

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Swords of Night and Day

David A. Gemmell

About the Book

The mighty Skilgannon is back . . .

Called back from the void to fulfil an ancient prophecy, Skilgannon the Damned has returned to help his people in their darkest hour.

But this Skilgannon – brought back to life by a mystic ritual – is a man out of time. Marooned in a strange world, he now finds himself isolated from all he once knew and loved.

Or *nearly* all. A surly giant possessing astounding strength but no memories has also been given the gift of life. To some he is a dangerous failure. To Skilgannon, this giant represents their last hope.

As ageless evil threatens to drown the Drenai lands in blood, two legendary heroes will once again lead the way to freedom.

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About the Author
Also by David A. Gemmell
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The Swords of Night and Day

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The Swords of Night and Day is dedicated with love to Don and Edith Graham, to the magical Chloë Reeves and to all the residents of Old Mill Park, Bexhill, UK, who have made the last seven years a joy.

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Prologue

THE SUN WAS warm in a blue sky as the priestess Ustarte stood at the graveside, watching her aides disguising the tomb. Carefully they placed rocks upon the small, island site, and transferred plants to cover the recently turned soil. Ustarte pushed back the hood of her scarlet and gold gown, revealing a hairless head, and a face of startling, ageless beauty.

A great sadness settled upon her. Ustarte had witnessed many deaths in the hundreds of years of her life, but few had touched her as strongly as the passing of this hero. She gazed down at the dry river bed. In spring the melt water would rush down from the mountains, and flow around the island on both sides before becoming a single waterway to the south. Now, in the height of summer, the island was merely a small hill, dusty and unmemorable. Not a good resting place for a great man.

An elderly priest in yellow robes approached her, his back bent, his gaunt, malformed features and huge brown eyes showing clearly to the initiated his status as a Joining, a meld of man and beast. Happily there were few in this benighted world of swords and spears who would recognize his origins. To most he would merely be an ugly little man, with friendly eyes.

‘He deserved better than this, Holy One,’ said the priest.

‘Aye, he did, Weldi, my friend.’

Ustarte turned away from the graveside and, leaning on her staff, moved down the hillside into the shadows. Weldi hobbled after her.

‘Why have we done this? The people would have built a great tomb for him, and erected statues. He saved them, after all. Now none will know where he lies.’

She sighed. ‘He will be found, Weldi. I have seen it. It may be fifty years from now, or a hundred. But he will be found.’

‘And what then, Holy One?’

‘I wish I could say. You remember the Resurrection priest who visited us several years ago?’

‘A tall man. He wanted your help with an artefact.’

‘Yes,’ she said, reaching into a deep pocket in her gown. From it she drew a section of shining metal, indented, and set with polished gems. Weldi gazed at it.

‘It is very pretty. What is it?’

‘It is part of a larger artefact used to produce creatures like us, my dear. To meld and to change matter. To extract the essence of life and cause it to be reproduced, or reshaped. Beasts to walk like men, or men to act like beasts.’

‘Magical, then?’

‘In a way, Weldi. This is an old world we find ourselves in. It has been through many births and rebirths. Once there were cities, where buildings were so tall that clouds gathered around their summits. In that time magic was commonplace – though it was not called magic. I have seen it in the Mirror. It was a time of evil so colossal, so all-consuming, that men no longer recognized it. They built weapons so horrifying that they could devour whole cities, and turn entire continents to ash. They poisoned the air, and poisoned the seas, and tore down the trees that kept the earth alive.’

Weldi shivered. ‘What happened to them?’

‘Mercifully they destroyed themselves before they could kill the whole planet.’

‘And what has this to do with our friend, and his death?’

Ustarte glanced back at the work party. The hilltop was bare once more. Within a few weeks there would be no sign

of the tomb. The wind would blow dust over the site, grass would grow, and *he* would lie beneath the earth, silently waiting. She shivered.

‘These ancients left many artefacts, Weldi. In the Resurrection temple there are objects like these, used for manipulating life itself. In other places there are more sites, dedicated not to life but to death and destruction. The more the priests delve into the secrets of these artefacts, the closer they will come to recreating the horror of those ancient days.’

‘Can we stop them, Holy One?’

She shook her head, an angry glint in her blue eyes. ‘I cannot. I do not have the power, and my time is running out. I have looked in the Mirror and seen many desolate futures. It tore my heart to watch them. Armies of Joinings rampaging across the nations, corrupted priests wielding arcane powers, the skies dark with deadly rain. Fear, desolation and evil rampant. I saw the end of the world, Weldi.’ She shuddered. ‘But in one future I did see our friend, born again to fulfil a prophecy that might end the terror.’

‘A prophecy? Whose prophecy?’

‘Mine.’

‘Yours? What is this prophecy?’

Ustarte smiled. ‘I do not know yet, Weldi.’

‘How can that be, Holy One? It is your prophecy.’

‘Indeed it will be. But such are the frustrations of seeing time fragments out of place. All that I truly know now is that our friend will live again. I know the Swords of Night and Day will aid him. I know that the dead will walk beside him. More than that I cannot say.’

‘And he will save the world?’

Ustarte stared back at the hilltop. ‘I don’t know, Weldi. But if I was looking for a man to achieve the impossible, that man would be Skilgannon the Damned.’

Chapter One

FIRST THERE WAS darkness, complete and absolute. No sounds to disconcert him, no conscious thoughts to concern him. Then came *awareness* of darkness and everything changed. He felt a pressure against his back and legs, and a gentle thudding in his chest. Fear touched him.

Why am I in the dark? In that instant a bright, powerful image filled his mind.

A man snarling with hatred, leaping at him, spear raised. The face disappearing in a spray of crimson as a sword blade half severed the skull. More warriors attacking him. There was no escape.

His body jerked spasmodically, his eyes flaring open. There were no painted warriors, no screaming enemies yearning for his death. Instead he found himself lying in a soft bed and staring up at an ornate ceiling, high and domed. He blinked and took a deep breath, his lungs filling with air. The sensation was exquisite – and somehow unnatural.

Confused, the man sat up and rubbed at his eyes. Sunshine was streaming through a high, arched opening to his right. It was so bright and painful that he raised his arm to shield his eyes from the brilliance. Then he saw the dark blue tattoo upon his forearm. It was of a spider, and both ugly and threatening. His eyes adjusting to the brightness, he stood and padded naked across the room. A cool breeze rippled against his skin, causing him to shiver. This too, in its own way, was confusing. The feeling of cold was almost alien.

The opening led to a semicircular balcony high above a walled garden. Beyond the garden lay a town, nestling in a mountain valley, the buildings white, with red-tiled roofs. He gazed at the snow-capped peaks beyond the town, and the brilliant blue sky above them. Slowly he scanned the rugged landscape. There was nothing here that tugged at his memory. It was all new.

He shivered again, and walked back into the domed room. There were rugs upon the floor, some embroidered with flowers, others with angular emblems he did not recognize. The room itself was also unfamiliar. On a table nearby he saw a water jug and a long-stemmed crystal goblet. He reached for the jug. As he did so he caught sight of his reflection in a curved mirror on the wall behind the table. Cold, sapphire blue eyes stared back at him, from a face both stern and forbidding. There was something about the reflected man that was unrelentingly savage. His gaze travelled down to the tattoo of a snarling panther upon the chest.

He knew then that a third tattoo was upon his back, an eagle with flaring wings. Though why these violent images were etched upon his body he had no idea at all.

Becoming aware of a gnawing emptiness in his stomach, he recognized – as if from ancient memory – the symptoms of hunger. Filling the crystal goblet with water he drank deeply, then looked around the room. On another narrow table, alongside the door, he saw a shallow bowl, filled with dried fruit, slices of honey-dipped apricot, and figs. Carrying the bowl back to the bed he sat down and slowly ate the fruit, expecting at any moment that memories would come flooding back.

But they did not.

Fear flared in him, but he quelled it savagely. ‘You are not a man given to panic,’ he said, aloud.

How would you know? The thought was unsettling.

‘Stay calm and think,’ he said.

The snarling faces came again. Hostile warriors all around him, hacking and slashing. He fought them with two deadly, razor sharp blades. The enemy fell back. He did not seek to escape then, but hurled himself at them, seeking to reach . . . to reach . . .

The memory faded. Anger swelled, but he let it flow over him and away. Holding to the memory of the scene, he analysed what he did remember. He had been bone weary, his swords unnaturally heavy. No, he realized, not just weary.

I was old!

The shock of the memory made him rise again and return to the mirror. The face he saw was young, the skin unlined, the close-cropped hair dark and shining with health.

The image returned with sickening intensity.

A broad-bladed spear plunged into his side. He winced at the pain of it, the hot, agonizing rush of blood over ripped flesh. The spear all but disembowelled him. A mortal wound. He killed the wielder with a reverse cut, and staggered on. The Zharn king screamed at his guards to protect him. Four of them charged – huge men bearing bronze axes. They died bravely. The last managed to bury an axe blade into his right shoulder, almost severing the arm. The Zharn king shouted a war cry and leapt to attack him. Mortally wounded, he swayed from the king's plunging spear, the sword in his left hand cleaving through the king's side, slicing through his backbone. With an awful cry of pain and despair the Zharn king fell.

The man looked down at the skin of his shoulder. It was unmarked. As was his side. There was not a scar upon his flesh. Was he seeing visions of the future, then? Was this how he was to die?

A cold breeze blew in from the balcony. He rose and searched the room. By the far wall was a tall chest of drawers. The top drawer contained carefully folded clothing. Removing the first item, he saw that it was a thigh-length

tunic of fine blue wool. He pulled it on, then opened the second drawer. Here he found several pairs of leggings, some in wool, others in soft leather. Choosing a pair in dark, polished leather, he donned them. They fitted perfectly.

Hearing footsteps outside his door he stepped away from the chest and waited, his mind tense, his body relaxed.

An elderly man entered, bearing a tray on which was set a plate of cured meats, and smoked cheeses. The man glanced at him nervously, but said nothing. He moved to the larger table, set down the tray and backed away towards the door.

‘Wait!’

The elderly man stopped, eyes downcast.

‘Who are you?’

Mumbling something under his breath, the tray-bearer rushed from the room. Only after he had departed did the man manage to piece together the answer he had given. The words were familiar, but somehow mangled. He had said: ‘Just a servant, sir.’ The man had heard: ‘Jezzesarvanser.’

Moments later a second figure appeared in the doorway, a tall man with iron grey hair, receding at the temples. He was lean, and slightly round-shouldered, his eyes deep and piercingly green. His clothes were sombre, a tunic shirt of grey satin and leggings of black wool. He smiled nervously. ‘Mataianter?’ he asked.

Might I enter. The man in the bedroom gestured for him to step inside.

The newcomer began to speak swiftly. The man held up his hand and spoke. ‘I am having difficulty understanding your dialect. Speak slowly.’

‘Of course. Language shifts, changes and grows. Can you understand me now?’ the other asked, speaking clearly and enunciating his words. The man nodded. ‘I know you will have many questions,’ said the newcomer, pulling shut the door behind him, ‘and they will all be answered in time.’ He

glanced down at the man's bare feet. 'There are several pairs of shoes and two pairs of boots in the closet yonder,' he said, pointing to a panel against the far wall. 'You will find all the clothes fit you well.'

'What am I doing here?'

'An interesting first question. I hope you will not think me rude if I respond with one of my own. Do you know yet who you are?'

'No.'

The grey-haired man nodded. 'That is understandable. It will come back to you. I assure you of that. As to what you are doing here . . .' he smiled again, 'you will understand better once you have remembered your name. So let us begin with *my* name. I am Landis Kan, and this is my home. The town you see beyond is Petar. It is, you might say, a part of my domain. I want you to think of me as a friend, someone who seeks to help you.'

'Why have I no memory?'

'You have been – shall we say – asleep for a long time. A very long time. That you are here at all is a miracle. We must take things slowly. Trust me on this.'

'Was I injured in some way?'

'Why would you think that?'

'I recall . . . a battle. Painted Zharn tribesmen. I was stabbed. Yet I have no scars.'

'Excellent,' said Landis Kan. 'The Zharn! That is excellent.' He seemed massively relieved.

'What is excellent?'

'That you recall the Zharn. It tells me we have succeeded. That you are . . . the man we sought.'

'How so?'

'The Zharn faded from history long ago. Only shreds of legend remain. One such legend tells of a great warrior who stood against them. He and his men led a desperate charge against the centre of a huge Zharn army. It was said to have

been magnificent. They charged to their deaths, in order to slay the Zharn king.'

'How would I recall an event that happened long ago?'

Landis Kan rose. 'Find yourself some footwear and let me show you the palace and its grounds.'

'I would appreciate some answers,' said the man, an edge creeping into his voice.

'And I would like nothing more than to sit down now and supply them all. It would not be wise, however. You need to arrive at your own answers. Believe me, they will come. It is important for you that we do this in a careful manner. Will you trust me?'

'I am not a trusting man. When I asked you why I had no memory you said I had been asleep for a long time. More accurately, you said *shall we say you have been asleep*. Answer this one question and I will consider trusting you: how long have I been asleep?'

'A thousand years,' said Landis Kan.

At first the man laughed, but then he realized there was no trace of amusement to be found on Landis Kan's face. 'I may have lost my memory, but not my intelligence. No-one *sleeps* for a thousand years.'

'I used the word sleep, because that is the closest to the actuality. Your . . . soul, if you like, has been wandering the Void for the past ten centuries. Your first body was slain in that battle with the Zharn. This is your new body – fashioned from the bones we discovered in your hidden tomb.' Landis Kan reached into a small pouch hanging from his belt. From it he took a small, golden locket, and a long slender chain. 'What does this mean to you?' he asked.

The man took the locket, his fingers closing gently around it. 'It is mine,' he said softly. 'I cannot say how I know this to be true.'

'Say a name – if you can.'

The man hesitated and closed his eyes. 'Dayan,' he said, at last.

‘Can you describe him?’

‘Him?’

‘The man, Dayan.’

‘It is no man. Dayan was a woman . . .’ A brief flash of memory flowed through his mind, causing him to wince, as if in pain. ‘She was my wife. She died.’

‘And you carried a lock of her hair?’

The man looked closely at Landis Kan. ‘You seem surprised. What were you expecting?’

‘It is not important. An error occurred somewhere. You are quite right. Our earliest tales of . . . of you . . . have you wed to a princess named Dunaya. It is said she was slain by a demon and carried away into the underworld. You went after her. For years you were lost to the world of men, as you journeyed through the deepest places of the earth seeking to bring her back.’ Landis Kan chuckled. ‘A fine tale, and there is probably a grain of truth in there somewhere. Now come with me, my friend. I have much to show you.’

Landis struggled to contain his excitement. Through what seemed endless years of fruitless toil he had held to the conviction that one day he would find a way to redeem himself. For the last twenty-three years he had waited patiently, hoping against all reason that this latest experiment would prove to be decisive.

The first three failures had been galling, and had dented his confidence. Now, however, in one glorious moment, all was restored. Two names had rekindled the fires of his vision. The Zharn and Dayan. He glanced at the tall man with the brilliant sapphire eyes, and forced a smile.

‘Where are we going?’ asked the man.

‘To my library and workplace. There is something I am anxious for you to see.’

Landis led the man along a narrow corridor and down a set of stairs. The lower levels were cold, despite the lanterns

hanging on cast iron brackets. Landis shivered, but the man beside him seemed untroubled.

At last they came to a set of double doors. Beyond them was a long room, with five soft chairs and three couches, festooned with embroidered cushions. A tall arched window showed a view of the distant mountains. The curtains billowed in the afternoon breeze. To the left was a second arch, leading through to a library, the scores of shelves bent under the weight of the books upon them. Landis walked on to another door at the rear of the library. This he opened with a key taken from his pouch.

Inside it was windowless and dark. Landis lit a lantern, and hung it from a bracket. Golden light flickered in the room, shadows dancing upon the plain walls. 'What has been removed?' asked the man.

Landis smiled, noticing the rectangular dust patterns that showed where objects had been taken down from the walls. 'Just some paintings,' he answered swiftly. 'You are very observant.' Moving to a desk, he reached down and lifted what at first appeared to be a short, curved ornamental staff. At each end were sections of beautifully carved white ivory, though the centre was smooth, polished ebony. Turning, he offered the object to his guest.

The man's face darkened and he stepped back. 'I do not want to touch them,' he said.

'Them?'

'There is evil in them.'

'But they are yours. They were buried with you in the tomb. They were laid upon your chest, your hands clasped over them.'

'Even so, I do not want them.'

Landis took a deep breath. 'But you know what they are?'

'Yes, I know,' answered the man, a wealth of sadness in his voice. 'They are the Swords of Night and Day. And I am Skilgannon the Damned.'

Landis curled his hand around one of the hilts. 'Do not draw that blade,' said Skilgannon. 'I have no wish to see it.' With that he swung on his heel and walked back through the library. Landis placed the Swords of Night and Day on the desk top and ran after him.

'Wait!' he called. 'Please wait.'

Skilgannon paused, sighed, then turned. 'Why did you bring me back, Landis?'

'You will understand why when you see the world outside my domain. There is great evil here, Skilgannon. We need you.'

Skilgannon shook his head. 'I do not remember much as yet, Landis, but I know I never was a god. In every generation there are war leaders, heroes, men of valour. I may - just may - have been special in my day. But you must have men of equal skill in this time.'

'Would that we had enough of them,' said Landis Kan, with feeling. 'There is a great war being fought, but not - in the main - by men. We have a few doughty fighters, but we have survived this long here for two reasons. First, my domain is largely inaccessible and offers no mineral wealth. Second, the passes are guarded by our own Jiamads.' Landis hesitated, seeing the look of non-comprehension on Skilgannon's face. 'Ah, but I see that I am getting ahead of my tale. You have no knowledge of the Jiamads. In some ancient lands they were known as werebeasts, I believe, though in your time the word was Joinings. Men and beasts melded together.'

Skilgannon's face hardened, his eyes glittering in the lantern light.

'You remember them?' asked Landis.

'A glimpse only. But, yes, I fought them.'

'And you won!'

'There is nothing that bleeds that I cannot kill, Landis.'

'Exactly my point! You will not find more than a handful of men in this land who would dream of saying that. We are on

the verge of becoming a defeated species, Skilgannon.'

'And you think I can change this unhappy situation? Where is my army?'

'There is no army, but I still believe you are the one man who can save us.'

'Why?'

Landis shrugged and spread his hands. 'There was a prophecy concerning you. It was originally inscribed on tablets of gold. And signed by the Blessed Priestess herself. But the tablets were lost. Copies were made from memory, but many of these contained contradictions. However, there was a map which showed the place where the priestess hid your body. It was a cunning map. Delightfully conceived. And all who followed it found only an empty sarcophagus in a cave. Beside it was a shattered lid. So they went away, disconsolate.'

'But you didn't?'

'Oh, yes, I did. Many times. I wish I could say that I deciphered the riddle of the map through the enormous power of my intellect alone. But I did not. I had a vision - a dream, perhaps. I had been searching the cave again - my fifteenth journey there, I believe. I was tired and I fell asleep. I dreamt of the Blessed Priestess. She took me by the hand and led me from the cave, and down onto the arid wasteland at the foot of the mountains to a dry river bed. Then she spoke. "The answer is here, if you have the eye to see it." This was similar to what was written at the base of the map. "The hero lies here, if you have the eye to see it."

'I awoke with the dawn and walked out to the cave entrance, staring out over the land below. There was the dry river bed. Once the water had flowed, and the river had been bisected by an island. Now there were only two dry channels etching the ground on both sides of a high, circular mound of rocky earth. From the high point of the cave it looked as if someone had carved a giant eye in the land. I cannot tell you how excited I was as I led the digging party

across to the mound. At the centre of it we dug. Some seven feet down we struck the stone lid of your coffin.'

'I can appreciate your delight,' said Skilgannon, 'but I am finding this talk of my coffin unsettling. Move on to the prophecy.'

'Of course, of course! Forgive me. The prophecy promised that you would be the man to . . . to restore our freedoms.'

'You hesitated.'

Landis gave a nervous smile. 'You are very sharp, my friend. I was trying to avoid unnecessary explanation. It actually says that you are the man who will steal the power of the Silver Eagle and restore peace and harmony to the world.'

Skilgannon said nothing for a moment. 'Who was this Blessed Priestess?' he asked at last.

'Some believe her to have been a goddess, who surrendered immortality for her love of humanity. Others say she was the human child of the Wolf God, Phaarl. For myself, I believe her to have been a brilliant arcanist and philosopher and prophet. A gifted woman, and holy, who was allowed to see the future, and to have a part in saving humanity from the Dawn of the Beasts.'

'Did she have a name, this paragon?'

'Of course. She was Ustarte. It was said that you knew her.'

All colour drained from Skilgannon's face. 'I knew her. She came to me in the last days.'

He stood on the hillside outside his home, and watched as the rider galloped back towards the city. A great heaviness settled on his heart. Slowly he strolled up the hillside, moving out onto the cliff path above the bay. Skilgannon had grown to love this place during the last eight years. A stone seat had been set on a jutting ledge of rock. He did not know who had set it here, but something in his heart had warmed to the man who had. The ledge was perilously

overbalanced, and looked as if it might drop at any moment, falling the hundreds of feet to the rocky beach below. Yet someone had decided to set a seat here, as if to hurl a challenge at the gods. Kill me if you will, but I will choose to sit here, in this place, and defy your power.

Skilgannon walked out onto the ledge and stretched himself out on the seat. The air was warm, the sunshine bright. Far out on the Jian Sea he saw the fishing boats, and the gulls swooping and soaring round them. Pain flared in his neck and he winced. The fingertips of his right hand grew numb. He stretched his neck, then looked down at his hand. The fingers were trembling. Making a fist, he tried to quell the tremor. Slowly the pain in his neck dulled, merging with the other aches in his tired body. His lower back troubled him at nights; the old scar on his hip would grind if he rode a horse for more than an hour. His left knee had never recovered from the arrow wound. Angry now, he pulled the parchment from his belt and opened it once more. 'Bakila has refused our offer,' he read, 'though he has accepted the gifts and tributes.'

Gifts and tributes.

For years Skilgannon had tried to tell them that Bakila could not be bought off for ever. The Zharn king had a hunger that would not be satisfied by tributes. He also had an army that needed to be fed with plunder. The young Angostin king had not understood this. He did now.

Now that it was too late.

'Ho, general!' came the call. Skilgannon swung on his seat. The pain flared in his neck once more. The young captain, Vakasul, came striding up the cliff path. He halted just before the ledge, and stood there, grinning and shaking his head. 'That will fall, you know,' he said.

Skilgannon smiled affectionately at the dark-eyed young warrior. 'Come sit with me - and dare it to fall,' he answered.

'I think not.'

'You know the Zharn are coming?'

'Of course.'

'And you will ride with me to fight them?'

'You know that I will. We will scatter them, general.'

Skilgannon rose and walked back to where the officer waited. Vakasul was in battle dress, black breastplate and helm of hardened leather, thigh-length riding boots, reinforced at the knee with bronze. His long dark hair had been braided in the Angostin fashion, lengths of silver wire placed within the braids to offer added protection to the head. 'You will fight a massive enemy army,' said Skilgannon, 'and yet you will not walk onto a stone ledge.'

'The ledge is not under my control,' said Vakasul. 'On the battlefield my sword and my bow will protect me.'

Skilgannon looked into the young man's eyes. Both men knew that nothing could possibly protect them in the coming battle. Bakila would have twenty thousand foot soldiers, and eight thousand horsemen. The Angostin force would number around four thousand trained infantry and two thousand cavalry. Eight years before, Skilgannon had led a coalition army against Bakila, and turned back his horde on the southern border of Angostin. Forces from Kydor and Chiatze and the Varnii nomads had fought a ferocious battle. More than thirty thousand Zharn had perished, and some twelve thousand of the allies. Bakila had managed to withdraw his surviving forces during the night. Skilgannon had urged the Angostin king to allow him to pursue them. The request had been denied. The king had been horrified by the losses and believed that Bakila would have learned a harsh lesson.

Indeed he had. The following year he had taken a new army southwest and crushed the Varnii. The next summer he had swept into Kydor, sacking its cities and pillaging the capital. Two years later he had made an alliance with the Sechuin people on the eastern coast, and attacked Chiatze, smashing its armies in two great battles. The Chiatze had

surrendered and offered Bakila a huge yearly tribute. To prevent a new invasion the Angostin king sued for peace, and also offered to send a yearly tribute to Bakila. Seven hundred pounds of gold was the agreed sum in the first year. Then it rose to a thousand. Then two thousand. Now the Angostin treasury was virtually bankrupt.

And the Zharn were coming.

'How long do we have, general?' asked Vakasul.

'Perhaps ten days.'

'And you will contrive a splendid battle plan to destroy them. I look forward to hearing it.'

'There is only one hope of success, Vaki. You know it as well as I.'

'It will be a miracle if we get to within two hundred feet of him.'

'Then we'll have to make a miracle.'

Vakasul swore softly, then edged past Skilgannon and onto the ledge. He sat down and stared out to sea. 'By the way, general,' he said, 'there are some odd-looking people waiting at your house.'

'Odd? What do you mean?'

Vakasul grinned. 'There is a bald woman in a gown of satin. Quite attractive, if you like bald women. The two men with her are astonishingly grotesque. As my father used to say: "They look as if they fell out of the ugly tree and landed on their faces."''

Back in his apartments Skilgannon began to exercise his body, moving through a series of dance-like steps, leaping and twirling. Several times he stumbled upon landing, and once he fell heavily. His brain knew how to execute the moves, but his body seemed sluggish. Keeping it simple, he continued to stretch, seeking to free his thoughts. The images in his mind were sharp, and yet fractured. There was no real flow to his memories. Scenes appeared, and then were cut off, or overlaid by some other image. Names

flashed into his consciousness: Dayan, Jianna, Druss, Vakasul, Bakila, Greavas . . . Occasionally a face would merge with the name, and then disappear.

He exercised for an hour and then sat on a rug, a blanket round his shoulders. Bowing his head he sought inner calm, focusing only on one word.

Ustarte.

The stars were bright, and the rain clouds had moved away towards the west. This was a blessing. The ground tomorrow would be dry and hard, the speed of the charge increased. With luck it would carry them deep into the Zharn ranks. How deep, he wondered? And would Bakila position himself on the left, as he had eight years before? Skilgannon strode to the top of the rise and gazed down at the battlefield. It was wide and flat. A stand of trees covered the hillsides to the west. To the east was the river. He pictured the likely formation the Zharn would adopt. The Angostin infantry had no choice but to stake out a position on the high ground north of the valley. The slopes were steep. The enemy charge would be slowed. More heavily armoured, and wielding short, stabbing swords, the Angostins would be able to hold for some time. Skilgannon scanned the valley. The eight thousand Zharn horsemen would sweep out to the east and west in an encircling move. The two thousand Angostin cavalry would be expected to split into two groups and seek to hold them on the wings. It was not possible. The cavalry would either be broken and scattered, or pushed back against the flanks of their own infantry.

It was galling in the extreme. The Zharn, for all their savagery, were well-disciplined fighters who did not fear death. No sudden charge would break their spirit. No clever strategy would see them thwarted. There was only one hope for the Angostins. Bakila was the head and heart of the Zharn. Strike him down and the enemy would break.

Skilgannon walked back to his horse and stepped into the saddle. Then he rode across the moonlit valley, heading up into the stand of trees. From the high ground he could see the distant campfires of the Zharn some five miles to the southwest. Dismounting, he trailed the reins of the chestnut and walked up to the tree line. The air was fresh and cool. Tomorrow he would hide three hundred of the finest of his Silver Hawk cavalry here. As the battle lines drew together he would lead them in a suicidal charge down the hillside.

His shoulder and neck ached and he could feel the weight of his fifty-four years. Sitting down with his back to a tree he closed his eyes, remembering the days of his youth. He had such dreams then, such vaunting ambitions. He wanted to be like his father, a great warrior and hero, adored by women and admired by men. He smiled. Such were the dreams of the young. Jianna's face appeared in his mind – not as the dread and beautiful Witch Queen of Naashan, but as the young princess he had first known. Those had been the great days of his life. The days of first love. He had believed then that his future would be with Jianna. What force on heaven or earth could prevent it? In that moment Skilgannon heard a soft rustling. He pushed himself to his feet, and turned to see Ustarte moving towards him, her long satin gown shimmering in the moonlight. 'It saddens me to feel your sorrow,' she said.

'Sorrow is the constant companion of the old,' he told her, forcing a smile. 'When you came to my house you said you would be asking a favour of me. Ask it – and if it is in my power I will grant it.'

Ustarte sighed and looked away. 'What I am to ask might cost you dear.'

Skilgannon laughed then. 'Did you not tell me that I would die tomorrow? How much more can it cost?'

Ustarte ignored the question. 'Tell the Angostin king that if you fall tomorrow your body and your weapons are to be given over to me for burial.'

'That is all you require?'

'No, Olek. To win you will need to wield the swords once more.'

'I can win without them! I do not want their evil in my hands.'

'You will not reach Bakila without them, and the Zharn will plunder and burn and slaughter their way across Angostin - and beyond. These are the two favours I would ask of you. Carry the swords into battle, and allow me to conduct your burial.'

'And you can tell me no more?'

She shook her head, and he saw a tear fall. 'No more,' she said.

On the fifth day of the resurrection Landis Kan climbed the winding staircase and entered the high turret room in the east wing of the palace. The old blind man, Gamal, was sitting on the balcony, a warm blanket round his thin shoulders. Landis shivered as he gazed upon Gamal. He was very frail now, his skin so thin as to be almost translucent.

Gamal laughed, the sound rich and musical. 'Ah, Landis, my friend, your thoughts fly around like startled pigeons.'

'There was a time when you had the good manners *not* to read the thoughts of friends,' Landis pointed out, stepping forward and kissing the old man's cheek.

'Sadly, that is not true,' said Gamal. 'What I had was the ability to *pretend* not to read them.'

Landis feigned surprise. 'You lied to us all these years?'

'Of course I lied. Would you have wanted to spend time in the company of someone you believed knew all your thoughts?'

'No. And I am not sure I want to now.'

Gamal laughed again. 'Ah, Landis! As well you know, I cannot read all of a man's thoughts. Never could. I can tell when a person is lying. I can tell when they are being deceptive. I can *feel* their sorrows and their joys. When you

walked in you were concerned about Skilgannon. His face was in your mind. Then you saw me – and thoughts of death and loneliness overwhelmed you. So put your mind at ease, and tell me why you are concerned about our guest.'

'He is not what I was expecting.'

'How could he be?' asked Gamal. 'You thought he would be godlike. You expected fire to blaze from his eyes.'

'Of course not. I knew he was a man.'

'A man who once flew a winged horse?'

'You are doing it again!' complained Landis. 'I do not believe he flew a winged horse. But that is one of the first stories I remember learning about him. I was a child, for goodness' sake! These stories fasten themselves to the mind. That is why I see the winged horse.'

'Forgive me, my friend,' said Gamal. 'No more winged horses. Go on.'

'It has been five days and he remains in his rooms most of the time, doing nothing. He asks no questions when we speak. He listens as I tell him things, but I know nothing of his opinions. Could the old stories have been so wrong? He does not seem like a warrior at all. He is not chilling like the Shadow men, nor overtly terrifying like Decado.'

'I can see why you are worried,' said Gamal. 'However, there are a lot of misconceptions in what you say. First, you say he sits in his rooms doing nothing. This is not true.'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Landis. 'I know he exercises. I know the servant girls are besotted with him. My guess is he has already bedded one of them.'

'Two of them,' corrected Gamal. 'And a third is with him as we speak. As to what you call his *exercises*, they are very ancient, and require high levels of suppleness, strength and balance. Once his body would have flowed through these rituals smoothly. His new body, however, is neither as supple nor as strong as the one he recalls. Before he can truly become *himself* he must bring his new body into harmony with his memories. As to his not seeming like a

warrior . . .’ The old man spread his hands. ‘What can I tell you? Yes, the Shadows are chilling. They were intended to be. They are bred for murder. The same, I think, can be said of Decado. He is not entirely sane. Of course Skilgannon is not frightening to you. You have done nothing to cause him to see you as an enemy. Let us hope you never do.’ For a moment the old man fell silent. Then he drew in a deep breath. ‘Skilgannon was once a priest,’ he said.

Landis Kan gasped. ‘There is no mention of that in any history.’

‘Yes, there is,’ said Gamal. ‘If one knows where to look. I found the references in Cethelin’s *Book of the Empty*. A fascinating piece.’

‘I have read it many times,’ said Landis. ‘Skilgannon is not mentioned, not even as a reference.’

‘Of course he is, but by the name he adopted as a priest – Brother Lantern. Cethelin called him the Damned.’

Landis Kan sat open-mouthed. Goose bumps appeared on his arms and he shivered. ‘Lantern was Skilgannon? Sweet Heaven! The madman who slew all those people outside Cethelin’s church?’

‘For a man of science, Landis,’ said Gamal, ‘you spend rather too much time leaping to conclusions. Yes, Cethelin wrote of him as a madman and a killer. But was he? One fact is clear: the mob had arrived at the church intent on killing the priests. Lantern stopped them.’

‘With murder,’ Landis pointed out.

‘Only after one of the mob had stabbed Cethelin.’ Gamal chuckled suddenly. ‘You chide me for mentioning the winged horse, my friend, but you are still trapped in memories of childhood. Skilgannon was a hero. Of this there is no doubt. He was also a killer. Those who stood against him died.’

‘He was a warrior. I know that!’ snapped Landis.

‘He was more than a warrior. However, for now you should not be concerned about how frightening he is, or how