

He smiled at that. It was fun to tease his Nonna by imitating her harsh Allanten accent. She was truly his great-grandmother, but everyone called her just Nonna. Respectfully.

*Did I ever tell you about your ancestor, the pirate? Of course I did, I'm not senile yet. I could name a few ports that could use the same treatment Old Gambrell gave them, but you've heard plenty from me about that.*

Some of his favorite nursery stories had been the bloodcurdling tales of Ravin the Pirate storming the ports along the Inner Sea. Even death hadn't slowed the fellow down—after his death, his ghost had supposedly rallied his ships to strike and burn. It probably wasn't true that the old pirate had trained all the gambrells to spy for him; besides, it was bad luck to kill those birds of the sea.

Tonio had laughed when he'd discovered that 'ravin' was dockside cant for 'ghost' here in Argnon. *One of these days I'm going to use that riddle-rhyme Nonna taught me to find my way through the rocks of Collar Island, and find out if Gambrell's last stronghold is still there. And perhaps I might pay a call on the current ruler of Allante.*

The first Tyrant had murdered nearly all the Gambrell family, except for Nonna. She had already entered the Vitor family, as a bride of fourteen in the days when women's names were never mentioned below the second floor. The second Tyrant had hunted down the few remaining survivors at the beginning of his reign. Now the third boasted of destroying all the great families that had once tempered a ruler's power.

*Come home. Bad times are on their way. Uri Delcoros is growing stronger in the Congregation. We can't let Cuda be sold to the Mintarans! Your father and brother will need your eyes and ears, though they don't realize it yet. We were a sea power equal to Argnon once. Are we going to let that sorry bunch of northerners fight our battles for us? I remember when Kercherrian ruled there, and was an idiot to lose it. What fools we would look asking them for help!*

Tonio considered that. To this day, some people in Argnon spat on the ground if they realized he was from Cuda. After he learned why they

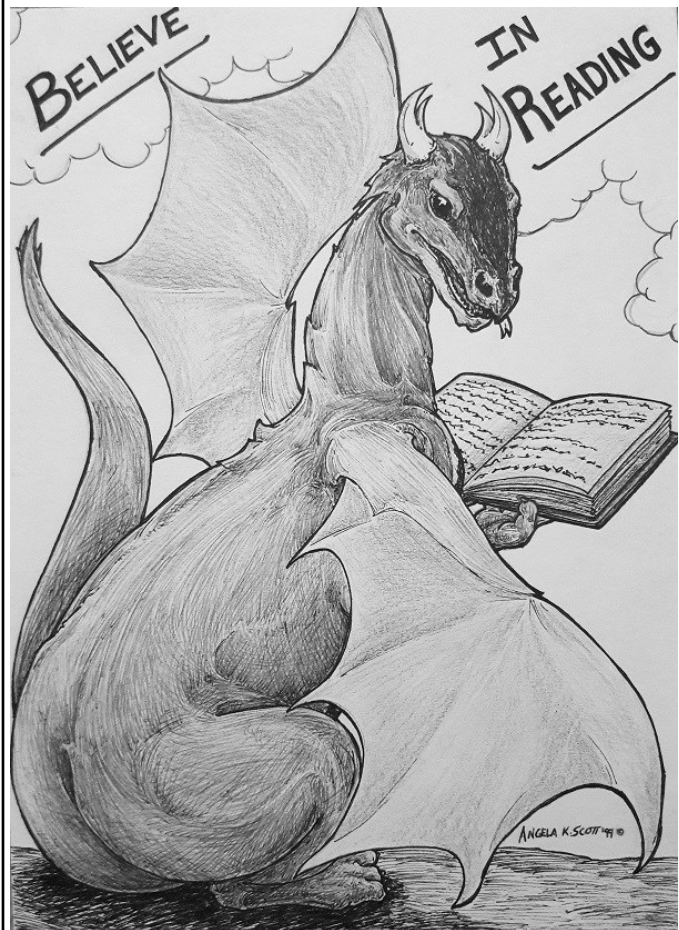
called Arion Kercherrian the Butcher, the way that hero had died looked less like hideous treachery and more like great good sense.

*Come home. We miss you. I threw an offering to the Sea-Lady to keep you in Siranna for as long as I live. Humor an old woman, will you?*

*Love, Nonna.*

He breathed a huge sigh of relief. He hadn't found a good way to explain his lack of honor to his father. The Maiden willing, only he and Luiva would ever know what the two of them had done. No doubt she'd already been pregnant by his brother when they'd met, since she was so close to her time now.

Tonio folded the letter and returned it to the pouch. What a weight his great-grandmother had taken from him. He always wanted to help the family, but had his own dreams too. Surely there



Art by Angela K. Scott....Dragon Reading

was a way to do both, and it sounded as if Nonna had thought of one.

The old woman was the strongest of the clan despite her many years. Sandro voted her way in the Congregation, and everyone in the Vitor family knew it. No one spoke of it to strangers, of course; a woman's influence, save for a surviving widow with a young son, was usually private.

That didn't stop the house from being flooded with gifts for Nonna every time the Congregation was in session. She laughed, accepted the booty, and claimed to be only a crazy old woman when a messenger pressed for an answer from her. Everyone thought it a huge joke, especially Tonio's father. Being able to pass off political pressures to each other amused both Sandro Vitor and Nonna—and drove the enemies of the house out of their minds.

Tonio thought he'd kept his own secret well. He was so glad he'd been wrong. Father had been so angry when he'd mentioned staying in Argnon permanently.

He bowed his head. It had been years since he'd made an offering to the Grove of Siranna with his father and brother. He gazed into the cup of blackbean tea, now stone cold, and sank into meditation. Yes. Deep down inside, he still felt the pull of those ancient trees. His birth-cord, along with those of all the sons of the Vitor family, was buried there. No wonder he'd never been truly lost at sea. In the center of his heart he always knew where he was.

Most men of the Congregation had that gift, even Avdan Delcoros. That was one reason a Cudan fleet was always feared, and why Allante hadn't attacked its main rival for over a century. It took more than that to make a good sailor, though, and Tonio was proud to have it.

He stood up and stretched. Harin and the others were waiting for him. He froze as he heard voices on the other side of the wall. Gentlemen didn't eavesdrop, but he listened anyway.

"If I knew someone reliable who could run the Chute more than once a month and could dodge the Emperor's pickets, I'd send the stuff myself," a man said.

"Surely it's not that bad?" That was a woman, an elderly one by the sound of her.

"That's what I'm told. Whoever goes has to avoid being inspected by the customs officials, or have a better hiding place than the last one. Your profits will be higher if he doesn't have to pay the fees, plus I won't have to pay a fine to see him come back."

"If they see what I want to send the old man, they'll keep the lot for themselves. Now, Artur, what's the point of the Shadow Guild if you can't do me a simple favor?"

"Yes, mother." The man sighed. "But I have to find someone who can get past the Hounds."

Tonio decided he'd better leave. A Shadow Guild member might not like being listened in on. A pity he couldn't tell them the Chute wasn't that bad if the ship had a centerboard. The tide didn't have to be full-moon high to sail without a keel. The *Wing's* draft with the board pulled up kept her from grounding, at least once the spring storms were over. He'd slipped into Lutan past the Emperor's picket ships on a dare just last fall.

He met Harin and the others in the front room. His friends were glad to see him, and only Harin seemed sober, compared to the others. The group noisily made its way through the port area, stopping only when Tonio bought gifts with some of his winnings, and paid his harbor and slip fees, which were required before departing.

Tonio nearly did all the work himself rather than trust drunken friends to raise sail and cast off, though they cheered his every move. Finally, he was tired of being distracted, and sent all but Harin below.

He glanced proudly at the gold-colored medalion nailed to the mainmast. It testified that he'd passed the harbor pilot's course and no longer had to pay anyone else to sail for him inside the bar. It hadn't been easy. The narrow eastern channel was handiest to the quickest route to the University, but he'd had to learn the traffic rules in the central commercial area, where the entrance to the Talis River began. However, it had taken Dr. Sirisac's influence to allow him a cursory run through the westernmost channel, where the ships of Argnon were docked when not out in the Inner Sea. That

was an unusual concession for a Cudan, to say the least.

*Marlena never told me how highly ranked her family was...* Tonio mused as he inhaled a rotting whiff of vegetation and dead fish. A pity he hadn't admired her as much as she apparently had him, but the odd system of marriage here would confuse anyone not raised to it. He refused to be one of three, if nothing else. It was bad enough to have a family arrange one marriage, let alone more.

He cursed as he nearly struck a marking buoy. He really should have slept and left on the noon tide, instead of raising sail at dawn. Tonio felt anxious to be home, though he told himself it was only because his brother's wife might be near her time.

Harin silently helped him, if only by his presence. It was annoying to be stuck right behind a Mintaran slaver, which easily maintained its position with oars. The Duke of Argnon could not forbid them the harbor entirely, though rumor said he wanted to. The southern empire spread poison that now oozed north. He'd met a few southerners last year, especially when he'd slipped into Lutan. They hadn't seemed like such bad fellows, but had taken slavery for granted in their daily lives. Of course, none of them were likely to give him any other opinion but the proper one.

Once past the bar, Harin went down below and Lessimo came up. This friend of his was almost too pretty to be a young man, but was competent enough with sword and dagger to avoid taunts. He had also studied sailing, and knew the way home to Cuda as much as they all did. He now looked pale and wan, as if he'd bent over a chamber pot recently.

A wave of sleepiness passed over him once they were out to sea. He turned the helm over to Lessimo, who was now reasonably sober.

As Tonio went below, he saw Harin with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "You have a nice design here. I didn't know you were interested in larger ships. One with three masts needs a much larger crew than you normally deal with."

"Yes, that's part of my final grade with the old dragon. And then he told me the real contest was last year!" Tonio had racked his brain to come up

with a compromise between something sturdy enough to haul cargo, but which could still endure storms and be faster than most other ships of its size and class. He'd really wanted to design something fit for racing, and had hated the other parameters. "I nearly screamed when I found out," he added. "Who knows, I might see it built one day, though I can already think of improvements. For one thing, I have to find a way to put a bigger bed in the captain's stateroom..." He yawned.

Harin laughed. "Speaking of bed, I'd better let you lie down." He stood up, put the papers back in a box, and waved his friend towards the berth.

Tonio took the empty place on the bunk and sat. He was lucky to have one—there were ten people on board, who either slept in hammocks or on deck. "I'm glad I stocked the ship and made it ready to sail between the end of tests and graduation," he said. "I can't believe it's only been a few hours since I threw those dice. It feels like a couple of days."



Art by Angela K. Scott...Sea Horse

“My memory’s clear enough! You frightened me out of a year’s growth.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to,” Tonio said. “You’ve probably heard that from your father, too.”

“No, he never apologizes any more. I’m just glad you won.” His cousin looked sober. “Enough of that. I’m going up on deck to keep Lessimo awake, but you should sleep.”

Tonio was exhausted, but he had one more thing to do once Harin had left. He opened the chest where he’d stowed the presents for his family, and pulled out a gossamer scarf. The filmy gauze rested in his hands like a breath of light blue air. *Oh, Luiva, if only I could stop loving you.*

A Sample Chapter

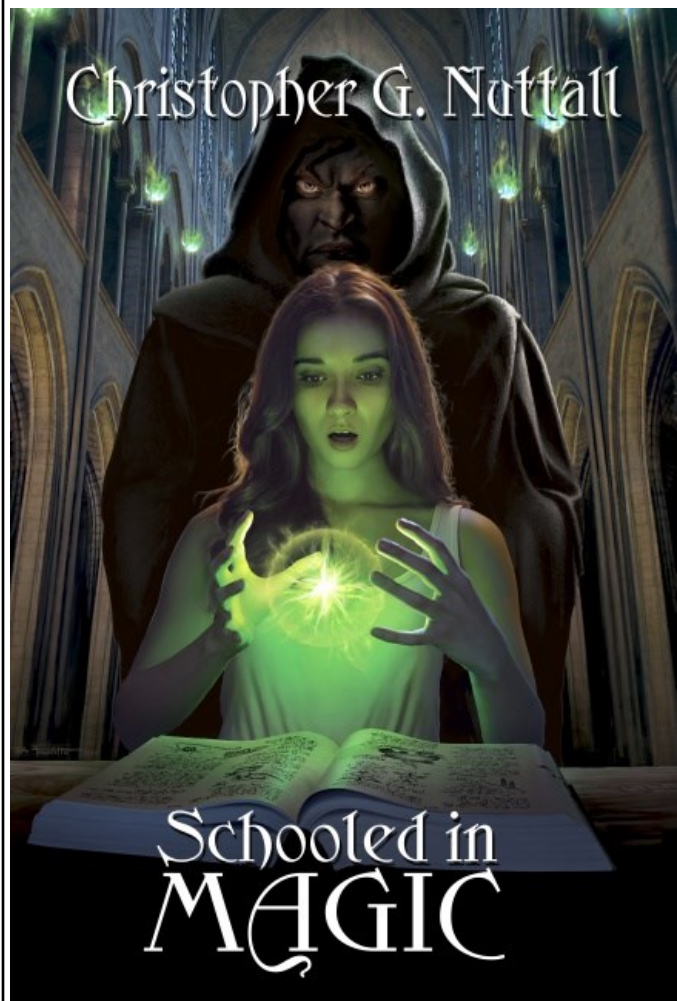
## Schooled in Magic

by Christopher G. Nuttall

"It's time to close, my dear."

Emily Sanderson nodded reluctantly as the librarian stepped past her seat and headed to the handful of other occupied chairs. This late at night, only a handful of people remained in the library, either intent on reading or simply because they had nowhere else to go. The library was small and rarely more than half-full even at the best of times. Emily loved it because it was her refuge. She too had nowhere else to go.

She stood and gathered her books, returning them to the trolley for re-shelving. The librarian was a kindly old man – he’d certainly not asked any questions when the younger Emily had started to read well above her grade level – but he got grumpy when visitors tried to return books to the shelves themselves. Not that she could really blame him. Readers had a habit of returning the books to the wrong places, causing mistakes that tended to snowball until the entire shelf was out of order. And Emily hated to see poor Rupert grumpy. He was one of the few people she felt she could rely on.



Most teenage girls her age would never crack open a history book, unless they were looking for the answers to some test. Emily had fallen in love with history from a very early age, taking refuge in it from the trials and tribulations of her life. Reading about the lives of famous people – their struggles to change the world – made her feel her universe had a past, even if it didn’t have a future. Perhaps she would have made a good historian one day, if she’d known where to start working towards a history degree. But she already knew she would never find a proper life. She knew what happened to most graduates these days. They graduated from college, they celebrated, and then they couldn’t find a job.

Her stepfather had certainly made it clear to her, after an endless series of arguments about

what she wanted to do with her life, that she would never do anything worthwhile with her life.

"You'll never amount to anything," he'd told Emily, one drunken night. "You won't even be able to flip burgers at McDonald's!"

Her mother should never have married again – but she'd been lonely after Emily's father had vanished from their lives, so long ago that Emily barely remembered him. Emily's stepfather – she refused to call him father – had never laid a finger on her, yet he hadn't hesitated to tear down her confidence every chance he could, or to verbally rip her to shreds. He resented Emily and Emily had no idea why. She didn't even know why he stayed with a woman he clearly didn't love.

Emily caught sight of her own reflection in one of the windows and winced inwardly. She didn't really recognize the girl looking back at her. Long brown hair framed a face too narrow to be classically pretty, with pale skin and dark eyes that looked somehow mournful against her skin. Her clothes were shapeless, hiding her figure; she rarely bothered with makeup, or indeed any other form of cosmetics, not when there was no point. They wouldn't improve her life.

Nothing would.

And they might attract unwanted attention too.

The librarian waved to her as she took one last look at the bookshelves and headed for the counter. "No books today?"

"No, sorry," Emily said. She had a library ticket – it said a great deal about her life that it was her most treasured possession – but she'd filled it over the week. There would be no more books until she returned some old ones. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The familiar sense of despondency and hopelessness fell back over her as she stepped out and walked down the street. There was no future for her, not even if she went to college; her life would

become consumed by a boring job, or an unsatisfactory relationship. No, the very thought was laughable. She was neither pretty nor outgoing; indeed, she spent most of her life isolated from her peers. Even when there were groups that might have attracted her – she did occasionally take part in role-playing games – part of her never wanted to stay with them for very long. She wanted friendship and companionship and yet she knew she wouldn't know what to do with them if she had either.

In fact, she'd been to a game earlier, before coming to the library. And she'd left early.

But now she didn't want to go home. Her stepfather might be there, or he might be out drinking with his buddies, swapping lies about their days. The former was preferable to the latter, she knew; when he was out drinking, he tended to come home drunk, demanding service from Emily's mother. And then he shouted at Emily, or threatened her.

Or looked at her. That was the worst of all.

She wished to go somewhere – anywhere – other than home. But there was nowhere else she could go.

Her stomach rumbled, unpleasantly. She would have to prepare a TV dinner for herself, or perhaps beans on toast. It was a given that her mother wouldn't cook. She'd barely bothered to cook for her daughter since Emily had mastered the microwave. If she hadn't been fed at school, Emily suspected that she would have starved to death by now.

As she trudged home, she realized something with a crystalline clarity that shocked her; she wanted out. She wanted out of her life, wanted out so badly that she would have left without a backward glance, if only someone made her an offer.

And then she shook herself into sense. No one had made her an offer and no one would. Her life

was over. No matter what it looked like on the outside, she knew her life was over. She was sixteen years old and her life was over. And yet it felt as if it would never end.

A fatal disease would have been preferable, she thought, morbidly.

The wave of dizziness struck without warning. Emily screwed her eyes tightly shut as the world spun around her, wondering if she'd drunk something she shouldn't have during the role-playing session with the nerds and geeks. She had thought that they were too shy to ever spike her drink, but perhaps one of them had brought in alcohol and she'd drunk it by mistake. The sound of giggling – faint, but unmistakable – echoed in the air as her senses swam. And then she fell ... or at least it felt like falling, but from where and to what?

And then the strange sensation simply faded away.

When she opened her eyes, she was standing in a very different place.

Emily recoiled in shock. She was standing in the middle of a stone-walled cell, staring at a door that seemed to be made of solid iron. Half-convinced she was hallucinating – perhaps it had been something worse than alcohol that she'd drunk, after all – she stumbled forward until her fingers were pressed against the door. It felt cold and alarmingly real to her senses. There was no handle in the door, no place for her to try to force the door open and escape. The room felt depressingly like a prison cell.

Swallowing hard, Emily ran her fingers over the stonework, feeling faint tingles as her fingertips touched the mortar binding the wall together. It felt like the castles she'd read about, the buildings that had been constructed long before concrete or other modern building materials had enabled the artists to use their imagination properly. There was a faint sense of age pervading through

the stone, as if it was hundreds of years old. It certainly felt hundreds of years old.

Where was she?

Desperately, Emily looked from wall to wall, seeking a way out of the cell. But there was nothing, not even a window; the only source of light was a tiny lantern hanging from the ceiling. There was no bed, no place for her to lay her head; not even a pallet of straw like she'd seen in the historical recreations she'd attended with her drama group. And how had she come to be here? Had she been arrested? Impatiently, she dismissed the thought as silly. The police wouldn't have put her in a stone cell and they wouldn't have had to spike her drink to arrest her.

A hundred scenarios her mother had warned her about ran through her mind; her captor could be a rapist, a serial killer, or a kidnapper intent on using her to extort money from her parents. Emily would have laughed at the thought a day ago – her stepfather wouldn't have paid anything to recover her from a kidnapper – but it wasn't so funny now. What would a kidnapper do when he discovered that he'd kidnapped a worthless girl?

A clatter that came from outside the iron door rang through the cell and Emily looked up sharply. She would have sworn that the iron door was solid, but all of a sudden a tiny hatch appeared in the metal and a pair of bright red eyes peered in at her. There was something so utterly inhuman about them that Emily recoiled, convinced that they belonged to a monster. Or a devil. There was a second rattle at the door, which then blurred into a set of iron bars, revealing a hooded figure standing outside the cell. His eyes, half-hidden under his hood, weren't just red; they were glowing. The rest of his face was obscured in darkness.

Behind him, there were more stone walls. A pair of skeletons stood against the wall as if they'd been left there to rot. Something about them caught Emily's attention before she saw the first skeleton begin to move, walking forward as if it

were still flesh and blood. The second skeleton turned its head until it was looking directly at Emily, the sightless eye-sockets seeming to peer deeply into her soul. Emily felt her blood running cold, suddenly convinced, right to the very core of her being, that this was no ordinary kidnapping. She must be a very long way from home.

"Welcome," the hooded figure said. There was something cracked and broken about his voice, almost as if he hadn't spoken for a very long time and had lost the knack. "You may call me Shadye."

He spoke his name as if Emily should know it, but it meant nothing to her. She tried to speak, but discovered that her mouth was so dry that speaking was impossible.

Shadye stepped forward, up against the bars, and studied her thoughtfully. His red eyes flickered over her body, before meeting her eyes and holding them for a long chilling moment.

Emily forced herself to speak. All the novels she'd read about kidnapped heroines suggested that she should try to get the kidnapper to see her as a human being – although she was far from convinced that Shadye himself was a human being. The fantasy books she'd devoured in an attempt to ignore her father's departure and her mother's desperate search for a second husband seemed to be mocking her inside her skull. All of this could be a trick, perhaps a reality TV show, but something in her mind was convinced that what she saw and sensed was real. But what? She couldn't have put it into words.

Besides, she couldn't see any TV cameras anywhere.

"How...?" She broke into coughs and had to swallow, again. "How did you bring me here?"

Shadye seemed oddly pleased by the question. "They said that there would be a Child of Destiny who would lead the forces of light against the Har-

rowing," he said. Emily realized suddenly that he wanted to gloat, to show off his own cleverness. "But I knew that every prophecy has a loophole. I knew that if I could catch that Child of Destiny before it was her time, I could use her against the cursed Alliance and defeat them utterly."

Emily felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. "But I am not that person..."

"No Child of Destiny knows who she is until her time has come," Shadye informed her. "But the Faerie know, oh yes they know. And I called for them to bring me the Child of Destiny and they have brought me you." He rubbed his hands together in glee. "And now I have you in my hands. The Harrowing will be pleased."

"Right," Emily said. Her, a Child of Destiny? Only in the literal sense...and she doubted that Shadye would believe her if she tried to explain it. What did her mother's name have to do with anything? She fought desperately for something to say that might distract him. "And I guess I'm not in Kansas any longer?"

"You are in the Blighted Lands of the Dead, on the southern face of the Craggy Mountains," Shadye said. Her words seemed to mean nothing to him, which was more disconcerting than anything else. "Wherever this Kansas place is, I assure you that it is far away."

Emily started to answer, and then stopped herself. "If you don't know where Kansas is," she said, trying to keep her growing fear under control, "I really am no longer in Kansas."

Shadye shrugged, the motion stirring his robe. Emily frowned as she saw the way the cloth moved over his body, disturbed in a manner she found almost impossible to describe. She couldn't see what lay beneath his robe, but there was something about the way he moved that suggested he was no longer entirely human. A very faint shimmer of light seemed to surround him, half-seen forms flickering in and out of existence ...

Somehow, that was all the more disturbing to her imagination.

This is real, Emily told herself. It was no longer possible to believe that she was standing in the middle of a TV studio, with hidden cameras recording everything she said and did. There was something so real about the scene that it terrified her. Shadye believed that she was the person he'd been searching for and nothing she could say, or do, could convince him otherwise. She thought of all the fictional heroes she'd known and loved, asking herself what they would do. But they had the writer on their side. She had nothing but her own wits.

Shadye snapped his fingers. The iron bars melted away into dust.

Fresh shock ran through Emily's body at the impossible sight, but before she could do anything, the skeletons stepped forward and marched into the cell, their eyeless sockets firmly locked on Emily's face. She cringed back as the bony hands, so eerie without flesh and blood, caught her shoulders. The skeletons propelled her forward, no matter how she struggled. The sorcerer's servants didn't seem to notice, or care. Oddly, their bones were held together without touching, as if their flesh was invisible. Like magic.

"You don't have to do this," she said, as she was marched out of the cell. Was she even on Earth any longer? "I..."

Shadye cackled, a high-pitched sound that chilled her to the bone. "Your death will bring me all the power I could desire," he said. Emily redoubled her struggles, but the skeletons never loosened their grip. "Why should I let you live when I would remain like this?"

He pulled his hood away from his face in one convulsive motion. Emily stared, horrified. Shadye's skin was pulled so tightly around his skull that she could see the bones underneath, his

nose cut away, replaced by a melted mass of burned flesh. His eyes were burning coals of red light, shining in the darkened chamber, utterly inhuman. She saw his hand as he lifted it to stroke his hairless chin and winced at the cuts that crisscrossed his flesh.

Emily had seen all sorts of movies, ones where the directors strived to outdo themselves in creating new horrors, but this was different. This was real. She took a deep breath and smelled dead flesh in the atmosphere surrounding him. It was suddenly easy to believe that his body was dying, animated only by his will – and magic.

"There is always a price for power," Shadye said. His voice darkened, unpleasantly. "But there are always ways to escape the price. And when I offer you to the Harrowing...oh, they will rebuild my burned frame and grant me power eternal."

He turned and strode off down the corridor, pulling his hood back up to cover his head. Emily stared at his retreating back, just before the skeletons started to push her down the corridor after him. Resistance seemed utterly futile, but she struggled anyway, panic giving her extra strength. Just for a moment, she broke free of their grip and turned to run, but then there was a flash of blue light and her muscles locked, sending her falling to the floor. No matter how she struggled, she couldn't move anything below the neck. She watched helplessly as the skeletons picked her up and carried her after Shadye.

The sorcerer started to laugh. "I told you where you are," he said, mockingly. "Even if you escaped my dungeons, where would you go?"

He was right, Emily realized. She'd never heard of the Craggy Mountains, let alone the Blighted Land of the Dead. And he had never heard of Kansas. No matter how she wanted to avoid it, she had to accept the fact that she had somehow been transported from her own world to one where magic worked, where skeletons could be used as servants and an evil sorcerer could sac-



rifice her for power. She was utterly alone, ignorant of even something as basic as local geography.

Shadye was right; even if she did escape, where would she go?

They reached a stairwell leading up into the darkness. Shadye seemed unbothered by the lack of illumination, as did the skeletons, but Emily found it hard to restrain her panic as they climbed onward and upward, while she was unable to see anything. Her legs bumped against the walls from time to time, the spell binding her holding her body as firmly as ever, just before they finally walked out into the open air. The ground below their feet was mud...no, she realized suddenly, it was ash. She sniffed and then shuddered at the stench of burned flesh in the air. In the distance, she caught sight of what had once been a forest. Now, it looked as if something had killed the trees, leaving their dead remains standing in the midst of the darkness.

"The Necromancer Kings faced the assembled might of the Empire not too far from here," Shadye said with heavy satisfaction. He seemed to like the sound of his own voice. "They say that the skies were black with dragons and terrible lizards as they fought for forty days and forty nights. In the end, so much magic was released that the land was permanently warped by chaos. Those who stray into these lands without protection find themselves twisted and transformed into horrors. Few dare to visit my fortress, even though they believe that they have powers that can match my own."

Emily found her voice. "Why did they fight?"

"The Necromancer Kings wished to enjoy their powers without restraint, to create a world where their whims and wishes would be the whole of the law," Shadye said. "But the Empire and their wizards believed the necromancers to be an abomination. The wizards believed that they had won, yet the Harrowing can never be stopped. All they could do was delay it, for a time."

He stopped and muttered a series of words under his breath. There was a brilliant flash of light, bright enough to make Emily squeeze her eyes closed against the glare. When she reopened her eyes, she saw a large building made out of dark stone right in front of them, as if it had been there all along. Perhaps it had been invisible, she told herself, taking some measure of comfort from the thought. If Shadye had needed to hide his dark temple, or whatever it was, it suggested that someone was watching for him. Maybe he'd been lying when he'd claimed that no one came into the Blighted Lands of the Dead.

The skeletons carried her into an opening that appeared out of nowhere, an instant before her head would have slammed into the stone. Inside, there was a sense of overpowering vastness, as if the building was much larger than she could comprehend. The smell of blood assailed her nostrils; a moment later, as she looked around, she saw great waves of red blood washing down the walls and pooling on the ground. Shadye seemed unbothered by walking through the blood, bowing from time to time towards statues that appeared out of nowhere, only to vanish again when Shadye walked past. They were disturbing. Oddly, the ones that looked most human were the most disquieting. One of them, a stone carving of a handsome man with sharp pointy ears, was impossible to look at directly. Another, an eldritch horror out of nightmares, seemed almost friendly by contrast.

And yet she couldn't understand why one scared her more than the other.

"There," Shadye said. He reached into his robe and produced a sharp black knife, carved from stone, before addressing the skeletons for the first time. "Place her on the altar."

The altar was a simple stone block, easily large enough to accommodate her – or any other sacrificial victim. Emily opened her mouth to protest, but it was futile; the skeletons picked her up and carried her forward with implacable strength. Some-

how, the simple lack of carvings on the altar was even more terrifying than the horrors she could see in the distance. It struck her, suddenly, that there was no doubt to whom the altar was dedicated. This place belonged to Satan. It was a place beyond the sight of God.

She tried to recall the prayers she'd learned as a child, but nothing came to mind. Instead, she kept trying to struggle, but the force holding her refused to surrender. The skeletons placed her on the stone and stepped backwards, almost as if they were admiring their work.

"We begin," Shadye said. He started to chant as he waved the knife in the air. Emily couldn't understand a single word, but she felt the gathering power in the chamber, as if someone – or something – was slowly pressing itself into existence. Brilliant tingles of light danced over her head, slowly fading into a darkness so complete that it sucked up the light. In the last moments of gloom, she saw new statues – savage-faced angels – appear at the edge of the chamber.

Shadye stopped chanting. Absolute silence fell, as if unseen watchers were waiting for a final command. The summoned presence hung on the air, its mere existence twisting reality around it.

Emily saw something within the darkness, a hidden movement that seemed to be only present within the corner of her eye. A strange lassitude fell over her, as if there was no longer any point in fighting and it was time to accept her fate. Shadye stepped forward, one hand holding the knife as he raised it up and over Emily's heart...

...And then, suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light. The summoned presence simply vanished.

Shadye bit out a word that was probably a curse and ducked as a bolt of lightning sliced through the air over his head, before smashing into the far wall. She twisted her neck as another flash of light lit up the chamber, revealing another dark-

clad form standing at the far end of the room. Darkness fell for a second before the third flash of light showed the figure much closer, followed by the monstrous angel statues, which had moved when Emily wasn't looking. Her savior? It was obvious that he didn't want Shadye to have her.

"No," Shadye snapped. He lifted his hand, somehow plucked a fireball out of empty air and threw it at the newcomer, who lifted a staff and deflected it into the darkened reaches of the chamber. There was a deafening explosion as it struck one of the angel statues, which appeared undamaged. "You will not cheat me!"

A second later, the newcomer tossed a spell of his own. Shadye vanished in a flash of light.

The spell holding Emily to the altar snapped at the same instant, allowing her to move again. She sat up, only to see the newcomer race toward her. Another flash of light revealed that his face was hidden behind a wooden mask. He reached for her and she drew back, suddenly unsure of what this new man wanted. Shadye had wanted to sacrifice her. What would this man want?

"Take my hand if you want to live," the newcomer said, when Emily balked. The darkness was flooding in from all sides, pushing in around them as if it were a living thing. "Come with me or die!"

Emily didn't hesitate any longer. She took his hand.

And then the dark chamber vanished in a final blinding flash of white light.

The *Schooled in Magic* fantasy series

By Chris Nuttall

Schooled in Magic book 1

Lessons in Etiquette book 2

Study in Slaughter book 3

Work Experience book 4

The School of Hard Knocks book 5

Love's Labor's Won book 6

Trial By Fire book 7

Wedding Hells book 8  
 Infinite Regress book 9  
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 The Princess in the Tower book 15  
 The Broken Throne book 16

## The One World

By George Phillis

### Prologue

Temple of the Falling Cloud  
 Aya-Apulchta, South-Shore  
 Leaf-fall 13, 2432

"Evaine?" the Instructor asked. "Recall for us the Proof from Life that Womankind, uniquely, partakes of the Divine Nature of The Goddess."

Evaine stood. She was not yet into her full height, but was still taller than her teacher.

"Instructor," she answered. "Among the beasts of the field as many boys as girls are born, because they are balanced between She Who Is and the Divine Boy of the Sea. Among Womankind alone, for every boy eight or a dozen girls are born, because Womankind uniquely is filled with her Divine Essence."

### Chapter 1

Caer Adurel  
 Springhint 9, 2446

Whap! Whap! A weighted wooden sword wrapped in cotton padding beat against an entirely real shield. Evaine-sa-Orowan sprang back from her attack, her right arm drooping, leaving her opponent an opening. Opponent thrust fast ahead, the sword's move a classic Strike of the Cobra. Evaine's sword, mongoose-swift, was suddenly left of the attack, pushing away her opponent's blade. She sprang forward, left leg back and braced. Her hip snapped into contact with her opponent's. Her extended right leg swung back, sweeping her opponent's feet forward. A hard push dropped her opponent onto her back. "That was really good,

Gloria," she announced. "Those were good counters. Your last roll was excellent." She helped her student to her feet. "What's the count?"

"Three hands of demonstrations," referee Katrina Katrinasdotr called, her voice a girlish high soprano. "That's four and twenty for you, Michael," she added, repeating the count in neutral numbers for the one boy in the practice cycle. "And two of us even touched you."

"You all did better," Evaine announced. "A lot better than two months ago." That was true, she told herself. They showed what rigorous practice and rational training did. "Catch your breath, have some water. We'll do more stair running." Students groaned. "Then back to rational training." Students groaned louder at the mention of weights, again, the same day. Evaine had been fighting continuously, one of them after the next, critiquing as she went. She was less winded than most of them. Still, sweat stung her eyes, the padding under her chain mail was soaked, and she was not gasping for breath only because she forced herself to breathe slowly.

A whistle shrilled from on high. Evaine's younger sister was the watchdaughter, keeping solitary lookout from the High Tower. "Gail! What is it?" Evaine's voice rang up the walls. It was wonderful that Gail was moving into adult responsibilities. Evaine slipped off her helmet to hear more clearly. The sun lay warm on her black hair.

"Two great-mules," Gail shouted. "Gallop up Longbeachport Road. A man riding one. Bareback."

"Gail!" Evaine called. "Who is chasing him?" The man, Goddess-in-Her-Five-Aspects have mercy on him, had no sidesaddle. He might become a soprano. Perhaps he was running away from the Republic. A Republic girl who wanted an expensive apprenticeship would have her Circle, her mother and aunts, support her. A Republic boy wanting the same would need to indenture himself. Every so often, a Republic boy with initiative ran away to Torinsdale. That was Torinsdale's gain, wasn't it? If the Republic treated boys like people, the apprentices would stop fleeing to Caer Adurel.

"Nothing!" Gail shouted back.

Evaine turned to her students. "Daphne, fetch the Swordmistress." Evaine's real weapon came off the benches and looped across her back. "The rest of you, draw steel. Return here. Fast!" There were groans. Drawing real weapons meant satisfying formalities. "Remember. Bureaucrats make you stronger." Evaine strode across the courtyard, trying to hide a smirk.

By and by, the Swordmistress appeared. "Steel?" she asked.

"Practice drawing from stores," Evaine answered. "An important task. They're slow. They must be tired. Perhaps they need more, more..." The younger women weren't slow, Evaine told herself, just not hastened by fear.

"Push-ups?" the Swordmistress suggested enthusiastically.

"I'm happy to honor your recommendation, ma'am. And then--stairs." Evaine formally outranked the Swordmistress, but listened carefully to the older woman's advice. Besides, they were the best of friends. They had common interests, little money, and no Circle. "The man. He could be chased by bandits. Better safe than sorry." The greatmule, blowing heavily, slowed when they saw Evaine and the Swordmistress blocking the gate.

"I know him," the Swordmistress said. "Dealer in spices and books. Never drunk."

The man's dry voice came faintly over the wheeze of the mules' breathing. "Demons!" the man babbled, rolling off his mule into Daphne's arms. Swordmistress helped Daphne lower him to the ground. "Demons! Longbeachport. All gone. Sliced to pieces. Demons. They killed them all. They can't be seen. Demons! They killed them all," Daphne opened her canteen, letting him swallow from the diluted vinegar. "Demons," he coughed. "All dead and ruined and sliced to pieces. Dead. Dead."

Bells chimed Lesser Recension. Noon. The Daytime Daughter, Her Second Shield, had reached the peak of her travels. Now her blinding disk would sink toward the Western Waters. The upper soprano voices of little girls rang out from the Library, climbing vigorously about the Heir-Second's golden baritone as he led them in song. Evaine peered thoughtfully down the road. The

Heir-Second was teaching. That left her completely in charge. She saw nothing like giant invisible demons, nor their hopefully visible giant footprints.

"Signe," she called. "Close and bar the gates! Set a watch at each."

"Against what do you guard?" Swordmistress asked over the man's babble. Gates rolled shut, the rumble not quite drowning out the choir.

"Darned if I know," Evaine answered. "But it's a lot less work to open gates again,"--a glance over her shoulder confirmed that the Caer's other gates were being closed--"than to push them shut, while someone's trying to enter unappreciated." She listened again to the man's ravings. "Floris, go to the classroom. Say to the Heir-Second: Your Cornet most humbly begs the fortune of the presence of The Goddess's Eye, The Shire Interlocutor."

"I should talk like I'm a fourteenth century romance novel?" Floris asked. "I can't just say 'Interlocutor Tomas, Evaine says please come downstairs' like normal people?"

"The language is the same millennium old as your Nimue novels. I'm Tomas's Cornet. He expects me to say it right." Evaine explained.

"Unappreciated?" The Swordmistress continued her careful survey of the Caer's walls.

"He was galloping bareback," Evaine answered. "He has a scabbard. Where is his sword?" Even men rarely lost their weapon. The Swordmistress looked thoughtful. Further thuds were other gates closing. Evaine waited patiently.

"You commanded my presence, Evaine-sa?" The speaker was a middle-aged man, round-faced, hairline not quite receding though silver threads wove through the brown, dressed in the traditional gray robes of a scholar. His collar, cuffs, and hem were embroidered with the violet tracery that marked an Initiate of the Archimagate. He came with the odor of lilacs: his morning perfume. Tomas Cherylsson-sa-Torinsdale-sur-Maserin would probably inherit the Domain if elder sister Joseline died. The Swordmistress curtsied. Evaine touched hand to brow.

"Tomas-sur, I humbly asked you," Evaine said. To her taste, Tomas was excessively fond of the

baroque stylistic phrasings of an Interlocutor's court.

"I believe the words were 'humbly beseech your presence'." His eyes twinkled. On another man, the trace of laughter might have sent jowls ashivering. Tomas was trimly thin. He regularly went for long walks through the fields. Gossip said his taste in women was equally odd, though none would say he had abandoned his duties to the Goddess's Aspects. "For an Interlocutor, the faintest shadows of duty are chains of blackest iron."

"Here is no shadow. This poor man says he saw people killed." The bookseller's head lay in the Swordmistress's lap.

"Demons," the man croaked. "Demons! Demons killed them dead." For all that the witness was only a man, a chill crept up Evaine's back. She knew how to kill women, horses, camels, even war-mammoths. But demons? 'Killed them all' sounded that more than two, perhaps even four, people had died, and a demon had done it.

"Gloria," Evaine said, "Join Gail in the High Tower. Keep watch toward Longbeachport." She raised her voice. "The rest of you, we will keep double watch in the High Tower." The Swordmistress raised an eyebrow. "For all that he's a man, he's terrified. He lost his sword. Perhaps his wits, too."

"The gates appear closed," Tomas remarked casually.

"Indeed," Evaine said. Their legal relationships were complicated. She was the Daughter-Heir's Banneret, with authority over the Caer in the Daughter-Heir's absence. However, he was Heir-Second. He might do something so unmannish as take charge. That was his hereditary privilege. If he did, the Caer might be in some modest danger, though far less than with most other men. "The man might be a Republic runaway," Evaine continued. "As well as a known bookmonger. Sometimes the Republic gets a bit vigorous about snatching back their men. Without precise regard for marked borders. The Daughter-Heir would rightly wax wroth with me if I permit him being snatched out of the Caer."

"Wax wroth?" the Swordmistress repeated painedly. Evaine grinned. It was an antique

phrasing. 'Char the whitewash off the gates' would be closer.

"He is that bookmonger. Timothy Lottason is his name," Tomas agreed. "His words are weird. You were right to be cautious. You cannot just go and look, can you, Longbeachport being across the border?"

Evaine bit her tongue. Tomas was not being contrary. He was waiting for her to explain something she was supposed to know. He was testing to see that she knew it. "Your Grace," she answered, "as Banneret-First, I cannot be seen in the Republic under arms. I might start a war. But wandering around unarmed is a really bad move if Longbeachport is infested by demons. However, as Cornet-Sole to the Shire Interlocutor, that's you, I can ride into Longbeachport, fully armed and armored. If I wear your kon and go about your business, I might even be treated politely." She pondered North-shore legal structures. Tomas was Shire Interlocutor, the investigating prosecutor of serious crimes across a legal structure that included Torinsdale Domain, the adjoining Republic, and modest interspersed bits of Archimagate and Temple Lands. Domain, Republic, and Archimagate were totally independent legal jurisdictions, all with different laws but the same Interlocutor. When Tomas donned his Interlocutor's stole, she was his Cornet, his avenging sword.

"Precisely," Tomas answered, smiling. "Actually, after the sheep rustlers I expect the Sisterhood would greet you warmly."

"One would hope. So I called you. So you could send me," she answered. She hadn't quite led him by the nose. "Whatever happened is near the border. I wear a kon the Republic respects, so I can cross the border. If need be, I will kill their demons." She hoped she was not actually called upon to honor her closing remark. The classic 361 Poses of the Perfect Sworddaughter neglected forms for demon-slaying, likely because its authors, agreeing with her and all other sane people, neglected to believe in demons.

"How will I defend the Caer without you?" Tomas asked querulously. She looked skyward. He knew that answer.

"You have two greathands of women, most reasonably skilled with sword and bow. A dozen men are passable archers. Gated walls. A moat. Towers. A keep. And someplace around here the Domain has a Master of the Dark Arts, too. Doesn't it?" Evaine asked, the last not quite seriously. Tomas was also a Mage. His quarters lay under the paw of the Lion of Arhad, and lawfully were part of the Archimagate, not part of the Domain. In those rooms, she was Tomas's Apprentice-Mage.

"Would you take escorts, say a Hand?" he asked innocently.

"Did you mean a Hand and five?" Evaine answered, equally innocently. There went another of Tomas's trick questions. The Swordmistress counted under her breath and nodded. Other women looked baffled. It was not so difficult to convert, Evaine thought, but most women reckoned in girl numbers, not in boy numbers. For a woman, four fingers marked four. A thumb was worth as much as its fingers, so a Hand of four fingers and thumb naturally meant eight women. A Great-hand, a Hand of Hands, was sixty-four women. Temple Instructors said girl numbers were octal, base eight. In all Torinsdale, only she knew what base meant. Others knew there were different counts. Men, of course, thought themselves sensible to use scores and men's dozens, dozens being thirteen here and eleven on South-Shore. The Republic Senate used base ten. A male Interlocutor used men's count for his escort, so a Hand and five would be a dozen—thirteen--escorts. "A dozen is way too many. I'll take Daphne and Avis," she answered.

"On horse," he decreed. "Armed and armored. I want you there and back soon. This man sold books to horse barbarians. He would not frighten lightly. Who will counsel me if his fear comes here?"

"The Swordmistress. Her knowledge of matters martial is a pearl beyond price. She knows far more than I," Evaine answered. Only a few people in the Care knew the truth of her final claim.

"I am absolutely confident that I can mouth 'what she said' faster than Swordmistress can shout commands, ummh, whisper suggestions," Tomas



Art by Angela K. Scott....Her Thoughts

answered. The Swordmistress sighed. "Get on with it. You have hours to Longbeachport, more hours back. You may need some moments to kill the, ahh, 'invisible demons'."

"The day is clear," Evaine noted, "The Longbeachport sunspeaker reaches the West Sea Tower. A sunspeaker there reaches here. We don't know whether my immediate return is wise. Sending people to the Sea Tower, I'm not sure that's within my authority."

"Do it!" Tomas ordered. "If Joseline or Mother wish to quarrel, it's with me, a family matter."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine, Avis, and Daphne, their horses pacing briskly, clattered up Longbeachport Road to the crest of Weathertop Hill. Just beyond lay the border between Domain and Republic. The rise gave them their first view of the father of the waters. The colors were a fantastic weave of sapphire and diamond. Evaine stopped, telling herself that she was resting the horses and checking their shoes.

"So far, naught out of the ordinary," Daphne said. "It's a fine day for a ride."

"Longbeachport is beyond the woods," Evaine drew her farseer from her saddlebags. The copper tube extended. Evaine twisted it slightly to peak the focus. "I see tall buildings. Some smoke, less

than I expected. You two take a look. There's something not quite right, isn't there? Something." She passed the farseer tube to the other women.

"Looks good to me," Daphne finally said, her naturally suspicious mind finding nothing awry.

"There are a lot of boats at anchor," Evaine noted. "Are their fisherfolk and lobsterdaughters not working?"

"They have a lot of fisherfolk," Avis said, pushing her curly brown hair back from her brow to tuck it more carefully under her helmet.

"Is this a Republic holiday?" Daphne asked.

"I didn't think of that," Evaine answered. "I don't know. Their holidays are not ours, save Summertide. Tomas and I went to their Summertide market. They had traders from the south with silks and spices and books. The locals sell seashell dyes, perfumes, and fruit cordials--our Domain's are better. Tomas bought books." She mounted her horse. "We stayed at the Inn. Even by Domain standards, it was well built, with an excellent chef. It had a fanciful name: The House That Floats. Its signboard was a rich mansion, bedecked with a truly absurd number of sails, bounding across the waves."

"Tomas likes vacations?" Daphne asked.

Evaine decided to ignore implications 'with you?' It had been no vacation. Nor had she had Tomas's company at night, as she might have expected with another man. She would not have complained, but Tomas never took advantage of his opportunities.

"Tomas had business there," Evaine answered. "Tomas's mother sent him to discuss taxes. The Domains were having another tiff with the Senate about Abundance and Surplusage, taxes so arcane Tomas says they defy human comprehension. Except one bit: We don't pay them. He went to talk. The Sisterhood of the Sword has a Longbeachport garrison, left over from when Sea Eagles attacked in their great canoes. The Sorority Chapterhouse was happy to have an extra fencing partner. But, Daphne, you are better at gossip than me, not to mention visiting Longbeachport more often. Did you ever hear demons mentioned?"

"Gossip? Me?" Daphne said. "No demons. Not even mages. The High Priestess of Xerinth took yet another mirror, this being less surprising

than news that the Shield rose in the East. There was buzz about strange boats far out on the water, almost at the horizon. I was polite. But a boat? Out at the horizon? What if there were a fog?"

"Once upon a time," Avis said, "I was out in a boat. A fog came up. There was no land in sight and nothing we could do. It still makes my skin crawl." She shivered. "If I'm on water, a river ferry securely tied to both shores is adventure enough."

"In the Western Reach," Evaine said, "sailors do go out of sight of shore. For a few hours, when the season wind is rock-steady, and every which way ahead lies land. Crew-bonuses for those trips are hefty. Vair Reach sailors are bolder." The other women flinched at the mention of the Vair Reach..

"Hello, what's that ahead?" Evaine gestured for the trio to slow. Something large and colorful lay behind bushes in the distance. "Doesn't seem to move."

They rode closer. The shape was a wagon, gone into the ditch, looking in good condition except where traces had been cut. A discarded sword lay on the ground. Evaine stared at the handle. "T L," she read. "Timothy Lottasson," she announced. "That's him. This is his. 'Tim's Treasures', that's his Factoring title. Why'd he run? Avis, do you see anything?"

"Demons have feet like giant turkeys," Daphne said, "I read that. If you believe in demons." They all giggled. "With two mules, that wagon is stuck. It's small, but full with books."

"Ground churned where the mules tried to pull free. Lottason's boot marks. No one else." Avis peered under the wagon. "You know, that's odd. This road is empty. We haven't met anyone coming towards us."

"Time to string bows," Evaine said. "I'll lead. You stay two greathands of paces back. If we meet something really strange, run! We absolutely have to get word back to the Caer." She slid her bow from its case, braced herself, and drew the string over the bow's pulleys.

"And if you are ambushed by pirates, outnumbered, and outmatched?" Daphne asked.

"Run for it," Evaine answered. "Word first, me second." To herself, she added 'what do you bet pirates don't know I'm temple-trained?' That was her secret. "Mind you, a sheep rustler seeing three of us, Interlocutor's kons and all, will run faster than Goodman Lottason did."

\* \* \* \* \*

Approaching Longbeachport, the smell of wood smoke filled the air. The lowing of cattle caught Daphne's attention. "Those cows," she said. "They want milking. Badly. They go on much longer, they'll go dry."

"Republic," Avis muttered. "It's a disgrace, the way they misuse the Lady's animals. Even in the Republic, dairy farmers should know better." They stared at farmhouses. A door had been left open. It swung back and forth in the breeze, banging whenever it hit its frame. No one came to close it. There were no people. No movement. No smoke from the chimneys.

Evaine pulled to the side of the road, waving for the two of them to come up with her. "This is the last stand of trees before town. Then it's open field, grazed grass, up to the walls. There's a path to the Shrine. We'll leave horses at the Fountain; go through the woods on foot. I want to see the town before I stick my head in. This close to town, there should be people in their gardens...there's not a sign of anyone." They turned from the road, horses' hooves sinking to muffled quiet when pavement was replaced by deep pine needles on sand. A splash and tinkle of water was the Fountain, fed by a pipe from the reservoir. Daphne stared into the pond, its fish swimming slowly in the depths. She tossed the last bits of her lunch onto the surface. Fish snapped hungrily at the crumbs. The horses slurped at a trough, raising no complaint when they were tied to hitching rings.

Beyond the trees, a cluster of houses stood close together. Their Circle, Evaine recalled, supplied haulers, selling water and fodder for draft animals. House after house stood empty, doors ajar, not a fire in any fireplace. A nearby pair of homes had burned to the ground. Recently, too; they still smoked.

"Stay here!" Evaine ordered. She slipped along the wood line, staying out of sight, then dashed for a low wall, dropping flat when she reached it. A long crawl brought her to its end. In the service yard of one home were three wagons. Their animals were gone. The merchants themselves? In the house garden lay three bodies. Evaine listened as hard as she could. There were birdcalls. Crows, a lot of them, someplace. The distant rumble of the surf. No dog barked. No sounds of tools, no hammers or saws. Perhaps she was too far from shore to hear shipwrights at work, but there was nothing to be heard, just three dead women lying silently in the mud of a yet-unplanted spring garden. The one she knew was Gabriela Michaellasdotr, whose hobby was sleight of hand. At the Caer she would always spend hours entertaining children, pulling things from nowhere, from children's ears, and from her flowing red hair. Now her sleight of hand was gone, spilled on the cold, cruel ground, her silver laugh never again to be heard at Caer Adurel.

Evaine waved. She hoped Daphne and Avis wouldn't spend too long being sick. To Evaine's surprise, the other two women did no more than turn pale. "Take a wagon tarp, open it, keep it in the air above the ground while you cover the bodies. Tomas studied forensic sorcery. He might interpret footprints."

"This must be what Lottason saw, don't you think?" Daphne asked.

"This is the oxenyard," Avis answered. "He had mules, would have stayed on the road until the turnabout near the gate. Besides, he said 'cut to pieces'. Those two argued with stabbing swords, and this one...that must have been an axe, taking off the back of her head. What happened to her face? Spearpoint? And lots of boot marks."

"I'll advance to the gate," Evaine announced. "And call if it's safe. We'll go to the Sunspeaker tower. I get to ask the Sorority detachment why they left buildings to burn."

Evaine left the Avis and Daphne spreading the tarp. She purposefully strode down the hill. A reach to her shoulders felt for her Interlocutor's kons, stiff white banners bearing the black-outlined outspread hand of She Who Is Five and



the lidless eye of She Who Judges. The kons were her shield. Few people picked quarrels with Interlocutors.

What had happened here? Homes burned to the ground, animals cried in distress, bodies lay in the open air, and no one seemed to be fixing anything. Some footprints were very sharp. Someone's boots were the same left and right. Surely even Republic shoemakers knew better?

Ahead was the town. The North gate tower was simply gone. All that remained was a blackened square-cut foundation the height of Evaine's shoulder. The tower, which Evaine remembered as six stories of wood, had vanished. Part seemed to have burned. Pieces, boards and tiles and furniture, lay scattered on the ground. The place smelled of burned sulfur. Its ashes were cold. The fire must have burned a day previous. Evaine felt her heart beating, harder and harder. She stretched and released, walking around the tower onto the main road.

The town gate had been smashed flat. Beams were strewn hither and thither. Up to the third floor of neighboring buildings, windows were broken. There, fallen well behind the gate, was the broken body of a gateguard. The woman lay on her side, clearly dead. She wore ceremonial plate armor, well enameled and polished. Now something had punched a large hole in her chest plate, her chest, and her back. Her sword remained in its scabbard. Here was someone dead as yesterday's dinner, lying in the sunlight with flies buzzing around her wounds, and no one was doing anything about it.

Something had happened to the road, too. A gaping pit, several paces across and a pace deep, had been torn in the gravel. Evaine stepped gingerly into the blackened hole.

Her perspective switched. Everything had moved directly away from her. The gate had fallen into town. The tower had fallen sideways, away from her, hit the town's stone wall, and shattered. Window panes down the street were blown in, as if a hurricane had struck. Roof tiles had gone upward. Even the poor gate-guard had likely been stationed someplace above the gate here, and had fallen to earth over there. She looked more closely

at the upper porch of a nearby building. Assuredly that fancy mass of bronze was a dragon--to be precise, one of the highly polished dragon hinges that had until recently held Longbeachport's main gates. Very briefly, the dragon had remembered how to fly.

She walked to the nearest building. The window was smashed. The floor was clean. Glass had not fallen in a spray on the floor, as it might if someone had smashed the window with a chair. She stepped through the doorway, skipped over the collapsed door, and peered at the further wall. Large pieces of glass had planted themselves like spikes in the plaster. Exploration with her dagger showed they were deep-buried. Someone standing in front of the window would have been flayed alive by her own casement. Standing next to the glass, looking back out the window, she could see the pothole, centered in the window.

Evaine walked back to the main gate, all the time listening. Listening for voices. Listening for work. Listening. She heard the sea, the wind, birds. She had found four bodies and a silent town. Where was everyone? She whispered the Chant of Imminent Readiness.

Avis and Daphne had walked down to the gate. "Is aught wrong?" Evaine asked. "You were going to stay..."

"We were afraid," Avis said. "We looked in the houses. There were dead people. Women. Babies. All killed."

"Tomas must be notified as swiftly as possible," Evaine said. "Let's go to the Sunspeaker tower."

"I'll need help," Daphne said. "Tower mirrors are too heavy for me to shift by myself."

"Tell me what to do," Avis said. "It can't be worse than helping Tomas with his spellcasting mill."

"Let's go," Evaine said. "Stay alert. Someone killed these people. She may still be here."

"Some one?" Avis asked doubtfully.

"All right. Some two. If you meet them both, first arrest the first, then arrest the second." Evaine said. "And please keep a dozen paces behind me. I'm jumpy enough without being nudged."

Fifty yards down the street, they found the next body, a woman of sixty years or so. She was still in her nightgown and slippers. She had been stabbed to death, great cutting slices coming up from stomach into chest. Another twenty yards brought them to three more women, equally dead, wearing chain mail under black tabards.

"Sisterhood of the Raven," Avis said. "They'd drawn their swords, were running--look how the swords fell--toward the gate." She rolled one of the women on her side. "What killed them? Greatbow? You see how the mail punched into the wound here, how it tore away in back?"

"That's a big hole," Evaine said. "You'd need a siege engine to drive that bolt. A spoolbow bolt, even a spoolbow lighter than mine, goes through like that, but a bolt is narrow. I could put my thumb through that wound."

The Sunspeaker tower rose eighty feet above Longbeachport, its thick stone walls reinforced to ignore any storm. Evaine knocked politely at the door, realized that an answer was most unlikely, raised the latch, and swung the door open. The first floor office had been vandalized, shelves swept clean onto the floor, drawers flung open and dropped on the ground.

"Interesting," Avis said.

"What?" Evaine asked.

"Someone pried open the cash drawer. They left the money. They took the pocket change," Avis answered.

Daphne led them up to the roof. Sunspeaker mirrors were intact in their cases. Evaine continued to scan the town. Boats lay at anchor. More bodies dotted the next road. On the fields to the south, there had been a very large fire. West of the square, toward the water, would be the Temple. There were a lot of birds above the temple. Truly a lot of birds. Crows. Gulls. Suddenly she became extremely grim-faced. "You two barricade the doors behind me. Get the sunspeaker talking to the Sea Tower. I see something I must investigate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine walked swiftly along empty streets. She could name a certain number of reasons why so many birds would gather. Most were unpleas-

ant. The western avenue, The Moon-Touched, bore a name so ancient that it must have been brought to Longbeachport by the first settlers, three millennia ago. If she remembered correctly, when first built the road was aligned on a setting of one of the Bracers. No longer. Its paving was brick, with mortared sand swept into the gaps. Coarse-rock dry-well gutters kept trees well-watered.

She found herself with back against a warehouse wall, sword in one hand. There had been motion, close overhead. Her training took over. The offending crow lay in the street, no longer moving. That hadn't been all that set her off. The wind had shifted momentarily. She had caught a smell. A very characteristic smell. One she had smelled far too often before she came to Northshore.

The temple gate was a square of walls rising twenty feet from the pavement to an open top. Arches framed its sides. A colorful mosaic of the Wheel of The Living covered the floor. The square's roof was a lattice of wooden beams spanned by budding grape vines. Moon-Gates were all flung open. That was odd; today was not the Quartersday. Evaine sprang through the second arch, looking one way and then the other, sword weaving a complicated defense against foes who might be waiting. Tradition said one did not bring weapons beyond the Gate. Indeed, townspeople overborn by raiders would flee to their Temple, leaving their weapons stacked outside, trusting the Grace of the Goddess and the pious faith of the raiders to protect them. From the stacks of swords, the people of Longbeachport had adhered to custom.

Something had smashed the front of the Sanctuary, splintering its stained-glass windows. Part of the roof had collapsed. The whitewash was stained with soot. A South-Shore war-mammoth, properly armored, could knock in a wall. But how could a mammoth enter the court yard?

Inside the Temple? Now she understood what Timothy Lottasson had meant, 'all smashed and killed and cut to pieces'. She sank into her training, looking for wounded whom she might succor. Failing that, she made a count. It was easier to count those who were still in one piece. On the

altar? At first she couldn't decide what she was looking at. All the parts were still there, but no longer assembled in their proper order. That hadn't happened in a very long time, a time Tomas could date precisely. She made herself look more closely at the dead. Close to the wall, they lay on their faces. Further in were the younger women, then the older, then the town's men, perhaps two hands of them. They all faced the rear wall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daphne and Avis waited at the Sunspeaker Tower. The suncatcher was correctly aimed, needing only the adjustment of a screw every few minutes as the Lesser Daughter sank toward the sea's loving arms. The West Sea Tower could be seen clearly in a large farseer. The Union sunspeaker crew apparently worked a few hours on alternate days, and logs said today was not the day. Until tomorrow, no messages could be sent up into the Republic.

"Ahoy, Daphne," Evaine called from below. "Are you there?" Daphne dashed down the stairs while Avis engaged Evaine in shouted conversation. Daphne flung open the door. A wan Evaine stepped though, carefully barring the door behind her. She drew from her kit a length of black silk and tied it around her right arm. "Never thought I'd do this," she announced, "but I am Tomas's Cornet. Let's go upstairs."

"There's no 'Receive' flag on the West Sea Tower," Daphne said. "They must not be ready."

Evaine looked doubtful. "They forgot to bring a banner," she guessed. "Floris and Dorothea left before we did and had less far to ride. They must be ready. Did you try a transmit flash?"

"We were waiting until you got back," Daphne said.

"I have a message for Tomas," Evaine said quietly. "And for Union, if you found their schedule."

"Union? Not today," Daphne asked. "Where is everyone?" Her voice rose in fear.

"Try the flash?" Evaine asked. "When I'm done, my message needs riding to Caer Adurel. Just as a backup. Could you do that? I'd ask you, Avis, but there's tracking."

"Flash answered," Daphne said. "You were right about the flag."

"There's a formula," Evaine said tonelessly, "For what I have to send. For what I found." Evaine sat down, pulled a pencil and paper from her kit, and began to write, speaking each line sotto voce after she had written it.

She finally began to dictate, her stops punctuated by the rattle of Daphne at the sunspeaker mirrors. "Speaking, Evaine. I Speak for She Who Judges." That phrase would get Tomas's most careful attention, because only an Interlocutor could invoke it. The conditions under which she was allowed to invoke it were incredibly narrow. "A Hideous Crime was committed." Hideous Crime, Evaine recalled, was a term of art for the most serious misdeeds. "Please confirm current North-Shore applicability, Council of Altairis, Decree on Summary Execution of Necromancers. Town gate was smashed by sorcery, repeat, sorcery. Her Priestess lies dead upon Her Altar."

Daphne stopped signaling, her hand covering her mouth. "Those wounds. They're the demon's claw. When it sucks out a woman's soul." She bolted down the stairs, shrieking in terror.

"Oh, dear," Evaine said. "I could have warned her. I'm sorry. I'm a bit distracted."

"What do I do?" Avis asked. "Go after her?"

"Why? They all died yesterday. Whoever did this is gone. She'll be safe. I think." Eight stories down, a door slammed shut. Evaine looked at the harbor. The Temple interior floated in her mind's eye. "Can you run the mirror?" Avis nodded in agreement.

"She got to 'Altar'," Avis said. "Continue."

"It gets worse," Evaine said, holding up a hand.

"Worse? It can?" Avis asked.

"Sorry. Resuming message: Evaine-sa to Interlocutor. In Her Longbeachport Temple and Sanctuary I found dead two greathands, repeat, greathands of people," Evaine said.

"Goddess preserve us! Sorry, I interrupted."

"They were murdered. Longbeachport is deserted." A long pause. "No one on walls. No people. No smoke from chimneys. All boats ride at anchor. Evaine-sa-Orowan, in the Interlocutor's absence, the Goddess's Eye." Evaine waited while Avis caught up with her. The Council of Altairis had been more than two millennia ago; she wasn't

sure North-Shore even remembered it. "Tomas-sur, I found no enemy dead. I strongly recommend raising the Domain Levy, High and Low, as soon as possible. Evaine-sa-Orowan, who is not utterly ignorant of battle tactics."

The last phrase should penetrate. She knew what her recommendation would cost. The High Levies were the Constables of each hamlet, three or four women from as many or more greathands of people. The Low Levy was every woman who could bear arms, and a few men with bows. Raising the High Levy would cost the Domain part of the Land-Rent. Raising the Low Levy would cause chaos.

Avis stared through the farseer. From the West Sea Tower, Evaine's words came back on wings of light. "They're transmitting to Caer Adurel. And I've been sent a private message from Dorothea." She made a response, and another. "I'm telling them we'll be reconnoitering for a piece."

"That first answer couldn't've been more than a half hand of letters," Evaine said. "Two," Avis answered. "No" comes that way. But your message is not a jest. Now what?"

Evaine slumped into a chair. "Let's recover our horses. There might be someone hiding in town. There might be tracks--looking for tracks is for you, house-by-house is me. A bit before twilight...you fort up in this tower, every door and stair locked. Me? The inn has good windows facing the tower door. If someone goes after the tower, I hit them from behind. Neither of us shows a light: let them hunt for us in the dark."

"I'll get the horses," Avis said. "They'll want a walk. You start your search."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine, shield at the ready, unlatched another door, kicked, and stepped back quickly. "Friend!" she called. For better or worse, her main danger was someone who had hidden, survived, and confused her with whoever attacked Longbeachport. This was the twentieth home she had searched. Every home had been looted. The looters were boringly consistent. Articles of Faith, Shrines to an Aspect, icons, anything with representational art, were trampled or gone. Books were all missing. So were wheelbarrows. Lockboxes were

smashed. Money was scattered on the floor. Coins and jewelry were gone--her intuition said that homes should have more small, decorative pieces of art than she saw. She found a few bodies. Grannies who might have slept through an alarm. A couple whose honoring of Her Aspect As Voluptuary had continued until, to judge from how the bodies lay, an unwelcome and fatal interruption had taken place. Whenever she found cradle or baby's clothes, she made a careful search for an infant who might have been hidden. She never found one. She blinked back tears.

Against the back wall of the counting house lay an old man, his robe the blue and gold of the Vaultholder's Guild, his sword resting a pace from him. He was in stockings, not wearing small-clothes; he must have dropped his clothing in place without dressing properly. A shattered box lay at his feet, a few vault notes still in it. Others had blown against the wall. His body had been pierced, once and again, by something. What? She should know, and didn't. Her best guess was a gear-cranked superheavy crossbow, a weapon with great carry but incredibly low rate of fire. The stucco of the wall behind him was fresh-painted.

Something glinted feebly in a hole in the stucco. Her probing dagger released...what was it? A slinger's ball? Slings required considerable skill, but outranged the feeble bows of four millennia past. Where had someone trained with a sling?

Shadows were lengthening. She would cut over to The Moon-Touched, and look into shops until she got back to the town square. She would indeed sleep in The House That Floats. Even their most luxurious bed would not compensate for sleeping under arms. More pounds of chain mail than she cared to contemplate would burden her dreams.

Across the street, awnings on grocers' stalls had been torn down. Pointless, she thought, pointless, it was damage that didn't do anything. Goods had been systematically taken. Two alleyways over lay more awnings, torn from their hangings, and another body, almost out of sight.

A half-house further along, she stopped. What had the dead woman been wearing on her feet? Temple training brought her curiosity to the fore.

She crossed the street and looked over a tall fence. The alley was depressed from street level. The dead woman was thoroughly out of sight except from the porches across the street. What was on her feet? Black? Polished like a beetle's carapace?

Evaine felt her hair stand on end. Demons, some of them, had the bodies of insects, shiny and odd colored. Some demons only looked dead until they struck. Or so, finishing her thought, some demons did if you believed in demons. She did not.

She kicked the alley's gate open, and stepped away. Surprise was one thing, but she wanted some hint about her opponent first. She did not really believe in demons, but matters in town were unreasonable. The gate slowly swung closed. Whatever the body was, it didn't move.

Evaine pushed the gate open and advanced, shield first, sword on guard. There were no noises, no movement. She used her sword point to tug at the awning. It lay atop the unknown like a bed's counterpane, ready to be dislodged. Thrust to snag awning. Pull rapidly sideways. The awning dropped onto the bare ground. A dead person lay there, the crossbow bolt through her head suggesting the cause.

She was wearing the oddest clothing...no, make that he, Evaine thought. The well-trimmed walrus mustache was unmistakable. He was wearing the oddest clothing. Dark green. Heavy, almost felted, fabric. Lavish white trim. A huge, unstylish hat. His boots were stained glossy black. The soles? They were the same. His shoemaker did not distinguish left from right. He was armed, too. A spear. Short shaft, not more than four feet. Spearhead fastened well off to one side. The spear shaft? Metal-wound? The shaft was hollow, more like a chunk of pipe than a pole, with grips at the far end. The spearhead was very long. She prodded with her foot, then picked up the spear. The weapon was grossly overweight relative to her training swords, which was saying a lot. Even two-handed, it would be clumsy.

The man was quite dead. From his hair, he did not bathe very often. Was he the local eccentric? Tomas would want to examine this one carefully. Perhaps forensic sorcery would reveal his confederates. She covered the body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the tower, Avis awaited Evaine. "Did you find anyone?" Avis asked.

"Dead," Elaine answered. "You?"

"I circled the town," Avis answered. "I found a huge trail. I back tracked. The trail starts at Blackwater Cove. People landed from the sea. They came here. Three or five greathands of people. They camped there, a day I'd say. They walk strangely, all in a dozen lines, one following another, like nuns on South-Shore. They spread out, tracks around the town. They all had the strange shoes. The way they stumbled, I think they walked at night."

"Boots," Evaine corrected.

"Look like shoes. Why do you say 'boots'?" Avis countered.

"I found a suspect. He's been dead a day," Evaine said. "A block down the street." Evaine and Avis strolled down The Moon-Touched.

"One other thing," Avis said. "Those trails come in to town. They don't come out again."

Evaine stopped, stock-still. She deeply wished that Avis had mentioned that first. "You tracked all the way around?" We're close-surrounded, she thought, perhaps in the next building, by several greathands of murderers?

"Yes," Avis said. "The town is rebuilding their roads. There's a good two hands of paces of sand with no cobblestones, no place to march out unnoticed. They came in and did not leave."

Evaine looked around warily. "Did you check the docks?"

"Why?" Avis asked.

"They came by water, they left by water," Evaine said. "Perhaps. Though this one is no Sea Eagle. Blonde, he is not. Also, clean, he is not."

Avis professionally examined the corpse. "He is filthy," she announced, cursing under her breath. "He has Creator-forefend fleas. And hair lice. I've never seen clothing like his." She hefted the man's spear. "Too heavy. Too short. His sword has I don't believe it a metal scabbard. Where did he come from? The far side of The Shield? You know, I've only seen books, but I think those face-marks are smallpox scars. Wasn't he vaccinated?"