

Chapter 5.

They were carried, none too gently, for some distance before being dumped unceremoniously on the ground, still firmly held by many hands. A wide circle of men now gathered silently around the captives, their eyes glinting menacingly behind their masks. All were clad in rough woollen cloaks or leather jerkins, and wore gloves or gauntlets. Some had bows in their hands and quivers of arrows at their belts, others bore heavy staves or clubs and here and there the moonlight gleamed on the hilt of sword or dagger. A string of laden pack ponies was herded together at one side of the circle, their hooves muffled with cloths so that they too were eerily silent as they stamped and sidled. Irinya shuddered. There was no mistaking these men's business.

"Well, well, what have we got here? *Two* men?"

"One man," answered one of those holding Irinya. "And one woman."

There was a throaty chuckle from the first speaker. "A woman, eh? There's luck!"

He stooped over Irinya. A big, swarthy man with a front tooth missing, displayed very obviously as he leered down at her. She glared back with all the venom she could muster.

"Not much of a looker, but they're all t'same in t'dark."

"Gods, tha'll ram owt," said another voice, sounding rather weary. "Drop it! There's work to do."

The newcomer was fully a foot shorter than the gap-toothed man, but his order was obeyed without question.

"Trouble?" he asked of one of the men holding Irinya.

"No, cap'n. We gor 'em just as they come down t'cliff. Easy."

The captain glanced round the ring.

"What have we got, does tha reckon?"

"Spies!" answered several voices.

"Kill 'em quick and let's be on us way!"

"No, make 'em talk first!" others objected. "Mebbe there's a trap laid."

"No time for that. Kill 'em!"

The captain held up his hand for silence, and the argument stopped dead.

"Let's see what they've got to say for themselves."

He gestured to the guards, and the prisoners were allowed to sit up. Their hands were securely bound in front of them, but the bonds were not cruelly tight and beyond that they were not constrained.

“No funny business,” said the captain, catching Gyrdan’s swift glance of assessment around the ring. “Try to scream for help or scarp, and tha’ll be dead, see? My men don’t make mistakes. Not much good at thy trade, is tha? If tha wants to spy on us, don’t stand on skylines.”

“We are not spies,” Gyrdan said, steadily.

“Oh? Then what was tha doin’ on t’ cliff?”

“We are travellers, leaving Carlundy.”

“Think I were born yesterday? There’s no way over t’ Moss!”

“There is a path for those who go light, and who know the country well.”

“A dangerous road. Honest men go by t’ Jaws. And honest travellers carry baggage.”

“When your life is in danger, you do not stop to pack, and nor do you take the main roads.”

“Ha! So tha’s runnin’ for thy life, is tha? Since when?”

“Three nights ago.”

“Why?”

“I have been arrested and beaten up once by Radwulf’s thugs. I barely escaped with my life. I don’t care to meet them a second time.”

“Arrested? Why?”

“Do they need a reason?”

A little growl ran round the ring. Clearly that struck a chord with the outlaws.

“And t’ woman?”

“It’s a poor sort of fellow who saves himself and leaves his lass behind in danger.”

Irinya was impressed, and also uneasy. Gyrdan could tell misleading half-truths with as much conviction as she could herself. What lies had he told her?

The captain snapped back the shutter of a lantern and held it up, surveying Gyrdan’s battered features coolly in its light.

“That’s a corker of a black eye tha’s got there, for sure. And a realistic-lookin’ bandage, even down to th’old bloodstain soaking through it.” He shot out a hand and plucked the bandage away. “Well, well. Even a real cut underneath. Nasty-looking, too.” He prodded at the black eye and ran a fingernail casually down one of the weals. Gyrdan gasped and flinched. “Real enough,” mused the captain. “Wrist bandaged too. Lot of other bruises and scratches. Hmmm. Somebody’s thrashed

thee bad, that's for sure. Tha'll forgive my caution. We've had traps set for us afore. A peasant with a sob-story, begging for our help - then th' ambush in a narrow place. T' Wolf's cunning, and t' fox has to be more cunning still."

He turned his attention suddenly to Irinya. Her plain grey dress and cloak, frayed and peat-splattered, could easily have belonged to a farmer's daughter. The brooch at her throat was much too fine, but it was concealed under her straggling hair. "Hmmm," muttered the captain. "Had a hard time by t' looks o' thee. Sure he's worth it?"

Irinya met his eyes without wavering, and lied for her life.

"I'd follow him to the end of the world."

The captain snorted. "What devotion! What d'you reckon, friends? Spies, or a lover and his lass trying t' escape t' Wolf?"

"Spies look like that *after* we've finished with 'em, nor' afore!" said one of the outlaws, and a ripple of grim laughter ran round the circle.

"T' Wolf don't use women as spies, excepting in t' taverns," said another. "An' then he'd find a prettier lass'n this."

"He fought like a tiger when Blacktooth here started taking an interest in t' lass," someone else added. "It took eight of us to sit on him, an' he only went quiet when you come along, cap'n."

"That don't mean nowt," objected another, a thin man with a narrow chin. "Don't trust nobody, I say. Even if they ain't spies, they've seen us now, and if they're caught they'll sing. Kill 'em, it's th'only way to be sure."

A babel of voices broke out.

"Thar' ain't fair -!"

"He's right, it's th'only way!"

"No, we can't murder 'em in cold blood!"

"Are we doing t' Wolf's work for him?"

"Kill 'em quick and ger' on!"

The captain held up his hand again, and they fell silent.

"We're short o' time," he said. "There's summat strange about thee, but I ain't got time to find out what. We can't take tha with us, so I've only got one choice." He drew a knife from his belt. A sigh of mingled anticipation and horror went up from the ring of outlaws.

The captain stooped over Irinya, the moonlight glinting wickedly on the naked blade in his hand. A single swift stroke - and the bonds around her wrists were cut. A second stroke, and Gyrdan was free too.

“Why should we kill thee?” said the captain, apparently amused at the surprise and relief on their faces. “Enemies o’ t’ Wolf shouldn’t fight amongst theirselves. Ger’ on thy way and fare thee well, both thee an’ thy lass.”

The smugglers drew away, one or two casting doubtful glances at Gyrdan and Irinya, but none daring to argue with their leader’s decision. They chivvied their ponies into motion and filed away northward on the track, the whole cavalcade silent and shadowy as ghosts under the sinking moon.

“If they are smugglers,” remarked Irinya, “I could wish there were more of them in Carlundy.”

“We were very lucky, lady,” Gyrdan said, getting to his feet. “Some would have killed us out of hand, some would have tortured us first. Some would have shot us on the clifftop and asked questions later. That was careless of me, to stand there so long against the sky, target practice for anyone. I must be getting slack in my old age.”

They had gone only a few yards when sounds behind made them stop, stiffening with alarm. Hoarse shouting, the frightened neighing of a pony, the clash and clang of steel on steel.

“They are assailed!” gasped Irinya.

As one, they turned and raced back up the track.

“Under Raven Tor!” panted Gyrdan. “Ambush!”

As they neared the pinnacle of shattered rock, they could just see a struggling melee of men and horses surging across the track below the tumbled cliff. Radwulf’s men must have lain in wait just beyond the tor. The smugglers were fighting valiantly, but against mail-clad men they were hard pressed and were giving back slowly, as far as could be discerned in the shadows.

“This way!” Gyrdan hissed, and they dived off the track to skirt the struggle on the left, leaping recklessly over the rough ground. As they came level with the northern end of the rocks he swept his sword from its sheath, brandishing it in his left hand.

“You stay here!”

“No way!” she snapped back, drawing the knife from her belt.

Yelling like furies, they fell upon Radwulf’s men from the rear. Dismayed, the soldiers turned to face this new assault, and with a shout of triumph the smugglers pressed forward. In the shadows under the cliff all was confusion. Gyrdan seemed to be everywhere, the sword rising and falling like flame in his hand.

“A-hai-yai-yai-e!” he yodelled. “Come on, men! To arms!”

The cliffs echoed the cry again and again. Radwulf's men faltered, fearing the approach of a new force of unknown strength.

"A-hai-yai-yai-yai-e!" shrieked Irinya, and the cliffs gave it back doubled and redoubled. An armoured man lunged at her, and she sidestepped and ducked under his spear, striking with her knife at his unprotected thigh. He screamed and fell forward, blood spouting from the severed artery, his weight twisting the knife from her hand. Another soldier charged her as she stooped to wrench the weapon free. She darted aside, as she would have dodged a charging boar in the far-off hunting days of her youth - and then her foot slipped in someone's blood and she fell sprawling over something that moaned and flapped feebly.

She felt the wind of a descending sword blade. For an eternal second she waited for the blow - and then steel screeched on steel just above her head. Rolling to one side, she saw Gyrdan and her assailant fencing in deadly earnest. The soldier was fighting fast and furiously while Gyrdan, by contrast, seemed hardly to move. He had neither shield nor armour and if the soldier's sword had ever made contact he must have suffered a grievous wound, yet always his own sword was there a fraction of a second ahead. Blow after blow was parried and returned with an economy of effort and precision of timing that was beautiful to watch.

Then, suddenly, the circle of glittering steel broke. A violent counter-stroke from the soldier, and Gyrdan's sword shivered into fragments, the shattered blade falling with a mournful *clink* onto the stones at his feet. He flung the useless hilt into his opponent's face, dived under the next blow, and caught the soldier's sword-arm with both hands. For a second or so the two men grappled for possession of the weapon. At first the struggle went Gyrdan's way, but his injured right wrist could not stand the strain for long. The soldier felt him begin to give way, and his lips peeled back in a triumphant grin. He exerted more strength, knowing Gyrdan's grip would break any minute, any second -

And then Irinya's arm came round his face from behind, forcing his chin up and back. He clawed at her hand, the grin now replaced by the contortion of fear - but even as he prised her grasp loose the vicious knife blade in her left hand came up, chose its moment - and slashed hard across his throat. With a horrible bubbling yell he sank to his knees and collapsed, leaving Gyrdan and Irinya transfixed, staring at each other across his body.

The fight was over. Radwulf's men gathered up their wounded and fled, some of the outlaws leaping after them until a sharp command from the captain brought them

swiftly back. The narrow track under the tor was a shambles, even though the darkness masked the worst of the horror. A dozen or so men lay scattered among the rocks, one or two moaning in pain but most lying quite still. Even now, the smugglers maintained their quiet discipline, some recapturing the terrified ponies, some tending the wounded, some stripping the fallen of weapons, armour, anything of value.

“You two! This way!” someone ordered sharply, and Gyrdan and Irinya were led a little way up the track under the shadow of the rock, skirting the dead, to a close huddle of men gathered around a bundle on the ground. A bundle that groaned and shuddered. Someone un-shuttered a lantern, and its fierce light showed a big man writhing in agony, his face a mask of blood and the lips drawn back in a snarl - showing clearly a missing front tooth.

“Goner, cap’n,” said a soft voice, and the lantern was shifted to illuminate a great gash in the man’s side, under the heart.

“Nowt tha can do?” But there was no need to answer the captain’s question, and no-one did.

“Can’t leave him, cap’n,” said the soft voice, insistently. “Does tha want me to -?”

“No. I’ll do it. Cover his eyes.”

“Wife -” groaned the injured man. “Wife -!”

“Easy now,” said the captain. “We’ll take care of her, lad, don’t tha fret. Easy now, good fellow.”

Two hands were laid gently over the dying man’s face, and the captain’s knife gleamed in the lantern light, a single swift stroke that let his colleague softly out of this life.

“Everybody else can walk, cap’n,” someone reported. “Seven dead, all told. Two wounded.”

“Right. No time for burial. Tha knows t’ drill.”

The captain got wearily to his feet, cleaning his knife blade on the dead man’s cloak. The other men faded away into the shadows, three carrying the body between them. The captain held the lantern high, and for the first time they saw his mask had been torn off in the fight and the light fell full on his face. It was Holman, the man with the red neckerchief from the combe.

“You two,” he said heavily. “I guessed it were, though when I heard that blood-curdlin’ yell I thought me last hour had come. Well, it shows I were right to let tha go, bur’ I were wrong about all t’rest. I want an answer. Tha were bred to arms. No peasant handles a weapon like that, even after months o’ training. Who are you?”

The question, as always, was addressed to Gyrdan, but it was Irinya who answered.

“I am Irinya Ingeld’s daughter, Prince of the Black Hills, Daughter of Ardern and Lady of Carlundy!” she declared proudly; and she looked it, too. The brooch at her throat glittered, her eyes flashed, and her voice rang like steel.

The captain stared, open-mouthed.

“So it’s true? Radwulf’s wife?”

“Ingeld’s daughter,” she corrected. “I have been Radwulf’s prisoner twelve years. Now I have a chance to escape, and I am flying for my life. But one day I will return!”

She wondered at herself even as she said it. Would she ever return? Would she not only bring more trouble on this land, which had borne far more than enough already? Yet if she abandoned it, who else could help?

The smugglers’ captain was unimpressed. “Ha!” he snorted. “Fine words! Thirty crowns, that’s t’ reward for thee an’ thy fancy man. More’n t’ value of th’ whole load. Enough to equip a small army. I could use that money.”

Irinya shrugged her shoulders.

“Do as you will with me. If you value Radwulf’s gold higher than your duty to your rightful lord, I cannot gainsay you. One thing only I ask - that you release Gyrdan. He is a stranger in this land and it is not right that he should suffer further in its quarrels. For myself I care nothing. But hear this, captain! You and your men, you may harry Radwulf, annoy him, smuggle goods into his country, deprive him of a little money, kill a few of his soldiers. But can you depose him? Without a leader to take his place? And do you think that the lords of Carlundy will follow such as *you*? You are only a gadfly on the flank of a great horse, hardly worth his notice. But I am the rightful Lady of Carlundy, and Radwulf fears me. I am your best hope, captain.”

“What do t’ likes of us care for lords an’ ladies? What difference does it make who screws our taxes out of us? For years we been squeezed dry. And nor’ only in money. No man’s life is safe, no woman’s virtue. We’re used worse’n cattle! All lords are alike to t’ poor man. We’ll have no truck with any o’ thee! We look out for us selves now!”

“That is a dangerous creed!” Irinya said sharply. “You will have a country of brigands, each with his own following, each a law only to himself. How is that better for the poor man?”

“I ain’t got time to waste on talking!” snapped the captain.

“Neither have we,” Gyrdan said calmly. “Dawn is approaching. If you plan to sell us to the Wolf it does not matter, but if not we must make haste. It will not be safe to linger here for long. Decide swiftly, captain. Are we still all enemies of the Wolf, or will you hand his escaped bird back to him and claim your prize?”

The captain glared at him, and stood for a few moments in anxious thought.

“All right,” he said, at last. “Tha come to help us against th’ attack, though tha could easily have fled, and tha turned t’ tide in our favour.” His lips twitched into a smile. “A honest woman’s rarer than thirty crowns o’ Radwulf’s gold! Tha can go thy way. But first, is there owt tha needs? Is either o’ thee hurt?”

He cast a practised glance down their bloody hands and clothes.

“No,” Gyrdan said. “But my sword was broken in the fight. Have I your leave to search the dead for another?”

The captain grinned broadly. “We can do better than thar’, I think! Come with me!”

They followed him to the north end of the defile, where the smugglers were gathered in an ordered company. Dawn was creeping into the sky, and already a dim light lay on the land.

“Last o’ t’ dead seen to, cap’n,” announced the thin-faced man, who appeared to be a kind of second-in-command. “We’d best get going soon.”

“Go on now,” said the captain. “Leave me this pony -” he cut the hindmost animal free from its traces “- and I’ll catch up. No time to lose. Tha knows where tha’s goin’?”

“Aye, sir,” came a chorus of voices, and with evident relief they hastened away northward, scouts detaching from the front and rear of the column and fanning out into the hills on either side of the track. They would not easily be taken by surprise again.

“Your men seem remarkably well-trained, captain,” Irinya commented, watching the column admiringly.

“We’d have no chance if we weren’t,” he answered. “I’ve been in t’ business many a long year now, an’ me dad afore me, but there’s a world o’ difference atween moonshining th’ odd cask o’ brandy or bolt o’ silk, like we used to in th’ old days, and what we do now. If it weren’t for t’ Shadow, we’d all have been hung long ago.”

“The Shadow? What is that?”

The captain coughed. “Not that, he. I don’t know his real name. I don’t even know if he’s one man or many. We don’t see much of him now. But he taught us t’

business. How to move goods secretly on a large scale, how to sell ‘em on without gettin’ caught. How to stamp ‘em so’s they look legal. How to make sure one spy can’t betray all t’others. We wear t’ masks as much against each other as against t’Wolf’s men. Most of us don’t know who t’others are, ‘til they’re dead.” He sighed, ruefully. “It’s nor’ as much fun as in th’old freebooting days, but it’s a hell of a lot more effective. I reckon we bring in more goods now than t’ lawful merchants!”

He patted the pony appreciatively. “Speaking of which -”

He threw back the cloths covering the pony’s load, loosened a strap and groped deep among the bundles.

“There!” he cried triumphantly, turning back, and even Gyrdan could not repress a gasp of amazement. In the captain’s hand glittered a splendid sword, its polished steel blade intricately patterned and rippled from the forging process, its hilt sparkling in the light of the newly rising sun.

“Dwarf-make,” said the captain proudly. “T’best in t’world. T’ *very* best. Bought in t’ markets of Fairhaven.” He ran a finger along the back of the blade with a gesture almost of affection. “Didn’t I say we could do better for thee than a dead soldier’s sword?”

“Bought?” Gyrdan queried, testing the blade in his turn. “How so? For this is a fine weapon indeed. I would not like to guess its price.”

“Special order,” said the captain vaguely. “We ger ‘em now an’ then.”

Gyrdan looked up, about to ask something else, and the captain tapped the side of his nose warningly.

“Don’t ask no questions, and tha’ll get no lies. Go on, take it. A fine sword deserves a fine swordsman to wield it.”

He hefted the sword - very carefully - by the blade and proffered it hilt-first to Gyrdan, who took it almost in a daze. For a moment he balanced it in his hand, then with a sudden movement swept it whistling in the air in a slashing, back-and-forth stroke. The blade seemed to leave a shining trail behind it, and the sun drew dazzling fire from the metalwork on the hilt. The captain stooped, took a scrap of cloth from the ground, and tossed it into the air. Gyrdan caught it across the sword blade - and the cloth fluttered back to earth, sliced neatly into two.

“Didn’t I tell tha?” the captain exulted. “T’ best swords in t’ world. Sharp enough to cut silk, strong enough to cleave through iron.”

“I - I can’t accept, captain. This is far above my worth!”

“Nowt o’ t’ sort!” cried the captain, and smote Gyrdan cheerily between the shoulders. “If it hadn’t been for tha, we’d have lost that little skit, and Radwulf would’ve got t’ lot. And us into t’ bargain! One sword seems small reward for that.”

He handed Gyrdan the scabbard, of dense, dark wood and tooled leather.

“They say it is rare for a dwarf-sword to change hands without either money or death as payment,” Gyrdan said, “and that one given freely brings good fortune on both giver and receiver. May that be true of this one! I cannot thank you enough, friend.”

“No need,” answered the captain. “Has tha gor’a name, friend?”

“Gyrdan.”

The captain looked puzzled. “Now, I feel that should mean summat to me, but I can’t bring it to mind.” He shrugged. “Well, never mind. Can’t be important.” He turned to Irinya. “I’m sorry I’ve got nowt to give thee. But if and when tha comes back, tha’ll not find I’ve forgotten. I wish thee all good fortune, my lady.”

“Fare you well, friend,” she answered. “If we meet again, I hope it may be in happier times.”

Swiftly, the captain reloaded his impatient pony, and with a wave of his hand turned and strode away north. They watched him until he was lost among the dun-coloured hills.

“The ravens of Raven Tor have a feast in store today,” Gyrdan said grimly, as they turned back south. Daylight showed the track beneath the cliff littered with bodies, and the great black birds already gathering on the rocks. Irinya grew faint and sick as they drew nearer, tried to look away and could not.

“The savages! Every corpse is headless! *Why?* Isn’t it enough that they are dead?”

“If Radwulf knew who these men were, he would wreak a terrible retribution on their families and neighbours,” Gyrdan answered, with a constriction in his voice that showed even he was not unmoved. “He has been known to burn an entire village if one of its men is caught smuggling. That is why they kill their own wounded, and why they strip and mutilate their dead. This is war, lady.”

They hurried on down the track without speaking, anxious to get away from the revolting aftermath of battle and the gloating ravens - and from Radwulf’s soldiers, who would undoubtedly return in daylight, to search for clues to the smugglers’ identities, and to take revenge on any luckless soul in the vicinity. It was this

thought that was obviously uppermost in Gyrdan's mind when he paused briefly to allow Irinya to rest.

"We cannot use this track now," he said, gazing uneasily back toward the tor. "Radwulf's men now know the smugglers use it. They will watch along its whole length for any traffic, by night and day. Quite uselessly, since the outlaws know they know, and will switch to another route, but nevertheless the path is closed just as effectively to us. I am afraid we shall have to take to the heather again, and hope to lose ourselves in the wilderness."

Irinya did not protest, but she was footsore and weary and the reaction from the fight was setting in. She had killed a man. A man of whom she knew nothing except that he had served her husband. Perhaps he had friends and parents who would grieve for him, a wife and children who loved him and would never see him again. And now his headless corpse lay stiffening and stripped on this forsaken moor, food for foxes and ravens. His blood still stained her hands and her knife, which she had sheathed in haste and had not cleaned. Its sickening stench seemed to hang around her, gagging in the back of her throat. And, for some unaccountable reason, the ground was pitching dizzily under her feet, worse even than the noisome undulations of the bog. If she had ever been in a ship, she would have said she felt seasick. But she knew no name for the sudden black wave of nausea that overwhelmed her.

When she came to, she found herself lying on the ground by the margin of a small tarn, once again wrapped in two cloaks and with the almost empty food-bag doing duty as a makeshift pillow. She was hungry, and with that thought came a shaming recollection, and hard on its heels the memory of battle, and blood, and the peaty filth of the Moss. She sat up hastily and crawled to the tarn to wash, steeling herself to face the reflection she would see in its glassy surface.

But the face that looked back, although pale and lined, was clean. And so were her hands, and her knife and its sheath. And most of the mud and blood had been scraped off her cloak and dress and shoes, and her feet had been washed and bound with new bandages, this time cut from the hem of her shift. There was little to make the fight any more than a grim memory.

She looked around. The tarn occupied the bottom of a very shallow dip, ringed by tumbled rocks and lined with tough grass. After a little while, she made out a figure wedged between two boulders, sitting hunched up and absolutely still. She crawled up to him, careful to keep low.

Only his eyes moved as she came close. He too had washed clean of blood and grime, and his clothes and hair were damp. For a tramp, he had remarkably fastidious tastes.

“Keep out of sight, and keep quiet,” he said, speaking out of the corner of his mouth and very low. “Radwulf’s men are here.”

She edged a little nearer, and peered out between the boulders. The green track was clearly visible half a mile or so away, and a company of foot soldiers were marching along it, two officers riding at the rear.

“They are following the smugglers’ trail,” Gyrdan murmured. “Hardly difficult! So far it has not occurred to them to search with any care off the track, at least not here. What they are doing back at Raven Tor I have no idea.”

They stayed silent and still until the soldiers had passed, and then Gyrdan sighed and relaxed, rubbing his bandaged arm as though it pained him.

“It was bad luck meeting those smugglers,” he said wearily. “It cannot be more than twenty miles from Raven Tor to Billand, and this track goes all the way. A path that could not be missed even if the weather turned against us. We should have been safe by now.”

“Where are we?”

“Only a mile or so from the tor,” Gyrdan answered, heaving another sigh. “It was as much as I could do to carry you here. It is poor cover, but there is nowhere better.” He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed his eyes. “Well, we are not beaten yet. They will call off the hunt tonight, and one more march will see us clear. If we can get through the day! Lady, will you watch for a while? I can manage with very little sleep, but not without any at all.”

Iryna swallowed. She was desperately tired, and wanted rest more than anything else in the world. But he must be in worse case, having done without sleep since their day in the cave near Mickleburg. She would have to stay awake somehow.

“Of course,” she said, trying to sound confident and alert.

He was already sagging drowsily to the ground.

“If they only pass along the track, there is no danger,” he said, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a yawn. “But if you see them searching off it -” another yawn - “wake me *immediately*. If they come between us and the cliff back to the Moss, we are trapped.”

Gyrdan stirred uneasily in his sleep. He was dreaming. Confused pictures of old battles flicked across his mind’s eye, and the ground echoed to the distant roar of a

cavalry charge. He rolled over onto his side, and the far-off thunder suddenly swelled to a deafening boom in one ear and faded to silence in the other. He jolted awake, soaked in sweat, his heart hammering. A little way off, Irinya lay asleep, folded against the rock as, dozing off, she had slid gently sideways. And the beat of hooves still pounded in the earth beneath his head, nearer and more urgent now, not a part of his dream at all. He sat up sharply and crawled to the edge of the group of rocks, hoping desperately that his hearing was deceived.

It was not. The setting sun glinted on the mail and weapons of many mounted men, quartering the moor with the thorough ease of practised hunters. Gyrdan flung himself wildly across to the other side of their refuge, leading to their escape route up the cliff. More soldiers. And again, and again, from every point of the compass. They were surrounded.

He shook Irinya roughly awake. She stared vaguely, still drugged and stupid with sleep, and then she too heard the horses, the jingling harness, the cheerful voices of the men calling to one another. She paled, and put her hand over her eyes.

“I - I fell asleep? I’m so sorry...”

“Oh, never mind that,” he said, in an angry whisper. “It’s too late to be sorry.”

They crept together up to the edge of the rocks again.

“This lot is rather more professional,” Gyrdan commented, watching the men moving purposefully about their work. “Their leader knows his business.”

Irinya shaded her eyes against the late sun.

“Why, I know him! He is Guthrum son of Guthlaf. I have met him often at Mickleburg. He is a good man, honourable as these things are reckoned now. At least he will not ill-treat prisoners.”

“Small comfort for me! But they will have to earn their ten crowns for my head!”

She studied his strange fierce face, outlined against the pale rocks. The fell light of battle burned in his eyes, and the glowing sunset gilded his face as if with blood. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword, and she saw the ripple of tension run down the muscles of his shoulders and back. So a cornered badger might look, grey-muzzled and grim, as it rounded on the pursuing hounds to defend its last redoubt to the death. She shivered, and drew away from him.

“I don’t want to die,” she murmured, hardly above a whisper. “Oh, I don’t want to die!”

She leapt to her feet with a shriek. A shout of triumph went up from the searchers, and they spurred their horses forward, closing in on this sudden focus with terrifying

speed. Gyrdan swore, and caught at her as she tried to spring over the boulders. She fell heavily, knocking him backwards and pinning his left arm and shoulder to the ground. He struggled to free himself, but could not shake her off without striking her.

“Help!” she screamed. “Oh, help, help, help me!”

By now the circle was boiling with large, powerful men, with more springing from their mounts and vaulting over the ring of boulders. Even as Gyrdan managed to push Irinya aside, he was seized by a dozen or more soldiers and quickly overpowered. Through the melee, he caught a vague glimpse of Irinya sobbing in the arms of one of the soldiers, before something struck the back of his head and the world dissolved in a scatter of stars that faded into blackness.

He came round, slowly and painfully, some hours later. At first he did not clearly recall events, seeing only a confused series of images, some of which he knew belonged to the distant past and others which seemed only fantasies. But slowly, his dazed brain began to winnow memory from dream, illusion from reality. He realised, first, that he was cold. His cloak was gone, and now that night had come the air was harsh with the first frost of autumn. A thin wind souged through the grass, and cut straight through him. He tried to wrap his arms across his chest in the hope of warmth, and that brought the second realisation. He could neither move nor feel arms or hands, and a tight band of pain spiralled around his ribs. It hurt to breathe. He groaned aloud and, near at hand, somebody guffawed.

He opened his eyes, and found his head was drooping forward so that his chin was almost level with a rope tied round his chest. More ropes bound his ankles, his thighs, and his waist, this latter also circling his elbows and holding his arms fast to his sides. All the ropes were cruelly tight, cutting deep into the flesh, and it was some time before he realised that this was because he was tied to something vertical, most probably a tree, and his body was sagging against the bonds. If he could take his weight on his feet -

He managed to straighten up, sweating with effort and pain. It was easier to breathe, but it soon brought its own problems. The blood began to creep back into his arms, bringing first the stinging pain of returning life and then an insistent burning ache in his right wrist. He had thought it was healing, but evidently the soldiers had wrenched it or twisted it or something and the damage had flared up again. His back ached, his neck ached, and his head felt as though a family of enthusiastic blacksmiths had taken over the tenancy. He leaned it against the hard

trunk of the tree, trying to avoid the sore spot on the back where they had hit him, and looked around, screwing up his eyes to make them focus.

He was on the edge of what looked like a sizeable camp. A couple of tents were pitched under the trees, a long line of horses stood patiently chomping on fodder, and a lot of soldiers were carousing around roaring camp-fires. Radwulf's men celebrating their thirty crowns' reward. A couple more soldiers lounged against another tree nearby, having evidently drawn the short straw and been assigned to guard duty, although even they were not missing out on the celebrations. A heaped platter of food and a couple of wine flagons were set on the ground between them, and both soldiers looked more than half drunk. Ordinarily, Gyrdan would have chalked that up as a promising sign and set about trying to devise a scheme of escape. But this time he felt too ill and too depressed even to try. Such a stupid way to get caught! Although probably neither of them would have been able to stay awake after the last exhausting days. It was not Irinya's fault - He jumped. Where was she? What had they done with her? He twisted his neck to peer over each shoulder in turn, heedless of the pain. No sign of her. And then came another realisation, stunning as a punch in the stomach. Her letter! He was still carrying the letter to her kinsmen, written a lifetime ago in Mickleburg Castle. It was in his tobacco pouch, and would have survived the soaking. Had they searched him? Had they found it?

He groaned again at the thought, and one of the guards chortled.

"Not comfortable, eh? Tha'll soon be wishing tha'd not woke up, when his lordship finishes his dinner an' comes along for a bit o' fun."

Gyrdan did not doubt it. Any man who could tie up a prisoner like this had a refined sense of cruelty worthy of Radwulf himself. And Irinya had said the leader was an honourable man! But what were they doing to her?

"The - the lady?" he got out, struggling for breath.

The two guards rolled on the floor in an ecstasy of laughter that was only partly due to drink.

"Bein' *comforted* by Lord Guthrum!"

"In his tent t' past hour!"

"*She* knows which side her bread's buttered, that one!"

That could not possibly be true. Could it? He recalled the brief glimpse he had seen before he was knocked cold. Irinya sobbing in the arms of a soldier, a rescuer. But she would never go back to Radwulf. Would she?

"Look at him!" the guard crowed. "He thought she'd took a fancy to him!"

The other snorted. "Listen, stupid! Tying thee up was her idea!"

"Takes a woman to think o' summat like that," the other added.

No. She would not have betrayed him. It was only an interrogation technique, one he had used himself to great effect. *Your companions have betrayed you. Why not get your revenge? Tell us everything you know.*

"He don't believe us," sneered the first guard. "Tha'll see, soon enough."

Gyrdan shut his ears stubbornly to their mockery. It was not true. It could not be true, and he would *not* believe it.

Ages passed, or perhaps it was only minutes. Breathing was difficult because of the tight chest rope, and soon the effort of forcing air in and out of his lungs drove all other thoughts from his mind. His brain was still chanting *It is not true It is not true*, over and over again, but the words had long ceased to have any meaning.

Something jabbed him in the ribs, but he hardly noticed it. Then, a woman laughed. A cruel, mocking titter, very like something he had heard once before. He opened his eyes. But it was not Radwulf's mistress who stood sniggering at him, hanging drunkenly on the arm of a richly dressed young man. It was not the Lady Alina who was prodding him contemptuously with a stick.

It was Irinya.

She was certainly no captive, so they could not have found the letter. Her eyes sparkled, and she was magnificently clad in a man's long silken mantle. This presumably belonged to one of the two noblemen flanking her, vying with one another in their efforts at gallantry. One, on whose arm Irinya was leaning, was a pale, sensitive-looking youth with a lot of curly brown hair, looking perhaps a little overawed at the honour of having rescued his master's wife. The other was a quite different type, lean, bearded, hawk-faced, dark-haired and dark-eyed, clad in the baggy trousers, thigh-length tunic and gold belt of a chieftain of the Black Hills. Gyrdan recognised him as one of the lords in Radwulf's hall that night, who had taken bets on the length of time it would take to beat a helpless prisoner unconscious.

He saw Gyrdan recognise him, and his face broke into a malicious sneer.

"So you were thinking you could use the Lady as a hostage, were you?" he said, his voice moving in the sing-song cadence of a Highlander speaking the unfamiliar tongue of the Lowlands. "Fool! You are going to regret that mistake, very soon."

Gyrdan made no attempt to answer, and the Highlander laughed.

“It seems your contrivance has made him less inclined to talk than ever, Irinya! You should have let Guthrum string him up properly, as he deserves.”

“The reward’s the same alive or dead, after all,” observed the second man. “And we may as well get it over with. I’ve no desire to kill him by inches.”

“It’s a soft heart you have, Guthrum!” hooted the dark man. “Where’s the harm in having a little fun?”

“Wouldn’t you rather parade him in triumph through Mickleburg?” inquired Irinya. “Crowds are always so much more impressed by a live prisoner.”

Guthrum shifted uneasily, but with Irinya leaning on his arm he could not decently get away.

“Looks a bit of a wreck,” the Highlander commented, critically. “But there’s enough life in him for a little sport. What a pity we had to camp here instead of getting back to Mickleburg tonight!”

“I simply could not ride any further,” Irinya said, stifling a sob. “The last four days have been terrible. Driven on at sword-point, starved, bound and gagged whenever we stopped. I tried to escape from him, but I could not.”

This was too much. He had risked his life to rescue her, helped her through the barren hills, spared her all the pain he could. Without her he would have been safe in Billand days ago.

“You bitch! You lying bitch! I wish I’d let that soldier kill you! I wish I’d left you in the castle to be -”

He got no further. Irinya’s eyes kindled angry fire. She took a step forward and struck him a stinging slap across the face.

“Quiet, cur!” she snapped, and the contempt in her voice and the shock of the blow knocked him into silence.

“Not content with abducting a lady, you now see fit to insult her as well,” crooned the Highlander. “You’ll pay for that. Besides, you cost me a wager worth two gold crowns, and I am not a man to let that pass. I am going to thrash the hide off you.”

“Don’t kill him, Hygurd!” said Guthrum urgently. “You can flog him through Mickleburg tomorrow! Lady Irinya is right; it will make a better spectacle.”

“I’ll just tickle him, then,” said Hygurd resignedly. “Just to give him a foretaste, you know.”

“He’s already had a foretaste, by the look of him,” Irinya said, with a loathsome giggle. “I’ve a better idea. Leave him tied up here all night, food and water just out of reach. What do you think he’ll be willing to do for them, by morning?”

Hygurd crowed with laughter.

“Not bad, Irinya, not bad at all. Just a little extra refinement -”

He carried a long, vicious black cattle-whip in his right hand, and now he cracked this in the air with a snap like a tree struck by lightning. Gyrdan flinched in spite of his effort not to show fear, and Hygurd grinned malevolently.

“I see you know what a whip can do,” he crooned. “It can cut -”

Crack! Two dandelions lay headless at Gyrdan’s feet.

“It can slice -”

Crack! Crack! A shower of leaves and twigs pattered down out of the tree, lopped off as if with a knife.

“Poor tree,” purred Hygurd. “Enough of that. Let us see what it will do to *you* -”

Crack! went the lash right by Gyrdan’s ear. He tried to jerk away, though it was far too late, and felt a stinging pain and the warm trickle of blood.

“Relax,” Hygurd sneered. “Only a little cut. I won’t lop your ears off until tomorrow. This is just a demonstration. The lash is so - versatile. It can strip clothes from flesh -”

With uncanny precision, the lash-tip caught one of the rips in Gyrdan’s sleeve and extended it down to the elbow.

“And flesh from bones -”

Crack! in exactly the same place, and a long red weal appeared from shoulder to elbow, oozing blood. Gyrdan only just managed not to scream. The cut was trivial, but it could easily have sliced to the bone, and both he and Hygurd knew it.

“It can slash and mutilate -”

Another shallow scratch, across Gyrdan’s temple to the corner of his eye. He recoiled, shuddering. Another half-inch and he would have been blinded. He thrashed against the ropes, to absolutely no avail, and Hygurd laughed mirthlessly.

“Frightened? Good. I’ll have you beg for mercy before I’m finished -”

The whip cracked and flickered like the tongue of a venomous snake. At every lash Gyrdan involuntarily tried to pull away, but the ropes held him fast. That unerring whip flicked at his face, his neck, his shoulders, tugged at his hair, coiled around his chest. It never actually did any serious damage, but the terror came from the threat, and from the sense of powerlessness. He lost track of time and of place, hearing only the crack of the lash, seeing only a series of disjointed images. A ring of laughing, grinning, jeering faces. The campfire blazing in a patch of red light. The trees, dark and solid. Hygurd howling with raucous laughter. Guthrum’s face, tight-lipped and disapproving. And Irinya, giggling drunkenly, egging Hygurd on.

He was near exhaustion. His headache had flared into a blinding pain, and his struggles made the ropes cut deep into his chest. It was getting difficult to breathe again, and a suffocating pressure was building up in his breast. He stopped trying to fight it, welcoming insensibility as a respite from pain and fear.

“I say, I’ve just thought of something!” came Irinya’s voice, pitched an octave higher than usual. “Stop, Hygurd, do! I believe this fellow knows who the smugglers’ ringleader is! Look at that fine sword they gave him. Make him talk, and we could break up their ring for ever!”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Hygurd reflected. “What a prize we’ve caught, if it’s true!”

“Radwulf will want to conduct the interrogation himself,” Irinya said, warningly. “He wouldn’t be at all pleased if someone carelessly damaged the prisoner first, would he?”

“No-o,” said Hygurd thoughtfully. “Oh, all right. Pity.”

He coiled the lash, and the soldiers started reeling off back towards their camp, sensing the end of the evening’s entertainment.

“Let’s throw things at him,” Hygurd suggested, picking up a stone. “Come on, Guthrum! Twenty paces distance, and a shilling says you’re too drunk even to hit him!”

“Will you stop it, Hygurd?” Guthrum burst out angrily. “I won’t tolerate this!”

“Oh, won’t you? Let me remind you, Guthrum, these may be your men and your estates, but *I* am the Lord Radwulf’s lieutenant here. Defy me and you defy him.”

The implicit threat effectively silenced Guthrum, but he continued to regard Gyrdan with a sort of covert sympathy. Gyrdan caught his eye, and although the young lord looked away hastily, it was clear that he found the whole business distasteful in the extreme. He might yet find the courage to disobey Hygurd’s orders, or at least modify them.

“Heigh ho!” Irinya yawned suddenly. “You must excuse me, my lords! I am almost asleep on my feet!” She swayed against Guthrum, who supported her solicitously. Whatever he might think of her, she was still a lady, and Radwulf’s wife to boot.

“You must do me the honour of taking my tent, Lady Irinya,” he declared. “This way. Careful now!”

Gyrdan’s only possible supporter was thus effectively removed from the scene, leaving him at Hygurd’s mercy. But that lord, after heaving a couple of ill-aimed

stones, seemed to grow bored with his sport in the absence of an audience and wandered away, leaving Gyrdan alone.

It was a bitter night that he spent there. Hunger gnawed at him, and the cold ate into his bones. He had hardly the strength to stand upright, but if he sagged into sleep the ropes yanked taut and sent a screaming pain to jolt him awake. But worse, far worse, than cold and hunger and pain was the knowledge that Irinya had betrayed him. The shared hardship and peril of the last few days had begun to forge a friendship between them far deeper than months of ordinary association could have achieved. He had grown to respect and like her, even - yes, all right, admit it - even to think that she liked him. Now it seemed that had been entirely illusory. She had deceived him as surely as she had the sentries and the servants - and Radwulf - back in the castle. He understood her now. She was not going back to Radwulf. But by betraying him, she had put herself above suspicion. Once the camp was asleep, she would be able to take a horse, ride back to the track where they had been caught, and follow it south to Billand. She no longer needed him, and so he was to be discarded like a broken tool. Well, he had only himself to blame. He had seen that she was a magnificent actress. He toyed with the idea of volunteering her letter, dragging her down with him - but rejected it. It would do him no good. Let her live with the shame if she could. She was as worthless as the rest of them, deceitful, faithless and cruel.

On the other side of the camp, there was a stealthy movement in the horse lines, and the muffled chink of harness as someone saddled up quietly. The horse sniffed suspiciously at the stranger, wanting its own master, but obedience was a long habit now and it followed where it was led.

Out in the woods, Irinya stood a moment and surveyed the snoring camp. No sign of movement. She patted one of the saddlebags, and heard the reassuring chink of coin. A pity to steal from the gentlemanly Guthrum instead of from Hygurd, but that could not be helped. The other bag was crammed with food and spare clothing. *Twenty miles from the tor, Gyrdan had said, and this track goes all the way.* Once back on the track, three or four hours riding would take her to Billand. Another four or five days, and she could be in Harkerness. She had money to pay for fresh horses and accommodation, and an imaginary brother as an excuse for visiting Billand. A lady would not travel alone, but a minor gentlewoman or a farmer's widow, unable

or unwilling to afford a retinue, would do it at need. Gyrdan was no longer necessary.

Gyrdan roused with a start. Something was crawling over his ankles. Rats, he thought, and a frisson of disgust shimmered down his spine. He jerked his legs, clumsily, and shook it off. But it came back almost immediately. He kicked again, and this time a hand caught his ankle and held it firm. He opened his eyes, and saw a knife at his feet, glittering in the moonlight as it sawed at his bonds. He recognised the blade. But in any case, there was only one person in this camp who could possibly be cutting him free.

“Can you hear me?” came Irinya’s voice in his ear. She was no more than a patch of deep shadow, having put aside the colourful mantle and reverted to her dilapidated dark cloak.

He managed to jerk his head, the nearest he could get to a nod. She cut the other ropes and, freed from their constraint, he lurched unsteadily against her. She caught him, and for the first time he had to be grateful for the wiry strength of her arm round his waist, supporting him as they staggered together into the shadows of the wood.

After only a few yards, Irinya stopped and helped him to sit down with his back against a great tree.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” she whispered. “But I had to do it. It was the only way. Are you much hurt?”

He shook his head, shivering too much to speak. She draped his cloak over his shoulders and knelt beside him, chafing his hands in hers.

“I brought you food and wine,” she said after a while. “Can you eat? Please try.”

Evidently Guthrum and Hygurd kept a good table even in camp. Soft white bread, good cheese, tender lamb roasted to perfection. As he ate, and as the wine warmed his chilled body, he began to feel a little better.

“It is I who should be sorry, Irinya. If you knew what I have been thinking -!”

“Shh. I know. And I deserve it. But it was the only way. If you had fought them, they would have killed you. If I had stood by you and defied them, I would be a prisoner too and there would be no hope at all. And I had to go along with Hygurd in his cruelty, or he would have suspected me. How changed he is! Hygaran must be turning in his grave, to see his son so completely Radwulf’s man. If you knew what it cost me to sit laughing and drinking with him while you were pinioned here alone in the cold, to laugh with him while he tormented you, to hit you -!” She broke off, and her fingers brushed softly against his cheek where she had struck him. “But

what else could I have done? At least I saved you from being hanged, and from a flogging and a stoning. And maybe that will atone for the rest. Can you forgive me? I am no heroine, Gyrdan.” A sound suspiciously like a muffled sob. “I had rather be a live bitch than a dead lion!”

“I am sorry I said that. I should ask your forgiveness. I owe you my life. Again. I should have trusted you. You have lied *for* me many times, but never *to* me.” He was, suddenly and unaccountably, close to tears himself. “Irynya, I promise, I will never doubt you again.”

“Never is a long time, my friend,” she said, her voice quivering between laughing and crying. “But this night is short. We must fly, or all this deceit and doubt will be for nothing. Can you stand?”

“All that is really hurt is my pride, and I should be used to that by now.”

He got to his feet, and they walked on as he finished the last of his meal.

“This valley is called Deepdale, they said. Do you know it?”

“Mm,” he said, with his mouth full. “Another league or so south. It is the nearest pass back to Errendale that is suitable for horses. Where are their guards?”

“Drunk,” she said succinctly. “I retrieved your sword as well as your cloak. And there are two horses tethered in the woods.”

“Why did you come back for me? You could have got away by yourself from here. You knew that.”

“Yes,” she said tensely. “Yes, I know. And this is probably the second most stupid thing I have ever done. For you will not tell me your business or your intentions, and therefore it stands to reason that I would not like the truth if I knew it. But somehow - I could not bear the thought of leaving you to Hygurd and Radwulf.”

He said, very quietly, “You do me an injustice, Irynya. I intend to see you safe, if by any means I can. It is not I who will not tell, but you who will not believe.”

She twisted her hands together. “I would like - But I cannot - I cannot see why you should -”

He sighed. “You have just said it. Because I could not bear the thought of leaving you to Radwulf. I wish you would believe me.”

Her voice was unsteady again. “I think - I think I do. It is why I came back. For good or ill, my future now lies with you.”

First light found them only a little way up Deepdale, their progress having been slow and anxious in the dark. With the coming of day, they could mount and urge their horses on at a faster pace up the narrow path that clung like ivy to the side of

the valley, rising and falling with every fold in the land. The sun was climbing by the time they came within sight of the pass at the head of the valley, little more than a narrow saddle on a long undulating ridge.

Gyrdan reined in and turned in his saddle. The whole of Deepdale lay spread before them, twisting away around a spur of high ground to debouch into Errendale. The woods where they had camped were a dark brushy smudge in the valley bottom, the silver beck disappearing into the shade. There was no sound, and no sign of activity.

“Surely they can’t still be asleep?” Irinya wondered.

Then a horseman emerged from the woods, followed by another and another, an oncoming tide surging up the path. And not only horses, but great loping grey beasts that overtook the leading riders and came bounding up the narrow path as though it were a broad high road.

“Deerhounds!” Gyrdan cried. “Come on! Ride, ride for your life!”

They hurried up the remaining path and galloped madly over the flat boggy ground of the pass, peat and water flying from the horses’ hooves. The far side, descending into a shallow trough, was less steep and difficult, but the first of the hounds was already snuffing the air from the top of the pass before they reached the bottom. And the pursuing riders, not hindered by the dark as they had been, were not far behind.

Swinging left at the bottom of the pass, they came to the green track that ran down the valley, striking south to Billand. Behind them, the deerhounds bayed, running fast on a strong scent, and further back still one of the pursuing horsemen raised a horn to his lips and blew a single clear note. They had been seen, and the hunt was on.

The horses felt their riders’ fear and found new energy, hurtling over the ground as though pursued by demons - which, in a sense, they were. Irinya was aware of little more than a terrifying sense of speed, clinging close to her horse’s back as it pounded on. A good rider once, she had not sat a horse for twelve years, and was trying only to hinder the animal as little as possible.

A wide stream appeared ahead, crossing their path. Gyrdan’s horse, leading, lifted and sprang lightly over, landing on the far side without even a break in its stride. Her own horse followed suit - but Irinya was no steeplechaser. She and it parted company somewhere on the rise, and collided again with a bone-jarring thud on the way down. The horse stumbled, snorting, to its knees. Irinya grasped vainly at its mane, but the horse had had enough of her. It put its head down in a decisive

fashion, and she was flying, describing a graceful arc among the clouds until the ground came up behind her and struck her in the back.

She must have screamed, for when she recovered her breath enough to struggle to her feet, Gyrdan's tall horse was already bearing down on her.

“Jump -!”

She grasped his downstretched hand, leaped blindly, and found herself hauled up in front of him. He wheeled his mount again, expertly, and they went plunging on. But the fall had cost them time. And Gyrdan's horse began to tire under its double burden. The pursuit was now gaining with every stride.

One hound, fleet of foot than the others, caught them up, foam flying from its chops as it raced alongside their terrified horse. It leaped for the animal's throat. The horse squealed, and Gyrdan twitched his foot out of the stirrup and kicked the hound hard in the ribs. Bone splintered with a ghastly crack and the hound fell away, yelping horribly. But the shock of the impact was too much for the all-but foundered horse. It missed its footing on the slippery grass, tripped, stumbled, and fell, sending both riders rolling over and over in heather and bracken.

One glance at the fallen animal told Gyrdan it would never rise again.

“Climb the valley side! Quick! They can't ride there -”

They scrambled up the steep slope, and a great halloo went up from the pursuing men. The hounds bayed savagely at the sight of their quarry, then fell silent as they too came leaping up the hillside.

They gained the plateau and sprinted for their lives over knobbly limestone grassland, all hollows and hummocks. The dogs poured over the lip of the hill and raced after them. Irinya's heart hammered in her breast, cramp prickling along her collar bones. There was an agonising stitch in her side. Yet still, somehow she kept running.

A confused pattern of colour flashed across her dazed vision. More horsemen, spurring over the ridge ahead! She veered sharply right, where rising ground and darker vegetation promised another peat moss and safe refuge from mounted pursuit. Gyrdan, far away to her left, was shouting something at her, but she could not make it out above the rushing in her ears.

The hounds and horsemen changed tack, swinging to head her off. Her strength was almost gone. She was stumbling now rather than running, her exhausted limbs hardly able to carry her. But the horses suddenly slackened pace. The converging hounds swerved away, leaving a wide gap. A little further, and she would be through.

She glanced over her shoulder. Gyrdan was almost up with her now, still yelling.

“Irynya! Not that way! *Irynya!*”

She did not understand. The horsemen were falling behind. They would escape again -

Then, the great black chasm yawning in front of her. The unstable ground at its brink giving way beneath her feet. Her own scream mingling with Gyrdan’s last despairing cry, and a plunge through miles of empty air. And then silence.

Chapter 6.

“Dead?” thundered Radwulf. “*Dead?*”

Hygurd explained, shuffling uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

Anred the steward listened in a stony silence almost as terrifying as his master’s rage.

“I am not sure I quite understand, my lord,” he said smoothly when Hygurd finally stumbled to a halt. “We send you with a hundred armed horsemen to arrest one brigand and his -” he glanced at Radwulf “- *captive* - and you fail?”

“Captive!” Hygurd spat. “I caught him and released her. How was I to know the bitch would deceive us all and run off with him?”

“Have a care how you speak of your mistress!” Radwulf roared.

“*My mistress!*”

“Your Lady,” Anred corrected, smoothly. “However unworthy of the title. It is a pity you did not manage to retrieve them, my lord Hygurd, and return them to Mickleburg to stand trial.”

“I said nothing of trial,” Radwulf snarled. “I wanted her back!”

“An adulteress caught in the act! With a common criminal! Sire, what an opportunity! To rid yourself of her with all men’s approval.”

Radwulf’s scarlet flush faded. He and his steward exchanged a glance, and then Anred turned to Hygurd, triumph beginning to gleam in his eyes.

“You are certain they are dead?”

Hygurd shrugged, with the carelessness of one who knows he is going to die, soon and unpleasantly. “Of course.”

“You saw the bodies?”

“Were you listening to me? They lie at the bottom of Hell Ghyll. If it has a bottom.”

“Dolt!” exploded Radwulf. “Imbecile! Who ordered you to hound her to her death? I will hang you in irons until you rot, inept bogtrotting scum -!”

“Sire,” said Anred, urgently. “*Sire.*”

The deferential title, given only to kings, mollified Radwulf a little. He allowed Anred to approach and whisper to him, a low urgent tone that came only in fragments even to Hygurd’s quick hearing.

“Sire, you must see..... you have won.... cannot defend herself now..... see how this bogtrotter reacted proclaim slut, whore, traitor.... as you will you are safe.... who will fight for her memory?”

Hygurd's breath caught in his throat, his thoughts in turmoil. So there might yet be a way to survive.

"Too easy a death for a scarlet whore!" he declared to the hall in general. "No torment is too great for one who brings dishonour to her family!"

Anred was watching him with a narrow, calculating stare. Hygurd took a deep breath, hoping it would not be noticed, and went on fulminating.

"To think the slut shared my father's salt! Shame on our household for ever! Glad I am that I at least had the chance to wash away some of that stain in her blood! Alas for the Eormenicsons, kinsmen to a harlot! Never will they hold up their heads again!"

A cynical half-smile played on the steward's lips. Hygurd felt the cold sweat running down his back. He had overdone it. These Lowlanders knew nothing of honour. They would never believe him.

"We must devise a fitting punishment for one who fails in his mission," Anred said, thoughtfully. He and Radwulf exchanged a nod. "My lord, you shall carry the news to the Black Hills. Make sure your savages know what a serpent they have raised, and how you, Lord Radwulf's *faithful* lieutenant, have saved their honour."

"And lift the watch on Buchart," Radwulf added. "Her kin can do no harm now, and you will have need of a strong guard among your barbarous kin!"

Hygurd bowed very low to hide his relief.

"As you will, Sire."

He left the chamber, calling for his horse. It would be as well to get out of Mickleburg before Radwulf's anger came back to the boil.

"Dead?" mused a short and stocky farmer, sitting by his hearth and honing a sickle ready for the following day's harvest. "Thirty crowns and a fine sword, at t'bottom of Hell Ghyll. What a waste!" But his sigh had regret in it for more than money.

"Dead!" exulted the Lady Alina, alone in her bedchamber. "Dead! And an adulteress into the bargain, or why else should she have released her tramp from Hygurd's bonds and fled with him? This must cure my lord of his obsession with her." She smoothed her rich golden hair luxuriously and admired herself in the mirror. She knew she had never looked more desirable. "So now he is a widower. It is a lonely state for a man. Especially one who has no heir." She smiled at her reflection, and watched it smile back, the slow satisfied smile of one who sees a long

schemed-for prize come within reach. As always, it was in complete agreement with her. She and her reflection understood one another perfectly.

“Dead,” muttered Hygurd to himself, waiting in the courtyard for horse and squire. “Well, I cannot imagine she would be greatly sorry. And what else could I have done?”

“Darling -?” Alina wheedled, much later that night.

“What?”

Radwulf’s grumpy tone should have given her warning, but she ignored it, curling her body closer around his in the huge bed.

“Darling - you know I love you very much.”

“So you have just shown me.”

“And you love me too, don’t you, darling?”

“Shall I prove it to you again?”

She purred like a contented cat. But she was not to be put off.

“I’m so glad *she’s* gone, darling. Now she can’t vex you any more. You’ll be so much happier, won’t you, darling?”

“Don’t talk about things you don’t understand..... Talking’s not what you’re for..... Come here.....”

“Mmmmm..... Darling!..... I could make you happier, you know.”

“You could keep quiet.”

“But now *she’s* out of the way - you could marry me -”

Radwulf’s roving hands were suddenly still.

“Marry you!”

Alina hurried on. “Then our son would be your heir. He’s a fine boy now. You could leg - legit - you know. Make him your proper son. And I’ll bear you many more, darling.”

“I’d as soon marry that dolt Hygurd as you!”

“But you promised!” she wailed. “You promised! And *she’s* dead now, the frigid little cow! You’re free -!”

Radwulf slapped her into silence.

“Listen, you little whore! You are one thing to me and one thing only! Understand?”

“Bastard!”

“That is one thing I am not. But you, my dear, will be the mother of many more -”

“Get off me! I won’t! I tell you, *I won’t!*”

“You will -!”

Radwulf did not sleep that night. Hours after Alina’s sulky sobbing had died away into snuffles and then into sleep he lay beside her staring balefully at the bed hangings. Irinya had been a threat to him. A thorn in his flesh for twelve years. Even with her securely imprisoned, he had never felt safe. Always there were rumours, whispers of other men who thought they could seize the Lordship as he himself had seized it. His security depended on Irinya’s full support or, as a poor substitute, her absolute surrender, and neither had ever been given.

And now she was gone. And the aching loss was worse than he had thought possible. It was as if a part of himself were dead. But it would pass. And now, at last, he was secure.

Or was he? If only there had been a body! If only he could have been sure!

He rolled over angrily. Of course he was sure! Nothing could survive the drop into such a pit, much less ever get out of it again. She was certainly dead. Of course. She must be. So why this cloud of foreboding? He was not one to believe in foolish talk of a curse. That legend he had heard from old Ingeld - all nonsense. Children’s tales. The old fool had been wandering. In his dotage. Unless -?

Radwulf got heavily out of bed and groped for his gown. Alina stirred in her sleep and murmured something unintelligible. He waited until he was sure she had settled again before he lit a candle and left the chamber.

He glanced around in the corridor to make sure no servants were about. It was his own castle, and woe betide any who got in his way. And undoubtedly there was really no secret at all to conceal. But if it were true - which of course it was not - *no-one* must ever know.

Hot wax dripped down the candle onto his fingers, and he cursed. Damn the woman! Even in death she still had the power to trouble him. It was her fault that he was wandering a draughty corridor at midnight. Witch!

The thought made him shiver. What if the curse were true? No, it could not be. He hurried swiftly through the maze of corridors and stairways that led to the treasury, buried under the dais of the great hall. Usually he liked to linger here. There was a feeling of invincibility in possessing all this wealth, all this armour and weaponry. But this time he spared them not a glance, hastening to the innermost chamber, deep in the foundations. The castle was built on this room. And on what it contained?

He swallowed the fear and strode purposefully to the far wall, flinging back the dusty folds of arras. There! Nothing! A blank wall! The old dotard had imagined it all - except a faint glint of gold that should not be there. He brushed away the dust with shaking hand. The guttering candle splashed melted wax onto his feet, but he did not heed it.

A keyhole. Exactly as the last Ingeld Ingeldson had said. Radwulf looked at the key in his hand, accepted carelessly from the old man years ago, and a cold sweat broke out and trickled down his back. It took him three tries to fit the key into the lock. But it did fit. And it turned. And a door swung open, with the musty smell of a tomb.

But the contents shone bright as new-minted gold. A tall shield, long enough to cover a man's body from shoulder to knee. A shield that seemed to be made of gleaming beaten steel, yet weighed less than one of hide and wood. And beside it a great sword in a plain black scabbard, the hilt chased with gold and the pommel a single huge ruby smouldering as the first light of decades fell upon it. Exactly as Ingeld had described.

Radwulf grasped the scabbard, hesitantly. It was dry and warm to the touch, like the skin of a snake. Trembling, he laid his hand on the hilt, and the ruby blazed into malevolent fire so that his hand seemed drenched in blood.

He drew the sword. It came easily, untarnished by years of disuse, the blade keen as if it had been freshly sharpened by an expert swordsmith. A black blade, black as a hole in darkness, soaking up the bloodstained light and casting a shadow of evil about him like a cloud.

A sound behind him made him start and turn, dazed to see the familiar treasury. Alina stood there, loosely draped in her bed-gown, her golden tresses tumbling around her shoulders. She had never looked more beautiful.

“Radwulf -? I woke when you got up. Darling, what are you doing? You look -”

“You followed me.” She shrank before the menace in his voice. “You ignorant, interfering bitch! What have you seen?”

“Radwulf - I'm sorry! I won't tell nobody!” She was backing away. “I promise! I never saw nothing! I won't never say nothing! I won't!”

“No. You will not.”

Her scream was stillborn. He went on squeezing her throat long after she was dead, as if by throttling her he could somehow strangle the evil that surrounded him. And when he again turned the key in the lock and replaced the arras, Bethoc's sword and shield had company.

In the inky blackness at the bottom of Hell Ghyll, something moaned feebly, coughed, and groaned in pain. Close beside it, something else stirred. Two hands groped blindly over the rocky floor, met, and clasped.

“What’s happened?” choked a weak voice, and added doubtfully, “Are we dead?”

“Not yet,” was the grim reply.

The smaller of the two hands let go its clasp, and its owner struggled up onto hands and knees, shivering in dripping garments. She sneezed, setting off another paroxysm of coughing, and her companion reached out and held her until the spasm passed and she sagged limply against his shoulder.

Iryna closed her eyes, not that it made any difference to the darkness, and tried to think back. There had been the fall. Then the impact, not the shattering rocks she had expected, but a flat, bruising crack into cold black water. She had fought to the surface once, half-stunned. A single gulp of air, and she had gone under again, entangled in her cloak. She had struggled vainly to shake it off, but it had clung as tightly as the weeds in Mickleburg lake, dragging her down and down. Then the suffocating pain in her chest, and the enervating cold that froze her limbs and spread through her body until the last flicker at the core went out.

She shivered, and Gyrdan pulled her closer to his side. He must have dragged her, half-drowned, out of the lake, pumped the freezing water out of her lungs, and sat by her in anxious vigil until she recovered consciousness. And she felt that he, too, was exhausted by the struggle, and that he needed the feeble warmth in her body as much as she needed his. Shyly, she slipped her arms around him, and they sat huddled together for a long time. Perhaps they even dozed. Their enemies now were cold and hunger, and against these there is no need to keep watch.

Some time later, they were roused by the realisation that the darkness around them seemed to be lifting. A faint grey light slowly grew, as dawn came creeping into the sky far above. Now they could make out some detail of their surroundings.

Unscalable cliffs plunged straight into the lake on all sides, a succession of fluted clefts, knife-edged buttresses and sheer rock slabs. Water trickled down the gullies and dripped monotonously off overhangs. High up, ferns and mosses clutched at holds, and a dead tree was wedged precariously across a cleft. The floor of the pit was filled entirely by a glassy black lake except for the narrow, boulder-strewn rock shelf where they sat, undercut from the base of the cliff as if by an eddying torrent. Another dead tree had toppled all the way down and lay caught on the edge of the shelf, half in and half out of the water.

“It was lucky the lake is so deep,” Irinya said, looking up at the sixty-foot drop. “Otherwise we would surely have been killed.”

To her surprise, Gyrdan began to laugh wildly, almost hysterically, peal after peal of mirthless laughter echoing off the cliffs until the whole pit rang with it.

“Killed!” He checked himself with an effort. “My dear girl, haven’t you realised what this means? We are buried alive!”

Hygurd and his squire led their tired horses through the silent streets of Mickleburg. The two men were no less fatigued than their mounts, but Mickleburg was a dangerous place to linger. The heads of two luckless sentries keeping eyeless, unceasing watch over the northern gate were a vivid reminder of the fate awaiting men who failed in their duty. It was a false mercy on Irinya’s part, Hygurd reflected, leaving the men alive to face Radwulf’s questioning. But they had been ready to talk, and there were worse deaths than hanging.

“Two more widows in Mickleburg,” said the squire, softly, as they swung into the saddle. “And how many more children who must watch their fathers’ heads corrupt over the gate?”

“If they live that long.” Hygurd answered, also in Arderin, the ancient speech of the Highlands. “No pension for those families. And who will help the wife of a traitor? They will starve when winter comes.” He raised his voice, switching back into the language of the Lowlands.

“So perish all traitors!”

The sentry at the gate returned their salutes, and closed the gate behind them. The heads gazed accusingly after the two young men as they spurred away north, riding hard for the Highland edge.

The sun was high before they reached it, and Hygurd’s own head was resting more securely on his shoulders. Even if Radwulf changed his mind, he would soon be safe in his own earldom of Darain. He and his squire dismounted, letting their tired horses plod unburdened up the steep slope of the Saltergate Pass. This was one of the few places where the Giants’ Road had to pay attention to the topography, and it climbed the hill in a series of sweeping zig-zags, so well-engineered that they had survived the neglect of no-one knew quite how many centuries. Hygurd stopped at the summit, a yard within his own territory, and looked ahead to the mountains with a sigh of relief.

His young squire rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“We will sleep today, and finish the journey tomorrow,” Hygurd announced.

The squire was gazing back over Errendale. He could not see the castle at this distance, much less the heads over its gate, but he had not forgotten them.

“I am thinking they will not starve,” he said, softly. “There is one who will help the victims of the Wolf.”

“Folly!” Hygurd snapped. “What good does it do? What difference does it make whether a few women starve, more or less? Sooner or later, the Shadow himself will be caught, trying to bring a loaf of bread to a brood of mewling brats, and it will be his head over the gate. It is a foolish chivalry that fights a battle it cannot win.”

“But heroic,” said the young squire, wistfully. “Brave and generous as a hero of the old songs.”

Hygurd snorted.

“Whose greatest hope was to go down to glorious defeat against impossible odds! The Lowlanders don’t care for honour and glory and romance. They care about winning. And so they rule Carlundy, and we - we *sing!*”

He sighed, and urged his horse onward up the road. “Come. You and I at least have work to do.”

“Where are we going? Not home?”

“To Buchart.” Hygurd laughed shortly. “There are a pair of Lowlanders who have learned from the Highlands! Eomund and Eomer, as romantic a pair of hotheads as ever any bard sang of. An unerring eye for a lost cause. Radwulf had me set a guard on their manor a week ago, fearing they would march on Mickleburg.”

“On Mickleburg!”

“A hopeless enough cause, do you think? In support of a wronged lady, too. *And* my father would have joined them, had he not fortunately died first. Fools! Let Radwulf dig himself in for twelve years and then, when it is far too late to do any good, make a last glorious stand for the House of the Falcon! That would make a good song, would it not? Aye, the song of the raven over the battlefield.”

“You do not wish for glory, then?” asked the squire warily.

“No, by the gods! I have learned from the Lowlanders. I mean to be on the winning side.”

Even, he reflected, if that earns me the hatred and contempt of my own people. Look at the lad! Twenty, at the outside? So much to live for, so much love and laughter. Yet he would throw himself unarmed at all Radwulf’s army, if he thought it would advance the honour of the Black Hills, and he despises me for not doing the

same. And the sons of Eormenic likewise. My guard has saved their foolish lives, but will they thank me for it?

They paused to eat at the hall of one of Hygurd's vassals, took fresh horses in the late afternoon and reached the border of Buchart by dusk. There Hygurd halted, to spend the night on his own territory, and an early start the following day brought them to Buchart with the first rays of the sun.

Irina watched the same sunrise turn the ragged patch of sky first grey, then blue. Up there, people would be waking to a day's toil. They would labour in the dusty fields of harvest. They would milk cows and churn butter, dig in vegetable gardens, herd sheep in the hills. Trudge the long miles to market, bent double under heavy burdens. They would chop wood and dig peat, repair roofs, rebuild walls, cook food, clean their homes, draw water, scrub laundry, mend clothes, scold children. A long, hot, drudging day of poverty and toil, under the shadow of fear. And there was not one, not the lowest beggar, not even those dying in pain, whom she did not envy. They could breathe the air, smell the heather, hear the birds in the trees, feel the sun hot on their faces. And always that little stubborn spark of hope at the bottom of the heart, looking forward to a better day.

Here there was nothing. The silence was a living, resentful presence that swallowed even the sound of their breathing. The darkness was not just around them, but inside, filtering into heart and brain, a thick dust of despair that dulled the mind and choked out hope. They had exchanged the swift agony of fire and rope for the long torture of starvation. They would weaken, slowly. Very slowly, for they had water in abundance, but inexorably their bodies would wither and waste as muscle and flesh shrivelled away. She ran her hands down her body, the body she had never been proud of, that was too thin and plain and angular, and knew what it would turn into. Each day, the bones a little more prominent, until they wore through the scanty covering of skin into huge gaping sores. The narrow waist and the flat stomach that would first draw into the hollows of the ribs, and then swell into a great bloated belly, a foul mockery of the barren womb within. The teeth and hair that would loosen and fall out. The last indignity, as the body grew too weak even to drag itself out of its own filth. And the same disgusting things would happen to the man beside her.

She was quite certain that he would die first. He was already hurt, and even leaner than she was. She would hear his breathing cease. His body would cool, then stiffen, then - maybe days later - warm and soften into corruption. Too feeble to

push the corpse into the lake, she would have no escape from the horror. And, worse, he might die very soon, while she still had the use of her limbs. Already hunger gnawed at her. How much worse it would be after days, weeks, without food. A craving that would over-ride any human feeling, any remaining shred of honour or dignity or respect. Perhaps that last desecration would turn her brain, and she would slide over the edge of madness into something less than a beast, crouching and gibbering in the dark, a savage chewing vainly on a last, sterile, bone. And finally, inevitably but far too late, she too would die.

“Dead!”

The two brothers faced Hygurd in the hall of their ancient manor, pale with shock. Hygurd shrugged. “You heard me.”

“Dead!” Eomer repeated. “Dead. And by your hand?”

“She was an adulteress, a whore and a traitor. She deserved death. Would you rather have watched her writhe in the fire?”

“Adulteress?” Eomund exploded. “Our plain, bookish little cousin?”

“Whore, brother,” Eomer corrected, smoothly. “It seems the sparrow had hidden depths. How often have you told us, Hygurd, that a man cannot sneeze in his own house without Radwulf’s knowledge? But little Irinya not only deceives her husband, under his very nose, in his own castle, with a string - nay, a *stable* - of lovers, but finally conducts a truly whirlwind romance with an escaped criminal and runs off with him. All this without Radwulf having the slightest inkling until the guilty pair have well and truly flown.” He sighed. “Really, Hygurd, could you not have invented more likely charges?”

Hygurd glared at him, and Eomer smiled coolly back. The two brothers were alike only in their height and reddish colouring, both inherited from their Ingeldson grandfather. But while Eomund was large, open-faced and possessed of all the subtlety of an enraged bull, Eomer was thin and polished as an assassin’s knife. Hygurd squirmed. It had been a mistake to enter into argument. It always was. But the accusation had to be made to stick.

“Her action proves her guilt,” he insisted. “Why else should she flee?”

Eomer arched one eyebrow and smiled thinly. “A good point, my lord. A very good point. Here we have a wife so devoted to her lord that she never left his castle from the day they were married. Who maintained this devotion even though her lord flaunted his string of mistresses and reared his bastards as part of his own household. Who never left his side at feasts even to greet her guests, much less to flirt with

them. Had she been fair as well as faithful, Radwulf would have been the envy of half Carlundy. Why should this model wife suddenly leave her beloved husband and her sheltered life and flee with some brigand into the wilderness?"

"Some wild passion or madness," Hygurd said lamely, and then rallied. "She did the same once before! Have you forgotten how your father cursed her? Fickle slut, he named her. Worthless jade, whose infatuation for a handsome man set her people under a tyrant's heel!"

"Tyrant?" Eomund challenged. "Have a care how you speak of your master!"

"I but repeat *your* father's words," Hygurd retorted. "Once a whore, always a whore!"

"Why, my lord, is this jealousy?" Eomer laughed. "Do you still yearn for your betrothed, who threw you over for that handsomer man? Is that why you are yet unwed?"

He advanced on Hygurd, who gave back before him.

"Does Lord Radwulf know of your passion for his wife, Hygurd? You, son of Hygaran, descendant in long line of Bethoc the warrior-lord, Prince of the Black Hills, whom many whisper has a better right to Carlundy than the Ingeldsons themselves?"

"That is treason!"

"Then carry the tale to Lord Radwulf."

Hygurd cast a wary glance at his squire.

"I am his lordship's lieutenant in the Black Hills. I serve only him."

"Aye," sneered Eomund. "He may be a wolf, but you are no more than a fawning cur!"

"Insults will get you nowhere," Hygurd said, but a nerve began to twitch high up on his temple.

"It must have broken your father's heart, to see his noble blood brought so low," Eomer taunted. "Radwulf's lieutenant!"

"Radwulf's lap-dog!"

"Do not mock my father!" Hygurd snarled. "You may insult me if it gives you any childish pleasure, but I will not have you besmirch him."

"Such filial devotion!" Eomer jeered. "So dutiful a son! Hunting men for your new master before your father is cold in his grave! His early grave, Hygurd. Was that how Radwulf bought your loyalty? Early inheritance of your father's lands?"

"I warn you -" Hygurd began.

Eomer began to laugh. “Do you think we care for your threats now? It is obvious why you are here. Eomund is heir to Carlundy. Hygaran, our last ally, is dead. Cousin Irinya is dead. Your troops have had us surrounded since Monday night. Radwulf knows our loyalty was to her - for *we* follow our father’s wishes. Foolish girl, she was still Ingeld’s daughter, however unworthy, and we would never have moved against her. Now all is changed. But I give you my word, Hygurd son of Hygaran, if I am to die I will bring you down with me.”

“We will see who dies,” Eomund said darkly, clenching his massive fists.

It was Hygurd’s turn to laugh, although the sound had a hollow ring. “You think you are so important? That Radwulf need bother to have you executed? You are nothing. Radwulf could crush you with his little finger. I am here, my lords, to lift the guard on Buchart. My men have better things to do than mind a pair of strutting children.”

He strode out of the hall. After a few seconds, concluding that the interview was at an end, his squire scuttled after him.

“They are really going,” Eomer whispered, as the two brothers stood leaning out of an upper window that evening, watching Hygurd’s soldiers jingle into the distance. “Why? I do not understand this.”

“Who cares?” Eomund shrugged, and spat into the courtyard. “Good riddance, I say.”

“But it makes no *sense*,” Eomer insisted, beginning to pace the room. “Radwulf sent those troops the night Hygaran died. Suspiciously quick, wouldn’t you say? We were surrounded before we even knew Hygaran was dead. How did Radwulf in Mickleburg know before we knew here?” He paused, though he knew his brother too well to expect a reply. “Answer: Radwulf planned it. He expected Hygaran, and us, to try to attack him, and he got his retaliation in first.”

“But Hygaran was dead,” Eomund objected.

“Convenient, no? Have you forgotten how our father died?”

“By all the gods, I have not!”

“Softly, brother. All things come to he who waits. So - Radwulf was expecting an attack. And he was so sure that he thought it worth murdering Hygaran, and setting us under guard. But I was planning no attack.”

“Hygaran -?” said Eomund, doubtfully.

Eomer shook his head decisively. “We’d have known. No. Either Radwulf knew something that we don’t, or he was planning something. Something that would have forced us to attack him, however ill-prepared.”

“He was going to march on us?”

Eomer glanced at his brother’s furrowed brow and sighed inwardly. Why was it that the brain and the brawn had divided so neatly between them?

“I think the first we’d have known of that would be the troops appearing over the hill,” he said, mildly. He continued to pace, and think. “Radwulf was planning something we could not ignore. So he took precautions against us. But something has happened in the meantime to render his precautions needless. What? What shifts us from gadflies to mortal enemies and back to gadflies again, within a week? What was it that would have provoked us? That he now cannot, or will not do?”

“Taking our lands,” Eomund suggested. “I’d die rather than let Radwulf into Buchart.”

“Possible. But he could have done that today as easily as on Monday.”

“Demanding money?”

“Again, what has stopped him?”

Silence fell as the sun sank to the horizon. Eomer continued to pace, while Eomund leaned over the sill whistling tunelessly.

“I know!” he said suddenly.

Eomer stopped.

“What?”

“Some - some kind of insult. Something we’d *have* to avenge. Something even your caution couldn’t overlook.”

“We have quarrelled over that enough,” Eomer answered, wearily. “I have not overlooked our father’s death. If *he* had been more cautious he might be living yet. Wait. The chance will come.”

He resumed his pacing.

“What stopped us avenging that?” he reflected.

“You should know, brother.”

Eomer ignored the jibe. “Because we could not have succeeded. Hygaran would not join us, remember? He chose to believe it was common murder.”

“Bloody old fool -”

“Shut up. Shut *up*.”

Eomer paced faster now. "So this must be something Hygaran would have fought over. And maybe not just Hygaran and us. Others, too. Something *important*. Something that could have brought Radwulf down."

"Assassination? Like his father?"

"Would you countenance that?"

"No, but -"

"Nor I, nor Hygaran. We are missing the point. How could Radwulf fall? How did he rise?"

He stopped. "The succession - !"

Eomund stared blankly.

"Look. The Lordship belongs to Irinya. She is Ingeld's daughter. As long as she is Radwulf's wife, he is Lord. But what if she wasn't his wife? What if she claimed the title in her own right? Hygaran would have supported her. So would we. So would many of the other clans. Radwulf is hated here. And in the Lowlands, if rumour is to be believed. Difficult to believe she could rule any worse. And as a widow, after Radwulf's death, she could marry again. A new Lord of Carlundy, doubtless chosen from her supporters! Many would fight for that."

"But she married Radwulf," Eomund protested. "She'd hardly leave him."

"She just did."

"Like Hygurd said, once a whore always a whore."

"A strange passion indeed," Eomer mused, "that on a Monday can make a woman give the world for love and consider it well lost, but on the Friday has so faded that she will hand her lover over to Hygurd and beg to be taken home."

"She fled with him later," argued Eomund. "She was lying." He grinned. "Good for her! I bet Hygurd had a bad time explaining that to Radwulf!"

"Cool-headed for a woman in the throes of a violent passion, don't you think? Come on, you don't really believe Hygurd's explanation, do you?"

"Er -"

"This is a better one. Sometime over the years she starts to regret marrying Radwulf. Maybe she was even forced into it in the first place. Think about the devoted wife. Never leaving the castle. Never any word to us - not that we gave her any encouragement. You can be a prisoner without being locked in a dungeon. Suppose she challenged Radwulf? Or suppose he feared someone was planning to use her against him? Suppose he thought she had become more of a danger than an ally, and he decided to get rid of her? The whole of the Black Hills would rise in protest, led by Hygaran and us. What would Radwulf do? Murder Hygaran and

guard us until the fuss had died down. But something went wrong. She got a chance of escape. Maybe the tramp was planted by someone, and maybe he was just luck, but he got her out. She was heading for Billand. Foreign help. A rising here in support. Radwulf couldn't survive that. What would he do?"

"Stamp on us good and hard," Eomund said, slowly. "And do his damndest to catch her."

"Or kill her," Eomer said. "He murdered Hygaran, and our father, and the gods alone know how many others. Some say his own father. He's hardly likely to flinch at his wife. Particularly when she stands between him and Carlundy. And then he calls her an adulteress and a traitor; who would take up arms to avenge a woman caught eloping with her lover? No foreign army. With Hygaran dead, Hygurd controls Darain and with it the only good road out of the Hills. What harm can we do, cooped up here? Nobody is going to risk life and lands to put *you* on the throne of Carlundy, brother. So he recalls his troops."

"Bastard!" Eomund muttered. He drew his sword and brandished it in the air. "Bastard!" he roared. The tears were coursing freely down his broad simple face. He brought the blade down in a slashing stroke and held it, quivering, pointing due south. From it the dying sun flashed a vengeful flame of fire.

Beside him, Eomer too was weeping. "Dead," he said brokenly, as though he had not at first understood. "Iryna - dead."

"All these years we have been wrong," Eomund said, gruffly. "All these long years and we did nothing to help her. And now it is too late. Too late, too late, too late."

Chapter 7.

Light faded above the rim of Hell Ghyll. They had spoken not a word all that second day. Irinya knew she had slept for some of the time, exhaustion asserting itself even in her terrible despair. If only she had been able to die quietly then, rather than waking to the dark and the cold.

The cold! She sat up sharply, her heart racing. Beside her, Gyrdan was curled up on the hard rock, motionless. Surely not already -? No, he was breathing. She groped for his shoulder and shook him, savage in the first flush of returning hope. He was difficult to wake, surfacing slowly through layers of sleep.

An inarticulate grunt told her she had been successful.

“It’s cold! Why is it so cold here?”

He rolled over, not properly awake yet, and flung up an arm over his face.

“You woke me up to ask that? Go away.....”

“No! Yes. Gyrdan! Don’t go back to sleep! It’s cold because of the draught! *Where does the draught come from?*”

He sat up, suddenly alert.

“You’re right! Irinya, you’re right!” He was on his feet now, groping along the rock wall behind them. “It draws *this* way, I think.... Must be a passage somewhere.....”

“Here! There’s a gap here!”

Gyrdan dropped to his knees beside her. The rocky cliff ended short of the floor, and beneath it there was an opening, into which the air swept, stirring their hair.

“But it’s so narrow,” Irinya said miserably. “Less than a foot. That’s no use to us.”

“It’s wider over here. And it keeps getting wider...” His voice was moving to her right, toward the centre of the shelf. “No, now it narrows again as you move back toward the lake. It’s like an open mouth, and this shelf is the lower jaw. And the widest part, in the centre, that might lead back into the throat.”

She wished he had chosen a more comforting analogy. Yet any chance was worth taking.

“Can we get through?”

The reply was muffled. She scrambled along the wall, until she blundered across a leg, felt her way up it, and found that its owner was half-buried under the rock, lying on his back. She tugged at the edge of his cloak until he backed out, coughing.

“It narrows further back, and it’s partly blocked by rubble and sand. Tastes horrible. But I think it may lead to somewhere much larger. I could thrust my arm through a hole into empty space. We may be able to burrow through. It is low, but wide. There is space for two to work alongside.”

He crawled into the fissure again, face down this time, and Irinya wriggled in beside him. After a few feet, they came to the blockage he had spoken of, a mass of boulders and smaller stones jammed into the narrow space between roof and floor.

“Here is where we turn from foxes to moles,” Gyrdan said grimly.

It was hard work, labouring in a crack less than two feet high. Irinya’s respect for all burrowing animals rose sharply. Agonising cramp stabbed through her arms and shoulders. Her nails were broken, and her fingers sore from the abrasive sand. A foul-tasting dust filled the air and stung her eyes and mouth.

Slowly, they made progress. The barrier was lowered, stone by stone. And it was only a narrow wall. The draught grew stronger as the gap was hollowed out, reaching the size of a rabbit hole, then a fox’s earth, then, finally, the last few stones were dragged out and the tunnel was clear from floor to ceiling.

Gyrdan squirmed into the tiny gap. The stony dam had formed in the narrowest part of the fissure, and there was not space even to crawl. His body was pressed tightly between roof and floor, the hard rocks scraping along his back, his chin on the floor. None too much space - but enough. He reversed back to the lake, where Irinya was a vague shadow against the dying light.

“Can we get through?” she asked again, anxiously.

“Yes. I think so. But not yet! Wait, Irinya!”

She turned back from the hole.

“What for?”

He groped his way along the water’s edge, and she heard something snap and splinter.

“That dead tree,” he panted, heaving hard on a branch. “We need fuel. Ow -! I wish we had an axe! Come and help break it up -”

After much painful effort, they managed to break off most of the branches, though they had to give up on the trunk. Gyrdan hunted through a succession of pockets for string and his clasp-knife, and set about binding the wood into faggots for easier carrying. Irinya sat to one side, putting her finger on the knots and trying to suck a splinter out of her other hand.

“You think of everything,” she observed.

“If I did, I’d have grabbed the food bag and the water bottle,” he grunted. “There, done. Drink as much as you can before we leave the lake. Heaven only knows when we will next find water.”

He crawled into the crevice first, shoving the bundles of wood in front of him. Left alone, Irinya stood a moment with her back against the rock, gazing up. A single bright star showed in the sky far above, and the thought came to her that she might never see sun or sky again. She shivered, and a fear that was not due to dark or hunger settled briefly on her heart. Something evil lay ahead.

Then she pulled herself together. With a last look at the star, she turned and plunged into the dark maw of the tunnel, cold and confined as the grave.

The tunnel was as short as it was low. A little more than one body length, and the walls and roof abruptly disappeared as it emerged into some new chamber. Irinya stood up, forgetting to check the height of the roof first, but did not hit her head on anything. Cautiously, she stretched her arms high above her head - blessed relief - and met only empty air.

“This place is huge!” she exclaimed, and her voice echoed off high sheer walls and rolled away into infinity. “How wide is it -?”

“Stand still!”

Gyrdan’s shout echoed and bounded terrifyingly around the walls. When he spoke again it was in a low, urgent whisper.

“Don’t wander off! *We must not* get separated. And you don’t know what hazards there may be - a cliff edge, a pit -”

She groped across the floor in the direction of his voice, and knelt close by his side. He was on hands and knees, shredding bark for tinder, and presently she heard him fumbling in his belt pouch for flint and steel. A shower of dazzling sparks flashed out, then another, and then the wood kindled sulkily into a flickering, feeble flame.

It showed another wall, two yards or so from the one they had crawled through, composed of some pale grey layered rock. The floor was coated in a thin film of mud and sloped slightly up to their right, littered with boulders and huge blocks that must have fallen from the roof, which was too high to see by their pathetic torch. To left and right there was nothing but yawning blackness. They were in the middle of a tunnel.

“Which way shall we go?” Irinya asked, half to herself. “But I don’t suppose it matters.”

“For preference, we should go to the right. Unless I have completely lost my bearings, that is south. We may as well start off in the right direction.”

“Do you really think -? I mean, could it be a way out?”

“Who knows?” he said wearily. He hoisted the wood onto his left shoulder and handed her the burning brand. “These hills are a maze of caverns and tunnels. It could lead anywhere. Most likely to a dead end. But anything, *anything* is better than sitting waiting to die.”

Then she knew they had shared the same dark thoughts, albeit silently.

The tunnel did not hold a consistent line, but wandered randomly along some line of least resistance in the rock. Sometimes it changed direction abruptly several times in a few minutes, sometimes it ran almost straight for a long way. Nor did it maintain a consistent size. In places it was so wide they could not see the opposite wall, in others they had to go in single file. Sometimes the roof drew down so that they had to crawl, sometimes it soared away to unguessable heights overhead. The gradient varied from almost level to about one-in-three, sometimes going up, sometimes going down.

Gyrdan had long since given up trying to keep track of their direction. He had begun to reckon their paces as a method of estimating distance, but had lost count somewhere around a thousand, or maybe it had been two thousand. That was a long time ago. How long was impossible to judge. It already seemed they had been trudging for ever, constantly afraid and yet immensely bored, with only the burning wood to indicate the passage of time. They were both stiff and tired, their hands smarting from abrasions and splinters, bruised where they had stumbled over obstacles, very hungry, very thirsty and growing very despondent. At first they had talked, to keep their spirits up, but the eerie echo of their voices had only made the subsequent silence more threatening and they had soon given up. Now they were even treading softly. Somewhere, up ahead, they could hear a slight murmur, barely audible but growing louder with every step, and both were hoping that it, whatever it was, could not hear them.

Gyrdan laughed suddenly, a harsh sound in his dry throat.

“Water!” he croaked. “Running water -!”

Around a corner in the passage and the air was suddenly full of fine spray, traced to a little waterfall cascading down the wall and forming a small stream that hurried off down the passage.

They drank deeply. The spring had a peculiar dark taste, but it was icy cold and refreshing, and its chatter was a cheerful reminder of the surface world. They sat resting beside it, their spirits lifting.

“I was beginning to wonder whether dying of thirst was better than dying of hunger,” Irinya mused.

“It’s quicker, but I’ve never heard it has anything else to recommend it.”

She almost laughed, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Strange how one suddenly becomes so grateful for small mercies,” she said, dipping one hand in the stream. “If only we had something to eat as well, I should be overjoyed.”

“Curse me for an addle-headed fool! I deserve to be set in Mickleburg stocks on a market day! I forgot all about it. I have a bag of oatcakes here, in my pocket -”

“Oatcakes. Oh, dear. I was thinking of roast goose and green peas.”

“Fresh bread and butter would be my choice. Or scrambled eggs. But oatcakes is all we have.”

He groped in the pocket of his cloak, and fished out a battered and rather lumpen leather bag.

“First rule of travel,” he said, grinning. “Never get separated from the food. Here. This is in one piece, more or less.”

“I won’t have you go without,” she said sharply. “We share and share alike, understand? Whatever happens, we are in this together.”

“I expected nothing less,” he said quietly. “I have too much respect for your intelligence to try to deceive you. Here. One biscuit each, and we may make the food last a couple of days.”

So they ate, and drank again from the fall, and even so pathetic a meal gave them strength to go on.

The spring seemed to indicate some change in the rock structure, for there were many others like it. They did not have to worry about thirst again, but the change brought its own problems. Water and mud made the going slippery and treacherous, especially on the steep sections, and the air took on an unpleasant dank chill. And although the caverns and passages were large and there was no need to crawl, there seemed no pattern to their branching complexity. Many blind alleys led only to plunging drops, or blank walls, or deep water, necessitating much weary back-tracking to pick another random branch and have another try.

They struggled on in this way for what seemed like hours, anxiously searching for any faint glimmer of light that might indicate a possible way out. Both were almost asleep on their feet, dizzy with weariness and hunger but unwilling to halt. Slips and stumbles became more frequent, until at length Gyrdan tripped over a loose rock, roused too late to save himself, and fell sprawling to the ground.

“This is hopeless,” he said, picking himself up. “Sooner or later one of us is going to break a bone. We must rest.”

“But where? We can’t sleep on a wet floor.”

“I have, many a time. But we seem to have climbed again, or the streams have gone somewhere else. It’s dry just here. And fairly flat. We are unlikely to find anywhere better.”

They ate two more of their pitiable stock of biscuits and then wrapped themselves in their cloaks and lay down against the wall. Gyrdan, it seemed, dozed off immediately, but for Irinya sleep would not come. Gyrdan had put out the torch, for it was absurd to waste fuel while they slept, and she lay staring hopelessly into the pitch blackness. It was impossible to get even remotely comfortable, and without the warmth of exertion the dank air seemed deadly cold.

She turned onto her side and drew her legs up tight against her chest, her arms locked around her knees. It was a little warmer, but not enough to stop shivering, and after a few minutes her back began to ache. After perhaps half an hour the pain was intolerable, and her cheek was numbed from contact with the cold stone. She rolled onto her back and stretched out. Every bone in her spine ground against the hard floor, and the chill struck her breast and seemed to seep right through her.

She tried sitting up next, her head resting on her knees, but this too was hopelessly uncomfortable. And the dark seemed heavy and stifling around her. What if the air supply ran out? It could hardly be often renewed, here in the bowels of the earth. Her breath caught in her chest at the thought. She sat up straight, leaning against the wall of the tunnel - the wall that supported millions of tons of rock.

She wished she had not thought of that, of the hundreds of feet of solid stone piled overhead, ready to crush this fragile eggshell of a tunnel. Even now, in the darkness above her, the ceiling might be bowing under the weight, cracks appearing in it, spreading, joining up to form fissures.....

She bit her lip, angry with herself for such imaginings. The silence was proof of the cave’s stability - no crunch of collapsing stone, no falling rocks. But she could not stop herself thinking. That very silence was the stuff of childhood nightmares. In silence as deep and heavy as that, *things* lived, creeping on stealthy feet, flying on

leathery wings, slithering after you, and no matter how fast you ran they could move faster, and you could never hear them or see them but you could *sense* them, and you *knew* there was no escape, whatever you did they caught you eventually, and then the pain and terror mingled with another nightmare, a peculiarly adult one -

Her own half-choked scream woke her.

“Lass?” Gyrdan muttered, drowsily.

She tried to keep the shaking terror out of her voice. “I’m all right. I-I’m sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep.”

“I was only dozing. What is it?”

His voice was full of concern. There was no anger, no impatience. She longed to tell him, but no-one can share another’s nightmares.

“It’s so dark...,” she stammered eventually, “...and so cold...”

The words were hopelessly inadequate to express her terror, her loneliness. But he understood, and stretched out an arm to her.

“Come close to me, lass.”

She crawled the few feet between them, forgetting everything except her craving for comfort, and huddled against him, still shaking with mingled cold and fear.

After a few minutes, she felt him stir beside her. Leaning over her, he prised her fingers loose, unfastened the brooch at her throat and opened her cloak, spreading it out on the floor. He lay down on it beside her, draping his own cloak over them like a coverlet. Then, before she knew what was happening, he turned her to face him, took her in his arms and rolled sideways with her, gathering up the cloaks as he went. When he came to a stop, they were tightly swaddled into a compact bundle. It would have been impossible to move, even if she had wanted to. Once she would have held herself stiffly, enduring the proximity for the sake of the warmth it brought. Now she welcomed the contact of his lean body against hers. Her face was pillowed comfortably against his bare throat and the steady pulse beat reassuringly against her cheek. His arms encircled her shoulders and waist, clasping her close against his chest. Even the rasping stubble on his unshaven chin, catching in her hair, was a source of comfort and security.

Iryna sighed softly, growing deliciously warm within their cocoon. Surrounded by darkness and danger, hungry, destitute, on the brink of a miserable death, how was it possible that she should feel so safe, so content, so nearly happy? It had never happened to her before. Here was the rescuing knight of her girlish dreams, the protective elder brother she had longed for, the loving father she had never known. There was a smile on her lips as she fell asleep.

Gyrdan felt her body relax and mould itself closer against his, and the wave of tenderness swept over him again as it had in the castle tower. There was still pity in it, so sharp it cut him to the heart, but now it was mixed with admiration, and with a kind of wondering gratitude that she could find comfort with him. Knowing she slept, he tightened his arms around her and bent his head so that his lips brushed against her dishevelled hair, a secret expression of a regard so deep it was almost affection.

They must have slept for many hours, for when Gyrdan woke his bruised muscles had stiffened up and the blood from his grazes had congealed on his skin. One arm was numb from Irinya's weight on it, and there was a crick in his neck. Never mind. He shifted position slightly to restore the circulation to his arm, and lay quietly waiting for the pins and needles to pass, absently stroking the girl's tangled hair with his free hand. It occurred to him that this was the first time in his life he had slept with a woman in his arms. The kind of woman he was used to did not waste the night in sleeping. Cash down, ten minutes, and send the next punter in on your way out. He flinched. That was the first time he had thought of Irinya as a *woman*, as opposed to a lady.

Irinya was hovering in the dreamy borderland of sleep, reluctant to wake up and face another day. She was conscious of a sense of comfort that she did not want to lose. Not physical comfort - she was awake enough to be aware that she was stiff and bruised and that every muscle would scream when it was expected to move - but a feeling of being wanted and cared for. It was new to her, and if she was only dreaming it she wanted to stay in the dream as long as possible.

She felt Gyrdan start, and the movement drew her reluctantly out of her doze. To her surprise, the comfortable feeling did not evaporate, and that was very strange.

She whispered, "I'm so glad you're here!" and then, as she came fully to wakefulness, she added hastily, "I mean, not *here*, of course! I wish you were safe somewhere. But I am glad you are with me. I would have lost heart long ago on my own."

"Me too," he said, ungrammatically. "And I am glad to be with you. Even here!"

Another wearisome trudge, soon with water as a constant companion again. The passage stopped branching and began to twist round a series of corners and up and down short steps and shafts, following some tortuous path through joints in the rock. Many grottoes had been eaten back into the walls, some empty, some occupied by

sinister, mirror-like pools. Sudden fissures, some threaded by thin waterfalls, split the roof and soared up into shadow. Broken rock, fallen from the walls or roof after its support had been eaten away, littered the floor. In one place a huge boulder lay propped up against the wall, almost blocking the passage. They had to wriggle, one at a time, through the tiny gap between the floor and the corner of the boulder, trying vainly not to imagine what would happen if the boulder shifted position by a fraction of an inch and slipped down. Irinya was chalk-white and rigid with terror by the time she got through, and it seemed only a matter of time before the tunnel must come to a dead end.

It did, but not as they had expected. The floor suddenly dropped down another short vertical step - only about six feet in height, but apparently falling straight into a lake. Their torch gleamed on a sheet of still black water, filling the lower passage from wall to wall. Unless they could walk on water, they were stuck. And neither of them felt they could face crawling under the boulder again.

They lay for a long time at the edge of the step, gazing down with despairing eyes.

“We must go back and explore the tunnel again,” Gyrdan said heavily. “We might have passed a side turning and not seen it.”

“Yes.”

“One of those holes in the walls might lead to another passage.”

“Yes.”

“Or we might be able to climb into one of the cracks in the roof.”

“Yes.”

“We can’t give up yet.”

Silence.

On an impulse, Gyrdan groped for a stone and dropped it over the edge, expecting an echoing *plunk* and the stone to disappear for ever into the mysterious depths.

Instead, there was a shallow splash and a clatter, and the stone came to rest with nine-tenths of it jutting out of the pool.

Irinya giggled hysterically, almost dropping the torch, and Gyrdan stared in disbelief and then exasperation.

“Oh, honestly!” he exclaimed. “What’s happened to my brain?”

He dropped a few more stones to be sure, all of which met the same fate as their predecessor, and then he swung himself down over the edge.

“I hope you can swim,” Irinya teased, as he rested briefly on his left arm. He grimaced up at her, feeling that such hilarity was a trifle misplaced, and then let himself drop the last few inches.

A splash, and a crunching sound. The pool was indeed no more than a shallow puddle, maybe an inch or two deep. But it was not solid rock it was covering. The floor was composed of thousands and thousands of pebbles, like a shingle beach. He slogged a little way down the tunnel. Yes, it was all the same. This was going to be hard work.

That proved to be something of an understatement. It was exhausting. The shingle shifted and slid underfoot, so that most of the energy of every stride went into moving stones backward instead of moving themselves forward. The water was opaque with fine greyish mud, and they had to grope for each step, unable to see. Irinya had kilted up her skirts in an attempt to keep them dry, and her ankles were getting bruised and grazed.

As they went on, slabs of rock began to appear among the pebbles, and scattered outcrops swelled up like the backs of wallowing animals. Eventually, the shingle disappeared altogether and Irinya stopped to rest, leaning against the wall.

"I'm glad that is over," she said wearily. "It's as bad as that stream you made us wade up -"

Her voice trailed off. The walls worn smooth. Shingle banks. Every pebble rounded, the corners knocked off by ceaseless grinding. This was a river-bed, and that step was a waterfall. When it rained on the hills above, the water would soak into the porous rock, find its way here, and turn this tunnel into a raging torrent -

They both looked back, half-expecting to see a towering wall of water crashing down upon them.

Nothing moved, and no sound broke the silence.

"The autumn rains are not due for a month," Gyrdan said quietly.

"In hill-country the rain falls when it pleases," Irinya returned. She pushed herself off the wall and held the torch high. "Come on. And pray for a drought."

Progress was much easier now the floor was solid rock again. The tunnel grew narrower, so they had to go in single file, and the roof grew lower, so that Gyrdan had to stoop. Irinya was leading, since she had the torch, and setting a great pace. Neither of them liked this tunnel at all, and the sooner they got out of it the better.

"Gyrdan," Irinya said hesitantly, her voice hollow. "We aren't going downhill, are we?"

"No."

She looked back over her shoulder, her face white and strained.

“Then why -” she swallowed. “Why is the water getting deeper?”

He looked down. The rise had been so slow as to be imperceptible, but there could be no doubt. She had kilted her skirts above her ankles, and now the hem was trailing deep in the water. It was not far short of knee-high.

“Hell,” he said. “Oh, *hell!*”

The October rains had come early.

Neither had any thought of rest, not even for food. They ploughed on as fast as they were able, kicking up fountains of spray. The water climbed to their knees. Then to their thighs. A current, not very fast but very strong, developed. The only comfort was that the tunnel roof had lifted a little, so that Gyrdan could just stand without stooping. They were almost running now, setting up waves that rebounded from the tunnel walls and soaked them to the waist. This passage could not go on, it had to come to an end some time -

Iryna rounded a corner, reeling against the wall - and skidded to an abrupt stop. “*No!*”

It was almost a scream. For a blank wall stretched across the passage, black, dripping and all too solid. They had reached a dead end.

Waist-deep in freezing water, they stood shivering and dejected at the end of the tunnel. The torch was jammed carelessly into a crevice, and the bundle of fuel bobbed idly against the wall, unheeded. Iryna was huddled in Gyrdan’s arms, her face refuged on his shoulder. Neither spoke. There was nothing to say. They had not the energy to struggle back the way they had come, and in any case it would avail them little, for the passage under the boulder would be flooded. All they could do was hope that the water would stop rising.

It did not. Throughout Carlundy that autumn was long remembered as the time of the Great Storm. Ten inches of rain fell in thirty-six hours. It turned brooks into streams, streams into rivers and the River Erren into a raging torrent. Mickleburg town lay two feet deep in water. Villages in the hills were washed away. The castle cellars flooded and rendered several thousand rats homeless. The subsequent clearing-up lasted for a month. And the sodden moorland disgorged its water into the rock beneath, until it seemed the very hills must float.

Iryna kept her eyes screwed shut. She knew that if she looked round, at the confining walls, the lowering roof, the creeping flood, she would go to pieces entirely. Already panic was taking its fatal grip. Her heart pounded as if after a long

chase, and she was gasping for breath. She was suffocating, choking, asphyxiating. The air was running out. The walls and the roof were pressing down on her, crushing her under their weight. The water was above her waist now, deathly cold. It was rising, and they were trapped, and there was nothing to do but drown where they stood. She thought of the water slopping into her mouth, thought of the struggle for air and the burning pain and the last few black, suffocating seconds dragging out for eternity, and then the lifeless corpses lolling and swaying in the river, until the flood subsided and dropped them contemptuously on the watery floor, there to rot and fall to pieces without even a decent burial -

Gyrdan stirred, suddenly tense and alert. He withdrew his arms from around her, and she clutched at him desperately. Completely irrationally, for there was absolutely nothing he could do to protect her, but she could not bear to be left alone.

“Don’t leave me -! Please don’t leave me -! If we’re going to die, why not together?”

“We aren’t going to die,” he said, and his voice was suddenly strong and forceful again.

She lifted her head from his shoulder in her astonishment, and saw the glint of purpose in his grey eyes.

“The current.” His voice was half-choked with excitement. “The current, lass! It must go somewhere! This isn’t a dead end!”

She turned round, half-expecting to see that the wall had suddenly disappeared, or had been a figment of her imagination in the first place - but, no, there it was, as real and as impassable as ever.

“I don’t see -” she began, and then understanding dawned. “An underwater passage?”

She shuddered from head to foot at the thought.

“Must be,” he nodded. “Here, hang on to my cloak, would you?”

He thrust the bundle of heavy, dripping cloth into her arms without waiting for an answer, and waded out to the end wall, kicking at its base. An intent expression came into his face, and suddenly, without word or sign, he ducked under the surface and disappeared from sight.

Iryna caught her breath. She could see nothing - the water was murky, and the light very feeble. It was as if Gyrdan had vanished for ever. How long could he stay down? She began counting, slowly.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve -

He came up, shaking his hair out of his eyes, took a gulp of air, and disappeared again. Irinya took a deep breath at the same time and held it, counting.

By the time she reached twenty, her heart was racing. Thirty, and her throat seemed blocked. Thirty-five, and there was a ringing in her ears. Forty. Red and purple lights pulsed before her eyes. Forty-five. Black dots encroaching on her vision, her heart about to burst. This was getting unbearable. Forty-six. Forty-seven

-

She exhaled in a great gust as Gyrdan surfaced again. Glittering droplets flew from his hair as he threw it back, and the water cascaded from his shirt. He stood leaning against the wall, gasping.

“Found it -!” he called, between heaving breaths. “Quite big - A good - four feet - high.” He threw her a smile, looking almost cheerful again. “Stay there -”

He dived again with the grace of a salmon, his heels breaking the surface briefly as one powerful kick drove him down. She imagined him, hair and clothes rippling in the current with that peculiar underwater grace, nosing into the tunnel’s maw like a fish in a strange pool. He would have to feel his way, for there would be no light, nothing to tell him where he was or which way he was facing, except the pull of the current.

She was counting again, almost subconsciously. She knew he could stay submerged for the count of about fifty. At twenty-five, he would be turning round. At forty-five, he must be almost back at the tunnel entrance, seeing the diffuse glow of the torch through the water. At fifty, he would surface again. He would have to, to breathe.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. And no sign of Gyrdan.

She must have been counting too fast. That must be the answer. *Fifty-three.* A long pause. *Fifty-four.*

Still no movement in the water. Still no head breaking the surface.

“Where are you?” she cried miserably. “Where are you?”

No sound but the slight rustle of rising water.

Perhaps he could hold his breath longer than she could. Perhaps half as long again. Perhaps twice as long. She waited. And then she waited again, in vain.

“Please come back,” she whispered to the uncaring walls. “Please come back.”

Surely now there could be no hope. He had been gone - how long? Minutes, certainly. It felt like hours. Perhaps he had missed his way and was groping blindly through a labyrinth, devoid of landmarks. Perhaps he had been caught on something, trapped, held struggling in black water until he lay still, limp and pathetic as a

drowned kitten. And she was left alone, alone as even she had never been before, far beyond the reach of light or hope. Why wait for the water to rise? Why not simply plunge into it now? A few hours, more or less, what difference could it make?

She stiffened, struggling to peer into the depths. Was that a flicker of movement? Something pale and flaccid, like a corpse. No - Yes!

Gyrdan shot up as if propelled by a catapult, water pouring from his hair and clothes, heaving for breath with a horrible rasping noise that sounded hardly human. He reeled against the wall, struggling to stand, clutching at his chest as if the air burned his lungs. Another tearing gasp seemed to consume all his remaining strength. He swayed, and toppled back into the water with a terrific splash that sent a tidal wave sloshing up against the walls.

Irinya lunged for his limp body, drifting face-down and struggling weakly like an insect trapped in syrup. She got her hands under the armpits and hauled him up against her shoulder, helped a little by his own feeble efforts. He slumped against her, choking and coughing, his heart hammering against his ribs as though it would knock its way out. Blood was dribbling from his nose and ears. He must have been only seconds from death.

Irinya held him close, massaging his back and crooning over him in her relief. It was several minutes before he recovered enough to stand upright. He said nothing, but the arm round her shoulders squeezed her for a moment in silent gratitude. It was enough.

He splashed water on his face, washing away the blood, and sleeked back his hair, shivering slightly.

“We can get through,” he said, and coughed. “It goes to another cavern, with a lake in it and a steep shore. Very big. Huge, from the echoes. It can’t possibly flood, even if it rains for all eternity. We’ll be safe there.”

Irinya shuddered. She had been half-hoping that the tunnel led nowhere, even though the water was now almost to chest height.

“I - I can’t swim under water,” she objected.

“You don’t need to. You pull yourself along the roof. That’s what I did, anyway.”

“It’s too far - I can’t hold my breath that long -”

“Neither can I. Most of the time I was trying to explore at the other side. The flooded part is quite short. You can just get to the cavern on one lungful.”

She looked up sharply. “*Just?* You fool! What would you have done if the cavern hadn’t been there?”

“Drowned,” he said candidly. “But it *was* there. I knew it would be.”

That might have sounded foolhardy. But Irinya had been raised in the Black Hills, and she had encountered that certain tone before.

“You have the clear sight?”

“Only after a fashion. I cannot direct it, as my mother could. And most of the time I see only fragments, and I do not know what they mean until afterwards. Which is of limited use. But occasionally I just know things, and I know we can get through that tunnel.”

“You can, maybe. But I can’t. It nearly killed you, and I haven’t your strength -”

“Going the other way is all right,” he said reassuringly. “It was coming back against the current that nearly finished me. I know we can get through. Both of us. Trust me.”

“I can’t -!” she almost sobbed. “I can’t do it -! I’ll drown! I’ll suffocate -!” She was shaking from head to foot, her terror none the less powerful for being irrational. “Dark - confined - no air, no light - like a coffin! Don’t make me go in there! Don’t make me -!”

She half-expected a slap, or at the very least angry words. He had come back for her, at the risk of his life, and all she could do was raise foolish objections. But instead, a gentle hand lifted her chin, and she looked up into eyes that were full of understanding.

“I won’t make you do anything,” he said gently. “Force only makes this sort of fear worse. I know that.”

“You too?”

“With me it is heights,” he confessed, slightly shamefaced. “But it can be overcome. Nothing is unbearable unless you believe it so. Not fear, not pain, not even grief. You have survived worse than that tunnel, lass. It is not narrow. It is not even very long. You will manage it. Believe me.”

His gaze held hers, and she felt her heart steady and some strength creep back into her limbs. She was a survivor. She was not going to die here, like some wretched kitten in a sack. There was no choice but to attempt the tunnel - unless you counted staying here to drown, which did not really rank as an option.

“All right.” She heaved a shuddering sigh. “All right. You can do anything if you have to.”

“Give me your cloak. It will get in your way, and you need both hands free.”

He rolled both cloaks tightly and pinned them to the string binding their sadly diminished supply of wood. Another piece of string attached the bundle to his belt.

He led her to the wall, the insistent current clearly indicating the position of the hidden opening.

“You go first,” she said. “You know where you’re going.”

And, she thought, if I panic and drown, at least I won’t block the way for you.

“You can’t get lost. Feel your way along the roof, and let the current draw you. Are you ready?”

She nodded, unable to speak, and with a single swift movement he ducked down and was gone.

Iryna took a series of deep breaths, in the vague hope that some of the air would somehow be stored, clamped her mouth shut, and plunged before she had time to think about it.

Silence. Darkness. Her skirts and hair swirled around her, weightless. It was like being suspended in some timeless void, like being already dead - She choked off that thought before it could get a hold. The current tugged at her, and she followed it. Her hands found a rocky edge, square-cut and rough, and she pulled herself down beneath it. It was almost relaxing. So quiet. So calm. She propelled herself along the roof with her hands, almost like crawling upside down, kicking out with her feet to keep the momentum up. This was not too bad, as long as she did not start thinking. It must be coming to an end soon. Quite short, Gyrdan had said, and opening into a big cavern. She could hardly miss that. Could she?

Pressure was building up. Her heart was crashing around in her ribs like a bull in a pen. Red lights pulsed before her eyes. Where was the cavern? Where was it? She groped ahead, desperate to find another edge - and encountered only more rock, smooth, hard and entirely devoid of holes of any kind. She must have taken a wrong turn. She must be in the wrong tunnel, one that led nowhere. She thought of going back - and knew she could not.

Iron bands gripped her chest. The lights turned to purple. Blood beat in her head, pulsating, pounding. This was far beyond the point she had deemed unbearable last time. Far beyond. And this time she could not just open her mouth and breathe. She was dying, choking.

The roof had disappeared. She must be sinking. She must find it again. Must find it. Only landmark. Must find the roof. She kicked out, her hands groping in pitch blackness. Up. But she no longer knew which way was up. She was lost, utterly lost, in cold and silence and the darkness of the grave.

Sound returned suddenly, a terrifying rushing and roaring like the thunder of a cataract. Snaky strands of wet hair plastered themselves to her face. A surface. Air.

She gasped, and the air seared her lungs like liquid fire. It was more painful to breathe than to suffocate. Water slopped into her gasping mouth, foul-tasting and cold. She felt herself sinking again.

A strong arm went round her, the hand grasping under her armpit, hauling her up as if she had been a conquered fish. She grabbed at it, not thinking she might pull him under, not thinking of anything except the need to hold on to something, anything. He had his other arm hooked round a rock, the most wonderful, the most beautiful rock in the entire world. They were safe. Safe. She clung to him, whimpering, her arms over his shoulders, her cheek against his, both coughing and sucking great, heaving gulps of air as though their lungs would burst.

“Well done, lass!” Gyrdan panted, over and over again. “Oh, well - done!”

Gradually, Irinya’s heart slowed to normal and her breathing grew steady. The pain in her chest faded, leaving behind it a numbing sense of weariness. She was deathly cold, too cold even to shiver, and so tired. Her clothes and her hair dragged like leaden weights. It was almost too much effort even to hold on to Gyrdan. Her grasp, until then cataleptic in its intensity, slackened.

“Don’t give up!” he gasped, and coughed again. “I can’t hang on much longer -”

His tone was urgent, not far short of desperate, as if he too was near exhaustion and knew it.

“It shoals,” he said. “Not far. One stroke, and you can put your feet down. Can you try?”

For answer she let go of him, gathered up the last shreds of her strength, and launched out away from the rock. She had no energy to swim, and as soon as the momentum died away, she began to sink. The water closed over her head - and then her feet struck rock, harsh and bruising, but solid. She floundered up, water cascading around her, her clothes clamping icily to her body. Gyrdan was beside her, yelping as he stumbled over a rock, and then they were splashing through the last of the shallows and up onto dry land. Flat rock slabs, climbing away from the water in a series of shallow terraces. They staggered up a little way, dizzy, shivering, their teeth chattering. Gyrdan blundered against another rock step and fell, clutching at his shin. Irinya came down beside him, and neither had the strength to rise again. Soaked, freezing, utterly spent, they could do no more than collapse together into the deep, deep sleep of exhaustion.

Chapter 8.

Gyrdan was cold. So cold. No warm body close beside him, no comfort of companionship. He struggled reluctantly into wakefulness, and opened his eyes. Pitch blackness, of course.

He sat up, repressing a groan. Ah, he was stiff! Every joint had seized up like neglected machinery. A pity there was no equivalent of the oil-can. And he had acquired a fine collection of bruises, judging from the assortment of aches and pains. He rubbed his battered shin tenderly, and probed at the other aches. No major damage. They must have slept a long while, for his clothes were still unpleasantly wet but no longer dripping. He shivered, and hunger sent a sharp stab through him.

He put out a hand, searching for Irinya, and encountered only bare rock. Where was she? What had happened to her?

He held his breath. Yes, someone else was breathing nearby, rapid and shallow. Was she ill? He reached out in that direction, and found her.

She was rigid. Rigid as though carved from stone. She did not speak, indeed she seemed hardly to breathe, but he felt she was locked in some great struggle with an unseen foe.

Then suddenly she sighed, and spoke in a low, musical voice to something that was surely not there.

“I hear thee. I heed thy call. I come, I come unto thee!”

The words were in Arderin again, the ancient speech of the Black Hills. He remembered how she had spoken of voices calling to her from the black pit on the Moss, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. He recoiled, suddenly afraid.

Speaking seemed to break the spell, and she shuddered convulsively and returned out of her thought. She reached for his hand, as if his presence gave her some comfort, and now she was trembling.

“What is it, Irinya?” he said anxiously. “Can you not tell me?”

“I do not know myself,” she said, miserably. “I only feel a - a presence. I cannot describe it - sometimes it seems so terribly lost and lonely and forlorn that I yearn to run to it and comfort it - and sometimes it is angry and vengeful and full of hate - and yet it is the same. And I am drawn to it, however I struggle, drawn like a fish on a hook.”

She sighed deeply, as though exhausted beyond bearing. “I felt the pull first at the Moss, and again many times since though I did not speak of it. But never before

have I felt the pain and the hatred, deep and savage and hungry for vengeance. If there is a curse on Carlundy, here is its heart.”

Gyrdan shuddered. He was tired and stiff and sore, and her words had sunk his already low spirits even lower. The cavern suddenly seemed evil, threatening.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go. Anywhere but here -!”

He groped on the floor for their bundle of wood. It couldn’t be far away. Light. Light would give them hope and renewed strength. Oh, damn, where had it got to?

His clutching hand encountered a loose stick, and he seized it with a sigh of relief. The faint rattle must be the rest of the wood falling out of the bundle. He would sort that out later. What mattered was getting some light, as fast as possible. At least the stick was dry, which was surprising after the flooded tunnel - His heart made a great leap like a frightened horse, and his palms began to sweat. Too smooth for a stick, unless all the bark had been stripped off. And too straight, with a smooth rounded knob projecting from one end....

His yell of horror shook the cavern.

“A bone! It’s a bone! We’re in a *graveyard!*”

For two people cursed with vivid imaginations, it was probably the worst discovery they could have made. Bones! How had they got here? And how had their owners died?

It felt like hours before Irinya screwed up enough courage to hunt for the fuel, and even when she found it Gyrdan’s hands were shaking so much he could not hold the flint. Minutes of frantic fumbling and cursing followed, before the wood was finally coaxed into flame.

Gyrdan cried out again as the light grew, and Irinya had to grab the torch from him before he dropped it in his shock. A skeleton lay beside them, quite complete apart from one thigh-bone, and unmistakably, horribly human. No flesh or hair remained, and no shred of clothing. It was partly propped against a large rock, the neck vertebrae tilted forward and the arms trailing loosely by its sides. The skull had become detached from the neck and rolled into the lap area, where it lay grinning up as if enjoying some demonic joke.

Gyrdan flung himself away, scrubbing frantically at his hand. He had touched it, touched the revolting object, and his hand would never be clean again. He retched, agonising on an empty stomach, and the thin acid burned his throat. Panic had him in its grip. He staggered to his feet, reeling dizzily. He wanted to run, to flee,

anywhere, only to get away from that grinning Thing and the ghastly doom it represented.

Gyrdan came slowly out of stupor. He was lying face-down on hard rock, with an appalling headache and a sense of absolute exhaustion. Something horrible had just happened, but he was not sure what. He opened his eyes cautiously, wincing even in the dim light, and a gentle hand smoothed his hair off his face. Irinya was sitting beside him, the torch propped up beside her. He struggled to sit up, clutching at his head in case it burst. Red lights pulsated across his vision, turned to purple and then faded.

“What - happened?”

“You fainted,” she said simply. “Only for a few minutes. How do you feel?”

“Awful.”

“There is a pool on the other side of this rock. Quite clear and fresh. A drink would make you feel better.”

She helped him crawl round to it. They both drank, and then Gyrdan plunged his left hand in to the elbow and rubbed it hard, feeling some of the taint lift off into the clean, cool water. Irinya had found the bag of oatcakes in his cloak pocket and they ate, the first food they had taken for many hours. Gyrdan felt rather ashamed of himself for his panic. One skeleton was hardly something to be afraid of.

He got to his feet and offered Irinya his hand. They had to go on, as long as they had any strength remaining.

The skeleton was still there, gleaming white in the feeble light, but now it seemed an object of pity and not of terror. He stooped, and returned the thigh bone to its proper place, a pointless gesture of respect for the dead.

“I wonder who -” he began, and stopped. It was Irinya’s turn to react with horror and shock.

“Look -!” she choked, pointing. “*Look at the brooch -!*”

There it lay, a brilliant flash of silver among the scattered rib-cage. A great silver brooch, in the shape of a falcon with spread wings. Identical with the one gleaming at Irinya’s own throat.

“My foremother! My namesake! Oh, Gyrdan! It was all true!”

“What a fate,” Gyrdan whispered, more to himself than to Irinya. He was wondering how long the wretched woman had wandered in this dreadful labyrinth,

and whether her mind had broken under the horrors, and what it had been like to die alone, quite alone, in this terrible place far from help.

“We share a name,” Irinya said, her voice strained and cracked. “We share a name, and now it seems we share the same fate also! *Now* I understand. It is her presence I feel, the desolate, vengeful, despairing ghost. Do you know the Great Oath of Ardern? ‘If I fall from this most solemn promise, my unquiet soul shall walk the earth in torment and my children shall be accursed, even unto the end of the world.’ So she swore, so she vowed to return the stolen sword and shield to her father, trusting in her husband to ransom her and redeem the pledge. And he did not! He walked away - and condemned her to *this!* And her curse haunts us all, and will follow me to the end of the world!”

She buried her face in Gyrdan’s shoulder and he held her close, gazing at the forlorn bones in sorrow and horror.

“At least we can lay her out decently,” he said, after a while. He shrugged off his cloak. It was tattered, and not half fine enough for a lady’s winding sheet, but it was better than nothing.

They stood a little while in silence after they had finished, looking down at the neat bundle of heavy cloth pinned with the dead woman’s own brooch. It was an action quite without reason, and yet both felt it was the right thing to do. To be left unburied was a disgusting thing, robbing the dead of their human dignity.

Irinya looked back as they turned away, and it seemed to her that the great brooch still glowed in the darkness behind, twinkling like a star.

“Bear it yet a little - a very little - longer,” she said, in a voice so low it could hardly be heard. “But be thou comforted, mother of my fathers. I will not forget thee. I will keep thy promise.”

The cavern was a huge one, with many tunnels and passages radiating from it like the spokes of a wheel. It seemed that all roads led here, to the centre of the labyrinth. Which gave them the awful agony of choosing which road to take out. They made their way along the wall like moths in a lampshade, peering at each opening in turn. Some were too small to enter, some were occupied by falling water, some blocked by rock falls. Others plunged either straight down or straight up. Several turned out to be blocked part way in.

“Damn!” Gyrdan said, as they came upon another such blockage, a heap of rubble that had tumbled down from a gaping hole in the roof. “Oh, *damn!* I thought this one was going somewhere.”

He sank down on the rubble pile, and buried his face in his hands. This was the last straw. Their fuel was almost gone, and they had finished the food some time ago. Both were accustomed to meagre diet and long fasts, and surviving on a dozen biscuits for several days had troubled them less than most, but the trembling weakness of starvation was now laying hold of them. They stumbled and swayed like late-night drunkards without the merriment, and their cuts and bruises were not healing. The trudge back to the central cavern seemed a distance of a hundred miles, and even if they struggled back and tried another tunnel, no doubt that would be blocked too. It was completely, utterly hopeless and there was no point in going on.

Irina caught at his arm, her hand shaking with nervous tension.

“It does go somewhere! It does! Look at this stuff! *It’s wood!*”

He looked. Jutting out of the heap of rubble, like a directing finger, was a rotting beam. A pit-prop!

“A mine!” he exclaimed. “A mine!”

“A way out,” Irina corrected. “It *must* lead out somewhere. If we can only get up there -!”

Gyrdan tilted his head back and squinted up into the yawning hole above. Irina scrambled up onto the heap of rubble, the makeshift torch held high above her head, and the feeble light clearly showed the top edge of the shaft. Twelve feet, no more. But twelve feet were quite sufficient. The rocks had torn away down some plane of weakness, leaving a slab-sided pit with walls quite free of any hand-hold. Gyrdan slid back into despair.

Irina did not. She stood on the very top of the rubble pile for a while, peering up. Then she leaned down and gave Gyrdan the torch.

“Can you climb a rope?” she asked.

He scowled at her, the strain telling on his temper.

“This is no bloody time for jokes,” he said sourly. “We haven’t got a rope. You expect me to climb up your hair?”

“Oh, no,” she said equably. “Something more reliable and a lot less painful. Give me your belt. And your sword-belt.” She was unwinding the belt from her own waist as she spoke, and threading the end through the buckle to make a loop. “Alfric is on the portly side, so his belts are long. If we buckle all three together - like that - we get a respectable rope.”

“Which would be a lot more useful if it was at the top of this hole and not the bottom.”

Irinya was poised on the top of the rubble heap again, swinging the belt thoughtfully.

“There are many lumps and projections up there,” she said absently. “I do not know if I can do this now, but once I was skilled with a rope, for I loved the mountains.”

She squinted up again, took careful aim, and threw. The first cast slipped and the belt came slithering back down again. The second caught something that broke and came rattling down the shaft, barely missing Gyrdan’s head and causing him to retreat hastily out of the line of fire. The third cast held.

Irinya swung her weight on it. It still held. Gyrdan whistled, impressed, and she laughed, looking almost cheerful at this small success.

“Have you got any string left?”

She cut a length, kilted her skirt up above her knees, clamped the torch in her teeth, and went up the rope hand over hand with the insouciant ease of a spider climbing a strand of its web. Gyrdan followed, much less elegantly because his right wrist still ached and because twelve feet was quite enough to make him feel uncomfortable, but without mishap.

It was, unquestionably, an abandoned mine. A long narrow gallery stretched away to both sides, lined with rotting wood and sloping very slightly to their left. Water trickled down the walls and dripped into puddles on the floor. After some hesitation, Gyrdan remembered that adits in hill-country are often cut on a slope so that water drains out of the entrance, and they turned downhill.

The gallery was in a very poor state. In many places the props had partly given way and the walls sagged and crumbled into the tunnel in rough heaps like badly-made rockeries. The rock was hard and the stones sharp-edged and unstable. Climbing over them, in one place having to crawl through the tiny gap that remained between a particularly large fall and the roof, was difficult, painful and exhausting. Rusted nails, sticking out of some of the fallen timbers, were an additional hazard. Occasionally, holes gaped in the floor, some quite small, others extending half-way across the passage and requiring them to edge past with extreme care, with no guarantee that the crumbling stone would support their weight. Irinya was limping badly now, her shoes falling to pieces and her feet cut and blistered. Yet they hurried on with as much speed as their weary bodies could sustain, always hoping to see

daylight around the next corner, always disappointed. Even when their last scrap of fuel burned out - experiment had already shown that the pit-props were too waterlogged to burn - they stumbled on as best they could, feeling for each step.

Until they came to another hole in the floor. And this one extended from wall to wall, with no way round. They had no means of gauging its width - except that it was further than Gyrdan could reach with his sword - and this time a stone dropped over the edge fell for a very, very long time before splashing into water far below. They could go no further.

“Iryna?” Gyrdan whispered, hesitantly. His voice was strained and tired, and in the echoing passage it sounded hollow and eerie. “Iryna - am I losing my mind - or is that light ahead?”

It was indeed, a faint patch of pale grey light, seeming almost dazzling to eyes that had seen nothing but darkness for so long. Dawn was breaking beyond the mine entrance. They had found a way out - but it was on the other side of the chasm in the floor.

The strengthening light showed their surroundings more clearly. The chasm was not all that wide - about three yards - but it really did stretch from edge to edge. No ledges, no holds, no way at all of creeping round.

“We will have to jump it,” Iryna said heavily. “The worst that can happen is to fall and die fast, instead of staying here and dying slowly. It is not all that far.”

“It’s not the distance that will be the problem,” Gyrdan answered sombrely. “Look at that far edge.”

It was, very obviously, dangerously unstable. The rock floor was cracked and discoloured as if by fire, and seemed to be resting on a mass of charred wood, presumably the props which had once supported the roof of the gallery below. The stale stink of burning still clung to the atmosphere, even after heaven knew how many years, and great irregular holes gaped where huge blocks had dropped out and disappeared into the gulf. Even the slightest additional weight might prove too much to bear, and send the whole heap crashing down.

“Even so,” Iryna insisted. “What other chance is there? We will jump together -”

“No, we will not!” Gyrdan said decisively. “That edge might hold one. It’s a lot less likely to hold two. *You* jump, lady.”

“Certainly not. You come, or I don’t go. We are in this together.”

“That was when there was no hope. Now there is. Once across here, you are out. Safe.”

“You didn’t abandon me. I won’t abandon you. I *won’t*.”

“I am not important. You are. Have you forgotten what you said to the smugglers’ captain? You are Irinya Ingeld’s daughter, and Radwulf fears you. You are their best hope. Your life is not your own to throw away.”

“But if it collapses - you would be trapped here -!”

“What of it?” he said with a shrug. “What difference does it make whether I meet my death here, or in a year or two’s time at a rope’s end, or skewered on an enemy spear, or racked with fever in some plague-ridden siege camp? It is all one in the end. There is not a soul in the world who will mourn if I disappear and precious few who will even notice.”

Irinya dropped her gaze, unable to meet that bleak, lonely look, and Gyrdan spoke very fast, so she could not get another word in.

“Radwulf will have given up looking for you. Even if we are still in Carlundy you will be able to get away. Make for Fairhaven. Take my sword and sell it. It is worth many times the price of a passage to Fairhaven. Ask for Fastred of Sherbourne. He is my friend. Tell him who you are. Tell him what happened to me. Give him my brooch if he disbelieves. It was my mother’s. He will recognise it. He will help you. Do you understand?”

“Fairhaven. Sword. Fastred of Sherbourne.”

“My lady,” he said, softly. And he stooped and kissed her hand.

He pinned his brooch to her cloak, and buckled his sword-belt about her waist. “Go on,” he said, his voice shaking. “And may good fortune go with you, lady.”

She did not want for courage, or for resolution. He watched her gauge the width and the stability of the chasm and select a likely spot. She backed off a few paces, and stood a moment swinging her arms lightly and taking deep, deep breaths, as a diver does before taking the plunge. Then she tensed, ran - and leaped.

Like a deer she sprang, up and forward, a beautifully judged leap despite her weariness. She seemed to hang in the air, weightless as a feather, and almost to float across the yawning gap.

She fell on the far side, well beyond the edge. Yet even as she landed, the rocks seemed to shiver and quake. A tremor shook the cliff. A few loose stones rattled and fell. And then, as if cut with a knife, a great slice of rock sheared off and slid into the gulf amid a groaning thunder.

Gyrdan crouched on the floor, coughing. From far below came an echoing salvo of splashes. A great cloud of dust rolled up, thick and choking as smoke. Only when it settled could he bring himself to lift his gaze and peer across the chasm.

Iryna was there. The collapse had not caught her, and she was alive and safe, silhouetted against the light.

“Come on!” she called to him. “You, too. Jump!”

It should have been fairly straightforward. About a yard’s worth of cliff had fallen away, but not along the whole edge. Near one side, presumably supported by the wall, a promontory remained. And Gyrdan should be capable of leaping at least as far as Iryna could. Where she could go, he should be able to follow.

And then his cursed vertigo took hold of him, and he trembled in its grip. All he could see was the image of the cliff edge crumbling, like a rotten snow cornice in spring. It seemed that the whole floor was giving way under him, tipping up and sending him sliding down, down into darkness.

He reeled against the wall, and screwed his eyes shut. Nothing is unbearable unless you believe it so, he told himself, finding it difficult, as usual, to follow his own advice. There’s no need to look down. It isn’t a cliff edge at all. You are not jumping a ravine. You’re jumping a river, because you don’t want to get your feet wet. Think of it like that. Just like crossing a river.

He turned round, his back pressed against the wall, struggling for control. A river. Just like crossing a river. He fixed his gaze on the far side. A few paces back. Now run. Now - *jump!*

Perhaps it was because he was tired out and weak from hunger. Perhaps it was the accumulated mental strain. Perhaps it was his fear of heights. Perhaps a combination of all of them. But whatever the reason, even as he launched out into space, he knew he had mis-timed his leap.

He fell heavily on the far side, the rocky edge catching him across the chest and all but winding him. His legs and body dropped down into empty air. His hands scrabbled for a purchase, found one, held. He had only to haul himself up. He heaved on the rock, muscles cracking, trying to swing his feet to find a hold. And then he realised, horror upon horror, that the boulder he was clinging to had detached from the cliff and was coming over with him.

He lashed out sideways as he fell, and caught something else. Wood, splintered and jagged, cutting his hands. He over-rode the reflex to drop it and clung on, as the boulder toppled from its support and thundered past him into the gulf. A long wait, and then the huge echoing splash from miles below.

Gyrdan could swear in a dozen languages, but no phrase even in his extensive vocabulary was equal to the moment. He was hanging by his hands from a splintered lump of wood jammed precariously into a heap of unstable rocks in a half-collapsed mine. He could not reach anything with his legs, and his right wrist hurt abominably from the shock, obviously quite unable to take his weight. He could hang on for a minute or so until his left hand gave way, and then fall, a long, long way down into darkness. Above his head, the beam he was clinging to creaked its disapproval, like a floorboard in an old attic, and began to bend in the middle.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

Someone was calling his name. He was hallucinating already. He wondered if he would see his past life flash before him as he fell. There would be plenty of time. Enough to run through it several times, most likely. He fought down an urge to giggle.

The voice was insistent, and getting very angry. He looked up, and astonishment almost made him let go of the beam.

“Irynya -! Fool! Go - *away!*”

She was lying flat, reaching down over the edge, but there was a good foot between his hands and hers.

“I can reach you with the belt. Don’t give up!”

“Go away!” he gasped, again. “This is all - coming down - any minute -!”

“No time to argue then, is there?”

Her belt uncoiled over the edge like a waking snake.

“You - can’t - hold - me -”

“I’m jammed against a rock,” came her voice, oddly cool and calm. “You might break my arm, but you won’t pull me in. Get on with it! I don’t want to die either!”

She had had the presence of mind to thread the end through the buckle, as before. His right hand wouldn’t grip - he knew that - but if he could snare it in the loop, and if she could take his weight just a moment, he would be able to move his left hand, find another hold and push himself up.

He lifted his right hand clear of the beam, which gave another resentful creak. The leather was stiff, and the loop wide. His hand slipped through on the second attempt, and he shook it up his arm above the elbow.

“Pull!” he called, and the loop drew tight. Cruelly tight, but now he could not fall. He let go with his left hand just as the beam, with a last protesting groan, broke.

The leather strained, but it had held his weight once, and it held it again. Very distantly, he could hear Irinya struggling for breath. And, less distantly, the grumble and crunch of overstressed stone.

His left hand, flailing around for something to hold on to, found a ledge at shoulder height. He pushed up on it, gasping. He was strong, and light for his strength, but to push his entire body weight up on one hand was a tall order, none the less.

His foot found a purchase. Oh, blessed relief! Another heave, and he got his chest over another beam, heedless of a vicious projecting nail. He hardly even noticed the scoring pain. The leather drew tight again as Irinya hauled in the slack. His left hand grasped the cliff-edge, which groaned but did not collapse - not yet.

Now he could see. He got his elbows up over the edge. Now his chest was resting on it, leaving a bloody smudge where the nail had torn his flesh. A final heave, and he was up. He collapsed flat on the rock floor, his whole body shaking. But Irinya would not let him rest. She was dragging at his shoulders, urging him up.

“Run! It’s going -!”

Loose rocks tumbled out of the roof. The edge of the cliff gave way even as he staggered up, crunching under his foot like shingle. As they ran, the whole gallery behind them seemed to be collapsing, in a roaring cataract of rock and dust, punctuated by the staccato crack of splintered timber.

They were stumbling now, sobbing with effort and dread, their hearts labouring almost to a standstill. The light grew stronger, driving back the echoes. Irinya, ahead, saw it resolve from a vague patch to a sharp-edged outline. She could see the angular stones in the floor, and the joints in the rocky walls, and a fringe of rough grass clinging to the tunnel mouth.

She was out. The overcast sky seemed painfully bright. Wind and cold rain lashed into her face, and she gasped, a deep gulp of sharp, peat-scented air. Gyrdan cannoned into her from behind, and she lost her balance, rolling headlong among clattering stones. She struck something hard, with a thump that shook her eyes in their sockets, and was thrown sideways, helpless as a rag doll. A second of plunging free-fall - and then a crunching thud into a tangle of brambles.

The brambles were pliant and clinging, with long, vicious thorns, and by the time Irinya had fought free her clothes were tattered and her strength all but gone. She managed to scramble up onto the low rocky bluff that sheltered the bramble patch, and lay panting on its flat top.

It was a desolate enough scene that lay before her. A short scree slope slid in one sweep from frowning grey crags to a dark tarn lying in boggy ground in the bottom of the corrie. Lifting her gaze, she saw the outflow stream pouring over a weir of grey rocks to enter a valley flanked by humpbacked fells, their tops shrouded in mist. Spoil heaps flanked a dilapidated path descending the corrie. An unseen waterfall could be heard chattering down a rocky stair, and a raven cawed, perched high up on the crags. Beyond that, there was no sound but the endless patter of the rain and the occasional wuthering of a gust of wind round the spoil heaps. She called his name, but only faint echoes answered her.

It was the raven who gave her the clue. Leaving his perch on the crags, he soared on the wind, circling the valley with effortless ease. When he glided lower, and then swooped down to settle out of sight, she realised what he had found. Ravens have an unerring instinct for carrion.

Limping on her sore feet, she stumbled dizzily down the slope. Sure enough, as the raven took off at her approach with a harsh croak of annoyance, she came upon Gyrdan's body. There he lay, half-buried in stones, his cheek crushed against this harsh pillow, his right arm twisted at an impossible angle. His shirt was heavy with blood, and a thin red trickle meandered away into the rubble.

Her choked sob mutated into a little cry of gladness, and she dropped to her knees beside him, her skirt puddling in the crimson stain. For dead men do not bleed.

Iryna fell.

For an hour they had been picking a painful path down the boulder-strewn valley descending from the tarn. It was still raining, and the clouds seemed, if anything, lower and heavier. Her feet slipped from under her on a wet rock, and she went down with a spine-jarring bump for what seemed the hundredth time that day. Gyrdan patiently stopped, turned round, and stood looking down at her.

"Get up," he said, his voice flat with the kind of exhaustion that brooks no argument.

She shook her head, nursing the wrist she had wrenched in trying to break the fall.

"No. Enough. No further."

He was too tired to be exasperated. His broken arm, supported in a crude sling made from his shirt-sleeve, ached abominably. His head throbbed, the gash on his chest burned, and the scree slide had battered him black and blue again. He was gnawingly hungry, light-headed from loss of blood, and a black mist seemed to be encroaching on his vision. The icy wind cut him to the bone, for his cloak had been

left in the dark under the hills and his clothes were drenched and reduced to little more than rags. And at every footfall it seemed that the ground was crumbling and collapsing beneath him, ready to precipitate him down a long black fall for all eternity.

“Can’t stay here,” he insisted.

“Must rest,” she pleaded. “Just a little while.”

“Can’t. Must go on.”

“Where?” she moaned. “You don’t even know where we are!”

“Borders of Billand,” he said, with more confidence than he felt. How could he be sure, with cloud blanketing the hills almost to the level of the tarn? Especially as he could see only straight ahead, and that only if he tried hard.

“Get up,” he said, again.

“Cruel,” she muttered vaguely. “Won’ let me res’ - jus’ a l’il res’ - cruel -”

She leaned her head against the rock, heedless of the water trickling down it. Already wet through, her torn clothes plastered to her body, her hair sodden and lifeless as seaweed at low tide, what difference did it make? She was almost past feeling the cold. But his insistent voice would not let her sleep.

“Stay here and you’ll die.”

“Don’ care,” she muttered sullenly. “Leave me ‘lone.”

Gyrdan reached down to her and tilted her chin up. She was deathly pale and cold to the touch, and her eyes were huge in her haggard face. No, death was not so very far away.

“Please, Irinya,” he begged. “Can’t carry you now. Please try.”

She nodded. Very slowly, she reached for a ledge on the rock and levered herself up.

They trudged on down the valley, following the tarn’s outfall beck blindly. To Gyrdan the greyness grew deeper, and the black mist crept in around the edges of his vision. He rubbed his eyes, but it would not clear. And now dark phantoms began to flit beside him, just on the limit of sight, so that he found himself shying at nothing, like a blinkered horse. The cold and wet seemed to have seeped into his bones, and a deadly ache spread through him. He was shivering violently, but it seemed to have lost any power to warm him.

In the afternoon, the valley came abruptly to an end, the hills giving way to a wide grey plain.

“Billand,” Gyrdan breathed, squinting ahead. “At last!”

“Don’ look ver’ friendly,” Irinya mumbled, muzzily.

He had to admit that it did not look worth all this effort to reach. The river ran down the last steps of its deep-cut valley, meandered aimlessly over level ground for a while, and then lost itself in a marshy, mist-wreathed fen. Gyrdan groaned to himself. He knew the border country well, or he thought he did, but no amount of searching produced any memory of a place like this. He was out of his reckoning, lost in empty country, cold and hungry and weary beyond endurance. He was no longer even sure which direction was which, for the shrouded sky was no help. But there was a dark line running along the edge of the hills, too straight for a natural feature. And where there was a lane there would be people.

He groped for Irinya's unresisting hand.

"Come on, lass. Fire and food tonight."

He was wrong. The lane was only a drove road, worn hollow through centuries of use and churned up by the recent passage of many cattle, but now deserted and devoid of life. There was neither light nor sound nor any sign of habitation, not even a herdsman's hut.

Gyrdan was near breaking point now, shaking, haggard and wild-eyed. Bones tapped and rattled all around him. Whenever he turned round, there was nothing there, but the conviction grew that a skeleton was following him, demanding its leg-bone back and shrieking curses on him. It was hiding there - no, there -! He had to kill it. No, it was already dead. Its head had fallen off. But it was following him, following, with strangling bony fingers, trying to push him over the edge of a cliff -

Yet at the sight of Irinya, exhausted to the point of death and utterly dependent on him, one solid idea crystallised out of the murk.

"Fairhaven," he said, dogmatically. "Get to Fairhaven."

All afternoon the rain fell. All afternoon they tramped, ankle-deep in mud. All afternoon Gyrdan muttered to himself, mainly disconnected ramblings but always ending in the mantra, "Fairhaven. Get to Fairhaven."

Irinya had ceased to understand the meaning of the words. All her senses seemed numbed. She was aware only of the necessity to keep putting one foot in front of the other, time after time after time. Even the burning pain of every footfall was distant and remote, as if it were happening to someone else. It was only willpower that kept them going now, and that could not long hold at bay cold and wet and weariness. So also thought their escort of expectant ravens, fluttering unhurriedly from tree to tree, waiting for the nightfall that would bring a halt, and then sleep, and then death.

After a while, she noticed vaguely that the lane had changed. Instead of the rough grassy verge and the hedges, it was running in a deep cutting between high walls of glistening earth bound by tree roots. It was the first proof that they had actually made progress and had not merely been trudging on the spot.

Then, from far behind, came the one sound that could have brought her out of her stupor. Hoofbeats!

Fear crackled through her. All her being concentrated on the sound. Beside her, Gyrdan raised his head, listening. There was no mistake. A horseman, riding hard.

All logic, all reasoning ability deserted her. It was as if the journey underground had never happened. It was Radwulf's soldiers behind, chasing them, and now catching them up at last! There was no way up the steep banks, nowhere to hide. They ran forward, briefly revived by sheer terror, hoping to get out of the cutting before the horseman reached them. But the banks grew ever higher and the cutting ever narrower, and the hoofbeats pounded louder and louder. Irinya gasped for breath and her legs felt like lead. She stumbled into the mud, and felt Gyrdan drag her up and onward, wrenching her arm almost out of its socket. Now the rider was upon them, a great black shape looming out of the rain. He was not going to stop or swerve. He would ride them down!

Gyrdan flung her against the wall of the cutting and threw himself alongside. She was suddenly aware of tiny details. The dank chill of the mud against her back. Gyrdan's cry of pain as he jarred his broken arm. The flecks of foam flying from the horse's mouth. The jangle and clink of its harness. The thunderous beat of galloping hooves. A glimpse of the rider, his cloak flowing behind him. His head was turned towards them, but there was no face, only the gleam of bright eyes in a formless grey mass.

As he drew level with them, he gave a sudden inarticulate cry, and wrenched hard on the reins. The horse checked and reared, squealing its pain and fright, its front hooves lashing wildly in the air. The rider dragged its head round and brought it to a heaving, sweating stand.

There was no way of escape, even if either had had the strength to run. All their pain, all their peril had been in vain. They had failed. They were captured. Fire and rope awaited them, just as if Gyrdan had never taken refuge in her chamber, just as if she had never fled with him. Irinya felt she was falling forward into darkness, and was glad to let herself go.

Chapter 9.

Irinya woke in bed, feeling she had been trampled by a herd of stampeding cattle. This was so common an experience that her subconscious did not even raise an eyebrow as it filed it efficiently under “Beatings from Radwulf, Number One Hundred and Something”. But this differed from previous occasions in small but significant particulars. Her whole body ached, but one very characteristic pain was missing. And the sweaty, panting embrace, the stabbing violation that was usually the first memory to surface - that was missing too. And she slowly realised that the view she had been staring at for five minutes contained a ceiling, white-plastered between dark beams, and a patch of wood-panelled wall. That was very odd. There *should* have been bed-hangings and bare stone. Not one of the rooms in Mickleburg was panelled.

She managed to turn onto her side. The view expanded to include a tall polished wooden cupboard, a chest of drawers with a lace runner on top, a marble washstand with a brightly painted basin and jug, and a couple of fragile-looking cushioned chairs. None of it would have been any use at all as a barricade. That too was very odd. And the window was as wide as it was tall, hung with heavy dark-red drapes looped back to show a tree outside, its dripping branches tossing against a grey sky. Yet rain and wind made no impression on the warmth and stillness within. It took Irinya a little while to work out why - glazed windows were a rarity in Carlundy. Even Mickleburg had them only in the grandest rooms, and only high above the ground where they were no weakness in the defences. Not at first-floor height, easily reached from a convenient tree, and certainly not hung with curtains just asking to be torched.

“I think she’s awake, Mistress Poll,” said a girl’s voice, nervously, and two people tiptoed clumsily round the bed and leaned over her. A short, plump, pretty blonde girl with a rather scared expression, and an elderly dame with a mob cap of white curls and shrewd china blue eyes in a face made up entirely of wrinkles.

Irinya blinked. That face was dimly familiar. It had peered down at her while hands lifted her head and smoothed pillows, or bathed her face, or coaxed her to drink a peculiar syrupy-sweet wine flavoured with bitter spices.

“Are we feeling better now, m’dear?” wheedled the dame, in the sort of tone used to a recalcitrant child. “Mr Fastred said you might be able to get up for a little today, if you want to.”

A memory floated up.

“Fastred of Sherbourne?”

“That’s right, m’dear.”

And hard on its heels came another memory, one Irinya would try hard to forget.
Fairhaven. Sword. Fastred of Sherbourne.

“Gyrdan! Where is he? Is he safe?”

“How you do keep asking that, m’dear! There’s no call for you to worry your head over *him*. Why, I said to Cook, I said -”

“Where *is* he? Is he hurt?”

“You mean the Captain, Milady?” the girl said, brightening up a little. “‘E’s safe an’ sound, Milady, an’ fast asleep in the next room -”

“And when he wakes up I’m going to give him a piece of my mind, I am,” said the dame, indignantly. “Whatever has he been doing to you? Why you was thin as a rake, and bruises from head to foot, and your poor face all scratched, and your clothes beyond repair - hardly decent, indeed - and I said to Cook, I said -”

“Gyrdan saved my life,” Irinya interrupted. “I won’t hear a word against him!”

“Oh! Well, all I can say is, he should have taken more care of you while he was doing it!”

Irinya opened her mouth to argue, and thought better of it. It would take too much energy, and in any case it did not matter. She was safe, Gyrdan was safe, they were obviously among friends, and that was enough for the present. She stopped listening, and it was only when the voice paused that she realised it had asked her a question.

“Breakfast? Er - I suppose so. But I should like a bath first, please, and to wash my hair. If that is possible.”

“Spoken like a true lady,” said Mistress Poll, approvingly. “I shall go and see to it for you.” She turned back briefly at the door, and indicated the blonde girl, who flinched. “This here is Rosie. She’ll be lady’s maid to you while you’re here.”

“If that pleases you, Milady -” faltered Rosie, and immediately disappeared from view in a deep curtsey.

Irinya raised herself with some difficulty on one elbow and considered the coronet of golden braids which was now all she could see of the girl.

“Well, I am charmed to meet you, Rosie,” she said gravely. “My name is Irinya.”

“Mumble, mumble, yes, Milady.”

“Rosie, do look up. I can’t hear you.”

“I’m sorry, Milady!” Rosie bobbed up hastily, and stood uncertainly twisting her hands together. “I’m sorry, Milady! Please don’t be angry, but I’m only a ‘ousemaid really an’ I don’t know nothin’ -”

Iryna had to crane her neck uncomfortably now.

“Please stop apologising, Rosie.”

The girl jumped like a frightened horse. “Sorry, Milady. Oh! - sorry, Milady!”

Iryna stared at her. Rosie seemed really terrified. Was she that intimidating? She searched for a simple request that would not alarm the girl further.

“Would you mind bringing me a drink, Rosie?”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Milady -” Rosie stammered, curtsying again, “Beggin’ your pardon, but there ain’t no wine up ‘ere, Milady. I’ll ‘ave to go down to the kitchen, Milady. I’ll only be a few minutes, Milady, is - is that all right?”

“Isn’t there water in the jug over there? That will do.”

Rosie bobbed up like a cork in a bowl. “I’m sorry, Milady, I didn’t know as that was what you meant, Milady. I’ll bring you fresh, Milady, I’ll only be a minute -”

She scuttled out like a mouse under the wainscot. Iryna had barely time to rub her aching neck before Rosie was back, a tray clutched in both hands. She shut the door awkwardly, and bobbed another curtsy. Water slopped out of the glass onto the tray.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Milady -”

If she says that one more time, Iryna thought, I’ll scream.

“Beggin’ your pardon, but the footman says your bath’s nearly ready, Milady. We ‘ad the copper on for the washin’, Milady, so’s the water was already ‘ot. ‘E says five minnits, Milady. Is that all right, Milady? We couldn’t do it no faster, Milady -”

“Of course it’s all right, Rosie! It’s faster than I was expecting.”

Rosie sprang up, pale and scared. The glass was barely half-full by now. “Oh, Milady, I’m sorry! Shall I tell ‘im ‘e’s to wait, Milady?”

“No, no, of course not!” She gave Rosie a minute to remember, and then prompted, gently, “Is that my drink?”

“Oh, yes, Milady, oh, I am sorry, Milady, please don’t be angry -”

She tried to drop a deep curtsy and offer the tray at the same time, her hands shaking. The glass danced and skidded, and the tray heeled alarmingly. Too late Rosie noticed, over-corrected frantically, caught her heel in the hem of her skirt and sat down heavily, the glass tipping over the lip of the tray and upending itself onto the floor.

A gasp of horror, and then Rosie burst into floods of tears, holding her hand up as if to ward off a blow.

“Rosie, whatever is the matter? Are you hurt?”

“N-no, Milady. Oh, Milady, I’m sorry, Milady! Don’t be angry, Milady, I didn’t mean it, and I’ll do better in future, *honest* I will, but I’m only a ‘ousemaid and I don’t know nothin’, but I’ll learn, oh, Milady, *please* don’t be angry -”

“Why should I be angry? It’s only water. There’s no harm done. Mop it up and nobody will be any the wiser.”

Rosie looked up, so astonished she almost stopped crying.

“B-but, Milady - I - Countess Marchbourn would of ‘alf-killed ‘er maid for that! Why, she ‘it our dressmaker with a ridin’ whip just ‘cos ‘er frock come out too small, an’ she tried to get Cook sacked ‘cos ‘er coffee were late one mornin’, an’ she threw a vase at Marigold - that’s my sister, Milady - for makin’ a noise doin’ the dustin’, an’ when Violet scorched one of ‘er ‘andkerchiefs ironin’ it she made ‘er pay for it - an’ it were a month’s wages, ‘cos Violet’s only the scullery maid, so Violet ‘ad to go to the moneylender -”

“Well, I am not Countess Marchbourn. Dry your eyes, Rosie, do.”

“You really ain’t cross, miss - Milady?”

“No, really. Who is Countess Marchbourn? Is she the mistress here?”

“Oh, no, miss - Milady - thank ‘eavens! She’s Mr Fastred’s sister. She come to visit last summer - first time we’d ever seen a real great lady.”

“And I’m the second,” Irinya said, smiling. “Poor Rosie! No wonder you were terrified. Cheer up. I am only a guest here, and it’s not my business to interfere with the household or its servants.”

“That’s jus’ what Mr Fastred said to the Countess, miss - Milady - after ‘e found out about Violet. Poor Violet, she couldn’t pay the moneylender, an’ she wouldn’t tell nobody about it ‘cos the Countess’d told ‘er she’d go to jail if she owed people money. She cried an’ cried til she made ‘erself sick, an’ then me an’ Marigold badgered it out of ‘er, an’ we told Mr Fastred. I never seen ‘im so mad before, miss - Milady. ‘E ‘ad a real slangin’ match with the Countess, an’ she left in a ‘uff the next day. An’ then ‘e paid off the moneylender, an’ told Violet not to worry about it no more, ‘cos nobody on ‘is estate was goin’ to jail on account of a mistake.”

“That was very kind of him. But then he has also been kind to me. It seems your Lord Fastred is a true gentleman, Rosie.”

Rosie beamed, delighted on her employer’s behalf.

“Yes, miss! ‘E’d be a gennelman even if ‘e were poor, d’you take my meanin’? Not like the Countess, who ain’t no lady even with all ‘er posh clothes an’ servants. Mistress Poll always said she’d got too spoilt to be a real lady, but I never knew what she meant til now.”

Irinya looked at her sharply, suspicious of flattery or mockery, but Rosie was quite obviously a complete stranger to both.

“Thank you, Rosie,” she said, her voice oddly constricted. “Thank you. That was a kind thing to say.”

“Ain’t no more’n the truth, miss - Milady. I think your bath might be ready now - they’ve stopped clumpin’ about in the dressin’ room.”

“Oh, wonderful!”

Irinya turned back the blankets and eased her legs painfully over the edge of the bed. Every movement hurt, and her head swam. But she would *make* herself stand up, she would -

When her vision cleared, Rosie was holding her up, her pretty face a study in shocked pity.

“Oh, *miss*. All them bruises. ‘Owever did you manage to walk all the way ‘ere? But I’ve got you now, miss, you’re all right. Just you try a step. You’ll feel better after a good ‘ot bath.”

“She’s nice,” Rosie reported to an apprehensive kitchen. “Not a bit like the other one. She ain’t even shouted at me yet, and she says please an’ thank you just like you was a real person. An’ she says curtseyin’s a silly ‘abit, especially when you’re carryin’ stuff, an’ would we please not do it.”

That brought an audible sigh of relief from Violet the scullery maid, a gawky fourteen-year-old who had been practising ineffectually for days.

“As she said anythin’ about - about the Captain yet?” she asked. That had been the subject of much speculation.

“She said -” Rosie paused for effect - “she said, ‘e’d bin kindness itself to ‘er. An’ ‘er eyes went all soft an’ dreamy, until she saw I was lookin’ at ‘er.”

“There!” Cook could even cluck like a hen. “There, I said they was in love, didn’t I? I ‘opes they gets married ‘ere, I do love a good weddin’.”

“Rather ‘er than me,” Marigold sniffed. She was Rosie’s elder sister, slightly taller, slightly slimmer and with a worldly-wise air that would not have disgraced a dowager duchess.

“Oh, I dunno,” Rosie said, meditatively. “‘Andsome is as ‘andsome *does*, Mags. Anyway, I think ‘e might ‘ave a nice face under all that beard. An’ ‘e’s got a lovely voice, an’ nice broad shoulders, an’ them long, long legs -”

“Rosie!” exclaimed Cook, scandalised, and Rosie subsided with a far from demure smile.

“I thought you said Mr Fastred sent you out before - you know -” said Violet, blushing.

“‘E did,” Rosie agreed, disappointed. “An’ I was takin’ ages to make up the bed, too. But it don’t take much imagination -”

“What do you lot think you are doing?” pealed Mistress Poll’s voice from the top of the stairs. “Back to work, all of you! Standing around gossiping like a lot of hens! Rosie, come here. This is that gown Miss Eloise had made last year - the one that came out too small. I’d forgotten about it til now. It should just fit the lady nicely, her being so slim. But she’s tall, so you’ll have to let the hem down. A good three inches, I should think. Go back upstairs and get on with it!”

Irina twisted her neck and tried to see over her shoulder.

“Oh, it laces up the back, does it? What a ridiculous idea! Why make a dress nobody could put on without help?”

“Wouldn’t of bothered the Countess, miss. She ‘ad two lady’s maids when she was ‘ere an’ four at ‘ome. An’ she wouldn’t never of dreamed of ‘elpin’ with the sewin’, neither.”

“I wanted something to occupy me.” Irinya gave up trying to watch Rosie, and stood still, looking out of the window. The rain had stopped, and the air had a clean, washed feel. Outside, a green lawn dotted with buttercups sloped down to an orchard, heavy with fruit, and birds sang joyously from every treetop. Two blackbirds bounced across the lawn looking for unwary slugs, and a flock of sparrows chattered excitedly around a puddle, like a group of schoolchildren trying to push each other in. The sun was shining from between piled meringue clouds, bright but not too hot, throwing long shadows on the grass. A brilliant red and black butterfly settled briefly on the window frame, opened its wings once or twice to the sun, and then fluttered off.

“Why do you sigh, miss?”

“I think - I think I must be happy.” That was the word, was it not, for this warm, comfortable feeling that she had almost forgotten about? For the first time in twelve years - almost half her life - she did not have to key herself up to face the next

moment. It would not last - she would have to face the future eventually - but she did not have to think about that yet.

Rosie tied the last bow and shook the skirt folds into place.

“Oh, miss, it’s going to look wonderful! It ain’t really finished, ‘cos the Countess wouldn’t pay for the embroidery seein’ as the frock didn’t fit, an’ we ain’t got no jewellery or bits of lace or fancy shawls an’ stuff, but I think it looks better plain. You’re so lucky to be so slim! Now me, I looks like a dumpling whatever I does - Miss? What’s so funny?”

“How fashions change! In Carlundy I’m considered a bag of bones! And you’d be the perfect beauty!”

“Then I’ll em - emma - what’s it called, miss, when you go to live abroad? Begins with E.”

“Exile,” Irinya said, heavily.

“No, that’s when you ‘ave to go, ain’t it?”

“Emigrate?”

“That’s it, miss! That’s what I’ll do! Emigrate to Carlundy an’ marry a lord. Is that where you come from, miss?”

“Yes. Didn’t you know?”

“Mr Fastred never said. Well, ‘e said ‘e didn’t know nothin’ about you, except you was a lady. The Captain was tryin’ to tell ‘im, but Mr Fastred said ‘e weren’t fit to talk an’ wouldn’t listen.”

“Why do you call Gyrdan the Captain?”

“Dunno, miss. ‘Cos Mr Wootton the butler does, I s’pose.”

“Is he also recovered?”

“Yes, miss, I think so. Mr Fastred told Cook there’d be three to dinner - Miss! You mustn’t look yet. Or I’ll ‘ang a blanket over the mirror. Your hair ain’t done. ‘Ow do you wear it?”

“What? Er - twisted up behind. Like this.”

She demonstrated, and Rosie pulled a face.

“Oh, miss, you can’t do it like that! It makes you look so *old*! And you got such pretty hair, too.”

“Don’t flatter me, Rosie. It’s brown.”

“There’s red in it too, miss. Real pretty when the light catches it. I’ll do it up in a band for you. Sit down, miss, or I can’t reach - There! You can look in the glass now.”

Irinya turned involuntarily to see if someone had come into the room behind her, but of course there was no-one. The woman in the mirror must be herself. But how changed! Where was the thin, pinched, prematurely old woman who had gazed mournfully out of mirrors in Mickleburg? The face looking out now was still too strong-featured for beauty - there was nothing Rosie could do about that - and there were shadows in the hollow cheeks and the yellow ghost of a bruise over one eye. But a faint flush of colour softened the angular features a little, the mouth had lost its downward droop, and the eyes were thoughtful but no longer haunted by fear. Her hair was held by a simple velvet band scattered with black beads - Rosie's prized possession, as she later discovered - and left to flow freely down her back, where the sunlight picked out glittering lights of copper and bronze - the red glints that proved she was her father's daughter. The silk dress gleamed like a kingfisher's wing, and whether by the skill of the dressmaker or Rosie's careful lacing, somehow contrived to make her look elegantly slender instead of flat-chested. She smoothed the rich fabric almost reverently, feeling its sensuous softness under her fingers. It was years since she had taken even the smallest pleasure in clothes, for her one concern in Mickleburg had been to look as dull and as unattractive as possible - an enterprise in which, she told herself wryly, she had great natural advantages.

"Rosie," she said unsteadily, "you work miracles! Is that really me?"

Rosie was beaming from ear to ear, delighted with her handiwork.

"Didn't I say it was goin' to look wonderful, miss? Didn't I say so? You look grand, miss, just grand. An' in good time, too. Now I'll show you down to the library."

A broad staircase led down to a flagged hall, where two great oak doors stood wide open and a pair of large floppy black dogs sprawled in a pool of sunshine. Rosie shepherded her charge confidently around them, acknowledged by a lazy eye-opening from one and a desultory thump of the tail from the other, and stopped in front of one of the many identical panelled doors.

"If you wait in 'ere, miss -"

She opened the door, and Irinya entered alone.

It was a larger room than the bedroom, panelled in fluted golden-brown wood and with a polished parquet floor. A few pictures, mostly of horses, hung on the walls, and a bright rug was spread in front of the hearth. Six books on a high shelf, well beyond the reach of any maid with a duster, presumably justified the title of "library". Sunlight streamed in through a pair of floor-to-ceiling windows propped

slightly ajar, and a small bright fire added the fragrance of apple-wood to the heady scent of a flower-garden outside. Light, elegant, comfortable-looking low chairs and sofas stood invitingly around the fire. One was occupied by a thin, dark man sitting at his ease with his feet up on a low table, and another by a golden-haired small boy. They looked round as Irinya entered, the boy's rapt expression replaced by annoyance, and the man got up hastily, wincing and having to support himself against the mantelshelf, but determined to be polite.

"Madam, pray excuse me -" he began.

"Oh, I am sorry to disturb you, sir -" she said at the same time, and stopped. There were grey flecks in his dark hair, and something oddly familiar about his face, as though she knew his brother. And his right arm was supported in a linen sling.

"Gyrdan!" she cried in sudden recognition.

"Iryna?"

He came to meet her, astonished and delighted.

"Let me look at you! Are you recovered? You look - you look quite superb!"

"I am tired, but well otherwise. But you - how are you? Your arm -?"

He grimaced. "It hurts, but that shows it is mending. It is nothing that time will not cure, lady."

"You look well. I hardly recognised you."

Someone else laughed merrily. "Small blame to you, my lady! Such a scarecrow I never saw in my life! Still, it is amazing what a bath, a shave and a change of clothes will do, even with such unpromising material!"

The speaker was a handsome, fair-haired young man, leaning nonchalantly on the back of one of the sofas and watching his guests with a beaming smile.

"Thank you kindly, Fastred," Gyrdan said. "Allow me to present to you the Lady Irinya, daughter of Ingeld and heir of Bethoc, Daughter of Ardern, Prince of the Black Hills and Lady of Carlundy. Lady - Fastred son of Tancred son of Heardred, Lord of Ash Dene, Wetherhill and Woodham Underhill."

"My lord," Irinya said, and dipped in a deep curtsy as she would have done to a great lord of her own land. But it seemed that customs here were as foreign as the architecture. Fastred waited for her to rise, then laid his hands lightly on her shoulders and kissed her swiftly on both cheeks. She could not help but flinch at the touch, imperceptibly she hoped.

"Welcome to Ash Dene Hall, Lady Irinya!" he said. "I trust you are now fully recovered?"

“Indeed, my lord, I am much better. I cannot thank you enough for your kindness.”

“Any friend of Gyrdan’s is a friend of mine,” he said airily. “My house is your house, for as long as you wish to stay. And I confess I hope that will be a very long time! You surpass my expectations as the sun the moon. I am dazzled, I am entranced, I am bewitched.”

He bowed very low, one hand on his breast, and kissed her hand. She stiffened, steeling herself not to recoil. Until two minutes ago, compliments had always meant mockery. Caresses were the prelude to violence. She wanted to snatch her hand ungraciously from his lips and back away.

It was Gyrdan who saved her.

“Stop it, Fastred!” he laughed. “Save your courtly flirtations for your society butterflies! Do you want to make me look a complete yokel?”

“Perish the thought!” said Fastred, straightening up with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes, and releasing her hand. “Do excuse me, Lady Irinya. I talk a great deal of nonsense, as *some* people never tire of telling me. But I welcome you most sincerely to my home. I don’t know what terrible ordeal Gyrdan has dragged you through - the man has no idea how to treat a lady -”

She made to interrupt, and then caught Gyrdan’s eye and realised Fastred was teasing.

“- but it is over now. You must both rest here until you are well again. Will you not sit down? Corin! Make yourself useful and serve drinks.”

The boy, forgotten until then, slid off his chair and poured three glasses of sparkling pale golden wine. Irinya was a little hurt that, although she thanked him graciously, she got only a perfunctory nod in return. But perhaps that was the custom here, or perhaps he was of some consequence and resented being treated as a servant. It was no concern of hers, in any case.

Sitting opposite the two men, she had a chance to study her host. He was the very image of her imaginary knight-errant, tall, fair and extremely handsome, with a fine athletic figure and the happy confidence of one who has always found the world a congenial place. Women, she guessed, would be drawn to him as wasps to honey, and if he was still unmarried it must be through his own choice. Yet she found her own gaze drawn back to Gyrdan. This was the first time she had seen him clean, shaved, properly dressed and more or less unhurt, and it was a decided improvement. His hair, which usually looked as if it had been roughly trimmed with a blunt knife and then left uncombed for weeks, had been neatly cut and brushed back from his

face in dark, gleaming waves. He was wearing a jacket and trousers of fine dark blue cloth, presumably borrowed from Fastred but fitting him excellently, all the way down the long well-muscled legs to his own boots, polished to a dull shine now by some devoted hand. Free of beard and bruises, his face was lean and strong, sculpted close over the bones. His eyes were deep-set, rather hollow now from weariness and loss of blood, but still alert and watchful, surrounded by a network of fine lines. The overall effect was - no, not handsome - but distinguished. And yet there was something else, some indefinable expression about the eyes, something bleak and desolate, bearing witness to a secret pain. When he smiled or laughed, which was often, it retreated like a shadow from sunlight, but it never quite vanished.

“I hear you are bound for Fairhaven, my lady?” Fastred said, turning to her. “Is your business there urgent? May I send a messenger for you?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you, my lord. I had no specific plans.”

“Then will you honour me with your presence here for a little longer? I shall be returning to Fairhaven myself in early December. It would be a privilege if you would allow me to escort you.”

“That is very kind of you, my lord. But to stay three months would surely be too much to ask of you.”

“Three months, my lady? Little more than two. It’s the eighteenth of September.”

“You’re joking!” Gyrdan exclaimed.

“Fraid not. Look where the sun’s setting if you don’t believe me.”

“How long have we been here, Fastred?”

“I wondered when you were going to ask. Let me see - about a week.”

“A week! How -? Oh, I *thought* there was something in that wine!”

“Oil of poppy-seeds,” Fastred said unrepentantly. “Repeated every time you roused up enough to drink. Don’t look at me like that! If you could have seen yourself when you came in, you’d have done the same. Jumping at nothing, like a frightened horse, and muttering to yourself. I really thought you’d lost what you’re pleased to call your mind. But a week’s sleep does seem to have restored what few wits you have, so now you can tell me your tale.”

“After dinner?” Gyrdan offered. “It is a long story, and parts are - not very appetising.”

“Oh, all right. Corin, go and tell Cook and Wootton we’ll have coffee in here.”

The boy hesitated and cast a pleading glance at Gyrdan.

“Do as you’re told, Corin,” Gyrdan said. “We will finish the tale tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy acquiesced, though not very willingly. “Tomorrow, sir? Promise?”

“I promise, Corin. At breakfast, if you like.”

The boy brightened visibly and went out.

“A handsome lad, my lord,” Irinya said. “Your son?”

“Good heavens no! Or at least, not to my knowledge!”

“Son of the head groom, so he tells me, and brother to Rosie and Marigold,” Gyrdan explained. “And *endlessly* curious.”

“What do you expect, if you appear romantically out of the mountains with a lady? You’re the talk of the neighbourhood, my friend. By the time the village gossips have finished you’ll have slain dragons and fought giants and carried the lady off on a white charger from the clutches of the wicked king.”

“The white charger would have been most welcome,” Irinya said, laughing. “But meantime, my lord, you can satisfy *my* curiosity. How did we come here? I remember nothing, and Mistress Poll will only say “Hush, chickabiddy, and don’t worry your head”, although I am sure it is more tiring trying to puzzle out what happened than it would be to be told.”

“She has been guarding you like a hen with one chick,” laughed Fastred, “and the last time I tried to argue with her I was sent to bed without supper, so I am afraid I have cravenly left you in her clutches! But there is little enough to tell. I had gone wildfowling in the fens - we had to bring the cattle down nearly a month early this year, after the storm - and on my way back I came upon you - two beggars as I thought, pardon the expression, my lady - in the drove road -”

“The ghostly rider with no face?”

“Me with a scarf over my head. I recognised one of the beggars as Gyrdan and stopped, but as I did so you collapsed -”

“Hardly surprising, after being ridden down by some irresponsible young fool,” Gyrdan put in.

“No point in keeping a good horse if you don’t let him show his paces occasionally. As I was saying, Lady Irinya, you swooned, and we carried you here and gave you into Poll’s charge. That is all.”

“So we are nowhere near Fairhaven?”

“No indeed, my lady! Sixty leagues or more.”

“But I am not mistaken - you are Fastred of Sherbourne?”

“Tancred my father is the Earl. But I escape up here whenever I can. Sherbourne Hall is a terrible place for a young gentleman of spirit! My sisters order me around

shamefully, and my grandmother is always trying to marry me off to some ghastly heiress with freckles and buck teeth - astonishing how all the pretty girls are either poor or married to someone else - and my aunts insist that I attend their dull dances and talk to dull dowagers and dance with their ugly daughters, and my father sighs wearily every time he looks at me, and my elder brothers smirk pompously and try to overawe me with rental incomes and investment returns, and there is really no hunting at all to speak of and what there is has to be shared with a dozen young bloods with not an idea in their heads but the cut of their coats, who wouldn't recognise a deer if it bit them, and who know no more about a horse than whether it is a pretty colour - stop laughing, Gyrdan! You've no idea what I suffer!"

"My apologies. I had no idea a nobleman's was so hard a life!"

"You don't know the half of it. I was very glad when father gave me Ash Dene and its outlying manors so I had a bolthole."

"I did not know you had lands here. I had thought to find you in Fairhaven."

"He only made them over two years ago, when I came of age. In the hope it would teach me some responsibility, I think."

"Poor misguided soul," Gyrdan said, with a grin. "But it was lucky for us that he did."

"And fortunate for me too, or I would have been denied the pleasure of meeting Lady Irinya. Ash Dene gets rather lonely sometimes, and Mistress Poll bosses me almost as much as my sisters do. A bit of intelligent company will be most welcome, and I suppose I shall have to put up with yours as well. Ah! The dinner bell! After you, lady -"

They were served by Rosie's elder sister Marigold, and a stocky, upright man with a limp, who snapped smartly to attention whenever spoken to.

"Corporal Wootton, isn't it?" Gyrdan greeted him immediately.

The butler saluted. "That's right, sah. Real good to see you on your feet again, Sergeant - I mean, Captain, sah."

"Neither any more, Wootton, as you know quite well. What a surprise to see you here!"

"Retired two year back, to buttle for 'is lordship. Wassat, sah? The leg? Oh middlin', middlin'. Bit roomaticky, but there, I'm lucky I still got it to get roomaticks, ain't I sah? Well, sah, good of you to ask, the wife don't much like livin' in the country, bein' a city gal all 'er life, but she'll take it kindly as you asked after 'er. Bit broader in the beam now than when you knew 'er back in the Karatka

campaign, sah, but a fine gal an' still knows 'ow to warm the cockles of a man's 'art. Fower sons in the rejament now, sah, all a credit to me, so I 'opes, an' the eldest gal wedded to a trooper, an' -"

"It was good of you to find Wootton a billet, Fastred," Gyrdan said, settling into an armchair after dinner and shovelling sugar into his coffee.

"Seemed only fair," Fastred said with a shrug. "I needed a butler for here, and there was Wootton with a bad leg wound the year before he qualified for the pension, and a wife and eight children to keep."

"The four sons at least seem to be keeping themselves," Irinya observed, scraping the last of the sugar into her own coffee and stirring it vigorously. Coffee was a rarity in Carlundy and she had never cared for it much.

"You shouldn't encourage him, my lady. Once get Wootton started on his sons' exploits and you can't shut him up. Why those boys haven't singlehandedly conquered the world I can't figure out."

"Four Woottons would be a formidable prospect," Gyrdan said, with a rueful smile. "They were bad enough as lads. I've still got the scars from Number One Son's fencing practice."

"If you taught them, that probably accounts for their reputation for being too dim to know when they're beaten."

"Flattery will get you anywhere," Gyrdan said mildly. He picked up a pipe from the hearth, knocked it out into the grate and started filling it with tobacco.

"Smoking after dinner?" Fastred said, in mock outrage. "Revolting habit. Why bother with decent coffee if you're going to turn it into syrup and then completely drown the flavour in tobacco? That's right, put your feet on the table as well. I despair of ever teaching you manners. No wonder my sisters think you're a bad influence on me. That disreputable mercenary, they call you. If they want to be polite."

"I don't recall having ever met either of your sisters."

"No, you haven't. But that doesn't bother them. They both like to form opinions without being confused by inconvenient facts. Now if you'd been a sailor, things would have been *quite* different. One of them would have married you by now."

"Getting seasick has one advantage, then."

"Ah, you may pretend! But my sisters know that every man in the country has broken his heart yearning for the Fair Ladies of Sherbourne! And you *would* lose

your chance by taking to land instead of sea! All sailors are dashing, handsome, romantic and brave. Whereas soldiers -”

Gyrdan snorted. “Spare me your sisters’ opinion of soldiers! I can guess.”

“How did you two come to meet?” asked Irinya, laughing.

“In the army,” Fastred said. “Where else? An army is a magnet for all the riff-raff of the world. Outlaw, brigand, criminal, vagrant, nobody asks any questions of a soldier as long as he can handle arms. So my sisters say. How long ago was it, Gyrdan? Five years? No, six by now. We were under attack from the Eastern tribes, as usual, and the King summoned levies from all the lords. My father was sick at the time and I was seventeen and proving quite hopeless at everything he tried to teach me. Land management and farming and investment and so on.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Hopeless. And horribly dull! So he sent me off with the levy to see if I was any good at soldiering, with a captain to keep an eye on me. Well, that was quite fun, riding down to Fairhaven to the weapontake at the head of a troop of five hundred cavalry, banners flying and what-have-you. But at Fairhaven the captain got horribly drunk in a house of ill-repute, and the following morning he was so busy nursing his hangover that he fell off his horse and broke a leg, and had to stay behind. So there I was, an irresponsible youth of seventeen, with five hundred cavalry to lead into a major battle and hardly knowing the difference between a charge and a retreat. And that wasn’t quite so much fun, especially as we rode further east and got out of country that I knew. And I don’t mind admitting that I began to get scared. Well, Gyrdan was assigned to my troop as a scout, nominally under my command. What a joke! He’d already forgotten more about soldiering than I’ll ever know. I was terrified of him at first, of course. You can see why. He was just as stern and grim-faced then as now, and he had obviously a very low opinion of young noblemen out on military adventures.”

“Slander,” Gyrdan protested sleepily. “I object to young noblemen on military adventures who think they know everything. You at least admitted your utter ignorance almost at once.”

“After running the troop slap into an ambush,” Fastred said ruefully. “It was Gyrdan that saved us - don’t interrupt me, Gyrdan, go back to sleep - and after that I threw myself on his mercy and begged him to tell me what to do. So he took me under his wing, and taught me everything I know. Tactics and strategy, using the land to your advantage, moving without being seen and making camp without being attacked, how to maintain discipline in a troop, and even the dull stuff about keeping both men and horses tolerably well-fed and comfortable. It was a long campaign, as

it happened, and by the time it finished I was beginning to feel that not only could I actually understand all Gyrdan's patient explanations, but I was starting to think of things for myself. I'd finally found something I could do. And there have been constant border skirmishes ever since, and every so often we get into a pitched battle again, so I have had plenty of opportunity to practice."

"From which you should infer, lady, that Fastred is probably the finest commander of light cavalry that Billand has ever had," Gyrdan added, sitting up and knocking out his pipe into the grate. "We have fought three campaigns together since then and, although Fastred may not be much use at anything else, on a battlefield I would rather not be on the opposing side."

"Unusually flattering," Fastred said. "I get worried when you compliment me, my friend."

"I so rarely have the opportunity," Gyrdan returned, refilling his pipe.

"Well, the coffee has obviously cleared your head of its alcoholic haze," Fastred said, cheerfully. "Enough chatter! I want to hear your tale, and I am not going to be put off again."

Irinya began, relating her own history in less painful detail than she had told it to Gyrdan, and then he took up the tale. At Hygurd, Fastred's handsome young face grew scarlet with fury and he sprang up and paced the room, muttering, "The dog! The cur! I'd horsewhip *him* for that!" It took a little while to calm him down, but as they recounted the rest of the tale, speaking alternately to ease the burden of memory, he ceased to mutter and sat spellbound.

"What a story!" he exclaimed, as Gyrdan ended. "Like something out of a legend! The beautiful princess imprisoned in a tower, rescued at great peril by a knight in shining armour!"

His guests exchanged glances and began to laugh in a way that contained more than a hint of hysteria.

"I say," protested Fastred, pained, "is this a private joke, or can anyone join in?"

"Sorry, Fastred," Gyrdan gasped. "But have a little regard for the facts! I am not a knight, and she rescued me first."

"And I am neither a princess nor a beauty, and we did not ride off into the sunset on a white charger, and there were neither dragons nor giants to fight."

"Minor details," Fastred said dismissively. "It's the story that counts."

There was a soft murmur of assent, and all three turned. They had an audience. Gathered rather sheepishly in the doorway were the entire household staff, variously

horrified, excited, and frightened but all completely absorbed. The scullery-maid was sniffing quietly into a handkerchief, the butler had squared his massive shoulders as though himself preparing to go out and fight, Rosie's eyes shone with inspiration, and in Corin's face was written pure hero-worship.

"*What* is the meaning of this eavesdropping?" Fastred demanded.

The butler saluted.

"Beggin' your pardon, sah, wasn't eavesdroppin', bein' as the door was open when I come with more coffee -" he brandished the pot like a talisman, "-an' I couldn't 'elp but listen, sah!"

"An' Mistress Poll sent me to look for 'im, sir," Corin said eagerly. "Sir, did you really -"

"An' then I come to look for Corin," Marigold interrupted.

"An' I come to look for 'er. Sir, you ain't cross with us, are you sir?" Rosie pleaded.

"Couldn't 'elp meself, sir," wailed the scullery-maid.

"Oh, all right, all right," Fastred shouted above the growing chorus. "Just don't let it happen again!"

"And a fine host I am!" he said anxiously, closing the door and turning to his guests. "You are looking about done up. If I'd known, I wouldn't have taxed you with such a tale so soon. Turn in now, and don't worry about getting up for breakfast! Good night!"

Iryna intended to take Fastred at his word, but dreams disturbed her sleep and it was a relief when morning came. There was no sign of Rosie, but a search of the clothes cabinet located a skirt and jacket of fine broadcloth, both with accessible fastenings. She had to stop and rest every few minutes, but eventually managed to wash and dress, and make her way downstairs.

The dining room door was ajar, and from within came Gyrdan's voice, its low inflections easily recognisable even though she could not distinguish the words, suddenly cut across by Fastred's clear ringing tones.

"No, no, no! You're remembering wrong, Gyrdan. Marchbourn was on the *left* - oh, never mind the strategic principle, Corin's interested in who did what, aren't you, Corin? Look, the butter is Marchbourn's cavalry *here*, on the left, - and the jam is me on the right flank, like this, and - Corin, pass me the bread - that's the King in the centre with the infantry, like *so* - and these apples are the enemy forces drawn up on a little hill like *that* - Rosie! Don't clear that coffee-pot away! - I don't care if it's

empty, it's my reserve cavalry, put it back - and they had some archers just *here* - the cream jug will do for that, and the sugar basin is our archers behind the right wing *here*. Got that, Corin? Right, and they poured down the slope like rats in a barn, waving their battle-axes and yelling fierce war-cries, and their horses' hooves shook the ground like thunder in a forest - Oh, good morning, Lady Irinya! Do take a seat. Rosie, chocolate for the lady, and bring more hot rolls - Did you sleep well, my lady? It looks like a beautiful day - What? Oh, Corin, do run along now, can't you see I'm busy? And tell Cook I want some more coffee, and a lot more sugar - Now, Lady Irinya, may I offer you -"

Fastred bustled off immediately after breakfast, with a cheerful, "Must excuse me - business to see to - harvest time, you know - just make yourselves at home -"

"Unusually keen," Gyrdan commented. "Maybe he's developing a sense of responsibility at last. After you, lady."

As they strolled out into the hall, Irinya noticed a small figure skulking under the stairs.

"Isn't that Corin?"

"Where? Oh, yes, lady, I see."

"He looked so disappointed at breakfast when Fastred sent him out, I thought."

"Aye, poor lad. Fastred is inclined to forget that other people have feelings."

"Why don't you talk to him now?"

"That is a kind thought, lady. But I am supposed to be entertaining you -"

"Oh, really! Does Fastred think me such a featherbrain? You bore the boy with soldiers' tales, and I will find something more interesting to occupy me."

Mid-morning found Irinya settled in Wootton's parlour, balancing a plate of cake and a cup of tea so strong it appeared to be dissolving the spoon. She now knew the entire Wootton family history, Mrs Wootton's largely unfavourable opinions of cockerels, cows, country smells, dirt roads and villagers, the extravagances of the junior Woottons, how Number Two Son had distinguished himself in a skirmish the previous summer - "e would of got mentioned in dispatches, ma'am, if the captain 'ad wrote any" - and the volatile romances of Number Three Son, who was courting a sergeant's daughter. And she had deftly steered the conversation round to the object of her interest.

"'E were my sergeant, ma'am, when I first knew 'im," Wootton reminisced. "I'd bin laid up a whole summer, with a wound an' then camp fever - an' that were the

luckiest fever o' my life, ma'am, 'cos that were the worst summer we ever 'ad out East. The rejament got caught in Dunaven Pass, an' cut to bits, an' I'd a bin with 'em if it weren't for bein' sick. So when I were sent back up the line, they put me in a new rejament, just bein' formed outa new recruits an' old lags like me. A real rag-tag it were. I didn't like it one bit, specially when I found my sergeant were only a lad - this were more'n fifteen year back, ma'am."

"We were all younger then."

"'E must a bin the youngest sergeant ever, ma'am. Well - mebbe not. I put 'im at no more'n twenty, but now I think 'e must a bin older an' just looked young, like. Some men do that. But 'e can't a bin above thirty, not no'ow."

"Is that unusual?"

"Un'eard of. It took me a full term - that's seven year, ma'am - to make Lance-Corpril, an' two more to make Corpril, an' if I'd served out me last term I might a made Sergeant, at forty-five. That's 'ow most sergeants gets there, by outlivin' all the others. But Gyrdan, 'e got there by bein' clever. You wouldn't believe 'ow sharp 'e is, ma'am."

"Oh, I think I would."

"'E could always think of a way forward. An' that was good, 'cos in them days most o' the orfcers was nobs - noblemen, I mean, ma'am - an' no more use'n a sick donkey, an' they was always orderin' us into 'opeless positions. Sendin' a cavalry charge across a bog, or tellin' us to march through a pass with savages throwin' rocks down on us, that sort o' thing. It were the warrant orfcers - the sergeants an' corprils an' such - what kept the army in the field, ma'am."

"I've heard that is often the case."

"It's better now, ma'am. The old King - may 'e rest in peace - 'e were a real soljer. When 'e were crowned, we started gettin' orfcers like 'is lordship, nobs still, but they knew what they was about. An' we started winnin'. Them tribes is only dagoes, ma'am, no discipline at all, an' once we faced up to 'em proper they didn't know what 'it 'em. An' the last winter, we marched on Dunaven Pass. 'Ave I told you about that, ma'am?"

"Another time, Mr Wootton."

"Just as you like, ma'am. Well, we thrashed 'em good an' proper that time. A real ding-dong fight it were, we ain't 'ad one like that in a long time. An' that were when the Captain got 'is commission."

"Commission?"

“‘E got made an orfcer, ma’am. By the King. For ‘is - ‘is bravery an’ devotion to duty, I think they said. We was ‘oldin’ their reinforcements back. Sixty of us, an’ near thirty killed, an’ all the others wounded. But we ‘eld it, ma’am, an’ it were Gyrdan what kept us together. ‘E took command after the orfcer got killed, an’ I never saw nobody fight like it. By the end o’ the day them dagoes’d run if ‘e so much as shook ‘is sword at ‘em. An’ shoot! ‘E could knock out a gnat’s eye at ‘arf a mile. So they made ‘im an orfcer. Captain. Ain’t ‘ardly ‘eard of, ma’am, for a ranker to make Captain, but there weren’t never nobody deserved it more.”

“I see. But he is not a captain now, he said.”

“No, ma’am. Can’t understand it. I were laid up a long while after Dunaven, an’ when I were back in the rejament, ‘e’d gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, ma’am. ‘Is seven years was up, an’ ‘e ‘adn’t signed up for another term. ‘E’d gone. Nobody knew where. An’ when I come across ‘im again, ma’am, ‘e was like ‘e is now.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

“Well, ‘e ain’t a regular no more, ma’am. No ‘arf-pay if ‘e’s ‘urt, an’ no pension, just ‘is shillin’ a week pay. They calls ‘im a mercen’ry, but that ain’t really fair. Can’t trust a mercen’ry further’n you can throw ‘is ‘orse, ma’am, but the Captain I’d trust with me life. An’ so would all the other men.”

“I can understand that.”

“‘E’s like that, ma’am. ‘E’s wasted, doin’ what ‘e does now.”

“Which is?”

“There’s a long word for it, ma’am. Scoutin’, an’ spyin’ out the land, an’ findin’ out where the enemy is an’ what they’re doin’. Can’t think what it’s called.”

“Reconnaissance?”

“That’s it, ma’am! ‘E’s good at it, don’t get me wrong. Uncanny, it is. ‘E can get through a picket line like it didn’t exist. But ‘e’d be a better orfcer than ‘arf the captains we got. Can’t understand why ‘e won’t sign up as a regular. I worry about ‘im sometimes, ma’am, indeed I do. What’s ‘e goin’ to do when ‘e’s too old for marchin’ an’ campin’? But at the end of every campaign ‘e lines up for ‘is pay along with all the ‘arf-wits an’ riff-raff, an’ orf ‘e goes again for months on end.”

“Where does he go?”

“Dunno, ma’am. ‘S’funny, but though I’ve known ‘im more’n fifteen year, I dunno nothin’ about ‘im. Dunno where ‘e comes from or where ‘e was born or what ‘is family was or nothin’. Do you know ‘im, ma’am?”

“All I know is that his mother came from the Black Hills of Carlundy, and she had the clear sight.”

“That’s two things more’n I ever found out. ‘E’s like that, ma’am. Folk don’t ask ‘im questions.”

“Oh, that can’t be true, Mr Wootton.”

“Well, you ‘aven’t asked ‘im, ‘ave you, ma’am?” asked the butler, shrewdly. “You come ‘ere to ask me. An’ if you finds a soljer what won’t talk about ‘imself, you don’t ask questions, ma’am, ‘cos you prob’ly won’t like the answers. There’s all sorts go for soljers. Murderers, robbers, thieves, an’ worse. Do a term, wait til the fuss ‘as died down, then off they goes again. Now I don’t say the Captain’s one of ‘em, ma’am, indeed I don’t! But people don’t ask ‘im questions.” His broad face broke into a grin. “‘E’ll be findin’ young Corin ‘ard work, I think. That boy’d try the patience of a saint.”

Iryna strolled thoughtfully out into the rose garden. So she had been right in her original guess. A soldier, and one of some intelligence. But she was no nearer knowing what he had been doing in Carlundy.

A shrill voice caught her attention, and she turned unobtrusively down the next walk.

“- but soldierin’ can’t be all mud an’ sentry-go an’ bad food, sir, or nobody’d do it. Mr Fastred says -”

“Fastred is a knight and a nobleman. You’d be a soldier. There’s a difference, believe me.”

“But if it’s that bad,” Corin persisted, “why do you do it, sir?”

“Some men like army life,” Gyrdan answered, evasively. “Some can’t do anything else. Some do it for the money. Some think it’s their duty. Some do it to get away from being nagged by women.”

“I can understand that last one,” said Corin, with feeling. “But why do *you* do it, sir?”

“Do you never tire of asking questions?”

“No, sir,” with perfect aplomb. “Mr Fastred says asking questions of everyone is the best way to get an education.”

“Oh, does he?” Gyrdan was sounding very harrassed now, but Corin was undeterred.

“Yes, sir. Why don’t you leave, if you don’t like soldierin’?”

Gyrdan’s voice cut like a whiplash.

“Because it is a good way of getting killed!”

“Oh, you do say some funny things, sir! You say ‘ill’ instead of ‘sick’, an’ ‘sick’ instead of ‘throw up’, an’ ‘very much’ for ‘real bad’. You mean it’s a good way to die, don’t you, sir?”

A sigh, and then Gyrdan’s voice, very controlled. “Yes, of course, that must be what I meant. Why don’t you go back inside now?”

“I’d rather talk to you, sir. Why did you join the army, sir?”

“Oh, various reasons. That hill behind the orchard looks a good place for rabbiting. Is it?”

“Yes, sir. What reasons, sir?”

Irynya had to admire the boy’s persistence. Like a terrier after rats.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Gyrdan answered, in a tone that anyone would have recognised as final. Except Corin.

“Why was it a good idea, sir?”

“Ah, Corin, there you are!” Irynya came up the avenue towards them, walking as fast as she was able. “Mistress Poll wants you in the kitchen. Run along, now.”

Gyrdan watched Corin’s retreating back with relief.

“Was that true, lady?”

“More or less.” She took Corin’s place on the seat beside him. “She was shouting for him twenty minutes ago. It seemed you needed help.”

He ran a hand through his disordered hair. “I suppose I should be flattered. The boy means well. But he has the grip of an old badger! I thank you, lady.”

She took a deep breath. “Gyrdan.”

“Yes, lady?”

“You have taken to calling me ‘lady’ again. And don’t tell me it is through habit - you have to remind yourself every time. Why?”

He looked away uncomfortably.

“It is not fitting that you should treat me as an equal, lady. Extraordinary circumstances threw us together, but they are gone now. I-I have no wish to presume on your goodwill. It is not right that you should associate with a common mercenary -”

“Uncommon mercenary,” she said lightly, but Gyrdan was in no mood to be teased.

“One step from the gutter, lady. And you are the Lady of Carlundy.”

“In name only,” she pointed out, dryly. “At present, I am a penniless fugitive, dependent on *your* friend’s hospitality for the very clothes on my back.”

“That will not always be so, lady. Do not confuse what you own with what you are.”

“You are doing so.” Her voice suddenly took on a low intensity. “Gyrdan, you helped me when no other would even lift a finger. Do you think I care for petty considerations of rank?”

“Others will care, lady. And they will matter, if you are to come into your own.”

“Oh, nonsense!” she said impatiently. “Fastred treats you as his equal.”

“Fastred is third cousin to the King, lady. Unsuitable friendships are a minor eccentricity.”

“Third cousin to the King? Yet you do not call him ‘lord’.”

“He and I have fought together, marched together, starved together. Each owes the other his life so often that we have lost count. We are friends.”

“And we are not? Everything you have said applies equally to me.”

There was a pleading tone in her voice, though she was not aware of it. Gyrdan looked across at her, saw the hurt in her eyes, and his resolution failed him. A captive almost since childhood, she had in some ways the outlook of a child, a curious mixture of cynicism and naivety. He had meant to say that this was different, that a man and a woman could not be friends in the way that two men could. That whatever the truth, the world would whisper and giggle. That informality would be interpreted as familiarity. That what was tolerated as eccentricity in a great lord would be seen as weakness in a lady. That he had done his part, and could help her no more, and would leave as soon as he had strength to ride.

He said none of it. He was too generous to hurt her, particularly for the sake of a social convention he despised. Besides, he might be wrong. The friendship might do her no harm. There could be no real danger - the gulf between them was too great, and she was another man’s wife. And a man dying of thirst does not spurn the offer of water.

He stretched out his good hand and took hers.

“As you wish, Irinya.”

Chapter 10.

Fastred was most irritated during that next week. He made sure to leave after breakfast and not return until dinner, riding miles over the dusty roads to spend all day listening to his tenants' interminable woes. He left strict instructions to his staff not to bother his guests, not to ask questions and particularly not to barge in on them unexpectedly. He'd even installed them in adjacent bedrooms. But they showed no sign of completing the fairytale in the accepted manner. Indeed, it almost seemed as though Gyrdan was avoiding Irinya.

Corin had attached himself to Gyrdan like a limpet to a rock, and either through kindness or a weakness for being hero-worshipped, Gyrdan did not send him away. Discovering that constant activity kept Corin's insatiable curiosity tolerable, he had been persuaded to teach him archery, and they were often seen down at the shooting butts by the orchard, Gyrdan patiently correcting the boy's stance and adjusting his grip on the bow. Wootton, who took his job of training the local militia very seriously, had inveigled Gyrdan into helping, and in the idle hour between milking and sunset, the stable yard echoed to the clash of steel and the instructors' shouts of "No, no, *no!* That flashy stuff is all very well to impress the ladies at a tourney, but in a real fight you have to keep it up all day! Let your enemy do the work! Like *this!*"

And there was the time when the stables had looked strangely empty when he came home.

"Yessir, the lady gone riding today," the groom had confirmed. "I give 'er the best bay mare, sir. I ain't done no wrong, sir? You said we was to treat 'er like she was mistress o' the 'ouse."

"No, no," Fastred had said, beaming. "You did right, quite right. Which horse did the gentleman take?"

"Gennelman, sir? She weren't with no gennelman."

"You let her go alone?"

"No, sir. She took my gal Rosie with her. Gone to see my old Ma they 'ave, the lady thinks as she might be able to 'elp 'er dropsy - Sir?"

He'd found Gyrdan in the armoury, earnestly discussing the relative merits of three methods of chain mail manufacture, and it had been as much as he could do to keep his temper.

He shook his head at the memory. There were times when he wondered if his friend was quite sane. But if he couldn't make the horse drink, he could at least

tether it in the middle of the river. He made his way briskly down to breakfast, turning over schemes in his head.

Gyrdan was finishing a cup of coffee as Fastred entered - his third, because the sugar basin was almost empty. He gestured with his cup.

“You’ve got a letter. King’s messenger, this morning.”

Fastred groaned, broke the seal, and cursed as he read, his vocabulary expanding when he realised Irinya was not there.

“It’s all very well for you to smirk!” he growled, meeting Gyrdan’s amused gaze. He skewered the letter to the table. “His Majesty’s Revenue Officers remind me that my accounts are overdue and respectfully submit that I may wish to remedy this oversight by the final date of thirty-first October or -”

“Or what? They’re hardly going to clap you in irons.”

“Worse than that. I’ll have to explain to the Chancellor. I tell you, I’d rather face a hundred axe-wielding tribesmen!”

“Can’t your steward deal with it?”

“Sacked him last summer,” Fastred said, briefly. “He’d been taking a second rent for his own use for years. Shocking business. Sent him packing the day I found out.”

“Good for you. Well, whoever keeps the accounts, then.”

“Yes. That’s my problem.”

“*You* keep the books!”

“Well, actually - they sort of keep themselves -”

“*Fastred.*”

“Yes, all right, I know. Don’t you start. But there are always so many other things to do and somehow I never seem to get around to it -”

“I can imagine.”

“I’ll have to do it now, I suppose,” Fastred said, gloomily. “Just what I need, weeks struggling with pen and ink and dust.”

“Let me do it, then.”

“Certainly not! You’re supposed to be enjoying yourself. Rest and recreation.” He cast a glance at Irinya’s empty place. “Entertaining the lady. Where is she?”

“How should I know? Anyway, I’m quite all right.”

“Nonsense! You’re half-starved, you lost a lot of blood and you were badly knocked about. I despair of you, I really do. You must have used up most of your nine lives at the front, and now you go and spend your vacation getting yourself

captured and falling off mountains. About the only intelligent thing you did was to break the arm-bone on the same side as that sprained wrist. Honestly, at your age you ought to have more sense - Are you listening to me?"

"I will when you stop lecturing me."

"Look, I won't have you tiring yourself out over my accounts. You take far too many risks as it is. You're hurt, you're going to need a fair while to recover, and I'm going to make damn sure you do."

"I was not hurt in the brain."

"That's not what I thought when I found you," Fastred said sharply.

Gyrdan had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Well, then, all the more reason to have something else on my mind."

"Any sensible man would already have something else on his mind!" muttered Fastred, glaring at Irinya's empty chair.

"What? Don't mutter, Fastred."

"Very well," Fastred said, resignedly. "You'll give up after a few hours anyway. I'll have a fire made up in the study."

"Despaired yet?"

Gyrdan looked up from the dusty desk.

"I brought you some lunch," Fastred said, hefting a laden tray. "Since you didn't put in an appearance!" He looked round. "And you've let the fire go nearly out! I'd no idea my accounts were so absorbing."

"Accounts?" Gyrdan leaned back in his chair and ran his hand through his untidy hair. "Don't maltreat the word!" He stirred the litter of papers with a finger, and a couple of inexpertly tied dry flies and half a biscuit fell on the floor. "What do you do, just open the door and throw your papers in?"

"Well, give up, then," Fastred said, hitching himself on the edge of the desk and helping himself to a roll off the tray. "Lady Irinya's back."

If he had expected that to produce a change of mind, he was disappointed. Gyrdan paid it no attention at all.

"I don't know which has left the more confusion, your steward's embezzling or your incompetence. I haven't found a single column that adds up to the total at the bottom. And your writing is appalling!"

"I'd rather handle a sword than a pen."

"Some of this looks as if you wrote it with a sword."

"I said it was an impossible task, didn't I? Come on, leave it."

“An interesting logical puzzle. End of October before the Revenue puts the thumbscrews on you, yes? I should manage to get it sorted by then. But I need a clerk.”

“Why? You can write.”

Gyrdan gestured to his sling. “Not with my left hand I can’t.”

He was disturbed a little later by a tap at the door, and Irinya came in.

“Fastred says you want a clerk?”

“You?”

“He tried to talk me out of it,” she said, smiling and drawing up another chair.

“But I’ve nothing to do either. If I can be of use -?”

“I’d rather have your help than anyone’s. This needs another mind. I’ve never *seen* such a mess.”

Much later.

“Gyrdan?”

“Fifty-six... Um?”

“*How* many shillings to the crown here?”

“Ten. Same as in Carlundy.”

“Are you sure it isn’t twelve or something?”

“Quite sure.”

“Oh. I just wondered.”

The pen scratched on.

The lamp was lit but the curtains still undrawn when Fastred passed the study window. He strode across the flower-bed and peered in, intending to tap and relieve his guests of their task - but stopped. The two chairs very close together at a desk only intended for one. The two heads bent together over the shared task. The easy flow of voices, mixed with the sound of laughter, faint but clear. Fastred grinned, and retreated.

“It’s not what I had in mind,” he muttered to himself, “but it might serve!”

Within a fortnight the accounts were so far untangled that it became necessary to check the remaining details directly with the tenants. Billand basked in an Indian summer, enamel-blue skies arching over the green and russet and gold chequerboard of fields and woods, and riding the round of the farms was less a chore than a

pleasure. The farmers greeted the “new steward” with enthusiasm, keen to explain how their rents were too high, or their neighbours’ fences unmended, or their buildings in need of repair or extension. It seemed Fastred was well-liked enough, but apt to agree to everything and do nothing.

For Irinya it was a wholly new experience. It took her several days to get over the shock of not needing to carry weapons - in Carlundy a gentleman would as soon appear without his trousers as his sword - and several more before she stopped keeping her knife hidden discreetly in the saddle-bag. She was amazed at the absence of fortified manors, and still more at the absence of ruined cottages or burned-out farmsteads. The one smouldering heap of ash they were called to turned out to be the result of a midnight assignation in a hay-loft and an unfortunately kicked-over lamp.

“I said that lad’d set ‘is pants afire one day,” the farmer grinned at his blushing milkmaid. “Let that be a lesson to you, my girl! In future, you do it in the dark like civilised folks! But that barn ‘ad all this year’s ‘arvest in it, sir, an’ I’ve ‘ad to buy fodder for the beasts, an’ -”

“Won’t Fastred mind you waiving his rent?” Irinya protested, as the farmer and his wife waved them off after an excellent meal.

“Fastred probably doesn’t even know they exist,” Gyrdan said, cheerfully. The farmer had been generous with home-brewed cider. “The Earl must despair of him! No sense of responsibility at all. Anyway, I didn’t waive all the rent. I said they could pay a third of this quarter’s rent in cattle - that will save them buying fodder and keep Fastred in roast beef for a few weeks - and another third over the course of next year, four instalments. They should be able to afford that all right. Provided he keeps his milkmaid out of the new barn.”

“But how do you know they’ll pay?”

“You wrote the agreement down. I signed it, he signed it, and you were witness. It’s legally binding, even if my signature does look as if a spider fell in the inkwell.”

“But he might not be here next year.”

“Then his sons will pay, or whoever takes on the farm.”

“You might not be here next year.”

“So? He has his copy of the agreement. Fastred, or Fastred’s steward, or whoever owns the estate, will honour it.”

“Oh!”

“Don’t look so surprised. It is common practice. What would Fastred gain from turning his tenants out because they can’t pay a quarter’s rent? No rent at all, and the land growing sour from lack of cultivation. This way he gets two-thirds of the rent, just a bit late. Everyone happy. The only trouble is -” he sighed - “once the word gets round, they’ll all try it. Like old soldiers malingering.”

“Now, look here,” Gyrdan argued, “I rode down this lane not ten days ago, and this so-called *barn* was a heap of firewood even then.”

“We’d repaired it, sir,” the farmer insisted. “An’ it were full o’ fodder. Dunno ‘ow we’re goin’ to pay this quarter’s rent, sir -”

Irinya, sitting at a trestle-table set up in the shade of the house and writing out blank receipt forms, industriously bent her head to hide her smile.

“What sort of fodder?” Gyrdan enquired innocently.

“Ay, sir.”

Gyrdan looked round at the pigs rooting in acres of corn and barley stubble, and raised an interrogative eyebrow.

“Really? Where’s your hayfield?”

“Er - it’s down the other end o’ the farm, sir.”

“Show me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t put you to no trouble, sir -”

“I’ve got all day.”

“It’s away down by the brook, sir.”

“Oh, the meadow by Sheepwash Bridge?”

The farmer brightened up. “That’s the one, sir.”

“Funny, I thought Deorlaf at the Red House owned that.”

“Er.” The farmer turned his straw hat in his hands. “‘E rents it to me, sir. I ain’t got no meadow o’ me own, sir.”

“Yes,” said Gyrdan dryly, “I know. Well, that’s in order. Though it’s strange that Deorlaf hasn’t reported the sub-let to Lord Fastred.”

“I ‘spect ‘e forgot, sir.”

“And another strange thing - that field doesn’t look big enough to fill a barn the size you said this one was.”

“Er - it’s bigger’n it looks from the road, sir.”

“Really? Shall we go and measure it?”

Irinya watched them go, and then laid down her quill and laughed.

“Men!” said the farmer’s wife from the doorway. “If they put a tithe o’ the effort into work that they put into avoidin’ it, we’d all be rich! Ain’t that so, ma’am? I tole ‘im it wouldn’t work! I said to ‘im, I said, there ain’t no flies on that new steward, ‘e ain’t no soft touch like ‘is lordship. Would you care for a scone, ma’am, they’ll be fresh out o’ the oven in a few minnits?”

“Thank you, Mistress, that would be very kind.”

“Psst!” came a hissing whisper from behind the woodpile, as the farmer’s wife disappeared back into her kitchen.

Irinya looked up, and a stocky brown-haired labourer poked his head round the corner of the house, and ventured out when he saw she was alone. He stood nervously, twisting his hat in his hands.

“Ma’am - tha’ll not be holding it aginst t’master, will thee? He’s nor’ a bad man, ma’am -”

“Just a bit thick!” pealed the wife’s voice from the kitchen. “D’you think I can’t ‘ear through an open winder, ‘Edric? I seen you ‘angin’ about like a naughty child! Is that last row o’ corn cut?”

“Yes, missis.”

“An’ the wood chopped?”

“Yes, missis.”

“Then,” said the farmer’s wife, coming out with two mugs of cider and a steaming plate of scones, “if you wants to talk to the lady, do it proper. Just make sure you milks the cows on time.”

“Thank’ee, missis.”

“Sit down,” Irinya said, pulling out the other stool. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Hedric, ma’am,” said the man, moving the stool to a respectful distance and sitting down. “Tha’ll put in a good word for t’master, ma’am, wi’ t’new steward? I wouldn’t like to see no harm come to him, ma’am, he been a good master to me.”

“I’m sure he’ll come to no more harm than being made to feel a complete fool, Hedric.”

His homely red face split into a grin of pure relief. “Thank’ee, ma’am.”

“Dunno what you was worrit about, ‘Edric,” said the farmer’s wife out of her window. “What’s ‘is lordship goin’ to do to us? It ain’t like it is with them savages where you comes from - oh! - beggin’ your pardon, ma’am - I didn’t mean -”

She bobbed back in some confusion, and Irinya turned back to Hedric.

“So you too are from Carlundy? I thought so, from your speech. How did you come here?”

“Same way as tha come, ma’am, I reckon,” Hedric said, taking a pull at his cider.

“I don’t think that’s very likely,” Irinya said, with a smile. She nudged the plate of scones towards him, and after a second’s hesitation Hedric took one.

“Tha didn’t come wi’ t’Shadow then, ma’am?”

“No. Gyrdan brought me here. I thought the Shadow was something to do with the smugglers?”

“Don’t know nowt about no smugglers, ma’am,” Hedric said quickly. “Nobody here never sees ‘em. Ain’t nowt to do wi’ us, is it, where t’ pack-horses is goin’ to?”

“Of course not. Tell me how you came here, Hedric. What made you leave Carlundy?”

“Didn’t have no choice, ma’am. I used to farm by Briarley. D’you know it, ma’am? T’other side o’ t’ Giants’ Road, ten mile down from town. Had me own farm and me own beasts, an’ a wife an’ three littl’uns, an’ a bit put by fer a rainy day. Paid me rent reg’lar and made sure all me salt was stamped legal like -” he grinned knowingly, “- an’ never expected no trouble. Never saw nowt o’ t’lord - t’manor belonged to Lord Anred, t’Wolf’s steward.”

Actually, Irinya thought, that manor belonged to my father and therefore to me. How dare Radwulf give my lands away to his cronies?

“What happened, Hedric?”

“Lord Anred had some quarrel wi’ Lord Frealaf - is tha not well, ma’am? Tha went all pale for a minute - an’ t’first we knew of it were when Lord Frealaf an’ his men come riding by one night -”

His voice broke, and he looked down at the ground.

“All right, Hedric,” Irinya said gently. “I can guess the rest. They burned your farm?”

He nodded. “It were t’beasts what went to me heart, ma’am. We couldn’t get ‘em out o’ t’barn. Twelve little piglets we had - an’ they *squealed* so -”

He took another swig of his cider, and pulled himself together. “I were right mad, ma’am, I can tell thee. I left t’wife an’ t’ littl’uns wi’ t’wife’s mother, in Broadford, an’ I walked up to town to complain to Lord Anred.”

“Oh, *Hedric*.”

“Aye, ma’am. Tha knows t’way o’ it. He laughed at me, and threw me out like a dog. And I swore at him. Like the fool I am, ma’am. But he were in a good mood,

planning what he was going to do to Lord Frealaf's poor tenants I s'pose. So he didn't have me hung. He put me in t'stocks instead."

"Slower, but just as sure." She had been able to see the stocks from the ramparts above the gates.

"Aye, ma'am. But somehow, t'Shadow got to hear of it, see. T'second night it were, when they loosed me, and fetched me away into t'hills, and when I were strong enough to walk, they guided me here. Well, not here, exactly. It were somewhere away north, ma'am. And t'folks was kind, like, but there was a lot of men like me and jobs was scarce. So I started walking, and after a bit I ended up here. Just a farmhand now, when I used to have me own farm, but alive, ma'am."

"But your family?"

"I were right worried about 'em, ma'am. Me being a jailbird an'all. But they said t'Shadow'd take care of 'em. Six months I never heard nowt, and then one night they turned up here. They'd brung 'em right to t'door. And we been here ever since, ma'am."

He took the last scone. "This is a rare country, ain't it, ma'am? It'd never happen here. Does tha know, ma'am, how t'last steward got sacked? Because one o't'farmers took Lord Fastred to court, on account o't' rent bein' too high."

"What?"

"It's true, ma'am. And t'court found in favour o't'farmer. And -" his voice became incredulous, "- and his lordship sacked t'steward and all t'rents went back down to summat sensible. Can tha see that happening at home, ma'am?"

"You seem very thoughtful, Irinya?"

They were riding back to Ash Dene in the glowing sunset, at an easy pace on the smooth road.

"I was thinking what a strange country this is. Do you know, Gyrdan, not one of these tenants has really tried to avoid paying his rent? And Fastred is actually going to pay his taxes. More or less on time, even. Why do they do it?"

"Rather a contrast with Carlundy, you mean? Probably because it's rather fair. It's the tax that pays for roads and bridges. And it pays for the King's ships, so all the merchant vessels come and go without fear of piracy. And for the regular army, holding the frontier out East. Everyone sees some benefit. Even if it's only being able to ride home in the dark without breaking our necks."

"Yes, but if everybody *else* pays -"

“If everybody pays something, your share is so small it’s not really worth going to the trouble of avoiding it. It’s also quite difficult. If Fastred doesn’t pay roughly what the Chancellor thinks this estate is worth, he’ll have to explain why - and the Chancellor will send his agents up here to check. If there’s a good reason - a bad harvest, or a freak storm, or something - all well and good. If not - well, it depends why not. If it’s just mismanagement, there’d be some arrangement reached for paying back the arrears, probably with interest. If it’s dishonesty - well, all land is held from the King, ultimately. If the terms on which it is held aren’t met, he can demand it back.”

“Then the King could ruin any lord he liked? By setting the tax so high that it couldn’t be paid?”

“What a suspicious mind you have!”

“Well, couldn’t he?”

“Not unless he got all the law-courts to agree with him. I thought you’d have heard of that by now. Anyone who thinks he is being unfairly treated can complain to the courts. One of Fastred’s tenants -”

“Took Fastred to court and got all the rents reduced. Yes, I heard. But that was Fastred -”

“Any lord would have done the same.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, Irinya, really. If Fastred had ignored the ruling, his tenants would have complained to the sheriff. If Fastred ignored the sheriff, he could have been fined - and I mean a serious fine, a tenth of his property or a full year’s income - or imprisoned.”

“Oh, yes? I’ll wager there aren’t any lords in prison for ignoring the courts.”

“No, there aren’t. Because nobody ignores the courts. The law in this country applies to everyone, Irinya, right up to the King.”

They rode on in thoughtful silence, as the hem of the sky faded from scarlet to crimson and the first stars pricked out.

“Dusk falls early now,” Gyrdan said softly, and added with a sigh, “I suppose this interlude must come to an end soon.”

Irinya looked across at him, but it was already too dark to see his face clearly.

“You do not wish for that?”

“No, indeed.” He half-laughed, bitterly. “Is it not odd how men live out one another’s dreams? You remember that farmer by Underhill? He yearns to be a sea-

captain, striding his own deck with the wind in the rigging and his eyes on the far horizon. Yet I knew just such a man in Fairhaven once whose only desire was to earn enough to retire to the country and grow cabbages for the rest of his days. And I have neither home nor lands nor lord, and Fastred envies me my freedom, while I -”

“Yes?” Irinya prompted softly, after a long pause. “What then is your dream?”

“Something a little like this past month.”

They had reached the top of a rise and he reined in his horse and halted, gazing out over the dusk-shadowed land.

“See how the lights shine in the valley,” he said softly. “I can put a name now to every farm and cot-house, and a face to every man’s name. And they to me. That is my dream, of a land that I know and that knows me, like an old dog. To look at a wood in winter and see it also in spring, carpeted with bluebells under the fresh sky, and in summer with the wood pigeons calling in dappled green shade, and in autumn heavy with nuts and the falling leaves a shower of gold. To ride by a house and see a girl with a babe in her arms and remember her as a child peering from behind her mother’s skirts, and before that as a babe herself. To belong, to be needed, to have honest work to do - and perhaps, somewhere in the dusk, there would be a room with lamplight at the window and a fire in the hearth, and a woman listening for my step...”

Irinya’s heart swelled into her throat, and impulsively she leaned over and took his hand.

“It may yet come to pass.”

He shook his head, and returned out of his dream.

“No,” he said, and his voice was hard and dry, and the misery in it shook her to the heart. “No, it is not for such as me. There are too many ghosts ever to let me rest easy. Though I have never killed without reason, have never gloried in slaughter, and latterly I have sought to fight with wits rather than weapons - yet still there are so *many* -”

His voice broke and failed, and his hand clutched convulsively at the reins. And she felt a sudden stab of anguish beyond all ease, like a cancer gnawing at the heart, the pain all the more savage because it was hidden.

“But they were soldiers - slain in battle -”

The reply was hardly above a whisper.

“Not all.”

He put her hand away, gently but firmly, and they journeyed the rest of the way home in silence. And the following morning Gyrdan was his old self, and the work went on as though he had never spoken.

“Would you ever want to go back to Carlundy, Hedric?”

They were back at the farm to collect the quarter’s rent, and Irinya had taken the opportunity to find her compatriot again. He put his pitchfork down and thought about it.

“Don’t rightly know, ma’am. It’s me home, see. I miss me own fields, and me own folk, an’ I miss t’heather an’ t’hills in t’distance. Folk here is nice, but it ain’t home, ma’am, is it? Tha knows what I means.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Bur’ I couldn’t go back to it like it is, ma’am. Not no way. Not knowing when tha might get arrested, never feeling safe, like. Tha don’t miss thar’ if tha’s never ‘ad it, ma’am. But having been here - oh, four year now, ma’am - and seeing me littl’uns grow up without being scared, and being able to put a bit by an’ save, an’ know as I’ll still be here to enjoy it - the gods being willing, that is - no, ma’am. I couldn’t go back now. Nor any o’ t’ rest of us.”

“Are there many of you?”

“Oh, aye, ma’am. All along these hills, an’ more of us down in Fairhaven itself. Hundreds of us, t’Shadow’s fetched out over t’years. Some for smuggling, an’ some for not paying rent or taxes, an’ some like me for annoying their lords.”

“What if things were different in Carlundy?”

“Different, ma’am?”

“Yes, different. Something like here.” She frowned, struggling with unfamiliar concepts. “People don’t lie down under the system even now, do they? They don’t just do what they’re told, even when they can be hanged for swearing at a lord. People have this sort of sense of what’s *right*. But it comes out in crime. Like smuggling and stealing. Because there isn’t any choice. What if there was a choice?”

She was thinking out loud now. “Murder and arson are against the law, whoever does them. It says so. There’s no law says Lord Frealaf had the right to burn your farm, Hedric.”

“Aye, but laws don’t apply to lords, ma’am,” Hedric said, patiently, as if explaining to a child that gravity worked downwards.

“They do here. The court found against Fastred’s rent, you told me. Why not in Carlundy?”

Hedric’s eyes caught fire.

“Could tha do that, ma’am?” He lowered his voice. “They don’t really know thee here, do they, ma’am? They just thinks tha’s a foreign lady. But I knows thee. Tha’s t’owd Lord’s daughter, ain’t thee? Our Lady. Would tha change things, my lady? If tha went back. Would tha change things?”

“Would you help me?”

“Would we not, my lady!”

Chapter 11.

October drew to its golden close. Fastred triumphantly sent off his completed accounts on the twenty-sixth, threw a party for all his tenants - it coincided nicely with Harvest Home - and settled down to observe his handiwork. Seven weeks of ease had worked wonders for his guests. Irinya had lost her unhealthy pallor and anxious expression, and had been eagerly welcomed into the life of the manor. Not for hope of a favour from the 'new steward's assistant', not out of deference to 'the lady at the big house', nor even for her growing reputation as a doctor, but simply because people liked her. To be popular was new and delightful to her, after so many years of contempt or suspicion, and she had blossomed in it. Gyrdan too had regained health and vigour, his arm had healed completely and was rapidly regaining its muscle strength, and his mind was, if anything, keener than ever. And both seemed to have gained happiness as well as physical health. They smiled more often than they frowned, laughed more often than they sighed, and both were quick of speech and movement. This was a welcome change, and Fastred found no difficulty in devising a reason. For even though the business of the estate was in order, and the work was done, Gyrdan and Irinya were seldom out of each other's company now. They walked together, rode together, talked together, endlessly. And Fastred's smile got steadily bigger.

"Oh, do stop moanin', Corin!" Marigold snapped, exasperated. "An' get out of the way! I got to scrub that bit. If the Captain wants you, 'e'll find you!"

"'E never says a word to me now," Corin whined. "'S'not fair!"

"Keep that joint turnin', Corin!" Cook ordered. "An' don't let the fat drip!"

"'E smiled at me the other day," said Violet, dreamily peeling carrots. "'E's got a lovely smile. An' she said I was lookin' pale an' was I all right -"

"What's 'e want to spend all day with 'er for?" Corin demanded.

"You'll find out when you're grown up, Corin," Marigold said, loftily.

"I'm grown up now! I'm eleven! Nearly. I could of 'elped when 'e was doin' the accounts -"

"I don't think they needed no 'elp," Marigold said, and the rest of the kitchen giggled.

"She's bewitched 'im, right enough," Violet murmured. "Oh, it's so romantic -!"

“I ‘opes ‘e asks ‘er soon, though,” Cook mused. “It ought to be venison for the weddin’, an’ there’s on’y two months o’ the season left. Deer gets all stringy by the turn o’ the year.”

“‘E ain’t goin’ to marry ‘er, is ‘e?” Corin wailed. “What’s ‘e want to do that for?”

“Ah, you wait til you’re older, Corin,” Marigold smiled. “You’ll find out.”

“Actin’ all sappy, like you an’ the blacksmith’s apprentice?”

Marigold dropped her scrubbing brush and blushed scarlet. “I dunno what you means!”

“I seen you walkin’ ‘ome with ‘im last Sunday!”

“It’s the blacksmith’s lad now, is it, Mags?” Rosie teased, amid the general mirth. “What ‘appened to the ploughboy at ‘Ome Farm?”

Marigold muttered something inaudible and fled to the scullery.

Corin stamped his foot, and got to be the centre of attention again. “‘S’not *fair!* ‘E was teachin’ me to shoot, an’ I was goin’ to run away an’ join the army with ‘im -”

“‘E didn’t want you to do that, Corin,” Rosie pointed out quietly. “‘E said soldierin’ was for men with nothin’ to lose.”

“But I ‘ates it ‘ere! It’s so borin’, an’ you nags me all the time, an’ nothin’ ever ‘appens! ‘E was tellin’ me about strange countries, where the rivers is ice an’ the mountains tears ‘oles in the sky, an’ fire boils out o’ the ground, an’ about the sea, an’ ships - an’ now ‘e never talks to me no more, an’ it’s all ‘er fault!”

“Oh, grow up, Corin,” Rosie said, losing patience. “Pa may spoil you ‘cos you’re the boy, but you can’t always get your own way.”

The kitchen might have been surprised to hear the conversation going on in the long walk along the shrubbery.

“You’ll need arms and money,” Gyrdan was saying doubtfully, “or it will come to nothing at all. Reforming zeal is all very well, but it won’t keep an army in the field when the food runs out. And lofty sentiment isn’t much protection against cold steel. How many are there?”

“Hedric thinks about a hundred, up and down the hills. Men of fighting age, that is. More in Fairhaven.”

“Mm. That won’t go far against Radwulf’s army.”

“It’s a start. And they’re all trained, at least,” Irinya pointed out. Since speaking to Hedric, her idea had grown from a spark into a flame of enthusiasm, and she had thought and talked of little else.

“Yes, there is that. Wootton’s done a good job with the militia. If the frontier breaks again - let us hope the regulars can hold it - but if it does, at least Ash Dene’s levy will know which end of a spear to hold.”

“And we’d have the advantage of surprise.”

“Yes, but -”

“Why so negative? Don’t you see how important this is? It’s not just me instead of Radwulf. Why should anyone care about that? It’s about treating people fairly. It’s about being able to live without fear. It’s about justice for everyone. It’s about using power for something good, not just for selfish pleasures. Don’t you believe me?”

“Oh, yes, I believe you.”

“Don’t you think that’s *worth* fighting for?”

“I do, indeed! It is the only reason I can think of that might justify a civil war. But it has to be a civil war that you win, Irinya. Killing people to change history is bad enough, but killing them *not* to change history is the worst thing in the world. So it needs thought. Planning. You need to recruit support. Among the great men, not only the common people. Suppose you begin with the chiefs of the Black Hills -”

And the conversation wandered on, getting ever more serious and ever more complex.

But the kitchen was not wholly mistaken, just a little premature. As time drew on and autumn lapsed into winter, Gyrdan had found himself growing ever more keenly aware of Irinya. He had never thought her beautiful, and he had not changed his mind, but he was coming to realise that beautiful is not the same thing as desirable. It was her face he looked for first on entering a room, it was her voice he could distinguish from a dozen others, her laugh that always brought an answering smile even before he knew what the joke was. He grudged every minute that was not spent in her company, watching the play of light and emotion on her face, listening to the musical voice that now seemed to him the loveliest in the world. So gradually did the feeling grow, and so warm and comfortable the pleasure it brought him, that it was a long time before he identified it as the feeling he had heard other men describe as “love”. And then he knew he had to do something about it.

Coming in one afternoon, dark with the threat of rain, Irinya paused at the foot of the stairs. The library door stood ajar, and from within came voices raised in argument.

“- and I cannot lie idle while every day that passes increases the danger!” Gyrdan was saying. “Oh, never mind that, Fastred! My arm is healed, and the ride to Fairhaven is neither difficult nor dangerous -”

“We’ve been through all that!” Fastred cut in. “Wait until the spring. You will never get the King to move in winter -”

“It’s only November!”

“It would be mid-month by the time you could even get an audience with the King. And then there would be the muster, and the march -”

“I’m not looking for an army of thousands!”

“This King is a cautious general. You know that. Three to one superiority, he’ll insist on -”

“This King is no general at all, as you well know. It’s about time he learned that war doesn’t obey rules like - like clockwork! So many thousand men, such and such a proportion of cavalry to infantry to archers, such a type of terrain, such a season - Doesn’t he remember the old King’s motto ‘It isn’t done to campaign in winter, therefore do it’?”

“He’s heard tales of the march across Dunaven Pass -”

“I *remember* the march of Dunaven Pass! Only twelve hundred of us got through out of over three thousand, all right, but it was twelve hundred more than they were expecting, and they have given Billand no trouble since! The old King knew the difference between risk and recklessness.”

“Well, this one is cut of a different cloth. It’s no good, Gyrdan.”

“It’s no good waiting here til spring, either. This is no fortress.”

“So we’ll take her to Fairhaven -”

Her! How *dared* they! She clenched her fists and began counting to ten.

“No, she is no safer at court -”

Irinya was no further than three, but kicked open the door and marched in.

“As this concerns *me*, perhaps you would have the courtesy to include me in the discussion!”

Gyrdan stopped his pacing and opened his mouth to speak. Fastred got up from his chair, looking abashed but evidently determined to pour oil on troubled waters.

“Now, Lady Irinya, this is not a topic for ladies -”

She slammed the door shut.

“- really not something you need worry your -”

“My head is neither little nor pretty,” she snapped, “and it has been worried with far weightier matters than have ever concerned *yours*, my lord!”

Fastred sagged.

“And *you*,” she turned on Gyrdan, who was trying to hide a smile, “I had not thought it of you! Plotting secretly, behind my back, in this underhand manner -”

“There is no plot, lady,” he said mildly. “And I came seeking you an hour back, but could not find you.”

“Well I am here now. And I am listening!”

He ran a hand through his hair as he always did when weary.

“I wish there was something to tell. But you do not want to hear two hours of futile argument.”

“You can tell me what you were arguing about. What is the danger you fear?”

“Now, lady, there is no need to be alarmed -” Fastred began, and fell silent under the stare of two pairs of steely eyes.

“Ash Dene is close to Errendale,” Gyrdan said. “The boundary runs along the crest of the hills beyond the house.”

“So near? I did not realise. Whose lands do we border?”

“I don’t know. Fastred - where’s that map?”

He swept aside the tea things on the low table and spread it out.

“Ash Dene, Ash Dene - here it is! Here are the pine woods, and the hills rising to the watershed.”

Irynya took a seat at his side.

“This wide plateau?”

“Exactly. And the border is as ill-defined as you would expect in such country.”

“And then it drops away again, and this valley snakes off, so.” She ran her finger over the map and stopped, tapping. “Higher Sutton. Frealaf. Elder brother of Guthrum son of Guthlaf, whom you remember, Gyrdan?”

“Frealaf is Radwulf’s man, I take it?”

“Like most of the Lowland barons, he cares most for his own aggrandisement. But he is no friend to me. He is ruthless and violent, and he delights in cruelty.” Her voice dropped. “He was one of the six.”

“No Carlundian lord would dare trespass into Billand!” Fastred broke in, not understanding the reference. “It would be an act of war!”

“*If* the culprits were caught,” Gyrdan argued. “Look at this country! Miles of uninhabited land, and those woods to hide in, and Ash Dene quite unprotected. A

small band of determined men could sweep down and seize as the eagle snatches a lamb. The King is cautious. Do you think he would risk war for border reiving? Irinya is not his subject, remember. A protest, maybe, at most. And Radwulf would apologise for his unruly subjects and promise due punishment, and there would be an end of it.”

“You are imagining the danger, my friend. No pursuit has followed you here.”

“Yes, Radwulf believes we both died in Hell Ghyll,” Irinya said. “And with me dead, he may take such wife as he chooses. The Lady Alina may yet be the mother of kings. He will have proclaimed my death to all of Carlundy by now. Why should any think to look for me here?”

“You speak truly. And if it were not for that, we should have had no choice but to flee to Fairhaven as soon as you were fit to ride and not lingered here, pleasant though it has been. But, lady, your reputation is spreading. People far and wide speak of the foreign lady at Ash Dene. And because the staff listened at the door that evening, we have not been able to keep your name or your story secret. I do not say the peril is immediate. But sooner or later, rumour will reach Radwulf’s ears, and he will start to guess. And then I would not answer for your safety.”

“You think he would dare?” Fastred asked incredulously.

“There is a streak of recklessness in all the Ingeldsons,” Irinya said quietly. “And in Radwulf it has not been tempered by adversity. He would risk all on one throw to gain something he desired.”

Any other woman, Gyrdan thought, would have simpered, *Radwulf would do anything for my sake*. He looked at her strong clear profile, outlined against the panelling as on a cameo, and thought of her fine courage and her fortitude, her generosity and her kindness, and then he remembered the feel of her body relaxed in his arms, her head against his shoulder, her hand in his -

He became aware that Fastred had asked him something.

“Sorry?”

“I *said*, shouldn’t we go to Fairhaven immediately and wait out the winter there? We could work on the King, too. He’ll take some persuading, I can tell you that.”

Gyrdan dragged his thoughts back to the present, and shook his head.

“No. I think not. The danger is different there but none the less real.”

Irinya turned to him, her skirt brushing his knee, and the light of her eyes pierced him through like a rapier, and her voice thrilled his bones.

“What danger? Explain.”

He sprang up and began to pace the room. Like a caged panther, Irinya thought, and wondered why she had never thought that before.

“I don’t know, exactly,” he said slowly. “And I know I should not be speaking of this, but I gave no promise. Fastred, you remember the Chancellor called me down last winter?”

“And you would tell nobody what for. Yes, I remember. I assumed he wanted you to go out East again.”

“Not this time. He was concerned with Carlundy. His spies monitor the arms markets in Fairhaven - that is no secret, it would be foolish if he did not - and for two years the volume of trade has been too high for comfort. The Varends of Isgar must be growing very fat. And last winter he traced the source of demand - though not accurately, for his spy never returned. Someone in Carlundy is stockpiling weapons on a grand scale.”

“Radwulf’s army, obviously,” said Fastred.

Gyrdan snorted. “Their weapons are not dwarf-make! That sentry’s sword shattered after a few minutes’ fighting! A Varend would be as ashamed of that as a mother of an ill-mannered child.”

“The smugglers, then?” Irinya asked. “We saw them -”

“They may well be the means, but not the end. When their captain says a small army, he means fifty men. The weapons flowing north from Fairhaven could arm thousands.”

“Then that can only mean - rebellion.”

“Exactly.”

“Who?”

“That is what the Chancellor wanted to know.”

“Then you were spying after all!” she said angrily.

“No, lady, I was not. I refused the commission.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“I do. When has either of us lied to the other?”

Her angry gaze wavered a little.

“Why did you refuse?”

“I owe allegiance to no man,” he said. “But I do not forget my mother’s bloodline. The King may have my sword for his shilling a week, for I have had much kindness from Billand, but my heart is in my mother’s country. I was in Carlundy on my own business.”

“Which was?”

He ceased pacing.

“My own business.”

Their eyes met and held, sparring for dominance as of old. Politics is a powerful antidote to passion. And yet her eyes were deep and clear as sunlight on a moorland pool, and his grey and cool as the moonlit sea...

Fastred broke the spell by demanding, “Well? Who is it, then?”

Irina turned in her seat and gazed into the fire, and Gyrdan resumed his pacing.

“Oh, come on,” Fastred insisted. “If we could assure him of a rising in support, the King might get a lot less cautious -”

Gyrdan lifted his shoulders.

“I do not know.” He glanced at Irina. “This is dangerous ground.”

“Aye, my friend, I know,” she said heavily. “I do not seek to plunge my land into civil war. And yet - if it is already brewing - and if there is something worth fighting for -”

The atmosphere lightened perceptibly.

“I had thought it might be your kinsmen,” Gyrdan suggested. “The Eormenicsons of Buchart. It is certainly someone in the Black Hills.”

“All rebellions begin there. But I do not think Buchart could support such an expenditure. And Eomund, in theory, is the next heir. I cannot see the Highlanders staging a rebellion for him, but Radwulf will watch Buchart like a cat at a mousehole.” She began to twist her hair in her fingers, frowning, and Gyrdan stumbled over the edge of the rug. “Hygurd has the wealth, but he is Radwulf’s man. And though many of the Highland clans must have cause to hate Radwulf, individually they are small -”

“An alliance?” Fastred said, hopefully, and the others laughed.

“Among Highlanders? Every Highlander claims Arderin descent, but none is of the great royal house. It follows that every family claims superiority over the others. They fight like rats in a sack.”

“Put any two hillmen together, and you will get three incompatible opinions,” Gyrdan added. “I doubt they can even agree that the sun rises in the east.”

“It might have been Hygaran, before he died,” Irina said, with more decision. “That would fit. He was of high descent, coming of Irdil son of Iona daughter of Bethoc the warrior-lord, and he never forgot it. He was ever Radwulf’s enemy. I fear he only kept his estates because Radwulf knew they would eventually pass to Hygurd. As they now have.”

“If that is so, there is no hope from that quarter,” Fastred said. “Hygurd will turn over any arms to Radwulf, if I have understood you aright.”

“If he knows where they are,” Irinya said. “Father and son were long estranged. Hygurd is Radwulf’s lieutenant, and that was bitter to his father’s pride.”

There was a long, thoughtful silence. It was Fastred who broke it.

“Anyway, fascinating though this is, I do not see what bearing it has on Lady Irinya’s reception at court.”

“Do you not?” Irinya said, softly.

“Look,” Gyrdan said. “The King - or his Chancellor, which is the same thing - is concerned about developments in Carlundy. He does not much like Radwulf’s rule, for there is a constant trickle of refugees over the border and the taxation restricts trade. But both problems would be hugely compounded in civil war. Stability is his objective, under any ruler. He is more likely to help Radwulf quash a rebellion than to support one. The last thing he wants is a power struggle on his northern border. There are enough problems in the East. Lady Irinya is a dangerous threat, as long as she is free. I did not bring her here to exchange one prison for another.”

“But she is rightful heir to Carlundy! He would be honour-bound to help!”

“Oh, Fastred,” Irinya said wistfully. “He is honour-bound to put his people first.”

“But to refuse help to a lady in distress! I should despise him for that!”

“I should despise him if he did not,” Irinya said. “Fastred, high courage and a swift temper are virtues in a young lord, and I admire you for them. But in a ruler they are vices as dangerous as cowardice and greed. A ruler must not risk the well-being of his country for his own personal desires. The greatest good of the greatest number must be his goal, even if it means one individual must suffer.”

“There is a second possibility, too,” Gyrdan said. “I do not know whether the King would consider it. But I guess he would not be averse to turning Carlundy into a vassal province. And that is why I will not have you ask him for a great army. Once in, they may be hard to dislodge.”

“Save at the promise of unbreakable alliance,” Irinya said bitterly. “And I have no desire to be forced into a second marriage!”

There was a break in Gyrdan’s even stride, but his back was turned and his face hidden. Fastred did not notice.

“No, you misjudge the King, I am sure -!”

“Fastred, if I were a simple damsel I might throw myself on the King’s mercy and trust to his good nature. But I am Ingeld’s daughter, and therefore not a woman but a queen on a chessboard. Never forget that.”

“Then what are we to do?” Fastred asked. “It seems there is danger if you go to court, and danger if you stay here -”

“A chessboard is beset with dangers,” she answered, with the hint of a smile. “It does not mean there is no move to make.”

“And the queen is the most powerful piece,” Gyrdan said. He threw himself into a chair by the fire and slung one ankle over the other knee, leaning back and steeping his fingers.

“Let us take thought. You are safe enough here, Irinya, as long as Radwulf does not know of your presence. And there are miles of bleak moor between the people of Ash Dene and those of Higher Sutton. Rumour must travel the long way, by the Jaws of Errendale and the Giants’ Road, before it comes to Radwulf’s ears. And his own tolls restrict news as well as trade. We may wait here a good while yet. But we cannot wait in idleness!”

“Neither can we well choose a course in ignorance of the opposing strategy,” Irinya said. “Radwulf I have sparred with for twelve long years and I know his game by now. But of your King I know nothing.”

“Nor I,” Gyrdan said, heavily. “I may have misjudged him. I do not know how he would react. He may yet be willing to support you, on a small scale that he can deny if you fail. With money maybe, or officers and equipment. Maybe even with a small force. Though I still say you should not go near the spider until we know his intentions! A guest may too easily become a prisoner.”

“But may we not shake the spider’s web? You say he is no friend to Radwulf. If he were approached by one of his lords, with suggestion of rebellion in Carlundy - under a leader friendly to Billand, of course - might we not learn much from his reaction?”

She turned to Fastred.

“Oh, no!” he said, alarmed. “It takes a subtler head than mine to play chess at this level!”

“He will pay no attention to a woman,” Gyrdan said, as she was about to speak again. “I can tell you that now. To say nothing of your own peril.” He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “I cannot reach the King, but I could gain audience with the Chancellor, to make my report -”

“I thought you refused his commission?” Fastred interrupted.

“I have been known to change my mind. And I doubt he has any more reliable source. Many spies have been sent into Carlundy, but few have come out. I could intimate the possibility of a revolt which, if successful, would know how to be

grateful to those who lent support. If I am careful, it should be possible to suggest that I know more than I do, and that more information could be obtained - for a price. He may well rise to that bait. If he does not, we have our answer.”

“It is a delicate task,” Irinya said, slowly. “Yet I believe you could do it. The Chancellor’s policy is the King’s, is it?”

“You could not get a sheet of paper between them,” Fastred said, decidedly.

“And you, Gyrdan? It is a risk -”

“He is a practical man. He will not break a useful tool.”

“Then that is decided!” Fastred announced. “I will lend you horses, and you must use my house in town -”

“Hold hard, my friend,” Gyrdan said quietly. “Have a care for your own position. You owe allegiance to the King -”

“I have heard nothing treasonable,” Fastred said cheerfully. “I am merely giving shelter to a lady in distress, as any chivalrous gentleman would do, and speeding the Chancellor’s agent on his way. How can anyone object to that? When will you leave?”

Gyrdan stood up.

“No time like the present.”

“So soon?” Irinya said, and broke off leaving the rest of the sentence, whatever it was, unsaid.

“The moon is near full, and the clouds are breaking. I can be well on my way by morning. Never mind about dinner, Fastred. I can eat as I ride. I will be packed in a few minutes.”

He made to go to Irinya, and thought better of it.

“Farewell, lady,” he said, and strode out of the room.

Chapter 12.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Rosie,” Irinya said, giving up on her fourth attempt to read *The Art of Mountain Warfare* - Fastred’s library was somewhat limited. “I can’t seem to settle to anything.”

“No, miss.”

“I hope I’m not sickening for something.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, miss,” Rosie said, smiling secretly and thinking: I know what’s wrong with you, and I know what the cure is, too.

“It’s stopped raining. I think I’ll go out for a walk.”

“Down to the road, miss?”

Irinya shot a glance at her, but Rosie’s golden head was bowed innocently over her sewing.

“No. Down through the oak woods and over the meadow. Well - I might come back up the road.”

“Very good, miss.”

All of Ash Dene watched her walk briskly over the lawns, and all smiled secretly. Rosie simply hoped her mistress would be happy. Fastred was constructing an elaborate best man’s speech. Marigold hoped to be picked as a bridesmaid so she could have a new dress. Wootton went to check if the best wine would go round and ordered two more cases to be on the safe side. Cook worked out a dinner menu and a seating plan. Violet wondered shyly if the Captain would ask her to dance and hoped she wouldn’t trip over her feet if he did. Mistress Poll assessed the width of the lady’s hips and wondered if twelve children would be asking too much. Only Corin skulked and glowered. He was jealous.

Irinya strolled idly through the carpet of leaves. A squirrel chattered angrily from a high branch, and a blackbird shouted his warning to the whole woodland. Irinya paid them no heed. She was not seeing the woods or the wildlife, not feeling the feeble sun or the chill damp. Her mind was busy with a tall spare figure, a deep gentle voice, cool grey eyes, a craggy, unhandsome face. She saw him settled in his chair after dinner, the endless legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, his hair falling across his forehead, gleaming darkly in the firelight. She thought of sitting with him during the endless hours wrestling with Fastred’s accounts; so *close*, their chairs touching, his shoulder against hers -

She drew her cloak tighter around her as a shiver went down her spine. Perhaps she *was* sickening for something. That would explain this strange restlessness, this peculiar empty, hungry feeling. She pushed swiftly through the eaves of the wood, brambles plucking unheeded at her skirt, and swished into the deep wet grass of the meadow. Twenty minutes' brisk walk and she would be back in time for lunch. Then there was the infusion of foxglove she had promised Rosie's grandmother, that must be ready by now, and she could call on Hob One-tooth on her way, the old man always liked company, and then she had meant to check on the Potters' barn in Fox's Hollow, because from a distance it really did look as though that north wall was about to cave in. And young Primula the smith's wife must be near her time by now. And Violet the scullery maid had been looking uncommonly pale and pinched of late. Maybe it was mere loneliness, but she was of an age to have begun the monthly flux, and Irinya remembered the grey dragging misery she had suffered herself in the first years. Willow tea might help, and maybe Mistress Poll could be persuaded to let the girl keep to light duties in the warm for a couple of days -

So much to do. She tried to keep her mind on the subject. Rosie's grandmother. Old Hob. Fox's barn in Potters' - no, Potters' barn in Fox's Hollow - What would it be like to be kissed by Gyrdan?

Stop that, she said to herself, hastily. Now, then. Potters' barn. Young Primula - So she had yielded to her husband at least once and, it seemed, gladly. Perhaps the child might compensate for much. But was - it - different if you loved the man? From Rosie's chatter it seemed it might be. It even seemed that some women could actually enjoy it. Perhaps at least it might not hurt. Or not very much. Not *as* much.

She crossed the rest of the meadow at a run and scrambled over the gate into the road. Rosie's grandmother. Hob. Potters' barn. Then all these tasks scattered like chaff before a rising gale.

A lone horseman was coming up the road.

He was only a speck in the distance, but she was absolutely certain who he was. Never mind that Fastred had said he would not be back from Fairhaven before Friday. Nobody else had that particular economical style of riding that could be kept up for hour after hour, day after day. Nobody else had just that squareness of shoulder, just that set of the head.

Without conscious thought, she turned right instead of left and hastened to meet him, walking at first but then breaking into a trot and finally into a run.

The rider dismounted as she approached - and nobody else had that lithe, athletic grace - and ran to greet her. To her delighted astonishment, he caught her as they met and swung her up into the air as though she had been a child.

“Put me down!” she protested, through breathless laughter. “Please!”

Gyrdan did so - but he did not take his hands from her waist.

“I’m so glad to see you!” he said.

“You are two days early.” She was trying to sound severe, but her voice seemed to have developed a will of its own. His hands were warm and strong on her waist. And he was so near - so very near -

“Then why did you come looking for me?”

Even the little scullery maid would have known to say, huffily, that she was only out for a walk, and had just happened to pass that way, and had certainly never given him a thought since he left. But, though twelve years married and twice betrothed, Irinya had never been courted. So she knew no better than to say,

“I missed you! I missed you so much!”

He pulled her to him then, and his mouth closed over hers.

She had always hated being kissed - hot and slimy, coarse and violent, the questing tongue presaging another invasion. But this time was different. She did not understand how, or why - all she knew was that she wanted to stay in his arms for ever.

Perhaps first love is like fine wine, all the sweeter for long storage. Certainly for these two, though long beyond ardent youth - indeed, neither had ever really been young - that day stood out as an island of happiness in a sunless sea.

For Irinya, it held out promise of a joy she had never imagined existed. Long ago, when he had helped her on that first wild flight, the touch of his hands had brought with it a thrill that was mostly fear. Later, the fear had been replaced by trust and friendship, and his arms had been a haven of comfort amidst danger. And now that friendship had finally ripened into love, instead of shying away from his embraces, she could return them. She could lose her fingers in his thick hair, following its springing waves as she had often wished to do. She could let him unclip her hair and pour it through his hands, lift it to his lips and kiss it. She could nestle in his arms, and as they kissed and she felt his body stir against her it was not fear that welled up inside her but a strange hungry fire she had never known before.

That afternoon lasted a thousand years, and yet it was over in an instant.

It was after sunset before they finally wandered back to Ash Dene. Fastred came out to meet them, the anxious reproach to Irinya for her absence dying on his lips as the obvious explanation suggested itself. Yet he also refrained from ribald congratulation, seeing something troubled, even strained, in their faces.

They spoke little at dinner, all Fastred's attempts at conversation falling on inhospitable ground. He grew puzzled, wondering if his conjecture was wrong. He considered himself a man of some experience, having fallen in love himself roughly twice a year since the age of fifteen, and lovers did not behave like this. He had met the ardent, the passionate, the guilty, the tender and the plain silly, but he had never before met gloomy lovers.

"I am weary," Gyrdan sighed, sinking into a chair in the library after dinner. Fastred wondered if he had consciously selected the seat furthest from Irinya.

"You have ridden far, and fast to get back here so soon," he pointed out. "I was not expecting you until Friday at least. Were you successful? With the Chancellor," he added hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, the Chancellor," Gyrdan said, as though recalling something from years ago. "I do not know. I still have my head, so I suppose that can be counted as success."

"Did you learn anything?" Fastred prodded, as his friend relapsed back into morose silence. "Come on, I know you will have told Lady Irinya the details, but you will just have to repeat them all to me. Will he offer help?"

Gyrdan drew a deep breath, as though marshalling his thoughts.

"He would make an excellent card player! Two meetings I had with him, and little of note from either of them. He displays cautious interest, but absolutely no enthusiasm. That does not surprise me, nor would it alone dishearten me. But I am convinced there will be no help from that quarter." He looked away, and went on, his tone carefully expressionless, "Radwulf has an envoy in Fairhaven. Negotiating for marriage with the King's sister."

"*What?*" gasped Fastred, incredulous. "The envoy told you that?"

"No, *he* was as tight as a clam, as all good envoys should be." There was a glint in the grey eyes now that was more like the old Gyrdan. "But I did not entirely waste my time while he was closeted with the Chancellor! His esquire was at a loose end, just as I was. What more natural than that I should show him the many delights of the city? By the sixth tavern he was my bosom friend, and by the time we were thrown out of the Sailor's Rest -"

“You got thrown out of *there*? Good grief, what were you doing?”

“Don’t ask. For sheer inventiveness you can’t match a young man of impeccable family and sheltered upbringing. Where was I?”

“Face down in the dock, I should think.”

“Oh, yes. Well, by then I had the whole story.”

“The marriage must be stopped!” Irinya interjected. “The girl -”

“Is a twice-widowed dowager, older than you and with even fewer illusions,” Gyrdan said. “But have no fear. Radwulf’s reputation has preceded him, and the King is dragging his feet. Although he has indicated that another alliance might be found, and rumour has it that there are some high-born ladies who are not averse to the idea!” He glanced at Fastred. “Your sister for one, Fastred. The elder. Her husband is ailing - not expected to last the week, I hear - and she is angling for a glittering match to outdo Eloise Countess Marchbourn.”

“Quite possible,” Fastred said. “Avela had her eye on Marchbourn herself, and never forgave Eloise for landing him first. She only married old Harkerness in a fit of pique. But you didn’t learn that from the esquire.”

“No scandal stays hidden from servants for long. You don’t appreciate how useful an hour loafing in a marketplace can be, Fastred. But never mind that. The point is that Radwulf is negotiating for an alliance by marriage with Billand, and he is being taken seriously. It is both good news and bad.” He began checking off points on his fingers. “One: Radwulf is evidently unsure of his position, enough to want the security of a foreign alliance. Two: he is also utterly convinced that he is a widower, and free to marry again. But three: the King thinks Radwulf is worth supporting.” He sighed, wearily. “The Chancellor was most interested in my tale of fomenting rebellion in Carlundy, though I told him no more than he knew already. But his questions were angled to crushing dissent, not supporting it.”

“The marriage,” Irinya insisted. “It would not be legal. Fastred, you must dissuade your sister somehow.”

“Avela can look after herself,” Fastred said, lazily.

“Against Radwulf?” She broke off, her voice catching.

“You may set your mind at rest, Irinya,” Gyrdan said. “I have achieved that, at least. The King is not yet convinced of the wisdom of alliance with Radwulf. He wants the freedom to trim his sails to the prevailing wind. He will not let any noble kinswoman wed Radwulf while there is any possibility of revolt; an alliance with a sinking ship is not what he has in mind. But,” he added heavily, “that also means he

is interested in shoring up Radwulf's rule if at all possible. He is more likely to offer you imprisonment than support."

"So what's our next move?" Fastred asked.

"I cannot think of one," Irinya said, slowly. "Gyrdan?"

He shook his head.

"Checkmate."

Sleep eluded Irinya that night. For a while she sat at her window, gazing unseeing over the moonlit gardens, her mind seething with rejected plans, and then she gave up and crept downstairs. The tall window in the library gave access into the garden without unbarring the heavy front door, and she stepped out onto the terrace, hoping the cool air would help her think.

Someone else had had the same idea.

The smile came unbidden to her lips and voice.

"You should be asleep."

"I am weary, but I cannot sleep," he answered, and his voice had a tenseness she had not heard before.

She went to him and he took her in his arms again, casting a fold of his cloak over her shoulders so that they shared its shelter.

"It is really true, then?" he said unsteadily, "I had begun to think I was dreaming, or out of my mind -"

"If you are, then I am dreaming the same dream -"

They did not speak again for many minutes.

That strange warmth kindled in her body again, a steadily rising fire that consumed all the oxygen and made her gasp for breath. She clung closer to him, understanding nothing but conscious only of a great need to touch and be touched.

He murmured her name between kisses, and endearments, "My sweet. My darling. My love."

And she answered him in kind.

A shriek rent the night, savage and terrifying, the cry of the damned, and she shrank from it.

"Sweet, it is nothing, only a screech owl -"

But the spell had been broken, and she kept him now at a distance.

"In the Black Hills we say it is the cry of a lost soul. No - no, no more. Keep away. It cannot be, Gyrdan - it cannot be -"

“Yes it can,” he said fiercely. “I love you, and you love me. That cannot be denied. Let us wed, sweet. It is late in our lives, but it is not too late -”

She did not answer.

“Iryna - my love - will you? Will you marry me?”

“No - I cannot - I cannot! I am already married -”

“By force! No vow is valid if given under duress! And you have broken most of your vows already - you have fled your husband, you are plotting war against him -”

“For Carlundy! Not for myself. Oh, Gyrdan, I love you, I love you! I long to yield - for I believe I want you, as much as you want me -”

She got no further for several minutes.

“But it cannot be so - for even if I am not Radwulf’s wife - I *am* Ingeld’s daughter - and while Radwulf rules in Carlundy there is no peace for me -”

“There are many places where Radwulf’s writ does not run. Even if you are not safe in Billand, we will go somewhere far beyond his reach. Swansey, on the trade route to Isgar. Or take ship from Fairhaven, to some strange land where none will ever know who you are. It will be a hard life - but, sweet, we will be together.”

“You mistake me. I would it were so easy! My love, do you think *I* care for hardship? But I cannot flee my own shadow. Iryna would follow you to the end of the world - but Ingeld’s daughter belongs to Carlundy.”

“Carlundy!” he snarled. “You are well rid of that accursed land! Have you not suffered enough already?”

“There is one who suffered more,” she answered. “And many others who suffer still. Hedric, and those like him, driven into exile. Widows and fatherless children who mourn their men. The whole country, it seems, crying out for aid in one long silent scream too loud to be heard. I cannot abandon them, as long as there is any hope -”

“What hope?” he said bitterly. “None will give you aid. Face it, Iryna. You are a queen with one loyal pawn, and you are beaten. Give up. Forget the past, and let us build a new life together -”

“However far or fast we run, the shadow of the past will always be there before us. There are some things that cannot be escaped.”

He was silent.

“Oh, don’t you see? There is no such thing as a new beginning. I cannot abandon my duty. I *cannot*.”

“Then stay, if you must - but let me stay with you -”

“And *that* would truly be the end of all hope. How could I expect men to fight and die for me, if I behave like a street-slut?”

“You scorn me for *politics*?”

“Oh, Gyrdan,” she begged, “do not torture me!”

“*I* torture *you*!” he began, savagely, and then relented. “Three days I will stay here. At the end of that time I will leave, and whether it is to hope or to despair is your choice. But I give you my word, I will not speak of this again.”

Corin greeted his idol rapturously, delighted to have him to himself again, and Gyrdan apathetically accepted the boy’s irritating company, as a man on the rack might accept a mosquito bite. Corin was first resentful at Gyrdan’s gloomy silences and preoccupied expression, then hurt, then angry. *She* was taking his hero away from him, and making him miserable into the bargain. Like the mermaids who lured sailors to their deaths and figured large in the lurid tales told by Mrs Wootton, a fisherman’s daughter who had lost a father and three uncles to the sea and considered army life kind by comparison.

The rest of the staff were disappointed and puzzled.

“She’s refused ‘im,” Marigold said. “What’s she want to do that for?”

“Maybe she’s playin’ with ‘im,” Cook said, doubtfully. “Fine ladies does that.”

“She wouldn’t never do no such thing!” Rosie said indignantly.

“Well, what’s goin’ on then? Look at the way ‘e looks at ‘er! She must ‘ave a heart o’ stone not to be moved by that.”

“Maybe ‘e’s asked ‘er an’ she’s thinkin’ about it,” Violet suggested, unwilling to give up her imagined romance.

“Well, I wish she’d make ‘er mind up quick,” Wootton said. “I never saw the Captain look so ill an’ unhappy, not even on the retreat from -”

“But she’s miserable too!” Rosie broke in, interrupting Wootton’s reminiscences.

“She don’t show it.”

“Yes she does, Mags, jus’ you’re too stupid to notice!”

“Oh, stupid, am I?”

The sisters fell to bickering, and the subject stayed unresolved.

Those three days seemed to stretch out for ever. Gyrdan had never hoped that his love would be returned. He had thought of it as another misfortune to bear, and had gone to Fairhaven in the hope - unfulfilled - that distance would provide a cure. To find that Irinya loved him too had been a pinnacle of joy as intense as it was brief.

And then to be rejected after all had plunged him into an abyss of despair he had seldom known before. He was like a prisoner who after long years in a dungeon hears the shutters being unbarred, but instead of light and air the chink admits a deadly dart to smite him to the heart. Like a man who has wandered years in a burning desert and is offered a clear draught of water, only to have it snatched from his lips and left with a thirst a hundred times fiercer than before. He did not beg her to relent, because he knew it would be to no avail, and he did not torment her with reproaches, because he loved her and he would spare her that. But it did not stop him watching her through dark anguished days, or dreaming of her through long delirious nights.

Irynya felt the same. But she was more practised in hiding her feelings. Her iron control, forged in days of peril and despair when maintaining her dignity had been all that was left to her, kept her outwardly calm. Rosie was the only one who sensed some of her inner agony. The others thought her cruel. Fastred thought her cold, watching Gyrdan watching her. And Corin hated her for making his hero unhappy, hated her with all the intensity of a child's simple heart.

"It is the third day, Irynya," was all Gyrdan said to her, as she left the library on the last evening. "In the morning I shall be gone."

She turned at the door. She stood a long moment looking at him, fixing his image in her mind, as though she were trying to store away the memory to sustain her through the rest of her life. Her hand shook on the door post. For the space of a heartbeat the decision hung by a hair. And then she said, quietly,

"Fare you well, friend. I shall not forget you."

The whisper of her silk dress was the sigh of lost souls. The light footfall on the stairs was the heavy tread of approaching doom. The click of the door was the slam of the gate of hell.

Gyrdan turned out the lamp and buried his face in his hands.

Long hours crawled by.

Gyrdan had survived grief before. He had lived, after a fashion, before he knew Irynya, and he would go on living, after a fashion, without her. Hearts did not break, whatever the poets said. The misery did not last for ever. It faded, like the pain from a wound, and the heart constructed scar tissue and repaired its shell. And meantime, life went on. Whether he liked it or not.

He lifted his head. Stiff and weary, he felt his way up the stairs in the dark. In his room, he lit candles and began to pack, his hands moving automatically without needing input from his brain. There was comfort in the mundane chores of a thousand departures, as if this were only another camp, to be pitched, and struck, and left without a backward glance.

The trip to Fairhaven had given him an opportunity to replace the travelling gear he had lost at Mickleburg - he would not be able to afford inns for long, even if he could find them. He packed a cooking pot, a couple of blankets, a small hatchet for firewood, a water bottle, a few tools. Then spare clothes, carefully sorting out the plain, serviceable garments made for him during his stay, and leaving Fastred's elegant tailoring folded tidily away. He washed, shaved, packed the razor and the comb, but left the hairbrush, which looked expensive. He adjusted the straps of the bag so it could be carried on the shoulders - he had no right to take a horse and was not going to. He buckled his sword-belt around his waist, and the familiar weight was reassuring, like the hand of an old friend. He filled his pockets and belt pouch with the few possessions that had survived his arrest - the old clasp-knife, flint and steel, his worn leather purse, a pipe also bought in Fairhaven, his tobacco pouch.

This last felt strange. It weighed oddly in his hand, and he looked down at it, puzzled. Had he picked up the wrong pouch by mistake? It looked all right, if curiously lumpy. He unrolled it.

And there it lay, as much a shock as if he had found a snake. Irinya's letter to her cousins, written in another life. The writing on the outside was still clear, the seal still unbroken. Like a stillborn child, it had never had a life. It would never now be read, its reason to exist overtaken by circumstances. He remembered watching her write it, when she had been no more than an abstract to him, a 'lady' with little more life than a carven statue.

He rolled it back into his pouch and thrust it deep into his pocket. Other men cherished painted miniatures, or locks of hair, or trinkets. He had never before understood why.

He flung on his cloak in haste, snuffed the candles, and strode for the door. Such was his agitation that he did not notice that the brooch was not his own but one borrowed from Fastred weeks earlier.

In the corridor, he stopped, waiting for his eyes to get used to the darkness. Irinya's room was to his right, and within he heard three quick steps. Then three

quick steps back again, and a low sound, neither a moan nor a sob but something in between.

To Gyrdan that sound said everything. She too was fighting temptation. She too felt the pain of separation. There was only a door between them, and he knew it would not be locked. He had only to turn the handle, had only to go to her and take her in his arms, and in her sorrow and hunger she would yield to him.

His fingers laid hold of the handle. The polished wood was smooth and warm to the touch. He gripped it - but he did not turn it. Perhaps it was his innate decency that held him back, that would not let him take advantage of a woman as lonely as himself. Or perhaps it was another, a more selfish reason. For his insight could see beyond immediate gratification. She would yield, yes, of that he was absolutely certain. But it would not truly be of her will. She would regret it bitterly, and the guilt would gnaw at her, and she would come to hate herself and then him. For it would mean giving up her ambitions for Carlundy. She was right about that, and he knew it, and she knew he knew it. If Hedric and the other exiles were ever to fight for her, it could only be because they saw her as a symbol of a better life. Why should they risk their hard-won lives to depose one cruel and capricious ruler, only to replace him with a woman carrying her own guilty secret?

Anger boiled up inside him. Oh, very noble! Very virtuous, to deny herself love for some higher purpose. But love was a two-way contract, not some private vice. What of the man she also denied? Had he no rights or feelings? Did he count for nothing?

He was seeing the core of steel in her soul again, but this time it was *his* will she was crossing. And now he understood something of the intense frustration Radwulf must have felt. Twelve years of this! It was enough to drive a man mad.

He clenched his fists, and his head cleared and his pounding heart slowed to normal. It was only her plans for Carlundy that stood between them. Very well. Let her try. The King would give her no aid. Without arms and officers a hundred farmhands could achieve nothing. Fastred's patronising chivalry would be no help. In six months, in a year, in two, she would have to give up. She would have to abandon the hopeless cause. A queen without a kingdom, she would shrivel like a rootless plant. Bereft of hope and ambition, she would break. And then, oh, yes, then she would be grateful for his love.

Outside, the air was bitter, and swirling with flakes of snow. A harsh night that matched his mood. Gyrdan set his face to the teeth of the wind, and never once did he look back.

Chapter 13.

“Mr Fastred! Mr Fastred, sir! ‘E’s gone! The Captain’s gone!”

Fastred looked down the long polished table to Irinya, white and silent at the far end.

“Is that true?”

Her voice came as if from the depths of a well.

“Yes. He is gone.”

Corin stamped. “Where? When’s ‘e comin’ back?”

“Never, I hope,” answered the toneless voice.

“What? What’s happened between you, Irinya? He was supposed to marry you!”

The blank eyes lifted and focussed. The voice crackled with pain.

“You mean you *intended* this to happen, Fastred?”

“Well, not like this I didn’t! What’s he done? Oh, gods, no, not that! I wouldn’t have thought it of him!”

“Fastred, were you born bone-headed, or did it take years of practice?”

“Well, I like that -!”

“Had you forgotten, you muddle-headed, tender-hearted, meddling fool, that I am another man’s wife?”

Corin did not stay to listen. He was already flying back up the stairs.

In a few hours, when Mistress Poll and the housemaids had finished with their dusters and their brooms and their clean linen and their dustsheets, the guest room would go back to its pristine anonymity. But for the moment, some trace of the Captain’s presence still lingered there. Little enough, for he was a tidy man and his few possessions had gone with him, but something. The bed, for instance. It had not been slept in, but it was rumpled, perhaps where he had sat. The towel was damp, the washstand was splashed where he had shaved for the last time, and a couple of dark hairs clung forlornly to Mr Fastred’s second-best hairbrush.

Corin picked them off, reverently, and put them away in his pocket.

The clothes cabinet contained Mr Fastred’s third-best blue suit, tidily hung up. Three of the four drawers in the chest were empty. The fourth contained a neatly folded shirt. It belonged to Mr Fastred, as proclaimed by the embroidery on the collar, which was no doubt why it had been left behind. Corin lifted it out of the drawer, as gently as if it had been a bird. Perhaps his idol might have worn it -

A step behind made him jump and turn round guiltily, dropping the shirt onto the bed.

In the doorway stood the woman he thought of only as *Her*.

Corin was too angry and too distraught to recognise a fellow-pilgrim. It was all *Her* fault the Captain had been so unhappy. It was because of *Her* he had gone away. Without even stopping to say good-bye. Tears of rage and self-pity pricked behind his eyes. Everything was *Her* fault -

“Why couldn’t you leave ‘im alone?” he stormed. “Why did you ever ‘ave to come ‘ere? You only ever made ‘im miserable! I *hate* you -”

To his horror he realised his voice was wavering. He couldn’t, he couldn’t cry in front of *Her*.

“I hate you!” he wailed, and flung himself past her, and down the stairs, and away into the hills where he could storm and weep to his heart’s content, alone.

Iryna hardly noticed the light but angry blow that knocked her sideways against the door post. She felt she was being torn to pieces inside.

Blindly, she stumbled across the room and sank down on the bed. If she had come here last night, how different this morning would have been. And the shame of their guilty delight could not, could not *possibly*, have been worse than this gnawing, virtuous agony.

Her eye was caught by the shirt, lying crumpled on the bed where Corin had dropped it. Stiffly, in a dream, she took it up. Yes, Gyrdan had worn it once, for she remembered the feel of the embroidery against her cheek and the linen smooth and warm and living under her hands. The memory sent a fresh pang through her. Would the pain never abate? And how must *he* be feeling now?

Mechanically, she began to smooth the shirt out, intending to fold it neatly and put it away, as though the action could lock away this torrent of feeling she had never known she possessed. Something bright slipped from the folds and fell onto her lap, and without thinking she picked it up.

It was the copper brooch he had used to fasten his cloak. The clasp was broken and the pin missing, she noticed. No doubt he had meant to mend it, and it had been put away safely, and then forgotten in his hurry to leave. She turned it in her fingers, admiring the elegant workmanship, the strong, flowing Highland design. It was as though she had never before realised how beautiful it was. It had belonged to his mother, he had said, and it was all that he had left of her. And now it was all she had left of him.

So Rosie found her. She did not understand what had happened either, or why Gyrdan had gone, or where. But she understood the mute misery in her mistress' stricken face, and her arms and heart went out to her.

Corin stopped crying.

It was not for want of misery. He felt he could weep for the rest of eternity and not exhaust all his anger and sorrow. For this was his first real grief, and it seemed to him greater than anyone in the whole world had ever suffered before. But he seemed to have run out of tears. He sat up, and rubbed his eyes with his hand, and blew his nose on his sleeve. His mother would be angry with him, but just now he felt rather grand in his desolation. A man as miserable as he had every right to blow his nose on his sleeve if he wanted to, and pettifogging womenfolk could go to the devil.

"I hate all women," he muttered.

What was it that Earl Marchbourn had said, when he and Mr Fastred had got very drunk one evening? All women were -

"All women are bitches!" he yelled at the uncaring moors. "A plague on the whole tribe! I hate all women! I hate her! I wish she was dead!"

"A man after my own heart," drawled a voice, close at hand.

Corin's heart jumped into his mouth. He had run a long way in his rage, and he was now further from the house than he had ever been before, right up on the wild moors above the pine-woods, where he had been told never, on any account, to go.

"Cheer up," said the stranger, coming round Corin's rock and sitting down comfortably at his side. "I'm not going to eat you."

He was shorter and much broader than either Mr Fastred or the Captain, with curly brown hair and a broad gipsy grin. Despite the cold he carried his cloak slung over his shoulder, and his coat was open at the throat showing a bronzed, corded neck and the beginnings of a muscular chest thickly furred with curling brown hair. His hands were large and square and glittered with rings, and his belt was of gold and gems.

"Good hunting, sir?" Corin enquired, consciously trying to 'speak proper', and hoping his voice wasn't shaking too much. The man frowned, and then glanced at his crossbow and the hunting knife hanging at his side, and burst into a great hearty guffaw.

"Very clever!" he boomed, slapping his thigh, thick as a tree-trunk in its close-fitting hose. "Very clever, young man! I can see there's not much gets past you. You'll be hunting yourself, I take it?"

Corin began to feel rather pleased with himself, and to think that brigands were rather splendid fellows after all.

“Oh no,” he said airily, as if he could come hunting any time he pleased, “not today. I’m out for a walk. I live down there.”

He pointed in the direction he hoped Ash Dene lay.

“Really?” said the brigand, visibly impressed. “And there was me thinking you a mountain man like myself. A hunter and a trapper, living by his wits.”

Corin was too flattered by this to wonder how a mountain man came by the price of a small estate in personal jewellery.

“I belong to Ash Dene Manor,” he said, in the tone of voice that suggested that *it* belonged to *him*.

“Ah. Ash Dene, is it? I’ve heard of that. A fine place, so I’m told. And be you happy there?”

It was natural to Corin that everybody should have heard of Ash Dene. After all, it was the centre of his universe and no doubt the centre of everyone else’s.

“On the whole, yes,” he said, and then his misery broke through again, and he burst out, “But not now I ain’t! *She* spoiled everythin’ an’ I wish she was dead!”

Sympathy would have made him cry again and then run away, but his new friend said nothing. He took a long-stemmed pipe out of a pocket, filled it with tobacco from his belt-pouch, and then he struck a match casually on the rock and lit it. When he was sure it was drawing properly he offered it to Corin.

“Smoke?”

Corin had never smoked before. His father, who did not smoke, said it was a filthy habit, and Mr Fastred and the Captain, who both did, agreed with him. But he had watched the Captain and knew how it was done. He took a big, deep breath, as befitted a big man with a big sorrow at his heart. The smoke was foul and acrid and stung his mouth and made him feel sick, but he managed not to choke on it, and inhaled again straight away.

The man took his pipe back, apparently without noticing Corin’s spluttering, and puffed on it himself while Corin stopped coughing.

“Tell me about it,” he said.

And Corin did.

His new friend listened in respectful silence until Corin had finished. Then he knocked out his pipe on the rock and refilled it, and offered it to Corin again.

“It’s my belief,” he said slowly, “that you be troubled with a witch in the house.”

Corin was too electrified even to splutter on his next lungful of smoke. A witch! He had been thinking of mermaids, but witches - yes. Witches figured in all the folktales he had ever heard.

“Everybody knows witches don’t exist,” he said, in what he hoped was a worldly wise and off-handed manner. “Can I have another puff of your pipe, please?”

The man handed it over and sat as if thinking hard. Then he turned to Corin.

“Now, I shouldn’t be telling you this,” he said, conspiratorially, “but I know you’re a fine strong man and I can trust you.”

Corin expanded like a flower in the sun. “Man” not “lad”. He began to think he liked this big, bluff man almost as much as his beloved Captain.

The brigand gestured over the wide expanse of moor stretching ahead to unknown territory.

“Now, you’ll be knowing that I come from away yonder. From Carlundy. And it’s true that I’ve been poaching your deer -”

Corin had already worked this out. The cut of his clothes, and a peculiar accent, proved his new friend to be a foreigner, and therefore his hunting gear made him a poacher. But it was decent of him to admit it.

“Oh, that’s all right,” Corin interrupted, anxious to reassure him. “I’m sure Mr - I mean, I’m sure I don’t mind. What’s the odd deer between friends?”

“There’s a generous spirit! But it is not only deer that I hunt.” He looked round and sank his voice to a whisper. “I am hunting a witch! In Carlundy we know witches do exist, and where we find them they are tried and executed. For only with a witch’s death are her spells undone and her slaves made free. And one, the worst of them all, has escaped justice and fled the country, to work her evil in other lands.”

Corin felt his skin prickle into goosepimples.

“What - what will she do?”

“Witches can do anything. There are no bounds to their wickedness. But this one can enslave men. She will choose her victim carefully. A strong man, a good man. And then she will weave a net of enchantment about him. She will lead him into terrible dangers and bitter pain. She will torment him by night and by day. His whole being will be filled with the thought of her, until he can neither sleep nor eat nor rest. Her spells will gnaw his heart within his body, as a maggot gnaws an apple, until only the lifeless shell is left. Hag-ridden, we call it. It is the worst fate that can befall a man.”

Hag-ridden. That was a fair description of how the Captain had looked, those last few days. Corin choked, and not from the pipe this time.

“Can he be saved?”

“Only when the witch is found, and made to recant her spell, and then killed. And I am hunting her. At the end of summer I almost had her - and then she eluded me and fled far away.”

Corin said, slowly, “*She* came from Carlundy. And in fear of some pursuit.”

The hunter’s eyes gleamed.

“When?”

“Two months back, just over. You think *she* -?”

“Describe her.”

“She’s very tall. Taller than you. And thin. And she has darkish brown hair that goes sort of coppery in sunlight, and brown eyes, and a way of looking at you that makes you think she can see right through you and out the other side.”

“Has she a name?”

“Irynya Ingeld’s daughter.”

The hunter caught his breath. “You are certain?”

“Is it her?”

“It may be.” The deep voice was cracked with suppressed excitement. “But these foul creatures have many tricks. We must be certain. Does she bear any token?”

Corin thought hard.

“She’s got a brooch. A big silver falcon with spread wings. She always wears it.”

“Ah-h-h-h!”

“So it *is* ‘er! And she’s cast a spell on the Captain and he’ll *die* -” Corin’s voice broke.

“Courage, friend! There is still hope! You may save him yet. Are you willing to face danger?”

“I’d do anythin’ for the Captain.”

“Then bring that brooch here to me. At this hour, the day after tomorrow. I will bring another man with me. A - a - a wizard. Yes. A white wizard, who knows how this evil may be fought and vanquished. Can you do that?”

Corin squared his shoulders.

“Yes.”

“Take care the witch knows nothing of it. For this may be your friend’s last chance, though he knows it not.”

“She’ll suspect nothing,” Corin said doggedly.

“Good man! Until the day after tomorrow, then -”

“Sir!”

The man turned back.

“What is it?”

“Since I am to help you, I am Corin son of Dorin, of Ash Dene Manor. But I do not know your name.”

“Frealaf son of Guthlaf, of Higher Sutton. Do not fail me, Corin!”

“I will not.”

Nightfall, six days later. A deserted glade on the upper margin of the pine woods, dusted with the first snowfall of winter. But look closer, as the birds and the animals have done, and see why they forage elsewhere this night. In the deep gloom beneath the trees, shadows shift.

Listen. There is too much breathing going on.

Look again, and the shifting shadows resolve suddenly into many horsemen. Mail clinks beneath their cloaks. Spears are grasped in their hands. Silent they sit.

Waiting.

Two are close to the edge of the glade, peering out, listening. One is taller than the other, and his hair glows like a flame. His eyes are blue, wild and staring and yet cold as the ice in the heart of a glacier. In his hand glitters something silver.

“Will the boy bring her?”

“He brought the brooch, Sire.”

“Milady?”

Tapping, quiet but urgent.

“Milady, wake up.”

The door swung open.

“Corin? What is it? Come in. I was not asleep.”

She was still fully dressed. So she had not gone to bed, although it was after midnight. Perhaps it was because he was so keyed up that he noticed how pale and troubled she looked.

She took his hand and led him to a chair.

“Are you in trouble, Corin?”

How very thin and cold her fingers were! There was a shawl round her shoulders. She must have been sitting alone for hours, without even a fire to warm her.

Corin’s resolution faltered. He thought of Frealaf’s face alight with triumph, and of the white wizard’s staring blue eyes, fixed on something that was not quite of this

world, and of the way his hand had closed over the brooch as though he wished to crush it.

And then he took hold of himself and steeled himself to carry on.

“Not me, Milady - it’s the Captain.”

Everything stopped for the space of a missed heartbeat. Her face contracted momentarily, as though at a sudden pang of pain. And then she said, steadily,

“Tell me the worst.”

“‘E’s ‘ere -”

She was on her feet in an instant, her eyes shining.

“Where?”

“On the moors beyond the woods. ‘E sent me to bring you -”

The effect was beyond anything he had hoped for. He had guessed a message from the Captain would tempt her, but he had not expected this sudden transport of joy. Surely a witch could not feel so deeply - ? Once again, he almost relented.

Then she stiffened and tensed, and her voice was sharp with suspicion.

“Why does he not come to the house?”

Corin thought fast, trawling through all the tales he had ever heard.

“‘E can’t. He - he’s been hurt -”

If he had spent a year and a day laying his plans, he could have said nothing more effective. She did not even wait to put on her cloak.

The old Irinya, with instincts for self-preservation honed over twelve years of imprisonment, would have suspected a trap instantly. She would have questioned and probed. How? Where? How badly hurt? How did Corin know? She would have woken half the household and sent other people to bring the injured man home. On no account would she have ventured, alone but for a small boy, out into hostile territory.

But here, surrounded by friends for two months of blissful peace, she had learned to hope again. And to trust. And to love. And so she followed Corin up the long and winding path, and the shadow of the trees fell about them like a shroud.

Rosie yawned as she lit the fire in the kitchen. What an hour to get up! It wasn’t even light yet. And this was the scullery maid’s job, too! Rosie wondered if she could get Miss to persuade Mistress Poll that she was also too ill to light the fires. Then she laughed at herself. She was a generous girl, and poor Shrinking Violet had been looking even peakier than usual yesterday. It wasn’t too bad getting up first

three days a month. Made you appreciate not having to do it for the other twenty-seven.

She poked the fire and threw on a few more logs. Bother! The log basket was nearly empty and she'd have to go out to the wood-pile. And it was snowing outside. Well, these would last a little while, and by then the stable lad might be about. She set the bread to rise and began to sweep the floor, humming to herself.

A commotion in the yard disturbed her. Horses puffing and snorting, the jingle of harness, and masculine laughter. Good. The stable lads must be awake, and her wood was getting low.

There was a sharp rap at the door.

"Anyone awake?" called a man's voice. "Open up, Violet, there's a good girl. It's perishing out here."

Rosie dropped her broom and leapt for the door. She knew that voice.

It was indeed the Captain, very wet and cold and with his cloak caked in snow, but in a high good humour. He fielded her expertly and held her at arm's length.

"You'll get soaked," he said, laughing, and then stooped and kissed her swiftly on both cheeks. Something in her expression made him laugh again and rasp a hand over his chin.

"Sorry. I haven't shaved for three days."

"Who," she said, "cares about that? Sir, it's real good to see you back!"

"It's good to be back. Move out of the doorway, Rosie, I've brought a friend with me -"

"Do I also get a kiss from the prettiest girl in the South?"

The new voice was lighter and spoke with a curious lilting accent, as though its owner were about to break into song. Rosie jumped as she looked at him.

"Sir, you might almost be Milady's brother!"

The two men exchanged glances.

"We are all friends here," Gyrdan reassured his companion.

"Cousin," the newcomer said to Rosie. "Eomer son of Eormenric son of Ingeld Ingeldson the seventeenth Lord of Carlundy, at your service." He paused for breath. "I haven't shaved either," he added hopefully, "but *I've* got a beard."

Rosie transferred her embrace willingly enough. Miss had always spoken well of her cousins.

"I'll make up a fire in the library for you, sir -"

“No, no!” Gyrdan protested. “Imagine what Mistress Poll would say! We have ridden day and night through mire and storm, and we are more fitted to the stables. If we may dry out here, it will be enough.”

“Food would be very welcome, too,” Eomer added. “I have sat on a horse forty-eight hours, and now I could eat one!”

“Cook ain’t up yet, an’ the bread ain’t done,” Rosie began doubtfully, and then rallied. “Never mind! There’s yesterday’s bread in the larder. I’ll make you some toast. An’ there’s eggs, an’ bacon, an’ sausages, an’ ‘arf a cold chicken, an’ a pork pie. An’ I’ll make you pancakes with butter an’ syrup, an’ ‘ot coffee -”

An hour later, both men were comfortably settled in front of the fire. It was blazing now, because between them they had insisted on bringing in enough wood to last most of the day. Rather to their surprise, the snow had not got inside their saddlebags and they had found dry clothes to change into - banishing Rosie from the kitchen first, to her manifest disappointment. And she had been as good as her word with regard to the food. Empty plates and cups littered the table, and the larder had the pathetic look it usually bore after a large party. What Mistress Poll would say when she noticed, or when she saw the pools of muddy water gathering on the floor, was a thought Rosie did not like to dwell on. Not that she was really very worried. Friends of Lady Irinya would have been allowed to trail mud right through the house and kinsfolk could probably sleep with their boots on in the best beds if they wanted to.

Eomer was already fast asleep, his head lolling against the back of his chair and his mouth half open. Even Gyrdan was nodding, his heavy, red-rimmed eyes closing of their own accord. Rosie laid a timid hand on his arm. It was a pity to wake him, for he looked terribly tired, but soon the rest of the household would be up and the kitchen would be a whirl of activity.

He sat up sharply at her touch, fully awake.

“Shall I make beds up for you, sir?”

“No. No, don’t trouble yourself, Rosie. We’re not staying. I think we shall ride on later today. But I must speak to Fastred first.”

“Very good, sir. But ‘e won’t be up for an hour at least, an’ this kitchen gets awful busy in the mornin’s. Why not wait in the library?”

“All right,” he agreed. “We’ll be out of the way there. No need to wake Eomer. This has been a rough ride, Highlander though he is.” He hoisted Eomer’s inert body

over his shoulders, steadied himself against the table and got his balance. “Lead on, Rosie -”

Fastred looked in some time after to find his two unexpected guests sound asleep, one sprawled on the sofa and the other slumped in an armchair. Very, very carefully, he draped blankets over them and worked up the fire. Then he backed out silently, and drew a chair against the door to remind the servants not to disturb them.

Far above in the pine woods, the snow fell softly. Gently, it laid a fluffy blanket over a dark hump huddled at the edge of the glade, and as it did so not even a groan broke the silence.

“What do you mean, gone?”

Rosie had never seen the Captain lose his temper, but it looked as if she was about to now. Mr Fastred and Wootton the butler were doing their best to hide behind one another, and the scullery maid was clinging to Cook’s skirts and trying to hide her eyes and see what was going on at the same time. Even Mistress Poll wilted before him. Poor Marigold was left facing the storm alone.

“Just that, sir,” she insisted, her lower lip beginning to tremble. “‘Er bed ain’t bin slept in, an’ she ain’t nowhere in the ‘ouse -”

“When did she leave?”

A ragged chorus of, “Dunno, sir”.

“When did anyone last see her?”

“She were at dinner last night, sah,” Wootton volunteered.

“Sir -”

That was Violet the scullery maid, cringing behind Cook and yet revelling in her moment of glory.

“Sir, she weren’t in ‘er room at two, ‘cos I went up to ask ‘er for - for summat for - for -” her voice faltered away in embarrassment.

“Two o’clock!” He swung back to Marigold. “Why in hell didn’t you wake me earlier? It’s almost noon!”

“Didn’t know there was nothin’ wrong, sir!” Marigold wailed. “She often goes for a walk early in the mornin’s, since you went away. ‘Ow was I to know this was summat different?” She burst into tears. “An’ Corin’s gone toooooo!”

All the anger went out of Gyrdan’s voice.

“All right, girl, all right. It’s not you I’m angry with. Do stop crying.” He glanced round helplessly, as if looking for someone he could rely on, and his gaze fell on Rosie. She hastened forward and led her sobbing elder sister away, gathering up Violet and, by extension, Cook, on the way. Behind her, she heard the Captain say crisply,

“Mistress Poll, I am not in need of your advice. I will thank you to look to your household. Corporal, take all the men who can be spared from the stables and search the lane -”

“Sah!”

“Fastred, Eomer, come with me, if you please. We will search the gardens and the grounds. She cannot have gone far. Much time has been lost, but there will be some tracks, even with this snow -”

“I can’t see a thing,” Fastred protested. “Are you sure she came this way?”

“Look where a skirt has swept the path, and then fresh snowfall filled in the trail. It’s clear as print.”

“Just looks like a smudge to me,” Fastred muttered, and drew his hood tighter over his head.

“We are fortunate you are here, Gyrdan,” Eomer said, anxiously. “I deem myself a skilled hunter, but this trail I could not follow. It seems a misplaced snowflake is enough for you to read!”

“I have hunted things more wary than deer,” Gyrdan answered, absently.

“What on earth would she want to come up here alone for, anyway?” Fastred complained. “After what you said -”

“She was not alone.”

“What?”

“Can you not even see that? The game here must truly go in fear of their lives! She was following someone.”

“Who?”

“I am a tracker, Fastred, not a wizard. I cannot tell. The prints are all smudged by the skirt and partly filled by snow. But they are there right enough.”

“Where does this path go?” Eomer asked. “Would that give us a clue? She visited poor people, the maid said -”

“Nobody lives up here,” Fastred said, dolefully. “The path peters out in the woods, and beyond the woods are the moors, and beyond them lies Errendale.”

“Frealaf of Higher Sutton,” Gyrdan said, before Eomer could ask the question. “Wait here. The trail leaves the path -”

He went ahead a little way, casting about in a wide circle, stooping low to the ground. The others waited, eyeing each other askance. They had hardly been introduced when Irinya’s absence had been discovered and thrown them all into this wild search.

“Er -” they began together.

Another pause, and then Eomer spoke first.

“I must thank you, lord, for succouring my cousin these past weeks.”

“No honourable man would have done less.”

“No man could have done more,” said the Highlander, warmly. “Indeed, I am ashamed to say that you, a stranger and a foreigner, have shown her more kindness than any of her kinsfolk! We had truly given her up for dead, until your messenger came and brought us hope beyond dreaming.”

“My messenger?” Fastred said blankly. “You mean Gyrdan? I did not send him! I had no idea where he had gone until he returned with you this morning.”

“Then why did he come?”

“I don’t know.”

They watched in silence for a moment. Gyrdan was on his knees in the snow, intently studying marks they could not see. His hood had slipped back, and white flakes were settling unheeded on his hair. He seemed to have forgotten their presence completely, a timeless hunter entirely at one with the wilderness.

Sometimes, Fastred thought, though I have counted myself his friend for years, sometimes I realise that I don’t know him at all.

“It was thus that he came to us,” Eomer said softly. “Like a spirit out of the snow. Past our guards and past our gates, and into our very hall, where he appeared out of the shadows like a ghost. He bore a letter from Irinya, written he said on the last night of her captivity. Ah, that letter! It makes me weep even to think of it! And then he told us that she was yet living, in secret, here in your South-country, and offered to bring one of us here to meet her.”

“And you accepted?”

“Foolish, no?” said Eomer, and laughed. “What an opportunity for a trap! But it never occurred to me not to trust him. I do not know why. Perhaps it was the way he spoke of Irinya.”

Fastred said, cautiously, “Er - you know - he -”

“He loves her, that is obvious. Though it is equally obvious he has given up all hope of her. But that would not have swayed me. Passion is no base on which to build a nation. No, he spoke of other things, of injustice and chaos and betrayal and murder, and then of their opposites, order and trust and peace. I did not fully understand, and I cannot now put into words what I felt. It was like listening to a gifted bard, one who can transcend mere words and speak direct from heart to heart. Or perhaps I also have the clear sight, for I seemed to see several distinct futures. All more or less marred, for that is the state of the world, evil mixed with good, and yet there was only one that I wished to enter.”

He caught Fastred’s eye and laughed. “I said I could not put it into words. And my brother would agree with you. Usually I am the cautious one, but not in this matter. He bade me farewell as though it were our last parting. He may yet be right. But there comes a time in a man’s life when he must do what is right, and no longer what is practical. I have kept our lands thus far by the wit of the fox, and by swallowing insults that burn in my breast even now, and there have been times when I have despised myself for it. Well, no more. If Irinya will raise the banner of the Falcon once again, I will march beneath it, let the tyrant do what he will.”

“If it is not too late!” Fastred said, sharply.

Gyrdan had sprung away, and was running now swift between the trees, following a trail that was clear to him, however invisible to the others.

“What has he found, think you?” Eomer panted, as they ducked and dived under the lashing branches.

“I don’t know, but I fear the worst!”

They burst out into a glade, dazzling white after the sombre woods. And it needed no hunter’s skill to pick up a trail here. The snow had been kicked up by many horses, pawed almost to the bare ground in places. And, to their cold horror, they saw tiny craters of blood speckling the snow.

Gyrdan was kneeling in the middle of the glade, his head bowed as under some crushing weight. As they came near, he rose, holding something dark in his hand. Wordlessly, he handed it to Fastred.

It was the shawl Irinya had worn. And it was stained with blood.

They stood a long moment, bowed down by grief. Fastred saw Eomer weeping silently, the tears running unheeded down his face, and then he realised that he

himself was weeping too. Only Gyrdan, who had lost more than either could fully comprehend, remained apparently unmoved.

Now he looked up, gazing around the glade. And his eyes found the white-shrouded hump by the edge of the trees.

“There!”

The three scabbled the loose snow off the body with their bare hands.

“It’s Corin!”

Gyrdan lifted the boy’s body in his arms.

“He’s still alive. And unwounded, I think. Give me your cloak.”

Both complied immediately.

“Who is he?”

“What’s he doing here?”

Gyrdan chafed the boy’s chilled hands in his. “That we may find out when he wakes. But at least we know who Irinya was following.”

“Corin brought her here? No! I won’t believe it!”

“Who *is* he?”

The combined warmth of three cloaks was bringing Corin slowly out of his stupor. A little colour came back to his cheeks, and he moaned vaguely. Then his eyes flickered open. A beatific smile spread over his face.

“Sir... So it worked, and you’re free...”

“Oh, Corin,” groaned Gyrdan, “what *have* you done?”

He shook the boy back into wakefulness.

“What has happened here? Where is Irinya?”

It took steady questioning to get the story out of Corin, for he gradually worked out that his audience did not see his heroic act in quite the same light. Fastred listened to his faltering tale in steadily growing horror, and the stranger, Eomer, tapped his sword hilt in menacing fury. Only Gyrdan stayed calm, his face as immovable as stone.

“And when you got here,” he prompted, patiently, “what happened?”

Corin began to sniff, feeling that a violent rage would have been less painful than this iron forbearance.

“They was all hidin’ in the trees. ‘Undreds of ‘em. I didn’t know they was ‘ere - I didn’t know -”

“But you knew they were somewhere, you cursed brat -!”

“Peace, Eomer!” Gyrdan snapped. “There is nothing to be gained by frightening him. Corin, what happened?”

The boy began to cry in earnest now.

“They - they rode out - an’ she saw ‘em an’ she *run* - an’ they chased ‘er. It was awful! Awful!” They had difficulty making him out now above the sobbing. “An’ she nearly got away - she nearly did - but the wizard ‘ad a sword - an’ ‘e rode ‘er down - an’ she fell - with all blood on ‘er dress - but she got up agin - like a wounded hare - an’ I run out to try an’ ‘elp ‘er - but they was too many an’ too fast - an’ they chased me too - an’ then I saw the wizard drag ‘er up on ‘is ‘orse - an’ then I fell down - an’ I don’t know no more.”

“You wretched little traitor -!”

“Shut up, Fastred! Corin. Was she dead?”

“N-no. I don’t think so. B-but she must of bin ‘urt bad - ‘cos she didn’t struggle no more -”

“By all the gods, boy, you’ll pay for this -!”

Gyrdan intercepted Eomer’s blow.

“Leave the boy alone! You could beat him to a pulp and what good would it do now?”

“How did they know she was here?” Fastred stormed.

“I-I dunno, sir, I dunno...!”

“Corin, don’t make matters worse by trying to lie,” Gyrdan said, sternly. “Tell the truth and you’ll come to no harm.”

“Oh, no -?” Eomer began, and fell silent under Gyrdan’s glare.

“Corin, I am waiting.”

“I-I told ‘em, sir. I didn’t know! The first man, Frealaf, ‘e said she was a witch an’ they wanted ‘er in Errendale - an’ she was makin’ you un’appy, sir - an’ ‘e said it were a spell - so I took ‘im ‘er brooch -”

“So that’s where it went!” Fastred exclaimed.

“An’ the wizard, when ‘e saw it, ‘e said - ‘e said -” Corin’s voice disintegrated into a wail, “ - an’ I didn’t know, sir! I didn’t know!”

“You knew you were doing something wrong,” Gyrdan said, evenly. “Lying - stealing -”

“But it was for a good reason, sir! It was, it was! She’s a witch - an’ ‘e said when she was dead you’d be free -”

“So that is it,” Gyrdan said, heavily. “Oh, Corin, Corin. Truly it is said that love is more destructive than hate!”

“But she’s a witch - an’ she was makin’ you miserable -!”

“There is more than enough grief in the world without invoking witchcraft. It is simple enough, Corin. A commonplace mischance. I love the Lady Irinya. She loves me. But we cannot marry, because she is already wed to someone else.”

“I didn’t know,” Corin whispered brokenly. “Sir - what will they do to her?”

“They’ll burn her alive.”

There was a long silence, broken only by Corin’s abandoned sobbing, muffled against Gyrdan’s shoulder.

“Hush, child, hush now.”

He was rocking the boy in his arms, trying to comfort him. “Hush. Sorrow mends nothing. Tears change nothing. Some deeds cannot be wiped out, and you must learn to live with them, all your life. It is a hard, hard lesson, child, and you have chosen a hard way to learn it.”

“I wish I was dead!” Corin wept.

“But you are not dead, and so you must pick yourself up and make the best of what life remains to you, and bear your sorrow and your guilt, on and on to the end.” He stroked the boy’s hair gently. “I do not think there is a greater sorrow than to see a young life marred thus, and yet it must be so. See that you grow stronger for it in the future, and your thought less clouded, and judge others more kindly for the memory of your own fault.”

“Please forgive me!” Corin wailed.

“Hush. You must seek forgiveness from the one you have most wronged. But I do not condemn you. Who am I to condemn anyone? Insofar as the wrong was done to me, I forgive you. And now I will take you home.”

Chapter 14.

Gyrdan and Fastred and Eomer sat around the dining table. They were eating and drinking quickly, as befits men in a hurry who do not know when they will next get a decent meal, and they were arguing.

“A night raid!” Fastred declared. “Higher Sutton is not strongly defended, Gyrdan, you say? I have three and sixty men under my command -”

“Three and sixty!” Eomer snorted. “We need hundreds! I say we should ride first to Buchart -”

“One properly trained soldier is worth a hundred undisciplined warriors.”

“The hillmen of Carlundy are the finest fighting men in the world, sir!”

“Oh, for looting and reiving -”

“You dare impugn our honour?”

“Oh, peace,” Gyrdan said, exasperated. “When someone starts talking about honour, it is a sure sign that blood is about to be spilt. Think before you waste further breath. It was an hour or so after midnight when they took her. The moor is rough but not difficult. They would have reached Higher Sutton by dawn. And from there the Giants’ Road is broad and true. She must have been in Mickleburg before we even realised she was gone.”

“Then all the more reason to go first to Buchart! My brother has three hundred swordsmen in readiness -”

“Three hundred will not go far in a siege,” Fastred said.

“Further than three and sixty!”

“We do not have even so many,” Gyrdan said, patiently.

“Oh, yes, we do -” Fastred began.

“The militia is the King’s command, and well you know it, Fastred. Even if you will not be dissuaded from joining us -”

“And miss this! Certainly not!”

“- you have no right to order other men to risk their lives in a quarrel which is not theirs. There are three of us. And there is no time to ride to Buchart for reinforcements. It took us two days and nights, Eomer, non-stop and on your best horses. At least the same back again, and then a foot-march south. All that will be left is the ash.”

“At least we may avenge her!”

“Vengeance will help neither her nor us.”

Eomer banged his fist on the table. “This is the talk of cowards and fools!”

“You call us cowards?” Fastred blazed back. “I have fought six years of bloody battle. Have you ever fought outside the tourney?”

“How dare you, sir!”

This time it was Gyrdan who banged the table. “Enough! Coward applies to neither of you, but fool to both! Have you forgotten? Radwulf has Irinya, now, as we speak, incarcerated in his castle, surrounded by his guards, entirely at his mercy. And you two argue over honour!”

“Oh, gods,” Fastred said, in a different voice. “I had not thought. If Radwulf has Irinya - is it not already too late? Will he not already have - have -?”

“Have murdered her,” Gyrdan finished for him. Neither of the others dared look at his face. “No. Of that I am certain. No secret death will serve for her. It must be as public and as humiliating as possible. It must demonstrate once and for all that his power will crush all who stand in his way, and it must trample her name in the dirt so that no rebellion will cluster around the memory. He will trump up the most ignominious charges. Witchcraft. Adultery -” his voice shook, very slightly, “- and he will stage a show trial, and find her guilty in due legal form. And then he will burn her. A protracted, hideous death, in full public display. No rumours of secret survival. No angry rising. No further threat. He must prove, to Irinya and to the world, that his is the final victory.

“And in that need lies what little hope we have. A trial takes time. To summon all the worthies of Carlundy to witness the burning takes time. Against the swift and secret assassin we could not succeed. Against a vainglorious lord, it is just possible that we may. I cannot see how, but something may turn up. I am going to Mickleburg, directly, secretly and with all possible speed. Not for empty revenge, but in time to save my lady, if I can. If you two prefer to stay here and defend your honour by duelling, I will go alone.”

“Not alone!”

“Well,” Fastred said, with a grin like sunshine after a storm, “we are all agreed on one thing at least! Gyrdan, for my part I will follow your lead. You know the country and the castle, which I do not.”

Eomer hesitated, and then nodded. “I also. I have little experience of war.”

Fastred kicked back his chair. “I think that will soon be remedied! Let us make a start. It will be dusk soon.”

At that moment, Mistress Poll appeared in the doorway, looking strangely nervous for that formidable dame.

“Beg pardon, Mr Fastred, sir - but you’ve got visitors.”

“Tancred son of Heardred son of Aldred,” trumpeted the herald. “Earl of Sherbourne, and Warden of the North March!”

“Oh, bloody hell,” groaned Fastred. “My father. What a time to come calling!”

He let Mistress Poll straighten his collar and flick lint off his shoulders. “I’ll get rid of him as soon as I can. Don’t you two dare sneak off without me!”

The Earl, a fine soldierly man in his fifties with thick iron-grey hair, leapt from his horse and strode across the yard to greet Fastred, his spurs jingling on the cobbles.

“My son! It is months since I have seen you! How are matters here? I heard you sent in your accounts on time for once. And correctly completed too!”

“Er, yes, father. What are you doing here?”

“What a greeting!” the Earl laughed. “Am I unwelcome? I am the Warden of the March, Fastred. As you should remember, since it is for that office that I hold these manors, which give you such admirable hunting. I am riding my border, to check that all is in order.”

“Nothing to report here, father,” said Fastred in an unnatural tone. Lying did not come easily to him, especially to his father. The Earl shot a shrewd glance at him.

“All is not well, Fastred. Do not attempt to deceive me! What has happened here?”

Fastred shuffled. “Well - er -”

A rhythmic sound stopped him in his tracks. The steady thump of booted feet, and over it Wootton’s voice getting steadily clearer.

“Left, *right*, left, *right* - pick it up there, you lazy beggars, you - left, *right*, left! ‘Alt! Eyes - front! ‘Ten-shun!”

Twenty men stamped to a halt. Wootton eyed their line, found nothing to complain of, and marched smartly up to Fastred.

“First Comp’ny, Ash Dene Militia, all present, an’ correct, sah!”

Fastred opened and closed his mouth a few times like a stranded fish.

“Very good, Corporal Wootton,” said the Earl, amused. He knew Wootton and his militia from a previous visit. “Very smart. Commendable. But what for?”

“Rescue mission, sah!”

“Oh, bloody hell, Wootton -”

“Indeed!” said the Earl. “Who ordered you to mobilise His Majesty’s militia?”

“All vol’nteers, sah!”

“What, really?” asked Fastred, surprised out of his torpor. “All of them? Really volunteered? I know you, Wootton -”

“Really vol’nteered, sah! Waitin’ for orders, sah!”

“Well, Fastred,” said the Earl, pleasantly, “don’t you think you owe me an explanation?”

“Absurd,” said the Earl, testily. “Quite absurd!”

“She was my guest, father, and I failed to protect her.”

“Most irregular. A foreign national here - and one of some consequence - and you failed to tell His Majesty?”

“I was going to get round to it.”

“And now you propose to invade a foreign country? Over my border? Out of the question, boy.”

“But -”

“Out of the question. I thought you’d have lost those romantic ideas at your age. A lady in distress, indeed! What put the idea into your head?”

It was just at that moment that Gyrdan and Eomer appeared from the stables, leading their horses.

“Oh, indeed!” snapped the Earl. “I might have guessed it! I knew that mercenary would get you into trouble one day!”

Gyrdan bowed stiffly.

“I have tried to dissuade him, my lord, and failed. I wish you more success.”

“Lord Fastred is acting as a true gentleman, my lord,” Eomer said, equally stiffly, “and with all due respect, my lord, you should honour him for it.”

The Earl simmered like a dormant volcano.

“Now, look here, you two,” Fastred began crossly, “I don’t need you to fight my battles for me -”

And then a shabby-looking body of men came in through the gates, some on foot, some riding an assortment of horses and ponies.

Hedric dismounted clumsily and came up to the steps where Fastred and his father still stood. He took his hat off rather bashfully and held it in front of his chest.

“Beggin’ thy pardon, milord, sir. We been hearing rumours, sir. Folk say t’Lady’s been taken, sir. By t’Wolf. Is it true?”

“What is it to you, my man?”

Hedric turned to the Earl and bowed with great respect. “Is it true, milord?”

“Yes,” Fastred said, heavily. “It’s true.”

The crowd of rustics muttered.

“No blame to thee, milord, I’m sure,” said Hedric, his tone sounding as though he meant it. “We’ll be goin’ now, sir. On’y came by to make sure, an’ to tell tha we was leavin’. Tha been a good lord to us, sir, an’ we be sorry to be goin’.”

“Going where?”

Hedric turned back, as though he had been asked whether the sun rose during the day. “To Carlundy, sir.”

“But you’re all wanted men!”

“Aye, sir. But that can’t be helped, can it, sir?”

“Why?”

“She be our Lady, sir,” said Hedric, with simple dignity.

“Right,” said Fastred, decisively. “Right. How many of you are there?”

“Twenty-nine, sir. All the exiles from near at hand.”

“How many of you have horses?”

“All but seven, sir. Given us by our masters, sir, not stolen. They was fond o’ t’Lady, too, sir.”

Fastred raised his voice.

“Dorin!”

The head groom came up.

“Sir?”

“You know I’ve ticked you off before about leaving the stable doors unlocked.”

The groom looked over his shoulder at the long low building with all the doors securely bolted.

“I’m really very angry about it, Dorin,” Fastred went on, though his stern tone was somewhat at odds with the twinkle in his eyes. “Why, this very afternoon, seven horses escaped, just as a party of renegade soldiers was passing by - and do you know - they vanished without trace!”

Dorin’s puzzled hurt dissolved into a grin.

“Right, sir!”

The Earl looked at Fastred. Then he watched Dorin opening the stable doors and handing over seven of Fastred’s least highly-bred horses to seven very lucky farmhands. Then he looked back at Fastred again.

“What do you think you’re playing at -?” he began.

Fastred grinned impishly, but another interruption saved him the trouble of replying.

Mistress Poll appeared from the kitchen, shepherding Cook, Rosie, Violet and two of Hedric's men, all weighed down by heavy baskets. Violet and Rosie cast apprehensive glances at Fastred, the two farmhands looked baffled and slightly embarrassed, and Cook was clucking and tutting over the depletion of her larder. Only Mistress Poll was as serene as ever. She dropped a curtsey.

"Beg pardon, Mr Fastred, sir, but these two ruffians broke into the kitchen and made us hand over all the food, sir."

The two men exchanged horrified glances and started hastily trying to relinquish their baskets and bundles - though Mistress Poll had loaded them up so thoroughly that it was impossible to put anything down without dropping the rest. Rosie, who was slightly faster on the uptake, began to giggle quietly.

"Superior force, Mistress Poll," Fastred said sympathetically. "No blame to you. Better help them load it into the saddle-bags. In case they get violent."

"Have you *all* gone quite mad?" the Earl exploded. "Now, look here, Fastred -" His son, who had apparently gone stone deaf in one ear, turned back to Hedric. "Armour? Weapons?"

Two rusty swords and a dozen pitchforks were displayed.

Fastred shook his head. "Can't help you there, I'm afraid. You see, I'm the representative of the Warden of the North March, and we have to be very careful with the armoury. Wouldn't do to let it fall into the wrong hands, would it?"

"No, sir," said Hedric, looking from father to son and evidently regretting entering this house of lunatics.

"However," continued Fastred, unhooking the huge bunch of keys from his belt, "I am *hopelessly* irresponsible. Everyone will tell you that. Can't be trusted with anything. Always leaving things -"

He whipped the keys out of his father's reach.

"- carelessly - lying - around."

The keys jangled onto the cobbles at Hedric's feet.

Fastred tut-tutted under his breath. "Shocking," he intoned sadly. "Quite shocking."

Hedric straightened up, his face one big disbelieving grin.

"The armoury," added Fastred helpfully, "is the big steel key third from the left."

The Earl was laughing now in spite of himself.

"My boy, you're wasted in the military! I should have sent you into politics! But I can't have this."

"With respect, father, you don't have any choice."

“I beg your pardon, boy?”

“You came with four men-at-arms and a herald. They have just surrendered to Corporal Wootton. You’re my prisoner, sir.”

“I’m the Warden of the North March!”

“Yes,” agreed Fastred. “And my prisoner.”

“His Majesty will take a dim view of this!”

“I expect he will, but that isn’t going to bother me. I’m going with them, father, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Don’t be a damn fool, boy! Do you want to start a war?”

“No need for that, unless the King wants to pick a fight. A bunch of renegade exiles - whom he will no doubt be happy to see the back of - and one company of militia, all free men. Officered by one foreigner, one mercenary, and one misguided young lord with a known fondness for bad company. Hardly an official force, is it?”

“If the King disowns you -”

“You must make sure he does.”

“- there’ll be no exchange of prisoners. No ransom! Think on that, and think again.”

“The tribes out East don’t go in much for civilised ransoms, either,” Fastred said dryly. “If I got captured there I’d expect to be flayed alive and then nailed upside down to the nearest tree. What’s the difference?”

“You can’t do this!”

“Watch me.”

“But, my son -”

Fastred put his hand on his father’s shoulder.

“I know I’ve been a disappointment to you, father. But you have two other sons to carry on the family line. Both far more sensible than me. And you brought me up to make up my own mind and act according to what I thought was right. You can’t complain now just because I judge differently than you.”

“But this - this sordid affair! The woman runs away from her husband. He is entitled to bring her back. What concern is it of yours?”

“My concern, father, is that a good and gracious lady stands to be burned to death - burned, mark you - for vile crimes of which she is totally innocent.”

“Then surely she has nothing to fear from a trial?”

“This is Carlundy we are talking about, father.”

The Earl nodded gravely, and his face cleared.

“You are sure of her innocence?”

“Completely.”

“And you are sure there is no other way?”

“Certain.”

The Earl drew himself up.

“As the Warden of the North March, I must warn you that you are acting illegally, and that His Majesty neither condones nor supports your actions. If you ever return to this land, you will stand trial for treason and all your lands and goods may be forfeit to the Crown.” His voice changed. “But as your father - my boy, I’m proud of you!”

Father and son embraced briefly, and the Earl clapped his son on the back. “Go, then. With my blessing.”

“Oh, cheer up, Gyrdan,” Fastred said breezily, as the well-horsed and well-equipped company, fifty-three strong, clattered off down the lane. “Whatever happens, it’ll be an adventure.”

The old Earl’s eyes were unnaturally bright as he watched them leave.

“Did I do wrong, Poll? Should I have stopped him?”

Mistress Poll, who had known her master very well in the days of their youth, patted his hand. “No, sir. You couldn’t have stopped him, even if you’d wanted to. Mr Fastred always had a mind of his own, even when he was a nipper.”

They turned into the silent house.

“Perhaps that was why he was always my favourite.”

It had been dark for a couple of hours when Gyrdan turned the company off the lane. Fastred knew they had ridden north because the hills formed a snow-whitened irregular skyline to his right. It was the only clue he had. Even when the moon came out from behind the clouds and showed they were riding on an intermittent rutted track through unkempt grassland, he was little wiser. This was uninhabited country, uncultivated, sour and devoid of landmarks. Yet Gyrdan led them as effortlessly as a gamekeeper leads his master through his own woods. Fastred was reminded of a sea voyage, years ago, when he had reeled nauseously up on deck to find the ship alone on a vast grey ocean. And the helmsman had pointed at one spot on the featureless circle of flat horizon, and said that the mouth of the Swanfleet river was there, and they would sight it in two and a half hours with this wind. He had been ten minutes out.

The track was getting less distinct and the ground stonier as they approached the feet of the hills, and the moonlight showed a silver river and behind it the mouth of a valley, evidently the way through the barrier. Gyrdan halted close by the river and directed each man across a ford - an underwater causeway with a devilish bend a third of the way across, that would precipitate any man who did not know the trick straight over the edge and into deep water.

Once on the far bank, a clear track opened out, following the north bank of the river and then climbing a little to skirt a series of tumbling falls.

Leaving Eomer to lead, Gyrdan dropped back down the column to Fastred, riding at the rear. The falls were no more than a distant murmur, and the sound of their horses' hooves seemed deafening.

"I hope the smugglers don't mind about the racket," Fastred said, trying to joke to cover his uneasiness.

"Mm," Gyrdan whispered, absently. He dropped even further behind, and then caught Fastred up again.

"We are being followed," he said in a low voice. "They must have caught us up near the river and watched us cross the ford. No, don't turn round. Ride on as though you'd noticed nothing."

"I haven't. How could anyone know where we are going? I'm lost myself."

"You could get lost in your own garden. But a company this size leaves tracks in snow that a blind fool could follow. There are not many. One, two at the most, riding hard. Pass the word up the column. There is a patch of scrubby woodland ahead, and we shall have them there."

"You're imagining things," Fastred complained. He was stretched out along a branch overhanging the path, and in the darkness under the trees the occasional crack of a twig or rustle of dead leaves indicated the presence of the rest of the group.

"Something with about a hundred legs has just gone down my neck -"

"Shut up," Gyrdan hissed back, from his matching position in the opposite tree. "Listen."

Faint but clear came the irregular footfalls of tired ponies in a hurry, and a brief interchange of bickering voices. Round a bend in the path they came, two riders, indistinct cloaked forms looming out of the darkness, their sulking ponies being kicked along at what might charitably be called a trot.

The two men drew knives, silently, and waited.

On the riders came, no longer talking, but taking absolutely no precautions. The narrowing of the path forced them to slow their mounts and as they passed under the branches they were moving at a slow walking pace.

By long-standing agreement, Gyrdan took the one ahead. The rider was concentrating on picking out a path, and blissfully unaware of the possibility of ambush. He didn't even look up as the lean dark figure dropped out of the tree above and bore him off his pony with textbook ease.

They hit the ground with a thump, the unfortunate rider underneath, and the pony shambled off down the track for a few paces before coming to a weary halt. Gyrdan pinned his victim ruthlessly to the ground, and held a knife to its throat.

"Keep quiet and do as I say, if you want to live!" he hissed.

There should have been terrified acquiescence, not a breathless giggle. And the body under his was oddly pliant, and soft in all the wrong places....

"Oh, *sir*," it said. "You only 'ad to ask!"

"Rosie!"

"Happy Families," drawled Fastred, six feet away. "I've got Master Corin the Head Groom's Son."

Rosie stood up, brushing snow off her cloak and rubbing her elbow.

"I'll 'ave a bruise there tomorrow, sir," she complained. "You might of picked somewhere softer."

"Think yourself lucky you weren't killed! What do you think you're playing at?"

"We was followin' you, sir."

"Yes, I know that. And you can lead those exhausted little ponies right back to Ash Dene, now."

"Shan't, sir."

"We're comin' with you, sir!"

That was Corin, his face pale and blotched with crying, but very determined.

"Oh, no, you're not, my lad," Fastred said. "Do you know where we're going?"

"After Milady," Rosie said. "Corin told me what 'e done -"

"You badgered it out of me!"

"- the wretched little creep," Rosie continued, unperturbed. "An' what them savages is goin' to do to 'er. So you're going to rescue 'er. 'S obvious. So we come to 'elp."

Fastred laughed in spite of himself.

"And just what do you think you two can do?"

“She’ll need a maid,” Rosie said, quite seriously. “All alone among all you rough men. ‘Tain’t fittin’!”

“An’ it was all my fault, sir,” Corin wailed. “All my fault! You got to let me try an’ put it right, you got to!”

“Don’t over-estimate your importance, Corin,” Gyrdan said sharply. “There are many strands of fault beside yours. If I had not left in selfish haste and bitterness of heart, if she had -” He broke off, drew a breath, and continued again. “No matter. What is done is done. Now listen, you two, this is all very romantic of you, but it is foolish. I do not think there is any chance of success. Those of us who die swiftly in battle will be the lucky ones. I do not want two more deaths on my conscience. Go back home.”

“If there ain’t no chance, what are you doin’ it for, sir?”

“Because I have nothing better to do,” he said bitterly.

“No, you ain’t,” Rosie said, serenely. “I knows better than that.” She turned to the group of men-at-arms. “You lot - not you with Mr Wootton, you others - are you doin’ this ‘cos you got nothin’ better to do?”

There was a little growl and a mutter, and then Hedric said, “She is our Lady, missy, and we owes her fealty. But that ain’t so for thee an’ t’ little lad.”

“Well, I dunno what fealty is,” Rosie said, “but seems to me it’s a fancy way of sayin’ you loves ‘er. An’ you ain’t the only ones, neither. Corin an’ me, we’re comin’ with you, whether you likes it or not.”

“Why did the gods create women?” Fastred groaned.

“To teach men some sense!” Rosie retorted.

“I’ve a good mind to tan the hide off the pair of you. Look, this is an army, and it’s got no place for women and children. Gyrdan, you make them go back.”

“How? Anyway,” he said with a sigh, “she is right. They have as much right to die in a hopeless cause as the rest of us.”

“Sir!” squeaked Corin, high-pitched with excitement. “Sir, thank you, sir!”

“This is madness!” Eomer exploded. “Would you burden us with women and children? They will slow us down, get in the way -”

Gyrdan looked up at him, his stern face seeming carved from stone in the pale light.

“It is a hard thing, Eomer, to have an ill deed on your conscience that cannot be atoned for. Perhaps you have never felt it, but have pity on this boy who has.”

He turned back to Rosie and Corin, and his voice now was stern with long command. “But Eomer is right. This is no game. We cannot afford you any special

treatment. You ride hard, you camp rough. If you straggle, you will be left behind. If you are hurt or fall into the hands of the enemy, we will not risk our task to save you. If you are given an order you obey it without question. And everyone in this company outranks you. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," they said, subdued.

"Right. Those poor ponies have about had enough. They will find their own way home from here, when they recover. Get everything you need into one bag - *one*, mind you. Corin, you ride with Fastred. Rosie, pillion behind me. Get on with it! We have wasted enough time already."

The company stopped to eat and rest for a few hours around dawn, while Gyrdan climbed up to a rocky knoll jutting above the valley, to check their position. When he came back he was in a good mood.

"Right where I thought we were. And I do not think anyone has passed this way since the last snowfall. But this is enemy territory now, and it does not do to take chances."

"I don't need reminding about *that*," Fastred said, woefully. "Corporal!"

"Sah!"

"Tell the men to get into armour. And set up warning patrols. Two men ahead, two men behind, on each ridge. Keep off the skyline - oh, you know the form, Wootton. And don't even think of going yourself! I'm not nursemaiding you if that leg gets rheumatically in the snow."

So they moved on again, a warlike company now with the fitful sun glinting on steel helms and bright mail. Their pace was slow, ever alert for danger, though none showed itself. Mid-day brought them to a junction of two rivers, and here they halted to rest and wait for dark. Guards were posted high on the valley sides ready to signal any alarm, and the rest of the company camped amid rock outcrops and prickly bushes on the triangular spur between the rivers, which would give some protection against any attack.

"Saves digging in, anyway," Fastred said. "Not that you could, in this barren country. What do these bushes grow in? Solid rock?"

He rolled himself disgustedly into a blanket and fell instantly asleep with the ease of an old campaigner. All around him the other men, old soldiers, shepherds or hunters, did likewise.

Rosie and Corin did not sleep, already feeling that heroic adventures were a lot less appealing than they were cracked up to be. Somehow, nobody told you that it

meant saddle-soreness, cold feet, stale bread without any butter, icy cold water straight out of a stream, and snow that slid off the bushes and down your neck with malevolent accuracy. Eomer had volunteered to take the first watch, and his silent and disapproving presence was chillier even than the searching wind. Corin, who had imagined camping to be a matter of roasting venison around roaring fires and singing rude songs while the beer flagon went from hand to hand, had to try very hard not to cry.

“Be grateful it isn’t raining,” was all the sympathy they got from Gyrdan, when he woke up after about two hours. But he showed them how to find a sheltered place among the rocks, and how to rig a blanket to keep out the worst of the wind, and he left them his own blankets while he disappeared into the hills again. Fastred relieved Eomer on watch, and that cheered things up a little more. It was, after all, a beautiful crisp clear afternoon. The morning’s cloud had gone, the snow shone in dazzling whiteness, and the wintry sun sparkled off tiny flakes of crystal in the rocks.

“Sir,” Corin said, after a while, “we been ridin’ an awful long time. I thought Carlundy was just the other side of the hills?”

Fastred pointed at the eastern ridge. “It’s over there. Just the other side of those moors, unless Gyrdan has lost us altogether. We are riding more or less parallel to the big valley - Errendale, they call it - and we must now be near enough opposite the castle. Gyrdan says there is a way round those hills further north, which will bring us close to the castle without being seen. Sort of a back entrance. He’s gone to look for it.”

A little before sunset, while there was still light left, Wootton broke up the camp and set some of the men to preparing a meal, some to saddling up the horses and others to packing up the gear, all with orderly efficiency. Except for their speech, Hedric’s men were already indistinguishable from Wootton’s. Hedric and Wootton seemed to consider themselves of equal rank, each had two or three subordinates, and the group was already settling into an organised pattern. Eomer watched this in baffled fascination, much as a man might watch bees in a hive.

Gyrdan came back plastered in snow and mud, just as the sun disappeared behind the hills.

“Might have known you’d turn up just as all the work was finished,” Fastred greeted him. “Lazing about all day, as usual, I suppose. Is the pass still there, then? Nobody pinched it overnight?”

“It’s still there,” Gyrdan answered, in between gulping down hunks of bread and cold meat. “There are soldiers camped on the far side -”

“Soldiers!” Eomer exclaimed. “What was the sense of bringing us all this way if it is guarded?”

“There are guards, and there are men wearing armour who sit round campfires playing dice and longing for their girlfriends,” Fastred said, grinning. “Which sort are these, Gyrdan?”

“The latter. They are not watching this pass, anyway. Radwulf cannot guard every gap in the hills, and the smugglers do not run this close to Mickleburg. That is one reason I brought us here. This is merely a patrol camped for the night, and their sentries are concerned with protecting the camp, which I have no intention of attacking. The farmers and shepherds will be more of a problem, if any are about on so cold a night. Most look the other way if they see smugglers passing through, but there are always some who choose the reward. We must be quiet and secret. Lead the horses, do not ride. And all armour and weaponry muffled under clothing, so it cannot gleam when the moon rises and betray us.”

Fastred nodded. “You’ll go ahead to check on the soldiers? And silence their sentries if need be.”

“Yes. I will take four men. Eomer, will you come with me? It is not knightly work, but of much importance. Thank you. We go a straighter road than you, Fastred, but on foot. Count to five hundred, and then start.”

There was a steep but uneventful climb, and then the pass itself was little more than a gash in the rocks, so narrow it was almost free of snow. It was passable for horses, but with care and in single file only. At least, Fastred thought to himself, groping a way forward in the lead, at least it was impossible to get lost.

The defile widened out suddenly, as if emerging from a cliff face, and Fastred halted, passing the word back up the line to gather at the exit and wait. If Gyrdan had failed and he had to fight, he wanted all his company together. He squinted, trying to peer ahead. Some of the shadows looked rather too solid for comfort.

“Hunting Owl,” whispered a low voice, apparently out of the cliff-face beside him.

“Dead Mouse,” Fastred replied promptly, wishing he had chosen a more serious-sounding password. “Who’s that?”

“Berold, sir.”

Berold was a tough, beefy-looking, dark-haired man, one of Hedric’s group, and Fastred had already noted him as steady and reliable. He relaxed.

“All well?”

“Aye, sir. Cap’n says, come right quiet an’ keep well left.”

“All present, an’ correct, sah!”

Even Wootton’s whisper somehow managed to be stentorian.

They saw the red glow of camp fires at a distance, and once a man’s shadow passed across the light, but they were unchallenged. Fastred privately decided that Radwulf must be a complete amateur.

Their guide left them in the shelter of a pine wood, and went back the way they had come. Presently, five dark shapes approached.

“Hunting Owl,” Fastred whispered.

“Dead Mouse,” answered Gyrdan’s voice. “I wish your puckish sense of humour didn’t extend to passwords. What kept you?”

“That’s not a path, it’s an obstacle course.”

“Complain to Radwulf about the state of his roads. The moon is high, so we must be very careful not to be seen. Spread out, and move downhill through the woods. Quietly.”

The pine trees gave way to birch and then to oak woods as they descended. They were not woodsmen, and the noise - twigs cracking underfoot, dead leaves scuffling, once a fierce bitten-off curse as someone stumbled - had Gyrdan squirming, though to any but a skilled observer it would have seemed little more than the mere chance sounds of a wood at night.

Perhaps an hour of slow progress, and they halted, Gyrdan splitting the company into four separate groups to lessen the chance of discovery. Leaving the men to pitch camp, he led Fastred and Eomer forward, and up a high crag on the edge of the wood.

At first Fastred thought the castle and the town were ablaze, so fierce was the light of burning. Bonfires blazed from the high battlements, around the town walls, along the lake shore, reflecting redly on the water so that the castle seemed to float on a sea of flame.

“Well!” Fastred breathed. “Not a complete amateur after all. Even you couldn’t get close without being spotted, Gyrdan.”

“Did you expect him to leave the gates open?”

“One can always hope.”

“Now what?” Eomer asked. “What can we do against that?”

“Go back to camp and get some shut-eye,” Fastred advised. “And have another look in daylight.”

Cloud had been building during the night, and the dawn was leaden and overcast. The fires slowly died, leaving the town with the cold, sullen look of an unswept hearth, and the castle looked gloomier and more impregnable than ever. It crouched on the crag like some huge leathery beast about to spring.

“No fog,” Fastred commented. “Pity. We might have done something with fog.”

“What?” Eomer said bitterly. It was his first sight of the castle from the viewpoint of a would-be attacker, and he could now fully appreciate the skill of the builder. “How could we possibly storm *that*?”

“Oh, you couldn’t,” Fastred said cheerfully. “Have to attack one at a time over that reef I can see underneath the bridge, with arrows whizzing round your ears from the battlements. And even if you got there, that gate looks like a day’s work for a dozen axemen. I don’t fancy climbing those cliffs, and the walls are a bit high for grappling irons. By the time you’d got halfway up even the sleepest sentry would’ve woken up and cut the rope. Sappers are no good - as well try to undermine a mountain. And those sweet little overhangs, and the turrets jutting out so the defenders can drop things on your heads. And you’d have to take the town first to get siege engines within range. Water supply?”

“A well in the central court,” Gyrdan said. “Maybe two - I had other things on my mind at the time.”

“Mm. Fire? Mangonels to chuck burning pitch-balls over the walls?”

“A few timber buildings in the courtyard - barracks, bakehouse, usual stuff - but the main defences are all stone.”

“Mm. Ten thousand men and about six months to invest it properly, I’d say.”

“Something like that. Depends on the state of the stores. Have to hold the lake shore all around, too, otherwise it could be resupplied by boat.”

“Oh, yes, your water gate. I’d forgotten about that. Hey, that might be a way in.”

“With all those beacons?”

“Swim underwater?”

“Full of weeds. You’d drown before you’d got ten feet.”

Eomer pounded his fist helplessly into the ground. “This is hopeless -!”

The others looked at him.

“Who’s storming the castle?” Fastred said. “I like that sort of castle. Even the fieriest commander doesn’t expect you to do anything with them. Sit outside, play cards and get to know the local girls. My kind of siege.”

Eomer turned on him in fury. “How can you joke? My cousin is in there, a prisoner in some terrible dungeon, perhaps even being tortured -! Do you care nothing for her?”

“Enough to come here in the first place,” Fastred reminded him quietly, and Eomer turned brick-red and hung his head.

“My - my apologies, lord,” he stammered. “You have forfeited wealth and home to be here, and I had forgotten. Will you forgive me?”

“Of course,” Fastred replied, feeling a little uncomfortable at the reminder. He had chosen exile lightheartedly and with the wealthy man’s disdain for money that he had never had to do without, and since then he had been trying to ignore the nagging thought that poverty might not be all that romantic after all. Oh, well, something might turn up, and worrying about it certainly wouldn’t help. There were more immediate concerns to hand.

“What happens now, Gyrdan?”

“I am not entirely sure. But there is much activity in the town. It looks as though something is planned soon. You two stay here, while I go and find out the details.”

“Today,” Gyrdan said, when he came back at about noon. “Radwulf must have sent out the messengers even before she was captured. Everyone of any importance in the Highlands and the Lowlands is either in town already or expected by the end of the day. They are building the stake now.”

“Already?” Fastred asked, astonished. “But surely there hasn’t been time for a trial!”

Eomer gave a hollow laugh. “Trials in Carlundy are swift and simple. Radwulf says: You are guilty. And there is an end of the matter.”

“Just as well we got here in good time, then,” Fastred muttered. “When is it to be, Gyrdan? Tomorrow morning?”

“Sunset today. I have been in the town and read the proclamation. It is much as we expected - except he has added madness to the list of charges. She is held somewhere deep in the castle, and the guards are as thick as fleas on a hedgehog. But there is hope I had not looked for.”

He leaned forward, his keen face eager. “There is much support for Irinya among the townsfolk. When she was supposedly Lady of Carlundy, people whispered of

witchcraft and madness. Now she is a prisoner, the same people say, ‘Poor lady! What will happen to her?’. The charity from the castle stopped the day after her flight, and people mutter that if that was lunacy they could do with more of it. The charge of adultery is the subject of widespread scorn. Everyone in the town seems to know someone who used to work at the castle. There is universal agreement that, one, she is not the type, two, nobody would blame her if she did, and, three, the pot should not call the kettle black. And at least a few people have remembered that *she* is the old Lord’s daughter, and therefore cannot commit treason. There is talk of the old curse. The storm ruined much of the harvest -”

“Aye, it did!” Eomer spat. “And they make it good with *our* cattle! With no thought of what we shall eat this winter!”

“It is said that the storm must be the curse coming true. And there are many who fear worse, if Ingeld’s daughter is slain. The charge of witchcraft carries slightly more credence. She is skilled with herbs, as I know well. But those who benefited - and it seems they are not a few - are inclined to call it medicine rather than witchcraft, and even the others believe nothing that Radwulf says. It seems his behaviour of late has been - erratic. And don’t forget that Radwulf proclaimed her death two months ago. One or two people mutter that he is the lunatic, not she.”

“Sound common sense,” Fastred said, yawning again.

“What use is peasants’ gossip?” Eomer snapped, impatiently. “The opinion of the herd changes with every shift in the wind.”

“Unlike their lords, who are never mistaken!” Gyrdan said sarcastically. “Do not fear. It is our own resources we will rely on. But if we win clear, you will be glad that they are all looking the other way as we pass. It is selective blindness and deafness that has kept the smugglers in business all these years.”

“We’ll have to wait til the last minute, Gyrdan?” Fastred asked. “Until they bring her into the square and clear the guards so that everyone can get a good view. I thought so. Good. Can I go back to sleep now?”

In the great hall, Radwulf snarled and paced like a chained dog. He had changed not a little in the past months. Still handsome, his face was now a little fleshy, almost dissipated, the result perhaps of too much wine, and his cold blue eyes had a staring, almost haunted expression. Always unpredictable, his temper had become savage and violent. Men eyed him askance, kept their distance, and hoped to remain unnoticed.

Reaching some decision, he slammed the wine flagon down on the table with a filthy oath, strode out of the hall, and went down the steps to the dungeons two or three at a time.

It was cold and dark, but not silent, save at the last cell where Radwulf stopped. The sentry stood smartly to attention, eyes fixed on an extremely fascinating crack in the stonework opposite, and the chief interrogator, a little rat-like man, got to his feet and bowed.

Radwulf indicated the closed door and its ominous silence. "She still lives?"

The interrogator shuffled. "Yes, Sire."

"She has not eaten?"

"No, Sire."

"Nor drunk?"

"No, Sire. Not so much as a drop."

"Has she slept?"

From behind the door came a sharp rattle of metal, a brief scuffle, and the angry squeak of a rat.

"I very much doubt it, Sire."

"She must break. She must. Let me in."

The cell was without heat and without light except for the torch the interrogator carried. The damp cold seemed to strike through to their bones, and both men shivered a little even in their heavy clothes.

"Well, my fair lady," Radwulf said, through ostentatiously chattering teeth, "are you cold? You will be warm enough in a few hours."

The vague pale shape lying shackled on the floor made no answer. Radwulf squatted down beside her and lifted her head. She was colder to the touch than the stones, and for an instant he feared she was dead, until the eyes opened, like holes in the white face.

"Have you seen reason, clever lady?"

She was probably too weak to speak, but the eyes closed again in a gesture of finality. Radwulf let her head smack onto the hard floor, and was gratified to see the gaunt body tense briefly in pain. He prodded the right shoulder, an ugly mess of clotted blood, and this time he was rewarded with a thin shriek.

"This is folly, my fair lady," he whispered. "Such folly for a clever woman! Sign. It is so simple a task, cousin. Just your name, traced on a sheet of parchment. So little a thing, just to please your loving husband. This is an uncomfortable place, is it

not? Sign, and you shall have a comfortable bed and a warm fire. You shall have food, and good wine to drink. And I will have that shoulder tended. Your wound begins to fester, I think. It swells. It must hurt you greatly. My poor cousin, why not let me help you? I would, if I only could.”

She could hardly move because of the fetters, but she managed to turn her face away with a world of contempt in the gesture.

Radwulf dragged her back by the hair and slapped the waxy cheek with a handful of rings. “Bitch!” He stamped on the injured shoulder. “Slut! Bitch! Here, you there! Vinegar!”

Vinegar was used to revive the unconscious with its pungent fumes. It was not supposed to be poured into open wounds. Even the interrogator shut his eyes.

“Sign!” Radwulf snarled. He thrust a parchment into the exhausted face. “Sign! It changes nothing! It merely legalises what is already established fact! I need not read it to you again. It confirms me as Lord of Carlundy, and you as my consort. Simple reversal of the roles, nothing more! As has been true in fact for years. Sign!”
Still silence.

Radwulf changed tack. His violent fury vanished as quickly as it had come. “I will forgive you everything, cousin. Everything. I will take you back as my loving wife. I will care for you, cherish you. Only sign. Is that so much to ask?”

The interrogator, looking on, wondered suddenly if that pleading tone was really an act. If it was, it was a very good one.

“You need not hope for rescue, fair lady,” Radwulf sneered. “None would dare. Your Southern friends skulk in their holes like fat mice. Your Highland savages I have summoned to watch you burn. Under close guard. None will challenge me. Do you know what it is like to burn, clever cousin? Skin blisters and cracks. Fat melts. Flesh blackens, chars, splits apart. The eyes burst. Pop! Pop! Like corn on a stove. Perhaps we should have a little dress rehearsal, eh, my lady? Nothing elaborate, not to spoil the real performance. Hot pincers. Perhaps a little hot lead. Just so you know what you choose by refusing to sign!”

The slight flick of the eyebrows was as dismissive as a shrug.

Radwulf got to his feet.

“Bring her!”

She hung half-conscious between the sentry and the interrogator, light and fragile, her head drooping like a flower too heavy for a slender stalk. Radwulf stooped and put his face very close to hers.

“Very shrewd, clever lady. I cannot break your body. You must walk to the stake this evening. But I will break your spirit, my fair lady, if it is the last thing I do!”

Chapter 15.

Fastred and Eomer sat their horses quietly, their men in an ordered company behind. It was already quite gloomy here under the trees, but still light enough to see clearly what was happening in the town, a scant quarter mile from this corner of the wood.

“There is Hygurd’s banner, the dastard!” Eomer exclaimed. “The gold dragon on black, you see it?”

“Indeed! Is he there himself?”

“Aye, he is. Come to watch his master’s triumph! How a noble gentleman could act so -! He is the tall man, to the left there.”

“In the very fine armour? I see him. A pity that today is not for fighting! I have a score to settle with my lord Hygurd. On a friend’s behalf.”

“I think Gyrdan can do his own score-settling. Do you see him?”

“No. But that would be his intention. Who are those men with Hygurd? His soldiers herd them like dogs among sheep.”

Eomer screwed up his eyes, and let out a groan. “It is the chieftains of the Black Hills. There is Vidian of Ailart, the black boar. And with him Taran of Caradon, Hygurd’s vassal, flying the gold dragon also but differenced, with the chain beneath. And Malise of Lanthart, of the leaping salmon, and there is Gartran of Islanart, the coiled snake, and Firdan, even, from far-distant Mortach, beneath the banner of the horned goat. And the wildcat of Gragart, that must be young Kerian. And many more.”

He scanned the forest of banners eagerly, and sighed, half in hope and half in fear. “My brother is not there. Our badge is the white falcon, crowned with the three stars of Buchart. I hope he did not fight. It would be like him, but foolish.”

“Perhaps Radwulf has him under close guard at home,” Fastred said. “Look at Hygurd’s soldiers herd them! There are few there who watch willingly, I think.”

“Save only Hygurd. Radwulf’s lieutenant. And once he was betrothed to Irinya! How can he do this?”

“Maybe that is the reason,” said a low voice behind, and they turned. Gyrdan was there, swinging himself into the saddle. “No man likes to be rejected. Do not wonder!” he said, as they stared. “Hedric holds the gate. The youngsters are awake and alert and safe-hidden further up the woodland, with two horses. They will ride to join us when they see us win clear. All is in order. I can be of more use here.”

“Ha!” Eomer exclaimed. “Radwulf comes!”

There was a stiffening in the whole group behind them. All eyes followed the tall, heavily-built, bejewelled figure as it strode arrogantly across the marketplace and up onto a raised platform opposite the empty stake. A woman hung on his arm, a showy, blowsy brunette in scarlet silk and too many diamonds.

Fastred sniffed primly. "When about to burn one's wife for alleged adultery," he intoned, in the manner of a maiden aunt lecturing on etiquette, "bringing one's mistress to see the show may be considered a breach of good manners."

Gyrdan smiled grimly. Eomer said nothing, beginning to suspect that Fastred's apparent facetiousness might conceal a tough professional competence.

The crowd in the marketplace evidently agreed with Fastred. A ripple ran through them, as around a stone cast into a pond. And then a trumpet neighed high and clear, and all grew still.

It was clear the two soldiers were not needed as guards. The woman between them needed all her failing strength to walk upright. Her right arm hung useless at her side and her shift - very obviously her sole garment - was stained with blood. More than once she stumbled, but each time fought to regain her balance and walk on, head unbowed.

A faint mutter rose from the crowd, like the surge of a high wind in a forest. They had come to watch a woman burned, and because they did not fully understand what that meant, it had not shocked them. But to make an injured woman walk barefoot in the snow - that they did understand, and it sickened them.

They reached the stake. Irinya stopped before it. She was trying to say something to the crowd. What it was the watchers could not hear, but it angered Radwulf. A gesture and a command from him, and one of the soldiers turned on Irinya and struck her to the ground.

The noise of the crowd was a menacing buzz now, as of bees who see their hive threatened. Behind the cordon of Hygurd's black and yellow guards, the Highland chiefs swirled and eddied like a vast concourse of colourful mice.

Irinya sagged against the ropes that bound her to the high stake, semi-conscious at best. Or at worst. Radwulf was not to be cheated of his fine spectacle. Another word and gesture, and one of the soldiers scrambled up on the faggots. What he was doing the watchers could not see, but when he leapt down again Irinya had been revived. Radwulf would not permit her the comparative mercy of unconsciousness.

The chieftains yelled curses. The buzz in the crowd grew almost to a roar. Radwulf, standing to address them, had to shout to make himself heard. The bees were about to swarm.

Gyrdan had seen many battles, not a few of them that rare breed that historians called “decisive” and wrote whole books about. In the square now, another decisive battle was being fought, for the hearts of Carlundy’s people. On the one side, Radwulf, tall, vigorous, handsome, richly clothed, Lord of Carlundy, commander of thousands of armed men, strong enough to force even the hill-chiefs out of their mountain eyries to witness his victory. On the other, a single woman, injured, half-starved, stripped all but naked, alone, defenceless.

It was hardly a fair fight.

It was perhaps typical of Radwulf, that in his thirst for victory, in his need to crush what he could not keep, he should sow the seed of his own destruction in this, his hour of greatest triumph. From safety in Billand, even with the King’s support and an army behind her, Irinya could have had little chance of regaining her realm. After all, why should Carlundy’s people welcome invaders, foreigners, who might prove worse than Radwulf? But after such a death, she would become a martyr to be avenged. In shared disgust and loathing, Radwulf had succeeded in uniting Highland lord with Lowland peasant, as had never happened before.

Gyrdan clenched his hand on his sword hilt. He was concerned with the living woman, not with an empty symbol. His body tingled with the prospect of action, as always before a fight. In an hour, in a minute, he might be dead, captured, wounded. But, if he had judged aright, Irinya would be alive.

The space around the stake was draining of people now. He glanced at his company, tense and excited but disciplined, waiting for the command.

His sword flashed from its sheath.

“Now!”

A quarter mile of smooth ground, even dusted with snow, takes little time to cover at a full gallop. Perhaps Radwulf, obsessed with the execution, did not immediately see them leave the cover of the woods. Perhaps he thought they were some odd company of his own men - for who other would ride in Carlundy? Perhaps he simply did not believe that forty men would ride against a walled town. He did not, of course, know about the dozen footmen, apparently harmless farmers who had followed the general drift into town over the course of the afternoon, weapons hidden under shapeless cloaks.

Two of these, Hedric and Berold, threw open the north gate, and stood by to catch the two strings of spare horses cast off as the charge swept through. The riders were in the main street by the time the soldiers in the square moved, and there they might have been penned but for the ten shabby farmers, wielding far from shabby swords, who suddenly appeared out of the scattering crowd. Scarcely time for a swift exchange of blows, and the main body poured into the square, riding two abreast. Some circled back to help the footmen and hold clear the route of escape. Others drove on in a tight-knit wedge. The crowd got out of their way with all despatch. So, with little less alacrity, did the bewildered soldiers. They had been expecting, at worst, a riotous crowd, not a disciplined charge.

The marketplace was a sea of chaos. The Highland chiefs, even though all unarmed, surged against their barrier of guards, who seemed to have their work cut out to contain them. All hillmen themselves, albeit from the southerly earldom of Darain, they were evidently reluctant to draw cold steel on fellow-countrymen. Hygurd's orders, shouted in a mixture of two languages, seemed only to add to the confusion. Half the square was filled by a milling crowd of panicked citizenry, effectively cutting off the guards around Radwulf's platform from the battle now surging against the stake. Somewhere a swine pen had been damaged or left open, and half a dozen squealing pigs ran to and fro, knocking men's legs from under them. Radwulf's soldiers were hampered by their own numbers. Any organised force trying to butt its way through the crowd was liable to meet another trying to go in the opposite direction.

Around the stake, some competent captain or sergeant had guessed the attackers' objective - hardly requiring advanced logic - and managed to organise a semblance of resistance. But men on foot are at a grave disadvantage compared to the longer reach and vision of men on horses, unless armed with spears, which these were not. Fastred's first love was cavalry, and the First Company of Ash Dene's militia, Wootton's personal charge, was composed of mounted men-at-arms. Not for nothing had Wootton spent months shouting and cursing and staging mock battles in the rough pastures and cut cornfields of home. A disciplined wedge cut a path to the stake. There a ring formed, surrounded by gleaming, leaping steel, on which the soldiers broke like waves on a rock, and with as little effect.

In the centre of this ring, a momentary island of calm in the eye of the storm, Eomer leaped up onto the faggots, red sword in hand. Three swift slashing strokes, and Irinya fell forward into his arms, so that he had to clutch the stake itself for balance. Willing hands reached up to help. Someone - Fastred - threw a cloak up for

Iryna before turning back to the fray. Someone else - Gyrdan - spurred a horse close in, slammed his dripping sword back into its sheath, and reached up both arms to take her, with more speed than gentleness. Eomer jumped wildly for his own horse, an athletic feat that gave him nightmares for weeks afterward, lifted the hunting horn to his lips and sounded the retreat.

All over the square, private fights were broken off. A rearguard coalesced at the mouth of the street. The rest of the attackers drained out of the square like water down a plughole. The rearguard delivered a last few savage blows, then abruptly turned and clattered after their comrades, Eomer pausing only to shake his fist at Hygurd and Fastred to make a rather more insulting gesture in the same direction.

It had all happened so fast that it was not even dark yet.

Radwulf's soldiers hung about, panting. Nobody was going to run down that street without a direct order. At the same moment that Radwulf yelled it, Hygurd finally got his own men to understand something, and the two companies collided in the street entrance.

And then a wondrous thing happened. By the time the two groups of soldiers had sorted themselves out, and their officers stopped the impromptu punch-up developing as each side blamed the other - Highlanders and Lowlanders were never slow to a fight - the empty street was miraculously full.

A small flock of undersized sheep, no doubt intended for the last of the autumn sales, had escaped from their fold - hardly surprising, given the shambles in the market-place - and three shepherds and their dogs were making a sad hash of rounding them up. Every time they got the flock approximately together, one of the dogs would dart in among them at quite the wrong moment and the sheep would scatter like rice, bleating their terror and bewilderment. For some reason, this seemed always to happen just when the frightened animals could most effectively trip up a company of soldiers - quite inexplicable incompetence, considering that the farmers of Carlundy were renowned for their ability to make sheep do exactly what they wanted.

Angry geese, presumably also from a damaged pen in the square, pecked and hissed without distinction. Not to be outdone by their menfolk, a dozen flurried women and children were trying to drive the geese back to their pen. Naturally, it was not their fault that the soldiers always seemed to be on the most direct route. The pigs in the market-place had somehow also been chased into the street, for good measure.

Some frightened countrymen were trying to hurry out of town. Others had suddenly remembered property accidentally left in the square - food, coats, children - and were trying to hurry back to fetch it. Townsmen were trying to get back to their houses. The merely curious (of whom there were a great many) had come to see if anything interesting was happening. Men cursed, women shrieked, children wailed, dogs barked. The sheep bleated, the pigs squealed and the geese honked. Officers shouting orders could hardly make themselves heard above the din.

The soldiers were mired, for the most part not unwillingly, in this undistinguished mass of humanity as surely as in a bog. The press was so tight they had not room to swing their swords - even if they had been ready to use cold steel on unarmed ordinary folk, their own friends and kin. As their officers yelled at them, they kicked and cursed and shouldered their way out again, only to find the next street similarly blocked, and the next. A hurrying detachment from the castle added to the congestion. Mickleburg Castle could be approached only through the town, a point of great strength since it converted the town effectively into an outer bailey, but which had its weaknesses in certain circumstances.

At the north gate, the civilian gatekeeper rubbed his wrists. He'd been tied to a chair most of the afternoon, and Hedric had cut him loose on his way out, with an apology and a silver shilling for his trouble. The gatekeeper listened to the commotion behind him, and a slow smile spread over his face. He shut the gate, and dropped the bar home. Then he went and found the chain, ran it through the ring-bolts in bar and gate, and locked it. He looked at the key thoughtfully for a minute. Then he shuffled back inside, and dropped it down the privy.

Radwulf's men had to find a blacksmith to break the chain - and for some reason none of them were at home - and by the time they were out of the town, and horses had been brought up, it was quite dark. All the roads were trampled in all directions, for Mickleburg was the main market town, and mounted companies came and went all the time.

A helpful shepherd directed them south. A mile further on, just as the soldiers were wondering if they were on the right track, another frightened rustic had seen the company pass by at great speed, and had heard them shouting "Briarley!" to each other. This made sense. Lady Irinya was known to own a manor at Briarley, now in the possession of the Steward. Taking it back by force of arms would be a suitably dramatic gesture. A big company rattled off south-east in hot pursuit, spurred on by the prospect of a substantial reward. It was only when daybreak came that they realised that most of the hoofprints in the snow were heading *into* town.

North and west, the fugitives were riding at a steady pace through rolling country. Berold had been a smith near here once, before turning to smuggling and being caught, and knew the land well. It was a smaller company now, having lost five men and three horses in the square, and eight more were wounded to a greater or lesser degree, but it was cheerful with success. Corin and Rosie were safely with them. Irinya was a dark, still bundle in Gyrdan's arms, wrapped in two cloaks, and the whispered conversation between them was surely of no concern to anyone else. Advance and rear guards reported no sound of pursuit. It seemed too good to be true. Fastred revised his estimate of Radwulf's competence downward again.

Berold led them to the remains of a manor. The main house was a blackened shell, but some of the barns and storehouses were still sound and reasonably weatherproof, enough to give shelter for most of the company. They still had some of the provisions they had brought from Ash Dene, now getting low but enough for another meal or two. Wood was gathered from the nearby copse, fires lit, and cooking started.

Rosie pushed her way up to Gyrdan before he had even had time to dismount.

"You just leave 'er to me, sir. I want blankets an' stuff, an' a fire made up in the best of these huts - that one'll do. An' 'ot water, buckets an' buckets of it. An' bandages. An' wine, an' food, if there is any -"

She was this far down her list of demands before she noticed Gyrdan's face.

"Sir, what's wrong? What's 'appened? She ain't - she ain't -"

He shook his head. It seemed to be an effort to speak. Evidently that long whispered talk had not consisted of sweet nothings after all.

"She lives," he managed to say. "Rosie - do your best for her!"

Fastred and Eomer came up in a concerted rush, and Irinya's inert body was lowered into gentle arms and carried into the hut. A pile of donated blankets made a reasonably comfortable bed. Rosie got everything she had ordered, shooed them all out like a farmer's wife chasing hens from her kitchen, and shut the door decisively behind them.

She emerged again some time in the small hours of the morning, stiff, weary and disgusted. As she stepped out, a dark shape detached itself from the shadows. She had no need to ask who it was.

“She’s sleepin’, sir. Though I ‘ad to make ‘er drink ‘arf a bottle o’ wine first. Small wonder, after what them animals done to ‘er -!”

“Don’t say it, Rosie! I know. She - she told me.”

“What, *everythin’*?”

“I hope so! I hope there was no more -!”

“Sir -”

Rosie laid a hand on his arm and found he was quivering with some violent emotion.

“Sir, she’ll get all right again, she will,” she said, urgently. “I’ve stopped the bleedin’. An’ the stab in ‘er shoulder, that ain’t anywhere near as bad as it looks. I’ve stitched it, an’ bandaged it. I got ‘er to drink, an’ to eat a little - they been starvin’ ‘er, the devils. An’ she’s tough, sir. Inside, which is where it counts. She’ll recover, sir, I’m sure she will.”

Gyrdan found her hand in the darkness and clasped it briefly.

“I hope you are right.”

“D’you want to see ‘er?”

“May I?”

She held the door open for him, and he passed in. Peering round the frame, she could see him kneeling by the bed, and the agony in his face brought tears to her eyes. Irinya’s right hand lay outside the covers, and he reached out and took it, and stroked it tenderly.

Irinya did not wake, but she flinched and cried out softly, and pulled away in terror.

Gyrdan rose to his feet and withdrew without a word.

“You might of forgave Corin,” Rosie muttered, seeing his shoulders sag when he thought she was no longer watching, “but I don’t think she will.”

Morning came, sullenly and reluctantly, as if the sun disliked being routed out of bed. Most of the fugitive company felt the same. They were all tired after three days of broken sleep and hard riding, and the jubilation of the previous evening had given way to a sense of anticlimax. They had come to rescue the lady; they had rescued her; now what? In such a mood as this, armies melt away to their homes. The only reason this company did not was because they had either no homes to go to, or had left them far behind. They seemed to have evaded pursuit, and the sense of urgency was gone. They slept, or sat around talking disjointedly about nothing.

In a half-derelict barn, Gyrdan, Fastred and Eomer also sat, arguing. As sometimes happens with cautious men, Eomer had been fired to a martial fury by the success of his first real fight. He was for sending messengers to Buchart, gathering an army, marching on Mickleburg and fighting a glorious battle. The only point of doubt was whether to hang Radwulf from his own battlements or drop him into the lake. All logistical and tactical problems were brushed aside. Radwulf's army were no better than a bunch of old women. Look how they had cut through them yesterday! Look how they had won safe away! Radwulf was even afraid to chase them. If they struck now, took him by surprise, his army would scatter like chaff on a wind. And so on.

Fastred was in favour of a rapid retreat back to Billand. They were in the west of Carlundy, a long way north admittedly but within easy reach of the wild flanking hills and safety. They were without supplies or reinforcements, a mere raiding party, and moreover burdened with a child and two women, one of them ill. Radwulf would eventually hunt them out. They should not push their luck. In a day they could be clear into the hills, which Gyrdan knew well, and less than a week later safe back at Ash Dene. He was convinced he could talk his way out of trouble, and moreover persuade the King to let them come back in the spring with a proper army.

At which point Eomer accused him of doubting the valour of the warriors of the Black Hills, and Gyrdan felt like banging their heads together. In vain did he protest that Billand held no safety for Irinya now. In vain he argued that yesterday's fray was no real battle, that they had succeeded only by surprise and speed, that given an hour, half an hour, Radwulf's soldiers would have cut them to pieces, quite probably literally. One listener called him an old cynic, one stopped only just short of calling him a coward. And both demanded, if their ideas were so unworkable, what did he suggest? His answer to that was always the same.

"That is for Irinya to decide. She is not to be taken here or hidden there, like some trophy or plunder. This is not your fight, Fastred, nor even yours, Eomer, and it certainly is not mine. Whether she fights, or runs, or does neither, is her choice."

"You expect too much of her, Gyrdan," Fastred protested, when they had reached this point for the third time. "She's sick. Can't you see that? The gods only know what she has been through -"

He was interrupted at this point by a faint cheer from outside.

"I wonder what that is?" Eomer said, but though both he and Fastred looked over their shoulders to the door, neither seemed sufficiently interested to get up and look.

“Probably organised a football match or something,” Fastred said, turning back with a shrug. “Look, Gyrdan, she’s only a woman. She can’t be expected to make decisions like that. Particularly not in her present state. She ought to be somewhere safe, in good care -”

“I appreciate your solicitude, my lord,” said a cool voice from the doorway. “But I am not on my deathbed yet!”

Fastred and Eomer turned. Gyrdan had no need to. His gaze and Irinya’s came together, held a moment, and parted again. He sat back, silent.

She had to lean on Rosie’s arm a little as they paced slowly into the building. A hideous purple swelling on her face, where the soldier had struck her, made an ugly contrast with the pallor of her skin. She walked gingerly, and her arm was in a sling to ease the strain on her gashed shoulder. But aside from that, she looked calm and businesslike. Rosie’s bag must have contained fresh clothes, for she was neatly dressed in green broadcloth, and her hair was clean and tidy and gathered into a net out of the way. There was a cold stillness about her that somehow stopped all Fastred and Eomer’s exclamations of concern and kept them in their seats, dumbfounded. Gyrdan had not moved since she came in. Since she remained standing, that meant they all had to look up at her, and somehow that seemed entirely appropriate.

Her voice matched her manner, carrying the brisk calmness of authority.

“First, my lords, I must thank you for my life. It was bravely and generously done. It is no slur upon you to say that I did not expect deliverance, and did not consider it possible. And I thank you also for your concern for my safety. So I hope you will not think me ungrateful if I decline to flee again.

“For even if we are still welcome in Billand - which I think unlikely, for Rosie told me of the Earl’s words to you - there are many more who could not follow us. I think Billand would not welcome the entire population of Carlundy migrating over the border. And neither I nor my people wish to leave our homes again. My place now is here, in my own realm. My purpose is to make it safe again for decent folk to live in. This is no sudden whim. I have been thinking and planning for some weeks. This capture and release has merely accelerated the decision.

“Radwulf, I think, is less secure on his throne than he would have men think. He offered me my life if I would sign over to him all my rights to the Lordship. For he was never made Lord in his own right. He was only declared Regent, during my indisposition or for seven years, whichever was the longer. I had not forgotten that, though I thought all others had. For almost three years now I have again been,

legally at least, sole ruler of Carlundy. It is now my intention to make that true in fact as well as in right.

“The time has come now for fighting, not for running. But fighting with wits, not with blind courage. If any war is worth fighting, it is worth fighting to win. I wish for no glorious defeat. I do not care if I am remembered in song. I intend to leave Carlundy a more lasting memorial. More lasting indeed than the child I will never bear. I will be the last of Ingeld’s line, and my successor shall be the Law.

“It is only by accident of birth that Radwulf has not the *right* to rule Carlundy as he does. Would his character have been so different had his father been the eldest of three brothers instead of the youngest? I think not. It is not right that a whole people should depend for their hopes and their lives on the wisdom of a single ruler. It is more than human, that anyone should be able to make the right decision, all the time, on every matter. I could not claim such. But law is the combined wisdom of many men, gathered over centuries. I would rather be ruled by law than by the best of rulers, and sadly, Carlundy has not hitherto had the best of rulers.

“I have said this already to the men. For I think if men are asked to fight, they should know what for. And I have also said, that any who does not wish to help me in this is free to go wherever he will, with my blessing. Now I say it also to you. I am already deeply in your debt. If you choose to leave now and go about your own business, I will be grateful to you for past kindness. If you join me, you will be very welcome.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going home now,” Fastred drawled. “Whatever would my father say, after my dramatic departure?”

Eomer leaped to his feet. “This I hoped for when I came to Billand! This we have all longed for!”

They all looked at Gyrdan. He seemed to be gazing at something in the middle distance, something that was not there. Then his thought seemed to return to the present, and he said quietly, “That is something worth fighting for. I am with you, lady.”

Fastred rubbed his hands in glee. “When do we start? And where do we go? We cannot agree on that ourselves.”

“I heard something of the - discussion,” Irinya answered, with a faint smile. “I purpose to ride north from here, into the hills. I do not expect to command any there, but I hope to find allies. Radwulf has grievously angered the Highlands. The proud descendants of Ardern do not take kindly to being summoned south and herded in a marketplace like sheep! And Radwulf has taken to calling himself King.”

Eomer stirred, but did not speak. Fastred opened his mouth to ask why that should be so important, but Irinya was speaking again.

“In the hills, Radwulf and Hygurd cannot come at us in force until spring. We have three months at the least. But to prepare, not to rest. To gather together such of the chieftains as will join us. To -”

“Cap’n! Sir!”

A young man came running in, gasping for breath. He stood wheezing and coughing, clearly uncertain which of the group he should address himself to. He picked Gyrdan, perhaps because he was the eldest of the three men, and saluted.

“Scoutin’ party reportin’ sir. Large army. Five ‘undred foot at least. A few ‘orsemen only. Four mile south, comin’ this way.”

“What banners did they fly?” Irinya asked.

The man looked surprised. “Only the one, ma’am. A yeller dragon, it looked like, on a black flag.”

“Undifferenced?” Eomer rapped out.

“Was there anything else on the flag besides the dragon?” Gyrdan expanded, as the messenger looked blank.

“No, sir.”

“Hygurd,” Irinya said. “With at least five hundred men. Well, I said the time had come for fighting, but I think not quite yet!”

“Did they see you?” Fastred asked the messenger.

“Dunno, sir.”

“Four miles,” Gyrdan mused. “At least an hour. He may only be returning to his estates, of course, not hunting us, though I should not rely on that!”

“He is a Highlander?” Fastred said anxiously. “We are not going to ride straight into his territory?”

Irinya shook her head. “Darain is north-east of here. It straddles the Giants’ Road. We must ride north by west, as I had purposed to do. That will bring us to Ailart. Vidian’s territory.”

“And he is your friend, Irinya?”

“I knew him well once, years ago. But if we are fleeing Hygurd, we need no other testimonial. He and Hygurd hate one another. In the Black Hills, my enemy’s enemy is my friend.”

The company packed up with commendable promptitude. Fifteen minutes after the messenger’s arrival, the ruined manor was quite deserted.

“Hell - fire!”

The road ahead was blocked by a company of foot soldiers. They were not a particularly formidable force, rather nervously clutching spears and doing their best to look fierce. But their commander had positioned them well. They were flanked by scrubby woodland on one side and a stony slope to the river on the other, and there was no way round. And behind was all hostile country, and Hygurd’s army.

“I thought this was too good to be true!” Fastred yelled. “One of their commanders is awake after all!”

“Slope’s in our favour,” Gyrdan flung back. “A wedge! Drive through!”

“It is Guthrum!” Irinya called to Gyrdan. “I know his banner.”

“Makes sense,” Gyrdan shouted back. “Radwulf would not let Hygurd loose in the Highlands without a reliable man to keep an eye on him. Keep it moving, there!”

It was a short distance to form up in, even for an experienced cavalry squadron. Wootton’s company had practised the manoeuvre many times, but Hedric’s farmers had been trained as footmen. All were tired, the horses no less than their riders, and there were two women and a child among them. It took Fastred and Gyrdan all their time and energy, and a great deal of fluent cursing - it was then that Rosie realised the origin of the phrase ‘to swear like a trooper’ - to shape their followers into a ragged arrowhead.

But it was still more than the waiting foemen had expected. They too were farmers by nature, and they had been marched here without choice or explanation, had spears thrust into their hands, and told to guard the road. To be faced with a cavalry charge, however amateur, was not something they felt their rates of pay covered. The trees looked very inviting. They began to shuffle sideways.

“Lily-livered dagoes!” bellowed Wootton. “Let ‘em ‘ave it, cap’n!”

Corin found himself and Rosie, sharing a horse, shunted into the fourth rank, in the core of the wedge. Irinya came alongside, riding alone and managing the horse well with one hand. She had refused point blank to ride pillion with anyone, had even refused help in mounting the horse. It was as if she could bear no man within a yard of her. The wounded men were also shuffled into the centre, and the remainder of Wootton’s company coalesced tidily around them. Hedric’s men, having more or less got the idea, thundered behind in two rough rows. Gyrdan took up position at the apex, his sword glittering bright and deadly, and immediately behind him galloped Fastred and Eomer, their rivalry doing much to keep the speed up.

For Corin it was the most terrifying and also the most exhilarating experience of his life. His body shook to the plunging, pounding thunder. The clash of weapons

on shields, the horses neighing their pain and fright, the shouts of the men urging them on, deafened him. He could see nothing ahead except the backs of the leaders, leaping up and down in time with the gallop, and above their heads the trees coming up with fantastic speed.

He was expecting a physical shock as the wedge crashed into the enemy. But it was more a contest of wills than of flesh. Had the foot soldiers stood firm, spears braced in the ground, projecting an unbroken fence of steel teeth, the horses would have sheered off. Or, if driven on, the leading animals would have been impaled on the deadly points by their own momentum, riders thrown, and many of those following also brought down by the fallen bodies. Maybe the soldiers had been told this, but it takes nerves of steel to stand still with a horse galloping straight at you. The horse may well fall, but more than likely it will land on you. Instinct yells: Get out of the way and let someone else be a hero.

Corin saw a flash of dripping red sword, heard someone scream, heard Wootton yelling hoarsely beside him - and then they were through. He looked back and saw the tidy line of soldiers split in two, like a log cloven by an axe, men leaping for their lives as the last of the horses pounded through, and one or two raw red lumps that would do no more leaping. And then he leaned forward and was very sick all down the horse's shoulder.

But the enemy was not beaten yet. Perhaps Guthrum had decided in advance that it would be wise not to trust entirely to the staying power of his foot soldiers, or had guessed that the fugitives would prove desperate and determined.

They were riding now on a rough and narrow track through broken country, all rocks and hillocks and clumps of thorn. It was impossible to move at any great speed, although they knew full well that a far larger mounted company was following behind. And probably gaining with every minute, for the fugitives' horses were flagging and already the group was beginning to string out.

"Enough of skulking and running!" Eomer shouted to Fastred. "This is no way for a gentleman to fight!"

No answer from the younger man, who seemed to be lost in thought.

"Are you listening to me?"

Still no answer.

"By all the gods -"

"Shut up," Irinya ordered. "Have you experience of these matters? Nor I. Leave it to those who have."

Gyrdan came up, having ridden ahead to scout along the trail, and pushed through to Fastred's side.

"Nobody ahead of us. Clear run to the mountains."

Fastred jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"They gain. How long til nightfall?"

"Two, three hours."

"Can't hope to outdistance them."

"Stand and fight!" Eomer shouted.

The others ignored him.

"How long d'you need, Fastred?"

"Country like this? An hour should do it."

Gyrdan nodded. He had a longbow strapped at his saddle, acquired from Fastred's armoury along with mail and helm, and now he tugged it free.

He glanced around, and raised his voice. "Who else can shoot?"

"I can, sir." That was Berold, reaching for his own bow. Everyone else was concentrating *very* hard on picking a path.

"Good man -"

Suddenly they heard the pursuit at no great distance behind.

"Hell!"

Horses were spurred into a weary canter. Gyrdan unhitched one of the bags from his saddle and slung it over his shoulder, grasping his longbow in one hand and the reins in the other. Berold followed suit, rather less efficiently.

They turned a shoulder of rock and saw a wide shallow valley before them, and beyond it the mountains humped against the sky.

"This'll do," Gyrdan said, throwing his reins to Fastred. "I will come to the Hill of the Watchkeeper, if I live. Irinya knows it. Ready, Berold? Now!"