alaine, although we have no proof.”

“The proof is in Cavor’s over-reaction to the escape of a lone prisoner,” Alaine said dryly. Then he made up his mind. “The prince will need friends. Friends who will be prepared to step forth once he makes his claim public.”

“We will stand forth!” Garth exclaimed, miffed.

Alaine nodded, and touched Garth briefly on his knee. “I know you will, young man. But Maximilian will need more than the four of you in this room. Vorstus,” Alaine kept turning to him as the natural leader of the small group now that Maximilian was asleep, “let me prepare the way for you. Let me begin to spread word.”

Vorstus was uncertain. “Premature action could harm rather than aid.”

“Once his claim is made then he must needs act quickly; Cavor will not let the matter rest. Maximilian will need friends, more than are held in this room, and fast.”

Vorstus made up his mind. “Very well. Here,” he reached for a small piece of paper from a pack and scribbled some names. “Start with these men. They are members of the Order of Persimius. Tell them what has happened. They will help you. Already we have a substantial network waiting only for this day.”

“Good.” Alaine scanned the list then hid it in the pocket that until recently had harboured the Persimius ring. He looked one last time at Maximilian, then without another word he rose to his feet and strode to the ruined door, sliding his axe into his belt as he went. He paused, tipped a finger to his forehead in brief salute, then was gone.

Once night had fallen, Vorstus woke Maximilian. The prince refused the drink and meal Ravenna offered, spoke briefly but quietly with Vorstus for a few minutes, then slipped out the door.

Garth watched him go with concern. “Vorstus? What does he do? Will he be all right?”

“Peace, boy.” Vorstus sat down beside Garth and Ravenna. “He will be well.”

“He goes to prepare for the claim,” Joseph said, his eyes dark and reflective. “And for that he needs a night alone for meditation and prayer.”

“Oh,” Ravenna said, understanding his refusal of food. “He needs to fast. He will make his claim cleansed both spiritually and physically.”

Vorstus looked gently at her. “Yes, child. Yet despite all he has endured, I think Maximilian’s soul is already pure and sweet, sweeter by far than that of the man he would supplant.”

When Garth woke in the morning, Maximilian was back, sitting in a shaft of sunlight that fell through the window. His face was calm, his eyes still, and Garth thought he had never seen a man more at peace with himself and the
world about him.
   The Manteceros on his arm seemed to leap and twist in the morning sunshine.
   “When?” Vorstus asked as he rose from his bedding.
   “Soon,” Maximilian replied. “But you have time to breakfast.”
   Again the prince refused food, although he took a sip or two of clear water, and the others ate quickly and
   silently. The air was tense with expectation, and Garth wondered that Maximilian showed none of the excitement
   that so evidently gripped everyone else. Even Ravenna, normally so composed, dropped a plate and several forks,
   muttering her apologies even as her cheeks stained with embarrassment.
   The prince’s mouth twitched, and he watched her as she moved about the room, but he said nothing.
   Finally all was ready. “What do we do now?” Garth asked Vorstus under his breath as they threw cold dirt on
   the fire and spread the few remaining coals out to die on the hearth.
   “Now? Now we wait, boy, for today will be in Maximilian’s hands.” Vorstus turned to one side and lifted a
   small pack from a cupboard.
   As if he had heard him, Maximilian stood up from his stool. “It is time,” he said, and stepped out the door.
   “Every heir is taught how to claim almost before he can walk,” Vorstus explained quietly as they followed
   Maximilian down a gently sloping forest path away from the ravine. “The procedure becomes instinctive.”
   “And the verse that the Manteceros taught me?”
   “It was a cryptic reference to the procedure used to claim, boy. Every heir knows it, and its meaning.”
   Garth eyed the small pack that Vorstus had seized from a cupboard as he’d left the hut. A sword stuck
   inelegantly out of one corner, but whatever else the pack held remained a mystery. “Vorstus?” Garth inclined his
   head at the pack.
   Vorstus shrugged Garth’s curiosity aside. “Be quiet, boy. This is a reverent moment, and likely one you will
   see only once in your lifetime.”
   Maximilian led them down a path towards the heart of the forest, his pace brisk but not overly fast. He still
   wore only a simple pair of breeches and some boots, and Garth wondered that he would not dress more formally for
   such an important day.
   They walked for over three hours, Maximilian never hesitating at a fork in the path or even when the trail
   disappeared completely. Garth glanced back several times to where his father and Ravenna followed, but they only
   nodded at his glance, their faces as calm and unquestioning as Vorstus’.
   Finally, when Garth was wondering if all the claim consisted of was a hike through the forest, Maximilian
   came to an abrupt halt.
   He tilted his head to one side, his blue eyes blazing. “Do you hear it?” he asked, and for the first time that day
   Garth could detect a trace of tension in the prince’s voice.
   “Yes,” Vorstus replied gently. “I hear it, Maximilian Persimius.”
   Garth strained for a moment, then heard a soft roar above the normal sounds of the forest.
   But Maximilian did not wait to answer the question that sprang to Garth’s lips. Without another word he turned
   back to the trail and strode forth, his pace noticeably hurried now.
   The others hastened after him.
   Within half an hour Maximilian led them to a great waterfall, a green lake spreading out from its misty base.
   Jewel-like lilies, their velvet pads so broad and thick it seemed a man could use them as stepping stones, spread over
   the calmer sections of the lake, while fish flashed just beneath the lake’s surface.
   But Maximilian had no eye for any of this beauty. He stared at the waterfall, then he turned to Joseph. “Will
   you witness?” he asked tersely.
   “Assuredly, Maximilian Persimius,” Joseph said without hesitation.
   Maximilian jerked his head in thanks, then he turned to where Garth and Ravenna stood. “Will you name me?”
   he asked, his voice softer now.
   Garth opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but Ravenna answered for the both of them. “Certainly,
   Maximilian Persimius.”
   Maximilian relaxed enough for a small smile. “Then I thank you.”
   Finally he turned to Vorstus. “Are you ready?”
   “I am, Maximilian Persimius.”
   Maximilian took a deep breath. “Already seventeen years have been wasted. I have no taste for lingering.”
   And with movements swift and smooth he stripped himself of his clothes and stepped to the side of the lake.
   “In crystal do drown me,” Vorstus said low, but very clearly. Garth glanced sharply at the monk. Vorstus had
   assumed an air of utmost authority and gravity, and Garth realised that this was not Brother Vorstus who stood
   before them, but the Grand Abbot of the Order of Persimius.
“In crystal do drown me,” Maximilian repeated, and in one graceful action he dived into the lake.

They watched the progress of his pale body as he swam deeper and deeper, ever further into the centre of the lake until he vanished beneath the still green waters. Garth held his breath in sympathy with the prince, and only became aware of it when his chest tightened in agony.

Just when Garth thought that he must have drowned in truth, the prince’s head broke water at the very centre of the lake. He ran his hands back through his hair, wiping it out of his eyes, then shook his head and looked about.

As soon as he spotted the group standing at the lake’s edge, he swam back to them with long, lazy strokes. As he stood from the water, Vorstus stepped forward and touched the prince’s forehead, then his chest, with slow, deliberate movements. “You are washed of your sins, Prince Maximilian Persimius. Do you wish to proceed with your claim?”

“I do,” Maximilian said, and Vorstus reached down into the pack he’d left close by, pulling out a long white silk shirt. Maximilian held out his arms, and Vorstus slipped the shirt over the man’s head and neck.

As it tumbled down over the prince’s damp body Vorstus spoke again, this time touching Maximilian briefly on the mouth. “Do you swear only to speak with the words of truth, Maximilian Persimius?”

“I do so swear,” Maximilian replied.

“Then wear always the white of truth draped next to your skin to remind you of your vow, Maximilian Persimius.” Vorstus reached down again, and this time he withdrew a pair of brown hose from the pack. “Do you swear to renounce pride, and embrace humility as a lover?”

“I do so swear,” Maximilian replied quietly, and stepped into the hose as Vorstus held them out.

“Then draw the dirt-brown of death up about you, Maximilian Persimius, to remind you that death and the decay of the grave await at the end of your life, and that pride is a road that leads nowhere.”

Vorstus reached into the pack again, and Garth, Ravenna and Joseph found that their eyes were filled with tears at the solemnity and majesty, yet the utter simplicity and extraordinary beauty of this ceremony.

Now Vorstus held a surcoat of crimson silk in his hands. “Do you swear that you will not hesitate to spill your own blood in the defence of your people?”

Again Maximilian swore, and Vorstus helped him don the crimson surcoat as a visible reminder of his vow.

This time, when Vorstus straightened up from the pack, the severity and solemnity of his face was relieved with a small smile. In his hands he held a pair of sturdy brown leather boots.

“Then Maximilian Persimius, you will have need of courage if you speak nothing but the truth. Exist in total humility, and fight to the death for your people’s needs. Accept these, as a gift from the order and from your people themselves.”

Maximilian smiled, and slipped the boots on.

Finally, Vorstus offered the prince the sword. It was sheathed in a scabbard of spun gold and silver, and hung from a belt of the same fine craftsmanship. “Let the light bind and hold you tight in its loving hands, Maximilian Persimius,” he whispered, belting the sword about the prince’s hips, “for none deserve it more than you.”

Then he stepped back, his face once more grave. “Who will name this man to lay claim to the throne of Escator?” he called, his voice shockingly loud in the stillness of the forest.

“I will!” Ravenna stepped forward, her voice ringing confidently. “I name him Maximilian Persimius, son and heir of the king dead, and I name him fit claimant to the throne of Escator!”

“And I!” Garth had suddenly realised his role in this ceremony. “I also name this man Maximilian Persimius, son and heir of the king dead, and fit claimant to the throne of Escator, and my naming adds weight!”

Maximilian, whose head had remained bowed through this exchange, now looked up. His face was bright with hope, and his eyes blazed with some inner fire. Whatever else Maximilian may have lost in the Veins, he had not lost his sense of destiny.

He stared, but it was not the small knot of people before him that trapped his eyes.

“Then step inside the green shadowed parlour, Maximilian,” Vorstus whispered, his voice now hoarse with emotion, “and claim what is rightfully yours.”

Maximilian stepped forward, and both Ravenna and Garth hurriedly stepped aside. He brushed past them, hardly aware of their existence, and lifted his foot onto the first step of the Pavilion that now sheltered beneath the trees behind them.

Garth and Ravenna could not stop a gasp of surprise. It had not been there a moment ago, and both instinctively understood that Maximilian had somehow called it from the dream world into this.

Ravenna’s eyes followed Maximilian as he stepped into the Pavilion. They were filled with vastly increased respect.
TWENTY THREE
THE PAVILION

Unlike its existence in the dream world, the Pavilion was carved from solid yet curiously translucent white stone. Its columns, twelve in all, soared to support a domed roof of emerald enamel that cast a deep shadow over the circular floor.

Calm and sure, Maximilian stepped into the very centre of the floor, then he sank to his knees, his head bowed in prayer for a long moment.

Raising his head and taking a deep breath, Maximilian slipped the ring of his forefathers from his finger and leaned down to the mosaic floor. Not hesitating, he grasped the ring so that its black gemstone was turned downwards, then he carved into the stone floor, tracing the lines already laid out in translucent blue gems.

Cavor was taking his afternoon leisure in the parlour of the Ladies House in Myrna. Despite the soldiers lack of progress in finding Lot No. 859, Cavor seemed curiously unworried. Later that afternoon, he had assured Egalion (who waited patiently outside), he would order the royal guard to a new destination—one that would almost certainly yield results.

Then, just as the youngest and most delectable of Anya’s girls leaned her sweet lips towards his, Cavor let out a most unloverlike shriek and shoved the girl aside.

Fire was slowly tracing through the patterns on the floor. Expelling his breath in relief as he completed the pattern, he stepped back, not taking his eyes from the stone floor.

The floor was laid out in deep green tiles, but with a slightly raised pattern of blue insets that outlined the same mark that stood out on Maximilian’s arm.

As Maximilian watched, the green shimmered, then the blue lines wavered and his own mark burned fiercely. He hardly noticed it.

Slowly the blue shape set in stone bulged into the room as lines quivered into life, and stone into bone.

Cavor staggered outside onto the verandah, brushing aside Anya’s concerns, and grabbed Egalion by the shoulder as the commander snapped to surprised attention.

"Get my horse," the king whispered hoarsely, "and get those damned units of yours moving. We ride to the forests. Now!"

The Manteceros sighed and shook himself, regretting—as always—the transfer from the dream world into this. This world only contained soreness and problems, and the Manteceros had every expectation that it had just materialised into one of the greatest problems it was ever likely to face.

The creature gazed about the Pavilion, its face mournful, its eyes sorrowing, then it rested its eyes on the man who stood before him. "Who comes to claim?" it asked. "Who dares the Dream?"

"I do," the man said quietly, and the Manteceros did not fail to note the unconscious pride in his bearing.

"And you are…?"

Maximilian stood straighter, wondering at the strange beast that now stood before him. Yet he was not frightened, nor even overawed. For fourteen years he had been trained for this very moment.

"I am Maximilian Persimius, Prince of Escator, Warden of Ruen, Lord of the Ports and Suzerain of the Plains," he replied, giving the Manteceros his full titles, “and I am heir to the throne of Escator.”

"Oh I don’t know about that," the Manteceros mumbled sotto voce, shifting its weight from leg to leg. "Why have you summoned me forth?" it asked in a louder although no less doubtful voice.

The Manteceros knew why—but all the formalities had to be observed.

"I claim the throne of Escator.

The Manteceros’ agitation increased. “You dare to claim? You—”


"This is very unfortunate," the Manteceros said. "Very. The throne does not lie vacant.”

Maximilian was silent, his blue eyes steady on the beast before him.

"Well," the Manteceros said, and blew air through its nostrils in a deep sigh, “why now? Why wait all this time?”
“I was deceived and kept from making my claim at the rightful time.” Maximilian paused. “The wrong man sits the throne.”

“He made a good claim,” the Manteceros justified.

“Nevertheless,” Maximilian said, refusing to back down, “he is the wrong man.”

The Manteceros pursed its lips, remembering what Garth had told him. “I have heard tell you think yourself a changeling,” it challenged.

“It was a lie to keep me chained and silent. I am true-blooded and bred, and I am first-born.” Maximilian’s tone hardened. “The throne is mine.”

Now the Manteceros’ tail swished and the skin along its back twitched. It snorted. “You know I shall have to administer the ordeal.”

Maximilian held the beast’s eyes, but did not speak.

“You are very confident,” the Manteceros observed, and a strange light filled its eyes. “But are you confident enough to dare the ordeal? Do you have the strength and fortitude to see you through?”

“I have no choice,” Maximilian replied. He paused, wondering at the expression in the Manteceros’ eyes. “Will you accept my claim?”

“I have no choice,” the Manteceros said tersely.

“And the ordeal? When will you administer that?”

The Manteceros stared at the man. “Cavor sits the throne. When you challenge him with your claim, then will I administer the ordeal.”

Then, in a flash of blue light so bright that Maximilian was forced to close his eyes and step back, the Manteceros vanished.

“Too late!” Cavor hissed as he pulled his horse to an abrupt halt on the road eastwards. “I lingered in that black sinkhole too long!”

“Sire?” Egalion mumbled, confused. Behind them the column of soldiers were milling to a halt.

Cavor turned furious eyes on his commander. “Take three squads and ride for the forests, Egalion. Seek any who might harbour the escapee. I…” his voice dropped and Egalion had to lean close to hear him, “I shall ride for Ruen. Home. Guard the throne. Wait. He must appear eventually.”

Guard the throne? Egalion wondered, but he did not voice his question. “As you wish, sire,” and, shouting orders, he formed three squads behind him.
TWENTY FOUR
CAPTURE!

They stayed that afternoon and the next day in the stone hut, Maximilian silent and introspective, the others waiting for some sign of what he wanted to do.

On the evening of the day after he had claimed, Maximilian raised his eyes from the fire, glanced at the four sitting quiet about him, and said one word, “Ruen.”

They left the next morning, the forest still and secretive about them. Even the bird calls were muted, yet none, all caught to some extent by Maximilian’s introspection, thought to question why.

Garth and Joseph led the small column, riding the horses. Some fifteen or twenty paces behind them stepped Ravenna, wrapped in mysteriousness as thick as her cloak, and some further eight or nine paces behind her came Maximilian and Vorstus. Maximilian had abandoned the clothes he wore to claim, and was now dressed in drab woodsman’s clothes—but Garth thought that even in their rough weave he exuded both dignity and destiny. None seeing him could ignore him.

Maximilian and Vorstus conversed in low tones, discussing the safest route to Ruen (through the forests for as long as they could, then across the plains by the stealth of night) and the knottier problem of what they should do when they got there. If Maximilian needed to challenge Cavor’s right to sit the throne he would undoubtedly have to get into the palace. How best to do that? Vorstus took Maximilian’s arm and his tone sank even lower.

The morning was clear and, as far as Garth could see through the interlacing branches of the forest, relatively bright. He relaxed on his horse, refusing to worry until they were closer to Ruen. Joseph glanced at him, sharing a smile with his son, then turned his eyes back to the path; light dappled prettily across the leaf-strewn ground and Joseph wondered at the sense of peace that enveloped the forest.

There was a slight noise to the right, and Joseph turned his head slightly, expecting to see a badger snuffling through the undergrowth.

Instead he saw a glint of steel.

And the peace of the forest shattered.

Scouts had reported movement ahead of them ten minutes before and Egalion, experienced campaigner that he was, had no trouble setting the trap well before the two riders emerged from a pool of particularly shadowed forest light. Having been at court when Joseph Baxtor had treated Cavor almost two weeks previously, Egalion recognised them instantly.

He also knew them to be the prime suspects in the escape.

Egalion gave a smooth, economical hand signal and the attack was launched—neither the physician nor his son had a chance. Within heartbeats they were ringed with steel, their faces pale with shock, their horses’ heads tossing in alarm.

Too late Egalion realised that there were several other people on foot some distance behind the Baxtors. There was a girl—he saw her first—and saw her wheel about to place restraining hands on the chest of a tall, dark-haired man who had stepped forward the instant he saw the riders encircled.

The man’s face was pale, his eyes wide pools of blue anger, and he opened his mouth to shout something.

Another man, older and tonsured like a monk, had grasped the man’s arms from behind and, like the girl, was similarly restraining him.

Egalion spurred his horse past the milling soldiers about the Baxtors, intent on seizing the man before he could escape. He must be the prisoner—who else would the Baxtors attempt to secrete in these woods?—and the capture of the Baxtors would be incidental if the prisoner were to escape.

Egalion was not worried about either the girl or the monk; the girl was slight and the monk too old to seriously perturb an armoured man on horseback. None were armed.

Yet even as he hefted his sword in his hand something made Egalion hesitate.

The man’s face—the prisoner’s face—seemed familiar, and Egalion did not understand it. The prisoner’s bearing and his startling anger when he should have been afraid gave him the demeanour of a noble, not a man who by rights should have scuttled to cower in the shadows at the first sign of trouble.

Egalion was a man several years past fifty, and he remembered the past king well.

He also remembered—and why this memory now?—the young prince, lost in this very forest.

“Maximilian!” the girl screamed, and wrapped her arms about him. “No!”
Tendrils of mist appeared from nowhere and wrapped themselves about the monk and the girl, both still struggling to keep the prisoner from rushing down the forest path to rescue the Baxtors.

Maximilian? Egalion’s confusion grew.

His horse, sensing his hesitation, faltered in its rush, and gave Ravenna the vital seconds she needed to get Maximilian away from the trap. She hugged Maximilian to her, envelpping both him and Vorstus in rapidly thickening mist, and dragging them through to the dream world with every last ounce of power that she had.

Behind him Egalion could hear horsemen spurring to his aid, but it was too late...far too late. One moment the three figures had been struggling in the middle of the shadowed path before him, all three—even the girl now—staring at him with a mixture of anger and defiance, then strange mist had enveloped them and, in enveloping them, spirited them away in a manner that was beyond Egalion’s understanding.

In the next instant his horse strode through and beyond the spot where they had stood, and Egalion reined him back and wheeled him about, his eyes frantically searching the shrubbery and trees.

But neither his eyes nor the efforts of his men could flush anything out of the surrounding forest save a dozen birds and a scuttling lizard, and Egalion was forced to ride for Ruen with only the Baxtors to assuage Cavor’s need for satisfaction.

And as they rode, Egalion thought only one thing.

Maximilian? Maximilian?

The Chamber of Justice was cold, and Joseph thought that the coldness emanated not only from the stone walls and flagging, but also from the fear and retribution that had been meted out in the chamber through the centuries.

He had been here on several occasions, twice to observe a trial, once to give evidence, but never had he thought to sit in the prisoners’ dock himself.

Despite the warning growl from one of the guards behind the dock, Joseph risked a glance to Garth, sitting still and tense beside him.

The youth’s face was pale but composed, and Joseph turned his eyes back to the chamber before him. He would cheerfully give his own life if it meant saving his son’s, but he did not think Cavor would let either of them live.

From the forest Egalion had hastened them with all haste due south to Ruen. Although closely guarded, they were not treated with any measure of harshness, and both Garth and Joseph wondered sometimes at the strange looks Egalion threw their way.

He’d given the guards strict orders not to speak with the prisoners, nor allow them to exchange words between themselves. Egalion himself spent most evenings brooding silently about his camp fire.

If Egalion had treated them firmly but fairly, their treatment had altered harshly once they were under the direct control of Cavor in Ruen. Joseph and Garth were thrown into separate cells, where they lingered for two cold and dark days. No-one spoke to them and no-one entered their cells, although Joseph wondered if occasionally Cavor himself came down to the dungeons to stand outside their iron doors and peer through the peepholes.

Sometimes he’d thought he could feel such venomous anger seeping from the other side of his cell door that Joseph had shuddered and turned his back.

Silence surrounded them, even here in the Chamber of Justice, for Cavor doubtless wanted no-one to hear who it was that the Baxtors had helped escape.

Yet the chamber was packed.

Immediately below the dais where Cavor would sit to pass judgement, the prisoners’ dock to one side, were a veritable horde of scribes, eyes sharp and yet curiously still, their quills sharpened and held at the ready, pots of ink full and easily to hand.

Behind them ranged several hundred observers. Nobles mostly, although Joseph could pick out a score of Ruen’s most important townsmen and merchants, and behind them a goodly collection of the shopkeepers and workmen of the city. Even further to the rear lurked three or four pickpockets and cutpurses—here to witness or to enrich themselves? Joseph did not know and cared even less.

Ringing all were at least four squads of Egalion’s most experienced soldiers, faces blank, bodies tense. Egalion himself stood to one side of the dais, as silent as all the rest, waiting for Cavor’s entrance.

Joseph was not heartened by the empty jury box directly opposite the dock; but then, treason was always tried and judged without the benefit of a jury.

Surreptitiously he dropped a hand to one side and touched Garth on the hip, gently, reassuringly, and was rewarded by a slight relaxing in his son’s muscles. Quickly, before the guard could see and intervene, Joseph sent as much love through the Touch as he could.

More than anything else, he regretted that Garth had been caught in this trap. The boy was far too young to die.
Whatever reflections those within the silent chamber were engaged in ceased the next moment as Cavor emerged from a rear door and stepped crisply to the dais. He was dressed in the blue bearskin-trimmed robes of the highest Justice in the realm; Joseph saw that he wore armour beneath them, the Manteceros gleaming from a brightly burnished chest plate.

Joseph’s mouth twisted wryly; did Cavor need to hide behind armour from the inevitability of Maximilian’s return?

The smile died, and Joseph wondered if Maximilian, even if aided by the powers of Ravenna and Vorstus, could rescue them from this predicament.

Unlike Joseph, Garth harboured no doubts that Maximilian would rescue them. Right was on their side, and if judgement was to be served here today, then Garth believed that it would be passed on Cavor, not on himself or his father.

Garth’s face hardened slightly as he watched Cavor take his place. The man had carefully avoided looking at them, and he arranged his robes scrupulously as he sat in the Seat of Judgement—a high-backed and heavily carved wooden throne. When he raised his head Garth saw that Cavor had just as scrupulously arranged his features; sadness and betrayal shone from his face in equal amounts. Here was a king who had trusted, and who had been betrayed vilely by those he had every reason to trust. Garth had to admire him; few present could have seen beneath the exterior to the lies and secrets kept for seventeen years.

Far to the rear, the mouth of one of the street thieves, his hands uncharacteristically in his own pockets for a change, twisted in a humourless smile. These past days rumours had swept the streets, and the thief had collected them as assiduously as he collected the earnings of other men. Unlike the coin he hoarded, however, the thief had passed the rumours on.

But Garth did not notice the reactions of men in the rear of the chamber. Behind him a guard poked him in the back, and he rose to his feet with his father.

Cavor raised his head to speak, his face composed and grave, his voice ringing with the sadness of betrayal. “My people. It troubles me greatly to request your presence here this day to witness. In the dock,” he did not look their way, “stand two I had once counted among my friends. I trusted them, with my secrets—”

Not all, Garth thought cynically.

“And even with my life.” Cavor shuddered theatrically, and closed his eyes for a moment. “Why they did not slip the knife into my ribs when they had me alone, I do not know. Perhaps they did not have the courage.” He paused. “But I digress.”

His tone strengthened and he sat straighter in his chair. A faint blush stained his cheeks, as if the enormity of the Baxtors’ treason cut to his soul. “Physician Joseph Baxtor, of Narbon, and his son and apprentice, Garth, are charged with treason of the most reprehensible and highest degree. They did knowingly conspire to effect a mass escape of the prisoners justly condemned to the Veins—”

A polite shiver ran through the front ranks of the nobles, although Garth noticed it did not spread to the back of the chamber where stood the ordinary people of Ruen. Undoubtedly many had lost husbands, sons and brothers to the gloam.

Garth’s eyes switched to Egalion. The man’s face was as unreadable as blank stone.

Cavor continued, encouraged by the reaction of the nobles. “Once they had their disorderly rabble freed into the sunlight, they meant to stir a general revolt against the throne of Escator. I have no doubt, my friends,” and Cavor’s tone dropped, as if the words hurt him as badly as the death of a friend, “Baxtor meant to put himself on the throne in order to satisfy his base instincts for power.”

Both Garth’s and his father’s mouths dropped open and Joseph stirred, as if he would say something, but Cavor forestalled him.

“Silence!” he hissed venomously, and the hand he had wrapped about his orb of state trembled violently. “I will hear none of your perfidious and warped words! Your actions judge you, and words will only condemn you deeper into the everlasting fire pits of the afterlife.”

Garth’s chest constricted, almost unable to bear the enormity of the lies Cavor spoke against them.

But then, Cavor had a lot to hide.

To one side, a hint of consternation flickered across Egalion’s face, but he controlled it quickly. Within the back ranks of observers there was a moment of restless movement, but it stilled quickly.

Cavor passed a hand over his eyes, then continued in a quieter and more controlled voice. “They did not succeed—their ineptness resulted in the escape of only one prisoner.” He glossed over the issue of the prisoner. “But I must judge them on their intentions, not their ineptitude, and so,” he took a deep breath and sat back in the Seat of
Judgement, “I do so pass judgement. Egalion?”

Egalion jumped, as if his thoughts had been far away.

“The covered axe, if you will.”

Despite his determined optimism, Garth shuddered. The covered axe would reveal his and his father’s fate, and Garth had no doubt what it would be.

Egalion moved to a small pedestal behind the dais, removing a large tray covered with a deep red velvet cloth from its top, then stepped onto the dais and moved around to the Seat of Judgement.

“There is a rumour,” came an anonymous and rough voice from the very rear of the chamber, “that the Baxtors freed Prince Maximilian from the Veins.”

Egalion, still several steps away from Cavor, started and faltered in his stride. He recovered quickly.

“Seize that man!” Cavor yelled, his composure deserting him in an instant. He half stood from his seat, then sank reluctantly down again.


“Aye!” called another, even rougher voice, “and brought back from a living death, ‘tis said.”

Garth and Joseph exchanged quick glances—this must be the work of Alaine the woodsman.

Any further comments were silenced by the guards who had muscled their way into the tight knot of tradesmen and street thieves. They seized four or five men, hustling them out the rear doors, and the Chamber of Justice returned to some semblance of order, although there was still an observable undercurrent of tension, if not of murmur.

Cavor smiled reassuringly, although from his close vantage point Garth could see what an effort it cost him. “See the result of abominable treason, my friends?” he called softly. “No doubt the Baxtors meant to dress up some poor prisoner and hope to pass him off as Maximilian—may his soul rest in peace.”

For the first time he stared at Garth and Joseph. “Or did you think to dye your son’s hair and pass him off as Prince Maximilian?” Cavor laughed, then abruptly sobered. “The depth of your treason hurts and,” his voice dropped, “saddens me. Egalion.”

Egalion now stood to the king’s side. He held out the covered tray, but he lifted his eyes and stared at Garth and Joseph. His bearing was confident, but his eyes were troubled.

Cavor did not notice. The incident at the rear of the crowd had unnerved him, and he wished he’d kept the chamber clear of rabble. But he’d wanted to avoid the look of a secretive trial, for that would indicate secrets to hide, and had ordered the doorsmen to allow in as many as the Chamber of Justice would comfortably hold.

Now Cavor hastened on with the judgement. He indicated Egalion should step forward into clear view, facing the prisoners in the dock. He took one corner of the red velvet and lifted his eyes, staring at the Baxtors.

Both stared back at him, their calmness unsettling, almost defiant.

Cavor swallowed. “Behold my judgement,” he cried, and whipped the cloth from the tray.

Beneath lay the axe of justice, glinting in the sunlight that fell from the chamber’s high windows.

Its blade was turned towards the prisoners in the dock.

Death.

If it had been turned away then the judgement would have been in the prisoners’ favour, but neither of them had harboured any doubts that the wicked blade would face them.

Another murmur spread through the chamber.

Cavor’s face had gone a pasty white. “Death,” he whispered. “Egalion? I would have the sentence carried out immediately. See to it, if you please.”
TWENTY FIVE
CITY SQUARE

The central space of Ruen was octagonal, but had never been called anything else than City Square. Separated from
the palace and court complex by a wide avenue, it was used for a number of purposes at any one time: markets (and
even the bustling twice-weekly market could not fill its vast area), parade ground, meeting place and, as today, part
execution ground.

Whether due to the efforts and rumours of the woodsman Alaine, perhaps aided by the Order of Persimius, or
because of the unusual nature of the trial—judging as it did not only a case of high treason (and who had seen one of
those in over a generation?) but also the Physician Baxtor and his son—the enormous square was filled to virtual
capacity.

Despite its size, the crowd was unusually quiet. Although few knew Garth, Joseph—as were his father and
grandfather before him—was fondly and kindly remembered by the ordinary folk of Ruen. All the Baxtors wielded
powerful Touch, yet they did not charge high prices for their services. Indeed, on many an occasion, they would
only smile and refuse to accept payment if they knew the patient or his family was in financial difficulties.

And Joseph was also closely associated with the old king and with Maximilian. How many times had Joseph
Baxtor strolled through this very square with the young prince at his side, smiling and laughing with those who
stopped to talk with them?

Maximilian. The crowd was tense. Expectant. Over the past few days unusual and unsettling rumours had
sworn the city, yet no-one knew their origin nor the full truth of them.

Maximilian. Kidnapped at fourteen. Enslaved in the Veins. Freed by his own indomitable spirit and the magic
of powerful sorcerers.

Would he return to claim the throne of Escator? When? And what of Cavor? Darker rumour had it that Cavor
had planned the young prince’s disappearance. Few, having heard this rumour, were prepared to repeat it save in
deepest privacy.

![](image)

And Cavor’s trial (if such it could be called) of the Baxtors damned him in many eyes—especially when further
rumour placed Garth Baxtor at the heart of the effort to free Maximilian.

Maximilian. Where was he? Did he really exist? Or were the rumours just a cruel hoax, constructed as Cavor
suggested, to foment rebellion and civil war?

No-one knew.

But surely, someone, somewhere, must have the answers.

Necks craned and feet shifted nervously. Hands clenched, and then unclenched. The crowd muttered and
rustled.

Egalion, squashing his own doubts as best he could (and only he knew how far into the nights they’d kept him
awake), marched at the head of the well-armoured execution detail into the square. In the heart of the detail,
surrounded on each side by at least eight guards, marched Garth and Joseph.

By this time even Garth’s eternal optimism had begun to pall. He’d expected Maximilian to stand forth in the
Chamber of Judgement and challenge Cavor. But nothing had happened. True, one or two men had shouted
Maximilian’s name, but the prince himself had remained stubbornly absent.

And a few shouted questions from the back of the chamber had done nothing to halt Cavor damning them to
death in City Square.

Garth stumbled and Joseph caught at his elbow, concerned, his own mounting horror evident in his dark eyes.

“I’m all right, father,” Garth muttered, half expecting the guards to strike him for speaking, but they kept their
heads averted and their weapons to themselves. Perhaps the Baxtors were as good as dead in their eyes anyway,
and a few mumbled words and goodbyes would matter neither one way nor the other.

Joseph’s hand tightened. “There is still hope, Garth. Still hope.”

Garth tried to smile for his father, but it didn’t work.

The guards marched them remorselessly on.

The crowd stirred as the execution detail moved out from the court complex into the square. Troops had kept a way
clear for it, and the detail marched sternly and briskly towards the hastily assembled executioner’s platform to one
side of the square. The splintered platform rose the height of two men above the heads of the crowd and there was a wide open space before it; no-one was to be denied a view.

Behind the detail came Cavor himself on a magnificent white horse, still in the blue robes of justice, but now thrown back over his shoulder to reveal more of his armour and the sword that swung at his hip. On his head sat the crown of Escator, and below it his face was implacable and showed not a shred of doubt or guilt; those who could see him wondered at the truth of the rumours—surely their king was too confident and too grave to be accounted a schemer who had cheated Prince Maximilian of the throne?

Behind Cavor marched yet more troops, their booted feet sounding an uncompromising dirge.

The execution squad had now reached the platform, and Egalion directed several guards to march the Baxtors to its top. The other guards he ranged two deep about the platform to repel any foolish rescue attempts; yet, despite the number of guards, Egalion could not stop his eyes traversing the crowd in a curious yet apprehensive sweep. He did not yet want to admit to himself for what or for whom he looked.

Cavor waited until Joseph and Garth, their hands now bound behind their backs, were standing behind the two wooden blocks—their surfaces scarred and stained by years of use—before he spurred his horse forward, scattering several of the crowd before him.

"My people!" Cavor shouted, standing up in his stirrups. "I beg you witness the deaths of two of the most heinous traitors this realm has yet bred!" He repeated the accusations he’d mouthed in the Chamber of Justice (and he’d rehearsed them so often in his mind that he now almost believed them himself), watching the crowd’s reaction with satisfaction. When he’d heard Maximilian’s name shouted in the Chamber of Justice, Cavor had momentarily doubted the wisdom of such a public accusation and execution. But now he was pleased. If anyone else had heard these treasonous rumours of Maximilian then best they realise the consequences of believing in them.

Garth and Joseph Baxtor’s deaths would do more than silence a pair of traitors; it might well stop civil insurrection before it had a chance to breed and fester.

"Executioner!" he shouted, swinging his horse back to face the block. "Do you stand ready?"

A black robed and masked man stepped forward from the back of the platform. "Aye, sire. I stand ready."

Two guards nudged Garth and his father forward, forcing them to their knees before the blocks. Garth gave his father one long, last look, then looked inward, searching for the inner peace he needed to meet death.

A cold smile playing across his face, Cavor raised a gloved hand high in the air. "Then—"

"I countermand both your order and your judgement, Cavor," said a clear voice from several paces back in the crowd, "and I challenge your right to wear those robes and that crown in the first instance."

The crowd parted and a man dressed in the rough clothes of a woodsman stepped forth.

Cavor, his hand still suspended above his head, his horse skittering nervously underneath him, stared unbelievingly into the face of Maximilian Persimius.

As the soldiers had seized Garth and Joseph, Ravenna had apologised silently to Drava for their intrusion, then spirited Maximilian and Vorstus into the dream world, expending more power in the extremity of her fear than she’d ever done previously.

As the mists closed about them Maximilian had rounded on her furiously. "What have you done? They need my help!"

Too exhausted to reply herself, Ravenna had let Vorstus speak. "And what would you do against sixty men, Prince? You don’t even have the ceremonial sword with you."

Maximilian had turned on him with equal fury.

"I—"

Vorstus did not let him finish. "They would take you too, Maximilian, and this time Cavor would make sure that you were condemned to such a darkness that it would be impossible to escape from. We must trust that Egalion will not harm either of the Baxtors until he gets them to Ruen. And from there…well, perhaps from there we will have a chance."

Grieving for the capture of the Baxtors, but accepting Vorstus’ reasoning, Maximilian had allowed Ravenna to lead them through the paths of the dream world until, with some direction from Vorstus, they eventually emerged into a mystical underground chamber of the Ruen headquarters of the Order of Persimius the same day that Egalion had delivered Garth and Joseph to Cavor.

There, with as many of the order as were in Ruen, together with Alaine and several of his closest and most
trusted confidantes, they had planned.

Deep into the night before Garth and Joseph’s trial, Maximilian had raised his face and stared at those about the room. “I am ready,” he said quietly.

“But—”

Maximilian had turned his deep blue eyes on Vorstus. “I will never be ready enough to suit your caution, Vorstus, but I will never again have the chance that tomorrow’s spectacle provides. If I cannot succeed tomorrow, then I will never succeed, anywhere.”

Cavor, his face pale with shock, slowly lowered his hand. His heart was thudding painfully in his chest, but somehow the actual sight of the man who threatened to tear down all he had built over the past seventeen years managed to calm and focus his mind.

His nemesis was here, and all he had to do was to confront it.

“Seize him,” he ordered Egalion.

Maximilian turned his head and looked steadily at Egalion.

His mind suddenly very clear, Egalion’s eyes flickered to Cavor, then back to Maximilian. “Perhaps you might like to state your business,” he said to Maximilian, and Cavor’s face twitched in shock at the man’s insubordination.

“I ordered you to—” he began, his voice tight with anger, but Maximilian interrupted.

“My business?” He raised his head, aware that every eye and every ear was strained his way. The square was stunningly quiet. He looked Cavor directly in the eye. “My name is Maximilian Persimius, Prince of Escator…and rightful king.”

His voice was clear and true, and the crowd took a single, gasping breath of shock.

“My business?” Maximilian said again, raising a quizzical eyebrow. Behind him two cloaked figures moved quietly out of the crowd to stand at his back. “I am here to challenge you for the throne, Cavor, and to accuse you of my kidnap and wrongful incarceration. If you claimed and sat the throne, Cavor, then you did so through lies and deceptions.” He paused. “Will you stand aside for me, Cavor? Will you vacate what you have so deceitfully claimed?”

Garth, watching from the block and with a clear view of both Maximilian and Cavor, had to admire the king’s reaction.

Cavor leaned back in the saddle and laughed, the sound apparently genuine and unforced. “Vacate the throne for you, Prince-of-wishing? I admire your determination, but I deplore your misguided sense of justice and truth.”

Again he stood high in the saddle and addressed the crowd; now, as far as Garth could determine, so tense that a single shout could have sent them into a black riot.

But in whose favour, Garth could not tell.

“Hear me,” Cavor called, his voice as calm and as true as Maximilian’s had been. “Before me stands a man who claims to be Maximilian Persimius, son of the late king and queen. See, he even appears to have the Persimius’ darkness of hair and blueness of eyes. But, my people,” Cavor’s voice assumed an inexpressible sadness, “it hurts me to have to relate to you the truth. The dead queen, may the gods have mercy on her fragile femininity, could not bear an heir, and the single fruit of her womb slipped dead from her body. In despair—for what else could have prompted her actions?—she swapped the dead babe for the newborn son of a blacksmith who, despite his low birth, had the visage and colouring that could fool even the most discriminating of observers. Then—”

“I am true-born and blooded, Cavor,” Maximilian shouted, “and these good people do not have to listen to any more of your lies. Let the gods decide between us! Come, will you accept my challenge?”

Garth could see that Cavor’s words had affected many in the crowd, but Maximilian, even in his woodsman’s clothes, stood proud and straight before Cavor. No doubt showed in his face—and who could doubt, staring into that face, its noble ancestry?

Cavor dropped his eyes from the crowd. “A duel to the death, pretender? Is that what you wish?”

Maximilian smiled, the movement cold and thin. “I am not afraid of you, Cavor.”

“I think you should know, Cavor,” and one of the figures behind Maximilian cast aside his cloak, “that the Order of Persimius stands behind Maximilian on this issue.”

Cavor hissed, momentarily nonplussed. Vorstus stood before him, now clad in his robes of office as Grand Abbot of the Order of Persimius. Cavor sneered. “What has the Pretender offered you, Vorstus, that you desert the truth so readily? You backed my claim, you marked my arm. Why turn against me now?”

“Because now Maximilian Persimius has returned from his unnatural grave, Cavor and, unlike the majority of the good people in this square, I know who put him there!”

Cavor stared at Vorstus a moment longer, then turned withering eyes back to Maximilian. “I can see that a duel
to the death is what it will take to consign your lies forever to the grave, pretender,” Cavor said very low, but clearly enough so that most could hear him in the preternatural silence. “Come, stand forth.”

“Oh,” an indescribably sad voice said, drifting over the crowd, “I’m not so sure about that.”

For the first time fear rippled swiftly across Cavor’s face, and was just as swiftly concealed again. He had known that Maximilian had made his claim in the Pavilion, had felt him trace through the mark, and he should have by rights expected this. But the actual appearance of the Manteceros unnerved him as nothing else had.

This was going to go to an ordeal, and suddenly Cavor was very, very afraid. Just for a moment he thought he heard ghostly echoes of the fourteen-year-old Maximilian’s screams reverberate about this square as they had once rung about the forest glade.

The Manteceros had appeared in the very centre of the crowd, although how he had displaced none in his sudden appearance no-one knew.

The crowd rippled and murmured in startlement, if not surprise. This had been a day when beliefs and loyalties had been turned on their heads, and the appearance of the legendary Manteceros only underscored the feeling of unreality and enchantment hanging over the square. As the ungainly blue beast stepped forward, the crowd parted before it.

Cavor bowed low in his saddle as the Manteceros approached. “I greet you well, Manteceros, if in some surprise. Has this pretender deceived you as well?”

The Manteceros came to a halt, its mournful face resolute. “He has claimed, Cavor, and that I must respect. Now he has challenged your right to the throne. That also I must respect. I might wish he had done neither, but his claim might be justified, and so I judge neither right nor left until the ordeal has been decided.”

“And the ordeal?” Cavor asked, his voice tight with nervous anticipation. “What form will it take? Will you administer it to the victor of the challenge, or to us both?”

The Manteceros sighed. “No, no, Cavor. I think you both misunderstand the nature of the challenge. Maximilian only needed to speak the challenge for me to appear and administer the ordeal—and that in itself will threaten no-one’s health. There is no need for a clashing of swords and a spilling of blood.”

Cavor’s lip curled—this ordeal sounded like a tame thing—and he looked back at Maximilian. “I see you have corrupted the Manteceros with your cowardly concerns, pretender. If you have no stomach for a challenge—a duel—then speak so now. I’m sure those here to witness will understand.”

Maximilian risked a quick look at the faces about him. If he backed down now yet still won whatever kind of ordeal the Manteceros thought to administer then he would never gain their respect. They would always remember him as the man too cowardly to take on Cavor. Too afraid to risk trial by sword.

“I had no other intent than to follow the speaking of my challenge with the sweep of my sword, Cavor. A duel to the death it is.”

“Oh,” the Manteceros exclaimed, angered by the two men’s stubborn desire to settle this with swords rather than words. “I really don’t know about—”

Maximilian looked at the Manteceros. “Don’t you see why I have to do this?” he asked softly. “I offered the challenge. I cannot back down now.”

The Manteceros held Maximilian’s gaze, then acquiesced with a curt nod. “I cannot approve, but I do understand.” Its blue eyes flickered over both Cavor and Maximilian. “But so too must both the claimants understand that as they refuse to be persuaded from this duel, neither will I be persuaded from administering the ordeal. Do you understand?”

Both men nodded, their actions as terse as the Manteceros’ voice.

The other cloaked figure who had stepped out behind Maximilian now moved to the Manteceros and stroked its neck soothingly. The creature relaxed, and Cavor spared the figure a curious glance.

But he had no time for an overlong look. “You challenged me,” he said to Maximilian, “and thus I hold the right to name the weapons.”

Maximilian inclined his head.

Cavor smiled. Maximilian had only been a boy when he was thrown into the Veins, and would have had only limited training before that. And seventeen years in which to lose what training he did have.

“I name the long sword, wish-hunter.” Cavor grinned in triumph. The long sword not only took extraordinary strength, but also required finely honed and practised skills. Even if Maximilian could lift his weapon, he would not have the skill to survive Cavor’s first thrust.

Maximilian accepted the decision, knowing why Cavor had chosen that weapon. “Then it rests to me to name the place,” he said, and Cavor nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes.”

Maximilian smiled, as cold an effort as any managed by Cavor. “Then I name the Veins, Cavor. Beneath the hanging wall.”
Silence, and then Cavor spoke, his voice as harsh as an arctic dust storm. “I name Egalion as my companion.”

Startled, for Egalion knew that Cavor should have good reason to be enraged by his earlier refusal to seize Maximilian when ordered, the commander recovered quickly. Best he be there. He nodded.

Maximilian thought, but he did not have to think long. He raised his head towards the platform and smiled with genuine sweetness, incongruous in this atmosphere. “Garth, will you stand at my back as companion?”

Even more startled than Egalion, Garth similarly nodded. Then he laughed. “If I still have a head.”

Before either Cavor or Maximilian could respond, the Manteceros stepped forward. “Cavor, you have tried and condemned these two men on the assumption Maximilian is merely a pretender. Until the issue is decided they must be released.”

Cavor shot the two Baxtors a look of pure hatred, but he agreed with a brief nod of his head.

“And you two,” the Manteceros continued. “If you are released, will you promise to submit to Cavor’s judgement if he wins through?”

Joseph let himself relax fully for the first time in days. “Yes, Manteceros. We will.” Then he looked at his son and grinned; nothing could blunt the exuberance and sheer joy of life snatched back from the very edge of the executioner’s axe.

“Well,” said the Manteceros to Cavor and Maximilian. “Don’t think you two will be going off without me. If I have to duck sword strokes to administer the ordeal, then so be it. Now,” and he turned to the cloaked figure by his side, “Ravenna, everyone else seems to have picked a companion for this nonsense, and so shall I. Will you accompany me?”

“Gladly, sweet creature,” she said, and kissed the Manteceros’ nose, the hood falling back from her head as she did so. “Gladly.”

It wasn’t until early evening, when the date for the duel had been set and well after the crowd had dispersed to discuss the day’s events about fires and ale jugs, that Cavor and Maximilian independently realised that neither yet had any idea what type of ordeal the Manteceros meant to administer.

Cavor spent an hour frowning into the ashes of his fireplace; in his chair in the order’s headquarters, Maximilian turned his head aside…and smiled.
TWENTY SIX
A SAD, SAD TALE

They had a week to prepare and travel to the Veins, and each man used that week as best he saw fit to ensure his triumph.

Maximilian spent the nights sleeping soundly and long, while the days he spent on his knees in prayer or meditation, or speaking gently with Ravenna, whose conversation he enjoyed.

Cavor spent time doing none of these things, but he did spend many hours closeted with Fennon Furst—who left for the Veins two days ahead of either Cavor or Maximilian—or in the palace courtyard at weapon practice, his long sword whispering viciously through the air.

No-one saw the Manteceros, but no-one doubted that it would appear as needed.

Four days after the aborted execution in City Square the two men made final preparations to travel (independently) to the Veins. Cavor left early one morning, escorted by the larger portion of Escator’s standing army.

Maximilian left at noon, his escort consisting only of those who had believed in him enough to rescue him from beneath the hanging wall, while the majority of the Order of Persimius followed Maximilian’s party in several well-appointed wagons.

Behind them, at a respectful distance of some two hundred paces, came the first in a column of almost fourteen thousand people from Ruen and surrounding districts. They could sense that not only would the duel in the Veins decide a throne, it would also birth a legend, and they wanted to be there to witness.

And all this time laboured thousands of men in the Veins, their bodies glistening with sweat and gloam and despair, and they had no idea of the drama about to be played out in their midst.

Along the coasts and in the underground caverns and chasms, throbbed the sea, watching, wanting, probing… seeking, seeking, seeking…

Myrna was overflowing with people, loud conversation and whispered rumour. The dreary town had never felt so alive: Anya and her girls locked the front door—who could think of business when such events as these beckoned? —and leaned from windows thrown wide open, eyes and voices wondering, their bright smiles and scarves drifting in the breeze blowing in from the sea.

The army lay encamped and encircled about Myrna and the Veins; beyond them sprawled the makeshift camps of the thousands who had walked from Ruen, their numbers swelled by further hundreds who’d come east and south from the northern countryside. When he arrived, Cavor and his immediate entourage accepted Fennon Furst’s hospitality; Maximilian, with the Baxtors, Ravenna and three or four of the Order of Persimius, made full use of the physicians’ quarters.

On the second day after all had arrived, mediators from both groups made arrangements for the duel; on the third day Cavor and Maximilian prepared to go down the Veins.

Cavor allowed Egalion to buckle on his weapon belt, then asked the man to wait for him outside. As Egalion left the room, Cavor made a show of checking the straps on the light armour he wore, then adjusted the weapon belt about his hips. The long sword felt satisfactorily weighty swinging against his left leg, and Cavor’s mouth curled in a tight smile. For almost forty years he’d trained with this weapon, and he’d never been fitter; since Maximilian had made his claim in the Pavilion the mark on his arm had healed completely. Cavor felt nothing but strength suffuse his body. Even if he would be fighting in the stinking cloyness of the Veins, he would prevail. His smile widened.

From his shadowed corner Fennon Furst saw the smile and stepped forward. “You will win, sire.”

Cavor’s face hardened. “In whatever manner I have to, Furst. Have you…?”

Furst bowed slightly. “All is prepared, sire.”

Cavor relaxed slightly. “Good. Then let us go and dispose of this wishful dreamer once and for all.”

Maximilian prepared in much the same ritualistic manner that he’d made his claim. Attended only by Garth, he spent an hour in prayer after he rose, breakfasted lightly, then bathed and dressed in nothing but linen breeches. Even his feet he left bare.
Garth eyed him with some concern. “Maximilian, er, Prince…” Garth had still not quite worked out what to call the prince.

Maximilian paused from rubbing a light oil into his arms and shoulders. “Call me Maximilian, Garth,” he said with a grin. “You of all people owe me no title.”

“Ah, yes, well…Maximilian. Are you sure that I’m the best person to act as your companion down the Veins? I would have thought that one of the guards…someone familiar with weapons…”

Maximilian ran his hands back through his hair, binding it in a short tail in the nape of his neck. “I need a friend at my back, Garth. Not someone shouting terse instructions about how to swing a sword.”

Garth’s eyes slipped to the long sword lying in its scabbard on the table. “Maximilian,” he said quietly, “can you use that?”

Maximilian sobered, and his hands dropped loosely to his sides. “It’s been years, Garth. Years, and at fourteen I’d only just begun my training with the long sword.” A wry expression crossed his face. “I wish Cavor had chosen mine-picks to fight with.”

Despite his concerns, Garth broke into laughter. “I doubt he even knows what one is, Maximilian. He’s probably no idea how the prisoners worried the gloam from the rock-face.”

Maximilian stepped over to the table and picked the weapon belt up, holding it in his hands for a long moment before buckling it about his hips. Then, without any apparent effort, he lifted the heavy sword and scabbard and slipped them into place. “Cavor will soon find out more about the Veins than he ever would have wished,” he observed.

Garth eyed him, sober now. Even dressed only in a pair of breeches, Maximilian looked every inch the king. His aquiline face was composed, almost grave, and his bearing proud. His skin glowed ivory in the soft light of the room, the blue-engraved Manteceros rippling across his right upper arm and catching the glints in his blue-black hair. Despite Maximilian’s years apart from the sword, he appeared to move at one with the weapon.

Without knowing why he did it, Garth offered Maximilian his hand. The prince grasped it with both of his, and their eyes met.

“You have my faith,” Garth whispered, letting his Touch burn fiercely through his hand, “and my belief.” There was no healing in that Touch, only pure emotion, and Maximilian’s eyes misted.

“I know it,” he replied, “and it is why I chose you for my companion. To have faith at my back today is more than I could ask for.”

For a moment longer they stood, then both let their hands drop, slightly self-conscious at the emotion each had revealed to the other.

“Well,” Maximilian said, “shall we go?”

Garth gave him a confident grin and waved that he should precede him through the door, but privately he wondered how Maximilian felt about going back beneath the hanging wall. Then he shook his head, and followed Maximilian out the door. For Maximilian to go back beneath the hanging wall demonstrated a courage that Garth found almost impossible to comprehend.

They met at noon by the main shaft. It was a bright and sunny day, yet the greyness of the Veins so pervaded the air that it seemed cool and dreary. At a distance of fifty or sixty paces stood guards and soldiers at stiff attention; behind them thousands upon thousands of the ordinary folk of Escator.

All were quiet and solemn.

Garth and Ravenna walked quietly behind Maximilian—Vorstus and Joseph were waiting at the first ring of soldiers. They shared a nervous glance—where was the Manteceros?

Cavor, waiting by the shaft, didn’t care. He had almost forgotten the Manteceros and its annoying insistence on administering its curious ordeal. All Cavor wanted, all he had on his mind, was that finally he was going to run Maximilian through with his sword. And then, he knew, knew, that his mark would never trouble him again.

He grinned coldly at Maximilian as he, the Baxtor youth and that curiously beautiful girl stepped underneath the ironwork surmounting the shaft—what’s the fool thinking of, dressing only in breeches? Cavor almost laughed. This was going to be easier than he thought.

“Summon the cage,” he said tersely, and behind him Egalion, dressed only in a short tunic and breeches himself, nodded to Jack, who stood by the controls.

Garth ran his eyes over Jack. He was newly stooped, and fresh scars littered his body; the guard avoided his eyes and threw a lever.

Deep in the yawning shaft at their feet came an answering rumble, then a frightful screeching as the cage rushed towards the surface. Garth forgot Jack and looked anxiously at Maximilian. The prince’s face and body was
apparently relaxed, but Garth thought he could see some tightness about his eyes.

The screeching increased, and now seemed overlaid by some ghostly wailing. Fennon Furst, who neither Garth nor Ravenna had noticed to this point, emerged from behind an iron strut. His red hair was oiled down so tightly it clung to his skull in a shining cap. “Welcome home, 859!” he jeered.

Maximilian could not help a flinch spasm across his face, and Cavor roared with confident laughter. “This time I will make damn sure you won’t escape, pretender!”

Cavor had been forced to shout to make his voice heard above the impending arrival of the cage, and the instant that he had finished the cage crashed into the iron framework. Above their heads massive wheels ground reluctantly to a halt, and great chains twisted and shrieked with the shock of the cage’s arrival.

With the cage had arrived the dreadful sulphurous stench of the Veins; it hung about the cage like a fog.

Garth shuddered, and wondered how Maximilian could bear it.

Furst stepped forward and swung open the door, then stepped back in hasty shock.

Standing inside the cage was the Manteceros, its face wrapped in an expression recalling the darkness below.

Ravenna stepped gracefully inside the cage and stroked the creature’s nose. “Skip, trip, my pretty man,” she smiled, and the Manteceros’ face lightened slightly.

“It is time,” it said, shifting its eyes to those waiting outside. “Finally, it is time.”

“More than time,” Cavor said roughly, and pushed past the Manteceros into the cage. Egaliion, then Maximilian, Garth and Furst—who announced loudly that he would operate the machinery and wait with the cage, crowded into the small space.

Ravenna found herself squeezed between the thick, rusty wire netting walls and Cavor, and she suppressed a grimace of distaste as the man pressed against her body even more than he had to.

Then the doors closed, and the silent group plummeted to their fate.

Furst let the cage descend, not to Section 205, where Garth had expected them to go, but to a section several levels lower. As soon as they stepped out of the cage—Furst remaining behind—he realised why. The initial cavern, then the tunnels opening off it, were much higher and wider than those of Section 205.

Here the combatants would have room to move; to swing their swords.

“Are you ready, pretender?” Cavor asked belligerently, a note of tension creeping into his voice. He could hardly believe the stench of this forsaken hole in the ground.

Maximilian stared at him a moment. “Not here,” he said calmly. “In the Veins, Cavor, not in their foyer.” He set off without a backward glance down one of tunnels, forcing the others to follow him.

The Manteceros, Ravenna at its shoulder, brought up the rear.

As they went Garth was shocked, deeply shocked, to realise that men still laboured down the Veins. Surely Furst could have called a halt to work for this one day?

But apparently Furst was committed to meeting his quota of gloam, and challenge or no challenge, the men still worked and died silently and hopelessly. Successive gangs watched silently, their bodies hunched, their eyes devoid of any expression or any hope, as the strange procession passed them by.

Ignoring the gangs he passed, Maximilian walked until the party was deep into the tunnel. Gloom surrounded them, torches sputtered fitfully but cast little light, and the blackness of the tunnel walls reached out hungrily for those who dared to pass within it.

“Here,” he said eventually, some minutes after they’d passed a group of prisoners huddled against the floor of the tunnel in an infrequent and inadequate break from their labour.

Cavor glanced about. If he had any doubts then they did not show from his face—barely visible in the pressing shadow. “As good a place to die as any other, pretender. Are you ready?”

Cavor’s sword rattled out of his scabbard, and Maximilian drew his to meet him. Egaliion and Garth hastily moved back two or three paces behind their respective combatants.

“Gentlemen,” said the Manteceros, ignoring the danger and taking a shuffling step forward. “There is still time to reconsider this ridiculous duel. A simple tale will suffice to determine who—”

“Be quiet, you irritating lump of morose flesh!” Cavor snarled, and lunged with his sword at Maximilian; Ravenna clutched at the Manteceros’ stiff mane and hauled the creature back a pace or two.

Maximilian surprised Cavor. The prince’s body was lean compared to Cavor’s well-muscled frame, but it belied a strength that had been built over seventeen years of back-breaking labour in the Veins. He met and parried Cavor’s first thrust, then drove home the attack himself. But Cavor met attack with vicious determination, and soon Maximilian found himself retreating first one step, then another, then three more.

Cavor grinned.

Yet if he had won an initial advantage, soon Maximilian’s knowledge of the Veins came to his aid. The gloom was his friend, the hanging wall his ally. He knew the darkness with a lover’s intimacy, and he used it as an
additional weapon, melding with shadows one moment, rushing out of them the next, stepping lithely over rocks that Cavor stumbled—and once almost fell—over, letting the darkness envelop him, comfort him, hold him as it had for so very many years.

He merged with the gloom and the shadows, became one with them; Cavor fought them and cursed them, and then had to spit out the choking dust that filled his mouth.

Soon he realised why Maximilian had only worn light breeches. Sweat trickled down his body, collecting in small pockets underneath his armour, rubbing, chaffing, irritating. Cavor was a strong man, and used to fighting in full armour, but soon even this light plate he wore felt as though he had rocks strapped to his back, his shoulders and his arms.

Maximilian had barely raised a sweat.

Cavor stepped back, drawing desperately needed breath into lungs screaming with abuse, then wasting it all in a scream of rage as he lunged for Maximilian again.

“Truly!” the Manteceros muttered under its breath, then turned its head and nuzzled Ravenna. The girl’s face was pale and damp with sweat; even though Maximilian was holding his own, she did not know how he could possibly manage to best Cavor.

“Sweet lady,” the Manteceros said quietly, “I must administer the ordeal. This clashing of swords will accomplish nothing—save, perhaps, the death of the true king.”

Ravenna dragged her eyes away from Cavor and Maximilian. Was the Manteceros admitting some preference for Maximilian?

“Egalion stands between me and the two men, Ravenna. Can you pull him back? Then stay with me, bury one hand deep within my mane and stroke my neck with the other, and give me the courage to administer this ordeal. It is very painful.”

“But you said that it wouldn’t harm them!” Ravenna cried.

“Not them,” the Manteceros replied, and Ravenna could see that it was close to tears, “but its sadness will plunge a sword into my own heart. Now, do as I ask.”

Hesitating, Ravenna tugged at Egalion’s arm. The man jumped. All his attention had been on the two fighting before him.

“Please,” Ravenna mumbled, and indicated that he should step behind her and the Manteceros.

Egalion blinked, turned to look at Maximilian and Cavor, then nodded, his shoulders slumping wearily. He stood at Cavor’s back, but he watched the battle as if he stood at Maximilian’s. He did not want the prince to die.

Ravenna flinched at the tortured rasp of metal against metal as she and the Manteceros drew as close to the men as they dared.

The creature coughed, then cleared its throat.

Neither man took any notice.

“Only the ordeal can determine the true king,” the Manteceros said softly, reaching deep within itself for the strength to do what it had to. “Not this ridiculous duel.”

The Manteceros lifted its head, but its voice remained soft. “Listen to me. Listen to the sadness I must relate. Live it.”

Neither man paid this any attention either. Cavor had driven Maximilian to his knees with a parry of strokes that seemed deadlier than any he’d struck before, and Ravenna cried out softly as Maximilian barely managed to regain his feet. For the first time it appeared the prince was tiring.

“Listen to me,” the Manteceros repeated. “Live it.” Its eyes were now far distant, looking at something far sadder than the battle before it.

“Once there was a woman, married to a blacksmith in Ruen. As wives are wont to do, she waxed great with child, and one afternoon her time came. Her husband sent for the local midwife, but she was busy elsewhere, and the midwife from the neighbourhood next to theirs answered the call. She was a short woman, stout, and she had a hunched shoulder, a twisted arm, and wall eyes that stared at deviant angles. When she entered the birthing chamber, the wife cried out in shock and terror, and the midwife took affront.”

The swords clashed in fury, and a shower of sparks cascaded to the floor. Ravenna did not think either man heard the Manteceros. But she...now she was there in the birthing chamber with the woman struggling with the new life within her.

“In spite the midwife sat back when the woman bled, and let her life’s blood drain into useless pools in the bed. And from these cooling pools she lifted a baby girl even as the mother took one last shuddering breath and died. ‘I curse you,’ the midwife cried to the infant, ‘to a sad life!’ Then she picked up her instruments, laid the infant down by her dead mother, and left the room.”

The Manteceros paused, and as it did so Ravenna roused enough to notice that Maximilian and Cavor also
paused. Perhaps they were listening.

But the next moment their swords met again, and both grunted with the effort of dealing each other death.

“The blacksmith mourned his wife, for she had been useful, and blamed his infant daughter for his loss. He put her out to a wet nurse, begrudging every coin he had to pay to let his daughter suck at the woman’s breast, and only reluctantly took her back into his house when she was four. The blacksmith already had three older sons, and he did not want this daughter, but he was obliged to take her.”

The Manteceros took a great, shuddering breath, and through the mists that wrapped her mind Ravenna heard Maximilian cry out softly. Had he been hurt?

“She grew, but following the midwife’s curse she grew only into sadness. Her father and brothers treated her with cold indifference that too often bordered on hostility. The girl spent her days attending their needs, never leaving the house or the forge that abutted it, keeping her head bowed, never smiling. She had no reason to smile.”

Now both men’s movements had slowed, and their shoulders dropped as if they carried some tremendous weight. Ravenna’s head was buried in the Manteceros’ mane, and her shoulders trembled.

The Manteceros continued, but great tears rolled out of its eyes and down its cheeks. Ravenna leaned even closer, rubbing, stroking, comforting, gaining comfort herself from the creature’s warmth.

“She grew into young womanhood, yet her days were as grey and featureless as they had been as a child. Her only comfort was her mother’s small collection of books which she kept under her bed and only pulled out to read once everyone else in the house was asleep. These books were her only friends. Until…until one day a young man came to the forge, bringing his horse which had cast a shoe. He spied the woman as she sought to hide in the shadows, and managed a quiet word to her. Over the next few weeks, with increasing courage, she met him for snatched minutes in the alley behind the house, exchanging words, hopes, dreams. For the first time in her life she learned to smile.”

The Manteceros hesitated, and when it continued its voice was thick with sorrow. “Alas!”

Both Maximilian and Cavor stumbled and cried out with the Manteceros. “Alas!”

“Alas! One night she determined to run away with the young man, run to an inn nearby where they planned to consummate their love and from there move into a world of hope. But she was careless, and in her eagerness left her father’s house before she had dried the dishes washed from the evening meal. Her brothers followed her, furious at her slovenliness, and one took his knife and, as the others held her down, he put out her eyes so that she need never be tempted again.”

“Oh gods,” Maximilian whispered, and almost let his sword fall from his hand. Cavor groaned, one hand to his forehead, then both recovered and set about their battle again.

“Now even her treasured books were denied her. Long hours she would sit on her bed, late at night, feeling their taunting shapes beneath her hands, her tearless sorrow ravaging her face. There was nothing for her now.” The Manteceros paused briefly to collect itself, then continued. “Her father grew old and died, and her brothers took wives, bringing them home to live in their house. She continued as the household drudge, creeping blindly about the house, sometimes but not always evading the sharp corners of furniture deliberately moved into her path and the stabbing fingers of her sisters-in-law. Nieces and nephews were born, and they soon learned the sharp ways of their parents. The woman learned to accept pinches and punches, and she bowed her head to fate.”

Now Cavor was crying, taking huge gulping breaths as he swung his sword about in great, useless arcs. Maximilian was no better; he leaned on his sword, one hand over his eyes, his shoulders shaking.

Garth watched them with growing concern—what was going on?

The Manteceros continued mercilessly. “After some years, she became aware of a comforting presence that lingered in the back alleyway. It was a great shaggy dog, a stray, that someone had discarded. Gradually he became used to her, and accepted careful scraps from her fingers, licking them gratefully when he had finished. He was her only friend, and somehow she conceived the idea that the dog was her lover’s soul come back to aid her. The thought comforted her. One day the dog went a-roaming, as dogs are wont to do, and he caught a squirrel, wandering madly through the back streets of Ruen. As the dog caught the squirrel the rodent bit him, and the dog yelped in surprise and let the creature go. Two days later he felt a madness building in his mind.”

The tunnel was utterly silent now, and if Cavor and Maximilian had their heads bowed in indescribable grief,
then all other eyes were on the Manteceros.

“The woman was relieved when she heard the dog scratching at the door, and she hurried to give it a pat and a hug. But as she leaned down the dog snarled and bit her hand, and she screamed and tore loose, and the brothers and their wives and their numerous children came a-running through the house and dragged her inside, slapping her for her foolishness, and stomped the dog to death.

“But it was too late. She grew feverish, her body wracked with convulsing agony. Her sisters-in-law tended her only enough to keep her alive, but they wished they had not bothered when the woman finally struggled up from her sickbed. The fever had crippled her back and twisted one leg shorter than the other. Even as a drudge, she was useless.”

Maximilian had sunk to his knees in the rock, only his grip on his sword keeping him upright. Cavor had turned to stare at the Manteceros.

“There is not much left to tell,” the creature said, and a strange light came into its eyes. “They threw her out to wander the streets, where she begged what food she could and slept in doorways when she was able. She accepted the abuse meted out by those who prey on the weak and helpless, and knew her time was short. Winter approached, and winter is never kind to those lacking both home and comfort.”

Now the Manteceros reared its head up to its full height. “So she curled up about her rags and sought the only answer to her pain. I ask you now,” it cried, its voice ringing with authority, “to venture the ordeal. What was her answer? What answer could she find to her pain and her sorrow?”

Cavor shifted, stumbling as he did so. “Death,” he whispered. “What answer could there be for her pain but death?”

The Manteceros stared at him. “You are wrong Cavor. Wrong,” it said, its voice now heavy with judgement, then shifted its eyes. “Maximilian?”

Maximilian slowly raised his head, and Ravenna almost cried out at the pain evident in his eyes. Did he somehow see his life mirrored in that of the poor woman cursed to a life of sorrow?

Then, unbelievably, Maximilian smiled his wondrous smile, and hope lit his features. “She laughed,” he said, then laughed himself, the sound ringing rich and vibrant through the tunnel. “She laughed. It was the only thing left for her to do.”

“Yes!” the Manteceros said, and Ravenna could feel its flesh leap beneath her fingers. She frowned. The creature felt almost hot, as if it were running a fever itself. “Yes!”

He turned back to Cavor. “You were wrong, Cavor, because you admitted hopelessness. A true-born king would never do that. You are a man of no hope and, hopeless, I cast you from the throne of Escator.”

“No!” Cavor shrieked, and raised his sword above his head in a huge arc meant to cut Maximilian down where he kneeled.

But rage turned to puzzlement an instant later as he felt his sword seized in tight hands.

His blade had cleaved straight into the gloam above him, and now there it hung, caught in the hanging wall. Cavor struggled with the weapon, his muscles bunching and straining, but he could not shift it.

For an instant everyone stared, then, just as Egalion moved to disarm Cavor completely, the Manteceros screamed.

Ravenna was flung back against the tunnel wall by a huge surge of power and heat. She cried out, and Maximilian scrambled forward on hands and knees, pulling her away from the ball of pulsing light that had enveloped the Manteceros.

Garth shouted and started forward as well, but before he could reach Maximilian and Ravenna, the blue light resolved itself into a tall, well-built man with a head of cobalt hair and eyes that sparked with blue fire. He was almost ethereal, and his fine features were very, very beautiful.

He stared at Maximilian, and spoke low but intensely, demanding.

“Who comes to Claim? Who dares the Dream, And, daring, ------”

Maximilian returned his stare steadily, accepting the challenge. “And, daring....laughs”, he finished, completing the stanza that had puzzled Garth and Ravenna and centuries of historians for so long.

The cobalt-haired man nodded. “Yes. Laughs.” An extraordinary and utterly exquisite smile swept his face. “To laugh is to dare, because laughter dares fate and sorrow and the weight of all injustices. You are true-blooded indeed, Maximilian, and I name you rightful king of Escator. Welcome home.”

Cavor finally let go the sword and slowly lowered his arms, still staring about in utter amazement. Then, in an
instant, his demeanour changed.

“Enjoy your triumph while you can,” he rasped flatly to Maximilian, the sword still hanging over his head, then turned and fled down the tunnel.

No-one paid him the least attention.

“Who are you?” Garth whispered. “Who?”
TWENTY SEVEN
BEYOND THE HANGING WALL

Cavor rushed along the tunnel, cursing each time he stumbled, shouting his frustration on the two occasions he actually fell to crawl on his hands and knees for a few blind paces.

But always he pushed himself up and onwards, shoving guards and prisoners out of the way whenever they threatened to impede his progress, striking one man in the face with his clenched fist when he didn’t move fast enough.

He’d never trusted that Manteceros, no he hadn’t. And wasn’t it like Maximilian to come up with a trick of his own? How had he known the answer to the Manteceros’ question? How? The two must have planned it earlier. Yes, that must be it.

It made what Cavor was about to do less of a treachery and more…well, more of a balancing justice…yes, that was it. A balancing justice.

Finally he ran into the cavern by the shaft. Furst was waiting, the cage door open, and inviting.

His mouth thinned in a cold smile. “And did you best him, sire?”

Cavor cursed foully and shoved Furst into the cage. “Is all ready?”

Furst inclined his head. “Of course, sire.”

“Then do it!” Cavor screamed, “And get us out of this nightmare!”

“If you think this is a nightmare,” Furst muttered under his breath, “be thankful you’re not still down that tunnel.” He leaned down by the cage door and twisted some wires that ran down the shaft.

“Will it work?” Cavor asked anxiously, his temper forgotten in his anxiety to escape into victory.

Furst did not answer for a moment. Then he leaned back, his face contented. “It is done, sire. And, yes, it will work. All we need do now is rise into the sunlight.”

And he slammed the cage door shut and threw the lever.

The cage rocketed towards the surface.

Beyond the hanging wall the sea seethed, waiting, wanting, hoping…probing, probing, probing.

“Who are you?” Garth repeated.

It was Ravenna who answered. She struggled to her knees, ignoring Maximilian by her side, then abased herself before the strange man. “Drava,” she whispered, “Lord of Dreams, I honour you.”

Garth started, stunned.

This extraordinary creature was really the Lord of Dreams?

Drava leaned down and took Ravenna’s hand, helping her to her feet. Behind her Maximilian rose slowly as well, his expression wary. Above him, Cavor’s sword still hung from the hanging wall.

“You were friendlier,” Drava smiled at Ravenna, “when you thought me only a sad, blue creature.” He did not let go of her hand.

The wires had been laid in place days before, and now their ingenious, deadly design did not fail. The slight tug that Furst had given the wire by the cage door activated a lever deep within the bowels of the Veins, and that in turn activated yet another, and that in turn…and so in turn the deadly chain reaction pulsed towards the charges laid in their careful holes in the thin rock-face.

The rock-face had been abandoned several years ago once the workings scraped too close to the sea pounding restlessly five paces through the rock. The face had been shored up and left alone…left alone until recently when the struts and supports had been removed or weakened, and holes carefully drilled into the rock-face itself so that concentric rings rippled out from a central hole.

And then the charges were placed, and connected, and left in peace.

Now wires tugged and pulled, busy levers snapped closed or open, and flint artfully arranged sparked in sudden fury.

Starting from the outside circle, a series of split-second explosions worked their way through to the central charge. In a heartbeat the rock-face blew apart.

For a few minutes there was nothing but the dust clouds and the darkness, then a small trickle of green water crept through a tiny fissure, creeping almost apologetically about the chaotic jumble of rocks, then it was joined by another, then another, and then the rock-face was blown apart by another massive blast and this time there was no
dust but screaming, triumphant water that filled the entire tunnel and then began to boil and foam its way upwards. They felt rather than heard the blast and the subsequent rupture. Maximilian scrambled to his feet and laid his hand on the tunnel wall. It was vibrating underneath his fingers. Drava tilted his head to one side, curious. “Hark,” he said softly, “the sea has penetrated.” Now all could not only feel it beneath their feet but hear it as well, a distant roar…and the sudden, horrifying scent of the salt water that chased away the stench of the gloam. Garth wished they were still wrapped safely in the stench. “It’s bad,” Maximilian whispered. “Very bad.” He paused, and when he resumed his voice was curiously toneless. “We’re dead. No-one is going to be able to escape this cataclysm.” Drava tightened his hold on Ravenna’s hand. As Maximilian had spoken she’d moved closer to him, and he could feel her trembling. “Oh,” he smiled, “I don’t know about that.” “Maximilian,” his tone turned brisk, and he clapped his other hand on the king’s shoulder, “are you prepared to dare the dream?” Maximilian stared at the Lord of Dreams. “What do you mean?” “Do you have the courage?” Drava’s voice had turned hard now, challenging. Maximilian straightened his back and shoulders. “Yes, Drava. Yes I do.” “Do you want to escape beyond the hanging wall?” “Yes.” Maximilian hesitated. “Drava, there are other men here as well. Thousands. Guards and prisoners. Whatever their crimes, none deserve to die like this.” Drava arched one blue eyebrow. “Criminals, Maximilian? You would rescue criminals?” Maximilian did not lower his eyes. “I am responsible for them, Drava—and if there is to be hope for me, then it should encompass them as well.” Drava nodded slowly. Maximilian was not only the true king, he would be a good king as well. “As you wish.” He turned away slightly as he smiled down at Ravenna. He shifted his grip on her hand so that their fingers interlaced. “Ravenna, will you help me?” She returned his smile; Drava needed no-one’s help…but it was nice of him to ask. “Surely, Lord.” “Then,” the Lord of Dreams whispered, and traces of green light flickered through his eyes, “let us dare the dream.” Whatever light there had been in the tunnel abruptly died; Garth, who was standing close to Egalion, heard the man breathe deep in fear, and he could hear his own breath similarly rattle in his throat. The roar of the sea was now much closer…much, much closer, so close the tunnel floor was shaking underneath his feet. With a startling clatter Cavor’s sword fell from the hanging wall, followed an instant later by a shower of small rocks. Without a word the group bunched closer together and Garth felt Maximilian place a hand on his shoulder and that of Egalion. “Courage,” the king whispered. “Believe in the dream.” “Believe,” Drava echoed, and then everyone save the Lord of Dreams took great breaths of surprise, for the blackness had been replaced by a delicate green light. Thousands of tiny emerald lines were spreading across the rock above and below them in delicate webs. As the startled onlookers watched, the lines spread up from the floor and down from the hanging wall until the tunnel was encased in tiny, wriggling emerald lines. Cracks. Tens of thousands of them. Garth remembered his dreams of the fracturing rock-face, and he could not help a shudder of horror. “Courage,” Maximilian repeated, and Garth heard the confidence in the king’s voice, and let it relax him. The emerald web surrounding them continued to thicken and spread until, within only a few minutes, the entire tunnel seemed to be made of frosted emerald glass. Garth, Maximilian’s hand still resting on his shoulder, jumped in surprise—beyond the opaque walls he could see the sea shadow and move. “Welcome to the dream,” Drava said. “Surely this is taking too long,” Cavor muttered, the fingers of one hand entwined in the wire of the cage for support. “Surely we fell faster than this?” Furst glared at the low ceiling of the cage, as if that would help propel it to the surface. The cage appeared to be moving fast enough, and it grunted and screeched and rocked as if it was putting its best effort in. “Falling is always faster than rising, sire. Be patient.” But Cavor could hear the doubt in Furst’s voice. “I want to get out of here, Furst.”
Furst grinned nastily. No doubt. No doubt at all.
Cavor’s mouth twisted in fury as he watched the expression on Furst’s face. “We are in this together…” he began, then puzzlement replaced his fury. “What?”
Furst spun about in the cage, only keeping his feet with difficulty as the cage rocked even more violently.
Faint emerald light trickled through the wire netting and iron framework of the cage.
The next moment Furst forgot all about the light as Cavor grunted in surprise and fell to the floor with an enormous thud. He tried to get up again, but it was almost as if the man’s right shoulder and arm were pinned to the floor.
“The mark,” Cavor gasped, pain carving deep lines into his face. “It’s so heavy…so heavy.” He grunted, trying to rise again, then screamed, his body twisting and writhing about the spot where his arm and shoulder were pinned.
“Stone! The mark is turning to stone!”
The cage slowed.

Garth’s nervousness rapidly gave way to sheer wonder. Now the shapes of fish and frolicking whales cavorted beyond the rapidly clearing emerald walls. He slowly turned on the spot, not knowing which way to look first.
Maximilian smiled as he watched Garth, then caught Drava’s eyes. The Lord of Dreams nodded slightly, and Maximilian walked past him and further down the tunnel. Drava and Ravenna followed, still hand in hand, then Garth and Egalion, both utterly awe-struck by the sights they witnessed, scrambled after them.
The tunnel twisted and bent, as Garth remembered it had, and at about the third bend Maximilian came across the first gang of prisoners. Both prisoners and guards were huddled on the floor, their eyes glazed, not knowing if they were still alive or had, somehow, unknowingly passed into death.
In this fragile emerald tunnel their filth seemed even more degrading and dehumanising than it had by flickering torchlight.
Maximilian smiled reassuringly as he approached, then squatted down by the huddled group. The men stared at him, their eyes wide and terrified, but they did not move.
“Drava,” Maximilian said quietly, not lifting his eyes from the men before him, “will you aid me in this?”
“Assuredly,” Drava replied.
“Do you know me?” Maximilian asked the men.
Silence, and then one man spoke, his voice rasping with fear. “You are Maximilian, the lost prince.”
Maximilian smiled, wide and beautiful, and the men visibly relaxed. “Yes, I am Maximilian, the lost prince. I was lost beneath the hanging wall…did you know that?”
Now one of the guards answered, his voice slow. “…we had heard rumours.”
“I was lost beneath the hanging wall, but I escaped, and so can you. Tell me, would you like to escape beyond the hanging wall?”
“And what is there for us?” one man cried, his voice harsh. “We are condemned men. Outcasts.”
Maximilian was quiet for a long moment. “Well,” he eventually said, very quietly, “it seems I am now king, and I would condemn you to the same fate I am condemned to.” A small smile playing about his lips took the harshness out of his words. “I condemn you to service to the realm. I have need of an honour guard. Someone to stand at my back, to carry my personal standard. Will you agree to form part of this guard? Swear your allegiance to me, and to me only?”
“You would take such as us?” one man asked.
“You forget that I was once one of you,” Maximilian replied, his voice hoarse with emotion, “and I would be proud to take such as you. Come, will you swear allegiance to me?”
Their hesitation dissipated. “Yes!” one man cried, then another, and then all raised their voices.
“With a harsh clatter, their chains fell away.”
“Thank you, Drava,” Maximilian said under his breath, then he extended his hand so that all the men, former guards and prisoners alike, could kiss it and pledge their allegiance.
Garth simply stood there, astounded. Eventually the men rose to their feet, their shoulders and backs straight now, pride and hope shining from their eyes. Several even smiled. As Maximilian moved forward, they fell in behind Garth and Egalion.
“Egalion,” Maximilian called. “I leave it to you to arrange these men in some order. No doubt others shall be joining us soon enough.”

“No!” Furst screamed, jamming his fingers into the wire of the door and shaking it furiously, “No! It’s not my fault!
I don’t deserve to die!”

Cavor’s eyes were now numb with terror; his right arm was unmoving, and the hand where it poked out of the sleeve of his jerkin was pale and veined like the finest marble. His left hand scrubbed ineffectually across the floor of the cage like a drunken spider.

Slowly, slowly, the cage was sliding downwards, and with each passing moment, its slide increased.

Along with the weight of Cavor’s arm.

With each bend in the beautiful tunnel they came across further bands of men, more than Garth knew should be in this particular tunnel, but this was a dream, and oddities were allowed in dreams.

At each group, all without exception huddled terrified by the unexplainable events about them, Maximilian squatted calmly and asked them to swear their allegiance to him, to trust their lives to him.

None refused, nor even hesitated.

The orderly file behind Garth soon stretched out of sight, the men stepping confidently and with obvious pride. Egalion had completely got over whatever surprise he’d felt and was now busily marching up and down the file of men himself, organising them into semi-regular units.

Turning to watch them occasionally, Garth realised that without the presence of chains it was difficult if not impossible to tell which men had once been prisoners, and which guards. Along with the chains had fallen away subservience, hopelessness or bravado—as well as a good deal of the filthy gloam dust. With each step the column took, more of the loathsome grime evaporated away, until healthy flesh glowed in place of the caked darkness.

Garth shook his head and paused as Maximilian reached yet another group; was this the fortieth or fiftieth group? He’d totally lost count.

Now the wail of Cavor’s despair was matched only by the tortured scream of metal as the cage plunged into the depths of the Veins. Furst knew that they should have struck the bottom a long time ago—What was happening? What enchantments had them trapped in this nightmare?

About them green light cradled them serenely, although strange dark shapes shadowed and flickered past the outside of the wire cage.

Maximilian was the first to notice them. He rose from the group of men who had just pledged their allegiance, and frowned at the dark shapes that shadowed through the glass walls. They were not a part of the ocean at all—for the shapes of the ocean fish floated by well beyond them—but seemed trapped within the glass itself.

Then Maximilian’s eyes dimmed and filled with tears as the shapes took form, and resolved into limbs and torsos and heads. Eyes pale with despair glowed at the watchers within the tunnel.

“What is it?” Egalion asked softly from the rear. “Who are they?”

“They are the lost souls of those who died in the Veins, Egalion,” Maximilian replied. “Dead, and cast into the pits to rot un lamented. I…I do not know what to do for them.”

Drava stared at them—the light in the tunnel had dulled because of the profusion of dark shapes writhing through the glass. Abruptly he let Ravenna’s hand go and he placed both of his against the hanging wall, his face frowning in concentration.

“They have watched you, Maximilian,” he said slowly. “They have watched you die and then live to laugh again.” His face softened. “They want to do the same.”

Maximilian gestured helplessly. “The dead are beyond me, Drava. I cannot…I do not know…”

“No,” Drava cut him off. “No. There is nothing you can do for them…but there is something I can do.”

Garth watched a little jealously as Ravenna’s hand go and he placed both of his against the hanging wall, his face frowning in concentration.

“They yearn for the sea,” Ravenna said softly. “To them it represents freedom.”

“So what would you suggest, my Lady of Dreams?”

She smiled slowly, then leaned close and whispered in Drava’s ear. He laughed delightedly, and his fingers twitched on the glass, as if he wanted to clap his hands.

The shapes writhed with greater urgency.
“So you have said,” Drava whispered, suddenly sombre. “And so it shall be.”

The writhing ceased, and for a moment the trapped souls gazed at those inside the tunnel with wide, startled eyes.

Then, gradually, very gradually, they began to change.

Bodies thickened and darkened yet further. Legs melded and arms widened and shrank. Heads became smoother, and the features of their faces blurred and then ran together. Eyes rounded, then enlarged and blinked with serenity and humour.

“Seals!” Garth cried in amazement. “They’re turning into seals!”

“Can you think of anything better?” Drava called. “As seals they will enjoy limitless freedom. They can laugh and clap and bark their joy to the sky if they wish, or slip silently into the water to play with the dolphins in the shadowed depths. Their life will be one of constant laughter and delight. I can think of no better life.”

“Nor I,” Maximilian said softly, tears running down his face. “Nor I.”

Cavor was silent now, but Furst knew he was not dead because such pain could not shine from the eyes of a dead man.

But apart from those agonised eyes, Cavor had turned completely to marbled stone.

The cage continued to plummet downwards, weighted beyond recovery.

On they continued, men in their hundreds and then their thousands rising from their huddled groups on the floor to pledge their allegiance to Maximilian.

This would be, Garth thought a trifle numbly, an honour guard like no other.

Eventually, when he thought he would drop in weariness, Maximilian called a halt. Unbelievably they had come to the end of the tunnel. Before them lay the shaft, but the cage had gone.

Maximilian stepped to the lip of the chasm and peered upwards. “There is a ladder inside,” he called, his voice echoing about the shaft, “and I can see the sun burning overhead—no more than fifty or sixty paces above us.”

Impossible, Garth thought wearily, but nothing was impossible wrapped as they were in this dream.

Maximilian stepped onto the ladder and climbed swiftly upwards, disappearing from sight almost immediately.

Sighing, Garth stepped on after him, then Egalion, and then the first of the thousands behind him.

As the men filed onto the ladder, Drava took Ravenna by the hand and pulled her gently to one side.

“Sometimes,” he said very quietly, “the Lord of Dreams finds his existence a lonely one indeed. And loneliness breeds sadness.”

She remained still, silent, but she did not pull her hand from his.

“And surely some days, Ravenna, you find the marsh tiresome, your days overlong.”

Still she said nothing, her eyes on the men filing past them, but she leaned her body closer to his, and he could feel the slight tremor that rippled through her.

“Lady,” he said, his voice barely audible, “will you keep me company through the dream paths of the night? Will you dare the dream with me?”

Ravenna lifted her head until her eyes met his. She smiled. “Gladly.”

Unnoticed by all those still filing past, tendrils of blue and green mist slid about the Lord of Dreams and his Lady, drawing them back into the darkness until all that was left was a brief sliding shadow and the hint of a smile.

They emerged into bright sunshine and the worried faces of those trapped above.

“What happened?” Joseph hissed as he hauled Garth from the shaft, Vorstus close at his shoulder. “We heard the thunder of the sea below…how…what? Where’s Cavor?” He turned slightly. “Maximilian—did you prevail?”

Maximilian, brushing himself down to one side, grinned weakly. “It is a long story, Joseph, but, yes, I did prevail.”

Joseph’s eyes returned to the shaft and his mouth dropped open. “And who are all these men?”

Garth took his father’s elbow and guided him away a few steps, attempting to explain the unexplainable.

Only later did anyone realise that Drava and Ravenna had not emerged from the shaft.

Furst slumped wearily to the floor of the cage and waited for death. That it would claim him he did not doubt, but he wondered why it should take so long.

Cavor was immobile now, save for his darting eyes, and Furst did not doubt that he longed for death as well.
Abruptly the screeching of the cage reached unbearable limits, and Furst screamed, his hands tight about his ears.

The next instant the cage crashed through the glass floor of the shaft into the turbulent depths of the ocean beyond.

It took a very, very long time to reach the ocean floor.
TWENTY EIGHT
ON THE BEACH

Maximilian stood on the beach and let the stiff sea breeze whip his hair about his face. Far out to sea one of the vivid Corolean trading ships ploughed through the seas; no doubt heading for Narbon to disgorge its goods. He watched it for a while, wondering if it carried news of the strange realms to the west. Well, if it did, no doubt the news would reach his ears soon enough.

In the eight weeks since he’d emerged from the Veins, Maximilian had worked tirelessly to consolidate his hold on the throne and on Escator. The people had by and large welcomed him, but there was seventeen years worth of news and developments to catch up on, ambassadors to receive and counsel, courts to preside over, decisions to be made, nobles and merchants to be entertained and listened to; and amid all this frantic activity, he’d had to find the quiet and the time to grieve for his parents.

In all, this was his first opportunity to get away and think.

Maximilian turned and smiled. “Do you see the ship, Garth?”

Garth shaded his eyes against the glare of sun across water; wearing a fine linen shirt and a well-cut jacket, he was dressed almost as well as the king beside him. “Assuredly, Maximilian. Once I dreamed I would grow to be a pirate and sail such ships as that.”

Maximilian returned his gaze to the sea for a moment. Garth had stayed by his side for these past eight weeks, providing sorely needed friendship and the benefit of advice offered from his fresh and uncorrupted perspective. Sometimes Maximilian found the court intrigues that had enveloped his life almost as restricting as his life beneath the hanging wall. Almost.

Without speaking, both men began to walk slowly down the beach towards a small cliff that had partly collapsed into a tumble of rocks. Waves washed over them, and seals, barking with laughter, clambered from perch to perch before launching themselves back into the sea.

Three days ago they’d ridden from Ruen to Myrna, and from there to the Veins, the Emerald Guard at their back. The men Maximilian had rescued from the Veins had quickly (some said magically) turned themselves into an elite fighting force, uniformed in distinctive emerald tunics with the outline of the Manteceros in brilliant blue prancing across their chests.

As they walked, a comfortable silence between them, Garth smiled to himself. No wonder Nennius had chosen the Manteceros for his emblem; the ungainly blue creature hid a power and an authority that could only be guessed at. And a lesson there for the learning—always within sadness, there was hope.

The Veins had almost proved unrecognisable. After he had risen from the depths, Maximilian had ordered that the iron poppet heads, and all the superstructures and buildings, be torn down. The Veins would operate no more. Indeed, even had he wanted to, Maximilian could not have ordered that gloam production continue. The sea had now completely claimed the Veins; yesterday Garth had stood at the lip of the main shaft for almost an hour, mesmerised by the lap of deep green water several paces below him. Below the surface were the shadowed shapes of fish while agile crabs clambered about the shaft walls.

No-one would ever be sent down the Veins again.

The mounds of gloam had been transported away, and only a few piles of iron girders and wheels were left. Soon even they would be gone. The filthy greyness had virtually disappeared from ground and building alike, and Garth could see that the health of the inhabitants of Myrna had improved dramatically.

Now that the gloam production had ceased, no doubt the economic health of Escator would suffer. But Maximilian planned to expand the realm’s trading potential, perhaps even build a fleet of ships that could trade across the Widowmaker Sea, and he also wanted to rebuild the academies and universities that had fallen into disuse over past generations. Knowledge would replace degradation and pain, enlightenment would replace darkness. Vorstus was ecstatic.

Their steps slowed as they approached the pile of rocks. Some of the seals paused briefly to gaze at them curiously, but otherwise paid them no attention. Maximilian stared at them a long time, then finally spoke.

“I suppose your father wants you back in Narbon now that things have settled down, Garth.”

Joseph had stayed a week in Ruen, then had hastened down to Narbon to be reunited with Nona.

“The surgery is busier than ever, Maximilian.”

Maximilian turned completely from the seals and stared intently at Garth. “Will you go?”

“I need to finish my apprenticeship. And I’d like to see my mother.”
“You are almost fully trained, Garth. And you could finish what training you need in Ruen. Visit your parents by all means, but...”

Garth watched him carefully. “What are you saying?”

Maximilian took a deep breath. “I have a palace and a realm and no friends with which to share them. “Will you stay awhile?”

Garth laughed, breaking the tension between them. “Cavor tried his best to get a Baxtor back to court, Maximilian. Now you do the same.”

“The court needs a Baxtor, Garth.”

Garth hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. I would be proud to serve at court, Maximilian. But only if, once my apprenticeship is done, you let me set up a surgery for the ordinary folk of Ruen as well.”

Maximilian visibly relaxed. “I agree and I thank you, Garth. You do me honour.”

Slowly they began to walk back the way they had come. In the distant dunes Garth saw a flash of green. The Guard waited there for them. No doubt they would ride for Ruen tonight. Maximilian had needed this visit to let go old ghosts.

“Have you ever seen her?” he asked softly.

Maximilian took a deep breath. “No. You?”

Garth shook his head. “Where is she?”

“With her Dream Lord, I suppose.”

“We both lost her.”

Maximilian rubbed the mark on his arm absently. “Yes, Garth. We both lost her. She is a lady of dream, and she always belonged to that dream.”

They walked in silence for some way, then Garth grinned. “Oh, I don’t know about that! No doubt we shall see her again.”

Maximilian stared at him, then burst into laughter—and, laughing, they walked up the beach to where the Emerald Guard waited.
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