

The Seven Precepts Of The Arcana

1. The mind of Man is sacred. It is not to be violated.
2. Mana is the most powerful of all known forces. It is not to be trifled with.
3. By the natural order of things, the world will resist the operations of the sorcerer. Be ever mindful.
4. The sorcerer must know his business. He must refrain from the uncertain course.
5. The sorcerer will always be feared. He must harm no innocent and must speak only truth.
6. The sorcerer must always suspect hidden motives in one who petitions him to act on his behalf.
7. Of only one thing must a sorcerer be perfectly certain: There are laws which he does not yet know.

Theron of Malagra
First Grand Master of the Arcana



Francis W. Porretto

== *He was the greatest of us.*

— *Greater even than Theron?*

== *Impossible to say. Yet I have seen no one of his power or quality since.*

— *What was it that took him?*

== *The wasting. Its progress was swifter than any I had seen before. His suffering was mercifully short.*

— *When it took hold of him, could you not aid him?*

== *I could have done. I would have, had he agreed to it. He would not have it.*

— *Unprecedented.*

== *He was tired, Bekar. His love had passed on and his tasks were far behind him. He wanted to rest.*

— *A very long rest.*

== *He had earned it. Few could say the same with as much justice.*

— *Had you no fear that we might need him again?*

== *Of course I feared. That did not give me the right to override his clearly expressed wishes.*

— *It still seems a waste.*

== *Perhaps. But we had him when we needed him.*

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Anam

The night-gale had abated with the touch of the sun. Gregor stirred, slid a hand to his eyes and teased his cloak away from his face. Day was returning to the Great Waste.

He shielded his eyes from blown grit as he uncurled and stretched his cramped limbs. If Aral was correct and the wind spoke true, he would reach the next oasis that day. He fished a jerky strip from his pack and chewed it without pleasure as he set off, head bent against the wind and the sun at his back.

The sun was just clear of the horizon when he planted his staff upon the western ridge and peered down at a verdant plain.

The green expanse stretched toward the horizon. Hovels and huts dotted the land, from the foothills of the mountain he bestrode as far west as he could see. Smoke rose from chimneys and cooking fires. In the distance, beneath a belt of low-hanging clouds, lay a hint of an obstruction, perhaps another range to girdle the tranquil vale that beckoned from below.

It was a bastion against the Waste, a protected space where life yet sustained itself.

The etheric aroma of plentiful mana rose from the greensward, curled around his brain and teased at his powers,

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making him momentarily dizzy. He reeled with a hunger not of the body, yet as commanding as any physical humor could be.

At the center of the plain was a large structure, perhaps sixty feet square and forty feet high, apparently all of stone: a noble's castle, small but definite. Men moved along its ramparts. Around it, a broad brown area had been trodden smooth.

Gregor's last brush with nobles and subjects and civilization lay thirty leagues behind him, in the charnel-festooned ruins of Beluz where no living thing remained. Where he had left the greater part of his soul.

Fulfilling his charge without entering the settlement would mean considerable privation. After six days in the Waste, his food was almost gone, and his mana was down to nothing. Even so, he searched for a path around the edge of the greensward. Perhaps he might go past the town without encountering its denizens, yet still replenish his stores.

The need to see another human face welled up inside him. It beat back his fear and revulsion.

He hefted his pack higher onto his shoulders, took a firmer grip on his staff, and plodded down the shallow crevice in the mountains, toward the oasis at his feet.

#

Karine had been delivered of her child three days before, and her scourging had been decreed for that day. At the appointed hour, Laella put down her hoe and summoned Marti and Luisa, and the three trudged the two miles to the square before the castle.

The square was dusty and uninviting. Nearly the whole of Anam had massed there. Most eyes were aimed at the dais and the stocks. Laella's household joined the crowd at its rear,

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trying to be inconspicuous. Those who noticed averted their faces with expressions of fear and distaste.

Laella struggled with her anger. She needed no reminder of her household's outcast status. The three women had gone a year without hearing a hundred words from any voices but their own. A hateful necessity, like the one that had shoved them to the fringe of their society, had brought them there.

The baron and his retainers had not yet appeared when an unfamiliar, roughly clothed man approached them from the east, a pack on his shoulders and a stout staff in his hand. He was tall, dark-eyed and dark-haired, broad at the shoulders and well muscled. From the dust on his clothes, he'd come over the mountains, from the Waste beyond. The weathering of his face and the squint to his eyes told of harsh sun and scouring wind long endured.

He moved up to them deliberately, with the careful step of the outsider that said *greet me or shun me as you like*, and glanced over the crowd to the platform that held the stocks. Laella's gaze followed his. Baron Semmech, his retainers, and the pitiful object of the gathering were mounting the dais.

Without preliminary, the baron's men bent Karine into the stocks and clamped the top bar securely down upon her, then yanked crosswise at her shift until it split along its back. Karine offered no resistance. Her eyes were dull and her face slack, as if she'd spent her capacity for terror in anticipation and had none left for the event itself.

The stranger spoke softly into Laella's ear, making her start. "What are they doing?"

She glanced up at him and read sincere ignorance in his eyes.

"She is to be scourged."

"Why?"

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“An unhallowed birth.”

He fell silent.

The baron stepped forward and extended his hand for the whip. A retainer darted forward and presented it to him, then slid away.

“We will have no witchery in Anam.” The burly nobleman’s deep, rolling voice echoed over the square. His eyes swept the assembled crowd, and Laella involuntarily lowered her head to avoid them. “Ye who think to bring the darkness that ate the world to this place, know by these events that I will not have it, now or ever.”

He turned to Karine, raised the whip, and swung it whistling down across her back.

The crack of impact seemed to ring from the surrounding mountains. Light flared in Karine’s eyes as she squealed in agony. Luisa and Marti flinched in sympathy. The crowd murmured. No one looked away.

The whip rose and fell again.

And again.

And again.

The stranger’s face drained of color. He shut his eyes, bowed his head and whispered in some unknown tongue. It might have been a prayer.

#

When it was done, Karine hung limp from the stocks, her eyes closed. A retainer removed the pinion and swung back the top bar, and the scourged girl crumpled to the floor. The crowd dispersed in near-total silence. Few eyes remained upon the dais. No one approached it.

Presently the baron’s party turned and made for the castle. Only Laella, Marti, Luisa and the stranger remained in the square. The stranger showed no inclination to depart.

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“Why are you still here?” Laella asked him.

His face betrayed nothing. “To observe.”

“To observe what?”

His mouth twitched. “You.”

Luisa and Marti’s eyes filled with fright.

“Are you a baron’s man, stranger?” Laella put as much steel into the words as she could manage.

A second twitch produced a simulacrum of a smile. “My name is Gregor. I descended the range to the east only this morning. I know nothing of your baron.”

“But you’re here to observe.”

He nodded. “What else would you have me do?”

“What else, indeed?” she said. She scanned the area. Semmech and his retainers had moved beyond earshot. Luisa and Marti appeared to have mastered their fear. Karine lay where she had fallen. “Are you competent with a shovel?”

The faint smile vanished. “And if I am?”

“We have need of your muscles, and will repay their use with food and lodging. Are you agreeable?”

A long moment of silence passed. Luisa shuffled her feet in the dust. Marti fidgeted with the buttons on her dress.

“I am.”

Before Laella could speak again, the stranger strode past her, mounted the dais, and crouched over Karine’s still form. He peeled back her eyelids and put two fingers to her neck, then slipped his arms around her and hoisted her up, cradling her pudgy body against his chest like an over-large child. He returned to stand before Laella and her gaping companions with Karine slumped in his arms, as if nothing untoward had happened.

“Lead on, Madam.”

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Her eyes shuttled between his burden and his face. "What do you mean by this?"

"Your townsfolk watched a strong man ply a heavy whip on this woman's back until she could not stand," he said. "When it was done, no one moved to succor her. Did you intend to leave her there, as they did?"

Laella's mouth fell open.

"The food and lodging I earn," he said, "will be hers. Now lead on."

She did.

#

Gregor stepped back from the midden he'd dug, thrust his shovel into the loam and wiped the sweat from his face. It would serve the little household for a year, at least. The dirt from the excavation had closed the previous garbage pit to decompose in peace.

His three hours of labor had exhausted him, but the communion with the earth had enabled him to replenish his mana at the same time. Once he'd prepared rations for the week to come, he could continue west. His map would go unaltered. No major tributaries flowed through Anam. Considering the potency of the soil, the etheric balance of the vale was strangely static.

He flapped his tunic to cool himself and strode toward Laella's cottage.

It was a small place for three grown women. It would be smaller still for four.

He knocked at the sill of the kitchen window. "Laella?"

The tall woman came to the window with a bundle of sewing in her hands. "Yes?"

"Your midden is finished." He swept an arm back at his handiwork. "Where might a man hire a room for the night?"

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Her eyes widened. "You will not stay with us?"

"You already have a boarder. Where would I stay?"

A shadow passed over her face. "We have room enough for both of you. And there are other tasks, if you're willing."

He frowned. "You said nothing of other tasks earlier. I must eat, Madam."

Her mouth drew thin. "You and Karine will eat to satiety. We have more than enough for you both. Are you willing?"

He surveyed their half-acre of garden, noted the many kinds of vegetables crammed too close together. Twenty chickens scurried about before a coop guarded by a large yellow dog.

They were doing too much in too small a space. They could triple their yield by growing one or two vegetables and trading for the rest. Theirs was the sort of farm that assumed that trade would not be possible.

Laella's threadbare dignity was enough to wring his heart, but he forced himself to proceed with care. His conscience would not support another Beluz.

"Did you hire the labor of a stranger out of convenience, Laella, or because your townsfolk will have no truck with you? I must buy provisions before I leave your vale. Have I stained myself in their eyes by consorting with you?"

She did not answer at once.

"Come with me a moment, Gregor."

He followed her stiff back into the house, through the commons and down the short hall to the bedrooms. Luisa sat in her own little room, laboring at something he could not make out. She glanced at him and returned her eyes to her own affairs. Through the closed door of the room adjoining, he could hear Karine's sobs as Marti tended her scored flesh.

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Laella guided him into her room and shut the door. He started to protest, but she raised a hand.

“We are women alone, and none of us is strong.” Her eyes held his as her hands undid her collar and moved to the buttons below. “I took Luisa in two years ago. Marti, just a year past. Our household formed out of necessity, for no one else would have any of us.” She undid another button, and another. “It was well that we needed little from anyone, for we got even less.” Her blouse gaped open, allowing her breasts to peek through. Her dark brown nipples were large and pointed. “But for you, I would have had to dig a new midden, and no telling at what cost to my back.” She pulled one arm out of its sleeve, then the other, gathered her wheaten hair in her hand and turned as the garment fell to the floor.

From shoulders to waist, Laella’s back was a landscape of pain. Thick ridges of scar tissue, irregularly puckered and blackened, crisscrossed to make a map of desolation. The flesh between the ridges was pale, almost translucent, as if it had never seen the sun.

“This is how Karine will look when she has healed, Gregor.” Her tone was bleak. “Her family has cast her out. The rest of Anam will endure her as it has endured us, but little more than that. I would have gone to her myself, had you not preceded us.”

“Luisa and Marti too?” he breathed.

She nodded.

“For bearing children out of wedlock? No more than that?”

She turned and peered into his eyes.

“Of course it was more than that, Gregor. They were virgin births. We conceived without having known men, and the baron adjudged us witches for it.”

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#

Marti laid five places at their table. Luisa brought the stew, a collation of pared roots in broth, and set the pot at the center of the table. Laella set a loaf of brown hardbread next to the pot and gestured to Gregor to sit.

“Marti, will you fetch Karine, or shall I?” she said.

“I’ll get her.” The small blonde woman scurried down the hallway.

A minute later Marti returned, urging pale, trembling Karine before her. In the firelight, the freshly scourged girl looked barely able to stand. Laella waited until they sat, reached for the ladle and offered it to Karine, who stared at it, uncomprehending.

“You must eat, dear. The cuts won’t heal otherwise.”

Karine took the ladle. They served themselves in turn. There was no conversation.

The fire had burned low when they were done. Luisa collected their bowls in silence. Marti attended to the leftover stew and tossed the end of the loaf to the dog, who settled by the hearth to gnaw it.

Karine sat slumped forward, eyes fixed on the table. Her color was returning, but she was clearly apprehensive about her place in Laella’s household. Laella noted that Gregor watched her discreetly, as if waiting for instructions. She caught Luisa’s and Marti’s eyes, and nodded a dismissal.

With a murmur and a touch, Marti urged Karine to rise and come with her, but Luisa hesitated briefly. Laella repeated her dismissal more pointedly. The younger woman excused herself and followed them, leaving Laella and Gregor alone at the table in the flickering firelight. His expression was solemn.

“You have a hard life,” he said.

“It’s not that hard. We’re used to being apart.”

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"I see."

"You've told us nothing about yourself. Where do you come from? Surely not the Waste?"

"No." He shifted in his seat. "I've traveled a great deal."

She examined him in the dim light. "You don't look old enough to have traveled much."

He smiled faintly. "Perhaps the marks are on the inside. Tell me of your baron."

The swerve halted her. She considered. "He is a strong ruler, and brooks no disorder. His men are well disciplined and properly under his command. He takes a tithe, but he does not meddle with trade or trifle with the women. The people fear him, but in the main they don't dislike him."

"Not even you?" His eyes compelled her to candor.

Her mouth twitched. "Not most of the time."

"Ah. There are worse rulers, then."

"There are. We've known a few."

They sat in agreeable silence.

His scars were few. The roughness of his face and hands was already fading. In their few hours' acquaintance, he had displayed strength, insight, compassion and fiber. He said little, but omitted nothing needful.

She could not imagine what could impel such a man to wander the Waste, but neither could she imagine what would impel a community to drive such a man from its bosom.

She felt herself grow warm under his regard.

"Are you weary?" she said, her voice husky.

He nodded.

"Might I persuade you to stay with us a while, address some other tasks? Or are you anxious to be off?"

Something moved behind his eyes. She waited an anxious interval before the corners of his mouth rose. "I am only just

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arrived. I need not hurry away. I will stay gladly, if I'm welcome." He looked about for his pack. "Where shall I sleep?"

She rose. "Come with me."

She led him down the hall, past Luisa's and Marti's rooms, their doors discreetly closed, and opened her own. She drew a slender candle from her dwindling cache of luxuries, lit it and set it by her pallet. He had halted at the threshold.

"Is something the matter?" she said.

His eyes were uncertain. "This is your room."

She nodded. "And yours." She gestured at the pallet. Luisa had set his pack next to it. "To share with me, if you will. For as long as you will." She stared at the floor. "I am a virgin, Gregor, not another man's cast-off."

In the candlelight, his eyes looked as if they might fall from their sockets.

"Wouldn't you rather remain a virgin, Laella?"

She barked a laugh. "Three years after bearing an unhallowed child?"

"The others—"

She flailed the air in sudden impatience. "What of them?"

He fell silent. After a moment, he approached her. As if of their own desire, her hands caught and drew him closer. He did not resist.

"You have a great strength in you," he said.

"You have a great kindness in you," she said. "Shall we share what we have?"

He bent and touched his lips to hers.

#

The candle had long since guttered out when she murmured, "Tell me of the Waste."

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He pulled her more closely against him, and she nestled her face into the hollow of his shoulder.

“Brown and dead.”

“No life at all?”

“Only husks, and not many even of those.”

“Is it hot or cold?”

“Cold.” He stroked her back, wincing as his palms traveled the map of insult traced there. “The wind blows always, heavy with grit and dust. In the day I hid my eyes from the wind, and at night I hid all of me from it.”

“Why—” She caught herself, paused, and began again. “Why did you chance them?”

He kept still until his geas had counted off time enough that his words would not be taken as an answer. She shifted uneasily against him in the silence.

“You who stay in the warm lands,” he said, “have a measure of security and comfort. Fertile soil, familiar faces, a steady foothold upon the land. But such things are not for all men. Some, when they reach a certain age, feel the stirring of a wanderlust. They must seek new vistas, whatever the cost.” He grinned in the darkness. “Perhaps when the world teemed with life, it was easier to understand. But even now, the need to see more lands than one’s birthplace, more faces than one’s family and neighbors, commands some too loudly to resist.”

Her hands clasped behind his back.

“What have you seen,” she said, “worth forsaking those who loved and reared you? What have your wanderings reaped that could repay always being alone, with no home to ward you from the dark and no love to buffer you against the cold?”

He thought of Beluz, by his fright and fury reduced to a drift of ash from which new life would never spring. He

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thought of Malagra, where the fear of sorcery was so great that he'd never been permitted to be alone, compelled even to sleep under the eyes of a wakeful, watchful guard. He thought of Urel, perched at the edge of the Great Waste, where crooked-faced Duisenne, so old that even her wrinkles had wrinkled, had taught him to wield and pattern the powers of the earth, and where Aral the Skeptic had bound him in the geas every Scholium-trained sorcerer bore. He thought of his parents and siblings, all of them dead, and of Serebal, his home forever lost to him.

"Nothing."

"Might you be ready," she said, arms tightening around him, "to leave off and make a new home?"

He could feel the tremor in her chest, hear it in her whispered words.

"Perhaps."

"Here?" The tremor intensified. "With me?"

Even without the geas, he could not have lied to her. Yet he could not bring himself to dash her hopes.

"We shall see."

#

Gregor was at work in the garden when Semmech's retainers came for him.

The approach of four men at arms, short swords slapping against their thighs, could not be concealed, nor did they try. They halted before Gregor. Their leader asked his name, and then demanded that he accompany them back to the castle. He put down his spade and complied. As they marched off, Laella came running to the threshold, her face a mask of fear. He bade her be calm with one raised hand.

The public places of Anam teemed with activity. Artisans labored, vendors clamored and bargained, and women and

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children scurried among the wagons and stalls. The townsfolk marked Gregor's passage with furtive glances and murmurs. The baron's men took no notice. Gregor kept his thoughts to himself.

The castle was dark and cold inside, with a hint of dampness to the air. The stone walls were unmarked and undecorated, save by widely spaced sconces in which torches burned. Gregor saw no one within except his escorts. No sounds suggested any great activity from around him.

The corridor opened onto a hall of odd proportions, unusually high and narrow. The hall was practically sheathed in iron. Dense iron lattices supported thin wooden surfaces, and were surrounded by ironwork chairs. Tall iron cages filled with pikes and swords lined the walls. It was plainly an armory, whatever else it might be.

It was the only place he'd been in Anam where the reek of luxuriant mana did not reach.

At the far end, on a shallow stone pedestal studded with iron rings and catches, stood a high-backed, thinly cushioned throne. Behind it was an unlighted opening, probably the egress to a private chamber.

On the throne, hands tight on its arms, sat Baron Semmech.

The retainers stepped away from Gregor, and their leader bade him approach the nobleman. He strode to the edge of the dais and bowed formally.

"My lord, I am honored."

Semmech stared at him. "Are you indeed, stranger?"

"I am."

"And your name?"

"Gregor, my lord."

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The baron nodded. “The townsfolk say you’ve been in Anam less than a week, Gregor. Yet it was time enough to form a liaison that brings you little credit with me or my people.”

Gregor said nothing.

“You have taken lodging with Laella, in the farmstead north of the smithy, have you not?”

“I have, my lord.”

“Do you know what she and her companions are?”

“I do, my lord.” Gregor kept his voice low.

The admission traced lines of displeasure across Semmech’s forehead. He looked Gregor up and down.

“You are young and strong, and your speech marks you as educated. Can you find no better associates?”

Gregor chose his words with care. “I am a stranger to your realm, my lord. I don’t know your customs, and I don’t wish to offend through ignorance. Have you decreed that no one may have dealings with Laella’s household?”

He locked eyes with the baron and willed a definite answer. Presently Semmech shook his head.

“Laella has made me welcome,” Gregor said. “She has been hospitable beyond what a traveler from the Waste could expect. I have provided her with certain services in recompense.”

The retainers brayed laughter. After a moment the baron smiled grimly.

“No doubt you have. But those women are not the choicest of Anam, Gregor. All have borne children, and all of them”—his lip curled—“died shortly after birth.”

Gregor did not reply.

“That doesn’t appear to surprise you.”

“I was aware of it, my lord.”

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“Were you?” Semmech rose and stepped forward to peer down at Gregor. “Were you aware that their quickenings did not partake of man?”

“I was, my lord.”

Anger returned to the noble’s face. “Does it not disturb you to keep company with four witches, then?”

“I fear you are mistaken, my lord. They are not witches.”

The retainers murmured. Semmech’s face reddened.

“And how do you reach this conclusion in the face of what all of Anam has seen? Are you expert in such matters? A sorcerer yourself, perhaps?”

Gregor breathed deeply and braced himself. On this subject the geas would allow him no latitude at all. He marshaled his powers, let the mana he carried rise and pulse at the ready, lest he should need it to win free of that stone and iron cage.

“I am, my lord.” The retainers shouted as one. “I trained at the Scholium Arcanum in Urel, was certified a journeyman by Master Sorceress Duisenne, then was bound to speak only truth and sent west by Grand Master Aral, whom the students of the academy call the Skeptic.”

Shock displaced the anger from the noble’s expression. “You admit all this freely? To *me*?”

“The truth-geas compels it, my lord.”

Semmech staggered backward and collapsed onto his throne.

#

Laella was sitting alone in the gloom of the commons when the door creaked open. She leaped from her chair, barked a shin against the table leg, and ran to the sound. It was Gregor. From what she could see in the light of dusk, he was dusty from the road, but no worse for the day.

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They embraced as the dog pranced around them. She pulled him to the table and made him sit beside her. The dog settled its head upon his thigh, and he tousled it with a murmur of affectionate praise.

“What did Semmech want of you?”

He was silent for a long time before he said, “He disapproves of my choice of companions.”

She’d feared as much. Though the baron had issued no decree of ostracism, he’d made his preferences plain. Anam had turned its back on the virgin mothers with a uniformity that could not have been bettered by an explicit command.

Gregor was the first man who’d dared speak to her since her own scourging. Despite his quality, her readiness to bind herself to him had surprised her. She hadn’t known how desperate she’d become for a scrap of human warmth, how thin was the rag of hope she’d clutched to ward her from Anam’s cold.

Chance had brought him to her, and he had blessed her beyond all chance. She would not surrender him without a fight, neither to the baron nor to the Waste.

“Did he command you to leave?”

He smiled. “No. Be at peace, love. A traveler becomes used to these examinations. A lord who doesn’t watch his borders and those who pass over them doesn’t remain a lord for long.”

She studied his face in the gloom. He appeared untroubled.

“Have you eaten?”

He nodded. “Is there anything undone?”

“No.” A shudder broke through her self-command. “I was worried, Gregor.”

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His hands rose to cup her face. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs, and she felt the last of her fears dissolve.

"Is there any hot water left?" he said.

She nodded. "Go to our room. I'll bring it."

When she returned, he had already undressed. He reached for the basin and towels she carried, but she stopped him and nodded toward their bed.

"Lie down."

He complied. She set the basin down beside their pallet, dampened a towel in it, and swabbed the sweat and dust from his body with long, tender strokes.

#

It was a week later that the troubles began.

In the space of three days, four women of the central village were mauled by their own dogs. Two survived. They told strange tales: that the animals that had assaulted them, old family retainers who had always been faithful, had swelled in size and taken on a demonic aspect before they struck. The dogs were put down. Even though the stories were discounted as a forgivable hysteria in the wake of a terrible event, they spread unease through Anam.

On the western outskirts, a farm wife claimed that the ground had opened beneath her husband as he harrowed. The fissure welled with a bubbling black fluid that swiftly sucked the screaming farmer into the bowels of the earth. A moment later the crevice had closed over him, leaving no trace that it had ever been.

A peculiar strain of ivy sprouted from the rocky ground around Semmech's castle: more blue than green, with long, narrow leaves that resembled clutching fingers. It grew at an unnatural speed. In three days it challenged the castle's eaves and curled over the top of the walls. Even on days without

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wind, the fingers seemed to flex and grope with unknowable purpose.

When a shoot of the plant caught one of Semmech's patrols by the ankle and pulled him off the parapet to die on the cobbles below, the baron had Gregor brought to him once more.

#

"You are a sorcerer." The baron's eyes were full of doubt. Gregor nodded.

"You know nothing of these events?"

"My lord," Gregor said, "am I the only sorcerer in Anam?"

Semmech's mouth tightened. "The only admitted one."

"Is there some way I could have gained from these deaths? For I confess I cannot imagine one."

Semmech's men at arms murmured. The baron stared into Gregor's eyes for a long moment, then settled onto his throne.

"I am," he said, "a military man. I am proficient with weapons. I know soldiers and combat, little else. I watch the borders and prohibit violence, nothing more. Anam endures my rule because I claim no powers beyond my scope. If I were to try to order my subjects' lives in detail, they would be right to depose me, for I have not the wisdom for it. But I keep to my sphere, and they tolerate me." He smiled grimly. "Sometimes I think they even approve of me."

It was an admission Gregor had heard from no other ruler. The candor and humility of it awakened his sympathies, moved him to offer what he could to one who, like himself, stood alone by necessity and long habit.

"My lord," Gregor said, "do you remember my geas?"

Semmech's eyes returned to Gregor's. He nodded once, slowly.

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Gregor considered for a moment, weighing his words and pondering how much to say.

“Then I will tell you two things about your rule. First, be aware that the people of Anam consider you a good and capable master, even those you have punished for a thing that was in no way their fault.” The retainers murmured again, and Semmech’s eyes narrowed in heightened concentration. “Second, though you have in all good intention tried only to ward Anam from danger by prohibiting the practice of sorcery, the ban works to the opposite effect.”

Semmech’s men surged forward and enveloped Gregor, buzzing with anger. The baron held up a hand and glared them back.

“Explain yourself, sorcerer.”

Gregor nodded and strained to remember his lessons.

“In Urel, alongside the Scholium Arcanum and allied with it, there is a college of record-keepers. The savants there pore over the writings we have from before the Fall, studying the history of the world and sorcery’s role in it. I spent a term among them.

“The scholars have come to believe that the stuff called mana, the earth power that fuels sorcery, is intertwined with all life. Without mana, life fails. Where life is plentiful, mana is created anew.

“But mana does not lie still, no more than life itself. It has its own kinesis; it swirls and flows under the skin of the world, in patterns the Ureli scholars have pondered for centuries. In the Waste, the net flow of mana is outward, which eventually rendered life impossible. Vales such as Anam are oases, pools of mana where life can flourish and generate new life, and new mana to sustain it.

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“Now and again, the life of a place will generate mana faster than it can be used or dispersed by the subterranean flows. Though not as immediately fatal as the depletion of mana, this is no less lethal. Mana accumulated beyond a certain amount is no longer a support to life, but a poison. It reaches out of the earth to make wonders and terrors such as those that have troubled Anam these weeks past.

“I believe that this is what has happened to your realm, my lord. Anam resides over an immense pool of mana from which there is little or no outflow. I sensed it before I descended the eastern slopes. Your people are fecund and industrious, and thus add to the pool, but they do no sorcery, and so the mana is not used, but congeals in the earth to become a menace to you all.”

Silence descended upon the hall. The retainers neither moved nor spoke. Semmech held so still that he seemed encased in an invisible crystal.

Gregor’s message had contained little to please the nobleman, though he’d couched it in the softest words he could find. In light of what he’d said, there were several ways to interpret his arrival in Anam, not all of them to his credit. Presently the baron voiced one.

“Did you come here,” Semmech said, “to exploit this resource?”

“No, my lord.” Before the baron could pose another question, Gregor added, “My arrival here was pure chance. I knew nothing of your realm.”

He prayed that it would be enough to forestall deeper inquiry into his wandering, but it was not to be.

“You say the Waste will not tolerate life,” Semmech said. “But you yourself give the lie to that, by coming thence to us.”

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Gregor shook his head. "I could not have remained there, my lord. There is no food, little water, and almost no shelter."

"Where had you been before that?"

Gregor swallowed. "A town called Beluz."

"A town like Anam?"

"Yes, my lord. Much like Anam, though smaller."

Semmech's eyes were merciless upon him. "And why did you set forth?"

Gregor's gas tightened irresistibly. It denied him all evasion, all concealment.

"Beluz is no more, my lord. The town suffered a plague of shapeshifters." His eyes closed against the memory. "Children and animals were overcome by madness, transformed into beasts beyond imagination, and laid waste to all around them until they were put down." He struggled for calm. "As here, I was the only acknowledged sorcerer in the district, so the townsfolk fastened upon me as the agent of their sorrows. They came for me and seized me while I slept, and would have put me to death, except that in my desperation I summoned the lightning against them."

Semmech vaulted from his seat before his men could move or speak. He swept a hand over their heads and shouted "Leave us," then beckoned to Gregor to follow him down the short, dark corridor behind the throne.

#

Laella could hardly believe it when Gregor stepped through the cottage door. No one had expected him to return unharmed from Semmech's second summons. Before he could take three steps, she ran to him and wrapped her arms firmly around him, hid her swollen eyes against his chest. He stroked her hair and murmured meaningless soothing phrases.

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Luisa, Marti and Karine tumbled through the back door and stood dumbstruck, tools clutched in their hands.

“All is yet well, ladies. He did me no harm.”

They settled around the table by the hearth, and he told them of the audience. Laella held tight to his hand the whole time. The shadows were lengthening toward evening when he was done.

“He means to protect Anam,” Gregor concluded. “He will allow me to create a balance against the accumulations of mana, but nothing else. I have agreed.”

Marti glared at him from eyes lit by outrage. “He means to protect *his realm*,” she said. “He means to protect *his power*. Why do you think he forbade sorcery from the first?”

The muscles in Gregor’s neck rippled. “There are dangers in it, Marti. An untrained sorcerer can lay waste to an oasis without meaning to.”

“No doubt,” Marti said. The heat of anger was strong in her. “But a *trained* sorcerer with the use of Anam’s mana could free us from the grip of a man who would lash a defenseless girl bloody for bearing a child.” She rose and glared down at him. “Do you know what became of our babies, Gregor? Did my lord the baron tell you?”

Gregor said nothing. Laella cringed as the memories surged back.

“He killed them, Gregor. He had his retainers mince them to bits as soon as they were free of our wombs, and then he had the bits burned, and the ashes thrown to the wind. He said he would have no witch-children in *his vale*, and bade us thank him for not visiting the fate of the children upon the mothers.” She pulled Karine to her feet, whirled her around, and yanked up her shift to expose the scars from her scourging, not yet fully healed.

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“He bade us thank him,” she whispered, “for *this*.”

The room became silent.

After a long interval, Gregor said, “It will not happen again, Marti. Once I have created the balance, there will be no more virgin births in Anam. I cannot undo the past, but I can foretell this much of the future: it will not happen again.”

“Gregor,” Laella murmured, “are you certain?”

His eyes locked with hers, and he began to tremble. The tremor became a quaking that shook the bench on which they sat and rattled his boots against the packed clay of the floor. When he had mastered himself, he spoke a single word.

“No.”

#

Gregor surveyed the moonlit garden, with Laella snug against his side. The night was cool and bright. A light breeze stroked their faces and stirred the leaves of the vegetables.

“Do you know of forests?” he said.

“No.”

“There were pictures of them, in a book in Urel.” He caressed her shoulder. “Their trees were very tall, with many branches and leaves as broad as a hand. Some gave nuts, and others gave sweet fruit. They cooled the earth and kept the water in the ground when the rain failed. Sometimes men would build their homes among the trees, for shade and a shield against the wind.”

“They sound very beautiful.”

He nodded. “Before the Dieback, they covered most of the world.”

She looked up at him. “What is a dieback?”

He started to explain, then smiled and said, “It produced the Waste.”

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Her mouth tightened, and she looked out over the moonlit landscape. They stood in silence for a long time.

“He will not let you stay, Gregor.”

He did not dispute it.

“Where will you go from here?”

“West, until I reach another oasis or the coast of the continent.”

“And then?”

He strained to remain expressionless. “That will depend on what I find, and on what I bring.”

“Bring? Other than food for the journey—”

“Perhaps I should have said ‘whom.’”

Her eyes went wide. They turned to face one another squarely, and he took her hands. “Are you asking me to accompany you?”

He nodded.

“The others—”

He grinned. “What of them?”

“I am a child of Anam, Gregor.”

“And I,” he said, “am a child of Serebal, two hundred leagues to the east. Yet I am here. The next oasis is no more than seven days’ travel. If you will do as I say, I can get us there unharmed.”

“Can you?” she said. “I have seen no sorcery yet.”

He exerted himself briefly. A sparkling nimbus swirled around them like a carousel made of stars. Two soft streams of light pulsed and knotted around their joined hands.

“Aral the Skeptic, Grand Master of the Arcana in the East,” he said, “has charged me with charting the oases and the flows of mana along the southern reach of this continent, as far west as it is possible to travel. On the far coast is the enclave of Pontreval, where what I learn will be joined with

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the findings of other travelers and used to draw a map. The greatest sorcerers in the world will work from that map to undo the Waste, restore it to life, so that men may wander the world freely once more. I may have a part of that work, if I arrive in time and am deemed equal to its rigors." He squeezed her hands, and the cords of light that bound them flamed to brilliance. "Will you come with me, Laella? Be my home and my comfort in the Waste between the oases, where no life abides and no home can stand?"

She stared up at him in a transport of wonder, face glowing with starlight, hands tight upon his own.

"I will."

#

Semmech peered at the western range. The morning sun glowed on its peaks. Underfoot the ground was dry, almost devoid of grass. The nearest huts were more than a mile to the east. "Why here?"

Gregor smiled. "Practical considerations, my lord. Should I fail, there will be no damage to life or property. Should I succeed, the balance will disturb no one, and few will be tempted to come close."

The baron smirked. "You underestimate the curiosity of my subjects." He indicated Laella and her household, all of whom had begged to witness the event.

Laella's hand clutched Gregor's. He essayed a shallow bow. "But I do not mistake your capacity to command them, Baron."

The noble nodded. "Very well. Proceed."

Gregor released Laella's hand, laid his pack and staff aside and walked toward the foothills of the western range. Before him, a shallow, gravel-floored pass cut through the mountains at an altitude only a third as high as the peaks that

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flanked it. It would be his egress from Anam. He halted at the grass's edge, pulled his arms to his chest, and closed his eyes.

The call of the teeming pool of mana beneath the vale became painfully intense. He opened his etheric senses wide and drove his consciousness into the earth, seeking full communion with the subterranean lake of power. What he learned of its breadth and depth would have made his body gasp, were it able.

Already, enough mana was stored beneath Anam for a master sorcerer to blast its protective mountain ranges to dust. Even Gregor, only a journeyman, could have used it to lift Semmech's castle from its foundations and hurl it into the Waste. The pool filled as he watched, as more mana trickled in from the vitality and enterprise of Anam's thousand folk.

Streamers of force leaped from the pool and scraped at the crust beneath the living lands. Life's natural resistance to manipulation had created a buffer zone, a partial barrier to the plumes from that inchoate furnace, but as the tendrils of energy licked at it, it grew ever thinner. The places where the mana had broken through were open wounds in the oasis, where the undirected power had brought destruction and grief.

He probed the limb of the pool and found a thick layer of the one substance known to block the flow of mana: iron. Anam's denizens lived over a giant iron bowl that caught the mana generated by their life-energies and contained it. No outflow was possible.

He quieted his mind, wrapped it around the pool, and reached out for working substance.

With an accelerating rumble, rocks, gravel, and dust slid down the nearby slopes toward where Gregor stood. He halted them a few yards away, shaped them into a great inverted cone, and caused them to spin.

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The rumble became a whoosh of rotating debris. He put metaphorical arms to the giant top and spun it faster, watching the level of the mana pool as he adjusted the speed.

Faster... Faster... a little slower, now... There.

He opened his eyes and stepped back.

Before him was a perfect sixty-foot-high cone of stone and dust, spinning faster than any whirlpool, whistling a shrill song of power. Though the air currents from its motion buffeted him almost strongly enough to knock him down, the cone itself was stable.

He turned to Semmech and spread his arms in triumph.

The baron stared at the whirligig as if it were an enemy come to spill his blood. His retainers watched him uncertainly.

While the soldiers and their lord stood frozen, Gregor beckoned the four women to him, gathered them close around him.

Semmech broke from his trance. He looked at his troops and jerked one hand violently at Gregor and his companions. The soldiers drew their swords and advanced.

Gregor exerted himself once more.

A second cone rose from the earth to girdle him and his companions: a blue-white forest of lightning bolts. They crackled with a hungry energy that mocked the blades of Semmech's men. One decided to test the shield. The blast slammed him to the earth, clutching a sword melted down to the hilt.

"As little as it becomes a common man," Gregor said, "to break his given word, Baron, it becomes a ruler still less."

Semmech glared at him. He put his hand to the hilt of his own sword.

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“Tell your men to sheathe their blades, my lord. Else I shall collapse the whirligig upon them, and Anam will be once more without a balance.”

The baron’s eyes lit with understanding. His hand retreated from his sword. “Practical considerations, sorcerer?”

“Just so.”

“Will you take my realm from me, then?”

“I will not,” Gregor said. “I leave upon the instant. *My* word, you see, is good.”

Semmech’s jaw clenched. He raised a hand, and his men returned their swords to their scabbards. Gregor quelled the curtain of lightning, then took up his pack and his staff.

“You have your balance, Baron. It will sense the flows into the mana pool and adjust to any changes. Leave it to its work, and there will be no more terrors in Anam. Your people will have peace.”

Semmech nodded and gestured his men back to the castle. As he turned to go, Luisa, Marti and Karine broke away and sprinted toward him. A kitchen knife gleamed in Karine’s hand.

Marti and Luisa knocked Semmech onto his face in the thin grass. Each woman pinned one of his arms beneath her as Karine struck.

The blade pierced the noble’s neck, releasing a jet of arterial blood. Karine ripped the knife crosswise, opening Semmech’s throat and more blood vessels. Semmech’s body spasmed, throwing Marti and Luisa to the side. He convulsed in silent agony, all four limbs hammering the earth as his life spurted into the air.

“Gregor.” Laella tugged at his arm. Her face was a stony mask. “We must go.”

Gregor stood transfixed, unable to speak.

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“Gregor!” Laella’s hiss penetrated the horror that girdled his brain. “They have chosen. It is done. We must go!”

The three women rose shrieking with vengeance fulfilled, only a moment before Semmech’s retainers closed upon them with drawn swords. The blades rose and fell, twice, thrice, and the shrieking ceased. Three new fountains of blood rose to dance to the song of the whirligig, as Laella pulled him away from the carnage, toward the pass that would deliver them from the warmth of Anam into the chill Waste to the west.