

THE OFFICE OF
SHADOW

ALSO BY MATTHEW STURGES

MIDWINTER

THE OFFICE OF
SHADOW

MATTHEW STURGES



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This book is dedicated to
MY PARENTS

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Pibil.

Part One

Uvenra slept among the ash at Belek; the daughter of Uvenchaud was dead by the hand of Uvenchaud and slept among the ash. For a week and a day the king wept. Then Uvenchaud took his chariot and drove it to Prythme, where the gods dwelled. To confront the gods he went there. He shook his sword at the gate; he shook his shield at the gate. Uvenchaud struck the earth with his sword and the earth trembled. The gate opened. At Uvenchaud's threat did it move upon its mighty hinge.

Uvenchaud went into the courtyard at Prythme. In the courtyard Uvenchaud called out. "I am Uvenchaud, whose fist is iron, who united the wild Fae clans; the Fae clans have submitted to my will. As the ruler of them I demand parley."

Uvenchaud stood in the courtyard for a week and a day. For another week and for another day he stood and there was no answer. Uvenchaud struck the earth again with his sword and called out. One of the gods came. The bearded god Althoin, god of Wisdom, whose Gift is Insight, came to match his wits against Uvenchaud.

"Why do you come here?" said wise Althoin. "Why does Uvenchaud come here to disturb the thoughts of the gods?"

"Uvenra my daughter sleeps among the ash. She is

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dead by my hand, for she betrayed me to my enemy Achera, the dragon who has slain many.”

“You have come here to be judged by the gods.”

“I do not come to be judged by the gods. I come to defy the judgment of the gods.”

Althoin spoke. He said, “You cannot escape the judgment of the gods. We are seated above you to judge you and to command you.”

“Who seated you there?”

“We seated ourselves.”

“Then I will unseat you.” Uvenchaud struck the earth with his sword, and the god laughed at the sword.

“You cannot kill a god,” said Althoin.

Uvenchaud struck at Althoin for a week and a day. After a week and a day he stopped and Althoin was unharmed. “You cannot kill a god,” said Althoin.

Ein, god of War, whose Gift is Leadership, came to match his strength against Uvenchaud. For a week and a day Uvenchaud struck Ein with his sword. For a week and a day they struggled, but Ein was not slain.

“You cannot kill a god,” said Ein.

“What I cannot kill I can bind,” said Uvenchaud. Uvenchaud had a rope, made of fibers from the tuluk plant. The rope was dipped in dragon blood. Uvenchaud bound Ein with the rope. Ein strained at the rope, but he was bound.

One by one the other gods came to answer the challenge, and Uvenchaud bound them. He bound Senek. He bound Urul. He bound Penithe and Althoin. He bound Tur and Locket. Obore and Reinul he bound. Ehreg and Purek he bound. Tenul he bound.

In this way did Uvenchaud bind each of the twelve gods at Prythme.

In Prythme the gods lie. In Prythme they are bound.

In Prythme they are held by tuluk fibers and dragon's blood.

No god judged Uvenchaud for the slaying of Uvenra.

—from *The Chthonic Book of Mysteries*,
translated by Feven IV of the City Emerald

chapter one

The sun in Annwn perches eternally on the horizon, swimming in lazy circles that allow it to fully rise for only three hours each day. Never lighter than morning nor darker than dusk, Annwn exists in perpetual transition—always arriving, never arrived.

Annwn was discovered by the Fae long ago and was, for many centuries, a bastion of the pure Elvish folk. But it was later discovered by men from the Nymaen world, those called human, and conquered by them. Over time the two races mingled, and have now become one. Neither Fae nor Nymaen, they are simply Annwni, with some of the qualities of each.

There are many villages in Annwn, but only one city, named Blood of Arawn. The city is built upon seven great ramparts of earth and stone dug out of the otherwise flat grasslands of that world. The oldest buildings of that city—the coliseum, the Penn's villa, the temples—are built of marble, but many of these structures have since crumbled and have been replaced with more modest structures of brick. Only the obelisk at the center of the great market, called Romwll's Needle, remains unblemished after fifteen centuries. Conventional wisdom holds that a pair of thaumaturges sit in a stone room beneath the obelisk, whispering bindings without cease, for it is believed that if the needle were ever to fall, then Blood

of Arawn would fall soon after, and all of Annwn crumble into dust.

—Stil-Eret, "Light in Annwn,"
from *Travels at Home and Abroad*

Five Years Ago

The flashes of witchlight began to streak the horizon shortly after midnight and continued through the night, growing closer by the hour. Paet ran through the dappled darkness, ignoring the sky.

The attack had come as no surprise to anyone, but Mab's Army had beaten even the most alarmist estimates in its timing. Back at the Seelie Embassy, the packing and burning of documents, which had begun in an orderly fashion three days earlier, had become a frenzy of activity. Bags were hurriedly packed; valuables were sewn into the linings of garments; empty kerosene barrels were stuffed with dossiers and set aflame.

None of this was of any concern to Paet.

Blood of Arawn was an ancient city. Not as old, perhaps, as one of its Seelie counterparts, but it appeared much older as a result of governmental indifference down the ages. The cobbles in the streets were uneven, some missing, and Paet could hear carts and carriages jouncing across them in the street beyond his darkened alley. He could also hear shouts and occasional shrieks, as certain of the populace considered the reputation of the encroaching conquerors and decided not to take their chances. Paet could hardly blame them; life under the Unseelie was certain to be a disappointment for those who decided to stay.

A group of a dozen Chthonic coenobites clattered past Paet, their faces calm, their legendary indifference suiting them well this night. Their saffron-dyed robes brushed the cobblestones, the bells sewn into their fabric quietly jingling. As the state religion in all but name, the Chthonics would be allowed to continue so long as they acknowledged Mab as a goddess, and superior to their own. This the Chthonics would happily agree to do, praising

Mab publicly and ignoring her in private. Their own deities had been subdued eons earlier and could scarcely take offense. Or so the stories went; Paet had no use for religion.

There was a scintillating flash in the sky. A moment later the ground shook and Paet stumbled. He stopped and listened as the low rumble of reitic concussions echoed down the alley. Waves of heat from the battle outside had begun to roll over the walls before Paet had left the embassy, and now the city both felt and smelled like a tavern kitchen: stifling, stinking of sweat and overripe food. Paet felt the prickling of perspiration beneath his heavy linen shirt. He continued running.

The district of Kollws Vymynal covered the smallest of Blood of Arawn's seven hills. The East Gate was set into the wall at the foot of Kollws Vymynal, which put it closest to the fighting outside. Here Paet could just hear the clash of blades and the shrieks of horses and men mixed in with thundering hooves and reitic blasts.

How long had it been since he'd left the embassy? His internal time sense told him it was only about twenty minutes. That gave him just enough time to retrieve Jenien and make it to the Port-Herion Lock before the Masters shut the thing down, stranding them in Annwn. Not the end of the world, but close enough.

The streets of Kollws Vymynal twisted and doubled back upon themselves, and what signs existed were printed in tiny ancient script that beggared deciphering. The district's inhabitants had either bolted themselves inside their homes, drawing the curtains and shutters tight, or had joined the frantic knots of refugees. Most were headed toward the Southwest Gate, which meant that Paet was fighting against their current. From the city they would beg passage to a different world or strike out southward, hoping to disappear into the plains villages.

The clock in a nearby Chthonic temple struck three and Paet whispered a curse. This was taking too long.

Paet finally found the address he was looking for at the end of a small cul-de-sac, a four-story tenement that smelled heavily of burnt cooking oil and pepper and rot. This was the address Jenien had written down in her logbook when she'd left the embassy that morning, long before word of Mab's invasion

had reached the city. Just the address and a name: Prae Benesile. All she'd told Paet was that she was going to visit a "person of interest," which could mean just about anything. By nightfall, while Blood of Arawn convulsed in preparation for its imminent surrender, she still hadn't returned. Paet had waited for her until he could wait no longer and had then gone after her.

"We won't hold the lock for you," Ambassador Traet had told him diffidently. Everything about Traet was hesitant and noncommittal; his appointment had been a sinecure, and laughably so. In happier times, Annwn had been a cozy assignment. Now Traet was in over his head, but at least he had the sense to realize it. "If you're not back by sunrise," Traet had said, stuffing a valise haphazardly with documents, "you're on your own."

Paet breathed deeply ten times. He consciously slowed his heart and forced out the remainder of the prickly heat that filled his blood. The fear of the body could be controlled easily, but for the fear of the mind there was no cure. Only action, despite it.

At the end of the street someone smashed the window of a bakery and grabbed a basket of bread amid surprised shouts.

Paet let himself into the tenement building and hurried up the stairs, making no sound that any Fae or Annwni could hear; of course, the things he was most concerned about were neither, and had excellent hearing. Still. The stairway was filled with cooking smells and body odor. When he reached the third floor he stepped carefully out of the stairwell. The narrow hallway was empty; several doors along its length were open, their inhabitants apparently not seeing the point of locking up behind them. Many of the older, poorer residents of Annwn had fought against Mab's Army in the Sixweek War twenty years previously, and had apparently had enough of the Unseelie for a lifetime.

The apartment Paet was searching for was near the end of the hall. Its door was open as well, though light still burned within. Paet took a long, serrated knife from within his cloak, testing the blade with his thumb by force of habit. He pushed the door open gently and waited, listening. His hard-learned caution warred in his mind with his sense of urgency. If ever there was a time to take a risk, this was it. He swore under his breath and stepped into the apartment.

It was small, a single room lit by a lone witchlamp sconce set into the wall. The long-untuned bilious green light cast harsh shadows over the furniture, placing imagined adversaries in every corner. A tattered cot slumped beneath the waxed-paper window. A chipped chamber pot sat in the corner. Books and bits of paper and parchment were everywhere, piled on the floor, leaned in uneven stacks against the wall, scattered across the cot. There was no sign of Jenien.

Stop and think. Breathe. Relax and smooth the edges of consciousness. Paet picked up a book at random and opened it. It was written by Prae Benesile himself, a work of philosophy, something to do with the history of the Chthonic religion. He put it down and picked up another. This one was a collection of Thule religious poetry, prayers to the bound gods, hymns of supplication, prophecies of liberation and doom. A sampling of the rest of the books revealed most of them to be of a kind: works of philosophy, sacred texts—many regarding the Chthonics, but also some Arcadian scrolls, a few codices from the Annwni emperor cult. Some were written in languages that Paet didn't recognize. There was nothing here to indicate that Prae Benesile was anything other than a reclusive scholar.

Paet sniffed. Blood. Blood had been spilled in this room, and recently. He knelt down and examined the dusty floorboards. Too many shadows. Paet glanced toward the window, shrugged, and created a stronger, pure white witchlight that suffused the entire room. The blood on the floor was tacky and brown, smeared in a scuffle. Paet heard the choking cough from beneath the cot just as his eyes followed the trail of drying blood toward it. He tested his grip on the knife and then channeled Motion and drew the cot quickly backward with a twist of his mind.

Jenien lay curled in a fetal position, clutching her abdomen, breathing raggedly. She looked up at him, and her eyes went wide in her pale face.



“Watching,” she whispered. “Bel Zheret are here.”

Paet's heart leapt forcefully at the name. He stood and whirled, brandishing the knife. Nothing moved.

He turned back to Jenien and knelt before her. "If they were here I either slipped past them, or they're long gone."

"Said they'd be back for me," Jenien wheezed. She was having trouble breathing. Paet gently pulled her hands away from her belly, pulled aside her shredded blouse. Jenien was going to die; there was nothing he could do for her. These were wounds that not even a Shadow could recover from.

Paet found a pillow on the overturned cot and put it under Jenien's head. Her hair was wet with perspiration. She reached for his wrist and grabbed it with weak fingers.

"Mab's coming," Jenien observed. "Thought we'd have a few more days."

"Things at the embassy have become frantic to say the least."

Jenien chuckled softly. "Traet running around like a headless chicken?"

"Yes."

"Is that knife sharp, Paet?" she said after a brief pause.

"I'm getting you out of here," he said. "Just rest a moment longer."

"Remember that night in Sylvan?" she asked. She was starting to slur her speech. Her body trembled. "The little theater with the terrible play?"

"I remember," Paet said, smiling.

"I bet if we were normal we could have fallen in love that night," she said, sighing.

Paet felt his emotions receding as she spoke. The world became flat. Jenien was an object, a bleeding thing with no impact. A problem to be solved. Was this lack of feeling something he'd always had, or something he'd developed? He couldn't remember. Had he become empty like this when he became a Shadow, or was it the emptiness that qualified him for the job? It didn't seem to matter.

"It was the mulled wine," he said, sitting her up. "It was strong. Hard to tell through the cinnamon and cloves."

She winced as he maneuvered himself behind her. "You looked very dashing. You had one of those red cloaks that were so popular back then."

"Just blending in," he said. Then, after a moment, "What was so important about Prae Benesile, Jenien?"

She shook her head sadly and worked to speak clearly. "Someone from the City of Mab had been to see him. Five times in the past year. I was just curious. Bel Zheret showed up when—" She winced.

Paet brought up the knife. "They take him?"

Jenien nodded. "He struggled; they killed him."

"Ah."

"I don't want to die," she said. It was a statement, merely an observation.

"We've been dead for a long time," he whispered in her ear. He drew the knife across her throat in a quick, sure motion, and pulled her neck back to hasten the bleeding. She shook; her chest lurched once, then twice. He waited until he was certain she was dead, checking her eyes. He looked into them until all the life had gone out of them. It took time. Dying always took time.

Paet took a deep breath and braced his knee against her back. He put the serrated blade of the knife to Jenien's throat again, using the original cut as a guide. He buried his other hand in her hair and pulled, hard, as he began to saw.

Ligament popped. Metal ground against bone. With a sickening crunch, vertebrae parted. A few more strokes and the remaining skin tore loose soundlessly. Jenien's head swung obscenely in his grasp.

He laid it gently on the floor and reached into his cloak. Among the few items he'd brought with him from the embassy was a wax-lined canvas bag, for just this purpose. He unfolded the bag and placed Jenien's head, dripping with blood and sweat, gently inside.

That's what you got for being a Shadow.



He didn't hear them so much as feel the disturbance of the air as they flowed into the room.

Paet turned and saw two tall, dark figures flanking the door. For an instant they looked as surprised as he, but to their credit, they recovered more quickly than Paet did. The first one had his sword out before Paet could begin to react.

Paet stepped back, feeling the position of the corpse behind him and moving easily around it. He stepped into a ready stance, his knife already warm in his hand.

The first swordsman closed on Paet, and Paet got a good look into the man's eyes. Black, empty black, stretching inward to infinity.

Bel Zheret.

Paet was a dangerous man. But going up against two Bel Zheret in a closed space was suicide. He backed up, toward the dingy window of waxed paper.

“You’re a Shadow, aren’t you?” said the first swordsman. He smiled pleasantly. “My name is Cat. It would be my sincere pleasure to kill you.”

“It would be my sincere pleasure for you not to.”

“Just so. But I must insist. I have never killed one of you.”

“Oh. In that case I’m not going to fight you,” said Paet, sheathing the knife.

The Bel Zheret stopped short, flicking his blade in the air. The grin faded, replaced with sincere disappointment. “Why not?”

“If I’m going to die anyway, I’d prefer to give you neither the pleasure nor the experience of engaging me in combat. The next time you come against a Shadow, I’d prefer that you have no personal knowledge of our tactics, our speed, or our reflexes. That way, you can be more easily defeated than by one of my colleagues.”

Cat pondered this, never taking his eyes off of Paet. “Well,” he said, shrugging, “we can still torture you.”

He waved the other Bel Zheret forward. “Restrain him, Asp,” he said.

Asp moved with astonishing fluidity and quickness. He didn’t seem to tread through the room so much as unfold across it, his limbs elastic, perhaps even multijointed. No matter how many times Paet saw this skill employed, it unnerved him.

Paet took a deep breath and unsheathed his knife again, rearing back for a sudden forward attack against Cat, carefully weighing the cloth bag in his other hand. Cat prepared to block Paet’s attack, but no attack came. Paet instead added to his rearward momentum by shoving off with his back foot, launching himself toward and through the window. The third-story window.

Falling backward, unable to see the ground, Paet considered his chances for survival. The descent seemed to go on for eternity. He concentrated and slowed his heart again, deliberately letting his muscles go slack. He even willed his bones to soften and become more flexible, though he had no sense of whether it was a good idea, or whether it would even work.

Finally, he hit the cobblestones on his back, at the angle he'd desired. Jenien's head made a sick, muffled thump as it struck. In his hurry, Paet had forgotten the knife in his left hand, and he felt the snap of his wrist as it was wrenched by the hilt's impact. How many of Paet's wrist bones broke simultaneously he couldn't guess. More than one. There was no pain yet, but that would come in a few seconds.

More prominent at the moment were the pain along his spine and his inability to breathe, the sharp crack of his skull against stone. So perhaps not exactly the angle he'd intended. He was still alive, however, and his legs felt fine; that was all that mattered.

Paet climbed slowly to his feet, looking up at the window. Cat was already drawing his head back inside the room. The waxed-paper window-pane fluttered down crazily in the shifting breeze of the cul-de-sac. He could already hear the steps on the stair, Asp already dispatched. He picked up the sack containing Jenien's head and ran.

Blindly at first, Paet raced out of the cul-de-sac and turned right, for no particular reason. He would need to make his way back west, but not by the most direct route, nor by the most secretive. He would have to split the difference, taking random turnings and inconvenient doublings in order to throw off a pair of Bel Zheret, who would already be considering all of the things that Paet was currently thinking. They outnumbered him, they weren't fleeing, and neither of them had just fallen out of a third-floor window. These were tangible assets that Paet couldn't at the moment figure out how to turn into disadvantages. On the positive side, the night that he fled into was growing more chaotic by the minute.

He kept running, the ringing in his ears from the fall replaced by the sounds of battle, ever closer, the clatter of feet and hooves on stone, shouting. He smelled smoke; somewhere nearby a building was burning. On some of the faces he passed, worry was being replaced with panic. The Unseelie were no longer *coming*; they were *here*. Life in Annwn was about to change significantly.

As Paet turned another corner into the wide avenue leading back toward Kollws Kapytlyn, his left hand, still somehow grasping the knife, slammed hard into the post of a pottery merchant's cart being pushed in the other

direction. His vision dimmed and his gorge rose as the pain from the broken wrist leapt up his arm, into his brain and then his stomach. Continuing to run, though slower, he considered dropping the bag. He couldn't defend himself while he carried it.

Looking back, he saw Asp now entering the market from the same alley that Paet had. The Bel Zheret caught his eye and moved toward him, shoving a fruit vendor's cart aside with a strength that made Paet wince. Empress Mab's operatives were getting stronger, faster, more intelligent. Whatever the black art was that grew them in the bowels of her flying cities, it was improving with every year.

So there was one. Where was the other one? Had he run ahead, plotting a tangential course, or was he behind the one he'd just seen? Which had been at the window? Which at the stairs? In the pain and hurry, Paet couldn't remember.

Scattered thinking kills quicker than poison. That was one of Master Jedron's favorite adages.

Paet ducked into a doorway and risked closing his eyes just long enough to concentrate and cut off the pain from his wrist, slow his heart, and clear out the essence of fear in his blood. Better to lose a moment of his head start than to give up his mind to panic and pain.

Again he ran, now turning into a blind alley that was dark and cool, the walls close together. It was quieter here; the commotion beyond became a homogenous roar. The smell of smoke, though, was stronger. Nearer the fire.

Condensation dripped down the moss-covered stones. Though Paet knew Blood of Arawn well, and had spent hours poring over maps a few days earlier, he wasn't exactly sure where he was at the moment, or whether this alley would take him to another street or to a dead end. Still, it was the unexpected thing to do, and that was his primary defense at the moment.

The alley opened on a wide street, and Paet hurried into the center of the city, where the giant obelisk atop the Kapytlyn rose up and vanished into the blankness of night. Asp was nowhere to be seen. The crowds were thicker here, the city's dependents waiting for news or instructions. Paet knew that those instructions wouldn't come until Mab's officers took control of the place. The rightful governor was long gone, having taken refuge in the Seelie

Kingdom earlier that day, along with a score of top officials. Most everyone else in government had already fled to the countryside.

Paet stopped a moment to get his bearings—he'd actually been running away from the Port-Herion Lock, not toward it. Inwardly cursing himself, he turned and began again. Thankfully the chaos surrounding him, which would normally have been a hindrance, worked in his favor. At any other time, a limping, sweating Fae brandishing a bloody knife would undoubtedly be noticed. The first rule of Shadows was to draw no attention; that was the ostensible meaning of the nickname. Though not the true one.

Paet breathed deep and concentrated again, hoping to heal the wrist enough to fight. He was running low on *re*, having used up much of his stored magical essence in his various reachings-in today. He did the best he could, then headed toward a side street that led to the Kollws Ysglyn, and the Port-Herion Lock beyond.

The Bel Zheret named Cat was there waiting for him, sword drawn.

Paet dropped the bag and rushed him, praying that his momentum would be enough to take the man down, but the Bel Zheret stayed on his feet and, though unable to bring his blade to bear, punched Paet hard in the stomach. There was something on his hand, turning his knuckles into spikes, and the Bel Zheret twisted those spikes into Paet's midsection, not hard enough to draw blood through Paet's cloak, but still painful.

Paet pulled back, stepping hard on the side of Cat's knee, a lucky move, and the Bel Zheret crumpled, falling backward against the wall. Paet knew from experience that having your knee kicked out of its socket was one of the more painful things that could happen in a fight, short of being run through, and he was amazed that Cat was still standing, let alone continuing to swing his blade.

For an instant, fear tumbled into Paet's mind and he was certain that he was going to die. Right here in this alley, carrying the severed head of a woman with whom he'd once made love. All his regrets spilled onto the dank cobblestones. Where was Master Jedron with a homily against the inevitability of death? Certainly one existed, and it was something stoic and tough. Well. Better to die here in an alley than in a dimly lit room with the Bel Zheret. They would torture him slowly and effectively, and despite his training they would cut his knowledge out of him. With their teeth.

There was a sound in the alley. A pair of burly city guards were approaching, their clubs out and ready. Both looked tense and afraid. They'd been given instructions to remain and to keep the peace until the bitter end. Neither one appeared happy about it.

Cat spun Paet around and shoved Paet's face hard against the wall. A knife pierced his back, went deep, and Paet felt something in his body give. A kidney? The knife traced a path across his back and caught on something hard, a vertebra. With Paet's enhanced sensitivity toward his own body, he felt it in excruciating detail, felt the nerve tissue shredding like spiderweb. Another hard shove and Paet's nose smashed into the bricks of the wall.

Paet slid down the wall and watched Cat begin a methodical slaughter of the two guardsmen, who barely had time to shriek before he began hurting them. One of the Bel Zheret's few weaknesses was that they took a bit too much pleasure in causing pain; perhaps it was an unintended side effect of whatever it was that created them. Perhaps, worse, it was intended.

With the very last of his *re*, Paet attempted to repair those nerves, to find his way into the kidney and send healing toward it. These were still killing wounds, but perhaps they would kill a bit more slowly now, and give him time to reach the lock before he died. Paet now reached out, out of his body and out into Blood of Arawn, looking for life, looking for *re* that he could steal. Two children in an adjoining house, huddling in bed. He drew as much from them as he could without killing them. They'd be sick for a few days, nothing more. It would be the least of their worries. He would kill the children if he had to, but not unless it was absolutely necessary. And it wasn't absolutely necessary. Not yet.

While the Bel Zheret continued its work on the guards, Paet exited the alley in the other direction as silently as possible, picking up the bag as he ran. The knife wound seared through his back, making the broken wrist seem mild in comparison. He could sense fluids in his body mixing that should not mix, blood leaking into places where blood did not belong. Despite his best efforts, he might not make it.

Again he considered abandoning Jenien. A loose cobblestone would do the trick, crush her brain until it was utterly unreadable. But he couldn't do it. Killing her had been bad enough. Nor could he simply toss the cloth bag

into one of the now-many burning buildings that lined the street along which he staggered.

A clock in the main temple struck the hour, and Paet felt what blood remained in him drain toward his feet. The Port-Herion Lock would be shut down soon. Any minute now. They would not wait for him.

Running. Breathing hard in his chest. Now no longer caring whether he was seen or what kind of impression he made. Get to the gate, through the lock, onto Seelie soil. This was all that mattered now.

There was a side street that ran along the base of Kollws Kapytlyn, where the Southwest Gate stood, and Paet reached it, out of breath, after what seemed like hours. The street was empty. It ran along a ridge line, overlooking the endless prairies of Annwn. In the distance, one of the giant, tentacled boars, the Hwch Ddu Cwta, raised its head to the sky in the dark, amidst the noise.

Paet's legs felt like they'd been wrapped in cold iron; his breath came like knife thrusts. Blood dripped down his back, thickening along the length of his thigh. He stumbled once, then again. He should have killed those two children; it had been necessary after all. He was sworn to protect the children of the Seelie Kingdom, not the children of Annwn.

He struggled again to his feet. The pain in his back, in his chest, in his wrist—they all conspired against him, hounding him. Each had its own personality, its own signature brand of hurt.

The city gate was up ahead, left open and unguarded. Beyond he could see the lock glowing in the distance. The portal was still open!

One of the Bel Zheret tackled him hard from behind, his shoulder biting into the knife wound. The bag containing Jenien's head tumbled away. Whether his attacker was Cat or Asp he couldn't tell; not that it mattered now. If it was Cat, then he'd get his wish to kill a Shadow after all.

But he wouldn't get Jenien. Paet crawled toward the bag, allowing the Bel Zheret free access to his back, which his assailant readily exploited, kicking him hard in the kidney.

Paet collapsed on top of the bag and, with the last of his strength, crushed Jenien's skull with his hands. It was harder than he would have thought. Mab wouldn't learn any of her secrets now.

The Bel Zheret knelt over Paet and began delivering efficient, evenly timed blows to Paet's spine, then turned him over and dealt equally with Paet's face. Paet felt his nose crack, his lower jaw split in two. Teeth rolled loose on his tongue; he swallowed one. He felt ribs crack, first one, then two more. Something popped in his chest and suddenly he could no longer breathe. There was no sound except the dull rush of blood in his ears. The world spun; the beating, the pounding receded, then faded altogether.



A few minutes later Traet, the Seelie ambassador, followed by a pair of clerks lugging baggage and valises thick with papers, literally stumbled over Paet's body.

"Oh, dear!" Traet cried. "How awful!"

"Is he alive?" asked one of the clerks, kneeling.

"We don't have time for that," Traet muttered, walking past. "There will be casualties."

"Sir, it's Paet!"

The ambassador quickly turned, his eyes wide. "Gather him up, then! Quickly!"

The kneeling clerk felt for a pulse. "He's dead, sir. Perhaps we oughtn't to bother. . . ."

"Don't be a fool," said Traet. "Hand me your bags and take him. Now!"

Neither the clerks nor Traet noticed the cloth bag that had fallen from Paet's hand, now resting in a clump of bushes just outside the gate.

Once the ambassador's party was safely through the lock, the Master of the Gates opened a small door on the side of the massive portal. He adjusted the ancient machinery, and a loud hum joined the cacophony of flames and the percussion of war from across the city. While a sextet of extremely fierce-looking members of the Seelie Royal Guard held back the small knot of would-be refugees that had surrounded the lock, the Master closed the door, carrying a heavy part of the lock's inner workings with him. He stepped through and beckoned the guardsmen to follow. They backed slowly into the silken portal, not so much disappearing as gliding out of existence. The tips

of their swords were the last things to vanish. The instant the last of them was through, the portal went dark, revealing behind it only a veneer of highly polished black stone. The desperate crowd banged their fists against it, some weeping, others shouting.

Just before dawn a tocsin sounded in the city and the Unselie flag was raised upon the obelisk. All was quiet. The crowd at the Port-Herion Lock hesitantly turned away from the dead portal and went their separate ways—some back into the city, their heads hung low; some out into the pampas, not looking back.