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Guardians of the West

David Eddings

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About the Author

David Eddings was born in Spokane, Washington, in 1931, and was raised in the Puget Sound area north of Seattle. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Washington in 1961. He served in the United States Army, worked as a buyer for the Boeing Company, was a grocery clerk and taught college English. He lived in many parts of the United States, most recently in the northwest with his wife Leigh. His first novel, *High Hunt*, was a contemporary adventure story. The field of fantasy was always of interest to him, however, and he turned to *The Belgariad* and later *The Malloreon* in an effort to develop certain technical and philosophical ideas concerning that genre. He died in 2009.

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The Belgariad

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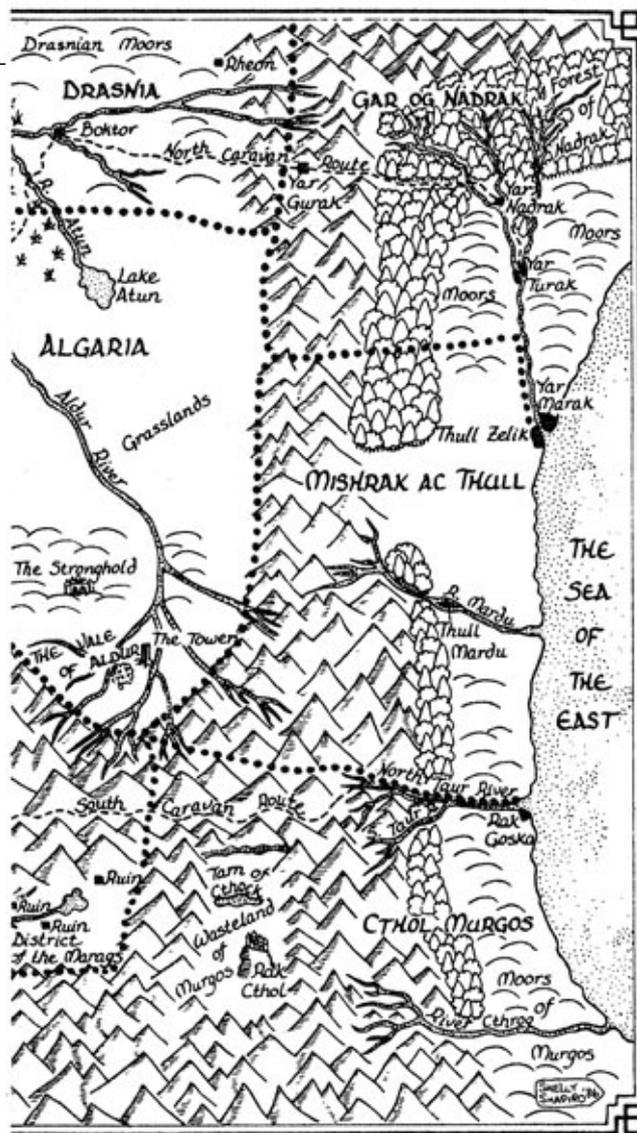
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For Judy-Lynn:

A rose blooms and then fades, but the beauty and the fragrance are remembered always





GUARDIANS OF THE WEST

Book One of the Malloreon

David Eddings



CORGI BOOKS

Prologue

Being an Account of those Events whereby Belgarion came to the Throne of Riva and how he slew the Accursed God Torak.

—from the Introduction, *Legends of Alora*

After the seven Gods created the world, it is said that they and those races of men they had chosen dwelt together in peace and harmony. But UL, father of the Gods, remained aloof, until Gorim, leader of those who had no God, went up on a high mountain and importuned him mightily. Then the heart of UL melted, and he lifted up Gorim and swore to be his God and God of his people, the Ulgos.

The God Aldur remained apart, teaching the power of the Will and the Word to Belgarath and other disciples. And a time came when Aldur took up a globe-shaped stone no larger than the heart of a child. Men named the stone the Orb of Aldur, and it was filled with enormous power, for it was the embodiment of a Necessity which had existed since the beginning of time.

Torak, God of the Angarak peoples, coveted lordship and dominion over all things, for to him had come an opposing Necessity. When he learned of the Orb, he was sorely troubled, fearing that it would counter his destiny. He went therefore to Aldur to plead that the stone be set aside. When Aldur would not give up the stone, Torak smote him and fled with the Orb.

Then Aldur summoned his other brothers, and they went with a mighty army of their followers to confront Torak. But Torak, seeing that his Angaraks must be defeated, raised the Orb and used its power to crack the world and bring in the Sea of the East to divide him from his enemies.

But the Orb was angered that Torak should use it thus and it lashed him with a fire whose agony could not be quenched. Torak's left hand was burned away, his left cheek was seared and charred, and his left eye took flame and was ever after filled with the fire of the Orb's wrath.

In agony, Torak led his people into the wastelands of Mallorea, and his people built him a city of iron, Cthol Mishrak, which was called the City of Night, for Torak hid it under an endless cloud. There, in a tower of iron, Torak contended with the Orb, trying in vain to quell its hatred for him.

Thus it endured for two thousand years. Then Cherek Bear-shoulders, King of the Alorns, went down to the Vale of Aldur to tell Belgarath the Sorcerer that the northern way was clear. Together they left the Vale with Cherek's three mighty sons, Dras Bull-neck, Algar Fleet-foot, and Riva Iron-grip. They stole through the marches, with Belgarath taking the form of a wolf to guide them, and they crossed over into Mallorea. By night, they stole into Torak's iron tower. And while the maimed God lay tossed in pain-haunted slumber, they crept to the room where he kept the Orb locked in an iron casket. Riva Iron-grip, whose heart was without ill intent, took up the Orb, and they left for the West.

Torak waked to find the Orb gone and he pursued them. But Riva lifted up the Orb, and its angry flame filled Torak with fear. Then the company passed from Mallorea and returned to their own land.

Belgarath divided Aloria into four kingdoms. Over three he set Cherek Bear-shoulders, Dras Bull-neck, and Algar Fleet-foot. To Riva Iron-grip and to his line he gave the Orb of Aldur and sent him to the Isle of the Winds.

Belar, God of the Alorns, sent down two stars, and from them Riva forged a mighty sword and placed the Orb on its pommel. And he hung the sword on the wall of the throne room of the Citadel where it might ever guard the West from Torak.

When Belgarath returned to his home, he discovered that his wife, Poledra, had borne him two

daughters, but then had passed away. In heartsick sorrow, he named his daughters Polgara and Beldaran. And when they were of age, he sent Beldaran to Riva Iron-grip to be his wife and mother of the Rivan line. But Polgara he kept with him and instructed in the arts of sorcery.

In rage at the loss of the Orb, Torak destroyed the City of Night and divided the Angaraks. The Murgos, the Nadraks, and the Thulls he sent to dwell in the wastelands along the western shores of the Sea of the East. The Malloreans he kept to subdue all of the continent on which they dwelt. Over all he set his Grolim priests to watch, to scourge any who faltered, and to offer human sacrifices to him.

Many centuries passed. Then Zedar the Apostate, who served Torak, conspired with Salmisra, Queen of the snake-people, to send emissaries to the Isle of the Winds to slay Gorek, Riva's descendant, and all his family. This was done, though some claimed that a lone child escaped; but none could say for certain.

Emboldened by the death of the guardian of the Orb, Torak gathered his hosts and invaded the West, planning to enslave the peoples and regain the Orb. At Vo Mimbire on the plains of Arendia, the hordes of Angaraks met the armies of the West in dreadful slaughter. And there Brand the Rivan Warden, bearing the Orb upon his shield, met Torak in single combat and struck down the maimed God. The Angaraks, seeing that, were disheartened and they were overthrown and destroyed. But at night, as the Kings of the West celebrated, Zedar the Apostate took the body of Torak and spirited it away. The High Priest of the Ulgos, named Gorim as all such High Priests had been, revealed that Torak had not been killed, but bound in slumber until a king of the line of Riva sat once more on the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King.

The Kings of the West believed that meant forever, for it was held that the line of Riva had perished utterly. But Belgarath and his daughter Polgara knew better. For a child *had* escaped the slaughter of Gorek's family, and they had concealed him and his descendants in obscurity for generations. By ancient prophecies revealed to them that the time for the return of the Rivan King was not yet come.

Many more centuries passed. Then, in a nameless city on the far side of the world, Zedar the Apostate came upon an innocent child and resolved to take the child and go secretly with him to the Isle of the Winds. There he hoped that the innocence of the child might enable that child to take the Orb of Aldur from the pommel of the sword of the Rivan King. It occurred as he wished, and Zedar fled with the child and the Orb toward the East.

Polgara the Sorceress had been living with a young boy, who called her Aunt Pol, in obscurity on a farm in Sendaria. This boy was Garion, the orphaned last descendant of the Rivan line, but he was unaware of his parentage.

When Belgarath learned of the theft of the Orb, he hastened to Sendar to urge his daughter to join him in the search for Zedar and the Orb. Polgara insisted that the boy must accompany them on the quest, so Garion accompanied his Aunt Pol and Belgarath, whom he knew as a storyteller who sometimes visited the farm and whom he called Grandfather.

Durnik, the farm smith, insisted on going with them. Soon they were joined by Barak of Cherek and by Kheldar of Drasnia, whom men called Silk. In time, their quest for the Orb was joined by other companions: Hettar, horse-lord of Algaria; Mandorallen, the Mimbrate knight; and Relg, an Ulgo zealot. And seemingly by chance, the Princess Ce'Nedra, having quarreled with her father, Emperor Ran Borun XXIII of Tolnedra, fled his palace and became one of the companions, though she knew nothing of their quest. Thus was completed the company foretold by the prophecy of the Mrin Codex.

Their search led them to the Wood of the Dryads, where they were confronted by the Murgo Grolim, Asharak, who had long spied secretly upon Garion. Then the voice of prophecy within Garion's mind spoke to Garion, and he struck Asharak with his hand and his Will. And Asharak was utterly consumed.

in fire. Thus Garion learned that he was possessed of the power of sorcery. Polgara rejoiced, telling him that henceforth he should be named Belgarion, as was proper for a sorcerer, for she knew then that the centuries of waiting were over and that Garion should be the one to reclaim the Rivan Throne, foretold.

Zedar the Apostate fled from Belgarath in haste. Unwisely, he entered the realms of Ctuchik, High Priest of the western Grolims. Like Zedar, Ctuchik was a disciple of Torak, but the two had lived in enmity throughout the centuries. As Zedar crossed the barren mountains of Cthol Murgos, Ctuchik awaited him in ambush and wrested from him the Orb of Aldur and the child whose innocence enabled him to touch the Orb and not die.

Belgarath went ahead to seek out the trail of Zedar, but Beltira, another disciple of Aldur, gave him the news that Ctuchik now held the child and the Orb. The other companions went on to Nyissa, where Salmisra, Queen of the snake-loving people, had Garion seized and brought to her palace. But Polgara freed him and turned Salmisra into a serpent, to rule over the snake-people in that form forever.

When Belgarath rejoined his companions, he led the company on a difficult journey to the dark city of Rak Cthol, which was built atop a mountain in the desert of Murgos. They accomplished the difficult climb to confront Ctuchik, who knew of their coming and awaited with the child and the Orb. Then Belgarath engaged Ctuchik in a duel of sorcery. But Ctuchik, hard-pressed, tried a forbidden spell, and it rebounded on him, destroying him so utterly that no trace of him remained.

The shock of his destruction tumbled Rak Cthol from its mountaintop. While the city of the Grolims shuddered into rubble, Garion snatched up the trusting child who bore the Orb and carried him to safety. They fled, with the hordes of Taur Urgas, King of the Murgos, pursuing them. But when they crossed into the lands of Algaria, the Algarians came against the Murgos and defeated them. Then at last, Belgarath could turn toward the Isle of the Winds to restore the Orb to its rightful place.

There in the Hall of the Rivan King at Erastide, the child whom they called Errand placed the Orb of Aldur into Garion's hand, and Garion stood on the throne to set it in its accustomed place on the pommel of the great Sword of the Rivan King. As he did so, the Orb leaped into flame, and the sword blazed with cold blue fire. By these signs, all knew that Garion was indeed the true heir to the throne of Riva and they acclaimed him King of Riva, Overlord of the West, and the Keeper of the Orb.

Soon, in keeping with the Accords signed after the Battle of Vo Mimbire, the boy who had come from a humble farm in Sendaria to become the Rivan King was betrothed to the Princess Ce'Nedra. But before the wedding could take place, the voice of prophecy that was within his head urged him to go to the room of documents and there take down the copy of the Mrin Codex.

In that ancient prophecy, he discovered that he was destined to take up Riva's sword and go with it to confront the maimed God Torak and to slay or be slain, thereby to decide the fate of the world. For Torak had begun to end his long slumber with the crowning of Garion, and in this meeting must be determined which of the two opposing Necessities or prophecies would prevail.

Garion knew that he could marshal an army to invade the East with him. But though his heart was filled with fear, he determined that he alone should accept the danger. Only Belgarath and Silbar accompanied him. In the early morning, they crept out of the Citadel of Riva and set out on the long northern journey to the dark ruins of the City of Night where Torak lay.

But the Princess Ce'Nedra went to the Kings of the West and persuaded them to join her in an effort to distract the forces of the Angaraks, so that Garion might win through safely. With the help of Polgara, she marched through Sendaria, Arendia, and Tolnedra, raising a mighty army to follow her and to engage the hosts of the East. They met on the plain surrounding the city of Thull Mardu. Caught between the forces of Emperor 'Zakath of Malloreia and those of the mad King of the Murgos, Tar

Urgas, Ce'Nedra's army faced annihilation. But Cho-Hag, Chief of the Clan-Chiefs of Algaria, slew Taur Urgas; and the Nadrak King Drosta lek Thun changed sides, giving her forces time to withdraw.

Ce'Nedra, Polgara, Durnik, and the child Errand, however, were captured and sent to 'Zakath, who sent them on to the ruined city of Cthol Mishrak for Zedar to judge. Zedar slew Durnik, and it was when he saw Polgara weeping over his body that Garion arrived.

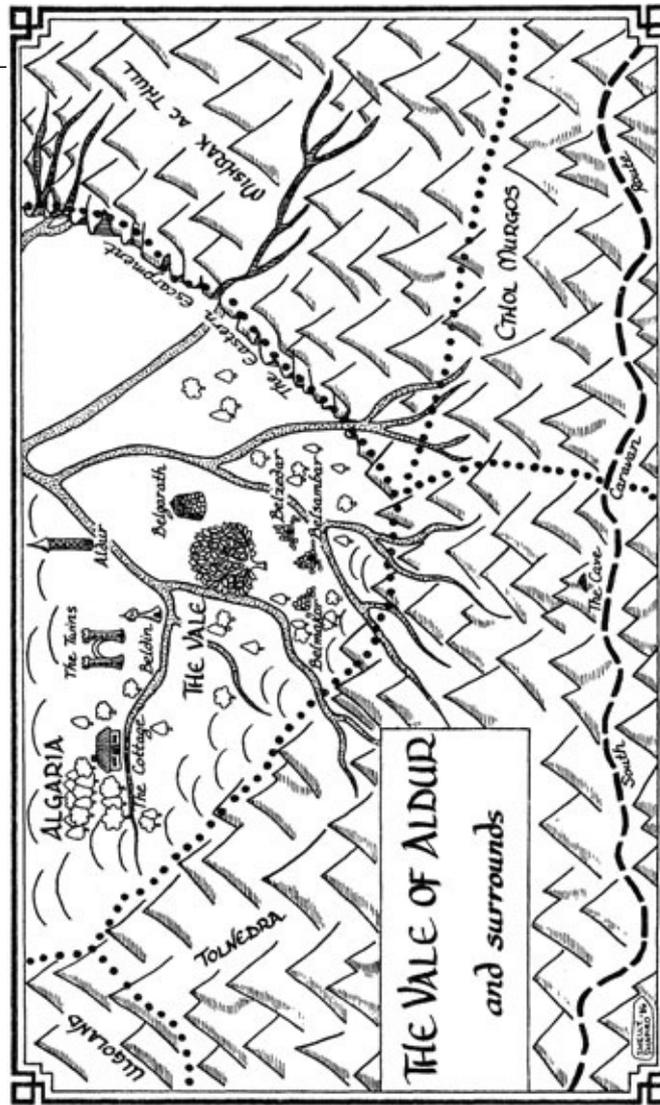
In a duel of sorcery, Belgarath sealed Zedar into the rocks far below the surface. But by then Torak had awakened fully. The two destinies which had opposed each other since time began thus faced each other in the ruined City of Night. And there in the darkness, Garion, the Child of Light, slew Torak, the Child of Dark, with the flaming sword of the Rivan King, and the dark prophecy fled wailing into the void.

UL and the six living Gods came for the boy of Torak. And Polgara importuned them to bring Durnik back to life. Reluctantly they consented. But since it would not be mete for her so far to exceed Durnik's abilities, they gave to him the gift of sorcery.

Then all returned to the city of Riva. Belgarion married Ce'Nedra, and Polgara took Durnik as her husband. The Orb was again in its rightful place to protect the West. And the war of Gods, kings, and men, which had endured for seven thousand years, was at an end.

Or so men thought.

THE VALE OF ALDUR



It was late spring. The rains had come and passed, and the frost had gone out of the ground. Warmed by the soft touch of the sun, damp brown fields lay open to the sky, covered only by a faint green blush as the first tender shoots emerged from their winter's sleep. Quite early one fine morning, when the air was still cool, but the sky gave promise of a golden day, the boy Errand, along with his family, left an inn lying in one of the quieter districts of the bustling port city of Camaar on the south coast of the kingdom of Sendaria. Errand had never had a family before, and the sense of belonging was new to him. Everything around him seemed colored, overshadowed almost, by the fact that he was now included in a small, tightly knit group of people bound together by love. The purpose of the journey upon which they set out that spring morning was at once simple and very profound. They were going home. Just as he had not had a family before, Errand had never had a home; and, though he had never seen the cottage in the Vale of Aldur which was their destination, he nonetheless yearned toward that place as if its every stone and tree and bush had been imprinted upon his memory and imagination since the day he was born.

A brief rain squall had swept in off the Sea of the Winds about midnight and then had passed as quickly as it had come, leaving the gray, cobbled streets and tall, tile-roofed buildings of Camaar washed clean to greet the morning sun. As they rolled slowly through the streets in the sturdy wagon which Durnik the smith, after much careful inspection, had bought two days earlier, Errand, riding burrowed amongst the bags of food and equipment which filled the wagon bed, could smell the faint salt tang of the harbor and see the bluish morning cast in the shadows of the red-roofed buildings they passed. Durnik, of course, drove the wagon, his strong brown hands holding the reins in the competent way with which he did everything, transmitting somehow along those leather straps to the wagon team the comforting knowledge that he was completely in control and knew exactly what he was doing.

The stout, placid mare upon which Belgarath the Sorcerer rode, however, quite obviously did not share the comfortable security felt by the wagon horses. Belgarath, as he sometimes did, had stayed late in the taproom of the inn the previous night and he rode this morning slumped in the saddle, paying little or no heed to where he was going. The mare, also recently purchased, had not yet had time to accustom herself to her new owner's peculiarities, and his almost aggressive inattention made her nervous. She rolled her eyes often, as if trying to determine if this immobile lump mounted on her back really intended for her to go along with the wagon or not.

Belgarath's daughter, known to the entire world as Polgara the Sorceress, viewed her father's semicomatose progress through the streets of Camaar with a steady gaze, reserving her comments for later. She sat beside Durnik, her husband of only a few weeks, wearing a hooded cape and a plain gray woolen dress. She had put aside the blue velvet gowns and jewels and rich, fur-trimmed capes which she had customarily worn while they had been at Riva and had assumed this simpler mode of dress almost with relief. Polgara was not averse to wearing finery when the occasion demanded it; and when so dressed, she appeared more regal than any queen in all the world. She had, however, an exquisite sense of the appropriate and she had dressed herself in these plain garments almost with delight, since they were appropriate to something she had wanted to do for uncounted centuries.

Unlike his daughter, Belgarath dressed entirely for comfort. The fact that his boots were mismatched was neither an indication of poverty nor of carelessness. It stemmed rather from a conscious choice, since the left boot of one pair was comfortable upon his left foot and its mate

pinched his toes, whereas his right boot—from another pair—was most satisfactory, while his companion chafed his heel. It was much the same with the rest of his clothing. He was indifferent to the patches on the knees of his hose, unconcerned by the fact that he was one of the few men in the world who used a length of soft rope for a belt, and quite content to wear a tunic so wrinkled and gravy-spotted that persons of only moderate fastidiousness would not even have considered using it for a scrub-rag.

The great oaken gates of Camaar stood open, for the war that had raged on the plains of Mishrak and Thull, hundreds of leagues to the east, was over. The vast armies that had been raised by the Prince Ce'Nedra to fight that war had returned to their homes, and there was peace once more in the Kingdoms of the West. Belgarion, King of Riva and Overlord of the West, sat upon the throne in the Hall of the Rivan King with the Orb of Aldur once again in its proper place above his throne. The maimed God of Angarak was dead, and his eons-old threat to the West was gone forever.

The guards at the city gate paid scant attention to Errand's family as they passed, and so they left Camaar and set out upon the broad, straight imperial highway that stretched east towards Muros and the snow-topped mountains that separated Sendaria from the lands of the horse clans of Algaria.

Flights of birds wheeled and darted in the luminous air as the wagon team and the patient man plodded up the long hill outside Camaar. The birds sang and trilled almost as if in greeting and hovered strangely on stuttering wings above the wagon. Polgara raised her flawless face in the clear bright light to listen.

'What are they saying?' Durnik asked.

She smiled gently. 'They're babbling,' she replied in her rich voice. 'Birds do that a great deal. In general they're happy that it's morning and that the sun is shining and that their nests have been built. Most of them want to talk about their eggs. Birds always want to talk about their eggs.'

'And of course they're glad to see you, aren't they?'

'I suppose they are.'

'Someday do you suppose you could teach me to understand what they're saying?'

She smiled at him. 'If you wish. It's not a very practical thing to know, however.'

'It probably doesn't hurt to know a *few* things that aren't practical,' he replied with an absolute straight face.

'Oh, my Durnik.' She laughed, fondly putting her hand over his. 'You're an absolute joy, do you know that?'

Errand, riding just behind them among the bags and boxes and the tools Durnik had so carefully selected in Camaar, smiled, feeling that he was included in the deep, warm affection they shared. Errand was not used to affection. He had been raised, if that is the proper term, by Zedar the Apostate, a man who had looked much like Belgarath. Zedar had simply come across the little boy in a narrow alleyway in some forgotten city and had taken him along for a specific purpose. The boy had been filthy and clothed, nothing more, and the only words his bleak-faced guardian had ever spoken to him were 'I have an errand for you, boy.' Because those were the only words he had heard, the only word the child spoke when he had been found by these others was 'Errand.' And since they did not know what else to call him, that had become his name.

When they reached the top of the long hill, they paused for a few moments to allow the wagon horses to catch their breath. From his comfortable perch in the wagon, Errand looked out over the broad expanse of neatly walled fields lying pale green in the long, slanting rays of the morning sun. Then he turned and looked back toward Camaar with its red roofs and its sparkling blue-green harbor filled with the ships of a half-dozen kingdoms.

‘Are you warm enough?’ Polgara asked him.

Errand nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘thank you.’ The words were coming more easily to him now, though he still spoke but rarely.

Belgarath lounged in his saddle, absently rubbing at his short white beard. His eyes were slightly bleary, and he squinted as if the morning sunlight was painful to him. ‘I sort of like to start out a journey in the sunshine,’ he said. ‘It always seems to bode well for the rest of the trip.’ Then he grimaced. ‘I don’t know that it needs to be *this* bright, however.’

‘Are we feeling a bit delicate this morning, father?’ Polgara asked him archly.

He turned to regard his daughter, his face set. ‘Why don’t you go ahead and say it, Pol? I’m sure you won’t be happy until you do.’

‘Why, father,’ she said, her glorious eyes wide with feigned innocence, ‘what makes you think I was going to say anything?’

He grunted.

‘I’m sure you realize by now all by yourself that you drank a bit too much ale last night,’ she continued. ‘You don’t need *me* to tell you that, do you?’

‘I’m not really in the mood for any of this, Polgara,’ he told her shortly.

‘Oh, poor old dear,’ she said in mock commiseration. ‘Would you like to have me stir something up to make you feel better?’

‘Thank you, but no,’ he replied. ‘The aftertaste of your concoctions lingers for days. I think I prefer the headache.’

‘If a medicine doesn’t taste bad, it isn’t working,’ she told him. She pushed back the hood of the cape she wore. Her hair was long, very dark, and touched just over her left brow with a single lock snowy white. ‘I *did* warn you, father,’ she said relentlessly.

‘Polgara,’ he said, wincing, ‘do you suppose we could skip the “I told you so’s”?’

‘You heard me warn him, didn’t you, Durnik?’ Polgara asked her husband.

Durnik was obviously trying not to laugh.

The old man sighed, then reached inside his tunic and took out a small flagon. He uncorked it with his teeth and took a long drink.

‘Oh, father,’ Polgara said disgustedly, ‘didn’t you get enough last night?’

‘Not if this conversation is going to linger on this particular subject, no.’ He held out the flagon to his daughter’s husband. ‘Durnik?’ he offered.

‘Thanks all the same, Belgarath,’ Durnik replied, ‘but it’s a bit early for me.’

‘Pol?’ Belgarath said then, offering a drink to his daughter.

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘As you wish.’ Belgarath shrugged, recorking the bottle and tucking it away again. ‘Shall we move along then?’ he suggested. ‘It’s a very long way to the Vale of Aldur.’ And he nudged his horse into a walk.

Just before the wagon rolled down on the far side of the hill, Errand looked back toward Camaar and saw a detachment of mounted men coming out through the gate. Glints and flashes of reflected sunlight said quite clearly that at least some of the garments the men wore were made of polished steel. Errand considered mentioning the fact, but decided not to. He settled back again and looked up at the deep blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. Errand liked mornings. In the morning a day was always full of promise. The disappointments usually did not start until later.

The soldiers who had ridden out of Camaar caught up with them before they had gone another mile. The commander of the detachment was a sober-faced Sendarian officer with only one arm. As he

troops fell in behind the wagon, he rode up alongside. 'Your Grace,' he greeted Polgara formally with a stiff little bow from his saddle.

'General Brendig,' she replied with a brief nod of acknowledgement. 'You're up early.'

'Soldiers are almost always up early, your Grace.'

'Brendig,' Belgarath said rather irritably, 'is this some kind of coincidence, or are you following up on purpose?'

'Sendaria is a very orderly kingdom, Ancient One,' Brendig answered blandly. 'We try to arrange things so that coincidences don't happen.'

'I thought so,' Belgarath said sourly. 'What's Fulrach up to now?'

'His Majesty merely felt that an escort might be appropriate.'

'I know the way, Brendig. I've made the trip a few times before, after all.'

'I'm sure of it, Ancient Belgarath,' Brendig agreed politely. 'The escort has to do with friendship and respect.'

'I take it then that you're going to insist?'

'Orders are orders, Ancient One.'

'Could we skip the "Ancient"?' Belgarath asked plaintively.

'My father's feeling his years this morning, General.' Polgara smiled, 'All seven thousand of them.'

Brendig almost smiled. 'Of course, your Grace.'

'Just why are we being so formal this morning, my Lord Brendig?' she asked him. 'I'm sure we know each other well enough to skip all that nonsense.'

Brendig looked at her quizzically. 'You remember when we first met?' he asked.

'As I recall, that was when you were arresting us, wasn't it?' Durnik asked with a slight grin.

'Well—' Brendig coughed uncomfortably. '—not exactly, Goodman Durnik. I was really just conveying his Majesty's invitation to you to visit him at the palace. At any rate, Lady Polgara—your esteemed wife—was posing as the Duchess of Erat, you may remember.'

Durnik nodded. 'I believe she was, yes.'

'I had occasion recently to look into some old books of heraldry and I discovered something rather remarkable. Were you aware, Goodman Durnik, that your wife really *is* the Duchess of Erat?'

Durnik blinked. 'Pol?' he said incredulously.

Polgara shrugged. 'I'd almost forgotten,' she said. 'It was a very long time ago.'

'Your title, nonetheless, is still valid, your Grace,' Brendig assured her. 'Every landholder in the District of Erat pays a small tithe each year into an account that's being held in Sendar for you.'

'How tiresome,' she said.

'Wait a minute, Pol,' Belgarath said sharply, his eyes suddenly very alert. 'Brendig, just how big is this account of my daughter's—in round figures?'

'Several million, as I understand it,' Brendig replied.

'Well,' Belgarath said, his eyes going wide. 'Well, well, well.'

Polgara gave him a level gaze. 'What have you got in your mind, father?' she asked him pointedly.

'It's just that I'm pleased for you, Pol,' he said expansively. 'Any father would be happy to know that his child has done so well.' He turned back to Brendig. 'Tell me, General, just who's managing my daughter's fortune?'

'It's supervised by the crown, Belgarath,' Brendig replied.

'That's an awful burden to lay on poor Fulrach,' Belgarath said thoughtfully, 'considering all his other responsibilities. Perhaps I ought to—'

'Never mind, Old Wolf,' Polgara said firmly.

‘I just thought—’

‘Yes, father. I know what you thought. The money’s fine right where it is.’

Belgarath sighed. ‘I’ve never been rich before,’ he said wistfully.

‘Then you won’t really miss it, will you?’

‘You’re a hard woman, Polgara—to leave your poor old father sunk in deprivation like this.’

‘You’ve lived without money or possessions for thousands of years, father. Somehow I’m almost positive that you’ll survive.’

‘How did you get to be the Duchess of Erat?’ Durnik asked his wife.

‘I did the Duke of Vo Wacune a favor,’ she replied. ‘It was something that no one else could do. He was very grateful.’

Durnik looked stunned. ‘But Vo Wacune was destroyed thousands of years ago,’ he protested.

‘Yes. I know.’

‘I think I’m going to have trouble getting used to all this.’

‘You knew that I wasn’t like other women,’ she said.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Does it really matter to you how old I am? Does it change anything?’

‘No,’ he said immediately, ‘not a thing.’

‘Then don’t worry about it.’

They moved in easy stages across southern Sendaria, stopping each night at the solid, comfortable hostels operated by the Tolnedran legionnaires who patrolled and maintained the imperial highway and arriving in Muros on the afternoon of the third day after their departure from Camaar. Vast cattle herds from Algaria were already filling the acre upon acre of pens lying to the east of the city, and the cloud of dust raised by their milling hooves blotted out the sky. Muros was not a comfortable town during the season of the cattle drives. It was hot, dirty, and noisy. Belgarath suggested that they pass up and stop for the night in the mountains where the air would be less dust-clogged and the neighborhood less rowdy.

‘Are you planning to accompany us all the way to the Vale?’ he asked General Brendig after they had passed the cattle pens and were moving along the Great North Road toward the mountains.

‘Ah—no, actually, Belgarath,’ Brendig replied, peering ahead at a band of Algar horsemen approaching along the highway. ‘As a matter of fact, I’ll be turning back about now.’

The leader of the Algar riders was a tall, hawk-faced man in leather clothing, with a raven-black scalplock flowing behind him. When he reached the wagon, he reined in his horse. ‘General Brendig,’ he said in a quiet voice, nodding to the Sendarian officer.

‘My Lord Hettar,’ Brendig replied pleasantly.

‘What are you doing here, Hettar?’ Belgarath demanded.

Hettar’s eyes went very wide. ‘I just brought a cattle herd across the mountains, Belgarath,’ he said innocently. ‘I’ll be going back now and I thought you might like some company.’

‘How strange that you just happen to be here at this particular time.’

‘Isn’t it, though?’ Hettar looked at Brendig and winked.

‘Are we playing games?’ Belgarath asked the pair of them. ‘I don’t need supervision and definitely don’t need a military escort every place I go. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.’

‘We all know that, Belgarath,’ Hettar said placatingly. He looked at the wagon. ‘It’s nice to see you again, Polgara,’ he said pleasantly. Then he gave Durnik a rather sly look. ‘Married life agrees with you, my friend,’ he added. ‘I think you’ve put on a few pounds.’

‘I’d say that *your* wife has been adding a few extra spoonfuls to your plate as well.’ Durnik grinned at his friend.

‘Is it starting to show?’ Hettar asked.

Durnik nodded gravely. ‘Just a bit,’ he said.

Hettar made a rueful face and then gave Errand a peculiar little wink. Errand and Hettar had always got on well together, probably because neither of them felt any pressing need to fill up the silence with random conversation.

‘I’ll be leaving you now,’ Brendig said. ‘It’s been a pleasant journey.’ He bowed to Polgara and nodded to Hettar. And then, with his detachment of troops jingling along behind him, he rode back toward Muros.

‘I’m going to have words with Fulrach about this,’ Belgarath said darkly to Hettar, ‘and with your father, too.’

‘It’s one of the prices of immortality, Belgarath,’ Hettar said blandly. ‘People tend to respect you—even when you’d rather they didn’t. Shall we go?’

The mountains of eastern Sendaria were not so high as to make travel across them unpleasant. With the fierce-looking Algar clansmen riding both to the front and to the rear of the wagon, they traveled at an easy pace along the Great North Road through the deep green forests and beside tumbling mountain streams. At one point, when they had stopped to rest their horses, Durnik stepped down from the wagon and walked to the edge of the road to gaze speculatively at a deep pool at the foot of a small, churning waterfall.

‘Are we in any particular hurry?’ he asked Belgarath.

‘Not really. Why?’

‘I just thought that this might be a pleasant place to stop for our noon meal,’ the smith said artlessly.

Belgarath looked around. ‘If you want, I suppose it’s all right.’

‘Good.’ With that same slightly absent look on his face, Durnik went to the wagon and took a coil of thin, waxed cord from one of the bags. He carefully tied a hook decorated with some brightly colored yarn to one end of the cord and began looking about for a slender, springy sapling. Five minutes later he was standing on a boulder that jutted out into the pool, making long casts into the turbulent water just at the foot of the falls.

Errand drifted down to the edge of the stream to watch. Durnik was casting into the center of the main flow of the current so that the swiftly moving green water pulled his lure down deep into the pool.

After about a half an hour, Polgara called to them. ‘Errand, Durnik, your lunch is ready.’

‘Yes, dear,’ Durnik replied absently. ‘In a moment.’

Errand obediently went back up to the wagon, though his eyes yearned back toward the rushing water. Polgara gave him one brief, understanding look, then laid the meat and cheese she had sliced for him on a piece of bread so that he could carry his lunch back to the stream bank.

‘Thank you,’ he said simply.

Durnik continued his fishing, his face still intent. Polgara came down to the water’s edge. ‘Durnik,’ she called. ‘Lunch.’

‘Yes,’ he replied, not taking his eyes off the water. ‘I’m coming.’ He made another cast.

Polgara sighed. ‘Oh, well,’ she said. ‘I suppose every man needs at least one vice.’

After about another half-hour, Durnik looked baffled. He jumped from his boulder to the stream bank and stood scratching his head and staring in perplexity at the swirling water. ‘I *know* they’re

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