

Chapter 1.

“You took this sword from the prisoner?”

The sweating, battered sergeant-at-arms stood straighter, if that were possible, and fixed his unwavering gaze on a stone in the opposite wall. “Yes, lord.”

Anred, High Steward of Carlundy, turned the blade in his hands. “A nice sword,” he said thoughtfully, his cascade of double chins wobbling in harmony with the words. “Well-balanced. Well cared-for. Belongs to someone who makes his living by it.”

No reply was called for, and the sergeant made none, staring straight ahead with the fixed intensity and lively intelligence of a statue. Anred had a reputation almost as fearsome as that of his master Lord Radwulf, and annoying either of them was apt to remove a man’s head from his shoulders and transfer it to a spike on the battlements.

Anred dropped the sword on the table and leaned back in his chair, making the ancient timber groan under the weight.

“I take it the blood on the blade isn’t his?”

The sergeant shuffled, embarrassed to admit that ten against one had turned into a struggle. The man had fought like a terrier among rats, stubbornly and with the skill of a lifetime’s practice. Something of a contrast with his own company of conscripted yokels, who hardly knew which end of a spear to hold. But if they had no idea how to deal with expert swordsmanship, they knew exactly what would happen if they tried to run away, especially with their sergeant right behind them.

“We got him in th’end, sir.”

Anred got up, running a finger around the inside of his collar. Carlundy was sweltering in an end-of-summer heatwave and the normally draughty stone castle was airless and stifling. “I suppose he had better be dealt with. Where is he?”

The sergeant pointed to the floor. “Down below, sir.”

The gatehouse was even hotter than the room above, if that were possible. Two pitch-pine torches provided a little light and a lot of acrid smoke, the lake surrounding the castle was beginning to stink in the hot weather, and the dozen or so guards in the room were sweating as if from heavy manual labour. Anred put a handkerchief delicately to his mouth and peered through the gloom.

The prisoner was standing facing the wall, head bowed and hands resting flat to the stones a little above shoulder height. He was tall and lean, with a sinewy figure

that looked as if it had never had the chance to carry fat, and he was now rather the worse for wear. His dark hair, streaked with grey, hung heavy with sweat and dust, and his torn shirt was sticking to his body and marked by heavy boots. His right wrist was bleeding and so swollen that it strained at his sleeve, and he was careful not to rest his weight on it. He did not move as the newcomers came in, but continued to stand as quietly and patiently as a cow waiting for slaughter.

“Turn him round!” Anred snapped, and two of the guards seized the prisoner and jerked him round, twisting his injured wrist up behind him with unnecessary force. The man gasped, but he neither screamed nor struggled, and Anred raised a mental eyebrow. Unusual.

It was an unusual face, too, lean and bony and composed entirely of angles and corners. Very far from handsome, it was enlivened by a pair of deep-set grey eyes of undoubted intelligence, and might have been described as interesting in happier circumstances. At present its most striking feature was a jagged gash above one eye, from which great streaks of crusted blood had run down the face and soaked into the shirt. Many more marks, some of which were already coming up into bruises, marred the face and neck, and from his irregular breathing the prisoner was obviously in pain.

“Some o’ t’lads gor’ a bit rough, like,” said the sergeant defensively, hoping that Lord Radwulf had intended them to beat the prisoner while arresting him. That was usually a safe bet, but Lord Radwulf’s temper was erratic and the penalties for guessing wrong were severe.

Anred ignored him, and addressed the prisoner direct.

“You are Gyrdan, tramp and vagabond?”

“Should you not have found that out before arresting me?”

The man’s voice was a little hoarse, probably on account of a punch in the throat, but it was quite calm. He drew himself up straight and his keen eyes flicked appraisingly over Anred, as if their roles were reversed and Anred were the one on trial.

This was unprecedented. For a minute the soldiers stood in dumbfounded silence, and then one of them, clearly hoping for a rising career, shouted,

“On tha knees, scum! And say ‘my lord’ to thy betters!”

“*When* I address my betters, I will -”

A fistful of chain mail across his mouth silenced the prisoner, and the soldiers took the opportunity to force him down to his knees and hold him there.

“Gyrdan, tramp and vagabond,” repeated Anred. “Do you deny it?”

Gyrdan shook his head, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “No.”

“My lord!” barked the first soldier, unwilling to let go of an idea, and drew back his hand for another blow.

“Enough!” snapped Anred. “Your job, soldier, is to arrest him.” He smiled like a shark. “Let him be insolent while he can. Lord Radwulf will soon teach him manners. As he will any who disobey orders.”

The soldier saw before him a brief and unpleasant stay in a dungeon followed by a spike with a splendid open-air view, and paled.

“My lord steward, I thought only -”

“Quiet!” roared the sergeant, who could react fast on certain occasions. “Soldiers does not think, boy! Soldiers does what they is told! Four days’ latrine duty. Dismiss!”

Gyrdan watched with apparent amusement but without making any futile attempt to move. The gatehouse was closed at both ends by heavy barred doors, and the rope attached to the winding gear for the portcullis was impossible to climb. Quite apart from the fact that the soldiers seemed to have broken his wrist when they stamped on it to make him drop his sword. The feeling in it was coming back now, but that was not an improvement. He waited. This was probably better than whatever was to come next.

“You four - bring him up into the hall,” the steward ordered. “Sergeant - you can go.”

The sergeant cast a swift glance at Gyrdan as he marched the rest of his company out of the gatehouse and back to their normal duties. He was not a thoughtful man - thirty years of marching about with a spear is not a cerebral occupation - but this prisoner puzzled him. He’d never seen anyone look so apparently unconcerned. Most prisoners screamed and wept and begged for their lives. Not that it ever did them any good, mind, they were always hanged anyway. He wondered, briefly, why they bothered. But then, most men had hope.

Radwulf, Lord of Carlundy and Prince of the Black Hills, was a big, handsome man in the prime of his life, flame-haired, blue-eyed and ruddy-cheeked - though the latter might be due either to the litter of empty wine flagons on the table or the buxom blonde on his lap. It was some time before either deigned to stop whispering and sighing, and to look at their prisoner.

“Is this him?” Radwulf demanded, a little thickly. “Let it be, Alina - later!”

The woman shifted on Radwulf's lap and looked down at the prisoner with interest, hitching up the bosom of her gown as she did so, although not very effectively. The youngest of Gyrdan's four guards went scarlet and tried to look elsewhere, with even less effect.

"Not bad," she said appraisingly. "Not bad at all." She stretched herself and yawned a little, and the young guard's hands began to shake. "Can I - ?"

Radwulf's long cruel fingers pinched her nipple and she squealed. "Later, darling. You can have him to play with after we've finished here. But first, we have business to get through. Anred?"

The steward bowed and took a paper out of his pocket.

"Gyrdan, vagabond of no fixed abode, you are brought before Lord Radwulf and this noble assembly -" he gestured around at the dozen or so lords slumped drunkenly over the table or blinking owlishly, "- to face the heinous charge of murder."

A more observant watcher than any in the hall would have seen a momentary change in Gyrdan's expression, a fleeting absence of all movement.

"To wit," Anred droned on, "that in November last you did shamefully waylay, rob and murder the most noble Eormenric of Buchart in the forest road known by some as the Dark Mile. If found guilty, all worldly goods belonging to yourself, your family and your heirs are forfeit to the Lord, and you shall die a shameful death. How do you plead?"

"You have chosen the wrong man," Gyrdan answered coolly. "My worldly goods are what I stand in. They will enrich your treasury little. Or have you run out of great men to rob on worthless charges?"

Radwulf's face flushed crimson, and the four soldiers turned on Gyrdan and struck him to the ground. This time, the steward did not stop them.

"Well, it matters little how you plead," Radwulf said conversationally, when Gyrdan was hauled upright again and his battered face turned back to the high table. "For we here say you are guilty, and we are the highest court in the land." That brought a laugh from the assorted lords, some of whom had woken up to enjoy the after-dinner entertainment. "So I can hang you, here and now if I please."

Radwulf's handsome face grew hard, and the ruthlessness that had kept him Lord of a turbulent land for a dozen years came to the surface, like rock outcropping through grass. He leaned forward. "But I can be a merciful man. I may let you go free. If you answer a few simple questions."

His fingers tapped the table before him.

“We know you are a spy. You have been in my land before, many times. Sometimes here in the South, sometimes North among the savages of the Black Hills. You have been seen.”

“It is - not - a crime - to wander -” Gyrdan spoke with difficulty through cut and bleeding lips.

“I say what is a crime in my land! Who sent you?”

The bruised lips parted briefly, then closed again.

“*Who sent you?*”

Silence.

“What are you looking for?”

Silence.

“Who have you met with? Who do you go to?”

Silence.

“You will tell me everything sooner or later. Why not spare yourself the pain?”

Silence.

“It is your master who sent you here. Why should you suffer for the fat Southern King?”

Silence.

“So it *is* the Southern King who sent you?”

Silence.

Radwulf clicked his tongue impatiently. “So you are going to be difficult. And on a hot night, too. I don’t like difficult men. They make me angry.”

Three soldiers remained around Gyrdan, the youngest having presumably retired to take a cold shower. Now they held heavy ash staves, bound with bands of iron, which they tapped menacingly on the floor.

“Oh, darling,” whined the Lady Alina, petulantly, “you’ll damage him!”

“Not beyond mending,” Radwulf said grimly. “Not yet. This is just to knock a little sense into him.”

Two or three of the younger lords were placing bets on something, and a heated argument was developing over the odds. Gyrdan calculated odds of his own, and decided they were long in the extreme. The main door led back to the courtyard, within the curtain wall. There would be places to hide there, maybe a way up onto the battlements. For a man who could swim, a castle built on a crag in a lake had a big advantage over one built on dry land - if you dived off the ramparts, you hit something soft. But there was a guardroom by the door and a dozen soldiers sprawled around it, playing dice or watching the proceedings with the vacuous

attention of cows chewing cud. No chance of getting past so many. The windows? All too high, and probably too narrow, designed for the passage of a little bit of smoke, not a man. The walls were hung with tapestries and banners, but none looked likely to support a man's weight, and conveniently-placed chandeliers belonged to gracious palaces, not to a comfortless fortress in a backward country that had hardly even heard of candles. There was one other exit from the hall, a narrow flight of stone steps cut in the wall opposite the main door and leading up to an archway at about first-floor height. One bored sentry dozed on his spear in the arch, but there were no other soldiers on that side of the hall. Gyrdan tried to remember how the castle looked from outside - certainly the best place to view it from. This hall must be in the keep, from its height. So the stair would lead up to the isolated turret on the east of the keep, jutting over the lake. Just a watch tower, presumably, with access to the ramparts. That would do. If he got a chance, he would go that way.

The small part of Gyrdan's brain not entirely awash with pain wondered what they were hitting him with. It felt like an iron bar. Mind you, by now a feather would have felt like an iron bar. Amateurs, the detached part of him muttered, sourly. Don't they know this is about the least effective way to conduct an interrogation? Beat a man as if he was a tough steak and eventually he'll say anything, just to make you stop.

A vicious blow cracked over his shoulders, on the precise site of an earlier one, and he screamed. A woman's titter echoed in his aching head, and he heard with peculiar clarity the chink as money changed hands. A pause in the rhythm as the guards changed shift, and then the rain of blows began again. He squirmed face-down on the unyielding flags of the floor, now slippery with his blood.

They were not asking him questions any more, not even listening. It sounded like a race meeting - voices laying bets, egging the soldiers on, cheering drunkenly, sneering sarcastic witticisms. Even if he gave in and confessed to the false charge, they would not hear, and even if they heard they would not stop. Probably they would beat him unconscious, then dump him in some stinking cell until they saw fit to have another try - Unconscious. Perhaps that would make them stop.

He slumped under the next blow and lay limp, forcing himself not to react. Another crack over the shoulders, and then - oh, blessed, blessed relief - they stopped. A foot poked him, and then pushed him a little way across the floor, inert as a heap of rags.

"Dead 'un," one of the soldiers called, breathlessly.

“Two crowns to me!” crowed one of the lords at the high table.

“You turned the sand-glass too fast,” objected another voice. “I saw you!”

“You lie!”

“And you cheat!”

A scuffle broke out, egged on by the Lady Alina. Radwulf ignored it.

“Get a bucket of water and bring him round,” he said, bored. “This is going to take all night.”

Booted feet stumped off across the floor. Gyrdan lay still, ready to faint in reality but struggling against it grimly. He had thought no further than getting them to stop hitting him, but possibly, just possibly, he could do more than that. He peered surreptitiously through his eyelashes. The steward had taken advantage of this break in the proceedings to approach the table and talk urgently to Radwulf, and the two remaining soldiers were gulping ale, getting their breath back and watching the brawl at the high table, which had now tumbled into the main hall and swept up another three or four participants in the process. Nobody was paying much attention to the supposedly unconscious prisoner. Amateurs, Gyrdan thought again, flexing his fingers. The stone steps and the arch. He wasn't sure he could stand, let alone fight, but he was quite sure he wouldn't get another chance.

The third soldier was ambling back now, the creak of a wooden bucket and occasional slop of water marking his progress. Gyrdan tensed his muscles as the booted feet came within his view. Another step, just one more step - now!

He shot out both hands, grabbed the ankles and tugged hard. Taken by surprise, the man went down with a thud and a cry of pain, his bucket thrown gracefully upward before turning over and depositing first its contents and then itself on top of him. By this time Gyrdan had already rolled and bounded to his feet. One of the other soldiers went down to a satisfactory punch, and the other to a well-aimed kick, and both had more sense than to come back for more.

Radwulf was on his feet, white with fury, the lady unceremoniously tipped off his lap.

“Stop him!”

The dozing sentry roused with a start and came lumbering down from the archway, jabbing vaguely with his spear. Gyrdan measured out his moment, caught the shaft just above the blade, and with an expert twist jolted the sentry off the stairs and pitched him over his shoulder. More by luck than judgement, the falling man cannoned into Anred, who lost his footing on the wet flags and fell on top of him.

Gyrdan almost laughed. He glanced round, breathing hard, beginning to enjoy himself. Surprised soldiers were spilling out of the guardroom, their unenthusiastic charge conveniently hampered by the quarrelling lords. None of them wanted to be first to arrive. There was no-one else near. Gyrdan vaulted onto the stairway and sprinted up the steps.

It was a long, spiral staircase, apparently climbing the inside of some tower, winding on and up with no opening wider than an arrow-slit. His breath began to come in short, tearing gasps. He had hoped for a corridor, a room to hide in, even a window to jump out of, anything - but there were only the hateful stairs, spiralling up and up like some nightmare. He could hear the muffled cursing of the pursuing soldiers, well behind, but gaining every minute. Pain, temporarily ignored during the fight, now surged back. He lurched against the stone wall, stumbled on the next step, and forced his dragging limbs onward and upward.

Far above, a new and sickening sound. A trumpet braying, then the bellow of a sergeant and the distant echo of footsteps pounding *down* the stairs. Trapped!

Gyrdan swore feebly in a couple of languages. No point going back, though, and none in standing still. He stumbled on.

Another reeling circuit of the nightmare tower. Then, before him, the dark arch of a door, iron-banded and sporting a lock worthy of a town gate. But it stood a little ajar.

He did not stop to think what might lie behind it - storeroom, guardroom, even a fatal drop into a courtyard. Any chance was better than being caught like a rat in a trap. He leaped for it, dived through, and fell, gasping, on the floor beyond.

It was a small, cosy room, furnished as a lady's bedchamber. Tapestries hung on the walls, the two chairs by the fireplace had embroidered cushions, and the huge bed was covered and curtained with brocade, intricately embroidered. A bright silk gown lay over a chair, torn and stained and in want of mending. Gyrdan struggled to his knees, shading his eyes from the dazzling light of two lamps. He was in luck. The lady was not here, and the window was open.

It was then, as his vision adjusted, that he made out the dim figure in the window seat. The lady's maid, a tall stringy woman in a sack-like grey dress, limp brown hair scraped back unflatteringly from a long bony face. Her mouth was open. Any minute now she would recover herself enough to scream, and he would be caught.

She did recover herself, but not to scream. Dropping her embroidery, she sprang to her feet.

“Quick!” she hissed. “Under the bed! The counterpane will hide you!”

Even as the thick cloth swung behind him, blocking out the light, he heard the party of descending soldiers clatter past the door, and he groaned inwardly. This was all very well, but as soon as they met the guards puffing up from the hall, they would realise where he must be, would search this room....

An ear-splitting screech echoed round the chamber, making him jump and crack his head on the bed frame. What did that woman think she was doing? Was she mad? He had been a fool to trust her. He should have pushed past her, threatened her into silence, held her hostage, anything...

Heavy feet pounded outside the door. A splash echoed from somewhere far below, and the woman shrieked again. The door crashed open, and the soldiers barged in, shaking the floor. Gyrdan tried not to breathe.

“Oh! oh!” screamed the woman, her voice rising to the high pitch of hysteria. “Oh! Murderer! Thief! Through my window! Oh! oh!”

“Come on, lads!” bawled the sergeant. “He’s in t’ lake! We’ll get him yet!”

The door slammed. They lumbered down the stairs and their tread faded away below. Gyrdan heaved a long sigh. Well, he was saved. But why? And for what?

He crawled out from his dusty refuge and staggered to his feet. The maidservant stood by the window, watching him impassively. He could see now that her face was pale and lined as though from years of ill-health or anxiety. Radwulf’s lady, whispered of as a lunatic, even a witch, must be a hard mistress.

She said, “They are gone. You are safe now.”

Her voice was calm and unhurried, but also cold. Gyrdan strove to speak, swallowed painfully, and tried again, the words coming with difficulty.

“Why - did you - do - that?”

“I do not care to see any man hunted like a beast.”

He gestured vaguely to the window.

“Clever,” he got out.

“Yes, it was rather a good idea, wasn’t it? Though I was fond of that footstool. Let us hope it puts the hounds off the scent for a while.” The voice was flat, expressionless, almost mocking.

Gyrdan hardly heard. The excitement of the fight had ebbed away altogether now, leaving him drained of all strength, cold and sick. He knew he was losing blood. His whole body was a shrieking cacophony of pain. But while he remained here the maid was in mortal danger.

“I must go - Before your - mistress - returns.”

A bitter smile came to the pale face.

“I am the mistress here. You do not know me? I am Irinya.”

A memory floated to the surface, old proclamations, old coins. Radwulf and Irinya, Lord and Lady of Carlundy, Princes of the Black Hills -

“Then you are -?”

“Yes. Radwulf’s wife.”

Gyrdan felt the room spin around him and his head fill with black. Radwulf’s wife! The lunatic. The witch.

“Oh, hell -” he muttered, and collapsed.

Irinya saw him sway, saw him grasp at the bedpost and miss it by inches. If he fell the sound might alert the guards. She caught him as he collapsed, and for the first time in her life she held a man in her arms.

His weight was less than she had feared. He smelled of sweat, tobacco and cheap soap - and blood. She could feel its sticky warmth against her shoulder and on her hands. Slowly, gasping with the unfamiliar effort, she dragged him nearer to the bed and let him sink, sprawling, across it. Biting her lip, she surveyed her prize.

He was a disappointing sight. If a girl is to be rudely disturbed by a man bursting into her bedroom with a score of guards in hot pursuit, the least she should expect is that the fugitive be young, dashing and handsome. This man failed on all three counts, as far as it was possible to tell. His face was a mess of blood and battered tissue. One eye was already closed by a bruise the size and colour of a ripe plum, and more bruises were flowering along the jaw and on his chest under the ripped shirt. His age was impossible to judge, but his skin was deeply tanned and weathered and there were streaks of grey in his hair. Somewhere on the wrong side of forty, she guessed, and her brows contracted in a frown. Even a young man might not recover easily from the beating he had taken. She flinched as she recalled the dull thud of staves on flesh and the few agonised screams that had echoed up from the hall. He might be badly hurt. And she had no way of concealing an injured man. If he was found -!

Irinya’s frown deepened. She was beginning to regret her impulse. The man was in danger, and danger spread all around him. Somehow, swiftly and secretly, she had to get rid of him.

Gyrdan groaned faintly. All he was conscious of at first was the pain. The pounding in his head must surely rack his skull to pieces - if it hadn't done so already. His bones ached. His limbs were heavy, and his face felt tight and hot. His mouth was full of the brassy, rotten taste of half-clotted blood.

Gradually, the pain receded enough for him to be aware of other things. The distant lap and splash of water against stone. The oppressive heat and uncanny stillness that had been building all day and must surely herald a thunderstorm soon. Far, far away, the distant hoot of a hunting owl.

Then, close at hand, the splash of water and a sharp, sweet fragrance, reminiscent of thyme and peppermint and the astringent resin of pine woods in spring. Something damp and rough, like the tongue of a loyal dog, dabbed at his face, stinging and yet oddly soothing. It was then that he realised he was lying on something soft, and that there was cloth beneath his hands instead of the bare stone or flea-ridden straw of a prison cell.

Memory was quite unable to account for this. He opened his eyes - or rather the only one that seemed to work - and a shaft of blinding light stabbed down and exploded in his head in a kaleidoscope of pulsating colour. He groaned again, and to his further amazement a bony hand was clamped firmly over his mouth, and a peremptory voice hissed in his ear,

“Sh! Rouse the guards and we are both lost!”

He lay limp, memory tardily doing its job. The tower. The thin, plain woman. Radwulf's wife.

“I've moved the lamp,” the voice said, presently. “Now try opening your eyes, if you can hear me.”

This time was not so bad. A vague yellow glow slowly resolved itself into dark wood and looped hangings and a patch of bare stone wall, all smudged around their edges. The voice had come from his right. He rolled his head sideways, very carefully in case it fell off.

The woman was sitting on the edge of the bed. A bowl stood on a table beside her, and she held a bloodstained cloth in one hand. He had to squint to get her face into focus, and even when he did it was of little help. A truly expressionless face is very difficult to achieve, but this woman had managed it. There was no cruelty or contempt there, but no hint of sympathy or kindness either.

“What - are you - going - to do - with me?”

“I do not know. There was no time to think about that. Suppose you tell me who you are, how you came here, and what, if anything, you have done to fall foul of my amiable husband. Then I shall decide.”

What was left of Gyrdan’s pride rebelled at the idea of stammering through his tale lying flat on his back - on her bed. He might have been beaten up but he was damned if he was going to act like an invalid. He gathered his strength together, got his relatively undamaged left arm behind him, and pushed himself up into a sitting position. His head throbbed as though it would burst, and he felt the room recede and the sweat of pain start out on his face, but his will held and he did not fall back. At least he was now on a level with her.

She seemed unimpressed. But after a moment she got up and fetched a jug and a cup from the table by the fireplace. Standing by the bed she poured a cup of water, handed it to him at arm’s length, and then seated herself again. Noticeably further off than before.

Gyrdan drank gratefully, trying to rinse the blood out of his mouth. He would have liked to spit, but not in front of a lady. He swallowed instead, and set the cup down on the bed.

“I am listening,” Irinya said, coolly.

He recounted his tale as briefly as possible - how he had walked into Mickleburg town at sunset and taken a room at the inn, how he had been arrested in the common room and dragged up to the castle without explanation, and finally the beating in the hall and his escape. She listened in complete silence, without a change of expression.

“So,” she said when he had finished, “you are accused of murdering Eormenic, are you?”

“That was the name, lady.”

“You deny the charge?”

“Yes.”

“Just as well,” she said, her voice menacing in its softness. “And it is to be hoped that I believe you. For Eormenic was my father’s brother, and the nearest I had to a friend. I have good reason to hate his murderer.”

Gyrdan’s heart skipped a beat, then guiltily slipped in two together. What appalling luck. The silence stretched out, inviting him to fill it with protestations of innocence, vows that he had never heard of the man, even pleas for mercy. But if she would not believe the truth, would she believe the truth hedged about with words?

“Have you nothing to say?”

“No, lady.”

He had surprised her. The brown eyes flicked up to meet his.

“Of course,” she said silkily, “I know you would not have acted alone. No doubt you were under orders from another?”

The temptation to throw a name into the silence, to deflect all the blame onto someone else, was close to irresistible. If he had known who she suspected, he would probably have yielded to it. But he did not know, and once again there was no recourse but the truth.

“I take orders from no-one, lady.”

Her flash of anger might have been real or feigned.

“Oh, indeed! Proud words for a hired assassin!”

If she had hoped to goad where she had failed to draw, she was disappointed. Gyrdan kept his temper.

“I am no hired assassin, lady.”

“Then what are you? You look like any peasant, and yet I am sure you are a stranger here.”

“If I am, since when has that been a crime, lady?”

“Whether there is a crime or not depends upon the stranger’s business. What are you doing here?”

“Admiring the scenery, lady.”

Her lips twitched momentarily as though she was suppressing a smile.

“If you will not tell me your business, I must assume that you have something to hide. And that Radwulf was right to have you arrested and tortured. And I must hand you back to him without delay.”

Gyrdan met her gaze unwaveringly. “That, lady, is your judgement.”

For a long moment they held each other’s eyes, struggling for dominion. Then Irinya smiled suddenly, and though she did not drop her gaze the hostility left it.

“Well, there is nothing of the coward in you, whatever else! I like you, Gyrdan of Nowhere-in-particular, and I am going to help you escape. If I can think of a way!”

Her voice had changed, regaining some animation and carrying traces of the musical accent of the Black Hills. It was like the coming of the first thaw of spring, when a stream long locked in icy silence suddenly breaks free and goes leaping down its old course, laughing for the joy of returning life. Gyrdan blinked. Here was luck indeed.

“How can I thank you?”

“Time enough for that when you are safe,” she returned briskly. “But you must wait here awhile yet. The castle is buzzing like an upturned beehive. And the moon is two days past half-full. It will not set until midnight.”

“But every minute I stay here, lady, you are in peril.”

She shrugged her thin shoulders. “Such is nothing new to me. And the danger is less than you might think. It was lucky Sergeant Treowin was heading the guards. He is a fine soldier, loyal as a carthorse and about as bright. This is now the one place within a mile of Mickleburg where they will *not* search for you. Listen!”

She was right. Shouted orders, voices, the clatter of weapons and mail swirled above and below and to every side, but the tower itself was silent, the eye in the centre of the storm.

“In a few hours they will grow bored, unless Radwulf himself troubles to command the hunt,” she continued. “When it is both dark and quiet you may have a chance. And we must make use of the time! For you are hurt. I think you would find it sore trial even to walk to safety, and so easy a route I cannot promise. I will tend your injuries as best I may. Take your shirt off and let me see what they have done to you.”

“No,” Gyrdan objected, hastily. “I am all right. All I need is rest -”

“Do not be a fool!” she snapped. “You think I want to do this? I want rid of you, as speedily as possible. But you are bleeding, and every breath pains you. You would not get far. And if you are caught and put to the question, you will talk. They all talk. And then it will go hard with me. Radwulf is not noted for his tender heart. Now, will you be sensible?”

There was no arguing with her. She examined him with an intent, slightly revolted expression, much as she might study an interesting but rather distasteful beetle found under a rock.

“A thorough job,” she said, looking up at last. “But nothing seems to be broken. And the cuts are shallow, and for the most part clean. It could be much worse.”

She rolled her sleeves above her elbows and set to cleaning the wounds, working methodically and in silence, her lips compressed into a firm line. The water stung in his cuts and the cloth tugged at his smarting flesh, and the bowls of bloodstained water came and went. It seemed a long time before she finished, and fetched bandages and a jar from a chest by the fireplace. Gyrdan watched suspiciously as she prised the lid off the jar, and scooped a little pungent-smelling pale yellow ointment out on her finger.

“This will stop the cuts from festering,” she explained. “And it will reduce the swelling, and ease the pain a little. But at first it will burn. One minute, no more. Brace yourself.”

The cream seared his lacerated skin like flaming ice, and it was all he could do not to cry out.

“What is it?” he gasped, when he could trust himself to speak.

“A recipe of my own,” she answered, bandaging the gash on his forehead. “Long tried and tested. I can vouch for its effectiveness.”

Well, it had stopped burning now, at least. The rest he would have to take on trust.

She turned now to his injured right wrist, which ached like a rotten tooth, and flexed the fingers gently, a worried expression on her face.

“This is bad,” she said gravely. “I do not think it is broken, but I cannot be sure.”

She bandaged the hand and arm to the elbow, leaving only his fingers and thumb showing. When she had finished, it still hurt like hell but at least it no longer jarred intolerably every time he moved.

“It should be in a sling and rested for a month,” she said, adding wryly, “But I expect you will need the use of it. Does it work?”

“A - a little.”

“A pity. It is your better hand, is it not?”

“For most things I can make shift with either. I thank you, lady.”

“Mm. I do not think I have helped much. You are still in great pain, are you not?”

“Some,” he admitted, reluctantly. “But it will ease, in a day or so.”

“Much use that will be tonight!” she said crisply.

Another trip to the chest by the fireplace, and this time she returned with a corked bottle, two-thirds empty. She tipped its contents into the cup, topped it up with water, stirred it vigorously, and handed it to him.

“Drink that.”

A less inviting concoction would be hard to imagine. The liquid was a pale greenish-grey, speckled with floating debris. A few bubbles swirled on its surface and dark grains danced in the depths. It smelt sour and musty at the same time.

“I am all right,” he protested again. Sediment was settling out in the bottom of the cup, like dregs in cheap wine. He did not dare to imagine what the stuff would taste like - or what was in it. Witchcraft, the rumours said.

“I am not trying to poison you!” she said irritably. “How would I get rid of the body? I want you to walk out of here and get as far away as possible, as soon as

possible. I know it looks revolting, and I can assure you it tastes just as bad, but it will take the edge off your pain for at least twelve hours. Do you want me to drink half of it first?"

He looked at it doubtfully. But why would she try to harm him now, after all this? It would not make any sense. And he would have to rely on her to get him away. If he was to trust her in one thing, he might as well trust her in all. He set the cup to his lips.

Gall and wormwood had nothing on this. The bitterness dried his mouth and the gritty sediment gagged in his throat. He could feel the cold spreading in his stomach, and as he set the empty cup down he shuddered. Perhaps he had done a very foolish thing.

"Well done," she said coolly. "It will take a little while to work, and it is better with food. When did you last eat?"

"Yesterday."

He realised, even as he said it, that he was famished. That must account for at least some of the light-headedness, unless it was that devil's brew already.

"Lie still and rest. I will draw the bed-curtains to hide you, and order food. Do not make a sound until the servants have come and gone."

That advice was easy to follow. The bed was comfortable and its brocade cover cool against his back. He heard Irinya call from the doorway, then the patter of feet and her voice giving brisk orders. He closed his eyes. Never mind food, what he really needed now was sleep. From far, far away, remote as in a dream, came more voices, more footsteps, the clatter of dishes and plates, then more voices, muffled now and vague....

A touch on his shoulder roused him. Irinya had drawn back the bed curtains, and they were alone again.

"No danger," she reassured him. "You have slept about an hour. But it is time you moved."

Gyrdan sat up, gingerly, and found that the pain had indeed faded appreciably. He tried standing up and Irinya frowned suddenly, scowling past him.

"There is blood on the coverlet. I should have been more careful." She dragged it off the bed, revealing another beneath it scarcely less fine, and crammed it into a chest. "That will do for now. I will think of something later. A woman's pains, perhaps. Now - has my treatment had any effect?"

Gyrdan was pulling on his shirt, having found that he could stand and move freely again with only a vague, bearable ache.

“It is magi -!” he began, and then stopped abruptly as she rounded on him.

“That it is not!” she snapped, furiously. “A little knowledge of herbs, that is all! Any cook could do likewise!” She pointed to the table by the fireplace. “Eat, and then go.”

The table was now stacked with food. Bread, cheese, cold meat, fruit, and a jug of beer. Simple fare, such as might be found at any wayside inn or reasonably prosperous farm. But there was something very strange about it. Everything was already cut into pieces, as if for a child.

Irinya looked half-guilty, half-ashamed, her assured manner gone. She shrugged defensively.

“I am not permitted a knife.”

Gyrdan’s glance went automatically to her wrists, still bare under the rolled-up sleeves, and he saw with almost physical shock the pair of diagonal scars scoring the left wrist, jagged white lines across the veins that showed blue beneath the transparent skin.

Irinya thrust the scarred limb behind her back.

“So you knew what to look for,” she said in a queer, strangled voice. “Tell me, do they still speak of me as the madwoman? As the witch? I see by your face that they do. What do they say of me now? I do not doubt the story has grown in the telling. That I am sane and rational one moment and run mad the next. That none can tell when the fit will take me. That I must be guarded ceaselessly for my own safety. And you do not know whether to believe the tales or not, now you have seen me. Nay, do not protest! Why should I blame you? For you have seen the evidence with your own eyes.”

Gyrdan took a deep breath.

“Aye. I have. And strange evidence it is. For you, lady, are left-handed.”

Glad astonishment came into her eyes, almost dispelling the shadow there.

“You are no fool!” she exclaimed. “No other has ever remarked on that. Yet surely, I could have held the blade in my worse hand?”

“Not at the angle to make those scars you could not.”

He took her unresisting hand between his and turned it palm up.

“You would have held the blade so - and slashed like so. Quite different.” He looked into her eyes, shaken with pity and horror. “Who did that to you, lady?”

“Radwulf. Who else?”

“*Why?*” He still held her hand, cradling it as he would a wounded bird. “*Why* should he use you so? You are his *wife!*”

Iryna laughed bitterly.

“Aye, for my sins! Three things I am to Radwulf, and none by my choosing. First I was his cousin. Then his wife. And, these twelve years, his prisoner!”

Chapter 2.

“Will you not tell me your tale, lady?” Gyrdan asked, gently.

Iryna had not spoken while he ate, but every time he looked up he had found her eyes on him, an odd mixture of puzzlement, anxiety and hope in their expression.

She shook her head. “No. I have spoken of - of - those things - to no-one. I could not find the words. And you should go.”

He should indeed. Night was wearing on. The moon must have set by now, and he would need all the time possible if he was to get away before daybreak. But she made no move, and the glance she darted at him had a depth of pain and longing in it that made him catch his breath.

“If you speak of it, lady, your burden may be lightened.”

“Little hope of that! But - I should like - I should like to think there was someone - anyone - in the world who knew the truth about me - and you are no fool -”

He was consumed by curiosity now. Radwulf’s wife, Lady of Carlundy, held prisoner in her own hall, wounded by her own husband in a manner that could only have been meant to kill, running desperate risks to save a common fugitive. How could she have come to such a plight?

After a little hesitation, she began to speak, and once started the words flowed fast as an undammed torrent.

“I am Ingeld’s daughter,” she began. “And from that one fact flows all my fate, good and ill alike. For my father was Ingeld son of Ingeld, the nineteenth of that name and eighteenth Lord of Carlundy. I am his only living child, and by the law of the country I should have ruled Carlundy after him.

“But my father did not see it that way. A daughter was to him less than nothing. He sent me to a small manor he owned in the Black Hills and would scarcely acknowledge my existence, while he and his wife tried ever more desperately for a son. It was my uncle, Eormenric of Buchart, who eventually took pity on me and brought me to live in his own household. He was a good man. A strange man in some ways, for when he married Kerith of Buchart he sold most of his own estates in the Lowlands and went to live with her on her clan territory. By the time I knew him he had become almost a Highlander himself. For a while I was betrothed to their elder son Eomund, and I had no higher ambition than to stay there in the peace of the mountains for ever.

“As Eomund grew up, however, he became less content with his lot, and eventually he fell in love with another girl. A pretty creature, all curves and dimples

and curling blonde hair, who can blame him? So the betrothal was broken off. To the Highland way of thinking that mattered nothing, for I was but fourteen and there were ten years yet to find me a husband. In the Hills people do not marry until they are old enough to know their own minds. But though Eormenric had lived nearly thirty years in the Black Hills, there were a few matters on which he still had Lowland ideas. My aunt Kerith was unwell then - it was the beginning of her last illness, though we did not know it - and Eormenric set himself to find another match for me. Their other son Eomer was not interested - he said he was tired of getting his brother's cast-offs -"

She tried to smile, but the hurt of those early rejections was very apparent "- and eventually Eormenric settled on Hygurd son of Hygaran, Earl of Darain, a long-standing friend of Kerith's family. I had no objection, for Hygurd and his father had been frequent visitors and were known to me, and one boy seemed much like another. Hygurd also had no objection, for unlike Eomer he was old enough to be ambitious.

"I truly believe Eormenric thought he was acting for the best. He chose the match for me that he would have chosen for his own daughter if he had one. Darain is the greatest and richest earldom in the Highlands. At full muster it can raise over ten thousand men and it controls the Saltergate Pass, where the Giants' Road enters the Black Hills from Errendale. To marry the heir to Darain would be a great prize for any girl. But it was that betrothal that sealed my fate.

"For it was obvious that my father could not live much longer. The hillmen, and especially Hygaran, who saw his son becoming Lord of Carlundy, were glad and looked forward eagerly to a future where they would call the tune. And so the Lowland lords began to mutter. Carlundy tends ever to divide into two, Highland against Lowland, the Black Hills against Errendale. The Lowland barons did not much like the idea of being ruled by a woman - it has never happened in all the long history of Errendale, though in the Black Hills it is not unknown - but they abhorred the idea of being ruled by the Earl of Darain's wife. Carlundy has always been governed from Errendale, and the Lowlanders look on the Black Hills as the haunt of savages.

"I did not know any of this at the time. I was young and foolish and careless of politics, trusting Eormenric to make decisions for me and happy to be left alone to read, to wander the hills and to dream. So when my father summoned me to Mickleburg, I was happy to go. I thought he had at last forgiven me for not being a boy.

“I found my father in great torment of body and mind. He was gravely ill and could barely move from his bed. Already he was relying heavily on his youngest brother Radwald, and Radwald’s son Radwulf. The two of them ordered Errendale much as they wished, though always in my father’s name.”

She sighed and brushed a stray strand of hair back from her cheek. “Radwulf instantly took a great interest in me. He dogged my every move and would hardly stir from my side. I wonder now that I did not see what was planned, but I did not. I had lived all my life in the Black Hills, and it never occurred to me that a girl could be forced into marriage against her wishes. I hated Radwulf’s attentions, but I could not get rid of him and so I tried to ignore him and hoped he would go away.

“Nearly a year passed. My sixteenth birthday came and went. My uncle Radwald was killed suddenly that next summer - a hunting accident, I believe - and Radwulf swore to find and kill the culprit and left me. Had I any sense, I would have fled back to the mountains then, but my father was dying. He was in terrible pain and struck out at any who came near him, so that none of the servants would care for him. I nursed him through four terrible weeks of agony and delirium. When he was sane he cursed me, calling me a half-grown sparrow, a useless girl, and when the fever took him he raved in his madness. He imagined his ancestors crowding his chamber, taunting him for being the last Ingeld Ingeldson, the one who broke the line, and his shame and his grief were heart-rending to see. It was a great relief to him when finally he died.

“But not to me, for a father is a father, whether he loves you or no. I had never had so much as a kind word from him, but I mourned him as he lay dead, and I vowed to him that I would try to take the place of the son he had so desired and rule Carlundy myself, wisely and well. And then I fell to weeping over his body, in my sorrow and my guilt.”

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath.

“Fool that I was! As I wept in my weakness, I heard the tramp of mailed feet on the stairs, and Radwulf strode in at the head of a company of guards, six of the Lowland barons at his side. When he saw my father’s body he laughed loud and long, in joyful triumph.

“‘A sad end to the House of the Falcon!’ he cried. ‘Long may the Wolf endure! And now, fair cousin, I will take you to wife, for I have no mind to fight your Highland savages.’

“I cried out that I would not marry him. That I was Lady of Carlundy by law and I would choose my own husband. And I ordered them to leave my castle.

“How they laughed! Radwulf drew his sword. ‘Here is the law!’ he declared. ‘Here is my right in this castle. And here is my power over you, Lady of Carlundy.’

“Two of the barons grabbed hold of me. One took hold of my hair and strained my head back. Another held a knife to my throat. ‘You may choose your husband, fair cousin,’ Radwulf mocked me. ‘You may have me, or a lover of cold steel. Which is it to be?’”

She shivered. “He went down on one knee and took my hand. He kissed it. His lips were burning hot. A horrible parody of courtship. ‘Will you marry me, fair cousin?’ he said. The baron drew the back of the knife slowly across my throat. I felt the touch of the cold steel, the edge of the blade. And to my everlasting shame, I - I said ‘Yes.’”

She put her hands over her face and fell silent, her shoulders hunched as if to ward off a blow.

“If he had killed you, then his power would have been absolute,” Gyrdan said quietly. “While you live, lady, there is hope.”

She lifted her head and smiled thinly. “You are kind to say that. I have used that excuse to myself, times without number in the bitter watches of the night. But it was not so. It was only the fear of death. I was sixteen, and I wanted to live. I would have endured anything, any pain, any degradation, only to live. And I thought: A wedding will take months to organise. Surely there will be a chance to slip away, back to my kinsmen in the mountains.”

She laughed bitterly. “I underestimated him. His grip closed tight on my hand, stronger than iron, and he put his face close to mine. ‘You are lying, fair cousin,’ he said. ‘I will make sure that you cannot go back on this bargain.’”

A spasm of remembered horror crossed her face. She closed her eyes and went on, her voice shaking, her arms clenched across her body, “So he - he took me, there and then. On my father’s deathbed, his body scarce cold beside me. The six barons holding me down as I fought. And then they too took turns at me, all that night and into the cold dawn. When - when they had finished with me, I wished I had chosen otherwise. I wanted only to die. But I was too weak even to crawl to the chamber window and cast myself into the lake.”

Gyrdan put out his hand instinctively, longing to console her. But a man’s hand was unlikely to bring her much comfort, and he drew back without touching her.

“Don’t say any more,” he said gently. “Don’t speak of it. Some things are better not remembered.”

“I cannot forget.” She drew a hand across her brow and heaved a long, shuddering sigh. Her eyes opened, dark with pain, but would not look at him. “I do not remember much of the next few weeks. Radwulf sent women to tend me. Slowly I healed, at least in body. But my mind, my spirit, that did not recover. The days went by in a black mist. I saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. Only a great emptiness. And then the wedding came. I remember the ceremony clearly, though from outside, if you understand me. As though I were a spectator, watching from some remote height. I think Radwulf had me drugged.

“Eormenric and Hygaran were there, and their wives and their sons. The companions of my youth that was now taken away for ever. And I looked on their faces from my distant height, and then, ah! *then* I tasted the full bitterness of despair. For they looked on the bride not with pity, as I might have hoped, but with hatred and disgust. They did not see a ruined girl wedded against her will to a man she hated. They saw a woman cynically grasping her chance of power, willingly marrying the usurper Lord of Carlundy, deserting the Highlanders who had raised her and cutting off all their hopes. And in twelve years I have never had a chance to tell the truth. Never to anyone - until now.”

“No doubt Radwulf thought the fight would be over after the wedding,” she continued after a long silence. “He was mistaken. I am Ingeld’s daughter and my line goes back to Bethoc the warrior, Prince of the Black Hills. I was beaten but not crushed. I would not co-operate with Radwulf. I would not sign state papers. I would not affirm his judgements. I would not set my seal to his decrees. And as I was Lady of Carlundy under the law and he merely my consort, he could do nothing of importance without me. He tried violence. He tried threats again, but by now I no longer cared for my life and I called his bluff. It was only then that I realised it *was* bluff. That he dared not slay me while Eormenric lived and Hygaran controlled the broad lands of Darain. And that I had brought all this bitter fate on myself through my own cowardice and folly.”

“Do not call it so, lady.”

“What other name is there? And fool I was still, for I had not learned that the wise yield and fight again another day. I defied Radwulf at every turn. And so he concocted the story of my madness. It began in a small way. Things mysteriously appeared in my room at night. I would wake in strange places and not know how I had got there. The servants whispered that I walked in my sleep. Radwulf took to locking me in my room, saying it was for my own safety. Then there was some

poison. Convulsions and terrible dreams - I thought I was dying. So I insisted then that all food should be tasted before I would touch it - and Radwulf humoured this unreasonable demand. And then, on a dark and cold night, there was *this*.”

She twitched her sleeve over the scars on her wrist.

“He gagged me and bound me. And he watched the blood flow, until I was too weak to move or speak. Then he took off the bonds and laid the knife by me, and left me.

“He misjudged his timing. The servants found me later than he thought, and I lay for weeks at the brink of death. And when I recovered, I found my uncle had agreed that I was - unbalanced. Unstable. Unfit to govern. And Radwulf was Regent and could do all he pleased in his own name.”

She held up a hand swiftly, seeing Gyrdan about to speak. “Do not blame Eormenic! Remember that he knew only what Radwulf chose to tell him. He was as unworldly as he was kindly, and he was always easy to deceive. The shame of an attempted suicide in the family! That must have been worse for him even than seeing me ungratefully spurn his selected match and wilfully wed Radwulf. To him I had proved myself unworthy of his kindness, either insane or wicked or both.”

“Folly may do as much harm as cruelty, however well-intentioned,” Gyrdan said bitterly. “He could at least have waited for your side of the story, lady.”

“He could have,” she said sadly, “but Radwulf knew he would not. He believed me mad, and what could he learn from the ravings of a lunatic? So he returned to Buchart and left me to my fate.

“That was a dark period. And yet, slowly, my fighting spirit came back to me. I tried to write to my kinsmen to tell them what had happened. I bribed the servants to take letters. They took my money, my jewellery, and my letters - straight to Radwulf.

“I tried to escape. I was caught. I tried again, and I was caught again. Many times. He beat me. And worse things. Worse than I hope you can imagine. And when he dared not use further violence, he had me guarded constantly. Every minute of every day. By soldiers of the coarsest kind - or maybe they were under orders to humiliate me wherever possible. I think he hoped to drive me from my wits in truth. But still I defied him.

“Finally, he locked me up without food or water, fettered and chained to the wall. In the dark, but not alone. With a corpse for company, the wreck of what had once been a man. For three days I held out, while the rats fought over him in the stench, and the screams of those enduring far worse echoed through the walls. Then I gave in. I could fight no more.”

Gyrdan found himself utterly at a loss for words. Here was the reason for the lines in her face. Sixteen at the time of her marriage, twenty-eight now, and he would have guessed her forty at the least. Yet she had not broken, despite this catalogue of horror. She could still think and act decisively, still help others to escape, even if she had given up hope for herself. Under that defeated exterior there was something stronger, a core of steel in the soul that would never yield, save in death.

Irinya looked directly at him again, her eyes heavy with self-contempt.

“So he defeated me. I am still his prisoner, though it is not now so obvious. Within this chamber I have privacy. The servants obey me in minor things. I preside at Radwulf’s feasts, and to the world I am his lady. Though I am denied anything that might serve as a weapon, and if I stir outside this tower a guard must shadow my every step. For my own safety, Radwulf gives out - it is convenient for him to maintain the fiction.

“When I was young, I would have said this was unendurable. I would have declared boldly that I would rather die. And many times I have stood at my window and looked down into the cold black water of the lake, and thought of a few seconds plunge and a few minutes suffocating pain, and then peace. Everlasting peace. Yet I never do it. I have not the courage.”

“Sometimes, lady, it takes more courage to live than to die,” Gyrdan said, quietly but with surprising intensity.

Again the faint flicker of a grateful smile. “Thank you for saying that. But you are too kind. It is not courage. Often - so often - I feel that I cannot go on. But I do not deserve to rest in peace. I have failed so many people. My father. My uncle. My friends and kinsmen. All the folk of Carlundy. It is my fault that Radwulf rules, and my duty to do what little is in my power to thwart him.”

“*Your* fault, lady?”

“If I were Ingeld’s son rather than Ingeld’s daughter, there would have been no question over the succession. If I were not a coward and a fool, Radwulf could not have forced me to marry him -”

“Lady, even if you had been the bravest warrior ever living, Radwulf would have been no less ruthless and no less greedy for power. The man who could threaten to cut a girl’s throat would hardly be one to shrink from murder, or even from war. Had you been a man, Radwulf would have fought you for the country. Carlundy might have escaped Radwulf’s rule, but at the cost of civil war. And -”

He broke off just in time, aghast at what the next sentence would have been. But Irinya followed the logic and smiled wryly.

“And if Ingeld’s mythical son had been strong enough and ruthless enough to overcome Radwulf, it might have been difficult to tell the difference between them. That is what you were going to say, is it not? The only people who can seize power are those who are not fit to hold it.”

She sighed. “I am inclined to agree with you. I have spun many, many fantastical plans for getting rid of Radwulf. I have tried to plot against him - but the Lowland barons fear him more than they covet his position. I have thought of murdering him - there have been a handful of chances, when he is drunk and careless enough to come to me alone - but even Radwulf surely does not deserve that. I have thought of escape, of running back to my kinsmen, stirring up the Highlands, starting a rebellion - but why should men fight for me? Does it really matter to anyone whether the ruler of Carlundy is Ingeld’s daughter or Ingeld’s nephew? My right to power is undoubted - but am I fit to hold it? Would I be as bad as Radwulf? I do not know. But I know the price of deposing Radwulf would be high, and I know I am not worth it.”

Gyrdan found the bleak misery in her tone more harrowing even than her account of her treatment at Radwulf’s hands. She was allowing herself no false hopes, and though she excused the behaviour of others she would extend no such generosity to herself. Compassion swelled suddenly in his heart. It might be honest to live without the warm glow of self-delusion, but it was terribly hard.

“You are surely worth better than this, lady,” he said gently.

She threw him a glance of pure gratitude, and then looked away abruptly as if she were afraid of betraying her feelings.

“It will not last. Nothing lasts for ever, not even Radwulf. He is eight and thirty now. Sooner or later he will die.” Her voice gathered a little more strength. “And if I can outlive him, I have won. For there is no child to succeed him. It seems I am barren. And while I am his wife he can take no other, and if both he and I die without legitimate issue, Carlundy will pass to Eomund or Eomer, without war. They are upright and honourable men and will rule well.”

“That may be many years away, lady. There must surely be someone who could help you now.”

“Do not tempt me with false hope!” she said sharply. “What help? A knight in shining armour, young, brave and handsome, to come riding up to the castle one fine day, faithful squire at his side? To challenge Radwulf to single combat? And

Radwulf, instead of pouring boiling oil on him from the ramparts, or shooting his white charger from under him, or sending out a hundred soldiers to drag him into the deepest dungeon to starve - Radwulf will accept the challenge! And they will fight all the long day, while I wring my hands and weep piteously at the tower window, until at sunset Radwulf is slain. And then I will bring my wounded champion into the hall and lay him on a silken couch and feed him grapes until he is well again. And then we all live happily ever after.”

She drew a breath, and went on in a softer voice. “I am sorry. I should not mock. But for months I watched from the battlements for my rescuer, and when he did not come the despair came near to breaking me. I should have known better. Even when we were children, and Eomer and Eomund played at knights-errant in the orchard, they never showed any inclination to rescue *me*. We borrowed the housekeeper’s daughter to play the maiden, and I had to be Eomer’s horse. Until he got too heavy for me to carry and I was promoted to squire. For, you see, the knight always has to marry the lady after he has rescued her, and what man wants an ugly wife? A plain woman has no help but herself.”

She squared her shoulders.

“I have learned now not to live on foolish dreams. I do not wring my hands and weep. In great things I am powerless, but in small matters I can do a little - a very little - good. Radwulf despises charity - he thinks it only encourages the beggars - but he does not lower himself to household affairs so he does not stop me. And occasionally there is the opportunity for something a little more active. Like tonight. One beggar more or less makes no difference to the world, but it makes a difference to that beggar. Small triumphs, but they lighten the long stalemate.”

She rose to her feet. “Come. I almost wish you were not going, but you must. The castle is quiet and the moon will have set long ago. If I can think of a way out! You cannot leave by the door. The stairs are guarded at top and bottom, and the sentries have now learned to stand where no-one can creep up behind them. You chose a bad place to take refuge!”

“I did not choose it, lady. And so far it has not proved ill.”

“Say that when you know the outcome. Can you swim?”

“Yes.”

“How far?”

“That depends on the conditions.”

She led him to the window and they leaned out. As he had guessed, the room was high in the castle’s eastern tower, jutting out over the lake and with an unbroken

drop to the water, perhaps forty feet below. Gyrdan shivered slightly - he disliked heights - and looked up. The stone wall above was smooth and sheer, and quite free of obliging creepers. Radwulf had chosen a good prison for his captive. Only a bird could escape.

“It is not quite hopeless,” Irinya said, following his train of thought. “The cliffs are vertical on this side of the island. No underwater rocks, and the water is deep. So one can dive without harm. It is not possible to swim to the town shore from here. I have tried that. The water on the other side of the crag is shallow and choked with weeds, which will drag you down and drown you. But to the east, to the far shore, the water is quite clear. It is a little over a mile. Can you swim that distance?”

“Is there a current?”

“No. The lake is as placid as a mill-pond. But it is very deep and very cold. And you would need to be silent until you are out of bow-shot of the castle walls. Any splashing will alert the sentries, and the men of Errendale are notable archers.”

“I could swim the lake, certainly, but I do not think I could dive silently from here.”

“That is not a problem. Bed-curtains and sheets and blankets and clothing tied together make a satisfactory rope, long enough to reach the water. I tried that, too, but someone saw the rope dangling from the window and sent a boat after me. And I suppose it was a good thing, for my strength gave out part way across and I would certainly have drowned if I had not been recaptured. Tonight I will draw the rope up after you and none will be any the wiser.”

“I thank you, lady. Maybe some day I will be able to help you in return.”

“I hardly think so! Challenge Radwulf to single combat? You are not my dream of a knight-errant, friend!”

“No,” he said ruefully. “I am sorry for that, lady. But - there may be something I can do. I could carry a letter for you. To your kinsmen in the Hills -”

She caught her breath. “You would do that? For years I have wished they knew the truth. But if you are caught -”

“Write it in some code, which only you and your kinsmen know. But I will not let the letter fall into Radwulf’s hands, lady, never fear.”

“I did not mean that. I was thinking of the risk to you.”

“It is not great, lady, and I am no stranger to such work. Trust me!”

“Then you are a spy after all?” Her tone was light, then hardened abruptly as suspicion suddenly glittered in her eyes. “Ha! Now I see! Does Radwulf seek to trap me into intrigue? A secret letter would be proof of plotting rebellion. High

treason. It would give him an excuse to rid himself of both me and my kinsmen, at one stroke. You are in Radwulf's pay! All this is some elaborate trick, staged to trap me into betraying myself and them! Oh, no! I am glad I saw through it in time. Get out! Now!"

Gyrdan did not move. "Surely Radwulf could have devised some simpler trap. A sympathetic servant, a false message offering help and inviting a reply, even a forged letter from you. He could even dispense with evidence altogether and simply accuse you and them of treason. Who would gainsay him? Why should he need to go to all this trouble?"

She stared at him, doubts warring in her eyes, biting her lip. She did not answer.

"If you believe me to be Radwulf's spy, lady, you had better call the guards. If you are right, it will do no harm. If you are wrong - think on the consequences. I am not the only one in danger. No doubt it will be easy for you to explain why you are harbouring an escaped prisoner. And how you have entertained me, alone, in your bedchamber for several hours."

He took a deliberate step towards her, and laid his hands on her shoulders, feeling the stark bones shift as she tried to recoil. He tightened his grip. "I do not think Radwulf would have much difficulty in devising an explanation?"

"No, damn him, he would not!"

A sudden convulsion and she had twisted away out of his grasp. An involuntary shudder shook her, and she clenched her arms across her breast. He recognised the gesture, and mentally kicked himself. What must she think?

He said gently, "The letter, lady. If you think the risk is too high - for you - then I will find your kinsmen and tell them what you have told me. I do not think they will believe me, a common tramp - unless there is some signal, some form of words that they would recognise?"

"No! They are not stupid. They will never trust you without some proof. And proof is dangerous - though I may never get another chance." She paced the chamber, restlessly. "I hate this - this poison of Radwulf's! Suspicion and mistrust, in every corner of the land. Spies, intrigue, bluff, double bluff. Maybe you are not working for Radwulf. But why should you work for me?"

The pacing continued, up and down, up and down. Then she seemed to come to some decision and turned to face him, her head flung defiantly back, her hands clenched at her sides. The next words came in something of a rush. "I - I cannot pay you. I have nothing of value left. Except - except myself! It - it is not much, I know, but if it is your price I - I - I am willing!"

Gyrdan stared at her. She was dead white and her face bore the harrowed look of one who walks open-eyed into hell. He had seen that look before, in circumstances he tried not to remember. Soldiers in bad battles, men facing execution, and, once, on the frozen face of a suicide.

“Oh, lady,” he said softly. “You misunderstand. I want nothing of you.”

“Then why? No-one runs a risk without reward.”

He said simply, “You did. Why can you not believe the same of me?”

For the space of a heartbeat she stood rigid. Then she sighed, and with the release of tension her whole frame seemed to shrink, almost to wilt. Her eyes grew soft and dark, and the ghost of a smile came to her lips. For a fleeting moment, she was almost pretty.

“I am sorry, my friend,” she said. “I have lived so long without kindness that I can no longer recognise it. Please forgive me.”

It took her only a few minutes to scribble the letter, and he knew she had written it many times in thought. She folded it deftly, sealed it, folded it again and tied it with string. It was a tiny package when she handed it to him, sitting easily in the palm of his hand.

“It is in code, of a sort,” she said. “One we used when we were children. They will recognise it, I think. You must give it only into their own hands; Eomer or Eomund, sons of Eormenric of Buchar. Do you know their manor? It is -”

She broke off, listening. Footsteps echoed on the stairs. “Radwulf!” she breathed. “I know his step by now. Get back under the bed! And stay there, and keep quiet! *Whatever happens*, do you understand me? No half-baked chivalry! I need no man to fight my battles for me. Can I trust you? *Promise me!*”

He had just time to nod, before the heavy counterpane dropped and he was shut in.

“Good evening, fair cousin,” came Radwulf’s voice, light, mocking. “I find you late afoot.”

“I have tried to sleep and could not,” said Irinya, her voice cool and flat and expressionless again. “It is too close. The storm will break soon.”

“Perhaps you have not recovered from the shock of earlier this evening?”

“Shock?”

“The brigand. I hear he burst in upon you. A terrible shock for a lady of gentle birth!”

“Oh, that.”

“I hear also that he leaped from your chamber window into the lake? A resourceful fellow. And lucky for him that your shutters were open! *If* indeed he leaped.” His voice hardened suddenly. “There is blood on your gown, fair cousin.”

Gyrdan’s heart stopped. How could they have been so careless? She had remembered the coverlet, but of course her dress must have been stained when she lifted him onto the bed. He clenched his fists. He was unarmed, but at least he would take the chance to land a couple of punches on that cruel, handsome face.

Iryna answered without hesitation, without a tremor in that flat, dull voice. “He pushed me aside on his way to the window. Do you think I scream without good reason?”

“No,” agreed Radwulf, his tone menacing. “No, you do nothing without good reason, fair cousin. In that at least we are alike. We have not found him.”

“I expect he swam away under water,” Iryna said, indifferently.

“Impossible! It is too far to the eastern side. He would have had to come up for air and then we would have seen him. And I have men posted along the western shore for a mile either side of the town walls. He did not swim ashore, my lady.”

“Then he lies drowned. Drag the lake in the morning and you will find his body entangled in the weeds. None escape their embrace. Have I not cause to know that? What had he done, anyway?”

“He was accused of the murder of Eormenic. Your kinsman, cousin. You would not hide your uncle’s murderer, now would you?”

She said, dully, “I could not hide a rat from your wrath, even if I wished. In twelve years I have given up the unequal struggle. But, Radwulf, if that was the charge, then you have drowned an innocent man.”

A sharp hiss of indrawn breath.

“What do you mean, fair cousin?”

“I mean that I know who murdered Eormenic, and it was not some foreign tramp.”

“Oh, do you? Then why, my clever lady, have you not brought him to justice?” The mocking voice had lost some of its assurance.

“Because he is above the law. Or he thinks he is. *You* murdered Eormenic. Oh, it was not your hand that held the knife. That may well have been a thief or an outlaw. But it was you who gave the order, you who invited him to the feast, you who planned to waylay and rob him so it would seem the work of a common cutpurse, you who -”

The monotonous voice was abruptly cut short. There was a choking sound. Under the bed, Gyrdan fought with himself to stay still, stay hidden.

“Shut up!” Radwulf snapped. “Shut up, bitch!”

Then Irinya’s voice, a little hoarse but otherwise unchanged, “Certainly, if you desire it. There is no need for violence. Your wish is my command.”

There was a pause, before Radwulf said, “What do you know, fair cousin? And how do you know it?” The mocking tone was back. He had regained command of himself.

“Shall we say a little bird told me?”

A harsh laugh. “In your case, likely enough to be true! Sorceress!”

“Radwulf, if I were a sorceress would I not be Lady of Carlundy and you in your grave twelve years ago? But you did not come here only to exchange insults.”

“No, indeed, my lady. I have news. Good news! Do you wish to hear it?”

“You will tell me whether I wish it or no, I have no doubt.”

“Hygaran is dead.”

“Oh? I am sorry. How so?”

“A fit, so I am told. And I think, fair cousin, you have good reason to mourn Hygaran.”

“Why so?”

Was there just a hint of a tremor in the level tone?

“Oh, come, my lady, you are not stupid! That at least is not one of your faults! Hygaran was your last supporter among the great lords. His son Hygurd is *my* man. And now he holds the wide lands of Darain. More than enough to put down any possible rebellion you might stir up among your Highland savages! Now, come, cousin, cannot you work out what this means for you? No? Really, how dull we are tonight! Shall I spell it out to you? It means, fair cousin, that I no longer have any need of you. My position is entirely secure.”

“Then you can let me go?” The cool voice shook a little on the last syllable.

Radwulf laughed without mirth.

“Let you go, fair cousin! Let you run off with your clever tongue and your scheming brain and raise a foreign army against me! Oh, don’t look at me like that! Don’t pretend you haven’t thought of it! That foreign tramp tonight. I know perfectly well he didn’t murder Eormenric. I doubt he even knew who Eormenric was. You were right in that surmise, my clever lady. But he has been poking around in Carlundy before. He was spying for someone, I am sure of it. And if those

damned guards hadn't bungled it, I would have had it out of him by now! Oh, no, cousin, I am not going to let you go."

"Then w-what has changed?"

No doubt this time. The voice was unsteady, the control cracking.

"Simply this, my lady," murmured Radwulf, softly. "I no longer need to keep you here by force. If you will not willingly be my wife, I will kill you."

Twelve years of restraint suddenly gave way, and if the first flicker of returning animation had been like the thawing of a stream, this was a river crashing through a dam.

"Oh, will you?" she spat back. "You will have to use your own hands then! No convenient dark alley for me, as for Eormenric! For I dwell here in your castle, under your *protection!*" The last word was hissed with startling venom. "Or is it to be a so-convenient fit? As for poor Hygaran? But I am still young, though I do not look it, and I am healthy. People will talk, you know."

"Ahh!" crooned Radwulf. "So there is life in you yet, is there? Good! You look almost attractive when you are angry. Come here!" His voice grew suddenly thick, slurred. "Sorrow take it, why do I desire you so? To be sure, it is not your face! Not even a lover could call you fair, save in mockery! Is it your body? You are well-made enough, although too skinny for my taste. Why do you persist in wearing such dull clothes? You dress like a widow!"

"If only!"

"Ha! I have not seen such spirit in you for years! Suddenly you melt, like snow in summertime! Is it the fear of death? Had I known, I would have threatened you with it sooner. Ah! I want you, cousin, as I have not wanted you since first we were wed! Take that ugly dress off! *Take it off!* Or I will tear it off. Thank you. And your shift. Now, come here!" The bedsprings creaked. Radwulf was sitting on the edge of the bed.

Under it, Gyrdan tautened like a coiled spring. Promise or no, he could not lie hidden and listen to that -

"Never!"

"Oho!" Radwulf sprang up, crossing the room in a single stride. There was a little gasp of pain. "Are you going to fight me, fair cousin? It is no good, you know. I am stronger than you are." Another little cry, quickly muffled. "But I do not want you now by force. I have had that too many times. It is too easy. Time has tamed the wildcat in you, my lady. No, now I will have you willingly mine. *All mine.* You cannot resist me, cousin. I touch you here - and here - and *here.* I caress. I *kiss.*" A

silence, broken only by his heavy breathing. “No woman resists me for long. All yield. *You* will yield. My wife. Willingly. For I want you, as I have never wanted any other woman. Alina. All the others. I will give them all up, all of them, if you will be mine.”

A sudden movement, and Radwulf roared in fury. “You bitch! You little slut! You’ll be sorry for that!” There was the sound of a blow.

Iryna’s voice, edged with pain. “Never your wife! Never willingly! By force you can take, but I will never give! Not to you!”

“Ah! To another, then! Have you a lover, you whore? You are devious enough for anything!”

“No. No lover.” Her voice was calmer now, regaining some of its icy composure. “Indeed, I doubt now that it would be possible. You have hurt me too deeply. But I will never willingly be your wife. Rather would I die.”

“Oh, would you? And why, pray?”

“I hate you,” she said, the level voice carrying far more conviction than any passion. “More, I despise you. For usurping the lordship. For taking me to wife by force. For my terror, my degradation, my shame. But most of all for what you have done to Carlundy. Where there is no justice. Where each man goes in fear of his neighbour. Between fear and suspicion you have no peace, and you have made Carlundy in your own image. *My country!* Never will I be a party to that!”

“All right!” snarled Radwulf. “Very well! You have made your choice, fair cousin. Get dressed. Well, if you will not be my wife, I shall have to become a widower. I am not going to endure a barren bed for ever, my lady, and a fine brood of bastards is not a way to found a dynasty.”

“Should you care to kill me now? That would be a brave and honourable deed, would it not, to strike down a defenceless woman in her own chamber? You would be remembered for that.” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm.

Radwulf managed a scornful laugh. “Oh no, fair cousin! Do you think you are the only one of the family with any intelligence? Trust me to think of something more - elegant - than that! No, I shall have you legally executed. You say we have no justice in Carlundy? That may be so. But we have the law. I shall have you burned at the stake, my lady.”

“So you will force some poor fool to confess to being my lover? Ha! ha! *There* you will be believed! Am I likely to attract any man enough to risk his life for the pleasure of bedding me?”

“Who knows? Love, as the poets interminably tell us, follows its own rules. But I had not adultery in mind, fair cousin. Oh no, I have a better idea than that. Can you not guess it, my clever lady? Too clever, perhaps, by half! No? Let me remind you. What is the penalty for witchcraft?”

A stunned silence. Radwulf laughed again, long and merrily this time.

“Ah! Not so ready with your tongue now, clever cousin? There are many who want to know how you find things out. Rumours spread already in the valley. Shall I tell you what I have in mind? It has a perfect symmetry which I am sure you will appreciate, clever lady. I will poison one of my mistresses. Alina, I think. I am growing a little tired of her, and she is getting above herself. She was taking far too much interest in that tramp this evening. Yes, Alina. Two birds with one stone. Something very unpleasant, I think. Then, before its effects become noticeable, I will give it out that you cursed her. Now *that* will be believed! Just the sort of thing a jealous wife might do, is it not? And you know how such wicked rumours spread in the servants’ hall. And among the townsfolk. Regrettable, but what can one do? People will talk, after all. And it does not look like a very good harvest this year. Oh, I think within a week I shall have a shouting mob at my gates demanding that I give up my sorceress wife, who has held me bewitched for twelve years. And, reluctantly, I shall be compelled to follow the wishes of my people - you approve of that, fair cousin, you are always telling me I should listen to them more - and I shall be forced to give up my much-loved wife. A month, my clever lady, and you will be ashes on the breeze. And, after a decent interval, who could blame a sorrowing widower for taking what comfort he can find in a second wife?”

No answer.

“Think on it, cousin. It is your choice.”

“You know my answer.”

“Why so stubborn?” Radwulf shouted, exasperated. “You could have everything! Lady of Carlundy! Power, freedom, wealth! Why refuse my gifts? Why?”

Her voice was hardly louder than a whisper. “All are worthless, without honour.”

“Honour!” he snorted. “Very well, fair cousin, keep your honour! And may it bring you comfort at the stake!”

He slammed out of the chamber.

Chapter 3.

Gyrdan emerged from hiding for the second time that evening, shaking with suppressed fury. Irinya stood with her back against the door, her hair half shaken out of its knot and dangling limply about her shoulders. A bruise was darkening on her face and another on her throat. But her eyes were hard and her voice steady, and she wasted no time on bewailing her fate.

“You must get out of here immediately!” she whispered. “Radwulf had a mind to search this chamber. He is not so easily taken in as his guards!”

“I know. I heard every word.”

“Did you?” She blushed crimson to the roots of her hair. “It was stupid of me to defy him, stupid. Maybe telling my story to a friendly ear has woken something in me that I thought was dead? But that does not matter. What matters now is getting you safe away.”

Gyrdan flicked a surprised spider off his sleeve, stood up as squarely as he could, and fixed her with his one good eye.

“I am not leaving you here. If I go, I am taking you with me.”

She was incredulous. Her glance swept him from top to toe, and she actually laughed. “With *you*? Are you mad?”

Gyrdan flushed very slightly.

“I am no knight, lady,” he said stiffly. “I cannot fight Radwulf, take the castle and restore you as Lady of Carlundy. But I am a hunter and a traveller, and I can take you to safety.”

Irinya stared at him, stunned. This was more than she had bargained for. To hide him, give him food and medicine, even to tell her story to a sympathetic listener - that was all very well, but to trust her life to him? To a man of whom she knew nothing at all, except that he had just been captured and beaten within an inch of his life? That itself was hardly likely to inspire confidence. And yet he appeared to be quite serious in his extraordinary offer. The desire to accept welled up in her. She had never before had an offer of help. She was never likely to get another. What if he did prove incompetent and get them both captured? How could her lot possibly get worse?

But she knew too well the torment of living on false hope. This was not really an opportunity, it was as much an illusion as all the other hare-brained schemes of escape she had invented over the years. None of them had worked; why should this? She was suddenly angry. It was cruel to mock her with fantasy, cruel and heartless.

“Fool! Have you understood nothing? *You* could get away. Radwulf may only half-believe you drowned but you are of no importance and he will not search hard for you. But *me!* He cannot afford to let me go free! If I fly this castle, even if it is possible - which I doubt - the whole realm will be raised. Nothing could escape. If you must insist on trying to help, deliver my letter. My hopes now must rest on that.”

Gyrdan shook his head, angry now in his turn.

“No. Do you not see? It is too late. Radwulf is no fool. If he is planning to move against you, he will expect you to try to reach your kinsmen. Unless he is sure they are on his side, they will already be under guard, maybe even prisoners, to be held until you are dead - or until you have yielded.”

She bit her lip.

“But they may have evaded him? They may have had warning?”

“You are clutching at straws, lady. And even if they are still free, what can they do? There is so little time. How many men could they raise? A hundred? Two hundred? To attack Mickleburg? If ever I saw an unassailable fortress, this is it. An army of thousands could not bring it low. Save perhaps by siege. And you would starve long before Radwulf did.”

“Then I must die,” she said simply.

“No, lady, you must run.”

“Where to? Hygaran is dead, Eomer and Eomund perhaps prisoners. All of Carlundy is closed to me.”

“There is a world outside Carlundy, lady.”

“I know nothing of it, nor it of me. I have never ventured south of Mickleburg.”

“I know all of Carlundy and the lands beyond. Since your kinsmen cannot help you, I will take you to the kingdom of Billand, south of here, by the sea. It is a great kingdom, and there you will find shelter and maybe even help.”

“Oh, it would be so easy,” she said sarcastically. “Just stroll out of this castle, wander down to Billand, tap on the king’s door and beg asylum. How? Have you any practical plan?”

“I have not,” he admitted candidly. “But we can cross those bridges as we come to them. I have never been beaten yet.”

“You were this evening.”

She threw the hurtful sentence like a stone, ashamed of herself even as she said it. But Gyrdan took it on the chin.

“Sooner or later Radwulf’s army will arrest every man in the country,” he said dryly. “But I am not now their prisoner, am I? And I think you may allow me some of the credit for that.”

That was true. She had forgotten that. It must have taken nerve and quick thinking to get away - she could not remember it ever happening before. And there was a brain in that battered head, for he was the only one who had ever understood the true meaning of the scars on her wrist, and he was also getting the better of this argument. Might he be able to -? But no, it was not fair to accept. He must have spoken on a kind impulse, without considering the risk to himself. She changed tack.

“Gyrdan, your chance of escape is slim enough as it is. Do not risk it for me!”

“In honour I cannot leave you here! And I will not!”

“You want me to risk *my* life for *your* honour? If we follow your half-baked idea, Radwulf will come after us and we will both be killed. *I* want to live.”

“For a month,” he said brutally. “A month, and you will be ashes on the breeze. What have you to lose?”

She fell silent. Gyrdan watched her thinking, marshalling arguments before she spoke again.

“Maybe I have nothing to lose. But you? I do not know what you are doing in Carlundy. But you are not some rootless, purposeless wanderer. You have some errand of your own. In that at least I agree with Radwulf! Can you in honour jeopardise that errand, whatever it is, for some romantic notion?”

He said, quietly, “If I have any errand, it is my own. I will not leave you here, and that is all there is to it. And I am quite prepared to stand here arguing with you all night, until I am recaptured and you are caught harbouring me. Is that what you want?”

“This is madness -!” she said, but there was a note of hope, of longing on her voice.

Gyrdan had the advantage now, and followed it up.

“The game has changed. The stalemate is broken. If you stay here now, Radwulf will kill you. Fly, and there may yet be hope. Are you to have endured all these years for nothing? To let Radwulf win at the last?”

“He has won, already. There is no escape. I told you, I have tried.”

Her tone was dull and defeated, as though she had given in suddenly and handed the initiative to him.

“There must be a way!” he said vehemently, remembering just in time to keep his voice down. “Can you swim?”

“Not across the lake. I told you, I tried. Think better of it, kind fool.”

“Is there any way out of the castle, save the main gate?”

“No. Well - No, it would not work.”

“I will be the judge of that. What is it?”

“A water-gate, in the cellars. It is never used, but I do not think it has been blocked up. It is on the south-eastern side of the crag, and leads into a fold of the rocks. A boat could be loaded, unseen from the shore. It was meant as a way of getting messengers out secretly, when the castle lay under siege. But we have no boat. And in any case, a boat could not hide from the archers on the walls.”

The plan suddenly presented itself to Gyrdan’s mind, fully formed.

“We don’t need a boat!” he exclaimed.

Iryna looked up, surprised at the confidence in his tone.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? This crag is not an island, though everyone calls it one. There’s a reef, a line of rocks, under the bridge. And the cliffs aren’t sheer on the south side. Scramble around the water’s edge, and over the reef to the shore! Under cover of darkness, and quietly. The sentries won’t watch the cliffs closely. Why should they? And there is a storm brewing. Even the weather is on our side.”

Hope sparked in her eyes and flared up into a great flame, then slowly died again.

“You have forgotten something. How are you to reach the water gate, even if it is still passable? I told you, the stairs from this chamber are guarded at top and bottom. And as for me, I cannot stir outside this room without a guard.”

“With a guard, may you wander freely in the castle?”

“Almost anywhere - ah!” She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly shining bright. “Now there is an idea!”

She twisted a strand of her hair through her fingers, frowning blackly, thinking aloud. “You’re too tall, of course, and your clothes are bloody. But a mail-shirt and cloak would cover that. And a helm would hide the bandages and disguise that black eye. Yes, I think you might make a fairly convincing guard. And I walk often in the castle ground, storm or no. No-one will be surprised at that. We shall have to trust to luck in the cellars. Sometimes they are patrolled, sometimes not.”

“Then you will flee? You are resolved on it?”

“I am,” she said, and heaved a sigh. “Since it seems impossible to convince you to do the sensible thing and go alone. And there may be a chance, just a chance, of success. If we are lucky, and do nothing rash or foolish!”

“How much time have we? Until you are missed?”

“I am not sure. Quite a while. I will have no maid to act as Radwulf’s spy, and I cultivate irregular habits. Sometimes I walk all night, sometimes I do not get up all day. They may not come looking for me until noon. Maybe not until later, unless Radwulf specifically orders it. And even when they find me missing, there will be more time while they search the castle to make sure I am not merely hiding to escape in the confusion. I have tried that before, too. We may have most of tomorrow. Can we reach safety in that time?”

“No. It would take two days at least to reach the Jaws of Errendale, the pass that leads south into Billand, even if we could use the Giants’ Road. Much longer if we must take to the hills and travel only by night. But there is a place I know where we could hide safely for a day or so. We could reach it by dawn, if you can travel quickly.”

“I was bred to the hills, and although I have been long a captive, the falcon’s wings have not been clipped.” Her eyes sparkled and there was a faint hint of colour in the sallow face. Now that she had made her decision, she did not hesitate. She braided her hair, continuing in a rapid, clipped undertone, “We shall need food. Hunter you may be, but this time you are the prey. I can collect some from the kitchens on the way to the cellars. I can take nothing else, whether I wished to or not. I do not carry luggage to stroll in the castle grounds!”

She took a long dark cloak from the chest by the hearth and threw it over her shoulders, pinning it at the throat with a silver brooch in the shape of a falcon. “I will call the sentry up from below,” she said. “If you are behind the door, and I get him to come fully into the room, can you knock him out silently? There must be no noise to arouse suspicion.”

“Trust me,” he said grimly, taking station.

“I must,” she said, very earnestly. “And you me. This is a desperate gamble. For the last time, are you resolved on this, before I cast the die?”

A look at his face gave her the answer. She went to the door and called, “Guard! Pray come up.”

She stepped to the middle of the room, where she would be visible through the open door. She wrapped her cloak around her and drew her hands over her face, and it was as if she drew on a mask. The colour faded from her face, the sparkle died in her eyes, her shoulders slumped, and she was again the cold, thin, plain captive.

The sentry’s feet clattered on the stairs and stopped in the doorway.

“Good evening, Alfric,” Irinya said, in the flat expressionless voice.

“Evening, ma’am,” said the sentry, stolidly. “Wanting to take a walk, ma’am?”

“I am afraid so, Alfric. I am sorry to drag you out with me, but it is not my wish.”

“No, ma’am.”

She was fiddling with the brooch at her throat, and tugged at it impatiently.

“Alfric, my brooch is jammed on something. Please, would you help me -?” She looked up, a picture of helpless appeal.

The sentry stepped over the threshold, a pitying smile on his face at the incompetence of women. Then the smile froze on his lips and his eyes rolled up in his head, as Gyrdan’s hand crunched down on the back of his neck. Irinya sprang forward, broke his fall and lowered him quietly to the floor. Gyrdan closed the door silently, and came to help her strip the sentry of cloak, helm, surcoat, mail-shirt and weapons.

“You haven’t killed him, have you?”

“No. He’ll have a sore head in the morning, but that should be all.”

“Good. Thank you. He has a wife and six children, and it isn’t *his* fault.”

“We’d better tie him up and gag him. He might wake up. Can we hide him somewhere?”

“Put him on the bed and draw the curtains. He’ll be more comfortable there anyway.”

She helped Gyrdan into the mail and surcoat and adjusted the bandages on his head so that they were hidden by the helm. He buckled the sentry’s sword belt about his waist, tried a few experimental thrusts and parries, and scowled at the blade.

“Something wrong?” she asked, anxiously.

“Not if all Radwulf’s men have swords of this quality. The balance is all wrong, and there is some flaw in the blade. I can feel it.” He sheathed the sword again.

“Ah, well, I hope I shall not have to trust my life to it. How do I look?”

Irinya viewed him critically.

“You’re too tall. Stoop a bit. You should be about my height. And slump your shoulders. Stand like a tired horse. That’s better. What guard wants to wander around in the rain after a lunatic?”

A sudden flash of lightning and roll of thunder outside made them both jump.

“The storm! That’s good. Sentries are so much less watchful in the rain.”

Irinya took the sentry’s waist belt, wound it three times around her own slim waist, and held out her hand.

“I should like his dagger, if you please -”

Gyrdan handed it over without a word. She hung it on the belt where it would fall easily to hand, and took up one of the lamps.

“Now, come! Let us take the chance!”

The hall was deserted apart from someone snoring under the table and three sentries playing dice by torchlight. They cast sympathetic glances at their colleague trailing disconsolately in the shadows behind the lady, but none spoke any word.

Through the main door past the guardroom, down a short flight of steps, then a sharp right turn along a wide corridor. Irinya walked at a maddeningly slow pace, drifting along as if in a dream. Gyrdan wanted to run, to race down the corridor and get out of the castle as quickly as possible. What if Radwulf went back to his wife’s chamber? He would discover the trussed guard immediately, raise the alarm, rouse the castle....

There were footsteps hurrying down the corridor behind them. Pursuit already! Irinya did not turn her head, apparently wrapped in her own thoughts. Gyrdan dropped his hand to his sword-hilt, feeling the tension rise to an unbearable pitch as the footsteps caught them up.

The servant passed them without a second glance, calling down muffled curses on a lord who demanded wine at this unearthly hour, and dived down a side turning. Gyrdan relaxed, sweat soaking into the bandages on his forehead. Irinya gave no sign that she had even seen the servant. Has she no fear? he thought. But then she has little reason to fear being caught. It is the stake for her either way.

She halted suddenly, so that it was all he could do to avoid bumping into her. They were in a doorway leading into a large room, its size felt rather than seen in the dim light. A sudden stab of white lightning lit the windows for a single moment, throwing the whole vast kitchen into vivid relief. It was deserted.

“So far, so good,” breathed Irinya. “Wait here.”

She was gone only a few minutes, but it felt like an age before she returned, with a leather bag slung over one shoulder.

“Food,” she said. “All I could find in a hurry.”

She opened a door set in the wall, and the lamp showed stairs leading down into a yawning blackness.

“The cellars. Now it gets dangerous. I am not allowed here, guard or no. We shall have to hope that it is not patrolled tonight.”

The stairs led to a narrow, winding stone passage. Shadowy rooms filled with sacks and barrels loomed through half-open doors on either side, and well-fed mice and rats scurried from the light, squeaking their annoyance. As they went on the

passage grew rougher, and colder. The doors grew fewer, and then stopped altogether.

They rounded a corner, and heard the sound they had both been listening for without realising it. Steps ahead that were not an echo. The slow, bored, measured tread of a sentry. They halted. Irinya swore softly, a startlingly expressive monosyllable that would have made Gyrdan laugh in other circumstances. There were no doorways visible ahead, and they had passed no hiding place for a long time. The sentry was drawing nearer. Gyrdan loosened his sword in its sheath.

“Don’t hurt him!” Irinya whispered in his ear. “He’ll be missed and they’ll raise the alarm hours earlier!”

“What other way is there?”

She did not answer, but caught his hand and ran forward to the next corner. She turned down the lamp and drew him into the shadows.

“We can’t hide here -” but his objection was cut short as Irinya threw her arms round his neck and drew his face down to hers.

“Kiss me!” she hissed. “And for pity’s sake try to make it look convincing!”

Mad, he thought. What possessed me to insist on trying to rescue her?

The sentry came pacing slowly around the corner, a sputtering lamp in one hand and a spear in the other. He saw the shadow in the angle of the walls, and caught his breath. He paused. But it was only a soldier and a maidservant locked in a passionate embrace, so deeply absorbed in one another that they had not even noticed his approach. One of the girl’s hands twined in her lover’s hair, and the other pressed his body closer to hers. She was breathing fast, punctuated by occasional little moans of passion. The sentry grinned to himself. Good for you, mate, he thought. I wonder which one she is? She looks like a real goer. He passed them with a muffled snort, half-derision, half-envy of his unknown colleague’s good fortune.

No sooner had his tread died away around the corner, than the couple sprang apart like the north poles of two magnets and ran on down the corridor. Irinya wiped her lips with shaking hand, and there was a note of hysteria in her whisper.

“Oh, that worked better than I would have thought possible! I thought it was worth trying. Half the illegitimate children in the castle are conceived down here.” She shuddered. “I am only sorry the trick was so unpleasant!”

The passage ended abruptly in a blank wall of roughly cut rock. There was a single wooden door on their right, its iron bands rusted with age and damp.

Irina twisted the handle and pushed.

“Locked.”

Gyrdan set his shoulder to the door and heaved with all his might. It did not open - but he had felt it give a little.

“Both together, lady -”

Their combined weight was too much for the ancient timber. With a rending crash, fortunately drowned in a roll of thunder, it gave way, and they staggered through into the chamber beyond.

It was not a room but a cave, scooped out of the cliffs at the base of the crags. Apart from a rocky ledge along one wall it was full of dark water, almost still despite the storm outside. Thin filaments of weed reflected the lamplight, swaying on the small waves like the strands of a drowned woman’s hair. A rotting boat, half-full of water, wallowed at its moorings, with a solitary oar floating forlornly beside it.

Gyrdan pulled off the surcoat, mail and helmet. Armour would only weigh him down, and he was not wearing Radwulf’s tokens a minute longer than was necessary. Even the wolf’s head badge that fastened the cloak was discarded - after checking that it was only steel and of no value. He tied the lot into the surcoat and dropped it into the water, where it sank from sight. But he kept the sword. It looked as if it had been made by a blacksmith on a bad day, and it was as sharp as a rusted poker, but it was better than nothing.

He took the comfortably heavy food bag from Irina and slung it over his shoulder, then wrapped the sentry’s cloak tightly around him and pinned it with his own brooch. They had not got around to searching him, and although his pack had been taken he still had the contents of his belt pouch and pockets.

Irina had jammed the door shut with driftwood and now stood holding the lamp out over the water. At his nod, she let it go. A brief streak of flame, and then a splash, a hiss, and they were in darkness.

Gyrdan led the way along the ledge to the cave mouth and halted, peering out into the gloom. The sky tore itself apart in a clap of thunder and a dazzling blue-white flash that bleached his night vision, but the instant of illumination had told him all he needed to know. The cave mouth opened not into a sheer cliff face as he had half-feared, but onto a giants’ rockery of tumbled boulders. Difficult, but - probably - not impossible.

It wasn't raining outside, because rain falls in separate drops and the water pouring out of the sky was more like standing under a waterfall. In minutes they were both drenched. The gale hunted around the cliffs in great ragged gusts, driving the rain before it in flying curtains, fleetingly lit by the flickering fires of lightning. It tore at their cloaks and whipped their hair across their faces, it lashed them with rain and spray, it leaned against them with the pressure of a malevolent giant's hand and then, as they fought it, it mockingly died away and left them staggering into the sudden airless void. On hands and knees, clinging to the slippery, moss-covered rocks, they crawled and clambered around the broken base of the cliffs. Every boulder seemed to be loose, and every one at a different angle. Often they skidded into unseen clefts, and sent loose pebbles skittering away to splash into the lake. And at every lightning flash they cowered flat, dreading to hear the loud halloo of a sentry from above. But from that threat at least they were safe, their dark cloaks almost invisible against the wet rocks, and the clatter of dislodged stones drowned by the din of rain and wind.

Both were bruised, and Irinya very weary, when they reached the reef under the bridge connecting the castle to the shore. And here it was more difficult still, for the rocks were tilted end-on and thrust up out of the water like a series of shark's fins. Fortunately it was the end of summer and the lake level was low, exposing handholds and ledges on the flanks of the reef that made it possible to crawl along. At least the storm was abating, the lightning now a distant display somewhere over the southern valley and the rain merely a steady downpour.

At the far end of the reef they waited, huddled under the hulking timbers, until the guard's heavy footsteps plodded overhead, paused, and turned. Now he had his back to the shore. They scrambled stealthily up the muddy bank and ran, stooping low to stay as inconspicuous as possible. On a night less inclement, they would certainly have been seen. But it was very dark, and the sentry on the bridge was concerned only with keeping the rain from dripping down his neck and waiting for his watch to end. And if he had seen the two shadows flitting along the shoreline - well, it was his job to guard the bridge, not to impose a curfew on Mickleburg's residents.

The town was surrounded by a high limestone wall, penning the houses tightly against the lake shore. Two gates pierced it, where the Giants' Road entered and left. The gates were locked, and although Gyrdan knew one or two places where the wall could be climbed, none were easy enough for a man with an injured arm and a tired woman in a long wet dress. But at the shore, the wall simply ended. After all, the

lake would be sufficient barrier to an invading army. Keeping stray fugitives in had not been part of the design specification.

It was a simple, if unpleasant, matter to wade around the end of the wall, thigh deep in muddy water, and they had gone about twenty yards up the far side before Gyrdan suddenly dropped flat to the ground, pulling Irinya with him. Two sentries were approaching, with the heavy squelching plod of men with leaking boots, sore feet and a pressing desire to be somewhere else. They stopped a few yards away in the shelter of a tangle of thorn trees, stamping their feet and flapping their arms to keep warm, and complaining about the rain, their boots and their sergeant.

Gyrdan waited, impatiently. This was pasture land and there was precious little cover. Only by crawling like snakes, and silently at that, could they possibly escape being seen. For him, that posed no problem. But Irinya did not share his ability to move secretly - few did - and she was plainly tiring. As soon as she tried to move on, she could not help but betray their presence.

He risked raising his head a little. The soldiers were obviously in no hurry to go. They had got a pipe lit and were sharing it unhurriedly. If they moved within an hour he would be very surprised. And it could not be that long until dawn.

He bit his lip. Unencumbered with the woman, he could escape with ease. With her, they would both be caught. Very briefly, he considered abandoning her and saving himself, but the thought had barely time to take shape before he dismissed it. She deserved better than that - no complaints of weariness, no noise or fuss, no protest over lying in the mud. If the simple solution of creeping past the sentries was unavailable, it was surely not beyond his wit to think of something else.

He leaned over to Irinya.

“Wait here. Keep still, and very quiet.”

All she heard as he crawled away was a rustle in the grass. It might have been a foraging hedgehog or a trick of the wind. The sentries didn't even turn their heads.

She was convinced that this was only a ruse to abandon her, for she was now out of her reckoning and of no further use to him. He had got her out of the castle, and that was fair recompense for hiding him. She could not expect more. But she did not stir. He had asked her to keep still and she ought to trust him for a few minutes at least. She would give him until she had counted to a hundred, and if he had not come back by then she would try to creep away in the shadow of the wall.

Seconds passed in silence.

Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two -

Twenty yards beyond the sentries, there was a muddy-sounding splash and a muffled grunt.

The sentries stood up sharply.

“Whassat?”

Twigs cracked and leaves rattled as something heavy blundered into a bush.

“It’s him!”

“Who’s there? Stop! I mean, halt! Halt I say!”

They lumbered off in pursuit of the noise, now heading away along the lake shore.

“There’s a gold crown in this for us!”

“It was me heard it first!”

Seventy-three. Seventy-four -

In the distance, more soldiers had joined the pursuit. Their voices floated over the pasture.

“There he goes! I see him!”

“Halt, I say!”

“We saw him first!”

Ninety. Irinya was now counting very slowly, sure that Gyrdan would not come back, but hoping very much that he would. *Ninety-one -*

A low voice said in her other ear, “Come now, lady. Hurry!”

Relief surged over her as she scrambled to her feet, quickly followed by astonishment. Whatever the soldiers were chasing was evidently still running.

“But - you’re over there!”

Gyrdan was laughing quietly, clearly pleased with himself.

“What did you do?” she gasped, as they climbed a wall and ran on up the next field.

“Woke up a couple of bullocks. And they barged into their fellows, and they woke up others, and so on. Oldest trick in the book, though it doesn’t always work this well.” He vaulted the next wall and waited while she negotiated it less elegantly. “Cattle run downhill when they’re frightened. They won’t stop until they get to the water meadows along the Willow Brook. And even when the soldiers find out what they’ve been chasing, they’ll decide it must have been us that disturbed the animals. Plus half the soldiers will swear blind they saw a man running away. It should be quite a while before they sort that out.”

By dawn they had climbed a long way up from the lake, through rough hill pasture - now deserted, with the sheep moved down to the lower fields for fattening before

the autumn sales and slaughter - and then steeper slopes of stringy grass and bracken. They had crossed half a dozen streams, and waded up one for what felt like miles, calf-deep in fast-flowing icy water and with a bed of boulders that rolled treacherously underfoot and pitched the unwary into deep, freezing pools. Now they were toiling up a slope of shifting stones, two steps up and one back. Gyrdan was making light of it, but Irinya was flagging. She was soaked and freezing, not having his knack of checking footholds in the stream-bed, and her thin shoes were no protection against the stones. Her knees were grazed where she had fallen, and her head was starting to ache. It was still raining. Gyrdan had offered her his hand several times, but as long as she could stand she would not accept.

“Here we are, lady.”

She looked round blearily in the thin grey light. A steep cliff reared above them, scarred by clefts and broken into crags. Grass, ivy and ferns hung from any crack big enough to get a roothold, and adventurous rowan trees and hawthorns clung vertiginously to ledges a bird could hardly perch on. Below, scree and boulders dropped to the eaves of a pine wood.

“Are we?”

Gyrdan pointed to a rowan growing out of a rock cleft, just like a hundred others along the base of the cliff.

“Follow me.”

Behind the rowan, the cleft widened out and ran back into the rock, like a narrow alley between tall buildings. It twisted round a buttress, where the rocks above leaned together like overhanging eaves, and met. They were in a tunnel. A few yards in, and they were beyond the reach of the light. Gyrdan stopped, and she heard the slap of wet cloth and a splash as he tipped water out of his boots.

“You are here, lady? Good. Wring as much water as you can out of your clothes and hair. We are under cover from now on.”

Under cover? The tunnel was dank and cold. The floor was shared with a stream, and somewhere close by water was dripping monotonously into an unseen pool. Irinya shivered. It would surely have been pleasanter out on the hill. Still, he presumably knew what he was doing.

Beside her, she heard a quick grunt and heave, and the scrabble of boots on rock.

“What - ?”

No answer. Then, from above,

“All is well, lady. Come up.”

“Where?”

“There is a short rock chimney. It starts above the big boulder to your right. Do you need me to help you up?”

“No!”

She had scrambled a lot in her youth, although mostly on mountains rather than in them. This was quite easy, though she was out of practice. There were a lot of good holds, ledges big enough to take feet and grips she could get her fingers right round. Although - they seemed to have run out. Her right hand groped vainly above her, encountering fingernail holds and loose rock, but nothing she would trust. And then she felt the uncomfortable sensation in one foot that said: any minute now, wet leather and rock are going to part company...

“Oh, hell -”

Her clutching hand was suddenly caught in strong fingers. And she was glad not to be alone in the dark, but also afraid of that grasp, from which she could not get away.

He seemed to sense the fear, although he misinterpreted it.

“It is not far up, lady. There is a good hold *here* -”

On the extreme of her reach, but adequate. It was a good thing she was tall. She seized it, levered herself up strongly, and found herself scrambling up through the floor of a cave.

It was a low cave, maybe five feet high at the point of the arched roof, quite dry, and opening at one end into the cliff face, where dim light filtered in through a curtain of ivy and ferns. Peering out, Irinya could see Mickleburg town and behind it the bulky silhouette of the castle, still apparently slumbering peacefully.

“We are north of Mickleburg!” she exclaimed, keeping the suspicion out of her voice with an effort. “I thought we were heading south?”

Gyrdan had been rummaging through the food bag and now handed her a chunk of bread, some cold meat and the water bottle.

“We are, tonight. But we could not have gone far before daylight came, and this is the best place I know nearby. I do not think they will find us here, search as they will. From below, you see only a patch of ivy hanging down a rock wall. A search party might pass within a few feet of this cave and never know of its existence.”

“How do you know about it?”

“Never mind. But we must keep watch today, nevertheless. Others may also know of this refuge, and I have no desire to be trapped here.”

Iryna looked at him thoughtfully. The daylight was now full, and although the ivy partially shaded the cave she could see him clearly. He had eaten only a little, his bruised jaw making chewing difficult, and he held his injured wrist awkwardly, cradling it in his other hand. The bandage on his forehead was stained, and something about the set of his mouth and the slump in his shoulders suggested he was very tired. Sympathy and suspicion chimed together. She did not trust him not to abandon, betray or murder her while she slept, and he was obviously in great need of rest.

“I’ll take the first watch, if you like,” she offered.

He hesitated, and she wondered if he was revolving the same arguments in his own mind and considering whether *he* could trust *her*.

“All right,” he said at last. “Thank you, lady. Give me four hours if you can, and then I will take my turn. There should be no danger. Even if they track us with hounds and the rain has not washed away our traces, they will lose the trail at the stream. But wake me if you see anyone moving in the woods or anyone crossing that stream. Anyone at all, even if it is only a shepherd or someone collecting firewood.”

He folded his cloak on the bare rock floor, lay down on it and fell immediately into sleep, as a man who has clung for days above a fearful precipice succumbs at last and plunges into the gulf.

Iryna settled down to watch, thinking and taking stock. He had offered her the only chance of escape she was ever likely to get, and she would have been a fool not to take it. Moreover, she had been impressed by his ruse to elude the soldiers - it might be the oldest trick in the book, but she would not have thought of it - and by his ability to guide her here in the dark without, as far as she could tell, missing his way once. She was beginning to believe that he might be able to take her safely out of the country, and it seemed he genuinely meant to do it, too. But she had learned in a hard school, and she could not let herself trust him completely. Why should he have burdened himself with her? Without her, he could have been clear of Carlundy within days. With her, his chance of survival was slim to non-existent. Had he really been so moved by her plight that he was willing to risk his life for her? She sighed. How much she wanted to believe that. But her experience of the world told her an ulterior motive was far more likely.

Then what could it be? She was certain he was no common tramp, despite his appearance. He spoke well, he was accustomed to weapons, and he had spoken of the difficulties of raising troops and assailing the castle with the air of long

experience. A soldier then, and one of some intelligence. And one who knew of hiding places like this one, yet whose voice had a very faint trace of some foreign accent, too slight to identify.

Certainty ran cold fingers down her back. Radwulf saw a spy in every shadow, yet for once it seemed he might be right. What was that Gyrdan had said? "I am no stranger to such work." And she had said, "So you are a spy after all?" and he had not explicitly denied it. And he was taking her south, to Billand. Why? Because she would be of some use to his masters. An unexpected opportunity, but one that could not be passed by. She could be intended as a hostage - for she was uneasily sure that Radwulf would want her back, if only for the privilege of murdering her with his own hands. She could be used as an excuse for an invasion - annex the country under pretence of restoring the rightful heir. That was an old, old diplomatic trick. Was that what Radwulf had meant? Had he some inkling of a foreign plot? Was she going to find herself a pawn on a man's chessboard again? Exchanging one prison for another? Even - as many had done before her - one enforced husband for another?

She began absently twining her hair around her fingers, thinking. There was no point in fleeing while Gyrdan slept. Carlundy held no refuge for her, and she had no idea how to get out of the country without being caught. She would have to rely on Gyrdan for that. But she did not have to follow blindly wherever he chose to take her. She had said she knew nothing of the world outside, but that was not quite true. Carlundy was too small and too poor a country to trade much, but what commerce there was went south to Billand - indeed, there was little choice, for Carlundy was surrounded by wilderness on all other sides. Billingan merchants bought broadcloth, raw fleeces, heather honey and the small, vicious hill cattle, black of coat and temper but very good eating. Then there was the luxury goods merchant from Fairhaven who sold silks and jewels and spices and perfumes, mostly to Radwulf's mistresses. And, most importantly, Billand was where the salt came from.

That stirred an old memory. There had been an ambassador - oh, ten years ago at least. When Radwulf had conceived the idea of taxing not just luxuries, which hardly anyone bought, but salt, which every peasant farmer needed by the cartload. Carlundy was no place to overwinter cattle outdoors, and there was not hay to feed a tenth of the summer herds. Every autumn the farmers selected the best stock for breeding, and the rest was turned into salted beef. Salt used to cost a shilling a barrel. Radwulf had started the tax at three pence, but it had rapidly reached two shillings, a huge source of revenue. Until the farmers gradually stopped buying.

Livestock prices plummeted and grain prices soared as people tried to exchange cattle on the hoof for something they could store through the winter. Some of the drovers even tried to take their herds all the way to Billand in the hope of better prices there, and for weeks in the autumn the Giants' Road was blocked by weary, stinking cattle. It had been to no avail, for there was not enough grazing on the route to support such numbers and most of the animals died of exhaustion on the way, shrivelling even as they plodded south. Other farmers took their unsold cattle back home to starve there. There had been terrible hardship, famine and disease working in lethal partnership. The next year, the same pattern. All the salt merchants ceased trading. And the following spring the envoy had come from Billand.

Iryna smiled to herself. Radwulf hadn't expected her to stroll into the hall and introduce herself to the ambassador as Ingeld's daughter, Lady of Carlundy. He could, of course, simply have ordered her out, but she had gambled that he would not want to air his matrimonial problems in front of a foreign envoy, and had been right. The ambassador had come to protest about the decline in the salt trade, and about the drovers cluttering up the roads with their dying animals, and about the export duties that had forced the price of broadcloth up. He had waxed lyrical about the friendship of nations and salt as the staff of life, and how the obliging merchants of Billand made great sacrifices to keep costs down, and would so much like to continue trading with Carlundy. And she had agreed with him, supported him at every turn. Partly to annoy Radwulf, but mainly because it seemed so obvious that reducing the tax would increase the total revenue. The ambassador had been charmed. Radwulf had scowled, dismissed him, and put the tax up to three shillings. And then, slowly, things had started to change. The salt revenue remained miserable, but somehow there seemed to be no shortage of salt on the farms. Cattle prices crept back up to their old levels. The farmers got drunk after market again, and the destitute beggars disappeared from the streets.

That was when Radwulf called the ambassador back. This time, her guard was under orders to keep her out of the public rooms, but nobody had told him to prevent her strolling the battlement walk and greeting the ambassador from the gatehouse wall as he arrived. Radwulf had looked murder at her, but once again pride had overborne anger and he had let her stay. And the envoy had been in a much better mood. He'd listened sympathetically while Radwulf ranted for twenty minutes about thieving smugglers, and then spread his hands helplessly. Of course the King was in accord with his esteemed friend in Carlundy - but it was Carlundy's responsibility to collect its own taxes. She had suggested that the King could not possibly tell

whether a man buying salt in Fairhaven was a legitimate merchant or a smuggler, and the envoy had beamed and pounced on that like a cat on an unattended kipper. Radwulf had stormed and shouted, and finally demanded that salt should be sold only to registered merchants. The envoy had begun to spread his hands again and make excuses, and she had said, innocently, that surely it must be so hard to police every transaction of so common a commodity as salt. Radwulf had been incandescent with fury, and the ambassador had left grinning from ear to ear and promising full co-operation. She'd paid for it later, of course, and that had been the last she saw of the Billingan ambassador.

Radwulf's hunt for the smugglers had been as unsuccessful as it was merciless. He conceived the idea of marking salt barrels with an official seal to show that the duty had been paid, and anyone caught in possession of unstamped salt was liable to torture and death. Revenue did not rise as expected, and by autumn Radwulf was avidly looking forward to making some savage examples. Huge numbers of soldiers were sent out to search the farms, and sure enough they found barns stacked floor to ceiling with salt - but every barrel was correctly stamped. At first Radwulf thought the duty must have been stolen, and the guard on the customs houses and stores was doubled. Then he thought his officials were cheating him, and life as an excise officer was rendered extremely unpleasant, as soldiers watched the officials and more officials watched the soldiers. Eventually, he had worked out that the seal must have been copied, and changed it - forgetting that people who can copy one seal can copy another.

It was a similar story with wool and cloth. The official fairs were almost moribund, for the Billingan merchants would not buy at the taxed price and had almost stopped coming, but there were just as many sheep on the hills and they were still sheared every year. Every woman on every farm still spun fleece into thread and in the villages the weavers were still busy, though the domestic market could not possibly be absorbing all the cloth produced. Radwulf had fumed and racked his brains, and invented a fiendishly complicated system for controlling supply. Every sheep and every loom had to be registered, and anyone in possession of either raw fleece or finished cloth must have either a receipt to prove the export duty had been paid, or a certificate to prove that it was for local sale. Unlicensed sheep, looms, fleeces or cloth carried the same penalties as unstamped salt. The queues for registration stretched for miles outside every tax post for months, and the number of officials - and their guards, and more officials to watch the guards - had to be doubled, and doubled again. More soldiers and more officials sweated round

mountain and moorland counting sheep - a task that was lengthy as well as boring, for any hill-pasture that would support more than one sheep to the acre was considered fertile. In the Black Hills a language barrier added further difficulties, for none of Radwulf's soldiers or servants spoke Arderin, and few of the hillmen chose to speak anything else. But the gargantuan effort was largely without effect. Although the receipts produced so willingly by the farmers and weavers totalled many times the actual revenue collected, there was no way of telling which were the forgeries and therefore nothing to be done about it. Even Radwulf could not hang the entire population.

So he had to turn his efforts against the smugglers themselves, a more difficult target than the farmers because they were, by definition, both secretive and mobile. He conscripted more and more soldiers, offered enormous rewards to informers, and vented his wrath in terrible punishments for those caught. Yet though he tortured, mutilated, hanged, burned and evicted, sometimes only on suspicion, the secret trade continued to flourish. Whoever controlled the smugglers was possessed of considerably greater administrative ability than Radwulf.

Iryna's own theory was that it was the merchants of Billand, not some benevolent folk hero as rumour fondly hoped. She did not believe that men would risk Radwulf's wrath to keep fellow peasants from starving - but show a merchant a three-shilling profit on a one-shilling outlay, and he'd run the gates of hell. Even if the Billingan government itself was not directly involved, it must certainly connive at the trade and would welcome an opportunity to reform Radwulf's ludicrous tax regime. And that might be a card she could play. She had said she wished for no civil war, and she meant it, but the mere threat of a foreign army might be enough to force Radwulf to change, or even for one of the Lowland barons to depose him in a palace coup. She knew them all well, knew how their minds worked and which belonged to which faction. That information would be very valuable to the King of Billand. Quite probably valuable enough for her to negotiate her own terms. She was unlikely to get military support, and was not sure she would want it anyway, but distinguished exile might be attainable. She would miss her own country terribly, but after Radwulf even that would be a kind of heaven.

Her eyes glinted. Yes, that might work. The ambassador would be the place to start. He had been most interested in her. He would recognise her. He would know she was who she claimed to be. Lord Adelard of Harkerness, that was the name.

She glanced over at Gyrdan, still deep in sleep. In the cruel light of day, he was an even less attractive sight than he had been the previous evening. Dark stubble was

sprouting on his dirty face, his clothes were splashed with mud, his thick hair was drying into matted tangles, and his bruises were livid and ugly. He looked rough, dangerous, not to be trusted. And that was not judging entirely by appearances. He was chillingly ready to use violence - the crunch of his hand on Alfric's neck made her shiver even now, and his first thought when they encountered the sentry in the cellars had been to reach for his sword. True, he had not actually killed Alfric, and he might not have intended to kill the other man either. But she had no way of knowing that, and no way of knowing what he planned to do with her. And she had no intention of finding out, either. He was out of Radwulf's clutches now. She owed him nothing. If he thought she was going to follow him trustingly, like a lamb to the slaughter, he was sadly mistaken. One thing she had learned in twelve bitter years was to rely on no-one but herself. She needed Gyrdan for a little while yet, but once safely out of the country she would jettison him and find her own way to Harkerness.

Chapter 4.

It was drawing on towards evening and the shadows were beginning to grow in the valley when Gyrdan woke. He came forward swiftly to the front of the cave, but Irinya could see from the way he moved that he was in pain again.

“It is close on sunset!” he said angrily. “I told you to wake me after four hours!”

“No, you did not. You said to give you four hours, if I could. Well, I did not want to sleep, so I thought I might as well do the watching. There was no need to wake you. Nothing happened.”

“How do you know? The alarm must have been raised by now.” He peered anxiously out through the ivy, scanning the valley closely. “Where are they searching?” he muttered to himself. “When did they begin? I wish I had stayed awake!”

Irinya said calmly, “Five hours after sunrise, there was a great flurry of activity in the castle. Alarms were blown and men went running here and there on the ramparts. An hour later four riders left, two each galloping north and south on the road with great speed. After another hour a dozen more departed, these going eight to the south and four to the north. None have returned. Men have rowed around the castle rock dragging the lake and scanning the cliffs, but they appeared to see nothing. And this afternoon there have been men on foot with dogs searching the lake shore, on both sides, and the people of Mickleburg were called together into the square by the inn and Anred spoke to them. I think it was he - short, fat and much bejewelled - but there are others who fit that description so I cannot be certain. None of the dogs bayed or barked, and they have lately all trotted back into the town with their tails between their legs, their handlers looking as dejected as they did. What else do you want to know?”

Gyrdan looked at her in surprise, and then he smiled, lopsidedly because of his cut lip.

“You have keen eyes, lady, and a mind to match. I am sorry. And I thank you for letting me rest.”

“It was small sacrifice. No exhaustion could have made me sleep today. I am free, and I almost feel young again!”

He glanced round the cave and then back to her, wonder in his eyes.

“Your life must have been truly terrible, lady, for this to seem such an improvement.”

Irinya laughed. Her mood had lifted during the day and she felt almost lighthearted. She might not trust Gyrdan, but she was genuinely and profoundly grateful to him.

“I am easily pleased, am I not? But this is the first day in over a dozen years that I have not passed every moment in terror of Radwulf. It is such a - a release. I cannot describe it.”

“But you know there is a long and dangerous road still ahead of us, lady?”

“Believe me, Radwulf’s soldiers following behind is a lot better than Radwulf on the spot.”

“They will be behind and before and to every side,” he said seriously. “I have never known a country as thick with soldiers as this one. Shout ‘Guard!’ anywhere in Errendale and you get trampled in the rush. What is he afraid of? It is not as though Carlundy is of any strategic importance. Even the Giants’ Road goes nowhere now.”

“Usurpers seldom rest easy. But Radwulf’s greatest fear is the family curse.”

“The one about disaster coming when Ingeld Ingeldson ceases to rule? Does he believe that?”

“You can laugh. My father believed it.”

Gyrdan leaned back against the side of the cave, stretched out his legs with a grimace, selected a convenient pebble and began trying to sharpen the sword he had taken from the sentry.

“Tell me the tale, then. We have at least an hour before it is dark enough to move.”

Like most aristocrats, Irinya had a fondness for family history, particularly her own.

“It begins nearly three hundred years ago, when the first of the settlers from the South came probing at the borders of Carlundy. At that time all Carlundy was occupied by Highlanders - themselves refugees from the fall of the Kingdom of Ardern over a century earlier - and their leader was Bethoc the warrior-lord, Prince of the Black Hills, of whom many tales tell. They did not wish to lose their hard-won lands to new settlers, and there were many battles before Bethoc finally drove them back beyond the Jaws of Errendale.

“But Bethoc had a proud and greedy younger half-brother, Tevyn by name, who secretly made alliance with the invaders. He betrayed the secret of the fort at the Jaws to them, and in one night of bloody battle the garrison was swept away and they poured into Errendale. Bethoc and his people fought valiantly, but they were forced

back to the Black Hills and lost Errendale for ever. Tevyn married a woman of the lowland invaders, changed his name to Ingeld and became chieftain of Errendale. Bethoc never forgave his brother's betrayal. He was a leader of great courage and resource, and he harried the Lowland settlers mercilessly until he died.

"There was then an uneasy peace between the two clans. Tevyn-Ingeld's son, also named Ingeld, ruled the Lowlands when his father died, and Bethoc's son Crinan ruled the Black Hills. These two men were on more friendly terms, and they often met at the border between Highland and Lowland to settle disputes and dispense justice. It was at one of these meetings that Crinan's daughter Irinya met Ingeld son of Ingeld Ingeldson. They fell in love, but Crinan would not countenance his daughter's marrying into the family that was polluted by Lowland blood. He wished her to marry a Highland chief of his choosing. But Irinya was proud and self-willed, and met her lover secretly, and soon she found she was carrying his child. Then she fled from her father, rode through the night to Ingeld Ingeldson, and married him. And she did not go empty-handed. For she broke into her father's treasury and stole the great sword and shield of Bethoc, handed down from the high days of Ardern. It is said they were made by the dwarves of the Mountain and had magical powers, a sword no enemy could withstand and a shield no weapon could pierce -"

Gyrdan snorted, and she stopped abruptly.

"You do not believe me?"

"Oh, I believe that is how the tale is told, lady. But don't expect me to believe in magic weapons."

"What do you know about it?" she said crossly, aggrieved at having her tale interrupted.

He drew up one knee and rested a hand behind his head.

"Well, of the vanished realm under the Mountain I know nothing, obviously. But I have had dealings with the Varends of Isgar - incidentally, lady, they do not like being called dwarves, they are not that much shorter than we are - and they talk of magic when they are trying to swindle the unwary. I'll believe the sword would be very hard to break and would hold an edge all day - unlike this thing, which won't stay sharp for ten minutes - and I'll believe the shield would be very strong for its weight and that most missiles would bounce off it. But that is superior smithcraft, not magic."

She was interested in spite of her annoyance.

"So dwarves really exist? I mean - what did you call them - Varends? I thought they were only tales. You must be very well-travelled."

“Such has been my fate,” he said shortly, and picked up his sword again. “I beg your pardon, lady - I interrupted you.”

Irinya groped for the thread of her story, and continued.

“When Crinan found his daughter gone, he swore vengeance, believing she had been seduced and stolen away from him. Egged on by his chieftains, he attacked the Lowlanders, took them by surprise, and vanquished them. Ingeld the elder was killed, but his son and Irinya, the cause of all the trouble, escaped into the hills, taking the sword and shield with them. And there their son was born.

“So much is well-known. Now we come to the part of the tale that none outside the family knows. It is told only to the eldest son when he comes of age. I pieced it together from my father’s raving in his last illness, though I am not sure how much of it is real and how much his own sick fancy.

“After the battle, Irinya was seized with remorse. Ingeld was gathering a great army, for the Lowlands were far more populous than the Black Hills even then, and she feared for the lives of her father and her kinsmen. She tried to persuade her husband to come to terms, but he was implacable. He was determined to crush the Highlanders into the dust, so that they would never have the strength to rise again, and he had his own father’s death to avenge. Irinya’s fears grew stronger, for she had some measure of the clear sight and she saw a vision of Ingeld striding a blood-soaked field, wielding Bethoc’s shield and sword and driving all before him. She realised she had betrayed her own people to slavery for years beyond count, only for her selfish love. Then the thought came to her that if she were to restore the sword and shield to her father, Ingeld would no longer be invincible and he would have to sue for peace. She could not steal the weapons again, for Ingeld treated them as talismen and would not let them from his sight. So she took the next best thing. Herself.

“She returned to her father offering to stand hostage for the sword and shield, for she believed Ingeld loved her and could not forbear to ransom her at any price. Crinan would have forgiven her, but his chieftains were not so generous. In particular his nephew Irdil, son of Iona Bethoc’s daughter, who had expected to marry Irinya himself. He insisted she was guilty of treason - which was true - and Crinan was compelled to swear that if Ingeld failed to redeem her, she should suffer the severest penalty of the law. At that time, that was to be cast into a pit, there to die alone and unshriven and without even decent burial.

“A parley was called, near Ingeld’s camp somewhere on the western moors. All were certain that Ingeld would agree to redeem his wife, for he was being asked only

to return the sword and shield, to which he had no true right. Crinan had agreed to restore the old truce, to rule the Black Hills and let Ingeld rule Errendale, with neither troubling the other. But Ingeld refused. His wife had given him a son, and he had no further need of her, while Bethoc's sword and shield would bring him victory. So he walked away, and left her to her fate."

Gyrdan had stopped sharpening his sword. "What happened?"

"Irdil held Crinan to his oath," she answered miserably. "She was cast into darkness, crying a curse on Ingeld's child and his children's children, though not on Ingeld himself, whom she had loved. Her death broke Crinan's heart, and whether because of that or because Bethoc's weapons were indeed magical, at the next battle Ingeld Ingeldson won a shattering victory. Crinan was slain and his followers utterly crushed, and all of Carlundy came under Ingeld's dominion. So it has been ever since."

Gyrdan's lip curled. "So he sold his wife as the price of victory. What kind of husband makes such a bargain?"

"Perhaps he had no choice," she said uncertainly.

"Perhaps he was greedy, ambitious, ruthless and an utter bastard," Gyrdan said, slamming the sword back into its sheath. "A fitting ancestor for Radwulf!"

"He is my ancestor also," she reminded him quietly. "Perhaps it is not true. Perhaps it was only my father's delirium. Yet always we name the eldest son Ingeld, in the hope that her curse will not come home."

"And Radwulf thinks to fight legend with soldiers," Gyrdan said, dryly. "What logic. If he is looking for the curse on Carlundy, he need search no further than the nearest mirror."

When the last of the afterglow had faded above the western hills and the valley was drowned in shadow, they left the cave and journeyed on. It was a pleasant night for walking, a bright moon lighting the way and a soft breeze blowing from the south. There was no path to follow, yet Gyrdan strode forward without hesitation. He seemed to know every rock, every stream, every dip and fold of the land, even when the moon set and left them only starlight to see by. Twice they had to scramble down into narrow wooded valleys, cloven into the hillside as though slashed with a knife, with little hurrying rivers coursing in the bottom. One of these they crossed on stepping stones and one they waded at a shallow pebbly ford. In both cases, Gyrdan struck the crossing exactly, and Irinya marvelled at his skill. They neither heard nor

saw any signs of life, except an owl sweeping on silent wings over the grass and once a sheep bleating far away below.

They stopped for only two brief halts, and dawn found them on the edge of a third wooded combe, broader and shallower than the others. There they wormed their way through bramble and scrub, and came to a patch of deep bracken under twisted oak trees, just beginning to change colour with the dying summer. Here they stopped, drank at the river, ate a little food, and prepared to spend another day in hiding.

This time Gyrdan took the first watch. Irinya was still reluctant to sleep in his presence, but she was tired out from the miles of unaccustomed walking, and she was no fool. If she was to use him as long as it suited her and then escape, she would need to keep her wits about her and her strength up, and for that she needed sleep as much as food. She lay down facing Gyrdan, with one hand on her knife, and though at first she started awake at the slightest sound, eventually she fell into an uneasy doze.

It was a few hours later when Irinya woke to find a rough hand clamped over her mouth and another shaking her far from gently by the shoulder. Shock was her first reaction, followed immediately by anger. Even before she was fully awake, she was trying to bite the hand over her mouth and clawing for the knife at her waist. But her assailant, though evidently surprised, was no amateur. The hand on her shoulder transferred itself promptly to her wrist, pinning knife and hand to the ground with a strength that had no need of brutality to be effective.

“Quiet, lady!” Gyrdan’s voice whispered urgently. “Please! Danger.”

Her mind overcame her instinct, and she stopped struggling. Gyrdan let go, and gestured to her to creep silently forward to the edge of the bracken. A group of men were coming up the combe, half-heartedly beating the undergrowth on either side of the river with heavy ash staves. They were sweating, and clouds of midges came swirling up out of the vegetation and settled on their exposed skin. They were not in a good temper. As they came closer to the fugitives, they stopped abruptly at a curve in the river, where the bracken gave way to rough grass on the stream banks.

“All right, ten minutes rest,” shouted a voice from the back of the group, and the men immediately dropped onto the sward, swatting midges and cursing. Some got out pipes and began to smoke, some drank from the river, and some just sat and mopped their faces.

“How much more o’ this, sir?” one called.

“Until we find something,” came the reply, and the leader came into view, a sturdy young man of well below middle height, leaning on his stave as he came striding up the combe. There was a chorus of groans.

“Sir -!”

“What for?”

“There’s nowt ‘ere, sir!”

“Damn t’ midges!”

“Shut up!” bellowed the leader. “You heard the messenger. *Search every inch of land, turn every stone, follow every trail.* Anyone here want to defy Lord Radwulf’s orders?”

Sullen silence, broken by a few muttered grumbles.

“Now, look ‘ere,” put in another man, a stocky fellow with a red handkerchief tied round his neck, “this is a wild-goose chase if ever there was one, but tha’s bein’ paid for it. And if tha don’t do what tha’s told, Radwulf’s men’ll find out, sure as t’sun’ll rise tomorrow, and then they’ll be up here to pay tha diff’rent wages. Tha knows what that means.”

Nobody argued. Clearly they all did know what it meant.

“Cheer up,” said the leader, trying to encourage them. “Think of the reward promised. Isn’t that worth a few midge bites?” He swatted at his own neck, and cursed. One or two of the men sniggered, but on the whole the air of surly gloom prevailed. The leader and the man with the red neck-cloth glanced at each other, and made their way around the edge of the group to sit on a fallen tree, almost on the edge of the bracken patch where the fugitives lay hidden.

“They don’t seem much excited by the reward,” complained the leader, in a low voice. “Why not? It’s a lot of money. Ten crowns for the ruffian, dead or alive, and twenty for the safe return of the lady. Twenty crowns! That’s the estate revenue for a year!”

“Aye,” said the other, “seems t’ Lord wants his wife back right bad.” He snorted. “Twenty crowns for a woman! I’d pay that to be *rid o’* my wife!”

His lord grinned. “If I was married to your wife, Holman, I think I’d say the same. But they should be keen as mustard with a reward like that. It’d set any of them up for life. Why so sullen?”

The other took off his neck-cloth and mopped his face with it before answering. “They don’t believe t’ messenger’s story.” He lowered his voice. “And tha can’t blame ‘em, sir. I never heard so much poppycock in my life! Some escaped brigand making off wi’ t’Lady as a hostage!” He spat, eloquently. “Getting into that castle’s

easy, just annoy a soldier, but to ger' out of it again, and steal t' Lord's wife into t' bargain, all without anyone knowing about it? Happen he turned into a bat and flew off down t' valley taking t' lady wi' him, or disappeared in a puff o' smoke!"

"Well, put like that it does sound a bit unlikely," mused the lord. "If ever a castle was impregnable, Mickleburg is. And it's hard to imagine Lord Radwulf being so careless as to lose his wife." He snickered at the thought. "Maybe she ran off with this brigand?"

"Women are daft enough for owt," said Holman, with deep conviction. "But then t' Lord wouldn't be so keen to say he wants her alive and unharmed, would he?"

"No-o. Mmm. It is too difficult for me. What do you think?"

"Thinking ain't for t'likes o' me, sir. Bur' I know one thing - if his Lordship wants tha to search for a trail, tha'd best find one. Unless tha wants to be accused o' helping t' brigand."

The lord's face went ashy pale. He swallowed hard. "B-but the L-Lord can't want my lands! The estate - it's not big enough to interest him! Is it?"

"Who knows? But tha'd better keep t'men at it, sir. T' reward's no interest to them if they don't believe there's no runaways to find. Bur' if tha lets 'em slack -!"

He drew a finger across his throat.

"Hell!" said the lord, with feeling, and added a few more choice epithets. "We'd better find something. I suppose lots of people use these woods?"

He glanced at his companion and they grinned slyly.

"Reckon so," drawled the other man, retying his neckerchief. "Reckon if we look we'll find some recent prints."

"Leading away off my lands, by any chance?" enquired the lord softly, rising to his feet.

"Reckon that might be arranged, sir."

The leader roused his men with a yell, and they slowly ploughed off up the combe, spreading out into the woods on either side. Gyrdan and Irinya glanced at each other, and retired stealthily ahead of the searchers.

All that long day they crawled and crept and climbed from den to den, sometimes being driven almost out to the open hill before a ditch or brake of bracken allowed them to double back. Sometimes they could rest for a few minutes, but they were never safe from the beaters for long. They grew very weary, and very thirsty, for they never dared approach the open ground by the river, and the water in the bottle did not last long.

It was close and hot in the combe as the long afternoon wore away. Sweat streamed off them, and midges tormented them. Twigs and seeds and bits of bracken crept inside their clothes and itched maddeningly. Brambles scratched their hands and faces, and the sweat dripped, stinging, into scratches and midge bites alike. It seemed an age before the sun dipped toward the horizon and the searchers blundered off down the combe to their homes.

The fugitives watched until they were out of sight, counting and re-counting to make sure that none had stayed behind. Only when all had gone did they emerge warily from cover and cross the open ground to the river, where they threw themselves down and drank as though they would drain it dry.

Iryna found she was shaking with nervous reaction.

“That was a close call!” she whispered.

“Not as close as it should have been,” Gyrdan said scornfully. “Amateurs! If they search like that it is only by luck that they will find us. And how mistrustful they are! I wonder how many false trails Radwulf will be presented with, by small lords eager to prove their loyalty?”

Iryna stared at him. If they had been caught, he would have been hanged the following morning - or later, if Radwulf had decided to have a little fun with him first. Yet he could scoff at the searchers’ failure, as if it were some kind of exercise, apparently quite careless of personal danger. And his physical resilience was astonishing. They had eaten nothing since sunrise, he had not slept for twenty-four hours, and it must have hurt horribly to drag his battered body around through the undergrowth. Yet he did not even seem tired.

She lay back on the bank, suddenly very weary. Her few hours sleep that morning had not been nearly enough. Midge bites seemed to cover every inch of her body, itching intolerably under her clothes, and her face was swollen and puffy around the eyes. She had also discovered a blister forming on one heel.

“I suppose we go on again tonight?” she asked.

“I am afraid we must, lady. When we are safe in Billand, you may rest.” His expression softened in sudden sympathy. “The midges are going quiet now it is getting dark, and we shall escape them altogether on the moors. Try bathing in the river. It is cold, but it will refresh you.”

He turned his back and sat peering into the gloom gathering under the trees, watching for any sign of movement on the riverside path. Iryna hesitated, a little nervous of undressing in the presence of a man, even though he clearly had no

intention of even looking at her. Then she shook herself, pulled off her grimy clothes and slipped into the shallow water. The heat of the day had made no impression on the river, and the chill made her gasp sharply. But it was a sharp, stimulating sort of cold that set her skin tingling, and the silken water was wonderfully soothing. After a few minutes the itching had almost gone, and she stepped out onto the rough grass.

“Don’t dry yourself,” Gyrdan said, without turning round. “It makes the bites flare up again.”

She took his advice, and slipped her shift over her head, wishing vainly for clean clothes. The best she could do was to pick the bits of bracken out of her dress and evict a couple of large many-legged insects which had taken up residence in one sleeve. But even that helped, and by the time she was clad again she did indeed feel much refreshed and ready for another long march.

“I may form a habit of cold baths,” she said lightly, coming to sit beside him and trying to tease the tangles out of her hair. “Your turn now. I’ll keep watch.”

He was quicker than she had been, but it was already almost dark in the deep combe by the time they left it, taking a path which climbed diagonally through the trees on the far side. It was a stiff slope, and Irinya was tired and breathless by the time they reached the top. As Gyrdan had predicted, there were no midges on the moors, and they walked at an easy pace for half a mile or so before stopping to eat. The afterglow still gleamed above the western rim of the valley, and the air was clear as crystal, with the moon and the first stars shining out brightly. The warm southerly breeze was still flowing and, gazing into its eye, Irinya fancied she could just make out a gap in the dark hills rimming the horizon.

“The Jaws of Errendale,” Gyrdan said, following her gaze. “The gateway to Billand.”

“It does not look very far,” she said thoughtfully, mentally tracing a potential route, and Gyrdan shot a sharp glance at her.

“Thirty miles, I should say, in a straight line. But that is not our route, lady. We could never pass the guards at the gate, for we have no permit and no means to forge one. So tonight we leave Errendale for the wilderness.”

She blushed slightly in the darkness. Did he know what she had been thinking? If not, it was a timely reminder. She would have to trust him for a little while yet.

Several hours steady tramp through woods and rough grassland followed, before they reached a wooded tributary valley feeding into the main dale. They could hear

the beck gushing merrily far below, hurrying over its last few yards before losing itself in the wide and stately River Erren, now rolling lazily down the broad vale on its way to Billand and the far distant sea.

The floor of the side valley rose steeply as they followed it westward, the chattering beck coming up to meet them. The woods grew thinner as they climbed, and eventually petered out altogether. Gyrdan stopped behind a last tangle of stunted thorn bushes, and Irinya sank gratefully onto a boulder, glad of the chance to rest.

“Wait here,” Gyrdan whispered in her ear. “Just ahead there is a narrow place. I am uneasy about it, and I am going forward to explore. Don’t move until I return.”

He melted away into the darkness and was lost among the other shadows. It was not that he moved stealthily. Many hunters could do that. Gyrdan disappeared, in the way a snake does, without sound or trace. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone. Irinya waited, peering round the bushes. The valley turned a corner ahead, and she could see only the shoulder of the hill, scattered with silvery boulders half-drowned in pools of black shadow. There was no movement, and no sound save her own breathing. Yet this time, for no obvious reason, she was sure Gyrdan would come back.

He did, as unobtrusively as he had gone. She might have thought him a ghost taking shape, if it had not been for the sinewy hand which grasped her elbow and urged her back into the woods. Not until they were among the tall trees again did he pause.

“Danger?” she asked. The pulse in his wrist was racing.

“Yes, lady. The narrows are guarded, as I feared. Three sentries, maybe four.”

“Did they see you?”

A little snort of amusement. “Of course not! But I could not get close enough to overpower them. On a dark night we might pass unseen, but not with tonight’s moon. There is no way through for us.”

Irinya’s heart sank suddenly. So this had been another false hope after all.

“Then we are trapped,” she said miserably. “It is all over.”

It was too dark to see Gyrdan’s face, but his voice was amused. “I am not beaten yet, lady. If we cannot go around the moor, we must go over it. Not even Radwulf will bother to watch the impassable bogs of Grinsbrook Moss.”

“If they are impassable, I do not see that they are much help to us,” she said, acidly.

His teeth gleamed white as he grinned. "They are not impassable to all. There is not much I do not know about these hills, lady. I doubt that any among Radwulf's army is a match for me on the moors."

"I believe you're enjoying this," she accused.

"Does the fox enjoy the hunt? But he may find a certain spice in outwitting clumsy hounds."

"Well, the vixen does not," Irinya said, wearily. "How much further must we go tonight?"

"At least to the fringes of the moor, I am afraid," he said, in a softer voice. "I am sorry, lady. You are tired, and I had forgotten. Lean on my arm if it will help, and we will go on."

They retraced their steps part of the way down the valley, keeping to the woods for cover, and then forded the beck to a narrow water-worn ravine cleaving the hill on the far side. By keeping deep within the cleft, near the stream at its centre, they could stay hidden from any watching eyes. In its lower reaches the ravine presented them with a relentless gradient of tough grass and scattered bushes, steep and wearisome but not difficult. As they climbed higher, however, the walls drew closer in, forcing them into the bed of the stream - fortunately little more than a trickle now, after two dry days - and the ground grew ever steeper, eventually breaking out into a series of short rock walls alternating with flat ledges full of moss and wet gravel. Gyrdan climbed these very slowly, breathing heavily, and Irinya was surprised to find that they were actually very straightforward. The rock had a tendency to fracture at right angles, giving good holds, and though wet it was neither greasy nor loose. As a girl in the Black Hills she had walked and climbed a great deal, mostly alone, and she had a good sense of balance and no fear of heights. She made fast progress, and several times she caught Gyrdan up and had to wait while he struggled up the next pitch.

"Are you hurt?" she ventured to whisper on one such occasion, wondering if his injuries were troubling him again, and got a curt denial in reply.

Eventually, a last short rock pitch brought her to the head of the gully and out onto an open hillside clothed in deep heather. Gyrdan had waited for her at the top, and for once it was she who recovered more quickly. He was still getting his breath back even when they moved off again, and at first she had no difficulty keeping up.

This, however, did not last long. There is a technique to moving fast over long heather, and Gyrdan was evidently a master of it. He was clearly anxious to catch up

lost time, and with every glance at the sinking moon he quickened his pace a little more. Irinya soon found herself lagging behind. Though no stranger to rough country, she was out of practice and in any case she would never have chosen to cross a heather moor in a long skirt and thin shoes. If she let her skirt trail it was forever getting snagged on things and trying to trip her up. If she tried to hold it up out of the way the tough heather, thigh-deep in places, did a very fair job of flaying her unprotected legs and ankles. Roots and stems at ground level tugged at her shoes, which were not ill-fitting but had never been meant for this sort of punishment, and soon the blister on her heel had grown into a great circle of fire. She never seemed to find the measure of the ground, so that she continually stumbled over lumps or into unseen hollows, jarring her bones and sapping her energy.

And still Gyrdan - who was wearing boots - continued to draw away from her, never waiting for her, never even looking over his shoulder to see where she was. He was now only a dim shape ahead, still moving at a great pace. This must surely be a deliberate attempt to get rid of her. The guards in the pass must have alarmed him more than he had shown, and he must have decided that her company was dangerous as well as slow, and that the reward - whatever it was - was no longer worth the risk. Soon he would be out of sight, and the thick heather held no tracks. Neither she nor Radwulf's soldiers would be able to find him, and he would be able to slip away on his secret route across the Moss in safety, leaving her to certain capture.

She bit her lip. Well, she had expected them to separate before journey's end. But it was she who would do the leaving! She broke into something between a run and a lope. If she could close the gap, even a little, if she could keep him in sight -

Then her foot met, not heather but a hidden rock slab, sloping away from her and coated in something slippery. She skidded, recovered a precarious momentary balance, lurched forward another stride, skidded again, and fell sideways across the slab with a thump that rattled her teeth in her jaws.

She lay still for a second, breathless and trembling. What a relief it would have been to close her eyes and fall into the soft darkness of sleep. But to do that was to give in, and she did not give in. Her right side was bruised and her leg grazed on the stone, but there was no sharp pain of a broken bone. She had been lucky. She slithered down the rock, feet first - and then bit back a cry of agony as she tried to stand up. Her shoe had been wrenched loose in the fall, and a raw pain seared her foot. Putting a hand down, she encountered something wet and slightly sticky, which

she hoped was not blood. Perhaps if she tied her shoe very tightly, so it could not rub -

“What is it?” hissed a voice at her side, sharp with anxiety and so unexpected that she jumped. She had not cried out - when had a scream ever brought her help? - so Gyrdan must have either heard her fall or noticed her absence. He was standing over her now, nothing more than a tall shadow, but somehow his whole posture communicated anxiety.

“This is no place to stop!” he said angrily. “It will be dawn soon. Why didn’t you say earlier if you needed rest?”

“How could I?” she snapped back. “With you half a mile ahead -!”

It was one of his more endearing characteristics that he would acknowledge when he was in the wrong and apologise. He did so now.

“I am sorry, lady,” he said, in a gentler tone. “I was thinking of the route over the Moss, and I forgot I was not alone. But we cannot stay here. There is no cover but the heather and we shall be caught like flies in honey when the dawn comes. You must go on.”

She made no answer, clenching her fists against the pain.

“This is more than fatigue,” he said, and both anger and anxiety had crept back into his voice. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“I - I fell.” Her voice wavered despite her effort to control it. “I hurt my foot.”

“Twisted ankle?” He dropped swiftly to his knees beside her. “Let me see.” A sharply indrawn breath. “Your shoe is covered in blood! You must be in agony.”

“I think I can stand,” she said, but without much conviction.

“That is a brave sentiment, but not very bright,” he said. “You were a fool to let it get to such a state, and you would be a bigger fool to make it worse. I will carry you.”

Irynya shrank back.

“Very gallant. But I am no light burden, and you are hurt.”

“I am recovering from your husband’s attentions, thank you kindly,” he said irritably. “And I have no mind to meet him again. If you try to walk, you will leave a trail of blood that even the dullest hound could follow. Now, will you let me carry you?”

She tried to get up and fell back, swearing through clenched teeth.

“I do not have any choice, do I?”

One arm hooked around her shoulders and his good hand found a grip on her arm. The other slid under her knees. With a grunt he hefted her up, balancing her

precariously across his thigh before shifting his grip. She felt herself tip sideways. The age-old fear of falling welled up in her and she grasped wildly for a hold, getting a handful of hair and another of cloak. Then she fell against the solid wall of his chest, imprisoned in his arms.

“No -”

He ignored her. A deep breath, the sense of muscles bunching and levering, and he was on his feet, staggering slightly to get his balance.

“If you don’t let go of my hair,” said a too-controlled voice in her ear, “I’ll drop you.”

Cautiously, she relaxed her hold and lay stiffly against his chest, tense as a wild bird, holding her body as far from his as possible. But there was something almost hypnotic in the rhythmic swing of his long, powerful stride, and she was very weary. Gradually, she settled more comfortably against him, and her head drooped to his shoulder. The coarse wool of his cloak was rough against her cheek, harsh yet strangely reassuring, like the man himself. She closed her eyes, half-listening to the steady beat of his heart, the regular deep sigh of his breathing, and the rhythmic swish of his footsteps through the heather.

Iryna woke as he laid her down. It was full daylight, with a thick blanket of cloud rolling over from the west. The heather had given way to knobbly grass and they were in a curious bowl-shaped hollow, with gently curving sides and a flat floor. A curlew wheeled and called above them, crickets chirped their hidden songs somewhere in the foliage, and a few early rising honeybees were about, industriously collecting nectar from odd clusters of flowers. A stream trickled over the lip of the dell, flowed quietly down a little channel, and faded away into the grass. In some unseen woods below, a pigeon was calling. Errendale and Radwulf’s soldiers seemed part of another world.

“Where are we?”

“On the fringe of Grinsbrook Moss, as I said,” Gyrdan answered, easing his shoulders with a grimace. “I cannot carry you any further without rest. We should be safe here for today.”

That was likely to be true. The hollow would keep them hidden from all but the birds, unless a search party blundered directly into it.

“For a foreigner, you seem to know every hiding place in these hills.”

“It was you called me a foreigner, lady,” he said dryly. “But there is nothing special about this hollow; it is one of dozens scattered over the hill.”

They drank from the stream, and another thought occurred to her.

“Where does the water go? There is no stream, and no pool, and the ground is dry as dust.”

“It sinks away through the rock. This whole country is riddled with caves and potholes like a maggot-chewed apple, and water appears and disappears at will. I guess these hollows are the remains of old potholes, partly blocked by rock falls and then covered in soil. In some of them you can see the ground shake. This water here will trickle down the old shaft, and probably travel miles underground, until it reappears in some spring far away. Now, lady, let me see that foot. If you are permanently lame, we are in trouble. I cannot carry you over the bogs of the Moss.”

He knelt down beside her, unlaced her shoe and drew it off.

“Poor lass,” he said, and now his voice was oddly tender. “Not as bad as I feared, but bad enough. This foot is rubbed raw. I suppose the other is the same?” He removed her other shoe without waiting for an answer, and sighed resignedly. “At least the blisters on this one are still intact. I wish you had said something earlier, but that cannot be helped now. Have you anything I can use to bind it?”

“I had a handkerchief somewhere.” She groped in her sleeve and located it. “Here. But I can do it myself - ah!” The gasp was jerked out of her as she moved and a stray stalk brushed against the sore.

“Show a little sense, and lie still,” Gyrdan said severely. “It is my turn to patch you up, for a change.”

He bathed her feet with the cool water and bandaged them. His large strong hands were surprisingly deft and gentle, but he could not avoid hurting her for all that. She concentrated on the chirruping crickets, and waited, dully, for the process to be over. It was not until he had finished that she realised he had supplemented her handkerchief with strips cut from his shirt, and that both her feet were now neatly cocooned in linen.

“With luck,” he said, “that should see you to journey’s end. You had better try to sleep again now, while you have the chance. I will keep watch.”

“I’d rather eat first,” she objected. “I am starving.”

He shared out the food. They had nothing left but cheese, now getting distinctly high, and the indestructible oatcakes used for long journeys, equally resistant to wind, weather and teeth.

“This detour will add at least a day to the journey, lady,” he explained, catching her disappointed glance. “It is better to go hungry than to risk more delay while I

hunt.” He smiled wryly. “Besides, you will appreciate good food all the more, when we finally reach Billand.”

Iryna found herself answering the smile, and realised with shock that she was beginning to think of him as a friend. Folly! He might be proving unexpectedly kind, but then he probably wanted to hand her over to his masters in reasonable condition. It would be so easy, and such a relief, to depend on him completely, but she was sure she would regret it later if she did. Rely on no-one, she reminded herself sternly. You have no help but yourself.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“I don’t know,” he said thoughtfully, dunking an oatcake in the stream in a futile attempt to soften it. “I think the best plan is to try to reach Fairhaven. I know people there, and besides, it is the chief city of the kingdom and the King is likely to be holding court there.”

“Is that near Harkerness?”

He looked up, his expression surprised.

“Harkerness is about twenty miles up the coast from Fairhaven, I think. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, it is just a name I have heard. Fairhaven is on the coast, you say? Is that far?”

“Sixty or seventy leagues south of the Jaws of Errendale, at a guess.”

“Seventy leagues -!”

“It will be easier travelling, lady,” he said reassuringly. “We will be able to use the roads, and there are many inns. I have a little money. And the people themselves are hospitable folk, and will often give strangers food and shelter in exchange for a song or a tale.”

“You know it well? Is it your home?”

“No land is my home,” he said sharply. Then his face softened as some pleasant memory took hold of him, and he said absently, “But I wandered in Billand for many years. It is a beautiful land, rich and deep-soiled, fat and fair and friendly like its people. And large-hearted enough to welcome even the most derelict outcast.”

He sat for a while in silence, gazing into the middle distance, and then he seemed to shake himself and returned out of his thoughts.

“Still, it is no good dreaming of Billand! We must get out of Carlundy first, if we can!”

“We have evaded Radwulf’s soldiers, have we not?”

“I hope so, lady. But we are not out of danger yet. We may be unlucky; we may blunder into a trap; they may hunt us with hounds and happen upon the trail. And from here on, Radwulf’s men may be the least of our problems. The hills have many hazards even for those who are not pursued. The Moss may not be entirely impassable, but it deserves its reputation nonetheless. One false step, and you will never be hungry again.”

“Then surely we cannot cross it at night! We must go on now - I will manage it somehow -”

“No. The moon is nearly full, and these clouds will break up before nightfall if I am any judge. We shall have light enough. Do as I tell you, lady, and rest while you can.”

Iryna tried to obey him. But, despite her weariness, she found sleep elusive. The wind had swung round to the north-west, banishing the soft air of summer. It was chill on the high moor under the sunless sky, and she was still wearing a flimsy summer dress. She lay shivering under her cloak, the tough grass and heather rubbing maddeningly on the midge bites that still covered her face, and dozed fitfully, cold and miserable. But at some point, she was vaguely aware that something had changed. She grew warmer, the vegetation stopped scratching her and she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Gyrdan woke her a little before sunset. The clouds were breaking, and the sky was flaming in glorious reds and oranges. She sat up, and found that she was wrapped closely in two cloaks instead of one, and that somebody had carefully spread the hoods beneath her head to keep the heather out of her face.

“Why, thank you! But you must be freezing! And you have not slept all day.”

“I am used to it, lady, and you are not,” he returned, accepting his cloak as she handed it back. “I do not relish the prospect of carrying you all the way to Billand! Can you walk now?”

“Yes. I am much refreshed.”

“Good. Then let us make a start. We have a dangerous road tonight.”

As the last wisps of cloud broke and fled, the moon shone out with a light as bleak and grey as the land. Endless acres of flat moor rolled away into the distance in all directions, broken here and there by jagged fingers of rock. Looking back, Errendale was visible only as a slight break in the plateau, and soon even that one link with the

past disappeared. To Irinya the moor was utterly featureless, but Gyrdan was clearly navigating by some complex set of landmarks, turning his head constantly from side to side and pausing often as though judging distances. Without him she would soon have come to grief.

The land grew steadily wetter. Reedy grass gave way to squelching moss, interspersed with slabs of slippery rock and sticky patches of bare peat. Soon they were no longer walking, but hopping across the bog from one scrap of firm ground to another. Sometimes they were deceived, and the supposed stone would turn out to be a discoloured patch of slime into which the hopeful foot would sink to ankle or knee, leaving behind a great hole which slowly filled with oozing black water. As well that both were agile and they were unladen with baggage, or they would never have found a way through.

As they toiled on, the peat layer seemed to thicken. The rocks disappeared, and tussocks of vegetation were now their only supports. Around them the bog quivered, black and noisome, scattered with still, shining pools. Small silent streams carved winding channels in the peat, often several feet deep and requiring a detour to find a narrow place to leap or stride across. One, larger than the others, they followed for a long way before it came suddenly to the edge of a yawning black hole and poured itself, sighing, into the gulf.

Irinya found this chasm repellently fascinating. Gyrdan paused, anxiously scanning the horizon, evidently temporarily uncertain of his way, and Irinya crept to the edge of the hole and peered into its depths. The moonlight glittered on the curtain of falling water, and little splinters of diamond light danced in the deep shadows. It seemed that if she leaned just a little further, she would be able to reach out and catch one. The tinkle of the fall grew louder and louder, until she could hear that it was made up of many intermingled voices, rising and falling in uncanny harmony. Like the voices on the edge of a dream, they spoke in a tongue she knew but could not understand, just beyond the reach of memory. She strove to isolate one. If she could hear just one voice, just one, she would be able to understand what it was saying. The voices were encouraging, welcoming. Now they were beginning to coalesce, to become a single voice, and she understood the call. So simple. The single syllable, "Come! Come! Come!"

Something seized her shoulder and jerked her violently backwards, and she cried out, clawing at it.

"Let go of me! Let me go -!"

Reality slowly dawned. It was Gyrdan, angry, anxious, his fingers gripping her shoulder like talons, seeming to press through the flesh to the very bones.

“You little fool!” he snapped. “Do you want to fall in?”

“It is calling me -” she gasped, still struggling feebly. “Calling.... Cannot you hear it?”

There was no sound but the trickle of the stream.

“It has gone,” she said. And then, struck by a terrible aching loss, “Why did you drag me away? Why could you not leave me alone?”

Gyrdan almost shook her.

“*That is why!*”

The soft peat at the pit’s mouth was scarred by two raw black furrows.

“Aye,” he said. “You had begun to slip. Another second -!”

Iryna began to tremble uncontrollably, realising the narrowness of her escape. Gyrdan relaxed his grip and slipped his arm comfortingly around her shoulders.

“All right, lass. You are safe now. Come away.”

“But something was calling me. What was it?”

“These chasms play strange tricks. The sound of falling water, magnified and echoing - it can sound like voices. I have heard them too. It is best to keep away. Nothing comes out of these pits, alive or dead.”

“It was not my imagination,” she insisted. “I heard it. What was it?”

“Whatever it was, it is better not to know,” he said grimly. “Come away, lady.”

Only when he reverted to her formal title did she realise they had been speaking Arderin, and that the imaginary voice had also used the old tongue. Raised in the Black Hills, she was truly bilingual and hardly noticed which language she was using. But it was rare to find a fluent speaker in the Lowlands, and her curiosity kindled again.

“How is it that you speak Arderin? Are you a Highlander?”

“My mother was,” he said, propelling her urgently away from the chasm.

“I should have realised,” she said, looking up at him thoughtfully. “From your height and colouring at least, though I could be forgiven for not recognising it in your face. Which is your clan?”

“None,” was the short and unencouraging answer.

“Oh, come, every Highlander has a clan.”

“Not exiles,” he said heavily. He was searching the horizon for the unknown landmarks again, and not giving her his full attention. “I guess she quarrelled with her folk. She never spoke of them.”

“Your father?”

He shrugged. “His existence can be inferred from mine. I suppose.”

She felt a sudden wave of sympathy for him, for there was a bleak loneliness in his tone that she recognised all too easily. *No land is my home*, he had said, and the desolation in those few words cut her to the heart.

“Oh, Gyrdan,” she said, and the warmth in her voice surprised even herself. “Have you ever belonged anywhere?”

He looked down at her, and though he had his back to the light and she could not see his face, she sensed he was surprised and a little touched. Perhaps he was as much a stranger to kindness as she was.

“Not really,” he said, then added with a forced laugh, “But what you have never had you cannot miss, can you? Come away, lady. We have much ground still to cover.”

Several more hours of bog-trotting dragged by without incident and the moon was sinking, before Gyrdan halted.

“Look!” he said, and Irinya lifted her tired eyes. She had been concentrating so hard on finding a path that she had not noticed the landscape changing. They were on the edge of a low cliff, and away to their right a great pile of tumbled rocks towered up, black and threatening against the sky.

“Raven Tor,” he said. “We are safely across the worst of the Moss now, lady. By morning we may be within sight of Billand.”

He led her along the cliff edge until they came to a gully cloven into the rock. A few minutes simple scrambling, and they were down, standing on firm ground again with the scent of heather all about them. A few hundred yards from the foot of the cliff, and they came to a distinct track of short grass, striking due south. To Billand. To safety and freedom.

Then, all around them, great black shapes came springing from the heather. A huge hairy hand was clamped over Irinya’s mouth, and brawny arms pinioned her hands to her sides. She kicked out savagely. Someone caught her foot, another man seized her other leg, and she was helpless, hanging between her captors like an ox on a spit. She twisted and plunged wildly for a moment, but it was no use. They held her with insulting ease, shifting their grip on her to spread the burden evenly between them as casually as if she had been a sack of meal. Out of the corner of her eye she

could just make out another knot of men that indicated Gyrdan had been similarly treated. They might be safely across the moor, but they were prisoners.