

## Chapter I

### 1

South of Cornwall, north of Iberia, across the Cantabrian Gulf from Aquitaine were the Elder Isles, ranging in size from Gwyg's Fang, a jag of black rock most often awash under Atlantic breakers, to Hybras, the 'Hy-Brasill' of early Irish chroniclers: an island as large as Ireland itself.

On Hybras were three notable cities: Avallon, Lyonesse Town and ancient Ys\*, along with many walled towns, old gray villages, castles of many turrets and manor houses in pleasant gardens. The landscapes of Hybras were varied. The Teach tac Teach, a mountain range of high peaks and upland moors, paralleled the length of the Atlantic foreshore. Elsewhere the landscape was more gentle, with vistas over sunny downs, wooded knolls, meadows and rivers. A wild woods shrouded the entire center of Hybras. This was the Forest of Tantrevalles, itself the source of a thousand fables, where few folk ventured for fear of enchantment. The few who did so, woodcutters and the like, walked with cautious steps, stopping often to listen. The breathless silence, broken, perhaps, by a far sweet bird call, was not reassuring in itself and soon they would stop to listen again.

\* In primaeval times a land bridge briefly connected the Elder Isles to Old Europe. According to myth, the first nomad hunters to arrive on Hybras, when they crossed the Teach tac Teach and looked down along the Atlantic foreshore, discovered the city Ys already in existence.

In the depths of the forest, colors became richer and more intense; shadows were tinged with indigo or maroon; and who knows what might be watching from across the glade, or perched at the top of yonder stump?



The Elder Isles had known the coming and going of many peoples: Pharesmians, blue-eyed Evadnioi, Pelasgians with their maenad priestesses, Danaans, Lydians, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Greeks, Celts from Gaul, Ska from Norway by way of Ireland, Romans, Celts from Ireland and a few Sea Goths. The wash of so many peoples had left behind a complex detritus: ruined strongholds; graves and tombs; steles carved with cryptic glyphs: songs, dances, turns of speech, fragments of dialect, place-names; ceremonies of purport now forgotten, but with lingering flavor. There were dozens of cults and religions, diverse except that, in every case, a caste of priests interceded between laity and divinity. At Ys, steps cut into the stone led down into the ocean to the Temple of Atlante; each month in the dark of the moon priests descended the steps by midnight, to emerge at dawn wearing garlands of sea flowers. On Dascinet, certain tribes were guided in their rites by cracks in sacred stones, which none but the priests could read. On Scola, the adjacent island, worshippers of the god Nyrene poured flasks of their own blood into each of four sacred rivers; the truly devout sometimes bled themselves pale. On Troicinet, the rituals of life and death were conducted in temples dedicated to the earth-goddess Gaea. Celts had wandered everywhere across the Elder Isles, leaving behind not only place names, but Druid

sacrifices in sacred groves, and the 'March of the Trees' during Beltane. Etruscan priests consecrated their androgynous divinity Votumna with ceremonies repulsive and often horrid, while the Danaans introduced the more wholesome Aryan pantheon. With the Romans came Mithraism, Christianity, Parsh, the worship of Zoroaster, and a dozen other similar sects. In due course, Irish monks founded a Christian monastery\* on Whanish Isle, near Dahaut below Avallon, which ultimately suffered the same fate as Lindisfarne far to the north, off the coast of Britain.

For many years the Elder Isles were ruled from Castle Haidion at Lyonesse Town, until Olam III, son of Fafhion Long Nose, removed the seat of government to Falu Ffail at Avallon, taking with him the sacred throne Evandig and the great table Cairbra an Meadhan, 'the Board of Notables'†, and the source of a whole cycle of legends.

Upon the death of Olam III, the Elder Isles entered upon a time of troubles. The Ska, having been expelled from Ireland, settled on the island Skaghane, where they rebuffed all attempts to dislodge them. Goths ravaged the coast of Dahaut, sacking the Christian monastery on Whanish Isle, sailing their longboats up the Cambermouth as far as Cogstone Head, from which they briefly menaced Avallon itself. A dozen princelings vied for power, shedding much blood, wreaking much grief and bereavement, exhausting the

\* Somewhat later, King Phristan of Lyonesse allowed a Christian bishopric at Bulmer Skeme, on the east coast of Lyonesse, insisting only that no wealth be exported to Rome. Perhaps for this reason, the church received little support from abroad, and the bishop exercised no great influence, either at Bulmer Skeme or at Rome.

† In years to come Cairbra an Meadhan would serve as model for the 'Round Table' which graced King Arthur's court at Camelot.

land, and in the end achieving nothing, so that the Elder Isles became a patchwork of eleven kingdoms, each at odds with all the rest.

Audry I, King of Dahaut, never abandoned his claim to sovereignty over all the Elder Isles, citing his custody of the throne Evandig as basis for his assertion. His claim was angrily challenged, especially by King Phristan of Lyonesse, who insisted that Evandig and Cairbra an Meadhan were his own rightful property, wrongfully sequestered by Olam III. He named Audry I traitor and caitiff; in the end the two realms went to war. At the climactic battle of Orm Hill the two sides succeeded only in exhausting each other. Both Phristan and Audry I were killed, and finally the remnants of the two great armies straggled sadly away from the bloody field.

Audry II became king of Dahaut and Casmir I was the new king of Lyonesse. Neither abandoned the ancient claims, and peace between the two realms was thereafter fragile and tentative.

So went the years, with tranquillity only a memory. In the Forest of Tantrevalles halflings, trolls, ogres and others less easily defined, bestirred themselves and performed evil deeds which no one dared punish; magicians no longer troubled to mask their identities, and were solicited by rulers for aid in the conduct of temporal policy.

The magicians devoted ever more time to sly struggles and baneful intrigue, to the effect that a goodly number had already been expunged. The sorcerer Sartzanek was one of the chief offenders; he had destroyed the magician Coddefut by means of a purulence, and Widdefut through the Spell of Total Enlightenment. In retaliation, a cabal of Sartzanek's enemies compressed him into an iron post which they

emplaced at the summit of Mount Agon. Sartzanek's scion Tamurello took refuge at his manse Faroli, deep within the Forest of Tantrevalles and there protected himself by dint of careful magic.

That further events of this sort might be avoided, Murgén, most potent of the magicians, issued his famous edict, forbidding magicians employment in the service of temporal rulers, inasmuch as such activity must inevitably bring magicians into new conflicts with each other, to the danger of all.

Two magicians, Snodbeth the Gay, so-called for his jingling bells, ribbons and merry quips, and Grundle of Shaddarlost, were brash enough to ignore the edict, and each suffered a severe penalty for his presumption. Snodbeth was nailed into a tub to be devoured by a million small black insects; Grundle awoke from his sleep to find himself in a dismal region at the back of the star Achernar, among geysers of molten sulphur and clouds of blue fume; he too failed to survive.

Although the magicians were persuaded to restraint, travail and dissension elsewhere were rife. Celts who had been placidly settled in the Daut province Fer Aquila became inflamed by bands of Goidels from Ireland; they slaughtered all the Dauts they could find, elevated a burly cattle-thief named Meorghán the Bald to the kingship and renamed the land Godelia, and the Dauts were unable to recapture their lost province.

Years passed. One day, almost by chance, Murgén made a startling discovery, which caused him such vast consternation that for days he sat immobile, staring into space. By degrees his resolution returned and at last he set himself to

a program which, if successful, would slow and finally halt the momentum of an evil destiny.

The effort preoccupied Murgén's energies and all but eliminated the joy in his life.

The better to guard his privacy, Murgén set out barriers of dissuasion along the approaches to Swer Smód, and, further, appointed a pair of demoniac gatekeepers, the better to turn back obstinate visitors; Swer Smód thereupon became a place of silence and gloom.

Murgén at last felt the need for some sort of alleviation. For this reason he brought into existence a scion, so that he might, in effect, live two existences in tandem.

The scion, Shimrod, was created with great care, and was by no means a replica of Murgén, either in appearance or in temperament. Perhaps the differences were larger than Murgén had intended, since Shimrod's disposition was at times a trifle too easy, so that it verged on the frivolous: a condition which was at discord with current conditions at Swer Smód. Murgén, nevertheless, cherished his scion and trained him in the skills of life and the arts of magic.

In the end Shimrod became restless and with Murgén's blessing he departed Swer Smód in all good cheer. For a period Shimrod wandered the Elder Isles as a vagabond, sometimes posing as a peasant, more often as a peregrine knight in search of romantic adventure.

Shimrod at last settled into the manse Trilda on Lally Meadow, a few miles into the Forest of Tantrevalles.

In due course the Ska of Skaghane perfected their military apparatus and invaded North and South Ulfland, only to be defeated by Aillas, the gallant young King of Troicinet, who thereupon became King of both North and South Ulfland,

to the grievous distress of Casmir, King of Lyonesse.

Less than a dozen magicians remained extant throughout the Elder Isles. Some of these were Baibalides of Lamneth Isle; Noumique; Myolander; Triptomologius the Necromancer; Condoit of Conde; Severin Starfinder; Tif of the Troagh; and a few more, including some who were little more than apprentices, or tyros. A goodly number of others had recently passed from existence: a fact suggesting that magic might be a dangerous profession. The witch Desmëi for reasons unknown had dissolved herself during the creation of Faude Carfilhiot and Melanthe. Tamurello also had acted imprudently; now, in the semblance of a weasel skeleton he hung constricted within a small glass globe in Murgén's great hall at Swer Smod. The weasel skeleton crouched in a tight curl, skull thrust forward between the crotch formed by the up-raised haunches, with two small black eyes glaring from the glass, conveying an almost palpable will to work evil upon anyone who chanced to glance at the bottle.

## 2

The most remote province of Dahaut was the March, governed by Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila—a title somewhat hollow, since the old Duchy of Fer Aquila had long been occupied by the Celts for their kingdom Godelia. The March was a poor land, sparsely populated, with a single market town, Blantize. A few peasants tilled barley and herded sheep; in a few tumbled old castles a rag-tag gentry lived in little better case than the peasants, consoled only by their honour and devotion to the doctrines of chivalry. They

ate more gruel than meat; draughts blew through their halls, flickering the flames in the wall sconces; at night ghosts walked the corridors, mourning old tragedies.

At the far west of the March was a wasteland supporting little but thorn, thistle, brown sedge and a few spinneys of stunted black cypress. The wasteland, which was known as the Plain of Shadows, met the outlying fringes of the great forest in the south, skirted the Squigh Mires in the north and to the west abutted the Long Dann, a scarp generally three hundred feet high and fifty miles long, with the upland moors of North Ulfland beyond. The single route from the plain below to the moors above led through a cleft in the Long Dann. During ancient times a fortress had been built into the cleft, closing the gap with stone blocks, so that the fortress effectively became part of the cliff. A sally port opened upon the plain, and high above a line of parapets fronted a terrace, or walkway. The Danaans had named the fortress 'Poëlitetz': 'the Invulnerable'; it had never been taken by frontal assault. King Aillas of Troicinet had attacked from the rear, and so had dislodged the Ska from what had been their deepest salient into Hybras.

Aillas with his son Dhrun now stood on the parapets, looking out over the Plain of Shadows. The time was close upon noon; the sky was clear and blue; today the plain showed none of the fleeting cloud shadows which had prompted its name. Standing together, Aillas and Dhrun seemed much alike. Both were slender, square-shouldered, strong and quick by the action of sinew rather than massive muscle. Both stood at middle stature; both showed clear clean features, gray eyes and light brown hair. Dhrun was easier and more casual than Aillas, showing in his style the faintest hint

of carefully restrained flamboyance, along with an indefinable light-hearted elegance: qualities which gave charm and color to his personality. Aillas, constrained by a hundred heavy responsibilities, was somewhat more still and reflective than Dhrun. His status required that he mask his natural passion and intensity behind a face of polite indifference: to such an extent that the trait had become almost habitual. Similarly, he often used a mildness close upon diffidence to disguise his true boldness, which was almost an extravagance of bravado. His swordsmanship was superb; his wit danced and flickered with the same sure delicacy, coming in sudden flashes like sunlight bursting through the clouds. Such occasions transformed his face so that for a moment he seemed as youthful and jubilant as Dhrun himself.

Many folk, observing Aillas and Dhrun together, thought them to be brothers. When assured otherwise, they tended to wonder at Aillas' precocity in the fathering of his child. Dhrun, in point of fact, had been taken as an infant to Thripsey Shee; he had lived among the fairies—how many years: eight, nine, ten? There was no way of knowing. Meanwhile time in the outer world had advanced but a single year. For compelling reasons, the circumstances of Dhrun's childhood had been kept secret, despite speculation and wonder.

The two stood leaning on the parapets, watching for those they had come to meet. Aillas was moved to reminisce of earlier times. "I am never comfortable here; despair seems to hang in the air."

Dhrun looked up and down the terrace, which in the bright sunlight seemed inoffensive enough. "The place is old. It must be impregnated with misery, which weighs upon the soul."

"Do you feel it, then?"

"Not to any great extent," Dhrun admitted. "Perhaps I lack sensitivity."

Aillas, smiling, shook his head. "The explanation is simple: you were never brought here as a slave. I have walked these very stones with a chain around my neck. I can feel the weight and hear the jangle; I could probably trace out where I placed my feet. I was in a state of utter despair."

Dhrun gave an uneasy laugh. "Now is now; then is then. You should feel exultation in that you have more than evened the score."

Aillas laughed again. "I do indeed! Exultation mixed with dread makes for an odd emotion!"

"Hmf," said Dhrun. "That is hard to imagine."

Aillas turned to lean again on the parapet. "I often wonder about 'now' and 'then' and 'what is to be', and how one differs from the other. I have never heard a sensible explanation, and the thinking makes me more uneasy than ever." Aillas pointed to a place down upon the plain. "See that little hillock yonder, with the scrub growing up the slopes? The Ska put me to digging in a tunnel, which was to extend out to that hillock. When the tunnel was finished, the tunnel gang would be killed, in order to secure the secret. One night we dug up to the surface and escaped, and so I am alive today."

"And the tunnel: was it ever finished?"

"I would expect so. I have never thought to look."

Dhrun pointed across the Plain of Shadows. "Riders are coming: a troop of knights, to judge by the glint of metal."

"They are not punctual," said Aillas. "Such indications are meaningful."

The column approached with stately deliberation, and finally revealed itself to be a troop of two dozen horsemen. In the van, on a high-stepping white horse, rode a herald, clad in half-armor. His horse was caparisoned in cloths of rose-pink and gray; the herald carried high a gonfalon showing three white unicorns on a green field: the royal arms of Dahaut. Three more heralds followed close, holding aloft other standards. Behind, at a dignified distance, rode three knights abreast. They wore light armor and flowing cloaks of rich colors: one black, one dark green, one pale blue. The three were followed by sixteen men-at-arms, each holding high a lance from which fluttered a green pennon.

"They make a brave show, despite their journey," observed Dhrun.

"So they have planned," said Aillas. "Again, such indications are significant."

"Of what?"

"Ah! Such meanings are always more clear in retrospect! As for now, they are late, but they have troubled to make a fine arrival. These are mixed meanings, which someone more subtle than I must interpret."

"Are the knights known to you?"

"Red and gray are the colors of Duke Claractus. I know him by reputation. The company would be riding from Castle Cirroc, which is the seat of Sir Wittes. He is evidently the second knight. As for the third—" Aillas looked along the terrace and called to his herald Duirdry, standing a few yards distant. "Who rides in the company?"

"The first standard is that of King Audry: the company comes on royal business. Next, I note the standards of Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila. The other two

are Sir Wittes of Harne and Castle Cirroc, and Sir Agwyd of Gyl. All are notables of long lineage and good connection.”

“Go out upon the plain,” said Aillas. “Meet these folk with courtesy and inquire their business. If the response comes in respectful language, I will receive them at once in the hall. If they are brusque or minatory, bid them wait, and bring me their message.”

Duirdry departed the parapets. A few moments later he emerged from the sally port with two men-at-arms for escort. The three rode black horses furnished with simple black harness. Duirdry displayed Aillas’ royal standard: five white dolphins on a dark blue field. The men-at-arms carried banners quartered in the arms of Troicinet, Dascinet, North and South Ulfland. They rode a hundred yards out upon the plain, then drew up their horses and waited in the bright sunlight, with the dun scarp and fortress looming behind them.

The Daut column halted at a distance of fifty yards. After a pause of a minute while both parties sat immobile, the Daut herald rode forward on his white horse. He reined to a halt five yards in front of Duirdry.

Watching from the parapets, Aillas and Dhrun saw the Daut herald speak the message dictated by Duke Claractus. Duirdry listened, made a terse response, turned about and rode back into the fortress. Presently he reappeared on the terrace and made his report.

“Duke Claractus extends his greetings. He speaks with the voice of King Audry, to this effect: ‘In view of the amicable relations holding between the Kingdoms of Troicinet and of Dahaut, King Audry desires that King Aillas terminate his encroachment upon the lands of Dahaut with all possible

expedition and withdraw to the recognized borders of Ulfland. By so doing, King Aillas will eliminate what is now a source of grave concern for King Audry and will reassure him as to the continuation of the harmony now existent between the realms.' Duke Claractus, speaking for himself, desires that you now open the gates to his company that they may occupy the fortress, as is their duty and their right."

"Return," said Aillas. "Inform Duke Claractus that he may enter the fortress, with an escort of two persons only, and that I will grant him an audience. Then bring him to the low hall."

Again Duirdry departed. Aillas and Dhrun descended to the low hall: a dim chamber of no great size cut into the stone of the cliff. A small embrasure overlooked the plain; a doorway gave on a balcony fifty feet above the mustering yard at the back of the sally port.

Upon instructions from Aillas, Dhrun stationed himself in an anteroom at the front of the hall; here he awaited the Daut deputation.

Duke Claractus arrived without delay, along with Sir Wittes and Sir Agwyd. Claractus marched heavily into the chamber, and halted: a man tall and massive, black-haired, with a short black beard and stern black eyes in a harsh heavy face. Claractus wore a steel war-cap and a cloak of green velvet over a shirt of mail, with a sword swinging from his belt. Sir Wittes and Sir Agwyd were accoutered in similar style.

Dhrun spoke: "Your Grace, I am Dhrun, prince of the realm. Your audience with King Aillas will be informal and therefore is not a suitable occasion for the display of weapons. You may doff your helmets and place your swords

on the table, in accordance with the usual precepts of chivalry.”

Duke Claractus gave his head a curt shake. “We are not here seeking an audience with King Aillas; that would be appropriate only in his own realms. He now visits a duchy within the Kingdom of Dahaut, such duchy being governed by myself. I am paramount here, and the protocol is different. I deem this occasion to be a field parley. Our attire is appropriate in every respect. Lead us to the king.”

Dhrun politely shook his head. “In that case I will deliver the message of King Aillas and you may return to your company without further ado. Listen closely, for these are the words you must convey to King Audry.

“King Aillas points out that the Ska occupied Poëlitetz over a period of ten years. The Ska also controlled the lands along the top of the Long Dann. During this time they encountered neither protest nor forceful counteraction from King Audry or yourself or from any other Daut agency. By the tenets of the common law dealing with cases of uncontested settlement, the Ska by their acts and in default of Daut counteracts gained ownership in full fee and title to Poëlitetz, and the lands along the top of the Long Dann.

“In due course the Ulfish army, commanded by King Aillas, defeated the Ska, drove them away, and took their property by force of arms. This property thereby became joined to the Kingdom of North Ulfland, with full right and legality. These facts and the precedents of history and common practice are incontestable.”

Claractus stared long and hard at Dhrun. “You crow loudly for such a young cockerel.”

“Your Grace, I merely repeat the words taught me by King

Aillas, and I hope that I have not offended you. There is still another point to be considered.”

“And what is that?”

“The Long Dann is clearly the natural boundary between Dahaut and North Ulfland. The defensive strength of Poëlitetz means nothing to Dahaut; however, it is invaluable to the kingdoms of North and South Ulfland, in the case of attack from the east.”

Claractus gave a hoarse laugh. “And if the attacking armies were Daut, what then? We would bitterly regret failing to claim our territory, as we do now.”

“Your claim is denied,” said Dhrun modestly. “I might add that our concern is not for the Daut armies, valorous though they may be, but for the forces of King Casmir of Lyonesse, who hardly troubles to conceal his ambitions.”

“If Casmir dares to venture a single step into Dahaut, he will suffer a terrible woe!” declared Claractus. “We will chase him the length of Old Street, and bring him to bay at Cape Farewell, where we will cut him and his surviving soldiers into small bits.”

“Those are brave words!” said Dhrun. “I will repeat them to my father, for his reassurance. Our message to King Audry is this: Poëlitetz and the Long Dann are now part of North Ulfland. He need fear no aggression from the west, and therefore may apply his full energies against the Celt bandits who have caused him so much travail in Wysrod.”

“Bah,” muttered Claractus, unable for the moment to make any remark more cogent.

Dhrun bowed. “You have heard the words of King Aillas. There is no more to be said and you have my permission to go.”

Duke Claractus glared a single moment, then swung on his heel, gestured to his companions and with no further words left the chamber.

From the embrasure Aillas and Dhrun watched the column receding across the Plain of Shadows. "Audry is somewhat languid and even a bit airy," said Aillas. "He may well decide that in this case his honour is not truly compromised. So I hope, since we need no more enemies. Nor, for that matter, does King Audry."

### 3

During the Danaan incursions, Avallon had been a fortified market town hard by the estuary of the Camber, notable only for the many turrets rearing high above the town walls.

The Danaan power ran its course; the tall hazel-eyed warriors who fought naked save for bronze helmets disappeared into the fog of history. The walls of Avallon decayed; the mouldering turrets protected only bats and owls, but Avallon remained the 'City of Tall Towers'.

Before the Time of Troubles, Olam III made Avallon his capitol and by dint of vast expenditure made Falu Ffail the most magnificent palace of the Elder Isles. His successors were not to be outmatched in this regard, and each vied with his predecessors in the richness and splendor of his contribution to the fabric of the palace.

When Audry II came to the throne, he applied himself to the perfection of the palace gardens. He ordained six fountains of nineteen jets, each surrounded by a circular promenade with cushioned benches; he lined the central pleasance with marble nymphs and fauns to the number of thirty; at

the terminus was an arcaded cupola where musicians played sweetly from dawn till dark, and sometimes later by moonlight. A garden of white roses flanked a similar expanse of red roses; lemon trees, clipped to the shape of spheres, bordered the square lawns where King Audry was wont to stroll with his favorites.

Falu Ffail was notable not only for its gardens but also for the pomp and extravagance of its many pageants. Masques, fêtes, spectacles, frivolities: they followed close one after another, each more lavish in its delights than the last. Gallant courtiers and beautiful ladies thronged the halls and galleries, clad in garments of marvellous style and complexity; each appraising the others with care, wondering as to the effect of his or her image, so carefully contrived. All the aspects of life were dramatized and exaggerated; every instant was heavy as honey with significance.

Nowhere was conduct more graceful nor manners more exquisite than at Falu Ffail. The air rustled with murmured conversations; each lady as she passed trailed a waft of scent: jasmine or floris of orange-clove, or sandalwood, or essence of rose. In dim salons lovers kept rendezvous: sometimes secret, sometimes illicit; very little, however, escaped notice, and every incident, amusing, grotesque, pathetic or all three, provided the grist of gossip.

At Falu Ffail intrigue was the stuff of both life and death. Under the glitter and glisten ran dark currents, of passion and heartbreak, envy and hate. There were duels by daybreak and murders by starlight, mysteries and disappearances, and royal banishments when indiscretions became intolerable.

Audry's rule was generally benevolent, if only because all his juridical decisions were carefully prepared for him

by his chancellor Sir Namias. Nonetheless, sitting on the throne Evandig in his scarlet robes and wearing his golden crown, Audry seemed the very definition of benign majesty. His personal attributes enhanced the kingly semblance. He was tall and imposing in stature, if somewhat heavy of hip and soft in the belly. Glossy black ringlets hung beside his pale cheeks; a fine black mustache graced his ripe upper lip. Under expressive black eyebrows his brown eyes were large and moist, if set perhaps too closely beside his long disdainful nose.

Queen Dafnyd, Audry's spouse, originally a princess of Wales and two years older than Audry, had borne him three sons and three daughters; now she no longer commanded Audry's ardors. Dafnyd cared not a whit and took no interest in Audry's little affairs; her own inclinations were adequately soothed by a trio of stalwart footmen. King Audry disapproved of the arrangement, and frowned haughtily upon the footmen when he passed them in the gallery.

During fine weather, Audry often took a leisurely breakfast in a private part of the garden, at the center of a large square of lawn. The breakfasts were informal, and Audry was usually attended only by a few cronies.

Toward the end of such an occasion, Audry's seneschal, Sir Tramador, approached to announce the arrival of Claractus, Duke of the March and Fer Aquila, who desired an audience at King Audry's earliest convenience.

Audry listened with a grimace of annoyance; such tidings were seldom the source of good cheer and, worse, often required that Audry spend hours in tedious consultation.

Sir Tramador waited, smiling the most gentle of smiles to see King Audry wrestling with the need to exert himself.

Audry at last groaned in irritation and jerked his heavy white fingers. "Bring Claractus here; I will see him at this moment, and be rid of the matter."

Sir Tramador turned away, mildly surprised to find King Audry so brisk. Five minutes later he ushered Duke Claractus across the lawn. From the evidence of dusty skin and soiled clothing, Claractus had only just alighted from his horse.

Claractus bowed before King Audry. "Sire, my excuses! I have ignored punctilio in order that I might report to you as soon as possible. Last night I slept at Verwiy Underdyke; by dint of early rising and hard riding I am here now."

"I commend your zeal," said Audry. "If I were served everywhere as well I would never cease to rejoice! Your news, then, would seem to be of moment."

"That, Sire, is for you to judge. Shall I speak?"

Audry pointed to a chair. "Seat yourself, Claractus! You are acquainted, or so I presume, with Sir Huynemer, Sir Archem and Sir Rudo."

Claractus, glancing toward the three, gave a curt nod. "I took note of them on my last visit; they were enjoying a charade and all three were dressed as harlequins, or clowns, or something of the sort."

"I fail to recall the occasion," said Sir Huynemer stiffly.

"No matter," said Audry. "Speak your news, which I hope will elevate my spirits."

Claractus gave a harsh chuckle. "Were this the case, Sire, I would have ridden all night. My news is not gratifying. I conferred, as instructed, with King Aillas, at the fortress Poëlitetz. I expressed your views in exact words. He gave his response with courtesy, but yielded no substance. He

will not vacate Poëlitetz nor the lands at the top of the Long Dann. He states that he conquered these places from the Ska, who had taken them by force of arms from the Daut realm and into their ownership. The Ska, he points out, had maintained this ownership in the absence of challenge from your royal armies. Thus, so he asserts, title to fortress and lands have devolved upon the Kingdom of North Ulfland.”

Audry uttered a sibilant ejaculation. “Sarsicante! Does he hold my favor in such small regard, to flout me thus? He would seem to scoff both at my dignity and at the might of Daut arms!”

“Not so, Sire! I would be remiss if I gave that impression. His tone was polite and respectful. He made it clear that he guards Ulfland not against Dahaut but rather against the possibility of King Casmir’s aggressive intent, which, so he states, is general knowledge.”

“Bah!” snapped Audry. “That is most farfetched! How could Casmir arrive on the Plain of Shadows without first defeating the entire armed strength of Dahaut?”

“King Aillas feels that the contingency, while remote, is real. In any event, he relies most strongly upon his first argument, to wit: that the lands are his by right of conquest.”

Sir Rudo cried out in scorn: “An argument specious and incorrect! Does he take us for lumpkins? The boundaries of Dahaut are grounded in tradition; they have been immutable for centuries!”

“Precisely true!” declared Sir Archem. “The Ska must be regarded as transient interlopers, no more!”

King Audry made an impatient gesture. “Obviously it is not so easy! I must give the matter thought. Meanwhile, Claractus, will you not join us at our breakfast? Your dress

is somewhat at discord, but surely no one with a conscience will cry you shame."

"Thank you, Sire. I will gladly eat, for I am famished."

The conversation shifted to topics more agreeable, but the mood of the breakfast had been roiled and presently Sir Huynemer again condemned the provocative conduct of King Aillas. Sir Rudo and Sir Archem endorsed his views, each advising a stern rebuff to put the 'young Troice upstart' in his place.

Audry leaned heavily back in his chair. "All very well! But I wonder how this chastening of Aillas is to be accomplished."

"Aha! If several strong companies were despatched into the March, with clear indications that we intended to take back our lands by force, Aillas might well chirp from a different branch!"

King Audry rubbed his chin. "You feel that he would yield to a show of resolution."

"Would he dare challenge the might of Dahaut?"

"Suppose that, through folly or recklessness, he refused to yield?"

"Then Duke Claractus would strike with his full might, to send young Aillas and his Ulf bantlings bounding and leaping across the moors like so many hares."

Claractus held up his hand. "I am chary of so much glory. You have envisioned the campaign; you shall be in command and lead the charge."

Sir Huynemer, with raised eyebrows and a cold glance for Claractus, qualified his concepts. "Sire, I put this scheme forward as an option to be studied, no more."

Audry turned to Claractus. "Is not Poëlitetz considered impregnable to assault?"

"This is the general belief."

Sir Rudo gave a skeptical grunt. "This belief has never been tested, though it has cowed folk for generations."

Claractus smiled grimly. "How does one attack a cliff?"

"The sally port might be rammed and sundered."

"Why trouble? The defenders at your request will be pleased to leave the portcullis ajar. When a goodly number of noble knights—say, a hundred or more—has swarmed into the yard, the portcullis is dropped and the captives are destroyed at leisure."

"Then the Long Dann itself must be scaled!"

"It is not easy to climb a cliff while enemies are dropping rocks from above."

Sir Rudo gave Claractus a haughty inspection. "Sir, can you offer us nothing but gloom and dismal defeat? The king has stated his requirements; still you decry every proposal intended to achieve the goal!"

"Your ideas are impractical," said Claractus. "I cannot take them seriously."

Sir Archem struck the table with his fist. "Nevertheless, chivalry demands that we respond to this insulting encroachment!"

Claractus turned to King Audry. "You are fortunate, Sire, in the fiery zeal of your paladins! They are paragons of ferocity! You should loose them against the Celts in Wysrod, who have been so noxious a nuisance!"

Sir Huynemer made a growling sound under his breath. "All this is beside the point."

Audry heaved a sigh, blowing out his black mustaches. "For a fact, our Wysrod campaigns have brought us little glory and less satisfaction."

Sir Huynemer spoke earnestly: "Sire, the difficulties in Wysrod are many! The gossoons are like specters; we chase them over tussock and bog; we bring them to bay; they melt into the Wysrod mists, and presently attack our backs, with yells and screams and insane Celtic curses, so that our soldiers become confused."

Duke Claractus laughed aloud. "You should train your soldiers not for parades but for fighting; then they might not fear mists and curses."

Sir Huynemer uttered a curse of his own: "Devilspit and dogballs! I resent these words! My service to the king has never been challenged!"

"Nor mine!" declared Sir Rudo. "The Celts are a minor vexation which we will soon abate!"

King Audry pettishly clapped his hands. "Peace, all of you! I wish no further wrangling in my presence!"

Duke Claractus rose to his feet. "Sire, I have spoken hard truths which otherwise you might not hear. Now, by your leave, I will retire and refresh myself."

"Do so, good Claractus! I trust that you will join us as we dine."

"With pleasure, Sire."

Claractus departed. Sir Archem watched him stride across the lawn, then turned back with a snort of disapproval. "There goes a most prickly fellow!"

"No doubt loyal, and as brave as a boar in rut: of this I am sure," declared Sir Rudo. "But, like most provincials, he is purblind to wide perspectives."

"Bah!" said Sir Huynemer in disgust. "'Provincial' only? I find him uncouth, with his horse blanket cloak and blurting style of speech."

Sir Rudo spoke thoughtfully: "It would seem part and parcel of the same attribute, as if one fault generated the other." He put a cautious question to the king: "What are Your Majesty's views?"

Audry made no direct response. "I will reflect on the matter. Such decisions cannot be formed on the instant."

Sir Tramador approached King Audry. He bent and muttered into the royal ear: "Sire, it is time that you were changing into formal robes."

"Whatever for?" cried Audry.

"Today, Sire, if you recall, you sit at the assizes."

Audry turned an aggrieved glance on Sir Tramador. "Are you certain of this?"

"Indeed, Sire! The litigants are already gathering in the Outer Chamber."

Audry scowled and sighed. "So now I must finick with folly and greed and all what interests me least! It is tedium piled on obfuscation! Tramador, have you no mercy? Always you trouble me during my trifling little periods of rest!"

"I regret the need to do so, Your Highness."

"Ha! I suppose that if I must, I must; there is no escaping it."

"Unfortunately not, Your Majesty. Will you use the Grand Saloon\* or the Old Hall?"

Audry considered. "What cases await judgment?"

Sir Tramador tendered a sheet of parchment. "This is the list, with the clerk's analysis and comments. You will note a single robber to be hanged and an innkeeper who watered his wine, for a flogging. Otherwise there seems

\* Also known as the Hall of Heroes, where Evandig the throne and Cairbra an Meadhan the round table are situated.

nothing of large import.”

“Just so. The Old Hall it shall be. I am never easy on Evandig; it seems to shudder and squirm beneath me, an anomalous sensation to say the least.”

“So I would think, Your Majesty!”

The assizes ran their course. King Audry returned to his private quarters, where his valets dressed him for the afternoon. However, Audry did not immediately leave the chamber. He dismissed his valets and, dropping into a chair, sat brooding upon the issues raised by Duke Claractus.

The prospect of retaking Poëlitetz by force was, of course, absurd. Hostilities with King Aillas could benefit only Casmir of Lyonesse.

Audry rose to his feet, to pace back and forth, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. When all was taken with all, so he reflected, Aillas had spoken only stark and unvarnished truth. Danger to Dahaut came not from the Ulflands, nor from Troicinet, but from Lyonesse.

Claractus not only had brought no cheer, but also had hinted at some unpleasant realities which Audry preferred to ignore. The Daut troops in their fine uniforms made a brave show at parades, but even Audry conceded that their conduct on the battlefield might be held suspect.

Audry sighed. To remedy the situation called for measures so drastic that his mind jerked quickly back, like the fronds of a sensitive plant.

Audry threw his hands high into the air. All would be well; unthinkable otherwise! Problems ignored were problems defeated! Here was the sensible philosophy; a man would go mad trying to repair each deficiency of the universe!

Thus fortified, Audry called in his valets. They settled

a smart hat with a cocked crown and a scarlet plume upon his head; Audry blew out his mustaches and departed the chamber.

4

The Kingdom of Lyonesse extended across South Hybras, from the Cantabrian Gulf to Cape Farewell on the Atlantic Ocean. From Castle Haidion at the back of Lyonesse Town King Casmir ruled with a justice more vigorous than that of King Audry. Casmir's court was characterized by exact protocol and decorum; pomp, rather than ostentation or festivity, dictated the nature of events at Haidion.

King Casmir's spouse was Queen Sollace, a large languid woman almost as tall as Casmir. She wore her fine yellow hair in bundles on top of her head, and bathed in milk, the better to nourish her soft white skin. Casmir's son and heir-apparent was the dashing Prince Cassander; also included in the royal family was Princess Madouc, purportedly the daughter of the tragic Princess Suldrun, now nine years dead.

Castle Haidion overlooked Lyonesse Town from the shoulder of a low rise, showing from below as an interlocked set of ponderous stone blocks, surmounted by seven towers of differing styles and shape: the Tower of Lapadius\*, the Tall Tower†, the King's Tower, the West Tower, the Tower of Owls, Palaemon's Tower, and the East Tower. The ponderous structure and the towers provided Haidion a silhouette which, if graceless, archaic and eccentric, was in total contrast to the fine façade of Falu Ffail at Avallon.

\* Also known as the Old Tower.

† Known as the Eyrie.

In much the same manner, the person of King Casmir contrasted with that of King Audry. Casmir was florid and seemed to throb with strong and ruddy blood. Casmir's hair and beard were mats of crisp blond ringlets. Audry's complexion was as sallow as ivory, and his hair was richly black. Casmir was burly, thick of torso and neck, with round china-blue eyes staring from a slab-sided face. Audry, while tall and ample of girth, was measured of posture and carefully graceful.

The court of neither king lacked for regal comfort; both enjoyed their perquisites, but while Audry cultivated the company of his favorites, of both sexes, Casmir knew no intimates and kept no mistresses. Once each week he paid a stately visit to the bedchamber of Queen Sollace, and there addressed himself to her massive and lethargic white body. On other less formal occasions, he made shift to ease himself upon the quivering body of one of his pretty pageboys.

The company Casmir liked best was that of his spies and informers. From such sources he learned of Aillas' intransigence at Poëlitetz almost as soon as had King Audry himself. The news, though it came as no surprise, aroused Casmir's vigorous displeasure. Sooner or later he intended to invade Dahaut, destroy the Daut armies and consolidate a quick victory before Aillas could effectively bring to bear his own power. With Aillas ensconced at Poëlitetz, the situation became more difficult, since Aillas could instantly counter-attack with Ulfish troops across the March and there would be no swift decision to the war. Definitely, the danger posed by the fortress Poëlitetz must be eliminated.

This was no sudden new concept. Casmir had long worked to foment dissension among the Ulfish barons, that they

might enter upon a full-scale rebellion against the rule of their foreign king. To this end he had recruited Torqual, a renegade Ska turned outlaw.

The enterprise had yielded no truly gratifying results. For all Torqual's ruthlessness and cunning, he lacked tractability, which limited his usefulness. As the months passed, Casmir became impatient and dissatisfied; where were Torqual's achievements? In response to Casmir's orders, transmitted by courier, Torqual only demanded more gold and silver. Casmir had already disbursed large sums; further he suspected that Torqual could easily meet his needs by means of plunder and depredation, thus saving Casmir unnecessary expense.

For conferences with his private agents, Casmir favored the Room of Sighs, a chamber above the armoury. In olden times, before construction of the Peinhador, the armoury had served as the castle's torture chamber; prisoners awaiting attention sat above in the Room of Sighs, where the sensitive ear—so it was said—might still detect plaintive sounds.

The Room of Sighs was bleak and stark, furnished with a pair of wooden benches, a table of oak planks, two chairs, a tray with an old beechwood flask and four beechwood mugs, to which Casmir had taken a fancy.

A week after receiving news of the impasse at Poëlitetz, Casmir was notified by his under-chamberlain Eschar that the courier Robalf awaited his convenience in the Room of Sighs.

Casmir at once took himself to the cheerless chamber over the armoury. On one of the benches sat Robalf: a person gaunt and thin-faced with darting brown eyes, sparse brown hair and a long crooked nose. He wore travel-stained garments of brown fust and a high-peaked black felt cap;

upon the entrance of Casmir he jumped to his feet, doffed the cap and bowed. "Sire, I am at your service!"

Casmir looked him up and down, gave a curt nod and went to sit behind the table. "Well then, what is your news?"

Robalf responded in a reedy voice: "Sire, I have done your bidding, tarrying not a step along the way, pausing not even to empty my bladder!"

Casmir pulled at his chin. "Surely you did not perform this function on the run?"

"Sire, haste and duty make heroes of us all!"

"Interesting." Casmir poured wine from the beechwood flask into one of the mugs. He gestured toward the second chair. "Be seated, good Robalf, and divulge your tidings in comfort."

Robalf gingerly perched his thin haunches upon the edge of the chair. "Sire, I met with Torqual at the appointed place. I delivered your summons, that he must come to Lyonesse Town, using your words and speaking with your kingly authority. I bade him make ready at once, that we might ride the Trompada south together."

"And his response?"

"It was enigmatic. At first he spoke not at all, and I wondered if he had even heard my voice. Then he uttered these words: 'I will not go to Lyonesse Town.'

"I remonstrated with all urgency, citing again Your Majesty's command. Torqual at last spoke a message for your ears."

"Ho ha!" muttered Casmir. "Did he now? What was the message?"

"I must warn, Sire, that he used little tact and scamped the appropriate honorifics."

"Never mind. Speak the message." Casmir drank from his beechwood mug.

"First of all, he sent his best and most fervent regards, and his hopes for Your Majesty's continued good health: that is to say, he addressed certain odd sounds to the wind and this is how I interpreted their sense. He then stated that only fear for his life precluded full and instant obedience to Your Majesty's instructions. He then made a request for funds either of silver or of gold, in quantity adequate to his needs, which he described as large."

Casmir compressed his lips. "Is that the whole of his message?"

"No, Sire. He stated that he would be overjoyed for the privilege of meeting with Your Majesty, should you deign to visit a place called Mook's Tor. He supplied directions for arriving at this place, which I will communicate as Your Majesty requires."

"Not at the moment." Casmir leaned back in the chair. "To my ears, this message carries a flavor of casual insolence. What is your opinion?"

Robalf frowned and licked his lips. "Your Majesty, I shall render my frank assessment, if that is what you wish."

"Speak, Robalf! Above all, I value frankness."

"Very well, Your Majesty. I apprehend in Torqual's conduct not so much insolence as indifference mixed with a dark twist of humor. He would seem to live in a world where he is alone with Fate; where all other persons, your august self and I as well, are no more than colored shadows, to use a flamboyant figure. In short, rather than indulging in purposeful insolence, Torqual cares nothing one way or another for your royal sensibilities. If you are to deal with him, it

must be on this basis. Such, at least, is my belief." Robalf looked sidewise toward Casmir, whose face gave no clue as to his emotions.

Casmir spoke at last, in a voice reassuringly mild. "Does he intend to do my bidding or not? That is the most important matter of all."

"Torqual is unpredictable," said Robalf. "I suspect that you will find him no more malleable in the future than in the past."

Casmir gave a single curt nod. "Robalf, you have spoken to the point, and indeed have clarified the mysteries surrounding this perverse cutthroat, at least to some small extent."

"I am happy to be of service, Sire."

For a moment Casmir ruminated, then asked: "Did he render any account of his achievements?"

"So he did, but somewhat as afterthought. He told of taking Castle Glen Gath, killing Baron Nols and his six sons; he mentioned the burning of Maltaing Keep, seat of Baron Ban Oc, during which occasion all within were consumed by the flames. Both of these lords were staunch in the service of King Aillas."

Casmir grunted. "Aillas has sent out four companies to hunt down Torqual. That is my latest information. I wonder how long Torqual will survive."

"Much depends upon Torqual," said Robalf. "He can hide among the crags or down in the fastnesses, and never be found. But if he comes out to make his forays, then someday his luck must turn bitter and he will be tracked to his lair and brought to bay."

"No doubt but what you are right," said Casmir. He rapped

on the table; Eschar entered the room. "Sire?"

"Pay over to Robalf a purse of ten silver florins, together with one heavy coin of gold. Then house him comfortably near at hand."

Robalf bowed. "Thank you, Sire." The two departed the Room of Sighs.

Casmir remained at the table thinking. Neither Torqual's conduct nor his exploits were gratifying. Casmir had instructed Torqual to incite the barons one against the other, using ambush, false clues, rumors and deceit. His acts of plunder, murder and rapine served only to identify Torqual as a savage outlaw, against whom all hands must be turned in concert, despite old feuds and past suspicions. Torqual's conduct therefore worked to unite the barons, rather than to set them at odds!

Casmir gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. He drank from the beechwood mug and set it down on the table with a thud. His fortunes were not on the rise. Torqual, considered as an instrument of policy, had proved capricious and probably useless. He was more than likely a madman. At Poëlitetz, Aillas had entrenched himself, impeding Casmir's grand ambition. And yet another concern, even more poignant, gnawed at Casmir's mind: the prediction uttered long years before by Persilian the Magic Mirror. The words had never stopped ringing in Casmir's mind:

*Suldrun's son shall undertake  
Before his life is gone  
To sit his right and proper place  
At Cairbra an Meadhan.*

*If so he sits and so he thrives  
Then he shall make his own  
The Table Round, to Casmir's woe,  
And Evandig his throne.*

The terms of the omen, from the first, had mystified Casmir. Suldrun had borne a single child: the Princess Madouc, or so it had seemed, and Persilian's cantrap would appear to be sheer nonsense. But Casmir knew that this was never the way of it, and in the end, the truth was made known and Casmir's pessimism was vindicated. Suldrun's child had indeed been a boy, whom the fairies of Thripsey Shee had taken, leaving behind an unwanted brat of their own. All unwittingly King Casmir and Queen Sollace had nurtured the changeling, presenting her to the world as 'Princess Madouc'.

Persilian's prophecy was now less of a paradox, and therefore all the more ominous. Casmir had sent his agents to search, but in vain: Suldrun's first-born was nowhere to be found.

Sitting in the Room of Sighs, clasping the beechwood mug in one heavy hand, Casmir belabored his brain with the same questions he had propounded a thousand times before: "Who is this thrice-cursed child? What is his name? Where does he bide, so demure and quiet from my knowledge? Ah, but I would make short work of it, if once I knew!"

As always, the questions brought no answers, and his bafflement remained. As for Madouc, she had long been accepted as the daughter of the Princess Suldrun, and could not now be disavowed. To legitimize her presence, a romantic tale had been concocted, of a noble knight, secret trysts in the old garden, marriage pledges exchanged in

the moonlight, and at last the baby who had become the delightful little princess, darling of the court. The tale was as good as any, and for a fact corresponded closely with the truth—save, of course, for the identity of the baby. As to the identity of Suldrun's lover, no one knew nor cared any longer, except King Casmir, who in his rage had dropped the unfortunate young man into an oubliette without so much as learning his name.

For Casmir, Princess Madouc represented only an exasperation. According to accepted lore, fairy children, when nurtured upon human food and living in human surroundings, gradually lost their halfling cast and were assimilated into the realm of mortals. But sometimes other tales were heard, of changelings who never crossed over, and remained odd wild beings: fickle, sly and cantankerous. Casmir occasionally wondered which sort might be the Princess Madouc. Indeed she differed from other maidens of the court, and at times displayed traits which caused him perplexity and uneasiness.

At this time Madouc still knew nothing of her true parentage. She believed herself the daughter of Suldrun: so she had been assured; why should it be otherwise? Even so, there were discordant elements in the accounts presented by Queen Sollace and the ladies appointed to train her in court etiquette. These ladies were Dame Boudetta, Lady Desdea and Lady Marmone. Madouc disliked and distrusted all three; each thought to change her in one way or another, despite Madouc's resolve to remain as she was.

Madouc was now about nine years old, restless and active, long of leg, with a boy's thin body and a girl's clever pretty face. Sometimes she confined her mop of copper-auburn

curls with a black ribbon; as often she allowed it to tumble helter-skelter across her forehead and over her ears. Her eyes were a melting sky-blue; her mouth was wide, and jerked, twisted or drooped to the flux of her feelings. Madouc was considered unruly and willful; the words 'fantastical', 'perverse', 'incorrigible', were sometimes used to describe her temperament.

When Casmir first discovered the facts of Madouc's birth, his immediate reaction was shock, then incredulity, then fury so extreme that it might have gone badly for Madouc had her neck been within reach of Casmir's hands. When he became calm, he saw that he had no choice but to put a good face on the situation; in not too many years Madouc no doubt could be married advantageously.

Casmir departed the Room of Sighs and returned toward his private chambers. The route led him across the back elevation of the King's Tower, where the corridor became a cloistered way overlooking the service yard from a height of twelve feet or so.

Arriving at the portal which gave on the cloisters, Casmir stopped short at the sight of Madouc. She stood in one of the arched openings, poised on tip-toe so that she could peer over the balustrade down into the service yard.

Casmir paused to watch, frowning in that mixture of suspicion and displeasure which Madouc and her activities often aroused in him. He now took note that on the balustrade beside Madouc's elbow rested a bowl of rotten quinces, one of which she held delicately in her hand.

As Casmir watched she drew back her arm and threw the quince at a target in the yard below. She watched for an instant, then drew back, choking with laughter.

Casmir marched forward. He loomed above her. "What mischief do you now contrive?"

Madouc jerked around in startlement, and stood wordlessly, head tilted back, mouth half open. Casmir peered down through the arch into the service yard. Below stood Lady Desdea, staring up in a fury, while she wiped fragments of quince from her neck and bodice, her stylish tricorne hat askew. At the sight of King Casmir looking down from above, her face sagged in astonishment. For a moment she stood frozen into immobility. Then, dropping a perfunctory curtsy, she settled her hat and hurried across the yard into the castle.

Casmir slowly drew back. He looked down at Madouc. "Why did you throw fruit at Lady Desdea?"

Madouc said artlessly: "It was because Lady Desdea came past first, before either Dame Boudetta or Lady Marmone."

"That is not relevant to the issue!" snapped King Casmir. "At this moment Lady Desdea believes that I pelted her with bad fruit."

Madouc nodded soberly. "It may be all for the best. She will take the reprimand more seriously than if it came mysteriously, as if from nowhere."

"Indeed? And what are her faults, that she deserves such a bitter reproach?"

Madouc looked up in wonder, her eyes wide and blue. "In the main, Sire, she is tiresome beyond endurance and drones on forever. At the same time, she is sharp as a fox, and sees around corners. Also, if you can believe it, she insists that I learn to sew a fine seam!"

"Bah!" muttered Casmir, already bored with the subject. "Your conduct is in clear need of correction. You must throw

no more fruit!”

Madouc scowled and shrugged. “Fruit is nicer than other stuffs. I well believe that Lady Desdea would prefer fruit.”

“Throw no other stuffs either. A royal princess expresses displeasure more graciously.”

Madouc considered a moment. “What if these stuffs should fall of their own weight?”

“You must allow no substances, either vile, or hurtful, or noxious, or of any sort whatever, to fall, or depart from your control, toward Lady Desdea, Dame Boudetta, Lady Marmone or anyone else. In short, desist from these activities!”

Madouc pursed her mouth in dissatisfaction; it seemed as if King Casmir would yield neither to logic nor persuasion. Madouc wasted no more words. “Just so, Your Majesty.”

King Casmir surveyed the service yard once again, then continued on his way. Madouc lingered a moment, then followed the king along the passage.