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GUARDIAN

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



THE SWORD AND THE STALLION

CORUM BOOK 6

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THE SWORD AND THE STALLION

CORUM BOOK 6

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This book is for Judith



PROLOGUE

IN THOSE DAYS there were oceans of light and cities in the skies and wild flying beasts of bronze. There were herds of crimson cattle that roared and were taller than castles. There were shrill, viridian things that haunted bleak rivers. It was a time of gods, manifesting themselves upon our world in all her aspects; a time of giants who walked on water; of mindless sprites and misshapen creatures who could be summoned by an ill-considered thought but driven away only on pain of some fearful sacrifice; of magics, phantasms, unstable nature, impossible events, insane paradoxes, dreams come true, dreams gone awry; of nightmares assuming reality.

It was a rich time and a dark time. The time of the Sword Rulers. The time when the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh, age-old enemies, were dying. The time when Man, the slave of fear, was emerging, unaware that much of the terror he experienced was the result of nothing else but the fact that he, himself, had come into existence. It was one of many ironies connected with Man (who, in those days, called his race “Mabden”).

The Mabden lived brief lives and bred prodigiously. Within a few centuries they rose to dominate the westerly continent on which they had evolved. Superstition stopped them from sending many of their ships towards Vadhagh and Nhadragh lands for another century or two, but gradually they gained courage when no resistance was offered. They began to feel jealous of the older races; they began to feel malicious.

The Vadhagh and the Nhadragh were not aware of this. They had dwelt a million or more years upon the planet which now, at last, seemed at rest. They knew of the Mabden, but considered them not greatly different from other beasts. Though continuing to indulge their traditional hatreds of one another, the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh spent their long hours in considering abstractions, in the creation of works of art and the like. Rational, sophisticated, at one with themselves, these older races were unable to believe in the changes that had come. Thus, as it almost always is, they ignored the signs.

There was no exchange of knowledge between the two ancient enemies, even though they had fought their last battle many centuries before.

The Vadhagh lived in family groups occupying isolated castles scattered across a continent called by them Bro-an-Vadhagh. There was scarcely any communication between these families, for the Vadhagh had long since lost the impulse to travel. The Nhadragh lived in their cities built on the islands in the seas to the north-west of Bro-an-Vadhagh. They, also, had little contact, even with their closest kin. Both races reckoned themselves invulnerable. Both were wrong.

Upstart Man was beginning to breed and spread like a pestilence across the world. This pestilence struck down the Old Races wherever it touched them. And it was not only death that Man brought, but terror, too. Willfully, he made of the older world nothing but ruins and bones. Unwittingly, he brought psychic and supernatural disruption of a magnitude which even the Great Old Gods failed to comprehend.

And the Great Old Gods began to know fear.

And Man, slave of fear, arrogant in his ignorance, continued his stumbling progress. He was blind to the huge disruptions aroused by his apparently petty ambitions. As well, Man was deficient in sensitivity, had no awareness of the multitude of dimensions that filled the universe, each plane intersecting with several others. Not so the Vadhagh or the Nhadragh, who had known what it was to move at will between the dimensions they termed the Five Planes. They had glimpsed and understood the nature of many planes, other than the Five, through which the Earth moved.

Therefore it seemed a dreadful injustice that these wise races should perish at the hands of creatures who were still little more than animals. It was as if vultures feasted on and squabbled over the paralyzed body of the youthful poet who could only stare at them with puzzled eyes as they slowly robbed him of an exquisite existence they would never appreciate, never know they were taking.

“If they valued what they stole, if they knew what they were destroying,” says the old Vadhagh in the story, *Now The Clouds Have Meaning*, “then I would be consoled.”

It was unjust.

By creating Man, the universe had betrayed the Old Races.

But it was a perpetual and familiar injustice. The sentient may perceive and love the universe, but the universe cannot perceive and love the sentient. The universe sees no distinction between the multitude of creatures and elements which comprise it. All are equal. None is favoured. The universe, equipped with nothing but the materials and the power of creation, continues to create: something of this, something of that. It cannot control what it creates and it cannot, it seems, be controlled by its creations (though a few might deceive themselves otherwise). Those who curse the workings of the universe curse that which is deaf. Those who strike out at those workings fight that which is inviolate. Those who shake their fists, shake their fists at blind stars.

But this does not mean that there are not some who will try to do battle with and destroy the invulnerable.

There will always be such beings, sometimes beings of great wisdom, who cannot bear to believe in an insouciant universe.

Prince Corum Jhaelen Irsei was one of these. Perhaps the last of the Vadhagh race, he was sometimes known as the Prince in the Scarlet Robe.

This is the second chronicle, concerning his adventures. The first chronicle, known as ‘The Books of Corum’, told how the Mabden followers of Earl Glandyth-a-Krae killed Prince Corum’s relatives and his nearest kin and thus taught the Prince in the Scarlet Robe how to hate, how to kill and how to desire vengeance. We have heard how Earl Glandyth tortured Prince Corum and took away a hand and an eye and how Corum was rescued by the Giant of Laahr and taken to the castle of the Margravine Rhalina—a castle set upon a mount surrounded by the sea. Though Rhalina was a Mabden woman (of the gentler folk of Lywm-an-Esh), Corum and she fell in love. When Glandyth roused the Pony Tribes, the forest barbarians, to attack the Margravine’s castle, she and Corum sought supernatural aid and thus fell into the hands of the sorcerer Shool, whose domain was the island called Svi-an-Fanla-Brool—Home of the Gorged God. And now Corum had direct experience of the morbid, unfamiliar powers at work in the world. Shool spoke of dreams and realities. (“I see

you are beginning to argue in Mabden terms,” he told Corum. “It is just as well for you, if you wish to survive in this Mabden dream.” – “It is a dream...?” said Corum. – “Of sorts. Real enough. It is what you might call the dream of a god. There again you might say that it is a dream that a god has allowed to become reality. I refer of course to the Knight of the Swords who rules the Five Planes.”)

With Rhalina his prisoner Shool could make a bargain with Corum. He gave him two gifts—the Hand of Kwll and the Eye of Rhynn—to replace his own missing organs. These jeweled and alien things were once the property of two brother gods known as the Lost Gods since they mysteriously vanished.

Armed with these Corum began his great quest, which was to take him against all three Sword Rulers—the Knight, the Queen and the King of the Swords—the mighty Lords of Chaos. And Corum discovered much concerning these gods, the nature of reality and the nature of his own identity. He learned that he was the Champion Eternal, that, in a thousand other guises, in a thousand other ages, it was his lot to struggle against those forces which attacked reason, logic and justice, no matter what form they took. And, at long last, he was able to overwhelm (with the help of a mysterious ally) those forces and banish gods from his world.

Peace came to Bro-an-Vadhagh and Corum took his mortal bride to his ancient castle which stood on a cliff overlooking a bay. And meanwhile the few surviving Vadhagh and Nhadragh turned again to their own devices, and the golden land of Lywm-an-Esh flourished and became the centre of the Mabden world—famous for its scholars, its bards, its artists, its builders and its warriors. A great age dawned for the Mabden folk; they flourished. And Corum was pleased that his wife’s folk flourished. On the few occasions when Mabden travelers passed near Castle Erorn he would feast them well and be filled with gladness when he heard of the beauties of Halwyg-nan-Vake, capital city of Lywm-an-Esh, whose walls bloomed with flowers all year round. And the travelers would tell Corum and Rhalina of the new ships which brought great prosperity to the land, so that none in Lywm-an-Esh knew hunger. They would tell of the new laws which gave all a voice in the affairs of that country. And Corum listened and was proud of Rhalina’s race.

To one such traveler he offered an opinion: “When the last of the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh have disappeared from this world,” he said, “the Mabden will emerge as a greater race than ever were we.”

“But we shall never have your powers of sorcery,” answered the traveler, and he caused Corum to laugh heartily.

“We had no sorcery at all! We had no conception of it. Our ‘sorcery’ was merely our observation and manipulation of certain natural laws, as well as our perception of other planes of the multiverse, which we have now all but lost. It is the Mabden who imagine such things as sorcery—who would always rather invent the miraculous than investigate the ordinary (and find the miraculous therein). Such imaginations will make your race the most exceptional this Earth has yet known, but those imaginations could also destroy you!”

“Did we invent the Sword Rulers whom you so heroically fought?”

“Aye,” answered Corum, “I suspect that you did! And I suspect that you might invent others again.”

“Invent phantoms? Fabulous beasts? Powerful gods? Whole cosmologies?” queried the astonished traveler. “Are all these things, then, unreal?”

“They’re real enough,” Corum replied. “Reality, after all, is the easiest thing in the world to create. It is partly a question of need, partly a question of time, partly a question of circumstance...”

Corum had felt sorry for confounding his guest and he laughed again and passed on to other topics.

And so the years went by and Rhalina began to show signs of age while Corum, near-immortal, showed none. Yet still they loved each other—perhaps with greater intensity as they realized that the day drew near when death would part her from him.

Their life was sweet; their love was strong. They needed little but each other’s company.

And then she died.

And Corum mourned for her. He mourned without the sadness which mortals have (which is, in part, sadness for themselves and fear of their own death).

Some seventy years had passed since the Sword Rulers fell, and the travelers grew fewer and fewer as Corum of the Vadhagh people became more of a legend in Lywm-an-Esh than he was remembered as a creature of ordinary flesh. He had been amused when he had heard that in some country areas of that land there were now shrines to him and crude images of him to which folk prayed as they had prayed to their gods. It had not taken them long to find new gods and it was ironic that they should make one of the person who had helped rid them of their old ones. They magnified his feats and, in so doing, simplified him as an individual. They attributed magical powers to him; they told stories of him which they had once told of their previous gods. Why was the truth never enough for the Mabden? Why must they forever embellish and obscure it? What a paradoxical people they were!

Corum recalled his parting with his friend, Jhary-a-Conel, self-styled Companion to Champions, and the last words he had spoken to him—“New gods can always be created,” he had said. Yet he had never guessed, then, from what at least one of those gods would be created.

And, because he had become divine to so many, the people of Lywm-an-Esh took to avoiding the headland on which stood ancient Castle Erorn, for they knew that gods had no time to listen to the silly talk of mortals.

Thus Corum grew lonelier still; he became reluctant to travel in Mabden lands, for this attitude of the folk made him uncomfortable.

In Lywm-an-Esh those who had known him well, known that, save for his longer life-span, he was as vulnerable as themselves, were now all dead, too. So there was none to deny the legends.

And, likewise, because he had grown used to Mabden ways and Mabden people about him, he found that he could not find much pleasure in the company of his own race, for they retained their remoteness, their inability to understand their situation, and would continue to do so until the Vadhagh race perished for good. Corum envied them their lack of concern, for, though he took no part in the affairs of the world, he still felt involved enough to speculate about the possible destiny of the various races.

A kind of chess, which the Vadhagh played, took up much of his time (he played against himself, using the pieces like arguments, testing one strain of logic against

another). Brooding upon his various past conflicts, he doubted, sometimes, if they had ever taken place at all. He wondered if the portals to the Fifteen Planes were closed for ever now, even to the Vadhagh and the Nhadragh, who had once moved in and out of them so freely. If this were so, did it mean that, effectively, those other planes no longer existed. And thus his dangers, his fears, his discoveries, slowly took on the quality of little more than abstractions; they became factors in an argument concerning the nature of time and identity and, after a while, the argument itself ceased to interest Corum.

Some eighty years were to pass since the fall of the Sword Rulers before Corum's interest was to be re-awakened in matters concerning the Mabden folk and their gods.

And this interest was awakened in a strange way when Corum heard voices in his dreams. The voices craved his help and called him a god, called him Corum Llaw Ereint—Corum of the Silver Hand. And Corum denied the voices until Jhary-a-Conel, his mysterious old friend who seemed able to cross between the planes at will, advised him to heed their call, for they were the descendants of Rhalina's own folk—the folk of Lwym-an-Esh. For Corum was the Champion Eternal and it was his fate to fight in all the great wars involving the most crucial and profound events in mankind's destiny.

So at last Corum agreed and he garbed himself in all the martial finery of the Vadhagh and he strapped on the best of his artificial silver hands (which could perform all the functions of a fleshly hand) and he went riding on a red horse into the future to meet the folk of Cremm Croich and to battle the horrible Fhoi Myore, the Gods of Limbo, the Cold Folk, the People of the Pines.

He found a world attacked by winter—a world fast freezing to death as the Fhoi Myore drew all heat from the land, wherever they conquered; and they poisoned whatever they conquered, without thought for their own existence, for they were moved by primal desires, not by intelligence, and they desired death. And many had already perished of the Mabden folk and the Treasures of the Mabden had been stolen or scattered and their Great Kings had been slain or captured or sent into hiding. And only a few small tribes in the remote west or in the distant north had not yet been in conflict with the Fhoi Myore—seven gods in seven crude wicker chariots drawn by seven foul beasts, seven gods who could destroy whole armies with a glance and whose leader was Kerenos who controlled a pack of hellish hounds.

From King Mannach of Caer Mahlod, from Medhbh, the king's daughter, Corum learned that only the Black Bull of Crinanass could drive off the Fhoi Myore in some unknown way. And the woman was fair, this Medhbh, and she was strong and a warrior and Corum was reminded of Rhalina, his dead love, and he was stirred by Medhbh.

He was told of his quest. His quest was to the land of Hy-Breasail, beyond the sea. This land was enchanted and no mortal returned from it. But Corum, they said, was a god, a Sidhi. He could go to Hy-Breasail.

And so he went. Through a winter world he went (though it was not wintertime) and had many adventures, encountered many strange folk, talked with wizards and with Sidhi, made bargains and heard a prophecy. An old woman warned him that he should fear a harp, a brother and beauty. Corum was puzzled by the prophecy and particularly puzzled as to why he should fear beauty. But he went on to Hy-Breasail, the only remaining part of sea-covered Lwym-an-Esh, and there he found the spear,

Bryionak, one of the lost Treasures of the Mabden which could, in the right hands, control the Black Bull. And many more adventures followed until he returned to Caer Mahlod as the Fhoi Myore attacked in all their dreadful might—seven malformed gods, together with their servants, the lost, the evil, the damned and the undying, led by Corum's old enemy Prince Gaynor, who could not be slain but yearned for death. And there was a battle at Caer Mahlod and the battle went ill for the Mabden until the Bull was summoned and drove off the Fhoi Myore's undead slaves and slew one of those crude, cruel gods and caused the others to flee.

Then took place the final rite and the land was made green again around Caer Mahlod and the Black Bull of Crinanass and the spear, Bryionak, were never again seen in mortal lands.

And Corum and Medhbh lay together in love, but still Corum brooded on the prophecy, for he knew he was the Champion Eternal and as doomed to struggle as was Prince Gaynor.

And the Fhoi Myore, the Lost Gods of Limbo, remained upon the Earth.

Thus it was at last that the great red king, King Fiachadh of the Tuha-na-Manannan, the people of the Distant West, came a-visiting with his splendid retinue, to confer with King Mannach and debate the matter of the Fhoi Myore. Already King Fiachadh had visited the kings of the surviving Mabden lands—Tuha-na-Anu, the land south of his own; Tuhana-Tir-nam-Beo in the north, Tuha-na-Gwyddneu Garanhir, the land nearest that of the Tuha-na-Cremm Croich. King Fiachadh urged his fellow kings to unite against the Fhoi Myore in one last attempt to drive them away for ever, but his fellow kings were cautious, saying that with their High King, Amergin, a prisoner of the Fhoi Myore there was none to command them. The only thing which would unite the Mabden, said King Fiachadh, would be the release of Amergin and the restoration of his full senses.

So Corum said that he would try to rescue Amergin, and this was to King Fiachadh's liking and King Fiachadh gave Corum a gift to help him enter Caer Llud where the Fhoi Myore now ruled and where Amergin was an enchanted prisoner. This gift was one of the old Treasures of the Mabden, a tattered Sidhi cloak which made certain wearers invisible: Arianrod's Cloak.

Corum set off upon the second of his quests, swearing that he would return with Amergin or not return at all.

Corum had not been long upon his quest when he met his old enemy Gaynor, who refused to fight him, and his old friend Jhary-a-Conel, the self-styled Companion to Heroes, who aided him against the Hounds of Kerenos. Together they continued for Caer Llud, through lands bearing much evidence of Fhoi Myore desecration. And it grew colder, and Gaynor and his hounds still tracked them, and once Corum heard the mysterious harp playing again and was afraid. Then they came to Craig Dôn.

Craig Dôn was the great holy place of the Mabden—seven circles of tall stones, each circle containing another until at the centre there lay a large stone altar—and Corum fancied the stone circles represented ripples upon a pool, planes of reality, representations of a geometry not wholly connected with earthly geometry. And Corum wondered if this place might not be the Mabdens' Tanelorn, for though the place was primitive in its materials it was considerably subtle in its conception. This had been the centre of the Mabden world.

And here, while they rested near the altar, came Gaynor, believing this place to be their ultimate destination and unwittingly revealing that the Fhoi Myore feared the properties of the place. “The vortex,” he said, “cannot swallow Gaynor the Damned.”

Then Gaynor revealed his trap. The Hounds of Kerenos circled Craig Dôn. Corum and Jhary could not leave. They would starve there unless Gaynor brought them food. They were his prisoners for ever. But by skill and cunning they did escape, after Gaynor had gone, and continued their journey, arriving at last in Caer Llud and seeing much evidence that the Fhoi Myore prepared to make war on the Mabden again. This lent further urgency to their activities. After considerable difficulty and danger, Amergin was rescued, though still enchanted and believing himself to be a sheep, and an old friend, Goffanon, discovered to be an enemy when he attacked Corum with his axe. It then emerged, however, that Goffanon was under a spell, too—a slave of the wizard Calatin, who had used Goffanon’s spittle to ensnare the Sidhi dwarf, who had traded Corum the Sidhi horn in exchange for his Name-robe, his Scarlet Robe, and who now leagued himself with the Fhoi Myore. Fleeing Caer Llud with Amergin, fleeing the wrath of Calatin and the Fhoi Myore, Corum was able to rescue—albeit temporarily—Goffanon from the spell. Then they all went back to Craig Dôn and here Jhary made an incantation, reaching for Amergin’s mind through the many veils of the enchantment, learning what they must do to rid him of that enchantment. He could be released only through the power of the Oak and the Ram—only the Oak Woman could call him home.

Now they must go to Tuha-na-Gwyddneu Garanhir, where the Golden Oak and the Silvern Ram were thought to reside. While Jhary-a-Conel took Amergin to Caer Mahlod, Corum and Goffanon would go by sea to Gwyddneu Garanhir.

They were at sea when it became evident that the Fhoi Myore travelled, too, to Gwyddneu Garanhir, bent on conquest. Further dangers were met before they reached a place where the People of the Pines waited for them. Attacked, as they were, all seemed lost, but then came help in the form of a golden god, a tall, laughing warrior who brought with him the smell of the sea, a giant, much taller than Goffanon—one of the surviving Sidhi, the son of the famous Manannan. Ilbrec he was named and he bore his father’s sword Retaliator and he rode a huge horse called Shining Mane. And he had been unwittingly awakened by the Fhoi Myore and he was angry. So he helped them. And thus three Sidhi warriors arrived at Caer Garanhir with the dread news of the Fhoi Myore’s coming.

It was ill-received, that news, and King Daffyn was drunk, as were all the warriors of Caer Garanhir, for they celebrated the marriage of the king’s son. Yet somehow—for all it seemed Ilbrec deserted them in his disgust—they defended the city when the Fhoi Myore came. Many good knights died. There was much tragedy, King Daffyn’s being the most intense. But at last, equipped with the twin treasures of Llud, the Oak and the Ram, they made speed back to Caer Mahlod, having received King Daffyn’s word that, if Amergin were revived, he would follow the High King against the Fhoi Myore.

But before they could return there were further strange adventures, one of which involved Calatin who was able to re-exert his power over Goffanon, and another of which involved Sreng of the Seven Swords, one of the Fhoi Myore, who died at last with delight. And five Fhoi Myore were now left upon the Earth.

Then the three—Corum of the Silver Hand, the dwarf Goffanon, and the Sidhi youth Ilbrec—came to Caer Mahlod. And the time was growing short and it seemed that Amergin was almost dead.

So they took Amergin to a place of power, to Cremmsmound, when the moon was at its fullest and shone upon the oaks of the grove and upon the white mistletoe, and here Corum shivered and recalled Ieven's prophecy concerning what he must fear.

At night, in the grove, the rituals and the summonings began, while what remained of Amergin's life ebbed away. Goffanon sang a song and found a word, and when he spoke the word it made Corum gasp and an awful shock ran through his whole body and he staggered, his heart pounding and his head swimming, though the word meant nothing to his conscious mind. The word was "Dagdagh".

And when the word was spoken the harp began to play. It was the same harp Corum had heard more than once before and heard at its most fearsome in his dreams. And this was the sound of the Dagdagh harp which most thought stilled for ever. But only Corum feared the sound. All others were grateful to it, for it seemed to call the Oak Woman, and the Oak Woman was able to revive Amergin and restore him to his whole sanity in the strangest of all the rituals Corum had so far witnessed.

And when she had revived Arnergin, the Oak Woman spoke to Corum: "You are Corum. You saved the High King and you found the Oak and the Ram. You are the Mabden champion now. You shall be great in the memories of this folk, yet you shall know little lasting happiness here. Your destiny is a noble one."

And then the Golden Oak, the Silvern Ram and Oak Woman were gone and were never afterwards seen again in mortal lands.

Yet Corum was haunted by the name of the Dagdagh harp which Goffanon said was an old name and a title, too, perhaps. Not a Sidhi name, though associated with the Sidhi. And Goffanon recalled a hint of a story regarding the Dagdagh's having betrayed the Sidhi cause during one of the historic nine fights against the Fhoi Myore.

Then, while all others celebrated, Corum left the hall of the king and went out to where he could stand looking over the gulf separating him from Castle Erorn, his old home, which was now called Castle Owyn. And he thought he saw a face staring at him from one of the broken windows of the castle. A handsome face, a face with a skin of gold; a mocking face. And when Corum called "Dagdagh!" he was answered by laughter which became the music of the harp.

He drew his sword, calling: "Dagdagh! Let me be!" Then came Medhbh to his side, saying: "Dagdagh is our friend, Corum. Dagdagh saved our High King."

But Corum knew Dagdagh was not his friend.

And that was the end of the Tale of the Oak and the Ram. And now the news went to all the surviving Mabden that the High King was restored and that they must mass at Caer Mahlod, there to begin their last great war against the Fhoi Myore.

– *The Chronicle of Corum and the Silver Hand*

BOOK ONE

IN WHICH ARMIES ARE GATHERED AND PLANS
DEBATED REGARDING AN ASSAULT UPON THE
FHOI MYORE AND CAER LLUD. SIDHI ADVICE IS
REQUESTED AND GLADLY GIVEN; YET, AS IS
OFTEN THE CASE, THE ADVICE CREATES FURTHER
PERPLEXITY



CONSIDERING THE NEED FOR GREAT DEEDS

SO THEY CAME to Caer Mahlod; all of them. Tall warriors garbed in their finest gear, riding strong horses, bearing good weapons. They had a look of practical magnificence. They made the country around Caer Mahlod blaze with the bright colours of their samite pavilions and their embroidered battle flags, the gold of their bracelets, the silver of their cloak clasps, the burnished iron of their helmets, the mother-of-pearl inlaid upon their carved beakers or set into their travelling chests. These were the greatest of the Mabden and they were also the last, the People of the West, the Stepsons of the Sun, whose cousins of the East had long since perished in fruitless battle with the Fhoi Myore.

And in the centre of the encampments stood a tent much larger than the rest. Of sea-blue silk, it was otherwise unadorned and no battle-banner stood near its entrance, for the size of the tent alone was enough to announce that it contained Ilbrec, the son of Manannan-mac-Lyr, who had been the greatest of the Sidhi heroes in the old fights against the Fhoi Myore. Tethered near this tent stood a huge black horse, large enough to seat the giant; a horse of evident intelligence and energy: a Sidhi horse. Though welcome in Caer Mahlod itself, Ilbrec could find no hall high enough to contain him and had thus pitched his tent with those of the gathering warriors.

Beyond the fields of pavilions there were green forests of pleasant trees, there were gentle hills dotted with clumps of wild flowers and shrubs whose colours sparkled like jewels in the warming rays of the sun; and to the west of all this glowed a blue, white-crested ocean over which black and grey gulls drifted. Though they could not be seen from the walls of Caer Mahlod, there were many ships on all the nearby beaches. The ships had come from Gwyddneu Garanhir and they had come from Tir-nam-Beo. They were ships of several different designs and divergent purposes, some being warships and others being trading ships, some used for fishing the sea and some for travelling broad rivers. Every available ship had been utilized to bring the Mabden tribes to this massing.

* * *

Corum stood upon Caer Mahlod's battlements, the dwarf Goffanon at his side. Goffanon was a dwarf only by Sidhi standards, being considerably taller than Corum. Today he did not wear his polished iron helm; his huge unkempt mane of black hair flowed down his shoulders, meeting his heavy black beard so that it was impossible to tell which was which. He wore a simple smock of blue cloth, embroidered at collar and cuffs in red thread and gathered at the waist by his great leather belt. There were leggings and high-laced sandals on his legs and feet. In one huge, scarred hand was a

mead-horn from which he would sip occasionally; the other hand rested on the haft of his inevitable double-bladed war-axe, one of the last of the Weapons of Light, the Sidhi weapons especially forged in another realm to fight the Fhoi Myore. The Sidhi dwarf looked with satisfaction upon the tents of the Mabden.

“They still come,” he said. “Good warriors.”

“But somewhat inexperienced in the kind of warfare we contemplate,” Corum said.

He watched as a column of northern Mabden crossed the ground beyond the main gate and the moat. These were tall and tough, in scarlet plaids which made them sweat, in winged or horned helmets or simple battle-caps; red-bearded men for the most part, soldiers of the Tir-nam-Beo, armed with big broadswords and round iron shields, disdaining all other weapons save the knives sheathed in the belts which crisscrossed their chests. Their dark features were painted or tattooed in order to emphasize their already fierce appearance. Of all the surviving Mabden, these men of the high northern mountains were the only ones who still lived, for the most part, by war, cut off by their own chosen terrain from what they regarded as the softer aspects of Mabden civilization. They reminded Corum somewhat of the old Mabden, the Mabden of the Earl of Krae who had hunted him once across these same downs and cliffs, and for a moment Corum wondered again at his willingness to serve the descendants of that cruel, animal-like folk. Then he recalled Rhalina and he knew why he did what he did.

Corum turned away to contemplate the roofs of the fortress city of Caer Mahlod, leaning his back against the battlements, relaxing in the warmth of the sunshine. It had been over a month since he had stood at night upon the brink of the chasm separating Castle Owyn from the mainland and shouted his challenge to the Dagdagh harpist whom he was convinced inhabited the ruin. Medhbh had worked hard to console him and make him forget his nightmares and she had been largely successful; he now saw his experiences in terms of his exhaustion and his dangers. All he had needed was rest and with that rest had come a certain degree of tranquility.

Jhary-a-Conel appeared on the steps leading to the battlements. He had on his familiar slouch hat, and his little winged black-and-white cat sat comfortably on his left shoulder. He greeted his friends with his usual cheerful grin.

“I’ve just come up from the bay. More ships have arrived—from Anu. The last, I heard. They have none left to send.”

“More warriors?” asked Corum.

“A few, but mainly they bring fur garments—all that the people of Anu can muster.”

“Good.” Goffanon nodded his great head. “At least we’ll be reasonably well-equipped when we venture into the Frostlands of the Fhoi Myore.”

Removing his hat, Jhary wiped sweat from his brow. “It’s hard to imagine that the world is so cold such a comparatively short distance from here.” He put his hat back on his head and reached inside his jerkin, taking out a piece of herbal wood and broodingly picking his teeth with it as he joined them. He stared out over the encampment. “So this is the whole Mabden strength. A few thousands.”

“Against five,” said Goffanon, almost defiantly.

“Five gods,” said Jhary, giving him a hard stare. “In keeping our spirits high we must not let ourselves forget the power of our enemies. And then there is Gaynor—and

the Ghoolegh—and the Pine Warriors—and the Hounds of Kerenos—and,” Jhary paused, adding softly, almost regretfully, “and Calatin.”

The dwarf smiled. “Aye,” he said, “but we have learned how to deal with almost all these dangers. They are no longer quite the threat they were. The People of the Pines fear fire. And Gaynor fears Corum. And as for the Ghoolegh, well, we still have the Sidhi horn. That gives us power, too, over the hounds. As for Calatin...”

“He is mortal,” said Corum. “He can be slain. I intend to make it my particular business to slay him. He has power only over you, Goffanon. And, who knows? That power could well be on the wane.”

“But the Fhoi Myore themselves fear nothing,” said Jhary-a-Conel. “That we must remember.”

“They fear one thing in this plane,” Goffanon told the Companion to Heroes. “They fear Craig Dôn. It is what we must ever remember.”

“It is what they ever remember, also. They will not go to Craig Dôn.”

Goffanon the smith drew his black brows together. “Perhaps they will,” he said.

“It is not Craig Dôn, but Caer Llud we must consider,” Corum told his friends. “For it is that place we shall attack. Once Caer Llud is taken, our morale will rise considerably. Such a deed will give our men increased strength and enable them to finish the Fhoi Myore once and for all.”

“Truly great deeds are needed,” Goffanon agreed, “and also cunning thoughts.”

“And allies,” said Jhary feelingly, “more allies like yourself, good Goffanon, and golden Ilbrec. More Sidhi friends.”

“I fear that there are no more Sidhi save we two,” murmured Goffanon.

“It is unlike you to express such gloom, friend Jhary!” Corum clapped his silver hand upon the shoulder of his companion. “What causes this mood? We are stronger than we have ever been before!”

Jhary shrugged. “Perhaps I do not understand the Mabden ways. There seems too much joy in all these newcomers, as if they do not understand their danger. It is as if they come to a friendly tourney with the Fhoi Myore, not a war to the death involving the fate of their whole world!”

“Should they grieve, then?” Goffanon said in astonishment.

“No...”

“Should they consider themselves in death or in defeat?”

“Of course not...”

“Should they entertain one another with dirges rather than with merry songs? Should their faces be downturned and their eyes full of tears?”

Jhary began to smile. “You are right, I suppose, you monstrous dwarf. It is simply that I have seen so much. I have attended many battles. Yet never before have I seen men prepare for death with such apparent lack of concern.”

“That is the Mabden way, I think,” Corum told him. He glanced at Goffanon, who was grinning broadly. “Learned from the Sidhi.”

“And who is to say that they prepare for their own deaths and not the deaths of the Fhoi Myore?” added Goffanon.

Jhary bowed. “I accept what you say. It heartens me. It is merely that it is strange, and the strangeness is doubtless what I find discomfoting.”

Corum was, himself, disconcerted to find his normally insouciant friend in such a mood. He tried to smile. "Come now, Jhary, this brooding demeanour suits you ill. Normally it is Corum who mopes and Jhary who grins..."

Jhary sighed.

"Aye," he said, almost bitterly, "it would not do, I suppose, to forget our rôles at this particular time."

And he moved away from them, pacing along the battlements until he reached a spot where he paused, staring into the middle distance, plainly desiring no further conversation with his comrades.

Goffanon glanced at the sun.

"Nearly noon. I am promised to advise the blacksmiths of the Tuha-na-Anu on the special problems involved in the casting and weighting of a kind of hammer we have devised together. I hope to talk with you further this evening, Corum, when we all meet to debate our plans."

Corum raised his silver hand in a salute as the dwarf went down the steps and strode through a narrow street in the direction of the main gate.

For a moment Corum had the impulse to join Jhary, but it was most obvious that Jhary required no company at this time. After a while Corum, too, descended the steps, going in search of Medhbh, for suddenly he felt a great need to seek the consolation of the woman he loved.

It occurred to him as he made his way towards the king's hall that perhaps he was becoming too dependent upon the girl. Sometimes he felt that he needed her as another man might need drink or a drug. While she seemed to respond eagerly to this need, it could be that it was not fair to her to make the demands he did. As he walked to find her, he saw clearly that there were the seeds of considerable tragedy in the relationship which had developed between them. He shrugged. The seeds need not be nurtured. They could be destroyed. Even if his main destiny was predetermined there were certain aspects of his personal life which he could control.

"Surely that must be so," he muttered to himself. A woman passing him on the street glanced at him, believing herself to be addressed. She was carrying a sheaf of staves which would be used for spears.

"My lord?"

"I observed that our preparations go well," Corum told her, embarrassed.

"Aye, my lord. We all work for the defeat of the Fhoi Myore." She lifted her load in her arms. "Thank you, my lord..."

"Aye." Corum nodded, hesitating. "Aye, good. Well, good morning to you."

"Good morning, my lord." She seemed amused.

Corum strode on, his head down, his lips firmly shut until he reached the hall of King Mannach, Medhbh's father.

But Medhbh was not there. A servant said to Corum: "She is at her weapons, Prince Corum, with some of the other women."

Prince Corum walked through a tunnel and into a high, wide chamber decorated with old battle flags and antique arms and armour, where a score of women practised with bow, with spear, with sword and with sling.

Medhbh herself was there, whirling her sling at a target at the far end of the chamber. She was famous for her skill with the sling and the tathlum, that awful

missile made from the brains of a fallen enemy and thought to be of considerable supernatural effectiveness. As Corum entered Medhbh let fly at the target and the tathlum struck it dead centre, causing the thin bronze to ring and the target, which hung by a rope from the ceiling, to spin round and round, flashing in the light from the brands which helped light the chamber.

“Greetings,” called Corum, his voice echoing, “Medhbh of the Long Arm!”

She turned, glad that he had witnessed her skill. “Greetings, Prince Corum.” She dropped the sling and ran to him, embracing him, looking deep into his face. She frowned. “Are you melancholy, my love? What thoughts disturb you? Is there fresh news of the Fhoi Myore?”

“No.” He held her to him, conscious that others of the women glanced at them. He said quietly: “I merely felt the need to see you.”

She smiled tenderly back at him. “I am honoured, Sidhi prince.”

This particular choice of words, emphasizing the differences of blood and background between them, had the effect of disturbing him still more. He looked hard into her eyes and the look was not a kind one. She, recognizing this stare, looked surprised, taking a step back from him, her arms falling to her sides. He knew that he had failed in the purpose of his visit, for she, in turn, was disturbed. He had driven her from him. Yet had not she first created the alienation by her remark? For all that her smile had been tender, the phrase itself had somehow cut him. He turned away, saying distantly:

“Now that need is satisfied, I go to visit Ilbrec.”

He wanted her to tell him to stay, but he knew she could not, no more than he could bear to remain. He left the hall without a further word.

And he cursed Jhary-a-Conel for introducing his gloomy thoughts into the day. He expected better of Jhary.

Yet, in fairness, he knew that too much was expected of Jhary and that Jhary had begun to resent it—if only momentarily—and he understood that he, Corum, was placing too much reliance on the strength of others and not enough upon himself. What right had he to demand such strength if he indulged his weaknesses?

“Eternal Champion I might be,” he murmured, as he reached his own chambers, which he now shared with Medhbh, “but eternal pitier of myself, also, it sometimes seems.”

And he lay down upon his bed and he considered his own character and at length he smiled and the mood began to leave him.

“It’s obvious,” he said. “Inaction suits me poorly and encourages the baser aspects of my character. My destiny is that of a warrior. Perhaps I should consider deeds and leave the question of thoughts to those better able to think.” He laughed, becoming tolerant of his own weaknesses and resolving to indulge them no further.

Then he left his bed and went to find Ilbrec.