



ANGELAEON CIRCLE
BOOK TWO

KARYN
HENLEY

EYE
OF THE
SWORD

A NOVEL



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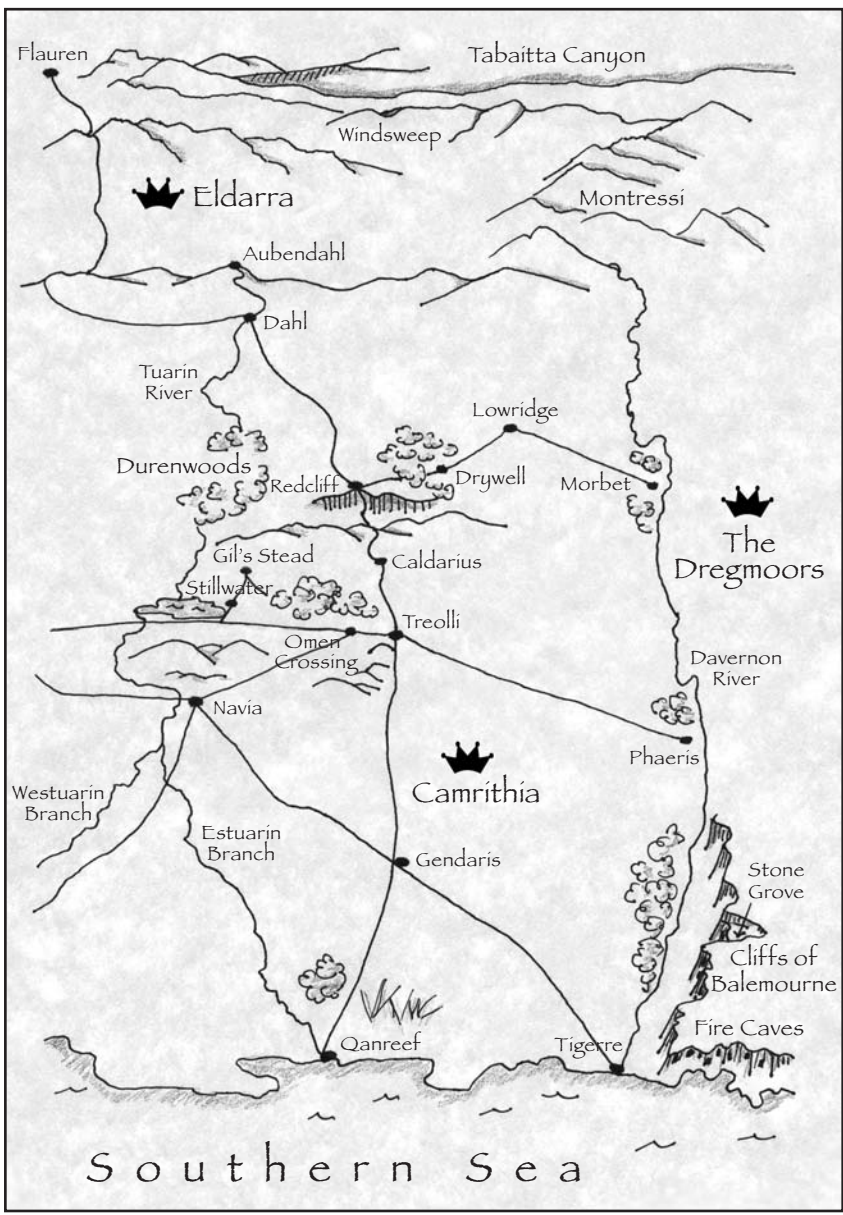
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*To Raygan and Heath,
excellent brothers and two of the finest men I know*

The Three Kingdoms



CAST OF CHARACTERS

- Ambria:** Queen of Eldarra; mother of Resarian.
- Arelin:** Angelaeon; a warrior angel.
- the Asp:** A spy for the Angelaeon; lives in the Dregmoors.
- Lord Beker:** King Laetham's advisor.
- Benasin:** The Second-born immortal; father of Jarrod.
- Catellus:** One of the missing comains of Camrithia.
- Cilla:** Serving woman at the palace in Qanreef; wife of Paullus.
- Dio:** A bard for the court of Eldarra.
- Dreia:** One of the Archae. Guardian of plant life and the Wisdom Tree.
- Dwin:** Sixteen-year-old brother of Trevin.
- Earthbearer:** One of the Archae. Guardian of ground and underground; also known as Lord of the Under-Realm.
- Flametender:** One of the Archae. Guardian of fire.
- Fornian:** One of Prince Varic's men; Dregmoorian.
- Haden:** Brother of King Kedemeth; a horseman of Eldarra.
- Hanni (Hanamel):** High priestess of the city of Navia.
- Hesel:** One of Prince Varic's men; Dregmoorian.
- Iona:** Fifteen-year-old priestess of Navia.
- Jarrod:** Nephili; half brother of Melaia; admitted to the ranks of Angelaeon as Exousia.
- Lady Jayde:** A noblewoman from the southern isles.
- Kedemeth:** King of Eldarra; father of Resarian; brother of Haden.
- Laetham:** King of Camrithia; Melaia's father.
- Livia:** A servant-messenger of the lower order of angels.
- Melaia:** Seventeen-year-old princess of Camrithia; Nephili.
- Nash:** King Laetham's personal servant.
- Nuri:** Thirteen-year-old novice priestess of Navia.
- Ollena:** Expert swordswoman; Angelaeon of the rank of Exousia.

Paullus: Angelaeon; tavern-keeper at the Full Sail in Qanreef.

Peron: Novice priestess at Navia; turned into a drak at the age of six.

Pym (Pymbric): Armsman to Trevin.

Lord Rejius: Firstborn immortal; ruler of the Dregmoors.

Resarian: Fifteen-year-old prince of Eldarra.

Seaspinner: One of the Archae. Guardian of water.

Serai: Angelaeon; Melaia's handmaid.

Stalia: Immortal daughter of the Firstborn; queen of the Dregmoors.

Trevin: Twenty-one-year-old comain of Camrithia; brother of Dwin.

Varic: Dregmoorian prince.

Windweaver: One of the Archae. Guardian of wind.

THE ANGELAEON

FIRST SPHERE: The three highest ranks are not strictly angels but winged heavenly beings who serve in the presence of the Most High.

CHERUBIM
Guard light and
sound (music)

SERAPHIM
Personal servants
of the Most High

OPHANIM
Guard celestial
travel

SECOND SPHERE:

KURIOTES
Regulate duties of
lower angels and
govern worlds

ARCHAE
Guardians of the
world's elements:
wind, fire, water,
plant life, and earth

THRONOS
Negotiators and
justice-bearers

THIRD SPHERE:

EXOUSIA
Warriors and
keepers of history

ARCHANGELS
Guardians of people
groups; influential in
politics and commerce

ANGELS
Messengers

WORLD SPHERE:

NEPHILI

The “clouded ones”; half-angel, half-human

SYLVANS

Elflike earth-angels; inhabit forests and woodlands

WINDWINGS

Winged horses

EYE
OF THE
SWORD

CHAPTER 1

As Trevin stepped into the seedy tavern at Drywell, his hand instinctively slid toward his dagger. Not that he was daft enough to challenge the three well-muscled strangers who had cornered his younger brother. Nor did Dwin look as if he wanted to be rescued. He laughed like a madman, his dark curls matted to his forehead, his hands around a mug. One of the three men pushed another mug his way.

A stringy-haired tavern maid sidled up to Trevin. He shook his head and watched her swish away. Maybe he was the mad one, tracking Dwin to Drywell when he should be at Redcliff preparing for the banquet being given in his honor that night. He fought the urge to throttle his little brother.

Melaia's name blurted from Dwin's mouth. His shoulders bounced as he chuckled.

"Dwin!" barked Trevin, striding to the table. His brother spewed barley beer, guffawing as if "Dwin" were the funniest name he had ever heard.

The three strangers eyed Trevin with expressions ranging from amusement to disdain. They appeared to be his age, maybe a few years older. One had a crooked nose. Another was wiry, and a scar ran across his temple. The third wore a close-cut beard, dark as charred wood. A crimson band spanned his forehead and disappeared beneath wavy locks.

At first Trevin thought they might be malevolent angels, but he sensed no aura, pure or impure. By their appearance they were Dregmoorian. Raiders and refugees entered Camrithia from the Dregmoors these days, but the men sitting with Dwin fit neither description. They were too richly dressed. Merchants? Or spies passing themselves off as merchants?

Dwin saluted Trevin with his mug. "My eshteemed brother," he slurred.

Trevin deliberately moved his hand away from his dagger. "Let's go, Dwin."

"I was just getting shhtarted." Dwin grinned.

"It's time you finished," said Trevin.

"I believe the young man wishes to stay," said the Dregmoorian with wavy hair. His eyes were as black as stag beetles. "Join us." He signaled to the tavern maid. "More beer!"

Trevin was tempted. The midsummer day was warm, he was sweaty, and the stone-walled tavern was cool. But he didn't want to drink with Dregmoorians. Besides, he hoped to get to the great hall early and perhaps spend some time with Melaia before the banquet started. He relished the thought of seeing her dressed in her royal best. Even in her priestess's garb, she was beautiful, but seeing her in a gown stole his breath and rushed his pulse.

Trevin started for the door. "Let's go, Dwin."

Dwin stood, wobbling, and the three Dregmoorians smugly rose to let him out. If they were spies, Trevin could only guess what information they had floated out of Dwin, who would say anything to keep the drinks coming and the air jovial.

Dwin swayed toward Trevin. "I musht show you the gash pits. Gash spits. Pit spits." He doubled over in laughter. "Gashpitspits."

"Show me, then." Trevin offered a hand to his brother, who shook it off and weaved toward the door. Benches scraped back up to the table behind him as the Dregmoorians returned to their drinks.

"Gash pits. Spits," murmured Dwin, stepping outside. He squinted in the bright afternoon light, then pointed to a path leading through the woods. "That way."

"Show me the pits another time," said Trevin. "Where's your mount?" He eyed the tethered horses that stood beside his borrowed roan. The three finely groomed and blanketed mounts no doubt belonged to the Dregmoorians.

"Follow me." Dwin wove down the path.

"Your mount?"

"At the gash pits. They stink. You'll see." He giggled. "No, you'll smell." He pinched his nose and weaved ahead.

Trevin followed him to a clearing, barren except for Dwin's gray donkey,

Persephone, and the dry well from which the village took its name. He frowned at the well. Steam writhed out of it, along with a burbling sound.

“Obviously no longer dry,” he muttered.

“You think the town’ll change its name?” asked Dwin. “Mistwell. Fogwell. Hellwell.” He chortled.

Trevin peered over the crumbling rim of rock into the well. At the bottom of the shaft, a dun-colored muck belched bubbles of hot vapor, its stench not unlike eggs gone to rot. “You’re right,” he murmured. “It’s gash.” The stuff was touted as a drink to restore youth, but it was dangerous. He had seen gash-drunks, youthful but foggy eyed and dull minded, dying from their addiction to it.

“Over here.” Dwin crouched beyond the well. Muck oozed from a rift in the ground, and steam curled into the air.

“Looks like the Under-Realm is vomiting its own bile,” said Trevin.

Already a greenish hue, Dwin turned away and lost his stomachful of beer.

Trevin shook his head in disgust and knelt to examine the rift, which was as wide as his thumb. Its length he couldn’t judge, for it snaked into the woods east of the clearing.

“It’s a landgash, Dwin. Lord Beker sent a dispatch about them, but I thought landgashes were closer to the Dregmoors. The blight must be growing worse.” Killing crops and parching rivers, the blight that had started in the Dregmoors was slowly creeping across Camrithia. Stinking rifts would not help matters.

Hoofbeats sounded behind them. Trevin rose. Dwin turned, lost his balance, and sat hard on his rump.

The three Dregmoorians reined their mounts to a halt four paces away, followed by a tan wolf dog with one black leg and gray eyes. At the edge of the clearing, Dwin’s donkey backed into the shadows, pulling her tethering rope taut, her ears laid back.

The man with wavy hair and the crimson band across his forehead, clearly their leader, nodded at Dwin. “You said you’re a friend of the court and can get us into Redcliff. Or was that a child’s boast?”

“It doesn’t always pay to listen to my brother,” said Trevin.

“It could pay today.” The man rattled a coin purse at his belt. “We’re looking for a forerunner. Someone to ease the way.”

“You’re best advised to go back to where you came from,” said Trevin.

The man with the crooked nose flexed his hand around the handle of his sheathed dagger. “I fancy your tongue as a souvenir, comely boy.” He turned to their leader. “What do you think, Varic? We could add that to our gifts for Redcliff.”

“Not today, Hesel.” Varic laughed. “I wish to impress the princess, and I hear Camrithian ladies turn their heads at the sight of blood.”

Trevin clenched his jaw. Why did this jackal wish to impress Melaia?

“Let’s try again.” Varic eyed Dwin and fingered the free end of his waist sash, a fine silver mesh. “You promised to introduce us at Redcliff. Do you mean to go back on your word?”

Dwin rose, pale.

Trevin folded his arms. “What’s your business at Redcliff?”

“Are you the gatekeeper?” asked Varic. “The constable?”

“He’s a dung digger.” The wiry one wrinkled his nose. “Can’t you smell him?”

“Ah, Fornian, always a good judge of character.” Varic grinned at Trevin. “Ever tried gash?” He tossed a gourd ladle at Trevin’s feet. “Drink some. It’s free.”

Gash merchants, Trevin thought as he picked up the gourd. No doubt they had an eye on the profit to be made from newfound rifts and a tavern nearby. He turned the gourd in his hands, admiring the delicate black designs etched into it. “If you and your friends drink gash, you’ve less wit than your dog.”

Varic narrowed his eyes and pointed at the ladle. “Drink up.”

“We always let guests go first.” Trevin tossed the gourd back to Varic.

Startled by the gourd’s return, Varic was slow to the catch. It struck his knuckles with a loud crack. “Scum,” he snarled.

The wolf dog bared its teeth. Hesel and Fornian dismounted and drew their daggers.

Trevin tensed. He had expected Varic to catch the ladle and respond to the sarcasm with a few choice words. Trevin shot Dwin a glare, warning him to keep quiet. Dwin’s tongue could be sharper than his own. As long as the daggers were not aimed his direction or Dwin’s, the threats were just bravado. Let the bullies strut and swagger, and they’d be on their way.

Trevin drew his own blade but kept the tip up, unmenacing, warily watching the Dregmoorians' movements.

"A cripple's grip," Hesel crowed. "The dung digger is missing a finger."

Varic rubbed his knuckles, his stare boring into Trevin. "Which one?"

"Little one."

"He can handle a dagger better than you," said Dwin.

Trevin groaned inwardly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fornian edge closer to Dwin. Trevin hoped his brother had his knife with him—and that he was sober enough to use it.

"What's your name, dung digger?" Varic leaned forward in his saddle, studying Trevin. "Where do you come from? How did you lose your finger?"

Trevin glared. "You tell me your business, and I may tell you mine."

"My business?" Varic gave a sharp laugh. "We hear your king is short of royal defenders—comains, I believe you call them—so we've come to help clean up the Camrithian countryside. I think we'll start by giving a couple of dung diggers a much-needed bath. Nice and warm—in gash. Off with your sandals, boys."

Trevin seethed. Now twenty-one, he had lost his boyhood long ago. Daggers, swords, fists—one-on-one he would take this jackal. His muscles burned with coiled energy. He locked eyes with Hesel, who pointed his dagger at Trevin's feet.

"I'll have your sandals, boy," said Hesel.

Trevin raised his dagger. "And I'll have your crooked nose."

Each eased into a fighter's stance, assessing the other. Trevin knew he had the advantage of height and reach, but Hesel was all muscle and would be a goring bull if he found an opening. Fornian's dagger was a concern as well. Trevin glanced at Dwin, who clutched his knife but still looked unsteady on his feet.

Swift as a snake, Hesel struck, slashing toward Trevin's face and growling, "*Your* nose, lowlife."

Trevin ducked and cut toward Hesel's shins.

Hesel dodged, and their daggers met with a clang.

Back and forth they attacked and parried, Trevin trying to prevent Hesel from slipping in close enough to lunge at him. At the same time, he tried to keep track of Fornian and Dwin, who circled each other warily but had not engaged.

Trevin evaded a cut and struck back, scoring Hesel's left arm. Hesel lashed out in retaliation. As Trevin jumped back, he saw Dwin twist away from Fornian, throwing the wiry man off balance.

Fornian stumbled, Varic whistled, and the wolf dog charged Dwin.

Trevin swerved from Hesel and dived in front of his brother.

At Varic's sharp command, the dog froze, his fangs a handbreadth from Trevin's wrist. Fornian bounded up and knocked away Dwin's knife, and Hesel grabbed Trevin's dagger.

"You want into Redcliff, I'll get you in," said Dwin.

"You will not," Trevin huffed.

The dog growled.

"Get up!" snapped Varic.

Trevin edged away from the dog and stood, panting.

Hesel pointed his dagger at Trevin's feet. "I'll have your sandals."

Trevin removed his sandals. At least Hesel wasn't demanding his nose.

"Tunic too," ordered Varic as the wolf dog ambled back to his side.

At sword point Trevin stripped to his leggings.

Varic motioned to Trevin. "Into the well."

"You're mad," said Trevin. Hesel prodded him toward the steaming pit.

"Salaciously sane," said Varic. "In fact, I feel like doing you a favor. You lack balance. Make his hands match, Hesel. A small finger is just the token I need to impress a certain lady."

"But you said Camrithian ladies shrink back at blood," said Dwin.

Varic grinned. "I was not speaking of a Camrithian lady. Shall we have a finger, Hesel?"

As Hesel swaggered toward him, Trevin grabbed the man's wrist and knocked his dagger hand on the ragged edge of the well, sending the blade tumbling into the darkness. Before Hesel could recover, Trevin hooked his leg behind the man's knees. The brawny Dregmoorian hit the ground, and Trevin laid into him, fast and furious. Hesel was strong, but Trevin was enraged. He punched and pummeled, twisted and turned until he had Hesel pinned.

Varic applauded. Panting, Trevin looked up to see the wolf dog crouched, poised to leap at him, and Fornian holding his dagger at Dwin's throat.

"I would recruit you for my guard, dung digger," said Varic, "but you have more courage than common sense. One word from me, my dog is on you, and

your brother will be something the countryfolk gawk at for years to come.” He stroked his mesh sash. “But I’ll be fair. You release my man, and I’ll release your brother.”

Trevin slowly loosed his grip on Hesel and stood, his back to the well, watching Fornian. He wanted to tell Dwin to take the blasted devils to Redcliff and be done with their bullying, but the oath he would take on the morrow loomed over him. A comain—pledged to defend king and kingdom—dared not provide a way for no-goods like these to enter the royal city.

Hesel rose, wiping his bloody mouth. But Fornian kept his dagger at Dwin’s throat.

Trevin flexed his fists and growled, “Release my brother.”

“Now!” commanded Varic. The wolf dog shot toward Trevin.

Fangs rushing toward him, the well at his back, Trevin didn’t hesitate. Before the dog could leap, Trevin grabbed the sharp, crumbling ledge of the well and hurdled over it, hoping to find the inner wall with the balls of his feet. As the mongrel clawed at the ledge, he lowered himself, grabbing at chinks in the stone, trying to hug the wall, but it was slick with slime. Before he could gain a hold, he slid within an arm’s length of the bubbling ooze.

Trevin heard Varic’s whistle and Dwin’s strained voice talking fast. He wedged his feet and hands in the widest cracks he could find and felt his way around until he straddled the well. His eyes stung from the steam, and he swallowed to keep from retching at the stench.

Hesel peered down, one eye swollen. “How long can you hold on, dung digger?”

Dirt and rocks, leaves and sticks showered down on him. Trevin turned his head, closed his eyes, and clenched his teeth. Moments later hoofbeats faded into the woods.

Trevin listened for Dwin, then called to him. No answer. He shook the dirt and twigs from his hair and studied the shaft above him. He had scaled walls before but with hooks, never barehanded. The crevices that pocked the sides of the well might serve as handholds if they were not too slick. He reached up and grabbed a protruding rock with his right hand.

As the rock touched the place where his small finger was missing, a mist descended over his mind. Within the mist stood the cloaked figure that haunted his terror-dreams. Never had he fallen into his dream in the daytime.

Gripping the rock, he fought back the image, ignored the flashing pain in his hand, and swallowed his screams.

A stinging sensation on his feet pulled him from the dream and brought him fully back to the danger of his situation. Hot muck spat on him with each thick belch of gash below.

“Climb,” Trevin muttered to himself. “Climb or boil.”

CHAPTER 2

Scraped, bruised, and sore, Trevin headed through the woods toward Redcliff astride Dwin's donkey. He had returned to the tavern for his mount only to find the horse missing. He suspected Dwin had filched the roan from the tavern post so he could lead the Dregmoorians to Redcliff in style. The dolt.

On the other hand, maybe Dwin knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe he had met with the Dregmoorians before. In that case he was no dolt; he was a traitor. Trevin broke into a cold sweat and nudged Persephone with his heel.

Persey picked up her pace, then settled back into a walk.

Trevin growled. "I can go faster barefoot." He slid off the donkey's back and onto a pine cone. "Blast!" he yelled, hopping on one foot, rubbing the other. He was already sore from brawling; he didn't need a pierced foot as well.

A flutter sounded overhead, followed by a sharp chirp.

Trevin squinted into the treetops. A drak clung to a bobbing branch with its taloned human hands. Not long ago he had aspired to be a talonmaster to the falconlike spy-birds. But then he had seen the shock in Melaia's eyes when she learned each drak held a captive human soul. Worse, Lord Rejius had kidnapped Peron, a child Melaia loved like a sister, and bound her in a drak's body. Now Trevin loathed the whole business of mastering draks.

He grabbed a pine cone and drew back to heave it at the bird. Then he froze. Most draks were large and traveled in pairs. This bird was small and alone.

"Peron?" He dropped the pine cone. He had no meat to offer, no glove to protect himself, but he held out his hand and whistled.

A breeze shuddered through the leaves, rippling the drak's dull black feathers, and the bird flapped away.

Trevin turned back to Persey and yanked her forward. "Come on, beast. You'll make me late to the feast laid in my honor."

Persey plodded through the dim woods as if she had all year to get back.

Trevin groaned. The new comain, valiant horseman of the king, was now a shirtless, shoeless donkey drover. "I hope no one sees me entering Redcliff," he mumbled.

The wind gusted. Leaves danced. A whisper swirled through the air. *Seeeeeker.*

Persey's ears twitched. Her nostrils flared.

Trevin jerked around but saw no one.

Seeeeeker.

A shiver snaked up his spine. The same flesh-prickling voice had come to him twice before, both times in the tower aerie.

Seeeeeker.

Both times he had dashed out of the aerie as quickly as he could. He didn't hesitate to make a quick escape again.

Seeeeeker.

Persephone obviously agreed. Trevin barely made it onto her back before she broke into a ragged gallop.



By the time Trevin approached the east wall of Redcliff, the tallest tower of the palace stood dark against the sunset sky, its stately silhouette interrupted only by the form of a body suspended from the parapet. Presumably another overlord who had supported the recent coup attempt. Trevin knew that if Melaia hadn't captured his heart, he might be hanging from the wall himself. Even now his loyalty to the king was largely unproven. His being late to dinner would not add to the king's trust. And Dwin... If he had told the Dregmoorians anything traitorous...

Trevin thrust away the thought and headed for the stable gate, which was cloaked in shadows. He pushed on the massive wooden door. It didn't budge. He pounded on it.

The peephole slid open, and then the barred inner gate grated through its track, and the bolt scraped aside. Pym, a stout, bandy-legged armsman, swung open the door.

“What are you doing outside?” Pym asked. “You’re supposed to be at dinner.”

Persephone nudged her way into the stable, and Trevin ducked in behind her.

Pym chuckled as he ran a hand through his shock of unruly hair. “Did the lady keep your tunic?”

“It was no lady.”

“I guess not.” Pym wrinkled his nose. “You smell overripe. And your cheek is bruised.”

“I ran into Dregmoorians intent on drowning me in landgash. They were headed here.”

“Must be the ones who arrived this afternoon. They caused quite a stir at the gates, they did.”

“Did Dwin get them in?”

“As I heard it, guards detained them while Dwin took their message to the king. They’ve come to propose a peace treaty, they say. Between Camrithia and the Dregmoors. One of them is Prince Varic.”

“*Prince Varic*,” Trevin muttered.

Pym spread hay in a stall for Persephone. “They left their horses here only awhile ago. As for your brother—” He nodded toward the door to the courtyard, where Dwin sat on an upturned keg, grinning.

Trevin clenched his fists and stomped over to his brother.

Dwin eyed Trevin through his black curls. “I knew you’d bring Persey back.”

Trevin stifled the impulse to cuff him. “You made a regal fool of yourself. You led the enemy straight to our gates while, for all you knew, I lay dead at the bottom of a well.”

Dwin waved his hand as if brushing away gnats. “I sent Jarrod for you. Didn’t he find you?”

“I rescued myself, no thanks to you. I could have boiled to death in gash.”

“You think *I* could have pulled you out? That’s why I sent Jarrod. Or is a

warrior angel not good enough for you?” Dwin looked around and lowered his voice. “Besides, I was spying.”

“For whom? The Dregmoorians?”

“For Camrithia. And don’t get all hot about it. You used to spy for Rejus.”

“And I despise myself for it,” said Trevin. “Besides, a spy *gathers* information. He doesn’t get drunk and tell all he knows.”

Dwin shrugged, a sheepish look in his eyes. “I drank one too many.”

“And then led the enemy straight to the king. What if they’re assassins?”

“They’re here for peace.”

“Right. And I’m here to learn basket weaving.” Trevin shoved the door open. “I’m late for dinner. I trust you can find my dagger among your new friends’ belongings.”

“I already have it.” Dwin smirked. “I suggest you don a tunic before you prance in for dinner.”

Trevin slammed the door and headed across the courtyard to the temple, where he and Dwin had rooms. Passersby looked askance at him. The odor of gash hung about him like an aura. He would need more than a fresh tunic.



By the time Trevin reached the palace, torches lit the darkening courtyard. He quickly made his way inside, loped down the corridors, and elbowed through the back-room bustle of attendants laden with baskets of bread, trays of meat, and jugs of ale and wine. He huffed. Feasting seemed a foolish extravagance when the countryfolk could hardly grow enough for their own bellies.

At the serving entrance to the great hall, he paused. Extravagant or not, this feast was for him, and he intended to enter with the assured demeanor of a comain. He calmed his breath and surveyed the room. Lampstands flanked the hall and sent a flickering glow onto the walls. The fragrance of spiced wine, fresh bread, and roasted meats drifted through the air as servants placed heaping trays before nobles and their ladies at tables running the length of the hall. Trevin recognized some of the guests as Angelaeon. Jarrod wasn’t among them. He was no doubt searching Drywell.

King Laetham, garbed in purple, presided over the feast from his usual place at the center of the head table. Melaia sat to his right.

Trevin didn't have to see her to know she was there. He sensed her as shimmering silver light. But to see her was pure pleasure, and he let his gaze linger. Her loose braid, the color of dark honey, fell over her shoulder as she leaned toward her copper-haired handmaid, Serai, and spoke intently. The gleam in her rich brown eyes rivaled the gold medallion suspended on a chain at her throat.

A barking call for ale rose from the other end of the table. To the left of the king, Varic held his goblet toward a servant. Trevin swallowed dryly. The seat of honor at the king's left hand was meant for him tonight, not for this wretch. He took a deep breath and strode into the hall, hoping he was rid of the smell of gash. He couldn't hide the bruise on his cheek.

Melaia looked up, her smile stunning.

Trevin wished the moment would freeze with her gaze locked on his. Never mind his hunger for food.

He smiled back and nodded. "My lady." As he passed, he let his hand brush her shoulder.

"I see Jarrod found you," she said. "Your cheek—"

Before Trevin could explain, the king turned his way, his eyes questioning Trevin's late arrival.

Trevin went down on one knee and briefly bowed his head. "Your Majesty."

King Laetham nodded, his thick, graying hair oiled and glinting in the lamplight.

"My apologies for being late." Trevin folded his hands to hide his scraped fingers and angled his head, hoping the bruise would seem a shadow. "I was detained by the discovery of landgash emerging at Drywell."

The king's eyebrows arched. "Landgash? So close? I must ride out and see these oddities. I hear they're strange to behold."

"They are, sire."

"You must meet our guest." King Laetham turned to the Dregmoorian. "Prince Varic, this is Trevin, the young man who will be appointed comain tomorrow. Perhaps you would attend the ceremony with us?"

Varic leaned back in his chair, goblet in one hand, pheasant leg in the other. His face stiffened momentarily, but then he flashed a haughty grin.

Trevin tried to breathe normally and keep the color from rising to his face. He would not bow his head to this Dregmoorian, even if he was a prince.

“Appointing this one?” asked Varic. “I wouldn’t miss it.” He went back to his meal. “Congratulations, sire. He’s a fine figure of a youth.”

Trevin’s muscles ached with the urge to lunge at the prince. No doubt Varic would welcome the fight. Nothing would make a comain look more foolish than assailing a royal guest in front of the entire assembly.

King Laetham clapped Trevin on the shoulder. “I accept your apology for being late. Find me after the entertainment tonight. I have a task in mind for my new comain, but for now my orders are to enjoy your feast.”

As the king waved a hand toward the vacant chair beyond Serai, lamplight glinted from a ring on his forefinger. Trevin couldn’t help staring at the ruby the size of an acorn that adorned the ring.

The king posed his hand regally. “A gift from the Dregmoors. A peace offering.”

“Wonderful, sire.”

Trevin strode to his seat, plopped down, and stabbed a stuffed breast of dove.



After dinner King Laetham rose. A hush drifted over the hall. “Our festivities have only begun,” he said. “We have feasted on fine food and shall soon feast on fine music. But first I present our guests: Prince Varic of the Dregmoors, Lord Hesel, and Lord Fornian.”

Trevin wished he could get a good look at Hesel. The cur was hiding his black eye behind a raised goblet.

The king continued, “This noble delegation has come to propose a peace treaty with Camrithia.”

Murmurs rippled through the audience.

“Tomorrow you shall all be my guests for the appointing ceremony for Main Trevin.” King Laetham swept his ringed hand toward Trevin, introduced

him, and gave a glowing account of how, only a few months earlier, this new comain had rescued him and his daughter from the sorceries of Lord Rejius and his attempted coup.

Trevin thought the king's story a bit exaggerated. Certainly he hadn't rescued the king single-handedly. Even so, he basked in the praise, glad for the Dregmoorian prince to hear the king's version.

"Our kingdom grows stronger," proclaimed King Laetham. "I am confident we are on the verge of an era of great prosperity. Let us drink to our future!" The king himself filled the prince's goblet.

Prince Varic rose, lofted his goblet high, then gulped down its contents without pausing. He saluted the king with his empty cup, and the court minstrels leaped into a rollicking tune with lyre, pipe, and tabor.

As the guests clapped and sang, Melaia carried her kyparis harp to the side of the hall. Trevin shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He supposed the harp was safe with her, but he hated to see it displayed before the Dregmoorians.

He was hazy about the details, but somehow Melaia's harp and two others like it had to be united in order to restore the angels' stairway to heaven, which had been destroyed by Lord Rejius, the immortal Firstborn and ruler of the Dregmoors. Rejius had arranged for the murder of the angel Dreia, Melaia's mother, in order to steal just such a harp from her. The memory curdled Trevin's stomach. He didn't doubt that Rejius would kill for the other two harps as well. With all three the Firstborn could lord himself over the angels by controlling their path home.

Was that why the prince had weaseled his way into Redcliff? Was he here to steal Melaia's harp?

Trevin touched his bruised cheek. He knew firsthand how Lord Rejius used underlings to reach his goals. Guilt still ate at his conscience for having once served the Firstborn.

He looked down the table at the prince. Varic ran his finger around the rim of his goblet as he studied Melaia, and Trevin's skin crawled. He drank the last of his fruited wine and turned his gaze back to her. He had never lacked attention from young women, but this one, the one he wanted, was out of reach, and there was no remedy for it. She was a princess, and he could never be more than a lowly comain.

“If only she were a normal maiden,” he murmured.

“What’s normal?” asked Serai, amusement dancing in her green-flecked eyes.

Trevin smiled sheepishly, raising his hands in surrender. For an Erielyon like Serai, normal was hiding her wings securely beneath her cloak. “Maybe ‘normal’ is not the right word,” he said.

Serai frowned. “Your fingers are scratched. The bruise, I noticed earlier. Did you and Dwin have at it?”

“I leaped into a well, then climbed out.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Why did you leap into a well? Demonstrating your rock-climbing ability?”

“You might say that.”

She rolled her eyes. “My brother, Sergai, was always pulling stunts like that.” Her smile trembled, and she murmured, “I should be ready to help Melaia when she’s done.”

Trevin scooted aside to give her room to leave the table. Her twin brother had died a vicious death the previous fall at the hands of Lord Rejius. The past was slow to let go of its choke hold.

Applause erupted. As the minstrels took their final bows and filed to the side of the room, Melaia made her way to a stool in the center of the hall. She bowed to the king, then sat down elegantly with the harp in her lap, her palms to the strings, her eyes closed.

Trevin drifted with the guests into a suspended silence. Then Melaia plucked a simple tune that gradually unfolded and fanned into an intricate melody that danced around the great hall.

Usually Melaia’s music entranced Trevin, but tonight his thoughts kept straying to the gold medallion at her throat. Was it a gift from Prince Varic, a peace offering like the king’s ruby? “I wish to impress the princess,” Varic had said. Why?

More important, had he succeeded?