

03008036

THE WAY OF LIGHT

STORM CONSTANTINE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

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Edited by Beth Meacham

A Tor Book

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SEA DRAGON HEIR

THE CROWN OF SILENCE

THE WAY OF LIGHT

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*This book is dedicated to Graham Phillips, who first led us on the quest
and revealed to us the hidden territories.*

Acknowledgments

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THE WAY OF LIGHT

A large, ornate, light-colored decorative flourish or scrollwork design, resembling a stylized dragon or a complex floral pattern, is positioned behind the title. It features intricate swirls and a central vertical element that frames the letter 'I'.

I

THE PRISONER OF CAWMONEL

RAIN WHIPPED DOWN LIKE furious tears upon a landscape of bleak curving moors, where spines of rock humped out of the earth, resembling through the deluge enormous petrified reptiles. Winter. Darkness. Arthritic trees bent away from the wind. Along the wide flat road a horse came: galloping, galloping. The rider's coat flew out sodden behind him. His hair was a drenched rag. The horse's nostrils flared wide, as if it struggled to gasp the last of its breath. Its neck worked madly, the legs a blur, throwing up a glutinous spray of mud. And ahead, the great cyclopean edifice reared like a giant's curse against the darkness: too dense a black, too severe.

There were lights in the fortress, dim pale gleams barely seen through the rain. The windows were narrow, high up and there were few of them. The only entrance was via a moat, and a looming portcullis, held up on gargantuan chains, from which hoary beards of lichen hung down. The rider brought his exhausted mount to a halt before it. The animal pranced and reared, slipped. Its limbs shuddered.

"Aye!" called the rider. "Guardsmen, open the gates!"

He was not sure his voice could be heard through the tumult, but

he felt eyes upon him. They would not recognize him, not yet. A face appeared at a window, which was pushed out against the elements.

"Who hails?"

"General Palindrake, Dragon Lord of the Splendifers. Give me entrance. I have the emperor's seal."

There was a pause, as if a host of watchers clustered at the narrow pane, looking down. What would Lord Valraven Palindrake want here in this wilderness?

There was no spoken response, but presently, the chains began to scream and slowly the portcullis descended. Below it, spears of rain stabbed the black water of the moat. A stench of bogs arose from it, perhaps tainted by waste from the fortress.

Valraven rode over the soaked boards of the bridge. His horse's head hung low now, for his hands were slack upon the reins. He passed beneath the entrance arch and was then enfolded by the rectangle of the fortress. Rain came down into the yard beyond, but somehow less fiercely. Men rushed about, wearing waterproof capes and enveloping hats. Some ran forward. Valraven dismounted and handed his mount into their care.

A captain hurried down the steps on the inside of the wall, from the guardhouse above the gate. His coat was dry, indicating he had only recently put it on. He looked flustered and his formal bow was jerky. "Lord Palindrake, you were not expected."

"No," said Valraven. "Take me inside."

"At once," said the captain. "Welcome to Cawmonel, my lord."

They crossed the yard and entered the main building opposite. Cawmonel Castle had once been the seat of a now extinct Magravandian ducal family. It had become something else. Not a prison, exactly, because there were no dank cells, no dungeons that were used. It was termed a secure house. Luxurious perhaps, in comparison to the Skiterings, the imperial jail in Magrast, but a prison nonetheless. Troublesome people were put there. People who had done nothing wrong, particularly, but who might do. People who, for various reasons (among them royal connections), could not be thrown into the Skiterings. Cawmonel was not that far from civilization: Magrast was only a few hours' ride away. Yet standing in that courtyard, Valraven felt as if he'd left the

world he knew behind and had come to a barbaric corner of the country. Perhaps this was because there were no towns nearby, and the only other inhabitants of the landscape were tough little sheep and the small, dark people who tended them.

Inside the black walls, a semblance of noble life remained. There were tapestries upon the walls, dark red rugs underfoot. A fire burned in the hallway, in a hearth that stretched fifteen feet up the wall. Heat blasted out of it. Valraven took off his coat and handed it to the servant who had materialized at his side. His long black hair stuck to his face, his shoulders.

The captain bowed again. "I'm Sanchis, my lord, overseer of this establishment. How may I help you?"

What he really wanted to ask was: what in Madragore's name are you doing here? But that would have been impolite.

"I am here to interview one of your guests," said Valraven.

The captain looked puzzled, but nodded. "Of course." A pause. "Might I ask who?"

"Tayven Hirantel," said Valraven. "He *is* here, isn't he?"

Sanchis appeared embarrassed now. No one was supposed to know Hirantel was there, not even the Dragon Lord. Eventually, he said, "Yes. Would you care for a hot meal, or a bath, before you interview him?"

"Take me to him at once. You can have your people bring food to me there."

"Very well, my lord. This way."

Sanchis led Valraven up the wide stone stairway, and along a maze of corridors. The walls were raw black stone and looked as if they should have been studded with reeking torches, but instead, oil lamps flickered mildly against the stone. There were many closed doors, once family bedrooms perhaps, but now ornate cells. Valraven had no idea who else might be secreted behind them. People often disappeared from court.

Sanchis jogged up another flight of stairs and turned into a passage at the top. Here, a pair of guards was stationed before a heavy wooden door. They spotted Sanchis and stood hurriedly to attention, staring straight ahead. "Unlock the door," Sanchis said to them. The guards

glanced at Valraven curiously, then one of them took a key from a jangling bunch at his belt and applied it to the lock. The door creaked open, just a small way. The guard held his arm across it, as if some maddened beast inside might try to make a run for it.

"You may leave me now," said Valraven "I would like a dinner of roasted fowl, with vegetables. A flagon of wine, and some cake."

Sanchis looked uncertain, perhaps thinking Valraven was mocking him. He ducked his head. "It will be attended to, my lord."

"Excuse me," Valraven said politely to the guards, who stood to the side. He walked between them and pushed the door wide.

There was a flurry of movement as a gang of pages fled from the threshold. Valraven stepped over it. The room beyond was large, sumptuous, if rather archaic in its decor. It was lit by the glow of a fire and two mellow oil lamps. A man in his late twenties stood stooped beside a table, as if frozen in the act of rising from his seat. He was dressed in loose-fitting tunic and trousers of soft gray wool—plain but not homely. His long pale hair was confined at his neck, tendrils of it falling free to frame his face. That face had beguiled princes and kings. It was older now and had lost the soft prettiness of youth, but Tayven Hirantel was still beautiful, his eyes almond shaped and dark, his cheekbones high. He had the look of a cornered animal. "Good evening, Tayven," Valraven said. "I trust you are well."

Tayven said nothing, perhaps silenced by shock.

Valraven closed the door behind him. He glanced at the wide-eyed young servants, crouched like kittens, half terrified, half fascinated, against the furniture. "Shoo!" he said to them and they ran.

Tayven straightened up. "Are you here to kill me?" he asked.

Valraven sauntered forward. "Why would you think that?"

"Who sent you?"

"Does someone have to send me here?"

Tayven frowned. "No, but . . ."

"No one sent me," Valraven said. "I'm here of my own volition. The empress has taken great pains to conceal you, but my intelligence network is second to none. I'm here to learn why you are here."

Tayven sat down. "I'm a prisoner, that's all there is to it. I presume my family has paid dearly to keep me alive."