

Irinya drew rein and her weary horse shambled gratefully to a stop. It had fallen to her to lead the way, being the only one with more than a passing acquaintance with the country. Fastred and half the men were foreigners, and the others were men of Errendale, who had never ventured into the Black Hills. Even Eomer, half a hillman by blood and wholly so by upbringing, had seldom entered Ailart. It was almost twenty years since Irinya had last lived here, on the tiny manor to which her father had banished his unwanted daughter, and thirteen since she had last visited, but luckily the land had changed little. They were now a couple of miles into Ailart, with the foothills steepening to both sides and the valley growing narrower and wilder. It was near sunset, and very unlikely that Guthrum's men would follow them here. They were safe.

Irinya was suddenly aware that she was about to faint. Even riding the horse at walking pace was painful, and the headlong gallop had been pure agony. Now even the slight motion of the horse's breathing hurt her. A cold sweat broke out, clammy and chill, and she shivered. Vision and hearing dissolved into a sort of hissing blackness. In a moment she would fall. But she must not fall. She ought to slide off the horse and lie down, but she knew well that if she did that she would never drag herself back into the saddle, and she could not bear the thought of a man's hands on her. In desperation, she shut her eyes and rested her forehead on the horse's neck, hoping that would be enough. The men who had kept up with her, about half the group, eyed her in silent and helpless pity.

She was dimly aware of voices and snorting horses as more men came up in ones and twos, and finally she recognised Fastred's voice and lifted her head. He and Eomer were the last to arrive, both carrying wounded men and leading stray horses. They both looked at her and then looked tactfully away again without comment.

"No sight or sound of pursuit," Fastred said. "Gyrdan and Berold have done their job."

"But there is no sign of them following us," Eomer said anxiously. "How long shall we wait?"

Fastred gave him an odd look. "We cannot wait."

"We *abandon* them?"

"What did you think? If they are still living, they will evade the soldiers and make their own way to safety as best they can."

Irinya pulled herself together, sensing the beginning of an argument. "Gyrdan may prove more difficult to catch than you think, Eomer," she put in, with an optimism she did not feel.

"On foot in the middle of hostile territory? In the path of an advancing army? What chance can they possibly have?"

"Rather less than evens, I should think," Fastred said. "And Gyrdan knew that very well, even if you did not."

"Then they are braver men even than I thought," Eomer said, awed.

"For Berold, that may be so. But for Gyrdan - it costs a man little to hazard something he does not value."

Both men turned to look at Irinya.

"He said exactly that to me, years ago," Fastred exclaimed. "Did you understand him, lady?"

"Understand Gyrdan? I am glad I do not. But enough of this. We waste time. Are we all here?"

Fastred's face suddenly set very hard.

"All except Corin and Rosie. I found their horse, way behind, but there was no sign of them. They must have been shot, or thrown."

Irinya turned a deathlier shade of white, if that were possible, but said nothing.

"That boy deserves everything he gets," Eomer said. "But the girl! We cannot leave her to the soldiers!"

"What would you have us do, pray? Risk forty lives searching for two? Waste Gyrdan and Berold's efforts by getting caught ourselves? This is not a game."

"We cannot leave the girl! We cannot! I would never forgive myself!"

"*You* would not!" Fastred exploded. "How do you think *I* feel? They were *my* servants. In some measure, my friends. You think I am happy to leave them unburied, miles from home? But I have still forty living men under my command, and my first duty is to them. You salve your tender conscience with a silly gesture if you like, my lord. *I* know where my duty lies."

Hitherto, it had been Gyrdan who kept the peace between his two lieutenants. Now that task passed to Irinya.

"I pray you, my friends, do not quarrel. We cannot spare any to go back and search. But they fell behind a long way back. Before we left Gyrdan and Berold. If Gyrdan survives, he will look after them as best he may."

It was false argument, and she knew it well. It was not likely that Gyrdan would be able to save himself, far less a helpless child and a girl. But Fastred was a little

cheered at the hope, and Eomer could follow Fastred's decision without having to admit he had been wrong.

So the mud-splattered and bedraggled little company turned their backs on the Lowlands and their missing friends, and trudged on into the mountains. All were weary, and all hungry, having little food left and no time to eat since early that morning. The ground was rough, all rocks and tough heather under the snow, and soon all but the wounded were dismounted, leading their tired horses as best they might. Irinya led, though there was now little chance of missing their way. The valley grew narrower and deeper, and the high hills began to close them in.

"I don't like this," Fastred muttered under his breath, gazing uneasily around at the frowning crags above and the rushing river beside them. "I don't like this at all. No room for manoeuvre."

He looked up at Irinya, grey-faced and swaying in the saddle but still stubbornly refusing any help. It was as much as he could get away with to slip a sly hand to her bridle and lead her horse as well as his own.

"You brought us here, lady. How long does this go on for?"

She seemed not to hear, and Fastred was suddenly very alarmed. He knew nothing of the country, not even from maps, and it seemed a cold and unfriendly place. Hedric's Lowlanders clearly regarded it as the haunt of savages and had clumped into a tight group, scanning the valley suspiciously with their hands never far from their weapons. Eight of the men were wounded, all the others - including himself - were in various stages of exhaustion, they had almost no food left and no means of contriving shelter. He had no idea where they were or what lay ahead, and no idea what sort of reception to expect from the inhabitants - except that if Eomer were a typical specimen they were likely to be very touchy and prone to quarrel. He did not even speak the language, and the prospect of relying on Eomer as a translator sent shivers down his spine. If only they had not lost Gyrdan! All right, Gyrdan was the best archer they had and probably the only one who could have been trusted to cover their retreat, but that did not alter the fact that they were going to miss him badly. Fastred was suddenly unreasonably cross with his friend for not being in two places at once, for leaving him to cope in a strange country with only a woman - and a sick woman at that - for a guide.

Still, broken reed or not, she was the only guide he had. He repeated his question, more urgently this time, and the anxiety in his tone seemed to revive Irinya, as though she too knew she could not collapse yet. She made her eyes focus and looked about her. Her voice was weak, but the words coherent.

"All the country ahead of us is like this, mountains and narrow valleys, until the edge of the realm and the Plain of Tears. But this valley will lead us to Vidian's dwelling in a matter of a mile or two."

Fastred jumped. Some of Hedric's evident anxiety had communicated itself to him.

"We're going straight to the chieftain? Without time to hunt food and recover our strength? This is folly!"

"Say rather, it is a calculated risk. Hygurd and Guthrum are behind us. We have no provisions, we are all weary and we have wounded men to care for. There is no habitation in the lower part of this valley, for it lies wide open to the South and Vidian's people like to live deeper in the mountains, where border raiders cannot easily come at them. One night, two nights in the wilderness will take a heavy toll. We need food and shelter. I think Vidian will provide both."

Fastred grinned ruefully, for he also had no illusions about the ability of tired and injured people to survive a night in the open in winter.

"He will get a shock, if forty-odd guests descend on him without warning!"

"Ah, Vidian will have warning. I doubt we will get much further without challenge."

"Do you -" Fastred began, and broke off abruptly, checking both horses. Some of the sleepier men behind cannoned into them, amid muffled cursing.

"Where did that come from?"

'That' was a single arrow, buried up to its mottled brown feathers in snow. It looked as if it had never moved, but it had not been there a second earlier. On the crags to the left, whence the arrow must have come, nothing stirred.

Another sibilant hiss, and there were two arrows, precisely crossed in the centre of the track. Fragile shafts of wood, that a man could snap between his hands, but they barred the way forward as effectively as any barricade.

Fastred swore, and tugged at Irinya's bridle. "A trap! Back -!"

"No. I think this is Vidian's challenge."

She slid off the horse, her face contracting briefly in pain, and steadied herself against the animal's flank, ignoring Fastred's proffered arm.

"Stay here. Make no move. Draw no weapon."

Alone, she walked forward, her good hand held up palm forwards in token of parley. Her dark clothes made her a perfect target against the snow, yet she stood apparently without fear at precisely the point where the hidden archers had shown they could strike.

She stooped, plucked the arrows from the snow, and held them up.

“Who shoots at harmless travellers?”

Her voice rang off the crags. A family of crows flew up, flapping and cawing, but for a long minute there was no other answer. Then a man’s voice pealed back,

“Who rides in Ailart without Vidian’s leave?”

“I am Irinya daughter of Ingeld, heir of Bethoc Dulamael. I come seeking Vidian, who once was my friend. Will you take me to him, or to his representative?”

“Who are these others?”

“Eomer son of Eormenric, of Buchart, is well-known to Vidian. Fastred son of Tancred is Lord of Ash Dene, from the Sea-country far away.” She paused, coughing from the effort of shouting. “The others are men of the Sea-country, or men of Errendale. All are my friends.”

“What does Irinya want of Vidian of Ailart?”

“A little private conversation!” Irinya threw back hoarsely, and the unseen challenger laughed.

“Wait you there, and I will come to you. But hear this! Every man has an arrow pointed at his heart. And the Ailarain miss not their targets. He who moves will die.”

Nobody felt inclined to test the assertion. They stood like statues. Much scuffling and scraping from the crags on the right, and presently two men could be observed descending. One was young, with raven hair and beard, tall and broad-shouldered. The other was older, grey-headed and bent a little with age, yet still with the hillman’s disregard for rocks and rough ground.

Eomer had pushed forward from the back of the group as soon as they stopped, and now raised his eyebrows as the elder of the two approached Irinya.

“Vidian! It is Vidian himself come to greet us! Here is great honour!”

Fastred was trying to edge forward without actually moving. “What are they saying? Can you understand this barbarous language?”

“It is not a barbarous language! They are speaking Arderin, the tongue of a kingdom far more ancient and venerable than yours, my lord!”

“Yes, yes, never mind that. Can you understand it?”

“Of course I can! My mother was a hillwoman, Chieftainess of Clan Buchart.”

Fastred hopped impatiently from one foot to the other. “What are they *saying*?”

“At this distance I cannot hear.”

Fastred stopped himself from saying, “Oh, brilliant!” just in time, and contented himself with a scowl. But it did not look hostile. Irinya was speaking rapidly to the

two men, with the fluent hand gestures that seemed to be part of the language, and they were listening attentively.

Presently, she turned and beckoned to Fastred and Eomer to join her, which they did with some trepidation. It is not a comfortable feeling to walk in the open past an array of unseen archers.

The young man glowered at Eomer.

“You are Eomer Eormenric’s son? Your mother was a close friend to the grasping House of Darain, who steal land and cattle from us.”

The hair on the back of Fastred’s neck stood up, as if trying to get out of the way of the inevitable arrow. But it seemed Vidian wanted no quarrel.

“She was also fourth cousin to my first wife, and the wife of his brother is Diribel of Mabrinen, who is god-daughter to my sister and daughter to a cousin of your mother,” he said, reprovingly. Both had switched effortlessly back into the lowland language, no doubt for Fastred’s benefit. Vidian shook hands with Eomer, and then with Fastred. His grip was firm and his black eyes frank and strangely youthful in their network of wrinkles.

“I am Vidian son of Vestinan, scion of the line of Vandil the Raven-Feeder, Lord of Ailart. You are welcome to my country, lords.”

“I am Venlan son of Vidian,” added the young man, also shaking their hands. “Forgive my harsh words. I spoke in ignorance, and I also welcome you to Ailart. My father has told me but little of your deeds in the market-place two days hence, but you are both brave men. I salute you.”

Vidian was looking past them, puzzled. “Surely there should be another? I had marked him as your leader. Dark. Tall. Where is he?”

“Gyrdan is no longer with us,” Irinya said, and went on to explain. Vidian listened, stroking his grey beard.

“You wish me to give them asylum, if they come to my lands? The Lowlanders I will shelter, since you ask it of me, Irinya. But the other - he has Highland blood, I think. If he is of the accursed line of Devern Aida, even your word will not keep me from killing him.”

“His mother was a hillwoman, but an exile, and he does not know her clan or even her true name. His father he knows not at all.”

Vidian shrugged. “Then I will assume I have no quarrel with him, until it is proven otherwise. He too is a brave man, and you will miss him, I think. That business in the square - it was masterly! And to have the common people cover your escape - that was a stroke of genius!” He laughed, a rolling guffaw of merriment.

“Such a confusion! Hygurd’s soldiers and Radwulf’s coming almost to blows, and the square and the streets full of beasts and fowl and folk, and the gate locked behind you, and all the blacksmiths from home - masterly! And the shepherd who sent the pursuit off south, chasing the moon! We shall make a song of that, and men a thousand years hence will laugh over it.”

This was news to the fugitives, who of course had not seen what happened after they fled, and they listened eagerly to Vidian’s description.

“How did you escape, Vidian?” Eomer asked. “Or were you not there? I saw your banner, among all the others -”

“Nay, I was there. Radwulf summoned all of us to witness his wickedness, and when Hygurd’s men took some of my folk as hostages, I could nowise disagree. There will be a reckoning, one day. Hygurd had set some few men to guard us, but not enough to hold the chieftains of the Black Hills! Even without our weapons we overcame them, poor fellows and sleepy, and with scarcely more fight in them than a sick kitten. How degenerate is proud Darain become! We escaped amid all the muddle, late that night. All are now back safe in their homes, I doubt it not - save Taran of Caradon, of course.”

“Taran was slain? But he is Hygurd’s vassal!”

“Not slain,” Venlan put in. “He died of a seizure amid the fight, so I heard, and his squires carried him home. He had been ailing these many years, and never left his own hearth. ‘Twould be the shock of travelling killed him, like as not.”

“And there will be others likewise, if we keep our guests standing longer in the snow!” Vidian bellowed. “Of what am I thinking? My son, will you go ahead, swiftly, and tell Verenice to make ready?”

“It is a message I dare not bear myself,” he added, turning back with a grin. “My niece will thank me little for forty strangers at such an hour. Though,” he added, with a glance at Fastred, “*some* of them she will make most welcome, I doubt it not!”

He waved an arm, and the crags were suddenly alive with men, leaping swiftly down to the valley floor. “My men will see to your horses. Fear not - they will be cared for well. Come you now, for the evening is drawing in. We will show you the hospitality of the Black Hills!”

A little further up the valley, and they came to a sheltered bay where a tributary stream came tumbling down from the hills. Here all the horses were installed in stables and barns, with a care that satisfied even Fastred. Here also they were met by a party of men with stretchers, who carried away those wounded who could not walk.

Then the others were led off, in groups of ten or a dozen, each under the guidance of two Highlandmen. At first Fastred thought this was a precaution against spying or treachery, but it soon became clear that it was simple common sense. Vidian’s house was not easy of approach.

The first obstacle was the river itself. Lower down it had been deep and fast-flowing, but fairly smooth and following wide serpentine swings. Fastred had mentally marked several places where it would probably be possible to cross by wading and swimming, given strong horses and determined men. Here it was a different matter altogether. The curves had gone, and the torrent thundered in a deep rocky channel, boulders grinding in its depths. Those rocks that broke the surface were rounded from the passage of water - for it seemed the river rose even higher than this in the spring floods - and sheathed in wet moss. Some, exposed to both wind and spray, were coated in ice. Anyone who tried to hop across from boulder to boulder would undoubtedly slip and plunge to certain death.

Irinya had assured him there was a bridge, and so there was. Of a sort. It consisted of a line of narrow planks, bound together by ropes and slung between poles fixed above the cataract. Two more ropes stretched above it at shoulder height, connected to the footway by a spider’s web of interlinked ropes and cords. That was it. Fastred watched transfixed with horror as their guide ran across it and back with apparent ease, disdaining the hand-ropes and setting the whole fragile-looking structure swaying alarmingly above the rushing river.

Several of his men immediately expressed a desire to sleep in the stables.

“Is quite safe. See? Is not hard,” the guide called, and ran back and forth several more times to prove it. All this achieved was to make Fastred dizzy.

“It is not so difficult as you think,” Irinya whispered in his ear. “You hold the two shoulder ropes, and move only one foot or one hand at a time. Then it does not sway so much. If you do not look down, you will not be too dizzy. I will go first.”

The bridge was a little lower than the path, and two rough rock steps led down to it. Fastred watched very carefully as Irinya stepped down, took hold of one shoulder rope - the other, of course, she could not use because of her injured arm - and walked out onto the bridge. The wind whipped her skirts about her and tore strands of hair loose from their fastenings, and the bridge swayed perilously in the middle, but she crossed steadily, looking straight ahead. And once she was safely on the far side, no strong man could decently refuse to go where a crippled woman led. One by one they inched their way across, without mishap except for one man whose helmet fell off at an inopportune moment and disappeared into the gulf.

Beyond the bridge, the valley narrowed and deepened. What had been steep craggy slopes became cliffs, crowding together and squeezing the river between them. A narrow path, without parapet or handrail, made its uncertain way along the cliff, hopping from one sloping terrace to the next. The river snarled below, resenting its confinement, but for the most part it was mercifully hidden from sight by outcrops of rock and hanging bushes. Fastred caught brief glimpses of red rocks carved into beautiful rounded shapes, arches and holes half-filled by foaming black water, and clear cauldrons trapped halfway up the cliffs, like rock pools on a receding tide. It was doubtful if any of his men saw even so much, clinging to the cliff and praying for salvation. The gorge was a place of roaring terror as well as beauty.

With astonishing suddenness, the rock walls drew back. A last - or first - waterfall, perhaps forty feet in height, hurled the river into the depths of the gorge, and beyond it the gentle dusk glimmered on a scene of pastoral tranquillity. The gorge opened into a wide oval scoop in the hills, over whose flat floor the river meandered amiably. Buildings of stone and timber stood around, from some of which came the soft lowing of cattle and the pungent smell of pigs. Dogs barked, and somewhere a cockerel crowed, with more sense of occasion than of timing. It seemed warmer, and the wind had dropped. Snow lay in drifts and banks, but for the most part it had been cleared and the ground was wet and grassy underfoot. In the distance, sheltered by a curving birch wood, they saw a cluster of squat buildings, and from the open doors of the largest flowed welcoming firelight. Eagerly they pressed forward. No sentinel challenged them and no gate barred their way. Vidian's house, secure in its hidden valley, needed no further defences. Here indeed they would find safe haven after storm.

What Verence said when required to cater for forty-seven strangers at sunset of a winter evening has never been recorded, but what she did was as competent as it was generous. Fastred found all the wounded men comfortably housed in a quiet building, on mattresses of hay and with an abundance of blankets and thick sheepskin rugs. Even more welcome to all but the most seriously hurt, two handsome girls were bringing round water, wine and food, under the baleful supervision of an elderly man. This last introduced himself as the physician, and after a few minutes' talk Fastred was convinced of his competence and left him to it.

After several false starts in the complex of buildings - this was not so much a house as a small village, and it was now dark - he found his way back to what seemed to be the main hall, and entered it for the first time.

It was his first experience of a Highland longhouse, and it was far from pleasant. The atmosphere was full of acrid smoke, from a peat fire and from lamps and torches hung on the walls. All seemed to be producing far more smoke than either heat or light, and it made his eyes sting and his throat rasp. Dim figures could be seen scurrying hither and thither, carrying things, dragging things, moving things out of the way. Voices yelled and muttered in the incomprehensible language - probably orders, or even greetings, but to a foreigner sounding more like shrill invective and mumbled curses. Somebody opened a door, and flames leaped up to the low roof and the smoke swirled. Fastred coughed, and rubbed his stinging eyes with a blackened hand. This was Hell, exactly as his nurse had described it to him years ago in an attempt to frighten him into eating his supper or going to bed on time.

A hand on his elbow made him jump, but it was only Venlan, equally smoke-blackened and also rubbing his eyes. He steered Fastred to a wall, groped along it till he found a door, and they both pushed gratefully through into another room.

"My apologies, lord," he gasped. "We were not using this part of the hall, and there is something amiss with the fire. It will be righted by and by. My cousin has allocated you lodging at this end of the building. Do you come with me."

It seemed the house was composed of a series of chambers arranged end-to-end, rather like a very wide corridor with cross-walls. They passed through three identical rooms, bare of furniture but bright and warm with blazing peat fires confined to deep fireplaces on the cross-walls. Fastred's men were already settling in, supplementing their own blankets with the thick sheepskin rugs supplied by their hosts, and some taking the opportunity for a much-needed wash and shave. Serving-girls came and went, bringing water and towels, or fresh clothing for those who needed it, or merely hurrying through on their way somewhere else. Fastred was slightly alarmed at this, uncomfortable with the thought of washing or changing his clothes in a room where a strange woman might walk in at any moment - though no-one else seemed at all worried.

The third chamber led into a square stone room, with a well in the centre and two other doors leading off. Venlan identified one as the way to the washing room and the privies, and steered Fastred through the other. It led into a tiny corridor or landing, just big enough to accommodate a door on each of four walls.

“This house has private chambers,” Venlan announced, with a touch of pride. “Verenice says you may take one if you so wish, for we understand that in your country it is the custom to sleep alone. But there is no fire. If you prefer to be warm, as our honoured guest you may sleep in the family bed-chamber with us. My mother’s third cousin’s brother and his wife will move out to make room for you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of putting them to such trouble!” Fastred said, hastily. The third cousin’s brother and his *wife*! What a country! No sense of propriety at all. “I shall do very well here.”

“We have brought up your baggage from the stables, and there is a bath prepared for you in the washing room,” Venlan went on. “Verenice regrets that she is too busy at present to attend you herself as is the custom, but she will try to send a servant to you. Now I must go. I shall see you again at dinner.”

It was long after dinner, and Fastred was feeling extremely well-fed and comfortable. The fire in the great hall was now burning properly, and most of the smoke went obediently up the chimney. The food had been surprisingly good - he would never admit it, but he had vaguely expected hunks of meat crudely roasted over a fire in the middle of the floor - and the wine excellent. Trays of delicious sweetmeats and nuts were now circulating, and a decanter of the local spirit had come to rest conveniently close to hand. He had had a little too much to drink. So had most of his men. Some were frankly asleep on or under the trestle tables, overcome by weariness and new-found ease as much as alcohol. Wootton was flat on his back on one of the benches, his mouth open and snoring fit to wake the dead. Others, with the disbelieving expressions of men who find themselves unexpectedly at the gates of Paradise, were entertaining the serving-girls, who were apparently at leisure now the meal was over. In the shadows lapping round the edges of the hall, away from the firelight and the lamps at the high table, a lot of not altogether mysterious whispering and sighing was going on. Savages or not, the people of the Black Hills certainly knew how to make guests welcome.

Fastred poured himself another cup of brandy and put his feet comfortably up on the table. Most of the Highlanders had congregated around a harpist near the fire and were listening in rapt attention. As Fastred could not understand a word of the song, he had nothing to do but watch them. They were a handsome people, long-limbed and lean, quick of movement and expression. In the shape of their faces, high-cheekboned and strong-featured, and in their deep-set eyes, they reminded Fastred of Gyrdan. Yet they were darker than Gyrdan, with hair of so vivid and

glossy a black that it put the ravens to shame, and black eyes that glowed like the embers of a dying fire. There were several distinct families living in the house, all related to Vidian in some way or other, however tenuously. It was, apparently, the custom here to live in crowds. Irinya said it was a response to the solitude of the mountains, though Fastred privately thought that fanciful.

The harpist reached the end of his song, and ecstatic applause broke out. Fastred turned to Irinya to ask for a translation, wondering what was worthy of such appreciation.

Irinya looked tired to death, the bruise on her cheek livid and great dark smudges under her eyes, but she made a valiant attempt to explain. Fastred tried to pay attention, but soon got hopelessly lost among the procession of great kings, courageous heroes, protracted sieges and bloody battles.

“It’s just history,” he muttered. “Who cares what a king with an unpronounceable name did ten centuries ago, or which side ambushed which at a battle in a place nobody has heard of?”

“We care because we are an ancient people, whose past is greater than our present,” Irinya answered, with surprising earnestness. “Your nation is young and looks to the future. Ours is old, and so we give much honour to those who remember the lost glories. That is why the title I claim here is Heir of Bethoc or Daughter of Ardern, not Lady of Carlundy. Bethoc Dulamael - Bethoc the Warrior-Lord - was the last man of Ardern to win any sort of victory, and his name carries more power in the Black Hills than that of anyone living.”

She seemed disinclined to talk further, as if the effort had exhausted her, and Fastred drifted off into a peaceful haze compounded of warmth, alcohol, and certain speculations about an extremely pretty young woman who kept catching his eye from the far side of the room. When he next looked round, Irinya had gone, and someone had taken the decanter.

“You will take more honey-brandy, lord?” said a soft voice, and a shapely arm reached over his shoulder and refilled his cup. It was the young woman from the other side of the hall.

Close to, she was even more enchanting. Tall and lissom, with a wide mouth curving in a warm smile, sparkling black eyes, and a cascade of blue-black hair that brushed his cheek as she leaned over him. Not entirely accidentally, he was sure. She was wearing a long gown woven in stripes of red and russet, made of some soft clinging fabric whose liquid folds followed her figure most attractively.

“It is my sorrow, lord, that I have not had leisure to speak with you before,” she said, in the soft lilting accent that Fastred found so alluring.

“The sorrow is all mine,” he said, gallantly, letting his eyes wander appreciatively down the long column of her neck and then on down. “Can you stay and talk to me now?”

“Indeed, that was my purpose, lord.”

She held out her hand.

“I am Verenice, and I welcome you to my uncle’s house.”

Fastred leaped up, hot with embarrassment. The lady of the house! And he had been looking her over like an innkeeper’s wench!

He bowed low with all the flourish he could muster - it was as well he had a good head for drink - and kissed her hand as if she had been his Queen.

“Fastred of Ash Dene, at your service, lady.”

She seemed a little surprised, and too late he remembered that Irinya had told him the custom here was to shake hands. But she also seemed pleased and flattered. Her smile widened, showing white teeth like pearls.

“As my guest, it is I who should serve you. Is all to your liking? You are satisfied with your room? Irinya said you would prefer a private chamber -”

So Irinya had spared the time to consider him, even amid her own cares and weariness.

“She has retired now,” Verenice continued, “and if you are weary, lord, you also may go to your bed. There will be music and much noise here for many hours yet.” She caught Fastred’s eye, and the smile turned into a laugh. She had not let go of his hand, and now she drew him towards a cushioned settle. “Then, lord, will you sit with me? Tell me of your country. It is near the Sea, so they say -”

What Fastred said he never had any idea. He did talk, and Verenice listened attentively, her black eyes resting on his face and her hands folded demurely on her lap. Every now and then she would half-rise, to refill his cup or hand a tray of sweetmeats or on some other excuse, and after the third time he was convinced that each time she sat a little closer than before.

He scratched his ear, and left his elbow resting on the back of the seat. She appeared not to notice. Cautiously, he extended his arm along the top of the back. Still no reaction. Fastred took a deep breath, and deftly dropped his hand onto her shoulder.

Back home in Fairhaven at one of his aunts’ society soirees, that would have earned him either a coy smirk from behind a fan or a shriek of outrage and a sharp

rap on the knuckles. Here, Verenice made a little sound like a kitten purring, snuggled up against his side and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Fastred gave up all pretence of trying to talk about Billand. The fragrance of her, a heady mixture of honey, peat-smoke and lavender, was all about him, and he was very glad that he was wearing a long tunic. Presently, with something between a wriggle and a shrug, she shifted position beside him so that his hand slipped, not exactly unwillingly, off her shoulder and down the front of her dress.

He expected to encounter something resembling armour-plating. Young ladies in Fairhaven were barricaded behind layers of whalebone that creaked under stress like a ship in a gale and rendered a chaperone quite unnecessary. But Verenice was soft and warm, and moulded to his cupped hand most deliciously. She sighed, in content or possibly relief, and one slender hand reached up to stroke his face. Fastred captured it, grinning, and kissed it again. It was going to be a good evening.

Alone in her room, Irinya heard little of the merriment from the hall. She had retired early, saying she was weary and her wound pained her, which was true, and she had sent everyone away saying she wished for sleep, which was not true. Now she kneeled on the floor in the unheated room, a single lamp on the flagstones before her, and the drops of water glittered in its feeble light as she washed, slowly and carefully, a square inch at a time. The cold water ached on her body, gnawed at her skin. She could have asked for a hot bath, for a room with a fire, for women to help her. Verenice would have agreed at once. But that would mean fuss and bother, the kitchen routine disturbed, people wondering and gossiping. Better to endure icy water that she could fetch herself from the well-house. Better to strain her tired muscles than to have some stranger staring at her ravaged body, speculating on what had been done to her.

Black specks floated before her eyes. Was she going to be sick again? There was a griping pain at the pit of her stomach, and acid in her throat, but there was nothing left to bring up. She retched, ineffectively and agonisingly, and felt dirty again. In sudden desperation she soaked the cloth and rubbed vigorously at her face, at her neck, arms, shoulders, back. But it was no good. It would never work. She would never wash away the memory. And even if she scrubbed the surface until it bled, she could not get inside, she could never wash that taint away. What was it good for, this mess of corrupting flesh, that took in good food and turned it into vomit and filth, that brought only pain, that existed only to be tortured by men? She wanted to

die, to be rid of her hated body. Let it rot in a coffin, where men could get at it no more, and let her fly free, free of fear and hurt.

She had used all the water. Her hair was dripping, limp over her shoulders, and as she turned her head it dragged across her back like a cold hand. And instantly she was back in the tower room, twelve years or two nights ago, sick with terror and disgust, crushed under another body, shrinking from its touch, and then came the rending pain, and the hot gush of blood, and a man's harsh laughter.

Her right hand was smarting, and that drew her back to the present. She saw, with detached interest, that her nails had dug so deep into the palm as to draw blood. Four little red crescents, in a neat line. It was a long time since memory had held so much power over her. For many years now she had cultivated a curious power of detachment. Radwulf could do anything he liked to her body, but he had not been able to touch her mind, walled off behind an impenetrable barrier. Now she had broken that barrier, to let another man into her heart. She had gone up to the woods in hope and trust, to meet the man she loved, to tell him she had been wrong, that she needed him, that she would marry him and to the devil with duty and responsibility and all the rest of the world. And it had been Radwulf waiting for her, and the pain was as raw as it had been all those years ago, and the despair and degradation as black.

But she was still young, turned twenty-nine a few days ago. Unless by violence, pestilence or childbirth, she was not likely to die for a while. More, she could not die yet. Too many people now depended on her, too much had been done. Fifty men had risked their lives, and five had lost them, not for her but for a hope she represented. Fastred had lost his lands and his inheritance and was now little more than a hired sword. And Corin and Rosie and Berold - what had become of them? Were they already dead, half-buried in snow, rent by scavenging birds? Or wandering, sick or wounded, in a hostile country? Or captured, and facing torture in some foul pit? All because of her. If she died now, all that would be wasted. If she broke down and fled somewhere to hide, all that would be wasted, and she would carry the guilt with her to her grave. And more, Radwulf would rule Carlundy for ever and her foremother's desolate and vengeful ghost would still weep and storm in the dark under the hills.

No, she had set her hand to the plough and she must cut the furrow to its end. Once Carlundy was rid of Radwulf, and the old curse redeemed, and the government of the realm set in order, her task would be done. Then, and only then, she could die. Until then, this wretched body with its pains and its misery was her prison. She did

not know how she was to bear it, but she knew that she must. She must build another cell in her heart, and thrust all feelings into it, and lock the door, and never let them out again no matter how much they wailed and hammered. And no one must ever guess.

She could be proud of that, at least. Her old self-control had not deserted her. None of the company had any idea of her suffering. They thought only that she was tired, not teetering on the brink of madness. Gyrdan knew, of course. She had broken down then, once and completely, and perhaps that had saved her. And he had understood, and had let her talk, though it must have cut him to the heart to listen. And he had not told her not to think of it or, which would have been worse, tried to comfort her with kisses, but had said only, "It is not what others do to you that counts, but what you do yourself. In my eyes, you are not diminished." And much later, when she was quiet from exhaustion, he had said softly, "Years ago, I knew a girl who suffered as you have suffered, and who took her own life because of it. I did not and do not blame her, but I sorrow for the sin on her soul. It was an evil deed that brought her to that pass, and an evil road she took out of it. The shadow of it follows me to this day."

Iryna realised, suddenly, that she was shivering violently. What had Gyrdan meant by that? Why should a girl's suicide cast a shadow over him? Had he loved her? But he had said he had never loved before. Then - had he been the man who destroyed her? He carried the guilt of something, of that she was certain. But that? It was surely unthinkable. Yet she could marshal not one single good reason against it.

She got stiffly to her feet. Sleep. If she could only sleep, she would forget her own misery for a while. She stirred the drink the physician had given her. At least people here understood the use of herbs and the old man had been able to provide everything she asked for. Drawing a deep breath, she tossed it down in one draught, feeling the familiar cold spread in her stomach. That brew had been her friend before, in worse circumstances than this. It could not dispel the memories, but it might at least lessen the pain.

Shaking with the chill, she crept into bed, and reached for the lamp. Darkness terrified her, yet if she was to govern a realm she must first learn to govern herself. She blew out the flame and lay down, cold and sick and shivering, her mind racing like a squirrel in a cage. It was a long, long time before she slept.



She was first up in the morning, before dawn. Early risers are composed disproportionately of the tortured and the driven. Fastred was late in to breakfast, looking heavy-eyed and rather flushed, followed by Verenice at a discreet distance that deceived nobody. He was not pleased to hear Irinya's announcement.

"What, move on again today? What for?"

"I have work to do. An army to raise. I am going on to Buchart, and then on to the other chieftains away north."

She did not add that she had had a long talk with Vidian that morning, and that although he was willing to offer them hospitality and refuge, at least while the winter lasted, he would not offer support. His lands were uncomfortably squeezed between Hygurd on the east and Radwulf on the south, and though well-guarded by the mountain barriers, Vidian had no illusions about his ability to withstand an attack in strength. Hygurd had ten thousand men, while Radwulf had five times that. More than all the men in the Black Hills added together. While she - she had forty-six, eight of them wounded. She must see, Vidian explained carefully, that her cause was not an attractive one.

She did see it, of course, and although it was a blow it was not altogether unexpected. If she wanted men like Vidian, with a great deal to lose, to join her, she would first have to show she could offer some hope of success. How, she did not know, but nothing would be achieved by drinking and wenching in Ailart.

"I thought we'd stay here at least a week," Fastred grumbled. "Can't we stay one more night? I mean, one more day?"

"The wind is in the west and the snows are melting. Today the high passes will be a slushy mess, but passable. Tomorrow the drifts may lie ten feet thick. We go now."

"I am anxious too about my brother," Eomer added. "But of course you may stay here with the wounded if you will. I do not doubt Verenice will -er - *accommodate* you."

And that settled the matter.

Their horses were still weary, and in any case would be little use in the winter hills, so Vidian and his people lent them mountain ponies. They were funny little beasts, rather round and shaggy, with short legs and broad hooves, and Fastred's eyebrows disappeared into his hair at the prospect of exchanging his splendid stallion for an animal that he said looked like an over-fed mule in need of a haircut. But he had to admit that they were admirably suited to the terrain, sturdy and sure-

footed on ground that would have crippled a proper horse. Above the birch-wood, Vidian's valley narrowed again to a deep glen, climbed to a wide pass knee-deep in soft snow, and then descended again into a broader valley running due north. After a few miles, this conveniently threw off a fork north-eastwards and they had only to follow it.

They made fast and easy progress, and Fastred had leisure to make his way up to Irinya at the head. She looked considerably better today, although still very pale and tired.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know these people well? Their customs and things, I mean."

"Yes. I feel more at home here than anywhere else." A pause while she guided her pony round a rock and then she prompted, "Was that the question?"

Fastred shook his head, his handsome face looking worried. "Er - no. Er. Well, to be honest with you, I'm rather afraid I may have been something of a cad."

"And you want me to reassure you that you were not?"

"Well, I hope you will," Fastred said candidly. "But I want your honest answer. I don't know what counts as good manners here. I mean, it seems very strange to me, living all on top of each other as they do, a couple of dozen people all sharing the one room, and this fascination with ancient history and poetry, and - well, I mean the girls are so much - freer than at home -"

"This is leading up to Verenice, isn't it? Oh, don't look like that, Fastred, I have eyes. Are you regretting it? I can tell you that Verenice is not."

A slow smile of remembered pleasure crept round Fastred's lips, and Irinya looked away hurriedly. It was grossly insensitive of him to broach such a subject at such a time, to her of all people. And yet he wasn't trying to boast, any more than Verenice had been. He was quite unaware that he had hurt her - and for that she had her own iron control to blame - and genuinely seeking advice.

"I am glad of that," he said, simply. "But you see, I - er - well, I wonder if there was some - misunderstanding. I mean, I want to do the decent thing by her. If you tell me I should, I'll go right back and ask her to marry me -"

"Do you want to marry Verenice?"

"No," Fastred admitted frankly. "Don't get me wrong, she's a beautiful girl. Very - er - warm-hearted. I'm just not in love with her -"

“That is just as well,” Irinya told him, with a great effort managing to keep her voice balanced between tears and laughter. “Because Verenice certainly has no desire to marry you.”

“Oh!”

Laughter won.

“I don’t think it’s funny,” Fastred said, pained.

“Forgive me. I was not laughing at you, truly. I am sure Verenice liked you very much, and she will remember you at least until the next handsome young man she encounters. Look, Verenice is no harlot. But she is nineteen, and beautiful, and as yet she is promised to no-one. Men like her, and she likes men. In the ordinary way of things she will not marry for at least four or five years. Why should she stay chaste all that time, if she does not wish it?”

Fastred blinked.

“Girls at home do,” he said, and then corrected himself. “Well - young ladies, anyway.”

“Young gentlemen likewise?”

Fastred went scarlet.

“That’s different,” he muttered.

“Well, here it is not.”

“But - what about - er - if she has a - er - you know?”

“A child? She won’t. If there was any danger of that, she would not have entertained you. Good grief, do you think she is stupid?”

“Oh!” Fastred said again, feeling rather deflated. A similar success with a young lady in Fairhaven would have seen the girl cast off by her family and ruined beyond redemption - for somehow, although married couples yearned and struggled for a child, any liaison outside marriage was certain to result in instant pregnancy. He had vaguely imagined Verenice overcome by a tempest of passion and willing to risk everything for his sake, and although marrying her would have been most inconvenient, the idea that he was irresistibly attractive had provided some consolation. Finding that it had been only an amusement on her side, that she had risked nothing and that he was not expected - or even wanted - to marry her was a considerable relief. But it was much less flattering.

He rode on in uncharacteristic silence, scowling.

The sun was slipping westwards when they left the valley. It was a slow and tortuous climb up the north slope, beside a partly frozen waterfall, and as they came

panting over the edge Fastred saw that it was not the top at all but merely the lip of a corrie. The tarn in its bed was frozen over, and a jagged peak reared high above it, saw-edged against the sky.

“The Peak of the Corrie of the Waterfall,” Eomer said eagerly, translating the name for Fastred’s benefit. “We are almost home.” He pointed to the left, where the rocks fell away to a gentle slope leading up to a solitary tree growing in a notch on the skyline. “From there we shall see the lights of Bucharth. An hour at the most, and we shall be there. Fire, and food, and good cheer. My brother keeps a good table. Come! I will lead now.”

Dusk fell swiftly that night under the warming blanket of clouds, and to get down safely they had to dismount and lead their ponies, a difficult business that demanded all their attention.

“Eomund should have sent guides for us,” Eomer said crossly, picking himself up after a slip. “What is he thinking of? He must have seen us on the ridge.”

“It is strangely quiet,” Irinya said, in a low and oddly constricted voice. “And I see no lights. I do not like this, Eomer.”

“Could we have missed our way?” Fastred suggested hopefully. But nobody paid any attention to him.

“*Listen!*”

A gentle creak, creak, creak came from the huddle of trees ahead. A broken branch, Fastred thought, stirring in the breeze. And then he thought what the others had thought, and his limbs stiffened with horror.

“Dear gods, no!” Eomer cried, and broke into a run. “Dear gods, no! No! No!”

There was just sufficient light to show them the devastation. Tumbled stones with roof timbers projecting from them like shattered bones. Heaps of ash where the bonfires had burned out. Scattered possessions - a cooking pot, a broken doll, one shoe - lying where the fleeing population had dropped them. In the centre of the wreck the hall, still standing but roofless and blackened by fire. And, hanging from the trees around the village, hideous and accusing, a dozen bodies, swaying idly to and fro in the light breeze. To and fro, to and fro, creak, creak, creak.

“Eomund!” Eomer yelled, despairingly. “Eomund! Where are you? Where are you hiding? *Eomund!*”

But only echoes answered him.

## Chapter 17.

Gyrdan rolled over in the snow, leaped to his feet and ran the few yards up the track to Berold.

“Up the crags! Quick -!”

Both men were scrambling up the snow-splattered rocks before the last of their comrades had passed by. But it was none too soon. As they heaved themselves up onto a wide shelf, protected in front by a fallen boulder, they saw the soldiers surging up in hot pursuit.

“Nearer than I thought!” Gyrdan panted, stringing his bow. “Wait, Berold, wait. At this distance mail will turn an arrow. Let them get close. Then you don’t have to aim for the eyes.”

The leading two soldiers turned the shoulder of rock.

“Shoot!”

Two arrows thudded into the man on the left, at heart and throat. He threw up his arms without a cry, and his horse neighed and ran on without him.

The other man had a few seconds to live, before a third arrow sent him too crashing into the snow.

“Good shot, sir!”

“Next time I’ll take the one on the right -”

Two more arrows whistled down the wind, and two more horses were suddenly riderless.

“Less enthusiastic now -”

The pursuers had piled up abruptly behind the rocks, as befits reasonable men. In skilled hands, the longbow is a murderous weapon.

A muffled cry behind them made them turn.

“It’s t’ girl, sir!”

“Irynya? No -!”

“From t’big ‘ouse. An’ t’lad -”

Corin, sickened and weary, had been struggling to stay in the saddle for miles, and Rosie had spent as much effort trying to hold him up as riding. As a result, they had lagged unnoticed far behind. And now she must have finally lost control of the horse, or fallen asleep herself, and both were stumbling dizzily in circles on the track.

“Oh, *hell* -”

There was no way they could catch up with the rest of the party, even if they had managed to capture one of the riderless horses. Gyrdan stood up.

“Rosie! Up here! No, get down! Crawl -!”

Crossbow bolts zinged off the boulder as he dived for cover again, and whistled over their heads.

“Wasting missiles -” Gyrdan muttered. “Amateurs!”

He waited for a break in the fusillade, and then peered cautiously round the boulder.

“They’re forming up again. Probably going to try to rush us. Get ready!”

Their adversary was sufficiently inexperienced to use an audible and obvious signal. The two archers heard the horn call, and one rider and one horse went down even as they sprang into a gallop. A few minutes of frenzied shooting, hands flying faster than sight, and the attempted charge was in shreds.

“Next time,” Gyrdan muttered darkly, “they’ll think of giving covering fire.”

Rosie crawled up over the ledge, sobbing with fright and fatigue and dragging Corin with her.

“You hurt?”

“N-no, sir.”

“Keep down, keep quiet, and keep out of the way, understand?”

“Gettin’ short of arrows, cap’n.”

“Well, make them all count, then.”

Time passed, quietly. Three incautious scouts left widows in the Lowlands. But no further charge developed.

“What in hell are they *doin’*, sir?”

“Can’t see.”

“Next time we won’t be able to stop ‘em -”

“Shut up.”

Gyrdan wriggled forward, round the boulder and under the inadequate shelter of a rocky projection. Now he could see the soldiers, forming up, moving out -

A hail of iron sent him whipping back like a snake into a hole.

“Close shave, sir,” Berold said, grinning, and leaned over to pick out a crossbow bolt tangled in his cloak near the chin.

“Very funny.”

He stuck his hood on the end of his bow stave and passed it to Berold.

“Give them something to aim at this time.”

The hood was rapidly reduced to rags, but Gyrdan looked pleased when he crawled back.

“Very good! Excellent! They’re working round behind us. Must think there are more than two of us. It’ll take them ages. Come on. Job done. Now we move out ourselves.”

“Damn!”

They huddled among some boulders, four bodies compressed into a space that would hardly have provided cover for two. Fifty yards separated them from the comparative safety of the woodland they had been aiming for. It might as well have been fifty miles.

Gyrdan poked his head round the rock, like a snail emerging from its shell.

“Still there.”

“Have they seen us, sir?”

“If they had, I’d look like a porcupine.”

Corin began to cry silently.

Gyrdan drummed his fingers on his sword-hilt.

“They’ll be up to us long before dark. Make a dash for it and trust to luck. Nothing else for it. Now listen, Corin, Rosie. Listen!”

Corin stopped sniffing. Rosie was white and scared but not yet beyond reason.

“Very simple. When I say, jump up and race for those woods like the devil was after you. Don’t look back, and *don’t stop!* Whatever happens, understand?”

They nodded.

“Now!”

Rosie had never run so fast in her life. She hardly felt her feet touch the ground. It was almost as if she were flying, free as air, no longer tired, no longer out of breath. Crossbow bolts and feathered arrows whined around her, skipping off pebbles. She laughed, exhilarated, careless of any danger.

Then she was on hands and knees, crouching for breath. Twigs crackled beneath her, and the damp smell of leaf mould was like a freshly dug grave. Nobody was shooting at her. Corin was wheezing and crying at her side.

Something crashed through the bushes in a whirl of scattered leaves, sweat and blood, and then Gyrdan was kneeling close by and gently lowering Berold from his shoulder.

“Didn’t ought to of carried me, sir -”

“Less chance - of them - hitting me.”

“Aie! Leave me here -”

“Don’t be - stupid. Not - that bad - yet.”

Berold’s right thigh was dripping blood, like a lump of fresh steak in the kitchens, and Gyrdan’s long fingers probed deep into a hole. Rosie wondered why she didn’t feel sick.

“Bone’s not broken. Artery’s not hit. You’ll live.”

He plucked Rosie’s scarf from her neck and wrapped it rapidly round the wound.

“That’ll do for now. Get your arm over my shoulders. Rosie, lend a hand -”

It never occurred to her to demur. She helped haul the injured man upright, Gyrdan grunting as he took the weight, for Berold was a heavy man. But she was crying even as she obeyed. They were all alone in hostile country, miles from Mr Fastred and Miss and the others, one man, a cripple, a child and a girl. And she was very, very frightened and very, very tired.

Gyrdan saw it, and squeezed her shoulder gently. “You’re doing very well, lass. Just hold up a little longer, eh? We’ll be all right now. Nobody can catch me in a wood.”

By the time it was properly dark, they had eluded all pursuit and all around was quiet except for the woodland birds and animals going about their own business. Gyrdan had stopped once or twice to pick leaves from a couple of strange-looking smelly plants, but apart from that they had kept up a slow but relentless pace. Corin was almost asleep on his stumbling legs, and Rosie was getting certain that she couldn’t go much further. Gyrdan and Berold formed a dark, shapeless lump a little way ahead, muffled swearing mingled with the heavy breathing of toiling men and the occasional smothered cry of pain.

“Here’ll do,” Gyrdan panted, as they came upon a stream and a tiny patch of bare ground under the dense canopy of a horse chestnut tree. At any other time, Corin would have gone delightedly foraging for conkers, but here he fell down and went to sleep as soon as Rosie let go of his hand.

Rosie sat down against the tree herself and burst into tears of reaction. But the storm was as short as it was violent, and when it passed she could hear Gyrdan’s voice, slightly muffled, as though he had his mouth full, talking to the injured man,

“That’s got the barb out of you. Worst over. Here - take two of these leaves. Chew them a bit, and then wedge them between the cheek and the gum and suck on them. They taste disgusting and they’ll make you feel very queer, but they take the pain away. Or they stop you minding it, anyway. Rosie?”

“Sir?”

“Get a fire going, and draw some water from the stream, would you? Use a helmet as a cooking pot. And get the towel out of my pack. I want something for bandages.”

The water and the towel were easy enough. She watched Gyrdan wash the wound, and stitch it as carefully as any woman. Then he spat out a wad of leaves, like a chew of tobacco, and pressed it over the cut.

“Stops the gangrene, three times out of five,” he murmured, in a clearer voice.

“That’s a very fair surgeon, sir,” Berold said faintly.

“To deal and receive wounds is my trade, Berold. It follows that I should also know how to treat them.” He finished bandaging and tucked the end in neatly. “There, you’ll do now. Nice clean scar to impress your grandchildren, that’s all you’ll have. Lie still. There’ll be food in a minute.”

This was optimistic. Rosie could light fires in huge fireplaces with well-swept chimneys, last night’s hot embers and an unlimited supply of dry straw. She wasn’t having much success here. She didn’t know how to build a hearth, or what sort of wood to collect, or how to find the dry bits of bark and shred it for tinder, or how to get a spark to lodge. All this fell to Gyrdan. It fell to him too to turn the dry oatmeal and salted beef into a savoury mess that at least tasted good, even if it looked revolting. With two spoons between four, and Rosie having to help Berold, eating was necessarily a slow affair. Corin was fast asleep and Rosie nodding by the time they finished, and Gyrdan threw more wood on the fire and got out blankets.

“One between you, I’m afraid,” he said. “Berold needs the other. Get some sleep, lass, and try not to worry. I’ll look after you.”

Try not to worry. It wasn’t easy. For all his cheerful manner, Gyrdan was clearly anxious. He had them all roused by first light, and carefully cleared away the hearth and the ashes of their fire to leave as little trace as possible. Then he left them while he slipped off on his own, so quietly that even the birds did not break off their chatter to call a warning. When he came back, he looked worried, though he said nothing. They moved off in as much of a hurry as they could, and presently they heard a trumpet call in the distance, and voices shouting far away, though there seemed to be nobody near at hand. They did not eat until dark, when Gyrdan again lit a fire and cooked a crude meal, and again they slept uncomfortably on the bare ground.

The days slipped by in this dreary pattern. It seemed they could stay hidden in the wood, but with Berold’s injury they could not move fast enough to get out of it

without certain capture. On the second day, it started to rain, and after that they were all wet through most of the time. Mud got everywhere, into their clothes and blankets and hair, into the baggage, onto the food, caked on their hands and faces. Their provisions ran out very soon and then they had to live on what the woods provided, which in winter was precious little - rabbits, squirrels, small birds, musty-tasting fungi, tart berries.

All the work fell to Gyrdan, for Berold was too ill to help and Corin and Rosie both absolutely hopeless. Not that they were unused to work, merely that they were quite lost in this new environment. Rosie had been a kitchenmaid as well as a housemaid, and so might have been expected to do the camp cooking. But she was a competent cook only when she had access to a huge fire, a roasting spit with a scullion to turn it, a wall full of gleaming copper pans, a rack of sharp knives of all shapes and sizes, and two ovens. With a campfire, a steel helmet and a clasp-knife, she was quite at a loss. And she had no idea how to skin and gut a rabbit. She hated the feel of cold, limp bodies, and for a sweet smile and a kiss the warrener had always done that for her. So it was Gyrdan who not only found food for four, but prepared it and cooked it as well. It was Gyrdan who kept track of where they were in their wanderings in the woods, and where the soldiers had been searching. It was Gyrdan who covered their traces. It was Gyrdan who dressed Berold’s wound, and supported him when they had to move. It was Gyrdan who found shelter, of a sort, every night, and, except for a few hours immediately after supper, it was Gyrdan who kept watch and guarded them all from harm.

Corin seemed to find nothing strange in this, having assigned Gyrdan superhuman qualities and being quite content to see them demonstrated. But Rosie was a good deal older, and a lot more perceptive, and to her the signs of strain were obvious and very alarming. If Gyrdan were to fall ill, she and Corin and Berold would soon starve or be captured. It was self-interest almost as much as sympathy that made her try to shoulder some of the burden. She learned to collect wood and light fires, and to clear away the camp traces in the morning, and even made herself learn to cut up rabbits. But her small help could not make their situation any less desperate. The cold and wet made Berold ill. His wound refused to heal, and he wandered in and out of some kind of low fever. Soon he was too weak to walk even with help, and then Gyrdan had to carry him over his shoulders, bent under the weight. Rosie could see Gyrdan getting ever more anxious. This could not go on, but she could see no way out.

One morning of cold, heavy rain, Rosie found herself roused long before dawn.

“What’s the matter?”

“Listen.”

“More soldiers?”

“A lot more,” Gyrdan said grimly, shaking Corin awake. “Get everything packed up. Fast!”

He wrapped Berold as close as possible in a blanket, and hoisted the injured man over his shoulders. Berold groaned, but made no other sound.

“Today we’ll have to hide properly. Follow me. And keep quiet!”

He led them swiftly through the dripping woods, following what seemed to be a circuitous route with many twists and turns. There was no path, and jutting roots tripped them and slimy rotten leaves and mud slithered underfoot. And from every side came trumpet calls, and the shouts of searching men.

A grey light glimmered in the sky before they came to a gully full of huge fallen boulders, green and ghostly with moss. A stream appeared intermittently between them, and Gyrdan waded across it and laid Berold down on the far bank.

“I marked this place out days ago,” he gasped, wiping the mingled sweat and rain off his face with his sleeve. “See the cleft beside that boulder? Squeeze through it, and you come to a place where a slab has fallen across two others to make a kind of cave. Help me get Berold up there.”

Fear lent them all strength. With the brassy neighing of the trumpets as a spur, they heaved and dragged the wounded man up between the rocks. The cave was about six feet square and maybe two high, dark and damp and rather smelly. Rain trickled down cracks in the rock. The floor was slippery with wet moss and mud.

“It is probably better than Radwulf’s dungeon, which is the alternative,” Gyrdan said curtly, as Corin began to whimper. “Get in. There is space for all of us -”

Suddenly he threw himself flat in the narrow channel between the rocks, dragging the other two with him. Rosie heard men shouting very near at hand, and then the sharp yelp of a hound. She felt Gyrdan start beside her, and then suddenly she knew he was afraid and felt all her own small courage drain away.

Gyrdan swore in a language she did not understand, softly but very expressively.

“So they are this far in already,” he said. “Somebody knows his business. Right, you two. Listen to me. Get in there with Berold. Stay there all day. No fire. No noise. Don’t come out for any reason, not *any* reason, do I make myself clear? I will be back at nightfall.”

He slung off his helmet and mail-shirt, and told Corin to take them and the bow right to the back of the cave. Then he turned to Rosie, speaking urgently and very low.

“I am going to give them something to chase. Wait for me til night. If I am not back by dark, assume I am not coming. Don’t cry, lass! I need someone I can rely on. I can’t leave you to starve while you wait in vain. If I don’t come back, you and Corin make your way out of this wood, and give yourselves up. Any soldiers will do. Listen to me! Say you have something important to tell their commander. His name is Guthrum son of Guthlaf, of Lower Sutton. Remember the name. Insist on being taken to him. He is the only honourable man in this nest of vipers. Say you are foreigners, and we kidnapped you. Answer any questions he asks you - you can say nothing that will hurt Irinya now. He might send you home. At any rate he will not treat you cruelly. Have you got that?”

She nodded, trying to hold back the tears. “What about Berold, sir?”

“Leave him here. Make sure he knows what happened, and leave him a sword or a knife. He will know what to do.”

A squeeze of her shoulder, and he was gone, vanishing among the boulders. Rosie turned away, and crawled into the dark maw of the cave, and fear lay hard and cold at the pit of her stomach.

That day was the worst of Rosie’s life. They had to lie flat on the cold and slippery floor, with water trickling under their bodies and dripping maddeningly off the roof. Even to turn over required considerable care if they were not to kick a companion - with four in it, the cave would have been unbearably cramped. They could not see out, but they could hear. The rocky gully seemed to magnify and focus all sounds. They heard the hounds bark, and then the triumphant baying and the thunder of hooves, racketing all around them.

In her mind’s eye Rosie saw Gyrdan, a dark, running figure on the horizon. She saw him plunging through undergrowth, mud flying from his feet, lashed by brambles, and behind the hounds poured like a dark river. She heard the stertorous breathing of a running man, felt the stitch in her side, the paralysing terror. She saw the dark figure stumble, perhaps slipping on mud, and go down on hands and knees, and the river of hounds break over it like a wave on a rock. She heard that dreadful, savage snarling and rending and yapping, smelt the blood. And then she saw the master ride up, and whip the hounds back, and there in the centre would be the

pathetic remains, blood-soaked and torn. Perhaps it is so for the vixen who lies in the lair with her cubs, listening to the hunt in full cry after her mate.

“You’re cryin’, Rosie,” Corin whispered. “Why are you cryin’? Ain’t it goin’ to be all right?”

“I ain’t cryin’. I - I got a cold. It’s goin’ to be just fine, Corin, just fine. Don’t worry.”

Much later, they heard the clash of steel, seemingly quite close at hand, and Berold stirred from his stupor.

“He’s fighting t’bastards! T’Captain’s fighting ‘em!”

Corin was squirming with excitement. “‘E’ll win, won’t ‘e, Berold? ‘E’ll beat ‘em all! Wham! Slash! Stab!”

With a sick horror, Rosie remembered the armour stowed at the back of the cave. He had meant to run, not to fight. Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Dusk fell. Corin began to get fidgety. It was quiet outside, and he was hungry and stiff. When could they go? When was the Captain coming back? Why was he so long? Rosie told him to be quiet, a sick certainty creeping over her. How long should she wait, before giving up hope?

Something scabbled outside, and blundered heavily against one of the boulders. They all heard the chink of metal against stone. Their hearts beat faster. Gyrdan moved as silently as a cat. But surely, the soldiers would have made far more noise?

A half-choked cough, and then the familiar voice said, breathlessly, “Rosie? Corin? Are you still there -?”

The rain had stopped, and for the first time in days they got a good fire going, hidden in a crevice in the boulders. Rosie watched Gyrdan surreptitiously in its light. He looked terrible. He was soaked - no new thing, but this time he was shivering. The shadows under his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks looked more pronounced than usual, and she was sure he was thinner. His tunic was torn across one shoulder and down the sleeve, and there was an ugly swollen graze on his face - caused by a jutting branch, he said. He was out of breath, and his movements were slow and less precise than usual, a clear sign of exhaustion. He wouldn’t talk much about the day, except to say that the soldiers had chased him, as he intended, and were now camped at the other end of the woods. The fight, he said, had been

nothing, a mere skirmish when he walked carelessly into a small patrol. There was nothing to worry about.

He had brought two rabbits back with him, miserable undersized creatures and poor fare for four people. Rosie had started to deal with them, but relief and fright had made her clumsy, and to her distress Gyrdan had taken the knife and the carcasses from her without a word and skinned them deftly. He chopped half the first rabbit into the helmet that served as a cooking-pot, and told Rosie to stir it while it simmered and try to convert it into something like broth. The remainder he carved up into six joints, and laid them on a flat stone by the fire.

By this time the boiled rabbit was cooked. Gyrdan tasted it, and grimaced.

“I suppose it’s nourishment,” he said, sighing. “You two deal with the rest of the rabbit. I’ll see to Berold.”

Berold didn’t want to eat. His wound obviously pained him, having been badly and unavoidably jarred in carrying him over the rocks, and his fever had returned. He pushed the pot away and moaned feebly. But Gyrdan was wonderfully patient, and equally determined. Despite the protests, he got Berold settled in reasonable comfort in the crook of his arm, and coaxed him to swallow first one spoonful of broth, and then another, and then another. It took ages, but eventually the pot was empty, and Gyrdan laid the sick man gently down and folded the blanket around him. Then he turned back to the fire, and his own dinner.

The flat stone was empty. Corin and Rosie, hungry and still dazed from the day’s strain, had without thinking cooked and eaten all six pieces of rabbit. All that was left were a few bones.

Gyrdan didn’t say anything, though it would have been easier if he had. He picked up the bones, and buried them along with the skin and the inedible offal. Then he took the helmet down to the stream and washed it out. Then, still without saying anything, he sat down by the fire and started mending arrows.

Corin and Rosie both burst into tears. They hadn’t meant to be selfish, they just hadn’t thought. And now they both felt useless and guilty, and shame made them angry. They hated everyone and everything, especially themselves and most especially each other.

“S all your fault,” Corin wailed, pushing at Rosie. “You never told me nothin’!”

Rosie pushed him back. “Don’t blame *me*! At least I does some work around ‘ere -”

“That ain’t fair!” Corin howled, all the more vehemently because he knew it was true.

“You never does nothin’! You just lays about all day an’ expects us to look after you. An’ you hogs the fire at night -”

“I don’t!”

“You do!”

She pushed him away. Corin pushed back, probably harder than he meant to.

“Ow! Now look what you done, you’ve torn my frock -”

“Shouldn’t let it take up all the space, then,” Corin said, huffily.

“You’re so *selfish*! It’s all your fault we’re ‘ere, if you ‘adn’t of sneaked on Miss -”

“Pig!”

“Sneak!”

And Corin hit his sister, and she hit back.

“Stop that the pair of you!” Gyrdan snapped. “Do you want your heads cracked together? And stop that snivelling! Nobody asked you to come here. Nobody wants you here. Don’t whine because you don’t like it! Now sit down, and shut up! And you can keep watch all night.”

He wrapped his cloak around him and threw himself down by the fire, with his back turned to them and one arm over his head. Presently, the change in the tone of his breathing showed he was asleep.

Corin cried himself quietly to sleep, and Rosie gently tugged the blanket over him and stroked his hair off his dirty face. Poor Corin. He wasn’t a bad boy, really. He’d just had more than he could stand. They all had. She put a hand to her face, and found it was wet. She too must have been crying. On an impulse, she crept down to the stream and filled the helmet full of water, and washed her face and hands. It was the dirt that got to you, she supposed, as much as the cold and the hunger and the constant fear. If you let yourself look like an animal, you started behaving like one, it seemed. Now she knew why Gyrdan was so particular about washing and shaving.

Back up at the dying camp-fire, she saw that Berold was awake. His eyes were open a crack and gleamed in the light, though he wouldn’t speak to her. No doubt he thought her selfish and stupid as well. She sat down as near the fire as she could get, hugging her knees and trying not to cry again.

A couple of hours went by, and then Gyrdan woke and came to sit beside her.

“You get some sleep now, lass,” he said, in a kinder voice. “We are all tired. We say things we do not mean.”

“It was all true though. What you said. We’re just a nuisance to you, Corin an’ me. We ought never to of come.”

He slipped an arm round her, as her father had when trying to show he’d forgiven her for some childish misdemeanour.

“Shhhh. You came for a good reason. So perhaps it will all work out right in the end. Lie down and go to sleep, and things will look better in the morning.”

He tucked her under a fold of Corin’s blanket, and she did try to sleep. But perhaps because she was so miserable and worried, she could not.

After a little while, she heard Berold stir.

“Sir?” he whispered. “Captain?”

“Do you need something?”

“Sir - tha knows we can’t go on like this.”

There was a pause, before Gyrdan said, heavily,

“Yes, I know, and I know you know, Berold. Speak low, and do not wake the others. Corin is too young for real fear - if I told him I could fly he would believe me - but the girl has some sound common sense, and she is very worried.”

“Wi’ good reason,” Berold said, with a groan. “Ah! It’s no good, sir, I can’t even stand. Tha’ll never get safe up to t’Hills wi’ me in tow.”

“There was no chance anyway. You and I alone and unscathed might have won through, but with the others -”

“If tha’d leave me here, sir, tha might be able to see ‘em safe yet.”

“No,” Gyrdan said, on a sigh. “Your hurt has only made a hopeless situation into an impossible one. I cannot hope to steer a girl and a child through this hornets’ nest we have stirred up. I thought they would give up looking for us in a few days, but it seems someone among them is determined to catch us.”

There was a long, worried pause.

“Sir -” Berold began, urgently, “- maybe I could draw ‘em off somehow - lay a false trail -”

“No. I will not abandon you, not until all else has failed.”

“It’d give thee a fighting chance.”

“No.”

“Tha can’t let ‘em capture us - not alive -”

Berold’s voice broke and faded away. Gyrdan did not answer. There was another long silence.

“Why not get some sleep, cap’n? I’ll watch. Things might look better by morning -”



“When you’ve crawled away to die heroically, you mean. I’m not to be caught by that trick, my friend.”

“But now they know we’re here. They know that’s here, any road. They’ll search properly now. I know what that’s like, sir, I know! A mouse couldn’t hide.”

Gyrdan stirred, and when he spoke again his voice was suddenly stronger, as though he had come to some decision.

“That’s it! You escaped that kind of search once before. Alone I cannot get you to safety, but with help -”

“Sir?”

Gyrdan whistled, a low three-tone note like a bird-call, and Berold jumped.

“T’ Shadow? He’s here?”

“I think I know where he can be found.”

“It’s dangerous, they say, to seek him out -”

“It is more dangerous to do nothing. But you are in no state to watch alone.”

He came and shook Rosie by the shoulder, too deep in his plans to notice that she was not asleep.

“Rosie? I need your help. Can you whistle?”

Much to her mother’s disgust, Rosie could, and said so.

“Good girl. Listen -” he whistled another call, two long notes and a shorter one. She copied it easily.

“Excellent! I am going to try to find help. I may not return myself, but others will come. I will tell them your name. They will make this call,” - he repeated it - “and you answer like that. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

“Very good. If I don’t come back, do as they tell you, and if no-one comes at all, remember what I said this morning.” He slung his pack over his shoulder, and she saw him smile for the first time in days. “Cheer up, lass! I’ll get you safe out of this if it’s the last thing I do.”

Rosie caught something of Gyrdan’s change of mood. The dark seemed less heavy and threatening, and the cold less bitter. She propped Berold comfortably in her lap, and they sat talking quietly until Berold dozed off.

Behind her, the stealthy scrape of boots on stone, and then came the three-tone whistle.

She answered, quavering more than she was supposed to.

More scraping. Then a voice said, close to her ear,

“Mistress Rose?”

Half a dozen men emerged from the gloom, moving as quietly as cats. One stooped over Berold.

“This is t’fella what’s hurt?”

“Real bad,” Rosie said. “E can’t stand.”

Two men hefted Berold’s limp body between them, and disappeared into the darkness. Another picked up Corin where he slept, and then Rosie felt a firm hand under her elbow.

“You come with us, Mistress,” whispered the first voice.

She wouldn’t have had any choice, even if she had not been told to obey them.

Her guide groped through the woods until they came out onto a track. Four ponies stood patiently, their hooves muffled with cloths. A makeshift litter had already been slung between two of them, and she could just make out Berold lying in it, wrapped in blankets. One man was already mounted, with Corin settled in his arms. She was lifted up onto the last pony and, just as she was about to protest that she didn’t think she could stay awake, someone else clambered up behind her.

“Comfortable, Mistress?”

And she leaned back against a reassuringly solid chest, and fell soundly asleep.

## Chapter 18.

“This is not as we thought,” Irinya said, calling Fastred away from the grisly task of cutting down the hanging bodies. “Look at this.”

The feeble grey light of a cheerless dawn was just sufficient to show the device on the dead man’s tattered surcoat.

“The wolf’s head!” Fastred exclaimed. “Radwulf’s men?”

“Aye. And there is more.” She parted the torn cloth and rent mail, and displayed a gaping wound in the chest, clotted with dark blood. “He did not die by hanging. Nor did any of those I have looked at. And among the dead there is not one Highlander.”

“I admit I was not looking closely,” Fastred said, swallowing. “But this is good news, surely? It seems your people have won a victory for once.”

“Victory? With Buchart ruined and all its people fled?”

“True. Then this is very strange. Does Eomer know what happened? Where is he?”

Irinya gestured to the ruined hall. “Still asleep. Wootton and I poured brandy down him until he passed out. In his despair he was like a madman. Of course, he could not see Radwulf’s tokens in the dark.”

They stood up, as two men came to drag the body away for burial, and turned back toward the buildings.

“How do you read the riddle, Irinya?”

“In detail I am not sure. But let us think. Whoever sacked the settlement, the people were not here when it happened. There are no bodies in the streets, and no fresh graves in the cemetery. And they had enough warning to take their cattle with them - there are no bones in the byres - but not enough to save everything, for there is still furniture in the houses and I think at least one barn was full of grain. So they had warning, but they fled rather than fight. That is strange, for Buchart is readily defended. At the river and at the Corrie of the Waterfall, where we came yesterday, a few men can hold up many.”

Fastred looked very puzzled. “Would your Eomund have fled from a fight? I have not met him, but from what you and Eomer have said -”

“Exactly. Eomund would have faced odds of a hundred to one and gone down fighting.” She sighed. “The poet who said a brave death in battle was the finest fate of man should have been strangled at birth. He has done the Arderain more harm than all their enemies rolled into one. So - I should say, there were no fighting men

here. And that would be just like Eomund, to go chasing after glory and leave his folk defenceless.”

“But *somebody* fought Radwulf’s men -”

“Vengeance. Afterwards. Why else hang dead men? Very symbolic. But for all that, nobody feels inclined to return here. There must be a large force of Radwulf’s men somewhere near, and somebody - Eomund, perhaps - expects them to come and avenge their fellows.”

She shivered, and Fastred waved a hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I have sentries posted.”

“It was not that. I do not expect the attack to fall here. What more harm can you do to a ruined and empty village? No, it is the cycle of revenge that I fear. Eomund avenges the burning of Buchart, Radwulf’s captain avenges the loss of his men, and so on for ever, strife without end. It will bleed the country white if it is not stopped.”

Fastred passed the philosophical point by, and went to practical matters.

“Where are Radwulf’s soldiers likely to be? They will not know *we* are here.”

“There is a fort on the Giants’ Road, not three miles distant. One of a chain -”

She was interrupted by a yell in the distance.

“Alt! ‘Oo goes there?”

“Your sentries do their job,” she said, smiling. “Shall we see what they have caught?”

The intruder turned out to be a young Highlandman, lean and darkly handsome with long black hair and a discreet scar on his cheek that gave him a slightly raffish air. He might have been an imposing figure, but no man looks his best when held down on his knees by two others.

“Found ‘im skulkin’ round the back o’ that ruined farm’ouse, sir,” reported the sentry. “‘Friend or foe?’ I shouts, an’ ‘e run orf. So me an’ some o’ the lads jumped on ‘im, sir.”

“So I see,” Fastred said, grinning. There was moss in the man’s hair, and his rich clothes were sadly stained with mud. “Well, what have you got to say for yourself?”

The prisoner looked up sullenly, and then he caught sight of Irinya and his expression turned to astonishment and then to delight.

“You! Well met, kinswoman!” He gave her a dazzling smile that he clearly expected to send every woman within a hundred yards into a fluttering swoon. “Tell these oafs to let go of me, kinswoman, and then I may greet you properly.”

“If you steal into a soldiers’ camp, you must expect to be caught, Lameter,” Irinya said. Her voice was cool, but there was a smile in her eyes. “Let go of him. He is harmless, unless you have an attractive wife or an impressionable daughter. Fastred - this is is Lameter son of Larador, cousin to Eomer and Eomund on their mother’s side, and an old - and dear - friend of mine.”

The prisoner got up, ruefully shaking mud off his fine garments, and offered Fastred his hand.

“I congratulate you on your soldiers, lord,” he said, rubbing his neck with a grimace. “The Wolf’s men snore like dogs beside their campfires. Yours patrol the whole boundary, and leap on a man like a hawk on a pigeon.”

Fastred shook the proffered hand, grinning. An ally, and a likeable one at that.

“We thought you were a spy.”

“Then it is a pleasant surprise both ways! I thought you were more of the Wolf’s soldiers, especially when I saw you cutting down these scum -”

“They are men, and as such deserve decent burial,” Irinya said sharply. “Friend or foe, Lowlander or Highlander.”

“You had always a soft heart, kinswoman -” Lameter began, smiling indulgently.

“Eomer is with us,” Irinya interrupted. “I will find him. And then, Lameter, tell us what happened here!”

The main particulars of the story matched Irinya’s deductions. It began with Hygurd, who had marched into Buchart a week previously to demand that Eomund and Eomer attend the execution. Without his cautious brother to restrain him, Eomund had told Hygurd in vivid detail exactly what he could do with his orders. Hygurd had tried the tactic of taking hostages - which had worked so well with Vidian - but Eomund had been prepared. He had archers stationed on the roofs, and swordsmen hidden in the barns.

“And when we advanced,” Lameter recounted, warming to his tale, “Hygurd’s cowardly face blanched as white as a maiden’s cheek, and he trembled like the aspen leaves in the West Wind -”

“Never mind the poetry,” Eomer said curtly. “Keep to the facts.”

Brought up on sagas and ballads, this was like telling Lameter to speak without using words. He struggled under the restriction, but eventually they made out that Hygurd had still refused to back down, and Eomund had given the order to start shooting. One of the hostages had been killed, and the soldiers had turned and fled,

Hygurd at their head. Eomund had led all the men out after him, and they had chased Hygurd and his men ten miles into Darain.

“Leaving Buchart defenceless,” Eomer snarled. “And with the fort of Eagle Crag on our flank. Has Eomund *no* sense?”

Irinya laid a restraining hand on his arm. “Go on, Lameter.”

Hygurd must have sent word to the fort, for when the triumphant warriors got home, expecting to be feted by their grateful womenfolk, they found the settlement in ruins and Radwulf’s soldiers in possession. But all was not lost, for Lady Diribel, Eomund’s wife, had had lookouts posted. She had ordered the river bridge destroyed to delay the soldiers, and had led the people and their cattle and all the goods they could carry up to the summer shielings out of harm’s way. Eomund and the fighting men had lain in wait for Radwulf’s soldiers on their way back to the fort, and - here Lameter waxed lyrical - fought a great battle, won a crushing victory, and chased the cringing survivors back to their fort like wolves among sheep -

“So the fort is still in Radwulf’s hands?” Irinya interrupted. “And there were twelve soldiers killed? Your losses?”

Lameter shuffled. “Sixteen killed. Two and thirty hurt.”

Eomer had to be restrained from punching him. “For a dozen of the enemy! By the gods! A few more such victories and my brother will have us all wiped out!”

After that, Lameter was not on speaking terms with Eomer, and it was only when Irinya pointed out that they could follow the tracks up to the shielings that he agreed to lead them. Leaving most of the men to rest and hunt food and try to repair at least one of the buildings - Buchart was defensible and sheltered and as such the best base they were likely to find - the leaders and a small escort took ponies and set out.

They had not gone far before one of the soldiers came spurring back with a message.

“Soldiers, sir. About fifty, one mounted. Comin’ this way, at a right lick, sir!”

“Banners?” Fastred had learned that no Highland chief even went to relieve himself without displaying his banner.

“Yeller dragon on black.”

“Hygurd!”

“It cannot be Hygurd,” Eomer said, with a decisive shake of the head. “When he comes back, it will be with far more than fifty men!”

“And to be riding up this valley, they must have crossed from Darain by the Bridge of the White Falls,” Irinya added. “They would only have come that way if

they wanted to avoid being seen from the fort. Why should Hygurd do that? I think these are supporters.” She turned to the messenger. “What else was there on the flag beside the yellow dragon?”

“A thing like a ribbon, ma’am.”

“A chain?”

“Could be, ma’am.”

“Caradon!”

Fastred scowled.

“Vidian said the lord of Caradon died in Mickleburg. How do we know his son is on your side?”

“He had no son -” Eomer began.

“Then it could be anybody!” Fastred wheeled his pony, already rapping out orders. “Irynya - back! You two - go with the lady and guard her! The rest of you, wait here, hidden. I’ll go forward on foot and challenge them.”

“Fastred -” Irynya began, “- there is something I should tell you -”

But this was addressed only to his retreating back. She shrugged, resignedly. “Ah, well. I think you may be in for a surprise.”

Half-hidden behind a boulder, Fastred watched the company approach. It was a formidable sight. Fifty-odd men, fierce and wild-looking, long swords at their sides, spears in their hands, battle-axes at their belts, advancing at a fast jog. None wore armour, only the Highland tunic and trousers, woven in stripes and checks of many colours. Gold and bronze gleamed on their fingers, on their brawny arms, at their belts, on their helms, on their rectangular shields and on their harness. Their long hair and beards were braided for battle, save for the leader, the only one riding. A young man, beardless, and with his hair flowing loose -

Fastred caught his breath. A girl!

Forgetting all about challenging, he stood rooted to the spot, staring. He had never seen so strikingly beautiful a woman. Her hair was black, not merely dark but jet-black, and glossy as a blackbird’s wing. Held by a band of gold, it fell perfectly straight to her shoulders, framing a face that was heartbreaking in its loveliness. Heavy gold chains adorned her neck, bangles clinked at her wrists, and her belt fastened with a great interlaced gold buckle. And yet this beauty was riding astride, and dressed almost like a man. A long sword hung at her side, and a shield swayed at her saddle. Thigh boots of supple leather fitted her shapely legs extremely well, and above them she wore the standard loose-fitting tunic -

Fastred gulped, his mouth dry. It might have been loose-fitting on a man.

The vision caught sight of him, and reined in abruptly. Fastred saw that her skin was flawless and glowing white, and that her eyes were soft and black as velvet. It was quite a while before he realised she was addressing him, in liquid, musical Arderin. It was utterly incomprehensible to him, but he was quite willing to go on listening for ever.

Like all Highlanders, though, she also spoke the Lowland tongue, and after a while she lost patience.

“Hey! You there! Talk Sassanach, yes?”

Fastred managed a nod.

“Go tell the Lady that Mael Caradon is here and would speak with her!”

Fastred did his best to recall his thoughts from the very pleasurable channel into which they had wandered. Mael. He wasn’t sure exactly what the word meant, but presumably it was something like Lord. He gazed down the column of warriors. They all looked identical to him.

“Er - which is his lordship?”

“Fool! I am Mael Caradon!”

Fastred felt his mouth drop open. For possibly the first time in his life he was at a loss for words. He was saved from further embarrassment by a cry from behind him.

“Tyria!”

“Irynya!”

The woman leaped from her pony, giving Fastred a soul-shaking glimpse of delectable white thigh, and ran into Irynya’s arms. They stood a little while embraced, and then both started talking at once.

Fastred caught Tyria’s pony and stood waiting for them to remember his existence. Besides, a back view of Tyria was no less rewarding than a front.

“Oh, I cannot believe this is Tyria,” Irynya was saying, laughing out loud. “Why, you were a child when last I saw you, and now you are a woman grown! And a splendid one! If you fight with me, every man in Carlundy will queue to join!”

“I have brought you three and fifty already. And myself. All that could be raised in haste. And I sent word also to Hygurd’s other vassals.”

“Will they heed it, think you?”

“Dunmas of Devern Aida will, for one. He wants to marry me. And Tiercel of Lake Dunart.”

“I hope they will not fight over you!”

“I have told them I will not marry anyone. Since my father died I am Mael Caradon, no? And I am your true friend, Irinya. My men and I will stand by you unto death.”

She drew her sword, dropped to one knee and offered the weapon up to Irinya.

“Lady of Hosts, Queen of the Mountains, Eagle of the Glen, Bearer of the Secret Fire, Scourge of the Wicked, Sword of Justice, Watcher of the Eye of Night -”

As one, the fifty-three savage warriors bowed their heads and repeated the oath, the sonorous words rolling from deep throats and deeper hearts.

“ - I, Tyria daughter of Taran son of Tirion, scion of the line of Irdil Ionason, do swear by the souls of my ancestors, by the sun upon the rivers, by the snow upon the mountains -”

Fastred felt his own heart swelling into his throat.

“ - by all that endures for ever, that I will stand at the side of Irinya Daughter of Ardern, until all enemies are overcome and the rule of Right is restored to the land, and to this end I pledge my sword and my body and my heart, even unto death. And should I fall from this most solemn promise, my unquiet soul shall walk this earth in torment and my children shall be accursed, even unto the end of the world.”

Irinya stooped, and raised her.

“That is a great oath, Tyria.”

“It is the oath of loyalty, no? Oh, am I the first? I hoped I would be! I gathered the men as soon as I got your message, and we have been marching since before dawn. Are we of use to you, Irinya?”

Fastred judged that this might be a reasonable moment to bring up Tyria’s pony.

“Tyria, you have not met my friend, Fastred of the Sea-country -”

Tyria’s beautiful eyes looked Fastred up and down appraisingly, taking in the travel-stained clothes, weather-darkened chain-mail and weary face - he had had four hours sleep last night, and rather less than that the night before. And he had assumed she was some camp-follower, not the lord of her estate and leader of her people. She bowed with frosty politeness.

“I have heard of your kindness to my kinswoman. For that I honour you, lord.”

Meaning, Fastred thought crossly, that you don’t honour me for anything else. He bowed back with equal correctness. “Irinya did not tell me she had sent word to you, or I should have been better prepared.”

“I thought it best to say nothing until I was sure,” Irinya said, smiling. “I am not so prosperous a cause that I expect people to flock to join. You bring me hope,

Tyria, as well as your fifty men. Will you ride with us? I go to find Eomund of Buchart, and to hold council -”

So it was settled that Tyria would ride with Irinya’s company, while her men went on to Buchart with two of Fastred’s men to guide them, there to await her return.

For some unaccountable reason, Fastred found himself edging forward until he was riding at Tyria’s side. She seemed to have forgiven him a little, and gave him a merry smile.

“This is chill for you, yes? In the South the sun shines all day and rain never falls, no?”

Fastred sat up straighter and tried not to shiver in the next gust of wind. “Not quite. But we do expect to see the sun more than once a fortnight, and the wind at least goes round rather than through you.”

“Let it go through you. Accept it, ride it as the eagle does, glory in it!” She urged her pony into a gallop. “See that holly tree? I will race you, Southerner!”

Fastred was nothing loth, and he almost caught her despite her head start.

“You ride well,” she said breathlessly.

Her chest was heaving and she put a hand to her side.

“You are warmer now, Southerner?”

“Much.”

She blushed a little, but instead of simpering coyly as a court lady would have done, she set her shoulders squarely and looked him boldly in the eye.

“You like what you see, Southerner?”

Fastred was unprepared for so direct an attack, and said, “Yes!” before thinking about it.

Her flush deepened, very attractively. But she was sure of her power, and there are few women in the world who are really offended by the frank admiration of a man, especially when the man in question is himself young and attractive. She smiled.

“Irinya has told me your customs are different from ours. Like the language. It is not your fault. Let us be friends, no?”

She held out her hand.

“We shake hands, yes? Like so. It is the custom of my country.”

Her fingers were strong and warm, her clasp firm and frank. Fastred did not let go but drew her steadily towards him.

“This is the custom of mine,” he said, and kissed her first on one cheek and then the other. Her hair swished across his face, smelling faintly of heather and woodsmoke.

“It is a pleasant custom,” she said unsteadily, when he released her. “But come, we must return to the others.”

They jogged back unhurriedly and fell in at the head of the group.

“What is your name? Irinya spoke it but I did not hear clearly. Southerner is the name for many and if we are to be friends I would know the name for you alone.”

“Fastred.”

“Fas-ta-red? Ah, I cannot say it! Fast-red? Fas-tred? Fastred! Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Fastred,” she repeated. “Fastred. It has a strange sound. Very foreign. May I ask you a question? Why are you here?”

Fastred hadn't really thought about it before, and resorted to the easy way out.

“Why not?”

Tyria gave him a look of scorn. “That is not an answer. If you wish to keep it secret, you say so, yes?”

“Well - there are a lot of reasons. For adventure. Because my father told me not to. Because Radwulf is an arrogant swine who ought to be taken down a peg or two. Because Irinya would run the country a good deal better. By accident, I suppose, in a way. Even, a bit, for hope of profit. But mostly for the sake of a friend, who is not here.”

“Tell me about him.”

“Some other time. Now, fair exchange. Why are *you* here?”

“Oh, for me it is very simple. For Irinya.”

“Are you family?”

“Only from afar. She is Bethoc's heir, and I count Iona Bethoc's daughter among my forebears. But she was like a mother to me - no, that is not right - like an elder sister, perhaps, although sisters always squabble, so that is not right either. I loved her very much, and I looked forward always to the times of her visits.” Her voice dropped, and she half-laughed, a little embarrassed. “I cried for a week when they told me she was married and would never come back to us again. Foolish, no? But I *knew* she must have been forced. She was going to marry Hygurd, and she always promised me she would have me for a bridesmaid. Irinya never, never, never goes back on a promise. I thought of her married to that - that - *brute* - and I felt like

screaming. But nobody would believe me. I swore I would help her as soon as I had the power. And that came to me three days ago, when my father died.”

She looked straight at Fastred, who dropped his gaze. He was not good at hiding his feelings. “Do not think me hard,” she said, and her tone was almost pleading. “My father wanted to die. He was old, and he had been ill a long time. And - he and I were not close, you understand? I am the child of his age, and he did not love my mother. He married her only to get an heir for Caradon.”

Fastred could readily understand that. He thought of the iron-jawed dowagers who prowled his aunts' social circle, desperately trying to land a mate for their ugly daughters or chinless sons. Never mind brains or beauty or character or sweetness of temper - all that mattered was propagating the pedigree.

“Ridiculous,” he muttered, and Tyria laughed sunnily.

“Well, it resulted in me, so I cannot complain, no? Father did not dislike me, it was just that his interest in me ceased at the moment of conception, you understand?”

Fastred blushed, and clutched at politics as a safer subject.

“Will many other chieftains join us, do you think?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “I do not think there are many who care greatly for Irinya - except me, and blood-relatives like the Eormenicsons - but all hate Radwulf. And Hygurd even more so, traitor and turncoat!”

“Why? Is it because of taxation?”

She tossed her head. “No! What gentleman cares for that? It is only money. Are we merchants, to quibble over a few paltry shillings?”

Fastred blinked. His father had never considered noble, even royal, blood an obstacle to owning the largest fleet of merchant ships in Fairhaven and making a great deal of money out of them. Fastred was well aware that the income from those ships kept - had kept - him in silk shirts and expensive horses, and although he found trade intensely boring, it was a novel idea that it might be beneath him.

“Radwulf,” Tyria declared vehemently, “Radwulf has pronounced himself King!”

It was a minute or so before Fastred realised that she was not going to continue, and that that was the reason. He stared.

“But Radwulf rules the country! He determines where and how and if people live! He controls an army, he levies taxes, he makes laws. What more is needed to make a king?”

Tyria gave him a pitying look. "Is that all that kingship means to your people? Only the possession of power? I am glad we are not sunk so low! Never, never will the Arderain bow down to one who is not of the true royal blood!"

"But Radwulf is of the Ingeldson line -"

"The Ingeldsons are not royal! No more than my line, or Hygurd's, or any other lord of the Black Hills, not even Bethoc Dulamael himself! I speak of the royal house of Ardern, the Kings of Men!"

Fastred was beginning to feel strangely untutored beside this barbarian girl. He rather wished he had paid attention in history lessons instead of trying to sneak mice into his governess's desk. Fortunately he had no need to confess his complete ignorance, because Tyria went on without even pausing for breath. He received a long lecture on the fallen glories of Ardern, its fair women and its valiant men, its fountains and broad streets and gracious palaces, its merchants and traders and bankers - the contempt for wealth was clearly a recent phenomenon - its musicians and poets and artists and craftsmen, its great armies that filled the plain and made all the nations of the world bow down to them. Strangely enough, this time it was fascinating, although this was possibly because Tyria was the lecturer.

"What happened?"

"It was the dwarves' fault," Tyria said vaguely, looking rather sad. "They created evil, and made the Mountain angry, and all the Mountain-country and the fair city of Ardern fell waste in fire and flood. And then your people came on us from out of the Sea, and we lost the Sea-country also, and the last King of Ardern fell in battle at the gates of Ashgar, that you call Fairhaven. All that was left to us was Carlundy, the Land Between, that in the great days was not thought fit for habitation. But though we have lost lands and home, we have not lost our pride! Shall we, who ruled the known world, bow down to any but the true King of Ardern? Never!"

"You swore fealty to Irinya."

"I swore alliance and friendship. Not fealty! Irinya is no more royal even than Radwulf. No true hillman will ever swear fealty to any but the Kings of Men."

Fastred said, cautiously, "Then you - er - you hope for the return of your Kings? One day?"

"Oh, no," Tyria answered candidly, displaying the vein of practicality that sat so oddly with the Highland taste for high-flown language and romance. "Indeed no! We have grown too fond of our independence. If a man came claiming to be descended from the High Kings of Ardern, we would refuse to believe him. But we certainly will not bow before anyone else."

Irinya watched them riding and talking together, and smiled to herself. She stopped listening to Lameter's lengthy account of the "battle" and his own heroic part in it, although this did not stop him talking, and withdrew into herself. By the time they reached the shieling, her plan was already formed.

Diribel, Eomund's wife, was standing in the middle of the group of huts, shouting orders. She was a formidable-looking matron in her middle thirties, with curling blonde hair and the kind of figure usually described as Junoesque. A fractious toddler sat astride one hip, and four other children of descending height trotted beside her or peered from behind her skirts. In between directing the construction of more shelters, berating a luckless man for letting his cattle stray, organising a hunting expedition, scolding her two eldest boys for using a half-built hut as a climbing frame, and supervising half a dozen sweating women cooking a meal, she found time to welcome these unexpected guests.

"Glad I am to see you, good-brother!" she greeted Eomer, planting a hearty kiss on his cheek. "You have been sorely missed! And you, Irinya - welcome! It is long since we met, not since I was a bride." She looked Irinya up and down, and shook her golden mane. "The years - or your marriage - have used you hard, cousin. I should not have known you again. I am sad to see it. I always said you would not willingly have married that monster, and when we heard you had fled, these foolish men had to agree with me."

Irinya smiled faintly.

"Aye, Diribel, it was you got the better choice of man."

"Ha! There are times when I wonder. All Eomund's brain is in his - trousers." The last word was obviously a hasty substitution for something a lot more graphic. She hitched the squalling infant higher on her hip, and Fastred suddenly found his hand crushed in a hearty grip that put him in mind of a benign grizzly bear. Surreptitiously checking his tingling fingers for broken bones and watching her hug first Lameter and then Tyria, he decided he had probably got off lightly. Meeting Diribel had much the same effect as an encounter with a hurricane.

"Eomund!" she bellowed, and half the village stopped work and anxiously checked the hillside for signs of avalanche. "*Eomund!*"

A man the size and shape of a small mountain emerged from one of the huts, a beer tankard in his hand, and more greetings and introductions followed.

“Do you all come in,” Diribel directed. “And talk some sense into this hulking man of mine! I declare, he is beyond all reason. He talks of marching on Darain, and it is as much as I can do to make the men build shelters for their families and care for their stock. Show a man a sword and he thinks of nothing but drinking and boasting!”

Eomund grunted. “I will make them pay for burning Buchart, woman!”

“If you had not left us defenceless, there would be no need to make them pay, you great lummo!”

Eomund did not answer, perhaps because his conversational skills had reached their limit.

Diribel followed him into the hut, still talking, “Now *I* say we should send at once to my kinsman Vidian and ask him for food. And we need also fodder for the beasts. And the old and the sick and the wounded need better shelter than I can contrive here. And indeed we cannot stay here all winter. It is a *summer* shieling, you oaf, and when we bring the cattle up in the spring this whole corrie is full of the debris of avalanches. But you, of course, you would not know this, for when did you ever do anything other than eat and drink and get children -”

Half an hour later, Fastred stood leaning against the eaves of Eomund’s hut, smoking a long-stemmed pipe. It was cold out here, but for once it was not raining and it was at least relatively quiet. He flinched as something smashed inside the house and Diribel’s voice reached still greater volume, cutting shrilly through the alternating bellows of Eomund and Lameter and drowning Eomer’s rather reedy note. The baby was yelling, one of the other children wailing and over it all two dogs started howling. Fastred looked up at the cloud-hung mountain rather apprehensively. If there was an avalanche waiting to happen up there, it had all the excuse it could possibly need.

Irinya and Tyria came to join him, giving the open door an unnecessarily wide berth and both looking amused.

“What are they saying?”

“It seems Eomund led an attack on the fort this morning. While we were on our way up here.”

“What, in broad daylight?”

“Mm. He was thrown back with heavy losses. Eomer accuses him of stupidly wasting lives. Diribel accuses him of playing war games and leaving all the real work to her. Lameter accuses Eomund of keeping all the glory for himself. Eomund

says the fort is impregnable and they don’t appreciate his difficulties. This, you understand, is not a literal translation.”

Fastred kicked his heel against the wall of the house.

“I think,” he said with unexpected bitterness, “I think we might as well give up now.”

“It is only a family row,” Tyria said, shrugging. “When people really hate each other they are quiet, no?”

“Tyria is right,” Irinya agreed. “This argument means nothing. To fight is in the blood, and when there is no-one else available the family will do. In an hour or two they will all be friends again. Meantime, shall we three do something useful?”

Fastred ploughed on up the hill, every step taking him above the ankles in half-melted snow. Irinya was now out of sight among the maze of little crags ahead but, although he was deliberately walking slowly, Tyria showed no inclination to take the hint and lag behind with him. So he lengthened his stride, and caught up with her. The exertion had brightened her complexion and made her chest move most interestingly, and there were a number of secluded hollows in the rocks that looked inviting places for a rest.

“Aren’t you tired?” he panted.

Tyria hopped up over a small crag with the light energy of a mountain goat. “No, why should I be tired? We have covered no distance.”

Fastred sighed. They had been walking, or more accurately floundering, for a good half-hour, and he was thoroughly bored. He hauled himself up over the crag, entertaining irresistible speculations as to the effect of this sort of exercise on female thigh muscles, and found himself on a narrow summit ridge. A few steps took him to the far edge, where Tyria grabbed his arm and tugged him down beside her. His hopes were short-lived, however, because Irinya was there too.

“What -?”

“Shh!”

He looked down over the edge.

“The fort?”

“You did not think,” Irinya whispered acidly, “that I dragged you up here to admire the scenery?”

“What about it?”

“I want you to capture it.”

Fastred rolled back away from the edge and stared at her.



“We need food,” she explained patiently. “Diribel has welcomed us kindly, for hospitality to strangers is the Highland way, but with food that could ill be spared. Already people are going short. Soon they will have the choice of starving now, or slaughtering their breeding stock and starving next summer. That fort will be stuffed with food. Rations for the garrison, taxes paid in kind. And there will be money there also, for the larger farmers and the merchants pay in cash. Radwulf has not collected since September -”

“How do you know?”

“We watch, of course,” Tyria said. “There is always the chance that he sends too few soldiers, no?”

“You mean you would steal the tax receipts?”

She shrugged. “It is money taken from us by force. Why should we not take it back by force?”

Fastred thought of saying that the nobility was surely above stealing a few paltry shillings, and decided against it.

“It may be more difficult than you think, Irinya. Eomund has already tried and failed.”

“Eomund,” Irinya said briskly, “is a brave man, but somewhat lacking in intelligence. I won’t believe that fort is impregnable until I get an expert opinion.”

Fastred opened his mouth to protest, saw Tyria looking at him expectantly, and shut it again. Well, compared with Eomund he probably was an expert. He leaned over the edge and studied the fort thoughtfully. It was a fine view from here, the fort spread out below him as if on a map. A sergeant was drilling thirty reluctant soldiers, and Fastred could have knocked his hat off with a well-aimed stone.

“Not bad,” he murmured thoughtfully. “Ten, twelve foot walls. Good masonry. Badly repaired in places. Looks like that south corner took a battering recently.”

“In wet weather a waterfall forms on this crag and runs past that corner. Perhaps the storm damaged the foundations.”

That was Irinya. It would be - she had after all lived half her life near here.

“Ah. Yes, very likely.” Getting interested in the task, Fastred fished in a pocket for a scrap of paper and a crayon, and started drawing a careful plan. “Outer ditch and bank - fallen in *there* and *there* - how very slovenly - causeway to the main gate - three more gates in the middle of each wall - lookout towers at three corners. Ground all churned up in front of the main gate, dark stains on the stone - ye gods! Did he attack *there*?”

“You would not?”

“Shall we say it wouldn’t be my first choice?” He peered at his plan, then back at the fort. “The timber buildings are the barracks, I guess?”

“Yes.”

“What’re the stone buildings in the centre?”

“One is the garrison commander’s house. The other, across the yard, is the storerooms and civilian quarters. There will be two tax officials and a clerk besides the garrison.”

“Why two?”

“Each to check on the other.”

“How many men do you reckon those barracks would house? Two hundred?”

“The usual complement is a hundred and eighty, in three watches of two companies each. Plus the officers. But they lost a dozen at Buchart, and they probably lost others this morning.”

“Good point. Say a hundred and sixty. They’ll be pleased with themselves after driving off the attack this morning, but equally they won’t be expecting another. They certainly don’t look very alert.”

“It is not a popular posting. I remember Anred - Radwulf’s steward - complaining that it was difficult to keep the garrisons up to complement, until he hit on the idea of using it as punishment. Being caught drunk on duty, or insubordination, or just falling foul of a senior officer in a bad temper, all result in a spell of duty up here, where the welcome is as cold as the climate.”

“Is that so? You’re a mine of information, Irinya.”

“I had twelve years to listen and watch. It would be a poor showing if I had not learned something. Can that fort be taken?”

Fastred tapped his teeth. “I don’t know. It must be tougher than it looks if Eomund failed with two hundred-odd men. What were his tactics?”

“As far as I can make out, everybody shout very loud and then charge. I am hoping you can use a little more finesse.”

Fastred leaned over the crag and stared down at the fort for several minutes.

“How many men have I got?”

“My fifty,” Tyria said, sounding gratifyingly respectful.

“Plus your forty. And - oh, probably another hundred-odd from Eomund. He can’t possibly have lost more than half his force in only three engagements.”

Fastred’s brow creased in thought. “Right. Say a two-pronged attack. Just before dawn tomorrow. Some make a diversionary advance on the main gate, trying to make enough noise for an army. While the garrison’s attention is concentrated there,

the rest creep across the gaps in the outer ditch, scale that rickety south corner where the tower used to be, take the defenders from behind and open the gate to let the others in. Done it before. But it has to be timed right. If the diversion starts up too soon, they'll be killed before the main attack can open the gates for them. If too late, the main attack will fail. Discipline is everything."

"I will tell my men they are to treat you as their chieftain," Tyria assured him, obviously impressed. "They will obey your every command."

"Right. Irinya - what about Eomund's men?"

"Eomund will expect to lead them, perhaps jointly with Eomer."

Fastred glowered. "Under my command."

"No. Eomund will never agree to that."

"Then forget it. I will not have my men's lives put at risk by an -"

Irinya held up her hand, and Fastred swallowed the epithet.

"Eomund will not accept you as commander - not yet. But he will agree to do what you say."

"I don't understand the distinction," he muttered sullenly.

"I do," she said. "Leave them to me. You tell me what you want done, and I will see that they do it."

"It is *because* of your gallant assault this morning, Eomund, that we have a chance of success now," Irinya said smoothly. "You will have knocked much of the fight out of them. And they will never expect another attack so soon."

Eomund's angry frown cleared. Of course, that had been his purpose all along.

"Fastred's men and Tyria's will steal into the fort from behind," Irinya continued, and all nodded, Tyria because she had already agreed and the three chiefs of Buchart because it was obviously better to leave so mean a trick to sneaking Lowlanders and men who were ruled by a woman.

"The most dangerous part will be the main attack on the gate," Irinya went on, "as they will take the full force of the defence. We need our boldest men there."

Eomund and Lameter volunteered immediately. Fastred hid his face hurriedly behind his wine cup in case they saw his smile. This was truly masterly. He had said to Irinya, "I want the reliable troops under my command, for the main attack. Mine and Tyria's. The rest for the diversion. They can probably be trusted to make a lot of noise." And here was the translation.

"Now we come to the difficult part," Irinya said, and the three Highlandmen sat up expectantly. "It is very important that the two attacks be synchron-" she saw

Eomund's brow furrow, and corrected herself in the same breath, "- er - done at the same time. Radwulf's men must be caught as between two stones."

"Like hunting," Eomer put in unexpectedly, his first contribution to the discussion. He had been most impressed with the skirmish in the square and had concluded that, though these Southerners had peculiar ways, they knew how to fight and win. "You can't drive the stag until the archers are ready."

Eomund nodded his massive head sagely. Hunting was something he understood.

"I have heard that Lowland troops often start before the signal and ruin everything," Irinya said, sighing. "But I have assured Fastred that hillmen are more reliable, and can be trusted with so important a task. Was I right to say that?"

Everybody assured her that not a man would besmirch the honour of the Black Hills by making the slightest sound or movement until they saw Fastred's signal.

"Now, to the details. Fastred, would you explain what you had in mind? Very carefully, please, so that I, a woman with no experience of war, can follow you -"

And so, a quarter-hour before dawn, Fastred was to be found crouched in damp grass at the foot of Eagle Crag, looking up at the battered outline of the fort's south corner, visible only because it blocked out the stars behind. To left and right stretched a line of ninety men drawn up three deep, although neither sound nor light betrayed their presence. He shifted position uncomfortably, and yawned. His left foot was going to sleep, and he felt it definitely had the right idea. It was occurring to him that Irinya had handled him, and Tyria, every bit as efficiently as the three Highlandmen. He'd been deftly inveigled into attacking this fort without the customary numerical advantage. Not that he thought it was impossible, far from it. He had not survived six years of stern warfare by being a reckless fool. It was just that Tyria's admiring presence had been a powerful incentive to agree. He also suspected that Tyria herself would never have agreed to give him command of her men if she had not felt involved in a kind of privileged inner circle. And there was another manoeuvre he had only just recognised. Irinya had picked the objective for sound military reasons, but it would also neatly make a political point. If he could take the fort and succeed where Eomund had so publicly failed, it would give him an authority over these chieftains that nothing else could. She could not order them to obey a foreigner younger than any of them, but she had manufactured an opportunity for him to prove his ability in action. He grimaced at the darkness with a sort of wry admiration. Irinya was shrewder than he had given her credit for. He'd be more careful next time, if he lived to see a next time.

“All correct, sah!”

Wootton’s voice, normally a parade-ground bellow even when he was whispering, could miraculously fade to a murmur when circumstances demanded it.

“Ready, lord!”

Fastred thought he would much rather have heard Tyria’s melodious voice say that in somewhat different circumstances.

“Good. You move back now. As soon as you see the first rope hold, give the signal.”

“Wish I was comin’ with you, sah.” Wootton’s old leg injury kept him out of any dismounted fighting, and even the coveted title of Signal Sergeant was poor compensation. “Good luck, sah. Miss, you come along o’ me -”

“Certainly not. I lead my men, no?”

“Tyria, get back,” Fastred hissed, alarmed. “A battlefield is no place for a woman.”

“Ha! You think so, Southerner?”

“Wootton, get going. Tyria, you cannot come with us. You’ll get hurt.”

“I am no coward, Southerner! I do not fear death or pain!”

“Well, you’re the only one here that doesn’t,” Fastred grumbled. “I’m not arguing with you. Get back. That’s an order.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realised it was the worst thing he could possibly have said. Tyria answered with a venomous whisper in Arderin, which Fastred was glad he couldn’t understand. Then she hissed, “I lead my men, Southerner! I and no other! I will order them not to follow you.”

Fastred groaned softly. But at least five minutes of the allotted ten must be up. If the girl wanted to be a pigheaded fool, there was nothing he could do about it.

“All right. But wait for my signal!”

He counted out the remaining time, and then with a wave of his arm leapt forward. He had time for one anxious thought about Eomund’s Highlanders - did their silence mean they were all asleep or in the wrong place altogether - before he reached the wall, and there was no more time for thinking.

## Chapter 19.

Fastred’s assault went more or less according to plan. The garrison were surprised, two-thirds of them were asleep, and their leader was apparently incapable of organising any effective resistance. The fort was lost in a matter of minutes, though the fighting went on long after that.

At first Fastred was annoyed with the defenders for unnecessarily prolonging the agony instead of surrendering like sensible men. It was only when the light strengthened enough for him to see as well as hear that he realised what was happening. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for the ferocity unleashed when subject people have representatives of the oppressors at their mercy. The Ash Dene Militia - bless Wootton and his constant drill - stayed under discipline, and Hedric and his second-in-command (a burly ex-smuggler called Leofric) kept the Lowland exiles under control, but once inside the fort the Highlanders disintegrated into a rampaging mob. No wonder the garrison wouldn’t give up, Fastred thought bitterly, when he came upon a cluster of corpses, stripped and horribly mutilated, and heard someone in his own company vomit at the sight. Chickens don’t try to surrender to the fox in the henhouse.

Halting the massacre was no easy task. Commands had no effect, and he had to resort to threats and sometimes to violence. And even when he had cowed one gang of warriors, he couldn’t be sure they would continue to obey him once his back was turned, and he couldn’t be in two places at once. If only Gyrdan were here! Two of them might have restored order. On his own, it was like trying to build a house with dry sand.

It was with great relief that he came upon Eomer, blood-spattered and shaken but equally aghast and trying to get the warriors of Bucharth back under some kind of control. Somewhere near the main gate they encountered Lameter, yelling and covered in blood that was definitely not his own, and after a furious row - most of which Fastred was extremely glad not to understand - Eomer convinced him to leave off pillaging and join them. After this they had rather more success, though the warriors looked sullen and resentful, and whenever no-one was looking a few of them would slip off to join in the fun elsewhere. A man could get rich very fast on a battlefield, and they saw no reason why they should let the Caradain - who were very much to the fore, judging from the slogans being yelled - have all the spoils. Fastred looked anxiously for Tyria, both for his own reasons and because she was probably

the only one who could control her clansmen, but could see no sign of her. He hoped very much that she was not leading the slaughter.

“Sir!” A muddy, bloodstained soldier, one of Hedric’s men, plucked at Fastred’s sleeve, gasping, “Sir - t’barracks - we can’t hold ‘em -”

Fastred knew there were at least forty of Radwulf’s men left in the barracks, caught asleep and unable to get out before the assault had swept past. He hadn’t bothered to take over the building, on the grounds that they couldn’t do any harm inside and it would be as difficult to break out as in, and had left a company to guard the exits, intending to sort it out later. But forty men, disciplined and determined, could do a lot of damage if they escaped. He sprinted down the nearest stairway three steps at a time, his company hard on his heels.

The sight at the barracks disgusted him. No bold break-out this, far from it. His men were fighting a desperate battle, but against their own side, outnumbered at least three to one by a yelling mob of Highland warriors. One man was flat on his face in the mud, another nursed a broken arm, and most of the rest were tiring, if not actually wounded. They were being forced back, step by step, and some of the hillmen were waving torches and yelling threats, obviously intending to set the barracks alight. At first Fastred was merely angry at the wanton destruction of a perfectly serviceable and useful building. And then he saw with sick horror that Radwulf’s soldiers were still penned inside. Terrified white faces peered over windowsills on the upper floor. Men whimpered and wept in sheer panic.

One desperate figure, clad only in a flapping shirt, managed to struggle out onto the roof and run a few paces along the ridgepole, until with a savage yell one of the Highlanders hurled a discarded spear. The man staggered, transfixed, and slumped to his knees. Very slowly, he toppled sideways. For a brief moment the spear shaft lodged in the gutter, and then the body’s momentum carried it over the edge and sent it plunging past the windows and down to splash into the mud.

Fastred had no need to order his men to charge. He could no more have stopped them than he could have stopped himself. And for all his handsome urbanity, Fastred of Ash Dene in fighting wrath was a force to be reckoned with. The Highland fighters, lacking a leader or a firm purpose, wavered, and then disappeared to look for easier targets elsewhere.

Fastred leaned on his sword, panting, and turned to the barracks.

“I am the commanding officer,” he hailed. “Do you surrender?”

If he expected the trapped men to treat him as a saviour, he was disappointed. Brains addled by sheer terror, a babel of voices answered him.

“No! Go away! Savages! Murdering scum! Animals! Leave us alone!”

“Surrender, and you will not be harmed!”

A rough voice answered with an obscenity, and some missile clanged off Fastred’s helmet and made his ears ring.

“All right, bollock-brains, have it your way!” He addressed one of his own men, but without lowering his voice. “You! Find where they keep the firewood and the lamp-oil. Show those fools how to make a real fire.” The man blanched, but discipline was deeply ingrained and he went. “The rest of you, start breaking down the doors and the shutters. Stack the wood against the windows and the doors! Higher!”

Inside the barracks, a kind of low wail went up. The rough voice could be heard shouting something, and several others shouting back. Listening with one ear to the developing argument above, Fastred exhorted his men louder, “Keep at it there! Fetch torches! Dozens! We’ll make ‘em fry.”

He grabbed a blazing torch from the first man who came running up, and brandished it over his head. Somebody in the barracks howled.

“You’ll find it hotter in hell!” Fastred bawled back. He approached the heap of wood by the door, torch held high.

“No! No, Sir! Please!” A shirt flapped frantically out of a window, doing duty as a grubby white flag. “We surrender! We surrender! Please, Sir!”

Fastred stepped back, thinking: About bloody time, or I’d have had to think of something else.

“Come out one at a time. Keep your hands on your heads. And no funny business, or I’ll roast you so your wives won’t recognise the remains! Anyone wants to be a hero, he can stay in there and fry.”

Nobody wanted to be a hero. They fell over each other to get out of the barracks, a sorry-looking crew standing shivering in the yard, unwashed, unshaven and none of them more than half-dressed. Fastred marched them to the guardroom by the gatehouse, locked them in and pocketed the key. It was cramped for forty-nine, but it would keep them out of harm’s way and at least it was stone and wouldn’t burn.

It was only then that he realised it had started to rain. He shivered. Time to see about breakfast and somewhere warm to eat it, sort the survivors into watches and dismiss at least some of them to sleep, count the prisoners and find somewhere sensible to put them - all the boring jobs that Gyrdan normally saw to. Oh, well. It seemed fairly quiet now, with not a single Highlander anywhere near the gatehouse. He sent his men off in two companies, under Leofric and Hedric, to gather up the

wounded and collect the dead, and himself went in search of Eomer and Lameter. Those two seemed competent and could share the work, and that would free him to go and look for Tyria -

His ears, which had been listening to the sound for minutes, finally got his brain to pay attention. Not the raging roar of a riot this time, not the metallic clatter of fighting, but the surging murmur of an angry crowd.

Fastred and Eomer converged on the rampart above the storeroom at the same moment from opposite directions.

“Oh, *hell*,” they groaned in unison, if in different languages.

The small open space between the storeroom and the commandant’s house was packed with a swirling, seething, shouting crowd, like a pot on the boil. Insults were hurled on all sides. The Bucharain called the Caradain vultures who appeared only to steal the profits. The Caradain retorted that it was only because of *their* valour that there were any profits. The Bucharain sneered that the Caradain’s wives and little children were not starving. The Caradain mocked them for having been beaten twice already and having to get real warriors to fight their battles for them. The Bucharain called them thieves and mercenaries. The Caradain called them cowards. There were well over a hundred men down there, all drunk with fighting, all warriors unused to any discipline or command, and when they broke into the storerooms and quarrelled over the money, there would be a bloodbath. When. What was stopping them?

A partially dismembered corpse lay before the building. One of the tax officials, unlucky enough to have been dragged out by the mob and slaughtered. Yet the crowd, though they snarled like a pack of hounds whipped off their quarry, would not come forward to finish the job. For a single slight figure stood over the body, holding them all at bay. Irinya, alone, with a drawn sword in her left hand.

In the doorway behind her, abject and terrified, huddled a group of men. Two, the clerk and the other tax official, were half-clad in civilian clothes. The others must be soldiers who had fled the barracks, most dressed only in shirts, one draped in a torn sheet and two, poor fellows, wholly naked. A wounded man, on his face in the mud, was trying feebly to crawl back into the shelter of the doorway. None of his comrades dared venture out to help him. Their frightened eyes were fixed on Irinya in a mixture of awe and disbelief.

“We must help her -!” Fastred started forward, but Eomer seized his wrist in a vice-like grip.

“If we go down there, they’ll riot for certain. Alone, she might hold them.”

“*Might!*”

He tried to shake Eomer off, but the Highlandman held him firm.

Below, unaware of their presence, the crowd snarled and muttered. But it did not advance. A man would have been butchered without compunction. But a woman, a fragile woman in a long feminine dress, her hair around her shoulders like a cloak - that was a different matter. Hard men sometimes have a peculiar sentimental streak, and though they slay fellow-men without mercy, they get their wives to drown the unwanted kittens. Besides, where was the glory in a tough fighting man murdering a helpless woman - a woman with her arm in a sling? That wouldn’t sound good in a song. It would be one of the things you paid the bard to leave out. The warriors squirmed, nicely balanced between a refusal to back down and a sneaking admiration for reckless courage.

Somewhere at the back of the crowd, someone yelled an obscenity, and a spear flew past Irinya’s head and stuck, vibrating, in the mud behind her. The men in the doorway cried out and shrank closer together, and the crowd surged a pace forward.

Eomer’s grip tightened on Fastred’s wrist as if in spasm. Time stretched out. It was one of those moments when history diverges, when a single action can flick the points one way or the other and change the destination entirely.

Irinya did not flinch. She did not even look over her shoulder to see where the spear had landed. With perfect timing and clarity, she threw back one short, sharp remark in Arderin.

A split-second’s shocked pause, and then a ripple of laughter.

Eomer was laughing too. “It loses in the translation,” he explained, “but she asked, if his aim was so poor, how did he manage to consummate his marriage?”

The atmosphere changed with the suddenness of weather in the mountains. Men realised they had won the fight and started feeling pleased with themselves. They congratulated each other, tribal divisions suddenly a matter for chaffing and not for blood-vengeance. With the magnanimity of complete victory, they began to feel a bit sorry for their poor bedraggled captives, who really looked as if they had suffered enough. They also realised it was raining, and they were hungry. The crowd started breaking up.

“Gods be praised!” Eomer breathed. “She has done it! Come on. We can handle them now.”

Fastred tugged his arm free.

"You go. I'm going to see what's happened to Tyria."

He found Tyria huddled in a corner of the north wall, her head bowed to her knees and her hands trailing in the mud. Her sword, bloodstained to the hilt, lay beside her, and a puddle of rain had formed in her abandoned shield. She looked very small and very forlorn, and Fastred's normally reliable heart turned over in his breast.

She did not look up or even stir as he came close.

"Are you hurt?"

The raven hair, shining now with rain, shook, but she would not lift her face.

"What is it?"

She jerked his comforting hand pettishly off her shoulder. Fastred thought she was crying.

"Tyria -" he said gently.

"Go away!" Her voice was muffled, but something in its tone gave Fastred a clue. He was not usually renowned for perception, but he did remember personal experience. Without saying another word, he went and fetched her shield, then picked up her sword and cleaned it, whistling tunelessly. Then he nudged her elbow.

"Your sword, Tyria."

"I do not want it!"

"Why not?" Fastred inquired, deliberately obtuse. "It's a nice sword. Looks like an heirloom, too -"

She lifted her head, rain and tears mingling on her cheeks.

"Oh, you are so *stupid!*" She choked back a sob. "I am not worthy of my father's sword. I am a coward! A coward! Oh, I wish - I wish I were dead!"

"I'm very glad you're not," Fastred said sincerely. "What's all this nonsense? Why, you wouldn't stay behind when I ordered you to -"

"Would that I had! Then you would still have thought me brave -"

"I do think you're brave."

"Oh, you do not know! I was so frightened! I - I - I - wanted to run away!"

Fastred's mind went back six years and flashed up a picture of another battlefield, another young warrior overwhelmed by the experience, another comforting veteran. Only this time he was the veteran.

"*Did* you run away?"

"N - no. No. I did not. But I wanted to!"

"If you did not run away, how can you possibly be a coward?"

"You do not understand. I was so afraid!"

"So were we all," Fastred said easily. "All of us with anything except bone between the ears, anyway. Now, I bet Eomund wasn't scared -"

That provoked a weak and fleeting smile, but this was a deep-felt pain, and not to be casually soothed like a child's hurt.

"You saw Irinya. You saw her face that mob, alone!" She put a hand to her eyes. "I tease her because she wears a long skirt and rides side-saddle, but - but she is braver than I!"

"Irinya is an extraordinary woman," Fastred said decidedly. "Please don't try to emulate her, Tyria. I like you as you are."

"It is kind of you to say that. But you must despise me. You are so brave -"

Fastred lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, although they were quite alone. "Shall I tell you a secret, Tyria? In *my* first battle, my sole contribution was to faint at the sight of blood and sprain a wrist falling off my horse."

"I do not believe you," she said, but the image had caught her fancy and she was smiling slightly.

"It's absolutely true. Hand on heart," Fastred said, extravagantly doing just that. "If you ever meet my friend Gyrdan, he'll confirm it. It was him fished me out of the river. Otherwise it would've been an ignominious end to a promising career."

Tyria laughed, and the misery left her face. Fastred considered offering her his handkerchief, but even if he could find it, it would be drenched through like the rest of his clothes.

"I wish somebody would invent waterproof chain-mail," he grumbled, and Tyria giggled again. He held out his hand. "Come on. Can't sit here all day."

"What happens next?" she asked, and then swayed dizzily as she stood up. She had been marching since before dawn the previous day, and had not eaten for at least twelve hours.

Genuinely concerned, Fastred steadied her with a hand on her elbow. He could have got away with at least putting an arm round her waist and probably a good deal more, but in the circumstances that would be a cheap trick.

"First thing is to find out if their cook survived and make him cook breakfast. Then commandeer the captain's house and find you dry clothes and a bed to sleep in."

"You also are going to rest?"

“Me? Some hope. Prisoners, wounded, burial party, watch bill, sort out quarters, check the stores, replace damaged armour and weapons, repair the defences so we can hold this place - a thousand things to do. No rest for the wicked.”

“I will help,” she said firmly. “Cowardly I may be, but not lazy.”

The day was full of surprises for the captured soldiers. They were let out of the guardroom after an hour or so, though it seemed longer, by a stocky man with a limp and a voice like a thunderclap. After searching them for weapons, he marched them back to barracks, where they were reunited with a dozen comrades captured at the storehouses. Their tale of the fearsome blond giant who stopped the barbarians burning them alive and then threatened to do it himself was instantly capped by the story of the woman who appeared like a guardian angel and fought off the whole mob single-handed. Neither lost anything in the telling. They were given ration biscuit and small beer, told to get properly dressed, and then marched out into the rain under armed guard and made to dig a big hole.

They were all convinced they were digging their own grave, but too frightened to refuse or try making a run for it. It looked even more likely when they finished and were ordered to line up in a neat row facing the hole, beside the pile of spoil they had raised. But instead of clubbing them from behind, their guards also formed up smartly and stood stiffly to attention.

All the enemy fighters now marched out and lined up on the far side of the grave, and a cart was hauled up, the enemy leaders walking solemnly beside it. One by one, bodies sewn into sacks were lifted out of the cart and into the grave. Not thrown in, like rubbish, but lowered in carefully with due and proper respect, victors and vanquished alike. As each body was laid down, the tall blond officer read out the dead man's name, and a drummer beside him sounded a single sonorous *boom*. Men on both sides wept as they heard the names of relatives or close friends, though when the name of the garrison commander was reached several of the prisoners brightened a little. It seemed even defeat had its compensations.

Forty-one times the drum struck, and then the prisoners were told to fill in the grave as quietly and quickly as they could. To the muted accompaniment of falling soil, the young woman - the beautiful one - took a harp and sang a lament of such sweetness and sorrow that even those who could not understand it felt tears pricking at their eyes, and the Highland warriors sobbed like children. Then the other woman - the Lady, as the prisoners were beginning to think of her - came to the head of the grave, and in a clear strong voice spoke the Lowland burial service, exactly as it was

heard at village funerals at home. And finally, forty-one boughs of holly were laid on the mound, their brilliant berries glowing against dark, gleaming leaves, and all paced back into the fort with the feeling of a solemn ceremony respectfully completed.

By this time the prisoners had begun to think that they might be used for forced labour instead of being slaughtered out of hand. This was definitely an improvement. They followed the limping sergeant back into the fort willingly enough, hoping they might get a little bread and something to drink. Instead, they were marched into the canteen on the ground floor of the barracks, issued with a motley assortment of mess tins and plates, and as the queue shuffled past the cauldrons every container acquired a dollop of hot stew. It was only standard rations - a thick glop of onions, barley and shredded salt beef - but this time it was properly cooked, unburnt, and still hot, a notable improvement on the cook's usual lackadaisical service. It was also, the more observant amongst them noticed, exactly the same as their captors, including the officers, were eating. The pessimists concluded that they were being fattened up for some sinister if unspecified purpose. Most of them just ate it.

In the afternoon they were set to repairing the wall at the south corner, which had been badly damaged in the floods over two months previously but which the commandant had never got around to mending. They were apprehensive at first when they saw they were to work alongside a detachment of Highlanders, but their fears proved unfounded. The shrieking savages of this morning had metamorphosed into warm-hearted men who worked just as hard as they did, told them rude jokes, and paid up immediately and with good grace when they lost the bet on who could shift most rocks in an hour. Although the sergeant and overseers expected to be obeyed and did not shrink from backing up their authority with force, they did not kick men who were working hard, and towards the end of the day the tall blond officer and the skinny one with ginger hair came round to inspect progress and told them all what a splendid job they were doing. The prisoners marched back to barracks in the dusk with their heads held higher than at any time since their conscription.

They found they had been allocated about two-thirds of the top floor of the barracks. It was a bit cramped, but as they had expected to be turned out altogether only the professional grumblers complained. Unbelievably, they were given a second hot meal and a tot of brandy all round. They all knew they were entitled to three meals a day but somehow it had never seemed actually to happen, and as for

the spirit ration, everyone knew that was for the commandant to drink. After dinner, their personal possessions were returned to them, and those who had relatives or friends on the wounded list were allowed to go and visit them.

This they had been dreading. Their own surgeon was an ex-blacksmith who'd changed career when his eyesight got so poor he kept missing the anvil, and the commandant's policy was to make the sick bay as unpleasant as possible to discourage malingering. It worked - no man so much as went near the surgeon while he was still able to stand up. Those with imagination had thought a barbarian-run sick bay would resemble some of the more excitable descriptions of hell, and the bellow of pain that greeted them on their arrival seemed to confirm their worst fears.

It turned out, however, that the medical team had finally got around to treating the minor injuries and the yell had emanated from one of the Highland officers. He was a huge ginger-haired man with the build of a prize bull, being held in an arm-lock by an equally large blonde woman while his slighter brother cleaned and stitched a shallow scalp wound. The joke doing the rounds was that he'd led the assault by battering down the main gate with his head.

Once past this dramatic reception, the sick bay was fairly peaceful. The surviving official and his clerk had been moved into the commandant's house, and the warren of interlinked rooms that made up their quarters and offices taken over for the wounded of both sides. Charcoal braziers gave out a comforting warmth, and most of the oil-lamps from the commandant's house had been pressed into service. Four or five matronly Highlandwomen, under the direction of the large blonde, moved between the mattresses, indiscriminately mothering their charges.

All the injured, regardless of which side they were on, had been treated - washed, stitched, splinted, bandaged, laid in clean beds. All those who were capable of eating or drinking had been fed. Some were too severely hurt to have any hope of recovery, but even these had been washed, bandaged where possible, and quietened with a powerful combination of alcohol and herbs so that their last hours should be as peaceful as possible. The professional pessimist who said suspiciously that *he* wouldn't take barbarian medicine and the woman who was a known witch was roundly told by all the others to hold his tongue, and one of the injured men even tried to punch him.

The prisoners went back to barracks looking unusually thoughtful. Even the pessimist was quiet. They were being treated as men instead of mere motive power for spears and spades, and it was a novel experience.

So when the Lady herself came to see them and asked if anyone would like to join her service, she was all but trampled in the rush.

Four days later, on a rare day of enamel-blue sky and sparkling sun, a colourful company gathered in the fort courtyard. The playful breeze sent the banners dipping and waving so that they seemed almost alive - the white falcon with its three stars for Buchart, and a veritable swarm of yellow dragons, for two of Hygurd's vassals had joined the revolt. Beside the dragon and chain of Caradon fluttered a dragon and fish for Lake Dunart, and a dragon chasing the crescent moon for Devern Aida, and beneath the banners the two young chiefs, Tiercel and Dunmas, danced equally close attendance on Tyria. Fastred kept a jealous eye on both of them, though he was grateful for the eighty men each had brought. These had enabled him to leave the fort with a garrison of a hundred and forty, likely to be swelled over the next few days as the lightly wounded men recovered, and still lead out a company of over three hundred.

The garrison, like the company, was a very mixed bag, for none of the tribal groups wanted to be left out of anything. Choosing the garrison commander had cost Fastred and Irinya many hours of anxious thought. As Irinya's closest relative, Eomund would naturally expect to be offered the first independent command. Fortunately, he had watched aghast as Fastred and Irinya tirelessly brought order out of chaos, and had concluded with refreshing candour that the administrative ability required was beyond him. Eomer and Lameter were too useful to leave behind, Tyria wanted to stay with Irinya, and Tiercel and Dunmas wanted to go where Tyria went (a reversal of the usual principle of camp-following). Finally, at Hedric's suggestion, Leofric had been selected for the giddy promotion, as he had captained a band of smugglers successfully for three years before being betrayed and caught. He was proving able and active, a good choice.

From the watchtower, Fastred scanned the southern horizon one last time, and turned away sadly. It had been too much to hope that Gyrdan would come before they had to march away north, and yet he *had* hoped. Vidian had all his people on the alert, for if Gyrdan and Berold did manage to bring the youngsters as far as Ailart it was very likely they would need help, and every day Fastred had expected to hear news of them. But almost a week had gone by since they separated, and they had heard nothing. He sighed. Well, no news was good news, he supposed.

As he hurried down to the waiting company, he cast a glance up at the banner waving from the fort flagpole. Gyrdan would have been pleased with that, had he



been here to see it. For it was not the white falcon of the Ingeldsons, as might have been expected. That was not forgotten, but it had been relegated to the cluster of family banners below. The flag flying above the fort and in the place of honour at the head of the column was the token of no family or house. A new flag, made at Irinya's express orders. A rayed sun rising. A new dawn. A symbol beneath which all men, Highlander or Lowlander, clan chief or exile, commoner or nobleman, all could march together.

That first assault set the pattern for the rest. Excluding his ally Hygurd, Radwulf's presence in the Black Hills was confined to four garrisoned forts, strung along the Giants' Road like beads on a necklace, and three tax-gathering posts. All fell. Some were more difficult than others - one fort fought a determined battle for three days before capitulating, while one of the tax posts hauled up the white flag as soon as the first banners appeared on the horizon. There was no repeat of the riot at Eagle Crag. Fastred and Eomer were both alert for indiscipline and moved to crush it immediately, and Irinya made it her business to persuade the chiefs that there was neither honour nor profit in slaughtering helpless prisoners. In this environment, most of the captured soldiers switched sides with alacrity. They were all conscripts, all had some grievance against Radwulf's officers or they would not have been serving on this frontier in the first place, and if they had to be stationed in a cold country miles from home it was a lot pleasanter if the local population was on the same side. Soon they formed a sizeable group, and Wootton was promoted to Regimental Sergeant-Major and set about the task of turning them into "real soljers" with gusto. The tax officials and some of the garrison commanders remained intransigent - the other side would say loyal - and were left under secure guard at the central fort, chiefly to save them from lynching.

Fastred found himself, rather reluctantly, the undisputed commander-in-chief. As was the Highland way, the assault on Eagle Crag had been turned into a poem of such epic dimensions that Fastred recognised neither the event nor the hero, and men from all over the Black Hills were eager to serve with him. It was a trying time for him. He had always detested the boring, organisational side of war and eagerly delegated it to anyone within range (most usually Gyrdan), and he liked to lead men he knew and could trust. Now he was landed with managing hundreds of complete strangers, in a foreign country with unfamiliar geography, peculiar culture and dismal climate. He coped, and he coped well, which said much for his ability and professionalism, but he didn't enjoy it. At first he consoled himself with the thought

that he would soon be able to hand it all over to Gyrdan - but as days drew into weeks and still no news came, even that hope slowly disappeared.

Irinya combined the military campaign with a diplomatic mission to the chiefs of the northern territories, and Fastred's respect for her political skill reached new highs. Although the Black Hills fell into six lordships - Ailart, Buchart, Islanart, Gragart, Lanthart and Mortach, not counting Darain which was as large as any four of the others combined - they were not lordships as understood in the Lowlands or in Billand. The clan chieftain was no more than the first among equals, leader of his (or, occasionally, her) people, not their ruler. Each lordship was a loose confederation of dozens of fiercely independent communities, some as small as the population of a single valley, or a village, or a fertile spot in the lap of the mountains. Each community had its own leader, and these subsidiary chiefs expected to be consulted on every decision of the slightest importance. The chieftain was generally the head of the largest or most powerful family, and in theory the office was inherited - although in practice, if the subsidiary chiefs disliked the current incumbent they were quite likely to attempt to overthrow him in favour of a brother or cousin or some other member of the principal family. Innumerable ties of blood, marriage, geography and friendship bound the clan confederations together, and equally innumerable quarrels, rivalries and feuds split them apart. Fighting was more or less endemic, both within the lordships and between them. This made the Black Hills a nation of warriors, in which almost every male between about fourteen and forty was capable of handling arms, in sharp contrast to the farming Lowlanders. It also made them impossible to control.

Yet, gradually, Irinya managed to construct a shifting alliance out of all the conflicting interests. As minor victory followed minor victory, the welcome grew ever warmer. Support was promised from all sides - for none wanted to miss a share of the spoils if the revolt proved successful - yet with the hillman's shrewdness, most tried to hedge their bets. Men were contributed in scores or fifties or hundreds, commanded by younger sons, half-brothers or distant cousins, with the solemn promise of more to come if they were needed. Venlan arrived with a hundred and twenty men - the largest contingent so far - and brought with him Fastred's horses, grown strong and glossy on Vidian's hospitality.

Kerian of Gragart, a volatile and vigorous young man of twenty who had inherited his lordship at the age of thirteen after his father's untimely death, was the exception to this rule. He came himself at the head of a troop of a hundred horsemen and two hundred and fifty foot-soldiers, a fine sight in bright livery blazoned with the spotted

wildcat, threw himself extravagantly at Irinya's feet, and swore the oath of loyalty - the only one to do so except Tyria. His arrival caused much comment and stir. Gragart was a long way north, among the last of the high hills before they fell away to the foothill country of Mortach on the edge of the Plain of Tears, and had hardly noticed Radwulf's rule. Kerian paid taxes only when he chose to, which was not very often, and replied to correspondence erratically and only in Arderin, which the harrassed officials were unable to translate. Deep within the Black Hills and fierce as the wildcat which was its symbol and friendliest inhabitant, Gragart was not really worth the trouble of subduing, and so Kerian had been able to get away with it. He therefore had less to gain than most, if also less to lose, and his presence in person and with almost half his full force was all the more remarkable.

"It is the faery blood in him, yes? It makes a man restless and eager for danger," Tyria observed, on one of the few occasions that Fastred got to talk to her. He was constantly busy with a thousand cares, and she was invariably the centre of a constellation of young noblemen.

"Faery blood? You're joking, surely?"

"Oh, no. Have you not noticed? The northern people are not of true Arderin descent. In Gragart the blood of the Old Ones runs strong. Can you not see it?"

Fastred had noticed that some of the Gragart contingent were somewhat different in appearance. Slighter of build and softer of colouring. There was a tendency to creamy skin tones instead of alabaster white, grey or blue eyes rather than black, and dark brown, slightly wavy hair rather than raven.

"Sometimes the songs call them Faeries, and sometimes the Old Ones," Tyria went on. "They lived in the forests and the mountains, before the Arderain came. They had the gifts of poetry and music, and it is said they could speak the tongues of birds and beasts and read the future. They are all gone now, but the first Arderain intermarried with them, just as later generations intermarried with settlers from the South. All the wandering bards are from those lineages, and in a few families there are still people with the clear sight."

"They must be related to Gyrdan," Fastred said thoughtfully. "He has the same colouring - not so dark as you - and sometimes he can see things before they happen. Not," he added bitterly, "that it seems to have done him any good this time."

Tyria's lovely eyes were dark and soft with sympathy.

"You have still heard nothing?"

Fastred shook his head, and Tyria sought for something hopeful to say.

"Then he must be still free, no? If he had been captured, we would hear. The Wolf would not miss such an opportunity."

"We'd hear *eventually*," Fastred said, without looking at her. "When Radwulf had finished with him -"

He broke off, picturing Gyrdan imprisoned, perhaps facing torment, and shuddered at the thought. Neither Gyrdan nor Irinya had ever given any details of what went on in Mickleburg's dark dungeons, but Fastred had an uncomfortable suspicion that it was worse than he could imagine. And he had served in the East, and could imagine some quite bad things.

"But it cannot have happened!" Tyria insisted, urgently. "Nor can he be dead. We would have heard that also, no?"

"If it was at Radwulf's hands," Fastred answered, his voice unusually sombre. "But it's winter. If they've had as much rain down South as we've had here, living rough would be very hard. Gyrdan's tough, and for all I know Berold is too, but Corin and Rosie aren't. And Gyrdan would put them first. He'd take any risk with his own life if he thought it would save theirs."

"They may not be with him -"

"Then it's even worse. If they aren't with Gyrdan, they're already dead. Maybe they all are. If he was hurt, or if he fell ill, he wouldn't have a chance. He could be dying of starvation or exhaustion or some awful fever, and we'd never hear. We'd never know."

Fastred would have been very gratified to see the expression on Tyria's face, if he had been looking at her. But his thoughts were far away, vainly searching the rain-soaked winter fields of Errendale.

"You were very fond of him, yes?"

"Very. Once in a lifetime you find a friend closer than a brother, and we were - I mean," he corrected himself fiercely, "- *we are* - like that."

Tyria reached over impulsively and squeezed his hand. "I am sorry," she said. "Truly I am."

"So am I," Fastred answered, on a long deep sigh. "So am I. Well, there is nothing we can do, nothing but wait. And hope."

There was one deeply unpleasant incident that threatened to destroy the alliance, and which had repercussions far beyond its immediate importance.

Shortly after the capture of the third fort, one of the Gragarain was found dead. His throat had been cut from ear to ear, he had been stripped of all clothing and

valuables, two of his fingers cut off to get at his rings, and the corpse had been thrown contemptuously into the fort ditch.

“Murder?” Fastred said, looking aghast at Kerian. “Are you sure? How do you know he was not killed in battle?”

“Because he was not in the battle,” Kerian answered. “I sent him with a message to my steward, three days before the assault. Riding very fast, he could not have returned here before nightfall of the day before we found him.”

“And we had all the garrison under lock and key by then,” Fastred said. “I see what you mean.”

Irinya went very white, and leaned against the edge of the table. “This I have feared,” she whispered. “This I have dreaded. Someone on our side killed him.”

“One of your turncoats, for sure!” Kerian snarled. “I said you should not welcome traitors! Lowland scum!”

“Now just you look here -” Fastred began, angered as always by the immediate assumption of Highland superiority.

Kerian’s hand went automatically to his sword-hilt. “This demands vengeance! No-one slays a Gragaran and lives!”

Irinya sprang between them.

“Murder is a crime whoever is killed,” she said sharply. “This is not a matter for blood-feud, Kerian, but for justice.”

“If you will not punish the evildoer, I will!”

“I will find him and punish him,” Irinya said with quiet determination. “I do not tolerate murder. Not by anyone, Kerian! Remember that!”

Enquiries were begun. The victim had returned to the fort shortly after midnight, according to the sentries on the gate, looking weary as if from a long ride. He had gone to stable his pony, which was confirmed, and then hailed a fellow-clansman patrolling the ramparts and had asked where he would find his chief. That, it seemed, was the last anyone had seen of him.

Irinya gave up on that line of investigation and started looking for the jewellery the man had owned, all of which he had been wearing when he hailed his compatriot. This bore fruit instantly. Gragart had a very individual jewellery style, based on a green-veined onyx unique to the locality and known as cat’s-eye, and the dead man had possessed an unusually splendid example set in a gold brooch in the shape of a leaping wildcat. Scores of men had seen that brooch since the murder, and they all agreed who had it.

“Lameter!”

He grinned insouciantly at Irinya, the magnificent brooch glittering on his cloak.

“It looks better on me than on him, do you not think? Undersized little whelp, the weight must have been too much for him to carry.”

Six burly Lowland soldiers were required to restrain Kerian. Eomer and Eomund, both present because Lameter was their close kinsman, looked intently at the floor.

Fastred stared at Lameter in bewildered horror.

“You don’t deny it? You admit you murdered him?”

Lameter shrugged as gracefully as he was able with guards holding him fast. “Of course I do not deny it. Why should I?”

Fastred was staggered. He had liked Lameter from the first, and could not believe him capable of such a deed. His hands flapped aimlessly. “But - but -”

Lameter laughed.

“Do not take on so! He was only a Gragaran.”

“Peace, Kerian!” Irinya said curtly. “Would you tell me, Lameter, why you did this wicked thing?”

“I wanted his wealth,” Lameter said easily. “Will you tell these oafs to let me go, Irinya?”

Kerian snarled at him savagely in Arderin, looking and sounding for all the world like an enraged wildcat. Lameter laughed at him.

“It is no good threatening me,” he said. “Tell him, Irinya. I am family.”

“If you let this devil go, Irinya, I will march all my Gragrain out of this camp within the hour, and we will not rest until Selatyn is avenged!”

“If you are here only to pursue a blood-feud, Kerian, then go, and good riddance to you!” Irinya snapped back, and Kerian fell silent. He had been expecting to be begged to stay, and the unexpected response had wrong-footed him completely.

Irinya looked back at Lameter, her eyes hard.

“You, Lameter son of Larador, are accused of the murder of one Selatyn son of Seladoc, of Gragart. You know the penalty for murder is death. How do you plead?”

“What do you mean -?”

“*Guilty or not guilty?*”

That was rapped out like the flail of a whip. The entire room fell silent. For the first time, Lameter looked worried.

“Guilty. But -”

“Silence!”

Irinya rose to her feet.

“Lameter son of Larador, you have pleaded guilty to the crime of murder before ten witnesses. You are hereby sentenced to death -”

“Irinya! No! You can’t do this!” Lameter was starting to gabble now. “I’m family! My mother was sister to your uncle’s wife!”

“- by hanging -”

“But the fellow was only a Gragaran! We have been at feud with the Gragarain for centuries!”

“- and may some god take pity on your soul.”

She turned her back.

“Irinya! Have you no pity? Have you forgotten me? Did we not hunt and ride and hawk together? Irinya! I was ever your friend. I have never harmed *you!*”

Fastred saw Irinya close her eyes and clench her hands. A well-liked friend, guilty of murder. He was very grateful that the decision did not rest with him.

“Spare me!” Lameter pleaded. “Spare me! I am your true friend, Irinya. Your true friend. Please -”

She turned to face him.

“Hang him,” she said coldly, and walked out of the room.

Chapter 20.

Rosie woke up, tried to turn over in bed, and was grabbed from behind.

“Hold still, Mistress!” laughed a voice in her ear. “Not much room on a pony.”

She craned her neck to see what manner of man had rescued them, and found to her surprise that he wore a mask. All she could see was a mouth, a pair of brown eyes, and a shock of untidy light brown hair falling over a square forehead. But the eyes were twinkling, and the voice was friendly enough.

“Who are you?”

“A friend,” he answered.

“Are you the Shadow?”

He tensed, and his voice lost its friendliness and became suddenly sharp.

“What is that to you?”

“I didn’t mean no ‘arm, mister,” Rosie protested hurriedly. “Only the Captain said ‘e was goin’ to fetch the Shadow to ‘elp us, an’ then you come, so I thought as you might be ‘im.”

“Who or what we are is no matter to you, Mistress,” he said coldly, and Rosie sighed.

“Now you’re cross with me. I didn’t mean to upset you, honest. But ain’t you got no name, mister? I got to call you something.”

He laughed, and relaxed a little.

“We do not use names. But, since I am carrying the Rose, I suppose I am the Briar.”

“Mister Briar. I s’pose it’ll do.”

She looked around for the others. It was early morning, judging from the cold pearly-grey light. Berold snored in his litter a few yards ahead, two men leading the ponies, and Corin was perched in front of another masked man, chewing on a lump of bread. The other men had disappeared, and she could see no sign of Gyrdan.

“Where’s the Captain?”

“Who? We were told - one sick man, one boy, and one girl. And that is what we found, is it not?”

“Wasn’t it the Captain what told you? I thought you was takin’ us to meet ‘im somewhere.”

“We are not going to meet anyone anywhere.”

“I ‘ope ‘e’s all right,” Rosie said anxiously. “‘E looked real bad last night, an’ ‘e never ‘ad no dinner, an’ next to no sleep. I thought ‘e were sickenin’ for somethin’. Mister, you sure you don’t know what ‘appened to ‘im?”

There was surprise in Briar’s voice now. “You seem more concerned for him than for yourself, Mistress.”

“Well, we’ll be all right now, won’t we? You’ll look after us.”

Surprise turned into astonishment.

“How trusting you are! You are not afraid of us? Even though we wear the masks, and you do not know who we are, and you are quite in our power?”

“What’s there to be scared of? The Captain brung you to ‘elp us, an’ ‘e wouldn’t do done that if you was goin’ to do us any ‘arm.”

“You have great faith in your friend,” Briar said wonderingly. “I am sorry I can give you no definite word of him. But take some comfort. He must have reached the Shadow safely with his message, or I should not be here.”

“True. ‘E must of gone on up to the Black ‘Ills to meet Miss an’ Mr Fastred, I shouldn’t wonder. ‘E wouldn’t want to be parted from ‘er a minute longer than ‘e ‘ad to be.”

She looked round, realising they must have travelled some considerable distance while she slept. They were out of the woods and climbing steeply up a narrow valley, desolate and dreary under the grey sky. The hillsides above were still white, but in the valley bottom the rain had washed away the snow and the ponies picked their slow path among muddy pools and faded grass. Stands of trees, all now barren and leafless, dotted the lower slopes, and a stony river thundered alongside. There was no path, and no sign of any human habitation.

“Where are we?”

“Here,” was the accurate but unenlightening answer.

“Where’s ‘ere?”

“In this valley.”

Rosie gave up this line of enquiry and tried another tack.

“Where are we goin’?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“You ain’t bein’ very ‘elpful,” she complained.

“Ask no questions, Mistress, and you will get no lies.”

“Why so mysterious, mister? Don’t you trust me?”

He laughed. “In this business, Mistress, I trust my own wits, my own right arm, and nothing else. I was asked to look after you, and I promised to do so. Let that be enough for you.”

In a little while, the valley levelled out into a sheltered dell, where a stream leaped down from the hilltops in a foaming white waterfall and plunged into a deep pool, before running out more sedately to join the main river. Beside the pool stood the remains of a tiny cottage, little more than a hut. Its windows were shuttered and blank, its paint peeling, and a rampant bramble bush covered half the front wall. Ivy clung to the roof and scrambled up the leaning chimney, and an overflowing gutter poured a thin stream of water down one corner. A derelict drystone wall surrounded what must once have been a garden, now sadly overgrown with weeds and littered with broken roof-tiles, and a heap of rubble and broken timber marked the site of the collapsed pigsty and wood-shed.

Rosie’s face fell. She had been hoping for a proper house, with a fire and hot food and a bed to sleep in, not some damp ruin.

“It’s better’n the cave in the woods,” she said bravely, as Briar dismounted and helped her down.

“So I hope,” he answered. “You will be safe here. We must make haste to be gone, but one of us may return tonight. Do not venture out of this dell, and make as little noise as you can. But you may light a fire - the smoke disperses before it rises above the shoulder of the hill.”

Corin and Rosie stood forlornly by the broken gate - Berold had already been carried inside - watching their rescuers ride away. It was a cold, raw day with rain in the wind. They were both hungry, tired, ragged and filthy from days of living rough in the muddy woods, and their clothes were unpleasantly damp from yesterday’s soaking. They had no food, no means of making a fire even if they could find any wood, no spare clothing and Berold needed the only blankets they possessed.

A tear trickled down Corin’s face, leaving a pale stripe in the dirt.

“I thought they’d take us somewhere nice. One give me a bit o’ bread, an’ I et it all, Rosie, I didn’t save none for you. I thought there’d be lots. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

She squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry. P’raps they’ll bring us somethin’ tonight. Come on, we better go in. It’s goin’ to rain again.”

In the gloom inside, she groped her way round the walls, barking her shin on something very hard, and threw open the battered shutters.

“Cor!” Corin exclaimed.

The cottage was not derelict after all. It was dusty, and home to a tribe of large and industrious spiders, judging from the cobwebs draped from the beams, but it was obviously weather-tight. The wooden floor and whitewashed walls, though worn and grubby, showed no sign of damp, and the felt visible between the beams was sound and dry. Evidently the scrambling ivy was hiding a sound roof, not a series of holes. The cottage was furnished, too, after a fashion. A table, a long wooden settle, a chair and a square chest under the window - that was what Rosie had tripped over. Never mind that the chair had one arm missing, or that the table had a chunk of wood shoved under one leg to stop it rocking. A basket of logs stood by the hearth, with a bundle of kindling twigs and a tinder-box next to it, and peering up the chimney showed it to be clear, with a glimpse of daylight far above. On one side of the fireplace a shelf held an odd assortment of pots and kitchen utensils, a reel of thread with a needle stuck in it, a jar of lye soap and a couple of half-burnt tallow candles, and beneath the shelf stood a wooden tub with a large cauldron stacked inside it.

On the other side of the chimney, a doorway with a patched curtain hung across it led into a second room. Berold was lying on a bed against one wall, still wrapped in his blanket, and there was just enough space for a second small bed under the window. Like the rest of the furniture, the beds were obviously discarded from somewhere else and reaching the end of their useful lives, but they were still serviceable and the straw-stuffed mattresses were dusty but not damp.

Rosie laid a hand on Berold’s forehead. No fever, and when his eyes opened they were clear and sensible. He recognised her and smiled feebly.

“How’re you feelin?”

“Grand,” he whispered, though his pale face and sunken cheeks gave him the lie. “Nowt wrong wi’ me, lass.” He tried to point to the foot of the bed. “A bag. Them fellas left it. Has tha seen it?”

Berold’s pack lay on the floor, and beside it was a bulging saddlebag. Corin grabbed it and unfastened the buckles.

“Ere, Rosie, look at this! A whole loaf o’ bread. An’ cheese, an’ apples. Apples! An’ somethin’ what looks like flour, only it ain’t been ground properly.”

“That’s oatmeal, that is.”

They rummaged deeper, and found a bundle of candles, some onions and carrots and turnips, and, right at the very bottom, a small lump of bony mutton roughly wrapped in a cloth.

Rosie rolled her sleeves up.

“Right! Looks like they thought of everythin’. A bite o’ breakfast, an’ then we’ll make a start.”

Late evening found Rosie kneeling on the floor in front of the fire, mending a huge rip in her petticoat. Every so often she would stop and get up to turn the damp laundry spread on every available surface, or to stir the pot hanging over the fire, and then settle to her task again, shaking out her hair in the hope of making it dry faster. Berold and Corin were already fast asleep in the two beds in the other room, and Rosie herself was tired out. It had been a busy day. For the first and maybe the last time since leaving home, they had had fires, hot water and shelter, and Rosie had not wasted the opportunity. She and Corin had swept and dusted and scrubbed the two rooms, heated water, stripped and washed Berold - despite his embarrassed protests - dressed his wound, and put him to bed. They had boiled cauldron after cauldron of water and scrubbed and pounded laundry until their fingers were sore and their backs ached and the steam billowed around the cottage like mist over the fens, and then they had cooked stew and Rosie had coaxed Berold to eat a little while Corin had a bath - Corin, who normally had to be forced to wash practically at swordpoint. Finally, after Corin had eaten dinner and gone to bed, Rosie had washed their remaining clothes and had her own bath. Ah, the comfort, the sheer luxury of hot water! She had never appreciated it until she had to do without. It caressed her skin like a fine lady’s silk gown, and soothed the bruise on her shin, and eased the ache in her shoulders and back. And then the pleasure of putting a clean dress on a clean body, and the wonderful feeling of emptying the tub outside and slamming the door on the cold black night and coming in again to the friendly glow of the fire. As soon as she had finished mending her petticoat, she would eat her share of the stew and then fall asleep herself. She would have to make do with sleeping on the settle - there were only two beds, and Berold had been scandalised at the prospect of sharing a room with a young woman - but the chest under the window had turned out to be crammed with blankets and rugs and she would be reasonably comfortable. Anyway, after living in the woods this was the height of luxury. She yawned, sleepy and contented as a fireside cat, and then jumped so hard she jabbed the needle into her finger.

A click of the latch, and the door opened, letting in a freezing draught, a brief swirl of sleet and a man huddled in a cloak and hood. Rosie's heart leaped briefly, and then she realised he was not tall enough to be Gyrdan. He took his cloak off, and she recognised the curly brown hair. And the mask.

"Mister Briar?"

He nodded, and made to come into the room.

"Ere, you take them filthy boots off first!" Rosie ordered. "An' what d'you mean by bargain' in like this without even knockin'? S'pose I 'adn't 'ad no clothes on?"

Another man might have answered that he could always hope. Briar's ears and neck, all that was visible around the mask, went crimson.

"Sorry, Mistress. I did not think."

A glance down confirmed to Rosie that all the buttons on her dress were done up, and her appearance was reasonably decorous. She folded the petticoat surreptitiously, so he would not know what it was she was mending, and hoped he would not notice the rest of her underclothes draped over the chest by the window.

"Well, no 'arm done. Come in an' get warm. I can feel the cold off you from 'ere. I thought nobody'd come tonight, bein' as it's got so late."

Briar, hopping on one foot and trying to remove his second boot, coughed sheepishly. "I thought it best to come a different way, on foot over the shoulder of the hill. Too many hoofmarks up the valley might attract attention. But I missed my way in the dark."

"You walked 'ere? In this weather?"

"This is nothing. Wait until winter really sets in. I've known this cottage buried in snow to the eaves, and the waterfall frozen solid."

But he drew the chair very close to the fire and stretched his hands out gratefully to the flames.

"Til winter? 'Ow long are we goin' to be 'ere?"

"Until the Wolf discovers you," Briar said, grimly. "But, I hope, long enough for your companion to recover. How is he?"

"Real weak. 'E's lost a lot o' weight. But there ain't no fever an' 'is wound don't smell. I think 'e'll be all right with rest an' warmth an' care."

"I am glad to hear it."

Briar leaned back in his chair. His eyes swept the room, missing nothing, and then came back to rest on Rosie. This morning he had left a cold, dusty cottage and three bedraggled refugees. This evening he came back to find the room clean and bright

and presided over by this lovely girl, with hair like a river of gold and a charming tendency to order him around as if she owned the place.

"You have worked wonders here, Mistress. I never knew the place look so welcoming."

"It wanted a good clean. You don't mind?"

"I think you improve it immeasurably," Briar said truthfully.

"Dunno if the spiders 'ud agree with you. Who lives 'ere?"

"When I was a boy, an old lady who kept chickens and about three hundred cats. Since she died, no-one."

"Why don't somebody fix up the outside proper? It looks like a ruin."

"That is the intention. It makes it much less likely to be searched." He leaned forward again, and his tone became low and urgent. "Be careful that you do not leave traces outside - do not clear away snow when it falls, do not mend the gates or tidy the garden. Never let a light show after dusk. And if you hear people passing, in the dead of night, *do not watch or speak to them*, do you understand?"

"Not even if they're other smugglers?"

Briar sat back and folded his arms. "I do not know what you are talking of, Mistress."

"Oh, come off it. It don't need no great brain to work it out," Rosie said tartly. "Masks an' stuff, an' the cloths over the ponies' feet, an' all this secrecy. Berold used to be a smuggler, 'til 'e got caught."

"If he was caught, he was very lucky to survive," Briar said sombrely. "Not many do. That is why I ask you to see nothing, hear nothing and say nothing. I am too attached to my head to want it stuck on a spike over Mickleburg gate. And yours, Mistress Rose, is far too lovely to suffer a similar fate. Be careful. Danger is all around."

He got to his feet. Rather wearily, Rosie thought.

"One of us will come every evening, after dark, to check on you and to bring more food." He pointed to the leather satchel he had left by the door. "I wish you good night, Mistress."

"Ave you got to go already? You can't be properly warm yet."

He laughed. "I shall get cold again between here and home, so that makes no difference. I have to go. It is late, and I have to eat, and I would like to get at least some sleep tonight."

"Well, at least stay an' eat somethin' 'ere. There's spare stew in the pot, an' if you brung us more food I don't need to keep it for tomorrow, do I?"

“Well -”

“It’ll only take a few minutes. Pass me two plates down, I can’t reach the back o’ that shelf. An’ push the table up in front o’ the fire -”

She took the lid off the pot, and Briar sniffed appreciatively. He sat down without further argument.

“This is good,” he said in amazement, after his first spoonful. And then, after he had cleared his plate and mopped up the gravy with his bread, “This is *really* good. You had provisions with you?”

“Not a sausage. It’s what you left this mornin’.”

“What? You work miracles. There was no time to find decent food - I could only bring whatever I could grab from the larder in the dark, and I am afraid it must have been very little.”

“There was scrag o’ mutton an’ vegetables. An’ there’s thyme growin’ in the garden, an’ a rosemary bush with a few needles left. What’s ‘ard about makin’ a stew out o’ that?”

Briar’s eyes were round with wonder.

“My housekeeper would have served up a plateful of bones and water, with a layer of grease floating on the top.” He shuddered slightly at the thought.

“Then you ought to give ‘er the sack an’ get a proper cook,” Rosie said crisply. “Or do your own cookin’.”

“I do, and it is even worse,” Briar said ruefully. He stood up and stretched, and Rosie noticed that his coat was crudely patched and there were holes in both his socks. Obviously the housekeeper was as useless a needlewoman as a cook. He held out his hand. “Thank you, Mistress. I am very grateful. Now I have to go, but I hope to come again tomorrow.”

Outside the cottage, days darkened, nights lengthened, and winter began to bite. Inside, all was warmth and tranquillity. They wanted for nothing, for the smugglers were true to their word and came secretly every night with food and fuel. Corin took on the role of nurse, for Berold refused point-blank to have Rosie look after him, even though she protested that he was old enough to be her father and she didn’t fancy him anyway. Under their combined care Berold’s wound slowly healed and his strength began to return. He was a cheerful and uncomplaining patient, and they all shared his infectious delight when he could sit in a chair for the first time, and when he could stagger a few steps around the cottage, leaning on Corin’s shoulder. If they had only known that Gyrdan was safe, they would have been completely

happy. But that was one comfort the smugglers could not bring. At Rosie’s urging, Briar made discreet enquiries all over the district, but drew a complete blank. They cheered themselves up by telling one another that Gyrdan must surely have reached the Black Hills by now - not knowing that, even as they did so, Fastred and Irinya were also waiting anxiously for news that never came.

Briar came very often, arriving ever earlier and staying ever later. The cottage was evidently more congenial than his own home, if only because he could be sure of finding a fire and a good meal. Yet he was never really relaxed. He would never remove his mask, despite Corin’s teasing, and he weighed every word before he said it, anxious to give no clue that would identify him, any of his men, or even their location. He was very angry when he found that Corin had climbed the tree behind the cottage, in an unsuccessful attempt to peer out of the confining valley and find some landmark that Berold would recognise. Instead of being praised for his initiative and daring, Corin found himself on the receiving end of a tongue-lashing that sent him to bed in tears.

“You’re too ‘ard on ‘im, Briar,” Rosie said softly, when Corin’s sobs had died away and been replaced by the familiar orchestra of snores, Berold’s bass to Corin’s contralto. “There weren’t no call for you to say you’d person’ly throttle ‘im if you caught ‘im at it again.”

Briar was lying back in his chair as though exhausted.

“It was no empty threat, Rose,” he said heavily. “I mean it. Even though he is your brother and I am fond of him.”

“It were just thoughtless. ‘E never meant no ‘arm.”

“Don’t defend him! Thoughtlessness kills just as effectively as malice.” He sat forward, and his voice took on a painful intensity. “You think you are safe here. And so you are. Because eight men are risking their lives to keep you so. Their lives, Rose! If we are caught harbouring you, every one of us will go to the gallows. Some of the men are married, and the wife and children of a convicted smuggler are outcast. Turned onto the roads to starve. And if the Wolf is in a bad temper, or feels like making an example, it won’t be just my eight men and their families who suffer but the whole village. Every man hanged, every house torched. Tell Corin to think of *that* next time!”

Rosie blanched, and Briar sighed. He leaned back in the chair again and drew a weary hand over his eyes.



“I am sorry. Do not think we resent you. We run those risks every day of our lives, with every load we carry. We will see you safe, if by any means we can. But I beg you, do not add to the danger!”

Rosie looked across at him, and tried to imagine what it must be like to live under the permanent threat of death, and why any man would choose to do so.

“Ow did you get into smugglin’? I can understand it for Berold, ‘e’s a poor man an’ prob’ly never ‘ad no choice. But you’re the local lord, ain’t you?”

Briar jumped. “What makes you say that?”

“S obvious. You don’t talk like Berold an’ the others. You talk proper, like Mr Fastred. Eddicated. An’ you got servants.”

“One. Lots of people employ the odd servant.”

“Not some ‘arf-witted ‘ousekeeper, what you keep on out o’ kindness, even though she’s so useless you ‘as to do your own cookin’ an’ mend your own socks.”

“She is very old and very frail, not half-witted,” Briar said sharply.

“Comes to the same thing,” Rosie answered, not much abashed. “So I reckon you’re the local lord, see? Ain’t I right?”

Briar sighed again.

“I see I have been very careless. It was a mistake to come here so often and talk with you, much as I have enjoyed it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about them others. Berold an’ Corin wouldn’t notice your accent. Them two wouldn’t notice a barn til it fell on ‘em. An’ I dunno where we are, so I couldn’t put no name to you whatever anybody did to me. Don’t think Radwulf’d get very far lookin’ for a Mister Briar, would ‘e? But what’s a lord doin’ smugglin’? Don’t make no sense.”

“A lord,” Briar said, with a queer smile. “You make me sound like a magnate. Castles and servants and mountains of money. I own five small hill-farms, Rose, two of them derelict and the others on the verge of bankruptcy, and another small manor further south in even worse case. If I get a month’s rent in a year I think myself lucky. I live alone in two leaking rooms in a half-ruined house I cannot afford to repair. I keep one servant, who is loyal but of little help, one decent horse - which I have now lost - and one broken-down hack. I eat - well, you can guess the standard of my table. A lord, Rose? A small farmer in your country would live better than I.”

He sounded tired to death, and yet oddly eager to talk. Rosie had long since guessed he lived a rather lonely life, and if he wanted to talk to her she would be only too pleased to listen. She nodded encouragingly.

“Why don’t you make ‘em pay their rent?”

“Because they *can’t* pay. How can they, with almost all the merchants out of business and no-one to sell their produce to except the smugglers, and what little cash they have needed to buy salt? Oh, I have the right to flog or imprison or evict, even to hang. And my neighbours do. But it serves no purpose, save to reduce the wretched family to even worse poverty, and render them unable to pay even a month’s rent next year. It is impossible to find tenants to replace those evicted, the land turns sour for want of cultivation, and I am worse off than before. My tenants pay me as much as they can afford, sometimes more, and between us every year we scrape up enough to pay my dues to my overlords. They know very well that if I fail to pay the manors could be confiscated and given to someone else. Who would also be unable to collect the rents, but might be more brutal in his failure.”

He sighed. “Once, this made me very angry. I talked a lot of nonsense about fighting back, starting a rebellion, overthrowing Lord Radwulf and setting everything to rights. Abolishing the tax on salt so we could preserve meat for the winter again, abolishing the tax on cloth so we could sell our wool, burning down the customs houses, hanging the officials from their own flag-poles. Not that I had any idea what I would do after Lord Radwulf was deposed, except maybe set myself up as a dictator in his place.” He laughed, ruefully. “I was lucky that no-one of importance heard me. But the Shadow got to hear, somehow. He came to me unexpectedly in the warm half-dark of a summer evening on the moors. Even my dog did not hear his approach. He made me see that fighting was no sort of answer. That people needed cheap salt and a market for their cloth, not empty vengeance. And that I could do more good as a trader than as a warrior, for all my fine talk.

“That was five years ago. I selected my men, as I had been selected, in secret. I know them, but they do not know each other, or me. Though of course, they may have guessed by now, even as you have. It is difficult for a group of close neighbours to remain disguised to one another, even behind the masks. But of the neighbouring groups, with whom we interchange loads, I know nothing at all, save the places where the goods are hidden and the code we use.”

“But I thought you got salt an’ stuff from Billand?”

“So we do. But not in one journey. I have never been out of Carlundy. It is like a bucket chain from the river to a burning house. I buy fleeces and finished cloth from the farmers in secret, shift them half a night’s journey south, and leave a message for the captain of the next group. I do not know who he is. All I know is that he takes the goods from their hiding place, and leaves me salt or weapons, and sometimes a little money to make up equal value. And I take what I can sell locally, and shift the

rest half a night's journey north or east, and leave a message for the captain of that group, whoever he is. And so on. The same with people. That is why I maintain this cottage - often they are not fit to travel and take time to recover. When Berold is well again, I will hand you on to the next captain, and he to the next, and so on until you reach home."

Rosie had to think quite hard about the next question. "I can see you makes a profit on the salt an' stuff. But what about folk? D'you charge 'em or somethin'?"

Briar shook his head vehemently. "I do not. Others do. If rumour is to be believed, some make a tidy living out of it. People whose lives are in danger will trade everything they have for a hope of safety." He shrugged. "It is not for me to criticise. I am not a poor man with a wife and twelve children to keep. But do not worry, Rose. If there is passage to be paid for you three, I will see to it. It is the least I can do."

"I wasn't thinkin' about that. 'Ow d'you leave messages if you dunno who they're for?"

"There are agreed places," Briar said evasively. "Hollow trees, loose bricks in pigsties, loose tiles in roofs. We change them by agreement now and then, in case the Wolf's spies find them. And we do not leave written notes. I can read and write, though I admit not very well, but maybe the others cannot. I do not know. We use objects. Suppose you looked behind a loose brick and found a swan's feather, an oak twig with a scrap of wool caught on it, a heather stalk cut half through, a dozen pebbles and a white stone with four deep scratches on it and a bit of string tied to it. What would you think?"

"I'd think it were rubbish, or kiddies playin' some game."

"Good. Yet to the captain of the smugglers south of here, that would tell him I had left twelve sacks of raw fleece in the oakwoods above the village of Swanley, that I wanted four barrels of salt from him, and that for some reason he should not use the pass where the heather grows deep, probably because I had seen soldiers camped there."

"Sounds awful complicated. Why not just meet 'im?"

"Because what I do not know I cannot be made to tell, whatever torment the Wolf invents. It must be that way, for this is a very dangerous trade, Rose. The only way we can hope to survive is to make sure that one traitor or captive cannot betray more than a handful of others. There could be another group under another captain operating out of the same village, and I would know nothing about it."

"Real clever. Did you think o' that?"

"Me? I could not invent such a system in a hundred years! It is all the Shadow's doing. It was the Shadow who copied the Wolf's seal, so we can stamp goods and receipts just as well as the customs house. And I guess it must be the Shadow who recruited all the captains, as he recruited me."

Rosie sniffed. "E must be a busy man, then."

Briar laughed. "I doubt it! I have met him exactly twice, once when he recruited me and once a week ago when he came to tell me about you. That is not much in five years!"

"What's 'e like?"

"I do not know. I never saw his face. I have no idea who he is, or where he lives. I do not even know how to get a message to him. That is as well, for if I knew how to reach the Shadow I could be used as a trap for him, and if he were caught and tortured, he could betray every captain in Carlundy. How your friend knew where to find him I cannot imagine."

"The Captain knows a lot of things other people don't," Rosie said thoughtfully. "Mr Wootton the butler says 'is job's spyin', though there's a nicer-soundin' word for it. P'raps 'e was spyin' on your Shadow?"

Briar looked up, and somehow she knew he was pale under the mask. "If he was, that may explain his disappearance, Mistress. We do not take kindly to spies."

## Chapter 21.

In some curious way, Lameter's execution helped to cement the alliance. It demonstrated, as nothing else could, that none was considered above the law, and that family feuds were not to be considered an excuse for murder. In theory, a new feud could have developed between Lameter's kin and Irinya's, but Lameter had been too cocky and too successful with other men's wives to inspire much of a passion for vengeance, especially as his closest kinsmen were Eomer and Eomund, neither of whom considered him a great loss. Several chieftains shelved their plans to use the revolt as a cover for their own quarrels, disappointed to be deprived of this time-honoured tradition. One or two minor captains quietly slipped away. Beyond that, there was little outward change, except that several mysteriously stolen trinkets were restored, equally mysteriously, to their owners.

By the third week of December, all the Black Hills except Hygurd's earldom of Darain was under Irinya's control, and all Radwulf's troops either prisoners or defectors. All the chieftains - again with the exception of Hygurd and those of his vassals who were not courting Tyria - had promised support, albeit with varying degrees of warmth. But still there was no news of Gyrdan and Berold, or of Corin and Rosie. They had not reached the Black Hills, of that there was no doubt. Yet there was no news of their capture in Errendale, either. And though Gyrdan had promised to come to the Hill of the Watchkeeper, and Irinya had prevailed upon Gartran of Islanart to station a permanent watch there, neither man nor message ever came. It was as though all four had vanished from the face of the earth.

It was two days before the winter solstice, and Irinya was away with a small escort on a mission to Firdan of Mortach, the last outpost of Carlundy. A rendezvous had been arranged at the northernmost fort the following day, and in the meantime the remainder of the host was being royally entertained by Kerian of Gragart in his own hall. It was some great feast day, although it seemed to Fastred that feast days came round at least once a week, and Kerian was no niggardly host. There was music, and dancing, and fine food, and many lovely girls - Kerian was the only boy in a family of twelve - and a great deal of alcohol. There was a strong sense also of the first stage accomplished and a new phase about to begin. It should have been an evening of celebration.

Fastred sat at a side table and glared at the crowd of men centred on Tyria like a swarm of bees on a honey jar. He did not feel in the least like celebrating. Not that he was at all jealous. Perish the thought. There was some other reason for his ill temper.

He wanted a woman. Perhaps that was it. Verenice had given him a night to remember, but it had been followed by nearly a month of celibacy. Quite why, Fastred was not sure. There had certainly been no lack of opportunity - his good looks, high position and charming foreign manners had seen to that - but somehow he had not felt like it. He shifted in his chair. There was a very pretty girl on the other side of the room, one of Kerian's numerous sisters or half-sisters, who kept trying to catch his eye. Fastred let his mind dwell on the possibilities for a minute, and then concluded that he didn't want a woman, he wanted Tyria.

He stared at the back of Venlan's head, which was the nearest he could get to seeing Tyria. Why did he not just get up, walk over there, and ask her directly? It was easy enough - the rules of the game here were simplicity itself. If you liked a girl you told her so. If she liked you she said yes, and if she did not like you she told you to take a running jump. What could be simpler?

Fastred sighed, and kicked the table moodily. Tyria might say no, and if she did he knew he would be deeply hurt. Even worse, she might say yes, as Verenice had. And this time he did not want to be treated as an agreeable amusement. For this was much more serious than his usual lighthearted passions. Much as he wanted to take Tyria to bed - and he crossed and uncrossed his legs at the thought - for once that was not all he wanted. He supposed he had what his aunts would call "honourable intentions".

Back in Fairhaven, he would have been on a well-marked path. It began with formal conversation in drawing-rooms, with fatuous remarks such as "Warm for the time of year, don't you think, Lady Whatsyourname?". It progressed to soirees and afternoon parties, where young men competed for the privilege of performing trivial tasks such as fetching a forgotten shawl or moving the young lady's chair out of a draught. It might progress to a strenuous walk of up to ten minutes in the gardens, under the eagle eye of the young lady's mother or chaperone. Then to being permitted to dance with her at glittering balls, under the baleful gaze not only of her chaperone, but of every inveterate gossip in society. By this stage, having fallen hopelessly in love with the young lady on the strength of perhaps five minutes private conversation, the swain was expected to freeze to death serenading her on

romantic moonlit nights, after which she might deign to appear at her window and throw him some token of her great esteem, such as a rose from her dress.

Fastred was a little hazy as to what came next, usually getting bored well before the rose-throwing stage. He had a vague idea that it involved an interview with the young lady's parents, when the mother simpered and the father stood with his back to the hearth and said things like "Can you keep my daughter in the style to which she has become accustomed?". That was never likely to be a problem for the Earl of Sherbourne's son, although a dispossessed exile might have rather more explaining to do.

At this point, the parents would either break off the match - whereupon the young man was expected to pine away for unrequited love and the young lady enter a nunnery and devote her life to prayer and fasting - or open negotiations in earnest. When the matters of dowry, inheritance, land rights, property, investments, education of the children, guests at the wedding, menu for the reception, location of the marital home and the names of the first three children were agreed, marriage would follow. Provided that the young couple had not died of old age in the meantime.

He had a feeling, however, that things must be done differently here. If he said "Warm for the time of year" to Tyria, she would say "How do you know?". She didn't notice draughts, and any attempt on his part to run errands would be met with laughter and the comment that surely he had better uses for his time. Tyria's idea of gentle exercise was a thirty-mile ride or a brisk run to the top of the nearest mountain. Fastred had danced with her, but such dances! In Fairhaven they danced stately pavaues, and a half-inch variation in the placing of his hand on the girl's waist could amount to a proposal of marriage. Here the popular dance was a crazy thing called a reel, an uninhibited leaping and gyrating which played havoc with low-cut dresses and at the climax involved lifting the girl clear off her feet and swinging her in the air, all flying skirts and long white legs. He couldn't serenade Tyria at her private window because longhouses didn't have private windows and he couldn't sing anyway. If he tried, the entire hall would wake up, and what they threw at him wouldn't be roses.

Tyria was dancing with Tiercel of Lake Dunart. Fastred watched her laughing into his face, watched Tiercel's hands on Tyria's waist and shoulders, and scowled like a thunderstorm. The reel ended, and she laughed and clapped and transferred to Kerian without even a glance in his direction.

Fastred sighed again, deeper this time. Perhaps Tyria did not find him attractive. This would make her unique among his female acquaintance, but there was no

conceit in him and he was willing to concede that it might be the case, however disappointing. The first girl he'd really fallen in love with was also the first who was not attracted to him. There was a word for that. Irony, that was it.

He reached morosely for the brandy jug. There was nothing ironic about brandy. You knew where you were with brandy.

The following morning was wet and cold and grey, and Fastred had a terrible hangover. He snapped at everyone who ventured a word to him, and the whole party seemed very much relieved to see the square outline of the fort looming up through the driving sleet. Fastred appropriated one of the rooms in the old commandant's house, squelched into it and slammed the door behind him. He swore at the servant who came to tell him dinner was ready, and at the one who offered to take his soaked clothes to dry, and at the one who came to ask if sir would like supper on a tray. After that, they stopped coming.

A little later, he found that he had neglected to fasten his bag properly that morning and his spare clothes were all wet too. But he was in too foul a temper to do anything about it except curse his rotten luck and this rotten country and its rotten weather. He sat shivering in the fireless chamber, listening to laughter and song filtering up from below, thinking that next time someone came to ask him to join them, he might allow himself to be persuaded.

Time went by. Eventually, when he realised that no-one was going to come and coax him out of his ill-temper, he went to bed to sulk in comfort.

"Mmmph?" muttered Fastred, waking up.

Someone else was in the room, breathing light but very quick. Fastred sat up, feeling for his sword.

Bangles clinked, and then the lamp was lit.

"Ty - ri - a!"

He made to get out of bed, and then rapidly thought better of it. His clothes were drying on the floor and for tonight he had adopted the Highland habit of sleeping naked.

"What is it? Some danger?"

She was clearly much agitated. The bangles on her wrists clinked together, and her breast was heaving.

"Danger? Yes, maybe. I-I do not know. Your customs are different from ours -"

"What have customs got to do with anything?"

“You like me, yes? You *look* at me, like the blackcock in the spring. But you do not *come* to me. I do not understand it.” Her voice was shaking, and her fingers plucked nervously at her belt buckle. “So now - so now - I come to you!”

She threw the belt to the floor and hauled the tunic over her head.

There was silence for a very long moment. Fastred had spent many restless nights imagining this situation, but somehow all he could do was stare, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth.

Tyria did not shrink under this unintentional scrutiny. But the colour came and went in her face, and her breathing was fast and irregular. Proof that she was not quite so bold as she looked.

“I am not - to your li - king now you - see me?” Her voice was constrained, and broke in the wrong places. “I disapp - oint you? Yes?”

Fastred found his voice.

“Yes,” he breathed. “Oh, *yes!*”

“I go then.”

“No! I mean - Tyria -! Oh, hell!”

“I am hell?”

“You are heaven. You are beautiful. I love you -”

She was in his arms now, and kissing him wildly. And presently there came an end to misunderstanding.

“Some customs are the same in all countries, no?”

His hands and lips made silent, eloquent answer and she laughed in delight.

“Again? So soon?”

“Hmm? Mmmm! You never sleep, no?”

“Not with you in my arms -”

“In *some* things you are hot-blooded - oh - yes -”

“Yes?”

“Yes!”

“Why did you come, Tyria?”

“Because I wanted you. I have wanted you almost since I first saw you. It is called love, no?”

“Tyria, you are wonderful! No woman of my own country would ever have said that!”

“I have heard that to make love to a woman of the South is like mounting a pillow with a hole in it.”

“Tyria!”

“I have said something funny? Is it really true, that your womenfolk do not say to men that they love? That they wait to be noticed and then pretend to scorn?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is.”

“I cannot understand them. For the fire burns in women as hot as in men, no? And we have a saying, that the fire must be quenched by a man, often and well, or it will burn the woman to ashes from within.”

“I’d hate that to happen to you -”

“It is dawn. It is time to get up, no?”

“That an offer?”

“I help you, so - It is to your liking?”

“Ah, *Tyria* -”

“Fastred!”

“Tyria? I want to ask you something.”

“For you, the answer is always yes -”

“No, this is important. Tyria - will you marry me?”

“The answer is yes. I said so.”

“Really? You really mean it? Tyria! When?”

“Today, if you like.”

“Don’t I have to ask your relatives’ permission or something?”

“You have my permission, no?”

“You don’t need anyone else’s approval?”

“I am Mael Caradon and I do not need anyone’s approval for anything. Remember that!”

So Fastred and Tyria were married in the dark days of mid-winter. And ever afterward they swore it was just chance that their wedding night was the longest of the year.

Irina gave them almost a week, during which time remarkably little was seen of either of them. Then she called both to council.

“Back to reality,” she told them, smiling. “We hold all the Black Hills now except Darain. There is no more to be done here. It is time we carried the battle to the enemy.”

Fastred agreed, apprehensively. He had been expecting to be asked to devise a strategy for the conquest of Errendale, and was not looking forward to admitting that he had no idea how to. He was by nature a dashing captain, not a general, and invariably lost at chess.

To his relief, Irinya continued.

“We have not the strength - yet - to challenge Hygurd or Radwulf directly. But we can twist the wolf’s tail. Caradon is right on the south-eastern fringe of the Black Hills. If you will agree, Tyria, it would make the perfect base for border raiding.”

“Of course I agree. Reiving is my people’s pastime, no?”

“Thank you. Fastred, I would like you to command the operation, if you will.”

Fastred sighed. Five days of marriage.

“Oh, very well.”

“Your second-in-command will be Tyria.”

Fastred’s grin threatened to remove the top of his head, and Tyria threw her arms round Irinya’s neck and kissed her.

“Our honeymoon! It is our honeymoon, no?”

“Well, we are a little cramped here, are we not? I think you would be happier elsewhere. But I expect you to earn your keep. And be careful!”

“I’ve certainly no intention of being good,” Fastred said.

“I meant, you clown, militarily. Don’t get yourselves hurt or killed, and above all don’t get caught.”

“All the girls say that.”

“Pay attention, both of you. This is serious.”

“Right,” Fastred agreed, pulling himself together. “All right, I’m listening.”

“You will need to take and hold a corridor through Darain to Caradon, to give you a means of retreat -”

Fastred nodded. “Very sensible. We can’t afford to get cut off. I’d say, from the fort at Eagle Crag heading east-ish up that valley there -” he tapped the map. “It’s quite short that way, and Leofric can offer reinforcements if Hygurd attacks in strength. Five hundred men should be enough.”

“Good. From Caradon, you can raid into Errendale. Take most of the horses, and as many Highlandmen as you think can be spared. As Tyria says, raiding is the national sport. Do not waste time on strong points, but strike swiftly, and retire into

the hills. Anything is fair game - baggage trains, soldiers, couriers, stores depots, taxation posts. Whatever you can find. But make sure you leave the common people alone. I want them on our side.”

Fastred raised an eyebrow. “You think that will make them rise for you?”

“No, I do not. But I *am* sure that stealing from them will set them against us. There is enmity enough between the Black Hills and Errendale without adding to it. And there is another reason. They will be the best source of news. I want to know what Radwulf is doing, who his commanders are, where his troops are billeted. For I am certain he does not lie idle. And also - you may hear news of Berold and the youngsters.”

“And Gyrdan,” Fastred said, with a long sigh. “You have still heard nothing, then?”

“Nothing.”

She turned her back and stood looking into the fire, though it was not lit.

“I can’t understand it,” Fastred said. “A month! We should have heard *something*. Even Gyrdan can’t just vanish.”

There was a short, awkward silence, while they all shied away from the same thought.

“Perhaps they are in hiding, no?” Tyria suggested. “Or perhaps Gyrdan has taken them back to safety in the Sea-country.”

“Yes,” Fastred agreed hurriedly. “That must be it. It would take ages to get back to Ash Dene without horses or food -”

The image of their friends captured or killed in battle was immediately replaced by one of a starved corpse lying in the snow, quarrelled over by ravens.

“We do not know, and we cannot know,” Irinya said, turning back. “To speculate is folly. If they are not already beyond all help, we shall serve them best by actions, not words. Are you clear what you are to do?”

“Can we raid Darain as well?”

“No. Hygurd’s lands are not to be touched, except to guard the corridor for your retreat. Do not steal from him, do not molest his people, and do not fight him unless you absolutely must. Retire on Eagle Crag first.”

“You are too generous with Hygurd!” Tyria burst out. “He is a traitor and a turncoat!”

“And I don’t like leaving him unfought on our flank,” Fastred added. “He slumbers in Darain like an old fat spider, but he may wake up. If you take my advice, Irinya, you’ll hit him before he hits you.”

“Darain is not to be touched,” Irinya said, in the tone that they had all learned was final. “It is my decision, and I have my reasons. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly. We shall treat Hygurd with kid gloves. How far into Errendale can we go?”

“I leave that to your judgement. But do not take risks. Your job is to harrass and disrupt, not to fight battles.”

“What about supplies?”

“You should be able to keep yourselves in most things, courtesy of Radwulf. Anything else you need, send word to Leofric at Eagle Crag and we will do our best. If you need food or fodder, buy it in Errendale from the villagers, and pay generously. With Radwulf’s gold.”

Fastred laughed uproariously. This was much more to his taste than the weary responsibility of high command. A light cavalry squadron, a task that promised to be both profitable and enjoyable, and his new wife at his side.

“When do we start?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“And while we annoy Radwulf, what are you going to do?”

She twisted her hands together, and her voice was very slightly unsteady. “I? I am riding south. To the Hill of the Watchkeeper.”

## Chapter 22.

Irinya was not the only one waiting in vain for news of Gyrdan. As December slid on its dreary way, news began to filter down from the Black Hills to the lonely cottage in its deserted valley. Briar brought tales of the assault on Eagle Crag, and a lot of other victories and defeats that were entirely fictitious. The savages roasted their captives alive over slow fires. They treated their captives well and offered honourable service. All Radwulf’s soldiers had been slaughtered out of hand. Radwulf’s soldiers were flocking to desert. The rebellion was led by a blond hero of surpassing valour and chivalry. It was led by a witch who bathed in human blood. Taxes were going to be doubled. Taxes were going to be abolished. All the Black Hills were starving to death. All the Black Hills feasted every night on roast beef and stolen wine. Lord Radwulf was so angry that servants drew lots for the unlucky task of waiting on him. Lord Radwulf was confident of his power, and amassing a vast army to crush the revolt in the spring.

About the only thing that rumour did not bring was news of Gyrdan. Wherever he had gone after leaving them in Briar’s hands three weeks previously, it obviously was not to the Black Hills. Or at least, he had never got there. Quietly and sadly, without mentioning her fears to anyone, Rosie gave up hope.

The others were much less concerned. To Briar, Gyrdan was only a name. He was sorry for Rosie’s sake, but could not feel himself personally concerned. His loyalty was all to his own leader, and if Gyrdan had indeed been spying on the Shadow, Briar would have had no hesitation in killing him with his own hands. Sometimes, in darker moments, Rosie wondered if he had, and put the thought hurriedly aside. Corin was quite unworried, still firmly convinced that his hero was immune to all danger, and Berold was absorbed in news of the revolt. He was delighted with the prospect of war, and eager to recover and join the fight.

Briar was not so enthusiastic.

“Madness!” he muttered darkly. “Wickedness! To begin a civil war. What does that achieve, save dead men and misery?”

Berold, interrupted in the middle of expounding his grand strategy for the conquest of Errendale, sat up in the armchair and stabbed an annoyed finger in Briar’s direction.

“It’s talk like that as’ll lose us the war, lad! Now, I got reason to be grateful to tha, and grateful I be, but I won’t listen to tha talking nonsense. If we don’t fight t’Wolf, we’ll never beat him.”

“You’ll never beat him anyway,” Briar snorted. “Nine-tenths of Carlundy lives in Errendale, and nine-tenths of that will follow their lords under Radwulf’s banner. And what’s on your side? A handful of Highland barbarians! Never trust a Highlander. Savages, the lot of them.”

“My lady don’t say that,” Rosie argued. “An’ she lived there ‘arf ‘er life.”

“An’ ‘er cousin, Lord Eomer, ‘e was unkind an’ e’ wanted to send us back ‘ome, but ‘e ain’t no savage,” Corin said. “An’ Mr Fastred said ‘e fought bravely in the square. An’ I ‘eard somebody say the Captain was ‘arf a Highlander, an’ ‘e’s the best man in the world.”

“You move in more exalted circles than I do,” Briar said sarcastically. “I have not your experience of the nobility. But border reivers prey on us like eagles among sheep. Stealing food and fodder and disappearing back into their cursed mountains where we cannot follow them.”

“Stealing, is it?” Berold said. “Murder? Rape? Arson? No? We get worse treatment off our own lords than off any reivers! Do they try an’ protect their tenants? Do they hell! Hanging’s too good for ‘em!”

Rosie held her breath, but Briar did not rise to the unintentional bait.

“War will only make it worse,” he said wearily. “Don’t you see that? Come the spring, the Wolf will turn all north Errendale into an armed camp. We’ll have a whole army billeted on us, eating our food, taking our women, fighting and drinking and running amok. May the gods help us, for no-one else will.”

“Tha could help thisen! Instead o’ sitting on thy backside and moaning, tha could turn and fight! Give t’Wolf a taste o’ his own medicine!”

“Yes, and have a double or a triple dose thrust back at us when he wins. It’s all right for the hillmen. Even the Wolf can’t wrinkle them out of their eyries. But we are here on the spot.”

“If all tha cravens stood up to be counted, t’Wolf wouldn’t win!” Berold shouted. “He could be beat, defeated, got rid of for ever! If only folk would fight!”

“And what if your side does win?” Briar said, on a deep sigh. “Nothing will change, except a lot of men will be dead and you’ll have a new ruler in Mickleburg. D’you really think she’ll make any difference?”

“Aye,” Berold said simply. “She will. She’ll make it like t’South. Where these two come from. Where t’law applies to everyone, rich an’ poor, an’ where everyone gets treated fair.”

“And the streets will be paved with gold, and the rivers will run with wine, and the sun will shine all day. You poor deluded fool. She might promise that. She might even start off that way, but it won’t last. Even if she gets rid of the salt tax, she’ll put it on something else. And she’ll have favourites and cronies who can do what they like, law or no law -”

He broke off and dodged sideways as Berold leapt out of his chair and hurled a punch at his head.

“I’ll shove all tha teeth down tha lying throat for that!” Another punch failed to connect, and Berold overbalanced on his still-weak leg and fell sprawling.

“You and whose army?”

“Oh shut up, the pair o’ you!” Rosie snapped. “Like kiddies callin’ names. Briar, you ‘elp Berold up. Now shake ‘ands, an’ say sorry.” She stamped her foot as they hesitated. “Do it!”

“Sorry,” they mumbled together, and sat down again.

“You two fightin’ won’t do nobody no good. Not another word about it for the rest o’ the evenin’, understood?”

Berold went to bed early that night, still in high dudgeon, and Briar stayed staring silently into the fire.

“You think I’m wrong, Rose, don’t you?”

She was sorry for him, but she was not going to help.

“It ain’t for me to say.”

“It is madness,” he repeated. “Folly! Wickedness, even. What right has she to stir up war, to ask men to die for her just because she does not like her husband any more? And don’t tell me she is the rightful heir. What do any of us care whose father was the eldest brother, or who has the direct line of descent? It is pure spite and greed for power, no more.”

“You ain’t met my lady, or I’d slap your face for that. Greed for power, is it? It was Radwulf what tried to kill ‘er, not the other way round. Are you sayin’ ‘e should of been allowed to get away with it?”

“No, no,” Briar said hastily. “I have rescued enough poor souls from the Wolf’s clutches to have sympathy for her. But to start a war in revenge! Why could she not have lived in distinguished exile in your country, instead of bringing all this trouble on us?”



“She wanted to,” Rosie said thoughtfully. “I think she wanted to marry the Captain and never come near this wretched country again. I know that’s what ‘e wanted.”

“Well, why didn’t she? Why doesn’t she now, come to that? Stop this madness before any more people get killed, and let us carry on with our lives in peace!”

Rosie’s brow furrowed, trying to remember half-understood, half-overheard conversations. “Because,” she said slowly, “because there ain’t no peace as long as the strong people can do whatever they want to the weak people. Everybody lives in fear of meetin’ somebody stronger than ‘imself. You do. You fear your overlords, in case they throw you off your land. P’raps they fear their overlords, if they got any. Everybody fears Radwulf an’ ‘is soldiers. I don’t rightly understand why, but it ain’t like that back ‘ome. I weren’t never scared o’ Mr Fastred, even though ‘e’s a grand lord an’ I’m just ‘is ‘ousemaid. Even the Countess were just an ill-tempered cow, an’ the worst she could possibly of done was get me sacked. An’ then I’d of got another job on one o’ the farms, or wed some nice lad, an’ not come to no real ‘arm. It never occurred to me that people could get murdered or beaten up or thrown out o’ their ‘omes, til I started talkin’ to folk from Carlundy. Them things don’t ‘appen back ‘ome. An’ my lady means to make it so they don’t ‘appen ‘ere, neither.”

“Very idealistic. But I wish she had given some thought to the ordinary folk who are going to suffer if she fails.”

“If you get caught smugglin’, your tenants’ll suffer, won’t they? Either Radwulf makes an example of ‘em, or they get a new landlord what’ll demand ‘is rents. But you still do it. An’ you don’t ‘ave to. You don’t even ‘ave to stay ‘ere. You could sell up, an’ go to live easy in the South. An’ then there wouldn’t be no smugglers in your village, an’ your tenants wouldn’t ‘ave to worry about ‘em gettin’ caught. They could prob’ly buy salt an’ stuff off the next group. You tell me why you don’t do that.”

“If everyone relied on the next group, we would all starve. And this is my home, Rose! My own people. I was brought up here. I belong here. I couldn’t run away and leave them to some other man to squeeze dry. I have to try and help them.”

“Even if that means breakin’ the law an’ riskin’ your life an’ theirs?”

“There is no other way.” He put a hand over his eyes. “Gods, what a tangle! How may a man judge what is right? I see where you are leading me, Rose. If I am to look after the people who depend on me, I have to cheat and lie. Even kill, at need. So I am as bad as the tyrant I am fighting, and yet power must be fought with power, violence with violence. There is no other way, save to lie passive under the

millstones and be ground down. And that I cannot do, cannot watch my people suffer without trying to help them, in any way I can. I may fail, but I have to try.”

“I ain’t clever enough to put it like that myself, but that’s what I meant. An’ my lady - she feels like that, too. About the whole country.”

Winter deepened. Snow crept down the flanks of the hills. As the year turned and the days lengthened again, Briar came back to the cottage.

“You are well again?” he asked, and Berold nodded.

“Fighting fit. Never felt better.”

“Good. Then the time has come for us to part. We will guide you to the edge of our territory, and then you may go where you will.”

“To the Highlands for me,” Berold said eagerly. “I be late, but better late than never. And tha’ll see tha’s wrong, my lad, when we comes marching south in t’Spring.”

“Well, I think you are misguided, but I admire your courage,” Briar said. He turned to Corin and Rosie. “You two we will take south, of course. It will take some weeks, but we will see you safely home.”

“Ain’t goin’ ‘ome,” Corin said stubbornly. “I’m goin’ up to the ‘Ighlands with Berold.”

Briar clicked his tongue behind his teeth. “Don’t be ridiculous! What can you do? Go home with your sister and keep out of trouble.”

“Er - Briar. I ain’t goin’ ‘ome neither, beggin’ your pardon.”

Briar stared at Rosie in complete disbelief. “Have you both gone out of your minds? You know there is a war on? You know Radwulf has ten or twenty soldiers for every one rebel? Do you *know* what he does to his enemies?”

“I know what ‘e done to my lady,” Rosie said bitterly. “But I’m goin’ anyway, unless you kills me. I come to look after ‘er, an’ I’m goin’ to.”

“But what difference can you possibly make?”

“If everybody said that, nobody’d do nothin’. I don’t s’pose I can do much, but I’m goin’ to do it anyway.”

“*Rose* - ” Briar began, and stopped. He spread his hands helplessly. “Very well. I have no right to plead with you. I will arrange for you to be taken all the way to your lady, wherever she is.”

Briar did not come himself. Two of his men guided them across the snowy hills to a great dark cave full of bats, stacked high with crates and boxes and barrels. The

next night some other men took them on again to a crude shelter deep in some woods, and the next night some others took them to another cave in another hillside.

On the fourth night they came to a huge bowl in the silent hills. A single standing stone jutted up at its centre, tall and pointed like a fang, and around this they camped. Many more men and ponies came in over the following three days, from all directions, like streams running into a lake. They were not a communicative bunch.

“Where are we?”

“Here.”

“Where are we goin’?”

“Somewhere else.”

“Who are you all?”

“Friends.”

“What’s all that stuff the ponies is carryin’?”

“Don’t ask no questions, Mistress, an’ tha won’t get no lies.”

“Why are you ‘ere?”

“Meeting.”

“Who?”

“Someone.”

“The Shadow?”

“Don’t ask no questions, Mistress, an’ -”

“- you won’t get no lies. I know.”

Very late on the third day, just as the sun was setting, Briar arrived in a breathless hurry, riding a tired-looking nag and accompanied by twenty men and a long string of ponies. In defiance of convention, none of them wore masks, and all openly bore weapons. Rosie stared at them, and at Briar in particular. He was younger than she had thought, somewhere in his early twenties, and though not handsome, comely enough, with a nose that turned up at the end and a dimple in his chin. It was the sort of face that ought to be laughing and mischievous, but just now it looked agitated and nervous. Yet somehow resolute, as if he had come at long last to an uncomfortable decision.

He came straight to Rosie and took both her hands.

“Are you pleased to see me?”

“Surprised. I thought you was stayin’ back there.”

“So did I. I could not make up my mind until the last minute, and then I was afraid we might have left it too late! I still think sometimes I was wrong. But here I am, for better or worse. And in time, just.”

“What for?”

“If the Shadow keeps his promise, he will meet us here tonight and lead us north. To join your Lady. And if he does not come, I will ride north myself, and my men with me. That is why we have discarded the masks. The time for secrecy is gone. I am Everard son of Adelard, of Standale Brow, and I bring my levy to serve the Lady of Carlundy.”

“But you was always so set against fightin’!”

“I thought a lot about your words. And I could not believe it when you and Corin chose to come here instead of going home. A woman who inspires that kind of loyalty has to be worth seeing.”

It was a still, cold night, the sky crowded with stars. The moon was just beginning to wane, a few days past the full, and the early night was dark and lonely. The smugglers did not sleep. No fires were lit. They sat, expectant, and listened.

The silence was thick and living. All the local creatures had fled from so many men, unused to travellers in these wild and empty lands. Frost had stilled even the drip of water and the trickle of streams. No wind rustled over the snow and coarse grass. No bird called. No man or animal stirred.

Far, far away, clear and cold on the frosty air, a horn called.

A sigh went up from the outlaws. All turned to face the sound.

A horse could be heard now, cantering swiftly, its light step making the waiting ground echo. Harness jingled. Nearer it came, and still nearer.

None moved. Rosie was reminded of a circle of birds fascinated by a dancing snake.

The horse - *stopped*.

Silence flooded back. A pale light gleamed in the sky.

Two hundred men held their breath. Rosie found she was holding hers too. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. *It* was there, somewhere, watching them. Like a snake. Waiting to strike.

A scream began to build in her breast. She tried to fight it down. It filled her throat. It filled her mouth. She clamped her lips shut, imprisoned it behind her teeth, pressed her hands to her face and shut it behind her fingers -

The moon rose. A thin silver scimitar, dazzling bright over the edge of the hills. It caught the tip of the standing stone and turned it to a glittering streak of silver fire. Slowly it grew, quenching the stars and filling the hollow with light. A broad crescent, a half-moon, a great white disc.

And outlined against it, sharp and black, the shadow of a horse and rider.

Two hundred men and a girl sighed.

No mountain pony but a noble horse, its graceful neck arched, its forefoot pawing the ground. It shook its proud head, and moonlight splintered from its mane. The rider sat still as stone, tall and straight in the saddle, a cloak flowing from his shoulders, his head bare. A sword was raised in his right hand, and it alone was not black, but a flame of silver.

Two hundred men rose to their feet as one.

“Hail!”

The salute filled the bowl and rose to the sky.

The rider moved.

The horse stepped forward. Slowly, gracefully, it slid down the bank, still a black shadow against the silver snow. It reached the floor of the hollow. Men divided before it, giving it a free passage, then formed up again and followed.

The horseman reached the standing stone. Men gave back before him. Rosie, too terrified to move, stood alone.

The horseman halted. Rosie trembled. Then, beside her, Corin’s voice cried, “Captain!”

## Chapter 23.

The smugglers sang as they marched now. It was a bright, cold winter day, and for the first time they were marching in daylight and without masks. Gyrdan strode at the head of the column, a tall and imposing figure with his cloak blowing in the wind, and beside him Rosie was sitting on his smart horse. She had been a little apprehensive about riding so handsome an animal, but Gyrdan was leading it and it was behaving itself. Briar, or Everard as she was learning to call him, rode his shambling nag on her other side, and Corin marched with Berold one file behind, joining in the song at the top of his voice and getting the words wrong. A constant stream of men made their way up to the front of the column, exchanged a greeting or a few words with Gyrdan, and fell back again. Rosie was flushed and excited and looking very handsome, and well aware of it. Nearly all the men gave her at least an admiring glance, several of them had called her “Madam”, and she felt like a fine lady instead of a housemaid.

Her horse shied slightly as a fat pony came galloping up, ridden by a short, stocky man with a red cloth tied round his neck. Gyrdan soothed and calmed the horse, and then looked up to greet the newcomer.

“A long way from Raven Tor, is it not, Holman?” he asked, laughing.

“It is that. Tha still got t’ sword, I see. An’ t’ horse to go wi’ it now.” A conspiratorial grin split his face. “An’ I reckon I know which stable tha liberated her from, too.”

Gyrdan looked puzzled.

“She was given me. By the first captain I called on. Not all your colleagues are poor men, Holman. There are one or two small lords among the brethren. And a welcome gift too, for she and I have covered many weary miles together since. I am for ever in his debt.”

“There is no need, sir,” Everard called across Rosie. “I do not grudge the gift -”

He broke off, stunned, as the man with the red neckerchief looked up and across.

“Holman!”

“Lord Everard!”

They stared a moment in flabbergasted silence, and then burst out laughing.

“Well, if we had known, Holman, we would both have been saved much trouble and deceit! Did you know, sir?”

Gyrdan looked from one to the other, and then also laughed.

"I did not realise until now! I had not connected Everard of Standale Brow, vassal to Herulf of Oxley on the borders of Ailart, with the young man who searched so ineffectively for a couple of fugitives that long day among the midges in Grinsbrook Combe."

"We took good care to find nowt," Holman said, grinning knowingly. "Tha were there all t'time?"

"I lay in the bracken not six feet from your heads." He looked searchingly at Everard. "I knew Holman, of course, and I thought you looked familiar, but I could not put a name to you. Men change greatly between eighteen and twenty-three, and I had not expected to see Everard of Standale so far from home."

"My mother's brother died childless and so the estate at Grinsbrook came to me," Everard explained. "Holman is steward there. Well! That explains all the times I thought you'd spent the night on the tiles, Holman."

"Some of 'em," Holman grunted.

Gyrdan grinned. "There will be many such surprises, I think, now we are all unmasked for the first time."

"There are so many!" Everard said, amazed. "I had no idea you commanded all these."

"Command? Did I command you?"

"Well, no, but -"

"I told each captain the same as I told you two; that if he wished to fight for the Lady against the Wolf he should come to the Wizard's Stone on the third day after the first full moon of the new year. All I have done is to cross and re-cross the Lowlands for weeks, bearing that message."

"All!" Holman snorted. "I bet it weren't that simple! T'whole country's crawling wi' soldiers like maggots in a ten-day corpse. An' tha's a marked man, sir."

"Well, there were times when I thought I would not make the rendezvous," Gyrdan admitted. "But there is no alternative to calling on every captain. I cannot issue a general order down some chain of command. Every man is independent, every man has run his own risks and made his own profits for years, and every man has made his own decision."

He looked back over the marching column, and his face was filled with wonder.

"I did not expect such a response," he said, in a suddenly humble tone. "I thought a dozen, a score might come. When I rode to the Wizard's Stone myself last night and looked down into the hollow, I could hardly believe my eyes. I think every man

I spoke to has come, and more besides. I knew Radwulf was hated, but I had no idea how much."

"This ain't just hate," Holman said briskly, "We've always had t' Wolf to fight *against*. An' them before him, for t' Wolf's only t' worst of a long line. But we ain't never had nowt to fight *for*, til now." His tone changed suddenly. "Rumour runs like fire in t'hayfield. They say all t' Black Hills has gone over to t' Lady, an' that things is different there. Any man can go to her wi' a grievance, an' get listened to fair, an' t'judgment's t'same for t'great and t'small. I heard her own kinsman murdered a man an' got hung for it."

"That's true," Everard confirmed. "Or at least, I heard it too."

"And me," another man put in eagerly. "And the fella that were murdered, he weren't no great man."

"Nowt but a common soldier," said another, sounding slightly incredulous. "A lord punished for murdering a common fella! Is that *true*, sir?"

"Yes," Gyrdan answered soberly. "She believes in the rule of law, and she stands by her beliefs."

"They say she don't allow no looting, neither," Holman went on. "Food give out fair, to them as needs it most. And even t'Wolf's soldiers get treated well, if they surrender. I'll believe it when I see it," he added, tartly, "but it's worth goin' to look."

Gyrdan led them at a steady pace, and they covered perhaps ten miles over the snowy moors, no longer following the natural lie of the land but crossing a succession of shallow troughs and ridges. In the early afternoon, they came plodding up to another crest, and halted for a late lunch.

Rosie gazed around in wonder. A child of the plains, she had never seen a view such as this before. They were on the tip of a promontory of high ground, the northernmost point of a long undulating ridge that ran south until the dazzle of the low sun confused the eye and hid it from view. Against the east side of this ridge, stretching south as far as the eye could see and east to the vague shape of another line of moors on the far horizon, lay the fertile, rolling lowlands of Errendale. From this high vantage point, perhaps a thousand feet above the plain, Errendale looked flat and very like home, a patchwork of fields and woods and scattered villages. By shading her eyes with her hand and squinting very hard into the sun, Rosie could just pick out a dark-grey square lump, hulking out of all the dazzle and glitter.

“Mickleburg Castle,” said a voice in her ear, and she turned to find that Everard and Gyrdan had joined her, bringing bread and cold meat.

“A formidable prospect,” Gyrdan said, looking out over the scene.

“What, the castle?”

He smiled at her. “No, the view. We have all that territory to conquer.”

“Errendale does look very big from here,” Everard agreed. “And very populous. And all the great lords are solidly behind the Wolf, and with a very few exceptions the lesser lords and the peasants will follow where the barons lead them.”

“I know it well,” Gyrdan said. “Have I not spent nearly ten years trying to recruit support? There are very, very few who are willing to take the risk of going against Radwulf. You are one in perhaps a hundred, Everard, though no less welcome for that.”

“Ten years,” Everard said softly. “And now it is over. No safe retreat into anonymous shadows for any of us now. This is the end of everything you have built up.”

“Yes, this will finish us. I knew that when I called the muster, and every man knew it in his heart when he came. But, though I think we have done much good, we were never able to do more than make a bad situation tolerable. Now we have a chance to make a real difference, a change that will last. If we succeed, we will no longer be necessary.”

“If. I hope we have not bitten off more than we can chew. How far does two hundred men go, spread over Errendale?”

“About one to every ten square miles,” Gyrdan said wryly. “Or one for every two hundred-odd of Radwulf’s soldiers. But we are not alone, and nor are we concerned with Errendale just now. Our hope is in the north.”

“I dunno where,” Rosie said, staring. Errendale might look a little like home, but the scene beyond was far outside her experience. All along an irregular east-west line, the fields and meadows gave way abruptly to a great area of high ground, as if some giant had ripped the land from its support, crumpled it in his fists and flung it back in a great piled heap. South of the line, fertile plain flanked by rolling moorland. North of it, range upon range upon range of snow-capped mountains, like the waves of a frozen sea. Deep, narrow valleys wriggled between the mountains like captive snakes. Sheer cliffs, too steep to hold snow, plunged into dark ravines, and on the high slopes great corries had been bitten out of the rock, as if the giant had fancied a snack after his labours.

“Why’re they called the Black ‘Ills? They’re all white.”

Gyrdan laughed. “Only in winter. At other times they look dark and forbidding, sentinels against the sky, though that is only from a distance. Close to, they are never dull. In spring the gorse is the colour of sunshine, the skylarks drench the air with song, and a glittering river tumbles in every glen. In summer comes the brilliant green of new grass, speckled with white lambs and black cattle, and later the heather makes a rich purple carpet a king might envy. In autumn the woods and the bracken glow gold and russet, and the stags bellow for their mates, and in winter sparkling snow lies thick and every ridge grows a crown of blue-green icicles.” He took Rosie’s arm and turned her to face east and a little south. “Those first hills, bordering the plain, are the mountains of Ailart, where the ptarmigan run and the eagles soar. Then north to Buchart of the swift rivers and rich summer grazing, and north again to Islanart of the many lochans, where the water snake hunts beneath the lilies. East lies mighty Darain, source of the River Erren that flows to the sea at Fairhaven, and deep Lake Dunart and lovely Caradon of the bright streams. Beyond Darain is Lanthart of the thousand lakes, where a man may live on trout and salmon and never turn his hand to the plough. North again, though we cannot see it from here, the wildcat makes her lair in the sandstone peaks of Gragart, and beyond that the land falls to Mortach of the moors where the curlews cry and the wild goats fight.”

Rosie looked up at him in wonder. Some of his deep love for the country shone in his face, and his voice was rich and strong.

“I never ‘eard you talk like that before.”

He laughed again, self-consciously this time, and let go of her arm. “They say, if a man has the slightest drop of Hill blood, he is drawn back to his home as a needle to a magnet. And I have far more than a drop. Somewhere there, my mother was born and grew up, and somewhere there she fell in love, whatever pain came after. My heart is always lightened when I can look upon the mountains.” He ran a hand through his hair, and returned to business. “We have not much further to go today. Four or five miles, no more.”

“Them first mountains can’t be more’n fifteen miles in a straight line,” Rosie said, puzzled. “Why don’t we go all the way there today? Save campin’.”

“We are not going to Ailart, but to the Hill of the Watchkeeper. And in any case you cannot get to Ailart from here,” Gyrdan said decidedly. “Look down, not across.”

Between their ridge and the mountains was a low-lying valley, fifteen miles broad at its narrowest point and at least twice that in length. At first Rosie thought it was

filled by a black lake, and then she realised that it was a forest. Not merely a woodland, open and friendly, but a forest. Row upon row of dark trees, silent and forbidding, lapped right to the feet of the hills. On the north the trees faded as the land rose to a high flat moor, maybe five hundred feet below the crest of their ridge, and on the south abutted sharply against the confluence of two rivers, which divided the forest from the fields and pastures of Errendale.

“That is what people call the Wychwood, or Witchwood,” Everard said. “Tales say that those who go in never get out again. Not that I believe them,” he added hurriedly.

“Supernatural or not, it is very, very old,” Gyrdan said. “And very dense, very dark, and very tangled. I have never entered it, nor do I propose to. Our way lies north, off the end of this ridge, around the northern fringe of the forest and then along the skirts of the mountains.”

“Across the moor?” Everard asked, peering at it doubtfully. “I do not like the look of that. Is that what I have heard of as the Great Wilderness? It is said that it is haunted. Strange lights at night, and ghostly voices, crying aloud in torment and driving men to madness.”

He shivered slightly, and this time he did not say he disbelieved the stories.

“They say the same in the Black Hills, and its name in Arderin translates as The Waste of Lost Souls,” Gyrdan answered. “It is an evil place. But I do not plan to cross it, merely to follow its edge along the hills. It is far swifter than dipping in and out of glen after glen.”

“You don’t believe in no ghosts then?” Rosie asked, and shuddered.

“Well, I would not even skirt it at night or in fog, save in very great need,” Gyrdan admitted frankly. “But in daylight the journey is possible. I have made it many times, and have met no ill-fortune. At the foot of this ridge there is a small river and scattered woodland - not forest - and we shall camp there. There is water and shelter and probably deer in the woods. Tomorrow we march along the edge of the moor, and by dusk we shall come to the Hill of the Watchkeeper, as I promised.”

That evening’s camp was much more as Corin had imagined adventures ought to be. Gyrdan and some of the other men went hunting, and although there was no beer and the songs were noticeably toned down out of deference to Rosie’s presence, the roast venison and the huge fires were well up to expectations. It was not raining, the hills and the woods gave them shelter from the wind, and the sky glittered with stars. Corin had quite forgotten how miserable the days in the wood had been, and

determined to sign up as a soldier as soon as he was old enough. The moor was a silent presence to the north, but if it was haunted the ghosts kept their lights and their voices to themselves.

The wind picked up during the night, and when dawn came there was no mist. They were packed up and moving within half an hour, for Gyrdan was anxious to make the crossing in daylight and knew well that one man moves far faster than a group. He stationed Everard at the back of the column to watch for stragglers and himself at the head, leading Rosie’s horse. Everard was less than delighted at the separation, but did not argue.

As Rosie was neither walking nor riding but simply sitting on the horse, she had leisure to look about her. Behind, the low rounded moors flanking Errendale dwindled to mere vague humps on the horizon. To the east, close at hand, soared the mountains of Ailart and Buchart, vertical rock cliffs patrolled by ravens, steep slopes where small crags and tufts of heather broke through the snow, waterfalls thundering in deep ravines, secret valleys snaking off between the mountains. In the far distance to the west there was a vague suspicion of a rim of dark-blue hills, though it might have been a low-lying cloud bank.

Rosie shivered, and clung tightly to the horse’s mane, though they were moving only at walking pace. From here, she would never have guessed that settled farmland and towns lay only a few miles to the south-east. They might have been a thousand miles from civilisation, crawling like ants on the vast brooding desolate face of the Moor. In places the snow had been scooped and piled by the wind into great drifts, and large areas had been scoured almost bare. Hundreds or thousands of tiny tarns, ice-crusts in the cold, lay dotted over the landscape. Patches of emerald-green scum hid deep holes of soupy black peat broth. Even what passed for dry ground was waterlogged, squelching moss where the sun had thawed it, cracking ice in the shadow of the mountains, so that men and ponies walked with exaggerated care to keep their footing. Boulders and ribs of rock jutted up, lichen-crusts and half-buried in peat, or lay as flat slabs sheathed in ice or green slimy moss. Near the mountains, streams and rivers flowed over stony beds, freezing solid as they wandered out over the moor and lost their way in level ground. No trees grew there, not even a bush, though sometimes they saw bleached tree roots flaring out of scars in the peat like gnawed bones.

After a while, Rosie began to notice one particular mountain. Other hills came and went behind intervening ridges, or changed shape as the angle of viewing changed, but this one was always recognisable. A shapely conical peak, whose

unbroken slopes swept in perfect geometric lines to a pointed summit. She watched it grow larger and closer for miles, and when it was near enough to see the stream gullies scoring its smooth flanks she leaned down and tapped Gyrdan's shoulder.

"That's a funny-lookin' mountain up ahead, ain't it? 'As it got a name?"

He looked up, smiling.

"That is our goal. The Hill of the Watchkeeper, in the territory of Gartran of Islanart. It is a fine sight, is it not? From its summit you can see all the beacons in the Black Hills. On a clear day, you can see the Sea in the far west, and far to the north the sun glittering on the everlasting snows of the Mountains of Morning above the wreck of the city of Ardern. And from it our approach will have been visible since we came onto the Moor. Irinya may be there now, watching for us."

Gartran of Islanart was taking no chances. The deep valley on the south flank of the Hill of the Watchkeeper was held at its narrowest part by a strong guard of warriors, and archers were posted on the flanking hills to either side. Gyrdan led the column into this obvious trap without trepidation, his stride quickening with every step, his keen eyes searching for one face.

Several files deep within the guard, someone else was doing the same. Rosie saw the stir in the ordered ranks, saw the tall slender figure push its way to the front, shake off restraining hands, break away from the group and come on alone.

Gyrdan dropped the reins. It was as though the world fractured into two parts, one containing himself and Irinya, one containing all the rest of the universe. He stepped forward. The horse, deprived of its guide, stopped. The column behind stopped. Gyrdan quickened his step. Irinya quickened hers.

Midway they met, and clasped hand in hand, each aware of nothing but the presence of the other.

"My lady."

"I knew you would come."

"I knew you would be here."

"I missed you sorely, Gyrdan."

"And I you."

His eyes searched her face, hungrily. "You are well? Your wound has healed. Yet you look weary."

"As do you," she said softly. "It seems we were neither of us destined for an easy life. I feared for you. I have heard nothing of you, since that day on the border of Ailart."

"I have heard of you. All the land rings with tales of great deeds."

"Magnified by rumour, I have no doubt. Small actions, nothing consolidated. I am glad you are come. I stand in great need of a general."

The two halves of the world came together again. For the first time, Gyrdan's gaze left her face. He glanced at the group of Highland chieftains, who had come forward a little way from their warriors. Gartran of Islanart was there with his three sons and innumerable cousins, and Venlan of Ailart, and Eomer. Gyrdan looked back to Irinya, and there was a wry smile on his lips.

"Nay, lady," he said, "I think you have a surfeit of generals. What you lack is a quartermaster."

Together they turned and looked over the long column of Gyrdan's men, standing silent and disciplined, their ponies alongside. "Two hundred men I bring," Gyrdan said softly. "Every one tested in the field, though hitherto we have been a hidden army. And three companions you will be glad to see. But more than that, we bring baggage animals. Arms and equipment. Great store of food. Up to now, lady, you have led a warrior band. Now you have an army."

Introductions, greetings, exchange of news, correction of misunderstandings, news of absent friends, more introductions, celebrations. Gartran of Islanart did not stint his hospitality. The evening disappeared in a swirl of new faces and chatter. Not until very late did Gyrdan and Irinya find themselves alone, in a quiet corner of the hall near the dying fire.

"Now at last I understand what you were doing in Carlundy, and how you know the land so well," Irinya said. "So the Shadow did exist after all! I confess I thought him a figment of hopeful imagination. I could not see how one man could do so much."

"Nor could he," Gyrdan said with a wry smile. "People attributed every deed of the entire group to 'the Shadow'. Berold and Hedric will swear that it was the Shadow who guided them over the border, but I can assure you I had nothing to do with either of them."

"Not directly, perhaps. But it was you who set the system up, you who recruited all the local captains, you who surveyed all the passes through the border hills. And in such a way that Radwulf could not crush it, try though he might."

"You over-estimate my importance. Where there are taxes there are smugglers, and each captain ran his own band in his own way. Do not think they needed secret

interference from me. I could have been killed, and they would have gone on without me.”

“And there is the mark of genius. To invent a system that can operate without its leader. Yet, I think, only for a while. Without you it would have decayed slowly. Someone had to observe Radwulf’s efforts, track his spies, find new routes and new men to replace those captured - for Radwulf is no fool, and the casualty rate was high. Is that not what you did, when you were not serving in the army of the South? And when Radwulf had you arrested?”

“You are half-right, lady. Most of the time, that was my business in Carlundy. But not on the day I was caught.” He lowered his voice a little. “You remember the arms sales in Fairhaven? That worried the Chancellor so greatly? It worried me too. I meant the smugglers to carry goods, not weapons. I had no desire to foment a chaotic revolt that would either be bloodily crushed or give us a new ruler even worse than Radwulf. Remember I did not then know that you existed. And yet some hothead, somewhere, was obviously planning war. I was trying to find out who - though I had no intention of telling the Chancellor.”

“Who?”

“I never found out. Radwulf’s men got to me first.”

“You were betrayed?”

“I do not know. But I have been in Carlundy many times in many guises, and always remained unnoticed. A curious coincidence, that I should be arrested on that particular occasion, was it not? Whoever has been buying arms on such a scale has power, wealth and grand designs. It would be surprising if he was not also ruthless.”

“Hygurd.”

“I think so too. Who else can it be? Unless you know something of one of these other chieftains -?”

“Well, none has come to me with an offer to arm thousands of men with dwarf-weapons,” she said dryly. “Whoever it is, even if he is not my enemy, he is certainly not my friend. And Hygurd’s behaviour is complex enough to require explanation. He has sat idle in Darain for six weeks, while Radwulf’s men have suffered defeat after small defeat, though he could have crushed us if he chose. That is not the behaviour of a loyal lieutenant. And in the square, I am certain he shouted “Charge!” in the lowland tongue, but “Stand!” in Arderin.”

Gyrdan nodded. “I heard that too. And that after we had fled with you, his troops and Radwulf’s hindered one another in the chase.”

“And he allowed the chieftains of the Black Hills to escape north. Yet I do not think he is on our side. Save for Tyria, and Dunmas and Tiercel who came for Tyria’s sake - though, to their credit, they have stayed - we have had no support from Darain. Hygurd is a good lord to his own people. His choice of overlord may prick their Arderin pride, but as a chieftain they could wish for none better. He commands great loyalty in Darain.”

“His choice of overlord. I wonder.”

“Exactly. Hygurd is playing his own game. He watches to judge which way to leap. He means to be not only on the winning side, but the winner on the winning side. War will weary both us and Radwulf. Hygurd, I think, plans to stand aloof from the conflict, husbanding and building his strength. He may throw in his weight behind us, if we look like winning, but he will make sure we take the brunt of the fight. And if we are victorious and Radwulf thrown down, Hygurd will turn on us. With his ten thousand men, armed with the best weapons in the world. Hygurd wants neither Radwulf nor I to gain the Lordship of Carlundy. He wants it himself.”

Gyrdan smiled. “I had reached a similar conclusion. But I play chess too. Come outside for a moment.”

He led her to a field where the smugglers’ ponies were tethered, their loads piled under canvas near the gate. At their approach, four dark shapes rose before them, hands on sword-hilts.

“Friend,” Gyrdan replied to the whispered challenge, and three of the sentries melted back into the shadows. One remained, pushing back his hood and raising a lantern. It was Berold.

“Nowt to report, sir. Everard took t’first watch, and he said all quiet too.”

“Good. May we pass?”

The gate moved silently on freshly-oiled hinges. Berold came with them, shading his lantern under a fold of his cloak. Secrecy was a habit that died very hard.

Gyrdan crouched down, turned the canvas back, and held the lantern to illuminate what was underneath. Irinya gasped.

“Quite an armoury, is it not?” Gyrdan asked, looking up at her. “Swords, spears, shields, mail, helms. Even the odd battle-axe, for those who like the old-fashioned ways. All dwarf-make.” He folded the canvas down again and stood up, handing the lantern to Berold. “Our friend may not be arming ten thousand men, but certainly three or four thousand. I could not trace the source of the orders, except to somewhere in the Black Hills. The Highland groups are not the same as the



Lowlands. Loyalty to a clan chief is higher than any loyalty to the Shadow. Nor could I trace the ultimate destination. Whoever is behind the trade is clever enough to use our own fragmented structure against us. A few swords here, a coat of mail there, delivered to a specified location where money will be waiting. No watching to see who collects it, no questions asked. If the man behind the trade comes under suspicion, there is no evidence against him - for he has no stockpile of arms on his territory, however hard Radwulf's soldiers search. We have obligingly hidden them for him in hundreds of secret caches scattered all over the moors, waiting for the moment when he decides to arm and strike. It is clever. But it is not quite clever enough. For we know where we left the goods. Some of the caches had been cleared, but many had not. When I called the muster I asked every captain to bring with him any arms he had hidden for an unknown customer. Here is the result. Perhaps half of the weapons so expensively procured have reached their owner. The rest are here."

Berold was grinning from ear to ear. "And he don't know nowt about it, whoever he is! Ain't it grand, ma'am? Wor I wouldn't give to see their faces when they come to t'hiding holes and find nowt there!"

He was still laughing as he returned to his post and watched them walk away.

"What's funny?" asked Corin's voice at his side.

"Nowt tha'd understand, lad. What's tha doing hiding here? Why didn't tha come and talk to t' Captain? Prefer old Berold now, does tha?"

"*She* was with 'im," Corin said in a small voice.

"Wor' of it?"

Seeing Irinya again had reminded Corin of why he had wanted to come in the first place. He did not really understand quite what had happened to her in the castle, though he guessed it was something very bad from the way Rosie went tight-lipped and would not explain, but he knew it was all his fault. And, far more real to him, he had seen the sword slash into her shoulder, and had seen her fall with blood pouring between her fingers and staining the snow. That image seemed to be burned on the inside of his eyelids, and he knew how painful it had been when he cut his finger on the bread-knife. A sword must be much, much worse. If somebody had got him hurt like that, he was quite sure he would never forgive them for it, no matter how much they said sorry. He naturally attributed the same feelings to Irinya, and he was going to avoid her as long as he possibly could.

Irinya stopped in the warm half-light of the hall, and turned to Gyrdan.

"Why? Why are you doing this for me? For hatred of Radwulf?"

"No."

She sighed, and looked away.

"I was afraid you would say that."

Without looking at him she went on, hesitantly, as if groping for the words. "You must understand - I would not - I could not - you must not cherish a false hope, Gyrdan!"

"I do not," he said quietly. "I guessed that though your shoulder is well again, your other hurts would be less easily healed."

She bit her lip. "I had hoped it was not obvious."

"It is not. You hide it admirably. But you must remember, Irinya, that I know you very well, and I love you dearly."

She stepped away and back again in her agitation. "Then you are doomed to disappointment."

"Only if I expect you to love me in return."

Now he had her full attention. She stood perfectly still, listening.

"You have not asked me," he went on, "why I returned with Eomer."

"I have often wondered. I could make no sense of it. If you wanted me - you had only to wait for me to despair - and yet you went to bring me hope. Why?"

He did not answer at once. Then he said, slowly, "It was not at first my intention. I left in selfish anger. But the night is a time for thought. I understood that I was wrong. Had we married and fled, Irinya, we should have come to hate one another by now. Stolen happiness turns swiftly to bitterness. Debts must be paid before they can be cancelled. You yourself said that the past cannot be escaped."

"I was thinking of Carlundy. Of my foremother's curse, and the promise she made and her husband broke. It is my duty to redeem it, whatever it may cost me. But that evil is not yours."

Gyrdan's voice was hollow as a grave, and chilled her to the heart.

"You are paying for your ancestor's misdeeds. I for my own."

He turned, and left her standing there.

They did not stay long in Gartran's hall. None had any further business there. Berold and a substantial company of Gyrdan's smugglers were preparing to shift the arms and stores down to Eagle Crag on the Giants' Road, intending to depart as soon as they and their pack-ponies were fully rested. Eomer left the morning after Gyrdan's arrival, having been in Islanart only as a staging post. He was on his way

north with a small but most impressive-looking escort, to remind Firdan of Mortach that Kerian's absence was not a heaven-sent opportunity to pay off old scores, and that he had promised to send seventy-five warriors to the Lady. Most of the chieftains had Eomund's tact, and could be guaranteed to start a feud even if none previously existed, but Eomer could be trusted with a diplomatic mission. Later that same day, Gartran's middle son and four cousins departed with a hundred men - he had only promised fifty, but was not going to be outdone by Firdan of Mortach - marching south to join Fastred in Caradon.

"A pity I missed Fastred," Gyrdan said, watching them go. "I should have liked to see him again. And to meet his wife." He grinned. "I still cannot believe it, lady! Fastred married! His aunts will be livid. They circulate him like the prize in a game of Pass the Parcel."

"And all the girls hope to be holding him when the music stops. Yes, so I gathered. Gartran's son will give him word of your safe return. Though you could join him yourself if you wish."

"My place is with you, lady. And I am scarcely needed. How many chieftains are with Fastred? Four? Five?"

"Six, I think. Tyria, of course. And Dunmas of Devern Aida and Tiercel of Lake Dunart. Their lands abut Caradon, and they bear Fastred no grudge for winning Tyria. That is three. Kerian of Gragart with nine of his captains, all cousins or half-brothers or half-sisters' sons. Malise of Lanthart sent his nephew, whose name I have forgotten, and Gartran's son makes six. If you count the second cousin commanding half of Vidian's men, seven. Eomund is back in Buchart - he got a most undignified wound a few weeks ago and is temporarily unable to ride - and Venlan son of Vidian marches with us. Hedric and Wootton command the Lowlanders guarding the retreat. They will make Berold very welcome. And his load."

"From my recollection, Radwulf arms his men very poorly," Gyrdan said wryly. "Highland-made gear is better, though not up to dwarf standards. Your Lowlanders will probably have to learn to use their swords all over again when they find the edges are sharp. And I very much doubt that Fastred will have organised his supply line properly. He never has yet. Wootton will sort that out, once he gets Berold's pack-ponies. So that leaves you with a hundred and twenty of my men and sixty of Venlan's, plus any from Buchart."

"None. Diribel has them all mending roofs and rebuilding houses. I could not deny her. Buchart suffered badly, and the high shielings are not fit for habitation in the blizzard season."

"Rather under two hundred left then, once Berold departs. Well, Fastred has the dangerous task, with Hygurd on his flank, and he needs the main force. Two hundred should be sufficient for us to watch the remaining border and do a little raiding if the opportunity presents itself. It should be a quiet time, for once."

Corin had elected to go with Berold, but Rosie had insisted on accompanying Irinya.

"She wants lookin' after," she confided to Everard as they made their way south. "Livin' on 'er nerves, as Ma would say. She's got real thin. She don't get enough sleep, an' I'm sure she don't eat enough. An' them men all takes advantage of 'er, bringin' 'er their piffin' little problems. She's got enough to worry 'er as it is, without some fool wantin' to know where 'e's to stable 'is pony an' whose turn it is to dig the latrines."

They took over one of Vidian's lesser halls as a base, and Rosie guarded Irinya like a vixen with one cub. Her biggest problem was Irinya herself, who ate only when she remembered and had formed the habit of sitting up most of the night, working until her exhausted brain mutinied and she dozed off in the chair. Rosie did not attempt to argue, but she had a privileged position and made shameless use of it. "Yes, miss," she would say, taking the pen out of the limp hand. "You can finish the letter in the mornin', miss. I'll make the clerk write the address and the greetin' for you. No, miss, that weren't no courier. It were just the sentries changin' shift. Well, why not lie down for an hour, miss? I've got the bed warmed up, an' it'd be a pity to waste it." And Irinya, stupefied with weariness, would find that by some miracle her hair had been brushed, her clothes had been removed and she was lying in bed with hardly time to wonder how she had got there before she fell asleep. And once there, anyone with a message or a question for her had to get past Rosie first. Men with trivial business generally retired hurt from the field of battle, looking sheepish and rather pink about the ears.

Gyrdan and Everard aided and abetted Rosie in this, and Irinya gradually lost some of the pinched, drawn look that had so worried those who loved her.

Not that it was a holiday for any of them. There was much to do. Guards and sentries to be organised, watches set, quarters found for men and the few ponies they had brought. A supply network to be set up - for Gyrdan had been quite right in his

surmise that Fastred would do it tomorrow - based on the forts up and down the Giants' Road. Patrols to be organised to watch the border from Darain to the Forest. Scouts to be sent out into Errendale to observe encampments, fortifications, troop movements. The reports to be listened to, plotted on maps, analysed and considered. A constant series of couriers trotted back and forth to Venlan, who was based at his father's hall two valleys away, much to Irinya's disquiet. Vidian was notoriously headstrong and had already been raiding the territory of his old enemy, Herulf of Oxley, on his own initiative. But Vidian could not be commanded - it was the negative aspect of the hillman's independence of mind - and the best they could do was try to keep abreast of his actions and talk him out of some of his wilder schemes.

"I wish he would see the risk he is taking," Irinya said to Gyrdan, as they rode home after a particularly trying meeting. Vidian, who had dined well on captured wine, had boasted of his successes, sneered at the opposition, and as good as accused Venlan, who had slightly more sense, of cowardice. That had provoked a violent quarrel and as a result Venlan and his sixty men were moving base, sullen and offended. "We have the strength to watch this border, not to guard it."

"It is surely his own concern," Gyrdan suggested.

"I wish it were so simple. But he risks the whole alliance. I hold it together by playing off one chieftain against another. Except Kerian of Gragart, their hearts are not with me, not yet. They contribute a score of men and a younger son, to keep an eye on each other and make sure they miss no chance of profit. That is why every chief has a contingent in Fastred's host. I understand that mistrust and I can work with it. In a land where my enemy's enemy is my friend, when all are enemies it follows that all are also friends, does it not?"

Everard, riding half a pace behind and listening, tried to work this out and gave up.

"And hillmen dramatise every incident," Irinya went on. "A handful of small successes are turned by the poets into a sweeping victory. By the same token, a defeat will become a disaster. If Vidian provokes Herulf of Oxley into retaliation before we are ready for him, and is beaten, rumour will make it a catastrophe. The chiefs will melt back into their hills like mist in sunshine."

"It may not happen," Gyrdan said. "Winter bites deep now. It is a very foolish man who ventures into the mountains in the blizzard season."

Everard looked from one to the other, and swallowed.

"Er -"

They turned to him, encouragingly.

"Herulf of Oxley is - was - my overlord, lady. Er. I would not call him over-blessed with brains."

Their fears were realised only a day or two later. An exhausted man on an exhausted pony reeled up to the gatehouse out of a gathering snowstorm, and was brought straight to the hall, hardly able to stand. He bore bad tidings. Herulf of Oxley had ridden into Ailart early that morning, with a troop of about eight hundred men. Vidian, drunk with success, had sworn that no low-country clod-hopper would enter Ailart without his leave.

"He set us to hold the ford in the Valley of the Pigs," the man recounted, leaning wearily against Venlan's arm. "A good place. Narrow. But Herulf had heavy cavalry, armoured. Our archers could do them no harm at a distance, and when they charged, they were on us before we could shoot more than a few. We could not stand, lord. We - we broke."

"You ran away?" Venlan cried. "Ah, the shame!"

"Say rather, sound common sense," Gyrdan said, and the man looked at him gratefully. "The hill-country bow is well enough for shooting deer, or in your own clan fights, for mail is little worn in the Black Hills. But against armoured men it is no more use than a child with a catapult. Vidian should have known that."

The messenger sprang to the defence of his chieftain. "What else could he have done, lord? Flee from them?"

"That is what you ended up doing," Gyrdan said crisply. "So - Herulf of Oxley won the day. Did he retire?"

"No, lord. I crept back later, and they had taken over the nearest farmstead and settled in. The storm was breaking then. I did not know where the chief had fled to, so I came to Lord Venlan with all speed."

"That was well done," Gyrdan said. "You just outran the blizzard. Well, we can do nothing against Herulf while the storm lasts, but neither can he move."

Venlan clapped a hand to his sword-hilt. "And when the snow settles, I will show him what it means to insult the Black Boar of Ailart!"

"Lord, you do not understand," the messenger protested. "We killed some of Herulf's men, yes, but not many. He has still at least seven hundred men, I would guess. And you have how many?"

"Less those out scouting or on patrols, eighty low-country men and sixty Ailarain under Venlan's command," Gyrdan said thoughtfully. "But from your account,

Vidian's men were scattered rather than slain. Even in haste we should be able to gather another fifty at the least."

"That is still under two hundred, lord. Against seven hundred! And foot soldiers against cavalry. We cannot fight them."

Venlan drew his sword and struck a suitably dramatic pose. "Shall it be said that Venlan of Ailart shirked a fight? Never!"

The messenger regarded him balefully. Deference was not the hillman's strong suit. "Shall it be said that he squandered his inheritance and led his people to their deaths?"

"Better to die with honour than live in shame!"

"Better to drive Herulf back to his Lowlands and take neither shame nor death," Gyrdan said, interrupting the incipient quarrel.

"You too?" said the messenger, staring. "I tell you, lord, they are invincible! They mowed us down like scythes among haystacks! Like eagles among pigeons!" Having admitted defeat, he was anxious to convince his listeners that there had been no alternative, that they could not possibly have done otherwise. A brave defeat against impossible odds made almost as good a tale as a brilliant victory, provided the odds really had been impossible. He warmed to his theme. "They trampled us beneath their horses's hooves! Against their armour our weapons were powerless. Alas for the brave warriors of the Black Hills! Always the Lowlanders triumph -"

"Only because you insist on fighting them in the wrong way, in the wrong place, and with the wrong weapons," Gyrdan said tartly. "If Herulf of Oxley wants a fight, I will give him one. But on my terms, not his."

Herulf of Oxley was not a bad man, by the standards of his time. He looked on raiding as a more absorbing and more profitable form of hunting. He killed people only if they got in his way and with the minimum of fuss, not seeing the point of flashy techniques. He did not go in for massacres, hardly ever burned down houses and was completely convinced that the women he ravished secretly enjoyed the experience.

He shifted in his saddle and belched politely. The inhabitants of the farmhouse had fled out of the back door as he crashed in at the front, but they had not taken their store of drink with them. Herulf was familiar with Highland brandy, but this had been particularly good and had kept him gloriously drunk for the two days the blizzard had lasted. Now the snow had stopped, the sun had come out, and he was riding on up the valley looking for another farmhouse, preferably one that would

give him an opportunity to see if the local women were as fiery as the drink. This was one of Herulf's more complicated plans, and he was proud of it.

He topped a little rise, and saw that the valley flattened and widened out ahead, giving a fine level field with space for sixty horsemen to ride abreast between the crags on the left and the river on the right. And at the far end of this field, maybe half a mile distant, Herulf spied the unmistakable glint of sun on steel. The sun was behind him, and despite his slight headache he had no difficulty working out what he could see. About four-score men on foot, drawn up in a square close by the river's edge.

Herulf beamed. They looked pathetically brave, standing there quietly waiting to be slaughtered. More disciplined than the last lot, and armed with spears instead of the pathetic little string bows these people persisted in using, but fewer in number and not even armoured. Herulf could count well enough to know that eight or nine to one was pretty good odds. He waited for his entire troop to catch up with him - by Herulf's standards, this was an advanced manoeuvre - formed them up smartly in twelve rows stretching right across the valley floor, and kicked his horse into a gallop.

An enquiring mind might have wondered why, after a blizzard lasting two whole days, there was only about three inches of snow on the ground, and might have wondered where it had all blown to. It might have speculated on why the spearmen should have chosen to stand so obligingly at the far end of ground designed for a cavalry charge. It might have observed the two mighty waterfalls cascading down the crags from hanging valleys, and wondered where the streams went when they got to the valley floor. It might also have delved back into previous experience and remembered that mountain streams in spate carve vast deep channels for themselves.

Herulf of Oxley was not possessed of an enquiring mind, and quite untroubled by such irrelevancies. He was therefore taken totally by surprise when his horse's forefeet crashed through a thin crust of hard snow into a deep, soft drift. He was astonished to find himself pitched out of the saddle and hurtling headlong through the air. By the time he had landed on his head in the half-frozen, stony bed of the hidden stream, with his horse on top of him, he was past being surprised. He was dead.

On either side of Herulf, the whole first line of charging horsemen suffered a similar, simultaneous fate. Unable to see what had happened, and unable to stop if they had, the second, third and fourth lines followed the first into ruin. The gully was too deep to scramble into and too wide to leap, and it stretched right across the

valley from the foot of the waterfall to the river. There was no avoiding it. Men and horses crashed down in a screaming chaos of splintering bones, those few who survived the fall intact being crushed beneath following comrades.

But even then the charge did not grind to a halt. As bodies piled in and compacted the soft snow, the gully filled up. Bridges formed. The remaining ranks got across and came on towards the waiting spearmen at hardly diminished speed, still outnumbering them and now with murder in their hearts.

The second gully was not so wide as the first, nor so deep, but it was enough. It was sufficient. In hopeless confusion those riders who were at the back of the column and avoided the second fall tried to pull up, to turn, to ride along the edge of the ditch, anything but struggle across it and face the silent menace of the still-waiting spears. Many were thrown by frightened horses. Some plunged into the river. Some tried to scramble up the crags. Some fled back across that terrible field to the ghastly ruin in the first stream.

But worse was yet to come. From behind rocks and bushes all along the flanks of the valley, yelling warriors leaped up. Venlan's men and Vidian's, father and son leading them, eager to avenge their earlier defeat. And now the spearmen advanced, crossing the choked stream with Gyrdan at their head, bright sword in hand.

The handful of Herulf's men who had not already done so turned tail and fled. And then they understood why campaigning in mountains in winter was thought foolish. Snow was an enemy more relentless and malevolent even than the hillmen. It slipped treacherously beneath their feet, clutched at their ankles, tripped them up, and the weight of their chain mail and weapons turned many a slip into a full-length tumble. Unhorsed, unused to fighting on foot, frightened, beaten, they wasted their remaining energy on fruitless cursing and impotent fury, and their enemies caught them up and slew them as they floundered. For there was some devilry at work. It seemed to the eye of terror that even the spearmen fared better than they did, though in reality their advantage was only the slight one of lighter weight and familiarity with fighting on foot. But the Highlanders were not only unhampered by the snow, they seemed to revel in it. It did not break beneath them, but let them glide over it at wondrous speed, fast enough to overtake even the remaining horses. To the beaten men this seemed a mighty matter of magic - for in Errendale snow never lay deep enough for long enough to warrant the use of skis.

Between the snow and the crags and the turbulent river, between the ruthless efficiency of Gyrdan's men and the savage fury of the pursuing Highlanders, it was a

very sad and sorry few of Herulf's splendid force that finally struggled back to the Lowlands with their tale of ruin and disaster.

All over the Highlands they hailed Gyrdan as their new hero, and in Ailart the bards were kept busy for weeks.

The western side of the border stayed quiet for the rest of the winter. Vidian had learned his lesson, and none of Herulf's compatriots felt inclined to repeat his adventure. And all Radwulf's attention must have been concentrated in the east.

For Fastred did not lie idle. He did not come back into the Black Hills that winter, but his friends could not help but hear of his doings. He and Tyria and Kerian of Gragart pillaged all of north-east Errendale happily for months. Captured money, weapons, food and stores found their way back through Darain to Eagle Crag, where Berold and Hedric and Wootton leaped on them eagerly and the stores grew full to bursting. Tax officials refused to accept posts in the area. Soldiers decided that they were not getting enough danger money and after every skirmish a few more slipped away in the confusion. Most went quietly home, but a few made the full jump and joined the rebels. All these came to Gyrdan in Ailart for interrogation and though most were genuine, a handful proved to be spies.

Once, a grinning courier brought a ragged proclamation, torn half across. It bore a rather poor likeness of Fastred, a rather better one of Kerian, a ringing denunciation of their activities and the promise of a fifty-crown reward for information leading to the capture of the brigands. Appended to it was a scrawled note in Fastred's unmistakable hand, saying, "*Someone* recognises my worth, Gyrdan. He only offered ten for you!"

Fastred became a matter of legend among Radwulf's soldiers. He struck swiftly, without warning, and apparently at will, wrought havoc and destruction in a few crowded hours and then disappeared without trace into the trackless hills. Two expeditions attempted to follow him there. One was attacked unexpectedly at night and cut to pieces. The other was ambushed trying to cross a river in spate, and though more were drowned than slain, no more attacks were mounted.

Radwulf's soldiers did their best to catch the raiders, a fifty-crown reward being unimaginable riches, but unaccountably they were never successful. The brigands were always at least an hour gone from every place they searched, and had an uncanny ability to avoid any traps laid for them. The peasants of the district seemed intensely stupid, replying to all questions with a bovine stare and, if feeling communicative, a grunt. Even when hoofmarks and tracks clearly showed that at

least three-score mounted Highlanders must have passed by within the last few hours, the rustics had seen and heard nothing. It was enough to drive a man mad.

The soldiers called Fastred Lightning, among other less polite appellations. The peasants had a different nickname for him. Goldenhand, they called him, a pun on his distinctive colouring and his habit of paying generous prices for their goods. The fifty-crown reward went unclaimed. The same peasants who shrugged blankly when asked if they had seen any Highlanders were astonishingly observant of the movements of Radwulf's soldiers. They were living in interesting times, and it was much less unpleasant than they had expected.

On a bright, blowy day in late March, a visitor arrived unexpectedly in Ailart. Gyrdan looked up from the map spread across the table, listening to the commotion outside.

"I know that voice!"

He sprang up, heedless of his chair as it crashed over backwards, vaulted the table and ran down the hall.

"Fastred!"

It was indeed Fastred, unmistakable despite the addition of a curling golden beard and a striped tunic of outlandish brilliance. He and Gyrdan ran together and embraced like brothers, too overcome with emotion to speak, but finding it unnecessary.

Irinya joined them rather more sedately.

"What brings you here, Fastred?"

"Well, a desire to see you both." He gripped Gyrdan's arm. "It has been a long time, my friend. I am very glad to see you again. I really thought you'd come to a sticky end this time." He wagged his head disapprovingly. "They tell me you have been running a smuggling racket for years. I always knew you were a shady character. My sisters' worst suspicions are fully confirmed."

"There is so much to tell you, Fastred," Irinya said, laughing. "And to hear, I do not doubt!"

Fastred looked suddenly serious.

"Yes. I bring news. I thought it best to come myself. I could not trust a courier, and in any case I think you will need me here. The thaw has begun. And Radwulf is on the march."

Chapter 24.

"Now what did you mean by gettin' wed without tellin' us, sir?" Rosie demanded, helping Fastred to a third plateful of roast duck. "An' in such a 'urry, too!"

"Sorry," Fastred said, with his mouth full.

"Cook'll be real disappointed! She's 'ad the menu worked out ever since I started as 'ousemaid."

"Sorry."

"An' Marigold was 'opin' for a new frock."

"Sorry."

"Marryin' in such a rush, an' without new clothes, an' none o' the family there -"

"Which was a blessing," Fastred muttered.

"- an' we never 'ad no chance to wish you joy, nor to welcome your lady proper -"

Fastred swallowed the last mouthful, pushed his plate away, and tilted his chair back.

"I can see you're following in Mistress Poll's footsteps! Now listen Rosie, if we get out of this alive, I'll invite you all up here to celebrate. If you're allowed to come and visit an exiled renegade, anyway. We'll have music and dancing, and you and Mistress Poll can lecture me to your hearts' content, and Wootton can get drunk, and Cook can criticise the food, and I'll buy all of you new clothes. Promise."

"That's real kind, sir, but it ain't missin' the party what's upset us. It's not bein' able to drink 'ealth to you an' your lady, an' tell you 'ow much we 'opes you'll be 'appy together. 'Cos there wasn't never nobody what deserved it more, sir, an' that's the truth, an' we'd all of said the same."

"That's very sweet of you, Rosie," Fastred said, touched. "Thank you. I am glad you said that, and so will Tyria be when I tell her."

"I had hoped Tyria might be with you," Irinya said, getting a word in edgeways for the first time. "I looked forward to seeing her again."

"And I to meeting her," Gyrdan added. "I have wondered for months what kind of woman would be brave enough to take you on! Is she following later?"

Fastred shook his head. "No, she remains in Caradon. We thought it best she should not travel."

Irinya's voice sharpened with anxiety. "Why? Tyria cares nothing for the rigours of travel! She has not been hurt?"

Fastred coloured slightly. "No, no, nothing like that."

"Is she ill?"

“Far from it,” Fastred muttered, turning a deeper shade of pink. “Er - um. Well. We are - that is, she is - er - she’s going to - er - you know - to have a baby.”

“Sir!” Rosie squeaked.

“What?” Irinya was torn between shock and delight. “Really? When?”

Fastred coughed delicately, and inhaled his wine by mistake.

“October,” he said, when he could speak.

Gyrdan finished the mental calculation first. “Good grief, Fastred, that was quick!”

“Thousandth time lucky,” somebody muttered in passing, and everyone within earshot - which was most of the hall - laughed. Fastred blushed, and then joined in.

Irinya glanced round at the hall, full of off-duty soldiers and hurrying servants. She stood up, cutting short Rosie’s flood of excited questions.

“Come Fastred, you must be weary. I will show you to your rest. The remainder of your news I will hear later.”

“I thought you’d want to hear now,” Fastred complained, as Gyrdan shepherded him into his bedchamber and Irinya closed the door firmly behind them. “The rest isn’t so much fun, but it’s a lot more important! D’you think I’ve ridden all night from Caradon, with every river in spate, just to tell you about Tyria’s health?”

“Of course not,” Gyrdan said impatiently. He waved Fastred to sit down on the bed, threw a cloak over a battered wooden chest and sat down on that himself, and left the only chair for Irinya. “But even if you don’t mind a hundred people eavesdropping on your private affairs, we can’t have them listening to the rest of your news. Rumour flies fast, and rumour of disaster even faster.”

“Start at the beginning,” Irinya said. “We heard something of the activities of the much-dreaded Lightning.”

“Damn silly nickname,” Fastred said disgustedly. “Couldn’t they have thought of something more romantic? I was hoping for something dark and dangerous, like Fastred the Destroyer. Always fancied myself as a barbarian chieftain. I even went to the trouble of growing the beard, too.”

“So I noticed,” Gyrdan said dryly.

Fastred fingered his chin approvingly. “Tyria likes it. Looks rather dashing, don’t you agree? Besides, you need all the insulation you can get in this country! Caradon is a lovely land, but the *weather!*”

“It does not seem to have hampered you much. We heard of the fifty-crown reward.”

“It’s up to a hundred now. I tell you, for that kind of money I’m getting tempted myself! I’m amazed one of the peasants hasn’t turned us in, but they seem astonishingly loyal.” He began to laugh. “Gods, what a dance we led Radwulf’s poor soldiers! And how easy it was! Most of them aren’t real soldiers, Gyrdan. Their officers are drunk half the time, you can hear their sentries a mile away, they snore fit to wake the dead, and if you disturb them in the night they leap up like startled pigs and run around in the dark shouting and tripping over each other. They straggle for miles even over good roads, they don’t seem to have heard of scouts or flanking patrols or advance guards, the soldiers hate the tax officials and the officials hate the soldiers. It’s like taking toys from a child. I hope you made good use of all the presents I sent back.”

“We did, indeed. Radwulf must be hopping mad. You say he is on the march? Where? Into Caradon, against you?”

Fastred shook his head, suddenly serious. “If I thought that, I would be there. Caradon is difficult country for a large army, especially at this season with all the rivers rising. A few men, under an able and active commander -” here he raised an eyebrow “- can do a great deal of damage. We could have harried the army all through Caradon and vanished over the hills whenever he tried to strike back. I think he knows this.”

“He? Is Radwulf himself in command?”

“Sadly not. He has more sense than that. It is one Guthrum son of Guthlaf, of Lower Sutton.”

Gyrdan whistled and sat forward eagerly.

“Guthrum! Well, well! So Radwulf has forgiven him for failing to stop you reaching the Black Hills, and recalled him from disgrace. There is good sense in Radwulf still, despite his fury. Guthrum is his ablest commander.” He ran his hand through his hair, frowning. “So - Guthrum is not marching on Caradon. Is he hoping to come through Darain and cut you off?”

“First thing I thought of,” Fastred nodded. “He’ll have to be quick, though, if that’s his hope. I came on as fast as possible, but the rest won’t be far behind. Kerian is bringing everyone out, and rolling up the corridor guards as he comes. Should be here the day after tomorrow. We can’t afford to get separated from you.”

“What of Tyria?” Irinya asked anxiously. “Surely she is coming with them, whatever her condition?”

Fastred’s handsome face clouded, and he sighed. “I tried to persuade her. Kerian tried to persuade her. We all did. But trying to get a Highland chieftainess off her

clan territory is worse than getting a limpet off a rock. Short of tying her up and bringing her by force, there was nothing I could do. She insists on staying in Caradon, come hell or high water.”

There was a long pause. All three were thinking the same thing. Tyria was now isolated in Caradon, with all the width of Darain between her and safety. If Fastred’s surmise were right, and Guthrum turned on Caradon, if Hygurd took the opportunity to attack -

It was Fastred who broke the silence. “It is not as bad as it sounds,” he said, trying to sound cheerful. “Have you ever seen Castle Caradon? Perched high between two rivers, cliffs on three sides and on the fourth three high walls with deep ditches between. As long as there are folk with heart to man the defences and food for them to eat, it will not fall. We left a strong garrison and stores crammed with provisions, and most of Tyria’s people are moving closer to the fortress for protection. Tyria reckons she can hold out there for six months, if need be. And - well, I’m not sure Guthrum is trying to take Caradon by the back door. He has too much force. A hammer to crush a nut. I think - I *think* he is going to follow the Giants’ Road over Saltergate Pass, march up through Darain under Hygurd’s protection, and then circle back west by south. Against you.”

He waited in vain for exclamations of surprise and dismay.

“Aren’t you worried?”

Gyrdan laughed, with a queer edge to it. “Worried, yes. Very. But hardly surprised.”

“Did you think I sent you to pillage Errendale purely for amusement, Fastred?” Irinya said wearily. “Listen. This alliance is as shaky as a house of cards. I cannot hope to hold it together over the course of a long war. The chiefs will grow bored, restless, quarrelsome, and the revolt will collapse, unless we win victory swiftly. Yet there are ten Lowlanders for every one Highlander, even if I controlled all the Black Hills, which I do not. We cannot hope to defeat Radwulf’s army, dispirited conscripts or not, in open battle on the plains. All Radwulf has to do is wait for us to fail.”

She stood up, and paced up and down the tiny room. “Many long nights I have spent trying to guess his heart. Always he was violent and unpredictable, liable to reckless fury. I think now that is worse. Some rumours say his temper is wild almost to the point of madness. The purpose of your raids, Fastred, was to enrage him to the point where he would not sit and wait. To make him send an army against us, into our mountains.”

“Well, you’ve managed that all right,” Fastred said, scowling. “Do you know how many men Guthrum has?”

“I was hoping you would tell us,” she answered acidly.

“Ten thousand.” He rested back on his hands and blew out his cheeks. “Ten - bloody - thousand! And two thousand of them horsemen. Is *that* what you had in mind?”

“Ten thousand!” Gyrdan repeated. “Hell!”

“Yes,” Fastred agreed sardonically, “that’s roughly what I said. I hope you two know what you’re doing.”

Gyrdan hunted a scrap of paper and a pencil out of his pocket and began jotting down notes. “Of the brethren - two hundred. If we strip most of the garrisons out of all the forts - another three hundred and fifty, say. How many men is Kerian bringing back from Caradon?”

“Five hundred and thirty-eight,” Fastred said. “The Caradain are staying with Tyria. As is Dunmas, for Devern Aida is on the most obvious route to Castle Caradon. And we lost some, of course. Keep going,” he added sarcastically. “I make that eleven hundred so far. With luck you might get to odds of eight to one against.”

“We can increase our numbers five-fold in a week,” Irinya said. “Now is the time for all the chieftains to deliver the men they promised. The letters are all written. I will have the couriers depart within the hour.”

Fastred snorted eloquently.

“Oh, they will come,” she said, with quiet assurance. “Now that Radwulf sends an army against us, they have no choice. They must fight or die.”

Fastred’s mouth dropped open. “You mean you *planned* this?” He stared. “By the gods, Irinya! I wouldn’t have thought you so ruthless!”

“I am playing Radwulf for the future of a country,” she answered. “And I play to win.”

“Ten thousand, lady,” Kerian confirmed, jumping off his horse in the clear light of dawn. “And we were both wrong, Fastred. They have not turned east for Caradon, but neither have they carried on up the Giants’ Road to Saltergate. They have turned west.”

“West!” Gyrdan exclaimed. “Already? Along the Highland edge? Are you certain?”



Kerian turned to him, annoyed to be questioned by a stranger. He scowled briefly, and then his face was suddenly illumined by a brilliant smile.

“You, I guess, must be Gyrdan of the Battles! I am Kerian, Lord of Gragart. I have heard much of you!” He wrung Gyrdan’s hand and looked at him searchingly, and his smile grew even broader. “But they had not told me you had Gragaran blood! By your hair and eyes you are my clansman.”

“Do not leap to conclusions,” Gyrdan said cautiously. “My mother was a hillwoman, and of a bardic line, but that does not necessarily make her Gragaran.”

Kerian promptly enfolded him in a bear hug. “All bards hail from Gragart, and all the Gragarain are brethren! I might have guessed, when we heard you had defeated Herulf of Oxley with only two hundred men against two thousand! That was worthy of a son of Gragart!”

“Not two thousand,” Gyrdan said, disengaging himself. “Less than half that. And Herulf of Oxley was a fool. We cannot hope for such luck a second time.”

“A man makes his own luck,” Kerian said with an infectious grin, and they were all reminded that this extravagant, energetic young man, scarcely twenty, had inherited his lordship at thirteen and fought off innumerable ambitious uncles and cousins to keep it. “Well, my friends, look not so gloomy! Are two sons of Gragart to be dismayed by a parcel of clod-hopping Lowlanders?”

“It is not Gragart they menace,” Venlan said crossly, joining the group at that moment, evidently just out of his bed. His tunic was on backwards and he was still doing up his belt and yawning. “Where are they?”

“My scout saw them make camp last night at Little Bexley, one league west of the Road,” Kerian replied, addressing his answer to Gyrdan rather than Venlan. “That was as dark fell, for he had to ride through the night to meet me here. He came by the Valley of the Pigs and the Hill of the Shepherd, and he reports that the rivers run high and the ground is wet, but the passes are clear.”

“Well, well, so rivers run high in the thaw,” Venlan grouched, jealous that Kerian knew more than he did. “Who’d have thought it?”

Nobody paid him any attention.

“What in hell are they doing *there*?” Fastred wondered. “Why leave the only decent road in the country a yard before you have to?”

“Quite,” Gyrdan nodded. “So Guthrum must have had to leave the road there. He must be coming into Ailart not from the north, by Darain, but from the south.”

Fastred yawned cavernously, and shook his head. “Can’t be. Makes no sense. From the north he can pen us in between his army and the Lowlands. But coming from the south he has nothing to trap us against.”

“I wonder,” Irinya said, speaking for the first time. “Kerian, you have more to say, I think.”

All eyes turned to the young chief. He waited a moment for dramatic effect, and then said, “Aye, lady. I sent scouts also into Darain as we rode through. Hygurd is mobilising.”

It was Fastred’s voice that rose above the clamour.

“I told you so! Irinya, I told you! I said we should not leave Hygurd unfought! I said we should strike at Darain, not Errendale! I warned you!”

“Your advice was heard and noted, my lord,” Irinya answered crisply. “The decision was mine, and mine alone. I had reasons for it, and I have not yet been proven wrong.”

“To the devil with Hygurd!” Venlan burst out. “It is this Lowlander we must deal with! I say we strike now! Sweep down from the mountains upon him while he is camped -”

“Won’t work,” said Fastred decisively. “Guthrum is no fool. His sentries stay awake, and his men sleep by their arms.”

“And he finds a fortified place for every night’s camp,” Kerian added. “And if there is nothing suitable, his men dig ditches and guard them.”

“Then we must hold him at the passes!” Venlan declared.

“No,” Gyrdan said. “We are too few, and Guthrum is no Herulf. We must fall back before him -”

“Let a Lowlander enter Ailart without a fight! Never! If you will not challenge him, the Ailarain will!”

“*No.*” Gyrdan did not raise his voice, but something in it cut through the din of agreement and dissent. “There is more at stake here, Venlan, than the honour of Ailart. When we defeated Herulf of Oxley, you swore you were for ever in my debt. Pay that debt now. Be guided by me, and let Guthrum enter Ailart.”

He drew a breath and went on, his eyes locked on Venlan’s. “I doubt not that we could hold him once. But he would only fall back to the Lowlands, regroup, and come at us again. And again, and again. And meantime, Hygurd mobilises behind us. Let no-one forget Hygurd! His intention we do not know, but Guthrum’s is plain enough. He means to strike up through Ailart, perhaps even through Buchart, and then turn east. We are to be caught between his force and Hygurd’s, like wheat

between the millstones, caught and destroyed.” He swept a glance around the group, silent for once as they worked out the implications, and smiled slowly. “But I have no mind to be crushed. We cannot fight both Hygurd and Guthrum together. So we must fight them separately. Let Guthrum come. Deep, deep into our mountains. Where he knows not the ground. Where his horsemen and his numbers are less of an advantage. Where he cannot call on support from the Lowlands. Where he cannot flee to safety. *There* we may not only fight him, but destroy him. And then - well, then we can deal with Hygurd.”

“Of course it is risky!” Gyrdan snapped impatiently. It was the evening of the third day since Kerian’s arrival, and tempers were getting frayed. Guthrum was advancing at a slow but inexorable pace, a steady eight miles a day that kept his host together. He was now over twenty miles deep into Ailart, and both Venlan and Vidian were sullen and angry. Had Guthrum brutalised the territory, there would have been no holding them back. But Gyrdan had read his adversary’s character aright. He had judged Guthrum to be an honourable man and a professional soldier, too kind-hearted to render innocent peasants homeless and too shrewd to ravage land into which he might have to retreat. Guthrum kept his army under strict discipline, and backed it up by hanging a dozen of his own men for looting and rape. By contrast, the hillmen retreating before him looked like a disorganised rabble.

“If he keeps on much longer,” Fastred persisted, “he’ll be within reach of Hygurd.”

“Of Darain,” Irinya corrected. “Not Hygurd. Hygurd has called the muster at his fortress of Tordach, deep within his earldom. Two days march from the border with Buchart.”

“Two days!”

“If you can’t say something useful, Fastred, hold your tongue!” Gyrdan said curtly.

Irinya sighed and closed her eyes. “Oh, for pity’s sake, don’t you two quarrel too. There is something in the air in these mountains, I am sure of it.”

Gyrdan got up, paced a few steps about the room, and sank back into his chair again in sheer weariness. All three were tired out from lack of sleep, travel and nervous strain. The chieftains of the Black Hills were as co-operative as a crowd of tom-cats, and only Irinya’s ceaseless diplomacy kept them pulling even approximately in the same direction. They hated inactivity, and still more retreat from an unfought enemy, and some of their frustration was rubbing off on Fastred.

“Guthrum must be loving this,” he said crossly. “Near thirty miles of territory gained and not a blow struck! For once I sympathise with Venlan.”

Gyrdan put his hands over his eyes, probably counting to ten. “That was the point,” he said, keeping his voice level with an effort. “Gods, do we have to go through it all again? We are not retreating from Guthrum, we are leading him. Every mile he comes tips the scales further in our favour. And the chieftains are rallying to Irinya, even if it is out of self-interest and not high principles. Every fighting man in Ailart and Buchart is here. Gartran of Islanart and his men are here. Hedric and Berold and Leofric and Wootton and all the Lowlanders are here. Malise of Lanthart is one day’s march distant. The remainder of Kerian’s Gragarain are nearer still, for Kerian summoned them himself before he even left Caradon. Even Firdan of Mortach comes. In two days we will have close on six thousand men under arms.”

“Against ten thousand -!”

“We fight on our territory, and at a time and place of our choosing,” Irinya put in. “That means much. And do not under-estimate the hillmen. They quarrel now. Do I not know it! But as soon as battle is joined, all differences will be forgotten until it is time to squabble over the spoils. Hillmen cannot be driven, but they will consent to be led, and they will follow you two to hell and back.”

“*Not* somewhere I particularly want to go,” Fastred said. “Look, you don’t have to remind me of the plan. But it won’t *work*! Not against Guthrum. He knows his business too well. He keeps his host closed up, moving in small groups, each protected by others. Foot patrols up both hillsides. Scouts ahead and to both sides. Advance and rear guards. So we can’t ambush him. He doesn’t let his men get drunk and run riot, or sneak off back home with loot. So his army is nearly the same size as when he started. All right, we cut all the bridges, but he doesn’t fool around trying to wade and swim rivers in spate. He waits while his engineers construct some sort of bridge. And then he leaves a guard to hold it behind him. So although he gets a bit delayed, we can’t cut his supply lines. A good four thousand of his men are his own levies and those of his brother Frealaf, and men following their own lord fight a deal harder than conscripts. So we can’t expect them to leap at the chance of surrender. In winter they’d lose heart, maybe, but it’s a long time to wait til winter. What are we going to *do*? He never makes a mistake.”

“Now I know why the King never made you a general,” Gyrdan said sarcastically. “Guthrum is not so obliging as to be a fool. Very good. So it is our job to *make* him make a mistake.”

Fastred looked across at him with rather more interest. "How?"

Iryna sat up in her chair too, and Gyrdan gave her a tired smile. He leaned back, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair, and steepled his fingers.

"Guthrum is doing everything by the book," he said. "As one might expect of a conscientious young man who has never before campaigned in mountains. His lands are in Lower Sutton, almost at the Jaws of Errendale. Hunting smugglers on the moors is the nearest he has ever got to real fighting. Now then, Fastred, what is the accepted pattern for a campaign in mountain country, when the enemy is bright enough not to get ambushed?"

Fastred shut his eyes and recited, "One - engage the enemy. Two - draw him into your territory. Three - pick a pitched battle at a prepared location in favourable terrain." He mentally turned the page. "Favourable terrain - high ground, a narrow place, a strategic location through which the enemy has to pass." He opened one eye. "I've forgotten the next bit."

"I'll let you off. Right. Now, if you were Guthrum, you would have recognised Stages One and Two by now, and would be looking out for Stage Three, would you not? And what is the standard procedure for that?"

"That's your part of the job," Fastred said immediately. "Find out where the prepared position is and how to outflank it."

"You scintillate this evening. Now work out where Guthrum is expecting us to stand and meet him."

"Haven't the faintest idea," Fastred said equably.

Gyrdan sighed. "I spoke too soon. Have you got a mental map of this country in your head yet? Good. Certainly plenty of space in there. Guthrum is coming north through Ailart. The thrust of the main valley turns him slightly west. But he needs to meet up with Hygurd in the east, so cutting the rebel territory in half. Are you with me so far?"

Fastred's brow furrowed. "And the further north he can come before meeting Hygurd, the better. Provided he does not go so far north that we could cut him off in the rear. So. Er. Two routes over the ridge, if I recall the map right. The Pass of the Cattle or, slightly further north, the Black Pass."

"Which would you choose? For a big army with two thousand horse?"

"The Pass of the Cattle, obviously."

"Excellent. Let us credit Guthrum with the same intelligence as you, if that is not too great an insult to him."

"Charming. Well, if I thought the enemy was waiting for me in the Pass of the Cattle, I'd come round by the Black Pass and ram him up the backside. Sorry," he added hastily, as Iryna laughed.

"Well done. Like pulling teeth, mind, but you got there in the end."

"Have I?"

Gyrdan groaned. "Have I spent six years talking to myself? Look -"

Fastred's puzzled frown cleared suddenly. "Right! Got you! You're going to try the Karatka Manoeuvre!"

"At last! Yes, I am. Maybe you'll get a general's hat yet. Right. So -?"

"We convince Guthrum that we are waiting for him in the Pass of the Cattle, and jump on him as he goes rattling through the Black Pass to outflank us." He paused. "Great idea. How?"

Midnight, two days later, and a small but hilarious party of men blundering along a valley in the dark, relying on their ponies to do the steering and having to concentrate all their efforts on staying upright in their saddles. Somebody fell off with a curse and a clatter, and the group lurched to a stop, rocking with raucous laughter and shouting helpful if incoherent advice to the casualty.

Eomer looked disapprovingly round at Fastred, who was barely able to sit up and was showing his integration into the local culture by bursting into snatches of song in excruciatingly-accented Arderin.

"Disgusting!" he said. "I'm surprised at you all! Behaving like a bunch of common soldiers! Just because you happen on a camped enemy patrol and take 'em by surprise, there's no reason to drink their spirit rations to celebrate! I suppose you'd be at it yet if I hadn't come looking for you, and probably have ridden into a bog on the way home!"

Fastred draped a fatherly arm over his shoulders, and hiccuped. "Don' take on so. Shorry we forgot to keep shome for you."

Eomer shook him off crossly and looked across to where Gyrdan and Everard were trying to hoist Kerian back onto his horse. Kerian appeared to have taken exception to their efforts and was struggling, and all three were shouting at the tops of less than clear voices.

"Quiet there!" Eomer roared. "They'll hear you for miles around! Oh, come *on!*"

Kerian was hauled up, prevented from falling off immediately on the other side, and the group staggered off again.

Eomer carried on scolding. "I hope the men don't see you like this! What hope have we got of maintaining discipline if the officers behave like drovers on market-day?" He whipped round. "And for pity's sake, stop singing back there!"

"Ev'rybody needsh a bit of fun," Everard bellowed, with the drunk's total inability to adjust the volume control. "Be a poor do if we couldn't 'ave a bit of a laugh now and then!"

"A laugh?" Eomer yelled back. "You call that a laugh? I'm ashamed to be associated with you! What were you thinking of? Tying those poor fellows up to trees, and - and -" he blushed "- and taking all their clothes off, and daubing insulting things on their chests!"

The others doubled up with alcoholic merriment.

"What possessed you to write that, Fastred?" Gyrdan called, from the other side of the group "*How* unoriginal!"

Fastred rolled his eyes. "My fund of shallay - salaysh - rude - slogans isn't all that big," he said virtuously. "Unlike shome people I could name, I wash well brought up."

He hiccuped violently, and Eomer grabbed his arm to stop him falling off his horse.

"I wish you'd let me let them go! They'll think we're barbarians!"

"Yes," agreed Gyrdan in a low voice, "they probably will."

He reined in, and his companions, miraculously restored to quiet sobriety, followed suit.

"We must be out of earshot now," he whispered. "Everyone here?"

A chorus of muffled affirmation.

"Everard?"

"Sir?"

"How long d'you think before they get those knots undone?"

"One hour. Two at the most, even if they're complete idiots."

"And we forgot a couple of horses?"

"Aye sir," Hedric agreed. "In t' confusion when his lordship disturbed us so angry, like."

"Good. And we must have left plenty of hoofprints going in this direction. Kerian, did their scouts get a good look at you digging in at the Pass of the Cattle this afternoon?"

"Four of them," Kerian said disgustedly. "Perched on the hills like doves on a ridgepole. It was hard work not to see them. And my captains shadowed them all

the way back to Guthrum, just to make sure they didn't get lost on the way home. One stayed til dusk, so we made a great show of lighting fires and getting camped for his benefit."

"And we know none got back from the vicinity of the Black Pass," Gyrdan said grimly. "Excellent. And when these fellows get loose, they'll hare back to Guthrum - make damn sure they get through - and confirm his suspicions that he is fighting a rabble of savages who get drunk, talk carelessly, and are inordinately pleased with themselves for thinking up a simple stratagem. Thank you for ticking us off so thoroughly, Eomer. A most convincing touch."

Eomer opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Malise and Eomund and Venlan were in position on the north flank this morning," Fastred confirmed. "Up and over the ridge from the back so there'll be no marks in the pass itself. And no watch fires tonight. To the casual observer the place will look deserted. Firdan is in the corrie above that deep bog. And Holman and Berold were getting the ponies hidden among those woods near the western end. All we have to do is get back to them."

"Try not to fall into the ditches in the pass," Kerian advised with a grin. "It is not a good place for cavalry just now. I left one of my captains to guide you through. Once over the summit it is easy, and you have only to circle back to the head of the Black Pass. It will take you two hours, perhaps three."

"If this does not work," Gyrdan said thoughtfully, "nothing will. Guthrum must have heard of Herulf's defeat. He will expect us to try the same tactic again - savages are noted for low cunning but not for original thought. He knows we have twelve hundred men camped in the Pass of the Cattle tonight. He might even think we are all there - you did display all the banners, Kerian? He knows we have carefully prepared a trap for him there. He knows we know he is only a few miles distant - I took care that some of our scouts were seen. He is an intelligent man. He will surely race through the Black Pass with all speed as soon as it gets light."

He dismounted, and Kerian and Everard did likewise.

"What he does not know," Gyrdan said, with an expression only just short of smugness, "is that to the hillman the mountains are not barriers. Guthrum could never get twelve hundred men across that ridge between the two passes in one night. But we can. Come dawn, Fastred, you can look for Everard and me, and Kerian's Gragarain, and Gartran and his Islarain, on the south side of the Black Pass. And we will give Guthrum of Lower Sutton a welcome to the Black Hills that he is not likely to forget!"

“Sir,” Everard said urgently, shaking Gyrdan by the shoulder. “Sir.”

“Mm?”

“You asked to be woken at dawn.”

“So I did.” He sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Any sign of them?”

Everard shook his head nervously. “Not yet.”

They were sitting on a long irregular shelf that ran along the south flank of the pass. It was quite broad, a score of yards deep in places, and almost level. This made it very wet and unpleasant, as all the water from the hillside above drained into it. It also meant that a large body of men could be hidden there, unseen from below as long as they did not stand up or carelessly show themselves over the edge. Above, steep rocky slopes and cliffs soared to the high snow-capped summit of the Black Boar of Ailart, and Everard shivered slightly as he remembered scrambling down them in the dark a few hours earlier. Perhaps it was as well he had been unable to see the drop. Below the ledge a heathery hillside, scored in a few places by deep gullies, sloped down to the floor of the pass.

Opposite reared the Sow of Buchart, for the Black Pass formed the boundary between the two lordships. The Sow was an altogether softer and more feminine mountain than the Boar, its south-facing slopes steep but devoid of rock and clothed with stunted pine and birch scrub to within a few hundred feet of the summit. Between the Sow and the Boar, the Black Pass was a wide valley, if deep and dark because of the shadow of the flanking mountains, and fairly level. Indeed, it appeared good ground for riding unless you looked closely enough to spot the peat hags and patches of suspiciously brilliant green, and realised that most of the flat area was bog. The many intersecting and twisting paths were not mere eccentricity, but a brave attempt to keep to firm ground. To the west, the pass dropped away down a modest slope, and the stream channels in the bogs coalesced into a river that rushed cheerfully downhill in a stony bed. This improved drainage gave firm, grassy ground, thickly wooded at the lower levels and in the shelter of the Sow’s south-facing slopes. A clear track climbed alongside the river, on its north bank at first, then crossing by a shallow ford to climb onto a ledge of firm ground on the flank of the Boar. This ledge carried the track comfortably above the level of the bog for several hundred yards, before petering out and returning the traveller to the winding paths among the peat hags.

“Looks very peaceful, does it not?” Gyrdan said, surveying the scene from the cover of a battered hawthorn tree. “Absolutely deserted.”

“What if Guthrum sends scouts up the ridges?” Everard asked, looking anxiously over his shoulder. “They could see us easily enough from up there -”

“I’m afraid the poor fellows will get their throats cut or an arrow in the back,” Gyrdan said candidly. “Both ridges are alive with Highland hunters. And Guthrum can’t wait for the all-clear. His chance of a brilliant victory lies in surprise and speed. Have all the men had breakfast?”

“Yes, sir. Kerian and Gartran saw to it.”

“Have you?”

“I-I can’t, sir.”

Gyrdan put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We have done all we could,” he said quietly. “All that remains is to wait. And pray that I calculated aright!”

They had not very long to wait. Guthrum must have made his decision overnight and acted on it with speed and determination, as befits a good commander. Within two hours a forest of colourful banners appeared, climbing the west slopes of the pass. Shortly afterward it could be seen that they were borne by a great dark torrent of men, filling all the firm ground on both sides of the river.

“Advance guard of horsemen,” Gyrdan commented under his breath. “Guthrum may be there himself. The rest will be scattered through the column, probably with a group at the back to watch for stragglers and round up deserters.”

“So many!” Everard whispered in horror. “So many! They fill the whole valley, and still they come!”

“Ten thousand men makes quite a column in narrow country,” Gyrdan said mildly. “Ah - there is the tail now, do you see it? Just coming into sight above those woods.”

“We can’t surely hope to fight so many!”

“Keep your nerve, Everard. We chose this site. We know we plan to fight here. Every commander knows all the plan and his part in it. Guthrum and his captains are mentally fighting quite a different battle in quite a different place, and their soldiers are bored, have sore feet, are missing their girlfriends and are hoping not to have to fight at all.”

The head of the column got up on to the track above the bog. It was a broad track, five or six horsemen wide at least. The watchers saw one of the leading riders rise in his stirrups and survey the seemingly empty hillside closely, and then settle back into his saddle again. They rode on apparently unconcerned.

Everard shifted and fidgeted. He looked along the long ledge, at the Highlanders crouched on it like cats at a mousehole, and at the long row of boulders lined up along the lip.

“Shouldn’t we give the signal now, sir? Get the horsemen at least -?”

“No. The purpose is to trap as many as possible. We can fight one battle and one only, and it has to be the right one. Wait.”

The leading horsemen reached the end of the ledge and started picking their way cautiously through the bog. Behind them, the ledge grew packed with foot soldiers. Congestion was developing near the river as the tail of the column piled up against the sudden bottleneck. A few soldiers tried their luck in the bogs, but most waited their turn for the track. The squadron of horsemen at the rear came to an abrupt halt, and began shouldering through the press of men to see what the delay was.

The leader recognised the developing problem. His horsemen closed up, as far as was possible on the soft ground, and waited for their companions, evidently intending to push on in a compact body with the support of at least some of the foot-soldiers. All the leading group of horses were now off the track and out into the black and emerald uncertainty of the morass. Infantry joined them in dozens and scores, and still the track was packed thick. The riders moved on again and, inevitably in such terrain, immediately spread out.

Gyrdan waited no longer.

At the horn-call, all the silent men on the ledge sprang simultaneously to life. Heaved by powerful shoulders, the row of boulders toppled over the lip and went hurtling down the steep hillside to crash onto the track below in thunder and destruction. And after them, leaping and yelling, went Gyrdan and Everard and twelve hundred men, swords and battleaxes in hand.

The soldiers and riders below turned back swiftly to their comrades’ aid. But the far hillside was now also alive with men, far more on that side, who had lain hidden in the trees and scrub. And there also were a few archers, Berold at their head. Not many, a score at most, but armed with the deadly longbow. Arrows hissed among the frightened soldiers like venomous snakes, and very few missed their targets. Some of the horsemen tried to ride on, out of range, only to be overtaken by bounding warriors, leaping light-footed over the soft ground. Lowland infantry and heavy horses, surprised and unused to fighting in such terrain, were easy prey for men who had grown up in the mountains.

To the west, at the tail of the column, confusion reigned. Those soldiers queuing for the track had seen their comrades flung aside by the shattering hail of boulders,

taken one look at the sprinting hillmen and the subsequent carnage and decided that discretion was by far the better part of valour. But their own fellows and most of their cavalry, packed in behind them, could see nothing. They pressed forward eagerly. Their colleagues pressed back no less eagerly. Some tried to scramble up the valley sides. Some fell or were pushed into the river. Some were trampled by the horses or crushed in the press.

Eventually, the remaining officers got command of their bewildered and frightened men. The tail of the column fell back a little way to give itself room for manoeuvre. Order came slowly out of chaos. Given time, perhaps as little as half an hour, these men could have regrouped, counter-attacked, turned the tables.

They were not given time. Even as the officers yelled and the men gradually shuffled into ordered companies all facing the same way, Fastred’s cavalry, hidden here for just this purpose, broke clear of the cover of the oakwoods. Light-armed on mountain ponies, in a straight fight they would have been no match for Guthrum’s cavalry. But this was not a straight fight. The Lowlanders were taken by surprise for the second time. They were trying to organise a large crowd of reluctant foot soldiers. They were on a stretch of ground which, although not boggy, was wet and now trampled into mud, and their horses slipped and slithered in it. Fastred’s mountain ponies, sure-footed and nimble, charged them, turned and charged again. Panic took over. The regrouping fell apart. The tail of the column disintegrated into irretrievable disorder.

Some - quite a lot - broke through and raced back the way they had come, heedless of the thirty-odd miles of hostile territory between them and the friendly Lowlands. But many were trapped and forced steadily onward and upward, back into the maw of the pass. There they collided with their own kind again, streaming west in flight from the fury of the hillmen.

Chaos ruled. The battle no longer followed identifiable lines. It was difficult now even to tell one side from the other, so intermingled had they become. Manoeuvres, plans, strategy, tactics, all were swamped in the bloody shambles of individual men trying to stay alive.

And so the day wore away.

Irynya had not meant the barn to become a field hospital. It had simply been somewhere to wait, on the far side of the pass and more or less out of harm’s way. She and Rosie and the score or so of other women with men in the battle and the courage or curiosity to want to stay nearby had congregated there because it was

somewhere out of the wind. Perhaps it was not surprising that wounded men had the same idea.

Mostly they came on their own feet. A few were brought by anxious friends who promptly turned back to the fighting. All but the severely wounded hurried back too, the minute their wounds had been dressed. At first the casualties were a trickle, then a steady stream. Rosie was despatched down to the farm a short distance off at the bottom of the pass and came back with brandy and old linen and blankets and the farmer's two buxom daughters and a milkmaid. A constant relay fetched water from the nearby waterfall. And still they could not keep up.

Irinya found herself making a mental note to organise this better next time. If there was a next time. Lost in an endless whirl of demands for help, advice, orders, she had little idea how the battle was progressing. The injured men could give few useful details, although they had all seen Gyrdan leading the onslaught, his sword aflame in his hand - like something out of a song, Irinya commented to herself, and discounted the story, though she took comfort that he was still alive. The fact that Guthrum's men had not come pouring over the summit of the pass suggested that they had not yet won. The noise of battle floating faintly on the air, hardly louder than the sound of the sheep down at the valley farm, suggested that it was not yet over. That was as much as she could be sure of. And in any case she could not influence the outcome. All she could do now was concentrate on the injured men, trying not to think that it was her fault they were hurt, trying not to imagine how many other men were dying in pain on the other side of the hill. She cleaned, stitched, bandaged, splinted. Spoke cheerfully and comfortingly to men who tried bravely not to scream in their agony and whose anguished eyes followed her in terrible hope. Drove herself unremittingly all day, without stopping either for food or rest, because it was preferable to thinking.

As twilight fell, she was kneeling beside a man with a sword cut across his back from his shoulder to his spine, mechanically swabbing away blood. Her head ached. Her back ached. Her arms and shoulders ached. She wanted nothing more than to fall asleep and never wake up. Yet somehow she was keeping going, talking cheerfully to the man as she bandaged his wound, reassuring him that he was going to recover with only a dashing scar, and that his children's children would beg him to tell them about the Battle of the Black Pass and how brave he had been in it.

Out of the fog of weariness, a new sound gradually made its way into her brain.

"What a country!" a clear well-bred voice was declaiming. "What a godforsaken, leg-breaking, bollock-freezing, barren wilderness! A snowdrift on every hilltop, a bog in every valley, and a precipice connecting 'em together. You can keep it!"

Irinya laid the wounded man gently down and went outside, wiping her hands on a cloth. Fastred was approaching, prodding a prisoner in front of him. He was plastered in peat to the waist, his helmet dented out of shape and a lump the size of an egg was coming up on his forehead, but he was very much alive.

He gave Irinya an elaborate bow.

"Greetings, my lady. Why you want to fight for this wretched land I cannot imagine, but this particular bog is now all yours. What little of it is not stuck to me, anyway."

"The day is ours?"

"Certainly is. Gyrdan's plan worked. And you should have seen him fight! He only had to turn up and the enemy fled for their lives!"

"Is he hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"Not a scratch," was the reassuring answer. "Honestly, Irinya. Nobody can stand against Gyrdan when he really puts his mind to it. It was all decided by lunchtime really," he added in a confidential whisper, "but it took this bunch of numbskulls hours to realise it. Still, I suppose I should be grateful. If you don't keep active you freeze to death in this rotten climate." He shivered theatrically. "Kerian is chasing those who thought it prudent to trust to their legs rather than their swords, and Gyrdan is tidying up. I am for a hot bath and a change of clothes, and a very large drink. Some clown tried to brain me with a rock, and if I'm going to have a splitting headache it seems only reasonable to get drunk first. But I brought you a present on the way."

The prisoner had been unluckier than Fastred. He had evidently been in the morass over his head, and was now merely a vaguely humanoid form smothered in glutinous black slime. Irinya had to peer very hard at the peat-coated features to recognise him.

"*Guthrum?*"

"The very same," Fastred said cheerfully. "We fished him out of the bog before he drowned. Not that he was grateful. I told him, a sea-captain goes down with his ship, but it's not expected in the army. Not even when you've managed to get comprehensively beaten by a force half your size."

The pillar of mud spat peat out of its mouth.

"You took us by surprise!"

“Of course we did,” Fastred said, looking puzzled. “That was the idea.”

“A low trick! A coward’s trick!”

“Well, now,” Fastred said easily, “I could say it was a low trick for you to have twice as many men, couldn’t I? All’s fair in love and war, Guthrum, and you lost. No point complaining about it. What do you want done with him, Irinya?”

Guthrum drew himself up with as much dignity as he could muster given that his feet kept sliding from under him, and faced Irinya.

“I am gentle-born, and I have the right to die cleanly by the sword!”

“Die?”

She looked across at Fastred, who spread his hands aggrievedly.

“Don’t look at *me*! He’s been saying that sort of thing all the way here. Seems to think we’re going to nail him up by his ears and pull all his toenails out. Can’t imagine where he gets such lurid ideas from.”

“I can,” Irinya said grimly. She took a step forward. “Guthrum of Lower Sutton, I will offer you the same choice as has been offered every man captured. I am Irinya Ingeld’s daughter, rightful Lady of Carlundy. I will forgive you your rebellion and take you into my service, if you will swear me fealty.”

Guthrum’s lip curled in what was probably scorn, although it was difficult to tell under the mire.

“Swear fealty to a witch and an adulteress? Never!”

“I’d clock you one for that,” Fastred said mildly, “but it’s not done to hit a prisoner. Don’t say it around the men, though. Some of them don’t have my impeccable manners.”

“Well, Guthrum, since you wish it so, you are my prisoner,” Irinya said, with a sigh. “I can clap you in irons and keep you close confined, or you can give me your promise not to escape and you can have the run of the camp. Which is it to be?”

“I say,” Fastred protested, looking worried, “don’t you think you’re being too trusting, Irinya? How do you know he’ll keep his word?”

“I am a man of honour, sir, foreign though that may be to this brigand’s rabble! If I give my word, I keep it!”

“So I expected,” Irinya said. “Well, Guthrum, do you give me your promise?” And then, as he hesitated, she added impatiently, “Do not be a fool, man! You are over thirty miles into my territory, you have lost a battle and you have lost an army. Do you think Radwulf will want you back, even if you *could* escape?”

It was impossible to tell under the mask of peat, but she thought Guthrum was manfully holding back tears. His shoulders dropped slightly, as if the weight of his failure had fallen on him suddenly.

“On your honour, Lord Guthrum, do you give me your word that you will not attempt to escape?”

A pause, and then the head nodded, once.

“Very well. Fastred, please see kindly to our prisoner. And to yourself.”



## Chapter 25.

The Battle of the Black Pass lived long in tales, and as time went on the poets made a legend of it. Yet though not so great as its subsequent fame made it, it was a hard-fought battle on both sides. Guthrum of Lower Sutton was neither craven nor fool. Four times he gathered his bewildered soldiers and clove a path through his enemies, and four times Gyrdan rallied his own men and forced the Lowlanders back. Gartran of Islanart fell on that day, and two of his sons died with him, defending their father's body. Venlan of Ailart was grievously wounded and died a few days later in his father's arms. Malise of Lanthart lost two nephews, and Firdan of Mortach was badly hurt. Berold fell there, calling aloud a woman's name with his last breath and dying with a smile on his lips. Kerian of Gragart, characteristically at the head of his men, almost lost his life when a group of fleeing Lowlanders turned at bay and struck back. Only the timely support of his friends and captains, who cut their way into the fray to free him, saved his life, and he was carried from the field in the arms of his esquire. Many others on both sides, both great and small, fell in that conflict, and for long years afterwards it was said that the ghosts of the fallen stalked the pass, wailing for their fate.

Gyrdan did not fall. Such was his skill and strength that few could stand against him, and in that battle he won renown as a swordsman that rang throughout Carlundy. Wherever the fighting was fiercest, there he would appear, and at his coming men found fresh heart and new vigour and pressed forward crying his name. All over that mud-slaistered, blood-soaked field, the Lowlanders learned to dread that cry, and to dread still more the tall, lean figure it heralded, and the deadly sword he wielded.

At last, as the sun slid behind the mountain's shoulder, Guthrum gathered together his close bodyguard and made one final effort to lead a fighting retreat from the stricken field. Not back this time, but forward and upward, trying to cut their way out of the trap. And high in the gut of the pass, between cliff and quagmire, Gyrdan and Fastred cornered him, and there the battle was finally won.

Seeing Guthrum defeated, captured and taken from the field - dead, according to some rumours, mortally wounded according to others - the Lowlanders lost what little enthusiasm they retained. Soaking wet, mud-caked, exhausted from hours of hard fighting, they threw down their weapons in despair, no longer caring even if they escaped with their lives.

Gyrdan was among the last to leave the field, numb with weariness. Covered in mud and blood, head bowed, shoulders bent to support a wounded man, in the gathering gloom he was as anonymous as any other tired and filthy soldier leading a comrade off the field.

He knew well that he could claim a hero's welcome. Even in their bone-weary state, his troops would cheer him to the echo. They would bear him down to the valley farm shoulder-high, and there nothing would be too good for their victorious general. Irinya would be there, would see him hailed as the architect of a famous victory. She would come to greet him, knowing that if she gained her realm it would be largely owing to him, and that would be a cause for great gratitude -

He shuddered. The injured man leaning on him groaned, and Gyrdan tightened his hold on the man's waist, trying not to think about the bloody ruin they were leaving behind. His last orders had been to collect every pony, mule and cart that could be found, and carry as many of the injured as possible off the field and down into some sort of shelter. He had kept them at it until the light failed, while Malise of Lanthart and Eomer herded the prisoners together, disarmed them and marched them off somewhere under guard. All the narrow track descending to the valley farm was scored with hoofmarks and wheel-tracks, and the farm itself must be stuffed with hurt and exhausted men. Yet many more still lay on the field of conflict, alive and suffering, and their cries wrung Gyrdan's heart. Nothing more could be done for them until first light, and by then many would have died in pain and loneliness in the bitter cold of a spring night. It did not seem to him that the creation of such misery was a subject for congratulation.

It was dark by the time he got to the farm. He groped along the walls of the yard until he found the barn door, and laid the wounded man down inside. He did not linger. The whole building stank of sweat and blood and human suffering.

Outside, his own weariness suddenly settled on him like a black cloud. He reeled a few steps along the edge of the yard. Disjointed thoughts chased through his brain. He should eat something, or drink at the least, for he had done neither since early morning. He should check that Irinya was safe, and tell her the news of the battle. He should check on Fastred, whose head wound might be more serious than his lighthearted manner would suggest. He should - he should -

Gyrdan swayed. He cared for nothing now, nothing except rest. His eyes closed. He felt his knees buckle, and made no effort to stop them. By the time he hit the ground, he was already asleep.

Irinya woke in the early morning. It was full daylight and the cockerels were crowing, but no-one seemed to be stirring. The farm routine must have been thoroughly upset by the events of the last few days, and no doubt the inhabitants were as weary as the soldiers to whom they had so generously - if with little choice - offered shelter. She got up, easing her back where she had strained a muscle yesterday, and struggled into her clothes. Rosie stirred on her half of the straw mattress and then rolled over into the vacant space without waking. Irinya crept out of the storeroom silently. Let the girl enjoy her sleep while she could.

The large adjoining room was packed with sleeping soldiers, lying with limbs asprawl and mouths open, lost to the world. Irinya almost tripped over one recumbent form stretched across her threshold. The young lord from the north lowlands - Everard - still with the dirt of battle on him, but smiling in his peaceful sleep. It was not hard to guess why he had chosen that particular sleeping place, nor who figured in his dreams. A primitive jealousy suddenly surged up in her. How dare he look so content, when her own brief love had only ever brought her misery? It was not *fair*.

The childish words of the thought made her dismiss it with a twisted smile. She fought down the transient impulse to kick Everard out of his pleasant dreams and stepped over him very carefully instead. There was quite enough unhappiness in the world without adding to it by petty cruelty.

More soldiers snored in the shelter of the farmyard walls, lying tangled together for warmth like a litter of puppies in a basket. Irinya picked her way among the slumbering forms to the well, where she drew water and washed. It was icy cold and refreshing, and the sky overhead was a thin clear blue. Already the sun was gleaming on the farmhouse roof. She drew a deep breath of the sharp cool air, and then turned resolutely to the big barn, rolling up her sleeves.

Gyrdan, who was also afflicted with an over-active conscience, was already there. His sword still hung at his side, but his armour and helm had been discarded and lay in a heap against the wall. Black streaks of peat and smears of blood, oxidised now to a rusty brown, stained his clothes, and an ugly lacerated graze stood out on his temple, angry red against his general pallor. He carried one shoulder a little lower than the other, as though it pained him, and black bruises mottled his forearms. Stubble sprouted over his cheeks and chin, but though he had not shaved he had washed. His face and hair were clean, and the blood on his hands was fresh.

“Get out of the light, whoever you are,” he said curtly, without looking up from his task. He was kneeling over a man lying face-down on the floor, running careful hands over a hideous bruise and clotted gash near the point of the shoulder blade. The man winced, and Gyrdan’s voice became soothing, “All right, easy there. Can you hear me, Leofa? Part of the barb has lodged in the muscle. We’ll get it out of you, but it’s going to hurt.”

He nodded to two other men hovering uncomfortably nearby. Evidently they had been unlucky enough to be in the way when Gyrdan was looking for helpers. Now they took hold of the injured man’s arms and Gyrdan pinned him down with a knee in the small of his back. Leofa tried to be brave, but when the knife cut deep into the muscle he screamed. As Gyrdan’s long fingers located the barb he kicked and plunged wildly, and then mercifully fell forward fainting as the jagged scrap of metal was wrenched out of the wound, followed by a gush of half-clotted black blood.

“Good,” Gyrdan murmured absently, looking intently at the shard. “Lucky it didn’t quite reach the bone.” He reached for a pile of rags beside him and bound a handful of folded cloth securely over the wound. Only then did he look round and notice Irinya. His face changed, and he got up swiftly and came to meet her, limping slightly.

“Are you hurt?” she asked anxiously, and he shook his head.

“Only bruises. Not many strokes got home, and the mail turned those that did. Nothing to signify, lady.”

“But your face?”

She reached out as if to touch the cut, hesitated, and shrank from the contact. Gyrdan put a hand up as if noticing it for the first time, and shrugged. “Argument with a rock, I suppose. Nothing compared to these poor fellows.”

He did not need to gesture round the barn to underline his point.

“There will be many more still on the field, lady,” he said in a low voice. “And those who survived the night will be much weakened by the cold. We need shelter, blankets, hot drinks. Hot water. Bandages, splints -”

“Someone else can surely see to it. I will see to it. You should rest.”

He smiled. “I have slept. I am not hurt. And I had rather labour to save lives than to take them. But do not think I refuse your help, lady. There is work enough to keep a dozen surgeons busy.”

So it proved. As the day wore on and more people woke up, both the task and the manpower increased. Eomer, who had escaped with nothing worse than a mud-bath,

came to help and so did Everard. Around mid-morning Fastred joined them too, white-faced and unusually quiet because of his headache but steady of hand and, it became apparent, probably the most skilled of them all. Rosie took over the kitchen and ordered the other women around with the relish of a lowly housemaid suddenly promoted to chief cook. Every man who had escaped unscathed was put to work. Casualties were brought down by the cartload, sorted swiftly into those with minor hurts, those who were going to die - who were comforted and made easy - and those who needed skilled treatment. There were foreign bodies to be cut out of wounds, broken bones to be set and splinted, dislocated joints manipulated, shattered and mangled limbs amputated. All day the work went on, and all day Gyrdan laboured, as if he felt personally responsible for the damage and determined to repair as much of it as possible. He was a quick and skilful surgeon and possessed of boundless compassion, no doubt born of bitter personal experience.

“A careless surgeon does as much damage as enemy steel, and hurts a deal worse,” he said shortly, when Malise of Lanthart - a warrior only by virtue of his social position and notoriously squeamish - suggested that such work was beneath the dignity of officers and a lady. “Those of us with any skill at healing have a duty to use it. But each to his own, lord. You need not help here. Is someone seeing to quartering, supply, the guarding of prisoners?”

“How can anything be worth so much suffering?” Irinya whispered, somewhere towards the end of that long day. “How can *anything* be worth it?”

Gyrdan did not answer immediately, and when he did it was with a question.

“How many people died in the salt famines?”

By the end of the second day, some sort of order had developed. The nearest hall, belonging to a fourth or fifth cousin of Eomund, was taken over as a temporary headquarters, the family moving out to share with still more distant relatives half a mile away. The nearby villages found themselves converted into vast barracks and makeshift hospitals, with every available building pressed into service. It was lucky, perhaps, that it was spring, when stock were moved out of shelter to graze on the new grass, and the barns were getting empty of winter fodder. For the most part the villagers were more than willing. The battle had been won, Radwulf's hated army vanquished, and they were delighted to welcome the soldiers as heroes - as long as they did not stay too long. Moreover, most had taken the opportunity for a little

quick profit, and many of the locals were to be seen sporting new cloaks and boots of suspiciously Lowland cut.

Inevitably, perhaps, this brought Guthrum of Lower Sutton to the hall one afternoon, seeking Gyrdan in high dudgeon.

“I *insist* on seeing your general!” he shouted at the sentry, a Mortachan from the far north who had suddenly decided to understand only Arderin. “Unhand me, sir! I may be a prisoner but I am an officer and a lord, and I demand proper treatment -”

“Does he, indeed?” Gyrdan said, when Everard rather sheepishly relayed this message. “Oh, very well, I'll come. I suppose it was inevitable that I should renew my acquaintance with Lord Guthrum eventually.”

“*We* are not rebels and brigands!” Guthrum was declaring to Eomund, who had only come into the hall in search of beer and was not listening. “We are loyal servants of the King -”

“Then you display extraordinary loyalty,” Gyrdan interposed coolly from the doorway. “The only King we recognise died four centuries ago.”

Guthrum swung round, and fell back a step as though physically struck.

“You!”

Gyrdan advanced calmly into the room and settled himself comfortably in a chair. “Indeed. The circumstances differ somewhat from our previous meeting, do they not, Guthrum? This time you are my prisoner. I trust you are faring better at your captors' hands than I did at mine.”

Guthrum had gone very white, but he did not flutter with cowardly excuses, nor did he attempt to blame Hygurd. “I do not doubt that will soon change! Had I known you were the rebel general, I would have saved my breath. I do not expect such as you to understand the rules of war.”

He turned on his heel and made to stalk out, but at a sign from Gyrdan the sentry barred his way.

“Let me pass, oaf!”

“You are a prisoner, Guthrum,” Gyrdan said calmly, “and I have not given you leave to depart. You demanded to speak with me, in some heat as I understand. Your request has been granted. It is hardly good manners to flounce out now, though it may salve your hurt pride a little. What is the grievance that demands such urgent attention?”

Guthrum turned back, standing very upright as though someone had pushed a poker down his back.

“My men’s belongings have been looted!”

Everard was seized with a fit of coughing and Eomund, who was less circumspect, laughed out loud.

“Of course they have,” Gyrdan said, smothering a smile. “Why else do most men fight? There are few enough chances of getting rich in this world. Dead men’s possessions are fair game, and have been since time out of mind. It is not pretty, but war is not pretty. At least your wounded and your captured were not slain for their goods, which you must own is better behaviour than we could expect of your lord.”

“I own no such thing!” Guthrum snapped back, though with a little less certainty in his tone. He knew quite well how Radwulf treated prisoners and, as Gyrdan had guessed all those months ago, he did not like it.

Gyrdan leaned back in his chair and slung one ankle over the other knee, studying Guthrum intently. He wondered how a young man of obviously high moral principles, bordering indeed on priggishness, came to be so loyal a servant of Radwulf, who recognised no principle except superior force.

“No? Do you think Radwulf would labour to save the lives of his enemies, as we have done? Do you think he would even trouble to feed prisoners?”

“A small good does not right a large evil,” Guthrum said primly, and then remembered something else. “In any case, you are rebels against the King, and he has every right to hang you as traitors!”

“Kindly do not refer to Radwulf as the King. It is deeply offensive to every person in the Highlands and most of those in the Lowlands. No ruler of Carlundy has ever claimed the title of King. Radwulf has no right to royal title, and well he knows it. If you do not, your education was sadly lacking.”

Hot colour flared in Guthrum’s cheeks. “Whatever the title, you are still rebels! Traitors!”

“How so?”

Guthrum blinked, taken aback. “Well - because you have rebelled against Lord Radwulf - the King -”

“On the contrary. Who was the previous Lord of Carlundy? Ingeld Ingeldson, the eighteenth of that name. And title and property descend from a man to his sons, and then to his daughters, and then revert to his eldest brother -”

“Do not lecture me!”

“Am I stating the law of Carlundy correctly? Or was your legal education as inadequate as your history?”

Guthrum could see he was being painted into a corner, and took refuge in bluster.

“I did not come here to be insulted by a brigand!”

“No, but you demanded this meeting and you will stay until I give you leave to go. Have I stated the law correctly?”

“You have,” muttered Guthrum sulkily.

“And the last Ingeld Ingeldson left an only child. A daughter. Who under the law inherited all his property and his title. Irinya is the Lady of Carlundy by right. Which makes Radwulf the traitor and the rebel, not us.”

“You talk nonsense. A husband cannot rebel against his wife! It is absurd. When a woman marries, her rights and property accrue to her husband. Any but a fool knows that.”

Gyrdan raised an eyebrow. “I grant you that is usual. But only because it is usual for the woman and her family to make over the rights as a dowry. Show me any document signed by the late Ingeld Ingeldson disinheriting his daughter in favour of Radwulf, or any document signed by Irinya transferring her rights - and I mean signed freely and genuinely, not under threat of force or with a forged signature -” he had to add that, for Radwulf might have forged anything, “- show me such a document, and I will abandon the fight.”

“Ha! You mock *my* education! Yet such a document was signed, years ago, declaring the woman mad and unfit to rule!”

“Only because Radwulf lied to my father!” Eomund bellowed. “Had he known the truth he would never have signed! Gyrdan, let me kick this stuck-up little whelp round the yard and throw him in the midden where he belongs!”

“Leave him alone, Eomund. Guthrum sets great store by legal form, it seems. Well, so do I. The document you refer to, Guthrum, was obtained by violence and deceit. And even if it were genuine, it would not support your case. It declared Radwulf *Regent*, not Lord, and only temporarily. Eormenic of Buchart would not sign away his niece’s rights. It fell void three years ago, and Radwulf has not attempted to have it renewed. Irinya is Lady of Carlundy by right, under any interpretation of the law.”

Guthrum swallowed. “I do not believe you.” He rallied. “Why should I be lectured on law by a brigand and an escaped criminal? A murderer, no less!” He jabbed a finger in Eomund’s direction. “Murderer of *your* father!”

“Nobody believes *that*,” Eomund snorted. “Radwulf murdered my father.”

“Slander!”

“You cannot complain, Guthrum, since all you have done since you came in is to hurl cheap insults at us. Brigands, traitors, rebels, criminals, you name us, though you have no basis for it.”

“You fight like brigands and thieves! Sneaking up on us treacherously, instead of fighting in open field as a gentleman should!”

Gyrdan sighed. “That is among the most foolish things you have said so far. I had thought better of you. If you and I were to fight a duel, Guthrum, each would be expected to use his wits as well as his sword. You feint to the right, I move to counter the blow, and you swiftly change stance and cut me down from the other side. That is not called treachery, it is called skill-at-arms, is it not? I but apply the same principle as a general. So do you.”

“I do not! I fight honourably, as a gentleman should!”

“Indeed? Then why did you not ride up through the Pass of the Cattle, where you believed us to be waiting? Why did you try to outflank us and take us by surprise, instead of giving battle like a gentleman, as you put it?”

“And walk into a trap? Do you take me for a fool? It was a ruse of war, a legitimate manoeuvre....”

Guthrum’s voice slowly lost its righteous certainty, and trailed off into silence. He hesitated and looked down at his boots, and Gyrdan suddenly felt terribly old, old enough to be his grandfather. When he spoke, his voice was toneless with exhaustion.

“The wicked thing about war is the killing. A dead man is just as dead whether he is slain by the sword in equal combat or crushed by a boulder or drowned in a bog. It matters nothing to him, and precious little to his wife and children. To kill or injure another man is a wicked act, and it is no less wicked for being done according to some set of silly rules invented by some silly poet who probably never fought a battle in his silly life. War is not glorious. War is hell. The only reason for fighting it is to achieve some good end that cannot be achieved by any other means. And to achieve that end as swiftly and as cleanly as possible, with the fewest on both sides killed along the way. I would rather fight an ambush of black treachery that slays a hundred men than a noble battle that slays a thousand.”

Guthrum’s head came up defiantly, and his eyes were hard and bitter again. “A good end? *This* is a good end? The rebellion of an adulteress against her lawful husband! This is no war for right and justice, for all your fine talk. It is no more than murder.” His voice shook with the violence of his contempt, and he almost spat the words. “Murder! By a harlot and her paramour!”

Gyrdan’s eyes blazed in his pale face. He did not move a muscle, and yet Guthrum blanched and involuntarily gave back a step.

“*Get out.*” Gyrdan’s voice quivered with controlled fury. “Get out! Before I forget the courtesy due a prisoner and run you through! *Go!*”

Guthrum didn’t hesitate. Aghast at what he had said, shocked by Gyrdan’s cold anger, he turned and fled.

Guthrum passed the remainder of the day in a turmoil of mental confusion. He was ashamed of himself for having spoken so, though his opinion was sincerely held. He looked on Irinya with the disgust he felt for particularly loathsome vermin. Yet it was ill-mannered and ungentlemanly to have said so. He had been stung to it only by the uncomfortable conviction that, in all other matters, Radwulf was in the wrong.

Before setting out, he had been completely convinced of the rightness of his cause. He was sure that the rebels were undisciplined and ignorant savages, out to wreck, murder, rape and pillage, and should be mercilessly crushed. Now he was not so certain. For one thing, they had more intelligence and courage than he had given them credit for. His defeat was still a source of bitter shame but, though he called it treacherous in others’ hearing, privately he admitted that it had been a brilliant manoeuvre and felt a sneaking admiration both for the man who had planned it and for those who had carried it out. For another, the rebels were showing greater mercy to their defeated enemies than he had dared to hope. He had not been brutally murdered or even punished for his insult. Even his common soldiers were being well treated. Almost all had refused to change sides, not being so disaffected as the defaulters who garrisoned the Highland forts and having more immediate recollections of Radwulf’s power. They knew that they were no more than a fourth part of Radwulf’s army, and had no intention of being caught on the wrong side when the rebellion was inevitably defeated. Moreover, they had not especially wanted to fight for Radwulf, were rather relieved to have got out of the battle alive, and had no desire at all to fight for anyone else.

Guthrum had been both sad and proud of his men’s loyalty. Because they were acting in a way he approved of, he was apt to attribute to them loftier motivation than most actually possessed. Yet the expected massacre had not occurred. In his own case, he told himself it was because the rebels wanted his ransom money, or planned to use him as a hostage. But it was more difficult to explain the ordinary soldiers, who were not only of no value but would also be an unmitigated nuisance to feed

and guard. Guthrum had spent many hours trying to construct a complicated cynical explanation, in order to avoid the simple one of common human decency.

He knew Radwulf would have left the enemy wounded untreated and their dead unburied on the battlefield. He knew Radwulf would have stolen everything of any value from the prisoners, then herded them into some stinking confinement to rot. He knew Radwulf would have tortured the enemy leader, partly for twisted amusement, partly to extract information. He knew Radwulf would have supplied his army by the time-honoured means of a lazy commander, by letting his soldiers pillage the surrounding countryside. Yet the supposed savages had done none of these terrible things.

In short, Guthrum was slowly coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that he would much rather be on the other side - if it were not for that one ugly central fact.

To him it was profoundly important. He was rather shy of women and inclined to regard them as exotic and incomprehensible creatures, both fascinating and dangerous. In early adolescence he had clumsily seduced a servant girl, because it seemed to be expected of him, and although she had not actually objected, she had cried bitterly afterwards and left him feeling uncomprehendingly sorry and ashamed. Later, his father and elder brother had taken great delight in introducing him to women of their acquaintance - somehow, despite their fine clothes and jewels, Guthrum could never think of them as ladies - and watching him stammer through his meagre stock of polite conversation, burning with embarrassment. The women called him "sweet" and stroked his hair, and giggled at him. His father and brother called him other names.

He had taken refuge in earnest study of his duties as a feudal lord and immersed himself in managing the family's great estates, first on his father's behalf and then on his brother's. Marriage, however, had not followed. Although there was no shortage of young women eager to marry into one of the wealthiest families in the Lowlands, none of them met Guthrum's ill-defined idea of a "nice girl". Women, to him, fell into two mutually exclusive classes - the chaste, to be worshipped, and the wanton, to be despised. In this he was painfully out of step with his times and class. The nobility took its cue from the Lord of Carlundy, and Radwulf's court at Mickleburg was notorious for its licentious behaviour. Frealaf, his elder brother, revelled in it. Guthrum was revolted, and stayed away as much as possible.

It had been on one of his infrequent visits to Mickleburg, presumably to attend some feast he had been unable to avoid, that he had first seen Irinya. He had noticed her because she seemed so different from the other women. She had been richly but

quietly dressed, she did not shriek or laugh loudly, and she had maintained an air of calm dignity throughout, even though Radwulf had deliberately snubbed her in favour of a plump, giggling girl squeezed into - or, more accurately, out of - a dress three sizes too small. Guthrum had been deeply embarrassed and angry on Irinya's behalf, and had carried away a muddled feeling that Radwulf was treating his wife shamefully and making her miserable. Being a romantic at heart, he had invented Irinya in his imagination as a faithful, loving wife unhappily married to a philanderer, and every subsequent meeting was trawled for material to feed this image. He had conceived a deep sympathy for his imagined lady, and woven a rambling fantasy in which he somehow forced Radwulf to mend his ways and the couple lived together happy ever after.

Frealaf, who spent almost all his time at court and came home only in the hunting season or when he needed funds, had found this touching daydream highly amusing. He had taken great delight in trampling Guthrum's gentle fantasy into the mire, and though Guthrum tried hard to dismiss the tale as mere empty boasting, he had never felt quite the same again.

And then, the events of the previous summer. Irinya in danger, taken hostage by a ruthless murderer. For Guthrum she had instantly become the romantic heroine again, and he had been overjoyed to be her rescuer. He had been a little disappointed at the hate she apparently showed for her erstwhile captor - but that was surely understandable if the man had treated her cruelly. He had looked forward eagerly to conveying her safely back to Radwulf - who would surely, having so nearly lost her, appreciate her properly in future. All his old dreams seemed to be coming true.

He had hardly been able to believe it the following morning, when he grew anxious at her long sleep and ventured shyly into the tent to wake her. Gone! And taking the murderer with her! He had felt as if he himself was the cuckold, so deep was the shock. To him the facts could have but one explanation; Irinya was not the chaste wife of his fond imagining but an adulteress fleeing with her lover. All Frealaf's beastly tale had been true. His boyish affection died then, and festered into the bitter hate of a man who feels himself deceived.

Never, no matter how much he hated Radwulf's tyranny, no matter how justly Irinya ruled, never could Guthrum bring himself to serve an adulteress. Illogical it might be - for Radwulf was openly an adulterer - but the conviction was no less strong for that. Guthrum's mind pulled him one way, and his heart pulled him the other, and it seemed they would pull him in two.

“An army! An army coming!” The watchman skidded to a halt, belatedly remembered his newly-learned drill, and saluted Gyrdan. “Captain Hedric’s compliments, sah. Large army, foot an’ horse, six thousand in sight so far, coming from t’east. Four mile off. Banners are all yellor dragons, an’ t’biggest one’s a dragon all by itself, sah!”

Wootton’s drill had at least extended as far as calling all superiors “sah”, Gyrdan reflected.

“Very good. My compliments to Captain Hedric, and tell him to stand the guards to arms.”

“Sah!”

Another salute, and the watchman was racing off on his new errand, hardly recognisable as the terrified scarecrow captured at Eagle Crag five months before. It was the day after the unpleasant scene with Guthrum, a bright, warm morning with soft air and a brilliant sun.

“So Hygurd comes at last,” Irinya said, at Gyrdan’s side.

“And in strength. Well, if he thinks to find us unprepared, he is mistaken.”

“I suppose you had better ready the defence,” she agreed. “Though I think it will not be necessary. Hygurd comes to parley, not to fight.”

Whether such had always been Hygurd’s intention, or whether he decided it on seeing the close-packed ranks drawn up to meet him, he halted his host when it was still half a mile away. Unhurriedly, almost arrogantly, they spread out over the valley floor and set about preparing a mid-day meal, for all the world as if they were merely a vast horde of picnickers. At the head of the column, a pavilion was pitched - for Hygurd liked to travel in style - and he himself could be seen lounging in its shade as various attendants scurried to and fro.

“Hygurd tries to impress,” Irinya commented to Kerian, who was sitting with her in the hall, still in pain from a leg wound but determined not to be left out. “And to show who is master. Well, let him show off if he wishes. We can wait.”

An hour or so later, a group of three gorgeously-apparrelled riders set off from Hygurd’s camp. A messenger and two escorts, bearing the proud dragon banner and, beneath it, a white silk pennant scattered with pearls. Even the white flag of truce had to display Hygurd’s wealth.

The messenger proved to be a slim, rather gangling youth sporting a carefully-tended moustache, though as yet his chin was devoid of beard. He looked avidly around as he was escorted in by two of Fastred’s guards, as though all were new and exciting to him, and fixed his gaze eagerly on Irinya.

He swept a low bow with a flourish that betrayed much anxious practice.

“I am Anaros son of Anaren, lady,” he declared. “I have the honour to be squire to Earl Hygurd of Darain, my mother’s kinsman. And the still greater honour to bear a message to you.”

It was not mere empty flattery. Irinya’s fame had spread in Darain, and while opinion was divided, curiosity was universal.

“I am listening,” Irinya said gravely. “What does Hygurd of Darain have to say to Irinya Daughter of Ardern?”

“He offers alliance. In your struggle against Radwulf -”

“Offers!” Kerian barked. “How dare he *offer!* As though he conferred a favour!”

“Hygurd of Darain has sworn loyalty to Radwulf,” Irinya interposed. “Does he turn his coat?”

Anaros shuffled, embarrassed. “Er - he believes he was mistaken -”

“Aye!” snorted Kerian contemptuously. “Now he thinks to join the winning side. To take a share of the spoils without a share of the blood.”

“Do not speak so of my lord! It would shame me to take a wounded man’s life.”

“I’d like to see you try, young cockerel -!”

“It is forbidden to quarrel during a parley,” Irinya said severely. “Anaros, address your remarks to me in future. What else did Hygurd bid you say?”

“Only this, lady. That he offers you his help but - er - he requires something of you in exchange -”

Irinya’s glance stilled the angry words on Kerian’s lips, and he contented himself with merely glaring at the young squire.

“I do not think Hygurd is in a position to *require* anything of me,” Irinya said icily, and Anaros hung his head. “Tell him to be more careful of his choice of words in future.”

“Lady - I think he *was* most careful. I was bidden also to say, that Earl Hygurd suggests a truce -”

“I was not aware that Hygurd and I were at war.”

Anaros coughed, aware that he was not doing very well. “Well - to maintain the peace, then. For two days, neither shall attack the other. To give time for talk. Earl Hygurd wishes to discuss these matters with you personally, lady. Er. Alone.”

“Take this answer back to Earl Hygurd. I am not at war with him, nor will I be unless he gives me reason. Therefore, his talk of truce is without meaning. But if he fears to approach without guarantee, I will send a safe-conduct for him. I will see him this afternoon, at one hour before sundown.”

“Yes, lady. Ah - my lord bid me say, that he would meet you on neutral ground - between the armies -”

“Indeed!” Irinya snapped, losing patience. “Earl Hygurd makes too many demands. I will meet him here, or not at all. He has my word that he will not be harmed or detained. Tell him that!”

Hygurd evidently did not think the point worth fighting, which said much for Irinya’s reputation as one who could be trusted to keep her word. He would not have treated with Radwulf on such terms, but early evening found him approaching the hall - half an hour late, just to show that it was at his own convenience.

“Earl Hygurd of Darain!” cried the herald, and Hygurd strode in, pausing in the frame for effect.

He must have gone to some trouble with his appearance, for he cut a magnificent figure. He was tall, even by the standards of the country, and carried himself with the confident assurance of a man accustomed to being obeyed. He was bareheaded, but clad in a coat of burnished black mail, and from his shoulders flowed a long mantle of rich velvet, jewelled at the hem and held at the throat by a brooch of gold and emeralds. A sword hung from his glittering gold belt, and he was very careful that the mantle swung back to reveal the gold chasing on the scabbard and the gems studding the hilt.

He advanced with a gait that would have been called a swagger had it been less elegant, stopped in front of the table, and flourished a bow that had more to do with displaying his own grace than with any deference to its object.

“Greetings, Irinya.”

“Greetings, my lord of Darain.”

Hygurd raised an eyebrow sardonically. “I had hoped we could avoid such stuffy formalities. But, *lady*, it shall be as you wish.”

He disposed himself in the chair set ready for him, arranging his long limbs with studied insouciance, and surveyed the scene as an actor surveys an audience.

Irinya sat at the centre of the long table, flanked on both sides by her chief supporters. Gyrdan and Fastred sat at her left hand and her right, and beyond them were Eomer and Eomund, Kerian of Gragart, Malise of Lanthart and his remaining

nephew Mordach, Ferthan son of Firdan who was still too ill to attend, Vidian of Ailart in deep mourning for his son Venlan, Gartravain of Islanart also in mourning for his father and two brothers, Tiercel of Lake Dunart meeting his erstwhile overlord’s eye fearlessly, and Everard of Standale Brow.

Hygurd included them all in a languid gesture.

“Such a crowd, lady! My squire must have failed to deliver my message correctly. I would speak with you alone.”

“Your message was conveyed, my lord. I do not choose to receive you alone.”

Hygurd’s eyes flickered away and back to her again.

“I assure you lady, I had thought only for your - modesty. Certain of the matters I wish to discuss are of a delicate nature.”

He swept a glance down what little of her figure he could see behind the table, and gave her his most charming smile. “Dismiss them, lady.”

“Whatever you have to say, you say it before all. These are allies and trusted friends. I have no secrets from them.”

That was not strictly true. Gyrdan, Fastred, Eomer and to a lesser extent Kerian formed a kind of inner circle of advisers, and many decisions were taken without consulting the others. But it was true that secret negotiations with Hygurd, who was cordially detested by all, would never have been tolerated.

Hygurd laughed shortly and sarcastically. “Your choice, lady.”

A moment of silence, like a break between fencing bouts, or the mutual appraisal of suspicious cats deciding whether to fight. Hygurd broke it.

“Enough nonsense! I am come, lady, to offer to join with you in alliance.”

“So I understand.”

Again silence. Again it was Hygurd who spoke first.

“Behind the hill here, I have close on nine thousand men. All full-armed. And two thousand of them also horsed.”

“Yes. I know.”

Gyrdan’s scouts had tracked Hygurd’s force long before the watch had brought warning of its final approach, and Irinya knew Hygurd’s statement to be correct.

Hygurd had no need to state the implicit threat. All were very well aware of it already. He smiled sardonically. “You need not fear, lady,” he promised in a silky tone. “All will serve you faithfully. On one condition.”

“Which is?”

Hygurd leaned forward slightly, took her gaze and held it.

“Marry me.”



Irinya's eyes flashed. "You forget, my lord, I am already furnished with a husband."

"We are all trying to widow you," Hygurd said crudely. "Give me your promise. When Radwulf is dead, you will wed me."

A storm of protest broke out. All the chieftains had been thinking exactly the same thing. Even those who were already in possession of a wife had unmarried brothers, sons, nephews or cousins, and the Lordship of Carlundy was a dowry worth having in the family. But just because they had the same thought themselves, they were not going to tolerate Hygurd saying it.

Hygurd had expected the reaction, and waited for it to die down.

"Your answer, lady," he prompted menacingly. "Nine thousand men I offer for your hand."

"And think they will serve as threat if not as bribe," she said wryly.

He smiled like a tiger. "That is your choice, lady."

"No. *This* is my choice. I refuse. Your threat, your bribe and your hand. I am bound to no man. To none have I given promise of goods or favour. I make no exception for you."

Hygurd's smile vanished. "Brave words! Very brave! But foolish. I am not the chief of some tuppenny lordship or a few dozen square miles of rock and bog! I am the Earl of Darain. Oh, yes, you fools can mutter!" He glowered round at the outraged chieftains. "Tuppenny lords and bog-trotters! I can field more men than all of you put together!"

He left his chair and stood over Irinya, resting his hands on the table before her, trying to intimidate her with his height and physical presence. "Think again, my lady. You cannot afford to reject me."

"What your courtship lacks in courtesy, my lord, it makes up in persistence. Have I not given you a clear enough answer? Widowed or not, I am not minded to wed. What else have you to say?"

Hygurd was not going to be dismissed so easily. "I say it is your duty to wed again. Carlundy needs an heir."

Irinya tried not to shiver. This was a painful subject, and doubly so when broached in front of a dozen men.

She said, carefully, "It will not get one from me. Have you forgot, my lord? Twelve years of marriage with no child, and it is clear that the fault lies not with Radwulf. I fear I am barren."

"Hah! Your fathers were brothers and your mothers cousins. It is too close for breeding. *I* will serve you better -" he made a crude gesture "- and fresh seed will bring forth harvest."

She recoiled as if he had slapped her face, which was exactly as Hygurd had intended. He valued strength and scorned weakness, and judged others by his standards. But he had not made allowance for the high regard in which Irinya was held by her allies. They had all come to admire and like her, if no more. She had shared the rigours of travel and campaign uncomplainingly, and if she drove others hard she drove herself harder. She was clever and courageous, made quick decisions and stuck to them, treated everyone with unfailing courtesy and, most important of all, she had led them to victory. Hygurd's coarse bullying, instead of making them despise her as a weak woman, made them rally round to protect her. A kind of snarl rose from the assembly, and if the words were not distinguishable, the general tone was all too clear.

But Hygurd was not accustomed to defeat, nor was he easily cowed. He shouted above the din,

"I have an army at my back! Aye, and more than an army! *I* have not squandered my wealth in clan quarrels. My men are no mere handful of peasants with home-made swords! They are armed with the finest weapons in the world. Dwarf-weapons from Isgar, bought in Fairhaven. And kept secret all these years, though many spies tried to find me out."

He glared across at Gyrdan. "*Most* of them did not survive!"

"But I did," Gyrdan said quietly. "No thanks to you."

The chieftains went suddenly quiet, sensing the edge of a secret they did not share.

Hygurd shrugged, and sat down again. "You were too close. And I could not afford to be found out. It was you or me." He turned back to Irinya. "So do not count my power by heads, lady. Two thousand men I have already armed with dwarf-weapons, and there are as many again hidden further south. Say the word, and all will be collected and placed at your service. *If* you so choose."

He sat back expectantly, pleased with the effect. The chieftains all looked troubled, and some frankly aghast. Dwarf-swords could shear through chain-mail or cleave a steel helm, almost never broke or bent, and kept their edge all day. Dwarf-wrought shields would turn all but the finest blade. Hygurd's two thousand, so armed, would be a match for five or six thousand with conventional armour.

Irinya had regained command of herself.

“Well, my lord of Darain,” she said pleasantly, “I think we can save you the trouble. You are referring to the weapons hidden for you by the smugglers, are you not? You will be delighted to know that they are already safely here.”

Hygurd took a little while to absorb this, like a man who has miscounted the cards and stares disbelievingly at the last trump laid on his ace.

“We thought it best not to trust to your good intentions,” Gyrdan said. “You will own I had reason for that.”

The chieftains crowed with glee, only half understanding the story but seeing that Hygurd had been somehow outmanoeuvred. But Hygurd had not kept his great earldom intact by being a coward or a fool. He saw that tactic had failed, and immediately fell back on another.

“You will cheer on the other side of your faces soon!” His voice dropped and became sibilant, menacing. “You do not know your peril.”

Hygurd had a commanding presence, and knew how to exercise it. Doubt darkened every face. Even Gyrdan momentarily glanced at Irinya, and got an almost imperceptible shake of the head in return.

“You are in deadly danger,” Hygurd went on. “But I, I can save you from it. If you wish, my lady. The choice is yours.”

“Details,” Irinya said shortly. “I am not to be cowed by imagined threats, Hygurd.”

“You do not already know of it?” He drew in his breath sharply. “Oh, dear, my lady. Oh, dear, oh, dear.” He shook his head like a pompous physician diagnosing a hopeless case. “Radwulf is sending a great army against you. Ten thousand men. You are caught between the millstones, my lady, and there is no escape.”

This had quite the wrong effect. They relaxed.

“Another one?” Fastred said, and they actually laughed.

Hygurd bridled. “This is no border patrol, fool! This is an army! Led by Guthrum of Lower Sutton!”

“Met it,” said Malise of Lanthart, briefly, and relapsed back into his habitual silence.

“Fought it,” added Eomer.

“Beaten it,” beamed Eomund.

Hygurd looked from one grinning face to another, his head spinning. He opened his mouth but no words would come.

“How did you think I got this?” Kerian bawled, pointing to his bandaged leg propped up on cushions. “You think I fell off my horse?”

“Bluff! Guthrum has ten thousand men! Twice your numbers! You could not *possibly* have fought him and won!”

“Have you heard from your ally lately? Seen his force? No? Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted,” Gyrdan said. “You would do well to remember that, Hygurd, if you seek success in war.”

“I do not believe you!”

“Page!” Irinya called.

“Ma’am?” came the answering squeak.

“My compliments to Lord Guthrum - you know, the Lowland gentleman - and ask him if he would be so kind as to step this way.”

Hygurd could do nothing but stare. Minutes passed. Then there was a step at the door.

“Guthrum!” Hygurd whispered.

“You too?” Guthrum gasped. “How -?”

Then he realised. His face went white, then scarlet, then white again.

“Traitor! Turncoat!”

He raced up the hall and sprang for Hygurd’s throat. “Renegade! I will kill you - !”

The assembly cheered him on, without much irony. Hygurd’s face was turning blue, and Guthrum was also trying to dash his head on the table for good measure.

“Coward!” he panted. “Das - tard!”

Fastred and Gyrdan dragged him off, and Hygurd staggered to his feet, clutching his throat. His fine brooch was bent and his mantle torn. All he could do for several minutes was drag raspily for breath, while Guthrum hung limply between his captors, exhausted.

“Traitor!” Hygurd choked, after a while. “Fool! I am no traitor.”

Guthrum raised his head. Two spots of colour burned in his cheeks, but otherwise he was pale as death. “You swore loyalty to the King! And now you betray him - treat with his enemies -!”

“King!” Hygurd spat in Guthrum’s face. “*That* for your King! Radwulf is no more royal than the bugs in his bed! I do not think myself bound by that oath.”

Guthrum wiped his face. “Then you should not have sworn it.”

“I was forced! I swore on pain of forfeiture.”

“What are lands worth if a man loses his good name?”

Hygurd lurched a step forward and raised his fist, then turned away.

“My good name.” He laughed, a hollow, mirthless sound rendered almost diabolic by the rattle in his bruised throat. “Oh, you poor innocent fool! I *am* my lands. I *am* my people. What would they care for my “good name” if the price is to have them turned over to some rapacious foreigner? But no Lowlander would understand that. Listen, you little prig. Listen, all of you!”

He swung round to include the whole assembly in his glance. “You, little chiefs of little lands, you can afford the luxury of dissent. You can insult Radwulf’s officials, forget to pay your taxes, boast of war against him. The Lords of Darain have not that luxury. A householder will tolerate the sparrows twittering in his thatch, but when he sees the eagle hovering over his sheepfolds he takes his long bow and does not come back until he has slain it. How long, think you, could we have kept Darain if Radwulf feared we would turn our strength against him? Almost we lost the earldom once, when my father spoke too loud and too proud in Radwulf’s hearing. I saved Darain then. By seeming converted to Radwulf, by playing the loyal lieutenant, I could convince him that he need not crush Darain because it would eventually come to me.

“And so it proved. And so I could let you escape from Deepdale, my lady - did you think Guthrum’s guards got drunk by accident? Maybe I overdid the thrashing a little - each of us playing up to the other, lady - but I did not actually *hurt* him. I had command of the guard in the square and could knot them into a hopeless tangle to give you time to flee. Aye, and I could order my men to let you chieftains escape later in the night - you surely did not think you overcame my guards by your own valour? I can come to you now with nine thousand men, not scores and fifties and hundreds. And Darain is intact and prosperous, under its ancient lords. Traitor? No, Guthrum, I am no traitor. I have never changed my heart. Only my face.”

“How many faces do you have, my lord?” Eomer asked sweetly.

Hygurd turned on him in rage. “As many as you! As many as *her!*” He pointed at Irinya, then round the assembly. Everard looked down at the floor. “How many of us have never swallowed some insult, told some lie, acted some part? Save those who are too stupid to think more than one thought in a week! In a dishonourable world a man must find his own honour.”

“Honour!” Guthrum cried. “You speak so! You, who have lied and cheated for years, have accepted favours and gifts from your overlord, and now turn against him! To serve an adulteress!”

The assembly erupted into fury.

“Adulteress,” Guthrum repeated, raising his voice above the tumult. “Fools! Do not believe her lies!” He pointed an accusatory finger at Irinya, his hand shaking. “Serpent! Viper! Whatever my lord’s faults, he did not deserve to be yoked to a whore, a faithless harlot who spits upon the holy state of marriage, whose lusts know no bounds! Half the court has known her.” His mouth contorted, as if the words were solid objects with a foul taste. “My own *brother* has known her -!”

“You fool,” Hygurd sneered, and at the cold contempt in his voice all fell silent. “Is there anything so stupid as a noble man? Guthrum the upright, the moral, the chivalrous, who cannot see the truth for his own dreams! It does not count as adultery when the lady’s husband is one of those holding her down.”

Guthrum flinched as if from a blow, and Hygurd’s lip curled. “I see Frealaf did not tell that part of the tale in his bragging! Ask him how he got that scar on his cheek.”

His glance strayed to Irinya, who looked as if she had suffered a mortal wound. “Ah, my lady, you were a fighter then! It would have spared us all much trouble if you had shown that fight earlier. But Radwulf was a handsome man, was he not? And you yielded to him like a common slut -”

“What else could I do? I was sixteen, and afraid to die, and I had none to turn to for aid!” This was a voice even Gyrdan had never heard Irinya use before, vibrating with raw pain. “All of you - kinsmen, friends, even my betrothed - left me to my fate. Where were you when my father lay dying and I had no comforter in my grief? Where were you when Radwulf took both me and Carlundy by force and I had no protector? Where were you when I was prisoned deep in the cells and had no rescuer? Where were you all when I needed you?”

The glance she swept around the table stilled the incipient chorus of excuses, and her tone softened. “Most of you can claim - truthfully, I believe - that you did not know. Though it might be more accurate that you did not *want* to know!”

Her gaze locked on Hygurd, who was the only one not looking crestfallen. “But you, Hygurd, you cannot plead ignorance. *You* did not sulk in the Black Hills. You were always at court. You knew. You had the power to help me, if you so chose. Yet you, my *betrothed* -” her voice shook on the word, “- who of all men I could surely have relied on - you stood by and you *watched* -!”

Hygurd’s arrogant lip curled in scorn. “Aye, I watched! I watched you reap the harvest you had sown. You suffered, and suffered grievously, and I was glad to see it. Aye, glad! You got no more than you deserved, when you chose him for husband instead of me -!”

Irinya gave way. She threw back her head and laughed hysterically.

“And now you would force me to choose you instead! By the same means! Yet he had a simplicity that you lack, Hygurd. You threaten me with a whole army. He made do with six men and a knife at my throat. Ah! *enough!*”

The cry seemed torn from her, and she turned convulsively away and buried her face in her hands. “Speak of it no more! I do not need reminding -!”

Guthrum looked from Irinya to Hygurd and back again. He began to shake. His lips worked vaguely, but no sound emerged. A greenish tinge came in his face, and then without speaking he clapped a hand over his mouth and rushed from the room.

“Well!” Hygurd said, looking after him. “How easily our friend is upset.” He essayed a light laugh, but failed miserably. Those nearest to him saw that he too was shaking. He dropped into the chair, forgetting to arrange himself gracefully this time, and looked under his brows at Irinya. Pity, shame, guilt chased briefly across his aristocratic features, and then with an effort he resumed his habitual arrogant assurance.

“We have unfinished business, lady,” he said.

The angry mutter indicated what the chiefs thought this business should include - starting with giving Hygurd a sound thrashing. Only Gyrdan never took his eyes off Irinya. He would gladly have thrashed Hygurd himself - he had scores of his own to pay off, as well as a burning anger on her behalf that threatened to choke him. But that would mean the loss of a valuable ally and, far more importantly, of the principle of fair treatment for which he at least was fighting. Hygurd was here under flag of truce, with Irinya’s word that he would not be harmed. If the anger boiled over, he was going to find himself having to fight his friends to defend an enemy.

Irinya raised her head. Her face seemed drawn tight over the bones, and her eyes burned. A coil of hair had slipped out of its pins and unwound itself over her shoulder. None there could really understand the memories being replayed in her tortured mind, though those with a modicum of imagination might be able to guess.

Hygurd lost his assured manner. He made a small helpless gesture, like a bird caught in a net.

“I did not know,” he stammered. “If I *had* known -”

“What then?” The words fell like ice crystals into the sudden quiet. “You would have fought Radwulf, carried me away? I think not. You never cared for me. It was Ingeld’s daughter you were betrothed to, not Irinya, and it was the loss of Carlundy that stung you so hard, not the loss of your bride.”

Hygurd shook his head. “No. You are mistaken in that. Can you not credit me with one lonely good feeling, among so many bad ones? Jealousy over a country could not have hurt so much.”

“Then why did you not come to us earlier? I have been free for five months. Why delay until now?”

She paused. Hygurd dropped his gaze. “Then I will answer for you. Because now you think you have a chance of Carlundy again. A country to rule, as well as a wife. Our alliance has not disintegrated, as has every other highland revolt since Bethoc Dulamael. You begin to think it may bring Radwulf down. So you choose to join, thinking to use your strength to dictate terms to us. You have learned much from Radwulf, Hygurd. You have learned to seek power as an end in itself, with no thought for how you will use it, like a miser who cannot enjoy his gold. Power you may gain that way, but never regard.”

She rested her elbows on the table and drew a breath. “You offered me alliance, on condition of marriage. The condition I reject absolutely. Yet if you wish to redeem yourself by using for good the power you have lost so much to gain, I will accept the offer. You are welcome to join us, on the same terms as all others. We fight to depose Radwulf and to restore Carlundy to the rule of law. No man here has any promise beyond that. I make no exceptions. On those terms, are you with us?”

Hygurd shifted in his chair. He might have been put to shame, but he was still inclined to negotiate.

“If -”

“Yes or no, Hygurd.”

No sound but the crackle of the fire. All held their breath. Then Hygurd inclined his head.

“I am with you.”

The collective exhalation was of relief, not triumph. Few there doubted that Hygurd would prove as dangerous an ally as an enemy.

“Very good,” Irinya said, and her voice stilled the stir. “You are welcome, my lord earl. Make arrangements for your men to be quartered in South Darain, close to the Giants’ Road. For yourself, make ready to ride, with a few attendants if you wish. In two days we depart. It is time I showed my face in the Lowlands, and you shall come with us.”

Hygurd’s lip twisted into a queer smile. “As your hostage?”

“As my trusted ally and my honoured guest.”

Guthrum crept cautiously through the hall, packed with sleeping shapes, and cursed the Highland style of building, with cavernous rooms and an almost complete lack of privacy. He had no particular need for secrecy, bar his ever-present fear of being laughed at, but he wanted no-one to see where he was going.

He closed the last door silently behind him, and waited for his eyes to get used to the darkness. This tiny square hallway had neither fire nor lamp, though there was a little light filtering through the cracks in the opposite door. Guthrum bit his lip. He knew that was Irinya's chamber - this was a small hall and had precisely one private room. She, or her beautiful foreign lady-in-waiting, must still be awake. He put a hand to his breast pocket and felt the stiff crackle of paper. He had meant to slip the letter under the door while all slept. What should he do now? Wait until the light went out? Deliver the letter anyway and hope to slip away before they noticed? Creep back to his bed and try again tomorrow?

The latch of the door behind him rattled slightly, and Guthrum's heart jumped into his mouth. There was not time even to leap across the hallway and dive through the other door, the one that led to the well-house and wash-rooms. Fortunately he was standing on the hinge side of the door, and had just time to shrink back into the shadows behind it as it opened.

A man slipped through the opening, almost as quietly as Guthrum himself had done, but unlike Guthrum he did not hesitate. Two strides took him to Irinya's door, and he raised a hand and tapped quietly, once, then twice, then once again. Almost immediately the door opened to admit him, and as he stepped over the threshold the light within shone full on his face. An instant only, but long enough for Guthrum to recognise the lean profile. Gyrdan.

The sight stabbed Guthrum to the heart. He screwed his eyes shut, wishing he had not seen this sordid, furtive rendezvous. No need of his letter now, no need to ask for an audience. He had all the proof he could need. He shook from head to foot with the intensity of his emotion. Any decent man would storm in there, and run the guilty couple through with a single stroke of his sword -

Guthrum had reached the door before he remembered he was a prisoner and unarmed. But now he was close enough to hear - and what he heard was a low, even murmur of voices, very different from his expectation. And the thread of light had broadened into a ribbon, a long, wide crack in the ancient timber.

Hating himself for it, his mind a riot of lurid images, dreading to see and dreading not to see, Guthrum stooped and applied his eye to the crack.

It was not a wide field of view that it afforded him. He could see part of a small round table, which appeared to be littered with papers, and five chairs crowded round it. One man had his back to the door, but could be readily identified as Fastred from his rich golden hair. Three others were sitting side-on, Gyrdan, Eomer and - Guthrum squinted until he felt his eyeball would pop out - Kerian. And, directly facing the door, sat Irinya. She was talking in a low voice and leaning forward over the table, tracing a pencil over one of the papers as though outlining a route. Gyrdan shook his head and said something that Guthrum did not catch, and Kerian sat forward quickly, took the pencil from Irinya and made a couple of marks, pressing so hard that he broke the point. Fastred must have queried something, for Kerian looked across at him and embarked on some sort of explanation. It looked for all the world like a meeting of brother officers discussing strategy.

Guthrum straightened up. Proof indeed, but in the other direction. The rush of relief overcame his shyness, and for once he knocked confidently.

Silence fell on the other side, followed by the scrape of a chair and the soft, menacing ring of steel as swords were drawn. Then a woman's voice, nervous but controlled,

"Assassins do not knock. Enter!"

Guthrum hardly registered the circle of steel that formed around him as he entered. He had eyes only for Irinya, standing motionless with her hand resting on the back of her chair.

"Lord Guthrum!" she said. "You I had not looked for! Let him pass."

The swords were put up, but not sheathed. Again Guthrum hardly noticed. He took three swift steps and dropped on one knee before her.

"Lady," he began, and broke off, tongue-tied again. But Irinya was looking down at him with an expression of grave kindness, not a hint of mockery or impatience. Guthrum took courage.

"Lady - I have thought much ill of you. Believed you - believed your cause to be evil. I - I see now that I was mistaken." He stumbled over his words in his rush. "You have been much wronged. I - I regret - that I did not see clearly earlier. I have fought against you with all my heart. Now I - if you will accept me as your liegeman, lady - I will serve you faithfully until my life's end."

## Chapter 27.

Corin was bored, which was not unusual, and miserable, which was. And this had started out so well, too.

Left at the fort of Eagle Crag when the troops were all summoned to battle, the tall tales of couriers and returning troops had only served to convince him that he had been swindled out of an exciting adventure. He had been determined not to get left out again, and when the soldiers marched out a second time he had successfully stowed away in one of the baggage waggons. There he had spent three very cold, miserable and hungry days and nights before being discovered trying to steal breakfast.

Gyrdan had been very angry, and all for sending him back immediately anyway. But all the other men had been sorry for the little woebegone figure - Corin was good at looking pathetic when it suited him - and had pleaded for him. And Corin himself had long worked out that the way to Gyrdan's heart was through pity and appeal to duty. He hadn't said anything pettish about being left out, or being bored, or about the glory of battle. He'd cried, "But I want to go with Mr Fastred, an' with you, Captain! Berold went to the last battle, an' 'e never come back, an' I never 'ad no chance to say goodbye!"

That had worked. He had been allowed to stay, and had quickly become something of a mascot. The soldiers petted him and let him ride their horses and carry their long spears until his arm got tired, and told him gruesome and exciting tales. They were nearly all Lowlanders, and though they "talked funny" as Corin put it to himself, at least it was more or less his own language. Some of them were just following their lord, Guthrum, and were not very interesting, although they had exciting tales to tell about the Battle of the Black Pass, in which they had all been very brave. Some had been captured serving in Highland forts, and were eager to tell Corin about Fastred's fighting prowess and how Sergeant-Major Wootton had taught them to be proper soldiers, and (of course) how they too had all been very brave in the battle. The others, who were the most interesting of all, were Gyrdan's smugglers. The battle was the least among their hair-raising stories (although, naturally, they too had all been very brave in it). Corin's eyes grew into big circles of wonder as he heard about spies and secret meetings, being hunted by Radwulf's soldiers and ingeniously escaping, setting traps and counter-traps. They didn't polish their belt buckles and boots like the others did, they knew nothing about drill and they rode like ploughboys, but they knew how to knife a sentry silently from

behind, and they could shoot a crow out of a tree at a hundred yards. And they all talked admiringly, even reverently, of Gyrdan. Corin decided that it was a much finer thing to be a spy than a soldier, and instead of Corin the Strong, with square jaw, gleaming mail and long sword, his fantasy created Corin the Cunning, with a long black cloak and a thin black dagger, secretly finding out all the enemy's plans and being hailed as Hero of the Age.

Corin should have been in his element. But he was unhappy. This was partly because, even if the men made him welcome, the leaders had not. Everard had threatened to tan his hide, and had actually offered to ride back to the fort with him. Rosie had ticked him off vigorously for about twenty minutes without pause, and although Corin got his revenge for that by teasing her about Everard (she always rode pillion with him, and they lagged way behind everyone else), he was still rather hurt by her disapproval. Mr Fastred had called him a confounded nuisance and told him he had to be a page boy, which meant Corin's great adventure had so far consisted mostly of cleaning boots and running errands, just like at home. He was still frightened of Irinya and kept out of her way, and the grand lord, Hygurd, looked at him as if he were something unpleasant stuck to the bottom of a shoe. And far worse, from Corin's point of view, his beloved Captain still seemed to be angry with him. It was over a week since his discovery, and Gyrdan had hardly said more than "Good morning" and "Not now, Corin, I'm busy" in all that time. He wasn't unkind - Gyrdan was hardly ever unkind - but terribly, terribly distant.

"T'General's gor'a lot on his mind," Leofric had said, when Corin raised the subject. He had got to know and like Leofric a lot during his stay at Eagle Crag. "All this is enemy country, lad -" with an expansive wave at the innocent-looking landscape. "Every mile is dangerous. War's one big risk, but t'General don't believe in taking no more chances than he has to."

"But you won the Battle!" Corin protested.

"Aye, but that were only against Lord Guthrum - what has now seen th'error of his ways, if a bit late in t'day. It weren't against t'Wolf."

"Then are we goin' to fight the Wolf now?" Corin asked, excitedly.

"Nor' if t'General can help it," Leofric answered, with his slow smile. "There's nobbut a thousand of us, lad, and even t'General couldn't win outnumbered ten to one. That's wor'all t'scouts is for, see. Give us warning of any soldiers coming. If it's some local lord trying to play t'hero, he'll ger'a bloody nose. If it's t'Wolf - we shove off back into t'Hills in double quick time."

“I don’t understand,” Corin said, his brow furrowed. He looked round at the column, gloriously martial in its gleaming mail, polished helmets and burnished shields, with the spear-points glittering above like a forest of stars. “What’re we doin’ ‘ere if we ain’t goin’ to fight?”

“Ah!” said Leofric mysteriously. “Happen tha’ll find out, lad.”

“I reckon you don’t know neither,” Corin said shrewdly.

“Wor’ if I don’t?” Leofric said. “T’General knows what he’s about. That’s good enough for me.”

“Huh!” said Corin, despondently, but it was clear that was all he was going to get. He gave himself up to being bored.

It had certainly been a dull week. It seemed all this immensely impressive column had done was to ride slowly around the country buying fodder and food from the local peasants at inflated prices. Every night they stayed in a different village, where the accommodation was always cramped and the food indifferent to appalling, and yet they seemed not to have gone very far. The mountains looked just as near as ever, and Corin was wondering if they were riding in circles - an idea supported by the fact that they had crossed the Giants’ Road at least twice already. The highlight of every stop was a thing called the oath-taking, in which a few men in moderately posh clothes - Corin was an accurate judge of social rank - knelt down in front of Irinya and mumbled through a long and boring speech. Corin was at a loss as to why this should be treated with such importance, especially as the speech was exactly the same every time.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if the people had been enthusiastic, or the country beautiful. But the peasants were for the most part dull, sullen and scrawny-looking, as if they didn’t always get enough to eat, and seemed frightened and suspicious at the same time. The country looked a bit like home with its woods and fields, except it went up and down a lot more, but it shared the sullen and run-down appearance of the people. Fields were full of weeds, hedges had holes in, and ruined buildings were depressingly common. Even in sunshine it had a miserable look.

But later that day, it seemed things were picking up. The village was the usual straggle of run-down shacks and dilapidated farms, but they did not stay overnight there. Instead, they rested during the afternoon and rode on at dusk, following the Giants’ Road until the halt was quietly called, a little before dawn.

“Everard?” Irinya called softly.

“My lady?”

“This is your country. Am I right in thinking that manor house ahead is Highbury Hall?”

“Yes, my lady. A fine place. Lord Anred owns it. Radwulf’s steward.”

“Lord Anred thinks he owns it,” Irinya corrected. “He is mistaken. It was my father’s manor, and therefore it is mine. Radwulf has no right to give it to Anred or anyone else. I mean to take it back.”

Corin peered hopefully at the house. Here was a chance to re-enact the tale he had heard of Fastred’s assault on the fort at Eagle Crag.

As with every house, from lord’s castle to peasant’s hut, the manor had been built with an eye to defence. It was perched on a low hill overlooking the Giants’ Road, and a high wall enclosed the house and grounds, surrounded in its turn by a deep, dry ditch. One drawbridge led across the ditch to a strong gate in the wall, and the slight elevation gave the house a commanding view of the surrounding country, all the way to the mountains of Ailart and Darain in the north. The defenders would have at least two hours warning of attack from any possible quarter.

Unfortunately, the best view in the world gives no prior warning when the watch have all decided it is far too cold a night to parade the walls and are snatching forty winks in the guardroom. Much to Corin’s disgust, all the assault party had to do was turn the key on them and open the gate.

“Their housekeeping is as efficient as their defence,” Irinya said sarcastically, surveying the sadly neglected great hall. She swept across the room, her skirts raising a cloud of dust, and seated herself in the lord’s great chair, almost grand enough to be called a throne. “A pity, for this could be a handsome house. Find whoever is in charge and bring him here at once.”

Edred, Steward of Highbury, had led a blameless and comparatively uneventful life for forty-odd years. Yet the certainty of having committed no crime worth mentioning gave him no comfort when soldiers came banging on his door in the early morning and woke him rudely from a deep sleep. As soon as they let go of his arms in the great hall, he dropped on his face in fright.

“Spare me, Sire!” he pleaded. “Spare me!”

“I have many titles,” a woman’s voice said crisply, “but ‘Sire’ is most certainly not one of them.”

Sheer astonishment made Edred look up. He saw, first, a semicircle of soldiers with drawn swords. Then, flanking Lord Anred’s great chair, two tall lords in

expensive armour, one blond and cheerful, one dark and sardonic. And seated in the chair itself, a slender, youngish woman clad in an elegant dark riding habit. In that warlike company she looked light and fragile and not at all threatening, though she obviously expected to be obeyed.

“Kindly stand up,” she said, and Edred did so, wishing the soldiers had let him get dressed first.

Irinya tactfully did not look at his grubby nightshirt and the two skinny legs sticking out underneath it, although she made a mental note to tell the soldiers not to interpret ‘at once’ quite so literally in future. Edred’s unshaven face and pallid skin put her in mind of a plucked chicken. She was sorry for him in his embarrassment, and resisting an impulse to laugh, and the combination gave her voice a certain warmth.

“I am Irinya Ingeld’s daughter, Lady of Carlundy and of this manor. You, I believe, are the steward here?”

“Ye - Yes, Your Majesty,” faltered Edred.

“I am Lady of Carlundy, not Queen. Use the correct form of address. Your name?”

“Ah - Edred, Your M - your ladyship.”

She glanced around disparagingly.

“Well, I cannot congratulate you on your stewardship. This place looks as if it has not been cleaned for six months.”

Edred apologised profusely, and then added, greatly daring, “But Lord Anred never comes here, your ladyship, not to stay, only sends somebody once a quarter to collect the rents -”

He broke off hastily, afraid he had said too much.

“What a waste of a lovely house,” Irinya said coolly. “Well, Edred, I am the owner, not Lord Anred, and I intend to stay here a few days. I am sure you want to keep your job -”

Edred nodded fit to make his head fly off.

“Very good. I want this hall looking as a lord’s hall should. *Now*. I expect to be receiving visitors later this morning. And I want rooms prepared for my officers, and for myself and my maid, and dinner this evening. Mistress Rose will give you further instructions.”

She indicated a pretty girl standing a little way off, holding her skirts out of the dust as though she were crossing a particularly repulsive farmyard.

“Yes, your ladyship,” agreed Edred.

“And I have nine hundred men to be fed and quartered, as many as possible within the house and grounds and the remainder in the village.”

Edred’s jaw dropped. “Nine *hundred* -!”

“We have provisions with us. Speak to Gyrdan or Lord Guthrum about it and they will refer you to one of the captains. You have also my permission to hire help from the village. See to it, Edred. I am sure you will not let me down.”

Edred wasn’t at all sure of that, but even feeding and housing nine hundred had to be easier than dying, which was what he had expected only a few minutes ago. He squared his shoulders.

“Yes, your ladyship.”

“And Edred?”

“Yes, your ladyship?”

She was smiling now. “Get dressed first. We can spare you a few minutes for that.”

“Very theatrical,” Hygurd said sarcastically, as Edred left. “Scare the fellow out of his wits and then play the gracious lady. He’ll do anything for you now.”

“It is more effective than threats,” Irinya answered. “To say nothing of being more humane. Rosie?”

“Miss?”

“How would you like to go and wake the kitchen up?”

“Right, miss!”

“Tell them I like mushrooms with my bacon, and a lot of fried bread, and two eggs, sunny side up,” Fastred called after her. He dusted the edge of the table with his cloak and hitched himself on it, resting his elbow on one knee and letting his other leg swing. “Now what? Apart from breakfast, I mean.”

“Do you think of nothing but food?” Hygurd sneered.

“Oh yes,” Fastred said cheerfully. “Hot baths and soft beds, mostly.”

“*Some* of us have more serious concerns,” Hygurd said loftily, drawing up another chair.

“Nothing more serious,” Fastred said, unabashed. “You try making cold, wet, tired, hungry soldiers fight. It’s possible, but it certainly isn’t easy.” He yawned, elaborately. “Old soldiers think about sleep first, food second, women third and fighting a very long way after that. You’ll learn eventually, Hygurd.”

Hygurd scowled, unable to think of a rejoinder, and addressed himself to Irinya, pointedly ignoring Fastred.



“What is the purpose of this charade, lady? If it has a purpose, beyond displaying me and my banner to as many people as possible.”

“You are a great lord and my trusted ally, Hygurd,” Irinya said sweetly. “So naturally your colours are in a place of honour in the van. You would not like them trailed at the rear as though you were a prisoner, would you?” She looked up as a shadow crossed the open doorway. “Ah, Everard. All in order?”

“Yes, lady. Your colours are flying from the watchtower and Gyrdan has stationed lookouts. I expect they will keep a better watch than Anred’s men. And Lord Guthrum says he will have the scouting parties ready any minute.”

“Excellent. Oxley is the greatest estate locally, is it not? Who would be its Lord now that Herulf is dead?”

“Both his sons fell in the Valley of the Pigs, so it would be his nephew, lady. Ulf son of Ulf son of Ulf Ulfsson.”

“What an original family,” Fastred muttered.

Everard smothered a laugh. “We will look for him first, lady. But I do not think we will find him at home.”

“I doubt there are many men in the country who could evade Gyrdan. You will find him eventually. Meantime, there are others I should like to meet. The tenants of this manor. All the lesser lords and their ladies. Everyone of any importance within a day’s ride. Do not use force. *Invite* them to attend.”

“They are used to Radwulf’s style of invitation, lady.”

“Exactly. So it is not likely they will refuse, is it?”

None did. Ulf of Oxley proved as elusive as Everard had predicted, but all the other lords were politely, if firmly, escorted in. A few, mainly young men of small lands - like Everard, masters of four or five or six run-down farms - came with alacrity and swore fealty eagerly. The rest came reluctantly, rattled through the oath as fast as possible, and bolted back to the security of anonymity, hoping only to be left alone. Irinya let them go. If they would only be as unwilling to take up arms for Radwulf, she would be content.

All the tenants of the manor’s dozen farms also turned up at the house to pay their respects. They came apprehensively, expecting demands for money they did not have, and went away pleasantly surprised. Irinya did no more than introduce herself as lady of the manor, offer them ale and bread for their trouble in coming, and tell them that, yes, she did intend to billet troops in the village but it would not be for long and the soldiers would pay for their accommodation. At this point in the

conversation, houses described ten minutes previously as shacks with barely room for the farmer and his family suddenly metamorphosed into rambling mansions with ample accommodation for a dozen - no, a score - of soldiers. Irinya thanked the tenants gravely for their generosity, referred them to Everard, and dismissed them.

An inquisitive crowd soon developed around the manor gates. People who had heard of the markets elsewhere turned up with things to sell. Women came hoping for a day’s work in the kitchens or as a maid. Most of the village came to crane their necks and stare and hope for a glimpse of all these famous people.

“Don’t like it,” said a farmer, lugubriously. He was a thin man with a stoop and a bald head, looking not unlike a vulture. “No good’ll come o’t, I tell tha. Meddling with t’quality.”

“T’quality’s here whether we likes it or not,” retorted his wife. “We can get ten soldiers in t’ house, and another dozen in t’barn if we put t’ cows out in t’ bottom meadow. How else are we going to pay t’ rent?”

The village blacksmith elbowed her aside and squinted in through the gates.

“Who’s in charge? Anyone know?”

“T’ tall dark fella,” said the farmer’s wife, pointing.

The blacksmith looked dubious. “What, him wi’ t’ patched cloak and no helmet? Can’t be.”

“It’s him they all take their orders off,” returned the woman, annoyed at having her superior knowledge questioned, and reclaimed her place at the gate.

The blacksmith gave way reluctantly. “How many of ‘em are there?”

“A thousand, so I heard,” put in the innkeeper.

“A thousand!” groaned the lugubrious farmer. “Trampling t’crops and scaring t’sheep an’ all.”

“Getting their horses shod,” said the blacksmith hopefully. “I’ll start t’big forge.”

“Buying beer,” added the innkeeper. “A thousand soldiers!”

“A thousand soldiers!” echoed his eldest daughter, in quite a different tone of voice, and ducked her father’s half-hearted slap with the ease of eighteen years’ practice.

“*Drinking* beer,” corrected the thin farmer. “T’quality’ll take what they want all right, but they don’t pay for nowt.”

A second farmer, a fat man with the shape and vivacity of a suet dumpling, came suddenly to life. “Tha’s wrong there. I don’t know nowt about t’Lady, but folks say Fastred Goldenhand’s here, and he never does common folk no harm.”

"I heard as he was tall and handsome, with hair t'colour o' sunshine," said the fat farmer's daughter hopefully, fluffing up her own mousy brown locks.

"I heard he pays good money for barley," retorted her father. He patted the surly donkey they were leading between them, bowed under two sacks, and got a vicious kick for his pains.

"I heard *she* were a witch," somebody said, dourly. "T'other herald said so."

"Aye, and t'one afore him said she were dead," sniffed the lugubrious farmer's wife. "Tha can't believe owt t'Wolf says." She lowered her voice. "I heard *he* were mad."

"Sh!" hissed a chorus of voices, and then, eagerly, "Who says?"

"I heard t'Lady were held a prisoner for years and years, an' then t'Shadow come and rescued her," interrupted the innkeeper's daughter.

"I wants to see t'Shadow," piped a child. "Mam, are we going to see t'Shadow? Mam, are we? Mam?"

"Our lad's one o' t'smugglers," said a thin-faced woman proudly, trying to crane her neck over the gate. "I never knew it til he went off so sudden in t'winter. He's in there somewhere. He'll tell tha about t'Shadow, littl'un."

The child gave her a stony stare. "I know about t'Shadow. He got Dad out o' prison. Mam, is Dad coming home now? Is he, Mam?"

"Won't need no smugglers soon," said another voice. "I heard she's going to get rid o' t' salt tax."

"I heard she's going to let all t'prisoners out o' jail."

"Them as is still alive, any road," said a woman's voice, bitterly. "Won't do *my* man no good now."

"Mam, is Dad coming home? Mam?"

"I heard she's going to stop t'lords stealing from us."

"I heard she hanged a lord for murdering a common fella."

"No, that can't be true. Is it?"

"I heard it too," several voices chimed.

"It's all going to be diff'rent," somebody said. "It's all going to be diff'rent now."

But the thin farmer, a born pessimist, had the last word. "She's got to win t'war first," he said, sombrely.

Ulf of Oxley was caught near the end of the second day, hiding in a barn. This was not difficult, as he had left his horse outside, taken a willing milkmaid inside,

and had his mind on other things. The party who escorted him back to Highbury could hardly stay on their horses for laughing.

Ulf was not laughing. He was a thick-set young man with a bull head, massive shoulders and hardly any neck, and although he had always been considered the brains of the family this was not saying much. He was not sure what was going on, but guessed he was not going to like it much.

He came into the hall looking stolid and rather bewildered, like a prize bull being taken to market. Irinya watched him narrowly. Stupid men could be at least as dangerous as the clever ones.

"Greetings, Ulf Ulfsson. Thank you for taking the trouble to attend."

Ulf was not used to irony. He licked his lips nervously.

"I fear you have been remiss in your duty. The first act of a new lord should be to swear fealty for his lands to his overlord. And you have recently become Lord of Oxley, have you not? After your uncle and cousins died so unfortunately in Ailart."

Ulf suddenly thought he understood. He threw himself on his knees.

"I never knew nothing about the raid! Never went with 'em! I swear it, Majesty! On my life!"

"In the circumstances, you must be grateful you did not."

"I - I'll make over a quarter of Oxley to you, Majesty! I know Uncle Herulf would of wanted it that way -"

Irinya steepled her fingers and looked at him quizzically. "I think that unlikely, as he and both his sons died fighting me."

"A half! I meant a half! Only don't kill me, Majesty, don't kill me -!"

"Why should you be killed?"

"All of it, then! Everythin' -!"

Ulf's brain slowly caught up with his mouth. He stuttered to a stop.

"It is not my intention to deprive you of either life or lands. Unless you know a good reason why I should?"

Ulf shook his head so vigorously it made him dizzy.

"You are summoned here merely to swear fealty for those lands. You promise to pay what is due to me at the proper times, uphold the law of the land in the proper manner, and to provide from your lands - how many is it, Everard? - eight hundred foot soldiers and five hundred mounted men-at-arms for military service when I require it of you. That is all."

Ulf began to look a little baffled. He hadn't really known what to expect, but it wasn't this.

“Majesty? You ain’t goin’ to punish me because of Uncle?”

“I do not hold you responsible for your uncle’s misdeeds. Since revenge was taken on the field, there will not even be compensation to pay. However, I remind you that border raiding is against the law and I will not tolerate it. From either side.”

A good thing the Highland chiefs were not here to hear *that*, Everard mused.

Ulf now looked thoroughly confused.

“An’ you aren’t going to take Oxley and give it to someone else? Not even some of it?”

“No, indeed. It is not for the central government to interfere in the lawful inheritance of lands.”

This was news to Ulf, and would have been to most of the Lowlands. Radwulf invariably interfered. Sensible men had learned that a will that failed to include a bequest to the Lord - usually to the tune of about ten per cent of the total value, payable immediately and in cash - was liable to be challenged. And Radwulf was apt to challenge with soldiers rather than lawyers.

Ulf’s brow furrowed.

“So I don’t get hung or thrown in jail?”

“Certainly not.”

“And I get to keep my lands?”

“Yes.”

“With nowt to pay from Uncle’s will?”

“That is correct.”

“Just for swearing fealty to you instead of Radwulf?”

“Yes.”

Ulf had his uncle’s sparkling intellect, but he could spot a good deal when it bit him. He could hardly gabble the words of the oath fast enough.

“I congratulate you on your clemency, lady,” Hygurd said nastily, as Edred and the other servants cleared away after dinner. “It seems to have mightily impressed the peasants.”

Everard glowered. Most of the men who had sworn allegiance that day had been of higher rank than he himself. But he said nothing.

“It is very clever,” Hygurd continued. “*Very* clever. You know you can’t expect yokels to understand succession and inheritance. You can’t expect them to fight for *you*. So you invent something they might fight for. This fine idea about the rule of

law and restoring justice. Very clever. And spoken *so* sincerely. I could almost believe you meant it.”

“I do mean it,” Irinya answered, quietly.

Hygurd laughed sardonically. “Oh, you can stop pretending, my lady! And do not mistake me! I am full of admiration. Some of them really believe you are going to make things different for them.”

“I hope we are,” Guthrum said, speaking slowly and for the first time. “It is hard for a rich man to understand what it is like for the poor. I have never really tried before. My own tenants never complained, and I never looked elsewhere. But I have listened to some of these people here today, and their tales wring my heart. I feel somehow - tainted. I had not realised there was so much injustice.”

“Injustice!” Hygurd jeered. “Of course there is injustice! It is the way of the world. It has always been so. Every man must look out for himself.”

“That is a comfortable philosophy when you have nine thousand armed men at your command,” Everard said bitterly. “It is not so comfortable for the rest of us.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Hygurd said sarcastically. “So life is not fair. Who said it was?”

“Who said it should not be?” Irinya asked.

Hygurd stared. “By all the gods, I think you are serious!”

“How perceptive,” muttered Fastred under his breath.

Hygurd shook his head. “Then I withdraw the compliment on your intellect, lady. You are spectacularly foolish, even for a woman.”

“That may be. But there are many who do not agree with you.”

“Then they are fools too! Gods, how can anyone be so - so naive!”

He paced a turn about the room, then threw himself into a chair again. Gyrdan watched him intently, but neither moved nor spoke, and the other three took their cue from him.

“Do you really think, lady,” Hygurd went on, speaking with a chill intensity, “do you really think that you will live up to your fine ideas if you triumph? Do you really think that you will not take favourites? That you will not be tempted to reward your friends - as, indeed, they will expect - and punish your enemies? Do you really imagine you can be impartial? When your lightest word can send a man to the gallows or save him?”

“No, I do not. I do not think anyone is strong enough to do that. Certainly I am not.”

“Then you *are* lying!”

“No, you have not understood. How did you become so cynical, Hygurd? You were good-hearted when I knew you long ago.”

“I was a fool. I have learned. Success goes to the strong, not to the well-meaning.”

“It must be a terrible thing to look on the world through so dark a mirror. You have my deepest sympathy.”

“I assure you I do not need it. Better a dark mirror than rose-tinted spectacles, my lady. And I say to you; when you have power you will use it. *Mis*-use it, in your simplistic terms. You are not strong enough to stay uncorrupted.”

“It is *because* I am weak that I need to rely so much on the law. How could I be impartial? I have friends to whom I could give the whole world and still be in their debt. And I have enemies.” Her eyes glittered. “*Many* enemies. Oh, how I should love to see them grovel at my feet! How I should love to make them feel a fraction, just a fraction, of the pain and terror and shame they made *me* feel!” Her voice swelled exultantly, and Guthrum shut his eyes. His brother was one of them.

“You see?” Irinya said, and her voice was now low and sad. “I am no more fit to rule than Radwulf is. There is cruelty and caprice aplenty in my heart. But the law - the law has no heart. It has no friends to reward, no enemies to punish. It knows neither hate nor love, joy nor sorrow. It has no memory of things past, no hope of things to come. It knows not rank nor wealth nor breeding nor beauty. All it knows is justice.”

“Then it is a harsh ruler,” Hygurd said, sounding oddly subdued. “Cold and harsh and unfeeling.”

“Yes. But equally so to all.”

“And if you achieve this dream, lady, it will not matter who rules Carlundy.”

“It does not matter now,” she told him. “What matters is *how* the country is ruled, not by whom. I would not ask men to die for *me*.”

Hygurd’s lip curled. “Very noble. But I do not believe you. You would fight Radwulf no matter how justly he ruled.”

She looked straight into his eyes. “If I thought Radwulf would rule justly, I would cease this war and its killing and go back to him tomorrow.”

Hygurd’s gaze wavered. He looked away, and looked back. Then he got up suddenly, and went out of the room.

Highbury set the pattern. Lands were reclaimed. Allegiances sworn. Tenants reassured. The May quarter-day came round and rents were collected, much less

than was officially due, but every shilling was a shilling gained and, more importantly, a shilling denied to Radwulf.

Support for Irinya grew more vocal. There were few among the peasants and small lords who had not suffered in some way from Radwulf’s rule - bereavement, poverty, extortion of money, loss of lands or privileges. If they had been allowed to choose freely between Radwulf and Irinya, there would have been no contest. As it was, well, they had no intention of fighting, but they would line the streets and cheer for the Lady all day.

Radwulf was surprisingly - worryingly - inactive. He sent several smallish armies against them, all of which were resoundingly trounced in a series of minor engagements. It would have taken a very determined force to stand up against Guthrum and Fastred and Gyrdan and close on a thousand well-trained cavalry, and Radwulf’s soldiers displayed an extremely sensible inclination to turn and run at the first opportunity. And yet still Radwulf lurked in Mickleburg, and the bulk of his army with him.

This should have produced a holiday atmosphere. It did not. It produced an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps Radwulf was cleverer than they thought.

“What’s the point?” Fastred demanded, one evening. It had been a particularly bad meal, it had been raining half the day, the fire in his bedroom smoked, and he was missing Tyria even worse than usual. “What are we doing here?”

“Getting wet,” said Everard, dolefully.

“Getting poisoned,” said Guthrum, who employed a good cook and was less inured to appalling food.

“Playing the fool,” growled Hygurd, and stalked out.

“For once I think he might have said something sensible,” Fastred grumbled. “Gyrdan? What are we doing here?”

“I am trying to work,” was the irritable response. “Can’t you be quiet for two minutes together?”

“No. You know that. And why so edgy? You’ve been looking like a thundercloud for days.”

Gyrdan looked up as if about to snap back something hurtful, and caught Irinya’s eye.

“You have, you know,” she said quietly.

“Anyone would think there was something to worry about,” Fastred observed to the world at large. “It’s a good job the men don’t see you in these moods.”

Gyrdan jumped. A commanding officer's first job is to inspire confidence. If he looks worried, morale drops like a stone.

"They don't," Fastred said soothingly. "But I don't like it much either. What's eating you?"

"Apart from fleas," muttered Everard, scratching his ankle. "*Damn* that cat!"

Gyrdan laughed. He rolled up his papers and left the table.

"Sorry," he said. "Have you ever wondered what it feels like to be the cheese in a mousetrap?"

"I'm very glad I haven't got that much imagination," Fastred said, heartily. "Try talking plainly for once. I've had a hard day."

Gyrdan sat down on the window sill, the only remaining seat. "All right, how -" He broke off, as Irinya inclined her head warningly. "Corin!"

"Sir?" came a hopeful squeak from a dark corner.

"Go away."

"Awww, sir!"

"Hop it," Fastred advised. "We do *terrible* things to spies."

"I'm sure he meant no harm," Guthrum said, as Corin fled. "Did he?"

"Probably not," Fastred agreed. "But don't take chances. You were saying, Gyrdan?"

"I was asking a question. How do you win at chess?"

"I don't know, I never do."

"You capture the opponent's king," Guthrum said, helpfully.

"Thank you. Now, Radwulf is hidden in Mickleburg Castle like a wolf in its den. How would you rate our chances of taking Mickleburg, Fastred?"

"Nil," came the cheerful answer.

"Anyone disagree with that detailed analysis?"

"I should think it was rather optimistic, if anything," Guthrum said, laughing. He and Fastred had become firm friends over the last few weeks.

"Quite so," Gyrdan agreed. "So we have to get Radwulf to come out of his castle, to somewhere we can defeat him."

"He'll never venture into the Black Hills," Guthrum said, and added ruefully, "Can't say I blame him, either."

Irinya smiled at him. "I agree with you. But we might tempt him into the Lowlands. If he is angry enough, and if the prize is rich enough. That is why I am here. He cannot long endure watching his vassals swear fealty to me, pay their rents to me. Nor, I think, can he endure the thought of my being free in his country, within

two score miles of him, and yet not under his control. He will be angry that Hygurd has deserted him. And that you have, Guthrum. Sooner or later, that rage will boil over."

"Already he fumes like a seething pot," Guthrum said, from unpleasant previous experience. "Indeed, he seemed on the verge of madness when he despatched me. He paced and snarled like a caged animal. I was glad to get away."

"And since leaving the Hills, we have beaten off three attacks," Everard said, thoughtfully. "That can hardly have sweetened his temper."

"Exactly. Yet he has not sent his main force against us." Gyrdan tapped the roll of papers. "Make no mistake, Radwulf has many men left to him. I have checked, and rechecked the scouts' reports. I know the tale of his losses. Even making allowance for desertions, I cannot bring the total to less than thirty thousand."

Fastred whistled.

"Thirty thousand!"

"At least."

"He could flatten us."

"Yes."

"What is he waiting for?"

Gyrdan shook his head. "I wish I knew," he said fervently. "I wish I knew."

Another rapturous greeting, in another village of no importance on another road to nowhere. Fastred scanned the crowd mechanically, wondering whether professional bodyguards died of boredom. A sea of identical cheering faces, identical waving hands, all exactly alike -

He froze in the middle of a yawn, every nerve suddenly a-tingle. One man not cheering. One man not waving. One man reaching under his cloak. At the edge of the crowd, a few yards from where Irinya must pass. And unlike the men, she never wore armour. The contrast made her look very courageous - and very vulnerable.

"Look out!" Fastred cried.

Too late. The man in the crowd straightened up. His arm came up, back and then snapped forward like a released spring.

"Long live King Radwulf!" he roared.

Fastred never saw the throwing knife. It seemed to be not steel, but a streak of light that left the man's hand. With a curse he spurred his horse forward, but it seemed the air around them had turned to treacle and held them fast. Nothing moved except the flash of light. There was no sound except its shrill hiss.

Like a striking snake, it clove the air, passed within a hair's breadth of Irinya's neck as she leaned down to speak to someone in the crowd, and was gone.

The sound came back on. The treacle turned back to air. Normal movement resumed. Fastred heard a sharp, metallic crack and a cry, and then Gyrdan was reeling in his saddle, one hand pressed to his breast.

"No!" Fastred yelled. "Gyrdan! No!" And then, to his men, "Get that bastard -!"

Gyrdan was slumped forward on his horse's neck, coughing and struggling for breath.

"No," Fastred said again, as if denying it would make any difference. He tried to raise his friend's head. "Gyrdan! Can you hear me? Speak to me!"

Gyrdan was trying to push him away. "All right," he wheezed. "All right. Mail - stopped - it -" Another spasm of coughing. "Never - mind me. Look to - Irinya. May be - another."

A yell of triumph from the soldiers and the crowd.

"Got him! Got t'murdering devil, sir!"

Sunset of a warm May day. Sparrows fluttering in the ivy. The last swallows skimming low over the fields before turning to roost. Rabbits hopping and nibbling in the meadow, and behind them in the woods the brief glint of a fox's eye. From the river, the soft plash of a hurrying moorhen. And, black against the warm light, the long shadow of a gibbet and a man's body swinging lazily in the soft breeze.

Fastred paused at the tower door. There was something strange about the tall cloaked figure leaning on the battlements, something lonely and indefinably sad. He approached quietly, and laid a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I told you to go to bed," he said reprovingly. "That knife didn't get through the mail, but it left a very nasty bruise. You ought to be resting."

"I need air. I can't breathe."

"What?" Fastred exclaimed, alarmed. A cracked bone, some internal damage? "I thought it was only bruising! Does it hurt?"

"Not much."

"Are you coughing blood?"

"Certainly not. Go away, Fastred."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong with you."

Gyrdan stared down at the gibbet, still horribly clear even in the fading light. He said nothing, but Fastred saw him put a hand to his own throat.

"You surely aren't upset about *him*?"

Silence.

"You are, aren't you? Good grief, why? He tried to kill Irinya!"

"I know."

"He damn nearly killed you!"

Silence.

"He had a fair trial, you know. He freely admitted he was guilty. Radwulf was to pay him ten crowns for the job."

"I know."

"It was better than letting the lynch mob have him."

"I suppose so."

A pause, and then, with difficulty, "Did he - Was it quick?"

"Yes," Fastred said briskly. "Hanging always is."

Gyrdan shivered. His hand stroked his throat, and he coughed. "It must be terrible to choke. To fight for air. Like drowning."

"Too bloody good for him, if you ask me! I don't mind a man who'll stand up and fight, but I can't stand assassins! Cold-blooded, cowardly, murdering -"

Gyrdan moved away along the battlements, still with his gaze fixed on the swinging shadow. Fastred followed him.

"Look, Gyrdan -"

"Fastred, I came out here to be alone."

"And I followed you because I'm worried about you. No, don't shrug like that! Listen to me for once! Getting upset over a silly thing like this just confirms it. You're as tense as an over-wound spring. I don't believe you've slept more than three hours at a time for weeks."

"Don't fuss, Fastred."

"You're thinner than I've ever known you," Fastred persisted. "I didn't realise that until today. You're a bundle of nerves. *And* you've taken to biting your nails again."

Gyrdan thrust his hands guiltily into his pockets. "I said, don't fuss."

"I will if I want to. Look, you're wearing yourself out. It won't do you or us any good if you make yourself ill. How long d'you think you can carry on doing the work of four?"

"Long enough."

"That isn't an answer. Long enough for what?"

The gibbet finally melted into the darkness below, and Gyrdan turned from the parapet.

“Long enough to get to the last battle. I think it is very near now.”

“And then?”

“If we lose, nothing matters. If we win - well, I am no longer important.”

Fastred’s tone amounted to a verbal nudge in the ribs. “I don’t think Irinya would agree with that.”

“For the last time, Fastred, Irinya is not going to marry me.”

“But -”

“Leave it, Fastred,” Gyrdan said, in a warning tone. “Leave it, understand?”

Fastred subsided, but he refused to be put off altogether. “Well, it’s traditional to reward the victorious general highly. Land, money, office. And you can’t stand soldiering much longer, not at your age -”

“Oh, thank you kindly. I am not quite so old as I look.”

“Then I rest my case,” Fastred said triumphantly. “You can’t carry on like this, Gyrdan. What’s the point of winning if you’re too exhausted to enjoy the well-deserved rewards?”

“Oh, Fastred,” Gyrdan said, with a peculiar laugh. “What would I do without you? Whatever I have earned, I don’t think it is a comfortable retirement. But you are right about one thing. Win or lose, this will be my last campaign.”