



Hecate's Glory

Book Two of the
Enemy Glory
Series

Karen Michalson

Arula Books by Karen Michalson

Enemy Glory
Hecate's Glory

Both titles were originally published by
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*Hecate's
Glory*

Reviews

“Brilliant. Unforgettable. Poetic. *Hecate’s Glory* — like *Enemy Glory*, the first book in Karen Michalson’s proposed trilogy — is a masterpiece of fantasy. You don’t read these books: you experience them. It’s like listening to beautiful alien music whose slow, hypnotizing melodies could either originate from an ancient, long-forgotten race or some madwoman’s dreams. The lyrical narrative is equally fascinating and disturbing. . . . If you’re looking for a light read, stay away from these novels. Michalson’s series is heavy in every sense of the word. If you enjoy stories that are complex and intellectually as well as morally challenging, I highly recommend *Enemy Glory* and *Hecate’s Glory* — dark, cerebral fantasy with enough treachery and revenge to satisfy even the blackest heart.”

— Paul Goat Allen, Barnes & Noble

“Here’s a little something for *Enemy Glory* fans who’ve been wondering whatever happened to Karen Michalson’s luckless Llewelyn. *Hecate’s Glory* will fill you in on the whole gory, blasting, twisted, dark deal that Michalson’s devilish imagination has rendered in ink — maybe it was blood. If you like your fantasy dark, depressing, and a little disturbing then *Hecate’s Glory* won’t disappoint. . . . Frankly, I’m wondering how many mediocre, pulp churning, New York Times List-making successful writers could meet Michalson’s well-crafted writing quality, or even read well enough to clue into her devastating deconstruction of the literary world.”

— Eva Wojcik-Obert, *Fantastica Daily*

“Llewelyn might say he serves evil – and, in truth, he’s no saint – but he remains a truly likable and, oddly enough, decent person. Michalson’s study of the darkness and light in every soul has created a powerful and memorable character.”

— Penny Kenny, *Starlog*

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All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious.
Any resemblance to real persons and events is accidental and unintentional.

HECATE'S GLORY

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A division of the author's sullied dreams

For information visit:
www.karenmichalson.com

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*For Bill
Again, for being there*

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One

(omitted - contains Book One spoilers)

Two

Despite my enemy's skill at once more staving off my inevitable death, I did not resume. Not even my need to believe that Isulde might one day read the blood-drenched words of my tale in the record that Walworth now stood poised to resume transcribing compelled me to speak.

I no longer cared that Walworth, I mean, the new King of Threle, was trying me for high treason, or that he had purchased this North Country hovel from the strange old fisherman and declared it part of his kingdom in order to make his makeshift trial lawful. It was tiresome to be kept alive merely to fulfill my enemy's self-imposed legal obligation of holding a trial that we both knew could only end in my death, for once I had finished speaking my plea, Walworth would either pronounce me guilty or pronounce me innocent and be under no further obligation to prolong my life, leaving my ban to destroy me.

So I did not speak.

My silence opened into a sudden, wordless prayer to Hecate. It was a prayer of air and darkness, a deathbed petition to the hollow wane of Her womb. The prayer was speaking itself without my leave, slamming between my heartbeats and pulsing out in points of pain into the killing North Country night. The prayer began with all the secret names of Hecate that I was taught in Kursen Monastery, the ancient names that bless and strengthen my particular evil, but the names were carved in retreating spasms of pain from my last bout of death, not in words. The North Country runs violent with so much primordial chaos that the clear clean

force of cutting intellect that we evil clergy know as Hecate, the Goddess who calls us to destroy the comforts of the flesh, poison creativity, and carve up our minds into half-living mazes of blind sophistry, cannot be drawn upon there. And so I did not know if the prayer went to Her or just went out. But the prayer went, in a stream of uncontrolled energy, and ran patches of thought like this:

Hecate pale, Hecate ascetic, Hecate Lady of the Waning Moon. And now you are holding my hand in my prayer. And now we are dull. Lightly we harvest bloody asphodels on the border scenes of my life. You are telling me they are the wildflowers that died when I loved them for their beauty, that my love scared the fairies out of them and that is why you called me to your service. And now we are ghosts gliding through my childhood hell, and you solemnly nod as I am mocked and beaten for my intelligence. And now I am an older youth and you are guarding me in the cracks and shadows of a prison cell in the long night before I escape from the sacrificial evils of Sunnashiven. You are there as I enter Threle, and now you are silently tricking me into my youthful alliance with Walworth, watching me foolishly open my heart and taste the sweet fruits of an intense friendship that is doomed to betrayal, for you know that will inspire me to later open my heart to you. You laugh as I risk my life to save his at another treason trial, for you know he will leave me to rot in the pit of evil called Kursen Monastery, and there I will align my heart to your divine evil, and there you will ease my way to advance my revenge against Walworth. If I have transgressed against you, the sacred source of my evil, please have mercy and hold back your dogs from destroying my spirit when I die back into you. Hecate Lady Who Guards the Crossroads, all that I have told of my life tonight is yours to bless or destroy.

The prayer dissolved and there was hollow moonlight in my mouth. The moonlight had shredded itself through the walls of the hovel. It spread and bunched into fat wriggling moonfish that flapped their tails and softly dispersed themselves back into moony beams that snowed heavily from the crowded nets on the ceiling, for Northern moonlight is as chaotic and unpredictable as anything else the North Country offers. A solid wall won't necessarily block it, but an open sky is as likely to swallow it into invisibility as not. The old fisherman caught a moonfish and his teeth marked blood where he bit its back and noisily tried to suck down the light before it changed form again. The yellow candle on the table caught the falling moonlight and stretched like a young flower drinking life from a black sky. And then it held steady in its flame a burning

lunar glow that made everything look as illusory as I felt.

It was Walworth who spoke, and as always, his voice conveyed the smooth, neutral tones of an experienced judge. “Have you finished your plea?”

“Death nearly finished it for me, my lord. I am tired and wish to die and take my chances with my deity’s judgment. Pronounce your verdict and do your worst.”

The old fisherman hooted, “Death! Hoo Hoo! As if things up here die so quickly! For so many strange years I have been dying and the North keeps me strong. Like a fairy and their songs! Like Isulde my sweet foster daughter.”

The old man’s mention of Isulde’s name summoned back the need I had at the beginning to make my words available to her. Back behind the place in my life where Hecate corrupted my heart and made me evil there was Beauty, a flower opening to shadow and singing like a portal to the realm of fairy, the dream of a perfectly executed spell, a perfect execution, autumn nights in Helas where I briefly believed I mattered, and learned magic, and had such glorious friendships, and played with words and found them beautiful. And then didn’t Isulde come to me in the dark of the woods in the dark of my heart like the fairy song I had always prayed to before I knew Hecate and then didn’t I reluctantly open my heart to her for one brief fairy moment when the moon was on the edge of new and she was showing me something beautiful in my despair?

At the mention of Isulde’s name, Walworth also went distant, as if try as he might, he could not reconcile the present justice demanded to a fairy beauty that transcended all justice. It took Walworth a moment to recover impassive neutrality, but once he did so, he said coolly, “You told of your role in the destruction of the Emperor Roguehan’s military camp, and then you ceased speaking. Are you certain you want me to render a verdict or do you wish to continue your plea?”

“Yes,” I replied, knowing how ambiguous my answer was. Perhaps I wanted both a verdict and to continue my tale. The Northern shadows were dancing with the lunar candle. The shadows were trying to kill the candle, but the darker they went, the brighter went the flame. *The fire I see by burns my eyes. Verdict and tale are one.* “And to keep my story pure, I shall continue to tell those portions of my tale touching yourself as if you are not here before me judging my words.” He nodded assent. “Set this down.”

The world was late. No matter how quickly I moved, the night moved

faster. It was always somewhere ahead of me, somewhere down the road. I would not catch up to it. It would spin itself up into dawn long before I passed through. The road was colder than I wanted it to be. I saw no fellow travelers. When I spilled my head's blood upon the crossroads where I had earlier prayed to Hecate, my hand trembled a little as I opened my wound. I did not know why it trembled. I kept thinking that my blood shouldn't feel so warm. That is all I remember of my trek back to Kursen.

Maintaining invisibility for long periods of time and conjuring wizard fire had exhausted more energy than I realized. Most of my return journey was a struggle to think clearly and strategically about the mess I was in. First, the cook, my link with Roguehan, was dead from my master El's curse or soon would be. Although this was not my fault, it would not make Roguehan happy, and it closed off communicating with him. Second, since nearly a third of Kursen's students had died this night, I now had the job of reporting this happy news to my master. It was imperative that I use this event to somehow gain control over El's emotional state, which meant that above all, I needed to wake up and gather in my strength before arriving at the monastery—and I was so *very* tired. Third, Welm, the illusionist I once mistook for Baniff and freed from Kursen Monastery, might or might not tell Roguehan who helped raze his camp. And I couldn't just run to Threle for protection against Roguehan's anger, even if I didn't belong by law to the monastery, because Walworth's people would now be completely aware, via Baniff, that I had embraced evil. For all they knew, I was capable of drawing down incredible amounts of god fire if I chose—from the wrong gods. And of course, Mirand would now and always be extra guarded against me, making it more difficult to fulfill my agreement with Cathe.

Yes, it was all a mess, but I could do nothing with my jumbled thoughts now except wait for my fatigue to pass into a second alertness. If Roguehan discovered my treachery, there was a chance I could mitigate his anger by delivering up the prize I'd promised him. And, of course, El still kept my wretched spirit, which meant that I couldn't just remove myself from Kursen.

I let my eyes stick themselves shut and my upper body rest itself against my groaning thighs, and whatever thoughts I had were for forcing my legs into hard heavy strides against the road. *Only my legs, just make them move, nothing else exists or matters. Push push push and the rest will follow. Someday I'll wake up again but there is nothing else for now.*

I didn't notice it was already light until I dragged myself back through the monastery gates. The sight of Kursen woke me a little. Then I noticed how normal everything looked. Twisted branches, muddy ground, early sun cursing the walls, walls stiffening into the day's pressures. Who would

think that nearly a third of Kursen's students had died last night? And here I was in superb condition for telling El all about it. I forced my legs to push their way down the path to the main building. Then I was leaning against the door and knocking weakly with my fist. And I remember the bronze felt cold and wet but that I felt this without caring.

I don't remember the doorkeeper letting me in, and I don't remember making my way through the hallways and up the stairs to El's apartments, but I do remember letting myself into El's rooms. His work area was empty with early morning. There was no sign of paperwork, for he had burned all paperwork with Riven, but there was no artwork either. The room was barren, so barren the feathery morning light felt sodden and full. I closed my eyes against the light and listened for El stirring in his private chambers, but heard nothing. I might have dozed off standing for a period of time.

I waited a sluggish half-minute before opening the door to El's private chamber, and then I drew back in a shock of full wakefulness at the sight of his great staring eyes and outstretched arms. El was stiff and bloated across a great chair—the whites of his eyes red and runny, his skin ashy and sallow, his mouth open, and his breathing sporadic and irregular. There was a little, just a little, blood trickling from his mouth. There were blood flecks across his forehead.

"He's dying," said a doleful voice out of the corner. It was Cathe. Cathe was wearing traveling clothes and leaning on his staff. "Really I don't even like to look at him. Bit of nasty business over the border last night. Nasty for us, that is, if El here dies before you can deliver him in proper form to Roguehan." He was worried about what would happen to his aspirations to divinity if I should fail Roguehan and become a target of the emperor's wrath.

I swallowed. "Why is he dying?"

"Why is he dying? Really, Llewelyn, why *wouldn't* he be dying? Everybody else is. Or was. Kursen's warriors went on a death spree all over Roguehan's camp last night. Lovely as mud lice—for them. Lovelier than hot fish drowning in the moon's sweat—for them. Ugly as the underside of Habundia's broken births—for him. Do you know what it feels like for a high priest to suddenly have dozens of spirits simultaneously ripped out of his own? *Violent* spirits?"

"No."

"Have a gander. Take a ride." He pointed his rod insistently at El, whose body was coughing up something like a death rattle.

“I would prefer not to.”

“Yes. Of course. Can’t say as I blame you. Only a priest of Ares could derive real pleasure from riding this sort of death. But then, only a priest of Ares would dare to have such utter lack of aesthetics. May the Lady forgive them their sense of beauty. Ah, welladay. I did take on something of his pain a little while ago. ‘Twas a bit too dry and salty and . . . *open* for my taste. So I gave it back.” He sighed and leaned on his staff again. “He mustn’t die. We don’t need Roguehan knifing your back to complicate things.”

“You’re a high priest. Can’t you do something?”

“I already have. Come come come, take my hand.” Habundia’s force was immediately around us. “Now then. Breathe with me—good, rely on the Goddess for steadiness—down, down—Llewelyn,” he whined my name and dropped my hand without releasing the goddess force. “You must work *with* me on this or all’s lost. What do they teach you here, besides word work? Your personal power feels weaker than a sea fairy’s fire. Come now.”

“Cathe—I’ve been—I’ve been working most of the night and I need to recover. And with my ban against using my full individual powers, I’d rather not push myself any further right now.”

“But that’s the point—I’m about to release you of that wretched ban. It’s more than time. Come then, sit with me.” He dropped to the floor and hugged his knees to his chest, so I sat beside him and glanced at El. El was still breathing. Cathe appeared to ponder something. “This would be easier if you trusted me. Look, you *must* trust me. There’s no help for it, but you must. I want you to feel your own ban, find the place where the Sunnashiven wizard collective fixed it in your being—you *can* do that, can’t you?”

“Of course. I know where it is. It oozes like a scorpion’s kiss between my aching joints and utter exhaustion.” I sounded irritated.

“Like a scorpion’s kiss? Really?” he asked excitedly. “I should think one of those would feel lighter—and—and—” He licked his lips. “—a tad *crunchier* than a wizard’s ban. But then, I’ve never experienced a wizard’s ban. Scorpions are a fine thing in the sunlight, aren’t they, but there’s a certain acid tang to kissing them on a grainy day, that’s simply—”

“It was just an expression.”

“Isn’t everything? Now then, you’re going to feel death. But if your master can stand it, you can. Consider it part of your training. And I’m

going to catch you. You'll be fine, really. Perhaps even stronger for it. No different than falling off a cracked gallows when the rope breaks." He took my hand. "You should trust me—a little, even. I *do* know what I'm doing."

"I'll do better than trust you, Cathe. I won't even care." And really, I didn't. Life was all too exhausted and complicated to care.

"All right, come, there isn't time to quibble over the words. Sit by your master. At his feet now. Yes, perfect. And so, take both my hands against yours." He locked our fingers together and already I felt something like a death nausea beginning. I began to choke on rising waves of emptiness pulsing out of my stomach, and I couldn't control the wetness leaking from my shriveling eyes. "You feel that because I'm drawing on the last reserves of your energy. Follow me steady and push, push all your wakefulness and life force against the scorpion's kiss—good, it's stinging, stinging,—shudder, shudder and sweat—steady now, it's only death, we all feel it sometimes—steady, feel the Goddess—She's here—sweet learned Hecate for you, and over Her now is Habundia, Her source and Mother—for and from me." I felt somewhere all the queer sensations of all my body fluids being pressed out of me. I was an unwashed grape bursting with an ugly midsummer and running lax into the ground. "That's death you're feeling. Not so bad, not so bad. I'm keeping you. But I haven't got the ban yet. Is there enough life to push your ban into my hands here—wait—lean against the Girls, they are all my Girls and won't let you fall, their force pushes against yours—all right then—I've got you—squeeze out your ban, use your full powers now and die—call upon Hecate."

I don't know if I had the energy to call Her name. But something broke, and suddenly I did get a glimpse of Hecate, and Her dogs were the dogs I had feared in my mind as a child. She sang to me the way Grana used to sing. She gave me the moon and it crumbled into red powder when I tried to eat it, so I remained hungry. Then She gave me a vial of water. It tasted bad and ugly. As it coursed through my veins, it clogged my heart and slowed the time around me. I clawed at Her skirts because the drink was hurting me and there was nothing to wash it out with. She let Her dogs feed upon my spirit flesh and they howled with the pain of it and then withdrew. But there were now holes in my chest through which the air was able to enter and the wind sucked out something dull and oily which was not flesh or blood. I knew it was my ban against using my full individual powers, and that its removal was a gift of the Goddess and a sign of Her favor. I was then able to say the words. I asked Her to hold me forever. I asked to be Her child. I asked to never know anything. I asked to be Her Nothingness.

And I got the words right, for the Goddess I called Mother responded, “I cannot hold you unless I make you die.”

“Make me die, then, Mother, for I am evil.”

“Then come. Let Mother make you die. Die cold like the evil bit of living that you are. Come and fold into yourself. You are my child. You are my rat. You are my little frog. My fish. My worm in the womb. My ancient buzzing fly. My white canker. My deathless mold.” “Mother? Are you ending me?” I clung to Her skirt and a dog licked my mouth. For I thought somewhere I had come too close or gone too far and the Goddess was going to wipe out my spirit on the cold north wind that was now opening my chest cavity into a cave. “Please, Mother. Please don’t end me yet. I love you.”

“Your love is darkness. That is your phrase. The phrase with which you shall enter me at your time. Language is our binding. I name you my priest.”

“Mother.”

“I return your spirit to you for now it is mine.”

“Mother.”

“My powers are yours to draw down and use be the place and time proper for my energy.”

“Mother.”

“And know that to deviate from my law is now sickness and death to you. For you are Mother’s little priest. And thus I ban you a second time against entering the North Country. For the North is not my place. Pass beyond the Drumuns and Mother takes back your life.” I felt the holes in my flesh close and heal over my darkness, and then something like strength. “Sleep and decompose. Dream of the ground. Smell the animal remnants of life it sucks and spits. ‘Tis ours, my broken bird. The place where your bones tumble out upon the north wind and break into fierceness upon dull rocks. Silly broken numbers that only Mother can sum together again.”

“‘Tis ours, Mother. I shall dream heavy my belief in it.”

And then there was a new sort of nausea abandoning me into nothing. When I came to, I saw that Cathe had turned El onto his side and was forcing his mouth to swallow a gray-black powder. And then I remember waking up in my bed but not getting there. It was much later. Evening. The day felt all wrong. Noise. Cristo was banging mugs. I was nervous first, shaking as sleep fled. Then I remembered why I was nervous. Then I felt a little sick, and despite my blankets, very cold. I did not want to move.

“El’s sent for you twice,” said Cristo. “Hey, you don’t look so good. You tired? Did you go last night? Did you hear what happened?”

“Luvellun, you look all different.” Devon bounced on my bed, and the motion echoed empty in my head. “Where did you go last night? Did you get to see all the death? Cristo missed it.”

“I went back to find you and when you weren’t here I didn’t go,” said Cristo sensibly. “Thought I’d wait.”

I slowly sat up.

“Luvellun?” asked Devon. “Are you all right? Here, I found you a bat on a board. See? A clerical student pinned down its wings while it was still beating and struggling and gave it to me after it died.” As he held the damn thing near my face, I started shuddering uncontrollably and vomiting all over the bedsheets, which made it impossible to speak. The bat’s recent death was still echoing through the room, and the freshly killed flesh sent me out again without my even trying to feel it.

And then it was completely dark save for a little fire in the grate and Cristo was shaking me awake. I may have moaned a little. “Hey, El’s still waiting to see you. I told him you were sick.”

“Thanks, Cristo,” I mumbled, my throat feeling sick over the words. I wanted to ask him about the bat but the thought of its pain sent gurgles of hot vomit up my throat and back down into my bowels. I coughed. “Whe heh—heh—where’s Dev?”

“Sleepin’ with the bat,” said Cristo dumbly. And sure enough, Devon was curled up by the fire with arm outstretched over the board. I started coughing and hacking uncontrollably. “Get rid of it,” I managed to spit out.

“Yeah, sure,” said Cristo, puzzled. He threw it on the fire and my coughing got violent as its flesh wrinkled up and then passed with the smoke. “You sure you’re all right?”

My coughing had roused Devon. “Luvellun, Luvellun, you’re awake now.” He looked desperately around the fireplace. “Where’s the bat?” By suppressing memory, I suppressed sickness.

“I burned it,” said Cristo.

Devon started to wail, “Cristo, you cud, that was special for Luvellun—”

“Hey—sssh! Come here, Devon,” I said weakly. “I told him to burn it. It’s all right. It was a fine ba—” I choked. “It was fine, really. But I—” I was so weak it was an effort to speak. I closed my eyes and leaned back in

the pillows. “But no more—no more—”

“Bats?” Cristo finished my sentence.

I threw up burning saliva. “No more—anything. For now. ‘Til I tell you differently. Understand? Promise, Dev? Dead and dying things make me sick now.”

“I’m sorry, Luvellun,” said Devon contritely. “I’ll give them to Cristo.”

“Yes, fine, but don’t bring them here.” I sighed and leaned back in my pillows again. I was weak but awake and alive.

The door opened. Slowly, carefully. It was El. Cathe was behind him. El was huffing with exertion and he spoke harshly. “Get out. Say nothing.” Cristo and Devon both looked terrified and started to leave. “Cristo.” El’s voice stopped him at the door. “I hear of this elsewhere and you and Devon die. Twice over.” Cristo stammered something and left with Devon. Cathe closed the door softly with his staff.

“Greetings from the other side,” I said weakly.

El sat down heavily on Cristo’s bed, ignoring my comment. He did not look particularly healthy himself. His breathing was labored and hard. “Hmmm.” He settled himself with an effort, bent his head down, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Humm.”

Cathe sat sharply on the end of my bed and leaned on his staff, and the motion sent me coughing. “Pretty pretty pretty. And so my blessed kinsman’s come through it. Fine as faith. But then, why wouldn’t he? Runs in the family, really it does. We all come from a long line of mystics. My dear—Luvellun here,” he was speaking Botha but he used my Kantish name as if it were a courtesy to El, “does you much honor, Brother. Really I don’t believe Kursen Monastery has ever had a direct initiation before.”

I smiled weakly, glad to have an obvious physical excuse for not commenting right away.

“No, I don’t believe we have,” said El. He rubbed his neck again and looked at me. “So I suppose you are a natural priest now, Luvellun?”

“Praise Hecate.” I coughed and coughed as I said it, so El did not insist that I speak further.

“Yes, praise Hecate.” El smacked his lips and looked around tiredly. “Well.”

“Well indeed,” said Cathe cheerfully and enthusiastically. “I for one can’t wait to tell the Sunnashiven clergy all about this most blessed event here at Kursen. It shall lend you and your monastery a great deal of well-

deserved glory—and perhaps even buy you some protection against the unfortunate consequences of the recent little affair in Helas. I’m sure that the emperor’s own priests would be loath to interfere with a place that has clearly been so—so, *blessed* by the Goddess Herself.”

“I’m sure,” said El dazedly. “The temple’s done its own share of interfering recently. Damn them all into rotting grain.” This was said without enthusiasm.

“Come come, your spirit will heal. And if it’s your ban you’re concerned about—really it’s all for your own welfare. The Sunnan clergy feel that all the priesthood must be one—must be consolidated—united in the Goddess—and so what’s a ban? If the more prominent high clergy cannot use their full powers in the Goddess, it makes it less likely for anyone to rebel against Sunnashiven—and there have been a few problems in the Helan monasteries.”

“Good for the Helan monasteries,” grumbled El.

“Brother,” said Cathe in soft admonishment. “Really we evil brethren must stay together, and if that occasionally means giving over to the new empire—” El was glaring at him. “Consider your ban—a mark of prestige. Only the best and brightest members of our order get the privilege of being banned. It’s all for the general welfare. To insure that you stay close to Sunnashiven—no matter what happens. But really, with a direct initiation here, I’m quite sure that Kursen’s sanctity will be respected. And, of course, the great sacrifice you’ve endured—the painful loss of so many students, surely that is worth something on the spiritual side, no matter what the emperor might think of it. Nothing in your daily activities should change. Take heart, and rest, and heal, and glory in the Lady’s blessing.” Cathe indicated me with his rod at the word *blessing*. I closed my eyes and pretended to faint to avoid speaking and saying something to destroy Cathe’s intricate plot.

“Luvellun,” said El, softly touching my shoulder.

“Yes.” I rolled away from him on my side and pulled my soiled blankets over my head. This was Cathe’s show.

“Yes, you’re sick, poor boy, hmm. It is dangerous to be named priest without knowing anything of theory. Much that merely sickened you before is deadly to you now. You have the power to draw upon the Goddess, yes, hm—but should you use it in the wrong time or place, the rebound could kill you. You have a constant link to Her power but you have very little training in how to use Her power properly.” There was a pause. “I suggest that you make yourself completely dependent on me and

on my guidance for now. I shall work with you independently—no more classes.” He said this as if he couldn’t think of anything else to say. I made no response.

“Brother El is correct,” hinted Cathe. “Stay close to him and all will be well. El, I should be quite happy to stay and witness the new brother’s mundane initiation. Surely you must arrange something, some show to commemorate this event. Something grand and glorious I can report back to Sunnashiven.”

“That is not how we do things here. Our initiation ceremonies always mark the last event of one’s education. And even though my—disciple—has partaken of divine initiation—he still has much formal training to undergo. When he is ready, I shall do the proper thing.”

“Of course, of course, wouldn’t dream of interfering—but I suggest—for safety’s sake, that you make this blessed event as public as possible.”

“Yes, right. Hum. I’ll call in witnesses tomorrow. That is,” El raised his voice, “if you are up to it.” I took it he meant me. I said nothing.

“Of course he will be up to it,” said Cathe. “Let him alone to rest and pray and he’ll be right as rhyme. The hard part is over. If the Goddess wanted him, She certainly had Her chance.”

“All right then,” said El. “Tomorrow.” I heard him leave and once the door closed, I threw off my blanket.

Cathe went to the door, listened for the last sound of El’s footsteps, and rekindled the nearly dead fire with his staff. “There now. You *will* be all right. Gave me a bit of a fright once or twice but that’s all past. The story about Sunnashiven is all nonsense of course, but you know that.”

“How did El recover so quickly?”

“My dear boy, I’m a high priest of Habundia Christus. I worked a healing on him in our Lady’s name, and She consented. Oh, by the way, you *are* a priest now—thanks to me. No Hecate about it.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

“Well, I suppose there is Hecate about it because She is your deity and the sole source of your power and your sole authority now—but really it wasn’t Her will to just have it happen like that—I had to beg and plead Her force for that one. Now—the rest should be easy as crushing tadpoles. El won’t harm you—he’s convinced your presence will deter even Roguehan from desecrating Kursen. A divine initiation is a sign of divine benevolence. Furthermore, his ban makes his powers considerably weaker—not so *you’d* notice, but over time he’ll be easier to wear down, and when

Roguehan finally arrives, El won't even think of fighting anybody."

"What ban?"

"Why, yours of course." I groaned. "Oh, come. *I* didn't want it. And the black powder it dribbled out in was burning my tender hands. And I needed my hands to save his life. By the way, it felt like no scorpion I ever kissed."

"Won't he know it was my ban?"

"That's quite impossible. As far as he knows, the Goddess took your ban. And the one he has really is from Sunnashiven. It will trace back there if it will trace anywhere. All that matters is that your power is no longer inhibited and his is. Your job is to prime him up for goodness and wait for word from the emperor. Study your love spells."

"Cathe—I won't be getting word from Roguehan anytime soon." And I explained about the cook.

"Ah welladay, that is a hitch, but at least his wrath can't fall on you over that one. I suppose I could offer myself as a courier for now. Create useful Sunnashiven tidbits for El as an excuse. Yes, it would not be a bad thing to become Roguehan's go-between with Kursen for now." He was starting to get up to leave. "Anything else I need to know?"

"Uh, Cathe—yes, sit down. You'd best be aware—about the Helan camp," and I explained my role in some detail, including that strange interlude with Welm and Baniff when they both saw me after I had led Kursen's students to destroy the camp. "So things are not—easy."

"So the gods answered your prayer. Delighted, I'm sure. Perhaps you were closer to initiation than I thought, although I really tend to doubt it. The circumstances had to be a great help. Hah, well and a spidery lick." He thought for a minute. "This is a fine cauldron of gasping geese. I can deal with Welm. That is, if I can find him. No, don't worry, I'll get to Roguehan first and fix it. Yes, don't worry about that. Just take care of El for now. And as to the other side." He sighed. "Lady lack it all but I'll see what I can do over there. Thanks for the warning." He sprung up lightly and went to the door. "Later, Brother."

"Yes, later." I slept and dreamt of nothing.

The following afternoon I was still bedridden, although I had managed to walk around my room a bit with Devon's help that morning. El brought in quite a crowd of witnesses shortly after midday, including Sister Elwyn and Brother Styrn and half a dozen senior clerical students. And El made quite a production out of the whole affair, by serving willow tea and biscuits

to everyone as if this were all a grand party and he was the happy host. In fact, El was smiling and bobbing around more than twelve doorkeepers. He wanted credit. I was sitting up in bed and flashing my mug around. El had given me a beautifully engraved gold mug to drink from, I think it was one of his own. I was also boldly surveying the envy and fascination of the other students. Cristo was there, hunching his shoulders and looking quite uncomfortable.

I killed the subdued chatter by suddenly speaking. “Greetings, sons and daughters, bold children of the evil forces. So glad to see you all here.” Then I looked at El with a mixture of respect and easy familiarity, and raised my mug to him. My words and gesture made it clear that El and I were now on near-equal terms and that my new status clearly superseded that of the other students.

I smiled over at El. He was now in the middle of pouring tea out of a large earthenware pitcher for Styrn. Styrn was shifting his weight from foot to foot and complaining that his mug felt too hot. I got an instant impression that El would like nothing better than to pour the hot tea down Styrn’s shirt. Then my palms burned a little until Styrn’s mug cooled.

Which reminded me that I really needed to ask El to show me a way to shield out all the sensations around me. I had no idea what a *sensitive* priest I would make. Before I met the Goddess, I had been able to open myself to feel selective sensations around me, and my study of wizardry had increased my skill in this area, but now everything came tumbling in without effort. A spider crawling across a wall three rooms away could send sensations across the back of my wrist. When I walked with Devon, the pain of the floorboards under my step became my own, which was partly why I was resting in bed. Surely the clergy didn’t live like this. I wondered how many were like Cristo—initiated in name only but not in spirit.

When El finished pouring, he had to look in my direction because everyone else was. I caught his eyes briefly in a way that indicated that he was just another member of the crowd. “Greetings.” I said this in a tone that loudly proclaimed, “Really you *might* notice me.” He nodded and bowed. Twice. And with the earthenware pitcher in his hand, he looked very much like a Sunnan servant putting on airs. I drank my willow tea gingerly, as if the tea were more important to me in the moment than El’s rare show of obeisance.

As soon as I finished drinking, everyone started murmuring and vying to kiss my hand, and they all called me “Brother” twice and three times over to impress everyone else with their humility. Which was only fitting, I suppose. Even El had to do it to prove to his colleagues he could be a

sport about the whole thing. After all, I'd just beat his game plan for me by several years. And I didn't even have to ask him to release my spirit from his first. The Goddess had released it for me.

He kissed the back of my hand and released it. "Truly the Lady has blessed us in our loss," he intoned, and the energy level plummeted around me as everyone felt a homily coming on.

"For as we remember our brave brothers and sisters who are now with Ares—" Everyone bowed their heads obediently. This was sort of sad, since most of the surviving students were quite content to have the field cleared a little, and their silence over the loss of their colleagues was shallower than El's pretense at health and joy. Only Cristo seemed genuinely disturbed, or impressed. I wasn't sure which. To me, sitting up in bed and idly receiving sensations, it felt like both. Perhaps Cristo was so rarely impressed with spiritual matters he found the sensation disturbing. He swayed uneasily back and forth. "—with Ares the Destroyer, yes, we also give joy and thanks for this sign of Hecate's favor. And now that we are fewer in number, it is fitting that we all remember that *we* are bound in evil, all of us one—"

"Taking orders and obedience from our high priest," I finished the sentence for him. "For let us remember to be ever humble, for if we were truly worthy, truly holy, we *all* of course would be dead—as the children of Ares are dead. Remember, evil as we are, and blessed as *I* might be in Her, we all still live, and that is something to be humble about."

"Yes," said El dourly. I had ended his homily for him.

There was a great deal of solemn silence and anxiously bowed heads now. No one who had remained behind from the peacemongers' last rampage could ever claim total seriousness again. After all, if you can't die for your deity one way or another, you'll never be accounted as worthy as someone who did. Even though it is certainly much easier to die for Ares than to die for say, Hecate. But then, I suppose one could always cut one's hands on the pages of a book and bleed to death. Or meet up with someone like Cathe.

The other students were all congratulating me again because their masters were there and they needed to impress them by acting enthusiastic. Devon asked me for a special blessing, being Sun King and all, and I graciously blessed him with Hecate's force, although in Devon's case, Her force didn't take. The power ran right through him and dispersed like badly colored smoke. And then all the clerical students asked for a blessing because they remembered they were supposed to, so I brought down Hecate's power again and blessed them all at once. Why not be generous? And the power came at my command, outside of myself but flowing

through me, and taking nothing out of me. Just a reminder that the Goddess and I were now as one. That I had become a conduit of Her force. Clerical magic may be full of restrictions but at least it won't exhaust one like other magical practices do. That is, if you do it properly. You are the Goddess in the moment you pass Her power and you are infinite unto Her.

And then I blessed each member of the clergy, except for Cristo, who stayed awkwardly behind the crowd. I ended by blessing El twice over and several people declared they could see a pale yellow light around him when I brought down the Goddess force. And he rose and briefly took both my hands in his while he declared a close to the witnessing. And from that moment on, I was recognized as a natural priest and all my studies were private studies.

It was two or three days after the witnessing before my heightened sensitivity receded into something manageable for daily life. And it was nearly a week before I could kiss Isulde in my dreams without the ecstasy being so intense that I instantly woke up away from her, the skin on my thighs burning and shriveling from my own semen. And so she refused all kisses, and teased that the fish her foster father caught made better lovers for the moon. And she bathed my thighs in cold brine water. And we ran together at a distance, which was dancing, for one touch of her own joy would flush tumbling along my bloodstreams and spin me dizzy against the sun. And when the dizziness peaked with running in the brine, I'd wake up again in my dark little room and taste salt. She fed me clouds for grounding. And then in one dream, near the end of my recovery, there were no clouds, just an after-storm brassy sky, and Isulde was sitting on a rock outside a cave and offering me a large red-and-gold goblet. The goblet was warm and steaming and running over with four streams of golden liquid. She called it "the drink of the Northern sun." She named it "honey and gingercloves, peppers and saffron, the best summer days of years lost and worlds unseen, knights jousting at the raw midday, ruddy-red stallions charging fire, hooves igniting afternoon fields of ripening corn, peaches and oranges waiting heavy on gold plates, mead burning light in ruby pitchers, drink from the Northern sun's treasure chest and be strong—"

Yes, right. Well, the "Northern sun" woke me up to a god-splitting headache anyway, but once the pain faded, I *was* strong again. And fully aware of the power of my remaining ban against the North Country. But then my dreams were pure untrammelled delight once more.

I started my individual work with El as soon as I could walk without feeling the pain of the floor beneath me. The first thing I learned from him

was that my heightened sensitivity was an after effect of my direct contact with the source of my own deity. I would only be that sensitive again at the point of death. Since he himself had nearly died, he had also experienced heightened sensations for a few days. I was to consider it tangible proof of my divine initiation, and, he smiled, I needn't say anything about his passing irritation with Styrn. Styrn could be irritating, but he was still a sincere and holy man.

He told me to take it as a warning that there would always be certain things I must avoid now, like meat and all things that reek of body and flesh, for Hecate denies the flesh for the mind. I must never permit myself to forget that the usual dietary restrictions were no longer a means of purifying and preparing myself for my deity's entrance into my being, restrictions that could be lapsed from occasionally without serious consequences. I was a priest now and could not break my Goddess's law without sickness or death. However, I would still need to learn to appreciate physical suffering, and there were ways to do this, but I must learn these ways with El's guidance and through using the proper precautions, which he would teach me in due time. A goddess is really a force like any other force, only purer and more intense, and I could, with a great deal of practice and concentration, protect myself against the natural consequences of violating Her law for short periods of time and in limited particular circumstances.

I was still expected to make some show of sacrificing something when I finally took my mundane initiation at the end of my studies, and El suggested an owl since it was customary at Kursen for all initiates into evil to kill Athena's bird to honor the place, no matter what else their personal deity demanded by way of sacrifice. Despite my restriction against flesh, Hecate would be pleased with the death of an owl under the circumstances of initiation. I did not remind El that I had already killed one owl for an initiation. I wondered if Hecate had noticed and counted that favorably toward my spiritual progress. I also never told El that despite my restrictions against flesh, once I recovered my strength whenever I dreamed with Isulde, I had sexual experiences like singing rainbows, color-kissed orgasms like exploding sunstorms. But then, with the exception of Ellisand, I never told anyone about Isulde.

And on nights when I didn't need sleep, for I found that I had a higher stamina through my Lady Hecate than I ever had before, I sometimes wondered about my own weird progress in the magical arts. I was a wizard—of sorts. A wizard by training anyway, although I never became a master. I had practiced some witchcraft, and was fairly adept with the witchworkings I knew, but I could not call myself a witch in anything save

the nominal sense. I knew no illusion, but I had gotten so skillful with my illusion ring that I could pass for a fair illusionist—which in itself was an illusion, I suppose. And finally, I was an alleged natural priest who had secretly been initiated through the interference of a still mortal high priest. And I had no papers or records to prove my priesthood at all until El decided it was time for a mundane initiation.

Yet for all my near successes in the various fields of serious magic, I was the absolute envy of Cristo, who never had any successes in anything. I remember reading a book of Sarana poetry in bed one evening near the end of my convalescence while Cristo was playing some game with Devon in front of the fireplace. Something that involved a stick and a bag of pebbles and all kinds of noise. I think Devon was winning, but I was trying to shut them both out of my consciousness in favor of reading, when Devon shrieked, “You’re burning the stick, Cristo. You’re burning the stick, you stupid cud! Make it stop or we can’t play!”

“Burning whaaa—Damn, I dropped it!”

“You lose, Cristo!” whined Devon. “It’s all in flames now. Luvelluun.” He ran over and jumped on my bed. “Make us another gaming stick. Use magic.”

“I don’t feel like conjuring anything right now, Dev. Why don’t you both go outside and find one?” *And stay there*, I added silently because I was aware of Cristo’s new sense of inferiority and didn’t see the use in antagonizing it further. Devon, however, the Sun King of Destruction, did the job for me.

“Cristo’s too lazy. He won’t go anywhere. If he did he’d be dead like the peacemongers.” Devon said this to me as if he were complaining that Cristo *wasn’t* dead. Cristo stood up stiff and abashed. I felt a little sorry for him.

“Devon! Cristo isn’t a peacemonger. He’s a brother of Hecate. It was probably smart for him not to go.” Then I teased Cristo in a tone of practiced affection. “Smartest thing you ever did, buddy. That is, if you *wanted* to live to enjoy our brilliant company.” I really meant this as a friendly joke, to smooth down his pique. It was the worst thing I could have said.

“Yeah, what makes you think I *wanted* to live anyway? Hauuh, I could have been a martyr. I’ve got morals, ya know. I could have died in the violence. I was looking for *you*—where *were* you anyhow? Thought maybe you went after all—then some bizarre cleric in a traveling cloak wakes me up near dawn to throw you in bed—same guy that showed up here before—had

to pacify Devon all night long too—he had *no* idea, man—next thing anyone knows, the Goddess is speaking to you personally and you’re a goddamned priest!”

I chose not to enlighten him concerning my night’s activities. “Well, Cristo, none of that was my fault.” I looked at Devon. He was frozen in the awkward position of dribbling pebbles out of the bag. He was so startled by Cristo’s burst of anger he didn’t know how to respond, and he had temporarily forgotten how to move. “Hey, so we’re brothers in fact now.”

“Yeah, I ain’t a brother. Never was. Really. Guess you know all about that now.”

“Cristo, everybody’s known all about that for a long time. But who cares? Half the priests in the world take initiation without taking on divinity. And some of them end up running monasteries and initiating others. At least you’ve got your papers in order. That’s all anybody looks at. I won’t have proper credentials for years, if ever.”

“Proper credentials, yeah,” spat Cristo, slightly mollified. Then, “But they ain’t getting me a real job.”

“Well, Cristo, there aren’t a lot of real jobs to be gotten. Look, I’m sure the Goddess will speak to you in Her own time.”

“Yeah, Cristo,” Devon finally said, dropping the bag. “Don’t be angry. Luvellun’s always right. Why don’t you bless him, Luvellun?”

“I don’t want your goddamned blessing. I’m still a priest. I can bless myself. Damn, why didn’t I go die with the peacemongers? One chance at glory and I blew it. I could have died for a *god*, man, any god. And I stayed back looking for *you*.”

“Cristo, there will be other chances. There are chances for dying every single day if you care to look for them. Remember, the war’s still going on, if you really want to chase it, and as a *priest* in fine standing, you can certainly leave Kursen, dispensation or no, and follow the violence. Really I thought you were smarter, and more devoted to Hecate than that, but if martyrdom to a war god like Ares is what you *want*—”

“I’m a priest! I don’t *want*! I can *be* Want! I know how to do it. I’m not stupid.”

“Then do it,” said Devon, settling himself down now as if to watch a performance.

“The gods damn you both for rotting grain—”

“Don’t you mean, ‘May we rot with the grain?’” asked Devon helpfully. He had heard the expression a lot and liked it.

“May you rot with—everything! May you rot!” Cristo bumbled out the door, tripped over the threshold, and loudly stamped down the hall.

And from that evening on, he said very little to either of us, or to anyone else as far as I could tell. It wasn’t that he literally gave up talking altogether, but he restricted his utterances to the bare minimum needed for communicating basic needs, and he was almost wholly silent around me. And I would catch him reading occasionally—very occasionally, for his own studies. And I noticed he no longer ate as much as he used to. And once I saw him blanch a little at a massacre Devon found, so perhaps the Goddess had finally taken up within him. But he never did seem to find himself a job.

Oh, what else? Roguehan sent me flowers. Black orchids firm and dying. They stank of dead, rotting snakes, but it was two weeks after my initiation experience, so I managed to stomach the odor with only a twinge of nausea.

The flowers came stuffed in the cook’s dead body, nearly an acre’s worth packed tightly within his hollowed-out body cavity. The rest of the corpse was preserved and shielded in something like yellow wax, so it did not sicken me. The corpse arrived strapped to a bier dragged by the horse and the black-nettled donkey. Cathe had ridden the horse up from Sunnashiven. He sent the first servant he could collar to find me, and as soon as I arrived he greeted me with a singsong boastful complaint about the “sweet monotony of decaying orchids dwindling along the road, and really Roguehan ought to know that such death would just *sound* tangier had he waited until first harvest, and someday we would *all* get ourselves an emperor with real taste.” Then he complimented me on my recovery while handing me a crumbly orchid. “For you, my priest.”

The orchid was tied to a note which read:

*Whatever it takes. What’s a few Helans between friends? I trust then
that El shall be amenable whenever I arrive.*

Roguehan

“And believe me, that one took Hermes’s own skill, but you’re all right on that end. Got Roguehan thinking that perhaps you’re overeager and a bit ambitious, and needed to put El on the rack a little. Of course you

knew nothing of the Threlans' little surprise, only intended the peacemongers to do enough damage to have propaganda value for the emperor—help him claim a need to take Kursen in hand that the Kantish locals could more than sympathize with. And as to the results of your little gesture—well, who can question the gods' blessing—you're a priest now and eager to serve with all your deity's might, the gods heard you and not even Roguehan can condemn you there. Besides, it's really the entertainment he lives for—he'd overlook almost anything for that. Keep El in hand for him and we're safe. By the way, I'm your new liaison. And as far as El's concerned, his link with the temple. How's he doing?"

"Quiet and steady. We're working together now."

"Excellent well. I'll tell you before Roguehan plans to arrive. If you need any help, you know who to ask." And he sauntered off on a high whistle, pointing his staff here and there as if he were calling his own attention to the hidden cracks in the world.

And that was that. I have no idea what Cathe told Baniff, if anything. He avoided the topic whenever I brought it up on his subsequent visits, admonishing me to learn my love spells and not concern myself with trivia. In fact, all I did learn from him about Walworth's friends and family came a few months later, around first harvest, when he informed me that the old duke and duchess had taken ill and died and so Walworth and Caethne were now joint rulers of the duchy. I wondered how Caethne liked being saddled with all the administrative chores while her brother ran a war. Then I wondered how Walworth liked his erratic twin being solely in charge of running the duchy with no one around to keep her in check. Then I decided they *both* deserved exactly what the gods had given them to work with.

Besides, I had plenty to work with myself. I needed to concentrate on my studies of Sarana and love spells and wizardry and all the theory that went along with my new priestly powers. I learned complicated methods for shielding myself against the sickness that came whenever I was exposed to bodily decay. I also learned that I could not maintain such a shield for more than a quarter-hour or so without sustaining great damage, as it involved reversing the current of Hecate's energy, that is, literally shaking hands with Athena. The trick was practicing a hearty neutrality in my mind while keeping up the shield, all the while knowing that one slip and Athena was likely to send me sicker than meat ever would. Once I could shield myself without El's direction, I was able to learn a critical appreciation of torture and physical suffering, and I really could ride other people's pain for short periods of time, although never with the fervor of a peacemonger.

Then I learned how to delicately work with other peoples' emotions to bind them to Hecate's will without their knowledge.

El was mine to nurse along throughout this time, and I was fairly successful in fostering in him a spiritual and intellectual dependence on me, for I now had the advantage of being "specially chosen" by the Goddess and that gave me some authority in his eyes. Cathe did his best to convince El that my holy presence was the only thing keeping Roguehan *out* of Kursen. And El's ban did damp down his energy enough for me to feel confident about my emotional ascendancy over him, and confidence is crucial in these endeavors.

My intense study was broken only by Ellisand's music and my dreams of Isulde. For Ellisand did return several times to perform for us, and Isulde and I played together in his music like the sportive undines we were in those moments. When I opened my full sensitivity to his music—well, words would only insult the weird and lovely effects his music had. He transposed magical formulas into sounds. There was a pulse below the living surface that I hadn't heard before, but once I learned to reach and ride it—well, days or weeks would pass before the influence did.

I pestered him with flattery and gifts until he reluctantly condescended to have brief conversations with me after his performances, but he never seemed particularly eager to discuss his art with me. The art was there, he did it, he got paid for it, and the work allowed him to travel, that was all. He did tell me that he was half-elven, and that he had learned his craft in Gondal, as I had guessed.

Ellisand told me many curious things about Gondal. He said it was a large northern wasteland that had once been a glorious elvish kingdom, and that in the far south there were two cities that were now inhabited by humans. He was from an elf colony, and he assured me that there were several such colonies hidden in the wasteland. I didn't ask him how his human parent had found the colony, although I was curious about him being half-elven.

He also told me that in ancient times, before the elves retreated to their colonies, that they left a gift upon the land, an energy that now existed as part of the structure of the world. "They used to tell me that whenever anything beautiful got created, the creator was drawing upon that elvish energy whether he knew it or not. That anytime a song or a painting or a story had emotional power, it was really a conduit for that elvish power, without which art couldn't exist."

"Do you believe that's true?" I asked him. I had never heard of this before.

“I believe it’s a pretty story. I also believe it’s true. What do I know? It works. I get paid.” He laughed.

He was also a poet, and he knew all manner of languages for he traveled all the time. One time he read his poems to me and I heard music all through them, draining in and out of them in foreign keys. The words literally got lost in sweet, dreamy elvish music and emerged again as words. And—how can I describe this—it was like the words had different sides, and each side came from a different language, and together the sides made a universal word that spoke itself. And his voice was perfect—a perfect day, was how I thought of it. The only voice which could read the words properly and make them sing. And I saw visions in his words too. When I pressed him he said that the elves had not taught him poetry—the words simply came from himself. Although chaia helped, he hinted. I began bringing him lots of chaia, as much as I could grow or steal. I think it was the chaia that finally induced him to tolerate me with something like approachability if not friendliness.

But he usually said little to me, even under the influence of the weed. Although he did like to boast that he had lovers all over the civilized world—men and women, elves and gnomes and humans and various mixes. He seemed prouder of this than of his music. He despised monks as killers—all monks—but would play for anyone who paid—even sang for the new emperor once, which surprised me a little.

I asked him one summer afternoon when it was late enough in the day to be behind the worst of the heat why he had taken such an interest in the guy El had killed with his music if he truly despised all monks as killers.

“*Because* he killed him out of my music. The man’s death was a response to my art.” He took a long drag of chaia. “It was wild and different. Never had that happened before. Most monks hold back, do their best not to respond. But El couldn’t hold back then and do what he did. Yeah, they’re all killers.”

“Yet when I respond, when I want to talk about your music, you never want to talk about it.”

“That’s because you do respond. What’s to say? It’s none of *my* business how.”

“But I thought you’d like to know. It’s your music doing it. It’s your sensitivity, even if you like to pretend you’re a different person when you’re not playing. You even said your poetry comes from you. I can’t believe you aren’t your music, that you don’t live your art—”

“Sensitivity—life,” he spat. “I’m horny and I’ve got a girl to meet.

You're the critic. Make sense of your own fantasies." He said this contemptuously, but when he saw how crushed I was by his distance, he added, "You know, playing music for you is worth all the rest, because you know *how* to love my music, if only you'd stop trying to make it die by questioning the reason behind every riff and chord."

"My questions are my responses."

"No they're not. Your sobs and smiles and shudders and cries of ecstasy are your responses. The only responses that count."

"Don't be absurd. If we clergy didn't question and analyze and strangle the meaning—"

"*Strangle* the meaning," said Ellisand slowly, cupping his hand around the chaia and dragging.

"If everyone just responded emotionally to art, half the clergy would be out of teaching jobs, certain orders of clerics would never find self-sacrificial paths to their own deities, monasteries would collapse—"

"Art provides an excuse for all that, man? Hey, I'm just a minstrel—what do I know? Look, I gotta go now. My girl's waiting, and she says she'll have some real food for me, not monk's peas and old grain. Despite the war shortages. Next time, Lew." He threw the stub of his chaia on the ground and walked jauntily away. In that one gesture I knew that he would always be happier than I.

I remember thinking that was the best thing anyone ever said to me, that line about playing music for me being worth all the rest. Really two people don't get much closer than that, do they? I cherished that tossed-off phrase for months. No, I still do cherish it. Had my life experiences been different I might have been able to believe in it as a sign of sincere friendship, coming from him. But of course, I had long ago ceased believing in friendship. I never brought up the topic of my responses again.

I paused here in my telling, and so did Walworth's pen.

"Beauty, my lord, is worth all the rest. Write it three times like a spell. Pray over it to whatever god you pray to."

"I do," he said solemnly, simply, and uncharacteristically. His sudden candor surprised me, but the intrusion of truth didn't last. "Will you continue?"

"Upon my life," I smiled weakly.

I should mention that it took Walworth about a year to lose all of southern Threle. Actually, Walworth never really *lost* the southern duchies. He just couldn't win them. And Roguehan, although he succeeded in nominally incorporating them into his empire, couldn't really win them either.

For Roguehan was constantly having to deal with unexpected, independent rebellions and random acts of war against his empire during all the time of his occupation, and the southern duchies became quite a liability—more trouble than the whole game was worth.

Which is a compliment to Walworth's brilliance as a strategist and skill as a fighter, for a lesser leader would have lost more quickly and decisively. Merchants as a rule are too independent-minded to make good soldiers, and Threlelan merchants especially are not in the business of taking orders, unless it be orders for their wares. But Walworth, with the help of Mirand's skill at rhetoric, managed for a while to use his soldiers' love of independence as a spur toward fighting off their attackers. And to their credit, fight they did, often like Ares's own arms and legs.

But the details of the war, save as they touch my upon my life, can be read in other records, and you know them as well as anyone, my lord. Say I studied for a year and a day. Say others died better deaths.