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Opening extract from

Faerie Lord

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Prologue

'Why don't I stay here?' Henry echoed. He knew he was plunging into one of his wretched waffles where he repeated what people said and cranked up his village idiot expression, but he didn't seem to be able to do anything about it.

'Yes,' Blue said firmly. 'Why don't you?'

They were walking in the gardens of the Purple Palace and Blue looked absolutely gorgeous. Night stocks had begun to release their scent and there was torchlight reflected on the river. If there was ever a perfect setting for a romantic moment, this was it and he knew, beyond doubt, he was about to blow it. 'Why don't I?' he asked.

'Oh, Henry, I wish you wouldn't do that,' Blue said mildly. She reached out and took his hand, so that they were walking together by the water's edge. 'You don't want to go home, I don't want you to go home, Pyrgus doesn't want you to go home, so why not stay?'

'Pyrgus doesn't want me to go home?' Henry said, surprised, then realised how stupid that sounded and managed to say something more stupid still: 'My mother would kill me.' He looked at Blue in the vain hope of her understanding and added, 'If I didn't come home.'

Blue ignored it. 'What are you going to do if you go home?'

Henry thought about it, then said vaguely, 'Exams and things.' It was anything but vague inside his head. He would do his exams and if he passed, which he probably would, he was set on a course that would take him on eventually to university, although not one of the good ones, not Oxbridge or anything like that. But whatever university he ended up in, he'd plod through to a mediocre degree, then become a teacher, because that's what his mother wanted. She was a teacher. Actually she was the headmistress of a girls' school. She kept telling him teaching was great because of the extended holidays, as if the measure of a good job was how long you could stay away from it.

'You don't *like* being at home,' Blue said, 'now your dad's gone. You don't like your mother ...'

'No, but I love her,' Henry said gloomily. That was the trouble. To say he didn't like his mother was an understatement. He couldn't stand her. But that didn't stop him loving her. He wondered if feeling guilty was a normal state of life.

'She makes you do things you don't want to do,' Blue said as if he hadn't spoken. 'And she keeps doing things you don't want *her* to do.' She turned to look at him.

Like moving in Anaïs, he thought.

'Like moving in Anaïs,' Blue said soberly. She turned away and they continued their walk. 'You're not *happy* in the Analogue World any more. I know you're not. Every time you go home, you look more miserable when you come back. And there's nothing for you to *do* there – nothing important. Just, you know ... *stuff,* like school

and exams. You don't have a position, like you do here. Nobody respects you.'

Hold on a minute, Henry thought: this was getting painful. Except it happened to be true. Or nearly true. Charlie respected him. In fact he half suspected Charlie fancied him. But that was about it. Life at home *was* pretty miserable.

'Whereas if you stayed here,' Blue went on relentlessly, 'you'd have important work. You're already a hero –'

That was nonsense. If anything he was a villain because of what he'd tried to do to Blue, even though he hadn't been himself when he did it, and after more people got to know about it ...

'– because of rescuing Pyrgus from Hael when he was Crown Prince, and if you don't like your quarters at the Palace, I can make them give you something better and –'

'No, no it's nothing like that,' Henry put in hurriedly. 'I *love* my quarters at the Palace.' They were about a billion times better than his room at home and he didn't have his mother knocking on his door. He had *servants* for cripe's sake!

Blue stopped, and since she still had hold of his hand, Henry stopped too. The sound of the water was overlaid by distant street noise from the city: the rumble of carts, the occasional call from a merchant. The city came alive at night in ways it never did during the day.

Blue said quietly, 'I'm Queen of Hael now, not just Queen of Faerie. I need somebody to help me with that – you know, help me run things. Pyrgus is useless – all he wants to do is get into trouble and save animals – and Comma's too young.' She looked at him, then looked away.

It took a moment for Henry to figure what was going on here, but then it hit him like an avalanche. He blinked. 'Wait ... wait, you're not asking me to take charge of Hell, are you?'

Blue still wasn't looking at him, but she shook her head. 'No, Henry,' she said. 'I'm asking you to marry me.'

One

Two years later ...

'What's going on?' Henry asked at once.

Hodge was staring out through the bars of the cat-carrier, an expression of fury on his face. Aisling was nursing a bleeding hand, an expression of outrage on hers.

'Your cat bit me!' she exclaimed. 'Vicious brute should be put down.'

'I told you to leave him alone,' Henry said. He looked directly at his mother. 'Why is he in the carrier?'

'Henry, he bit your sister. Scratched her too. Luckily just on the hand. If he'd gone for her face, he could have scarred her. She could have lost an eye.'

'I told her not to tease him,' Henry said. 'Why is he in the carrier?'

'I *didn't* tease him!' Aisling shouted.

Henry rounded on her. 'You're always bloody teasing him! Ever since I brought him home. Picking him up and poking him and taking away his food. It's no wonder he bit you. He's an independent tomcat, not some sort of stuffed toy. He just wants to be left alone.'

'I don't think we need that sort of language,' his mother said stiffly. She stared at Henry for a moment,

then went on. 'The point is that he attacked your sister and drew blood. There's a risk of tetanus or cat-scratch fever. We can't just ignore something like that. You know I was against his coming to live here in the first place.'

Henry looked his mother directly in the eyes. 'Why is he in the carrier?' he asked for the third time.

She looked away, to one side. 'Oh, we're not going to have him put down, if that's what you're thinking. Anaïs has gone to get the car. We're taking him to the vet to be neutered.'

For a moment Henry simply stood there, stunned. Then he said, 'You're getting him neutered because he scratched Aisling? As a *punishment?*'

'No, of course not,' his mother said impatiently. 'It's just that he'll be more placid when he's neutered. Less likely to attack people.' She sniffed. 'And a lot cleaner.'

'Mum, he's never attacked anybody in his life except Aisling and that was only because she teases him. She teases him *all the time.* And what's this about cleaner?'

'Tomcats spray,' his mother said. 'They mark their territory. I don't think even you want that sort of smell about the house.'

'He doesn't spray *in* the house,' Henry said. 'He's *never* sprayed in the house. He may spray a bit in the garden, but that's a different thing.'

'It's not something they can help,' his mother said reasonably. 'It's territorial, just as I said, and it's only a matter of time before he starts to do it in the house. We've all decided it's better to do something about it before he actually starts.'

'Not *all,*' Henry said at once. '*We* didn't *all* decide anything. You and Aisling and, I suppose, Anaïs decided. *I* didn't decide anything. I wasn't even consulted – and he's

my cat!' Technically, he was Mr Fogarty's cat, but Mr Fogarty hadn't seen him in two years so he might as well be Henry's cat.

'Try to keep your voice down, Henry,' his mother told him. She waited a moment, as if he needed time to control himself, then went on in her most reasonable tone. 'We thought it would be a great deal easier on you if we simply went ahead. I know how much you love that old cat and that way you wouldn't have to worry about the effect of anaesthetic or the operation going wrong. I actually thought you'd gone out.'

This was the way it had always been. His mother kept insisting every nasty little thing she ever did was *for his own good.* And it was worse since Anaïs moved in. Anaïs herself was all right – Henry quite liked her and she'd even sided with him about bringing Hodge home – but when it came to the things Henry's mother really cared about, like that stupid little scratch on Aisling's hand, she always seemed to get Anaïs on her side. Like now. Anaïs had gone to bring the car to take Hodge to the vet. Not because he sprayed in the house or would ever spray in the house, but because he bit Aisling in self-defence and Henry's mother wanted to teach him a lesson.

It was the sort of thing Henry had had to put up with since he was a little boy. And with Dad long gone he was in an all-female household and it was steadily getting worse. But he wasn't a little boy any more and he wasn't going to put up with it.

Henry walked over to the carrier. 'Not this time, Mum,' he said and flicked the catch.

Hodge burst out of his cage like a rocket.

Two

'You did *what?*' Charlie exclaimed, grinning delightedly.

'I let him out,' Henry said. 'There was a kitchen window open and we haven't seen him since. I think he knew what they were going to do to him.'

They were sitting side by side on a park bench. The sole of Charlie's left trainer was starting to come away and she was fiddling with it ineffectively. Henry thought she looked very nice in a cuddly sort of way now she'd started to put on a bit of weight. She left the shoe alone suddenly and asked, 'Why didn't you want him fixed?'

'I'm not having Hodge fixed,' Henry said. 'Apart from anything else, he's not really my cat.'

'No,' Charlie said. 'He's Mr Fogarty's cat. You still haven't heard from him?'

'Mr Fogarty? No. No, I haven't.'

Charlie said casually, 'It's been eighteen months.'

Actually it had been more than two years, but Henry had to be careful. The story was that Mr Fogarty had gone to see his daughter in New Zealand, leaving Henry to look after his house and his cat ... a story that was getting thinner every month. Charlie hadn't brought it up before, but Henry's mother went on endlessly about the arrangement. It was only the regular cheques

that stopped her pushing it too far. They were simply signed 'A. Fogarty' and she assumed the A stood for 'Alan'.

'You know what old people are like.' Henry shrugged vaguely.

Charlie stared out across the ornamental lake, watching two swans glide gracefully towards the shore. 'I was just wondering what you were going to do next year, when you go to uni.'

'Who says I'm going to uni?' Henry asked. 'I mightn't make the grades.'

'Oh, you'll make the grades all right,' Charlie said. 'And then you'll be off. Where are you going to apply – Oxford? Cambridge?'

'No chance,' Henry said. 'I'm not that bright.'

This time Charlie shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. Wherever you pick it'll mean moving away – there's nothing locally. And if you move away, you won't be looking after Mr Fogarty's house or saving Hodge from a fate worse than death or seeing me or anything.'

Henry picked up the real worry at once. 'Oh, I'll be seeing you all right. I can come home at weekends.'

'Not every weekend.'

'No, maybe not. But, you know ... some.'

'Some?'

'Yes,' Henry said. 'Some.'

'Did you know swans mate for life?' Charlie asked suddenly.

'I think I read it somewhere.'

'If one dies, the other one won't mate again,' she said as if he hadn't spoken. 'Not ever.' She turned her head to look at him and licked her lips lightly. 'Henry, I think we should stop.'

'Stop what?' Henry asked stupidly.
'Going out together,' Charlie said.

For once Henry had the house to himself when he got home. He found some yoghurt in the fridge, took it up to his room and sat down to write a letter.

Dear Mrs Barenbohm, he wrote, then paused.

It was getting complicated already. Angela Fogarty, Mr Fogarty's daughter, had married an American industrialist called Clarence Barenbohm, then emigrated to New Zealand with a great deal of his money after the divorce. She insisted on using the Barenbohm name for everything except financial transactions, which she conducted under her maiden name.

Henry's pen lurched into action again and wrote, *I write to tell you that I do my A Levels this year and next year I hope to go to university. I don't know where it will be (the university)*

He paused again. He wasn't even sure he *would* be going to university. Despite what he'd said to Charlie, he thought he'd probably get the grades all right, but when he tried to discuss his future with his mother, she got evasive, which was a bad sign. Part of him suspected there might be money worries, but she wouldn't come clean and tell him. Anaïs claimed she didn't know.

He shrugged. It didn't matter. Even if he never went to uni, he wasn't hanging around here when he left school.

but there are no suitable educational establishments locally, he went on. *This means that soon I will be unable to look after your father's house and cat (Hodge), as I have done in the past, for very much longer.*

I appreciate the money you sent – He crossed out

sent and inserted *have been sending,* then stared at the page wondering if he should write it all out again. After a moment he decided it wasn't a school essay and went on, *but I very much regret I will be unable to keep on with our arrangement as it has been to date. I am writing to tell you this now while there is still time for you to make other arrangements or otherwise sell the house* (Angela thought her father was dead and the house hers under the terms of his will; only Henry knew differently) *or whatever it is you would want to do. Please write back to me marking the envelope 'Personal' and let me know what you decide to do and if I can help you further in any way apart from continuing our present arrangement beyond the New Year.*

He signed the letter *Henry Atherton,* then immediately wrote a PS:

PS Some children broke a downstairs window, but I had it repaired with money from the Contingency Fund. He knew he should leave it at that, but somehow could not stop his hand writing: *PPS I might be able to continue to look after Hodge (the cat) even after I stop looking after the house or even after I go to university. I wouldn't want him put down or anything.*

He sat staring at the words for a long time. Best not to mention the current little problem with Hodge or the fact that Henry had no idea where he was at the moment. Hodge was bound to come back – he was too old and fat and lazy to make his own way in the world any more. The trick would be to make sure Henry's mother never got her hands on him.

... *even after I go to university.* How on earth would he look after a tomcat while he was attending university? But he'd think of something. He owed that much

to Mr Fogarty. And to Hodge. His hands were trembling slightly as he folded the letter.

Since there was *still* nobody downstairs, he stole a stamp and an airmail sticker from his mother's desk, then pulled his coat back on again; the sooner he posted this off the better. When he opened the front door, Hodge was waiting for him on the doorstep.

'Ah, there you are,' said Henry.

Against Hodge's furious protests, Henry bundled him into the cat-carrier. 'It's for your own good,' he hissed, sucking one thumb where the brute had drawn blood. 'You *really* don't want to hang around here.' It was going to be a pain racing off to Mr Fogarty's house to feed Hodge in the middle of exams, but he couldn't see any alternative. He knew his mother.

As he waited for the bus, Henry thought about Charlie and what she'd said about not going out together any more. He was surprised how little upset he felt. He'd been close friends with Charlie ever since they were little kids, but the romantic interest had started less than a year ago and to be absolutely honest, Charlie had been keener about that than he was.

The bus journey was a nightmare. Hodge wailed all the way and several passengers took to staring at Henry as if he was committing murder. But he settled once they left the bus, and by the time Henry was carrying him along Mr Fogarty's cul-de-sac he was looking around through the mesh of the carrier as if he recognised the place.

Mr Fogarty's house, the last one on the street, was looking distinctly the worse for wear despite Henry's best efforts. Most of the trouble dated back to the days of

Mr Fogarty's own occupancy – he'd pasted brown paper on the bottom panes of the downstairs windows to stop people looking in, seldom bothered with minor repairs and had a habit of leaving half-eaten hamburgers to rot down the side of his sofa. Now it was unoccupied, the process of decay was visibly accelerating. Even if Henry hadn't been planning to leave, it would make sense to sell the place before it fell down.

He carried the caged Hodge to the front door and let himself in – he had his own set of keys. Then he walked through to the kitchen, set the carrier on the floor and unlatched the side. Hodge stretched, looked around suspiciously, then walked out slowly.

'Do you want your Whiskas now or would you prefer to go out the back and kill everything that moves?' Henry asked him conversationally. Hodge walked to the back door and sat down facing it. He waited patiently. 'So it's the killing fields, is it?' Henry said. He walked over, shot the bolt, then unlocked the back door.

Two strangers were standing on the lawn outside.

Henry frowned. He wasn't anything like as paranoid as Mr Fogarty, but the back garden *was* private property and he couldn't see any reason for these two to be poking around.

The man was in his mid-thirties, stockily built with a shock of red hair that was turning prematurely grey. He had on a sharp green suit and suede shoes. The girl seemed a lot younger. She might have been his daughter, except she was dressed in a blouse, skirt and coat that looked as if they'd come from Oxfam.

'Can I help you?' Henry asked coolly.

It was like one of those scenes from a movie where everything goes into slow motion and movement seems

to leave trails. The man turned (slowly) towards him. 'Henry ...?' he said.

The girl turned towards him just as slowly. 'Henry!' she exclaimed. He watched the smile begin to spread like a pouring of honey, illuminating her face, transforming her into a radiant beauty.

They stared at him expectantly. Henry felt a curious emptiness in the pit of his stomach. He stared back at them blankly. Now he could see her face, he knew the girl, of course. 'Nymph?' he whispered.

'Henry!' the man said again. He began to grin and the grin told Henry at once who he was, although it was impossible.

Henry felt his jaw begin to drop and stared and stared until eventually he said what he had to say, what he knew to be true even though it wasn't true, couldn't possibly be true.

'Pyrgus?' Henry said.

Three

'You're *old!*' Henry blurted. It was stupid, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. They were sitting round the table in Mr Fogarty's kitchen. Hodge had jumped on to Nymph's lap and was curled purring while he had his ears tickled. Close up, Pyrgus still looked in his thirties, maybe even *late* thirties. Henry found himself wondering if this was some sort of spell thing, set up as a disguise.

'I wouldn't put it quite like that,' Pyrgus said. 'But I know what you mean.'

'What are you doing here?' Henry asked. What he really wanted to ask was why they were wearing ordinary clothes, Pyrgus in particular: his suit could have come from Marks and Sparks. Henry had never seen them wearing gear like that before. Clothes in the Realm were generally a bit medieval-looking and Forest Faeries like Nymph wore Grecian-style tunics, nearly always in green. 'Why are you dressed in –' he pulled the word out of two-year-old depths '– Analogue clothes?'

'I have to live here,' Pyrgus said, as if that answered everything. He caught Henry's expression and grinned again, a little sheepishly this time. 'Nymph came with me because we got married.'

For a long beat Henry gaped in stunned amazement;

then he exploded, '*Married?*' He looked at Nymph, who smiled a little. 'The two of you are *married?*'

She nodded. 'Yes. Very shortly after you last saw us actually.'

'You can't be married,' Henry said. 'Not really.' But he was grinning all over his face. He liked Nymph and she was perfect for Pyrgus. The way Pyrgus looked had to be a spell thing. He glanced at Nymph. 'Don't you miss the forest?'

'There are forests in this world,' Nymph said calmly. 'A wife must be at her husband's side.'

Charlie mightn't go along with that one, Henry thought. She'd taken to feminism in a big way over the last six months and kept talking about independence and equality and the way women were oppressed by traditional values. Which Henry sort of agreed with really, although to be honest it wasn't on his mind much of the time. 'Is the age business ... like, some sort of magic thing?' he asked, returning to an earlier thought.

The smile on Pyrgus's face disappeared as if he'd thrown a switch. 'It's an illness, Henry,' he said softly. 'That's why we're here.'

four

Chalkhill was dressed in a shocking-pink silk knicker-bocker suit with fashionably clashing electric-blue suede knee boots and a sweet little lime-green slithskin apron. Brimstone stared at him in distaste. 'Were you followed?' he asked.

'No, of course not,' Chalkhill said. 'I took precautions.' He smiled broadly. The spell coatings on his teeth flashed and sparked and played a cheery tune. 'Isn't this *fun?* The old team back together again. Really, Silas, I'm so excited I could *dance.*'

'Have you brought the money?' Brimstone asked drily.

'In my knickers,' Chalkhill said. He caught Brimstone's blank look and added, 'In case somebody tried to steal it.'

They were waiting together on the doorstep of a lonely, tree-shrouded mansion set in the outer reaches of the Cretch. There was a legend that it had once belonged to the Master Vampire Krantas, and whether or not this was really true, it certainly looked the part. Gothic towers and spires reached for the sky like spindly fingers. From somewhere deep inside, a bell was tolling hollowly.

'I thought you'd given up that nonsense,' Brimstone muttered.

'What nonsense?'

'The camp act,' Brimstone said. 'It may have served some purpose when you were spying for Lord Hairstreak, but everybody knows it's just a performance now.'

Chalkhill sighed. 'Perhaps, but the performance has become a part of me.' He glanced philosophically into the middle distance. 'It may be that life itself is a great actor seeking parts to play. It may be –'

'Just don't try it on with the Brotherhood,' Brimstone told him.

They could hear slow footsteps in the depths of the building, and after what seemed like an eternity, the heavy oakwood door swung open. A hollow-eyed Faerie of the Night in evening dress stared down on them. 'Ah, Brimstone,' he said. The eyes swung to regard Chalkhill with an ill-concealed expression of disgust. 'And this must be the Candidate.'

Brimstone nodded shortly. He felt no urge to explain. Everybody knew Chalkhill's only real function was to provide money. Lots of money, warm from the knickers.

'Walk this way.'

They followed the creature through a maze of winding corridors until they emerged into an enormous stone-flagged kitchen. The forbidden smell of Analogue World coffee wafted from a cauldron on the stove. Brimstone wondered briefly if it was to be used as an hallucinogenic.

Their hollow-eyed guide looked around him, frowning. 'Wrong turn,' he muttered. He swung on his heel. 'This way,' he said firmly.

They approached, and passed, a sweeping staircase. 'D'Urville!' a voice hissed angrily.

D'Urville stopped and looked up. 'Ah, there you are, sir,' he said.

Brimstone recognised the Faerie of the Night at the head of the stairs as Weiskei, the Brotherhood Sentinel, a beaky little pain-in-the-ass with a habit of sticking his nose in where it wasn't wanted. He was wearing a red robe with his official lamen on the breast and carrying a ridiculous ceremonial sword. He stared at Chalkhill with even more distaste than D'Urville had. 'I take it this is the Candidate?'

Brimstone nodded.

'Why is he dressed like a circus clown?'

Chalkhill started to say something, but Brimstone signalled him to silence. 'Where do we get ready?' he asked shortly.

Weiskei glanced at him. 'You're Sponsor, are you not, Brother ... Brother ... ah, Brother ...?'

'Brimstone,' Brimstone said, frowning with irritation. What was the matter with the man? They'd only known each other for a quarter of a century; not well, admittedly, but well enough. Unless Weiskei was trying for a put-down, the little tort-feasor.

'Brimstone,' Weiskei echoed and there was a momentary blankness in his eyes that was disturbing. But he rallied quickly. 'Follow me.'

They followed him to the antechamber of the Lodge Room, a stuffy pigeonhole of a place with heavy black curtains blocking any daylight from its windows. The only illumination came from the stub of a candle stuck on to a skull on a side table. It was supposed to remind the Candidate of his own mortality, but Chalkhill didn't seem impressed.

Weiskei pompously took up guard position with his

back against the Lodge Room door and his ceremonial sword upraised. Brimstone swung his demonologist's shawl over his shoulders. 'Take off your shoes and socks,' he instructed Chalkhill. Then, as an afterthought, 'And that idiotic apron.' As a petulant expression began to crawl across Chalkhill's fleshy face, he added patiently, 'It's symbolism, Jasper. Supposed to show humility.'

'Oh, very well!' Chalkhill exclaimed.

The man had painted his toenails! Was there no end to his theatrics? Brimstone looked away tiredly. There was nothing he could do. There was nothing anybody could do. The Brotherhood was desperate for Chalkhill's money.

They settled down to wait. The candle had started to gutter precariously before the Lodge Room door finally opened.

A loin-clothed creature with a jackal's head peered out.

'Good grief!' Chalkhill exclaimed.

'Hoodwink the Candidate, Brother Sentinel,' the creature instructed, his voice muffled by the mask.

'At once, Brother Praemonstrator!' Weiskei exclaimed, snapping to attention. He produced a hoodwink from the folds of his robe and pulled it over Chalkhill's head. Brimstone knelt quickly and rolled Chalkhill's left trouser leg up to his knee. Chalkhill giggled.

The man was utterly impossible. But obscenely rich, Brimstone kept reminding himself. And the Brotherhood had never needed his money more than it did today.

Not if they wanted to regain their former glory.

Five

The battlefield looked exactly the way it did the day the Civil War ended. Evidence of violence was everywhere. Spell-driven explosives had gouged vast craters out of solid rock. Grasslands were withered and burned. The few surviving trees stood barren and bare. There were mangled, bleeding bodies everywhere, most motionless, some mewling softly in their pain, a few still trying desperately to crawl away on limbless stumps.

The illusion was perfect. You could smell the blood and the unmistakable stench of military magic. Blue picked her way carefully through the debris, her face impassive. The memorial was here by her order. It was her penance.

Although she knew the bodies were phantoms, she only knew it with her head. Her gut clenched in pity and horror – the horror she herself had brought about. She talked to no one about it, not even Madame Cardui, but she knew beyond a doubt that had she made different decisions when she first became Queen, the brave soldiers immortalised in this gory spectacle would never have died. The Realm would never have rent itself in two. Faerie would not have fought faerie. The guilt of it drove her back. For one full day in every month, Blue forced herself to walk and look and smell and remember.

Her guards were two squat demons. The vicious little brutes scampered from rock to rock several yards away, but she knew from experience their stubby wings could carry them to her side within a second if danger threatened. She only ever came here accompanied by the demons. She claimed the choice was political: she was Queen of Hael now, after all. But the real reason was that she could not bring herself to parade her guilt in front of her regular faerie guard. Even penance had its limits.

One of the pseudo-corpses was an officer she knew by sight, a former Captain in the Palace Guard. He would have been a Major now, if things had been different, maybe even a Colonel. Instead he was dead, his real body buried in the military plot on Imperial Island. One small tragedy within the greater tragedy, yet it was this memory that forced a tear from Blue's eye. She wondered, not for the first time, whether the Realm would have been a better place had she followed her brother's example and refused the throne when it was offered her.

The thought of Pyrgus brought her attention back to the here and now and the crisis that might yet become a greater threat to the Realm even than the Civil War. Was there anything more she should be doing? She ran through the checklist in her head and decided there was not. What else could she do? What else could *anyone* do? Some things were beyond control, even for a Queen. But at least Pyrgus had a chance now, since she'd insisted he live in the Analogue World. He mightn't like her decision, but he'd had to admit it made sense. And mercifully, events back here were moving slowly. While that continued, there was hope.

She wished Henry were with her.

Even now, so long after it happened, Blue felt herself flush at the memory. How stupid she'd been! Admittedly she was just a child then, scarcely more than fifteen, but even so she should have known better. Men never liked to feel pursued and boys were even worse. She'd been mad to ask Henry to marry her. Anyone with half a brain could have told her what he would do. In fact Madame Cynthia *had* told her what he would do, but Blue had typically ignored the advice. She sighed. Where was Henry now? Still at home in the Analogue World, of course, but did he have a steady girlfriend? Was there someone in his life who took his hand and smoothed back his hair and made him feel a little better about himself?

It was stupid, but she felt a rush of sadness that even overwhelmed her guilt about the Civil War.

The demons were by her side. Blue jerked away on reflex – she could never get used to the speed with which the creatures moved ... or her basic revulsion to the breed. But they meant her no harm, of course. Their red eyes were staring outwards, their bodies in defensive posture. These were her subjects now, whether she liked it or not, and they would protect her without a single thought for their own lives.

Blue followed the direction of their gaze to find out what had triggered the alert. The gruesome battlefield stretched out dismally in all directions, but there was a figure silhouetted on a distant hillock, and the fact that it was upright meant it was no illusion. The demons were watching it intently, chittering softly to each other in those curious lobster-claw clicks they used in places where telepathy was blocked.

'At ease,' Blue said softly. It made little difference. Both

her guardians were aquiver, watching the approaching figure like cats focused on a bird. She had a horror that one day they would disembowel an innocent, perhaps some poor subject who pressed forward to present a petition. So far it hadn't happened: demonic discipline was extraordinary. But she still worried.

The figure was a messenger. She could tell by the curious loping gait as it approached. As it came closer, it resolved itself into a trance-runner, prominently identified by the insignia of his Guild. The man's eyes were fixed on a point high in the sky, while his right hand clutched an ornate ceremonial dagger that he plunged up and down as if it were a staff. Somehow he managed to avoid all obstacles.

'Stand down,' Blue ordered firmly. The dagger, if nothing else, might have triggered an attack, but the demons would not move now unless she was directly threatened.

Although the runner could not possibly have seen her, he swerved to stop a few discreet yards away. Light alone knew how far he had come, but he was not even breathing heavily. His eyes gradually lowered and regained their spirit; then he sank to his knees. 'Majesty,' he said, extending his dagger, hilt first.

Blue took the weapon. The gesture was symbolic of the fact that the Guildsman meant her no harm, but it was more than that. Deftly she unscrewed the top of the dagger and shook a scrap of parchment out of the hollow hilt. There was a moment as the embedded security spells sensed her essence; then the parchment expanded into a standard Palace message scroll.

As Blue began to read, her eyes widened in sudden alarm.