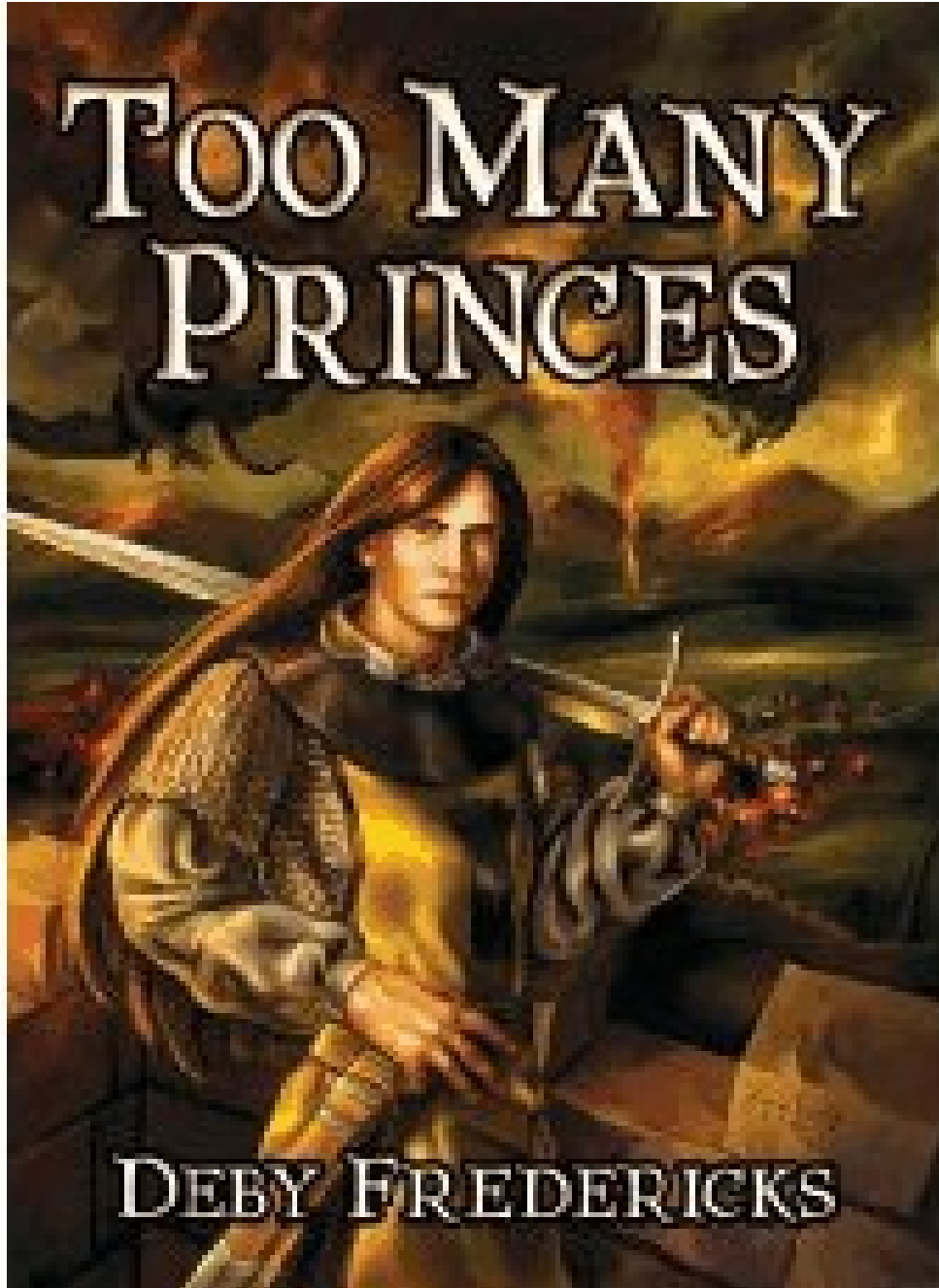


TOO MANY PRINCES



DEBY FREDERICKS

TOO MANY PRINGES

by Deby Fredericks

Chapter One

The Dead Donkey

"Where is he?" Therula fumed as she stalked from the stable of Crutham Keep. "Where is my worthless half-brother?"

Brastigan was supposed to be helping her with Fire Rose, the chestnut colt their father had given her. The young horse was so beautiful, she had been longing to ride him, but he was still too skittish. No one was better with horses than Brastigan, and he'd promised to help train Fire Rose. Instead, he went off to the low-town—getting drunk again, no doubt. He did that far too often.

Therula stormed angrily across the packed earth of the castle courtyard. She realized what she was doing when a pair of serving maids bobbed in nervous curtseys. Therula drew a deep breath and slowed her pace, consciously assuming a calm expression. She could practically hear her mother telling her that a royal princesses must not stomp and scowl, however frustrated she might be. She would simply have to find Brastigan later and express her disappointment directly to him.

As Therula continued toward the inner keep, a falcon winged between her and the granite towers. A shrill cry came, thin with distance. Therula paused, looking up and down the broad courtyard. No one was near the mewes, nor did she remember anyone planning to hunt with falcons today. If they had, Therula would have been invited.

The bird of prey banked and soared over Therula's head. It was a prairie falcon by its brown-and-buff coloring, but much larger than any she had seen before. She saw its wings with feathers spread wide, like hands with too many fingers. Something white was clutched in its talons—perhaps a scroll of parchment?

What she did not see was the dangling strap of a falconer's jesses. Intrigued, Therula

turned to follow the falcon with her eyes. If this was a wild bird, what was it doing here, above the king's fortress?

The falcon banked again, still descending, and gave another shrill cry. A word came to her clearly over the air: "Unferth!"

Therula took a half-step backward. Unferth was her father, the king of Crutham. Then she shook her head. Birds couldn't speak. She must not have heard correctly.

The falcon glided down toward the great hall, where King Unferth and Queen Alustra should be holding court at this time of day. It stretched out its talons and beat its wings to alight on the peaked roof. The falcon settled its wings and stood in proud silhouette. Therula could have sworn its fierce, pale eyes were fixed on her.

"Unferth!" the falcon shrieked.

There was no mistaking that time. Therula stared back at it, fear fluttering in her chest. Birds did not speak unless magic made it so.

"Unferth!" it cried again.

This creature was no mere falcon. Whatever it was, it wanted her father. Therula forced herself to move, lifted the folds of her riding skirt with a pretense of regal dignity, and hurried toward the great hall. All thoughts of Fire Rose and Brastigan had vanished from her mind.

"Hey!" Brastigan yelled. No one looked around. It took more than that to get yourself noticed in the Dead Donkey.

The Dead Donkey was a low-town alehouse, one of a dozen crabbed together and fighting for life along one narrow, cobbled way. The city guard's barracks were just down the street, and despite its name, the Dead Donkey was a favorite of the garrison. Not because it was a safe place, nor for the sake of good ale, clean women or honest games. The Dead Donkey boasted none of those things. What it did have was an evil reputation. Men liked to brag that they had been there and lived.

The gaming tables were crowded with folk of every size and description. It was hot as a smithy. The air was thick with pipe smoke and a reek of sour beer. Conversation was a deafening, constant roar, punctuated by shouts from the gaming tables. Fortunately, the senses numbed quickly.

A mixed lot of soldiers and tradesmen wenched and swilled. Others elbowed up to the bar, which defended itself with an array of splinters and nails. Many wore the black-tower badge of the King's livery. Others wore a commoner's woolen treads, with shirts of coarse linen and heavy leather boots.

An even less promising assortment of women wove their way among the men, giving voice to easy laughter. A few carried pitchers to excuse their presence. It was these Brastigan called out to.

Brastigan sat alone against the back wall. His chair was tipped back to lean against the rough planks. One booted foot hooked under the near edge of his table. He seemed no more than a common sword-for-hire, clothing threadbare and none too fresh. A sword-belt hung from the back of his chair. It and the blade were plain and serviceable. They were well worn, but cared for in a manner that belied their owner's unsavory appearance.

"Hey, sweetheart!" Brastigan called again. He grinned ruefully. Usually he didn't have

this much trouble catching a woman's eye.

Brastigan had the fair skin and bright, dark eyes of an Urulai warrior. Glossy black hair fell well past his waist, beaded and braided in the fashion of that barbaric race. His features were narrow, almost angular, and he looked no older than five-and-twenty. Even seated he was a tall fellow, wide-shouldered, narrow-waisted, well-muscled.

One of the alewives passed nearby. She was a cozy blonde with peasant blouse and bodice barely laced. Her full skirt was stained with ale, and perhaps other things. Brastigan spied his chance.

"Hey, are you busy right now?" He pitched his voice low, but she heard the familiar invitation.

The alewife smiled and sauntered over. "I'm never too busy," she crooned. "What can I give you?"

Brastigan turned his tankard over, sprinkling the last few drops of ale on the tabletop. The alewife leaned forward to refill it. As she did, her sleeve slipped off her shoulder.

"Anything else?" she asked hopefully.

"Well..." Brastigan drawled. He flipped her a copper bit. "You can stand there for a while, if you want to."

The alewife straightened. She plucked the coin from the air with an offended snap and strutted away. Brastigan grinned over the rim of his dented tankard and took another pull at his ale. It was his third or fourth, he hadn't bothered to keep track, and he was feeling fine. The alewife glanced back at him. Brastigan grinned at her, a laughing wolfish grin. It was probably her first blush in years.

Mirrors were no stranger to Brastigan. He was better than good-looking. He knew it, and he reveled in it. What he didn't know was that while he was staring at the alewife, someone else was staring at him. And that not happily.

What little light filtered through from the door was abruptly blotted out. On the opposite side of the table was a man as big as a house, with straw-colored thatch of hair cropped at ear-length. His face was brutally flattened, as if his horse had run him into a wall or two. It seemed luck had deserted him at the gaming tables, for he wore no shirt, but there was no hint of softness in the massive exposed chest.

The table creaked warningly as the fellow set both fists on it and leaned over. He squinted mean, pale eyes. "That's my girl."

Typical Cruthan. No beating around the bush, just an open challenge.

Brastigan came easily to his feet, with a greasy clap of chair legs hitting the floor. Around them, others turned sharply, alerted by the sound. Alewives squeaked and scurried for cover.

"No problem, friend." His voice was lazy, mid-ranged, but his grin was a little dangerous now. He extended his right hand, as if in greeting. "Brastigan."

The house looked from him to his hand and back. He straightened slightly, suspicion evident in the set of his shoulders. Then an answering smile whitewashed his blunt features.

"Herut." He smirked confidently.

Herut's huge fist closed over Brastigan's long one. Closed and clinched hard. Brastigan responded with equal pressure. The two men stood there, eye to eye, smiling and trying to break each other's hands.

This went on for several minutes, as those around them tensely looked on. Gamblers whispered, calculating the odds. A fine sheen of sweat appeared on Brastigan's face. Herut more grimaced than grinned. Neither would yield.

Who can say what would have happened? Before the contest could be won or lost, violent shouts erupted from one of the gaming tables. Everyone turned to look. As they did, Herut suddenly yanked on Brastigan's arm, trying to pull him into a bear-hug. The swordsman tensed, pushing back against the edge of the table. With a shriek of wood over flagstones the table lurched forward, catching Herut in the groin. He doubled over and Brastigan pulled free. He danced backward, grabbing for his weapon. Not that he needed her yet, but Victory had been with him for a long time. He didn't want her damaged.

Within moments, the whole place was a-brawl. Ale splattered everywhere. Cheap furniture shattered, or was ripped up for cudgels. Fists and bodies flew. Brastigan crouched low against the wall, working his fingers to restore circulation. He grinned unconsciously at the familiar, primal roar. In all the world, there was nothing better than a good brawl.

Then he recalled the alewife, and his grin widened. Maybe there was one thing better.

Herut had recovered from his momentary distraction. With all the subtlety of a bear, the man bellowed and charged. Brastigan tucked Victory under his left arm and waited. At the last moment, he leapt aside. Herut caught himself just short of the wall. As he spun, Brastigan reached down. Magically, as if from nowhere, he produced a brawling-pin. Crusher was another of his most trusted old weapons, a foot-long hardwood club, well seasoned and lovingly tended in the hope of just such need. He tossed the club, caught it lightly. Herut charged again. This time when Brastigan leapt away he delivered a smart rap to the chin. It couldn't have hurt the fellow, but it added insult to injury.

Whatever control he'd had was gone in an instant. Herut charged, flailing his brawny arms. Again he missed Brastigan. This time, he blundered into a pair of off-duty soldiers who were almost as big as he was. Brastigan leaned against the wall, laughing silently as they instantly turned on Herut. He almost felt sorry for the fellow. Almost.

Brastigan had survived enough brawls to know that danger could come from any direction. He kept an eye out as the two soldiers demolished Herut. That habit saved his life. He caught a flicker of motion in the corner of one eye. Instinct took over before his brain understood what it saw. Long legs collapsed, sending him to his knees in a controlled fall. There was a sharp, splintering smack. Brastigan hugged Victory as he rolled and came to a limber crouch. He wasn't laughing any more. A long dagger quivered in the wall where his chest had been only a moment ago.

He spared it but a glance. Dark eyes searched for signs of the assassin, without success. It could have been anyone in the struggling mob, maybe even one of the alewives.

The melee was over as quickly as it began. Howling riot gave way to shouts of alarm as a column of big, black-clad men forced their way in from the door. Suddenly no one wanted to be seen fighting. Weapons dropped to the floor or vanished up sleeves. Men stood apart, allowing the soldiers passage. Some showed innocent, empty hands. Even Herut, breaking free of his assailants, thought better of coming after Brastigan again.

A heavy silence fell, broken by much shuffling of feet and a single half-conscious moan. The soldiers parted, roughly clearing an isle. Between them strode one who was even more

imposing.

Prince Habrok, Champion of Crutham, stopped in the center of the room. The cloth of his surcoat would have been enough to make shrouds for a trio of lesser men. A hauberk gleamed beneath it, though the prince seemed not to feel the weight. Silently, great arms akimbo, he surveyed the wreckage of the Dead Donkey's common room. The injured man groaned again. The prince's helmeted head turned in that direction.

"Somebody help that man," Prince Habrok ordered. His voice was deep as a bull's. Four of the soldiers leapt to obey.

Habrok beckoned to his sergeant. "I want the names of every man involved in this."

The off-duty soldiers in the crowd suddenly looked apprehensive.

"At once, my lord." Though Stam was by no means a small man, he sounded like a boy compared to his commander.

Then Habrok turned in Brastigan's direction. Cold eyes, surprisingly blue, glinted in the shadow of his helmet's heavy nasal bar. A blunt, gloved finger thrust out. "You. Come with me."

The tension was thick enough to cut with a sword as Brastigan unbent his lanky knees. For a moment, the onlookers thought—feared? hoped?—he would defy Prince Habrok. Then long fingers touched his forehead in a sketchy salute. With a sweep of black hair, he turned to seize the dagger that still stood in the wall. The blade grated as it came free. He paused a moment more to lock eyes with Herut.

This time it was Brastigan who smirked. "Good fight, friend. Have to do it again sometime."

Herut ground his teeth, but the presence of so many soldiers restrained him.

"Prince Brastigan!" Habrok's voice rang impatiently from within his helm.

Brastigan had the pleasure of seeing Herut's fury turn to alarm. It was never wise to provoke a royal prince, even if there were dozens of them in Harburg. He flashed another mocking grin.

Jauntily, then, Brastigan strode out past the watching soldiers. Shards of crockery and splintered wood ground under foot as his half-brother followed him through the door. The porch shuddered with each step.

Brastigan paused to restore Crusher to his boot-sheath and belt Victory on. Then he took a good, long look at the dagger that someone had tried to sheath in his heart. It was, unfortunately, a completely ordinary blade. Well worn, cross-wrapped leather on the haft. Dung. There could be hundreds like it in Harburg alone.

"So, brother," he inquired casually, as Habrok loomed over him. "How did you find me?"

Prince Habrok pulled off his round helm and the attached mail coif, revealing square, solid features. Blond hair was neatly tucked under a quilted arming cap. He eyed Brastigan with a mixture of envy and disgust.

"Easily," he rumbled with what might have been humor. "I just looked for the fight, and there you were. As for why..." he shrugged with a muted whisper of mail links. "Father sent me to find you."

"And you never asked why," Brastigan snapped. Habrok was by no means his least favorite half-brother. Still, there were times when the great hulk seemed to be deliberately dense.

"I ask when it's my business," Habrok retorted. He proved it by jabbing a finger at the

unsheathed dagger. "Where did that come from?" he demanded.

Brastigan glanced up. He hadn't been mistaken. There was a current of suppressed alarm in his half-brother's voice.

"I don't know," he replied softly, for Habrok alone to hear. "But if I was just a bit slower, you'd be carrying me home on a table. You might ask Stam to keep an eye out for a man with an empty sheath. I'm taking this up to show Eben. If anyone can find out where it came from, he can."

Habrok might be slow, but he wasn't stupid. No less than four of King Unferth's illegitimate sons had died within the past year. Aric had been killed by bandits, Mathas choked on a bone, Rickard in a hunting accident, and young Luvan drowned while fishing on the Great Bay. Brastigan would have been the fifth. Given his well-known liking for such places as the Dead Donkey, who would have questioned it? Nevertheless, the surviving Princes of Crutham were watching each other's backsides these days.

"I'll stay myself and see what I can find out," Habrok decided. He gave Brastigan a clout on the shoulder that fairly knocked him over. "You get up to the keep. It took me almost an hour to find you."

Brastigan grimaced, but stepped off the porch.

"And make yourself presentable," Habrok called after him. "It's for official business."

Brastigan glared over his shoulder. "The only time I ever see our father is for official business," he growled, not really meaning Habrok to hear.

It didn't matter. His half-brother was already plowing a path back into the inn. A pair of soldiers passed him on the way out, unceremoniously dumping an unconscious man into the horse-trough just outside the alehouse. The resulting fountain of water restored Brastigan's humor somewhat.

The most important thing in Harburg was the great, gray keep. There lived King Unferth of Crutham with his wife, several consorts and numerous offspring. Theirs was a sizable court, bustling with soldiers, officials, servants and assorted other hangers-on. Not surprisingly, since it housed all these people—and their chickens, pigs, cows, horses, goats, dogs and falcons—the keep was easily the largest thing in Harburg. That wasn't saying a lot. Crutham wasn't much as kingdoms went. Queen Alustra had pointed this out to her husband on more than one occasion.

The keep was built from the gray stones of the craggy mountains that loomed behind it. It stood on a promontory overlooking the rolling plains of Daraine. From the uppermost tower, one could see well in every direction. Alas, there was little more to see than mountains. Mountains to the north, in Verelay. Mountains to the south, in Gerfalkan. Mountains in Firice and Begatt. Crutham would have been twice the size if so much of it wasn't vertical. They weren't even wild or dangerous mountains, but sad old peaks, worn down like the teeth of an aged dragon. To the west, the sea ran out and away. Far, far across the Great Bay was the desolate coast of Urland. That was where the *real* mountains lived.

The city swirled, like a raggedy skirt, out from the knees of the keep. Neither looked as though it had been washed in quite a few years. Thus, Harburg was known to be very strong, and in more than one sense of the word. Especially so on an afternoon in spring, with the day almost visibly lengthening toward summer.

Long legs carried Brastigan rapidly down the street. He skirted vendors and heaps of refuse. The common folk gave way before him, and not just because of the knife he bore. His lips twitched in what could have been a grin but wasn't. Brastigan swished his dark mane and stalked on.

All his life, Brastigan had been a misfit. He wasn't one of them, he didn't belong. Oh, he hadn't been told in so many words. No one dared insult a prince that way. But any reasonably intelligent boy would have taken their meaning. His mother had been a foreigner, Leithan by name. A wellborn lady, or what passed for it among the Urulai. Accepting concubinage to King Unferth had been the price of safety for the tattered remnant of her people who'd fought their way free when Sillets conquered Urland.

Leithan had died when he was young. Some said she had been poisoned by Queen Alustra. Personally, Brastigan didn't believe it. He couldn't imagine stuffy Alustra being so overcome by jealousy that she plotted against another woman's life. That would have required emotion, of which he doubted the bitch was capable. Except where matters touched Oskar, her only son—but he was a different problem.

All of this was meaningless, of course. Brastigan's mother was so long dead he had never known her. His father was, to put it kindly, a loving man who had sired so many offspring he probably couldn't remember all their names. And Brastigan was a half-breed misfit who didn't have the sense to be ashamed of his differences.

His upbringing had been left to Joal, an old Urulai who'd been Leithan's servant during her life. In that respect, Brastigan had to admit he'd been luckier than he deserved. Joal had been both father and mother, had wiped his nose and his behind, washed his cuts, and paddled him when he needed it. It couldn't have been easy. Brastigan had been a wild brat, more beast than boy, but Joal had been like the mountains, everywhere and immovable. He was the one obstacle Brastigan could never get around.

Always, he'd been teaching. Oh, not reading, or any of that nonsense. On important subjects, Joal had taught Brastigan everything. Not just how to ride, but how to gentle a horse so that it served him out of love. Not just how to shoot from horseback, but how to make the bow he shot with. How to move silently, leaving no trace, and how to track one who wished not to be followed. How to hold his own against boys—and later men—twice his size. Brastigan was arguably the best swordsman in Crutham, maybe the best in the world. That was only part of the debt he owed to Joal.

Oh, there had been complaints. Queen Alustra, for one, hadn't approved of a savage Urulai being brought up in her court. Unferth hadn't seemed to care what Joal did, except when Brastigan was in trouble for one thing or another. Fortunately, he'd been all but eighteen when Joal stopped breathing one night. Brastigan scowled, remembering. Those had been bitter days. Then, despite himself, Brastigan's lips twitched into a smirk. It was lucky he'd been too old for any more fostering by then. He could have been stuck with some stodgy old lump of a nursemaid, like the one who'd badgered Lottres half to death, poor pup. Neither of them would have survived his adolescence!

A clatter of hooves on cobblestone jarred his thoughts. Brastigan looked around quickly, then relaxed as he remembered he hadn't done anything blameworthy. At least, not today. He was at the base of the ramp that led up to the keep, and a mounted patrol was coming down. Around

him, commoners hurried out of the way. Brastigan toyed with the idea of standing where he was, forcing the riders to break around him. But no, he recognized the troop leader. The man had no sense of humor. Grudgingly, Brastigan stepped to the side of the road, concealing the dagger he still carried behind his arm. He shook his head at the ugliness of the passing chargers. Those weren't horses, they were barrels with legs! Finally they were gone, leaving only a few heaps of steaming dung to mark their passing. The waiting populace surged out into the street, and Brastigan with them.

The ramp wove twice across the face of the bluff below the keep. The rock walls were sheer, to prevent any attackers climbing up from below. At the first bend was a guardhouse, where Brastigan passed unchallenged. They knew him—there weren't many Urulai left in Harburg.

From that point, the ramp was walled. Anyone foolish enough to try fighting his way through would face a host of defenders and a dozen dirty tricks: concealed archers, boiling oil, caltrops, or worse. Siege warfare was not a pretty business. Brastigan hoped to avoid it for many years to come.

The ramp was steep. Brastigan kept an even pace, but he was sweating by the time he reached the top. Guards at the gatehouse questioned him about the dagger, although, being a prince, he could fairly well do what he wanted. Then it was into the gatehouse, under the barbed portcullis and the murder holes, and out into the yard.

Within the keep was a wide rectangle of packed earth, oriented west to east. The low dwellings of the servants were tucked under the northern wall. A planted garden occupied most of the western end, along with penned animals. Those provided the fresh morsels Queen Alustra demanded. Along the southern wall were interior barracks for the soldiers on duty. All roofs were of slate, a ward against fire.

On the eastern side was the high-walled inner ward, where the king and queen dwelt with their personal attendants. Their quarters were finer than the rest, but not much larger. There was not enough room inside for all of the king's offspring, so additional housing had been constructed inside the southern wall. Brastigan made his way toward this.

At Queen Alustra's insistence, one wing of the two-storied dwelling was occupied only by men, including the princes and gentlemen of the court. The other wing was reserved for the king's daughters, who, since Luvan's untimely passing, outnumbered his sons.

Along the northern wall, the new Great Hall thrust out into the courtyard. Brastigan avoided that, since the royal court conducted most of its business there and it was always crowded. He toyed with the idea of cutting through the women's wing and seeing how much fuss he could stir up. Grinning, he reluctantly decided not. He angled his long strides toward the men's wing.

There always seemed to be someone loitering beneath the high, arched entry. Courtiers and toadies, Brastigan thought with an unconscious sneer. Today one of them hurried out to meet him. To his surprise and pleasure, he recognized a friend.

Lottres was another of Unferth's bastards, but he too was an odd one among them. Perhaps that was why he and Brastigan had become such friends. Brastigan's lanky height often out-stripped that of the burly Cruthans, and he had his striking good looks to add insult to injury. No such good fortune had visited Lottres.

Folk said he had the look of Merowen, his dam. She had been a foreigner, too, the daughter of a diplomatic envoy from Forix. Lottres was shorter than almost everyone at court, including the ladies, and frankly scrawny. He had reddish-brown hair that curled far too much. Muddy-brown eyes were set in a face too finely drawn to be a man's. Even a thick fleece of beard couldn't hide that. At twenty, Lottres still had the gawky, unfinished look of a half-grown pup. He'd followed Brastigan around like one, too, starting when he was three and Brastigan five. Brastigan hadn't been too happy about it, but Joal had taken a liking to the younger lad. Under his patient tutelage, Lottres had slowly learned to manage his unruly limbs. He would never be a great swordsman, but he could defend himself. And in other ways, he was as gifted as Brastigan. If not for Lottres, Brastigan wouldn't have been able to do more than scrawl his own name.

So he genuinely smiled as Lottres scurried up to him. "Hello, Pup."

He hadn't slackened his pace, so Lottres was forced to whip around and follow. "Bras, we've been looking high and low. Where were you?"

Brastigan shrugged. "Well, first I was at arms practice this morning." He smirked. "Whipped the snot out of Tarter again, too. Then I had to try gentling that colt of Therula's." He grimaced, shook his head to toss black hair over his shoulders. "That nag isn't worth a heap of dung, but it's pretty, so she won't let go of it. After that, I needed some relaxation, so I went down to the low-town. Ran into a little trouble."

Brastigan flipped the dagger into the air, spun on his heel and caught it. Lottres ducked nervously. The courtiers by the door applauded politely. Brastigan managed not to sneer at them.

"Worthless toadies," he told Lottres in an undertone. "Come on, let's go somewhere we can talk."

"But Brastigan, Father wants us. Now!"

"He'll like me better when I've bathed," Brastigan promised.

"True," Lottres retorted. Brastigan grinned and punched his shoulder lightly.

The courtiers bowed as they passed, a habit which never failed to grate on Brastigan's nerves. He swept through without acknowledging them as Lottres jogged to keep up. Just inside was a steep stairwell. One flight led downward, to the subterranean bath-house and stores. They took the other, upward, to the quarters of the junior princes and gentlemen of the King's household.

"Brastigan, would you please slow down?" Lottres sounded slightly winded. "You know I can't keep up."

"The exercise will make you strong," Brastigan teased, but he did wait.

The long corridor was hushed, since most of the suites were empty at this time of day. At the far end, a lone servant went scurrying about some errand. The two men had adjoining chambers near the center of the wing. Brastigan unlocked the wooden door to his own suite and pushed through.

Since he wasn't one of the legitimate or important princes, he had only a pair of mid-sized rooms, linked by an arched portal. One was a sitting-room, the other his bed-chamber. They were furnished not richly but comfortably and, he noted with irritation, had been tidied during his absence.

"Now tell me what really happened," Lottres said, following Brastigan through to the bedchamber.

"I don't know," Brastigan replied, voice muffled as he rummaged through a chest of clothing. "I was at the Dead Donkey having a drink, and I was looking at one of the alewives. Some big fellow saw me and didn't like it. Seems she was his girl." He emerged long enough to toss a garment onto the bed.

"What then?" Lottres picked up the dagger, which Brastigan had left atop another chest.

Brastigan shrugged. "Nothing much. We were clinching hands, and a fight broke out at one of the gaming tables. Nothing I couldn't deal with," he insisted, seeing Lottres' worried expression. "Then, in the middle of the fight, someone threw that at me. I couldn't see who it was. Let me tell you, it's a good thing Joal trained me. One of Tarter's whelps would've been dead for sure."

"You never saw who threw it?"

"Habrok and his bully-boys showed up before I had a chance to ask any questions. As if I could have, with a brawl going on." He dug deeper in the chest, this time bringing out a pair of dress boots. "I kept the knife, though. Eben might be able to learn something from it."

Lottres frowned slightly, leaning in the door. "Eben can't work miracles."

"Well, we have to start somewhere. Be assured, I have no intention of ending up like Aric." By this time Brastigan had found what he needed. He gathered the armload of clothing. "Come on. I just need a quick rub-down, and then we'll go see what father wants. Bring that, would you?" he added, meaning the dagger.

Lottres stuck it through his belt and stood aside to let Brastigan pass. Together they moved down the corridor and descended the stairs. The lower level was dimly lit by smoky candles set on wall brackets. Widely spaced doorways hinted at storage rooms beyond. The lower hall took a sharp turn and gave out into the main bath. Again, the room was nearly empty except for a single manservant who bowed at their approach. Arrel was a wizened little scrap of old man, toothless, bald, and deaf as a post. He had worked in the baths as long as either of them could recall. Brastigan waved him away.

There was a main pool, rimmed with tile, and beyond it a row of partly enclosed stone basins. The pool was drawn directly from subterranean springs. Its water was cold at best. In the basins, one could draw hot water from a tank heated behind the main ovens in the kitchen. Queen Alustra had insisted on many innovations, when she was newly come from Tanix. Hot water for bathing was probably the only one that had been accepted gladly.

Brastigan set his clean clothes on a low bench, and quickly stripped to the waist. Arrel shuffled after them with towels and a bucket of cold water from the pool. This Brastigan accepted, motioning the man to leave. The servant bobbed his hairless skull several times before obeying. A smaller basin was cut into a rock ledge at the back of the cubicle. Brastigan drew hot water until it was half full, and added a dollop of cold. Lottres settled on the bench.

"Your turn," Brastigan told him. "Any idea what Father wants? I assume he sent for both of us, since you're all dressed up, too."

"No and yes," Lottres replied, examining his good clothing carefully. He wore traditional Crutham garb, that being a simple, long-sleeved tunic over close-fitting treads. The tunic was of finely-made cloth, embroidered about the cuffs and t-slot collar. Polished boots gleamed softly. This particular shade of blue was one of the few that went well with his rusty hair. Lottres carefully straightened his belt. "Yes, he sent for both of us. No, I don't know why. I think there

was an emissary of some kind. The men were telling me about it when you arrived."

Brastigan snorted as he washed. "I don't know why you waste your time with those fellows."

Lottres shrugged. "They like to gossip, and sometimes they know things. Rodrec said a falcon landed in the courtyard, calling Father's name. 'Uh-herh!'" he said in a shrill, high voice, trying to imitate the bird's speaking. "It sounded like that, Rodrec said. There was a message of some kind in its talons, but it wouldn't let anyone touch it. They took it in to Father and he read it. That's when he sent for us."

Brastigan stopped and twisted around to stare at Lottres. "That sounds like a winter tale," he remarked, but he didn't feel sure. Magic was a force in the world, as real as the tides on the Great Bay—and potentially as dangerous.

"I don't think they were joking." Lottres shook his head soberly.

"I don't like the sound of it." Brastigan scrubbed his back with a long-handled brush, holding his hair aside to keep it dry. "Sounds like witch-work."

"It could be," Lottres sounded interested. "I've never met a witch. I wonder what they're like."

"Dangerous, if you listen to the tales." Brastigan reached for a towel. "At least for normal folk like us. People who get involved with them come to bad ends."

"Or become heroes," Lottres argued.

"Heroes!" Brastigan gave a bark of laughter. "I've been on raids, Pup, and let me tell you, it isn't as much fun as you think. Trust me—you don't want to be a hero."

"That's easy for you to say," Lottres murmured resentfully.

Startled, Brastigan twisted around to look at him. They traded stares for just a moment, Lottres' brown eyes betraying old hurt and resentment. Then the younger man looked away, shrugging uncomfortably. Brastigan shifted restlessly as the silence stretched between them. Despite their friendship, he knew Lottres must sometimes envy him, wishing he could be as handsome, as quick with a sword. Well, there was no way for either of them to change what they had been born with.

Brastigan reached to clap him on the shoulder. "Pup," he said gruffly, "for every live hero, there's a dozen dead fools. I'd rather have you alive."

Lottres managed a smile in response.