

# The King's Glory

Book Three of the  
Enemy Glory  
Series

"Brilliant. Unforgettable. Poetic. *Hecate's Glory* — like *Enemy Glory*, the first book in Karen Michalson's proposed trilogy — is a masterpiece of fantasy."

— Paul Goat Allen, Barnes & Noble, from a review  
of the *Enemy Glory* series

Karen Michalson

Arula Books by Karen Michalson

*Enemy Glory*  
*Hecate's Glory*  
*The King's Glory*

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*The King's  
Glory*

## *Praise for the Enemy Glory series*

“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*

*The King's  
Glory*

*Karen Michalson*

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THE KING'S GLORY

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*For Bill*  
*For patience*

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My readers who, having twice entered Threle, have asked to go back. Third time's a charm



# *One*

(omitted - contains Book Two spoilers)

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## *Two*

The rooms I once occupied as Gondal's king held only failing sunlight. There was nothing else.

When I told Shadow to take me back, I understood that "back" might be unrecognizable, depending on how much time had passed during my absence. But somehow I didn't anticipate that my royal chambers would be as bereft of their former glory as I was.

The elvish paintings that once graced my walls, weeping beauty like a failed god disbelieving eternity?

Gone.

The elvish statues that once graced my rooms, capturing the fall of divine energy as it lapses into mortal form?

Gone.

Rectangles of setting sun marked exposed floor and walls. The only furnishing was a pile of torn and bloodied clothes where my sumptuous bed used to be. I knew I was still sensitive because the dried blood caused my senses to creep a bit when I examined the clothes. They were Roguehan's. He was wearing them when I killed him.

There was no way to determine how long ago anybody had been here, or how much time had passed while I was in the North Country. The door was locked. This was so cleverly pointless, considering there was no longer anything here to protect, that I decided Aeren must have moved everything in one of her fine rants. She wasn't enthusiastic about me breaking our contract by tossing Gondal at her to run, so vacating the royal chambers and tossing Roguehan's death

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clothes here as some kind of obscure statement could easily have been her way of showing appreciation. But before entering the rest of the castle, the rest of my life, and an unpleasant disputation with Gondal's unwilling queen, I had more pressing concerns.

Here, in these rooms, Hecate had commanded me to destroy Gondal and purge the world of elvish beauty, or experience eternal damnation. And here, I would know from Her if my choice mattered. If I was ever to know anything again, I would know that. Was I still clean for Her? Damned to eternal torture upon my next death? And if I were so damned, what did my life now mean?

I retreated to a deeper part of my rooms to avoid the minor distraction of the blood. My cache of weapons, the scrolls I had taken from Zelar's cave, the shards from the Mirror of Transformations, were also gone. And then I remembered that I had unshielded and unlocked these rooms before I left, not expecting to return. Of course the weapons were useless, as I alone could call down the power words from Hecate to activate them. That is, if Hecate was still for me to call. The shards retained considerable power, enough to have caused Aeren to assume dragon form during the elven battle. They were worth much. As to the scrolls, I had no idea who might want them as, except for the two in Botha detailing the weapons' uses, I had no idea how to read them.

I stood in the innermost section of my chambers, waiting for what remained of the sunlight to die. Not because it was strictly necessary, but because I was trembling so violently that useful prayer was impossible. I clumsily removed my cloak, spread it on the marble floor, and sat lightly as the sun slowly faded. If I were damned, did I want to know about it? How to live knowing that, on any blessed day, death might come and gift me with unspeakable suffering? And yet how to live, how to practice magic, without knowing where I stood with my deity? Could I still practice magic? Was I still a priest? A king? Bound to evil? Would Hecate hear my prayer?

The light withered into a mere suggestion of light, as if it needed to deny its own nature to satisfy the Gondish night. That was my only answer.

To still my thoughts, to prepare myself for the awful prayer I needed to make, I focused on what was around me, needing to know intimately this fragment of world Isulde's fairy horse had brought me to before knowing anything else. And in doing so, I began, instinctively, to read the energy around me, using the wizardry Mirand had once taught me. Not just to read these rooms, but to take their energy into myself and make its acquaintance before facing the horror of knowing myself again as Hecate now knew me.

What came back was emptiness and anger. There are many kinds of emptiness, just as there are many kinds of anger. The emptiness

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was the sort of emotional hole in which some people hide their damaged hearts. But whether this hole was protection, a vantage point to spit at the world, or both wasn't clear from my reading. The anger was violence-laden frustration. I sensed that it concerned an argument that somebody desperately wanted but was unable to have. I also sensed that if it were possible, this person would earnestly commit ten thousand atrocities just to make that argument happen. But I also sensed that whoever had been here cared more about making some obscure point than about whatever the point was.

It had to be Aeren.

Be that as it may, there were clearly no impediments to drawing upon Hecate here. Emptiness would work. In fact, emptiness is one of the best conduits of Her force.

So in this oddly furious nothingness, I opened myself in prayer and willed myself into trance, hurling everything I was—mind, life, energy—into Hecate's keeping or that of whatever deity would have me.

What came back was dirty, broken, and silent. That is all.

I stopped my prayer.

I considered my past, my destruction of El and Cathe, and how I was now anathema to my own kind. My willing self-sacrifice, or my willing destruction of Gondal, was to have paid for those acts. But Gondal was still here. And I was still here. And so my "sacrifice" felt as undefined as the emptiness through which I now called to Her and as open and indecipherable as what came back.

I prayed again, hesitantly.

Nothing.

That is, nothing but reverberations in the dark. I knew those reverberations. Some say they emanate from a fit of anger that happened shortly after the world began, that the energy from that anger still ripples through time. Aeren once told me a tale about that anger. Her tale concerned a fighter who lost the world for sulking in his tent over some imagined slight. Except the way she told it, the slight, imagined or not, was of a nature to justify such a loss. You almost admired the fighter for sticking to his fit despite the cost, thinking a mere world is worth such stunning discipline.

Anyway, it was that kind of silence that my prayer brought back. Reverberations I could read old tales into but take no meaning from. So I sat there, heavy with my thoughts in the Gondish night, unsure how to proceed, unsure if I should proceed. And then, somewhere in my maze of distraction, or in the emptiness of these rooms that was all I had left of my former kingship, Mother Hecate took me into Her keeping.

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*Again I am croaking and wordless. I know myself as a shuddery bird in the nasty nest of Mother Hecate's heart, trembling and terrified. Hecate tightens Her cold fist around my wings, pressing them flat into uselessness. The pressing hurts my narrow bones, which break and crack into whistles of pain. I also know that the frightened bird is merely a form that contains my being, and that my being is only a streak of excess energy, constantly seeking to be contained in matter.*

*She offers me a dirty choice: to exist in physical form as Her priest, for Her evil and from Her evil, or to become pure formless energy again and dissipate into oblivion. Exist in Her evil or don't exist.*

*And then, before I can make my choice, She snaps my bird-neck and drops my now limp bird-form into Her energy stream.*

*It is timeless here, in Hecate's energy, and so I am dying forever, dying eternally, in a moment that never begins or ends, touching but never reaching death. My bird-neck hangs loose where She twisted it; it mirrors Her symbol, the waning moon.*

*And here, between bare flutters of existence and nonexistence, is my divine Mother's voice, harsh and glittering with poisoned light.*

*"I know your life. I was there when you cried for the flowers to love you. I was there when you played your childhood witch-games with Grana. It was me lurking in her heart. I also lurk in yours.*

*"I loved you in your evil. I found you beautiful with transgressions. Each time you destroyed something you loved, I sickened your heart for solace. I gave you my tears for strength. I alone keep you while the world condemns you.*

*"You chose not to destroy Gondal, your pretty toy. And so you rejected the cleansing I required for your murder of two high priests of Habundia Christus, my highest form. For elvish Beauty you chose to die damned to me forever in the North Country, and through no fault of your own, failed in your choice. However, your capacity for sacrifice attracts my mercy.*

*"And so you shall feel me in your flesh, as a promise of what is to come to you forever when you die again. But, for mercy, you may void this promise if you perform two sacrifices in my honor.*

*"One. You once caused my beloved child El to turn to good. You shall balance that loss by causing your former master, Mirand, to embrace evil.*

*"Two. Mirand marred the world to save Threle. You will heal that wound by destroying Threle, which you once loved.*

*Should you die before you accomplish this mandate, you will spend eternity as you spend this night."*

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Hecate fled my cracked mind.

I was in human form again, but I had scarcely breathed before something cut my body, carving a line of blood that curved around my back and stomach. The cut was made so swiftly that I didn't feel pain until after the cutting stopped. And then—how do I describe this torture from Mother? She carefully, slowly, almost tenderly, pulled my skin from my chest and arms and over my screaming face the way one removes a soggy shirt from a child. As I lay in an agony that quivered through exposed flesh, veins, and muscles, Hecate's words caught me like thorns:

*"I don't want you to die. I want you to understand."*

And then, to peak the excruciating pain dancing through my mess of half-skinless body that should have died for mercy, Mother cleansed me. With salt. Her pale fist rained salt against my exposed flesh. Over and over. Without end.

Except sometimes the salt paused. And then I was Her toad, eternally existing in the excruciating moment when my cold life matter spurts irretrievably out of my flattening body. There would never be anything but this experience of horror, this eternal moment of terror. Except sometimes I was a screaming bird forever in the maw of that damned orange cat I once loved in the Helan border town. As the beast ripped and tore me, fluttering and raw, I returned to myself in my empty chambers and experienced my open body burning. Every nerve an enemy. Everything I might have loved—language, learning, music, Threle, that damned cat—resolved into waves of smashing pain. And then my language, what words I could hold onto, swarmed out of the salt like confused insects, stinging my vulnerable flesh out of all experience, I mean all ties to existence—and into a terrifying dissolution. The word-insects gnawed me backward into wordless elements. My mind dried into dead stars. And then I hung, a graceless pulse of pain, a nasty tangle in Her womb. But there was no respite there, for I knew that every month, when the moon went dark, Mother would make me grow back just enough to again be birthed into torture.

When dawn became morning, the torture stopped. In a breath, a thought, Hecate replaced my flesh, with only a light line of scar to motivate me. And around my neck was Her mark, a silver chain bearing a waning moon that I knew instinctively I could never remove. And then there was a cold maternal kiss on my face and I was back. Too terrified to *be* back, too terrified to *be*. I lay clutching the silver moon for hours, maybe days, holding to Her energy, waiting to feel like I could even begin to know how to live again.

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*Welcome home*, I thought ruefully. *Welcome back to the world I know*. Turn Mirand. Who, for all I knew, was halfway there anyway. Destroy Threle as payment for Gondal. Finish the vengeance I no longer had enthusiasm for, and the torture of that night would pass me over when I died. If I would risk eternal damnation to save elvish Beauty, would I do the same for Threle?

There is a kind of freedom in only having one goal, in not being distracted with what-ifs. Mirand had spat at the gods and torn history to save Threle. In justice, there was no cosmic reason not to turn him, save sentiment, and the knowledge of the torture I'd be suffering even now if Walworth had not kept my death at bay. And yet Walworth had appeared to know that Isulde would be able to bring me back, that his death sentence would have no power. And for such hidden mercies I should work to destroy Mirand? Yes, I had done the same for El, absolutely, but Mirand would be difficult in ways I didn't care to admit to myself—and I was not somebody he had reason to trust. What to do? Ride to Threle with no real plan, take Walworth up on his implied offer of work, and steal his country?

There was nothing for it but to enter the world, so I unlocked and opened the door. The castle was as empty as my chambers. I was still shaking so badly I stumbled through the hallways, staggered into the rooms. There was nothing here now but nothing. I could feel pockets of the same anger I felt in my rooms when I opened myself. But mostly there was only silence. And empty space. The elvish art, the stunning emotional tones, the energy I had been willing to damn myself to save had all evaporated.

I faltered onto the balcony where I had witnessed the elvish battle. And there, I saw that my city, Arula, had been razed. I mean, as far as I could see were sunshine and ruins. If I had some kind of holy mandate to destroy Arula, then somebody had clearly done my job for me.

I don't know how long I stood in front of that terrible void, helplessly staring at the wasteland, grieving for a history that wasn't even mine. At some point, I remembered that I needed a plan, a goal, a damned understanding of what I was supposed to do next, but the wreckage before me revealed nothing, and I wasn't eager to follow my thoughts. I tried to command the power of the land to surge through me but drew only a gust of emptiness. And then another. I was a king of air and shadows, nothing more. Or else I was still King of Gondal, but the land had gone to death, and so death is all I felt.

I conjured a stone in my palm. A small dull rock appeared, slowly, to match the one in my heart. I still had wizardry. I tossed the rock and stood for a long time after it fell, remembering the elves, remembering that Arula was once their city, created as a repository for their art. I'm sure I mourned. I sent a wizard call to Aeren but

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my call felt weak and insincere. I received no response. I didn't expect to.

Eventually, I made my way through the city's remains. There was nothing else for it. There was silence here—charred and unreadable as Arula now was. The earth was dead and scarce before me. A desolation without apparent cause. That is the only way I knew that day. That is the only way I knew myself on that day. That is all I knew as I stood sickened by this sad strange stain on the world.

Later, as the moon set, I called down Hecate's power, screaming for an explanation. For a word. For anything. A broken old horse came straggling through the ruins. That was Her only answer. Using wizardry, I changed my clerical garments to those of Athena. That was mine.

I rode the broken horse. We kept a broken pace. I thought if I could get to Anda, Gondal's other city, I might learn what happened to Arula. Of course there was nobody on the road to ask. There being no towns between the cities, and no actual city left of Arula, there was no reason for anybody else to travel along this path. I rode three days in solitude.

As I neared Anda, I started to pass the farm that belonged to Relyr Ean Gransag, the reticent farmer that had supported my bid for the throne. I saw him working outside so I dismounted and approached. "Relyr! Ean! Gransag! Old friend. How long has it been?" I admit the greeting was pure show, but I was also genuinely relieved to see him. He was someone familiar. Also, I felt reassured that he and his farm were as I remembered them. Perhaps I hadn't lost a lot of time in the North Country.

Relyr was highly annoyed by my presence. "Aren't you the so-called 'king' that Ygresan D'an Fen said was going to restore the monarchy?" He kicked the fence post he had just shoved in the ground with a little more aggression than necessary, appeared satisfied, picked up a bucket of farming tools, and headed across his hay field toward the barn that had once been my command quarters. He had no use for me. I kept pace with him anyway, leaving my tired horse to rest.

Relyr had once placed himself—or rather, allowed his farmstead to be placed—in the center of Ygresan D'an Fen's various political schemes. Not that he ever had any confidence in Ygresan or in his schemes, but, being Andan, he liked feeling important too much to forgo being in the center of something. I was certain that, because of his prior political involvement, Relyr would know what happened to Arula.



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I was wrong. Probing Relyr's mind as we crossed the field yielded nothing of interest. The old farmer had grown isolated and ignorant. He liked it that way. He'd been disappointed by his fellow Andans as often as he'd trusted them. Relyr was, at base, intensely angry over having been wrong in his support of Ygresan and myself. Publicly wrong. Being Andan, that was intolerable. And since the world clearly lacked the ability to appreciate how intolerable, he had no more traffic with the world. He had his farm. He was all set.

Relyr made a show of ignoring me, as if further comment would have indicated that he cared enough to notice. When he stopped to repair the gate to the pasture where his animals were grazing, I retrieved my poor old horse and let her into the pasture without being asked, to see if that would elicit a response. It didn't. Relyr was not going to be manipulated into speaking again. My probe told me that he was annoyed, but that he could not let on that he was annoyed because he wanted to impress me with his silence. He wasn't supposed to care about anything anymore, and chiding me about letting my horse into his field would have marred the game.

As to Arula, I couldn't find anything in Relyr's thoughts, not even an indication of how much time had passed since I left the throne.

"How many coins will it take to let me stay here a few days?" I still had some conjured coins from my last visit to Anda.

"You can't count that high."

"Will you sell me a better horse?"

He helplessly ruminated for longer than the question merited. He would have liked my gold, but he wasn't *sure* he wanted my gold, which would have been too much like admitting he wanted anything. Also, he might regret having sold me a better horse than the sorry one I had, which was too much like doing me a good turn.

"No." His thoughts conveyed unease. Maybe he was passing up a good deal on the gold, but as he couldn't be sure, and he distrusted everything, "no" was safe.

So I attempted to lead him to think about Arula. "What's the news out of Anda's sister city?"

He looked at me incredulously. "You mean you don't know?" He rubbed his chin and stared at the ripples the breeze made in the growing hay. His exaggerated tone and gesture was meant to mock my ignorance. "It got wrecked. I hear." It was not a loss that made much of an impression on the old fellow at this point in his life. "Not my concern." I probed his mind again, but he really didn't know anything else about it. I sensed that he was happy to have something awful to tell me, to impress upon me how miserable the outside world is, and how justified he was in his isolation.

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Relyr's snit annoyed, but his braggy reticence suited me. I could do worse than take lodging with someone who chose to isolate himself in ignorance and didn't talk to anyone. At least until I could discretely educate myself on recent events.

I showed him some gold. "Horse and a few days lodging?"

"Seen Ygresan?" His sudden curiosity surprised me.

"No, actually I haven't."

"Neither have I." He said this like an oblique condemnation that carried a hint of us now having something in common. He meant it as a rebuke to me for having been fooled by Ygresan, and as a way to draw attention to his own discernment. I used it like an opening line.

"Relyr—the world is a broken deal. I haven't seen Ygresan or anybody else from Anda in a long time." I emphasized this as if I, too, felt betrayed. "But I know you for a plain dealing, dependable sort." I said the latter like I was complimenting him, and I sensed from his slight shrug that he took it that way. "You I always trusted far more than Ygresan and his associates." I suddenly sensed Relyr pulling back. He didn't want to be trusted. He feared entanglements. I backed off. "I'm not here for any other reason than I remember you kindly, and I'd rather give my coin to you than to the innkeeper in town. To make up for past inconveniences, including Ygresan's."

He considered, squinting at the sun so he wouldn't have to look at me, and said in spite of himself, "You can take that horse." He indicated a dull brown mare. "And keep the barn for a week."

"Come home, then." I gave him a fistful of gold, which he managed to look both eager and confused about because he didn't have a handy place to put it. He poured the coins into his tool bucket. "That's what they say in Threle—in the old Duchy of Helas—when someone's made a good bargain."

Relyr had no more interest in Threle than in Arula. He was done.

I wasn't. As Relyr turned his attention back to his tasks, I used wizardry to cause him to trip and spill the bucket. As he crawled over the ground to retrieve his tools and gold, I knelt near him, reached my arms under his shoulders as if to help him up, and set a binding spell on his tongue as a precaution. "You may not speak of me or of my presence here save to me alone. The word 'gold' renews the spell should the binding fade." The spell held fast, and Relyr was none the wiser. He really thought I was just being a good guest, helping him.

In what appeared to be an attempt to simultaneously reciprocate my gesture and ignore my presence, he ambled over to the gate on

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the opposite side of the pasture, called the mare, and walked her toward my new lodgings.

And then, as he set off across the field, something blasted him and the horse into a pile of death and bones.

It wasn't me.

The blast was so pure and clean that I instinctively thought it was clerical. The aftershock knocked me to the ground. I lay there shuddering with the terror of how close I had come to returning to Hecate before I realized that the blast was wizardry, for its energy still hung lightly in the air. But I was too dazed and scared to focus enough to read the energy before it dispersed, and putting up a wizard shield seemed like a better choice. That, and throwing a clerical shield around my wizard shield. Not that a clerical shield would necessarily protect me against a wizard blast at close range, but I had no idea what I was going to encounter.

I had no shortage of enemies, but I also knew that if the blast was meant for me, it wouldn't have missed. A wizard powerful enough to raise that amount of energy wouldn't miss. So why was an obscure Andan farmer like Relyr marked for special attention?

There was nothing for it but to stay hidden in the hay, cursing the fact that my shields prevented me from reading my surroundings. But I wasn't about to make myself known to whatever wandering wizard had decided to blast Relyr. So I waited as the day crawled into dusk, waited as the dusk slowly collapsed into darkness, waited as the moon set in the early evening and night collapsed around me.

Uncomfortable from having lain so long on the earth, I dragged myself through the dew-soaked hay until I could feel the edge of the blast's bare circle. The suddenness of the scalded soil startled, not because I wasn't expecting it, but because I was.

Still I waited, listening. Only the peculiar silence of the newly dead tinged the hardened ground. The thick growth surrounding the blast area would block any light on the ground, so I risked conjuring a candle. I did the working inside my shield to prevent my spell from being sensed, and I kept the flame so weak it barely traced an area the size of my hand before sputtering into the near-total darkness.

That's why it took several minutes to explore the dead earth. As I suspected, there wasn't enough left of the farmer and the horse to sicken on, even if I hadn't been shielded. But something glinted near a piece of the mare's skull.

I recognized it as a death charm. Somebody had tricked up the horse with this thing, and Relyr had taken the blast after reluctantly selling me that particular animal. The charm was spent and cold and therefore as impossible to read as Relyr's now dead thoughts. I

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placed it in my pocket, extinguished the candle, strengthened my shields, and slowly stood up in the darkness.

Not a star, not a guide. I cautiously made my way to Relyr's dimly lit farmhouse.

And there, through a faintly illuminated window, I observed a young man in a slightly overwrought wizard robe. The kind of robe a new wizard might wear if he wasn't sure how to show acceptable ambition without annoying his superiors. He was sitting at Relyr's coarsely-hewn supper table, utterly focused on whatever he was writing, except when he looked over at the fireplace wall, which was often. Then his expression conveyed something approaching mortification. Then he would read, look vexed, write intensely, stare back at the shadows on the wall, and nervously rub his palm over his mouth.

He clearly lacked the casualness that accompanies experience. But he also had none of the blaring self-consciousness that burdens novices. His carefully muted eagerness revealed unease. I decided he was new, but not green. Much as I wanted to probe his mind, or conjure some parchment and manifest his words, dropping my wizard shield and exposing myself to a blast wasn't an option, even if it were possible to work a manifestation without him sensing it. Also, I had to assume he was shielded, although my own shields prevented me from knowing for sure.

Obviously, I needed to render him useless for magical workings. Just as obviously, I needed to keep up my shields. That left one option. Wizard shields being cobwebs to clerisy, I brought down Hecate's force against the fellow. That is, I called down Hecate's energy with the will to cause this wizard extreme pain. He was writhing across the floor like a piece of just-shredded snake when I entered the farmhouse. Nothing incapacitates wizardly focus like a generous serving of divine agony.

"Who are you and why did you set up Relyr Ean Gransag to kill me?"

My would-be assassin began to vomit a little, so I helped him out by kicking him in the stomach. He vomited again. Hard. Then he stopped and hunched and lurched like he wanted to heave his scathing insides into eternity. I knew from my clerical training that Hecate had stirred acid in his vomit. He made awful choking noises because the more he heaved, the more his insides boiled in pain. "Wizardry is no match for clerisy. Drop your shield and I might show mercy."

"I have . . . done it so." He gagged the words in horribly stilted, academic Sarana. Given that my shields were up, I had no way of knowing whether he actually had dropped his. Not that it mattered now, but I wanted him to feel as vulnerable as possible.

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I stuffed his writing in my cloak without reading it. That was hard, because I was intensely curious, but I had to focus on keeping him so distracted with pain that he couldn't concentrate his power against me.

"Answer my question, Wizard. Who are you?"

He refused to answer so I called upon Hecate to increase his suffering. I willed Her force to scathe his flesh and eyes in addition to his gut, but only to the point of agony, not death. I let him scream and crawl and roll around until he simply couldn't scream anymore. Then I let up enough for him to speak.

"I call myself Beotun. I have . . . I am . . . to travel . . . I do travel the way from Sunna."

This time I could make out that his accent was Helan, and that his command of Sarana was not simply academic but sketchy.

I responded in Botha, using the Sunnan cadences I grew up with. "So you are Helan and you come from Threle." I increased his pain again to show I wasn't pleased with his lie. He nodded slightly, almost involuntarily, but he mostly just suffered. I wouldn't let him do anything else. "What's a Helan wizard doing in my country? Who sent you?"

Beotun scrunched his eyes and prepared himself for another onslaught of torture. "Take it from my mind," he responded in perfect Botha. This wasn't exactly an honest challenge, although he probably wanted me to think that it was. It sounded more like a response he had been taught to say in such a circumstance. When caught in a lie, scoundrels rely on policy. Particularly new scoundrels.

"I've no intention of dropping either of my shields, Wizard. And I've no intention of ending your current . . . *religious experience*, shall we call it . . . until you answer me." I increased his torment as far as I dared without killing him. After a minute or two, I eased off, but not by much. The real problem was that if I let him reach a comfort point, or even a point of stasis he could adapt to even briefly, he'd be able to focus his power enough to blast me. He might do damage at such close range despite my shields. So I had to keep unexpectedly changing the intensity of the suffering I was sending him. "Proposal. I blast you out of your miserable Helan life just as you sought to blast me." He cried and twitched. "Or you tell me your story—as they say in Threlan courts—and I might reconsider my death sentence on you for attempting to murder Gondal's king."

Beotun chuckled and coughed at my referring to myself as Gondal's king. That, of course, piqued my interest. "A murderous tyrant of a 'king' that can't keep his throne. Or will you keep torturing me for speaking truth?"

## *The King's Glory*

So now the guy fancied himself a political martyr? “Gondal values free speech as much as Threle does. Say whatever you like about me.” I didn’t give a damn about his speech rights; I just wanted him to keep talking.

“You’re no more Gondish than my grandam’s goat. You’re a Sunnan commoner that destroyed the Helan border camp and all that was in it. And our border town. That one’s out now, too.”

“So you’re here on behalf of the Duchy of South Walworth?” I asked coolly.

“*Helas*,” he corrected. “I’ve got a charter from the king to kill you.”

“The King of Threle?” I was nonplussed.

“No, may Walworth rot with the grain. The King of *Helas*.”

*Damn, I had much to learn about the state of the world.* “So *Helas* is a kingdom now, is it?” I managed to say this with a hint of sarcasm I didn’t feel, as if to convey that *Helas*’s affairs weren’t worthy of my consideration.

“*Helas* took its rightful independence.” He emphasized the traditional name again. “Or haven’t you heard, King?”

“Against the rest of Threle?” This time I tried to provoke more information by sounding like I didn’t believe him, or didn’t believe in Helan independence, or something.

“The ‘rest of Threle’s’ king hasn’t been particularly present for the last two years.”

*So that’s how long we were in the North Country.* I considered asking who destroyed Arula, but decided it was not strategic to show my ignorance by asking my would-be assassin to educate me on my own country’s recent history. I tried to get at it another way. “How did you know I’d be visiting Relyr Ean Gransag’s farm, Wizard?”

Beotun stiffened. Despite my considerable attempts to ruin his evening, he clearly didn’t want to say more and lose his job. I increased his torment into chaotic pulses of pain cracking through his bones. That got him talking. That is, when he finished screaming. “Crystal. Pouch.” I picked up a small cloth purse from the table. Inside the purse was a tracking crystal that my shields had prevented me from sensing.

“This? How were you able to track me since I’ve nothing for the crystal to detect?” Beotun shuddered, his limbs trembling like the remnants of an old storm. He spat pain. He dreamed pain. He shimmered with anguish. If I let up now, I knew he’d kill me. He gagged, jerked, and forced his face into an odd half-grimace. “We

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apprenticed with the same master.” He spoke with as much embarrassment as it is possible to have while being tortured. “We’re bonded, damn the gods. If you dropped your bloody wizard shield, you’d know that.” He gasped and gagged. “You sent out a wizard call days ago.”

*I had called Aeren in Arula and Beotun picked it up. We had a wizard bond. Something in me went breathless. Then I did. “Mirand sent you?” I asked thinly.*

Beotun winced and nodded. The next hit of pain I sent him had nothing to do with interrogation strategy. It was helplessly personal. Then I kicked him again. In the head. “That’s for your . . . *our* . . . master.”

He moaned uncontrollably, in long low violent sobs that didn’t stop for a long time. Then, appearing to make peace with the unfairness of the situation, he groaned until he could form something resembling words again. “He made a death charm . . . set to your wizardry. I placed it in a horse’s mane . . . paid Relyr to be certain you took that animal.” *Meaning my binding spell set off the charm when Relyr led the horse, because the charm sensed my wizardry.*

“How needlessly complicated.”

“It was my idea.”

“Obviously.” I could tell he resented the implied insult. “You’re new at this sort of thing. You’ll improve.” I said this without emotion. Emotion was a deadly distraction. “What did Relyr know?”

“Nothing. I told him nothing. He was the perfect front. I used the circumstance.” *That’s why I didn’t catch this in Relyr’s mind.*

“Why does Mirand believe I’m a threat to Threle?”

Beotun laughed at me like he thought the question was a joke.

I tried again. “The only time Mirand ever consented to the death of a fellow wizard—let alone a former apprentice—was when he believed—no, knew—that wizard was a threat to Threle. So why does Mirand want to kill me?”

“Take it from my mind.” It was another invitation by rote. But if Beotun thought I was dropping my wizard shield, then Mirand never taught him how to think.

“Mirand didn’t send a Helan rebel to Gondal with assassination orders against the king.”

“Former king,” he struggled to remind me, which made the rebuke worse because he had to work so hard through his considerable suffering to speak. “Mirand and I play the same coin on that one.”

## *The King's Glory*

“Call him then.” I threw the crystal at his chest. Beotun groaned and shook. “Send Mirand a call through the crystal, give him my love, and I’ll let you live. How’s that?”

Beotun cried, grasped the crystal, tried to focus through the chaotic throbbing of his pain-riddled mind, and failed. I knew he would.

“Well. As they say in Helas, ‘Coming home is always an act of belief.’ Isn’t it? Here. Take this message to our beloved master.” I blasted him into eternity along with the damn tracking crystal. If Mirand was on the other end, he’d know what happened. Besides, Mirand appreciated elegance in intellectual arguments. So maybe he’d give this one a pass. Me? I simply appreciated the elegance of expediency.

Then, spent from the energy I’d used on magic all day, I fell exhausted into the chair, propped my feet on the table, and wearily renewed my shields. Somewhere the night was a comfort of clouds, but I was too confused to know this more than distantly. I shakily took Beotun’s parchment bundle out of my cloak and began to read. The writing was in Botha—no surprise—and appeared to be notes and commentary on an academic paper. Then I tiredly realized that it was commentary on one of *my* academic papers.

Beotun was carrying one of the essays I’d written on Habundia-Ceres as a propaganda piece for Cathe to disseminate after El died. It was one of the pieces Cathe told me to target for Mirand. Beotun’s intended rebuttal was competent. I’ll give him that. Not that I cared. I was mostly amused that he was doing me the honor of taking my phony argument seriously after he believed he had just killed me. Then I sobered with the realization that a true student of Mirand’s would not see that as funny but as a mark of professionalism. Then I looked at the back of the parchment and laughed a little, because Beotun had written that he had “problems with the sincerity of these arguments.” He figured that out, did he? But I immediately went cold and strange when I read Mirand’s response. “Study the process, not the mask.”

Of course Mirand knew I was evil, but how could he know about my mandate from Hecate to destroy Threle? He couldn’t. But if he didn’t know, why then did he send Beotun to kill me? And provide him with the means to study how I think? And what, if anything, did Walworth know about this little adventure?

I manifested the words “no defenses” next to Mirand’s writing. Then I magically erased them. Staring tiredly at the darkening fire, I contemplated the twisted implications of my next move.