

Two

WITH KERATRIX GUIDING THE WAY AND PAXON LENDING support, Aphenglow Elessedil walked down the corridors and passageways of the Druid's Keep toward the airship platform off the north tower. A few Druids passed them on their way, pausing to offer greetings to which the Ard Rhys dutifully replied before continuing on. A suggestion of haste marked her progress—and in truth haste defined the nature of her leaving, no matter how you looked at it.

She deviated from her path only once. Pausing at the door that opened out onto the landing platform and the waiting airship, she gestured Keratrix away, standing silently with Paxon as she awaited her aide's return. The seconds slipped by in slow procession, the measure of her life steadily shortening. More than once, the Highlander thought to speak with her, but something in her demeanor kept him from doing so. She was alone with her thoughts, and he sensed that, for now, she wanted it that way.

When Keratrix returned, he had Chrysallin in tow.

Paxon's sister rushed ahead of the scribe toward Aphenglow, all protocol and formality abandoned as they embraced. Chrysallin began to cry, her face stricken.

"Don't go, Mistress," she sobbed. "Don't leave us!"

"You've guessed, then," Aphenglow replied, taking her by the

shoulders and moving her away so she could look at her. "You are always so quick to know the truth. It will serve you well."

Chrysallin seemed to make a monumental effort to get her tears under control, straightening herself, becoming composed. She was tall and slender, her girlishness gone—a young woman now, strong and steady, her path through the world determined. "Is there nothing that can be done?" she asked the Ard Rhys quietly.

"All that can be done has been. What happens now is preordained. I leave because it is time. My life has been long and full. Do not grieve for me. Celebrate me in your memories."

Paxon's sister glanced at him beseechingly for help, then found the answer in his eyes to her unspoken need and nodded slowly. "I will never forget what you have done for me," she said finally. "I will celebrate you in my memories, but mostly in my heart."

Aphenglow smiled. "That makes me very happy. Now, give heed to me this final time. Should you need counseling at any point, on any matter, speak to Paxon. And listen to your brother. He is there for you if you should need him. He has sworn to me it will be so—though I am certain he would be there for you even without his vow to me. But there may come a time when life becomes so difficult you cannot bear it. If that happens, lean on him."

"I will, Mistress. I promise."

"That's a promise I will hold you to." The older woman leaned forward and kissed her on both cheeks. "Good-bye, Chrysallin."

Once through the door and atop the landing platform, the Ard Rhys and her attendants moved to the fast clipper that Isaturin had prepared and by which he stood waiting. He was to come with Paxon on this journey, and only the two of them would witness Aphenglow's passing from the Four Lands. The Captain of the Druid Guard, Dajoo Rees, and his Troll companions were already aboard and would act as crew. To all who might witness it, this leaving appeared to be just another of many, and not the last. Only the handful gathered at the airship knew the truth.

At the ramp prepared for her boarding, Aphenglow turned to Keratrix and took his hands. "Good-bye to you, young one. You were

everything I could have hoped for in a scribe and a confidant in these final years. I hope you will think well of me once I am gone, and that you will remember I tried to be kind to you.”

“You were unfailingly kind, Mistress,” the scribe managed to say before breaking down.

She took him by his shoulders and hugged him momentarily before turning back to Paxon. “Help me to board,” she ordered.

It was done in moments. Standing with the Ard Rhys and Isaturin, Paxon watched the Trolls raise the light sheaths and release the mooring lines. He heard the diapason crystals begin to power up, snugged down in their parse tubes, warm with the flow of energy siphoned down by the radian draws. He watched the sails billow out in the midday breeze, and then they were lifting away, rising into clouds banked overhead, thick and fluffy against a deep blue sky. Below, Paranor’s walls and towers grew small against the green of the surrounding forests, and as the airship shifted course south, they faded and were gone.

“The last time,” Aphenglow whispered, mostly to herself, though Paxon heard the words clearly.

Isaturin moved away toward the bow, leaving the Ard Rhys with the Highlander. Paxon watched him go. He had noted the other’s deep reticence during their boarding, and he believed the High Druid was dealing with these final hours in the best way he knew how—but still he was struggling, his path uncertain. Paxon could not blame him. His own emotions were edgy and raw, his sense of place and time rocked by his own reluctance to accept the inevitable.

The airship flew south toward the Kennon Pass, navigated the narrow fissure that split the Dragon’s Teeth, and descended into the borderlands of Callahorn before turning east to follow the wall of the mountains, tracking the blue ribbon of the Mermidon River far below. No one spoke, himself included. There was a surreal aspect to what was happening, a sense of suspension of time as they made their passage. The day eased through the afternoon and on toward sunset, but even knowing their destination did nothing to help dispel the unreality that wrapped the cause of their journey. Paxon kept think-

ing the same thing, unable to absorb the words fully, incapable of finding a way to accept them.

The Ard Rhys is dying. We are taking her to her final resting place. After today, she will be gone forever.

There had never been a time in the collective memory of living men and women when Aphenglow Elessedil hadn't been a part of their lives. She had been as immutable and enduring as the land itself—a presence unaltered by events or the passing of the years. That she would one day die was inevitable, but it always felt as if it would never be this day, or the next, or any day soon. The constancy of her presence was reassuring and, in some sense, necessary. Her life had been a gift. Her tenure as Ard Rhys had been marked by accomplishment. She had been instrumental in saving the Four Lands from the creatures of the Forbidding when they had broken free. She had reformed the shattered Druid order when all but two were killed and made it stronger and more effective than it had been in years past. She had brokered a peace that had lasted for more than a century between the Federation and the other governments of the Four Lands. She had made the Druids relevant and acceptable again in the eyes of the Races.

Her entire life had been given over to her duties as Ard Rhys. There had been two men in her life, but both had come to her in her early years, and both had been all too quickly lost. It was said that the loss of her sister Arling had been even worse, leaving her so bereft she had never been able to love again, and had supplanted that need with a deeply ingrained dedication to her work. It was said that, with her own family lost, the Druids had become her family.

All this Paxon Leah had gleaned from stories told and writings read—from Druids and common folk alike—and instinctively he knew it to be true. Knowing her confirmed most of it. The rest only added trappings to the legend she had become, wrapped in a mantle of history that would remain long after she was gone, survived by a legacy that would now be passed on to Isaturin. Paxon wondered at what this must feel like to the other man. Everything he did would be measured against what she had done. Everything he was or would become would be compared with her memory.

He would not wish that on himself, he thought. He would not wish that on anyone.

They were seated in front of the pilot box now, watching the sky grow slowly darker ahead of them as the sunset approached—passed now beyond the Runne River, where it turned south to reach the Rainbow Lake; beyond the city of Varfleet, as well; beyond everything of Paranor and the Druids but the airship on which they rode deep along the Dragon's Teeth toward the broad expanse of the Rabb Plains, which could be seen stretching away toward the distant purple wall of the Wolfsktaag.

Then they were shifting north toward a gap in the Dragon's Teeth where Aphenglow had told Paxon a path led upward into the jagged peaks to the Valley of Shale and the Hadeshorn.

"I want you to come with me when I go," the Ard Rhys told him suddenly, leaning close so she could be heard without having to raise her voice over the wind. "Just you and me and Isaturin."

He nodded his agreement, wondering at this, but not willing to question it openly. Why was he being asked to go? Was she worried for her safety? Was the presence of her successor not enough to reassure her?

Then they were down, the mooring lines fastened in place, the light sheaths brought in, and the radian draws unhitched. The hum of the diapason crystals faded as the parse tubes were hooded, and a deep silence descended as everything came to a standstill.

With Paxon's help, the Ard Rhys climbed to her feet and moved over to the railing. Dajoo Rees had already opened the gate and lowered a rope ladder. He tried to help her climb down, his great hands reaching for her, but she brushed him aside and navigated the ladder on her own, beckoning Paxon and Isaturin to follow.

"The rest of you will please remain aboard," she called back. "Thank you all for your service. Please do for Isaturin what you have done so faithfully for me. I will carry my memories of you with me when I am gone and will cherish them always."

The Trolls muttered in response and clasped fists to their chests as a sign of respect. Stone-faced, expressionless, huge, and terrible crea-

tures they could be, yet Paxon could discern a softness in the looks they cast after her.

Once down, the Druids and Paxon set out on the trail that led into the mountains. Isaturin carried torches to help light their way when darkness closed about them. They would be walking for much of the night to reach their destination, and moon and stars alone might not provide enough light to reveal their passage. Paxon worried that the trek might be too much for the Ard Rhys, and he had already accepted that he might have to carry her before it was over.

But it soon became apparent that she would be able to manage on her own, drawing on some reserve of strength she had husbanded deep within, intent on completing the journey to the Hadeshorn under her own power. They walked in single file up the steep trail, setting their feet carefully on the loose rock and uneven earth, allowing Aphenglow, who led the way from start to finish, to set the pace. The sun passed west and disappeared, the twilight deepened into nightfall, and the moon and stars came out in a glorious display across the darkened sky. In the mountains, the silence was deep and pervasive, unbroken even by birdcalls. Nothing moved about them, and only the scrape of their boots and the exhaling of breath marred the utter stillness.

They walked through most of the night—a walk that was more of a slow climb for the first few hours and then a cautious winding among giant monoliths and narrow defiles mingled with sheer drops and broad fissures that required cautious navigation. Only a few times did the Ard Rhys feel the need to reach out for Paxon's strong arm to steady her, and never once did she ask to stop or offer complaint about her weariness. She kept to herself, but stayed steady as she went, and it was Paxon and Isaturin who were at times forced to keep pace with her.

They were still several hours from dawn when they reached the rim of the Valley of Shale. It appeared abruptly before them, the rocks parting to open out on the shallow depression and its acres of smooth, glistening black rock, shards of it spread away on the slopes of the valley and about the lake at its center from rim to shoreline. The lake

itself was a dead thing, the waters flat and green and still, not a ripple to mar their smoothness. The travelers stood together for a moment, studying the Hadeshorn, marking its look and feel, casting about for something living where there was clearly nothing to be found. Of living creatures, they had only themselves for company.

“We wait here until just before dawn,” Aphenglow said—the first words she had spoken since they had set out from the airship.

So they sat together at the rim of the valley and faced down across the shards of rock to the empty-seeming waters, the moon and stars traveling along their endless course overhead, the earth turning as it had since the beginning of time, the night passing slowly toward dawn. And as they sat, the Ard Rhys began talking, her voice soft and low, but her words clear and measured. She spoke of her love for the Druid order and her hopes for its future. She related stories of her life and her involvement in the events that framed the history of the Four Lands during her years as leader of the order. She told of her sister, whom she had loved more than anyone, and of the Elven Hunter Cymrian, her protector during the quest for the Bloodfire, whom she had loved only slightly less. She told of Bombax, her first love, and of the assault on Paranor by the Federation, which had claimed him. She admitted failures and recounted accomplishments, and there were more of the latter than the former.

Paxon listened without interrupting, entranced. Even dour Isaturin seemed enraptured with her tales, caught up in the drama and humor, in the euphoria and angst. There were so many revelations offered by a life lived long and well.

Eventually she went silent, and for a long time no one spoke, the three of them lost in their separate thoughts as the night advanced and the dawn neared. When the first blush of light appeared on the distant horizon, and the stars began their slow fade back into the growing brightness, the Ard Rhys rose and turned to them.

“It is time for me to leave you. I do so with confidence that both of you will do your best for the Druid order and for the men and women who have embraced its cause. I entrust to you, Isaturin, the future of the order, and to you, Paxon, its protection.” She paused, and for an

instant her smile was bright and warm. "Shades, but I wish I could stay here with you and help you with your struggles. And there will be struggles, I can assure you."

Then she turned and stared into the bowl of the valley. "Isaturin, I have changed my mind. I would like to go with Paxon alone. Paxon, will you walk me down, please?"

He did so, rising to take her arm and lead her through the loose rock and uncertain footing toward the Hadeshorn. Isaturin remained where he was, looking after them, his expression stoic, his thoughts unreadable.

The Ard Rhys and her Blade made their way to the base of the rock-strewn slopes and moved to within a dozen yards of the water's edge. There, she released herself from the Highlander and turned to him one last time. "Go no farther. Stand where you are until I am gone. Watch and remember what you see this day."

With the darkness still holding back the sunrise, she moved to the very edge of the lake and stood staring out across its waters. She was so still she might have been a statue, back straight, hands clasped before her, and head lifted. Everything froze then, the whole of the valley caught in a moment in which it seemed nothing would ever happen again, and the three who had come there would be left as they were until the end of days.

Then a roiling of the lake waters commenced, slow at first, and then more violent, the surface churning wildly so that waves rose, capped in white foam. The sound of the waves breaking on the shore mingled with the slap and rush of foam, and a sudden hissing that rose out of the depths. It seemed to Paxon in that moment as if the night had closed back down again and no dawn would appear on this day, but only an inexorable darkness. The hissing increased, and abruptly turned to moans. The voices were high-pitched and frantic, as if those who spoke were trapped beneath the waves and desperate to break free. Deeper voices joined in, then all of them turned to shrieks and screams that brought the Highlander to his knees in shock and dismay.

It grew worse when the shades of the dead began to rise from the

waters, hundreds of them streaming into the night air, lifting away from the lake in clouds of vapor, their forms small and inconsequential, moths set loose into the world they had lost. They whirled and spun as they circled skyward and then dropped away again, a kaleidoscope of wraiths changing shape and form in a giant disintegrating prism. They came so close to the Ard Rhys that Paxon thought they might touch her, perhaps even bear her away with them. But though they came near, they kept enough distance to ensure that their forms would not interact.

Then the center of the Hadeshorn exploded skyward in a massive geyser, and a huge dark form lifted into view. Cloaked in black robes that were distinctly Druidic, it stood upon the surface of the water as if its size meant nothing and its weight were negligible. It seemed to have no substance, and yet its darkness was more intense than the night around it. All of the tiny shades that had surfaced earlier fled to the edges of the lake and remained there, safely removed, as the waters continued to hiss and steam.

Paxon watched as the form began to move slowly across the waters toward Aphenglow Ellesedil. It did not walk as men, but floated, its body and limbs kept still beneath its robes. A cowl was drawn close about its head, and nothing of its face could be seen in the deep shadows that had formed within. When it stopped only feet from where she stood, the Ard Rhys lifted her arms and held them out in greeting.

“Allanon!” she called out boldly. “I am ready!”

Paxon almost went to her then, terrified of what he knew was about to happen, suddenly convinced that it was a mistake, that it was not yet her time, that he must make her see this before it was too late. But he found he could not move, his body frozen as if encased in ice, all chilled and stiff within his clothing. Already the arms of the shade were reaching down. Already the arms of the Ard Rhys were reaching up to receive them.

Then the Shade of Allanon enfolded her like a parent would a child and lifted her away, cradling her as it backed away from the shoreline, not bothering to turn about, not hiding what it intended. It

bore her to the center of the Hadeshorn, the smaller shades of the dead now moving to join it, closing about both of them like a retinue meant to shelter and protect—or perhaps to pay homage and celebrate.

Beneath Allanon and Aphenglow, beneath the past and the present, between living and dead, the waters erupted one last time, then drew everything down in a whirlpool that quickly faded back into tranquility.

Seconds later, movement and sound had ceased, and the Hadeshorn had become still and silent once more. On the eastern horizon, above the valley rim, the sunrise erupted in a blaze of golden light, and the new day began.