



— S E M B I A —
THE
SHATTERED
MASK

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CHAPTER 1

25 Hammer, 1372DR, The Year of Wild Magic

Shamur Uskevren was grateful that all three of her children were home. Even Talbot, who generally resided in a tallhouse across town, had moved back into Stormweather Towers, the Uskevren family mansion, for a day or two.

Shamur found her oldest child in the solarium, where shafts of afternoon sunlight fell through the many windows to nourish the potted plants. This winter it was fashionable for the merchant nobles of Selgaunt to exchange portraits, and Thamalon Uskevren II, Tamlin to his family and Deuce to his friends, was posing for a picture. A handsome young man with wavy black hair, he sat astride a red saddle which in turn rested on a trestle. He held a stirrup cup in one hand and wore a falconer's glove on the other, which he poised as if he actually were carrying a hawk upon his wrist. Presumably his favorite

horse and bird would do their posing later in the stable and the mews.

Around the painter and easel milled a tailor and two apprentices, displaying samples of fabric: gleaming damask with designs woven in, shimmering sarcanet, and brocades embroidered with silver and gold. Tamlin winced at a hideous pattern of orange and mauve, whereupon the tailor smiled ruefully and congratulated him on his taste.

Regarding Tamlin from the doorway, Shamur remembered how his birth had brought a spark of happiness into her life after a year of utter misery. A sob welled up inside her, and she suppressed it. She'd worn her mask of lies for thirty years, and she must wear it for a few hours more. When she spoke, her voice was steady, her features, smiling and composed. "Hello, my son."

"Mother!" Tamlin replied.

He scrambled down from his wooden mount and strode to meet her. His father had once remarked that the Uskevren heir was too vapid and self-centered to truly care for anyone but himself, but now there was no mistaking the love in his deep green eyes. Behind him, the artist and tradesmen bowed respectfully to the mistress of the house.

Up close, Tamlin smelled of wine. Evidently the silver cup was more than just a prop. Shamur hugged the young man fiercely. So fiercely that, puzzled, he asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No." She forced herself to let him go. "Of course not. Can't a mother be happy to see her son?"

"She certainly can," he said, "for I'm delighted to see you as well. Especially since I'm having a beastly time deciding on colors. Gellie Malveen says that after Green-grass, everybody who counts will be wearing yellow, but I hate the way I look in yellow!"

They spent the next few minutes in consultation with the tailor, planning Tamlin's spring wardrobe. Ordinarily Shamur delighted in assisting her son with such endeavors. Now, as he chattered on and on about what to wear to balls, hunts, sailing parties, and cotillions, as if there were nothing more to life than revelry, she felt

a vague disquiet, and wondered how he would fare in the days ahead.

“Have you paid attention to the negotiations with the emissaries from Tantras and Raven’s Bluff?” she asked.

Tamlin blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The discussions are important,” she said. “If we can convince their cartel to trade with House Uskevren exclusively, it will greatly augment our profits.”

Tamlin peered at her uncertainly. “Well, that would be nice, I suppose, but you know I find all this buying and selling and dickering wearisome. Father is attending to it, surely?”

Shamur sighed. “Yes, of course.” Let her perfect boy remain carefree for a little longer. Why not? One way or another, he’d have to become responsible soon enough. “Let’s consider something of *true* import: the cut of your doublets.”

They spoke for a few more minutes before she took her leave to seek out Talbot, her youngest. He was staying at Stormweather Towers to facilitate his use of the mansion’s library, and that was where she found him.

The library was quite possibly the most unique in the land of Sembia. Most of the human inhabitants feared and distrusted elves, but Thamalon Uskevren found them fascinating. In consequence, the Old Owl, as people called him, had filled this room with an assortment of elven artifacts. Golden light from the enchanted sconces gleamed on bronze and wooden masks, a longbow carved from some unidentifiable substance white as alabaster, enigmatic sculptures of fused crystal, and, the pride of the merchant lord’s collection, a set of ivory chessmen with a mahogany board. The volumes and scrolls shelved in the massive oak bookcases suffused the air with a musty odor that persisted no matter how often the servants cleaned and aired the chamber out.

Talbot sat at the table, hunched over a book. Like Tamlin, he’d inherited Thamalon’s dark hair, but unlike his brother, not their father’s trim build and middling height. Tal was a broad-shouldered giant, the only member of the

family who towered over the willowy Shamur. He was so huge that people expected him to be awkward, but when he lost himself in his fencing, he displayed a grace worthy of a dancer in the Temple of Joy.

Shamur thought she'd entered the library silently, with neither a creak of hinges nor the brush of a footfall to announce her, but somehow Talbot sensed her anyway. He shot up from his chair and spun around, his teeth half bared in a snarl and a wild reddish light in the gray eyes that so resembled her own.

When he realized who she was, that feral radiance died, and his features rearranged themselves into a sheepish smile.

"You startled me," he said.

"Evidently," she said dryly. She took him in her arms, and though she wanted to clasp him to her as tightly and as desperately as she had Tamlin, this time she managed to control herself.

"How are your researches going?" she asked.

"Pretty well," he said. "I think Mistress Quickly will be pleased."

Like Tamlin, Tal showed scant interest in his father's mercantile enterprises. In contrast to his elegant sibling, who chose to wile away the days enjoying the diversions appropriate to a man of his station, Tal inexplicably delighted in performing with a troupe of common players, over which one Mistress Quickly presided as impresario and occasional playwright. Supposedly she now intended to compose a tragedy on the subject of Parex the Mad, fifth Overmaster of Sembia, and her young Uskevren protégé was trying to help her learn more about the deranged monarch's disastrous reign.

Shamur turned to glance at the books on the table. Talbot's hulking body jerked, almost as if he'd had to suppress an urge to interpose himself between the volumes and her.

To her surprise, most of the books appeared to deal with magic, demonology, religion, and natural philosophy rather than history. "*The Speculum of Selûne?*" she asked,

flipping the pages of a book whose covers were plates of polished silver. "*The Visage of the Beast?* You won't learn much about Parex from these."

"Oh, but I will!" Talbot exclaimed, too loudly. She raised an eyebrow, whereupon he grimaced, lowered his voice, and stumbled on. "I mean, there's reason to believe Parex read these very books. That he misunderstood the ideas inside them, and that misapprehension prompted him to perpetrate some of his follies and atrocities." He eyed his mother as if trying to determine whether she credited what he'd told her.

She peered back, trying to read him in return, wondering why he seemed so nervous. Over the past few months, she'd noticed a difference, a strangeness in him, even though he'd done his best to hide it. It struck her now that after this day, this hour, she'd never have another chance to understand, or to help him if, indeed, he needed it.

"Talbot," she said, "you know that if anything were ever wrong, you could come to me, don't you?"

He hesitated. "Of course."

"I mean it," she persisted. "There's nothing you could ever do and no misfortune that could befall you that could turn me against you."

He smiled, looking touched, puzzled, and embarrassed, with all of a player's artifice. "I do understand that, Mother, and I'm grateful. But I swear, everything's fine." His eyes narrowed. "Is this going to turn into another argument about my acting?"

Recognizing that he had no intention of confiding in her, she allowed him to divert the conversation into the old, familiar squabble. "I've always encouraged you to take an interest in the arts," she said, "theater included. But why must you lend your talents to vulgar claptrap devised for coarse and ignorant minds? Why not something more respectable? You could perform in the court masques for a refined audience of your fellow nobles."

"I could," he said, "if I wanted to act in the dullest plays ever written. Tragedies where everything happens

offstage, and the characters just stand around lamenting it. But I'm afraid I'd keep falling asleep in the middle."

"You," she said, smiling, "are a perverse and willful boy, and I daresay we should have switched you more often when you were small."

They talked a bit longer, and as usual, she found herself bombarding the feckless lad with the advice he so sorely needed on virtually every aspect of his life. His shaggy hair and slovenly attire. His unsuitable friends. His curious reluctance to court the eligible daughters of other merchant-noble Houses. Meanwhile, his secret trouble went undiscussed.

She consoled herself with the reflection that it couldn't be so terrible. Talbot had too much of a mild and unassuming nature to have blundered into a genuinely desperate predicament, even if it seemed dire to him. One way or another, he'd flounder his way out again. He'd have to, because she'd run out of time to assist him.

When she ventured in search of Thazienne, her daughter and middle child, she heard her before she saw her. Tazi was practicing in the training hall, and the crunch and clatter of her sword, chopping apart a wooden dummy, echoed through the corridors of the great house.

Shamur hesitated at the sound. Some time ago, on one extraordinary night, Tazi had seen her mother perform feats of which the dignified, pacific mistress of Stormweather Towers was supposedly incapable. Though the girl still didn't understand how such a thing could be, she alone of all the household knew that Shamur was something other than she seemed. No doubt for that reason, the older woman now felt a pang of anxiety that Thazienne would somehow divine her present intent. The object hidden beneath Shamur's voluminous skirt, which had scarcely troubled her hitherto, suddenly felt heavy and awkward, likely to clank, trip her, or otherwise reveal itself at any moment.

But her trepidation notwithstanding, she couldn't bear to depart without seeing Tazi. She'd just have to make sure she didn't give herself away.

The salle was a drafty, high-ceilinged room where a chill hinted at the winter cold outside. Concentric rings inlaid on the hardwood floor defined the dueling circles. Live blades, blunted practice weapons, ash and whalebone singlesticks, bucklers, targes, and kite shields hung on the walls, along with a row of battered wicker fencing masks.

Tall and slim, her short black hair sweat-plastered to her head, clad in a man's ratty tunic and hose, Tazi advanced and retreated at the far end of the room. Her long sword flashed in precise attacks, cutting wood every time and returning to a strong guard afterward. She'd nearly completed the task of hacking the upper half of the dummy into splinters.

"Thazienne," Shamur said.

The younger woman pivoted. "Mother," she said, sounding terse and impatient. "What is it?"

"I hadn't seen you today," Shamur said. "I wanted to, that's all." She advanced and took Tazi in her arms.

At first, surprised and discomfited by her mother's display of affection, Thazienne stood rigid in her embrace. It was scarcely surprising. The two had been at odds almost from the day Tazi was born, for all that Shamur loved her and believed that the girl reciprocated her affection. At last Thazienne relaxed and rather gingerly returned the hug.

It was only to be expected that Tazi stank of sweat. But Shamur could also feel that the girl's heart was pounding and that she was panting raggedly. Moreover, a grayish pallor underlay her tawny skin.

"You're pushing too hard," Shamur said.

Thazienne scowled. "I'm fine. I simply need to build up my stamina. Which is what I was doing when you interrupted me."

A year ago, undead creatures had attacked Stormweather Towers, one grievously wounding Tazi before the household guards destroyed it. The hoydenish girl, from the cradle possessed of an energetic and adventurous temperament, lay bedridden for months, an ordeal that nearly drove her mad. Now that the healers had finally

released her from the prison of her chamber, she exercised obsessively, fighting to cast off the last vestiges of her infirmity and regain the strength and agility she'd enjoyed before.

"I want you to be careful," Shamur said. "Pace yourself. Otherwise, your exertions are likely to do more harm than good."

Tazi rolled her sea-green eyes. "Of course, Mother," she said in a tone that made it clear that, as ever, she would do precisely as *she* chose. "Anything you say. Was that all?"

"No," Shamur said. "I know that when you feel ready, you'll resume stealing, if, indeed, you haven't already." She'd discovered that Tazi practiced burglary for sport on the same night that the girl had witnessed proof of her mother's secret talents. "Be careful then, too. I know you're adept at thieving. I know that as you catfoot through the shadows, or find some fat lord's hidden coffer and pick the lock in a trice, you feel untouchable. But you're not. Things could go horribly wrong in an instant. You could lose everything, even your life."

Shamur expected Tazi to jeer at her warning, so she was surprised when the sweat-soaked, black-haired girl frowned at her thoughtfully. "What's troubling you, Mother? Why are you saying this now?"

Shamur silently cursed. She'd resolved to make certain that Tazi wouldn't suspect anything was amiss, yet she'd failed almost immediately. Now she needed to shift the focus of the conversation. "What troubles me is your poor judgment."

"I don't have poor judgment!" Tazi snapped.

"Of course you do," Shamur said in the condescending voice that always infuriated the girl. "You're still a child, so I suppose I shouldn't blame you when you behave like one. But until you grow up, you'll need a mother's guidance, thankless task though it may be."

Tazi responded with a torrent of abuse. She'd never been able to resist a quarrel, particularly when her mother sought to instruct her, and this occasion was no exception. Shamur judged that within a minute or two, the girl had

forgotten all about her murky suspicion that something unusual was afoot.

Strangely, this last quarrel, echoing all the others through the years, afforded Shamur a sort of bittersweet pleasure. She had to force herself to break it off.

Afterward, as she went to fetch her riding gloves and cloak, the three conversations came back to her in all their triviality. It seemed to her that she hadn't said anything meaningful. Not even *I love you*. Not even *good-bye*.

But however inadequate, the partings would have to do. For now it was time to put love aside and fan the fire of her hate.



Brom Selwick hated the cold. As the gangly young man with the wispy, patchy, and generally risible chestnut goatee waited in the courtyard, he shivered and, beneath his weather-stained gray woolen mantle, hugged himself for warmth. His eyes roamed over the complex roofline of Stormweather Towers, a hodgepodge of shapes and architectural styles that somehow managed to meld into a unified and graceful whole, and he tried not to think about the all the varieties of delicious warmth—crackling hearth fires, eiderdown comforters, hot tea, mulled cider—awaiting him inside the mansion.

It was difficult not to think of them, however, because he had no real need to linger out of doors. His master hadn't commanded his presence. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to retire inside. Several months previously, Thamalon Uskevren had engaged Brom to be his household mage, and the young man felt a keen imperative to prove himself worthy of his new responsibilities. To that end, he tended to hover officiously near his employer whenever he had nothing else to do.

Bundled up in an ermine-trimmed cloak, his breath steaming and his cheeks ruddy, Thamalon waited by one of the ice-sealed horse troughs, chatting with Erevis Cale, his butler. The Uskevren lord was a man of average

height with a slight stoop, still muscular and fit despite his more than sixty years. His arresting dark green eyes set off his white hair, but his brows were vivid black. He stood and moved rather stiffly and deliberately, in a manner that somehow conveyed a sense of his authority and strength of character

Pasty and bald, his severe garments too voluminous for his gaunt frame, Erevis loomed over his employer like some sort of apparition. He too carried himself stiffly, but in his case, the rigidity reminded one of a jointed wooden doll. Some of Thamalon's servants made fun of the butler behind his back, mocking his awkward appearance and somber demeanor, but Brom recognized just how competently Erevis performed his duties, and the high regard in which Thamalon held him. In consequence, he rather admired Cale.

Two grooms clad in white and gold Uskevren livery led a handsome pair of saddled horses forth from the passage that ran to the stable. The roan gelding was one of Thamalon's favorite mounts. The jet-black mare, an exemplar of the celebrated line of horses bred by the Fox-mantle family, was one of Shamur's.

"Well," said Thamalon, smiling, "my wife's horse is ready. If she herself were here, we could get underway. Not that I'm such a fool as to expect a woman to arrive on time."

Erevis smiled ever so slightly in acknowledgment of his master's humor, and then, as if on cue, Shamur Uskevren appeared, the hem of her hooded russet mantle sweeping along just above the pavement.

Though half a century old, Thamalon's lady was one of the most striking women Brom had ever seen, tall and slender with long, ash-blond hair, lustrous eyes, and a fine-boned, intelligent face. Her clear, unlined skin made her look younger than her years, though at the same time, her austere manner could make her seem older. In Brom's opinion, Shamur was a cold one, who, though courteous and often even kind, never shared her innermost self with anyone. Though she played the role of a grand dame of Selgaunt society with skill and seeming

relish, the wizard suspected she was profoundly lonely and unhappy underneath.

Shamur greeted Thamalon and Erevis, thanked the groom who was holding her mare, then swung herself into the saddle. She was an expert rider, but it seemed to Brom that on this occasion, she didn't mount quite as nimbly as usual. He thought he detected a hitch, as if something had momentarily impeded the action of her legs.

Thamalon climbed onto the gelding, and two servants opened the sturdy, iron-bound gates. Someone had swept the hexagonal paving stones of the courtyard clean, but Rauncel's Ride, the thoroughfare outside, still wore a shroud of snow, its whiteness much defaced by footprints, hoof marks, and wheel ruts.

Brom had grown up a cooper's son and was still learning the ways of a great House of the Old Chauncel, as the nobility of Selgaunt called themselves. Thus, it only now occurred to him that, though he'd been informed that Lord and Lady Uskevren planned an excursion into the countryside, they evidently intended, in breach of the usual practice, to ride forth without an escort.

With the realization came a pang of unreasoning apprehension. He scurried out in front of the horses, slid on a stray patch of ice, and had to flail his arms to keep his balance. Thamalon's reddish gelding whickered and shied.

The Old Owl smiled wryly down at his retainer. "What is it now, Brom?" he asked in his pleasant bass voice.

"I don't think you should venture outside the city walls without a contingent of the guards."

Thamalon arched an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Brom hesitated, for in truth, he couldn't explain *why not*. He simply had a feeling, and he suspected that alone would carry very little weight with Thamalon, whose life was in large measure founded on logic and common sense. He was still trying to frame a persuasive reply when, rather to his surprise, Erevis shambled up to support him.

"Master Selwick does have a point, my lord," the butler said. "It might be prudent to take an escort."

Ever willing to consider advice, especially from Erevis, Thamalon tapped his chin with his forefinger, pondering. Shamur gave him a melancholy smile. "Perhaps they're right, my lord. I was hoping we could enjoy these next few hours alone together, but there will be other chances, I suppose." Her frosty breath veiled her mouth as she spoke.

Brom's brown eyes narrowed in puzzlement. Among the Uskevren retainers it was generally believed that if Shamur had ever loved Thamalon, that love had withered long ago. The wizard couldn't imagine why she suddenly seemed to crave her husband's company.

But apparently Thamalon, who, gossip held, still yearned for Shamur's affection, wasn't disposed to question his good fortune. Smiling, he said, "It's all right, love. We'll have our outing as planned." He gazed down at Brom and Erevis. "I appreciate your concern, but we'll be all right. Things have been peaceful ever since the city got rid of that infestation of ghouls. Perhaps our rivals have finally resigned themselves to the fact that the Uskevren have returned to Selgaunt to stay. And if Shamur and I should encounter any trouble, we both have fast horses, and I've got this." He tapped the scarred nickel crossguard of his long sword, a plain blade in a worn leather scabbard whose lack of ornamentation stood in contrast to the richness of his garments.

"As you wish, my lord," said Erevis. The butler stepped clear of the horses and Brom reluctantly did the same.

As his lord and lady rode out, Brom felt another upswelling of dread, this one even stronger than the first. He almost cried a warning, then realized that Thamalon and Shamur were already gone, and the servants already pushing shut the gates.



When she and Thamalon reached the street, Shamur breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment she'd feared that Brom and Erevis would ruin everything. But happily, her scheme was still on track, and, intending to keep it that way, she turned and gave her husband another smile.

“Well,” he said, grinning back at her, “I hope we don’t come to grief. Otherwise we’ll look like proper fools.”

“I know,” she said, guiding her steed around an ox cart heavily laden with rolled carpets. “But I think you’ll agree that what I’ve found is unusual. Unusual and possibly so valuable that for the time being, it might be wise to keep it a secret even from our own retainers.”

She’d told Thamalon that on a social outing the previous day, when she’d momentarily strayed from her fellow gentlewomen, the lackeys, and the guards, she’d noticed a fallen pillar lying almost invisible within a thick tangle of brambles. The cracked, weathered column bore Elvish inscriptions, and when she’d curiously approached and touched the stone, she’d experienced a rapid, dizzying succession of visions. Though she hadn’t truly understood them, it had seemed to her they might be glimpses of the future. If so, then who knew, perhaps the column could be induced to provide foreknowledge that a merchant lord, a speculator in grain, wine, olive oil, and other commodities, might exploit to his profit.

She fancied it was a clever lie, just the bait to lure the man riding along beside her. But now, rather wistfully, he said, “And that’s why we truly set out alone, to safeguard a treasure. Not because my wife is eager to have me all to herself.” He sounded as if the pleasure of her society, not the prize she’d dangled before him, was his primary reason for accompanying her.

She marveled anew at the skill with which he counterfeited love, kindness, and honor so convincingly that occasionally, down through the years, she’d found herself warming to him in spite of everything. How astonishing—and maddening—to discover that he was as adept a pretender as herself.

But she mustn’t let him guess that she’d seen the cruel face lurking beneath his facade of decency. To the contrary, she must do everything in her power to maintain his trust. Even feign a desire for reconciliation, if that would please him, no matter how the pretense churned her stomach.

She smiled at him and said, “You don’t give yourself enough credit. It *is* pleasant to have some time alone with you. I . . . I sometimes wish that we were closer.”

“Indeed?” His green eyes brightened. “So do I.”

She continued to cozen him as they traversed the busy streets of Selgaunt, the richest city in Sembia, and, in the opinion of its inhabitants at least, the grandest in all the world. Signs of wealth and commerce abounded on every side: Magnificent temples. The mansions of the nobility. The tallhouses of prosperous burghers and aristocrats like Talbot, who desired a refuge away from their kin. Taverns, theaters, and street performers. Open-air marketplaces, shops, manufactories, warehouses, and strolling vendors. A host of wagons and pack animals that, when loading, unloading, or simply creeping along, often slowed traffic to a crawl.

Just before turning off Rauncel’s Ride, Shamur glanced back for one last look at Stormweather Towers, her home and prison for more than two decades. She felt a twinge of jumbled emotion, but didn’t bother trying to understand it. It didn’t matter. Nothing did, nothing but hate and the cold weight resting against her leg.

As the Uskevren neared the north wall, the homes and shops became more modest. Once they passed through Klaroun Gate, however, they found themselves atop the most imposing structure in all Selgaunt: the High Bridge. Arching far above the wide blue waters of the River Elzimmer, lined with houses, taverns, and emporia, including its famous fish market, the stone span was an important precinct of the city in its own right, and, for commoners, one of the more desirable addresses. People liked to live there for the view.

At the other end of the bridge lay Overwater, where traders from other cities and lands stayed while conducting business with their counterparts in the city. It was a noisy confusion of inns, tents, and paddocks, of strange clothing, accents, smells, and customs. To most of the smug, sophisticated citizens of Selgaunt, Overwater was a pit of gaucherie if not outright barbarism. Shamur, however, had

once wandered the Dalelands and the southern shores of the Moonsea, and she generally enjoyed the foreign sights and sounds to be found there. They reminded her of better times.

Yet that afternoon they didn't attract her in the slightest. She and Thamalon only had a little farther to ride, and that realization filled her with a feverish impatience. She touched her mount with her spurs, and the spirited black mare plunged forward, scattering a flock of squawking chickens that had wandered out into the road.

Thamalon cried, "Ho!" and galloped after her. In a trice they left the confines of Overwater, and thus, Shamur reflected, Selgaunt as well. She'd departed the city of her birth once before, and, against all expectation, eventually returned. This time, however, she was certain she would never see the place again.

She led Thamalon off the broad artery of trade that was Rauthauvyr's Road, across snowy fields shining almost painfully bright in the light of the westering sun. At last they came to a patch of woods. Stirred by a breeze, the leafless branches of the oaks and maples scratched feebly at the sky.

Shamur took a deep breath, steadying herself. Making sure her rage wouldn't seep into her voice, for it was becoming harder and harder to maintain control.

"Why don't we leave the horses here? They'd have a difficult time trying to move through the trees." In reality, she wanted to make sure Thamalon wouldn't have the opportunity to scramble onto the roan and flee.

"Whatever you say," he replied. "You're the guide on this expedition."

They dismounted and tied the animals. Cautious as usual, her husband removed a horn lantern from his saddlebag, just on the off chance they might find themselves still in the woods when darkness fell. Shamur reflected that he was wiser than he knew. One of them would indeed remain there through the night and perhaps forever after.

She led Thamalon into the trees. The afternoon was colder and darker in their shadow. It seemed quieter as well, as if the snow crunching beneath their boots, the

susurrus of their breath, and the occasional rustle or snap of a branch were the only sounds left in the world.

The sky was darkening by the time they entered the clearing she'd selected for her work. A hidden arena far removed from all his minions, where no one would see or interfere.

"We're here," she said.

Thamalon peered about. Standing behind him, Shamur unfastened her cumbersome cloak and let it drop to lay on the snow like a pool of drying blood. The winter chill bit into her flesh, but she reckoned exertion would warm her soon enough. She lifted her skirt, removed the broadsword she'd concealed beneath it, unsheathed the blade, and discarded the scabbard. It would have been child's play to drive the sword between her husband's shoulders, but that had never been her way. Besides, she wanted to watch his face as he perished.

"All right," he said, puzzlement in his voice, "where is the pillar?"

"There is no pillar," she replied, now making no attempt to keep her malice from sounding in her voice. What a joy to discard her mask at last. "Turn around and face me."

He turned, and his brows knit when he beheld the weapon. "Is this a joke?" he asked.

"Far from it," she replied. "I recommend you draw and do your best to kill me, because I certainly intend to kill you."

"I know you haven't loved me for a long while," he said, "if indeed you ever did. But still, why would you wish me dead?"

"Because I know," she said.

He shook his head. "I don't understand, and I don't believe you truly do either. Rather, you're ill and confused. Consider what you're doing. You have no idea how to wield a sword. Even if we did fight—"

She deftly cut him on the cheek. "Draw, old serpent. Draw, or die like a sheep at the butcher's."

For an instant he stared in amazement at her manifest skill with her weapon. Then he stepped back and reached for the hilt of his long sword.