

Chapter 1 KERRIL

Three in one shall save the day
When danger threatens Azaray

The serving boy stood with his back pressed against the wall, wishing he could slip through the big grey stones and vanish. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but something had put his master into a towering rage and that was enough to make Kerril's heart pound with fear.

Someone would suffer for their lord's rage. Someone always did. He prayed it wouldn't be him.

In front of him stood Lord Bezroll, the scar on his cheek burning red and his whole body stiff with rage. He banged his massive right fist on the table and roared, 'Fetch him in!'

The Sergeant at Arms repeated the command in a voice echoed round the huge hall. A minute later two men marched in, holding a third, who stumbled along between them, his face white.

Any servant who could do so had already crept out of the hall or hidden behind something, but Kerril was trapped behind the high table where his master sat, so could only stay where he was, trying desperately not to attract attention to himself.

Lord Bezroll beckoned. 'Bring the fellow closer.'

The sergeant poked the prisoner in the ribs and the man took a reluctant step forward, shivering.

Bezroll strode round the high table, picked up the terrified prisoner by the scruff of his neck and shook him like a dog holding a rat. 'No one is allowed to touch that sword! It belonged to my grandfather and is my most treasured possession.'

'I just touched the hilt. It looked so beautiful. I'm truly sorry, my lord.'

Bezroll flung the man down on the floor at his feet, where he lay shaking with fear. 'Had you not been new to my service, I would have wrung your neck for that.'

Behind them the boy closed his eyes in relief. It seemed the man would escape with his life. It made Kerril feel sick when people were killed.

The man risked a glance upwards. 'Lord, I pray you have mercy on me. I meant no harm.'

Bezroll strode back to his great carved chair and sat down, frowning.

It seemed to the terrified lad that silence now echoed round the hall as loudly as the lord's voice had done a minute ago. Just as Kerril thought he would burst with trying to breathe quietly, Bezroll pointed one finger at the man.

'Be out of this keep within the hour. The sergeant will see you through the gates and on the road to Azaray. You've time to get there by dusk if you hurry. Do not set so much as one toe off that road until you get to the city, if you value your life.'

It wasn't necessary to say that, Kerril thought with a shiver. Everyone at the keep knew that if you stepped into the Shadows that lay between the worlds like clouds of dirty mist, you simply vanished, never to return.

'Yes, lord. Thank you, lord.' The man scrambled to his feet and ran from the hall.

At a nod from the sergeant, one of the other men-at-arms followed to see him on his way.

Bezroll gestured to his goblet. Kerril filled it carefully with wine and gave his best bow as he backed away. He looked round, desperate for something to take him out of the hall.

As he carried a pile of empty platters back to the kitchens, he exchanged glances with the scullery lad, but neither spoke. This was no time for chatting or loitering. Everyone at Sendalands Keep would be treading carefully for the rest of the day.

Later, when he served his lord with more wine, Kerril was cuffed about the head for filling the goblet too full.

In the evening, when he set down the lord's platter of meat with hands that shook, he spilled a drop of gravy on the white tablecloth. A blow from one huge fist sent him spinning backwards into the wall. He slid helplessly to the floor, the breath thumped out of him by the impact.

'Stay out of my sight, you dolt!' roared Bezroll. He glared over his shoulder at the dazed lad. 'You're getting too big to be a page. I should send you to work in the mines.' He picked up his goblet and muttered, 'About time we did something about you, anyway.'

Kerril scrambled to his feet and fled, still gasping for breath and rubbing his bruised arm. What did his master mean by 'about time we did something about you'?

Oh, how he wished he could serve another lord! Anyone would be a better master than Bezroll. And even the meanest hut must surely be a happier place to live than this great stone keep.

Kerril knew that one day, when this new world had come fully out of the Shadows, people would settle on it and his master would rule it all. As he waited for that to happen, Bezroll made sure the only road through the Shadows was well guarded. But the mists were creeping back more slowly than expected and so far had revealed only barren mountains, with no animals to hunt. Everyone knew Lord Bezroll needed farming land if he was to attract folk from Azaray to settle here.

No wonder Kerril's master was always angry. It must be costing him a great deal of money to keep control of this keep, because most of the provisions had to be brought in from Azaray.

The men who drove the big supply carts didn't linger at Sendalands. They unloaded their goods quickly, satisfying their hunger as they worked, glancing uneasily over their shoulders, eager to get back through the Shadows before nightfall.

The next day the house steward was in a good mood, so Kerril asked him about Azaray.

'I'd really like to see the city. Couldn't I go back with the supply carts, just for a day or two?'

‘Certainly not. You’re needed here. Besides, it’s a crowded, dangerous place. You can’t turn round without tripping over somebody. Here at least you can breathe fresh mountain air and—’ the steward lowered his voice, ‘there are no wizards.’

‘Are wizards so bad?’

‘Pray you never find out. And be satisfied with this answer, because if you ask to go to Azaray again, lad, I will beat you until you can no longer stand.’ Cedrith leaned forward and poked Kerril in the chest to emphasize his point. ‘You’re getting too uppity lately. Leave thinking to your betters and concentrate on doing your duties quietly and well. That’s all we ask of you.’

Cedrith was like that, friendly one moment, sharp the next. But at least he had taught the serving lads to read and write, so that they could all read the lists of daily duties written on the big slates in the kitchen, lists which changed often when their master was in residence to suit his whims.

Kerril loved reading because he liked to know why things were so. When the lord was away, he would go and read the books in the library, a place no one else used if they could help it, because it was so gloomy. They said they heard footsteps when they knew no one else was near, or sounds of voices in the distance. Kerril had never heard any such things. He always felt comfortable there.

Fortunately Lord Bezroll spent at least half his time in Azaray and when their lord was away life in the castle was easier.

Kerril had another worry now. Lord Bezroll had said, ‘About time we did something about you, anyway.’ What did he mean by it? What was he going to do?

Kerril couldn’t get the words out of his mind.

A messenger arrived the following afternoon from the King in Azaray, summoning Lord Bezroll to the royal palace on that world, a much older world, long settled. The lord left within the hour, and took half the inhabitants of the keep with him.

Now that Kerril had no pressing duties, he begged an hour's leave from the steward, coaxed a hunk of bread from the cook and escaped through the small side gate to walk in the fresh air.

'It's not fair,' he muttered as he walked up the rocky slope behind the keep. 'Why do they never take me to Azaray? All the other servants have been there.'

He sighed, feeling miserable and alone. The steward said he was a foundling child, left at Lord Bezroll's gate in Azaray. It was dreadful having no relatives. Even the kitchen lad had a mother and two older brothers, whom he was allowed to visit once a year. All Kerril knew was this keep and he'd never been allowed to leave it. He reckoned he knew it better than anyone else, for he'd played in its passages for as long as he could remember.

Well, he'd played everywhere except in the lord's rooms. People only went there to serve Lord Bezroll.

From the hilltop Kerril could see the Shadows in the distance, grey, always shifting. They looked a bit like clouds but heavier and menacing, somehow. As if they had a life of their own. No one, not even the King, knew what lay inside the Shadows.

Kerril felt happier when he arrived at the big black rock on top of the hill behind the castle. He sat down on it and clasped his arms round his knees. This was his special place and he felt safe here. No one else from the keep ever came up here. The other servants said ghosts haunted the hilltop and many claimed to have heard or seen them.

He smiled as he ran one fingertip over the surface. So smooth and glassy, and always slightly warm to the touch, whatever the weather. He'd been coming here ever since he was small, drawn to it by something he didn't understand. He'd never seen any ghosts, but he wasn't going to tell anyone else that. He liked having the place to himself.

On a sudden whim, Kerril went to the edge of the cliff to the land behind the keep. In the rocky valley far below him a river tossed its way between huge boulders. There were no people down there, not yet.

He went back to the rock, stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Within minutes the dog arrived, as she usually did, a large hunting hound whose head was as high as his shoulders. She must have escaped from the keep years ago and was clever enough to stay free. He envied her that.

She came right up to him, grinning and wagging her feathery, red-gold tail. He put his arms round her neck and buried his face in the long soft fur. Hallie was his only friend. He didn't know why he'd chosen that name, it had just popped into his mind, but it seemed to suit her.

'You're beautiful,' he whispered in her ear. But this time Hallie didn't lick his nose and let him cuddle her. This time she threw back her head and howled—on and on, the cries becoming so shrill they hurt his ears.

Kerril found it hard to move, hard to think, even. Everything blurred around him, the sky grew dark as night and he cried out in fear as lightning split the clouds and thunder boomed across the valley.

He struggled to his feet but something seemed to snatch at his body and drag him down again.

Expecting to land on the rock, he yelled in terror and shock as he tumbled instead into a hole, then yelled again as the hole turned into a dark tunnel that went down and down, a tunnel that seemed to have no end.

As the lad lost consciousness, Hallie floated down the tunnel beside him. Her paws turned into hands—still covered in red-gold fur and having six fingers, but hands nonetheless. Her face and body changed shape too and she became—something else.

As the tunnel curved to an end, she gathered Kerril close and carried his limp body through the magic portal that barred the way into the True Vale, for none might enter this place without a guide.

After setting Kerril down gently on the soft, cushiony grass, she straightened up and stared down at him sadly. 'You're too young for this, child, but they're plotting to kill you. This is your only chance of survival.'

She turned to leave the True Vale and go back to the shadow worlds to fetch the others who would share his quest. If she didn't rescue them in time, they too would be killed.

2 SHAYLA

‘Get that saddlebag packed quickly, you fool!’ Lady Alvyna’s voice sounded even shriller than usual. She set her hands on her plump hips and scowled at the girl, continuing to scold and making no effort to help. ‘Why are you always so slow? Stop staring around and hurry up with the packing!’

‘Yes, my lady.’ Shayla continued to roll the garments and push them carefully into the leather saddlebags. She was working as fast as anyone possibly could, but no matter what she did, she couldn’t please her foster mother and never had been able to. She’d learned when quite young to hide her feelings and keep a dull expression on her face as orders and complaints were tossed at her.

Why Lady Alvyna and Lord Beffris had fostered her in the first place, she had never been able to work out, though they said it was because they’d known her parents. She couldn’t remember her mother and father at all.

Her only happy memories were of the nursery here at Weyridge House. Her nursemaid had loved her, she knew, but after she turned five, Luanna had been put to other work and Shayla had been sent to do lessons with the servants’ brats. Since then, she and her nursemaid had only occasionally been able to catch a moment together in private, but it had helped to know that Luanna was nearby and still cared about her.

Two years ago, however, Lady Alvyna had caught them meeting and had immediately sent Luanna to work in the big town house in Azaray. Shayla missed her old nurse dreadfully.

When she was little, she’d tried to play with the servants’ children after lessons, but Lady Alvyna had forbidden that, so she’d made a pet of an old stable cat for a time. The cat had died, though, and the stable master had told her to leave the other cats alone or they wouldn’t do their job of keeping down the vermin.

Lady Alvyna's own children lived in the city, not out here at the big rambling house which stood alone in its walled grounds on the edge of this new shadow world to which Lord Beffris and his wife had laid claim. Shayla had never even met their children, for she was not allowed to leave the estate. She heard about them sometimes though—heard too much, for her ladyship was always comparing her to them, saying she was such a fumblefingers that she'd never make a proper lady.

It might be wicked to hate the people who had looked after you all your life, but Shayla did. One day she was going to run away from Weyridge House—she was quite determined on that—but not till she was grown up. She'd started planning it already, because she was sure she would only have one chance of escape.

She'd go at night, disguised as an old woman, a time when other folk feared to travel anywhere near the Shadows. But how was she to get out of the grounds next to the road? The walls round them were high and topped by jagged spikes, and there were always armed men guarding the gates and patrolling the grounds.

The road led to Azaray, she knew, but on each side of it the Shadows twisted and writhed. Fearsome demons lived there, people said, or evil spirits which sucked the life from your body. Perhaps the dog would come with her. She'd feel less afraid then. Of course, dear Hallie might not alive by then, but she didn't seem to be ageing as other animals did, so Shayla kept on hoping. She didn't know why she'd called the dog Hallie. The name had just popped into her head. Perhaps she was a magic dog. Shayla didn't care if she was.

No one at the house knew about Hallie or they'd have taken her away from Shayla, she was sure.

She was definitely going to escape from this unhappy house one day, even if she died trying. And where else should she go but Azaray? Easier to hide in a big city, she was sure.

Later that day Lady Alvyna and her husband left for the city and the house grew quiet again.

Most of the servants went off for a snooze or sat about in the kitchen gossiping.

If only it were always as peaceful as this, Shayla thought, as she looked out of the window of the mending room.

After she'd finished her work she decided to go out for a walk and enjoy the late afternoon sunshine. When the lord and lady were away, no one cared what she did or where she went as long as she was present for the morning and evening meals.

She walked slowly up the rocky hillside behind the house, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her shoulders and the gentle breeze in her hair. This was her favourite place.

The garden walls ended at the cliff edge. No need for Lord Beffris to set guards or build walls up here. The single path led only to the flattened peak of land that jutted out over the valley.

Other folk stayed away from this rocky outcrop, but Shayla didn't care what they said. Ghosts couldn't be half as bad as Lady Alvyna in a rage or Lord Beffris's quiet malice. Anyway, she'd been coming here for years and never seen a ghost. The only sounds she'd ever heard up here were perfectly natural ones, the wind blowing, an insect humming or birds singing.

She went to stand on the big black rock near the top. She loved the way the clouds and sun were mirrored in its shiny surface, the way it always felt warm to the touch.

She whistled and within a few minutes the dog arrived and came bounding up to her, grinning and wagging her plummy golden tail. Shayla put her arms round Hallie's neck and buried her face in the soft fur. 'Oh, I've missed you these past few days. But I couldn't get out to see you because they were here.'

A rough tongue licked her nose then the dog raised her head and began to howl—loud, unearthly shrieks that hurt the ears. Shayla winced and tried to pull away, but couldn't.

As the sounds grew louder they beat into a wild rhythm which twisted around her like a net of sound. She was unable to move a muscle and yet she wasn't afraid. How could anything bad happen to her with Hallie beside her?

Black cloud piled upon black cloud until the sky grew as dark as midnight. Thunder rolled across the hills, lightning stabbed down towards the valley and the ground shook beneath her. Shayla cried out in shock as she felt herself slipping then falling down and down.

3 RONAN

Ronan scowled at his elder brother. 'Do it yourself! It's your responsibility to clean your armour. You're not a knight yet and I'm not your squire.'

Garrill smiled, not a nice smile. 'You will do it, brat! Because if you don't, I'll make you very, very sorry.'

Ronan drew in a deep breath and debated whether to defy Garrill. No, not yet. Not till he was older. Although he was the taller of the two now, he was very thin and had grown so much lately he seemed not to know his own body, couldn't even walk without tripping let alone fight someone. At fourteen, he had a boy's muscles still, with no real strength in them.

Garrill, on the other hand, was seventeen and almost a man, strongly built and an expert at making trouble for others. You didn't cross him if you could help it. The servants were absolutely terrified of him and Ronan took great care not to anger his brother. After all, what was the point in starting a battle you couldn't hope to win?

So he shut his mouth on a protest, bent his head and picked up the breastplate that had been tossed at his feet.

Garrill sniggered. 'Make sure it's well polished, you crawling louse. If I find one speck of rust on that steel, I'll beat you till you can't sit down.'

By taking a very deep breath, Ronan managed not to answer back. He watched his brother stride off with that confident air he always envied. No wonder Garrill was confident. He was their parents' favourite. He had all the love and attention from them and even during their rare stays at the castle, they barely spoke to their younger son.

Although Lord Nezrim had laid claim to this new shadow world just before Ronan was born, he and his wife spent most of their time at the royal palace in Azaray, favourites of King Sevriss.

When people assembled in the hall for the mid-day meal, Ronan was late. As he came hurrying in, Nezzrim scowled at him. 'Can you not even manage to be punctual, you dolt? I swear you get uglier each time I see you.'

Ronan couldn't help flushing at this greeting, delivered loudly enough for everyone to hear.

'You look as untidy as a bear,' his lady mother grumbled. 'Go to your room. I can't bear to see you looking like that.' She turned to smile at Garrill and say something in a tinkly, laughing voice.

Ronan swung round and left the hall, trying not to let anyone see how much this treatment hurt. What had he done wrong now? He couldn't think of anything.

In the corridor outside he bumped into Tevis, the swordmaster. 'I've been sent out of her sight again.' Anger at the injustice still throbbed through him.

'Then you can come and eat your meal peacefully with me in the guard house,' Tevis said with one of his quiet smiles. 'It'll be deserted at this hour.'

They turned and walked across the castle yard together.

'Why do they treat me like this?' Ronan asked for the hundredth time.

'Because they know no better.' Tevis laid a hand on the lad's shoulder. 'It won't go on for ever, I promise you. When you're old enough, things will change.'

'You always say that, but I don't think I can bear much more of this treatment. I'd do better to run away.'

Tevis sighed. 'You'd do better to stay. Nezzrim only comes here occasionally to check this new land he's claimed. He'll go back to the palace in Azaray soon, frittering away his time in attendance on the King.'

'Sevris the Cruel,' Ronan muttered. Even here they'd heard of the king's vicious behaviour and greed for gold.

Tevis nodded. 'He is, indeed, a cruel man. Not worthy to be king.'

Ronan followed Tevis into the empty guard room, served himself with a platter of lukewarm stew and a hunk of rough bread from the remains of the guards' meal, and followed his mentor into a smaller chamber where they wouldn't be noticed. 'What are the other worlds like?' he asked wistfully as he began to eat. 'You never tell me about them. You only talk about Azaray.'

'Because it's the oldest in this ring of worlds, the heart of everything. It's there that your future lies, lad, not here or on one of the other new worlds.'

'Not if my family is living in Azaray, it doesn't. They keep me too well guarded here.' He ate another mouthful then sighed. 'I don't know why people want to be kings. It seems to me some men are wicked and greedy, and just want to boss others about. I'd never want to be a king.'

'This talk is foolish,' Tevis said severely. 'Let us discuss swordplay instead. That has more practical use for you and you have a natural aptitude for weapons. Once you grow into your height, we'll get you a man's sword.'

Ronan ate the last of the stew. 'You're risking your life teaching me. We both know that. Why do you do it? If it becomes known, my father will have you killed for disobeying his strict orders.'

'I do it because I have a passion for justice and a fondness for you, lad. Two excellent reasons.'

'That still doesn't explain anything.'

'All will become clear to you one day.'

Ronan sighed and let Tevis lead the conversation back to fighting. He found the discussion of strategy interesting, as always, and soon forgot his misery in discussing old battles and how exactly they'd been won.

He left before the change of guards because he still had to finish burnishing Garrill's breastplate. As he walked to the arms workshop, he wondered once again why his parents had

forbidden him even to touch a sword. It wasn't true that a younger son didn't need to know how to fight. Sometimes older sons were killed and then younger ones inherited.

His parents hadn't given him much education, either, but Tevis and Nella had introduced him to the castle library and encouraged him to educate himself. He now knew far more than Garrill about the history of Azaray, which he found fascinating.

Until Sevrus became king following the murder of his brother Ronan, the royal family had ruled wisely and done well for their people. In those days they'd had a magic sword to guide them.

No one knew what had happened to that sword, which had vanished when Ronan died.

Rumour said that Pavros had destroyed the sword, which seemed the most likely explanation. He was the most powerful wizard who had ever lived and even Nezzim spoke respectfully of him.

When Ronan had the breastplate gleaming brightly, he heard a noise at the castle gates and glanced out of the window. A royal messenger from Azaray was just riding in, clad in the dark green and gold livery. What now? he wondered. His parents and brother had only arrived here two days ago. What message could possibly be so urgent that someone would ride a poor horse to exhaustion to get here?

Within minutes, servants began scurrying about and Garrill came seeking his breastplate. He snatched it up without a word of thanks.

'What's happening?'

'We've had a message from the king. We're to leave today.' He looked scornfully at Ronan. 'Not you, of course. You're too stupid ever to go to Azaray. You'd only embarrass the family. So you can stay here with the other thick-brained country bumpkins.'

An hour later the family left without a word of farewell. Ronan watched them go from the narrow window slit of his chilly bedchamber in the west tower. At least now the castle would be peaceful for a while.

When the last sound of hooves had faded away into the distance, Ronan decided to get a breath of fresh air. He ran quickly down the twisting stone staircase and left the castle through the small servants' gate at the rear. Making his way up the rocky hillside, he went to sit in his favourite place on the big black rock.

He clasped his arms round his knees, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his shoulders and the knowledge that no one was going to shout at him for a while.

Within a few minutes the dog arrived, as she sometimes did. He didn't know where she lived, was just happy to see her. She came up to him, grinning and wagging her tail as usual. He put his arms round her neck and buried his face in the soft red-gold fur.

He'd called her Hallie, because it seemed the right name, somehow, but he'd never dared take her back to the castle. If he had done, Garrill would have poisoned her, as he had once poisoned a kitten Ronan had made a pet of.

As he touched Hallie this time, though, she stiffened and began to howl like a soul in torment. Before he could open his mouth to ask what was wrong, there was a wrenching, tearing feeling and the world turned black around him. He cried out in fear and clung to the dog.

Thunder crashed through the sudden darkness and lightning stabbed across the valley. Ronan felt his senses whirling, but was comforted by a lick on his cheek. Suddenly he began to fall, tumbling head over heels into a gaping hole where no hole should have been.

Although he fought against whatever power had seized him, trying desperately to hold on to his senses, it was to no avail. He was whirled round and round till he could feel consciousness slipping away.

His last thought was to wonder if he had somehow stumbled over the cliff and was crashing down to his death. Then the darkness swallowed him up.