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Uschi Zietsch

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CHRONICLES

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NIGHTFIRE

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Uschi Zietsch

The Woodzee Chronicles Trilogy

BOOK 2

Nightfire

"A great fantasy adventure that is impossible to resist after the first few pages." *Lies-und-lausch*

"More legends, heroism and epicness you will rarely find."
Mediamania

The battle for Ardig Hall is lost, young knight Rowarn and Vision Knight Angmor are imprisoned in the Splinter Crown in the desolation valley of Starfall.

But Femris is by no means the victor, he too has suffered heavy losses.

The search for the Shards of the Tabernacle continues. Rowarn's burden grows as he must face revelations about his true origins - triggering tragic destinies ...

Fabylon

About the author

Uschi Zietsch was born in Munich in 1961. She is married and has lived for years as a writer and publisher with her husband and many animals on a small farm.

Her first publication, a fantasy novel, was published in 1986. This was followed by well over twohundred publications in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, children's books, TV series and many more.

Imprint

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PART FOUR
In Darkness

Chapter 19

The Gray

So it has been a lie after all: my life.

Rowarn lay lonely in his gloomy cell, brooding restlessly, incessantly. There was nothing alive in here but him, no distraction, no comfort. But at least it was less dark in the dungeon than in his soul.

So it was a demon that lurked inside him, that made him unpredictable and dangerous. How could he have thought that he was a rithari? This blind fury, the obsession in the fight, did not come from a disease, but from the side of the darkness. From ... Nightfire, the murderer of his mother. The confidant of Femris. The Twilight Walker.

Was it really possible that the Velerii had not suspected anything about the demon blood in him? Why had they insisted so strongly that Rowarn was not the Two-Splitted? Claimed that the Two-Splitted must be a being of a special kind, with qualities he did not possess?

If only it were so!

Once again, the feelings threatened to overwhelm him. He lay rigid and gritted his teeth. He could not let himself

go!

The floor was hard, and the thin straw bed offered little comfort. Rowarn alternately sweated and froze, depending on how deeply he became entangled in his thoughts. Only ever briefly could he escape to sleep before aching bones woke him when they wanted to be moved.

There were demons who had chosen the Rainbow, like Fashirh. Rowarn respected the Red Demon, but he also feared him as an alien being with whom he would never be familiar. They were too different, and Rowarn didn't want to be anything like Fashirh, or any other demon. Especially not like Nightfire.

Tears burned hot on his cheeks and his insides were on fire. *If only I had never asked ... but how could I have known ... that the truth could be so infinitely cruel!* He had sworn revenge on the murderer of his mother, and now he had to face his own father. Did Nightfire know that he had a son? How had it even come to this?

At this point in his deliberations, Rowarn could no longer contain himself. He jumped up, pushed himself into the gloomy corner next to the narrow viewing hole, and threw up sobbing. It was unimaginable to him how it might have come to his conception then. His mother and the murderer ... no. What could he have done to her ... how could she have endured to feel Rowarn growing inside her ...?

Stop it, he thought, as he continued to retch. *Stop it, or you'll go insane. Don't think about it. Don't think about it!*

Sometimes he tried to console himself with a kind of dry humor: *No wonder I'm the Two-Splitted. And I am, no*

matter what my Muhmes said! This must tear one to pieces. But this kind of joke had never been his strong point, and it didn't make him feel the least bit better.

Rowarn no longer had any doubt that he was the Two-Splitted after all. He was a true son of the Rainbow and the Darkness, both sides united in him, but could no longer form a true UNITY. The Eternal War had arisen because the UNITY was broken and the DIVIDED realized that they could never come together again. Rowarn was thus divided in two. The split in two! The thought could not be suppressed, and nothing could settle his stomach, whether there was anything in it or not. Always Rowarn had struggled with having to vomit when strongly aroused. Now the attacks were worse than ever, and Rowarn sank deeper and deeper into self-pity, disgust, and horror of himself.

Rowarn did not know how much time had passed since his capture. His world was almost dark and very small. Three steps long, two and a half steps wide. Hardly any possibility of movement.

His thoughts did not advance either, they constantly turned in circles until he became dizzy. Then he stopped for a moment, and everything came to rest. Until it started all over again.

Finally, he lay still for once. Welcomed the captivity and the darkness around him. Monsters like him belonged locked up, kept away from the light so they couldn't even see themselves. He kept his eyes closed most of the time so he wouldn't notice his own shimmering. The Naurakian

heritage within him. All that was good. And for him now unbearable.

Was that why Queen Ylwa had cried so when she left her newborn with the Velerii? Had she already known that her demon child was the Two-Splitted who alone could use the Tabernacle? Was that why Rowarn had stayed alive, because he had to complete the task?

I just don't understand it, he thought time and again as he began the circle of thought anew. Then why don't I know anything? Never felt that I have two sides in me? Never felt connected to the Tabernacle, not even in Ardig Hall when I was very close to the Shard? I can't even imagine what this thing looks like, or what it's supposed to do when the fragments come back together.

Also in his inside nothing had changed since he knew his origin. It had not caused or awakened anything hidden in him. Except self-hatred.

And yet I am ... Rowarn, he took refuge in defiance when he mustered the strength. The Rowarn who grew up happily in Inniu, lovingly raised by the Velerii who saw no evil in their foster son. No one can pretend that much. I would have noticed at some point if they had felt disgust towards me. My Muhmes did not lie to me. They really didn't know. I wish they would never know either ... then what would they have to think of me ...

There was still one tiny possibility that it was all just a bad nightmare that would one day simply dissolve: namely, that Angmor, the Vision Knight, was mistaken. Rowarn had put him through too much after the fight against Femris, had shaken him up too much that it had cost him his last

strength. Perhaps Angmor had seen the images too blurred and therefore misinterpreted them. That remained as the last vestige of hope, which Rowarn clung to in order not to finally despair.

Now and then he was interrupted in his circles of thought. At approximately regular intervals, as far as Rowarn could judge, he was given something to eat through a flap, a jug of clean water and a plate with some meat and bread and dried fruit. They wanted to keep him strong and healthy, presumably until it was decided what to do with him.

At some point, Rowarn counted and estimated how many distributions he had missed by then. It was time to get back to caring about the world out there. He couldn't lie there complaining and drowning himself in self-pity for all time. One day, he had to move on.

He was alive, and hopefully Angmor was too. So the first thing Rowarn had to do was find a way to get out of here. The fight was far from over - especially not now. He owed it to Angmor, who had only become a prisoner because of him. What became of *Rowarn-the-monster* could not matter to him. But the Vision Knight had to be freed. He was the most important fighter for the Rainbow.

After twenty meals, when Rowarn had reasonably adjusted to the rhythm, the door to his dungeon suddenly opened. "Come with me," croaked the gruff voice of a Warine.

Rowarn stood up and entered the torch-lit hallway, blinking. Now he would finally learn where he was. He had only awakened in the dungeon from the unconsciousness

into which the soldier Moneg had beaten him. Perhaps he had been given an additional drug to keep him sedated longer, for even such a violent blow should not have put him out of action for more than an hour or two. But more, much more time must have passed, for all around Ardig Hall there was no prison camp of the enemy. So they had probably taken him farther east, perhaps even to beyond the Golden River, where Rowarn had never been.

If Moneg had told the Dubhani all about Rowarn, they knew of his uncontrollable frenzy at extraordinary excitement, which gave him the forces of at least four strong men - reason enough, therefore, to keep him unconscious during the journey.

Moneg, that crooked little soul, who had betrayed him to the enemy only out of revenge! Thus Rowarn had fallen into captivity, and so had Angmor, which should never have happened.

A total of four Warines awaited him outside the cell, their broad, short swords at the ready, taking Rowarn in the middle. If he had been a normal prisoner, he would now have felt a certain pride at being so heavily guarded. For he weighed quite a bit less than a Warine and was much younger than these seasoned soldiers. Once they had been dwarves who had made a covenant with demons and now carried their life essence within them. This made them long-lived, dangerous creatures who lived only for battle.

A short distance followed, during which they passed a series of doors similar to his. Then Rowarn stepped out of the rock into a deep, wide ravine with high bluffs all around and a ditch in the middle.

It was early morning, a few oblique rays of sunshine already managed to illuminate the opposite rocky edges. A deep blue sky stretched over the canyon. Rowarn saw cliff dwellings cut into the rock, and more barred dungeons, supply stores, and many cavernous entrances to shelters. There was bustle, as in any army camp. The only difference from Ardig Hall was that here were mostly Warines running about, some humans and very few dwarves. And on a high pole flew the banner of Femris: the broken Tabernacle, its seven splinters close together, in red and gold on a black background.

The sounds were also different. In the camp of Ardig Hall, a constant buzz of voices had been heard, much laughter and often singing, even during the day at work. Here, however, there was little talking, mainly orders echoed from the rocks.

Rowarn was led to one of the rock houses, and on the way he saw more prisoners from Ardig Hall. They wore neck rings from which chains led down to their arms and legs. The chains allowed just enough freedom of movement for the shackled to be used for loads and other menial labor. The prisoners appeared dejected and at the same time strangely apathetic, but adequately fed. Their guards, posted everywhere, carried three-tailed whips with thorns on the end, but they did not use them. They were not even particularly attentive.

Rowarn knew one or two of the prisoners fleetingly, but no one looked his way. He was glad that none of his friends were among them.

Two brawny people were posted in front of the door to the rock building. One of the guards opened and motioned Rowarn to enter.

The room, lit by daylight through rock holes, was unadorned. Scrolls and leather bindings lay scattered on a work table, a chair stood in front of it, and a large reclining chair behind it. On it sat the man in gray armor whom Rowarn had first glimpsed shortly after the fall of Ardig Hall, in Angmor's tent.

He had taken off his helmet, and Rowarn saw the hulking face of a Warine, which at the same time showed surprisingly human-like features. The man's physique also more closely resembled that of an exceptionally strong, medium-sized human. A half-breed, it seemed.

Just like Rowarn. He felt his stomach turn again in a moment, but he was still in control.

"Take a seat," the man asked him without looking up from his work. He was setting seals on several documents with his ring.

Rowarn silently complied with the request. The chair had only a very short backrest, which did not permit comfortable sitting, and it was lower than the armchair opposite. Cold silence reigned in the room, only hissing softly now and then when the wax held over the candle flame became too hot and began to burn.

The young Nauraka did not move the whole time and sat, as far as possible, in a relaxed posture. To distract himself, he counted the small shadows on the roughly textured wall that wandered in front of the light.

Finally, the man in the gray armor turned his full attention to Rowarn. "I am Heriodon," he introduced himself in a gruff voice. "General and new army commander of Femris the Immortal."

Rowarn remained unmoved.

"You are the squire of Prince Noïrun," the General continued after a while.

Rowarn did not correct him. If Heriodon had only this information, so much the better. Moneg probably had not brought the shameful truth that Rowarn had been knighted after only a short time to his lips. Moneg the traitor, who had reviled Rowarn during training until it had become too much for the young Nauraka. His temper ... no: the demonic part of Rowarn had taken control and nearly killed Moneg. The man had never forgiven Rowarn for that and for demoting him to a simple foot soldier. However, Rowarn would never have believed that his hatred could be so deep-rooted as to betray Ardig Hall and deliver not only Rowarn but also the Vision Knight to the enemy.

"Are you faithful to your master?" the army commander wanted to know.

"Of course," Rowarn replied proudly. "You can torture me all you want, I won't tell you anything about him, nor about anyone else."

Heriodon smiled softly. "Ah, this pathos reminds me of another passionate young man. Brave, defiant, and fearless, he charged forward where even demons shuddered. Much like you, with the same fire in his eyes. I believe you. So torture is unnecessary, if only because you lost the battle,

and with it Ardig Hall, so there is little you can tell me at present."

"What do you plan to do with me instead?" wanted Rowarn to know.

"You will be *my* squire," the gray man promptly announced. "I have a use for you."

"What if I refuse?"

"You can refuse, you can try to escape, and yet in the end you will only find that both are futile." Heriodon whistled softly, and Rowarn felt a chill run down his spine when he heard a hiss. The barely healed scar on his right hand suddenly ached.

An iridescent feathered serpent floated in from the shadows of a wall ledge and slowly circled around its master.

"You ...," Rowarn groaned hoarsely. "*You* ordered the Chalumi to kill my Prince then!"

"With moderate success, unfortunately," Heriodon remarked, and his smile deepened. The room grew all the colder. "It was you, wasn't it? You saved him. Don't deny it, the Chalumi smells the poison in you."

"What poison ..."

"You have just given yourself away. The small scar on your hand that you are rubbing right now is from a Chalumi bite. You owe your life to a miracle, and a great healing art. Whoever did this - I could use someone like that in my army!"

"I cannot serve you with that," Rowarn replied coolly. "I was in a fever at the time and can remember nothing more."

"Of course not," Heriodon agreed. His tone made it clear that he didn't believe a word he said. "We'll come back to that some time later. In any case, that one healed you, boy, which hardly seems possible, and neutralized the poison. It can no longer harm you. Yet you still carry it in your body. The Chalumi can smell it. It takes years for the poison to be fully excreted."

Rowarn's self-confidence melted away. He felt fine beads of sweat on his forehead. This man was extremely dangerous. He didn't just fight and kill, he was a strategist, planning every move, having a precise overview. He was like ... the dark side of Noïrun.

Heriodon continued, "The Chalumi always know where you are. You can therefore move freely everywhere, I have no objection. After all, as my squire, you have to."

"I am not your squire," Rowarn said calmly. "I am your prisoner."

"Today you may call it so, and tomorrow differently," Heriodon remarked equanimously. "I will be your teacher, for there is still much for you to learn."

Rowarn sat up straight. "Not in this place."

"You say that without knowing this?" Heriodon leaned forward and folded his hands. "What do you greenhorn know about Femris? How long have you been in the army, huh? One turn of the moon? Two?" He shook his head slightly. "You presume to judge something you don't know the first thing about. You've only seen us from afar, and you only know what's been whispered to you. If you want to be a good knight one day, you should also be prepared to get

to know both sides, without reservation. You cannot judge anything of which you know only one side."

Rowarn had to admit that there was something to these words. In order to defeat the enemy, he had to know him. This was the opportunity. He would comply and soak it all up like a sponge. "Can't you find anyone else to hire that you want to convert me?"

"Everyone is important to us who shows talent and commitment," Heriodon said. "It would be a waste of precious material to slay or imprison you. That's true of most of Ardig Hall's soldiers, and even more so, of course, of the Vision Knight."

Now Rowarn could hardly hide his feelings. "How ... is he?"

"All right, of course. I will hand him over to Femris as soon as he calls us to Dubhan. The Immortal will be extremely pleased that we have finally got hold of him, after all this time." The gray man grinned. "What were you doing there, anyway, by his side, dressed as a knight?"

"I was tasked with protecting him," Rowarn muttered. "I have failed. My Lord will chase me away in disgrace."

"Yes, your Prince would do well to reprimand you for this failure. But he will not get another chance to do so. I, however, also do not tolerate failure, and if I am dissatisfied, there will be canings or lashes, my young hero. There will be no loafing under my leadership. In return, you will learn much. And soon you will carry the banner of the Immortal with pride."

"Never!" Rowarn realized how hollow and empty his cry was echoing. He was making a fool of himself with his

impetuosity. It almost sounded as if he were afraid or unsure. Yet he was convinced - but did he have to defend himself because of it?

"Count on it. You are very young and fickle, like all your age, and once you know the whole story, you will think differently." Heriodon rose and approached Rowarn. His rock-gray eyes were cold as a wet stone in autumn. "Now tell me your name."

Rowarn did not want to do it, because he knew that by doing so he was putting himself in the General's power. He would then officially be his squire, his subordinate, before all the world. With the name, the General gained dominion over the prisoner, if he knew how to use it properly. And Rowarn had no doubt about that.

But he couldn't lie either, because Moneg had surely already given Rowarn's name away. He had no choice. But it felt like he was giving himself away.

Tortured, he revealed, "I am Rowarn."

Was he mistaken, or did a muscle twitch in the otherwise motionless face of the gray man? Had he not known the name before? But what was striking about it? For a moment, the mask fell, and Rowarn saw a being older than human. At least a century, if not more.

"An old name, that's what its sound tells me. But I can't remember where I've heard it before at the moment," Heriodon said. "Anyway, it's not a name for a human."

"I don't know anything about that," Rowarn countered, and it wasn't a lie.

"You're right, and it's meaningless, too," the army commander stated. "Your service begins now. Camp Master

Gonarg will tell you everything else."

Outside, the same Warine was waiting for Rowarn; at least he thought so. It was not easy for him to tell them apart. "Come along," the soldier ordered. He led the young Nauraka deeper into the rock, into a wide side path of the gorge, where many caves had been driven into the rock, some of them interconnected. A large army camp for the Dubhani. Rowarn was surprised. He would have believed that Femris would have housed his troops with him. But this seemed to be the main assembly point. Well protected, it seemed.

The larger open spaces were eagerly practiced. Rowarn did not dare to imagine that there were more such side canyons. On the other hand, Femris' numerical superiority had been nullified by Ardig Hall's troops; only reinforcements had been able to achieve victory. But that was far from enough if Prince Noïrun had escaped and raised a new army.

No wonder the prisoners were to be "re-educated": The Immortal urgently needed supplies. And if he could deprive the enemy of his own troops for this purpose, all the better.

Perhaps this is where I belong, Rowarn thought dejectedly. *Noïrun once said to me that much darkness lurked within me. He must have guessed then that I was half of the darkness.*

The Warine led him to one of the large caves, where some soldiers stood together. "I'll bring the new squire," he snarled and withdrew.

One of the men turned around. He was a man. With an eye patch.

Ragon.

Rowarn remembered very clearly the first encounter, when Odrig, Noïrun and he reached Ardig Hall and a rider had come to meet them. The War King had greeted him with pleasure, like a friend. Ragon was one of the advisors of the warlord.

But he, too, was a traitor. Ragon ... Gonarg ... of course. How many more traitors had Femris planted with them? How long had it been going on? No wonder Ardig had lost Hall! The Immortal had only had to wait for the moment when the magical protective wall had collapsed. Then he had all the trump cards in his hand!

Rowarn felt a bitter taste in his mouth. He briefly considered going after the traitor and spitting on him. But what for? All was lost. Rowarn would not show his face and keep his distance. Pretend he wasn't really here. Let nothing get to him and think only of escape.

"Ah, young Rowarn," remarked Ragon, or rather Gonarg, as he was really called. "I've been expecting you."

"I can guess that," Rowarn groaned. "So, what do you want me to do?"

Something flashed in the man's eye. "Chivalrous pride and dignity," he grinned. "Good." He beckoned Rowarn to come along. "You can start with the horses." It went a good distance down the ravine behind. "You don't even have to think about escape, by the way," Gonarg continued on the way. "This side valley ends at an impassable escarpment.

And the Chalumi are omnipresent." He showed Rowarn where the horses were stabled; over a hundred, and filth and neglect everywhere. "The Warines don't take much care of their mounts, but now you're here. Shine them up, and the captured ones from Ardig Hall to boot."

Rowarn nodded silently. Hard work didn't bother him. It was distracting. And the poor animals couldn't help it, after all.

"Here it will take you significantly longer to become a knight," Gonarg said mockingly. "General Heriodon is much more demanding in this regard than the ridiculous Master of the Army of Ardig Hall. I don't even think you're fit to be a squire, but he probably wants to drive a spike into Noïrun's flesh personally. And even out of puny good-for-nothings like you, Heriodon can make passable warriors. When he's done with you, you'll be Noïrun's greatest enemy."

"Never," Rowarn whispered.

Gonarg grinned. "The General convinces everyone. And for you, escaping Noïrun's baleful influence can only be beneficial. His interest in you is sick."

A bright glow entered Rowarn's eyes. "Don't ever get too close to me," he growled softly. "And you'd better be armed at all times."

"Your temperament will be of great use to us. Now let off steam at work. A Warine will supervise you, and if you dawdle, there will be blows."

Rowarn had no intention of dawdling. He would be diligent, keep his eyes and ears open, and learn everything he needed to escape. He did not fear the Chalumi, he had

already defeated them once. And probably they would not be allowed to kill him even if he fled. The army commander would hardly go to so much trouble with him, only to have him summarily killed by his guards.

As the Nauraka entered the cave where the horses were tied close together, he heard a bright whinny above all the sounds, and tears welled up in his eyes. Windstormer! The little dun was here! Suddenly Rowarn didn't feel so lonely and abandoned. Windstormer still recognized him, and the animal didn't care that his master was half demon.

At night, Rowarn was locked in his cell again. He was so tired that evening that he could hardly take anything in. He was no longer even capable of thought. The straw bed seemed inviting, and Rowarn fell into a leaden sleep, hardly having bedded his head reasonably comfortably.

The days passed quickly from now on. After some time Rowarn was allowed to move to a barred cell where he had a clear view of the gorge and the deep moat. He was never mistreated, nor beaten, although there were plenty of Warines running around with sticks, clubs and whips. There was plenty to eat; it was not necessarily varied in taste, but fresh and nutritious. His clothes were cleaned regularly, and he was given the opportunity to wash thoroughly every few days.

In addition to his daily squire duties at Heriodon, Gonarg pulled him in to do various jobs, all of which were unpleasant, but Rowarn never complained. He did everything silently and observed the surroundings

incessantly. The changing of the guards, the strength of the troops, their way of fighting. Nothing escaped him.

Since he was inconspicuous, the Dubhani soon got used to him and began to joke good-naturedly when he once again collapsed under the weight of a trough of water or almost melted in the blazing heat of the forge next to the bellows. Rowarn didn't mind the hard work. It kept him in practice and preserved his strength. He did not respond to the jokes, sometimes he even smiled at them, and went on.

He was doing surprisingly well as a prisoner, and he could see that the others were also being treated appropriately. So the "re-education" began immediately. Soon everyone's chains were removed, and they were placed in collective dungeons. Rowarn got a chance to have a word with one or two of them, but he soon gave up. Whatever had happened to the soldiers, they were not thinking of escaping. It seemed as if they had given themselves up. The young Nauraka would have liked to shake them up, but he didn't want to draw too much attention to himself.

"You're a pretty smart kid," Heriodon remarked once as he passed the forge where Rowarn was mainly employed, in addition to his duties for the army master. "But this is only the beginning."

"You're very smart, too," Rowarn whispered to himself. "And this is far from the end."

Time passed, and no opportunity for escape presented itself. Rowarn still did not know where in Valia the ravine was and what exits there were. At least the Warines

showed that they had life in them now and then in the evening, when they ate together by the fires and made a little (albeit strange for Rowarn's taste) music now and then. There, they might even have a laugh and a good time in their own way. Sometimes Rowarn was present when the food was distributed, but there was never an opportunity to talk to a soldier to get information.

One noon, after Rowarn had finished his squire duties, Heriodon wanted to talk to him. Gonarg stood next to him, and Rowarn's eyes sparkled with hatred.

This did not escape Heriodon, and he smiled finely. "You don't seem to like my camp master very much."

"I didn't expect you to put your trust in a traitor."

The one-eyed man grinned. "Probably that's exactly the reason. The General knows where he stands with me."

"Yes, Gonarg has given me excellent service. Only Prince Noïrun, unfortunately, he could not capture after the battle." Heriodon drank thoughtfully from his cup.

"The man is as slippery as an eel, no one has ever been able to catch him," Gonarg remarked. "He escaped your Chalumi, too."

"Because I called them back," Heriodon replied. "They were needed elsewhere." He nodded to Gonarg. "You can withdraw."

Rowarn stared straight ahead as Gonarg walked past him to the outside. Heriodon pointed to the chair, and he sat down.

"Tell me, what is your impression of this camp?" the General got straight to the point.

Rowarn had to admit that everything was in pristine condition among the soldiers and strict discipline prevailed. "There are few who seem brutal or cruel. The prisoners are treated well, no worse than I am."

"So hardly any difference from Ardig Hall, is it?"

"Yes, I know what you're trying to do, which is to get our people to defect to you. But you will not succeed. The bond with Ardig Hall is more than mercenary. At least for most soldiers. I cannot speak for traitors like Gonarg or Moneg."

"Have you ever considered that Femris might be in the right?" asked Heriodon.

Rowarn shook his head. "He's not, from what I've heard. He has no right to the Tabernacle."

"Neither did the Nauraka."

"That is correct. However, you were only guarding the Tabernacle."

"Are you seriously suggesting that the Nauraka would not have used the Tabernacle had they been able to?" There was a lurk in the half-warin's voice.

Rowarn hesitated. "No," he then admitted honestly. "But that doesn't change the fact that Femris is in the wrong. The Tabernacle is not meant for him."

"Well, according to that, surely it wouldn't hurt if he put it together? Why don't we just wait and see what happens then?" Heriodon put his fingertips together. "The war was started by Ardig Hall, not by Femris."

"You can look at that any way you want," Rowarn replied. "Femris has made a demand that has been denied him. Repeating it at gunpoint can hardly be the way to go. More so, since he had no claim on the Tabernacle."

"What entitles the Nauraka to designate themselves as Guardians? Why should Femris be denied to do the same?"

"For what reason would Femris want to take on the job of Guardian?"

Heriodon's gray eyes glittered like a frost-covered rock in the moonlight. "Because of balance, young Rowarn."

Restlessly, Rowarn moved in the chair. "I've heard about it swaying."

"The eclipse *is* the balance," Heriodon quietly offset. "Femris has been called to restore the balance. The Nauraka, by their imprudence, have put everything in danger."

"Or done exactly the right thing," Rowarn offset.

"And there's no doubt in your mind at all?"

Rowarn knew he was making a mistake now when he avoided the General's gaze. But he didn't want Heriodon to read his eyes and thereby realize what battle was raging inside him. How much fear he had. "Darkness is my enemy," he whispered.

"And that is your great error," Heriodon said unexpectedly gently. "Darkness is your life force, your balance. You cannot exist without it. No one can live without the Darkness. Harmony alone is not enough. If the Rainbow is victorious in the Eternal War, the Dreaming Universe is lost. And with it everything that is in it. It dissolves as if it had never been when Ishtru awakens."

"One day we won't be able to stop it." Rowarn's face contorted in anguish. This conversation was stirring up too much in him. "Such discourse leads nowhere. You may believe that it does, but the Eternal War is far from us. I,

however, am sure that Femris will drive Woodzee to ruin if we let him have his way and the Tabernacle falls into his hands." Only now did he turn his eyes back to Heriodon. "Have you ever heard of the Black Annatai Tar'meso?"

The General eyed him scrutinizingly. "What are you getting at?"

"He is a Mighty," Rowarn replied, "who is in the service of the Darkness. It is said that even demons fear him. It is also said that Femris may use the Tabernacle to pave the way for him to make Woodzee a bastion of the Darkness."

Heriodon jumped up. Then he came around the table, his hand shot forward and closed around Rowarn's neck like an iron claw, squeezing relentlessly. "What are you talking about?" he hissed. "What does an adolescent like you know about such things?"

Rowarn groaned in pain, he was on the verge of fainting and could hardly breathe. Heriodon knew exactly where the pain zones were. He could inflict agony without scratching the skin or using gruesome instruments. Water ran from Rowarn's eyes, mouth and nose. He could not scream, and his eyes bulged out of their sockets.

"Who are you?" shouted the General.

Rowarn was almost ready to tell the truth. His temples throbbed, his feet began to wriggle the longer the pain lasted. But instead, he whimpered, "I will not let this happen ... I am a servant of Ardig Hall and I have committed myself ..."

Heriodon let go of him, and Rowarn fell from the chair. Spasms shook him, and he lay twitching and helpless, with no control over his body, completely draining himself. Not

even after being bitten by the Chalumi and treated without anesthesia had he felt such pain. And felt so humiliated.

The General leaned against the table. "What does Noïrun want from you?"

"What do you want from me?" sobbed Rowarn. He tried to stand up, but his arms were paralyzed. From the back of his neck, he slowly went numb. As if from a distance, he heard Heriodon command, "Take him away."

Two Warines each grabbed an arm and dragged him outside, all the way to his dungeon. They threw him inside. The barred door clanged shut and was locked.

The night was darker than anything Rowarn had experienced before. Not even his own glimmer could illuminate it. No sounds drifted in from outside, nor did he see the usual firelight. It was completely silent.

What about me? he thought fearfully. *Have I gone blind and deaf?* He felt his way across the floor; his body still ached. He didn't understand what Heriodon was trying to do with all this. Surely there were other ways to press him into service.

When he hit a wall, Rowarn pushed against it and pulled his legs in. He curled up, holding onto himself. *He mustn't make me sway,* he thought desperately. *Nothing Heriodon said to me must touch me. All the followers of Ardig Hall have acted from conviction, and it cannot be that all are mistaken. Noïrun for the humans, Olrig for the dwarves, Tamron for the Immortals. Femris is the enemy, he must be fought. He murdered my mother... murdered by a demon who is my father.*