

FOREVER FALLING



A DEATH GATE story
by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
with Kevin Stein

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Dear Reader: This enchanting tale will not help you solve puzzles in the game, but is merely an extra bit of magic, direct from the masters of their genre.

All of us at Legend Entertainment are most grateful to Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman and Kevin Stein for contributing this original story. Fans of the Death Gate novels will know Lady Ciang as the leader of a fearful group of assassins known as the Brotherhood. In this new story, we meet her early in life and learn how this noble elf made the terrible decision which preserved her spirit but banished her from elven society.



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A DEATH GATE STORY

by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

with Bruce Frier

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"The Ancient," I'm known as. How old am I? Truth to tell, I have no notion. Cycles don't matter much when you're scrambling for food in the gutters and fighting the village dogs for thrown-out scraps. But Hugh the Hand and I once sat down and tried to reckon it up. I have a keen memory and I've traveled much. So by this and by that, we figure I must be nigh-on one hundred. Yes, sir. A respectable age for a human. But one hundred is one-tenth a life-time to an elf. And not even that to my lady: Lady Ciang, Arm of the Brotherhood.

(The Ancient bobs his head in respect, as do the other members of the Brotherhood who have gathered together around the kitchen fire to hear his tale.)

I've been in her service some thirty years now, ever since I grew too old to take an active role in the business. (The business of the Brotherhood being assassination.) I am old, but she is older by far. Old even by elf standards and eight hundred years is a man in his middle-years to them. Some figure Ciang is the oldest living being on Arianus.

And so, you're wanting to know how did Lady Ciang, a high-born noblewoman who, some say, not me, mind you, but some, is related to the Emperor himself--how did Lady Ciang come to be head of the Brotherhood.

It all started, you see, with her weesham. I've heard Lady Ciang speak with respect about few people in my life; Hugh the Hand being among them. But she always talks of her weesham in hushed tones, with a smile and a nod. For it was her weesham that showed my lady the true way.

What is a weesham? Ah, I forgot. You don't see many elves nowadays, since their conquest of human lands ended.

A weesham is an elven woman or man who is assigned to a noble elf child at birth. The weesham follows that child all the rest of his or her life, waiting, you see, for the elf to die. When that happens, the elf's soul is captured in a lapis-lazuli box which the weesham carries always. The soul is taken to a garden in a crystal dome. Here, the soul is trapped, forced to spend eternity serving the Emperor, for the elves believe that the souls of their dead nobility add strength and power to the realm.

Ah, gentlemen and ladies, I want you to picture a merry dance, given in the rich palaces of the elven kingdom. I want

you to see the lovely lords and ladies in their costly gowns drinking and eating and dancing. And picture, too, the weesham in their black robes seated all around the room, the lapis boxes held fast in their hands, watching, waiting.



“This wine tastes bitter, my lady!” Kasia exclaimed in a loud and strident voice. “A bad year. How dare they pass off bad wine to us?”

She was glad to have some distraction from her tension, even an unpleasant distraction.

“I’ve drunk from the same decanter, Kasia. The wine is quite good.”

Kasia shook her head, scowled at the bitter drink, and threw the crystal goblet back on the table. The goblet’s stem broke, snapped at the base. Wine sloshed onto the gossamer lace cloth that draped the table. Several drops splattered on the lapis box that Kasia was forced, by law, to keep close at hand. The droplets glittered on the box like drops of blood. Kasia paled, bit her lip and brushed them swiftly away, hoping Ciang had not noticed. Who knew whether she would take this as a bad omen and leave?

“My dear Kasia,” Ciang said languidly, “your compatriots are staring at you. Do try to behave with more decorum.”

Kasia scooped the hated box of lapis swiftly under her arm and glanced around the room. The other weesham sat in chairs placed around the ballroom, forging a ring of dark silence that seemed to form a boundary beyond which the light, the music and the laughter could not pass. Several of the weesham were glaring at her, frowning. They had seen her display of temper, and naturally they did not approve. Weesham are supposed to be seen, not heard.

The hard edge of the soul-box she carried, ready to capture the soul of the young woman who had been her charge since birth, dug painfully into Kasia’s arm.

The box was a constant reminder of all she had come to hate, a mute herald for her loved one's death.

"Pah! Idiots! Staring at me like a bunch of geese." Kasia stared back, not at all disconcerted.

"You've never truly been one of their number, have you, my weesham?" Ciang asked softly.

It was an odd question for a elf woman in her early twenties, particularly a noble elf woman, who was not supposed to have any other concerns beyond the painting of her lips, the draping of her elaborate hair coif, or the steps of the latest dance.

But then, Lady Ciang was not ordinary, as Kasia had known since the days her charge was old enough to toddle into her weesham's arms. Did Ciang know that yet? Had she finally learned? Well, if not, this night would teach her.

Kasia's eye narrowed. "The soul-box is the promise of death without purpose, perpetuation of the empire's stagnation."

Ciang raised one eyebrow. "My dear Kasia, lower your voice. I should have you whipped for saying such things."

But Kasia knew she was safe. Lady Ciang was more tolerant of open speech than most. With a sigh of resignation, Kasia gestured at the ring of weesham. "Your fine friends pretend to take no notice of them. With enough wine, Counts and Princes actually forget the promise of their own mortality." She shrugged and added, "At least for a little while."

"You're one of the 'them,' or have you forgotten?" Ciang dipped her finger in the spilled wine on the ruined tablecloth and idly traced the form of a butterfly in the red liquid.

"And you're one of 'them,'" Kasia countered. She gestured at the elven nobility who were dancing, laughing, and drinking. "You're just like the rest of them, always doing the same old things, in the same old way. Unless you start thinking for yourself, acting for your own good, you'll end up like all the rest."

Vacant, empty, and dead." She gestured at her own heart "Dead. On the inside. Within them, nothing is precious--there is no life. Their weesham are wasting their time. These"--she waved contemptuously at the other elven nobles--"have no souls to catch. But not you, my lady. Not you."

Ciang did not move, did not even glance at her weesham. Acclaimed as the most beautiful woman to ever grace the court, Lady Ciang remained distant and calm. The ivory-hued hair, which hung to her waist in a loose braid, was as still as the marble columns of the ballroom.

"I know you love me, dear Kasia, and that you want only what is best for me," Ciang said, her painted lips barely parting as she spoke. "What is it that truly troubles you?"

Kasia was taller than her charge, some twenty years older, but she always imagined herself of lesser stature to Ciang, perhaps because of the other woman's commanding presence and poetic beauty. As for love, Ciang meant more to Kasia than the weesham's life; far more, because Kasia hated her life, the culmination of which would be the death of the only thing she loved. But the mention of love made Kasia nervous. Ciang was certainly not acting like herself tonight. Perhaps she suspected?

Taking a breath to calm herself, disguising it as a sigh, Kasia altered her expression to one of almost blank stupidity. As a weesham, she knew how to defend herself beneath the cover of servility, just as Ciang knew how to hide behind the cover of nobility.

"What is bothering you?" Ciang repeated.

"I dared not tell you before, my lady," Kasia whispered. The expression on her face was pensive, filled with anxiety. Her eyes widened just a touch, her mouth frowned just a little. She had practiced the expression for hours every day for many months - countless rehearsals in preparation for this moment. "I dared not tell you because I did not know if it was true. I did not want to worry you needlessly. But

sources confirm it. It is the Emperor's command, ever since you insulted him by refusing to dance with him. This night--you are to be assassinated!"

Kasia had expected Ciang to react with surprise, or fear, or even excited interest at this dramatic change from the boredom of routine existence.

Ciang did not move. She gave no reply. Kasia was grievously disappointed. She wanted a reaction! Anything! But before she could continue to press her point home, they were interrupted by a young nobleman.

Bowing and simpering, he held out his hand. "I most humbly beg your pardon, Lady Ciang, but might I have this dance?"

"No, you might not. Leave me!" Ciang commanded, perfectly still and calm.

Kasia did not look around, but she heard the young nobleman's retreating footsteps, and the weesham's heart leapt with joy. Despite Ciang's outward appearance, the threat of assassination had evoked a response. More than satisfied with the course of events, Kasia said, "I doubt the rumor is true, but it is best to be prepared." She gestured at the lapis soul-box. "I will remain close to you all night. You need have no worry. Your soul will serve the Empire still."

Ciang smiled faintly. "Now you are being sarcastic. Go talk to your compatriots. See if they have heard anything of this 'rumor'."

Kasia shook her head. "I mustn't--"

"Leave me, Kasia. I need to be alone now." Ciang smiled gently, her lips curving slightly.

The weesham sighed and made no further protest; once Ciang had made a decision, it was never rescinded. Kasia left to seek out information on the assassin. Or at least to give the appearance of doing so.

The weesham rose from the table and walked among the entourage. Her gaze went to the human slaves lined up against the wall, ready--upon pain of whipping--to obey the commands of their elven mas-

ters. Her eyes went to a particular human with "scars of ownership" on his face. Kasia had chosen this particular human two years ago, after hearing tales of his fighting prowess and ferocity. It had taken her two years to teach him to remain calm, to control the animal nature that is born in all humans. The human slaves were always searched for weapons before coming near their elven masters, but no one had found the thin-bladed knife hidden within the leather harness crossing his chest.

Kasia had spent two years training the man for his mission tonight. Two years to make him the rumored assassin. And tonight, in the course of a few minutes, she would change forever the woman she loved.

Or Ciang would die.

Kasia did her best to "search" for information about the assassin. But she never said more than a few cursory words to the servants as she walked around the grand ballroom that was filled with the laughter of the hour. The thought of her own treachery turned the light to darkness, laughter to tears. She felt as if her spirit had been cut loose from her body and, though weesham had no souls that were of use to anyone, she had the strange feeling that hers might have easily jumped into the lapis box. She let her body carry her from place to place, guided by the movement of the crowds.

And then, suddenly, Kasia saw Ciang rise from the chair in which she'd been seated all evening, saw her stand up and actually move out into the crowd, seemingly to place herself in deliberate danger. Wherever she walked, the men parted in waves and bowed low until their heads practically touched the floor. Even when she had passed, the men's eyes gazed after her with desire. Kasia smiled proudly. Even as a tiny baby, the lovely Ciang had always been the center of attention.

Ciang returned the greetings graciously, but never stopped for a moment. Her walk was so fluid that her single braid of hair did not sway. And as she moved

from one place in the hall to another, each new group of courtiers, soldiers, and statesmen bowed and spoke, hoping to attract her attention.

Kasia's heart ached with frustration. Ciang was a born leader, intelligent, strong-willed, implacable. And it would all go to waste, unless she could be made to understand.

The weesham recalled when she had first realized that she must plot the assassination. When Ciang was sixteen, she had asked Kasia to open the lapis soul-box. Though forbidden to do so by law, Kasia had agreed without question. She remembered lifting the lid . . .

"What are you doing so far from Lady Ciang?" a man asked from behind her.

Kasia turned to face Rubel, Baron Kris'ah's weesham. Kasia was glad to have her thoughts interrupted. She stared down at the man, who was somewhat shorter, and tried to think of a suitable reply.

"We all wish to know why you have allowed your charge to stray, Kasia," Rubel stated, gesturing to the silent ring of weesham.

Kasia needed to stall until she could think of a way to rid herself of his presence. "I don't think it's any of your business," she replied loftily.

"And we think it is," Rubel countered. "We could report you to the Kenkari."

A dire threat. The Kenkari were the elves who held the souls in their care--some said they were the true power in the elven empire. Glancing over the man's head, Kasia saw Ciang moving toward the far end of the ballroom. Through those far doors, fragrant gardens waited under the moonlight. Kasia watched anxiously for a moment to ensure that her charge did not leave the room.

"Well?" the annoying weesham demanded. "Look! She is near the door. If aught happened to her now, you could not reach her in time to catch her soul."

Kasia was about to comment on the stupidity of his

accusation when she felt a sudden stab of pain in her stomach. Her eyes widened and she leaned forward, clutching her side. Strange. It must be the bad wine. She hoped Ciang was not similarly affected. She might take it into her head to leave early.

Kasia grunted, "Get away from me now, Rubel, or I shall tell the Kenkari of your 'adventure' last week in the bedroom of a certain baroness. Were you waiting to catch the baron's soul then? I think not. Surely you were hoping that his soul--and the rest of him--would be staying far away."

Rubel gasped, and then turned on his heel and left. After a moment, Kasia's pain subsided and she was able to stand straight again, though she continued to massage her side. Kasia concluded that the pressure of the evening's events, combined with the bad wine, was making her sick to her stomach. Ciang did not appear to be affected.

Kasia had been at least two hours from Ciang's side, long enough, she thought, to lend credence to the story she had composed. She strode across the floor, taking advantage of the liberties granted to a weesham of so well-known a lady as Ciang. The men and women parted at the weesham's advance, although not in the same way they had parted for Ciang. There was no joy in Kasia's presence, only the reminder that one day, even the most desired must die.

Ciang turned from where she had been standing and staring out the glittering paned glass doors that led to the gardens. She held out another glass of wine to Kasia.

"Will you drink a toast with me, dear weesham?"

"No, thank you, my lady," Kasia said, shaking her head and holding up her hand. "No more wine for me."

"Are you sure? You seem very pale."

Kasia gave a short laugh. She shook her head again.

Ciang's smile was calm, remote. "Have you discovered any information about the assassin?" She seemed

disinterested and could just as easily have been asking about the weather.

"I'm afraid not," Kasia replied, with a carefully practiced air of unhappiness and worry.

"What do the human slaves say? Did you speak to them?"

"They claim to know nothing. But they rarely say anything to anyone but themselves. They are very secretive."

"And Rubel? I saw you speaking with him?"

Before Kasia could reply, the orchestra began another dance.

"Servest'es," Ciang said, turning to face the players. "And my favorite."

"No doubt it was picked especially for you," Kasia said, gesturing.

A nobleman dressed in black and silver was approaching them. His walk was sure, steady, and delicate. He wore a long sword at his side. In these days of dangerous court intrigue and plotting, men wore their weapons even at fancy dress balls. He smiled wide as he saw that he had gained Ciang's attention.

Before the man could speak, Kasia stepped forward and interposed herself between him and her charge. Weesham occasionally acted as chaperones, if need be. This elf was known as a rogue, a scoundrel, a ladies' man. No fit person for her lady.

"Good evening, Lord Walt'ar."

The lord bowed graciously. "Good evening to you, Weesham. May I have the honor of a dance with your most beautiful charge?"

"What of the other ladies of the court?" Kasia inquired mildly. "Do they hold no attraction for you?"

"I have eyes only for Lady Ciang," Walt'ar answered, still smiling, still bowing.

"That is not what Lady Dian'nne seems to think."

The lord did not glance around. The woman in question was watching him jealously and covetously.

"We are just friends," he replied.

"What does this gentleman want, dear Kasia?" Ciang asked, though she could obviously hear for herself.

Kasia shrugged. "I'm not really sure, my lady. I think he desires to show you his back side."

Ciang smiled coolly.

"Please tell the gentleman that I thank him for his selection of music, but that I do not care to dance at the moment."

The lord continued to hold his position, though he was visibly disappointed.

"You heard my lady," Kasia said.

Lord Walt'ar stood to his full height and paused a moment, but saw there was no chance for a change of heart. He flashed a charming smile and turned to leave, adding, "Perhaps another time."

Kasia turned toward Ciang, saying, "What do you--"

"Lord Walt'ar!" Ciang called out suddenly.

The nobleman stopped, but did not turn.

"I have changed my mind. I will dance with you."

Kasia was too stunned to speak. She had never known Ciang to change her mind. Nor had Kasia ever known Ciang to so honor any man by dancing with him--not even the Emperor. Why this change?

It could only mean one thing, Kasia thought despairingly. Ciang knows and is seeking this lord's protection. Would she never think or act for herself?

Lord Walt'ar returned, though the smile on his face seemed more smug than amorous. He had probably just won some sort of bet, Kasia thought bitterly.

Ciang did not look at Kasia as she left. When she stepped on the dance floor, almost every other couple backed off. Kasia fumed as Ciang danced with the handsome lord. The weesham's plans were suddenly falling apart with the simple acceptance of a dance.

She shook her head in defiance of fate. Perhaps she could use this turn of events to her advantage. The

assassination would be made even more credible by Walt'ar's unwitting presence. Perhaps the nobleman himself would be blamed. Kasia turned toward the group of human slaves at the other side of the dance floor and waited till the man she had trained caught her eye. She raised the lapis box to the level of her lips--the agreed upon signal.

The man nodded once. He picked up a small chair and began his practiced route around the ballroom. He bowed politely, smiled a slave's smile when someone shoved him aside. He gave a slave's apology when a noble turned and struck him for no reason. He was angry, but he had learned to contain that anger. Besides, he would soon have his revenge. He would get to kill an elf.

Ciang continued to dance with Lord Walt'ar. Everyone watched, either with delight at their youth and beauty, or with jealousy of the same. Nobody noticed the slave with the chair. He was just another human to be pushed or ignored. The assassin continued to edge closer to the dancers. Kasia herself moved nearer when she saw that the slave was well within striking distance.

The music stopped, ending on a final, sharp note.

Lord Walt'ar bowed graciously. "That was a most enchanting dance, my Lady Ciang."

"No one is more enchanted than I," Ciang replied with an arched eyebrow, her smile cool and remote.

"May I offer you a chair?"

"It seems my needs have already been provided for," Ciang said, pointing at the slave, who hovered near her.

Walt'ar frowned, struck at the human. "You dog! I didn't ask for--"

The slave threw the chair at Lord Walt'ar, striking him in the chest. The noble stumbled backward and fell to the floor. The human drew the knife from his leather harness. He leapt at Ciang, bloodlust in his eyes.

"Lady Ciang!" Kasia screamed and ran forward.

Too late, of course. Ciang would die. Better she should die than live a slave--as much a slave to this corrupt society as the human slave who would kill her. And, as planned, Kasia would die along with her charge. The soul-box would remain forever closed.

The stiletto flashed in the light of the chandeliers. Kasia braced for the impact, anticipating the ice-cold pain that at any instant would sear through her chest.

But the knife that should have ended Ciang's subservience and Kasia's hated existence clattered to the floor. The slave stood with a look of dumbfound astonishment on his face. The blade of a thin sword went clean through his chest and stuck out his back. The sword jerked free. The slave collapsed to the floor, blood spewing from his mouth. He died at Ciang's feet.

It was Ciang herself who held the sword blade. She had drawn Lord Walt'ar's sword from his scabbard an instant before the assassin struck. Ciang, standing over the man she had just killed, did not move. Only her eyes shifted, and they gazed steadily at Kasia.

The weesham's heart raced with excitement. The elven nobility was in an uproar. The slave had committed an unpardonable sin, but what Ciang had done was nearly as bad. She should have permitted some man to save her or, if none were available, she should have died gracefully, politely, courteously. But no. Ciang had acted; she had finally taken her life into her own hands. She would be an outcast now; perhaps even an outlaw.

The weesham grabbed hold of Ciang and together they ran out of the ballroom, out into the garden. The two continued to run until Kasia was sure they were lost so deeply within the hedge maze that they would not be easily found.

"Dear Kasia, I must stop and rest," Ciang said. She was still holding the sword.

Kasia nodded her agreement, breathing heavily. She had won. Her victory was complete. She could not

describe to herself the measure of her feelings.

"You escaped the assassin, my lady."

"Did I?" Ciang asked gently. "It seems to me that my life has ended."

"It has only begun, my lady," Kasia answered. "Your life. Your death. Your soul. All your own. No other's."

"You plotted this, didn't you, Kasia?" Ciang asked. She was staring down at the sword, at the blood that was black in the moonlight. "Might I ask why?"

"I love you too dearly to let you fall under the same spell of complacency and decadence that the rest of these people live under."

Ciang said nothing. Reaching down, she gathered up a fold of her silken dress and wiped the blood from the sword's blade.

Kasia continued, "If you wanted, you could seize power, my lady. You could rule a kingdom."

Suddenly, the pain in Kasia's stomach returned with renewed force. She doubled over, gasping. "There is only one more thing you must do, my lady. You must kill me, too. Only then, with my death, will you truly be free."

Reaching into the lapis box, Kasia drew out a black, stone-handled dagger. She dropped the soul-box onto the soft earth. Feeling a great sense of release, she held out the dagger.

Ciang did not move. "To kill my weesham would be to damn my own soul."

"And it would also be your first act of free will!" Kasia whispered, the pain now overwhelming. "The act that would lead you out of stagnation."

She straightened. The pain in her stomach was suddenly gone, replaced by a sensation of pleasant warmth. The feeling spread slowly through her arms, her legs. Her head felt light, as if she were drunk on fine wine.

"I've already made my choice, darling Kasia," Ciang

replied.

Kasia shook her head. She could barely hear her charge's words. "You must . . . kill me," she mumbled. But the dagger fell from her numb hand.

Ciang did not pick it up. "I have made my choice, darling Kasia, my weesham. I made it the day I asked you to show me inside the soul-box. Inside was nothing. And that's when I understood what you had long been trying to teach me. I made my choice, the choice you pushed me to make. I understand. I love you for it. Yet I hate you, too."

Ciang paused, then continued. "The wine you drank this night was poisoned."

The weesham's heart leapt with joy at her charge's words. She had known, one way or another, that she would not live past the night. But Ciang would live. Her life would not be happy, it would be one of pain, of running, of toil, of depravation, but it would be a life. Not a living death. And her soul would be forever her own. Kasia's sight faded as the poison took final hold.

She pitched forward onto the ground, her hand clasped around the empty soul-box.

