

STRANGE SOBRIQUET

By Brent Bowen

Chapter 1 - Genizah

The vegetation held the crumbling columns together, wrapping their vines like a bandage around the dilapidated supports. With the verdant mass covering everything, it took a keen eye for one to notice the structure. A person was likely to walk past it a hundred times without detecting its existence. That was exactly what the residents had in mind. They didn't want it found--ever.

So it was no surprise to Range that he found the path deserted. The rustic figure, a silver and white-furred Skuhy, knew the way, but he paused just the same, lifting his muzzle to catch a waft of air, trying to snag a scent and make certain he had not been followed.

Satisfied that no one had trailed him, he sped to the temple. This was to be the time of their rendezvous. He charged through the coarse bromegrass without hesitation, bounding over fallen ash trees and ducking under overgrown limbs. The plush fur of Range's ears bristled when he picked up the familiar hum not too far off in the forest. It was the sound of the Portrans. This network of portals allowed passage to every major destination within Nydimm, though several locations were kept a well-guarded secret. Such was the case with Genizah.

They must be here.

He expected cries from the baby and the jovial voices of his comrades, but they were not there. Only the wind's whispers and the white noise of the Genis Falls sounded off to the east.

"Calm yourself," he muttered. "Scout says you worry too easily."

He walked up to the copper statue of Feraj and faced the rendition of the famous wizard. The wizard's arm extended into the air with a tarnished palm resting open, performing one of his famous spells. Range stepped onto the plinth and leaned against the statue, staring up into the face of the man who was said to have the power to pass between worlds. Without the use of Cirri Diamonds.

"We could use you right now," Range said, his ears drooping.

He looked off into the woods--still no sign of his comrades. It was crucial they return with the child, but Range had mixed feelings about the boy's arrival. Without him, their

world would face a cataclysm unlike any they had known before-- he understood this much from the scholars. However, rumors persisted throughout Genizah that once the boy was rescued, a major responsibility faced him.

He was soon to be the caretaker and protector for this child, a responsibility he did not believe he was ready to accept. He was exceptional at rescuing things, normally relics desired by the scholarly. In fact, the Staff of Ignedyia consumed his thoughts these days. And if it hadn't been for the attacks on the children, he would still be in Solgrave now, working to rescue the artifact some believed held the power to save the ancient city from the rising tide waters. For that, he already didn't like the boy.

But if rumors were true, he Range had been chosen to defend him, or rather, not defend so much as to care for the child. As if rime cut through his dense fur, he shivered at the thought of carrying out a task this significant. Other Cirri children were in danger, as well, but the scholars only wanted him and the other Skuhies to defend and rescue this particular infant, who, within the last weeks, had become referred to as Mith.

Hadn't this been the name reserved for the savior of their world, the kin of Feraj? He looked back again into the face of the wizard. "Is it true he's your descendant?"

He half expected the statue answer back. But once it did not, Range continued his speculation on the origin of the boy's name, unable to determine whether Mith was a variation of myth, as in legend, or mithridate, the idea of a universal antidote.

Lost in his thoughts, he nearly missed the tufts of fur floating out of the woods. Damn hazard of our kind, he thought. This would be the death of them one day for sure. Even though Skuhies excelled in almost every way as adventurers, shedding fur didn't lend itself to stealth. But this time, the sight of floating tufts brought him joy, a sign his comrades had arrived.

His heightened hearing then picked up the panting of other Skuhies. Range's three brethren stepped from the trees several moments later. The first to walk through was the largest of his comrades, Scout. The amber-hued Skuhy limped slightly, but was strong enough to carry the infant they had set out to rescue.

Durham and Tilt followed, peering cautiously behind them. Neither of them was as large as Scout, but Durham was a nimble swordsman and of perfect markings with his blue eyes, symmetrical grey mask and dense coat. Tilt, while slight of build, was scrappy, his fearlessness welcome in missions that required bravery.

"Can you manage?" Range asked, noticing Scout's limp and the others' nervous glances.

"Just a nick. We clear...?"

"No sign of the Sundu here," Range said, his hackles rising at the thought of their presence so near to Genizah. "Where's the boy's mother?"

Scout's muzzle and ears drooped. "Dead...killed during the boy's rescue."

"What? How?"

The Skuhies had known every detail of the attack, including

when it would occur. The plan was to arrive before the attackers and rescue both the boy and his mother. Yet the timing only allowed them to arrive minutes before the Sundu, lest they tip their hand. What had changed?

"We'll ask the scholars. All I know is that the Sundu got there first. Fortunately for the boy, his mother's killer spent several moments grieving her passing and we slipped out of the chamber with the child before he could realize we were there."

"I wonder if this new development will force Cellach to deploy us to Garstaad."

Scout threw up a paw in disgust. "We are not ready to move against--?"

As soon as he made the motion, a crashing sound reverberated off the trees of the forest, shimmering the leaves. Before anyone could object, Tilt bounded alone on all fours back into the woods, his long tail curving over his back.

"Tilt, no! Fool!" Range rasped out, but too late to stop his comrade.

"Guess it doesn't matter if we make it through all of this," Scout said over Range's shoulder. "What's important is that we get the child out."

Range turned and joined the other Skuhies huddled around the infant. They stretched their necks to lean in as closely as possible without actually nuzzling the child. But Range couldn't get close enough, ignoring the pain from the mats of fur pulling at the back of his ears.

"Do you really think he's the one?" Durham asked in a

guttural gnarl, nudging the boy with a paw.

Scout cocked a disgusted eyebrow at Durham but otherwise ignored the remark. "He's so small. I'm just amazed he survived the journey," he said, snuffling the child's head.

He brushed the boy's ear, sending him into a series of high-pitched coos.

The child's sudden warbling made them more conscious of the silence in the woods. Range lifted his ears to listen for any hints of Tilt's progress.

"Should we check on him?" asked Durham. "Can you hear anything?"

A faint shuffling came from the trees. "Shhhhh!" exclaimed Range.

The rustling of branches made them all jump to attention. Still holding Mith in one arm, Scout drew his sword. Range and Durham dropped to their knees, peering down the stocks of their crossbows, molten bolts loaded and their leather-gloved paws gripped near the triggers.

They were all somewhat disappointed when Tilt appeared from the path in the forest.

"Whoa!" Tilt yelled, somersaulting away from the direction of the crossbows. "Don't get carried away boys. It was nothing. A tree collapsed where we emerged."

Range scanned his fellow Skuhies and watched their ears flatten in a collective show of relief. The rescue in the Ruals must have been grisly, Range thought. His comrades were never this jumpy. Range knew none of them would admit it openly,

instead their nervous humor offered further proof these adventurers had seen enough action for one day.

"I'm ready for an ale," suggested Scout, his tongue hanging from one side.

"Speaking of ready, I'm ready for my trip to Ensnac. Last month, I got an offer to star in a touring theatre production," said Durham.

"You, in a show?" said Range.

"That's right."

The more he thought about it, he could imagine Durham, with his quintessential good looks, in a play. "Can you even act?"

"They wanted to achieve a certain authenticity," Durham contested.

"Oh...you're authentic all right. An authentic moron," joked Tilt. They all snickered, baring their long fangs. "They'd send you packing as soon as you drooled on the script."

The laughter stopped abruptly as they reached the viney cover that hid the entrance to the main temple of Genizah.

Range dug his hand deep into a leather pouch slung over his shoulder. "Tilt, clear away the brush."

Tilt and Durham obliged, pulling at the mass of growth and revealing the ragged limestone of the temple.

Range removed a crystal from the pouch, which looked like two squat butterflies placed back to back. The sunlight glinted off the crystal, cascading a spectrum of colors across the adventurers' fur. His eyes crinkled as he pawed an inscription that ran length-wise down the shard. He brought it to his face

and slid a claw along the ridge that had been cut all the way around each end of the crystal. Pressing it to the bridge of his muzzle, he took two steps forward to position himself better underneath the day's light and then lifted his head.

With Range looking through the crystal, the light overhead refracted the inscription on the stone wall in front of them. He located the embossed inscription midway up the wall that matched that of the crystal and moved the lit inscription down to overlay its stone sister. There the light rested before giving way to a gurgling sound that came from the limestone. The section of the stone with the inscription started to flow like molten lava. It shifted and swirled until it formed an opening just large enough to accommodate the crystal. Range waved his paw over the space, amazed the rock gave off no heat.

"The key hole is revealed...they haven't banished us yet," jested Tilt, referring to the Skuhies' sometimes tense relationship with the scholars.

Focused on inserting the key, Range ignored the joke and matched the grooves of the crystal with the slits now formed in the stone. The crystal's grooves, shaping, weight and composition were a precise match--he understood it to be impossible to duplicate. He pushed the crystal length-wise into the newly formed slot and the entire wall changed its molecular state as the key hole had done moments before.

The wall opened and the Skuhies stepped into the temple with the child. As soon as Range cleared the opening, the wall immediately solidified behind them. The crystal passed through

the stone, resting on the other side of the insertion point. He collected the temple's key and handed it to Scout, whose brows peaked in mild surprise. "An educated guess you'll be needing this."

Scout dropped the crystal into a leather pouch similar to Range's and then, somewhat reluctantly, extended to him the swaddle holding the child. "Likewise Range," Scout said. "...an educated guess."

When Range accepted the child, a cause powerful beyond anything he'd known replaced his doubts. Subconscious whispers called out to him. Protect. Defend. Care.

Falling behind his comrades, he finally dismissed this preoccupation with guarding the child and scurried out of the limestone foyer into the temple proper. It opened to a stairway that dropped them below the surface. The temple's interior was vastly different than the overgrown appearance of the exterior. The original limestone structure had been updated several times over and the only room that remained unchanged and preserved was the main library.

As they made their way through the stairwell and its levels, it was apparent the temple was no derelict, a parade of wonders and advances in magic overflowing from every lab.

Just as they passed, a smoke cloud and burst of flame escaped an entrance on the third sublevel, followed closely by a bubbling brook of liquid nitrogen and the shouts of safety personnel.

As quickly as the acrid smell from the chemical spill

filled his nose, a breeze on the next level washed it away. The cool gust danced in concert with a brilliant wave of light that swirled around their party. It never ceased to amaze Range that nearly microscopic mirrors captured the natural light from outside and returned it to the temple's interior through the ventilation system. This floor was the junction point, regulating their output to a consistent level.

For years, this whole temple had captured his curiosity. But after today, he might have to leave. And with the expected assignment, who knew whether he'd get to return.

Other Skuhies stared at them as they passed each lab and level, but none were daring enough to approach. The group kept moving through the temple, passing lab upon lab on their way to the control room above the main library. That is, until Tilt's curiosity stalled their progress.

He wandered into a lab where two assistants stood on a platform, running tests on a strange contraption, while an older scholar observed. One assistant worked to tighten a harness that strapped the equipment to the other's back. Range followed Tilt into the lab and noticed the main components of the contraption were a center canister and wide metal wings that extended a good foot beyond the width of the scholar's shoulders.

"Boys! Take a peek at this menace," Tilt yelled. "You seen anything like this before?"

"Come on Tilt, we must get to the main library," Range begged, staring dutifully at the child in his arms, while he stepped further into the lab.

Scout and Durham followed.

Yet Tilt descended further in the chamber. "No, I'm serious. What in Feraj's name is this thing?"

When the others entered the lab, the object of Tilt's fascination became clear. Their ears all spiked, inquisitive. The older scholar stepped from behind his desk and motioned his hand to the young assistants, urging them to ignore the Skuhies and continue with their preparations.

With the senior man's wide paunch and pointy beard, Range recognized him as Talimar. "You have every reason to wonder. It's quite impressive, yet so simple we can't believe we've overlooked it for so many years. Xavier, harness Lucian in--all the way," instructed the older scholar. "Let's reward their curiosity."

The Skuhies all looked on as Xavier tightened the last belt and stepped down from the platform. Lucian tugged on his harness to ensure that it was secure.

"Everything's set," he called out, smiling wryly at the Skuhies, their ears erect and heads cocked in anticipation of the demonstration.

Talimar nodded. Lucian crouched slightly, as if he were trying to duck a punch, and then he jumped. But he did not come down. He continued hovering in the air.

A chorus of half-howled oohs and ahs came from the Skuhy contingency, Range joining in.

"The design is quite simple really," Talimar said, pointing in the air to the center of Lucian's back. "The canister is

designed to hold nine tylar seeds, so when the body moves, the seeds, they react off one another to hold you afloat. Bringing you back to the ground is the only motion the human... I mean, a being's body can't perform because it was never intended to leave it in the first place. For this purp--"

Talimar peered past the Skuhies. Range turned in the direction of his scholar's glance. He almost dropped Mith when he saw who was standing in the doorway.

"Ahem. Are you infernal Skuhies going to keep me waiting all day?" asked Cellach, the chancellor of Genizah. The lanky man tapped his needle-like fingers slowly against the limestone doorjamb. "Nice work, Talimar--and team--on the Phoenix project. I will certainly be back to get the details. But right now I need the Skuhies to join me in the library chamber."

"Of course, sir," Talimar replied, then addressed the Skuhies. "Sorry gentlemen, but you will need to join us another time."

The Skuhies stepped into the main corridor and found Cellach more cordial than they anticipated, considering their disregard for the urgency of returning the child. He didn't say a word, only spreading his arms wide, urging them to join him. Range studied the man, but with the loose ebony folds around Cellach's eyes his expression was its normal sad self.

Range lifted his muzzle. Nothing. No fear, no nervousness, no anger. He was always impressed at how Cellach could disrupt their natural empathy.

The senior scholar approached Range and leaned in to look

at the baby. Range resisted the instinctive rumble that was building in his throat.

"May I?" Cellach asked in a way that showed he understood the power of Range's obligation to the child.

Range relaxed. "You may."

Cellach's long, shriveled hands opened the blanket that covered the child.

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Gabriel moved through the crowded castle courtyard, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight from the Constable to whom he owed several tasks. The crowd pressed toward the stage, allowing him to pass with relative ease. He paused for a moment to stare at the titanium statue of King Varick, resting in the center of the courtyard. Even in the morning's haze the metal visage glistened.

"Curse you," Gabriel muttered under his breath. "You had to announce the succession now."

As his eyes lingered on the towering monument, Gabriel's curiosity piqued as a few passersby discussed the very topic.

"You know what the King was waiting for?" asked a man dressed in a fine wool houpelande with modest bezants. "The last Cirri Child, that's what. He was born last week."

"No, I didn't know," replied his friend. "It's tantamount to Utopia, isn't it?"

"Yes. That I can recall, all twelve alive together has never happened..." the man said, his voice finally collapsing underneath the weight of the crowd's din.

Cirri Children were special for sure, but Gabriel didn't understand what they had to do with the King's legacy. Ultimately, though, it didn't matter. The succession had brought him home to Adon. And he hadn't wanted to return.

Gabriel sighed, giving the statue one last curse before continuing on to the blacksmith's tent. He hustled to the massive canvas structure, the motley flaps tied back, cinders of the trade drifting into air. The blacksmith cradled a sword he had brought from the fire.

Feraj, I can't remember his name, Gabriel thought. Have I really been away that long. The blacksmith shouldn't take it personally, he justified--he'd forget his own name if given the chance.

At seeing Gabriel, the blacksmith tossed the fiery sword in a bucket of water, and stepped to the split oak that served as his counter.

"Oy, Gabriel. I've been expecting you," he said, sticking a hand in the air and making a rubbing gesture between his thumb

and forefingers before nodding toward the crowd. "Don't tell them, but I know you've made me money."

Gabriel looked into the crowd. The announcement of the King's appointment was expected any moment from Sir Walter, the Duke of Adon, and ubiquitous wagers exchanged hands on the expected outcome.

"Oh, why is that?" Gabriel asked, turning back.

"Your mere presence here tells me who will be named," the smitty said, smiling. "The famous Grand Warden Macallan in Adon. A very rare occurrence. Hasn't happened since...well...you know all about that."

"I..." Gabriel stammered, not focused on the smitty's wager, but the man's statement of Macallan's last visit. The Grand Warden had discovered Gabriel working in the courtyard four years earlier. After making arrangements with the Constable, who had been his caretaker--his mother having been killed during child birth--Macallan saw something in him and decided to make him his squire.

"...wouldn't know anything about the succession. We're simply here to protect the Duke."

The smitty frowned. "Whe'tter I'm right or not, we're glad you're back. Haven't seen the Constable, have ya?"

Gabriel thought of the Constable and the numerous tasks associated with the celebration to follow this evening, activities where he had his place, but no desire to be a part.

"Owe him some work," Gabriel sighed. The action he saw as Macallan's squire had squelched his enthusiasm for such menial work as decorating dining halls. "So, honestly I'm trying to avoid him."

"I see," the blacksmith said, setting his hands on the counter, the left wrapped in bandages.

Rope-like burns appeared where the bandages hadn't covered his skin. Then the blacksmith's name came to Gabriel. Herb.

"Herb, what happened?" Gabriel asked. "You never burn yourself."

"You don't miss a beat do you? Just a boy caught unwrapping a gift a day too early," Herb said, looking at him sheepishly. "I bet you'd make a fine blacksmith yourself. Want to sit in for me?"

"No thanks. I like my current appointment just fine," he said, unable to help but wonder where he and Macallan would be if they weren't in Adon.

"Fair enough...le' me go ge' the devil." Herb said, stepping from the counter.

As Herb ducked into his tent, a set of shelves, full of bizarre trinkets, caught Gabriel's interest. It held artifacts

he had never seen the likes of before: a peculiar horn with a rubber bulb on the end, flat rectangle plates with broad numbers and letters embossed on them, metal stars the size of his finger tips, and a narrow metal and wood cannon.

Herb returned with a bundle of cloth cradled in his arms. "That's called a rifle."

Gabriel still stared, mesmerized by the items on the shelves. "I've never heard of a rifle," he said, his eyes working down the barrel, across the chamber and down to the wooden stock. "It's a weapon, right? A small cannon?"

"Very good, nor would you ever have heard of a rifle. It's not of our world, but of Hale's. What a strange..."

Gabriel shifted uncomfortably. Hale. While he had never known the man, melancholy washed over him whenever Hale's name was spoken. Macallan mentioned him often, as the two had been the best of friends.

"...this was a gift from Hale to your master," the blacksmith continued, unaware of Gabriel's momentary inattentiveness. "Too painful for him to keep, I imagine."

"Yes. It probably was," Gabriel uttered anxiously, sweat forming along his brow. He couldn't tell if it was from the heat building under his titanium armor or the awkward subject of Hale's death. How could he change the conversation without appearing rude?

He needed to because Herb continued gazing at the shelves, lost in his subject. "If the Wardens ever start favoring these contraptions, I'll be extinct. In fact, Macallan told me in Hale's world blacksmiths were a dying breed. Not that we're not a dying breed already...with all that elemental armor and all. Next thing you know they'll figure out how to cast the gel into weapons."

Positive he spotted the Constable, Gabriel dismissed the niceties of social graces and blurted out, "How's the mace?"

"Oh...yes...right...", the blacksmith sputtered and then spun around. He unfolded the layers of cloth covering the mace. "I've never seen its equal."

Nor had Gabriel. Instead of having one club, as most maces do, it had two, one on each end. The main grip was in the center, with another two grips down the shaft, closer to the clubs. Each club was shaped into ram's horns, much like the pair on Macallan's gelmail helmet.

"How much do I owe you?" Gabriel asked, staring at the weapon, now glimmering under the sunlight.

"Two Mazattis. Tell Macallan if he cleans this more often the horns won't need so much restoration."

Digging into his leather satchel, Gabriel produced the thick silver coins and exchanged them for the mace. As he tied

the weapon to his belt, he noticed the Constable's familiar girth rounding the other corner of the blacksmith's tent.

Gabriel rushed away as he was speaking. "I'll tell Macallan. Thanks, Herb!"

"Don't mention it." The words drifted behind Gabriel as he stepped into the crowd on his course back to the castle.

He followed a path along the front outer wall of the courtyard and moved to an entrance at the inner castle wall right of the banner-decorated dais. Looking now into the heart of the courtyard, he spotted someone else who wished to sidle across the grounds to the other castle entrance on the opposing side of the dais. But unlike Gabriel, she didn't seem to be having much success wading through the chaos of spectators enjoying the festivities.

Gabriel did not recognize her, but dressed in white gowns tinted with gold, she was clearly noble. And her appearance didn't help her blend in with the crowd. With her fair skin and delicate features framed by ink ribbons of hair, Gabriel conjured images of a pearl stuck in the muck of an oyster.

Though he shied away from eye contact with the young woman, he thought he caught a glimpse of a smile intended for him. Nervous, he attempted to mat down the jutting spikes of his short blond hair. With his lack of social status, he had little

right to make eye contact with the young woman, let alone to gape at her.

But taken by her beauty, he continued to stare. Some hundred feet away, she kept moving parallel to him, her striking visage bobbing in and out his view while she navigated the crowd. Satisfied she was in no real harm, Gabriel reprimanded himself for his tardiness and hurried toward his own door. With the procession starting shortly, Macallan would require his mace.

After a few moments, Gabriel reached his destination. Grabbing the door's latch, he couldn't help but take one last opportunity to admire the girl. But as he turned, he had trouble locating her.

His spine tingled, spiders spinning webs of anxiety in his stomach. A circle of men huddled over something not a hundred feet from him. Every instinct told him to investigate the group, but he was conscious of the time. Macallan was going to scold him for sure.

But he couldn't walk away from the tension buzzing in the courtyard.

Then a muffled cry tore through the mist-filled morning and Gabriel noticed a flash of gold cloth from the center of the group. He looked for the guards, but they were either all busy or too far away to call.

Gabriel shoved his way through the crowd. As he rushed toward the huddle--the indecipherable screams beating at his armor--he tore away the cloth covering Macallan's mace and shouted at the bystanders, "Stand clear!"

Once he was closer, he made out the interchange of loud yells of encouragement and cries for help.

Gabriel roared, gripping one of the spectator's cloaks at the shoulder. The man jerked, trying to rip free, but Gabriel's muscular arms and hands trapped his prey like quicksand--this guy might squirm a little, but he wasn't getting out. He shoved the man to the ground, forcing himself into the huddle. The air in the group reeked of mead. Grizzled faces raucously cheered the activity in the center. He saw little except a pinwheel of gown and bare flesh, but it was enough to satisfy any moral dilemma he might have in resorting to violence.

Gabriel used the assailant's own black cloak to drag him off the young woman. He then whipped around and lifted the man off the ground.

A tan-skinned man with flowing raven hair looked him in the eyes, scowling. He clamped his hands onto Gabriel's shoulders, thrusting his face inches from his and spoke to him in a low hiss. "We will have it eventually!"

The venom in the man's voice startled Gabriel. He dropped him to the ground and the attacker again scurried to the girl.

Gabriel lunged, jamming a mace club into the man's midsection. He jerked the mace free, ignoring the screams as the horns ripped from the man's stomach.

The assailant writhed on the ground. Gabriel gritted his teeth at the bite of the mace's backlash, the air sizzling with its electricity.

"Back off!" Gabriel yelled. He turned and swung the full length of the mace around at the crowd of onlookers. Those closest to him leapt back to keep from the weapon's sting.

After several scurried away, he knelt down to help the girl to her feet. Tears streaked the young woman's pale face and a small line of blood trickled out of the corner of her thin mouth. She hacked and gasped for breath. Gabriel tied the mace to his belt and lifted her from the ground.

"Are you hurt?" he asked as he pushed through the crowd.

Onlookers' gasps and garbled whispers surrounded them, but his only focus was delivering the girl to the guards.

"My stone. They wanted my stone."

"I've got you," he reassured her. "No one will harm you now."

"Thank y--" she offered weakly before fainting.

"Help!" he yelled. "She needs some help here!"

No answer. Only a swarm of bystanders watching his every step. Sweat dripped from his forehead and burned his eyes.

"Guards!" he bellowed. "Guards!"

To his relief, the guard from the far corner of the courtyard and another involved in a previous skirmish noticed the activity and headed toward Gabriel.

But he didn't hear the other set of footsteps. Just as Gabriel handed the young woman to the guards, a sharp stab of pain exploded through his lower back like a star burst in the galaxy above. Reaching around his torso, Gabriel felt a small blade protruding from below his titanium armor. He tore the blade from his back, blood covering his hand, and spun to face his attacker.

"It can't be. Look at his eyes!" someone yelled from the crowd.

Looking into his assailant's face, Gabriel paused in shock when he noticed the attacker's appearance. A black ring circled the iris and two vertical black bars replaced the pupil. The sting of sweat had not left his own eyes. Unsure of what he saw, he blinked to clear them. When he looked back, the assailant's eyes remained fixed for a moment with the strange mark then faded to a normal crystal blue.

By the time Gabriel fully regained his composure, the odds hadn't improved. He faced not just the man who stabbed him but

another two men, as well. They stood several feet behind the lead and all three looked similar to the first man he had pulled off the girl: dark cloaks, tan skin, and flowing black hair.

He hurried to untie the mace. But sweating and anxious, his fingers fumbled the laces. His delay gave the assailants another chance to strike. The first attacker, the one with the shifting eyes, swung a broadsword overhead.

Gabriel simply tore the mace free. In one motion, he sidestepped the attack and swung Macallan's mace underneath the arc of the sword. The assailant stepped directly into its path. The points of the ram's horns tore through the man's chest, screeches of ripping metal stinging Gabriel's ears as droplets of warm blood pelted his face.

Gabriel stepped to one side, using the first attacker's crumpled body to shield him from the left flank assault. With an uppercut blow he crushed the club of the mace into the next attacker's jaw. The man shrieked as he flipped in mid-air and then dropped in a heap to the ground. He then turned to face the third attack, but it never came.

To his amazement Macallan stood over the last assailant and pierced the man's breast with his broadsword. Gabriel stared at the man's eyes. Even in death they remained rigidly open. He was almost as shocked to see the man's eyes were not white with the

black ring and parallel bars, but in death, instead returned to a dull olive brown.

"How did you...know I was in trouble?" Gabriel asked, awestruck and struggling for breath.

Leg firmly placed on the dead man's breast, Macallan pressed against him to retrieve his blade. "Know? You'd made me wait all morning for my mace," he said, winking at Gabriel.

"Glad to see it's gleaming for the ceremony."

Tearing his sword free, he arched his back and bellowed his growling mort into the sky. Gabriel followed suit before he collapsed.