

Christopher Stasheff

The Warlock Heretical

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"One... two... three--shoot!"
Four small fists swept down into a circle--and changed form. One turned into a rock, one turned into a pair of scissors, and two turned into sheets of paper.
"I win!" cried Cordelia. "Scissors cut paper!"
"Nay, / win!" Geoffrey corrected. "Stone doth dull scissors!"
"Then we two do win, " Magnus pointed out, "sin that paper doth wrap stone. "
"Yet I then win, after all!" Cordelia maintained, "for my scissors will cut thy paper from off this stone!"
"We all do win. " Little Gregory beamed. " Tis fine. "
"Nay, 'tis horrible!" Geoffrey's chin jutted out. "If all win, none win!"
"Thou wouldst think thus!" Cordelia snapped.
"Only a lass could ha' thought of so silly a game at the outset!" Geoffrey retorted. "Who e'er did hear of playing 'Scissors, Stone, and Paper' with more than two?"
"You must not let newness itself keep you from attempting new ideas, Geoffrey. " The voice was in the children's minds, not their ears, and it came from a huge black horse that stood nearby, watching.
"Still, in practice it proves to have been less than effective. "
"Any could see it would not work, Fess!"

"Not that thou didst attempt it with any great effort. " Cordelia glared at Geoffrey. "I could see thy fist through thy rock. "
"Thou couldst not! Yet I did see two fingers on thine hand, with but the barest suggestion of paired blades!"
" Tis a lie!" Cordelia squawked.
"Children, children!" Fess reproved. "Please limit your use of hyperbole. "
" 'Twill avail naught, Fess, " Magnus said wearily. "They persist, though they know full well that Gregory doth cast the best illusions of us all. "
"I know naught of the sort!" Geoffrey glared at Gregory, who shrank back wide-eyed.
" Tis true--thou knowest naught, " Cordelia agreed.
"Wilt thou not cease!" Magnus cried. "Art thou so desperate for summat to do that thou must needs quarrel to pass the time?"
Cordelia subsided, glaring, but Geoffrey only shrugged. "Wherefore not? Or wouldst thou prefer combat, brother?"
Magnus gave him a slow grin. "Assuredly, an thou art foolish enough to attempt it. Wilt thou wrestle or box?"
"Nay!" Cordelia cried. "Thou knowest what Mama hath told thee of fighting!"
"We do but practice. " Geoffrey unbuttoned his doublet. "Let us grapple--'tis hot weather. "
"Let them go, Cordelia, " Fess advised. "It will channel their excess energy--and, to some extent, boys need to wrangle. "
Magnus grinned, pulling his doublet off. "I warn thee, brother, I've weight and height on thee. "
"Yet I have the skill, " Geoffrey retorted.
"Thou must needs stop!" Cordelia cried. "Even Papa would... " Her voice trailed off in despair as her brothers started circling each other, crouching. "Oh! Gregory, canst thou think of naught to stop them.... Gregory! Where hast thou fled?"
Magnus looked up, startled, the match forgotten in a sudden surge of concern.

Geoffrey saw the opening and dived in to catch Magnus's knee and pull hard with a yowl of victory. Magnus slammed down backwards. "Geoffrey!" Fess scolded. "Foul!"

Magnus scrambled up with blood in his eye. "How unfair canst thou be, to attack when I'm distracted with concern for thy brother!"

"Distracted thou wert, " Geoffrey agreed, "and combat is ever unfair. Even Papa doth say so. " Magnus's face reddened, and the fight was about to become real, when Gregory appeared with a bang. "Strangers!"

His brothers straightened up, their quarrel forgotten. "Strangers! Where?"

"In the meadow yon. " Gregory pointed. "I thought I sensed an errant thought, so I skipped aloft to look--and I

did behold a great sort of cottage there, with men in brown robes who did till the earth!"

"But that meadow was barren only last Sunday!" Geoffrey cried. "We did picnic there!"

"Two Sundays ago, actually, " Fess corrected. " 'Tis filled now, " Gregory answered. "A score of men can raise a

house of wattle and daub in a few days' time. " Magnus frowned. "Yet what are these brown robes, brother?

Peasants wear smocks and biashosen!"

"What know I?" Gregory said, with wide-eyed innocence. "I am but seven. "

"Even so. " Magnus caught up his doublet and shrugged into it. "Let us go see--yet quietly!"

"No, children! There might be danger!" Fess warned. But Magnus was already in the air, arrowing away between

tree trunks. Geoffrey whooped and flew after him, pulling on his doublet as he went.

"Do not go too close, " Fess cautioned, resigned. Cordelia caught up her broomstick from a nearby tree. "Well

done, little brother! Thou hast most ably distracted them from bruising one another!" Gregory smiled, pleased, and darted off after her.

The house was everything Gregory had said it was--large, thatched, and mud-plastered, at least on one wall. The other three were still basketworks of twigs, with a couple of two-man teams busily spreading more mud over them. A fence stretched around a quarter of the acre surrounding it, with two more men in brown robes working at extending it. Their cowls were thrown back, and sunlight gleamed off the bald spots in the middle of their scalps. Around them a third of the meadow had already yielded its long grass to the two teams of monks

with wheeled plows, each with one steering and two pulling, leaving the dark brown of turned earth behind them.

"By whose leave do they take the whole meadow for themselves!" Geoffrey cried. Gregory shrugged.

"None said

them nay, brother." Geoffrey strode forward, pushing up his sleeves. "Thou wilt not!" Magnus caught him by the

collar, then ducked aside from his punch with the ease of long practice. " 'Tis not thy meadow, to say yea or nay

to it--'tis the King's!" "Yet it hath been our place of play all our lives!" "As hath the whole wood, and every

grotto and clearing within it," Magnus reminded. "Surely we can spare one such place for the good fathers."

"Fathers?" Geoffrey stopped swinging and frowned up at him. Then his eyes widened. "Aye! The cowls, the

brown robes--how foolish I am not to have seen it!"

"Thou art," Cordelia assured him. "They are monks." Geoffrey turned back to the clearing, puzzled.

"Yet what do

they here? Monks dwell in the monastery, so far to the south. . . . Hist! What comes?"

"What indeed?" Magnus frowned, peering over Geoffrey's head at the meadow.

" 'Tis another band of strangers!" Cordelia exclaimed. "These are not goodly." Gregory's face

darkened. They certainly did not appear to be. They wore grimy clothes, untrimmed beards, and tangled hair, and they came out of the forest from several different directions, converging on the monks. Each carried a shield and a quarterstaff. One or two had swords. One of the brown-robos saw them coming and shouted a warning. His fellows looked up, startled, then leaped to catch up steel caps and quarterstaves from the long grass. The other plow team did, too, and came pelting across the meadow, jamming their caps on their heads. The fencers and plasterers dropped their tools, caught up caps and staves, and came running to join the plowmen. Geoffrey's face darkened. "What manner of monks are these, who bear weapons?" "Is't not fair, then," Cordelia jibed, "for men of the cloth to defend themselves 'gainst men of arms?" Geoffrey turned on her, anger flaring, but Magnus clapped a hand over his mouth and hissed, "Be still! Dost thou wish them to turn upon us?" He saw Geoffrey's eyes light up, and bit his tongue. "Indeed, be most cautious." Not being able to fly as easily as they did, Fess had taken a while to catch up. "In fact, children, come away—here is danger." "We are far from them," Geoffrey protested, "and none can see us." "There is no hazard, Fess," Cordelia pleaded. " 'Tis not as though we did attempt to fight them." "Not yet," the black horse muttered. "The bandits slacken their pace," Gregory reported. Geoffrey twisted out of Magnus's hold and stepped up next to his little brother. "Thou canst not know they are bandits!" "Who else would dress so slovenly, yet bear arms?" Gregory answered. The bandits slowed, seeing the weapons, but still came on to surround the monks on three sides, grinning. "Dost'a truly think to bear weapons 'gainst us, men of God?" The tallest bandit made the last three words an insult. The lead monk stepped forward a pace. "We hope not to. Who art thou, and what is thy business?" For some reason the bandits seemed to think this was hilarious. They broke into guffaws, and the tallest one said, "Why, we are gentleman, good friar—canst thou not tell by our comely appearance and costly garments?" "Thou dost mean thou art bandits." The lead monk let a touch of contempt show. "Well, I am Father Boquilva. What dost thou think thou canst have of us?" The bandit's grin turned into a snarl. "Have? Why, only such goods as thou dost own, gentle monk—all of them." Father Boquilva shrugged. "Take all thou canst find that is ours, and welcome—Christ will provide us with more." The bandits stared at him, not believing their ears. Then the leader's grin widened with a chuckle. "The more fools thou, then! Come!" He trotted off toward the house, beckoning to his men. "The sheep are primed for shearing!" The other bandits jogged after him. The monks watched them go. "I do not think they will take my breviary," said one. An older monk shrugged. "If they do, what of it? I can pen it anew for thee, from memory." "Wherefore do they give way so easily!" Geoffrey hissed. "They have staves and helms! How can they care so little for their goods?" "They are men of the spirit," Gregory answered. "Things of wood and stone mean little to them." "Who asked thee, wight!"

"Then I'll ask thee." Gregory frowned. "How can men so godly take up weapons?"

"There is, unfortunately, precedent for it," Fess sighed. "Monks of every religion have, sooner or later, learned to fight—or taken weapons."

" 'Tis shields they take up now." Magnus's hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Mayhap they but sought time to arm."

Geoffrey spun to stare, then shook his head. "Only shields. There's not so much as a paring knife among them."

"The bandits come," Cordelia said, with dread.

Indeed they did, boiling out of the house with yells of rage. "What mockery is this!" the biggest bandit demanded as he pounded up to Father Boquilva. "Hast thou naught but meal and pease?"

The priest nodded at another robber. "I see that thou hast found my missal. Take it, an thou wilt; Christ will provide."

The bandit threw it away with an oath.

Father Boquilva's jaw firmed. "There is naught more, save a little meat, some sacramental vessels, and each man's curios."

"Naught more, is it?" The bandit grinned and held up a dirty sack. "What of this?" He lifted a golden chalice.

"One of the sacramental vessels I but now spoke of." The lead monk paled. "That is not ours—'tis God's. I pray thee, place it back upon the altar from which thou hast taken it!"

"Thou hast but now said Christ will provide. He hath, then, provided us with this bauble of His."

"Assuredly thou wilt not desecrate a chapel!" "Wherefore—would not God wish to share with the poor?" "Thou dost blaspheme. Give back that sacred cup—or wouldst thou violate the Lord's house?"

"Nay, but I'll steal from thine! What else hast thou hid here, eh?"

"Naught, though thou hast missed our glass cruets. Thou hast in thine hand such gold as we do hold."

"I'll not credit thee," the robber snarled, "sin that thou hast already withheld this from me. Nay, speak!" He slashed a backhanded blow into Father Boquilva's face. The priest's head

rocked, and his face darkened, but he struggled against anger and won. The robber growled and raised his hand again, but as he swung, the priest's arm shot out, blocking the blow as he kicked the robber's feet out from under him. The bandit fell heavily as his men shouted, "Hold!" "Nay, now!" "Leave off!" and leaped forward, swords slashing and staves whirling. But the monks swung up their shields, and the swords clunked into layers of toughened hide. One bandit aimed a terrific double-handed quarterstaff blow at a monk's head, but the holy man swung up his shield, and the staff cracked into its covering. The bandit used the bounce to swing it higher.

Another bandit reached out and yanked at a shield; the monk behind it stumbled, and the bandit's staff swung in a short, vicious arc. The blow rang off the monk's helmet, and he staggered, dazed.

"They do but ward off blows!" Geoffrey cried. "These monks have staves; wherefore do they not strike back?"

"And there are half again as many bandits as monks!" Cordelia added, despairing.

The two swordsmen had wrestled their weapons free and were circling their target monks.

"Geoffrey," Fess said with sudden foreboding, "do not dare to—"

The boy shot out of the thicket, yowling before the horse could finish the sentence.

"Geoffrey!" Fess moaned in despair. "Nay, brother!" Magnus shouted. " 'Tis no quarrel of— Oh, devil take it! He's in the broil!"

Geoffrey had caught up the dazed monk's staff and was swinging at a bandit, enraged. The man

leaped back in
sheer surprise; then his face darkened, and he advanced.
"Nay, thou fiend! Stand away from my brother!" Magnus bellowed as he, too, charged out of the wood.
"Magnus!" Fess wailed. "Oh, children! How could you!" But he was thundering out of the brush as he said it.
"What? Shall we alone stay quiet?" Cordelia cried. "Nay!" She leaped on her broomstick and darted off into the
fray. Gregory prudently stayed in the shadows, but he stared at a fist-sized rock, and it stirred, lurched, then shot
up off the ground to brain a bandit.
Geoffrey's robber swung his stick high to smash the boy— but Magnus leaped up, caught the staff on the
backswing, and yanked hard, throwing all his weight into it. The bandit
staggered back and spun about, wide-eyed. He saw Magnus and bared his teeth, lifting his staff . .
. and Geoffrey
landed on his shoulders, yanking back on his head. The bandit roared and stepped back, and Magnus hooked a
foot behind his heel. The man crashed down, arms windmilling.
One monk was down with a bandit standing over him, staff poised for a deathblow. Cordelia shot into his face,
screaming, and the bandit leaped back with a yell of fright. Then he saw his attacker was only a little girl, and
raised his staff with blood in his eye.
Fess reached out and caught the man's collar with steel teeth. He yanked and spun, and the man went flying with
a howl.
"Spoilsport!" Cordelia shouted.
Father Boquilva saw her and stared, appalled. A quick glance showed him two more children in the thick of the
fight. He bellowed, "Children! Brothers, ask not—protect them! Strike!"
The monks didn't turn to look, but their staves were suddenly whirling blurs. They lashed out with hollow
knocks, and bandits cried out; two toppled. The staves whirled again. Four bandits jumped on Magnus and
Geoffrey. Fess charged into their midst, screaming, and the men leaped back, yelling with fright, as the steel
hooves lashed out at them. But behind Fess Geoffrey cried, "A rescue!" as the lead bandit yanked him up above
his head to throw. Fess whirled to lash out at the man, and Geoffrey fell, flipping over to land on his feet—but
the four bandits shouted with victory and pounced on Magnus. Fess spun about to counter them, but suddenly
froze, poised in mid movement like a statue; then his forefeet thudded down and his legs spraddled outward
stiffly as his head plummeted to swing between his fetlocks.
"Villain!" Geoffrey cried. "Thou hast caused our horse a seizure!" And he sprang at the nearest bandit's face. The
man
stepped back, startled, then reached up to catch him—and a
hand from a brown sleeve grabbed his shoulder and spun him
about; a quarterstaff cracked into his skull. He fell, and Father Boquilva stepped over his unconscious
body, face thunderous, to grasp Geoffrey's shoulder. "Bide
with me, lad! Stay close!" He thrust Geoffrey behind him and
turned to find another enemy. . . . But he was out of luck. His brother monks' staves had done their threshing; the harvest lay on the ground, and the chaff
were running for the forest.

Father Boquilva looked at the half-dozen unconscious robbers, panting. " 'Twas ill done; men of

the cloth should
not strike. See to them, brothers; be sure none are dead, and aid those who are injured."
The other monks dropped down to their knees to check for heartbeats and bruises.
Father Boquilva turned to Geoffrey, Magnus, Gregory, and Cordelia, his face dark. "I doubt not
thine efforts
were well meant, children, but 'twas nonetheless foolhardy."
"But thou wouldst not strike in thine own defense!" Geoffrey cried. "Yet once thou didst, they
could not stand
against thee!"
"They should have had no need to," the priest retorted. "Say how thou didst chance to be nearby."
Gregory and Magnus exchanged a look. Then the elder said, "By your leave, sir, we must needs see
to our
father's horse." "Horse?" Father Boquilva frowned, looking up at Fess. "Even so. What ails the
beast?" "He is elf-
shot." Magnus turned to Fess. "Epileptic?" Father Boquilva stared. "I wonder thy parent doth not
put him out of
his misery!"
"He is a true friend, and a valiant fighter," Geoffrey said angrily. "His seizures are a small
matter, weighed
against all his good service."
Magnus felt under the pommel of Fess's saddle and pushed the enlarged vertebra that was a
disguised circuit
breaker.
"Yet how didst thou come to knowledge of the word?" Gregory asked.
A transparent shield seemed to slide down behind Father
Boquilva's eyes. " 'Tis no matter. Is thy mount wounded?"
"Nay; he doth come to himself now." Magnus was watching
carefully as Fess slowly lifted his head. Where . . .
what . . .
Magnus stroked the velvet nose. "Thou hast had a seizure, old friend. Tis naught; thou wilt
presently be well
again." He looked up at the monk, and felt a thrill of alarm. "Why dost thou stare so?"
Father Boquilva was gazing at Fess intently. "I had thought ... no matter." He turned a stern gaze
on the boy.
"Thou, too, wert valiant—but foolish. These bandits would not have slain us, for we are adept at
defense."
"Too much so," Geoffrey said, frowning. "What manner of monks art thou, to own such skill with a
quarterstaff?"
"Geoffrey!" Magnus snapped, then turned to the monk. "I cry thy pardon, Father. He is but young,
and doth
forget his manners betimes."
"I have no need for thou to apologize for me," Geoffrey grated.
"Nay; thou must needs speak thine own regrets, an thou hast them." Father Boquilva studied the
sturdy lad. "As
thou shouldst; 'tis not meet for thee to speak so to thine elders—yet I feel some trouble of the
soul within thee,
wherefore I shall explain. Ere I came to the sense of my vocation, young sir, I was a lad much
like thee, and was
as fond of martial sport as I think thou art. I did delight at quarterstaff play, aye, and at
archery and wrestling too,
and forbore them only when I sought out the cloister." He nodded toward the other monks, who were
busy
administering restoratives. "The same is true of most of my fellows—yet when we did come away from
the
monastery to dwell by ourselves, we did bethink us of bandits who might seek to prey on such easy
game as
ourselves. Therefore did we take up practice again, and did teach these skills to such of our
fellows as had them
not."
"Fairly said, and I thank thee," Magnus said. "Yet wherefore hast thou come out from the

monastery?"

"Ah. That is a matter of some dispute with our Abbot's policies," Father Boquilva explained, "a dispute so strong that we have felt the need to go off by ourselves."

"And is this, too, why thou dost practice thy skills at arms?" Gregory's eyes were huge. "Dost thou fear thine

Abbot may try to bring thee back into his fold by force?" Father Boquilva turned to him, startled. Slowly, he said,

"Thou hast excellent insight, youngling. Aye, there is some thought of that in our hearts."

Gregory's face crumpled; tears welled in his eyes. "It cannot be! 'Tis vile for men of God to think of battle!"

"I cannot but concur with thee," Father Boquilva said softly, "and do heartily wish 'twere not so. Yet come, I will

seek to explain it to thee the whiles I escort thee home." Cordelia stiffened. "Oh, nay, good father! Thou hast no

need to accompany us!"

"Yet I have," the monk said quietly, "for I wish to speak of thy kind assistance to thy father—most personally."

Rod slipped a pair of hose, folded into a flat bundle, into his saddlebag next to the package of biscuit. He heard

the door open, and looked up to see Gwen framed in the doorway with a basket on her hip. "Hi, dear. Wondered

where you were." "Plucking berries, ere the birds do have them all." She came in, leaving the door open, and set

the basket on the table, eyeing the saddlebags. "Thou'rt away, then?"

Rod nodded and started folding his spare shirt. "Tuan and Catharine have kindly appointed me emissary to the

Abbot. I should be back in three days. Can you manage without me?" "Oh, thou wilt never learn!"

She caught the

shirt from him, shook it out, and folded it into a neat, flat bundle. "Aye, I shall manage without thee—dost thou

think me helpless by myself?"

Rod grinned. "Never, dear. But for all I knew, you might have had something planned for the family."

"Naught, as it doth chance." She tucked the shirt in beside the dried meat. "Yet an I did, is thine errand of so

great an import that it could not wait?"

" 'Fraid so. M'Lord Abbot has declared the Church of Gramarye to be separate from the Church of Rome."

Gwen froze, staring. She swallowed, then said, "Wherefore?"

"He says a man on another world can't possibly understand

our problems here, or the theological reasons for solving those problems the way we do—he's talking about the

Pope, of course."

"Yet the Pope is Christ's deputy!" Gwen protested. "He doth hold the power granted to Peter—that what he doth

bind or loose shall be bound or loosed in Heaven!"

"But, says milord Abbot, Gramarye is not Earth." Rod held up a finger. "Therefore, the power of Peter doesn't

apply here."

"Oh, he doth seize upon excuses! Wherefore doth he truly wish to divorce us from Rome?"

"Well, he's the head of the Gramarye Church, since all our priests are members of his order." Rod frowned. "And

I assume he felt really diminished when Father Al handed him that letter from the Pope that gave him orders—so

he figures that the only way to keep his power is to separate from Rome. After all, that makes him top spiritual

banana again. But why do you care so much, dear?"

Gwen turned away, tucking the saddlebag's flap in.

"Dear?" Rod prodded.

"It doth fill me with foreboding, my lord." Her voice was low. "What doth threaten the unity of the Church, doth threaten the wholeness of my family."

Rod stared, shocked. And, now that he thought about it, hurt. He opened his mouth to tell, her that, but someone knocked at the door.

He looked up. Perfect, right on cue! The "someone" wore a brown robe with a little yellow screwdriver in the breast pocket, and a bowl-cut hairdo with a tonsure.

And had Rod's four junior Gallowglasses in front of him. . . .

"Children!" Gwen exclaimed. "What mischief hast thou wreaked now! . . . Good morn, Father."

"Good morn," the priest replied. "I would not say 'tis mischief they've been wreaking, milady--i' troth, they did seek to aid us."

"Sought to, maybe." Rod fixed Magnus with a gimlet glare, noticing how the boy's chin squared, and how

Gregory was trying to shrink into Cordelia's skirts while she glared back at Rod in defiance.

Geoffrey was fairly

strutting into the room, head high and chin out--but Geoffrey would, of course.

"Obviously, they think they've done something we wouldn't allow. Confess, children!"

"Is not that mine office?" The priest held out a hand. "I am Father Boquilva."

"Rod Gallowglass, and my lady, Gwendylon." Rod stepped up to take the priest's hand, and noticed that the man

hadn't stepped across the threshold. "Be welcome in my house, Father."

The\$ priest smiled and stepped in, looking up and all about as he recited, "Let there be peace in this house, and to all who dwell herein."

Rod noticed Gwen relax, so he smiled. "Thanks for pulling my kids out of whatever jam they were in, Father."

"'Kids'? Oh, thou dost mean thy children. Nay, they as much aided me as I them. . . ."

"They would not have struck in their own defense had I not!" Geoffrey burst out. "Nay, not though they carried staves and bucklers!"

Rod stared at him. "You jumped into the middle of a grownups' fight?" He pivoted to Magnus. "Why did you let

him?" Magnus spread his hands in exasperation. "Who could e'er stop him, Papa?"

"There's some truth in that," Rod allowed. "Who tried to beat up on you, Father?"

Father Boquilva shrugged. "Naught but a band of robbers who thought that men o' the cloth would be easy meat.

They did not think that we would have so little."

Gregory nodded. "Naught but the chalice, Papa, yet those nasty bandits stole even that!"

Rod frowned at the monk. "So they were disappointed, and they were going to take it out on you with a beating?"

Reluctantly, the priest nodded. "Yet what are a few bruises when measured against eternity? I doubt me not

they'd have caused us pain, but little damage."

"They would not even have fought to ward off blows!" Geoffrey said.

"But that was up to them." Rod turned to scowl at his son. "You leave grown-ups to grown-ups."

"Even though

we see good folk plundered!?" "You might have been justified in staying in hiding and using 'magic,'" Rod

admitted, "but not in jumping into the fight physically!"

Geoffrey's jaw set.

"There is just too great a danger thou wilt be hurled, my jo," Gwen told him.

"We will not be hurted!"

"That'll make a great epitaph, some day," Rod sighed, "but I'd rather not see it while I'm alive.

Let's say I'm the

one who's chicken, son, and I'm scared to have you mix in a grown-ups' fight."

"Oh, Papa!"

"Silly or not, it's the rule!" Rod took a step toward the boy, then realized his hands were hooking into claws. He jammed them together behind his back and looked around at his brood. "And what's the punishment for breaking that rule?"

Geoffrey glared back, but awareness of doom shadowed his face.

Behind him Magnus stirred with a sigh. "Aye, Papa, we know. Come, my sibs—let us to it."

Gregory turned to follow him, and so did Cordelia, but with a troubled glance backwards at Geoffrey.

Rod fixed his glare on his second son, his anger warring with admiration for the boy's courage. Of course, he

didn't let it show, and Geoffrey just stared back, his chin like a rock. Gwen stepped up beside Rod, gazing

intently at Geoffrey. "Thou dost know thou didst break our rule, my son." "But it would have been wrong to let

them be beaten!" "Aye, yet we would not have thee be right but wounded, or worse. Therefore art thou not to

partake of adult quarrels—and to make thee mindful of that, thou wilt do thy punishment." Geoffrey glared at

her, but why should he be able to stand against the compulsion of her gaze when his father never had? He

growled, but he turned away to follow Magnus.

As the door closed behind him, Gwen went limp. "Praise Heaven! I feared he might defy thee to rage!"

"Not this time, thanks to you." Rod let himself begin to relax. "Thanks for backing me, dear."

" 'Twas a rule we had both agreed on, my lord—and one well made, to my mind. I come near to believing he

doth think 'tis better to lose his life than a fight!"

"And better to lose either than to lose face. Oh, yes." Rod sighed, and turned back to the priest.

"Thou hast a worthy son," Boquilva noted.

"Yeah, we do, don't we?" Rod grinned. "Well, Father! Can we offer you a glass of wine?"

Someone squalled behind the closed door, and the grownups paused in their chat. Muffled by oak came the cry,

"Mind thy mop handle, "Delia!"

"Only one in a room at a time," Rod called. "That's part of the punishment!"

There, was silence behind the door, then footsteps receding and the splash of a mop in a bucket.

"I have heard of many children's punishments," the monk said, "yet this was never one."

< Rod nodded. "They can do a lot more than most folks give them credit for, Father—but ordinarily they only

have to clean their own rooms."

"We were abducted a year ago," Gwen added, "and 'twas two weeks ere we could win home. Then did we

learn what they'd done in our absence."

"By the end of the week the house shone." Rod's smile was brittle. "And they have to do it without using magic,

too." "Aye, there's the rub," Gwen agreed. "Not that I really mind their defeating evil wizards, Father," Rod

explained. "It's just that I nearly had a heart attack when I found out how much danger they'd put themselves into."

Father Boquilva chuckled and regarded his wineglass. "Well, we did surmise that they were magic-workers." He

looked up at Gwen. "How dost thou contain them, milady?" "I have a few spells of mine own." Gwen dimpled

prettily. " 'Tis more a wonder that thou, and thy brothers, did survive their interference."

"Well, as to that, they may truly have aided us," the priest said. "We would certainly have sustained a harsh

beating, and we might have died had we not fought. There was some look to these bandits that minds me they

would not have been content with small cruelties—yet ere we'd have admitted such knowledge, belike we'd have been too incapacitated to defend ourselves."

Gwen shuddered. "Beshrew me! But it horrifies me to think that some truly enjoy slaying others!"

Rod nodded, face dark. "But what were you doing out in the middle of that meadow anyway, Father? Why didn't you just stay home, behind the walls of your monastery?"

"Ah." Father Boquilva's face turned grim. "As to that—w< had come to some disagreement with our Lord Abbot."

"Disagreement?" Gwen stared. "Yet didst thou not swear obedience to him when thou wast ordained?"

"Aye, and sin that we could no longer give such obedience with sound consciences, we thought it best to go apart by ourselves."

"Hold it! Whoa!" Rod held up a flat, open hand. "Whan orders could your Abbot be giving that were so bad some of his own monks couldn't obey them?" Then he paused, remember-' ing his new assignment and its cause. "It wouldn't have anything to do with his wanting to declare the Church off Gramarye separate from the Church of Rome, would it?"

Father Boquilva met his eyes with a long, steady gaze. "Thou has most excellent minstrels, to bring such news so quickly."

Rod waved the remark away. "I have inside sources." "Aye." A shadow crossed Boquilva's face. "Thou art the High Warlock, art thou not?"

Rod gave Gwen a quick glance of exasperation. "I keep telling the kids not to brag. But yes, Father, I am—and I spoke with His Majesty this morning, about exactly this matter." Boquilva nodded, not taking his gaze from Rod's. "Then events have proceeded more quickly than I had thought." "Oh. It was still only talk when you left?"

Boquilva nodded. "Yet that was a week ago—small enough time, when our Lord Abbot hath brooded six years over the matter."

"Six years? Let's see ... of course, that was when the Abbot squared off against Tuan, and only backed down

because Father Al handed him a letter from the Pope telling him to do whatever Father Al said." Rod clasped his head as a brief dizzy spell swept him. "My lord! Has it been that long already?"

"Nay, my lord." Gwen covered his hand with hers. " 'Tis simply that our children have grown so quickly."

"Thanks for the reassurance, dear." Rod let his other hand rest on hers and looked up at Father Boquilva. "And it still bothers the Abbot?"

Father Boquilva nodded again. "He hath some strain of worldly vanity, I fear, and was greatly ashamed to be so set

down, there before all of two armies. Yet 'tis only these last three months that he hath begun to speak of separation."

"Rather persuasively, too, I suspect." Rod frowned. "I heard the man preach once. He's almost as powerful an orator as King Tuan."

Boquilva nodded. "Thou dost not undervalue him. In truth, some of the reasons he doth advance do hold merit, great merit—that what authority the Pope may once have had over the Church here on this Isle of Gramarye, he

hath defaulted, through having so long ignored us. In truth, for all we heard from Rome, one might have thought that His Holiness knew not of our existence."

"Well, be fair, though—Gramarye never sent any messages to Rome, either."

"How could we? For that is milord Abbot's next point—that the Pope is so far distant from Gramarye that he cannot possibly know what doth occur here. Even doth he hear report, he can have no sense of the tensions of power, as milord Abbot hath. Then beyond this, there is such a maze of matters theological, of hairsplitting over the authority of Peter and his passing on of that power—and of the tightness of the Church of Rome today—that we cannot know what it doth or doth not I hold to be a sin."

"Sounds a little weak."

Father Boquilva agreed. "It doth in truth. For look you, milord Abbot's whole upbringing hath instilled in him the belief that the Pope is the heir of Peter, the rightful head of the Church, and that he doth hold from God Himself the power to declare what is right and wrong. Yet an upbringing alone were not enough, there is all of milord's schooling for the priesthood, and his priestly vows themselves, to tell him to obey the Holy See."

Rod said, "But it's hard to accept religious authority greater than his own when, all his life, he has thought that if he could rise to Abbot, he'd be the supreme spiritual power in Gramarye, second only to the King."

"Aye, yet that 'second' doth gall him."

"Oh, yes! That's what the whole fight was about six years ago—whether the King should take orders from the Abbot, or the other way around. Yes, the thought of power must be tempting."

"Aye, and some of us were agreed that, despite what he knew to be right in his heart of hearts, milord Abbot, did but devise excuses to justify a break with Rome and a regaining of his full power."

"Where I come from, we call that kind of excuse a rationalization—and once a man has found enough of them, he's capable of doing anything. Yes, I can see why you'd be wary."

"Wary indeed—and unsure whether our vows of obedience to our Lord Abbot might not be superseded by obedience to our Holy Father the Pope. Thus we sought to place ourselves apart from the dilemma by coming away from the Monastery of St. Vidicon and journeying here to Runnymede, to begin our own chapter house."

"Wisely done," Gwen agreed. "Yet doth this not, in itself, violate thy vow of obedience?"

"It would, had we been commanded to stay—yet we were not."

"Of course not." Rod smiled, amused. "In fact, the Abbot didn't even know you were leaving, did he?"

Father Boquilva had the grace to look abashed. "I own he did not—and nay, further, that we did not seek his permission, as any monk is obliged to by the rule of our order. Yet we were resolved to go, whether it broke our vow to our Lord Abbot or not, for we feared greater peril of sin than that."

"Ah, then." Owen's eye glinted. "Thou didst come away at night, and most quietly?"

"Like thieves." Father Boquilva gave her a guilty glance. "In truth, we did steal away. Yet if I cannot feel completely right in my heart therefore, I would have felt more wrong still had I stayed."

Rod nodded. "Wise decision, I'd say. But isn't the Abbot apt to try to make you come back?"

"He may indeed—and 'tis therefore that we have come to Runnymede, to Their Royal Majesties' personal demesne."

"Ah." Rod sat up straighten "A prudent move, Father—putting yourselves under the King's accidental protection, so to speak."

Father Boquilva replied, "I do not think milord Abbot will wish to make too great a stir so close

to Their
Majesties, for fear King Tuan will notice that the Order of St. Vidicon is not wholly of one mind on the issue."
Rod was still nodding. "Yeah, it makes good sense. The
Abbot doesn't want to make that much of a fuss where the King might notice. But it might be a little wiser,
Father, to let Their Majesties know you're here; they might wish to be a little more open about their protection."
Father Boquilva shook his head. "I had liefer not; we have too great a sense of betraying our order even now. I do
not think milord Abbot would stoop to foul means to bring us home."
"I wish I had your rosy view of human nature. But if he does send a war party?"
"Nay," Father Boquilva protested. "He is a good man, Lord Warlock!"
"Yes, but not a terribly strong one—and priests can be tempted, too. So just for the sake of argument, what would
you do if he sent an attack squad?"
Father Boquilva said slowly, "Why, I would heed thine advice, and appeal to the Crown for protection."
"Wise—and I hope you won't have to, Father," Rod said.
"Yet thou dost anticipate it." The priest gave Rod a searching look. "Wherefore dost thou so?"
Rod shrugged. "He's just always struck me as the kind who can resist anything but temptation. And as you say,
he's found some rationalization that will let him stop resisting. But I don't think he came up with those excuses
all by himself."

The house was finally quiet, and Rod sank down in a chair by the fire with a grateful sigh. "Well, they're
wonderful, but it's always a relief when they're down for the night." His brow clouded.
Gwen noticed. "Aye. Thou wilt not be here to join in it tomorrow night, wilt thou?"
"No, but I should be back two nights after, with smooth
roads and fair weather. Even if the Abbot wants to take a hard
line. That should just make the conference shorter, in fact."
"Thou dost suspect meddling from our enemies tomorrow,
dost thou not?"
Rod noticed how the futurians were "our enemies," now. Nice and reassuring, that. "Ah. You caught me."
"Knowing thee and the contests we have waged in the past, 'twas open and clear when thou didst say the Lord
Abbot had help in the devising of his excuses. Who else wouldst thou think did aid him?"
"Well, yes, but suspecting futurian influence is becoming a reflex now. I'm beginning to look for them
everywhere. If a sunny day turns cloudy, I see their hand in it."
"Not so bad as that. In truth, thou dost suspect their intervention only once or twice in a year, and thou art usually
in the right half the time. Yet in this case I am minded to concur with thee."
"Oh?" Rod looked up. "You see the hand of the future totalitarians in this, too?"
"Aye, though I would favor those who seek to abolish government altogether—for look you, the Abbot's action
can only bring war, and strife between Church and Crown can but work toward chaos." She hugged herself,
shivering. "Eh! But when the Church is shaken, all are! Nay, I've dark forebodings indeed, my lord."
"Well, share, then." Rod stood up and went over to settle down beside her on the floor cushions.
"Why hug
yourself when there's a volunteer available?" He illustrated the point by slipping an arm about her.
She was rigid for a moment, then relaxed against him. "My lord, I fear."
"I know what you mean. But remember, dear—whether or not our home is solid has nothing to do with

the Church." Gwen was still a moment, then shook her head. Rod frowned, lifting his head. "What? Do you think that if the Church shakes, our marriage fails? That's superstition!" "Mayhap, yet 'twas in the Church we were married." "Yeah, but that was our idea, not the Church's. No priest can create or destroy our unity, dear--only we can."

She sighed and leaned against him. "Well, there's truth in that, praise Heaven. Even so, the Faith can give aid."

"You don't believe that!" Rod stiffened in indignation. "Yeah, sure I know the Church doesn't allow divorce--but you don't think that's why I'm still here, do you?"

"Nay, I do not." Gwen turned to look up at him with a slow, heavy-lidded smile that bespoke reams about her opinion of herself.

A few minutes later Rod lifted his head, took a deep breath, and said, "Yes. Well, so much for religious prohibitions. No, dear, I can't help but think that we'd stay married even if the Church said we didn't have to."

"I have some suspicion of the sort myself," Gwen agreed, snuggling up. "Yet still, my lord, I grew up believing that marriage is a sacrament, as did all here in Gramarye--as something good and holy in itself; and I cannot help but think that 'twas therefore I did not burn to marry whosoever I could, but did wait till I'd found he whom I wanted."

"Well. My self-image soars," Rod whispered into her ear-- as far into her ear as he could. "Remind me to thank the Church."

"Why, so I do, now, " she said, in full seriousness, and Rod drew back a little, sobering. Gwen went on, " Tis also the honoring of the sacrament, my lord, and the wish not to profane it, that hath made me strive to preserve the harmony between us. Must thou not also admit to somewhat of the same sense?"

"Yes, I would, now that you mention it. " Rod frowned. "And, come to think of it, some of my more worldly acquaintances, back in the old days, did seem to regard marriage as more of a convenience than a privilege. Still, I don't think that attitude is totally dependent on the Church, dear--it comes from the home; it's passed down from parent to child. A family heirloom, you might say. "

"And the most valuable of them all, " she agreed. "Yet didst thou not find that those who thought thus did also cling to the Faith?"

"Which faith? There were so many where I grew up, and some of them were very definitely not religious. And no, I never did do a statistical analysis on any of them. Religion isn't the kind of thing you discuss in polite society, back home. In fact, I even knew a few people who lived very Christian lives but never went to Church. People can read the Bible without a priest's help, dear. "

"Aye, yet how many of them do? Yet also, my lord, thou dost forget that the greater number of our folk cannot read. "

"Yeah, so they have to take the priest's word that what he reads is what the Book really says. That's why I'm so big on education, sweetheart. "

"As am I, my lord, for I'm aware that what our children do learn outside our home hath great influence indeed on them. And what would that learning be, were there no Church for them to learn in?"

"They'll learn more from their playmates than from the priest, dear. You know that. "

"Aye, and that is why I am so concerned that their playmates also learn what we wish them to. How could we assure that, if there were no Church?"

"I see, " Rod said slowly. "If the Church becomes the Church of Gramarye, who knows what else they'll change?

Maybe letting the priests marry. " He nodded. "And if the priests start marrying, how long will it be before they find a good reason for condoning divorce?"

"My lord! I scarcely--"

"Oh, no, sweetheart, I didn't mean it that way! But you've got to admit--if a priest is going to be unprincipled enough to forget his vow of celibacy, isn't he apt to start condoning divorce, too?"

"Aye... thou hast summat of truth there. Yet not all priests do think of expedience. "

"No, " Rod said slowly, "most of them are just ordinary men, like the rest of us, trying to be good but still be men-- hopefully with a little greater success. But there are the ones who go too far that way, too. "

Gwen was puzzled. "How can a priest go too far toward being good?"

"By working too hard at it. It doesn't come naturally to any of us, you know. There are the priests who go to extremes and become fanatics. They're bound and determined that they're going to come near anything that might be even remotely sinful--and they're bound and determined that the rest of us won't, either, so we can't contaminate them. So they decide anything pleasant is sinful--songs, dancing, theater, sex--"

"And love, " Gwen murmured.

"They don't go quite that far, or at least, they don't dare say it aloud. But they can sure as hell make a child feel guilty about loving anybody but God, and make him feel like a total sinner if he has the least lascivious thought. Not to mention making think that he should spend every spare minute in prayer-- don't laugh, dear, I've met 'em.

'My lord, ' they say, 'have you read The Lives of the Saints? "

"Aye, my lord. They were good and Godly people. "

"They were a bunch of psychotics! Do you want your son to pull off every thread he's wearing and shove 'em at you so he can tell you that now he has nothing to bind him to you anymore? Or to have your daughter have sores on her knees 'cause she spends too much time kneeling on hard granite floors, praying?"

Gwen shuddered. "My lord! These are sacrilegious words!" "Sacrilegious, my donkey! They're darn near direct quotes from the saints' lives! And have you noticed how few of them were parents?"

Gwen winced, but she said doggedly, "I mark how few of (them hearkened to the blandishments of the worldly, my lord, or let themselves be led into sin so that evil folk might use and abuse them. "

"There is that, " Rod admitted. "There were only a few of them who let some pimp seduce them into prostitution, then turn them into virtual slaves--and that was before they became saints. It's awfully hard to victimize someone who won't even let other people come near them. But you've got to admit, dear, that you can't do much about helping other people if you spend all your time praying. "

"I scarcely think 'twas true of the saints. "

"But it was true of some of them! They went off and turned into hermits. The ones who really worry me, though, are the ones who kept on living in their villages, but had to suffer through ridicule and ostracism, and had to ignore everybody around them. Sure, that was because they were only one out of two or three moral

people in
whole depraved towns—but is a seven-year-old really going to understand that?"
Gwen reddened, but she pressed her lips tightly together.
"Oh, yeah, sure, our seven-year-old! But don't give him credit for too much maturity, dear. Just because he
understands everything the first time it's told to him doesn't mean he'll understand the things
he's not being told!
Say what you like—it is possible to be victimized by piety!"
"Mayhap, " Gwen said, lips pressed tight, "yet I have never met one who hath suffered thus. "
"Maybe not, but you must admit you've met people who don't dare do anything their parish priest
has told them is
wrong, for fear they'll die the next minute and spend eternity writhing in hellfire. "
Gwen was silent, almost rigid.
"Admit it! You've met them, scores of them—poor peasant folk who have no choice but to trust the
priests,
because they've never been taught how to think for themselves. "
"I cannot deny it. " Owen's voice was low, but also dangerous. "Yet I have met more who are not. "
"Maybe, but what really scares me is the number of educated people I've met who have the same hang-
up! They
know how to think, but they're afraid to—because, after all, the priest must really know what's
right or wrong,
since that's his job. They haven't found out yet that if you ask two different priests the same
question, sometimes
you get two different answers. "
"Why, how treacherous!"
"Maybe, but it works. "

"Yet 'tis also dishonest! 'Tis deceptive, 'tis—" "What was that? That word you were going to say
there?
'Sacrilegious, ' was it? Or maybe 'blasphemous'? As though questioning the priest were the same as
defying
God?" Rod shook his head. "No. A priest is just a man, and as human as any of us. When we forget
that, we start
asking him to take care of our consciences for us. "
"What sayest thou!" Gwen glared up at him. "Why, when someone isn't sure what's right or wrong,
and he's
afraid to try to figure it out for himself—because if he guesses wrong, it's hellfire, for the
rest of eternity!—he
asks the priest to give him a verdict. And the priest just gives him an opinion, but the poor
sinner takes it as
Gospel truth. No, dear, I'm afraid I'd have to say that most people I know turn chicken when it
comes to their
souls. They'd much rather trust them to a specialist. "
"Thou art but an arrogant knave, Rod Gallowglass!" Gwen leaped to her feet. "Thou dost but resent
any who may
be in authority over thee!"
"You know that's not true. " Rod stood up slowly, matching her glare. "I take orders when I have
to—when I'm
convinced the other guy knows more about the matter than I do, and I have to take action. But I'm
also capable of
making up my own mind. "
"As are all! Thy slanders of other folk in this are born of overweening pride!"
"There, you see?" Rod pointed a finger at her. "You're talking about hubris—thinking you're better
than the gods.
But a priest isn't a god any more than I am!"
"And canst thou claim to be as close to God as one who doth devote his life to prayer?"
"Yes, considering that I'm trying to live every part of my life as I believe God wants me to. "
Rod paused.
"Where did all this piety come from, all of a sudden? You've never exactly been the 'kuche, kirke,
and kinder'
type before. "

Gwen turned away, her anger darkening into brooding.

"Mayhap that I have become so whilst thou didst not notice. "

"Apparently, and I thought I was pretty good at studying you. " Rod frowned. "Certainly my favorite subject of contemplation.

When did this happen?"

;
"When I became a mother, my lord," she said slowly, "and I it hath grown as my children have. And I must conjure thee to

credit my words with truth, for thou canst never understand it, though thou hast been a father."

"Why, of course I will," Rod said, suddenly softening. "When have I ever doubted your word? But is motherhood that different from fatherhood?"

"I think that it is, my lord, though even as thou, I cannot know both. Yet look you, 'tis a matter of feeling, not

knowing; for bringing forth life out of one's own body doth bring one also closer to the other world. Aye, that is

one source of my sudden piety, as thou dost term it, yet another's hard upon us." She turned, catching his hands

and staring up into his eyes. "Be aware, my lord, that we have a lad about to spring into the heated turmoil of

youth, and a lass hard behind him—for womenfolk do begin that strife sooner than men."

"Adolescence. Yes, I know." Rod nodded, face somber. "It happens to everyone. No way to avoid it, dear."

"Aye, and seeing its onset doth bring me to greater awareness of the worldly hazards lying in wait for the

children, our treasures—and, therefore, doth make me also aware of the safeguards available to help shield them."

"Such as the Church and its teachings?" Rod said softly.

Gwen started to answer, when the door creaked behind them. They turned, to see a sleepy Gregory come blinking

out of his room in his nightshirt, squinting against the light. Gwen moved over to him with a wordless sound of

sympathy, pressing him to her side and murmuring, "Was it, then, a fell dream, my jo?"

"Nay, Mama," Gregory answered. " 'fis that I cannot sleep at all."

"No sleep?" Rod came over, frowning. "What's the matter? Worried because of those monks today?" The little boy nodded.

"Don't worry, son." Rod clasped the boy's shoulders. "They have a strong house, and they all have shields; they'll

be safe."

" 'Tis not that, Papa," Gregory murmured.

"Then what?" Gwen asked, anxiety in her voice.

Gregory looked up at her, all eyes. "I feel some pull toward them, Mama . . . and I bethink me that, mayhap, I

must grow to become a monk."

Rod stood frozen, feeling the shock thrill through him.

4

"Nay, I tell thee, Brother Alfonso! 'Tis not my vocation to rule!"

Brother Alfonso's mouth quirked with impatience. "If thou hadst no vocation to govern, milord, thou wouldst not

be Abbot."

The Abbot stared, then looked away, pursing his lips.

Brother Alfonso allowed himself a small smile. "Naethe-less, milord, 'tis not of ruling that I speak, but of

Tightness. Thou hast done well, and wisely."

The Abbot lapsed into a brooding frown. "Yet I cannot help but wonder, Brother. The Bishop of Rome is, after

all, heir to Peter."

"Aye, in that he governs the souls of Rome. Yet that he hath inherited the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, I can

find room to doubt."

"To doubt is a sin." But the Abbot's tone lacked conviction.

"To question, then." Brother Alfonso shrugged impatiently. "But think, milord--when doth the Pope claim infallibility?"

"Only when he doth speak ex cathedra," the Abbot recited from rote.

"And what is the meaning of ex cathedral Is it not when he hath consulted with as many of his cardinals and bishops as he can, in council?"

The Abbot did not respond.

"Then it is the council that is infallible, not the Pope," Brother Alfonso insisted. "Yet did Christ give the Keys to a council? Nay!"

"There are answers to that question," the Abbot muttered.

"Aye, I have heard them--and the best of them is that a Pope hath, now and then, spoken ex cathedra to

contradict his own council! Why therefore were they called?"

"Why, so that he might have the benefit of all good arguments, and could consider most carefully ere he spoke."

"Aye! And doth that answer satisfy thee?"

"What matters that?" the Abbot muttered. "Only that I am obliged to keep seeking."

"And wilt never find," Brother Alfonso said with vindictive satisfaction. "Yet there is some present question of action that must needs be considered."

"Must it?" The Abbott turned to him, frowning. "Wherefore?"

"Why, for that the King doth ever seek to gather more power unto himself, and will end by attempting to govern the Church!"

" 'Tis not he, but the Queen," the Abbot growled.

"Then he's but her dupe! Behold her actions--once before she hath claimed the power to appoint parish priests!"

"She did relinquish that," the Abbot reminded.

"Aye, yet when shall she take it up again? When the King hath garrisons in every town, and not even the greatest

lord durst gainsay him, for fear of his armies? Oh, nay, my lord! If ever thou wilt bridle this proud and arrogant

prince, 'tis now, whilst his power's still a-borning!"

The Abbot was silent, gazing out the window at his pastures.

"The Pope cannot know of that," Brother Alfonso reminded him, "nor comprehend the fullness of its import."

Slowly, the Abbot nodded. "Thou hast the right of it. I did well, to declare as I have." Behind his back Brother

Alfonso breathed a sigh of relief.

"Not that I'm against the kid becoming a priest, if that's what's going to make him happiest." Rod lifted his head

to let the wind stream over his face. After a few minutes he realized Fess hadn't responded; the only sound had

been the triplets of the great horse's hoofbeats. "You don't believe me. ..."

"Do you, Rod?"

"All right, hang it! So I don't want the kid to become a priest! But if that's the natural extension of his identity, he has to do it!"

"But you do not believe it is his calling," Fess interpreted. "No, blast it, I don't! I think he's being subtly

indoctrinated by the priests and their continual emphasis on the priesthood as the holiest vocation!"

"Assuredly they would think so, since it is theirs." "Yeah, but they have no right to go imposing their own views

on the rest of us." Rod scowled. "Though that's just what they'll do if the Church of Gramarye

really does start
thinking itself supreme."
"How else could they? In medieval society the clergy constituted the First Estate."
"The most important and the best." Rod's mouth twisted
with bitterness. "It's too bad the Pope can't know about this."
"Why can he not, Rod?" Fess's voice was behind Rod's ear;
he didn't need to transmit at human thought frequencies,
thanks to the earphone implanted in Rod's mastoid process.
Rod nodded slowly. "I suppose we could send a message.
No reason to think your transmitter isn't still working, is
there?"
"None at all. I am still sending your monthly reports." Rod's jaw dropped. "But I haven't written
any for a year
now!"
"I assumed you would want me to accept responsibility for certain routine tasks. ..."
"Of course." Rod closed his jaw. "Yes, quite right. But next time let me know, will you?"
"Certainly, Rod."
"After all, it is a courtesy. By the way, what have I been reporting?"
"Only the major royal actions, and indications of public reaction. There has been no warning of
restlessness
among the clergy."
"Probably because there hasn't been any—just in the Abbot," Rod mused. "And without the support of
his priests,
he might decide not to push the issue to crisis. No, I don't think we'll send a special, Fess.
Certainly not to the
Vatican, not quite yet."
"As you will, Rod," Fess sighed.

Rod noted the tone of martyred patience. "You think the problem is bigger than it looks?"
"It could become so. In a medieval society, the quickest route to a totalitarian government is
through the
Church."
"I know what you mean." Rod frowned. "The parish priests already have pretty thorough control over
every
aspect of the congregations' lives, simply by telling them what is and is not a sin."
"But they are limited in that by the Church's official positions."
"Not if they haven't heard about them, and our boys have been a little out of touch for the last
half millennium or
so. Besides, just because a priest finds out what Rome teaches, doesn't necessarily mean he'll
agree with it."
"Surely a parish priest would not preach that fornication is virtuous, even though Rome teaches
that it is sinful!"
Rod noted Fess's tone again. "You aren't really as scandalized as you sound, are you?"
"You still have difficulty discerning sarcasm," the robot replied.
Rod nodded, satisfied. "Thought so. And no, I think the tonsured tribe are all pretty much agreed
about
fornication. But say, oh—that whole business about evolution. The Church finally accepted the idea
in 2237,
when the anthropologists discovered the skeleton of Homo Fidelis."
"Yes, I recall the announcement." Fess had been almost brand-new at the time. "There was a great
deal of
controversy, but both theologians and anthropologists finally acknowledged that the statuette with
Fidelis was a
religious icon."
"Yeah, that's how you taught it to me when I was ten. But even now, three hundred years later,
I've met priests
who are still preaching that it's a sin to believe Darwin's theory."
"Humanity naturally resists change," Fess sighed. "I sometimes think your species should be named
Homo Habit-
ualis."
"Man of habit, eh?" Rod smiled. "Not referring to monks' robes, I suppose."

"I did not exclude them. Nor would the Church, if it gained worldly authority. In fact, it might make Church garb obligatory."

"No, it would want to be able to tell the clergy from the laity on sight, to make sure the priests got instant privilege wherever

they went. But they probably would issue a dress code for ordinary citizens, and make it a crime to wear anything else."

"That in itself could be resisted, Rod. But the Church would probably make the violation of the dress code a sin, and that would induce greater obedience from the citizens."

Rod shuddered. "You've got a point there. Never underestimate the power of guilt."

"Oh, I do not," Fess said softly. "I assure you, I do not."

"Father Matthew! They come!"

Father Boquilva looked up from his daubing, every muscle instantly tense, but his tone was mild as he called

back to the sentry on the watchtower, "Sound the alarm, Brother Fennel. Is it bandits again?"

"Nay, Father, 'tis our fellows of the order. Yet I see the glint of steel where their tonsures should be."

Father Boquilva stiffened. "So? Well, we have steel caps, | too. Sound the alarm, but be mindful, they are of our order."

The whistle shrilled high above, and all over the meadow s monks froze, eyes turned to the tower.

- Father Boquilva turned to the monk beside him with a smile. "Brother Jeremy, I believe Father Arnold and

Brother Otho have the day's cooking in hand. Would you inquire if they can

'serve in an hour or so? We have guests."

- The visitors turned into the lane between rows of turned earth with grim faces, gripping their staves tightly as they eyed

- the band drawn up before them. Sure enough, the renegades 'charged, shouting.

" "Brother Lando, thou scoundrel! Thou art a sight for sore eyes!"

; "Father Milo! Right good it is to see thee!"

"Eh, Brother Brigo! Thou dost yet feed too well!" And they were throwing their arms about the visitors,

thumping them on the backs with delight and good cheer, not staves and daggers.

Foremost among them was Father Boquilva, roaring above ail their voices, "Welcome! Welcome, our brothers

all! We joice in the sight of thee!"

"Well, and so do we also," the visitors' leader grinned, clasping Boquilva by the shoulders and leaning back to

look at him. Then he sobered. "Yet thou hast done wrongly by our good Abbot, Father Matthew."

"Not a word of it, Father Thorn! Not a word!" Father Boquilva turned in beside the visitor, slinging an arm across

his shoulders and urging him toward the house. "Father Arnold and Brother Otho have labored all this morn to

make a hearty supper for thee, and thou must eat of it ere we speak a word of this matter!"

Supper was downright festive, with monks who had not seen each other for a month laughing and trading gossip.

By unspoken mutual consent, the Abbot wasn't even mentioned until Father Thorn sat back with a sigh and

began plying a toothpick. "Eh! Our refectory is lonesome for thee, Brother Otho!"

" Tis but simple fare." Brother Otho smiled, pleased. " Tis naught but bread, cheese, and eggs. If thou wilt visit

with us next year, I doubt not we will even have meat for thee."

Father Thorn lifted an eyebrow. "So long? Come, Brother! An thou wilt return with us now, thou shalt have pork

to roast, and even good beef!"

"So then," said Father Boquilva, "thou dost wish us back only for Brother Otho's fine touch with herbs?"

"The hour for jesting is past, Father Matthew." Father Thorn sat forward, frowning. "Thou hast sworn obedience to thine Abbot; now doth he bid thee come back to his house." He pulled a scroll from his robe and laid it on the table before Father Boquilva. When the monk did not move to take it up, Father Thorn urged, "Open it, if thou dost doubt me!"

"I doubt thee not at all, Father," Boquilva answered quietly. "Yet we hold another obligation that doth supersede even our duty to Milord Abbot."

"Naught could. What obligation dost thou speak of?" "Our duty to the Pope."

"The Pope hath no right of command in Gramarye," another monk said instantly, "nor did ever."

"So?" Father Boquilva turned, smiling. "How dost thou come to know that, Brother Melanso?" "Why, our Father Abbot told us so!" Father Boquilva resisted the temptation to jibe, and said only, "We believe him mistaken."

"He cannot be; he is the Abbot," Father Thorn said instantly.

"'Cannot?'" Father Boquilva turned back with a raised eyebrow. "Is he infallible, then?"

Father Thorn reddened. "Assuredly he is far wiser than thou!"

"How so? He was not appointed by God for his knowledge, Father—he was chosen in conclave by all the brothers, and that for his gift of bringing all to work together, not for his judgment in theology."

"An thou hast chosen him for the one, thou hast chosen him for the other!"

But Father Boquilva shook his head. "I chose him for Abbot, Father, not King."

Father Thorn sat back, his face losing all expression. "Ah, then, we come to the nubbin of it. Our good Lord Abbot doth not seek kingship, Father Boquilva; he doth but seek to assure Their Majesties' moral conduct."

"Quid est, he doth intend that when he shall say a given action is wrong, they-shall not do it," Father Boquilva interpreted.

"Is that not right?"

"There is a case for it," Boquilva admitted, "yet it is like to turn to ah intention that, when he shall tell them they must do another thing, they shall do it."

"And where is the wrong in that?" Father Thorn challenged.

"In that our Lord Abbot will thus be tempted to rule," Father Boquilva answered. "His province is that of the spirit, not of the world."

"Yet the world should behave in accord with the spirit!"

"Aye, but by choice, not by coercion. When Tightness rules by force, it doth cease to be right."

"Dost thou say our Abbot is wrong?" growled a short, muscular monk.

"I say he seeks a near occasion of sin," Father Boquilva returned, unperturbed.

"Traitor!" The short monk leaped up, yanking a bludgeon from inside his cloak. The table crashed over as monks surged to their feet and scrambled for their quarterstaves.

"Nay, Brother Andrew!" Father Thorn held up a hand to stay the blow, and the melee settled down to two armed lines, the visitors glaring at their foes, the hosts warily watching their former allies. Father Thorn choked down his anger enough to say to Father Boquilva, "I know thee well enough to respect thy belief; thou dost think thyself right, even though thou art wrong. Yet be mindful, Father, that thy special abilities, and those of thy fellows, are so strong as they are because of the care and fostering thou hast all received at the hands of our order."

Father Boquilva stood very still, and was silent so long that it was gray-haired Father Arnold who answered. "We own ourselves obliged for instruction--nay, mayhap even for life; for any one of us might have been burned at the stake by a mob in panic, had we not had the protection of the monastery's walls." "Then come home to it! Thou hast not the right to parade thy talents in the wide world, when so much of thy strength is the Order's!" "We have not left the Order," Father Boquilva said slowly, "nor do we wish to. We have only begun a new chapter house." "There must be only one chapter in Gramarye, Father! Thou dost know the need for secrecy!" "And I doubt it not. Yet be not afeared--we will not practice our powers save within the walls of this house, where none can see but ourselves." "And if some peasant doth peer through a chink in the wall? And he doth tell all his neighbors? What then will become of all clergy in this land!" "We know how to daub our walls well," Father Boquilva returned, "and how to maintain each his Shield, and to watch for peasants' minds straying near. Thou canst not truly believe we would be so careless, Father." "What can I believe of thee, who hast left our precincts?" Father Thorn cried, exasperated. "Dost thou not see that our house, like the Body of Christ, is weakened by the loss of any one member?" "Ah, then." Father Boquilva spoke softly. "'Tis not the rightness of our leaving that doth trouble thee, nor the chance of the worldly folk discovering our natures--but the weakening of the Abbot's house." Father Thorn was silent, but his face darkened with anger. "Where's the morality in that?" Father Arnold murmured. "We have bandied words enough." Father Thorn drew a truncheon out of his habit. "The right of the matter is for the Lord Abbot to decide, not thou, whose knowledge is no greater than mine. Thou wilt do as thou art commanded." "We will not turn away from our Holy Father the Pope," Father Boquilva answered. "Then have at thee!" Father Thorn shouted as he slashed at Father Boquilva. Boquilva's staff leaped to block the truncheon, but Brother Andrew swung his cudgel crashing down on Father Boquilva's head. The taller priest fell back, dazed in spite of his steel cap, but Father Arnold stepped up to catch him with his left arm while he blocked Brother Andrew's next blow with the staff in his right hand. Father Thorn slammed another blow at him, but Brother Otho caught it on his staff, then whirled to block a swing from Brother Willem, and Father Thorn swung again. But Father Boquilva shook his head and brought his staff up to block, slowly and with a wobble, but effectively. Brother Fennel caught Brother Andrew's cudgel on the upswing from behind, and the short monk whirled with a roar, to slam a crushing blow at Fennel--but the taller monk blocked and countered. Throughout the single, large room, monks swung murderous blows at one another. Hardwood rang off steel helmets, and a few monks fell to the ground, their unconscious bodies tripping their fellows. The door crashed open, and a gentleman in doublet and hose strode in. A dozen armed men dashed through behind him, spreading out in a line along both side walls as a man behind the gentleman blew a piercing blast on a horn, then roared, "Stand, for the King's bailiff!"

The monks froze, staring.

"What mayhem is this!" the bailiff cried. "What perversion of nature, to see men of God about the Devil's work!"

Father Thorn drew himself up, his face flint. "Do not dare to instruct a priest in morality, fellow!"

One of the men-at-arms stepped forward a little, raising a pike, but the bailiff held up a hand to stop him. "Do

thou not dare to bear arms, friar. Or dost thou care naught for the scandal thou dost give?"

Father Thorn reddened, but answered, "Tis scandalous indeed that men of God must do what worldly authorities have forborne!"

"Why, let us not forbear further, then." The bailiff nodded to his men. "Arrest them, in the King's name!"

"Hold!" Father Thorn paled. "Thou hast no authority ovei men of the cloth!"

"Thou didst forfeit the protection of thy cloth when thou didst raise a staff," the bailiff replied evenly, "and I have

authority over any who disturb the King's peace in this parish!"

"Thou hast not! All clergy are subject only to the Abbot, and to him alone!"

"In truth? Why, then, call for thine Abbot and bid him excuse thee!"

"Why, so I shall," Father Thorn said, eyes narrowed. "Stand aside." He nodded to his monks and strode toward

the door, thumping the floor with his staff. For a moment it seemed he must collide with the bailiff, but at the last

moment that worthy stepped aside and waved them out the door with a low, mocking bow. When the last monk

had gone by, he stepped into the doorway and gazed after them with a hard eye. "Williken. take thou five men

and follow them at a distance—and see that they leave not the roadway."

^Williken tugged his forelock, beckoned his men, anc departed.

The bailiff turned back to Father Boquilva. "Now, gooc friar, what was the cause of this coil?"

The monk opened the door and managed to incline his body without actually bowing. Rod tried to ignore him

and stepped into the study. "Hail, Milord Abbot."

"Hail," the Abbot responded, with a smile in his voice; but he forgot to stick out a hand. Just as well; Rod wasn't

excited about kissing rings, anyway.

*

The monk who had opened the door had followed Rod in, stepping past him to the Abbot's side. The Abbot

indicated him with a wave. "My secretary. Brother Alfonso."

Rod gave the man a brief, but intense, glance, memorizing his face; anyone that close to the Abbot was a possible

enemy. He saw a pale face with a lean and hungry look on top of an emaciated body. And, of course, the fringe

of hair around the tonsure. But the eyes—the eyes were burning.

Rod turned away, trying to ignore the man. "I bear greetings from Their Majesties, milord."

"I am pleased that my children remember me."

Oh. It was going to be that way, was it? "My children"—implying that the Abbot had the right to rebuke them.

The Abbot waved toward a table by the tall bay window. "Wilt thou sit?"

"Thank you, yes; it has been a long journey." Since he'd been in the saddle most of two days. Rod really would

have preferred to stand, but there was no point in making the

meeting any more formal than it had to be. The cozier, the better; he was out to rebuild friendship, if possible. If.

The Abbot sat, too, and waved to Brother Alfonso. "Wine, if you please."

The fruit of the vine trickled into a cup in front of the Abbot, then (just so he wouldn't have any false notions

about who was more important here) into one in front of Rod; it may have been poor courtesy, but it was an

effective statement. Rod, however, waited for his host to drink first. The Abbot raised his cup and said, "To Gramarye."

"To Gramarye," Rod echoed, relieved that it was a toast he could drink to (albeit only a small sip; he loathed sweet wines).

The Abbot didn't drink much more—only enough for the symbol. Then he sat back, toying with the cup. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

And he did seem to be enjoying it—for all the wrong reasons, no doubt. "Their Majesties have grown concerned about the role of the Church in this land of Gramarye, milord."

"Indeed." The Abbot tensed, but held his smile. "They should be so concerned, for only a godly country may be peaceful and whole."

"Well, I can agree to that much, at least," Rod said with relief. "If all the people in a country believe in the same religion, it welds the country together."

"Oddly phrased." The Abbot frowned. "Not that I disagree; but thou dost make the Church seem to be the tool of the State."

Hasn't it always been? But Rod didn't say that aloud; he could think of a few cases where it had been just the reverse. "Not at all, milord. Indeed, the Church is to the State as the soul is to the body."

"And the body is dead without it?" The Abbot smiled again, seeming to relax a trifle. "Well said, well said. I am consoled to find that my royal son and daughter do see this so clearly."

Rod wasn't quite sure Their Majesties would have phrased it the way he had, but he let it pass. "Yet also, milord, if the body is ill, the soul may suffer."

"Not an it bear the thought of Heaven in mind." The Abbot frowned. "Yet I will own that a person who's ill may be tempted to anger and despair. Still, such trials will strengthen the soul, if they are endured."

Rod had a sudden memory of the smoking ruins of a village he'd seen shortly after the bandits had left. "True, but the illness should not be courted. At least, that's what I was taught when I was a boy—that it's a sin to damage your body, because it has the potential of being a temple of God."

"That, too, is true." But the Abbot's frown deepened. "Yet do not misconstrue; the body matters naught in Eternity. Only the soul endures."

It was hard not to point out the logical flaw—that the Abbot's argument could be used as an excuse for oppression— but Rod managed; he was here to conciliate, not to antagonize. "But doesn't God want us to try to achieve a sound mind in a sound body?"

"He doth; yet do not therefore dream that the two are equal in importance."

"Surely, milord, you do not preach that the body should be the slave of the soul!" That was bringing matters to a head— who should rule? Church or Crown?

"Not the slave," the Abbot qualified, "but the servant. Assuredly the body should be in all ways subject to the soul."

Dead end. Rod took a deep breath, trying to think of another approach. "But how, milord, if the soul becomes ill?"

"Then it must come to the Church, to be cured!"

Well, some of the medieval priests had been great practical psychologists—some. But Rod noticed that the Abbot had taken the argument around in a circle, stubbornly refusing to consider the implications

of his own
analogy. "Yet until it does, milord, it may create havoc within the body, may it not?" Rod had a
vivid mental
image of a schizophrenic patient he'd seen once—haggard, unshaven, and dressed in sloppy clothes.
Maybe the Abbot had seen something like it, for he looked distinctly unhappy. "Aye, yet we speak
of the body
politic, not the body human!"
The analogy wasn't working for him anymore, so he was rejecting it. "Yes, and we're talking about
the Church,
not any one soul. But there have been times when the Church has been ill, in a way—split into
parties with
different beliefs."
"Heresies have taken root, aye, and done great damage ere they have been stamped out." The Abbot
scowled.
"Yet 'tis all the more reason why they must be eliminated—with fire and sword, if need be!"

He'd pushed it over the line; Rod caught his breath. "But the Commandment says, "Thou shall not
kill.'" "
"The Commandment doth not speak of the vile seducers who would sway God's children from the true
Faith!"
the Abbot snapped. "Assuredly thou dost not wish to be such an
one!"
"No, Milord Abbot, I've no wish to tempt people away
from the true Church."
The Abbot's face turned to stone.
"Any such division in the Church can only wreak havoc and misery on the poor common people who
make up
most of its body," Rod said softly. "I beg you, Milord Abbot, to do all that you can to prevent
such a breach."
Behind the Abbot the secretary watched, trembling, his eyes like glowing coals.
" 'Tis not for us to do or undo," the Abbot answered, his tone glacial. "The unity of Gramarye
doth rest with the
great lords, and with Their Majesties."
The thought of the implied civil war chilled Rod's insides. "Yet you are the healer of the soul,
Lord Abbot. Can
you not find a way to make the body of Gramarye whole again?"
The secretary took a step forward, reaching out, but caught
himself.
"We do intend naught that would work against the interests of the common folk," the Abbot answered
stiffly,
"nor against the Crown—provided, of course, that Their Majesties conduct themselves in accord with
morality."
Which meant that the Church wouldn't fight Tuan and Catharine, as long as they did what the Church
said. No,—
not good enough. "Does Milord Abbot mean that Gramarye can be unified only if Their Majesties
abjure the
Church of Rome, and recognize the Church of Gramarye as the only Church of the
land?"
The Abbot's face twisted with distaste. "Thou hast small enough grace, and smaller tact. I would
prefer to say
that I can give neither my favor, nor my blessing, to any reign that doth uphold a faith that we
find false."
"Even though the morals and beliefs are the same—except in regard to who gives the orders." Rod
tried to
squench his rising anger. "Yet would you not say, Milord Abbot, that it is vital to have the
authority of the Church
available as a refuge

for the people, in the event that the Crown becomes tyrannical?"
Guarded wariness, now, not granite—the Abbot thawed a trifle. "It is, aye; the Church hath ever

been a counterpoise to the excesses of the great lords and the King. I do confess surprise to hear thee espouse such a view."

"You wouldn't, if you knew me better—especially since it follows that the Crown must be available as a refuge if the Church grows tyrannical."

The Abbot's face turned magenta. "Never shall it be so! Only clerics may hope to be immune from harshness!"

"Yes, but they're only human." Rod couldn't help but smile. "Even a priest may succumb to temptation."

" 'Tis far less likely than for a lord or king!"

Rod spread his hands. "No argument. Yet if it were to happen, milord, would it not be vital that the Crown be free to protect its subjects?"

The Abbot glared, his eyes narrowing.

"The Church must be separate from the State," Rod said softly, "just as the State must be separate from the Church. Therein lies the surest protection of the people."

"I will beg thee not to instruct me in care for the common weal," the Abbot grated. "The nurture of the poor folk hath ever been our concern."

"May it ever be so," Rod said piously.

"It shall." The Lord Abbot rose with the dignity of an iceberg. "In that, thou hast my pledge. Wouldst thou have more of me?"

It was a challenge, and Rod knew when to stop pushing. "I thank you, milord. You have given me all I could have expected."

And he had, of course—a bad sense of foreboding. Rod tried not to show it as he bowed to the Abbot, who returned a brusque nod as Brother Alfonso stepped to open the door. Rod glanced at the man as he stepped out, and he froze at the sight of the secretary's small, triumphant smile. Rod slowly nodded. "It has been instructive to make your acquaintance, Brother Alfonso."

"It shall be more so," the man purred.

Not exactly auspicious, Rod thought—especially since, as he followed a novice down to the gatehouse, he realized that

the Abbot hadn't once referred to Rod as "Lord Warlock," or even just "milord."

The Comte d'Auguste strode into the hall with the band of noble hunters behind him, flushed and grinning, but empty-handed. "Ho, stay-at-homes!" he cried. "Thou hast missed a brave ride!"

The four remaining noble hostages looked up from their gaming. "We have not missed it at all." The Comte Ghibelli gave D'Auguste a jaundiced glance.

Sir Basingstoke, heir to the Baronet of Ruddigore, drawled, "Let him be, Ghibelli, Their excitement in the chase doth allow them to forget that they are, in truth, but prisoners of the Crown, held to assure their fathers' obedience." He shook his dice cup and rolled.

"I had liefer be a hostage than have a headless sire." D'Auguste dropped down into an hourglass chair, caught up the ewer of wine, and poured himself a full cup. " 'Twas my father's choice, and I approve it. Yet 'tis a pleasant enough captivity—thou canst not deny we are accorded the freedom of

guests."

"Aye, to hunt with a dozen of King Tuan's knights about us." Ghibelli turned back to his chessboard. "And I note that thou, noble son of Bourbon, hast come home empty-handed." "What matter if the wolf hath fled?" The Viscount Llangol-len, son of Earl Tudor, dropped down beside D'Auguste and caught up the pitcher of wine. "I doubt not he shall lie low this night, and avoid the haunts of mortal folk."

"We shall have him on the morrow." Count Graz sat down across from him and reached for the pitcher. "Leave off, Llangollen! Thou canst not drink more than thy cup will hold!"

"Mayhap, yet I may attempt it." Llangollen grinned.

"Thou, like all Hapsburgs, dost ever seek to take all the wine for thyself."

"Thou art so besotted with sport that thou carest naught for thine heritage," Ghibelli snarled.

"Dost'a not see?"

'Twas not the gray wolf thou didst chase, but the wild goose!"

Maggiore, scion of Savoy, turned with blood in his eye, reaching over his shoulder to touch an arrow in his quiver. "I've enough of the gray goose about me to mend the ill manners of the Medici!"

Ghibelli's eyes sparked fire at the reference to his father. He started out of his seat.

"Peace, milord." D'Auguste reached out to stay Maggiore's hand while his gaze met Ghibelli's. "And where was this goose of thine hatched?"

"Why, in the brain of Tuan Loguire," Ghibelli said, "which is to say, in the head of his wife. What! Art thou so befuddled with pleasures thou dost fail to see that this round of hunts, games, and balls is but a curtain to dazzle thine eyes, the whiles Their Majesties do strip thee of thy birthright?"

Graz flushed and started to answer, but D'Auguste laid a hand on his arm. "To answer briefly and to the point—our birthrights are the ruling of our demesnes, which our fathers have still in hand; and the amusements the King doth provide are training for good governance and wise council. As to the wolf, we found the sheep he had slain and the tracks he had left—and, aye, for a short space, we saw his tail and his haunches, ere he loped into the rocks of a hillside whither we could not follow."

"Aye, not without soiling thy pretty tabard!" Earl Marshall's son sneered.

D'Auguste glanced at the splendor of gold and brocade on Marshall's doublet, knowing that he himself wore rough clothes of broadcloth and leather. "There was too great a chance that the beast might spring from ambush, and the sun neared the horizon. Yet we have found his lair, and will have him out on the morrow."

"And if thou dost, what then?" Ghibelli's eye glittered with contempt. "Thou wilt then but aid thy father's enemy, by taking away a threat to his folk. Wilt thou thus increase all his flocks and herds, and strengthen him for the day he doth seek to yoke all his nobles?"

"Thine eyes see naught but thine own thwarted power!" Graz stormed.

Ghibelli's teeth bared in a grin as his hand went to his knife.

D'Auguste caught Graz's hand as it touched his own hilt and held it immobile, forcing a smile at Ghibelli. "The King doth seek one law for all Gramarye, to ensure justice and peace for all his people—even thou. There is no harm in this, though it hinders our sires' whims and fancies."

" 'Tis more than a whim, when he doth choke off our revenues!"

"Aye, by one part in five. We may no longer grind each cent from our peasants to wallow in waste, nor maintain

whole armies--yet we've enough to live richly, build strong castle walls, and keep enough men-at-arms to put down all bandits. I see small enough harm in that, and great good and more riches due to rise from folk who feel safe and hopeful."

"And what of this appointment of priests to thine estate, eh? What sayest thou to that?"

" 'Tis naught." Graz waved the complaint away. "What care I who doth preach on my lands? Yet 'tis the Lord Abbot who hath these appointments, not the King!"

"Only for that he did wrest such power from the Queen, who had thieved it from our sires!"

"The Queen was arrogant," D'Auguste admitted. "Yet King Tuan hath tempered her manner."

"Aye, she doth but spit sparks now, where before she breathed flames! What, wouldst thou serve such an one?"

D'Auguste's eyes kindled. "I would serve none, yet I would follow King Tuan."

"He hath made thee his lackey!" Ghibelli spat. D'Auguste surged halfway up from his seat, then froze, glaring.

"And what doth halt thee?" Ghibelli taunted. "Dost thou fear the King's wrath?"

"Nay," Marshall purred. "He hath wed the fair Lady Mab, who will come to childbed presently. 'Tis not the King hath stolen his pride, but a woman who hath ta'en his manhood."

D'Auguste's glare swiveled to him, and his hand dropped to his hilt; but he felt Graz's hand on his, and checked himself. " 'Tis true I shall soon be a father," he said softly. "Nay, 'tis my boast."

"Thou are bridled," Marshall taunted. "Thou are bitted and saddled."

"That may be," D'Auguste admitted, and the words were gall on his tongue. "I have shouldered the burden that each of us must bear, or see his house perish."

"Thou hadst no need of great force to induce thee to take it up!"

"Nay, for my lady is beauteous." D'Auguste's eyes glowed, and he smiled. "And if I rejoice in my load, 'tis the happier for me. Yet it doth raise up care in my heart, to assure mine heir's holdings. Therefore do I peer down the road of the years, to judge where I must turn now, that I may make this whole land of Gramarye peaceful and bountiful--for as the land fares, so fares my house."

"And the Crown is thy surest means to so grand a view," Marshall said with contempt. "The King's plans have merit." "Say the Queen's, rather!"

"Mayhap." D'Auguste shrugged impatiently. "I care not if 'tis her scheme and his hand, so long as they bring about a smoother path for my child to walk."

"And if it doth diminish thy power? Or tarnish thine honor?"

"There is no loss of honor in following a prince I believe to be right! And if I lose some moiety of glory, what matter? As to loss of power, 'tis not so great as to trouble me."

"It did trouble thy sire!" Ghibelli's eyes burned. "He did fight to stay the Queen's hand, and though he lost, suffered defeat with honor! 'Tis the King and Queen whose escutcheons were blotted, for they hid behind a rabble of beggars and witches! What noble son could countenance such baseness?" Graz started to answer, but Ghibelli overrode him. "What of thy grandsire? What of the noble Bourbon who founded thine house? Would

they have brooked such meddling in their affairs? Would they have prattled of 'the good o' the people'?" "Their day is gone," D'Auguste answered, tight-lipped. "Their sun hath set. 'Tis for mine own day I must care, and for my son's."

"Fair words, to excuse thy betrayal of thy house!" "There is no betrayal in seeking the welfare of mine heirs and my line," D'Auguste answered, stung. "Each noble's house will be far more strongly warded by the King's peace than by his own army—for look you, there will be no more warring of lord against lord, and no more devastation of lands and murdering of peasants for the false god of Pride!"

"Pride?" Ghibelli's lip curled. "I am amazed thou dost know the word! Yet thou canst not have heard of Honor, for thou hast betrayed it!"

"There is honor only in doing as I believe right!" D'Auguste snapped. " 'Tis thou who art traitor—to the Crown!"

"What! Could / contemplate lifting mine hand against Their Majesties? Oh, for shame, sirrah, that thou couldst think it of me! For only a fool would dare think of treason, in a castle where tame witches do leap to do the chatelaine's bidding, and hearken to the thoughts of any and all!"

"And thou, I take it, art not a fool?" D'Auguste asked, with a skeptical smile.

"Nay, certes, for a man's not a traitor till he doth take up arms against his King."

"And when wilt thou do so?"

Ghibelli started to answer, but caught himself and glared at D'Auguste, his face crimson. D'Auguste met that glare with a wolf's grin. "Thou wouldst but now have signed thine own death warrant, if Their Majesties did truly use their witches as thou hast said. Yet they do not; they do respect all their subjects' right to the privacy of their own minds; and they will not permit witches to hearken to the thoughts of any, without good and clear reason."

"If thou dost credit that," Ghibelli spat, "then thou art a fool; for no prince would e'er disdain the use of a weapon of such might."

D'Auguste reddened. "He would, as he did hold the law to be greater than his own whim or pleasure!"

"Dost thou truly hold so" Ghibelli said between his teeth. "Then thou hast the soul of a squire!"

D'Auguste blanched bone white, and his dagger leaped into his hand. Ghibelli snatched out his stiletto, teeth bared in a fierce grin, and lunged at D'Auguste.

D'Auguste sidestepped, catching Ghibelli against his forearm and shoving him back. Ghibelli flailed for balance, and D'Auguste whipped the tail of his cloak about his arm before Ghibelli recovered and stepped in again, snarling and stabbing; but D'Auguste caught the blade on his padded arm. All around the table, daggers flashed and young noblemen leaped at one another, shouting. Steel rang against steel; razor edges shredded cloth and drew lines of blood across flesh. Marshall slashed down at Chester's thigh, a foul blow, and as Chester faltered, swung his stool against Chester's head. The young man slumped, senseless. Ghibelli cheered at the sight and leaped back from D'Auguste long enough to swing his own stool at Graz. The stool cracked against Graz's head, but D'Auguste stepped over him as he fell, shielding his companion with his body. Ghibelli sneered, caught

the edge of the table, and heaved it at D'Auguste, who stepped back, shoving

Graz's body aside with his heel as the table crashed over. Then the melee resolved into dueling pairs with stools for shields and poniards for swords.

The door boomed open, and a brass voice roared, "Hold!"

The young men all froze, but didn't look away from one another for so much as a second.

"In the King's name, put up your arms," the dwarf in the doorway thundered. He stamped into the hall, arms

akimbo; behind him men-at-arms streamed in through the door to stand ready near each lord; alert, ostensibly

only to serve, but wearing half armor and carrying pikes.

"For shame, milords!" Brom O'Berin boomed. "Noblemen, brawling like any rough peasants in a low tavern! Art

thou not mindful that this is the King's castle in Runnymede? What shall he say to thy sires, as to why thou art

naught but a brawling pack?"

Most of the young lords had the grace to look ashamed. But Ghibelli turned slowly to look directly at Brom with

eyes that glittered. "And how, my Lord Privy Councilor, didst thou know we did battle?"

"But how if they do, Brother Alfonso? How then?" The Abbot whirled to confront his secretary, clenched fists

trembling.

Brother Alfonso's lips pinched tight before he answered. "They will not, milord. Their Royal Majesties dare not

arouse the anger of the people."

"Oh, the people!" the Abbot said, disgusted. "The people will not rise to slay a dog, unless there is one to lead

them! The people count for naught in princes' plans!"

"Be not so certain, milord." Brother Alfonso's eyes glittered. " 'Twas the people aided Their Majesties to put

down their barons' rebellion some thirteen years ago. The people become the armies; the people pay the taxes."

"Only if they are led, Brother Alfonso—only if they are led."

"Aye, but 'tis thy priests who lead them!"

The Abbot stilled, frowning. Then, slowly, he turned to look out the window.

"They cannot force thee to leave thy chair," Brother Alfonso told him. "They cannot declare the Church of

Christopher Stasheft

Gramarye to be naught but the dream of a brain-sick fool. Thy priests would raise the people against them."

"Yet who would lead them in this rising?" the Abbot muttered. " 'Tis no office for a monk or priest."

"It is not," Brother Alfonso agreed, "yet be assured, they will not chance it. No prince can govern without the

consent of those he governs."

"Yet how, if the people do not side with the Church of Gramarye? How if they do hearken to the Church of

Rome?"

"Why, make sure they do not." Brother Alfonso smiled. "Hast thou no preachers who can inflame with zeal? Hast

thou none to quiet restless ghosts who do cry out against the Pope?"

The Abbot turned back to him, lifting his head, eyes

widening.

"I am assured that thou hast many among thy monks who are quite gifted," Brother Alfonso said, with a

penetrating gaze. "In truth, the wonders I have seen them work might well pass for miracles among the

uninstructed—miracles, or the work of vengeful spirits." The Abbot began to smile.

"Let each monk go forth from this our abbey," Brother Alfonso counseled. "Let each work among the people ac-

according to his talents; give each a task befitting his gifts. Let them thus arouse within thy people love for thy Church of Gramarye, and contempt and hatred for the Church of Rome." The Abbot was smiling broadly now, nodding with enthusiasm. "Set the process in train, Brother Alfonso. Let my monks go forth." "So we didn't really accomplish anything. He effectively said he isn't about to budge an inch, and I said you weren't, either." Rod shrugged. "I might just as well not have gone." "Nay," Tuan disagreed. "Thou hast drawn from him a clear statement of his position and intentions." " 'Tis nigh to a declaration of war," Catharine said, tight-lipped. "Near the mark, yet short of it," Tuan agreed. "He hath threatened war, and our good Lord Warlock hath responded with reminders of our force. Yet he hath not summoned troops, nor have we." "Not yet, anyway. But I do think you ought to do so, Your Majesties." Rod felt a chill as he said it, and took a sip of wine to warm himself. He leaned back in his hourglass chair and tried to relax, relishing the warmth of the solar, even by night; for the brocaded curtains were drawn close over the windows to shut out the darkness, and the tapestries on the walls seemed to glow with the light from the fireplace. It was good to be here, good to be in Their Majesties' privy chambers again, with a whole castle between himself and the ambitious Abbot. It was good to be with a couple of people who, if not exactly friends, were at least old associates—and Tuan and he were, now, certainly shieldmates; they had shared the dangers of more than a few battles, and consequently trusted one another in a fundamental way that was as important as liking. Not that Rod didn't like the King. There were traces of silver in Tuan's blond hair now, and a few faint wrinkles in his brow—but the face was still open and honest. Tuan might not have learned guile with the years, but he had certainly learned all about it—and about treachery and power-hunger, as well as s most of the other unpleasant characteristics of their species. I Underneath the weight of that knowledge, though, the King ' still believed that most people could learn to be good. Not so Catharine. She knew the jealousy and suspicion of her own nature too well to believe that anyone could ever be devoid of either. Her hair was still golden and her complexion still unblemished, though Rod suspected that might be due more to her skill with cosmetics than to nature. But the first few lines were beginning to show, and her body had thickened to maturity since he had first met her. Her temper had not slowed, though, nor her vehemence slackened. Still, Tuan's love had mellowed her—her tongue was no longer quite so sharp, and underneath her arrogance and imperiousness was the solid certainty of knowing she was loved. Rod sighed, envisioning a future age in which the three of them, and Gwen, would be old cronies together. It sounded very peaceful. "Be of good cheer, Lord Warlock," Catharine said softly. "We shall prevail." Rod turned to her in pleased surprise. Yes, she had matured. "We shall," Tuan agreed with full assurance, "yet we must not therefore grow careless or neglectful. There are ever troubles, Rod Gallowglass." "Won't there always be, as long as there are people?" Rod smiled. "After all, our species can't endure too much

calm and harmony. But what were you thinking of?"
" 'Tis our noble hostages," Catharine said with distaste. "What a band of gross fools they are! At least, some."
"Only some." Tuan nodded, gazing at the fire. "D'Auguste has grown into a goodly young man, as have his friends Llangollen and Chester. Maggiore and Basingstoke also have become men worthy of their station."
"Well, that's five." Rod frowned. "How come you haven't demanded that Romanov send you a hostage? I know he didn't

have any children when the lords rebelled against Catharine the first time, but he does now."
"I would never bring such goodly, innocent lads to brush elbows with the likes of Ghibelli." Catharine's face tightened. "Nor with his companions Graz and Marshall."
"Aye." Tuan seemed somber. "And, too, since thou hast served their father the Duke so well, he hath become a veritable pillar of support."
"Well, your hospitality to his wife and children had something to do with it, too," Rod demurred. "Too much so, I think." Catharine smiled ruefully. "He hath begun to request that we allow his son to attend upon us, here at Runnymede."
"Well, that's the tradition, isn't it? Every nobleman should be a knight, and every knight has to start out as a page."
"Aye, and the pages must needs serve in the house of a nobleman other than their sire." Tuan turned to Catharine.
"He may stay with the other pages, my sweet. There is no need for him to be among the more boorish of our young lords."
Catharine's face blanked with surprise at the notion; then she turned thoughtful. " 'Tis most intriguing, the notion of a duke's heir going about as though he were any common knight's son. ..."
Rod suppressed a smile and veered back to the concern at hand, or not too far behind. "I take it your troop of young louts has been more loutish than usual."
"Aye, so thou couldst say." Tuan's face hardened. "They have set to brawling."
"Rapier and daggers in the hall set aside for them!" Catharine's eyes kindled again.
"Really?" Rod looked up. "And the cause of the quarrel?"
"Who can say?" Tuan slapped the table in annoyance. "They claim lords' privilege, and refuse to speak of it."
"Oh, come on—say," Rod coaxed. "What do you need, a signed confession?"
Catharine looked up at him, amused. "There is some sign of faction, is there not?"
Rod nodded. "Ghibelli, Marshall, Glasgow, and Guelph against the Crown, the other five for it. I'd say that amounts to a party, Your Majesty."
"Aye, even as their fathers do align themselves." Tuan

rolled his eyes up, exasperated. "Ever do di Medici, Marshall, and Savoy swear allegiance—and ever are they forsworn!"
"And ever will be," Rod said quietly. "Ever consider appointing new lords, Your Majesties?"
"Be sure that we have," Catharine responded, "and be sure that we foresee the barons rising as a man were we to so disinherit even one of their number."
"Yes. Not much luck there." Rod gazed into his wine. "The problem is to replace the lords without replacing the houses. Their sons being hostage should have helped, there."
"I had so hoped," Than admitted. "Yet they will not be persuaded."

"Rather do we harbor serpents in our bosom," Catharine said venomously.

"Well, at least you know where they are that way."

"As we know their sires' whereabouts." Tuan shook his head. "I mislike it, Lord Warlock. 'Tis a harbinger of war.

These resentful barons lack only a focus, a point toward which to rally."

"Which our Lord Abbot is rushing to give them—and they trust him to bring the mass of the people with him."

"They will be torn," Catharine said, glowering. "Our good folk do treasure our reign."

"You've brought tranquility to the average peasant," Rod allowed, "and your armies haven't trampled too many crops in the process."

"Nay, not so many," Tuan said, with a rye smile. "Our subjects shall be torn indeed, 'twixt Crown and Gown."

"So will the monks."

Catharine looked up sharply. "Surely the Abbot's own will declare for him!"

"They have no choice," Tuan reminded.

"No, they haven't," Rod agreed, "but I can't help wondering how many will wish they had."

"Thou dost speak of these friars who have broken away and come nigh us?"

"Well, yes, them, of course." Rod paused. "I was also wondering, though, how many weren't quite ready to make the break, but don't quite approve of what their good Lord Abbot is doing."

"What is good about him?" Catharine snapped.

"Oh, quite a bit, really," Rod insisted. "He always struck me as being a good man at the core, Your Majesty. With a lust for power that he doesn't control too well, of course."

"Aye, or he'd not be Abbot!"

"What else? But there have been some abbots who were elected for their saintliness. Some of them were even decent administrators."

Tuan sighed. "Would that I knew how they combined the two."

Catharine glanced at him with apprehension. "Do not trouble thyself overly with the matter, I prithee." She turned back to Rod. "Still, Lord Warlock, he hath not impressed me as one who doth ken the use of his power, once he hath won it."

"A point," Rod agreed. "No great deal of initiative for anything beyond gaining status, no. And there's a fundamental weakness to him."

"Why, what is that?" Tuan looked up with a frown.

"Moral, surprisingly. Power's more important to him than anything else. I think he could find an excuse to break any oath or Commandment, if it would boost his authority."

"Thou dost read him aright." Catharine's face darkened. "Yet what first gave him the notion that he could rise against us?"

"That phrase from Scripture, that he doth take without regard for the remainder of its chapter," Tuan said, with disgust, "'Put not your trust in princes.'"

Rod abstained from comment. Personally, he was pretty sure the flea that had bitten the Abbot's ear was really a futuristic agent, but he wasn't about to say so. Their Majesties hadn't been able to absorb a concept so far outside their medieval frame of reference, and had rejected it so thoroughly that they had largely forgotten it. Which was just fine with Rod. If the time ever came when they could understand, he wouldn't need to worry about their knowing a secret.

But Catharine noticed his reticence. "Thou dost not concur, Lord Warlock?"

Rod stirred. "I think it's a natural outcome of disagreements between yourselves and the clergy, Majesties." He didn't mention that the Abbot probably wouldn't think of anything to disagree about, left to his own devices. "But I wouldn't really worry about it too much. What matters is that he has come to the verge of rebellion—but his ability to sway the people will

be drastically lessened if a few friars who don't support him can preach to the peasants." Tuan lifted his head. "Well thought, Lord Warlock! And we have these friars of whom thou hast spoke!"

"They're not about to. speak against their Abbot yet," Rod cautioned. "We really need to know who's getting

upset with him, inside the main monastery."

"Manage it if thou canst," Catharine urged, "and discover what next he doth intend!"

"Oh, I think you can probably figure that out pretty well by yourselves, Majesties."

"I do not." Catharine gazed directly into his eyes. "Since he raised up the barons against us, and then, at the verge of battle, reversed his stand and swore loyalty—why, ever since, I have despaired of discovering his thoughts."

Which was pretty good, coming from her; but again, Rod withheld comment—especially since he knew quite

well what had changed the Abbot's mind, last time.

"His Virtue, the Lord Monaster!"

Behind the elderly manservant, the Abbot raised an eyebrow.

"'His Grace,' old Adam, 'His Grace!'" The Baroness Reddering fairly bolted out of her chair and sailed toward the

Abbot, arms outstretched. "And 'tis 'Lord Abbot,' not 'Lord Monaster!'"

"Well, if he is an abbot, he should rule an abbey," the old servitor grumbled.

"A monastery is an abbey—or hath one!" The Baroness clasped the Abbot's hands. "Thou must needs forgive

him, Father—he ages, and his mind—"

"Ah, but I've known Adam for years—many of them," the Abbot interrupted, sparing the old man. He turned to

the servitor with a smile. "And as to forgiving, why, is that not an aspect of my vocation?"

"So thou hast said many times, in the confessional." Old Adam's eye glinted with affection. "What matter these

lordly titles, eh? Thou wast ever Father Widdecombe to me."

"Adam!" the Baroness gasped, but the Abbot only laughed and clapped the old man on the shoulder as he turned

toward the young lady who floated toward him with a whisper of linen. He straightened, shoulders squaring, smile settling, and eyes

widening just a little. "Lady Mayrose, how well dost thou appear!"

"I thank thee, milord," the lady murmured with a curtsy and a faint look of disappointment. She was in her mid-

twenties, older than a well-dowered lady ought to be, unwed. There was no reason, to look at her—her face and

form were comely, and her hair like a fall of burnished gold. She watched the Abbot from the corner of her eye

as she turned to pace beside him to the table before the great clerestory window, where she sat at her

grandmother's left hand, watching him with a look that might have explained her single state.

The Abbot's eye kindled as he beamed at her. "When I think how gawky a babe thou wast when first thou didst

come unto this house in the days when I was still chaplain!"

Lady Mayrose forced a silvery laugh, and her grandmother said quickly, "Thou wast scarce more

thyself, holy
Father."
"In truth." The Abbot smiled ruefully. "A half-fledged boy was I, puffed up with the self-importance of my final
vows. I wonder thou couldst abide me, good lady."
"Ah, but even in callow assurance thou wast ever a well of strength." The Baroness's eyes glittered with tears. "In
truth, scarce could I have borne life when my good lord passed from us, hadst thou not come hither from the
monastery with thy consolation and thy cojnfort."
"Glad I was to be of aid, as ever I shall be," the Abbot assured her, clasping her hand. " 'Twas little enough I
could do, in token of the kindness and patience thou didst show to me in my first years of priesthood. Nay, ne'er
could I entrust this house to any of my monks."
"For which we rejoice." Lady Mayrose's voice was low and husky. "No other priest could ever make the mass so
meaningful as thou dost, milord."
It was the wrong tactic, for it reminded the Abbot of his spiritual responsibilities. He drew his hand back to touch
the crucifix that hung on his breast, and plastered on an artificial smile. "I thank you, my child, yet be ever
mindful that our Lord's sacrifice is ever new and vital, no matter which sanctified hands may hold His body."
The lady bowed her head, rebuked, but still held her gaze on the Abbot.
Flustered, he turned away to the Baroness. "I wished to speak to thee directly, noble lady, and apprise thee of my
deeds,

for I would not have thee misapprehend my purpose, an thou
didst hear echoes of me from other lips."
"Yet we have; rumor doth travel faster than any mortal
feet." The beldame's lip quivered, but she sat up straighter, lifting her chin. "I ken not why thou hast decreed our Church
to be separate from that of fabled Rome, milord, yet I am sure thou hast good reason."
"I bless thee for thy faith in me! And be assured, the reasons flock." But the Abbot's gaze strayed to Lady
Mayrose. "Rome is far distant from us, both in time and space. 'Tis five hundred years they've paid so little heed
of us, thou wouldst conjecture they had forgot us quite. How can they know how we fare, or 'gainst which forces
we contend?"
"Yet surely," the Baroness murmured, "good is good, and evil, evil, no matter where they be."
"Yet Satan may don many guises, and how can Rome know which he doth wear here?" Lady Mayrose clasped
her grandmother's hand, but her eyes glowed at the Abbot. "Continue, ghostly Father; we most ardently attend."
It wasn't much of a troupe, as royal expeditions go—just six children, two nannies, eight servants, and a dozen
soldiers. Well, yes, a trifle cumbersome, but even princes need to go out and play now and then, and they do
need playmates; and brothers will do when there's absolutely no one else available, though they're not really
adequate. So the four Gallowglasses were over to play with Prince Alain and his little brother Diarmid. Their
mothers had, with some trepidation, allowed them to go as far as the outer bailey—but Catharine didn't like to
take chances.
Gregory and Diarmid looked up from their game of chess as Alain skidded to a halt and dropped down beside

them (one of the nannies bit her lip at the thought of grass stains). Geoffrey, Magnus, and Cordelia crashed in right behind him, panting and red-cheeked, their eyes aglow with fun.

"Ware!" Gregory threw up a hand, palm out, shielding the chessboard--and not just symbolically; the upright palm showed him where to spread his forcefield.

"Oh, be easy!" Geoffrey wheezed. "Could I not land wide of thy game, I would be a poor marksman indeed."

"True, thou canst ever strike wide of thy mark," Alain agreed. "'Tis hitting it that doth cause thee grief."

Geoff swung a fist at him. Alain ducked under it with a laugh.

"Enough! Thou dost but confirm what he saith!" Magnus caught Geoff's fist in his own. "Yet I thought 'twas of missiles thou didst speak."

"Aye, and thereof must thou needs ask the priest." Alain grinned.

"Book or branch, I shall throw it!" Geoffrey retorted. "At thy head, brother! I scarce could miss, 'tis grown so great!" "I had never thought thou wouldst acknowledge me as head," Magnus purred. "Yet 'ware of thy throwing; for if thou dost miss, I shall have to send thee to thy sister for lessons." Magnus looked up at Cordelia with a twinkle in his eye. "How sayest thou, 'Delia? Wilt thou not--" He broke off as he saw her glazed eyes and abstracted look. "What dost thou hear?" "A shred of thought," she answered distantly. Gregory and Geoffrey looked up, alarmed; then their eyes lost focus as they concentrated on the unseen world of thoughts that swirled about them.

There it was--so faint and vagrant that it might have been only the breathing of the earth, or the glimmer of a notion. "Gone," Cordelia breathed.

Geoff squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head, then looked up, frowning. "'Tis a thought-hearer who doth not wish his presence known."

"Aye," Magnus agreed. "He doth listen as a sentry doth watch."

"Yet for what?" Gregory whispered.

"We cannot know." Magnus stood up.

"Nor are we likely to guess." Gregory stood up with him.

"We cannot leave it be!" Geoff cried, leaping to his feet.

"Nor shall we." Magnus turned to the two princes, bowing. "Pardon, Highnesses, we must depart."

"Thou shall bear this news to thy parents?" Alain seemed to gather an air of authority about him.

"Even as thou dost say."

"Mama is closest," Cordelia noted.

Rod had just hit his critical level for pomposity. The deadly self-seriousness of the Abbot, and the somberness of Tuan's reaction, overloaded his capacity for sympathy and flipped him into a healthy state of detached amusement. He realized he'd hit threshold when he found himself thinking that Catharine was the only one involved who wasn't overreacting.

Which included himself, of course. With a sardonic chuckle he slipped through the branches of the last trees on the slope and stepped up to the bald top of the low mountain. "You don't really need to be clear of the underbrush, you know, Fess."

"True, Rod," his horse replied, "but I diagnosed your condition as being critical, and believed

you should step
aside from human company for a minute."
"Damn straight I'm critical! There isn't a one of them that's being even halfway reasonable about
all this! Even
Catharine gets angry every time she thinks of being crossed."
"Tuan is maintaining his composure," Fess contradicted. "Though I do detect a tendency toward
melancholy
which is wholly unlike him."
Rod shrugged. "What do you expect? Anybody can burn out—and if Tuan isn't in a high-stress job, I
don't know
who is."
"He has never before shown signs of weakening."
"Yeah, but he wasn't finding the basic assumptions of his spiritual worldview being questioned.
I'd say our good
King is approaching the first genuine spiritual crisis of his life—and he might come out the
better for it."
"He could also do grave damage while he's in its throes. We must watch him closely, Rod."
"A good point." Rod pursed his lips. "I'll tip Brom to have Puck keep an eye on him."
"How will that aid? . . . Oh."
"Right." Rod nodded. "The hobgoblin has a certain healthy skepticism about all religions; he
thinks they're
humorous. If he can't help Tuan keep his perspective, nobody can."
"I would say Catharine is more in need of such distancing, Rod."
"Why, because she doesn't think she can second-guess the Abbot any more?" Rod shrugged. "Common
sense
reaction, I'd say."
"Odd, for her."
"She's growing up—there's something about having kids that does mat to a girl. Of course, she
doesn't know why
His Grace changed his mind on the verge of that battle years ago; all she knows is that the monk
who was with
me ran over and talked to him."
"True—and, of course, she had no way of knowing that Father Al was from Terra."

"With a letter from the Pope enjoining all clergy to do what he said. No, she didn't know that,
and I'm not about
to tell her. It would shake her self-confidence too badly."
"Not to mention the doubts it would create about your sanity." Fess emitted the burst of static
that passed for a
robotic sigh. "Nonetheless, the Abbot had absolutely no difficulty accepting Father Al's letter as
genuine."
"And accordingly obeyed the Pope's emissary, and made peace quickly. But apparently he found it
very
humiliating, and has been just aching for an excuse to ignore Rome and get back to trying to take
over
Gramarye."
"It would seem so. Therefore, our problem is discerning who gave him that excuse."
"An excellent question. Not that's he's dim-witted or anything, but his intelligence doesn't
really take a
theological bent. No, some futurian agent fed him his rationalization—whereupon, with great
delight, he rejected
Rome. But the Cathodeans here don't have hyper-radio, so he couldn't let Rome know about it."
"An oversight which you, no doubt, will generously rectify for him," Fess murmured.
"I always did like to help the clergy in little ways. Got the whole story encoded, Fess?"
"Ready to transmit, Rod. Do you wish to add a personal message?"
"Yeah. Tell Father Al that I said the Pope had better find some way to kick the wolf out of his
fold before it leads
his sheep to the slaughter."
Fess's head swiveled to gaze directly into Rod's eyes. "Just send it," Rod urged.
"You could at least mix your metaphors clearly," Fess sighed. "Very well, Rod."
He didn't move; he didn't have to. The section of his metal body that faced toward Terra suddenly

became an
antenna for the warp transmitter buried inside him, shooting an elongated beep at the sky.
"Transmission
completed."
Rod nodded, satisfied. " 'Fraid we can't wait around for Brother Al's answer, though. It'll take
them a few hours
to locate him, and of course he'll need to confer with His Holiness. Wonder what they'll do about
it?"
"I trust they will let us know."
* * *
"Why, how is this?" Brother Alfonso's voice sizzled with anger. "How canst thou have failed! There
were two of
thee for every one of them! Thou hadst but to fall upon them, knock them senseless, and bear them
home!" He
fell silent, eyes narrowed, glaring at Father Thorn. Then, just as the monk started to answer,
Brother Alfonso
snapped, "Thy bravery failed thee."
Father Thorn's jaw firmed. "Say, rather, that we were loathe to strike at brothers."
"They are brothers no longer, but traitors! Aye, yet traitors who spoke thee fair and welcomed
thee with open
arms and laden tables, did they not?"
"They greeted us with joy," Father Thorn acknowledged, "and we did break bread with them. Yet when
we
sought to convince them of the error of their ways, they were obdurate."
"Then couldst thou not have fallen upon them?"
"We did, to our shame." Father Thorn lowered his head, shoulders hunching. "For look you, we are
men of faith,
not of arms!"
"Yet I bade thee bring them back by fair means or foul! Thou assured me thou wouldst, for all in
this land would
fare better if clergy ruled! Thou wert two to their one, and thou hadst set upon them! Couldst
thou not defeat
them?"
"Nay, for they bore arms, even as we did, and had learned the use of them betimes."
"Thou knowest their use also! Could each of them fight as well as two of thee?"
"For a short space," Father Thorn admitted. "Ere we could prevail, a bailiff burst upon us with a
band of
soldiers."
"So!" Brother Alfonso's eyes widened. "How chanced they to be nearby?"
"I have no knowledge," Father Thorn answered, and the other would-be bandits muttered to one
another behind
him, suddenly apprehensive.
"There are several ways to it," Brother Alfonso snapped, "yet they all come to this: that the King
hath knowledge
of our actions!" He scanned the appalled monks with a gimlet glare. "How could that chance? Why,
in that one or
more of thee have failed to ward thy thoughts from reading!"
"Or ..." Father Thorn swallowed, unable to form the words.
Brother Alfonso nodded, stony-faced. "Or that one of our

number is a spy. What, brothers! Tis bad enough that the King might know our actions—yet what will
chance if
our good Abbot learns of them?"
The monks exchanged appalled glances. " 'Twould be hard fasting and long prayers alone, at the
least," one
whispered.
"Or that, and a scourging and defrocking," Brother Alfonso snarled.
The monks fell silent, staring, appalled at the thought of being cast out of the monastery, and
out of the Order.
Brother Alfonso nodded, narrow-eyed, looking at each of them in turn. "That, or worse. Therefore,

brothers, be
certain to speak of this fool's errand to no one—and to watch one another closely, to be sure no
other doth." His
voice fell ominously. "And be certain to obey mine orders henceforth."
They stared at him, shocked. Then Father Thorn summoned up nerve to scowl and say, "Thou canst not
afright us
thus! Thou canst not say what we have done without casting blame on thyself also!"
"Be not so sure," Brother Alfonso ground out.
Father Thorn blanched, but went on with determination. "What thou hast said would hap to us, would
hap also to
thee."
"Aye," Brother Alfonso snapped, "and therein lies my concern. Be sure, brothers—whosoe'er shall
bear the
blame for this night's work, I am determined 'twill not be myself! Ward each other well, and heed
my
commands!"
Rod had made his way home after sending his message. So he was sitting by as though he were
waiting, when
the children crashed through the door as though it were a purely theoretical construct. "Papa!
Papa!" "Mama!
Mama!" "Pama! Mapa!"
"Hold it!" Rod called, regretfully shelving some remarkably scurrilous plans he'd been
entertaining.
Silence bloomed.
"Now." Rod exhaled sharply. "What's the crisis?"
" 'Tis a nasty sneak!"
" 'Tis a loathsome spy!"
" 'Tis a renegade 'gainst all the witches!"
That caught Rod's attention. "Hold it! Let's have a little sense, here." He pointed at Magnus.
"What happened?"
"Cordelia felt the faintest touch of a thought-hearer listening and hoping none would remark him,
Papa."
Fury lit, and Rod opened his mouth for an outburst, almost beside himself, but Gwen was beside
himself, too,
and managed to speak before he could get started. "How couldst thou know that, Cordelia?"
"We were playing, Mama, and of a sudden I felt the faintest hint of a presence, like the gossamer
of abandoned
spider webs, breeze-tossed. I stilled, and hearkened, and could just be certain 'twas still
there—not thinking, nor
giving out of any thoughts, but hearkening even as I hearkened."
Gwen nodded. " 'Twas one who listened, then. But thou knowest this could have been naught but the
phantasm of
thine own mind." Cordelia was just beginning to hit the unstable age.
"Yet we all heard it, Mama!" Geoff stated.
Cordelia nodded. "I told them what I heard, and they did hearken also."
Magnus nodded too. " 'Twas even as she saith. Was't not, mite?"
Gregory nodded, wide-eyed. "The very image."
"You seem to be recognizing this." Rod had managed to calm down a bit.
"Having my mind probed by a thought-hearer?" Magnus smiled, amused. "How could I not know the feel
of it, in
this house?"
"True, true." Rod nodded. "I suppose every esper child gets used to it, if he has esper siblings."
He turned to
Gwen, frowning. "How'd the Abbot manage this one?"
Gwen looked up, startled. "My lord! Thou dost not think—"
"That this eavesdropping 'witch' is working for the Abbot?" Rod shrugged. "Who else would be
wanting spies
right now? And doesn't already have them, of course. Tuan and Catharine have the Royal Coven, if
they're
unethical enough to use it."

"Only when war hath already been declared," Geoff said quickly.
Rod nodded. "But the Abbot, not being a professional, might not be so scrupulous. No, I think it's a safe bet that the two are related--and from where I sit, that means His Grace has managed to persuade some witch-folk to work for him." He frowned. "Wonder how he convinced them?"
"Dost thou not guess too rashly, Papa?" Gregory asked.

"There could be many others who grow restive, or even one who hath--"
"A common cause. Yeah, I know." Privately, Rod gave his youngest points for insight. "But that would be too much of a coincidence, for the Abbot to start stirring up trouble again exactly when somebody else happens to take up mind-spying. I'll try to keep my mind open for the possibility, son, but from where I sit, this looks like the safest bet. You're right, though--we need to know more about our mental spy."
"Or spies," Geoff noted.
Rod nodded. "Amended." He turned to Gwen. "Mind asking Toby over? He was still running the Royal Coven, last I knew."
"Goody!" Gregory cried, and Cordelia clapped her hands.
"He is ever welcome." Owen's smiled warmed. "And aye, husband, he is best for bidding the Crown's witch-folk be alert and hearken for listeners."
"Without letting Their Majesties know, of course." Rod nodded. "Tuan might decide it's being too sneaky too soon."
"The Queen might, also, Papa!" Cordelia maintained, chin jutting a little.
Rod shook his head. "Not a chance. Catharine's the practical sort. You know--suspicious."

8
"Has the messenger been given refreshment?"
"Aye, Your Grace." Brother Alfonso closed the door of the Abbot's solar. "He dines in the kitchen, and will rest in the guest house. He is not so very wearied."
"Ayes 'tis but a day's ride, from Medici." The Abbot looked down at the letter he was holding with a smile.
Brother Alfonso's eyes glowed. "The news is good, then?"
"Most excellent. See! His Grace the Duke di Medici doth declare his support for the Church of Gramarye, and his adherence to our cause." He spread the letter on his desk.
Brother Alfonso moved quickly to his side, gazing down at the letter. "Praise be!" He scanned it quickly and smiled, amused. "Ah! His words do sear the page! '. . . protection 'gainst the overweening arrogance of the powers of this land ...' 'Powers' i' truth! And writ by one of the greatest of the lords of the land! Nay, who could these 'powers' be save the King and Queen! Ah, the ghost of caution that lingers on this parchment!"
"Tush, good Brother Alfonso. We could not ask His Grace to speak treason, could we?" The Abbot leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers across his stomach. "Thou dost know of whom he doth speak, as do I."
"Aye, and of whom three other great lords have spoken! They turn to us as their defense against the tyranny of the Crown! When, Holy Abbot, wilt thou prove their faith in thee?"

The Abbot's good mood evaporated; he leaned forward, frowning. "Patience, Brother Alfonso. If a passage of arms may be avoided, it must be! 'Tis enough to know we've done rightly; we need not make a show of it!"

"How canst thou truly believe thus!" Brother Alfonso protested. "Thou canst not think Their Majesties will let thy challenge pass unheeded!"

"Nay, nor would I wish them to." The Abbot's frown deepened. "'Tis for the Church to see to the welfare of the people, not for the Crown; they must cease alms-giving in their own names, and grant those monies to us for disbursement. Nor may they claim jurisdiction over clergy accused of wrongdoing."

"Have they made thee any answer in this regard?" "Only as they did years ago—that there will be no harm in both Crown and Church caring for the common weal, and that they will gladly cease trying clergy when our justice is even as theirs."

"And Rome would have had thee yield to them! Hath the Pope not read his Bible? Hath he not conned the verse, 'Put not thy trust in princes'? Doth he not condone play and licentiousness on the sabbath? Nay, doth he not condone licentiousness in all things?"

"Even to women becoming priests, I doubt not, and wearing vain and frivolous garb, not sober habits." The Abbot nodded. "Aye, such have we heard."

"Nay, further! He doth allow all to garb themselves indecently; he doth permit commoners to wear clothing similar to that of great lords! I' truth, he doth claim to see naught of difference 'twixt prince and pauper, for, saith he, 'All are alike before the Lord!'"

"'Tis a vile and treacherous belief." The Abbot nodded heavily. Clergy or not, he had been born the second son of a minor nobleman.

"Yet his offenses mount! This 'Holy Father' doth allow the lending of money at usurious interest! He doth condone players and shows; he doth turn a blind eye to roistering and drunkenness! He will abide for his Christians to have converse with heathens—aye, even to wed them!"

"Abominations!" The Abbot shook his head, astounded at the impiety of the Holy See.

"Yet 'tis there for all to read, in the writings of our founder, Father Marco!"

"I have read them, Brother," the Abbot said. "In truth, he doth seek to explain why Rome doth allow such vice to flourish, and why it must content itself with counseling moderation in such!" He grasped the edge of the desk to keep his hands from trembling. "Almost I could doubt the holiness of my predecessor!"

"Do not, for 'tis only that he was blinded by his vow of obedience, and cozened by the Pope! 'Tis the See of Peter that is impious, not Blessed Marco! And are not then Their Majesties fully as impious as the Holy See, since they have not given thee their support in this?"

The Abbot nodded with the slow weight of judgment. "Aye. That they are. And they have willfully blinded themselves to morality in not seeing the offenses of which thou dost speak."

"Aye, and in not acknowledging that the good of their subjects' souls doth suffer in their hesitation! 'Tis open sin in them, that they have not declared the Church of Gramarye to be the only church legitimate, the Church of the State! For be assured, milord, that thy Church, having freed itself from the snares of Rome, can now redress such faults and condemn them for the vile vices they are! They must be made to see the lightness of thy

claims, by
force of arms if need be!"
"Be still!" The Abbot shoved himself to his feet and turned away from Brother Alfonso.
"Wherefore, my good lord? Is't not even as thou hast but said, even now? Can there be aught of
wrong in it?"
"I have sworn not to bear a sword," the Abbot said, distressed. "In truth, our good Savior did say
that 'He who
doth live by the sword, shall die by the sword!'"
" 'Tis scarcely living by the sword to but take it up for a few days to school a wanton soul! And
if 'tis wrong for
thee, how is it not wrong for the great lords and their knights?"
"I am a priest anointed, Brother Alfonso, a minister of God!"
"As they are His knights! And bethink thee, milord, how long will they abide without sign of
redress of their
grievances?"
The Abbot was silent.

Brother Alfonso pressed his point. "They have declared their adherence, milord, yet how long will
they maintain
it? Nay, they must needs see some way in which thou dost strengthen their cause 'gainst the Crown,
or they must,
soon or late, withdraw their support."
"Thou dost counsel immorality!" The Abbot turned on Brother Alfonso. "A priest must not consider
such worldly
issues when he doth decide right from wrong!"
"Nor would I counsel that thou shouldst!" Brother Alfonso said quickly. "I" truth, there's no
need—for assuredly,
such principles must be clearly evident to a prelate."
The Abbot stared at him. Then, slowly, he said, "I am not a prelate."
"Art thou not? Nay, be assured, milord—if the Church of Gramarye is a church entire, sole and
separate from
Rome, it must needs have a bishop, a ghostly father—and who can fulfill that role, save thyself?"
The Abbot kept staring. Then, slowly, he turned toward the window, frowning.
"Nay, an Archbishop," Brother Alfonso murmured, "for there are so many souls in Gramarye that thou
must
needs name bishops to each province! A Prince of the Church—for one with so much authority must
needs be a
prince, with authority equal to that of the worldly Crown. Yet the common folk cannot comprehend
such, unless
this Prince of Souls doth show himself to them in all his power and glory—borne in a throne on the
shoulders of
monks, with heralds and trumpets going before, and a guard of honor coming behind! He must clothe
himself in
purple royal, bearing a crozier of gold, crowned with a gilded mitre! He must stand beside his
Royal Majesty,
appearing as his equal in every way!"
"Be still!" the Abbot thundered. "What I decide, Brother Alfonso, I will decide because it is
right, not because it
doth yield me advantage! Leave me, now! Go!"
"Why, so I shall," Brother Alfonso murmured, turning away, "for as Thy Lordship wills, so shall it
be done. Yet I
beg thee, milord, be mindful that even a prince should be subject to a prelate."
The door closed behind him, but a portal yawned within the Abbot's heart, disclosing a vista of
power and glory
that he had never conceived of, beckoning, tempting . . .

Lady Elizabeth lifted her head off the pillow, then rolled onto one elbow, wondering what had
wakened her. She
reached out to touch her husband for reassurance, then remembered that he had not come
home—nothing

unusual; the hunt often took him far enough, late enough, so that he stayed the night with Sir Whittlesy. But the apprehension in her breast turned to fear, from knowing that he was not home. She frowned, angry with herself, and slid out of bed; she had footmen and maids and men-at-arms to guard her, if she needed. She was probably troubling herself for no reason; if there were any real danger, her guards would already be shouting the house down and fighting the intruder. But a cold breeze seemed to blow against her back as she wondered why she had thought of an enemy entering her moated grange. Why not have thought of fire or flood, or even a squabble between servants? Naught but a woman's megrims, she told herself sternly, and caught up her bed robe. As she started to wrap it around herself, though, she heard a clanking sound beyond her door and froze, heart leaping into her throat. For a moment she stood, frozen by fear, then forced herself to move toward the door. This was nonsense! she told herself. She was a knight's daughter, and should be indifferent to fear. But the clanking came again, and her heart hammered in her breast. Still, she kept moving, reaching out for the unseen door in the dark . . . It yawned open before her, creaking, and she stopped dead in her tracks, fear frissoning into terror, for dark against the dim glow of the night-lamp bulked a suit of armor, filling the doorway. For a moment her terror almost wheeled into panic, but she just barely managed to rein herself in and demand, "Who art thou, come so unseemly to my chamber?" The man stood silent, closed helm turned toward her. "Who art thou?" she demanded again, and was relieved to feel some of her fear transmute into anger. "How durst thou so afright me, coming here unheralded, unexpected? Nay, have the small courtesy to tell me thy name!" Still the man stood, only staring. "At least lift thy visor!" she cried in exasperation. Good, good—she was working toward fury. Anything would be better than this unbearable fear! "Ope thy helm and let me gaze upon thy visage, at least!"

The man's hand went to his visor then, and she felt a thrill of triumph as he lifted it ... And a bare grinning skull looked out at her with empty sockets where its eyes should have been. Terror struck, and she screamed and screamed till unconsciousness claimed her and she mercifully swooned. Rod had hoped it would go away if he ignored it, but it had been eight days now, and Gregory was still feeling as though he wanted to be a monk when he grew up. Rod hoped it was just a phase, but knew he had to at least pay it lip service—so here he was, trudging out of the woods with his youngest at his side (walking instead of flying, so as not to afright the natives) toward the log chapter-cabin of the brand-new Runnymede Chapter of the Order of St. Vidicon of Cathode. So what was he doing bringing the boy, if he was so skeptical? Well, that was the point—that Gwen wasn't skeptical; she was delighted. Any medieval parent would be—having a son in the monastery was instant status. Not that the senior witch of Gramarye needed to worry about such things (though she would have liked it if the majority of the people she met really approved of her), but it was nice thinking she had an "in" with the Other World, too. That wasn't really it, either, of course, and Rod knew it. Gwen was just happy thinking that her

baby was going
to have a surer road to Heaven than any of the rest of them. Which, he had to admit, was a nice
idea—but he
wasn't sure of it. He'd known too many clergymen himself.
"It's not all it seems to be, son." They turned into the footpath that led to the door. "Not just
praying and
contemplating." He pointed toward a three-monk team that was plowing the field near them. "That's
how they
spend most of their time—in good, hard work."
"Why do they say that 'tis 'good'?" Gregory asked.
"Because they think it helps keep sinful impulses away. I think it mainly keeps them worn out."
Gregory nodded. "Well, weariness would keep flesh from temptation."
Rod stared at the boy, amazed (as he always was) to find that children could understand so much.
Probably right,
too—after ten hours of pulling a plow, the monks couldn't very well have enough energy left for
sinning.

The lead monk in the team looked up, saw them, and held up a hand. His mates stopped, and he
disengaged
himself from the harness, then strode over the furrows to meet them. As he came close enough, he
called out,
"Greetings . . . Why, 'tis the Lord Warlock! And his youngest."
"Well met, Father." Rod was startled to see it was Father Boquilva.
"And well come." The priest came up to them, dusting off his hands. "What matter brings thee, Lord
Warlock?
Have my brethren bred trouble again?"
"No . . . well, yes, but nothing we weren't expecting. Really nothing to do with the trip." He
clapped a hand on
Gregory's shoulder. "But this is."
"Thy lad?" Father Boquilva registered surprise for only a fleeting second; then he smiled and
turned away toward
the house. "Well, 'twill be more than a passing word or two. Come, sit and sip!"
Rod followed, squeezing Gregory's shoulder for reassurance—Gregory's reassurance, that is.
"Brother Clyde!" Father Boquilva called as they neared the house.
A big monk looked up in surprise, then laid down his trowel and mortar board and came toward them.
"This is Brother Clyde," Father Boquilva said to Gregory. "As thou seest, he doth labor with his
hands, as do all
of us— and if his task seems lighter than mine, be assured that yesterday he did labor in my
place."
The big monk smiled and held out a hand that fairly swallowed Gregory's. The little boy looked up
at him, wide-
eyed.
"And this nobleman is Rod Gallowglass, the Lord Warlock." Father Boquilva looked up at Brother
Clyde again.
"I must speak with these good folk awhile; wilt thou join Brother Neder and Father Mersey in my
place?"
"Aye, and cheerfully." Brother Clyde sighed. "Is not that mine office? Good day, good folk!" He
bowed his head
to them, and walked on toward the plow.
"This is a monk's life," Father Boquilva explained as they went in, "prayer at morning and night,
and hard work
between, then rising to pray in the midnight also. Yet that thou hast already seen, when thou
didst watch us
aforetime."

Gregory looked up, startled. "How didst thou know we did watch?"
"Why, for that thou didst come to aid us in fighting," Father Boquilva said easily, sitting at a
long table made of
rough-hewn boards. " 'Ware splinters, now . . . and how couldst thou have come, then, if thou
hadst not been
watching, hm? Yet this thou hast not seen—the inside of the chapter house. Regard how monks live."

Gregory looked about him. "'Tis clean and clear."
Perception was amazing. Rod would have said it was empty and sterile.
"Clean indeed, and 'tis monks' labor keeps it so. 'Tis we ourselves who spread the whitewash, and we who crafted
the tables and benches—as well as the wooden cups." Father Boquilva poured from a pitcher and set a mug in
front of Gregory. "There will be ale in the fall, and wine in the spring—yet for now, 'tis water. And even with ale
and wine, 'tis clear water for the greater part. Our food is bread, greens, and fruits, with meat on feast days."
"•'Tis a hard life," Gregory said, eyes wide.
"Aye, and thou wilt therefore understand the strong call it doth need, to do God's work." Father Boquilva took a
long, thirsty drink, then looked up at Rod. "Now, Lord Warlock! In what matter may I aid thee?"
"You already have." Rod smiled, amused. "My boy has a notion that he may want to be a monk when he grows
up."
The only sign of surprise was Father Boquilva's total stillness—possibly, Rod thought, because the priest had al-
ready guessed. Then he poured himself another water. "Well, 'tis not unheard of for a vocation to make itself felt
so early in life. Though 'tis more common for a lad to feel the tug of the holy life, then find it was only one of
many such pulls we all know, ere the strong, steady pull of the true vocation doth come. 'Tis a hard life, lad, as
thou dost see me—and many who begin it as postulants return to their families ere they take the novice's vows.
Of those who stay, many retire ere they become deacons; and even some few of the deacons return to the worldly
life and never take final vows."
"A monk may go back to the daily life, then, and take a wife?"
"Aye, and rear children; many of those whom we call Brother may leave the order at any time. A man may be a
husband and father and still be a deacon, lad; his service to the Church is second to that to his family. Yet many a
brother will remain with the order his whole life, and never take final vows; 'tis simply that he doth not feel
himself strong enough for the responsibility of the Mass, nor worthy to hold the Eucharist. Naetheless, some of
those number wrought miracles by their holiness and, we have good cause to think, bask now in Heaven."
Gregory said slowly, "How doth it come, then, for a lad such as myself to know his vocation?"
"Thou canst not till thou art older; the age is eighteen, for our order. Till then, thou must needs bide and live as
holy a life as thou mayest, and do all that thou canst for thy fellows."
Gregory nodded. "Prayer, fasting, and good works."
"Thou must not fast till thou art fourteen, and then but once a month, and only from dawn till dark." Father
Boquilva wore no smile now. "This is thy first test: obedience. If thou canst not live by this command, thou hast
not the makings of a monk within thee."
"I shall obey," Gregory said quickly, and Rod breathed a sigh of relief, combined with gratitude to Father
Boquilva. Fasting, taken to the extremes which zeal made possible, could have ruined the boy's health.
He was amazed to realize Gregory was capable of such dedication. His gentle, thoughtful child—where had this
fanaticism come from? With an uneasy prickle of conscience, he remembered certain excesses of fervor from his
own adolescence—but the boy was only seven!

"But how when I am eighteen, Father?"

Boquilva nodded. "Then thou mayest go to the House of St. Vidicon in . . ." A shadow crossed his face. "Or

mayhap thou shall come here." He shrugged oif the mood. "No matter."

But it did, to Rod. He took note that Boquilva regretted leaving the monastery. It spoke well of the man, that he

had summoned the strength to do what he thought right, even though he hadn't wanted to; but it was also a source

of weakness for the King's cause. What would happen if the Runnymede monks became pivotal in the current

crisis, and became so filled with remorse that they decided to go back to their brothers and Abbot?

Rod decided to make sure they wouldn't become pivotal.

"And what shall I do there?"

"Thou shall try thy vocation. We call such a young man, who cometh to discover whether or not he should be a

monk, a 'postulant.' Thou wilt live the life of a monk in all ways save the performance of holy offices, and if,

after a year spent thus, thou dost still wish to be a monk, thou wilt be tested, to say if thou art the stuff of which

monks are made, or hast the strength to be a priest in a parish."

Rod perked up his ears; this was new. He'd never heard of a monastery testing for those qualities before.

Gregory frowned. " 'Tis toward the monastery that I feel the pull."

Father Boquilva nodded. "Many do, but have not the ... talent for it, the qualities, the ... different sort of strength

required. In this must thou trust in the judgment of thy seniors, and abide by their decision.

Naetheless, some find

themselves unable to, and return to the world."

Rod frowned, wondering what sort of qualities differed monk material from parish priest. The ability to do

research? Even in a medieval society, was it publish or parish?

"Yet where shall I go if thou dost think me destined to be a parish priest?"

"There are two parts to the House of St. Vidicon," Father Bolquilva explained, "the cloister, for those who will

become monks, and the seminary, for those whose call is toward the parish. The two pray together, and sing

together in choir, yet have little other contact."

Gregory asked, "And if, even told I must go to a parish, I still wish to serve God as a priest—what then?"

"Thou shalt proceed as thou hadst, in fasting, prayer, study, and labor—though there is less of that last for the

seminarians; there will be labor enough in their parish lives, and they must learn in only a few years that which

will fill a monk's lifetime; a seminarian must heed his books, that he may not preach errors when he hath his own

parish."

"Nay, certes." Gregory frowned, nodding. "I had not thought that—but any priest must needs be a scholar of

sorts, must he not?" And when Father Boquilva agreed, he said, "Mayhap I have such a calling. Yet how if I have

not? How if I am to be a monk?"

"Then mayest thou take the vow of a sexton, and become a monk in earnest."

"Thereupon the cloister will be mine whole life?" Gregory asked, wide-eyed, and his voice sank to a whisper. "I

will never go out therefrom, never gaze upon a lass or a knight, never again see my family?"

Rod felt a stab of apprehension, and nearly yanked the boy off his bench and bolted; but Father

Boquilva said,
"Nay. Thou wilt go out anon and again; our monks have ever journeyed to visit with their folk from time to time, commonly twice in a year—save, of course, those who have been brought to us as orphans. And, now and again, our services are needed."
Rod missed Gregory's next question and the answer, because inspiration struck with a blinding flash. So the monks were allowed to go home and visit from time to time, were they? Then the monastery wasn't completely cut off from the rest of the world! There was a channel of communication available! He came out of the daze as Father Boquilva was saying, "Well, more questions will come, be sure. When they do, thou art welcome among us—yet I prithee, bring always thy father." He turned to smile at Rod. "I believe he hath need of it!"
"Oh, yes! You never know what you can get from a visit to a monastery!" Rod rose, reaching out to shake Father Boquilva's hand. "It's been great talking to you, Father! I tell you, you're sending me back out into the world with renewed energy and vigor!"
"Why, thus would I hope the cloister may ever do, for the faithful," Father Boquilva returned, "yet I own I have never seen it work so quickly. Art certain thou hast no need for a longer retreat?"
"No, I'd say I'm in the mood for a challenge. It's time to press forward—I might even say, charge!" He took Gregory by the hand and turned away to the door. "Come on, son, we've got to hurry and get your big brother moving."
"But he hath no call!"
"He's about to get one, and he darned well better answer!"
"Oh, Milord Abbot!" The Baroness hurried over as the Abbot stepped into the room, lowering his cowl to reveal hair plastered against his head. "I had not meant for thee to come on so foul a night!"
The Abbot looked up in surprise, displeased. "Thy message, milady, spoke of urgent need."
"And so it is, so it is! Yet tomorrow would have been soon enough. Oh, poor man! Come, come stand by the fire!
Mayrose, pour brandywine! Adam, move a chair to the hearth!"
"Nay, I am not so wetted as that." The Abbot pulled off his monk's robe, revealing another beneath it. "When I saw the rain, I took a larger robe for a cover." But the inner robe was damp, too, and as the clergyman stepped in front of the flames, he steamed. Still, the look in his eye as Lady Mayrose handed him a goblet said he did not regret the trip. Indeed, there was a haunted hunger there.
The Baroness saw, but had tact enough not to mention it directly. She gestured for Old Adam to bring her chair nearer the fire. "I marvel that thou canst yet spare time for us, milord, when thou art so much taken up with matters of great moment."
The Abbot frowned, his troubles coming to mind again. "In truth, milady, thy house and thine affairs seem almost a refuge to me now."
"Why, come to sanctuary, then," Lady Mayrose said with a silvery laugh, and turned away in a swirl of skirts to stand by her mother. "Still, 'tis a somewhat troubled sanctuary, as who should know better than its confessor?"
"But thy troubles are so . . . wholesome, I might almost say." The Abbot smiled. "Nay, thy disagreements seem ever to be borne with love toward one another. Would I and the King might so quarrel!"
"In truth, the Lord did bid thee love thine enemy," Lady Mayrose murmured.

The Abbot nodded. "So indeed He did, Lady Mayrose, yet our enemy will not therefore cease being our enemy."

His brow creased. "In truth, Their Majesties are so arrogant that they can scarcely abide the least challenge to their power."

"And art thou so great an affront, then?"

The Abbot sighed, looking up to Heaven. "Alas! How may I be otherwise? For I must oppose this steady extension of their powers, that doth encroach even on the domain of the Church. . . . Oh! Rome is so blind! Not to realize that a worldly prince must needs hamper the Church's work if he doth usurp her offices! So blind, not to see what moves here—and so uncaring!"

The ladies were silent, surprised at his vehemence.

He realized, and smiled apologetically. "Pardon, ladies. My spirit grows agitated as I realize the hurt to the poor folk, in both soul and body, that must come from the Crown daring to take upon itself the alms-giving of the Church and the ordering of our clergy."

"Ah! How can a king or queen understand what is needful in that?" Lady Mayrose said, scandalized.

"Nay, certes the Church must remain supreme in such venues!"

The Abbot looked up at her in appreciation. "I thank thee, Lady Mayrose, yet I doubt that even one so ardent as thou wouldst condone the step that I may needs take on this road."

"What step is that?" The Baroness was suddenly apprehensive.

"That of declaring myself to be Archbishop." The Abbot looked away, his mouth twisting as he said it.

The Baroness gasped, but Lady Mayrose's eyes glowed. She nodded, faster and faster. "Certes . . . aye, certes! Nay,

what else couldst thou do, my lord? If the Church of Gramarye hath separated from Rome, it must needs have a head—and that head must be titled Archbishop! Yet ought it not ever have had bishops and archbishops?"

"It should have, Lady Mayrose, it should have." The Abbot turned to her with a slow, approving nod. " 'Tis only for cause that all priests in Gramarye are of the Order, and owe obedience to the Abbot of the only monastery, that we have not."

Lady Mayrose's eyes widened. "Are there other orders of monks, then?"

"Aye, and priests who are not monks." The abbot smiled at her astonishment. "There are many holy houses named in our books—the Order of Saint Francis, for one, and the Order of Saint Dominic, for another. There is also the Society of Jesus, from which came our founder, Saint Vidicon. Yet 'twas a monk of Saint Vidicon's alone brought the Faith to Gramarye, so that the only priests here are those of our Order."

The Baroness's hand trembled at her throat. "Yet will not Their Majesties see thy taking the title of Archbishop as an attack upon their authority?"

"I doubt it not," the Abbot said, frowning, "and 'tis that which doth give me pause in so declaring myself. Yet, milady, would I thereby claim aught that the Abbot hath not always had, in this Isle of Gramarye?"

"Thou wouldst not, and thou wouldst thus do as an archbishop must!" Lady Mayrose insisted. "Who can trust the judgment of kings or queens? For they must, by their natures, be worldly, and therefore liable to corruption!"

" 'Tis even so, Lady Mayrose, even so." The Abbot nodded, pleased. "There must be a check on the powers of

them who govern, or tyranny will follow."

"And who can check a king, save an archbishop?" Lady Mayrose shook her head, fire in her eyes.

"Nay, milord!

An archbishop thou must needs be, and naught less than archbishop! For just and right behavior is natural to men

of the Spirit—but greed and violence are natural to men of the World!"

"Why, even so had I thought!" the Abbot declared, with a warm smile for her. "Only in men of God may the

people trust, for justice!"

"Folly is the prerogative of the Crown," Lady Mayrose answered, "but wisdom is the prerogative of the Mitre!"

"I could not have spoken it better," the Abbot breathed, gazing into her eyes.

She met his gaze a moment, then blushed and bowed her head.

The silence became awkward.

The Abbot turned away, with a noise of impatience. "What a rude guest am I, to so dwell on mine own affairs! I

had forgot, milady, the cause for which thou hadst summoned me."

"Oh . . . 'tis only some disagreement 'twixt this willful child and myself." The Baroness looked up over her

shoulder at her granddaughter. "Our quarrel seems petty indeed, weighed against thy matters of great moment."

"I assure thee, milady, that naught which doth trouble thee and thy granddaughter can ever be of small moment

to me," the Abbot said with fervor. "What quarrel is this, that can so disturb the loving harmony between thee?"

"What is it ever!" the Baroness sighed. "I have brought to her mind once again, Lord Abbot, her duty to her

house and country, yet she doth once more defy me!"

"Lady!" The Abbot turned to Lady Mayrose in mild reproach. "Surely thou dost not deny thou shouldst wed!"

"Nay, not truly, milord." The maiden met his eyes with a deep, disconcerting directness. " 'Tis only a matter of person."

"I did no such thing!"

Squire Rowley frowned across the table at the village pain. Laughn was as scruffy as usual—his tunic probably

hadn't been washed for a month, let alone changed; the warden had obviously dragged him in before his weekly

shave; and there was something about the lice that kept peeking out from his mange, as though they were finding

the aroma inside a little hard to take themselves. Rowley was just glad it had been a clear day, so he could have

his men bring his table outdoors to hold court—but he hadn't thought to make sure he was upwind of Laughn. He

tried to breathe lightly, and said, "The keeper found thee coming away from the deer, which had still thine arrow

in it."

" 'Twas an arrant knave stole that arrow from me!"

"An arrant knave shot the deer, surely." Rowley gasped at a sudden gust and held his breath till it had passed. His

knight, Sir Torgel, had a very enlightened attitude toward poaching—

he only forbade hunting to people who had enough to eat. But Laughn still lived with his parents, though he was

in his twenties, and was well-enough fed, though he was more often seen in the woods than in the fields—and

that deer could have fed the whole village for several days. No, Sir Torgel would not take the large view toward

this deer slaying. "And how didst thou come to be near the deer?"

"Why, I sought deadwood to gather for the fire! How was I to know a dead deer lay nearby?"

"How, indeed?" the squire sighed. "Yet thou hadst no billets about thee, nor even a bag with which to carry kindling."

"Only for that I had not found any yet!"

"Though 'twas high noon? Our woods are not so well kept as that!" Rowley frowned and glanced at the horizon; the sun had almost set, and gloom was gathering. The trial had lasted far too long. "Nay, I must needs hold thee guilty of poaching."

"Thou canst not!" Sweat started on Laughn's brow; he knew the sentence could be death. "I did not shoot!"

"Yet all signs say thou didst." Rowley's face hardened. "Unless thou hast a witness to say he saw thee without thy

bow as he saw the deer fall, I must needs hold thee--"

"Yet there was!" Laughn shrilled. "Such an one did see me so!"

Rowley paused, scowling. "Who did?"

"Stane did!"

Rowley sat, eyes widening at Laughn's audacity. Stane had been found dead by a keeper about the same time that

another had discovered the slain deer and had caught Laughn. The young man had been a short distance from

both, lying near a rock that fitted the dent in his head. To all appearances he had tripped and fallen. Rowley had

sent a guardsman back for the body; he had found it stiffened. "Thou knowest Stane lieth dead."

"Naetheless, he did see me even as he let fly the arrow! Twas Stane slew the deer, not I! I did not wish to speak

ill of the dead, but thou dost leave me no choice!"

"Ill indeed." Rowley's eyes narrowed. "Thou art, then, the last to see Stane alive. Methinks thou mayest know

more of his death than thou speakest!"

"I do not!" Laughn fairly screamed, straining against the guards' grasp, raising his bound hands.

"I call him to

witness!

Stane, come! For if thou didst, thou wouldst bear witness that I am innocent!"

This blasphemy was too much even for Rowley. "Thou dost lie, vile murderer! I would Stane could stand here, for--"

He broke off at the look of absolute terror that came into Laughn's eyes, and turned to follow his gaze.

There, dimly seen in the gloaming, but there quite clearly, was a wisp of smoke in the form of a man, a young

man in smock and leggins with a raw bloody dent in his forehead.

"Stane," Rowley whispered.

He doth lie, said Stane's voice inside their minds. He slew the deer; I did see it. And for that, he slew me. Then he

half buried the rock, so that it would seem my own clumsiness had slain me.

Laughn screamed, then screamed again and again, thrashing against the hold of the white-faced soldiers while

Stane's ghost faded, as though the sound of Laughn's howling were shredding the shade and dispersing it. Then

Laughn's voice cut off short, eyes bulging as he stared at the place where Stane's shade had been, before he

slumped, unconscious.

The tinker wore a three-day beard and an assemblage of clothes that seemed to be made up of equal parts of tatter

and grime. The boy beside him was a little better off; his face was unwashed instead of unshaven. Both of them

were hung about with pots and pans that jangled and clattered as they walked. Of course, the alert eye could have

seen that under the rags they were both well-fed and well-muscled, and the tinker, at least,

seemed to be
unwholesomely happy about the whole thing. He ambled into the village with his thumbs hooked
around pot
handles, whistling.
The boy, on the other hand, looked rather glum about it all. He glowered up at his father. "Do you
have to be so
happy about the whole thing, Papa?"
"What good would it do being sour?"
"If anybody you knew saw you, they might think you were glad to get away from Mother."
"Never! Well, no, I have to amend that—I'd rather not have her around when I lose my temper." Rod
grinned.
"But I always do enjoy getting away from Their Majesties and the court for a little while. There's
this tremendous
sense of ... freedom."

"Freedom." Magnus jangled his pots and glowered at the grime in his homespun tunic. "This is
freedom?"
"Son, I've been meaning to tell you—freedom and luxury are not the same thing. In fact, they don't
even go
together, most of the time." Rod stepped into the center of the village common and shrugged off
his load. It fell
with a jangle and a clatter, and he called out,
"Pots, mistress, pans! Bring them out to my hands! Are they cracked, bent, or bruised? Are they
not fit for use?
Then bring them out here, Where we'll hammer and sear And weld them for you To make them like
new!"
Magnus winced. "You've done better, Papa."
"Well, what do you expect for improvisation? Besides, who made you a critic?"
"You did," Magnus said instantly. "At least that's what you said the last time I didn't want to do
my homework."
"I know—every educated man should be a critic," Rod replied, sighing, "and if you're not willing
to learn, you
have no right to criticize. An unkind cut, my boy, an unkind cut."
"I thought we were talking about education, not steak."
"Are you still beefing? Try to simmer down—here comes a customer."
"Ho, tinker! I've waited long for thee!" The housewife was broad and plump, with a pleasant round
face and a
small cauldron that had a long jagged crack. She swung it up into Rod's hands. "For months I have
cooked in a
crockery pot!"
"Eh, I should have come sooner." Rod's voice moved into a country dialect. "'Twill cost thee a
penny, missus."
The woman's face clouded. "I've no coin to spare, tinker." She reached for the cauldron.
"That being so, we're a-hungered," Rod said quickly. "Can ye spare us a bowl of stew with a taste
of meat?"
The woman beamed. "I've a bit of dried beef on the shelf yet." She frowned down at the odd noise
the boy made,
then shrugged and turned back to his father. "Still, I cannot stew it without a pot."

"Why, then, a mun mend it quickly." Rod sat down tailor fashion, pulled out a knife and a stick,
and began
shaving tinder. "Fetch a few sticks, lad, like a good 'un."
"Pretend, anyway—right?" Magnus muttered, before he turned away to hunt for kindling.
A few other wives came up as Rod laid the fire. One had a pot with a bad dent, but the others had
only interest.
"What news, tinker?"
Rod always had wanted to be a journalist. "Naught that's so new as all that. The Abbot hath
declared the Church
of Gramarye to be separate from the Church of Rome."
A housewife frowned. "How can he do that?"
"He doth ope his mouth and speak." Rod shaved a curl of wood.

"Can we not hear Mass, then?"

"Rumor saith that the Abbot himself doth so, every day."

The first housewife knit her brow. "Then what matters it?"

Rod shrugged. "Little enough, I would say." Privately, he was appalled that the peasants took the news so blandly. "Yet what know I of the Church? 'Tis a priest must say." He looked up as Magnus came up with an armload of broken branches. "Ah, that's good enough, lad."

Magnus sat down with his bundle of sticks, trying not to look at the erstwhile customer who was running toward the only building with a wooden roof. It also had a small steeple.

"Now, when I can find one who hath a brother or son in the monastery," Rod said easily, "I can find the truth or falsehood of this rumor." He struck a spark into the tinder and blew it into a glowing coal, carefully leaving enough silence for a villager to volunteer a comment. When no one did, he sighed inwardly and said, "Other than that, there's small enough news. 'Twas a storm in the north, off the Romanov coast, and a fisherman swore he saw a mermaid singing in the midst of the lightning."

The housewives gasped and exclaimed to one another, and Rod started feeding kindling into the glowing coal. Flames licked up.

"What had the fisherman been drinking, Papa?" Magnus asked, and the women turned toward him, startled.

Rod swung a backhanded slap at Magnus's head, but Magnus ducked it lazily. "Go along with 'ee, now! Hast no respect for thine elders?"

"Not so harsh," a housewife protested. "I've known mine husband to see odd sights when he's been a-drinking."

The other women chortled, and Rod wondered if the woman's husband would thank her for the broadcast. "Mayhap, goodwife, yet bear in mind this: the fairy folk have a fondness for tosspots."

"Then why do they not take them away?" a woman snorted, and the others hooted their agreement. Rod waved a hand over the little blaze and nodded, satisfied. " 'Twill do." He laid a strip of welding wire along the crack and held it over the blaze.

"I do the real work, right?" Magnus murmured to him.

"So why do you think I brought you along?" Questions don't qualify as fibs. "But it's your choice. I can make a try at it on my own."

"Oh, I don't mind," Magnus said quickly. Rod gave the boy points; he didn't want to hurt Papa's feelings by letting him botch the job. And Magnus had practiced a lot more, Rod had to admit.

Magnus stared at the crack, and the wire melted and flowed, though the fire wasn't really hot enough to do it.

Rod knew that, under the cover of golden metal, the iron of the pot was softening all along the crack line and beginning to flow together as Magnus excited the molecules. The kid really had great control—the intense heat spread only about half an inch from the crack on either side. Rod had checked that, the last time Magnus had mended a pan for his mother.

They were so absorbed in their work that Rod was able to pretend not to notice the parish priest come striding up behind the young wife who had run to tell him the news.

The pot glowed red along the seam, then yellow, but the villagers couldn't see that under the flow of the welding wire.

Then Magnus relaxed. Rod took his cue and lifted the pot away from the flames, setting it aside to cool. "Let it stand an hour, goodwife. Then try it, and I'll warrant you'll find it as good as new." He was quite sure of that. "Quickly done, and quite well," said the priest. "Thou art the most skillful tinker that ever I've seen." "Why, thank'ee." Rod looked up, then widened his eyes and added, "Father," as though just realizing he was speaking to a priest.

The friar smiled. "I am Father Bellora, good tinker. Be at peace." Rod tried to look nervous. "Hast thou a pot to mend?" "Not a pot, but a heart." Anxiety creased the friar's face. "Is't true, this news that ye bring?" "What—that the Church of Gramarye be parted from the Church of Rome?" Rod shrugged. " 'Tis the news, Father. Canst not say if 'tis true?" "I have not heard speak of it." The friar shoved his hands into the sleeves of his robe, his face taut, his eyes haunted. "Nay, then, can it be sooth?" "If 'tis, Father," a woman asked with foreboding, "canst thou still say mass?" "Or," Rod quipped, trying to lighten the atmosphere, "must we needs stop dying till thou canst once more say the funeral?" The friar's lips quirked with amusement. "Nay, surely not. Tis years since I was ordained; my hands are yet consecrated to the Eucharist and the work of God. I may minister the Sacraments, unless the Pope doth place Gramarye under the Inderdict." The little crowd was silent, aghast at the thought of Rome abandoning them to the Devil. Rod made a feeble try at his original purpose. "Canst not send word to the monastery to ask if 'tis true?" The priest shook his head. "Only were I to discover some holy friar who doth thither wend." "Yet there must needs be some soul in this village who hath a son or sib at the abbey, who may come bearing word." Father Bellora frowned down at him, then shook his head. "Nay. None here have folk in holy orders, save myself, and I do not hearken from this village." "Hast no friends from thy days of schooling?" The priest's smile soured. "Aye, friends did I gain whilst I did study holy writ; yet they, too, are among the parishes, even as I am." "Why, how is this?" Rod said, scowling, even though he knew well. "Are not all friars taught together?" "Nay," the priest said. "We are not all numbered among the elect." "Not?" Rod pretended to be startled. "Yet I thought that once tha wert of the monastery, tha wert all as one." "Nay, neither in heart nor in schooling. Some are drawn

away into the cloister, and some remain in the novice's dormitory and scriptorium." A separate scriptorium for the novices? As monasteries went, this was definitely something new. "And those who rest without, do go without?" Father Bellora nodded. "Out to the world from which we came, to contend with the temptations and burdens that divert a man from Heaven." "Yet 'tis a holy calling withal." Magnus sounded shocked. "How would the ... we poor folks find our way to Heaven without such as thee?" Father Bellora's face softened. "Truly said, lad, and I thank thee. Fie upon me that I may let old bitterness rise to

veil the worth of my life from me! For I must own, my superiors were right; I have found this life rich in a feeling of others' need. Never, since my first week here, have I asked why I was made."

"Yet thou didst not choose it?" Rod frowned; he had had visions of a parchment application form. "Didst thou wish the cloister, Father?"

"Aye, as do all young men who go there. Well, mayhap not all," the priest corrected, "but surely the greater number of us. Yet 'tis not for a postulant to decide his own course; there are older heads than his, and wiser, who can read his calling more clearly than he himself."

"Yet tha dost feel thaself set aside, as lesser clay," Rod interpreted.

Father Bellora's shoulders shook with a single ironic laugh. "Aye, 'tis quite foolish when thou dost say it aloud, is't not? For surely the parish priests serve God as fully as they who are cloistered, mayhap more, and surely we are no lesser stuff." "Mayhap better," Magnus suggested. "For must ye not be stronger, to withstand the temptations of the world and bear up under its burdens?"

Father Bellora nodded, an approving glint in his eye. "Aye, so we were told, though I put it down as an attempt to persuade us to remain in the order, and to console us for being among those rejected. Yet I have come to see the truth of it."

"Yet who bid thee be a parish priest?" Rod asked. "How could they tell?" Father Bellora spread his hands. "I know not. Mayhap when

I am aged, I will. Tis they of the cloister who decide—and the seniors among them, at that."

"Yet how can they know this of thee?"

"A wise old monk sat down and spoke with me a while. Then on the next day, after Mass, the master of novices took me aside to tell me my fate."

"Only that?" Magnus stared. "Only some minutes' talk?"

"Perchance the half of an hour. Yet 'tis even as thou dost say—on that they decided my fate. That and the report of the Master of Postulants," the priest said thoughtfully. "He had watched me for two days, at that."

"Two days, and half an hour's talk, to decide a life's work?"

"Be not so dismayed." Father Bellora turned to Magnus with a smile. "The wise old monk was right, after all."

"Yet still dost thou wish to be of the cloister!"

"That is my besetting sin," the priest sighed, "overweening pride. I pray daily that it may be lifted from me."

"Canst thou not be what thou dost wish?"

"Nay." Father Bellora gave Magnus his full attention now. "For look you, lad, 'tis not only hard work and determination that will win thee the work thou dost wish—'tis also a matter of talent. In cloister, I doubt not, I would have been too restless, though I find it hard to credit—and, belike, I'd be beset by a feeling of lack of purpose. Nay, he who judged me, judged well." The last sentence sounded definitely forced. Rod was impressed by the man's merciless self-evaluation. "Yet have they never erred, these monks, in their judgment as to who should go, and who should stay?"

The priest shook his head. "Never, so far as I know."

"Father! Father!" A young man in a farmer's smock came running up. "Praise Heaven I've found thee!"

The priest turned, attention completely on the runner. "Good day, Lirak. What troubles thee?"

"Tis old Sebastian, Father! He hath fallen in the field, and's breath doth rattle in's throat! Oh, come, I beg thee!"

Father Bellora glanced at Rod and Magnus. "Thy pardon, yet here's one who doth stand in need of me." He pressed his breast pocket, next to the tiny yellow handle of the emblem of his order. "Aye, the sacred oil's there. Nay, show me the way, Lirak." And he hurried away after the boy. Rod watched them go. "Well, they didn't make any mistake about that one, anyway."

"Aye, one." Magnus scowled. "Yet they must have erred now and again, Papa!" Rod glanced around; all the housewives seemed to have gone home, probably to discuss the scandalous news about the Church by themselves. "Yes, that definitely sounds a bit odd, son, not to mention inhuman. They couldn't possibly have a perfect track record on something like that. There're just too many variables."

"Mayhap the postulants each have some sort of sign impressed on their foreheads, that we mere mortal folk cannot see," Magnus said. Rod looked more closely at his boy, surprised at the sarcasm. He was definitely beginning to grow up. "Well, they know what to look for, at any rate." He frowned at a notion. "Or, more likely, they never know about their mistakes." Magnus looked puzzled.

"Look," Rod explained, "if a parish priest starts sinning, they can just say he has weakened." Magnus's eyes widened. "Aye, and if a monk doth make a clamor in the cloister, they may say 'tis only that he doth lack discipline!"

"On your home territory there, are you? But you do have the gist of it there, yes. Makes sense, doesn't it?" "Too much so!"

"Well, they're only human," Rod sighed. "They've got to do the best they can under the circumstances."

"Nay, they need not! They could let each postulant choose his own way, and try it!"

"Yes, they could," Rod agreed. "Probably yield just as high a success rate, in the long run."

"Bless thee, tinkers!"

Rod looked up, startled. It was the housewife whose pot they had mended, coming up with a big, steaming bowl in her hands and a loaf tucked under her arm. Rod grinned, and reached up to accept the bowl. "Bless thee, goodwife." He stuck his nose over the bowl and inhaled deeply. "Ah! God send thee more broken pots, whene'er I chance this way again!"

"And take this also." The woman pressed a fat sausage into his hand. "And godspeed!"

Magnus lifted the spoon and sipped as she turned away.

"Why, 'tis good! Mayhap we should think of this trade more often, Papa."

"Pays well enough, you mean?" Rod smiled. "Well, not bad, for fixing one pot—a big bowl of stew, a loaf of whole wheat, and a salami. Not only dinner, but journey rations for tomorrow."

"Had they more pots," Magnus pointed out, "we could also trade in foodstuffs."

"Didn't realize you had an aptitude for business. ..."

"Naetheless," Magnus said, through a mouthful of stew, "we've not found the one thing we came for."

"Yes." Rod frowned. "Nobody in town has a relative in the monastery. Well, there's always the next village, son."

Magnus groaned.

Father Bellora stepped out the door to dump the dirty wash water, calling, "Wee Folk, take care!" His teachers at the monastery would have been scandalized to hear him, and would have rebuked him for the sin of superstition, but they didn't have to deal with the realities of life. An elf with dampened dignity could become extremely inconvenient.

Having called the warning, the good country parson tossed the contents of the basin. They splashed into the weeds—the greenest patch anywhere near the rectory—and Father Bellora turned back toward his kitchen. But out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of an approaching figure and turned to look. His eyes widened, and he yelped. "Brother Matthew!" The other friar waved, grinning, and broke into a run. Father Bellora clapped him on the shoulder with a crow of delight. "Thou old curmudgeon, what dost thou here? Oh, right glad I am to see thee!" "And I thee, Father Bellora." Matthew was a year older, but they had studied together at the monastery. "Nay, come in, come in!" Father Bellora cried, and led his old schoolmate into the kitchen. Half an hour and a large meat pie later, Brother Matthew sat back with a sigh and a toothpick. Father Bellora grinned, leaning back and patting his belly. "Now, good Brother! What matter is't doth bring thee to my parish?" "News which our good Abbot doth enjoin thee to proclaim to all thy congregation." Brother Matthew's face darkened.

"He hath declared the Church of Gramarye to be separate from the Church of Rome." Father Bellora's face fell. "Rumor had spoke of this, yet I had hoped 'twas not true." "So soon?" Brother Matthew looked up, startled. "Doth word run faster than writing?" "Ever, Brother. Twas a tinker came by, yester e'en. He mended a pot, slept the night, and went on. Belike another parish doth learn of it, even now." "Aye, Brother," Matthew said, sympathizing. "It doth make for turmoil in our souls, doth it not?" He withdrew a roll of parchment from his sleeve. "Here is the text of it, which thou art to copy and read at Mass for a week, and carry this scroll to Father Gabe, in Flamourn parish o'er the hill, even as I have brought it to thee." Father Bellora accepted the scroll with all the delight of a man ordered to cuddle a tarantula. "Tell me the gist." "Why, 'tis that the Church of Rome hath erred. ..."

Father Bellora went stiff as a Puritan in a ballroom, eyes wide in horror. "How can he dare speak so!"

"He is the Abbot," Matthew answered with a shrug. "Tis hard, is't not? When we had thought the Pope infallible in matters of doctrine. Yet our good Lord Abbot doth say that he whom we have called the Holy Father knoweth not how matters fare here, nor their complexities; and furthermore, that he is too much bound by the licentious easiness of his forebears, and by the corruption of his clerks and scribes in the Curia."

"Yet how can he chastise the Holy See?" Father Bellora whispered.

"Because, saith the Lord Abbot, the Pope is, when all is said and done, only the Bishop of Rome, and is not truly greater than any other bishop. To make all of us mindful of mat, and to make clear his standing as head of our Church, the Lord Abbot hath declared himself henceforth Archbishop of Gramarye."

Father Bellora only sat, transfixed in shock.

"And," Brother Matthew went on, "the Archbishop of Gramarye may surely chastise the Bishop of Rome. He doth decry the Pope's errors, saying that he doth err most especially in not demanding that all princes recognize the Church's greater wisdom in all matters of morality."

"But such matters encompass all of government!" Father Bellora protested. "What matter can a prince rule on

that is not moral or immoral?"

"That is his point--and therein, saith our good Lord Abbot, lieth the cause of all the miseries of our worldly state."

"Yet the words of Christ! 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's!'"

Brother Matthew nodded. "Yet, saith our Lord Abbot, even Caesar must render unto God that which is God's--

and in so doing, he must recognize the guidance of the Church."

Father Bellora paled. "Doth he mean to say ..." but he couldn't finish the thought, his voice fading.

Brother Matthew nodded, aching with empathy. " 'Tis even so, Father.. Our good Lord Abbot doth thus conclude:

that the Church must needs be superior to the King, for that it is closer to God, and must therefore know what He

doth wish far more accurately than any King could. And the King must recognize the authority of the

Archbishop."

"How can the King not march against him?" Father Bellora whispered.

10

Screams tore the night, raw, full-throated howls of terror. The Village rang with the noise for a few seconds that

seemed to stretch into hours. Then doors slammed open all around the common and stocky peasant men barreled

out in their smocks, cudgels and sickles in their hands, bellowing in answer. They converged on the cottage of

screams and slammed through the door.

A gray-haired lady knelt in the middle of the single room, at the foot of the ladder to her sleeping loft. The pieces

of the rungs hung crookedly from the uprights. The tables and stools were overturned; the chest lay on its side,

with the woolens a mess around it.

The men stared, appalled.

A jug shot toward them.

The men shouted and ducked. Then one of them dashed in to catch up the woman in a bear hug. "Art thou hurled,

Griselda?"

The screams stopped, and Griselda stared up at the big peasant, panting, wild-eyed.

A wooden mug flew at his head. He ducked, and Griselda shrieked. " 'Twas naught," he assured her, "'twas

naught. What of thee?"

"No . . . hurt," she gasped. "An ache ... in my leg, but I doubt 'tis aught."

"Well enough, then. Hold firmly." The burly peasant heaved her up over his shoulder and turned toward the door.

A stool whizzed right at his face.

He shouted as he sidestepped. The stool shot past him and smashed into the fireplace. He ran for the door.

The other men pressed back, making room, and he stumbled out into the night, then pulled to a halt and lowered

the old woman to the ground carefully, panting.

"I ... thank thee, Hans." She stepped a little away from him, but held onto his shoulder.

" 'Twas naught," he panted. "What of thy leg, Griselda?"

Griselda leaned onto the leg in question, trying her weight on it cautiously. " 'Twill hold," she judged.

"Well enough, then."

There was a shout behind them, and the men in the doorway jumped back, slamming the portal closed. Something shattered against it, and they shuddered.

" 'Tis a hearth ghost," said one of them. He looked up to see the common filled with people in smocks, come out

to see if they needed to flee or not.

Hans saw them, too, and stepped forward, waving both hands. " 'Tis done, good folk, and Griselda

is well.
Frighted, but well."
"Frighted, i' truth," Griselda admitted. "I lay down to sleep, and dreamt, and of a sudden something crashed near mine head. I tumbled out of my loft, set my foot to my ladder--and the rungs all snapped like kindling wood!"
"Praise Heaven thou hast not broke thy leg!" cried one good dame.
A gray-haired man stepped forward, shaking his finger at her. "I had told thee thou wert too old to sleep above so! Come, thou art alone in thy cottage now--thou couldst make thee a couch below o' nights!"
"Oh, be still, Hugh," Griselda snapped. "There's no hazard in my climbing down, if the rungs hold!"
"Aye," said another woman, somber-faced. "Tis not every night a ghost doth throw things at one."
"Praise Heaven!" An old man crossed himself. "Yet whence cometh this spirit?"
The villagers were silent, staring at one another.
"This house was never haunted aforetime," one whispered.
In the silence of the night, dread filtered through to each one. Whose house might be next?

Then Hans lifted his head, frowning. "Tis gone."
Everyone was silent, listening. Sure enough, there were no more sounds coming from Griselda's cottage.
"I may go back in, then." Griselda turned to face the door, but she hesitated.
"Do not." Hans took her elbow. "Wait for the dawn; let the priest come from Malbrarle Town to bless thine house ere thou dost return."
Griselda stood, irresolute.
"Do not think of it!" A younger woman stepped forward, one hand holding a shawl about her shoulders, the other holding a little boy by the hand. "We've room enough within for the night. Hans can sleep on a pallet."
"Aye." Hans met his wife's gaze and nodded; then he smiled. "'Tis not as though 'twas the first time I've done it."
"Hans!" his wife cried, scandalized, and glanced quickly at the neighbors, blushing.
The common was quiet a moment; then it erupted into laughter, far more than the feeble jest was worth.
"Eh! Mirth is good, mirth is good!" Hans wiped tears from his eyes. "And thy pardon, Letricia; 'tis a vile lie."
"Not vile," his wife said, with a twinkle in her eyes, "and 'twas needful. Yet come, Griselda, surely thou'lt not deny us."
"Eh, then! Thou hast persuaded me!" Griselda turned to her with a smile. "And bless thee, good folk, for friends in time of need!"
"Whatever else were neighbors for?" Letricia answered, taking her by the arm. As they turned away to Letricia's cottage, Hans called out, "Enough, then, neighbors! Back to our beds, eh? There's darkness left, and we must rise to work with the dawn!"
A chorus of grumbles answered him as the peasants turned away to their huts, the excitement over. Slowly they went indoors, though not without a few apprehensive glances backwards. But finally the last door closed, and the village lay quiet in the darkness again.
Inside Griselda's house, crockery crashed.
"I am hot, Papa." Magnus wiped his brow and reached for the waterskin (not being old enough for the wineskin).
"Kvetch, kvetch, kvetch!" Rod snorted. "All you do is gripe. What happened to the young warrior who was determined to undergo hardship for the Cause?"

"The Church be not much of a cause," Magnus grunted.

"Don't let your mother hear you say that--and in case you haven't noticed, we're on the King's side. What's the problem--you had something else you wanted to do? What?"

"Name it. I am open to suggestion."

"Not the kind / feel like making. Look, son, this is an important mission! We're trying to recruit a spy, someone who's loyal to the King and Queen but can go into the monastery without anyone suspecting."

"Oh." Magnus looked up, frowning. " 'Tis therefore we do look for some soul that hath a relative in the cloister?"

"You get the idea quick."

Magnus winced. "Eh, come now, Papa! What dost thou think me to be--a mind-reader?" Then he stopped suddenly.

"What's the matter--heard your own words?"

"Aye, yet not thine. Is't my fault if thou art better at shielding thy thoughts than I am?"

Well. Rod was amazed; he'd never thought he would have heard the boy admit it. "Not really a shield, son--only trying to keep a huge number of details straight."

Magnus nodded. "I will remember that."

"Don't worry, it'll come naturally some day." Rod toyed with the notion of suggesting Magnus start calling him

Dad; "Papa" was beginning to seem a little young for him. The word was in period, but Rod wasn't too sure of its connotations; he let it slide.

"Speaking of things that come naturally, night is not far away." Magnus squinted up at the rosy sun. "Art thou certain we will come to a village ere dark?"

"That's right, doubt your father," Rod sighed. "Here's a fortuitous local--check me. Ask him."

Magnus looked up, frowning at the plowman who came toiling toward them, following his ox. He was young, scarcely twenty, and his arms were banded with muscle. Out of the corner of his eye Rod watched Magnus twitch his shoulders and clench his fists, comparing the plowman's build to his own--unfavorably. Rod smiled and waved at the peasant.

The plowman noticed, smiled affably, and waved back. As he came up even with them, he called to the ox to stop, and as it lowered its head to graze, he stepped over to the fence with a tolerant smile, wiping his brow.

"Good day, tinkers!"

"Good day." Rod liked the young man on the spot--most

peasants wouldn't even talk to tinkers if they could help it. Besides, the plowman had included Magnus in his greeting. " 'Tis a fair one."

"Fair, aye, and like to be so on the morrow." The plowman squinted at the sky with an experienced eye. "And cooler than it might be, praise Heaven!"

Rod took the hint and unlimbered his wineskin. "Hot work makes strong thirst. Will you drink?"

"Why, thank'ee." The plowman took the skin with a broad grin, held it up, and squirted a stream into his mouth.

He bit it oif, swinging the skin down with a flourish and wiping his mouth. "Ah! Tart wine is good for hot work!"

" 'Tis indeed." Rod grinned. "I am Owen the tinker, and this is my son Mag." Magnus didn't react; he'd chosen the alias himself.

"I am hight Hoban," the plowman returned. "What news hast thou?"

"Little enough--a deal of fussing 'mongst the churchmen."

"Will they still give us the Sacraments?"

Rod answered, "There seems small doubt of it."

Hoban nodded. "Then I care not what broil they make amongst themselves. Unless . . ." His brow

clouded ". . .
my brother's not caught up in it."
"Brother?" A thrill shivered through Rod. "Why ought thy brother be caught up in priest's doings?"
"For that he's a monk."
Pay dirt! It was all Rod could do to keep from grabbing the man, and Magnus stood very still, eyes wide,
watching. But Rod was too experienced a hunter to leap on his quarry before it was too close to get away, so he
leaned back on one hip, frowning as though he were puzzled. "Should that not keep him safe from such a broil?"
"Oh, nay!" Hoban grinned, fairly bursting with pride. "He cometh home now and again, and doth let drop some
hint of life in a cloister. 'Tis no better than a village, I can tell thee— with sour ones ever scheming to gain
vantage o'er the gentle ones, and factions banding together. 'Tis only that, when they band, 'tis o'er a deal of
words, not land or food."
" 'Tis nourishment to their like, I doubt not." Rod leaned forward. "Then mayhap thou dost wish the fullness of
this news."
Hoban frowned. "Wherefore? Is there in it some words as to set monks contending?"

"There is," Rod answered, "for look you, the Abbot doth say that Gramarye is no longer of the Church of Rome."
Hoban froze, staring.
Rod nodded, trying to look sad. " 'Tis sooth, good Hoban."
"Nay, 'tis words to set monks to fighting, if ever there were," Hoban breathed. "Some will wish to bide with
Rome, though I doubt they'll dare say it."
"Not openly," Rod agreed.
Hoban paled. "Aye, they will be secret in their doings till they think they have enough force to challenge the
Abbot, will they not?"
Rod only gazed at him till Magnus nudged him with an elbow. Then Rod nodded slowly. "Aye, even so. Thy
brother hath told thee much of the doings within the cloister, hath he not?"
Hoban waved it away impatiently. "As I've said, 'tis quite like a village. Eh! Pray my poor brother hath the wit to
hold himself aloof from both camps!"
"Do more than pray," Rod suggested, and waited while his words sank in and Hoban focused on him again.
"Why, how so? How could I aid my brother in this?"
"By giving him no choice," Rod explained. "By seeing that the one side is doomed ere it doth make a beginning."
Hoban stared at him, and Rod opened his mind, feeling the thoughts that wheeled through the plowman's brain.
No wonder Hoban's brother had been able to qualify for the monastery—if he was anything like Hoban, he must
have been very bright.
"Who art thou?" Hoban said at last. "For assuredly thou art as much a tinker as I am."
"I am a King's man," Rod admitted, "though this lad is truthfully my son. And I have wandered these byways,
searching for a man who hath a brother in the monastery, but doth love his King." He met Hoban's gaze, eye to
eye, unflinching.
Finally, the plowman nodded. "Thou hast found him. What wouldst thou do with him?"
Rod's heart leaped, but he kept his composure with iron control. "Why, send him to the monastery also. Hast thou
not a sudden craving for prayer and contemplation? For assuredly they'll not doubt the earnestness of a Brother's

brother."

Hoban held his gaze, and Rod could see new sweat start

along the man's brow. "And I am to send word of their doings to thee?"

Rod nodded. " 'Tis easily done. Thou hast but to call out in a soft voice, 'Send this word to the King,' and speak

thy message. Be assured, His Majesty will hear it ere the night's out."

Hoban stared. " 'Tis the Wee Folk, then?" And when Rod agreed, he said, " 'Tis hard to credit.

Ne'er have I seen

them."

"Nor wilt now," Rod assured him. "Yet be certain, they will hear thee, so long as thou art without doors."

Hoban's lips quirked with humor. "Aye. They'd not be in a House of God, would they?"

"Not willingly," Rod concurred, his opinion of Hoban soaring. If he could see the humor of a situation like this . .

. !

"What dost'a think monks would do, were they to discover a spy in their midst?" Hoban asked very softly.

"Flogging, belike." Rod held the eye-to-eye gaze. "Yet naught more. They are, after all, men of God."

Hoban's face twisted. "What manner of God's men are they, who even think of bearing challenge to the King?

Yet be assured, I am Their Majesties' man as well as God's. I'll be thy spy."

"Good man!" Now Rod clapped him on the shoulder. "Go about thy business as ever thou didst, then—but on the

morrow, go to thy priest and tell him thou hast felt the call of vocation."

"He'll not doubt me," Hoban said, with a wry smile. "They're ever eager for new clerics."

"The more they are, the safer they feel," Rod agreed. "Will there be any way in which I can aid thee, good

Hoban?"

"Aye," the plowman answered, with his gaze still on Rod's eyes. "I would know the name of the Vice who hath

tempted me to loyalty."

Rod stared into his eyes, feeling the thrill of alarm, and Magnus's thoughts spoke in his brain: Careful, Papa!

Why would he want to know?

To be sure of me, Rod answered, and to Hoban he said, "If thou art shy of asking elves to bear thy word to the

King, then ask them to speak of thee to the High Warlock."

The awe was there, finally, and a touch of fear with it. Hoban pulled a forelock, bobbing his head. "I am honored,

milord."

"I think 'tis I shall be saying that." Rod clapped him on the shoulder again. "Go thy ways, good Hoban, with

courage—and be sure of the thanks of thy King and Queen."

" 'Tis reward enough," the man answered, with the ghost of a smile.

He straightened, turning away toward his ox. "Well, then! If 'tis as ever I must needs bear myself, then as ever I

shall. Godspeed thee, milord—and young lord." He bowed his head toward Magnus.

No man should give me a bow! the boy's thoughts shrilled.

Rod's thought pounced on his, Then give it back! And, gravely, Magnus bowed to Hoban.

When the plowman had followed his oxen away over the field, and the tinker and his son had journeyed on down

the road, around the bend, and out of sight, Rod tore off his cap, threw back his head, and howled with triumph.

"Splendid, Papa. Wonderful. Thou hast talked the man into risking his life. A real victory."

"They won't kill him, son." Rod clapped his hat back on his head. "And I sure hope they won't flog him—but he

just may save this country from war!"

A clump of weeds parted, and a six-inch humanoid in tight-fitting brown clothing popped up. "Didst

thou
summon an elf, Lord Warlock?"
"No, I was just holding a little victory celebration." Rod grinned at the mannikin. "Sorry to trouble you, there."
"Nay, I didst even now seek thee. Thou art summoned, milord."
"What, Their Majesties again?" Rod complained. "Can't they even manage a day or two without me?"
"Wouldst thou truly want them to, Papa?"
"True, true," Rod sighed. "Tell them we're on our way, sprite."
Piers hurried home through the dark woods, wishing he hadn't come up with his bright idea of separating. It had
seemed to make sense at the time; if they came back into Runnymede from different directions, there would be
that much less chance of their wives guessing they'd been out in the forest. But now, with the wind moaning in
the branches above him and the moon hidden, it didn't seem so sensible.
Something snapped behind him; he whirled, his heart

leaping into his throat, but saw nothing. Only a branch, he thought, a twig snapping in the wind. Nonetheless, he
turned back toward Runnymede and hurried even faster down the track. Everyone knew spirits filled the woods,
and not just the Little Folk, no, but more vicious spirits, and far more dangerous. ... Furious barking filled the night, and four huge glowing eyes rose up before him. Beneath them two black
muzzles split, showing glowing fangs.
Piers howled in terror and whirled, running; but huge feet thudded behind him, then past him, and the dog reared
up in front of him, whirling to glare at him with both its heads, each one barking with rage. Piers screamed and
spun away, running flat out, hearing the howling behind him and the huge paws thudding on the earth, closer and
closer. . . .
And a root bulged up to trip him. He flew sprawling; a rock tore his cheek, and huge jaws closed on his ankle. He
kicked out, bellowing in panic, and was somehow on his feet again, running and running with a limp now, the
night filled with baying.
Then he was out of the trees and onto the road. Once he dared to look back, but once, and saw the two great
heads just behind him, their eyes filled with flame, mouths filled with sharp teeth. He gasped, past screaming
now, and jerked his head back to the front, running harder though he seemed to go slower, fire in his legs and
breath rasping his lungs.
Then houses were flowing past him, he was into Runnymede now, and the great baying still filled the night
around him. He swung around a corner—
And slammed into the arms of the night watch.
"Hold, fellow! What—"
Then they saw the hound and fell back shouting, pikes swinging up to guard, dropping Piers. He fell to the
ground with a sob of thanks, that he no longer faced the horror alone.
The huge beast sprang, but the watchman grounded his pike butt and aimed the steel even as he shouted his fear.
The blade clashed on the beast's teeth, and it sprang back with a howl.
"It doth fear cold iron!" one of his mates cried, and stepped forward one pace before fear jellied his limbs.
The huge, black, two-headed dog crouched, snarling.
Two watchmen screwed up all their courage and advanced, jabbing out with their pikes, crying,
"Angels and
ministers of

grace defend us!" With a howl the beast sprang back, but one pike head stabbed into its breast— And it vanished. The night was still. The watchmen looked about them, their hearts hammering. "Can it truly be gone?" "Aye, praise all the angels and saints!" "And the good smith who did forge this steel!" Then they heard the tearing sobs of relief behind them, and turned to stare at the poor huddled heap of a man. One of the watchmen frowned, bending down, and helped Piers to his feet. "And where shall we take thee, poor fellow?" one of them asked. But another answered, his own voice still trembling, "To the castle."

"He said whatl\"

"That he is Archbishop of Gramarye," Catharine repeated. The sunset light struck down over the garden wall to

backlight her golden hair, enveloping her in the flames of her wrath.

"No, no!" Rod waved it away. "Not that part—it's not exactly unlikely. The other part, the business about Crown and Gown."

"He hath proclaimed that we should be guided by him, Catharine and I, in all our governing," Tuan answered.

"At the least, 'tis the essence of his words."

"Yeah, it sure is! Why doesn't he just issue a demand for you to turn over the crown?"

"That shall follow, I doubt not." Catharine bit off the phrase as though it were a poisoned dart.

Tuan nodded. "Belike he doth but await our response."

"Well, no." Rod sawed back on his exasperation and anger, forcing himself to look at the realities of the

situation. "He can't simply declare you to be deposed all at once. There are some intermediate steps he'll have to

go through, such as declaring you to be heretics, then excommunicating you, and finally laying the land under the

Interdict until you abdicate."

Catharine shuddered. "Could he truly so imperil the souls of so many?"

"If they stand between him and the power he wants, yes." Rod resisted the temptation to tell her that people could

still go to Heaven without the Sacraments, that Christ's grace didn't absolutely have to be made official—but he

resisted; the

medieval mind wouldn't understand the chain of reasoning involved. To them Sacraments blurred into magic; the

distinction wasn't at all clear, as it was to Rod. At least, he thought it was. "And that is the one thing in which our

good Lord Abbot is strong-willed, Your Majesties—the pursuit of power. If he thinks he has a real chance, he'll

call up an army and attack you with everything he can muster."

Tuan's face darkened. "Assuredly, Lord Warlock, a priest cannot so completely forget morality!"

"No, but he can find excuses to justify what he wants to do, and make it seem moral—even to himself. That's his

weakness."

Catharine stepped into the shade of an apple tree. "Then we must strike first."

"Nay!" Tuan's head snapped up. " 'Twould be folly, and 'twould be sin!"

Catharine whirled to face him, amazed at his tone. She saw the look in his eye, and her face darkened, but with

foreboding as much as with anger.

Rod sympathized; Tuan almost never contradicted her flatly. But this time there was religious fervor behind it,

and that meant he wouldn't even think of backing down. This could be a graver danger to the Crown than a

clerical rebellion—a break between Catharine and Tuan.

So, of course, Rod moved into the breach. "Forget about the 'sinful' part—that's how the clergy

shackle you,
make you do what they want. They raise you to believe it's a sin to do anything but what they tell you is right."
Tuan's head snapped around toward Rod; he stared, scandalized. "How durst thou say it!"
Rod felt his stomach sink. "All right, call it my opinion--"
"Nay, 'tis truth--I know enough of government to see that." Tuan glanced up at the sky through the garden trees.
"And lightning hath not smote thee. . . ."
Rod almost went limp with relief. He forced a sarcastic smile. "The Abbot doesn't necessarily speak for God, you know, Your Majesty. But that only brings us to the other point you raised--folly."
Catharine suddenly looked wary.
Tuan agreed. " 'Twould be folly to attack a House of God, Lord Warlock. The peasants would rise as a man to defend it."
"And so would most of the lords, but not out of religious conviction."

"True enough," Catharine stated, looking only faintly relieved. "If they could bring us down, they might once again become each a prince within his own domain, as they were in my grandfather's time."
Rod hadn't realized it was as recent as that; suddenly he was understanding the depth of the barons' resistance more clearly than he had before. "Of course, they'd be wrong. If the Abbot can bring down a king, he can certainly undercut the lords, one at a time."
"So we end as we began." Tuan smiled sourly. "He would rule."
"Oh, yes. Make no mistake, Your Majesties, what you have here is an embryo theocracy, a 'government by God.'
It isn't, of course--it's government by clergy, who only cite God to justify what they want to do. Governing comes naturally to priests. That's the whole underlying, reason they invented priesthood in the first place: to give them power over the peasants."
"Power?" Tuan frowned. "How could preaching Holy Truth grant them dominion?"
"Because even you, with all the King's horses and all the King's men, can't control a man's thoughts--but a priest can, simply by telling him it's a sin to think about certain things. What's worse is that they tell him what's right to think about-- and if people start thinking about something, they're apt to do it. Such as having a Holy War against the ungodly--to which position I think you have just been elected."
Catharine stared, appalled.
Tuan saw, and gave her a sad smile. "Thou didst not see, my sweet? If we oppose Holy Mother the Church, we must needs be most ungrateful children."
"Assuredly our people would not believe such of us," Catharine whispered.
"Oh, but they will," Rod assured her. "A religious man never has to worry about what his opinion should be--he just asks his minister."
"But they can then make the people do whatever the priests do wish!"
"And the priests will obey the Archbishop." Rod nodded. "You want to really rule effectively? Take holy vows and proclaim yourself Archbishop."
"Yet the priests do say the Word of God shall make all folk free!"

"It makes them free, all right. But the peasants? No more than they ever were. In fact, it's the perfect tool for keeping the masses in their places. You just tell them that it's right to stay in the class they were born into, and wrong to try to move up the social ladder, and the vast majority of 'em will stay put. They won't

even fuss too
much when food is short or they don't get new clothes, because you tell 'em that their suffering now means less suffering after they die. 'Pie in the sky, by and by'—but never pie here on earth, right now. So the priests may try to alleviate human misery, but they also keep people from trying to help themselves."
"Yet that is a central cause of the Abbot's quarrel." Tuan interrupted. "He doth wish to see to the distribution of all alms, that he may ease the suffering of the poor."
"Yes, and make them totally dependent on him. Then he'll have the rabble at his command." Tuan winced; he had managed to weld the beggars of Runnymede into an army once, himself. "Thou dost not say the Church gives only to get!"
"Oh, I'm sure that's not how it starts, but after a while even the most spiritual priest has to realize that he has an awful lot of grateful people who will do whatever he tells them to. That's when he starts to become worldly."
"Nay, Lord Warlock!" Catharine held up a hand. "Thou dost exceed even my spleen! Dost say the Church ought have no power?"
"Well, I hadn't wanted to be so blunt about it, but now that you ask, yes. That's exactly what I'm saying."
"Yet the Church cannot do God's work if it hath no power in the world," Tuan objected.
"Sure it can—by praying and teaching. It's supposed to persuade its congregations to behave rightly, not force them to." Rod shook his head. "It's bad for the Church to have worldly power, Tuan. Power corrupts, and the Abbot, now the Archbishop, is aiming for absolute power. The priests are the ones who invented the term 'hierarchy'—it means 'sacred government.' Or 'government by the holy.' But when they start governing, they stop being holy. Absolute power corrupts the priest absolutely, just as surely as it corrupts a knight or a merchant."
"Or a king?" Tuan demanded.
Rod shook his head. "Your power isn't absolute, Your

Majesty—your barons see to that. And the Abbot has always done his share. In fact, if your power was absolute, the Abbot couldn't have gathered an army the last time he challenged you!"
Tuan turned away, gazing about him at the garden. Then he nodded. "Thou hast the right of it, Lord Gallowglass.
In this we must oppose the Church outright."
Rod breathed a huge sigh of relief; Tuan had come out of his religious miasma. He exchanged a quick look with Catharine and saw the same relief in her face, coupled with gratitude. He smiled back, staggered at the realization that for the first time he finally felt he was really her ally.
"Still, you should be tactful," he said, turning back to Tuan. "Don't give the people any reason to believe you're a demon; the new Archbishop will give them all they need for that."
Tuan gave him a sardonic smile. "Well said, Lord Warlock. In this 'tis only needful to deny his claim."
Catharine frowned. "Must we not do more than that?"
"I am sure that we shall," Tuan returned, "yet 'tis poor tactics to begin a battle with a melee. 'Tis enough for him to see our pickets."
"And exactly what 'its' are you planning to pick?" Rod watched him out of the corner of his eye.
"Naught but a mild rebuke, should he wish to construe it so. Our heralds shall proclaim that, though the Queen and I govern in all worldly matters, we acknowledge the right of the Abbot of the order to govern

his monks and
rule on all matters of faith as are open to question."
"Uh ... " Rod bowed his head, rubbing his chin. "I think you might want to be a little more, uh, forceful."
"Nay." Catharine stepped to Tuan's side, taking his hand. "He hath chosen well, Lord Warlock, for by referring to
'the Abbot of the Order,' he doth refuse to acknowledge him as Archbishop, or as having any authority over
Gramarye; and by acknowledging his right to judgment in all matters that are 'open to question,' he doth refuse to
recognize any breach with Rome."
Rod lifted his head slowly. "Very delicately done; it's as much what you don't say as what you do. But maybe too
delicately; do you really think anybody will understand the significance of it?"
"Oh, you may be sure that the lords will," Tuan replied, "and the Abbot. Be sure."

"Which they will, of course," Rod told Fess as they galloped home through the dusk. "And so will all their
descendants. I'm so glad Tuan's going to put it in writing."
"He must, so that it may be copied for heralds to read throughout the land," Fess answered. "It will thus become a
part of the common law."
"Yes, whether Tuan realizes it or not--and will no doubt be incorporated into whatever constitution eventually
gets written or compiled."
"Separation of Church and State," Fess mused, "a point vital to democracy. You could not have arranged it better
yourself."
"And the fact that I didn't only makes it better." Rod grinned. "Remind me to keep a copy."
"'. . . in all matters spiritual, or relating to the ghostly world.'" The scribe set down the parchment and looked up
at Their Majesties in expectation.
Tuan gave a slow nod, and Catharine pronounced it "Excellent. Each word is in its place, and not a one is
spared."
"Even so; it saith neither more nor less than we do wish." Tuan looked up at the scribe. "Copy that as thou hast
read it, and give it to thine apprentices to make a score ere morn. I shall direct the master-at-arms to take them
from thee."
The scribe bowed. "Even as thou hast said, Majesties." He stepped backwards through the door, then closed it.
Tuan rose with a sigh, setting his hands against his back and leaning backwards to stretch. "Well, 'tis done, and
mine heart is lightened thereby. Come, let us to our bed."
The hardness of her anger softened into a smile, and she came to him, taking his hand. He returned her smile as
they turned toward the door.
Sir Maris stood in the doorway.
Catharine and Tuan stopped, their smiles fading. Then Tuan squared his shoulders against the weight of
responsibility settling back onto them. "What matter is so urgent, Seneschal, that thou must needs come to our
solar at so late an hour?"
" 'Tis a peasant frightened, Majesty."
"Only frightened?" Tuan frowned. "Come, Sir Maris! There must needs be more, or thou hadst no need to come to
us."
" 'Tis even as Thy Majesty doth say." Sir Maris bowed his

head. "Yet I pause to tell thee of the matter in his tale that doth alarm me. I prithee, attend to his words, that thou mayest judge for thyselfes."

"Why, then, bring him in." Tuan exchanged a commiserating glance with Catharine and went back to his chair.

She stepped around to stand at his right, one hand on his shoulder.

Sir Maris stepped back from the doorway, beckoning, and a frightened peasant came in, shoulders hunched, twisting his hat in his hands.

"Be not afeared," Sir Maris commanded. "Thou art in the presence of thy sovereigns, whose only concern is thy protection and welfare."

If the peasant had reservations about that statement, he didn't let them show, but only bowed as low as he could, possibly to hide the look on his face.

"Come, come, man, ere thou dost topple!" Tuan beckoned impatiently. "What is thy name and place?"

"Piers, Majesties." The peasant straightened up. "I am an hostler at the Inn of the Red Cask."

"Well enough, then, Piers," Tuan said. "Say to us what hath frightened thee."

Piers swallowed, twisting the hat tighter. " 'Twas an hour ago, Majesty, as I did wend my way home."

"So late?" Catharine asked. "Where wast thou at such an hour?"

The peasant blushed. "I ... some comrades of mine . . . we . . ."

Tuan realized he had run out of words. "Thou and thy friends did seek sport?"

"Of a manner. We did drink ale and tell tales, Majesty."

Tuan glanced at Catharine, then back at the peasant. "Art thou wed?"

Piers swallowed again and nodded, eyes downcast.

"Then where didst thou drink?" Catharine demanded.

"In a clearing in the wood ..."

Catharine turned away and rolled her eyes up, but Tuan kept a straight face. "And what did befall thee on thy ways home?"

Piers took a deep breath, then told them, faltering, ashamed. Once, when he fell silent too long, the King muttered, "Nay, it surely must have been of Hell! I, too, would have feared," and Piers took heart enough to tell them the rest of it.

Finally his voice dwindled and he stood twisting his hat, eyes still downcast, finished.

The audience chamber was quiet. The King looked down at his folded hands; the Queen gazed at Piers with pity.

He glanced at her quickly, swallowed heavily, and looked down at his mangled hat.

The King looked up. "Then these watchmen brought you to Sir Maris?"

Piers nodded. "Aye, Majesty. And I would have followed wheresoe'er they did lead."

"Be sure thou wouldst have," Tuan said, then lapsed into brooding again.

Catharine broke the silence this time. "Thou hadst drunk much ale? And told stories of ghosts and spirits?"

Piers hesitated.

"Be truthful," she commanded.

"Aye to the drinking," he said, as though it were pulled out of him, "but nay to the tales."

"Then what didst thou speak of?"

Piers swallowed.

"Was't women?" Tuan demanded.

Piers nodded.

"Still, thou hadst been drinking, and deeply." Tuan looked up at Sir Maris. "But the watchmen saw the spirit?"

"They did, Majesty."

"As did all the folk who lived along those alleys and streets, belike." Tuan's mouth tightened.

"Nay, the word will be all over the town, even now. Is there any question of the watch's truthfulness?"

"Nay, Majesty. All are good men; all were sober. All four picture the spirit in the same way, as they tell the tale."

" 'Twas real, then, as much as any spirit may be." Tuan nodded. "I thank thee, Piers." He slid a gold piece from his purse and tossed it. Piers caught it, saw its color, and stared. "Thank thy name saint for thy life," Catharine said with some asperity, "and stay with thy wife o' nights henceforth." "I will, Majesty," Piers murmured, nodding and bowing, "I will." "See that thou dost. Now go directly to thy home." The peasant bowed again and hurried out, away from their dread presence. The chamber was quiet, the King staring into the flames, the Queen staring at the King, and the seneschal gazing at them both.

Finally Tuan looked up at Sir Maris. "Thou didst well to bring us the man hard on the event." Sir Maris bowed. "How many others," Tuan asked, "hadst thou not told us of?" Sir Maris froze with his head down, then slowly raised it. "Three, Majesty. One was a spinster who swore the ghost of a farmer had sought to seduce her, and only her rosary had warded her; another was a cooper who did so well imitate his own casks that he was quite filled up with ale. The third was a poor, simple lad, who swore a pouka, a glowing horse, had pounced upon him, and given chase till he came within sight of the lights of the town." "And all three had been the only ones who had seen the spirits?" "Aye, and ..." The seneschal hesitated. "Thou hadst reason, with each, to doubt that the sights he or she had seen were truly there." Catharine gave him a brittle smile. "I had, Majesty," he admitted. "Thou must never fear to be honest with us, Sir Maris," Than said, though he had to admit the delicate pause had prepared Catharine just enough to prevent her rebuking the old knight—and incidentally rejecting what he had reported. "Yet in this instance, others had seen it." "Aye, Majesty, many others—and heard it, too." Tuan nodded. "Henceforth thou must needs tell us all such occurrences, even if they be naught but the self-conjured dreams of brain-sick fools. Our thanks, Sir Maris, and good night." The old knight bowed and retreated out the door. Tuan sat still for some minutes, holding Catharine's hand on his shoulder. Finally, he murmured, "Runnymede hath ne'er before been haunted, sweet wife." "Never," she agreed, so softly he could scarcely hear. "What manner of evil is set loose upon us, my lord?" "What manner indeed?" he replied. "And wherefore?"

11

"Oh, nay, my lord," Baroness Reddering protested. "We were quite . . . startled, when Old Adam told us the word that did run through the parish." "Old Adam?" The Archbishop frowned. "Was it not Brother Felix who spoke of it to thee?" " 'Twas not." The Baroness looked up in surprise. " 'Twas Old Adam." "I" truth?" The Archbishop looked up at old Adam. "And whence gained thou this intelligence, Adam?" "From Brother Felix, milord, when he came to the gate," Old Adam said with grim satisfaction. "He would have

withheld it from me; yet I kept at him and at him, till he became so out of sorts that he did give it me."

"Well, I cannot truly blame him." The Archbishop sighed. He well remembered Old Adam's badgering. Yet the irritation remained. "I could swear that only another so ill-tempered as thou could withhold a secret from thee."

Yet how is't he did not then come to bear my word to Her Ladyship?"

"Oh, for that I sent him packing." The corners of Old Adam's lips quirked in a very small smile.

"There was no

need for him, certes, now that I might bear the word myself."

"Adam!" Lady Mayrose gasped, shocked, but the Archbishop only signed. "And my order to him was of no

consequence to thee? Nay, I see not; wherefore did I ask?"

Old Adam started to answer, and the Baroness interrupted quickly. "Enough, Old Adam; thou art dismissed." She

waved, shooing him away. "My granddaughter will suffice to company me in Milord Ab- Archbishop's presence." She blushed slightly, inclining her head toward the Archbishop.

"As Thy Ladyship will have it," Old Adam grumbled, and turned to go.

The Archbishop returned the bow, and the smile. "I thank thee, Lady, for bearing my new title in mind."

Lady Mayrose turned to her grandmother. "Thou shouldst pension Old Adam, Grandmother, and send him to

dwelt in some small cot far removed from us. I' truth, he doth grow so bothersome in his dotage that I scarce can

contain myself from shouting at him!"

" 'Twould yield thee no gain; he would not mind it," the Archbishop assured her. " 'Tis not age that doth make

him so, milady—he was ever thus. Even twenty years ago, when I was chaplain, was he sour and waspish."

"Then praise Heaven I was not born in this house," the lady said, and a shadow crossed the Baroness's face, so

the Archbishop spoke up quickly, to distract her from the memory of the circumstances under which her son had

left, and the woman who had caused them. "Yet why, milady, should this news of my new title have shaken thee,

when I had told thee aforetime what I bore in mind?"

"Oh! 'Tis one thing to speak of it aforetime, milord, and another to hear 'tis done." The Baroness seemed

flustered. "Yet there was also this matter in thy declaration, that the King and Queen must needs be guided by the

Church."

"We had spoken of that also, Grandmother," Lady Mayrose reminded her.

"So we had; yet I had not thought His L- His Grace would proclaim it so."

"I could not do less, proclaiming my new office." The new Archbishop's face hardened. "For the Crown doth

hold its dominion from God, and we clergy are God's voice among men."

"Yet the King and Queen will say their forefathers won dominion, not that it was given them by God," the

Baroness suggested.

"Not so! For they style themselves monarchs 'by the grace of God.' Their heralds so proclaim them at every

coming and going, in every royal progress, and in every proclamation!"

"Quite true, Lady Mayrose, quite true." The Archbishop nodded, his gaze wanning as he looked at her. "And if

they are monarchs by the grace of God, then must they hold their kingdom in fealty to God—and therefore must

they be guided by the men of God."

"I do not doubt thee," the Baroness said quickly. "F truth, who am I, a worldly woman, to question an

Archbishop?"

Lady Mayrose's eyes sparked, but she said nothing.

"Nay, I know that thou art right in thy making our Church apart from Rome's," the Baroness went on, moving to lay a hand on the Archbishop's, but it hovered, then withdrew. "Thou must therefore be Archbishop—I know this, too—and I doubt not thou hast the right of it in declaring that the King and Queen must needs be guided by thee." She colored. "Yet I own, 'tis more that I believe in Father Widdecombe than in the doctrines."

"Or that thou dost believe them because Father Widdecombe doth say they are true?" The Archbishop's smile warmed, but there was a trace of disappointment in his expression. "Yet must I caution thee, my ghostly daughter—is there no least smidgin of pride in this thy loyalty?"

The Baroness blushed and lowered her gaze. Lady Mayrose smiled, amused. "Oh, never, milord! 'Tis only that she doth sing thy praises from morn till night, and exclaim how marvelous 'tis to have an abbot, and now an archbishop, for her confessor!"

"I had thought as much." The Archbishop leaned back with a fond smile. "And I own I am warmed by thy regard.

Yet must I caution thee to eschew the sin of pride."

"I shall endeavor, Father." But the Baroness did not look up.

"And thou, Lady Mayrose?"

"I confess to some part in the sin my grandmother hath spoken of." Lady Mayrose smiled, too. "Yet, oh! I am so proud of thee, that thou hast had the courage and the sense to separate from Rome!"

"Truly?" The Archbishop looked surprised.

"Oh, vastly! The Pope's so blind, not to see how horribly the Crown doth abuse its authority! What! Will Their

Majesties turn the noble houses into serfs to their whims?"

"Well spoke." The Baroness regarded her granddaughter with pride, but also with apprehension. "Yet I own thou

dost astonish me, in view of . . ."

Her voice trailed off. "In view of my parents' folly? Nay, say it, Grandmother! They were good souls at the heart, but their minds bore

treason to their class! How they could espouse a course of action that would wreak their own downfall, I know

not—but I ken far less how they could e'en condone beliefs that would rob their own daughter!"

Lady Mayrose

turned a smouldering countenance on the Archbishop. "And Rome doth aid and abet the Crown, and thereby the

downfall of the lords! Nay, milord, I cannot find a trace of good in the Pope! Praise Heaven thou hast had the

sense to send him packing!"

" 'Tis mayhap too strongly put." The Archbishop smiled. "Yet 'twas needful."

"Oh, thou art so brave and strong!" Lady Mayrose's eyes glowed into his. "And so wise, to see that only by

guidance of the Church may the common folk of Gramarye be brought to happiness! For look you, the King's

men are forever trampling the grain in their haste to exterminate those who oppose Their Majesties' will, and

their judges are ever scourging poor folk who seek but to find food! And now, folk say, these proud princes do

speak of robbing the very bread from out the mouths of the poor by levying a tax direct to the Crown, atop those

brought by their lords!"

She didn't seem to have heard that, under the plan in question, the lords would no longer be required to send tax

money to Gramarye, and would be expected to lower their own taxes accordingly.

"'Tis only rumored," the Baroness murmured.

"Yet rumor hath basis, I doubt not. They will do that, and worse, and no man saith them nay! Oh, there must be

one who can bid these royal lions, 'Hold, enough!' And who can do it, save the Church?"

"Thou dost give me heart, Lady Mayrose." The Archbishop gazed into her eyes with total concentration. "I own I

did begin to question the lightness of my course."

"Do not!" she cried. "Oh, my ghostly lord! Thou must not withdraw, must not give way, must not abate a bit of

this that thou hast done! Nay, thou must insist, and call all forces against them, if need be! For naught can save

the peasants save the Church—and thy good will can direct the Crown's strong arm in such a way as to bring all

poor folk ease, without pulling down the lords nor lessening their standing!"

The Archbishop was nodding in agreement, more and more

vigorously. " 'Tis even so, 'tis what I feel within my heart of hearts! Yet how wouldst thou give answer, were one

to ask thee where the gold shall be drawn to buy the peasant folk safe housen and stout clothes?"

"Why, from the coin held back from the Crown's foul greed! Nay, an but a part of the tribute every lord must pay

were held within his own parish Church, assuredly it would suffice the peasant folk!"

"Assuredly," the Archbishop agreed, with a rapt gaze that made all seem to dim save her. "And thou, how dost

thou think I should speak unto these o'erweening princes who do proclaim the limits of our ecclesiastical

authority?"

"I would declare them fell and foul!" she said instantly. "I would hold them up for the ridicule of all the nation as

the things of pride and greed they are! I would declare them traitors to the Church and criminals 'gainst the word

of God! And I would call up all the truly godly lords, if need be, with all their horse and men, to school these

arrogant monarchs by force of arms!"

"Wouldst thou so," the Archbishop breathed, never taking his eyes from her. "Then thou must needs have a heart

of flame, and a will for right that would do credit to a saint."

But the Baroness watched with misgiving, forgotten by them both.

Brom O'Berin had his own suite in the castle at Runnymede, and was careful to maintain the fiction that he

actually used it. No point in hurting Their Majesties' feelings, after all, so he did use it whenever he could—for

example, for receiving intelligence reports, some of them from humans. And for meeting with the Lord High

Warlock.

Not this time, though. It was an elf who faced him, nodding emphatically. " 'Twas a banshee in truth, dread lord!

At the castle of the Marquess D'Arrigato."

"A sennight ago, thou didst say?" When the elf nodded, Brom mused, "And none have died in that house."

The elf nodded again. "I have never known a banshee to be wrong, save when one did haunt the battlements here

at Runnymede, these fourteen years past."

"Yes, well, we know about that, don't we?" Rod said. The banshee in question had been a projection from a

memory loop activated by remote control.

"Aye." The elf frowned. " 'Twas not even the banshee of the Plantagenet line."

"And their banshee had had plenty of opportunities, too. Well, maybe it was worn out. There've

been a lot of deaths in this family."

"'Tis the price one pays for births," the elf sighed.

"Yet the price ought not to be paid ere 'tis due," Brom rumbled, "and these cobbles which thou hast seen are no more real than a will o' the wisp."

The elf looked up in indignation. "I have known many will o' the wisps, Majesty, and they were quite gentle people, almost all."

Rod hoped he didn't meet the "almost." "But the other monsters you heard about were fakes?"

"Those that elves did see," the elf qualified. "For the ones we only heard mortals talk of, we cannot answer."

"Yet they, too, were likely false," Brom rumbled. "When so many come so quickly, belike all are alike."

"And if they're false, people made them." Rod nodded. "I told you about the esper sentry Cordelia detected, didn't I?"

"And the boys confirmed? Aye, thou didst." Brom had a special interest in the Gallowglass children. "Thou didst say 'twas a sign that the Abbot—who calls himself Archbishop now—had cozened witchfolk into aiding him."

Generalizing from inadequate data, Fess's voice sighed through the implanted radio transmitter in Rod's ear. He ignored horse sense and told Brom, "I still think so, even though it does seem an unlikely alliance. After all, when there's a witch-hunt, you think of clergy as leading the mob."

"Yet 'tis rarely so," the other elf said. " 'Tis more often self-appointed hedge preachers who raise the hue and cry."

"Aye; yet a man who seeks power will ally with any," Brom answered. "How wouldst thou deal with them, Lord Warlock?"

"With their own kind, of course. No, not more monks— other witches."

Brom nodded. "Even as I thought. I shall advise Their Majesties to set the Royal Coven to warding, that they may discover when a monster doth appear, and hasten to banish it."

"Fact is, we've done that already. Except for the part about advising Their Majesties. I'll let you do that, and I'll get back out on the road, to see if I can find the ringleader and bring him in."

Brom looked up indignantly. "Thou wouldst go gallivanting about, escaping the burden of command!"

"Yes, but I can get away with it." Rod grinned. " 'Cause the only other person who'd stand a chance of finding an esper ringleader is Gwen, and you wouldn't want her roaming around the countryside alone, would you?"

Brom could only glare at him. Gwen was his daughter, though only he and Rod knew it, and he would rather have gone through fire than chance her coming to harm. "Thou dost take unfair advantage, Lord Warlock!"

"Yeah. Ain't it great? Besides, if I'm not available, maybe Tuan and Catharine will finally get the idea that Gwen can handle any crisis they can come up with, just as well as I can."

"Almost," Brom demurred. "I would not wish her to go into battle."

"In spite of the fact that she has, several times. I know, though, you'd rather risk me than her. All right for you, Brom O'Berin. See if I come to your next Wild Hunt!"

"It shall more likely come to thee," Brom growled, "though 'to' might not be the most precise word. Nay, get thee hence! Is not the road a fit place for a mountebank?"

"But he'd rather keep his mountie in the bank, if he could." Rod tightened the girth on Fess's saddle. "Sometimes I suspect the old elf of actually having developed affection for me."

"Merely good friendship," Fess assured him. "You have shared dangers and joys."
"You mean the children? Well, we do have him over to dinner whenever we can." Rod frowned at a thought.
"Y'know, if the kids hadn't picked up that esper sentry, I might not have put five and five together, and come up with a handful of espers on the Archbishop's side."
"What else ... I withdraw the question. In this land it could be almost anything."
Rod nodded. "Witch-moss constructs from old grannies who don't know they're projective telepaths; telling bedtime stories to projective grandchildren, for example—or a projective maiden having a nightmare that she casts into others' minds."
"Still, Rod, the coincidence of so many such phenomena in so short a period of time . . ."
"Concerted action is enemy action. Yeah." Rod scowled.

"And the scary part is that it's happening all over the land, in every dukedom, county, and parish. That was a long list the elves put together." He shook his head. "No, when so many espers are on the Abbot's side, somebody has to be leading them. This is a confederation we're fighting, not a bunch of individuals who were fired up by their parish priests."
"You are not the most skilled at detecting psionic nuances, Rod," Fess said delicately.
"I should bring along an expert, you mean?" Rod retorted. "I don't know anybody better, except ..."
He froze on the thought. Fess maintained a tactful silence.
There were so many tacts that Rod got the point. "Oh, all right!" He threw down the reins and stumped out of the stable, calling, "Cordelia! Pack your saddlebag!"
"And this is their response!" Brother Alfonso slapped the parchment down on the desk. "Nay, they have not even the courtesy to send this news in a letter to thee! We must have a copy sent in secret from this royal clerk who is our deacon!"
"Thou hast the right of it." The new Archbishop glowered at the fire. " 'Tis an egregious lack of protocol."
Neither of them thought of their own slip in failing to send the King and Queen word of the Abbot's self-promotion to Archbishop; they had only had the parish priests proclaim the news from the pulpit.
" 'Twill not do, milord!" Brother Alfonso snapped. "This statement that the Crown must reign, and the Church must rule in matters of faith and clergy only, saith naught!"
"Aye, naught that was not already said," the Archbishop said heavily. "He will not budge an inch."
"Nor shall we!" Brother Alfonso cried. "This is not a response—'tis a lack of response! What, my lord! Wilt thou be content with no effect?"
"I will not! The King must declare himself openly! We must find a way to induce him to do so!"
"Induce?" Brother Alfonso gasped, outraged. "Nay, milord! Thou must needs demand! Thou must not let him scorn thee thus!"
"Demand!" The Archbishop looked up, startled. "What dost thou speak of, Brother Alfonso? Tis not meet for a subject to 'demand' aught from his liege!" Then he heard the echo of his own words, and his eyes widened.
"'Subject,' forsooth!" Brother Alfonso spat. "An arch-bishop subject to a king? Nay, milord! Thou art of the First Estate, and he of the Second! Wilt thou tell me that we of the cloth claim that title to no effect?"
"Oh, nay, I will not, and well thou knowest it!" The Archbishop turned away, clasping his hands

together so tightly that the knuckles turned white. "We are the First Estate because we are closest to God—most holy, and therefore most deserving of respect. Yet the noblemen, Brother Alfonso, are the Second Estate because they have the care of the bodies of all their brethren, even as we of the First Estate have the care of their souls."

"Yet the soul is of far greater import than the body," Brother Alfonso reminded, "and the First Estate is, therefore, more vital than the Second."

"And therefore should be guided by us, I know." The Archbishop leaned his chin on his knuckles, gazing into the fire.

"Aye, milord. Thou hast demanded only that condition which should ever have obtained. Should the King not acknowledge the sovereignty of Holy Mother the Church, doth he not set himself in opposition to the word of God?"

The Archbishop lifted his head, turning to frown at Brother Alfonso. "What dost thou say?"

"Why, I but offer thee a goad with which to prod this arrogant monarch, that he may show his true colors. But think, good milord—is not the Church of Gramarye the True Church?"

"Thou knowest it is!"

"Then what is he who doth deny it?"

The Archbishop stared at him, eyes widening. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Thou hast the right of it, Brother Alfonso. He is an heretic."

The monk behind the wrought-iron gate frowned. "What dost thou here?"

He seemed overly suspicious, but Hoban answered anyway. "I have felt a calling toward the sacred life."

The monk stood still a moment, then threw the latch and swung the gate open. "Enter and follow. Brother Miles!"

Hoban stepped in and saw another monk sitting beside the wall, looking up from his breviary. He closed it and tucked it into his sleeve as he rose, looking up inquiringly.

"Take this good man to the Master of Postulants," the porter said.

Brother Miles nodded and turned away, beckoning. Hoban followed.

The monk led him into a small building not far from the gate, into a plain whitewashed room with two straight chairs and some pictures of starving saints on the walls. "Sit," he advised, and left.

Hoban sat, gazing about him, rather daunted by the sterility of the little chamber. But as he sat, waiting, he began to feel his tension ebb away in spite of the lie he was living, and the plain white walls began to seem not sterile, but clear. In fact, by the time the Master of Postulants came in, he was feeling so much at peace that he didn't even think of his mission.

"Bless thee, fellow." The Master sat in the other chair. He was tall and lean and lantern-jawed, with the supressed eagerness of a pointer sighting a pheasant. "What is thy name?"

"I am called Hoban, Father." Hoban rose.

"Sit, sit." The priest waved him back toward his chair. "I am Father Rigori. Thou dost believe thyself to have a vocation?"

"I think that I may, Father." Hoban was amazed to realize he was telling the truth. "How may I be certain?"

"By living among us a few months, good youth." The Master's eyes glowed. "Yet say to me what hath put this thought into thy mind."

Hoban remembered, with a touch of guilt, his reaction to his brother Anho's first visit home, his own wondering if perhaps he, too, should seek the holy life. He should have acted on the thought. " 'Twas my brother, Father.

When first he came home from these halls, I thought perchance his road should also be mine."

"Thou hast a brother here?" The Master almost jumped on it.

"Aye, Father. He is called Anho, and our village is Flamourn."

"I know him." There was a trace of doubt in the Master's face. " 'Tis two years he hath been among us; he is a deacon now. In truth, he will go to a parish in a year's time. Wherefore hast thou been so long in coming?"

Hoban hung his head. "Ah, Father! I am but a strong back on two legs, not a man of wit!"

"There is a great deal to learn, I own," the Master agreed, "yet 'tis far more a matter of zeal than of studies. When last cometh to last, 'tis for thine heart our Lord doth care, thy faith and thy charity. Wit matters little to Him; yet he who would lead a flock must needs have some understanding of God's Word."

"I wish to learn," Hoban said fervently.

"Then belike that will suffice." Father Rigori nodded. "Zeal alone may drill into thy brain the truths thou must needs con." He stood up. "Much more could I tell thee of thy life among us, good Hoban, yet I trust thy brother can tell thee more. Come, thou art hereby a postulant among us; I shall take thee to Anno."

He turned away, and Hoban followed, his heart leaping in his chest at the thought of seeing his brother; between his religious zeal and his delight at the thought of seeing Anho, not once had he thought of his mission for the King, nor of the Lord Warlock.

He had more of the same waiting for him, when he saw Anho.

"Ho, Brother brother!" Anho cried, clapping him on the shoulders. "Art thou so lonely for me, then, that thou must needs follow me even unto holiness?"

"He is thine for the nonce," Father Rigori said. He drew a saffron bundle from his robe and laid it on the cot.

"Clothe him, Brother Anho, and guide him through the places a postulant must know."

"But he hath already seen the fields, Father, as he came near!"

Father Rigori smiled. "Thine humor will light us all, Brother Anho. Nay, but show him also those places he hath come to find--an thou knowest where to find the abbey." Rigori bowed and turned away.

"I dropped both my jaw and mine hoe when they told me thou hadst come." Anho picked up the saffron packet and shook it out; it was a monk's robe. "Strip off these clothes, brother, and don the cloth of the Order! What wrought this change of heart in thee, lad? Had the lasses tired of thy great thews and hot breath?"

Hoban grinned, stripping off his smock and leggings. "Eh, Anho! Thou dost wrong me! Ne'er did I touch a lass more than was seemly."

"Aye, but only for that thou couldst not keep thy mind on any one of them long enough! Thou didst ever see another more comely ere thou hadst fondled more than a kiss!"

"Kissing doth come before fondling, brother," Hoban corrected, pulling the robe on. "Yet 'tis not that book I have come to con."

"I" truth? And what could take thy mind from the lasses?"

There was an undertone of seriousness to the question. Hoban looked up, frowning. " 'Twas thyself, brother, when thou didst come home to sojourn--thyself, and the aura of peace and contentment thou didst bring."

"Ah." There was sympathy in Anho's gaze. "And art thou still so restless within thine heart?" Hoban turned away, flushing.

"Tis well thou hast come," Anho murmured, "for with thy striving spirit, thou must needs else have become a drunk or a bandit."

"Leave off, Anho."

"I cannot now, Hoban, for the depth of thy feeling is of import here." Anho smiled. "Thou hast a need to feel that

the world is different because thou art in it, hast thou not?"

"Aye, and the sprouting of crops is not so great a difference, brother."

"Nay, for if thou didst not plow that field, surely another would." Anho's smile turned merry again. "Fear not,

brother! For the crops we raise in God's field can be nurtured only by those who have the gift of it! Between us,

thou and I, we may sow the Word of God in many sinners and raise them to God's good harvest, eh?" Hoban looked up at his brother, a glint in his eye. "Mayhap we shall, my sib, mayhap that we shall."

"I doubt it not!" Anho clapped him on the shoulder again and turned away, leading. "Come, we shall show thee

the refectory, wherein thou shall feed, but not hugely; and the abbey, wherein thou shall pray at all hours, and far

more than thou mayest wish! This, the dormitory, thou hast already seen--'tis where thou shall sleep, but not

long."

"Thou dost daunt me. Is the life so hard as that?"

"It is, brother, it is. Yet thou art hard enough for it, I warrant." Anho turned, the glint in his eye now. "Yet 'tis not

hardship might deter such an one as thee, but boredom. Come, let us give thee thy first lesson--with vespers."

12

Rod woke up to the sound of a bird trilling. He levered himself up onto one elbow, blinking around until things

came into focus. The trilling, it turned out, was coming not from a bird, but from his daughter Cordelia.

She looked up brightly when she saw his head lift. "Good morn, Papa! Is't not a beautiful day?"

"If you say so," Rod grunted, pushing himself up to a sitting position. "But much as I like being away from it all,

sweetheart, I must admit that I prefer a civilized mattress."

Of course, he could have had one easily; there were self-inflating mattresses cached inside his spacer--but he

was apt enough to be in trouble for witchcraft, as it was. With the haunts running all around the countryside, the

mood of the peasants wasn't exactly conciliatory. He heaved a martyred sigh and rolled off his pallet, lifting his

cloak with him as he stood up, then shaking it out. "At least it's summer."

"Oh!" Cordelia looked up, eyes wide. "I should not have cared to have slept in the forest if 'twere winter, Papa."

"I wouldn't have, either," Rod agreed. "Get the fire going, would you? I'll be right back."

By the time he returned from a call of nature, Cordelia had assembled twigs and tinder into a little cone, point up,

and was glaring at it. A wisp of smoke curled up; then it burst into

flames. Cordelia relaxed, looking up at her father happily. "Tis lit, Papa. On what shall we dine?"

Well, it would be a good exercise. Rod frowned, his eyes losing focus as he concentrated on the thoughts all

about him: worms, raccoons, deer . . . there! An escaped hen who had just laid two more eggs. He deepened his

trance, feeling the flow of his esper powers, and thought of the eggs as being here, instead of there.

Something popped; he felt a sudden weight in his hands. He looked down and saw four smooth white

ovoids in
his cupped palms.
Somewhere in the forest a no-longer-domestic fowl looked up with a startled, and very indignant, squawk.
An hour later, the tinker and his daughter wandered into a circle of peasant huts glorified by the title of "hamlet."
(The melancholy prince certainly would have objected, if he had known.) The two of them had faces bright and
cheery, pots and pans clattering, and minds wide open for the slightest thought about flying cooking ware,
hauntings, or other espers. But Rod didn't even have a chance to give his trade call; the peasants were already
gathered together in the circle of beaten earth that served for a common, gossiping furiously. Cordelia's eyes
widened. "Papa . . . ought not these men be in the fields?"
"By this time of day, they should." Rod frowned. "Something big must be going on. Maybe just the kind of
haunting we're looking for?"
"Mayhap." Cordelia's eyes glazed, but she shook her head. "I cannot make out one separate thought, Papa, 'tis
such a jumble."
"Well, then, we'll go back to the old-fashioned method." Rod stepped up and tapped a villager on the shoulder.
"Ho, countryman! What coil hath bred such a storm of talk?"
"Why, hast thou not heard?" The villager looked up, startled, then saw a tinker, and his nose wrinkled with
disdain. "What, a tinker who knoweth not the happenings? Nay, then, I'll tell thee the news! The Archbishop—
the Abbot that was, if thou hast heard it not—hath issued a new proclamation."
Rod felt his guard going up as though it were an invisible shield that surrounded him in a globe.
"What doth he
now declare?"

"Why, that anyone who doth not declare his allegiance to the Church of Gramarye must needs be an heretic!"
Cordelia stared, appalled, but Rod only stood, his face immobile. Then he said, "An heretic."
"Aye." The peasant grinned. "And will thereupon be declared excommunicated."
Rod couldn't make out any separate thought any more easily than Cordelia could, but he could feel the emotions
boiling up around him—excited, enthusiastic, and verging on violence. "Thou art all of the Church of Gramarye,
then?"
"Aye, for our lord, Count Florenzo, doth adhere to his lord, the Duke di Medici, who doth follow the
Archbishop." But the peasant was frowning now, the presence of strangers on such a day finally registering. A
few of his neighbors noticed his frown and turned to stare at Rod and Cordelia. In a few minutes the whole
common had fallen silent, gazes fixed on the two strangers. Cordelia felt their hostility, and pressed up against
her father.
A broad, stocky peasant with grizzled hair pushed his way through to them. "I am declared warden of this
village, tinker. Say what manner of man thou art."
Rod answered, "An heretic."
"I had thought they would hang thee, Papa."
"Burned at the stake, dear—that's the punishment for heresy. But I have the distinct opinion that it's very badly
overdone."
"Praise Heaven we were not!"
"Yes, I shouldn't have let myself get carried away like that. Good thing that housewife needed a

new cooking
pot."
"Aye, and that 'twas the castle's pot boy come down to bring the news." Cordelia shook her head.
"What great
good luck that his cook did need two saucepans and a griddle. Yet who would ha' thought she'd buy
them from
an heretic?"
"Yes, well, even in this society practical matters have to be taken care of before you can get to
such incidentals
as preserving the True Faith. But it was a nice excuse to get away from that mob before they
decided to get back
to religious issues." He glanced at the castle behind him. "Although I will admit, it's the first
time I ever heard of
a tinker not staying for a bite and a bowl after a sale."

"Well, we are back on the road again." Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief. "I have gained new
understanding,
Papa."
"What?" Rod looked up, alert for trouble in his daughter's emotions. "About the pack instinct? The
urge to turn
on the misfit?"
"Nay, about why Mama doth worry when thou dost take to the road alone."
Rod was just deciding to take umbrage at the remark when an elf popped out of a clump of bayberry.
"Lord
Warlock!"
"Ssh!" Rod gave a quick, frantic look around, but there didn't seem to be any peasants nearby. He
relaxed.
"Listen, around here I'm Owen the tinker, okay?"
"As thou wilt have it, Lord Warlock. I bring word from His Elfin Majesty."
"What, from Brom?" Rod frowned. "What is it—Catharine and Tuan getting touchy?"
"In a manner of speaking. The new Archbishop hath proclaimed—"
"That anyone who isn't with him is against him. Yes, we heard. Don't tell me Their Majesties are
seriously
wondering which side of the fence they should jump to!"
"Nay, but they do wish thy counsel."
"Again?" Rod cried, exasperated. "Look, I'm not the only high-powered witch around here—and
Cordelia and I
are on a top-secret spy mission! Well, it was secret."
"Surely it cannot be more important than—"
"Oh, yeah? Look, if we don't finish this job, and fast, the ghosties and cobblies will take over
Gramarye!"
The elf frowned. "Thy point doth have weight—"
"Yeah, a ton or two! Look, tell them they don't really need me—they've got Gwen right there! Just
get her a
babysitter!"
"I rejoice in thy presence, Lady Gallowglass." Tuan looked distinctly unhappy. " 'Tis good of thee
to come at our
need."
"Pay him no heed." Catharine clasped Tuan's forearm and patted it. "These men are of the opinion
that only they
can understand matters of urgency."
"I comprehend." Gwen smiled, amused. "He had as lief mine husband did come." She held up her hand
to
forestall Tuan's protest. "Nay, deny it not, Majesty, though 'tis good of thee to attempt it; and
to ease thine heart,
I shall tell the Lord

Warlock straightaway whatsoe'er we discuss here, and tell thee directly his opinion on it."
Tuan relaxed visibly. "I thank thee."
"And she is as wise in statecraft as she is tactful." Catharine stepped over to the gleaming
walnut table before the

great clerestory windows. "Come sit with us, Lady Gallowglass. There are many matters of which I wish to speak with thee."

"I cry Thy Majesty's mercy." Gwen slid gracefully into an hourglass-shaped chair and looked around her. "Thy solar doth ever gladden my heart."

"Gramercy, Lady Gallowglass." Catharine sat by her. "Yet 'twas not of my making."

"Nay, but the choice of draperies and carpets was thine." Gwen leaned forward. "As are thy concerns. Which matter doth trouble thee most--the children's discovery of a witch-spy?"

"That is foremost, aye." Catharine frowned. "I must own that if thy husband hath the right of it--that the new Archbishop doth use witches--it doth trouble me deeply. We must raise our children by the Church, Lady Gallowglass, or their souls will be lost and they will lack all sense of lightness."

Gwen nodded. "Yet how can they know right from wrong if the Church itself doth act in contradiction to its own teachings? Aye, Majesty, this troubles me also. We can have no harmony within our homes if there is no order in the Church."

" 'Tis of the harmony within the kingdom that I am more greatly concerned." Tuan wasn't disguising his impatience very well.

" 'Tis all one." Gwen turned to him. "As 'tis within our households, Majesty, so it is within thine. And if thine house is larger than mine, it rests nonetheless on the foundation of the Church."

"Yet that foundation is broken now," Catharine whispered.

But Gwen shook her head. "I think not. This our Church hath been shaken, yet 'tis not yet sundered."

"I would say that it is," Tuan contradicted. "For look you, how can it be whole when the Church of Gramarye hath broke with Rome, and the Abbot hath declared himself to be Archbishop?"

"There have ever been many bishops within the Church of Rome, Majesty, or I misunderstand my Bible quite. And the breach may yet be healed."

"How may it be so?" Catharine demanded.

"Why, by adhering to the Church of Rome. Thereby may there be a break within the Order of St. Vidicon, but 'twill be plain to all that the Church doth rest intact."

"And folk will see that this quondam Archbishop is but a fragment?" Tuan's eyes widened. "Well said, milady! Yet how may we make this plain?"

"By declaring thine adherence to Rome, Majesty."

"But the Archbishop will then call up what troops he may, and march to war!" Catharine cried.

"Will he not do that presently? Think, Majesty--he hath made such proclamation as must make thee declare for him, or be counted heretics and thereby be excommunicated."

" 'Tis so." Tuan nodded heavily. "Whether by our declaration or his, we will be aligned with Rome."

"The fiend!" Catharine said, hotly.

"Say, rather, 'the fox.' Yet thus mayest thou oust him from his burrow."

"The metaphor is apt." Tuan nodded. "Ay di me! If only there were some way of making clear to all the folk that the Abbot hath sundered his own order! For then would they comprehend, even the peasant folk, that 'tis the Abbot who hath broken away, not the Church!"

"Thou hast the means to hand," Catharine reminded him. "Thou hast these monks who have builded themselves a new chapter house, hard by our door."

Tuan's face hardened. "I will not so use godly men."

"Then thou must needs' call up thine armies," Gwen returned. "Or, if thou wouldst avoid civil war,

thou must
needs declare thyselfes loyal to the new Church of Gramarye."
"Thou dost not truly believe we ought do so!" Catharine protested.
"Nay," Gwen agreed, "since thou and Tuan would thereby acknowledge thy willingness to obey the new Archbishop."
"Never!" Catharine stated, eyes flashing.
"That must never befall," Tuan concurred.
"Then thou must needs proclaim thine allegiance throughout the land," Gwen advised them, "and admonish all
souls of good conscience to adhere to the Holy See with thee."

"Then so we must," Catharine breathed, fire in her eye.
The room was silent a moment.
Catharine frowned, and turned to Tuan.
He sat, leaning back in his chair, scowling down at the table.
"What, my lord!" Catharine cried. "Wilt thou not declare thy stand?"
"I do not think I shall," Tuan said slowly.
Catharine stared, scandalized, and for a moment the atmosphere in the solar was very, very tense.
Then Tuan said, "We are heretics if we do declare our allegiance to Rome, and heretics if we do not. Yet if we do
not so declare, give him no response at all, fewer will rally to his banner."
Catharine's eyes widened. Slowly, she nodded. "Aye. A lord or two may hold aloof from the fray, uncertain that
thou dost not truly believe as he doth."
"They may," Tuan agreed. "And even if they do not, we will thus buy some few more days' time whilst this
Archbishop doth await, and await, a response that cometh not."
Catharine nodded. "The game is worth the candle, milord."
And I could not make them see otherwise, Gwen told Rod half an hour later, by remote exasperation. Well, at least you did help them decide not to give in to temptation. Rod answered.
What temptation is that? Gwen demanded, puzzled.
The temptation to save their country from civil war by knuckling under to the Archbishop, Rod answered.
Ah. In that I have aided, aye.
See? I knew you could do everything I could have done.
Mayhap thou couldst have persuaded Their Majesties of the need to declare themselves, my lord, Gwen's
thoughts sighed.
Maybe. Though Rod was dimly aware of the tree-lined dirt road about him, the vision of Gwen was much more
vivid—but then, wasn't it always? The important point has been won, though. 'Cause however much I may
mistrust the rule of kings, I'll take it over the rule of priests any day.
I would as lief have Tuan and Catharine than the Archbishop, Gwen agreed.
Sure, because one of them is a woman, which ameliorates the Crown's judgment. Rod didn't bother mentioning
that in this particular joint monarchy, it was usually Tuan who did the

ameliorating. Also, kings can be persuaded to see the merits of a constitution, and parliamentary rule.
Cannot churchmen also?
Of course not. A good priest tries to be as much like God as he can—and God is an autocrat.
Mirth tinged Gwen's thoughts, and gratitude to her husband for providing it. And shall that be the word I bear
back to Their Majesties, my lord, of thine opinion of our conference?
Rod shuddered. Heaven help me, no! It might give them ideas. But you might tell them I said they might think
about giving the refugee chapter of the Cathodeans all the support they can, dear, in spite of Tuan's scruples
about using them. Just remind him that it never hurts to have an extra arrow in his quiver.
Certes, I shall, she answered, and Rod thought she might be giggling on the other end of the link.

They might even move the monks into one of their smaller castles, for starters; that might give the people the idea that they've formed a rival monastery, without Tuan's actually using them. Thou art the very soul of deviousness, Gwen accused. You say the sweetest things. Oh, and Their Majesties might want to ask the loyal lords to lend them a few knights, dear, and any extra soldiers they might happen to have lying around. They might, in truth. Gwen's thoughts became a little less cheery. Is there aught else thou dost wish me to tell them for thee? Only what I said at the beginning, Rod answered. Confusion now. Which, my lord? There were many-thoughts. Only one that really matters, dear: What did they need me for? The King had donned a peasant's tunic and robe, and was wandering through the darkened streets. Thus he had walked among his people, alone and only lightly aimed, when he was only the second son of a duke; thus he still walked among them, when his mind was troubled with a decision that might affect their welfare. Now, though, witches had leagued with the Archbishop, so two more peasants followed him, and another paced him farther ahead down the alley, all of them with chain mail beneath their tunics and swords beneath their cloaks.

Still he walked, listening for chance remarks caught in passing, pausing in the doorways of inns, lingering near any • group of folk that talked and laughed among themselves while a bottle passed from hand to hand. The streets should be better lighted, he noted, especially the narrower ones; crime preferred shadows. Then he lifted his head, hearkening. Somewhere near, a man was talking, and loudly—talking with the cadence and timbre of one who spoke to a crowd. This, especially, should be of interest. His spirit quickening, Tuan followed the sound of the voice. He came into a small square—a triangle, rather, an open space ringed on three sides by house fronts, one of which bore the sign of an inn. A horse and cart were tied to a post, and several booths stood empty, awaiting farmers' produce on the morrow. Across from the booths, a man stood on a hogshead, a man in a brown hooded robe with a black rope for a belt and a small yellow handle in a pocket on his chest. Tuan's eyes widened; he'd seen hedge priests before, but not in the habit of the order, and not in Runnymede town itself. "They besiege us!" the monk cried. "All about us foul spirits spring from the rocks and dead souls rise from their graves! The ancient ghosts of the land rise up to daunt us! What can have brought them upon us?" Tuan pricked up his ears. This was something new—and perhaps even pertinent. He settled back to hear the preacher's theory. "The King!" The monk answered his own question, and Tuan stiffened. "The King stands for the land, for the whole of the nation! What thou and I are, what we all together make, the King doth stand for! The King is the meeting place of all that is good and right in us!" And Tuan found himself agreeing. There was something about this preacher that almost compelled belief. "Yet if we make the King, 'tis even as truthful that the King doth make us!" the preacher went on. "If the barons threaten the King, the land is in turmoil—yet equally, if the King doth threaten the barons, the land will be also

in turmoil!"

Tuan began to see the direction the man was taking, and he didn't like it. Nonetheless, it seemed to make a certain amount

of sense, and the crowd around the monk was beginning to rumble agreement.

"Yet the spirits do not haunt the King of their own accord!" the preacher cried. "Nay, it must needs be he who hath stirred them up!"

A few shouts of agreement came out of the crowd. With dread, Tuan recognized a kindred spirit—a man who was at least as talented a speaker as Tuan himself. The King eased back to murmur a few words in the ear of his closest guardsman. The man nodded and moved away.

"For centuries," the orator declared, "Holy Mother the Church hath kept the spirits at bay! For hundreds of years the Church hath brought holiness to the land and lulled its fell spirits to sleep! Thereby, if they now wake, what hath caused it?" He paused to let a rumble build, then capped it. "The King! He doth set himself up 'gainst the Church! In the souls of his people he doth raise up strife! And as he doth in the people, so he doth in the land!"

This time he had to pause till the rumble died down.

Tuan waited, too. The longer the preacher took, the more time his men would have to surround the little plaza.

"The land is unquiet!" the preacher stated. "Nay, what could cause it but an unquiet soul in the King of the land?"

'Tis the sin of the King in opposing the Church! In abiding corrupted Rome! In his heresy!"

The crowd roared.

The preacher let it build, satisfied.

So was Tuan; his men must have blocked the streets. He eased back into the shadows, waiting while the preacher

whipped the crowd up to the point where they were calling for the King to abdicate, then sent them on their way

to shout beneath the magistrates' windows. Tuan watched them stream by him, more certain than ever that there

was more to the success of this rhetoric than well-chosen words. His men let the people pass;

then, as the

preacher climbed down off his hogshead, they strolled in from each alleyway. The monk looked up, smiling

pleasantly. "What wouldst thou, good men?"

"I would have some words with thee about the doctrines thou hast but now espoused," Tuan answered.

The monk frowned; the language was scarcely that of a peasant. "Certes, my son. May I know thy name and

rank?"

"Gladly will I give it." Tuan signed to his men, then pulled back his hood. "I am Tuan Loguire, King of Gramarye."

The monk froze in horror, eyes bulging, and in that second of paralysis husky peasants stepped up all about him.

He recovered and glanced about him wildly, but saw the hardness of their faces, and his own expression

smoothed. He straightened, relaxing. "What wouldst thou of me, milord?"

Tuan frowned, noting the avoidance of the term Majesty. "Dost truly believe the course thou didst but now

preach?"

"By Heaven, I do!"

"Then," said Tuan, "thou shouldst not hesitate to come debate that course with an adherent of mine, who doth

hold the contrary view."

A guarded look came into the monk's eyes. "And thou wilt truly listen?"
"Myself, and the Queen. Further, we shall not speak, but allow thee and my champion alone to discourse on the issue. Wilt thou come?"
"Willingly." The monk's eyes glittered. "I do not fear to defend my Faith!"
13
"Dinner? Indoors? How novel!"
"Be not so silly, Papa." Cordelia yanked on his arm. "Thou hast been on the road but one night."
"One night with you. Your brother kept me out for two nights before that!"
"As he did tell it, 'twas not he that kept thee," Cordelia retorted. "Come, Papa. Dost thou not wish to dine with me?"
"Oh, yes! Especially when I don't have to catch the main course first!" Rod stepped aside at the doorway and bowed his daughter into the inn. "After you, mademoiselle."
"I thank you, sir," she answered, tilting her chin up as she stepped past him. They stepped into the usual hubbub of a small town's posting-inn, which meant that most of the customers were hard-working peasants spending a cheerful hour away from their wives. It also meant they weren't much for eating at the moment. Rod took a table against the wall and not too far from the door, holding the chair for Cordelia and bowing again as she sat, giving her the full gallant treatment. His reward was a radiant smile as he moved around the table and sat across from her. He glanced up to make sure he could see both the door and the kitchen behind her, out of habit—and noticed a peasant in keeper's green come in and sit down with a small group at a table. Nice to be where everybody knew everybody else—

provided they didn't mind strangers. He also saw the landlord bustling up to them with a smile. Rod reflected that the man would have been kicking them out, not smiling, if they hadn't changed their clothes, washed, and cached their load of pots. But since they looked moderately prosperous, he rubbed his hands and beamed.
"How may I serve thee, good folk?"
"Soup?" Rod looked up at Cordelia. She nodded and smiled. He asked the landlord, "What is it tonight?"
"Pease porridge, goodman."
"Hot?"
"Surely." The innkeeper frowned. "Wherefore would it not be?"
"Well, some like it cold. With bread, of course—and do you have meat?"
"Only a hen, goodman, who is past her laying days."
"A bowl of stew, then, and two bowls of pease porridge, hot. And a flagon of ale." Rod noticed the keeper rising and moving to another table, where he sat and chatted again.
"Ale for the child, also?"
"Mm? Oh, not just yet."
The landlord smiled, bobbed his head, and hustled off toward the kitchen. Cordelia looked daggers at her father.
"Not till you're twenty." Rod leveled a finger at her. "I don't care what you think other girls your age drink."
"Even babes do swill ale, Papa!"
"Yeah, and some of them are alcoholics before they're fifteen. No, dear, nutritional value isn't the only factor."
"Thou and Mama! Thou dost conspire against us!" . "No, we just discuss the issues ahead of time." Rod watched the keeper rise and move to a third table. Popular man. "Good, here's dinner." The landlord set a bowl of soup in front of each of them and another bowl in the middle. Rod

noticed dumplings,
and smiled as a mug thumped down in front of him. "Thank you, mine host." He laid a silver penny
on the table.
The host picked it up, raising his eyebrows, nipped it with his eyeteeth, and smiled. "Thank'ee,
goodman."
"My pleasure," Rod said around his first mouthful of stew. "My compliments to whoever revived this
old biddy
so well."
"My wife?" The landlord frowned a moment; then his face cleared. "Ah! Thou didst speak of the hen.
Well, I'll
tell the

other of thy thanks. Good appetite to "ee!" He moved away again.
Rod watched the keeper move to a fourth table.
Cordelia inhaled steam and smiled happily, then reached for a piece of bread. She smeared butter
on it, then
looked up at her father with a happy smile that turned to a look of surprise. "What dost thou see,
Papa?"
"A keeper," Rod said, his voice low. "You know, a forest warden who keeps an eye out for poachers.
He's
chatted with people at four different tables in the last few minutes, but not enough for a real
conversation with
anyone. Whups! There go the first set of people he sat with, out the door, and the second set look
as though
they're trying to finish their meal fast."
"He doth spread word," she said, eyes wide.
Rod nodded. "Word about going someplace. I think maybe we'll tail along."
"Oh, goody!" Cordelia squealed, then scrunched her head down between her shoulders, glancing to
either side.
"An adventure!" she said more softly.
A relatively safe one, though. Rod hoped she wouldn't mind.
Twenty minutes later they were strolling into the forest along a deer trail with newly flattened
brush to either side
of it. There was no one visible in front of them and no one behind them, but Cordelia was staring
off into the
dimness of the leaves as though she weren't quite seeing it. "I hear curious thoughts before us,
Papa."
"'Curious' meaning 'odd,' or meaning that the peasants aren't sure what's going on?"
"The last, Papa. Yet there is apprehension in it. ... Oh, Papa! 'Tis perfectly safe!"
"Maybe, but there's no sense taking chances." Rod picked up a dead branch, lashed some grass to
it, and handed
it to Cordelia. "Go aloft, would you, 'Delia? You'll see more that way."
The view from the Archbishop's study was delightful—a dozen troops of knights, each with a half-
dozen men-at-
arms, practicing passages of arms in the meadow beyond the monastery wall under the noonday sun.

"Doth it not delight thine heart, my lord?" Brother Alfonso asked.
'T truth, it doth." The Archbishop beamed at the proud sight of the Duke di Medici in full plate
armor, charging
across a field with blunted lance lowered as one of his knights rode against him.
"They will not be content with tilting forever," Brother Alfonso reminded. "They must needs ride,
my lord—
against the King, or away to their estates."
But the Archbishop wasn't about to let his secretary's pessimism darken his day. "Peace, peace,
good Brother
Alfonso. If they gain their desire without bloodshed, the more pleased will they be."
The dark look on Brother Alfonso's face plainly denied the claim, but before he could say so, the
Archbishop
gave a glad cry, pointing. "See! Another train doth come!" Then he frowned and peered at it. "Yet

'tis odd. I see
no proud flags, no glisten of mail . : ."
Brother Alfonso looked, too. "Those be mules, my lord, not chargers—save for the first, which is a
palfrey." His
eyes widened. " Tis a woman!"
"The Lady Mayrose!" The Archbishop exclaimed, his whole face lighting in a smile. His eye lingered
fondly on
her form for a few minutes before he turned away toward his study door. "Ho, chamberlain! Brother
Anno!"
The monk stepped in, bowing. "Aye, my lord?"
"The Lady Mayrose doth approach the gate with her train! Bring them in, bring them in, and conduct
her to this
room!"
Brother Anho stared, shocked. "My lord! A woman, within—"
"Do as thou art bid, man!" the Archbishop stormed in sudden rage. "Must I invoke thy vow of
obedience? Bring
her in, and conduct her here!"
Brother Anho swallowed, paling, then backed away, bowing, and turned.
Brother Alfonso watched, with a slight smile.
"Ah, 'tis good of her to come!" the Archbishop said, rubbing his hands. "Yet what can have
occasioned this
visit?"
"What indeed?" Brother Alfonso murmured. "And what could she have brought?"
They found out a few minutes later, as Brother Anho appeared at the study door, pale and tight-
lipped. "My lord
the

Archbishop, the Lady Mayrose." And he stepped aside as the lady entered.
"Lady Mayrose, how good of thee to come!" the Archbishop seized the hand she preferred and swept
it to his lips
for a kiss. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"
"Why, to the troops who gather in thy meadow, Thy Grace," she answered, dimpling. "We had thought
they must
be provisioned, my grandmother and I, and therefore hath she sent me to conduct hither such poor
provisions as
we can offer."
If Brother Alfonso had his own suspicions as to who had persuaded whom, he kept them to himself.
He only
smiled broadly as the Archbishop turned to him with an expansive sweep of the arm, saying, "My
secretary,
Brother Alfonso."
"Honored, milady." Brother Alfonso bowed. "I have heard so much about thee from milord the
Archbishop."
"And I of thee, good Brother! I had oft wondered what pillar of strength could support the world
weight which
lies upon His Lordship's shoulders!"
"Ay, thy tongue is gilded," Brother Alfonso said, with a true smile. "Yet I doubt not thou, too,
hast given
encouragement to this our good lord."
"What little I may, I give gladly," she answered. "In truth, the holiness of this house doth
excite me, to know that
herein, men may be stirred to deeds of righteousness!"
"May we always be so," Brother Alfonso said piously. "Yet now, I fear, I must be stirred to the
work of the
countinghouse, without which no enterprise can succeed in this sordid world, no matter how holy
its purpose."
"Well said, Brother," the Lady said, amused. "I trust I shall have further converse with thee?"
"I trust thou shall." Brother Alfonso had moved to the door; he turned back with a bow. "By your
leave, my
lord?"
"Why . . . that is to say, I ..." The Archbishop swallowed heavily, daunted by the prospect of

being left alone with the beautiful young lady. But she smiled at him roguishly with a challenge in her eye, and he felt a surge of indignation. "Nay, assuredly thou must be about the tasks to which I have set thee!" But his heart sank as he watched Brother Alfonso bow himself out of sight. "La, my lord," the Lady Mayrose laughed. "Wouldst thou have me think an Archbishop afraid of a maid?"

The Archbishop laughed with her, but anger spurted within him at the challenge. He took her hand, conducting her to the window and chatting a mile a minute, to gaze out at the gathering of troops. In the antechamber, Brother Anho looked up from his breviary, saw the Archbishop at the window with the lady for all the world to see, and felt his blood run cold. It was a contest on two levels, spoken and silent. Catharine and Tuan heard only a debate about the Church, but Brom O'Berin, listening to the tug of thoughts beneath the words, felt a battle for information. "Thou wilt not deny thou art a priest?" Her mind was wide open and alert for any associations that the term might raise. "Wherefore? 'Tis my pride." The friar smiled. There had been nothing—not only the humdrum, daily images that filled a human mind, but nothing. A void, a vacuum. Gwen frowned and tried again. "I am Gwendylon, Lady Gallowglass. Whom do I address?" "I am Father Peron, my child." So he was going to give her the pastor's patronization, eh? Well, Gwen knew how to ignore it. "I confess to puzzlement, Father," she repeated. "How canst thou term Their Majesties 'heretics,' when they but hold to the beliefs they have held all their lives?" "There is flow and change in all things, child—and as conditions in the world change, so must the Church. This is why Christ gave to Peter the power to bind or loose in Heaven what he bound or loosed on earth—so that the Church could change as it needed." His eyes seemed to burn into hers, and a massive surge of fervor hit her. Gwen almost gasped at the strength and suddenness of the wave. She rallied and countered. "Yet it is the heir of Peter from whom thou hast separated." The priest reddened, and anger flowed with his zeal. "The Pope cannot know how matters stand on Gramarye. The changes he doth declare for other worlds must not be binding here." His anger was daunting, making Gwen feel indeed like a child in front of a stern teacher. Inwardly she quailed, but refused to let it show, and narrowed the focus of her mind on only one area of his—fear of the Afterlife. "How dost thou know the Pope to be wrong, Father?" "Why, for that milord the Archbishop hath said so." If he had any reservations or any anxieties, there was no inkling of them; where thoughts should be, there was nothing. Gwen frowned; certainly his fervor could not completely counter all his upbringing and his fearful religiosity. "Canst thou not judge such a matter for thyself?" "I am sworn to obey my lord the Archbishop. His wisdom in these matters must needs be greater than mine." "Nay, thou wert sworn to obey the Abbot, not the Archbishop." A touch of exasperation showed in the man's face, but not in his mind. "Though he be Archbishop, he is Abbot still, and what he doth pronounce right for Gramarye must needs be right indeed."

"Even if he doth oppose himself to the Pope?"

"Even so."

"Then is it not he who is an heretic?"

Father Peron flushed, and his anger hit like a padded sledgehammer. "Nay, 'tis the King who is an heretic, if he

doth not adhere to the one true Church."

Deadlock. Gwen paused and changed the subject. "The Queen doth rule as surely as the King.

Wherefore dost

thou speak only of His Majesty?"

"God is our Father, child, and doth rule all. Rulers therefore must be male. A woman's rule is abomination."

Catharine half rose, turning crimson and emitting ^ very strange gargling noise; but Tuan's hand tightened on

hers, and she had promised Gwen to hold her tongue, so she did. But Father Peron permitted himself a small

smile.

Gwen bit down on her own anger and managed to keep her puzzled frown. "Dost not revere sainted Mary,

mother of our Lord?"

"Aye, as the Ruler's mother--and I eagerly await the reign of Alain."

Tuan was reddening now, too, but he held his peace. He could tell when someone was trying to get to him.

"Yet by thy lights," Gwen pointed out, "Alain will be also an heretic."

"I trust God shall send him wisdom, when he doth come of

age," Father Peron said piously. "If he doth not, he shall find himself opposed to all his barons--nay, to all his

people."

"Thou art confident of the future," Gwen murmured.

"Victory is the Lord's, child--victory is ever the Lord's." Father Peron's gaze seemed to pierce through to her

soul, and the flames of his fervor seemed to burn all about her mind. "Right will triumph--and the Church of

Gramarye is right."

"There was no more that I could gain from him," Gwen said, when Father Peron had followed his jailers to a cell

that probably reminded him of home. "He hath the most excellent shield that ever I have known--save in my

husband, when he doth wish it." She shuddered at the thought, and changed the subject. "Yet he is most truly a

priest."

"A warlock in a monk's robe?" Tuan shook his head, pacing. "Is this not blasphemy?"

"Aye, for the clergy have ever inveighed 'gainst the witches," Catharine agreed.

" 'Tis only the parish priests who have spoken thus," Brom reminded her. "What the monks say amongst

themselves within the cloister, we have no knowledge."

"Why should there not be one among them who hath our powers?" Gwen said with a shrug. "We have found

witchfolk in every county and every class; wherefor ought there not be one within the monastery?"

"A point," Tuan admitted, "yet still an odd one. Is he, mayhap, the one who hath called up other witches to side

with the Archbishop?"

Gwen shook her head. "I cannot tell; I could read nothing of his thoughts--yet his feelings did reach out toward

me." She frowned. "In truth, so strongly did his zeal press all about me, that I found myself beginning some

feeling of the lightness of his cause."

Tuan nodded. "Such a feeling enwrapped me in the town, when I did hearken to his speech."

"Nay!" Catharine cried. "Assuredly, Lady Gallowglass, thou dost not believe--"

"Nay, I do not. Yet this is his power--the ability to put his feeling of rightness or wrongness

within another's
mind."

"Mayhap every good orator hath some touch of that talent," Tuan suggested. "Assuredly 'twas not his words alone did touch me."

"Nay, 'twas not. It was the power of his mind that worked upon thee."

"And his words, then, served no purpose but to hold the folk about him, the whiles he worked his spell?" Tuan

said. "Well, that I can credit."

"Is not this the power that the rebel sorcerer Alfar did have?" Catharine demanded.

"Aye, Majesty, yet 'tis not nearly so strong in Father Peron. The sorcerer could so enfold another's mind that he

lulled his victim into a waking sleep, then could thrust within not only his feelings, yet also his thoughts. Thus

could he compel anyone to do as he wished. 'Tis a state mine husband doth term hypnosis."

"And thine husband hath a word for this priest's power, I doubt not."

Gwen nodded. "He doth term the priest a projective."

"Projective! Hypnosis!" Catharine threw up her hands. "A deal of nonsense! What need for names?"

"They aid in thinking, Majesty," Gwen explained. "When thou dost see how two words resemble one another,

thou canst see what may cause the things they stand for. In this instance, seest thou, the preacher is a 'projective

empath,' whereas" Her voice trailed off, and her eyes lit.

Catharine noticed, and asked, "What ails thee?"

" 'Tis even as I've told thee—the use of the words!" Gwen clapped her hands. "The preacher is projective, yet

mine husband doth also use the term to signify a witch who doth craft things of witch moss!" She referred to a

substance found only on Gramarye, a telepathically-sensitive fungus that assumed the shape of whatever a

nearby projective telepath was thinking of. Gwen spun to Brom O'Berin. "Lord Privy Councilor! Can thy spies

seek out the trail of this two-headed dog that did afright the peasant Piers?"

Brom frowned. "Assuredly, they can. Yet wherefore ..." Then he followed her train of reasoning, and began to

smile. "Be sure, I've spies who can ferret out its lair."

"They must need be valiant men, who would seek to trail so fell a spirit," Catharine said, doubt plain in her voice.

"Valiant they are," Brom said grimly, "or will be."

Hoban leaned back to stretch the ache out of his spine, and mopped his brow, glancing up at the sun. The work

was

familiar—he had been hoeing most of his life—but he had never before done it in a long saffron robe, nor

thought about it as an aid to prayer. Still, there were worse things, and both Father Rigori and Anho had warned

him the life would be hard. He bent over again, and chopped at a weed; he had never thought of this dull,

repetitive work as a discipline to school the body, freeing the mind for prayer and contemplation. Always before,

he had let his mind roam over the pleasures that awaited him at the end of the day—food, and talk with friends,

and sleep, and on the sabbath, dalliance with wenches.

He pushed that thought away; monks didn't think about girls, and he was determined to be a monk.

He tried to

steer his thoughts back to God and godliness, but was only able to appreciate the neatness of the beds of

cabbages, and the precise border of old horsehoes set upright side by side, which closed the end of the field. As he reached them he shook his head, marveling at the labor it must have taken to so fence all the monastery's fields, not to mention gathering all those worn shoes. How like the monks not to count the labor, because their minds were on the other world! He sighed and lifted his hoe again.

"Hist! Farmer Hoban!"

Hoban looked up, startled, coming out of his reverie. Who had called? Brother Hasty, who watched over the monks in the field? But no, he was a hundred feet away, with a wary eye on two novices who had paused for a rest and a chat. And there was no other monk near him. Then who . . . ?

"Here, foolish one! In the patch of cowslips to thy left!"

Hoban started to look, then remembered that whichever way Brother Hasty was looking now, he was quite likely to be looking Hoban's way next, so he bent back to his hoeing, glancing at the cowslips out of the corner of his eye.

And lo and behold, there he was, he really was, one of the Little People! Larger than he'd heard they went—he was a foot-and-a-half high, scowling up at Hoban, arms akimbo. "Aye, thou dost see me now. Be sure thou dost give no sign. Tis long I've waited for thee to come to the edge of the field, for I could not go in to thee, not past that barrier of Cold Iron."

Of course, Hoban realized with a shock, that pretty little fence would keep elves out too! And, of a sudden, all thoughts of the holy life were swept aside as he remembered what he had promised the Lord Warlock.

"Try not to think of it, if thou canst," the elf advised, "for there are many minds here to hear thy thoughts. I' truth, they do not like my kind, and I cannot help but wonder why. 'Tis not the sort of thing the Archbishop would have thought of by himself."

"I think thou hast the right of it," Hoban breathed. "I have not seen a mean spirit in him."

"Yet there is such a spirit in this monastery, or I mistake it quite." The elf cocked his head to one side. "Who is it, then?"

"Brother Alfonso, or / mistake," Hoban muttered. "He is the Archbishop's secretary, and is ever with him so long as he is within these walls. The other monks give him more respect than they ought, for one who is but a servant—and one who is so newly come."

"Newly come?" the elf frowned. "How newly, then?"

"But three years ago, saith Rumor. At the first he was ever willing to labor at whatever task he could, and worked long and well—so all came to know his name. Yet he could write and cipher, so the Archbishop—the Abbot then—set him to the accounts. He proved adept at them, and was therefore more and more in milord's company."

"As he became more and more set on separating from Rome, belike." The elf nodded, with a wry grimace. "How can he be countered?"

"He cannot, now! Those who would not submit to him, fled to Runnymede. All who remain here, live in fear of the fellow."

"Odd, for a man of God," the elf said. "Then we must deal with him. When doth he come outdoors?"

"In the evenings, to walk in the Archbishop's garden with His Lordship."

"Which is hung about with so much Cold Iron, I would think it a smithy." The elf's face hardened.

"Well, we shall find a ... whup!"
He disappeared into the cowslips as a shadow fell across the earth in front of Hoban. He looked up into the stern visage of Brother Hasty.
"Hoban," said the severe supervisor, "wherefore hast thou hoed at that same patch of earth for this last quarter hour?"

"Surely the beast has no need for the second!" Kelly McGoldbagel stared at the huge paw print in the patch of moonlight. "I've never seen a dog who used the head he had!"
"Oh, be still!" Puck groaned. " 'Tis not the beast who hath need of two heads, but the one who made him."
"But why?"
"To fright poor peasants, thou lob!" Puck snapped. "Now be still, and follow his trail!"
Kelly grumbled and followed Puck down the trail between the huge old forest trees. Why Brom O'Berin had insisted he bring the Englishman along, Kelly couldn't understand— surely one leprecohen would be enough to track any monster! "Sure an ye don't think the Elfin King fears for the safety of one of his elves, do ye?"
" 'Tis not what I think, but what he doth! Wilt thou not be still and track?"
Kelly sighed and followed, frowning at the trail. The beast's paws must have been half the size of Kelly himself, to leave such traces. "At the least, the beast cannot have been one of yer pranks, if it left tracks."
"I shall leave tracks on thy backside!" Puck jerked to a halt, frowning at a fork in the road. "Here are but fallen leaves; I see no more prints. Whence came the beast?"
"Why, yonder!" Kelly exclaimed, pointing to the right. "See ye not the twigs it broke from the trees as it passed?"
Puck stared. Then he said, "Well done, great scout! Thou mayest take the lead now."
Kelly looked up at him, startled. Puck grinned. Kelly shivered and turned away, grumbling. "I'd sooner have a two-headed dog at my back than an Englishman!"
"Thou mayest have thy wish," Puck reminded. "We track the beast's trail in reverse, to discover whence he came; none say he hath returned. In truth, we may feel his breath hot on our necks as he doth come home."
For some reason, Kelly went a bit faster. The path widened suddenly, and they found themselves in a small clearing, wide enough for some moonlight to strike through the forest crown, showing them a wattle hut with a thatched roof. The door was made of stout planks, though, and the single window was shuttered.
Kelly stopped. "I never knew a forest spirit that sought a roof over its head."
"Aye, nor that latched the door and barred the shutters when it was away from home." Puck frowned, stepping out into the clearing. "Yet it may be that 'tis within, and therefore hath made fast its portal."
"Then the more fool ye are, to be courtin' its wrath! What, would ye bring disaster upon us?"
Puck tossed his head impatiently. "The spirit's not made that can harm the Puck."
"Savin' his Elfin Majesty, o' course," Kelly grumbled.
"I misdoubt me an he bides within yon hut. Come, wilt thou not play hearth ghost and find a chink through which to enter?"
"What's to find? 'Tis more holes than walls, with wattle!" Kelly protested. "Whoever bides there does not mean to winter within it, does he?"
"Nay, or he would have daubed it without." Puck glanced about him and dashed up to the wall. Kelly

stared,
appalled, then cursed and sprinted after him.
Puck was fingering the wattle. " 'Tis yet green. This hovel's newly built, sprite."
"Aye, 'tis that." Kelly looked down. "Yet there's already a footpath trod from the doorway—and I see no prints of the hound!"
Puck glanced about, also, nodding. "And since the leaves have been cleared away to bare the earth, we should surely have seen such. What could this cotter have sought beneath compost? Yet the dog's prints end at the verge, as though it had been conjured forth at the spot."
Kelly shivered. "Why, then, we've fulfilled our commission! Let us ... histl"
Puck looked up, startled, then heard the sound Kelly was pointing after—the tread of human feet through forest mulch.
A few minutes later a pot-bellied peasant stepped into the moonlight, leaning against the load of a heavy basket.
He stumped to the door, set down his burden, and sighed, rubbing his bald spot—a perfect circle, in the midst of what would otherwise have been an excellent head of hair. He wore an ordinary smock and leggings, and was in middle age. He glanced about and sighed. "Ah, the loneliness is hard to bear!" Then he shrugged, lifting the latch and pushing the door open. He frowned as he stepped in, muttering, "Be still, my heart! 'Tis for God, the Church, and the Order!" He sighed as he hoisted his basket and went into the hut. A minute later a lamp flame glowed inside, and the door swung shut. Two seconds later Puck and Kelly were back at the wall, peering through chinks in the wattle.
The peasant muttered to himself as he stirred the coals on the hearth, laid on kindling, and blew it into flame, then set on some sticks. Behind him the stuff in his basket began to quiver, then to churn about. He turned back to it, frowning, then nodded his head, apparently satisfied with its motion. He dumped it out before the hearth and sat down on a three-legged stool, staring at it. The stuff was gray and formless, with a faint sheen, like puffball toadstools that couldn't keep their shape. As the elves watched, wide-eyed, the mass began to spread, then to stretch upward. Gradually it grew into the form of a sapling, its color darkening to brown, pieces of it stabbing outward into four branches. Each branch tip blossomed into stiffened twigs. The peasant nodded, satisfied, and held up a hand. Slowly the sapling bent one of its branches down, wrapped a set of twigs about his wrist. The peasant smiled, and the sapling let go of his hand, straightening. The man murmured, "To the door, now." The sapling began to quiver; then one root humped up, pushed forward, and flattened again. Another root took a step, then the third, then the first again, and slowly the sapling moved toward the door. The peasant nodded, scowling, and muttered, "Find a peasant, clutch at him, then chase him—but do not catch him."
The sapling's branches shook as though it, too, were nodding; then it bent to go through the doorway, and shuffled off across the clearing and into the wood.
Kelly and Puck watched it go, eyes wide.
Inside the hut the peasant sighed and sat back wearily.

him. Soon he could hear them whispering to one another, with the occasional nervous giggle, as though they were a bunch of schoolchildren sneaking off to do something forbidden. Then, through a gap in the leaves, he saw orange light with silhouettes of his fellow travelers before it. The light expanded, and Rod came out into a clearing. A monk stood on a stump at its far side, flanked by branches stuck into the ground, with their tops flaring torches—makeshift Qandelabra. The sight of the man's tonsure and robe was enough to raise Rod's hackles. Are you up there, Cordelia? To play safe, he was thinking in the family mode Gwen had invented, and he heard Cordelia's answer in the same compressed fashion: Aye, Papa. 'Tis like looking down on a church from the choir loft. I don't think that's accidental, 'Delia. Now, remember—we just listen; we don't do anything. I shall be mindful of it. Papa, she thought, with some asperity. The unvoiced thought was: Will you? It was nice of her not to think it, though. Rod had to admit she had a point; he was the one with the temper. "Dearly beloved!" the monk cried, holding up both hands.

The crowd quieted. "I bring thee news from our Most Reverend Archbishop," the monk called, and the crowd muttered with enthusiasm. The hairs on the back of Rod's neck prickled; they were in Tudor's demesne, and Tudor was a Papist. These peasants, apparently, were the ones who were partial to the Church of Gramarye—or at least curious about it. No wonder the keeper had passed the word in secret. "The Archbishop doth delight in thy steadfast adherence to him," the monk continued, perhaps overstating the case. "The godly lords gather to him at the monastery, and prospects prosper for the Reign of Right!" The crowd cheered, though not exactly with great vigor. The friar ignored the fact. "He doth send thee now word of his latest search for truth. Thou knowest all that priests may not wed; thus hath Rome ruled down the ages." A mutter began with some foreboding in it. Rod didn't blame the peasants; he didn't think he was going to like what was coming. "This ruling was made for base causes," the preacher lectured. "For the first thousand years of the Church, there was no bar to priests wedding and rearing up families. Yet those sons who, like their fathers, took the cassock, did frequently serve in the same parish that their fathers had. Thus did one parish pass from father to son for many generations, till the authority of that parish, and the income from it, was the priestly family's, not Rome's. The Pope could not abide such a challenge to his rule, nor the thought of all the shillings that did not come to him; therefore he did forbid priests to marry." The crowd burst into incredulous jabbering. Is't true, Papa? Rod could feel the disturbance in Cordelia's thoughts. Partly, 'Delia, he answered. There were other reasons, too, more spiritual ones. Bet this preacher doesn't mention them, though. Nay, he would not, would he? Her doubts quieted, and Rod felt his daughter's natural strength of will returning. He smiled, and listened as the preacher began calling again. "Our good Archbishop doth think this

reasoning

specious, and unworthy of a Pope entrusted to concern himself only with men's souls. Therefore hath he declared

that priests need no longer hold themselves apart from family life . . ."

The crowd's noise swamped him before he could finish the

sentence, and here and there, people turned away into the forest.

"He doth declare!" the priest cried, waving his hands. "He doth declare!"

The people finally quieted enough to hear him.

"He doth declare, our noble Archbishop, that priests may marry!"

Then it was all over. The people argued furiously among themselves, and many of them turned and went away,

walking as quickly as they could into the dark forest. But some stayed and crowded around the priest, asking

questions at a furious rate. He did the best he could to answer each separate objection.

Can there be good in this, Papa? Rod could hear the trepidation in Cordelia's thought.

What could he say? It's debatable, 'Delia--there's a lot to say on both sides. Me, I feel more comfortable with a

priest who doesn't have to worry about being home on time for dinner.

I, too . . .

The people began to leave, and the knot around the priest loosened as they stepped aside to argue among

themselves. The friar stepped down from the stump, his exhaustion showing.

" 'Twas nobly said, Father." A village girl stepped up a little too close to the priest, hands behind her back, skirts

swaying, smiling up at the priest, then blushing and lowering her eyes. "Assuredly, if the priests are the best of

us, they should rear up sons, should they not?"

The priest took an involuntary step back, blanching, and the girl took another step forward with a dazzling smile.

Why, the shameless hussy! Cordelia thought, scandalized. She doth woo him!

Well, that's the other side of it. Suddenly Rod was concerned for his daughter. If you let the priests marry, they're

not safe from predatory females any more.

"Why . . . aye, there's truth in that." The priest rallied bravely. "Yet 'twould be an ill life for a woman, lass. A

priest must ever be out and about, tending his flock."

"The more reason, then, why he would need a woman he could trust, in his house," the girl returned. "And, too,

he would then not need trouble himself o'er the temptations of the flesh."

The priest's eyes widened; apparently he hadn't thought of that aspect of it. He began to smile, and stepped closer

to the girl. "Aye, he would not, would he? For such impulses would then become virtuous, even as they are for

any married man. What is thy name, daughter?"

She'll not be his daughter--she'll bear him one! Cordelia thought, fuming. How can he be so blind as not to see

that she doth desire not him, but his rank?

Men are generally pretty dumb about that. Rod thought about a few episodes from his own past and winced. He

appreciated the irony of her reaction, but also realized that her faith in the clergy had been shaken, and with it,

her faith in her religion. Just remember, dear--men being weak doesn't make God any smaller.

There were no words in answer, only a feeling of confusion, and Rod decided his daughter needed his presence.

He stepped back into the forest, thinking, Come on down. I think it's time to go home.

He caught Cordelia's quick mental image of free flight through the crisp night air, and the feeling of cleanliness

she associated with it. His mouth tightened; his little girl was beginning to have some vague

notion that people
could be dirty in soul as well as body.
Including archbishops, of course. Sure, John Widdecombe could have been very sincere about the
theological
reasons why priests should be allowed to marry—but Rod doubted it.
" 'Twas a thing of witch moss, then?" Brom frowned.
"Aye, milord," Puck affirmed. "The dog's tracks led there—and we saw him make a walking tree."
" 'Twas but a wee one, though," Kelly qualified. "In truth, 'twas scarce more than a sapling."
"I doubt not it will grow, whensoe'er it doth chance upon another batch of witch moss," Brom
rumbled. "Thou
hast the right of it, Robin. And he wrought it quickly?"
"It could not have taken more than the quarter of an hour, Majesty, if that."
"Most expert, then—only the Lady Gwendylon could do better." Brom stifled a fatuous smile. "And he
had a
tonsure?"
"He had, my lord, unless he'd chanced to lose his hair in so perfect a circle."
"Still, he was old enough for it to have done so," Kelly maintained.

What, art thou his advocate?" Puck rounded on the elf. "Be still, abbey lubber!"
"Who dost thou call lubber, lob of spirits? I'll have thee know—"
"Thou'lt have him know naught," Brom boomed. "Wilt thou waste all our time in contention, while
this
Archbishop doth afright all the peasants into bringing down the King? Nay, go thou and wait by the
crafter's cot,
that thou mayest follow his every step doth he go out! Go there, and bide in patience, till Their
Majesties' troops
can come!"
The door crashed open, and the peasant bolted up off his pallet—but two soldiers caught his arms
behind him
even as he staggered to his feet, and another whipped rope about his wrists. Dazed, he blinked
about him at the
hard-faced men in mail shirts with pikes in their hands. "What . . . what dost thou? Wherefore
hast thou sprung
upon me? I have naught thou couldst wish!"
But the soldiers turned him to face a man wearing a light helmet and a hauberk with a sword at his
hip, standing
with arms akimbo, glaring at him. "Thou hast made monsters and set them to afright the poor folk."
Without
taking his eyes off the peasant, he called out, "He is secure, my lady!"
Then a beautiful, shapely redhead stepped into the hut, and the peasant blanched, for he
recognized the Lady
Gwendylon.
"Do not seek to deny it," she advised him, "for we have report from two who saw thee make a
walking tree. Tell
me now why thou hast done it:"
The peasant's face gelled. "Nay. Thou shall learn naught from me."
And he meant it, Gwen knew, for his mind seemed totally empty; mentally, she perceived him only as
a blank,
smooth curve. Then, suddenly, an imperative thought leaped out of that globe, a command to come,
to fight, and
Gwendylon spun toward the door.
The thing burst in with twin howls of rage, eyes burning in both its heads. The knight whipped
about, his sword
drawn; but Gwendylon scowled, staring at the two-headed dog, and its form began to blur even as it
leaped at
her, like wax on a hot rock. The knight yelled and leaped in between Gwen and the dog, but what
thudded
against his chest was no longer a beast, only a formless mass of churning gray. It bounced off him
and
fell to the floor, and the knight stepped back, turning a delicate shade of avocado; but Gwen

glared at the mass of
witch moss, and it split in half. Both halves split again, and again and again, until it lay in
forty little, shapeless
blobs. Each blob sprouted a shoot, which fractured into leaves, turning yellowish brown--and a
bushel of onions
rolled about the floor.
The peasant stared at them, his face ashen.
Gwen turned her glare on him. "I advise thee not to seek to make them turn to aught that might
think to strike a
blow."
"I ... I will not, Lady." It was as good as an admission of defeat.
"Tell me, then," she commanded, "wherefore thou hast left thy monastery to come unto this wood."
He looked at her, appalled; then his expression hardened again. "An excellent device, seeking to
shock me into
speaking; yet I do know 'twas but a fortunate conjecture." "Thou hast too perfect a bald spot for
a common
peasant," Gwen pointed out, "and thou art too well fed for a forest hermit. Nay, further, thou
hast not the wild
look of one who dwells apart. Wherefore shouldst thou not say truth?"
"I will not hold with heretics." And his mind was still a bland, smooth globe.
Gwen frowned at him, weighing her chances. Then she smiled, and her voice softened amazingly. "Yet
thou art
alone, here in the fearsome wood by thyself, and far from human company. Truthfully, thou must
needs miss thy
comrades greatly, Father."
"Not 'Father,'" he said automatically. "I can claim not that--" Then he stopped, annoyed at his own
slip. She
could see his thoughts work by the look on his face, though she could not hear them; he hadn't
really let any
information out, hadn't actually said he was a monk. She poured the oil on. "Come, thou art a good
man, and hast
ever sought to be--and thou art caught clearly now; there is no chance thou mayest return, till
this coil's
unwound. It must be hard for thee, to be constrained to making devices that will terrify poor good
folk." Doubt in
his face, now, and the first signs of weakening; Gwen gave him her saddest, most sympathetic
smile. "Belike
thou art troubled sorely about the rift, and those monks who have gone off to found their own
chapter. Come,
dost thou not ache for their good company?"
The peasant's mouth tightened with chagrin, and he admitted, "I do miss them sorely, Lady."
"And art worried for their safety? Nay, why not say it?"
"I am," he admitted, "for they are truly my brothers in spirit."
Gwen nodded. "Closer than thy mother's sons could be, I wot. Nay, say thy name, good friar, so
that I may know
to whom I speak."
He gazed at her, then gave up with a sigh. "I am Brother Clancy, Lady, and I ken not how thou
couldst pierce my
shield and con my thoughts. Thou art the Lady Gallowglass, art thou not?"
"I am," Gwen confirmed, fighting not to let show the soaring triumph that she felt. "If thou
knowest me by
repute, good friar, thou must needs know there's only honor in having maintained thy silence
against me for so
long."
"Thou art a most puissant dame," Brother Clancy admitted, "and thou hast the right of it--I do
regret most
shrewdly the making of false haunts to afright poor villagers."
The soldiers lifted their heads, outrage in their faces, but at a look from Gwen they bit their
tongues. "I am sure
thou must needs be so, for thou hast ever sought to give only aid and comfort, hast thou not?"
"Aye, I have," Brother Clancy said, with a sad smile. " 'Tis more the office of our order."

"And belike thou dost regret the rift with Rome."
Gwen wasn't prepared for the huge wrench of anguish that distorted Brother Clancy's features. "Oh, Lady! I am so filled with dread! All my life I have sought to serve the Church and Pope, for thereby serve I God--yet to have that prop and fundament broke out from 'neath my feet. . . ! Oh, 'tis agony, 'tis deepest doubt, that doth prey upon my soul both day and--" Suddenly his eyes cleared as he realized what he'd been saying, and he stared at her in horror.
Gwen tried to look her most commiserating.
"Eh, thou'rt skilled, thou!" he breathed. "Thou hast brought me from beginning to speak only what thou dost already know, to say what thou canst only guess at! Ah, but thou'lt have no further word from me!" He shut his mouth so hard she could hear his teeth snap against each other.
Gwen shook her head sadly. "Thou hast said little enough, good friar." She turned to the knight. "Come, escort him to the castle, Sir Fralkin, and see him housed with what comfort a tower cell can afford." And she stood aside, sighing and shaking her head as they led him out--then let her spirits loose to soar with a silent cry of triumph. True, he had told her fairly little--but he had confirmed her most important suspicion. He was not a hireling warlock who had allied with the Archbishop, but one of the monks themselves, a Cathodean friar disguised as a peasant! There was not only the one monastic magic-worker--the projective orator Tuan had caught--but this other, a witch-moss crafter.
Her mood steadied at a thought that gave her pause: if there were two esper monks, there might be others. Just how many of them were there?
"Both monks?" Catharine stared.
"I might comprehend one as the working of chance," Tuan said, "yet two?"
" 'Tis scarcely an undue number, of their hundreds," Brom rumbled. "Yet I own amazement; I had thought the monks opposed to witchfolk."
"They have seemed so," Tuan said, frowning, "though we have ever judged them, of necessity, by those we met without the monastery. Mayhap those of the cloister are more tolerant."
Gwen spread her hands. "If they are so, mayhap the cloister doth draw such spirits, Majesties."
"Wherefore?"
"For that 'tis one place wherein they need not fear for their lives," Gwen guessed.
Tuan nodded slowly. "A good thought, Lady Gallowglass."
"Yet better would be one to counter them." Catharine frowned, her anger almost an aura about her.
"How doth one oppose such witchfolk?" Then her face cleared as she heard her own words. "Why, with more witchfolk, doth one not?"
Tuan nodded, eyes glittering. "In this instance, sweet wife, I will not scruple to use the Royal Coven."
The woods were dark and gloomy, with just a few shafts of moonlight to make them seem more eerie. Elsa picked her way carefully over the roots in the trail, holding her torch high, heart racing with fright. The branches loomed close, twigs crooked to catch at her hair, and she felt eyes on her back constantly--but when she turned to look, nothing was there. She shuddered and hurried onward. Not for the King himself would she have dared

this forbidding woodland at night—but
for a chance of seeing Orlof again, of at least hearing his voice. . . ! And this spirit-man who
had built his hut in
these woods this week past, seemed to have the gift—at least, so said old Cressida, who had first
found him, and
who said she had spoken with the ghost of old Lothrain. . . .
There it was, a brush lean-to in a clearing, almost a thicket by itself—but the weird old man sat
by his fire before
it, chanting as he fed herbs into a small, steaming kettle. Elsa's heart leaped into her throat,
and she almost turned
and fled, then remembered sweet Orlof, lying with his bright blood around him where Sir Grimal had
run him
through, for nothing but trying to protect his wife Elsa from the knight's advances! Hatred burned
up in her, and
guilt, for Orlof would still be alive if he had not wed her! Desire welled up, desire to speak to
him, to hear him
say he forgave her, and she stepped forward into the clearing.
The weird old man looked up at the sound of her footfall. "Come, child. Do not fear me."
But it was hard not to, with the firelight streaming upward, making his features look unearthly,
and with the
steam from his kettle wreathing his face. Still, she came, though she felt her heart must shake
her apart, and knelt
near his fire, grounding her torch.
"Thou dost wish to speak to the shade of thy dead husband," the old man sighed. "Well, I shall
conjure him for
thee. Yet what shall thou give me for fee?"
Elsa blushed and lowered her eyes. What could she give, save herself? But surely Orlof would hate
her for it! He
might forgive her for what Sir Grimal had done—that was forced, not given. But this? She touched
her ring,
remembering Orlof and his love.
"Nay." The old man's voice was the sound of the breeze among twigs. "Thy ring is sacred; I'll not
take it for
witch work. Yet I shall shear thy hair, for I've use for it."
Elsa looked up, startled and frightened. Her hair? Her long, glistening flow of hair, that Orlof
had so loved? What
use could—
She bit down on the thought. What use the witch-man might have for her hair, she did not wish to
know—and
she could surely grow more. It was fitting, too, to give it for Orlof. "Take it, then," she
breathed, and untied her
kerchief, bowing her head.

It was quickly done, a few strokes with great shears, and she bound her kerchief about her head
again with a sob,
to hide the ragged ends; but she felt a certain satisfaction; it was fitting, for mourning.
The witch-man spread the rich fall of hair across his knees and nodded. " 'Tis well." Then he sat
back, rolling his
eyes up and intoning, "Oh, Orlof, come forth! Come now from that other world; come speak to the
one who most
loves thee, come forth, come forth, come forth. . . ." His words trailed off into a moan; his eyes
were open, but
only the whites showed. Elsa shuddered, looked away . . . And saw the steam coalescing above the
kettle. It
slowed as it welled up from the brew, swirling into a globe, a ball the size of a head. Indeed, it
took on the
semblance of a head; it eddied into eyes, nose, and mouth; it peaked as a peasant cap peaks; it
was Orlofs head,
floating there above the kettle, Orlofs lips that opened and hissed, Elsa, do not believe! This is
not Orlofs face,
but a clever dream only!

The weird old man snapped forward, his eyes rolling down, staring. Then he scowled furiously, glaring at the wraith—but it stayed, and its lips formed more words in spite of him. This witch-man cannot bring Orlof back, but can only give thee an image that he doth craft himself! 'Tis not thy dead husband would speak, but this old witch-man only!

Elsa screamed, rising to her feet, screams that formed into words as her hands hooked into claws, and the old man jolted up and away from her, kicking over his stool and raising his hands to protect himself; but thunder shook the grove and three young men stood behind him, reaching for him. He took one horrified look at them and screamed, then exploded and was gone.

Elsa screamed still, screamed and screamed, feeling her mind begin to shred, but a young woman stepped forth from the trees, a peasant her own age, hands uplifted, arms wide, saying, "Oh, poor lass, poor lass! What vile things have they done to thee, these wretched, twisted men!"

Elsa's screams wrenched off; she stared, amazed, as the young woman stepped forward, her face all sympathy, crooning, "Poor Elsa, poor, poor lass!"

Elsa took one halting step forward, then collapsed into the stranger woman's arms, sobbing and sobbing as the pieces of her mind began to pull themselves together again, and her heart began to realize the horror was past.

"Oh! 'Tis so great a scandal, Maria!" the woman said as she hauled her bucket across the village common.

" 'Tis in truth, Rillis! That Their Majesties should so defy the Abbot!" Maria answered, hefting her own bucket.

"The Archbishop, thou dost mean," Matilda sniffed. "An thou wilt hold Their Majesties wrong in opposing him, goodwives, thou must needs call him 'Archbishop' now."

A goat looked up and bleated as they passed.

"I will not say that, Tilda." Maria frowned. "Who hath raised him, eh? Only himself."

"Hath he not the right to so do, Maria?" Rillis demanded. "He is the highest priest of the land!"

"Why, so might thine husband proclaim himself squire, Rillis. Would that make him so?" Maria demanded as they came to the village well.

Rillis started to giggle, and clapped a hand over her own mouth. "For shame, Maria! To make me laugh at mine own husband! Wherefore didst thou not speak of thine own?"

"For that her Rolf would not dare to term himself aught she might decry." Matilda swung her bucket up to the well curb. "My Jack, now, scarce would have pride enough to term himself a plowman."

"Only for that he would then have to plow, Matilda. He might, though, call himself a layabout."

Matilda managed to convert her peal of laughter into an indignant snort.

"Well, so much for the follies of mankind, my godsibs," Maria sighed, laying hold of the crank.

"Now for the wisdom of womankind. Shall we have some water for the cleansing of our houses?"

"And for the pot." Rillis set her hands on the crank from the other side. "Up with the bucket, now!"

"I shall have a sip of it first," Matilda decided, bending over to peer down into the gloom. "Ah, 'tis so cool and . . . ahhh!" She screamed.

Maria nearly let go of the crank, but not quite—which was a good thing, because Rillis did.

"Matilda! What—"

But Matilda was past speaking; she cowered back, hands over her mouth, pale and trembling.

"What can it be she hath seen?" Rillis turned to look, and drew back with a gasp. "Maria! Let go!"

"What dost thou see?"

"A dragon's worm! Tis a horrid thing, with a gaping maw and scales of sickly yellow! Its wings have sprouted, and its tail hath a sting! Maria, let go\"

Maria heard a furious hiss from the well, seeming to fill all the air about her. She let go of the crank as though it

were a live coal. It spun, and the well rang with a scream so high-pitched they could scarcely hear it, dwindling,

gaining echo, till the bucket splashed.

The three women stared at one another, horrified. Rillis found her voice first. "What now shall we drink?" She

whispered.

"Drink be hanged, godsib! What shall we do when 'tis grown!"

"It shall not grow."

The three spun about.

She couldn't have been older than twenty-five, but she bore herself with the authority of a knight's lady. She wore

peasant's clothes, as they did, but of a richer fabric and more vivid colors, and she came toward them with a

gentle smile, but a look of grim purpose in her eyes.

"Who art thou?" Maria breathed.

"I am a witch of the Royal Coven," the stranger answered. "As for thy worm, behold!" She stepped up to the well

and frowned, gazing down at it.

The three women glanced at one another, then plucked up their courage and stepped up to peek.

They saw the worm shrink and harden, hissing furiously as its wings grew and spread, till the hissing stopped and

there was scarcely any body at all. But the wings were huge, a foot across at least, and of so marvelous a swirl of

rainbow hues as to make the women gasp. It drifted up from the well, a magnificent butterfly—but, harmless

though it was, they ducked out of its way as it rose above the curb and hovered inside the well for a moment. The

stranger frowned at it, and it sped away, rising to glide off into the forest on a vagrant breeze.

The stranger relaxed, and there was a sheen on her forehead as she turned to the three women. "

Twas no true

worm, but a

crafting of witch moss. Tis sped now, and shall trouble thee no more."

The women stared; then Maria found her voice. "Who . . . who crafted it?"

"Some malicious witch who doth strive 'gainst Their Majesties' rule."

"What if that witch doth transform it to a worm again?"

"Why, then, I shall banish it again—I, or another like me." The young woman gave them a radiant smile. "Fear

not, goodwives—the King and Queen do ward and care for their folk."

She turned and moved away into the forest. The three women stared after her in the heat of the midday sun.

Then Matilda straightened, a gleam in her eye. "Well, godsibs! Shall we have a tale to tell this even!"

Dinner was done, and the grown-ups wandered out of their cottages to stand in groups, chatting, while the

children ran about, tagging each other and wrangling—a normal Gramarye village evening.

"Hear the Word of the Lord!"

Where the preacher had come from, no one knew, but they all stilled and looked at him, with .more dread than

surprise on their faces. The clergy had not been bringing good news lately.

" 'Put not your trust in princes,' saith the Lord! And in truth, he who would put his faith in our princes, in Tuan

and Catharine today, would be foolish indeed!"

The people stared, galvanized by the words of treason they were hearing. Even the children began to realize

something was wrong, and one by one ceased their games and turned to listen.

"Tuan and Catharine have sought to usurp the powers of the Church! The King and Queen have scorned the word of the Lord Archbishop! They have adhered to a profligate and sinful Church in defiance, and have thus rent this land of Gramarye asunder! And as is done with the people of the land, so is done with its substance! Even now forces build to rend the very soil itself! Verily I say unto thee, in three minutes' time the earth shall quake!" The villagers burst into a panic of yammering disbelief. Here and there rose a cry of despair, and a few turned toward their cottages.

"Naught will be damaged!" the priest cried. "Or at the least, very little! The ground will shake, aye, but shall only tremble; it shall not heave! This is but the Lord's warning, not His devastation! Hearken! Heed!" Somewhat reassured, the peasants turned back to watch him again. The priest straightened, smiling, sure of his control . . .

And the seconds passed. And passed. And passed.

The priest frowned, and the folk began to murmur. "Assuredly three minutes have come and gone!"

"Aye, most

surely! Hast thou felt a quake?" "Nay, not so much as mine oxen make as I follow the plow."

The preacher was scowling now, fists clenched, forehead beading with sweat. People saw, and fell silent again,

staring at him—but nothing happened.

" 'Tis a mountebank," somebody muttered. "Aye, 'tis a jester who did cut his own tonsure," a goodwife agreed.

"Dost seek to mock us, fellow?" A bulky peasant stepped forward, anger in his voice.

"I am a true friar of St. Vidicon!" the priest shouted. "Any may don a robe and paint a bit of wood for his breast,"

another beefy peasant sneered. "What, fellow! Dost take us for fools?"

"Stand away from me," the priest commanded, but trepidation hollowed his voice, and he stepped backwards,

and backwards again, as the big peasants closed in on three sides. Behind two of them he saw a slighter man

smiling, and glared at the man. But the peasant only smiled wider, and it was a hard and threatening smile.

"Mend thy ways!" the preacher cried. "Cease to follow these false monarchs—or, I warn thee, the ground shall

shake!" And he turned to hurry away into the forest, his face burning with embarrassment—and with anger at the

young man with the hard smile who was, he was certain, the warlock who had held the earth still with his mind,

when the preacher had sought to shake it.

15

Lutes and hautboys wove a tranquil melody, calming the spirits of all who entered the great church in

Runnymede. The choir's voices rose to fill the nave as Their Majesties came in, arm in arm, their two sons

walking before them with gravity far beyond their years. Footmen preceded them; maids came behind. A third of

the household came to mass in the cathedral; the others attended in the chapel.

The royal party sat, and Catharine clasped Tuan's hand tightly, smiling. He smiled back into her eyes. For a few

brief minutes the peace of God touched their souls.

Then the choir finished with a triumphant "Alleluia!" and the priest cried from the pulpit,

"Dearly beloved in

Christ!"

Catharine and Tuan spun about to stare at him. What had happened to the Introit? To the Confiteor, the Gloria,

the Epistle, and Gospel?

"There will be no Mass in this Church on this Sunday," the priest announced grimly. Tuan frowned, and Catharine's face darkened as a huge hubbub erupted all about them. The priest grimly waited it out, then unrolled a parchment, declaring, "I must read to you a letter from our Most Reverend Archbishop!"

Catharine nearly bolted from her chair, but Tuan restrained her with a hand on her arm. "Let him speak. We are not yet despots--and 'tis better to have it said openly."

She subsided, fuming, while Alain and Diarmid stared up at them, frightened.

"Dearly beloved," the priest read, "it is with great sadness that I pronounce Tuan and Catharine, erstwhile King and Queen of this land, heretics against the Word of God and the Church of Gramarye, and do therefore declare them excommunicated from all services and Sacraments of our Church."

The hubbub turned into a roar this time, and even the footmen seemed to shrink away from Their Majesties.

Catharine was on her feet, fists clenched tightly, face white, and Tuan was beside her. " 'Erstwhile!'" the Queen said grimly. "How dare he say 'erstwhile!'"

But the priest was waving for quiet. As the crowd subsided, they could hear him crying, "... and hear me out, ere I am silenced! His Grace the Archbishop doth say, 'I hearby call upon all good men and true, whose souls are devoted to God, to abjure this false prince and come to me here in my house in Ruddigore, to join in a holy march against these heretics who do tyrannize our fair Isle of Gramarye!'"

Now Tuan's face swelled with wrath; now, finally, he bellowed in rage, "Art thou done?"

"Thine in Christ,'" the priest finished, coolly if quickly, " 'John Widdecombe, Archbishop of Gramarye by the grace of God.'"

"Say, rather, by the word of John Widdecombe!" Tuan thundered. "If thou hast finished, thou wilt doubtless leave this church, and thou shalt not say Mass!"

"In truth, I would not stay in the presence of an heretic," the priest stated, rolling up the letter with trembling hands. "Silence me if thou must, Tuan Loguire, but thousands of monks shall cry thine iniquity throughout the land!"

"I know some who shall not," Tuan called back, mastering his temper with difficulty. Eyes narrowed, he turned to the seneschal. "Sir Maris! Ride with all haste to the chapter house nearby, and beseech Father Boquilva to come say our Mass!" He turned to Catharine and said, more softly, "Now shall I not scruple to 'use' them!"

His answer was the glow in her eyes, and the clasp of her hands on his.

The noble hostages filed back into their hall, and for once there was no badinage of insults between the two parties. They took their places and sat, faces dark, gazing at one another with foreboding. No one spoke, perhaps because D'Auguste was absent, comforting his bride.

Finally Maggiore broke the silence. "My lords, it is war."

Ghibelli nodded heavily. "How can it be aught else, when the Archbishop doth excommunicate the King?"

"Yet 'tis plain that Rome doth not," Chester answered, "and that there be two orders of St. Vidicon now, not one."

"Aye, there is a St. Vidicon of Rome, and one of Gramarye. Pest!" Marshall threw his hands up in exasperation.

"How can there be two Saints Vidicon when only one was martyred?"

" 'Tis a rebellion among the priests," Glasgow growled, "and fools we are not to have seen it."

"My sire hath declared for the Archbishop," Marshall said, glowering. "I had thought his example showed that the Archbishop was right in embracing change, and Their Majesties were wrong in their foolish obstinacy."

"Aye," Graz agreed. "Yet if the Archbishop's priest will not say Mass in the presence of the royal heretics, but Father Boquilva will most willingly accord them the Sacraments ..."

"Aye," Ghibelli whispered. "Who is the true heretic, eh? The King, or the Archbishop?"

He whirled to stab a finger at D'Auguste as the young lord came into the hall. "Riddle me that, eh? Thou, who dost ever believe thyself knowledgeable in all things—tell me! Who is faithful to God—His Majesty, or His Grace?"

D'Auguste froze, startled. Then he came forward, frowning. "I cannot see how he can be 'His Grace' when he hath cast us all into so much confusion of spirit. Yet the question for us, milord, is much more to the point: Who shall we march with? The King? Or . . ."

"Our mourners," Graz said softly.

They were all silent, staring at each other, the sudden fact of their own mortality shrouding their souls—the realization that they could die at the headsman's block, though none of them had yet seen twenty-five.

"Who hath declared for the Church?" Glasgow muttered.

"Thy father, Duke Stuart," Ghibelli answered, "and my sire. With him march Earl Marshall and Count Borgia."

There was no sign of relief on any face, but several nods; the young lords had heard only what they had expected.

"For myself," Ghibelli said slowly, "if my lord father doth willingly allow me to go to the block, I care naught."

He swallowed, belying his own words. "At the least, I hold him blameless—nay, honorable and right, to uphold the rights of our estate. I doubt me not an my death will pierce him to the very heart and fuel the fires of his vengeance; he will be doubly determined to bring down this upstart Loguire. Tis for the good of the House of Savoy, and of all the great lords."

The room was silent.

Then Guelph said, "Thou hast the right of it—for myself and my sire. Yet what of our souls, eh? How if Father Boquilva be right and the Archbishop wrong?"

"Aye." Ghibelli met his somber gaze. "I have no great wish to suffer the tortures of the damned for all eternity, for no better reason than that my parent adhered to an heretical cleric."

"Yet," said Chester, "mayhap the Archbishop is right. What of that, eh? And we who adhere to Rome and the King might therefore burn without end."

"Oh, thou hast little concern!" Ghibelli exploded. "Thou wilt have the fullness of thy three score and ten ere thou dost face the Judgment! Thou wilt know the end of this quarrel, and which Church is true; thou wilt have time to recant and repent, an thou hast need of it! Yet we whose sires rebel, we go to the block on the instant, as the King doth saddle his mount!"

"Aye, I have a part free of care," Chester answered, meeting his gaze, "if I am not slain on the field."

Ghibelli was silent, only staring at him.

The young lords all sat, numb, chilled to their souls by the thought.

Then Guelph slapped the table and shouted, "What a pack of great ninnies we are! What fools, what hollow

heads! Here we sit and shudder over words that silly shavepates do bandy! What matters their nattering, in truth?
God is God; they will not change Him!"

"Brave words," Glasgow said bitterly. "Wilt thou recite them as they haul thee to the block?"

"His point is well-taken." D'Auguste finally stepped up to take his seat. "We are the lords of the land; we ken the wielding of power. Dost not see such maneuvering in this?"

The lords were silent, looking at one another in surprise, then slowly beginning to nod.

" 'Tis naught but a jousting for place," Guelph said, with a wolfish grin.

"Why, then, let us regard it as just such a contest." D'Auguste leaned forward, elbows on the table, cocking a forefinger at Ghibelli. "But think, milord—if 'twere a war and we wished to be sure our houses did survive it, how would we proceed?"

"Why ..." Ghibelli stared at him, nonplussed. Then he frowned and answered, "We would be sure our house did have a son on each side."

"The very thing!" D'Auguste slapped the table. "Thus have our ancestors done, time without mind, whenever two great lords did fight o'er the succession. March on the King's side, my lord, and fight as much as thou must, though not more, and thou shall inherit thy father's title and land, if Their Majesties win." Ghibelli stared at him in surprise. Then his eyebrows drew down in suspicion. "Wherefore wouldst thou so advise me, if thou art a King's man? Wouldst thou not wish me to fight with my all?"

"I own I would—yet I will rejoice to see thee in the battle line at all, for thou wilt do more good there than here, with thine head in a basket,"

"Yet how if our sires win?" Glasgow demanded, but Ghibelli turned on him. "Art thou a slow-witted fool? They will know why we have fought on the King's side; they have learned the histories of our houses and their conduct in wars civil as surely as we! Hath it not ever been thus—that a house with two sons did send one to fight for the suzerain and one for the rebel?"

" 'Tis so," Glasgow admitted. "Thou hast the right of it; our fathers must surely forgive the prodigals."

"Aye, and thus we may keep our heads on our—" Ghibelli froze at the thought. "Why, what a craven knave have I become, that I would value my life above mine honor!" He spun to D'Auguste. "Thou hast spoken well and wily, my lord, to tempt me from loyalty to my sire and class! Yet I have seen thee for what thou art, an equivocator and temporizer who doth leap to wherever the main chance doth fall! Get thee behind me, Satan!"

"I have spoken words of sound policy only," D'Auguste said quietly.

"Words of expedience, which are words of treason! This is truly why thou wilt declare for Tuan Loguire, is it not?" And D'Auguste said, "No."

"Now how is this?" The Archbishop whirled, stabbing out an accusing forefinger. "Thou hadst told me our brothers could move the folk to cry against the King, yet now the King's warlocks do counter each last move that ours do make, and doth even turn them against our monks!"

He stood with his back to the windows of the solar, sunlight streaming down behind him, surrounding him with a glow that hid his face in shadow. But Brother Alfonso didn't seem to be impressed; in fact, he had to hold his face carefully immobile to keep the contempt from showing, and modulated his tone to conciliation.

" 'Tis but the sensible move in the game, milord, and we have but to counter it."
"What, to counter a counter? Thou dost speak in riddles, Brother Alfonso! How may we do so?"
"By turning their own thrust against them, milord. They do seek to raise the folk against us clergy—and we may raise them far more easily, 'gainst the witchfolk!"
The Archbishop lifted his head, a wary look coming into his eyes.
"If a great outcry 'gainst the witches rose," Brother Alfonso went on, "the King would scarcely dare to use them, for fear of the mob."
"He would be wise," the Archbishop said, his tone grim. "The mob might quite easily turn against the witches in truth. We might see folk once more burned at the stake, or buried with spikes of wood through their breasts."
Brother Alfonso shrugged. "Such are the hazards."
"Aye, and now, thanks to thy chowderheaded counsel, such a hue and cry could turn 'gainst us of the Order! Nay, the mob might even rise against the monastery!"
"I think not, milord." Brother Alfonso's smile soured. "There is a way to safely advance such a policy. We may show 'tis not witchfolk who are evil, but the King's witches only."
The Archbishop scowled. "And how shall thou do thus?"
"Why, by interdicting only their leaders." Brother Alfonso smiled again, with malice. "Thou mayest simply condemn the High Warlock and his wife as heretics."

"Have you any particular reason for riding to Moltrane Village, Rod?"
It was unusual to have your mode of transportation question your motivation for using it, but Rod always made an exception for Fess. So did the horse, for him.
"Officially, to get a salami to chop up for dinner," Rod answered. "At least, that's what I told Gwen."
"Did she wish to know why you did not go to an inn in Runnymede? It is almost as near."
"She didn't, which means she understands that I need to get away from it all for a while."
"It will scarcely take us an hour to go to Moltrane and back, Rod, even at my slowest pace."
"That's long enough—and frankly, I couldn't justify staying away much longer than that. Just between you and me, Fess, I think this conflict is making Gwen a lot more nervous than any fight we've ever been in before."
"Because of her religious convictions, you mean?"
"Yeah, I think that's why. I didn't even know she had any."
"No doubt she hid them well, Rod, out of consideration for your feelings."
Rod frowned, glaring at the back of the horse's head. "What do you mean by that?"
"She understands that you have an aversion to the outward show of religion, Rod, to its rituals and sacramentals, and therefore restrains her own desire for them."
Rod stared.
"Rod?"
"Yeah, I'm still here. Fess, I don't have an aversion to liturgy—I just don't like religion!"
"You were reared a Catholic, Rod, and when the Faith takes hold of you as a child, it never truly lets go."
"Yeah, early brainwashing." Rod shuddered. "Well, I will admit I have a tendency to play it safe when I think of the afterlife."
"More than that, Rod—underneath your show of agnosticism, you are a very religious man."
"What do you mean? I'm not even sure who Christ was!"
"That does not hinder your belief in Him."
Rod frowned. "I could take offense at that, you know."
"True, but you know that I do not intend any such offense— it is outside my program. Your programming, however, is a product of the Church."

"Is that why I all but hated it for a while?"
"Perhaps, but that only illustrates my point. You may have resented religion, Rod, and you may have rejected it—but you have never been indifferent to it."
Fortunately at that point, they heard the tolling of a nearby chapel bell.
Rod stopped. "That's the Moltrane chime. What's the matter? Flood? Fire?"
Fess lifted his head. "My sensors do not detect any byproducts of combustion, Rod, so it cannot be fire. And we have not had rain for two weeks."
"So it has to be foes. Gallop, Fess! They might need our help!"
But the scene on Moltrane Common was peaceful enough. The peasants crowded around the church steps, with a few late plowmen still running up. Rod reined in as he came even with the cottages, frowning. "All that just for this? What is he, the monk who cried wolf?"
"He is reading aloud, Rod. Presumably it is a communication of great importance."
"I'm leery of communications from the Church, these days." Rod twisted the stone in his ring and pointed it at the priest. The stone was a well-disguised microphone, extremely directional, and the elaborate setting hid an amplifier circuit and miniature transmitter, feeding the signal into the earphone implanted behind Rod's ear.
"Boost your amplification, Fess— I want you to hear this, too."
"'. . . a traitor to Holy Mother the Church,'" the priest was reading, " 'and an infidel and unbeliever. He doth practice his Art in contravention of God's will and the direction of the Church of Gramarye. Therefore do we pronounce the heretics Rod Gallowglass, who doth style himself Lord High Warlock, and his wife Gwendylon, to be no longer in communication with the Church of Gramarye, and as excommunicate, banned from all services and Sacraments, and no longer within our protection against the entrapment of the Devil. Yours in Christ, John Widdecombe, Archbishop of Gramarye.'"
The priest rolled up the parchment with trembling hands, and the peasants burst into furious babbling.
All Rod could say was, "I'm going to have to tell Gwen, aren't I?"

"You must, Rod. Personally. And, I hope, before anyone else can bring her that news."
"Yes." Rod gazed out at the crowd, frowning. "I hate letting her down at a moment like this, but I don't think I should stop to pick up that sausage."
"I am damned! I am bound to eternal hellfire!"
"No you're not, darling." Rod knelt beside Gwen, pleading. "It's just a bunch of words."
"Words of an Archbishop! No! Do not touch me! 'Tis thou hast brought me to this, thou and thy pride, that would not allow thee to bow to the man of God! No!"
"But I haven't changed what I believe!"
"Yet thou art excommunicated! And I with thee!" She spun about, her face in her hands.
"Excommunicated!
Nevermore to have the Sacraments! Nevermore to receive God's grace! Oh, thou hast woefully wronged me now and again, Rod Gallowglass, yet never so badly as this!"
"But it wasn't me who did it, it was—"
" 'Twas done to thee! And I am under its ban for being thy wife! Though aye, I must own I have done grievous wrong to the Church also, in giving aid and support to Their Majesties 'gainst the Archbishop! Oh, what a vile sinner am I!"
"You're a heroinel" Rod exploded. "Time and again you've been the only wall between the poor, good

people and
the greedy, selfish men who wanted to grind them into the dirt!"
"I cannot be good if the priests so execrate me!"
"But you didn't go up against the Church—you just followed where I led!"
"Aye, and shamed am I to have done so! 'Tis my soul, mine, and 'twas for me to decide whether to
take God's
part or thine! How could I have been so blind as not to see thou didst stray into Satan's net!"
"It's the Archbishop who's going to the Devil!" Rod howled. "You know that! You've watched him
move, step by
step, away from the Pope and toward the sins he himself preaches against!"
Gwen stood transfixed, pale as a shroud, wordless, staring at him.
He didn't know whether she was going to break or rally, but he had to try something. "You are as
good as any
human being

can be! You are patient, gentle, giving, and loving! You have never faltered for an instant in
your faith in God's
goodness or my redeemability! Never in any way, as long as I've known you, have you done anything
the Church
preaches against!"
"I have taken arms," Gwen whispered. "I have fought in wrath, I have slain men!"
"But only in defense of the people they were trying to kill! Only when you were caught between
Commandments! Oh, sure, you've lost your temper now and then—but only a saint could have kept it,
with our
four little imps! And the saints wouldn't have dared come anywhere near them!"
Gwen stared at him in a silence that stretched on for so long Rod was afraid she would break, but
he didn't dare
speak another word. He'd said all that he could; anything more might push her away from him
forever.
Then her shoulders began to shake.
Tears? he thought, in a panic. Or laughter?
Her mouth curved, and she began to giggle.
Rod almost caved in.
The giggle swelled into laughter and she collapsed into a chair, sprawling helplessly as her howls
of glee shook
the house. Rod found himself laughing, too, and couldn't help wondering why his cheeks were wet.
He staggered
over and collapsed next to her, kneeling as he fell, arms outstretched, and she fell into them,
rocking back and
forth with him in a gale of mirth.
Finally they quieted, and Gwen wiped her eyes as she gasped, "Aye, 'tis foolish, is't not? When I
have seen this
very priest stray into sin, and do yet hearken to his words?"
"He excommunicated himself," Rod pointed out, "when he separated from Rome. He's the one who
opened up
the heresy business."
"'Tis true." Gwen nodded. "Rome would call him an heretic, would it not?"
"The Pope and every soul in the College of Cardinals," Rod assured her. "So what are you, if
you're heretical to a
heretic?"
"One of the faithful, to be sure." The amusement was fading into something grim. "We are still of
the Roman
Church, my lord, are we not?"
"Sure," Rod said quickly. "We haven't repudiated it."
"And this was a most wily snare of Satan's, that did both

tempt and afright me into deserting the True Church." Owen's tone hardened. "Had it not been for
thee, my lord,
I would have fallen into his net." •
"Oh, no, I wouldn't say I deserve credit—"
"Thou never dost," she cut him off. "Thou hast humility, among thine other virtues; how could I

have thought
thee a sinner?"
"Uh ..."
"Be still," she commanded. "/ will number thy virtues, sin that thou wilt not. Yet, my lord ..."
She turned to him,
frowning, puzzled. "How may we say which is right, when two churches each say it is sole and true?
And how
can we know which is right—the one that doth say we are damned, or the one that doth say we are
not?"
"It's really up to God, isn't it?" Rod said gently.
"Aye, certes, yet how are we to know?"
"Same way the churchmen do—try to listen to Him. And just in case you don't hear anything, check
your
conscience. At the bottom of your heart, do you honestly think you've done anything really
sinful?"
Gwen was still, and Rod held his breath.
"In my youth, mayhap," she said finally, "though I think our children have given me ample
opportunity to atone."
Rod heaved a sigh of .relief. "So it's the Archbishop and his henchmen who're the sinners, not
us."
"Aye, 'tis he doth sin, and most grievously, in bringing this confusion of the soul upon us, by
separating from
Rome." Then her eyes widened. "Did I truly say that?"
"Don't worry about it," Rod soothed.
"I will not," she said, with decision. "And now, my lord, by our Archbishop's accounting, I am
truly an heretic."
"Only on Gramarye, dear," Rod assured her, "and only in five counties."
"I couldn't believe she'd taken such a medieval attitude." Rod shook his head, flabbergasted.
"Wherefore not, Rod? She is, after all, a medieval woman."
"Yeah." Rod frowned. "I keep forgetting that, just because she's so intelligent and responsible,
and has managed
to learn everything I've learned, and does just as much on the national level as I do, and—"

Fess emitted a rumbling noise, the robot's equivalent of clearing his throat.
"Oh! Yes, I was kind of running on there, wasn't I?" Rod pursed his lips. "At least it's
understandable, how I
forget."
"Understandable, yes. But she was raised in a medieval society, Rod, and early attitudes are
fundamental; they
are always there, at the bottom of the personality."
"Yes." Rod nodded. "The wonder is not that she went berserk for a few minutes, but that she
managed to come
back."
The Archbishop was in his scriptorium, appointing bishops. He smiled as he wrote, dipping his pen
in the inkwell
with zest and signing his name with a flourish.
"... art hereby created Bishop of Tudor, to be confirmed by the laying on of hands when tide and
times allow, at
our abbey here in the House of St. Vidicon. Till that time doth come, ward thy flock well, and
guide them in the
true way of our Church. John Widdecombe, Archbishop of Gramarye."
"Theodore Obrise, Bishop of Stuart," he said as he sprinkled sand over the ink.
Brother Alfonso wrote Father Obrise's name carefully on the roster of bishops.
The Archbishop shook the sand off the parchment, rolled it, and handed it to a rather pale Brother
Anho, who
melted sealing wax onto the rolled edge, then held it while the Archbishop pressed his signet ring
into the pool.
He turned and laid it on the stack for the messenger as the Archbishop turned back to the desk and
took a clean
sheet of parchment. "Now. Who is chaplain to the Earl Tlidor?"

"Father Gregory McKenzie," Brother Alfonso replied.

"To the Reverend Gregory McKenzie," the Archbishop wrote, "in the name of the Lord, greetings. Knowing thee to be steadfast in the Faith . . ."

Father McKenzie unrolled the parchment with a frown. "What hath His Grace to tell me, Brother Lionel, that may not be said by word of mouth?"

The messenger put down his mug and wiped foam from his moustache. "I know not, Father; I but bear the scroll."

" 'To the Reverend Gregory McKenzie,'" the priest read; but as he went on, his eyes widened. When he finished, he

looked up, eyes glowing, lips trembling as he tried to confine them to only a small smile. "I thank thee for this good news, Brother. Wilt thou bear messages for me, to all the parish priests in Tudor?"

"Father Obrise doth wish speech with thee, milord."

"The priest?" Earl Stuart ran his hand over the withers of his new chestnut stallion, frowning. "What doth he wish?"

"He will not say, milord, yet he is pale as a January hillside."

Stuart lifted his head, then turned slowly away from the stallion. "Bid him come." He went out of the paddock, a footman closing the gate behind him, and stood, feet apart, arms akimbo, as the priest came up. "God save thee, Father."

"And thee, my lord." The old man's lips were pressed tight, and his hand trembled as he held out the parchment scroll. "I hold here a letter from Milord Archbishop."

Stuart braced himself. "Read it me."

The priest unrolled the parchment with a sigh; he knew well that Earl Stuart had never spared the time to learn to read. " 'To the Reverend Axel Obrise, from the Reverend John Widdecombe, by the grace of God Archbishop of Gramarye . .

When he had finished, he rolled up the parchment, straightening as much as he could and gazing directly into Earl Stuart's eyes.

"Well, then," the Earl said, with a taut smile, "thou art my bishop henceforth. Shall I congratulate thee?"

"Nay," Father Obrise said, "for I cannot accept this appointment."

The earl lost his smile, and the two men stared at one another in taut silence. Then the earl said, "Wherefore canst thou not?"

"For that I cannot in all good conscience part from the Church of Rome."

Earl Stuart stared at him, his eyes two chips of ice. Then he said, "Thou art lately come to this piety."

" 'Tis my shame," the old priest acknowledged. "I did delay, hoping His Grace would cease his vanity; yet he doth persist. Now I find that I can no longer endure in silence."

The earl nodded slowly. "And thou canst no longer be chaplain here." He turned to a nearby guardsman. "Escort Father Obrise to our most pleasant dungeon cell."

The young soldier blanched, but came forward to do as he was bid.

The altar bell rang, and Earl Tudor knelt for morning mass-but when he looked up, he stared in horror at the apparition before him. It was Father McKenzie as always, but the chaplain was holding a crozier and wearing a bishop's mitre on his head.

"Dominus Vobiscum," the priest intoned. "Ere we begin the Mass, I shall ask thee to rejoice with me—for, by authority of our good Archbishop, I am elevated to the rank of Bishop of Tudor." He held up his hands, but there was no outcry of delight, for Earl Tudor was standing, pale-faced and trembling.

"Reverend Father," he grated, "thou canst not be made bishop by Abbot Widdecombe, for he doth lack authority. The Pope hath not named him Archbishop."

"So I had thought, my lord." The priest turned to the Earl, lifting his head a bit. "Yet I am now persuaded of the lightness of his cause."

"Aye, for that he will make thee a bishop! Nay, I shall not have the Church of Gramarye within these precincts! Thou mayest no longer be chaplain here."

"My lord, 'tis not for thee to—"

"Sir Willem!" the Earl snapped. "Thou, and a guard of six men, take this overweening friar in all his finery and escort him to the eastern border, where he may cross to the estates of the Due di Medici! He will find greater hospitality there, where the Church of Gramarye doth hold sway!"

Sir Willem stiffened, beckoned to his guardsmen, and came forward to surround the chaplain, who stared at them, shocked. They escorted him from the chapel, and the earl turned to the seneschal. "Send to Count Rhys, and bid him send Father Glen to us here."

"Hapsburg! Tudor! Romanov! Ruddigore!" The Archbishop slapped each parchment down onto his desktop.

"Ruddigore, even Ruddigore! Though our house doth lie within the baronet's demesne! Not a one of these arrogant noblemen but hath flouted mine appointment of his bishop!"

"Vile are they, indeed," Brother Alfonso hissed, "yet not so vile as the priests who did refuse thy commissions."

"Vile? Nay, more—they are heretics! And are therefore hereby cast out of the Order and the priesthood! Draw up a proclamation so stating, Brother Alfonso, for my signature."

"I shall, my lord," the secretary purred. "Yet be of good heart—Bishop McKenzie and Bishop Vogel did declare loyalty to thee."

"Aye, yet only for that they would gain croziers thereby! Still, the attempt was most surely worthy, and 'tis to be lamented they could not sway their lords." The Archbishop shook his head. "I could almost wish the King's lords had imprisoned them; then might their congregations have risen in outrage."

"Their lordships took the course of wisdom," Brother Alfonso regretfully agreed, "in only exiling them."

"Aye, and here are McKenzie and Vogel among us again." The Archbishop frowned. "Yet they shall keep their rank, aye, and shall be bishops in absentia. And . . ." He lifted his head slowly, a smile touching his lips. "For those recreant monks whom we shall declare unfrocked, let us appoint other absent bishops, that all the land may know their sees await them!"

"Excellently thought, my lord!" It was so excellent, in fact, that it made Brother Alfonso nervous; the Archbishop wasn't supposed to think for himself. "The more so for that it shall weld these new bishops more ardently to thy cause! Who shall thou choose?"

"Father Rigori," the Archbishop said slowly, "and Father Hasty. There are also Father Samizdat, Father Roma, and Father Rhone. . . ."

Rod stepped out to gaze up into the sky, to let the infinite vastness of the stars calm his soul by making him realize how little the absurd strivings and conflicts of his minuscule mortal kind really mattered.

He should have known better.

An elf popped up next to his shin. "Lord Warlock! The friars in the log house do call for thee!"

"Father Boquilva?" Rod asked. "What's wrong now?"

"I do not know, save that he did step without his door and cry, 'Wee folk, if thou dost hear me, call the High

Warlock!'"

"Oh. He did." Rod nodded. "Interesting. Practicality wins out over theology. You elves are supposed to be

superstition, but when he needs you badly enough, he calls. Yes, this order does derive from the Jesuits. Okay,

tell him I'm coming."

Rod turned into the lane toward the chapter house and saw Father Boquilva hurrying toward him with a lamp in

his hand. At least, the priest's face looked as though he were hurrying, but his pace matched the slower

movements of the stocky man beside him, who was strangely dressed for a Cathodean. For any Gramaryan, for

that matter. He was wearing a black coverall—with a Roman collar.

Rod stood taut, all his danger signals screaming. The man was from off-planet.

Then he remembered that the man was also clergy, and if he wasn't trying to disguise himself, was probably a friend.

"Good evening," he said. "Did I send for you?"

Father Boquilva gasped, but the stranger looked up with a merry glint in his eye. "In a manner of speaking, you

did—and as I remember, your manner of speaking was a bit abrupt. You're the, uh, 'High Warlock,' I take it?"

"They call me that, even though I have less to do with spirits than you do." Rod held out a hand.

"Rod

Gallowglass, Father."

"A pleasure." The man took his hand. His grip was warm and strong, and his smile broadened. As his face came

close to the lamplight, Rod could see that he had thinning, close-cropped graying hair, and a neatly trimmed,

grizzled beard. "But how did you guess my alcohol intake?"

"Easy—you're a priest. Mass once a day, with at least a thimbleful of wine. Not to mention the other kind of

spirits."

"Thank you; I'll try not to. I'm McGee."

"The Reverend Morris McGee," Father Boquilva said stiffly, "Father-General of our Order!"

Rod froze, staring at the priest. "You just may be the answer to the prayer I didn't quite phrase."

"I remember it being closer to a threat, actually. His Holiness was good enough to read it to me." McGee turned

back to Father Boquilva. "If you would, Father, we would appreciate the hospitality of your house for a few

hours longer."

"Of course, Reverend Father. Our house is yours—in more than name." Father Boquilva turned away toward the

door, his back ramrod straight.

And his tone had been stiff enough to iron a shirt on. Rod fell in beside McGee and leaned over to mutter in his

ear, "Who's being rebuked, me or you?"

McGee looked up at him with delight. "Quite so, Lord Warlock, quite so! I believe I am a trifle too, ah, informal,

for Father Boquilva's taste."

Rod nodded. "After all, you're almost a legendary figure to him. You could at least have the courtesy to be tall, lean, and grim."

"Oh! Yes, I must try." McGee stood up a little straighter and went a few steps with a stiff-legged stride, scowling fero-

ciously. Then he relaxed and looked up at Rod. "Something along that line?" Rod held up a thumb-and-forefinger circle. "You have it down pat."

"Thank you--and thank you for the guidance," McGee chuckled. "I think we shall get along famously." The monks were moving about in a daze, and whenever they sneaked a peek at the Father-General, their faces were loaded with awe, even fear.

"They'll grow used to it," McGee said, but he eyed them sympathetically. "They never should have been left so completely out of touch with the rest of the Order for so long, Lord Warlock."

"'Rod,' please ..."

"No, 'Lord Warlock,' by your leave--I must learn to think in your terms, and quickly."

Rod bowed his head. "As you wish, but if you really think the situation's so urgent, why didn't you come sooner?"

"Ah! I began trying to clear my schedule as soon as Father Uwell reported to me, but there are so many chapters, with the good souls of fifty planets under their care! And from Father Al's report, matters were in good order here." The Father-General shook his head. "I should have realized that, if the Abbot had been tempted toward opposing the King once, he might be so again."

"Well, don't blame him too hard. I'm pretty sure it's not just his idea alone, Father."

"Oh?" McGee's gaze seemed to probe into Rod's brain. "Who would have helped him?"

"Secret agents." Rod gave him back stare for stare. "I have reason to believe there are two separate off-planet groups trying to subvert the government and take over the planet, Father. I think one of them got to him."

McGee nodded, without taking his gaze away. "I'd think you were paranoid, if I didn't know you were an agent of SCENT."

"Why doubt it?" Rod shrugged, impressed by the thoroughness of McGee's briefing. "I could be both."

"True," the Father-General admitted. "Still, Widdecombe has declared a schism, Lord Warlock, and Rome earnestly wishes to heal the breach."

"They won't tolerate it, you mean? But at this point, Father, the only way to eliminate the schism is to eliminate the Archbishop."

"Abbot." McGee raised an admonishing forefinger. "Only an Abbot, Lord Warlock--we mustn't forget that. The congregations of Gramarye are of the Church of Rome, no matter what a misguided soul has told them."

"And the Cathodeans of Gramarye are part of your Order?" Rod smiled. "Do you think the Abbot will accept that, Reverend?"

"Whether he does or not is of no consequence." McGee waved a hand, palm flat and level. "I have faith in my monks."

Rod could have raised the question of ownership, but he liked McGee's attitude--for his own purposes, of course. "Well, most of the current crop of friars seem to have been very willing to follow the

Abbot off the straight and narrow path. If you'll pardon my saying so, they're a little weak on the virtues they preach."

McGee winced. "You must not judge them too harshly, Lord Warlock. Be mindful, the Abbot and his clergy are only human; they, too, are fallible. The Word of Christ, and His Sacraments, are a treasure more precious than gold, but we hold--"

". . . this treasure in an earthen vessel.'" Rod finished the quotation, nodding. "Yeah, yeah, I know the song, too, Father. But why does there have to be so doggone much earth in the vessel?"

"How else can one make ceramics?" McGee countered.

Rod's mouth twisted in impatience. "Father, if I tried to fire a vessel with that much earth in it, it would fall apart in the kiln—which is exactly where I'm tempted to put His Grace the quondam Archbishop."

"Patience, Lord Warlock, patience." McGee lifted the forefinger again. "That kiln you speak of is only for God's stoking, and if the Abbot and his monks are fallible, they are also redeemable. We may yet find a way to woo himself and his adherents back to the Church."

"Good luck, Father," Rod sighed, "but you'll pardon me if I remain skeptical. A power-hungry ecclesiastic is power-hungry first, and an ecclesiastic second. In fact, he's probably

an ecclesiastic only as a means of gaining power. Personally, I think the clergy started with a Paleolithic con man,"

McGee reddened, but didn't mention anything about courtesy. "Why Paleolithic?"

"Because there are signs that Neanderthals buried their dead, and I personally doubt they were trying to salt away stores for the winter. And you have to admit that the ancient Egyptian priests pretty effectively took over the government when they decided that the Pharaoh was a god."

"Ah! But that could just as easily have been the government taking over the priests," McGee countered. "Still, I take your point, Lord Warlock—when Church and government have mixed, the results have generally been unhealthy. Nonetheless, you must admit that even though there have always been some opportunists in holy orders, there have also been many truly dedicated religious people who happened to have an aptitude for administration, and have naturally tended to move up in the hierarchy."

"No, I don't have to admit anything, Father." Rod cocked his head to the side, studying McGee.

"Still, I do think you're right. But even some of those good souls have succumbed to temptation, and started seeking power for its own sake."

McGee watched him keenly. "Are you thinking of your local abbot now?"

"I am," Rod admitted. "From what I know of him, he's basically a good man, in spite of his being a reasonably competent bureaucrat."

"Ah." McGee nodded, pleased. "Then he may be open to appeals to his conscience, and capable of repentance."

"Yeah, but by the same token, he might reject any idea that he's done wrong."

McGee frowned. "How do you reason that?"

"Because," Rod said, exasperated, "it's the only way he can avoid massive guilt. Once he gave in to temptation, he became a convert to his own particular vice, with all the fanaticism of any convert. You might say he's acquired a vested interest in sin, and to disown it would be to ruin him. No, Father, I think he's

gone too far down
the road he's on to be able to come back again."
"He may have crossed his Rubicon," McGee admitted, "though I certainly hope not. Why do you think so, Lord Warlock?"

"Because of the tactics he's using. You see, Reverend Sir ..." Rod glanced up at the hovering monks, then hunkered down and lowered his voice. "How much did Father Al tell you about our local variety of, uh . . . magic?"

"As much as he knew, Lord Warlock—that an astonishing percentage of your people are functioning espers of one degree of proficiency or another."
"Good enough, as a summary. And, well, Father, suddenly there's been an unusual number—hell, there's been an outright epidemic of hauntings and poltergeists and unlicensed mind-readers, all spooking the population and driving them toward the Abbot's camp."
McGee frowned, then turned and beckoned Father Boquilva over. As the head monk sat, McGee asked, "Has there been an unusual amount of 'magical' activity lately?"
Boquilva stiffened, then slowly nodded. "I blush to admit it, Reverend Sir, but there has."
McGee's face darkened. "Can it be that a man of the Church would dare to use his flock's superstitions to coerce them into accord with his will?"
Rod shrugged. "Why not? Priests have been doing it for centuries."
"That was not worthy of you, Lord Warlock," McGee snapped. "You know quite well that the Church has done all it can to enlighten its people!"
"Well, yes, I do have to admit that," Rod sighed. "In fact, when the Church wouldn't provide enough superstition, people went out and invented their own."
"Yes, and frequently became lost and tortured in the maze of their own imaginings—which is why it is doubly reprehensible for the chief clergyman of the nation to reinforce those superstitions, by producing illusions of them!" McGee shook his head, scowling. "How does one fight nightmares, Lord Warlock?"
"With dreams, Father." Rod smiled. "Been doing it all my life."
Father McGee raised his hand in blessing over the kneeling monks, murmuring some Latin phrases, then watched them as they rose and turned away, following the path away from Rod's house and back into the woods. Then the Father-General looked down at his monk's robe, pressing his hands over the fabric. "I had never thought I would wear a real monk's robe! It's so much more comfortable than a coverall. But, ah ... a trifle more, shall we say, insecure?"
"Nobody said that only pilgrims could gird their loins, Father. I'm sure we can find you a strip of linen, if you'd like." "I would appreciate that." McGee looked back up at the retreating monks. Their robes were obscured by the darkness now, so that they appeared to be only a double file of torch fires. "Excellent fellows! I'm sure they'll recover from meeting me." He turned back to Rod with a smile. "Still, their awe is a bit uncomfortable, for the time being. I do appreciate your invitation, Lord Warlock—my sons' reverence is pleasant, but tiring. Are you certain, though, that your good wife will not object?"

"Believe me, Father, I know. The system we've got beats radio and visiphone all to he— uh, heck. As long as you don't mind sleeping in the same house with a family of witches."

"Oh, I would, if you really were witches," McGee said, "devoted to Satan and to evil. But I know you to be espers, devoted to good, and according to Father Uwell's report, perhaps better Catholics than you may know."

Rod paused in the act of raising the knocker, frowning. "What's he know that I don't know?" Fortunately, the door swung open before McGee could answer.

Gwen stared at the priest, frankly awed, then curtsied and stood aside. "Welcome to our home, Father."

"Why, thank you, milady." The priest stepped in, raised his hand to sketch the Sign of the Cross in the air, and intoned, "May the blessing of God be on all in this house." Then he looked up at Gwen with a guilty afterthought. "If you don't mind?"

"Oh, nay, Father! We are honored!"

"Well, that's a relief. I'd hate to bless anybody who didn't want it. By the way, where are 'all in this house'?"

"In their beds, praise Heaven, and asleep—though 'twas quite some time ere I could calm them sufficiently, after Cordelia's news."

Rod wondered what form the calming had taken this time. Shouting? Birch switches? Hypnotism?

"It's so nice to be an occasion! May I sit?"

"Oh, of course, Father! Wouldst thou wish ale?"

McGee looked up, his eyes lighting. "Why, yes, I would, now that you mention it! My sons in the forest are to be commended for their piety, but plain water can become a bit boring, no matter how tasty the brook it was taken from. Yes, that will do nicely. Thank you, milady."

" 'Tis my pleasure, Father." Gwen sat across the fire from him, beaming. "Hast thou truly come from another star to aid us?"

"Don't pay any attention to her 'humble local' bit, Father— she's been to Terra herself."

"Well, true." Gwen lowered her gaze. "Still, I am amazed thou couldst be with us so quickly."

"The Holy Father counts the planet of Gramarye to be of considerable importance, milady; faith that keeps a whole population within the bounds of doctrine for five centuries is rare."

"Besides," Rod inferred, "you'd rather be drawn and quartered before you'd lose a chapter of your Order. And the Pope is aware of just how much havoc we could wreak if we started trying."

"There is some (ruth to that," Father McGee admitted, "and the sudden explosion of hauntings here is evidence of it. Tell me, milady, have you noticed any effects of this sudden plague of ghosts on the faith of the peasants?"

"Aye, Father, and 'tis sad to see." Gwen sobered. "Many among them do begin to doubt the goodness of the clergy."

"Just as I feared, just as I feared," McGee muttered, staring at the fire. "The schism would have shaken their faith enough, but ghosts and goblins would finish the job. I shudder to think of the effect on the children—they are so ready to believe whatever they see! Yet they are also so steadfast in the faith and love they've given."

"Pretty good description of it," Rod said, rising from his chair. "In fact, I think I'll just take a peak at our resident fanatic."

"He rests soundly, my lord," Gwen protested, turning to watch him go to the door of the boys' room.

"I take it one of your children suffers from an excess of faith?" McGee asked quietly.

Gwen denied it with an impatient toss of her head. "Tis only that the boy doth feel the pull of a vocation, Father.

It doth worry his father unduly."

McGee sat still for a moment, then asked, "How old is the lad?"

"He is seven."

"Rather young," McGee said, frowning, "and, though the call may come at any age, those who—"

"Gwen." There was panic under Rod's tone, and she was at the doorway to the boys' room almost before he

finished the word. She gasped, then ran in.

Gregory lay stiffly, his whole body trembling with silent sobs.

"Nay, my jo, nay!" Gwen gathered him up in her arms. "Oh, my poor babe! Whatever 'twas, lad, 'twill not hurt

thee; lo, 'tis gone!"

Rod stroked the boy's back and bit his tongue, also his panic. Gwen was better able to maintain her composure in

this kind of situation; the best he could do was give moral support.

He could see the boy go limp as she stroked his head, crooning, and the sobs suddenly became huge and racking.

Geoffrey lifted his head from the next bed, awake and wondering, and Gwen picked up her youngest and took

him out of the room, to spare him embarrassment, and his brother wakefulness. Rod stayed just long enough to

assure Geoffrey, "He's all right, son. Back to sleep now, hm?" Geoffrey collapsed back into his bedclothes, and

Rod stepped out the door, hoping he wasn't a liar.

Gwen sat in the mellow light of the tallow lamps, in the big chair McGee had just vacated, rocking Gregory and

crooning till the sobs passed. The Father-General gazed down at her, then looked a question at Rod, who

hesitated a moment, then shook his head, motioning for McGee to stay in the room.

The sobs eased, almost ceased, and Gwen murmured, "Now, lad. What frightened thee?" And when the boy only

wept, she pressed, "Was it a foul dream?" Gregory nodded, and she urged, "Tell it me."

"I ... was old, Mama," Gregory mumbled, and Rod breathed a sigh of relief. "Old, and . . . alone."

"Alone?" Gwen sighed. "Well, some old folk are. What had made thee so?"

"I . . . had gone to become a monk, and . . . as I aged, I forsook even their company, for an hermitage in the

wood." Anger blazed. Rod snapped, "Who's been telling this boy about—"

Gwen glared a dagger at him, and he bit off the rest of the sentence. She was right; the boy needed sympathy

now. Any anger, he would construe as being aimed at him.

"There are holy hermits," Gwen admitted. "Yet they are not truly alone, lad, for their lives are filled with the

company of God."

Foul! Rod wanted to scream. They go crazy with loneliness! But he held his peace, and managed to keep the

thoughts unvoiced; Gregory would certainly have picked them up if he had. Rod wondered if he should leave,

get as far away as he could; certainly his own emotions must be agitating the boy even more. But Gwen caught

the thought, looked up, and shook her head as she said, "They go apart for study of holy books and contemplation of the Word of God, my son."

"Aye, so I dreamt," the boy sniffled, "and so I had. But ... oh, Mama! Thou wert not there, nor was Papa! Nor

Magnus, nor Geoff, nor Cordelia, nor even Diarmid! And life seemed so . . ."he groped for the word. "Empty?"

"Aye, empty. Without purpose. Oh, Mama! How could such a life be holy, without any folk to be good for?"

What could Rod say? That Gregory wasn't the first one to ask that question, nor would be the last?

At least for him it was only a dream--so far. But the boy had calmed enough to catch the thought. He looked up at his father, eyes wide. "Is that truly what my life must be?" There was terror just under the words, and Rod hastened to assure him, "No. It doesn't have to. You have the choice, son." "Yet I do wish to study!" Gregory protested. "Not just Holy Writ, though--the plants, and the animals, and the stars . . . Oh, Papa! There is so much to learn!" Well, there spoke the born scholar. "But you can have other people around, and still find time to study, son." "I cannot possibly, Papa! So much study as I wish, must needs leave small time for converse!" His eyes widened in horror. "Yet without folk to study for, what is the purpose of knowledge?" "To bring one closer to God," McGee murmured. Gregory whirled to stare at him, almost shocked. Before he could protest, Rod stepped into the breach. "Son, we have a guest tonight. He is the Reverend Morris McGee, Father-General of the Cathodeans." Gregory stared. "The Abbot?" "No, the Abbot's abbot." McGee smiled. "I am leader of all the chapters of the Order of St. Vidicon, lad." Gregory forgot his nightmare in awe. "All the monks, on all the planets that circle all the stars?" "Only the fifty that have Terran humans on them." McGee glanced at Rod. "I thought your people were innocent of the rest of the Terran Sphere, Lord Warlock." "Well, of course, my own children are going to have to suffer through a modern education, Father. But don't worry, they all know better than to let anyone else know." " 'Twould fash them unduly," Gregory explained, his eyes still wide. "Nay, thou knowest all about the life of a monk, then, dost thou not?" "All," McGee confirmed, poker-faced. "And I assure you, lad, that you don't have to be a monk in order to try to learn all you can about everything." "Yet thou dost think such learning would lead one toward God." "If one really studies everything, and pursues it far enough, yes--or so I believe." McGee turned his gaze toward Rod. "Perceptive little chap, isn't he?" "Only three leaps ahead of me, most of the time." Rod turned to Gregory. "You heard it from the Order's mouth, son." "Yet surely one must go off alone to study so much!" "Hermitage is not necessary," Father McGee said firmly, "though you might want to think seriously before you married. If you wish to have a family, they must be more important to you than your studies." "So that if study is to be more important to me, I should not wed?" "So I believe." McGee nodded. "That is why many scholars become monks--so that they may still have human companionship, but be able to devote their lives primarily to study. Still, that is only true of a few Orders; ours is one of them. Many others are primarily concerned with praying." Gregory nodded slowly. "Thus could a man have solitude to concentrate all his thoughts on study, yet still have times when he is in company." It was positively weird, hearing statements like that coming

out of the mouth of a seven-year-old, and Rod always had to fight to remember that, emotionally, he was still a very small boy. But it didn't seem to faze Father McGee. He simply nodded, very seriously, and came over to the boy. "All true, lad—if the man's studies are directed toward learning as much as he can about God, through His creations. Yet if you wish to study the universe by itself, without the need to find a connection between God and every slightest phenomenon, you might wish to be a scholar, but not a monk."

Rod breathed a sigh of relief; he had just heard an intellectual Emancipation Proclamation. But Gregory frowned. "I do not understand." "Why, it's simply this." McGee pulled up a straight chair and sat down. "A vocation to study does not, by itself, mean that you have a vocation to the priesthood." Rod could see the little boy relax, a little outside, hugely inside. "I may be a scholar, yet not a monk?"

McGee nodded. "That is the way of it. The two can be quite separate, you see." "Yet where can I find companionship, if I do not become a monk?"

"Why, wherever you may. Hindu holy men sometimes built their hermitages near villages, so that they could be there if they were needed. Ancient Taoists were supposed to build their villages near a hermit's mountain, so that they could follow his example." McGee smiled. "You might even consider gathering other scholars about you, founding the first university on Gramarye."

He gazed at the boy, smiling, and after a few minutes Gregory began to smile, too. And from that moment, in his parents' eyes, Father McGee could do no wrong.

17

The trestles had been folded and laid against the wall, and the tabletops had been stacked. The refectory in the Runnymede chapter house had been converted into a dormitory, each monk rolling out a pallet that wasn't much harder than the cot he'd been sleeping on in the monastery. It was midnight, and the • friars slept the deep, dreamless sleep of men exhausted by physical labor. Only the moonbeams through the windows lent a touch of life to the great room.

In the center of the room a ghost appeared, a smokelike form of a man. The smoke thickened, growing more and more substantial, until it began to gain the brown of a monk's robe with the pink of a tonsure atop a lean, lantern-jawed face. The fiery eyes finally became clear, and the monk dropped the few inches to the hard-packed dirt floor with a soft thud. He looked around at the sleeping forms, and a tear rolled from his eye as he lifted a dagger. He stepped up to the nearest monk, gasping, "Fools, poor weak fools, to be so led astray! Yet thou art nonetheless apostates, and must needs die! Eh, Brother Alfonso is right in this!"

The knife stabbed down in a short, vicious arc. Brother Lurgan convulsed into a ball, coming awake for one searing instant of agony. He made no sound, but his mind let out a tearing shriek of pain and fear before it ceased utterly, and every monk sat bolt upright, staring and crying out in panic as

they felt the insubstantial essence of the man lift away from them. The assassin yanked his knife free and spun, swinging it down at Father Boquilva. Boquilva shouted, blocking the attacker's forearm with his own and driving a fist into his belly.

The lean monk doubled over in breathless pain, and Father Boquilva caught the wrist, slamming the knife hand against his knee. The blade clattered on the floor as Boquilva shouted, "Brother Somnel! Hasten!" A short, fat monk hurried up, glaring at the lean attacker who was struggling for breath. His glare softened into a brooding gaze, and all at once the assassin's body went slack. He crumpled to the floor. All the monks were silent for a moment of horror; then the assassin's chest rose and fell, and they felt the surge of a sleeping mind. They relaxed with sighs of relief. "Light!" Father Boquilva called, and the tallow lamps flickered into life. Then the monks saw who lay unconscious on the floor and cried out in horror. "Tis Brother Janos!" "Gentle Brother Janos!" "How can this be?" Brother Axel knelt beside the assassin, tears in his eyes. "He is a true scholar! Twas he who did come to know the means by which we appear and disappear!" "Aye, and did learn thereby to control it more shrewdly, so that he might appear as slowly as he wished, and thereby with as little noise." Father Boquilva frowned. "Nay, certes he would be chosen as assassin!" "And what hath he done?" moaned Brother Clyde. The monks all turned to stare at Brother Lurgan's dead body curled up in the flickering glow, and caught their breath in sorrow. Father Boquilva fell on his knees beside the unconscious assassin and caught up his head, holding it between his two hands and staring. "Brother Janos! That he could do such a deed!" Brother Clyde cried. "He, who was ever a wise and gentle man!" "Yet he burned with zeal, Brother," Father Hector reminded him, "and was intensely devoted to the Order." "And therefore to the Abbot." Brother Clyde nodded heavily. "Aye, he might view us as traitors. Yet surely he would not think to slay!" "He did not." Father Boquilva's voice was weighted with grimness. "Another did put the thought into his mind, nay, did harangue him and accuse him till he was convinced of our

wrongness and the need for our slaying—for he was ever great of mind, yet was ever simple of soul. As much as he understood of the cosmos, so little did he understand of human nature. Nay, he was manipulated as surely as a marionette in a Christmas play." "And who pulled his strings, Father?" Brother Clyde demanded, his face somber. "Why dost thou ask?" said Father Hector, with a grimace. "Who but Brother Alfonso?" Father Boquilva looked up and nodded. Brother Clyde's face darkened, and his fists clenched into cannon balls. "I shall be revenged upon him!" "Tis for God to revenge!" Father Boquilva snapped, coming to his feet. "Nay, Brother, be not misled by Satan!" "Yet may I not be God's instrument in this?" Brother Clyde implored. "Mayhap, yet I misdoubt me of it." "Who shall be, then?" "One who, praise Heaven, hath come!" Father Boquilva turned to Brother Somnel. "Do thou stay by Brother Janos and keep his sleep deep, aye, and dreamless." Brother Somnel only nodded, his gaze on the sleeping assassin. "Come with me now, and call." Father Boquilva beckoned Brother Clyde and turned away to heft the bar out of its staples and open the door. He stepped out into the night with the friar hot on his heels, crying, "Wee Folk,

hear me!"

"Wee Folk, hear!" Brother Clyde called.

"I beg thee, call the High Warlock! Bid him bring our Father-General to us as soon as he may, for we have grievous, woeful tasks laid upon us now! Call him, I beg thee!"

"Call him, call him," Brother Clyde echoed with tears in his eyes.

Moonlight striped the middle of the bed, enough to show Rod and Gwen, loosely embraced, deeply asleep.

A small figure approached their bed slowly, then climbed the headboard to call softly, "Lord Warlock."

Rod lay absolutely still, but his eyes opened wide. He glanced about until he saw Puck. The elf laid a finger across his lips, then sprang silently to the floor, beckoning.

Rod slid out of bed, stepped to the closet, and pulled on his doublet and hose. He stepped out into the main room, buckling his sword belt. "Speak softly; we have a guest."

"I am awake," Father McGee's voice said in the dark. "May I light the lamp?"

"No need." Rod frowned at a candle and its wick glowed to life.

Father McGee stared at the foot-and-a-half-tall humanoid before him.

Puck glared up at him, arms akimbo. "At what dost thou stare?"

"Oh! Pardon my rudeness." Father McGee pushed himself to a sitting position and looked up at Rod.

"It's reassuring to know how accurate Father Uwell's report is."

"That may be the only thing that's reassuring about seeing Puck in the middle of the night." Rod turned to the elf.

"What moves, hobgoblin?"

"Bloody murder," the elf answered with a scowl. "Thou must needs come to the friars, Lord Warlock, and be not anxious for the harmony of thy garb."

Somewhere the monks had found some black cloth to drape on the wall in a makeshift archway. The dead monk lay under it, hands folded over his breast, his robe neatly patched where the knife had entered.

McGee stood over him, burning with suppressed rage. "An abbot! That an abbot could so forget morality as to command the murder of one of his own monks!"

"He wasn't one of the Abbot's own any more," Rod pointed out. "Widdecombe thought of him as a traitor."

"As Christ thought of Judas, Lord Warlock! Yet He did not slay His betrayer, and neither should we have Abbot Widdecombe!"

Rod wondered why he was taking the Archbishop's side. Pure cussedness, probably. "But the Abbot thought of him as a heretic."

"The unity of the Faith is not worth men's lives, Lord Warlock, as Rome has learned to its sorrow."

"Just because they lost the Beta Crucis Crusade—"

"Yet we did learn! When faith is used as an excuse for war, the warriors have lost faith, and morality has been corrupted into immorality!"

Rod felt the impulse to continue the argument, but recog-

nized McGee's wrath from his own paternal instincts—the Father-General was filled with grief and guilt because one of his spiritual sons had died. For a brief, dizzying moment, Rod had a glimpse of what it must feel like to be responsible for hundreds of thousands of monks on fifty different planets, and shuddered. McGee didn't have to take his title so seriously.

Or did he? Judging from the man, he didn't have much choice.

Rod looked for a change of subject. "I think one of your monks is managing to dredge some information out of the would-be mass murderer, Father. Could we go eavesdrop?"

"Mm?" McGee looked up, frowning, then nodded. "Yes. Of course. There may be something we should know."

He turned away from Rod, Father Boquilva beside them.

Brother Janos lay on his side on a cot, eyes closed, chest rising and falling with the rhythm of sleep. Brother Somnel sat beside him, sad gaze fixed on the assassin's face. He didn't seem to be doing anything, and Rod wondered why he was there. Another monk sat beside Somnel, murmuring, "He did command thee to slay us all?" Then he waited patiently; finally, Brother Janos nodded.

Rod stared.

"Who did so command thee?" the inquisitor asked gently.

"Brother Alfonso," Brother Janos answered with a sigh.

McGee stood, face wooden.

Rod regarded Brother Somnel, puzzled. "Are you a hypnotist?"

Brother Somnel looked up at him, silent for a moment, then slowly nodded.

Rod felt his spine prick. "Well. Your Order is just full of surprises."

Brother Somnel gazed at him a moment longer, then turned back to Brother Janos.

"He did not, then, have his orders from the Abbot," McGee said slowly. "Who is this Brother Alfonso?"

"The Archbishop's secretary, Father-General," Boquilva said at his shoulder.

"McGee," the Father-General replied absently.

Rod leaned closer to McGee and muttered, "We have reason to believe Brother Alfonso is the agent I mentioned earlier."

"Oh. You have a spy in the monastery?" McGee murmured,

and when Rod didn't answer, he nodded. "So the orders may have come from the Abbot, or may not."

"Ask, Brother Comsoph," Father Boquilva instructed. The inquisitor leaned forward again. "Did Brother Alfonso say this was the Archbishop's will?"

After a moment Brother Janos breathed, "Nay. He did say we must protect our Lord Archbishop from his enemies, for he is too kindly to take arms against them." "I wronged the man," McGee admitted. Rod frowned.

"Sounds as though Brother Alfonso did a full-scale persuasion job on Brother Janos."

"Do not doubt it, Lord Warlock." Brother Comsoph looked up at him. "Brother Janos was ever a good and gentle man, but scholarly and quite naive."

"He always tried to see the good side of everybody around him, hm?" Rod knew the syndrome. "But if he was so gentle, how could he be maneuvered into murder?"

"He was very fervent in his faith," Father Boquilva explained. "Such zeal can be twisted."

Rod murmured into McGee's ear, "If it helps any, we should have Brother Alfonso in custody soon."

Father McGee looked up at him in surprise, then nodded slowly. "That may go a long way toward solution of the problem, yes—if Brother Alfonso is as bad an apple as he seems to be."

"Very bad," Rod assured him. "In fact, we're pretty sure he lied his way into the monastery."

"Lied?" Father Boquilva asked. "Dost say he had no true vocation?"

"Oh, he has a vocation, all right—but I don't think it's very holy. I'm saying he lied about wanting to live the pure life, and deliberately wormed his way into the Abbot's favor so that he could manipulate His Lordship."

"Then the oaths he swore were falsely taken," Father Boquilva said, wide-eyed.

"And therefore have no validity." Father McGee's face had turned thunderous again. "He is a Judas priest indeed."

Rod looked down at the sleeping monk, his face grave. After a minute he said, "How did he get in

here?"

An explosion rocked the hall, and a young man stood in its center, glaring about him in anger.

The monks leaped to their feet, all shouting and demanding at once.

Rod was on his feet, too, staring, dumbfounded. He had never, but never, seen Toby angry before. Then he found his voice. "Toby! What do you think you're doing!"

"Fear not, Lord Warlock." The young man's lip curled. "There is no longer need to fash ourselves over

scandalizing these monks!"

Father Boquilva reddened and looked away.

Rod noticed it, frowned, and turned back to Toby. "Want to tell me what's happened?"

"Brom O'Berin's folk have brought him a witch-moss crafter, Lord Warlock. He did make false monsters to

afright the villagers."

"Well, we suspected that was how it was done." Rod shrugged. "What's so outrageous about that?

Because he

was working for the Archbishop? We knew the monks were using witches."

"Nay, Lord Warlock—the monks are witches. For thy wife hath read the mind of this rogue, and hath seen there

the memory of the Archbishop's secretary commanding him to go forth and wreak havoc—and not him only, but

many others too. And all were monks!"

Rod's eyes widened. "All?"

Toby nodded, watching Father Boquilva coldly.

"Wait a minute," Rod protested. "There couldn't be a lot of espers in the monastery, without the other monks

knowing about it."

Toby still watched Boquilva, waiting.

"But who says there were any others, eh?" Rod said slowly. Then the full impact of the idea hit him. "Holey

soles! It's not just one esper in a monastery—it's one monastery full of espers!" He turned on Father Boquilva.

"Isn't it?"

The monk glanced at Father McGee. The Father-General nodded, very slightly, and Boquilva said, "'Tis true.

Lord Warlock, and hath ever been. Yet I could not tell thee, for we arc all sworn to secrecy when we take Holy

Orders."

"My lord!" Rod's eyes widened. "No wonder they can tell, just from a simple interview, which postulants qualify

for the cloister and which ones don't! The interviewer knows whether or not he's talking to a telepath within the

first two seconds!"

"There is always some feedback effect, yes," Boquilva admitted.

"Feedback?" Rod said. "Kind of a funny word fora simple medieval friar!" He turned on McGee.

"Anything else

your people haven't been telling us, Father?"

"Such as the monks having kept knowledge of technology?" McGee nodded. "Yes, Lord Warlock. But they only

begin learning science and engineering after their final vows, when they have been sworn to secrecy."

"How nice of them to wait so long! May I ask how you knew about it? Wait a minute, strike that—Father Al

included it in his report, didn't he?"

"He did, yes. But he saw no reason to burden you with the information."

"Gee, the good guy didn't want me to worry! Do me a favor, Father—give me an anxiety attack!"

"Why, so I do," McGee said calmly. "You, at least, should have full knowledge of the situation, Lord Warlock."

"I trust you will not divulge it," Father Boquilva said.

Rod glanced at Toby, then back to Boquilva. "Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Excellent reasons, as Father Ricci told us when he founded our chapter."

"The original fugitive from Terra?" Rod asked. "How did he keep his knowledge of technology?"

"An accomplice reprogrammed the computer that erased the colonists' memories of technology, ensuring that he would retain his mental records intact."

"No Cathodean could have volunteered to come here otherwise, Lord Warlock," Father McGee said quietly. "We are an order of priestly engineers, after all." "Did he consider staying at home?" "He did," Boquilva said, "but was the only priest available when the Romantic Emigres left Terra; and he thought that a priest was a necessity for a medieval colony." Toby looked up, frowning.

"They have succeeded in the task he set them," Father McGee explained, "permeating this society with Christian ideals, ameliorating the brutality of a medieval culture."

"Great!" Rod burst out. "Why don't you ameliorate some of the squalor, while you're at it? Cure some of the sicknesses? Prevent a few deaths?"

"We have done what we can," Boquilva grated. " 'Tis why our folk do ever go about among the people, cloistered or not. We wreak 'miracle' cures when we can—but dost thou truly believe there would be more of us if we let modern knowledge be open?"

Rod hesitated. There had always been a very limited number willing to go to the mental toil of learning medical science.

"And there are cures, too, that we know of, yet know not how to effect," Boquilva went on. "Father Ricci was an engineer, not a physician. Yet some of our Brothers, with the necessary gift, have sought to discover these cures."

Rod lifted his head, eyes widening. " 'Discover'? You mean research?"

"Of course, Lord Warlock," McGee said. "Every Catho-dean has always had the duty of attempting some form of the search for knowledge."

Puzzle pieces connected in Rod's mind. "And . . . just what sorts of knowledge would a monastery full of espers be looking for?"

"You have the answer, Lord Warlock, or you would not ask the question." McGee nodded. "Yes. Most of the Cathodeans in the monastery research new psionic techniques."

"Monastery?" Rod exclaimed. "That isn't a cloister—it's a research lab!"

"I would be indebted to you if you could explain the difference between the two," McGee said with irony.

"My lord!" Rod stared at a vision of a voracious theocracy gobbling up all the planets of the Terran Sphere. "That means the Archbishop isn't just a threat to the King, he could be the death knell of democracy for all of humanity!"

"Yes, Lord Warlock." Father McGee nodded gravely. "That is the other reason I've come."

" 'Other'?" Rod glared. "Not too worried about the truth, are you?"

McGee lifted his head, eyes widening with outrage.

Rod frowned, puzzled. "Wait a minute—you really meant it! Not losing one of your Order's chapters is more important to you than the future of democracy!"

"It is," McGee agreed. "Not much more important, perhaps, but still my first priority."

Rod's face slackened, appalled by another realization. "But . . . but . . . that means you've been taking the most talented espers on Gramarye out of the gene pool for five hundred years!"

"That is an old charge," McGee sighed, "though the gift you mention is not the one usually spoken of. And in answer, Lord Warlock, I can only ask how many of our Brothers would marry even if they did not come here."

"You mean they wouldn't fall in love?"

"Perhaps, but that does not mean they would be good husbands. Most religious are unworldly enough not to be terribly good providers, Lord Warlock, and are of the sort to take their work as being the most important element in their lives."

"You're saying Fathers might not make the best fathers?" Rod frowned. "Still, I get the point. And in this case, their work is whatever the Archbishop tells them to do."

"In the current crisis, yes."

"Which means that, if we want to stop the hauntings, we have to stop the Archbishop. And he's got the most highly trained espers on the planet working for him! Just great!"

18

The moon rays glanced down, blackening the rusted masses of broken iron that bedecked the Archbishop's garden wall, and casting a huge, monstrous, misshapen shadow of one who worked there, heaving and tearing the Cold Iron from the stones.

"Only a few more, Dread Lord, and thou shall have this whole side of the wall clear," sang a baritone from the shelter of a nearby pear tree.

" 'Tis a foul crop espaliered against these blocks," Brom O'Berin grunted as he tore away the last horseshoe. "Yet now must I examine mine own trail most carefully, Robin, lest a single nail be left to score the flesh of one of mine elves." Puck shuddered in the shade. "May the grove's spirits forefend! 'Twould be certain death."

But Brom worked his way along the wall crabwise, and finally pronounced himself satisfied. " 'Tis all cleared, Robin. Come now, and see what we may espy."

Puck leaped to the top of the wall with him, hiding among some thick old ivy vines while Brom hid in the branches of an espaliered fruit tree. They waited in silence as the moon rose higher, with only an occasional whispered word between them—or any of the other elves who crept over the wall and hid themselves among the flowers.

Finally the door at the base of the tower opened, and the elfin watchers stiffened like hounds scenting prey. The Archbishop came strolling out with Brother Alfonso beside him. He stopped to inhale the perfume of the flowers and sighed, feeling the weight of his cares rolling off his shoulders. "Ah! A nook of blessed peace in this troubled world!"

"True, my lord. Yet the troubles never vanish—they are only held at bay."

"Peace, my conscience," the Archbishop sighed. "Can I never have a moment free of care?" "Art thou Archbishop, my lord?" "I had almost as lief I were but an abbot again," the Archbishop grumbled.

"Yet thou hast the right of it, as when hast thou not? What matter's so great that I must needs contemplate it presently?"

"A host of matters, my lord, all of which come together as one, videlicet: now that thou hast broke from Rome,

thou canst now break also with all these stances 'gainst which thou hast railed in years past." The Archbishop stilled, his imagination caught. "Thou hast inveighed against the buying of indulgences," Brother Alfonso reminded, "and 'gainst lending for interest." "Aye," the Archbishop muttered. "How can Rome condone a man making profit of aiding his neighbor?" "And celibacy, my lord. Thou hast already dealt with that. Word has it the common folk are pleased with thy stance." The Archbishop paused at his companion's remark. Brother Alfonso hid a smile. "Thou hast often said a monk may not truly comprehend the burdens of a husband. And thou hast said that, if a priest be devoted to God, he must needs raise up more souls for Him." "And that if we tell the plowman 'tis his vocation to rear children, we had ought to do so ourselves," the Archbishop added. "Aye, I remember." Brother Alfonso wiped a hand down across his lips. Chanting drifted to them on the evening breeze. The Archbishop looked up sharply. "Vespers! And we are late! Come, Brother Alfonso!" "Directly, my lord," Brother Alfonso murmured; but he stayed rooted to the spot, watching till the Archbishop's form had passed through the door and gone. Then he threw back his head and laughed, not loudly, but long. He was still laughing as his feet flew out from under him, and the laugh turned into a cry of alarm that lasted only a second before a solid thud cut it off. Elves darted out from bushes as a leprecohen straightened up, tapping his hammer against his palm. They whisked threads about and about the unconscious monk as Brom O'Berin came up, rumbling, "Well done, stout hearts. Now take him where he shall do no further harm." The elves ducked down about Brother Alfonso's form; then the body seemed to lift itself up on dozens of legs. It turned about in a complete circle, then oriented on a huge old chestnut tree and shot toward the roots just as a large hole gaped between them, letting out a shaft of golden light. The body dodged down into the hole; Puck leaped in after it, then Brom O'Berin. The hole seemed to close itself, as gnomes pitched in merrily; then the light was gone, and the garden lay quiet under the moon. The noble hostages were all drawn up around the trestle table in the center of their hall, and their faces were drawn, too. They were grouped in parties—D'Auguste and the loyalists at the eastern end of the table; Ghibelli at the western end with Marshall, Guelph, and Glasgow. They all faced the main archway, which was flanked by a dozen stone-faced soldiers with pikes at the ready. The room was very quiet. Then Sir Maris stepped through the archway, announcing, "Milords, thy King!" They all rose. Simple courtesy would dictate that—and Tuan had never demanded they kneel. The King entered in full royal regalia, a purple robe trimmed with ermine swirling from his broad shoulders and framing a golden doublet, a jeweled crown on his head and a golden sceptre in his left arm, right hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He came to a halt and turned his head slowly, surveying all the faces before him. Then he said quietly, "Milords, it is war." Not a word was said, but he could almost feel the impact of his words physically, in the slight tightening in their bodies, the widening of their eyes. They had all known what he would announce, but hearing it from

the King
made it inevitable.
"I will not slay any man whose only crime is loyalty to his father," the King said, "in spite of the threat implicit in thy being hostages here. If thy parents should gain so much ground

as to force me back here to Runnymede, I might then pronounce that threat, and if need be, thy death warrants.
Yet I misdoubt me 'twill come to such a pass." He surveyed their faces again, slowly, and said, "Yet I will ask each of thee to surrender his arms to my seneschal, here and now, and bide within these walls, never going out for air or sun till this issue be resolved."
He held all their gazes, and the choice was clear, but unsaid.
What choice, really? They all knew their duty to their houses, regardless of their feelings. If the King lost, their fathers would forgive them; if the King won, their houses would still be intact.
Besides, some of them wanted to.
D'Auguste led, as usual. He stepped forward and knelt, saying, "Majesty, I am thy man. Command me in battle and I shall fight with all the strength of mine heart and mine arm."
There was silence for a moment; then TUan said, his eyes moist, "Why, then, bless thee for a loyal liegeman! I shall accept thy service, and I shall not set thee 'gainst thine own blood!"
Chester came forward, then, kneeling. "Majesty, I too."
Then Graz, Maggiore, Basingstoke, and Llangolen knelt.
"I praise thee," Tuan murmured. "I accept thy service."
The room was very silent.
Then Ghibelli stepped forward to kneel. "Majesty, I am thy man."
And, one by one, his companions followed him.
The monks sat at their places in the refectory, but lamps burned on each table, for it was night.
The Archbishop sat on his dais, with standing candelabra to each side of him—but his high table had been pushed aside, and his great chair stood in its place. He sat on it like a prince on a throne, in full panoply—golden cope and mitre, span new from the seamstresses of Reddering, his crozier resting in the crook of his arm—again, newly come from Reddering. But this was no celebration; his face was grim.
All the monks of the chapter filled the hall, faces drawn. Before the Archbishop stood Hoban with his head high, but his arms were lashed behind his back. The hall was totally silent, every eye fixed on the Archbishop and the culprit before him.
Father Rigori stood forth, crying, "Hearken and hear! Our Brother Alfonso has gone from our midst! For two days and nights none have seen him! Whither hath he sped?"
The room was silent, every eye now on Hoban.
"Our Archbishop doth sit now in judgment!" Rigori declared. "He who can bear witness, let him stand forth!"
The room was still.
The Archbishop lifted his head and stated, "I was last to see him, this Tuesday night past at the commencement of vespers. He tarried in the garden when I went to the abbey. Hath any seen trace of him since?"
The hall was silent.
The Archbishop turned to his left, nodding at a monk who sat near. "Brother Molin."
Brother Molin stood, his hands trembling. "I have been night porter this week past. I have seen none pass the gate betwixt vespers and matins."

He sat, and the Archbishop turned to his right. "Brother Santo?"

"I have been porter for morning," said Brother Santo, rising. "He did not pass my gate 'twixt matins and nones."

"Brother Hillar?"

"He did not pass through the gate 'twixt nones and vespers."

"He might have climbed the wall," the Archbishop said grimly, "yet I misdoubt that he would have. Brother Loes-sing!"

In the center Brother Loessing stood up.

"Thou hast been gardener this month," the Archbishop stated. "Say what thou didst find when thou didst come to thy post this Wednesday last."

"The horseshoes, bent nails, and other old iron had been cleared from off the wall," Brother Loessing answered,

"and cast into the manure pile. And when I came into the garden, there was a fairy ring in the grass."

An excited murmuring filled the hall, though all the monks had already heard this from gossip. It was another matter entirely to hear it from an eyewitness.

"From this we may know that elves had come into the garden," the Archbishop said, stone-faced, ignoring the Church's stand on supernatural beings. "Brother Livy!"

A tall, gaunt monk rose and said, in a quavering voice, "I stood guard on the wall by the gate that night, as our Lord

Archbishop hath lately commanded. I chanced to see down into the garden, and saw Brother Alfonso fall. He did not rise again, and therefore did I go' to fetch Brother Parker; but when we came, the garden was empty."

The Archbishop's jaw clenched. "Brother Hasty!"

Brother Hasty stood. "I saw this postulant, Hoban, linger at the edge of the field overlong, near the wild flowers and weeds, and I saw his lips move. When I came to rebuke him, I saw the ground had been hoed so thoroughly that it might as well have been plowed. I thought naught of it at the time; yet now . . His voice trailed off; he spread his hands.

"There can be no question of it." The Archbishop glared down at Hoban. "Brother Alfonso hath been taken, and 'tis this man who told the elves how they might encompass the deed. Belike 'tis also he who cleared the shield of Cold Iron from the north field and the garden wall."

Hoban protested. "I did not take the iron from the field or the wall, milord."

"Yet thou didst speak to the elves?"

Hoban stood silent. Then he said, "I came to be a monk. At the least, I will not lie."

"Why!" the Archbishop spat. "Wherefore dist thou betray this Order?"

"From loyalty to my liege lord Tuan, King of Gramarye." Now that it was out, Hoban's boldness came clear again. "I came hither at his behest, to discover what evil genius did move thee."

The whole hall strained in shocked silence.

"And I did discover 'twas Brother Alfonso who had tempted thee to defy Rome," Hoban went on. "This did I tell the elves, as I told them of his walks with thee in a garden ringed by Cold Iron. This I did, and naught more!"

"'Tis enough to have destroyed him!" the Archbishop raged. "How durst thou speak of temptation! How durst thou claim loyalty to an heretic and a corrupted Church as thy defense!"

"Thou hast asked." Hoban's face was hard, hiding the dread he felt. "And I have answered with truth."

"As I shall pronounce thy doom!" the Archbishop shouted, his face livid. "Thou art guilty of

treason to thine

Archbishop and this Order! And thou hast aided in the death of a monk!"

He glared around at the assembly. "Doth any speak in his defense?" His glare dared them to say a word.

But slowly, quaking, Anho rose.

The Archbishop stared, furious, but grated out, "Speak, Brother Anho!"

"I plead ..." Anho croaked. "I beg thy mercy for my birth-brother and . . . friend!"

"Bethink thee what thou dost say." The Archbishop's voice was like a glacier pushing up gravel.

"He may have done foolishly," Anho said, gaining courage, "he may have committed vile sin. Yet he did believe,

with the whole of his heart, that what he did was right!"

"Why! How canst thou know this of him!"

"Why, for that I have known this man from his birth," Anho declared. "I have dined with him, worked with him,

rejoiced with him, wept with him. I know him as well as a man can know another—and never have I seen the

smallest part of malice in him, nor of deceit. He is a plain, blunt, honest man, who hath no understanding of

churchmen's casuistry, nor any liking for it. He doth believe as he was bred to believe."

The Archbishop's eyes burned, but he made no comment.

"There is this, too," Anho said, less stridently, "as my teachers here have shown me: that no mortal who doth

claim to be a man of God, ought ever take the life of another, for any cause but defense of his own life."

The Archbishop reddened, remembering that he had been one of the teachers who had so maintained.

"Well

enough, then," he said, "thine eloquence hath saved thy brother's life; he shall but be flogged twenty strokes, and

shall dwell henceforth in a bare and barred cell, alone and in solitude, and shall have naught but bread for his

food and water for his drink. But thou shah ne'er more be chamberlain of mine, nor hold any office save work in

the fields!"

"Thou art gracious, my lord." Anho bowed, and his voice trembled. "Gracious and merciful! And I thank thee

with all of mine heart!"

"The more fool thou, then," the Archbishop snapped, and gestured to several burly monks who stood by. "Go,

take this fellow away, and his brother with him! Take him, and lock him in our darkest cell, and never let me see

him more!"

The monks were silent as the warders led Hoban and Anho away, and many felt their hearts sink in sympathy.

Then they sat in silence, for the Archbishop sat before them, chin on his breast, brooding.

Finally he raised his head and croaked, "Well enough, then. Now shall thou—"

"My Lord Archbishop!" A monk came running into the hall.

The Archbishop whirled. "What . . . Brother Lyman! What dost thou from thy post by the gate!"

But a severe young man came following in Brother Lyman's wake, resplendent in an embroidered doublet and

scarlet hose, a scroll in his hand.

A murmur sprang up throughout the hall. The Archbishop's face froze. "How came this man here?"

"My lord ... I had thought . . . thou wouldst wish ..."

"Naught were to enter!" the Archbishop stormed, but the young man spoke in a calm tone that nonetheless

carried throughout the hall. "I am an herald of Tuan and Catharine, monarchs of Gramarye, come to summon

thee to audience with the Right Reverend Morris McGee, Father-General of the Order of St. Vidicon

of
Cathode."
The hall was instantly silent.
The Archbishop stared at the courier. Then he stretched out a hand. "Give me!"
The herald stepped forward and placed the scroll in his hand. The Archbishop broke the seal, unrolled it, and read. As he did, his face turned white. He set the scroll in his lap with a trembling hand and said, "The insignia of our Order is there, pressed in wax--yet it must needs be forgery! The Father-General bides on distant, storied Terra, and hath never come unto Gramarye!"
"Nevertheless, 'twas his hand gave it me," the herald answered.
"And 'tis thy tongue shall bear him his answer! That I declare him a false, prating imposter, a pawn of unscrupulous Tuan Loguire! Nay, tell him I shall meet him indeed--with an army at my back!"
Tuan and Catharine stood atop the gate tower, looking down into the outer bailey. It was chaos within order, men sitting by tents burnishing their weapons, horses picketed against the south wall, auncients and knights coming and going between the various bands, distinct in their liveries.

"At the least," Catharine said, "not a one of thine own thralls failed to come at thy call." Tuan nodded. "They are brave and good men, and their loyalty warms mine heart. And our household guard hath done well in their welcoming, in but one day bringing the levies to think of themselves as one in spirit."
" 'Tis not a one of thine own soldiers should not be an auncient, my lord."
"Truth." Tuan smiled. "Yet do not let them know it, I prithee. They are of the King's Guard; 'tis enough honor for them."
Sir Maris limped up to them, bowing. "The couriers are returned, Majesties."
Tuan's smile vanished; he was taut in a moment. "Their reports?"
"Di Medici, Stuart, Marshall, and Borgia are gone, as our spies had foretold; we doubt not they are with the Archbishop."
"There was never cause to doubt our intelligence from Ruddigore. And the rest?"
"Ruddigore sends word that his troops already hold the Plain of Despard, betwixt the Crag Mountains and the Ducat River; the Archbishop and Di Medici shall not strike through to Runnymede without cost. Yet he doth call upon thee as his liege to come quickly, for the enemy could obliterate him."
"Why, so we shall," Tuan said, his face grim. "How does my father?"
"Thy good sire is already afield, marching through Durandal Pass to join with Ruddigore."
"How blessed am I in my parentage!" Tuan cried, and Catharine gripped his arm more tightly. "And the others?"
"All send word that they march, Majesty; their men were summoned and provisioned, and but awaited thy call."
"We gain more than lust for preferment," Catharine said, her eyes glowing. "Here are no boot-licking sycophants, but men who desire our rule!"
Tuan nodded, restraining a grin. "They have come to think they are better with us than without us, or I misjudge.
Mayhap these past years have not passed in vain. Send word, good Sir Maris! Tell all my vassals of my pleasure, and bid them meet me at Despard Plain. There shall we mass to ride to the abbey!"

With Hoban's arm around his neck, Anno stumbled into the darkened cell. Only starlight showed them its confines, scarcely four feet wide and ten long, with but one narrow window at the end wall; but Anho had been

guiding his brother from the whipping post through totally dark hallways, and could see the narrow cot well enough. He guided Hoban there, then stumbled as he helped him to lie down, and Hoban landed hard. A moan escaped his clenched teeth.

"Regrets, regrets!" Tears wetted Anho's cheeks as he knelt by the pallet and pulled a small earthen pot from his sleeve. "I had not meant to drop thee, brother!"

" 'Tis I must beg thy pardon, for so spoiling thy chances here," Hoban gasped.

"What—my post as chamberlain?" Anho shook his head. "I care naught. I came here to become a parish priest, brother, not a monk. 'Twas the Archbishop—Abbot then—bade me to the cloister, and I was no more joyous in it than the rest of the friars; they did not think me fit, nor do I. Brace thy nerve, now, for the apothecary was merciful and did bring thee salve the whiles they did whip thee—and, oh! brother! That beast of a monk who did lash thee!"

"He did but as he was bid, brother, and was true to his lord, even as I was," Hoban gasped. "Nay, I of all men could scarce complain . . . Aieeee!"

"I had warned thee," Anho said with tears in his eyes. "In minutes, though, it will lessen the pain. . . . Oh, dear Lord!" He threw his head back, gazing up toward heaven. "I give thee thanks from all that I am, for the life of my brother! Each day will I offer a rosary, all the years of my life, in thanks!"

" 'Tis a hard vow," Hoban muttered. "I had not known I was so dear to thee."

"Ah, Jittle fool!" cried big brother, exasperated. "Dost not know that, of all the friends God gives us, those we are born with are most precious? Yet 'fool' I said and 'fool' I meant, for daring to act against our holy Order and our merciful Archbishop!"

"I know I have burdened thee for the rest of thy days," Hoban answered, muffled, "but I was afeard thou mightst be caught betwixt the Archbishop and those of his monks who do wish to be loyal to Rome. Yet here I have sprung about thee the very trap I did dread!"

"What, wilt thou berate thyself for doing what thou didst believe to be right? Oh, false man! Aye, I can believe 'twas concern for me that did bring thee here, as much as loyalty to thy King! Wilt thou tell me thou hast thereby done wrongly? Or didst thou come here only for adventure?"

Hoban was silent a moment, then answered, "Nay. I came out of faith, brother. And I would do it again if there was need, and no hazard to thee—for I do most truly believe in the Holy See and the Roman Church, though many say they are but child's tales. If they are, then am I still a child. Yet I do believe even more shrewdly in Their Majesties."

"Well, then, be still with this foolishness of remorse! Thou hast hurted me in no wise, but doth bear all the pain thyself! Would I could share it with thee! Pride of place matters naught, 'gainst thy soul—and I see that if sin was there, 'twas venial at worst. What matter advancement in the order!"

"If thou dost truly believe that," Hoban said with a wry grin, "thou art either a most lamentable excuse for a monk, or a most holy one."

"Most lamentable as a monk, belike—yet I am glad enough to be a good brother."

19

"Yon comes Romanov!"

Rod followed Tuan's pointing arm. Another barge had come into sight around a bend in the river,

its deck filled
with men and horses.
"He was your enemy once." Rod smiled. "Nice to see him coming to support you, isn't it?"
"In truth, it is!" Tuan turned to look out over the plain with a happy sigh. "So were they all,
all our enemies, save
my father! When Catharine did reign alone, we did defend her from their charge—thou and I, and our
allies." His
face clouded. "Still, some stand against me."
"There seems to be hope that the younger generation won't, Your Majesty. You never know—you just
may really
unite this country yet."
"Not if thou hast so poor a taste for kinging," Brom jibed by Tuan's belt. "For one who bore so
long a face about
the dangers of war herein, thou art happy enough to be a-field!"
Tuan grinned, straightening and squaring his shoulders. "I ever did feel more easy with harness on
my back! And
my conscience, too, is easy, for it rests secure in knowing that I have done all I can to preserve
the peace!"
"Maybe too much," Rod pointed out. "Couldn't we maybe have pulled off a little sneak attack before
the
Archbishop gathered his troops?" He saw the appalled looks on the others'

faces, and held up a palm to forestall their objections. "No, no, don't tell me—it wouldn't have
been honorable."
"I must admit there's some value to that viewpoint, Lord Warlock," McGee said, "especially in a
medieval
culture."
"Yeah, well, it didn't do us too much good to kidnap the fly in the monastery's ointment, did it?
Brother Alfonso
notwithstanding, the Archbishop's still gathering troops."
Tlian nodded. " 'Twas foolish, but I had hoped that, left to himself, he might repent and seek
truce."
"Aye, 'tis odd." Brom scowled, "One would think he'd listen to his heart and his conscience, now
that his evil
angel is gone."
"Maybe he is listening to his heart—and who says he has a conscience?"
McGee braced him with a hand on his arm. "Charity, Lord Warlock, charity."
"Aw, can't I be a realist for once?"
Why stan now? Fess's voice said behind his ear.
Rod frowned. "Odd echoes on this hilltop. Of course, it could be that Milord Archbishop has a
backup Vice to
tempt him. Could we ask Brother Alfonso about that?"
"Not unless thou dost wish to wake him," Brom rumbled, "which I would not countenance."
"Oh. He's really notwithstanding, huh?"
"Lying prone," Brom affirmed, "in sleep ensorcelled—and by at all times, to be certain that sleep
with one sitting endures."
Rod nodded, nightmares?"
"I don't suppose you could put in a few
The Archbishop came into his study with quick strides and quick glances, his agitation plain for
anyone to see.
One of the glances fell on Lady Mayrose, who sat reading at a desk, head bent over a book, the sun
striking a
halo from the burnished gold of her hair. The Archbishop stopped, feeling a moment's awe at her
beauty, and the
beginnings of peace. She looked up with a radiant smile, then saw the look on his face and stared,
appalled.
"Milord Archbishop! I had not thought thou wouldst object if I—"
"Nay, nay!" The Archbishop waved the notion away. "I delight to see thee, milady!"

She relaxed a little. "Then what doth trouble thee, my lord?"
"Ah, 'tis the reports of our . . . 'scouts,' I believe the word is. Men who ride out to espy the

enemy's troops." He turned away, wringing his hands. "And, oh! I had not thought the King would bring so many against us!" Behind his back, Lady Mayrose's eyes narrowed. "They will break our poor troops, they will maul them! And even should our forces prevail, there will have been so much slaughter! Oh, sweet Heaven!" He buried his face in his hands. "Can there truly be right in this course I have taken? Can the supremacy of the Church in Gramarye truly be worth the shedding of so much innocent blood?" "My lord!" the lady cried. "I am appalled that thou canst doubt!" The Archbishop looked up, surprised. "When the King doth come against thee with so vast a force?" Lady Mayrose hurried toward him. "How canst thou think this battle to be any doing of thine? Tis only because the rule of kings is so godless that such bloodshed doth happen! Nay, but think!" She caught his hands between her own. "This battle will end battles! When the King hath knelt to thee and acknowledged the rule of God, there will be no more wars, no more spilled blood!" " Yet how if . . ." the Archbishop swallowed. "How if the King be slain?" "Why, then, 'tis thou must rule! The lords have acknowledged thy guidance already, have they not? Who else should govern, save the Church!" The Archbishop stood immobile for a moment; then a gleam came into his eye. Lady Mayrose saw it, and waxed poetic. " Tis thy duty to thy fellow man to press forward in this holy and righteous cause! Nay, 'tis thy duty, above all, to thy God, to be bloody, bold, and resolute!" She let the wrath grow, knowing how beautiful she was when she was angry. "Laugh to scorn the power of man! Thou wilt prevail, thou must prevail, for thou art God's voice in this kingdom!" "Thou art the very soul of courage," the Archbishop breathed, clasping her hands tightly and gazing into her eyes. "Nay, 'tis even as thou dost say! We shall press forward; we shall prevail! And when the rule of God hath triumphed, all men of Gramarye, for a thousand years, shall bless thy name!" She blushed and lowered her eyes (she did it so well!). "If I but strengthen thine arm, my lord, I care not for the opinion of men." "Yet I must." There was something about the way he said it that made her look up again, her heart beating wildly in her breast, and she saw the look of deadly seriousness in his eyes. "I must tell thee of this latest rule that I have proclaimed," he said, low, but with total conviction. "Since the tyranny of Rome be ended for we of Gramarye, we need not abide by those precepts of theirs that have been for so long absurd! Men must not demand interest for the lending of money; men must not give hugely to the Church, in expectation of fewer years in Purgatory—and clergy must be free to marry!" She stood. She had heard of this, but hearing it now from his lips, she was galvanized by the achievement of her purpose. "There is no true reason why priests should not wed and father children," the Archbishop affirmed, "least of all

we of St. Vidicon! I have writ, I have had it proclaimed!"

He was silent, staring into her eyes, and she thought her heart must burst, or she must swoon. Then he said, "Wilt thou wed me? Wilt thou be my wife?"

Tuan scented the dawn wind and turned toward the sunrise. "At the least we've a fair day for our battle, Lord Warlock."

"Yes, and for once the family didn't come along for the trip!" Rod answered, with fervent relief. Across the plain the rebel army was dousing campfires and folding tents. "They pull themselves into battle order," Tuan observed. "How fare our men, Lord Counselor?"

"All gear is stowed; they now drink each his measure of brandywine," Brom answered. "The battle line doth form, Majesty."

"This is really fascinating," McGee said, looking all about him with a bright eye. "I've never seen a knights' battle before!"

"If God doth will it, thou wilt not see one today, Father." Tuan called out, "Ho! Sir Maris!" The seneschal came riding up. "Majesty?"

"Take thou the truce flag, and ride out to signal for parley!

'Twill be the Duke di Medici and the Archbishop for their side, I doubt not, so it shall be myself and the Lord Warlock will meet them!"

"If thou dost wish it, Majesty," Sir Maris sighed, "though 'tis to no purpose." But he turned his horse and went for the white banner.

"May I come along?" McGee said hesitantly. "If they have a clergyman present, you really ought to have one, too."

"Sorry, Father. As the local field representative of the Society for the Prevention of Nascent Totalitarianisms, I have to insist that you help avoid cultural contamination here."

"By not letting them know I'm from Terra, you mean? Well, I suppose Father Uwell did keep his origin relatively secret."

"Really. He only intervened at the last second. Even then he only told the Lord Abbot who he was." Rod shook his head. "We have to let the locals solve their disputes by themselves, Father, or we'll give them a national inferiority complex."

"But by that argument," said McGee, with a keen glance, "shouldn't you retire from the lists, too?"

Rod started to answer, then bit down on his own logic coming back at him. "Not the same case, Father. I'm a local."

"Then you must be the only local who was born and raised on an asteroid far, far away. Come, Lord Warlock—by what virtue can you claim citizenship?"

"By virtue of a wife and four children, all homegrown," Rod snapped. "Keep out of it, Father. Okay?"

And he rode out to battle, doing a mental double take at his own phrasing. Was there a truth in there he'd been trying to avoid?

Under the circumstances, the Duke and the Archbishop were a welcome distraction, even though the nobleman wore a vindictive, gloating smile. Rod frowned and subvocalized, "Di Medici is outnumbered three to two here, Fess, and a quarter of his men are monks. What's he looking so cocksure about?"

"Perhaps he is thinking of the Archbishop's witch force, Rod. There is no reason why they should confine themselves to bogus haunting."

That hit Rod with a mental blow that rocked him, and for a moment his heart sank. Then he

remembered Toby

and the Royal Coven. High Warlock to Low! Gallowglass to Toby! Come in, Toby!

He strained his senses, letting Fess take care of getting to the parley, so Toby's thought fairly blasted. We attend,
Lord Warlock.

Thank Heaven! Send the crew down here to Despard Plain, will you? The Archbishop's about to pull some rabbits out of his hat, and we need you to stuff them back in!

The greater number of us are here already, Lord Warlock; thy wife did advise it. Yet we left a home guard.

Rod felt his face flush with chagrin. "She was one step ahead of me again, Fess." Then he grinned.

"Wow! What

a woman!"

"You mature, Rod," the robot observed.

"Yeah. Someday I might even be big enough for her." Thanks, Toby. Just hold yourselves ready, okay? And ask

Gwen to send for a babysitter.

As thou wilt have it, Lord Warlock.

Then Fess was drawing up, and the Archbishop and duke were five feet away; there was no more time for tactics.

Rod inclined his head. "Your Graces."

"Lord Warlock," the Archbishop said in his most noncommittal tone.

Rod glanced at the Archbishop's gleaming plate armor. "If you don't mind my saying so, milord, your mitre looks

a little out of place on that rig."

The Archbishop flushed. "Is't so rare for a cleric to defend himself?"

"I just didn't expect a man of the cloth to go in for such a close weave. And weren't you supposed to be carrying a crozier?"

The Archbishop hefted his mace, his face grim. "I doubt not this shall serve me better in this day's work."

"Odd-looking sacramental, if you ask me."

"I did not." The Archbishop's face darkened. "Know, Lord Warlock, that Our Lord said only, 'Those who live by

the sword will die by the sword.' Even if we extend his words to all edged weapons, men of God are still free to

carry those that have no sharpness."

Rod took a deep breath, trying to stifle his outrage, holding back a comment about the spirit of the law versus its

letter; and while he was stymied, Tuan managed to get in a word.

"I am loathe to clash with arms in this quarrel, my lord,

since we both wish, foremost, the good of our people. Is there no means to peace left?"

"Why, dost thou now snivel?" Di Medici sneered. "I had not thought so ill of thee, Tuan Loguire."

The King flushed and turned to the duke. "There is no shame in seeking to abide by God's word, milord, and

avoid slaying my neighbor." He turned back to the Archbishop. "Come, is there no path open?"

"Certes," said the Archbishop, stone-faced, "if thou dost recant thine heresy, and embrace the Church of Gramarye."

Tuan shook his head sadly. "That, milord, I cannot do; I would hold it sinful to desert the Church of Rome for expedience."

"Yet 'tis an expedient argument for thee to refuse to be guided by me!" The Archbishop's eyes fired. "Nay, I must

hold thee a traitor to the true Faith!"

Rod frowned; the man was behaving quite unlike himself. Was this the monster within that he had kept under

wraps all along? Or was there a more obvious reason? "One might speculate about the expediency of your own

stand, milord. I have heard that your preachers have proclaimed your decision that the clergy may marry."

"Rome was ever wrong-headed in that belief!"

"Yet on the heels of that announcement came the news that you are engaged to the Lady Mayrose Reddering,"

Rod mused. "One could question your motives in this decision, milord, and gain the impression that you have allowed the clergy to marry only as an excuse to satisfy your own lust."

"Lord Warlock!" Tuan hissed, and the Archbishop turned pale, face tensed. Before he could speak, Rod capped his insult. "And if your decisions are excuses for personal indulgence, your whole schism is rampant hypocrisy."

"Enough!" the Archbishop shouted. He turned his horse away, calling back over his shoulder, "Thou shall see the justice of my stand by my steel! Ward thee well!"

The duke watched him go with an amused smile, then turned back to give Tuan a mocking bow. "Most excellent words of peace, milord." He turned to Rod. "Thou dost easily insult a man who doth lack the skill to defend his honor, Lord Warlock. I will gladly be his champion. Come, wilt thou duel with me in sight of these armies?"

"As soon as the parley is over," Rod said, tight-lipped. "You lead the charge, and I'll meet you." The duke raised his eyebrows in gratified surprise, then bowed with a broad smile, spurred his horse, turning it as it reared, and galloped away toward his own line.

Tuan turned away toward his knights, face somber. "And what hast thou gained hereby, Lord Warlock?"

"Some dumb mistakes on their part, I hope, Your Majesty. An angry general doesn't think too clearly."

Tuan turned, then nodded slowly. "I should have known thou hadst reason. Yet I am saddened to lose this last chance at peace."

"Yeah, but you gave it your best shot. Your conscience is clear now—so go enjoy the battle!"

Tuan stared at him, then slowly grinned. "Well, I must own there will be excitement ia it, at the least." He turned back toward his men, head high, eyes glowing. "Come, Lord Warlock! If we must fight, let us do it well!" He spurred his horse and broke into a canter.

Rod followed him, subvocalizing, Okay, so I let myself go. At least I couldn't have made things worse!

Let us only achieve victory as quickly as possible, Rod, Fess answered. The shorter the battle, the fewer the dead.

Rod pulled up between the King, who was rattling off commands to his couriers, and Father McGee, who was fixing him with a whetted gaze. "Have we proved well enough that the locals can't resolve their own dispute?"

"Yes, damn it!" Rod snapped. "Oh . . . sorry, Father."

"Think nothing of it I would like to dam the stream of this quarrel, myself." McGee turned toward the rebel line.

"In fact, I think I will . . . Ho!" He kicked his horse and galloped out into the space between the armies „

"What the— Come back!" Then Rod covered his face with his hand and moaned.

"What doth the Father-General?" Tuan stared, flabbergasted. "Hath he gone mad?"

"No, Your Majesty—only enraged."

"You impious renegade!" McGee was shouting as he galloped. "You Judas goat!"

The Archbishop whirled, startled, then saw the monk's robe and paled.

On a hillock at the rear the Lady Mayrose paled, too, and

kicked her palfrey into motion, charging down into the troops, shouting, "Make way! Let me through! I must

come to him, ere all is lost!"
The troops made way for her out of sheer surprise.
The Archbishop gulped air.
"Wilt thou so let a monk upbraid thee?" Di Medici demanded. "Come, milord! Thou wilt let thine authority be
rent asunder! Thou must needs rebuke him!"
The Archbishop closed his mouth, jaw firming, and galloped out to McGee. "False priest, give way!
Who art
thou to chastise thine Archbishop?"
"Thou knowest full well who I am!" McGee roared in anger. "I am Morris McGee, Father-General of
the Order
of St. Vidicon of Cathode! Kneel to thy senior, false prelate!"
His voice carried very well—to both armies. Every man, knight or peasant, stared, his jaw gaping.
"He hath done it!" Tuan cried. "He hath made all understand the falseness of this schism!"
But the Archbishop countered. "Thou art an imposter, false man! Belike thou art not even a priest!
None have
ever seen the Father-General of the Order; never hath he come to Gramarye!"
"Yet now he hath!" McGee thrust a fist at the Archbishop, and a circlet on his ring finger flared
in the sunlight.
"Here is my ring and my seal!"
Only the Archbishop could see the narrow band of copper with the integrated-circuit chip in its
tiny alligator-clip
setting; but the knights in the front lines of both armies saw the blood drain from his face. "
Tis the very signet,"
he whispered, "the ring made by sainted Vidicon himself! Oft have I gazed upon its impression in
our books and
our seal!"
The King's men didn't know what was going on, but they got the impression that things were going
well. They
cheered.
Their yell rang in Di Medici's ears with the sound of crumbling victory. He looked about him in
desperation,
thinking to ride out in force, but saw the doubt in his soldiers' faces and knew they would fold
when the King's
knights charged. As a last hope, he turned to the platoon of monks. "Up, men of cloisters! Thy
master's beset!
Come, follow me to his succor!"
The monks looked at one another, then back at the two clerics in mid-field. They didn't move.

"I shall impale any man who doth not march!" Di Medici shouted, and his sword hissed out of its
sheath.
The monks eyed it with dread. Then Father Rigori stepped forward, and one after another, the
others followed.
The Lady Mayrose galloped past them up to the Archbishop's side, and drew rein. "Be mindful, my
lord! Of all
the iniquities of the Roman Church! Of the corruption the Pope doth allow!"
"The Holy Father cannot enforce the commandments," Father McGee bellowed in answer, "for Christ
said,
'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's!'"
"The Pope doth allow usury!"
"The Church hath never approved more than moderate interest!" McGee insisted.
"He doth sell indulgences!"
"The Holy Father hath said that only prayer and good works—faith, hope, and charity—will hasten
our journey
to Heaven!"
Di Medici towered over him on a rearing horse. McGee spared him a single contemptuous glance, then
turned
back to glare at the Archbishop.
"Come, knights!" Di Medici bellowed, livid. "Come, my lords Florenzo and Perdito! School me these
prating

shave-pates, and bring them to heel!"

"Be still!" both clergymen bellowed, turning on him, and back in the line, the counts gave him only apprehensive looks in answer.

"The First Estate bids thee retire!" the Archbishop bellowed in full fury. "Godly matters are past thy comprehension!"

Di Medici gave him a long, narrow stare, then nodded and turned his horse away--and with a sinking heart, the

Archbishop realized that, no matter what the outcome of this battle would be, he had lost Di Medici forever.

He turned back to save what little he could. "Rome cares naught for Gramarye, and would issue commands

without understanding!"

"The Pope is so deeply concerned for thy nation, that he sent Father Uwell on an emergency mission, and told

him to bring back as much knowledge about Gramarye as he could," McGee shouted back, "and now hath sent

me, to issue directives based on understanding!"

Lady Mayrose clasped the Archbishop's armored fingers

tightly. "But think, my lord! If Rome is right, you cannot have mel"

The Archbishop stiffened, alarm inflaming his face. Then he looked about him in desperation, and for the first

time realized that his horse stood surrounded by his own monks. "Father Rigori!" he cried in glad relief. "Brother

Hasty! All my brothers and sons! Seize this imposter!"

But Father McGee bent a stern eye on them, and they turned to meet his gaze.

"Wilt thou not heed me!" the Archbishop raged. "Seize him!"

Slowly McGee raised his fist, and all the brothers could see his ring.

"Thou hast sworn obedience!" the Archbishop shouted in desperation. "I command thee by thine own vows!"

"We are sworn to the Order, milord," Rigori answered, wooden-faced, "and therefore to the Father-General. Our

loyalty to him must supersede our fealty to thee."

And slowly he knelt, bowing his head. In a slow wave, the others followed his example.

"Thou hast never truly believed my doctrines," the Archbishop whispered, ashen-faced. "In thine heart of hearts

thou hast ever wished to be loyal to Rome and to the Crown, but did lack the courage to say it!"

Rigori kept his head bowed, and did not deny it.

"Cowards!" Lady Mayrose wailed. "If thou shall not bring down the imposter, I shall!" She yanked the mace

from the Archbishop's limp fingers and turned, swinging it high to strike the Father-General.

A shriek like an avenging angel's split the air, and a small figure on a broomstick shot down out of the sky. The

mace jerked itself back in Lady Mayrose's hands, almost pulling her off her horse, then spun down toward her

head. She screamed, wrestling with it, trying to hold its cruel barbs away from her face, and the Archbishop

shouted in fright, leaping to her aid, catching at the mace.

"Vile temptress!" the little witch screamed, circling ten feet overhead. "Vice and seductress!"

But above her a bigger witch dipped down, riding sidesaddle, calling "Lord counts! Good knights! Wilt thou let

such a serpent writhe free? Nay! Catch her and bind her!"

Her voice was compelling with more than mere overtones.

The counts finally shouted and leaped forward in the relief of action, and a dozen knights charged with them to

wrest the Lady Mayrose from the Archbishop's arms. He roared, finally charged with anger again, catching the

mace from her hands and whirling it down at the nearest knight.

Geoffrey appeared with a gunshot crack, floating in midair, one hand upheld, and the mace bounced off an invisible shield about him as he shouted, "Wouldst thou attack, then? Thou, who hast preached the word of Christ? Thou, who dost dare to instruct knights and dukes? Thou corrupter of Gospels! Thou renegade cleric! Thou most unworthy of the cloth thou dost wear!"

In panic the Archbishop rained blow after blow at the boy, but Geoffrey parried them all in sheer reflex.

A man-at-arms laughed in disbelief. Then another did, and another, and soon the whole field roared in hilarity at the ridiculous spectacle of the dreaded Archbishop, balked by a boy.

Di Medici bellowed in dead-end despair and charged out.

'The hell you do!' Rod roared. 'Now, Fess!'

The great black horse screamed and leaped toward the duke.

Di Medici saw him coming and turned to meet him, sword flashing out.

Rod parried one cut and slammed into him, body to body, and Fess's unyielding form staggered the duke's charger. He swayed in the saddle, and Rod twisted him around, the duke's throat in the crook of the Lord Warlock's arm. " 'The Lord has given him into my hand!'" Rod roared. "Yield, my lord, yield! All who follow this traitorous duke, lay down your arms, or he dies!"

One by one the knights threw down their swords, and the men-at-arms, grinning, dropped their pikes.

Except, that is, for the knights who had finally managed to drag the Lady Mayrose down off her horse, to bind her arms as she screamed and screamed, cursing them in more vile language than ever they had heard from a lady—and too loudly for them to have heard the Lord Warlock.

The mace slipped from the Archbishop's exhausted fingers.

"Down on your knees!" McGee thundered. "Repent while you can!"

Ashen-faced, the Archbishop slid from his horse, stood a moment, then toppled in a dead faint.

Panting, Rod looked up over Di Medici's squirming shoulder, and saw Tuan sitting his horse with one knee, hooked around the pommel, wearing the broadest smile he owned.

Rod scowled. "You could at least have helped out a little, Your Majesty!"

"Wherefore, Lord Warlock?" the King asked, all innocence. "Thou and thy bairns did so well of thine own!"

20

The rays of the afternoon sun slanted in through the high windows of the Great Hall, gilding the ranks of the assembled noblemen and their knights. The King and Queen sat framed in purple draperies under a silken canopy above their thrones.

Before them, in a clean tunic and hose, was Hoban, trying to stand tall and proud, but more terrified than he had ever been before the Archbishop and all his monks.

"Know ye all," cried a leather-lunged herald, "that this good man, hight Hoban, did bravely go into the monastery of St. Vidicon, knowing his peril, yet determined to discover the news that Their Majesties did need. He sent to them intelligence that did bring the traitor Alfonso into their hands, and thereby did strongly abet their victory at Despard Plain. In recognition thereof, Their Majesties do bestow upon him the honor of the Order of the Wheel!"

The chamber burst into murmuring, for the order was the highest that could be awarded a member of the Fourth Estate. Tuan nodded to Sir Maris, who stepped forward to place a chain over Hoban's head. Hoban stared down

in amazement at the medallion hanging on his breast.
The herald blew a blast, and the courtiers fell silent. Catharine lifted her head and called out,
"In further recogni-
tion of thy worth, good Hoban, we raise thee now from thy
bond to the land, and declare thee henceforth a yeoman, with the surname Bravura!"
The crowd's murmur was much louder, but very much approving. Hoban turned beet red. "Majesty ... I
am not
worthy--"
Tuan silenced him with a lifted palm, then signed to the herald, who blew another blast. The
courtiers quieted
again, and Tuan said, "We grant to thee ten acres of land, to have and to hold for thyself and all
of thy line, as
long as it shall endure--ten acres within the County of Schicci, formerly of the demesne of Di
Medici, but now
within the estates of the Lord High Warlock!"
Hoban nearly fainted from shock, and the crowd burst into a roaring hubbub. It was fitting that
the traitor's lands
should be awarded to a loyal man, but it was the first sign of the Crown's justice.
"My lord, 'tis far from our cottage, o'er the mountains!" Gwen said into his ear.
"I know, dear," Rod said glumly, "but I don't think this is quite the time to tell him I hate the
idea of being a
landlord."
Hoban was being conducted from Their Majesties' presence by a footman, and he needed the help--he
was so
dazed, he scarcely knew where he was going. Tuan let the hubbub grow, then slacken, before he
nodded to Sir
Maris again. The seneschal beckoned to some guardsmen, and they stood aside as a train of knights
escorted the
Due Di Medici and his supporters in to face the thrones, their heads held high in spite of the
load of chains that
weighted them. They lined up, and if looks could have killed, Tuan and Catharine would have been
dead that
instant.
Catharine returned glare for glare, but Tuan only held his face hard against their hatred as he
stood.
The room grew very quiet.
"Thou dost stand convicted of high treason," the King declared. "Hear now our judgment: That thine
estates shall
each be diminished, arid thy loyal neighbors' increased, and that thou shall have one day and
night to make such
peace with God as thou canst, ere thou dost go to the block, to have thy heads hewn off from thy
bodies."
Their glares held the resignation of fatalists now; they had gambled, and they had lost. But the
courtiers around
them
were impressed at the King's mercy; noblemen or not, he could have insisted they be drawn and
quartered.
So they were almost scandalized when Count Ghibelli stepped forward from their ranks and cried,
"Mercy! I cry
mercy for my father!"
"Be still!" Di Medici hissed furiously, but Tuan turned to the young nobleman and nodded gravely.
"My lord Ghibelli, thou hast well and faithfully served us in this coil. Speak; we attend."
Ghibelli fell to one knee, and Marshall and his other companions stepped forward beside him,
falling to their
knees also. "He hath offended grievously," Ghibelli pleaded, "yet I beg thy gracious mercies! Let
not our fathers
be slain! Grant them, at least, the opportunity for penance and remorse, we beseech thee!"
"A lord must not beg," Di Medici grated.

Tuan met Catharine's glance, then turned slowly back to Ghibelli, nodding. "It shall be as thou dost ask; this boon, at least, we may grant. Thy sires shall retire to the monastery they have so lately supported, or to a well-guarded hermitage at a castle remote."

"Thou art merciful." Ghibelli bowed his head. "I thank thee from all that I am!"

"Thou shall be greater henceforth," Tuan answered, and the crowd stiffened, suddenly knowing what would be said. It was the rule of the game, after all, for the young lords had sided with the Crown. Tuan fulfilled expectation. "Take up each his father's demesne and powers. Thou, Count Ghibelli, art hereby created Duke Di Medici; thou, Guelph, art now Duke Borgia. Each will take up the rule of thy diminished acres--and I charge thee to hold them in better fealty than did thy sires!"

The crowd roared its approval.

"There is danger in it, my lord," Gwen noted.

"Yeah, but there's a chance it'll work, too." Rod didn't sound terribly happy. "They just might not take the chance on their families' losing any more land."

But the crowd was quieting, for Di Medici had stepped forward. He said it grudgingly, but he said it. "I thank Thy Majesties for the safety of mine house. And . . ." He glanced at his son out of the corner of his eye. "I accord thee honor, my son, for thy prudence."

The young man glanced at Tuan with apprehension, but Catharine spoke.

"Be certain, my lord, that, although we would lief have thee loyal from devotion, we will be glad of thy faithfulness out of prudence."

"I thank Thy Majesties." Ghibelli didn't hide his relief too well. "And I hereby pledge thee my firstborn son as hostage."

"Easy to offer, since the kid isn't even born yet," Rod grunted.

"I* truth, Ghibelli is not even betrothed," Gwen agreed.

But the King was shaking his head slowly. "Thou hast committed no treason, Milord Duke; there is no need of a hostage as yet."

Ghibelli and all his party looked up, surprised, then turned to one another.

Tuan frowned and glanced at Catharine:

Out of the throng came the Comte D'Auguste, bowing. "Majesties!"

"We hear thee, D'Auguste," said Tuan.

"Majesty, I crave a boon!"

"Tis granted." Catharine smiled. "Thou hast not even to ask it; we grant it thee in light of thy selfless support of our cause."

"And," Tuan said, with his first smile of the day, "as evidence of our delight at the birth of thy son."

The whole room went into an uproar again. Even the young lords looked startled.

"I didn't even know the countess had gone into labor!" Rod said.

"Aye, my lord, in the wee hours, and the babe was born three hours ago." Gwen smiled.

"Why do I bother trying to set up intelligence networks?" Rod sighed.

"Indeed," Catharine cried, and the room quieted. "In truth, we regret that the turmoil bred by the Abbot hath prevented us from honoring thy new heir as befits his station. Yet be assured we shall, when all order is restored."

"I thank thee, Majesties." The warm glance D'Auguste exchanged with Tuan was his welcome to the fraternity of fatherhood. "And the boon I crave is for my boy."

Tuan frowned; this was unexpected. "Thou hast but to say it."

"That when the boy hath seen fourteen years, Majesties,

thou wilt accept him into thine household to be trained as a squire!"

The courtiers roared, and Tuan and Catharine exchanged a startled glance. Then Catharine nodded, and Tuan mirrored her movement as he turned back to D'Auguste.

The crowd quieted to hear his answer.

"Thy boon is granted, and gladly," Tuan called, and the crowd cheered.

Later, as the setting sun turned the view from the solar windows into an enchanted landscape, Tuan demanded,

"We are honored, certes, and I feel that we may truly have made great progress toward welding this land into a whole—yet why would he ask it? And the child scarce three hours old!"

"We had said we had no need of hostages," added Catharine. "Wherefore would he thus hedge us into accepting one?"

"I think," Gwen said with a smile, "that D'Auguste can think of no place in which he would as lief have passed his growing years than here in thy castle."

Rod nodded. "Right. He wanted to make sure his son would get into the best school, so he made his reservation early."

The next night Rod stood in the shadows behind a pillar in the refectory of the monastery. He was there at the Father-General's invitation, and everyone knew of his presence, but he felt it was politic to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Not that anyone had any attention to spare for him—for the Father-General sat in the great chair on the dais, and the Abbot stood before him, bound in chains.

Father McGee fixed his gaze on the Abbot, intoning, "You must know, Reverend Father, that you can no longer be Abbot in this place."

"I have sinned grievously, I know." The Abbot bowed his head. "Yet worse, I have shown a weakness of judgment that hath severely hurt this our Order, and could have caused its demise."

"So it could have." The Father-General nodded. "Indeed, the Gramarye Order can never be one single chapter again—though, all things considered, it may be better that way."

The monks glanced at one another uneasily, but none dared speak.

"In the eyes of the King and Queen," the Father-General said, "you and your secretary are guilty of high treason."

"I have owned I have sinned," the Abbot said. His eyes were downcast, but his voice was clear, if subdued. "I have sinned mightily before God and man, and am deserving of the worst of punishments thou canst mete out."

"Yes, for you succumbed to temptation. But your secretary, Brother Alfonso, is even more deserving of such punishment, for he it was who showed you the lures of power and pride." Somehow, even now, there was sympathy in McGee's eyes. "He we have given over to the secular arm; of him, there was no doubt."

Damn straight, Rod subvocalized. Just catch Tuan giving him up!

He has not even waked yet, Fess answered.

And never will, if Brom has his way!

He fails to mention that Brother Alfonso was truly afuturian agent, masquerading as a monk, Fess answered.

No wonder he fails to! He promised me he wouldn't!

"I deserve no less," the Abbot stated.

McGee lifted his head slowly. "He has pronounced his own sentence." He looked out over the hall and cried, "If anyone wishes to speak in this man's favor, let him do so now!"

The hall was still, each monk glancing uneasily at the other.
Then, hesitantly, Anho stepped forth.
McGee looked down in surprise. "Speak."
"I am Anho, brother of Hoban," the monk declared, "of he who came here as one of us, but did spy for the king.
When he was found out, this captive was Abbot, and showed mercy to him, though he was convicted of treachery to the order—for which we all rejoice, now that Hoban's crime has been found to be no crime. May not mercy be shown to him who was merciful?"
Slowly, McGee nodded. "Well said, Brother Anho." He turned to the erstwhile Abbot. "And therefore shall I grant you life."
The Abbot stared at him, thunderstruck.
"Yet even though you have proved yourself unfit for the high office you held," McGee said, "you will always be a potential focus of power and heresy. So I judge that you must retire to a life of solitary meditation in a well-guarded hermitage, far beyond the ken of all in Gramarye."

The Abbot nearly collapsed with relief. "I thank you, my lord, for your generosity and clemency!" He may not be so thankful when he finds out just how far away the Father-General has in mind, Rod muttered as Anho and a robust monk escorted the former Abbot away.
Let us trust that he will not care, Rod. He may be sincere in his desire for solitude and meditation.
A self-flagellant? Rod frowned and nodded slowly. Yeah, I suppose he's got it in him.
The Father-General cleared his throat, and the room quieted. "Of the Lady Mayrose I must also speak. I have conferred with the King, and we have agreed that she shall be imprisoned for life, and shall live the life of a penitent. His scouts even now search for some abandoned tower in the wilderness."
Rod had a notion that Tuan's 'scouts' had known exactly the right tower for the purpose, before he even thought about it.
"Her grandmother, out of love for her, has agreed to be her keeper," the Father-General went on, "and there shall be stalwart guardsmen to ward her."
A few of the monks shuddered at the thought of so young a lady having to spend her whole life in such confinement. Rod could see them wondering if it was really preferable to death.
"Brother Anho," McGee called.
The young monk glanced quickly to left and right, then stepped forward. "Aye, my lord?"
"You alone, young Anho, have shown the courage, and devotion to truth and to the Order, that should characterize all our monks," the Father-General said. "Therefore I declare you henceforth Abbot of this order for the term of five years, at which time your brethren shall cast ballots to choose whether to keep you in office, or select a new Abbot."
Anho paled. "My lord," he stammered, "I am not worthy—"
"No good Abbot ever thinks he is," McGee said gruffly. "Step up here!"
Anho came up, with faltering step, and McGee stood, stepping aside. "Sit down in that chair, now.
. . . Yes, I know it's hard, but you didn't ask for this, did you? Now!" He turned, facing the monks. "Come up here, one by one, and swear to obey your new Abbot!"
They didn't even stop to think about it; they immediately started filing up. Anho stammered out his acceptance of their

loyalty, one by one. But he gained confidence as the line stretched onward. The Father-General lifted his head, caught Rod's eye across the room, and winked. Behind them in the abbey, the red-eyed monks chanted matins, lulling the night. Above them a dark shape stooped, swelling as it came closer. Before them the former Abbot gawked upward, staring at the descending spacer. "Oh, he knows what it is, well enough," McGee said. "You forget, Lord Warlock, that my monks have always kept the knowledge of technology alive within the cloister." "No, I don't," Rod said. "Poor guy must be all the more scared, now that he knows what he's going to ride in." "I have enough faith in the man to earnestly believe that he will rejoice at the opportunity to spend the rest of his life in prayer." "He should." Rod tasted bitterness at the back of his tongue. "When you think of the misery he caused by letting his monks imitate hauntings, the soul-searching anxiety of people doubting their Church, the deaths he could have caused—all because religion is such a great way to gain power!" "You have cause for bitterness," McGee agreed. "But please, Lord Warlock, remember that it wasn't the Faith that committed those actions—it was a man who used that Faith for his own worldly purposes!" "All right, so religion by itself isn't to blame," Rod admitted. "But the only way to keep it 'unworldly,' Father, is to limit it to being a set of beliefs, without a separate meeting place or ministers." "A faith without a Church?" McGee shook his head, smiling. "That's an old argument, Lord Warlock—that religion is fine until it becomes organized." "It may be old, but I never heard of it being totally disproven. Once religion becomes organized, Father, it turns into a ball in a game; it can't be the referee anymore, and you can't rely on it as a rule book." The Father-General's head and shoulders hunched in a smothered laugh. "So faith is a sort of sport? I think religion could be even more seriously misused by amateurs than by professionals, Lord Warlock. Still, even allowing the validity of your idea, I don't think organization can be prevented. There have been sects, such as the Taoists and the Methodists, who began with the idea that there should be no formal, ministers or hierarchy, but who eventually developed both." "You're probably right," Rod admitted. "Sooner or later, someone will probably try to make a living out of any religion." "I wouldn't quite put it that way." McGee frowned. "It might be more accurate to say that people in emotional turmoil will always look for a guide and teacher, and will look for spiritual answers in their religion, so that they will always develop a need for ministers." "But just because it's inevitable doesn't make it right," Rod objected. "The average person will always want to put his or her conscience, and the responsibility for his or her life, into someone else's hands. Very few people are willing to take the responsibility onto their own shoulders, Father." "Oh, really?" The Father-General finally showed preliminary signs of exasperation. "And how are you doing with the responsibility for your own conscience, Lord Warlock?" "I'm bearing up. Not that it's exactly pleasant, mind you, but I generally manage to wrestle through my tough times on my own. Of course, I have a wonderful wife. ..."

"And you never seek guidance from a religious professional?"

"Seek it, no. One usually shows up to offer it without my asking, though."

"And how do you cope when you discover you've already done something wrong that can't be undone?"

"You mean do I look for the sacrament of reconciliation?" Rod smiled wryly. "Only during the Easter season,

Father. I still think confession is the Church's opportunity for thought control. Okay, so I have indulged in it

occasionally—but just as often there hasn't been a priest handy, and I've had to apologize to God on my own. Of

course, when I finally do find a priest, it makes for a long session. Probably unnecessary, but it won't do any

harm either—and it can't hurt to take out afterlife insurance."

"The cure for long sessions in the Reconciliation Room is to go there more frequently. Have you been lately?"

"No, Father—I haven't committed any major sins since the last time."

Father McGee briefly considered the variety of mayhem and dirty tricks he'd heard Rod advocate, and wondered

what the Lord Warlock counted a major sin. "You should go, anyway— it's good for the soul."

"Whose, Father? Your soul, or mine?"

Rod closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair with a massive sigh.

"Aye, my love—yet 'tis done now." Gwen came over to perch beside him and stroke his forehead.

"Mayhap the

Father-General will pay us greater heed in the future."

Rod stiffened. "You 'would mention a thing like that, wouldn't you?"

Gwen's eyes widened. "Dost not wish him to?"

"Only so long as he doesn't get any ideas about trying to throw his weight around."

"Nay! Surely Father McGee is a saintly man!"

"Yeah, but even a good man can be tempted, as our late Archbishop just finished proving. Not that I'm really

worried about McGee, though—he's one of the good ones. But he'll have a successor, one of these decades—and

I'm not eager for that."

Gwen frowned. "He cannot do so very much without revealing his monks' knowledge of wondrous machines."

"That helps, yes—but they have a sufficient capacity for mayhem by themselves."

The door to the bedroom opened, and a small ghost drifted out in a white nightshirt, heading for the water bucket.

It sipped from the dipper and turned to go back.

Rod reached out and caught it by the middle as it tried to get past. The child howled happily, struggling with

more effect than conviction, as he plumped it onto his lap with a grin. "Thought you were supposed to be asleep."

"I did thirst, Papa," Gregory explained.

"Only for water? Fine."

The boy sobered. "There's naught wrong in thirsting for grace, Papa."

"True." Rod tried to ignore that chill down his back. "But tiptoeing about in the night won't bring it."

Gregory actually grinned. "Nay, but knowledge will. The Father-General did have the right of it, Papa—I am

called to learning, but not to holy orders."

The chill went away, and Rod fought his body's impulse to collapse. "I said he was a good one. But what are you

going to do for company?"

"Even as he said—I shall found a community of scholars."

Rod stared at the boy, implications reeling through his mind. Then he grinned slowly. "Why, so you will, won't

you? The University of Gramarye, no doubt." He swung the boy to the floor, aimed him toward his room, and

propelled him toward it with a spank. "All right, enough conversation. Back to bed, now, and sleep quietly,
please—that's enough dreams for one night."
Gregory gave a theatrical squall and scurried away.
As the door slammed behind him, Gwen turned back to Rod, smiling with amusement. "Well, he is safe from all
thou didst fear. Yet would it be so horrible to have him a priest, my lord?"
"Yes! Not that there's anything wrong with the clergy, dear—it's just that Gregory has too free a mind to be
happy among them."
Gwen stared at him in total surprise. Then she nodded. "He hath, hath he not? Wherefore did I not see it?"
"Because it never occurred to you that the Church might restrict a person's thinking. Never occurred to anyone
else on this planet, either."
She gave him her "convince me" look. "Wherefore would it not?"
"Because none of you ever knew there was any other way to think. You were raised to believe there was only one
Truth, and the Church—had it."
"Why, that is so . . ." Gwen said slowly.
"But there may be aspects to that Truth that the Church doesn't know yet."
"Surely the good fathers will embrace such knowledge, when it is discovered!"
"Sure—just as they embraced the new idea of a second chapterhouse." Rod shook his head. "Sorry, dear. I can't
believe that religions like new ideas."
"Yet the Runnymede Chapter will endure, now that it hath begun—as will new notions."
"Yes, but only in spite of attempts to wipe them out—and I'd rather Gregory weren't caught between those
particular millstones."

"True," Gwen agreed reluctantly. "Yet surely this land will tolerate difference and newness more easily, my lord,
now that some few great lords' estates have been quartered, and new lords elevated."
"Yes." Rod glowered at the fire, nettled. "You would remind me of our new responsibilities, wouldn't you?"
" 'Tis naught but thy due," Gwen insisted. "Whoe'er did hear of a lord without an estate?"
"But I don't want responsibility for a whole bunch of serfs!"
"Wherefore not, when thou hast already the care of all Gramarye? And, too, our new lands have a castle upon
them."
"Yeah—a gloomy stone pile that nobody's lived in for a hundred years! No, this cottage is quite enough for me,
thank you."
"I have endeavored to make it so." Gwen leaned her cheek on his head and linked her arms loosely around his
neck. "Still, 'twill be a pleasant retreat in the summer."
"Retreat . . ." Rod lifted his head. "It would be a little harder for Tuan and Catharine to get to us there, wouldn't
it?"
"It would indeed," she said, amused. "Mightest thou not find rest in such a place, my lord?"
"I might, at that." Rod smiled, leaning his head back to gaze up at her. "That's why I need you, dear—to look on
the bright side for me."
She bowed her head to gaze down at him, then smiled slowly. "And dost thou need me for naught else, my lord?"
"Well, there were a couple of other things." Rod reached up, sliding his hand under her hair to cup her neck,
drawing her head down. "Think the kids are asleep yet?"
Her eyes lost focus for a moment; then she smiled down at him again, murmuring, "Very soundly," and lowered
her mouth for a long, and very healing, kiss.