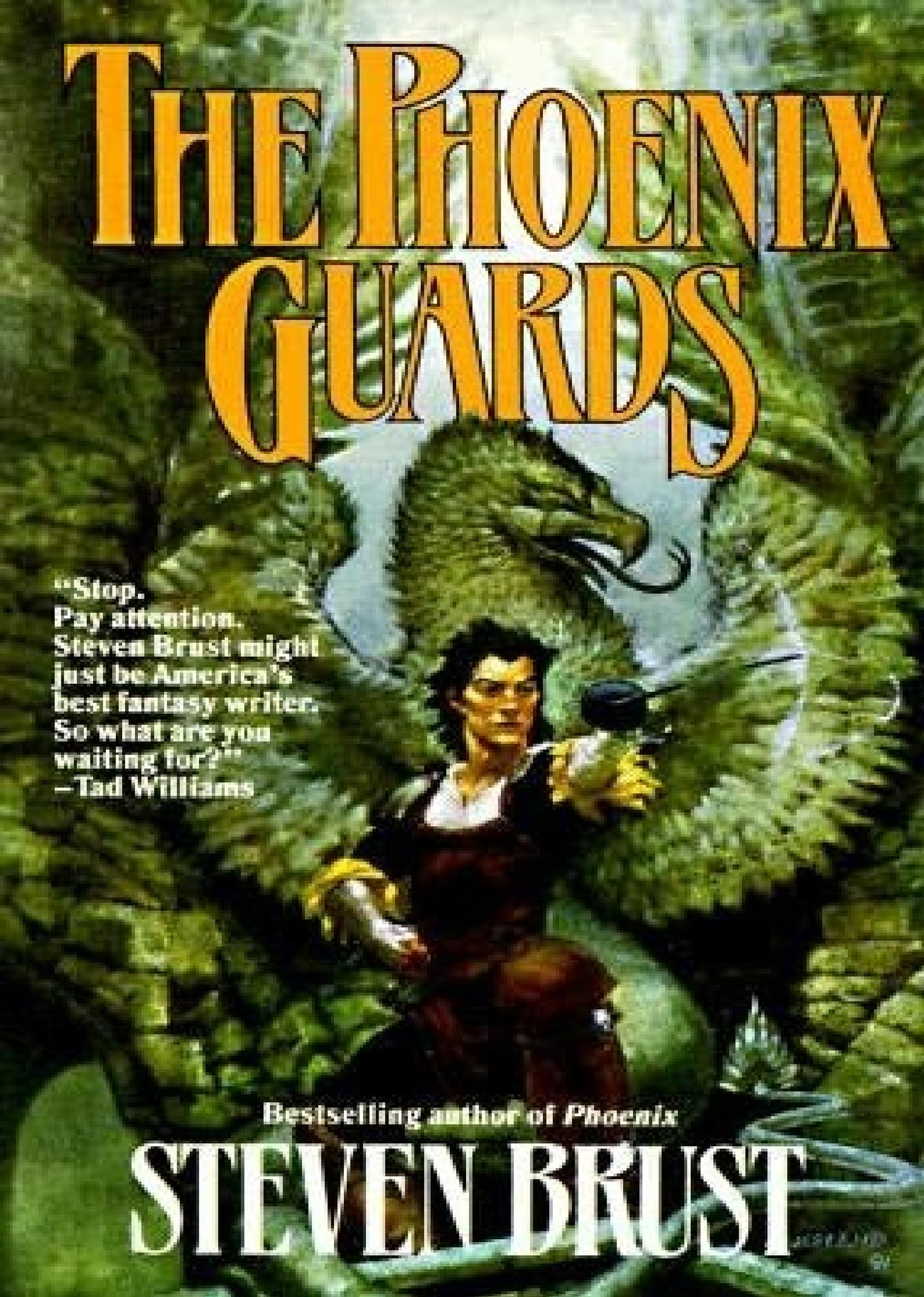


# THE PHOENIX GUARDS



"Stop.  
Pay attention.  
Steven Brust might  
just be America's  
best fantasy writer.  
So what are you  
waiting for?"  
—Tad Williams

Bestselling author of *Phoenix*

# STEVEN BRUST

## ***FLASHING BLADES!***

Tazendra, after having made a great show, charged Kurich's longsword, which was flashing in such an intimidating manner that she was forced to back out again.

She charged once more, but was again forced to retreat, this time trailing blood from a deep cut on her left shoulder.

"First blood to me!" cried Kurich.

"But last to me," said Tazendra, striking with such force that the Dragonlord's weapon was brought far out of line...

**Steven Brust**

**P.J.F.**

***Contents***

*Cast of Characters*

*Preface*

# **BOOK ONE**

*Chapter the First | Chapter the Second | Chapter the Third | Chapter the Fourth |*

*Chapter the Fifth | Chapter the Sixth | Chapter the Seventh | Chapter the Eighth |*

*Chapter the Ninth | Chapter the Tenth | Chapter the Eleventh | Chapter the Twelfth |  
Chapter the Thirteenth | Chapter the Fourteenth | Chapter the Fifteenth*

*| Chapter the Sixteenth | Chapter the Seventeenth*

## **BOOK TWO**

*Chapter the Eighteenth | Chapter the Nineteenth | Chapter the Twentieth |*

*Chapter the Twenty-first | Chapter the Twenty-second | Chapter the Twenty-third*

*| Chapter the Twenty-fourth | Chapter the Twenty-fifth | Chapter the Twenty-sixth*

*| Chapter the Twenty-seventh | Chapter the Twenty-eighth | Chapter the Twenty-ninth |*

*Chapter the Thirtieth | Chapter the Thirty-first | Chapter the Thirty-second | Chapter  
the Thirty-third | Chapter the Thirty-fourth Conclusion*

# Epilogue

## ***About the Author***

*About the Author*

## **BOOKS BY STEVEN BRUST**

### **The Dragaeran Novels**

*Brokedown Palace*

### **The Khaavren Romances**

*The Phoenix Guards*

*Five Hundred Years After*

*The Viscount of Adrilankha, which comprises The Paths of the Dead, The Lord of Castle Black, and Sethra Lavode*

### **The Vlad Taltos Novels**

*Jhereg*

*Yendi*

*Teckla*

*Taltos*

*Phoenix*

*Athyra*

*Orca*

*Dragon*

*Issola*

### **Other Novels**

*To Reign in Hell*

*The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars*

*Cowboy Feng's Space Bar and Grille*

*The Gypsy* (with Megan Lindholm)

*Freedom and Necessity* (with Emma Bull)

NOTE: If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

THE PHOENIX GUARDS Copyright © 1991 by Steven Brust

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Cover art by Sam Rakeland

A Tor Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10010

[www.tor.com](http://www.tor.com)

Tor® is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

ISBN 0-812-50689-8

EAN 978-0812-50689-1

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-29900

First edition: August 1991

First mass market edition: June 1992

Printed in the United States of America

For Maria, CB

### ***Acknowledgments***

My thanks to Dawn Kieninger for some translations, and to Betsy Pucci who helped

with medical information. To David Dyer-Bennet for keeping the machine running, and to Dan Goodman who let me steal a line or two. Thanks also to Valerie Smith who keeps me eating and allows me not to think about the more depressing aspects of being a writer. My sincerest appreciation to copy editor V. Fleming and proofreader Don Keller for excellent work. Apologies and thanks are due Rich Adamski and David S. Cargo who tried to help me with palace architecture.

As always, I am deeply indebted to the Scribbles: Emma Bull, Pamela Dean, Kara Dalkey, and Will Shetterly; to my editor, Terri Windling; and to Fred A. Levy Haskell. I cannot describe just how helpful and patient these people have been, nor how much fun it is to work with them.

Thanks, all of you.

Steven Brust, P. J. F.

### ***The Phoenix Guards***

*Touching Upon Certain Events Which Occurred*

*in the Year of the Phoenix,*

*In the Phase of the Phoenix,*

*In the Reign of the Phoenix,*

*Of the Cycle of the Athyra*

*Submitted To the Imperial Library*

*By the Sliptower Estates*

*House of the Hawk*

*On This Eighth Day of the*

*Month of the Jhegaala*

*In the Year of the Lyorn*

*In the Phase of the Dragon*

*In the Cycle of the Phoenix*

*In the Great Cycle of the Dragon,*

*Or, the Three Hundred and Ninth year*

*Of the Glorious Reign of The Empress Zerika the Fourth By Sir Paarfi of Roundwood*

*House of the Hawk*

*(His arms, seal, lineage block)*

*Presented, as Always, With Humble Respects*

*To Lady Parachai of Redstaff*

*In Hopes that it will Meet with her Approval*

### ***Cast of Characters***

#### ***The Court***

His Majesty Tortaalik I— *The Emperor*

Her Majesty, Noima— *The Imperial Consort, Tortaalik's wife* Her Excellency Lytra e'Tenith— *The Warlord*

G'aereth— *Captain of the Red Boot Battalion*

Lanmarea— *Captain of the White Sash Battalion*

Gyorg Lavode— *Captain of the Lavodes*

Duke Wellborn— *The Imperial Discreet*

Count Shaltre— *An advisor to His Majesty*

Her Ladyship Seodra— *An advisor to His Majesty*

Lord Garland— *The Favorite*

#### ***House of the Phoenix***

Illista— *Khaavren's lover*

Allistar— *Brother of Illista*

#### ***House of the Dragon***

Marquis of Pepperfield— *Deceased*

Uttrik e'Lanya— *Son of Pepperfield*

Kathana e'Marish'Chala, Baroness of Kaluma— *An artist*

Jenicor e'Terics— *Fifth in line as Dragon Heir*

Diesep e'Lanya— *A friend of Jenicor*

Adron e'Kieron, Duke of Eastmanswatch— *Dragon Heir to the Throne*

***Guardsmen in G'aereth's Company***

Aerich

Fanuial

Frai

Khaavren

Pel

Tazendra

Tuci

***Guardsmen in Lanmarea's Company***

Dekkaan e'Tenith

Kurich

Sergeant Lebouru

Rekov

Thack

Uilliv

***House of the Iorich***

Guinn— *A jailer*

***House of the Jhereg***

Corris— *A gaming room operator*

Fayaavik— *Friend of Seodra*

Tukko— *Runs the Hammerhead Inn*

***House of the Teckla***

Srahi— *A servant woman*

Yini— *Maid of Jenicore e'Terics*

Mica— *A peasant*

***Easterners***

Crionofenarr— *Leader of an Eastern army*

Ricardo— *Librarian at the Zerika Library*

## Preface

### *In Which Discussion is made of the Sources*

#### *Which Led to the Document that Follows*

IT HAS NOW been a mere two score of years since we had the honor to have our work, *Toward Beginning a Survey of Some Events Contributing To the Fall of the Empire*, rejected by Lord Tri'ari and Master Vrei of the Institute. We may say that we are in complete sympathy with their desire to have our work expanded by an additional eight or nine volumes prior to its appearance in the Imperial Library in order to ensure that certain details are sufficiently clear and that our annotation is complete. But should he who holds the present sketchpad of words in his hands wonder how it came to occupy such a place, we should explain that it was one of our notebooks while we were preparing for the longer work mentioned above. Yet Master Vrei, who happened to see the notebook one day while we discussed the volumes in question, and read it on the spot, announced that, by itself, it would, if not provide an accurate look at certain aspects of court life before the Interregnum, at least be a possible source of, in his words, "enlightened entertainment." It was with this in mind that, for the past twenty-one years, we have had the honor of refining, or, if we are permitted, "honing" the notebook, and preparing it for the publication we humbly hope it merits.

We pray, therefore, that we may strain our readers' patience long enough to give a brief explanation of how this particular notebook, or, if you will, sketchbook, came to exist.

It may be hoped that the reader has had the pleasure of perusing Master Kesselroi's *Survivors of the Fall*. If not, we wish to express the earnest wish that he

will make for himself a note to do so. In any case, it was our pleasure and honor to read this manuscript some decades prior to its publication, when its author was kind enough to send us, via our common patron, Parachai, Countess of Sliptower, a handwritten copy, which we eagerly devoured, being familiar with the author's earlier works in history and poetics.

One thing that caught our eye occurred in the sixty-third or sixty-fourth chapter, where mention was made of a certain Tiassa who "declined to discuss the events"

leading up to the tragedy. While the notion of a reticent Tiassa is startling enough, it also brought to mind at once a passage in the ninety-third stanza of Mistress Fornei's poem, "Return to Me, My City," where we find the lines, "Yet you survived, for far away/ Walking out upon the silent road/ Where quiet Tiassa for you waits/ With Yendi and gallant Lavode."

This intrigued us so much that, when Master Kesselroi refused, quite properly, to

directly identify the Tiassa in question, we could hardly fail to find and study the entire poem. And, while noting no other references to a Tiassa, we did find reference, in the eighty-eighth stanza, to one Aerich, which name stuck in our mind as having to do with certain events transpiring nearly five hundred years before the Disaster and the Interregnum.

Unable to stop here, we searched for references to Aerich where we could, and discovered that he was, in fact, a Lyorn, and associated with a Yendi, with a Dzurlord who, some time later, became a Lavode, and with a Tiassa. A little more work told us the name of the Tiassa, and yet more work, some of which is of a nature we are not prepared to discuss, procured for us copies of certain letters to and from him, mostly written early in his career, which provide much of the basis for the work you now hold in your hands.

We must beg our readers' indulgence, of course, if we have used other sources as well. Many of the events herein described are matters of public record, and we can hardly claim to be the only historian who has chosen to discuss them.

Furthermore, the Yendi who was mentioned in the poem has left many records and missives behind, some of which, no doubt, are accurate, at least in part. In addition, we have more accounts that we can make use of for such matters as the geography of the Imperial Palace and Dragaera City; and many of the events were witnessed by such chroniclers as the Marquis of Windhome, and, in some cases, by Sethra Lavode herself. We also took the trouble to conduct interviews with the Duke of Y\_\_\_\_\_ and the Baroness of D\_\_\_\_\_, whose memories were graciously placed at our disposal. Yet, for the most part, it was the occasional journal entry by the Lyorn, Aerich, and letters (home and abroad) by the Tiassa himself that have given us this look at Imperial life before the Interregnum.

As a last note, we would like to say that we have every intention, for our own enlightenment if for no other reason, of continuing our researches into the lives of these personages. We have, even now, reason to believe that some of them may have had an influence on the events at Court beyond the account contained herein, perhaps even exerting their influences as far as the Interregnum itself.

With this in mind, we hope our reader will take some degree of pleasure in our relation, or, if you will, *collation* of these events, and, perhaps, even to such a degree that we may feel justified in continuing our researches.

—Paarfi

309 (2/1/2/3)

1Translator's Note: The Dragaeran language uses the symbol "gya" to represent someone of unknown sex. Since English lacks this convenience, I decided to use the word "he" for all such occurrences.

**BOOK**

**ONE**

# Chapter the First

*In Which We Introduce Several Persons*

*With Whom, In the Hopes of the Author,*

*The Reader Will Wish to Become Better Acquainted*

^ »

IT HAPPENED THAT on the sixth day of spring, in the first year of the reign of His Imperial Majesty Tortaalik I of the House of the Phoenix, a young gentleman entered a small hostelry, in the village of Newmarket, some sixty leagues from Dragaera City.

The inn was called The Three Forts, and its sign depicted three tall fortresses with doors flung wide open. The name was taken from those fortresses built during the War of the Barons, in which the district had been much involved, that could be seen from the west end of town.

The village (and, consequently, the inn) was located in the wide valley between the Yendi and the Shallow Rivers, a region renowned for its wheat and maize fields and for the unique odor of its kethna farms. If we go on to say that Newmarket was in that portion of this valley which was located within the County of Sorannah, and that within the Duchy of Luatha, we hope we shall have identified the place well enough to satisfy all but the most exacting of our readers.

As for the village itself, it should be said that there was little to distinguish it from other villages in the area. That is, it had its inn, it had its leather-worker, it had its mill and bins. It had no sorcerer, but did have an augur and a healer. It had no steelbender, but did have a smith and wheelwright. It had no packing-house, but did have a smokehouse. It had no mayor, but did have its Speaker, with a low Speaker's House that was the only building of stone in the town. It had one street, that for half the year was mud and for the rest was the good, black soil of the district. It was near enough to the Imperial Highway that a coach came by the inn every morning and evening, but far enough away that it was a good refuge for the few bandits and highwaymen who dared to brave the wizards of the Athyra Guard, just lately retired with the turning of the Cycle from the Athyra to the Phoenix and with the ascension of the Emperor Tortaalik.

This day was the thirteenth of Tortaalik's reign, and this reign the eighteenth of the House of the Phoenix. The inaugural festivities still had four days to run their course.

So it was that the young gentleman found Newmarket in a state of quiet and serene celebration.

This gentleman, to whom we now have the honor of returning, was, we should say, dusty. In those days, before the Interregnum, a gentleman who had been traveling on

foot was easily seen to be poor. And yet he was surely of gentle birth.

He had long, curly black hair, parted at his noble's point; soft brown eyes; and a rather long, pleasant face, distinguished by the creases in the forehead that show high intellect and by the strong chin that indicates determination and will. To these features, add high cheekbones, a proud nose, and a fair complexion, and it will be seen at once that he was not only a gentleman, but clearly of the House of the Tiassa—which was proved by the color of his garments, where they could be discerned beneath the dust he wore as his outer, and, no doubt, inner, layer of clothing.

His tunic was of white cotton, with puffed sleeves, and was drawn tight around the waist. He had a light woolen overtunic of pale blue with wide lapels. The tunic ended in a short flared skirt without fringe or tassel. Beneath, he wore hose of the same shade of blue, and lyornskin boots, undyed, with low heels and rounded toes.

A chain of flat links around his waist held a light sword of good length. The chain also held a thong which ran from scabbard to belt, preventing the sword from scraping the ground when he walked, as well as a sheathed dagger next to the sword, and a purse on the opposite hip. The purse, upon close inspection, looked rather anemic.

He was of medium height, but well built and athletic-looking. He wore neither jewelry nor hat—this last because it had been lost in a gust of wind two days before.

To round off our description, with which we hope our readers have not lost patience, we will say that he had a clear, friendly eye, an open countenance, and a frank, pleasant smile. With these things and a sword of good length, much can be done, as we will, by and by, endeavor to show.

The Tiassa, whose name was Khaavren, entered the inn, and stood for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. On one side was a table where sat the host, waiting for travelers. On the other was a single large room, lit by kerosene lamps and containing four long tables. At first glance, every chair seemed to be occupied, but a closer look revealed a few empty places in the farthest corner. Khaavren made his way there, smiling his apologies to a Jhegala and a Chreotha, into whom he could not help bumping. Since the inaugural festivities continued, and since the Tiassa's countenance was one of friendliness, neither one was inclined to take offense, so he soon found himself seated on a plain, hard-backed wooden chair.

At length, he identified a servant who seemed to be keeping the patrons supplied with cheer. This servant, however, was on the other side of the room, so Khaavren relaxed, making up his mind to wait patiently. To pass the time, he looked around, his gaze slipping by the numerous Teckla to dwell on persons of more interest. To his right a wizard of the House of the Athyra sat drinking alone, staring into his cup, and, we must assume, thinking deep and subtle thoughts. Next to this wizard was a Vallista with her head on the table, snoring loudly. To Khaavren's left was an attractive young lady of the House of the Dzur, who was engaged in a game of three-copper-mud with a Lyorn and two Hawks. As Khaavren's eye was about to pass over them, the Dzurlord

suddenly stood, a hand on the greatsword she carried over her shoulder. Several pairs of eyes turned to her as she frowned at one of the Hawklords. The Hawk at whom she stared seemed suddenly pale.

"My lady," he said in a raspy voice. "What troubles you?"

The Dzur, as Dzur will when in the presence of someone showing fear, allowed a smile to play about her lips. "It is very simple, my lord," said she, in a strong voice.

"I have an amulet, given me by my uncle, Lord Tuaral." She paused here, evidently to see if the name produced an effect. When it didn't, she continued. "This amulet emits a small sound, which only I can hear, whenever sorcery occurs near it."

"I fail to see," said the Hawk, "how I am concerned with an amulet given you by your uncle."

"Ah, but you soon will."

"How so?"

"Well, this way: four times now, you have made very difficult throws. Twice, you managed three Thrones over my split high; once, you achieved three Orbs over my three Thrones; and now, just lately, you threw three Orbs followed by a split high after my three Orbs."

"That it true," said the Hawk. "But how does this concern your amulet?"

Khaavren, who saw things faster than the Hawklord pretended to, drew in his breath and leaned forward.

"It concerns the amulet," replied the Dzur, "in that at each of the throws I have just had the honor to describe, I have heard that sound. Had it been only once, I should have thought nothing of it. Even hearing it twice, no action would have been called for. But four times—come now, my lord. Four times is excessive, I think."

The Hawklord seemed to understand at last. His brows came together. "I almost think you accuse me," he said.

"Well, yes," said she.

He glanced around, then said to the other Hawklord, "Will you stand for me, my lord?"

"Gladly," said the other. Then the latter turned to the Dzur and said, "Have you a second?"

"I have no need," she said, "If this gentleman"—here she indicated the Lyorn next to her—"will be so kind as to judge for us."

The second Hawklord turned to the Lyorn. "My lord?"

Now, all this time there had been more and more interest in the proceedings from those nearby, until nearly everyone in the room was watching the interplay. But the Lyorn, who had been one of the players, had shown no sign of interest save for a slight, sad smile which flitted across his face, rather like the small, red daythief across an afternoon sky. When spoken to, however, he shrugged. Then he said to the Dzurlord, in a quiet, melodious voice, "Do you accuse?"

"I do," she answered, with a toss of her head that sent her dark hair from one side of her neck to the other.

He turned to the second Hawklord while pointing to the first. "Do you deny?" he asked.

They looked at each other, and the principal nodded. "He does," said the second.

"Well, then," said the Lyorn, and drained his glass in one motion, his throat bobbing smoothly. He set the glass down gently and stood up. "Perhaps the street,"

he suggested. He looked around, his eye coming to rest on Khaavren. "Would you care to draw the circle?"

Now, we would not be faithful to our role of historian if we did not say that Khaavren was young, and, moreover, had come from a noble family, albeit one that had fallen on hard times. He had been as well-educated as his poverty would permit, but the Fallen Nobility, as they were beginning to be called in that day, usually had little experience with the ways of Court, or even the ways of the more prosperous of the aristocracy; yet they invariably craved such knowledge and experience. A young gentleman, such as Khaavren, could hardly be made such a request without being delighted. He nodded.

Remembering what was involved as best he could, he walked out into the street, which was, fortunately, rather wide. He noted the size of the Dzurlord's blade, estimated the distance between the hostel on the one side and the livery stables on the other, and decided that it would do. He took more pains with his task because, in addition to other factors, he had been living far out in the country, and, in his ninety-five years, he had never been this close to a duel. To be sure, he had once, as a child, peeking over the stone wall that surrounded his home, had occasion to see his father beat a neighbor with the flat of his sword over some insult, but that was hardly the same as a duel, with all of the formalities that, like war, make legal and proper injury or death inflicted on one's fellow man.

As he was making his observations, the Dzurlord emerged, speaking to the Hawklord's second, apparently deciding on the terms of the engagement. The Lyorn came after them. Khaavren looked at the latter briefly, noticing the short, straight brown hair brushed back off a high forehead, the thin face, the small chin, small mouth, and

hooked nose. These, along with the dark complexion, identify the Lyorn even without his costume. This Lyorn, who was very tall for one of his House, seemed to be a warrior, as he was wearing soft leather boots, a plain red blouse, and a brown skirt that came to his ankles. He had no visible weapon, but wore a pair of copper or bronze vambraces.

The Tiassa turned back to his task then, and drew his sword. He found a spot to make the corner, and lowered his blade to begin drawing the line. He was interrupted, then, by a low, soft voice near him: "No, not your sword."

He looked up and saw the Lyorn standing near his elbow.

"No?" he inquired.

"Use your knife," said the Lyorn.

"Why?" asked Khaavren.

The Lyorn smiled sadly. "Name?"

"Khaavren of Castlerock."

"Aerich," said the other, accompanying the word with a gesture to indicate himself.

"But," said Khaavren, "about the sword—"

Aerich gestured at the weapon's point. "This is your honor," he said. "It must never touch the ground. Use your knife."

Khaavren looked at Aerich for a moment, trying to decide if the Lyorn were jesting. But then, he thought, Aerich was the judge. He sheathed his sword, took out his dagger, and drew a line across the width of the street, then one along the side, twice seventeen paces in length, then crossed the street again, and back to where he had begun to complete the rectangle. He straightened his back with some relief and looked up at Aerich, who nodded solemnly.

Aerich turned and gestured to the combatants, indicating where they ought to stand. The Dzurlord removed her doublet and folded it carefully, setting it on the street outside of the circle. She drew her sword from behind her back. The weapon seemed close to her own height, yet she had no apparent trouble wielding it. The Hawk had a short broadsword, and a dagger in the other hand. Aerich looked at the Hawklord's second.

"Terms," he said.

The other Hawk frowned. "We have agreed—"

"State them aloud, please," said Aerich.

The Hawk nodded. "Plain steel weapons, sword and dagger, to first blood, no healer present, but a healer may be summoned at once upon conclusion."

Aerich looked an inquiry at the Dzurlord, who seemed disgusted, but nodded.

The Lyorn stood between them, so they were each separated from him by five paces, and from each other by ten. He raised his hand.

"As your chosen Imperial intermediary, in accordance with the laws of the Empire, I ask if you will not be reconciled." His tone of voice indicated a certain lack of interest in the answer.

"No."

"No."

"Very well," he said, and lowered his hand in a motion that was at once graceful and sudden.

Both Hawk and Dzur seemed to be startled but the Dzur recovered first. With a yell, she sprang at her enemy, her blade visible only as a blur. The Hawklord barely had time to assume a defensive posture, and at once there was the ringing sound of steel on steel, which sent a thrill through Khaavren's heart.

The Hawk stepped back, and swung his blade wildly—and from so far away that Khaavren could see it was a useless gesture. The Dzur smiled contemptuously and stepped in, and, to Khaavren's inexperienced but expert eye, she moved with a grace and fluidity that would have made her a worthy opponent of his own sword-master.

With her next step, she beat aside the Hawklord's sword and, with the same motion, gave him a good cut across his right shoulder and down to his chest. The sound that came from his throat was more squeak than moan as he fell over backward, the point of her sword still lodged in his chest, breaking two ribs and nearly cutting open his lungs.

The Hawklord's weapons fell from his hands as he lay on the ground, staring upward in horror as the Dzur pulled her sword free and raised it for the killing stroke.

"Lady!" called Aerich, in a tone that was far sharper than Khaavren would have suspected possible from the quiet gentleman. It was used to good effect, too, as the Dzurlord stopped, looked at him, then sighed and nodded.

"Ah, yes," she said, with a hint of contempt in her voice. "First blood."

Then, turning her back on the fallen Hawklord, she walked back into the inn, stopping only to clean her blade and retrieve her doublet. The Hawk's second approached his principal and dropped to his knee, looking at the wound.

"A healer!" he cried.

The village healer, such as he was, was sent for, and Khaavren returned to the inn, following Aerich back to the same corner he had occupied earlier. They sat down next to the Dzur, who had already resumed her place with an air which indicated that the battle in which she had just been victorious was not even worth the trouble to discuss. Aerich picked up the three copper pieces they had been playing with, threw them into the air, looked at the result, and carelessly set out two silver orbs.

"With only two players?" asked the Dzur, who was gathering the Hawklord's winnings over to her side of the table. Khaavren studied her for the first time. Her hair and eyes were quite black, the hair hanging straight down to well below her shoulders without evidence of a curl. Her cheekbones were high, and she had the upward tilting eyes of the House of the Dzur. She was fully as tall as he, with a dark complexion. Her nose was long and straight, her chin strong. She wore a black doublet of finely woven linen, which came to just below her waist. The collar was high, but she had no ruff. The sleeves were nearly as puffed as Khaavren's own, with a bit of white lace at the cuff. The buttons on the doublet seemed to be of gold, and had inlay work that looked to be Seriolli in style. Her belt of black leather was wide with brass buttons. He couldn't see her legs, but his memory told him that her hose were of silk, and finely knit. She wore gleaming black boots with cuffs just below the knee.

Around her neck was a pendant on a silver chain, with the face of a dzur pictured on it.

Aerich shrugged and looked an inquiry at Khaavren. The latter felt himself blushing. "Lord Aerich," he said, "I do not play."

Aerich studied him, then wordlessly drew several coins from in front of him and set them in front of Khaavren.

"My lord," said Khaavren, as he tried to decide if he ought to be offended that his lack of funds had been discovered. "I could not—"

Aerich cut him off with a smile and a shake of his head. Then he pointed to the three copper coins. "Split high," he said. He pointed to the coins he had placed in the middle of the table. "Two," he added.

Khaavren swallowed, and pushed two silver orbs into the center of the table. The Dzur had already done so. Aerich passed him the coins, and Khaavren gathered them clumsily into his hand. He licked his lips, and tossed the coins half a meter into the air. They hit with the high, tinkling sound of light copper, two of them showing orbs and one showing the throne, the same as Aerich's.

The Dzurlord said, "Split high. You match."

"Hmmm," said Khaavren, struggling to remember the little he knew of the game.