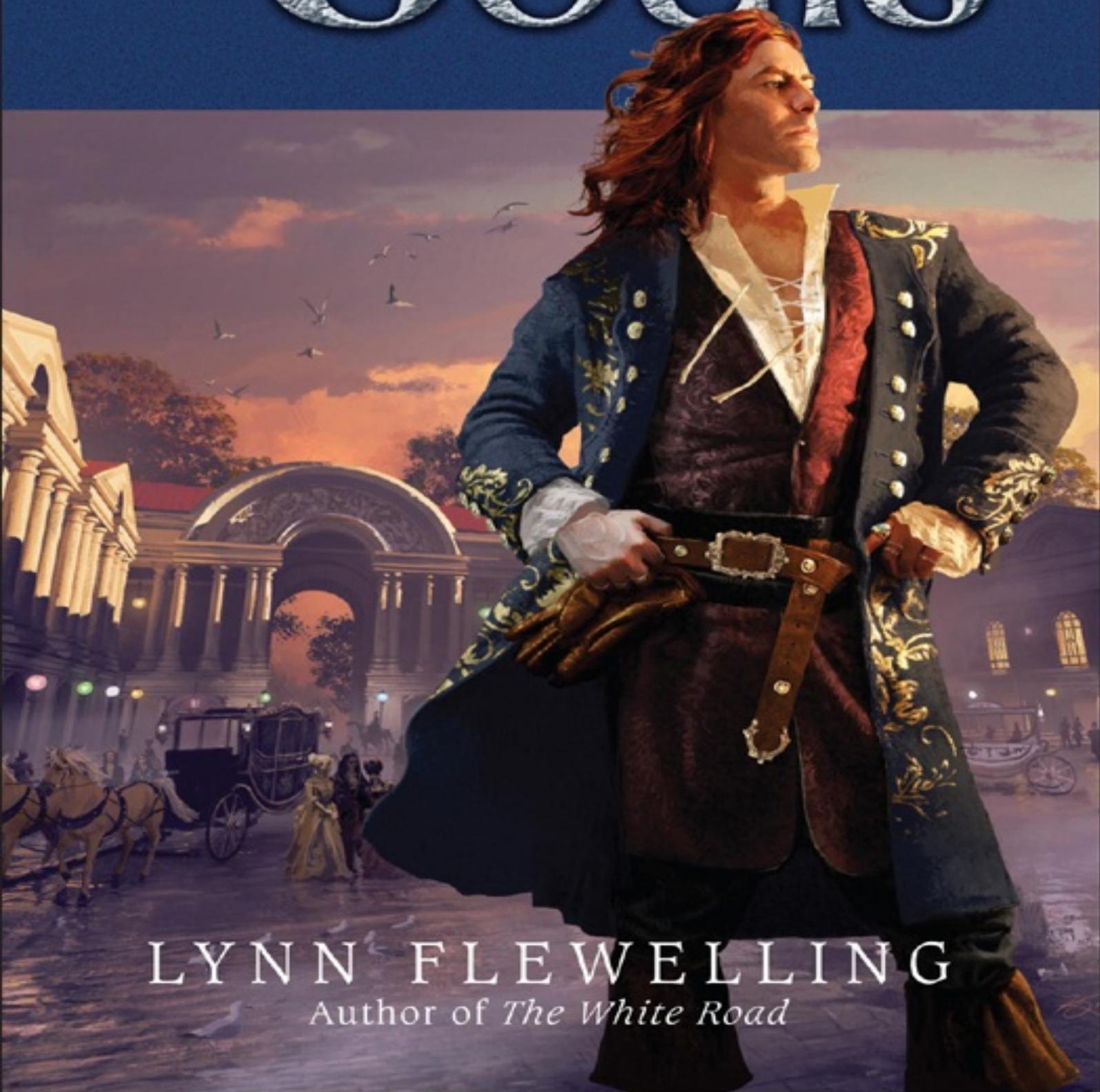


# Casket of Souls



LYNN FLEWELLING

Author of *The White Road*

*Praise for*  
THE WHITE ROAD

**2010 RT Reviewers' Choice Award Nominee for Career Achievement in  
Sci Fi/Fantasy**

“*The White Road* is an action-packed and terrific read—enjoy. Flewelling is at the top of her game, and her game is very, very good indeed.”

—PATRICIA BRIGGS, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Mercy Thompson series

“Picking up right where the fourth book left off, this is an action-packed and exciting read... Seregil and Alec remain two of the most memorable heroes in fantasy.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Marvelous ... one of the most entertaining series out today. What makes Flewelling’s books so appealing is that they manage to blend Tolkienesque world-building with characters who are three-dimensional, realistically drawn, and often gritty. Though the stories themselves are awash with spells, prophecies, war, and other high fantasy conceits, the characters are always at the foreground—characters who live and breathe and love.”

—Rob Will Review

*Praise for*  
SHADOW'S RETURN

**2008 *Romantic Times* Reviewers' Choice Award Nominee for Best  
Fantasy Novel**

“The fourth book in Flewelling’s superb Nightrunner series picks up right where the last book left off with nary a hiccup. Seregil and Alec continue to be entertaining, while Flewelling pulls off the near impossible in this compelling pageturner.”

—*Romantic Times* (4½ stars)

“Excellent! ... This [is a] terrific fantasy thriller that can stand alone, but is enhanced by the other tales in the Skalan saga.”

—BookReview

“Flewelling presents a well-developed fantasy world with faie from many clans, wizards, alchemists, and ambitious humans. Love and jealousies abound and drive the story.”

—SF Revu

*Praise for*  
The Tamir Triad

“Some of the most inventive and emotionally gripping fantasy to come down the pike in years ... Flewelling’s writing is both intelligent and visceral, with unflinching detail that compels readers to turn pages in wide-eyed fascination.... At the same time, however, a sense of poetry runs through her narration.... Flewelling takes the stock trappings of the sword-and-sorcery genre and turns them into a riveting epic story that is unique, disturbing, and enthralling.”

—*Mythprint*

“Perhaps the deepest psychological novel I’ve ever read—the fantasy makes the unconscious issues real. Gorgeous but dark.”

—ORSON SCOTT CARD

*Praise for*  
The Oracle’s Queen

“A splendidly stirring coming-of-age tale.”

—*Romantic Times* (4½ stars)

“It is a great book!”

—*Affaire de Couer* (4½ stars)

“I’ve been looking forward to *The Oracle’s Queen*, the third volume in The Tamir Triad, with eager anticipation and it doesn’t disappoint. Central characters remain true to the previous volumes, and at the same time we see new facets to their personalities. The inexorable flow of events drives the narrative forcefully onward while unexpected twists keep us guessing.... I can recommend it and indeed the whole series to lovers of intelligent contemporary fantasy that nevertheless keeps faith with all the strongest traditions of the genre.”

—JULIET E. MCKENNA, Emerald City

“This novel delves deeply into the psychological effects of razzle-dazzle magic, thrones, swords, and the rest, and makes for a terrific read.... Magic, mystery, politics, emotions, and rare golden threads of the numinous all make this book a rich tapestry of a read right through the climax.... There is never an easy answer in *Oracle’s Queen*: the characters gain so much dimension that they linger in the mind long after one reads the last page. This trilogy is a must for those who love fantasy with all the Good Stuff stitched together by intelligent world-building and a wise eye for the frailties, and the greatnesses, of the human spirit.”

—SF Site

“A fine conclusion to an above-average series ... Flewelling does an excellent job of adding depth and texture to the story of a young person thrust onto the throne of Skala.”

—*Contra Costa Times*

“Lynn Flewelling’s *The Bone Doll’s Twin*, *Hidden Warrior*, and *The Oracle’s Queen* are brilliantly original and moving. This story still haunts me, months after reading the books. There’s plenty of gritty realism to make this a book for adults and mature teenagers, but what it definitely is not is ‘escapist.’ This book drags you through so much emotionally painful territory that you’re almost relieved when it’s done and you can escape to your safe regular life.”

—ORSON SCOTT CARD

*Praise for*  
HIDDEN WARRIOR

“Stellar high-concept fantasy.”

—*Mysterious Galaxy*

“A rousing prince-in-hiding adventure, with some unexpectedly satisfying developments for a middle volume in a series.”

—*Locus*

“A beautiful, compelling, dark tale.”

—*Booklist*

“A superlative job ... The world she has built is complex, and the action non-stop.... Flewelling handles the gender questions with such skill that the reader really feels Tobin’s ambivalence, and gradual change.... Recommended highly for anyone seeking a rollicking good read.”

—SF Site

“Satisfying ... intriguing ... exploring not merely issues of gender and power but questions of honor as well.”

—*Lambda Book Report*

*Praise for*  
THE BONE DOLL’S TWIN

“*The Bone Doll’s Twin* is a thoroughly engrossing new fantasy. It got its hooks into me on the first page, and didn’t let loose until the last. I am already looking forward to the next installment.”

—GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

“Lynn Flewelling’s *The Bone Doll’s Twin* outshines even the gleaming promise shown in her earlier three books. The story pulled me under and carried me off with it in a relentless tale that examines whether the ends can ever completely justify the means.”

—ROBIN HOBBS

“Fresh and original—and unlike most fantasies that try to put women in traditionally male roles, hers works. I found the world exceptionally well realized and coherent. I think you have a winner here! My congratulations to Lynn. Books like this are too good not to share.”

—KATHERINE KURTZ

“Flewelling’s language never calls attention to itself, and instead she brings us inside the heads of an array of splendid, believable characters. Which is what fiction is supposed to do—give us fascinating people and powerful relationships from the inside out. Flewelling is a master of it. I fell in love with all her characters and hated for the book to end. Fortunately, it has a sequel (*Hidden Warrior*), but I also hated for it to end and it did. That’s how good books are supposed to make you feel: like you’re living in another world, with people you really care about, and you don’t want to close the book and go home. If these books hadn’t turned out to be excellent, I wouldn’t be reviewing them, of course—because I rarely review books I didn’t finish, and I rarely finish books that I don’t enjoy. I loved these.”

—ORSON SCOTT CARD

“*The Bone Doll’s Twin* is a great read. Lynn Flewelling has outdone herself with this vibrant tale of dark magic, a hidden child, and the demon ghost that haunts it. She builds a convincing, colorful world with carefully chosen details, and her characters are memorable because their dilemmas are vividly drawn and heartbreakingly believable. This is exactly the kind of fantasy novel that will keep you up long past your bedtime.”

—KATE ELLIOTT

“A fascinating read, both intellectual and haunting.”

—BARBARA HAMBLY

“A dark and twisting enchantment of a book, a story of deception and loyalty and heroism that will magick its readers along with its characters.”

—LOUISE MARLEY

“Lynn Flewelling is one of the best at creating complicated stories peopled by diverse characters, each with his own agenda, and each absolutely believable. This tale of a girl disguised by magic and brought up as a boy is engrossing and compelling as it explores the honorable reasons behind

dishonorable deeds—and the dark consequences that follow a single desperate act. Flewelling accompanies her skill at storytelling with an exquisite level of detail that brings her entire world to life. A most satisfying tale for readers already familiar with her Nightrunner series—for others, an excellent introduction to the joys of a Flewelling fantasy.”

—SHARON SHINN

“You liked Lynn Flewelling’s Nightrunner series? This novel is even better. *The Bone Doll’s Twin* is a sharply honed, powerful story where good and evil are as entwined as two children’s lives, and salvation carries a very high price. Highly recommended.”

—ANNE BISHOP

“An intriguing prequel to Flewelling’s splendid Nightrunner series and a solid beginning to a new triad of fantasy from a most generous and skilled fantasist, *The Bone Doll’s Twin* will satisfy old fans and capture many new.”

—PATRICK O’LEARY

“Masterful ... readers will be hooked.”

—*Bangor Daily News*

“Magnificent, impressive ... capture[s] some of the same flavor found in T. H. White’s classic, *The Once and Future King*, as well as in Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea books. Factor in some essence of Mervyn Peake, and you have a winning combination.”

—*Realms of Fantasy*

“Flewelling’s Nightrunner books are popular among fantasy fans for a very simple reason—they’re good. *The Bone Doll’s Twin* continues that trend, and I look for her to be a major force in the future of fantasy.”

—*Monroe (LA) News-Star*

“An intensely poignant tale that begs the question—how far should one go to change destiny? Lynn Flewelling delivers a tightly crafted narrative with vivid characters and a detailed background that quickly pulls the reader into her world.”

—*Romantic Times*

“It is the death of children that literally haunts this book, giving it a dark edge that takes *The Bone Doll’s Twin* out of the realm of fantasy and into the world of amoral, ends-justifies-the-means politics.... Most of the characters are presented as people trying to do the right thing, and being caught up in events that leave them questioning just what the right thing to do is.... Flewelling’s storytelling ability and strong prose make it all work.... It’s a

gripping beginning to a story that looks to become even deeper, more complex, more political, and more real as the series goes on.”

—*New York Review of Science Fiction*

“Flewelling is the best thing that could have happened to the fantasy genre.”

—BookWeb

“Every now and then a book reminds me of why I originally started reading fantasy. *The Bone Doll’s Twin* ... has the buzz. It’s original, well written, and totally absorbing ... by turns poignant, spooky, and earthy.... A moving and thoroughly recommended read.”

—*Starburst*

“This terrific tale is dark and exciting, and the magic in it is truly wonderful.”

—*Booklist*

*Praise for the Nightrunner Series*

*Luck in the shadows*

“Memorable characters, an enthralling plot, and truly daunting evil ... The characters spring forth from the page not as well crafted creations but as people.... The magic is refreshingly difficult, mysterious, and unpredictable. Lynn Flewelling has eschewed the easy shortcuts of clichéd minor characters and cookie-cutter backdrops to present a unique world.... I commend this one to your attention.”

—ROBIN HOBB

“Part high fantasy and part political intrigue, *Luck in the Shadows* makes a nice change from the usual ruck of contemporary sword-and-sorcery. I especially enjoyed Lynn Flewelling’s obvious affection for her characters. At unexpected moments she reveals a well-honed gift for the macabre.”

—STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

“A new star is rising in the fantasy firmament.... I am awed by the scope of the intricate world. It teems with magic and bustles with realistic people and spine-chilling amounts of skullduggery.”

—DAVE DUNCAN

“A splendid read, filled with magic, mystery, adventure, and taut suspense. Lynn Flewelling, bravo! Nicely done.”

—DENNIS L. MCKIERNAN

“An engrossing and entertaining debut ... full of magic, intrigues, and fascinating characters. Witty and charming, it’s the kind of book you settle down with when you want a long, satisfying read.”

—MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

“Exceptionally well done and entertaining.”

—*Locus*

“Lynn Flewelling has written a terrific first novel, a thrilling introduction to this series.... Highly recommended.”

—*Starlog*

## STALKING DARKNESS

“Flewelling is bringing vigor back to the traditional fantasy form. In this highly engaging adventure novel, the most powerful magic is conjured out of friendship and loyalty. The author has a gift for creating characters you genuinely care about.”

—TERRI WENDLING, *The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror, Eleventh Annual Collection*

“Events move forward in this second adventure.... it’s up to four companions to stop Mardus’s schemes. Things get very violent and there’s also a strong emotional undercurrent ... an amusing twist on the old ‘damsel in distress’ scenario.”

—*Locus*

## TRAITOR’S MOON

“What most fantasy aspires to *Traitor’s Moon* achieves, with fierce craft, wit and heart. It is a fantasy feast—richly imagined, gracefully wrought, and thrilling to behold. An intoxicating brew of strange and homely, horror and whimsy, lust and blood, intrigue and honor, great battles and greater loves. It is a journey through a world so strange and real you can taste it, with companions so mysterious and memorable you won’t forget it. Lynn Flewelling is a fine teller of tales who delivers all she promises, cuts no corners, and leaves us dazzled, moved, and hungry for more. *Traitor’s Moon* is a wonderful book.”

—PATRICK O’LEARY

“While fans of Dungeons and Dragons–style lore will find enough wizardry, necromancy, swords, daggers, and devilishly clever traps here to satisfy the most avid, this book also provides entry to a complete and richly realized world that will please more mainstream readers.”

—*Bangor Daily News*

# Casket of Souls

LYNN FLEWELLING



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*Casket of Souls* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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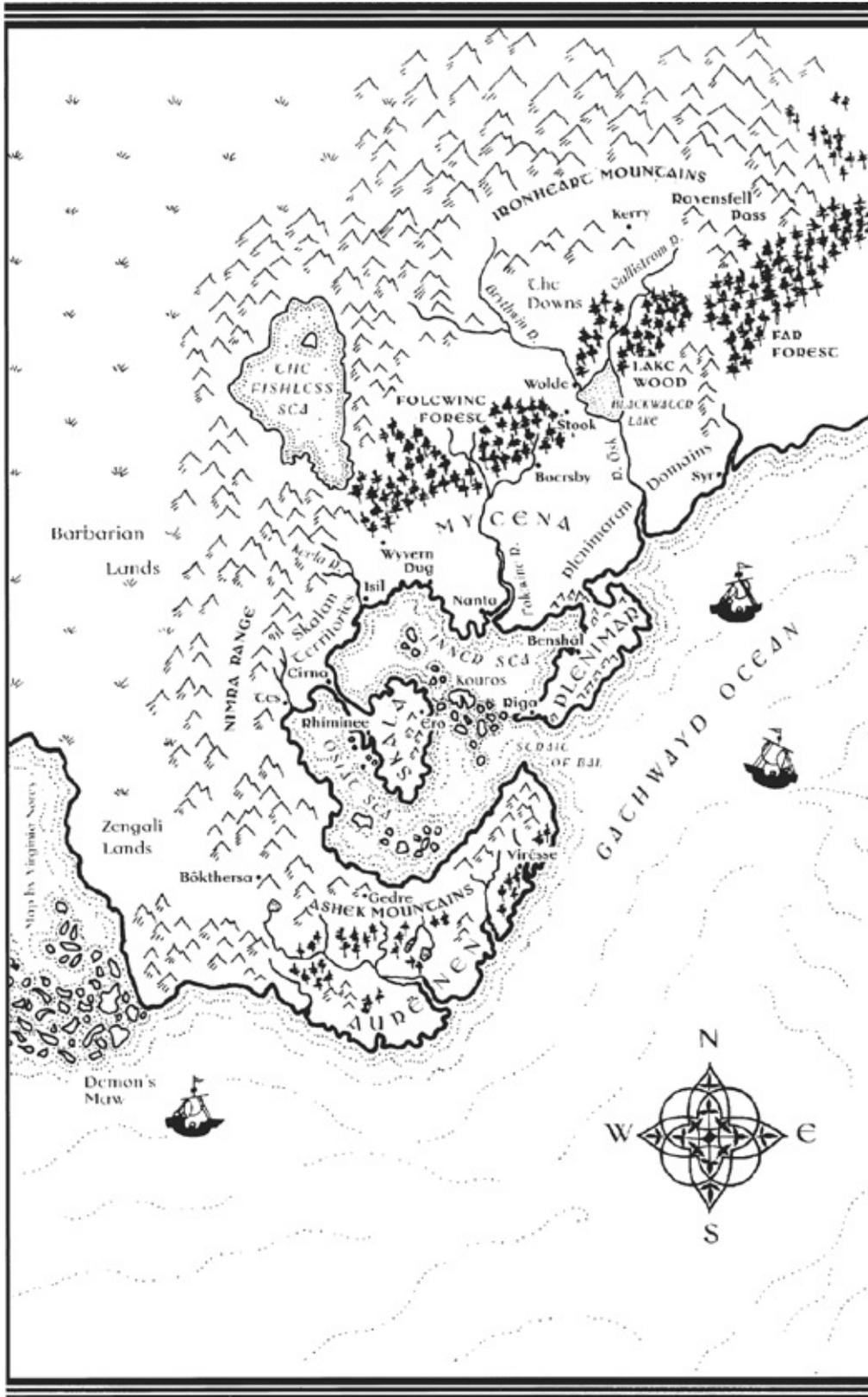
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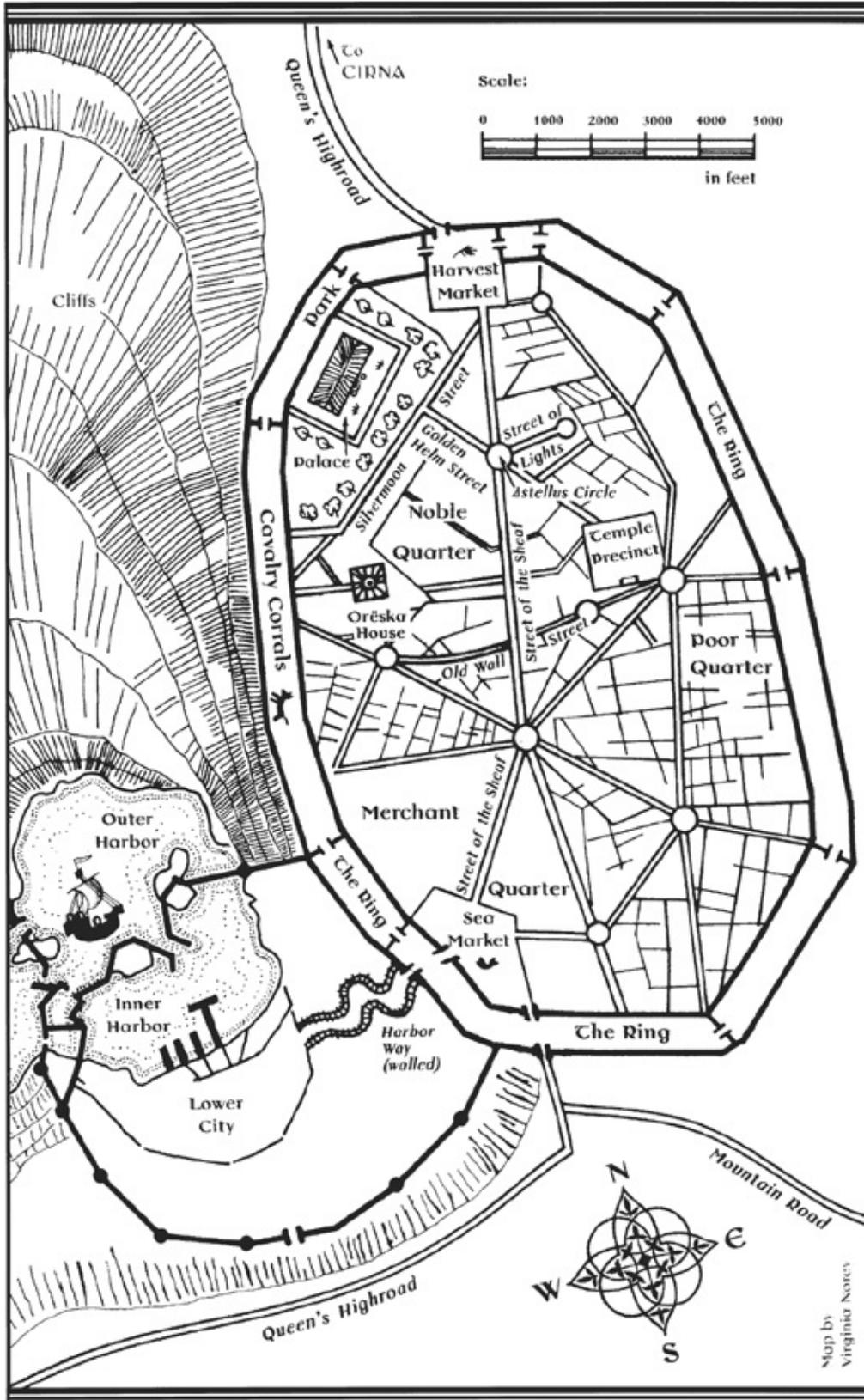
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CHAPTER I  
  
An Evening's Entertainment

SEREGIL hadn't been sure what to expect—or rather, he hadn't expected much. This sweltering, run-down little theater in Basket Street used to cater to merchants of middling means with aspirations to culture, but who had neither the purse nor polish for the likes of the Tirari in the Street of Lights across the city. This place had been shuttered last he knew. The proscenium's faded paint was peeling, its gilt dull, and the footlights flickered in the draft. Only the scrim behind the stage was new, expertly painted to suggest a dark, forbidding forest.

The theater was barely large enough for a hundred people, most of them groundlings in front of the raised stage. It was nearly full, and the smell of overheated bodies was already oppressive. It was unusual for it to be this hot so early in the summer.

"Are you certain this is the right theater?" asked Duke Malthus as he handed his wife Ania, Lady Kylith, and her niece Ysmay into their chairs.

"I was just wondering the same thing myself," Seregil remarked, settling cautiously into a rickety chair between Alec and Kylith.

"Of course it is!" Kylith chuckled, tapping them both playfully with her fan.

Malthus and Kylith were considerably older than Seregil appeared, but he'd known them both in their youth. Malthus had risen to become one of the queen's senior exchequers. He had a short cropped beard but wore his grey hair to his collar—rather daring for a man in his position. Kylith, a former lover, was one of Seregil's closest friends, and an unimpeachable source of society gossip.

Seregil dabbed the sweat delicately from his upper lip with a lace-trimmed handkerchief and scanned the crowd, acknowledging those he knew—merchants and sea captains mostly—who puffed up among their friends at his notice. Even at this level of society, whom you knew, and whom you were known to know, meant a great deal. Seregil, the infamous Aurënfaie exile, had made his living playing that game in Rhíminee for a good many years now.

He and his party were certainly attracting looks and whispers. Lady Kylith's elaborately coiffed hair sparkled with jeweled pins as she murmured something to Duke Malthus. As always, she, Ania, and Ysmay were dressed in the height of summer fashion in light silks and jewels; here they looked like swans among ducks. Seregil supposed they all must. No doubt there were a few cutpurses in the audience below, sizing them up for later.

Seregil and Alec cut quite a figure themselves, two handsome, lanky young men—one dark-haired, one fair—dressed in long linen summer coats stitched in gold, fawn breeches, and well-polished boots. Seregil's long, dark brown hair was caught back with a thin red silk ribbon that matched his coat. Alec's thick blond braid hung down the back of a coat the same dark blue as his eyes.

Half-blood *ya'shels* like Alec aged a bit more quickly at first, but he still looked younger than his soon-to-be twenty-one. He had something of the fine 'faie features of his mother's people, and was likewise beardless, but had his human father's coloring.

Seregil played the role of a dissolute young exile that was only half true; he wasn't particularly dissolute, though he played the part well. He and Alec were well known for carousing with the young blades of the nobility and a good many not-so-young, like Kylith and Malthus. But they managed to stay just on the boundary of respectability, and when they happened to stray outside it, Seregil's distant relation to the royal family made up the difference. Handsome, foppish, and exotic, the grey-eyed 'faie was known to be somewhat well connected but of little importance.

Their true vocation would have raised more eyebrows than their dissolute ways, if it ever came to light.

"I don't suppose you've heard the latest news from the front?" asked Malthus.

Queen Phoria was still at war with the Plenimarans; the army had left winter quarters two months ago and marched north again to the battlefields of Mycena.

Malthus leaned closer to Seregil and lowered his voice. "The heralds will be announcing it tomorrow, so I suppose there's no harm in my telling you. The Overlord sued for a parlay. Phoria refused. She's sworn to drive the enemy all the way back to Benschâl and crush them on their own ground."

Seregil shook his head. "She means to end the endless conflict. Do you think she can do what her mother couldn't?"

"Prince Korathan seems cautiously optimistic."

The door opened again, and Lord Nyanis and his much rowdier party spilled in and noisily ascended to the far box. He and his companions had brought several pretty courtesans from the Street of Lights as their companions, and it was evident they'd all had a lot of wine. Among them was brown-haired Myrhichia from Eirual's brothel, with whom Alec had once spent a night. Seregil was not the jealous type, particularly since he'd taken Alec there for that very purpose. She waved to them when her partner for the evening wasn't looking, and Seregil blew her a kiss. Alec shyly waved back.

Nyanis spotted them and shouted over, "We're going gambling after this. You must come with us!"

Seregil gave him a noncommittal wave.

"I haven't been to the theater in weeks. I hope these players are all you claim, my lady," Alec was saying to Kylith.

“And that we don’t go home with fleas,” Seregil muttered, scratching at a persistent itch in the crook of his left arm.

“Count yourselves lucky to be under a roof, my dears,” Kylith replied. “Until recently, this company was performing in the streets of the Lower City. They’re refugees from Mycena. They barely escaped with their lives when the Plenimaran army overran Nanta this spring.”

Mycena had always been the battleground when Plenimar and Skala went to war. Those who could fled north up the Folcwine, or south to Skala. There were Mycenian enclaves up and down the northeastern shore, and quite an alarming number had found their way to Rhíminee, thinking to make their fortune here. Most were quickly disillusioned. The tenements around the Sea Market and Temple Square were crowded with families eking out a living any way they could, with the unluckiest driven into the abject poverty and degradation of the south Ring—that no-man’s-land between the inner and outer city walls.

This troupe of players seemed to be among the lucky few to advance their fortunes, having attracted the attention of people like Kylith, who’d heard of them from her seamstress. Like Seregil, she never allowed rank to get in the way of anything that might prove amusing.

“What’s the play called?” asked Malthus.

“*The Bear King*,” Kylith told him. “Have you heard of it, Seregil? I never have.”

“No, but I’m no expert on Mycenian theater. I have heard it can be a bit dull.”

“Not this play, apparently.”

Just then the sound of a drum began backstage, slow and deep as a heartbeat. An imposing, red-haired man with a long, solemn face stepped onto the stage, dressed in what appeared to be a poor approximation of ancient noble garb cobbled together from some ragman’s cart. His eyes, outlined in black, seemed to look to some far-off vista as he raised a hand for silence.

“Long ago, in the time of the black ships, a caul-shrouded babe was born deep in the wilderness of the eastern mountains,” he intoned, his voice deep and resonant. On the stage behind him, a girl in a tattered gown and veil writhed and cried out on the boards, then pulled a painted doll from beneath her skirts, its face covered with a veil.

“There aren’t any eastern mountains in Mycena,” Alec whispered.

“Dramatic license,” Seregil murmured back with a smile.

The narrator continued. “And when the caul was lifted, eyes like gems of ice did steal the very breath from his mother’s lips before she could give suck.”

The girl expired with a groan. Someone offstage did a credible job mimicking a baby’s crying. Then an older actress draped in a fusty bearskin shuffled out and gathered up the doll, rocking it in her arms.

“A she-bear found the babe and suckled it as her own until a huntsman struck her down.”

An older man with grizzled grey curls leapt onstage with a crude lance and mimed running the bear through. When she expired, the man peeled the skin off her and wrapped the doll in the edge of it.

“The huntsman wrapped the child in the pelt of the she-bear that had nursed him and took him back to his wife,” the narrator went on. There was no chorus, but he already had the crowd spellbound.

Despite the raggedness of his costume, the tall narrator commanded the stage as well as any player Seregil had seen at the Tirari this season.

The hunter walked around the edge of the stage, while the woman who’d played the bear took her place on the far side in a different veil and held out her arms to the child. Together the couple walked offstage.

“The baby grew to child, and child to youth, known to all as Auron the Bear’s Child.”

The narrator disappeared; apparently this pantomime had only been a prelude. Now the actors took over, and they were indeed very good—far too good for a place like this.

The young Auron soon revealed an unfortunate power to kill his playfellows with an angry look. At the end of the first act, ill-starred Auron reached manhood, in the form of a strikingly handsome man with wavy auburn hair.

“Well, well, who do we have here?” Kylith murmured, leaning forward for a better look at the newcomer. Her tastes ran to actors as well as officers and nobles.

Over the course of the next two acts, Auron’s fortunes rose to great heights due to his dark powers and prowess with his sword. He ended up as a tyrant king, but in the end he slew his beloved and very beautiful wife and children in a fit of jealousy, turning the fatal gaze on them, then ended his own life by looking at his own image in the polished surface of a shield belonging to a younger hero—the actor who’d played the young Auron—who’d come to avenge them. Somehow, even with their ragged costumes and overlapping roles, the cast managed to maintain a veracity that impressed Seregil, who knew a thing or two about working in costume.

When it was over, people were weeping and applauding and tossing handkerchiefs and coins to the actors as they assembled to take their bows.

“I must say, I’m impressed!” said Malthus.

“Come along,” Kylith said, standing and smoothing her skirts. “I want to speak with the players before that fool Nyanis gets to them.”

The crowd parted for them as Kylith led the way down to the stage. Two little boys who’d played Auron’s sons were still picking up the favors thrown by the crowd.

“Lady Kylith would like to speak with the master of the company,” Duke Malthus told them, distributing a few coins of his own.

One of the boys made them a bobbing bow and ran backstage. A moment later the entire cast came back and bowed to them again. There were ten in all: the handsome auburn-haired lead actor, the grey-haired man and older woman, the lovely black-haired woman who’d played Auron’s wife, the tall

narrator, a teenage boy and girl who appeared to be twins, and three young children—two boys and a red-haired little girl—who rode on the narrator's shoulder.

Up close, their costumes looked even more threadbare, their stage paint little more than chalk and charcoal. Still, to Seregil's practiced eye, they'd made skillful use of what they had.

Kylith smiled up at the tall man. "My compliments to you and your fine company."

But it was the man who'd played Auron who bowed with an elegant gesture. His eyes were the same dark blue as Alec's. "You are most kind, gracious lady. Master Atre, lately of Nanta, at your service. May I present the company?"

"Please do!"

"This tall fellow is Brader, and this is Merina, his wife." The black-haired beauty who'd played Auron's wife curtsied to them.

"My daughter Ela," Brader told them, patting the little girl on the leg. "And those two rascals are ours, as well: Kalin and Van." The two youngest boys who'd played Auron's sons made them expert bows, with an actor's poise even at their ages. They had their mother's dark hair and eyes.

"And this is Master Zell and his wife, Mistress Leea." The old hunter and his wife bowed. "They are Merina's parents and actors of great renown in Mycena. Our twins complete our little company: Teibo and Tanni." The boy had played both young Auron and the young hero who'd killed Atre at the end of the play. Tanni had been Auron's mother. Both were lithe and shared the same high cheekbones and brown hair and eyes.

Seregil made the introductions for his friends.

Atre's eyes widened. "We are honored to have such nobles attend our humble performance! I must apologize for our lowly state and poor showing."

"You're far too modest," said Seregil. Behind the man's fawning smile he sensed a sharp mind already wondering how to best capitalize on this bit of luck.

"It pains me to see great talent in such poor estate." Taking out her silk purse, Kylith gave it to the actor unopened and Seregil heard the mellow clink of gold. She gave Merina a ring from her finger and a kiss, then turned to the rest of her friends. "Come along now, talent must be rewarded! You, too, Nyanis." She waved over the other lord and his guests.

Seregil and the others could hardly refuse, and Brader and his wife had to help collect the money—quite a bit of it gold.

"And how did you fare in Nanta, Master Atre?" she asked. "I suppose you had your own theater?"

"We did, my lady, until the soldiers burned it to the ground. As you can see, we lost everything. Four of our players were killed. The rest of us barely escaped."

"I hope our contributions tonight help you. I look forward to seeing more of your performances."

Atre took her proffered hand and kissed it reverently. “You will always have a place of honor in our theater, my lady.”

“That was a more expensive evening than I’d anticipated,” Seregil murmured, pretending to be piqued as they took their leave of Malthus and his wife, and followed Kylith and Ysmay out to find their carriage. “I think, between us, we gave him enough to buy the wretched place.”

“You can certainly afford it,” Kylith said with a laugh. “And admit it, you were transfixed.”

“They were very good,” said Alec.

Seregil glanced around as they waited for the carriage to make its way to them through the departing crowd. There wasn’t a link boy in sight, what street lanterns there were in this part of town were only sporadically lit, and the hazy gold half-moon didn’t cast much light. Emboldened, a knot of ne’er-do-wells lurked on a nearby dark corner like wolves waiting to pick off stragglers from the herd. Their numbers had increased over the summer—thieves, footpads, even gate runners emerging from their sewer kingdoms at night—and they were becoming more brazen. It was getting to be an annoyance.

The carriage rumbled up at last. The page followed behind, leading Cynril and Windrunner. The footman jumped down and held the carriage door open for his mistresses. Kylith held out her hand to Alec and Seregil.

“Are you sure you two won’t join us at Duke Laneus’s for supper? He’ll be so disappointed. He’s been wanting to meet the handsome young men I talk so much about.”

“Please give him our regrets,” Seregil replied, kissing her cheek. “We have a long journey tomorrow.”

“But we’ll see you all at my party in a few weeks, won’t we?” asked Alec, kissing her good-bye.

“I hope before that!” she exclaimed. “Perhaps you could ask Atre and his players to be part of the entertainment.”

Seregil laughed. “So you’re already their patron?”

She settled back on the velvet seat and winked at him. “I know talent when I see it. Perhaps not all of them, but that fellow Atre, at least, could go far in this city.”

Mounting their horses, he and Alec rode beside the carriage down the Street of the Sheaf, the broad thoroughfare that bisected the city, and bade her and her party good night at Merchant Circle. The carriage continued on into the Noble Quarter while Seregil and Alec made their way toward the Orëska House.

There were throngs of people out strolling and taking the night air. Summer had come early to Rhíminee. Now, in mid-Gorathin, it was so humid and hot by day that even in the Upper City the air pressed down like a great, unrelenting hand. The market squares were all but deserted at midday except for a few stray dogs and beggars stretched panting in the shade of the stalls.