

The dramatic culmination  
of the quest of the Riddle-Master of Hed

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# HARDIST IN THE WIND



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Harpist In The Wind  
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For all who waited, and especially  
for *STEVE DONALDSON*,  
who always called at the right time  
for *GAIL*,  
who reminded me of the difference  
between logic and grace  
and for *KATHY*,  
who waited the longest.

# 1

The Star-Bearer and Raederle of An sat on the crown of the highest of the seven towers of Anuin. The white stone fell endlessly away from them, down to the summer-green slope the great house sat on. The city itself spilled away from the slope to the sea. The sky revolved above them, a bright, changeless blue, its expression broken only by the occasional spiral of a hawk. Morgon had not moved for hours. The morning sun had struck his profile on the side of the embrasure he sat in and shifted his shadow without his notice to the other side. He was aware of Raederle only as some portion of the land around him, of the light wind, and the crows sketching gleaming black lines through the green orchards in the distance: something peaceful and remote, whose beauty stirred every once in a while through his thoughts.

His mind was spinning endless threads of conjecture that snarled constantly around his ignorance. Stars, children with faces of stone, the fiery, broken shards of a bowl he had smashed in Astrin's hut, dead cities, a dark-haired shape-changer, a harpist, all resolved under his probing into answerless riddles. He gazed back at his own life, at the history of the realm, and picked at facts like potshards, trying to piece them together. Nothing fit; nothing held; he was cast constantly out of his memories into the soft summer air.

He moved finally, stiffly as a stone deciding to move, and slid his hands over his eyes. Flickering shapes like ancient beasts without names winged into light behind his eyelids. He cleared his mind again, let images drift and flow into thought until they floundered once again on the shoals of impossibility.

The vast blue sky broke into his vision, and the swirling maze of streets and houses below. He could think no longer; he leaned against his shadow. The silence within the slab of ancient stone eased through him; his thoughts, worn meaningless, became quiet again.

He saw a soft leather shoe then and a flicker of leaf-green cloth. He turned his head and found Raederle sitting cross-legged on the ledge beside him.

He leaned over precariously and drew her against him. He laid his face against her long windblown hair and saw the burning strands beneath his closed eyes. He was silent for a time, holding her tightly, as if he sensed a wind coming that might sweep them out of their high, dangerous resting place.

She stirred a little; her face lifting to kiss him, and his arms loosened reluctantly. "I didn't realize you were here," he said, when she let him speak.

"I guessed that, somehow, after the first hour or so. What were you thinking about?"

"Everything." He nudged a chip of mortar out of a crack and flicked it into the trees below. A handful of crows startled up, complaining. "I keep battering my brains against my past, and I always come to the same conclusion. I don't know what in Hel's name I am doing."

She shifted, drawing her knees up, and leaned back against the stone beside her to face him. Her eyes filled with light, like sea-polished amber, and his throat constricted suddenly, too full of words. "Answering riddles. You told me that that is the only thing you can keep doing, blind and deaf and dumb, and not knowing where you are going."

"I know." He searched more mortar out of the crack and threw it so hard he nearly lost his balance. "I know. But I have been here in Anuin with you for seven days, and I can't find one reason or one riddle to compel me out of this house. Except that if we stay here much longer, we will both die."

"That's one," she said soberly.

"I don't know why my life is in danger because of three stars on my face. I don't know where the High One is. I don't know what the shape-changers are, or how I can help a cairn of children who have turned into stone at the bottom of a mountain. I know of only one place to begin finding answers. And the prospect is hardly appealing."

"Where?"

"In Ghisteslwchlohm's mind."

She stared at him, swallowing, and then frowned down at the sun-warmed stone, "Well." Her voice shook almost imperceptibly. "I didn't think we could stay here forever. But, Morgon—"

"You could stay here."

Her head lifted. With the sun catching in her eyes again, he could not read their expression. But her voice was stiff. “I am not going to leave you. I refused even the wealth of Hel and all the pigs in it for your sake. You are going to have to learn to live with me.”

“It’s difficult enough just trying to live,” he murmured, without thinking, then flushed. But her mouth twitched. He reached across to her, took her hand. “For one silver boar bristle, I would take you to Hed and spend the rest of my life raising plow horses in east Hed.”

“I’ll find you a boar bristle.”

“How do I marry you, in this land?”

“You can’t,” she said calmly, and his hand slackened.

“What?”

“Only the king has the power to bind his heirs in marriage. And my father is not here. So we’ll have to forget about that until he finds the time to return home.”

“But, Raederle—”

She pitched a sliver of mortar across the tail feathers of a passing crow, causing it to veer with a squawk. “But what?” she said darkly.

“I can’t.. I can’t walk into your father’s land, trouble the dead as I have, nearly commit murder his hall, then take you away with me to wander through the realm without even marrying you. What in Hel’s name will your father think of me?”

“When he finally meets you, he’ll let you know. What I think, which is more to the point, is that my father has meddled enough with my life. He may have foreseen our meeting, and maybe even our loving, but I don’t think he should have his own way in everything. I’m not going to marry you just because he maybe foresaw that, too, in some dream.”

“Do you think it was that, behind his strange vow about Peven’s Tower?” he asked curiously. “Foreknowledge?”

“You are changing the subject.”

He eyed her a moment, considering the subject and her flushed face. “Well,” he said softly, casting their future to the winds over the dizzying face of the tower, “if you refuse to marry me, I don’t see what I can do about it.

And if you choose to come with me—if that is what you really want—I am not going to stop you. I want you too much. But I’m terrified. I think we would have more hope of survival falling head first off this tower. And at least, doing that, we’d know where we were going.”

Her hand lay on the stones between them. She lifted it, touched his face. “You have a name and a destiny. I can only believe that sooner or later you will stumble across some hope.”

“I haven’t seen any so far. Only you. Will you marry me in Hed?”

“No.”

He was silent a little, holding her eyes. “Why?”

She looked away from him quickly; he sensed a sudden, strange turmoil in her. “For many reasons.”

“Raederle—”

“No. And don’t ask me again. And stop looking at me like that.”

“All right,” he said after a moment. He added, “I don’t remember that you were so stubborn.”

“Pig-headed.”

“Pig-headed.”

She looked at him again. Her mouth crooked into a reluctant smile. She shifted close to him, put her arm around his shoulders, and swung her feet over the sheer edge of nothingness. “I love you, Morgon of Hed. When we finally leave this house, where will we go first? Hed?”

“Yes. Hed...” The name touched his heart suddenly, like the word of a spell. “I have no business going home. I simply want to. For a few hours, at night... that might be safe.” He thought of the sea, between them and his home, and his heart chilled. “I can’t take you across the sea.”

“In Hel’s name, why not?” she said.

“It’s far too dangerous.”

“That makes no sense. Lungold is dangerous, and I’m going with you there.”

“That’s different. For one thing, no one I loved ever died in Lungold. Yet. For another thing—”

“Morgon, I am not going to die in the sea. I can probably shape water as

well as fire.”

“You don’t know that. Do you?” The thought of her caught in the water as it heaved itself into faces and wet, gleaming forms made his voice rough. “You wouldn’t even have time to learn.”

“Morgon—”

“Raederle, I have been on a ship breaking apart in the sea. I don’t want to risk your life that way.”

“It’s not your risk. It’s mine. For another thing, I have been on ships from Caithnard to Kyrth and back looking for you and nothing ever happened to me.”

“You could stay at Caithnard. For only a few—”

“I am not going to stay at Caithnard,” she said tersely. “I am going with you to Hed. I want to see the land you love. If you had your way, I would be sitting in a farmhouse in Hed shelling beans and waiting for you, just as I have waited for nearly two years.”

“You don’t shell beans.”

“I don’t. Not unless you are beside me helping.”

He saw himself, a lean, shaggy-haired man with a worn, spare face, a great sword at his side and a starred harp at his back, sitting on the porch at Akren with a bowl of beans on his knees. He laughed suddenly. She smiled again, watching him, her argument forgotten.

“You haven’t done that in seven days.”

“No.” He was still, his arm around her, and the smile died slowly in his eyes. He thought of Hed, gripped so defenselessly in the heart of the sea, with not even the illusion of the High One to protect it. He whispered, “I wish I could ring Hed with power, so that nothing of the turmoil of the mainland could touch it and it could stay innocent of fear.”

“Ask Duac. He’ll give you an army.”

“I don’t dare bring an army to Hed. That would be asking for disaster.”

“Take a few wraiths,” she suggested. “Duac would love to be rid of them.”

“Wraiths.” He lifted his eyes from the distant forests to stare at her. “In Hed.”

“They’re invisible. No one would see them to attack them.” Then she shook her head a little at her own words. “What am I thinking? They would upset all the fanners in Hed.”

“Not if the farmers didn’t know they were there.” His hands felt chilled, suddenly, linked around hers. He breathed, “What am I thinking?”

She drew back, searching his eyes. “Are you taking me seriously?”

“I think... I think so.” He did not see her face then, but the faces of the dead, with all their frustrated power. “I could bind them. I understand them... their anger, their desire for revenge, their land-love. They can take that love to Hed and all their longing for war... But your father... how can I wrest something out of the history of An and lead it to danger in Hed? I can’t tamper with the land-law of An like that“

“Duac gave you permission. And for all my father is interested in land-law, he might as well be a wraith himself. But Morgon, what about Eliard?”

“Eliard?”

“I don’t know him, but wouldn’t he... wouldn’t it disturb him maybe a little if you brought an army of the dead to Hed?”

He thought of the land-ruler of Hed, his brother, whose face he barely remembered. “A little,” he said softly. “He must be used to being disturbed by me, even in his sleep, by now. I would bury my own heart under his feet if that would keep him and Hed safe. I would even face an argument with him over this—”

“What will he say?”

“I don’t know... I don’t even know him any more.” The thought pained him, touching unhealed places within him. But he did not let her see that; he only moved reluctantly from their high place. “Come with me. I want to talk to Duac.”

“Take them,” Duac said. “all of them.”

They had found him in the great hall, listening to complaints from farmers and messengers from Lords of An whose lands and lives were in turmoil over the restlessness and bickerings of the dead. When the hall finally cleared and Morgon could speak with him, he listened incredulously.

“You actually want them? But Morgon, they’ll destroy the peace of Hed.”